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(Extra)Ordinary letters: A view from below on seventeenth-century Dutch
Nobels, J.M.P.

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Author: Nobels, Judith Maria Petrus

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Chapter 1. Introduction

Some people wonder why others can become fascinated by historical objects that illustrate everyday life of the past. They raise their eyebrows at archeological museums and do not understand how can would spend minutes gazing at a display case which contains, for instance, a flattened and deformed piece of leather that was once a plain seventeenth-century men's shoe. But for other people, realising that this object was once a shoe worn by another human being can be simply mesmerising. When they stand before the display case, they do not merely see a perished shoe, but a physical link between the present and the usually intangible past. Inspired by this single remnant of a man's life, they wonder about this person and his world. What was his name? What did he look like? What did he do for a living? Was he married? Did he have children? And if this onlooker is a historical linguist, by any chance, he or she will also ask different kinds of questions: What was his language like? What would it sound like if we could hear him speak? Could he write? Did he write differently from the way he spoke? Did his language use differ from that of his parents, his wife, his helper or his boss?

At first sight, all these intriguing questions about the late shoe bearer's language seem impossible to answer, for the seventeenth-century texts that have been preserved until this day seldom reflect the spontaneous language of ordinary people. Research on seventeenth-century Dutch is more often than not carried out on the basis of printed works, official texts, or the correspondence and diaries of famous or highly placed persons. However, a recently re-discovered collection of seventeenth-, eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Dutch private letters has changed this. The so-called *Sailing Letters* provide historical (socio)linguists with a chance to examine the everyday Dutch of the past and to unearth – layer by layer – the linguistic history of lower- and middle-class people.¹

This dissertation is part of the project *Letters as Loot*, which started at Leiden University in 2008. The goal of this project has been to examine the sociolinguistic variation in private letters written by men and women of different social classes in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Within

¹ *Sailing Letters* is a term often used to indicate the letters present in the collection of *Prize Papers* in the High Court of Admiralty archive in the National Archives in Kew, London. Sometimes, the term is used as a *pars pro toto*, referring to the entire collection of *Prize papers*, which does not only contain letters, but also includes other types of documents, such as ship's journals and bills of lading. In this dissertation, I will use the term *Sailing letters* to refer only to the actual letters in the *Prize papers*. In §1.4, the history of the *Sailing letters* will be presented in detail.

the *Letters as Loot* project, the present dissertation has focused on language use of the seventeenth century, more in particular of the period around the Second and Third Anglo-Dutch Wars (1665-1667 and 1672-1674 respectively), which has been examined carefully in six morphological and syntactical case studies.²

The theoretical background of this dissertation will be discussed in §1.1 and the research traditions in which it is embedded will be elaborated on in §1.2. Then, in §1.3, the main objective of this study will be disclosed. The spectacular history of the material used for this dissertation is described in §1.4. Finally, in §1.5, the outline of the dissertation will be presented.

1.1. Theoretical background

1.1.1. Historical sociolinguistics

In what follows, I will briefly sketch the general research tradition in which this dissertation can be situated: historical sociolinguistics. The discipline of historical sociolinguistics studies sociolinguistic variation in the past. Sociolinguistics in general is “an independent sub discipline of linguistics comprising many different approaches and research goals which have the social view of language as their common denominator” (Raumolin-Brunberg 1996: 11). The best known sociolinguistic approach is variationist sociolinguistics, as first practiced and advocated by William Labov (1972, 2001). It is a quantitative method which examines the relationship between linguistic variables and external social variables such as social class, gender, age, ethnic group membership, and social and geographical mobility (Raumolin-Brunberg 1996: 11-12).

While sociolinguistics has been a thriving discipline for about half a century already, it has taken historical sociolinguistics somewhat longer to develop, even though languages of the present and the past are expected to vary in the same patterned ways (Romaine 1988: 1454 in Nevalainen & Raumolin-Brunberg 2012: 25). This similarity follows from the well-known *principle of uniformitarianism*, which states that “human beings as biological, psychological, and social creatures have remained largely unchanged over time” (Nevalainen & Raumolin-Brunberg 2012: 24). According to this principle, if languages from the present can be examined

² The *Letters as Loot* project was funded by NWO (the Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research). A second sub-project, entitled *A perspective from below. Private letters versus printed uniformity (1776-1784)* is carried out by Tanja Simons and focused on the eighteenth century. The third sub-project, *Filling the gaps: rewriting the history of Dutch*, is carried out by Gijsbert Rutten and Marijke van der Wal and compares the results for the two different periods among other things.

successfully using sociolinguistic methodology, languages from the past should also be liable candidates for this kind of scrutiny. The first proof that it is indeed feasible to use sociolinguistic methods on historical data was given by Suzanne Romaine (1982) in her book *Socio-historical linguistics* (Nevalainen 2010: 1). Since then, the field of historical sociolinguistics has grown: the diversity and size of the discipline can be gathered from the recently published *Handbook of historical sociolinguistics* (Hernández-Campoy & Conde-Silvestre 2012) and the success of HiSoN, a network of historical sociolinguists.³

I have already established that historical sociolinguistics applies the same methodologies as sociolinguistics by and large. However, due to the fact that historical sociolinguistics concentrates on language varieties from the past, the field differs from sociolinguistics in some respects, as Raumolin-Brunberg shows (1996: 17-18). The language material preserved from the past is almost always written material, given that sound recordings have only become widely available in the twentieth century. So while sociolinguists examining present-day languages can observe phonetic/phonological variation and change in a straightforward manner, historical research of phonetic/phonological variation and change is complicated by the medium of writing. The fact that historical sources are all written also complicates researching spontaneous language use, which will be discussed in more detail in §1.1.3. Furthermore, where sociolinguists examining present-day languages can find data for all kinds of people, historical sociolinguists can usually only find data produced by people who were literate. Since in historical contexts, literates were most often men from the upper classes (Raumolin-Brunberg 1996: 17-18), historical sociolinguists are challenged to find data for women and people from the lower classes. These specifics of historical sociolinguistics ask for a slightly different approach in some cases, as will be amply shown in chapters 2 and 3. For now, let us focus on the sub-discipline within historical sociolinguistics to which this dissertation is strongly linked.

1.1.2. (Language) history from below

Until a few decades ago, history seemed to tell us “little about the great majority of the inhabitants of the countries or states it was recording” (Hobsbawm 1997: 201), but much more about the few powerful people at the top of society. History was primarily about world leaders, important politicians, the changes in boundaries and relations between countries and

³ The website of the network features (past and future) conferences and summer schools as well as recent historical sociolinguistic publications:
<<http://www.philhist.uni-augsburg.de/hison/>> [08/11/2012]

states, the major works of the most important artists. However, sometime in the twentieth century, a new approach arose (Hobsbawm 1997: 203). Eric Hobsbawm held a lecture about this changing view of history and the title of the ensuing publication became the name for this new approach: *history from below*.⁴

Sharpe (1991) and Hobsbawm (1997) describe how the interest of historians shifted more and more towards the common people as soon as these common people became “a constant factor in the making of such [major political] decisions and events” (Hobsbawm 1997: 202). This new interest in the lives of the common people seemed to take flight after the Second World War and is now in full swing (Hobsbawm 1997: 203-24). Several historical disciplines that can all be linked to this new interest have come to life over the past few decades (Elspaß 2005: 12); take for instance *microhistory*, which originated in the seventies (Ginzburg 1993). An interest has risen in documents that can offer a view on history through the eyes of ordinary people. Some of these texts are so-called ego-documents, documents “in which an author writes about his or her own acts, thoughts and feelings” (Dekker 2002: 7). Autobiographical documents, such as private letters and diary entries, are typical examples of ego-documents. An inventory of Dutch ego-documents written between 1500 and 1918 which comprises diaries and travelogues is presented by the *Center for the study of egodocuments and history*, established by Rudolf Dekker and Ariane Baggerman.⁵ History from below is not only present in academics, it is also translated into a very personal approach of history in museums. At the *In Flanders fields Museum* in Ypres, for example, where the First World War is commemorated, all visitors receive a wristlet with a chip, which enables them to discover four personal stories and to learn about the impact of the events of the Great War on the life of a man, woman or child living or fighting in the area around Ypres at the time.⁶

A similar shift has taken place in the realm of language history. For a long period of time historical linguists, unlike linguists interested in dialect studies, mainly focused on aspects of standardisation and thus on the language of the high culture. However, in 2005 the sub-discipline of language history from below was officially born: Elspaß’s groundbreaking work on nineteenth-century everyday German appeared (Elspaß 2005) and a conference dedicated to language history from below at the University of

⁴ The lecture was first published as a contribution to a Festschrift for George Rudé in 1985. Hobsbawm does not seem to have been the first scholar to use the term *history from below*, however, since Edward Thompson already published an article entitled ‘History from below’ in *The Times Literary Supplement* in 1966 (Sharpe 1991: 25).

⁵ <<http://www.egodocument.net/egodocument/index.html>> [08/11/2012]

⁶ <<http://www.inflandersfields.be/en>> [08/11/2012]

Bristol united various scholars who turned their attention to the history of the everyday language of the lower classes.⁷

Instead of taking a “bird’s eye view”, language history from below can be said to take a “worm’s eye view” in two respects (Elspaß 2005: 13, Vandenbussche & Elspaß 2007: 146). Firstly, language history from below wants to focus on the language of the majority of the population, members of the lower ranks of society, instead of on the language use of a small group of high-ranked, well-educated and practised writers. Secondly, language history from below wants to move away from the focus on the prestige-variants of a language, which are language varieties strongly associated with writing and/or printed works. According to the theory of language history from below, language varieties used by the majority of the population and by the less well-educated should be seen as legitimate objects of study (Elspaß 2005: 13, 2007: 155).

It is important to note here that the term ‘from below’ as it is used within this new discipline is not completely equal to the term used by Labov. The Labovian ‘change from below’ and ‘change from above’ are linguistic changes that respectively take place below and above the level of consciousness of the language users (Labov 1994, 2001). While the level of consciousness is crucial for the Labovian interpretation, within language history from below, the origin and direction of a change in society determines whether a change is ‘from below’ or ‘from above’. In this dissertation, the term ‘change from below’ refers to a linguistic change originating in the language use of the lower classes and spreading upwards through society, while ‘change from above’ refers to a linguistic change originating in the language use of the upper classes and spreading downwards through society.

This new theoretical perspective, language history from below, calls for a different type of research material, namely linguistic material produced by people who did not belong to the highest social circles. Types of linguistic material that have been most frequently studied until now – such as literary works and printed texts in general – do not suffice any longer, for they are usually produced by members of the upper classes. Members of the lower social classes have left their linguistic footprints elsewhere. Over the years, linguists have come up with linguistic material of the lower classes in the form of different text types; Vandenbussche and Elspaß (2007: 148) list “private letters, chronicles and personal diaries written by farmers, soldiers,

⁷ The proceedings of this conference were published in the volume *Germanic language histories’ from below’ (1700-2000)* (Elspaß, Langer, Scharloth & Vandenbussche 2007). An earlier development was seen in the 1970s, when language history started to move away from the potentates, courts, higher education, and literary circles (Besch 1979: 324 in Elspaß 2005: 12-13).

artisans, or housemaids; ‘pauper’ letters in which poor people pleaded with the authorities for material relief; meeting reports/minutes from worker’s organizations, etc.” Most of these texts are ego-documents.

1.1.3. Speech and writing

What these neglected documents have in common is that – compared to printed texts – the language varieties which they contain are often more closely associated with speech than with writing (Elspaß 2005: 13). The traditional dichotomy between spoken and written language on the basis of the medium (speech or writing) is not fit to reflect this (Elspaß 2005: 24-27). For instance, think about a sermon. This is spoken language, since the medium to convey the message is sound. However, surely the language variety used in a sermon is not prototypical of spoken language. On the other hand, there are texts like online chat conversations. They are made up of written language, since the medium through which the message is conveyed is writing. However, chat conversations certainly do contain elements of spoken language too, for when chatting, one tends to write more like one speaks (Schlobinski 2005 in Vandekerckhove 2009: 34).

A text can thus contain elements of both written and spoken language at the same time. To be able to address this, Koch & Oesterreicher (1985 in Elspaß 2005: 26-27) proposed a conceptual scale between *Sprache der Nähe* (hereafter referred to as ‘language of immediacy’) and *Sprache der Distanz* (hereafter referred to as ‘language of distance’). ‘Language of immediacy’ is the familiar register, the language variety people spontaneously use with friends and family. The other extreme on the scale is the ‘language of distance’: a formal register, a language variety people use with strangers or superiors. Language of immediacy is typical of situations:

- in which the distribution of the communicative roles is open (e.g. in a spontaneous conversation between two friends in which both persons can act as speaker or listener versus a speech in which one person is the speaker and the rest of the people present are listeners)
- for which the theme of the text/conversation is not fixed (e.g. a diary entry versus a year report about a company’s results)
- that are familiar and intimate (e.g. a conversation between family members versus a job interview)
- that are private (e.g. an e-mail to a friend versus a press release)

- in which the text is created spontaneously
(e.g. a telephone conversation with a friend versus a presentation learned by heart)
- which are emotional and affective
(e.g. a column versus a news paper article)

On the basis of these criteria, different text types can be ordered on a scale from immediacy to distance irrespective of whether they are written or spoken. Koch & Oesterreicher (1985: 23) illustrated this with a diagram (fig. 1.1)

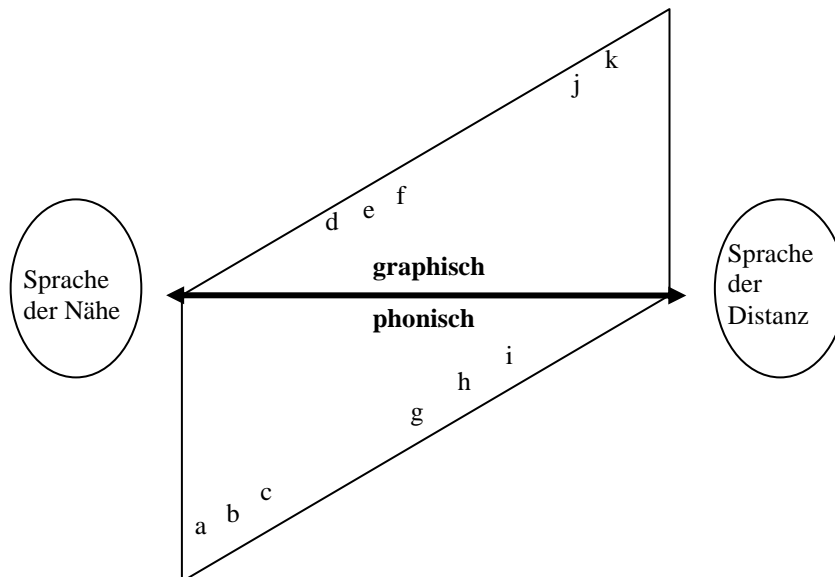


Figure 1.1: diagram representing different text types on a scale between the language of immediacy and the language of distance (adapted from Koch & Oesterreicher 1985: 23)

The left side of the diagram represents the language of immediacy, the right side represents the language of distance. The top half of the diagram represents written language, the bottom half of the diagram represents spoken language. Although the dichotomy of spoken language and written language is not the same as the dichotomy of language of immediacy and language of distance, the two pairs of concepts are related to each other. This is also illustrated in the diagram by the two triangles. These triangles represent the affinity of the language type (immediacy or distance) with the medium (spoken or written): the top triangle leans to the right, illustrating that language of distance is more closely affiliated to written language. The bottom triangle leans to the left and illustrates that the language of

immediacy is more closely affiliated to spoken language than to written language.

The letters in the diagram represent different text types.⁸ Letter *a* for instance refers to a conversation with a trusted person. It is situated at the bottom of the diagram because it is made up of spoken language and to the left of the diagram because the spoken language used in such a conversation would typically consist of language of immediacy. Letter *k* represents an ordinance. Other than letter *a* it is situated at the top of the diagram and to the right. This is in accordance with the fact that such a text type is written and is typically set in a register far removed from language of immediacy. Letter *j* stands for a newspaper article. Like the ordinance, it is situated at the top of the diagram, because it is a written text, and it is situated to the right of the diagram, because it is more closely affiliated to language of distance than to language of immediacy. However, the newspaper article is situated more to the left of the diagram than the ordinance represented by letter *k*, because one would expect a newspaper article to contain fewer elements of language of distance than a formal ordinance would (Koch & Oesterreicher 1985: 23-24).

To conclude, the text types in which the voice of the lower social strata can still be found are very often ego documents, such as private letters. These text types are relatively good environments for language of immediacy: they are at least in part spontaneous, emotional, private, and intimate. So when studying the language use of lower-class writers in ego documents, one is bound to find elements of language of immediacy. This text type is represented in the diagram by letter *f*: it is situated in the top half of the diagram because it is written language, but it is situated somewhere in the middle between language of immediacy and language of distance because it can contain elements of both.

1.2. Status quaestionis

1.2.1. Studies within the fields of historical sociolinguistics and language history from below

In what follows I will present a selection of studies which were a source of inspiration for the *Letters as Loot* project and this dissertation in particular.

⁸ Letter *a* refers to a conversation with a trusted person. Letter *b* represents a telephone conversation with a friend. Letter *c* is an interview. Letter *d* is a published interview. Letter *e* represents a journal entry. Letter *f* refers to a private letter. Letter *g* refers to an introductory talk. Letter *h* represents a sermon. Letter *i* refers to a lecture. Letter *j* represents a newspaper article. Finally, *k* stands for an ordinance.

These are studies of various languages, among which are German, English and Dutch. Most of these studies are important and influential within the tradition of language history from below; others cannot be characterised as studies within the framework of language history from below in particular, but are fine examples of historical sociolinguistic research and are also related to the research carried out within the *Letters as Loot* project. It goes without saying that this selection can only illustrate a part of the quantity and diversity of historical sociolinguistic research in general and language history from below in particular. Many more studies could have been mentioned.

Let us begin with studies on German: in 2006 Vandenbussche described the impressive tradition of research on the *Arbeitersprache* – ‘the language of the working class’ – of the nineteenth century and listed several studies on the subject. The earliest publication mentioned in this list goes back to 1977, reporting research carried out from 1970 onwards (Bielefeld & Lundt 1977 in Vandenbussche 2006: 440). In just a few decades, several scholars examined the language use of the lower classes and slowly the idea developed that the typical features of *Arbeitersprache* should not be seen as class features, but rather as the results of a low level of writing education (Vandenbussche 2006: 440, 453-454). The chain of studies eventually resulted in Elspaß’s detailed study (2005) of nineteenth-century letters written by German emigrants.

For his research, Elspaß compiled a corpus of as many as 648 private letters, mostly from German emigrants or Germans in the process of emigrating. Rather than on social class, he focused on the degree of education of the writers under examination, following the idea that the level of (writing) education is the most influential factor of the two. Furthermore, the region of origin of the writers was taken into account as well (Elspaß 2005: 40-51; 67-71). The goal of this study was to identify forms and variants in the New-High German everyday language, to identify templates in written German influencing the orally based everyday language in the letters, and to examine how inexperienced writers coped with the tension between their spoken everyday German, and the written German, which they used less often (Elspaß 2005: 20-21).

Elspaß had to conclude that in spite of the nineteenth-century pursuit of unity in the German language, a wealth of variation still existed, especially in the documents of inexperienced writers. However, the variation was not completely random: there were clear norms of usage, often differing between regions. The standardisation of German had thus not reached completion in the nineteenth century. On the contrary, a standard variety was and is still developing (Elspaß 2005: 497-470). Elspaß’ study (2005) is very important for the *Letters as Loot* project from both a methodological and a

theoretical point of view: the study is based on a corpus of historical private letters and one of its focal points is the tension between the striving for linguistic standardisation in a given society and the variation present in the actual language use of lower-class or inexperienced writers.

Not only in German linguistics, but also in English linguistics the field of historical sociolinguistics in general, and language history from below in particular, has provided a large number of interesting studies. A lot of historical sociolinguistic research has been carried out at the Universities of Helsinki and Jyväskylä by the members of VARIENG, a centre for the study of variation, contacts and change in English.⁹ One of the VARIENG projects is the CEEC, the Corpus of Early English Correspondence. It contains letters written by people of different social ranks (but mainly of higher social ranks) from the period of Late Middle English to Late Modern English (the early fifteenth century to the end of the eighteenth century). The corpus was initiated in 1993 by Terttu Nevalainen and Helena Raumolin-Brunberg (Nevalainen & Raumolin-Brunberg 1994; Nevalainen 2010: 6). Since then, it has been expanded and several scholars have made use of it to examine the English of the past.

In 1996 a first volume appeared with studies based on the CEEC: *Sociolinguistics and language history: Studies based on the Corpus of Early English Correspondence* (Nevalainen & Raumolin-Brunberg 1996). Not only the models for social stratification, gender difference, apparent-time research and regional variation are examined in this volume, but also some specific changes, such as the rise and fall of *methinks*, periphrastic *do* and *be* plus *ing*-form, and forms of address. Several doctoral theses have been based on the CEEC (Nurmi 1999 on periphrastic *do*; Palander-Collin 1999 on *I think* and *methinks*; Nevala 2004 on forms of address; Laitinen 2007 on common-number pronouns; Sairio 2009 on letters in the Bluestocking network) as have been a great deal of other publications. The VARIENG-research sets very good examples of successful analysis of variation in historical corpora of ego-documents and is in this way of high value for the field of historical sociolinguistics in general and the *Letters as Loot* project and this dissertation in particular.

The English language history from below can also be studied using English applications for poor relief. Fairman (2007a) describes the history of these letters. Since the seventeenth century, English parishes were obliged to help their poor. In 1795 the state decreed that the parishes were also obligated to help the poor who had once lived in their parish, even if they did not live in that parish any longer. As a result, poor people began to write letters (or had letters written for them) to their former parishes begging for

⁹ <<http://www.helsinki.fi/varieng/>> [08/11/2012]

relief. These letters have been kept in the records of individual parishes all over the country. Most of the poor applying for relief can be assumed to belong to the lower classes, which means that the pauper letters that have actually been written by the petitioners themselves can offer an entirely new view on lower-class writing. Tony Fairman has taken on the Sisyphean task of collecting pauper letters from across the country, building a substantial corpus over the years (Fairman 2000, 2003, 2007a, 2007b, 2008). Sokoll (2001, 2005) has compiled a corpus of pauper letters as well, which contains letters only from Essex. The writing in these letters of (possibly) inexperienced writers and the questions it raises about the ideology of the Standard (Fairman 2007a) may bear a resemblance to what might be found in the seventeenth-century *Letters as Loot* corpus, which also contains letters written by people belonging to the lower social strata, and thus possibly letters written by inexperienced writers.

An important work for historical sociolinguistics and the language history from below in English is also *Alternative Histories of English* edited by Watts and Trudgill (2002). As the title clearly suggests, the book strives to show aspects of the history of English that did not make it into text-books on the history of English, given that these tend to focus on the history of the standard dialect of English in Britain and in the USA. The contributions of different leading scholars paint a fresh picture of the history of English (English(es) around the world, women's language, pragmatics), exactly what this dissertation wants to achieve for part of the history of Dutch.

At first sight, *The Codifiers and the English Language* project that was carried out at Leiden University and led by Ingrid Tieken-Boon van Ostade does not seem to belong in this overview of research related to this dissertation, because it focused on norms (codification and prescription) and grammarians in eighteenth-century England rather than on the language use of 'ordinary' people. However, the way in which the language use of important eighteenth-century grammarians of English was studied by Tieken and her co-workers, does bear a relation to the *Letters as Loot* project. *The Codifiers* project did not only examine grammars of English, but also compared the language used in these grammars with the language use of their authors (and the social networks of these codifiers) in private correspondence (cf. Tieken-Boon van Ostade 2003, 2005, 2006; Auer & Tieken-Boon van Ostade 2007; Auer 2008; Fens-de Zeeuw 2011; Straaijer 2011).

Studies of Germanic languages are not the only inspirational sources for the *Letters as Loot* project and this dissertation. For French, for example, Ayres-Bennett (2004) focuses on non-standard and spoken language in the seventeenth century using metalinguistic texts as well as literary texts, pamphlets and correspondence. Lodge (1994, 2004) strives to describe the

sociolinguistic history of spoken French in Paris and combines – just like Ayres-Bennett (2004) – information from metalinguistic texts as well as from more direct sources (literary works, correspondence, and diaries for example). Branca-Rosoff & Schneider (1994) present a corpus of administrative texts from Revolutionary France; these texts have been written by semi-educated people and contain a wealth of non-standard features. Martineau (2007) examined the Canadian French of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries on the basis of ego-documents (letters and diaries) written by people pertaining to different social classes and created a corpus of familiar French consisting of letters, diaries and accounting books (Martineau 2009: 162-163). For Finnish, two projects are running at the University of Helsinki: *'The Common People'. Writing, and the process of literary attainment in nineteenth-century Finland* and *Reading and writing from below. Toward a new social history of literacy in the Nordic sphere during the long nineteenth century* (led by Lea Laitinen, Anna Kuismin, and Taru Nordlund).¹⁰ Sandersen (2007) describes an interesting corpus of nineteenth-century Danish letters written by private soldiers. She examines the relationship between writing ability and social rank and the relationship between the degree in which a letter writer diverges from the norm and his time and place of birth. At the university of Lissabon, Rita Marquilha leads several projects that aim at building large corpora of historical private letters: the *CARDS, unknown letters program* (Marquilha 2012), the *FLY, Forgotten Letters Years 1900-1974 program*, and the project *Post Scriptum: A digital Archive of Ordinary Writings (Early Modern Portugal and Spain)*.

This overview already hints at the extent and the diversity of the research tradition of the language history from below and the field of historical sociolinguistics in general. However, some important volumes still need to be mentioned: they bring together studies on a variety of languages around a theme within historical sociolinguistics in general or within language history from below in particular. They are indispensable if one wants to get acquainted with the research tradition in which the *Letters as Loot* project and – as a consequence – this dissertation are rooted. Elspaß, Langer, Scharloth & Vandenbussche (2007) focuses on the Germanic language history from below between 1700 and 2000. Dossena & Tiekens-Boon van Ostade (2008) comprises articles on Late Modern English correspondence, while Dossena & Del Lungo Camiciotti (2012) broadens the geographical scope with *Letter writing in Late Modern Europe*. Finally, Langer, Davies & Vandenbussche (2012) focuses on the interdisciplinary

¹⁰ <[https://tuhat.halvi.helsinki.fi/portal/en/projects/the-common-people-w\(2dea2809-1c5c-4ca9-9055-8b5ceed510d9\).html](https://tuhat.halvi.helsinki.fi/portal/en/projects/the-common-people-w(2dea2809-1c5c-4ca9-9055-8b5ceed510d9).html)> and <[https://tuhat.halvi.helsinki.fi/portal/en/projects/reading-and-writing\(2ebd7083-1c1b-4a9a-bddd-a7d95b4dcd87\).html](https://tuhat.halvi.helsinki.fi/portal/en/projects/reading-and-writing(2ebd7083-1c1b-4a9a-bddd-a7d95b4dcd87).html)> [15/11/2012]

character of historical sociolinguistics, discussing what historiography can mean to linguistics and vice versa.

Internationally, there are many studies within historical sociolinguistics or language history from below which can serve as examples to the *Letters as Loot* project and this dissertation. But what is the situation like for research on Dutch? In the Dutch-speaking regions of Flanders and the Netherlands, among the first scholars to start exploring the language history from below approach was Vandenbussche, with research on the language of lower-class writers in nineteenth-century Bruges (Vandenbussche 1996; 1999). With this research, Vandenbussche followed in the footsteps of Willemyns who had been examining the linguistic situation and substandardisation in nineteenth-century Flanders and who had pointed out the fact that some common assumptions about this era should be reconsidered (Willemyns 1991, 1992, 1993, 1995). Several dissertations on language in nineteenth-century Flanders have followed in the wake of Willemyns' and Vandenbussche's work: De Groof (2004), Vanhecke (2007), and most recently Vosters (2011).

For research from below on the historical language use in the northern part of the Low Countries, extramural Dutch studies seem to have given the first push. Robert Howell and his team from the university of Wisconsin have examined the Dutch vernacular in the Netherlands in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries on the basis of diaries and letters, paying attention to the role of immigrants from the southern part of the Low Countries and from German-speaking regions in the process of language change (Boyce & Howell 1996; Boyce-Hendriks 1998; Boyce-Hendriks & Howell 2000; Goss 2002; Howell 2006; Goss & Howell 2006). However, also scholars from within the Netherlands have taken an interest in the language history from below approach or in texts that would be excellent material for that approach. Van Sterkenburg, for instance, examined the informal written Dutch in the private letters of the seventeenth-century naval officer Elant du Bois (Van Sterkenburg 2003). Van Megen was the first to examine the *Sailing Letters* linguistically on the basis of a modest corpus of about 50 private letters (Van Megen 2001; Van Megen 2002a; Van Megen 2002b; Van Megen 2002c; Van Megen 2006). In her inaugural lecture, Van der Wal (2006) made a case for examining the linguistic history of Dutch from below and for compiling corpora of historical ego-documents, such as the sixteenth-century Van Spulde-letters (Van der Wal 2002a).¹¹ *The Letters as Loot* project – of which this dissertation is a part – and the publications ensuing from this project can be seen as a direct answer to her plea for a

¹¹ The Van Spulde-letters can be found online:
<<http://www.hum2.leidenuniv.nl/Dutch/Cecilia/>> [08/11/2012]

linguistic history from below for Dutch.¹² But other ego-documents than the *Sailing Letters* have been examined as well since the call: eighteenth-century diaries, for example (Rutten 2008; Rutten 2010).

1.2.2. Previous research of seventeenth-century Dutch

Above I have sketched the research traditions in which this study is embedded. It has become clear that the language history from below approach has been standing strong within German and English linguistics for years. For Dutch linguistics, however, the approach is still rather new. A lot of research on seventeenth-century Dutch has been focused – explicitly or implicitly – on the subject of standardisation, and so is its reflection in the various textbooks on the history of Dutch, such as De Vooys (1952), Van der Horst & Marschall (1989), De Vries, Willemyns & Burger (1993), Van den Toorn, Pijnenburg, Van Leuvensteijn & Van der Horst (1997), Van der Sijs (2004) and Van der Wal & Van Bree (2008). In the different descriptions of seventeenth-century Dutch a lot of attention has been given to the works of grammarians, printed texts and texts written by literary authors or members of the upper classes. This is clear, for instance, in the description of the morphology of Dutch in the period of 1650 to 1880 in Van de Toorn, Pijnenburg, Van Leuvensteijn & Van der Horst (1997: 400-405) in which the names of contemporary grammarians and famous writers are omnipresent. This is not to say that scholars have not been interested in spoken Dutch or everyday language use in the seventeenth century, but to describe elements of everyday language they often had no choice but to turn to literary works and other published texts that might reflect everyday language, such as farces (e.g. Crena de Iongh (1959) and Van Leuvensteijn (1985)).

Years of research have resulted in a linguistic profile of the seventeenth century that is generally acknowledged. In this period, regional varieties started to make way for a variety of Dutch spoken in Holland in all sorts of public functions (Van Leuvensteijn 1999: 91). By 1650, the standardisation process that had started in the sixteenth century had consolidated to a certain extent (Van der Wal 1995: 101; Van den Toorn, Pijnenburg, Van Leuvensteijn & Van der Horst 1997: 362). Many important grammars and other works on Dutch had been published in the first half of the seventeenth century (Van der Wal 1995: 29-30). There was a positive attitude towards Dutch in general and the variety of Dutch spoken in the provinces of Holland (with some southern influences) had become accepted

¹² Nobels & Van der Wal 2009; Van der Wal & Simons 2010; Rutten & Van der Wal 2011; Nobels, Simons & Van der Wal 2011; Nobels & Van der Wal 2012; Van der Wal, Rutten & Simons 2012; Rutten & Van der Wal 2012; Rutten, Van der Wal, Nobels & Simons 2012; Nobels & Simons forthcoming; Rutten & Van der Wal forthcoming; Van der Wal & Rutten forthcoming

as the standard language. However, there was still discussion about the micro-selection: during the remaining part of the seventeenth century and all through the eighteenth century, choices had to be made about the appropriateness of specific linguistic elements. The well-known literary authors Hooft and Vondel came to be regarded as authorities in the field of Dutch and their influence on this micro-selection would reach far into the eighteenth century (Van der Wal 1995: 101).

It is immediately clear from the profile presented here that the development from regional varieties to a more uniform Dutch standard language, i.e. the standardisation process, has been at the core of Dutch historical linguistic research for many decades. More recently, researchers started to focus on the variation that at the same time still existed, as I have described above. It is this variation during the second half of the seventeenth century that I intend to trace and describe in this study.

1.3. The objective of this study

A unique source of historical Dutch linguistic material has been rediscovered quite recently: the so-called *Sailing Letters*, a collection of about 38,000 seventeenth-, eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century letters, both commercial and private (Van Gelder 2006: 30). Almost 16,000 private letters, as estimated by Van Gelder (2006: 30), were written by men and women of different social strata: from sailors and their wives, through carpenters and entrepreneurs to wealthy businessmen and naval officers. These are not the only Dutch ego-documents stemming from that period, of course, but the collection is absolutely unparalleled regarding its volume, the variety of writers, and the fact that it is all kept in one single archive: the National Archives in Kew, London. In §1.4 I will describe how this collection of letters came into existence. For now it suffices to say that the private letters in particular offer us the chance to uncover a part of the history of Dutch that has not been examined extensively before: the everyday language of ordinary people.

This is exactly what the *Letters as Loot* project aims for. In this five-year project the language use in the seventeenth-century *Sailing Letters* and that in the eighteenth-century ones is examined separately and in comparison to one another. As Van der Wal (2006) explained, until recently the viewpoint adopted in many studies regarding the history of Dutch has been the point of view of standardisation. The important question was how the standard variety of Dutch had developed in the course of time. The focus was often on grammars and grammarians, important authors and literary circles, books, poetry, plays and other printed texts. But over the years the

interest in the variation behind the standard language has grown. What did the everyday language of the Dutch look like? In what respects did the language of ‘ordinary’ people – people who were not grammarians, writers, poets or playwrights or who did not belong to the upper strata of society – differ from the Dutch found in printed texts? The *Letters as Loot* project wants to give an initial impulse to filling in these gaps in the history of Dutch with the help of the extensive collection of *Sailing Letters*.

The main objective of this dissertation is to examine the everyday Dutch of the seventeenth century from a sociolinguistic point of view. Given the fact that it is the first time that this collection of seventeenth-century private letters is examined linguistically on such a large scale, it seemed appropriate for this dissertation to discuss several different linguistic phenomena as a way of exploring the possibilities of the new corpus rather than to focus on one single topic. The case studies were chosen based on discussions and debates in the international literature and in the literature on the history of Dutch. The phenomena examined in this dissertation stem from different layers of the language system: morphology (forms of address, the reflexive pronouns *elkaar* ‘each other’, *mekaar* ‘each other’ and *zich* ‘himself/herself/itself/themselves’, diminutives, and schwa-apocope) and (morpho)syntax (the genitive, negation). Social factors influencing variation in these different areas, as in social class, gender and age, will be central to this study. Occasionally, language-internal factors will also be taken into account. By looking at the everyday Dutch leaning as close to spoken language as possible in the letters of people from different social classes rather than at the Dutch found in printed texts produced by people (mainly men) from the upper social circles, I hope to shed a new light on various aspects of the history of Dutch.

1.4. The origin of the *Sailing Letters*

The material of which this dissertation makes use calls for some further comment. I will briefly describe the origin of the *Sailing Letters* and explain why such a large number of Dutch seventeenth-, eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century letters are kept in an archive in London. For this description I rely on the publications by Van Vliet (2007: 47-53) and Van Gelder (2006: 10-17). A more detailed discussion about the British privateering enterprise – although focused on the eighteenth century rather than on the seventeenth – can be found in Starkey (1990).

It all started with the many wars in which England and the Dutch Republic were at opposite sides: the First Anglo-Dutch War (1652-1664), the Second Anglo-Dutch War (1665-1667), the Third Anglo-Dutch War

(1672-1674), the American War of Independence (1775-1783), the Fourth Anglo-Dutch War (1780-1784), and some wars during the French Revolutionary period and the Napoleonic period (1793-1803 and 1803-1813). For the Dutch as well as for the English, privateering was an accepted war tactic and it should therefore not be confused with piracy. Unlike piracy, privateering was a practice supported and controlled by a country's authorities. A government could issue allowances to seize ships, known as 'letters of commission' or 'letters of marque', and with such an allowance in his possession, any ship owner could man a ship and go out to sea to capture enemy vessels.

A captured vessel, however, was not the end to a privateering story, for in England privateering was under the strict control of the Admiralty. Before a captured ship was considered to be a 'lawful prize' and the privateer could sell the ship and its goods, it had to be checked whether the vessel did indeed belong to the enemy and whether it had been captured according to the rules. This fell under the authority of the High Court of Admiralty. In order to judge whether a captured ship could be declared a 'lawful prize' or not, the High Court of Admiralty needed as much evidence as possible. To procure this evidence, captains of captured ships were interrogated and all the paperwork aboard their ships was examined. Ship's journals, bills of lading, other administrative papers, and the personal documents of every person aboard, including all the letters a ship was carrying, were confiscated by the English and used as evidence at the High Court of Admiralty. After the trials, the evidence was stored in a part of the High Court of Admiralty's archives which is now known as the *Prize papers*.

During the seventeenth and the eighteenth centuries, the Dutch Republic was very active overseas. Dutch merchants could be found in many waters, and the Dutch controlled many a trading post and colony in the East- or the West-Indies. Many Dutch people worked on ships or overseas and many Dutch loved ones were thus separated by the oceans. In order to communicate with each other, these men and women had to rely on letters. These could be sent over land, for instance when the absent beloved ones were in France. However, sending letters over land was impossible when letters needed to reach people living overseas or people working on ships that were constantly on the move. Therefore people often relied on ships to carry letters back and forth between the Netherlands and the regions and ships overseas. The letters, whether private or commercial, were also interesting for the English, since they could prove the origin of a captured ship or they might contain information about the Dutch state of affairs, which could be very useful in wartime. That is why letters aboard captured

ships were also confiscated and stored as case files in the High Court of Admiralty's archives.¹³

This extensive collection of seventeenth-, eighteenth-, and nineteenth-century documents, the *Prize papers*, had been gathering dust in the archives for centuries when the maritime historian Braunius discovered them in the late nineteen-seventies. He wrote an article in which he advised to make an inventory of the Dutch letters present in the archives and to make them available to scholars (Braunius 1980: 13). It took a while, however, before this advice was heeded. In 2005 the historian Roelof van Gelder spent half a year in Kew on the authority of the *Koninklijke Bibliotheek* (the Dutch Royal Library) and made an inventory of the archives with a focus on the Dutch material, making it easier for scholars to find the letters in the overwhelmingly vast quantity of documents contained in the archive.¹⁴

1.5. Research directions and outline

In order to achieve the general objective of this dissertation – examining seventeenth-century Dutch from below – compiling a substantial electronically searchable corpus of Dutch *Sailing Letters* with metadata about their writers was a prerequisite. Such a corpus had to be built and thus the first step for this dissertation was to compile a corpus of seventeenth-century private letters and to collect metadata about each letter, sender and addressee. In chapter 2 I will go into the details of how this corpus was created.

When examining the writings of lower-class individuals of the seventeenth century the issue of literacy and illiteracy is never far away, nor is the ensuing problem of the authenticity of the writings. One does not always know for certain whether the sender of the letter is also the person who did the actual writing, which can have far-reaching consequences in the case of sociolinguistic research. This writer-sender problem and the solutions to it will be discussed in chapter 3.

¹³ Although the Netherlands and English were not at war with each other during the War of the Austrian Succession (1739-1748) and during the Seven Years' war (1756-1763), the English did capture quite a few Dutch ships during these periods. The *Prize papers* in the archive of the High Court of Admiralty are estimated to contain about 3,000 Dutch letters from these periods (Van Gelder 2006: 30).

¹⁴ The part of the archive containing documents on captured ships is estimated to contain about 4,000 boxes (Van Gelder 2006: 16). The boxes also contain documents in other languages, such as for instance German and Spanish, for it were not only Dutch ships that were captured. Ships from other nations at war with England were seized as well.

In chapters 4 to 9 I will examine different linguistic phenomena that have been the subject of discussion in studies on Dutch or that are very typical of private letters: pronominal forms of address, the reflexive pronouns *zich* ‘himself/herself/themselves’ and *elkaar/mekaar* ‘each other’, negation, apocope of final schwa, diminutive suffixes, and the genitive and its alternatives. The actual research questions will be different for each of these phenomena, but overall the goal will be the same: describing language variation and change in relation to social factors (such as gender, social class and age), regional factors, and – in some cases – language-internal factors in order to shed a new light on the history of Dutch.

In chapter 4, I will discuss a topic very typical of letters, namely forms of address. The goal of this chapter will be twofold. Firstly, it aims to describe and analyse the distribution of different forms of address across different social factors. Secondly, it aims to find out whether the sender-addressee relationship influences the choice for particular forms of address.

Chapter 5 consists of two parts which deal with the theme of reflexivity and reciprocity: the upcoming use of the reflexive pronoun *zich* ‘himself/herself/itself/themselves’ in the seventeenth century and variation in the use of the reciprocal pronouns *elkaar/elkander* and *mekaar/mekander* ‘each other’. These topics were chosen because of discussions in the literature on the history of Dutch. This new corpus will yield several new insights, despite the fact that reflexivity is not a very frequent phenomenon in the seventeenth-century private letters I analysed.

Negation is a prominent topic of both research on Dutch and research on other languages. Therefore, it could not be left out in this dissertation. In chapter 6, I will discuss variation in the use of bipartite and single negation. Changes in the system of negation were in full swing in the seventeenth century and one can thus expect to find much variation. The key questions are: Which factors played a role in the switch from bipartite to single negation in the Netherlands? And did the change take place at the same point in time for handwritten private letters as well as for published texts?

Apocope of final schwa will be the topic of chapter 7. This change in Dutch has been examined before, but until now, the effect of social factors has never been taken into account. The corpus of seventeenth-century private letters offers us the chance to find out whether social factors played a role in the spread of schwa-apocope in seventeenth-century Dutch.

Another morphological issue will be the subject of chapter 8: diminutives. In present-day Dutch there is variety in the use of different types of diminutives. This was similarly the case in the seventeenth century. In chapter 8, the relationship between the use of different types of diminutives and social and regional variables will be discussed. This

examination, however, is hampered by a spelling issue: when looking at the tokens in isolation, in some cases it is impossible to say which of two types of diminutive suffixes was intended. A detailed examination of the spelling habits of each letter writer, however, may help solve this problem.

Chapter 9 will deal with the genitive and its alternatives. It is generally thought that the genitive had been completely lost in the spoken Dutch of the seventeenth century. However, when examining the private letters of the seventeenth-century corpus, the genitive case seems to occur quite often, which is remarkable for a text type that is strongly associated with spontaneous language use. The aim of this chapter is to find out how this is possible and which (social) factors influence the presence of the genitive and its alternatives.

Finally, in chapter 10, I will take stock of the first large-scale linguistic examination of the seventeenth-century *Sailing Letters*. Which gaps in the history of Dutch have been filled? I will recapitulate the findings for each case study and I will draw some general conclusions by answering the following questions: What does this first large-scale linguistic investigation of seventeenth-century private letters reveal about language variation in the seventeenth century? To what extent can we witness traces of spoken Dutch? What is the distribution of different linguistic variants across the different groups of language users? Do these data reveal where particular language changes started: in which region and among which language users? Does this dissertation yield unique data and insights? The answers to all these questions will give proof of the value of this dissertation for historical sociolinguistics and language history from below in general and for the history of Dutch in particular.