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Colliers, farmers, strikers. The discussion of work-related themes in Late Modern Scottish letters and diaries

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ABSTRACT

In business discourse, the discussion of work relations is a very interesting branch of study, especially when it refers to contexts that are relatively distant in time and/or space. In this respect, emigrants' letters and diaries are as invaluable sources of information today as they were when they were written. In this paper I intend to concentrate on nineteenth-century documents and focus on three main issues: the state of the job market, cases of conflict and negotiations, and the narration of accidents or other extraordinary events. The aim is to highlight the main linguistic strategies employed to convey meaning, in order to assess what topics were given prominence, and how they were narrated and evaluated. Data will be drawn from a corpus currently in preparation at the University of Bergamo; while its size does not allow quantitative findings to be offered yet, it is believed that qualitative observations on these unique materials may help shed useful light on the phenomena under discussion.

Keywords: Nineteenth-century correspondence, Late Modern English, labour discourse, evaluative language, emigrants' letters.

From all that I hear, Highlanders make excellent farmers and lumberers.
The Scotch generally flourish. So do Norwegians in Minnesota.
(Campbell, 1876, p. 37)

1. Introduction

In business discourse, the discussion of work relations is a very interesting branch of study. This is possibly even more interesting when the context in which such relations occur is particularly distant in time and/or space. In this respect, emigrants' letters and diaries are as invaluable sources of information today as they were when they were written. In this essay I intend to concentrate on nineteenth-century documents encoded by men and women who had left Scotland in search of new job opportunities and working conditions, or who operated in Scotland as business subjects, whether as employers or employees. Their letters and diaries often include comments on the labour market, and help us reconstruct language history 'from below', while providing useful data on the socio-historical context in which they were written. My study will deal with three main issues relating to labour discourse: the state of the job market, cases of conflict and industrial action, and the narration of accidents or other extraordinary events. The aim is to highlight the main linguistic strategies employed to convey meaning to interested, often empathetic but not always equally informed recipients, in order to assess what topics were given prominence, and how they were narrated and evaluated.

While occasional reference will be made to published sources, data will mostly be drawn from the Corpus of Nineteenth-century Scottish Correspondence (19CSC) currently in preparation at the University of Bergamo (Dossena, 2004, and Dossena & Dury, 2008). While its size does not allow quantitative findings to be offered yet, it is believed that qualitative observations on these unique materials may help shed useful light on the phenomena under discussion. In recent years, ‘second-generation’ corpora, i.e. collections of texts that do not necessarily encompass different registers and may serve multiple purposes, have been compiled with specific research questions in mind, and may thus focus on a certain register or variety. In addition, increasing attention has been given to Late Modern English on the one hand, and to Scotland on the other. The Bergamo project¹ thus places itself at the intersection of complementary research interests. In particular, we intend to take into consideration authentic usage in correspondence, because this enables us to investigate a range of different text types within the same category, from business and official correspondence to familiar letters. We can analyze documents encoded by users whose linguistic competence may vary greatly depending on their level of schooling and circumstances; we may come across letters that follow highly codified models of business writing and texts that are actual ‘conversations in writing’, in which vernacular usage is reflected in spelling, syntax and vocabulary.

At the time of writing (spring 2011), 19CSC comprises ca. 400 letters (250 business-oriented and 150 familiar ones), for a total of ca. 100,000 orthographic units (Dury, 2006 and Dury, 2008).² Clearly, this is far from representative of nineteenth-century epistolary discourse, and much more work will be needed to achieve that aim. For now, however, we think it is important to stress a few key points concerning the main qualifying traits of the corpus. First of all, the texts included in the corpus derive from the transcription of authentic, previously unedited, manuscripts selected both randomly and in connection with each other

¹ I gratefully acknowledge permission to access and quote from MSS held in the National Library of Scotland, Glasgow University Archives, and the Bank of Scotland Archives in Edinburgh. Such permission does not extend to third parties, so the quotations presented in this paper should not be used elsewhere.

² On terminological issues see Dossena (forthcoming a).

(e.g., in the case of answers to enquiries, or rejoinders to controversies). As for encoders and recipients, they are men and women of varying ages, living in Scotland or of Scottish origin, whose level of education ranges from fully to minimally-schooled (Fairman, 2003).

Familiar letters comprise a substantial number of documents (about 1/6 of the whole corpus) written to friends and relatives by people who had emigrated from Scotland to the USA, Canada, Australia and New Zealand. In business exchanges, by contrast, different types of letters, reflecting different types of business relationships, are recorded. On the one hand, we have fairly distant, official circulars issued to agents and representatives, in which personalization is minimized. On the other, we have highly personalized letters that, while still dealing with business issues, address someone specifically and, as a result, adopt linguistic strategies that follow the development of the relationship itself (see Dossena, 2006a; 2006b).

In 19CSC, therefore, focus is on geo-historical variation in correspondence of different types. As a result, this collection is expected to enable us to investigate different issues from different points of view, concentrating on different aspects and different themes.

2. Labour discourse in 19CSC

In 19CSC work-related themes are found in both branches of the corpus. Business letters include job applications, letters of reference and letters requesting help in finding an employee. Among familiar letters, on the other hand, the comments found in emigrants' correspondence may prove particularly interesting on account of the light they shed on a completely different environment. In what follows I will attempt to provide an overview of the remarks found in letters issued in different social contexts, and for different purposes: the discussion may range from the middle-class remarks on what makes a good employee, such as we see in letters of reference, or what materials are suitable for a teacher in a relatively remote part of the British empire, to the predicament of homesteaders and gold diggers in the American West. Correspondence will also be seen in its relationship with diaries and emigration guides, as the latter may contribute another useful point of view on the topic.

The authors of such guides meant to encourage emigration and, at the same time, instruct prospective emigrants about what they might expect (whether in terms of wages and social environment) and how they would be expected to behave in case of industrial conflict; as a result, they are very valuable sources for the general context in which emigrants found themselves, which in turn may help us understand their personal correspondence better, beyond what is actually found in the text, which was often relatively elliptical, whether because the aim was to reassure the recipients, or because space or time was lacking.

2.1. The job market: wages and opportunities

Many nineteenth-century emigrants hoped their economic conditions would improve overseas, so their letters often provide detailed information on prices and wages in the host country, and the message is typically reassuring; as Gerber (2006, p. 183) notes, many correspondents refrained from writing, if they could not provide good news. In the quotation below,³ the encoder reassures his recipients about his earning potential, despite the high prices of commodities; the chance to buy land at a low cost and the commercial value of produce are also stressed:

money is easer earned hear nor what it is at home and the onley expencive thing
hear is cloas for cloath of all kinds is dubel price and som things mor and the
onley thing easey purchased hear is land and the produs of land sells verey well
hear. (Charlotte Town, 9 July 1818)

There is therefore a kind of tension between the need to inform about the cost of living and the need to reassure recipients who naturally worry about the welfare of their distant friends or relations. This is all the more the case when correspondents also need to counterbalance the (perhaps inaccurate) reports of local newspapers or journals at home. In the quotation below, for instance, a

³ In all quotations symbols indicating line breaks (#) or page breaks (###) are omitted for the sake of space and legibility; ^^ indicates superscript.

prospective gold digger in Klondike confirms his intention to continue his enterprise, though he has not actually struck gold yet:

You mention about exaggerated reports being in the home newspapers, but there is lots of truth in them too although my luck has been bad so far, still i beleive this to be as rich a gold field yet discovered and this wash up there is bound to be an extraordinary amount of gold taken out, in fact it is hard for one outside to credit it. (Dawson City, 18 March 1898)

In fact, disappointment and the need to move further afield were not infrequent. On the other hand, moving west and/or setting up a new homestead were distinct possibilities –quite a change from being tenants in Scotland, as the encoder below indirectly stresses when he says they are their own masters and there are ‘no term-days’:

we can have plenty to live upon and we Can with industry advans our property by Clearing land [...] I paid my land before ever i Came on to it and I have no dout but if i was for selling it Could nearly threepel wha^t^ I gave for it [...] I think ^I^ Can bring my famley more Comf^ortab^ up hear we Can keep then all abouts us we ar our oun masters we have no tearmdays. (London [Ontario], 28 Jan. 1835)

Indeed, the fact that rents were not due had a positive impact on prices as well; as one correspondent put it:

I am sorry that you have such depression in prices of Stock in the old Country - which makes farming very unprofitable. It is hard to understand how it pays to send so many Cattle and sheep from this Country for the European markets. Of course the Stock raisers of this Country have not the expensive rents of the old country to contend with, and which makes a great difference.

(Winnipeg, 3 Feb. 1900)

In addition, fishing and hunting were not subject to the very strict poaching laws of Britain:

Lots of small gem in the mountains any Body can go + hunt Lots of peopel gos up in the summer for a month on to hunt + fish take Blankets we them + a horse

+ saddle + camp Lick the tinkers [...] + the Rivers is fill of Salmon + trout + any Body can catch them I think my self ther is mor Liberty hear then over their. (Troutdale, 5 March 1895)

Comparisons with the ‘old country’ were naturally frequent, which accounts for the numerous occurrences of comparative forms; these, however, often concerned different parts of the same country:

I am going to hold this place down now for a while any way ^they^ say better wages here than in any other place in America so if I will work steady for some time I will be able to safe a few dollars. (Granite, 8 Jan. 1890)

But emigration did not always lead to a land of milk and honey: disappointment could be expected, as in the case of the man in the quotation below, whose health was also damaged:

i may let you know that your brother Alexander has come home from Astralia we did not know any thing about him till he came in at the door there is a great altration on him a great deal older like he has a very bad cold and stifled at the breast we think his Jaunt has done him no good [...] He says he has [...] come home a poorer but a wiser man. (Shone Cottage, 31 May 1895)

In fact, correspondents did admit that the situation could be bad, but they were also quick to offer alternative solutions to their predicament, or to state that their own situation was not so bad after all; two examples are given below:

I wont stay very long it is a very unhealthy country and it must be worse in the summer time. and I think a fellow has a better show out west any way it is a new country and there is more enterprise in business. (Liddle, 8 March 1890)

I have no news to give you as I cant write much we my hand being strept but I have plenty to eat + a good bed to sleep on but times is verry bad hear Lots of men out of work. (Troutdale, 1 Feb. 1894)

In other cases, the narration of success stories stressed the importance of one’s own careful attitude, good relationships with native populations, and

attention to detail; in the next example, the encoder reports on his adventures and often contrasts his (wise) choices with those of other prospectors:

Doubtless you have heard of the great and general excitement caused, and being still caused, by the rich finds of gold that has been made on the Yukon River, and its tributaries in the far north.

Well I may tell you that I was seized with a desire to try my luck in search of the precious metals, and I on the 5th of Feby of last year ('98) started from here, and conducted a party of 33 men, and led them on to the North via the M^cKenzie River route, intending to get on to the upper waters of the Liard River – where I was aware of the finding of gold in paying quantities as far back as the early 70s. Of course we met with and encountered many difficulties, as was sure to be the lot of every one trying to get into that inhospitable region –but my former experience in, and knowledge of that country aided us very materially indeed and we got on and along in many places where a great number of others failed. Every one was in a rush in order to get to the gold-fields first, but I was taking things coolly, and showed no excitement at any stage of the journey. Finally we got as far as Great Slave Lake, and there I fell in with an old native who remembered me well since I was in the M^cKenzie River District from 1863 up to 1873 –and having been very good and kind to him, as he said, he thought that he would try and make some compensation for the good I had done him, and which he apparently had not forgotten, and offered to guide me to a place where he thought I might find what I was in search of, and accordingly we started out on our expedition of discovery, and true to his idea he took me to a place where I made very rich finds in gold-bearing quartz – silver + copper – some of the quartz assayed as high as \$ 5.800⁰⁰ to the ton of 200.0 lbs. of course the whole of my party benefited by the rich finds which the native halfbreed [sic] (for such he really is) led me to –and the company who outfitted the party that I led and commanded, are now the owners of exceptionally rich properties, and will commence developing works on them early next spring. I came out from the North last October, and brought out a quantity of samples with me and with which I went on to Chicago, where our Company is, and had the samples assayed there. I am one of the Company myself now –and own a large number of shares in it – as well as being manager and agent for the Company in Canada.

(Winnipeg, 1 Jan. 1899)

When talking about third parties, however, correspondents were often somewhat elliptical, simply saying that someone was “doing well” in such and such a place. On the one hand, this may be explained by the fact that perhaps

information was not necessarily so accurate by the time the letter was written, and encoders did not wish to be misleading, albeit inadvertently; on the other, they could assume that such third parties would be writing their own letters, so it was not really worth ‘wasting’ much ink and paper of their own. Instead, new opportunities, especially relating to mining, could be discussed in detail, and the company’s progress could be the object of fairly detailed reports by second or third generation correspondents, when recipients were known to be competent. It is in such cases that vocabulary becomes much more specialized, on account of the more direct interest of the recipients:

A couple of days ago I had a trip down the Belcher, one of the largest mines up here, the perpendicular shaft is 850 ft deep, and the incline runs from here down to the 1600 ft level. there is one engine for the incline, and one engine with two hoisting reels worked from clutches on engine shaft. they use double deck cages, each car holds one tow of rock. the engines are each 20” x 26” dia. there is one pumping engine and force pumps which pump from the bottom of the perpendicular shaft all water below that is pumped by small pumps run by air into another mine from where it is pumped up. (Gold Hill, 12 Oct. 1875)

Tomorrow I start on a new route, a trip through Arizona I have heard considerable of the country, there are a great many very rich mines there, principally Silver, as a rule they do not last long, pay well for a year or two, and then give out. Capitalists are only just commencing to interest themselves in the district and up to the present principally Eastern parties. They are buying the mines up and working them on their own hook, without putting them on the boards. [...] I have spent the greater part of this year traveling from one town to another in Nevada and Cal. but making my headquarters at Bodie. We took an order a few days ago for one of the mines there, for a pumping rig similar to the New Almaden having the “Davey” motion. (San Francisco, 27 Oct. 1879)

On the other hand, ‘specialized’ vocabulary could feature in radically different contexts too: in George F. Ruxton’s *Life in the Far West* (1848),⁴ for example, many lexical items occur in the narrative without extensive explanations, in order to give a flavour of authenticity to the text. The language of the mountain

⁴ This was first published in *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine* between June and November 1848. On language in Ruxton’s works see Hubbard (1968) and Barrick (1975).

men engaged in fur trading and trapping in the Rocky Mountains in the mid-1840s is presented to provoke vicarious thrills for the readers safe in their bourgeois British homes (see Hubbard, 1968), just as the language of Native Americans is occasionally cited in travel narratives (Dossena, forthcoming b), or indeed as snatches of Gaelic are interpolated in narrations of the Highland Clearances (Dossena, 2001).

British readers certainly did take a great interest in the New World and the way in which it was developing. For many, it presented an invaluable opportunity. But emigration was not for everybody. As a guide put it, capitalists, speculators (especially impecunious ones) and intellectuals did not really need to move, and even industrial workers were only encouraged to emigrate if they were “industrious, frugal and temperate” –qualities that were typically stressed in letters of reference. As for women, they would only find jobs as domestic servants:

We must not conclude, however, without saying a few words as to who ought not to emigrate to the United States. All classes of professional men, those who work chiefly with the head rather than with the hands, will find few openings. Commercial men and speculators of all sorts, with little or no capital, are not wanted, Capitalists can make their profitable American investments at home. Mercantile clerks are in no request. [...] Even of the operative classes, none but the industrious, frugal and temperate can expect to prosper in America. [...] Nor is there any opening for female emigration, except for domestic service.

(Macaulay, 1872, pp. 399-401)

But emigrants who invited women to join them sometimes discouraged this, probably because they had other plans –presumably marital ones, as the letter below seems to imply:

Dear Uncle I wish you would be so good is to send Mary Walker out here if you can get her to syne her name as other single females does and if she comes send me let me know of it and the name of the with which she comes and as soon as I will see in the news paper that that vessel comes I will meet her and she must not hire to any one if she comes [...] if she do come I will take care of her wherever I go she will go and if ever I am sored to go home once more she will go home.

(Portland Bay, Australia, 8 April 1856)

Correspondence thus complements guides in outlining the social background in which emigrants found themselves –a background that was not always entirely welcoming, especially in times of strife.

2.2. Workers' rights at home and abroad –a changing picture

Books intending to offer guidance to prospective emigrants could hardly be taken to be objective sources of information. Not only were many of them meant to encourage emigration, and therefore highlight the positive aspects of the new context but their comments were often moralizing, when not actually polemical in political terms. An anonymous text of 1840, for instance, *The British Mechanic's and Labourer's Hand Book, and True Guide to the United States: with ample notices respecting various trades and professions*, provided a short historical overview of the 1835-36 strikes, which had quickly spread from Philadelphia to other parts of the country,⁵ then concluded:

[strikes] have never been productive of the slightest benefit to the workmen, [...] the freest country upon the face of the earth cannot tolerate them, being as they are so thoroughly inimical to its best interests. Indeed, all trades' confederacies, be they what they may, are alike injurious to the individual and the community. They may in themselves be successful, and answer the purpose of the parties for a time, but [...] they seldom last long, [...]; for as soon as the employer is capable of releasing himself from the extorted claim, he invariably does so, and always to the future disadvantage of the workman. (Anon., 1840, p. 198)

As a matter of fact, familiar letters do not discuss industrial action in any great detail, possibly because the recipients would not have known enough about the reasons justifying it. Instead, authors are quick to reassure their recipients that they will soon look for other jobs, if they have not found them already, as in the example below:

We were about coming out on strike in the Indian Territory so it was as well to get out of it in time Well as for this country I can not say much about it as yet I could

⁵ See Commons (1907) for an early, albeit short, discussion of the years leading up to these events.

get a job or two here already but I did not take them, of course there is nothing out here but mining, there is mines of every description [...] I may not stay here more than a few days if I wont strike something that will suit me. I may pull up into Colorado but it is hard telling where I may go to this country is so full of ups and downs that a person does not know where to go for the best, and I beleive times is pretty dull all over at present, but they will be opening up pretty soon now for the summer work. (Gallup, 28 March 1890)

It may be interesting to note that the initiative of industrial action may be attributed to foreign influence; in particular, the author of the text below refers to “English trade unionists of the Sheffield type”, where the ‘Sheffield type’ becomes almost a metonymy of the prototypical trade unionist of industrial England:

When I was at Boston there was a strike among the operatives at the Fall River factories. An attempt was made to coerce, at the instigation, it was said, of some English trade unionists of the Sheffield type. The militia was promptly called out, and the unionists were told that “whatever they might do in England, interference with the right of free labour would not for an hour be tolerated in America.” There was a strike some time afterwards among the colliers in Pennsylvania. This was also traced to foreign workmen, few of the native Americans taking part in it. The combinations of working men, however, are increasing throughout the Union, and may cause political as well as social troubles. We have heard already of a labour league threatening to make a separate organization in view of the next presidential election. The prospect of political influences from such combination is small, the mass of the people being well leavened with sound views of political economy through the press. (Macaulay, 1872, p. 354)

Protests against slavery are also said to be started by English abolitionists, a quarter of a century before the American Civil War broke out. The author of the letter below, however, finds the predicament of the working class is actually much worse in Britain than it is in Pennsylvania, where he is writing from. Indeed, his tone is almost resentful, and he makes his point very defensively, referring to the fact that the people he has hired would not mind being slaves again, while admitting that slavery cannot be easily discussed in a letter:

well there is nothing of note stirring in this country at present with the exception of some fanatical _ abolitionists sent from england and which I hope to see tarred

and feathered for their pains let stay at home and look inside of some of these large factories and they will see slavery enough. here Niger works 7 hours a day better fed than the Middle Classes in General in Britain _ However I am not able to give you a proper idea of the slave on paper. But this fact I can mention that I have employed ^for labourers^ emancipated Negroes that would be happy to be taken back by their old master to be slave again if they would take them_ (Philadelphia, 19 Aug. 1835)

Emigrants are sometimes seen to be ambivalent about such complicated issues, especially once their permanence abroad has begun to span decades. While they do not wish to sound inconsiderate of their recipients at home, they are also beginning to take pride in their new home, and may defend the political choices of their new leaders, occasionally drawing parallels with the situation at home. This is the case, for instance, in the quotation below, in which the American Civil War is discussed in relation to the Irish question:

The American Colonies seceded from the Mother Country and at the close of the war made a contract (the written Constitution) with one another all the rights of sovereignty except such as were yielded to the general Government by that constitution. When the Northern States became strong enough they violated the terms of contract and there being no power to enforce [sic] those terms and brought on a brutal war the necessary consequence of which was the **conquest** of the Southern States. These states therefore are no longer an ass^ociation of free states as they always professed to be and do so now. Compare this now ^with the^ state of affairs between Great British Government and Ireland. Ireland was never anything but a country conquered by Great Britain and has now just claims against that Government except such ^as^ were yielded at the dissolution of the Irish Parliament. The case of Great Britain against Ireland is similar to that between the Northern + Southern States with this fatal difference. The South fought against the North for rights to which we had a just claim Ireland is fighting against Great Britain for claims to which it has no just claims whatever. Gladstone the great admirer of the **free** Government of the so called United States and is the great leader of the Irish who are trying to break down the freer Govern^t of Great Britain. Consistency!!! (Camden, 26 March 1889)

The forcefully evaluative terms of the letter leave little doubt as to the encoder's views. This, however, concerns political issues. When attention is given to work relations, language becomes more factual and indeed the informative

quality of the texts, rather than their persuasive one, is emphasized. In a grammar and letter-writing manual meant for Italian emigrants to the USA (Anon., 1905), for instance, we find interesting letters in which the worker claims his wages, or indeed asks a lawyer to help him sue his former employer:

Dear Sir: Mr W. Cameron, your representative, discharged me yesterday from work on the Pennsylvania R.R. at Corning, NY. and refused to pay me \$ 41.00 due to me for 20 ½ days' work without giving any reasonable explanation therefore.

Will you kindly inform me whether you will instruct Mr Cameron to pay over the money, or if I shall have to call for it at your office [...] (Anon., 1905, p. 313).

Dear Sir: on July 30th last I was discharged from work on the Pennsylvania R.R. at Corning, NY.

Mr D. Brown superintendent of the works for [...] refused to pay me \$ 40.00 due for work done. I claimed this amount directly from [...] and could not get any reply.

As I intend to institute legal proceedings to enforce payment of the amount due, I wish you would kindly inform me as to your fee for taking charge of the case and pushing it to a speedy conclusion [...] (Anon., 1905, p. 315)

In both cases the tone is matter-of-fact, perfectly in line with the directness that business correspondence envisages in such contexts, especially when superiors address subordinates (see Dossena, 2006b). The worker is determined to see his rights acknowledged and his just claims met, and his unemotional statements on the one hand, and polite usage of deontic modality on the other, place him in a relatively powerful position. It is the same kind of power encoded in letters by employers or managers who wish to convey information on retirement issues, such as in the case below:

I have received your Letter of 21 Inst and regret to learn that you still continue an invalid . I have submitted to the Directors the question as to a retired allowance and have to acquaint you that on account of your long service they are disposed to allow you to retire on three fourths of your salary that is £ 105 p annum.

It is not the practice of the Bank in any case to give the full salary and I trust that what is now proposed may be satisfactory to you [...] (Edinburgh, 23 July 1840)

Although the former employee is not really in a position to negotiate the arrangement, the bank directors politely express confidence that this may be satisfactory, thus at least acknowledging the recipient's positive face.

2.3. The newsworthiness of work

The study of ego-documents, such as diaries and correspondence, may also enable us to witness extraordinary events, such as accidents, through the eyes of the protagonists, whether eyewitnesses or second-hand reporters. In the case discussed here, the letter provides information about an explosion in a mine in which three people were killed and nine were injured. The summary of events in the text is supplemented with a sketched map of the workings (in the blank space on the right in the transcription below), in order to give a more accurate representation of the space in which the accident occurred, and where people were when it happened: places and people are represented by letters in both the map and the text:

My dear Father, [...]

last night about nine [^]half past eight[^] o'clock I got a telegram saying that Udston pit had blasted and that there were three men in it. I went straight off to Mr Robson's and we got the 9.20 train for Hamilton and got there shortly after ten o'clock. We found that at about half past four when the men were coming up out of the pit an explosion occurred in the main coal. In about ten minutes all the men, but Archibald, the manager and two colliers, got out. These three men could not be got at for some time, but about half past seven they were got out, all of them quite dead. The oversman, was pretty severely burned and other 7 colliers, the most severely of whom is a lad Tierny. After hearing these description [^]particulars[^] from Mr Ure, Mr Robson and I went down to the place and saw it. The accident occurred in the Stoop and room workings to the right of the "Cowsie" from the shaft. It seems that the place to the rise from which A was driven off was 20 yards up and

A was driven off level course to go through on B, which had been driven up some weeks ago and was close fallen. There was a man Morrison and his son⁶ working in it and two a man named Morton in the straight up place. On Monday night ^afternoon^ Archibald an the manager and Bolton, the oversman went in here on Tuesday afternoon and while they was were in an the explosion took place. Bolton escaped and ran to the shaft, but Archibald (1) Morrison (3) and his son (2) were lost. They appear to have been killed with chokedamp rather than burned. The brattice was in to within 6 feet of the face and was not disturbed except at C where the corner to the dip was lifted. The other men who were burned were on their way to the shaft. Last night we could not get into A for firedamp and the fireman said he did not know whether the place was through or not, but this morning we found a hole about 4 feet wide and 18" high had been put down from the low side of the place and on the top of the grounds coal. B The oversman and manager vests were found at V as if they had been going to put the place through and a jumper was found in the hole as if this had been used to do it with. Bolton is too ill to be examined, but the fireman told us that he had told him that this was the case, and that Mr Archibald had sent the men home and he and Bolton (the former

⁶ The discussion of child labour and its representations in these documents would deserve a separate study. What is perhaps immediately striking for the twenty-first century reader is the naturalness with which the presence of teenagers, and indeed children, in workplaces is unquestioned. Indeed, in one of the 19CSC letters, a middle-class boy describes his daily routine in a letter to his uncle in the following terms:

I am still in the drawing room + like it very well [...]. we start work about 7½ o'clock + then go home at 5. At 12 o'clock I come home (about 2 Blocks) for dinner. hurry up + get back at 12½ o'clock then I sketch free hand (mechanical) for the next ½ hour. [...] this year about 18 boys are all engaged every noon time. he [my father] never likes to see them idle at noon time. then in the evening . My father . Andrew + I go down to the office . and stay till about 10 o'clock. + we work out different kinds of Mechanical questions [...] (San Francisco, 21 Feb 1875)

with a Clancy and the latter with a gauze lamp) were going to put the place through. They had just done this when Morrison came back for a pick or something and with his naked light ignited the gas. There was a hutch standing on the road and they seem to have run out the bratticed side of the road. Bolton got clear but ^but^ Archibald seems to have gone too far and getting behind a hutch which was standing in E got overpowered by the afterdamp before he could get clear. The boy Morrison was found in the face of the rise place ^at 7^ and his father was found at 3. He appears to have run against a tree and stunned himself as his forehead is all bloodshot. Morton, who worked in the straight up place was in his face at the time but got away so little burnt that he remained and helped them to put up the brattice at C. The blast appears to have gone back by D as it burned the men who were going out at L.

Altogether it appears to have been a very simple thing caused by not putting the men on safety lamps when going through on a place likely to contain gas.

Mr Alexander noticed the account of the accident in the papers and came up this morning. He went down the pit and saw where the accident happened. [...] (Rutherglen, 16 May 1882)

The letter also encloses a newspaper cutting, the source of which is not quoted, probably in the assumption that the recipient will know anyway. In the report the same events are narrated with more factual details, such as the age of the people involved, their addresses, how long they had been employed there, and the reactions of the community. The narrative thus becomes more complete thanks to intertextual references that present a three-tiered story: the letter itself, probably written in haste and without a preliminary draft, on account of the urgency of the matter, as the numerous self-corrections seem to suggest; the graph outlining the space of the event; and the more extensive newspaper report. It is therefore interesting to see how the same event is presented to two very different types of recipient: the general public in the case of the newspaper report, for the benefit of whom human-interest details are provided, and an

informed correspondent who is already familiar with the mine and the people involved, and for whom a much shorter report is offered, while supplementing it with a graph meant to help the reader understand the exact location of the people and places under discussion more.

It is of course beyond the scope of this contribution to compare the report and the letter in any greater detail. Suffice it to say that this seems to be a very interesting instance of an encoder supplementing his private, personal(ized) message with a more extensive text addressed to a more general readership. Individual communication is thus seen to interact with generalized information, placing the letter at the centre of a newsworthy, and very dramatic, report.

3. Concluding remarks

The overview presented in this contribution, albeit brief, has enabled us to identify some interesting patterns in the way in which working conditions are presented and discussed in the documents taken into consideration. First of all, it should be pointed out that the discussion of work encompasses a fairly wide range of topics: not just wages and the cost of living, working conditions, job opportunities and the more or less successful outcome of specific enterprises, but also the social perception of workers in letters of reference or in emigration guides; especially in the latter, advice against industrial action is typically given to prospective expatriates, who are encouraged to be frugal, sober and productive. Letters may also discuss political and economic issues, such as slavery or the Irish question, though of course always from the point of view of microlevel commentators, as none of the correspondents in 19CSC is a well-known protagonist of historical events.

In the discussion of such topics, the relationship between correspondents always has a crucial impact on the linguistic and textual choices of the encoders. The need to reconcile reassuring information and factual details is probably what makes epistemic modality so prominent in such letters. The frequent occurrences of ‘may’, for instance, as in “I may pull up, I may go”, express probability which –far from signalling hesitation or uncertainty– signal the open attitude of the encoder towards his situation, in which decisions are made according to what seems to be the most profitable and safest choice. For the

same reason, verbs expressing opinion, such as “I think, I believe”, indicate that the encoder’s actions obey a line of reasoning in which reality is evaluated both subjectively and confidently. Indeed, evaluative vocabulary features very prominently, especially in relation to items, the semantic prosody of which is positive; this accounts for the occurrence of adjectives like ‘rich’ or ‘comfortable’, nouns like ‘excitement’, and verbs like ‘advance’, in addition to boosters like ‘plenty’, ‘first rate’, ‘exceptionally’ and –of course– ‘very’. When it is people that are evaluated, however, the qualities that Victorian society appreciated so much are quick to emerge: references to temperance, frugality, honesty and productivity occur in various ways in the texts, and it is often the case that they may be gleaned from indirect references, rather than full lexicalization.

The study of these documents, then, contributes to our understanding of Late Modern times (and their modes of expression) in various ways. Beyond the quantitative findings that a typical corpus-based search might provide, there is a much wider perspective to be gained from the accurate reading of papers, the publication of which was never envisaged by their authors. Correspondence may truly be said to hold a mirror up to culture –or, perhaps– to changing cultures.

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