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Editorial

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Sincerity and epistolarity: Multilingual historical pragmatic perspectives

The history of letter-writing in Europe is profoundly multilingual: not just in the obvious sense that Europe is historically multilingual, but also in that the language of letters from different vernacular traditions often shares similar influences. This may be by way of predecessors (e. g. epistolary Latin) or as a result of genre-specific contact across multilingual communities of practice. Thus understanding anything about the features of this written mode of communication – in any language – requires a multilingual discussion. As a genre of writing that spans centuries of practice, letters afford us the opportunity to explore a range of questions to do with social and linguistic practices and change across periods and languages; as such, the letter holds enduring interest for linguists, literary critics, historians and pragmaticians alike. To communicate by way of a letter is to engage with an ancient and dynamic form of social practice (Barton and Hall 1999) and the form and function are in turn governed by the norms of behaviour (i. e. etiquette and pragmatics of interaction) prevailing in the society in which the letter is produced, consumed and exchanged between parties. Part of the letter's distinctiveness among genres may be attributed to the extent to which its language is explicitly shaped by the presence of two subjects – the writer and the addressee – and the relationship between them. This relationship varies, of course, from kinship to acquaintance to business connection, and the emotional, expressive content of a letter varies with respect to its relational purpose. What is more is the letter's distinctive discursive manner, wherein the writer collapses the temporal and spatial distance with the addressee by seeming to speak to them as if they were present at the moment

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of writing,[1] a fact that does much to influence the pragmatics of letters and the types of linguistic performances they involve.

The history of the letter in the West also presents a compelling way of tracking the development of literacy in these societies; and depending upon the level of education, literateness, and socio-economic background and status of the correspondents, the language of letters varies dramatically in rhetoric, grammar, vocabulary, length and structure. Over the course of its history, the letter has served as an aid to learning literacy on the one hand and to social improvement on the other. In this way, the literacy afforded by letter writing is more than just grammatical-semantic; indeed, letter writing manuals in Europe since the Middle Ages have provided models of socially appropriate linguistic behaviour for learners to copy as well as demonstrations of the practice of etiquette and style for learners to master (Poster and Mitchell 2007). Thus letter writing manuals are often arranged according to pragmatically-relevant details, such as function (e. g. 'refusal') and relationship (e. g. 'from a son to his mother'). The centrality of the letter genre in the cultural as well as the literate life of societies is indicated, for example, by its role in the history of the English novel (see e. g. Bray 2003). Given all this, it is unsurprising that the letter has been the subject of historical, linguistic, literary and social study, and generated a considerable body of work across these perspectives.

This special issue of *Multilingua* focuses on one (albeit highly complex) feature of the letter, namely, the epistolary expression, or performance, of sincerity. For the most part, our contribution to the discussion arrives by way of historical sociolinguistics and pragmatics, subfields of historical linguistics that have relied much on letters as primary data in the past several decades (for an overview, see Del Lungo Camiciotti 2014). For many English speakers/writers today, sincerity is probably familiar as a standard feature of the letter, encountered principally in the closing formulaic phrases with which writers sign off. As such, the word *sincerely* might be regarded primarily as a word that has been bleached of semantic meaning over time, together with other items such as *faithfully*, when it is included as part of the conventionally polite phrase used by the writer to end the communication. Compare, for example, two of the *Oxford English Dictionary*'s definitions for the adverb *sincerely*: one with its original semantic content, 'Without dissimulation or pretence; honestly,

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[1] The extent to which a particular letter collapses the space between writer and addressee can vary. For instance, many medieval and early modern letters would have been composed by way of dictation, and may have been recited orally and/or verbally completed upon delivery – a fact that is sometimes reflected in the content of a letter, in a way drawing attention both to the temporal and physical distance between writer and addressee.

straightforwardly', and one with epistolary-discursive specificity, 'Used in the subscription of letters. Frequently in **yours sincerely**'. So when one ends a letter *sincerely* in English today (as well as its cognates in other languages), it is unlikely that there is any conscious inscription of the word's original, inwardly expressive sense. Instead, the word indicates to the reader that the letter has come to an end (a discursive-structural feature that is important to defining many genres), to be followed only by one's name/signature. Yet the development of this conventional phrase, as well as other manifestations of sincerity to be found in the body of a letter-text, have up to this point not been discussed in a multilingual, cross-period context. A discussion in this vein should be warranted by the fact that epistolary sincerity is, as we discovered in our original discussions with contributors here, employed by a wide range of communities of letter writers across languages and periods of time. Sincerity was, in one way or another, one of the primary and recurrent aspects, or functions, of the letter genre, regardless of language or period, and our contributors consider the discourse and lexical forms that letter writers employ to fulfil this function over time.

But what does *sincerity* mean? Book-length attempts have been made to address this question (e. g. Magill Jr. 2012; Williams 2018 for medieval England); but as a starting point for present purposes, let us assume that sincerity consists of the identification of actual feeling with its expression; in other words, we might assume that to speak sincerely is to speak as one actually feels. But then, might one suggest that this is something more akin to *authenticity* (see Trilling 1972 for a distinction)? Present-day speakers are likely to differ in their interpretations of these terms; and because sincerity is susceptible to variable interpretations, it yields a complex social, moral and linguistic set of behaviours that are described and evaluated by a set of expressions that (for present-day English) includes *honest, true, plain* and *faithful*. In this sense, sincerity cannot be reduced to the congruence of an inward feeling and its outward expression. The interpretations of sincerity and the variation in its pragmatic use range from 'purity' (feeling the right way at the right time), 'honesty' (being true to oneself), through the 'avowal of feeling' (self-expression) to 'genuineness' (of expression rather than of person). From a cultural perspective, the meaning of sincerity is just as much moral or ideological as it is semantic.

Sincerity as a set of forms (*sincere; sincerely; sincerity*) and as a concept [SINCERITY], including a number of synonyms, appears in most European languages with Latin as their common source. That said, meanings change over time and vary across languages despite the status of clearly related items as cognates; therefore, we examine 'sincerity' from a semasiological as well as an onomasiological perspective in different languages. What links them is the

common lexical pool from which each language selects linguistic resources over time. The antecedent of modern English *sincere,* French *sincere*, Italian *sincero* and Spanish *sincere/a* is Latin SINCERUS (cf. Thomas; de Toni; Williams this volume). Yet the concept of [SINCERITY] does not require the lexical item for it to be conveyed in language; Williams (this volume) examines the language that writers drew upon in the absence of the availability of the lexical item 'sincerity' in Middle English and Anglo-Norman in order to perform sincerity as part of late medieval social courtesy. Tamošiūnaite (this volume) takes an onomasiological approach to the examination of how Lithuanian letter writers between the late nineteenth and early twenty-first centuries deploy different lexical realisations of [SINCERITY] as the language changes to encode their stance, their attitude towards their interlocutor.

Taken together, our contributions paint a complex landscape of the semantic history of the concept of sincerity in each language over time as witnessed through letters. For example, Thomas observes that 'up through the mid nineteenth century, the French *sincérité* has a broader semantic range than its Spanish counterpart'. She notes that the French lexical field of terms associated with sincerity is very large (including lexical expressions related to authenticity, honesty, truth and frankness, purity, affection, love and the heart). She found that the lexical term *sincérité* itself appears more frequently than any other expression in her corpus. In contrast, the Spanish documents in her corpus did not show that the lexical item *sinceros* enjoyed the same prominence. Instead, she found that Spanish speakers in the corpus appear to favour the explicit mention of honesty, affection, or religion in place of explicit mentions of 'sincerity'. De Toni notes that in nineteenth-century Spanish and Italian lexicographic sources, there is a clear identification of the association between the heart and sincerity. This association is underlined in the New Norcia monastic correspondence he explores via the use of terms belonging to the lexical families of the heart in Italian and Spanish. He observes that the 'heart [is used] as a metonymy for the speaker's faculty of feeling … across all the letters'. Indeed, the prominence of the congruence of heart and sincerity is shown to be extensive and enduring; Williams comments on the fact that for late medieval Europeans, because 'the heart was the locus of both cognitive and affective interiority [...] it is not surprising that AN *de/du coer* (literally 'with heart') should be one of the primary sincerity markers'. And it thus follows that for Lithuanian, the metapragmatics of sincerity should be performed by lexemes denoting the heart (*šird-*) to the extent that these predominate in Tamošiūnaite's corpus of letters. One particular example provided by Tamošiūnaite creatively addresses the seemingly impossible gap between inward truth and outward expression, namely where one writer discursively constructs his sincere self by

making an explicit link between frankness, honesty and a seemingly pre-verbal (i. e. before dialects of the tongue transform it) 'language of the heart': *Rašau atvirai tai, ką pasako mano paties širdis, be dialektų* (Piečiukaitis 1958-12-05; 'I write frankly and that what my own heart tells [me] without any dialects').

One way of interpreting the communicative, pragmatic function of these types of epistolary performances is by way of speech act theory and the concomitant idea of felicity conditions. The idea of sincerity as a felicity condition that must be satisfied for a speaker to perform a speech act is a fundamental part of Searle's original theory (1969), and this is likely to be what most pragmaticians associate with sincerity as a theoretical term of study. However, in the studies for this volume, the notion of sincerity is the object of pragmatic exploration itself; it is not the metalinguistic label for a technique of speech act analysis (for explication see Williams, this volume; Fitzmaurice 2016).

Our contributors consider the role that the notion of sincerity plays in persuading readers that the letter serves as a direct, affective and trustworthy representation of the speaker (or writer), and they examine the ways in which letter writers deploy the linguistic resources available to them in their language and period to perform epistolary sincerity as a method of communicating both interpersonal (pragmatic) and generic (text-discursive) expectations. These are performances that are more and less to do with the avowal of inward feeling and/or a matter of social expectations within their community of practice (e. g. doing courtesy in the Middle Ages or business in the late modern period), depending upon a letter's language, period and context of production. In other words, this collection considers the extent to which words associated with [SINCERITY] maintain their meaning in the medium over time and the extent to which they are appropriated by larger fields of discourse and/or become bleached as they are used conventionally (as in the case of *yours sincerely*).

In addition to these more general considerations, the discursive construction of epistolary sincerity also varies from writer to writer, of course. It is striking how the particular nature and circumstances of a specific epistolary relationship can characterise the letters exchanged between two individuals as a unique correspondence. Jane Austen's letters to her niece Cassandra, written in the first years of the nineteenth century, draw an idiosyncratic character whose notion of the letter is an occasion for an intimate, honest, if slightly mischievous intervention (ed. Le Faye 1995: 114–115):

> A few days ago I had a letter from Miss Irvine, and as I was in her debt, you will guess it to be a remonstrance, not a very severe one however; the first page is in her usual retrospective, jealous, inconsistent style, but the remainder is chatty and harmless. She supposes my silence may have proceeded from resentment of her not having written to inquire

particularly after my hooping cough, &c. She is a funny one. I have answered her letter, and have endeavoured to give something like the truth with as little incivility as I could, by placing my silence to the want of subject in the very quiet way in which we live. (Jane Austen to Cassandra Austen, Wednesday January 7, 1807)

In this excerpt, Jane Austen deploys language which invites the inference that she is sufficiently comfortable in her relationship with her niece to be quite judgmental of poor Miss Irvine; her style, her reasons for writing and her supposed motives for conducting the correspondence as she does. Austen's language is evaluative and she addresses directly the matter of truth in her reported response to her correspondent. In fact, Austen dissembles – she is not sincere here – as she claims that she has nothing to share with Miss Irvine because of her very uneventful and quiet life, but at the same time her letter to Cassandra (which includes this little story) is full of frankly expressed gossip. Her discourse illustrates the extent to which she can convey her genuineness of feeling for her correspondent while avoiding the formulae that would render the correspondence more formal and conventional (and in this context at least, less 'meaningful' as a result). From a modern perspective, most would probably agree that all this somehow makes Austen's message to her niece more sincere, especially when juxtaposed with the interaction she recounts in the letter. However, according to earlier ideals, namely Christian ones, associated with sincerity as a type of moral purity, idle gossip (once a sin of the tongue) sits somewhat uncomfortably in the 'sincere' category. Again, the currency of sincerity, or what type of truth it represents, is contingent on the cultural-historical context in which it is produced and interpreted.

The letter from Austen provides an example of a type of sincerity that is achieved over the entirety of a letter without predictable forms derived from conventional epistolary language; but in contrast to the discursive construction of sincerity in the body of a letter, where we find a range of lexical and pragmatic expressions, the openings and closings of the letter can serve to codify sincerity as a trait that belongs to the letter as a matter of convention rather than intervention. Language at the opening and closing of any discursive-generic sequence, e. g. a conversation (*hello/hi ... goodbye*, originally *God be with you*), is particularly prone to pragmaticalisation, or discursisation (see Claridge and Arnovick 2010), which might be referred to as a form of conventionalization and loss of semantic content. This observation seems to hold true for 'sincerity' in a number of languages as the letter becomes increasingly generic and recognisable as a particular way of communicating in writing. In English letters, the writer's attitude has, over time, been conventionalized in the salutations that open and close letters. For comparison, an addressee need not be 'dear' to a

writer in order for them to be addressed as *dear* in the opening of a letter or email; indeed opening a letter with this form is a marker of conventionalized formality (vs. *hi,* for example) rather than an expression of affectivity related to the word's original semantic content.[2] Likewise, the signatory encodes the relationship that the writer shares with the addressee with terms such as *sincerely*, *faithfully*, etc., but these emerge as constitutive of letters only in the nineteenth century, as discussed by Shvanyukova (this volume), who examines the gradual formalisation of the closing formula *yours sincerely* in the business letter and its codification in contemporary letter-writing manuals. The capture of the notion of sincerity in a closing formula may thus become an identifying feature of the letter as a text genre through instruction and prescription.

Tendencies toward the conventional language of sincerity are furthermore associated with stylistic choice, literacy of the writer in the language of composition (L1 or L2?), and the establishment of conventions in any one language versus another (especially relevant in cases of bilingual correspondence and epistolary-based language contact). In Lithuanian letters produced in the twentieth century, sincerity lexemes appear in a number of formulaic contexts, but they are not deployed in any distinctively conventional manner. Tamošiūnaite notes that 'inscription of the writer's stance toward the addressee in the closing formulae seems to depend on the writer's individual style and the social distance between the writer and the addressee, i. e. the level of formality (official vs. personal letter)'. This is an interesting point in the context of the observation that less practiced writers may tend to rely more heavily on formulaic language than those who are expert letter writers (cf. Dossena 2012; Fairman 2012), as Tamošiūnaite notes that 'letter writing as a social practice evolved only at the turn of the twentieth century as a result of increasing literacy rates'. Likewise, Thomas observes that in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, bilingual writers who are Spanish-dominant rely heavily on formulaic language to perfect letter writing in French. At the same time, she notes that bilingual speakers are able to deploy linguistic and formulaic resources creatively to exploit the semantic range of sincerity to maximise the range of their communicative repertoire. De Toni examines the epistolary language used within a nineteenth-century monastic network to perform friendship and commitment. He notes that in letters exchanged among the participants in Italian, 'the lexical family of *sinceritá* 'sincerity' has limited frequency and restricted use in epistolary formulae', while in the Spanish correspondence, the end formulae do not

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2 Conventionalized features like this frequently surprise non-native speakers who might know what the word means in terms of its semantics, but find this interpretation inappropriate in the context of a letter or email with an unfamiliar correspondent.

use the lexical family of *sinceridad* 'sincerity' at all. So even within singular communities of letter-writers, the language of sincerity varies due to the fact of multilingualism amongst its writers.

It should be clear already that while there is much overlap between the themes treated in the following contributions, their co-publication highlights variation and change just as much as, if not more than, a sense of stability or similarity across different epistolary communities when it comes to the performance of sincerity. The overarching question for the contributors to this issue is: what is the role of sincerity in the construction of epistolarity in different languages over time? The combined results, and indeed our rationale for presenting this work as a special issue in *Multilingua*, may be summarized as an affirmation that the words, pragmatics and (in some cases) conventionalization of sincerity are multilingual strands of influence and confluence for the history of European letter writing over time. Focussing on sincerity is telling of the ideals of the communities of practice dealt with in each respective contribution, and the particularities of each community in time are of course highlighted by way of their comparison with others. Moreover, there are a number of larger observations to be taken from reading the articles side by side, some of which have been mentioned briefly in this introduction – for instance, to do with literacy and conventionalization. The essays examine metalinguistic, discursive and pragmatic levels in their analyses and interrogate the ways in which the context of production may condition the reading of sincerity. Over the course of these discussions, sincerity as a linguistic-pragmatic and generic-cultural construct is defined, operationalized and problematized in various ways. We expect and hope that others working on different communities of letter writers will find this exercise a productive one, and that the analyses that follow should afford plenty of scope for congruence and variance when compared to material outside this volume.

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