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‘Lower-order’ letters, schooling
and the English language, 1795 to 1834

1. Introduction

Between 1795 and 1834, English Poor Laws permitted people living in distress outside their parish to apply for relief to their home parish in person or writing. Although a few wrote for relief before 1795, distressed people didn’t apply in large numbers till after 1800. The over 10,000 applications I have seen are usually filed as ‘correspondence’ in the parish overseers’ records in County or Metropolitan Record Offices (also called Archives).1

Overseers’ records contain letters on the many branches of parish business for which the overseers were responsible. Some are drafts of the overseers’ own letters, but most, and linguistically perhaps the most interesting, are the applications, written by or for the applicant. A few are from informants about someone who, the writer alleges (sometimes wrongly), is cheating the parish. Most are addressed to parish officials, but a few are addressed to friends and relatives and have ended up in the overseers’ records because they include requests for assistance.

I have a corpus of over 1500 letters, comprising about 230,000 ‘orthographic units’ – that is, groups of graphs which the writers separated from other groups by spaces before and after. Most units coincide with dictionary words. The language of the letters ranges from un- and partly-schooled on all linguistic levels (handwriting, orthography, lexis, grammar, discourse and punctuation) to (for about fifty) fully schooled2 for the early

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1 There are other letters in partly-schooled English in other files, but the overseers’ files contain the largest collections. I haven’t visited Welsh or Scottish Record Offices.
2 ‘Unschooled, schooled, schooling’ refer to a, perhaps the primary agent through which recognised, or self-appointed authorities on language, supported by textbooks and pedagogues of all types, try to control language. ‘Schooled language’ is achronic. ‘Standard’ refers to the accumulation of features in the mid to late 1900s, when authorities made great efforts to get the whole English-using community to write and speak alike. In the early 1800s, the authorities’ main aim seems to have been to ‘refine’ English, not to make everyone use it alike.
1800s. The aim of this paper is to try to construct an overall view of these different letteracies.3

2. Three scripts

The first script4 was written in December 1821 by John Ansell near Hull in north-east England to his parish New Romney, some two hundred miles (320 km) south.5 The letter includes mistakes and alterations because he probably had no money for paper for a rough copy and may not have thought of making one.6

Establishing who wrote such letters is often impossible, because we cannot prove that the person whose name appears at the end did the writing. This letter, however, reads as if the writer wrote it himself. But in 1821 there were three John Ansells in New Romney. Two were 18-year-old youths. One of them was the son of a 62-year-old man, the other was illegitimate, and was probably the writer – his mother could sign her name and may have taught him.

Plate 1. John Ansell’s letter

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Transliteration</th>
<th>Comments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>from John Ansell North Cave Yorkshear</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>frends this coms from me with a</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>gret deel of un eas for to think how</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>worry i am of bad of and i should</td>
<td>dill h written above.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>be glad if you could send me acup</td>
<td>orig?: glas--</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ple of pounds for i am yerry</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bad of and if you yount i suld</td>
<td>orig?: basi i inserted later.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>fall seek on this parrish and</td>
<td>pa or po</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>they well breng me home</td>
<td>orig: brend. h started before me.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sick send it sune to for</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>i am bad of i wish that i was</td>
<td>i an. i doubtful mark before wish.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>back agane at my home a</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>gane for hear is bread as</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>black as my at and i have</td>
<td>blas. i ha rising loop started.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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5 In the early 1800s, people who could read counted as literate. But, since it is difficult to discover the reading ability of lower-class writers, I discuss only writing. ‘Letteracy’ means ‘writing’ and the ability to produce it.

4 ‘Script’ means handwritten discourse. ‘Text’ is printed discourse. Scripts may contain their own history and provide information about writers which texts don’t.

5 Centre for Kentish Studies, Maidstone (CKS(M)): New Romney, P309/18/17.

6 Unlike now, paper did not lie in the streets in those days. William Hone’s biographer says Hone (1780–1842, father a copy-clerk) “plundered rubbish bins [for reading matter] with the desperation of a drug addict” (Wilson 2005: 26).
Handwriting

Ansell was an inexperienced pointillist writer; that is, he didn’t write his words but drew them graph by graph, as pointillist painters build an image dab by dab. In fact, he was a minimal pointillist because he drew some graphs with more than one stroke of the pen, as calligraphers do – lower case \(<m>\), for example. Other graphs he didn’t produce in schooled shape – his lower case \(<y>\) looks slightly upper case. As learner writers still do, he confused \(<b, d, g, p>\) (l. 9). One might guess from his many false starts that forming graphs took up so much of his attention that he lost track of his message (l. 4). This guess is supported by comparing the names John Ansell, Robberd Hewson and the two instances of North Cave with the rest of his writing. His pen formed the names with long, smooth strokes and good calligraphic swells on the down strokes. As a learner he must have practised his own names many times. The other names were strange to him. Someone, therefore, may have written them for him, with the unschooled spelling, which isn’t unique. When copying these names, therefore, he concentrated entirely on producing ‘a fair hand’.

Lexis

1) His vocabulary and phrasing are almost entirely Anglo-Saxon. His Latinate words had been in the English language so long that they looked Anglo-Saxon. For example, partly-schooled writers throughout England used the lexeme [UN]EASE (l. 3);
2) fall seek on (l. 8) and bad of (ll. 4, 7, 11): language authorities tried to refine such metaphorical and phrasal usages out of English.
3) for (l. 6): writers like Ansell rarely wrote ‘because’.

\[\text{\textnormal{[unse]}}\]
Orthography

There is much to say about this level, but I point out two features: 1) *werry*, *yerry*, *yarrer* (ll. 4, 6, 19): this is a rare example of dialect influence. Kentish speakers in those days pronounced /w/ for the schooled initial /v/ and spelt accordingly.8 2) *youould, youoynt, thay well* (ll. 5, 7, 9): Ansell must have learnt not to write his spoken abbreviations, but, like other partly-schooled writers,9 he was unsure how to unpack them into schooled spellings. As with other partly-schooled writers, uncertainty about forming <v, w> and <γ> may have increased his uncertainty about unpacking.

Grammar

My corpus has examples of *for to (+INFIN)* (l. 3) and double negation (l. 15) throughout England.

Discourse

1) Ansell didn’t know the schooled openings and endings of a letter.
2) Like other writers who had learnt no more than to form graphs and to copy, Ansell seems to have thought in formulas, which sometimes led him to repeat words and phrases too often for the requirements of schooled styles. For example, *I am bad of*, and *back agane and home agane* (ll. 12–13).10

The annotation at the end shows that lack of schooling didn’t deter TW (Thomas Woollett, the New Romney overseer) from relieving applicants. It didn’t deter other overseers either. Partly-schooled letteracy was effective and those who wrote it felt no need for a schooled script.

The second script was sent to another overseer of New Romney by Stephen Wiles, three days before his nineteenth birthday.11 Wiles was apprenticed to a watch and clockmaker in Rye, Sussex (south east), a few miles from New Romney.

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8 For example, *gorge plummer*. No date, 1806? it [is not in my powr to come to] [the westrey. CKS(M): Farningham, P145/18/1.
9 For example, Catarine Peace. Febry 17 1834. you promised you [ould a foard me some asssten Somerset R.O (south west), Curry Rivell, D/P/cur.r/13/10/3.
10 German scholars speak of “Stilzusammenbruch” (‘stylistic collapse’. See Vandenbussche 1999: 53, quoting from Mattheier. All translations from German to English are my own.), which views discourse from above. But the concept of formulaicity views discourse panormically (see Wray 2000). Partly-schooled writers in England weren’t concerned to follow schooled stylistic requirements.
Romney. Thomas Woollett had taught Wiles to read and ‘write’. Many of Woollett’s letters survive, showing that he wrote good schooled English of his time. But, like other teachers, he didn’t think it was his task to teach Wiles (then aged 10 to 15 years) to compose in schooled English.

Plate 2. Stephen Wiles’s letter

Rye May 8th 1821
Mr Cohen, — — —

Sir I have taken the liberty
of writing a few lines wich I should be
very much a bleidge to you if you will
have the Goodness to Git my trowers
Donn by Saturday if you please — —
Sir/ this Wheskett peace i add Given me
if you will have the Goodness to make me
a Wheskett i Should be very much a bleidge
to you Sir/ I am very much a bleidge
to you for the things that you
Sent me a Saturday
from yours Respectfully
Stephen Wiles —

Wiles’s handwriting is pointillist in places, but his script is more schooled than Ansell’s. Perhaps its most striking feature, which isn’t unique in my corpus, is the vocative punctuation, Sir/, which Wiles used before (not after) each proposition. Other writers punctuated verbally before they changed the subject, instead of starting a new paragraph. Few partly-schooled writers used punctuation, perhaps because most spelling-books introduced it at the end of the book, as an aid to reading aloud.12 For example, Joseph Guy in *A New British Spelling Book* (1810), which Woollett used when teaching Wiles, wrote

A comma is a pause, or resting in speech, while you may count one [...] A semicolon is a pause while you may count two [...] A colon is a pause while you may count three [...] A period, or full stop, denotes the longest pause, or while you may count four. (Guy 1810: 149)

The left dislocation, *this wheskett peace i add given me* (l. 8), wasn’t a schooled structure, and still isn’t – ‘a feature of colloquial style [...] very loose and informal spoken English’ says the Quirk team (1985: 1416). But it isn’t ungrammatical and is easy to understand. There seems no reason why it should

12 Several teachers demonstrated the efficacy of their teaching by staging annual Public Recitations. See Canterbury Cathedral Archives: Dover St Mary’s, U3/P30/25/10, from 1871 to 1901, and Caffyn (1998) for Sussex in the 1700s.
be unschooled, except perhaps that it wasn’t used in Latin – then still the model for schooled English.

I include the third script for contrast with the other two. It was written by Philip Papillon from his boarding school in what is now a north London suburb to his parents in Canterbury.13

Plate 3. Philip Papillon’s letter

April 26nd, 1834
My dear Mama

I hope Lawrence is better give my love to Papa & Sisters give my love to MFS scrain. I likeed been at school very much I took such a long walk the first day & I walked with Johny & fredy we had our diner at the inn I drank tea with Mr Burron the first night I make a very nice breakfast of the cocoa I am able to pa^ly at all the games that the boys play at tell Papa that I have not began to learn my gramar so good bye my dear mama your dutiful son

P O Papillon

Papillon was a gentleman’s son and had probably been privately tutored at home before he went to school. He must also have benefited from his literate and well-schooled home environment. His handwriting (calligraphic and minimal pointillist) and content are childlike (he was seven years, eight months old), but all his graphs are well formed and, because he wrote between double lines, regular. Like Ansell and Wiles, Papillon didn’t punctuate. But, young as he was, he had the concept of sentence.

If we count unschooled spellings in the first 82 units in the bodies of the letters as a letteracy marker, the figures for Wiles’s first and his last surviving letter one year and five months later are 13/82 (for Ansell 23/82) and 8/82, and he still punctuated vocatively. During that time he was learning to repair and make watches and clocks. Papillon’s figures are 6/82 and 2/82, including words like Colossians, filberts and because. During that time Papillon took notes of Sunday sermons, stopped pointillism, and began to use punctuation and learn Latin – we now have two Latin lessons every day.14

13 CKS(M): Osborne, U1015/C122/1.
Stem cell script and causation

These three scripts were probably the writers’ first compositional writing. In the New Romney records, for example, the first letter about Wiles’s need for new shoes and clothing is from Mary Wiles, his sister or sister-in-law, and is dated more than two years before desperation drove Stephen himself to write.

Like Stephan Elspaß, discussing similar German letters (2002: 49), I am not inclined to take a one-sided view from above and ‘shrug off’ the language of these letters simply because it isn’t schooled.

Such first scripts, or, since it’s impossible to be sure they really were first scripts, such near-first scripts are of interest to teachers and linguists, because they are the sites at which the language user changes from being only a speaker to being a speaker and a writer. Such scripts I call ‘stem cell scripts’. The National Institutes of Health website says a stem cell has:

the potential to develop into many different cell types. When a stem cell divides, each new cell has the potential to either remain a stem cell or become another type of cell with a more specialized function.

Two questions arise concerning stem cell scripts: 1) What happened before them? 2) What, if anything, did the writer produce afterwards? To answer the first question I propose four factors:

1) age: What effect does age have on a writer’s first composition? A young child’s linguistic ability isn’t fully developed. But in the early 1800s, unlike nowadays, adults also wrote stem cell scripts. I shall not discuss this factor;

2) speech and writing: Modern researchers take their data from the speech and writing of people who are (or were) fully-schooled writers and focus on similarities of features in speech and writing (Biber 1988; Street 1995). But I focus on a more basic level, on the point at which speakers became writers too, before they had learnt much about schooled writing.

3) social background: The linguistic environment within which the learner writer lives;

4) schooling: How is writing taught?

Speech and writing

Researchers classify writing as either Standard or non-standard, which they subdivide into dialect and failed Standard. My letters have few dialect features, few, at least, according to standard reference books. But since the letters contain words and meanings which the books don’t record, there may be more regional features than we know of. Furthermore, written dialect is a special
category, invented in the early 1800s by writers who either had never spoken it, or had done so, but, after learning schooled English, had invented printed dialects when there was a market for them after about 1850. Printed dialects differ from partly-schooled writing.

As for failed standard (the ultimate shrug-off category), we must not assume stem cell scripts are interlanguages on the way to full Standard (Richards 1974). In theory, they could change in any direction, or not at all. Certainly, we can take a view from above and sort the letters into a continuum according to their approximation to full schooledness. It is also certain that some initially partly-schooled writers became fully-schooled, for there are single letters, written in practised hands, which the writers might have written after just such a change. But I have seen no sequence in which the letteracy developed from partly- to fully-schooled. So far I have seen only two series where the writer changed the letteracy in an unschooled direction: 1) Rachel Clark’s three increasingly ‘impudent’ letters in 1826; 2) the vocabulary of William King, shoemaker, gradually became more religious in fourteen applications for relief which he wrote from London to his home parish in Essex between 1828 and 1834. Most series of partly-schooled letters I have seen remain unchanged over many years. Their writers were not on a continuum to anywhere. If they altered anything, they usually altered only to make better sense.

Wim Vandenbussche (1999), writing of Belgian scripts, says many, perhaps most writers seem to have regarded letteracy as ‘a onefold’ task. They aimed to express themselves clearly, and not also in schooled language. But, in fact, as I discussed above, some writers did have two tasks: making sense, and what Vandenbussche and I, who both produce fully-schooled scripts with comparative ease, don’t see as a task at all – the purely mechanical task of forming graphs.

These letters and other types of writing, such as bills, form a body of language, which doesn’t fit into the categories which linguists have developed for classifying schooled or dialect writing.

Despite Street’s arguments (1995: passim), I maintain that scripts are sites both of the socially defined requirements for letteracy and of what he calls ‘autonomy’. For example, even the least-schooled language users didn’t write, like, fillers and phatic communication, which they probably said, know what I mean. The scripts of writers with little or no training in composition, or who

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16 James and Frances Soundy, for example, Berkshire (just west of London) R.O.: Pangbourne, DP 91/18/4–11 (1818–1829).
perhaps had been exposed to discourses (Biblical, for example) which were unlike what they wanted to put down on a blank sheet of paper – the scripts of these writers are sites where we might be able to detect both what writers do which speakers don’t and informal forces of language conventionalisation.

One rarely mentioned factor in successful communication is the reader’s input. Kate Parry (1988), discussing English as a second language, quotes Frank Smith that for writing to have meaning ‘readers have to draw all the time on “the theory of the world in the brain”’. A reader who knows nothing of cigarettes, for example, cannot understand what ‘NO SMOKING’ is intended to mean. Parry discusses a good example of reader’s input – a moving letter she once received from a Nigerian student. Readers without African experience find this letter a puzzle, if not incompetent. If, therefore, readers of English partly-schooled letters find them incomprehensible, they should not blame only the writer, but should consider what types of reading skills they do and don’t bring to the script.

Social background

Ansell and Wiles lived in largely orate environments; Papillon in a literate [sic] one. Another difference is that educationists, family members and others expected Papillon, as a gentleman’s child, to write what they might find worth reading. But from Ansell and Wiles, as members of the lower orders, they expected little more than bills for services rendered.

Patrick Colquhoun, lawyer and social activist (1745–1820), calculated the population of England and Wales in 1803 by status and occupation (1806: 23). The less than well-schooled letters in my corpus were written by members (and their spouses) of occupational classes such as shopkeepers, lesser landholders, master craftsmen, artisans, soldiers, clerks and other business assistants, labourers, servants, pedlars, publicans and paupers, totalling 83.7% of Colquhoun’s population of 9,343,561. This occupational range is too wide to be a useful determiner of letteracy.

Furthermore, the overseers’ records contain letters in well-schooled English by other members of these classes. We must, therefore, beware of the concept of eine Arbeiterschriftsprache (‘a workers’ letteracy’), which German scholars (Mattheier 1990, Klenk 1998) have tried to identify in similar German letters in the same period. It might be true that a certain letteracy is predominantly workers’ letteracy, but it isn’t true that workers had no other letteracy.

Secondly, from the Industrial Revolution in the mid 1700s onwards more and more people became socially mobile. William Cobbett, for example, started his working life as a copy-clerk and ended it as a landowner and
member of parliament, and the author Charles Dickens also came from a working-class family.

Thirdly, in the 1970s in Africa many students’ parents were agricultural labourers very like those in Europe in the early 1800s. I find no trace of anything I want to call an Africanised labourers’ letteracy. Street discusses something similar on Pacific Ocean islands (1995: 77ff.).

Finally, researchers often cannot relate letteracy to class because we don’t know who wrote the letters, and if we do, we often know little about the writers beyond the date of their baptism and, after 1812 when such details were first required to be recorded at baptisms, their father’s occupation.

The schooling of letteracy

No one just picks up writing. We must be schooled. By this I don’t mean only attendance at school. Many children – of rich and poor parents alike – were schooled at home.

There are two difficulties to accounting for letteracy by schooling. First, whereas we can often link an upper-class child with schooling because records have survived, we cannot link a lower-class child with schooling because usually none have survived. For example, Stephen Wiles is the only writer out of hundreds in my corpus whose schooling I know something about. Secondly, home schooling is almost unrecoverable.

Nevertheless, if poor people went to school, most attended one type – a free, or charity school. I have written elsewhere (Fairman 2005) about such schooling. So, here I mention only two key features. First, teachers were untrained and their methods must have differed synchronically and diachronically. This resulted in different letteracies and probably literacies too. Secondly, until after 1870 teachers taught letteracy in two distinct stages. All learners started the first stage, which we might call ‘the mechanical part of the instruction’.17 This method had hardly changed since Quintilian in the first century AD: pupils learnt to form and join graphs regularly, moving from left to right in straight lines, from top to bottom of the page (Kress 2000). They would then practise ‘WRITING in all its useful Hands’18 by copying religious or moralising texts into their copy (not exercise) books. Lower-order children could spend three years doing this.

18 An advert for a boys’ school in Mayfield, Sussex, 1771 (Caffyn 1998: 201). Schooling the poor for ‘usefulness’ was often stressed.
Only children whose parents could afford the fees started the second stage of letteracy, ‘liberal education’, though others taught themselves later. Stage-two letteracy was narrower than modern letteracy. The National Curriculum for England (1999), for example, expects an eleven-year-old child to write ‘narratives, poems, playscripts, reports, explanations, opinions, instructions, reviews, commentaries’.

This two-stage instruction in letteracy had three consequences. First, Elspaß’s question ‘To what extent, and for how long, did regional influences prevail in [the teachers’] actual written language production and their teaching’ (2002: 45) arises only partly for those English writers who weren’t taught to compose and who copied from books, not from their teachers. They may have learnt from each other after their basic instruction. Such informal traditions are as much forces for language conventionalisation as schooled formal instruction with all its supporting means is.

Secondly, there was “keine für Volksschulen geeignete Grammatik” (‘no grammar suitable for elementary schools’, Klenk 1998: 326). The children of the poor learnt no grammar, neither in the modern nor in the old sense, which included all levels of language. Robert Lowth, the first modern English grammarian, defined grammar as “the Art of rightly expressing our thoughts by Words” (1762: 1), which suggests a reason why the lower-orders were thought to need no grammar: they were “so trained up, as to make them [...] not only fit, but willing to be employed [as copy-clerks] either in trade, service, husbandry, or any other business”. They were expected to copy others’ words, not write their own.

Thirdly, if they did write for themselves, their letteracy was more open to unschooled influences than that of fee-paying scholars. Finally, since their partly-schooled applications for relief were granted, they didn’t need to write schooled scripts.

Partly-schooled writers wrote according to conventions which extended informally throughout England. For example, 1) some began letters to social superiors with ‘Frends’ and ended ‘so nomore from [NAME]’; 2) they used words like dark (blind), shift (make a living), nourish(ment) (tonic), tramp (look for work), which the OED doesn’t mention, or defines as obsolete, or dialect; 3) for ‘precision’ schooling authorities demanded different words for different meanings, but partly-schooled writers combined the same words (be,
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come, go, make, take, etc.) with different particles to convey different meanings by phrases.

In this volume we are invited to view the history of language from below. But a view from below is as one-sided as a view from above. I try to adopt a position from where we can have a panorama of all forces, formal and informal, which conventionalise letteracies. The term ‘convention’ includes those forces which insist on a single way to write (or speak) and those which result merely in ways in which writing is done.

References


