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Title: Old Russian birchbark letters: a pragmatic approach

Issue Date: 2016-09-28

CHAPTER 9

CONCLUDING REMARKS

9.1 Introduction

In chapter 4, a line of investigation was proposed in which a pragmaphilological approach to the birchbark letters is employed in order to elicit manifestations of orality from the birchbark corpus. In chapters 5-8, a set of linguistic parameters was investigated in order to shed light on the position of the birchbark letters on the orality-literacy interface. It is time now to formulate our conclusions and to connect the various strands of argument with which the case studies have supplied us. The insights yielded by the case studies will be generalized, so that we can see in what way the case studies are interconnected, by identifying overarching features that recur throughout the case studies (§9.2). These features show that the birchbark letters functioned in a transitional period of *Verschriftlichung*, i.e. they show a dynamic stage of development where the language of immediacy and the language of distance are in close interaction (§9.3). A brief final appraisal is given in §9.4.

It was mentioned in chapter 3 that Gippius's (2004) communicatively heterogeneous letters are one manifestation of orality in one specific text type. We took this as our starting point and then stressed that if this is so, it is to be expected that there are other linguistic manifestations to be found in the whole of the corpus, too. So our main question was as follows:

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?

The application of a pragmaphilological approach to four case studies has allowed us to identify linguistic parameters that can be connected to orality; more precisely, the presence and use of these linguistic elements can be *ex-*

plained from the perspective of orality. Thus, the absence of imperative subjects in communicatively heterogeneous letters has been explained by the letters' context-dependence, mainly because of the messenger's mediating role. The use of (free) direct speech has also been explained in terms of a high degree of context-dependence. Both the epistolary past tense and assertive declarations have been explained by making the past tense refer to a preceding act or oral ceremony, which is also a form of context-dependence. In all these cases, by *positing* an oral component, we have been able to *interpret* the birchbark letters more accurately *in the light of* this oral component.

9.2 General lines connecting the case studies

The abovementioned results from the individual case studies will now have to be connected to each other, in view of providing us with some new insights about the birchbark corpus as a whole in terms of orality and literacy.

Firstly, it has to be borne in mind that each individual case study can provide only part of the picture. For example, the case study about imperative subjects showed us several communicatively heterogeneous letters for which Clark's 'standard (face-to-face) setting' has to be assumed, because they cannot be properly understood and explained otherwise. This alone does not necessarily tell us anything about the birchbark corpus in general. It only tells us something about the specific type of documents that was under consideration, viz. instructions to more than one person. The insights gained from them can be generalized only while taking into account the other case studies as well.

Secondly, we cannot position the entire birchbark corpus at a point on the scale between immediacy and distance; the corpus is too heterogeneous for that. Only individual documents, and possibly genres, can occupy a position on that scale. What remains to be done, then, is to identify common characteristics that connect the results of all case studies together.

Three general lines will be followed in the following three subsections: 1) dividing the features of orality in the birchbark corpus into three **types**; 2) discussing **shifts of perspective** as a *leitmotiv* emerging from all case studies; 3) identifying the degree of **context-dependence** of the birchbark letters.

9.2.1 Types of orality

In §4.5.3, we distinguished three types of orality, viz. **speech-based**, **speech-like** and **speech-purposed**; the terms were borrowed from Culpeper & Kytö (2010), whereas the definitions were slightly modified to fit the purposes of the present study. Now that we have a general overview over the results from the case studies and the relationship between them, we can categorise our findings in terms of these three types of orality. In this way, we can add to the general observation made by Gippius (2004) that the birchbark letters contain an 'oral factor'. How can this oral factor be further specified on the basis of our findings?

Speech-based orality is first of all reflected by the procedure of dictation: the letters are a reflection of a previous spoken utterance. Gippius (2004) already noted this phenomenon, and we have also adduced several examples where traces of dictation could be seen; see e.g. N344, N497, N955, and St.R.11, quoted here once again:

- (123) 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)

In addition, past tense assertive declarations are the result of a preceding oral act, which makes these utterances speech-based to a certain extent, though in a different way than dictated letters; see, e.g., N318:

- (124) Se kupilo Mixalo u knzja velikogo Boroce u Vasilija Odrejana Kuzneca i Tokovu i Ostrovnu i Rotkovici Kodracja i Vedrovo. Da 2 rublja, i 3 griny daste Jakovъ. Atno se zaměšete Mixaly bratu jeg daste srebro dvoje.
 ‘Hereby Mixal has bought from Vasilij, the great prince’s tax collector, Odrejan the blacksmith and [the villages] Tokova, Ostrovna, Rokoviči Kodrača and Vedrovo. [Mixal] has given 2 roubles, and Jakov will give 3 grivnas. If any damage will occur, [the one who is guilty] shall pay the double amount to Mixal and his brother.’
 (N318 / 1340-1360 / DND: 611)

Speech-purposed orality can be seen in communicatively heterogeneous letters and instructive direct speech. These letters are meant to be read out aloud or elaborated on orally, so that they function in a face-to-face setting. The presence of a messenger is indispensable for this type of orality to be employed successfully, as was demonstrated by N954:

- (125) Gramota ot Žiročъka i ot Těšъka къ V[ъ]dъvinou. Mlvi Šilъcevi: “Cemou pošibaeši svinъě cjužě? A p[ъ]nesla Nъ[z]dъrka. A esi posoromilъ konъсь vъxъ Ljudinъ. So onogo polou gramata. Pro kъni že ta bys(ъ) ože si tako sъtvorilъ.”
 ‘A letter from Žiročko and from Těško to Vdovin. Say to Šil’ce: “Why are you damaging other people’s pigs? Nozdr’ka has made [this] known. And you have disgraced the entire Ljudin End. [There has been] a letter from the other side [of the river]. It was about horses, that you have done the same with them”.’
 (N954 / 1100-1120 / NGB XII: 50)

Speech-like orality is more basic, more pervasive, harder to detect; it is rather a consequence of the presence of the other two types of orality. If a text is speech-based or speech-purposed, this will most likely result in speech-like

characteristics. These can be seen in all case studies. The letters are phrased in such a way that they either cannot be understood independently of an oral component (which testifies to their context-dependence), or certain linguistic elements that are contained in them can be explained only with reference to the letter's speech-based or speech-purposed nature, and therefore are a manifestation of the language of immediacy.

9.2.2 Shifts of perspective

Shifts of perspective are another thread running through the case studies. In a more theoretical vein, they can be connected to deixis. We have encountered different kinds of shifts.

First of all, and most conspicuously, there are referential shifts in communicatively heterogeneous texts, viz. between parts of texts with different addressees. These shifts can be evaluated in the light of person deixis: for instance, the second person singular personal pronoun *ty* can refer to different participants at different sides of a referential boundary. What is more, *ty* as an explicit imperative subject can *signal* such a boundary:

- (126) Ot Maksima ko Desjascjanamo. Datъ Melejanu 8 deže, naklado i veši. A ty, starosto, sberi.
 'From Maksim to the inhabitants of Desjatskoe. [You are to] give Mel'jan 8 *dežas*—interest and grain. And you, elder-VOC, collect [them].'
 (N253 / 1360-1380 / DND: 583)

Secondly, we have seen referential boundaries between reported speech and the authorial frame as a signal of direct reported speech. In the same way as with communicatively heterogeneous texts, personal pronouns of all kinds can refer to different participants at different sides of the boundary, so this type is also concerned with person deixis:

- (127) [...] Ot Esifa k Ѡnfima. Čtъ prišle ot Markъ k tobě ljudii Olъksa, ili kъ žene mъjei, otvěcai jemu takъ: "Kakъ esi dokončalъ, Marke-VOC, съ mnъju, mně vyjexati Petrъvo dъne k tobě i rosmъriti sъla svojegъ; tъbě rъže svъja snjati, a mně naklady tvoje dati. A istina dana." [...]
 'From Jesif to Onfim. If Oleksa will send people from Mark to you or to my wife, answer him as follows: "As you, Mark, have arranged with me, I have to come out to you on St. Peter's day and inspect my village; you have to harvest your rye, and I have to give your interest. And the debt has been given." [...]'
 (N142 / 1300-1320 / DND: 536)

In the case studies about the epistolary past tense and assertive declarations we are confronted with a different kind of shift, viz. temporal. This type of shift is connected to temporal deixis, as the author positions himself and the act of

writing temporally with respect to either decoding time (i.e. a real temporal shift towards the moment when the addressee will read the letter) or the execution of the sending procedure itself or a previous act, the completion of which is ratified by the document:

- (128) Ognū Jelizaru mnogo čelomъ biju. Poslaľъ jemъ, ognē, k tobě s Lari-
onъ(cem)[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 usual explanation of the epistolary past tense in terms of a switch to the addressee’s temporal perspective (i.e. the author tries to overcome the temporal boundary by transferring himself beyond it) is not very likely in the case of ‘naïve’ writing, which is usually characterized by egocentrism (i.e. the deictic centre is constituted by the author, and is not transferred to the addressee).

Thus, all three forms of deixis (person, time and space) are involved in a description of some boundaries that the case studies have shown. However, not every type of boundary can be dealt with in the same way. In the case studies about imperative subjects and speech reporting (chapters 5 and 6), concerning personal deixis, the issue is whether or not the boundaries are signalled explicitly, and to what extent context and common ground should be relied on to detect the boundaries. Often no need was perceived for an explicit signal. In the case studies about the epistolary past tense and assertive declarations (chapters 7 and 8), concerning temporal deixis, it is rather a question of the temporal position which is taken by the author *vis-à-vis* the addressee, or rather, where the temporal origo is situated.

What seems to connect them, though, is ‘experimentation’ with the deictic parameters and the boundaries that arose due to the nature of the written medium in its several applications and functions. We have seen several instances where medieval Novgorodians would assess the implications of these boundaries differently from present-day writers, due to the fairly different function and status of writing. Again, this is to be analyzed as a manifestation of orality, in the sense that this kind of experimentation is a feature of the process of *Verschriftlichung*.

9.2.3 Context-dependence

When it comes to the relation between the birchbark letters and the context in which they were used, we have noticed a fairly high degree of context-dependence. In communicatively heterogeneous texts, this is mainly due to the recreation of an oral setting, which presupposes the presence of a messenger. As to speech reporting, the various strategies are dependent on the context to varying degrees. As to the epistolary past tense, context-dependence comes into expression because the past tense refers back to an act which im-

mediately preceded the writing of the letter and which is inextricably linked up with it. The letter is part of a broader transaction and delivery act. Context-dependence is also seen in assertive declarations, viz. in those instances where the assertive record is first dependent on a preceding oral act or ceremony. Later on, trust in writing develops and the act is performed by writing it down, which makes it less context-dependent.

An important part of a letter's context is the messenger or letter-bearer. The concept of a messenger does not play an obvious role in the case study about assertive declarations: the texts in which they occur are usually not letters in the strict sense of the term, and hence not necessarily meant to be delivered to an addressee (though there may be exceptions, such as N384). The other case studies show clear traces of the messenger's role, most notably regarding the category of communicatively heterogeneous letters, as noted by Gippius (2004) already, but also to some extent in instructive reported speech, which can also serve as a mandate, and letters with the epistolary past tense, where a person accompanying the shipment with the letter is inevitable anyway.

9.3 A transitional period of *Verschriftlichung*

In spite of the lines that connect them, several case studies also show paradoxical results. A certain linguistic parameter can be perceived as an indicator of the language of proximity, but at the same time it may reflect a feature of the developing language of distance. It is in this sense that the birchbark letters occupy an intermediate position. They function between orality and literacy, in a transitional period of *Verschriftlichung*. The concept of *Verschriftlichung* was briefly explained already in §4.5.2. Recall that it is not just a question of *Verschriftung*, which means that a spoken utterance is written down verbatim, without taking into account the necessity of a greater explicitness in writing. However, a greater explicitness is often necessary because the reader may not have access to the immediate context of the original spoken utterance. Once the writer acknowledges this, he will try to adapt his writing, in order to exclude misunderstandings (for instance in denoting which part of the letter is addressed to whom, or which part of it is direct speech and who utters it). This recognition marks the beginning of the process of *Verschriftlichung*. In our Western culture, this process has been carried through to a fully-fledged standard written language with rigid conventions. The birchbark letters are situated at a much earlier stage of this process, in a vigorous phase of development. This is why certain observations about the case studies may seem paradoxical at first sight.

For instance, if a letter functions as a mandate, this implies trust in writing, which is a literate feature, but at the same time the letter's function is embedded into an oral encounter between the letter-bearer and the addressee.

To mention another example, the use of the past tense in assertive declarations can be seen as a feature of ‘creating common ground’, because a declaration is made which is meant to announce and consolidate a (legal) act. On the other hand, it may be seen as ‘exploiting common ground’, because it is the result of a common oral agreement which is entrusted to writing. If we stress the assertive component, it is a feature of proximity; if the declarational component is stressed, it is a feature of distance. In other words, on the one hand, the past tense signals that a preceding oral ceremony was primary, which is an oral feature. On the other hand, the past tense (aorist) formulae that were developed in the written medium are a literate feature. So we see oral features that developed explicitly for the written medium. This paradox is illustrative of the whole problem of the dual position which is occupied by the birchbark letters.

In a more theoretical vein, what we have identified as manifestations of orality concerns a mixture of Koch & Oesterreicher’s medium and conception. It should be stressed that the medium is also concerned. In some instances of the language of immediacy, its felicitous use is facilitated by the spoken medium; in others, by the common ground without necessarily involving the spoken medium. Both can be subsumed under ‘common ground’. If the messenger elaborated on the written text, the medium of the communicative act as a whole is not clearly delineated. Medium and conception thereby become more of a blend and less of a dichotomy than Koch & Oesterreicher are willing to acknowledge. Nevertheless, the distinction between medium and conception remains useful. To mention just one example, one paradox (cf. Ducrot 1984) is the following: when the author is not the same as the writer (scribe), this can be an indication of orality (dictation) or, on the contrary, an indication of literacy, because this non-identity is only possible in the written medium. But this goes for many parameters. In cases like these we do need the distinction between medium and conception.

One final issue remains, viz. trust in writing. The two seemingly conflicting views (Gippius/Bulanin vs. Clanchy) about the topic are too crucial to be left unnoticed. It should not be forgotten that Gippius’s (2004) 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 in the face of another. So ultimately, the issue of trust in writing is relevant and indeed crucial to our topic.

Trust in writing comes most into evidence where letters function as mandates. This we see first of all in communicatively heterogeneous letters, as well as in some instances of reported speech (instructive direct speech). In the case study about the epistolary past tense, it is only marginally touched upon, as sending accompanying letters with shipments was apparently a rather usual procedure. The most crucial function of trust in writing can be seen in the in-

stances of assertive declarations, where the development towards greater context-independence goes hand in hand with an increased role of the written utterance, and hence, a greater trust in writing.

Let us recapitulate the issue (cf. §4.5.4). The problem of trust in writing in the Middle Ages can be approached from two different (and contradictory or at least paradoxical) angles. One is that documents have an oral residue due to a lack of trust in writing; in other words, trust in writing had to be reinforced orally. The other viewpoint is that a document could serve as a mandate, to give credit to the messenger; this means that the oral message was accredited by the document.

How can these seemingly contradictory viewpoints, as expressed by Bulanin (1997) on the one hand, and Clanchy (1979) on the other, be reconciled, and what can the birchbark letters tell us about these apparently diverging views? In accordance with Clanchy's theory, letters would be contextualized because they were not trustworthy in themselves; they needed accreditation, either from a messenger, or otherwise, for example when witnesses are enumerated in a will. Bulanin (1997) and Gippius (2004), by contrast, argue that letters were contextualized because they were meant to accredit the messenger (who would elaborate on their contents) and give him a mandate for a specific situation. So either the messenger is in need of authorization, or the letter. This issue is most pressing in our case study about the assertive declarations. A better alternative is that both can reinforce each other, in which case there is an intricate interaction between both directions of accreditation (see below).

Bulanin's theory is quite extreme and far-fetched; he allows for little more than a purely symbolic function of writing, without any real content (i.e. in the initial phase of literacy in Novgorod). But Gippius also speaks about a letter as a mandate. In fact, all authors who raise the matter in connection with the birchbark documents seem to take the same stance: they assume a certain amount of trust in writing which lends authority to the documents.

What do our case studies say about this? As was pointed out above (§9.2.3), there does not seem to be a very clear-cut connection with the epistolary past tense (although the letters were sent together with the messenger who also brought the goods, so that we see a kind of mandate for the messenger, too), but the other three case studies would point to the letter as authorizing the messenger or other persons involved.

Again, this seems to be at odds with the theses of Clanchy, Köhn and others. Obviously, although these authors write about roughly the same period as the birchbark era, their field of study concerns Western Europe, not Russia. In addition, the text types with which they are concerned are generally more of a chancery-type literacy, whereas our birchbark letters are generally more casual and ephemeral. But that is strange: we would rather expect the opposite conclusions to be drawn, i.e. more trust in the official, 'chancery-type' parchment documents, and less trust in the short-lived and casual birchbark letters.

An additional problem is that medieval England had witnessed a much longer tradition in writing than Novgorod, where the first birchbark letters appeared already shortly after the advent of Christianity and the simultaneous introduction of writing. If Clanchy's theory can be generalized to apply equally well to medieval Novgorod, it is rather to be expected that trust in writing was not yet fully developed in the birchbark era. After all, the centuries of literary practice in England had had provided ample time to develop an attitude of trust in writing, but still it turned out to be less than fully developed; why, then, should this be different in Novgorod, where much less time had been available for such a process?

The following considerations can be put forward to solve the paradox. The magical power of the written word in combination with oral witness ensured trust in the communication procedure as a whole. Pure and absolute trust in writing is a 'medial' concept: it views the written documents as independent from the communicative procedure in which they functioned. In that sense, trust in writing is an anachronism. In medieval England as well as Novgorod, documents never functioned independently, and as such they did not inspire trust; it was rather the way in which they were used that mattered. This mode of use often involved a messenger.

On the one hand, the messenger is responsible that the message comes through as it was meant; oral elaboration is often necessary for this, due to the elliptic nature of the texts themselves (think of, e.g., the absence of an imperative subject). On the other hand, the document is meant to confirm the credibility of the messenger. This (to our minds) circular way of reasoning would not suffice to generate trust in our day. In medieval Novgorod, though, it was apparently a sufficient and usual communicative procedure.

So on the one hand, the messenger is trustworthy enough to elaborate on the written message. On the other hand, the messenger needs accreditation by means of a document. This would mean that the document and the messenger are in close interaction, which is a sign of context-dependence. A messenger who is accredited by a document is still a messenger who brings an oral message.

What we see, then, is a pervasive interdependence of speech and writing in the medial sense, but this has consequences for the conception (in Koch & Oesterreicher's terms). In other words, the letter and the messenger are mutually dependent and in close interaction with each other, and this is reflected in the way in which the letter is phrased (for instance, in its elliptical wording). In this way, the theories of Clanchy and Bulanin are not necessarily contradictory, but the interdependence of both reflects the transitional nature of birchbark communication.

9.4 Final remarks

We can now recapitulate once more what the present study has added to the initial pragmaphilological research enterprise by Gippius (2004) and the field of berestology in general. It has become clear that the phenomenon of communicative heterogeneity is clearly embedded in a wider array of oral features, which are reflected in several linguistic features.

I have demonstrated the coherence of the case studies by extracting common elements that connect them. From this, a general picture starts emerging. We cannot describe linguistic features as such to be elements of orality. Rather, the linguistic features tell us something about the way in which orality is reflected in the language, in interaction with developing literary habits.

Certain elements of Gippius's (2004) theory have been corroborated, such as the letters' context-dependence. In addition, the area of the language of immediacy has turned out to be broader than just the category of communicative heterogeneity, especially in its connection to instructive direct speech. In other respects, the birchbark letters turned out to show more of a development towards the language of distance, such as the increasing use of the aorist for assertive declarations.

Trust in writing has turned out to be a more delicate and complicated phenomenon than Gippius (2004) seems to assume. It is not fruitful to play the two conflicting theories (Clanchy vs. Bulanin/Gippius) off against each other. Both are entitled to be credited. What we see in the birchbark letters is a rather intricate interwovenness of the two in a way that does not allow one to do without the other.

Thus, we have seen several ways in which the degree of orality and the development of literacy can be traced throughout the birchbark corpus, in connection with the use of various linguistic features. An outcome in diachronic terms is viable only for two out of the four case studies (speech reporting and assertive declarations). Hence, tracing a movement from orality towards literacy for the corpus as a whole is problematic, and has, for the time being, been demonstrated in merely tentative terms.

Our whole theme is not only the result of "medium-transcoding", as Oesterreicher (1997: 196) seems to suggest.¹ In other words, writers of birchbark letters did not simply write down exactly the same things which they would otherwise and in earlier times have pronounced orally (*Verschriftung*). What they did write down, however, resulted in a rather complex interplay of strategies of adaptation to the written medium that led to new communicatory phenomena (*Verschriftlichung*).

¹ "As a matter of fact, it is precisely this property of language to undergo such processes of medium-transfer or transcoding that is the very condition of the existence of our orality in text problem."

We can conclude that the pragmaphilological approach to the birchbark letters has been fruitful, building on and stretching beyond its first implementation by Gippius (2004). Its further application will be able to show us more of the birchbark letters' characteristics in the field of orality in due time. After all, almost every year a number of new birchbark letters are excavated; this leaves the field with a promising perspective for the future, as the steadily accumulating number of texts provides us with an increasingly accurate picture of communication on birchbark.

