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Forms of address as politic behaviour in seventeenth-century Dutch private and business letters

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Various characteristics of historical letters, such as formulaic language and forms of address, have been analysed from a politeness perspective (e.g., Bijkerk [2004] and Tiisala [2004]) and sometimes also explicitly from a sociopragmatic perspective (Nevala 2004a). In Rutten and van der Wal (2014), we analysed Dutch private letters of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, arguing that the many changes occurring in the system of forms of address, which includes both nominal and pronominal forms, can be modelled sociopragmatically, with reference to both sociolinguistic factors and politic behaviour in the sense of Watts (2003). We also observed differences between the private letters in our corpus and a limited number of business letters that we had at our disposal at the time, and it is this issue that we explore in this paper. On the basis of a recently compiled subset of business letters by seventeenth-century merchants (van der Wal and Rutten 2024), of whom we also have private letters, we first analyse the distribution of forms of address in the business letters against the background of what we know about private letters in general. We then compare qualitatively the use of forms of address in the business letters with private letters by the same writers, focussing on three prolific authors.

Keywords: business letters, Dutch, forms of address, individual variation, politic behaviour, private letters

1. Forms of address and politeness in Dutch

In this paper, we analyse forms of address in Dutch private and business letters from the seventeenth century. In previous work (Rutten and van der Wal [2014], and see Section 3), we focussed on variation and change in forms of address, both pronominal and nominal, in private letters from the seventeenth and eighteenth

centuries. We adopted a so-called second-wave perspective on politeness, following Watts (2003), arguing that the high frequency of nominal forms of address in private letters exchanged between spouses and family members renders implausible an analysis in terms of negative politeness strategies and face threatening acts. In a small-scale comparison of private letters and business letters, we also found some intriguing differences that could be interpreted as signs of positive and negative politeness strategies. We here follow up on this research by delving more deeply into the comparison of private and business letters, asking what potential differences can tell us about historical politeness. It will prove beneficial that we know from previous research what the eighteenth-century result of seventeenth-century variation was.

Forms of address in private and business letters have been at the heart of historical politeness research for a long time (Taavitsainen and Jucker [eds] 2003; Bijkerk 2004; Nevala 2004a, b; Tiisala 2004). Often, a first-wave approach in terms of positive and negative politeness strategies has been employed (see also Jucker [2020: 86]), More recently, second- and third-wave approaches to historical politeness have emerged (Rutten and van der Wal 2014; Jucker 2020). Overall, we will maintain that a second-wave approach in terms of politeness behaviour is useful for our data, whilst also exploring a third-wave qualitative, context-based approach in Section 6.

We will first introduce our data in Section 2 and provide a brief overview of previous research on forms of address in historical Dutch in Section 3. Sections 4 to 6 present the new results of the comparison of private and business letters. We round off with a discussion of these results and conclusions in Section 7.

2. Data for Dutch

Letters constitute an important data type for research into the history of forms of address. For Dutch, sociolinguistically annotated letter corpora have been compiled for the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The Letters as Loot Corpus (LAL Corpus) is based on archival sources that are part of the so-called Prize Papers which are kept in the National Archives in London, specifically in the collection of the High Court of Admiralty. The Prize Papers consist of documents and artefacts from the period 1652 to 1815, and related to the activity of privateering. Both privateers and the British navy captured enemy ships during times of war, which were then brought to London in order to determine the legality

of these actions.¹ The Prize Papers include notebooks, books, ships' logs, papers relating to trade and the colonial administration, etc., as well as thousands of often undelivered letters. Languages covered in these documents include Basque, English, French, German, Hebrew, Latin, Portuguese, Russian, Spanish, Yiddish and more. Since the Netherlands and Britain were at war several times in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, many Dutch ships were taken, and therefore many Dutch documents are part of the Prize Papers, including about 40,000 letters, of which some 15,000 are private letters. As these letters were written by men as well as women from various social ranks, they constitute an exceptional dataset for sociolinguistic and sociopragmatic research (Rutten and van der Wal 2014).

The original LAL Corpus used in Rutten and van der Wal (2014) consists of 933 letters by 716 writers, totalling 424,500 words: 59 percent of the letters are from the 1660s to 1670s and 41 percent from the 1770s to 1780s. Sufficient social background information is available for the writers of 603 letters so that we can establish that 74 percent of the letters are written by men and 26 percent by women, and 25 percent of the letters can be connected to societal upper ranks (e.g., wealthy merchants, ship owners, academics and commissioned officers) and 75 percent to middle and lower ranks (e.g., non-commissioned officers, shopkeepers, craftsmen, sailors and soldiers). The most recent version of the original LAL Corpus contains 1,033 letters, mostly private letters, and approximately 10 percent business letters. The letters in this corpus have extensive metadata and the corpus is lemmatised and tagged for parts of speech. A recent extension called the Letter as Loot Corpus 2 (LAL-2) comprises another 1,386 letters, including about 26 percent business letters and letters of a hybrid private–business nature. The letters in this corpus have fewer metadata and are neither lemmatised nor tagged for parts of speech.

For a study on the language of merchants (van der Wal and Rutten 2024), we recently compiled a focussed dataset of business letters written by merchants from the 1660s to 1670s, taken from the LAL Corpus and the LAL-2 Corpus. Based on the contents, many letters are clearly either of private or of business nature. However, a clear-cut distinction cannot always be made, since private letters may contain business information (trade partners were often relatives and friends), and business letters sometimes comprise personal information (van der Wal and Rutten 2024: 256). Letters combining substantial private and substantial business information are categorised as private if the sender and addressee were closely related

1. See also the large-scale digitisation project at the Niedersächsische Akademie der Wissenschaften (see: <https://portal.prizepapers.de/index/>), and another digitisation project at the Huygens Institute in Amsterdam (see: <https://prizepapers.huygens.knaw.nl>).

(e.g., husband–wife or parent–child). The merchant collection used here contains eighty-eight business letters by sixty-two merchants, totalling 41,152 words. All merchants are men, forty-eight are assigned to the upper-middle ranks, another thirteen to the upper ranks,² and one to the lower-middle ranks. One reason to compile this merchant collection was our aim to make more extensive comparisons between the genre and register of private letters – the focus of Rutten and van der Wal (2014) – and business letters. On a smaller scale, such a comparison had already proved to be insightful for the analysis of forms of address (see Section 3). In addition, we identified thirty-eight private letters by twenty-five of these merchants, which enables us to make the private–business comparison also at the level of individual merchants.³

3. Forms of address in the history Dutch

The history of Dutch forms of address shows many patterns familiar from the literature (Jucker and Taavitsainen 2003). Medieval sources mostly display a two-way system of singular *du* ('you') and plural *ghi* ('you'), with *ghi* increasingly also being used as a polite form in the singular, similar to the course of *vous* in French (Berteloot 2003). The form *du* disappeared from writing in the Early Modern period, which may have led to a need for new polite forms, as *ghi* was now the general pronoun for the second person, in any context. Nominal forms came into use, which were often abbreviated (Rutten and van der Wal 2014: 205). The nominal form *ul* stands for *u liefde* or *uwe liefde* ('your love') and was in use from the fifteenth century into the eighteenth century. The nominal form *ue* means *u edele* or *uwe edelheid* ('your honour') and was used from the sixteenth to the nineteenth century. These nominal forms could be used in subject, object and possessive position. Meanwhile, the object form of the subject pronoun *ghi*, namely *u*, emerged in subject position in the seventeenth century (van der Horst 2008: 1094). Initially, it probably did not signal politeness but in the present-day standard language, *u* is the polite pronoun.

2. These socio-economic labels are, obviously, relative: in early modern society, there was an even higher rank comprising the nobility and the non-noble ruling classes, which is not represented in the LAL Corpora (and hardly in the Prize Papers), see Rutten and van der Wal (2014: 10).

3. For more detailed information on the merchant collection of business letters and the additional private letters by twenty-five of the merchants, we refer to van der Wal and Rutten (2024) and its appendix.

The seventeenth century is interesting, as it displays a lot of variation. There is the traditional form, by then often spelt *gij* ('you') with the object form *u*, which occasionally occurs in subject position. In addition, the nominal forms *ul* and *ue* are used, abbreviated or not. Rutten and van der Wal (2014: 226) present the overall results for the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries based on 8,468 tokens from the LAL Corpus. The main trends are:

- *ul* represents 42 percent of the tokens in the seventeenth century, which sinks to 1 percent in the eighteenth century;
- *ue* rises from 16 percent in the seventeenth century to 71 percent in the eighteenth century;
- the subject form *gij* decreases from 17 percent to 8 percent;
- the form *u*, in all positions, decreases from 23 percent to 19 percent;
- all other forms, such as forms with initial *j*- as opposed to *g*- (for example, *jij*), are marginal – that is, 2 percent in the seventeenth century, and 1 percent in the eighteenth century.

These trends imply that there is focussing (i.e., the variation decreases over time in the sense that the majority form becomes more dominant) whilst minority forms decrease in frequency. At the same time, the dominant form changes from *ul* in the seventeenth century (42 percent) to *ue* in the eighteenth (71 percent). Thus, the main change in private letters of the seventeenth and eighteenth century is the switch from *ul* to *ue*, whereby *ue* emerges as the focussed variant. This change can be modelled sociolinguistically at the community level. If we consider *ul* and *ue* as two competing nominal forms, we can plot the proportion of the incoming form *ue* within the category of nominal forms of address according to gender and social rank, as in Figure 1, where we focus on the seventeenth century.

Despite the overall proportion of 16 percent *ue* in the seventeenth century, Figure 1 shows a strong social distribution. Whereas *ue* is virtually absent in the lower ranks (LC = lower class), it gradually increases in the lower-middle (LMC), upper-middle (UMC) and upper ranks (UC). This pattern is stronger with men (blue line) than with women (red line). All in all, at the community level, the rise of *ue* is a gendered change from above. It should be noted that the use of nominal forms itself hardly indicates any social differences: in all ranks, about 50 to 60 percent of the forms of address are nominal forms; but in the lower ranks (LC), these are almost exclusively instances of *ul*, whilst upper-class men already use 72 percent *ue* in the seventeenth century. Men in the upper-middle ranks are at 40 percent of the incoming form *ue* on average. The majority of the merchants in our collection are allocated to UMC and UC.

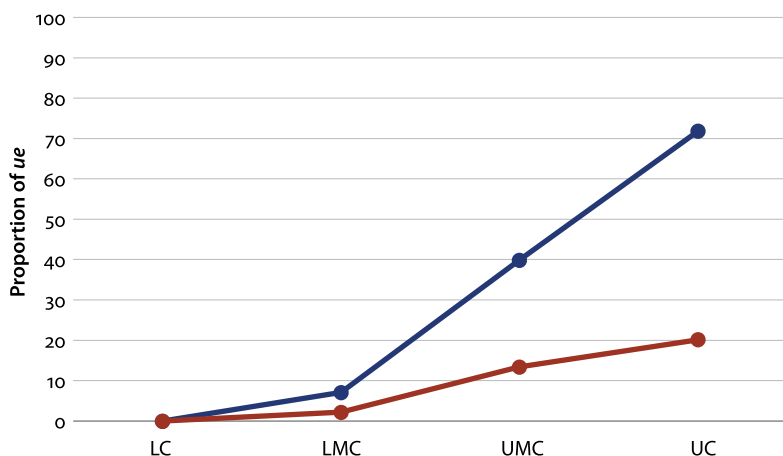


Figure 1. Proportion of *ue* within the category of nominal forms of address ($n=1,606$) in the seventeenth century, across social rank and gender (blue = men, and red = women), based on Rutten and van der Wal (2014: 227–230)

The results of our previous study of private letters has led us to an interpretation of these forms of address in terms of politic behaviour (Rutten and van der Wal 2014: 207–225), defined by Watts (2003: 20) as “behaviour, linguistic and non-linguistic, which the participants construct as being appropriate to the ongoing social interaction” (see also Culpeper and Haugh [2021: 326] about appropriateness as the central focus of sociopragmatics). Nominal forms were the most frequent forms and even increased in the eighteenth century. Unlike Nevala (2004a, b), who analyses historical English letters, we did not consider nominal forms as instances of negative politeness: one reason for this was that the LAL Corpus contains private letters exchanged between spouses, siblings, friends, parents and children, and so on. Jucker (2020: 86) argues that previous work on English, such as Nevalainen and Raumolin-Brunberg (1995) and Nevala (2003), could have adopted the concept of “discernment politeness” instead of an approach in terms of negative/positive politeness strategies. Ridealgh and Jucker (2019: 59) define discernment politeness as “(linguistic) behaviour which is socially and situationally adequate and quasi-mandatory and which closely reflects the social relationship between speaker and addressee, as well as the social and linguistic context within which the exchange takes place”, and they add that the idea of discernment is “largely coextensive with the notion of politic behaviour (Watts)”.

Still, exploring the LAL Corpus and the feasibility of an approach in terms of positive and negative politeness strategies, we made a comparison (Rutten and van der Wal [2014: 208–209], cf. Nevala [2003]) with a small number of busi-

ness letters that were then available. We neutralised the influence of social rank and gender by limiting ourselves to letters written by men allocated to the upper-middle ranks. This was done because most business letters in the LAL Corpus stem from upper-middle ranked men. Table 1 gives the results.

Table 1. Forms of address in private and business letters by men from the upper-middle ranks in the seventeenth century, based on Rutten and van der Wal (2014: 208)

	Private letters		Business letters	
	121 letters, 86 writers		41 letters, 35 writers	
	n	Percent	n	Percent
Nominal forms				
<i>ul</i> (nom/obl/poss)	501	40	225	49
<i>ue</i> (nom/obl/poss)	333	27	188	41
Pronominal forms				
<i>gij</i> (nom)	155	12	21	5
<i>u</i> (obl/poss)	238	19	21	5
<i>u</i> (nom)	11	1	7	2
<i>j</i> -form (nom/obl/poss)	12	1	1	0
Total	1,250	100	463	100

If we adopt the view, following Nevala (2003) and others, that nominal forms index distance, whereas *gij*, its oblique form *u* as well as *j*-forms and the nominative use of *u* are more prevalent in solidarity contexts, there appears to be a difference between private and business letters. The nominal forms are highly frequent in the business letters, totalling 89 percent (413/463). Both nominal forms are proportionally more frequent in business correspondence, which applies even more to *ue* than to *ul*. If we accept that nominal forms index distance more so than pronominal forms, it should still be acknowledged that the frequency counts show that nominal forms also predominate in private letters (Rutten and van der Wal 2014: 209). Nonetheless, we find these distributional differences between private and business letters intriguing enough to warrant a deeper analysis based on a larger set of business letters.

In what follows, we therefore take up the comparison of private and business correspondence, focussing on differences between nominal and pronominal forms, and within the nominal forms on differences between *ul* and *ue*. We do this first at the level of a quantitative overview of the distribution of the forms (Section 4), then at the level of individual letters (Section 5), and finally at the level of individual letter writers (Section 6).

4. Merchants' letters from the seventeenth century

Examining the collection of eighty-eight business letters by sixty-two seventeenth-century merchants (see Section 2), we found similar results as in our previous, but more limited, study of business letters. Nominal forms of address are likewise proportionally more frequent than pronominal forms. In the merchant collection, they represent 83 percent (967/1,159) compared to the earlier 89 percent (Table 1). As in Table 1, the older form *ul* is more frequent in Table 2 than the incoming form *ue*. This is also in line with Figure 1, which shows that upper-middle ranked men, who constitute the majority in the merchant collection, adopt *ue* less often (40 percent) than *ul* (60 percent) in private letters.

Table 2. Forms of address in business letters in the merchant collection

Merchant collection	Business letters 88 letters, 62 writers	
	n	Percent
Nominal forms		
<i>ul</i> (nom/obl/poss)	547	47
<i>ue</i> (nom/obl/poss)	420	36
Pronominal forms		
<i>gij</i> (nom)	100	9
<i>u</i> (obl/poss)	80	7
<i>u</i> (nom)	4	0
<i>j</i> -form (nom/obl/poss)	8	1
Total	1,159	100

As mentioned above, we also have thirty-eight private letters written by twenty-five of the merchants in our collection. This group of twenty-five merchants contributed thirty-seven business letters to the collection. This means we can make a very focussed comparison of thirty-seven business and thirty-eight private letters by a group of twenty-five merchants, allowing us to compare the forms of address of these two types of letters at the individual level and to look for possible register differences. We begin with a quantitative comparison, shown in Table 3.

The private and business letters written by these twenty-five merchants roughly show a similar high proportion of nominal forms of address: 76 percent (372/491) and 79 percent (356/448). The high proportion in private letters is the most remarkable observation here. The genres differ in their distribution of *ul* and

Table 3. Forms of address in private and business letters by twenty-five merchants

	Private letters 38 letters		Business letters 37 letters	
	n	Percent	n	Percent
Nominal forms				
<i>ul</i> (nom/obl/poss)	193	39	212	47
<i>ue</i> (nom/obl/poss)	179	36	144	32
Pronominal forms				
<i>gij</i> (nom)	64	13	55	12
<i>u</i> (obl/poss)	51	10	33	7
<i>u</i> (nom)	4	1	4	1
<i>j</i> -form (nom/obl/poss)	0	0	0	0
Total	491	100	448	100

ue, which is almost equal in the private letters, whilst *ul* appears to be preferred in the business letters. The higher frequency of *ul* compared to *ue* was also found in the whole merchant collection (Table 2).

This quantitative analysis raises various questions. So far, our results resemble the initial analysis presented in Table 1, based on previous research. Still, there is a lot of variation in our data, which we will now try to grasp from a more qualitative angle. A first question concerns the variation within single documents. Many letters display variation in forms of address. In Section 5, we ask whether we can discover particular patterns with respect to the distribution of forms of address within individual letters. In Section 6, we move to the level of individual writers (i.e., to merchants who contributed private and business letters, and thus produced a sizeable number of forms of address in different contexts).

5. Intra-letter variation: Searching for patterns

We first briefly discuss intra-letter variation in the whole merchant collection of business letters. Scrutinising the letters, we find different patterns of use with respect to forms of address in individual letters, some of which include one or more sub-patterns. In total, seven (sub-)patterns can be distinguished, which also implies a high level of inter-letter variation. These seven patterns are listed in Table 4

Table 4. Seven patterns of nominal and pronominal forms of address in the business letters

Nominal forms		Nominal and pronominal forms	
1	Only <i>ul</i>	4a	<i>ul</i> and <i>gij/u</i>
2	Only <i>ue</i>	4b	<i>ue</i> and <i>gij/u</i>
3a	Both <i>ul</i> and <i>ue</i>	4c	<i>ul</i> , <i>ue</i> and <i>gij/u</i>
3b	Only <i>ul</i> but with <i>ue</i> in closing		

The first two patterns are characterised by the use of only one nominal form of address: either only *ul* (Pattern 1) or only *ue* (Pattern 2). A combination of both nominal forms also occurs in accordance with two sub-patterns. The forms *ul* and *ue* can alternate in the whole letter (Pattern 3a), or *ul* is used throughout the letter, except in the closing part (Pattern 3b). About two-thirds of the sixty-two merchants (68 percent) use only nominal forms of address: only *ul* (Pattern 1=29 percent), only *ue* (Pattern 2=16 percent), or both *ul* and *ue* (Patterns 3a/3b=23 percent). Example (1) is taken from a business letter by Pieter van Loo, who uses twelve forms of address: the letter has eleven tokens of *ul* and only one token of *ue* (here spelt *VE*) in the closing of the letter (Pattern 3b).

- (1) *Waarmede vriendelijcken gegroet en godt den almogende bevoolen van*
 with which friendly greeted and God the almighty commended by
VE Dienstwillige vrind Pieter van Loo
 your obedient friend Pieter van Loo
 ('with which friendly greeted and commended to God almighty from your
 obedient friend Pieter van Loo') (Pieter van Loo, 8 December 1664, LAL-2)

Nominal and pronominal forms of address can also be combined (Pattern 4) and this happens according to three sub-patterns, which are essentially extensions of Patterns 1 to 3 with the addition of the pronominal forms *gij* (nominative) and *u* (oblique and possessive), resulting in the use of *ul* plus *gij/u* (Pattern 4a), the use of *ue* plus *gij/u* (Pattern 4b), and the combination of *ul* and *ue* with *gij/u* (Pattern 4c). These sub-patterns with additional pronominal forms are less frequently used (Pattern 4a=15 percent, Pattern 4b=7 percent, Pattern 4c=10 percent).

Examples (2) and (3) demonstrate that different forms of nominal and pronominal address may alternate even within one single phrase: the possessive form *ul*, the object form *ue* and the pronominal form *gij* (here extended with the pluralising noun *lieden* ['folks']) in Example (2), and the subject form *ul*, the pronominal nominative *gij* and the possessive form *ue* in Example (3).

- (2) *t Zedert **ul** vertreck hebbe noch geen brieve van **uE** ontfange, alleen*
 Since your departure have yet no letters from you received only
*verstaen Dat **ghij** Lieden op Saterdagh smorgens Eerst buijten*
 understood that you folks on Saturday morning[genitive] first outside
Enckhuijsen waert,
 Enkhuizen were
 ('Since **your** departure, I have not yet received any letters from **you**, I have only
 understood that **you** were not outside Enkhuizen until Saturday morning')
- (Jan Backer, 22 December 1670, LAL)
- (3) *alsoohaest **ul** jnd Calbarij is en **ghij** **uE** handel daer selver cunt doen*
 as soon as you in Calabar are and you your business there yourself can do
 ('As soon as **you** are in Calabar and **you** can do **your** business yourself there')
- (Jan Backer, 22 December 1670, LAL)

To summarise, this diversity of seven different (sub-)patterns testifies to a high degree of intra- as well as inter-letter variation. Whilst the overall quantitative results did not lead to new insights into the distribution of the variants (Section 4), we have here established a variety of usage patterns. Against this background, we now focus on individual variation.

6. Intra-writer variation in the letters of three individuals

Whereas Patterns 1 and 2 show invariable use, all other (sub-)patterns display multiple forms of address. Against the background of our discussion so far, this raises the question of whether we can explain the variation of nominal and pronominal forms and, within the nominal forms, the variation of *ul* and *ue*. A related question is whether the variation depends on the type of letter (private *versus* business). To answer these questions, we will again compare business and private letters, this time qualitatively and focus on the writing practices of three merchants who wrote both types of letters, displayed a variational pattern of use, and moreover produced the highest number of forms of address. These merchants are Johannes Robbers, Jasper Dankaert and Gerard Douw.

6.1 Johannes Robbers

Johannes Robbers contributed three business letters and two private letters, dated 1664 and 1672, with 101 forms of address in total. His writing practice shows Pattern 4c – that is, the combination of both *ul* and *ue* along with the pronominal forms *gij* (nominative) and *u* (oblique and possessive). There appears to be a

register difference as the nominal forms dominate in his business letters (61 percent nominal *versus* 39 percent pronominal), whereas it is the other way around in his private letters (41 percent nominal *versus* 59 percent pronominal).

The frequencies of the two nominal forms *ul* and *ue* are similar in business and private letters: 71 percent *ul* and 29 percent *ue* in the business letters, 69 percent *ul* and 31 percent *ue* in the private letters. Example (4) is taken from a private letter Robbers sent to his wife. She is addressed with all three options, *gij*, *ul* and *ue*, which each occur twice. Whilst punctuation was not commonly used in this period (Rutten and van der Wal 2014: 266–286), the whole passage reads as one long unit starting with the phrase *Jck hebbe verstaen* ('I have understood'). Two subordinate clauses are attached to the verbal phrase, and both have Robbers' wife as the subject: in the first, she is indicated by *ghij*, in the second by *ul* (spelt *VI*). More clauses are connected to this, with Robbers shifting back to *gij* (spelt *ghij*), then to the possessive form *ue* (spelt *UE*), after which he continues with *ue* and switches back to *ul* in the final part. The passage seems to exhibit free variational use of forms of address: we do not see grammatical conditions – both *ue* and *ul* occur in different functions – and neither do we see any politeness strategy in this, in that all forms appear to be equally polite or, rather, politic.

- (4) *Jck hebbe verstaen door Capt Jacob soettelijnc dat **ghij** aen Boordt hebt gewest doen hije te vlijssijngen jn de kaeij lach met sijn schip jnde dat VI wel van resoluise soude wesen om hijer te commen soo wanner **ghij** weste dat het met mijn sijen soude wesen maer laet sulcke in UE: gedachten nijet commen want als ick van sijne ben hijer te hebben soo sal ick wel om UE commen maer het is genoeg alser een armoede lijdt en Zuyrenamme voor VI nocht nijet goetd genoch is*

('I have understood per captain Jacob Soetelink that **you** were aboard when he was at the quay in Flushing with his ship and that **you** had decided to come here if **you** knew that it would please me, but do not let that cross **your** mind, for, when I would like to have you here, I will fetch **you**, but it is enough that one of us suffers poverty and Surinam is not good enough for **you** yet'.)

(9 January 1672, LAL-2)

Examples (5), (6) and (7) are taken from Robbers' business correspondence. These show the same free variation of different forms: the subject form *ue* alternating with possessive *ul* in Example (5), the subject form *ul* with possessive *ue* in Example (6), and the object form *ue* with the subject form *gij* in Example (7).

- (5) *dije mijn tot antwoorde gaf, dat VE. noch met VI. Fammijlge Jn goede gesonheijt was*

('who answered me that **you** with **your** family still were in good health')

(2 January 1672, LAL-2)

- (6) *mijts dat VI. sal VE. ordenarre, prouvijsse af getrocken suldt hebben*
 ('supposing that **you** will have deducted **your** usual commission')
 (2 January 1672, LAL-2)
- (7) *sal VE. noch medder goederen, jn commijsse toej senden, waer op ghij mucht verlaetten*
 ('I will send **you** even more goods on commission, on which **you** can rely')
 (2 January 1672, LAL-2)

This kind of extensive variation is found throughout Robbers' letters. The case of Robbers thus shows a register difference in that he uses more nominal forms in business letters than in private letters, but the patterns of use within these letters appear to show free variation, often even within one discourse unit.

6.2 Jasper Dankaert

Merchant Jasper Dankaert is represented by two business and two private letters from the year 1664, totalling 103 forms of address. He adopts Patterns 4a with *ul* as well as *gij/u*. The nominal form *ul* dominates his writings, although more so in his business letters (82 percent) than in the private letters (57 percent), indicating a similar register difference as with Robbers. We discuss examples from his letters in order to find out whether we can interpret any switches from nominal to pronominal and *vice versa*.

Examples (8) and (9) are from Dankaert's private correspondence.

- (8) *De moijelijckheit Die ghij uijt staet met ul meester en vrouw Die treffen mij soo wel als ul en bender seer Droevigh om*
 ('The problems **you** have with **your** boss and boss lady affect me just as **you** and I am very sad about it')
 (4 December 1664, LAL-2)
- (9) *hoor ul bij hem sijt geweest om te raden of ul bij hem in uwer ouder dach te wonen en tot Amsterdam te blijve het welck mij ter hoogster wel aen staen soude, als ghij het te weghe konde brengen*
 ('I hear that **you** were with him to have advice whether **you** should live with him in your old age and stay in Amsterdam, which would please me very much, if **you** could achieve this')
 (1 December 1664, LAL)

As with Robbers, the subject form *gij* is used alongside nominal forms in subject, object and possessive function, and within very short pieces of discourse, and as with Robbers, we do not see any politeness strategies underpinning this variation; put differently, the forms appear to index similar levels of politeness. There is exactly one switch in a private letter by Dankaert that may be different. When he

writes to his sweetheart, Susanne Spijkerhof, he begins with seven highly formulaic introductory lines, including various religious expressions. Here, he uses *ul* three times and the object form *u* once. After this extensive formulaic opening, Dankaert switches to a more personal style, and affectionately addresses Susanne as *Lieve meijt* ('dear girl') in Example (10).

- (10) *Lieve meijt, naer die ghij mij versoght het en bij Desen versoeckt gheen brieven meer aen ul te schrijven,*

('Dear girl, as **you** have requested me and hereby request to write no more letters to **you**.') (4 December 1664, LAL-2)

It is tempting to see the pronominal form *gij* as triggered by this affectionate stance, although we also notice that Dankaert returns to *ul* in the following infinitive clause.

As the nominal forms dominate in Dankaert's business letters (82 percent), they appear to be his conventional choice, which is why we focus on the use of the pronominal forms here. One of his business letters shows a regular use of *ul* with only two exceptions: an instance of the object form *u* in the middle of the letter (Example [11]) and an instance of *gij* in a *post scriptum* (Example [12]).

- (11) *Ick heb noch een halfie suicker klaer, voor u*

('I have a halve of sugar ready for **you**') (4 December 1664, LAL-2)

- (12) *apropos, indien ghij vrij geworden sijt soo wensch ic ul bij Desen soo veel geluckx...*

('apropos, if **you** have become free, I hereby wish **you** so much happiness...') (4 December 1664, LAL-2)

Unlike the apparently random choice of *u* in Example (11), the switch to *gij* in Example (12) could be explained as a switch to a more ordinary form of address in the afterthought style of a *post scriptum*. As with Example (10), however, Dankaert returns to the nominal form *ul* in the same phrase.

In the other business letter, Dankaert begins with two instances of *ul*, one of which is in the first line of Example (13). The formulaic opening is followed by a long emotional part, in which Dankaert explains his situation and defends himself against apparently false accusations. The start of this long passage is marked by two instances of *gij* (spelt *ghij*), after which he returns to *ul* in the following more business-like phrase.

- (13) *waer uijt verstaen het quaet advis van Dirck mathijsz aen **ul** gedaen, [...]*
 ('from which I understood the negative message by Dirk Mathijsz. given to **you**')
*ghij sult De Leugen Door het komen van Ian Lauw wel uijt vinden, ick sie Dat **ghij** met Een vooroordeel tegens mij ingenomen sijt Daer ick in waerheijt getuighe geen reden Door mijn schult Gegeven hebbe, [...]*
 ('**you** will discover the lies by the arrival of Jan Lauw, I see that **you** have a prejudice against me for which I declare honestly that I have not given any reason')
*nu bid' ick **ul**, hoe konde ick hier soodanigh gestelt siende **ul** order volgen van Contant te vercoopen*
 ('now I ask **you**, how could I here in such a situation follow **your** order of selling cash')
 (4 December 1664, LAL-2)

The switch to *gij* may be seen as an attempt to create solidarity between Dankaert and his business partner, who has heard negative rumours about him. When Dankaert accuses the addressee of having a prejudice, he aims to minimise his reproach by using the solidarity-orientated form *gij*.

6.3 Gerard Douw

Our third merchant is Gerard Douw, who produced eighty-nine forms of address in seven letters (four private and three business), written in 1664 and 1665. His letters show Pattern 4c — that is, he uses both *ul* and *ue* as well as the pronominal forms *gij/u*. The nominal forms dominate in his business letters (92 percent), more so than in the private letters, where they are nonetheless quite frequent (80 percent). Based on previous research (Section 3) and the merchant collection as a whole (Table 2), we expected a higher frequency of *ul* compared to the incoming form *ue*, which is the case in the business letters (*ul* 60 percent versus *ue* 40 percent). Douw's private letters, however, have *ue* as the preferred variant (*ue* 59 percent versus *ul* 41 percent). In his letters, Douw vacillates between *ul* and *ue*, without any apparent difference: see Example (14) from a private letter. Example (15), taken from a business letter with mixed usage, shows the same variation, although it is notable that the switch to *ue* takes places in the closing, as in Pattern 3b described in Section 5.

- (14) *Maseurtu heb den uwen⁴ vanden 6 7dr becomen Beneffens alles wel gecondisio-neert, dat door V:L: gesonden was waer voor VE hertgrondigh Ben bedanckende, val V:L: hier weer lastigh met het senden van twee Balen Cattoen*

(‘My sister, I have received your letter dated 6 September and all was in good order that was sent by you, for which I thank you heartily; I bother you here again with sending two bales of cotton’) (9 December 1664, LAL-2)

- (15) *ende van hem die naer v.l. den almachtigen Bevolen te hebben, Blijft Monsieur V:E:dt:will: dienaer Gerard: Douw*

(‘and from him who, after having commended you to the almighty, remains, Sir, your obedient servant Gerard Douw’) (9 December 1664, LAL-2)

Overall, both nominal forms occur throughout his letters so that *ul* and *ue* seem to be equal variants.

In view of their low frequency and in fact almost absence in the business letters, it is most interesting to focus on the pronominal forms, as we also did with Dankaert. In Douw’s private letters, pronominal forms occur mainly in letters to close female family members, Douw’s sister (Example [16]) and mother-in-law (Example [17]).

- (16) *Ick en Can niet wel vatten wat V:L: meijnt als ghij schrijft van seeker persoon...*

(‘I cannot understand well what you mean when you write about a particular person...’) (9 December 1664, LAL-2)

The pronominal switch from *ul* to *gij* in Example (16) seems to be a random choice. It is in the letter to his mother-in-law that a potentially meaningful switch from the formulaic beginning of the letter with *ue* to the pronominal form *gij* occurs. After a start with *ue*, Douw switches to *gij* in a personal and self-justifying part, obviously replying to earlier reproaches resulting from infrequent writing. His direct address *moedertie* (‘dear mother’) highlights his informal and emotional appeal, in which he tries to build solidarity through the use of a term of endearment. After mentioning his intention for the future, Douw returns to *ue* in the formulaic performative with which he thanks his mother-in-law for sending some goods.

4. This example and similar cases of the substantive possessive *den uwen* (‘yours’, meaning ‘your letter’ here) were not included in the *u* (obl/poss) category of our forms of address research.

- (17) *sie tot ons verblijden **ue** gesontheit [...] (‘I see **your** health to our delight’)*

*Ick sie even wel **ghij** wilt den Camp behouden met mij te verwijten (...) maer moedertie weet Ick noch al 2 mael heb geschreven Eer **ghij** eens en doch gedunckt aen het oude spreek woort dat men een ander fouten Beter siet, als zijn eijgen, nu voortaan mejne het vrij te verbeeteren, [...]*

(‘I see however that **you** will remain quarrelling by blaming me (...) but, dear mother, do know that I have written twice against **you** once and remember the old proverb that one sees another’s faults better than one’s own; from now on I will change for the better.’)

*Bedanck **ue** voor t’ senden van...*

(‘I thank **you** for the sending of...’)

(9 December 1664, LAL-2)

7. Discussion and conclusions

Our main goal was to explore the distribution of forms of address in seventeenth-century Dutch private and business letters, and to see whether we can interpret the extensive variation of several nominal and pronominal forms in terms of particular politeness strategies, following related work on historical English letter writing (Nevalainen and Raumolin-Brunberg 1995, Nevala 2003, 2004a, b). In earlier work on private letters (Rutten and van der Wal 2014: 207–225), we argued that an analysis in terms of politic behaviour (Watts 2003) appears most appropriate for the Dutch data, but we also found some evidence of differences between private and business letters — namely, a relatively higher frequency of nominal forms in business letters. In this paper, we examined the forms of address in our recently compiled collection of business letters by merchants and compared the outcome to previous results for private letters as well as to private letters written by some of the same merchants.

In earlier work, we found that nominal forms of address were more frequent than pronominal forms in letters in general and moreover that nominal forms were even more frequent in business letters than in private letters (Table 1). Whereas private letters contained about two-thirds nominal forms, this went up to 89 percent in business letters. In this study, we again found a high proportion of nominal forms in business letters (83 percent, see Table 2). Focussing on twenty-five merchants who contributed both business and private letters, we found that the proportion of nominal forms was slightly lower in the business letters (79 percent) and remarkably high in the private letters (76 percent) (see Table 3). In van der Wal and Rutten (2024), which is based on the same collection of merchant correspondence, we argue that the register differences between

private and business letters are sometimes surprisingly small. This conclusion is corroborated by the present research.

The distributional differences between nominal and pronominal forms in the quantitative overview and operating at the community level are not always clearly visible when focussing on individual letter writers. Merchant Douw produced high numbers of nominal forms in his business letters, but also in the private letters. Robbers and Dankaert did show the community-level difference, adopting nominal forms more strongly in business correspondence. We can conclude that nominal forms were more appropriate in business letters than in private letters, whilst emphasising that they were also the dominant forms in private letters. We therefore maintain our previous interpretation in terms of politic behaviour. Nonetheless, we found a handful of switches that can be interpreted from a more specific politeness perspective – in particular, the use of pronominal forms as instruments to uphold solidarity in emotional passages. Whilst nominal forms were expected, pronominal forms enabled writers to build or preserve an emotional bond.

Another issue concerned the variation between *ul* and *ue*. The incoming form *ue* was still the minority choice, except among upper-ranked men (Figure 1). Our merchants are predominantly assigned to the upper-middle class, for whom *ul* still was the dominant nominal form of address (Figure 1). We know from previous research on private letters that *ul* disappeared and was overtaken by *ue* in the eighteenth century. Here, too, the community-level generalisation displayed in Figure 1, and the ongoing change, can hardly be traced to the individual level. The change in progress from *ul* to *ue* operated on different social meanings attached to the forms, which can however only be inferred from Figure 1 as it presents average scores for groups of writers. Whilst our qualitative analyses showed predominantly the extensive variation of the period, there are nonetheless indications that *ue* was changing into a variant preferred over the conventional form *ul*. Whereas Dankaert did not use *ue* at all, and Robbers mixed *ul* and *ue* freely, Douw partially followed the mixed practice of Robbers but also produced a surprisingly high proportion of *ue* in his private letters. In Douw's writings, we may thus be witnessing the emergence of social meaning at the individual level: from a more recent alternative to *ul*, the form *ue* is developing into the preferred politic variant in written communication, so much so that its proportion in Douw's private letters even surpassed the proportion in his business letters.

Like private letters, Dutch seventeenth-century business letters show an enormous variation in the use of forms of address, at the quantitative level of the whole community, at the level of usage patterns within single letters, and in the language use of individual writers. Much of this variation, visible even within

clauses or short stretches of discourse, seems random and suggests a situation of free variation. From a politeness perspective, the two most frequent variants, namely the nominal forms *ul* and *ue*, should be seen as politic choices, whereby one supersedes the other in a gendered change from above. The pronominal form *gij*, although infrequent and dispreferred in business and private correspondence, could be used in emotional contexts instead of the nominal forms. The main goal, then, was to establish solidarity and confirm familial or friendship ties.

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Corpora

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