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CONFEDERATE CIVIL WAR LETTERS IN THE *PRIVATE VOICES* CORPUS: CONTENT IN FOCUS, WITH NOTES ON STRUCTURE AND FORM

This paper explores Civil War letters written by less literate Confederate soldiers based on the *Private Voices* corpus. While structure and form are addressed, the main focus is on content – an area often overlooked in linguistic research. Six central themes emerge: letters (exchange of correspondence), military life, health, hope, otherness, and civilian life. These topics reveal the expressive depth of marginalized voices and invite further study by linguists and cultural historians. Structurally, the letters follow a recognizable epistolary format – opening, body, and closing – and commonly feature conventional formulaic expressions. In terms of form, the letters display nonstandard grammar, irregular spelling, and inconsistent punctuation. Despite limited formal education, the writers show an intentional effort to engage with shared communicative norms, offering insight into everyday literacy practices during the Civil War. Overall, the paper calls for deeper scholarly engagement with the *Private Voices* corpus to better understand not only linguistic, but also cultural

dimensions of Confederate epistolary practice, especially as expressed by those who, prior to the war, received limited (if any) formal education.

Keywords: Civil War correspondence, *Private Voices* corpus, epistolary structure and content, egodocuments

1. Introduction

Letters hold particular value for scholars of many disciplines because they often contain details that root the text in a specific time, place, and personal perspective. The date helps place the text within its appropriate historical timeframe. The location, indicating from where the correspondence was sent or where it intended to reach, situates the text within a spatial context. Lastly, the signature can lead researchers to identify the author through the investigation of civic censuses and other archival records. By combining these elements, researchers can more easily establish the broader context of the letter, which is usually crucial for any academic inquiry.

While thousands of letter collections are available to researchers, not all serve the same scholarly purposes. Some collections, in fact, prove especially valuable to certain disciplines while offering limited insight for others. On the one hand, the *Mary Hamilton Papers*[1] might attract scholars interested in women's writing and private histories of eighteenth-century England. However, Hamilton's social background (her aristocratic upbringing) makes it unlikely that her letters capture the spoken language of her time, and thus their value for linguistic study remains restricted. On the other hand, the letters preserved in the *Southern Historical Collection* at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, on the other hand, open a broad view onto the social and cultural life of the American South. They offer rich material for historians examining family relations, plantation economies, and the texture of daily life before and after the Civil War. Some of these letters have also been studied by linguists such as Stephenson (1956, 1958, 1967, 1968, 1975) and Elliason (1956), who explored them for evidence of early regional pronunciation, grammar, and vocabulary. Their work shows that the collection can, in certain cases, reveal valuable information about Southern dialects and the written representation of speech. Still, much of the surviving correspondence comes from educated and socially prominent writers, giving only a partial view of the region's linguistic variety.

Among nineteenth-century letters, those written during the American Civil War by men and women of limited education are particularly revealing. What is the most unique, in comparison to other letter collections, is the quantity of

[1] https://www.maryhamiltonpapers.alc.manchester.ac.uk/ (accessed October 25, 2025).

surviving documents from the war years gives scholars a concentrated record of ordinary lives at a moment of upheaval. As Hager (2018: 4) observes:

> The personal letters that millions of Civil War soldiers and their families wrote to each other between 1861 and 1865 number somewhere close to half a billion. Although it is impossible to be precise, all available estimates point to the same order of magnitude. A Northern relief worker recorded the volume of mail into and out of Union army camps as averaging 180,000 letters per day. Multiplied out for four years of war, that translates into well over 250 million – for the North alone. A New York chaplain tallied 3,855 letters he mailed for his regiment in the single month of April 1863. If his regiment was typical, it suggests soldiers in the Army of the Potomac alone, about one-sixth of federal forces, produced a million outbound letters per month. There is no reliable way to calculate the number of letters soldiers received from civilians, but it would be nearly as large. Any reasonable calculation yields a figure of several hundred million, in a country that had a population slightly over thirty million people and a literacy rate, though among the highest in the world at the time, markedly lower than it is today.

Evidently, the war prompted a significant rise in the volume of correspondence, driven by the harsh conditions of camp life, along with the boredom and loneliness soldiers experienced. These factors encouraged many to write frequently, regardless of their literacy or writing skills and, as Dylewski (2013: 128) observes, letter writing became a vital daily activity for many a soldier. This surge in correspondence offers researchers a rich and concentrated body of letters from a relatively brief period, which can provide valuable insights into the era for numerous types of academic inquiry.

In contrast to such collections as *Mary Hamilton Papers* or *Southern Historical Collection*, linguists might find the informal language in Civil War letters especially attention worthy. Literacy levels[2] varied widely across the camps, depending on social rank and place of soldiers' origin. Generally, Northerners, who had greater access to education before the war, tended to write more refined letters compared to their Southern counterparts, whose literacy levels were typically lower[3] (Dylewski 2013: 159). Writers with limited education and exposure to formal language norms often produced texts that closely mirrored spoken language (Schneider 2013: 76), thus providing a rich resource for researchers interested in the everyday idiom of the time.

The content of Civil War correspondence is diverse and deserves closer attention. It is also a central concern of this paper. Soldiers from a wide range of

[2] Literacy in 19th-century America should not be associated with literacy as we know it today. A person was deemed literate if they could put words together or understand basic meaning from a simple text (Dylewski 2013: 159).

[3] We mean that the language of these letters tended to align more closely with what we now call standard English, and they generally followed the epistolary conventions of the time. This statement does not imply that Unionists did not write correspondence filled with informal traits.

social backgrounds and geographic regions wrote about matters that were important to both their personal and communal lives. Their letters shed light on the concerns and experiences of different groups during the war. In what follows, the focus is placed on correspondence written by privates with limited formal education and by their family members. These documents reveal how ordinary people understood the conflict, what most occupied their thoughts, and how they used language to express emotion and experience in writing.

For these reasons, Civil War letters constitute a distinctive and valuable source for many fields of research. When read with attention to their historical and social contexts, they offer insights into daily life, personal experience, linguistic practice, and patterns of social connection – forms of evidence rarely preserved for other historical periods. Despite the richness of this material, one of the most comprehensive collections, the *Corpus of American Civil War Letters* (*Private Voices*), remains surprisingly underused. Encompassing thousands of letters from soldiers and civilians, it provides an unparalleled view of the era, yet it has not received the scholarly engagement it merits. This gap leaves significant opportunities for historical, linguistic, and cultural inquiry still to be explored.

The present study aims to demonstrate the research potential of Civil War correspondence contained in the *Private Voices* corpus. It begins by introducing the corpus, outlining its scope and describing the backgrounds of its letter writers. It then turns to an analysis of a selected group of letters, focusing primarily on their thematic content while also considering aspects of structure and form. The paper concludes by emphasizing the broader scholarly value of the corpus and by encouraging its greater use in future research.

2. Private Voices

As mentioned earlier, Civil War letters provide readers with a unique glimpse into the voices of the past, and the efforts to collect them for research purposes have been continuing for years. Among the various repositories of Civil War letters, there are, for instance, the *Civil War Letters Collection,* from the University of Washington[4], *Civil War Diaries & Letter Collection* from the Auburn University[5] and the most extensive and orderly the *Corpus of American Civil War Letters* (CACWL), functioning on the Internet as *Private Voices*.

The *Private Voices* project was initiated in 2007 by Michael Ellis (Missouri State University) and Michael Montgomery (University of South Carolina). Its primary goal was to gather evidence of regional American English from the mid-19th century by collecting and transcribing letters written by Civil War

[4] Available at: https://content.lib.washington.edu/civilwarweb/index.html.
[5] Available at: https://diglib.auburn.edu/collections/civilwardiaries/.

soldiers and members of their families.[6] When the website was launched in 2017, it contained approximately 4,000 letters from four Southern states: North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, and Alabama. In 2018, another 2,000 letters from Northern states – Ohio, Pennsylvania, Massachusetts, and Maine – were added to the corpus. As of the most recent update in 2018, the corpus includes around 10,000 letters. The process of building this corpus involved visiting archives and repositories, digitalizing and transcribing letters, and conducting additional research on census and military records. Unfortunately, the project's momentum slowed following Montgomery's death in 2019.

The uniqueness of *Private Voices* lies not only in its size and scope but also in its accessible features. The letters were carefully transcribed by project members from photocopies, microfilms, or digital images of original manuscripts to ensure maximum accuracy. The original structure, spelling, punctuation, and capitalization were preserved, with minimal editing, so readers can enjoy the convenience of transcribed material without sacrificing authenticity. The website's most basic function is the "Search" section, where users can browse letters by any desired keyword(s).[7] Additionally, the letters can be sorted in a table by categories such as "Letters," "People," and "Collection," and downloaded as a CSV file. The "Letters" category allows users to sift through all the letters in the corpus, "People" filters by senders and recipients, and "Collection" lists all the collections used to create *Private Voices*. Furthermore, the website features sections on regional language features and word maps, as well as a dedicated section where users can explore regional terminology related to food, the nomenclature used by Union and Confederate soldiers, and other unique aspects of vernacular speech.

The linguistic features of the letters largely mirror the vernacular spoken by younger white Americans from the lower socioeconomic classes during the mid-19th century. Dylewski (2013: 167) highlights that war was primarily the domain of the young, with Nelson and Sheriff (2007: 74-75) noting that for both armies, the majority of soldiers were rural white men, with 40% of those "serving between 1861 and 1865 being twenty-one years old or younger". Regarding their occupations, most were farmers, farm laborers,[8] blacksmiths, or mechanics, with urban workers, who typically hailed from the North, also present among the

[6] https://altchive.org/about/introduction (accessed January 10, 2024). It must be mentioned that most of the letters available to 21st-century readers were penned by soldiers. While many letters were written by their family members, their chances of preservation were lower since they were sent to camps and battlefields. As a result, most surviving letters are those sent by soldiers to their hometowns, where they were more likely to be preserved.

[7] The main drawback of the database is the presence of duplicate/multiple entries, as the same letter appears to have been indexed more than once.

[8] Whose concerns stemming from their occupation, such as the state of the crops, will be a recurring topic in the contents of the letters.

ranks (Dylewski 2013: 125). Ethnically, the soldiers were predominantly white, although the Union army included black men, who, according to Freeman et al. (1992), made up as much as 10% of the Union army by the end of the war. However, the number of preserved letters penned by black soldiers is significantly lower.[9] The *Private Voices* project does not allow for filtering by the author's ethnicity, but some results can be found using keywords such as "slave," with specific collections like the William H. Wills Papers[10] and letters by Benjamin T. Montgomery[11] yielding relevant material. This indicates a numerical dominance of letters written by white soldiers in the *Private Voices* collection.

As previously mentioned, the education level of these soldiers was generally limited, with literacy often assessed by the ability to write and understand basic texts. Despite varying levels of education and writing skills, soldiers and their families wrote letters out of necessity, leading to many being penned by individuals with little to no prior experience in writing.

Montgomery (1997: 229) created a tripartite typology of writers whose letters, he believed, would be most desirable in linguistic research. "Functionaries" were letter writers whose job required them to put pen to paper and communicate certain ideas; the *Southern Plantation Overseers Corpus* (SPOC) consists of letters written by such individuals – plantation overseers were seldom educated, but due to their function they had to write letters to the plantation owners. Next, "desperadoes" are people who found themselves in dire circumstances which forced them to write – among desperadoes would be, for instance, letter authors who faced death sentence or were kept in captivity. Finally, "lonely hearts" are people who, for various reasons, had to stay away from their family members and familiar environment, and that longing made them attempt their best at composing a letter. The *Private Voices* letters were certainly composed by individuals belonging to the last category. For linguists, such letters provide a unique opportunity to study written texts that closely resemble the soldiers' spoken language. For historians, they offer a first-hand glimpse into the war experiences of members of the underprivileged strata of mid-19th-century American society.

Despite the advantages that *Private Voices* offers as an online repository of Civil War letters, to our knowledge only a few research projects have utilized its

[9] The reasons for such a state of affairs are manifold: first, Black literacy rates were lower when compared to Whites, mainly due to systemic barriers to education, especially among formerly enslaved men. Second, during the war, their access to writing materials and the postal system was apparently also more limited when compared to their White soldiers. Finally, historical preservation efforts often prioritized white correspondence, or, generally, white narratives, leading to fewer archived materials from Black voices.

[10] https://altchive.org/node/321 (accessed September 7, 2024).

[11] https://altchive.org/node/14662 (accessed September 7, 2024).

material. For example, the authors of the project (Ellis and Montgomery) published two articles based on *Private Voices*: their 2011 publication focused on the plural pronoun *you all* and the preposition *all to* (Ellis and Montgomery 2011) They also investigated the 19th-century dialect boundary in North Carolina incorporating – next to data from the *Linguistic Atlas of the Middle and South Atlantic States* (LAMSAS) – also the *Corpus of American Civil War Letters* (Ellis and Montgomery 2012). Next, Ellis (2013) authored an extensive book on the regional features of Southern American English during the Civil War period. Dylewski et al. (2020) explored variations in the grammatical patterns of typical letter endings in Civil War letters, such as "I remain/remains." Levey and DeRooy (2021) used the Civil War letters to investigate vernacular grammar patterns in the South and North, demonstrating regularities in the regional and less-educated representation of speech. Finally, Dylewski and Witt (2022) used letters written by Southern individuals to analyze mid-19th-century speech patterns, comparing them to the literary representation of Southern vernacular. To the best of the authors' knowledge, these are the only published academic projects that have utilized the letters compiled on the *Private Voices* website.[12]

3. Methodology

To navigate the extensive resource that *Private Voices* is, the analytic section of this paper focuses on a selection of Civil War letters: we have curated a sample that serves as the basis for our analysis.

This sample includes exclusively letters from the Confederate states, as there are significantly fewer letters from the Northern states in the *Private Voices* corpus – likely because the South was of primary scholarly interest to the authors of the corpus.[13] Therefore, we aimed to concentrate on the Confederate states we assumed were represented in *Private Voices*, which comprise Texas, Arkansas, Louisiana, Tennessee, Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia, Florida, South Carolina, North Carolina, and Virginia.

To structure our analysis effectively, we imposed two key constraints on our sample. First, to examine how perceptions of the war evolved over time, we selected letters from three specific periods: 1861, marking the war's onset; 1863, the halfway point; and 1865, the year the war concluded. Second, we aimed to collect five letters from each of the Confederate states from each of these periods.

[12] Notably, these projects focus solely on the linguistic value of the letters, while their cultural and historical significance remains largely unexplored.

[13] Although additional archival work in the Union states had been planned (Michael Montgomery – private correspondence), it supposedly entered a hiatus after the death of Michael Montgomery.

However, limitations in the available corpus[14] hindered our ability to gather exactly 15 letters from the Confederate states across the chosen years. While these constraints were essential for our study, they resulted in a reduced sample size, as we could not include letters from 1862 and 1864, and there was a notable lack of letters from certain states in specific years. Table 1 below illustrates the number of letters collected for analysis, resulting in a total word count of approximately 35,000 tokens for the entire sample.

Table 1. Corpus structure – number of letters.

State:	1861	1863	1865	Total:
Alabama (AL)	5	5	2	12
Arkansas (AR)	0	0	0	0
Florida (FL)	0	0	0	0
Georgia (GA)	5	5	4	14
Louisiana (LA)	0	1	0	1
Mississippi (MS)	5	5	3	13
North Carolina (NC)	5	5	5	15
South Carolina (SC)	5	5	4	14
Tennessee (TN)	0	1	0	1
Texas (TX)	0	0	0	0
Virginia (VA)	5	5	0	10
No. of letters (and tokens):	**30 (15,205)**	**32 (12,689)**	**18 (6,694)**	**80 (34,588)**

To support our analysis, we utilized *ATLAS.ti*,[15] software specifically designed for qualitative research. This tool facilitates efficient data organization, analysis, and visualization. We employed *ATLAS.ti*'s coding and tagging features to identify and group recurrent themes and topics across the corpus. Textual segments (here referred to as "citations") ranged in length from single sentences to entire paragraphs. Our priority was a logical flow of topics rather than uniform citation length. A new citation was typically created when the writer shifted topics (for instance, from the state of their health to troop movements). These topics were generally straightforward, because, as mentioned before, the soldiers' limited educational background prevented them from describing complex ideas; therefore, coding decisions were made with relative clarity.

[14] Specifically, the fact that it did not contain a sufficient number of letters for every state in each selected year.

[15] *ATLAS.ti* Scientific Software Development GmbH. 2023. ATLAS.ti Mac (version 23.2.1) [Qualitative data analysis software]. https://atlasti.com.

These citations were then assigned one or more codes, with each representing a theme we had defined through inductive reasoning (see Example 1). This system allowed for multi-layered annotation: a single citation could be associated with multiple codes when thematically relevant.

Apart from qualitative description of the themes in the letters, we used the total number of those citations to calculate the changes in the frequency of the occurrence of those themes over the course of the war. However, it is important to note that our findings are based on a selected sample of letters. While we did employ statistical analysis, it was meant to represent patterns within the scope of our dataset to complement the qualitative analysis.

4. Letters – content

4.1. Major themes identified in the Civil War correspondence

The content of Civil War letters can be analyzed from multiple perspectives. In this subsection we outline the main topics found in these letters and show the content of the letters evolving over the duration of the war. For the sake of transparency and clarity these themes are provided here in a tabulated form and categorized suitably:

Table 2. Most common themes in Civil War letter sample.

Major category:	Sub-category:	Example:
civilian life	clothing	ma I want you to bee Sure and Send me Some cloths by Lt, Mann if you can do so for I am in need (GA_1865_EVERETT82)[16]
	faith and God	we never meet one arth that we may all be prpared to meet in heaven whar parting is no more (VA_1863_HAMPTON8)
	family and community updates	ell ant aner that i herd from her Boyes yesterday thay was Both well and give her my Best lov (SC_1865_CULBERTSON16)
	food	we ar far ing fin now We get plety to eat We draw flour and baks our bread (SC_1861_BOYD2)
	yearning for loved ones	I wod give the hole world if I cod onley be with thee one that I love So deare ley (MS_1861_HONNOLL2)

[16] The abbreviations in brackets are structured in the following way: code of the state_year of sending_code corresponding to the letter in question on the *Private Voices* website.

Table 2. cont.

Major category:	Sub-category:	Example:
	family business and money matters	John William Jimison I want you to bee savin with the corn & every thing els for for it will bee hard times (VA_1863_JIMISON8)
	travels	his is a very low flat contry the leveles smoothest contry that I ever saw in my life (VA_1863_-HAMPTON8)
	weather	we have had a greate deal of rain for the last week and the river is verry high and still rising (SC_1865_JEFCOAT91)
health	negative – sickness, death	we have A Grat Deal off sickness hir Jams Alewine is sick he has Got the Measels & so has Jams (SC_1861_BOYD5)
	positive – wellness	I am glad to hav to report that the health of our Camp is some what on the improveing order (MS_1861_BROWNFAMILY1)
hope	hopefulness	we ar Coming to the Conclosion that the war will be Closed by the 1 of Janwary (AL_1863_-MATTHEWS19)
	hopelessness	Dear fathe the times is so sterd up that I dont know whether that I ever will come back or not (AL_1861_POE1)
letters (exchange of correspon-dence)	asking for letters	mother you must write me an other one as I have not got but one from you since I left (GA_1861_MOBLEY7)
	apologize for poor writing skills	you must look over my mistakes and excuse my bad writing for it is a bad place to write in (NC_1861_PATTON2)
	discussing letters sent/ received	I received your leter of the 3rd inst in due time and was glad to hear from yo all (NC_1865_BLECKLEY18)
	writing without news	I have nothing of interest to write though I will try to give you a little news (NC_1861_PAT-TON7)
military life	camp life notes	we are Still in lines of Battle as the yanks will not let us camp in abetter way (GA_1865_EVER-ETT84)
	desertion	he Sed that tha was runing away from his Brigade lik wild cats Some gos to the yankeys and Som gos hom (NC_1865_HILL9)

Table 2. cont.

Major category:	Sub-category:	Example:
	combat operations and tactical movements	for we here that the yankeys is at charlett and if tha get betwixt me and home I want Stay here (NC_1865_HILL9)
	attitude to war – negative	i wold Be Glad if tha wod mak pease for i tell you we hav seen a hard time of it (SC_1861_BOYD5)
	attitude to war – positive	the boys are all in fine spirits and seam to be ready to try the ranks at anytime (TN_1863_HONNOLL28)
	soldier life – complaints	We see very hard times here what few thare is of us left we dont git a nuff to eat (AL_1863_-POE56)
	soldier life – contentedness	we ar all well and has got the name of the best looking Company in the Bethal Regiment (NC_1861_PATTON1)
otherness	us vs the Yankees	you need not think that I am going to Dersert I do love my contry too well to Ever go to the yanks ma It looks like we have got to fight 4 yr long longer (GA_1865_EVERETT82)
	us vs other soldiers	there may be a few lazy scamps around the out s[c]irts of the county that ougt to be sent to some fort to work (NC_1861_PATTON7)
	camp life vs home life	at last I think a grate eal a bowt home and want to be thar bwt it Cant be (GA_1863_MCCORKLE1)

It should be noted that many fragments depicted there belong to several categories as the topics are often interconnected; the same fragment could touch upon the matter of letters (exchange of correspondence), family issues and missing their loved ones, as demonstrated by Example 1:

(1) I am in hopes tha will rech you an find you well an all the rest of the thire I recken that you will think that I am [ver?]bole a riten to you I cant her from youns up ther and that that I wod rite a few lines to you and then maby I cod her from you I wont to her from Gramother Mc millian tell her that I wont to see her very much an want her to rite to mee an all my frinds up thire (AL_1863_POE36).[17]

[17] The overlap between categories may pose certain analytical challenges. However, since linguistic boundaries are rarely clear-cut and messages can convey multiple meanings

Before examining Civil War correspondence, it is essential to address the role of censorship, as it directly shaped the content of these letters. One significant advantage of Civil War letters is that, unlike in later wars, they were not subjected to formal censorship. While both Union and Confederate authorities were concerned about leaking sensitive information like troop movements or military strategies, they generally refrained from implementing systematic censorship on soldiers' correspondence. Civilian postal services and military mail systems were largely free from official intervention, which allowed letters to maintain greater thematic and stylistic freedom (Dylewski 2013: 150).

This lack of censorship enabled a more open exchange of personal ideas and opinions, making the content of these letters appear largely unfiltered. However, this freedom was not absolute. Informal controls, such as social norms and peer pressure, often influenced what soldiers chose to write about. For instance, less literate soldiers, who might have struggled with complex writing, tended to focus on simpler topics – such as family matters, homesickness, or daily camp life – somewhat automatically steering clear of controversial or sensitive subjects.

Moreover, religious and moral expectations significantly influenced the content and tone of soldiers' letters, particularly among Confederate soldiers, though not exclusively. Many correspondents were aware that their letters might be circulated within their communities, leading them to consciously avoid topics that could be deemed inappropriate or excessively graphic. The pervasive influence of religious institutions further reinforced this restraint, often encouraging soldiers to emphasize themes of faith, perseverance, and spiritual fortitude in their correspondence, rather than delving into the harsh or violent aspects of warfare. This moral framework shaped not only what soldiers chose to write but also how they presented their experiences to those at home.[18]

Though some soldiers may have relied on more educated comrades to assist in writing, which could introduce an element of self-censorship, this practice was reportedly uncommon. As Dylewski (2013: 150–151) points out, the sheer volume of letters written during the war would have made it impractical for

simultaneously, we proceed with the analysis despite this overlap. We thank Reviewer 1 for drawing our attention to this issue.

[18] Dylewski (2013: 135, fn. 25) writes: "The body of letters is surprisingly devoid of sexual content .... The lack of frivolous content is especially intriguing in the case of young volunteers and conscripts who wrote suspiciously decent correspondence to family and friends. However, commentaries on erotic matters might have existed; they, nonetheless, shared the fate of erotic novels from the times of the Civil War. Such sexually explicit content was most probably destroyed by relatives, archivists, and veterans themselves in the decades following the end of the war" (Walter L. Williams, an online review of T. P. Lowry's 1994 publication *The Story the Soldiers Wouldn't Tell: Sex in the Civil War*. In *International Gay and Lesbian Review*. http://gaybookreviews.info/review/3386/793. Date of access: [02.01.2012]).

fellow soldiers or regimental scribes to regularly assist others in letter writing. Thus, the majority of soldiers, even those with limited literacy, likely managed to express their thoughts independently, contributing to the authentic, unfiltered nature of these communications.

4.2. Changes over time

By analyzing a corpus of letters from three distinct periods during the Civil War, it becomes possible to identify shifts in the most common themes addressed by soldiers and their families. Table 3 presents the numerical data and percentages reflecting the frequency of topics based on the total number of citations tagged in *ATLAS.ti* for each respective year. This method allows for a clear comparison of how the content of the correspondence evolved over time, revealing trends in what soldiers and their loved ones prioritized or avoided as the war progressed.

Table 3. Most common themes in 1861, 1863, and 1865 sub-corpora.

Major category:	**Sub-category:**	**1861**	**1863**	**1865**
civilian life	clothing	5 (1.8%)	6 (2%)	6 (4.3%)
	faith and god	5 (1.8%)	9 (3.4%)	10 (7.1%)
	family and community updates	26 (9.2%)	29 (11.1%)	9 (6.4%)
	food	11 (3.9%)	5 (1.9%)	4 (2.8%)
	yearning for loved ones	26 (9.2%)	17 (6.5%)	7 (5%)
	family business & money issues	18 (6.4%)	20 (7.7%)	10 (7.1%)
	travels	6 (2.1%)	3 (1.1%)	0 (0.0%)
	weather	6 (2.1%)	4 (1.5%)	7 (5%)
	total	103 (36.5%)	93 (35.2%)	53 (37.7%)
health	negative – sickness, death	10 (3.5%)	10 (3.8%)	3 (2.1%)
	positive – wellness	6 (2.1%)	7 (2.7%)	1 (0.7%)
	total	16 (5.6%)	17 (6.5%)	4 (2.8%)
hope	hopefulness	10 (3.5%)	7 (2.7%)	4 (2.8%)
	hopelessness	2 (0.7%)	1 (0.4%)	2 (1.4%)
	total	12 (4.2%)	8 (3.1%)	6 (4.2%)
letters (exchange of correspondence)	asking for letters	22 (7.8%)	25 (10%)	15 (10.6%)
	apologize for poor writing skills	2 (0.7%)	2 (1%)	1 (0.7%)

Table 3. cont.

Major category:	**Sub-category:**	**1861**	**1863**	**1865**
	discussing letters sent/received	8 (2.8%)	16 (6.1%)	8 (5.7%)
	writing without news	13 (4.6%)	11 (4.2%)	6 (4.3%)
	total	45 (16%)	54 (21.3%)	30 (21.3%)
military life	camp life notes	27 (9.6%)	15 (6%)	9 (6.4%)
	desertion	0 (0.0%)	1 (0%)	4 (2.8%)
	combat operations & tactical movements	17 (6%)	25 (10%)	6 (4.3%)
	attitude to war – negative	5 (1.8%)	3 (1%)	1 (0.7%)
	attitude to war – positive	5 (1.8%)	3 (1%)	2 (1.4%)
	soldier life – complaints	13 (4.6%)	12 (4.6%)	6 (4.3%)
	soldier life – contentedness	11 (3.9%)	2 (0.8%)	0 (0.0%)
	total	78 (27.7%)	61 (23.4%)	28 (19.9%)
otherness	us vs the Yankees	7 (2.5%)	13 (5%)	8 (5.7%)
	us vs other soldiers	3 (1.1%)	1 (0.4%)	1 (0.7%)
	camp life vs home life	18 (6.4%)	14 (5%)	11 (7.8%)
	total	28 (10%)	28 (10.7%)	20 (14.2%)
Total:		**282**	**261**	**141**

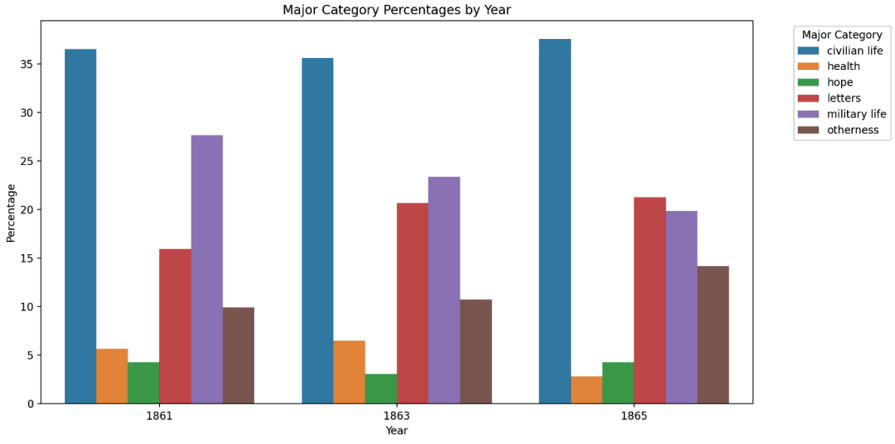

Figure 1. The percentage of each major category by year.

Whereas Figure 1 shows the percentage of each major category by year, making it easy to see which categories grew or shrank in prominence over time, Figure 2 is a stacked bar chart, which depicts how the composition of categories changed as a share of the total each year.

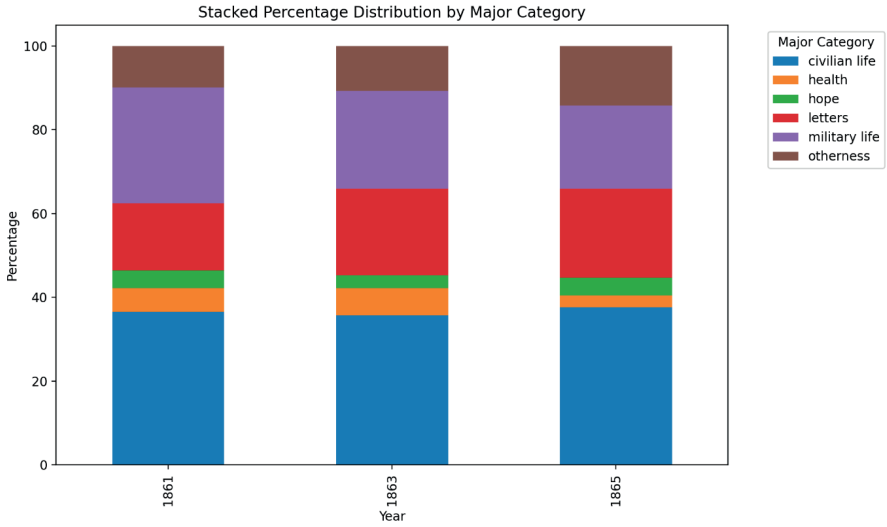

Figure 2. Stacked bar chart.

Table 3 and accompanying graphs show several interesting patterns across the years 1861, 1863, and 1865: civilian life consistently remained the most prominent major category, maintaining roughly 35–38% of the content across all three years, showing its sustained importance throughout the period. In turn, health-related content showed a certain decline from about 5.7% in 1861 to 2.8% in 1865, possibly indicating shifting priorities in communication. Hope-related content remained relatively stable, fluctuating between 3–4.3% across the years.

Looking at the data in more detail, it is evident that the most prevalent theme in Civil War letters throughout the conflict pertains to life-related topics. Approximately 35% of the content each year encompasses subjects such as missing loved ones, family affairs, financial concerns, or community updates. For many a soldier, the war marked their first prolonged separation from their families, which likely accounts for their intense interest in domestic matters. Given the hardships they endured, it is unsurprising that they longed for news from home. This separation heightened their feelings of otherness and alienation, which is further explored in the paragraph below.

Next, military-related notes and meta-commentary on letter writing constituted roughly 20% of the correspondence's overall content. Considering the context in which these letters were composed, the prominence of these topics is expected. Several patterns are noteworthy. First, any expressions of satisfaction regarding military life diminished. This trend appears to reflect the declining morale in the camps, exacerbated by pervasive illness, death, and the growing fear of the Confederacy's collapse. References to desertion, initially absent, emerged in the sub-corpora for 1863 and 1865. The presence of such

references, particularly in the smaller 1865 sub-corpus, is quite telling. Additionally, requests for letters became more frequent, likely driven by escalating feelings of loneliness. Overall, while the frequency of military notes slightly declined over time, references to letter writing showed a visible increase. This shift could indicate a reduced interest in recounting the harrowing experiences of camp life and a heightened desire to maintain correspondence as the war dragged on.

A discernible decline in enthusiasm and optimism is evident in Civil War letters over the war's duration, likely linked to diminishing confidence in the Confederate cause. Nevertheless, explicit expressions of hope or despair were relatively rare. This rarity might reflect the soldiers' reluctance to share their feelings, as they were too distant from their families to receive comfort and too uncertain about the future to contemplate it. This hesitance may also relate to the relatively low frequency of remarks concerning their attitudes toward the war.

Regarding health, mentions of sickness and death were more common than those conveying the writers' contentment. Both positive and negative references declined slightly over time. Like the theme of home life, this trend might be attributed to a reluctance to share their physical condition due to the separation from their families. Additionally, the letters demonstrate a notable fluctuation in the significance of health-related themes. While initial concerns regarding sickness and mortality were prominent, these topics became less central as the war continued. The oscillation between hopefulness and hopelessness mirrored the changing tides of the war, with soldiers alternating between optimism for an impending conclusion to the conflict and despair at the persistent suffering they endured.

One theme that requires clarification is the notion of *otherness*. The concept captures the psychological tension experienced by soldiers as they struggled to define themselves in relation to others: their enemies in the Union army, fellow Confederates who deserted, and even their families left behind. As the war went on, this sense of distance became more pronounced, particularly in the way soldiers described Union forces and reflected on the moral and emotional divisions of the conflict. The "us vs. the Yankees" mentality grew stronger over time, reflecting a mounting alienation from the enemy. Additionally, correspondence with loved ones emerged as a central part of soldiers' experiences. The frequent mention of letters underscores the vital emotional support that family and community provided amidst the chaos of war. Soldiers often expressed a profound longing for home, contrasting the comfort of close relationships and familiar environment with the harsher realities of camp life, where drinking and fighting among fellow soldiers were common. In their letters, many emphasized the moral and emotional refuge that home represented, setting it apart from the often-rough behavior they witnessed among their peers. While "us vs. other soldiers" dichotomy was marginal in the letters, "camp life vs. home life" theme steadily accounted for ca. 6% of the correspondence.

In order to assess the statistical significance of our results, we performed several complementary analyses: a chi-square test, a one-way ANOVA,[19] effect size calculations, and a correlation matrix of category percentages.[20] The chi-square test of independence for the major categories across 1861, 1863, and 1865 showed that none of the categories or subcategories reached the conventional threshold for statistical significance ($p < 0.05$), indicating no meaningful difference in the overall distribution of category frequencies across years. To confirm this result using a different statistical perspective, a one-way ANOVA was conducted on the mean category percentages for the same time periods. Here, the F-statistic was extremely close to zero, and the p-value equaled 1.0, showing that the mean proportions of categories also did not differ significantly between years. This lack of variation may partly reflect the limited size of the current corpus, and it could change once a larger sample of Civil War correspondence is examined.

When it comes to effect size calculations, most categories have very small effect sizes, except for *health*, which shows a moderate effect size, suggesting some year-to-year fluctuation in that category.

Finally, Figure 3 presents visual representation of category percentages:

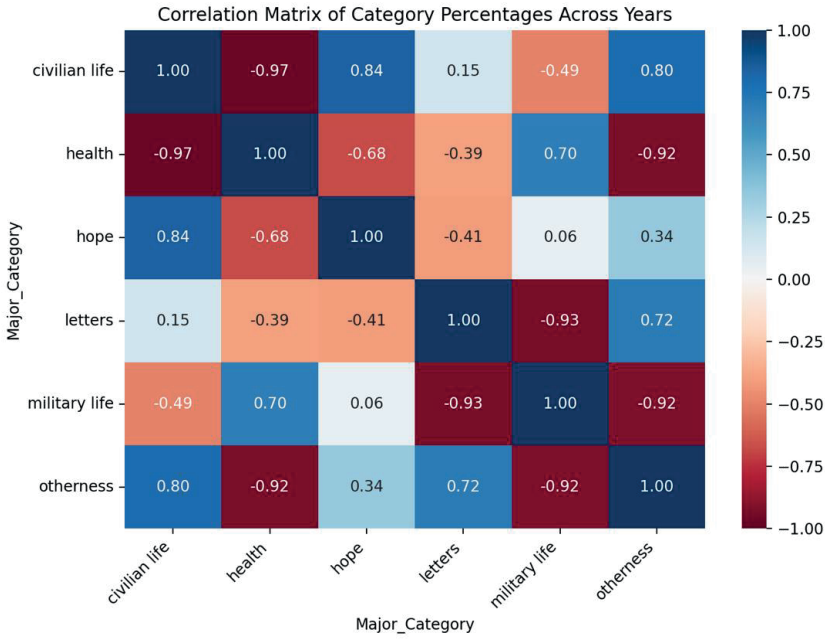

Figure 3. Heatmap visualizing the correlation between the major categories.

[19] Using both tests (chi-square and one-way ANOVA) provides complementary evidence and helps verify the robustness of the findings.

[20] This has been done so by the use of Julius.AI, an AI data analyst available at: https://julius.ai. (date of use: April 12, 2025).

The heat map displays the Pearson correlation matrix of six categories under discussion based on their proportional representation across 1861, 1863, and 1865. As for its interpretation, strong inverse relationships are visible between certain categories, most notably between *civilian life* and *health* (r = -0.97) as well as between *letters* and *military life* (r = -0.93);[21] this implies that as the focus on one category rises, the focus on others tends to recede (and vice versa). Similarly, *otherness* also shows a strong negative relationship with both *health* and *military life* (r = -0.92 for each) which suggest some sort of trade-off: when attention is given to *otherness*, it is often done so at the expense of *health* and *military life*. In turn, c*ivilian life* category is positively correlated with both *hope* (r = 0.84) and *otherness* (r = 0.80), which indicates that these themes often rise and fall together in the body of letters analyzed by us.

From a sociolinguistic perspective, these patterns suggest that people's communicative priorities shifted according to the historical and social circumstances in which they wrote. The negative relationship between *civilian life* and *health* may reflect periods of crisis, such as war or widespread illness, when concern for physical well-being overshadowed the routines of everyday life. The association between *letters* and civilian contexts, together with their decline in military settings, points to the way communicative styles and genres adapt under pressure. The recurring presence of *otherness* alongside *civilian life* and *hope* may signal moments of self-reflection and negotiation of identity, while the negative link with *military life* (r = –0.92) suggests that wartime language often favored unity and shared purpose over expressions of difference. Taken together, these patterns show how language mirrors social tension, collective values, and changing perspectives over time, revealing gradual shifts from institutional to more personal modes of expression.

5. Civil War letters – structure

Letters, be it private or official, usually employ a tripartite structure comprising an opening formula, the main body, and a closing formula. The formulae reflect the "pragmatic situation in which the epistolary formulae acquire meaning consisting of the texts (the letters) and the two participant roles of the writer and the addressee" (Rutten and van der Wal 2012: 177). In this subsection, we aim to discuss the variety in the opening and closing formulae as used by the Civil War soldiers and their families.

[21] In summary, these strong negative correlations are indicative of the fact that certain themes tend to trade off against each other in terms of their relative prominence from year to year. Thus, when one category becomes more central, another often recedes, suggesting a dynamic balance in the content's thematic focus.

Letters retrieved from the *Private Voices* repository typically adhered to contemporary epistolary conventions. Dylewski (2013: 226) writes:

> The typical structure of a Civil War letter with at least some degree of vernacularity has been described more extensively in the preceding chapter. In a nutshell, a letter of this kind consists of the following components (taking into account the running text, but discounting the date, place, and signature): introductory greeting/opening (usually a formulaic expression) > body > conclusion/closing (usually a formulaic expression). The Civil War soldiers were seemingly exponents of the same epistolary tradition insofar as the letters contain more or less similar opening and concluding formulae, with the letter content and grammar obviously dependent on a given individual.

The usage of formulaic expressions, oftentimes imperfectly rendered, shows "that formulae were disseminated by ear and only later were they subject to unfaithful rendering in the written form" (Dylewski 2013: 161, ft 8). Thus, the replicated forms are a result of their poor writing skills and little exposure to norms – this is evident from erratic spelling, irregular capitalization, and semi-phonetic transcriptions which occur in those expressions (Montgomery 1997: 229). Even though one could argue that their existence speaks against the letter's vernacular character, the unevenness in the replication of the opening and closing formulae suggests that while the soldiers and their families were aware of the typical letter structure, they likely have never used a letter writing manual.

As for the introduction, letters would usually start with a salutation of the following kind usually containing the following chunks: *I write hoping this will find you well, I take the pleasure to*, *I take/embrace the opportunity to*, *I take my pen to drop/write/address a few lines*, *I seat myself to let you know.*[22] These are illustrated below:

(2) Dear son I again write well at this time hoping this will find you in good helth (AL_1861_MILLER3);
(3) Dear Brother I take this opportunity to in forme you that I am Not well at this time (AL_1863_MATTHEWS19);
(4) my dear sister i this day take my pen in hand to rite you a few lines to let you no that i receive your letter of the 24 (AL_1863_POE56);
(5) Dear Brother I this Evening take plasear of Writing you afew lines Which leaves me in good healthe at prese (AL_1861_THROWER1);
(6) Dear Mother I Seat my Self to let you know I am up and about but not well it is all I can doo to keep up (MS_1863_BUCKLEY2).

[22] This list is by no means exhaustive as well as there are variations of the strings of words at issue here. However, the repertoire of salutations/opening was very much limited.

Regarding closing formulae, it is notable that the authors consistently observed the epistolary norms of their era. They resorted to a number of such formulaic expressions as, for example: *I must come/bring my letter to a close/an end*, *so nothing more* (*at present*), *I remain*(*s*) *your …*, *I am your…/yours truly* (see Examples 7-10 below):

(7) I must come to a close Right to me as soon as this comes to hand W. M. Dalton A. H. Dalton to Mr. W. M. Dalton (SC_1861_DALTON13);
(8) so nothing more far well tell Rob to G. P. Bird to J B Patton not mary son (NC_1861_PATTON1);
(9) I Remain as Ever your affectionate John J. Jefcoat Mrs. R E. Jefcoat (SC_1865_JEFCOAT91);
10) i am yours truly Franklin Setzer to Carline Setzer (NC_1865_SETZERF36).

6. Civil War letters – form

Let us examine two letters that exemplify the body of correspondence under scrutiny to show distinct elements that characterize its form. The first letter was written by Elizabeth Thrower, the wife of Civil War soldier, John T. Thrower, who hailed from Moore County, North Carolina.[23] This letter was addressed to Zebulon Baird Vance, the Governor of North Carolina at the time. It reads:

(11) the
April 13 day 1863 Gov
Mr Z. B. Vance Sir I mwste
tele you my Consitione ate this time I ame a
volentieres Wife and ine bade fix I hante gote
nothing to live one my hwsbande wente of as a
Swbstitute and he gote one hwndred dollars
and the comita nevere giv me one Cente and I
hav Solde evry thing I hav gote to liv one and
canote liv eny longere with owte helpe my
husband is twenty six yeares of age he volinde
teared in Captine W. M. Blacks company its company
D 49 Regt N C T and I hav gote five children
wndere tene years of age and John. T. Throwere
has bine gone the Second day of laste Aprale
is twelve months and thay have not giv me

[23] https://altchive.org/node/10518 (accessed August 29, 2024).

one cent yet and my family is a lowte to
Swfere thay Say thay wil note giv me eny
thing becaws my husband wente of As a SwbStitut
and that is all I cane Say to you yorse Trwly
Elisabeth Throwere
To M Z B vance the govinere
[page 2]
if yo cante doe nothing fore me I Shal Sende
my old mane word and there is ahepe ind my
fix yo may depend they is no farnes in the way
they doe i hav Sold my lande and i ame throw
now it is So cornal Richardsone done all he
code fore me and it done noogode at all yo cane
pase yore [??]tance abowt it yo mwst excruse
bade riting and Speling i hant gote nohorse to
make one thing

It should be noted that, as is evident in the letter, the transcriber faithfully adhered to the original text, striving for the highest possible accuracy by preserving the original, often unusual and idiosyncratic spellings.

This correspondence reveals several noteworthy phenomena. First, the spelling indicates that the writer was not accustomed to composing written text and struggled to convey the message: she was apparently forced by dramatic life circumstances to grab a pen and write to the governor. Second, punctuation is sparse, and capitalization appears somewhat haphazard. Additionally, the grammar deviates from what is considered standard by contemporary normative grammarians. For example, the author uses the now-obsolescent vernacular contraction *hain't* (e.g., "i *hant* gote nohorse to make one thing") and employs double negatives ("*hante* gote *nothing*," "if yo *cante* doe *nothing*," "i *hant* gote *nohorse*"). The letter also features non-standard vernacular forms of the preterite tense ("nevere *giv* me one Cente," "So cornal Richardsone *done* all he code fore me and it *done* noogode at all") and the past participle ("thay have not *giv* me ne cent yet"), expletive *they*[24] as well as a subject-verb agreement violation ("*they is no* farnes in the way").

Although there is no formal salutation, the first part of the letter is signed off with "*yorse Trwly*, Elisabeth Throwere," and the section to follow ends with the apologetic remark mentioned earlier: "*yo mwst excruse bade riting and Speling*."

[24] The expletive *they* appears in places where one would typically expect to see *there* in standard English (as in: "*They's* about six or seven guitar players here" (Montgomery and Hall 2004).

The second letter we use here for illustrative purposes was written by a Civil War soldier, John N. Dale serving in the 24th Mississippi Infantry, to his beloved Sarah Jane Honnoll:[25]

(12) Camp rowen Marion Station
October the 6 1861
Dear Miss it is throwe the kind murcies of
god that I imbrase this opurtunity to in
forme you that I am tolerable well at this
time a hope ing when thease lines coms
to hand you may be a injoy the Same
like blsing of god I have nothing of importance
to rite to you onley I wod like to see you
one time more for of all lonsum dayes that
I ever Spen it has bin Sece I lef you theire
is nothing that imuses me I dont beleve
I ever will See any more plasur fore the love
I have fore thee never can repay thee det of love I owe
to thee Jane you Said that in yore letter that
I receive from you that you thought it a
grat honor to be promist in maridg to Such
a one as eye but you think it no more
honor than I dwo I [t]hink it a grat honor
confurd on me I feld my Self hightley
honord to think that you wold mry me
deare friend you dont know the love
I hav fore thee I have not languedg to expr
esse when I think of th ples word that have past
when Sed by Sed the lovly words that have
fallen from yore Sweet lips
turne over
[page 2]
Jane I think that you will be tiard a reading
my leteter it is so badly com pose
it may be that I can writ some thin
g that will inturest you a little more
a bout the wore and a bout the Calado
nia Rifles they get the prase every
where they go they got the prase in collum
buss and they got the prase here of being

[25] https://altchive.org/node/15140 (accessed August 29, 2024).

the best drilld company in the in camp
ment Jane I think that I will
Come home to Swe [1] you all in a Short
time if we dont leave here
captin rowen thinkes that we will
be order in one from here to Ship ilant
and if we are I wont get to Swe you
any more but if we never meet
on urth I hope we may m[?]et in heav
ens excuse bad righting and Spelling
I mus bring my letter to a close
wright to me
nothing more at present onley
you remain my deare friend untill deate
From yore love ing friend
John N. Dale to Sarah J Honnoll

In this case, the situation is similar to the previous letter – the spelling suggests that the author had received little, if any, education prior to the Civil War. The letter opens with a passage that aligns with the letter-writing traditions of the time:

(13) I imbrase this opurtunity to in forme you that I am tolerable well at this time a hope ing when thease lines coms to hand you may be a injoy the Same like blsing of god I have nothing of importance to rite to you onley I wod like to see you. (MS_1861_HONNOLL1).

This piece of writing generally exemplifies the common epistolary practices of the Civil War era, when maintaining contact with family, relatives, and friends was a vital concern for soldiers. For many, writing letters became the highlight of their day, with their lives soon revolving around the routine of composing, sending, and eagerly anticipating responses from home. For days at a time, their chief concern was the next letter either sent to or awaited from loved ones (Madden 2000: 221). As Dylewski (2013: 128) writes:

> Even a cursory glance at samples of Civil War correspondence might suffice for an understanding of the expectancy with which people in encampments would await the arrival of the mail and the profound disappointment they would feel when it did not arrive. In fact, when the soldiers did not receive mail with various kinds of news, from rumors, crops, and other details of life at home to, more importantly, the health of the family, they became deeply frustrated or enervated, to say the least (Wiley 1978 [1943]: 192).

This chunk is also illustrative of the vernacular character of Civil War correspondence gathered in the *Private Voices collection*. The writer's spellings, such as *imbrase* for *embrace*,[26] *opurtunity* for *opportunity*, and *rite* for *write*, reflect an effort to represent words according to their sound rather than the standard spelling conventions.

The letter is ended with a typical closing of the time preceded by an apology "excuse bad righting and Spelling":

(14) ens *excuse bad righting and Spelling* I mus bring my letter to a close wright to me nothing more at present onley you remain my deare friend untill deate (MS_1861_HONNOLL1).

Once again, this letter illustrates a lack of punctuation and erratic spelling throughout. Examples include the use of *eye* for the 1st-person pronoun, and misspellings such as *untill deate* and *yore lette*. The passage quoted below (Example 15) further highlights these features:

(15) I have not *languedg to expr esse* when I think of *th ples* word that have past when *Sed* by *Sed* the *lovly* words that have fallen from *yore* Sweet lips (MS_1861_HONNOLL1).

The use of capitalization is also inconsistent and erratic (see Example 12), with words like *Spen*, *Sence*, *Same*, *Self*, *Sed*, *Sweet*, *Such*, *Swe*, *Ship*, *Come*, and *Rifle*s capitalized – interestingly, mostly words starting with the sibilant '*s*.'[27]

Also, the grammar of the letter displays deviations from present-day normative rules. The author uses the following phenomena deemed non-standard/colloquial/dialectal: *thease lines coms* or *a*-prefixing, a feature associated with several Southern and Appalachian dialects in which the unstressed *a* might precede present participles or progressive verbs (for example, *a-coming, a-going, a-running*)[28] (Burkette and Antieau 2023):

(16) Jane I think that you will be tiard *a reading* my leteter (MS_1861_HONNOLL1).

The orthography of the letter also points to features of pronunciation. In addition to the *pen-pin* merger mentioned in footnote 26, it also shows evidence

[26] The form *imbrase* may also exemplify the *pen–pin merger*, a widespread feature in Southern speech where the vowels /ɪ/ and /ɛ/ merge before nasal consonants (Montgomery and Eble 2004).
[27] While this may be purely coincidental, this unconscious emphasis on sibilant-initial words, maybe due to rhythm, sound, or simply a habit developed by the soldier.
[28] This is, of course, a simplified account of a more complex phenomenon that involves specific phonological and syntactic constraints governing where the prefix can appear.

of word-final consonant cluster reduction[29] affecting the *-ed* ending of regular verbs, as seen in such spellings as *we will be order* or *badly com pose*.

Interestingly, within an otherwise vernacular context marked by erratic spelling and informal phrasing, John Dale seems to have adopted a more solemn tone in his letter (see Example 17):

(17) I dont beleve I ever will See any more plasur fore the love I have fore *thee* never can repay *thee* det of love I owe to *thee* Jane… (MS_1861_HONNOLL1).

The presence of the archaic *thee* seems part of Dale's effort to invest his words with emotional weight. The phrasing recalls the language of the English Bible,[30] which likely served as a stylistic and emotional resource for writers seeking a tone of reverence and devotion.

7. Conclusions

In conclusion, Civil War letters are invaluable sources that offer unique insights into the lives and language of individuals who experienced the war firsthand. The content of the letters found in the corpus, which constitutes the focus of the present paper, offers a unique glimpse into an interplay of themes that evolved or were present throughout the duration of the conflict. Soldiers often articulated a profound longing for home and the comfort of familiar relationships, which served as a refuge from the brutality of their surroundings. Additionally, the letters demonstrate a notable fluctuation in the significance of health-related themes. While initial concerns regarding sickness and mortality were prominent, these topics became less central as the war continued. The evolving discourse around health issues reflects broader existential considerations. Next, the oscillation between hopefulness and hopelessness mirrored the changing tides of the war, with soldiers alternating between optimism for an impending conclusion to the conflict and despair at the persistent suffering they endured.

Ultimately, the stable prominence of civilian life themes – such as family updates, yearning for loved ones, and expressions of faith – illustrates that, despite the violence and uncertainty of war, soldiers maintained a deep connection to their personal lives and core values. These themes remained consistent throughout the conflict, comprising a significant portion of their letters, which functioned not only as a means of communication but also as

[29] For a discussion of this process in Civil War correspondence from South Carolina, see Dylewski (2013: 282–295).

[30] *The King James Bible* (1611), still widely read and quoted in the nineteenth century, preserved *thee* and *thou* in religious discourse.

a critical outlet for the expression of their hopes, fears, and identities. This multifaceted representation of their experiences gives researchers a glimpse into the emotional landscape of Civil War soldiers.

By briefly examining their structure, form, and content, we show how these letters can inform research across a wide range of disciplines: from historical sociolinguistics and corpus linguistics to the study of epistolary practices and cultural history.

The Civil War letters preserved in the *Private Voices* corpus represent an exceptional source for historical linguistic research, offering direct access to the everyday language of nineteenth-century Southerners and Northerners whose voices are otherwise absent from written records. As Dylewski (2013: 142) notes, the war prompted members of the lower social strata to become articulate in writing for the first time, producing texts that capture spoken features rarely found in formal documents. The letters' nonstandard spelling, lack of punctuation, and variable grammar (guided more by ear than by schooling) constitute a valuable record of regional and social variation (Ellis and Montgomery 2012: 472). By focusing on semiliterate and transitionally literate authors, the *Private Voices* corpus preserves linguistic features such as archaic forms, local vocabulary, and grammatical variants that were deliberately excluded from more standardized writings (Levey and DeRooy 2021: 298). Moreover, the corpus's digital accessibility (Dylewski 2013: 143) enables systematic linguistic analysis at scale, facilitating the study of dialectal diversity, orthographic practices, and the development of vernacular literacy across the American South.

For historians, this collection is a rich and intimate archive of direct voices, which deepen and detail the understanding of the past. The letters depict the everyday realities, regional identities, and emotional responses of people who are usually omitted from traditional historical narratives, thus providing a rare view of the way ordinary individuals experienced and comprehended the major events. In fact, they disclose the human side of history through feelings, stamina, and outlook which the official records are silent about.

For scholars of letter writing, the collection also offers valuable insight into epistolary practices of the time. The structure of the letters, their forms of address, and the use of opening and closing formulae reveal social conventions, personal relationships, and patterns of communication that shaped how people expressed themselves in writing.

Sociologists can likewise draw on these materials to study aspects of social class, gender, and family relationships, which were influenced by war and social change. However, the main importance of this collection is its power to bring back the individual voices into the historical record. Nevertheless, its potential is still largely untapped due to low awareness outside the specialist circles and certain difficulties in analyzing texts written in nonstandard language. A more

extensive cooperation across different fields could assist scholars in revealing the complete insight of this collection.

Summing up, the corpus (re)introduced in this paper, *Private Voices*, is a particularly promising resource: a large, transcribed, comprehensive, and underutilized collection that is ready for scholarly exploration. Given the characteristics of private correspondence, *Private Voices* constitutes a source which allows for all types of interdisciplinary research.

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