Book Review

Marina Dossena & **Gabriella Del Lungo Camiciotti** (eds.). 2012. *Letter Writing in Late Modern Europe*. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins. ISBN 9789027256232 (hardback), vii, 254 pp. €95.00

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DOI 10.1515/jhsl-2015-0016

Letter Writing in Late Modern Europe, edited by Marina Dossena and Gabriella Del Lungo Camiciotti, offers an overview of letter writing practices among different language communities from the sixteenth to the end of the nineteenth century. By using the "language history from below" approach, most of the studies comprising the volume provide new details and a fresh look at written varieties used in correspondence, especially by lower and middle class people. The volume comprises studies focusing on six different languages, and thereby provides the reader with a comparative approach, facilitating the establishment of cross-linguistic and cross-cultural links in the letter-writing practices of diverse language communities.

Correspondence plays an important role in investigating language histories "from below": it offers the researcher the possibility of reconstructing lesser-known written varieties that existed in parallel to printed standards. The editors of this volume emphasize the usefulness of epistolary discourse in the diachronic study of language: situated at the intersection of spoken and written language, letters help reconstruct the vernaculars of the past, as well as "bridge the gap between prescription and real language use" (p. 3), allowing linguistic analysis of different genders, social classes, and ages. Several aspects of epistolary discourse, such as dialogic interaction, self-(re)presentation, temporal relativity, and letter writing as a social and cultural practice, are discussed in the book. The topics covered range from theoretical and methodological issues to issues of identity construction and the relationship between literacy, education, and linguistic production.

Marina Dossena discusses the main theoretical and methodological challenges by focusing on such problematic issues as obtaining and processing the primary sources, the lack of biographical and social network information about the people involved, the terminology employed in identifying the types of documents or participants involved in discursive exchange, the physical qualities of the text, issues in transcription, and the diaglossic nature of correspondence.

The issues raised by Dossena are buttressed by contributions from Rita Marquilhas on the historical digital archive of Portuguese letters (the CARDS[1] corpus) and Marijke van der Wal, Gijsbert Rutten, and Tanja Simons on the Dutch *Letters as Loot* corpus. These contributions help identify key elements necessary when building a corpus, database or digital archive of letters suitable for historical sociolinguistic analysis: diplomatically transcribed texts should be supported with paralinguistic and extralinguistic information, including, but not limited to, socio-historical and linguistic keywords (as in the CARDS corpus), information on manuscripts' physical layout, digital facsimiles, a separate database containing demographic information on the participants involved in the correspondence (as in the CARDS corpus) or (an) additional database(s) containing information on the letters (as in the *Letters as Loot* corpus). As the experiences with Portuguese and Dutch material described in this volume indicate, the development and compilation of letter corpora (or databases) requires not only social, historical or linguistic approaches, but should consider paleographic and textual criticism methods as well.

Epistolary formulae or formulaic language found in epistolary discourse is another major theme of the book. Stephan Elspaß, discussing the role of formulaic language such as clichés, proverbs, and other so-called "pre-fabricated linguistic chunks" in German emigrant letters of the nineteenth century, distinguishes between formulae used independently of the semantic context (such as address, opening and closing formulae, and others) and formulae that depend on and support the context (such as quotations from the Bible, proverbs, idioms, and others). Relying on German, Dutch and Danish examples, Elspaß concludes that the formulaic framework helped the partially (or mechanically) schooled writers to compose a letter as "it played a crucial role in structuring the content of a letter and in supporting its central arguments" (p. 51). Elspaß's study highlights the importance of textual factors (degree of formulaicity or creativity) in the study of historical language variation and change.

Marijke van der Wal, Gijsbert Rutten and Tanja Simons's chapter on Dutch also suggests that letter writing, especially among lower and lower-middle class people, was "a heavily conventionalized social practice" (p. 156). Their sociolinguistic analysis of the greeting formulae in the corpus of Dutch letters from the seventeenth century suggests a direct link between the use of fixed epistolary formulae and writing experience: formulae prevail in the letters written by less experienced scribes and are more likely to be found in letters written by women.

1 *Cartas Desconhecidas* ('Unknown Letters').

Lea Laitinen and Taru Nordlund, on the other hand, relying on Finnish data, discuss epistolary formulae as "meaningful elements with textual functions on their own" (p. 66). Even though self-educated Finnish letter writers relied on formulaic expressions in order to structure their texts, these performative formulae, borrowed from administrative discourse, helped to create stylistic practices and indexed writers' identification with the national language community. Laitinen and Nordlund's study describes letter-writing practices in a rather complex sociolinguistic situation: a diverse letter-writing "community" in nineteenth-century Finland comprised of Finnish-speaking ordinary people, Finnish-speaking "social climbers", a Finnish-speaking Swedish-educated (bilingual) elite, and a Swedish-speaking elite who shifted to Finnish. Thus, the study presents multilingual language communities with unequal social and linguistic power relationships. More research on these types of communities from other languages might provide us with new insights for cross-linguistic comparison in the study of language history in Late Modern Europe.

Issues of identity construction in letters are also approached in chapters by Eleonora Chiavetta and Gabriella Del Lungo Camiciotti. Chiavetta applies the Critical Discourse Analysis approach to the letters of Frances Leonora Macleay to her brother William. Chiavetta's analysis illustrates how the use of meta-communication devices, the choice of topics in the letters, as well as the increasing spatial distance between the writer and the addressee index the writer's identity changes over time. Del Lungo Camiciotti, on the other hand, discusses issues of identity construction and relational functions in the commercial letters of art dealers in the nineteenth century. The chapter highlights complex issues between the public and private domains in business correspondence, as the latter "can express both social distance and proximity in addition to conveying commercial information" (p. 111). The issues related to asymmetrical communicative relations, discussed by Del Lungo Camiciotti, are also touched upon in the chapter on news reporting in English and Italian diplomatic correspondence by Nicholas Brownlees. Brownlees's cross-linguistic comparison nicely shows that personal letters written by English and Italian envoys to their respective Secretary of State at the end of the eighteenth century exhibit "marked similarity" (p. 136) in terms of textual superstructure and semantic macrostructure. These results inquire further cross-linguistic and cross-cultural research on the history of diplomatic discourse.

The relationship between oral and written language and the problem of dialect representation are touched upon in the chapters by van der Wal, Rutten, and Simons on Dutch and Robert McColl Millar on English letters written by semi-literate writers exiled to New South Wales. With their study of *h*-dropping in letters to and from Zeeland, van der Wal, Rutten, and Simons illustrate that seventeenth- and eighteenth-century scribes gradually adopted the supraregional writing

practice and resisted writing in dialect. McColl Millar, based on the analysis of letters written by two inhabitants from Lancashire, similarly argues that semi-literate writing can be defined as non-standard rather than dialectal, as the written language in the analyzed letters did not accurately represent the spoken language of the time (p. 176). On the contrary, the very fact that some frequently used spoken dialect language features are missing in the letters suggests that writers were conscious of their writing experience and therefore local dialectal forms were disfavored compared to supraregional or standard forms.

The relationship between standard and non-standard written varieties is discussed further in the chapters by Kevin McCafferty and Carolina P. Amador Moreno (on Irish English) and Tony Fairman (on English lower-class letters of 1800–1834). McCafferty and Amador Moreno focus on the variation between the standard and non-standard use of first-person *shall* and *will*, the spread of the "standard pattern", and the replacement of *shall* by *will* in Irish English, based on the data from the *Corpus of Irish English Correspondence* (CORIECOR). In his chapter, Fairman elaborates on issues related to literacy, prescription, and standard language ideology, and their effect on the study of language history. With an analysis of the distribution of Anglo-Saxon monosyllabic words vs. Latinate polysyllables, Fairman illustrates how the decreasing use of monosyllables correlates with better literacy and social class in early nineteenth-century England. Some of the claims proposed by Fairman in his scheme of ideas, even though valid for some language communities (or, more specifically, linguists), may not be valid for others. For instance, handwritten sources have a long tradition in the histories (including standard language histories) of some European languages, especially the "small" ones; thus, they have not been "neglected" by language historians. In addition, the development of standards (as is in the case of Estonian, Finnish, Latvian, Lithuanian, Slovak, and other languages) is not always associated with the higher social classes, but rather with a cultural elite stemming from lower social strata.

The volume concludes with a chapter by Linda C. Mitchell that presents an overview of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century English letter-writing instructions found in letter-writing manuals and grammar textbooks and discusses their role in teaching grammar and composition skills.

The diversity of the language communities discussed and the theoretical and methodological issues raised make *Letter Writing in Late Modern Europe* a solid addition to the field of historical sociolinguistics. The book will offer the reader a glimpse into the most recent cutting-edge research projects, corpora, and digital archives designed for historical language study and will provide historical sociolinguists with refined tools, methods, and approaches, as well as the cross-linguistic contextual background necessary for future studies.