

Articoli/Articles

MEDICAL CORRESPONDENCE IN ENGLISH JOURNALS  
SINCE 1665. *LETTERS TO THE EDITOR*

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SUMMARY

*This study traces the development of letters published in medical journals from 1665 until today from a linguistic and scientific viewpoint and considers some of the advantages offered by the letter format. The original letter type has evolved into two separate sub-genres, one resembling the short scientific report, the other more personal and informal. Letters thus offer the scientist something more than a mere academic instrument for keeping abreast of the times.*

Most scientific journals have a section for letters to the editor, and in some (Nature, Science, Lancet), up to a third of the space available is devoted to letters. Evidently, therefore, this apparently minor text genre is considered useful and important and it has survived over the years while other text types have come and gone. Letters have also undergone various changes, and it is interesting to note how they have developed and how their writing style and content have changed. Here this development is traced from 1668 onwards by taking samples of letters at intervals of 50 years since 1668 in order to consider why the letter format has remained so popular.

To begin with, as noted by Lefanu<sup>1</sup>, men of science kept up to date with new developments through private manuscript corre-

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spondence. The early medical periodicals, such as *Medicina Curiosa* and *Hippocrates ridens*<sup>2,3</sup> were simply adaptations of the contemporary news-sheet. However, after the foundation of scientific societies (of which one in Rome as early as 1603), the serial publication of their Acta or Transactions soon followed. From these early beginnings arose the research article, and then the other text types, such as the editorial, the survey, the review article and so on, but alongside these, letters continued to thrive and to be published in all well known journals. Books continued to be written, but journals became more and more important in the building up of a communicative network and codified beliefs on which scientific arguments had to be based in order to be acceptable.

#### *The transition from Latin to English*

Some of the first letters appeared in 1665 in Philosophical Transactions (London), probably the first scientific journal, and certainly the first to contain publications written in English<sup>4</sup>.

Until then, in fact, the English themselves frowned upon the use of English for cultural purposes and the transition from Latin to English which took place between 1560 and 1760 was slow and gradual. In 1582 Richard Mulcaster<sup>5</sup> wrote:

*our English tung is of small reach; it stretcheth no further than this land of ours, nay not there over all.*

English was considered inelegant and unsuitable for anything apart from everyday conversation. Besides Latin, Italian was also a strong influence in Elizabethan times, and Italian models were imitated in manners, music and writing, which favoured a flowery and elaborate style. After the Civil War, however, there was a reaction against this tradition of persuasive rhetorical tropes and figures of speech, and the Royal Society (of which Philosophical Transactions became the official journal in 1752), was at the centre of this break with linguistic tradition.

Thomas Sprat, in his *History of the Royal Society of London* in 1667, called for a plainer and more sober style<sup>6</sup>:

*Ornaments of speaking ....are in open defiance against Reason, he claims,*

and cries out against:

*all amplification, digressions and swellings of style ..., preferring the language of Artizans. Countrymen and Merchants before that of Wits and Scholars.*

There arose a conviction that scientific reasoning required clarity and concision of language, and during the seventeenth century, and especially the eighteenth, English, which formerly had been so looked down upon, came to be seen as the ideal vehicle for objective description. It was appreciated as a straightforward kind of language with the advantages of a simple grammar and a copious vocabulary, owing to its mixed lexicon.

Hence it came about that Newton wrote his *Principia Mathematica* in Latin, but chose to write *Opticks* in English. Bazerman<sup>7</sup> has shown how the genre which became a model and precursor of the scientific article as we know it today was invented by Newton. His first contributions to Philosophical Transactions were letters describing his experiments to other researchers. These aroused a long controversial exchange, so much so that in the end he became tired and impatient of the other correspondents' criticisms and stopped writing to the journal altogether. Nonetheless, his style of writing left its mark on future generations of scientific writers.

#### *Philosophical Transactions*

Early issues of the *Transactions* contained mostly accounts, letters and journalistic writing, as well as book reviews. The introduction to the 1714 edition lists the kinds of publications which the journal will contain and declares the secretary's intentions. These are:

1. to present the public with such short tracts which might otherwise be lost to posterity,
2. to give an exact account of *such experiments as have been made before the Society,*

3. to give extracts of *such letters as correspondents shall please to honour him with* (*him* refers to the secretary),

4. abstracts of books.

It will be noted that the text typologies are similar to those featured in modern journals. The short tracts have become what many journals refer to now as the *short report*. The accounts, which together with the letters made up a large part of the texts, were originally descriptions of experiments carried out before members of the Society, because in the early days it was held important to have reliable witnesses to vouchsafe the authenticity of the experiments. Gradually, however, it was enough for the writer to be a prestigious and reputed figure for his report to be considered valid. With time, more attention was given to exact descriptions of materials and methods, and the mere account of the experiment was not enough. Writers started to provide also theoretical reasons for their findings. Thus, the scientific article gradually took shape as a model of discourse with a rigorous conventional format.

The letters did not follow such rigid conventions and allowed for more intimate argument. Eventually, however, there also evolved a type of letter which resembled the short report. There was evidently a perceived need for both types of letter, one more personal and the other more objective and displaying the kind of mode we have come to recognise as scientific. These two sub-genres have different linguistic styles. As noted by Gotti<sup>8</sup>, the epistemologic base of a discipline cannot be separated from its linguistic realisation.

Readers were from a wide variety of professions and social standings - mainly educated city dwellers but not necessarily scientists. The first letters to *Philosophical Transactions* were personal and adopted the genteel style expected of a gentleman of that time. Let us return to the first years of publication and consider an extract from a letter written in 1668,(3:710-713) which gives an idea of the tone:

*Sir, you have sensibly obliged me to have assured me by your Letter of April 29, That the Magistrate of London had not at all concern'd themselves to prohibit the Practice of the Transfusion of Blood, and that that operation had been hitherto practised with good success on Brutes, and without any ill consequence on Man. The Enemies of New Discovery's had*

*taken so great care of publishing every where this false News to decry this Experiment, that there needed an authentick testimony to disabuse the multitude.*

The purpose of this letter, which goes on to describe a case of blood transfusion, is mainly to defend the writer against the attacks of his adversaries at a time when transfusion was in its infancy and still very risky. The writer, Jean Denis, *D. of Physik and Prof. of the Mathematicks at Paris*, gives a long and detailed account of the transfusion of calf's blood in a mentally ill patient who subsequently died. The writer evidently suspects the patient's wife of having caused her husband's death and is anxious to defend his personal and professional reputation. Correspondents thus soon found out that the letter format is the best way to respond quickly and publicly to the criticism and scepticism of opponents and hence to defend the author's good name.

Another motivation for writing letters was to make known some idea or discovery to other members of the Society, which gathered together people of similar interests.

In the early days the Society (called the Royal Society since the king became a member in 1661) was composed of about 50 members, mainly barons, physicians and scholars of mathematics, physics and natural philosophy from London and Oxford, united by curiosity about science and new discoveries. On the frontispiece of the 1668 issue the journal announces the publication of accounts of the studies of *the Ingenious in many considerable parts of the World*. There are several references to their aim of writing for the benefit of the *Curious and the Learned*. In the preface mentioned above (1714), the secretary describes himself as *The first who attempted anything of this Nature... having been sufficiently known to the Curious and always acceptable to the Learned*.

In this spirit of curiosity about natural phenomena, correspondents often presented personal observations of interesting or unusual events they had noted.

If the observation described is felt to be of minor significance, the modest writer will prefer to have recourse to a letter rather than an account. The following extract from a letter written in 1668 (3:727-729) is an example. The purpose is to share with others a chance discovery which the author made when he

hit on the idea (as we would say today) of a new kind of lens device for his weak eyesight. The letter makes no claim to be strictly scientific, but does give a detailed description of how he prepared the lenses. Here we have the Baconian idea of the chance observation leading to scientific study. Note the humility of tone (as exemplified in the word *trifle*).

*An Extract Of a Letter concerning an Optical Experiment, conducive to a decayed Sight, communicated by a Worthy person, who found the benefit of it himself.*

*I am to acquaint you of an Experiment, if it may deserve that name, and not rather that of a Trifle; the matter of which is known to many, but unapplied (for ought I know) to such use as it affords.*

The reference to the correspondent as a *worthy person* is significant, because accountability and validity were gradually more entrusted to the reputation of the writer rather than to witnesses.

Fifty years later, in the 1706 issue, in a letter (53-58) written by Van Leeuwenhoek, we find a distinct change. He gives a very careful and objective 6-page account of a histological examination of a sample of gut under the microscope. By now, challenged by disputes, science has had to evolve a rhetoric of its own<sup>9</sup> and has become a mode of persuasion where fame and reputation are no longer sufficient to convince the reader. Argumentation and exact, repeatable description become paramount. In Leeuwenhoek's letter we find not only description, but also theoretical speculation as to the possible causes of what he finds:

*I take the Liberty to acquaint your Honours, that Professor Bidloo came to my House March 7th. desiring me that he might view thro' a Microscope a little piece of Gut, which, he said, was part of the Bowele of a Woman; whereupon I having separated a small particle thereof from the rest, we discovered in one of the thin Membranes, of which, for the most part, the Gut is composed, a great number of little Fibres and Vessels, which lay in great Multitudes over and across each other, as also some Particles of Fat, which lay like Bunches of Grapes upon the said Fibres.*

The experiments took place in Leeuwenhoek's house, but the data presented are of great scientific precision. It is particularly interesting that Leeuwenhoek published exclusively through

correspondence printed in journals and his books were collections of letters.

Later in the same century in 1768, Dr Alexander Russell sent a letter (142-150) to *Transactions* presenting to the President of the Society, then the Earl of Morton, a letter he had received from his brother in Aleppo on the subject of inoculation against smallpox:

*My Lord, The inclosed account of inoculation in the East I have just received from my brother at Aleppo, and thought nothing farther seems wanting in this country to remove prejudices against that practice, yet I thought its being made public might be of some use to other European nations, where such prejudices still prevail, and as a matter of curiosity, would not be unacceptable to the Royal Society, I have therefore taken the liberty to trouble your Lordship with it for that purpose  
Just before my leaving Aleppo, I did hear that it was practised amongst some of the Bedouins there, and went by the name of buying the smallpox...*

The presentation ends as follows:

*I have the honour to be  
My Lord, Your Lordship's most obedient  
and humble servant*

The enclosed letter from his brother, Patrick Russell, ends as follows:

*Having related in what manner I came to learn inoculation was known to the Arabs, I can arrogate no merit in the discovery; nor would I be thought to insinuate any reflection on the accuracy of the indefatigable M. Tournefort, to whose labours the curious stand so much indebted.*

The letter is couched in the ceremonial style of the day and continues the tradition of courtesy and modesty of this epistolary genre. The description is again anecdotal, but the attention to detail allows other researchers to continue the fight against smallpox. In fact, it was on the basis of these empirical applications of inoculation that Jenner eventually evolved his idea of vaccination. Scientists are already aware of being part of a common research front and are more careful of what they write.

te, both in research articles and also in the more modest letter format.

The writer's heightened awareness of the necessity to persuade his readers of the validity of his findings is apparent also in a letter of 1808 from William Brande on an examination of caluli:

*The collection which I have examined is not only uncommonly large, but the greater part of the specimens have histories of the case annexed to them .. and circumstances attendant on their formation. I have therefore to form an arrangement upon these principles, with a view to render the subject more clear and perspicuous.*

The content of the letters thus becomes gradually more scientific and informative, rather than being a simple account of curiosities such as that of the previous century.

#### *Nineteenth century periodicals*

*Philosophical Transactions* continued to report important medical research throughout the late 17th and 18th centuries. However, during the 18th and 19th the number of journals increased rapidly, and 1823 witnessed the appearance of the first edition of *The Lancet*. Its declared aim was to make available to *the Public and to distant Practitioners as well as to Students in Medicine and Surgery reports of the Metropolitan Hospital lectures*. It proposed also to include case reports, and again there were letters. The Letters to the Editor section has continued until the present day and there are usually about 20 pages of letters in each number.

Unlike other journals, *Lancet* lists the titles of letters on the contents page on the outside cover, giving them more prominence than in other journals.

It is interesting to note that the Editor in his opening preface to Volume 1 (1923) is aware of the novelty of the project of publishing a journal of this kind as he refers to the *interested opposition* which he expects from some quarters, and continues:

*we trust that mystery and ignorance will shortly be considered synonymous. Ceremonies and signs have now lost their charm; hieroglyphics and gilded serpents, their power to deceive.*

Beneath this ornate Victorian prose there is evidently a desire to make medical knowledge more widely available. In fact, the editor goes on to lament the fact that laymen know more about the *constitution of their horses and dogs* than that of their own kind. Physicians and academics are thus invited to render their ideas and studies public, and they become open to comment and criticism. Through publication in journals, authors gain prestige and success, but public exposure also lays their ideas open to criticism. This confrontation of ideas is part of the life-blood of science and the rhetoric of persuasion becomes vital in this kind of writing.

While the scientific article proper has evolved its own rhetorical style and canonical conventions which leave less space for more personal appreciations, the letters continue to keep a channel open for more direct exchange. Letters may also form part of a debate which goes on for several weeks. In this they are different from conventional articles and, as I have noted elsewhere, may be considered a sub-genre<sup>10</sup>.

The disputes expressed in the letters may at times be quite acrimonious, as was an exchange of letters in 1868 between two correspondents of *Lancet* who sign themselves as *Lumbicus* and *Cellula* respectively. There is a bitter contention between them about natural science teaching at Oxford which goes on for some time.

As a further example, let us consider the following extract from a letter headed *Pleural effusion and its treatment* published in *The Lancet*, 1908 (258):

*Sir,- I hope the rest of your readers are edified by Dr Harry Campbell's letter under the above title in your issue of Jan. 11th. I must candidly confess that I am not; however, as I hope to get some educational advancement in physics I continue this controversy.*

This is more modern in tone and style, with the plain opening *Sir*, but the element of direct interaction with other correspondents is still there. The confrontation is courteous but more open and direct, with no mincing of words.

In the 19th century letters sent to journals became less a matter of private correspondence among scholars and more a public

declaration of opinion. With the spread of literacy, letters to the editor became more frequent. In the early years of the *Veterinary Record*<sup>11</sup>, many of them were still anonymous, signed by *A Candid Friend*, *A Quack* or even *Bunkum*. By the end of the century, correspondents were not afraid to sign their letters and had become more serious and *earnest* (as was then the fashion - witness Oscar Wilde's famous play<sup>12</sup>, but this did not prevent them from being outspoken and even venomous in their criticism if they wanted.

#### Letters today

When we look at the letters published in periodicals today, we find there are two main types: the more personal letter which resembles in many ways those published in ordinary broadsheet newspapers, and which allows for criticism, conflict, irony and even mockery at times (see the last example above); and another kind of letter found in *The BMJ*, *Science*, *Nature* and other reviews, which contains original observations and resembles a short report. This second type is often signed by several authors (in Vol. 368:6474 of *Nature*, there is a letter signed by 24 authors); it contains diagrams, tables and other non-linear features, is followed by references and generally follows the conventions of scientific research reports. *Nature* has three sections, Correspondence, Scientific Correspondence, and Letters to *Nature*, of which the last two feature letters of the second type. One advantage of the letter for busy readers is that it is short (in *Lancet*, for example, it must not exceed 500 words), but it must be of some importance to have been admitted by the gatekeeping procedures to publication - although letters commenting on previous features in a journal are not always submitted to peer review a letter usually follows rapidly on the appearance in print of another letter or article on the same theme, whereas it would require far more time to write a complete article. The accepted code of the research article does not prevent discussion and negotiation of claims, of course, but there has been a progressive de-personalisation in the style of research articles since the fifteenth century<sup>13</sup>. Gunnarsson has studied the use of personal pronouns

in medical articles from 1730 to 1985, and has found that the use of sentences with the pronoun *I* has decreased by 250%, and the use of *we* has only slightly increased, by 7.8%<sup>8</sup>.

Letters seem to be a special case. Biber and Finegan<sup>15</sup> in a study of the history of fiction, essays and letters, note that letters have evolved the most oral styles in the modern period. Their corpus includes professional and personal letters written by well known literary figures, rather than scientific correspondence, but it seems clear that, given this general drift towards more oral styles, scientific editors have felt the need to evolve a more rigorous format for scientific correspondence. More personal letters in the journal *Nature* are thus restricted to the separate section called simply *Correspondence*, while scientific report letters appear in the other two letter sections.

This variation of style from one journal to another or even within the same journal allows for more freedom of choice. Thus, there is the advantage that the letter admits a more varied style and so many authors feel that if they want to speak plainly, it is more acceptable to do so in a letter. Letters allow more direct interaction and admit the correspondent to a lively international forum for the rapid exchange of ideas.

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Pauline Webber

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Articoli/Articles

AMBIENTE, ALIMENTAZIONE E SALUTE  
NELLA INCHIESTA MURATTIANA DEL 1811

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SUMMARY

*ENVIRONMENT, NUTRITION AND HEALTH  
IN THE ENQUIRY PROMOTED BY G. MURAT IN NAPLES IN 1811*

*The Survey, promoted in 1811 by the government of the Kingdom of Naples, then ruled by the French-supported king Joachim Murat, represents the first analysis of the mutual relationships among environment, social variables, nutrition and public health conducted in Italy. The large amount of data that were collected then still lays in the archives of Naples and of the other major towns that were part of the Kingdom. The data that have been made public, referring to local situations, document impressive conditions of poverty and undernutrition among people of the lower classes. It is meaningful that nutritional deprivation was then identified as the main cause of predisposition to disease. It is also noteworthy that, at the beginning of the XIX century, the lower classes of the population of Southern Italy were still very far from the application of the healthy dietary model defined nowadays as mediterranean diet.*

Alimentazione e qualità di vita costituiscono un peculiare complesso di aspetti e di interazioni fra la popolazione e la sua salute, da un lato, l'ambiente e le sue risorse dall'altro.

Ad evidenziare l'imprescindibilità dei reciproci vincoli fu, fra i primi cultori della scienza in materia, Sabato Visco<sup>1</sup>. Sostenne che lo sviluppo di una qualsiasi comunità umana dipende dal territorio in cui vive, dalla natura e produttività del terreno col-

*Key words:* Environmental deprivation and famine - Nutritional epidemiology - Early Eight hundredth - Naples' kingdom.