

Ingrid Tieken-Boon van Ostade. 2014. *In Search of Jane Austen: The Language of the Letters*. New York: Oxford UP. 282 pp. ISBN: 978-0-19-994511-5.

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The language of correspondence has attracted the attention of scholars for years, but particularly since the compilation of certain corpora such as the *Corpus of Early English Correspondence* ([CEEC] 1998) and the *Corpus of Late Modern English Prose* (Denison et al. 1994), which began at the beginning of the 1990s. The study of letters provides not only insights into the grammatical features of the language of different periods but also allows a better understanding of the most significant socio-historical features of a particular time or a specific person. Whereas an analysis of a corpus of letters contributes to a broad description of the characteristics of the language of correspondence in general, the in-depth study of a single author's work can also give information about personal writing styles. As the author of this work points out, "studies of Jane Austen's language are few and far between" (1), despite her popularity as the object of study of many researchers, who have however mainly concentrated on literary analysis.

The book is structured in nine chapters, the first being the introduction and the last the conclusion. Only three refer specifically to linguistic features, chapters five, six and seven, and these comprise the analysis of spelling, words and grammar respectively. The remaining chapters are essential to understand the social context of the letters as well as the corpus that has been put together in order to carry out the linguistic analysis. The book also includes four appendices, which contain lists of the attested and unattested letters (appendices one and two), the transcription of one letter (appendix three) and the network of people Jane Austen corresponded with (appendix four).

The introduction is extensive, since it contains several sections, and at the same time it is extremely clarifying in its description of both the corpus and the method used. The corpus has been compiled by the author using the WordSmith Tools programme. This chapter is particularly abundant in references, which reinforces the quality of this study.

Chapter two, "Letter-Writing," provides a general overview of the culture of letter writing in eighteenth-century England and contains statistical data on the letters that Jane Austen both sent and received. Within the group of the sent letters, Tieken-Boon van Ostade has included not only those letters that have survived and are collected

(Le Faye 1995) but also those that are “referred to in the correspondence” and that the author believes were written as they were mentioned in some way in the surviving letters (32). As regards the received letters, very few have survived and the author has also included those which are unattested. Although the statistics presented might be considered controversial since an extensive number of them are only presumed to have been written, the description of how the references were found in the corpus contributes to strengthening the belief in the validity of the estimations.

From a sociolinguistic and pragmatic point of view chapter three, “A Social Network of Letter-Writers,” is very enlightening. Although Jane Austen’s sister, Cassandra, was her most frequent correspondent, Austen was also in contact with other members of her family as well as friends. A detailed description of all the different people she corresponded with is presented, along with details related to differences in her writing styles depending on who she was writing to. The analysis includes many tables, which generally clarify the textual comments, although Table 3.4 seems confusing as one of the groups of correspondents has been left without a subcategory (62). In addition, there sometimes seems to be some speculation in relation to data present in the unattested letters, although justification of its interpretation is provided in all cases, making the implications cogent.

Chapter four, “The Letters as a Corpus,” concentrates on the selection of the corpus, which comprises 144,002 words in total. The author includes some remarks on the self-corrections that were often found in Jane Austen’s letters and the linguistic implications of this. Abbreviations and some punctuation features are also commented on, all of which are duly exemplified as is the case in the rest of the book. The author acknowledges that not all the letters available today are originals; some are copies of the originals and others are simply available in published form. This will have connotations in the linguistic analysis, as editors’ choices might have interfered in the process, as the author points out.

Once the corpus, method, correspondents and all other general aspects concerning the letters are described, the focus of the book turns to the analysis of pure linguistic features. In chapter five, “The Language of the Letters: Spelling,” Tiekens-Boon van Ostade embarks in a complicated task because “Jane Austen’s spelling practice . . . has never been described” (108). She addresses several questions which are gradually discussed throughout the chapter. The spelling characteristics of Jane Austen’s writings are constantly compared to the spelling features of other writers described previously by other contemporaneous scholars. In addition, not only does Jane Austen’s spelling show differences when her private writings are compared with her novels, but the possibility of manipulation by editors has to be considered as well. This clearly explains, according to the author, some of the variations analysed. At the end of the chapter, Tiekens-Boon van Ostade admits that although some of the changes that can be observed in her writings as time goes by were definitely influenced by the publishers, it is sometimes more complicated to confirm why some spellings are as they are.

Chapter six, “The Language of the Letters: Words,” focuses on Jane Austen’s innovation of words and on her influence in terms of vocabulary on later generations. Other scholars have analysed different aspects regarding Jane Austen’s use of vocabulary, but never has such

a detailed study been carried out, particularly in relation to the words used in her letters. As is the practice throughout the book, previous studies are mentioned before explaining aspects such as what position Jane Austen occupies in the *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED) as regards her innovative vocabulary, her usage of obsolete words such as “authoress” (137), or her inclusion of vulgar words, particularly when writing to younger generations. This chapter contains a vast number of tables clearly displaying the information provided, but which can sometimes be overwhelming. In addition, the author’s assumptions are backed up by other studies on specific issues or by the results found in her careful analysis. Tieken-Boon van Ostade concludes that “a certain amount of idiosyncratic practice” is found both in Jane Austen’s spelling and her vocabulary; however, the language of her letters proves interesting because of the presence of new words, which may not have been “necessarily coined by her” (166), but which would not have been brought to light had it not been for her usage. The author admits that since the OED is constantly being updated the figures that she has found in relation to the first attestation of certain words by Jane Austen may not be exact.

The main idea introduced at the beginning of chapter seven, “The Language of the Letters: Grammar,” is that it may not be good practice to use Jane Austen’s writing as an example of the language of the Late Modern English period. The author justifies this assumption on the basis of the idiosyncrasy of both Austen’s spelling and vocabulary, as well as on her findings on grammatical features which she develops in this chapter. The author’s point of departure seems to be a strong statement: “Jane Austen had no access to the normative grammars of the period” (176). The fact this is mentioned in other chapters and that Tieken-Boon van Ostade is extremely meticulous in her justification regarding this assumption, makes the information highly credible. Only certain grammatical features are analysed and described. These include the use of double negation, preposition stranding, the use of *-ing* forms and the subjunctive, variation in verb forms and the use of *do*-less negatives and periphrastic *do*. However, most of the features studied occur in low numbers and hence Tieken-Boon van Ostade acknowledges that they “should be interpreted with great care” (199).

In chapter eight, “Authorial Identity,” the author argues that some of the features attributed to Jane Austen might in fact be the “spelling preferences of the person or persons who copied the letters before they were lost” (208). In addition, this illuminating chapter includes information in relation to three novels, *Persuasion* (1818), *Mansfield Park* (1814) and *The Watsons* (unknown date). In the case of *Persuasion*, the focus is on the two chapters that were not finally included in the book. As regards *Mansfield Park*, variations in different editions are analysed, which show the spelling preferences of the corresponding printing house, more than the writer’s own choice. And finally, the dating of *The Watsons*—one of Jane Austen’s few unfinished novels—is considered. This work has never been dated exactly; previous studies have generally been tentative about probable dates. Thanks to her analysis of the spelling features, the author concludes that this novel could not have been written in 1804, as previously suggested. However, she is also extremely careful in her assertion as she states “we may perhaps date the beginning of the Watsons to the early months of 1806” (222).

Finally, in the conclusion in chapter nine, the author encourages more research on letters in general and more specifically those of the Late Modern English period in order to identify characteristics of writers or groups of people, as this would help to increase knowledge of the language of the time. In addition, Tieken-Boon van Ostade suggests that more studies of a comparative nature between letters and novels, both by Jane Austen and by other authors, should be carried out, as she admits that in her study there are only brief references to the novels. Specific emphasis is placed on the often idiosyncratic and conservative language of Jane Austen and the occasional remaining difficulty in identifying dialectal usages in the letters. At the end, a few comments about Jane Austen's life are made, since they probably influenced her writing style: her limited experience of travelling, her lack of contact with large groups of people, and the fact that despite the strong likelihood of familiarity with other writers' works, she probably did not know them personally.

This is not the first book by the author on the correspondence of a specific writer, as she also published one on Robert Lowth's letters in 2011, following a similar pattern. Since Lowth and Austen were contemporaneous, constant references and comparisons between the two studies are made in this current work, which are at times rather tiresome and not always relevant. However, all in all this is an extremely thorough study with many references both to other authors and previous works on Austen, and it not only enlightens the reader on Jane Austen's language but also encourages similar studies.

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