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Old Russian Birchbark Letters
A Pragmatic Approach

Old Russian Birchbark Letters

A Pragmatic Approach

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PREFACE

In 1951, a sensational discovery was made at an excavation site in the medieval part of Velikij Novgorod, a city in the Northwest of Russia. The first birchbark letter was found: a piece of birchbark, into which a text had been incised with a stylus, in a variety of Slavic now known as Old Novgorodian. The assumption that birchbark was used as a writing material in the Middle Ages had been around for a while, but now direct evidence was found and the real first-hand sources could be studied.

In the same year, several more such birchbark letters were unearthed from the medieval cultural layer. The excavations have continued up to the present time, so that at the end of the 2015 archaeological season, we have approximately 1180 birchbark letters available, among which 1074 are of Novgorodian provenance (i.e. found in the city of Velikij Novgorod). The other birchbark letters were found on the territory of other cities in medieval Rus', viz. Staraja Russa, Toržok, Smolensk, Pskov, Tver', Zvenigorod in Galicia, Moscow, Mstislavl', Nižnij Novgorod, Staraja Rjazan', Vitebsk and Vologda. The timeframe of the letters ranges from the second quarter of the 11th to the late 15th century, which leaves us with over four and a half centuries of attestations.

The unique character of the birchbark letters has warranted due attention, mainly from Russian scholars, so that quite a few works have appeared that treat the birchbark letters as sources for the study of Russian history and the Old Russian language. These remarkable medieval texts are the primary sources for the present study, too. A more detailed introduction of the birchbark letters is presented in chapter 1.

This study aims at providing a further linguistic assessment of the birchbark letters in terms of their function and use. We shall deal with them not so much from a purely grammatical point of view; much work has already been done in that area. Instead, the birchbark letters will be viewed from a pragmatic perspective, and we shall especially be interested in matters of orality and literacy; the background and relevance of this angle will be elaborated on in chapter 2. A more detailed statement of the problem and presentation of the research question will be given in chapter 3, whereas the theoretical and methodological considerations will be introduced in chapter 4.

The perspective of this study is to view the birchbark letters not just as the texts themselves, but in the light of the communicative event as a whole. I shall be arguing that the birchbark letters occupy an intermediate position on the orality/literacy continuum. We shall look at four case studies (chapters 5-8); each of these is concerned with a specific linguistic feature. (The case studies will be introduced in §3.3.) More specifically, I shall be arguing that each of the linguistic features can tell us something about the degree of orality in the

birchbark corpus. The early appearance of the birchbark letters (in the sense that the technology of writing was a fairly new phenomenon in medieval Rus') might give rise to the hypothesis that they must show a large number of oral features, and to a certain extent this comes true, but throughout the birchbark period we also see a substantial element of more literate characteristics. All these terms, and their backgrounds, will, of course, be introduced in more detail in the upcoming chapters.

The significance of the present study is enhanced by the interest in historical pragmatics, and more generally language history 'from below', which has been shown over the past decade. It is only a logical consequence that this interest should be put to account in relation to the birchbark letters. The unique character of the birchbark corpus (see chapter 1) is certainly a sufficient warrant for devoting a study to this topic.

Finally, a few practical remarks need to be made. Each birchbark letter or fragment thereof that is excavated gets a number. Thus, the first birchbark letter that was found in Novgorod in 1951 is known as N₁ (where N stands for Novgorod). Each of the other cities is designated by its own abbreviation, for example Smol.1, St.R.12, Psk.5. These designations have been adopted in this study, too (see Table 1).

N	Novgorod
N.N.	Nižnij Novgorod
Mos.	Moscow
Mst.	Mstislavl'
Psk.	Pskov
Rjaz.	(Staraja) Rjazan'
Smol.	Smolensk
St.R.	Staraja Russa
Torž.	Toržok
Tv.	Tver'
Vit.	Vitebsk
Vol.	Vologda
Zv.	Zvenigorod

Table 1: Cities of provenance

Throughout this study, many (parts of) birchbark letters are quoted. The original Old Russian text, which is based on the standard edition (DND and NGB XII; see Table 4 below for these and other abbreviations), is given in Latin transliteration. For the sake of legibility, modern punctuation has been added. The guidelines for transliteration are given in Table 2.

Transliteration	Cyrillic	Transliteration	Cyrillic
a (not after j)	Ɑ	o	о, Ѡ, ѡ
b	Ѣ	p	п
c	ц	r	р
č	ч	s	с
d	Ѡ	š	ш
e	ѣ	šč	щ
ě	Ѥ	t	т
f	Ѵ	u (not after j)	у, ѹ
g	г	v	в
i	и, Ѡ, ѡ	x	х
ja	Ѣ, Ѧ	y	ѣ
ju	ю	z	з
k	к	ž	ж
l	л	ь	ь
m	м	ѣ	ѣ
n	н		

Table 2: Key to the transliteration system for Old Russian used in this study

Notes:

Numbers are rendered in Arabic numerals, instead of the original Cyrillic letters between double dots. In addition, the following conventions have been adopted, following DND:

- A stroke — on top of a word indicates a contraction.
- -- indicates a damaged piece of birchbark, where each stroke stands for one illegible or lost letter. In cases where an educated guess could be made by the editors, this is given in round brackets. Square brackets indicate those cases where the identity of a visible letter or sign is debatable.
- Words that are not in the original but have, for clarity's sake, been added to the translation are given in square brackets. In cases where only part of a birchbark letter is quoted, the omitted part is denoted by [...], both in the original and the translation.

Present-day Russian words and names are transliterated according to the standard scientific system (except quotes from Russian scholarly sources, which are given in the original Cyrillic with an English translation).

Some authors (Collins 2001, Schaeken 2011a) use a ‘normalized transcription’ of Old Russian (ignoring the peculiarities of spelling and local morphology), instead of an exact transliteration of the surface form. I have chosen not to employ such a standardized form, as the primary focus of this study is not morphological, but pragmatic. In those cases where a detailed morphological

analysis is necessary to the argument, glosses have been added to the Old Russian text. A list of abbreviations can be found in Table 3.

ACC	accusative case
AOR	aorist
COP	copula
DAT	dative case
F	feminine
IMP	imperative
INF	infinitive
IPF	imperfective aspect
M	masculine
N	neuter
NOM	nominative case
P	past (tense)
PERF	perfect tense
PF	perfective aspect
PL	plural
PPF	pluperfect
PRES	present tense
PTC	participle
REFL	reflexive
SG	singular
VOC	vocative case
1	1 st person
2	2 nd person
3	3 rd person

Table 3: Glosses

The English translations of birchbark texts have been prepared by the present author, with due attention to the modern Russian translations by Zaliznjak (2004) and the Dutch translation of a number of birchbark letters by Schaecken (2012). In order to facilitate the legibility for an international audience, while at the same time trying to reflect the linguistic diversity of the scientific community, quotes from sources in languages other than English are first given in the original (mostly Russian or German), followed by the present author's translation.

DND	<i>Drevnenovgorodskij dialekt</i> (= Zaliznjak 2004)
GVNP	<i>Gramoty Velikogo Novgoroda i Pskova</i>
KJV	King James Version
NGB	<i>Novgorodskie gramoty na bereste</i>
NRSA	Narrative report of a speech act
RNC	Russian National Corpus
SRJa XI-XVII	<i>Slovar' russkogo jazyka XI-XVII vv.</i>

Table 4: Other abbreviations

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