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ENGLISH PAUPER LETTERS IN THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY AND BEYOND: ON THE VARIABILITY AND EVOLUTION OF A NEW TEXT TYPE[*]

1 INTRODUCTION

Text typological studies have long attracted the interest of scholars exploring language variation and change in the history of English. Adopting a multidimensional approach, Biber/Finegan (1989: 512), for instance, show that letters rank among speech-like texts (cp. Culpeper/Kytö 2010: 18) and observe an evolution in letters from the seventeenth to the twentieth century in the shape of a drift from a more literate to a more oral style. While a significant amount of attention has already been paid to the familiar letter (e.g. Fitzmaurice 2002, Dossena/Tieken-Boon van Ostade 2008) and business correspondence (e.g. Dossena/Fitzmaurice 2006), as well as formulaic sequences typical for epistolary writing, also in languages other than English (e.g. Nevalainen/Raumolin-Brunberg 1995; Nevala 2004; Dossena 2006; Laitinen/Nordlund 2012; Rutten/van der Wal 2012, 2014), the primary focus in this article lies on the value of formulaic sequences for the exploration of a new subtype of vernacular correspondence emerging in the eighteenth century, i.e. the pauper letter.

Social change involving the creation and modification of a welfare system brought about the development of this new type of letter. Under the Old Poor Law, originally established in 1601, anyone in distress could appeal to their parish of legal settlement in order to obtain relief, which often took the form of financial aid, to be paid weekly or as a lump sum. Settlement could be gained through, e.g., birth, marriage or a completed apprenticeship (Whyte 2004: 280). Non-resident poor, i.e. those who had migrated to another parish, could also apply for support by writing to the overseers and church wardens, but risked being removed to their home parish where they would be relieved, but had fewer prospects (Sokoll 2000: 24; on migration patterns of paupers see Gardner *et al.* 2022).[1] It was then often more economic for home parishes to grant relief to paupers at their current domicile, so-called out-relief (Sokoll 2000: 24). Letters abound where applicants use this circumstance as a negotiating factor when soliciting relief.

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[1] In this article the term *pauper* is used both in the specific sense of 'a recipient of relief under the provisions of the Poor Law or of public charity', as well as with its broader meaning of 'a very poor person' (*OED Online*).

Only few pauper letters survive from the eighteenth century, starting in the 1730s (Sokoll 2001), but became much more numerous after a legislative change in 1795, as a result of which removal still remained a possibility, yet posed a lesser threat than before (for details see Sokoll 2001: 13, Sokoll 2008: 111–115). A noticeable increase in out-relief applications can also be observed from the end of the first decade of the nineteenth century, when many labouring poor found it difficult to make ends meet, for instance after the "Year Without a Summer" (1816) (Brönnimann/Krämer 2016), which resulted in food shortages, and after the Napoleonic Wars (Beardmore 2020: 144).[2] Collecting poor-relief correspondence for Essex, Sokoll finds that fewer than 2% of the letters date to the eighteenth century (13 out of 758 letters), and that there is a "massive concentration of the material in the 1820s and early 1830s" (2001: 19); this serves to highlight the scarcity of pauper letters from the eighteenth century. Nevertheless, pauper letters are a "rich demotic source" (Jones/King 2015: 56) and even as smaller datasets offer valuable findings, as shown by earlier research by e.g. Fairman (2008), Gardner *et al.* (2022), and Auer *et al.* (2023). Pauper letters unlock the voices and experiences of the labouring poor, providing us with a much-needed perspective 'from below' (Elspaß 2005, Auer *et al.* 2015, Timmis 2020: 78–80), which remains under-researched in text typological studies.

The poor had already appealed for financial support in writing long before poor-relief applications were penned. These texts were typically formal petitions by the resident poor addressed to magistrates and dealt with at quarter sessions (Hindle 2004: 408, Healey 2016: 84–6). Jones/King (2015: 76) describe a petition as a "closed question" or "two-way monologue" where the request is either granted or dismissed, whereas a pauper letter initiates a dialogue for negotiating relief through correspondence. Another major difference between petitions and pauper letters is that the former were normally encoded by "highly competent scribes" (Jones/King 2015: 75), while the latter were mostly written by the supplicants themselves or someone from their immediate social circle (Sokoll 2001: 64; Jones/King 2015: 72, 75; King 2019: 36). The historians just referenced refer to poor-relief applications as pauper letters rather than petitions, highlighting differences in the production circumstances and communicative setting, but acknowledge the potential stylistic influence of petitions. According to Sokoll (2001: 57), "pauper letters, in their basic composition, rhetoric and gesture, may be said to be bounded by two contemporary types of epistolary expression: the 'familiar' letter on one hand, and the formal petition on the other". In Sokoll's view, relief applications resemble the familiar letter more than petitions (ibid.), while Jones/King (2015: 73–4) note that the question of "how and why the emphasis shifted so comprehensively from one form of appeal to the other over this period" remains unanswered. In earlier linguistic research, in contrast, the labels 'petition' and 'pauper letter' are sometimes used synonymously (e.g. Laitinen/Auer 2014, Auer 2015). This article sets out to determine empirically, firstly, whether poor-relief applications should be classified as petitions or

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2   Only following the 1819 Vestry Act parish records were officially required to be kept in order, and increasingly assistant overseers and vestry clerks were paid to manage these records (Sokoll 2001: 23). Further reasons for the uneven diachronic distribution of pauper letters are discussed in King (2000: 414–5), Sokoll (2001: 19) and King (2019: 27).

as letters, and secondly, whether there was indeed a shift from petition style to letter style from the early eighteenth century towards the nineteenth century.

With respect to text classification, differing approaches (e.g. Biber/Finegan 1989, Kohnen 2001, Görlach 2004) have resulted in a "terminological maze" (Moessner 2005) – concerning terms such as 'genre', 'text type' and 'register' –, which has been comprehensively reviewed by Diller (2001). In this article, Kohnen's definition of text types as "dynamic patterns of communication combining aspects of function, context and form" (2001: 198) is adopted, which is able to account for variability and evolution in a text type over time. For the textual classification of pauper letters, five essential features will be investigated (voice, greeting, petition-element, closing formula and self-reference) which serve to distinguish petition-style from letter-style writing. These features have been chosen because they have a text-constitutive function, meaning that "[w]ithout actually having to read the body of the text, the text type is revealed" (Rutten/van der Wal 2012: 178; see also Wray (2002: 101) and Rutten/van der Wal (2014: 82–6)). Such an approach makes it possible to perform a quantitative text type analysis on a larger dataset, meaning that close reading of the texts in their entirety is not required for an initial classification and content is eliminated as a factor determining text type. Coherence across the dataset in terms of content is ensured by focussing on the first application letters surviving from all selected correspondence sets (see also Section 3). Since the five selected features are realised very differently in model letters and model petitions presented in letter-writing manuals, as illustrated in Section 4.1, they provide an immediately discernible contrast between the two writing styles and are therefore sufficient for the purposes of text type classification.[3] Closing formulae (e.g. *in duty bound shall ever pray*) and self-references (e.g. *your humble servant*) are typically composed of formulaic sequences, which can index social relationships and the writer's identity (e.g. Del Lungo Camiciotti 2006; Laitinen/Nordlund 2012). As such they are highly revealing with regard to the social practice of letter-writing (Barton/Hall 2000: 1, Rutten/van der Wal 2012: 194–5), offering insights into how the poor viewed and portrayed themselves in the application process, what kind of education they received, how they acquired formulaic sequences, and to what extent their use of these formulaic sequences differs from that of other social groups such as the better-educated parish officials.

In order to better understand the variability and evolution of pauper letters, inter- and intra-writer variation as well as self-corrections in closing formulae and self-references (as they appear throughout the text as well as attached to closing formulae) will be examined in more detail. Particular attention will be paid to how the linguistic choices regarding the five essential features relate to the communicative setting and the writer's social roles, as well as to the production circumstances of pauper letters, i.e. the question of who encoded the letters, and the educational background of the applicants.

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3   Follow-up studies may be interested in analysing rhetorical and pragmatic or politeness strategies used in pauper letters with a view to comparing petition-style and letter-style writing. However, earlier research has not identified a differing use of rhetorical strategies in the two writing styles (e.g. Sokoll 2001; King 2019; Timmis 2020), which is a further reason for their exclusion in the present study, while the analysis of pauper letters from a pragmatic point of view lies outside the scope of this article.

While earlier research has touched on the language of pauper letters and the possible influence of petitions and models in letter-writing manuals on the writing of the labouring poor (e.g. Sokoll 2001, Auer 2015, Jones/King 2015, King 2019, Calvo Cortés 2020, Timmis 2020), these studies are based on smaller datasets or letters to different institutions, or they do not incorporate a more fine-grained diachronic analysis of pauper letters from a linguistic perspective; furthermore, a closer examination of intra-writer variation in applications for poor relief has not yet been undertaken.

The following section discusses the (limited) educational opportunities the labouring poor had in order to acquire letter-writing skills, which has a bearing on the linguistic repertoire available to them. Section 3 describes the correspondence material on which this article is based in more detail, i.e. 203 letters written between 1730 and 1834, primarily drawn from a corpus which is currently being compiled as part of the project *The Language of the Labouring Poor in Late Modern England* (LALP). The analysis of the poor-relief correspondence is divided into two parts. Section 4 is concerned with a diachronic investigation of the stylistic impact of petitions on pauper letters, providing a text-type classification for poor-relief applications. Section 4.1 identifies five relevant features (voice, greeting, petition-element, closing formula and self-reference) which can be found in pauper letters and where authors theoretically have the choice of writing in the style of a petition or of a familiar letter. Section 4.2 investigates actual usage patterns in pauper letters regarding these features, with a view to shedding more light on the observation by King/Jones (2015: 73–4) that in terms of preferred writing style there was a shift from petition to letter towards the nineteenth century. Section 5 focuses on the two features where variation in pauper letters is most extensive, i.e. closing formulae and self-references. Inter-writer variation concerning these features will be examined in Sections 5.1 and 5.2, respectively, both within pauper letters and, by way of comparison in order to shed light on social practices of letter-writing, in a sample of letters by parish officials and advocates (e.g. servant, doctor, landlord) who wrote on behalf of poor-relief applicants. In further steps, intra-writer variation (Section 5.3) and self-corrections (Section 5.4) in pauper letters will also be investigated, offering valuable insights into the acquisition and usage patterns of stylistic conventions as exhibited in closing formulae and self-references. Finally, the article closes in Section 6 with a brief summary and outlook.

2 ACQUIRING LITERACY AND LETTER-WRITING SKILLS

Working-class families typically relied on additional income generated by their children in order to make ends meet. With elementary education only becoming compulsory in England in 1880 (up to the age of 10, Stephens 1998: 79), children from poor backgrounds either received no schooling at all or had to abandon their education at an early stage, equipped with reading skills but unable to write, which was usually taught after reading (Stephens 1998: 2). An exception were National Schools run by the Church of England from 1811 onwards, where writing was taught first (Gardner 2023a; Iremonger 1813: 272).[4] Composition (e.g. of letters), a skill which would

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4   For more information on the limited educational opportunities of the labouring poor see e.g. Timmis (2020: 51–71), Auer et al. (2023) and Gardner (2023a).

have been useful for poor-relief applicants, did not become part of the school curriculum until 1871 (Vincent 1989: 89). In the eighteenth century, working-class children often left school by the age of 8, and even by the mid-nineteenth century rarely received schooling after reaching the age of 10 or 11 (Stephens 1998: 2, Vincent 2014: 274). As a result, many among the labouring poor were unlikely to be more than semi-literate initially.

However, many of the lower classes are known to have continued their education alongside work, either informally by themselves, with their peers or in mutual improvement groups, as well as more formally in Sunday schools (from the 1780s onwards) and evening schools amongst others (Lawson/Silver 1973: 189–95, 238–50, Stephens 1998: 3, 5). Data from Suffolk prison records, for instance, show that among the offenders the most literate are over 40 years old, and the most illiterate under 15. Repeat offenders typically acquired a new skill in prison school or in-between prison sentences, either becoming semi-literate or moving from partial to full literacy (Crone 2018: 182–3). Lifelong learning thus played a significant role in the education of the labouring poor. Yet based on signature literacy, by 1840 still only approximately 27% of unskilled labourers and 21% of miners could read and write, while average signature literacy was at around 67% for men and 50% for women (Vincent 1989: 93, 97).

There is little evidence of poor-relief applicants directly relying on models presented in letter-writing manuals (Sokoll 2001: 59, Auer 2015: 142, King 2019: 36, see also Section 4.1). At the time of publication the letter-writing manuals by Brown (1770?) and Cooke (1770?) cost one and two shillings, respectively, which would have been forbiddingly expensive for most of the labouring poor when the letters in the corpus document the hopes of many of receiving one or two shillings per week (see also (1)) in order to ensure survival. Letters and petitions were also printed in newspapers, which would be more readily accessible to the poor than manuals. However, it must be born in mind that the authors of manuals drew on actual practice (King 2019: 362–3, fn. 15), meaning that the art of writing letters and petitions must have been part of communal knowledge. As Timmis (2020: 80) convincingly argues, literacy should be seen "as a community resource". Even if a person was not literate enough to (read and) write themselves ('possessive literacy'), they would be able to approach someone in their community who was ('accessive literacy') (cp. Timmis 2020: 81). Research has shown that letter-writing could have been taught by family or community members, and received letters could have been used as models (e.g. Whyman 2009: 221, Auer 2015: 143, Timmis 2020: 90–1). Since letters were often read aloud even the illiterate could become familiar with certain formulations typically found in epistolary communication (Timmis 2020: 91). Besides their family, friends and neighbours, other members of the local community could also provide assistance during the writing process, including landlords, employers, creditors, overseers, tradesmen, teachers, clergymen and members of the military (Sokoll 2001: 65, Houston 2014: 81, Jones/King 2015: 67, King 2019: 35). In this vein, Jones/King propose the existence of a "shared linguistic register of appeal […] that cut across social, economic and structural boundaries" (2015: 69) and suggest that pauper letters are "the product of a community of voices that interacted to produce a vernacular of appeal" (2015: 76).

3 DATA

The letters examined in this article were collected as part of the LALP project, which aims to build a corpus of letters written by paupers who applied for poor relief under the Old Poor Law (c. 1795–1834). As a result of opportunistic sampling in archives across England, the project also unearthed letters composed earlier in the eighteenth century, as well as correspondence by parish officials and advocates writing about or in support of paupers. For this article, three different subcorpora were compiled, drawing on a collection of letters which were transcribed by members of the LALP project as close to the original as possible.[5] The first was designed for the diachronic study of inter-writer variation and contains pauper letters written between 1730 and 1834 ('Diachronic Corpus'), the second acting as a 'Supplement' with letters from advocates and officials from the earlier eighteenth century for comparison. The third corpus forms the basis for the analysis of intra-writer variation and is comprised of letter sets by six poor-relief applicants ('Individual Corpus'). The following two subsections elaborate on the sampling principles and make-up of these corpora, including the authorship of the sampled letters. In total, 203 letters containing 39,674 words were prepared for analysis.[6]

3.1 Diachronic Corpus and Supplement

Linguistic choices in letters, especially concerning greetings, closing formulae and self-references, varied depending on the degree of familiarity between writer and addressee (e.g. Nevala 2004). In order to ensure comparability between pauper letters, missives indexing familiarity on a personal level or intimacy (an infrequent occurrence) rather than the social relationship of applicant and parish official were not considered, so that the sample only contains writing produced in a formal setting. In terms of content, the sample was restricted to first applications for poor relief, or, where not available, the earliest re-application for relief obtained from the archives.

Following these principles, the Diachronic Corpus of pauper letters comprises 139 letters (26,509 words) based on the LALP collection, with three letters added from Sokoll (2001: Letters 280, 281 and 707) to supplement data from the earlier eighteenth century.[7] For the diachronic analysis of pauper correspondence in Sections 4 and 5, the material was divided into three subperiods covering 25 to 30 years each (Table 1). The gap of 15 years between Subperiods I (1730–1759) and II (1774–1799) allows for a comparison between the earlier and the later eighteenth century without running the risk of imposing an artificial boundary in a continuous corpus, while Subperiod III (1807–1834) contains only letters from the nineteenth century

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5   With the LALP corpus still under construction, suitable letters for the current investigation were sampled from 35 of 39 historic counties of England, without any particular regional bias. Limitations in data availability, particularly in the eighteenth century, currently do not permit the investigation of regional variation in the occurrence of stylistic features.

6   Addresses (or superscriptions) providing directions, as well as annotations on the documents in other hands were excluded from the word count and the analysis.

7   The transcription of Letter 281 used for analysis is my own, based on the image provided by Sokoll (2001: Plates XIX–XX).

up to the implementation of the New Poor Law in 1834. To avoid overrepresentation of individuals and thus an imbalance within Subperiod III, only one letter from each pauper was sampled. As a result, the gap between Subperiods II and III had to be reduced to 8 years. However, 85% of the letters in Subperiod III are dated between 1814 and 1834, which means that for most of the material a gap of 15 years to the previous subperiod is in fact observed.

Table 1. Diachronic Corpus (pauper letters)

Subperiod	Years	Senders	Number of letters	Word count
I	1730–1759	Paupers	22	4,166
II	1774–1799	Paupers	17	3,207
III	1807–1834	Paupers	100	19,136
		Total	**139**	**26,509**

The Supplement consists of 14 letters from the earlier eighteenth century by officials and advocates interceding on behalf of paupers (Table 2), and will be used to illustrate inter-writer variation between different social groups in Sections 5.1 and 5.2.

Table 2. Supplement (letters by advocates and officials for Subperiod I)

Subperiod	Years	Senders	Number of letters	Word count
I	1730–1759	Advocates	5	990
		Officials	9	1,537
		Total	**14**	**2,527**

As regards authorship of the pauper letters, a basic distinction is made for the Diachronic Corpus between (a) 'authentic' letters which were probably written by the paupers themselves or by someone from their circle with limited schooling (cp. Sokoll 2001: 65), and (b) 'non-authentic' letters which were probably encoded by someone with significant training and education.[8] These typically boast unusually neat and elaborate handwriting on even lines, sometimes with flourishes on individual characters, as well as careful layout, for instance observing deferential space (Sairio/Nevala 2013). The proportion of non-authentic letters in Subperiod II is much higher than in the two other subperiods (Table 3). However, this is the result of opportunistic sampling and probably also reflects the vagaries of archival survival. There is too little data to warrant the hypothesis that at the end of the eighteenth century paupers took recourse to professional support more often than in the other periods.

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8   For a more detailed discussion of authorship and authenticity of pauper letters see Gardner (2023b).

Table 3. Authenticity of pauper letters in Diachronic Corpus

Authenticity	Subperiod I (1730–1759)		Subperiod II (1774–1799)		Subperiod III (1807–1834)	
	Letters	Words	Letters	Words	Letters	Words
Authentic	18	3,459	10	1,792	87	16,683
Non-authentic	4	707	7	1,415	13	2,453

The letters by advocates and officials in the Supplement are not examined further with respect to authorship, but are presumed to be authentic, i.e. representative of writings from the respective societal group to which each author belongs. Part of a parish official's duties was to engage in correspondence, sometimes with the support of a clerk, and advocates writing on behalf of the poor are believed to have acted on their own accord.

3.2 Individual Corpus

For the analysis of intra-writer variation in Section 5.3, six individuals were selected who sent a total of 54 letters to receive out-parish relief in the nineteenth century: Charls Ann Green, John Hammont, Sarah Hughes, Robert Kingston, Augustine Morgan and Frances Soundy (Table 4). Owing to the scarcity of available archival records, a comparable study is currently not possible for eighteenth-century writers. However, the findings of this case study are also likely to apply to the earlier material because of the similarities in the limited schooling opportunities of the labouring poor and in the production circumstances of their letters.

Table 4. Individual Corpus[9]

Applicant	Current domicile	Parish of legal settlement	Period	Number of letters (and hands)	Word count
Autographical					
Charls Ann Green	London	Wimborne (Dorset)	1818–1826	8 (same hand)	894
Augustine Morgan	Beaminster	Blandford Forum (Dorset)	1803–1806	6 (same hand)	1,023
Frances Soundy	Battersea	Pangbourne (Berkshire)	1818–1830	20 (same hand)	7,792
Total autographical				**34**	**9,709**

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9   Four letters (one each from Green, Hammont, Hughes and Soundy) are also part of the Diachronic Corpus (Subperiod III). 'Current domicile' refers to the parish in which an individual resides at the time of application, i.e. the parish to which they had migrated to, whereas 'Parish of legal settlement' indicates the parish in which they had originally gained settlement (see Section 1).

Applicant	Current domicile	Parish of legal settlement	Period	Number of letters (and hands)	Word count
Non-autographical					
John Hammont	Manchester	Brampton (Huntingdonshire)	1821–1824	4 (4 different hands)	338
Sarah Hughes	London	Pangbourne (Berkshire)	1829–1830	11 (5 different hands)	968
Robert Kingston	Huntingdon	St Andrew the Less (Cambridgeshire)	1820–1821	5 (2 different hands)	432
Total non-autographical				**20**	**1,738**
TOTAL				**54**	**11,447**

The question of whether the letters by the six applicants are autographical or not, and if non-autographical whether they are authentic or not, is of central importance in the linguistic analysis. In the case of three of the applicants (John Hammont, Sarah Hughes and Robert Kingston), several hands were involved in the composition of their letters over the course of time, and consequently their letters are deemed non-autographical. In other words, the person who penned the actual letter (writer) and the person whose name appears in the signature and who solicits support from their home parish (applicant) are not identical. It would appear that none of the three applicants were even able to write their own name, since the handwriting of the signatures (and even the spelling of the names) varies across the parishrent hands involved. Nevertheless, all non-autographical letters can be considered authentic, i.e. representative of the writing of the labouring poor, on account of the limited training evidenced in handwriting and layout (see previous subsection), with three exceptions: the third letter sent by Kingston and the last two sent by Hughes were clearly encoded by well-educated scribes.

For two other individuals, Augustine Morgan and Frances Soundy, clues in the letters allows us to conclude that missives are autographical, i.e. writer and applicant are identical. The production circumstances which Soundy describes in (1) leave no doubt:

(1) PS Sir I have wrote this un be none to any one But my salf (3_Soundy_1828_3)[10]

Likewise, Morgan must have been able to write as in one letter, not investigated here as it contains only brief instructions on how Morgan's relief should be conveyed, a certain Joseph Barratt acts as a witness to his handwriting. Lastly, Charls Ann Green's letters are also considered autographical. The eight letters sent in her name, and appealing for support for her family, were written by the same untrained hand over a period

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10   The filenames of pauper letters follow the model 'Subperiod_Surname of applicant_Year'. In the Individual Corpus, several letters by the same applicant from the same year are numbered in temporal sequence with the addition of '_Number' after '_Year'. Non-authentic letters are marked with a superscript N at the end of the filename.

of eight years. Following Sokoll (2001: 64) and King (2019: 37), it is unlikely that the same scribe would have assisted her in the writing of the letters during such a long period of time. An analysis of dialectal features in Green's letters shows that the writer must have had their linguistic anchor in Dorset, where her parish of legal settlement is situated, which gives further support to the assumption that Green wrote these letters herself (Gardner *et al.* 2022).

4 PAUPER LETTERS: CATEGORISATION AND EVOLUTION

This section explores the impact of petitions on linguistic choices in pauper letters, first identifying five features typical for petitions where the authors of pauper letters have the option of adopting these or of writing in the style of a familiar letter (Section 4.1). A diachronic analysis of these features in pauper letters then follows in Section 4.2, with a view to classifying pauper letters as a text type and exploring the evolution of this text type from the early eighteenth to the nineteenth century.

4.1 Petition-style vs. letter-style writing

Both petitions and letters share the same rhetorical roots, having developed from Classical models which were subsequently adapted in medieval times (Sokoll 2001: 57, Houston 2014: 73–5, Jones/King 2015: 59f.). Jones/King (2015: 60) illustrate that the rhetorical tradition of petitions is remarkably uniform across time, space and culture, which leads them to state that "the form of the written petition in history remained […] consistent over more than 1,800 years". In the eighteenth century, guidance works continued to perpetuate the model of the formal petition. The history and audience of English letter-writing manuals, the first being printed in the mid-sixteenth century, has been well-documented (e.g. Bannet 2005, Fens-de Zeeuw 2008, Auer 2015). The first such guides to specifically offer sections with model petitions appear to be *The Universal Letter-Writer; or, New Art of Polite Correspondence* by Thomas Cooke (1770?) and *The New and Complete English Letter-Writer; or, Whole Art of General Correspondence* by George Brown (1770?). These sections are advertised within the lengthy titles of the works as *Containing great Variety of Petitions on various Subjects, from Persons in low or middling States of Life, to those in higher Stations* (Cooke 1770?) and *The New Universal Petitioner, Comprehending The greatest Variety of Petitions, adapted to every Situation, with Directions for presenting them in a proper Manner* (Brown 1770?). Example (2) reproduces a model petition from Brown (1770?: 195f., original italics), which presents the case of a poor widow applying to her parish for financial support.

> (2)   *To the Maſter, Church-Wardens and Overſeers of the Pariſh of --------.*
> *The humble Petition of A. B.*
> *Sheweth,*
>
> That your petitioner's huſband was an honeſt induſtrious man, and lived many years in credit in the pariſh, where he ſerved every office, and paid ſcot and lot; but dying in diſtreſſed circumſtances, owing to his buſineſs having fallen off ſome

years ago, ſhe is left utterly deſtitute. In this unhappy ſituation ſhe has preſumed to addreſs herſelf to you; and as ſhe has a little work to do, when able to go through with it, ſo ſhe ſubmits to you, whether the allowance of two ſhillings per week would not be better than going in to the workhouſe. Your petitioner humbly hopes that her caſe will be taken into conſideration.
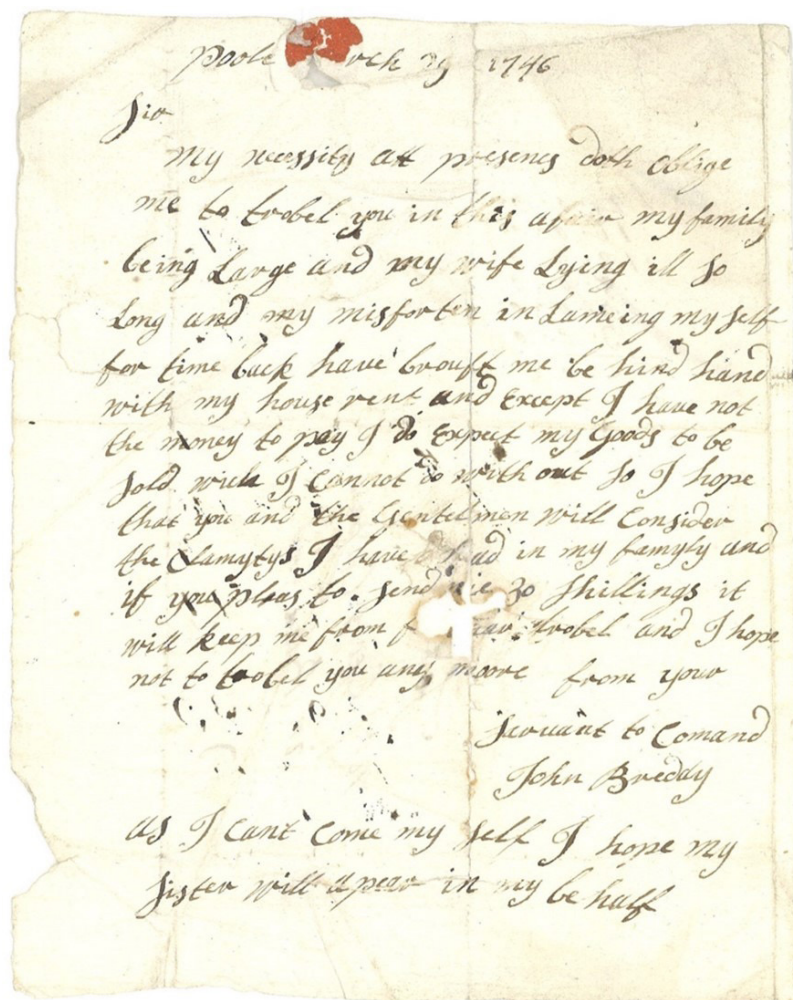*And ſhe, as in duty bound, will ever pray.*

This case is reminiscent of the difficult circumstances which cause the lower classes to turn to their parishes of legal settlement for out-relief. One such application, by a husband with a large family and a wife who is unwell (1_Breddy_1746), is reproduced in Figure 1 and transcribed in full in (3).

(3)　　　　Poole [ˆSEALˆ]rch 25 1746
ſir
　　　My necessity att presencs doth oblige
me to trobel you in this afair my family
being Large and my wife Lying ill ſo
Long and my misforten in Lameing my ſelf
for time back have brouft me be hind hand
with my house rent and Except I have not
the money to pay I do Expect my Goods to be
ſold wich I Cannot do with out ſo I hope
that you and the Gentelmen will Consider
the Clamytys I have d̶ had in my famyly and
if you pleas to ſend me 30 ſhillings it
will keep me from f[ˆ{…} HOLEˆ]ar trobel and I hope
not to trobel you any moore from your
　　　　　　　　　ſaruant to Comand
　　　　　　　　　John Breddy
as I Cant Come my ſelf I hope my
ſister will apear in my be half

On the basis of the model petition in (2) and a similar petition by a destitute widow in Cooke (1770?) (discussed in Auer 2015: 140–1), as well as the pauper letter in (3) and the other applications under investigation, it is possible to identify five essential features which are prescribed for petitions and to determine their realisation in applications written in the form and style of a familiar letter (Table 5). While petition-style features are fairly uniform across different samples, letter-style writing presents a significant amount of variation. Petitions are typically written in the third person and open with a heading containing the title(s) of the addressee(s) followed by the title of the petition and the sequence *Sheweth, That* across two separate lines (petition-element for short). Letters, in contrast, are normally written in the first person and begin with salutation such as *Gentlemen* or *Sir*, lacking the petition-element. The closing formula

expected in petitions is the "prototypical petitionary phrase" (Sokoll 2001: 59) involving a combination of *(as) in duty bound* and *shall/will ever pray*; *your petitioner* is used as a self-reference throughout the text and often also at the very end before the signature. In contrast, in letters there is considerable variation when it comes to closing formulae and self-referential terms (Sections 5.1 and 5.2). Although this list of features (and examples) is not exhaustive, it serves to illustrate major differences between petition-style and letter-style writing, and as such provides as a useful starting point for the analysis of variation in pauper letters in the following section.

Figure 1. Letter by John Breddy, 25 March 1746, Poole[11]

Table 5. Typical features of writing in petition style and letter style

Feature	Petition style	Letter style
Voice	3rd person	1st person
Greeting	Heading[12] (*To the Master/Minister, Church-wardens and Overseers of the Parish of …*)	Salutation (e.g. *Sir, Gentlemen, Mr NAME*)
Petition-element	*The humble Petition of NAME // Sheweth, // That*[13]	X
Closing formula	*(as) in duty bound shall/will ever pray* (or variation thereof)	e.g. *I remain*, *so no more from*
Self-reference	*your petitioner*	e.g. *your humble servant*

4.2 A continuum of styles

As King/Jones (2015: 73–4) suggest, there was a comprehensive shift in pauper letters from petition style to letter style as the preferred form of epistolary expression in the later eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. This section seeks to verify this observation and explore inter-writer variation in pauper letters from a diachronic perspective, considering to what extent these letters contain petition-style or letter-style features. The features under consideration are voice, greeting, petition-element, closing formula and self-reference (Table 5 in Section 4.1).

How many pauper letters in the Diachronic Corpus contain between 0 and 5 petition-style features is displayed in Figure 2 (overall proportions) and Table 6 (detailed diachronic perspective). Although the dataset for the eighteenth century is comparatively small and the results need to be treated with caution, three broader tendencies can be observed. Firstly, relief applications which do not rely on any petition-style features at all are the most dominant. Overall, merely 12 out of 139 pauper letters (8.63%) show more than one petition feature. Secondly, the proportion of letters containing petition-style features is higher in the eighteenth century (c. 41% in both Subperiods I and II) than in the nineteenth century (21% in Subperiod III). Thirdly, there is a decrease in the number of petition features used in pauper letters over time. In the early eighteenth century 22.73% of all applications contain at least two petition features. This proportion appears to drop towards the end of the century (11.76%) and diminishes even further to 5% in the early nineteenth century. The only application boasting all five petition features under investigation dates from the first subperiod (1_Nason_1758). These findings, although based on relatively few letters, seem to confirm the observation by King/Jones (2015) concerning a shift in writing style, but suggests that it could be a gradual development. This may have been encouraged by the change in legislation at the end of the eighteenth century and is more fully in evidence owing to the increase in letter frequency (and therefore source material) in the earlier nineteenth century, as described in Section 1.

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12   This term is taken from Włodarczyk (2013: 203f.).

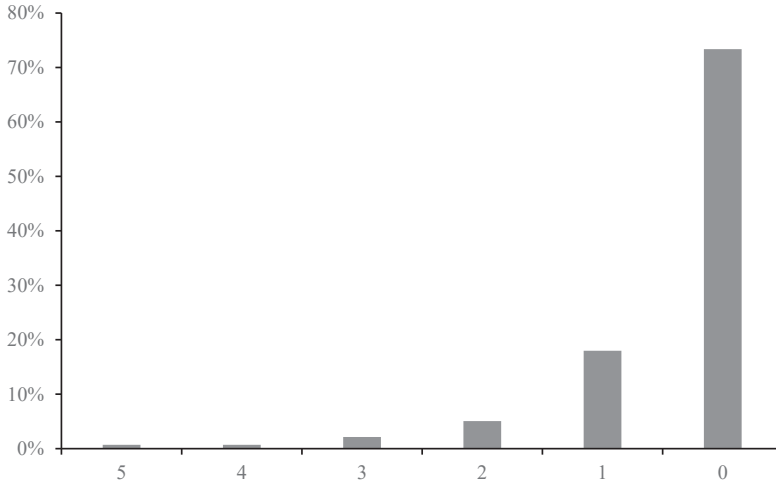13   A double forward slash // indicates a line break.

Figure 2. Proportion of pauper letters containing 0–5 petition features (Diachronic Corpus)

Table 6. Number of pauper letters containing 0–5 petition features by subperiod (Diachronic Corpus)

	Number of petition features					
Subperiod	**5**	**4**	**3**	**2**	**1**	**0**
I (1730–1759)	1	0	0	4	4	13
II (1774–1799)	0	0	1	1	5	10
III (1807–1834)	0	1	2	2	16	79
Total	**1**	**1**	**3**	**7**	**25**	**102**
Proportion	**0.72%**	**0.72%**	**2.16%**	**5.04%**	**17.99%**	**73.38%**

petition style   letter style

Figure 3. Continuum of styles in pauper letters

The inter-writer variation in pauper letters regarding the use of petition-style and/or letter-style features can perhaps best be described as a continuum of style, with petition style at one end of the pole and letter style at the other (Figure 3). A relief application containing all five petition features is situated on the petition-style end of the pole, and in opposition a missive without any petition features on the letter-style end of the pole. The more petition features a relief application contains, the further left on the continuum it is positioned.

A model based on a cline is also able to represent relief applications where both petition style and letter style are employed within a single feature. This is most common in closing formulae (10x), followed by the features greeting and voice (both 6x) and self-reference (5x).[14] Example (4) illustrates how one writer, Sary Young, uses both styles sequentially at the end of the letter. She effectively closes the application twice, first in petition style with the self-reference "your poor {patitioner} pertisoner" and the closing formula "will all ways be bound to pray For you all", then in letter style with the closing formula "[I] am" and the self-reference "your most Humble Sarvant to Command".[15] On three occasions the petition-style formula based on *in duty bound* appears in non-conventional places, twice in the running text (3_Elkes_1817, 3_Wood_1827) and once after a signature (1_Jones_1730); in all cases letter-style closing formulae are employed before the final self-reference. Petition style and letter style can also occur together, as in the self-reference in (5) where "petitioner" and "parishioner" are both linked by a conjunction and jointly pre-modified by "your humble". Example (6) exemplifies a combination of styles in the greeting, with the petition-style heading "To the Overseers of Shippon Mallard" followed by letter-style "Sir".

(4) your poor {patitioner} pertisoner will all ways be bound to pray For you all & am your most Humble Sarvant to Command (1_Young_1755)

(5) your humble petitioner and parishsoner (1_Cross_1755)

(6) To the Overseers of Shippon Mallard Sir (3_Sheppard_1829)

A switch in voice from third to first person (petition style to letter style) is presented in (7) and (8), and a change from first to third person in (9). The names mentioned at the beginning of the applications in (7–9) appear again in the signatures, underlining that all applicants refer to themselves in both the first and the third person. Such switches in voice, while infrequent, have also been observed by Calvo Cortés (2020: 200) in petitions to the Foundling Hospital and the Bank of England written between 1785 and 1815. Here the switches were from third to first person, which Calvo Cortés attributes to the introduction of personal circumstances. For 1820 settler petitions Włodarczyk (2013: 215) also records changes in voice, those from third to first person coinciding with a switch in social roles (e.g. from petitioner to mother or wife) and those from first to third person associated with closing formulae, triggered by formulaic phrases. Formulaic phrases and by extension particular words, as well as structural aspects, also seem to have triggered the switches in voice in the Diachronic Corpus, where they are present in both the beginning (7, 8) and at the end of letters (9). The switches do not appear to be content-related, but in three cases there is a switch from third to first person after a letter-element clause containing the verb or noun *petition* (e.g. as a verb in (7)), and one switch is located at the end of the letter with the introduction of a letter-style

14 The petition-element is excluded from this list as this is a feature which is either present or absent and has no letter-style equivalent.

15 Curly brackets {} are used to indicate uncertainty in the transcription. The self-correction will be discussed in Section 5.4.

closing formula (8), adding a more personal dimension to the application through ego and topic involvement in "I hope". Conversely, in (9) the letter is opened with an epistolary greeting and formula "I have to inform you that", while for the remainder the petition-style third-person voice is maintained. A final example of an unconventional and only brief switch comes from a non-authentic letter where a run-on formula developing from the previous clause (cp. Bannet 2005: 65) introduced by *who* triggers switch to the third person, which is then not followed through, leading to technically incorrect agreement in first-person *am* (10).

(7) Elizabeth Patchett in the City Of Worcester Petions you being in great distreſs and Oppreſd with a Large family, Craves your Aſtance for Relief as it's not my Wishes to Come with all my family troublesome Wholly on ye [Parish] (2_Patchett_1777N)[16]

(8) this Sheweth that Jane Wildman is at this time in verry Great destreſs […] I hope to heare from you I reman […] (3_Wildman_1826)

(9) Dear Sir I have to inform you that Sarah White your parisher are So bad in health that […] (3_White_1831)

(10) I am Sorry that […] a Distrest widow, Who am with Duty and humble Submiſsion (2_Keely_1799N)

What reasons could lie behind the general dominance of letter-style writing, the decrease in petition-style features over time, as well as the mixing of both petition and letter styles within individual applications? Paupers seem to have been aware that by applying for relief they would enter into an epistolary relationship with officials from their home parish which would allow them to negotiate relief and re-apply through continued correspondence. At the same time some applicants at least must also have been aware that petitions as a text type existed as well, which were directed at other institutions for different reasons and characterised by a more formal writing style. The diachronic decrease in petition-style features could perhaps, in part, be the result of a dwindling number of pauper letters based on the petition style which could potentially serve as a model for new applicants, with lower-level community knowledge of this form of writing receding over time. Considering the significant numbers of applications in the nineteenth century, it is also possible that word spread that it was not necessary to adopt petition-style features in order to be granted poor relief. However, those writers who did emulate features of petition style were able to increase the formality of their writing, highlighting the social distance and unequal status between applicant (supplicant) and parish official, conveying their respect and deference for those higher up in the social hierarchy who had the power to decide over their fate. With this strategy these applicants probably hoped to better achieve their communicative goal of securing financial support.

Another strategy for indexing formality is to use the label *petition* in an application, which occurs only in five letters (for the use of *petition* as a verb see (7)). While (11) could be interpreted as a shortened and modified version of the petition-element (but

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16   Examples from non-authentic letters are marked with a superscript [N] after the filename.

is not counted as such), the meaning of "Pettition" in (12) is more general. Rather than referring to a specific type of document used in the context of courts, however, these writers likely relied on the broader meaning of 'a formal written request or supplication […] appealing to an individual or group in authority (as a sovereign, legislature, administrative body, etc.) for some favour, right, or mercy, or in respect of a particular cause' (*OED Online*).

> (11) this with a humble petition to you (1_Robinson_1750)
> (12) my Pettition is that you will only Relieve me a Little from the Severity of the Hard Winter (2_Williamson_1799 [N])

Interestingly, despite the general decrease in the use of petition-style features towards the nineteenth century, it is not the case that particular petition features fall out of use entirely, since all of them are attested in all subperiods. Rather, it seems to be a matter of individual choice which petition-style feature is employed, regardless of whether the letter represents the writing of the lower classes (authentic) or of the better-educated members of society (non-authentic). The findings in this section contradict the seemingly too sweeping claim made by Jones/King (2015: 73–4) concerning a comprehensive shift in style since letter-style writing is shown to be dominant already in the earliest pauper letters. In conclusion, from a text-typological perspective poor-relief applications constitute not a type of petition, but a type of letter. The following section explores inter- and intra-writer variation in more detail, including differences between authentic and non-authentic letters, and focuses on the two features where variation is most extensive, i.e. in closing formulae and self-references.

5 VARIATION IN CLOSING FORMULAE AND SELF-REFERENCES

This section is concerned with variation observable in closing formulae (Section 5.1) and self-references (Section 5.2) in letters by paupers from the Diachronic Corpus, and by way of comparison in letters by advocates and parish officials from the earlier eighteenth century (Supplement). This extended perspective on inter-writer variation within pauper letters and between the different groups of writers will be complemented in Section 5.3 by an analysis of intra-writer variation in pauper letters from the Individual Corpus. Self-corrections occurring in closing formulae and self-references offer additional support for findings concerning the acquisition and processing of formulaic sequences (for a definition of the term see Timmis 2020: 100) and will be examined in Section 5.4.

5.1 Inter-writer variation in closing formulae

In the Diachronic Corpus of pauper letters, 133 instances of closing formulae can be observed, occasionally occurring in combination, while 14 letters contain no formula at all (Figure 4). The two most frequent formulae overall, based on *remain* (13) and *am* (see (4)), do not become dominant until the nineteenth century. By this period *remain* has become associated with business correspondence (Austin 1973: 131, Dollinger

2008: 282, Shvanyukova 2020: 96–7; see also Dossena 2006 for examples), and was also observed to be the most common closing formula in a larger corpus of pauper letters (Timmis 2020: 100). The formula based on *am* was already commonly used by educated writers in the early eighteenth century (Austin 1973: 131), and is also attested in later business correspondence where it "focuses the addressee's attention on […] the explicit presence of the writer" (Shvanyukova 2020: 91). Considering the official nature of poor relief correspondence and, viz. *am*, the need for paupers to be 'seen' in their distress, the two most frequent closing formulae seem appropriate choices in this context. Less frequent, closing formulae based on *oblige* (14) are also attested in business writing (Dollinger 2008: 272–273, Shvanyukova 2020: 91).

(13) iremain you afflickted Servn{t} (1_Rumbell_173X)
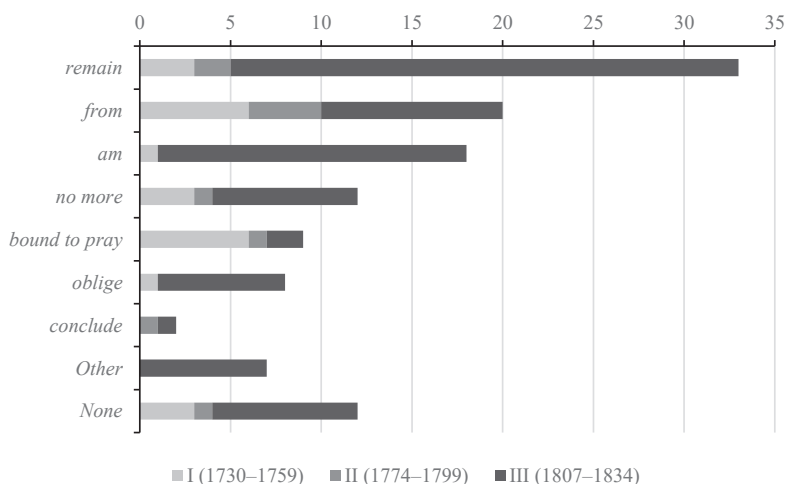(14) and you will much oblige your humble petitioner and parishioner (1_Cross_1755)

Figure 4. Closing formulae in authentic pauper letters (Diachronic Corpus)

The formulae *from, no more* and *conclude*, on the other hand, were firmly associated with the lower classes in the eighteenth century (Austin 1973: 119, 130–1).[17] The fact that the paupers represented in the Diachronic Corpus continue to employ these in the nineteenth century speaks in favour of a generational transmission of epistolary conventions among the labouring poor. At the same time these closing formulae, proportionally especially *no more* (15), remain less common than the two most

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17 When *from* follows *no more*, as in (15), this is counted as part of the realisation of the formula *no more*. The formula could also be extended, for instance by adding of *so* before and *at present* afterwards, as illustrated in (17).

frequent choices, which shows that the poor were also able to acquire knowledge of alternative and likely more appropriate forms. Alongside *from*, the petition-style closing formula based on *bound to pray* (see (4)) is proportionally the most frequent in the earlier eighteenth century where half of all occurrences of this formula can be found. This highlights the decline of petition-style features after this subperiod. Sokoll (2001: 59) notes that there are only twelve occurrences of *bound to pray* in his collection of 758 pauper letters from Essex. Timmis (2020: 110) similarly observes only six *bound to pray* formulae (as opposed to 134 examples of *remain*) in his pauper letter corpus, but intriguingly a much larger proportion in a collection of coeval prisoner letters; the formula is also a conspicuous feature in petitions to the Foundling Hospital (Calvo Cortés 2020: 207). Such findings reveal the stylistic variation observable across different pleading genres addressed to different institutions and indicate that the closing formula *bound to pray* was upheld longer in petitions proper than in poor-relief applications. Formulae occurring only once in the Diachronic Corpus are subsumed under 'Other' in Figures 4 and 5 and include, amongst others, *by* (2_Patchett_1777[N]), run-on formulae and phrases with an imperative, as in (16), which is again a strategy also documented in business letters (Shvanyukova 2020: 91).

(15) no mor from A poour poper (1_Jones_1730)
(16) except this my humble patition and believe me to be your very hum{le} servent (3_Stagg_1807)
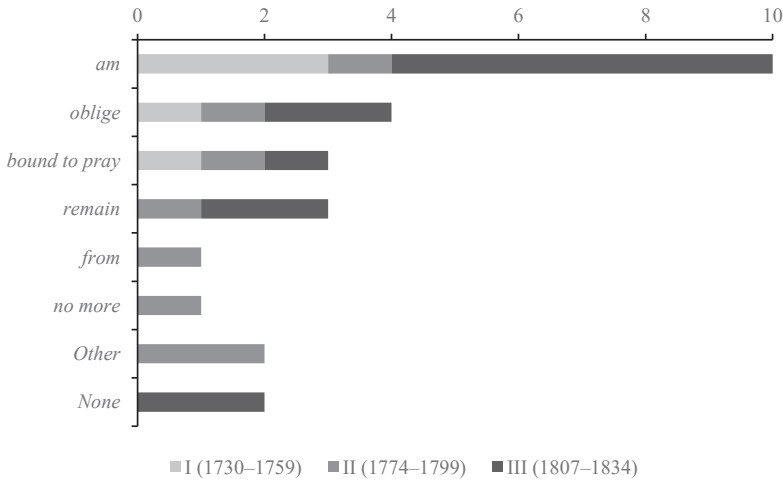

Figure 5. Closing formulae in non-authentic pauper letters (Diachronic Corpus)

Although only few non-authentic letters are included in the corpus, what is striking is the preference here for *am* already in the earlier eighteenth century (e.g. (4); Figure 5). Trained encoders of pauper letters seem to have been more aware than untrained writers of the general appropriateness of this closing formula in a formal context. Corroborating this finding, the same preference is shown during this period in letters by those writing on behalf of paupers, whether parish officials addressing their peers (5x) or other advocates (3x), closely followed by not including any closing formulae at all (officials 4x, advocates 1x). The only instance of 'lower-class' *no more* in the Supplement appears in a letter by an advocate from 1758, fittingly by a servant (Merey Willioms), who like the pauper Catherine Jones she writes for (both as advocate and as encoder) also belongs to the group of lower-class writers.

5.2 Inter-writer variation in self-references

The most common self-reference in the diachronic pauper letter corpus is a noun preceded by the pronoun *your* and an adjective. In keeping with epistolary traditions of the time, *servant* is by far the most frequent noun (Figures 6 and 7), expressing deference and social distance, particularly in combination with *your humble* (see (4)). However, *petitioner* and *parishioner* also make a noticeable appearance, especially in the earlier eighteenth century, sometimes in combination (see (14)). These nouns are particularly suitable choices in pauper letters in that they allow the writer to draw the attention of the addressee to their social roles of formal applicant and member of their home parish, which entitles them to apply for relief and also instils a sense of responsibility to act in the recipient. The connections between applicant and parish official is strengthened by the pronoun *your*, which according to King (2019: 33) conveys "embodied belonging". The noun *pauper*, employed in two letters (see e.g. (15)), places the focus on the financial distress of the applicant. *Supplicant* expresses a social role akin to *petitioner*, perhaps with a higher level of humility, but unlike *petition* and *petitioner* the Latin borrowing was probably not part of the register-specific vocabulary pertaining to poor-relief applications which the poor would be familiar with – in the Diachronic Corpus at least *supplicant* only occurs in a letter encoded by a well-educated hand (Figure 7).

Again unsurprisingly, in all subperiods the most frequent adjective used in self-references is *humble* (Figures 8 and 9), sometimes preceded by the superlative *most* (8x; see (4)) or the intensifier *very* (3x), and five times occurring in combination with *obedient* (cp. also Timmis 2020: 109). In the eighteenth century, *obedient* was only used in non-authentic letters by well-educated writers, and it was not until the nineteenth century that less-educated paupers followed suit. During this period, *humble* and *obedient* are also regularly encountered in business correspondence, as are expressions of obligation like *obliged* and *obliging*, and the semantically bleached intensifier *truly*, which aptly occurs in a non-authentic letter (Del Lungo Caminciotti 2006: 161, Shvanyukova 2020: 93). *Afflicted*, *poor*, *distressed* and *unfortunate* allude to the struggles and reduced circumstances of the paupers. In (15) *poor* pre-modifies *pauper*, emphasising

the financial difficulties.[18] While *afflicted* can refer to both 'distress' and health issues (*OED Online*), no semantic preference can be detected in the pauper letters. Like *afflicted*, the more unusual *devoted* only appears (after a reflection on suffering and the transience of life) in a letter deemed authentic, but it was written by a hand on the upper hand of the spectrum with more advanced training, and epistolary phraseology can be found throughout the application.
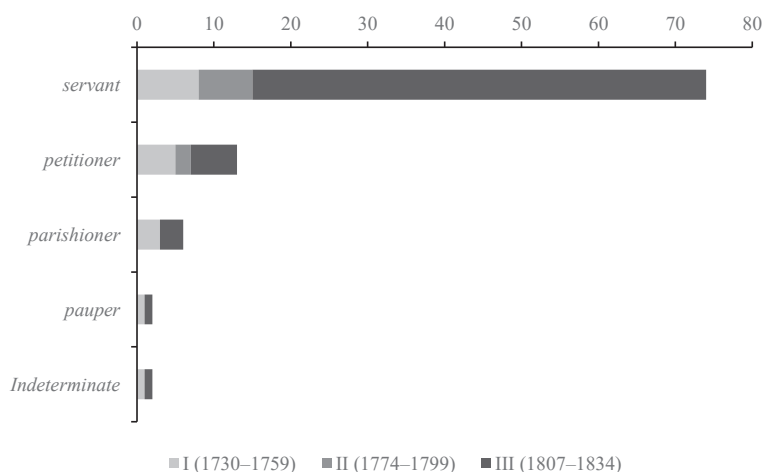

Figure 6. Self-referential nouns in authentic pauper letters (Diachronic Corpus)
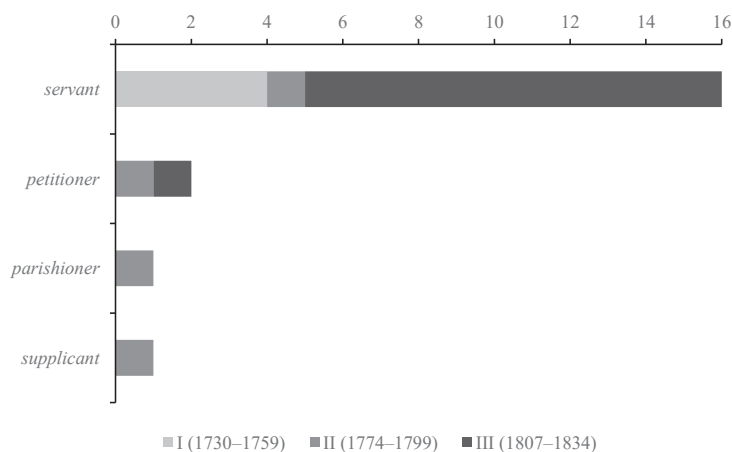

Figure 7. Self-referential nouns in non-authentic pauper letters (Diachronic Corpus)

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18   This is one of only two instances in the Diachronic Corpus (both in Subperiod I) where an indefinite pronoun is used in place of *your*.
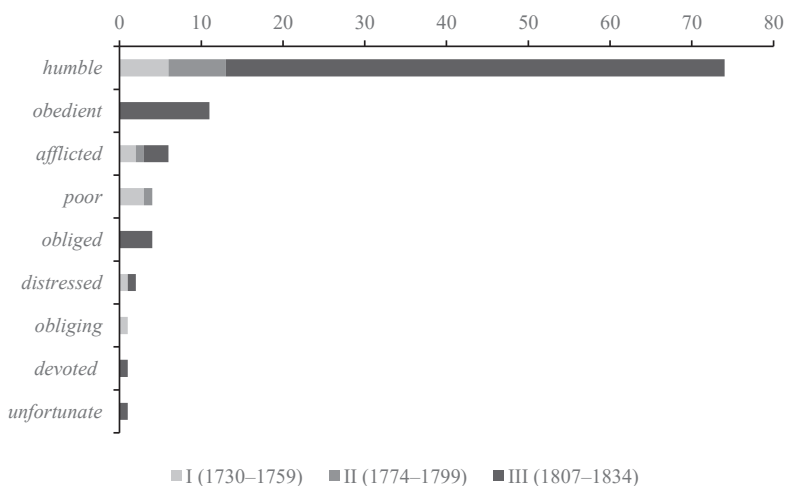
Figure 8. Self-referential adjectives in authentic pauper letters (Diachronic Corpus)
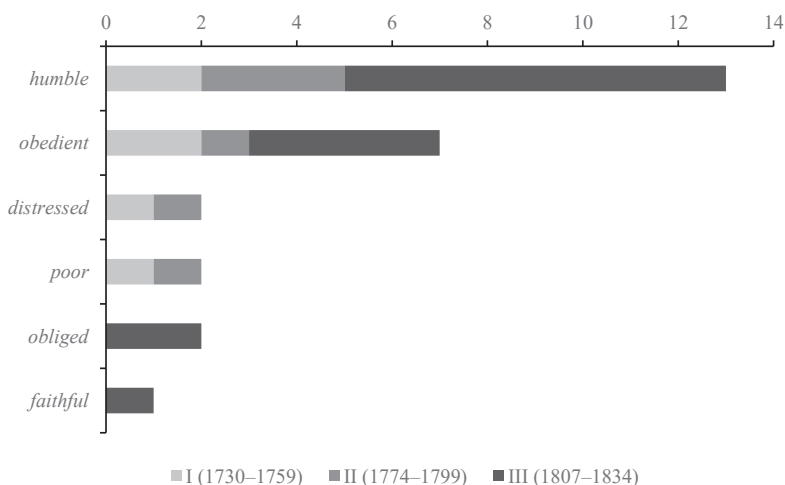

Figure 9. Self-referential adjectives in non-authentic pauper letters (Diachronic Corpus)

Although a self-referential type based on *your humble servant* is most common, some writers do not fill the adjective slot (21x) or the noun slot (5x), and one writer simply concludes with *your* (2_Rosthron_1779[N]). *Yours* is used in only 14 letters and in all except two instances is followed by additional elements such as adverbs or phrases, with a potential diachronic trend towards *yours respectfully*, although frequencies are low overall. Infrequent already in the early eighteenth century, *till death*

was associated with the lower classes (Austin 1973: 135–6) and correspondingly only occurs once in an authentic letter in the earliest subperiod of the Diachronic Corpus (17). Also employed as a post-modifier of *servant* on three occasions in the earlier eighteenth century (see e.g. (3) and (4)), the time-honoured formula *to command* (for examples from the fifteenth to seventeenth centuries see Nevala 2004: 95, 145, 153) seems to fall out of use towards the nineteenth century, with two attestations each in the earlier and later eighteenth century. In non-authentic letters, instead, *in distress* occurs once in the later eighteenth century, the former emphasising the pauper's situation (cp. *distressed* above), and *&c* ('etc.') once each in Subperiods II and III. The abbreviation *&c* is used to represent the final self-reference, which according to Dossena (2010: 288–9) points "to the degree of codification that these formulae had achieved: so fixed and invariable were the formulae, that the encoder did not even need to note them down". In authentic letters from the nineteenth century, *&c* is used once as well, alongside one instance of *respectably* and four of *respectfully* (cp. Timmis 2020: 110), which index social distance and respect. Overall, seven letters (all authentic) contain no self-reference formula at all, which means the applicants forgo a final chance in their letter to display respect, deference and submission (cp. King 2019: 235, 345) towards the recipient, which could have increased their chances of success. Four of these applicants also omit the closing formulae, and it seems probable that they were not aware that these were conventionally expected in letters, nor that by engaging with this type of humiliative discourse they would signal their adherence to the "shared set of norms and values" (Shvanyukova 2020: 99; see also Timmis 2020: 102–3) underpinning the poor-relief system.

> (17) So no more at presan But I Remain Yover abl[ˆi OVERWRITES eˆ]ging
>   Saruant til Deth (1_ChappellH_1741)

With respect to self-references, letters by advocates and officials from the earlier eighteenth century (Supplement) once again mirror majority usage patterns. They rely almost entirely on the formulaic sequence *your (most) humble Servant* or drop the self-reference altogether, in three of five cases the letter starting with a petition-style heading instead of a letter-style salutation. Once a doctor, John Lodwick, writing for "Perriſioner Roice" in 1741 adds "to Command" after the self-reference, in keeping with the temporal trajectory of this phrase indicated by the Diachronic Corpus.

To conclude, variability in closing formulae and self-references is much higher in pauper letters than in missives by advocates and parish officials. Much of the variation reflects the need for applicants to invest in their identity construction, outlining their reduced circumstances, as well as specifying their social roles and their relationship with the recipient. On the other hand, this can also be the result of the limited schooling received by applicants who, unlike parish officers and the more educated advocates, might not be sufficiently aware of existing epistolary norms. This will be explored further in the next two subsections.

5.3 Intra-writer variation in closing formulae and self-references

The pauper letters in the Individual Corpus cast an interesting light on the inter-writer variation observed previously: paupers writing their own letters hardly wavered in their linguistic choices. In his six letters Morgan always concludes with the *no more* formula as in (18), three times without the self-reference *a poor* before his signature. Green is consistent in her use of *I remain your humble servant* across seven letters (e.g. (19)), even if the spelling is somewhat variable, only once omitting both formulaic sequences. Soundy unfailingly closes with the *bound to pray* formula in her twenty letters as in (20), variation occurring only in spelling and word order. Also writing on behalf of family members, her preferred self-reference is *your parishioner(s)* (18x), *your petitioner* occurring only twice. In merely three letters she fills the adjective slot with *unfortunate* (1x) and *distressed* (2x), and once the self-reference is lacking; the second and third options do not deviate from typical usage patterns described in the previous section.

> (18) So no mour fro{m} a pour (3_Morgan_1805)
> (19) I Rame your Houmble Servant (3_Green_1820_1)
> (20) your Perrishoners In duty bound will ever Pray (3_Soundy_1823_2)

In non-autographical letters there is a much higher degree of variation. For instance, each of the four letters encoded for Hammont has a different closing formula and self-reference, and each hand involved with the letters by Hughes and Kingston has their own stylistic preference. In line with autographical applications, however, the choices are fairly invariable within the sets encoded by particular hands when deemed authentic, i.e. representative of someone with limited schooling. This can be seen, firstly, in the first six letters encoded for Hughes, all in the same hand, where the closing formula is always based on *remain* and the self-reference on *your humble servant*; and secondly, in the four letters encoded by the same 'authentic' hand for Kingston, where the two features are never realised.

The three non-authentic letters in the non-autographical set yield additional insights. The final two letters encoded for Hughes were prepared by a trained hand, and although the self-reference remains the same (*your obedient Servant*), there is stylistic variation in the closing formula (*am* vs. run-on formula). As Auer (2015: 155) notes "[t]he better the schooling and the writing practice, the greater the stylistic variation will be", which would apply here as well. The third of the five Kingston letters was equally penned by a well-educated hand; its rendering of closing formula and self-reference as "I Remain yours Respectfully" (3_Kingston_1821_2[N]) offers a stark contrast to the four authentic letters (all by the same untrained hand) where the formulae are absent and the text abruptly closes with the signature. This particular case is interesting because the letter by the trained hand is the third of the five Kingston letters and positioned in the middle of a sequence of three letters sent between September and December 1821, with the earlier and later letters encoded by the uncoached hand. This indicates that Kingston, who could not even sign his name (Section 3.2), was probably not aware of the expressions used in the letter by the trained hand and also did not pass on any formulations to

the less experienced encoder. The stylistic variation in the set of letters sent by Hughes, who also could not sign her name, suggests that she was also not involved linguistically in the composition of the letters, at least not concerning the closing formulae. Otherwise, considering her level of schooling and the evidence from the autographical letters, the formulaic phrases would be more homogeneous. The cases of Kingston and Hughes present counterexamples, on a local level, to the "shared linguistic register" stipulated by Jones/King (2015: 69) and provide proof for the final scenario outlined by Sokoll (2001: 66) who proposes "a broad spectrum of possibilities, with some paupers dictating their letters, while others had them written without much say in their composition and still others where the sender dispatched them without ever knowing what had been set down in his or her name".

The evidence from autographical letters, and sets of letters by authentic hands among the non-autographical applications, strongly supports earlier findings on epistolary formulae in writers with limited schooling, also including members of the lower classes from other European countries. The repertoire of formulae is relatively small and fixed (Elspaß 2005: 163, 172, 192), with formulaic phrases being stored as a single unit in the mental lexicon and retrieved as a whole during the writing process (Elspaß 2005: 170, see Timmis 2020: 97–100 for an extensive discussion). Variant spellings observed in closing formulae and self-references by paupers suggest that the writers probably acquired knowledge of formulaic sequences by hearing them rather than seeing them in writing (unless they happened to take a letter with non-standard spelling as a model), and they rendered the formulae in writing according to the spelling principles they were familiar with (cp. Fairman 2008: 206–207; Allen 2015: 211, quoted in Timmis 2020: 101).

Limited schooling and incidental rather than comprehensive (oral) transmission of stylistic norms could also explain why pauper letters do on occasion contain petition-style features, but why different applicants focus on (a varying number of) different features. Furthermore, as a result of an incomplete acquisition of epistolary norms paupers may not have been aware that closing formulae like *from, no more* and *conclude*, or the addition of *till death*, had become associated with lower-class language and would not be used by the officials they corresponded with (Sections 5.1 and 5.2), or that a switch from first to third person after a letter-style element would be considered unconventional as well (Section 4). While the letters examined in this subsection date to the nineteenth century, the findings on the production circumstances of later pauper letters and the influence of limited education on the stylistic repertoire of the writers can likely also be applied to the eighteenth century, when there were even fewer institutional schooling opportunities for the labouring poor.

5.4 Self-corrections in closing formulae and self-references

A number of self-corrections in pauper letters offer additional support for the hypothesis that oral transmission was an important pathway for the acquisition of epistolary formulae. In closing formulae and self-references in the Diachronic and Individual Corpora there are 24 corrections, 18 of which affect the spelling of individual words. 7 self-corrections reveal struggles with the spelling of the verb *remain* in a closing formula,

and the adjectives *humble* (2x) and *obliging*, as well the nouns *servant*, *petitioner* and *parishioner* (1x each) in self-references. Uncertainty concerning the correct vowel representation, for instance, can be seen in exchanged vowels in "abl[ˆi OVERWRITES eˆ]ging" (1_ChappellH_1741), "H[ˆo OVERWRITES uˆ]mble" (2_Keeling_1788) and "pr[ˆea OVERWRITES iˆ]shener" (3_Wall_1821). Such variant spellings can represent reflections of speech (Auer *et al.* 2033, Gardner *et al.* 2022, Gardner 2023b). Particularly revealing in this context is the self-correction in (4) where Young struggles with the standard spelling of *petitioner*, deleting her first attempt "patitioner" and opting for "pertisoner" instead with insertion of non-etymological /r/. This suggests that she had a rhotic accent and spelt phonemically (Fairman 2008: 206) owing to limited schooling and lack of written models. Rhoticity is likewise evidenced in other writers, for instance in the spelling "Pertishoner(s)" (3_Soundy_1823_1; 3_Soundy_1827_1; 3_Soundy_1828_3) by Frances Soundy, who also wrote to a home parish in Berkshire, her likely place of origin, an area in which r-colouring was still attested in the mid-twentieth century (Upton/Widdowson 2006: 42–3). 11 further modifications betray lapses in concentration on the word level when a writer thought ahead and had to supply a character that was omitted (9x), e.g. with an insertion in "Distt͵esed" (1_Camp_1759), or when a repeated character is deleted by overwriting (2x), e.g. "Se[ˆr OVERWRITES eˆ]vant" (3_Spencer_1815). On the sentence level we find similar concentration lapses or mechanical mistakes (following Fairman 2008: 199) which are due to the (partial) repetition of a previously written word (1x) or thinking ahead (2x). In (21) the writer started with "y[our]", part of the self-reference, but realised "from" was missing from the closing formula, and in (22) the verb "Will" originally appears before the self-reference is complete. With the petition-style closing formula *duty bound* variation in the word order is possible, but in twenty letters Soundy is relatively invariable (Section 5.3) and diverts from her usual order "self-reference + in duty bound will ever pray" (see (20)) merely three times, with "in duty bound" appearing either before the self-reference (1x) or between "will" and "ever pray" (2x). With the self-correction in (22) Soundy establishes her preferred word order.

(21) so no mor [ˆ{y} RUBBED OUTˆ] from your […] (3_Bryan_1829)
(22) your unforchenate [ˆWill CROSSED OUTˆ] Perrishoner in duty bound will
Ever Pray (3_Soundy_1818_1)

Only three changes register beyond the level of spelling and mechanical errors. In an undated letter (3_Morgan_18XX), Morgan deletes an indefinite pronoun from the self-reference slot, presumably the start of *a poor*, switching to his alternative strategy of not supplying any self-reference at the end of the letter (Section 5.3). However, as previously noted, there is no indication from the contents of his letters as to when he prefers which option, and there is no change in preferences over time either. In a letter sent by Hughes, "Servᵗ" is added above the line after "your Hunble" (3_Hughes_1829_2), which could mean a deliberate change from a self-reference without a noun, but most likely represents an omission since this particular hand writes *your humble servant* in

the self-reference in six different letters for this applicant. Fixedness in the application of epistolary formula probably also accounts for the change in a different letter by the same hand from "yours" to "your" after "i Remain" (3_Hughes_1829_4). It is noteworthy that no correction was made in closing formulae or self-references with the objective of switching from letter to petition style, or vice versa.

In total, 22 of 189 pauper letters investigated are affected by changes to closing formulae and self-references. While this seems to be a comparatively low proportion, especially in light of Fairman (2008: 198) finding 490 decipherable strike-throughs in c. 1,600 pauper letters, further research is required to determine to what extent epistolary formulae are generally subject to modification during the writing process. The relatively low number of self-corrections in the present study is suggestive of the fixedness of formulaic sequences and supports the theory that they are stored and retrieved as a whole from the mental lexicon (Section 5.3). That only three changes rectify mechanical errors on the sentence level – even though Fairman (2008: 208) notes that in his corpus such corrections owing to lapses in concentration ('slips of the pen', i.e. his categories 'jump', 'echo' and 'repeat') are roughly as frequent as spelling modifications – could signify that the effort in retrieval of formulaic sequences is fairly minimal, but also that when drawing on these pre-fabricated chunks the mental load is lighter and the writers are less easily distracted than when they are required to freely compose new sentences. Within formulaic sequences lapses in concentration manifest themselves most commonly at the word level, as shown by the insertion of omitted characters and the deletion of repeated ones.

As a final point of note, self-corrections in closing formulae and self-references were only found in authentic letters, which again highlights the role of education in the acquisition of epistolary formulae. Better-trained writers will either have been able to write an error-free letter straightaway or, provided they had sufficient means, they prepared a clean copy from a draft, being aware of the notion that self-corrections were considered impolite and carried a social stigma. As early as 1756 (and possibly earlier, if earlier editions can be uncovered), self-corrections were described in a letter-writing manual as 'not only a Reflection on the writer, but a Rudeneſs to the Perſon to whom they are written' (Anonymous 1756; on draft writing see also Gardner 2018, 2023a).

6 CONCLUDING REMARKS

Through the study of five text-constitutive features this article has shown empirically that relief applications written under the Old Poor Law represent letters rather than petitions in terms of form and style, and for the first time offers a text-typological account of pauper letters as a subtype of correspondence which shows stylistic similarities not only with the familiar letter and petitions, but also with business and official correspondence. Within the text type of pauper letters there is significant variation, and a continuum of style can be observed ranging from letter style to petition style. However, in the analysed dataset letter-style writing was already the dominant form of expression in the earliest poor-relief applications. A low proportion of applicants does adopt features typical of petitions, yet mostly only one or two of the five identified here, and

the usage of petition-style features decreases already in the eighteenth century. These observations contradict and offer a more nuanced view on the observation by Jones/ King (2015: 73–4) that a shift in stylistic preference took place towards the nineteenth century only. Although the dataset on which the present study is based is comparatively small, owing to the scarce survival of pauper letters from the eighteenth century and limited source availability, the article has uncovered interesting and suggestive diachronic trajectories which merit exploring further in a more extensive collection of letters, but find support in related research, as noted in the earlier sections, and also in Sokoll's study on Essex pauper letters. In a much larger dataset of 758 letters he unearthed only one pauper letter clearly modelled on a petition, written on behalf of Ann Marsh in 1824 by a professional scribe (Sokoll 2001: 48, 193–4). The findings presented in this article corroborate Sokoll's statement that "it cannot be emphasized too strongly that in stylistic terms and from their overall scriptual habitus, most pauper letters do *not* normally follow the contemporary model of the formal petition" (2001: 59, original emphasis).

While inter-writer variation across pauper letters is extensive regarding closing formulae and self-references, letters by parish overseers and advocates exhibit significantly less variation and, similar to letters by the better educated (which includes non-authentic pauper letters), reveal a noticeable affinity with formulaic language evidenced in business correspondence.[19] The findings on intra-writer variation and self-corrections in pauper letters suggest that individuals typically acquired only one formulaic expression each for the slots of closing formula and self-reference, often only through oral transmission. Owing to limited schooling opportunities, stylistic conventions were not always learned entirely successfully as evidenced by self-corrections affecting spelling, the partial adoption of petition-style features and their occasional application in unusual positions.

Although their literacy and epistolary skills may have been limited, the poor-relief applicants nevertheless were competent enough to be able to successfully engage with parish officials in correspondence in an attempt to alleviate their distress. The evidence from pauper letters, particularly concerning the lack of intra-writer variation and the types of self-corrections made, is significant for our understanding of the social practice of letter-writing, as well as how the lower classes acquired literacy and to what degree. The labouring poor emerge as resourceful individuals who penned letters themselves or identified individuals in their social circle who could act as scribes for them (see also Sokoll 2001: 65, King 2019: 36). This could support Vincent's findings concerning household literacy in the nineteenth century, which signifies that at least one member of the household is literate; on the basis of signature literacy documented in marriage registers he determines that in the mid-nineteenth century, i.e. a generation after the latest pauper letter investigated in the present paper and a generation before compulsory elementary education was introduced, "there was literacy in 75% of the new homes" (2014: 275). The concept of household literacy is equally relevant for the earlier periods

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19   Inter-writer variation in pauper letters with respect to orthographical and phonological features has been examined in e.g. Gardner et al. (2022) and Auer et al. (2023).

investigated in this article, and in fact preceding centuries. Following Hailwood (2023), already in the period 1550–1700 the literacy skills of the lower classes should not be underestimated. Examining whether witnesses left simple strokes, meaningful marks or symbols, initials or signatures in depositions, he argues that gradations between illiteracy and literacy should be recognised, finding that

> [a]rtisans, husbandmen and labourers are all groups that are considered to be overwhelmingly illiterate using traditional signature studies techniques, but here they emerge as subsections of society in which between 50 and 60 per cent of individuals demonstrated more than the most basic writing skills. They could form meaningful and recognizable letters or symbols with a pen in hand. (Hailwood 2003: 59)

Furthermore, Hailwood (2003): 61) maintains that "even a minimal amount of formal schooling could have been sufficient for an individual to acquire 'letteracy': the ability to identify individual letters, if not much more". The writing competencies observed in pauper letters from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries are testament to the continued resourcefulness of the lower classes and their access to foundational education at the very least.

The findings of this article and limitations in the amount and type of data analysed have also created new research questions and opened up new avenues for future studies. For instance, why the already infrequent recourse to petition-style features decreased even further over time merits further consideration. After all, these features could usefully be employed to increase the formality of their writing and to show respect towards the socially distant addressees, i.e. the overseers and other parish officials. Perhaps the petition as a model became less popular or available, or, more likely, letters and epistolary style became even more firmly established by convention as the appropriate mode for poor-relief applications. Such applications initiated correspondence with parish officials, in some cases spanning many years, which the poor used to negotiate their case and plead for (continued) support (Sokoll 2001, 2008). It would also be interesting to adopt the framework and methodology by Biber/Finegan (1989) and determine whether the decrease of petition-style features in pauper letters can be linked to the drift towards a more oral style which the two authors observed in letters more generally (1989: 515).

For a fuller perspective on these changes the period of investigation needs to be extended back into the seventeenth and sixteenth centuries as well, requiring extensive archival work (and luck) in order to uncover relevant material from the labouring poor. Further research is also necessary to establish the potential stylistic impact of business and official correspondence on pauper letters, and to determine to what extent overarching norms for official writing can be identified across different areas of letter-writing. A comprehensive diachronic investigation of closing formulae and self-references in different types of correspondence from the sixteenth to the nineteenth century would help elucidate these questions further and also show when certain specific formulaic

expressions may have become restricted to e.g. lower-class writing over time. Once a version with normalised spelling of the LALP corpus of pauper letters is completed, it will be possible to conduct a more extensive analysis of stylistic variation, increasing the number of features and adopting a stylometric approach, to obtain a more comprehensive view of inter- and intra-writer variation in pauper letters, and achieve a more detailed text-typological differentiation between pauper letters, petitions, business and official correspondence, and the familiar letter.

All in all, this article aimed to contribute to current debates in historical sociolinguistics and has showcased pauper letters as a text type in its own right which helpfully contributes to the study of language history 'from below' by documenting the language of members of the lower spectrum of society from whom relatively few linguistic sources have survived and made available so far. The rich findings gained from investigating intra-writer variation and self-corrections in pauper letters invite further research considering a wider range of linguistic features in order to gain a deeper understanding of the social context in which pauper letters were written. Considering the fact that similarly valuable insights have emerged in previous studies on the language of the better-educated (e.g. Gardner 2018, 2023a), analysing intra-writer variation and self-corrections in handwritten documents from the past should become standard in historical linguistic research.

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Abstract

ENGLISH PAUPER LETTERS IN THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY AND BEYOND: ON THE VARIABILITY AND EVOLUTION OF A NEW TEXT TYPE

This article explores a new subtype of vernacular correspondence emerging in the early eighteenth century, the pauper letter, providing a textual classification of this new text type and an account of its variability and evolution into the nineteenth century. The study is based on 189 letters sent between 1730 and 1834 by the poor applying for support from their parish of legal settlement, with a focus on the potential influence of the form and language of petitions in the realisation of five features which can be found in pauper letters (voice, greeting, petition-element, closing formula and self-reference). From a diachronic perspective, letter-style writing was preferred already in the earliest pauper letters, and the presence of petition-style features further decreases over time. In consequence, pauper letters should be classified as letters rather than petitions. The analysis of inter-writer variation across pauper letters and different social groups shows that in pauper letters there is significant stylistic variation and that the writers employ strategies, in particular self-reference, to index their social roles of applicant and parishioner or to highlight the difficult circumstances in which they find themselves, as they appeal to the responsibility of the parish officials to offer assistance. In contrast, in 14 letters by parish officials and advocates writing on behalf of the poor formulaic sequences are generally more

uniform than in pauper letters. Stylistic choices by writers with more experience (including paupers) tend to be oriented towards majority usage patterns and show an affinity with stylistic expressions also attested in business correspondence. A study on intra-writer variation reveals that individual encoders have a fixed repertoire of formulaic expressions expected in closing formulae and self-references. Owing to their limited schooling opportunities, paupers typically only acquired incomplete knowledge of conventional expressions and their appropriateness. Self-corrections by paupers in closing formulae and self-references support earlier findings that formulaic sequences were often learned through incidental oral transmission and stored and processed as a whole.

Keywords: historical sociolinguistics, pauper letters, text types, formulaic language, self-corrections

Povzetek

ANGLEŠKA PISMA REVNIH V 18. STOLETJU IN POZNEJE: O RAZNOLIKO-STI IN RAZVOJU NOVE BESEDILNE ZVRSTI

V članku se ukvarjamo s pismom revnih kot novim podtipom vernakularne korespondence, ki je nastal v zgodnjem 18. stoletju. Predlagana je besedilna klasifikacija te zvrsti in predstavljena njena raznolikost in razvoj do 19. stoletja. Raziskava temelji na 189 pismih, ki so jih revni poslali med 1730 in 1834 in v katerih so župnijo, ki so ji uradno pripadali, prosili za podporo. Posebej nas zanima morebitni vpliv oblike in jezika teh prošenj na izraženost petih značilnosti, ki jih najdemo v tovrstnih pismih (slovnična oseba, pozdrav, prošnja v ožjem smislu, zaključna formula in avtoreferencialnost). Z diahronega stališča se avtorji že v najzgodnejših pismih odločajo za pisemski slog, medtem ko prisotnost peticijskega sloga skozi čas še nadalje upada. Zato bi bilo smiselno imeti pisma revnih za pisma, ne za peticije. Analiza variantnosti med posameznimi pisci in različnimi družbenimi skupinami kaže, da so pisma revnih slogovno zelo raznolika in da pisci z uporabo določenih strategij, predvsem avtoreferencialnosti, kažejo na družbeno vlogo, ki jo imajo kot prosilci in župljani, ali pa skušajo poudariti, v kako težkih razmerah so se znašli, ko se sklicujejo na odgovornost župnijskih uradnikov, da nudijo pomoč. Nasprotno pa je za 14 pisem, katerih avtorji so bili župnijski uradniki in zastopniki, ki so pisali v imenu revnih, značilna večja enovitost uporabljenih stalnih zvez kot v pismih revnih. Slogovne izbire bolj izkušenih avtorjev (vključno z revnimi) stremijo k vzorcem prevladujoče rabe in vsebujejo podobnosti s slogovnimi izrazi, ki jih najdemo tudi v poslovni korespondenci. Raziskava o znotrajavtorski variantnosti razkriva, da imajo posamezniki ustaljen nabor stalnih zvez, pričakovanih v zaključnih formulah in na avtoreferencialnih mestih. Spričo omejenih izobrazbenih možnosti revni običajno pridobijo zgolj okrnjeno znanje o ustaljenih izrazih in o ustreznosti njihove rabe. Samopopravljanja revnih, ki jih najdemo v zaključnih formulah in pri avtoreferencialnih izrazih, govorijo v prid

predhodnim ugotovitvam, da so bile stalne zveze pogosto naučene prek naključnega ustnega prenašanja in da so se shranjevale in procesirale kot samostojne enote.

Ključne besede: zgodovinska sociolingvistika, pisma revnih, besedilne zvrsti, formulaični jezik, samopopravljanje