

Cover Page



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SUMMARY

This dissertation is centred around what is known as the Old Russian birchbark letters from Velikij Novgorod, a city in north-western Russia, and surroundings. Small strips of birchbark were used here as writing material in the Middle Ages; short messages were scratched onto it with a stylus. These messages could concern personal or business correspondence, notes, lists of goods, draughts of legal documents, etc. In short, everything that had to do with everyday life. Literacy rates were relatively high in Novgorod, so that the birchbark letters reflect the life of various layers of the population. Most authors originated from the richer elite, though, and the majority of birchbark letters is connected to finance in some way or another.

The birchbark letters that have come down to us date from the early 11th until the late 15th century; it follows that we have over 400 years of attested texts. The pieces of birchbark have been preserved in the soil, and since 1951 they have been unearthed almost yearly, together with a host of other archaeological artefacts. The absence of oxygen in the marshy soil has prevented the organic material from decaying. Up to the 2016 season, a total of approximately 1185 birchbark letters have been excavated, of which 1079 have been found in Novgorod.

During half a century, exhaustive research has been conducted into a variety of linguistic aspects of the birchbark letters; this has resulted in new insights into the grammar and linguistic development of Eastern Slavic. However, this research was restricted to structural and grammatical topics; issues of *language use* in its connection with the *function* of the birchbark letters in the communicative process were hardly ever addressed, or not at all.

The past decennium has brought a change in this respect, as the birchbark letters came to be studied from a new perspective. Attention was devoted, among other things, to the messenger who delivered the letters, and the oral component which he introduced into the communicative process. This oral component is reflected in the way in which the letters were formulated. For a number of individual letters, this new approach resulted in an innovative reinterpretation.

The present study has expanded on this topic by researching the corpus as a whole, and by drawing attention to a number linguistic elements that point to an oral component in the communicative process of which the birchbark letters formed a part.

The research question of this study runs as follows:

In what way does the 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 research has been conducted by way of four case studies, in which four linguistic parameters have been analysed. It has been investigated to what extent they can be related to the notion of orality.

The first case study (chapter 5) deals with imperative subjects. It turned out that in letters that are addressed to more than one person they can function as a signal indicating when the author switches to another addressee. In many instances, the identity of this person is also explicitly indicated by a name in the vocative case. Sometimes, the imperative subject as such suffices, though. The imperative subject can even be entirely absent. When this is the case, and the imperative subject cannot, therefore, play a role in making the different addressees explicit, the implication is that this information must have been conveyed in a different way, viz. thanks to the role of context. The person of the 'messenger' plays an important role in this respect, as he must have expanded on the letters orally, taking into account that the latter were often formulated quite cryptically.

The second case study (chapter 6) deals with reported speech. Starting from the basic dichotomy of direct and indirect speech and two additional strategies, the distribution of these strategies throughout the corpus is set out. The use of the various strategies functions as an indicator of the texts' context-dependence. This can, in turn, be connected to orality: the greater the context-dependence, the more relevant the oral factor.

The 'epistolary past tense, which is the topic of the third case study (chapter 7), is a well-known phenomenon from other languages and ancient cultures, which has always been explained as a switch to the temporal perspective of the letter's recipient. This phenomenon regularly on birchbark, too. However, the data from the birchbark corpus have shown that an alternative explanation is at least possible, viz. in terms of the author's perspective, who (a) has made the decision to send the letter with the goods; (b) has taken preparations for the shipment; (c) by writing the letter considers the act of sending to be finished. It is hard to indicate a totally uniform connection to orality, except that the instable status of the deictic centre may indicate the experimental character of the written word in the period in question, as it was developing towards literacy (a development known as *Verschriftlichung*).

The final case study (chapter 8) is taken up with the use of the past tense in performative contexts. The utterance in the document *by which* a certain act is realized is often phrased in a perfect or aorist form, where we would expect a present tense form today. Using Searle's taxonomy, these past tense forms are classified as 'assertive declarations', the mixed class which does justice to the assertive as well as the declarational component. 'Assertive' in this case means that the past tense is a reflection of the preceding oral ceremony or negotia-

tion, which is situated in the past. However, by describing this past act, it is ratified in written form (declaration); this has to do with trust in the written word, by which the performative act is ultimately fixed. The use of the past tense shows that the oral agreement is primary and performative, whereas its written fixation is secondary and descriptive. In our highly literate society, it would be the opposite.

The four case studies together provide a general picture that indicates a communicative constellation in which the oral element plays a substantial role. The text turned out to be connected to the spoken context in three possible ways: they can be speech-based, speech-purposed and speech-like. Switches of perspective, be they explicit or not, are a second link connecting the case studies together. A third criterion is the high degree of context-dependence of texts on birchbark. These criteria together indicate that the birchbark letters functioned in a transitional period that was developing towards literacy (*Verschriftlichung*). The role of the messenger, who delivered the letter, on the one hand, and the developing degree of trust in the written word on the other hand, are factors in the communicative process which supplement and reinforce each other mutually.

