

## Research on letters in Romance languages: Navigating between 'immediacy', 'orality' and 'discourse traditions'

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Rutten and Vosters (2026, IX) characterize historical sociolinguistics as a “vibrant field.” This presentation aims to demonstrate that the study of handwritten letters and their writers makes a substantial contribution to this research agenda. For several centuries, letters represented the predominant mode of written communication. A notable achievement of historical sociolinguistics, exemplified by works such as Fairman (2000), Elspaß (2005, 2015) and Rutten & van der Wal (2014), is the systematic attention to the heterogeneity and variability of extant correspondence and its writers. This approach moves the discipline beyond an exclusive focus on documents produced by writers with *high literacy* and *high writing experience*. Furthermore, this contribution, in a broad sense, seeks to assess the use of epistolary corpora as a data source in historical sociolinguistics of Romance languages, while simultaneously exploring a set of selected research questions.

To begin, we will revisit the issue of distinguishing between *privacy* and *immediacy* in epistolary discourse. Conventional descriptions of personal letters emphasize the intimate relationship between correspondents (e.g., their familiarity, the private setting of their exchange), the specific topics addressed (family, daily life, health, emotions, etc.) and the communicative intentions involved. These factors are considered essential criteria for classifying a document as a private letter. However, when specific letter corpora are analysed, this dichotomy often proves to be less useful than initially assumed. The separation between personal literacy and functional literacy frequently fails to capture the complexity of the respective material. As a result, we encounter not only a greater heterogeneity among the letter writers—who may possess multiple social identities (Auer 2015)—but also a need to reconceptualise the typologies or classifications of the letters themselves. Rather than imposing rigid, discrete categories, it is more appropriate to regard the corpus as comprising continua that reflect hybrid and overlapping forms of written practice (cf. also Bergeron-Maguire/Greub 2020). Private letters are also hybrid in another sense: they incorporate formulaic language (and often formal written features) that is discourse-traditional and thus socioculturally conditioned, while simultaneously employing linguistic features associated with *language of immediacy*.

Since the well-known definition of the letter as a “conversation among the absent,” scholars have repeatedly revisited the notion of *orality* in epistolary texts. Some affirm it vigorously (in terms of *written orality* and dialogical communication), while others reject it—particularly when orality is narrowly construed as face-to-face interaction. The debate on the ‘oralization’ of letters typically draws on features such as vernacular style, speech-like patterns, exclamatory particles and discourse markers; elements that evoke spoken or conceptually oral communication. However, the information-structural dimension—i.e., the way syntactic, lexical and semantic choices encode discourse organization—has received comparatively little attention. This leads to an unresolved question: to what extent do structures traditionally associated with spoken discourse, such as cleft constructions, left- or right-dislocation, and specific topic

markers, serve as indicators of written orality in private letters as well as in letters that are less private?

To illustrate these points, examples will be drawn from French and Spanish letters found in several distinct corpora. These primary sources include soldiers' correspondence (First World War) from the Franco-German border region and the *Prize Papers collection* located at the *National Archives in London*. The latter comprises a heterogeneous assortment of letters, such as, French-language correspondence sent from New York to France in 1793.

## References

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