This article discusses the linguistic features typical of correspondence by comparing the fictional letters in an epistolary novel, Dorothy L. Sayers’s The Documents in the Case, with the author’s genuine correspondence written before, during and after the writing of the novel. The linguistic features studied include both those arising from a reading of the studied material (forms of address, use of dialogue) and those in a list of forms identified by Biber (1988/1995) as being the most significant in distinguishing correspondence from fiction. The results show that while dialogue and reported speech are the most salient features in distinguishing fictional from real letters, on the whole Sayers seems to achieve a fairly good imitation of actual letters in her epistolary novel.

**Keywords** correspondence; epistolary novel; linguistic variation; Dorothy L. Sayers

**Introduction**

What is a letter? How do the literary representations of letters, particularly those appearing in epistolary novels, differ from actual letters sent? In this case study I compare a particular novel (Dorothy L. Sayers’s *The Documents in the Case*) and the personal letters of its writer. The main emphasis of this study is on a number of linguistic elements that, according to Biber (1988/1995), show the greatest differences between fiction and correspondence. Other features evident in reading the texts have also been taken into account where appropriate. My aim is to establish how much difference there is between letters in an epistolary novel and genuine letters, and what the main features contributing towards this difference are.

**The material studied**

In this study I compare two sets of material. The fictional letters come from the detective novel *The Documents in the Case*, written by Dorothy L. Sayers in...
collaboration with Robert Eustace (1930/1981), and the real letters from an edition of the letters of Dorothy L. Sayers (Reynolds, ed., 1995). The selected letters from both sources were digitised, and the linguistic items to be studied were retrieved using the WordCruncher program.

The Documents in the Case

The epistolary detective story *The Documents in the Case* (*DITC*), first published in 1930, has the name of Robert Eustace on the title page along with Dorothy L. Sayers. There is plenty of evidence, however, that while Eustace (a pseudonym of Dr Eustace Barton) was involved in the planning of the plot, Sayers alone was responsible for writing the book (Kenney, 1990/1991: 48). As H. R. F. Keating (1993: 134) puts it, ‘she generously shared authorial credit with Robert Eustace, who gave scientific advice’.

The novel has three parts. The introduction consists of one document: a cover letter introducing the purpose and method of collection of the documents following. Section One, ‘Synthesis’, has 45 numbered documents. 40 of these are letters and one is a telegram. In addition, there are two notes by the collector of the documents (the son of the murder victim), and a statement by one of the witnesses in two parts. Section Two, ‘Analysis’, has eight numbered documents: two letters (plus one unnumbered letter as part of a statement), two extracts (and one unnumbered extract) from the fictional newspaper *Morning Express*, three statements by witnesses and one note by the collector of the documents.

In this study I concentrate on the letters in the novel, as my aim is to see how they differ from real letters. The recipients of the letters are mostly members of the immediate family: Agatha Milsom, a middle-aged spinster, writes to her sister Olive Farebrother (with one letter to a more distant recipient, Elizabeth Drake); John Munting, a poet, writes to his fiancée Elizabeth Drake (the one telegram is also his; there is one brief note from Drake to Munting as well); George Harrison, the murder victim, writes to his son Paul Harrison; Margaret Harrison, the wife of the victim, writes to her lover Harwood Lathom. There is also one letter each from Lathom to his friend Munting, from Sir James Lubbock (a Home Office pathologist) to Paul Harrison, and from Munting to Paul Harrison. The size of the selected sample is 35,294 words.

The letters of Dorothy L. Sayers

When comparing the novel with actual letters, I have chosen to compare it with letters written by Dorothy L. Sayers herself (*DLS*), in order to eliminate as many extraneous variables as possible. Sayers’s letters come from the first volume of the recent edition of her correspondence (Reynolds, ed., 1995). From the hundreds of extant letters, the editor has had to choose only a small portion, which to some extent seems to favour Sayers’s professional contacts. However, there is a sufficient selection of letters to family members for the purposes of this study.

I have chosen a sample of Sayers’s letters written between 1928 and 1935: that is, before, during and after the writing of *The Documents in the Case* (Reynolds, 1993: 221). There are twenty letters to Sayers’s ‘partner in crime’, Eustace Barton, as well as a number of letters to other recipients. Because most of the letters in the novel are addressed to members of the immediate family (sister, son, fiancée, lover), I have, in
addition to the letters to Barton, chosen letters addressed to Sayers’s parents, son, cousin (Ivy Shrimpton) and a close friend (Muriel St Clare Byrne). The size of the selected sample is 26,007 words, and altogether 64 letters have been included.

The linguistic features studied

I will look at various linguistic features appearing in the letters, including forms of address, the use of personal pronouns, tense, dialogue and other elements. The linguistic features studied by Biber provide a good point of comparison, although applying all of them to these two shortish corpora did not prove practical.

The linguistic features selected for this study from Biber were chosen as being the ones that showed the most marked differences between fiction and personal letters. Some features, such as infinitives and that-deletion, were left out because retrieving them from a grammatically unannotated corpus would have been too time-consuming.

Presentation of letters

Both the novel and the book of real letters follow the traditional format of an edited collection of letters. The documents in the novel are numbered, as is customary in an edition, while the letters in the edition are not. In both cases, the letters are preceded by what could be called editorial headings: information on who wrote the letter to whom – again, a customary feature of letter collections.

The documents in the novel are nearly always complete, the only two exceptions being letters Twenty-seven (where the opening pages of the letter are said to be missing), Sixteen (where the rest of the letter is irrelevant to the main point) and Thirty-one (where the intimate nature of the rest of the letter has led to its exclusion). In Reynolds’s edition of Sayers’s letters, numerous passages have been omitted. These omissions are characterised by the editor as being uninteresting (Reynolds, ed., 1995: xvii – xix).

Sayers’s own letters include occasional drawings, which have (at least to some extent) been reproduced in the edition. The novel does not contain any such drawings.

Forms of address

Both the novel and the edition of real letters present address formulae at the beginning and end of each letter. In the fictitious letters, the address forms and signatures include nicknames between lovers (Bungie, Petra, Lolo); however, Sayers never uses nicknames in her real letters, however close the recipient may be to her.

Use of dialogue

In the novel, dialogue takes place in the so-called statements that have been left outside this study. There is also a great deal of dialogue and reported speech in the letters of the novel – for example:
Kitchen door in the distance heard to burst open. ‘Well, where have you been?’
Awful realisation creeps over us all that the sitting-room door has been left open.
I say hurriedly: ‘Have you read the new Michael Arlen, Miss Milsom?’ We are all
aware that a prolonged cross-examination is proceeding. Lathom fidgets. Voice
rises to appalling distinctness: ‘Don’t talk nonsense! How long were you at the
hairdresser’s? Well, what were you doing? – Yes, but what kept you? – yes, of
course, you met somebody. You seem to be meeting a lot of people lately! – I
don’t care who it “only” was – one of the men from the office, I suppose –
Carrie Mortimer? nonsense! – I shall not be quiet – I shall talk as loudly as I like –
Did you or did you not remember –?’

(DITC: 68)

In the edition of Sayers’s letters there is only one lengthy piece of dialogue,
describing the questioning and then firing of a servant (Purfield) by her husband
(Mac). This is set out as drama, complete with stage directions, rather than as
dialogue in a narrative:

Mac: Purfield, you say you sent this bacon back because it was unfit for human
consumption?
Purfield: Yes.
Mac: Is this the boy to whom you gave it?
Purfield (raising his eyes to Heaven and lifting his hand in a theatrical manner
while addressing the Boy): I don’t want to get you into trouble. You may have an
aged Mother depending on you –
Mac: CUT THAT OUT! Did you give the bacon to this boy?

(DLS: 337)

The use of dialogue and reported speech is clearly one of the main distinguishing
characteristics between Sayers’s real letters and the fictional ones. Sayers uses dialogue
in the novel to further the plot and to describe the characters, much in the manner of
a non-epistolary novel. In her letters, dialogue and reported speech are much rarer.

Features drawn from Biber

Biber lists a high frequency of the pronouns I and you, contractions and private verbs
as being typical of personal letters (1988/1995: 132 – 33). In addition to these
features, I have tested some others that, in Biber’s data, attest the clearest differences
between fiction and correspondence.

Table 1 shows the linguistic features studied, with frequencies per thousand
words for each. The first four columns reproduce Biber’s results for general and
mystery fiction and for personal and professional letters, while the last two columns
give the frequencies in the two texts studied here. Details of the linguistic features, as
well as the raw frequencies for Sayers’s texts, can be found in table 2 in the Appendix.

The results in table 2 show that the epistolary novel The Documents in the Case is in
most cases closest to the personal letters in Biber’s data. The frequencies for past
tense, first and second person pronouns, emphatics, possibility and predictive modals,
and private verbs are all fairly close to those found in personal letters. In three
categories (BE as main verb, demonstratives and contractions), DITC resembles Biber’s category of mystery fiction; and in one category (public verbs), it resembles general fiction. It seems, therefore, that Sayers has fairly successfully captured the tone of personal letters in her epistolary novels, at least with regard to these features.

Sayers’s personal letters (DLS), on the other hand, most resemble Biber’s category of professional letters. The occurrences of past tense forms, first and second person pronouns and possibility and predictive modals fall closest to the frequencies observed in that category. The use of BE as a main verb, demonstratives and private verbs resemble mystery fiction, while the emphatics and public verbs are the only linguistic items in Sayers’s letters that are close to personal letters. This tendency of Sayers’s letters to be similar to professional letters may in part be explained by the large number of letters addressed to her co-author Robert Eustace. It has to be noted, however, that even in letters to family members Sayers often seems to remain somewhat distant, which may have a linguistic reflection in the ways attested by the frequencies in table 1.

The two Sayers corpora differ from one another in a fair number of respects. Notably, the use of first and second person pronouns and past tense is different: all are more common in the novel than in the real letters. Where the personal pronouns are concerned, this is probably partly connected to the frequent use of dialogue in the novel; while the high frequency of past tense forms may to some extent be related to the narrative passages necessary to further the plot of the novel by reporting the actions of characters. It should be noted that the use of the past tense in the novel falls far short of Biber’s results for both general and mystery fiction. Again, the use of dialogue may be part of the reason.

Similarities between the two Sayers corpora appear in the use of BE as a main verb, emphatics, demonstratives, and possibility and predictive modals. Of these, it is interesting to note that the use of emphatics comes the closest to Biber’s frequency for personal letters, and is considerably higher in both of Sayers’s texts than in Biber’s

### Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Linguistic feature</th>
<th>General fiction</th>
<th>Mystery fiction</th>
<th>Personal letters</th>
<th>Professional letters</th>
<th>DITC</th>
<th>DLS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Past tense</td>
<td>85.6</td>
<td>93.6</td>
<td>43.8</td>
<td>10.1</td>
<td>36.1</td>
<td>19.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First person pronouns</td>
<td>32.0</td>
<td>28.2</td>
<td>62.0</td>
<td>40.9</td>
<td>60.4</td>
<td>45.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Second person pronouns</td>
<td>11.1</td>
<td>10.5</td>
<td>20.2</td>
<td>15.2</td>
<td>22.4</td>
<td>16.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BE as main verb</td>
<td>25.2</td>
<td>28.0</td>
<td>39.3</td>
<td>27.0</td>
<td>30.4</td>
<td>29.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emphatics</td>
<td>4.9</td>
<td>5.1</td>
<td>11.2</td>
<td>7.8</td>
<td>11.1</td>
<td>10.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Demonstratives</td>
<td>7.8</td>
<td>6.6</td>
<td>9.0</td>
<td>12.0</td>
<td>5.8</td>
<td>5.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Possibility modals</td>
<td>5.2</td>
<td>6.1</td>
<td>9.0</td>
<td>7.7</td>
<td>8.6</td>
<td>7.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Predictive modals</td>
<td>6.2</td>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>9.8</td>
<td>11.9</td>
<td>10.8</td>
<td>12.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public verbs</td>
<td>10.3</td>
<td>8.3</td>
<td>6.7</td>
<td>9.2</td>
<td>11.4</td>
<td>7.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private verbs</td>
<td>20.6</td>
<td>19.2</td>
<td>27.2</td>
<td>17.1</td>
<td>25.6</td>
<td>19.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contractions</td>
<td>11.2</td>
<td>18.1</td>
<td>22.2</td>
<td>4.7</td>
<td>19.4</td>
<td>10.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
fiction categories. Also, in the use of modals Sayers falls closer to the letter categories than the fiction categories, though here the differences are admittedly small. On the other hand, Sayers’s use of demonstratives is considerably lower than that usually attested in either personal or professional letters, and falls much closer to that in the fictional categories.

Conclusion

When the epistolary novel is compared with the real letters by the author, it turns out that the main distinguishing feature between the two is the more frequent use of dialogue and reported speech in the novel. This result is supported by the findings for the linguistic items studied, with particularly high frequencies for first and second person pronouns in the novel. Sayers’s epistolary novel turned out to be closer to Biber’s data for personal letters than to either general or mystery fiction. Sayers’s personal letters were closest to Biber’s professional letters category, which may in part be explained by the more professional nature of some of the letters in the Sayers data. On the whole, it seems that Sayers has on some levels successfully created authentic-sounding letters for her epistolary novel, though some features – such as the frequent use of dialogue – are more reminiscent of novels.

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Note


References


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**APPENDIX**

**Table 2** List of searched items and raw frequencies for the samples of Sayers’s texts

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Linguistic feature</th>
<th>DITC</th>
<th>DLS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Past tense:</strong>  ‘Any past tense form that occurs in the dictionary, or any word not otherwise identified that is longer than six letters and ends in ed.’ Participles have been excluded. (Biber, 1988/1995: 22)</td>
<td>1275</td>
<td>495</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>First person pronouns:</strong> <em>I, me, we, us, my, our, myself, ourselves</em> and contracted forms. (Biber, 1988/1995: 225).</td>
<td>2130</td>
<td>1174</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Second person pronouns:</strong> <em>You, your, yourself, yourselves</em> and contracted forms. (Biber, 1988/1995: 225).</td>
<td>790</td>
<td>427</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Be as main verb</strong></td>
<td>1072</td>
<td>754</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Emphatics:</strong> <em>For sure, a lot, such a, real + adjective, so + adjective, do + verb, just, really, most, more.</em> (Biber, 1988/1995: 241).</td>
<td>393</td>
<td>262</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Demonstratives:</strong> <em>That, this, these, those,</em> but not demonstrative pronouns or <em>that as</em> relative, complementiser or subordinator. (Biber, 1988/1995: 241).</td>
<td>206</td>
<td>154</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Possibility modals:</strong> <em>Can, may, might, could</em> and contracted forms. (Biber, 1988/1995: 241).</td>
<td>302</td>
<td>200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Predictive modals:</strong> <em>Will, would</em> and <em>shall</em> and contractions. (Biber, 1988/1995: 242).</td>
<td>381</td>
<td>329</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Public verbs:</strong> <em>Acknowledge, admit, agree, assert, claim, complain, declare, deny, explain, hint, insist, mention, proclaim, promise, protest, remark, reply, report, say, suggest, swear and write.</em> (Biber, 1988/1995: 242).</td>
<td>402</td>
<td>190</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Private verbs:</strong> <em>Anticipate, assume, believe, conclude, decide, demonstrate, determine, discover, doubt, estimate, fear, feel, find, forget, guess, hear, hope, imagine, imply, indicate, infer, know, learn, mean, notice, prove, realise, recognise, remember, reveal, see, show, suppose, think, understand.</em> (Biber, 1988/1995: 242).</td>
<td>903</td>
<td>513</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Contractions</strong></td>
<td>683</td>
<td>282</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>