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“Disrespectful and too familiar”?

Abbreviations as an index of politeness in eighteenth-century letters¹

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1. Introduction

On 13 November 1768, Robert Lowth (1710–1787), English grammarian and at that time since two years Bishop of Oxford, wrote the following letter to his friend Gloucester Ridley (1702–1774):

Cuddesdon; Nov^r. 13

1768.

Dear S^r.

I just now observe in y^e. S^t. James’s Chronicle of Yesterday an Advertisement f^m. the Chamber of y^e. City of Exeter, for raising 3000^h on Anuities for Lives: they offer 10^h p. an[̄] for 100^h on a Life of 60 years of age: M^{rs}. Lawman’s Anuity may therefore be purchased for 120^h: & the Security is better yⁿ. y^t. of many private person.

If you approve of dealing with y^m., I will write immediatly to Chancellor Quicke at Exeter to secure it; for as y^e. sum to be raised is small, it will soon be filled. Pray let me have your answer immediately. Granville Sharpe, who publishes, never was in India: he is Son of y^e. y^e. [sic] late Archdeacon Sharp.

Dear S^r. Your’s most Aff^{ly}. R. Oxford.

¹ I am very grateful to Noel Osselton for presenting me with his notes on contractions and abbreviations in eighteenth-century spelling books, as well as for his comments on an earlier version of this article.

Cover: To/ The Rev^d. D^r. Ridley/ Poplar near/ London.

The letter deals with affairs relating to the inheritance of Sir Joseph Spence (1669–1768),² of which Lowth and Ridley had been appointed joint executors (cf. Tierney 1988:89). A striking feature in the letter is Lowth’s use of abbreviations: *Nov^r.*, *S^r.*, *y^e.*, *S^t.*, *f^m.*, [#], *p. an⁻*, *M^{rs}.*, *yⁿ.*, *y^t.*, *y^m.*, *Aff^{dy}.*, *R.*, *Rev^d.* and *D^r.*. Some of these – *St.*, *Mrs.*, *Dr.* and *R.* for “Robert”³ – are still in general use today, albeit without the superscript letters. With the exception of [#] (“pounds”) and *p. an⁻* (“per annum”), all these abbreviations have in common that they represent the first few letters combined with the last one (or ones in the case of *affectionately*) of the words in question, usually followed by a period. This is even true for the form *y^e.* “the”, though *y^e.* is strictly speaking not an abbreviation but the remnant of a spelling convention found in manuscripts since the early fourteenth century (*OED*, s.v. “Y”) in which modern <th> is spelled as <y>.

2. *An index of politeness?*

Around the same time as the date of Lowth’s letter to Ridley, John Carter, in his *Practical English Grammar* (1773), wrote that “Contractions, except for private Use, should be as much as possible avoided. They argue Disrespect to Superiors and are puzzling to others” (1773:137). The comment follows upon a list including *Feb.*, *Obt.*, *y^e.* and *y^t.* A few pages further down Carter reiterated that forms like *wou’d* and *don’t* “appear disrespectful and too familiar” (1773:140). The same comment was made nearly twenty-five years later, when in *The Scholar’s Spelling Assistant* (1796) Thomas Carpenter wrote about “Contractions used in Writing and Print”, noting that “it is to be remembered, except in Addresses and Accompts,

² Spence is characterised in the *Dictionary of National Biography* as a “literary scholar and anecdotist” (s.v. “Spence”).

³ Lowth also occasionally abbreviated his name as *Rob^t.*, though only in formal letters such as those to the Duke of Newcastle and to William Warburton at the time when their relationship was at its most hostile (see below). The form *R^t.* was reserved for the formulas *Right Reverend* or *Right Honourable*.

such Contractions in the Body of a Letter, are improper” (1796:110). If the use of abbreviations and contractions was disapproved of in the handbooks of the period, the question arises whether Lowth’s usage of them, as well as that of his contemporaries, could be interpreted as an index of politeness, according to which the fewer the number of such forms, the politer the letter would be, and, consequently, the more distant the relationship with the addressee. Determining the relationship between correspondents is important in order to be able to study a writer’s full sociolinguistic competence. In the case of informants from the past different methods have to be developed to be able to study their usage than the methods used by modern sociolinguists, who can monitor living informants into producing different speech styles for linguistic analysis. Elsewhere, I have already shown that Lowth used contractions such as *won’t*, *can’t*, *don’t*, and *I’ll* in his most informal letters only, i.e. those to his wife, Ridley and his publisher and friend Robert Dodsley (Tieken-Boon van Ostade 2003a). Lowth’s use of abbreviations may have been conditioned similarly, and so may that of his contemporaries.

The reason for selecting Lowth’s correspondence as the object of analysis here is the following. In her study of the treatment of contractions in early grammars and spelling-books, Haugland (1995:167) notes that by the end of the seventeenth century forms like *y^e* and *y^t* are obsolete in printed documents. Consequently, Haugland argues, “most eighteenth-century grammarians avoid contractions” in their grammars, though such forms still occur in great numbers in plays, poetry and correspondence (1995:173). In this light she suggests that it would be interesting to try and determine how this lack of contractions – and, I would like to add, abbreviations⁴ – corresponds with the usage of the grammarians themselves or with that of the compositor. Such an analysis she believes to be impossible because no eighteenth-century grammars have come down to us in the hand of their author. There is, however, one

⁴ In distinguishing between contractions and abbreviations I have made use of Haugland’s definition of abbreviations as forms which do not represent pronunciation, such as *w^{ch}*, *y^t*, *M^r*, and *&c.* (1995:166).

exception, i.e. John Kirkby (1705–1754), whose *New English Grammar* (1746) exists in an earlier manuscript version called *The Practice of Speaking and Writing English* (Tieken-Boon van Ostade 1992). In the manuscript Kirkby uses forms like *tho'*, but not *can't* or *y^e*. This would be in line with Thomas Tuite's comment in *The Oxford Spelling-Book* (1726:54) that “*tho'* and *thro'* are now commonly written instead of *though*, *through*”.⁵ Another possibility of looking at the grammarians' own practice is, obviously, to study their private letters or other personal documents. In Kirkby's case I have located two – very polite – letters addressed to the Royal Society in the year 1752 (see Tieken-Boon van Ostade 1992); apart from *tho'*, *Serv^t*, *Jan.* and *Febr.*, these letters do not contain any abbreviations. Kirkby's practice therefore agrees with the advice that contractions and abbreviations are to be avoided in letters to one's superiors, in this case the Royal Society, because they might be considered disrespectful. Because these are the only two letters I have found so far, it is unclear what Kirkby's practice was like in his more informal letters. A better case for analysis, therefore, is Lowth, of whose private correspondence I have so far collected 271 letters, 202 out-letters, addressed to thirty-one correspondents, and 69 in-letters, written by twenty-nine different people. This as yet unpublished correspondence allows us to study Lowth's usage according to different degrees of formality as well as to test the extent to which his use of abbreviations merely reflects “idiosyncratic variation” (Görlach 2001:79).

3. Analysis

3.1. The letters analysed

For the purpose of the analysis I have made the following selection:

- out-letters:

⁵ This is also true for Lowth's correspondence, the out-letters as well as the in-letters. The forms occur irrespective of the formality of the letters.

- informal letters: to his wife Mary Jackson (?–1803); to Rev. James Merrick (1720–1769);⁶ and to Sir Joseph Spence
- formal letters: to Sir David Dalrymple (1726–1792),⁷ to the Duke of Newcastle (1693–1768);⁸ to the Earl of Liverpool (1727–1808);⁹ to the Essex historian the Rev. P. Morant (1700–1770); and to William Warburton (1698–1779)¹⁰
- formal notes: to the booksellers Thomas Cadell (1742–1802) and James Dodsley (1724–1797), Robert Dodsley’s brother, and the Polish orientalist Geoffrey Woide (1725–1790)
- in-letters:
 - informal letters: from Sir Joseph Spence and James Merrick
 - formal letters: from the philosopher James Beattie (1735–1803), the Duke of Newcastle, the Oxford bookseller and publisher Daniel Prince (1712–1796), Geoffrey Woide, Thomas Secker (1693–1768), the Archbishop of Canterbury, and Edward Pearson.¹¹

Formal notes are brief notes written in the third person, such as “The B^p. of London presents his Comp^{ts}. to M^r. Woide, & has just nov rec^d. an Answer f^m. L^d. Clarendon to his Letter recommending the Petition of M^r Woide & his Congregation at the Savoy to his Lordship’s favour” (Lowth to Woide, 2 May 1781; BL Add. MS. 48708, f. 53). (I have not yet come

⁶ Merrick was the author of “A Poetical Version of the Psalms” (1765), on a draft version of which he had asked Lowth to comment. When Lowth’s grammar came out in 1762, Merrick supplied Lowth with several comments for an improved second edition (Tieken-Boon van Ostade 2003b).

⁷ Sir David Dalrymple, Lord Hailes (1726–1792), was a Scottish judge with whom Lowth corresponded on matters of scholarship.

⁸ As Lord of the Privy Seal, Sir Thomas Pelham-Holles, first Duke of Newcastle, had been instrumental in Lowth’s appointment as Bishop of St David’s (1766) and later that year of Oxford.

⁹ Charles Jenkinson, first Earl of Liverpool (1727–1808), corresponded with Lowth on a vacancy for a Gentleman of the Chapel Royal.

¹⁰ William Warburton, later Bishop of Gloucester, had a disagreement with Lowth over Lowth’s failure to acknowledge a reference to him in one of his published lectures. The disagreement between the two men has been called “the greatest literary battle of the century” (Hepworth 1978:99-105).

¹¹ From Pearson’s letters, which are kept in Durham University Library, it appears that Pearson acted as a kind of ecclesiastical assistant to Lowth, informing him of current Church affairs during the few months that Lowth was Bishop of St David’s in 1766.

across any formal notes addressed to Lowth.) If the occurrence of abbreviations in Lowth's correspondence serves as an index of politeness, I would expect their frequency to be lowest in the formal letters, and lower still in Lowth's formal notes.

3.2. The nature of the letters

Before analysing the letters it is important to establish whether they are drafts, copies or letters actually sent. Because drafts and copies are usually intended for private use only, they may contain more abbreviations than fair copies of the letters. In some cases there is external evidence that a letter is an original, as in one of Lowth's letters to his wife, which ends as follows:

Here I Stopp'd in hopes y^t. a Packet would come in, but to no purpose. My Letter is call'd for at a minute's warning. Love to all. Your's most Aff^{ly}./ R.L. (July 27 1755; Bodleian Library, Ms Eng Lett c572 f.68).

Similarly, Pearson wrote:

The Bellman is going past so y^t. I can say no more but that I am, My Lord, Your Lordships/ Most Obedient & very much obliged Humble Serv^t. Edw^d. Pearson
(Durham University Library Add. MSS 451, ff. 212–213)

In neither case would there have been time to produce fair copies of the letters. Besides, the cover of Pearson's letter reads, in Lowth's hand: "rec^d. July 6. 1766." Letters such as these are all originals.

There are also draft letters in the correspondence. An obvious case is the following letter to Samuel Speed, usher of Winchester College, and rector of Martyr Worthy, written 10 November 1766:

D^r. S^r.

Your Papers are now come safe. I am much obliged to You for them, but sorry you have had <something crossed out> repeated trouble in transcribing & sending y^m. I made what inquiries I c^d. for y^e. Packets in London it ~~seemed as if they were~~ was not lost there, as far as I c^d. judge find. The Bookkeeper at y^e. Inn s^d., it was entered in y^e. list of Parcels, but never delivered or rec^d. there (Bodleian Library MS. Eng. Lett. C. 574, ff. 76–78).

Words are erased and inserted, showing Lowth carefully formulating his thoughts, and the passage contains many abbreviations. Lowth’s use of abbreviations for names provides important clues in deciding whether a letter is a draft or not. Thus, in a letter to Warburton, dated 9 September 1756, he wrote: “Our good Friends D^f. C. & M^r. S. have agreeably to your desire communicated to me some particulars of y^e. conversation w^{ch}. you have lately had with them relating to me” (Bodleian Library MS Eng. Lett. C. 572, f. 128-131). “D^f. C. & M^r. S.” are Lowth’s friends Thomas Chapman (1717–1760) and Joseph Spence, who had been called upon by Warburton to communicate his displeasure with Lowth for his failure to acknowledge a reference to him in one of his published lectures. My analysis includes one lengthy draft letter to Warburton as well as three letters to Warburton expressing extreme displeasure on Lowth’s part. These three letters look like fair copies, and should therefore contain few abbreviations.

4.3. Abbreviations

In all the letters analysed, abbreviations occur in large numbers. They are used to refer to the names of the months: *Feb./Febry*, *Mar.*, *Apr.*, *Aug^t/Aug./aug^t/aug.*, *Sep^r/Sept^r.*, *Oct^r.*, *Nov^r.*, *Dec^r.* (I found only one abbreviation of a day of the week: *Sat.*); and to titles and forms of address: *Abp./ArchBp./Arch-Bp./Arch Bp./Archbp*, *B^p/Bp.*, *Cap^t.*, *Col.*, *D.* “Duke” and *D^{ss}.* “Duchess”, *D^r.*, *Gents/jant*, *Lieut./Lieut^t./Lieut^{nt}.*, *L^d.*, *Lordsh^p/L^p/Lordp*, *M^r.* and *M^{rs}.*,

Prof.^r, *R.^t*, *H.^{ble}*. “Right Honourable”, *R.^t*, *R.^d*. “Right Reverend” and *S.^t*; they are part of epistolary formulas: *Affect./Affect^{ly}./Aff^{ly}*., *Broth^r./B^r*., *humb.*, *Obed^t*., *P.S./PS.*, *Serv^t*. and *S.^r*.; there are abbreviations of verbs: *cd/c^d*. “could”, *rec^d/rec^d./reced* “received”, *s^d*. “said”, *s^d./sh^d*. “should”, and *w^d*. “would”; of pronouns: *w^{ch}*. “which”, *w^m*. “whom”, *y^r*. “your”; and of prepositions: *ab^t*., *ag^t*., *f^m*., and *wth*.; they refer to personal names and placenames: *Dan^t* “Daniel”, *Fred* “Frederick”, *H.* “Hartington”, *L.* “Lowth”, *N.* “Newcastle”, *Rob^t./R.* “Robert”, *Tho^s*., *W^m*. “William” and “Wykeham”, *B* “Brunswick”, *D./D^m*. “Durham”, *E.* “Edinburgh”, *Hants.* and *Wint.* “Winchester”; there are abbreviations of words typical of letters: *acc^t*. “account”, *Comp^{ts}*. “compliments” and of words characteristic of the written medium: *ibid*, *i.e*, *N.B.* and *viz.*; of books of the Bible (only in Lowth’s letters to Merrick): *Deut.*, *Ezek.*, *Gen.*, *Heb.*, *Jud.*, *Num.*; of general nouns: *A-Deaconry*, *Bprick/Bp.rick*, *Comp.* “Company”, *D.* “Deacon”, *H.* “House” as in “H. of Commons/Lords”, *N.T.* “New Testament”, *Parl^t./Parliam^t*., *Preb^d*., *Preferm^t*., *Univ^{ty}*., *y^{rs}*. “years”; of words relating to scholarly matters: *ant.* “anterior”, *Cap^l*. “Capital”, *col.* “column”, *Heb.* “Hebrew”, *MS* and *MSS*, *p.* “page”, *Ps.* “Psalm”, *v.* “verse”; and titles of books: *D.L.*, *Hom. Edit. Rom.*, *Antiq. Sacr.*, *Introd. to Gr.*; forms abbreviating the words *pounds*, *shillings* and *pence*: *℥.*, *s.* and *p.*; and *&* and *&c.* *&* is by far the most frequent of all abbreviations used by Lowth: it occurs in about 96% of the instances in which *and* might have been used. The use of *&* by all his correspondents combined amounts to about two-thirds of the use of *and* in their letters; some of them don’t use *&* at all. Finally there are the “y” words, perhaps the most interesting category from the perspective of the present analysis: *y^e*. “the”, *y^m*. “them”, *yⁿ*. “than”, *y^s* “this” and *y^t*. “that” (conjunction, demonstrative and relative). In Lowth’s letters, they are, after *&*, the most frequent of all abbreviations used, *y^e*. occurring in nearly 20% of all instances of the definite article (cf. *y^m*. 8.3%, *yⁿ*. 7.9% and *y^s* 10.2%). Usage by his correspondents is quite different: some authors, such as Beattie and Woide, don’t use any of them.

Some abbreviations, such as for the names of the months, are in general use, and they are found in the letters of most correspondents, while others, especially the scholarly words, are highly restricted. Lowth did not, for instance, discuss scholarly matters with his wife, and less so with Spence than with Merrick, whom he sent comments on the translation of the Psalms. It is perhaps striking that the use of abbreviations was not standardized: though Lowth tends to be very precise, usually using a stop to mark the end of a abbreviation, he varied, for instance, between *Affect.*, *Affect^{ly}*. and *Aff^{ly}*. for “Affectionately” and *Broth^r*. and *B^r*. for “Brother”. In the light of Carter’s advice to avoid abbreviations because they might be “puzzling to others”, it is striking that even now it has proved possible to identify most of them. There is, however, one significant exception. Of all correspondents, including Lowth, the use of abbreviations by Pearson is highly unusual and singularly idiosyncratic. There are many forms of which the meaning is unclear to me, and one wonders if even Lowth would have been able to interpret them: *afstion*, *Aption*, *Exors*. Some interesting if transparent forms are *Memdum* “memorandum”, *Sprual* “spiritual”, *Xtian* “Christian” and *Unsu^{ff}^y* “Unsufficiency”. I will return to the case of Pearson below.

4.4. Results

The results of my analysis are presented in Tables 1 (out-letters) and 2 (in-letters). The figures have been calculated as follows. I have excluded the abbreviations for the titles *M^r*., *M^{rs}*., *S^t*., *D^r*., *L^d*., *Prof^r*. and *Rev^d*. (but not *Serv^t*.), for pounds, shillings and pence, for cardinal numerals, for the names of the days of the week and the months and the books of the Bible, as well as certain first names (*Fred*, *R.*, but not *Dan^l*. or *Rob^t*.). All these appear to have been common practice at the time, and to include them would have distorted the figures. Total numbers of instances have been normalized per 1000 words. In both tables, the resulting figures have been used to rank the letters according to their supposedly different degrees of

politeness. I have furthermore made a distinction between content words and grammatical words (pronouns, auxiliaries, including forms for “said” and “received”, prepositions) to see if there would be a difference in ranking if non-salient words were considered only; I have done similarly for the use of & (rightmost column). Following the opinions of contemporary handbooks, the lower the number of abbreviations, the higher would appear to be the degree of politeness expressed.

Table 1. Abbreviations in the out-letters.

| <i>addressee</i> | <i>amount of text</i> | <i>all abbrev.</i> | | rank | <i>gram. words</i> | | rank | <i>excluding &</i> | | rank |
|----------------------------|-----------------------|--------------------|--------|------|--------------------|--------|------|------------------------|--------|------|
| | | N | N/1000 | | N | N/1000 | | N | N/1000 | |
| Lowth's wife | 24,138 | 1295 | 53.7 | 8 | 1139 | 47.2 | 5 | 604 | 25 | 5 |
| Spence | 3228 | 231 | 71.6 | 3 | 216 | 66.9 | 3 | 127 | 39.3 | 3 |
| Merrick | 5333 | 324 | 60.8 | 5 | 291 | 54.6 | 4 | 147 | 27.6 | 4 |
| Dalrymple | 1943 | 92 | 47.4 | 9 | 77 | 39.6 | 8 | 23 | 11.8 | 8 |
| Liverpool | 351 | 13 | 37 | 10 | 8 | 22.8 | 10 | 3 | 8.6 | 9 |
| Morant | 297 | 16 | 53.9 | 7 | 9 | 30.3 | 9 | 5 | 16.8 | 7 |
| Newcastle | 477 | 26 | 54.5 | 6 | 22 | 46.1 | 6 | 3 | 6.3 | 10 |
| Warburton (fair copies) | 2480 | 168 | 67.7 | 4 | 109 | 44 | 7 | 47 | 19 | 6 |
| Warburton (draft) | 3129 | 238 | 76.1 | 2 | 223 | 71.3 | 2 | 133 | 42.5 | 2 |
| formal notes | 409 | 46 | 113.3 | 1 | 33 | 80.7 | 1 | 23 | 56.5 | 1 |

To begin with, my analysis indicates that the formal notes contain the highest number of abbreviations. This is rather unexpected in view of their highly formal, even formulaic language. Lowth's usage may, of course, be idiosyncratic, because I have nothing to compare it with, but in all likelihood the notes represent a separate genre, an analysis of which would seem worthwhile.¹² Secondly, all three rankings show that Lowth's draft letter is next highest in the occurrence of abbreviations. This confirms that an unusually high incidence of abbreviations in an author's letter may serve to indicate that the letter was most likely a draft version. Thirdly, the three different rankings suggest that, with the exception of the formal notes and the draft letter, the figures excluding abbreviations for content words as well as &

¹² They have to my knowledge never been studied as such; they are not discussed in Baker's introduction to the eighteenth-century letter (1980), nor do they occur as a genre in the frequently reprinted *Complete Letter-Writer*, my own copy of which dates from 1840. Another example of an informal note may be found in Robert Dodsley's correspondence, and Tierney, the editor, was evidently at a loss trying to explain its unusual style: the author "writing in the third person to his friend Dodsley gives this letter an unusually impersonal air, almost as if it had been written by an assistant. Nevertheless, the holograph is in Graves's own hand" (Tierney 1988:474n).

serve as the best index of politeness.¹³ Thus, the rightmost column confirms that Lowth is least polite in his letters to his wife and his friends, and most polite in the letters to Dalrymple, Liverpool, Morant and Newcastle, and, in the latter group, most so to Liverpool and Newcastle. That his letters to his wife should be more polite than those to his friends need not surprise us: at the time, it would be more common for men to engage in an amicable exchange of letters (cf. McIntosh 1986:82–84) than for a husband to communicate by letter to his wife, no matter how close they might be.

On the use of abbreviations by Lowth’s correspondents, the following comments may be made (see Table 2).

Table 2. Abbreviations in the in-letters.

| <i>addressee</i> | <i>amount of text</i> | <i>all abbrev.</i> | | rank | <i>gram. words</i> | | rank | <i>excluding &</i> | | rank |
|------------------|-----------------------|--------------------|--------|------|--------------------|--------|------|------------------------|--------|------|
| | | N | N/1000 | | N | N/1000 | | N | N/1000 | |
| Spence | 538 | 21 | 39 | 3 | 15 | 27.9 | 3 | 4 | 7.4 | 2 |
| Merrick | 2487 | 71 | 28.6 | 6 | 39 | 15.7 | 5 | 8 | 3.21 | 4 |
| Beattie | 429 | 0 | 0 | 8 | 0 | 0 | 7 | 0 | 0 | 5 |
| Newcastle | 437 | 19 | 43.5 | 2 | 14 | 32 | 2 | 3 | 6.9 | 3 |
| Pearson | 4588 | 380 | 82.8 | 1 | 343 | 74.8 | 1 | 247 | 53.8 | 1 |
| Prince | 699 | 23 | 32.9 | 5 | 12 | 17.2 | 4 | 0 | 0 | 5 |
| Secker | 480 | 16 | 33.3 | 4 | 7 | 14.3 | 6 | 0 | 0 | 5 |
| Woide | 564 | 3 | 5.3 | 7 | 0 | 0 | 7 | 0 | 0 | 5 |

There is one correspondent, Beattie, who used no abbreviations at all. This agrees with the nature of the letter, in which Beattie, after first introducing himself (“... Marischal College Aberdeen, where I am professor of moral philosophy”; 19 March 1785; National Library of Scotland, MS 2521, f. 11), seeks preferment for his tutee William Deans, the bearer of the letter. Woide used very few abbreviations, and none for grammatical words, but he was a foreigner, and may not have been fully aware of what was allowable or not in the use of abbreviations, or, indeed, in matters of politeness generally. Secker’s low ranking suggests extreme politeness on his part, which is, indeed, in line with the content of the letters, for in

¹³ The opposite, i.e. a ranking on the basis of the use of abbreviations for content words only, provides a highly diffuse picture, producing the following ranking (ranging from a high to a low incidence of abbreviations): formal notes, Warburton (fair copies), Morant, Liverpool, Newcastle, Dalrymple, wife, Merrick, Warburton (draft), Spence.

one of them he reprimands Lowth for his role in the Warburton affair. As Archbishop of Canterbury it was presumably his duty to do so, but he adopts the politest of forms in phrasing his message:

May I intimate a Wish, that you had been less earnestly engaged of late in another Employment? The provocation, I own was such, that my Resentment, in a like Case, would probably have been stronger. Most Persons beyond Comparison will be on your side; & no wonder. But I would have had all on your side: which, if you had been remarkably gentle, must have been the Effect, perhaps even on the Person immediately concerned. I should be afraid to say this to Him: and would not say it to you, if I was not, with a very sincere & very great Esteem,/ Your Loving Brother/ Tho. Cant. (5 December 1765; Bodleian Library MS. Eng. Lett. C. 574, f. 67)

Secker, moreover, was in his seventies when he wrote to Lowth, and the scarcity of abbreviations in his letters may represent an older pattern of usage.¹⁴ The Duke of Newcastle, however, was of exactly the same age as Secker, and yet he allowed himself to use more abbreviations in his letters to Lowth than Secker. It is striking that his usage is almost identical to that of Lowth, which is lowest of the letters to all his other correspondents. The letters between Lowth and Newcastle are very formal, dealing with Lowth's appointment as Bishop of St. David's and later of Oxford, and with Lowth's required presence in a meeting of the House of Lords. It is also striking that Spence and Merrick used far fewer abbreviations in their letters to Lowth than vice versa. Spence was of the same generation as Newcastle and Secker. As in the case of Secker, we may have to do with a case of generational change here (cf. Nevalainen and Raumolin-Brunberg 2003: 86–89). For all that, it is striking that Lowth's use of abbreviations was so much higher than that of Merrick. Whatever the explanation for the difference, it is clear that Merrick was not offended by Lowth's use of abbreviations.

¹⁴ Lowth's only letter to Secker in my collection is a draft letter. Unlike in the case of Newcastle, Spence and Merrick (see below), I cannot, therefore, compare Secker's usage to that of Lowth.

But the most interesting case is that of Pearson. His usage is higher than that of any of the correspondents as well as that of Lowth even in his most informal style. It is higher even than in Lowth's draft letter to Warburton, and nearly as high as in the formal notes. But as explained above, Pearson was not a close friend of Lowth's, nor are his letters comparable to the style of formal notes. There must be a different explanation for his use of so many abbreviations in letters to someone who was his superior within the hierarchy of the Church. Pearson corresponded with Lowth during the few months in the summer of 1766 that Lowth was Bishop of St. David's, and in a period of only eight weeks, he sent Lowth seventeen letters.¹⁵ Letter writing was evidently part of his Pearson's profession, occupying much of his daily work. It seems that he did not need to affect politeness in the same way as Beattie, who did not know Lowth personally, when trying to bring about preferment for a friend of his, or Secker when reprimanding Lowth for his role in the affair with Warburton. Pearson's letters are very direct in tone, as may appear from the following opening: "My Lord/ Last night I had Your Favour, and this morning went to Austin Friars to enquire after M^r. Townshend, who I find is in Wales" (19 August 1766; Durham University Library Add. MSS 451, f. 198). A politer version of the opening words might have read "I cannot omit the first opportunity of acknowledging y^e. favour of your very obliging Letter, w^{ch}. is just now come to my hands", as Lowth wrote to Warburton on 14 October 1756 (Bodleian Library MS Eng. Lett. C 572, ff. 151–152). The next sentence in Pearson's letter, moreover, lacks a subject, which would be more appropriate of the style of a private journal than of a letter to one's superior. Pearson's use of abbreviations shows involvedness rather than politeness, which was evidently the appropriate form of behaviour in his relationship with Lowth. Pearson's relationship with Lowth was probably similar to that of any modern private secretary to his or her superior: without being too close on a personal level, the nature of the working relationship allows for

¹⁵ So far, I have not yet come across any of Lowth's replies to Pearson's letters.

the use of an informal style of language. It appears that in this respect the eighteenth century was not very different from today.

5. Conclusion

The main function of the use of abbreviations in letters is to speed up the process of writing. Thus, we find a higher usage in letters in which appearance is of less significance than contents, as in the case of draft letters and in letters like Pearson's. For letters to close friends one would expect the same, and this is indeed true for Lowth, but, strikingly, less so for his friends. One possible explanation for this difference in usage may be generational change, in which case the differences between different generations of letter writers would be part of the general drift towards greater informality (Biber 1988). The question of whether the occurrence of abbreviations in eighteenth-century letters can serve as an index of politeness can, it seems to me, be answered positively, though as a tool it would be most useful in distinguishing between the different styles of writing of a single author. Differences may not be absolute due to possible generational changes or personal preferences with regard to the question of to what extent the use of abbreviations is acceptable. It is in the latter perspective only that we might have to do with idiosyncratic styles.

What I have tried to show in this paper is the importance of studying an author's writing as fully as possible and, in doing so, of carefully distinguishing between different linguistic styles. My analysis suggests that, then as much as now, speakers and writers were able to draw upon their sociolinguistic competence in order to signal greater or lesser intimacy or politeness to their addressees. I have been able to demonstrate this most clearly for Lowth, for whom I possess more as well as more varied material than for any of his correspondents, but the case of Pearson shows that what is true for Lowth may well have been true for others, too. Despite the fact that Lowth was the author of an authoritative English

grammar, he was a relatively ordinary (if highly educated) speaker and writer of English. Consequently, I don't think that on a more abstract level his sociolinguistic competence was very different from that of the people he corresponded with.

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