

The Familiar Letter in Early Modern English

Pragmatics & Beyond New Series

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The Familiar Letter in Early Modern English: A pragmatic approach

by Susan M. Fitzmaurice

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A pragmatic approach

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Introduction

You see how I presume on your friendship in taking all this freedom with you: But I already fancy that we have lived many years together, in an unreserved conversation... (Addison to Pope, Nov 2, 1713)

Since I waited last on your Lordship I have employed twelve Days in reflecting on my own Melancholly Circumstances, and such most certainly they appear to be when I apprehend that it is possible I may be ruined in my Fortune without being accused of any Fault, and wounded to Death without seeing whence the Arrow comes. (Matthew Prior to Charles Montagu, Marquis of Halifax and Lord Treasurer, February, 1706/7)

You desired me to write some Letters of Complement, as also some Panegyricks, but I must intreat you to Excuse me, for my Style in Writing is too Plain and Simple for such Courtly Works. (Margaret Cavendish, 1664)

I fancy you are now saying — 'Tis a sad thing to grow old. What does my poor mama mean by troubling me with Criticisms on Books that no body but her selfe will ever read over? (Lady Mary Wortley Montagu to Lady Bute, March 1, 1752)

In the correspondences and letters that that provide the focus of this book, there will be occasion to examine many remarks such as those above; from conventional comparisons of letter-writing with easy conversation, to the painful admission of undeserved personal trouble, to bashful, self-deprecating comments regarding one's inability to write with ornament, to remarks which effectively put words into the mouth of one's addressee. The familiar letter accommodates all of these things: compliment, as exemplified in Addison's gesture to Pope, accusation, hinted in Prior's appeal to his erstwhile friend, Charles Montagu, self-conscious self-presentation as embodied in Cavendish's portrait of herself as plain writer, and self-revelation, as illustrated by the response that Lady Mary imagines her daughter has to her writing. And all of these things have been studied as attributes of the genre, in both its literary and non-literary guises.¹ This study will address the familiar letter, both fictional and real, as a pragmatic act that is embodied in a text that responds to a previous text, whether spoken or written, and at the same time anticipates new texts. The familiar letter thus represents an exchange between actors. Acts of writing and reading the familiar letter involve making and inferring mean-

ings that may be pertinent to a single reading only as well as constructing meanings that might shift with the circumstances in which the letter might be read. In addition, there will be more contingent, interpersonal meanings that reside in the act that the letter represents rather than in the epistolary language itself that is relevant to the relationship of writer and reader. This study will scrutinize what is involved in the act of making a compliment (such as Addison's), but also the reception of the compliment as well as the complementee's response to the act. It will explore the expression of complaint (like Prior's), but also its effect on the addressee, in both word and deed. It will interrogate the conscious work of self-presentation that Cavendish's epistolary discourse embodies, but also how a reader construes and interrogates that self presentation in turn; and it will examine the strategy of self-revelation as practiced by Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, but also the ways in which that revelation is read and understood.

This book is intended to contribute to the conversations among disciplines regarding fruitful ways to approach topics and subject matter of common interest. In this case, the discussion that I want to stimulate is one principally between linguists and literary critics. I hope that it will add to the body of work in this vein on seventeenth and eighteenth century English texts begun by Carey McIntosh, whose (1986, 1998) examinations of the history of prose style in eighteenth-century English draw upon the insights of modern corpus linguistics even as he grounds his studies in the rhetorical theory of the period. Janet Sorensen's (2000a, b) account of nationalism and language in eighteenth-century Scotland is solidly informed by cultural theory but she alludes effectively too to work on linguistic theory, prescriptive grammar and correctness in the period. Carol Percy's (2000) feminist approach to the language of eighteenth-century book reviews makes extensive use of the methods of literary stylistics and lexical semantics as she shows how literary genres in the period become marked as masculine ('manly') or as feminine ('easy') as reviewers condemn what they construct as feminine language by contrast with masculine language. There are other interdisciplinary studies important to the present study that do not concern my period. Lynn Magnusson (1999) has adapted and developed Brown and Levinson's (1987) theory of politeness in order to examine the ways in which social relations are encoded and manipulated in Shakespeare's dramatic language, and how Shakespeare's notion of conversation relates to the letter-writing practices of the early modern period. She builds a rich picture of the interaction of literary, social and linguistic practices in the period as she draws upon the methodologies of linguistic anthropology

and Bourdieu's social theory of language. The work of McIntosh, Sorensen, Percy, and Magnusson represents major attempts by rhetoricians and literary critics to engage with the methodology and insights that modern linguistics may provide. Sylvia Adamson's (1994/5, 1998) work on the grammaticalization of speaker subjectivity in the history of a literary style such as indirect free style provides another model of research that participates in linguistic debate and literary criticism. This model in particular has influenced my thinking and understanding of the literary-linguistic interface and the relation between the history of the English language and literary history.

This book seeks to represent a perspective that is typical neither of standard literary approaches to the study of the familiar letter nor of the standard linguistic approaches to the topic. It is informed more consistently by historical literary and literary critical accounts of the familiar letter than by literary theoretical accounts, and it is more solidly rooted in the methodology of linguistic pragmatics than in the methodology of sociohistorical or variationist linguistics.² Thus this project is predominantly linguistic in its theoretical underpinnings and its analytical techniques but its approach to interpretation and description may share something with the concerns of literary history and literary criticism. What of the audience, the ideal reader for work like this? The audience for this book includes the reader who may be more interested in literary than linguistic matters, the reader who may be more interested in historical than literary matters, and the reader who is interested more in linguistic than literary matters. I depend upon the assumption that all these readers are willing to venture beyond the boundaries of their familiar scholarly domains to consider new (or at least different) ways of examining familiar subjects. At the same time, I hope that my treatment of the familiar letter in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries will open up the ways in which sociohistorical linguists examine such a rich and historically complex genre.

I conceived the current project in the course of continuing research on the construction of standard modern English in the prescriptive grammars in the second half of the eighteenth century. This long-term research program is a sociohistorical linguistic study of the processes of linguistic standardization as the manifestation of social and cultural influence exerted by figures active in Augustan England. At the center is Joseph Addison (1672–1719), who is identified by prescriptive grammarians like Robert Lowth and Joseph Priestley as 'one of our best authors' (Wright, 1994, Tieken Boon-van Ostade, 1997). To investigate the sources and extent of Augustan influence, I have constructed an electronic corpus of texts produced by Addison and figures in his circle as well

as those on the periphery of his social network. Many in Addison's cohort are literary people whose oeuvres include a range of genres, from plays and political essays in the case of his literary mentor, John Dryden, and his close friend, Richard Steele, to verse epistles and criticism in the case of Alexander Pope, to fiction, verse and drama in the case of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu and William Congreve. However, there are actors in the picture who leave no textual record beyond their letters. Edward Wortley, husband to Lady Mary Wortley Montagu and Addison's companion on his tour through Italy in 1701–3, leaves only his letters. Importantly, all of the members of this discourse community, whether they are connected to or outside Addison's network leave behind their letters. This epistolary corpus provides the key source of data for the investigation of linguistic variation in the period. This investigation in turn informs the study of the extent to which the grammar constructed in the prescriptive grammars is anticipated by the structure and use of language in earlier texts like these. In the course of reading the range of letters written in the period, I became aware that not all personal letters are the same, and that the genre of the familiar letter is itself as heterogeneous as its authors.³

The range and variety of letters that appear in the corpus are indexical of the letter's importance in the social and literary life of the period. The letter — its writing, reading, keeping, endorsing and sending — apparently permeated every aspect of English life in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. It is the kind of document most commonly written by literate adults because it was used for multiple purposes. In eighteenth century government for example, the official letter or brief was the principal means of transmitting news, information and authorization for particular acts and agreements. So diplomat and poet, George Stepney, who was posted in Vienna for many years, wrote regular diplomatic letters to his superiors in London but used the very same paper that bore the record of his formal observations for strikingly personal postscripts.⁴ This practice could be misleading too; Lady Mary Wortley Montagu remarks somewhat incredulously that her letters home were publicly assumed to be covers for less innocent, political epistolary purposes.⁵ Daniel Defoe, who was in the (secret) service of Robert Harley, kept him informed of events in Scotland by carefully worded letters in which he used code to refer to key events, places and characters.⁶ When Addison was under-secretary to Lord Wharton, Lord Lieutenant of Ireland in 1708, he posted regular newsletters to his Whig patrons and sponsors to let them know what passed in the halls and corridors of the colony's capital.⁷

The activity of letter-writing for the actors mentioned here turned out to

be everyday work that was necessary for the efficient conduct of routine business in the period. This included writing letters to keep one's creditors at bay (as Richard Steele constantly does), wrangling with one's publishers over payment long overdue (Dryden to Jacob Tonson), and dropping polite notes of thanks for favours received, such as a case of spa water (Congreve to Pope).⁸ Letters provided a record of financial affairs and accounts, so that it was common to endorse a letter for further reference if it mentioned a promise of payment of rent or school fees. It also included the management of family business; in the early days of their marriage, Wortley would issue terse instructions by letter to Lady Mary placing restrictions on the house she wished to rent and the furniture she planned to buy.⁹ But not all family correspondence is financial business; parents write to their children and vice versa as acts of filial duty. To this category belong the carefully crafted, though seemingly artless missives from Richard Steele to his children at boarding school, and Addison's letters from the countryside to the twelve-year-old son of the Countess of Warwick. Letter-writing also included more remarkable work; writing letters in order to conduct a clandestine courtship seemed to involve the anxiety that comes with necessary secrecy (Wortley and Lady Mary Pierrepont), and writing letters of application to powerful people in an effort to win preferment (for example, Daniel Defoe to Robert Harley) or writing to a big name in the hopes of winning favourable mention to the queen (for example, Matthew Prior to Sarah Churchill, Duchess of Marlborough), seemed to be fraught with the risks of rejection and the ignominy of losing face.

Letters of love and friendship — those letters with which we usually associate the term 'familiar' — assume different guises in the period. Some correspondences seem leisurely and pleasurable to perform. Among these are Matthew Prior's early teasing, eloquent letters to his friend, Charles Montagu, later Earl of Halifax, Congreve's long correspondence with Joseph Keally, and Jonathan Swift's gossipy epistolary conversation with Hester 'Vanessa' Vanhomrigh.¹⁰ There are also correspondences that despite being pleasurable to both writer and reader, have the function of criticism and debate. Congreve wrote long letters to the critic John Dennis on the subject of theatre criticism, and Mary Astell conducted a series of learned philosophical disputations with John Norris (Perry, 1986). Others are the product of necessity: Richard Steele was in the habit of having brief yet affecting notes hand-delivered to his wife Prue across town when he realized (somewhat late) that he was not going to get home in time for dinner. Other familiar letters of the period seem more evidently designed to fulfill a purpose other than the ordinary expression of

friendship. Classical examples of epistolary friendship appear to provide the model for Pope's own letter-writing practices; in 1735 he cannibalized and edited real letters he had sent to friends for an edited volume of his correspondences with important people.¹¹ Modern editors have routinely included in their editions of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu's collected letters the travel letters she wrote as she accompanied her husband on his diplomatic mission to Turkey, and this editorial decision encourages us to read them as one of a piece with her family letters.¹² Brief investigation exposes the error of this assumption. The letters evidently had considerable circulation in manuscript, and Lady Mary even lent the collection to her friend, Mary Astell in 1724, who then 'wrote an exuberant preface in the blank pages at the end of the second volume' (Halsband, 1965, vol. 1:xvii). Lady Mary took the manuscript letters with her when she left England in 1739, and years later gave them to an English clergyman to dispose of as he considered appropriate. After her death, her family bought the volumes to prevent their publication, but in May 1763, less than a year after her death, the letters were published anyway, from pirate copies made surreptitiously after the letters had passed into the clergyman's possession.¹³

As the work on building this increasingly complex eighteenth-century corpus has progressed, it has also become obvious that the genre or (in the parlance of corpus linguistics) the register of the familiar letter that a naïve linguist had originally considered to vary with writer and subject matter was really a cluster of genres united only by their adoption of a notionally common form. The epistolary form was ubiquitous in the period — Dowling (1991:21) observes that the eighteenth century is a 'literary moment dominated by epistolarity'. Literary criticism has long identified the letter form as having a critical influence on the shape of the novel in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and Altman's notion of epistolarity — 'the use of the letter's formal properties to create meaning' (1982:4) — has been fundamental to standard accounts of the history of the novel since. The short paper or political essay in the period typically assumes the form of a letter, and this convention marks the shape of the periodical essay, from *The Tatler* and its successor, *The Spectator*, to Defoe's *Review* and Swift's *Examiner*. Indeed, in high literary culture, the verse epistle held full sway, 'emerging out of relative literary obscurity to become the dominant poetic mode of its age, giving voice during the period of its formal hegemony to a tremendous range of related moral and imaginative conventions to create space for, in this case, the rise of Romantic lyric' (Dowling, 1991:9). One of the form's most prominent exponents, Alexander Pope, exploited the formal as well as the conversational pos-

sibilities of the verse epistle, both for his verse imitations of the classical epistles of Horace and for his critical and conversational pieces, like his *Epistle to Arbuthnot*. Frequently, the titles of numerous, even key, works of philosophy, medicine, theology, political theory, propaganda written in the period give no hint of the fact that they take the form of an extended epistle. And indeed the frequency with which the words ‘epistle’ and ‘letter’ appear in the titles of works in these domains conveys the sense with which their authors conceive of their texts as epistolary discourse. The discovery of this immensely complicated web of epistolary texts in the period raised fresh questions for the linguist in me about epistolarity and reading meaning in the letter, not least, questions about the ways in which writers construct readers and audiences, and how writers organize their language to ensure that readers have the means both to calculate writers’ intentions and infer their meaning.

I therefore began to read letter fiction and epistolary essays, and found it instructive to read different instantiations of the familiar letter from different historical periods. So I compared the epistolary language of the real love letter written (sent, and responded to) by Lady Mary Wortley Montagu with the letter fiction of seventeenth-century precursors like Aphra Behn. I returned to my own early linguistic study of the epistolary language of seventeenth-century writers like Dorothy Osborne (Wright, 1990) as I reconsidered the letters in the light of my turn to an interactive, pragmatic method of reading. I had early on dismissed the mode of epistolary discourse deployed by Margaret Cavendish in her *CCXI Sociable Letters* as inauthentic, as too distant from the language of ‘real’ letters to be interesting from a sociohistorical linguistic perspective, but now I found it fascinating for its radical conventionalization of the practices and strategies that I was encountering in the ‘real’ letters.

These discoveries prompted a new strand of investigation; I began to adapt the analytical techniques of linguistic pragmatics in order to apprehend and discuss the ways in which readers systematically conceive a writer’s attitude in a text. I also decided to take this work to a largely non-linguist audience, and to this end I presented a paper on the ways in which literary criticism could deploy the theory of linguistic politeness and techniques for calculating nonlinguistic meaning for interpreting subjectivity in epistolary discourse. My case study was the instantiation of tentativeness and insistence in Cavendish’s *CCXI Sociable Letters*, and it met with a warm and interested response (Fitzmaurice, 2000b). I continued to work on Cavendish’s epistolary discourse, presenting to Cavendish scholars studies of her use of the topos of advice in letters on medical matters, and of her pragmatic construction of her

interlocutor in her *Sociable Letters*.¹⁴ I also returned to the eighteenth-century corpus for literary pragmatic investigation. As I became more and more familiar with their circumstances, their lives, and their writing, the letter writers seemed to be saying so much more than their words appeared to express. I began to seek ways to account for the variety of functions performed by epistolary discourse and the ways in which writers go about ensuring that their addressees get their message. Reading letters as sequences or correspondences provided a larger textual setting in which to judge the extent to which addressees were able to calculate their correspondents' intentions and how they responded.

These exploratory studies provide the impetus and groundwork for this book. As I read literary, historical, and linguistic studies of the familiar letter in general as well as those specific to the period under consideration, I am increasingly convinced that what is needed is a treatment that will produce the subtle insights that literary criticism can, but in the transparent and systematic fashion that linguistic analysis affords.¹⁵ Literary readers tend to consider linguistic studies to be too reductive because of their narrow concern with linguistic form and variation. At the same time, linguists view literary studies as subjective, opaque and resistant to generalization because of their ritual appeal to theory (whether it is literary or cultural) and their apparently purely metaphorical understanding of language and discourse. These positions have been rehearsed and criticized, contested and debated by scholars like Stanley Fish and Michael Toolan, and they remain largely typical of the stances (to be sure stereotypical) of literary critics and linguists.¹⁶

In this book I begin to challenge the prejudices that inform these apparently intractable positions by demonstrating that it is possible to attend to the study of linguistic form, linguistic function and linguistic practice systematically, critically and interpretatively. I will develop an account of reading meaning in the familiar letter that uncovers meanings that cannot be located in the surface form of sentences that appear on the page as part of an autonomous code, because they are not linguistic meanings *per se*. Instead they are meanings that are borne by the writer's act of writing something on a particular occasion. If they cannot be found in surface linguistic form, they must be calculated and inferred by comparing the meanings that emerge routinely in the course of the normal, repeatable practice involved in the utterance of similar forms, with the specific performance of the form under scrutiny by a particular actor, for a specific purpose on a particular occasion. The key task in this enterprise is to provide a rigorous and rich characterization of the processes

of calculating and inferring meaning as kinds of reading.

Of course, such an enterprise requires some reflection and discussion of how to conduct the kind of analysis of the materials that provide the data for this study in order to produce a pragmatic account of reading them. Reasonable questions include the following: What are the problems of dealing with this particular kind of material? How do we know things about the contexts in which letters are written and received? How can we construct readings and responses in the gaps that appear in the correspondence in a given historical moment? My method is grounded in historical knowledge, that is, familiarity with the materials that provide the evidence for historical context as well as familiarity with the variety of linguistic codes used to represent and interpret this context. The materials used as evidence include standard documentary sources that function as testimony of practices, events, and activities by individuals and groups in a particular period, including official records, legal documents, and contemporary reports, as well as interpretative and analytical accounts of contemporary events and practices. Included in the latter, of course, are texts that are more private than public, as well as texts that are more imaginative than descriptive, and more fictional than factual. Constructing the historical context in which letters were written and received involves interpreting the documents referred to and comparing this interpretation with the accounts yielded by standard historical studies, including biographies, cultural histories, literary histories, and social and political histories. The data for analysis — the letters — are set in the historical context constructed out of these different interpretations. In the same way that the historical context requires construction on the basis of an incomplete historical record, the correspondences that are the epistolary contexts for interpreting the data are also likely to contain gaps. Referential opacity and vagueness, informational gaps and inexplicitness all contribute to the challenge of reading the letters. The act of reading that necessarily accompanies pragmatic analysis is one that must be informed by familiarity with the study of the registers of early modern English. Part of the study of historical letters thus consists of the historical analysis of the linguistic code that marks the discourses of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The historical reading of historical texts thus provides the data for the application of pragmatic analysis.

The book is notionally divided into two parts. The first part — Chapters One, Two and Three — introduces key linguistic concepts and techniques and develops a pragmatic account of making and reading epistolary meaning in historical texts through extensive illustration. The second part — Chapters

Four through Seven — illustrates the application of the pragmatic analytical method to a range of different sets of letters and historical correspondences, and provides occasion for elaborating the theoretical models introduced in the first three chapters. A brief epilogue concludes the study with a critical review of the account of pragmatic epistolarity developed, some discussion of the relation of pragmatic analysis to rhetorical analysis of the familiar letter, and brief reflection on reading meaning in modern reflexes of the familiar letter, such as email.

Chapter One is a basic, largely non-technical, introduction to some of the ways in which readers rely upon pragmatic skills to calculate the meanings that letter writers intend their readers to apprehend and those meanings that readers infer that may not necessarily be intended by the letter writer. Chapters Two and Three together provide a guide to the understanding of the pragmatic phenomena that will be more fully explored in each chapter. Chapter Two describes the manner in which the boundaries of the epistolary world are delineated in language, specifically in the deictic system. I illustrate how deixis shapes the cognitive, emotional and social coordinates of this domain in addition to the physical ones of time and space. This chapter pays particular attention to the ways in which the realization of deictic language is historically bounded, and to the consequences for a historical pragmatic reading of this temporal situatedness. Chapter Three turns to the ways in which pragmatic theory seeks to account for those routine linguistic practices that allow us to carry out interpretative procedures in line with the 'normal' cultural expectations tied to those practices. For example, the question, 'Where is the salt?' uttered at the dinner table by a speaker who is about to tuck into a plate of lasagna, is routinely and straightforwardly interpreted as a request for the addressee to produce the salt rather than as a genuine question requesting information about the whereabouts of the salt. In the same way, the remark, 'Your servant' placed at the end of a letter is taken neither as the writer's acknowledgment of his inferior rank relative to the addressee, nor as a sincere assurance of the writer's willingness to perform a service for the addressee. Instead, it functions as a conventional signal that the letter is at a close. Thus linguistic form, when practiced in repeatable ways, gives rise to conventional interpretations. Much more challenging for a theory of language use is to account for the nonce, subjective meanings that language use is so richly endowed with that they rarely require anything beyond than the individual's communicative competence and common sense to unpack them (Hanks, 1996). These meanings are made in the performance (rather than in

the regular practice or mention) of an utterance that generates a situation in which a listener's expectations interact with precise circumstance. I assume the existence of pragmatic procedures of interpretation that are habitual and routine which generate meanings that are expectable and conventional. At the same time, the techniques of inference developed to handle pragmatic practice may be used to address pragmatic performance to understand the inference of particular, individual, historically and culturally specific meanings in the correspondences that provide the textual data for analysis. It is the critical development of inferential techniques that allows the theory to be applied to the texts produced in different periods, at the same time as allowing some commonality in the actual ways in which readers deal with text and listeners with speech over time.

The organization of the second part of the book imitates the stages of meaning making that a letter undergoes, first in the hands of the writer, and then in those of the reader. Chapters Four and Five explore the process of epistolary exchange from the perspective of the letter writer and his or her intention in constructing a letter as an act designed to have some effect upon an addressee. This examination involves the critical use of aspects of speech act theory to interrogate the nature of the gap in interpretation that may ensue between utterer's intention and interpreter's reading. Chapter Four explores the extent to which traditional generic boundaries become obscure as we examine the contingent relation between the form of the letter and its intended function. For instance, in the seventeenth century, members of the medical profession like Theodore Mayerne adopt the epistolary form for the commercial purpose of selling medical counsel. At the same time, writers like Margaret Cavendish conventionalize the letter offering advice for more general consumption, in something of the same way that agony aunts do in today's newspapers. The advice topos runs through the epistolary discourse of the period, as illustrated by the correspondence between friends like Henry More and Anne Conway who routinely express mutual concern for one another's health and offer advice accordingly. The question for investigation in this chapter is whether advice offered in a letter is routinely accepted, and more importantly, acted upon. I consider how authority and expertise influence the dispensing of advice, and the contexts in which some writers may be authorized to give advice and those in which others are not.

In addition to providing the form for a particular rhetorical function such as advice, the letter offers a linguistic means of getting somebody to do something. In the eighteenth century, individuals used the letter form as an instru-

ment in their search for patronage from people in a position to grant it, and those in search of literary patronage often registered their thanks in return for promises of patronage by writing a dedication in epistolary verse to the would-be patron. The question for discussion is whether the patronized recognizes the nature of the contract offered in a letter of patronage. To what extent do the participants clearly apprehend the nature of the imposition that the request places on the patron as well as the debt that the patronized incurs in the act? Literary men like Jonathan Swift and Joseph Addison were well-practiced in the art of seeking patronage, and their work provides the data for an interrogation of the pragmatics of patronage in Chapter Five. I will compare the strategies deployed by Jonathan Swift and Joseph Addison as they approach the Whig magnate, Charles Montagu, Earl of Halifax, on the one hand, and as they instruct the young Ambrose Phillips on the other to see how their epistolary approaches to the same person differ or overlap, and how the addressee responds.

The next two chapters, Chapter Six and Chapter Seven, switch focus to the role of the addressee (or audience) as interlocutor in the conversation that the epistolary form appears to assume. In Chapter Six I take as my object of analysis two extended 'one-sided' seventeenth-century correspondences, Dorothy Osborne's love letters to William Temple, and Margaret Cavendish's *CCXI Sociable Letters*. These text sequences make up one side of a correspondence and as they do so, they develop a textual image of the addressee and how he or she might in turn address the writer at the same time as it develops a self-portrait of the writer. So I explore the ways in which these writers construct the objects of their address, and how this construction shapes their epistolary discourse. I argue that Cavendish's self-conscious epistolary discourse shows how she imagines her interlocutor in the image of herself, and ways in which this construction of self in her interlocutor drives her rhetorical self-presentation. The letter thus becomes a quintessentially reflexive text, even as it assumes the guise of a Bakhtinian dialogic one. In Osborne's letters, we see the ways in which she commits each letter to a place in a chain of correspondence; she uses her letters as a vehicle for constantly anticipating and responding to something that has either already been said, or implicated, constructing an elaborate relationship based on reciprocity and disputation.

Chapter Seven considers letter writing as an act of reading as much as one of writing as I examine how writers act as self-interested readers as they put words into the mouths of their interlocutors. When an addressee responds to a letter, what does he or she specifically respond to? I offer a reading of the

courtship correspondence of Lady Mary Pierrepont and Edward Wortley that shows how subjects find meanings that they are interested in constructing out of the texts. The central role of (cognitive and affective) relevance in this courtship results in the generation of meanings that their makers do not intend. Each reads the other for the most relevant meaning that may be inferred in the moment of reading. I conclude that, far from cooperating in a courtship, each actor develops an antagonistic reading of the other's letters in an attempt to gain the upper hand in a relationship in which there is considerable unease and uncertainty.

The concluding note will bring the reader back to reconsider some of the assumptions and questions raised at the beginning, as we revisit the association of epistolarity with conversation and assess the extent to which reading meaning in the familiar letter depends upon convention and common sense in reading between the lines rather than reading the lines themselves. We will assess the extent to which the pragmatic account of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century epistolary discourse provides an effective means of interrogating this complex historical form that resists easy categorization as literary genre or as social text. I offer a pragmatic account that draws upon all the techniques explored to demonstrate the radical nature of the interpretation processes involved in reading. I demonstrate that reading generates meanings that are recoverable by other readers, but which might not necessarily be intended by their writers.

At the heart of the enterprise in this book then is to discover how and why readers and writers negotiate the meanings they do in the processes of interpreting and producing linguistic expressions in a particular linguistic channel — reading and writing letters. In addition, as I read I will interrogate my own practice in making choices regarding the functions and meaning of the letters — in a context of situation far removed from the series of contexts that generated the letters, their first, and subsequent readings. So the final challenge of this book will be to present a pragmatics rich enough to apply to letters other than the familiar kind, and perhaps to texts other than epistolary ones; to build a robust set of techniques for apprehending implicit meaning in spoken and written texts, and a sufficiently sensitive framework for the study of texts in periods that are culturally and historically distant from our own.

Notes

1. See Irving (1955), McKenzie (1993), Anderson, Daghljan & Ehrenpreis (1966), Day (1966), Winn (1977), Kaufman (1986), Lowenthal (1994), Altman (1982), Redford (1986).
2. Key examples of the sociohistorical and variationist models that I allude to here include the sociohistorical work of Tieken-Boon van Ostade (for example, 1982, 1999, 2000), and the approach to the letter as a register as exemplified in corpus linguistics in work like Nevalainen & Raumolin-Brunberg (1996), Geisler (2000), and Biber (1988, 1994).
3. See Bazerman (2000: 15) for a discussion of the role of the letter in the historical proliferation of multiple genres over time, including 'newspapers, and other periodicals, financial instruments such as bills of exchange and letters of credit, books of the new Testament, papal encyclicals, and novels'.
4. I am grateful to Sinthya Solera for transcribing George Stepney's letters from microfilm of British Library MS Egerton 929; Add. MS. 9719, Add. MS. 4740, and Bodley MS Montagu. d.1.
5. She reports a conversation with an old Priest who suggested that she might be using code, and retorts, 'Thus I suppose my innocent Epistles are severely sc[r]utiniz'd, and when I talk of my Grand children they are fancy'd to represent all the potentates of Europe. This is very provoking.' To Wortley, October 10, 1753. Halsband, ed., 1965, vol. iii, p. 42.
6. See Healey (1955) for Defoe's letters to Robert Harley, and Backscheider (1989) for a detailed account of the relationship between Defoe and Harley.
7. See Graham (1941).
8. See Blanchard (1941) for Steele's letters to numerous creditors, and Winton (1970) for an account of Steele's financial difficulties. Dryden's relationship with Tonson was not straightforward. For example, as Winn (1987: 476) illustrates in the case of their financial dealings over the profits of Dryden's works, Dryden took the money for the subscriptions and Tonson the profits from the trade edition of Dryden's translation of Virgil. However, difficulties later arose when Dryden realized that the contract specified he would collect the money from the first subscription only. Also see Dryden's letters to Tonson (Ward, 1942). Congreve writes to Pope, 'I thank you a thousand times for your Case of the Spaw water. I have sent this morning to the Custom house about them. I believe I shall not need quite so many but some friends may be glad of some of them' (Letter 137) Sherburn (1965).
9. See Halsband, 1965, vol. i, 190–195. See Wortley's letters of August 1713.
10. Matthew Prior's letters are preserved in the Earl of Bath's Longleat Papers. I am grateful to Sheila Williams and to Jeanne Arete for transcribing from microfilm autograph copies for this corpus. See Congreve's letters (Hodges, 1964), and Williams (1965) for Swift's letters to Vanessa. Also see Nokes (1995: 154ff) for an account of their relationship.
11. See Winn (1977) for discussion, and Sherburn's (1965) edition of Pope's letters for the complicated relationship of letters written to friends, and those he collected for his own edition.

12. For the publishing history of Lady Mary's letters, see Halsband, 1965, volume I, xvii-xix. Selected excerpts of 31 of Wortley's letters to Lady Mary, most of them drafts, were included in George Paston's biography, *Lady Mary Wortley Montagu and Her Times* (1907). The extract of one of his letters was first published in Dallaway's (1803) authorized edition of Lady Mary's works: *The Works of the Right Honourable Lady Mary Wortley Montagu Including Her Correspondence, Poems, and Essays Published, by Permission, from Her Genuine Papers*. In Five Volumes. London: Printed for Richard Phillips, No. 71, St. Paul's Churchyard. 1803.
13. For the story of the publication of the Embassy letters, see Halsband (1956: 278-289) and Grundy (1999: 625-6). Halsband (1965: xvii) gives the inscription in the volumes: 'These 2 Volumes are given to the R[everen]d Benjamin Sowden, minister at Rotterdam, to be dispos'd of as he thinks proper. This is the will and design of M. Wortley Montagu, Dec. 11, 1761.'
14. I presented papers on Cavendish's letters on medicine and medical advice at the Annual conference of the Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies in Tempe, 1997, and at the Cambridge Symposium in May 1998. I presented a paper on Cavendish's interlocutor at the annual Cavendish Society conference in Paris, June 1999. Chapters four and six, respectively, represent the development and expansion of the analyses and arguments attempted in these two papers. These early efforts are represented in brief in Fitzmaurice (forthcoming; 2001)
15. Clearly, I am not the first linguist to attempt such an approach, though I may be one of the first to focus on a single genre cluster (as it were) in trying to make the attempt. A notable recent work is Roger Sell's book, *Literature as Communication*, which examines literature within the framework of a general theory of communication (2000: 5), to develop what he calls 'mediating criticism' (2000: 119).
16. See different issues of *Language and Literature*, the journal of the Poetics and Linguistics Association, for substantive examples and some sense of the tenor and tone of this discussion. Also see Weber (1996).

CHAPTER 1

The pragmatics of epistolary conversation

Preliminary considerations

The truth is, the Letters that pass between Friends if they are written as they ought to be, can scarce ever be fit to see the light. They should not consist of fulsome Complements, or tedious Politicks, or elaborate Elegancies, or general Fancies. But they should have a Native clearness and shortness, a Domestical plainness, and a peculiar kind of Familiarity; ... In such Letters the Souls of Men should appear undress'd: And in that negligent habit, they may be fit to be seen by one or two in a Chamber, but not to go abroad into the Streets.¹

Let the Style of Friends be loose and irregular, let them be bold and unconcern'd in giving their Thoughts their full Scope; their Thoughts themselves shou'd be naked, not dress'd in the borrow'd Ornament of Rhetoric, as being not asham'd of their native Simplicity. For a Friend will be more pleased with that Part of a Letter which flows from the Heart, than with that which is the Product of the Mind.²

These very similar prescriptions for the style of the familiar letter appear in two rather different places. Thomas Sprat writes the first in his prefatory remarks to the works of Abraham Cowley (1668) in which he compares the styles that the poet adopted for his published writings and for his private letters. The second occurs in the anonymously penned prefatory matter of a letter collection intended to instruct the reader in the art of letter writing, published nearly eighty years later, in 1748. These two sets of remarks might be taken as a pair of bookends that hold together the epistolary texts that will be the focus of study in this book. Of course, by 1748, Thomas Sprat's by no means original prescription that letters between friends ought to be marked by 'Domestically plainness', and a 'peculiar sort of Familiarity' is echoed in an instruction that seems conventional and commonplace. Sprat's treatment of the style of the familiar letter was itself not new in 1668; his pronouncement is based on a collection of precepts representing a digest of Renaissance humanist and English rhetorical treatments of the familiar letter. They owe their character to Erasmus's rejection of the medieval tradition of *ars dictaminis* on the one hand, and on the other to his transformation of the letter's

classical definition as a 'mutual conversation between absent friends'. Perhaps they are more directly grounded in such seventeenth century applications and adaptations of Erasmus's epistolography as Angel Day's *English Secretarie*.³ In practice however, the apparent elaborateness of these prescriptions tended to be reduced to the more straightforward comparison of epistolary discourse with spoken language, as Dorothy Osborne's remark about contemporary 'received Opinion that People ought to write as they speak' illustrates.⁴

In this chapter, I apply the comparison of letter writing and conversation to the reading of some familiar letters. My primary goal in this and the next two chapters is to examine the structural and functional motivations for the comparison, and to demonstrate in a preparatory fashion how the comparison might be made productive for theorizing the reading and writing of letters as interaction and exchange. I try to show how it is possible to understand the precepts outlined for the appropriate rhetoric of letter writing in terms of the analysis of linguistic interaction. In Chapters Two and Three I introduce concepts that are fundamental to a functionalist study of meaningful language use, and describe techniques of pragmatic analysis. I will elaborate their usefulness in attending to the range of meanings constructed in the language of letters, which embrace both extra-linguistic, contextual meaning relevant to the situation of the letter and linguistic meaning pertinent to the content of the letter. These meanings include social meaning, which has to do with the nature of impositions and obligations that the relative social rank and position of political power might license writers to expect of readers and vice versa. They include interpersonal meanings, which have to do with the degree of distance or intimacy between writer and addressee, and the extent to which these interpersonal relations may or may not be captured in polite expression. In addition, they have to do with the attitudes and degrees of involvement of the actors in the communicative event, thus giving rise to affective and emotive meanings. Of course, among the types of meaning in a letter is propositional meaning, which has to do with the actual linguistic content of the letters. In Roman Jakobson's now classic description of the situation of utterance, this type of meaning is considered the text's substantive content or message. A key category of meaning that we will be concerned with here is what I will label inferential meaning. This type of meaning becomes available when a linguistic expression is used in a context in which the factors listed above all interact. Briefly, it includes meanings that may not be explicitly expressed in the words on the page, but meanings that can be inferred. This category includes those meanings that are expressly intended by the writer, as well as meanings that a

writer might not intend, but which a reader might infer in any case. In short, inferential meanings are what is meant, never mind what is said.

1. The practice of letter writing as conversation

To see how the rhetoric of the familiar letter as dictated by the opening quotations of this chapter might be construed in terms of the language of speech and the conduct of conversation, let us examine a note written by Richard Steele to his wife Mary (whom he called 'Prue') late in January, 1715.

I hope this will find You well as I am at this present Writing. I send Wilmott to know how you do only and to bring the Books concerning the Law of Elections: or what is better let Him bring the Green covers with Him. If you have a letter with a note of Warner's send it hither and I will have it of his Neighbour Mr. Jessop, I write now among Dancing Singings Hooping hallooing and Drinking. I think I shall succeed: My Dear I Love you to death.

If the Bill is not come and you have a Guinnea or Two send them for I would not borrow till my bill comes which will certainly be next arrivall of the Post to York (Richard Steele to Prue Steele, 27 January, 1714/15. Blanchard, 1941: 99).

The style of Steele's letter would seem to satisfy contemporary injunctions for 'Native clearness and shortness, a Domestical plainness, and a peculiar kind of Familiarity' and the recommendation that it should not 'consist of fulsome Complements, or tedious Politicks, or elaborate Elegancies, or general Fancies'. In sum, it is direct, plain-speaking, and brief; it is also addressed to somebody who is so familiar to the writer that one might imagine that he can dispense with the niceties of elaborate introduction. But this observation is insufficient motivation for comparing the letter with conversation; to find such a motivation, we must examine the circumstances in which the letter was written, together with the relationship of writer and reader, the structure of the letter as a communicative act, and the language of the letter itself. The fact that the letter was written specifically to his wife on a specific occasion for a specific purpose suggests that Steele might not have expected his letter to survive 'to see the light of day' but assumed that it would be discarded once its immediate purpose had been served.

In terms of the letter's immediate function, the writing and delivery of this epistolary request to Prue to send Dick books relating to election procedures and some money might be compared with a phone call asking a spouse to draw cash from an ATM machine and to buy milk on the way home from

work. Although a phone call would involve some explicit response (whether assent or refusal) on the part of the addressee to the request, these acts seem to share the same communicative thrust. Basically, they both embody the speaker/writer's expectation or hope that the request will have the effect of getting the addressee to do what they ask — what philosopher J.L. Austin called the illocutionary force of an utterance. If the letter can be understood as a kind of speech event that will get the addressee to respond in a particular way, the question is how the speech act is constructed so as to achieve the outcome desired. Let us consider Steele's note a little more carefully.

Perhaps because the note appears to have been penned out of necessity — Steele needs books relating to electoral procedures in view of the imminent parliamentary elections, and he also needs some money — he does not waste time on pleasantries.⁵ He merely offers a perfunctory greeting, which also serves the conventional function of opening the familiar letter. In fact, Dick Steele's expression of momentary concern for Prue's well-being has a similar, preparatory function that the greeting, 'Oh hi, sorry to bother you' might have at the beginning of the type of phone-call suggested above. It is a warning that the speaker is about to appeal to or impose upon the addressee in some way. This attention-getting contact alerts the addressee to anticipate that the act of communication about to ensue is likely to place an obligation on the addressee to do something for the speaker, whether the action is actual or verbal. To all intents and purposes, Steele's greeting prepares his wife for his request to send by the bearer of the note, Wilmott, the items requested. He then performs his request. Because he knows that she knows what he is asking for and so will have no difficulty identifying and locating the items that he requests, he refers to the items both definitely and briefly ('the Green covers'). He continues the letter with a further request; he also asks Prue to send a letter that would authorize him to convert a promissory note to cash. He was expecting money from John Warner, a London goldsmith, and he believed that he'd be able to cash Warner's note with William Jessop, his fellow parliamentary candidate.⁶

The urgent business of the communication now complete, Steele turns to the brief business of ending the letter by referring to his own immediate situation. He mentions the difficulties he's having writing the letter in the midst of the 'Dancing Singings Hooping hallooing and Drinking' going on around him. Having noted his success in getting to the end of his missive, he closes with a conventional expression of affection, 'My Dear I Love you to death'. Finally, anticipating a possible scenario in which Prue is unable to perform part of his original request, Steele directs his wife to a further course of action