

**INFORMAL ENGLISH:  
A THEORETICAL-METHODOLOGICAL DISCUSSION**

**INGLÊS INFORMAL:  
UMA DISCUSSÃO TEÓRICO-METODOLÓGICA**

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**Fábio Henrique Rosa Senefonte<sup>1</sup>**

**Abstract:** Drawing upon sociolinguistic issues inherent to language variation and registers (BIBER et al., 1999), this paper, fundamentally theoretical, sought to discuss theoretical and methodological issues related to informal (colloquial) English. Besides the fact that this type of register is fundamental to one's linguistic proficiency, the literature on the topic is substantially scarce both in theoretical and didactic-pedagogical terms (SENEFONTE, 2018). Thus, this article can contribute to the literature by possibly promoting critical thinking about the conscious use and approach to such type of language in the classroom, aiming at understanding language as a social practice and at critical language awareness.

**Keywords:** informal English; theoretical-methodological issues; teaching-learning

**Resumo:** Tendo como pano de fundo questões sociolinguísticas inerentes à variação linguística e registros (BIBER et al., 1999;), este artigo, fundamentalmente teórico, buscou discutir questões teórico-metodológicas relacionadas ao inglês informal (coloquial). Além de esse tipo de registro ser fundamental para a proficiência linguística de um falante, a literatura na temática é substancialmente escassa tanto em termos teóricos quanto didático-pedagógicos (SENEFONTE, 2018). Assim, este artigo pode contribuir com a literatura ao trazer reflexões quanto o uso e abordagem consciente desse tipo de linguagem na sala de aula, com vistas ao entendimento da linguagem como prática social e à consciência crítica de linguagem.

**Palavras-Chave:** Inglês informal; questões teórico-metodológicas; ensino-aprendizagem

### **Introductory Notes**

Throughout history, language studies have theorized their object of study from different lenses. Since classical antiquity, language has been examined by means of disparate

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<sup>1</sup> Professor adjunto na UENP-CP. Doutor e Mestre em Estudos da Linguagem pela UEL. Especialista em Ensino de Língua Inglesa pela UENP. Foi bolsista Fulbright como professor assistente de língua portuguesa na Howard University (Washington DC-EUA). É líder do Grupo de Pesquisa "Estudos Linguísticos e Literários em Inglês (ELLI)". E-mail: [fabiosenefonte@uenp.edu.br](mailto:fabiosenefonte@uenp.edu.br). ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8343-7165>

ontological and epistemological orientations: contrastive, structuralist, transformational generative grammar, cognitive, interactionist, to name a few (CÂMARA JR, 1975; PARANÁ, 2008). The fact is that the more language studies advance, the more complex the concept of language becomes, as the understanding of language embraces numerous domains (viz. theoretical perspectives).

The question is not whether perspective A seems to be more appropriate than B. In the past, such theoretical dispute did occur, conversely however, at present, what we have is a multifaceted and ever-changing phenomenon, called language, which seems to surpass any delimitation established by linguistic theories/perspectives. In this regard, Borges Neto (1996) argues that any language perspective will be impartial/incomplete, given the complexities of the object of study. Hence, the author predicates that the language studies scenario is permeated with a theoretical pluralism and each branch (theory) focuses on one or some specificities of language. Bearing this in mind, we can certainly assume that one theory complements one another in the epistemological realm of language.

This paper focuses on one portion of such theoretical pluralism: sociolinguistics<sup>2</sup>, more specifically on language variation (informal language). By and large, sociolinguistics emerges from a demand for studying language taking social factors into consideration (LABOV, 2008). In this respect, Calvet (2002, p. 147) postulates that “linguistics can only be defined as the study of a social community in its linguistic aspect”. In sum, sociolinguistics concerns the study of the impacts of social factors on language and such factors encompass, inter alia, languages in contact, language attitudes/behavior and language variation (on which this paper is centered) (CALVET, 2002).

Inasmuch as language is interwoven with society, it is extremely heterogeneous and, thereby varies; this variation occurs on account of internal and external factors (BAGNO, 2007; CALVET). The former includes phonetic and syntactic context, for instance, whilst the latter is broader and is associated with geographical variables (diatopic), social stratification (diastratic), medium of communication (diamesic) and levels of formality (diaphasic). Needless to say such variation occurs at all levels of language (phonetic/phonological, morphological, semantic, lexical, syntactic, stylistic, orthographic and others).

Bearing this discussion in mind, informal language (in this case, English) is primarily situated in the diaphasic realm. Nonetheless, it can certainly be related to diatopic, diamesic

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<sup>2</sup> As this paper is centered only on one topic of sociolinguistics, it does not provide an in-depth scrutiny of this area of study. For such purposes, Calvet (2002), Bagno (2007) and Labov (2008) can be valuable sources.

and diastatic variables (SENEFONTE, 2018), which in turns proves the dynamic nature of language.

This paper is comprised of a methodological section, which covers the type and the rationale for this study. Then, the following section endeavors to provide theoretical and methodological insights as of informal English (which also includes language teaching). Finally, some conclusive notes are presented in the closing section.

## **1. Methodological Issues**

As avowed earlier, this paper is a (qualitative) theoretical study, focusing on informal language. Demo (2000) explicates that theoretical research seeks to reconstruct a certain theory, concepts, ideas and so forth. Moreover, Demo (1994) asserts that theoretical studies can give rise to future research, especially the ones involving empirical or practical purposes. With this in mind, this paper endeavors to provide a theoretical systematization of informal English aiming at language learning and teaching purposes. Thus, this study does not attempt to reconstruct the theory on informal English; rather, the purpose is to discuss the concepts related to informal language and, most importantly, connect such discussion with a teaching-learning context.

This paper is a derivative of my doctoral thesis (SENEFONTE, 2018), in which the systematic review of literature conducted revealed a substantial scarcity of both empirical and non-empirical research on informal English (p. 73). As a matter of fact, the doctoral study provided a systematization of informal English in a holistic way, encompassing numerous features of informal language, as will be illustrated later on in this paper. Such systematic conceptualization proved relevant, as no other research study had ventured to do so (p.45 and 262). Therefore, the justification of this paper is undergirded by the fact that:

a) It addresses a topic that has been substantially overlooked in the literature<sup>3</sup>, despite the fact that it is widely employed in real and virtual settings. Additionally, it helps construct one's proficiency and it is prescribed by several standards/guidelines for language teaching and learning (SENEFONTE, 2018);

b) It provides a more 'accessible'<sup>4</sup> overview of informal English in a thorough way, which includes multifold aspects of this type of language. In this sense, this theoretical study

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<sup>3</sup> The systematic review of literature will not be illustrated in this paper, as it would be merely duplicative. A new literature search was conducted in 2020, by means of the same procedures employed in the doctoral thesis, and no new results were found.

contributes to the development and explanation of the theoretical conceptualization of informal English (EDGAR; MANZ, 2017);

c) It promotes critical thinking about (informal) language and its teaching and learning. In this respect, this paper has both a metalinguistic and an applied nature.

Hence, this paper is not simply a copy (or summary) of my doctoral thesis. First, because the systematization of informal English presented herein is critical and not merely duplicative. In other words, the content provided is updated and may have a slight difference from the version of 2018. Second, this paper adds a discussion on informal English teaching-learning, taking into consideration the multifaceted nature of the topic. It is worth noting that such discussion incorporates original insights, therefore not presented in the thesis.

## 2. A Theoretical and Methodological Discussion on Informal English

Informal language seems to be germane to the concept of language register. Generally speaking, register is a language variety that is motivated by contextual and functional variables (BIBER at al., 1999) and is mostly associated with levels of formality. Eisenstein (1983) argues that the choice of a certain language register (by the speaker) is predicated on some elements as follows: mode (medium of communication), topic (the subject), participants (the speakers involved) and notion/function (the purpose of communication).

As language registers are associated with levels of formality, they range from a formal to an informal realm, as illustrated in chart 1:

**Chart 1: Levels of Formality**

<i>Formal</i>
Might I suggest a red wine? May I suggest a red wine? Can I suggest a red wine? Why don't you drink a red wine? Why don't cha drink a red wine?
<i>Informal</i>

**Source:** the author (based on SENEFONTE, 2018).

As exhibited in chart 1, a register can be closer to a formal or informal domain. However, it is imperative to understand that there may be several 'layers' in between. As a matter of fact, the nature of language is considerably dynamic and one cannot simply label a

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<sup>4</sup> It is believed to be more accessible, since it is being publicized in a paper format, rather than in a doctoral thesis format, which is a complex and lengthy work, as is the case of the thesis focused. Hence, accessibility here

certain register as formal or informal. Rather, language registers are to be construed in terms of ‘degrees’ of formality (SENEFONTE, 2018). Furthermore, Bortoni-Ricardo (2004) explains that the closer a register is to the formal domain, the more monitored (controlled) it is, whereas the closer it is to an informal realm, the more spontaneous (less monitored) the register is.

In addition to the tenets exposed, it is pertinent to clarify that levels of formality are not necessarily associated with written or spoken language. In this regard, informal language cannot be exclusively alluded to spoken language, or formal registers to written language, as such allusion generally happens. On account of technological advances, for instance, informal registers are largely employed by means of written language. Needless to say, formal language can be used in numerous oral genres (e.g. announcements, speeches etc.).

Once informal language has been contextualized, the following subsection provides a characterization of such type of language.

## 2.1 Characterization of Informal English.

Informal English subsumes manifold features, as will be illustrated herein. However, this list is always prone to being revisited, since language is dynamic and fluid. Additionally, although such features belong to informal language, they may present different levels of informality, as explicated earlier:

a) *Ellipsis*: the omission of a language structure. Ex.: “you did this?” (omission of auxiliary).

b) *Headers*: A resource that introduces information about a topic, before such topic is introduced. Ex.: “Children, they are more vulnerable”. Inasmuch as spoken language is usually more fluid and this type of occurrence tends to happen more easily, we can assume that headers decrease the level of formality more in written language than in spoken.

c) *Tails*: A resource that provides information about a topic, after such topic is introduced. Ex.: “She’s a great student, Helen”. Like headers, tails tend to be more informal in written language.

d) *Fillers*: A resource, also known as hesitation markers (ENKENT, 1986), which aim to fill time. Ex.: “you know?”, “well”, “hmm”, “uh”, to name a few. Since they are features of spoken language, they also decrease the level of formality more in written communicative events.

e) *Backchannels*: A resource used to express confirmation or to encourage the speaker to continue. Ex.: “oh, I see”, “yes”, “uh-huh” and others.

f) *Repetition*: As the name implies, repetitions tend to occur more in spoken language, as it is a synchronous event (real time), therefore, they also decrease the level of formality more in written registers. Ex. “I, I’m cold”, “My opinion is (...) is this”.

g) *Metaplasms*<sup>5</sup>: A phonetic change that can result in spelling changes. Such changes include loss, addition or modification of sounds. Ex.: “cause” (loss of sound from ‘because’), “this” pronounced as ‘/dɪs/’, rather than ‘/ðɪs/’ (modification of sound).

h) *Emotional language*: includes impoliteness, which in turn may involve, inter alia, verbal aggression, life threatening, swearing and cursing. Ex.: “you, idiot”, “Damn it”. Additionally, emotional language is related to endearment. Ex.: “baby”, “sweetie”.

i) *Slang*: Non-standard language that serves heterogeneous functions, such as identification of a certain group (secretive language), as an ice-breaker and others. Ex.<sup>6</sup>: “bee’s knees” (excellent), “nicked” (stole).

j) *Taboo Language*: Category of words or expressions deemed inappropriate or offensive, as they are usually attached to body excretions, parts of the body, sex, discriminatory acts, sexual orientation, illegal activities and others. Ex.: “shit”, “ass”, “nigger”, to mention a few.

k) *Euphemism*: A resource used to substitute a word/expression regarded as harsh or blunt. Ex.: “bite the big one” (die).

l) *Idioms*: Combination of words that result in a particular meaning (usually figurative). Ex.: “stabbed in the back” (betrayed).

m) *Aphorism*: Usually a statement of wisdom (e.g., “actions speak louder than words”).

n) *Clichés*: Overused statements. Ex.: “brave as a lion”.

o) *Joke*: Resource employed in informal settings to amuse people; they are stories with a funny punchline (e.g.<sup>7</sup>, “Parallel lines have so much in common, it's a shame they'll never meet”).

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<sup>5</sup> For further information and/or examples of metaplasms, see Crowley (1997) and Phillips (1983).

<sup>6</sup> Examples from Oxford Royale Academy. Available at <<https://www.oxford-royale.com/articles/introduction-english-slang/#aId=1f3d6742-5901-4d8c-839a-d2881fad9004>>. Accessed on 05/13/2020.

<sup>7</sup> Example from Good Bad Jokes <<https://www.goodbadjokes.com>>, accessed on May 26, 2020.

p) *Riddles*: Also used for entertainment purposes, usually involve a question that requires ingenuity to be answered. Ex<sup>8</sup>: “What gets wetter and wetter the more it dries? A towel”.

q) *Tongue Twisters*: Phrases that are constructed to be difficult to articulate (e.g.<sup>9</sup>, “Round the rough and rugged rock the ragged rascal rudely ran”).

r) *Multi-word verbs*<sup>10</sup>: Commonly referred to as phrasal verbs, are a combination of a verb and another participle (preposition, another verb, adverb, noun, conjunction etc.). Ex.: “get up”, “go away”, “make fun of”.

s) *Colloquialisms*: Certain words, structures or expressions can be, by their nature, more informal/colloquial. Ex.: the addition of ‘up’ in some verbs may render them more informal (e.g., “call up”, “listen up”); the use of ‘you’ as a general pronoun (e.g., “you should respect teachers”), the use of ‘you guys’ for second person (plural), the use of ‘way’ as an intensifier (e.g., “This is way harder”) and some grammatical structures (e.g., “I’ve ran out of gas”, “where’s my books”, “he don’t like me”).

t) *Internet language*: Predominantly employed in written events, this type of language is characterized by economy of language (SENEFONTE, 2018). Hence abbreviations are the most common feature (e.g., “info”, for information). In addition to abbreviation, internet language is comprised of acronyms (e.g., “BTW”, for by the way), blending (e.g., “2F4U”, for too fast for you), extra punctuation (e.g., “THX!!!!”), symbols (e.g., “<3”, for heart/love) and onomatopoeic words (e.g., “haha”, for laughter).

## 2.2 Informal English Teaching and Learning

As illustrated earlier, informal language (English) is multifaceted and therefore, its teaching and learning present multiple possibilities. In the light of sociolinguistics, language teaching takes a heterogeneous position, as language has such nature. Being heterogeneous means incorporating as many ‘faces’ of language as possible into the classroom. Furthermore, the study of language is believed to be purposeful and effective provided that it is contextual,

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<sup>8</sup> Example from Your Dictionary <<https://examples.yourdictionary.com/examples-of-riddles.html>>, accessed on May 26, 2020.

<sup>9</sup> Example from Smart Word <<https://www.smart-words.org/tongue-twisters.html>>, accessed on May 26, 2020.

<sup>10</sup> It is important to highlight that multi-word verbs, by their nature, are not necessarily informal. As a matter of fact, there are numerous multi-words verbs that are formal (or closer to a formal domain), such as: dwell on, account for, to name a few. They are presented here as a ‘subset’ of informal language, because they are usually associated with informality and the reason lies in the fact the the majority of these multi-word verbs have an equivalent word, which in turn usually increases the level of formality. Ex.: rise (get up), explode (blow off).

that is, when language is examined within the social context in which it operates. In other words, the use of authentic (real) language is of utmost importance to such didactic purposes.

Senefonte (2018) argues that the literature on informal English teaching and learning shows that this type of language can be addressed by means of some tools as follows:

a) *Media*: Includes a vast range of tools (e.g., internet, TV shows, songs, films, advertising, platforms, applications etc.) and proves to be a great source of authentic language. In addition, media resources are widely accessible and are part of people's everyday lives. Regarding internet, it is relevant to mention some resources that are specially designed for teaching/learning purposes, which in turn can include informal language. In this respect, informal English can be addressed by means of games and activities from language teaching/learning websites (EISENSTEIN, 1983), online dictionaries<sup>11</sup> (HOMUTH; PIIPPO, 2011), to name a few.

As of *internet language*, social networking tools (e.g., blogs, applications etc.) can be explored both at a receptive and productive level (EKUNDYO, 2014). Features of conversational English (viz.: *ellipsis, headers, tails, fillers, backchannels, repetitions* and *metaplasms*) can be addressed through a systematic scrutiny of conversations from short videos, films, interviews and other spoken language events (HILLIARD, 2014). In this regard, Engkent (1983) advocates for the use of transcripts of actual conversations, as the written record can help students to identify such features in a more 'concrete' way. Needless to say that such language events are also a substantial source of other features of informal language<sup>12</sup> (e.g., *slang, emotional/taboo language, idioms, euphemism, aphorisms, clichés, riddles, jokes, tongue, twisters, multi-word verbs and other colloquialisms*).

In addition to the ideas discussed, media can support activities that focus specifically on language variation (registers). From the same types of sources presented earlier, different registers can be approached, ranging from formal to informal ones and with different levels of (in) formality. Such approach can include comparisons and critical discussions, for example, on the language choices, and most importantly, on the implications of these choices. Analogous to this type of activity, (applied) sociolinguists endorse a dialect/register sensitive

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<sup>11</sup> There are dictionaries that are specifically deployed for informal language (especially for slang, emotional/taboo language, multi-word verbs and metaplasms), as is the case of the Urban Dictionary, for instance. Available at <<http://www.urbandictionary.com>>, accessed on May 22, 2020.

<sup>12</sup> By deploying the most common and popular web search engines (viz.: Google, Bing, Yahoo etc.), one can easily find countless websites that focus specifically on some features of informal language (*idioms, aphorism, riddles, jokes, tongue twisters, to name a few*) and these websites can function both as a source of informal language and a starting point for teaching/learning activities.



view<sup>13</sup>. According to this theoretical-methodological perspective, language classes can sensitize students regarding the multiple varieties that account for a certain language, so that students develop critical awareness of this multifaceted nature of language. Most importantly, language varieties are seen at a descriptive level, rather than evaluative. In this sense, the role of language classes is believed to widen students' linguistic repertoire (starting from what they already know when they begin formal education).

b) *Journals*: Students and teachers can devise a journal specially designed for informal language. This way, as new words/expressions (viz.: *colloquialisms*, *multi-word verbs*, *slang*, etc.) are learned, the journal is updated (HOMUTH; PIIPPO, 2011). It is of paramount importance to highlight that such journal is updated as informal language emerges in linguistic events covered in the classroom. Hence, the journal is construed as a compilation of a type of language extracted from authentic communicative events, drawing upon a top-down perspective, therefore the journal is not made up of decontextualized or isolated words, expressions or sentences.

c) *Conversational events*: In addition to real dialogues and games gleaned from media resources, the literature on informal language signals possibilities of approaching informal language by means of conversational events, which can subsume dialogues, games, plays, interviews, to mention a few (KIMBALL, PALMER, 1978; SNOW, PERKINS, 1979). Hilliard (2014) contends that some of these conversational events can be designed through school projects, especially interviews, so that they can be more purposeful.

In a nutshell, informal language is substantially ramified and media resources prove to be a great ally to informal English teaching/learning. In addition to the didactic-pedagogical foundations illustrated, some principles seem to be worth mentioning, such as the dichotomy between receptive and productive language skills with respect to informal registers. Some authors advocate for a receptive-level approach for certain features of informal English (e.g., taboo/emotional language, slang.) (JACOBSON, 1975; ENCKENT, 1986; AUGER, 2003; SHENK, 2014), as they are believed to be inappropriate or offensive when produced by the speaker (especially a non-native one). On the other hand, however, Belmore (1970), Trudgill (1984), Senefonte (2014), to name a few, endorse a comprehensive approach to informal English teaching/learning, that is, at both levels: receptive and productive. In this regard, students can understand (receptive level) what people say to them, especially when it involves offensiveness and aggressiveness and can have the skills to (re) act to such situations

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<sup>13</sup> Another variation for this term is 'culturally responsive pedagogy'. For further details, see Erickson (1987).

(productive level). Nonetheless, it is relevant to emphasize that students need to be aware of their language choices and the consequences of such choices in a social (communicative) event. This awareness, developed in class, illustrates how dynamic and complex language classes are, since not only are linguistic issues covered, but also sociolinguistic, pragmatic, intercultural and others.

Another discussion that seems imperative is regarding translation of one type of register into another. In other words, it is common to find exercises, which claim to approach language variation/informal registers, whose aim is only to compare registers and ‘translate’ informal expressions to their formal equivalents, for instance. This type of exercise may have some significance, nevertheless, it is rather superficial, if that is the only action taken. Instead, metalinguistic activities can be a potential chance for exploring language use in a social context, which involves, inter alia, political, economical, religious and ideological variables. Besides comparing and contrasting registers, it is important that one understand the social motivations behind the choice of a language register and the extent to which such choice impacts on (and is impacted by) the speaker’s position and actions in a certain social sphere.

### Final Considerations

Grounded in Sociolinguistics and focusing on informal registers, this theoretical paper sought to discuss the concepts related to informal language and, raise a methodological discussion on informal English teaching-learning.

As adduced earlier, this study attempted to provide a more ‘accessible’ overview of informal English concisely and comprehensively. Taking into consideration the multilayered nature of this type of language, chart 2 summarizes the characterization of informal English presented herein:

**Chart 2: Characterization of Informal English**

<b>Feature</b>	<b>Example</b>
Aphorism	A penny saved is a penny earned
Backchannels	You’re serious?
Clichés	Like a kid in a candy store
Colloquialism	They ain’t got nothing to say
Ellipsis	You loved him?
Emotional Language	You bastard!
Euphemism	I’ll have to let you go (fire someone)
Fillers	Hmm
Headers	My mom (...) well, she’s a doctor.

Idioms	Your guess is as good as mine (I have no idea)
Internet Language	Wbu? (What about you?)
Jokes	"I was born in California." "Which part?" "All of me."
Metaplasm	They're gonna be dancin'
Multi-word Verb <sup>14</sup>	Cut it out! (stop doing something)
Repetition	But I, I'm with you
Riddle	I have a tail, and I have a head, but I have no body. I am NOT a snake. What am I? A coin.
Slang	Coin (money)
Taboo Language	What the fuck is that?
Tails	She's your girlfriend, Jane?
Tongue Twisters	Two tiny timid toads trying to trot to Tarrytown.

**Source:** the author (Based on SENE FONTE, 2018).

As a last remark, it is worth stating that the multilayered nature of informal language indicates countless levels of (in) formality. A certain language realization can be placed at different levels (categories) of (in) formality, hence language registers cannot be limited to only two categories: either formal or informal. Moreover, even a given feature of informal language can have multiple levels of formality, such as idioms, slang, emotional/taboo language, to name a few.

Although a discussion on informal English teaching and learning was raised, the main contribution of this paper is certainly theoretical, as it systematizes informal English in a thorough way. Therefore, providing an educational product (a didactic unit or sequence, for example) was not the aim of this study, even though some tangible ideas and sources of informal language were provided, so that teachers could devise their own teaching material.

Besides, the systematization of informal English and the discussion on its teaching and learning process did not seek prescriptive purposes. In other words, the theoretical-methodological overview illustrated was meant to be descriptive and to be a starting point for addressing informal language in the classroom, reason why a ready product was not offered, so that teachers can have the autonomy to choose what aspects of informal English and how they wish to address it. Such approach proves to be of utmost importance, since informal language accounts for one's proficiency, as follows:

Learning about characteristics of spoken grammar (and informal language) and ways to teach them empowers you to improve your students' overall fluency and face-to-face conversation, increases the authenticity of your speaking lessons, and prevents your students from speaking English like a textbook. (HILLIARD, 2014, p. 2, *comments added*).

Most importantly, when teachers address language registers in class, it is important that conscious decisions be made, both in terms of what/how to cover and why. In the classroom, language awareness is fundamental to understanding how language operates as a social phenomenon.

From this perspective, language classes are seen as a way to expand students' linguistic repertoire, which includes multiple skills (viz.: intercultural, discursive, sociolinguistic, pragmatic etc.). The language classroom is an opportunity to sensitize students regarding how language operates and this process includes what/how to say (language choices), when/where (context), to whom (interlocutors), why (purposes/function) and most importantly, the social implications of such choices and actions.

The understanding of language as a powerful tool (critical language awareness) enables us to realize how it can promote inclusion or exclusion, access or denial (of certain social spheres), prestige or stigmatization and so many other actions, which can be inherently related to the language variety we speak or choose (consciously or not) to use in a given communicative event. Thus, the more language varieties one masters, the more access/opportunities one has, both in terms of belonging to a certain social context and of acting, though language, upon and within such context.

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<sup>14</sup> Not exactly a 'feature' of informal English, but a closely-related topic.

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