

The Evolution of Personal Language: Effect and Expression

A Comparative Analysis of Ancient Personal Writing

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Introduction

The landscape of language and communication is ever-changing as human expression itself continues to change. Different language use changes the way we communicate with others, and in the way we communicate with ourselves. Personal writing can take its form in many ways whether in diaries, journals, on a stone tablet, or on the notes app of a smart phone. Regardless of the form it takes, personal writing has a certain uniqueness that separates it from other genres of writing. This uniqueness comes from it following its namesake, personal. Now this genre and the specific language use that it entails has been the field of study across different disciplines because of its uniqueness and just how impactful it can be.

In the realm of psychology, personal writing has been a topic of research on the possible effects it has on mental health. Some psychologists in the field refer to it as “healing writing” because it has been shown to help people with overcoming past trauma and reaching a point of peace and healing. This was not just one certain way of writing, like just writing about the traumas or emotions surrounding it, but even creative writing or simply recapping one’s day was shown to help with mental healing. This research also delves into the language use of these trauma victims to help decipher what type of linguistic features are more common in those who experienced a greater sense of healing after their journaling (Moran, 2013). Showing its benefits in the mental aspect, this positive psychology would make its way into the world of academia, and how to integrate it within studies. Belli describes how the popularization of positive psychology led to “a surging interest in emotions, well-being, and happiness in educational settings, raising awareness of factors beyond the intellectual domain that has traditionally been the focus of academic achievement” (2016). This could lead to some more positive effects, like in the case of Lauren Lara, who integrated personal journaling into a children’s classroom of kids who were diagnosed with emotional and

behavioral disorders. Journaling helped the children better regulate their emotions on a daily basis, as well as improved their overall writing skills as the class progressed (Lara, 2019). However, Belli, and many others do not think personal writing has a place in the classroom in later years as it leads to too much emotion in academics, a world that is supposed to be objective (2016). The integration of this type of writing not only affects the way students learn, but also these students' relationships with their emotions, something Belli calls a "transformative edition" to writing, but it must be done properly (2016). This type of addition is a clear-cut example of the evolution of writing that is constantly happening, once again, even at the personal level.

And in order to keep progressing the evolution of writing, sometimes it is important to take a look back at successful writers. A study was done that had students mimic a famous writer and their personal writing style by examining the famous writer's diary entries, notes, and notebooks. This was to help learn new habits and create new ways to develop their own ideas in a different method. It helped show the importance that this type of informal, personal writing, has in different contexts. The students integrated

this specific style of personal writing to improve upon their own academic writing (Salibrici, 2008).

It is important to look back, but this research only used writers from the last about 100 years, which is fairly recent history. There is so much left to explore that this multi-disciplinary area of interest does not cover in much detail. How does contemporary language use compare to that in ancient personal writings? Not only that, but the importance of the emotions that personal writing is shown to encapsulate. How are these language differences reflected in a writer's emotional expression? Those are the questions that this paper aims to answer through a variety of different analyses including a student survey, text comparisons, and an overall analysis of one of ancient history's most famous personal diaries.

Methodology

Survey

The survey section of this research was distributed to 105 students who attend Western Oregon University. The survey began with a question asking participants whether or not they performed any form of personal

writing, regardless of the form. This meant that results included those from journals, diaries, notes app, etc. Participants who answered “yes” to this question had their results measured; ones who answered “no” were not included in the results since they would not provide as accurate accounts of their personal writing experience in the context in which was being analyzed.

Text Comparisons

The main text that the students and their corresponding results will be compared to primarily is *Meditations* by Marcus Aurelius. The book was originally written by the Roman emperor in about 170 CE and was just his personal journal that survived the test of time and later became a book. It made its way through history to become a classic piece of philosophical literature, gaining popularity through the emperor’s unique humanness and his peculiar delivery throughout the text.

This text analysis attempts to decipher what messages Aurelius was sending to himself, how he integrated emotion into his writing, his possible goals that led him to write, and how language helped display certain

emotions in his text. Computer tools have also been used to analyze the types of linguistic features that are favored throughout Aurelius' writing. These features include his most favored structures, his use of metaphors throughout, which word types he favors, etc.

After that appears a comparison of how both parties use their language, focusing on a few specific aspects. First, understanding the reasoning behind personal writing gives insight into what type of writing and language is used, even before any analysis of the text at hand. The purpose of the text often dictates the language usage. Second, the analysis explores the use of language elements favored by each text, such as figurative language use, personal anecdotes, etc. Finally, this analysis is capped off with an emphasis on emotional expression in both types of texts. These are all examined to see how language has evolved, and what language aspects we still share with ancient writing.

Results

Survey

Of the 105 students that this survey was distributed to, only 30 students participated and completed the survey. Of those, only 19 students reported that they keep some form of personal writing. This limited sample size is what will be used for the remainder of the analysis. Of this sample, 12 also filled out the optional portion of the questionnaire, providing an example excerpt from their personal writing. These will be examined more thoroughly in the Analysis section. Appendix A displays the questionnaire in its entirety, as well as the important results from each.

Text Analysis

In terms of the overall text analysis of *Meditations*, as mentioned above, there are a few points that will be discussed. These include the message Aurelius delivered and how he delivered it, his purpose for writing the piece, and the different language factors that helped him integrate his emotions and thoughts into the text.

The discussion begins with the purpose of Aurelius writing *Meditations*. There is debate about what purpose Aurelius attempted to accomplish in his writings, but his background helps to provide a better lens

to look through. Not only was he an emperor, but he considered himself a student, and his teachings were within philosophy. Sellars from King's College London describes the book as "a series of philosophical exercises designed to digest philosophical theories, to transform his character . . . and his entire way of life" (2002). This could be his purpose for writing into one of the categories that was within the survey; it was used as a tool for self-reflection.

Self-reflective language use employs the use of critical thinking and analysis on oneself or the ideas the writer is dealing with. This can come in the form of rhetorical questions being asked, introspection (looking within), attempts at honesty in the language use within the text, or by expressing emotion. An example of his rhetorical questioning gives an idea into the concepts he was examining. Questions he poses could be along the lines of "What is the nature of the good?" or "Is this within my control?" (Aurelius, 2014).

As for the specific structure of the text, Aurelius plays through a variety throughout the book. For the most part, he deals in quick thoughts that he seemingly just jots down, most likely out of the blue as something catches his attention, or he employs the teaching of his philosophical

teachings. For example, “Very little is needed to make a happy life; it is all within yourself, in your way of thinking” (Aurelius, 2014). This quote was the entire paragraph. The book is scattered with remarks like these.

And this quote is a great glimpse into the type of language use that Aurelius employs. He is often quite vague with his delivery, at times even paradoxical. This approach contrasts with the survey results, where students preferred clarity over poetical ambiguity. At times, he accomplished this by using strong figurative language like metaphors and imagery, even if the comparisons were difficult to comprehend. This can be seen from the excerpt, “As the same fire assumes different shapes when it consumes objects differing in shape, so does the oneself take the shape of every creature in whom it is present” (Aurelius, 2014).

The relationship between language use and emotion is also a unique relationship within *Meditations*. Aurelius was under the philosophical branch of Stoicism. This branch often is not extremely expressive with their emotion in the way of contemporary writing. Instead of using strong, emotion-filled words, the emotions were expressed in a more introspective, inward manner. This is developed through that self-reflective writing style mentioned prior. The underlying tone for a lot of those reflecting passages

tends to be perseverance through hardship, and to be courageous and just. However, he rarely wears this on his sleeve with his language usage.

Analysis/Comparison

Now how do these contemporary trends in personal journaling compare to what the Roman Emperor was writing thousands of years ago?

First, we can start by analyzing the difference in the purpose of the writing because that helps sets the basis for the language use we see within our text. Our authors have very different reasons why they pick up their pen or pencil in the first place. If we look at Appendix A, we can see that the main purpose for the students' journals was to have a creative space, as well as to use it as a tool of emotional release. This could be due to the way the positive psychology movement that Belli described has been flooding into classrooms. This positive psychology movement brings a focus of emotional intelligence, and this could have reciprocated within a student body who has been exposed to it in recent years (Belli, 2016). Or the focus on mental health in this current generation and the proven benefits of expressing one's emotions for one's mental health (Moran,

2013). Aurelius's main purpose was to self-reflect, but in a philosophical manner. For him, his self-reflection was putting his practice into words, and in a way, could honestly be seen as a display of creativity, just in a different expression than we are accustomed to. So, the disparity between their purposes are not that drastic. An example of emotional release could be seen in one of the excerpts provided by a student. They say, "These past few races have been pretty lackluster. I'm not seeing the results that I know I am capable of; I know it's mental but just saying that doesn't solve the issue" (Appendix B). This could be described as both self-reflective and emotional release; it just depends what the writer had the intent of doing. At the end of the day, any scenario depends on what the author is trying to accomplish, and only the author knows that.

Now on to how these authors format their journals. Aurelius has a whole book worth of his personal writing and displayed most the structures at least once. However, the most common structure usage of his was bullet points/quick thoughts and reflective topics (rhetorical questions). Those were two of the top three categories that were selected for the writing styles according to Appendix A. Once again, like the purpose behind their journaling, there are some very strong similarities between the two in this

section. Obviously, each writer has their own unique journal with their own unique thoughts; however, the general consensus on how personal writing is done has been engrained in us, even if it is subconsciously. We learn from watching others and learning to integrate their own effective ways and make them our own, just like Salibrici did in the classroom by making her students copy other famous writer's personal writing methods (2008). Aurelius most likely learned from his teachers of philosophy how to format his words in order to display his Stoicism, and the college students most likely learned from their teachers or parents on how to write in their own way. If the method is effective in relaying thoughts and ideas, then it is successful.

Finally, let us examine specific language usage and how it expresses each writer's emotions differently. Stoics, as mentioned, are known to lack emotions. They are content with life and the nature around them. Aurelius shows this Stoicism through his language use. He rarely uses strong words that jump off the page to show anger or sadness or one of those main emotions. The emotions at play through his language are mostly neutral. Aurelius and the Stoics partly pride themselves by approaching life in this manner, unbothered and following nature's path, regardless of what

happens. However, when it comes to the college students and how they answered in the survey, they are on the complete opposite spectrum of this. Many said that they were very open and expressive in terms of letting emotion into their writing. Results also showed that more than half let their mood effect their writing, almost 40% stating that mood affects them strongly. A simple-yet-effective quote to show the difference comes from another student excerpt from Appendix B. It simply states, “What brought me joy this week...” and it is open ended. Even this small-but-direct expression of joy is more than Aurelius directly shows in the majority of his journal.

Many reasons might explain why one time period is more expressive than the other. There is no way to go back in time and ask Aurelius if he was just practicing his Stoicism, or whether he was simply more of a cold personality. In today’s culture, his stance would still be widely accepted and even applauded. Yet, at least at the college age, being able to use words to display and describe emotions is much more relied on. These words on the paper help better connect emotions rather than try to put on a brave, stone face like Aurelius.

Conclusion

After contrasting the differences between the two time periods of these personal journals, there is a slight sense of relief in knowing that college students can share so much in common with a Roman Emperor, one of the most powerful people to walk the face of the Earth. There is a quote from *Meditations* that encapsulates that entire idea, “Consider that everyone will face adversity, loss, and the trials of life. What you experience now, others have faced before, and others will face it in the future” (Aurelius, 2014). It shows that all a person can do is look inward and try to improve one’s self. However, Aurelius did not approach it the same as people would today, and that is okay, as everyone is fit to pursue their way as they please. But in terms of the relationship that one has with dealing with one’s own emotion, contemporary personal writing provides a different level of self-reflection that this piece of ancient writing does not possess. It could be due to differences in expression or acceptance of certain emotions, but it should not be taken for granted that writers nowadays describe their feelings in all their glory. A diary, a daily note to self, a journal, it does not matter, it should be seen as the safe place for thoughts and emotions. Use that language to set those emotions free.

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Appendix A

Survey Question	Responses
How often do you journal?	Approx. 43% journaled once a month
Rank the reasons you journal (Self-reflection, Creative Space, Record Keeping/Daily Recap, Emotional Release)	Highest ranked was creative space, followed by emotional release
Select which structure(s) most resemble your writing style (Quick thoughts/bullet points, Freeform, Poetry/Lyrical Expression, Dialogue/Conversation Style, Reflective Topics (ask question and answer), Mood tracking)	Most selected structure was freeform, followed by quick notes, third was reflective questions
How "formal" is your language use?	39% selected slightly informal, followed by 29% strongly informal, no strongly
Rank the following language elements in order of importance to your journaling (Sentence Structure, Metaphors/Imagery, Vocabulary Richness, Humor, Personal Anecdotes, Cultural References)	Cultural references ranked highest, followed by a 3-way tie between: sentence structure, metaphors, and
Do you consciously choose specific words to evoke certain emotions in your journal entries?	50% chose sometimes
Which do you prioritize more in your journal entries, clarity of expression or poetic ambiguity?	43% chose strong clarity, 36% chose slight clarity, no strong poetical ambiguity

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Do you feel like you express all your feelings and thoughts into your journal, or more restricted?	54% selected Strongly Expressive, followed by 18% in neutral
How much does your mood affect your writing?	39% chose Strongly, followed by 21% neutral

Appendix B

Student Excerpts
I prefer to go outside when the sun is setting, that way I can enjoy the sunsets while also experiencing the warm breeze.
What brought me joy this week/day....
These past few races have been pretty lackluster. I'm not seeing the results that I know I am capable of; I know it's mental but just saying that doesn't solve the issue.
I am grateful for having more time to relax today
I had a good day... nothing crazy.