

# How has business communication changed in the last 4,000 years?

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Discussions of historical changes in language use make for fascinating reading. Much of this has looked at how a particular language has changed over time, such as examining how the Norman Conquest changed English. The issue of how a particular genre has changed through time has been the focus of much less research. Exceptions include Ayers' examination of research summaries over 15 years, and Gunnarson's investigation of how research articles became standardised between 1730 and the present. Gunnarson's 280-year timespan may seem impressive, but in this paper focusing on business communication I examined the maximum possible timespan of 4,000 years by comparing some of the earliest writing with modern-day counterparts.

Some of the earliest texts still extant are Sumerian cuneiform tablets dating from around 2,000 BCE (examples can be seen at <https://www.spurlock.illinois.edu/collections/search-collection/advanced.php?n=cuneiform+tablet>). Writing at this time involved using a wedge-shaped stylus to make imprints into clay tablets. Some of the tablets concern commercial functions which still exist today, such as debt collection, allowing us to compare texts serving the same purpose separated by 4,000 years.

Comparing the language of Sumerian debt collection tablets with that of modern-day business letters allows us to investigate the comparative impact of context and communicative purpose on language use. The context and medium of writing of ancient Sumeria are vastly different to today's world so we might expect major differences. If communicative purposes are paramount in language use, however, we would expect the two to be similar. To investigate the amount of difference between a debt collection tablet from ancient Sumeria and modern-day model debt collection business letters, this article uses genre and register analyses.

Starting the genre analysis with an inductive identification of moves and steps from one of the modern letters, we find two main moves – background information and action to be taken – and several steps such as referring to previous requests for payment, showing the decency of the creditor, and threatening legal action. These functions are also apparent in other modern letters and in the Sumerian tablet, albeit with some variation in sequencing and some repetition of functions in the ancient text.

For the register analysis, I used Nini's Multidimensional Analysis Tagger which generates scores for each text on six dimensions of register variation. The scores on five of the six dimensions were very similar for the Sumerian text and the modern texts, showing that they are all highly interactional narratives depending on knowledge of the context for interpretation and highlighting the author's perspective.

Overall, the Sumerian text and the modern texts are surprisingly similar suggesting that there has been little meaningful change in business communication over the last 4,000 years. The shared purposes and expected procedures in doing business greatly outweigh the differences in the two contexts in influencing how language is used.

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