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THE COMMUNICATION THEORY OF JOHANN CARL MAY:
ITS INFLUENCE ON BUSINESS COMMUNICATION IN GERMANY

Working Paper No. 236

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INTRODUCTION

If one were to compile a history of business communication in Germany, that history would include Johann Carl May: Versuch in Handlungs-Briefen, und grösseren Aufsätzen, nach den Gellertschen Regeln. Nebst einer Abhandlung von dem Guten Geschmack in Handlungs-Briefen. (Attempt in Business Letters and Longer Reports According to Gellert's Rules. Including a Treatise on Good Taste in Business Letters.) This work is significant for two reasons.

First, it depends upon a preceding work by Christian Fürchtegott Gellert entitled Briefe nebst einer praktischen Abhandlung von dem Guten Geschmacke in Briefen. (Letters and a Practical Treatise of Good Taste in Letters.) It was this work, published in 1751, which set the touchstone for subsequent German works on writing. The title of May's book indicates that Gellert's book had fast become known and that his principles were considered worth following. The second part of May's title is almost identical with Gellert's title; both stress good taste in letters, den guten Geschmack. The title also indicates how highly May considered Gellert's achievements. His is an attempt to follow Gellert, meaning that Gellert set very high standards which would be difficult to reach. This attitude is also expressed in the preface to the first edition where May almost apologizes that his book is not for Gelehrte (men of letters) but only for Handelsleute (merchants).¹

Second, May is important because his is the first book on business letters which follows the "new" rules, in theory and example. May takes Gellert's principles and applies them to business situations.

May was not the first to focus on business communication as seen in letters; he was preceded by Johann Heinrich Gottlob von Justi who had written on business letters in 1755, Anweisungen zu einer guten Deutschen Schreibart und allen in Geschäften und Rechtssachen vorkommenden schriftlichen Ausarbeitungen. (Guidelines For a Good German Style And All Written Communications in Business and Law.) Justi's theoretical approach is similar to that of Gellert and May. While May demands a natural style, Justi distinguishes between private letters and letters to higher people. His examples almost exclusively are letters to persons of high social rank. These letters require special formulas, use of titles, etc. and are therefore closer to the stylus curiae.² They are not illustrations of his theoretical principles.³

May is the first to write business letters that are in harmony with the new stylistic principles. Thus the work by May holds a significant position in Germany, a country heavily involved in foreign trade during the 18th century. To position May more precisely in his period, and in the history of business communication, our analysis is threefold: (1) antecedent influences on May; (2) May's theory of business communication in Germany; and (3) May's letters as exemplifying his theory.

ANTECEDENT INFLUENCES ON MAY

Until the end of the 17th century the mastery of the stylus curiae was considered essential for anyone who wanted to write good letters in German. Letters were composed according to set rules of style and organization: *antecedes, connexio, amplificatio, conclusio*.⁴ Not only

were there rules binding for the organization of the letter, but set formulas had been developed for a greater number of situations. The expression of individual thoughts in letters was almost impossible. Since the stylus curiae had reached a climax in the church of the middle ages, letters were full of Latin phrases that most people did not understand. It took Germany a long time to free itself from the overuse of foreign words and develop the German language to a level where it could be used to express complex ideas and thought processes in the vernacular.

Developments Before Gellert

Several people stand out because of their attempts to refine the German language. Luther is probably best known in the effort to unify German. The translation of the Bible gave Germany a national language for the first time. People after him continued to give the language form so it could be used in poetry and live up to the demands of artistic forms like ode and sonnet.

During the 17th century Martin Opitz laid down rules for German as a language of poetry in his Büchlein von der deutschen Poeterei. (Little Book of German Poetry.) He wanted to show that German could be used in literature just as well as any other language.

In the century after Opitz the mastery of form gained in importance. The German princes attained more independence during that time. Each one tried to create his own empire. Life at court became refined, polite, the baroque gave way to the rokoko. This development is also reflected in the style of letters. The stylus curiae is somewhat replaced by the Hofstil (court style), practices at court. A letter written according to the Hofstil is supposed to be clear, elegant, and short. But, as Nickisch points out, the definition of these words is directly tied to

what is considered acceptable behavior at court. Standards are set at court, not by the common people.⁵ The elegance of the Hofstil begins to require its own formulas which in many ways are not different from those of the stylus curiae. Free expression of thoughts is difficult with the emphasis on form in both styles. The theory of the Hofstil still encourages formalities, patterns, ceremonial expressions, and foreign words.

German language and literature were at another low point when Gottsched, professor at the University of Leipzig, turned against the baroque deformities of and the foreign elements in the German language in the first half of the 18th century. Gottsched wrote a grammar for the German language. He also encouraged the writing of a German dictionary; in short, he attempted to make German fit for literature. Gottsched considered it his task to revitalize the language, to develop it to a point where it was strong enough to express complex thought processes and encourage creativity. His Sprachschöpferische Tätigkeit cannot be overestimated because it provided the basis for Gellert's new approaches to writing letters.

Gellert

Gellert, like Johann Christoph Gottsched, was a professor at the University of Leipzig, and Gellert too was deeply concerned about the state of the German language. In 1742, Gellert published Belustigungen des Verstandes und des Witzes, (Pleasures of reason and intellect), which contained the "Gedanken von einem guten deutschen Briefe, an den Herrn F. H.v.W." (Thoughts about a good German Letter, to Mr. F. H.v.W.) These thoughts already contain most of Gellert's principles for writing. Gellert's later book, Briefe nebst einer praktischen Abhandlung von dem

guten Geschmacke in Briefen (1751), (Letters and a Practical Treatise of Good Taste in Letters) expands on the theory and develops it in more depth, but the basic ideas are the same in both publications.

Gottsched's work obviously began to bear fruit, and Germany was ready for the direction that Gellert gave. Gellert's book went through ten editions in the 18th century.

At first glance the title of Gellert's book looks rather conventional, presenting another of the Briefsteller or (Recipe Book For Letter Writing). The book seems to promise patterns and precise rules for writing various letters. However, the title is misleading to some extent. The letters are examples of the principles discussed, and they follow the discussion of the guten Geschmack in letters contrary to what the title indicates. The emphasis is on the theoretical foundation for writing letters, not on the giving of examples that should be copied routinely. In fact, Gellert opposes the strict following of any rules; as a result he also rejects the Briefsteller.

Alle die künstlichen Methoden, nach welchen uns unsre Briefsteller Gemeiniglich lehren wollen, wie man einen Brief ordnen und seine Gedanken in gewisse Behältnisse zwingen soll, in die sie sich meistentheils nicht schicken, sind niemanden anzupreisen....Die Erfinder dieser Künste haben es unstreitig gut gemeint, aber ihre gute Meynung, jungen Leuten das Briefschreiben zu erleichtern hat vielleicht mehr Schaden angerichtet, als wenn sie die schlimmste Absicht gehabt hätten....Sie geben uns gewisse Angangs-und Schluss-Formeln, gewisse Verbindungswörter, die im Umgange nicht gerbräuchlich sind....Der Gebrauch dieser Methoden ist unstreitig an dem schlimmen Geschmacke in Briefen hauptsächlich

(All the artificial methods which our experts on letters are eager to teach us, how to organize a letter, and how to force the ideas into certain forms which usually do not fit, should not be held up as examples for anyone....The inventors of these methods were well meaning without doubt, but their good intentions to make letter writing easier for young people have caused more damage than if they had had bad intentions....They give us certain beginning and ending formulas, certain connecting phrases which are not used in everyday language....The use of these methods is undoubtedly the reason for the poor taste in letters....The best

Ursache, der lange Zeit in Deutschland geherrscht hat.... Das beste Mittel diese Methoden zu widerlegen, sind die guten Briefe der Alten und Neuen. Und aus diesen Exempeln sehen wir nichts mehr, als dass es keine abgemessene Ordnung giebt, die man schon im Vorrath hat, ehe man den Brief schreibt: sondern dass die Vorstellung des Inhaltes jedesmal die Einrichtung giebt.⁶

remedy for these bad methods is the study of good letters, old and new ones....From these examples one can see that there is no definite order one can determine before writing the letters; but that the content in each case provides the order.)

1. Gellert's Stylistic Principles. Gellert establishes several basic principles that have to be followed if a letter is to be good. (1) A letter has to have the character of a conversation. (2) A letter has to be natural. (3) A letter has to be individual and personal. The following is a discussion on how Gellert attempts to realize these principles.

a. Conversational. "So viel ist gewiss, dass wir in einem Briefe mit einem andern reden, und dass dasjenige, was ich auf ein Blatt schreibe, nichts anders ist, als was ich ihm mündlich sagen würde, wenn ich könnte oder wollte."⁷ (It is certain that we talk to each other in a letter, and that what I write down on paper is nothing else but what I would tell him orally if I could or wanted to.)

In the 1751 book this reads "Das erste, was uns bey einem Briefe einfällt, ist dieses, dass er die Stelle eines Gesprächs vertritt." (The first that comes to mind when thinking about a letter is that it takes the place of a conversation.)⁸

Considering the stylus curiae and its formulas, Gellert's demands for the Gesprächscharakter of a letter seem to break with all tradition. However, Gellert does not say that a letter is a conversation, but that it should imitate the good conversation. He strongly

distinguishes between educated and uneducated talk. "Ein Brief ist kein ordentliches Gespräch; es wird also in einem Briefe nicht alles erlaubt seyn, was im Umgange erlaubt ist....Er ist eine freye Nachahmung des guten Gesprächs."⁹ (A letter is no ordinary conversation; therefore in a letter not everything is allowed that is permissible in everyday speech....It is a free imitation of the good conversation.) This is so because "man hat mehr Zeit, wenn man schreibt, als wenn man spricht. Man kann also, ohne Gefahr unnatürlich zu werden, etwas sorgfältiger in der Wahl seiner Gedanken und Worte, in der Verbindung derselben seyn."¹⁰ (One has more time when one writes than when one talks.

Therefore one can, without danger of becoming unnatural, be more careful in the choice of one's thoughts and words, and in their formulation and connection.)

Gellert's demand for the natürliche, the natural, is connected with the conversational character of a letter.

Die Worte und Redensarten eines Briefes müssen also im gemeinen Leben nicht ungewöhnlich, obgleich nicht die gewöhnlichsten, sie müssen gebräuchlich, aber auch gut und richtig, und nicht allein einzeln, sondern auch im Zusammenhange, üblich seyn. Wer Briefe schön schreiben will, muss nicht so wohl schreiben, wie ein jeder im gemeinen Leben reden, sondern wie eine Person im Umgange ohne Zwang sprechen würde, welche die Wohlredenheit völlig in ihrer Gewalt hätte, welche schön redete, ohne dass die Ausdrücke sich von den Ausdrücken anderer so weit entfernten, dass der Unterschied dem Ohre gleich merklich würde.¹¹

(The words and phrases of a letter must not be unusual in everyday life. Although they should not be the most common, they should be customary and also good and correct not just by themselves but also in context. Who wants to write letters well should not write as everybody talks in everyday life but as a person would talk who mastered good conversation completely, who could talk beautifully without his expressions being so different from those of others that the ear would notice it.)

b. Natural. The meaning of the word natürlich, as Gellert uses it, is rather complex. It combines the elements of being concise, appropriate, tasteful, and lively.

Man muss endlich das Natürliche nicht bloss in Worten und in den einzelnen Gedanken eines Briefes, sondern in dem Ganzen, in dem Zusammenhange der Gedanken untereinander, suchen. Wenn die Gedanken aus einander herzufließen scheinen; wenn keiner fehlt der zum Verstande nöthig ist; wenn keiner da steht, der zu nichts dienet.... wenn diess ist: so heisst der Zusammenhang in der Schreibart und in Briefen natürlich. Man wird also bey dem Natürlichen nicht bloss mit dem Leichten zu frieden seyn müssen, sondern immer noch nöthig haben, eine Wahl in denen Gedanken zu treffen, welche sich hierher am besten am feinsten, am kürzesten, am lebhaftesten ausdrücken können.¹²

(Lastly one has to look for the natural not only in words and in the individual thoughts of a letter, but in the whole, in the relationship of the thoughts. When the ideas seem to flow out of each other, when no idea is missing which is necessary in the understanding of the whole, when no idea is there that has no purpose....when all this occurs, the context and the style of letters is natural. To reach the natural one cannot just be satisfied with the simple but one still has to make a choice of those thoughts which fit best, which express the matter not just in the clearest but also in the most refined, most concise, and vivid way.)

Natürlich definitely does not mean everyday. The stylus curiae is rejected, the artificial phrases and forms are ridiculed, but writing based on Gellert's principles requires discipline and understanding of people and situations, and an ability to analyze them.

Ein guter Brief muss natürlich, deutlich, lebhaft, und nach der Absicht der Sache überzeugend sein.¹³

(A good letter has to be clear, vivid, and according to the situation, convincing.)

Der erste Begriff, den wir mit dem Natürlichen, ins besondere in Briefen, zu verbinden pflegen, ist das Leichte; dieses entsteht aus der Richtigkeit und Klarheit der Gedanken, und aus der Deutlichkeit des Ausdrucks.¹⁴

(The first idea which we connect with the natural, especially in letters, is the light, and unaffected style; this comes from the correctness and clarity of the thoughts, and the clearness of the expression.)

c. Personal. Gellert also insists that the language of letters has to be adapted to the situation. Everyday matters require a simpler

language than special occasions. His rejection of elaborate symbols and metaphors comes directly out of his rejection of the baroque extremes, the overabundance of decorative style elements. Yet, Gellert does not want the plain style of everyday language either. He explains his principle of natural style to the reader by examining letters from other writers. His thorough and critical analysis shows an awareness of the German language, the logic of thought and the structure of sentences that was not present in any of his predecessors. Gellert insists that the situation should dictate the organization of a letter.

Man setzt gemeiniglich, was in der Sache das erste ist, voran. Man fährt mit den Vorstellungen fort, wie sie sich darbieten, und man hört auf, wenn man glaubt, das Nothwendigste gesagt zu haben. Dieses ist auch der Plan zu einem Briefe. Man bediene sich also keiner künstlichen Ordnung, keiner mühsamen Einrichtungen, sondern man überlasse sich der freywilligen Folge seiner Gedanken, und setze sie nacheinander hin, wie sie in uns entstehen.¹⁵

(Usually one puts first what comes first in a matter. One continues with the presentation of things as they appear and finishes when one believes to have said what is necessary. This is also the plan for a letter. One should not use an artificial order, no laborious rules but follow the voluntary sequence of one's ideas and put them down as they arise in us.)

2. Omission of Rules. While Gellert insists that formal education is not necessary to cultivate the qualities for writing good letters, it is obvious that education and social experiences in an educated society do help in developing the sensitivity and the skill to write well.

How can one learn to write well? The traditional Briefsteller had given numerous examples of letters, outlines and patterns for a variety of occasions that only had to be copied and filled in with the particulars. Gellert throws these rules out but does not provide any detailed rules to take the place of the old ones.

"Man darf nur die Natur, die Absicht eines Briefs zu Rathe Ziehen, und einige Grundsätze der Beredsamkeit zu Hülfe nehmen: so wird man sich die nöthigsten Regeln, welche die Briefe fordern, leicht entwerfen können."

(One only has to consider the nature and purpose of a letter and consult some of the principles of eloquence: then one can easily design the most necessary rules which letters require.)

The reader might feel rather disappointed at this stage because he is really on his own. Gellert develops his five principles, discusses, explains, and analyzes them by criticizing and rewriting poor examples. He does not, however, provide the reader with a convenient checklist but rather insists that careful observation and study of circumstances will help in adapting the style and the words to a special situation.

3. Imitation of Good Examples. Gellert does not provide an easy cure. He who wants to write well needs determination. Since he considers the quality of most printed German letters poor, he gives the following advice for improvement: "Will man sich selber im Briefschreiben üben: so wird man sehr wohl thun, wenn man im Anfange gute Briefe übersetzt."¹⁷ (If one wants to practice writing letters, one is well advised to translate good letters in the beginning.)

However, translating is not understood as a verbatim transposing of a letter but as a rethinking and retelling in one's own language which, of course, requires the mastery of at least two languages. This is evidence that Gellert is writing for the educated middle class. In addition to reading good letters in French and Latin, particularly Plinius and Cicero, and translating them into German, he believes that a free imitation of the masters will help students to develop a natural and tasteful style.

4. Exemplary Friendship Letters. To demonstrate his theory, Gellert gives 73 examples of letters after the discussion of the theoretical foundation. They are on a variety of topics. Some give insights into the life of the time; some talk about the hardship of travel; one talks about the education of women; most, however, are letters of friendship. In some cases the emotional language of friendship is embarrassing for the modern reader. Most of us feel rather uncomfortable when reading sentences as the following:

Ehe wir noch miteinander reden,
 so erlauben Sie mir, dass ich
 Ihnen in Gedanken etliche
 Dutzend Mäulchen geben darf....
 Auf die Mäulchen will ich Ihnen
 nunmehr sagen, dass ich Ihnen
 recht herzlich gut bin, und dass
 ich von Ihrer freundschaftlichen
 Seele eben dieses erwarte.¹⁸

(Before we talk to each other,
 permit me to give you in my
 thoughts several dozen kisses....
 After the kisses I would now
 like to tell you that I am
 very fond of you and that I
 expect the same from your
 friendly soul.)

This is a letter from a man to a married woman. A letter between two men reads like this: "Schreiben Sie mir nicht mehr so schöne Briefe, wie der letzte war, ich stehe sonst nicht dafür, dass ich nicht ein wenig eifersüchtig auf Sie werden sollte, so sehr ich Sie auch liebe."¹⁹

(Don't write me any more of those beautiful letters like the last one, otherwise I cannot guarantee that I won't become somewhat jealous of you as much as I love you.)

And another one:

Wenn Sie wüssten, wie lieb ich
 Sie hätte, und wie lieb ich Sie
 stets haben werde, und wenn Sie
 zugleich wüssten, dass ich
 künftig eben nicht fleissiger
 an Sie schreiben werde, als
 zeither; so würden Sie etwas
 wissen, das nicht recht
 zusammenhängt, und das
 demungeachtet sehr wahr ist.²⁰

(If you knew how much I love
 you, and if you knew also that
 I won't write to you more often
 in the future than in the past,
 then you would know something
 that does not make sense but
 which is nevertheless true.)

One easily gets the feeling that many of the letters are written for the sake of writing, to make pleasant and polite conversation. There is little content, little communication other than the longing, the feeling and sentiment for the friend who has left--often just for a few days. Each letter by itself may be sincere, but a whole collection of them strikes the modern reader as repetitious and monotonous.

However, the letters and the language do have to be seen in the context of the time. This was the beginning of the Freundschaftskult, the beginning of the cultivation of personal letters. Without Gellert's work in style the German language might not have been ready for the period of Sturm und Drang, storm and stress. Goethe, for example, who studied in Leipzig while Gellert was still there, was influenced by Gellert's work. Gellert proved that the German language was capable of expressing thoughts of politeness, good behavior, humour and delicate emotions.²¹ What Gellert's letters show, in spite of any shortcomings, is that the German language could express the same deep thoughts as French or any other foreign language. Gellert's letters are flowing, easy to read and, above all, they are written in good German. As pointed out above, Gellert laid the foundation for writing good letters regardless of subject matter.

MAY'S THEORY OF BUSINESS COMMUNICATION

May takes Gellert's theory and applies it to one specific area, business letters and business reports. He was the first one to put the new approach successfully to practical use. As the title indicates, May bases his ideas on Gellert, but he does not just imitate Gellert. He goes beyond him in that he is able to modify Gellert's approach to fit the specific circumstances of commerce. Also, the first edition of May's book appeared in 1756, only five years after Gellert's book. Based on a

reference by Gellert to May, it appears that May had been working independently on a new theory of business letters for some time before Gellert published the "Letter to Herrn F.H.v.W." where he first discussed his own principles. In the "Letter to Herrn F.H.v.W." he says:

Helfen Sie durch Ihre Arbeit die gewaltige Menge der französischen Briefe aus unsern Buchläden verdrängen, und wünschen Sie, dass der Herr Professor May noch bey seinem Vorhaben bleiben mag, eine Sammlung von guten deutschen Briefen herauszugeben, damit wir auch in dieser Art den Ausländern etwas entgegen zu setzen haben, und den Vorwurf nicht länger leiden dürfen, dass wir lieber elende französische Briefe, als schöne deutsche schreiben wollen.²²

(Please try to push the tremendous amount of French letters out of our bookstores through your work and hope that Professor May will stay with his idea to publish a collection of good German letters so we will be able to show foreigners something good and that we will not have to take the accusation that we would write bad French letters rather than good German letters.)

May opens his book on a very positive note: "Wir leben in den beglückten Zeiten, da alle Wissenschaften und Künste sich zum Gipfel der Vollkommenheit schwingen."²³ (We live in very blessed times where all sciences and arts develop to the climax of perfection.) This is in contrast to the anecdote that Nickisch relates about Gellert's feelings on the development of mankind when talking to the King of Prussia.

King: Es ist etwas Verteufeltes. Sie bringen mir ganze Bogen, und ich verstehe nichts davon.

Gellert: Wenn es Ihre Majestät nicht ändern können, so kann ichs noch weniger. Ich kann nur rathen, wo sie befehlen.²⁴

(King: It is devilish. They bring me whole sheets, and I don't understand a thing.

Gellert: If your majesty cannot change things, I can do it even less. I can only give advice where you can give orders.)

This answer indicates resignation and little hope for improvement on a broad scale.

While May insists that he bases his discussion of theory on Gellert's principles, there are some striking differences in the approaches of the two men. Gellert wants to improve the quality of all letters; May is mostly interested in the improvement of business letters. He pleads with his audience and appeals to their pride when he says:

Herr Gellert hat uns vollkommene
Muster in der freundschaftlichen
Art geliefert....Sollen denn die
Kaufleute allein den alten
gezwungenen Canzley Stil
beybehalten? Haben wir keinen
Anteil an einer angenehmen,
geläuterten Schreibart?²⁵

(Mr. Gellert has given us perfect
examples of the friendship let-
ters....Are the merchants the
only ones to continue with the
old forced Chancelery? Do style
we not have a part in a pleasant,
revised writing style?)

Based on this, one could assume that everybody, except merchants, was writing according to Gellert's rules; this of course is not the case.

Separate Treatment of Business Letters

Since May separates business letters from other letters, he feels compelled to justify this separate treatment. He does that in two ways. He gives a philosophical and a practical justification.

Einige haben den Nutzen, und
andere das Vergnügen der
Menschen zum Endzweck. Die
erstere verdienen ohnstreitig
mehr Achtung und mehr Fleiss,
als die letztere; diese sind
ohne jene ein todter Körper,
der ohne das Nutzbare unwirksam
ist.²⁶

(The purpose of some is the
usefulness for people, the
purpose of others is the
pleasure of people. The first,
without question, deserves more
than the second. Those are a
dead body without the first,
which is ineffective without
the useful.)

May maintains that philosophy, art, poetry, pleasure are only possible after the necessities of life have been secured. People who have no livelihood do not and cannot enjoy the arts and the muses. May does not just put the useful and the pleasant on an equal level but he puts the useful as a prerequisite of the pleasant in the first place.

International Trade

Trade, according to May, is the soul of states, it helps all people, the high as well as the low. Because of trade, faraway countries were discovered. Trade furthers knowledge and creates wealth. May is not concerned with retail communications, but with trade that connects distant parts of the world. This global trade he calls the vornehmste Handel, the most noble trade. This point is emphasized throughout his letters. The writer communicates with shippers and merchants in Hamburg, London, Petersburg, Lisbon, Brussels.

To guarantee that trade relationships between distant cities and partners are successful, letters have to be written. Letters have to make sure that the merchant gets the ordered goods, that goods are shipped on time, that payment is made promptly.

Principles of Style

Out of these practical considerations arise the principles that May feels are most important. A letter has to be deutlich (clear), nützlich (useful), natürlich (natural) and deutsch (in good German).

A comparison with Gellert shows the different orientation clearly. Gellert emphasizes the stylistic element of the Natürliche (the natural) the most. In his discussion he refers to it 56 times. This is followed in importance by the Schöne (the beautiful), which is used 40 times. Next is the Lebhafte (vivid) used 20 times, and the Deutliche (clear) used 15 times.²⁶

1. Clarity. For May the most important element of a letter is that it is deutlich and erstündlich (clear and understandable). He refers to this characteristic 12 times.

Die Briefe müssen verständlich
seyn; ein jeder Punkt muss in
gehöriger Ordnung vorgetragen,
und alles dasjenige vermieden
werden, was zu einem
Missverständnis Anlass geben kann.
Ein jeder weiss es, wie viel an
der Deutlichkeit in dem
Kaufmännischen Briefwechsel
gelegen ist.²⁸

(The letters have to be
understandable; each point has
to be presented in proper
order, and all those things have
to be avoided which can cause
misunderstanding. Everybody
knows how important clarity is
in business correspondence.)

A letter has to be nützlich (useful); this is referred to eight times.

"Da die Handlungswissenschaft dem menschlichen Geschlecht darauf verwendet,
das Angenehme mit dem Nutzbaren zu verbinden."²⁹ (Since trade is so
useful for mankind it simply deserves that one spends more effort to con-
nect the pleasant with the useful.)

2. Elimination of Foreign Elements. The request for a natural style
is made four times; the same emphasis can be found in the discussion of
negative elements of style. For Gellert the unnatural is the worst. This
is followed by the forced or unclear style. May sees the worst offense
in a undeutliche und unverständliche und verwirrte letter, all meaning
that the message is not clear.

The second offense in May's eyes is the use of foreign words. He
insists on the use of German for two reasons. The first one is national
pride. Germans should use their own language and get away from imitating
others.

Wir müssen uns unsere
Muttersprache sehr arm
vorstellen, da wir ihr mit
ausländischen Brocken zu
Hülfe zukommen suchen.
Wir wollen sie verschönern;
wir machen sie statt dessen
eckelhaft und unverständlich
....Sie ist an sich reich und
schön genug, wenn man sie
nur gehörig kennt.³⁰

(We must think our mother
tongue to be very poor since we
try to improve it with foreign
phrases. We want to beautify
it; instead we make it dis-
gusting and obscure. It is
rich and beautiful enough if
only one knows it well enough.)

The second reason for rejecting foreign words is the fact that most merchants do not understand French and Latin. Therefore a letter using foreign words violates the most important principle: clarity.

Und was sollen ferner die
fremden und gar römischen
Wörter, das Genus vitae,
Consilia, Consiliis inhaeriren,
in einem Handels Briefe thun?
Können sich nicht unter zehn
Handelsleuten neune finden, die
so viel Latein nicht gelernt
haben, diese Ausdrücke zu
verstehen. Müssen sie
nicht rathen? Und wie leicht
kann man alsdann einen falschen
Sinn herausbringen?³¹

(And furthermore what is the
purpose of all the foreign
Roman words, the Genus vitae,
Consilia, Consiliis inhaeriren,
in a business letter? Could it
not be that out of ten busi-
nessmen nine have not learned
enough Latin to understand these
terms? Would they not have
to guess? And how easily
could one read the wrong meaning.

In his insistence on using German, May is much stronger than Gellert. Gellert requires good German too, but he discusses a number of French and Latin letters assuming that the educated person was fluent in at least one foreign language. May is more practical in his orientation. He gives a detailed list of foreign words and their German equivalents in an attempt to prove that all those foreign words do have German counterparts and are not necessary.

It is interesting to note that many of these words have been Germanized over the last 200 years. Words like abstrahieren, adressieren, acceptieren, difference have been completely assimilated into the German language. A number of the words on May's list are at present used in the Beamtendeutsch, the German of the bureaucrats, which is the modern equivalent of the Kanzleistil of May's time. Now--like then--most people, even educated ones, have difficulties understanding the exact meaning of these words and phrases.

May also turns against the German disease of using titles.

"Übertriebene Titel und Ehrenwörter können der menschlichen

Gesellschaft wenig nützen, und in Handlungsgeschäften sind sie vollends überflüssig.³² (Exaggerated or honorific titles are of little use to mankind; in business they are even more superfluous.) Titles complicate communications, but May has to admit that a basic knowledge of titles and their correct use is important in his time. It has taken Germans almost another 200 years to rid themselves of the overuse of titles. Even today titles are more important in Germany than in many other countries.

3. Conversational Character. Like Gellert, May insists that a good letter have the qualities of a good conversation. "Wir haben keine andre Regel, als diese: So zu schreiben, wie man spricht. Geschieht dieses, so wird ein Brief natürlich schön, und folglich gut seyn."³³ (We have no other rule but this: Write as you talk. If this is the case, a letter will be naturally beautiful and consequently good.) His interpretation of this principle is the same as Gellert's; the letter resembles the conversation of educated people. But again, this principle is adapted more to May's special audience. Since a letter is a conversation between people who are far apart and who conduct important business, the conversation has to be clear, and sentences have to be concise.

4. Organization. May discusses the organization of letters in greater detail than Gellert. To write well, he maintains, the writer has to first organize his thoughts. This, of course helps clarity, but there are some other pragmatic considerations too. If the writer does not organize his thoughts at the beginning, a letter may have to go through several revisions. This takes time and costs money, a violation against the Nützliche, the useful. To reduce the rewriting, sentences should be concise, and ideas should logically follow each other. Complex and

long sentences take more preparation and are therefore more time consuming.

Dieser augehnte Stil fñhret noch eine andere Beschwerlichkeit mit sich. Ein solcher Brief kann unmöglich ohne vorherigen Aufsatz gut geschrieben werden. Ferner weiss man, dass es auf einer Schreibstube, wo 4, 5. bis 10. 12. Personen arbeiten, nicht immer stille seyn kann.³⁴

(This extended style carries with it another difficulty. It is impossible to write such a letter without prior draft. Furthermore, one knows that it cannot always be quiet in a writing room where 4, 5, up to 10, 12 people are working.)

5. Beginnings and Endings. May also addresses the beginning and ending of letters. While he advises readers to put the important points in a letter first, he does note exceptions. "Es ist...nicht undienlich, wenn man ein betrübter Bote seyn muss, dass man gewisse Nachrichten vorher gehen lasse."³⁵ (It is not unwise, if one has to be the messenger of bad news, to put certain other news first.)

May feels that a buffer is helpful. This shows insight into the psychological impact of negative messages and shows his concern for analysis of the situation and adaptation to specific circumstances.

Since merchants need records of agreements, orders etc., references to dates of letters are important. May admits the need for the practices; it helps clarity and is useful, but he definitely turns against a set pattern for beginnings of letters. He maintains that his example letters in the second part of the book will provide a number of possibilities and writers should strive to vary the openings of letters.

6. Tone. Gellert gives examples of letters between friends. May's letters are messages between strangers, or people who have known each other for a short time, or people who are friends and at the same time have business relationships. The tone of a letter depends on the special relationship of the persons involved, but May insists that business

letters can combine business and friendship. This of course ties them to Gellert's letters.

Man urtheilet falsch, wenn man glaubt, dass sich die Empfindungen der Freundschaft in die Briefe der Handelsleute nicht schicken.... Ausdrücke, welche die Sprache einer zärtlichen Freundschaft reden, sind allemal angenehm.... Und sollten Menschen, die.... wirklich gute Freunde geworden sind, die Empfindungen einer Freundschaft, die sich nach und nach von selbst errichtet, deswegen nicht ausdrücken dürfen, weil sie Handelsleute sind?³⁶

(One judges wrongly if one believes that the feelings of friendship are inappropriate in letters of business people.... Expressions which talk the language of an affectionate friendship are always welcome.... And should people, who have become really good friends, not be allowed to express the feelings of friendship which gradually grows by itself just because they are business-people?)

Language and Trade

In order to write good examples of business letters, the writer has to have a solid foundation in the art of language and in trade. May agrees with Gellert that the basic principles for writing are the same for all letters; differences are differences in emphasis and differences in situations. People with pure literary backgrounds, May maintains, do not know enough about trade to write effective business letters. They are missing the particulars of business situations. Merchants, on the other hand, he argues, know their business, but they do not have the background in the art of language, they do not have a solid understanding of the theoretical foundation of business letters or good letters in general. In addition, they do not have the time to reflect on the language they use.

Ein jeder ist nicht aufgelegt, mit gehöriger Aufmerksamkeit, gut geschriebene Schriften zu lesen....Die mehrsten Kaufleute sind überdies theils mit nöthigen, theils mit unnöthigen Geschäften überhäuft.³⁷

(Not everyone is in the mood to read well composed writings that were put together with proper care....Furthermore, most merchants are overburdened partly with necessary, partly with unnecessary affairs.)

To develop the theory and the examples for business letters takes a person who understands both the art of language and the business, and May considers himself to be well educated in both areas. He hopes that other merchants will agree that his examples are better than those of the old school and imitate his style and his letters.

Rejection of Classifications

Both authors reject any classification of letters into groups like good news, bad news, persuasive letters etc. A set classification could of course easily lead to patterns or formulas again, and writers might again, like in the stylus curiae, take the patterns and simply fill in the particulars. The basic principles of the new approach might easily get lost. May turns against classifications of letters for one additional reason. Most letters combine a number of messages, a division into good and bad news letters would therefore be simplistic and unnatural, May argues. In his discussion May concentrates mostly on those points that are particularly important for business. The principles that are equally important for business letters and letters in general and where he fully agrees with Gellert, are not developed in detail. Those that are crucial in business, like clarity, he discusses in great detail. May's analysis and improvement of weak letters in the first part of the book shows a mastery of the German language similar to that of Gellert.

SUMMARY

May's book, Versuch in Handlungsbriefen, is the first text on business communications utilizing the new theoretical approach which had been developed by Gellert. Gellert discusses stylistic principles and demonstrates those principles in examples of friendship letters. His approach is a definite break with the traditional stylus curiae.

May takes Gellert's theory and adapts it to business. This process changes the emphasis of some of the stylistic principles. For Gellert the most important characteristics of a letter are the conversational and natural tone. For May the most important characteristic is clarity. The natural and conversational elements have to serve the clarity, they are not there for their own sake.

The one area where May's letters are much stronger than Gellert's is content. As pointed out above, Gellert's letters seem to lack content. In May's letters the content is important. The letters are written for a purpose--the linen will not arrive till spring; a ship sank in the English Channel; the earthquake in Lisbon destroyed warehouses and goods. Those events affect the livelihood of the merchant, his customers and creditors. May's book went through four editions in nine years. This is some indication that merchants were willing to try the approach based on Gellert's principles.

MAY'S EXEMPLARY LETTERS

Two sections conclude the May work: a compendium of 125 letters and nine sections generally entitled Grössere Kaufmännische Aufsätze, or Extended Commercial Essays. Our analysis will be fivefold: (1) May's pedagogical technique; (2) style within the letters; (3) topics covered; (4) structure and form; and (5) a critique of May's method.

Pedagogical Method

The word loose would describe May's approach. But that term is more a criticism and will be detailed later. Here we report on pedagogical technique.

Most of the 125 letters stand by themselves--devoid of headnotes, sidenotes, preamble, or concluding comments. The letters stand in isolation, the reader supplying personal inferences as to what should have been learned. For example, letter 38:

I have received the bill of lading sent via the ship Danglade for containers numbered 10, 11, and 12....

A messenger from Bologna brought the distressing news that an English warship forced the Danglade ashore under full sail....

At the departure of the messenger we were concerned and busy....

I remain with all sincerity....

Thus what is to be learned is left up to the reader: whether to adapt the material to a similar situation or copy verbatim.

A second approach is more thoughtful, namely, a sequential illustration built on a single theme, or problem. The usual method is a trilogy, the first letter raising an issue, the second responding, and the third answering the second. No indication is ever given as to pedagogical intent, only the titles suggest an answer is to be given: Antwort auf den Zweiten Brief, or Antwort auf den dritten Brief.

An interesting scenario in the 125 letter sequence is a four part progression: from an initial three letters to a fourth and final response--six months later--which answered queries raised in the first letter.

May is more useful as a pedagogue in Part II of his illustrative section translated as Extended Commercial Essays. We feel he uses the case method in the following:

GUTACHTEN ODER PARERE

1. History of the case--3 page statement
2. Additional material--5 sections

3. Series of questions to be answered before final decision can be made--3 questions
4. Responses to three questions bearing on the issue of the litigation--3 optional responses
5. Optional opinions on the preceding data--4 optional responses a writer might use.

A similar logical chronology of another case progresses in this manner:

VERLAUF DER SACHE, ODER SPECIES FACTI

1. History, facts of the case
2. Series of possible advisory statements
3. Letter responding to the two previous discussions

Both of the preceding examples are as barren as presented; the reader, again, inferring what goal is to be attained.

Third, May is silent on mechanics of a letter, but our analysis suggests that the following mechanical methods are used to move ideas along.

- Numbered paragraphs are indented to set apart options
- Quotations from previous letters or sources are either indicated in a different type script or indented
- Adverbs used--firstly, secondly--to separate thoughts in a long series
- Occasional use of the P.S. to suggest appended thought

Fourth, languages other than German are put into parentheses to further explain the German concept or business term, as for example, conossement for Verladungsschein; Recambio for Rückwechsel; Dispacheur; Parere for Gutdünken; Leccagie for Ausgeleckte. An inference is that May desired German to be the language of business, but realized that some foreign terms had to be used--they were more familiar. The preceding may contradict his attitude of merchants not knowing French or Latin, yet he

played it semantically safe by including both the German and the foreign international term to ensure understanding.

Thus over two hundred years later, our hindsight suggests that May's pedagogical style left readers to shift for themselves; editorial comments are absent.

Style of Letters

There are major differences between business letter writing of the early 18th century and stylistic techniques common today. Whether all of May's stylistic methods were prevalent we cannot determine. Yet, the tone and approach for his day is evident.

Few formal business letters today would include many references to God, or the Deity in any form. The following suggest the almost homiletical pleadings that God oversee all aspects of business, the usual method being to insert, in mid thought, statements as the following.

Der Schiffer gehet mit erstem
günstigen Wind ab. Nach seiner,
Gott gebe, glücklichen Ankunft
gelieben Sie den Empfang dieser
Güter zu besorgen, und des Herrn--
Willen damit zu vollziehen.³⁹

The ship departs with the first
favorable wind. After the
happy arrival, God willing,
please take care of the receipt
of the goods, executing there-
with the will of Mr. --

The following example has close similarity to the prayer, most appropriate because the letter writer is looking forward to the next year.

Für Ihren freundschaftlichen
Wunsch zu dem God lob! Der Höchste
erfülle ihn! Er überschütte
Sie, und was Ihnen zugerhöret,
mit seinem reichsten Seegen,
und lasse alle Ihre Unternehmungen
glücklich seyn.⁴⁰

For your friendly wish praise
to God. May the Almighty ful-
fill it. May He shower
you and what you possess with
His richest blessing, letting
all your undertaking be blessed.

God is also implored to watch over those who travel by sea, particularly sailors and ships about to go under sail.

Er gehet heute noch unter Seegel. He goes today under sail. The
Der Wind ist ihm sehr günstig. wind is very favorable to him.
Der Höchste geleite Ihn!⁴¹ May the Highest guide him.

As a result of the Lisbon disaster,⁴² May has the writer attempt to relate the happening to a higher power because so many merchants, inhabitants, and ships were affected.

Dies sind Schläge, welche
unmittelbar von der Hand des
Allmächtigen kommen; Wir
müssen die Ruthe küssen,
ihn als Vater verehren, und
jenen Unglücklichen, als
unseren Mitbürgern, unser
Mitleiden schenken.⁴³

These are blows which come
directly from the hand of the
All-Powerful. We must kiss
the whip, honor Him as Father
and give every unfortunate our
compassion as our fellow-
citizen.

Not unusual, or unexpected is the use of the deity in the opening paragraph or final close of a letter.

--Leben Sie Wohl. Gott Bewahre
uns für allen widrigen
Zufällen.

Farewell. God keep us from all
adverse accidents.

--Gesund, Gott lob!

Health to you, praise God.

--Man befürchtet vieles; das
Beste müssen wir hoffen. Der
Höchste bewahre einen jeden
für ferneren Unglücksfällen!

One fears much; we must hope
for the best. May the Al-
mighty preserve everyone from
future accidents.

Thus the Almighty--in the Christian sense--pervades much business writing: to help, assist, watch over. The depth of the request is hard to determine, or whether the letter writer is to simply follow an accepted formula.

Dependence on personal friendships is a second consistent convention. One infers that the entrée to business relationships could be speeded up, that the ethos of the letter writer was enhanced through knowing the right people. Such an implied relationship is found in the introductory or concluding remarks: carrying a distinguished family name; having a

father who was previously involved in business dealings; being the friend of another businessman with whom the reader transacted business. Thus a mutually known friend or the right family name suggested acceptability for a business relationship.

An outgrowth of this strong filial and personal friendship method is a conversational mode of writing. Here we mean the occasional use of an imaginary dialogue between writer and reader: "All your creditors will presumably have the same luck? Yes, Yes! You said so yourself. With Mr. Bartels you have had a misunderstanding....But enough said."⁴⁴ Occasionally May, by implication, suggests that the interjection "oh heavens" or incomplete sentences have a place in business writing, perhaps to break up the formal progression of ideas.

Interestingly, the style of negative letters is formal, but with short sentences. Clipped, staccato writing would characterize the several negative letters included as examples, or in this 18th letter:

"You promised me 500 German Marks, and still the bill is not paid. You were traveling. Your dear wife, at least, answered me. She asked for eight more days, and promised to send the money. The time has gone and still no money. Is this right? I will wait no longer."⁴⁵

Yet, no matter how negative, as in the above example, politeness to all persons continues. The writer, above, is angry, yet is courteous to the wife. We found no examples of disrespect toward persons regardless of the severity of the tone. People are treated with respect, indeed, even affection.

While the preceding may lead one to conclude that the tone of 18th Century German letters is casual, this is not the case. There are only flashes of informality. May's letters are humorless. He may argue for the informal, natural style, but there is no humor. Formality is the norm.

The final genre of the text, Extended Commercial Essays, are just that: long, circuitious legalese, written in the stereotypic language of the legal world. May's intent--he does not say so--is to separate the business letter from the more formal legal statement. Droll, dull and repetitious characterize the Essay section. Humor is absent. Formality and circumlocutions abound.

Personal, homey experiences are frequently mixed in with the usual topics of business letters. The Lisbon earthquake event is ubiquitous. Obviously May was well informed, for he puts into several letters examples written from different points of view. Some tell the story second-hand; others third-hand; ultimately telling the story in the words of a merchant who escaped into the hills.

Thus the naturalness of May is to suggest the inclusion of filial comments, a conversational style at times, along with underlying politeness. He only partly succeeds--at least by standards of today.

Letter Topics

A letter transmits history. It is a mirror of the times recorded in personal terms. Hence, to know the business concerns of the day, a fruitful source for a view of the early 1700's, is to survey subjects in May's illustrative letters.

1. Maritime trade. We were consistently surprised at the international breath of commerce, assuming May's examples would only be within his country. But much business was transacted outside Germany. Cities and countries mentioned included Paris, Bologna, London, America, Lisbon, Madrid, Frankfurt, Hull, and Lübeck. Surely the German cities predominate, and the German rivers on which goods moved, but the international flavor of the letters is surprising.

Indeed, it is interesting to speculate whether this emphasis on international trade--vornehmste Handel--as May calls it, is the earliest work dealing with style of writing for international commerce. If it is, May deserves credit for the first work that seeks a common style of communication between the major trading countries of the world.

2. Ships. These means of conveyance are not really themes, yet the ships seem to be the main means for transport of goods. And of course the ships are not referred to in feminine terms, but with masculine sounding names as Donglade; Christian Roose; or Schutt. Their arrivals and departures must have been major happenings, admitting to the vicissitudes of the sea. Many letters begin with an almost exclamatory statement that the ship has arrived, safely. Conversely, a tag line on letters is the fervent hope that God will give good and safe passage to the ship.

Again the emphasis is upon ocean-going ships and not the simple river barges which plied the canals and channels of Germany. This international thrust would be in keeping with May's world view of trade and commerce.

3. Wind. The weather occupies more than an afterthought: it is the propellant for international trade. The ship will leave on the wind, or similar phrases punctuate the letters. Rough weather, treacherous storms bedevil the safe arrival of goods. There is no doubt that the wind or the lack of it occasioned many inquiries as to the potential arrival dates for goods.

4. Messengers. Although Germany had a rudimentary postal system by early 1700, May's letters suggest that much business correspondence was carried by private couriers. Captains of ships had the varied roles of guiding the ship, carrying business letters to another merchant along

with the cargo, and then returning with funds in payment for the goods transported.

Private persons were no less used, even to sending an employee as the company messenger. No doubt some messengers absconded with funds in such a loosely run system.

5. Events. The Lisbon earthquake of 1775 has been mentioned. Questions were also raised as to war between England and France, disasters at sea, relationships between classes of merchants, and the safety of the sea, specifically the gunboats of certain nations. Surprising, not one letter mentions any political issues.

6. Specific business concerns. A modern reader will remark that things have not changed much in the last 200 years as to the content of business letters. Indeed, most of the following examples in May are reflected in recent business communication texts.

- Price of material
- List of goods sent
- Approximate arrival date of goods sent
- Differences between invoice and goods received
- Increase in the cost of goods

- Credit policies
- Interest charges
- Money due on late payments
- Insurance issues
- Which port, wharf on which to unload

- Request for bill of lading
- Request for payment
- Rate of exchange
- Opportunity to buy goods cheaper elsewhere
- Extention of payments

- Funds deposited into bank account for future orders
- Evaluation of credit standing
- Receipt of payment
- Threat of lawsuit
- Payment in arrears

May at no time puts the above topics and themes into some kind of letter category, i.e., each letter has no heading other than the number of the letter illustrated. Consequently a sales letter is similar to a request letter, of any type.

From the previous sections of this paper the reason is clear: May wished to avoid categorization; he wished a natural style which erased any vestige of strict forms that business writers, in lock step, would follow in all instances. Sadly, a lack of topic identification makes it hard for readers to discover any specific help on themes.

7. Extended essays. Without a semantic pause May moves from his 125 letters to his Extended Commercial Letters. This brief section, we presume, may have been for either the professional scribe or notary. We doubt that the complexities of the German syntax could have been handled by the average merchant. One of the few salutation examples in the text begins the section with Hochedlgebohrner, Hockgelahrter Herr Doctor, suggesting the turgid style to follow.

a. Unterrichte, oder Insturctiones. Lessons or instructions is primarily a claim case, discussed chronologically. Two letters, a discussion of the data, and a concluding lesson based thereon make up the section.

b. Gutachten oder Parere. Advice or legal opinions has these parts of a rudimentary case: the 128th letter; history of the affair; the answer or judgment; the 129th letter; history of the affair; additional material; possible questions; possible answers to the questions; and optional judgment statements.

c. Bittschriften. Petitions include the 130th letter; a petition; and a proposal on the issue.

d. Ansuehung um ein Subsidual, oder Gerichtliches Vorsehreiben.

Request for a subsidy or judicial decision.

e. Vollmachten, or Power of Attorney discussion. Includes the 131st letter; an answer to the previous letter; and a power of attorney statement regarding the previous issue.

f. Beträge, oder Contracte. Business contracts include an exemplary business contract highly legal in tone; a specific business contract between two people; a service contract; a dissolution contract; an employee contract; and a teaching contract.

g. Obligationen, oder Schuldverschreibungen. Promissory notes or debt statements has two parts: an example of a loan on goods; required collateral on a bond; and more simple loan instruments.

h. Cesziones, oder Ueberträge. Endorsement examples included are those of an inheritance share and endorsement of a debt or claim.

i. Mortifications oder Tilgungs Schein eines verlohren Documents. Example of a certification statement applicable to the loss of documents.

j. Generale Quittung für einen Failliten. May concludes with a brief statement relevant to general receipts.

By way of summary for the above examples, May seeks to illustrate the complexity of writing for the legal world. Definitely, his admiration for a natural style does not apply to legal semantics.

Structure, Form

Idea progression in May's letters varies little. Whereas today we discuss cause to effect; topical; chronological; inductive; deductive; problem-solution; and other methods of organization, May's letters begin, and progress with monotonous similarity. "I was pleased to hear in your dear letter of the 5th of October...;" "I've received two of your

notes of the 11th and 15th;" "Your two letters of the 9th and 14th with 1,000£ has just been received." Thus opening paragraphs are touchstones to some previous event in time. It is the dominant way May begins a letter.

Apologies run a close second for opening paragraphs: either for not writing or for trespassing into the time of the reader.

Other prefatory remarks--for either positive or negative letters--include the hope of a continued friendship; mild reprimands for not writing; or receipt of funds for payment of goods delivered. Frequently, the safe arrival of the transport ship occupies the initial position in a positive letter.

The body of the letter is structured most often in chronological form. Most of the 125 letters progress in this manner. Time is constantly before the reader, from initial sentence, through a chronological re-telling of events in the body, to the final close, to which we shall now turn.

Endings are uniformly polite and warm, with the usual variations: "Your willing servant;" the familiar "Leben Sie Wohl" or "Farewell;" "I acknowledge your friendship and promise to remain with all sincerity...;" "I seek to continue our business relationship;" "Remember me in your thoughts;" and others similar in nature. Not unusual was the prayerful benediction; especially after receiving bad news:

Der Höchste bewahre Sie vor
allen schmerzhaften Zufällen!
Er erhalte Sie bis in das
späteste Alter bey unverrücktem
Wohlseyn! Ich fühle, wie
empfindlich es ist, dasjenige zu
verlieren, was man liebet. Spät,
sehr spät müsse Sie die
Traurigkeit drücken die ich
jetzt empfinde--Ich habe die Ehre
zu seyn....⁴⁶

The Almighty preserve you from
all painful accidents. May he
keep you in sane good health
until the end of time. I
know how sensitive it is, to
lose the one that one loves.
Late, very late will you
squelch the sadness that I
now feel...I have the honor
to be....

It is difficult to note any structural change between positive and negative letters, or for that matter in any of May's letters. The formula is (1) refer to a previous date; (2) state a pleasantry; (3) arrange the subject chronologically; and (4) conclude with a reaffirmation of friendship.

Inconsistency describes the format of either a positive or negative letter. May is so non-prescriptive that readers must guess as to procedure, particularly when one sharp letter immediately begins in the negative:

Aus einliegenden Auszug Ihrer laufenden Rechnung werden Sie ersehen, dasz Sie mir seit 1754. und also schon 2. Jahre 545. Rthlr. schuldig sind. Meine Umstände erlauben mir nicht länger zu warten; ich bitte Sie daher, mir auf das eheste zu melden, ob wir hierin übereinstimmen, und auf recht befinden mir die Gelder einzusenden, damit ich diesen Post in meinen Büchern tilgen kann.⁴⁷

You will see from the summary of your current bill that since 1754, and still two years later, you owe 545 Rthlr's. My circumstances do not permit me to wait any longer, therefore, I ask you to remit at the earliest time, and send the money that I may cancel this request in my books.

The preceding lacks a buffer, moves directly to the issue. Other illustrative letters occasionally buffer the news with a reference to a previous date, or some other phatic communication. Readers had a choice.

Positive letters, for the most part, state the good news early and then move to remaining material. May's approach is no different than what we suggest today in business communication texts.

Critique of May

Simply for contrast we will compare May's handling of business letters with that of a predecessor: August Bohse's Gründliche Einleitung zu Teutschen Briefen, 1706.⁴⁸ From the following matrix one can then arrive at some conclusions.

| Bohse (1705) | May (1775) |
|--|---|
| --Introductory comments to all the illustrated letters | --Omitted |
| --Letters into categories, as: Gebühr Briefe Geschäfts Briefe Anwerbungs Schreiben Benachrichtungs Schreiben Bericht Schreiben, and others... | --No titles or categories given |
| --Titles of address, as for: Dr. and Prof. of law Dr. of laws without Prof. Prof. of philosophy King of Sweden Married countess Dancing master Lieutenant, and over 200 other titles of address... | --None; clearly May attempts to remove himself from the artificiality of these hierarachies of address |
| --Salutations and complimentary close | --Appears in three of 125 letters |
| --Intended reader of letter | --Omitted |
| --Dates; place of origin of the letter | --Omitted |
| --Grammar; punctuation; ortho- graphy discussion | --Omitted |
| --Essay preceding each class of letter | --Absent |
| --Legal letters | --Special section illustrating nine kinds of legal writing |
| --Latin salutations | --None |
| --Index to letters | --Absent |
| --Rules for writing letters | --None |

While the Bohse work goes beyond business communication, it is obvious that May is intentionally less prescriptive. He wishes to disregard the minute classifications, the innumerable rules, the pedantic titles which presumed a commonality for all letters. No doubt he would

have found galling the 200 salutations and forms of address of his predecessor Bohse. Too, he had little use for the pedantic use of Latin and French as symbols of writers who wished to be impressive in style, again proposed by Bohse. Artificial rules are absent in May.

As an organized presentation, the May work fails. We have said that his loose structure puts the burden of learning entirely on the reader. If his latter two thirds of the work were to have been a compendium for reference, it fails. So too does his handling of letter content. Needless repetition, close similarity in style, themes, and structure pervade his examples. Many letters could have been omitted.

While the preceding appears negative in tone, it reflects our personal demand for clarity in idea progression. May's response might be that naturalness in style is just that: the reader must have freedom to choose any style, any idea progression which would resemble the flow of oral discourse, complete with its untidy sentence structure and unclear main points. Eventually the idea would be clear, though circuitous.

In leaving much unsaid in the letter section, the bridge is weak between theory and practice. The reader must mentally rehearse the background and apply the tenets of that background to the 125 letters: adding, subtracting, and omitting at one's own discretion. Much is unsaid. The reader is much--alone.

CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, May's work represents a significant contribution to the history of German business communication. In our century we may be unhappy with his approach, but the success of his text suggests a desire by German business to follow a less dogmatic style and less prescriptiveness:

- His work in the first to apply good taste (clarity, naturalness) to the German business letter writer. He may have borrowed from his predecessor Gellert, but he made the practical leap to the world of commerce.

- He contributes to the further refining of the German language, joining scholars who insisted that the German language possessed the semantic stamina for trade and other business relations.

- He represents the international man, realizing that business communication surpassed the boundaries of Germany and that for clear communication to occur one had to grasp the essential of clarity no matter the country.

- He desired an openness in style, a divorce from the mechanical formats of his predecessors. This freedom thus would result in a more natural and conversational style of business communication.

Finally, what influence he had on removal of the innumerable artificial titles for both the secular and religious world is not unclear: but he did continue that momentum which today is less formidable in business than it was in the 18th century.

Notes

- ¹Johann Carl May, Versuch in Handlungs=Briefen, und grösseren Aufsätzen, nach den Gellertschen Regeln. Nebst einer Abhandlung von dem guten Geschmack in Handlungs-Briefen. (Altona: David Iversen, Kön. priv. Buchhändler), 1765, p.2.
- ²The Papal Curiae of the Middle Ages developed a variety of patterns and formulas to be used in the writing of official letters and documents. Often the formulas were collected in a book which also included a set of rules for good writing. Since this particular style has its origin in the Papal Curiae, the style was referred to as stylus curiae.
- ³Reinhard M. G. Nickisch, Die Stilprinzipien in den deutschen Briefstellern des 17. und 18. Jahrhunderts. (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht), 1969, p. 185.
- ⁴Elsewhere, in more detail, is developed the hypothesis that Greek and Roman rhetoric directly influenced dictamen or writing of the Medieval and Renaissance world. Succinctly, letters were structured in similar form as oral discourse: exordium; narratio; divisio or partitio; confirmatio; refutatio; and conclusio. Also, letter writers borrowed heavily from the ancient tenets of rhetoric, using primarily inventio, dispositio, and lexis or style. See Herbert W. Hildebrandt, "Greek and Roman Rhetoric's Influence on Business and legal Communication in the Medieval and Renaissance World." Working Paper #127, (University of Michigan, 1980).
- ⁵Nickisch, Stilprinzipien, p. 80.
- ⁶Christian Fürchtegott Gellert, Briefe, nebst einer praktischen Abhandlung von dem guten Geschmacke in Briefen. (Leipzig: Johann Wendler), 1751, reprinted by Carl Ernst Poeschel Verlag, Stuttgart, 1971, p. 49ff.
- ⁷Christian Fürchtegott Gellert, Gedanken von einem guten deutschen Briefe, an den Herrn F.H.v.W., Belustigungen des Verstandes und des Witzes. (Leipzig: Bernard Christoph Breitkops), 1742, reprinted by Carl Ernst Poeschel Verlag, Stuttgart, 1971, p. 178.
- ⁸Gellert, Briefe..., p. 3.
- ⁹Ibid.
- ¹⁰Ibid., p. 7.
- ¹¹Ibid., p. 11.
- ¹²Ibid., p. 31.
- ¹³Ibid., p. 183.
- ¹⁴Ibid., p. 29.

- ¹⁵Ibid., p. 47.
- ¹⁶Ibid., p. 1.
- ¹⁷Ibid., p. 68.
- ¹⁸Ibid., p. 285, letter 70.
- ¹⁹Ibid., p. 213, letter 33.
- ²⁰Ibid., p. 201, letter 28.
- ²¹Nickisch, Stilprinzipien, Anhang, p. 11.
- ²²Gellert, Gedanken von einem Briefe, p. 189.
- ²³May, p. 1.
- ²⁴Nickisch, Nachwort in reprints of Gellert's work, p. 3.
- ²⁵May, p. 3.
- ²⁶Ibid., p. 1.
- ²⁶Nickisch, Stilprinzipien, p. 173.
- ²⁸May, p. 29.
- ²⁹Ibid., p. 30.
- ³⁰Ibid., p. 49.
- ³¹Ibid., p. 54.
- ³²Ibid., p. 94.
- ³³Ibid., p. 35.
- ³⁴Ibid., p. 57.
- ³⁵Ibid., p. 64.
- ³⁶Ibid., p. 73.
- ³⁷Ibid., p. 32.
- ³⁸Ibid., p. 168.
- ³⁹Ibid., p. 115.
- ⁴⁰Ibid., p. 124.
- ⁴¹Ibid., p. 157.

⁴²The city of Lisbon suffered a severe earthquake on November 1, 1775. On that date most of the city was destroyed, followed by a tidal wave which wrecked the harbor, followed by a severe fire. Over 30,000 people died. Repeated references to this event occur in May's letters, attesting to the imprint the event had on European and Asian business.

⁴³May, p. 203.

⁴⁴Ibid., p. 133.

⁴⁵Ibid., p. 136.

⁴⁶Ibid., pp. 216-217.

⁴⁷Ibid., p. 273.

⁴⁸August Bohse, genannt Talender, Gründliche/Einleitung/zu Teutschen/ Briefen/ Nach den Haupt Reguln der/ teutschen Sprache eröffnet/ und allen Liebhabern eines teutschen Con-/ cepts, solderlich aber/ Denen zum Nutzen abgefasset/ So des Autoris Collegia in/ diesem nöthigem Studio frequentiren/ Auch nach gegeben richtigen Lehr, Sagen/mit einer/ Jetzt Üblichen Titvlatvr und allerhand/ Brief Mustern erläutert/ Von./Talandern./ (Bey Ernest Clavde Bailliar), 1706, reprinted by Scriptor Verlag, 1974.