

LETTERS FROM THE FRONT: A HISTORICAL SOCIOLINGUISTIC ANALYSIS OF TRENCH LETTERS WRITTEN BY SCOTTISH SOLDIERS

Historical correspondence has been the object of increasing interest in the field of English linguistics; such research interests, in the case of vernacular letters, offer a valuable insight into language use seen from below. While lower order letters differ from oral autobiographical memories, they can be considered “as close to speech as non-fictional historical texts can be” (Elspaß 2014: 156).

This work investigates a corpus of personal letters produced by semi-literate Scottish soldiers serving on the Western Front in the Great War. The corpus has a total of approximately 94,477 running words written between September 1914 and late November 1916 and thus covers the first two years of the conflict. Since letter writing is a socially situated practice, one in which meaning, and significance derive from its situation in “cultural beliefs, values, and practices” (Barton and Hall 1999), such letters can afford the modern-day reader a glimpse of the letter writers’ experiences and views as texts are always historical as is discourse as it is inextricably linked to both contexts and other discourses (Wodak & Meyer 2009).

The letters in the corpus were written to members of the soldiers’ immediate families, a setting in which Scots is likely to have been used. While the letters are written in English, there are frequent occurrences of Standard Scottish English (SSE) and Scots. Instances of SSE and Scots use were then subjected to thematic analysis. The analysis reveals how the letter writers adopted Scots words when referring to specific topics closely related to home and family; instead, SSE was used less frequently than English. The analysis suggests that Scots was a vital part of the soldiers’ linguistic repertoire employed in letter-writing that, in turn, enabled them to lessen physical and emotional distances.

References

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