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CHAPTER 2

THE BACKGROUND: COMMUNICATIVELY HETEROGENEOUS LETTERS

2.1 Introduction

Before we are able to formulate the research question in some more detail (which will be done in chapter 3), we need to review some issues that form the background for the research question. In §2.2, some examples will be given of birchbark letters that are hard to interpret for the modern reader; these will be identified as instances of ‘communicative heterogeneity’ (as defined in §2.3) and explained with reference to an oral component (§2.4). This is what constitutes the essence of Gippius (2004) (as evaluated in §2.5), whose research forms the basis of a pragmatic approach to the birchbark letters. In §2.6, some subsequent studies will be reviewed. These studies all concern individual texts, whereas the present study is intended to contribute to this pragmatic research area in a more systematic way (§2.7).

2.2 The problem

The grammar and linguistic structure of Old Novgorodian have been extensively studied. However, if we read the birchbark letters, the grammatical knowledge that has been accumulated over the decades does not always help us to actually understand what the texts are meant to convey. We do not always understand why the texts were phrased the way they are; the meaning of some texts remains particularly puzzling. In part, this is due to the “bad data problem” (Labov 1994: 11), which means that we are unable to interpret the letters in all details like the original addressees, because they knew the background and context, whereas we do not.¹ After all, the letters were never in-

¹ Obviously, I do not mean that the data are good for nothing. Whatever the drawbacks are, the birchbark letters remain a useful and unique resource for conducting linguistic research. A well-defined methodological framework can help to overcome the limited nature of the data, as is evidenced by the present study.

tended for us; but more remains to be said. The structure and textual organization of quite a few birchbark letters will strike modern readers as unusual. This will be illustrated by means of several birchbark letters. Here is the first example:

- (4) Ot Žily k Čjudinu. Dai Ondrěju rubľ. Ne daš li, čo mně ni dospěje v ruble tomъ neči jati, to tvoja. Ot Žilě k Savě. Dai ----- poltinu [...]
 ‘From Žila to Čudin. Give Ondrej a rouble. If you won’t give [it], any loss [he] will cause me to take because of that rouble is yours. From Žila to Sava. Give ----- a *poltina*² [...].’
 (N589 / 1340-1360 / DND: 559)

The final part of N589 has not been preserved, but nevertheless, it is clear that this text consists of two separate letters. Both were written by Žila, but the first one is addressed to Čudin, whereas the second letter is addressed to Sava. So we have two letters on one piece of birchbark, that are graphically linked up in a continuous flow of text. How can this situation be accounted for? The most sensible solution is to consider a scenario in which the letter is entrusted to a courier (messenger), who brings it to Čudin first, reads out the first message, which is intended for Čudin, then takes the letter on to Sava, to whom he reads out the second message. In order to consolidate this claim, some more letters can be presented.

- (5) [...] i ribi i maslo i siri – a to prazka 3 godo ----dai to. A mi tobi, ogīne Ofonose, klanjaesme. A daro vedaše: 3 kunici 3 godo. A pocne prošati ženi ili sinovi, ženi 2 beli a sinu belka.
 ‘...and fish and butter and cheeses – this is the rent for 3 years, [...] this. And we bow down you, lord Ofonos. And you know the tribute: 3 marten for 3 years. And if he starts asking for his wife or his son, then 2 squirrels for his wife, and a squirrel for his son.’
 (N406 / 1360-1380 / DND: 593)

This letter provides an even stronger indication for a scenario in which the messenger reads the letter out aloud in front of the addressee. Interestingly, this letter consists of two parts. In the first part, farmers address their landlord, specifying the rent and tribute that they propose to pay him, ending with the standard closing formula *A mi tobi, ogīne Ofonose, klanjaesme* ‘And we bow down to you, lord Ofonos’. The second part, which starts with *A daro vedaše* ‘And you know the rent’, looks like an instruction to the farmers’ representative (i.e. the messenger), to remind him of the rent and instruct him in case the landlord is not satisfied with the proposal and asks for more. Thus, the letter was meant to be read out by the representative, but not to be handed

² A *poltina* is half a rouble.

over to lord Ofonos: obviously, the latter was not supposed to read the instruction to the messenger.

The procedures of dictation and reading out aloud are less unusual than they may seem from a present-day perspective: they have been described as usual practice in many ancient cultures,³ as well as in the Middle Ages. In medieval Europe, letter writing was “an intellectual skill using the mouth rather than the hand” (Clanchy 1979/2012: 273), i.e. letters were often dictated. In this context, positing an oral element is not at all anomalous.

Bearing in mind the two parts of which the previous letter turned out to consist, we can turn to another letter which addresses more than one person, i.e. more than just the person who is mentioned in the address formula:

- (6) Poklonъ osp̄zi mtr̄i. Poslalъ jesmъ s posadnicimъ Manuilomъ 20 bělъ k tobě. A ty, Nestere, pro cicjakъ prišli ko mni gramotu, s kimъ budešъ poslalъ. A v Toržokъ priixavъ, koni kormi dobrymъ sinomъ. K žitnici svoi zamokъ priloži. A na gumni stoi koli molotjatъ. A koni kormi ovsomъ pri sobi, a v miru. A v klitъ rži s----- peremirъ i ovesъ tako že. A skazyvai komu nadobi rož li ili ovesъ [...]
 ‘Greetings to madam, mother. I have sent you 20 squirrel pelts with the governor’s [man] Manuil. And you, Nester, send me a letter about the helmet, [to let me know] with whom you will send it. And when you arrive in Toržok, feed the horses with good hay. Attach your own lock to the granary. And remain on the threshing floor when the threshing is being done. And have the horses fed with oats in your presence and in [good] measure. And in the barn rye [...] measure it again and the oats, too. And let [me] know who needs rye or oats [...].’
 (N358 / 1340-1360 / DND: 550)

This letter was written by Onsifor (as we know from N354, written in the same hand; see the following example) to his mother (as is indicated by the salutation). However, after one sentence, Onsifor already switches to address Nester, which is explicitly signalled by the phrase *A ty, Nestere* ‘and you, Nester’ (imperative subject + vocative; see chapter 5). Consequently, although the letter is formally addressed to ‘madam, mother’, its greater part is addressed to Nester (who apparently was a steward to the family; cf. DND: 551). Thus, like the previous example, this letter also consists of two parts. The following letter has a similar organization, although Nester is now not explicitly addressed:

- (7) Čelomъ bitije k og̃ži mtr̄i ot Onsifora. Veli Nesterju rublъ skopiti da iti k Ijuriu k sukladniku. Molisja jem čto by konъ kupilъ. Da idi s Obrosiemъ k Stepanu, žerebii vozmja. Ili vozmety rublъ, kupi i drugii

³ Cf. Charpin (2010) for Ancient Mesopotamia, Thomas (1992) for Ancient Greece, etc.

копѣ. Да проѡай оу Јурија полтини да купи соли с Обросијемѣ. А мѡи и се-
ребра не добудетѣ до пути, поѡли с Нестеромѣ симѣ. Да поѡли 2 кози,
корјакулју, рјатенѣ, полѣсти, веретиѡа, мѡи и медвидно. Вѡи у Максима
оу клјуѡника рѡенки попроѡати.

[Reverse] I didu molisja ȋto by ixaľ v Ijurijevњ monastirњ рѡенки по-
проѡаľ. A sdise ne nadiisja.

‘A request to madam, mother, from Onsifor. Order Nester to get a
rouble together and to go to Jurij, the business associate. Ask him to
buy a horse. And go with Obrosij to Stepan, having taken my share. If
he takes the rouble, buy another horse, too. And ask Jurij for a *poltina*
and buy salt with Obrosij. And if he cannot get the fur and the money
for the journey, send it over here with Nester. And send two tripods, a
fork, branding-irons, felt cloths, canvas covers, sacks, and a bearskin.
Give instructions to ask Maksim, the manager, for wheat.

[Reverse] And ask grandfather to go to Jur’jev monastery [and] ask for
wheat. And there is no hope [of getting it] here.’

(N354 / 1340-1360 / DND: 550)

Like the previous example, this letter is also addressed to ‘madam, mother’.
Onsifor asks her to give an instruction to Nester, viz. ‘to get a rouble together
and to go to Jurij, the business associate’. Then, ‘ask him to buy a horse’. Who
should buy a horse? Is mother supposed to ask this to Nester, or should Nester
ask this to Jurij? The latter is much more likely (due to the choice of the
verb).⁴ And what about the subsequent instructions? Does Onsifor really or-
der his mother around to go to Stepan, buy a horse, buy salt? That seems ra-
ther unlikely. Alternatively, is it Nester who should carry out these instruc-
tions, even though it is ‘madam, mother’ to whom the letter is formally
addressed? The implication would be that Nester is addressed without an ex-
plicit signal to indicate a switch of addressee. But why should this be the case?
Consider the alternative: ‘Order him to ask him to buy a horse. And order him
to go with Obrosij to Stepan, taking my share. Order him, if he takes the rou-
ble, to buy another horse, too. And order him to ask Jurij for half a rouble and
to buy salt with Obrosij.’ This would be an excessively wordy and long-
winded formulation. But, one might object, if we read on, we do encounter
Nester again in the third person: ‘send him over here with Nester’. That is
true, but it shows that this part of the letter must be addressed to mother
again. Thus, the letter is divided into three parts: it is addressed, consecutively,
to mother – Nester – mother.

⁴ Mother should ‘order’ (*velěti*) Nester to get a rouble together. Nester should ‘ask’ (*molitisja*)
Jurij to buy a horse. These two verbs have different connotations that reflect different social rela-
tions. Nester is a subordinate whom mother ‘orders’, but he, in turn, ‘asks’ Jurij, who is his supe-
rior.

2.3 Communicative heterogeneity

The two letters discussed above (N354 and N358) can serve as an illustration of a phenomenon identified by Gippius (2004). As we have seen, both letters are addressed to more than one person; thus, the letters consist of several parts, each with its own addressee. Gippius (2004: 185) calls this “коммуникативная неоднородность” ‘communicative heterogeneity’. The definition given by him runs as follows (Ibid.):

“[...] оформленное как единый текст письменное сообщение распадается на части, обладающие различной ролевой структурой, то есть имеющие разных авторов или адресатов.”

‘[...] a written message, composed as a single text, is divided into parts, each of which has a different role structure, i.e. the parts have different authors or addressees.’⁵

The difference is that in N358 the switch of addressee is made explicit (‘and you, Nester, [...]’), whereas in N354 it is implicit; the switch can only be inferred from the context there. This is the difference between ‘overt’ and ‘hidden’ communicative heterogeneity. Another letter with hidden communicative heterogeneity is the following:

- (8) От Petra къ Vasilevi. Vъdai 6 kounъ i grivъnou Vyšjatě. Ali ti ne dastъ a pristavi na nъ otrokъ.
 ‘From Petr to Vasil’. Give 6 *kunas* and a *grivna* to Vyšata. If he doesn’t give [them], then send a court official after him.’⁶
 (St.R.15 / 1140-1160 / DND: 328)

If we look at this letter, something may strike us as awkward. The letter is addressed to Vasil’, who has to give a certain amount of money to Vyšata. But then, apparently, Vyšata is also supposed to give something, because, if he doesn’t, Vasil’ should send a court official after him. Theoretically, this is possible, of course. But such a laborious scenario can be dispensed with if we allow for a different interpretation, viz. that the letter consists of two parts that are addressed to two different persons. First, Vasil’ is addressed: ‘Give 6 *kunas* and a *grivna* to Vyšata.’ The next sentence is intended for Vyšata: ‘If he [i.e. Vasil’] doesn’t give [them], then send a court official after him.’ In this way, the text can be understood as an order to Vasil’ (to pay to Vyšata) on the one hand, and a mandate for Vyšata (to take action in case of non-payment), on the other. At the same time, however, the sentence addressed to Vyšata is also

⁵ So far, we have only seen communicatively heterogeneous letters with different addressees; for examples with different authors, see (16-17) below.

⁶ A *kuna* is a marten skin, which was used as a monetary unit; a *grivna* is a silver ingot of around 200 grams.

indirectly intended as a threat to Vasil', to force him to pay the desired amount: he gets to know the consequences if he refuses to pay. Thus, Petr addresses Vasil' and Vyšata consecutively, as if both were standing in front of him. The author considered this structure pragmatically optimal. It creates a 'presence effect', as if Petr gave oral instructions (Gippius 2004: 194).⁷ The letter must have been read when both addressees were together; most probably, the letter was handed over to Vasil' by Vyšata. It then served as a mandate: by it, the debtor is called upon to pay, and the letter-bearer is authorised to collect the debt.

A similar phenomenon can be seen in the following letter:

- (9) Ot Panka kъ Zaxarъ · i ko Ogafonou. Prodalъ esmъ sorokъ bobrovъ Miljate na desjati grivnъ serъbra. Olна же · vъzmъ serъbro, to же dai bobry. A dai serobro Zaxarъ.
'From Panko to Zaxar'ja and to Ogafon. I have sold forty beaver skins to Miljata for ten silver *grivnas*. When you-SG receive the silver, then give-SG the beaver skins. And give-SG the money to Zaxar'ja.'
(N420 / 1240-1260 / DND: 478)

As we can see, this letter is addressed to two persons. However, in the main body of the text, instructions are given in singular imperatives (twice *dai* 'give-2.SG'). Why is this? Because Zaxar'ja is mentioned in the last sentence, one might suppose that the letter is actually addressed to Ogafon only. In that case, Ogafon should receive the silver, and then give it to Zaxar'ja. But why, then, should Zaxar'ja be mentioned as one of the addressees? If we want to explain this, we can consider the following scenario: Panko and Miljata have agreed on a transaction involving the sale of beavers (skins). Zaxar'ja is the steward of Panko, Ogafon is the steward of Miljata. The first phrase (*Prodalъ esmъ...* 'I have sold...') is addressed to both addressees and is a general statement; the second phrase addresses Zaxar'ja, who is exhorted to give the beaver skins, and then, in the final phrase, Ogafon is ordered to give the silver to Zaxar'ja. Thus, both addressees are addressed consecutively. In this way, the letter functions as a mandate for Zaxar'ja.

Some letters contain linguistic clues that help us to detect hidden communicative heterogeneity. In the case of the following letter, this concerns the imperative in the singular vs. the plural form:

- (10) Ou Voislava vъzъmi 10 kounъ istinъ a 5 kounъ namomъ: ne vъdale dъvoixъ namъ. | Ou Něžjatъ vъzъmi desjaty kounъ i grivъnou. | Ou

⁷ It has, for that matter, long been recognised by a variety of authors (e.g. Constable 1976, Clanchy 1979/2012, and many others) that being read out aloud was a feature of letters in the Middle Ages in various parts of Europe.

Boudotъ възьми grivъnou naménouju. | Ou Bojana възьми šestě kou-
nъ naménouju Ozerevaxъ. A otrokou vьdaite po kouně moužъ.
'From Voislav take-SG 10 *kunas* principal and 5 *kunas* as interest: he
hasn't paid the interest for two terms. | From Nežata take-SG ten *kunas*
and a *grivna*. | From Budota take-SG a *grivna* as interest. | From Bojan
take-SG six *kunas* as interest in Ozerevy. And give-PL the officer a *kuna*
each.'
(N509 / 1160-1180 / DND: 361)

The communicative boundary (i.e. the point where a switch of addressee takes place) occurs after the word *Ozerevaxъ* 'in Ozerevy' (place name). The scenario is the following: first, a tax-collector is called upon to collect certain amounts from certain persons. But then, these persons are addressed and ordered to pay the tax-collector a *kuna* in addition to the already mentioned sum, as wages for his work.⁸

Although the phenomenon of *hidden* communicative heterogeneity seems to be unique to the medium of birchbark, *overt* communicative heterogeneity occurs in the parchment letters (GVNP) as well, as the following example shows:

- (11) Se jazъ knjazъ velikii Ivanъ Danilovičъ vseja Rusi požalovaľ esmъ sokolnikovъ pečerskixъ, xto xoditъ na Pečeru, Žilu sъ drugi. [...] Xto li čerezъ moju gramotu, čto u nixъ vozьmetъ, i jazъ knjazъ velikii kažnju, zaneže mi ljudi tě nadobny. A prikazaľ esmi ixъ bljusti Merkurьju; a ty, Merkurei, po moei gramotě bljudi ixъ, a vъ obidu ixъ ne vydavai nikomu.
'Herewith I, grand duke Ivan Danilovič of all Rus', grant [tax exemption] to the Pečoran falconers, those that go on [the river] Pečora, to Žila and others. [...] I, the grand duke, will punish anyone who takes [tribute] from them in spite of my letter, because I need these people. And I hereby order Merkurii to protect them; and you, Merkurii, protect them according to my letter, and do not give them over for insult to anyone.'
(GVNP 84 / 1328-1341 / Valk 1949: 142)

First of all, in (11), the grand duke makes a general statement in an official document (*žalovannaja gramota*, i.e. what in the English monarchy would be

⁸ Punctuation on birchbark is generally unstable and not very telling in any respect. Nevertheless, it is somewhat strange that the writer inserts graphical boundaries (in the form of a vertical stroke) between the sections that pertain to the various debtors, but, of all places, not at the communicative boundary. We would, after all, consider the latter to be a more important boundary, and worth designating.

called a letter-patent, granting certain privileges) not explicitly addressed to anyone in particular. Subsequently, he starts addressing someone personally, viz. Merkurii. Similar instances can be found in other parchment letters; one more example should suffice here. It is a will, first containing a general statement of bequest, where subsequently 'my brother Ivan' is addressed directly:

- (12) Vo imja Otca i Syna i Svjatogo Duxa. Se azъ rabъ božii inokъ Aleksēi spisaxъ rukopisanie pri svoemъ životě. [...] A ty, brate moi Ivane, ne vstupaise ni vo čto ž [...].
 'In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Hereby I, God's servant, monk Aleksei, write a testament at [the end of] my life. [...] And you, my brother Ivan, do not interfere with anything, [...].'
 (GVNP 295 / ca. 1456 / Valk 1949: 293-294)

We can enlarge on the abovementioned phenomenon of hidden communicative heterogeneity by looking at what Clark (1996: 8) calls the "basic language setting", in which face-to-face communication is achieved by participants' joint activities at the same place and time. Deviation from the basic setting requires "special techniques" (Ibid.: 11), in order to make up for the lack of 'directness' or 'basicness'. For example, applying these terms to the present topic, one characteristic of the basic setting is "visibility", i.e. "the participants can see each other" (Ibid.: 9). Thus, by way of eye contact, they can establish and reinforce contact with each other; in other words, they negotiate speaker selection (see §5.4 for a more detailed description of this term) primarily through non-verbal interaction. In a non-basic setting, such as a letter, other ways have to be found to indicate the relations between speech act participants. One such way is to use a personal pronoun and a vocative, as we saw in (5): *A ty, Nesterē* 'and you, Nester'.⁹ When 'special techniques' like this are absent, as in (8), an obvious conclusion to be drawn is that the basic setting must be implied. To put it differently, if no 'special techniques' are used, the only way to achieve a felicitous contact between participants of a communicative act is in a basic, i.e. face-to-face, setting. Thus, reasoning from a somewhat different angle, we would arrive at the same conclusion as does Gippius (2004), viz. that a basic, i.e. oral, setting is relied on to convey the message felicitously. A letter that is dictated, transmitted and finally read out aloud can be seen as a "mediated spoken setting" (Clark 1996: 5), in which 'special techniques' can be used in inverse proportion to the extent to which the letter-bearer recreates a basic setting when reading the letter out aloud. The greater the messenger's role is, the less 'special techniques' are necessary to ensure a successful communicative act.

⁹ This aspect will be further elaborated on in chapter 5.

2.4 The oral component

What combines the discussion of the abovementioned birchbark texts is that they contain a somewhat mysterious message, which is clarified by a new interpretation in the light of (hidden) communicative heterogeneity. Such interpretations are only possible if we allow for an oral component.

Although the oral component serves as the main explanation for communicative heterogeneity, the latter is not the only indicator of an oral component in birchbark communication. Gippius (2004) identifies several other characteristic instances which show the central role which the messenger or letter-bearer played in the communicative act. Let us discuss some of them, by looking at a few examples.

- (13) [...] Koulotъke gramъta къ Xoudъ[...]. Idi reki Plъskovou.
 '[From] Kulotka a letter to Xudo[ta]. Go to Pskov [and] tell [them].'
 (N656 / 1160-1180 / DND: 357)

This letter is wholly intact, with only the left edge missing (see Figure 4).

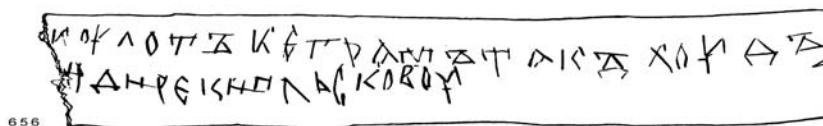


Figure 4: Drawing of N656 (1160-1180)

So apart from the address formula, the message consists of only three words (*Idi reki Plъskovou*). All the rest is left to the context. So who was meant to say what? Apparently, the addressee knew what he was supposed to tell in Pskov. Therefore, he must have been instructed orally about this. The most plausible option is, then, that 'Go and tell it in Pskov' is addressed to the messenger, who has been instructed by the author, and now carries this letter, which is meant to sanction the spoken word that he is supposed to deliver in Pskov.¹⁰ The reason why the message itself is not included in the letter may have to do with its secrecy (DND: 357), or otherwise just because it was felt unnecessary to include details that the messenger would convey orally anyway.

The following two letters are even more 'truncated':

¹⁰ The question then remains: who is Xudota? Is Xudota the name of the messenger, or is it the name of the person in Pskov to whom the messenger was supposed to deliver the message? Gippius (2004: 205) seems to consider the second option the most plausible one. In that case, we are actually confronted with a communicatively heterogeneous letter: the incipit is addressed to the receiver of the message in Pskov, and the second sentence is addressed to the (anonymous) messenger and meant as an accreditation for him in the face of Xudota.

- (14) Кѡснѣтинѣ грамѣта.
'Kosnjatin's letter.'
(N397 / 1180-1200 / DND: 453)
- (15) От Домитра ко ко Феларју и ко Несодиле.
'From Dmītr to Flar' and to Nesdila.'
(N443 / 1200-1220 / DND: 438)

These complete letters contain just a heading, without any real content. In the same vein as the previous example (13), these 'truncated' messages will have been handed over by a messenger. Thus, the function of both letters is that of a symbolical written sign which accompanies and ratifies a spoken message (Gippius 2004: 204), or possibly a shipment of goods. This kind of writing is more of a symbolical than of a practical kind. Of course, most birchbark letters are of a less extremely truncated kind, but still, quite a few letters provide indications for a large role of the messenger.

2.5 Evaluating Gippius (2004)

All the above examples serve as justification to consider the oral component as a primary force in explaining the pragmatic structure and organization of birchbark letters. This can be called the principal point made by Gippius (2004). A communicatively heterogeneous textual organization (especially in its hidden form) would definitely be awkward in a present-day letter. So why was it not awkward in medieval Novgorod? The explanation given by Gippius (2004) revolves around the person of the messenger, who was more than just a letter-bearer. He not only delivered the letter, but also orally elaborated on its contents (which often served as an *aide-mémoire* or to lend authority to the more elaborate oral message). The role of the messenger is the clearest manifestation of an oral component in birchbark communication. Without this oral component, the letters would indeed come across as cryptic and hard to understand.

According to Gippius (2004: 203), the hidden communicative heterogeneity of a birchbark letter can often be explained in terms of the structure of an oral dialogue that has been imitated in writing. The main characteristic of this oral structure is that the situational context is relied on and that explicitly marking the switch from one conversational partner to another is only optional. Gippius (2004: 204) argues that the oral structure of birchbark letters must be dated back to the earliest era when Rus' had just been converted to Christianity, and when written communication in the sphere of everyday life and business was of a secondary and facultative kind. Thus, writing did not just fulfil a practical function, but served as the symbolic sanctioning of an oral message (Bulanin 1997: 151).

Such an oral structure of writing is possible thanks to the messenger. The status of the messenger is such that he licences the communicatively hetero-

geneous structure of the letters that we have seen. In this way, the messenger serves as the main explanatory force for the peculiarities in the contents and structure of a number of birchbark letters.

The pragmatic line of analysis that has been initiated by Gippius (2004) involves a switch from a purely grammatical to a more functional perspective of the birchbark letters. The approach can indeed be called “ground-breaking” (Schaeken 2011a: 1) for the field of berestology. Let us once more sum up and evaluate the main merits of Gippius’s (2004) article.

- The article’s first merit is that it draws attention to a peculiar kind of textual organization (communicatively heterogeneous texts, overt and hidden), thereby providing new and more exact interpretations for a number of previously mysterious birchbark letters.
- The second important point is that this textual organization is possible thanks to an oral component. This oral component is explained by the role of the messenger, who could elaborate on the text and make up for the lack of explicitness. It follows, then, that the birchbark letters are to a large extent context-dependent.
- Thirdly, communication on birchbark was more than just a utilitarian communicative tool.¹¹ It also served as a mandate which conferred authority upon the messenger to execute affairs on behalf of the sender.

Although Gippius does not explicitly mention the term, an important principle that underlies his interpretations is the notion of ‘trust in writing’. It can even be contended that his argumentation hinges on trust in writing to a large extent; he stresses the function of quite a few communicatively heterogeneous birchbark letters as being mandates. This often involves that they give accreditation to one participant (often the letter-bearer) in the face of another. Now, if a messenger was invested with authority on the basis of a birchbark letter, it must follow that a written message was deemed more trustworthy (or at least more authoritative) than a person who just pronounced a spoken message.

This interpretation seems to have been based to a large extent on Bulanin’s (1997) theory about the sacred status of the written word, which lends it authority in the face of the letter’s recipient. Interestingly, several researchers of Western European medieval literacy take a diametrically opposite point of view, viz. that the messenger was necessary to accredit the written message (rather than vice versa) due to the absence of trust in the written word as such. Both theories will be reviewed in chapter 4, when discussing the notion of orality in more detail.

¹¹ This is a point that is worked out in more detail by Schaeken (2011a) (see §2.6 below).

2.6 Subsequent research

Gippius (2004: 229) concludes his article with a plea for a more extensive investigation of the higher levels of textual organization and the communicative peculiarities surrounding the birchbark letters. And indeed, his innovative approach to the birchbark corpus has sparked interest to further investigate the topic of communicative heterogeneity, as well as to apply a pragmatic approach to several more birchbark letters. This was done in recent years, primarily by Schaeken and Gippius.¹² The main output of their investigations shows that Gippius's (2004) approach has been fruitful beyond the initial article, and that following up on his findings, as will be done in the rest of this study, is not just a shot in the dark. For this reason, some of the subsequent research will now be briefly reviewed.

Schaeken (2011a) provides a new interpretation for birchbark letter N497:

- (16) Pokolono o Gavrili o Poseni ko zati moemou ko Gorigori ži koumou i ko sestori moei ko Ouliti. Čo bi este poixali vo gorodo ko radosti moei, a našego solova ne ostavili. Da Bogo vamo radoste.
 Mi vašego solova voxi ne osotavimo.
 'Greetings from Gavrila Postnja to my brother-in-law Grigorij, [my] *kum*, and to my sister Ulita. May you come to the city, to my happiness, and not depart from our request. May God give you happiness. We will all not depart from your request.'¹³
 (N497 / 1340-1360 / DND: 563 / translation Schaeken 2011a: 3)

Schaeken (2011a: 4) notes some oddities about this letter: these serve as a starting point for his investigation. Firstly, it is a bit strange that Gavrila Postnja invites Grigorij and Ulita to come over, and then promises to respond to an earlier invitation from their side. Secondly, the letter was excavated in Novgorod, although Gavrila Postnja invited Grigorij and Ulita to come to the city (i.e. Novgorod), so that the letter should have been sent off from Novgorod.

Schaeken's (2011a: 5) alternative interpretation is that N497 is a communicatively heterogeneous letter, but in a somewhat different way than are Gippius's (2004) examples. The letter's final phrase (*Mi vašego solova voxi ne osotavimo* 'We will all not depart from your request') is Grigorij and Ulita's reply to the above invitation. Thus, the invitation and the reply to it are written on the same piece of birchbark; but the thing is that they are written in the same hand. How can this be explained? In this respect, Schaeken stresses the central

¹² I refer to a series of articles (Schaeken 2011a, 2011b, 2014, Gippius & Schaeken 2011, Collins 2011) that deal with certain aspects of the pragmatics and communicative structure of various individual birchbark texts, building on the insights of Gippius (2004), and consolidating his conclusions. Two of these articles (Schaeken 2011a, 2014) will be reviewed below.

¹³ "A *kum* is a relative by baptism of one's child" (Schaeken 2011a: 3; cf. SRJa XI-XVII 8: 116).

role of the messenger, who functioned as the scribe for the authors of both parts of the letter. This means that Gavril Postnja dictated his message to a scribe, who wrote it down, and with whom the letter was sent away. Grigorij and Ulita, in turn, instructed the same scribe (messenger) to write the reply, whereupon the latter brought the letter back to Gavril Postnja. This communicative setting is in full accord with Gippius's (2004) observations about the role of the messenger.

The scenario described above has several important implications as to the role and status of the written word. If there was a face-to-face encounter between the messenger and the addressees anyway, why write a letter at all? Schaeken (2011a: 8-9) devotes a paragraph to this question and draws the conclusion that

“written communication on birchbark, at least in the later period, could serve more than utilitarian purposes in Novgorod society. [...] Taking into account N497, writing on birchbark seemed to be integrated in society to the extent of communicating matters of courtesy and politeness.”

Schaeken (2014) continues his investigations in the same vein. He shows “a perfect typological parallel” (2014: 156) for the invitation with reply (N497). This concerns a Greek papyrus from Roman Egypt (2nd century A.D.), where the first part of the document is written by Heras to “Taphes my sister”, with the reply (“To Heras my sister”) underneath it, written in the same hand. The conclusion to be drawn is that the scribe and the messenger are the same person.

Schaeken (2014) also provides a more precise interpretation for N771 and Zv.2 in the light of communicative heterogeneity. As before, the messenger serves as the main explanatory mechanism here, too. In N771, the second part of the letter is an instruction to the messenger.¹⁴ In Zv.2, the messenger is the author of the second part of the letter (from *Oli nъ vodasi* ‘If you don’t give [it]’):

- (17) + Ot Gověnovoe : ko Něžъnъсју. Dae 6 desjato kouno lodienouju. Pov-
ědalo Gověno ida na soudo : a porъ pslъ. : A dae Loučě. Oli nъ vodasi,
to ja u konjazja poema otroko prižъ priedju; a vo bole ti vonidъ. :
‘From Goven’s [widow] to Neženec. Give 60 boat-*kunas* (i.e. 60 *kunas*
for the boat). Goven said [this], going to Judgment, and the priest
wrote [it] down. And give [it] to Luka. If you don’t give [it], then I will
come, taking an official (constable) from the prince with me; and it will
go into more [expense] for you.’
(Zv.2 / 1120-1140 / DND: 346 / translation Schaeken 2014: 162-163)

¹⁴ For further details about this letter, the reader is referred to the original article (Schaeken 2014: 158-162).

Schaeken (2014: 163) arrives at this conclusion by analyzing *poema* ‘taking’ as a *masculine* form of the present active participle. This is odd, given that Goven’s widow is obviously feminine. The sentence in question must, therefore, according to Schaeken, have been authored by the messenger (Luka, who is also the scribe). Interestingly, if Schaeken’s alternative interpretation is valid,¹⁵ it can be observed at this point that in a communicative sense *Zv.2* is a variation on *St.R.15*. Both include an order to pay and a threat in case the money is not paid, but in *Zv.2* the threat is not phrased in the form of a mandate (as it is in *St.R.15*). Thus, although the communicative constellation is different, it still consists of three parties involved, and it is still one of hidden heterogeneity.

What we have seen in Schaeken (2011a, 2014) is a successful further pursuit of the approach that was initiated by Gippius (2004). This resulted in the discovery of a new type of communicative heterogeneity.

2.7 Discussion

The abovementioned research marks the start of a new research area in berestology. The most tangible result is that more accurate interpretations of individual texts have been given, thanks to the discovery of (hidden) communicative heterogeneity. On a more general note, a first account of the oral aspects of communication on birchbark has been formulated. One central theme that can be subsumed under this heading of orality is the role of the messenger; all of the above studies refer to the messenger in one way or another. But in passing, we have already seen several kinds of orality so far, connected with dictation, reading out aloud, the role of the messenger, the role of the broader context, etc. In addition, some attention has been devoted to the fact that writing served not just utilitarian, but also ceremonial purposes. These are features that will, of course, be elaborated on in the remainder of this study. The findings regarding individual texts will have to be generalized.

Now, in what way have the above publications by Schaeken (2011a, 2014) added insights to Gippius’s (2004) initial investigation? Crucially, the above-mentioned investigations all revolve around individual documents that are more or less problematic to interpret; a communicatively heterogeneous reading is then presented as the solution to the interpretative problems. It is in this vein that the subsequent articles resume the thread of Gippius (2004). This pragmatic approach results in improved readings of these individual texts, which is indeed a great gain to the field of berestology. What is lacking up to the present day, however, is a general overview connecting the insights gained

¹⁵ Schaeken (2014: 164-165) himself puts in a caveat against his own interpretation, taking into account the possibility that the participle might be neutral as to gender; it “might actually be the earliest unambiguous attestation on birchbark of loss of agreement.” Chances are that we may never be entirely sure.

from these individual studies. It is at this point that the present study is meant to continue the quest.

Gippius's (2004) argumentation may at first sight seem anything but convincing to someone who is less familiar with the birchbark letters. It runs counter to all our present-day intuitions about the use of written language. Some more attention will, therefore, be devoted to underlining the validity of his line of analysis, while making use of theoretical terms. This study is not meant to replicate the abovementioned approach by applying it to more documents. Neither is it meant to provide an exhaustive overview of all communicatively heterogeneous birchbark letters. It is intended to furnish a deepening and broadening of the new approach taken by Gippius. This will inevitably involve an encounter with issues of orality. A more precise formulation of the research question will be given in the next chapter.

