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ANATOMY OF EARLY MODERN LETTERS: FUNCTIONS OF STRUCTURAL ELEMENTS

Summary. The article offers a comprehensive examination of the structural and functional dynamics of Early Modern English epistolary discourse. Letter is a complex and codified communicative artifact that evolved significantly from its Middle English antecedents. Unlike the often fragmentary and pragmatically driven letters of the Middle English period, Early Modern English correspondence exhibits a clear tendency toward formalization, symmetry, and genre-specific differentiation. This transition is interpreted as a reflection of broader sociolinguistic processes: the rise in literacy, the influence of Renaissance humanism, and the increasing bureaucratization of written communication.

Central to the study is the identification and functional categorization of the constituent components of the Early Modern English letter: superscription, vocative, opening formula, main body, closing formula, subscription, and postscript. Each of these structural elements is shown to perform distinct yet interrelated pragmatic, social, and rhetorical functions. For instance, the superscription serves a logistical purpose in an era lacking standardized postal systems and functions as a marker of social status and spatial identity. Similarly, the vocative reflects the communicative norms of politeness, subordination, and affective alignment, acting as both a mechanism of interpersonal engagement and an index of socio-political relations.

The article situates within the frameworks of functional stylistics, pragmalinguistics, and historical sociolinguistics, advocating for a multi-dimensional approach to the study of historical discourse. Letters from Anne Boleyn, Katherine Parr, and Bess of Hardwick illustrate how formulaic language and rhetorical devices were strategically employed to navigate social relations and reinforce existing structures of power.

Key words: Early Modern letter, letter structure, superscription, salutation, opening formula, body, closing, subscription, postscript, pragmatic functions.

Problem statement. Over the past decades, there has been a growing scholarly interest in the epistolary heritage as an important source for the study of the history of language, sociolinguistic processes, and communicative practices of past centuries. The correspondence of the Early Modern English period makes it possible to trace the formation and standardization of written genre forms, as well as to identify the specific features of linguistic behavior exhibited by representatives of various social strata.

The Early Modern English letter is not merely a textual artifact but a multidimensional social act that combines multiple functions: ritual, pragmatic, and informational. The structural organization of such letters is neither accidental nor a purely stylistic feature; rather, it reflects stable mechanisms of social interaction, cultural perceptions of politeness, subordination, and familial or corporate

affiliation. For this reason, the study of the structural components of the epistolary text opens up wide possibilities for linguistic analysis, particularly within the frameworks of functional stylistics, pragmalinguistics, and historical sociolinguistics.

In contemporary Anglophone linguistics, a substantial body of research has been devoted to epistolary discourse, including the works of T. Nevalainen (2001), S. Fitzmaurice (2002), and D. Archer (2005), which examine both the general discursive features of letters and their genre differentiation depending on the social context. At the same time, within the Ukrainian scholarly tradition, the question of the structural composition of the Early Modern English letter remains insufficiently explored, which underscores the relevance of the present study.

The aim of the article is to analyze the typical structural model of the Early Modern English letter, taking into account its pragmatic functions and historical-cultural context. Particular attention is devoted to the description of the initial, main, and final components of the letter to elucidate their role in shaping the epistolary genre as a coherent communicative unit.

Results and discussion. In the Middle English period, the letter often lacked a clearly defined composition and could consist of several paragraphs united solely by thematic cohesion. But Early Modern English writing acquired an increasingly symmetrical structure and demonstrated a marked tendency toward formalization and standardization. A distinctive feature of the Early Modern English letter was the growing functional differentiation of its components. Whereas in Middle English texts the salutation and the opening often merged into a single structure, in most letters of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, there is a clear separation of each element, both visually and functionally. The form of the letter was also much more strictly structured in Early Modern English correspondence. It was not free-form but was required to conform to numerous conventions in the sphere of political correspondence, which formed part of a broader protocol: salutation, occasionally a formula of politeness, a ceremonial greeting, an indication of time and place, and signatures.

Early Modern English letter ceased to be merely a means of transmitting information and evolved into an important communicative unit with established components. These components fulfilled not only textual but also pragmatic, socio-cultural, and rhetorical functions. The evolution of letter structure was driven by a number of factors, such as the expansion of the sphere of written communication, the growth of literacy among the urban middle class, the influence of humanist rhetoric, and the development of administrative and legal genres in the post-feudal society.

A particularly significant role in the standardization of letter structure was played by the Latin epistolary tradition, which

in the Middle Ages set the model for formal communication. Its rhetorical canons (*exordium, narratio, petitio, conclusio*), although not implemented in their entirety in English epistolary practice, nonetheless exerted a notable influence on the formation of the compositional logic of the letter. Moreover, Early Modern English correspondence demonstrates a clear adaptation of Latin rhetorical structures to the needs of domestic, familial, and business communication [1, p. 240].

The materials examined in the present study make it possible to identify the typical components of the Early Modern English letter, namely: the superscription (address), salutation, opening formula, body, closing, subscription (signature), as well as the postscript. Each of these components performs a specific function within the structure of the letter and corresponds to the established norms of etiquette and the social rituals of the Early Modern English period. [2].

It should be noted that the first structural element of the Early Modern English letter is the superscription. It was placed on the verso of the letter and performed several functions. An illustrative example is the address found in a letter from Charles Cavendish to his mother: *"To my Lady: At Hardwicke"* [3, letter ID 007].

Several communicative and social functions are combined in the chosen superscription. The first component primarily fulfils an identificatory and etiquette function. It designates the addressee as a woman of high social rank while simultaneously displaying the requisite ritual respect. The second component indicates the location of the addressee and performs a logistical function. It should be emphasized that in the absence of a standardized postal system, such information was crucial for the correct delivery of the letter. From a historical and cultural perspective, the superscription operates simultaneously as a formula of localization and social differentiation, since the place functions not only as a geographical reference but also as a symbol of status, for example, the well-known estate of Hardwick Hall, where Bess of Hardwick, Countess of Shrewsbury resided.

Another example of superscription is taken from a letter by Bess to Sir Robert Cecil:

*"To the Right honorable my verie good frend
Sir Robert Cecyll knight principall Secretary to her Majestie /
1601 Countess of Shrewsbury Dowager
to my Master"* [3, letter ID 127].

The given example represents a model of the extended superscription formula of the Early Modern English period. From a formal-structural perspective, this superscription primarily fulfils an identificatory function, clearly delineating the addressee, his title (Sir), social status (*Right honorable*), and administrative position (*principall Secretary to her Majestie*). At the same time, the phrase *my verie good frend* serves as a ritual formula of political courtesy, which, although bearing the external features of personal friendliness, in fact functions as a means of reinforcing loyalty or patronal bonds.

In turn, the mention *1601 Countess of Shrewsbury Dowager to my Master* indicates a context of representation or delegated authorship, allowing us to conclude that the letter was likely written or conveyed on behalf of the countess by a person of lower status, who refers to her as their "master." Such an address formula performs an important authorization function, attesting to the hierarchy between communicants and the legitimacy of communication. The inclusion of the date (*1601*) also has chronological and legal-documentary significance.

Overall, this superscription reflects a high degree of formalisation in the epistolary discourse of the late Tudor period, where textual components of the letter were strictly subordinated to the norms of social protocol, and language functioned as an instrument of political and ritual interaction.

The second component of Early Modern English discourse is the form of **address (vocative)**. In Early Modern English correspondence, the vocative construction (or form of address) constitutes an obligatory structural element. The epistolary vocative is typically positioned immediately after the address block or within the opening sentence of the letter, and it may display either a formal or an emotionally personal character.

Common vocative formulas include expressions of affection and endearment, as well as terms denoting kinship relations, honorifics, and familiarizers. The choice of form of address in Early Modern English discourse is determined by several conditions: the addressee's social status, the degree of familiarity between the communicants, and the rhetorical conventions of the period. At the same time, the vocative reflects the categories of politeness, subordination, and personalization, which are central to the communicative culture of Early Modern England [4, p. 63].

Within the structure of the Early Modern English letter, the vocative fulfils a set of important functions that extend beyond the purely nominative reference to the addressee. Firstly, the vocative formula performs a contact-initiating function, serving as a means of establishing communicative engagement between the sender and the recipient, a feature of particular significance in written interaction, which lacks the paralinguistic markers inherent in spoken discourse. Secondly, the vocative has a socio-identificational function, since through the choice of address it encodes social status, degree of intimacy, role hierarchy, and the nature of interpersonal relations. For instance, in a letter from Katherine Parr to the Privy Council, we find the form of address: *Right trusty and well-beloved cousins* [5].

The use of the adjectival components *right, trusty, and well-beloved* constitutes evidence of ritualised politeness and signals a high degree of trust, loyalty, or political alliance between the sender and the recipient. At the same time, the designation *cousins* in Early Modern English usage did not invariably carry a strictly kinship-based meaning: it could be applied to individuals belonging to the same social stratum or bound by a system of patronage relations. In this light, the form of address may be interpreted as an instrument for reinforcing social bonds and reproducing established roles within a vertically organised communicative system.

Furthermore, the vocative functions as a mechanism of etiquette-driven regulation of discourse, representing the norms of politeness, subordination, and respect characteristic of the epistolary culture of Early Modern England. A pertinent example is found in the vocative used in a letter from Baron Dunganon to the Lord Deputy: *Right honorable* [6].

The use of such vocatives is not arbitrary but strictly codified in accordance with the estate-based norms governing linguistic behaviour in written communication. In this way, the vocative marks the social status of the addressee, ensuring compliance with protocol requirements and maintaining a balance between institutional politeness and a personalised tone.

In a number of cases, the vocative also acquires an expressive-emotive colouring, signalling the sender's emotional state or communicative intention to create a certain atmosphere of mutual

understanding. Thus, in Early Modern English correspondence, the vocative emerges as an element that synthesises sociolinguistic, pragmatic, and stylistic parameters of epistolary discourse and performs the role of a ritual marker, providing a socially acceptable prelude to the substantive part of the epistolary text.

The subsequent element of the Early Modern English letter is the opening formula, in which the sender expresses respect or gratitude with reference to previous correspondence or events preceding the act of writing, and may also extend wishes for good health or divine blessing. Such opening formulas ensure an appropriate level of politeness, calibrated to the social status of the addressee, while at the same time introducing the main topic of the message in a manner consistent with the norms of restraint and formality.

The central element of the letter, **the body**, contained the principal communicative content, such as requests, reports, news, or complaints. Despite variation in subject matter, the organisation of the main body generally preserved a coherent and logically ordered structure. In private correspondence, as for example in the letters of John Donne, one encounters elaborate descriptions of events interwoven with rhetorical insertions, indicating a stylistic convergence of the epistolary mode with literary narrative:

"I write not only to tell you what I do, but to remember what I am" [7].

In contrast to the letters of the Middle English period, which often presented themselves as fragmented and predominantly pragmatically oriented, Early Modern English correspondence displays a notable and progressive shift towards the development of a more coherent narrative structure. This shift reflects a broader cultural transformation that underscores the increasing importance of personal expression and emotional resonance in written communication. The letters of the Early Modern period thus reveal a marked tendency to integrate functional and informative content and also a more deliberate and intricate exploration of subjectivity, self-representation, and the nuances of interpersonal relationships. This transition, emblematic of the broader sociolinguistic dynamics of the time, signals a growing sophistication in the interplay between form, function, and expressive intent within the evolving landscape of the English language.

The closing elements of the Early Modern English discourse performed significant socio-pragmatic and textual functions. The **closing** or **valediction** typically initiated the final section of the letter with a polite formula, such as (6) *"Written by the hand of her that is most bound to be your humble and obedient servant, Anne Boleyn" [8]*, which served to reaffirm courtesy, social distance, and the ritualised conclusion of discourse.

The subscription typically follows the closing formula in Early Modern English letters and plays a role in the communicative framework of the text. It is a significant element that serves to authenticate the correspondence and solidify the sender's identity. The subscription generally includes the author's name, with occasional references to their social status, title, or role. Identificational and legitimizing functions reflect a broader social and cultural context in which the inscription of one's status could provide additional layers of meaning to the written exchange. For example, in one such letter, Anne Boleyn's subscription:

(7) *"Your loving mistress, Anne the Queen" [9].*

It embodies both a personal and official identifier, underscoring her status as the sender as well as a political and royal figure. The phrase "Your loving mistress" acts as an expression of personal

intimacy, while *"Anne the Queen"* reinforces her political authority. The duality of these elements reflects the complex nature of Early Modern English epistolary practice, in which the content of the letter is intimately linked to the social position of its author, and the subscription becomes an essential component of the letter's overall communicative and rhetorical structure. This practice underscores the increasing importance of personal branding, self-representation, and the negotiation of power dynamics in written correspondence, reflecting the changing nature of social relations and communication during this period.

The postscript (P.S.), although not obligatory, followed the main text and possessed considerable pragmatic significance: it could supplement or clarify information, and in some cases contained the principal message "forgotten" in the body of the letter. It is noteworthy that the P.S. was not always placed at the end; it could also appear in unconventional positions, such as in the margins or near the beginning of the letter, when space permitted or when there was a particular intention to draw attention to the additional message [10].

The interplay of these elements attests to the ritualisation of letter closure, which integrates pragmatic economy with social politeness and contributes to the structural integrity of the epistolary discourse.

Conclusions and suggestions. The conducted analysis substantiates the thesis that Early Modern English epistolary discourse represents a codified communicative phenomenon, whose structural composition is far from arbitrary. Rather, it emerges as a product of diachronic linguistic evolution, influenced by sociocultural conventions, rhetorical traditions, and emerging norms of politeness and institutional communication. The transition from the pragmatic and loosely structured letters of the Middle English period to the formally organized and functionally differentiated letters of the Early Modern era reflects a broader trend toward the standardization and ritualization of written discourse within the framework of an increasingly literate and hierarchically stratified society.

The empirical material illustrates that each component of the Early Modern English letter fulfills distinct pragmatic and sociolinguistic functions, which collectively ensure the textual cohesion, communicative efficacy, and social appropriateness of the document. These structural elements function as vehicles of information transmission as well as markers of relational dynamics, social stratification, and communicative intention. In particular, the vocative and subscription sections emerge as crucial indicators of socio-identificational positioning and rhetorical strategy, reflecting the sender's awareness of both the recipient's status and the interactional norms of the period.

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Куц А. Анатомія листів ранньоновіанглійського періоду: функції структурних елементів

Анотація. У статті здійснено всебічний аналіз структурної та функціональної організації епістолярного дискурсу ранньоновіанглійського періоду. Лист розглядається як складний і кодифікований комунікативний артефакт, що зазнав істотної еволюції порівняно зі своїми середньовіанглійськими попередниками. На відміну від фрагментарних і переважно прагматично орієнтованих листів середньовіанглійської доби, епістолярій ранньоновіанглійського періоду демонструє чітку тенденцію до формалізації, симетрії та жанрової диференціації. Цей перехід інтерпретується як

відображення ширших соціолінгвістичних процесів таких як зростання рівня грамотності, впливу гуманістичних ідей Відродження та посилення бюрократизації письмового спілкування.

Центральним елементом дослідження є ідентифікація та функціональна класифікація основних структурних компонентів ранньоновіанглійського листа: адресації (superscription), вокативу, вступної формули, основної частини, завершальної формули, підпису (subscription) та постскрипту. Кожен із елемент виконує специфічну, але взаємопов'язану прагматичну, соціальну та риторичну функції. Наприклад, адресація виконує логістичну функцію в умовах відсутності стандартизованої поштової системи та водночас виступає маркером соціального статусу та просторової ідентичності. Вокатив, своєю чергою, відображає норми ввічливості, підпорядкування та емоційного налаштування, функціонуючи як інструмент міжособистісної взаємодії та індекс соціально-політичних відносин.

Стаття базується на підходах функціональної стилістики, прагмалінгвістики та історичної соціолінгвістики, пропонуючи мультимірне бачення історичного дискурсу. Листи Анни Бoleйн, Катерини Парр і Бесс Гардвік ілюструють, як формульна мова та риторичні засоби свідомо використовувалися для навігації у соціальних відносинах і підтвердження існуючих владних структур.

Ключові слова: ранньоновіанглійський лист, структура листа, адресація, вітальна формула, вступна формула, основна частина, завершальна формула, постскриптум, прагматичні функції.

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