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‘With the greatest sincerity’: expressing genuineness of feeling in nineteenth-century business correspondence in English

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Abstract: This article is concerned with the history of *yours sincerely*, a popular closing formula in English epistolary discourse. The formula was already used sporadically in the seventeenth century, gradually increased in frequency in the Late Modern period, and was the preferred subscription in English business correspondence by the end of the 1950s. This study investigates patterns of usage of closing formulae in a bestselling business letter-writing manual William Anderson’s *Practical Mercantile Correspondence, A Collection of Modern Letters of Business, etc.*, whose first edition was published by Effingham Wilson in 1836 in London. The first half of the nineteenth century was a period during which *sincerely* appears to have been gaining in popularity. The analysis of the repertoire of the closing formulae in Anderson shows that *sincerely* was starting to compete with *truly* for the same slot within the matrix of the extended type of closing formulae. This competition of *sincerely* with *truly* can be read as an indicator of a larger social and cultural change, which saw the rise of *sincerity*, reinterpreted as genuineness of feeling, as the new cultural buzzword.

Keywords: yours sincerely, closing formula, letter-writing manual, correspondence, Late Modern English

1 Introduction

The publication of William Anderson’s *Practical Mercantile Correspondence, A Collection of Modern Letters of Business, etc.* in 1836 marked a new phase in the tradition of English letter-writing manuals. Its three hundred and one “genuine commercial letters, of recent dates” (Anderson 1836: v) were accompanied by a rich appendix containing forms of various business documents, as well as “an explanation

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of the German chain rule” (Anderson 1836: title page). A brief introductory section entitled *Preliminary Observations* (Anderson 1836: xiii-xvi) offered some essential guidance on the art of business letter-writing. The brevity of this section was compensated by the extraordinary variety of sample letters provided, as illustrated by the detailed analytical index (Anderson 1836: xvii-xxvii). This specialised manual was primarily addressed to young correspondence clerks, who were expected to learn all about “[t]he proper characteristics of the commercial style” in English (Anderson 1836: xiii) by copying out Anderson’s examples and then practising writing their own letters. In addition to teaching the technicalities of the commercial style of writing, such specialised guides aimed to help young traders assimilate and internalise “a range of accepted norms and [...] subtle business practices” (Haggerty 2014: 110–111). In other words, to be accepted as full members of the business community, these young men were expected to learn both how to write and how to behave as merchants.

This paper focuses on one particular aspect of teaching how to write commercial letters, namely the choice of closing formula or subscription. One significant development in the recent history of this highly routinised epistolary segment is represented by the emergence and spread of the formula *yours sincerely*. As the literature review in Section 3 shows, this now conventionalised formula was considered innovative in the eighteenth century and gradually increased in frequency in the nineteenth century. The discussion of the repertoire of closing formulae in William Anderson’s *Practical Mercantile Correspondence* in Section 4 presents a more systematic approach to the analysis of closing formulae used in early nineteenth-century business correspondence. Specifically, I investigate the patterns of the emergence of *sincerely* as a component in the extended, longer versions of closing formulae (Section 5). Finally, in the concluding sections (Sections 6 and 7), I attempt to explain why *yours sincerely* increased in popularity in the nineteenth century, focusing on the linguistic and extralinguistic factors that may have motivated the spread of the formula. In Section 2, I start by contextualising William Anderson’s letter-writing manual within the tradition of such manuals in English.

2 *Practical Mercantile Correspondence* and the tradition of letter-writing manuals in English

William Anderson’s manual had a number of early nineteenth-century predecessors,¹ but its unrivalled commercial success makes it the best example of the new type of a

¹ Most notably William Keegan’s 1815 *The Universal British Merchant, etc.*, which will be discussed later in this section.

letter-writing manual in English.² This new type can be defined as a specialised business letter-writing manual that owes much less to the tradition of the popular seventeenth- and eighteenth-century epistolary guides than has been previously claimed (cf. Mitchell 2007). In fact, Anderson's work only partially fits the generic categorisation of these earlier manuals, described by Bannet as

compensia of fragments: anthologies of diverse and largely discontinuous model letters, and of formulae for cards and for legal documents such as indentures, wills, bonds, and bills of exchange that were bound together in book form with a short grammar, instructions for punctuation, directions for addressing people of different ranks, a list of contractions, and a spelling dictionary for homonyms. (Bannet 2003: 59)

The practice of adding a few commercial letters to the variety of “diverse and largely discontinuous model letters”, occasionally accompanied by a longer dedicated section with forms of legal and business documents, already existed in the seventeenth century. However, the selection of business letters in the earlier manuals tended to include only a handful of generic examples. Among the most popular examples, we find letters entitled “London merchant to the country tradesman about unsatisfactory goods” and “Tradesman asking for a loan”, which were reprinted verbatim in the majority of the manuals in circulation (Mitchell 2003: 332). John Hill's “trendsetting transatlantic bestseller” (Bannet 2007: 17), entitled *The Young Secretary's Guide, Or Speedy Help to Learning* (Hill 1687), set a new standard for practical, utilitarian guides addressed to the members of the now literate “humbler classes” (Hornbeak 1934: 82). Several business letters can be found in Hill's guide in the section dedicated to “Choice letters on several occasions” (Hill 1698 [1687]: 14–104), such as “A letter of Trade and Commerce”:

Sir,

I send you with this Letter the several Goods you bought of me, with a Bill of the Parcels inclosed, whereby you may understand the several Prizes; and as for the other Goods I promised to procure you, I cannot as yet furnish you with them, for as much as they are not as yet taken up, but are expected daily to be landed: wherefore assure your self, I will not suffer you long to be without them, but will make it my constant Business to serve you

² This claim is based on the number of the new editions and reprints of the book, its unauthorised reprints with modified titles, translations into other languages and its bilingual versions, as well as inclusion of selected letters from *Practical Mercantile Correspondence* into anthologies and miscellanies (see Shvanyukova 2014 for an overview of the main re-editions and reprints of the book; Del Lungo Camiciotti 2005, 2006a, 2006b, 2007, 2008 for the discussion of a number of linguistic and pragmatic features in the bilingual English-Italian edition of the manual).

in that, or in any thing else you shall command, that lies in my way. Wherefore taking leave at present, I remain,

Sir,
Your most Humble Servant,
T.G.
(Hill 1698 [1687]: 85-86)

In this letter, no indications are given as to the type of business or goods in question, or the kind of relationship between the merchant and his customer (i. e. new or existing customer?); standard epistolary formulae (e. g. “Wherefore taking leave at present”) are used, but no technical commercial vocabulary is found. Similar generic business samples are offered in a bestselling eighteenth-century epistolary manual, *The Universal Letter Writer; or New Art of Polite Correspondence, etc.* Published in London in the 1770s under the name of Reverend Thomas Cooke A.B., the manual contains thirty-six model letters (out of a total of 140) dealing with business matters. One of these letters is “Letter LVIII. From a Merchant’s Clerk in London, to his Master in the Country”:

Sir,
Our not hearing from you these three weeks has made us very uneasy, but still we hope you are well. The business has been carried on in the same manner in which you left it: but yesterday an order came from New York for goods to the amount of five thousand pounds and upwards. You know the American credit, and therefore I would not do any thing till I heard from yourself. If you please to write by the next post, I shall abide by your direction, and every thing shall be conducted by your order. We would not wish you to return before your health is fully re-established, although we long to see you every day. All the family are well, and am,
Your obedient faithful servant.
(Cooke 1791 [1770-71]: 56)

This example is just as generic as the business letter in Hill’s guide; moreover, by making references to the merchant’s health and family, Cooke blurs the divide between the professional and private domains, confirming the generic fuzziness that was characteristic of the earlier stages of business and professional discourse in English (Dossena 2010a; Dossena 2010b).

Thus, the few business letter samples in Hill’s and Cook’s popular manuals depict a business environment in which young men write to “benevolent gentlemen” to ask for general advice or a sum of money to start a career in commerce; clerks report to their masters; and provincial shopkeepers communicate with correspondents in London or write letters of recommendation for servants.³ With

³ On the exceptionally popular Hill’s *Young Secretary* see Hornbeak (1934: 77–99) and Bannet (2005: 110–124); on Cooke’s bestselling manual see Bannet (2005: 194–210) and Shvanyukova (2016).

only occasional hints at the expanding global commercial networks (see the above example from Cooke) and no instruction on how to write letters to business partners abroad, the contents and the style of writing in the business letter sections in earlier epistolary manuals had become decidedly outdated by the turn of the century.

The Universal British Merchant, etc. (Keegan 1815) may have been the first specialised correspondence manual addressed specifically to the audience of young commercial clerks. With this compilation of 210 model business letters, all of which focused on international commercial transactions, its author ambitiously promised “to improve the dawning talents of our youth, to lead them progressively to the attainment of mercantile knowledge, and to model them, at an early period, into men of business” (Keegan 1815: v).⁴ The following critical remark in the preface to *The Universal British Merchant, etc.* explicitly targets the old-fashioned letter-writing guides in circulation:

[F]or what can more forcibly predispose us to esteem those with whom we correspond, than the mode in which the correspondence is conducted? It is not, therefore, insignificant models that will lead to the attainment of such requisites; they must be real, and analogous to the true method of transacting business. How defective are those of that description hitherto published! How widely do they differ from the approved mode of holding a commercial correspondence! (Keegan 1815: vii)

Keegan was convinced that the reading, copying, and rewriting of genuine commercial letters constituted the only efficient method “to render the youthful mind cultivated in a department so essentially connected with the duties of the Counting-House, – that of holding a correspondence in a well-digested and merchant-like manner” (Keegan 1815: v). The same approach was adopted by William Anderson, who also expressed his preference for authentic business letters over the fictitious ones in the teaching of the English commercial style of writing:

Nothing, I conceive, can better conduce to this end than a collection of genuine commercial letters, of recent dates, adapted at once to form the style,⁵ and to afford a correct insight into the business of the counting-house. In fact, the utility of such a collection

4 Interestingly, *The Universal British Merchant, etc.* was a translated and expanded version of a business handbook previously published by the same author in French (Keegan 1799).

5 Anderson states that he was able to compile his collection from “a large mass of correspondence at my hand”, which was supplemented by “some letters obtained through the kindness of my friends” (Anderson 1836: vii). Commenting on the stylistic changes he was compelled to introduce, he lists actions such as “correct[ing] the diction where necessary [...]; avoiding some inelegancies, and some ungrammatical and quaint expressions”, in addition to altering proper names and dates of the letters (Anderson 1836: vii).

has been long acknowledged; and its want felt, as well by the young gentlemen themselves, as by those tutors who profess to give their pupils a commercial education. (Anderson 1836: v)

In terms of their contents, structure, and organisation, the similarities between *The Universal British Merchant, etc.* (Keegan 1815) and *Practical Mercantile Correspondence* (Anderson 1836) can be summarised as follows:

1. Both contain model letters dealing with business matters only and discussing a variety of different types of goods and commercial transactions, as the “Index” in Keegan (1815: 395–407) and the “Analytical index” in Anderson [1836: xvii–xxvii] indicate;
2. Model letters are grouped according to the different specialised sub-genres of business letters, e. g. circulars, letters of introduction, etc.;
3. Both manuals offer several series (2 series in Keegan 1815, 30 series in Anderson 1836) of connected letter exchanges that follow all stages of a specific business transaction;
4. International commercial networks feature prominently in the model letters, with, for instance, either the sender or the addressee trading from outside of England in more than half (171) of the model letters in Anderson (1836).

These similarities between the two nineteenth-century specialised manuals make them radically different from the earlier letter-writing manuals, such as Hill’s *The Young Secretary’s Guide, Or Speedy Help to Learning* (Hill 1698 [1687]) or Cooke’s *The Universal Letter Writer; or New Art of Polite Correspondence, etc.* (Cooke 1791 [1770–71]). Furthermore, some occasional references to real historical events in *Practical Mercantile Correspondence* suggest that Anderson’s claims regarding the authenticity of the material may be justified.⁶ If we were to subscribe to Anderson’s or Keegan’s claims about the authenticity of their material, then these early nineteenth-century specialised letter-writing manuals should be read as prescriptive and, at the same time, descriptive metasources (Paternoster and Fitzmaurice 2019). Their authors selected what they deemed to

⁶ All letters in the first 1836 edition are dated and display the addresses of the sender and the receiver. In Letter 281, for example, the date and the location are stated as “Gibraltar, June 1st, 1813” (Letter 281, Anderson 1836: 219). The letter is signed by I. C. Martin, a merchant reporting to his partner in London, Adolph Schmidt, about the arrival and partial sale of a consignment of chairs from England. In the same letter, I. C. Martin adds this extra information: “The plague is reported to have broken out in Malta; and there have been long quarantines appointed for all vessels coming from the East, which will be a great impediment to our commerce” (Letter 281, Anderson 1836: 220). The dating of the letter makes it plausible to connect it to the year of the terrible outbreak of Maltese Plague, “a severe epidemic of bubonic plague that killed 4,486 persons in seven months” (Childs Kohn 2008: 249).

be the most representative and most “fair examples of the commercial style” (Anderson 1836: vii) in order to teach young clerks how to conduct “correspondence in a well-digested and merchant-like manner” (Keegan 1815: v). The prescriptive efforts of their authors are traceable in footnotes, such as the following note in *Practical Mercantile Correspondence*: “*Since my last* is a common phrase, but an ungrammatical one”, followed by a detailed explanation of the grammatical rule regulating the use of *since* (Anderson 1836: 143). However, linguistic interventions of this kind in these manuals are rare,⁷ and thus both *The Universal British Merchant, etc.* and *Practical Mercantile Correspondence* can be read as compilations of letters reflecting the actual usage of the business community of early nineteenth-century English merchants. These manuals are also a privileged metasource of information about the business culture of the period, as Jeacle and Brown have pointed out:

[Business] manuals were invariably invested with promoting the cultural ideals of the time. [...] Their popular appeal, evidenced in often multiple editions, carries with it some credence in their historical value. They may therefore be more informative in this regard, than isolated remnants of correspondence found buried within the archive. (Jeacle and Brown 2006: 28)

In the following sections, I scrutinise model letters in Anderson’s *Practical Mercantile Correspondence* for patterns of usage of closing formulae, focusing specifically on the formulae containing *sincerely* or *sincerity* as one of their components. I start by outlining the history of the emergence and spread of the closing formula *yours sincerely* in Section 3.

3 The history of the formula *yours sincerely*

The emergence and spread of two closing formulae, *yours sincerely* and *yours affectionately*, together with their variants, *sincerely yours* and *affectionately yours*, were investigated in Bijkerk’s (2004) corpus-based study. In this study Bijkerk adopted the distinction, first proposed by Tieken-Boon Van Ostade

⁷ The few examples of notes commenting on Anderson’s linguistic interventions reveal this tension between prescriptive and descriptive approaches. In one of these notes, for instance, Anderson explains that he has substituted the expression “‘I flatter myself,’ which is often used improperly in this sense” with “I am led to hope” (Anderson 1836: 26). However, in a different note he contradicts his own prescriptive orientation by authorising the use of “my bankers” instead of “my bankers’ hands”: “This expression, if not strictly grammatical, is truly mercantile; the word ‘hands’ is understood” (Anderson 1836: 48).

(1999), between Type 1 and Type 2 closing formulae: formulae of the *yours sincerely* pattern were categorised as Type 2, while the shorter and longer version of subscriptions containing *servant* (e.g. “*your most humble servant J(ohn) G(ay)*”, Tieken-Boon van Ostade [1999: 104]) were labelled as Type 1 (Bijkerk 2004: 298). Having surveyed a number of databases,⁸ Bijkerk was able to determine that some variants of Type 2 subscriptions could be found in drama and fiction, but not in actual correspondence, as early as the beginning of the seventeenth century. During the eighteenth century, Type 2 formulae slowly increased in popularity in actual correspondence, with more examples appearing in literary sources as well. The popularity of Type 2 formulae reached its peak in the nineteenth century, “with the *sincerely* formula ending as a rather formal, negatively polite and old-fashioned closing convention in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century” (Bijkerk 2004: 309). Bijkerk’s study draws our attention to the cyclical pattern regulating the phases of the introduction, spread, conventionalisation, and, ultimately, pragmaticalisation of the closing formulae.⁹ Bijkerk summarises her findings as follows:

[t]he Type 2 formulas started their development as an innovative closing formula, showing positive politeness to friends and family in the eighteenth century, then split in usage into positive politeness [*yours affectionately* and *affectionately yours*] and negative politeness [*yours sincerely* and *sincerely yours*] in the nineteenth century. [...] The fate of such pragmatized forms and constructions may be that they will eventually disappear, as in the case of the comparable process of grammaticalisation; this is a development that actually seems to be in progress now with *sincerely*. (Bijkerk 2004: 309–310)

While Bijkerk’s paper offers more comprehensive insight into the history of *yours sincerely* and its variant, in two larger projects conducted by Dollinger (2008) and Morton (2016), patterns of usage of the closing formulae were examined as one of the aspects of language use in authentic historical business correspondence. Dollinger analysed a corpus of 230 authentic business letters, written in three Late Modern English varieties of British English, Canadian English, and Australian English. The corpus was divided into two subsets,

⁸ Among these were eight Individual Literature Collections from the Chadwyck-Healey database; the Corpus of Early English Correspondence (CEEC), containing English letters from 1420 to 1681, together with its eighteenth-century Extension (CEECE); the Correspondence of Jonathan Swift (ed. Williams 1963–1965); and Letters of Alexander Pope (ed. Butt 1960) (Bijkerk 2004: 300–301). Bijkerk’s interest in Type 2 formulae mainly concerned the role of the writer and poet John Gay (1685–1732), who may have been responsible for introducing such formulae and promoting their usage within the social network of his correspondents.

⁹ This pattern has been discussed by Nevalainen and Raumolin-Brunberg (1995) in the case of the development of address formulae used in the salutation at the beginning of the letter.

with period 1 covering the years 1761–1799 and period 2, 1800–1850.¹⁰ In Dollinger's data the presence or absence of the word *servant* in the closing formula (as in “*your most humble servant*”) was taken to be the most reliable “indicator of the distance between the writer and the addressee” (Dollinger 2008: 268). A number of additional components that could be included in the formulae were also examined, such as superlatives (e. g. “*with the greatest Respect*”), intensifiers (e. g. “*your obedient and very Humble Servant*”), and qualifiers (e. g. “*it will greatly Oblige your Hbl Ser-vt*”) (Dollinger 2008: 272–273). Dollinger's analysis showed that, although the British English letters remained more conservative than the two colonial varieties, maintaining a more constant use of “*servant*” in the second sub-period (2008: 282), a general diachronic trend towards simplification of the closing formulae was evident. The features pointing to the simplification included “fewer superlatives and intensifiers, and more neutral expressions such as *I have the honour to be, I remain, I am [...]* found more frequently in period 2 than in period 1” (Dollinger 2008: 273). While Dollinger did not discuss the subscription “*yours sincerely*” individually, two examples containing its variants were provided in this study.¹¹

On the other hand, Morton's dataset consisted of 500 authentic business letters extracted from the British Telecom Correspondence Corpus (BTCC), covering the years 1853–1982. Relying on n-grams and keyword analysis, Morton identified and categorised the different types of subscriptions in the BTCC as either “single-part closing salutation” or “multi-part closing salutation” (Morton 2016: 194). To the first type of single-part subscriptions belonged shorter formulae of the type “*Yours truly*”, while the second type typically included the conventionalised component of the “*obedient servant*”, as in “*I am sir, your obedient servant*” (Morton 2016: 193–196). Although the earlier decades of the BTCC were under-represented in terms of the number of letters (Morton 2016: 293), two clear patterns of diachronic evolution of the subscriptions could be observed. The first concerned the “general decline in the use of multi-part closing formulas over the course of fourteen decades represented” (Morton 2016: 193), a development that was most evident in the drop of the conventionalised formulae containing the formulaic noun phrase “*obedient servant*”. The second pattern saw the progressive rise and the subsequent establishment of “*yours sincerely*” as the standard form of closing in the BTCC (Morton 2016: 199). In Morton's interpretation of these two developments, the gradual substitution of the multi-part closing formulae with shorter subscriptions of the “*yours*

¹⁰ See Dollinger (2008: 262–263) for the full description of the corpora.

¹¹ These examples were: “(2) Your sincere Friend & Humb-l. Serv-t (BrE1)” and “(5) Adieu Yours Sincerely (AusE1)” (Dollinger 2008: 263, Dollinger 2008: 270).

sincerely” type is indicative of the increasing preference for more informal alternatives over the conventionally deferential, negatively polite forms. Overall, in Morton’s larger study of the historical development of business English in the period between 1853 and 1982, a whole range of frequent linguistic features appears to have undergone a similar shift towards informality and a reduced degree of deference, pointing to “a sort of stylistic democratisation of form” in the professional communication of the period (Morton 2016: 287–290).

The findings of the three studies discussed above (Bijkerk 2004; Dollinger 2008,; Morton 2016) can be used to hypothesise what kind of closing formulae will be found in Anderson’s *Practical Mercantile Correspondence*. For instance, Dollinger (2008) and Morton (2016) agree on the keyness of the conventionalised component “*servant*” in the extended, or multi-part, closing formulae throughout the nineteenth century. Hence, it is reasonable to expect a substantial number of examples containing this component in Anderson’s model letters as well. More interestingly, the analysis of the patterns of usage of the closing formulae in *Practical Mercantile Correspondence* may shed new light on the rise in popularity of the *yours sincerely* formula in the same period, as claimed by Bijkerk (2004) and Morton (2016). In the next sections, I present the results of this analysis and discuss the factors that may have played a key role in triggering the initial spread and subsequent pragmaticalisation of *yours sincerely* in English business correspondence.

4 The repertoire of closing formulae in *Practical Mercantile Correspondence*

As already mentioned, Anderson’s *Practical Mercantile Correspondence* contains 301 sample letters. All but five contain a closing formula.¹² The 296 formulae vary significantly in terms of length, degree of elaborateness, and choice of specific linguistic items used. Rather than focusing on a particular type of formula (cf. Bijkerk 2004) or specific lexical items (cf. Dollinger 2008), or making use of automated tools of analysis such as n-grams and keywords (cf. Morton 2016), a different approach was adopted, aiming to provide a more systematic overview of the different options available. After manually checking the components in all 296 formulae, it became clear that they all rely on a structural matrix of four possible components or slots. After labelling the components according

¹² Letters 159, 160, 161, 213 are written in the format of a note, while Letter 219 is a petition signed with the formula “will ever pray, &c. &c.”.

to their position in the matrix (as initial, intermediate, pre-final, and final slots), I identified the individual lexical items available to fill in each slot:

1. The initial slot typically contains a two-word cluster. This cluster is either a combination of the first-person pronoun and an existence or relationship verb (“*I am*” or “*We remain*”), or an imperative containing a mental verb and a first-person pronoun (“*Believe me*” or “*Believe us*”). Other lexical options in this slot include what Dollinger has defined as “more neutral expressions” (2008: 273) – for instance, “*I have the honour (to be/to remain)*”, “*We subscribe ourselves*”, or a present participle (“*being*” or “*remaining*”);
2. The intermediate slot is usually separated from the initial slot by a comma. This is the slot with the highest number of possible lexical options. Among the most frequently used, we find adverbs with or without an intensifier (e. g. *always, faithfully, respectfully, or very truly, always sincerely*, etc.), or an adverb phrase (e. g. *under all circumstance, with much esteem*, etc.). The function of the intermediate slot is that of increasing (or intensifying) the degree of deference expressed by the formula;
3. The pre-final slot can be occupied by the repetition of the salutation, so the same address terms, such as the conventional *Sir* or *Gentlemen*, are used here;
4. The final slot is reserved for one of the variants of the conventionalised closing expressions. This can be the formulaic *your obedient humble servant*¹³ or less frequent expressions – for example, *yours (very) truly*.¹⁴

The flexibility of mixing and combining different components, within the limits permitted by the matrix, means that the inventory of the closing formulae in Anderson’s *Practical Mercantile Correspondence* is highly varied.

Table 1 below provides an overview of the frequency with which individual combinations of the components are used in *Practical Mercantile Correspondence*:

This categorisation based on the number of components points to several trends of usage of the closing formulae in Anderson’s manual. Firstly, we see that the initial slot is included in the majority of the examples. Only two subscriptions here do not contain a self-referential cluster (with a predicate or an imperative verb, cf. Palander-Collin 2011) that represents the typical realisation of the initial slot.¹⁵ Secondly, the

¹³ With a slight degree of variation in the choice of the adjective or a combination of adjectives preceding *servant* in this corpus.

¹⁴ Indeed, Morton (2016: 193–199) also discusses “multi-part closing salutations”, but he does not identify or label the individual components of such formulae.

¹⁵ These are found in Letter 187 (“An early answer will oblige, Sir, your obedient humble servant”) and Letter 229, signed with *Yours, very sincerely*. For reasons of space, run-on subscriptions (cf. Bannet 2005: 66), as in the example from Letter 187, have not been treated separately in the present study.

Table 1: Distribution of the combinations of components.

Combination	Example	Number of occurrences/ Percentage
Extended formula: all four slots are occupied	We remain, truly, Sir, your obedient humble servants, Letter 127	134/45%
Truncated formula: only contains the initial slot followed by '&c.'	Believe me, &c. Letter 142	83/28%
Abbreviated formula: three out of four slots are occupied, with the intermediate slot being omitted	We are, Sir, your obedient humble servants, Letter 84	61/20%
Other combinations (4 patterns)	1) Yours, very sincerely, Letter 229; 2) I remain, your very obedient humble servant, Letter 68; 3) we remain faithfully, &c., Letter 52; 4) we subscribe ourselves, respectfully, your obedient servants, Letter 3	18/6%

first three types of formulae (extended, truncated, and abbreviated types) account for 94% (278 out of 296) of all formulae in *Practical Mercantile Correspondence*, with only a tiny minority of formulae following a different pattern. Finally, the standardised expression containing *servant* is used consistently, with a variant of the *your obedient humble servant* closing occurring in 65% (193 out of 296) of all subscriptions. In the next section, I focus on the use of *sincerely* in the closing formulae in Anderson's *Practical Mercantile Correspondence*.

5 The use of *sincerely* in the closing formulae in *Practical Mercantile Correspondence*

There is only one instance of the abbreviated formula *Yours, very sincerely* in Anderson's compilation (Letter 229, example given in Table 1, Other combination, above). However, in addition to the abbreviated formula, *sincerely* and

sincerity are found in twenty-two others,¹⁶ where they fill in the intermediate slot of the extended type of formula, as in example (1) below:

- 1) I remain most sincerely, Sir, your obliged and obedient humble servant.
(Letter 56)

As already noted, the pool of lexical items found in the intermediate slot is exceptionally varied in Anderson's *Practical Mercantile Correspondence*. Table 2 provides an overview of the most popular options, arranged according to the frequency of the intensifying keyword:

Table 2: Linguistic expressions in the intermediate slot in extended formulae.

Linguistic expressions	Example	Occurrences
truly/very truly/most truly/with great truth	I am, truly, Sir, your obedient humble servant, Letter 152	71 occurrences (53%)
sincerely/very sincerely/most sincerely/always sincerely/with great sincerity/with the greatest sincerity	Believe me, very sincerely, Gentlemen, your obedient humble servant, Letter 190	22 occurrences (16%)
faithfully/respectfully/with much respect/with great respect/with the greatest respect	I remain, most respectfully, Gentlemen, your obedient humble servant, Letter 257	15 occurrences (11%)
with esteem/with much esteem/with great esteem/regard/with great regard/with great consideration	I subscribe myself, with esteem, Gentlemen, your obedient humble servant, Letter 130	14 occurrences (10%)
Always/ever/as on all occasions, etc.	Believe us, under all circumstances, Sir, your obliged and obedient servants, Letter 30	12 occurrence (9%)
		Total: 134

The frequency counts clearly show the preference accorded to the group of expressions with the keyword *truly*, which is by far the most popular option

¹⁶ In Bijkerk's study (see Section 3), the search for formulae was set to collect entries with "*yours fby* (i. e. "followed by") *sincerely*, *sincerely fby yours*" (Bijkerk 2004: 300). Hence, this will automatically have excluded the cases of *sincerely* in formulae where the item does not collocate with *yours* immediately to its right or to its left. This exclusion is potentially problematic as the retrieval of the extended formulae with *sincerely* and *sincerity* in the intermediate slot, as discussed in Section 5, may have produced a different hypothesis as to the reasons why such formulae emerged and started to spread in the course of the eighteenth century.

for filling in the intermediate slot. The group containing *sincerely* and *sincerity* comes second in frequency, ahead of the third largest group with *faithfully* and *respectfully* as keywords. The same keywords are discussed in Morton's investigation of authentic business letters in the BTCC corpus. In Morton's BTCC data, *faithfully* is the preferred option in the sample of late nineteenth-century letters, with *truly* being the second most popular. According to Morton, *sincerely* gradually started to rise in frequency during the 1930s. By the end of the 1950s, the abbreviated variant of *yours sincerely* had become the preferred closing formula in the BTCC corpus (Morton 2016: 198–199).

In Morton's analysis, formulae containing *sincerely* are treated as “familiar or cordial forms”,¹⁷ often used in combination with “deferent forms”, as in the following example dated 1897:

2) I remain, dear Sir, yours very sincerely. (Morton 2016: 200)

Overall, Morton tends to agree with Bijkerk (2004) on the evaluation of the *sincerely* formulae as positively polite, friendly, and “historically more informal” options, often used “to maintain a friendly tone with a recipient with whom [the sender] is acquainted” (Morton 2016: 195–199, cf. Bijkerk's conclusion in Section 3). However, out of the twenty-two occurrences of the use of *sincerely* in the closing formulae in Anderson's compilation, only one example (Letter 229, signed with *Yours, very sincerely*) fits the case of a letter sent to a business partner who, judging from the tone of the letter, seems to be a close personal acquaintance as well. The passage in (3) can be considered atypical when compared with the professional style of writing found in other examples in *Practical Mercantile Correspondence*:

3) Believe me, dear Schmidt, it is impossible for a man to feel more than I have for these several past, and do now, from knowing the agony of suspense you must endure, until this relieves you. (Letter 229)

In the other twenty-two occurrences of the formulae containing *sincerely*, the situation is quite different. For example, in thirteen of these (Letter 56, 79, 80, 86, 106, 131, 144, 171, 185, 259, 269, 270 and 283), the merchants are engaging in their very first business transaction, which is made possible thanks to an introduction by the third party. This use can be illustrated by analysing ten letters included in Series IV (*General Correspondence – Joint Speculation in Tobacco*, Letters 78–87, Anderson

¹⁷ This kind of terminology (“cordial”, “intimate”) is typical of the twentieth-century prescriptive literature that Morton examined (2016: 168–170).

1836: 52–58). These letters are exchanged between four parties: Esq. Robert Jackson in London writes to Liverpool to inform Esq. James Thompson that he has placed an order for a shipment of tobacco with Esq. J. M. Da Souza from Bahia (Brazil). This transaction is arranged on a joint account between three parties: Robert Jackson, James Thompson, and the firm Messrs. W. Thompson & Co. from Hamburg in Germany, managed by the latter's brother. In this exchange of letters, we learn that Jackson and James Thompson have met in person to negotiate the details of this transaction, while for Jackson and Messrs. W. Thompson & Co., as well as for Jackson and J. M. Da Souza from Bahia, this transaction marks the start of a new business connection, as shown in (4a) and (4b):

- 4a) Sir, - At the recommendation of Messrs. W. Thompson and Co. of Hamburg, I take the liberty of addressing you, and avail myself of the opportunity to make you a tender of my best services in this city. [...] Trusting that this introduction may lead to more important transactions, I remain, most sincerely, Sir, your very obedient humble servant, Robert Jackson. (Letter 79, to J. M. Da Souza)
- 4b) Gentlemen, - I beg to inform you, that agreeably to an arrangement made with your worthy brother, Mr. James Thompson of Liverpool, when in London, I have ordered from 1,000 to 1,200 mangotes of tobacco, to be shipped from your city, and to your address, by Mr. J. M. Da Souza of Bahia [...]. In full expectation that this little adventure, from its success, will lead to others of greater magnitude, I remain, most sincerely, gentlemen, your obedient humble servant, Robert Jackson. (Letter 80, to Messrs. W. Thompson & Co.)

As (4a) and (4b) illustrate, English merchants of the period would actively seek new correspondents by initiating transactions with partners they did not personally know (Haggerty 2014). In such cases, even when addressing a new partner, *sincerely* and its variants could be used in the intermediate slot of the extended formula. In fact, Jackson here opts for the same extended closing formula with *sincerely* in addressing his two new business partners, possibly to emphasise his commitment to the new business relationship in a more formally polite way. His expression of sincerity can also be read as an attempt to “elicit ‘trust’ [by] highlighting the truthfulness of [his] statements” (Dossena 2014: 183). In other words, Jackson may be attempting to “reassure the recipient about his wish to [establish a new] friendly relationship” (Dossena 2014: 193).¹⁸ Such uses of *sincerely* indicate

¹⁸ Cf. also Dossena's (2010c) analysis of the strategies employed to encourage the trust of the recipient in nineteenth-century business correspondence.

that factors other than social proximity should be examined to explain the spread of these formulae. These factors are discussed in the next section.

6 From *truthfulness* to *sincerity* in the closing formulae: A Late Modern English shift?

Table 2 showed that in Anderson's *Practical Mercantile Correspondence*, five different groups of linguistic expressions (e. g. with *truly* or *sincerely* as keywords) compete for the intermediate slot in the extended type of formulae. The *truly* group, with more than 50% of all occurrences, is the preferred option. Moreover, in 61 out of 71 examples, *truly* is used in combination with the standardised closing expression *your obedient humble servant(s)*, as in (5a, b) and (6a, b) below:

- 5a) Believe me, truly, Sir, your obedient humble servant (8 examples, Letters 78, 165, 166, 167, 174, 182, 183);
- 5b) Believe me, truly, Gentlemen, your obedient humble servant (4 examples, Letters 129, 255, 264, 296).
- 6a) I remain, most truly, Gentlemen, your obedient humble servant (Letter 39, Letter 192);
- 6b) I remain, most truly, Sir, your obedient humble servant (Letter 72, Letter 87, Letter 111).

It appears here that the extended formulae containing *truly* consistently follow conventionalised patterns. This pragmatization can be explained by the process of semantic bleaching. In earlier periods of letter-writing in English, semantic bleaching had affected, for example, a number of positive adjectives routinely used in salutations, such as *honoured* or *dear*. In time, these lost part of their semantic force, eventually becoming associated with specific address forms (e. g. *honoured lord* or *dear sir*, cf. Nevalainen and Raumolin-Brunberg 1995: 587–591). According to Nevalainen and Raumolin-Brunberg, semantic bleaching is indicative of the process of “routinisation in letter-writing conventions.” (1995: 588) In the case of *truly* specifically, its reanalysis was not limited to epistolary discourse, as Defour explains:

From 1500 onwards *truly* gains more ground as an intensifier, not only in relative frequency but also in terms of meaning. Intensifying uses of *truly* move away from an

embedded, truth-related reference towards more grammaticalized and purely intensifying uses with a limited, local scope. (Defour 2012: 86)¹⁹

This semantic-pragmatic development of *truly* would explain why it is routinely selected as the preferred option in the standardised, conventionalised subscriptions in *Practical Mercantile Correspondence*: it is used as a nominal intensifier with little semantic force, as a place-holder required to build an extended, longer version of closing formulae. At the same time, as the analysis of the closing formulae presented in Section 5 showed, the lexical group with *sincerely* as the keyword starts to emerge as an alternative to *truly* in the intermediate slot of the extended formulae. As a result, in (7) and (8) below, *truly* has been substituted by *sincerely* to produce extended formulae that follow the conventionalised patterns already seen in (5a,b) and (6a,b):²⁰

- 7) Believe me, very sincerely, Sir, your obedient humble servant. (Letter 92 and Letter 173)
- 8) I remain, most sincerely, Sir, your very obedient humble servant. (Letter 79 and Letter 110)

Combined, the extended formulae with keywords *truly* and *sincerely* (93 examples out of 296) account for 31% of all closing formulae in *Practical Mercantile Correspondence* and for 69% of all extended formulae that contain the intermediate slot (see Table 2). What must be discussed in light of these figures is, firstly, how *truly* became an essential component in subscriptions to business letters in English and, secondly, why *sincerely* started to challenge the preference accorded to *truly* in the early nineteenth-century commercial correspondence. In other words, why did the professional letter-writing conventions dictate that English merchants were to emphasise the truthfulness of their commitments in the closing formulae, and why did this emphasis shift from truthfulness to sincerity in the Late Modern English period?

Trust and reputation already played a crucial role in the building of social and economic relations in the Early Modern period (Muldrew 2001 [1998]). This crucial role was maintained during the Late Modern period, with trust and reputation constituting “the ‘institutional elements’” of the successful British

¹⁹ Defour (2012) examines the semantic-pragmatic development of *truly* together with two more adverbs from the semantic field of veracity, namely *verily* and *really*.

²⁰ This applies not only to the group with *sincerely* as the keyword, but to the remaining groups as well, e.g. “I remain, most respectfully, Gentlemen, your obedient humble servant” (Letter 259).

business culture (Haggerty 2014: 235). Muldrew explains that in Early Modern England, the building, maintaining, and breaking of economic trust was perceived as a form of human interaction with a strong emotive dimension to it. An essential influence on the conceptualisation of trust was exercised by basic Christian theology and its teachings on the interrelationship between trust and truth (Muldrew 2001: 123–147). The precept that placing trust in one’s neighbours and being honest and true to one’s own word was, just as placing trust in God, the foundation for all interpersonal relations: “The virtue of honesty [therefore] made it possible to trust one’s neighbours who would also trust God to help them.” (Muldrew 2001: 130) Hence, it was through religious teaching that people assimilated the importance of trust and honesty. The introduction of humanist thinking from the mid-sixteenth century resulted in an even stronger emphasis on conscience and honesty, making “the role of faith in economic relations [...] not only [as] socially important, but [as] the basic and *necessary* initial building block of interpersonal relations in general, and as a result also of communication, human sociability, and commerce.” (Muldrew 2001: 134) How important honesty was as both a Christian virtue and a key component of business success is explained in the following lines of “a generall remembrance”, written by an experienced sixteenth-century merchant for the benefit of his young apprentice:

Be most faithful & iust in al your accompts with euery man, & defraud no man willingly not the value of a farthing. [...] in all your actions, vse diligence, conscience, silence and patience. Thus making no doubt, but if you be mindfull of you dutie and seruice to God, all things shall go well and haue happy successe that you take in hand. But contrarie doing: your labours will not prosper, nor anie thing that you doe, will euer come to good passe or perfection. (Browne 1589: 11-12)²¹

The influence of the Christian notions of neighbourliness and interpersonal trust on the one hand, and humanist thinking about the ethical nature, or sociability, of commerce on the other (Muldrew 2001: 123–147) seem to have left a linguistic trace in the closing formulae that continued to be used in business correspondence throughout the Late Modern period. The prototypical combination of the intensifying adverb *truly* with the self-referential cluster composed of a first-person pronoun and an existence verb in the closing formula (e. g. *I am, truly*, etc.) focuses the addressee’s attention on a) the explicit presence of the writer and b) the writer’s commitment to truthfulness and honesty as the building

²¹ This passage is taken from *The Marchants Avizo*, which is considered to be the first known business handbook written in English (McGrath 1957).

blocks of the professional relationship with the addressee.²² A possible explanation for the frequency and salience of *truly*, with its original truth-related reference (Defour 2012), in the extended closing formulae is its function of signalling the merchant's adherence to the business community's shared set of norms and values.

By the early nineteenth century, this association of *truly* with the commitment to honesty had been lost as the adverb became pragmaticalised as an intensifier, at the same time becoming conventionalised as a component of the extended closing formulae. The progressive semantic bleaching of *truly* seems to have taken place almost contemporaneously with *sincerity* acquiring the status of a new cultural keyword.²³ This rise of *sincerity* has been discussed, for example, by Fitzmaurice (2016), who investigates the ways in which the concept of sincerity contributed to the reanalysis of the concept of politeness in the course of the eighteenth century. Fitzmaurice examines the different types of politeness that evolved, co-existed, and succeeded one another in the changing discursive contexts of that period, investigating both the semasiological and the onomasiological histories of politeness as a term and a concept. Fitzmaurice argues that while "a shifting lexicon" characterises the notion of politeness from the onomasiological point of view, the semasiological history of the term "includes the semantic change of *sincerity*; *politeness* shifts over time from referring to a mode of (honest) sociable interaction to a display of (genuinely felt) personal manners." (Fitzmaurice 2016: 198) While at the beginning of the eighteenth century the Spectatorial understanding of the virtuous, true politeness was centred on the idea of transparency of speech and behaviour, in the middle of the century sincerity was radically excluded from the definition of politeness in the aristocratic, "egoistical" variety of politeness, as codified in Lord Chesterfield's writings. Being insincere served to achieve one's goals by managing and manipulating the perceptions and feelings of others. The exclusion of sincerity meant that insincerity, "namely, the clear distancing of one's words and demeanour from one's heart" (Fitzmaurice 2016: 189), became a hallmark of the dominant mid-eighteenth-century brand of politeness associated with "good-breeding" and "upper-class manners, a variety that is anathema to

22 Cf. Thomas (this issue) who observes that "[t]he very act of insisting on one's sincerity can paradoxically cause the reader to suppose the opposite; that the speaker is in fact dishonest, concealing something, or feeling something different to what he professes [... .however,] speakers wishing to be seen as sincere – that is, truthful, emotionally open, and authentic – do seek to express it."

23 According to Defour's data from LModE corpus (1650–1760): "In contrast to *verily*, *truly* also increasingly acquires intensifying meanings." (Defour 2012: 86)

the virtues of sincerity and consideration.” (Fitzmaurice 2016: 187) Towards the end of the century, a more nuanced understanding of sincerity played a decisive role in the moral rehabilitation of politeness. With Jane Austen as the main promoter of an altruistic conceptualisation of politeness, sincerity was reinterpreted as “‘genuineness of feeling’ rather than as ‘honesty’”, making it “easier to construe and adopt a politeness that is considerateness without having to weigh the advantages and disadvantages of being honest.” (Fitzmaurice 2016: 198) In the final section of this paper, I discuss the implications of the rise of sincerity as the new cultural keyword for the epistolary conventions in Late Modern business correspondence.

7 Concluding remarks

In light of Fitzmaurice’s analysis, I would like to suggest that the emergence and gradual spread of expressions of sincerity in closing formulae in the early nineteenth century can be connected to the rise of the concept as the new cultural buzzword. The business community also seems to have embraced the new commitment to the genuineness of feeling, with its emphasis on showing consideration for others, as example (4) from *Practical Mercantile Correspondence* shows. Although these merchants continued to rely on personal trust and personal and community reputations in their daily interactions with new and old business partners (Haggerty 2014), they also felt compelled to add a new interpersonal dimension to their professional relationships by expressing consideration for each other and for each other’s business interests, as James Box does in example (10), addressed to Messrs. Dugard:

- 10) Gent. - By desire of Mr. J. G. Sommers, I have the honor to wait on you with a policy of insurance for 300l, effected by me on goods per Nancy, Captain W. Richards, from Havre de Grace to the island of Fayal. I avail myself of this opportunity to make you an offer of my best services in this city, and to assure you that I am, with great sincerity, Sir, your obedient humble servant, James Box. (Letter 106)

Not only, as Bijkerk and Morton have shown, did the spread of *yours sincerely* indicate a shift in politeness strategies and a decreasing degree of formality and expression of deference, but the competition of *sincerely* with *truly* in the intermediate slot of the extended closing formulae can be read as an indicator of a larger social and cultural change that left its mark on the community of the

early nineteenth-century merchants. In this paper, the evidence for this shift was collected from a single specialised business letter-writing manual.²⁴ When more Late Modern English business corpora become available (see Dossena 2004, Dossena 2006, Dossena 2008, Dossena 2012; Dury 2006), this hypothesis will have to be tested in a larger corpus-based study.

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²⁴ In terms of the number of letters analysed, the corpus used in this study is comparable to Dollinger's (2008) corpus of with 230 authentic business letters, and Morton's (2016) corpus of 500 letters.

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