

Mgr. Alena Andrllová Fidlerová, Ph.D.

Institute of Czech Language and Theory of Communication,  
Charles University, Prague

Mgr. Jana Strániková, Ph. D.

Institute of History, University of Pardubice

## Artisan Family Correspondence as a Source for Interdisciplinary Research: Historical and Linguistic Perspectives

This paper presents the conceptual framework of a planned interdisciplinary research project focusing on the personal correspondence of a selected Czech artisan family from the late eighteenth to the late nineteenth centuries, specifically the Hulakovský family from eastern Bohemia. The project aims to explore the analytical potential of artisan correspondence at the intersection of social and gender history and historical sociolinguistics.

For several decades, personal correspondence has attracted the attention of historians, literary scholars, and linguists alike. It represents a valuable source of information on everyday life and social relations in past societies and, at the same time, constitutes an important body of material for historical (socio)linguistic research. A wide range of methodological approaches to historical personal correspondence can be observed; however, the perspectives of historians and linguists have often developed separately and therefore cannot fully benefit from interdisciplinary collaboration. While historians tend to base their research primarily on content-oriented analysis, historical sociolinguists value personal correspondence for its inedited character, which makes it particularly close to everyday spoken language that is otherwise largely inaccessible due to its ephemeral nature. In order to fully exploit the linguistic potential of such sources, however, detailed knowledge of the historical context of the writers—their life conditions, education, social status, and mutual relationships—is indispensable, yet often difficult for linguists to reconstruct and interpret adequately. We therefore consider it

essential to develop an interdisciplinary approach based on close collaboration between historians and linguists, enabling a more nuanced understanding of epistolary practices and language choices in the artisan milieu, drawing on a representative corpus of sources.

The core source base of the planned project will consist of predominantly Czech-language letters written by members of an artisan family who generally had only elementary education. A substantial part of the corpus is formed by letters written by women. Female correspondence is of particular importance for our research, as within the contemporary social context women from the artisan milieu were generally not expected to receive higher education, nor education oriented towards public or professional activity, and only a limited number of texts written by them have been preserved.

More generally, ego-documents from the artisan milieu offer a rare opportunity to study everyday writing practices outside elite environments and to analyze how education, gender, family relations, and regional background shaped epistolary communication in a Czech-speaking artisan context, as well as to what extent the influence of the German-speaking environment manifested itself - or, conversely, failed to manifest itself - in this correspondence.

From a historical perspective, the project focuses the social and cultural embeddedness of family correspondence, in particular on intergenerational communication, the structure and reach of correspondence networks, the position of women within artisan households, and the specific conditions under which education and literacy were acquired and practiced in the artisan milieu, including their gendered dimensions. The historical analysis addresses not only

the thematic content of the letters but also their formal aspects, such as modes of expression, adherence to contemporary orthographic conventions, grammatical competence, and the use of politeness strategies.

From the perspective of historical sociolinguistics, the project focuses on orthographic, phonological, grammatical, lexical, and stylistic variation as shaped by age, gender, social status, and the relationship between writer and addressee, including potential influences of the German-speaking environment on Czech written production. Special emphasis is placed on epistolary conventions and practices of politeness, particularly on discrepancies

between contemporary prescriptive norms and actual usage attested in the letters. The project also addresses methodological challenges arising from the asymmetric preservation of correspondence, as in many cases only one side of the epistolary exchange has survived.

The aim of the paper is to initiate a discussion on the possibilities and limitations of artisan correspondence as a source for integrated historical and (so-cio)linguistic research and to situate this largely unexplored material within broader debates on social communication, literacy, and language variation in nineteenth-century Central Europe.

Contact:

Mgr. Alena Andrlová Fidlerová, Ph.D.

Institute of Czech Language and Theory of Communication,  
Charles University, Prague

[alena.fidlerova@ff.cuni.cz](mailto:alena.fidlerova@ff.cuni.cz)

Mgr. Jana Strániková, Ph. D.

Institute of History, University of Pardubice

[jana.stranikova@upce.cz](mailto:jana.stranikova@upce.cz)