

Book Review

Marijke J. van der Wal & Gijsbert Rutten (eds.). 2013. *Touching the Past. Studies in the Historical Sociolinguistics of Ego-documents* (Advances in Historical Sociolinguistics 1). Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins. ISBN 9789027200808 (hardback), vii, 279 pp. €99.00

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The publisher is to be congratulated on the launch of a new series of scholarly volumes in which studies in historical sociolinguistics will appear, as this field of research has been drawing considerable attention over the last few years. Since more digitized editions of texts have become available, it has become easier to assemble increasingly representative corpora; however, only a small number of them include manuscript sources, as these are less easily available and require time-consuming operations of transcription and systematic proof-reading. This is particularly true if the manuscripts originated among the lower classes, as their spelling, syntax, and overall use of language may not fit the typical patterns of supposedly “standard” usage, and may thus require some degree of normalization (though of course without erasing the original source) before they can be added to a computerized collection of documents. And yet such materials have proved of considerable importance for the study of language, whether its internal history or its external history are concerned. In particular, ego-documents, i.e. diaries, memoirs, and of course correspondence, have shown how valuable they can be for the investigation of language history “from below” – i.e. going beyond the dicta of grammarians, the usage of educated writers, and the recommendations of prescriptivists in general, in order to investigate real, possibly rather unmonitored, usage on the part of ordinary speakers, whose schooling may not have been very extensive, but whose communicative competence could nonetheless enable them to use language efficiently and effectively. Such topics have recently been the object of investigation in several contexts – for instance, within the Historical Sociolinguistics Network:¹ see Elspaß et al. (2007) and Vandebussche and Elspaß (2007) – but also at a conference specifically devoted to letter writing in Late Modern Europe (Dossena and Del Lungo Camiciotti 2012). The book

¹ See <http://hison.sbg.ac.at> (accessed September 2014).

under review here places itself within this academic framework, as the editors present findings that were first discussed at a conference held in Leiden (NL) in June 2011, and organized in connection with the *Letters as Loot* research programme.²

In the introductory chapter, Marijke J. van der Wal and Gijsbert Rutten outline the main theoretical and methodological issues pertaining to the study of ego-documents, stressing their importance especially as far as their relationship with spoken language is concerned, before offering an overview of the contents of the individual chapters and an illustration of their mutual cohesiveness. While it is argued that the papers focus on three different aspects of investigation (“Social difference and variation in context”, “Representing the self”, and “Speech and writing”), the Table of Contents does not make this distinction explicit, possibly because the three aspects constantly interact with each other.

As for the other twelve contributions in the book, they deal with four languages (French, Dutch, English, and Lithuanian), albeit in a predictably different way from the quantitative point of view: while there is just one paper on Lithuanian, there are as many as six on English (for which there is perhaps a longer tradition of ego-document study), three on French, and two on Dutch, both pertaining to the *Letters as Loot* project. The time span of investigations is equally broad, though with a clear majority of papers dealing with Late Modern times, perhaps on account of the fact that far fewer materials have survived from earlier centuries: two papers deal with the sixteenth century, while one looks at letters written during the First World War. Similarly, papers offer analyses of usage in different social classes: from ladies-in-waiting to slaves, from coal miners to merchants and even important literary figures. This variety of contents bears witness to the richness of the material, but also indicates that studies in this field may run into potentially difficult methodological questions when it comes to the comparability of findings. In what follows, a brief overview of individual chapters will be provided, prior to outlining a general evaluation of the book.

The volume opens with Anthony Lodge’s paper on “A lady-in-waiting’s begging letter to her former employer (Paris, mid-sixteenth century)”, in which phonetic and morphological variants are discussed in relation to issues concerning the autograph status of letters, the acceptability of variation, and its quality as an indication of class. The following two contributions, one by Gijsbert Rutten and Marijke J. van der Wal on “Epistolary formulae and writing experience in Dutch letters from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries” and one by Judith

² See <http://www.brievenalsbuit.nl> (accessed September 2014).

Nobels and Tanja Simons on “From *ul* to *U.E.*: A socio-historical study of Dutch forms of address in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century private letters” rely on materials collected for the *Letters as Loot* project to investigate formulaic usage in correspondence. While Rutten and van der Wal discuss this in relation to writing experience, Nobels and Simons discuss the same letters in relation to social class, though of course social class and writing experience are not unrelated.

Ingrid Tieken-Boon van Ostade’s contribution centres on the occurrence of flat adverbs (i.e., those not ending with a *-ly* suffix) in Jane Austen’s letters, especially in relation to their occurrence in informal usage. Familiar usage is also the object of Carita Klippi’s paper on “Letters from Gaston B.: A prisoner’s voice during the Great War”, in which the author investigates usage as witnessed in the letters in relation to schooling and its impact on the sender’s writing competence.

Also France Martineau, in her paper on “Written documents: What they tell us about linguistic usage”, discusses the hybridization of local oral characteristics with supraregional writing ones in the diary kept by a New French (Canadian) merchant in the second half of the eighteenth century and in a collection of letters exchanged in English or in French in the Campau family: in the letters, issues relating to choice of code (English or French) appear to depend on generational variation, with the younger members of the family gradually moving to exclusive use of English.

The next five papers deal with self-representation from different points of view. First of all, Peter Burke discusses “The rhetoric of autobiography in the seventeenth century”, then letters take centre stage again in the papers by Arja Nurmi (“All the rest ye must lade yourself”: Deontic modality in sixteenth-century English merchant letters”), Anni Sairio (“Cordials and sharp satyrs: Stance and self-fashioning in eighteenth-century letters”), and Matylda Włodarczyk (“Self-reference and ego involvement in the 1820 Settler petition as a *leaking genre*”). What the three papers have in common is the attention paid to the construction of social distance, the negotiation of power, and the need to reconcile possibly contrasting communicative needs, such as making requests while meeting the reader’s expectations in terms of formality. Finally, Aurelija Tamošiūnaitė analyzes “Ego-documents in Lithuanian: *Orthographic identities* at the turn of the twentieth century” in the light of the spelling reforms that were under way at the turn of the twentieth century and the ideological implications that choice of script could have for language users.

The last contribution in the volume, by Laura Wright, focuses on “The language of slaves on the island of St Helena, South Atlantic, 1682–1724”, and resumes the debate on the relationship between speech and writing in

ego-documents; the author's thought-provoking reflections on naming practices in the context of slavery will, and perhaps should, encourage further investigation.

The book includes a general index, and comes across as an important addition to the growing corpus of studies on materials which – up to fairly recent times – had obtained a far smaller amount of attention than they deserved. Despite some minor inconsistencies (“ego-documents” is spelt as one word, with, and without a hyphen in different contributions), what might be an excess of zeal towards non-expert readers (did the citation in the title of Nurmi's contribution really need to be glossed?), and the absence of images where they are promised (p. 21), the book will prove of considerable interest both to scholars already working in the field and to students approaching the complexities of language use in different social contexts in a historical perspective.

References

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