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Rutten, G.J.; Wal, M.J. van der; Wal M.J. van der, Rutten G.J.

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Epistolary formulae and writing experience in Dutch letters from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries

Gijsbert Rutten & Marijke van der Wal
Leiden University

The paper discusses epistolary formulae and writing experience in Dutch private letters from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Reviewing research into the history of reading and writing skills in Early Modern Europe, we argue that writing experience varied in the language community across gender, social rank and time. Using the *Letters as loot* corpus compiled at Leiden University, we show that the distribution of two frequent epistolary formulae is fully in line with the distribution of writing experience. We explain this by arguing that the use of epistolary formulae was convenient to lesser-skilled writers. The paper also argues that there is no reason to assume a great influence of letter-writing manuals on the actual practice of letter writing.

1. Introduction

This paper focuses on the interplay of epistolary formulae and writing experience using a collection of Dutch private letters from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.¹ It is argued that formulaic language offered generally accepted ways of verbalising information and experiences, and that the use of such conventionalised chunks of discourse was particularly convenient to lesser-skilled writers experiencing communicative problems in the written code.

In Section 2, we discuss the written culture of the Early Modern period, focusing on the Netherlands while occasionally drawing on research into other

1. The research was carried out at the Leiden University Centre for Linguistics within the research programme *Letters as Loot. Towards a non-standard view on the history of Dutch* (see www.brievenalsluit.nl), funded by the Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research (NWO).

European language areas. We consider who participated in the written culture and to what extent, and how reading and writing skills were distributed across the community so as to demonstrate the great effort lesser-skilled writers must have made to produce private letters. Participation in the written culture or *writing experience* was socially stratified, and people differed greatly in the extent to which they participated in the written culture as well as in the way they participated. Hence, there is no reason to assume beforehand that letter-writing skills were generally acquired, despite the availability of letter-writing manuals.

In Section 3, discussing the functions of formulaic language, we explain that reducing the effort of writing may be one of these functions in view of the social stratification of writing experience. The interplay of formulaic language and writing experience is investigated in the case study reported on in Section 4, where we look into the use of two epistolary formulae in Early Modern Dutch letters, and show that the distribution of these formulae parallels the distribution of writing experience. This suggests that formulaic language was indeed helpful for less experienced writers.

2. The written culture and letter writing

As is well-known, the transition from medieval to post-medieval times in western Europe went hand in hand with a steady increase in literacy (Blaak 2004: 11–12). Predominantly oral cultures became more and more literate, a process which accelerated from the late medieval period onward (Mostert 1995; Stein 2006; Kuijpers 1997: 490). We refer to this shift from more oral to more literate as textualisation (cf. Ong 1984; Harris 1984). It is equally well-known that textualisation spread gradually, with some cultural practices becoming more literate over time (e.g. news services with the rise of newspapers in the Early Modern period), and others remaining primarily oral up to the present day (e.g. political debate). Also, some occupations textualised earlier than others, such as traders or merchants. A great part of the correspondence surviving from the Early Modern period, for instance, is linked to the trading business (Stein 2006: 226). In the Corpus of Early English Correspondence (CEEC), compiled at the University of Helsinki, about half of the letters from outside the gentry are written by merchants (Nevalainen & Raumolin-Brunberg 2003: 46). Finally, literacy spread at a different pace across social rank and gender, with people higher up the social ladder and men acquiring reading and writing skills generally earlier than people from the lower ranks and women (Nevalainen & Raumolin-Brunberg 2003: 40–43; Frijhoff & Spies 1999: 237–238).

2.1 Reading

Research into the history of reading, which has a strong focus on the eighteenth century, has both confirmed the increasing importance of books in people's lives and the social differences accompanying it. In this respect, the figures provided by Stein (2006) are impressive. The annual production of new titles published in Germany increased considerably from about 1,000 in 1700 to about 4,000 in 1800 (Stein 2006: 220) with, moreover, a growing number of vernacular publications. While in 1681, publications in German outnumbered publications in Latin for the first time, only 4% of all titles printed in Germany were still in Latin by 1800 (Stein 2006: 220). A significant figure is also the rise of German periodicals from 70 around 1700 to over 1,000 in the 1780s (Stein 2006: 220–221). Similar estimates of increasing book production and a shift from Latin to vernacular titles have been made for France, England and the Netherlands (cf. Brouwer 1995: 23–24).

The increase in the production of vernacular reading materials, however, does not imply that any member of late eighteenth-century society read more books or spent more time reading than any member of seventeenth-century society. The written culture was socially stratified. Stein (2006: 241) notes that in the West of France in the first half of the eighteenth century no less than a third of all estate inventories included book titles, but most of these were found in the inventories of writers, scholars, lawyers, clergymen and nobles, and much less among merchants and labourers. Brouwer (1995) investigated the history of reading in the Dutch city of Zwolle at the end of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth century. He estimates that no more than a few percent of the population of Zwolle regularly read a book (Brouwer 1995: 294). Similarly, Kloek (1999), who investigated the 1808 clientele of a bookseller from the Dutch city of Middelburg, notes that by far the most books were bought by male members of the upper and middle ranks. His stratification is based on occupation, with the upper ranks including high provincial and municipal officials, senior civil servants, academic professionals, wealthy merchants and commissioned officers, while the middle layer comprised teachers, surgeons, notaries and self-employed artisans and shopkeepers. The lowest level of small merchants and low-level officials only made up about 10% of the book buying population.² De Kruif (1999: 111) estimates that 39% of the eighteenth-century population of The Hague did not possess any books, and another 27% no

2. These layers correspond to our labels UC, UMC and LMC, respectively, see Section 4.1. Note that “the bottom of the social pyramid” (Kloek 1999: 297), i.e. what we call the lower classes or LC, did not buy any books from the bookseller investigated by Kloek.

more than five books.³ When stratifying the sample according to funeral tax rates, she claims that 47% of people who were buried at the expense of the municipality did not own any books, whereas in the highest tax bracket this was only 16% (De Kruif 1999: 102). Last but not least, individual variation in reading practices is shown by Blaak (2004), who presents four in-depth case studies of Early Modern Dutch readers, who all had their idiosyncratic ways of reading. The publications they read varied from newspapers and pamphlets to theological tracts, and their reading practices from intensive to extensive.

2.2 Writing

The results from research into the history of reading thus suggest that the degree to which people participated in the written culture of the Early Modern period differed greatly, and that intense participation cannot be generally assumed, and especially not in the case of the lower and lower-middle ranks of society. Both social and individual variation also existed in the domain of writing. Interestingly, Brouwer (1995: 295–300) notes that the true bestsellers in eighteenth and nineteenth century Zwolle were not books to read, but books to write, i.e. empty books to be used as cashbooks, diaries, notebooks, housekeeping books, letters and the like. This might bear witness to a vivid writing culture, as Brouwer argues, which may have been more widespread than daily reading. Still, we have to bear in mind that reading was taught before writing in schools throughout Europe, probably because writing materials (paper, ink, pens) were expensive, and because teaching writing demanded more individual attention (Kuijpers 1997: 501). This implies that more people were probably able to read than to write. At the same time, it is usually assumed that fewer people were able to write extensively than were able to sign, which is important because literacy rates are often estimated on the basis of signatures on, for instance, marriage contracts (Kuijpers 1997: 501). On the basis of such signature studies, it is commonly estimated that two thirds of the male population and one third of the female population were able to write in the northern Netherlands in the second half of the seventeenth century (Frijhoff & Spies 1999: 237). Around 1800, literacy had increased to about 80 per cent of the male and 60 per cent of the female population (Kloek & Mijndhardt 2001: 81).

3. De Kruif (1999) used inventories for her estimates of book possession. While it is obviously not certain that books possessed were also read, another problem with this type of resource is that commodities of low economic value were generally not mentioned in inventories (De Kruif 1999: 77–80). Reading materials of little value include pamphlets, newspapers and single numbers of periodicals. This means that people without books in their inventories may still have owned (and read) reading materials.

Literacy was also socially stratified, in that one third of the lower ranks and two thirds of the higher ranks of society were literate in the later part of the seventeenth century (Frijhoff & Spies 1999: 238).

Literacy rates were generally related to social variables such as rank and gender, but it has been repeatedly argued that daily activities and occupation, and in particular the extent to which reading and writing were important in everyday life, should be considered as important variables in historical sociolinguistics (Vandenbussche 1999; Elspaß 2005). Kuijpers (1997: 518–519) presents evidence that occupation was indeed important in the distribution of literacy in seventeenth-century Amsterdam. Throughout the century, two thirds to three quarters of the craftsmen and schooled workers were able to sign their names, while the rates were systematically lower among unskilled labourers. In our corpus (see Section 4.1), we find merchants and ministers, of whom it is safe to assume that they were able to read and write. For many other occupations, this is much more uncertain, such as the lower ranks of seamen. Davids (1995: 125–126) notes that promotion prospects did exist for seafaring employees, but also that the ability to write was a minimal requirement for promotion. This implies that there was a potential literacy gap between the lower and upper ranks aboard ship. Kuijpers (1997: 514) furthermore notes that we need to distinguish between passive and active literacy. Active literacy refers to people who regularly needed to write in their daily activities and/or occupation. Passive literates had once learnt to write, but did not use their writing ability regularly. On the assumption that active literates were more likely to produce fluent signatures with connected letters, while passive literates are expected to produce fairly wooden signatures with the letters separated from each other, she shows how active literacy remained more or less stable throughout the seventeenth century, despite the general increase in literacy when counting signatures. In other words, the general increase in literacy rates may have been largely due to an increase in passive literacy.

Furthermore, we cannot assume any active literate to have been experienced in letter writing. After all, “[a]s a written genre, letter writing has to be learned” (Nevalainen 2004: 182). It is all too telling that many letter collections in historical sociolinguistics only exist because the writers were forced to write letters in the absence of their loved ones, because of emigration or war (cf. Elspaß 2005; Dossena 2007; Nordlund 2007; Sandersen 2007, as well as our corpus, see Section 4.1), or because they wrote petitions to overseers or authorities, asking for relief (cf. Klenk 1997; Fairman 2007). The practice of letter writing, in other words, depends on such external circumstances, and it is only when these circumstances occur that people were forced to acquire letter-writing conventions.

Could they, after having ended up in such circumstances, rely on their educational history and/or letter-writing manuals? Letter writing was taught at schools

and within the family, and there was a tradition of letter-writing manuals, but the importance of both facts for letter writing in actual practice are not undisputed. As mentioned above, reading and writing were taught one after the other, and learning writing skills was more expensive than learning to read. Boekholt and De Booy (1987: 39–40) state that in the northern Netherlands, writing lessons in schools usually began when pupils were about eight years old, after some three years of reading lessons. When the pupils finally reached the stage of writing, they first had to learn to write, that is, create the letters, and most attention was probably paid to developing an elegant hand (cf. De Booy 1980: 47). Letter writing came even later. De Booy (1977: 55), discussing educational practices in the province of Utrecht in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, notes that many parents ended their children's school careers when writing came in sight, for financial reasons, but also because children of eight or nine years old were potential workers. In sum, there is no reason to assume that letter writing was a skill generally acquired by pupils in the Netherlands.

This conclusion is corroborated by research into letter-writing manuals. We will deal with this topic more extensively elsewhere, and show that the many remarkable differences between letter-writing manuals and actual language use render any direct influence of the manuals on linguistic practice unlikely.⁴ In the same vein, Austin (1973: 12) argued that the differences between actual language use in English letters from the late eighteenth century and the theory of the time were surprisingly great. Here, we will restrict ourselves to a few important additional observations. The Dutch writing manuals were targeted either at an elite audience or at a fairly modest or bourgeois audience and/or at usage in schools. A well-known seventeenth-century example of the first type is *Nederduytse secretaris oft zendbrieffschryver* 'Dutch secretary or letter-writer' (1637) by Daniël Mostart, an author who associated with literary figures such as the poets P.C. Hooft and Joost van den Vondel, and who was, apart from his profession of secretary of the city of Amsterdam, a playwright himself (Koning 1997). Elite manuals such as Mostart's have been shown to be irrelevant for the letters in our corpus (Van der Wal & Rutten 2013). The second type, which we will call school books as they were generally written by schoolteachers or explicitly meant for use in schools, may have been more important to our letter writers. A well-known example of such a school book is Heyman Jacobi's *Ghemeyne zeyndt-brieven*

4. Van der Wal and Rutten (2013). Similar claims have been made for English letter-writing in the long eighteenth century (Whyman 2009: 28–45; Brant 2006: 9–10), for German, Irish and Finnish letters from the nineteenth century (Elspeß 2012, 2005: 194–195; Laitinen & Nordlund 2012), as well as for Dutch elite correspondence from around 1800 (Ruberg 2005).

'Common sending letters', arguably the most important letter-writing manual of the Early Modern period which also had the most reprints. It was published throughout the Netherlands in a period spanning more than two centuries, the first edition at least as early as 1597, in Amsterdam, the latest edition in 1803, in Maastricht.⁵

Despite the fact that manuals such as Jacobi's can be considered school books, there is scant evidence that they were actually used in schools. They are usually not mentioned in school regulations nor on schoolteachers' receipts or reading lists (De Booy 1977: 276; Roosenboom 1997: 228).⁶ The manuals were not commonly owned by pauper schools, and their use may have been largely restricted to private schools (De Booy 1980: 48). In other words, there is little evidence that such manuals were widely used in elementary schools in the Netherlands in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, while it is certain that many other books such as basic reading manuals and catechisms were used on a very large scale, that is, in every school (cf. De Planque 1926; De Booy 1977, 1980; Roosenboom 1997).

In sum, reading and writing were indeed socially stratified cultural practices. The participation of people in the written culture varied, and moreover changed in the course of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Furthermore, since letter writing is a specific genre, there is no reason to make the prior assumption that even active literates were always experienced letter writers. Neither are there any grounds for a prior assumption that letter-writing skills were generally acquired, despite the availability of letter-writing manuals.

3. Formulaic language and writing experience

Private letters, the focus of the present study, constitute a genre by external criteria, and a text type by linguistic features conventionally associated with the genre (cf. Nurmi & Palander-Collin 2008). Among the most striking text type features of our Early Modern Dutch private letters are epistolary formulae. In this respect, these letters do not differ from, for example, English, German, Scottish or Finnish correspondence of the Early and Late Modern period (Austin 1973; Tieken-Boon

5. De Planque (1926: 134–143) assumes that the 1597 Protestant edition is not the oldest one, but that it was founded on an earlier Catholic edition.

6. Schoolteachers' receipts mention the books schoolteachers bought for poor children, which they would get reimbursed from the parish. The two most popular books by far were the catechism and elementary ABC-books (De Booy 1977: 271).

van Ostade 1999; Nevala 2004; Elspaß 2005, 2012; Dossena 2007; Laitinen & Nordlund 2012). All these letters bear witness to a pervasive pan-European tradition of letter writing dating back to the late-medieval *ars dictaminis* and the Renaissance rhetorical art of letter writing, and to Latin and French models for business and legal writings, the *ars notaria* (see Nevalainen 2001; Poster & Mitchell 2007 and the references there).

Building on Elspaß (2005) and Wray (2002), we can distinguish three main functions of formulaic language: the text-constitutive, the intersubjective and the Christian-ritual function (Rutten & Van der Wal 2012). These three functions do not constitute three separate categories of formulae; rather, formulae may combine two or three functions, with one function being dominant. Text-constitutive formulae such as address formulae, salutations, opening formulae and closing formulae foreground the text in itself, that is, they draw attention to the fact that the text is a letter. Other text-constitutive formulae mark the text structure by realising the transition of one part of the discourse to another, for instance *voors soo* 'lit. further so, furthermore'. Intersubjective formulae foreground the interactional aspect of the pragmatic situation. In terms of content, they cover three domains: health, greetings and contact. A prototypical example of a health formula is given in (1).⁷

- (1) *als dat ick en ul vaeder en min vaeder en moeder noch*
that I and your father and my father and mother still
klock en gesont sien
strong and healthy are
'that your father, my father and mother and I are still strong and healthy/in good health'

The Christian-ritual formulae usually place the writer and/or the addressee under divine protection. The most frequent Christian-ritual formula is the commendation formula, with which the writer commends the addressee into the hands of God.

- (2) *godt in genaede bevolen*
God in grace commended

These are just two examples of epistolary formulae; see Rutten and Van der Wal (2012) for more examples. Such formulae do not only appear in many letters in our subcorpora, they also typically occupy fixed positions in the rhetoric of letters. The formula in (1), for instance, is usually the second or third clause in letters'

7. All examples are taken from the subcorpora introduced in Section 4.1.

openings, while the formula in (2) is usually found in the closing part. Since the formulaicity also exists on this higher level of the ordering of the discourse elements, we may say that letters are both formulaic on the level of the individual expressions and formulaic text types on the level of the discourse structure (cf. Kuiper 2009).

Obviously, this formulaicity has to be acquired. In this respect, it is interesting to note that Wray (2002), in line with earlier research on routines (e.g. Tannen 1987), distinguishes another function of formulaic language, i.e. reducing the effort of processing. This is a psycholinguistic notion referring to the relative ease of retrieving formulaic chunks whole from memory rather than composing them word by word. This idea of the ease of using formulaic language is particularly interesting against the background of our discussion of reading and writing skills in Early Modern society in Section 2. Since it is not at all evident that many people were proficient in letter writing, we hypothesise that the widespread use of formulaic language indicates that it made letter writing easier for people with less writing experience. As noted above, the importance of writing experience in historical sociolinguistics has been put forward by Vandebussche (1999) and Elspaß (2005), among others. Specifically concerning formulaic language, Elspaß (2005:192) claims that it was predominantly used by inexperienced writers when solving communicative problems in the written code (cf. also Rutten & Van der Wal 2012; Elspaß 2012). Instead of lengthy pondering, the writer could resort to fixed formulae providing generally accepted ways of verbalising information and experiences. Kuiper and Haggo (1984:224), discussing the formulaic language of livestock auctioneers, compare the process of becoming a fluent auctioneer to the oral poet's transition from a neophyte to a young singer, and finally to a mature singer. The acquisition and production of auctioneers' formulae depends on experience, and the process runs from learning the formulae from an experienced practitioner, through the use of "established formulae in established ways" (1984:224) to creativity. Similarly, we would expect the most experienced letter-writers to be the most creative ones, using the fewest formulae. The interplay of formulaic language and writing experience will be the topic of our case study.

4. Case study

4.1 The two subcorpora

The data for the present study are taken from a large corpus of private and business letters compiled at Leiden University within the research project *Brieven als buit/Letters as loot*, funded by the Netherlands Organisation for Scientific

Research (NWO).⁸ The letters are part of a huge collection of predominantly Dutch documents kept in the National Archives in Kew, London. These documents were aboard Dutch ships, and were confiscated by English warships and private ships (privateers) authorised by the government to attack and seize cargo from enemy ships during times of war from the second half of the seventeenth to the early nineteenth centuries.⁹ The letters in the corpus were all transcribed from photographs of the original manuscripts.

Corpus compilation involved research into the autograph or non-autograph status of the letters. As part of the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century population was illiterate or semi-literate, we had to establish whether or not the letters were written by the senders themselves. In order to deal with this problem, we developed the Leiden Identification Procedure (LIP, see Nobels & Van der Wal 2012). This procedure, which combines script and content analysis, was applied to our whole corpus of seventeenth-century letters. For the eighteenth-century letters, the increasing literacy rates make the identification problem easier to solve, although occasionally we still find non-autograph letters (cf. Van der Wal, Rutten & Simons 2012). For the present study, we have only used established autographs.

Within our research project, we focus on two periods, with 100 to 120 years in between. For the present study, we compiled two subcorpora of approximately 200 letters and over 100,000 words each. Subcorpus I comprises letters from the 1660s and 1670s, subcorpus II from the 1770s and 1780s (see Table 1). Therefore, one important external variable is time. Furthermore, since the letters were sent by both men and women from various ranks of society, the subcorpora are fit for sociolinguistic analyses into both gender and social variation. Early Modern Dutch society was socially stratified into different layers or ranks. We adopt the common sociolinguistic term *class*, distinguishing between lower class (LC), lower middle class (LMC), upper middle class (UMC) and upper class (UC). This division is mainly founded upon the writers' occupation and/or the occupation of family members and closely follows the division historians use (Frijhoff & Spies 1999: 190–191). The only exception to be mentioned is that the highest social level distinguished by historians, that of the mobility and the non-noble ruling class is not represented in our corpus. The LC comprises waged workers, mainly sailors, servants and soldiers. The LMC covers the petty bourgeoisie, including small shopkeepers, small craftsmen and minor officials. To the UMC we allocate the prosperous middle classes (storekeepers, non-commissioned officers, well-to-do farmers),

8. See www.brievenalsbuit.nl.

9. From 1652 till 1813, four Anglo-Dutch Wars were fought and in various other wars England and the Netherlands were on opposite sides.

while the UC mainly comprises wealthy merchants, shipowners, academics and commissioned officers. Table 1 presents the make-up of the subcorpora used for the present paper according to social rank and gender.¹⁰ For each cell, we give the number of letters (N letters) and the number of words (N words).

Table 1. Make-up of subcorpora I and II

| | | M | F | Total |
|---------------------------------|-----------|--------|--------|---------|
| Subcorpus I 1660s/1670s | | | | |
| LC | N letters | 5 | 5 | 10 |
| | N words | 3,000 | 2,500 | 5,500 |
| LMC | N letters | 21 | 19 | 40 |
| | N words | 11,000 | 13,000 | 24,000 |
| UMC | N letters | 114 | 24 | 138 |
| | N words | 51,000 | 13,000 | 64,000 |
| UC | N letters | 15 | 7 | 22 |
| | N words | 10,000 | 5,500 | 15,500 |
| Total | N letters | 155 | 55 | 210 |
| | N words | 75,000 | 34,000 | 109,000 |
| Subcorpus II 1770s/1780s | | | | |
| LC | N letters | 20 | – | 20 |
| | N words | 7,000 | – | 7,000 |
| LMC | N letters | 29 | 5 | 34 |
| | N words | 11,000 | 2,000 | 13,000 |
| UMC | N letters | 56 | 17 | 73 |
| | N words | 27,000 | 11,000 | 38,000 |
| UC | N letters | 51 | 18 | 69 |
| | N words | 49,000 | 21,000 | 70,000 |
| Total | N letters | 156 | 40 | 196 |
| | N words | 94,000 | 34,000 | 128,000 |

10. A note on region: most of our letters were sent to or from the western parts of the present-day Netherlands, viz. the provinces of Zeeland and Holland. In our research, we also incorporate region as an external variable. For lack of space, we will not discuss region here, though note that generally epistolary formulae do not vary across different regions, as we hope to show elsewhere in the future.

Allowing research into social and gender variation, the present corpora are unique in the historical study of Dutch. Note, however, that even in this unique collection of letters men are better represented than women, and the upper classes better than the lower classes. A specific problem is constituted by eighteenth-century LC women, since the present subcorpus II contains no letters from this group.

4.2 Two formulae

In the present study, we focus on two formulae. The first is *een vriendelijke groetenisse zij geschreven aan* ‘a friendly greeting be written to’. If this formula occurs in letters, it always occupies the first position in the discourse structure. It is the opening clause of many letters in our corpora, and, as such, it fulfils a text-constitutive function. At the same time, it conveys greetings to the addressee, thereby incorporating an intersubjective element. Since the formula exhibits quite some variation, we will first explain what counts as a token of the formula, and provide examples (3–5). Fixed elements are the article *een* ‘a’, the noun *groetenisse* ‘greeting’ and the preposition *aan* ‘to’. A full example is given in (3).

- (3) *een vriendelijcke groetenisse sij geschreven aen mijn*
 a friendly greeting be written to my
beminde man aerien iacopsen
 beloved husband Aerien Iacopsen
 ‘a friendly greeting be written to my beloved husband Aerien Iacopsen’

The adjective commonly modifying the noun is *vriendelijcke* as in (3), to which the intensifier *seer* ‘very’ may be added. Most examples contain both the adjective and the verb forms *sij geschreven* ‘be written’, though reduced variants also occur (4, 5).

- (4) *een vriendelicken groetenissen geschreven aen mijn seer*
 a friendly greeting written to my very
bemijnden man ijan klaes klaessen
 beloved husband Ijan Klaes Klaessen
 ‘a friendly greeting written to my very beloved husband Ijan Klaes Klaessen’
- (5) *Een vriendelijcke Groetenisse Sij aen eldert jansz*
 a friendly greeting be to Eldert Jansz
 ‘a friendly greeting be [written] to Eldert Jansz’

The second formula to be discussed is *ik laat u weten als dat* ‘I let you know that’. This is a text-constitutive formula marking a new topic. The formula’s key words are the infinitive *weten* ‘know’, and possibly inflected forms of *laten* ‘let’. The subject is usually the first person singular form *ik* ‘I’, and the indirect object is *u* ‘you’ (6), but there are other options, such as the first person plural as a subject (7).

The formula may be interrupted, especially by the writer’s self reference or by a form of address (8).

- (6) *mijn seer beminde huijsvrouw reijnst melles Ick laet u*
 my very beloved wife Reijnst Melles I let you
weeten als dat
 know as that
 ‘my very beloved wife Reijnst Melles, I let you know that’
- (7) *Seer beminden Broer Jan Claesen kappetjen wij laeten u*
 very beloved brother Jan Claesen captain we let you
weeten als dat
 know as that
 ‘very beloved brother, Jan Claesen captain, we let you know that’
- (8) *ick maritet barendts ul suster laet ul mijn bemijnde*
 I Maritet Barendts your sister let you my beloved
broder weeten aels dat
 brother know as that
 ‘I, Maritet Barendts, your sister, let you, my beloved brother, know that’

4.3 Hypotheses

If it is true that the use of formulaic language made writing easier for those who were less experienced in producing letters, in short, if the use of formulae depends on writing experience, we would expect to find more formulae in letters written by less experienced writers. While it is impossible to identify the exact reading and writing skills of historical individuals, especially when about the only things we know of them are their names and occupations, the discussion in Section 2 provides us with sufficient clues for generalisations about the distribution of writing experience in Early Modern society. Specifically, it seems safe to assume that writing experience was gendered as well as socially distributed, and, moreover, that it increased over time. This means that we expect to find (1) more epistolary formulae in letters written by women than in letters written by men, (2) more in letters from the lower ranks than in letters from the upper ranks, and (3) more in the seventeenth century (subcorpus I) than in the eighteenth century (subcorpus II).

4.4 Results

We extracted all relevant examples of the two formulae from the subcorpora I and II by focusing on the key words discussed in Section 4.2. This resulted in 41 tokens

of the formula *een vriendelijke groetenisse zij geschreven aan* 'a friendly greeting be written to' in subcorpus I from the 1660s and 1670s. This means that approximately one in every five letters begins with this formula. Despite the fact that it usually occurs only once per letter, we decided against counting per letter, and instead counted per 10,000 words, so as to enhance comparability with the second formula, which may occur many times in one and the same letter. In Figure 1, we plotted the frequency of the first formula per 10,000 words across gender and social class.

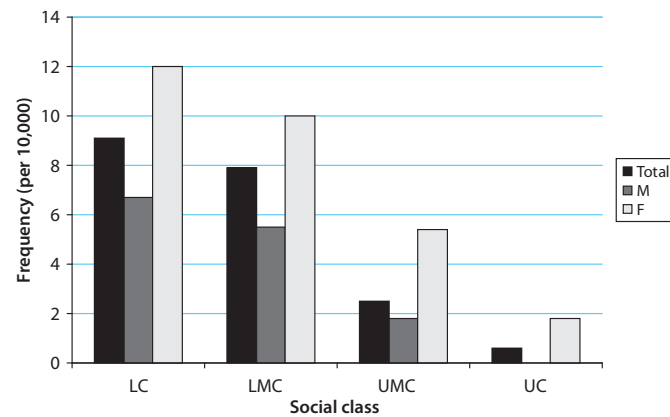


Figure 1. Frequency per 10,000 words of the formula *een vriendelijke groetenisse zij geschreven aan* 'a friendly greeting be written to' in subcorpus I, across gender and social class

The black columns represent the total scores, that is the frequency per 10,000 words in each social class. As can be seen in Figure 1, the steady decrease towards the right-hand side means that the frequency per 10,000 words is consistently lower when the social class index rises. At the same time, within each social class the scores for women (the light grey columns representing the frequency per 10,000 words in letters by women) are higher than the scores for men (the dark grey columns, representing the frequency per 10,000 words in letters by men). Subcorpus II, with letters from the 1770s and 1780s, did not provide a single token of this formula, which generates the strongest diachronic difference possible.

The text-constitutive second formula, viz. *ik laat u weten als dat* 'I let you know that', occurs 154 times in subcorpus I, and is, therefore, almost four times as frequent as the first formula discussed. Figure 2 presents the frequency of the second formula per 10,000 words across gender and social class.

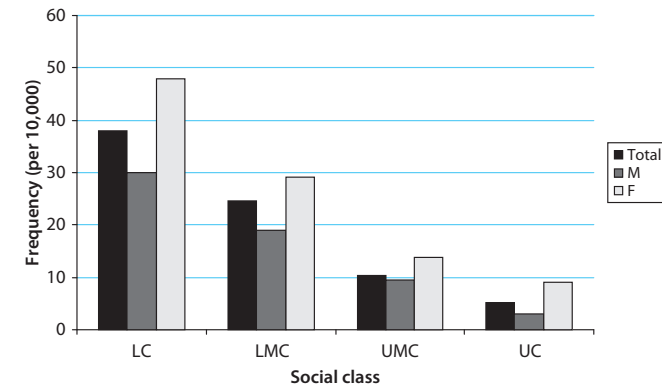


Figure 2. Frequency per 10,000 words of the formula *ik laat u weten als dat* 'I let you know that' in subcorpus I, across gender and social class

Figure 2 depicts the same steady decrease towards the right-hand side as Figure 1. In the LC, the black total column peaks at about 38 tokens per 10,000 words, which drops to a frequency of less than 5 in the UC. Again, women (light grey columns) score consistently higher than men (dark grey columns) within each social class.

In subcorpus II, with letters from the 1770s and 1780s, we still find quite a few tokens of the formula, though far less than in subcorpus I. There are 41 tokens, whose distribution across gender and social class is presented in Figure 3. Recall that there are no letters by LC women in subcorpus II so that the LC total score equals the score for LC men.

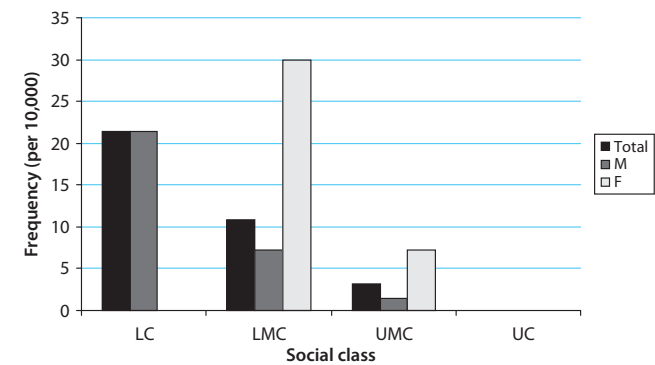


Figure 3. Frequency per 10,000 words of the formula *ik laat u weten als dat* 'I let you know that' in subcorpus II, across gender and social class

Figure 3 shows that the second formula is not used any more in the UC. In the UMC, some tokens are produced, mainly by women. The highest scores are found in the LC and in the LMC. Note, finally, the gender difference, which is particularly clear in the LMC.

The diachronic decrease in the use of the second formula may already be clear from the absolute numbers. In Figure 4, we plotted the results of subcorpora I and II, focusing on the frequencies across social class.

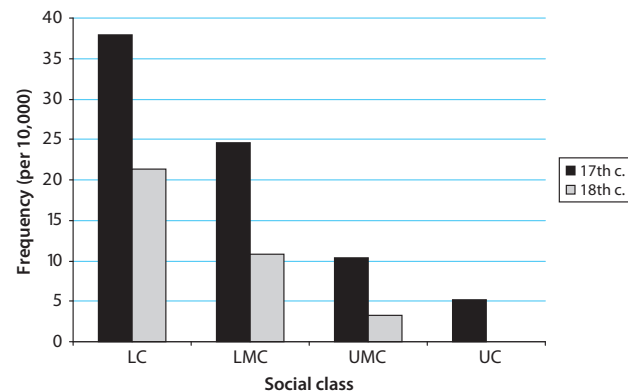


Figure 4. Frequency per 10,000 words of the formula *ik laat u weten als dat* 'I let you know that' in subcorpus I and in subcorpus II, across social class and time

As becomes clear from Figure 4, the second formula was much less in use in the eighteenth century than in the seventeenth century. Moreover, the diachronic difference holds in every social class.

5. Discussion and conclusion

The hypotheses formulated in Section 4.3 are corroborated by the results, in that women produced more epistolary formulae than men and more formulae were to be found in letters from the lower ranks than in those from the upper ranks. Finally, the use of formulaic language decreased over time. The first formula is entirely absent from subcorpus II, and the second is much less frequent there than in subcorpus I. The distribution of epistolary formulae across gender, social rank and time therefore parallels the distribution of writing experience as based upon the discussion in Section 2. Our results resemble the findings of

Austin (2004), who studied the decline of epistolary formulae in English letters from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and who concluded that “[t]he two main groups that continue to use the formulas, even into the nineteenth century, are seamen, mostly of the lower ranks, and women”. Note that we as well as Austin (2004) claim that there is a general decrease of formulaic language over time. Private letters have become much less formulaic, despite the obvious fact that epistolary formulae remain part of letter writing style up to the present day.

It is important to note that we do not consider the variation found as examples of gender and social variation in the strict sense. For us, these broad social categories were indicators of writing experience, and, in our view, writing experience has been shown to be the determining factor. The use of prefabricated chunks of language enabled less experienced writers, for whom producing a letter may have constituted a serious communicative problem, to generate a fully acceptable piece of discourse. Still, one may wonder whether the variation found is nothing other than a change in letter-writing style, accidentally led by men and/or the upper classes. Indeed, we see a change in letter-writing style, but we have to add that an appeal to writing experience can moreover explain why this is such a well-ordered and gendered change from above. It offers a socio-cultural explanation, viz. the gradual and socially varied textualisation of society, which underlies the observed patterns of variation.

Another possible explanation relates to linguistic differences as reflecting social group practices. Differences between social groups, possibly originating from relatively less or more writing experience, may have developed into markers of group languages. If, for instance, less experienced writers use more epistolary formulae, these formulae may become characteristic of their language and the language of the social groups with which they identify (cf. Laitinen & Nordlund 2012). This may happen even among experienced writers from these social groups, and even when writing experience increases over time. The use of formulae may thus turn into a group practice, independent of the level of writing experience. While such an explanation can perhaps not be entirely ruled out, we would argue that the orderly distribution of epistolary formulae across gender and social rank, with the steady decrease in frequencies towards the right side of the figures in Section 4, makes such an interpretation in terms of social identities or group practices less probable. If identity roles or group practices were decisive, it should still be explained why frequencies decrease over time, why we do not find the opposite pattern of high scores for the UC and low scores for the LC, where the persistent gender differences come from, et cetera. It would also remain obscure why both formulae show the same pattern in terms of social class, and the same gender distribution as well. It would in fact be quite astonishing

if both formulae were to behave more or less alike. Obviously, more research is needed into more formulae in order to corroborate our claims, but note that similar patterns have been found in an earlier study of a set of different formulae (Rutten & Van der Wal 2012).

Nevertheless, we have to point out that our conclusions do not imply that any individual formula is produced by a less experienced writer. By way of illustration, we can point to the language of one of the letter writers in our corpus, viz. Katelijne Haexwant. She is a woman allocated to the UC, and a very experienced writer. One of her letters, sent to her husband Leendert Arijensen Haeswant on 31 October 1664, contains 146 lines and 1952 words. As such, it is an exceptionally long letter bearing witness to her impressive proficiency at writing, since seventeenth-century letters in the present subcorpus only have 519 words on average.¹¹ Despite its length, however, the letter begins with a ten-line fully formulaic opening. The first few lines are presented in (9), and include both formulae discussed in Section 4.

- (9) *Vriendelijcke Groetenijse aen vl Mijn lieue ende wel*
friendly greeting to you my dear and well
bemijnde man Leendert arijensen haeswant Ick katelijnghen
beloved husband Leendert Arijensen Haeswant I Katelijnghen
haeswants vl bemijnde huijsvrouw late vl weten als dat
Haeswants your beloved wife let you know as that
'Friendly greeting to you, my dear and well beloved husband Leendert
Arijensen Haeswant. I, Katelijnghen Haeswants, your beloved wife, let
you know that'

Haexwant's example shows that formulae were highly conventionalised expressions which may occur in the language of skilled writers, despite the fact that skilled writers as a group developed a more varied repertoire. Haexwant thus diverges from the general pattern of similar writers who use fewer formulae. Apart from individual cases such as Haexwant, on the basis of the corpus results for the entire population, we would consider that there is a probable relationship between writing experience and formulaic language. In sum, we conclude that the best explanation for the crystal-clear distribution across gender, social rank and time is offered by the interplay of writing experience and formulaic language.

11. 109,000 words/210 letters = 519 words/letter; see Table 1 in Section 4.1.

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