

**The Linguistic Register of  
Wikipedia.org**

Link:

<http://www.wikipedia.org/>

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### **Yes, I Still Wiki.**

I began my examination of Wikipedia.org during my “Summer A” session at Columbia in a class entitled “Computers, Problem Solving and Cooperative Learning.” I am continuing my study of this website because I find that it provides an excellent example of the study of languages. There are many points within Halliday’s definition of a linguistic register which I can apply to Wikipedia.org.

Within the “Hallidayan” framework of a linguistic register are three important “headings”. They are the field, the tenor and the mode.

### **Wikipedia’s Field of Discourse:**

Halliday defines the **field of discourse** to be “...what is happening, to the nature of the social action that is taking place: what is it that the participants are engaged in, in which the language figures as some essential component?” (Halliday 1985)

A wiki, as defined by [Wikispaces.com/tour1](http://Wikispaces.com/tour1), is “a set of web pages that anyone can edit.”(Wikispaces.com 2006) Wikipedia, the first online wiki encyclopedia, was founded by Jimmy Wales in 2001. The company is operated by the non-profit Wikimedia Foundation and has a payroll of five individuals. Wikipedia, however is maintained by over 30,000 actively participating volunteers whose mission is to work collaboratively to provide articles in many languages.(Twomey 2006) Here is a chart listing the number of articles on Wikipedia in ten main languages as of 8/5/06:

	Articles as of 08/07/06	Articles as of 06/07/06	Difference in Two Months
English	1,292,000	1,176,000	116,000 articles
German	441,000	411,000	30,000 articles
Polish	267,000	240,000	27,000 articles
Netherlands	216,000	203,000	13,000 articles
Italian	181,000	163,000	18,000 articles
Spanish	139,000	124,000	15,000 articles
Portuguese	165,000	143,000	22,000 articles
Swedish	176,000	165,000	11,000 articles
Japanese	240,000	220,000	20,000 articles
French	337,000	297,000	40,000 articles
Approximately 141 Other Languages Categorized as +10,000 or +1,000 or +100 articles			312,000 total

Wikipedia's **field of discourse**, therefore, is a global online encyclopedia written by a collaborative society of individuals who work to maintain the articles. Language plays an integral part in the maintenance of this website. This discourse is an attempt to share knowledge by making information available in the world's language base. As we can see from the chart above, a total of 311,000 articles have been added to the Wikipedia site in ten main languages over a period of two months. Since I have written my first two reports about Wikis, there has been an average of 5,200 articles per day. The 30,000 editors who are collaborative contributors of this website are engaging in the edification of the global base of internet users.

The global base of internet users is also an integral part of the "social action"(Halliday 1985) of the **field of discourse**. They have the opportunity to view articles in their own language or attempt to read articles in any other language of their choosing.

It is interesting to note that Wikipedia maintains a “Meta-Wiki” page which standardizes the use of languages within the Wikipedia site. The following link,

[http://meta.wikimedia.org/wiki/Meta:Babel\\_templates](http://meta.wikimedia.org/wiki/Meta:Babel_templates), maintains a set of templates which standardizes the language level being used. In describing the categories of languages, the Meta Wiki page states:

“Not everyone at the meta speaks the same language. To help with communication, users can categorize themselves into different language categories on their user page. Example language groups are: en for English, de for German, and so on. Additionally, users can specify their level of proficiency in the language.

- 1 stands for basic knowledge, i.e. the ability to understand and answer simple questions in the language.
- 2 stands for intermediate knowledge.
- 3 stands for advanced or fluent knowledge, i.e. the ability to correct spelling and grammar errors in the language.
- Category without number stands for 1st language speakers (so-called mother tongue).
- For example, de-1 refers to a user with basic skills in German, and en-3 refers to a user with advanced skills in English. The two-letter language code is the two-letter code as described in [ISO 639](#).”(Wikipedia 2006)

Halliday discusses “the essential component of language” within the definition of **field of discourse**. Within the context of Wikipedia, the essential component of language is defined with the two letter code plus an number indicating level of fluency. By doing so, they are creating their own register as a basis for editing and reading. That way, the editors and users can have a frame of reference as to the level of “fluency” within which an article was written.

### **Wikipedia’s Tenor of Discourse:**

Halliday defines tenor of discourse to be, “...who is taking part, to the nature of the participants, their statuses and roles.”(Halliday 1985)

There are three main groups that comprise the **tenor** of Wikipedia. The first is the staff of the Wikipedia Foundation, a small group of five individuals who are paid to maintain the Foundation. Wikipedia defines its own Foundation as:

“The **Wikimedia Foundation Inc.** is the parent organization of the [Wikipedia](#), [Wiktionary](#), [Wikiquote](#), [Wikibooks](#) (including [Wikijunior](#) and [Wikiversity](#)), [Wikisource](#), [Wikimedia Commons](#), [Wikispecies](#), [Wikinews](#) and [Meta-Wiki](#) collaborative projects. It is a **non-profit** corporation based in [St. Petersburg, Florida, USA](#), and organized under the laws of the state of [Florida](#). Its existence was officially announced by Wikipedia co-founder [Jimmy Wales](#), who was hitherto running Wikipedia within his company Bomis, on [June 20, 2003](#). Its approval by the U.S. Internal Revenue Service, by letter in April 2005, as an educational foundation in the category "Adult, Continuing Education" means all contributions to the Wikimedia Foundation are **tax deductible** for U.S. federal income tax purposes.”(Wikipedia 2006)

The Wikipedia Foundation has never had to change this wiki to a “read only” status. Certain articles which have a tendency to attract editorial comments, such as those pertaining to George Bush, are “protected” by a semi-protection rule which states:

“Pages that are **semi-protected** cannot be edited by unregistered users or from accounts less than 4 days old.” (Wikipedia 2006)

The second main group of the **tenor of discourse** consists of the 30,000 editors of Wikipedia. The Wikipedia policy page defines editors as:

“Those who edit in [good faith](#), show [civility](#), seek [consensus](#), and work towards the goal of creating a great [encyclopedia](#) should find a welcoming environment. Wikipedia greatly appreciates additions that help all people.”(Wikipedia 2006)

The editors of Wikipedia not only write their own articles, but also edit the articles which are not in the spirit of “civility” and “consensus”. For example, Wikipedia has a centralized area of pages that need “cleanup” which editors can access and return to the spirit of Wikipedia.

The third main group of the **tenor of discourse** consists of any user on the World Wide Web. The user could access articles, in any language for the purpose of research. A researcher can become an editor if they are willing to abide by the Wikipedia policies of good faith, civility and consensus.

### **Wikipedia's Mode of Discourse:**

Halliday refers to the **mode of discourse** to be, "...what part the language is playing, what it is that the participants are expecting the language to do for them in that situation: the symbolic organisation of the text, the status that it has, and its function in the context, including the channel ...spoken...written...combination...and also the rhetorical mode, what is being achieved by the text in terms of such categories as persuasive, expository, didactic, and the like."

When a user of the internet first encounters Wikipedia, they are presented with an index page which displays a metaphor of the earth's sphere as a puzzle that is incomplete, with pieces presumably being added. The puzzle pieces are comprised of language symbols. The globe itself is surrounded with a circle of ten main languages that represent the leading number of a topic articles that comprise Wikipedia, the online collaborative encyclopedia. A search field is presented with the word "search" displayed in each of the ten main languages. Language is the star of this website.

The "participants" of this Wikipedia encyclopedia are expecting to be enlightened and educated, to have their questions answered. A student of a second or third language can attempt to read an article in another language. As a researcher of the wiki format, I was personally surprised to find more than 150 languages represented in

the available articles. I didn't realize that there were that many languages on the face of the earth.

The symbolic organization of the text centers on highlighted words connected to hypertext links which further define the linked text. "Buttons" are not as prevalent. Highlighted words, images and text links to audio and video are Wikipedia's navigation cues.

Halliday also discusses rhetorical modes of persuasion, exposition, didactic (moral) lessons. I believe that Wikipedia's mission is to be the opposite of these rhetorical modes. Wikipedia maintains a policy page entitled, "What Wikipedia is Not." This link, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:What Wikipedia is not#Wikipedia is not a mirror or a repository of links.2C images.2C or media files](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:What_Wikipedia_is_not#Wikipedia_is_not_a_mirror_or_a_repository_of_links.2C_images.2C_or_media_files) goes to great lengths to inform editors and users that Wikipedia is not a repository of personal beliefs. It is edited in the spirit of consensus. If an article is found to be slanted toward personal opinion rather than verifiable fact, then it is returned to its prior format through its history logs. If need be, the page is placed into a "semi-protected" mode to discourage editorial comment.

### **In Conclusion:**

It was interesting to examine the Wikipedia website under the lens of Halliday's linguistic framework of field, tenor and mode. I believe that Wikipedia has created a global linguistic register which invites inquisitive people from around the world to examine articles in their own or another's language. By establishing Wikipedia's own

base rule of “fluency”, they have established the groundwork for researchers to examine global topics of interest.

I found that Halliday’s framework was flexible enough to help me determine the field, tenor and mode of Wikipedia’s linguistic register. It left room for me to figure out what the web site was, and what it wasn’t.

There is one main and important difference between the edit format of Wikipedia and the edit formats contained on Moodle and Edublogs. The Wikipedia edit format has **section** edits. There is a small link displayed as [edit] on Wikipedia pages. If you hover your mouse over this word, you will see the words “Edit section: section name”. This tells you which portion of the page you can edit by clicking on the link. The entries on a wiki page are large, so the wiki software makes this more manageable by providing section edits. In order to determine how Wikipedia manages editing conflicts, I signed up as an editor. By doing so, I was able to find the edit tips which describe this situation:

### “Edit conflicts

If [someone](#) else makes an edit while you are making yours, the result is an [edit conflict](#). Many conflicts can be automatically resolved by the [Wiki](#). If it can't be resolved, however, you will need to resolve it yourself. The Wiki gives you two text boxes, where the top one is the other person's edit and the bottom one is your edit. Merge your edits into the top edit box, which is the only one that will save.”(Wikipedia 2006)

The Wikipedia software resolves the conflicts by helping the editors manage the conflict. This service is not provided by Moodle and Edublogs. “Logical locks” which are edited directly by editors and viewed by their collaborators provides a needed “work around” where the software is not capable of managing conflicts. The “logical lock” which we are using in the Moodle wiki looks like this:

Being edited by (name)(date)(time).

The editor modifies and saves the wiki to reserve the edit. Then the user modifies the lock back to its original state when they are done. Wiki on!

## **References**

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