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Functions of epistolary formulae in Dutch letters from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries

Gijsbert Rutten^{1,2} and Marijke van der Wal¹

¹Leiden University / ²Vrije Universiteit Brussel

Wray (2002) distinguishes three main functions of formulaic language relating to processing, interaction and discourse marking. In this paper, we show that Wray's analysis of the functions of formulaic language also applies to historical letter-writing in a corpus of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Dutch letters. Discourse is marked with formulae indicating the text type or the text structure. Interaction is covered by intersubjective formulae communicating health, greetings, wishes for renewed contact, as well as Christian-ritual formulae. The processing function is operationalised in terms of literacy and writing experience, assuming that the use of prefabricated formulae reduces the writing effort. Therefore, we expect less-experienced letter-writers to use more formulae than more-experienced writers. We will show that less-experienced writers are indeed more likely to use epistolary formulae, and conclude that Wray's "reduction of the speaker's processing effort" in online speech production, also applies to written seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Dutch.

Keywords: formulaic language, epistolary formulae, letter-writing, Dutch, literacy, historical sociolinguistics, writing experience

1. Introduction

Many text types and communicative situations are characterised by certain phrases, specific verbalisations, expressions, speech acts, routine formulae and similar devices and this also applies to private and business letters from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. In this paper, we will focus on equivalent language in Dutch letters from this period, adopting "formulaic language" as a cover term, following Wray (2002), Corrigan et al. (2009), Kuiper (2009), Dossena (2003) and many others. With regard to the text type under discussion, we will speak

of “epistolary formulae”. The Dutch seventeenth- and eighteenth-century letters constituting the corpus that is presently under construction at Leiden University (see Section 2) abound in formulaic language, to the extent that some letters may even seem to consist of very little other than formulae. This large proportion of epistolary formulae calls for further investigation.

Questions that have been addressed in earlier research regarding epistolary formulae include such topics as power and politeness (Nevalainen and Raumolin-Brunberg 1995; Dossena 2003; Nevala 2004; Tiisala 2004; Bax 2010), sociolinguistic variation (Tieken-Boon van Ostade 1999; Austin 2004), the relation between formulaic and expressive language (Wood 2009), and the functions of epistolary formulae (Elspeß 2005: 152–196). In this paper, we will focus on the (sociopragmatic) functions of formulaic language. We will discuss the main functions of Dutch seventeenth- and eighteenth-century epistolary formulae in particular, following Wray’s (2002) analysis of the functions of formulaic language, and examining to what extent her approach may be applied to historical letter-writing. Our analysis of Dutch letters from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries consists of a descriptive part (Section 3) and a case study (Section 4).

Apart from research on epistolary formulae, formulaic language has been studied from a (predominantly) psycholinguistic point of view (Wray 2002), and from a sociolinguistic and ethnographic point of view (Kuiper and associates, see Kuiper 2009), as well as from conversation analytic (Tannen 1987; Norrick 2000), historical linguistic (Corrigan et al. 2009) and pragmatic perspectives (Coulmas 1979, 1981b). Moreover, similar topics have been addressed in phraseology (Cowie 1988; Granger and Meunier 2008), and are also at the core of constructional approaches to grammar (Goldberg 1995, 2006), pattern grammar (Hunston and Francis 2000) and corpus linguistics (Biber 2009). This is not to say that, for instance, constructions in the sense of construction grammar and epistolary formulae are one and the same. All these approaches, however, share an interest in multi-word strings or so-called extended lexical units (Sinclair 1998, 2008; Poss and van der Wouden 2005), and regard a strict separation of grammar and lexicon as problematic. Many of these approaches are discussed by Wray (2002), who offers a comprehensive overview of the functions of formulaic language.

The main question to be addressed in the present paper is the following: to what extent does Wray’s analysis of the functions of formulaic language apply to Dutch letters from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries? After having discussed the many possible functions of formulaic sequences mentioned in the literature, Wray (2002) collapses these into three main functions: “the reduction of the speaker’s processing effort, the manipulation of the hearer (including the hearer’s perception of the speaker’s identity), and the marking of discourse structure”, in short: “processing, interaction and discourse marking” (Wray 2002: 101).¹ Reduction of

the processing effort is a psycholinguistic notion referring to the relative ease of retrieving multi-word strings whole from memory rather than composing them word by word. The interactional function includes pragmatic and sociolinguistic phenomena such as constructing individual and group identities through linguistic features. It also refers to facilitating the hearer's comprehension, as routine formulae are supposedly easier to interpret than novel constructions, especially in everyday communicative situations. The third main function refers to the organisation and signalling of discourse structure.² Two of Wray's main functions, the interactional and discourse marking functions, are straightforwardly found in Dutch letters from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. At first sight, the reduction of the processing function, characteristic of online speech production, is not a self-evident phenomenon in a historical corpus of written texts, but closer examination will show otherwise.

After introducing the corpus used for the present study (Section 2), we will present our analysis in Sections 3 and 4. In Section 3, we distinguish three types of Dutch epistolary formulae, which correspond to two of Wray's main functions, viz. discourse marking and interaction. In the case study of Section 4, we determine in what sense and to what extent Wray's third function, that is, reduction of the processing effort, may be represented in historical letters. In Section 5, we discuss the implications of our results for the study of historical letter-writing.

2. The corpus

The data for this study stem from a corpus which is currently under construction at Leiden University, and which consists of original Dutch letters from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.³ Most of the letters are private or combine private and business information, though there are also a small number of purely business letters, especially from the seventeenth century. The letters were predominantly sent from the western part of the Netherlands, in particular the present-day provinces of North-Holland, South-Holland and Zeeland, to friends and family engaged in colonising activities overseas (e.g. in Surinam), or vice versa. For the present study, a subcorpus of some 100,000 words was compiled, the basic external data of which are given in Table 1. All letters used are established autographs, which is not self-evident, especially in the case of seventeenth-century letters (Nobels and van der Wal 2009).

The Leiden letter corpus is invaluable as it contains letters by writers from differing social ranks, even from the lower and lower-middle classes. We distinguish between four social classes (lower, lower-middle, upper-middle, upper) following the stratification commonly made by historians as shown in Table 2 (Frijhoff and

Table 1. Basic external facts relating to the subcorpus used in this study

Period	Men	Women	Total	No. of words
1660s–1670s	43	38	81	c. 45,000
1780s	77	23	100	c. 56,000

Table 2. Social stratification and the corresponding distribution of letters (note: of 12 seventeenth-century letters, the writer's social class could not (yet) be determined)

	Historians' stratification	Leiden letter corpus	1660s–1670s	1780s
1	Patriciate: nobility and the non-noble ruling classes			
2	Bourgeoisie, e.g. wealthy merchants, shipowners, academics, commissioned officers	Upper / UC	5	35
3	Prosperous middle class, e.g. large storekeepers, uncommissioned officers, well-to-do farmers	Upper-middle / UMC	47	35
4	Petty bourgeoisie, e.g. petty shopkeepers, small craftsmen, minor officials	Lower-middle / LMC	13	23
5	Mass of wage-workers, e.g. sailors, servants, soldiers	Lower / LC	4	7
6	Have-nots, e.g. tramps, beggars, disabled			
			69	100

Spies 1999:190–191; Bruijn 2008:16).⁴ These social strata are primarily defined in terms of profession and/or occupation. We used a variety of criteria to assign letter-writers to social classes, the most important being the writer's profession or, in the case of women, the husband's profession. The number of letters selected for the present study is given in the right-hand columns in Table 2.

In principle, we do not collect letters from the first group, the patriciate, as we adhere to the so-called language history from below approach (e.g. Elspaß 2005), assuming that letters by people from the other classes are closer to the spoken language of the time.⁵ Unfortunately, letters from have-nots are almost impossible to acquire, even assuming that they exist.

As can be seen from Table 2, the letters for this study were taken from all four social classes we distinguish, albeit not completely equally distributed.⁶ For the present purposes, however, this corpus will suffice (see also below, 3.2). In a pre-test, it was found that after analysing ten letters from each period, new formulae turned up only sporadically. Therefore, we may safely assume that these 181 letters

provide us with a representative sample of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century epistolary formulae.

3. Functions of epistolary formulae

Many different formulae are found in the letters studied, including greeting formulae, address formulae and health formulae. The last will form the core of the case study in Section 4. In the current section, we present our general approach to formulaic language in Dutch seventeenth- and eighteenth-century letters. The pragmatic situation in which the epistolary formulae acquire meaning consists of the texts (the letters) and the two participant roles of the writer and the addressee. Furthermore, we distinguish a third participant to whom reference is frequently made, viz. the Christian God. Building on Elspaß (2005:157–196) and Wray (2002), we distinguish three main functions of formulaic language, each foregrounding different aspects of this pragmatic situation: the text-constitutive (Section 3.1), the intersubjective (Section 3.2) and the Christian-ritual function (Section 3.3). It is important to note at the outset that these three functions do not constitute three separate categories of formulae. Rather, formulae may combine two or three functions, with one function being dominant. Moreover, all epistolary formulae are text-constitutive in that they only appear in letters and thus mark this specific text type. Wray (2002:88) rightly comments that “any given expression can have more than one function at the same time”.

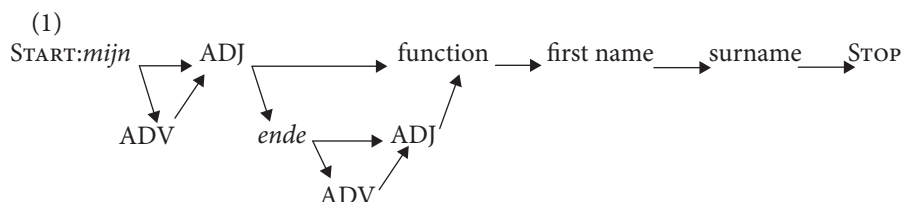
The three main functions we distinguish correspond to two of Wray’s (2002) three functions of formulaic language. One of the main functions that Wray (2002:101) distinguishes, pertaining to the reduction of the speaker’s processing effort, will not be discussed here, but will be addressed in Section 4.

3.1 The text-constitutive function

Text-constitutive formulae foreground the text in itself, that is, they draw attention to the fact that the text is a letter. They express one of the main functions that formulae perform according to Wray (2002:101), namely “marking of the discourse structure” or “discourse marking”. There are two subtypes of text-constitutive formulae, the first relating to the text type, and the second to the text structure. Elspaß (2005:157), discussing German letters from the nineteenth century, speaks of “Textsortenkonstitution” and “Textkonstitution” respectively. Text-type formulae identify the text as a letter. When scrutinising the text for the first time, the text-type formulae may enable the addressee (or the researcher) to rapidly and easily determine that the document in question is a letter. The text-type formulae

comprise address formulae, date formulae, salutation and opening formulae, closing formulae and signatures. Without actually having to read the body of the text, the text type is revealed by these surrounding text-type formulae. All the letters, apart from a few exceptions, contain these text-type formulae.

Text-type formulae are well known and belong to the most studied of all epistolary formulae. For the present purposes, a full description of the text-type formulae found in Dutch letters will not be necessary. By way of example, we present the common structure of the formula used for addressing the recipient in (1), adopting Kuiper's method of representing formulaic structure (e.g. Kuiper and Haggo 1984: 221). This formula is part of a cluster of opening formulae, to which greeting formulae and formulae referring to earlier communication also belong. The opening of a letter thus comprises at the most these three elements: addressing, greeting and referring to earlier communication.



The meanings of the two words in italics, *mijn* and *ende*, are 'my' and 'and', respectively. The addressee's function is either a societal function or a profession such as a captain or carpenter, or it indicates the social relationship between the writer and the addressee (see example 2a, 2b), or both (example 2c). Using this formulaic format, and having knowledge of the adverbs and adjectives used, writers can generate a wide range of conventionalised address formulae. A limited number of five or six adjectives are commonly used, which can be modified by an even smaller number of adverbs with the meaning 'very'. Examples are in (2).

- (2) a. *mijn* lieue *ende* wel beminde man *jan* van nes
 my dear and very beloved husband Jan van Nes
- b. *mijn* eerwaerdighe hus vrouwe frans sinie schelwaerts
 my honourable wife Franssinie Schelwaerts
- c. *mijn* bemijnde kosijns schijpper wallijn janse
 my beloved cousin shipmaster Wallijn Janse

The second subtype of text-constitutive formula is text-structural formulae, which mark the text structure by realising the transition of one part of the discourse to another. In principle, text-structural formulae can be used throughout the text, and, in fact, in any text. In practice, they are not only highly specific for this text type, but also largely confined to specific text-structural functions. The first kind

of text-structural formula marks the transition of the opening of the letter with its typical text-type formulae to the next part of the discourse, where the writer's health is usually communicated (see Sections 3.2 and 4). Here, we mention two frequent variants (example (3)), centring on the collocation *let know*. Both variants are also frequently attested in Early and Late Modern English (Austin 1973a: 16–17).

- (3) a. ick laet ul weeten als dat ...
I let you know that ...
b. dese diend om UEd te laten weten als dat ...
this one serves to you let know that ...
'This is to let you know that ...'

Whereas these formulae are usually found in the first part of the letters, near the beginning, another type of text-structural formula commonly appears towards the end of the letters, where they mark the transition from the body of the text to the closing formulae. There are three frequent variants of this kind (example (4)). The English counterparts are attested by Austin (1973b: 129–130).

- (4) a. niet meer op dit pas dan ...
nothing more on this step than ...
'Nothing more for now but ...'
b. voorts is mijn schrijven niet dan ...
further is my writing nothing than ...
'For the rest, I know nothing to write but ...'
c. hiermede breek ik af
with this break I off
'I hereby end this letter'

Contrary to the first two types, a third type of text-structural formula is often found throughout the letters, linking different parts of discourse and announcing a new topic. Of these topic shifters, we give two of the most common variants (example (5)).

- (5) a. voort ijs mijn schrijven als dat ...
further is my writing that ...
'For the rest, I'm letting you know that ...'
b. wat mij aangaat ...
what me concerns ...
'As far as I'm concerned ...'

3.2 The intersubjective function

By focusing on the relationship between the writer and the addressee, intersubjective formulae foreground the interactional aspect of the pragmatic situation. They amount to what Wray (2002: 101) considers as one of the main functions of formulaic language: “the manipulation of the hearer (including the hearer’s perception of the speaker’s identity)” or shortly “interaction”. In terms of content, intersubjective formulae cover three domains: health, greetings and contact. Health formulae (cf. Davis 1965; Austin 1973a, 2004; Nevalainen 2001), to be discussed in more detail in Section 4 below, consist of health statements and health wishes, of which prototypical examples are given in (6a) and (6b) respectively:

- (6) a. als dat ick en ul vaeder en min vaeder en moeder noch klock
that I and your father and my father and mother still healthy
en gesont sien
and healthy are
‘that your father, my father and mother and I are still in good health’
- b. wensse VE gesontheijt
wish you health
‘I wish you all the best’

After text-constitutive formulae such as address formulae and date formulae, text-structural formulae (example (3)) mark the transition to the intersubjective part of discourse, mediated by the glue of the connective *als dat* ‘that’.

Greeting formulae display a wide range of variation (e.g. Nevalainen and Raumolin-Brunberg 1995). A first subdivision is made between greeting formulae addressed to the addressee (7a, 7b) and greeting formulae addressed to a third party, where the addressee functions as intermediary (7c, 7d). A second subdivision is made concerning the kind of wish expressed. Cases where the writer simply greets the addressee (7a, 7c) or bids him or her good night (7b, 7d) are the two main types. Illustrative examples are in (7):

- (7) a. sijt van harten gegroet
be-IMP from heart greeted-PART
‘I send you my kindest regards’
- b. ick wenssen ul veel hondert duisent mael goeden nacht
I wish you many hundred thousand times good night
‘I wish you a very good night’
- c. de groetenis aen al onse broers en vriende
the greetings to all our brothers and friends
‘give my kind regards to all our brothers and friends’

- d. segt u maet en alle goede kennis veel goede nacht
 say-IMP your mate and all good acquaintances many good night
 'a very good night to your mate and to all the friends (on my behalf)'

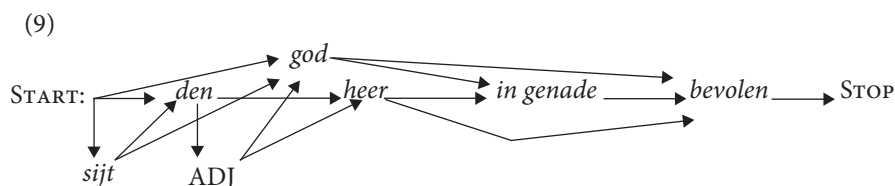
A third type of intersubjective formula concerns the domain of contact. Writers express the wish that epistolary contact with the addressee will be maintained or renewed, and/or the wish that contact in person will take place in the future. Three main variants are presented in example (8).

- (8) a. schrijf een
 write-IMP once
 'Please write (me a letter)'
 b. ... dat wij mal kanderen met lief weeder sien moogen
 ... that we each other with love again see may
 '... that we may/will see each other again with love'
 c. ... als dat ick hoop dat godt de heer ons weeder bi malcander sal
 ... that I hope that god the lord us again by each other will
 laten comen
 let come
 '...that I hope that God the Lord will let us come together again'

3.3 The Christian-ritual function

The third main function of epistolary formulae in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Dutch foregrounds the relationship between the writer and the divine world, or between the writer, the addressee and the divine world. The Christian-ritual formulae usually place the writer and/or the addressee under divine protection, thereby manifesting the writer's religiosity. Thus, the writer's stylisation of the self (Coupland 2007) involves ethical reliability. In Wray's (2002) perspective, Christian-ritual formulae might be termed a subset of interactional or intersubjective formulae, particularly since these include formulae that promote (the hearer's perception of) the speaker's identity, including "being perceived as a full member of whichever groups are deemed desirable" (Wray 2002:96). The abundance of Christian-ritual formulae, however, and the fact that the Christian God and/or the divine world can be described as a separate participant in the Early Modern situation, leads us to define the Christian-ritual formulae as fulfilling a function of their own in epistolary discourse.

The most frequent Christian-ritual formula is the commendation formula, with which the writer commends the addressee into the hands of God. By way of example, the structure of the most common seventeenth-century commendation formula is represented in (9), again following Kuiper and Haggo (1984).



The adjectives commonly inserted into this formulaic structure are *goede* ‘good’ and *almogende* ‘almighty’. Some examples of the commendation formulae are given in example (10).

- (10) a. godt in genaede bevolen
 God in the grace commended
 b. den heer bevolen
 the Lord commended

4. A case study of health formulae

Building on the broad research tradition in formulaic language, Wray discerns three major functions of formulaic language, which she then reduces “to one overriding priority, the speaker’s promotion of self” (2002: 101). The three major functions are discourse marking, interaction and processing. Discourse marking corresponds to the text-constitutive formulae (3.1). Interaction corresponds to what we called the intersubjective function (3.2). The third function, processing, or more precisely “the reduction of the speaker’s processing effort” (Wray 2002: 101), is a psycholinguistic notion, pointing to the speaker’s ability “to produce language in a more efficient, less energy-draining way”, as Tannen (1987: 581) puts it. Most importantly, using prefabricated strings, the speaker buys time for processing, and creates a shorter processing route (Wray 2002: 97). Obviously, there is a crucial difference between speaking and writing with regard to time, and therefore with regard to processing. In conversation, production and reception take place virtually at the same time, and the use of formulae is therefore efficient. Written communication does not suffer from time pressure and is conversely characterised by “the property of being *worked over*” (Chafe 1994: 43). Writers may adjust, rephrase, edit or rewrite anything they have written, thus buying, in a sense, additional processing time.

Still, it might be argued that reduction of the processing effort is also important in the case of written language, adopting Elspaß’s (2005: 180–181) idea that formulaic language may function as “*Formulierungshilfe*”. Recourse to formulae would not only serve text-constitutive and intersubjective / Christian-ritual

functions, but would also provide a safe option for writers experiencing formulating difficulties. Lexicalised multi-word units, retrieved whole from memory, would make writing easier and speed up the writing process. In order to investigate this, it should first be demonstrated that formulae are indeed lexicalised “prefabs” (Bybee and Torres Cacoullos 2009). This will be done in 4.1. Next, if they function as *Formulierungshilfe*, it is expected that more-experienced writers will use fewer formulae than less-experienced writers (4.2).

We will mainly focus on the health formulae, as these provide the best chances of variation because of their extensiveness and high frequency. Text-constitutive formulae define the text type and are therefore least likely to vary considerably; every writer needs to address the reader and date the letter.

4.1 Health formulae as lexicalised prefabs

In the corpus of 81 autographs from the seventeenth century, health formulae appear in 63 letters (78 per cent). The corpus contains 11 business letters and 70 letters which are either private or a mixture of both. Of the 11 business letters, only 3 (27 per cent) contain health formulae, whereas 60 out of 70 private/mixed letters (86 per cent) contain health formulae. This suggests that health formulae are characteristic of private and mixed letters and less so of business letters, though further research is required into possible genre differences on the basis of more data. In any case, we will focus on the 70 private/mixed letters in the following analyses, so as to keep the corpus as homogeneous as possible.

First, in order to exemplify the use of health formulae in practice, the first part of the introduction of two different letters is presented in Table 3. Both letters contain health formulae. The health formulae are represented in italics, in boldface, underlined, and in small caps. Provisional translations are given below with the same layout. The phrases in normal font are also formulaic, but they are not health formulae and will be disregarded.⁷

Both women are writing a private letter to their husband overseas, but they do so using similar language — language that is found throughout the corpus. In letter 1, no less than five formulae relating to the health theme are found, and three in letter 2. Fixed formulae were used time and again for the verbalisation of such individual experiences as the bodily condition, hope and fear. This is a clear indication that writing was a sociocultural practice.⁸

As can be seen in Table 3, we should distinguish between health formulae and so-called subordinate health formulae (cf. Kuiper 2009:7). Only the first phrase, in italics, contains an overt reference to the health theme, with the common use of the words *kloek* ‘healthy’ and *gezond* ‘healthy’ (cf. example (6a)). The subordinate formulae are merely related to the health theme by their reference to the first

Table 3. The first part of the introduction of two letters by different writers

Letter 1: from Kathelijnen Haeswants, 10 November 1664	Letter 2: from Angenietge Cornelis, 15 September 1664
Vriendelijcke Groetenijssse aen ul mijn lieve ende bemijnde man Leendert arijensen haeswant jck katelijnghen haeswants ul huijsvrouw late ul weten <i>als dat jck met al onse kijnderen noch kloeck ben</i> godt lof van zijn genade <u>verhoepende dat het met ul oock soo is</u> WARE HET ANDERS 'T SOUDE MIJN VAN HARTEN LEET SIJN OM HOEREN <i>dat weet godt almachtijch die een kender van alle harten js</i>	eersaemen seer beminden man roellant iosten oost voren dick en alderliesten man ick ul husvrouw angenietge cornelis laet ul weeten <i>als dat ick en ul vaeder en min vaeder en moeder noch klock en gesont sien en</i> <u>ick hoep min alderliesten man roellant iosten oost vooren dick oock mede soo is</u> WAER HET ANDERS HET SOUDEN MIN NIET LIEF OM HOOREN WEESEN en ick hoep dat het den goeden god goodt langen sal laeten dueren
Provisional translation 1	Provisional translation 2
A friendly greeting to you, my dear and beloved husband Leendert Arijensen Haeswant. I, Kathelijnghen Haeswants, your wife, let you know <i>that I with all our children am still in good health. Praise the Lord for his mercy. Hoping that you are also like that.</i> IF IT WERE DIFFERENT, I WOULD BE VERY SORRY TO HEAR THAT. <i>The almighty God, who knows all the hearts, knows this.</i>	Honest and very beloved husband Roel-lant Iosten Oostvorendick and most dearest husband. I, your wife Angenietge Cornelis, let you know <i>that I and your father and my father and mother are still in good health. I hope my dearest husband Roellant Iosten Oostvooren-dick is also like that.</i> IF IT WERE DIFFERENT, I WOULD REGRET HAVING TO HEAR THAT. And I hope that the good God will make this last for a long time.

formula. As such, they index a specific discourse structure, consisting of “sequential formulaic dependencies” (Kuiper 2009:7). This means that the introductory passages of letters are not just formulaic in that they use similar language, but also in that they constitute a formulaic genre, with discourse structure rules governing the sequence of formulae (Kuiper 2009:7).

Focusing on these sequences in introductory passages, strong formulaic patterns can be found. Not every letter contains all the subordinate health formulae, but many letters contain some of them. The maximum length of an introductory formulaic health passage is six formulae. These formulae are represented (with provisional translations) in Table 4 with their frequencies in the 70 private/mixed letters from the seventeenth century. The examples are randomly chosen from the corpus of seventeenth-century letters.

Similar formulae are found in English letters from the fifteenth to the early nineteenth century (Davis 1965; Austin 1973a, 1973b, 2004; Nevalainen 2001). Davis (1965) also points to French examples from the late fourteenth century.

Table 4. Health formulae in introductory passages in 70 seventeenth-century letters

	Sequence of health formulae in introductory passages	No. in 70 private/ mixed letters (17th c.)
1	<i>als dat ick en ul vaeder en min vaeder en moeder noch klock en gesont sien</i> 'that I and your father and my father and mother are still in good health'	40
	Subordinate health formulae:	
2	<i>godt sij lof van syn groote genade</i> 'Praise the Lord for his mercy'	19
3	<i>gelijck ik hoop van vl mijn lief te verstaen</i> 'as I hope to hear from you my love'	29
4	<i>het welcke mijn van herten seer lief om te hooren is</i> 'which I would very much love to hear'	11
5	<i>waer het Anders het waer ons van herten leet</i> 'if it were different, we would be very sorry'	22
6	<i>dat wedt godt almachtich die en kender van alle herten is</i> 'The almighty God, who knows all the hearts, knows this'	13
		94
	Total	134

Elspaß (2005) does not mention German counterparts from his nineteenth-century corpus.

Note that formula 1 in Table 4 informs the reader about the writer's health, and that there are also formulaic health wishes. Therefore, the difference between stating one's own health and wishing the recipient good health is an important distinction that has to be made; see Section 3.2 and examples (6a, 6b), repeated here as (11a, 11b).

- (11) a. *als dat ick en ul vaeder en min vaeder en moeder noch klock*
that I and your father and my father and mother still healthy
en gesont sien
and healthy are
'... that your father, my father and mother and I are still in good health'
- b. *wensse VE gesontheijt*
wish you health
'I wish you all the best'

Many health statements and health wishes are found in the 70 letters scrutinised here. Formula 3 in Table 4 could be considered as a health wish, but it prototypically occurs in introductions to letters and it does not contain specific words

relating to health. It is therefore considered to be a subordinate health formula following formula 1, not as an independent health wish. In the 70 letters under discussion, 100 subordinate formulae were found, 94 tokens of which are covered by formulae 2 to 6 in Table 4. The other six appear in letter endings; they are not part of the health formula in the opening of the letter and are therefore not included in Table 4.

The majority of health statements found in the 70 letters are variants of formula 1 in Table 4, which appears 40 times in the corpus. The sequence of formulae represented in Table 4 may contain a Christian-ritual formula such as formula 2. In the introductions to the 70 letters, 25 such Christian-ritual formulae perform the function of strengthening the health theme by expressing gratitude for the health communicated. Of these 25 subordinate formulae, a majority of 19 tokens consists of variants of formula 2.

Broken down into separate units as in Table 4, it becomes clear that complex formulaic health passages are composed of several, more or less independent, multi-word strings, which are usually combined in the discourse structure in Table 4. Though the sequence of the separate formulae is fairly fixed, writers may choose to leave out one or more of the formulae, resulting in the different frequencies in Table 4. Thus, in the first letter in Table 3, five formulae were used, and in the second letter, three.

The discourse structure in Table 4, from which writers may diverge by leaving out one or more subordinate formulae, suggests that the formulae are indeed lexicalised prefabs. There appears to be compositionality only at discourse level, not at sentence level. The lexicalised and prefabricated nature of formulae is furthermore suggested by results from research on orality and literacy (cf. Ong [1982] 2002), and especially from research on “oral residue” (Ong 2002: 36), for instance in Homeric literature. Formulae have always been at the centre of interest in this line of research. Bakker (2005: 48) argues that an explanation of the many Homeric formulae is to be found in the intonation units of spoken language, which are reflected in the metrical units of poetic language. The concept of the intonation unit borrowed from Chafe (e.g. 1994: 53–70) should be understood as the prosodically marked verbalisation of one idea or cognitive unit present in the working memory. When speaking, language needs to be segmented for respiratory reasons, and according to Chafe this segmentation “operates in happy synchrony with some basic functional segmentations of discourse” (1994: 57). Bakker (2005: 48) extends this connection of memory and intonation units to Homeric formulae, and building on this we suggest that the formulae in Table 4 represent formulaic units; that is, they are prefabricated and comprise strings of words memorised as a whole.

One might argue that these lexicalised strings could also very well be copied from written examples. We cannot rule out this possibility, but there are reasons to

assume that they were mostly orally transmitted. Elspaß (2005: 193–196), discussing formulaic language in German emigrants' letters from the nineteenth century, doubts that grammars, guide books, writing manuals and the like were commonly used by the lower and middle ranks. Instead of concrete written examples, letter-writers probably used a collection of proverbs, platitudes, religious formulae and Bible quotes, as well as formulaic models (Elspaß 2005: 195). Austin (1991: 15), discussing the English language in the Clift family correspondence of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, also assumes that "traditional family usage" frequently leads to formulae being "passed on from parents to children". Similarly, Austin (1973a: 13) states that "[t]he only explanation for the resilience which these formulas show in maintaining their original form in spite of the later collections of model-letters seems to be that conventions of letter-writing, the most used and most personal of all written forms of language, are handed down through family traditions rather than through any external medium". The health formulae in particular constitute an age-old Western European tradition of letter-writing, dating back to medieval French practices (Nevalainen 2001). As to the Dutch situation, Ruberg (2005) argues that elite correspondence in the Dutch eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was a social practice, the rules and conventions of which were transmitted in the family rather than through normative publications. According to Ruberg (2005: 101–102), writing manuals do not seem to have been sold very much at that time, and moreover, discrepancies can be found between norms and practices.

Still, further research is required, as a number of writing manuals were in fact published in the Netherlands in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, most of which also underwent several reprints.⁹ Some of these, such as Mostart (1637), were explicitly intended for the upper classes, but others, such as Hakvoord (1750), aimed at a wider audience. The possible influence of such manuals on letter-writing practices remains as yet unclear. Note that the health formulae which are currently under discussion are usually not contained in letter-writing manuals¹⁰ so that any direct influence of contemporary manuals is not very probable in this case. Finally, it is important to note that we do not need to assume a strict division of orally transmitted prefabs and written examples. These two means of cultural transmission were probably intertwined, if only because, when written down in a letter, orally transmitted prefabs materialise into written examples.

In sum, letter-writing appears to have been a fairly regulated social practice, partly consisting of conventionalised formulaic multi-word units. We assume that these formulae were mainly orally transmitted, memorised and indeed retrieved from memory as a whole.

4.2 Patterns of variation

If health formulae as in 4.1 were prefabricated units retrieved from memory as a whole, they may have facilitated the writing process, rendering the effort of formulating easier. In this sense, Wray's (2002) third major function of formulaic language, reduction of the processing effort, would also apply to written language. This claim is further tested by linking it with writing experience. If the use of formulae reduces the writing effort, it is expected that writers suffering the severest formulating problems will prefer fixed formulae. Therefore, it is expected that more-experienced writers will use less formulae than less-experienced writers.

The importance of writing experience in historical sociolinguistics, often operationalised in terms of literacy and schooling, has been put forward by Vandembussche (1999) and Elspaß (2005:45–46), among others. Specifically concerning formulaic language, Elspaß (2005:192) claimed that formulaic language was predominantly used by inexperienced writers when solving communicative problems in the written code. Instead of lengthy pondering, the writer could resort to fixed formulae that provided conventionalised and generally accepted ways of verbalising information and experiences. Kuiper and Haggio (1984:224), discussing the formulaic language of livestock auctioneers, compared the process of becoming a fluent auctioneer to the oral poet's transition from a neophyte to a young singer, and finally to a mature singer. The acquisition and production of auctioneers' formulae depends on experience, and the process runs from learning the formulae from an experienced practitioner, through the use of "established formulae in established ways" (1984:224) to creativity. Similarly, we would expect the most experienced letter-writers to be the most creative ones, using the fewest formulae.

The question, then, is who were the most literate and most experienced writers in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries? With regard to the second half of the seventeenth century, it is estimated that two-thirds of the male population and one-third of the female population were able to write (Frijhoff and Spies 1999:237), which might imply gender variation.¹¹ Around 1800, literacy had increased to about 80 per cent of the male and 60 per cent of the female population (Kloek and Mijnhardt 2001:81). At the same time, literacy appears to have been socially stratified as well, in that one-third of the lower two ranks (5 and 6 in Table 2), and two-thirds of the other ranks were literate in the later part of the seventeenth century (Frijhoff and Spies 1999:238). If we operationalise writing experience in terms of literacy, these insights lead us to two hypotheses, the first suggesting a gender distribution, the second a social distribution.

We will test both hypotheses using the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century subcorpora. The seventeenth-century subcorpus is fairly equally distributed in terms of gender, with 43 letters by men and 38 letters by women; see Table 1 in

Section 2. As health formulae appear to have been characteristic of private/mixed letters, we will again focus on the 70 private/mixed letters, as we did in 4.1. Of these 70 letters, 32 are written by men and 38 by women. Since 60 out of these 70 letters (86 per cent) contain health formulae, we cannot take their mere presence as a criterion. The presence of health formulae marks the text type, rather than the writer's writing experience. Moreover, writing experience is a gradual notion, not something which is either present or absent. We can account for this gradualness by investigating the number of formulae used per letter. Health formulae are especially useful in this case, as they may make up a formulaic discourse consisting of formulae and subordinate formulae (see Section 4.1). Counting health formulae per letter results in a clear gender pattern: see Figure 1, where we distinguish three groups on the x-axis, representing 0 or 1, 2 or 3 and 4 or more health formulae respectively. The columns represent the proportion of male and female letter-writers within these groups.

Whereas the use of no more than one health formula per letter is mainly restricted to men (88 per cent), the use of four or more health formulae and subordinate health formulae is largely preferred by women (77 per cent). The fact that most of the writers are from what we refer to as the upper-middle class (see Table 2 in Section 2) is something of a blessing in disguise, because it probably means there is no interference from social factors, and therefore the gender pattern is reliable. As stated above (Section 2), the seventeenth-century corpus is not (yet) suitable for systematic research on social variants, but we may note in passing that none of the lower and lower-middle class writers use 0 or 1 formula, and that in fact most of them use 3, 4 or more formulae. See also below on social variants in the eighteenth-century part of the present corpus.

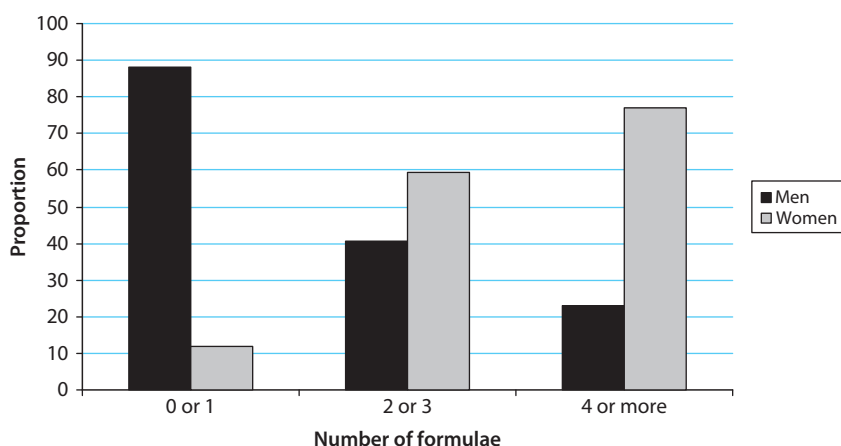


Figure 1. Proportion of letters by gender with the number of (subordinate) health formulae in 70 seventeenth-century letters

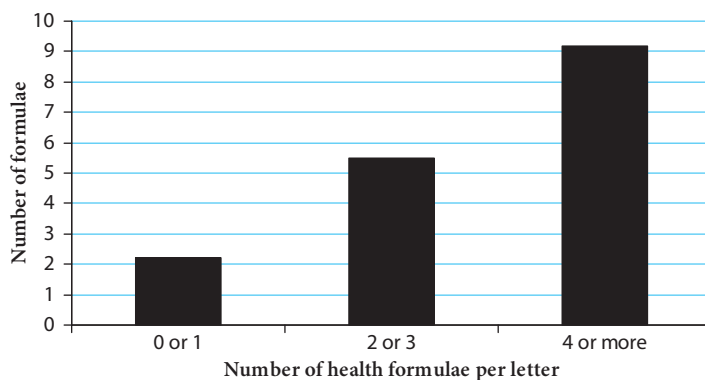


Figure 2. Average number of intersubjective and Christian-ritual formulae in three categories of letters with 0/1, 2/3, or 4 or more (subordinate) health formulae

The next question is whether writers who use more health formulae also use more intersubjective and Christian-ritual formulae in general. In Figure 2, the three categories on the x-axis in Figure 1 (0 or 1 formula, 2 or 3 formulae, 4 or more formulae) are plotted against the average number of intersubjective and Christian-ritual formulae found in the same letters.

As can be seen in Figure 2, letters with no more than 1 health formula contain on average 2.2 intersubjective and Christian-ritual formulae; in letters with 2 or 3 health formulae, the average rises to 5.5; and in letters with 4 or more health formulae the average peaks at 9.2. In other words, writers who use more health formulae than others also use more intersubjective and Christian-ritual formulae in general.

The eighteenth-century subcorpus is far better distributed over the different social classes (see Table 5) than the seventeenth-century subcorpus. Only the fourth category (lower class) is, unfortunately enough, still underrepresented. Moreover, 77 letters in the eighteenth-century subcorpus were written by men and only 23 by women. This enables us to compose a subcorpus of 77 eighteenth-century letters written by men, thus neutralising possible gender differences. As the category lower class is underrepresented, we decided to combine lower class and lower-middle class into one cell. The resulting “male subcorpus” is presented in the right-hand column in Table 5.

Before turning to the eighteenth-century results, it should be pointed out that the use of health formulae in general decreased from the seventeenth to the eighteenth century, as it did in English (Austin 2004; cf. Nevalainen 2001). Extensive health passages, consisting of a sequence of subordinate formulae as in Table 4, rarely occur in the eighteenth-century material. This does not mean that information on health is no longer communicated, but rather that its verbalisation is usually reduced to one sentence or subclause, which can be either formulaic or

Table 5. Social and gender distribution of the eighteenth-century subcorpus, and the subcorpus of letters written by men

1780s	100 private letters	Of which by men	Male subcorpus 18th century	
Upper Class	35	27	Upper Class	27
Upper-Middle Class	35	24	Upper-Middle Class	24
Lower-Middle Class	23	19	Lower-Middle / Lower Class	26
Lower Class	7	7		

non-formulaic. Nevertheless, remnants of the extensive seventeenth-century formulaic options do still appear. We will now address these occurrences.

The use of the (subordinate) formulae in Table 4 was studied in the eighteenth-century subcorpus. With regard to formula 1, it should be noted that the fixed expression *kloek en gezond* ‘healthy and healthy’ (‘very healthy’, ‘in good health’) does not occur in the eighteenth-century letters. Instead, another equally tautological and fixed expression is used: *fris en gezond* ‘fresh and healthy’, also meaning ‘very healthy’ or ‘in good health’. This formula is illustrated in the examples (12a) and (12b).

- (12) a. dat ik Nog fris en gesond zyn
that I still fresh and healthy am
‘that I am still in good health’
- b. dat wy u broer en susters ooms en meus neven en nigten
that we your brother and sisters uncles and aunts cousins
alle nog vris en gesond syn
all still fresh and healthy are
‘that we are all still in good health, your brother and sisters, uncles and aunts and cousins’

In 15 of the 77 eighteenth-century letters written by men, 18 attestations of the fixed combination ‘fresh and healthy’ were found.

Next, the use of subordinate formulae (cf. Table 4) was examined in the eighteenth-century corpus. Table 6 shows the results. Subordinate formulae 2 and 6 were not found, and subordinate formulae 3 and 4 only a few times, while subordinate formula 5 was found 13 times in 12 letters. The numbers are quite low, which is interesting in itself and calls for further investigation. It appears that the use of these kinds of formulae, though certainly not all formulaic language, decreased from the seventeenth to the eighteenth century, paralleling developments in English letter-writing (Nevalainen 2001; Austin 2004; and see Section 5).

Table 6. Subordinate health formulae (cf. Table 4) in 77 eighteenth-century letters, written by men

Subordinate health formulae in the 18th century		Tokens	Number of letters
2	‘Praise the Lord for his mercy’	–	–
3	‘as I hope to hear from you my love’	5	5
4	‘which I would very much love to hear’	2	2
5	‘if it were different, we would be very sorry’	13	12
6	‘The almighty God, who knows all the hearts, knows this’	–	–

Despite the relatively low numbers, a clear pattern appears when the use of the expression ‘fresh and healthy’ and of the subordinate formulae is plotted against the writers’ social class. Figure 3 displays the proportion of letters which contain the fixed expression ‘fresh and healthy’ per social class. Figure 4 gives the proportion of letters which contain one or more subordinate health formulae per social class.

As can be seen in Figures 3 and 4, the use of health formulae diminishes sharply according to how highly the writer is situated in the social hierarchy. The fixed expression ‘fresh and healthy’ as well as subordinate health formulae occur in almost half of the lower / lower-middle class letters, viz. in 12 out 26 letters (46 per cent).¹² At the same time, only a minority of the upper-middle class and upper class letters contains tokens of these formulae. Generally speaking, the health formulae under discussion do not appear very often in the 77 letters from the eighteenth century, but when they do, they feature predominantly in letters from the



Figure 3. Proportion of letters with the formula ‘fresh and healthy’ in 77 eighteenth-century letters, written by men, per social class

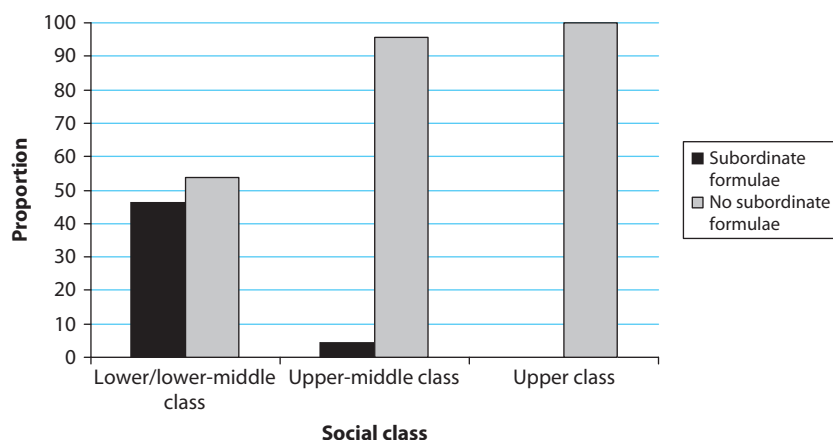


Figure 4. Proportion of letters with subordinate health formulae in 77 eighteenth-century letters, written by men, per social class

lower and lower-middle classes. As all of the 77 letters from the eighteenth century were written by men, and there is no interference from gender effects, we conclude that the use of the formulae under discussion displays social class variation.

The use of formulaic language in Dutch letters from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries showed gender and social variation. These results suggest that the use of formulae is related to literacy and writing experience, which also showed gender and social variation. The explanation of the variation in use is sought in the literacy and writing experience effects linked to the social categories. Note that especially in the seventeenth century health formulae are also found in upper-middle class and upper class letters, and note also that the eighteenth-century health formulae were examined in a corpus of letters written by men. Hence, there appears to be no straightforward one-to-one relationship between broad social categories such as gender and class on the one hand, and the use of health formulae on the other. Interestingly, among the male writers using no more than one health formula in the seventeenth century, we find two clergymen and a clerk, whereas the male writers using subordinate health formulae in the eighteenth century were predominantly sailors and other semi- and unskilled crew members. In the eighteenth-century upper class category we find mostly ministers and wealthy merchants, and in the upper-middle class, merchants, captains and shipmasters. Obviously, ministers and merchants were greatly involved in the written culture through exegesis and preaching, and business correspondence. Although captains and shipmasters may have been rather more strongly oriented towards manual labour in their everyday lives, they had passed navigation exams for which written materials were in use (Bruijn 2008: 135–136, 144–145). This lends support to the claim that an interpretation of historical language data could benefit from taking

into account the writer's everyday experience with different language varieties. This would in particular be the case when dealing with different kinds of writers: those who are primarily oriented to manual labour and those who are mainly oriented to written work (cf. Vandenbussche 2002: 39).

The gender and social distributions found in this paper are in line with the findings of Austin (2004), who studied the decline of epistolary formulae in English letters from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and who concluded that "[t]he two main groups that continue to use the formulas, even into the nineteenth century, are seamen, mostly of the lower ranks, and women". Functionally speaking, our findings suggest that formulae are indeed a kind of *Formulierungshilfe*, providing less-experienced writers with basic ready-made expressions. Therefore, we assume that Wray's (2002) third main function of formulaic language, "the reduction of the speaker's processing effort", which refers to online speech production, also applies to seventeenth- and eighteenth-century written Dutch.

5. Letter-writing as a social practice

In this section, we will discuss the implications of our results for the study of historical letter-writing. In Section 4, it was demonstrated that the third main function of formulaic language distinguished by Wray (2002), relating to the speaker's processing effort, was also found in Dutch private letters from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. We operationalised the processing function in terms of literacy and writing experience, and it was demonstrated that the use of formulae was linked to social groups that are likely to consist of less-trained writers. For these writers, formulaic language functioned as *Formulierungshilfe*. Following Kuiper and Haggo (1984), we may say that writing experience enables language users to "overcome" the use of fixed formulae, and eventually to become creative specialists. Note that this mainly applies to intersubjective formulae, as text-structural formulae and especially address formulae and the like were necessary for any writer.¹³

The results of Section 4 give an insight into "letter writing as a social practice" (cf. Barton and Hall 2000; also Chartier 1991), providing information on the process and the activity of letter-writing. As almost every letter contains formulaic passages, and as letters may be considered to be a formulaic genre with specific conventions, we should conclude that many writers conform to these conventions, to the extent that nearly all seventeenth-century letters contain health formulae. Individual expression and idiosyncratic language data appear to be infrequent in the introductions and endings of letters, and we find highly conventionalised speech acts instead. Put differently, letter-writing appears to have been a fairly

regulated and learned practice, not necessarily through explicit instruction, but in any event through routinisation and conventionalisation. Moreover, taking research into Homeric formulae into account, it seems probable that formulae are orally transmitted lexicalised prefabs, again suggesting that letter-writing was a social practice with conventionalised habits, even in the field of individual experiences such as the bodily condition.

The eighteenth-century results, in particular, point to different community or network practices, with men in the lower class and lower-middle class categories scoring quite highly, while health formulae are virtually absent in the upper-middle class and the upper class. As writing experience is linked to daily occupation and profession, which are themselves clearly linked to social categories such as class and gender, a similar distribution of linguistic features is a natural outcome of socially stratified writing experience. As such, community or network practices may maintain or even reinforce usages which were originally the result of stratified writing experience. Still, we suspect writing experience is the main explanatory factor since the seventeenth-century results do not show such a conveniently discrete distribution at all, but rather a gradual one. Also, most of the seventeenth-century letters, which are mainly from the upper-middle class, contain health formulae, whereas the eighteenth-century upper-middle class letters hardly contain any health formulae at all. This remarkable change in community or network practices requires an explanation. To us, it seems more probable that the persistence of health formulae in the eighteenth-century lower class and lower-middle class is not so much the result of community or network practices, but mainly an effect of less writing experience. When these lower social classes are forced into the national education system from the nineteenth century onward, the use of health formulae diminishes. Nevertheless, the exact interplay of community and network practices, the identity roles connected to these, and writing experience remains an interesting topic for further research.

The difference between the seventeenth-century health formulae and the eighteenth-century (lack of) health formulae is astonishing and calls for further investigation as well, though it should be noted that formulaic language in general is not absent in the eighteenth-century letters. Whereas the seventeenth-century letters are mainly from the upper-middle class and almost all of these contain health formulae, eighteenth-century letters with health formulae are mainly from the lower class and lower-middle class. The decrease of health formulae in the upper-middle class could perhaps be considered a change in letter-writing style related to a general development towards more involved styles as stated by Biber and Finegan (1989) with regard to English fiction, essay and letter style. Formulaic language should then be seen as fairly detached or impersonal language. Such a stylistic development, however, may also be dependent on the parallel development of

writing experience. Being able to use creative language throughout a (formerly) formulaic discourse implies routine. In other words, it could very well be the case that increasing literacy rates and the ongoing textualisation of society led to more extensive writing experience, particularly among the upper-middle class, and thus to a reduction in the use of health formulae. This would be an educational and linguistic development mirroring historians' ideas of the eighteenth century as the age of the rise of the bourgeoisie (e.g. Kloek and Mijndhardt 2001), and paralleling contemporary developments in the history of linguistics where the eighteenth century is characterised by the rise of grammars intended for a middle-class audience (Beal 2004: 105; Rutten 2009).

6. Conclusion

In this paper, we have shown that Wray's (2002) three main functions of formulaic language, linked with interaction, discourse marking and processing, also apply to Dutch letters from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. First, we described functions corresponding to discourse marking and interaction, viz. the text-constitutive function (relating to text type or text structure), the intersubjective function and the Christian-ritual function. Next, we demonstrated that the processing function can also be found, when operationalised in terms of literacy and writing experience. It became apparent that there was a gender and a social distribution in the use of formulae, and we concluded that in general less-experienced writers were more likely to use formulaic language. Therefore, we may state that formulae functioned as *Formulierungshilfe*.

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Notes

1. These three main functions are then "further reduced to one overriding priority, the speaker's promotion of self" (Wray 2002: 101).
2. These three main functions more or less correspond to Tannen's (1987: 581–584) explanation of "repetition in conversation" in terms of (facilitating) production and comprehension, (discourse) connection and (social) interaction. Sociolinguistic, ethnographic and pragmatic issues

of power, politeness, style and identity are subsumed under the heading of interaction. A range of these interactional functions is also discussed by Coulmas (1979, 1981a).

3. The manuscript letters are kept in the National Archives in Kew (UK). The letters were transcribed and digitised for sociohistorical and corpus linguistic analysis within the *Brieven als buit*, ‘Letters as loot’, project carried out by Judith Nobels, Tanja Simons, Gijsbert Rutten and Marijke van der Wal at the Leiden University Centre for Linguistics (LUCL), and supported by the Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research (NWO). See www.brievenalsbuit.nl. The 100 letters from the eighteenth century constitute our subcorpus 18A. The 81 letters from the seventeenth century are the autograph part of subcorpus 17A. On the problem of autographs and encoded letters which is of special importance for the seventeenth century, see Nobels and van der Wal (2009).

4. We are aware of the fact that “class” is a nineteenth-century category, although there were, of course, social divisions or strata before the nineteenth century. We use the common sociolinguistic term “class” to refer to these pre-nineteenth-century social divisions.

5. We may of course use letters from the patriciate as a reference corpus, especially since there are edited collections of patriciate letters. See Ruberg (2005) and Bax (2010) for historical-pragmatic research on Dutch elite correspondence.

6. Composing a balanced corpus, we face the common historical linguistic problem that we are dependent on what history has left us. Apart from this, we have to determine for every single seventeenth-century letter whether it is an autograph or not, as in many instances the sender and the actual letter-writer are not one and the same person (Nobels and van der Wal 2009); cf. note 3. Eighteenth-century letters are usually written by the senders themselves.

7. The last sentence of letter 2 (“And I hope that the good God will make this last for a long time”) looks very much like a subordinate health formula. We have, however, not found any other tokens of this supposed formula.

8. Note that we consider the examples formulaic despite the lack of literal similarities. There is variation in wording, justifying Kuiper’s method of representing formulaic structure as in (1) and (9) above.

9. Ruberg (2005) and Bax (2010) include comprehensive overviews of Dutch letter-writing manuals from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

10. We checked Mostart (1637), Breton (1645), Van der Serre (1654), Iacobi (1728) and Hakvoord (1750).

11. It should be noted that literacy rates are usually estimated by counting signatures in marriage registers. However, being able to sign, that is, to write one’s own name, does not necessarily imply full writing skills.

12. These are not the same 12 letters in both cases.

13. Note also that the use of fixed formulae by professional scribes and in official documents fulfills an entirely different function, and that the professional and administrative domains should therefore be kept separate from private correspondence. For professional scribes, the use of formulae rendered communication easier, as text composition became something of an exercise

in filling in the blanks. The use of formulae must also have functioned as a proof of the scribe's knowledge of his profession. In the administrative domain, legal practice demanded specific formulae.

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Authors' address

Universiteit Leiden
 Leiden University Centre for Linguistics LUCL
 P.N. van Eyckhof 3
 Postbus 9515
 2300 RA Leiden
 The Netherlands

 g.j.rutten@hum.leidenuniv.nl
 m.j.van.der.wal@hum.leidenuniv.nl

About the authors

Gijsbert Rutten is a postdoctoral researcher and assistant professor working at Leiden University and at the Vrije Universiteit Brussel. His main research interests lie in the field of historical sociolinguistics of Dutch. He has published on the internal and external history of the Dutch language from the sixteenth to the nineteenth century. He is currently working on seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Dutch private letters within the research programme *Brieven als buit* (www.brievenalsbuit.nl).

Marijke van der Wal is Professor in the History of Dutch (Chair Merweborgh Foundation) at the Leiden University. Her publications cover the fields of both historical linguistics and the historiography of linguistics. She has published *Geschiedenis van het Nederlands* (in co-operation with Cor van Bree; Spectrum, 2008) and *De moedertaal centraal. Standaardisatie-aspecten in de Nederlanden omstreeks 1650* (Sdu, 1995). Her current research is focused on egodocuments and language history from below. She directs the research programme “Brieven als Buit / Letters as Loot. Towards a Non-standard View on the History of Dutch”, which aims at exploring the extraordinary source of Dutch seventeenth- and eighteenth-century private letters, kept in the National Archives (Kew, UK). She has been co-editor of the journal *Nederlandse Taalkunde* since 1996.