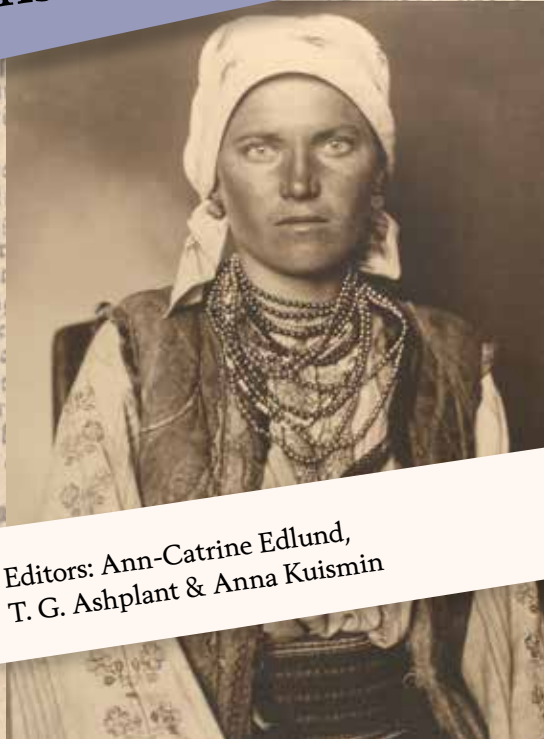# Reading and Writing from Below
Exploring the Margins of Modernity

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At the Crossroads

Orality and Literacy in Early and Late Modern Dutch Private Letters

ABSTRACT. In this paper, we examine the interplay of orality and literacy in Dutch private letters written by less-privileged people, using an extraordinary source of letters from the past. Drawing on the *Letters as Loot* corpus compiled at Leiden University, we show that these Early and Late Modern letters contain both typically oral elements, i.e. traces of the spoken language not usually found in the contemporary written and printed language, and typically written language features such as epistolary formulae. Our case study of clause chaining presents a phenomenon whose status on the oral-literate scale is more difficult to establish and whose distribution reveals remarkable social class patterns. We conclude that despite unambiguous interferences from the spoken language, what we traced in the letters is to a large extent not the *everyday spoken language* of the past, but rather the *informal written language*. That informal written language may be characterised as *hybrid*, only in the neutral sense of combining both oral and written elements, not indicating any 'defective' variety. On the contrary, the letters show the fully-fledged everyday language of less-skilled letter writers, men and women at the crossroads of the spoken language, and their simultaneous awareness of writing practices and conventions.

KEYWORDS: letter writing, private letters, literacy, orality, formulaic language, letter-writing manuals, clause chaining

1. Introduction

The linguistic experiences of illiterate and semi-literate people from past periods and the related cultural practices are mostly beyond the horizon of historical linguists, in the Netherlands as well as in other Western and Northern European countries. As has been argued over the past years, however, so-called *ego-documents* such as private letters can be used to assess the linguistic practices of less-skilled writers, and may give an insight into the spoken language of the past (cf. Elspaß 2012:156). Private letters with their language of informal communication between spouses, parents and children, relatives, and friends, are both testimonies of writing practices and "the 'next best thing' to authentic spoken language" (Nevalainen & Raumolin-Brunberg 2012:32). Furthermore, it is the language history *from below* approach that constitutes an appropriate historical-sociolinguistic framework. This approach not only focuses on the written language of ego-documents, thus differing from more traditional accounts of language history largely based on edited and published literary language, it also shifts from the traditional focus on the language of the elite, mainly men from the upper ranks of society, to an emphasis on the language of the lower and middle ranks, both men and women (cf. Elspaß 2007).

In this paper, we will examine the interplay of orality and literacy in Dutch private letters written by less-privileged people. We begin by discussing literacy rates in the Northern Netherlands (section 2), the problem of finding appropriate sources and the rediscovery of a treasure trove of letters from the past (section 3). This extraordinary source comprises not only Late Modern Dutch letters from the 1770s/1780s, but also Early Modern letters from the 1660s/1670s, allowing us to develop a diachronic perspective. The *Letters as Loot* project, which fully concentrates on the rediscovered letters, is presented in section 4 where we introduce our corpus and the external variables that we distinguished. In section 5, we show that our Early and Late Modern letters contain both typically oral elements, i.e. traces of the spoken language not usually found in the contemporary written language, and typically written language features such as particular epistolary formulae. We will also deal with the question of how these formulae were acquired and whether evidence can be found for the often debated role of letter-writing manuals. In section 6, we present a case study of clause chaining, a phenomenon that could be considered an oral feature, but that at the same time may have functioned as a strategy in written discourse. We also give an explanation of the remarkable social class patterns found in the letters and finally in section 7 we draw our conclusions.

2. Literacy and Letter Writing

When examining Early and Late Modern private letters, we have to take into account the contemporary circumstances of literacy and illiteracy. Although the rate of literacy in the Northern Netherlands was high compared to other European countries at the time, part of the population could neither read nor write.[1] Around 1800, literacy rates were about 80 per cent for the male and 60 per cent for the female population (Kloek & Mijnhardt 2001:18), but the degree to which people participated in a reading culture differed greatly, as we have discussed elsewhere (Rutten & van der Wal 2013). We also have to bear in mind that those who were able to read may not have had any writing skills, as reading and writing were taught in succession, not simultaneously (Blaak 2009:3–4; Kuijpers 1997:501). Literacy rates were lower for the Early Modern period. On the basis of signature studies of marriage contracts, it is commonly estimated that two-thirds of the male population and one-third of the female population were able to write in the Northern Netherlands in the second half of the seventeenth century (Frijhoff & Spies 1999:237).

However, not all these literates may have used their reading and writing skills regularly. It has been argued repeatedly that daily activities and occupation, and in particular the extent to which reading and writing were important in everyday life, should be considered as significant variables in historical sociolinguistics (Vandenbussche 1999; Elspaß 2005). Merchants and captains, for instance, needed writing skills and regularly practised writing in their professions. The captain's wife, who arranged a lot of business during her husband's absence, necessarily had to be able to write, whereas many female activities did not require writing skills and writing experience. The same applies to, for instance, soldiers and lower- rank sailors who did not use these skills in their daily activities.

Literacy as well as reading and writing experience thus differed in the language community across gender and social rank: the estimated literacy rates as well as reading and writing skills were higher for the upper social classes than for the lower classes and higher for men than for women (Nevalainen & Raumolin-Brunberg 2003:40–43; Frijhoff & Spies 1999:237–238). Against the background of these differences, originating from gender- and class-specific schooling opportunities and daily activities involving or not involving writing experience, we have to address the question of what written material *from below* is actually available for historical-sociolinguistic research?

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[1] Around 1800, the northern Netherlands, Scandinavia, Iceland, Prussia and Scotland had less than 30 per cent male illiterates, a much lower percentage than, for example, the southern Netherlands, England, Ireland and France (cf. Graff 1987:173–248).

3. Letters From Below

Although in Early and Late Modern times many Dutch private letters must have been written by people from all social ranks, relatively few survived and until fairly recently, linguists interested in ego-documents had to rely mainly on those written by men from the higher ranks of society. Private letters from women in general and from both men and women of lower and middle ranks were available only in very small numbers, scattered over various archives in the Netherlands (cf. van der Wal 2006). The rediscovery of an impressive collection of Dutch private letters, kept in the National Archives (Kew/London UK), however, opened up entirely new perspectives. These letters dating from the seventeenth, eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, are among the papers, both commercial and private, that were confiscated from ships taken by the English fleet and by private ships (privateers) during the frequent warfare between England and the Netherlands. These papers were considered evidence in the legal procedure that followed, when the High Court of Admiralty (HCA) had to decide whether the conquered ships were taken lawfully and thus could be declared a lawful prize. After the final decision, the so-called Prize Papers remained in the HCA's archives, and, miraculously, they survived and were rediscovered in the 1980s by maritime historians (cf. Figure 1). It was, however, not until a rough inventory was made in 2005 that the Prize Papers appeared to comprise about 40,000 Dutch letters, including 15,000 private ones, sent from the Netherlands to, for example, Asia, Africa, the Caribbean region and vice versa.[2] A subsequent pilot study by Marijke van der Wal revealed that these private letters were sent by people of all social ranks, men and women alike, which made them excellent material for a historical-sociolinguistic analysis, and offered an unprecedented opportunity to gain access to the everyday language of the past. This unique collection has been at the core of the *Letters as Loot. Towards a non-standard view on the history of Dutch* (2008–2013) research programme, directed by Marijke van der Wal at Leiden University (cf. Rutten & van der Wal 2014:1–2).[3]

4. Letters as Loot

The main goal of the *Letters as Loot* research programme was to conduct the first extensive sociolinguistic analysis of these Dutch private letters, for

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[2] The inventory made by Roelof van Gelder is available at http://www.gahetna.nl/collectie/index/nt00424

[3] The *Letters as Loot* research programme was funded by The Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research (NWO). For further information see also http://www.brievenalsbuit.nl (English and Dutch version).

Figure 1. HCA box with documents in the National Archives Kew, UK.

which we selected letters from two periods with a deliberately chosen interval of about 100 years, the 1660s/1670s, from the prelude to the Second Anglo-Dutch War to the end of the Third, and the 1770s/1780s, from the start of the Fourth Anglo-Dutch War to the end of the American War of Independence (see Table 1; the figures in bold indicate the periods of the selected letters).

Table 1. Chronology of Anglo-Dutch Wars.[4]

1st Anglo-Dutch War	1652–1654
2nd Anglo-Dutch War	**1665–1667**
3rd Anglo-Dutch War	**1672–1674**
4th Anglo-Dutch War & American War of Independence	**1776–1784**
Napoleonic period	1793 –1813

The original manuscripts of the letters were photographed, and diplomatic transcriptions were made on the basis of these digital photos. From our corpus of approximately 2,000 transcribed letters, we compiled our balanced

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[4] Apart from these periods, documents survived from ships taken during the War of the Austrian Succession (1739–1748) and the Seven Years' War (1756–1763), periods of partial neutrality and changing alliances.

corpus of almost 1,000 letters, from 716 different writers, and amounting to 424,500 words, following particular guidelines that restricted the number of words of individual writers (cf. Table 2).[5]

Table 2. The lemmatised and POS-tagged *Letters as Loot* corpus.

Period	Subcorpus	N letters	N words	N writers
1660s–1670s	Total	549	228,000	424
(1660s–1670s	Autograph	260	118,000	202)
1770s–1780s	Total	384	196,500	292
Sum of both subcorpora		933	424,500	716

Each word form was lemmatised, i.e. related to the corresponding modern Dutch lemma, and labelled with the appropriate part of speech (PoS), which enabled searching by word form, lemma and part of speech. This corpus is available as an internet database at http://brievenalsbuit.inl.nl, comprising photos, transcriptions and metadata, and provided with extensive search facilities.

One of the metadata added to the database is the autograph/ non-autograph label. Being aware of the literacy rates discussed in section 2, we had to determine whether letters were self-written or whether illiterate or partly literate senders of the letters had relied on professional writers or on others with writing skills such as relatives, friends and neighbours whom we refer to as social writers. When examining the language use of different social ranks, it is obviously crucial to establish whether letters are autographs or non-autographs, otherwise we would risk linking the language use of an unknown social or professional writer to, for instance, the lower-class sender of a letter. This issue is less problematic for the eighteenth century: the increased literacy rate allowed us to compile an eighteenth-century subcorpus of only autographs (cf. Table 2). Going back further in time, however, we needed to identify Early Modern letters as autographs or non-autographs by using our Leiden Identification Procedure (LIP). For details of this procedure and various problems and solutions, we refer to Nobels & van der Wal (2012) and Nobels (2013:53–76). Here we only mention that we were able to establish the autograph status of 260 seventeenth-century letters (see Table 2).

In the internet database, the main variables of our historical-sociolinguistic research can be chosen for search actions. These variables are gender (male/ female), age (<30, 30–50, >50), social class and region. Relying on the stratification made by historians, we distinguish four ranks or classes for the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Northern Netherlands or the

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[5] For details see Rutten & van der Wal (2014:15–17).

Republic of the Seven United Provinces (see Table 3; cf. Frijhoff & Spies 1999:188–191; Bruijn 2008:16).[6] The highest rank of nobility and non-noble ruling classes is scarcely represented in our material, nor is – obviously – the class of have-nots. The missing highest level does not present us with a serious problem, since data from this rank are well known and have dominated traditional language history. This leaves us with a social stratification of four ranks or classes, viz. the upper class (UC), the upper-middle class (UMC), the lower-middle class (LMC) and the lower class (LC), a four-partite classification that we would like to stress is relative rather than absolute. To assign specific letter writers to social ranks we used a variety of criteria, the most important being the writer's profession or, in the case of women, the husband's profession.

Table 3. Social stratification of the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Republic of the Seven United Provinces.

	Historians' stratification	Letters as Loot corpus
1	Nobility and the non-noble ruling classes	
2	Bourgeoisie, e.g. wealthy merchants, ship owners, academics, commissioned officers	Upper Class / UC
3	Prosperous middle class, e.g. large storekeepers, non-commissioned officers, well-to-do farmers	Upper-Middle Class / UMC
4	Petty bourgeoisie, e.g. petty shopkeepers, small craftsmen, minor officials	Lower-Middle Class / LMC
5	Mass of wage workers, e.g. sailors, servants, soldiers	Lower Class/ LC
6	Have-nots, e.g. tramps, beggars, disabled	

Search actions may combine word searches with the variables under discussion and with various other metadata relating to the sender or the addressee of letters.

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[6] It should be noted that we use the term class as a synonym for rank, not as the nineteenth-century notion of class.

Having compiled a balanced corpus, we examined various phenomena at the phonological, lexical, morphosyntactic and discourse level. After exploring the oral and written characteristics of the letters in the following section, we will present one of these phenomena, i.e. clause chaining *and*, as an illustrative case study.

5. Oral and Written Characteristics

Our corpus comprises letters by people from four social ranks who, as we discussed in section 2, differed in writing experience. Therefore, our documents are expected to be relatively oral in two respects: firstly, we are dealing with private texts as opposed to public/edited texts, and secondly a considerable number of letters are related to people who were not used to reading and writing, but who needed to communicate with family members or other relatives at a geographical distance, sailing as employees for the Dutch East or West India Company, or staying in overseas territories. Such a corpus would be expected to show a remarkable number of linguistic features linked to the spoken language of particular regions, which we did indeed find. We will restrict ourselves here to a few examples of characteristics that vanished from the written language in the period of incipient standardisation, such as (1) and (2), or that are hardly attested in the written language throughout the history of Dutch, such as (3) and (4):

(1) *h*-dropping in words such as *andt* for *handt* 'hand', *adde* for *hadde* 'had' and *usvrouwe* for *husvrouwe* 'housewife'; a feature found mainly in the south-west;

(2) *sk/sc* in initial position, where <sch> is common in this period, indicating the change from /sk/ to /sx/, i.e. from s+plosive to s+fricative; e.g. *scip* for *schip* 'ship', *biscop* for *bischop* 'bishop'; a North-Hollandic feature;

(3) <ee> spellings for reflexes of Gm. *ē* as opposed to the common <ae> and <aa> spellings, e.g. *geet* for *gaet / gaat* 'goes', and *seet* instead of *saet /saat* 'seed'; a North-Hollandic feature;

(4) *n*-deletion in nominal and verbal forms such as *schulde* for *schulden* 'debts', *gesonde* for *gesonden* 'sent' and *zij konde* for *zij konden* 'they were able'; a feature of almost the whole Dutch language area with the exception of the north-east and the south-west.

Such localisable forms, related to particular regions, give the impression of a high "degree of orality", as we have argued elsewhere (Rutten & van der Wal 2011). It should be noted, however, that non-localisable or supraregional forms prevail in our corpus (cf. Rutten & van der Wal 2014:73–74). Clearly the shift from spoken to written language use often implied a shift from localisable language features to supralocal elements. This testifies to a strong

awareness of the medial, situational and, consequently, linguistic differences between spoken and written language, even among less-skilled language users from the lower and middle ranks of society.

Apart from oral characteristics, we come across typically written language features such as epistolary formulae, that is formulaic strings found repeatedly in letters, and, as may reasonably be assumed, even largely restricted to the language of letters.[7] Building on Elspaß (2005:157–196), Wray (2002), and Rutten & van der Wal (2012), we distinguish four main types of such formulae: text type, intersubjective, Christian-ritual and text-structural formulae. A letter is first of all characterised by text type formulae such as an address, opening and closing. An illustrative example is the *Praise God in [a particular place] at [a particular date]* opening formula, which is frequently found in seventeenth-century letters. Other frequent formulae are the intersubjective formulae which focus on the relationship between the writer and the addressee. Among these we find the four-partite or even more extended health formula, which is also well known from the history of English and other European languages: *I let you know that I am in good health/ I sincerely hope that the same applies to you/ If not, I do regret it/ As God knows, who knows the hearts of men* (cf. Austin 2004; Laitinen & Nordlund 2012:70). The most frequent Christian-ritual formula is the commendation formula with which the writer commends the addressee into the hands of God: *zijt de heere bevolen* 'be commended to the Lord' and its variants. Yet another function, i.e. marking the transition of one part of the discourse to another, is fulfilled by the so-called text-structural formulae, such as the Dutch equivalent of *I let you know that* which initiates discourse or indicates a change of topic. This formula is also found in both English and German letters of the Early and Late Modern period (Austin 1973:16; Elspaß 2005:165, 168–170), and in Finnish letters from the nineteenth century (Laitinen & Nordlund 2012:69). We note that these text-structural formulae are very convenient strategies in our letters which frequently lack punctuation and paragraphs (cf. Figure 2).

In the corpus, we find a large variety of what appear to be formulae, which, moreover, show a striking similarity with those found in private letters from other language areas. Such a noticeable similarity points clearly to a shared epistolary tradition in Western Europe which has been the topic of various studies (cf. Nevalainen 2001; Poster & Mitchell 2007 and references there). In this context, the questions arise of how the formulae characteristic of that widespread tradition were acquired by letter writers and whether

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[7] For our elaborate study of formulaic language we refer to Rutten & van der Wal (2014:75–172).
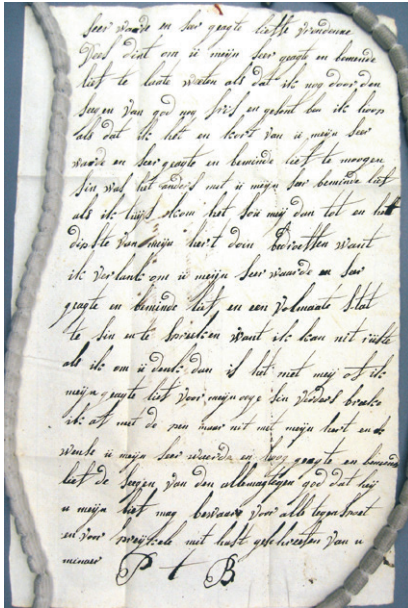
Figure 2. Eighteenth-century letter without punctuation.

the often reprinted letter-writing manuals played a decisive role. Our digital letter corpora allow us to investigate the characteristics of Early and Late Modern Dutch private letters and to compare them with the advice and models in manuals. We established many remarkable differences between the manuals and actual language use, as we showed elsewhere in more detail (van der Wal & Rutten 2013; Rutten & van der Wal 2014:187–202). The more elaborate Dutch manuals, aiming at an audience fairly high up the social scale, and translations of popular foreign manuals such as De la Serre (1654) and Breton (1645), do not show any resemblance to the formulaic language of our letter corpora. We did find formulae that occur in our letter corpora in booklets targeted towards a more modest audience or intended to be used in elementary schools, although sometimes these appeared as marginal options. What does surprise us, however, is the absence from manuals of particular popular formulae such as the frequent *looft God bovenal* 'praise God above all' formula, and the popular closing formula *duizend goede nachten* 'a thousand good nights'. Yet other striking discrepancies are the presence in manuals of formulae that do not feature in our letters and the survival in eighteenth-century manuals of old-fashioned formulae, vanished from usage after the seventeenth century (cf. Rutten & van der Wal 2014:197–199). Therefore, in our view, the differences outweigh the resemblances to the extent that direct influence of letter-writing manuals on actual practice is not very likely. We have to consider another option: that pupils at school and youngsters at home learnt letter-writing conventions and formulaic

language by imitation in practice, that is by reading and copying letters and hearing them read aloud. Similar claims have been made for English letter writing in the long eighteenth century (cf. Austin 1973:13; Brant 2006:9–10; Whyman 2009:28–45;), and for German and Finnish letters from the nineteenth century (Elspaß 2005:194-195; Laitinen & Nordlund 2012), as well as for Dutch elite correspondence from around 1800 (Ruberg 2005).

Having shown both oral and written language characteristics in the letters, we continue with clause chaining *and*, a phenomenon whose status on the oral-literate scale is more difficult to establish.

6. Clause Chaining *and*: Between Oral and Written

In present-day spoken English, discourse units may be connected by semantically empty conjunctions such as *and*, as in the example:

(5) And it's very well equipped.
     You know the kitchen,
     and and it's got a dishwasher,
     and it's got all kinds of you know mixers and plates
     and you know every kind of equipment you need.
     And and staple things.
     (Chafe 1985:111)

The main function of *and* in (5) is not to create coherence at the textual level, but to signal the continuation of the discourse. Clauses linked by a semantically bleached connective such as *and* are a "common feature of narrative discourse" (Beaman 1984:59), established for oral genres by, among many others, Chafe (1985). This phenomenon has also been observed with regard to Early Modern English by Culpeper & Kytö (2010:158–183) who concluded that the frequency of this *and* is relatively high in *speech-based* genres such as trials, drama and witness depositions. We find similar examples in our corpus such as (6), which seem to be prototypical cases of oral residue in a written text type (Ong 2002 [1982]:36):

(6) *t is alles wel ontfangen en volgens uw versoek neef heuck gesprooken*
     'it is all well-received, and in accordance with your request I have spoken to cousin Heuck'

Here two separate statements are made, connected to one another by *and*, which is commonly rendered *en* in the eighteenth century, and *ende* in the previous century, a connective which could easily have been omitted. This use needs to be distinguished from *and*'s more common coordinating func-

tion at the level of two noun phrases (*geluck ende salijgheijt* 'happiness and salvation') or two verb phrases (*nu sal ik van deeze afstappen en tot de ander over gaan* 'I will now abandon this subject and proceed to another one'). We refer to the use of *and* as a cohesion creator, that may be omitted, as "chaining *and*".

From Chafe's work on present-day English and Culpeper's & Kytö's study on historical English dialogues, it seems that chaining *and* is an oral element, in yet another respect than the oral, localisable elements in section 5. Furthermore, Brinton notes that "[b]ecause of their frequency and oral nature, pragmatic markers [such as chaining *and* – MW&GR] are stylistically stigmatised and negatively evaluated, especially in written or formal discourse" (1996:33). Against this background and that of previous studies on the presence of oral elements in the written language, we would expect less experienced writers to produce more of these oral *and*'s. We thus hypothesise that relatively more bleached connectives will be found in letters from the lower classes than in letters from the upper classes, more in letters by women than in letters by men, and more in letters from the seventeenth century than in letters from the eighteenth century. In other words, bleached connectives, as more oral characteristics of language, are expected to be less prominent in letters by writers who were more involved in the written culture and who used mainly other non-bleached connectives and punctuation to indicate continuation of the discourse.

We would thus expect clear social patterns in the distribution of chaining *and*. We therefore examined part of our total corpus by compiling a smaller subcorpus of approximately 70,000 words for each period, consisting of only autographs (cf. Table 4). This restriction was necessary because of the laborious type of analysis that we intended to perform.

Table 4. Subcorpus for clause chaining *and*.

	LC letters/ words	LMC letters/ words	UMC letters/ words	UC letters/ words	Total letters/ words
1660s–1670s	10/5,500	40/24,000	48/27,000	22/15,500	120/72,000
1770s–1780s	26/9,000	38/13,800	48/23,500	48/28,000	160/74,300

Following social historians as discussed in section 4, we distinguish between lower class (LC), lower-middle class (LMC), upper-middle class (UMC) and upper class (UC).

We divided our subcorpus into so-called *discourse units* whose main

functional property is that they prototypically contain one new idea (Chafe 1994:108–119). In the process of dividing letters into discourse units, we took the clause as a starting point. For a detailed description of our method and the problems involved we have to refer to Rutten & van der Wal (2014:271–280). In our subcorpus we counted what proportion of *discourse units* begin with chaining *and*, in both periods and in the different social ranks. The results are shown in Figure 3.

Figure 3. Proportion of discourse units with chaining *and*.
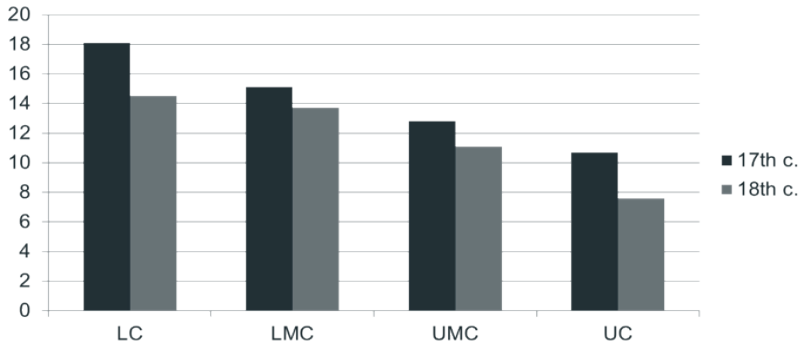

N discourse units 17th c. = 8,282
N discourse units 18th c. = 8,987

Figure 3 reveals a social difference for both periods. In the eighteenth century, the number of discourse units that begin with chaining *and* decreases as the social class rises and the number also decreases in all social ranks, compared to the numbers in the previous century. In the seventeenth-century LC, 18% or almost one in five of all discourse units begins with chaining *and*, whereas there is a less than 11% occurrence in the UC. Thus we may have found an oral element that was subject to social variation, and that gradually decreased over time as literacy rates rose and more people became involved in the written culture. At the same time, however, we have to realise that chaining *and* could be a typically written element: another means to create cohesion in the absence of punctuation. For less experienced writers, that is lower-class writers, chaining *and* is a relatively simple tool to create cohesion; well-educated people, mainly men from upper classes, with elaborate writing experience, had less need of chaining *and*. The latter also made use of another means, i.e. punctuation.

In this respect, it should be noted that clause chaining also implies the separation of clauses. On the one hand, *en* and *ende* continue discourse and signal that the new clause proceeds from the preceding clause. On the other

hand, they mark the transition from one clause to another, thereby separating them from each other. The same function is performed by punctuation marks such as commas and full stops which signal the end of a piece of discourse, but also indicate the beginning of another clause. To illustrate letter writers' familiarity or lack of familiarity with punctuation, we examined the use of punctuation in our subcorpus, distinguishing letters with and those without punctuation.[8] We note that letters with consistent punctuation throughout the whole letter appear to be almost absent. Most writers who use punctuation do so irregularly, or in any case irregularly compared to punctuation in contemporary printed books. Often, they vary not in the choice of a particular punctuation mark, but in the presence of punctuation. As becomes clear from Figure 4, the use of punctuation is not at all common in letters from both periods: in our subcorpus, 67 out of 160 eighteenth-century and 32 out of 120 seventeenth-century letters show any punctuation. The columns of Figure 4 indicate the proportion of letters with punctuation across social class. In the eighteenth century, a strong social difference occurs, ranging from about 10% punctuation in the LC to 70% in the UC. In the previous century, the proportion of letters with any punctuation is even less in all social classes. Figure 4 also clearly shows that the rise of punctuation must have been a change from above (cf. Labov 1994:78).

Figure 4. Proportion of letters with punctuation.
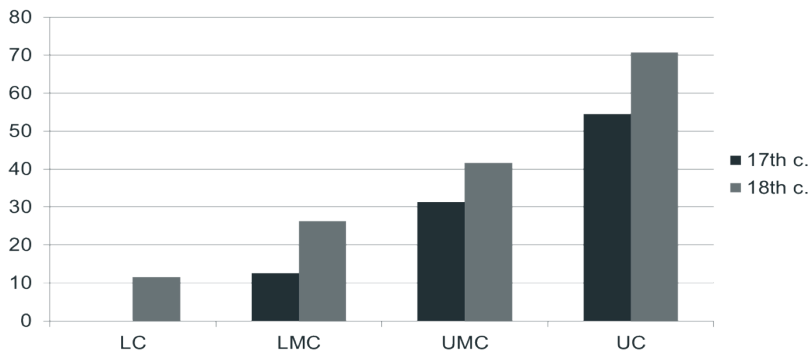
N letters 17th c. = 120
N letters 18th c. = 160

Returning to the status of chaining *and*, we conclude that chaining *and* could be an oral element, but also a written strategy to create textual structure, a strategy that was gradually replaced by punctuation. In the absence of spoken language data, there is no chance to find out whether either of

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[8] Therefore, Figure 4 does not give the proportion of discourse units separated by punctuation, but the presence of any punctuation in the letters.

them or both are the case. The question whether *and* is an oral or a written element becomes less important, however, when we simply establish that *and* is the typical and frequent strategy of connecting discourse units in our letters.

7. Conclusions: Orality and Literacy

At the beginning of this paper we mentioned that private letters are both testimonies of writing practices and "the 'next best thing' to authentic spoken language". Our research of the confiscated Dutch letters gave us an unprecedented view on the writing practices of letter writers from the lower and middle classes, including the differences and the patterns of variation and change, which we could only briefly illustrate here. For a more detailed description we refer to Rutten & van der Wal (2014) and to Nobels (2013) and Simons (2013). As far as the representation of the spoken language is concerned, we arrive at two findings. We did find more oral or local elements in our letter corpus than in contemporary printed publications, but generally we came across relatively little influence from spoken language, as we argued in section 5. The shift from spoken to written language use thus clearly implies a shift from local and oral language features to supralocal and written elements. We conclude that what we traced in the letters is to a large extent not the *everyday spoken language* of the past, but rather the *informal written language*. That informal written language comprises both what are considered more oral and typically literate phenomena and may therefore be characterised as *hybrid* (cf. Martineau 2013:133–134). The label *hybrid*, however, may be confusing when hybridity is interpreted not just as a combination of both mainly written and mainly oral elements, but also as indicating what, in any respect, is a 'defective' variety. That would be a misunderstanding. The informal written language of our Dutch private letters is not defective at all. It is the fully-fledged everyday language of letter writers from the lower and middle ranks of society, the everyday language of men and women at the crossroads of the spoken language and their simultaneous awareness of writing practices and conventions.

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