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CHAPTER 7

CASE STUDY III: EPISTOLARY PAST TENSE

7.1 Introduction¹

The present chapter deals with a phenomenon that is widely encountered in various (ancient) written cultures, known as ‘epistolary past tense’. However, this phenomenon has not yet been recognized in the corpus of birchbark letters from medieval Novgorod and surrounding cities, or anywhere else in older stages of Slavic. In this chapter, we shall discuss a number of examples from the birchbark corpus that could be analyzed in the same vein. The question to be answered is: can this interpretation be justified in the case of Old Russian, and to what extent is the use of the past tense in instances like these motivated by a mindset of oral communication? Judging by the predominant occurrence of the epistolary past tense in ancient written cultures, it is plausible to start from the hypothesis that its use has something to do with the development from orality to literacy.

It will first be shown that some of the past tense examples on birchbark can only be interpreted as instances of the epistolary past tense (§7.2). Secondly, a number of parallel examples from other ancient languages will be put forward (§7.3). The analysis that is usually given for these instances would seem to fit well for the examples on birchbark, too (§7.4). However, it will be argued that the standard analysis of the epistolary past tense for other languages, such as Latin, does not apply to all instances in the Novgorod birchbark letters. Instead, it will be shown that for quite a few of the instances from the birchbark corpus a different analysis is necessary (§7.5), which in some sense resembles the use of performatives (§7.6). These findings may have important implications for the analysis of comparable data from other languages (§7.7).

¹ The same data were presented by J. Schaeken and E.L.J. Fortuin at a conference of the Slavic Linguistics Society (Aix-en-Provence, 2 September 2011) and analysed in Schaeken, Fortein & Dekker [Schaeken, Fortuin & Dekker] (2014).

7.2 Birchbark data and discussion

Before discussing an instance of the epistolary past tense, it is insightful to first discuss a standard use of the past tense. It should be noted that the perfect is the default past tense on birchbark, whereas aorists and imperfects are extremely rare and stylistically highly marked (DND: 142, 173). In the following example, two perfect verb forms are encountered:

- (68) [...] a zvalo jesmь vaso v gorodo, i vy mojego slova nъ poslušali. [...] ‘[...] and I have called you to the city, but you have not listened to my word. [...]’
(N345 / 1340-1360 / DND: 556)

It is clear that the verbs in the perfect refer to events which took place prior to the writing of the letter. This is also in accordance with the definition of the past tense for modern Russian, as given by Percov (2001: 193): “глагольная ситуация предшествует некоторому времени отсчета” ‘the situation described by the verb precedes some reference time’. In (68), the reference point is the moment of speech. This is the standard, unmarked use of the past tense.

Now consider the following birchbark letter from Staraja Russa:

- (69) Poklonъ ot Grorъi Jermolě i Ozěkěju. Poslasmь-PERF.M.1SG k tobě šestъ bocekъ vina, kakъ palěcě xvati. I ty to osmotri gorazno, a prodai kakъ i tě po tomu že. {Li to prodale,} i ty to otšli. A moim rob[ět]amъ ne davai serebra; po[šl]i z dolgomъ.
‘Greetings from Gr[ig]or’ja to Jermola and Ozěkěj. I have sent to you six barrels of wine, [filled] to a finger’s length [from the top]. And you check it carefully, and sell them like those others, under the same conditions. {And if you have sold them,} send back the proceeds. And don’t give my servants (?) the money; send it along with the debt.’
(St.R.39 / 1380-1400 / NGB XII: 167)

Let us concentrate on the word *poslasmь*-PERF.1SG.² In the edition (NGB XII: 169), *poslasmь* is translated with a past tense form (Modern Russian *ja poslal* ‘I sent / have sent’).

When analyzing this birchbark text from a pragmaphilological and linguistic point of view, a number of questions arise. In this text we find a past tense, but how should this past tense be interpreted? In its prototypical use, the past tense indicates an event that took place before a particular reference point,

² This form is an unusual contraction of the forms *posla(lъ)* ‘send-I-PTC.M.SG’ and *(je)smь* ‘be-PRES.1SG’ (NGB XII: 169). Alternatively, but far less plausibly, as Nørgård-Sørensen (2015) proposes, the form can be analysed as an aorist with a person-number marker (a contraction of *posla* ‘send-AOR’ and *(je)smь* ‘be-PRES.1SG’).

often the moment of speech, as in (68) above. But if it is this the case in (69), it would mean that the six barrels of wine were sent prior to, and thus independently of, the letter. After all, that is what the translation of the perfect tense in the edition would make us believe: *ja poslal* 'I have sent'. If that is indeed the case, we can only speculate about the way the barrels of wine were sent; they may have been sent with an earlier accompanying letter or with a name tag, or perhaps even without a written message. If so, the next question concerns the temporal interval between sending off the wine and the letter. Was there just a couple of minutes in between, or perhaps a couple of days?

But this scenario does not seem very probable and realistic. It should be remembered that the contents of the barrels should be checked upon arrival: *ity to osmotri gorazno* 'and you look it over carefully'. We must assume, then, that Grigor'ja expects the letter to be delivered more or less at the same time and the same place as the goods. If so, the most efficient and reliable way to make sure that the barrels of wine will be checked upon arrival is, of course, to send the letter together with the six barrels of wine. But then, again, we stumble across the perfect tense: *poslasmъ* 'I have sent'. If the scenario sketched above is true, why would not the present tense be used, indicating that the writer is in the process of sending the six barrels of wine? That would, after all, be the normal procedure in present-day Russian (and in English as well, for that matter): *ja tebe posylaju* [...] 'I (hereby) send you [...]'. But on birchbark, forms of *-sylati* are not attested at all (more examples of the 'sending' type will be dealt with below).

So we encounter a past tense form, but it does not seem to have the expected semantics, i.e. it most probably does not denote an event that lies in the past, from the perspective of the writer. But this leaves us at a loss about its function. How can it be analyzed and explained? This issue is not so easily decided, while being confronted with the 'bad data problem' that is so pervasive in the field of historical pragmatics (see §2.2). Before proceeding to a further discussion, we shall now review a few more texts that deal with the delivery of goods. Here is an example which is similar to (69):

- (70) Colobitъe отъ Smona k popu Ivanu. Co by esi moego moskotъja moego peresmotrele dad by xorъ ne poportilъ. A ja tobi, svoemu ospodinu, colomъ biju v korobki. A poslalbъ esmъ klucъ Stopanomъ. A pomitka gornostalbъ.

'Request from Semen to the priest Ivan. May you check up on my goods so that moths will not ruin [them]; I request to you, my lord, in regard of my trunk. And I have sent the key with Stepan. And the mark (on the trunk) is an ermine.'

(N413 / 1400-1410 / DND: 662)

So, Semen asks the priest Ivan to check his goods which are stored in the church. In order to do so, Ivan needs the key to the storage room, which Semen recognizes: ‘And I have sent the key with Stepan’. If we take the past tense form at face value, we have to assume two separate, consecutive acts of communication: (a) Stepan bringing the key; and (b) another person bringing the letter. However, both acts are fully interdependent; thus, taking into consideration matters of efficiency and assurance of the request to be fulfilled adequately, it makes more sense to assume that we are dealing with a single action: Stepan is the letter-bearer, bringing with him the key which is necessary to comply with the instructions.

- (71) Ognū Jelizaru mnogo čelomъ biju. Poslalъ jemъ, ognē, k tobě s Larionъ(сѣм)[ъ 100] kleščevъ. Pošli, ospodine, [...]
 ‘To lord Jelizar I bow deeply. I have sent, lord, to you with Larionec 100 breams. Send, lord, [...]
 (N964 / end of 14th century / NGB XII: 75)

The editors already comment on the fact that the name of the sender is not mentioned: “В начале грамоты стоит весьма редкая формула: от первого лица «челом бью», но без указания автора; предполагается, что адресат сам поймет, от кого письмо” “The beginning of the letter has quite a rare formula: in the first person *I bow deeply*, but without indication of the author; it is supposed that the addressee himself will know from whom the letter came’ (NGB XII: 75). If we suppose that the letter was sent without the goods, which either were on their way to the addressee or had already arrived, the carrier of the goods himself (Larionec) must then have communicated to the addressee the origin of the delivery. He could have done this orally, or by bringing an earlier letter from the addressee with him. N964 would then be another (second) letter in which further instructions are given (the preserved fragment ends with *Pošli, ospodine [...]* ‘send, lord, [...]'). Again, these arrangements seem implausibly awkward and laborious. And again, it is much simpler and more reasonable to assume a scenario in which the goods were sent together with the letter, and that the carrier, who is explicitly mentioned (Larionec), was the one who made the name of the sender clear to the addressee (if that was necessary at all).

- (72) Poklonъ ospři mtri. Poslalъ jesmъ s posadnicimъ Manuilotъ 20 bělъ k tobě. [...]
 ‘Greetings to madam, mother. I have sent you 20 squirrel pelts with the governor’s [man] Manuil. [...]
 (N358 / 1340-1360 / DND: 550)
- (73) Ot Jureja k Nosu. Poslale jesemъ so Mixalъkoju sto koroběi [...]
 ‘From Jurij to Nos. I have sent with Mixalka a hundred baskets [...]
 (N937 / 1380-1400 / DND: 634)

In examples (72) and (73) we can argue the same way as was done above. Manuil in N358 and Mixalka in N937 are either the carriers of the goods only (at some point in time before the letter was sent), or of the goods as well as the letter (simultaneously).

If the goods had been sent off beforehand and the letter followed later with a second messenger, the relevance of the ‘sending’ statement in the letter would at best be questionable. Such a procedure would reveal a blatant lack of efficiency which can hardly be systematically assumed as being typical of businessmen in medieval Novgorod, or anywhere, for that matter. What is more, giving superfluous information is by no means a general characteristic of communication on birchbark; on the contrary, it is often characterized by a rather pervasive scarcity of information. Having reviewed the above examples, we need to stick to the scenario of a simultaneous sending of the goods and the letter with one messenger, and thus suppose a non-standard use of the past tense.

But what explanation can be given for this particular usage of the past tense? I propose that the above examples from the birchbark corpus are illustrations of a phenomenon that has been observed in a variety of languages by various researchers, who described it as ‘epistolary (past) tense’ or ‘epistolary perfect’. In this case, the past tense refers to events that take place at the moment of writing. The use of the epistolary past tense is often explained as a strategy in which the sender concentrates on *the perspective of the reader*. When the letter is received, and the reader’s perspective is taken, the sender’s action obviously lies in the past. The sender anticipates this perspective and projects it (Lyons 1977: 579) into the letter by means of a past tense form. Before determining the applicability of this analysis to the data on birchbark, we shall first review some examples from other languages, restricting ourselves to Latin, Greek and some of the ancient Semitic languages.

7.3 Epistolary past tense in other languages

First of all, the existence of the epistolary past tense in Latin has been accepted for a long time already. “In Latin, the point of view of the speaker may be ignored [...]. Rather, the point of view of the hearer (or rather, the reader) is relevant, since actions contemporaneous with the letter-writing will be a part of the past by the time the reader sees the letter” (Lakoff 1970: 847). We shall illustrate this point making recourse to an example from a corpus of everyday texts not unlike the Novgorod birchbark letters, viz. the wooden Vindolanda tablets, dating from the first and second centuries AD and found in the North of England:

- (74) Metto Aduecto plurimam suo salutem missi-PERF.IND.1SG tibi materias per Saconem [...]
 ‘Metto (?) to his Advectus (?) very many greetings. I have sent you wooden materials through the agency of Saco. [...]’
 (Tab. Vindol. II 309 / ca. 100 AD / Bowman & Thomas 1994: 286)

In Greek, the use of the epistolary past tense, usually the aorist, is also well attested. One example from the New Testament will suffice by way of illustration:

- (75) [...] ὃν ἔπεμψα-AOR.IND.1SG πρὸς ὑμᾶς εἰς αὐτὸ τοῦτο, ἵνα γνῶτε τὰ περὶ ἡμῶν καὶ παρακαλέση τὰς καρδίας ὑμῶν.
 ‘[...] whom I have sent [i.e. am sending] unto you for the same purpose, that ye might know our affairs, and that he might comfort your hearts’ (KJV).
 (Epistle to the Ephesians 6:22)

As can be seen in (75), the King James Version (1611) translates *ἔπεμψα* [AOR.IND.1SG] using a past tense, ‘I have sent’. More modern Bible translations recognize the epistolary character of the aorist, and accordingly translate it using a present tense, e.g. the New International Version UK (1978), ‘I am sending him to you’. A similar state of affairs can be seen in Russian translations, where the older Synodal Version (1876) has “которого я и послал к вам” ‘whom I also have sent to you’, whereas the Contemporary Version (2011) reads “Я посылаю его к вам” ‘I send him to you’. Moulton and Turner (1963: 72-73) comment on the Greek epistolary aorist as follows: “The aorist in *Epistolary* style (as in Latin) is logical, since the action so described will be past at the time the letter is read”.

Further parallels for the epistolary use of the past tense can be found in several ancient Semitic languages, such as Classical Syriac:

- (76) mṭl hn’ ktbt-PERF.1SG b’yt mnk dt’t
 ‘For this reason I have written [i.e. am writing], asking you to come.’
 (The Doctrine of Addai, the Apostle / 6th cent. AD / Rogland 2001: 247)

Rogland (2001: 247-248) comments on this phrase as follows: “What we are dealing with here is an epistolary convention in which the writer adopts the temporal standpoint of the recipient of the letter and therefore writes in the past tense”.

Going considerably further back in time, an Ancient Hebrew ostrakon will be taken as an example. Be it noted that it is of a genre which can be considered similar to the majority of birchbark letters, dealing with everyday affairs.

- (77) hnh šlhty lh^cyd bkm
 ‘I [hereby] have sent [i.e. am sending] [you this message] to warn you.’
 (Tel Arad ostrakon, no. 24 / late 7th/early 6th cent. BC / Pardee 1983: 36)

Our final example from the Semitic languages stems from Akkadian, where the phenomenon is particularly well attested: “Properly ‘epistolary’ perfects occur in the Akkadian of the Amarna letters with the verbs *šapāru* and *šūbulu* ‘to send’ many times” (Pardee and Whiting 1987: 14).

- (78) [...] ù anuma uttašar ^{amēlu} mār šiipriia ana mahriḫa ù alluú uttašarka
 ina kati ^{amēlu} mār šiipia ana katú 1 me bilat erē [...]
 ‘[...] so I have sent [i.e. am sending] a messenger on to you, and I have
 even sent [i.e. am sending] with the messenger to you 100 talents of
 copper.’
 (Amarna letter / 14th cent. BC / Pardee and Whiting 1987: 16)

So far, we have pointed to attestations of the epistolary past tense from various ancient sources. However, the same phenomenon occurs in our day (in spite of the fact that most of the abovementioned examples cannot normally be rendered with a past tense in English). Nutting (1916: 71) already notes the modern use of epistolary past tense: “A still closer approach to the Latin epistolary use of the past tense may be found in the following usage. The writer, on his arrival home, sometimes finds awaiting him a note to this effect: “I *have gone* to the city. Will be back at four”. At the time the note was written, going to the city was merely prospective”.

7.4 The data on birchbark revisited

The observations made by the various authors quoted above all point in the same direction: they all mention the timeframe as being adapted to the reader’s temporal perspective. But is this analysis adequate for the examples on birchbark, too? To answer this question, a more thorough review of the data on birchbark is necessary.

In Table 14 below, I present all instances on birchbark, as far as I have been able to detect, that are open to an analysis along the lines sketched above. The instances are presented in chronological order. The fifth column indicates the number of the example in the present chapter, if applicable. Due to the ‘bad data problem’, there are some cases where doubts exist about the specific character of the past tense; these instances are indicated by a question mark.

No.	Date	Verb	Translation	Example
N842	1120-1140	<i>poslati</i> ³	send	(fn. 14)
N119	1120-1140	<i>vъdati</i> ⁴	give	
N879	1120-1140	<i>reči</i>	say	(79)
N952	1140-1160	<i>poslati</i> ⁵	send	
N384	1160-1180	<i>dati</i> ⁶	give	
N723 (?)	1160-1180	<i>iti</i> ⁷	go	
Torž.10	1200-1220	<i>poiti</i>	go, depart	(82)
N358	1340-1360	<i>poslati</i>	send	(72)
N133	1360-1380	<i>poslati</i>	send	
N131	1360-1380	<i>poslati</i> ⁸	send	
N259/265	1360-1380	<i>poslati</i> ⁹	send	
N281 (?)	1360-1380	<i>poslati</i>	send	
N578 (?)	1360-1380	<i>dati</i>	give	
St.R.39	1380-1400	<i>poslati</i>	send	(69)
N937	1380-1400	<i>poslati</i>	send	(73)
N362	1380-1400	<i>poslati</i>	send	
N27	1380-1400	<i>poslati</i> ¹⁰	send	

³ Here we find a rare example of the use of the aorist: *posъlaxově* 'we both have sent'. See further below, fn. 12.

⁴ See DND: 273 for an explanation of the pragmatical aspects of this text: "Весьма вероятно, что грамоту доставил не кто иной, как упоминаемый в ней Гюргевич; в этом случае ее общий смысл таков: 'Податель сего вручит тебе такую-то сумму от меня. Возьми и раздай людям'." 'It is most probable that the letter was delivered by none else than the Gjurgevič who is mentioned in it; in that case, its general sense is: 'The bearer of this will give you this and that sum from me. Take it and distribute it to the people'.'

⁵ Here I have the second part of the text in mind: *I poklanjanie ot Vjačъsbъkě kъ Lazorъvi. Poslalbъ estъ konь jukovoucъsko [...]* 'And greetings from Vjačeška to Lazor'. I have sent the packhorse [...].'

⁶ Cf. the translation in DND: 358: "Вот что я даю (букв.: дал) Савве" 'Look what I give (lit. have given) to Savva'.

⁷ Cf. the comment in DND: 355: "Письмо могло быть написано с дороги; но возможно также, что «я пошел» означает здесь просто «я сейчас отправляюсь»". 'The letter may have been written while on the way; but 'I have gone' possibly just means 'I am leaving right now'.

⁸ Note the occurrence of the adverb *nine* 'now' in *a nine eseme k tobě riboko poslale* 'And now I have sent you the fish'. The phrase is at the end of the letter, preceded by *a jas ti, ospodine, budu, a ja borzo budu* 'And I, lord, will be [there], I will be [there] soon'. Thus, it seems plausible to assume that the sender of the letter will come soon himself, but 'now' he is (already) sending off the fish.

⁹ See also Gippius (2004: 220).

N536 (?)	1380-1400	<i>poslati</i> ¹¹	send	
N964	end of 14 th c.	<i>poslati</i>	send	(71)
N413	1400-1410	<i>poslati</i>	send	(70)
N125 (?)	1400-1410	<i>dati</i>	give	
N963	1416-1421	<i>poslati</i> (2x)	send	
N243	1420-1430	<i>priiti</i>	come	(80)

Table 14: Cases of ‘epistolary tense’ on birchbark

Let us now further clarify the use the epistolary past tense on birchbark by discussing two examples from Table 14, which do not deal with the delivery of goods (as was the case in the examples treated above), but with other actions. They clearly point to a shift to the reader’s temporal perspective.

- (79) Ot Žirjaty poklanjanie ko Radjaty. Vodai semu eže rbklo – vьrѣščju tu.
 ‘From Žirjata to Radjata. Give this [man] what he has said – that grain.’
 (N879 / 1120-1140 / DND: 368)

This is a complete letter, in which *semu* ‘this-M.DAT.SG, i.e. to this [man]’ refers to the messenger or letter-bearer (Gippius 2004: 205, cf. Mendoza 2002: 300). Gippius (2004: 205) offers the following interpretation for the use of the past tense form *rbklo*: “Форма перфекта оказывается [...] ориентированной на момент прочтения грамоты адресатом” ‘The perfect form turns out to be oriented towards the moment at which the addressee reads the letter’. For the sender, the utterance ‘what he has said’ lies in the future: Žirjata sends ‘this man’ away with the instruction to take a certain amount of grain from Radjata. In his letter, he anticipates what ‘this man’ is going to say to Radjata, and adapts the time frame to the moment when Radjata will be reading the letter. So, ‘this man’ will go to Radjata and tell him to give the grain, and then show the letter as an authorization of what he just said. This is fully in line with the general gist of Gippius (2004), providing ample scope for the view that the letter served as the authorization of a spoken message which the letter-bearer pronounced in the name of the sender.

¹⁰ See also Gippius (2004: 214): “Подразумеваемым объектом является в таких случаях гонец, несущий весть, или же сама эта весть” ‘The implicit object in such cases is the messenger, who brings the message, or the message itself.’

¹¹ The interpretation of the first occurrence of *poslati* depends on the reconstruction of the underlying first-person subject (see DND: 629).

- (80) Poklonъ ot Smenka ot Korĕlina. Prišle, gñe, t kobě na selo na Pytarevo. Címъ jeho žaluješъ, i ty, osp̄dne, prikaži vsjakoje slovo. A jazъ tobě, svojemu gñu, colomъ bĕju.
 ‘Greetings from Semenko the Karelian. [He] has come to you, lord, to Pytar’s village. If you will grant him anything, then you, lord, give all the instructions. And I bow deeply to you, my lord.’
 (N243 / 1420-1430 / DND: 674)

This letter makes reference to a peasant who moves to the estate of another landlord. It is likely to be a ‘letter of recommendation’, which the peasant took with him to his new lord. Thus, ‘he has come to you’, would be an instance of the reader’s temporal perspective being taken, as the act of coming still had to take place at the time of writing.

Finally, here is a vivid example from the GVNP parchment documents, which illustrates that the phenomenon is not restricted to the birchbark corpus:

- (81) [...] A kto privezľ gramotu siju, tomu very imite.
 ‘[...] and who has brought this letter, have trust towards him.’
 (GVNP 36 / 1303-1307 / Valk 1949: 65)

This is an indisputable instance of the reader’s perspective being taken. The delivery of the letter is still future to the writer, but will be past to the reader.

Thus, the presence of the epistolary past tense in Old Russian and its interpretation along the lines of the reader’s perspective would seem a nice confirmation of a phenomenon encountered elsewhere. The examples (79-81), in combination with the typological support from other languages, would seem to suggest that the other abovementioned examples (of the ‘sending’ type) from the birchbark corpus should also be analyzed in these terms. But however elegant and attractive such an analysis might be, some substantial difficulties arise in this respect. I shall first introduce some theoretical terminology, and after that, I shall discuss these difficulties, which will eventually have to lead to a modification of the analysis in a number of cases.

7.5 Deixis

The phenomenon of the epistolary past tense can be embedded within the broader field of deixis. As Levinson (1983: 55) explains, “deixis concerns the encoding of many different aspects of the circumstances surrounding the utterance, in the utterance itself. Natural language utterances are thus ‘anchored’ directly to aspects of the context”. Thus, the first- and second-person pronouns can only be interpreted successfully if the identity of the speaker and addressee is known. Similarly, the referent of demonstrative pronouns such as *this* and *that* is retrieved contextually, e.g. by means of gestures; in addition, spatial determiners like *here* or *there* require the interlocutors’ loca-

tion to be known. Finally, temporal expressions such as *now* or *yesterday* can only be interpreted in relation to the time of utterance. These are the three main categories of deixis, i.e. connected to person, place and time.

For our present topic, it is important to realize that temporal deixis can also be connected with the category of tense. After all, any event that is described is always viewed as lying in either the past, present or future, relative to the speech event. In normal, face-to-face conversation, the temporal perspectives of the speaker and hearer obviously coincide. However, communicative acts on birchbark are, by virtue of their epistolary nature, ‘dragged apart’ into “encoding time” and “decoding time” (Fillmore 1971/1997: 61). Encoding time can be understood as the point at which the message is couched in writing, i.e. when the author writes or dictates the letter, whereas decoding time is the point at which the message is decoded from the written medium, i.e. when it is read by the addressee or read out aloud by the messenger. Taking into account the different temporal perspectives of the author and addressee, it follows that a choice has to be made: the temporal perspective of one of the participants has to be taken. The common accounts of the epistolary past tense treat it as a shift from encoding to decoding time. This is the same principle as the one encountered above, though now phrased in more theoretical terms.

Our main objections to the abovementioned common explanation in terms of the reader’s perspective are connected with all three components of deixis, viz. spatial, temporal and personal. They will be dealt with in the following two subsections.

7.5.1 The spatial and temporal component

Two considerations can be taken into account with regard to the spatial component: a demonstrative pronoun and verbal prefixes. As it happens, in many letters, the letter itself or the messenger is referred to by the proximal demonstrative pronoun *sei* ‘this’ (Mendoza 2002: 300), as was the case in (79) and (81). Now, to whose spatial perspective does this pronoun refer? Bearing in mind the division into encoding and decoding time, these notions can be extended by also distinguishing between ‘encoding and decoding place’ (Fillmore 1971/1997: 82). After all, not only the temporal, but also the spatial deictics of the interlocutors are different: they find themselves at different places. The question is then: does the author take his own spatial perspective, or that of the reader? In (79), decoding time is given preference by means of the use of a past tense verb, but does this also apply to decoding place?

Interestingly, the demonstrative pronoun cannot give any decisive information about this. The pronoun is proximal, i.e. denotes an object which is ‘near’, but the question is: near to whom? Are ‘this letter’ or ‘this man’ near to the author or to the addressee? The answer is: to both, but at different points in time. At encoding time, the letter and letter-bearer are near to the author,

and at decoding time, they are near to the addressee. Thus, in this specific usage, the demonstrative pronoun is neutral as to the spatial origo.

But this is not the only parameter that can be analyzed in terms of spatial deixis. Crucially, certain verbal prefixes can confer a spatial (directional) component on verbs, too (more specifically, on motion verbs). Within the confines of the present topic, the relevant compositions are the prefixes *po-* and *pri-* and the verbs *slati* 'send' and *iti* 'go'.

Grenoble (1998: 47) describes the difference between the prefixes *po-* and *pri-* in present-day Russian as follows: "*po-* denoting the beginning of motion, or 'setting-off,' and *pri-* specifically denoting the end of motion, or arrival". This description provides a small and logical step to a temporal definition. After all, a movement must have a beginning and an end. In other words, the progress of movement towards the goal goes hand in hand with the lapse of time. We can say, then, that these prefixes have a spatio-temporal meaning.

A similar state of affairs existed in Old Russian. Sreznevskij translates *priiti* with words like "подойти, приблизиться, дойти, прибыть, прийти, явиться" 'approach, arrive, appear' (2: 1406); SRJa XI-XVII (19: 166) is even more explicit: "достигнуть, дойти до кого-л. или чего-л.; достигнуть места назначения" 'reach something or someone; reach one's destination'. All these words have the goal in mind. *Poiti*, on the other hand, is translated as "пойти, идти, выйти, уйти" 'go, leave, go away' (Sreznevskij 2: 1097-1098). These words express the point from which the movement starts, as becomes even clearer from SRJa XI-XVII (16: 137): "Начать перемещаться в определенном направлении пешком или по воде" 'begin to move in a certain direction on foot or by water'.

Similarly, the meaning of *poslati* is described as "приказать идти, послать (о лицѣ)" 'order to go, send (about a person)' (Sreznevskij 2: 1276), and "отправить кого-л. или что-л. с какой-л. целью; послать" 'send someone or something away for some purpose' (SRJa XI-XVII 17: 174). This, again, implies the beginning of the movement. *Prislati*, on the other hand, envisages the arrival of the sent person or items: "прислать, доставить" 'send, deliver' (Sreznevskij 2: 1469).

In more theoretical terms, these observations can be connected to deictic directionality by applying the notions 'centrifugal' and 'centripetal' (see Létoublon 1992: 270). Thus, *poiti* and *poslati* are centrifugal, i.e. they denote a movement away from the deictic centre. *Priti* and *prislati*, on the other hand, are centripetal, denoting a movement towards the deictic centre. This directionality is attained by adding the prefixes to the otherwise deictically neutral verbal stems.

Now, what is the state of affairs to be detected in the birchbark corpus, regarding the prefixation of *slati* and *iti*? To begin with the latter, we can refer back to (80), discussed above. We pointed out that decoding time is taken, i.e. a prototypical example of the epistolary past tense. We can now see, by virtue

of the prefix *pri-* in *prišle* ‘has arrived’, that decoding space is also taken. This is not surprising: if the reader’s temporal perspective is taken, then surely also his spatial perspective. Otherwise, the deictic shift would only be partial. Nevertheless, we encounter examples like the following:

- (82) + Ot Onufriě kъ materi. Rošylъ Petrъ kъ tebe, roemъ konъ i mjatъlъ Lazar(e)въ. A vorotite konъ i mjatъlъ, a samogo posli sěmo. Ali ne poslešъ, [a t]aku že mi vēstъ prisli. I poklanjaju ti sja i cěluju tja.
 ‘From Onufrija to mother. Petr has gone to you, having taken Lazar’s horse and coat. Return the horse and coat, and send [Petr] himself here. If you do not send [him], then send me a message. I bow to you and greet you.’
 (Torž.10 / 1200-1220 / DND: 452)

If we suppose that this is an instance of the epistolary past tense, and that decoding time is taken, then we would expect the verbal prefix to take on decoding place, too, e.g. **prišlъ Petrъ* ‘Petr has arrived’. But the centrifugal prefix *po-* is used instead: ‘Petr has departed’, i.e. he has set off on the way (i.e. away from the author). How can this be explained? Gippius (2004: 200) comments on this letter as follows:

“Обратим внимание, что перфект *пошълъ* в данном случае обозначает действие, только имеющее совершиться, то есть мы имеем здесь дело с таким же переносным употреблением прошедшего времени, как и в современных записках вроде “ушел, буду через полчаса” или классического “ушла на базу”.”

‘Note that the perfect form *pošlъ* ‘has gone’ in this case denotes an act which just needs to be completed, i.e. we have to do here with exactly the same figurative use of the past tense as in present-day notes like ‘I have gone, will be back in half an hour’ or the classical ‘I have gone to the warehouse.’

So, when using *pošlъ*, Onufrija apparently does not envisage Petr standing in front of his mother, but rather stresses Petr’s departure from him. This means that he cannot have had the addressee’s temporal perspective in mind either, because in that case he would also have shifted the spatial (directional) perspective by using the prefix *pri-*. Thus, the encoding space expressed by *po-* points to an interpretation of the use of the past tense form which does not allow a deictic shift to the decoding place and time of the reader.

If we now return to the ‘sending’ statements, a similar conclusion has to be reached. Crucially, the form *prislalъ esmъ* ‘I have sent (centripetal)’ does not occur on birchbark at all (see below, Table 15). This means that decoding place and time are never taken when a sending statement is made in the first person; the person or goods that are sent are seen from “a viewpoint which is disjunct from the deictic center” (Grenoble 1998: 49). So when *poslalъ esmъ* is

used, the deictic centre cannot belong to the addressee, but it must belong to the author, who views the goods as going away from him.

These considerations have several implications. To return to the question posed at the beginning of the article: What does the author have in mind when using the past tense, and, as we can add now, a centrifugal directional prefix? The common explanation has to be rejected for reasons mentioned above; no deictic shift is made, i.e. the deictics are not projected onto the reader. This leaves us with the following proposal: the author retains his own temporal as well as spatial perspective, i.e. encoding time and place. The use of the past tense can be explained as follows: the author has in mind (a) his decision to send the goods away; (b) the preparations that have been made for the dispatching of the goods; and (c) as far as he is concerned, the act is finished, and the letter is written to ratify the act of sending (see further below). Compare in this respect Heimpel & Guidi's (1969: 151, cited by Pardee & Whiting 1987: 27) observation about Akkadian epistolary usage of the past tense, functioning as the "Konstatierung einer mit Absendung des Briefes vollendeten Handlung" 'constatation of an act which is completed by the letter being sent off'.

So if we return to example (69), and reanalyze it in terms of encoding time, the following will have to be acknowledged: Grigorij has decided to send six barrels of wine. He has given instructions to his servants, to make the shipment ready. Thus, the barrels were ready to be shipped, and the only thing he needed to do was to write an accompanying letter, in which he "looks back" on his decision and the preparatory process, which is finished by the letter being written. The barrels are about to be sent off.

7.5.2 The personal component

It should be borne in mind that there exists a crucial difference in personal deictics between (79), (80) and (81), and the other examples we have seen so far. In (79-81), the actor is a third person, whereas in the other letters, the actor is a first person, viz. the author himself.

So if a third person (specifically, the letter-bearer) is involved, the author can very well make a temporal shift to accommodate the reader's perspective, i.e. decoding time is given precedence. In the case of 'sending' statements in the first person the picture looks somewhat different: 'sending' is, after all, an action accomplished by the author. It does not say 'you have received', which would be the reader's part of the action.

The use of prefixes has a very strong tie with the category of person, and, by extension, communicative roles. The general tendency with respect to the verb 'sending' in birchbark letters is that *pri-* has a preference for 2nd and 3rd person, and *po-* for 1st person. This reflects the orientation of their perspective

towards, respectively, reader, side participant and author. A systematic presentation of the data on birchbark can be seen in Table 15.

	<i>poslati</i>	<i>prislati</i>
1SG.PRES	6	1
1SG + 1PL.PERF	19	0
2SG.PRES	2	6
2SG.PERF	2	3
2SG.IMP	29	51
3SG.PRES	2	4
3SG + 3PL.PERF	4	1

Table 15: Occurrences of *poslati* and *prislati* on birchbark

Note that a centripetal verb like *prislati* can very well be used when the author constitutes the deictic centre. Thus, imperatives like *prisli mi* ‘send me’ are quite common. So if a centripetal prefix like *pri-* is used, it is typically the author who is at the deictic centre (though there are some exceptions, such as (8o) discussed above).

7.6 Performatives

In the preceding sections, we have argued that the use of the epistolary past tense in instances like (69) does not corroborate the hypothesis that the writer uses the past tense to take the perspective of the receiver (decoding time). We have identified two factors pointing to the prevalence of encoding time (i.e. the time in which the writing takes place) in certain instances of epistolary past tense usage, viz. directional verbal prefixes and person deixis. How, then, should the use of the past tense be explained? We have mentioned three reasons, concerning (a) decision; (b) preparations; (c) ratification. In this section we shall deal with the ratification (c): I shall argue that the use of the past tense may also have to do with the ceremonial character of the writing, i.e. writing as a way to ratify an act which is considered to be irreversible. As such, I shall show, the use of the epistolary past tense has a performative-like character in cases like (69).

In order to show this, let us go back to example (69). One question as to this letter remains: why did Grigorij write a letter at all? Why was oral communication not considered sufficient? This question becomes all the more pressing because the transaction appears to be a routine one, cf. NGB XII: 170: “Слова продаи какъ и тѣ по тому же ясно показывают, что автор и адресаты совершают данную торговую операцию не первый раз” ‘The words *sell the lot like those others, under the same conditions* clearly show that the author and addressees make this commercial transaction not for the first time’. Apparently, Grigorij did not entirely trust the servants—after all, they were not supposed to take the money for the transaction. But if they were not to be

trusted, who would guarantee that they would hand over the letter at all? They would have had to do so, if handing over a letter was an expected procedure. Otherwise, Jermola and Ozekej would have grown suspicious. So the letter seems to have functioned ceremonially, as well as practically. As such, the use of the past tense (*poslasmь-* [PERF.M.1SG] *k tobě* 'I have sent to you') is to some extent reminiscent of a performative act.

The main principle of a performative utterance is that it establishes the act by uttering it, e.g. promising, baptizing, betting, etc. Interestingly, various ancient languages express such performatives by a verbal form in the past tense (e.g. Rogland 2001: 244). By and large, the data on birchbark also conform to this pattern, i.e. the perfect tense is used: "Специализированный частный случай исходного значения перфекта составляет перформативное (или близкое к таковому) значение, проявляющееся прежде всего в начальных формулах официальных актов" 'A specific, particular instance of the basic meaning of the perfect is the (near-)performative meaning, which mainly appears in initial formulas of official documents' (DND: 175), such as the incipit formula of a testament:

- (83) Se azo, rabo B̄zi Seliv̄stro, napsaxъ roukopisanije [...]
 'Hereby I, God's servant Selivestr, have written a testament. [...]'
 (N138 / 1300-1320 / DND: 533)

An example of a non-formulaic past tense performative is the following:

- (84) Ivanjaja molovila Fimъ: Ljubo kounъ vosoli, pak li dorgo prodaju.
 'Ivan's wife has said to Fima: You either send the money, or I will demand that a large fine is imposed on you.'
 (St.R.11 / 1160-1180 / DND: 446)

It is obvious that Ivan's wife has not said this to Fima before, in which case this letter would be a mere reminder. The only way in which the letter gets communicative relevance is to assume a performative interpretation of the perfect tense, as proposed in DND (175, 447): 'Hereby (by means of this letter), Ivan's wife is telling Fima as follows: [...].' A second consideration is that Ivan's wife may have instructed a scribe to write this message down. In that case, from the scribe's perspective, Ivan's wife has already said this, though not directly to Fima, but dictating it to the scribe. As far as Ivan's wife is concerned, however, the action is completed.

Now, how can the abovementioned insights into the use of the epistolary past tense be connected with performatives? Of course, it is first and foremost the use of the past tense that connects cases like 'I have sent to you six barrels of wine' with 'I have written a testament'. But we can also analyze them in the same way, viz. by considering the author's perspective at encoding time. Again, the author looks back on (a) his decision to accomplish the act; (b) the

preparations that have been made. In addition, (c) the act is ratified in a ceremonial way by committing a record of it to writing. The past tense is used because of its retrospective force: the act has just been accomplished, it is irreversible now. The letter functions as a final wrap-up of the act, which cannot be undone.

Note that the letter itself does not effectuate the act, it only ratifies it. The term ‘performative’ should therefore be used with caution. Pardee & Whiting consider epistolary past tense verbal usages as ‘constatives’, rather than ‘performatives’ (1987: 28); “they report an act rather than effecting one” (ibid.: 30). Many written instances labelled ‘performatives’ also have a reporting, and at the same time ratifying character. For instance, performatives encountered in the Novgorod and Pskov parchment documents (GVNP) describe land or privileges granted to persons or institutions. They can be analyzed in the same way as the abovementioned examples, viz. the author refers to his decision to grant something to someone, as well as to the fact that it has irreversibly been accomplished by that decision, and thus, for the author’s part, the act has been completed; the written fixation is only a ratification, not the act itself. Thus, the use of past tense forms is not surprising at all and the ceremonial ratification of official acts of granting, bequeathing, etc. can be compared to the equally conventionalized ratification of the sending of goods.¹²

7.7 Ancient Greek revisited

The above claims about the epistolary past tense may come as a surprise to the mind of those who are used to this phenomenon in the classical languages. Nevertheless, we can point to some provisional external evidence—viz. from Greek. Two examples, both from the New Testament, will be put forward, which highlight two of the aspects of the above discussion, viz. temporal and spatial (directional) deixis. The first example will show that ‘to send’ can be past for the author by the time he writes the letter, and the second example will show that Greek also has a spatial component, though not

¹² It should be mentioned, for completeness’s sake, that the present tense also occurs in performative-like contexts:

- (1) Se azъ, rabъ Bъŕii Mosii, pišju rukopisanije pri svojemъ živo [...] ‘Hereby I, God’s servant Mosei, write a testament at (the end of) my life. [...]’ (N519/520 / 1400-1410 / DND: 653)

The word *se* often occurs together with formulaic performatives as in (83), but it can also be used with an epistolary past tense, thus testifying to the close relationship between the two types of verbal usage:

- (2) + Ot Dъjaka i ot Ilъkъ. Se posъlaxovъ-[AOR.DU] [...] ‘From the deacon and from Il’ka. Hereby the two of us have sent [...]’ (N842 / 1120-1140 / DND: 311)

(Note that Zaliznjak (DND: 398) claims the existence of two different versions of *se*: a ‘bookish’ one that goes with performatives, and a ‘neutral’ one meaning “*vor*” ‘look’.)

on the verb ‘to send’ (i.e. the Greek spatial marking on verbs by means of prefixes seems to be less pervasive than in Old Russian), which leads to a similar conclusion as the one we have drawn regarding Old Russian.

The first example, taken from the Acts of the Apostles, requires some clarification of its background. At a certain point, when Paul is in prison, the Jews plan to catch him in an ambush and kill him. The chief captain Claudius Lysias hears about this plot, and he orders his men to send Paul at night from Jerusalem to the governor in Caesarea. He writes an accompanying letter:

(85) Κλαύδιος Λυσίας τῷ κρατίστῳ ἡγεμόνι Φήλικι χαίρειν. Τὸν ἄνδρα τοῦτον συλληφθέντα ὑπὸ τῶν Ἰουδαίων [...]. μηνυθείσης δέ μοι επιβουλῆς εἰς τὸν ἄνδρα μέλλειν ἔσεσθαι ὑπὸ τῶν Ἰουδαίων, ἐξαυτῆς ἔπεμψα-AOR.IND.1SG πρὸς σε, [...].

‘Claudius Lysias unto the most excellent governor Felix [sendeth] greeting. This man was taken of the Jews [...]. And when it was told me how that the Jews laid wait for the man, I sent straightway to thee, [...]’ (KJV).

(Acts of the Apostles 23:26-27, 30)

The first parallel with the data on birchbark is that the phrase ‘this man’ indicates someone who is sent along with the letter, i.e. to whom the letter ‘belongs’. Crucially, there is not only a letter, but also the advantage of a surrounding narrative, which makes some of the circumstances explicit in which the letter played its part. Thus, it is clearly indicated in the surrounding narrative that Paul (‘this man’) is sent to Felix with this *accompanying* letter. Furthermore, and most importantly, it becomes clear from the preceding narrative that Claudius Lysias (a) took the decision and (b) gave his men orders to send Paul to Felix (vv. 23-24) before he (c) wrote the letter (v. 25) to ratify these acts. In that sense, the act of sending was completed for him, and the letter served as a ceremonial addendum. This would lend support to our claim regarding the primacy of encoding time: Claudius Lysias looks back on his decision and the preparations he has ordered to be made. Subsequently, he writes the letter to complete and ratify the act of sending. Interestingly, both the Living Bible and Today’s English Version translate verse 30 as “I decided to send him” (cf. Werner 1985: 37), which clearly has this retrospective element that our analysis proposes.¹³

A second example from the New Testament concerns the spatial (directional) component of the verbal prefix ἐξ-, similar to the Old Russian examples encountered above (cf. especially (82), *pošlō*):

¹³ Interestingly, the present tense can be used in a spoken utterance: *καθὼς ἀπέσταλκέ με ὁ πατήρ, καὶ γὰρ πέμπω ὑμᾶς* ‘as [my] Father hath sent me, even so send I you’ (John 20:21, KJV). More research would be needed to explore this topic.

- (86) ὅτι τὴν μὲν παράκλησιν ἐδέξατο, σπουδαιότερος δὲ ὑπάρχων αὐθαίρετος ἐξῆλθεν-AOR.IND.3SG πρὸς ὑμᾶς. συνεπέμψαμεν-AOR.IND.1PL δὲ μετ’ αὐτοῦ τὸν ἀδελφὸν [...].
 ‘For indeed he accepted the exhortation, but being more forward of his own accord he went unto you. And we have sent with him the brother [...].’ (KJV).
 (Second Epistle to the Corinthians 8:17-18)

The most attractive interpretation is to treat these verbs as instances of the epistolary past tense. Some modern translations indeed do so: “[...] he is going to you of his own accord. With him we are sending the brother [...]” (New Revised Standard Version).

But what is most interesting in this case is that ἐξῆλθεν, like *pošblv*, contains a deictic directional element. As Létoublon (1992: 270-271) points out, the unprefixed aorist stem ἦλθον is centripetal (i.e. ‘I came’ (here)). When adding the prefix ἐξ-, however, the meaning of the verb is ‘I went away, I left’. Thus, by virtue of its being prefixed, ἐξῆλθεν can be considered a centrifugal verb: ‘he has departed’. This would have the same implications as those I described above for Old Russian, viz. that there cannot be a deictic shift towards the reader’s perspective. The use of the aorist here must, then, stem from what I described above as the author’s perspective at encoding time, i.e. (a) the decision has been taken, (b) preparations have been made, and (c) the action is considered near-complete, and ratified by the letter. Recall Gippius (2004: 200): “действие, только имеющее совершиться” ‘an act which just needs to be completed’. Thus, even in Greek, not every example necessarily fits into the standard treatment of the epistolary past tense.

7.8 Concluding remarks

To return to the question posed at the beginning of this chapter: can the traditional ‘epistolary’ interpretation of past tense forms be justified in the case of Old Russian, and to what extent is the use of the past tense in instances like these motivated by a mindset of oral communication? As we have seen, not all instances that can at first sight be analyzed as epistolary past tense are really of the same kind as those well-known examples from other languages. The data on birchbark have some complicating elements, which render an analysis in terms of the prevalence of decoding time impossible in quite a few instances. It remains to be seen to what extent the insights acquired by the investigation of the data on birchbark can be extended and applied to the data in e.g. Greek, Latin and the Semitic languages, although a first glance at (85) and (86) appears promising in this respect.

I certainly do not deny the existence of those instances that have traditionally been called ‘epistolary past tense’, which can be analyzed in terms of the reader’s temporal perspective. What I am trying to say, though, is that not all in-

stances on birchbark are open to this line of analysis. More particularly, we have seen examples in which the beginning of a motion is envisaged—therefore a centrifugal verb is used. The use of the past tense then expresses that (a) the author refers back to his decision to send; (b) the author also looks back upon the process of preparation; (c) in addition, the letter is a ratification of the decision and preparations.

This use of the past tense is typical for Old Russian and other older script cultures. This led to the hypothesis that it may be understood as a communicative peculiarity of earlier stages of the development of literacy, in which case it can be considered a manifestation of orality. Is this really the case? It is here that the topic can be connected to the main research question of this study. It can be posited that switching the reference point to the future is more typical for contexts where the communication between the speaker and the hearer (addressee) is not direct, as in oral communication, but mediated by script (writing), whereas at the same time the written communication is less conventionalized and partly leans on oral communication. There are two ways in which the temporal and spatial distance of this new and still unusual way of communication is tried to be overcome. Firstly, in some cases the author takes an egocentric perspective (encoding time), using the past tense to indicate that for him (or her) the decision to complete the action has been taken, ignoring as it were, that writing something down does not mean that the action as a whole has been completed, i.e. ignoring the distance in time and space. This is most clearly illustrated by performative-like sentences such as (84), but, as has been argued, it also plays a role in cases such as (69). Secondly, the speaker may also anticipate the perspective of the addressee (decoding time), as if the letter equals a person who is directly talking to the addressee at the moment when the letter is being read. Even though these perspectives seem opposite, what they have in common is that the writing heavily leans on an orally-oriented communicative ‘mindset’. The distinction between orality and literacy, as it is perceived in modern times in terms of deixis and referential perspective, is somehow blurred.

Compared to the other case studies, the connection to orality in this one is somewhat more tentative. The line of reasoning followed in this chapter may need to be confirmed by further research. In any case, the investigation of the epistolary past tense has led the present author to extend the research into the next case study (about assertive declarations), in which the use of the past tense in performative-like expressions is examined. As will be shown in the next chapter, past tense performatives can more easily be linked to the notion of orality.