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# Letters as loot

## Confiscated letters filling major gaps in the history of Dutch\*

Marijke van der Wal, Gijsbert Rutten & Tanja Simons

In this contribution, we will introduce the recently rediscovered collection of Dutch documents from the second half of the seventeenth to the early nineteenth centuries, comprising over 38,000 letters, both commercial and private ones. The socio-historical linguistic value of these private letters, kept in the National Archives (Kew, UK), will be indicated by discussing a few illustrative cases. Examining the linguistic phenomena of *h*-dropping and *n*-deletion in a selection of letters from the *Letters as Loot*-corpus, compiled at the University of Leiden, we will show that they reveal the linguistic variation of the past and give access to the everyday language of people from all social ranks, thus filling major gaps in the history of Dutch. A social and gender distribution found for the usage of formulaic language suggests a connection with socially stratified writing experience.

### 1. Tracing linguistic variation

The sociolinguistic variation of the past is mainly beyond the eye of the observer, invisible in printed texts that come down to us. This lack of insight into linguistic variants and variation is often assumed to be rectified by analyzing private letters written by people from various social ranks – letters which are supposed to reflect the everyday, more informal language of the time. The rediscovery of Dutch ‘sailing letters’ allows us to put this hypothesis to the test by examining a few linguistic phenomena in the *Letters as Loot*-corpus, compiled at the University of Leiden. After having given the background of the sailing letters, we discuss both the details of compiling the *Letters as Loot*-corpus and the problems that we face before being able to examine the linguistic data fruitfully. Ultimately, we will assess the preliminary results of research into *h*-dropping and *n*-deletion and discuss

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\* We would like to thank Ingrid Tieken-Boon van Ostade (Leiden) for her useful comments on an earlier draft of this paper.

the perspectives they offer for future research into linguistic variation of the past. From another point of view, variation also concerns the social and gender distribution found in the use of epistolary formulae.

## 2. Confiscated letters in times of war

England and the Netherlands share a past of strong rivalry and frequent warfare. During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, no fewer than four Anglo-Dutch Wars were fought, and in various other wars both countries stood on opposite sides (see Table 1):

**Table 1.** Chronology of Anglo-Dutch Wars in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries

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1st Anglo-Dutch War	1652–1654
2nd Anglo-Dutch War	1665–1667
3rd Anglo-Dutch War	1672–1674
War of the Austrian Succession	1739–1748
Seven Years' War	1756–1763
4th Anglo-Dutch War & American War of Independence	1776–1784
Napoleonic period	1793–1813

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For historical linguists, this warfare and the privateering involved have borne unexpected fruits. Privateering was a longstanding legitimate activity, performed by all seafaring European countries and regulated by strict rules. When private ships (*privateers*) authorized by a country's government, attacked and seized cargo from enemy ships, the conquered ship and all its cargo were considered as loot for the privateer, if rules had been followed scrupulously (Van Gelder 2006: 10). In England, it was the High Court of Admiralty (HCA) that had to establish whether the current procedures had been properly followed. In order to be able to decide whether the ship was a so-called lawful prize, all the papers on board, both commercial and private, were confiscated.

After the legal procedure, the confiscated papers stayed in the High Court of Admiralty's Archives, gathering dust for centuries; nowadays, they are stocked in hundreds of boxes in the British National Archives (Kew). Only a very small part of the confiscated papers has been examined for specific historical research, and this mainly in the last decade of the twentieth century. The actual size of the collection did not come to light before 2005, when historian Roelof van Gelder made an indispensable, but still rough inventory of the Dutch HCA papers

(see Van Gelder 2006).<sup>1</sup> Apart from a wide range of other material including treatises on seamanship, plantation accounts, textile samples, ships' journals, poems and lists of slaves, the collection was found to comprise about 38,000 Dutch letters, both commercial and private, from the second half of the seventeenth to the early nineteenth centuries. To fully appreciate the huge number of letters it is important to note that in very many cases the ships' cargo contained a lot more mail than the crew's own correspondence. Ships often took mailbags on board and thus functioned as mail carriers between the Netherlands and remote regions such as the Caribbean and East India (Van Vliet 2007: 47–55; Van Gelder 2006: 10–15).

### 3. The linguistic perspective

What makes the rediscovery of this particular source of letters so interesting for linguists is both its quantity and quality. The huge number of 38,000 letters, dating from this particular period, not only surpasses many existing collections of letters in any other archive in the Netherlands, but the value of the 15,000 private letters among them cannot easily be overestimated. Their so-called language of proximity (the language written to and spoken with spouses, children, relatives and friends) is a familiar and highly valuable source for sociolinguistic data (cf. Koch & Österreicher 1985; Elspaß 2005; Elspaß 2007a). Until recently, such data were only rarely available for the history of the Dutch language. Apart from printed texts, linguists had to rely mainly on private documents written by men from the higher ranks of society. Private documents from women in general and from both men and women of lower and middle classes were available only in very small numbers, scattered over various archives in the Netherlands. If the HCA letters compensate for this lack of linguistic data, we will be able to explore what is largely a *terra incognita* of the Dutch language history from below, thus filling major gaps in the history of Dutch (Van der Wal 2006).<sup>2</sup> This challenging task is the aim of the research programme *Letters as Loot. Towards a non-standard view on the history of Dutch* at the University of Leiden.<sup>3</sup>

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1. The inventory is available at the website of the Nationaal Archief in The Hague ([www.gahetna.nl/collectie/index/nt00424](http://www.gahetna.nl/collectie/index/nt00424)).

2. Other private documents such as diaries and travelogues may also contribute to a non-standard view of language. For research on Dutch diaries see Rutten (2008) and van der Wal (2007). See Boyce Hendriks (1998) for research on Dutch letters from the time period 1583–1624.

3. The research programme *Letters as Loot. Towards a non-standard view on the history of Dutch* was initiated by Marijke van der Wal (Leiden) and is funded by The Netherlands

Before being able to analyze the letters from a socio-historical perspective, two issues had to be solved: firstly, the issue of how to make a selection from the 15,000 private letters and secondly the problem of establishing whether the letters are autographs or not.

#### 4. *The Letters as Loot-corpus*

To solve the selection issue, two cross-sections were made, one for the seventeenth century (1664–1674), the period of the second and third Anglo-Dutch Wars, and the other for the eighteenth century (1776–1784), the period of the fourth Anglo-Dutch War and the American War of Independence.<sup>4</sup> From these two periods, with a hundred years in between, letters were selected and photographed digitally during a number of visits to the National Archives. The selection took place by inspecting HCA-boxes which, according to Van Gelder's inventory, contained letters from the chosen periods. From the digital photographs taken, transcriptions of the letters are made following a diplomatic transcription method without any normalization of word boundaries or of i/j and u/v variation.<sup>5</sup> Thus we transcribe *ghe coft*, *iaer* and *bouen* which we do not change into *ghecoft* 'bought', *jaer* 'year' and *boven* 'above'. We opted for this transcription method in order to enable various kinds of linguistic analyses, including phonological and graphematic analyses. Both the transcriptions and the corresponding digital photographs are included in a digital archive. As a working tool, a database, specially developed for our research programme, has been constructed to store and retrieve all information on the letters. Our aim is primarily to build a digital corpus for linguistic research; a digital edition of the letters is beyond the scope of the current programme, but will be contemplated for the future. Automatic tagging of the corpus is not within the scope of our programme either.

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Organisation for Scientific Research (NWO); cf. also <http://www.brievensbuit.nl> (English version).

4. The cross-sections correspond with two subprojects of our programme: *Everyday Dutch of the lower and middle classes. Private letters in times of war (1665–1674)*, the Ph.D.-project carried out by Judith Nobels, and *A perspective from below. Private letters versus printed uniformity (1776–1784)*, by Tanja Simons.

5. The time-consuming transcription process has mainly been carried out by volunteers of a project called *Wikiscripta Neerlandica*. The participants provide transcriptions which are checked three times by different members of the *Letters as Loot* team before they are accepted as final transcriptions for the electronic corpus.

A careful selection from the letters transcribed for the two periods has to guarantee an appropriate representation of both male and female writers, of various social classes and of various age groups, but we have to be aware of the limitations and problems involved here. Since the letters only provide us with the sender's and addressee's name and address, additional research in local Dutch archives is needed in order to find more details in the registers of marriage or baptism and in notarial registers. Those, however, are often all but complete – if they have been kept at all – and it is therefore not surprising that we often encounter difficulties in finding more details about the senders, such as their age or social background. For each period a corpus of about 500 letters is compiled. Apart from the sociolinguistic variables, the regional origin of the writers is taken into consideration. However, regarding this, not all Dutch regions are equally represented in our *Letters as Loot*-corpus due to the origin of the confiscated letters. The seventeenth-century letters were mainly sent to and from the provinces of Holland and Zeeland. More regions are represented in the eighteenth-century letters than in the seventeenth-century ones, but the province of Holland prevails in both subcorpora.

Building the digital corpus also involves complex research into the autograph or non-autograph status of the letters. Although we find letters sent by people of all social ranks, including the lower and middle classes, and by both men and women and even children, we should not jump to conclusions, as to hastily matching specific language use with the sender of a letter. As part of the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century population was either illiterate or partly literate, we have to establish first of all whether the letters were written by the senders themselves or not.<sup>6</sup> In order to deal with this problem, we developed the so-called Leiden Identification Procedure (LIP) (Nobels & Van der Wal 2009). This procedure, which combines script and content analysis, is applied to our whole corpus of seventeenth-century letters. As a result we have three categories of letters: autographs, non-autographs and letters of unclear status. Non-autographs were written by professional scribes or by friends or relatives (whom we designate as “social scribes”) upon whom people with limited writing skills called to write letters for them. For the eighteenth-century letters, the increasing rate of literacy makes the identification problem easier to solve, although we still find non-autograph letters which were not written by the senders, but by professional or social scribes. A few examples of eighteenth-century letters from the *Letters as Loot*-corpus will illustrate the problem of addressing the question of who is able to write.

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6. See Frijhoff & Spies (1999:237), Kuijpers (1997:501) and van der Wal (2002:9–13) for literacy rates and teaching practices in the Netherlands of the seventeenth century.

## 5. Writing experience in the last decades of the eighteenth century

How the senders of late eighteenth-century letters differed in writing skills, will become clear from letters sent by a kitchen-maid and by the wives of sailors on VOC ships. We might have supposed that the letters from Cornelia Buyk to her brother Coenraad (see Figure 1) and to her uncle and aunt present us with specimens of the writing practice of a late eighteenth-century Dutch kitchen maid. In this case, however, we are disappointed: extra-linguistic information in the second letter reveals that Cornelia asked the post-mistress of her home town Kampen to write the letters for her.

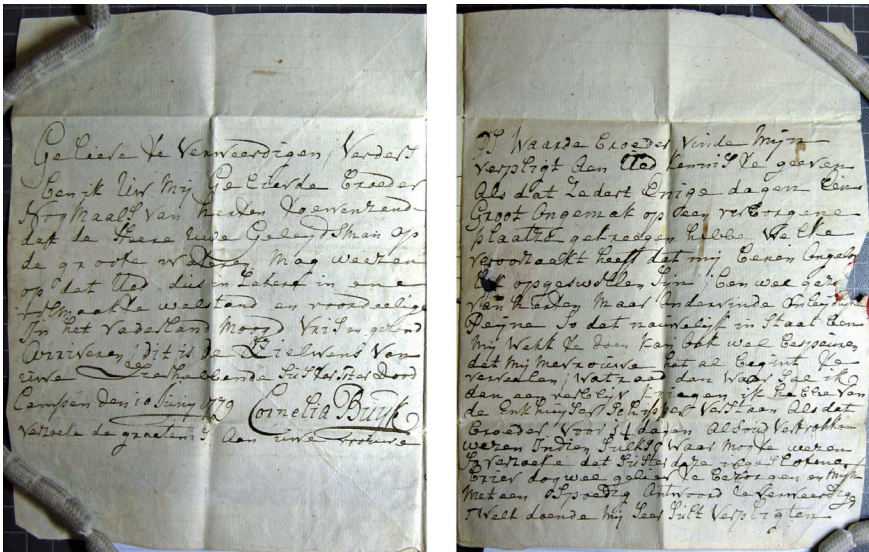
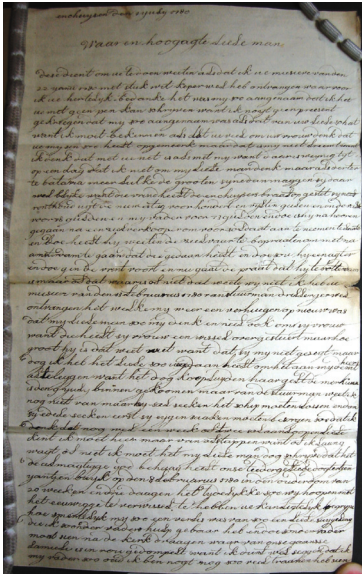
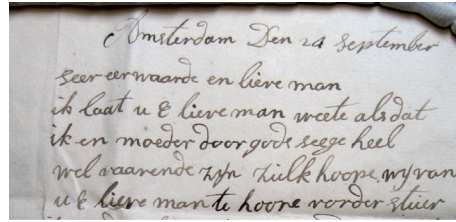


Figure 1. Letter sent by kitchen maid Cornelia Buyk

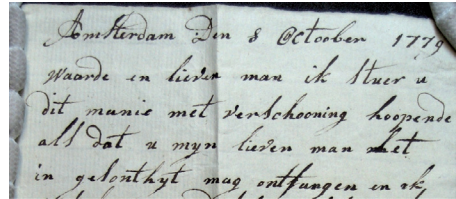
The above finding need not surprise us, as we could have doubted the writing ability of a kitchen maid. The other case of two young women, Meymerigje Kleynhens from Enkhuizen and Hendrikje ten Broek from Amsterdam, is more complicated. Both women from equal social rank, married to (second) mates on VOC ships, had to deal with all kinds of duties varying from regulating the ship's provisions to discussing the commissions given to their husbands. It seems reasonable, therefore, to assume that they needed reading and writing skills to perform these duties. This assumption proves to be correct in the case of Meymerigje Kleynhens, whose letters were identified as autograph. Her characteristic signature in the same handwriting as the body of the letters is found in the joint will that was drawn up shortly before her husband sailed to the East in 1779 (cf. van der Wal 2010: 93–94). Meymerigje was not only able to put pen to paper for a short note, but she also shows good writing skills in elaborate letters of three or four pages (see Figure 2a).



(a) Handwriting of Meymerigje Kleynhens

(b) Letters sent by Hendrikje ten Broek  
Scribe 1

Scribe 2



Signature of Hendrikje ten Broek

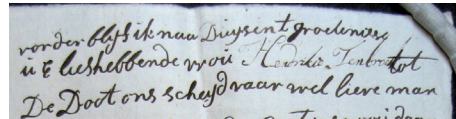


Figure 2. Different hands in the corpus

Hendrikje ten Broek's letters, however, present us with a serious problem: they appear to have been written in two different hands. Apparently, two unknown scribes wrote the letters for her, often leaving a blank space for Hendrikje's signature, as shown in Figure 2b.

The letters are therefore examples of the encoding practice. It is important to note that our use of the term *encoder* differs from the use in Dossena (2008) and Dossena & Tiekens-Boon van Ostade (2008). We distinguish between the *sender* of the letter (the person in whose name the letter is written and whose thoughts are conveyed in the letter) and the *scribe* or *writer* of the letter (the person who performed the mechanical act of writing the letter). Sometimes the scribe of a letter is not its sender, for instance when the sender of the letter is illiterate and has paid a professional writer to produce the letter. In these cases, we call the writer of the letter an *encoder*. From Hendrikje's letters we might have concluded that she was unable to write more than her own signature, had we not come across a brief note that suggests the contrary (see Figure 3).<sup>7</sup>

7. For an analysis of the handwriting in these letters and additional information on Hendrikje's writing skills, see van der Wal (2010: 45–49).





## 6. *H*-dropping in letters to and from Zeeland

The well-known English phenomenon of *h*-dropping is also found in Dutch, going back to medieval Flemish manuscripts and still current in modern Dutch dialects, in particular in the Flemish dialects and the dialects of the province of Zeeland.<sup>8</sup> In these dialects the initial *h* in front of a vowel is regularly absent, as in *alf* ‘half’, *eel* ‘whole’, *uus* ‘house’ – see Figure 4.

After the medieval period *h*-dropping survived in the spoken dialects of Flanders and Zeeland, but it is not a characteristic of seventeenth- or eighteenth-century printed texts from the province of Zeeland. The *Letters as Loot*-corpus comprises a fair number of letters sent to and from the province of Zeeland, which allows us to examine the practice of *h*-dropping in this particular written source. Do we find *h*-dropping in these letters and, if so, do the letters fully reflect the spoken dialect in this respect?

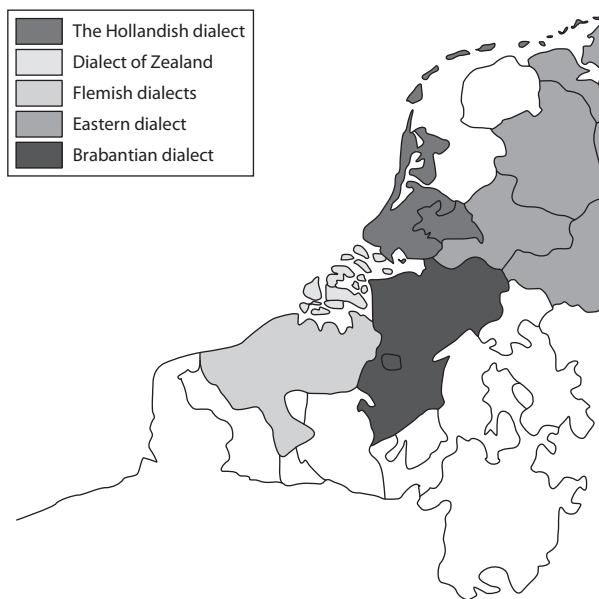


Figure 4. Map of the Netherlands (seventeenth and eighteenth centuries)

Having examined both seventeenth- and eighteenth-century letters, we indeed found *h*-dropping and moreover *h*-prothesis, the overuse of the *h* (so-called hypercorrection) in front of a vowel in instances such as *hacht* for *acht*

8. As for English usage, see McColl Millar (this volume).

'eight' and *handere* for *andere* 'others.' Both *h*-dropping and *h*-prothesis are characteristics of speakers of an *h*-less dialect. The instances of *h*-prothesis show both the hesitation of dialect speakers and their awareness of the supraregional writing practice, in which *h*-less words in the Zeeland dialect were written with *h* according to the data in other dialects and in the developing standard language. 64% of 99 seventeenth-century Zeeland-letters from our preliminary corpus show traces of *h*-dropping, *h*-prothesis or the orthographical confusion of the *a*- and *h*-graph in words such as *hllle* for *alle* 'all' and *aoe* for *hoe* 'how' – see Table 2.

**Table 2.** Frequent phenomena in the corpus

Phenomena	Proportion of letters
<i>h</i> -dropping	46%
<i>h</i> -prothesis	34%
orthographical confusion: <i>h</i> for <i>a</i>	8%
orthographical confusion: <i>a</i> for <i>h</i>	2%

Note that the four phenomena occur simultaneously in various letters too, which explains why the percentages add up to more than 64%. The orthographical confusion of the *a*- and *h*-graph, which is a strange phenomenon at first sight, can be explained by taking into account the practice of learning to read. Learning to read by the common practice of pronouncing the names of the letters, native speakers of an *h*-less dialect (such as the dialect of Zeeland) would not distinguish between *a*, pronounced [a:], and *h*, pronounced [a:] as well, which subsequently leads to confusing the two graphs in writing.

We examined a preliminary corpus of 99 seventeenth-century Zeeland letters which consists of two subcorpora: a subcorpus of autograph letters and a subcorpus comprising non-autograph letters and uncertain cases. The results appeared to be similar for both subcorpora. This confirms our expectation that non-autograph letters were written by professional or social scribes from the same region and therefore do not differ from the autograph letters as far as this specific regional characteristic is concerned.

We do find *h*-dropping in the letters, but do the letters reflect the spoken language in this respect? Examining the number of instances against the number of possible occurrences in the seventeenth-century letters, we find only 10% *h*-dropping and 10% *h*-prothesis. In other words, the scribes wrote the prevocalic *h* in most instances (90%) and did not insert a hypercorrect *h* in most instances (90%) either. From these data we have to conclude that the seventeenth-century scribes must have been well aware of the supraregional writing practice during their own writing process and that they did not intend to write dialect (see also

Rutten & van der Wal 2011). In this they do not greatly differ from German and Flemish scribes in the nineteenth century (Elspaß 2007b; Vandenbussche 2002). Our preliminary eighteenth-century corpus which comprised 35 letters sent from and to Zeeland, shows that eighteenth-century scribes increasingly adopted the supraregional writing practice. Only 31% of the eighteenth-century letters show traces of *h*-dropping or *h*-prothesis against 64% of the seventeenth-century Zeeland-letters. Note again that the phenomena occur simultaneously in eighteenth-century letters too, which explains why the percentages add up to more than 31%. See Table 3 below:

**Table 3.** Phenomena in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century letters

Phenomena	17th-c. letters	18th-c. letters
<i>h</i> -dropping	46%	29%
<i>h</i> -prothesis	34%	11%

Apart from this conclusion, the relatively small number of *h*-dropping and *h*-prothesis tokens clearly shows the extent to which spoken language and conventions of the supraregional writing practice are intertwined. It is the careful analysis of the marginal dialect features in the letters that allows us to get a clear view of the regional variation in the written language of the past, a view that would not have emerged if only printed records had been examined.

## 7. *N*-deletion in letters from three female scribes

Today *n*-deletion occurs, both in nominal and verbal instances, in all Dutch-speaking regions except the north-eastern and the Flemish south-western part.<sup>9</sup> Plural nouns such as *boeken* ‘books’ are pronounced as *boeke* and monomorphemic words such as *molen* ‘mill’ and *open* ‘open’ as *mole* and *ope* respectively. Infinitives such as *spreken* ‘to speak’, past participles such as *gesproken* ‘spoken’, finite verbs such as plural present *spreken* ‘speak’ and plural past tense *spraken* ‘spoke’ all show *n*-deletion in spoken language: *spreke*, *spreke*, *sprake* and *gesproke* respectively. *N*-deletion varies according to the type of speech, whether we deal with the reading of texts and expressive speech or with casual spoken language.

9. See Goeman (2001) and De Wulf & Taeldeman (2001:23–25) for an overview of present-day dialects.

Phonological conditions play a role too: the *n* tends to be preserved between vowels, such as in *we spreken elkaar zeker!* (lit. ‘we speak one another surely’).

*N*-deletion is not a recent phenomenon. As early as the first decades of the seventeenth century, grammarians mention it disapprovingly as a characteristic of the inhabitants of the province of Holland (Van Heule 1625: 117; Leupenius 1653: 59). According to grammarians and schoolmasters, *n*-deletion should be avoided both in speech and in the written language. It does not therefore surprise us that printed texts hardly show any trace of it. In a reference corpus of eighteenth-century printed texts we found only one instance of *n*-deletion (van der Wal & Simons 2010: 675; 682–683). For this reason it seemed an interesting topic on which to analyse the letters in our corpus. Focusing on letters written by three female scribes, all originating from *n*-deleting regions, we find the data a bit confusing at first glance, but on closer inspection, the data represent a system.

The three female scribes are all more or less the same age (they all have adult children and two of them grandchildren too), while they belong to three different social ranks.<sup>10</sup> Upper-class Anna Maria van der Sluijs, who ran a plantation in Demerara (Guyana), wrote to her husband in Amsterdam. Upper-middle-class Debora van Spall wrote from Utrecht (the Netherlands) to her son in Cochin (India) and lower-middle-class Antje Cornelis wrote from her farm in Zijpe (near Alkmaar in the north of the province of Holland) to her husband on the isle of St. Eustatius in the Caribbean region. All three women write fluently, as we can see in the samples of their writings (see Figures 5–7 respectively).

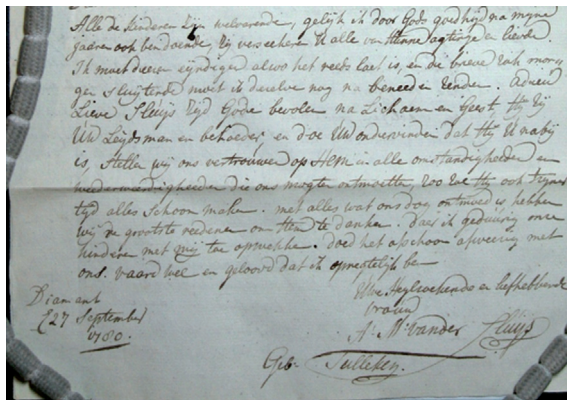


Figure 5. Letter by Anna Maria van der Sluijs

10. In our research we distinguish four social classes: upper class, upper-middle class, lower-middle class and lower class. Naturally, we use *class* as a neutral term referring to social layers, not suggesting any connection with the nineteenth-century notion of class in industrialized societies.



Leven piet udd meldt dat udd vader udd  
 altesz so wonderlyk schryft nunt het tog niet  
 wonderlyk ge kent u vader het is waas udd  
 myn waas daas Wel onder setten maas dat  
 moet ik Wel doen want als ik dat niet eyn  
 doe daas heb ik misse ik heb het ock aan udd  
 bren jaan geschreuen soe dat het myn schult  
 niet en is ik heb eens de bneven mit udd  
 onder tekenen die u vader an udd schryft doe  
 naas ik bren vrese en daas om doe ik het maas  
 mit leven piet ik weet niet myn te schryuen  
 want myn jegen doen sijn udd jegen ock sijn  
 omhelse udd en naas hoort en bren udd leen  
 maas vroolyk en wel te vreden myn sijn  
 ock heb maas gedult de Heeren sal udd behulpen  
 nu adieu leven piet Gode Heer bewaren  
 udd en geft sijn jegen ock bren tog veel om  
 des Heeren hulpe want de Heeren verlaat niet  
 de synen die hem anroepen nu nog maas  
 adieu leven piet  
 — Leven piet  
 Utrecht udd luthicken de M. oeder  
 Den 2 November D. V. Spall Gel. Rademaker  
 1770  
 — Dag leven piet

Figure 6. Letter by Debora van Spall

Dink peper in de syp den 29 februarij 1780  
 Waard man  
 nu is dijnude als dat het mit ons gesentheit nog  
 radelyk wil is maas mit ons nu is het soe wat  
 wij hadde al over de drie weke de stoffe gehat en  
 wij hadde sijf koeije doet en vier gebiert en nog  
 in sak soe na is het in huys afgelopen  
 in de doot is het nog wil daar staan. er negen in  
 twe die kalve moede ons soon jaan heeft mit melk  
 buste verlor en twe jonge gebiert  
 kus blink heeft er ses doot en drie gebiert  
 de gebiert van ons sijn de twee Grijwe die allens sijn  
 en Jonge nibbid en die wij van broder Jan hebbe  
 ge kocht de stoffe onder de mense is in alkmaar  
 heel ord daar sijn er in Januarij en februarij  
 Wel hondert en dertig gesteren in het beqint en  
 de syp ja toe schagen ock al wat  
 ik het redent de condracht geen breue van  
 u ontfangen vordier sijn gebroet van alle vrende  
 en kinden en mensaam van myn udd  
 Antje Cornelis

Figure 7. Letter by Antje Cornelis

Though the three women originate either from the province of Holland or the province of Utrecht, which are both areas of *n*-deletion, in their letters we find



different practices of the representation of final *-n*. Upper-class Anna Maria van der Sluijs follows the orthographic practice of printed texts. In 4602 words we find only 3 slips of the pen: the infinitives *raade* (instead of *raaden* ‘to guess’) and *eette* (instead of *etten* ‘to eat’) and the plural past tense *zij konde* (instead of *zij konden* ‘they were able’). Lower-middle-class Antje Cornelis, on the other hand, systematically shows *n*-deletion in plural nouns, in finite verbs, mostly in infinitives, but never in past participles. Her few monomorphemic singular nouns (*gulden* ‘guilder’, *segen* ‘blessing’, (het) *boeren* ‘running of a farm’ and *morgen* ‘c. 2 acres’) do not show *n*-deletion either. How can we account for these exceptions to Antje’s general practice of *n*-deletion? As a rule, she represents the current pronunciation in which *n*-deletion occurs, and therefore the question arises whether she actually pronounced the *n*- in past participles and singular nouns (see Table 4).

Table 4. Antje Cornelis’ representation of the final *-n*

<i>n</i> -deletion			<i>n</i> -maintenance		
plural nouns	54	(100%)	singular nouns <i>-en</i>	13	(100%)
finite verb	23	(100%)	finite verb	0	(0%)
infinitive	21	(84%)	infinitive	4	(16%)
past participle	0	(0%)	past participle	19	(100%)

One of the problems for historical linguistic research is the lack of information about the spoken language of the past. What we can do, cautiously and well aware of the methodological risks, is look at present-day regional variation. Today, in the very region in which Antje lived, *n*-deletion occurs in plural nouns, infinitives and finite verbs, but it does not occur in past participles and only now and again in singular nouns.<sup>11</sup> We may therefore conclude that *n*-maintenance occurs in exactly the same environments as in Antje’s letters. This striking similarity in present-day data leads us to the conclusion that *n*-maintenance in past participles and singular nouns in Antje Cornelis’ letters may have been part of her spoken language.<sup>12</sup>

As for a specific orthographic rule on the one hand and the question of the representation of pronunciation on the other, with Anna Maria van der Sluijs and Antje Cornelis we have two clear-cut cases of writers from different social

11. Cf. MAND (volume I: 16, 17, 18, 25, 26, 27 and volume II: 54, 55, 58, 59, 60, 64, 65, 68, 69, 70) and “<http://www.meertens.knaw.nl/projecten/mand>” ; “<http://www.meertens.knaw.nl/mand/database/>”

12. Cf. Goeman (2001) for similar differences depending on word class in present-day dialects.

backgrounds and – we may assume – with a different education level. What do the letters of upper-middle-class Debora van Spall show us? In Debora van Spall's letters we find only a few instances of both nominal and verbal *n*-deletion, such as *schulde* (instead of *schulden* 'debts'), the past participle *gesonde* (instead of *gesonden* 'sent'), the plural present tense *omhelse* (instead of *omhelsen* '[they] embrace') and the infinitive *worde* (instead of *worden*). The instances of *n*-deletion are only about 1.5 % against 98.5 % regular forms with *n*-maintenance, but what strikes us is that Debora van Spall's letters contain a large number of what could be hypercorrections, such as *tanten* – *tante* 'aunt' and *ik hopen* – *ik hope* 'I hope'. In 7912 words, we find only 9 instances of *n*-deletion against at least 42 instances of 'hypercorrections'. Was she so much aware of the current orthographic rule that she made frequent mistakes in writing an *n* where it need not occur? Or is there a different explanation?

Examining her letters more closely, we notice that also the final *-e* (the schwa) of adjectives is often represented with *-en* (*lieven, groten, braven* 'dear, great, brave'), while there is no historical or regional explanation for this phenomenon. Checking her most elaborate letter of 3900 words, we find 112 attributive adjectives with final *-en* against only 8 with final *-e*. Among the latter are 5 compounds such as *grotevader* 'grandfather', *groetemoeder* 'grandmother' and *oudeluy* 'old folks'. This leads to the conclusion that Debora van Spall's so-called hypercorrections should be explained differently. We have to conclude that Debora van Spall uses her own orthographic rule: she systematically represents the schwa in unstressed syllables with *-en*, whether it is an original schwa or a single schwa resulting from *n*-deletion. Further research has to clarify whether we are dealing with individual writing practice or with a different spelling convention that may be found in other letters as well.

Comparing the practice of three female scribes from different social backgrounds, we may conclude that for *n*-deletion lower-middle-class Antje Cornelis's language represents the spoken language. The two other women studied apply different orthographic rules, which both deviate from the spoken reality: upper-class Anna Maria van der Sluijs writes according to current orthographic practice as found in printed texts, while upper-middle-class Debora van Spall writes according to a different spelling rule. Strictly speaking, we cannot conclude only on the evidence of these three women that their different orthographical practice reflects social variation. We mentioned earlier that we may be dealing with an individual orthographical practice in the case of Debora van Spall. Further research has to show whether this is the case. It also has to clarify whether other upper-class letters in our corpus reflect the current orthographic practice in printed texts and whether lower-class and lower-middle-class letters reflect the *n*-deletion in spoken language.

## 8. Variation in the use of epistolary formulae

From the previous sections it has become clear that the letters in our corpus give insight into historical phonology as well as into Early Modern writing practices, about which very little was known until today. Indeed, the language of the letters appears to be closer to the spoken language of the past than that of any other source examined so far, but there is another side to this. As is well-known from research on, for instance, German, English, Scottish and French correspondence of the period (e.g. Davis 1965; Austin 1973a and 1973b; Chartier et al. 1991; Nevalainen 2001; Dossena 2003, and Elspaß 2005), letters were often highly formulaic, and as such probably not close to spoken language at all. This also applies to the Dutch letters in our corpus. In this section, we will provide an overview of the wide variety of epistolary formulae used in the letters, and then, by way of illustration, present a small case study on sociolinguistic variation in the use of one particular formula.

Epistolary formulae can in principle be found anywhere in a letter, but usually the first part and the last part of the letter abound in formulae, whereas the middle part may contain more creative language. We distinguish three main functions of formulae, and will try to link all formulae attested in the letters in question to one of these main functions. The three main groups of formulae are text-constitutive formulae, intersubjective formulae, and Christian-ritual formulae.<sup>13</sup> Following Elspaß (2005: 157), text-constitutive formulae comprise text-type formulae and text-structural formulae.<sup>14</sup> Text-type formulae identify the text as a letter. When setting eyes on a letter for the first time, the addressee (or indeed the researcher) is able to use the text-type formulae to identify the document in question as a letter straight away. Text-type formulae comprise the address, the date, the salutation and the opening sentence, as well as the closing formulae and the signature. Text-structural formulae mark the structure of the text by identifying the transition from one part of the discourse to another. The following text-structural formulae may serve to illustrate this. Formula (1) is frequently used to mark the transition of the opening of the letter to the next part of the discourse where the writer's health is described (see (3) below), while the formula in (2) is used to mark the transition to the closing of the letter:

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13. This division into three main functions is explained in more detail in Rutten & van der Wal (forthcoming).

14. Elspaß (2005: 157) calls the functions concerned “Textsortenkonstitution” and “Textkonstitution”, respectively. See also Elspaß (this volume).

- (1) *ick laet ul weeten als dat ...*  
‘I let you know that ...’
- (2) *hiermede breek ik af*  
with this break I off  
‘I hereby end this letter’

Intersubjective formulae foreground the interactional aspect of the pragmatic situation. In terms of content, they cover three domains: health, greetings and contact. Health formulae (cf. Davis 1965; Austin 1973a and 2004; Nevalainen 2001) consist of health statements and health wishes. A characteristic example is given in (3):

- (3) *als dat ick en ul vaeder en min vaeder en*  
that I and your father and my father and  
*moeder noch kloek en gesont sien*  
mother still healthy and healthy are  
‘... that your father, my father and mother and I are still in good health’

Christian-ritual formulae foreground the relationship between the scribe and the divine world, or between the scribe, the addressee and the divine world. The Christian-ritual formulae usually place the scribe and/or the addressee under divine supervision, thereby manifesting the scribe’s religiosity. The most frequent Christian-ritual formula is the commendation formula, with which the scribe commends the addressee into the hands of God. See the following example:

- (4) *godt in genaede bevolen*  
God in the grace commended

All the formulae mentioned so far are highly frequent in our letter corpus.<sup>15</sup> By way of example, consider the following prototypical opening from a seventeenth-century letter:

Vriendelijcke Groetenijssse aen ul mijn lieve ende bemijnde man Leendert arijensen haeswant jck katelijnghen haeswants ul huisvrouw late ul weten als dat jck met al onse kijnderen noch kloek ben godt lof van sijn genade verhoepende dat het met ul oock soo is ware het anders ’t soude mijn van harten leet sijn om hoeren dat weet godt almachtijch die een kender van alle harten js

15. In addition, there is a wealth of other formulae which remain to be discussed elsewhere. Space constraints also prevent a more detailed discussion of the three main functions of epistolary formulae here; cf. Rutten & van der Wal (forthcoming).

[A friendly greeting to you, my dear and beloved husband Leendert Arijensen Haeswant. I, Kathelijnghe Haeswants, your wife, let you know that I with all our children am still in good health. Praise the Lord for his mercy. Hoping that you are also like that. If it were different, I would be very sorry to hear that. The almighty God, who knows all the hearts, knows this.]

(Letter from Kathelijnen Haeswants to her husband, 10 November 1664)

Every part of this opening passage is formulaic, apart from the proper names of the participants in this communicative event. All other forms are attested many more times in the letter corpus, which suggests that letter writing was a heavily conventionalized social practice. This does not mean that we do not encounter any spontaneous or creative language in the letters that can be called non-formulaic, but epistolary formulae abound.

The greeting formula used in the example usually runs, in normalized spelling, *Een vriendelijke groetenisse zij geschreven aan...*, lit. 'A friendly greeting be written to'. This is by far the most frequent greeting formula in the corpus. We have analyzed the distribution of this formula (and of many other formulae) in a corpus of 315 letters from the seventeenth century, amounting to c. 155,000 words. In Table 5 below we present the structure of the corpus in terms of gender and social class (lower, lower-middle, upper-middle, upper).<sup>16</sup>

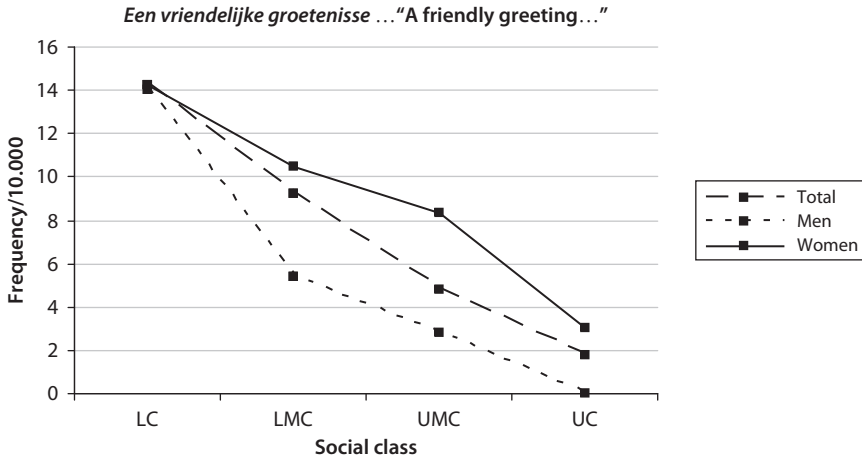
Table 5. 17C corpus used for the study of the greeting formula

17C	LC		LMC		UMC		UC		TOTAL	
	N letters	N words	N letters	N words	N letters	N words	N letters	N words	N letters	N words
Men	10	5,000	27	13,000	92	40,000	12	7,000	141	65,000
Women	39	19,000	68	37,000	54	24,000	13	10,000	174	90,000
<b>Total</b>	<b>49</b>	<b>24,000</b>	<b>95</b>	<b>50,000</b>	<b>146</b>	<b>64,000</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>17,000</b>	<b>315</b>	<b>155,000</b>

The distribution according to gender and social class of variants of the greeting formula under discussion is far from accidental, as can be seen in Graph 1. The frequency of the formula per 10,000 words is plotted against the four social classes we distinguish. The three lines represent the frequencies in letters by men, letters by women, and the average for both. There is a clear social pattern, with a gradual

16. This division into four social strata is mainly founded upon the scribes' occupation and/or the occupation of family members. Our division closely follows the one historians use (Frijhoff & Spies 1999: 190–191), the most important exception being that the highest social level distinguished by historians, the so-called patriciate (which includes the nobility) is not represented in our corpus.

decrease in frequency per social class. This pattern also correlates with gender in that within each social class, women tend to use the formula more often than men.<sup>17</sup>



**Graph 1.** Greeting formula *Een vriendelijke groetenisse zij geschreven aan...*, (distribution by gender and social class)

The social and gender distributions indicate strong differences in style. Assuming that letter writing was a conventionalized social practice, the least we can say is that this practice was not the same for everyone. But we do not think that these differences should be taken as merely stylistic. The distribution in terms of social class and gender neatly parallels the social distribution of writing experience in the time period. Elspaß (2005: 45–46) and Vandebussche (1999), amongst others, argue that one of the most important independent variables in historical sociolinguistics may be writing experience, operationalized in terms of literacy, schooling, and everyday contact with written varieties due to professional and/or personal circumstances. Following historians such as Frijhoff & Spies (1999: 237–238), we assume that writing experience was socially stratified as well as gendered. Furthermore, Elspaß (2005: 180–181) interprets the use of epistolary formulae in nineteenth-century German letters as a kind of *Formulierungshilfe*. For less-experienced writers, recourse to lexicalized multiword units such as epistolary formulae would lessen the burden of the writing process. In the same vein, Austin (2004) concludes that around 1800, the use of English epistolary formulae is largely restricted to sailors and women. We cannot go into the details of the argument here (see Rutten & van der Wal, forthcoming), but

17. Note that there is also a diachronic pattern as none of the eighteenth-century letters contains this formula.



we suggest that there is a direct link between writing experience and the use of formulae, in that less-experienced scribes tend to use fixed formulae more often. We also suggest that the social and gender distribution found for the greeting formula, and in fact for many more formulae, is connected to the social distribution of writing experience. In this perspective, it is striking that upper-class men constitute the social group where not a single token of the greeting formula can be found.

## 9. Conclusions

Examining a limited selection from the *Letters as Loot*-corpus, this contribution has presented two case studies that serve to illustrate both regional variation with *h*-dropping and what may be interpreted as social variation in the case of *n*-deletion. These two phenomena at the phonological and morphonological level give only a first impression of the extraordinary nature of the confiscated letters as a source for sociohistorical linguistic analysis. In our research programme we examine the wealth of data at the linguistic levels of morphology, syntax and the lexicon as well. The striking variation of pronouns of address, remarkable evidence of spoken language syntax and examples of lexical variation are among the topics that are currently being addressed. Even in formulaic opening and closing phrases of letters variation occurs. Exploring the formulae in a subcorpus of seventeenth-century letters, we discovered class and gender dependent variation in the usage of the so-called greeting formula. We found a gradual decrease in frequency per social class (from lower class to upper class) and a clear gender pattern, in that within each social class women tend to use the formula more often than men do. We are currently still in the process of compiling a digital corpus that will allow us to examine the full significance of the confiscated letters as a source of evidence for a wide range of linguistic phenomena. Our results so far show that the letters indeed reflect the linguistic diversity of the past, and that these new findings will most likely change to a significant extent the traditional view of linguistic uniformity which is based on contemporary printed texts and limited written evidence.

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