

## **Conventionalisation, specialisation, institutionalisation: Exploring communicative practices and genre developments in letter writing**

### **Workshop convenors:**

Lisa Lehnen (JMU Würzburg, [lisa.lehnen@uni-wuerzburg.de](mailto:lisa.lehnen@uni-wuerzburg.de))  
Theresa Neumaier (TU Dortmund, University, [theresa.neumaier@tu-dortmund.de](mailto:theresa.neumaier@tu-dortmund.de))  
Ninja Schulz (JMU Würzburg, [ninja.schulz@uni-wuerzburg.de](mailto:ninja.schulz@uni-wuerzburg.de))

## **Between culture-specific practices and general trends in letter writing: Setting the scene for tracing conventionalisation, specialisation and institutionalisation**

Ninja Schulz  
(JMU Würzburg, [ninja.schulz@uni-wuerzburg.de](mailto:ninja.schulz@uni-wuerzburg.de))

Lisa Lehnen  
(JMU Würzburg, [lisa.lehnen@uni-wuerzburg.de](mailto:lisa.lehnen@uni-wuerzburg.de))

Theresa Neumaier  
(TU Dortmund, University, [theresa.neumaier@tu-dortmund.de](mailto:theresa.neumaier@tu-dortmund.de))

With corpora, linguists seek to provide a sample of language use representative of a specific variety, genre, time period or topic. Depending on the breadth and aim of the corpus project, parallel corpora have been compiled for comparisons of language use across time and varieties. Correspondence has traditionally been included in (diachronic) corpora since it approaches spoken language and is thereby more inclusive of different (literate) social strata. From a superordinate perspective, correspondence can be clearly delineated as a genre, being marked by specific situational characteristics (Biber & Conrad 2009: 40). However, it also shows a high degree of genre-internal heterogeneity. Letters are extremely culturally-sensitive and dynamic regarding who has access to writing/reading them, how they are written and why. Over time, different types of letters evolve based on the communicative purpose, with some letter writing practices becoming established and others disappearing (e.g. the emergence of pauper letters in consequence of the Old Poor Law). On the other hand, models for some letter types are not always available in society, especially for those which are not socially sanctioned, i.e. “illicit genres” (Bojsen-Møller et al. 2020). Therefore, to identify factors affecting specific linguistic choices within the genre, the respective sociocultural context must be considered. The variation in the genre of correspondence across time and culture thus problematises corpus compilation. Nevertheless, letters constitute very

rich datasets since even gaps in the data (e.g. regarding social variables like gender) can be taken as indicative of the sociocultural context.

In our introductory talk, we showcase the processes of conventionalisation, specialisation, institutionalisation in correspondence on the basis of three contexts involving different periods of time, cultural settings and interactional goals: 19<sup>th</sup>-century letter-writing guidelines in Madeira, threatening communication in Late Modern English, and 20<sup>th</sup>-century business correspondence from Hong Kong. In terms of conventionalisation, we trace the development of communicative practices that are nowadays common in letter writing but had not been established in previous periods. We show that the structure of letters has undergone distinct changes over time, with elements newly emerging, disappearing, or becoming obligatory (e.g. the salutation in extortion letters). Furthermore, we analyse changes on the pragmalinguistic level in speech act realisation, especially levels of directness in requests and threats. Concomitant with conventionalisation, our data shows that free variation in the linguistic choices decreases or becomes restricted to specific types of letters. Changes in the sociopragmatic functions of letter types (e.g. the disappearance of gossip from business correspondence) can thus be taken as indicative of processes of specialisation. Such an evolution is reflective of institutional changes relating to company structure, technological advances, or legal contexts.

Considering that the variables influencing language use in correspondence are highly culture- and context-dependent, they must be identified to enable comparisons across time and varieties. While our presentation is necessarily selective, it sets a departure point for the discussion of genre developments in letter writing and the challenges and opportunities these pose to corpus linguistics.

#### References:

- Biber, Douglas & Susan Conrad. 2009. *Register, genre, and style*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Bojsen-Møller, Marie & Auken, Sune & Devitt, Amy & Christensen, Tanya. 2020. Illicit Genres: The Case of Threatening Communications. *Sakprosa* 12(1). 1-53.

## Conventionalisation of health communication in Early Modern English letters

Oriana Yim

(Heidelberg University, oriana.yim@as.uni-heidelberg.de)

Everyone talks about health and sickness, not just to doctors, but also to family members, friends, and acquaintances. So how do people talk about health and what pragmatic functions does this communication perform? Most historical pragmatic research regarding health and illness concerns itself with medical discourse and texts (for an exception, see Taavitsainen 2011). However, this does not make up the entirety of health communication. In contrast to existing research on historical medical discourse, this presentation is concerned with the forms and functions of laypeople's health communication. Naturally anyone can partake in informal health communication; and I argue that everyone does communicate health. Health, as a topic of informal conversation, is reasonably diachronically stable – a *tertium comparationis* – this makes informal health communication an almost universal phenomenon, and a valuable subject for (diachronic) analysis.

This project analyses laypeople's informal health communication in Early Modern epistolary letters, as letters offer an excellent channel to examine laypeople's language since they are authentic, neither fictionalised, nor reported. Following Fitzmaurice (2002) and Palander-Collins (2002), I take a historical pragmatic approach to investigating epistolary data and am concerned with how health communication performed pragmatic functions which were conventionalised by language users.

My data comes from the *Parsed Corpus of Early English Correspondence* (PCEEC). I present a case study on the Arundel collection of 78 letters (1589–1680). This collection was selected because it is small enough to locate health communication instances through close reading (as proposed by Kohnen 2007) and pragmatically annotate them, yet large enough to include many instances. This collection is from a prominent family in English history, therefore there is contextualising information available for many letters. This analyse is a pilot study in anticipation of an analysis of the whole corpus. Following health communication categorisation, I qualitatively analysed occurrences, interpreting pragmatic meanings including speech acts and politeness, and considering various layers of context.

Preliminary findings show health communication, particularly sharing and requesting health reports, was a conventionalised means to strengthen and maintain relationships and keep communication channels open (Locher and Graham 2010). Health reports were also employed as justifications to mitigate against impoliteness. Additionally, these findings support Fitzmaurice's (2002) analysis of advice in medical council, as they show that giving health advice was a pragmatic act to demonstrate empathy and affection. Conventionalisation of health communication is most visible in letter-concluding health formulae constructed as undefined well-wishes. Comparing this data to informal PDE, processes of pragmaticalisation and speech act attenuation are perceived (Jucker 2019), particularly in well-wishes and reference to God which are no longer as sincere. To conclude, informal health communication is a device worthy of analysis because it

offers a concise, yet widespread and stable, focus to analyse conventionalised interpersonal interaction; by concentrating on such a device, rather than confining analysis to one speech act, researchers build multifaceted perception of interactions. Through the study of this linguistic device this research contributes to our understanding of relational functions of language.

#### Data:

*Parsed Corpus of Early English Correspondence 2*, parsed version. 2022. Revised and corrected by Beatrice Santorini. Annotated by Ann Taylor, Arja Nurmi, Anthony Warner, Susan Pintzuk, and Terttu Nevalainen. Compiled by the CEEC Project Team.  
<https://github.com/beatrice57/pceec2>.

#### References:

- Fitzmaurice, Susan M. 2002. *The Familiar Letter in Early Modern English: A Pragmatic Approach*. Vol. 95. Pragmatics & beyond New Series. Amsterdam / Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company. 3
- Jucker, Andreas H. 2019. 'Speech Act Attenuation in the History of English: The Case of Apologies'. *Glossa: A Journal of General Linguistics* 4 (1): 1–25.  
<https://doi.org/10.5334/gjgl.878>.
- Kohnen, Thomas. 2007. 'Text Types and the Methodology of Diachronic Speech Act Analysis'. In *Methods in Historical Pragmatics*, edited by Susan Fitzmaurice and Irma Taavitsainen, 139–66. Topics in English Linguistics 52. Berlin / New York: Mouton de Gruyter.
- Locher, Miriam A., and Sage L. Graham. 2010. *Interpersonal Pragmatics*. Handbooks of Pragmatics [HOPS] 6. Berlin / New York: De Gruyter Mouton.  
<https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110214338>.
- Palander-Collin, Minna. 2002. 'Tracing Patterns of Interaction in Historical Data'. In *Variation Past and Present: VARIENG Studies on English for Terttu Nevalainen*, edited by Helena Raumolin-Brunberg, Minna Nevala, Arja Nurmi, and Matti Rissanen, 117–34. Mémoires de La Société Néophilologique de Helsinki 61. Helsinki: Société Néophilologique.
- Taavitsainen, Irma. 2011. 'Dissemination and Appropriation of Medical Knowledge: Humoral Theory in Early Modern English Medical Writing and Lay Texts'. In *Medical Writing in Early Modern English*, by Irma Taavitsainen and Päivi Pahta, 73–93. Studies in English Language. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.  
<https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511921193>.
- Taavitsainen, Irma, and Andreas H. Jucker. 2010. 'Trends and Developments in Historical Pragmatics'. In *Historical Pragmatics*, edited by Andreas H. Jucker and Irma Taavitsainen, 3–29. Handbooks of Pragmatics 8. Berlin / New York: De Gruyter Mouton.

## **“I don’t comprehend this intercourse of seal’d letters” – Contractions in the Mary Hamilton Papers**

Monique Tschachtli  
(University Zürich, monique.tschachtli@uzh.ch)

This paper investigates the use of contractions in Mary Hamilton’s private letters and diaries, alongside the letters of her correspondents. Contractions in eighteenth-century private letters were considered informal and vulgar following criticism from Swift and Addison (Haugland 1995) and can therefore be interpreted as markers of familiarity. Previous research on contractions in Elizabeth Montagu’s correspondence finds that they are most frequent in letters by female writers, family members, social equals, and older writers and that Montagu’s use increased over time despite mounting criticism of the form (Sairio 2009, 2010). Hamilton’s writings, recently made accessible in an electronic corpus, have not been investigated thoroughly. Moreover, previous research on contraction use in eighteenth-century letters has relied on descriptive statistics, only. This paper addresses a research gap in the field of historical sociolinguistics by examining contraction use with a multi-factorial approach and utilising a novel dataset.

The paper focuses on ‘participle contractions’ (e.g. *lov’d*, *lik’d*, *receiv’d*) and ‘negation contractions’ (e.g. *don’t*, *can’t*, *couldn’t*), contrasting them with their full forms. The study answers the following research questions: How does Hamilton’s contraction use vary according to contraction type, over time, between her letters and diaries, and based on her addressee’s age, gender, social rank, and relationship to her? How does her correspondents’ contraction use vary according to contraction type, over time, and based on their age, gender, social rank, and relationship to her? Which variables most strongly affect writers’ contraction use and how do they interact? By examining these questions, the study explores intra- vs. inter-speaker differences within the broader context of the conventionalisation of a stigmatised feature in the specialised genre of personal letters.

The data are extracted from *Unlocking the Mary Hamilton Papers* (Barker et al. 2019) on *CQPweb* (Hardie 2022), including full and contracted participle and negation from Hamilton’s diaries, out-letters, and in-letters. Variables include author and recipient gender, age (relative to Hamilton), social rank, relationship (to Hamilton), decade, and period (of Hamilton’s life). The data are analysed using Random Forest models, combining the ‘ctree’ and ‘cforest’ functions in R.

The results reveal that Hamilton uses participle contraction frequently, but categorically avoids negation contraction. She uses participle contraction more frequently in her diaries than in her letters, and her contraction use decreases significantly over time. This pattern varies based on her correspondent’s age, social rank, and relationship to her. In her correspondents’ letters, participle contraction is likewise more frequent than negation contraction, though their contraction use shows a less marked decrease over time. This pattern varies based on their gender, age, social rank, and relationship to Hamilton. The Random Forest analyses reveal the complex interactions between

these variables in shaping contraction use, challenging especially the importance ascribed to gender by previous studies (Sairio 2009, 2010, 2018).

Thus, this paper suggests that the stigmatisation of contractions limited their perceived appropriateness to specific contexts. This provides new insights into the conventionalisation of familiar features in personal letters as a specialised genre.

#### Sources:

Barker, Hannah, Sophie Coulombeau, David Denison, Tino Oudesluijs, Cassandra Ulph, Christine Wallis & Nuria Yáñez-Bouza. 2019. Unlocking the Mary Hamilton Papers. Unlocking the Mary Hamilton Papers. <https://www.maryhamiltonpapers.alc.manchester.ac.uk/> (5 September 2024).

Hardie, Andrew. 2022. The Mary Hamilton Papers: Powered by CQPweb. Corpus. CQPweb. <https://cqpweb.lancs.ac.uk/hamilton/> (13 September 2024).

#### References:

Haugland, Kari E. 1995. Is't allow'd or ain't it? On Contraction in Early Grammars and Spelling Books. *Studia Neophilologica* 67(2), 165–184. doi:10.1080/00393279508588159.

Sairio, Anni. 2009. *Language and Letters of the Bluestocking Network: Sociolinguistic Issues in Eighteenth-Century Epistolary English*. Société néophilologique.

Sairio, Anni. 2010. “if You think me obstinate I can't help it”: Exploring the Epistolary Styles and Social Roles of Elizabeth Montagu and Sarah Scott. In Päivi Pahta, Minna Nevala, Arja Nurmi & Minna Palander-Collin (eds.), *Social Roles and Language Practices in Late Modern English*, 87–109. Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company. doi:10.1075/pbns.195.05sai.

Sairio, Anni. 2018. Weights and Measures of Eighteenth-Century Language: A Sociolinguistic Account of Montagu's Correspondence. *Huntington Library Quarterly* 81(4), 633–656. doi:10.1353/hlq.2018.0024.

## **Conventionalization of politeness strategies in Hong Kong business correspondence: a diachronic perspective on the use of requests**

Carina Stick  
(JMU Würzburg, carina.stick@uni-wuerzburg.de)

While business correspondence is generally perceived as a highly conventionalized genre, studies have shown that this is a rather recent development. Up to the 19th century, business letters were virtually the only way of communicating over long distances, which is why they often contained private news and gossip (Dossena 2006: 176). It is only from the mid-19th century that, with the development of firm structures from small family businesses to larger companies, a new business ethos focusing on transactional approaches emerged, ultimately leading to the conventionalization of the genre (Del Lungo Camiciotti 2006: 156).

This paper investigates the conventionalization of politeness strategies in early 20th century business correspondence from Hong Kong through an analysis of requests and their accompanying moves. While requests have been studied extensively since the 1980s (e.g. Blum-Kulka 1987, Del Lungo Camiciotti 2008), the fact that these often occur in combination with other moves, such as justifications (Kong 1998) or apologies (Blum-Kulka & Olshtain 1989), has been neglected to date. Therefore, this paper investigates the following questions:

- How has the use of requests and their accompanying moves in Hong Kong business correspondence changed from the 1900s to the 1940s?
- Which expressions, request strategies or supportive moves have become conventionalized over time?

The study is based on a corpus of business letters sent from or to two Hong Kong based businesses, namely the holding company Jardine Matheson & Co. and the Hong Kong and Shanghai Banking Corporation (HSBC). Three sub-corpora, each covering a decade (the 1900s, 1920s and 1940s), have been compiled and digitized with every sub-corpus consisting of roughly 25.000 words.

The project relies on a mixed method approach: after manually identifying typical words and phrases that indicate a request by reading through the letters of a test corpus, using AntConc each subcorpus was searched for these expressions to find all requests. These were then coded and analyzed following an adapted coding scheme which is based on Blum-Kulka and Olshtain's (1989) coding manual, so that some initial results can be presented. It is expected that the results will, due to the reduction of social hierarchies and the establishment of corporate companies in the 20th century, show a less overly polite style and an increase in directness in the formulation of requests. Furthermore, it is expected that certain expressions and request strategies have been conventionalized and are routinely employed based on the situational context rather than semantics.

References:

- Blum-Kulka, S. (1987). Indirectness and politeness in requests: Same or different? *Journal of Pragmatics*, 11(2), 131-146.
- Blum-Kulka, S. and Olshtain, E. (1989). *Cross-cultural pragmatics: Requests and apologies*. Norwood, NJ: Ablex.
- Dossena, M. (2006). Forms of self-representation in nineteenth-century business letters. In M. Dossena & I. Taavitsen (Eds.), *Diachronic perspectives on domain-specific English* (pp. 173-190). Bern: Lang.
- Del Lungo Camiciotti, G. (2006). "Conduct yourself towards all persons on every occasion with civility and in a wise and prudent manner; this will render you esteemed": Stance features in nineteenth-century business letters. In: M. Dossena & S. M. Fitzmaurice (Eds.), *Business and official correspondence: Historical investigations* (pp. 175-192). Bern: Lang.
- Del Lungo Camiciotti, G. (2008). Two polite speech acts from a diachronic perspective: Aspects of the realisation of requesting and undertaking commitments in the nineteenth century commercial community. In A. H. Jucker & I. Taavitsainen (Eds.), *Speech acts in the history of English* (pp. 115-131). Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Kong, K. (1998). Are simple business request letters really simple? A comparison of Chinese and English business request letters. *Text & Talk*, 18(1), 103-141.



## Understanding pragmalinguistic choices in appellative letters – focus on early 20th-century business and extortion letters

Theresa Neumaier  
(TU Dortmund, University, [theresa.neumaier@tu-dortmund.de](mailto:theresa.neumaier@tu-dortmund.de))

Ninja Schulz  
(JMU Würzburg, [ninja.schulz@uni-wuerzburg.de](mailto:ninja.schulz@uni-wuerzburg.de))

Lisa Lehnen  
(JMU Würzburg, [lisa.lehnen@uni-wuerzburg.de](mailto:lisa.lehnen@uni-wuerzburg.de))

Correspondence provides a rich data source for studies in historical sociolinguistics, genre analysis, language variation and change. However, to fully exploit the potential of the data, it is important to be aware of external factors relevant for their production and acknowledge the options and limitations for deriving such metainformation. Socio-historical, cultural and technical aspects, e.g. the socio-demographic background of the writer, societal structure, communication purpose, and the production circumstances, need to be understood to enable a comprehensive linguistic analysis and valid interpretation. Although specific grammatical features or discourse-pragmatic units, e.g. modal verbs and requests, can be easily located and formally analysed in different types of datasets, interpreting their use and function requires a clear conception of their embedding in the respective context. Similarities and differences in the occurrence of these features may be inflicted by conventions established within the (sub)genre at large but also on the level of the speech community, specific social networks, or even the individual.

To illustrate the relevance of contextualisation, we investigate two sets of early 20<sup>th</sup>-century letters, written in different cultural settings and with varying communicative purposes. The first dataset consists of business correspondence from Hong Kong collected from archives in London and Cambridge, the second of extortion letters collected from the Metropolitan Police's Threatening Letter Book. We focus on directives, which are well-researched in cross-cultural comparisons and omnipresent in business-like correspondence. Our letters are appellative by nature and similar in their communicative intent - the sender asks for some action from the addressee, thus exerting the illocutionary force of a directive (Bergs, 2007, p. 33). However, the ways the letter writers set out to achieve their goals differ considerably as the business letters include socially sanctioned directives, while in extortion letters the directive is realised as an illicit speech act. We show that factors traditionally used to describe the seriousness of face-threatening acts like requests (social distance, power, rank of imposition) cannot fully explain pragmalinguistic choices. Regarding power, for instance, some of the writers in our corpus of Hong Kong business correspondence have inherent status (Bargiela-Chiappini et al., 1996, p. 637) in Hong Kong due to their societal activities beyond the business context, while others only have relative status within the company. In extortion letters sent to high-status recipients (e.g. the Prime Minister), the (mostly anonymous) writers use intertextual references to depict themselves as members of powerful groups, thus

reducing the social distance between themselves and their recipient and adding force to their demands.

For both datasets, the specialisation of letter types leads to a conventionalisation of realisation strategies and the development of formulae, which can even override politeness norms once the transactional function of the letter is established. On a theoretical level, our findings therefore imply that we need to find ways to conceptualise sociopragmatic factors in a more fine-grained manner, allow for interactions between them and integrate dynamic processes of genre-internal conventionalisation and specialisation to understand pragmalinguistic choices in correspondence.

References:

- Bargiela-Chiappini, F., & Harris, S. J. (1996). Requests and status in business correspondence. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 26(5), 635–662. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0378-2166\(96\)89191-0](https://doi.org/10.1016/0378-2166(96)89191-0)
- Bergs, A. T. (2007). Letters: A new approach to text typology. In T. Nevalainen & S.-K. Tanskanen (Eds.), *Letter writing* (pp. 27–46). John Benjamins Publishing Company.

**Conventionalisation, specialisation, institutionalisation: Discussing communicative practices and genre developments in letter writing**

Ninja Schulz

(JMU Würzburg, [ninja.schulz@uni-wuerzburg.de](mailto:ninja.schulz@uni-wuerzburg.de))

Theresa Neumaier

(TU Dortmund, University, [theresa.neumaier@tu-dortmund.de](mailto:theresa.neumaier@tu-dortmund.de))

Lisa Lehnen

(JMU Würzburg, [lisa.lehnen@uni-wuerzburg.de](mailto:lisa.lehnen@uni-wuerzburg.de))

During the closing session, the workshop convenors will synthesise the main themes and conclusions arising from the presentations. There will be a particular focus on discussing questions and issues raised in the workshop proposal relating to the conventionalisation of communicative practices, the specification of correspondence into letter types, the institutionalisation of letter writing, and the variation that can be observed across time, socio-historical contexts, and cultural settings. We will also talk about options for further collaboration and a joint publication.