

Anita Auer, Daniel Schreier & Richard J. Watts (eds.), *Letter Writing and Language Change*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2015. Pp. 352. ISBN 9781107018648.

Reviewed by Minna Nevala, University of Tampere

Letter writing as a socio-historical practice has attracted the attention of many historical linguists in recent years (see e.g. Dossena & Fitzmaurice 2006; Dossena & Tieken-Boon van Ostade 2008; Nurmi *et al.* 2009; Pahta *et al.* 2010; Dossena & del Lungo Camiciotti 2012). Both personal and business correspondence of the past provides researchers not only with ample data for the study of our ancestors' daily life, but also of the different forms and functions of the language used at the time. Epistolary language and its practices have been particularly popular among those studying the history of English, as letters can be seen as a text type combining features of both spoken and written language. Moreover, they often represent the only available material of language change in authentic personal (and private) discourse.

Letter Writing and Language Change is another collaborate venture into the study of letters from a sociolinguistic perspective. The book is a collection of thirteen studies which all focus on different aspects of the epistolary genre as a conduit of change, as well as on their uses and practices. The gist of the volume is to look at the language of letter writing from the theoretical and methodological viewpoint of the three 'Waves of Variation Studies' (p. 8). Many of the studies also deal with the notion of language change, and language histories, 'from below' or 'from above'.

The volume starts – after an introduction into the central themes by **Richard J. Watts** ("Setting the scene, letters, standards and historical sociolinguistics") – with the first prevailing issue of variability and change in language. In "Assessing variability and change in early English letters", **Juan Manuel Hernández-Campoy & Juan Camilo Conde-Silvestre** base their discussion on First Order and Third Order Variation Theory, using the Paston letters as their data. They trace the development of <th> both as a feature progressed through a certain speech community, but also as a variable related to writer identity as an stylistic choice. The chapter shows very nicely the way in which the Third Wave has introduced a way of looking at variation and change from an individual's point of view, something that also **Stephan Elspaß** takes up in his article about letters as an alternative history of German ("Private letters as a source for an alternative history of Middle New High German"). He criticises the traditional approach to language history as a study of the product of a very small minority of language users, i.e. the standard presented in printed texts and classical authors, and calls for shifting our focus on 'language history from below'. This strand of study concentrates on everyday language used by the majority of writers, as seen in the nineteenth-century emigrant letters he uses as his data. Interestingly, many of those language features which were at the time condemned or non-existent from the prescriptive point of view were common in authentic language use.

Stylistic variation in vernacular letters is the next main topic that carries through the next four articles in the volume. **Tony Fairman** discusses in his chapter "Language in print and handwriting" the transcription of Late Modern English pauper letters in respect to various social aspects, like schooling and standardisation. He argues that the sociolinguistic study of vernacular letters should be seen as the study of "pools of handwritten and printed literacies" (p. 69), placing individual styles in the foreground in language variation. In the next chapter, "Heterogeneity vs homogeneity", **Marianne Hundt** studies vernacular style from the viewpoint of authenticity. Her material consists of published

letters written by English settlers in New Zealand in the 1840s and the so-called *Cherry Valley Chronicles* written by English emigrants to Massachusetts. After an exhaustive account of various grammatical features, Hundt concludes that both data sets show surprisingly homogeneous and standard language, although there is some orthographic variation present. Heterogeneity vs homogeneity in new varieties of English is also the topic of **Stefan Dollinger's** chapter, "Emerging standards in the colonies, variation and the Canadian letter writer", in which he studies the development of Canadian English from the late eighteenth century to the end of the nineteenth century. In this study as well, the letter data is found to show much more variation in certain grammatical features (*shall* vs *will*) than comparable print corpus data.

Alexander Bergs's chapter, "Linguistic fingerprints of authors and scribes", works as an arch joining together the themes of stylistic variation and social class. Another writer in the volume using the Paston letters as its data, Bergs focuses on scribal practices and their influences on authors' language. By a thorough study into two particular morphosyntactic features in the data (personal pronouns, relativisation), he concludes that it appears scribes had a very minor impact on the language in the letters. This might be owing to the fact that they either wrote down exactly what the author dictated or that the language in the letters reflects what the scribes thought the author's language should have been like, thus linking the findings to the notion of prestigious, appropriate, and prescriptive language use. These are also some of the issues **Anita Auer** discusses in her chapter ("Stylistic variation") on the link between social and stylistic variation. Looking at the prescribed epistolary practices against actual letter writing in Late Modern England, she uses examples of letters of women writers from the upper, middle and lower strata of society to show that stylistic variation is strongly linked with linguistic repertoire. The opportunity of gaining a repertoire in the first place was of course a privilege not had by the lower end of the social spectrum, and this also shows in less creative style and language use in general. In her study, **Susan Fitzmaurice** delves more into social meaning in stylistic variation, as she focuses on the epistolary practices of the members of the Kit-Kat Club, a prominent London dining club for the early eighteenth-century aristocracy. On the basis of a close analysis of three particular letters, she concludes, among other things, that the stylistic variation in their language relates to the writers' ability for creating a particular persona or identity according to their recipients, something also Auer found in her study. **Mikko Laitinen's** chapter, "Early nineteenth-century pauper letter", then takes us to the bottom layer of the English social hierarchy and discusses linguistic diversity in relation to migration in Late Modern English pauper letters (see Fairman above). By looking into both local and translocal styles in letters for the poor relief, Laitinen shows how both personal and contextual stylistic choices are used together with formulaic features, such as persuasive threats and conditionals.

The final four articles in the book deal with features of standard vs vernacular language more in depth. **Barbara Allen**, in her contribution "A non-standard standard? Exploring the evidence from nineteenth-century vernacular letters and diaries" discusses early nineteenth-century Standard English as a changing system, and proposes a continuum of non-standardness for vernacular letters. She points out that in order to be able to get their message across, even vernacular writers must have had a sense of uniform rules and principles of letter writing. Also **Lukas Pietsch** takes up the issue in his chapter "Archaism and dialect in Irish emigrant letters", which focuses on archaic and dialectal features in Irish emigrant letters. Persistent use of conservative language in letters appears to be the result of both epistolary genre as such and the writers' unfamiliarity with the written standard of the time, thus resulting in an approximation of what 'good' grammar and 'good' style were. **Lucia Siebers's** study on heterogeneity in early African American English letters ("Assessing heterogeneity") discusses the notion of individual literacies further. Each writer's own assessment of

what the written ‘standard’ is shows in variation in, for example, spelling, punctuation, and capitalisation. Again, the data show that certain linguistic and stylistic elements are used from one letter to the next, something that also **Daniel Schreier** finds in his chapter on local dialect features in postcolonial Tristan da Cunha English, entitled “Hypercorrection and the persistence of local dialect features in writing”. By focusing on ten letters by two writers, Schreier discusses how one of the writers shows clear signs of hypercorrection in the use of *is/are*, as she is a speaker of a lower prestige variety. These findings related to social, stylistic, and (non-)standard variation are finally tied together in the concluding chapter by the editors (“Epilogue: where next?”).

It is not very often one gets to read a collection of articles which is a true pleasure to read. Editing thirteen studies into a unified and well-balanced whole is, however, something the editors of this book have managed to do, and do it well. The various theoretical, methodological, and analytical discussions presented in this book are fascinating and make the reader want to learn more about different aspects of the epistolary genre. The editors could have guided the reader a bit more through their train of thought by inserting the articles into subsections, but that is only a small flaw in a book which otherwise offers a full array of different sociolinguistic perspectives into studying historical letter writing. The introductory and the concluding articles provide a good background for the studies and a comprehensive discussion of where the sociolinguistic study of epistolary writing is, and should be, next heading. According to the editors (p. 187), letters should be looked at from a more holistic perspective, in which the focus is not on standard language but on language as a conscious performance ‘from below’ and/or ‘from above’.

Reviewer’s address:

Faculty of Communication Sciences

33014 University of Tampere

Finland

minna.nevala@uta.fi

References

- Dossena, Marina & Gabriella del Lungo Camiciotti (eds.). 2012. *Letter Writing in Late Modern Europe*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Dossena, Marina & Susan M. Fitzmaurice (eds.). 2006. *Business and Official Correspondence: Historical Investigations*. Bern: Peter Lang.
- Dossena, Marina & Ingrid Tieken-Boon van Ostade (eds.). 2008. *Studies in Late Modern English Correspondence: Methodology and Data*. Bern: Peter Lang.
- Nurmi, Arja, Minna Nevala & Minna Palander-Collin (eds.). 2009. *The Language of Daily Life in England (1400–1800)*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Pahta, Päivi, Minna Nevala, Arja Nurmi & Minna Palander-Collin (eds.). 2010. *Social Roles and Language Practices in Late Modern English*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.