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CHAPTER 3

RESEARCH QUESTION

3.1 Introduction

In this chapter, the main research question will be formulated in the light of the issues encountered in chapter 2. As was announced in the Preface, the research will be conducted in the form of four case studies. A justification of the selection of these case studies will also be presented in this chapter (§3.3).

3.2 Research question

Now that we have discussed several examples of communicatively heterogeneous texts (§§2.2-2.3), and are tuned in to an explanation in the realm of an oral component (§2.4), especially the role of the messenger, we can take the subject up for a more thorough investigation. The studies mentioned in the previous chapter have resulted in substantially new findings. They are explorations of a vast innovative area that had not been studied before, at least as far as the birchbark letters are concerned. Inevitably, these studies also lead on to a number of questions. It is against this background that we can present our **research question** in some more detail:

Keeping in mind that (hidden) communicative heterogeneity has been identified as one manifestation of an oral component in the communicative process, it is to be expected that there are more such manifestations in the birchbark texts. In what ways does this oral component manifest itself in linguistic features, and how can these features be accounted for in terms of the transition from orality to literacy?

Presenting an answer to this question is the main objective of the present study. The question itself may need some more detailed specification.

First of all, the kind of elements that will be searched for can be described as linguistic features. These are elements that occur throughout the corpus as a whole, and can thus be regarded on a higher level than that of individual texts. These linguistic elements will be treated in the individual case studies.

Secondly, a research method will have to be specified (which will be identified as ‘pragmaphilology’ in chapter 4). How can these oral elements be found? They should be searched for in a more generalized way than has been done heretofore. Our pragmaphilological approach will provide a more solid underpinning to the initial discoveries made by Gippius (2004), as it will be concerned not with individual letters on a problem-and-solution basis, but rather with a systematic investigation of linguistic parameters that are to be found throughout the whole of the corpus. In so doing, we shall take a next step towards providing an inventory of oral features that are characteristic of the corpus.

In short, the investigations mentioned earlier in chapter 2 form the background against which the present study should be viewed. It is meant to build on the abovementioned investigations, but also to provide a follow-up with a well-defined methodology. Gippius’s (2004) argumentation and the subsequent studies may all come across as quite strange. But if the theme is viewed from the right perspective, it is not strange at all. All instances of communicative heterogeneity are part of a broader phenomenon. One of the aims of this study is to position the previous findings within this broader field.

3.3 The choice of case studies

As was said before, the research will be implemented by way of case studies; specific linguistic features have been selected for investigation, viz.:

- I. Imperative subjects
- II. Speech reporting strategies
- III. Epistolary past tense
- IV. Assertive declarations

Below, several reasons will be given to justify the choice of linguistic parameters for the case studies. Inevitably, the selection of case studies implies a “top-down” approach (Jucker & Taavitsainen 2013: 43), which suggests that certain parameters are selected *a priori*, while others are left out. This may seem a biased approach, only good for underlining the importance of certain pre-established notions. Nevertheless, the case studies have been selected deliberately, in view of consolidating earlier observations about individual letters. Earlier research (some of which was discussed in the previous chapter) served as the basis for the selection of linguistic features. In order to explain why these specific case studies have been selected, we inevitably have to refer forward to some examples from the case studies, as will be done in the following subsections.

3.3.1 Imperative subjects

The first case study (about imperative subjects, chapter 5) flows forth from Gippius's (2004) central theme of communicative heterogeneity. If letters can consist of several parts, each with its own addressee, then it is relevant to investigate the connection with imperative subjects (especially second persons pronouns). To what extent do imperative subjects serve as a linguistic signal for the category of communicative heterogeneity, i.e. to explicitly indicate a switch of reference from one addressee to the next? The answer to this question will provide a more theoretical basis for Gippius's (2004) statements. The hypothesis is that the second-person pronoun *ty* 'you' (possibly in combination with a name in the vocative case) is the most prototypical way of indicating a switch of addressee. We have seen an example already, viz. *a ty, Nestere* 'and you, Nester' (N358, see example (6) in chapter 2), where we have an imperative subject plus a vocative to signal the switch of addressee.

3.3.2 Speech reporting strategies

The second case study (chapter 6) deals with speech reporting strategies. The question to be raised is how the various speech reporting strategies are distributed throughout the corpus, and to what extent this distribution can be analysed as a reflection of orality and literacy. In order to justify the choice of this topic, we have to refer to the notion of deixis, which is a crucial element within pragmatics. Collins (2001) provides an in-depth analysis of speech reporting strategies in trial transcripts and other legal documents from late medieval Russia. He argues that trial records were largely oral in nature. Furthermore, he connects the difference between direct and indirect reported speech to the transparency of deictic expressions. In other words, the context determines whether a phrase is interpreted as direct or indirect speech: there are no syntactic criteria. It is exactly because of this context-dependence that the topic of speech reporting can be connected to orality. The hypothesis is that direct speech is more context-dependent and, therefore, more oral in nature. Consequently, if we can detect a certain diachronic tendency in the use of direct speech, this may serve as one indicator of the development of the context-dependence of the birchbark letters. This will all be explained in greater detail in the case study itself. For this case study, no formal linguistic feature is available. The selection of relevant data follows instead from a careful reading of each letter as a whole.

3.3.3 Epistolary past tense

The third case study (about the epistolary past tense, chapter 7) arose from the study of an individual document, where the past (perfect) tense is used in an instance where we would expect the use of the present tense: *Poslasmъ k tobě šestъ bocekъ vina* 'I have sent to you six barrels of wine.' It follows from the

context that the barrels of wine were sent together with the letter. So why is the past tense used? This is a phenomenon which in itself is well-known from a variety of (mainly) ancient languages. The usual explanation is that the author adapts his formulation to the addressee's temporal perspective. The fact that this phenomenon occurs mainly in ancient, but not in modern languages, led to the hypothesis that the use of the past tense may have something to do with an oral residue in early stages of a literary culture. This hypothesis justified a corpus-wide investigation of the phenomenon, while asking the question whether the same 'epistolary' interpretation will hold for Old Russian, and to what extent the use of the past tense in these instances can be accounted for in terms of the development from orality to literacy. Our case study provides an alternative analysis for this so-called epistolary past tense, which connects it to orality.

3.3.4 Assertive declarations

The fourth case study (chapter 8) deals with the use of the past tense in performatives (or performative-like expressions) and is in a certain sense a continuation of the third case study, which contains examples of past tense usage in contexts where we would use the present tense nowadays. The analysis of these instances led to further questions relating to the use of the past tense in performative (or performative-like) expressions. This case study is mainly concerned with a specific type of performatives (assertive declarations). The question to be answered is: Should the reason for the use of the past tense in these instances be sought in the area of orality and literacy? It can be hypothesized that the use of the past tense in these instances has to do with a different role of the written word than is customary in our modern use of writing. This case study seeks to explain the distribution of present and past (perfect and aorist) tense forms in terms of primary orality and secondary literacy, i.e. the spoken word is primary and the written word only a secondary record of the spoken utterance, and that the one has no real force and validity without the other. Thus, speaking and writing function in close interdependence.

3.4 Concluding remarks

The previous research described in chapter 2 has resulted in fruitful and innovative interpretations of individual birchbark texts. Some of these findings can even be described as spectacular. Nevertheless, we want to proceed one step further. The aims of the present study are not restricted to finding new interpretations for individual texts. This study is rather intended to strengthen the argumentation that revolves around orality. If orality is used as an explanatory tool for the occurrence of hidden communicative heterogeneity and similar phenomena, we should be able to view orality throughout the corpus, not just as an explanation for unusual phenomena, but also as a more pervasive characteristic of communication on birchbark. This should be underpinned theo-

retically. A presentation of the theoretical framework for this study will be given in the next chapter.

