



Article

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Comparing the register of seventeenth-century Dutch business letters to private letters: formulaic language and French-origin items

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Abstract: In this article, we examine, quantitatively and qualitatively, Dutch business letters written by merchants, focusing on formulaic phrases and French suffix borrowing. The letters are part of the *Prize Papers*, the collection of documents confiscated by the English during times of warfare. We compare these business letters to private letters from the same source, and address the question whether the business letters constitute a particular register. The business letters, written by upper and upper-middle ranked male merchants from the seventeenth century, appear to differ from private letters written by people with a similar social profile. Frequent formulae highly characteristic of seventeenth-century private letters occur to a much lesser extent, if at all, in the business letters. Other formulae, some including Romance origin items (*Laus deo, saluut, cordiale*), occur more frequently in the business letters. The frequency of verbs with the French-origin suffix *-eren* is found to be higher in the business letters than in the private letters. Functional explanations are presented for these register differences: formulaic language is correlated with writing experience, and the use of French-origin items may be connected to the common vocabulary used in international trading networks. Similarities in phrasing are also revealed in a qualitative analysis of examples of private and business letters by the same writer. This finding demonstrates how similar private and business letters often were, thus challenging the idea of distinct registers.

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1 Introduction

Merchant letters from the past have been the subject of elaborate historical research, as a source of information for economic and social historians (cf. Trivellato 2007: 90–93). They offer detailed information on many aspects of trade (prices of trading goods, methods of buying and selling, transport and insurance, payment), the national and international networks of traders and the actual process of mercantile collaboration.¹ Communicating through letters, which informed the recipients on profits and risks and in which valuable information on the trustworthiness of business relations was exchanged, has been vital for long-distance trade during many centuries, as historians have repeatedly argued (Trivellato 2007). Merchant letters have also attracted the attention of historical linguists who focus, for instance, on the possibly innovative character of the language of traders (Wagner et al. 2017). Another linguistic question is whether merchant letters may be characterised as a particular category or genre, which can be identified not only by the profession of the letter writers and their relationship to the addressees, but also by specific linguistic features. This question is sensitive to different historical contexts and therefore requires case studies of merchant letters from various periods and regions. Wagner (2017), for instance, shows that the language of Judaeo-Arabic mercantile writing of the early and late medieval and early modern periods differed from the language of private letters and letters used for community purposes. Other case studies will have to show whether this particular finding can be generalised to other languages and periods and what, in these other cases, the characteristics of mercantile writing are.

In this paper, we study letters by Dutch merchants from the seventeenth century and address the question whether there are register differences between private letters and business letters. In analysing the letters, we follow the approach to textual categories laid out by Biber and Conrad (2009), according to which a *genre* can be externally described, that is, based on the situational context and the communicative purpose, which then also have linguistic repercussions. A business letter, for example, is typically exchanged between business partners and deals with trade-related matters. Linguistically, this type of situation may lead to particular phrases or expressions that characterise business letters (*viz.* genre conventions). There is no

¹ An illustrative example of this practice is found in the Dutch letters written by the Hamburgian citizen Michiel Heusch senior, an international trader of high importance, and addressed to his son Michiel travelling in Italy (cf. van der Wal 2018, 2019).

doubt that the business letters that we use for the present paper can be described as such a genre, as we use the communicative purpose and the social roles of the writers and addressees as criteria for establishing whether a letter is a private letter or a business letter (see Section 2). *Register*, in Biber and Conrad's (2009) approach, refers to linguistic features that tend to occur significantly often in particular genres for functional reasons, but they are not restricted to these genres and may occur in any type of text. These features and possible register differences will be examined for private and business letters in our present article.

Our empirical focus is on Dutch business letters from the late seventeenth century, which are part of the *Prize Papers*, the collection of documents confiscated by the English during times of warfare. We will examine, both quantitatively and qualitatively, a set of business letters written by merchants, focusing on formulaic phrases and on foreign language items, in particular on a case of French suffix borrowing. We will compare these business letters to the private letters from the *Prize Papers* that we analysed previously (Rutten and van der Wal 2014). Against this background, we also intend to problematise mercantile correspondence with regard to the aforementioned genre/register distinction, discussing the issue of “what sets traders’ letters apart from private correspondence and other ‘low’ registers” (Wagner et al. 2017: 24).

2 Data and method

2.1 The Letters as Loot source

Our previous research concentrated on seventeenth- and eighteenth-century private letters, which miraculously survived due to warfare and privateering, the long-standing legitimised activity of conquering enemy ships and confiscating all papers on board, including mail bags and the crew's private papers. In England, the confiscated papers of Dutch ships remained in the High Court of Admiralty's Archives. As a result of the frequent warfare between England and the Netherlands from the second half of the seventeenth to the early nineteenth century, approximately 40,000 Dutch letters, both private and business, and a wide range of other material are currently stored in over a thousand boxes in the National Archives (Rutten and van der Wal 2014: 1–18; van der Wal 2006; van der Wal et al. 2012). This archival source of letters allowed us to examine the language use of the middle and lower ranks of society, both men and women, as the private letters were sent by people from various social ranks, in particular lovers, spouses, parents, children, other relatives and friends who needed to communicate with their loved ones at a geographical distance. Our research of these private letters revealed both gender and

social rank differences for a selection of linguistic features such as epistolary formulae, forms of address, schwa apocope, relativisation and negation (Rutten and van der Wal 2014).

Although we focused primarily on private correspondence, we also collected business correspondence. The tagged and lemmatised *Letters as Loot (LAL)* Corpus comprises 1,033 letters, including a limited number of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century business letters.² The additional *LAL-2* collection of another 1,386 transcribed letters comprises more business letters as well as letters of a hybrid character.³ We emphasise that a clear-cut distinction between private and business letters often does not exist. Apart from letters with content of a strictly private nature, quite a few private letters also contain more or less extensive passages with business information. On the other hand, business letters written by one business associate to another may also show private information. In the LAL Corpus all letters were categorised as either private or business-like. In the case of letters of a hybrid character, comprising substantial information about both private and business matters, the relationship between the sender and the addressee was decisive: for instance, letters between husband and wife, parents and children were labelled private, while letters of individuals writing to their business contacts or more distant relatives were categorised as business letters. Such a categorisation was not carried out for the additional LAL-2 collection, which therefore still comprises the hybrid category.

2.2 Selection of letters written by merchants

The selection of letters written by merchants from the LAL and LAL-2 corpora started with search actions in our database, using the metadata *koopman* ‘merchant’, *koopman/eigenaar plantage* ‘merchant/plantation owner’, *koopman/schipper* ‘merchant/skipper’, *schipper/koopman* ‘skipper/merchant’, *handelaar op plantage* ‘trader at a plantation’ and *zakenman* ‘businessman’. Secondly, checking all letters and examining in particular the hybrid letters, we divided them into the two categories private and business. Thirdly, we selected the business letters, at which point we noticed that the seventeenth-century business letters from merchant-senders (108 letters written by 62 merchants) outnumbered the eighteenth-century ones

² For this corpus with elaborate search facilities (see <https://brievensbuit.ivdnt.org>). This corpus comprises 50 seventeenth-century and 54 eighteenth-century business letters.

³ As a late spin-off, the *LAL-2* collection was published online in early 2021 at <https://brievensbuit2.ivdnt.org>. LAL2 comprises 85 seventeenth-century business letters and 31 hybrid letters, and 152 eighteenth-century business letters and 86 hybrid ones.

(74 letters written by 38 merchants). Therefore, we decided to concentrate on the seventeenth-century material for our present research. This seventeenth-century selection initially consisted of 108 business letters written by 62 different merchants. To avoid overrepresentation of particular writers, we limited the letters of individual writers to 1,500 words. The final selection thus consists of 88 business letters (41,152 words), written by 62 merchants. Finally, among this group of merchants we also identified 25 individuals who wrote both business and private letters. More information can be found in the Appendix.

All merchants were male and allocated to mainly the upper-middle and upper ranks of society according to the stratification adopted for the LAL Corpus (Rutten and van der Wal 2014: 9–10).⁴ Note that ‘upper’ is a relative term and does not refer to the highest layer of contemporary society comprising the aristocracy and the non-noble ruling classes; in the present research it refers to wealthy merchants and plantation owners. The merchants discussed here were involved in long-distance trade, mainly in the Caribbean region. A majority of 42 letter writers sent their 60 letters from the islands of St. Kitts (St. Christoffel), Guadeloupe, Martinique and St. Martin, and from Surinam, to merchants in the towns of Middelburg and Vlissingen in the province of Zeeland in the south-west of the present-day Netherlands. To a lesser extent, letters were sent to business relations in the cities of Amsterdam and Rotterdam. Only nine letters were sent vice versa from the Netherlands to the Caribbean region. The other nineteen letters circulated within Europe. The contents of the letters reveal the character of the trade. Apart from a diversity of trading goods, many merchants in the Caribbean region were involved in the sugar trade and they often refer to the state of the sugar plantations and the expected harvest. They appear to have been staying in the Caribbean region for a couple of years and often complain about still not being able to return home, as they needed to collect outstanding debts either for themselves or their employers in patria. Their trade and the collection of debts were hindered by rumours of the second Anglo-Dutch War (1665–1667) and the third Anglo Dutch War (1672–1674). In his letter from St. Kitts, dated 10 December 1664, for instance, merchant Esaias Storm mentions the influence of war rumours on the payment of debts: he tries to collect the debts from the English inhabitants, who are not willing to pay. If the war is confirmed, it will be even worse. Therefore, Storm takes all he can get: better something than nothing (*daerom so neem Jck nou Al Dat Jck kringen Can Beeter Wat, Als niemendal*). Apart from financial losses, these wars interrupted communication, as letters were confiscated by privateers.

4 Only one merchant was categorised as lower-middle class, 13 as upper class and 48 as upper-middle class.

2.3 Approach and outline

Elaborate previous research has led to a clear linguistic picture of seventeenth-century private letters (Rutten and van der Wal 2014). The present study extends the research on Dutch historical letters to include business letters. We will use the results for private correspondence as the point of departure for the present study, approaching business letters by merchants through the lens of private letters, and looking for possible register differences between these genres.

Formulaic language is one of the most striking features of seventeenth-century private letters (Rutten and van der Wal 2014: 75–202), which we briefly discuss in Section 3.1. In a quantitative analysis, we will examine whether the selected business letters differ in their formulaic usage from private letters written by male writers from a similar social rank, viz. the upper and upper-middle ranks as indicated above. In 3.2, we compare the use of six formulae that frequently occur in private letters to their use in the business letters. In Section 3.3, we discuss an additional set of formulaic phrases, also singling out formulae that characterise business letters.

While reading through and analysing these business letters by merchants, they appeared to comprise another phenomenon, viz. a high frequency of foreign, often French-origin items (cf. Rutten et al. 2015). This raises the question whether these business letters are characterised by a strong influence from French when compared to private letters. We will explore this issue with a case study of the verbal suffix *-eren*, which is based on the French infinitival suffix *-er* (Section 4).

After quantitative case studies in Sections 3 and 4, Section 5 zooms in qualitatively on the writing practices of merchants who wrote both business and private letters. Section 6 discusses our findings and presents conclusions.

3 Formulaic language in private and business letters

3.1 Formulaic language and writing experience

Dutch private letters from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries exhibit a remarkable number of formulaic phrases (Rutten and van der Wal 2014: 75–202). The phenomenon of formulaic language and of so-called epistolary formulae is shared across European writing traditions, and many examples have been discussed from other language areas, including English (Austin 1973a, 1973b; Davis 1965; Nevalainen 2001), German (Elspaß 2005: 152–196) and Finnish (Laitinen and Nordlund 2012). The commonality is usually explained by tracing the various Early and Late Modern

traditions back to late-Medieval and Renaissance letter writing in Latin and French legal and business practices (Nevalainen 2001).

Rutten and van der Wal (2014: 129–172) analyse six formulaic sequences in Dutch private letters from a quantitative perspective, focusing on the distribution of the formulae across social rank and gender. The consistent pattern found is that the frequency of formulae decreases when the social rank of the letter writer rises: there are significantly fewer formulae in letters allocated to the upper and upper-middle ranks than in letters connected to the lower and lower-middle ranks. There is a similar gender difference: women produce many more formulae than men. Rutten and van der Wal (2014: 164–172) explain these differences with reference to the concept of *writing experience* (Elspaß 2005: 45–46; Vandebussche 1999), i.e., the degree to which a person participates in the written culture. Lack of writing experience promotes the use of fixed phrases, whereas elaborate writing skills enable letter writers to be more creative. For people who were not used to writing, using a collection of fixed phrases was a safe option when writing a letter to their loved ones (Rutten and van der Wal 2012). Writing experience was unequally distributed across the community: the upper and upper-middle ranks as well as men in general had better access to education and were more likely to have a profession or occupation that required reading and writing, compared to the lower and lower-middle ranks as well as to women in general. The idea that epistolary formulae functioned as ready-made phrases for less experienced writers is supported by the quantitative result that non-autograph letters comprise many more formulae than autographs (Rutten and van der Wal 2014: 179–180). In this case, too, letter writers fell back on standard phrases, enabling them to write a socially acceptable letter.

Obviously, not all formulaic language can be explained with reference to writing experience alone, since formulaic phrases perform various communicative functions deemed necessary for successful interaction (Coulmas 1981; Wray 2002). One example is the greeting: whereas almost every historical letter comprises a formulaic greeting in the opening lines, letters differ in the extensiveness of the greeting formula (Rutten and van der Wal 2014: 100–101). The most extensive greeting formula is typically found in the letters of less experienced writers (Rutten and van der Wal 2014: 137–141).

We will investigate here the frequency of the six formulae analysed by Rutten and van der Wal (2014: 129–172). They were chosen for quantitative analysis due to their high frequency in the private letters. Establishing their frequency in business letters written by merchants will therefore shed light on possible register differences between private letters and business letters. As was mentioned above, the merchants in the present study were all allocated to the upper and upper-middle ranks, and all of them are men. Rutten and van der Wal (2014: 136–137) investigated 219 private

letters from the seventeenth century where the writer could be allocated to both a social rank and a gender category. In view of the social and gender categories relevant for our 88 business letters by merchants, we will only compare these to private letters also written by men from the upper and upper-middle ranks. Of the afore mentioned 219 letters, 121 were written by upper-middle ranked men, and sixteen by upper-ranked men. The results for these 137 letters are of particular relevance for the current comparison with 88 business letters, all authored by male merchants from the upper and upper-middle ranks of society.

3.2 Six frequent formulae

A frequent opening formula of seventeenth-century private letters is the phrase *een vriendelijke groetenisse zij geschreven aan* ‘a friendly greeting be written to’ (Rutten and van der Wal 2014: 137–141). There is quite some variation in this formula. Fixed slots are the indefinite article *een* ‘a’, the noun *groetenisse* ‘greeting’ and the preposition *aan* ‘to’. The other slots are variable, for example, another adjective may be used, or the verbs (*zij geschreven* ‘be written’) may be left out. It is a relatively frequent formula with 42 instances in 219 letters, thus the opening of 19 % of the private letters. Focusing on male writers from the upper and upper-middle ranks, Rutten and van der Wal (2014: 140–141) indicate that the formula appears in 7 % of the letters, which means that we would expect c. 6 tokens in 88 business letters. The normalised frequency in the private letters is c. 2 tokens per 10,000 words, in which case we would expect c. 8 tokens in the 41,152 words of our business letters written by merchants. In sum, 6–8 tokens is our prediction, but there is in fact not a single instance of this in the business letters.

Another frequent formula expresses health, usually in the first-person singular or plural, sometimes also in the second or third person (Rutten and van der Wal 2014: 141–146). The key words of the formula are *kloek en gezond* ‘strong and healthy’. A typical example is (1):

- (1) *ick laet u.l. weten als dat ick noch klouck ende gesont ben*
 ‘I let you know that I am still strong and healthy’
 (Rutten and van der Wal 2014: 141)

This expression, which addresses the health of the participants in the communication, usually occurs in the first lines of a letter and, unlike the previous greeting formula, it may occur multiple times in one letter. In the corpus of 219 private letters, it occurs 52 times. The frequency in letters written by upper- and upper-middle class men is c. 4 per 10,000 words, so we expect c. 16 tokens in our collection of business

letters. However, only one possible token is found, which does not occur in the opening passage of the letter, but further down, and it also has an unusual grammatical subject:

- (2) *al de slaven sijn Noch klouck ende ghesondt*
 ‘all the slaves are still strong and healthy’

This example deviates as it lacks a pronominal subject and does not refer to any of the participants in the communication. Following the wish that the addressee is still healthy, a third frequent formula (55 tokens in the corpus of 219 private letters) states that if this were not the case, the writer would be very sorry to hear this (Rutten and van der Wal 2014: 146–150). A typical example can be found in (3).

- (3) *waer het anders het soude mijn van herten leed sijn om t’hooren*
 ‘if it were different, I would be very sorry to hear that’
 (Rutten and van der Wal 2014: 146)

The key word is *leed* ‘sorrow’. The formula is usually preceded by a conditional clause (*waer het anders* ‘if it were different’). The verbal elements vary between the conditional and the modal auxiliary (*soude* ‘would’ in the example). The formula normally ends with *om te horen* ‘to hear’. Like the previous formula, this one occurs c. 4 times per 10,000 words in private letters by men from the upper and upper-middle ranks, so we expect c. 16 tokens in our business letters. There are four examples in which similar wordings are used to express sorrow (4), but there is only one token that can be considered a full example of the formula following the description in Rutten and van der Wal (2014: 146–147), see (5).

- (4) *het is mij seer Leet te hooren dat ghij noch niet betaelt ben*
 ‘I am very sorry to hear that you have not been paid yet’
- (5) *zoude ick anders verstaen zoude mij leet sijn om horen*
 ‘were I to understand differently [i.e. were it different] I would be sorry to hear that’

The fourth formula often follows the previous one and comprises a reference to God’s recognition of the previously expressed sorrow (Rutten and van der Wal 2014: 150–153). The phrase typically runs *dat weet God* ‘that God knows’, in which the noun *God* can be modified in various ways, for example ‘God almighty’ or ‘God, who is an expert of all hearts’. There are 29 tokens in 219 private letters, and c. 1.5 tokens per 10,000 words in the letters written by men from the upper and upper-middle ranks. We could therefore expect 6 tokens in our 88 business letters, but there are none.

The four formulae discussed so far are most often found in the introductory part of seventeenth-century private letters, and they also often follow one another in a particular order (Rutten and van der Wal 2014: 114–127). They characterise private letters, but they do not seem to be very characteristic of business letters. We will now discuss two further formulae that do not perform an interpersonal function such as greeting or expressing health statements, but that instead have a text-structural function, and can therefore appear anywhere in a given letter. The expression *ik laat u weten als dat* ‘I let you know that’ (cf. example (1) above) is often used to initiate discourse (Rutten and van der Wal 2014: 153–158). The infinitive *weten* ‘know’ is the key word of the formula, which is often combined with inflected forms of *laten* ‘let’. There are 138 examples in the 219 private letters, and the normalised frequency for upper-middle ranked men is c. 8 per 10,000 words, for upper-ranked men c. 2. In the business letters, which comprise 41,152 words, we therefore expect at least 8, and possibly 32 tokens. There are only four, one of which is given in (6).

- (6) *soo dient deser om u te latten wette als dat Ick [...]*
 ‘so this [letter] serves to let you know that I [...]

The sixth formula under scrutiny is another text-structural formula, which is used to continue discourse as well as to indicate a topic shift (Rutten and van der Wal 2014: 158–163). It often occurs as a single lexical item such as *vorders*, *voorder* or *voort* ‘further’. This lexical item may be reinforced by the expletive item *soo* ‘so’. The formula often introduces the previously discussed formula (*ik laat u weten als dat*), but can also be combined with yet other formulae (7) or wholly different and more creative language (8).

- (7) *Voorders is mijn schrijven dezès als dat jck [...]*
 ‘further is my writing here that I [...]
- (8) *Vorders aengaende den Engelsèn oorlooch*
 ‘further concerning the English war’

This formula is very frequent in the private letters (180 tokens). In view of the c. 12.5 tokens per 10,000 words among upper-middle-ranked men, and 15 tokens among upper-ranked men, we expect to find 50–60 tokens in our collection of business letters written by merchants from these same social layers. Whereas the formula is indeed much more frequent than any of the formulae discussed so far, the 88 business letters still provide only 24 tokens (two examples are in (7) and (8)).

In sum, these six frequent formulae highly characteristic of seventeenth-century private letters occur to a much lesser extent, if at all, in our 88 business letters. An explanation for this phenomenon will be presented in Section 6.

3.3 More formulae

In order to obtain a fuller picture of formulaic language in business letters by merchants, we investigated an additional set of other epistolary formulae that have been described as recurring elements in seventeenth-century private letters (Rutten and van der Wal 2014: 75–128). We paid particular attention to greetings and related formulae, most of which typically occur once per letter. We returned to the LAL Corpus for this analysis, selected the greetings and related formulae, which occur at the beginning and the closing of letters, and retrieved distributional frequencies that were not initially part of our description in Rutten and van der Wal (2014).

A frequently occurring phrase found at the beginning of private letters involves praise to God (Rutten and van der Wal 2014: 94). The most common forms appear to be *Looft God* ‘Praise God’ and in particular *Looft God boven al* ‘Praise God above all’. In the entire seventeenth-century LAL Corpus, the Dutch formula occurs in 48 % of the private letters. The Latinised counterpart *Laus deo (semper)* ‘praise to God (always)’ features in about 8 % of the seventeenth-century private letters. Focusing on the 137 letters written by men from the upper and upper-middle ranks, we find 22 instances of *Looft God (bovenal)* in the LAL Corpus (16 % of the letters) and 10 instances of *Laus deo (semper)* (7 % of the letters). The frequency of these formulae clearly differs in the business letters, in which not a single instance of *Looft God (bovenal)* occurs. However, the frequency of *Laus deo (semper)* (9) is higher than in the private letters with 14 instances in 88 letters (16 % of the letters).

- (9) *Laus deo Semper anno 1664 11m/15d*
 ‘Praise to God always in the year 1664 11th month/15th day’

Another frequent seventeenth-century formula is the *goede nacht(en)* ‘good night(s)’ wish (Rutten and van der Wal 2014: 122–123); see (10). This formula, which occurs in the closing of 50 % of the seventeenth-century private letters of the LAL Corpus, varies in the numeral slot, which may stay empty, but is often filled with indefinites and numerals indicating large quantities such as *veel* ‘many’, *(veel) duizend* ‘thousand(s)’, *(veel) honderdduizend* ‘hundred thousand(s)’ (van der Wal 2016: 211–213; van der Wal et al. 2018: 455–457). The word *nachten* ‘nights’ originates in the convention of using the night to indicate a time period as in English *fortnight*, Dutch *veertiennacht* for a period of fourteen days.⁵

- (10) *wenssen Ul hondert duissent goede nacht*
 ‘wish you a hundred thousand good nights’
 (Rutten and van der Wal 2014: 122)

⁵ For the meaning of *night* see the lemma ‘nacht’ in the online historical dictionaries of Dutch at gtb.inl.nl.

The *goede nacht(en)* formula has been shown to be characteristic of female and lower-ranked letter writers (van der Wal et al. 2018: 457). For the male writers from the upper and upper-middle ranks, we also find 29 instances in 137 private letters (21 % of the letters). In our selection of 88 business letters, however, (11) is the only instance of the *goede nacht* formula.

- (11) *Wensche Ul met Ul familie ende alle de vrienden goeden nacht*
‘(I) wish you with your family and all relatives good night’

Many seventeenth-century private letters have a variant of the highly variable commendation formula in their endings, in which the addressee is commended into the hands of God (Rutten and van der Wal 2014: 126–127). In 137 private letters written by upper and upper-middle class men, we find 16 instances (i.e., in 12 % of the letters). The frequency differs considerably among the merchants, with 43 tokens in 88 letters (49 % of the letters); some examples are shown in (12–15).

- (12) *De heere Beuolen*
‘Commended to the Lord’
- (13) *Sijt godt in ghenade bevolen*
‘Be commended to God in grace’
- (14) *Ick beuele vl inde bescherminge des alder hoochsten*
‘I commend you in the protection of the very highest’
- (15) *VL beuelende Jn godes protexie*
‘commending you in God’s protection’

Another epistolary phenomenon is the presence of the French loan *saluut* ‘greeted, a greeting’ at the beginning of a letter. There are only 15 tokens in the 137 private letters written by men from the upper and upper-middle ranks (11 % of the letters). The number of *saluut* instances is remarkably higher in the business letters: 31 tokens in 88 letters (35 %); see (16–18):

- (16) *Mijnheer rawelee Saluijt*
‘Mr. Rawelee (Raule) greeted/a greeting’
- (17) *Eersaemen Goeden vriendt saluijt*
‘Honourable good friend greeted/a greeting’
- (18) *Naer winschenge alles Goets salut*
‘After wishing all the best greeted/a greeting’

As discussed in Section 3.2, the frequent formula *een vriendelijke groetenisse zij geschreven aan* ‘a friendly greeting be written to’ does not occur at all in the 88

business letters. Rather, the merchants seem to use more succinct formulae. One example is the French loan *salut* discussed above. Another example is the short phrase *na cordiale groete(nisse)* ‘after cordial greeting’. This formula occurs in both private and business letters. The relatively high frequency of *saluut* in the business letters prompted us to look into the use of *cordiale*, which is also a loanword from French. It turns out that there are only 7 tokens of *cordiale* in connection with greetings in the 137 private letters written by upper and upper-middle-class men (5 % of the letters). In the 88 business letters, however, there are 8 tokens (9 % of the letters); see (19).

- (19) *naer cordiaele Groetenisse winsse VE Inde Genadege protexie des alderhoogste*
 ‘after cordial greeting (I) wish you in the merciful protection of the very highest’

This does not mean that all foreign elements are more frequent in business letters than in private letters. The Latin formula *actum* ‘done’, for example, which appears at the closing of a letter (20), occurs only three times in 88 business letters by merchants (3 % of the letters), but there are 14 tokens in the 137 private letters (10 % of the letters).

- (20) *actum In St Cristoffell aen baxstaar den, 7, desember [...] anno 1664*
 ‘done in St. Kitts, Basseterre, 7 December 1664’

Table 1 gives an overview of the results, showing the proportion of letters with a particular formula and the absolute number of instances (between brackets) of the formulae in private letters written by upper and upper-middle class men (UC & UMC men) and in business letters written by male merchants.

Table 1: Formulae in seventeenth-century private and business letters.

Formula	137 private letters by men from the upper and upper-middle ranks	88 business letters by male merchants from the upper and upper-middle ranks
<i>Looft God</i> ‘Praise God’	16 % (22)	–
<i>Laus deo</i> ‘Praise God’	7 % (10)	16 % (14)
<i>Goede nacht(en)</i> ‘Good night(s)’	21 % (29)	1 % (1)
Commendation formula	12 % (16)	49 % (43)
<i>Saluut</i> ‘greeted, greeting’	11 % (15)	35 % (31)
<i>Cordiale</i> ‘cordial (greeting)’	5 % (7)	9 % (8)
<i>Actum</i> ‘done’	10 % (14)	3 % (3)

In sum, the *Looft God* (*bovenal*) and *goede nacht* formulae appear to be restricted to private letters, with not a single instance of the former and only one token of the latter in the business letters. On the other hand, the commendation formula is more frequent in the business letters written by merchants than in private letters. Foreign elements such as *Laus deo* (Latin), *saluut* and *cordiale* (French) also occur more frequently in the business letters. At the same time, *actum* occurs more often in private letters.

4 French-origin items in Dutch

The Romance-origin items mentioned in Section 3.3 (*Laus deo*, *saluut*, *cordiale*) do not stand alone. On the contrary, while exploring the business letters written by merchants, we noticed that such Romance items, and French-origin items in particular, appear to be relatively frequent in these sources. Examples include words such as *monsieur* (instead of *heer*) ‘sir’, *freer* (instead of *broeder/broer*) ‘brother’, *mere* (instead of *moeder*) ‘mother’ and *cognossement* ‘consignment note’ (from French *connaissance*). This raises the question whether business correspondence was more prone to adopt French-origin items, for example because merchants often collaborated within international networks where French was a lingua franca, or because French had developed into a prestige variety (cf. Rjéoutski et al. 2014).

The supposed Frenchification of Dutch is a recurrent theme in traditional cultural and linguistic histories of the Low Countries (Frijhoff 1989, 2015). The explanation for the alleged Frenchification is (at least) two-fold: French was a contact language and therefore a functional choice for merchants, but also for people with other professions and occupations such as journalists and diplomats. There were also many French-speaking migrants in the Netherlands such as Huguenots, who advanced the establishment of French schools, churches, newspapers and publishing houses. Over time, the use of French also increased for identity reasons instead of functional reasons: French became a prestige language, and for some people even the preferred choice in letters and diaries, particularly from the eighteenth century onwards (van Strien-Chardonneau 2018).

There is, however, an astonishing lack of empirical research into the actual language contact situation. Rutten et al. (2015) present the first sociolinguistic corpus-based analysis of the distribution of French loan suffixes in historical Dutch letters from the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The authors identify social patterns relevant for the present analysis: many more loan suffixes are found in letters stemming from the upper and upper-middle ranks of society,

and this pattern applies to both male and female writers (Rutten et al. 2015: 164). They also find significant differences in frequency between the various suffixes: whereas most suffixes (e.g. *-age*, *-es*, *-teit*, *-aal* and many more) occur fewer than 20 times per 100,000 words in their sources, the verbal suffix *-eren* is extremely frequent in comparison, as 441 tokens per 100,000 words occur in private letters from the second half of the eighteenth century (Rutten et al. 2015: 158).⁶ The analysis includes private letters written by both men and women of all social ranks. The high frequency of *-eren* in historical Dutch, when compared to other Romance-origin suffixes, has been confirmed in recent corpus-based studies (Assendelft 2023; Rutten and Vosters 2023).

In view of its high frequency, we decided to focus on the suffix *-eren* in the present study, which occurs in verbs such as *arriveren* ‘arrive’, *adviseren* ‘advice, report’, *passeren* ‘pass, happen’ (see below for more examples). The verbal suffix *-eren* is etymologically a double suffix: it combines the French infinitive ending *-er* with the Dutch infinitive ending *-en*, signalling the integration of what were originally individual lexical loans into the Dutch morphological system.⁷ The suffix *-eren* was already productive in the Middle Ages, as there are many verbs in *-eren* found in Middle Dutch sources (c. 1150–1500). The oldest attestation of *arriveren*, for example, is from 1240.⁸ It typically occurs in borrowed verbs, although there are also already in medieval sources examples of verbs consisting of a Germanic stem with the suffix *-eren*, such as *waarderen* ‘appreciate’, again pointing to an increasing integration of *-eren* into the grammar of Dutch (van der Sijs 2005: 194).

As mentioned above, the frequency of *-eren* in eighteenth-century private letters amounts to 441 instances per 100,000 words, or 44 tokens per 10,000 words. The diachrony of influence from French is usually interpreted as intensifying during the Early and Late Modern period, with the so-called Frenchification being assumed to have reached its peak in the eighteenth century (Frijhoff 1989). This is confirmed by Assendelft et al. (2023b), who analyse the distribution of French-origin suffixes in a historical corpus, viz. the Language of Leiden Corpus, which comprises text samples from seven social domains relevant in the history of Leiden, and which spans the period from the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries. They find an increasing rate of French loan suffixes that reaches its highest point in the eighteenth century. They also find differences between the various social domains. In the domain of Economy, loan suffixes from French are quite frequent

6 This part of the analysis in Rutten et al. (2015) is in fact based on the eighteenth-century part of the LAL Corpus.

7 The suffix *-eren* is in fact a Dutch generalisation over verbs with different suffixes in French, among which *-er* but also *-ir* and *-re* as well as Latin-origin verbs in *-are*; see the entry ‘*-eren*’ in the online historical dictionaries of Dutch at gtb.inl.nl as well as van der Sijs (2005: 194–195).

8 See the lemma ‘*arriveren*’ in the online historical dictionaries of Dutch at gtb.inl.nl.

(although not as frequent as in the domains of the Academy and Charity), whereas they occur much less often in the domain of Private Life. As in the previous studies mentioned, we are here not primarily interested in the moment of borrowing but rather in the distribution of loanwords in the language community. While it may be the case that some of the verbs in the corpus were already borrowed earlier, such as *arriveren* which was borrowed in the thirteenth century (see above), it is for our purposes more revealing that Assendelft et al. (2023b) establish a gradual rise of verbs in *-eren* in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and a peak in the eighteenth century. This result confirms the traditional idea of a frenchified eighteenth century and indicates a heightened contact situation leading to an increase of French-origin items.⁹

Based on these previous studies, we expect to find fewer instances of *-eren* in our seventeenth-century letters than in the eighteenth-century letters studied in Rutten et al. (2015), i.e., fewer than 44 tokens per 10,000 words. We also expect to find differences between private letters and business letters (written by merchants), following the domain differences established by Assendelft et al. (2023b).

All forms in *-eren* were collated manually, while reading through the 137 private letters written by men from the upper and upper-middle ranks (i.e., the letters that were also used in Rutten and van der Wal 2014), as well as through the 88 business letters written by male merchants. The most frequently occurring variants are infinitives and present tense plural forms, which are identical in Dutch (e.g., *adviseren* ‘advise, report’), present tense third person singular forms (e.g., *mankeert* ‘lacks’), and past participles (e.g., *gecorrespondeert* ‘corresponded’). Following van der Sijs (2005: 194–195), Rutten et al. (2015), and Assendelft et al. (2023b), we consider *-eren* to be a suffix derived from French, i.e., that came to be part of Dutch morphology in the wake of the many lexical loans from French. This does not exclude the possibility that some verbs in *-eren* are actually borrowed from Latin, such as *oreren* ‘address, hold a lecture’. Similarly, there are presently also verbs in *-eren* based on English (e.g., *implementeren* ‘implement’), see van der Sijs (2005: 194). As we are not interested in the etymology of individual lexical items here, but rather in the distribution of verbs with the French-origin suffix *-eren*, our dataset comprises any example of *-eren*, including inflected variants such as *mankeert* ‘lacks’ and *gecorrespondeert* ‘corresponded’, irrespective of the etymology of the verb in question. Table 2 gives an overview of the results.

Table 2 shows that there is a substantial difference between the private letters and the business letters used for this study. Whereas the private letters have 47 tokens of *-eren* per 10,000 words, the normalised frequency is 82 in the business

⁹ This is also confirmed by Assendelft et al. (2023a), who analyse the distribution of French loanwords in the Language of Leiden Corpus (1500–1900).

Table 2: Suffix *-eren* (including inflected variants) in seventeenth-century private and business letters.

Period	Source	Words	Tokens of <i>-eren</i>	N <i>-eren</i> per 10,000 words	Types of <i>-eren</i>	Type-token ratio
1660s–1670s	137 private letters by men from the upper and upper-middle ranks	56,757	267	47	99	0.37
1660s–1670s	88 business letters by male merchants from the upper and upper-middle ranks	41,152	337	82	116	0.34

letters. The type-token ratio is very similar, so it is not the case that a limited number of types are simply used more often in the business letters. We would like to note that the 47 tokens per 10,000 words are not so different from the 44 tokens per 10,000 words established in Rutten et al. (2015) for eighteenth-century private letters. What this means for the diachrony of French-origin suffixes and the contact situation in general will need to be explored in future studies. Our focus here is on the difference between private and business letters. Taking the frequency of *-eren* as a measure of so-called Frenchification, it appears that the business letters are more likely to undergo contact influence.

With 337 tokens of *-eren* in 88 letters, the business correspondence comprises almost 4 instances of *-eren* per letter. We will discuss some examples, focusing on both highly frequent and relatively infrequent types, while also comparing the business letters to the private letters. The relatively low type-token ratio of 0.34 points towards considerable lexical diversity, and it is indeed the case that 65 types in the 88 business letters occur only once, and 23 types only twice. At the same time, a few very frequent types stand out. The three most frequent types are *arriveren* ‘arrive’ (36 tokens), *adviseren* ‘advise, report’ (28 tokens) and *passeren* ‘pass, happen’ (18 tokens). These are indeed typical correspondence verbs: *arriveren* is used to indicate the arrival of ships, persons and goods, *adviseren* is used for meta-communication about things that have been or need to be told, and *passeren* is often used to report on recent events. These three types are also among the four most frequent types in the 137 private letters (*arriveren* 29 tokens, *adviseren* 15, *passeren* 14), where *recommanderen* ‘recommend’ (16 tokens) is the second most frequent verb. In the business letters, *recommanderen* is the seventh most frequent type (12 tokens). Between the top three and *recommanderen*, the business letters have three *-eren* types that occur less often or not at all in the private letters, viz. *reguleren* ‘regulate, orient’ (14 tokens), *mankeren* ‘lack, fail’ (13 tokens) and *ordonneren* ‘order’

(13 tokens). The verb *reguleren* often occurs in phrases as in (21), which recommends the addressee to adopt a certain behaviour or policy in business matters. Likewise, in reports about envisaged business transactions, there is a recurrent expression with *mankeren* (22). The verb *ordonneren* is also typically used to regulate ongoing business (23).

- (21) *daer VE naer cunt reguleren*
 ‘to which you can orient [i.e. in accordance with which you can regulate your business]’
- (22) *dat het aen mijn devoor niet en manqueert*
 ‘lit. that it does not lack on my effort [i.e. my effort is not lacking, I will do my best]’
- (23) *te ordonneren, dat ghij van ons goet ijets tot Ancona ofte Goro sult lossen*
 ‘to order that you will unload some of our goods in Ancona or Goro’

As stated above, a large number of *-eren* types occurs only once or twice in the business letters. Many of these types indicate actions that are closely linked to economic life, such as *crediteren* ‘credit’ (24) and *depescheren* ‘to order a ship to leave’ (25), or they are formal alternatives to Dutch equivalents, such as *adjouteren* ‘add’ for *toevoegen* (26), and *veradverteren* ‘inform’ instead of *laten weten* (27).

- (24) *hoe veel vl mijn sal moeten crediteren*
 ‘how much you will have to credit me’
- (25) *om tship ten spoedichste tot de hoogste vracht doenlijck af te laeden en te depecheren*
 ‘to unload the ship for the largest part and as soon as possible, and to order it to leave’
- (26) *t geene daer onder hebbe gadiouttert*
 ‘that which [I] have added under this’
- (27) *Dese regelen dienen alleenlijck om Ul te veraduerteeren*
 ‘These lines serve only to inform you’

Other examples of infrequent verbs with a similar economic and/or formal background are *effectueren* ‘realise’, *employeren* ‘use’, *menageren* ‘reduce’, *reclameren* ‘reclaim’, *remburseren* ‘reimburse’, *tarderen* ‘delay, slow down’. Some of these verbs also occur in the 137 private letters (e.g., *employeren* and *adverteren*, without the Germanic prefix *ver-*).

The frequency of verbs with the French-origin suffix *-eren* is remarkably high in the business letters written by merchants: much higher than in the seventeenth-

century private letters (and also much higher than in late-eighteenth-century private letters; cf. Rutten et al. 2015). There is significant overlap with the seventeenth-century private letters, in that the set of highly frequent verbs is similar. Nonetheless, the higher normalised frequency in combination with the commercial/economic background of many of the verbs involved suggests that business correspondence was more strongly influenced by French-origin items than private correspondence. Some of the examples have a distinct formal connotation (e.g., *adjouteren*, *veradverteren*), and probably originate in commercial or administrative language. Since similar verbs are certainly not absent from private correspondence, the business letters may have formed a channel through which these verbs spread to related genres.

5 Business letters versus merchants' private letters: a qualitative approach

Sections 3 and 4 have provided an overall view of the differences and similarities between seventeenth-century private letters and business letters written by merchants. A group of 25 merchants also wrote private letters that have been preserved. This allows us to compare the writing practices of these two types of letters at the individual level.¹⁰ Within the limitations of this article, we will discuss the letter writing practices of three merchants, thereby focusing on text-structural and phraseological aspects. Just as almost all letters of the 25 merchants, both the private and business letters of the following three merchants were written at about the same date and sent with the same confiscated ships.

Similarities in structure are striking, for instance, in the case of merchant Alexander van de Welle. He wrote a business letter to merchant Gerrit van Vollenhove (based in the town of Middelburg), dated 15 November 1664, and a private letter to his sister Elisabeth van de Welle, dated 18 November 1664. Both letters begin with *Laus deo semper anno 1664*, followed by a greeting formula in the business letter, and by a reference to earlier communication in the private letter. Both letters continue with a similar health formula and a similar text structural formula *ik laat u weten dat* 'I let you know that'. See (28) and (29).

¹⁰ The 25 merchants wrote 47 private letters but limiting the contribution of individual writers to 1,500 words as in the case of the business letters, resulted in 38 private letters (18,727 words) versus their 37 selected business letters (16,731 words). See the Appendix for details.

(28) **Business letter by Alexander van de Welle (opening lines)**

<i>Laus deo Semper anno 1664 11m/15d</i>	Laus deo formula
<i>Monsr: gerrit van vollen hooouen met vl huijsvrouwe</i>	
<i>met vl kinderen naer hertelycke groetenisse</i>	Greeting formula
<i>soo wensche vl altsamen gesontheyt – naer Ziele & lichaem, gelyck ick –</i>	Health formula
<i>syn wenschen[de] v[oo]r myn seluen, soo laet</i>	Text structural formula
<i>ick vl weeten dat op heden niet meer verkocht en hebbe dan twee degens ende - een pystol (...)</i>	
‘Praise to God always in the year 1664 11th month/15th day. Mr. Gerrit van Vollenhoven with your wife, with your children, after heartily greeting, I wish you all health of both soul and body, as I am wishing for myself. Thus I let you know that at present I have not sold more than two blades and a pistol’	

(29) **Private letter by Alexander van de Welle (opening lines)**

<i>Laus deo semper anno 1664</i>	Laus deo formula
<i>Eerwerdige masseur elisabet van de – welle vl aen genaemden brief vanden –</i>	Referring to earlier communication
<i>7 september met de rekeninge, ende - den Inhout verstaen, soo ben i[c]k vl –</i>	Health formula
<i>altsamen met vl twee soonen wenschen[de] alles goets naer ziele ende lichaem gelyck – ick ick selue sijn wenshende voor mij,</i>	
<i>ick laet vl by desen weeten, dat mijn vrouwe niet wel tevreden is, (...)</i>	Text structural formula
‘Praise to God always in the year 1664. Honourable sister Elisabeth van de Welle, Your pleasant letter dated 7 September with the bill [received], and the contents understood, I am wishing you all with your two sons all the best both of soul and body as I myself am wishing for me. I hereby let you know that my wife is not happy.’	

The letters close with a slightly different commendation formula, and a similar closing and signature in (30) and (31):

there forever’) and followed by a contact formula (33). The intersubjective contact formula which expresses the wish that writer and addressee will meet again, may be combined with a reference to health or to the help of God (cf. Rutten and van der Wal 2014: 123–125). In (33) both such elements are present.

(32) *gesontheit is mij seer leeff vnt angename vor mij end min volck kan Ick deguede gott nit genochsam dancken vor guede gesontheit*
 ‘health is very dear and pleasant to me; concerning me and my crew, I cannot thank the good Lord enough for good health’

(33) *gesontheit is mij seer leeff vnt angenaem vor mij end min volck kan Jck de guede gott nit genochsamen dancken vor guede gesontheit de fromen getrouwer gott de wilde vns mit gesontheit wederom bij milckander vorhelpen*
 ‘health is very dear and pleasant to me; concerning me and my crew, I cannot thank the good Lord enough for good health; the exalted, faithful God may bring us together in health’

In (34) below, the formula *ferner so* introduces a similar reference to previous correspondence in both letters, although with a different message: the good health of the addressees in the business letter (34) and the sadness about the loss of two children in the private letter (35).

(34) *ferner so is mine schriuent mit weinich an e. L. als dat gij wetten mogen als dat Ick e L schriuent van den 3 Junij woll entfangen hebb op den 24 september dar vt gesien den frinden gesontheit dar ouer ick seer vor bliet bin*
 ‘Further is my writing to you little more than that you may know that I have well received your letter of 3 June on 24 September, from which I have seen the friends’ health what pleases me greatly’

(35) *ferner so is mine schriuent mit weijnich an e l hues frauw als dat gij wetten moegen dat Jck e l schriuens van den 17 September woll entfangen hebb end dar vt vor staen e.l droeffheit vant vor liess van onse soen end dochter dar ouer ick mede seer bedrouet bin*
 ‘Further is my writing to you, wife, little more than that you may know that I have well received your letter of 17 September and I have understood from it your grief over the loss of our son and daughter, about which I am also very sad’

The formula *gott in gnaden befolnen/befohlen* ‘God in grace commended’ closes both letters, preceded by the *goede nachten* ‘good nights’ formula in the case of the private letter.

Reyer Pietersz Verwer's business letter (36), sent to the Amsterdam merchants Guillaume and Michel Henry, dated 27 November 1664, and his private letter (37), written to his wife Beertje Dircks in Nieuwendam, dated 26 November 1664, show a similar opening by referring to the reception and sending of previous letters:

- (36) *Mynen laesten aen vl js geweest van den 15 deser pr het schip van bosman over vlissinge dar jn nit anders als den ontfanghst van vl Aengenaeme van den 18/19/22/23 sept als mede de ordonnantie en procuratie soo sal dese dienen jn antwoort van deselve*

'My last [letter] to you was dated the 15th of this month, by Bosman's ship via Flushing in which nothing else than the reception of your pleasant letters dated 18, 19, 22 and 23 September and also the order and procuration. Thus the present letter will serve as reply of these.'

- (37) *Mijne laesten aen v js geweest van den 15 deser sijnde niet anders als rapport van mijn gesontheit t doen en met eene dat jck vl aengenaeme van den 8 sept wel hadde ontfange doch dese sal dienen jn antwoort van deselve*

'My last [letter] to you was dated the 15th of this month, being nothing else than to report on my health and, at the same time, that I had well received your pleasant [letter] of 8 September. But the present letter will serve as its reply'.

The letter to his wife comprises the following contact formula:

- (38) *hope godt daer tyt en gelegenheit toe sal geven dat wy bij malkander jn gesontheit mogen comen*

'I hope that God will give time and opportunity that we may meet in health'

The private letter closes with greetings to relatives and neighbours and a deviating variant of the commendation formula (39), whereas his business letter ends with a more formal closing formula (40).

- (39) *godt wil u mijn beminde met onse kinderen bewaren jn jn gesontheit en wel varen*

'God may you, my beloved, with our children keep in health and well-being'

- (40) *middeler wijlle nae mijn ootmoedige gebiedenisse blyve vl Dienaer Reijer Pietersz.*

'meanwhile, after my humble greeting [I] will remain your servant Reijer Pietersz.'

The quantitative analysis in Sections 3 and 4 revealed mostly differences of degree between business and private letters. Apart from differing frequencies, more elaborate health formulae were found in private letters versus simpler health phrases in

business letters. The qualitative approach in this section, in which we focused on a selection of individual writers, revealed similarities in openings, greetings, references to earlier communication and commendation formulae. Comparing the examples of private and business letters by the same writer demonstrates how similar private and business letters often were, thus challenging the idea of distinct registers.

6 Conclusions

It has been our aim in this paper to shed light on business letters written by Dutch merchants in the seventeenth century, primarily through a comparison with private letters for which elaborate research has been done over the years. The available knowledge of private letters determined our choice for such a comparison through the lens of the private letters and enabled us to explore the still unknown characteristics of business letters. In particular, we wanted to find out whether these business letters constitute a particular register, characterised by linguistic elements that set them apart from private letters. The genre, as a largely externally determined phenomenon, can be said to be different, since the social roles of the writers/addressees and the communicative purpose are dissimilar in the case of private and business correspondence.

We have undertaken a series of analyses. First, we have looked into the use of formulaic language, in particular six epistolary formulae that occur frequently in seventeenth-century private letters (Section 3.2). A quantitative comparison reveals that these formulae are much less characteristic of business letters, in which they occur far less frequently or even not at all. In previous research, we have argued that there is a relationship between formulaic language and writing experience. If this is indeed the case, the relative lack of formulaic language in the business letters may result from the fact that merchants were heavily engaged in the written culture, and hence were experienced writers. Nonetheless, we can certainly not conclude that these business letters written by merchants did not contain any formulae, as a second analysis has revealed (3.3). Greeting, for example, is a function that is performed in any letter, and which is commonly verbalised through fixed phrases. Another example is the commendation formula, which does occur in private letters, but which is more frequent in business correspondence. We conclude that there is a considerable set of formulaic phrases in historical Dutch, which are in general, though not always, more likely to appear in private letters than in business letters. This is, however, a difference of degree, and based on frequencies, not on a principled linguistic distinction between the two genres. These formulae, therefore, do not constitute genre differences, but the frequency differences between the genres indicate different registers.

The latter observation, that there are frequency differences, also relates to other-language items, such as French and Latin loans. Items such as *saluut*, *cordiale* and *Laus deo* occur more often in business letters. We have subsequently analysed the frequency of the verbal suffix *-eren*, establishing a large difference between the genres, with this French-origin suffix occurring almost twice as often in the business letters as in the private letters (Section 4). Still, when inspecting the most frequent lexical items (e.g., *arriveren*), we found that the patterns are quite similar in both genres. In the business letters, an additional set of formal/administrative lexical items occur. Business correspondence thus attracted more French-origin items, specifically verbs in *-eren*. While some of these had been borrowed earlier (e.g., *arriveren*), we hypothesise that their high frequency in business letters reflects the international and multilingual context of Early Modern trade.

Our final analysis compared private and business letters by individuals who contributed both types of letters to our dataset (Section 5). Here, it was striking how great the similarities in phrasing often are despite the frequency differences established in the previous sections. This means that the genres are very closely related, which is also clear from the fact that it is often quite difficult to decide whether a certain text is a private letter or a business letter. In our case, the Dutch seventeenth century, we are often dealing with relatively small and tight networks in which there is considerable overlap between family, friends and business partners. Register differences emerge in the texts related to these networks, but the similarities across the genres are also undeniable. Register studies often operate at a relatively high level of abstraction (see, e.g., Seoane and Biber 2021), and we therefore believe it is valuable to zoom in on historical genres, and to trace emerging register differences between them against the background of the socio-historical context. An analysis of the so-called hybrid letters, which combine private and business information, would constitute an interesting follow-up study as these letters challenge genre boundaries, and perhaps also register differences.

The business letters under scrutiny here, written by upper and upper-middle ranked male authors from the seventeenth century, differ from private letters written by people with a similar social profile. Functional explanations are available for these register differences: formulaic language is correlated with writing experience, and the use of French-origin items may be connected to the common vocabulary used in international trading networks. A next step could be to investigate the distribution of grammatical phenomena such as the ones we analysed before in private letters (Rutten and van der Wal 2014). It is also to be expected that the register differences are even more pronounced when business correspondence produced by large trading companies is taken into account. With the present study, we have made a first contribution to the study of historical registers in the history of Dutch.

Appendix

Merchants	Business	Business	Private	Private
	LAL1	LAL2	LAL1	LAL2
Adriaan van der Spiegel		1		1
Alexander van de Welle		1		1
Anthony Arnouts		1		3
Barend Rees	1			
Bastiaan Goudijn		2		
Carel Nachtegaal		1		
Claas Jansen		2		1
Cornelis Jans (2)		1		
Cornelis Machij		2	2	
Cornelis Maij		1		
Cornelis Snelleman		1		1
Daniel & Math Lestevenon		2		
Elie des Poumare	1			
Elize Wastelier	1	1		
Esaias Storm		1		1
Evert van Leeuwen		1		
Frederik Brogh		1		
Gabriel Pieters		2		
Gerard Douw		3	1	3
Guillaume (& Michel) Henry	1			
Guillaume Momma	1			
Hendrik Huiberts		1		1
Hermanus ter Beek		2		
Hubert de Looover		2	1	
Huibert Wichem	1			
Isaac Rochussen		1		1
J.A. Weijers	1		2	
J.V. Ruijven	1			
Jacob Theunissen	1			
Jacob Trom		1		
Jacob van de Velde		1	2	
Jacques Wijaart		1		
Jan Donker	1	2		
Jan Jacobsen Tinnegieter		1	2	
Jan Luke		1		
Jan Muessen Ossenweijder	2	2		
Jan Pedij		1		
Jan PZ Backer	1			
Jan van der Spiegel		3		1
Jan Volkertsen Kuiper		1		1
Jannis Coornen		1		

(continued)

Merchants	Business LAL1	Business LAL2	Private LAL1	Private LAL2
Jasper Dankaarts		2	1	1
Jean de la Villette		2		
Jean Le Grand	2		1	
Johan Simon	1			2
Johannes Robbers		3		2
Joris Evertsen		1		
Josias Tielrooij		1	1	
Lieven de Wever		1	2	
Martijn Thomas		1		
Matthijs ten Broek	2	1		
Michiel Daniels		1		
Nicolaas de Zoutte		2		1
Nicolaas Jacobs	1			
Pieter van Loo		1		1
Reyer Pietersz Verwer		1	1	
Sibrand Claasen		1		
Teunis (Thunis) Jorissen	1			
Willem Pedij		2		
Willem Robbertsen		1		
	20	66	16	22

The two business letters written by merchants Gerhart Heusch and Jacob Jansen are not available online (for these letters see van der Wal 2019: 182–185, 224–227).

Notes

Hubert de Loover's two business letters are incorrectly categorised as private letters in LAL2 online.

Jan Muessen Ossenweijder's two business letters in LAL2 online and one of his business letters in LAL1 online are incorrectly categorised as private letters.

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