

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

### **Workshop convenors:**

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The delineation of genres and subgenres is a challenging task for the compilation of corpora that aim at comparability across varieties and/or across time as genres constantly evolve in accordance with socio-historical changes. At the same time, their variability is limited by the fact that they also have to remain recognisable for language users (Brinton 2023: 186). Understanding the factors and forces shaping genres within specific socio-cultural settings is thus a key element in designing corpora and interpreting synchronic and diachronic variation. Correspondence is particularly interesting in this respect as letters are usually a) non-edited, b) interactive and c) sensitive to technological progress.

With respect to a), written genres are often regulated by institutions or public players, regarding mostly the publication process and sometimes also the production process. This is not necessarily the case for correspondence, where a less clearly defined group of individuals produces texts and engages in establishing norms by relying on conventions of language use that they are familiar with (Claridge 2017: 186). However, not all language users have access to the same models of correspondence and conventions for new sub-genres emerging from changing communicative needs (such as company-internal business correspondence) have to be established first. Regarding b), the socio-pragmatic function of letters (as a form of written interaction) (Bergs 2007) makes them especially sensitive to cultural norms regarding, for instance, politeness, stance-taking, and expressions of deference, which will affect the conventions emerging in different cultural and socio-political settings (including modifications made in cross-cultural communication, for instance in international business correspondence). Thus, while politeness and communicative conventions have some universal characteristics, they are largely dependent on context. The resulting variation is induced by culture-specific understandings of face, rights and obligations and interactional goals (Spencer-Oatey 2008). In addition, norms and conventions have changed through time due to increasing language contact and economic and societal transformations, e.g. the spread of literacy, democratisation, or changing gender roles (Bruns & Kranich 2021; Jucker 2020; Loureiro-Porto 2021). Regarding c), technological developments have changed letter writing considerably over the centuries, including changes in the mode of production (handwritten, typewritten, electronic, etc.), means of transport (railway, steam ships, etc.), and services (e.g. penny post, internet), all leading to

an increasingly reduced time lag between sending and receiving letters (from several months to instant communication) and the expansion of the group of people participating in the practice of producing correspondence.

In this workshop, we aim at bringing together researchers who explore correspondence from a diachronic perspective. The contributions cover the time span from Early Modern English to the 20th century exploring diverse contexts, such as health communication, threatening letters, business correspondence and pauper letters from Britain, the US and Hong Kong. Key issues include but are not limited to:

- Conventionalisation: What language practices have become typical in correspondence over time? To what extent are these sensitive to cultural setting, politeness norms, and influences from other media etc.?
- Specialisation: What (sub)genres have emerged (for instance business letters, threatening letters, etc.)? To what extent has the genre diversified? What influences between specialised subgenres and beyond genre boundaries can be identified?
- Institutionalisation: What role does correspondence have in different domains? Which practices have become part of institutional discourses? Which groups have been included in and excluded from these practices?

By investigating historical correspondence from and across English-speaking communities and contexts, we want to initiate a discussion about new approaches to tracing and theorising genre developments and the complexities involved therein.

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