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From the Bridal Letter to Online Flirting Changes in Text Type from the 19th Century to the Internet Era

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1 HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

A love letter is a "metasign" of love, as Roland Barthes notes in his work *Fragmentes d'un discours amoureux*, published in 1977. This semiotic term reveals the love letter's function: as a whole it signifies – or, more broadly, expresses¹ – the writer's love. This illocutive force evolves in interaction with the socio-cultural knowledge of the text type "love letter" and love discourse in general.²

In this paper I will focus not only on contemporary letters and especially Internet love messages and flirting, but also on letters written more than a century ago. I thus analyze correspondence from a historical perspective focusing on letters, text type and writing practices as an integral part of evolving textual meaning and social practices. In a contemporary context, readers decode the meaning and the function of an individual text by referring to their more or less tacit knowledge of the "gestalt" (phenomenological form), specific cues indexing the text type, letter content, discursive norms and performative rules that govern their milieu. A historical anal-

- 1 Böhler (1934) mentions in his theory of language that all linguistic signification can be divided into three functions: the expressive, the appellative and the representative text types. He follows a well-known differentiation of literary genres into the poetic (expressive), the epic (representative) and the dramatic (appellative), as formulated in classical genre theory (Plato, Aristotle and Horace).
- 2 Sandig (2006) and Brinker (2001), for instance, are exponents of the position that, from a merely holistic point of view, the text function is conceived of as the principal and, as Sandig points out, the prototypical feature among other textual dimensions. Other positions focus on the complexity of textual meaning, which cannot be fully described by pragmatic theory, as for instance Heinemann & Viehweger (1991), Adamzik (2000), Fix (2000) and Feilke (2003).

"The letters swarm with hints and anecdotes about daily life, with adolescent jokes, lovers' private codes, promises of gifts. A pocket-knife or book has not been returned; the friend who knows where to get gloves has not been seen; the weather, of course, is cold, or hot, or damp [...]'" (1992: 116).

In brief, they do not really correspond to our "Golden Age" image of earlier amorous communication. Of course, there were also traditional love letters, and some of them can be found in Lovric's anthology (1990), but these should be regarded as exception rather than the rule.

In sum, the introduction of the modern means of communication and the concomitant changes in communicative practices seem to have some repercussions in the sociolinguistic and sociopsychological dimension of amorous discourse. However, contrary to common assumptions, these consequences are not necessarily of a negative nature. Rather, the introduction of the new media has multiplied the possibilities available for communicating thoughts and feelings. The more traditional love letter has been supplemented by email and short messages, each of which can now be used in very special conditions and for very special purposes. Interestingly, the stylistic and cultural inertia that has been observed in amorous discourse seems to have survived the medial changes, so that we still find some of the traditional imagery, metaphors, and style in modern SMS and emails (cf. Wyss 2002: 85). Nevertheless, the modern electronic media have also developed medium-specific forms and rules of usage so that authors are offered some chances to escape the dilemma of having to be original and traditional at the same time. What remains to be seen is to what extent there will also be some reflux in the future which might bring forms, structures, and practices from the electronic media into the traditional modes of communication, and whether these memes and memplexes will also have a chance of long-term survival.

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case; socio-psychologists have come to the conclusion that email and short messages actually invite people to communicate more than before. It is a fact that there is a fast-growing number of short messages being sent throughout the world, and these are used for purposes that remained unfulfilled before. In other words, people now can "text" things that they could not "say" or "write" before, either because of temporal or technical restrictions, or because these things were conceptually not possible in either the written or spoken mode. Döring, for instance, reports that many lovers send short messages in the morning or evening, or even during the day just to say hi and ask after their significant other's well-being. Men are said to be more open and willing to talk about their feelings on email and short messaging, particularly when the message is somewhat face-threatening (saying they are grateful, sorry, etc.). Even after the advent of email, short messages, and instant messaging, there has still been a steady increase in business travel and meetings – and why should that be the case if electronic media are faster, supposedly more efficient and much cheaper? Naturally, some face-to-face communication or letter writing has disappeared due to electronic media, but it can be argued that the introduction of the new media has also led to new forms of communication. They have filled (and sometimes even created) gaps that the other media could not fill in the same way. Email is faster, cheaper and less formal than letter writing; phoning is more expensive, personal and less binding than writing. Also, it is one of the few synchronous means of communication, i.e. both communication partners have to engage in the communicative event simultaneously. Letter writing, email, and short messages are all asynchronous means of communication. The recipient can read the message and reply at their discretion, which is why people sometimes use email rather than the phone. It is not only because "even people with no computer experience are finding that email is often both less expensive and more convenient than traditional phone calls" (Baron 2000: 227) that people use this form of communication, but because email allows you to avoid intruding into the addressee's time and space. I can talk to colleagues about some technical detail any time of the day via email, and I do not have to prepare every single issue that I wish to discuss beforehand. This is what I would have to do for a phone call because I cannot call, let alone reach, a colleague 24/7, and certainly cannot bother this colleague every hour or two if I have forgotten some point or when something new comes up. Emails can be sent 24/7, and they can be sent several times a day, if need be (but within limits, of course). This is the reason why they are sometimes more elegant and useful than the phone. Short messaging, then, is mobile, cost effective, asynchronous, and less personal than a phone call. Also, as has been mentioned above, the act of writing seems to impose fewer inhibitions on communicators than the act of calling and talking. On the other hand, many things cannot or should not be communicated via email or short messages, mainly for security reasons, but also because of urgency, or because the matter is very delicate and personal. While flirting via short messaging is often tolerated and

sometimes even endorsed (see above), ending a relationship via short messaging is generally considered inappropriate, as is proposing. Baron mentions that condolences can now be sent via email (2000: 235) and while this is generally true, it also depends on the recipient and occasion. Condolences for distant relatives, friends or colleagues are certainly appropriate in email or in letter form. In the case condolences sent to people with whom one is socially or emotionally close to, I would like to argue that email would be a marked choice and would probably be considered offensive. Instead, a phone call, personal visit or maybe a letter would be required. In the former case, we simply would often not have sent anything at all before email became available. Thus, email has created and filled a gap rather than ousted the phone or the letter.

If we now turn our attention back to love letters, as pointed out above, the concept "love letter" has many different realizations and the traditional love letter is only one of them. The introduction of the electronic media has led to new possibilities to express amorous sentiments. At the same time, there is growing concern that the traditional forms will be ousted by the new ones, that traditional love letters will be devalued and eventually die out. I have argued that this is not the case. Traditional handwritten love letters are not ousted by the new forms, but are supplemented by them. The new forms allow for communication that has rarely been possible before. In such a way, the older forms are actually not devalued, but gain in value, as they are now reserved for very special occasions and purposes; the traditional love letter has become the marked choice. In other words: receiving an amorous short message on a mobile phone today is nothing special and can only serve daily purposes, much like the little notes that were sent in the nineteenth century. But receiving a carefully handwritten letter on special paper has become (or still is) something very special. Furthermore, it has been shown that the present-day idea of prototypical love letters is also based in some part on clichés and misconceptions. The average nineteenth-century love message is not carefully written, ornamented, scented, etc., but rather a brief note on scrap paper. Very few of these messages show "correct" language use. Often, they contain very mundane messages following or preceding declarations of love, as Barret-Ducrocq points out:

"The most striking feature of this rare and precious material is its variety of tone. It is most unusual [...] for one of these letters to be devoted entirely to the expression of amorous sentiments. Suitors who lived or worked in distant parts of a metropolis not yet equipped with long-distance communications wrote mainly to arrange a rendezvous or to apologize for missing one." (1992: 114)

... continues:

stead of simple adjectives). However, this is not to say that collocation frequency, number of words, or structural complexity can be used to predict the success of a given linguistic meme with any degree of precision. However, it seems intuitively clear that these are important factors which must enter into the equation when the power and long-term survival of memes is considered.

Meme theory can thus also be applied in explaining the stylistic and cultural inertia that can be observed in love letters and in ideas about love letters across time. People often seem to be very unwilling to change and to violate the overt and covert norms and rules of successful amorous communication (cf. Wyss 2002: 61). The memes of amorous discourse are promoted and enforced through general cultural ideas about language and language use, such as the value and importance of (hand-) writing and correct language use (cf. Milroy and Milroy 2001; Stein 1997) on the one hand, and media influence on the other. The media, and literature in particular, have always fostered the idea of traditional love letters with well-established stylistic elements as something valuable, important, and, most importantly, successful. Cyrano de Bergerac, or the poets of the romantic period (Byron, Keats, Burns, to name but a few) are probably the all-time classics in this respect. In portraying love letters in such a way, the media promote and enforce this memeplex in at least two ways. On the one hand, they show the great success that writers can have with traditional letters, on the other hand, they tell the recipient what they can and should expect from authors. Thus, the pressure authors are put under is twofold: they should follow the example of successful writers as seen in the media, and they should carefully attend to what their addressee expects, which is also determined by the media. And yet, language users are caught on the horns of a dilemma. On the one hand, strong memes want to be copied and it seems desirable to follow well-established patterns. On the other hand, another maxim of amorous discourse, a meme in itself, is creativity, spontaneity, and originality. Authors of "good" love letters find and use new, original ways of expressing their feelings – the overt, non-ironic use of clichés is as much a faux pas in love letters as blatant directness is. Thus love letters simultaneously epitomize the romantic and the postmodern credo: Make it new, but there is nothing new, everything has been said before.

4 SOCIOLINGUISTIC AND SOCIOPSYCHOLOGICAL CHANGES

What changes in terms of sociolinguistic and sociopsychological factors can be observed between the middle of the nineteenth century and the present day? The widespread cliché, as has been pointed above, is that if amorous discourse exists at all, it no longer uses the pen and paper form, but takes place exclusively via electronic media, such as email and short messages. These, many critics fear, may have

had a substantial influence on shaping our ideas about love and amorous discourse (cf. Kesselner and Bergs 2002). First, it has to be acknowledged that many people today do indeed use short messaging and email as a media for their love messages, and that sometimes the modern electronic media win over the traditional ones, such as letters and Valentine's cards. VirginMobile, for example, reports that in 1999, twelve million people, i.e. half of Britain's mobile users, expected a Valentine's text message rather than a traditional card from their lovers. In 2001, about 25 per cent of all weekly short messages in the UK, i.e. 71 million, contained flirtatious or romantic text (Garcia-Robles 2001). Concomitantly, it can be observed that more and more people are subject to some kind of emotional exhibitionism. Many speakers today are quite willing to publish their thoughts and feelings on Internet websites (e.g., <http://library.lovingyou.com/>; <http://www.love-letter.de/basic.html>). In some cases it is even expected that love be publicly declared and expressed. This might be regarded as analogous to the situation in eighteenth century Britain, where the act of letter writing and reading was considered a public affair and entertainment for friends and family. Also, the growing number of websites that offer prefabricated text elements for online love letters (e.g., <http://www.secretloveletters.com/>) has been a cause of growing public concern. Critics have regarded these websites as signs of rapid devaluation of originality and of a general loss of creativity in authors. However, these websites seem to correspond to traditional letter-writing manuals, which have been available for hundreds of years and which offer practical advice, rules, guidance, and prefabricated text chunks for good love letter writing. Needless to say, all these normative institutions are powerful amplifiers of the memplexes in question.

Second, as a rule, the introduction of new media leads to new forms of expression without necessarily endangering old(er) forms. The printed book supposedly endangered traditional learning, newspapers endangered coffee house conversations and eventually also the printed book; the telegraph in turn endangered newspapers and traditional journalism (Baron 2000: 244f). Once the telephone had become firmly established, quite a number of critics pronounced the letter and written communication dead (Baron 2000: 245). Obviously, none of these worries proved to be substantial. While there is indeed a rapidly growing number of phone calls, emails, and short messages being exchanged, we also have a more or less stable number of letters being sent world wide (http://www.upu.int/fact_sheets/en/fact_sheet_en.pdf). In fact, it seems that 9/11 had more of an impact on postal communication than the rise of the new economy before 2001. There is no indication that phone calls or any other electronic medium can or will take over 100% of written and face-to-face communication. Similarly, the introduction of email and short messaging on mobile phones has led to fears that these might oust older forms of communication, that they might isolate people, and eventually endanger general face-to-face communicative skills (Baron 2000: 245). Again, this is clearly not the

written equivalent to real life kisses. Why do some of the metaphors, images, and symbols have such a surprisingly long life, while others quickly fall out of use, or even never catch on at all?

This paper suggests that this retention of certain metaphors and images can be explained by general cognitive principles as they have been formulated in meme theory. Meme theory, first mentioned by Dawkins (1976) and further elaborated by Blackmore (1999) and Aunger (2001), basically assumes, very broadly speaking, that ideas ("memes") are replicators and follow a replicating mechanism just like biological genes. This is not to say that ideas, theories, linguistic expressions, etc. have a physical correlate in genes, but only that they replicate in the same way as genes are said to in Lamarckian or Darwinian evolutionary theory, i.e. through mutation and selection. Whenever humans imitate each other "something is passed on" (Blackmore 1999: 4). This "something" has been called a "meme".

Memes are not strictly defined entities. They can be structurally simple, such as the schwa sound used in thinking pauses in many European languages, or a gesture like "thumbs up!" or "the finger". But they can also form meme complexes ("memeplexes"), such as melodies or songs, like "Jingle Bells" or "Happy Birthday", or rituals, like the white wedding. Even whole stories can be regarded as memes, like the wide-spread urban myth of the cat that was dried in the microwave oven, and whose owner successfully sued for damages since nobody told her not to put living animals in the oven. The latter example also illustrates the principle of mutation and selection in memes. This particular urban myth is circulated in a large number of versions. Different animals are dried (cats, poodles, guinea pigs, parrots, among others), the age and gender of the owner vary, the lawsuit is or is not successful. This shows that there is variability, or mutation, in memes. But only the best memes eventually survive and get copied, so that while there is no statistical survey available, at least not to my knowledge, I am willing to bet that one or two particular versions (e.g. old lady, poodle, successful lawsuit) are much more widespread than the others (e.g. young man, parrot, not successful). It seems intuitively clear and obvious that some memes must be much stronger and more successful than others. Certain opera melodies are known to millions of people, most of whom have never been to any opera, while other melodies hardly make it beyond the evening of their performance. The smiley is a well-known symbol for a smiling, good-humoured face, the winking smiley is slightly less well-known, the emoticon *!#!^*&~>: ("I am very angry after losing hours of work") is certainly unknown to the majority of internet users and will never catch on.

A number of factors might contribute to the success of certain memes over others. These include factors relating to the meme itself on the one hand, and to the meme carrier (speaker) on the other. Complexity, transparency, and frequency seem to be the most important factors as far as the meme is concerned. Structurally complex memes have fewer chances of survival than simple ones, semiotically op-

ones have fewer chances than semiotically transparent ones, and also the more frequently they occur, the better their chances of survival. In terms of the meme carrier (for speaker in most cases), social networks and group or cultural ideology can be identified as the prime factors that promote or defer the spread of certain memes. The more contacts somebody has and the more willing he or she is to innovate his or her group or culture, the greater the chances of spread and survival for the meme.

I would like to argue that metaphors, images, symbols, and conventions of discourse in general are also memes and memeplexes, and that they follow the same kind of principles, i.e. mutation, selection, and replication. From the meme theory point of view, we can show why and how certain images, symbols, and conventions of discourse have survived over many years, even centuries, while others have died out quickly. Symbols, like "x" for a kiss, or metaphors, such as the object of love as appetizing food, are meme complexes that have spread rapidly and successfully through society and across time. In contrast, one particular symbol that can be found in emails and short messages, "xoxoxo" "Hugs and kisses", for example, differs only slightly from the traditional "x", and can be seen as a mutation of the original. Whether it will eventually be more successful in its replication than the original form, and whether one will oust the other or not, remains to be seen. Similarly, particular metaphors or images are simply "better" (for instance structurally simpler and therefore easier to memorize) than others. Many people could use an utterance such as (9a):

(9a) My love for you is like the surging sea, wild and passionate against the sand

All of the elements are well-known to most people, the adjectives are clear, simple, and very common in this collocation. Moreover, the structure is quite simple: X (my love) is (like) Y (the sea). The syntactically independent adjunct ("wild and passionate[...]") with its elliptic structure makes the utterance look quite spontaneous, lively, and emotionally involved (cf. Koch and Österreicher's "language of distance versus of language of proximity" (1994), or the distinction between "planned" and "unplanned" discourse). Only minor modifications, as in example (9b), reveal interesting differences in quality:

(9b) "My love for you can be compared to the undulating briny. It is out of control and flows with much emotion in the direction of the beach"

Example (9b) is propositionally roughly equivalent to (9a), and yet it seems quite unlikely that this phrase will ever make it into a love letter, and even if it did, it would have few chances of being passed on, in contrast to (9a). It contains eleven more words, its collocations are rather uncommon, and its overall structure is much more complex (two complete and grammatical sentences; prepositional phrases in-

- (2) "My dearest Eliza, I just received your welcome letter and was very pleased to Receive it i was rather Disappointed as i hurried home for you but i know it cant be helped at all times..."
- (3) "accept the kisses you sent in your note with pleasure and will return with interests on friday night althou I would rather had them from your lips than your hands..."

Examples (1) to (3) illustrate a number of interesting phenomena. First, they are clearly not embodiments of a highly literate style. They contain "errors" in the domains of punctuation, orthography, and morphosyntax. Examples (1) and (2) lack full stops and the apostrophe in "cant"; example (2) has a misspelling in "very", faulty capitalization in "to Receive", "Disappointed", and "i"; example (3) also contains some lack of capitalization in "friday" and the phonetic spelling "althou" as well as one morphosyntactic irregularity, "would rather had them". Moreover, all three examples illustrate a rather simple, paratactic style. Many other messages from the corpus follow a similar pattern, although some stylistic diversity can certainly be diagnosed. In general, the letters and notes seem to represent some kind of written orality. They show signs of both planned and unplanned discourse: on the one hand, they sometimes carefully develop an idea or conform to generally accepted notions of good letter writing; on the other hand, they sometimes change topics in the middle of a sentence or end quite abruptly. Also, the lack of punctuation and the rather paratactic syntax put them closer to the unplanned end of the discourse spectrum. Many of their features are characteristic of what Koch and Österreicher (1994) have called the language of proximity. Example (4) below contains forms of direct address very reminiscent of oral features that can be interpreted as signs of solidarity, proximity and understanding:

- (4) "My dearest Isabella, I receive your kind letter last night and am very sorry to hear that Miss S is thinking of shutting up the house as you say she is no Lady I should call her an old wick or something worse but never mind Old Gal Brighter days will come again as the darkest cloud as a silver lining cheer up your pecker up Dear ... dont fret old Gal I am coming to Long Acre on Thursday evening so I shall give you a call at 7 at the corner so please be on the look out I hope I shall see the Old Clock out when I come ..."

The use of "Old Gal" as form of address and the phrase "or something worse but never mind" make this text look particularly oral, spontaneous, and emphatic. What appears to be h-dropping ("the darkest cloud (h)as a silver lining") further underlines this effect.

In terms of content, virtually none of the letters is obscenely pornographic or even openly sexual. In the rare cases where physical descriptions can be found, they almost always remain rather vague and harmless, at least from a modern perspective, as the allusion in example (3) shows. This may be due to the general cultural

and ideological climate of Victorian England (compare Lystra 1989 for a different perspective and assessment), but there is also a very practical reason, as Barret-Ducrocq (1992: 120f) suggests. Many men were aware of the danger of extramarital relationships and illegitimate children and therefore tried to keep evidence of their indecent involvement to as minimal a level as possible, as example (5) shows:"

- (5) "But enough of that foolery I should very much like to be with you to sit beside you with my arm round your pritty little waste how happy I should be."

The author's intention is quite easy to see behind those rather "innocent" words; yet, superficially, the text in (5) is perfectly in accord with moral standards. Apart from that, also note the faulty orthography, which, in this special case even leads to a little pun on the homophones waist and waste (see above on other linguistic irregularities) (vgl. Elspass 2002).

What is also interesting is that many letters in the LFH corpus contain quite similar traditional imagery and metaphors. The metaphors and images still revolve around LOVE as a JOURNEY, as a UNITY, as INSANITY; the object of Love as (appetizing) food, as a valuable object or divine being; BEAUTY or LOVE as a (natural) FORCE etc. (cf. Kövecses 1988; Lakoff and Johnson 1980: 139-40). Some of these metaphors can be traced back several hundred years. As early as 1697, John Hervey, First Earl of Bristol wrote to his wife Elizabeth "Tis you alone that sweetens life". More than two hundred years later, Duff Cooper, an English politician wrote to his future wife, Lady Diana Manners "O my rose, my lily, my ripe nectarine...". Both authors referred to the object of their love as appetizing food or sweetness. The same basically applies to many other metaphors and images. One of the most interesting symbols in the letters is the "x", which is used to symbolize kisses. John J. in example (1) above uses it, as does the writer in example (6):

- (6) "hoping you are happy and well ... kisses xxxxx"

This symbol "x" has survived all these years and is still used today in letters, emails, short messages and Valentine's cards:

- (7) "som1 tell sugarlips I LOVE HER!!! babychops :-) xxxxxxx" [SMS]

- (8) "It might frighten you and make you less inclined to kiss me. And although I wouldn't blame you, I don't want that to happen. Your kisses don't come very often as it is (even in your messages I'm rationed to only two X's!), and I certainly don't want to make them even less frequent." [email]

Interestingly, the author of example (8) even plays with the symbol in a metalinguistic way. He portrays "x"s, or kisses on paper, as countable, real life entities, the

away from the vernacular (cf., e.g., Labov 1972: 208; Wardaugh 1998: 17-18; cf. Milroy 1992: 66). It has been shown that the observer's paradox also applies to written historical documents in general, and letters in particular (Tieken-Boon van Ostade 2001). There is evidence that in the eighteenth century, many writers were aware of the fact that their "private" correspondence was anything but private and that letters were often read in public when they arrived. As Tieken-Boon (2001) and Fitzmaurice (2002) have shown, letter writing was not necessarily a private affair in early modern England, at least. Letters were, essentially, public affairs and were read by an unknown number of people. On occasion, writers even used that fact to tease the addressee, as in the following eighteenth-century note from Emily Lennox to Henry Fox:

"What a creature you are! I receive your letter before a thousand people 'A letter from Mr. Fox, oh we shall have some news.' Everybody waits with impatience till I have read it. I open it with an important face and then behold it's full of nonsense and indeed such stuff as is not decent to shew to any creature." (Tillyard 1994: 94, quoted in Tieken-Boon van Ostade 2001: 447)

Apparently, the English love letters more or less followed the contemporary models of letter writing (cf. Fitzmaurice 2002) and had to be designed both for their "private" and "public" function. However, Lystra (1989) has also shown that the situation seems to have changed at least for nineteenth century America. In her study, she found substantial evidence of the fact that writers and readers were quite capable of keeping private and public apart; they even seemed to have enjoyed the secrecy of their intimate communication.

Nevertheless, love letters from all periods seem to show their *actual* form and content only as long as they are kept private. When love letters are written with the intention of publishing them, in whatever form and through whatever channel, this already involves monitoring in the sense that the authors are aware that their writings will be read and scrutinized by people other than the addressees, and thus they tend not to use the same language which they would have employed if no potential observers had been involved. It is also important to keep in mind the fact that when love letters are submitted to collections like the ZLA, not only are the letters and their composition actually monitored in the writing process, but these letters also only represent a pre-selection of the whole corpus. Researchers can never be certain about how many letters they did *not* receive and what could have been found in those letters. This does not in any way subtract from the great merit that an archive like the ZLA has. However, it is important to keep these caveats in mind when one describes the structure and content of love letters.

3 THE LINGUISTICS OF ENGLISH LOVE LETTERS THEN AND NOW: A CASE STUDY

This part of the paper will focus on some of the special linguistic features and developments that can be observed in English nineteenth-century hand-written love letters in contrast to those composed using modern electronic media forms, such as email and short messaging. The aim is to show that there is some interesting "stylistic inertia", i.e. fewer changes in structure and style than was to be expected, as Wyss (2003) has already shown in the case of the German love letter. Moreover, it will also be argued that this stylistic inertia, the continuant use of metaphors and imagery, can be explained by some very general cognitive principles formulated in meme theory (Blackmore 1999; Aunger 2001).

The present study is based on a very rare collection of writings which were accumulated during the nineteenth century at the London Foundling Hospital (LFH). The LFH was an institution for "an unmarried mother wishing to place her child permanently, or for a limited period [...]. She had to be able to show that her good faith had been betrayed, that she has given way to carnal passion only after a promise of marriage or against her will [...]" (Barret-Ducrocq 1991: 41). The applicants at the hospital had to fill in a detailed application form and give a personal statement about their relationship with the child's father and about their social background. Moreover, "[...] those daughters of the people who applied to the Foundling Hospital did possess notes and love letters, which they attached carefully to their admission forms by way of evidence. Snippets of sentimental conversation, fragments of vanished exchanges, faint echoing half-phrases in overlapping male and female voices, are thus retrieved from the depths of time." (Barret-Ducrocq 1991: 114). While some of the men involved were certainly wealthy, highly literate and educated, others belonged to the other end of the social spectrum: they could certainly read and write, which already places them at some distance from the endpoint of the social scale, but their literacy was rather un- or underdeveloped. In other words, many of the writings collected by the LFH were penned by authors comparable to the present-day average writers of emails and short messages. Here, for the first time ever, it has become possible to compare historical and present-day average written language use. The following examples illustrate some of the typical documents that can be found in the LFH corpus:

"You will think it very unkind of me for not writing to you before but you will not when I tell you the reason I have been to Hastings with my master for a week and I enjoyed it very much indeed I should very much like for you to have been there with me indeed as Hastings is a very nice place... I wish that you were living there with me... Your affectionate lover, John J. XXXXXXXXXXXX"

Even the data that is available at the moment must be taken with a pinch of salt, since (diachronic) studies in love letters seem to have to cope with at least three different types of problems: onomasiological versus semasiological perspectives on love letters – and the confusion of the two –, an inverse relationship of authors and data then and now, and finally the observer's paradox.

The first problem that needs to be discussed is the question of onomasiology versus semasiology. Onomasiology and semasiology are different semiotic perspectives on (linguistic) signs. Onomasiology asks for the different linguistic realisations of particular concepts, while semasiology asks for the different concepts or senses that are associated with one or more particular forms. For example, fig. 1 below illustrates how the basic concept LETTER is associated with at least six different linguistic forms (letter, message, mail, missive, epistle, note, etc.), while the linguistic form "letter" only expresses two different concepts (the letter from sender to addressee, and the letters of the alphabet). Starting with the concept and asking for its realisations is an onomasiological enterprise; starting with the expression and asking for its associated concepts is a semasiological task.

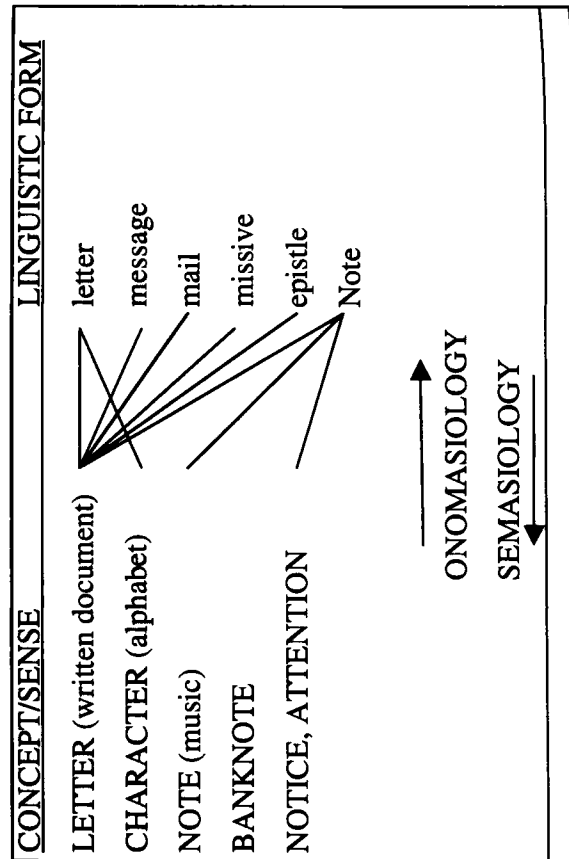


Figure 1: Semasiology vs. Onomasiology

How does that relate to the study of letters and possibly also other text types? Love letters can be defined both from a pragmatic/functional and from semantic/structural perspective. From a pragmatic perspective, the primary function of love letters is to express amorous sentiments (for a detailed discussion, cf. Wyss 2002: 59-61), including unrequited love, physical desire, admiration, etc. This

might be interpreted as the concept of love letters which would be found on the left-hand side in fig. 1. The prototypical features of traditional love letters are a careful, elegant, flawless style, with sensuous imagery, and without any overt sexual vulgarity or pornographic imagery; they should be handwritten on fine paper, maybe even scented and ornamented with ribbons (cf. Voland 2001). However, these are only common ideas about what real love letters *should* look like. The question is whether this prototypical concept has any reflection in real life, or form. In fact, it appears as if the actual realizations of love messages have been, and even still are quite diverse. In other words, the prototypical concept is manifested in countless realizations, ranging from notes on the refrigerator door, through pillow notes, to letters, faxes, emails, and short messages (cf. Wyss 2002: 60f). Especially when medial transitions are considered, important changes in the realisation of love letters become apparent (cf. section 4).

A diachronic study of love letters is also confronted with the problem of an inverse relationship of data and authors from historical and present-day periods. Historical data is mostly available for people of some renown, such as royalty, politicians, philosophers, and literary authors (e.g., Henry VIII and Ann Boleyn, Robert Burns and Agnes McLehose, John Keats and Fanny Brawn, James Joyce and Nora Barnacle, Elizabeth and Robert Browning, Winston Churchill and Pamela Plowden, Katherine Mansfield and John Middleton, to name but a few). It seems very reasonable to assume that the letters these people wrote do not reflect the everyday language use or vernacular of their time, but the stylistically high and elaborate end of the spectrum. These people were probably aware that their letters would be kept and read, and that their style and content might be analysed. On the other hand, we have few, if any, (English) love letters from contemporary celebrities. Contemporary influential writers usually do not publish their love letters, and even if they do, these tend to be edited to a great degree. What we have access to today are love letters written by average people who most certainly did not think of any potential public relevance of their missives at the time of composition (obviously, they thought about such a thing later, or we would not have access to these documents today, but that is a different matter). So what we find today is mostly average language in love letters, while historical love letters often present only special, elevated language use and style. Therefore, comparisons of the historical and present-day letters in terms of linguistic features are not as straightforward as they seem, and should generally be taken with a pinch of salt, especially if the topic is stylistic progress or decay (cf. Lessler & Bergs 2002).

Another related methodological point to be considered in analysing (love) letters is the question of the so-called "observer's paradox". The aim of many studies in traditional sociolinguistics is to investigate the vernacular of their informants, as this is the least monitored variety of language. The problem is that many speakers alter their speech when they know they are being observed or recorded – they move

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Investigating Love Letters Across Time

Semiotic, Sociolinguistic and Cognitive Problems and Perspectives

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1 INTRODUCTION

On the one hand, this paper offers some thoughts on the semiotic and sociolinguistic problems and perspectives that can arise when love letters in general, and their diachronic developments in particular, are investigated. On the other hand, using the exemplary case study based on the 19th century London Foundling Hospital letters and present-day short messages and e-mails, it aims to show how both sociolinguistic methodologies and recent cognitive theories can be applied in accounting for some of the observed diachronic similarities and differences.

INVESTIGATING LOVE LETTERS: THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL PROBLEMS

Investigating love letters is certainly not an easy task. While most people have written or received one or more of these texts during their life time, only few are willing to share them with the public. Thus, it is not surprising that letter collections and other linguistic corpora (e.g., the Helsinki Corpus, or the International Corpus of English) usually do not contain many love letters; if they do, they do not group them into one separate category, but rather classify them as "letters" or "private letters". The Zurich Love Letters Archive (ZLA, cf. Wyss 2002) is the first systematic collection of these texts; it only contains German-language material, however. While interesting anecdotal evidence can be found in commercial productions such as Michelle Lovric's anthology (1997), we still lack systematic collections of love letters in most other languages, including English – even despite the fact that, for example, American "Victorian letters survive in large numbers" (Lystra 1989: 4).