Patterns of interaction in Early English Correspondence

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This paper focuses on language as social interaction, exploring the use of the first and second person pronouns in a sample of sixteenth-century English personal letters extracted from the Corpus of Early English Correspondence. These pronouns are studied for their pragmatic meaning as linguistic devices showing the relationship between the letter writers. The writer and the addressee are overtly referred to by means of the first and second person pronouns, which are therefore likely to show both quantitative and qualitative variation according to the addressee, as in examples (1) and (2).

(1) I ame well assured that your Lordship will not finde fault with any thinge done touchinge this cause when you shalbe let to understand the truthe of the procedinge therein. Thus beseching God to blesse your Lordship with an increase of his holie spirit to his glory and your great comfort, I humblie take my leave.

(Nathaniel Bacon to Lord North, Steward of the Duchy of Lancaster in Norfolk, Suffolk and Cambridge, 1582, p. II, 227)

(2) Aldred, yf the rentes of West Somerton be ready & gathered, I wold have them delivered to Momforth, the bearer hearof. Toucching your rent corne I am content he shall bargaine with yow either for the whole or for your part....

(Nathaniel Bacon to Goodman Aldred, 1570s, p. I, 93)

These examples are from letters written by Nathaniel Bacon, a Norfolk gentleman, to two very different addressees. Example (1) concerns local administrative matters and was written to a baron, who was definitely Bacon’s superior. Example (2) concerns the business of farming and was written to a local yeoman, addressed as goodman Aldred and definitely Bacon’s social inferior.

The examples represent very different styles of writing showing the writer-addressee relationship. The letter to a nobleman seems to be more polite with honorific address (your Lordship), generally roundabout ways of saying things (I am well assured that...) and the emphasis on the writer’s humbleness (I humbly take my leave). The letter to a local goodman, on the otherhand, states the business directly (I wold have them delivered) and does not employ polite phrases. The first and second person pronouns are involved in these strategies.

In this paper, I shall experiment with quantitative methods to see if we can measure these stylistic differences. I shall also analyse qualitative differences in the way different letter writers use the first and second persons. My claim is that the use of the first and second persons is pragmatically meaningful for the discourse of social hierarchies of the period and that discourse styles vary according to the addressee. Different social ranks also seem to have used different discourse styles.
References


