BOOK REVIEWS


Reviewed by Mel Evans (University of Leicester)

*Letters as Loot* is a substantial volume which makes a similarly weighty contribution to the field of historical sociolinguistics. At nearly 450 pages, the monograph represents the state of the art in a field that is now over thirty-years old, detailing and developing theoretical and methodological aspects of linguistic research into “language users and language use in the past”, to quote the series brief. As the second volume in John Benjamins’ “Advances in Historical Sociolinguistics (AHS)” series, it is a fitting, and significant, publication.

The book is the culmination of a five-year research programme, funded by the Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research, based around the “newly discovered text source” (p. 1) of some 40,000 Dutch letters confiscated by English ships in the seventeenth to early nineteenth centuries. Until their re-appropriation for the project, the letters had survived with only a catalogue list “in over a thousand boxes in the British National Archives” (p. 1). Whilst any unknown archival text resource is of interest to historical linguists, what makes these letters of special significance is their social breadth. The private correspondences “stem from a rich variety of senders, both men and women (and even children) of all social ranks” (p. 2), and thus present a corrective to the traditional (and sometimes unavoidable) reliance on literary and elite (printed) language. These make them well-suited to a specifically historical sociolinguistic investigation.

The *Letters as Loot* project embodies a “‘language history from below’ approach” (p. 2), seeking to investigate how language users from lower social ranks, and the language used for informal, every-day purposes, drew on the resources of written language, and how this compares with the conventional narratives of linguistic uniformity and standardisation that typify Dutch, as well as other European language histories. More specifically, the authors have four aims for this new-found material and their historical sociolinguistic research, namely: “to map variation and change”; to offer explanations for the linguistic distribution, to “fill gaps in the history of Dutch” and “contribute to the international historical – sociolinguistic debate” (p. 5). I was struck by the ambitiousness of these aims, and the
demands they place on theoretical frameworks, methodological processes and the level of detail required to meet them sufficiently. This helps to explain the volume length, which reflects the comprehensiveness of the analysis and the systematicity of the approach. One gets the sense that no stone was left unturned in interrogating the corpus, pursuing an inter-connected and multi-perspectival analysis of language variation in its social context.

The ambition and complexity of the project, informed by recent thinking in historical sociolinguistics, is most evident in one over-arching argument for the relationship of writing experience to sociolinguistic variation. The authors position their analysis not, as might once have been the case, as an investigation of the spoken vernacular in an (unavoidably) written form, but as a study of “contemporary informal written language” (p. 406, original emphasis). The linguistic features, and the frameworks of analysis and interpretation, demonstrate that the language of (these) letters has a “hybrid nature” that is bound to the letter-writers’ experience of writing and degrees of literacy (p. 406). The stratified nature of the Dutch letters corpus enables the import and impact of writing experience and contact with language-users in the written mode to be better described and appreciated across the diverse set of language features studied. The authors make a forceful case for historical sociolinguists to explore their historical data on its own terms, rather than comparing it to the “superior” spoken language of modern-day sociolinguistic analyses.

*Letters as Loot* is divided into eleven chapters, of which nine report original analyses of linguistic features in the corpus. The book’s over-arching structure progresses from letter-specific or letter-bound variables, starting with graphological variation (Chapter 2), epistolary formula (Chapters 3 to 5) and forms of address (Chapter 6), to broader Dutch morphosyntactic developments, including clause chaining (Chapter 7), relative clause markers (Chapter 8), apocope of final schwa (Chapter 9), and clausal and local negation (Chapter 10). Each chapter is framed by the epistolary and sociolinguistic context. This structure works very effectively. The authors are careful to accommodate readers who are not necessarily familiar with the intricacies of the history of Dutch, providing succinct but relevant accounts of the linguistic and social contexts of each linguistic feature. In accordance with their fourth aim, the authors also contextualise their descriptive and interpretative discussions with reference to historical sociolinguistic literature for other languages, with English being a common reference point. Indeed, as a scholar of the history of English, I found the consistent comparison of the Dutch linguistic data with its English counterparts provided a stimulating and provocative cross-linguistic perspective.

The first half of the book engages with linguistic variables that are closely tied to the epistolary context of the data. In Chapter 2, the authors consider
the relationship between phonological variables, such as *h*-dropping, long *e* and Germanic *sk*, and their orthographic representation, in order to assess the “degree of orality of the letters” (p. 73). Significantly, they find surprisingly little evidence of letter-writers writing according to their regional, spoken norms (as understood for the period), and instead suggest that the coherence across the corpus indicates “supralocally orthographical levelling” (p. 73). Writers, even those of the lower social ranks with minimal education and experience, participated in “the *graphemisation* of the writing system: the importance of phonology for orthographical practice was reduced” (p. 67) over the course of the seventeenth- and eighteenth-centuries. This has implications for existing narratives of orthographical standardization in other languages during this period. The authors offer a persuasive starting point for their proposition of writing experience as a key sociolinguistic factor for their linguistic data.

Chapters 3 to 5 examine epistolary formulae in the letters. Beginning firstly with a descriptive overview of common epistolary structures, and the position of various formulae within these structures (e.g., health statements, greetings, ritualistic appeals to God and comments on letter-writing), the subsequent chapters scrutinize the data from sociolinguistic perspectives. In Chapter 4, the authors assess the connection to writing experience, and consider whether it may also have a social-group marking function (p. 130). Using a series of case studies, the authors find evidence of social stratification, with women generally using more formulae than men, and the lower classes using more formulae than the upper classes. The corpus also suggests a diachronic shift away from formulae. Viewed collectively, the corpus indicates that formulaic language was a compositional crutch for those with less writing experience (p. 171). As levels of literacy increase, the need for formulae decreases.

To complement the analysis of macro-level social categories, Chapter 5 investigates the distribution of formulaic language according to autograph/scribal status and the influence of contemporary letter-writing manuals. This chapter addresses some common claims concerning the significance of scribal status and the import of pedagogical texts. Significantly, the authors find that scribal letters rely most heavily on formulaic language, suggesting that they can be seen as a “fall back” for effective epistolary composition (pp. 179–180). The similarity in formulae across the corpus offers little evidence that these constructions demarcated group identities. Instead, the formulae lost any perceived connection with inexperienced letter-writing, as well as their original pragmatic meaning. In the case of the latter, this helps to explain why the corpus includes letters with ten-line formulaic openings (p. 186). The comparison with manuals (elite and school-room texts) found some similarities, but the authors profess doubt of any direct connection with epistolary practice.
Chapter 6 considers the distribution of address forms: a feature the authors describe as one of “the most salient characteristics of historical letter writing” in any language (p. 203). The complex functionality of address is reflected in the history of Dutch second-person pronouns, and in its more particular distribution in the Dutch letters corpus. Working with the conventional paradigm of positive and negative politeness, the authors do not find the expected correlation between informal (private) exchanges and the use of the T-form *jij*. Instead, Dutch letter-writers prefer epistolary-specific forms that, rather than being positively or negatively loaded, “should in general be considered the appropriate linguistic behaviour in private correspondence” (p. 224). As with many of the analyses, the authors’ privileging of context and text-type in the discussion makes such interpretations both nuanced and persuasive.

The second-half of the book builds on the context-sensitive approach to examine how cross-textual linguistic phenomena distribute within the correspondence corpus. Chapter 7 assesses the forms of clause-chaining, looking at connectives such as *ende* and *en* (‘and’), and punctuation, and the relationship with the degree of orality of the letters. This analysis offers an effective way of engaging with the hybrid nature of correspondence as a spoken – written mode, providing new insights on Dutch and adding to the cross-linguistic work on letters as a text-type (e.g., Culpeper and Kytö 2010). The authors find evidence that the connectives are semantically bleached, instead aiding “discourse continuity” (p. 266), a finding also identified in English correspondence (e.g., Williams 2013: Chapter 4). The Dutch corpus reveals a socially stratified distribution of connective and punctuated clause-chaining.

Chapters 8 to 10 “focus more generally on morphosyntactic features undergoing change in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Dutch” (p. 289), selected on the basis of their frequency within the letter corpus. These chapters perhaps bear the closest resemblance to more traditional historical sociolinguistic studies of other languages, such as Romaine (1982) on Scots, and Nevalainen and Raumolin-Brunberg (2003) on English. However, by positioning these chapters at the end of the volume, the authors ensure that the preceding detailed analysis of linguistic variation in its epistolary context informs how the patterns of morphosyntactic variation (internal and external) are interpreted, showcasing the profitability of combining macro- and micro approaches to language use (see Nurmi et al. 2009).

Chapter 8 tracks the shift from *d*-form to *w*-form relative markers, loosely comparable to the rise of *wh*- markers in English. The authors position their analysis within the framework of syntacticisation: a process that posits the evolutionary shift of meaning-making from pragmatic and semantic to syntactic structures over time (see Givón 2009). This process is entrenched in the socio-cultural context of the language, potentially including spoken and written modes (p. 294). Rutten and van der Wal hypothesise that if Dutch relative clause development is connected to
the “ongoing textualisation of society”, then the shift from $d$- to $w$-relatives will be connected to writing experience (p. 296). The testing of this hypothesis includes social categories (class, gender), syntactic contexts and the textual constructions (formulae) in which they occur. The multi-perspectival analysis reveals that the change appears to occur from above, by those “most involved in the written culture” (p. 320). Significantly, the distribution of $w$- forms is not homogeneous across the texts, but occurs at different frequencies in different formula – a pattern that suggests “constructional diffusion” (p. 320).

The scope of the analysis, which testifies to the complexity of language change as a socio-textual process, is maintained into the final two chapters. Chapter 9 analyses the letter corpus for evidence of apocope of final schwa – one of “the most salient” changes in Dutch linguistic history – for example, $hase > haas$ (“hare”) (p. 323). The loss of schwa was regionally distributed, and the make-up of the corpus allows the geographical progression of the change to be documented, alongside other social factors. The analysis focuses on first-person singular present indicative constructions (with a few exclusions, such as monosyllabic verbs and modals), as these are thought to show extensive regional variation in the Early Modern period, as well as being helpfully frequent in a corpus of ego-documents, such as letters. The findings show that the change is well-developed (> 50 percent) in most regions, except Zeeland, from the seventeenth century. However, writing experience is again relevant to the distribution of conservative and progressive forms. In North Holland and Amsterdam, those with more writing experience prefer schwa, “presumably adhering to an age-old writing tradition” (p. 349). However, as the change becomes more established in the spoken language, the corpus reveals the establishment of a “new norm” for schwa-less forms (p. 349).

The final chapter of analysis (Chapter 10) considers one of the most researched changes in historical linguistics: negation, focussing on the replacement of bipartite negators with single negation in the seventeenth-century letter corpus. The authors undertake fine-grained analyses, considering the possible relevance of lexical-semantic patterns (e.g., particular verb forms and frequencies), phonological patterns (indefinite pronoun $men$ or final morpheme -$en$) and complexity (processing) effects. The diverse factors considered in this chapter attest to the thoroughness of the investigation, aided by the potential of the sociolinguistically diverse corpus. The findings confirm previous emphases on region and construction as the most salient factors for the choice of negation type (p. 391).

Overall, Letters as Loot is a rich, nuanced and substantial contribution to the history of Dutch, and the field of historical sociolinguistics more generally. As a text, it works as a reference monograph – of interest to researchers of specific changes in the Dutch language, but also for scholars of other languages or periods seeking guidance on methodological approach or a theoretical model. Indeed,
regarding the latter, the authors could have been more forthright in their emphasis on the significance of their “writing experience” hypothesis from the start. Yet, I get the sense that this was not their aim. The book is a testament to a treasure trove of letters, newly discovered, that offer a richness of descriptive and interpretative sociolinguistic insights.

Significantly, in addition to the hard-back volume, which is produced to a very high quality with numerous colour photographs and letter transcriptions/translations, the monograph is also (at the time of writing) available through open access as a PDF document. The corpus of letters, too, can be consulted on the web. The richness of the epistolary loot is thus shared in multiple formats – a status that seems only fitting, after being confiscated and archived for so long.

References


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