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*Intra-writer variation at the top of the social hierarchy in 17th-century Germany:
The letters of Prince Ludwig von Anhalt-Köthen*

Recently, variationist researchers have shown a growing interest for intra-writer variation in historical letters. Thanks to the increasing accessibility of correspondence of individuals from middle and lower social classes, letters have often been used to observe ongoing language change from below (s. contributions in Dossena/Del Lungo Camiciotti 2012; Auer et al. 2015).

This paper addresses intra-writer variation in historical letters from a different perspective, focusing rather on style-shifting in high social classes in 17th-century Germany, a context of strict social behaviour rules, in which letters were a codified genre with – seemingly – small room for personal style (Furger 2010). Through an analysis of the correspondence of Prince Ludwig von Anhalt-Köthen from 1638–1643, the paper shows how intra-writer variation can occur even under such constraints.

The aim of the paper is to assess whether style-shift in Ludwig's letters follows addressee-based accommodative patterns and whether initiative style-shifting is observable. Bell's (updated) concepts of Audience and Referee Design (Bell 2001) serve as a theoretical point of reference.

To study the presence of Audience Design in Ludwig's letters, five addressee groups were selected: i. family members; ii. peers; iii. untitled nobles; iv. untitled nobles (intellectuals); v. non-noble intellectuals. To avoid effects from other variables, gender and regional origin of the addressees as well as the topic of the letters were kept constant.

The corpus was then analysed quantitatively and qualitatively with respect to indexed features associated with the writing style of high social classes: i. high syntactic complexity; ii. adverbs and pronouns in *-o* (*dero, jetzo* instead of *der, jetzt*). The analysis shows that convergent accommodation to Audienceship is observable in Ludwig's letters: the degree of syntactic complexity correlates with the social status of his addressees, reaching its peak in letters to his peers, decreasing in letters to untitled nobles and intellectuals (with no relevant distinction between nobles and commoners), and the lowest grade in letters to close family members.

References

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