Merchants of Innovation. The languages of traders

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Aims and Objectives

Traders around the world are known to use particular spoken argots. This arises out of a need to develop coded or secret language to disguise the specialised knowledge employed in their trade, and also marks them out as a separate social group. Many examples of such spoken mercantile languages can be found; from the relatively limited market argots used among Yemeni businessmen (Walter 2003) and the goldsmiths in Cairo (Khan 1995–1997), to a horse and cattle traders' sociolect, related to other Yiddish-influenced argots such as Rotwelsh, Yenish and masematte, that emerged in Germany (see Guggenheim-Grunberg 1954). This phenomenon of mercantile language is not restricted to speech; written forms of mercantile language developed too: Yiddish-speaking merchants in 17th-century Prague resorted to encoding parts of their business letters in a secret alphabet (Landau 1911: xxx, 63–64), and Italian traders had developed their own style of handwriting, mercantesca, distinct from the contemporary chancery hands cancelleresca, by the 14th century (Ceccherini 2009).

The language which traders employ in their correspondence differs from that used in official, legal or private writing. There appears to be a cross-linguistic tendency that merchant writings tend to show more language mixing and code-switching, and they also exhibit more dialectal forms than other text types. This may be a semi-conscious decision. Traders needed to rely on cordial relations in their business dealings with the addressees of their letters in a business world whose economy was largely build on trust, familiar connection and good relationships. By choosing to compose their correspondence in a mix of vernacular forms and specific codes known only to other merchants, they conveyed a sense of intimacy and belonging to the same social class to their correspondents. In addition, traders have the desire, and the self-confidence as a distinct and often important social group, to develop their own registers, in speech and in writing (see Wagner 2013, 272–273). Not conforming with the prescriptive 'high' writing standards of the time but writing in a 'lower' variety, traders create particular mercantile language forms and developed homogenous and relatively standardised written registers.

Languages are often shaped by official writing (royal inscriptions and documents) or outstanding literary works, and the drivers of language standardisation are sought within the

intelligentsia, chanceries, and political and legal offices. With this focus on the writings of the upper echelons of society, the influence of merchants on emerging language norms and standardisation has not been thoroughly investigated. We would like to address this issue by gathering scholars from the various fields working on traders' language. This is the first time such an interdisciplinary conference about this topic has been organised, and it is hoped that this approach will lead to further fruitful research.

The conference will seek to place trade languages within a wider sociolinguistic context and examine in depth their effect on standard varieties of a large number of different languages. Questions to be answered include issues such as: which differences can be observed in regard to official scribes registers? As Middle class 'low' varieties show language change in the written medium before the language changes in the 'higher' varieties, is this an anticipation of forms coming from spoken language forms that take longer to infiltrate higher registers, or are they influencing 'higher' language standards by setting linguistic precedents? What sets traders' letters apart from private correspondence? The conference will also address bilingualism, for example in the case of Jewish Yiddish and Arabic speaking merchants, who chose to write Hebrew. Similarly, semi-bilingualism will be discussed, where authors wrote in languages they felt most comfortable in the knowledge that the choice of language did not matter since different languages would be understood by the reader. The reasons for code-switching and for using particular languages will be explored. Finally, the writers themselves and their social environment will be addressed. Who are the protagonists within the traders' caste which set the standards? Which linguistic differences can be observed in the language used within particularly tight mercantile groups and those in a wider business network?

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