Book Review

Raymond Hickey (ed.). 2019. *Keeping in touch. Emigrant letters across the English-speaking world* (Advances in Historical Sociolinguistics 10). Amsterdam & Philadelphia: John Benjamins. ISBN: 9789027200479 (hardback), x, 289 p. €99.00/\$149.00.

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The past three decades have seen a growing interest in emigrant letters. The linguistic value of such letters is twofold. Firstly, they represent historical texts of orality, since they are mostly private letters written in an informal register. Secondly, they belong to one of the few types of texts in modern history which were composed by writers from both genders and from all parts of the population(s), but mostly from the lower and middle ranks of societies. This makes them important not only for historical sociolinguistics, but also for historical linguistics and research into linguistic change in general, as they allow insights into a much wider range of variation in historical language use than printed texts, which were the focus of historical linguists for a long time. The study of historical language variation in such texts enables researchers to investigate more precisely both the diachronic trajectories of today's variants and the 'internal' and 'external', i.e., social factors, governing or affecting the processes of change.

The present volume on emigrant letters in English is a welcome contribution to the study of emigrant letters. It contains twelve case studies on the modern history of English, viewed from the perspective of such linguistically heterogeneous texts.

In his introductory chapter, the editor Raymond Hickey explains the socio-historical context of emigrant letters and the particular value of emigrant correspondence for the study of historical sociolinguistics. He also addresses some text-linguistic characteristics of such letters, e.g., the co-presence of archaic formulae and genuine – and sometimes progressive – features of the vernacular. Furthermore, Hickey identifies seven “caveats when using data from emigrant letters” (p. 9).

1. It remains uncertain to what extent the language in emigrant letters represents vernacular usage at the time.
2. The letters of writers of the first generation are most reliable in terms of the language usage of the home country, as letters by later generations may contain features of dialect mix or language contact.
3. “The authorship of emigrant letters may be an unresolved issue”.
4. The range of linguistic data may depend on the content topics addressed in the letters, e.g., long lists and enumerations provide only very limited data for syntactic analyses.
5. The linguistic register used in the letter may depend on the social status of the addressee and/or the personal relationship between writer and addressee.
6. Writers sometime use formulaic or archaic language in their letters.
7. “As a rule, no biographical information is available about the letter writers [...]”.

As for the authorship problem (no. 3) and the availability of biographical information (no. 7), I am less pessimistic than Hickey. In fact, the study of emigrant letters can benefit from the fact that writers can usually be identified via emigration or immigration lists, passenger lists from ships etc. What is crucial for linguists here is to seek collaboration with migration historians who have taken the brunt of work in this direction. As for emigrants from Germany, for instance, historians have collected sometimes astonishingly detailed socio-biographic information on emigrants and their social networks (e.g., Helbich et al. 1988 [1991]). With respect to the authorship problem, e.g., whether the scribe and the person who signed the letter may have been different people, the development of the *Leiden Identification Procedure (LIP)* (Nobels and van der Wal 2009) was a big step forward in the identification of letter writers on the basis of hand-written letters.

Hickey then provides a six level “classification of insights from emigrant letters” (p. 10), to which some of the contributors refer in their analyses:

- Level 1 Emigrant letters reveal previously unrecorded features or confirm uncertain features.
- Level 2 Emigrant letters have features or combinations of features not attested or not continued in a present-day variety.
- Level 3 Emigrant letters help in determining the period in which known features of a later variety probably arose.
- Level 4 Emigrant letters confirm features known from later sources and observations of present-day speakers.
- Level 5 Emigrant letters yield clear negative finds for later known features or those suspected of not belonging to a variety.

Level 6 Emigrant letters confirm general patterns assumed for the development of vernacular varieties and hence are of low diagnostic value in specific cases.

Hickey offers a first illustration of this classification with examples from letters by a single letter writer, a young Irish woman who had emigrated to the Midwest of the US to work as a domestic servant and/or cook and upheld a correspondence of letters with her family in Ireland in the 1880s and 1890s. Whereas Level 3 and Level 5 are not explained by evidence from the small exemplary corpus and remain somewhat unclear, Levels 1, 2, 4 and 6 are certainly highly significant for the analysis not only of historical variation, but also for the description of the diachronic trajectories and the explanation of present-day variants (cf. Elspaß 2015: 41–49 for a three-level classification with examples from German).

The eleven other contributions to the volume are grouped into three parts: Part 1 *The language of emigrant correspondence*, Part 2 *The language of the Irish emigrant experience* and Part 3 *Vernacular correspondence: Widening the scope*.

Part 1 opens with Chapter 2, authored by Angela Bagwell, Samantha Litty and Mike Olson. The three authors investigate *Wisconsin immigrant letters*, written by emigrants from German-speaking countries. They focus on two letter series (111 letters in all) by families who originally came from northern Germany. In these letters, they identify “450 instances indicative of German transfer to English” (p. 27) that have developed into characteristics of Wisconsin English, such as spellings pointing toward final neutralization (e.g., *I frose*), syntactic transfer such as topicalization (e.g., *with seeding we are most done*), and semantic transfer (e.g., *to leave you wait*, influenced by German *lassen* ‘to let’). In Chapter 3, Stefan Dollinger studies the development of the modal auxiliaries *shall* and *will* in a small corpus of nineteenth-century emigrant letters, which were sent from Canada to England (*Petworth Emigration to Canada Corpus*, PECC). The result of his statistical analyses “does no longer give preference to a dialect contact scenario”, but rather supports a claim brought forward by McCafferty and Amador-Moreno (2014) who attributed “the spread of the first person *will* [...] to spreading literacy skills and an imperfect acquisition of the (written) first person *shall* convention” (p. 61). Maria Dossena investigates a small corpus of nineteenth-century emigrant letters which form part of the forthcoming *Corpus of Nineteenth-century Scottish Correspondence* (19CSC), performing a quantitative and qualitative analysis of the use of pronouns in stance-taking.

Part 2 concentrates on the language in the correspondence of Irish emigrants. In Chapter 5, similar to Maria Dossena in the previous chapter, Emma Moreton and Chris Culy apply a mixed-method approach to a small corpus of Irish emigrant letters – in this case: letters of two sisters who had emigrated to the US. The authors

present the *Interesting Item Visualisation Tool* (IIVT) they developed to “identify similarities and differences across collections of related items” (p. 88). Essentially, the IIVT appears to be a sophisticated tool to computerise content analyses. The comparison of the two sisters’ letters reveal different ‘lexicogrammars’ to express certain aspects of the (female) migrant experience, e.g., one of the sisters verbalises “homesickness in terms of physical distance” (e.g., with a focus on “the lemmas COME, GO and CROSS”), while the other conceptualises “homesickness in temporal terms” (e.g., using “the lemmas SEEM and LOOK” to express the perceived passing of time since she last communicated with her relatives, p. 103). The next two contributions both use the *Corpus of Irish English Correspondence* (CORIECOR), which comprises 3.5 million tokens or word forms from texts from the eighteenth- to the early twentieth-century, but mainly nineteenth-century sources. In Chapter 6, Kevin McCafferty uses the CORIECOR and the ICE Ireland corpus (twentieth-century) to analyse the development of the variants of negation of lexical HAVE in Irish English (IrE). He shows that the conservative variants ‘no-negation’ (*I have no means*) and ‘bare negation’ (*I have not means*) “persisted in IrE through the nineteenth and well into the twentieth century” (p. 135), while the more innovative variants (‘DO-support’, ‘HAVE *not got*’ and ‘HAVE *got no*’) were hardly used in nineteenth-century IrE. Interestingly, only in the twentieth-century did IrE very quickly adopt the American English variant with ‘DO-support’; however, IrE has continued to largely avoid the ‘HAVE *not got*’ variant, which appears to be typical for British English. In Chapter 7, Carolina P. Amador-Moreno presents a qualitative study of a subcorpus of the CORIECOR, consisting of 135 letters from Irish emigrants to Argentina, and some additional 27 letters from members of an Irish family in Argentina. She identifies several (standard or non-standard) syntactic features of IrE such as the ‘*be* perfect’ (e.g., *I am now arrived*) in the letter corpus and interprets them as “retentions of older forms” (p. 152) of orality. The contact with Spanish becomes evident in the letters in the use of loan words or semantic calques (e.g., *camp*, apparently referring to a ‘field’, from Spanish *campo*). In the following Chapter 8, Raymond Hickey focuses on nineteenth-century Irish Australian letters. He provides phonological and grammatical evidence for features of IrE present in two letter corpora: a subcorpus of CORIECOR and the *Corpus of Oz Early English* (COEE). Hickey points to the interesting fact that “the non-standard features recorded there are nowhere to be found in present-day Australian English”, meaning that all such features “were dropped quickly by the generations following the initial immigrants”, which appears to contradict “deterministic models of new dialect formation” (p. 164). In the abstract, Hickey hypothesises that this may be due to a stigmatisation of IrE features “as indexical of low-status emigrants”, which prompted following generations of Irish-decent Australians to avoid the use of these features (p. 163, abstract). From a

sociolinguistic point of view, it would have been interesting to see this idea being pursued in more detail in the paper. Some of the grammatical features mentioned in the previous chapters also appear in a small corpus of nineteenth-century letters by three emigrants from Northern Ireland to New Zealand, analysed by Dania Jovanna Bonness in Chapter 9. Bonness identifies early loans from Maori in the letter authors' English and interprets this as one of three indications of these letters representing stage two of 'exonormative stabilisation', according to Schneider's (2003) Dynamic Model of the evolution of postcolonial Englishes. However, this thought is not elaborated in any further detail here.

Part 3, entitled *Vernacular correspondence: Widening the scope*, has a focus on African American English (AAE) and Caribbean English vernaculars. In Chapter 10, Lucia Siebers presents an analysis of two letter series from the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century from the *Corpus of Older African American Letters* (COAAL), which comprises 1,500 letters, written between 1760 and 1919. One third of them are letters from emigrants to Sierre Leone and Liberia. In this fairly small sub-corpus, she finds 23 of the 107 features which are deemed typical of AAE (from a total of 237 features in the *World Atlas of Variation in English*, WAVE). She stresses the oral character of the letter writing ("language of immediacy", p. 221). According to Siebers, the analysis of the letters can help to gain "Level 3" and "Level 4" insights (referring to Hickey's "classification of insights from emigrant letters" in his introductory chapter) into the history of AAE, i.e., they help to determine the period in which non-standard vernacular features probably came into use and they can "confirm features known from later sources and observations of present-day speakers" (p. 9). As the letters display a considerable amount of interspeaker variation, the bigger corpus may allow for an examination of the language in the letters "with regard to social and gender variation" (p. 234). In Chapter 11, Alexander Kautzsch uses a similar corpus (*Corpus of Earlier African American English-Letters*, CEAAE-L), consisting of "345 letters written by semi-literate African Americans" (p. 240), and compares his findings with results of an analysis of AAE transcribed speech (*Corpus of Earlier African American English-Liberia*, CEAAE-TS). In the CEAAE-TS, he finds a higher proportion of non-standard morphosyntactic features listed in the WAVE than in the CEAAE-L. Although both corpora share 58% of the 235 WAVE features – which prompts Kautzsch to claim that "the standardizing effect of the written medium is not exceptionally strong in semi-literate writing" (p. 252) –, he recommends "a strict separation of written and speech-like data", as "even a small degree of literacy has an astounding standardization effect on non-standard grammar" (p. 253). The last chapter, Chapter 12, widens the scope of vernacular correspondence insofar as the analyses of letters presented here do not pertain to emigrant letters. Stephanie Hackert investigates a "corpus of earlier Caribbean vernacular English", consisting of "more than one

hundred letters written in 1963 by former Panama Canal workers as part of a competition commemorating the 50th anniversary of the opening of the canal” (p. 261, abstract). Thus, the texts are more personal accounts (or narratives) rather than private letters addressed to a particular person. Hackert investigates the most pervasive feature in such narrative texts, i.e., the use of past tense inflections. The main finding of her statistical analyses is that “the alternation between unmarked and past-inflected verbs has shown that the abstract patterning of variation observed for this feature in the Panama letters [...] is exactly that found in previous studies of variable past inflection in CECs [=Caribbean English-lexifiers creoles] and related varieties” (p. 281).

All contributions in this volume adopt a historical sociolinguistic and/or a historical pragmatic approach. Most of them offer a good insight into the socio-historic and biographic background of the letter writers, and most papers also provide plenty of examples and illustrations of linguistic features in the letters which can be characterised as “IrE”, “vernacular”, “non-standard” etc. The papers are relatively diverse with regard to the methodology used. This may be due to the fact that some of the letter corpora are fairly small and/or still under construction; accordingly, contributions such as the ones by Dossena, Amador-Moreno and Bonness are more exploratory and qualitative in nature. For this reason, they present findings of preliminary investigations of these relatively new corpora rather than results of hypothesis-driven analyses. In only a few contributions is it noticeable that they hint at explanations for certain developments rather than discussing them in detail.

All in all, the volume presents the breadth of current research on emigrant letters and shows the exciting potential inherent in this type of text for the study of the varieties of English. There is some disagreement in the papers on whether emigrant writers are ‘communities of practice’ and whether they are suitable for network studies. But such issues are of course related to the data situation, the availability of biographical information as well as the structure of the corpora. There are also differences among the studies in this volume in terms of the quality of the data used. Most of the contributors have worked with corpora of originally hand-written letters. In general, it is recommended to work with literal transliterations of original material whenever possible – or at least with diplomatically edited texts, which allow for a comparison with the original letters. Such synopses of originals and transliterations are not only essential for graphemic analyses (if not grammatical analyses in general); a look at original letters may also solve one puzzle or the other. For instance, Dollinger, who used a “verbatim edition” for his PEEC, wonders about a writer’s statement on “his ‘bad writing’, when in fact it is a polished letter” (p. 54, cf. also the title of his paper *I hope you will excuse my bad*

writing). Could the writer not simply have been referring to his poor handwriting, as scribes of German letters did (cf. Elspaß 2005: 151–152, 2007: 154)?

To sum up, the contributions in this volume impressively demonstrate what a treasure trove emigrant letters present, not only for scholars investigating the histories of different varieties of English but for historical sociolinguists in general. Due to the linguistic and socio-historic characteristics referred to at the beginning of this review, such letters are a very suitable, if not the most suitable, text genre to study the diachronic trajectories of present-day variation, but also of historic variants, which have not left any traces in present-day varieties. Arguably, such texts can even be viewed as valuable sources for alternative histories of standardisation (cf. Elspaß 2015, 2020). This volume could serve as a model for similar edited volumes on world-wide varieties of larger languages such as French or Spanish. Going beyond the single-language perspective, comparative work on common structures would also be desirable. A next step could entail conducting comparative studies across languages on common writing strategies, network patterns and common linguistic structures – if not ‘vernacular universals’ – in emigrant letters and similar texts of historical orality.

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