

# Commercial Phraseology in Nineteenth Century English Textbooks for Italians

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## *1. Introduction*

In the nineteenth century the development of international and maritime trade led to a considerable increase in the production and consumption of English textbooks for both native and foreign novices in the business world. Correspondence has been a privileged way to conduct business transactions since the Middle Ages. Indeed, by the fifteenth century letter writing has become part of the daily life of the professional and merchant classes (Richardson 1985). In the nineteenth century, letter writing was still the most important means of communicating over a distance and the only way to maintain business relations in international commerce<sup>1</sup>. Because of this many practical course books specifically intended for the traders' community consisted of model letters.

The main purpose of this contribution is to analyse a set of manuals from the latter half of the nineteenth century, which focus on letter writing, from a pedagogic perspective. Letters form an interesting text type since they reflect the social and functional relations between sender and addressee to a high degree (Göllancz 1999: 149). The five guides under scrutiny in this paper are, in fact, a valuable source of information on the textual construction of the international trader's social role and on how epistolary business relations were negotiated in the late nineteenth century (Del Lungo Camiciotti 2006a, 2006b). In this paper the focus is on the pedagogic aspects of practical courses and specifically on the teaching of the words and phrases of commerce; their relevance to the

<sup>1</sup> On the rhetorical features of nineteenth century commercial letters and the main differences with modern business communication see Del Lungo Camiciotti 2005. For a brief overview of the cultural-historical context of production and consumption of correspondence manuals owing to the development of international trade in the nineteenth century see Del Lungo Camiciotti 2006a.

study of nineteenth century foreign language pedagogic practice may be hardly overestimated as it is typical of practical commercial courses of this period to focus on the teaching of technical terms and expressions rather than on grammar.

## *2. Data and method*

The small specialised corpus here analysed comprises five manuals specifically compiled for Italian learners. Three contain model letters of various length dealing with the routine activities of the international commercial firm (for a description of the corpus see Del Lungo Camiciotti 2002); two are practical courses with special reference to correspondence. For the purposes of this paper, a twofold investigation has been conducted. Firstly, following a procedure adopted by Vicentini (2002) and myself (1983) for the study of grammars, I have analysed the prefaces and other paratextual material to gather information on both the intended addressees and the methodology followed by the authors. Secondly, I have examined the apparatus of notes and glossaries/lists of words and phrases to determine how the authors tackled the question of teaching specialised lexis and phraseology. As a matter of fact, it may be interesting to compare statements by the authors as to the aims of their works and the adopted methodologies with what they actually provide for learners of commercial English.

## *3. Analysis of title pages and prefaces*

Anderson clearly states that his intended audience is primarily composed of novices to the trader world and underlines the centrality of letter writing to business communication. His aim is to form the young trader by introducing him to the international community, both to its practices and ways of establishing commercial networks.

The following sheets have been compiled with a view to supply a deficiency that has hitherto existed in our literature. It appears a remarkable anomaly that, in a country so eminently commercial as Great Britain, the initiatory study of youngmen destined for mercantile life should be so notoriously neglected. [...] We have excellent dictionaries of commerce, and works of practical utility in this department, but none, that I have met with, calculated to form the youthful mind to habits of business, and familiarise it with the objects to which his future energies are to be directed.

Nothing, I conceive, can better conduce to this end than a collection of genuine commercial letters, of recent dates, adapted at one to form the style and to afford a correct insight into the business of the counting house. (Anderson V)

As to the pedagogic method to be followed by learners, he suggests they copy his model letters. In addition, he relies on an appendix containing information as to the technicalities of international trade. He aims to provide rhetorically effective patterns concerning the most common activities of the international firm.

In short it has been my principle object to furnish an appropriate Exercise-book for the use of schools; and I will venture to suggest that every pupil destined for mercantile life should be required to copy the following sheets from beginning to end. Foreigners desirous of acquiring the english (sic) commercial style, may employ themselves very profitably in a similar manner. The Appendix is a new feature in a work of this kind. In it will be found some useful information on subjects intimately connected with mercantile affairs, and which I have endeavoured to place in a clear point of view, to render them intelligible to my youthful readers. (Anderson VII-VIII)

A similar opinion is expressed by Theophilus Cann (1883: V-VI) as to the need for a practical instrument to learn how to write business letters in English.

Concerning the motives, which have induced me to present this work to the Italian public, it is not necessary to say much, except that it has been my desire to supply a want long felt for a Reading-book composed entirely of English letters, and adapted to the Students of the English Language. [...] The first part of this work comprises a series of letters on mercantile affairs, such as applications for situations, answers to advertisements, orders for goods, applications for payments, rendering accounts, consigning goods, effecting insurance, etc etc. I trust this section will be found of use to those entering on, or already engaged in commercial pursuits. [...]

Cann highlights the importance to learn not just words but also idiomatic expressions. In his opinion, isolated words do not seem to carry meaning, so he provides notes giving the translation or paraphrase of expressions specifically English, that is, which he considers not translatable literally.

The numerous Italian notes which I have added at the foot of every page, offer in many cases not merely an interpretation of isolated words, but give the general sense of various idiomatic expressions peculiarly English. By this means the irksomeness, which is occasioned by poring over the columns of a dictionary will be obviated.

In writing some of the miscellaneous letters, I have aimed at amusing as well as instructing, and have endeavoured throughout to render the work as extensively useful as the prescribed limits of the understanding would permit, and trust that it will be no less acceptable to Professors, than those for whom it is specially designed. (*ibid.*: vi)

Romeo Candelari is driven by motivations similar to those of the other authors to publish his collection of model letters. Lexis is

considered the central element of foreign language teaching and translation is seen as the most appropriate strategy to learn words and expressions deemed typical of commercial English.

I rapporti di traffico che ha l'Italia coi paesi nei quali si parla l'inglese, sono continuamente stimolo ed occasione a coltivare questo importante idioma e ad adottarlo nella corrispondenza d'affari. [...] In questo trattatello si è inteso di offrire una modesta raccolta di lettere commerciali più usuali; la si è contenuta quindi nei limiti degli affari trattati generalmente e di nessuna complicazione, avendosi avuto il precipuo scopo d'iniziare il giovane corrispondente, che deve carteggiare con case dell'Inghilterra o degli Stati Uniti ( o dei loro possedimenti coloniali) alla composizione in inglese delle lettere della sua Casa o di quella che serve. (1899: 5-6)

Di tutte le lettere si è data la traduzione in italiano, per facilitare la ricerca del vocabolo o della frase, e per render subito intelligibile il testo inglese ai principianti di tale idioma. (*ibid.*: 7)

A slightly different approach is adopted by both Manetta and Lowe, who seem to have a wider and more sophisticated audience in mind and produce not just collections of letters, but complete courses. In the preface, Manetta clearly states his multiple objectives, the first of which focuses on phraseology. He is convinced of both the specificity of commercial English and the lack of appropriate instrument to impart knowledge on this subject.

Tutti coloro che hanno studiato l'inglese, anche sotto dottissimi maestri, hanno certamente osservato che il commercio e le technicalità della sua corrispondenza non hanno per lo più formato parte della loro istruzione, per la ragione che anche i dottissimi maestri o non si sono curati di insegnar loro i termini e le formule della corrispondenza commerciale, o erano poco versati essi stessi in questo importante e difficile ramo della lingua. Per riempire una lacuna così pregiudizievole agli studiosi dell'inglese, mi sono accinto al compito abbastanza arduo di rimediare a questa mancanza; ed ecco qui che oso pubblicare questa mia operetta, colla quale mi propongo un triplice intendimento: 1° di ammannire in queste pagine la fraseologia commerciale più in uso per gli studenti delle Scuole tecniche, dei Collegi e dei Circoli filologici; 2° di dare una raccolta delle technicalità applicabili alla vita mercantile, affinché i Giovani di Banco già istruiti nell'inglese, possano imparare a tenere una facile ed elegante corrispondenza; 3° di venire in aiuto ai professori d'inglese ignari di commercio, onde abituarli a superare le difficoltà inerenti all'insegnamento di uno stile speciale. (1874: VII-VIII)

A similar opinion is expressed by Lowe, who underlines the shortage of practical courses for administrative and commercial purposes, and points to the importance of translation as a means to acquire English phraseology.

Nel pubblicare questo corso commerciale inglese, l'autore spera offrire tanto agli insegnanti, quanto alla gioventù Italiana che dedicasì al commercio, un libro di testo quale non si era ancora pubblicato. Queste pagine sono una raccolta di lezioni da lui tenute; conservano quindi essenzialmente l'impronta della pratica. Tali lezioni hanno a precipua base l'esperienza dell'autore desunta nelle funzioni amministrative e commerciali; esperienza che congiunta alla cognizione della lingua gli consente di trattare largamente la parte commerciale e bancaria. (1893-1894: I, 2)

Nella prima parte di questo "corso" lo studioso ebbe campo d'impadronirsi della grammatica e rendersi familiare la fraseologia commerciale. In questa seconda parte del "corso commerciale" ogni articolo di giornale, che riecheggia un'illustrazione epistolare, sarà da voltarsi in italiano. Come tema l'allievo troverà la risposta in italiano la quale tradurrà in inglese. Procedendo di questo passo l'alunno terrà dietro a una serie di operazioni commerciali, quali [...] Al fine di facilitare la traduzione nello stile inglese, il testo delle lettere italiane è dato letterale. (*ibid.*: II, 5)

To sum up, from the analysis of paratextual material, it emerges that the authors of both letter collections and practical courses have in mind to teach how to communicate in English to would-be traders and office clerks in the international firm. All authors seem convinced that the most relevant element that characterises commercial English is lexis and phraseology as they all underline the need to learn commercial expressions to acquire a business "style".

Their prefaces are mostly motivated by promotional goals in that they try to present their works as desirable to buy. They point to the necessity to learn English for commercial purposes and hint at the cultural values which form part of business interaction. They also point to the little attention paid to commercial English by authors of grammar books. In short, they are going to reduce a widely perceived pedagogic market gap, even though, in some cases, they appear to boast more than they really offer with their textbooks.

As to the methodological aspects, two elements emerge from the prefaces: firstly, the centrality attributed to lexis and phraseological units to distinguish the discourse of business from general English; secondly, a pedagogic practice based on model imitation and translation. This is hardly surprising; indeed, translation and the explanation of lexical units was the most widely accepted method of foreign language teaching in the second half of the nineteenth century. Travellers' phrasebooks had been traditionally used in the business community over the centuries to establish a communicative network. In the nineteenth century there was a growing need for practical competence in English

and thus both a growing market for such works and the development of direct methods, which required no grammar at all (Howatt 1985), that seemed better to respond to the circumstances. Some authors included grammar rules in their courses, but the focus was on translation-imitation and lexis.

#### *4. Analysis of notes and glossaries*

The centrality of phraseology in all textbooks raises some questions. What did the authors mean by this expression and to what extent was it perceived as the defining feature of commercial English? And further, which is the connection between technical lexis and domain specific English according to teachers of English as a foreign language in the nineteenth century? To try to answer these questions, I have analysed the apparatus of notes and glossaries contained in the textbooks.

In written language, the word is the visible unit of meaning in that a text can be seen as a succession of discrete items, while the sentence is the unit that aligns grammar and discourse. Grammarians have traditionally marginalised lexis as a source of meaning and given priority to grammar and later syntax (Sinclair 2004). However, words and groups of words have always occupied a central position in practical courses as the writers of such courses, often practitioners rather than grammarians, have implicitly recognised that words have the property to enter into meaningful relations with other words. Today, the role of patterned lexis in creating texture and communication is the object of much research (to mention just a few Sinclair 1996, 1998, 2004, Pearson 1998, Nuccorini 1999, Tognini-Bonelli 2001, Hoey 2005). It seems that the intermediate level between words in isolation as listed in dictionaries and grammar centred on language structure was also the privileged area of interest of the authors of commercial courses caring for the needs of the growing community of international traders in the nineteenth century.

Today, corpus-based research has shed light on the centrality of lexis in defining contexts of use. Actually, despite the fact that many recent studies defining specialised discourses tend to foreground generic and discursive aspects based on communicative functions and rhetorical choices (Swales 1990, Gotti 2003, Bhatia 2004), a domain specific discourse is also in no small proportion constituted of technical terms and phrases which contribute to the overall impression of its specificity. The authors of the nineteenth century textbooks under scrutiny here were keenly aware of the centrality of technical terms and fixed expressions as recognisable patterns of commercial English; indeed, the

commercial “style” was perceived as such owing to the use of terms and phases referring to the technicalities of trade. In this paper, I will try to delineate the nineteenth century conception of phraseology by contextualising it in contemporary teaching practices.

#### 4.1. Teaching strategies: translational notes and glossaries

The learner was supposed to acquire the ability to read and write commercial English by focusing on lexis and phraseological units, which were explained by notes, comments and glossaries. As illustrated by the table below, all the authors make use of notes to the text giving the Italian equivalent of English words. They also relied, though to a lesser extent, on lists of words and expressions which were perceived as typical of commercial communication.

Author	Glossary	Notes
Anderson	yes (specialised)	yes
Candelari	yes (general)	yes
Cann	no	yes
Lowe	yes (specialised)	yes
Manetta	yes (specialised)	yes

It should be here pointed out that different types of notes were used: synonymic notes giving the equivalent of the item, and explanatory notes giving a periphrasis of its meaning. As can be seen from the table below, all authors use both types, while only three out of five add comments explaining the procedure or the practice referred to with a phrase.

Author	Synonymic notes	Explanatory notes	Comments
Anderson	yes	yes	yes
Candelari	yes	yes	yes
Cann	yes	yes	no
Lowe	yes	yes	no
Manetta	yes	yes	yes

Much more variation is deployed in the use of glossaries. So, after this brief overview, it is perhaps time to look in some detail at how each author solves the problem of giving an aid to learners trying to master specialised phraseology.

Anderson’s collection of model letters contains notes translating not just technical terms but also words of the common stock as the examples show: by next mail – *posta corriere* (57), prying neighbours – *curiosi* (*ibid.*). Sometimes he gives a full explanation or adds a comment as the following examples show:

Del credere – This is a premium, or commission, charged by merchants for becoming responsible for the buyers of goods, or underwriters; so that in case of the failure of the latter, the owners are secured against loss (51).

Which they have paid into my bankers – This expression, if not strictly grammatical, is truly mercantile, the word “hands” is understood (57).

I have now to wait on you with a bill of lading – When the bill of lading is signed, the goods are shipped (82).

Anderson’s textbook contains a longish appendix, entitled “Mercantile technicalities” (183-229), which, in addition to examples of documents, includes definitions of technical terms. Some are brief, such as: *Acceptance – the art by which the drawer of a bill of exchange binds himself to pay the sum when due*. Others longer and more descriptive, such as:

Account sales – It is the practice of merchants to render a separate account sales for each every parcel of goods received, and not to include several consignments in one, although they happen to be sold at the same time and at the same price. The forms here given are to be considered merely as forms, and not as guides to in regard to the rate of commission [...].

Candelari’s textbook is made up of Italian letters on the left page and English equivalents on the right one. Both have notes in Italian, which usually give synonyms and comments. For instance:

*Commercial friends* – Si può anche valersi del vocabolo *correspondents* oltre che di *acquaintances*, *connections*, *commercial friends* e *customers* per clienti e avventori [16]. Nota. Alle voci italiane clienti, clientele, corrispondono di solito in inglese i vocaboli qui contro indicati per il commercio giacchè *clients* è usato preferibilmente per i legali [17].

Cann’s textbook comprises many notes of both technical and general words, which may translate not just words but also phrases and even longer passages. In this work there is not a special focus on commercial discourse. Examples:

Bill stamps – marche da bollo [6]. In reply to your advertisement in the Times of to-day for a clerk, I beg respectfully to offer my services – Mi prendo la libertà, traduzione letterale: chiedo rispettosamente di offrirvi i miei servigi [3]. With regard to the salary – In quanto al salario [7]. Should you be disposed to entertain my application, I need scarcely say Accogliere la mia domanda non c’è bisogno che dica [11].

The remaining two textbooks are practical courses with a special focus on commercial English. Both pay special attention to lexis. The grammar book by Lowe, a professor of vocational schools in Trieste, contains a glossary of words both technical and general. In addition, it



includes three lists: “Espressioni speciali usate nella pratica mercantile”; “Nomenclatura burocratica” containing technical terms such as, for instance, *Banking firm – Casa commerciale, Clerk – Impiegato*; “Locuzioni commerciali” comprising expressions such as *With a view to extend our business – allo scopo di estendere i nostri affari. Sales few and far between – le vendite sono scarse*.

The second volume contains letters and passages to be translated provided with longish notes giving the equivalent of both words and longer expressions, such as

Accuso ricevuta della pregiata vostra – I acknowledge receipt pregiata vostra your esteemed favour [2].

If this is case send us a small lot, say ten bales of GMF Egypto – Lot-partita, Egypto – cotone egiziano.

An alphabetical appendix, entitled “Terminologia commerciale”, includes the translation and/or explanation of single items or longer expressions, as well as exemplary documents. Some examples:

Account current – a running debtor and creditor account. Assets – the stock in trade, cash, and property of all sorts, of a bankrupt, an insolvent, or a deceased person. Also, the means to pay the debts of an estate or commercial house.

Manetta’s course, dedicated to a Turin industrialist, is a rhetorical guide to the commercial style and is subdivided into sections focusing on specific functions such as *Per cominciare una lettera – To begin a letter*. Each section comprises not full letters, but parallel texts of phrases and expressions deemed useful to write commercial letters. Examples:

In conformità a un aggiustamento stipulato a Venezia fra i signori Gualdi e Roberto Brown e C. – In pursuance of an arrangement entered into at Venice between Messrs. Gualdi and Robert Brown and C. (2-3).

Il motivo principale della presente mia è di... – My principle motive in addressing you at present, is for the purpose of... (5-6).

The textbook by Manetta also contains notes commenting on words or phrases. Example: *Esq. È abbreviazione di esquire, che non è punto un titolo, ma semplicemente un complimento. Si dà a quel negoziante che occupa una certa posizione distinta in commercio* (2-3).

The course is provided with a short glossary, *Vocabolario dei principali articoli di mercanzia*, which gives just the equivalent of an item, such as *Riso-rice, Rubini-rubies*. It also contains a section, “Termini di banca”, which includes grammar and spelling notes formulated as queries. Examples: *Query 1. Is the word BANK a singular or plural term? Query 3. Should we write CHECK or CHEQUE?*

### 5. *Concluding observations*

To sum up, the analysis of the five textbooks enables us to conclude that their authors primarily rely on imitation/translation, lexical notes and glossaries to teach commercial English. The apparatus of both notes and glossaries varies from the equivalent of single items and phrases to longish comments on and explanations of words and phrases. The learner is supposed to absorb the English commercial style and practice its technicalities by imitating model letters. This very traditional approach may be due to the pragmatic purposes of the courses and the very provenance of some authors, traders themselves. However, it seems that this is the case of texts written by both teachers and practitioners alike. Overall, the authors do not seem to be fully aware of the distinction between general and specialised lexis as no clear-cut distinction is made between general English words and technical terms. Anderson, Lowe and Manetta, however, seem to have a clearer picture of English for commercial purposes in that they make use of lists of words and expressions that can be defined specialised.

If we now go back to the questions posed at the beginning of the article and attempt to answer them, we can start by trying to answer the question of what nineteenth century authors meant by phraseology. From a theoretical perspective, this term seems to have several layers of meanings. For instance, Nuccorini (2006: 37) says that traditionally the term ‘phraseology’, which originated in the Russian studies which developed from the late 1940s to the 1960s, has been used to refer either to the set of phraseological units in a language or to a branch of linguistics studying them. Recently, the use of corpora has led to a redefinition of phraseological items as collocations referring to typically discontinuous framework leaving room for choices from open classes to combine with them (Sinclair 2005: 20). According to Hoey (2005), collocation or the psychological relation between words is the foundation of the sentence. These claims are linked to the recognition of the central importance of lexical units larger than the word and the idea that lexis instead of grammar should be given priority, which is a recent development due to applied corpus linguistic study often based on the analysis of spontaneous speech in corpora.

From a practical perspective, however, the description of phraseological patterns has a long tradition (Knappe 2004) and the centrality of lexis in commercial language teaching has always been largely recognised. Of course there are important differences between modern conceptions of

phraseology and the meaning implied by nineteenth century teachers. The authors of the practical guides under scrutiny here all share a stylistic approach to lexis which may explain the convergence with modern corpus linguists as to the lexical approach to meaning production. Another factor shedding light on their lexical approach may be the idea they all share that words are linked to the technicalities and the objects of trade as well as to the activities of the commercial firm. It is the ability to process stretches of discourse, meaningful groups of words linked to the practices and functions of business communication that enables the learner to master the commercial “style”, the discourse of commerce as we would say today. To conclude, despite the fact that the authors do not make any overt statement as to what they mean by phraseology, the theory underpinning their practical courses seems to be that words tend to go together and make meanings by their combination.

As to the awareness of domain specific English, we may say that the authors of the guides seem to think that commercial English is composed of the rhetorical choices preferred by the commercial community of practice and the technical terms referring to the objects most frequently encountered in the traders’ world. This approach again shows similarities with modern views of domain specific genres as constituted by the rhetorical moves realising textual functions. They, however, restrict their attention to the combinations of words in phrases. According to nineteenth century authors, phraseology is central to the identification of commercial English in that the linguistic patterns characteristic of the international traders’ discourse are supported by tendencies for objects and events to correlate with specific functions and to associate with each other. The strong link between words and expressions and the technicalities of commerce are underlined by all authors as it is through the frequent occurrence of specific terms and expressions referring to commercial practices that they appear to conceive commercial English communication.

## Corpus

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- CANN T. C. (1883<sup>2</sup>), *Trattato completo di corrispondenza commerciale contenente una serie di lettere originali inglesi sopra vari soggetti / The comprehensive letter writer: a complete guide to English correspondence comprising a series of original letters on various subjects*, Florence Paggi, Rome Alinari & Cooks, Naples Nicola Jovene & Co.
- LOWE H. (1893-1894), *Corso commerciale inglese teorico-pratico ad uso delle scuole commerciali, dei negozianti, delle amministrazioni ecc.*, Trieste, Alessandro Levi editore, 2 vol.
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