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Style-shifting and individual language use in French logbook entries during the 17th–18th centuries

My talk focuses on the analysis of documents from the 17th–18th centuries which were written during or right after transatlantic voyages by naval officers, pilots and captains on behalf of the French Navy.

Besides displaying a high level of reading and writing skills (cf. van Lottum/Poulson 2011: 68), the writers strictly obey linguistic, structural and content related rules that the text genre “logbook” required (cf. Sankey 2010: 402) and were understood by the small group they were addressed to (cf. Delgado 2017: 216): In the Navy, these documents served as juridical, scientific and administrative tools (cf. Borde/Roulet 2015: ix) that helped to record detailed strategical, nautical and geographical findings.

Nevertheless, a logbook is often a “hybrid and individualistic genre” (Sankey 2010): Alternating with obligatory text passages that display standardized linguistic structures, one can find passages in which the writers seem to flexibly choose their linguistic variety and to give up “officiality” and its rigid structures in favor of individual language use: Enhanced by the isolation on board, these text genres can serve the writers as personal diaries (*journal intime*) that allow them to express their identity and give us insights into their thoughts, feelings, and personal opinions.

Methodologically, my research is based on a rich sample of administrative and pragmatic texts such as logbooks and letters. By analyzing them, I want to shed light on the functional literacy on the one hand, which is linked to the administration and nautical practice in maritime communities and characterized by the use of structural and linguistic rules that these text genres required, and on the other hand on the “flexibility” and the individual language use that can be found in passages within the same document, that were specific to the communication situation and social context on board as well as the writer’s personality.

References

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