
Reviewed by Matylda Włodarczyk (Adam Mickiewicz University)

For almost every year of the last decade, an important edited collection of historical linguistic studies based on private or public, semi-public or institutional letters (e.g., Nurmi et al. 2009; Pahta et al. 2010; Dossena and Fitzmaurice 2006; Brownlees et al. 2010) was published alongside some ground-breaking monographs (Williams 2013; Tieken-Boon van Ostade 2014; Rutten and van der Wal 2014). Our understandings of the history of English and other languages (in particular, German and Dutch, but also Finnish [Nordlund 2013], Lithuanian [Tamošiūnaitė 2013] and French [Martineau 2013]) were broadened and new approaches developed. The 2015 volume edited by Anita Auer, Daniel Schreier and Richard Watts addresses both the well-known and new challenges in the field by introducing (1) novel perspectives on the survival and revival of grammatically redundant forms in written language; (2) the framework of the sociolinguistics of globalisation applied to historical communication; (3) assessments of non-standardness; and (4) reflections on the role of the scribes in letter writing practice. The volume as a whole emphasises the need to assess both uniformity and variation not only of the potentially “fixed” standard (which is nevertheless rarely unchanging, see Allen p. 203), but also of all the data that sociolinguistics embarks on analysing.

The collection covers thirteen empirical papers, as well as an introduction and epilogue. The perspective on language histories “from below” – see the *Historical Sociolinguistics Network* (HiSoN) – is central and a significant amount of space is devoted to assessing the status of lower-order data within the broad spectrum of varieties and evaluating non-standardness. As literacies are vital to this framework, the volume offers an overview of educational opportunities relevant for the analysed datasets and sociocultural insights into the involved social and linguistic evaluations (Auer, Allen, Fairman, and Pietsch). The significance of social networks, mobility, and social and family roles as factors in language change are underlined frequently (Hernández, Campoy and Conde-Silvestre, Bergs, Auer, and Laitinen).

Richard Watts opens the volume by presenting three problems fundamental to historical sociolinguistics. Firstly, the still widespread abstraction of language
at large should be replaced with the notion of “a language” in a local, well-contextualised social setting. This relates to the next difficulty: the myth of homogeneity sustained by the ideologies of the standard. In the orderly heterogeneity of languages, standards have their significant place (histories “from above”), but should not lure linguists into the teleological view of language histories. The third problem is the data at large: the overwhelming interest in the language of the higher social strata has created a gap which needs to be redressed.

The analysis of the fifteenth-century correspondence of the Paston family presented by Juan Manuel Hernández-Campoy and Juan Camilo Conde-Silvestre focuses on the spelling innovation of the <th> variant for the runic thorn and Roman eth in 280 documents from eleven male informants covering seventy-eight years. The results of the analysis not only illustrate the gradual adoption of the new variant, but also patterns of both generational and communal change. An interesting observation concerns language change in adulthood: social, family roles, as well as performativity may motivate change in which some generational and communal patterns are intertwined. In the absence of general normative pressures in the fifteenth century, the shift of spelling patterns to <th> by William Paston I may be explained by his legal career and the socially advantageous marriage.

Stephan Elspaß’s contribution provides an alternative view on the history of German and raises many issues that are relevant for the history of any language “from below”. Elspaß revisits one of the most popular conceptualisations of the spoken and written dimensions of language use (Koch and Oesterreicher 1985). Language of immediacy and language of distance metaphors have become the staple methodological framework, in particular in historical pragmatics, although researchers interested in modern languages have offered interesting extensions of the concepts (Landert 2013). Elspaß provides an in-depth account of Koch and Oesterreicher’s work on the communicative parameters relevant for the classification of historical texts and places the German emigrant data from the nineteenth century clearly at the “written orality” end of the spectrum (p. 39). Elspaß juxtaposes the elements of the language of distance (i.e., older norms of language use, developed in the printed medium) and language of immediacy (colloquial forms in the genre of “written orality”), connected by the fact that both were stigmatised in the period, albeit for different reasons. The results point to a fairly complex pool of social and regional varieties which are hard to capture exclusively by means of the hierarchical diglossic relationship between dialects and the standard.

Tony Fairman builds his contribution around the late-modern ideology of the Standard, which he proposes to challenge by means of studying manuscript data. He shows that, despite such an ideology, editors and scholars have dealt with the handwritten and printed modes rather freely over time. Overall, Fairman postulates introducing collaboratively developed conventions for rendering the
manuscript reality in digital format. Such faithful manuscript representations would be a welcome addition to the printed data available in the “representative” corpora. Such material should, in his view, enter mainstream linguistic research. This “social model” (p. 69), as Fairman argues, should replace the autonomous Standard model in the study of both handwritten and printed linguistic data.

Printed material still provides an important source, in particular for the study of grammatical variables (p. 75). Marianne Hundt investigates non-standard and obsolete forms in a corpus of published letters written in early New Zealand English (1843). In order to assess the level of editorial interference and its homogenising influence, the author compares the data with the Cherry Valley Chronicles – a roughly contemporary letter collection from North America. The paper offers a qualitative overview of the features of social and stylistic variability and focuses on the use of relative clauses. The author concludes that, relative clauses aside, the letters are indeed fairly standard and homogeneous. Whether or not this is due to editorial interference is hard to confirm: the American letters show a greater orthographic variability, but a similar degree of “standardness”. As the author argues, this is an effect of the written medium and of the avoidance strategies regarding the debated usage (p. 99).

Stefan Dollinger provides another study of a colonial variety, and offers a bottom-up perspective on Canadian English by analysing letters that cover seventy-six years. The letters have been written by both middle- and lower-class writers. Following an overview of normative grammars of the time, Dollinger analyses the distribution of future marking shall/will in print and letter data. The findings show that the usage has evolved from very conservative (the prevalence of shall with the first person) in the earliest period (1776–99) to will gradually gaining ground in the first half of the nineteenth century. This development, at odds with the British norm, occurs surprisingly at the peak of immigration from Britain and may be seen as a compensatory strategy to ease colonial inferiority (p. 110). Moreover, the Scottish, Irish and Northern English groups of speakers may have been responsible for spreading the first-person will variant.

Alexander Bergs revisits one of the most fundamental questions in linguistics: whose language do the data represent? In particular, his concern is with scribal influences on “authorial” language and the methodological significance of these. The Paston women’s letters are particularly significant to the paper, as they are largely scribal (i.e., possibly dictated to an amanuensis). Alternatively, the letters may have been composed by scribes from memory, or notes, rough versions may have been drafted and possibly read again to the “author”, and later corrected before a final draft was prepared. All of this would have left, inevitably, some “fingerprints” of the auctor manualis (see Vosters et al. 2015) on different aspects of the language of the letters: morphosyntax (personal pronouns and relativisation) specifically
lies within the scope of Berg’s interest. For instance, Margaret Paston shows lifetime change in the use of personal pronouns. As for the scribes, whose mediation she used, as Bergs claims, these may have been very attentive to the forms used by the *auctor intelectualis*. The paper ascribes the central role to the scribes in language change: the new forms (*th* pronouns) in particular would have undergone scribal evaluation. Consequently, depending on whether a given variant would have worked well in a given sociocultural context (agreed or not with the scribe’s perception of a social group), an innovation would, or would not, be propagated.

Anita Auer focuses on stylistic variation and the effects of social variation on style in Late Modern English. In the heyday of normative grammars, surprisingly, letter-writing styles were viewed in a rather flexible way, while the recommended plainness clashed with the insistence on precision and elevated styles (p. 143). The author illustrates linguistic repertoires and style shifting in the writing of three women representing different social strata. Auer shows that stylistic choices depend largely on different skills (e.g., calligraphic and grammatical). Stylistic variation, moreover, increases parallel to the levels of schooling and experience in writing: lower-order informants manipulate forms of address, while subtle nuances of phrasing are the domain of the upper classes. Auer proposes that actuation of language change takes place in the writing of the elite and the middle social strata, due to their competence and scope for creativity.

Susan Fitzmaurice follows up exactly on this point, as she analyses the language of aristocratic letters written by the members of the Kit-Cat Club in the early eighteenth century. The author introduces social perceptions of the contemporary aristocracy in order to contextualise the data she analyses within the contemporary literate culture. Linguistic choices, as the paper shows, not only convey social meanings, but also build what Fitzmaurice describes as “persona style”. The analysis of the letters is conducted on different levels: of the autograph text (spelling and abbreviations), epistolary frame (salutations), grammatical complexity (subordination by relative clauses) and vocabulary (Latinate derivational suffixes). Fitzmaurice concludes that even aristocratic letters “as hallmarks of standard language practices” (p. 178) included features that became stigmatised when the ideology of the standard developed later in the eighteenth century. Moreover, being rather flexible with respect to the elevated style that their social status would warrant, aristocrats carefully followed the epistolary models taught by the privileged educational systems.

Mikko Laitinen reaches to the very bottom of the socio-economic scale to the pauper letters written in relation to the English Poor Laws. Laitinen sets his data against the background of industrialisation and mobility, which characterised the Late Modern period, and the theory of globalisation and super-diversity, which apply to modernity in general. The perspective assesses “mobility/migration through
vertical social spaces and focuses on people making use of linguistic resources that are valued differently in various spaces” (p. 186) and allows for distinctions between the centres and peripheries, as well as “local” and “translocal” styles of writing. The paper also underlines the uneven access to the normative sources and their restricted influence. In the analysis, Laitinen looks closer into naming practices (references to financial aid) in relation to the speech act of request as a feature of humiliative discourse.

Barbara Allen analyses vernacular writings from the Sussex Weald – a rather remote location in the nineteenth century. Borrowing the creolistic terminology of acrolect, mesolect and basilect, Allen assesses the awareness of the standard and the degree of its emulation by means of a continuum ranging from a variety close to the educated standard (“the non-standard standard”) to extreme non-standard (p. 204). In particular, acrolectal writing is distinguished by features of lexis (Latinate vocabulary) and syntax, but violations of grammatical and spelling norms are infrequent. Towards the mesolectal and basilectal end of the continuum, “non-standard” forms are more frequent. Regardless of the specific place of a given letter on the continuum, punctuation and capitalisation are clearly the least fixed features. Allen makes some detailed observations about the spellings found in the data closer to the non-standard (for example, diphthongs, unstressed vowels and homophones), and observes inconsistencies mostly in the mesolectal data. Schooling is one factor, but also the time distance between the completion of education and the moment of writing is another (see Laitinen and Auer 2014). Overall, Allen observes features of structured homogeneity, if not uniformity, in vernacular writing.

Lukas Pietsch presents a study based on a larger corpus of private emigrant letters from the late eighteenth through the early twentieth century (Hamburg Corpus of Irish English, about 510,000 words). The analysis focuses on the persistence of a conservative feature in the writing of informants with limited schooling, the periphrastic do in unstressed assertions. This usage occurs in spoken Irish English dialects marking habitual aspect of the verb and they are most interesting as “a place of accidental overlap between archaic standard English and vernacular English in England” (p. 227). Pietsch discusses the phenomenon of conservatism in letter writing based on formulae (the characteristic Scottish/Irish I remains in the closing) and claims that a similar mechanism of preservation may be extended to grammatical features. His analysis of non-habitual do shows that it may be viewed as a discourse specific feature of “intended formal written English” (p. 237; see the “intended standard” or “intended supraregional variety” of Rutten and van der Wal 2014: 73–74). Pietsch underlines the importance of viewing letters not only as a specialised, but also as a self-contained domain, and questions the relevance of standard models and ideologies for the writers. Minimally schooled writers resort
to the written models they have at hand – most likely other letters, possibly from similar social circles. Moreover, there is little ground to maintain the assumption that letters involve close approximations of speech.

Lucia Siebers assesses heterogeneity of the letters in early African-American English (AAE), described as products of “semi-literate” informants from two under-researched locations covering the period from the 1760s to 1910s in the *Corpus of Older African American Letters* (COAAL). Siebers provides a synthesis of research into AAE and concludes that these must have involved oral rather than written models. The American educational system, unsurprisingly, excluded slaves, but research into slave narratives shows that 5 percent reported learning reading and writing skills. Siebers’ study shows that *was/were* variation as a characteristic of early AAE was related to the operation of the Northern Subject Rule. The exception here would be Missouri and the Indian Territory where no Scottish – Irish settlements occurred.

Daniel Schreier opens his discussion of hypercorrection and the persistence of local dialect features in Tristan de Cunha English by reminding us of the principle of filter removal which needs to be applied in the search for vernacular features (authorship and recording process). A brief social history of the variety sets the scene for the study of *be*-levelling in the letters by two female Tristanians (born in 1928 and 1942) who had not left the island before the 1960s. In the letters, Schreier finds Tristanian features (*h*-dropping and insertion, copula absence, multiple negation, etc.), but the patterns of *be*-levelling are different for the two informants: one uses more *are* in her letters. Recordings of speech are available for these informants, and unlike their letters, these show the expected patterns for the levelling to *is*. Schreier thus interprets the frequency of *are* in the letters as hypercorrection: the informant “writes *are* when she should say *is*” (p. 275). Clearly, letters are complex and hardly ever straightforward sources of vernacular features, and generalised interpretations are risky indeed.

In the “Epilogue: Where next?”, the editors conclude that although the contributors were united in the pursuit of orderly heterogeneity, and applied either interactional or variationist premises and methods, the overall result is somewhat messy. Some findings may be hard to reconcile with one another (e.g., the creolistic scale of non-standardness with stylistic motivations, p. 282–283). The editors also pre-emptively respond to some obvious criticisms: although the small sample sizes are normally not adequate for variationist studies, the lack of quantitative results (p. 284) is justifiable by both the emphasis on manuscript material and the need to focus on individual informants. In the Epilogue, the editors single out Pietsch’s conclusions as to the self-contained nature of lower-order epistolary practices and talk about a “second domain of linguistic conventionalisation” (p. 286) which characterises this type of material.
The book is an extremely interesting and rich source of information and analyses. It expands the perspective “from below” and critically evaluates letters of this type with regard to fairly common misconceptions (apparent orality) and less common, but dangerous assumptions (letters reflect dialect features). This, next to the emphasis on the hybridity of all epistolary discourse (Martineau 2013), is a very important contribution to historical sociolinguistics. Some authors make very strong, but justified, statements about the data problem involved in studying historical correspondence: “Researchers need new reading skills” (Fairman p. 71). One only wishes that the book had not been so long in the making: its origin is the 2009 Utrecht colloquium “Heterogeneity and homogeneity in language: Searching for a “standard” in letters”, and the most recent reference dates from 2012.

“Letter-writing” in the title suggests focus on practice, and in the Introduction, Watts places the volume within interactional sociolinguistics with its major foci on “the various ways in which individuals negotiated meanings through contextualising language in interaction, cross-cultural differences in language use and conceptualisation of language use in social interaction as a form of performance” (p. 6). Indeed, in some studies, variation emerges as creative and strategic, involves a specific identity projection (Hernández-Campoy and Conde-Silvestre, and Bergs) and results from the creation of a letter-writing persona (Fitzmaurice). But as the editors notice in the Epilogue, performance has only featured marginally in most papers (p. 286). One reason for this might have been that despite the realisation that language change occurs first in communities of practice (Epilogue, p. 283), no attempts were made in the volume to develop the notion and study the relevant CofPs in greater detail (see Jucker and Kopaczyk 2013). The epilogue and Introduction aside, according to the index, the notion appears in four papers (Hernández-Campoy and Conde-Silvestre, Bergs, and Fitzmaurice and Pietsch), which make an attempt to specify the domain of practice in more (Fitzmaurice) or less detailed ways (Hernández-Campoy and Conde-Silvestre). The most elaborate, though still under-defined understanding of practice emerges in relation to the scribal practices discussed by Bergs and Pietsch. Otherwise, CofP seems to refer to the practice of letter writing in general, hence the notion is not free from problems involved in the other units used in sociolinguistics (discourse community or speech community). Had the insistence on the issues of performance, stylisation or CofPs not been somewhat superficial, the volume would have related nicely to the parallel field of historical pragmatics which has contributed considerably to the study of historical correspondence (e.g., Nurmi et al. 2009; Pahta et al. 2010; Włodarczyk and Taavitsainen [eds] forthcoming). The regrettably limited

1. Regrettably, even the exquisite work on the eighteenth century grammarians (Watts 2008) on the meanings of the notion of CofP was not referred to.
“dialogue” the book allows between sociolinguistics and historical pragmatics is clear in the omission of Johanna Wood’s (2009) work on the role of scribes of female Paston letters.

Finally, the volume would benefit greatly from ironing out a terminological matter and a possible misconception. Firstly, letters to authorities (Dollinger), applications for relief which cross vertical spaces (Fairman and Laitinen) and desperado letters (Siebers) are in fact letters of request or simply petitions, an epistolary genre with a long discourse tradition in English (Włodarczyk 2013). Secondly, the work on medieval (Thaisen 2014) and Early Modern scribal practices (Daybell 2012), and in particular the findings of Williams (2013), problematise the term dictation (seven occurrences, according to the index). If used literally, dictation is at best a simplification and at worst a misnomer. Finally, I have spotted several transcription inaccuracies where photos of the originals were attached (pp. 201, 271 and 272). These minor things aside, the book is not likely to disappoint fellow researchers in historical linguistics, as it relates to many general concerns in the field. “Letter writing” will not fail to satisfy historians and even readers outside the community who are interested in the historical data from the underprivileged social strata. Moreover, the rich presentation of the primary data may be useful to undergraduate students of the humanities interested in historical letters.

2. Scribes very often worked from notes: this may be true even in the case of obvious candidates for a dictating delegator. For example, Thaisen (2014: 510) talks about scribes of a blind writer, John Audelay (died c. 1426), who worked from ephemeral notes or written exemplars.

3. The suggestion that lower-order informants with minimal literacies may have in fact dictated their letters to a scribe is impossible to reconcile with the nature of their compositional, lexical and pragmatic repertoires which the volume sets out to characterise and understand.

4. Based on the manuscript photos, I would like to indicate the following transcript versus MS inaccuracies (220–221): Pade (transcript, fifth line from the top), suggested Pade: (MS, tenth line from the bottom, left-hand sheet); harwesten (transcript, eighth line from the top), suggested harvestin (MS, fourth line from the bottom, left-hand sheet); Cuntry (transcript, sixth line from the bottom) suggested Cuntrey (MS, ninth line from the top, right-hand sheet); Willy (transcript fourth line from the bottom), suggested Willey (MS, eighth line from the bottom, right-hand sheet); don’t (transcript, sixth line from the bottom), suggested dont (MS, eighth line from the top, right-hand sheet). P. 271 planting (transcript, third line from the bottom), suggested Plenting (MS, fifth line from the bottom). P. 272 Better (transcript, fourth line from the bottom), suggested Bette (MS, fourth line from the bottom).
References


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