Epistolary Formulae in Late Middle English Commercial Correspondence: the Cely Letters.

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1.- INTRODUCTION.

The extant collection of the Cely letters consists of 251 items written by members of the Cely family and other correspondents between the years 1472 and 1488. They concern mainly commercial matters connected with their positions as wool merchants at the Staples of London and Calais. Linguistically speaking, this collection of letters may be considered of great interest because of the mixed character of both their external apparatus, with a mixture of formulaic and free discourse, and their semantic content, mixing commercial affairs and domestic matters. It is with the first of these two issues that this paper is concerned. The editor of the Cely letters, Alison Hanham (1985:14) comments that "epistolary formulae persisted well into the next century, but correspondents of the Celys' class gradually became more skilful in the use of the written language, experimented more freely, expressed themselves more easily, and drew more readily on richer resources of vocabulary." It is my hypothesis that by isolating the formulaic language from the free discourse, that new and easier syntax and lexis can be identified. Current work on commercial language includes the compilation of the Corpus of Early English Correspondence, which is being carried out at present at the University of Helsinki, and which includes the Cely letters among many other collections. The researchers on the project have already published some material based on the work in progress, particularly in the area of historical socio-linguistics. The team agrees that the language represented in the letters has generally been assumed to represent informal or everyday M.E. but they consider my idea of excluding formulaic expressions a valid one because such expressions tend to cause problems in quantitative studies bearing in mind that they do not necessarily represent that kind of informal language. Thus, recognition of formulae within these letters seems to be a valid exercise. [1]

The present paper is part of a longer personal project for the study of the letters and offers a descriptive account of the formulaic expressions used by these 15th century London merchants. This report of work in progress covers only the first 50 letters, spanning over a five-year period, from 1474 to 1479, and representing both the older and the younger generations. However, I expect that results and conclusions should not vary much once the information from the remaining letters is incorporated, expanded to include nine more years. An examination of the structure of the letters shows that the majority of them can be divided into the following sections: (invocation and date) + introductory greeting + body of the letter + conclusion + signature + (post scriptum), the first and last ones being optional. Since the Cely papers are not literary texts, but rather commercial-cum-personal letters, written with

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[1] Personal communication

no other purpose in mind than the immediate transmission of news of either type, it is quite feasible to speculate that the main body of the letters, free from standard phraseology, reflects everyday language. Thus, my hypothesis is that the writers might have been language-aware at such points as the introductory greeting or the conclusion, using those well-known epistolary formulae, which were frequently used as models, but it could be argued that the language in the main body of the text flows naturally, in an unselfconscious way, since their main concern then is the reproduction of their own personal items of news, for which there were no exact models to follow. It is in those sections that any supposed ongoing linguistic changes can be verified, in the context of non-literary language. A secondary aim of this description is to contribute towards a comparative study which could identify any possible stylistic differences between for example commercial letters such as these and private letters proper, such as the Paston collection, of the same period

Let us now have a look at each one of the above-mentioned sections in turn, some of which are of a more limited scope than others. (Letter numbers, usually indicated in brackets after quotation, if relevant, refer to Hanhan's edition)

2. INVOCATION AND THE DATE.

It is not rare to find in medieval times an invocation to God before embarking on some enterprise, including the writing of a letter. Let us begin by seeing what information emerges from an examination of that part of the text which includes the opening invocation and the date at the beginning of a letter.

The commonest pattern is shown in:

(1) jhesu Mliiij lxxiiij

in which both the invocation and the complete year are included. This is present in 26 letters. There are another 4 letters including information about the year but excluding the invocation; it should be noted that such information appears in an incomplete, rather colloquial form, as in:

(2) A Lxxvj

The second most numerous group consists of 14 letters which include neither the invocation nor the year; finally 5 letters include the invocation only, as in:

(3) Jhesu

In all cases the invocation is written in Latin and the date appears in Roman numbers, following the Christian calendar and not the regnal tradition.

3. INTRODUCTORY GREETING.

An introductory greeting or *salutatio* is present in all the letters under examination.[2] Before looking at such parts of the texts, let us look first at the way in which introductory greetings are linked to the main body of the letters. This may be done in such a way that both sections run into each other, linked together in a copulative construction, as in:

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[2] Except in item 29, which strictly speaking is not a letter but a summons to an archery match.

(4) I grete the wyll, and I haue grete marvele...

or two separate sentences may be selected for each section, as in:

(5) Ryght weIbelouyd brother, 1 recomaunde me herttely to yow. Farthermore plecsse yt yow to wette that...

Both options are equally represented across these first fifty letters, but this may be due to the fact that a high proportion of them are written by Richard the elder who invariably uses the first of the two formulae. The rest of the writers tend to use the second type.

Whether the greeting is linked to the body of the text or not, the patterns which emerge from a study of the wording of the greetings show some variation both in form and content, in spite of their formulaic character. Syntactically, two patterns are recurrent. Let us look first at the less common of the two, since it offers no complications at all. This is present in 16 letters, and it is simple, monotonous and repetitive. Consider:

(6) I grete the wyll

Hardly any of the examples exhibit any syntactic variation at all; the only deviation is at the lexical level and consists of the use of the pronoun 'you' instead of 'the' on only two occasions.[3]

The commonest pattern, which is present in 31 letters, is linguistically appealing because of the variation it shows within the basic framework, due perhaps to personal choice according to the context of the letter and to social parameters such as addressee and message. This basic framework can be summarised as follows: vocative, (time adv), 'I recommend me' (manner adv) 'unto you' (manner adv), where the three adverbials are optional elements.

Nearly half of the letters exhibit this pattern in its plainest form[4]. Consider

(7) Ryght reucrent syr, I recommeund me vnto yow. (40)

The main syntactic deviations concern the presence and co-existence of the optional adverbials. Thus we find that the simplest and most popular choice is the inclusion of the adverb 'heartily' after the verb 'recommend', as in:[5]

(8) Welbelouyd brother, 1 recomaund me herttely to yow ... (3)

A second option is the combination of the first and last adverbials, as in:[6]

(9) Ryght whorshyppffull ffadyr, *afftyr all dew recomendassyon pretendyng* I recomeavnd me vnto yow *yn the most lowlyest whysse that 1 con or may*. (22)

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[3] Letters 37 and 50, addressed to Richard Cely the younger and to George Cely respectively. However, nothing can be concluded concerning the addressees, since when he writes to his other son (letter 2) he uses 'the' and on all the other occasions he writes to George Cely he also uses 'the'.

[4] These are 14 out of 31 letters, corresponding to numbers 1, 5, 9, 18, 19, 21, 25, 28, 32, 39, 40, 42, 43, and 49.

[5] This is used in 6 letters, which are numbers 3, 8, 15, 34, 35 and 47. Normally, the sentences that show the inclusion of 'heartily' do not include anything else, except in letter 47, in which the adverb 'heartily' changes position in order to be included in a more flowery adverbial appended at the end of the sentence: I recomende me wnto you as harttely as 1 c an dewyse or thynke, ...

[6] Other letters exhibiting these adverbials are 41, 45 and 46.

Another common use is the inclusion of just the first adverbial, with or without an optional clause appended at the end asking after the addreesee's welfare:[7]

> (10) Honorable *and* worshipfull sir**,** *after all humble and due reuerence had as apparteyneth* Y recomaunde me vnto you**,** *desyring to here of your prosperous welfare,* which Jhesu preserue *t*o the accomplysshment of your hertys desire. (16)

Personal choice is at work also at the lower level of the internal structure of the vocative noun phrase itself. For the purposes of presenting syntactic variation, I have divided the phrases used into two groups, according to whether they exhibit one or two nouns at the head, and within each one of these two categories I have arranged them according to increasing level of complexity. Thus, consider the following patterns in Table 1:[8]

Pattern	Example
(1) Single head	
Noun	Syr
adj noun	Welbelouyd brother
adj and adj noun	Goode ande speceall ffrende
adv adj noun	Ryght whellbelovyd brothyr
adv adj and adj noun	Ryght rewerent and whorshipffull ffadyr
adv adj and adv adj noun	Ryught reucrent and harttely weIbelouyd brother
adv adv adj and adj adj noun	Ryught harttely weIbelouyd and myn aspecyaull good brother
(2) Double head	
adj noun and noun	Reuerentt syr and brother
adv adj noun and noun	Ryght trosty syr and brother
adv adj noun and adj noun	Ryght reuerent syr and my specyall frende

Table 1. Syntactic patterns in vocative expressions. Cely letters, 1474-1479

Although the inclusion of adjectives and adverbs in the basic structure is, strictly speaking, optional, it can be argued that the prototypical pattern of a vocative phrase exhibits in the majority of cases more complex structures, the two most often used being 'adv adj noun' and 'adv adj and adj noun', which complicate even further the title of address.

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[7] Letters containing the first adverbial only are: 33 and 44. Letters inquiring after the addressee's health only are 10 and 17. Letter 4 exhibits the final adverbial only, in a way similar to letter 22 above, this time using the form as....as. Letter 6 includes the command 'I beseech you to recommend me' and such recommendation is not to the addressee but to other people.

[8] These patterns appear in the following letters: One noun: (a) 7, 42, 49; (b) 3, 8, 28, 34; (c)6, 16, 33; (d) 4, 15, 1 7, 18,21, 22, 32 39, 40, 43; (e) 1,41, 44, 45, 46, 47; (f) 19; (g) 25. Two nouns: (a) 35; (b) 21; (c) 5, 9, 10.

Let us now examine the introductory greetings from a lexical standpoint. Here two issues deserve consideration: the use of the second person pronoun of address and the semantic content of the vocative expressions. Regarding the first one, it must be mentioned that Richard Cely the elder almost invariably uses the singular form 'the', whereas most of the other writers, if not all, use the plural form 'you' when greeting their addressees; this variation obeys customary rules of the time, and is thus formulaic as opposed to free personal choice. Concerning the second of the issues, it may be argued that stereotypes seem to have been at work, especially at the level of adverbs and adjectives, with little room for personal preference, which was more patent at the level of nouns, but which obviously obeyed the impositions established by the social relationships to be stated. The adverb used is invariably 'right', except in those instances where there are two adverbs, in which case the second one is 'heartly'. The adjectives used are (numbers in brackets after each example indicate number of instances) 'Well-beloved' (13), 'reverent' (12), 'worshipful' (9), 'special' (3) and 'good, faithful, honorable, trusty' and 'inteyrly' (1 each). The nouns used are: 'brother' (17), 'sir' (8), 'friend' (5), 'father' (4) and 'master' (1). Note the special use of 'brother', meaning 'comrade, colleague' among members of the Staple , also used as a term of endearment. Favourite collocations are for example 'well-beloved brother' and 'special friend'.

4. INTRODUCING THE BODY OF THE TEXT.

While the actual items of news or body of the text proper are argued to reflect everyday language typical of the commercial jargon –as opposed to formulaic language- the way in which these are introduced is syntactically and semantically more rigid, although with some scope for flexibility, as we shall see.

1. The simplest way of introducing the first item of news is by means of the conjunction 'and', invariably appended to the greeting in the same sentence. This use of 'and' consistently occurs in all the letters written by Richard Cely the elder, and therefore comes after the also simple greeting 'I grete the wyll' which we have already seen above.[9]

> (11) I grete the wyll, *and* I haue grete marvele that ye wryt not to me no letters...

2. Another way of introducing the body of the letter is by means of a non-finite clause in the gerund, which may be preceded or not by the adverb 'furthermore' and which may be appended to the introductory greeting or start a new sentence by itself, in both of which cases this subordinate clause depends on the main verb, usually 'recommend', of the previous clause. This construction does not present much syntactical variation (almost invariably gerund + indirect object + direct object that-clause, with or without the 'that' conjunction), but there is lexical variation when choosing the subordinate verb; thus, we find through the data 'informing', certifying', 'praying' and the periphrasis 'letting you wit'.[10]

> (12) I recomende me wnto you as harttely as 1 can dewyse or thynke, *informyng you that* I haue ressauyd a letter from you

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[9] These are letters nos. 2, 6, 11, 12, 13, 20, 23, 24, 26, 27, 29, 30, 31, 36, 37, 38, 48 and 50.

[10] 'informing' is used in letters 3, 19, 21, 25, 32, 35, 47; 'certifying' appears in letters17 and 18; 'praying' in letters 28 (followed by 'for'), 42 (followed by 'that'), 33 ('pray you to'); the periphrasis 'letting you wit' in letter 10.

3. The most complex solution, one which is fairly productive in terms of frequency of use since it is present in 17 out of 50 letters, is based on the impersonal construction 'please it you to know', (cf. ModE. 'may it please you to know') and it shows a great deal of syntactical variation. There are also two personal constructions which are very similar to these. Let us examine these structures:

Impersonal
Please it you to wit
Furthermore, please it you to understand
Furthermore, and it please you to wit,...
Furthemore please you to wit that...
... and it please your mastership
please it your mastership, to have notice and knowledge that...
like it you to wit...
Personal
Furthermore you shall understand that...
Furthermore, and it please you, ye shall understand that... (mixed type)

Table 2. Structures introducing the body of the letters. Cely letters, 1474-1479.[11]

Of all these, impersonal constructions are more often selected than personal ones, the one under impersonal (2) being the most popular one. Lexical variation includes fluctuation between 'wit' and 'understand' and an expansion of the subject 'you' into a more respectful 'your mastership'.

5. CONCLUSION.

A conclusion may appear tailed at the end of the main body of the letter, running together into the last sentence, or it may be an independent last section. The most clearly formulaic element in these letters is no doubt the conclusion. Over 30 letters out of 50 end in almost exactly the same way, and it should be noted that not all of them are by the same writer. About 10 letters deviate from the standard pattern in order to show a more flowery language. The rest are a shorter version of the standard type. Thus, syntactically the basic pattern is repeated letter after letter; semantically, the majority of letters have the same content, that is, there is no more news; Jesus keep you; place and date of writing, some including the year some not; finally, some letters include the fact that they were written in great haste.[12] A typical example is:

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[11] Impersonal structures: (1) appears in letters nos. 1 and 34; (2) 4, 15, 22, 41, 45 and 46; (3) letter 39; (4) letter 40; (5) letter 7; (6) letter 16; (7) letter 8. Personal structures: (1) letters 44 and 49; (2) letters 5 and 9.
[12] Richard Cely the elder regularly uses the expression 'in (great) haste', and conversely this expression is almost invariably only used by him. George Cely uses it in letter 4.

(13) I wryt no more to the at thys tyme, but Jhesu kepe you. Wryt at London the xxvj day of Jencuer in grete haste. (letter 11)

It is noteworthy that the item that shows most variation is the reference to the Lord, no doubt in order to sound the more respectful the more complicated structurally this is expressed and the more semantically meaningful the terms used are. Thus we observe once again the always invariable and semantically unmarked expression used by Richard Cely the elder in all his letters as in the above 'Jesus keep you', which shows the basic message at its simplest. This clause can get more complicated, in all cases showing the following pattern:

But S have Object in (his blessed) keeping

The main syntactic deviation lies in the inclusion or not of the possessive and/or the adjective in the final PP. Major deviations are at the lexical level, in the range of nouns chosen for the subject and object slots. Thus, we observe the following nouns as subjects: 'the Trenyte', '(allmyty) God' and 'Jhesu'. For the object: 'you', 'ws all' and 'yow and (all) yowrs'.

A typical example is:

(14) No mor vnto, yow at thys tyme, *but Jhesu hawe yow and all yowrs in hys blessyd kcpyng, Amen.* Wrytt at Calles the viijth day of May, 1 xxviij.

Finally, concerning the dating of the letters at the close, particularly the stating of the year and not just the day and month, the majority of letters which are not dated at the close had already been dated at the beginning; those which do include the year now had not done so at the beginning (except the letters written by George Cely, who thus dates his letters twice). However, there are some 10 letters which remain undated as far as the year is concerned.

6. SIGNATURES.

An examination of signing practices makes the following pattern evident:

Prep + (NP or AP) + proper name

Richard Cely the elder, for example, always signs in the coolest, simplest, unmarked way: prep + name. The same goes for a couple of other writers, but the rule in the other cases is to include some term indicating the relationship between the writer and the addressee. Thus, between brothers it is common to sign 'by your brother + name' This is also the case in John Dalton's letters, in which he always refers to himself as 'brother' of George Cely, either alleging their fellowship in the Staple, or claiming a closer relationship than other fellow members, such as William Maryon who does not use this term, but the rather more respectful 'By your own'. George Cely always closes his letters in a respectful manner towards his father, since he signs off with 'by your son', and not with just simply the name. Finally, other people who are not members of the family sign off with just their name or expressing their relation, such as 'attorney' or 'chaplain'.

In addition to this, there is lexical variation also at the level of the preposition: this can be either the English 'by' (sometimes 'be') or the Latin 'per'. The one most

often used in these letters is 'per', by Richard Cely the elder, George Cely, etc. 'By' is used by some of the writers who, perhaps, are not used to writing so often.

7. CONCLUSION.

To summarise, in this paper I have attempted a description of the different epistolary formulae used in the Cely letters, which exemplify late Middle English commercial jargon. The main aim was to isolate formulaic from non-formulaic passages, which would provide fresh ground for historical research, specifically in the area of sociolinguistics. A secondary aim was to pave the way for a possible contrastive study of formulaic expressions in letters of the same period but of different background, or else for the study of the diachronic evolution of such expressions.

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