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Letter Writing and Language Change outlines the historical sociolinguistic value of letter analysis, in both theory and practice. The chapters in this volume make use of insights from all three 'Waves of Variation Studies', and many of them, either implicitly or explicitly, look at specific aspects of the language of the letter writers in an effort to discover how those writers position themselves and how they attempt, consciously or unconsciously, to construct social identities. The letters are largely from people in the lower strata of social structure, either to addressees of the same social status or of a higher status. In this sense, the question of the use of 'standard' and/or 'non-standard' varieties of English is in the forefront of the contributors' interest. Ultimately, the studies challenge the assumption that there is only one 'legitimate' and homogeneous form of English or of any other language.

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Contents

<i>List of figures</i>	<i>page</i> ix
<i>List of tables</i>	x
<i>List of contributors</i>	xii
<i>Preface and acknowledgements</i>	xiii
1 Setting the scene: letters, standards and historical sociolinguistics <i>Richard J. Watts</i>	1
2 Assessing variability and change in early English letters <i>Juan Manuel Hernández-Campoy and Juan Camilo Conde-Silvestre</i>	14
3 Private letters as a source for an alternative history of Middle New High German <i>Stephan Elspaß</i>	35
4 Language in print and handwriting <i>Tony Fairman</i>	53
5 Heterogeneity vs. homogeneity <i>Marianne Hundt</i>	72
6 Emerging standards in the colonies: variation and the Canadian letter writer <i>Stefan Dollinger</i>	101
7 Linguistic fingerprints of authors and scribes <i>Alexander Bergs</i>	114
8 Stylistic variation <i>Anita Auer</i>	133
9 English aristocratic letters <i>Susan Fitzmaurice</i>	156
10 Early nineteenth-century pauper letters <i>Mikko Laitinen</i>	185
11 A non-standard standard? Exploring the evidence from nineteenth-century vernacular letters and diaries <i>Barbara Allen</i>	202

viii	<i>Contents</i>	
12	Archaism and dialect in Irish emigrant letters <i>Lukas Pietsch</i>	223
13	Assessing heterogeneity <i>Lucia Siebers</i>	240
14	Hypercorrection and the persistence of local dialect features in writing <i>Daniel Schreier</i>	264
15	Epilogue: Where next? <i>Anita Auer, Daniel Schreier and Richard J. Watts</i>	277
	<i>References</i>	288
	<i>Person index</i>	319
	<i>Subject index</i>	324

Figures

2.1	Average usage of the innovating form <th> per birth date of the male members of the Paston family	<i>page</i> 28
2.2	Average usage of the innovating form <th> per generation in the male members of the Paston family	28
2.3	Average usage of the innovating form <th> among the male members of the Paston family	29
2.4	Progression of the adoption of the new form <th> in William Paston I, John Paston I, William Paston II and John Paston III	32
3.1	The model of ‘language of immediacy vs. language of distance’ following Koch and Oesterreicher (1985: 18, 23; 1994: 588)	38
3.2	Prototypical communicative parameters of ‘language of immediacy’ and ‘language of distance’ according to Koch and Oesterreicher (1985: 23) and Oesterreicher (1997: 194)	39
6.1	Davidson’s (1845: 153) treatment of <i>shall</i> & <i>will</i> (‘etymology’ section)	106
7.1	Family tree and biodata of the Pastons, 1421–1503	119
7.2	Pronoun forms (<i>hem</i> vs. <i>them</i> , <i>here</i> vs. <i>their</i>) in Margaret Paston across time	125
7.3	Relativisers in restrictive and non-restrictive relative clauses in the Paston letters	127
7.4	The loss of non-restrictive <i>that</i> across time (in %)	128
7.5	Innovation and change in social networks	131
10.1	Nineteenth-century letter writing in immediate sociocultural milieu (Image from James Collinson’s <i>Answering the Emigrant’s Letter</i> (1850). Reproduced with the kind permission of the copyright owners, the Manchester City Galleries.)	190
14.1	Present <i>be</i> concord with pivot form <i>is</i> in spoken TdCE	269
14.2	Present <i>be</i> levelling in letters of author A (TdC female, b. 1946)	273
14.3	Present <i>be</i> levelling in letters of author B (TdC female, b. 1928)	273

Tables

2.1	Percentage of <i>-(e)s</i> in three successive apparent time analyses of materials in the <i>CEEC</i> (1530–1629)	<i>page</i> 19
2.2	Informants	22
2.3	Variable (<i>th</i>), distribution per informant and letters	27
2.4	Age and period of letter writing	27
2.5	Informants and letters	30
3.1	Use of comparison particles after the comparative	47
3.2	Use of grammatical case after ‘prepositions governing the genitive’	48
3.3	Use of <i>nicht brauchen</i> with or without particle <i>zu</i> and the infinitive	48
4.1	A Chesterfield letter (Bath, 26 October 1739) and the printed version	57
5.1	Composition of the New Zealand letter collection	74
5.2	Social background of male authors	74
5.3	Adjectives as adverbs in the New Zealand letter collection	83
6.1	Ontario letter data, 1776–1849	103
6.2	Origins of letter writers in <i>CONTE-pC</i> , identified writers in percent	103
6.3	Print run (and, implicitly, copies sold) of Davidson’s <i>Canada Spelling Book</i>	105
6.4	First person <i>shall</i> and <i>will</i> in <i>BCE</i> print data (n). Declaratives	108
6.5	First person <i>shall</i> and <i>will</i> in Canadian letters, declaratives. Percent (n)	108
6.6	Period 1: first person <i>shall</i> & <i>will</i> in letters, declaratives. Percent (n)	109
6.7	Letter data from SIN (Scottish, Irish and Northern English) immigrants to Canada	110
7.1	Authors, texts and approximate word frequencies in the Paston letters	120
7.2	Scribes in the Paston letters	120
7.3	Development of plural pronoun forms in English	121
7.4	The use of third person pronoun forms by Edmond II, John II and John III when acting as authors and scribes	124
9.1	Common abbreviations	167

List of tables xi

9.2	Derived nominals in the letters	176
10.1	Verbs used in the speech act of asking for pauper aid	199
10.2	Frequencies of the four discourse features in Essex pauper letters	200
12.1	Distribution of word counts across areas and time periods in the <i>Hamburg Corpus of Irish English (HCIE)</i>	229
12.2	Periphrastic <i>do</i> constructions in the <i>HCIE</i> , by sub-period	232
12.3	Periphrastic <i>do</i> constructions in the <i>HCIE</i> , by region	232
13.1	<i>Was</i> by number, person and subject type	255
13.2	<i>Was</i> by number, person and subject type in the freedmen letters	258
13.3	Third person plural verbal <i>-s</i> on auxiliary <i>be</i> and <i>have</i> by subject type	259

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Preface and acknowledgements

The present volume originated in a colloquium entitled ‘Heterogeneity versus homogeneity in language: Searching for a “standard” in letters’, which was held at Utrecht University, 12–14 November 2009 and organised by the editors of this volume. As the title of the colloquium indicates, it was our aim to bring together (socio)historical linguists who have worked with (manuscript) letters and/or compiled letter corpora of geographical, social and stylistic varieties of English. On invitation, papers were presented by the following (socio)historical linguists (in alphabetical order): Barbara Allen, Anita Auer, Stefan Dollinger, Stephan Elspaß, Tony Fairman, Susan Fitzmaurice, Marianne Hundt, Mikko Laitinen, Terttu Nevalainen, Lukas Pietsch, Daniel Schreier, Lucia Siebers, Richard Watts and Laura Wright. The expertise of these scholars covers not only the history of letter writing in English, i.e. different varieties of English, but also different methodological and theoretical approaches to the topic.

Unfortunately, not all the presenters were able to contribute a chapter to this volume. Hence, in order to cover the earlier letter-writing periods in the history of English, some additional scholars, notably Alexander Berge, Juan Manuel Hernández-Campoy and Juan Camilo Conde-Silvestre, were invited to contribute chapters to the present volume. For this reason, the present volume should not merely be seen as the proceedings of a colloquium but as a volume that sheds light on the state of the art of letter writing and language change.

As the editors of this volume, we would like to thank the contributors to the colloquium and all the contributors to this volume for their great work and for their patience with the volume editors. We would also like to express our thanks to Merja Kytö, the series editor, and to Helen Barton, the commissioning editor, for their support throughout the editing and publication process of this volume.