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The concept of language of trust and trustworthiness: (Why) history matters

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ABSTRACT

This paper puts forward the argument that the concept of the language of trust and trustworthiness can be a useful way of understanding what trust means in specific situations. This concept refers to linguistic devices – verbal and non-verbal – which purposefully convey trust and create a foundation for continuing or improving relations. The concept has been developed based on research into relations between premodern merchants and their urban governments. In this context, the language of trust has emerged from historical sources as a tool which was used with great skill. By studying the form, the functions and the content of the language of trust in a concrete setting, contemporary or historical, we can grasp what can constitute the basis for trust and trustworthiness. The second argument proposed here is that, by pointing to the foundations of trust, the language of trust reveals the core values of an individual, a group or a society at a given time and place.

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Introduction

Almost 15 years ago, the economic historian Timothy Guinnane published a paper with the rather provocative title, 'Trust: a concept too many' (2005). His point was that the fashionable concept of trust had become too vague because scholars and policymakers alike had often been confounding trust and trustworthiness, sentiments and actions. As he saw it, the concept had also become superfluous because, at least from the point of view of economic history and economics, it was not yielding any new or useful insights. Older terms related to information or sanctions, for instance, were more effective in capturing interesting aspects of human interaction, and social context should be the primary focus of research. This raised the question of whether we should altogether keep talking about trust.

In this paper, I argue that we definitely should keep talking about trust. I beg to disagree that the concept is not useful. At the same time, I pay heed to reservations regarding its vagueness and the need to contextualise it. Trust – as a concept, sentiment or action – needs to stand for something specific in order for it to be meaningful. There are various

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inspiring ways in which this goal can be achieved, as trust research in recent years has demonstrated (Möllering, 2017, 2018; Searle et al, 2018; Zmerli and Van der Meer 2017). Here, I would like to propose yet another way, which is grounded in historical research on premodern mercantile relations and the functioning of premodern urban institutions. Specifically, I would like to put forward the argument that a related concept – ‘language of trust and trustworthiness’ – can be useful. By this concept, I mean linguistic devices which purposefully convey trust and demonstrate trustworthiness, and create grounds for continuing or improving relations. The concept shows the interaction between the trustor and the trustee, and in particular the perspective of the trustor (Möllering, 2019). I further argue that by looking into the specific content of the language of trust and trustworthiness, we can create a new entry into understanding what people perceive and have perceived as essential values in their relations. In the past, the language of trust and trustworthiness could be an indication of the public good or honesty in economic exchange. This content of trust, by which I mean what people explicitly refer to as the reason for which they trust or trusted, is a dimension that should be added to systematic examinations of trust. By analysing the forms, functions and the content of the language of trust and trustworthiness, not only does trust itself as a concept become more defined in a setting, so too does the picture of the overall societal relations.

The historical aspect of the language of trust and trustworthiness is of crucial importance here for two reasons. Just as language in general is subject to variations and change through space and time, so are trust relations and their concrete articulations. In addition to studying the variety in trust relations between individuals or within groups and societies in diverse contexts throughout the modern world, it is also essential that we take temporal variation into account. Why? Because such an examination will reveal different variations than what the analysis of the modern world can offer us. Yet even more importantly: because this language was very well developed in the past and employed very consciously by its speakers. Far from being fashionable or fluffy, it was a concrete and pragmatic tool that referred to both sentiments and actions (Frevort, 2003). If we take medieval merchants as an example: the language of trust and trustworthiness, and thus trust itself, was above all considered useful by the actors themselves in organising their lives and business. In a world in which there was more uncertainty than certainty, speaking such language was – to continue the line set out by Niklas Luhmann (1979, 1988) and others – a strategy for reducing complexity and risk (Court, 2008). It could strengthen ties but also put pressure or even function as a contract. The mercantile example demonstrates that expressing trust was directly related to the desire to appear trustworthy, so the categories can be seen as interrelated instead of unclear. The language of trust might be worthwhile to learn anew, as a conceptual framework.

I approach the topic as a historian and make use of the insights from my source research on premodern trade and cities to underpin these points. I am pleased to enter into a more direct dialogue with social scientists, as over the years, I have greatly benefited from social studies on trust and other topics covering interaction in and between groups. This is an opportunity to contribute to the conceptual discussion from the bottom up, with historical illustrations, i.e. ‘history matters’. Trust is a topic that resonates with many historians, especially those who investigate how past economies and institutions worked, in line with or in conflict with New Institutional Economics (Ogilvie,

2004 and 2011; Greif, 2006; Gelderblom, 2013; Muldrew, 1998; Forrest, 2018a and 2018b). Some of these historians have employed the concept of the language of trust in studies of trade relations in the premodern Mediterranean (Trivellato, 2009; Aslanian, 2006 and 2008; Court, 2004 and 2008), and I will briefly outline here what this magnifying glass has revealed about the interaction. This research has influenced my own studies on the Hanse as a medieval organisation of cities and traders in northern Europe: I will draw here on the conclusions I have made so far on the form, function and content of the language of trust and trustworthiness on these macro and micro levels (Wubs-Mrozewicz 2013, 2015, 2017, 2018a, 2018b). This will provide insight into how trust was conceived of and expressed by Hanseatic traders, and as mentioned above, give an indication of what they perceived as essential for doing business and living in commercial cities. Naturally, such a historical case study is not a direct blueprint for contemporary conduct, and there may be problems of translation in the cultural or conceptual sense (Weltecke, 2008). However, to paraphrase the poet Robert Frost, a case from the past can reveal a road once taken but since forgotten.

It must be pointed out that the concept of language of trust that will be discussed here is broader than, for instance, studies on intergenerational trust and communication (Holmes et al, 1971). It should apply to more topics. At the same time, it is also a different language than the very general one spoken in Michael Maslansky's et al. *The language of trust: Selling ideas in a world of skeptics* (2010). There, the aim is indeed to sell – whether it be ideas or products – in a credible way, with guidelines on how to appear and even be personal, plainspoken, positive and plausible. Such a commercial framing in publications in the fields of advertising, marketing or leadership in businesses is geared towards teaching how to use the language of trust (with or without referring to the specific term), regardless of the content. An academic analysis goes further. Here, I am just as interested in the 'how' (i.e. the 'by means of what'), as in the 'why' someone employs the language of trust and trustworthiness in a specific setting. Still, I find commercial manuals, whether medieval (De ruyscher, 2018) or modern, intriguing as a subject of study. Two very practically formulated observations from Maslansky's book are valid here: people can use such language consciously if they choose to do so, and this language changes. The whole point of the manual is that a language of trust that relies on expertise or status is now obsolete in a post 9/11 world of sceptics and, as such, we need new guidelines, which are conveniently provided by the authors. As I argue here, the concept has more potential. An academic approach focusing on the semantics and contextualisation of the language, like the interdisciplinary one developed in *Discourses of trust* (Candlin, 2013), seems to be a promising avenue.

Straddling the divide between disciplines is certainly needed, as is straddling the divide between research on premodern and modern societies. Despite the reservations of some trust scholars (Seligman, 1997), this is something that can actually be done. To provide an example from a related field that I find particularly inspiring: the language of diplomacy, which encompasses studies of communication and signalling in diplomatic exchange from both the past and the present. Researchers attend the same conferences, and publish together (Oglesby, 2016; Jönsson, 2016; Lazzarini, 2015). Their findings show that the language of diplomacy is – and was – employed very consciously in terms of form and content, and that it is considered an essential tool for a specified vocational group, namely diplomats. Moreover, it is constituted by both verbal and non-verbal communication,

choices made between action and inaction, and the display of specific sentiments, which are all weighed against the goal being pursued (Jönsson, 2016; Watkins, 2015). There is some degree of content overlap in that diplomats have to be trustworthy. And, like the language of trust, the language of diplomacy makes diplomacy itself more specific. Where it differs from the language of trust in my opinion is that it does not disclose personal or group values, but rather the political interests and concerns of an entity. Similarly, the language of conflict (related to but not identical to language *in* conflict) can be seen as an intentionally chosen instrument for achieving an aim, though sometimes this instrument gets out of hand (Darquennes, 2015; Janicki, 2015 and 2017; Friedrich, 2007; Smith, 1998). Also historians have devoted attention to the language of conflict at levels other than diplomatic, for instance in the context of legal strife (Turning, 2009; Smail, 2003). A further conceptualisation of the language of trust and trustworthiness would surely benefit from dialogue with other 'languages of social interaction', past and present. The goal of the paper is more modest: to start a conversation. I will first briefly demonstrate how historians have engaged with the concept of trust and then zoom in on my Hanseatic example.

Examples from premodern trade, cities and religious communities in Europe and outside

Once upon a time, a historian suggested that to study trust (and the language of trust and trustworthiness), it would be more fruitful to have premodern merchants fill in a questionnaire rather than to rope in undergraduates looking for beer money. After all, merchants had far more experience in putting trust to good use and communicating it (Court, 2008). This might also be extended to their customers, and in general to past societies in which trust appeared in various forms in their discourse. Obviously, none of these groups are available for interview, yet we can extract more relevant information from premodern sources than one might assume.

First of all, why is premodern trade a good place to start? From the twelfth century on, commerce in the Mediterranean grew exponentially in terms of scope, intensity of connections and complexity of conducting trade. It revolved around Italian cities like Venice, Pisa or Genoa, and their merchant communities which settled abroad, as well as their Arabic and Jewish connections and immigrant communities. In the north, the evolvement of the Hanse linked urban centres and hinterlands in the Baltic and North Sea areas. Also, the south and the north became commercially intertwined in long-distance connections which crossed linguistic, cultural (including religious) and political boundaries. This emerging fabric of social interaction has been coined 'the commercial revolution' (Lopez, 1976). It is one of the hallmark developments of premodern Europe, next to the impact of Christianity and the Church, the demographic changes, early state formation, urbanisation and the impulses given by literacy or the rise of universities (Abulafia, 1999; Blockmans & Hoppenbrouwers, 2017). In the early modern period, the networks expanded and intensified both to and in the Americas and Asia, with the question of making contact and maintain connections becoming a global one (Antunes & Polónia, 2016). Trade relies on cooperation, and it is therefore a good illustration of Dasgupta's stance that trust can be both a precondition and a result of cooperation (Dasgupta, 1988). For historians, one of the relevant questions has been how this commercial revolution was able to come into being and gain speed. Specifically, the role of trust between merchants in the

exchanges, especially the long-distance ones or the role of trust towards authorities, has been discussed. These debates have proved so influential that economists have picked up premodern trade as a source from which to draw lessons (Milgrom, North, & Weingast, 1990; North 1990, 2006).

Trust and premodern trade thus seem to be a happy, solid couple. Still, historians, as well, have struggled with the vagueness of the concept of trust and have tried to make it more specific. There are a number of highly interesting studies on the premodern Mediterranean that have zoomed in on the language of trust. I will highlight three scholars and their findings here.

As Ricardo Court (2004, 2008) has pointed out, trust is intrinsically connected to communication. He studied Genovese mercantile letters in the sixteenth century and demonstrated how traders carefully formulated them to indicate the measure and bearing of trust. Even the well-known and recurrent reciprocity assurances were far more than a stylistic device. In addition to conveying civility, voicing expectation or making an assurance that a partner would take care of business like oneself would (in a 'mine plus yours' fashion), they aimed at a greater degree of coordination. Specifically, they represented a reiterated agreement that the business interests would be aligned and integrated: something which only worked with goodwill from both parties (cf Hardin, 2002). The language of trust was thus a reminder and token of this agreement, and might be seen as an elaborate vessel of reciprocal trust (Sztompka, 1999). Moreover, Court has argued, it was one of the cornerstones of commercial activity, i.e. credit was intrinsically connected to being trustworthy (*credere*: to believe and to trust). And a merchant needed to be convincing both in deeds and words that he had earned such a designation.

Equally, Francesca Trivellato (2004, 2009) in her analyses of a Sephardic Jewish diaspora in early modern Livorno and premodern business correspondence in general, has emphasised that the language of trust was a highly utilitarian tool, which reminded the partners and employees of obligations or which could give extra weight to expectations. Her findings on the functioning of mercantile networks have since been corroborated by studies on other locations, extending beyond Europe (Forrest & Haour, 2018; Goldberg, 2012). Importantly, Trivellato has posited that business correspondence was unique in employing a language of trust to solidify trustworthiness. This is an interesting addition to the 'higher' political and diplomatic correspondence and the language of diplomacy, and a modification of the role of printed news as trustworthy sources of information. A personal touch in the letters, such as recommending an agent or passing on political news with a personal perspective, fostered relations and these means were thus employed on purpose. Francesco Datini, the fourteenth-century Florentine merchant whose network had produced a staggering number of more than 150,000 letters (preserved by serendipity), is a good example of how this language was modulated. In the late Middle Ages, such letters were accepted as proof in court and some traders kept copies of their missives just like municipal governments did, which shows that the language of trust had acquired contractual traits (Trivellato, 2004).

A third research contribution to the concept of language of trust in premodern trade that I would like to highlight comes from Sebouh Aslanian (2006, 2008). His work has focused on the early modern networks and business correspondence of Armenian traders from New Julfa (Isfahan), whose connections stretched from all over Europe to the Indian Ocean. In this case, as well, information sharing was a way to build trust, and

it encompassed not only business updates but also political and social news. The language of trust zoomed in on the reputation (or to use the word from the sources: honour) of agents and partners, and helped them make decisions regarding whom to employ or with whom to engage in trade. A good reputation was crucial for merchants in general, and the frequency of mentions in the Armenian sources shows that its importance was very high in this community. Armenian traders also kept copies of their letters in order to demonstrate not only what the business agreements were, but also how the relations were evaluated and communicated. According to Aslanian, business correspondence, and the language of trust employed there, gave Armenian traders a competitive edge. His studies thus showed that such an approach to correspondence was not a unique trait of Italian or Jewish traders. Also, an important point (in line with Trivellato's findings) is that trust was not a by-product of closely-knit communities, but rather one of the reasons they were able to be closely knit. Again, this is a case in which there was a conscious choice of a language that fostered trust.

These are three examples of researchers who have reflected more explicitly on the concept of language of trust in their specific historical settings, and the mercantile angle shows parallels (directly: writing and presumably also talking about reputation, and indirectly: offering extensive and diverse information as a token of trust). Yet also other premodern historians have worked on trust and its communicative aspects, and their findings indicate why it is worthwhile to look closely at the context. In his study of the cities of the medieval Swiss Confederation, Michael Jucker (2008) has posited that the formulaic aspect of the correspondence, the use of acknowledged messengers (who supplemented the official written information by more sensitive oral additions), and having a system of numbering correspondence in order to be able to refer to it (and be aware of lost letters), all contributed to promoting trust. When looking at the discourse, the very frequent appeals to reciprocal loyalty, worded as brotherly loyalty and enveloped in biblical quotes, were clearly seen as the point of departure for building and maintaining trust. Craig Muldrew, in his analysis of the extension of credit and debt litigation in early modern England (Muldrew, 1998), has shown that a language of trust was essential in the extension of credit to households and debt litigation, and it was rooted in Christian morality, reputation, promise-keeping, good neighbourliness and thrift as a virtue. In a recent study on the growth and functioning of the Church in England in the Middle Ages, Ian Forrest (2018) has put the role of 'trustworthy men' into spotlight: they were a link between bishops and parishes. They were said to be chosen due to their Christian reputation and their ability to keep promises. In practice, social status also played a significant role: wealthy men in leadership positions had more means to impose not only their own will, but also the bishop's will. How such a choice was 'sold' to a community is of particular interest here, as it was apparently considered effective and essential within this community. This list of historical works and approaches mentioned here is not and cannot be exhaustive, but they all show that within a setting, the language of trust took specific forms and was consciously employed.

The language of trust and trustworthiness in the Hanse: An overview

Researchers of the Hanse as a premodern organisation of cities and traders have also paid heed to the role of trust, indicating that it was especially important because multiple

political, legal and cultural boundaries had to be crossed in order to conduct coordinated trade and economic policy. The mercantile network structure relied on trust, both strong kinship ties and ties extending beyond them. These ties had to counterbalance the strains that mobility and migration put on the network members. Trust has been analysed on the basis of some extant personal letters (Abraham-Thisse, 1992; Böcker, 1999), but the Hanse was more than an association of individual merchants and their networks, so trust also went beyond the particularised approach and sentiment (Ewert & Selzer, 2001 and 2009). Traders from northern German cities started to organise themselves in groups while trading abroad as early as the twelfth century, and they dominated the commerce in the North Sea and Baltic areas until the sixteenth century. Their intensive cooperation gave rise to the cooperation of their cities in the fourteenth century, which turned the Hanse into a political power, as well (Hammel-Kiesow, 2015; Selzer, 2010; Harreld, 2015; Wubs-Mrozewicz, 2013). Also at the interurban level, historians have underlined that trust was needed because even in its own time, it was a peculiar urban organisation that challenged the legal definitions of collective liability and power structures.

At first glance it might have seemed structured, with Hanseatic traders enjoying shared privileges and settlements abroad and the organisation's representatives meeting regularly. These meetings took frequently place in Lübeck, which often took the initiative in external political relations (Jahnke, 2017). However, the mercantile and urban cooperation was multicentric, as there was no formal head of the organisation, no common seal, no shared treasury and even the executive power ran through the individual cities. The number of rules and laws approved by these cities as binding for all was limited. This means that agreements had to be made over and over again, through direct meetings (*Hansetage*) and written communication at the urban level, but also at the level of individual merchants, both those who travelled and those who conducted business through letters. Trust was a pragmatic choice for keeping the organisation and business in motion, because it involved contact with people, places and institutions different from what were described as one's own (Vanneste, 2016), even when it pertained to a fellow Hanseatic trader or city. If distrust imposes a kind of tax on the interaction (Fukuyama, 1995), then the Hanse was very much into tax reduction. My point and addition to current Hanse research is that the constant need for making agreements entailed the communication of trust and trustworthiness. Below, I would like to go a step further than the research discussed in the previous section by looking at this language more systematically, based on the forms, functions and the content of the language of trust and trustworthiness.

Let's start with the interurban Hanseatic level. The basis for the presentation and the discussion of the data is extensive data mining in a source edition (Hanserecesse/Hanserezesse, 1870–1970, 26 volumes) and archival work on the Hanseatic city of Danzig (Wubs-Mrozewicz, 2018a). The sources are mostly in medieval Low German and Latin. It is striking that there were many terms used to express trust (*toversicht*, *troest* (*en*), *gelove(n)*, *getrouwe(n)*, *fides*, *fiducia* and their further variants) sometimes described through the absence of distrust. They amount to thousands of hits in the search, but perhaps more important than the quantitative indication: a qualitative analysis shows that they were a recurrent, expected and readily used element in conversations (as reported in the minutes of the Hanse general and regional meetings) and even more in letters. For instance, in 1466, due to an inner-Hanseatic conflict, a (temporary) cessation

of trust was declared towards some Hanse members ('nen vast truwe geluwe met en mer is', in *Hanserecesse* 2:5 nr. 828). Or, in 1498, in the context of Hanseatic-English relations, complaints were voiced that trust and reputation had been weakened and harmed ('gelove unde gode fame sere geswecket unde gekrenket', in *Hanserecesse* 3:4 nr. 111, p. 157). Moreover, it is striking that they were often in the form of a verb (*troesten, geloven, getrouwen, betrouwen*). Trust was an action, something that one did or demonstrated that one had chosen to do (cf Möllering, 2013). In 1414, Prussian cities in the Hanse stressed that they trusted their peers fully, even using two expressions to strengthen the message: we have full trust and faith in you ('wy gantze tovorsicht unde geloven des to ju hebben', in *Hanserecesse* 1:6 p. 121). Adjectives (the various forms of 'trusting' and sometimes 'distrusting') were also frequently used. This was often tied to reciprocity, like in the Mediterranean or Switzerland, which shows that the Hanse was embedded in a more general mode of approaching commerce and closer political cooperation. However, Hansards went a step further: they were also vocal about the necessity of trusting each other *well*, warning that overall trade and further relations would otherwise not be possible. As such, this went beyond personal bonds or enterprises. Hansards could also be explicit about whom they no longer trusted, whether it concerned the inhabitants of a non-Hanseatic city, a foreign ruler or on occasion fellow Hansards (the latter in more confidential missives, and often concerning specific aspects of the relations). The value of 'good faith' was often underlined, pointing towards possible differences of degree of trust, that is better and worse trust (e.g. 'te goeder trauwen', *Hanserecesse* 1:4 p. 77). Obviously, this is an aspect that is difficult to reconstruct from a mosaic of source fragments. Below, a case study shows how the language of trust was articulated in a concrete setting of conflict, i.e. when there was a need for it as a visible tool in social relations.

There were also less explicit forms of employing the language of trust, but it does not mean that they were less important. One of them was broaching secrets. The paradox of secrets is that they should not be discussed (Bellman, 1979), but passing on secrets to other Hanseatic city governments was a powerful token of trust and a means of delimitating a specific interest group within the Hanse, or the Hanse as a whole at a given moment (Wubs-Mrozewicz, 2018c). Another indirect form of the language of trust was to refer in letters and other correspondence to non-verbal trusting behaviour, i.e. using actions as proof of trust. Noticing them involves reading between the lines, but the references are to actions which occurred all the time and which can be perceived as quite intrinsically Hanseatic. This could be, for instance, the fact that various cities sent their traders to settlements abroad (e.g. to London) and accepted the chosen leadership there, that delegations from cities were championing the interest of a larger Hanseatic group when negotiating privileges with rulers, or that envoys from a larger Hanseatic city were to represent a smaller town at a Hanse meeting. These actions spoke of trust, and sometimes this was intentionally pushed to the foreground in the written communication.

What was the function of this language of trust? On a general level, it was to create another dimension of trust, namely trustworthiness (cf Kasten, 2018). A city government demonstrating trusting behaviour in multiple ways communicated that it was trustworthy. One might call it the Hanseatic power of vulnerability, which of course relied on reciprocity. As follows, the language of trust was at the same time a language of trustworthiness. When we go through the sources systematically, however, we can observe more. As Georg Simmel once noted, voicing trust contains an almost coercive power (Simmel, 1964; Mutti,

1990). You want the other to trust you as well and continue cooperation (i.e. aiming at the long-term relation and a feeling), but also to do or refrain from doing specific things (i.e. short-term actions). In other words, it is a way to create or augment social capital (Coleman, 1988) and make use of it. Both types of motivations are present in exchanges between Hanseatic city governments. In connection to various topics, the assurances of trust were to express a positive attitude towards a suggested action or policy, they could also aim at boosting each other's reputation (especially if the correspondence was directed towards a larger group or copied afterwards, see Wubs-Mrozewicz, 2014) or give extra weight to assurances and agreements made. Put differently, the language of trust and trustworthiness was then consciously geared towards strengthening relations. However, there was also the other side in inner Hanseatic relations: voicing trust could be a means of applying pressure, in the sense that 'I trust that you will do what I want', for instance, that your envoys will come to a meeting after all: 'in toversicht, dat ore radessen-debaden noch ankamende wurden' (*Hanserecesse* 3:6 nr. 727 § 7). This pressure was applied to remind others of obligations or even shame a fellow Hanseatic urban government (again, with additional impact if it was expressed to a larger audience of readership). And, in some cases, it could amount to veiled threats, for instance if there had been breaches of trust. Here, the language of trust appears as a specialised tool. I would argue that it was so sophisticated because the lack of hierarchy in the Hanse made it difficult to bluntly force others to follow your suit. This is in line with the findings of trust researchers like Piotr Sztompka, who point out that greater interdependence and complexity calls for more trust (1999).

When it comes to the content of this 'Hanseatic language of trust and trustworthiness', we have to look at the explicit reasons given as to why Hanseatic municipalities trusted or should trust each other, going deeper than the context of waging war or implementing a commercial regulation, for instance. First of all, trust was connected to the shared interests of Hanseatic traders and cities, in the form of privileges, exclusion of competition or the ability to negotiate autonomy from their rulers (as mentioned, in the fragmented Europe of the Middle Ages, Hanseatic cities had different overlords). Here, reciprocity took a prominent place, in reference to mutual obligations which bound the cities together at various economic, political or even juridical levels. Specific examples could be the shared upkeep of the settlements abroad, the possibility of forging a closer political alliance within the Hanse (*tohopesate*) when needed, or the approach that litigation in another Hanseatic court could be treated as 'own court litigation', despite differences in substantive law.

Second, the content could be the overall value of the relations within the Hanse. The history of their relations, namely that it was 'old trust' which had proved its worth time and again, was frequently mentioned. This could, for instance, pertain to a discussion of relations which were at risk of becoming weaker or severed. A breach of trust was seen as a serious matter, and a risk to the Hanse in general. The value of friendship between the cities was often underlined in these sources: understood both as good relations and as the possibility of resolving or managing inner conflicts through arbitration or mediation, i.e. outside of court (the legal phrase was 'through friendship or law', if extrajudicial means failed, see Cordes, 2015). I have argued elsewhere that efficient conflict management within the Hanse was the added value of being a member of this organisation (Wubs-Mrozewicz, 2017). The trust (often referred to as hope) that a partner city would put inter-

Hanseatic matters high on their municipal agenda can also be classified here. When it was pertinent, the necessity of peace (within the Hanse and with external relations) was clad in a language of trust, often in connection to the Christian faith.

Finally, the value of written communication, that is trust in the information provided, was a recurring aspect: this referred both to correspondence and to decisions taken at Hanseatic diets and written down to be distributed among the Hanse members. This was also demonstrated by the astounding quantity of written communication. The sheer bulk of correspondence between the cities and the copies of the Hanseatic minutes: in each of the Hanseatic archives, municipal missives take up a prominent place and metres of space, and by no means has all of it survived to this day. This trust was also connected to messengers, both when it comes to the writs which they were to bring and to the oral communication which often supplemented the written information.

In sum, the overall language of trust of the Hanseatic cities took explicit and less explicit forms, and had multiple functions which were carefully developed and chosen depending on the context. Moreover, the contents of this language show that the Hanseatic 'upgraded reciprocity', seeing and defending the added value of the Hanse, and reliable information exchange were what Hanseatic municipal authorities considered important in their relations.

Two traders talking trust

What if we could eavesdrop on two premodern Hanseatic traders discussing trust at length, and follow how they saw the trust between them diminish step by step? A court case between merchants from mid-sixteenth century Danzig (Gdańsk, part of the Polish Crown since 1466) and Deventer (part of the Habsburg Netherlands since 1528) allows us to do just that. While I analysed this serendipitous source find elsewhere in detail (Wubs-Mrozewicz, 2015), here I would like to sketch the background very briefly and concentrate on what these two individuals presented as contents of their trust.

In 1558, Henrick Wenterschwieck, a wine merchant from Deventer, lent 389 Polish gulden to his friend from Danzig, Jacob Dembker. It was a substantial sum, for which one could buy 20 horses or 150 pairs of shoes at that time. The agreement was that this loan was to be repaid within four days. Quite strikingly, they made this agreement orally. Admittedly, for short term loans, it was not unusual within the Hanse to abstain from putting pen to paper, but this was mostly the case in the context of smaller sums, partners or traders in the same city. Merchants from different cities who extended large amounts of credit wrote it down, and often registered it with the local municipal authorities (who played the role of notaries in the Hanse until the sixteenth century). Here, an additional unusual aspect was that no interest was charged. The context of close friendship was most probably the reason for no written proof and no interest; perhaps it was seen as equally improper in the sixteenth century as it usually is nowadays (Sztompka, 1999). Yet problems started very soon afterwards: Jacob disappeared without settling the debt or leaving any recognisance. Henrick launched an extensive search and found him in the Duchy of Mecklenburg. Rather than suing, Henrick took Jacob to the nearest town and had the loan confirmed in debt, and demanded a surety from Jacob's wealthy family in Danzig. They had to wait five weeks for it, but the matter seemed settled and they apparently had a pretty good time, spending Christmas together.

However, when no payment followed within the agreed period, Henrick started legal proceedings in Danzig. And in an unexpected twist of the story, the indebted Jacob made a legal counterattack and sued Henrick for kidnapping. The legal proceedings on this dual matter took place before the municipal court in Danzig, where they have survived in the archive and now form the basis of my analysis. In this particular case, no lawyers were involved at the foreground and the language at court was only in part formalised: this means that we can hear the voices of the two traders quite directly, becoming at times quite emotional. Court cases from this period in northern Europe are fascinating sources for studying different perspectives of plaintiffs, defendants and witnesses (Wubs-Mrozewicz, 2018b).

Now, both merchants put trust at the centre of their argument. It was not a vague notion, but an action and something to be measured (Glaeser et al, 2000). They discussed breaches of trust, and talked about how trust had eroded up to the moment of bringing the case to court. (In general, Hanseatic traders avoided litigation, if possible, due to the cost, the time it consumed and the damage to relations: instead, they opted for less formal arrangements, including mediation or arbitration, just like their municipal governments described above). For Henrick, the scale went from very high trust (giving the loan without recognisance), to more limited trust (demanding surety but not suing formally or even starting arbitration), to further diminished trust (having to start legal proceedings on debt collection in Danzig), to total breach of trust (being dragged to court for a criminal offence, i.e. kidnapping, as a tactic to avoid repaying the debt). For Jacob, it went from trust (doing business together), to diminished trust (Henrick doubting Jacob's will to repay), to a severe breach of trust (forcing Jacob to follow Henrick and arranging a surety). This alleged violent assault was according to him in violation of the contemporary laws safeguarding the trade and travel of merchants, and therefore had to be brought before his home court. Thereafter, witnesses of the so-called kidnapping and stay in Mecklenburg were called in, who confirmed the version of the events provided by Henrick. Accordingly, the Danzig court ruled against their own burgher, Jacob. He later escaped and continued plotting against Henrick, which almost caused a war, but that is another story.

From the point of view of the language of trust, it is interesting to see what these two traders referred to as the foundations of their trust, and how they presented the foundations of their trustworthiness. They both did so when describing their mutual relations, and their expectations towards the municipal court of Danzig, which was charged with the task of judging two Hanseatic merchants from two different polities. So what we have here is the language of interpersonal trust and trustworthiness, and the language of generalised trust directed at institutions (Ogilvie, 2004; Luhmann, 1988), which were seen as elements of one system which was designed to provide stability for the merchants, not unlike nowadays (Mutti, 1990). It is a case of multi-level trust: both towards individuals and towards institutions (Fulmer & Dirks, 2018). The language disclosed not only why Henrick and Jacob trusted, but also how they trusted and how this trust shifted. The following discussion is thus of the action and process of trusting (Möllering, 2013).

Starting with the lender, Henrick: as the basis of his trust as demonstrated by the loan, he discussed his lifelong (business) friendship with Jacob. In other words, the type of relationship which did not awaken any suspicions in him when he was asked to help out. The extension of the loan was a non-verbal gesture of trust, as Henrick argued, 'from a true heart' ('auss trewenn hertzenn'). The consecutive and aggravated breaches of this trust – and friendship

– were addressed very directly. Henrick said: ‘Although there is a saying that you lend money to a friend and try to retrieve it from an enemy, I would have expected a more honourable behaviour and kindness from Jacob Dembker’. Both interest-free and paper-free loan can be seen as a gift, i.e. as a malleable social transaction, according to the broad framing of Gadi Algazi (Algazi, 2003). In this case, it was a gift that was ill-reciprocated. When it was later formalised, it became a contract. Both breaches of trust in fulfilling the obligations were presented by Henrick as very serious. Conversely, discussing his own trusting behaviour had a clearly very specific aim: showing that he had been trustworthy in the relationship with Jacob, and that he was a trustworthy party before the municipal court. Towards this court (or more exactly: towards the people constituting it, see Sztompka, 1999), his discourse of trust was also consciously modulated. He anchored it first of all in faith: he voiced belief in the justice of the court, as an extension of the fairness of God, spiked this with bible quotes on wise Solomonian judgements and called in God as witness. Second, he expressed trust in the written law, and especially the impartiality of the court as an institution which was designed to protect guest merchants. In other words, trust was rooted in religion and in the expectation that a fair procedure would be followed. The idea of reciprocity and the special position of Hanseatic courts for fellow burghers also played a background role.

Jacob, on the other hand, decided to use attack as a linguistic strategy, and air his disappointment in the lack of trust of his (former) friend. To manifest his own trustworthiness, he pointed to conditions which were outside of his power when trying to repay the loan (illness and political trouble while he was away), and to his overall reputation. He went on to contrast this with the lack of trustworthiness of Henrick, the alleged kidnapper. Towards the municipal court of Danzig, his hometown, he expressed hope that they would properly protect their own burgher. Jacob also invoked God in various ways, hoping that godly justice would triumph. As Craig Muldrew has pointed out, God was very present in the rhetoric heard at courts of the sixteenth century, including debt cases (Muldrew, 1998). Again, what we see here is a conscious choice of linguistic repertoire.

So what does this language of trust and trustworthiness of this particular case reveal about what was important for two individual Hanseatic merchants in the sixteenth century, in the context of business relations and life in a commercial city? Long-term (business) relationships, which normally were not easily put at risk; reciprocity not only connected to strict business, but also to social conduct; taking personal circumstances into account; using writing or legal means judiciously, i.e. making a choice when to put pen to paper or take a matter to court; wholehearted honesty; proper contract enforcement; the existence of law which was comprehensive enough to cover unusual situations and fair enough also for foreigners; impartial municipal institutions and, on the other hand, institutions which would take reputation into account. And, as a framework in which all this fit in naturally, faith in God.

As a small epilogue, the language of trust and trustworthiness in this particular case did not only pertain to these two traders and what they said to each other and the municipal court in Danzig. Language of trust here was also a gesture: the city of Danzig provided a full copy of the proceedings to the city of Deventer, showing a willingness to provide much more information on the legal proceedings than what they usually did in response to requests from their overlord or non-Hanseatic cities. This is thus a concrete example of the added value of being part of the Hanse. In this case, trust is not vague. It is now a tangible object preserved in the archive of Deventer.

Conclusions

What is the language of trust and trustworthiness? It is a discourse revolving around trust, which can be studied from the points of view of form, function and content. This last element offers room for listening to why people trust and want to appear trustworthy, both today and in the past. Trying to understand the language of trust and trustworthiness is a good way of getting a firmer grip on the sometimes elusive notion of trust.

Is there one language of trust? No, I would argue. We are cursed and blessed by a diversity of languages, with some of them resembling each other in some respects and others exhibiting idiosyncrasies. The explanation for this diversity is that studying these languages only makes sense in concrete settings, and those settings will of course differ. 'A' language of trust is thus to be treated as a collective term; covering past and present dialects like 'Norwegian' covers a whole range of linguistic diversity.

Why does history matter here? It matters because it shows the richness and changeability of the language of trust. The examples discussed here demonstrate that in premodern Europe and outside of it, the language of trust and trustworthiness could have various:

- forms (making extensive use of written documentation, discussing trust explicitly with numerous terms, pointing to actions demonstrating trust and trustworthiness, discussing secrets, being verbal and non-verbal),
- functions (demonstrating a willingness to continue relationships, even if it meant slower conflict resolution or loss of money; preserving political or religious unity; providing proof of own trustworthiness by pointing to trusting behaviour; reminding others of obligations or applying pressure; forging or maintaining alliances; influencing the opinion of a group or an institution),
- content (linking a specific matter to the deeper issues of morality, religious faith, public good, well-functioning institutions, virtues like thrift, shared interests of a group or alliance, the value of reciprocity in various spheres of life, the value of reliable information, the value of kinship and friendship as long-term relations, and the value of fairness *as reasons for trust*).

Etceteras should follow here, because other (historical) examples would certainly enrich this list. Another common denominator is that these historical examples show that such a language was used consciously and skilfully, especially in situations of unclear hierarchies and insecurities. Nowadays, I would argue that we still use a language of trust, but we are less conscious of it and perhaps also less skilled at it, relying on more formal securities instead like highly developed law systems, detailed contracts or social security.

Finally, I suggested in the introduction that the content of the language of trust – i.e. expressing why people trust or trusted – shows what people consider essential in a given relation. For instance, it shows why Hansards bothered to be part of an organisation for centuries. Certainly, in addition to explicitly expressed reasons, there might have been other reasons which were less in the foreground or hardly discussed, as people are not always open about their motivations (Seligman, 1997). However, this does not mean that we should not listen well to what they choose to talk about in a language of trust. Quite the contrary, it can indicate what was considered valid and important in the

larger societal group to which they belong, at a given time. This includes listening well to voices from the past.

Notes on contributor

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