

The observee's paradox. Accounting for differences between types of ego-document

Ego-documents are at the heart of language history ‘from below’. Contrary to what a label such as ‘ego-document’ or ‘private writing’ might suggest, we are dealing with a heterogeneous group of genres comprising i.a. private letters, diaries and journals. It has been observed that there are important linguistic differences between private letters on the one hand, and diaries/ journals on the other: the latter often seem surprisingly formal; various empirical studies have confirmed these differences. Theoretical models of register variation (Biber & Conrad 2009; Yañez-Bouza 2015) and orality (Koch & Oesterreicher 1985) can partially explain the differences, without however offering a full explanation of the formality of diaries/ journals. We argue that it is crucial to take into account theories and explanations recently developed by social historians concerning the increase of diaries/ journals in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (Baggerman 2011). This makes it possible to show that the formality of diaries/ journals is related to what might be called the ‘observee’s paradox’: while producing a monologic text principally unintended for any audience, the unobserved writer creates a tangible object that will stand time and could be read by anyone in the future, which causes a shift towards more formal language.

References

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