

Don't shoot the messenger. A pragmaphilological approach to birchbark letter no. 497 from Novgorod

Прагмафилологический анализ новгородской берестяной грамоты № 497

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Abstract The article analyses the communicative function and linguistic form of Novgorod birchbark letter no. 497 (N497) within a pragmaphilological framework. By applying a function-to-form mapping and taking into account the graphic representation of the text, I propose a new reading, in which the messenger plays a central role in the communication chain and in which the spoken word continuously interacts with the production and interpretation of the written document. This makes N497 a 'communicatively heterogeneous' text, a recently identified category of birchbark letters which deserves special attention in the wider field of historical pragmatics.

Аннотация Статья посвящена прагмафилологическому анализу коммуникативной функции и языковой формы новгородской берестяной грамоты № 497. Исходя из соответствия функции и формы и принимая во внимание графические характеристики грамоты, предлагается новая интерпретация документа с акцентом на своеобразный статус посылного в коммуникативной цепи и устный фактор в берестяной переписке. Грамота № 497 является 'коммуникативно неоднородным' текстом, относясь к недавно выявленной категории берестяных грамот, которая заслуживает серьезного внимания как объект исторической прагматики.

1 Introduction

This paper offers a new interpretation of Novgorod birchbark letter no. 497 (N497, where 'N' stands for Novgorod). I will argue that the letter belongs to a special category which was identified by A. A. Gippius in a groundbreaking article on the pragmatics and communicative organization of birchbark documents (Gippius 2004). The category consists of

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texts which Gippius classifies as ‘communicatively heterogeneous’ (*коммуникативно неоднородные тексты*). At first sight such texts seem to be formulated as single coherent messages, but on closer inspection they appear to be composed of separate discourse units which each have their own referential perspective: “оформленное как единый текст письменное сообщение распадается на части, обладающие различной ролевой структурой, то есть имеющие разных авторов или адресатов” (Gippius 2004, 185).

In Sect. 5 below, after dealing with N497, I will go further into the specific matter of communicatively heterogeneous texts. In general, Gippius (2004) article has opened a whole new research perspective in the field of ‘berestology’ by systematically investigating the communicative functions of birchbark texts and the way in which these functions are linguistically moulded into written messages. His research can be considered a showcase of pragmaphilology, a subfield of historical pragmatics that was identified some fifteen years ago by A. Jacobs and A. H. Jucker (Jacobs and Jucker 1995, 11–13). Pragmaphilology focuses on synchronic analyses of written sources from the past and “studies pragmatic aspects of historical texts in their sociocultural context of communication” (Jucker 2006, 330). The subfield is closely related to what L. J. Brinton calls historical discourse analysis ‘proper’: “the study of discourse forms, functions, or structures [...] in earlier periods of a language” (Brinton 2001, 139; cf. also Taavitsainen and Fitzmaurice 2007, 13f.). The starting point of pragmaphilological investigations can be either the linguistic form of a historical text, which throws light on its communicative function, or conversely its function, which clarifies the form in which the written text was shaped (Brinton 2001, 139f.).

This case study emphasizes the latter direction (‘function-to-form mapping’). As a first step the communicative function of N497 will be discussed (Sect. 3); then the proposed analysis will be brought in line not only with the stylistic and syntactic structure of the text, but also with its graphic representation (Sect. 4).

2 The text

N497 has been known for almost forty years. It was found in 1972 during the excavations on Kirov Street in Slavno End (Славенский конец), located on the Market Side (Торговая сторона) of the city (Arcixovskij and Janin 1978, 9f.). The document (19.6 × 9.8 cm) is dated stratigraphically between the 1340s and the mid-1380s, whereas extra-stratigraphical evidence places it between the 1320s and the 1370s, preferably not earlier than the 1340s (DND, 563).

N497 was first published in 1978 (Arcixovskij and Janin 1978, 90f.). The reading of some individual letters was later corrected by A. A. Zaliznjak (Zaliznjak 1986, 211), and the text was republished in DND.

Edition according to DND (563f.), normalized transcription and translation:

1	поколono	w	гаврили	w	посени	ко	зѣ
	rok<o>lonɔ	o[t]	gavrilǝ/-y	o[t]	pos[t]<e>ni	kɔ	z-
	Greetings-NOM.ACC.SG	from	Gavri-la-GEN	from	Postnja-GEN	to	
2	ати	моемоу	ко	горигори			
	[j]ati	моему	кɔ	g<o>rigori[i]			
	brother-in-law-DAT.SG	my-DAT.SG.M	to	Grigorij-DAT			
	жи	коуמוу	и	кѣ			
	ʒ[e]	[k]	kumu	i	k-		
	also	[to]	kum-DAT.SG	and			

3	о	сестори	моени	ко	оулити	во
	z	sest<o>rě	moei	kz	ulitě	č[t]o
	to	sister-DAT.SG	my-DAT.SG.F	to	Ulita-DAT	that
	ви	есте	п			
	by	este	p-			
	SBJV	be-PRES.2PL				
4	оухали	во	города	ко	радости	м
	oěxali/-ě	vz	gorodz	kz	radosti	m-
	ride-l-PTC.M.PL	in	city-ACC.SG	to	happiness-DAT.SG	
5	оени	а	нашего	солова	не	оста
	oei	a	našego	s<o>lova	ne	osta-
	my-DAT.SG.F	and	our.pl-GEN.SG.N	word-GEN.SG	not	
6	вили	да	бого	вам	радосте	
	vili/-ě	da[i]	bogz	vamz	radostě	
	leave-l-PTC.M.PL	give-IMP.3SG	God-NOM.SG	you.pl-DAT	happiness-ACC.SG	
7	ми	вашего	солова			
	my	vašego	s<o>lova			
	we.pl-NOM	your.pl-GEN.SG.N	word-GEN.SG			
8	вохи	не	всота			
	v<o>xī/-ě	ne	os<o>ta-			
	all-NOM.PL.M	not				
9	ви					
	vimz					
	leave-PRES.1PL					

‘Greetings from Gavrila Postnja to my brother-in-law Grigorij, [my] *kum*, and to my sister Ulita. May you come to the city, to my happiness, and not depart from our request. May God give you happiness. We will all not depart from your request.’¹

Notes on the translation:

- A *kum* (line 2) is a relative by baptism of one’s child, who in this particular case can be either Gavrila’s or Grigorij’s (cf. Arcixovskij and Janin 1978, 91; Faccani 1995, 171). Note that the particle ž[e] in the same line has the function of introducing a further specification of the preceding noun (*отождествительное же* ‘specifying one’, DND, 564), thus identifying Grigorij with *kum* and ruling out the possibility that we are dealing with two different persons (as was suggested in the first edition: “полученное [...] от зятя, кума и сестры приглашение”, Arcixovskij and Janin 1978, 91).
- The phrase **во ви есте поухали** (3–4) is syntactically ambiguous. Here it is translated as the beginning of a main clause, but it might also be subordinate to the word ‘greetings’ in line 1 (*poklonz*, lit. ‘bow (as sign of obeisance)’) as suggested in DND (564: “примерный смысл: ‘просьба с поклоном, чтобы вы поехали...’”). If this is the case, the translation would be ‘[I make] obeisance [to you] that you may come’.
- The noun *slovo* (5, 7), lit. ‘word’, is attested some twenty times on birchbark. The specific meaning of *slovo* is determined by the context, which usually presupposes

¹Russian translation (DND, 563): ‘Поклон от Гаврилы Постни зятю моему—куму Григорию и сестре моей Улите. Поехали бы вы в город к радости моей, а нашего слова не забыли бы (не оставили бы без внимания). Дай Бог вам радость. Мы все вашего слова не забудем (не забываем)’.

the imperative connotation of ‘command, summon’.² This is not surprising, given that birchbark letters most often deal with instructions and orders. In the case of N497, the translation of *slovo* as ‘request’ (i.e., a directive with a lower degree of illocutionary intensity) seems more appropriate, since we are dealing with a family-to-family invitation.

3 Interpretation according to the edition in DND

Palaeographic analysis shows without doubt that the document was written by only a single hand (see Zaliznjak 2000, 354 for details). Graphically the text appears to be homogeneous as well, with eight cases of syllabification (*скандирование*; cf. DND, 35) as its most prominent feature from beginning to end. The pleonastic letters that result from this syllabification are indicated by pointed brackets in the normalized transcription above. Other graphic effects that are consistently present throughout the text include **и** reflecting *i, y* as well as *ě* (e.g., **гаврили** 1 = *gavrilě* or *-y*, **пѣихали** 3–4 = *poěxali* or *-ě*, **ми** 7 = *my*, **вохи** 8 = *v<o>xi* or *-ě*), and the rendition of etymological **ъ** by **о** (e.g., **поколono** 1 = *pok<o>lonъ*, **восота|вимо** 8–9 = *os<o>tavitъ*) and **ь** by **е** (**радосте** 6 = *radostь*). The grammar and syntax of N497 are also coherent and do not reveal any discrepancies within the text (cf. DND, 564).

In view of these observations it is not surprising that N497 has been considered a single homogeneous message by the sender Gavrila Postnja, containing two pieces of information for his sister and brother-in-law:

- (a) an invitation (lines 3–6) to come to the city to visit him and apparently also the rest of his family (cf. ‘and not depart from *our* request’ 5–6);
- (b) a positive reply (lines 7–9) to an earlier invitation from the same two addressees.

As A. V. Arcixovskij and V. L. Janin put it in the first edition: “По-видимому, рассматриваемая грамота является ответом на полученное Гаврилой Посеней от зятя, кума и сестры приглашение приехать к ним в гости. Принимая это приглашение, Посеня в свою очередь зовет их погостить в городе” (Arcixovskij and Janin 1978, 91). This interpretation is problematic for two reasons.

First, it is somehow strange that Gavrila Postnja and his family invite Grigorij and Ulita before they themselves pay a visit by invitation to the same party. Even if this were the case, then the sequence of the two parts of the letter would be still communicatively odd; one would have expected that part (b) precedes (a), just in the way in which the editors phrase the meaning of the message: Gavrila Postnja first accepts the invitation (b) and then, in return, invites the same party over to his place (a).

Second, the interpretation does not provide a specific, content-based explanation for the fact that the letter was recovered in Novgorod, although it was clearly sent out of the ‘city’ (‘may you come to the city’), which on birchbark by default means Novgorod. As a general explanation the editors state: “Письмо не было отправлено или, наоборот, было

²See, e.g., the fragmentary letter N345 from the mid-14th century: **а звало ксмь | васо в городе и вы мокого слова | нь посласушали** ‘and I have called you to the city and you have not listened to my *slovo*’ (DND, 556). Cf. also N17, N243, N749, and N757 (ibid., 635f., 650, 674f.). In a few cases, *slovo* is also used as a statement of some legal kind; cf. N531 (ibid., 416–420) where *slovo* has the connotation of ‘accusation’, and N312 (ibid., 685) and N755 (ibid., 636–638) where the context points to *slovo* in the sense of ‘testimony’.

привезено с собой его адресатами, приехавшими в гости к Гавриле” (Arcixovskij and Janin 1978, 91). Of course, there is no way to prove these two explanations wrong, but by the same token there is no positive indication that they apply to N497. In any case, the document does not look like a message that was not sent; it is a complete text on a piece of birchbark that was neatly trimmed. Also, the contents do not suggest that we might be dealing with an unsent draft.³ Furthermore, given the nature of the letter, it is hard to imagine a situation which would have motivated the addressees to bring back the letter along with their visit to Gavriila Postnja and his family. These kinds of situation more typically apply to letters with instructions to subordinates; the initial letter had to be brought back by the addressee or messenger to the sender as proof that the assignment had been fulfilled.⁴

4 Alternative interpretation

As an alternative to the interpretation given by the editors, I propose that part (b) of the letter (lines 7–9) is not a continuation of the message (or rather a second message) that Gavriila Postnja wants to convey to his brother-in-law and his sister, but rather *their reply to his invitation*. There are three reasons in favour of this hypothesis:

First, the alternative does not suffer from the two complications seen in the editors’ interpretation (see above). By assuming that part (b) is the reply to (a), it makes perfect sense why N497 was found in Novgorod: the invitation was sent out of the city and came back with the answer written below it. Also, the textual structure of the document immediately becomes transparent; it is a family-to-family correspondence, in which the invitation concludes in a natural way with the words ‘may God give you happiness’, and in which the phrasing of the answer (ВАШЕГО СОЛОВА | ... НЕ УСОТА|ВИМО 7–9) echoes the words of the initial letter ([УО БИ ...] НАШЕГО СОЛОВА НЕ УСТА|ВИЛИ 5–6).

Second, the alternative explains Zaliznjak’s observation (DND, 171) that the pronoun *my* in line 7—i.e. the very beginning of part (b)—is not preceded by the conjunction *a*: “редкий пример без союза”. In the interpretation of the editors this indeed is at variance with similar cases where phrases with contrasting personal pronouns are combined with *a* (cf. N605 ТЫ ЕСИ МОИ А А ТВОИ ‘you are mine and I [am] yours’ and other examples mentioned in DND, 171). In the alternative interpretation, it makes sense that there is no conjunction before *my* in line 7, since part (b) reflects the words of senders different from (a).

Third, the alternative explains why the layout of the text suggests a temporal interval between the compilation of the invitation and the answer (see <http://gramoty.ru> for the

³See, e.g., N933, an unfinished letter on a piece of birchbark with evidence of previous use (DND, 675); or N421, a letter in which the sender Bratjata tells Něžil ‘come home (ДОМОВЬ), son; you are free’ and which was written in relatively small letters on a large piece of birchbark, with a sizeable space open on the bottom and the right side of the document: “Очевидно, письмо предполагалось отрезать от остального листа, но по какой-то причине это не было сделано (возможно, грамота осталась неотосланной)” (DND, 293).

⁴See, e.g., N776, a complete letter sent to Pskov (ПАСЬКОВѢ КО ЛИВИНѢ : | КО МОСТОКѢ ‘to Pskov, to the Livonian Mostka’), but found in Novgorod. The letter contains specific orders to Mostka the Livonian to send money and goods, and ends with a threat of confiscation in case he fails to do so: “вероятнее всего то, что письмо привез обратно в Новгород тот, кто доставил требуемое (сам лив Мостка или его посланец); оно могло в этом случае играть роль списка заказов, т.е. служить свидетельством того, что доставлено всё, что требовалось” (DND, 308).

photograph and Fig. 1 below for the drawing). We are clearly dealing with two different writing events: the invitation in six straight lines and the answer in the following three wavy lines, in which the writer tries to avoid the horizontal scratches on the writing surface.

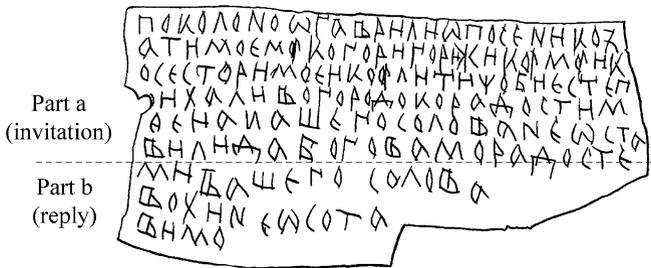


Fig. 1 Drawing of N497 (Arcixovskij and Janin 1978, 91), showing the two parts of the message

Apparently the original message (i.e. the invitation only) must have been written on a piece of birchbark that was larger than the text itself, with extra space at the bottom. The birchbark must have been trimmed in the shape it was recovered before the answer was written down below the invitation; otherwise we would have expected the words of the answer to extend to the outer right end of the piece of birchbark. We cannot be sure why the birchbark was trimmed in the way it was recovered: did the writer of the invitation already anticipate that the answer would be written below it, or was it pure coincidence that the piece of birchbark left enough room for a written reply?

It should be noted that in the proposed reading N497 is not the only birchbark document that consists of two different messages. This also is the case in N736 (early 12th century) which contains a letter ‘from Ivan to Dristliv’ (N736a: + **отъ ивана къ дрист[ь]ивоу**) on the outer side of the birchbark, and the reply ‘from Dristliv to Ivan’ (N736b: **(о)тъ дристива къ иваноу**) on the inner side (see DND, 263–265).⁵ Whereas N736 displays different hands on the inner and outer side, we have at least three clear examples on birchbark of double messages which are written by only a single hand. In all three cases we are dealing with seemingly unrelated letters from two different senders or to two different addressees:

- In N589 (mid-14th century; see DND, 559f.), the sender Žila first addresses Čjudin (**Ѡ жилѣ к ѡудинѣ** ‘from Žila to Čudin’) and then, at the end of this message, he immediately begins a new message to Sava (**Ѡ жилѣ к савѣ** ‘from Žila to Sava’) on the same line, without any interruption in the writing.
- In N750 (early 14th century; see DND, 530–532; Gippius 2004, 206), the sender Stepan addresses Potka on one side of the birchbark (**поклонѣ Ѡ степана ко поткѣ** ‘greetings from Stepan to Potka’) and gives additional instructions—most probably to the messenger—on the other side (**оу зѡбеца поло гривнѣ | новаа ...** ‘from Zubec half a new grivna ...’).

⁵Two other texts on birchbark, also displaying two different hands (N904 and Staraja Russa 35), have received the same ‘letter-plus-answer’ interpretation. However, Gippius (2004, 227–229) has made a strong case for an alternative reading of both documents (especially Staraja Russa 35), without assuming two separate messages. As for N332, which is similar to N736 (each side of the birchbark containing messages in different hands), it is difficult to establish the relationship between both texts because of the fragmentary condition of the second one.

- N952 (mid-12th century; see Zaliznjak, Toropova and Janin 2005, 24–27) contains in the first four lines a letter from Radko to his father (Ѡ радѣка къ отьцѣви поклананіе ‘from Radko to father, greetings’) and then, without interruption, in the following two lines a letter from Vjačeška to Lazor’ (и поклананіе Ѡ вѣцьшькѣ къ лазорѣви ‘and greetings from Vjačeška to Lazor’). Note that it is possible that Lazor’ is the name of the father of Radko, in which case we are dealing with two senders but one and the same addressee.

In comparison to these documents, one could say that N497 combines the ‘two messages—one hand’ type with the ‘letter-plus-reply’ type that is attested in N736.

5 The role of the messenger on birchbark

In the proposed reading, N497 is, on the one hand, paleographically and linguistically fully coherent and, on the other hand, consists of a message and a reply. The most obvious explanation for this is to assume that the messenger was the writer of the invitation, which he put on birchbark while he was in the city in the presence of Gavriila Postnja, as well as the writer of the answer, which he jotted down while he was out of the city in the presence of Gavriila’s family. In writing down the words of the invitees, he did not bother to compose a new message with its own greeting formula on a separate piece of birchbark (or on the back of the same birchbark, like in the case of N736), but composed the reply in the form of an uninterrupted continuation of the initial message.

This scenario may seem strange at first sight, but is fully in line with the character of communicatively heterogeneous birchbark texts. They arise in situations which deviate from what in modern times can be considered the standard model—*эталон*, as Gippius 2004, 185 calls it—for written personal messages. In this model there are three participants in the communication chain with each their own roles: the sender, who is also the composer and writer of the message, the messenger who is no more than the carrier of the message and does not play any role in the communication between the sender and addressee, and the addressee, who is also the reader of the message.⁶

In his 2004 article, Gippius amply demonstrates that in birchbark letters this standard model can be interfered with different ways and with different consequences for the linguistic make-up of the documents. The two most important and often interrelated factors which disrupt the model and which can influence the composition of the written text are the ‘extended’ role of the messenger and what can be called the orality–literacy interface: the interaction of the spoken word in the written speech act production. The messenger can participate actively in the communication between the sender and the addressee: he can be the composer and writer of the text; he can be authorized by the sender to elaborate orally on the content for the addressee; he can be the reader of the message to the addressee; and he can even be a beneficiary of the business dealt with in the letter.

⁶Gippius (2004, 185) identifies these six roles as ‘отправитель сообщения’, ‘составитель текста’, ‘пишущий’, ‘посыльный’, ‘читающий’, and ‘получатель сообщения, адресат’. He points out that in principle each of these roles can be executed by different persons, like for instance in the case of high diplomatic correspondence. As a mirror-part of the role of the composer (‘encoder’) on the sender’s side one may add a seventh role of the ‘decoder’ on the receiver’s side of the communication chain (for instance in state-to-state correspondence with a complex hierarchically structured administration). However, separate roles of encoder and decoder which might occur in very specific communicative situations will probably often coincide in practice with the roles of sender/writer and to an even greater extent with the roles of reader/addressee, respectively.

In the proposed reading of N497, it is clear that the messenger took over the role of the writer of the invitation as well as the reply. Both texts may have been composed and dictated to him by the senders themselves. In view of the phrasing of the second message, repeating the words of the invitation, it may even very well be that the messenger also fulfilled the role of the composer of the reply. It is also plausible to assume that the messenger read aloud the text to the addressees (and probably showed them the birchbark at the same time as proof of the assignment given to him); this at least would explain why the reply was written in such a casual way, right below the initial message and without the usual greeting formula. The communicative coherence of the written text would be guaranteed by the intermediary role of the messenger and the sender's greetings (*poklonъ*) could be delivered by the messenger as well.⁷

Also, it is very likely that the messenger of N497 had a further oral explanatory role in the communication, since the letter does not state when and on what occasion Grigorij and Ulita should come to the city; unless they were already informed about the details prior to the written invitation, it seems obvious that the messenger had to give the necessary additional information. Compare in this respect birchbark letter no. 40 from Staraja Russa (late 14th century), which is also an invitation to come to the city and which is stylistically very close to N497: 'Greetings from Oksin'ja and Onanija to Rodivon and my sister Tat'jana. Come to the city *this Sunday* (к сеи недѣли); *I am to give away [my] daughter and my sister is to represent the family* (давати ми доци а сестри моѣ приставницать). And I bow deeply to my Lord Rodivon and my sister' (cf. Zaliznjak, Toropova and Janin 2005, 29f.). Here, it is stated explicitly when and for what purpose the invitees from Staraja Russa are to be expected in Novgorod.

6 Why was Gavrila's invitation written down at all?

Birchbark documents are typically utilitarian and instrumental, where written proof of action is to be expected: "Древнерусские люди 'брались за писало', за редкими исключениями, лишь в связи с настоятельной и [...] житейской необходимостью" (Zaliznjak 1987, 180). N497 seems to be one of these 'rare exceptions'. The letter looks like a 'simple' invitation and a 'simple' reply, and in this assumption the messages could just as well have been conveyed orally by the messenger. What would have been the need, the additional value of putting them down on birchbark? Although we can only speculate about possible reasons, it is still important to briefly address the question, because in order to establish an interpretative framework of the functions of written communication in medieval Novgorod society we need to delineate these functions from alternative means of spoken communication.

To be sure, N497 was not meant to convey practical information that was to be remembered by means of a written message (see above). For some reason, the letter was a way of intensifying the semantics of the directive. By sending out an invitation in writing Gavrila may have stressed its importance, i.e., giving it greater elegance and making it seem more solemn, using the conjunctive mood in 'may you come to the city' and the words 'to my happiness'. In return, the invitees may have wanted to comply with the overtone of

⁷Cf. N422, in which the writer/messenger writes down some instructions in the name of Mestjata, who is the sender of the letter. As a note to himself the messenger formulates Mestjata's greetings to the addressees in the way he should deliver them orally: 'From Mestjata to Gavša and to Sdila. Find me a horse. And Mestjata sends you his greetings (а : ѡбѣстѣта : сѡ : вама поклѣнаѡ). [...]' (cf. Gippius 2004, 212f.).

Gavrila's phrasing by echoing his words and adding the seemingly pleonastic 'all' ('we ... all').

We can only guess why the invitation was so important and different scenarios come to mind. Was it a major ceremonial event, for instance a wedding, like in the case of Staraja Russa 40 (see above)? Or was it not the happening itself that was at stake but the relationship between the two families; were there tensions underlying the request which Gavrila deliberately wanted to mitigate by phrasing his invitation as a politeness strategy in the most friendly way?⁸

In any case, N497 seems to testify that written communication on birchbark, at least in the later period, could serve more than strictly utilitarian purposes in Novgorod society. Putting things on birchbark was not restricted to business deals, hierarchal instructions, legal or pseudo-legal threats, individual or collective complaints, secret or confidential correspondence. Taking into account N497, writing on birchbark seemed to be integrated in society to the extent of communicating matters of courtesy and politeness, whether strictly interpersonal or more strategic in nature.

7 Epilogue: berestology and historical pragmatics

As Gippius states in his 2004 article, a historical pragmatic approach to the birchbark corpus is the next important step which has to be taken in the research field of berestology:

В настоящее время, когда черты бытовой графики и древненовгородского диалекта, выявленные и систематизированные А. А. Зализняком, составляют уже “азбуку” новгородистики, а подавляющее большинство берестяных документов удовлетворительным образом прочитано и переведено, необходимым и возможным является обращение к более высоким уровням организации текста для выяснения специфики самой системы письменной коммуникации, осуществлявшейся при помощи берестяных грамот. (Gippius 2004, 229)

Comparing the interim results with general insights gained from other investigations in the pragmatics of historical texts—which have predominantly focused on the history of English (cf. Jucker 2006, 330f.)—it becomes clear that the role of the messenger and the interaction of the spoken word in written correspondence are typical for the epistolary genre of the Middle Ages and earlier times. As G. Constable already put it:

Letters originated as oral messages, when distance made speech impossible, and the earliest letters took the form of instructions to messengers, reminding them of what to say to the recipients. [...] According to Ambrose [of Milan—JS], ‘The epistolary genre (*genus*) was devised in order that someone may speak to us when we are absent’; and the medieval masters of letter-writing similarly defined a letter as ‘sermo absentium quasi inter presentes’ and ‘acsi ore ad os et presens’. (Constable 1976, 13; cf. also pp. 52–55 on the transmission—carriage and delivery—of letters in the Middle Ages)

Over the last decades further research has been conducted on these topics (see, e.g., Clanchy 1993, 89f., 260–266; Wenzel 1997, 86–89). In the field of historical pragmatics and historical discourse analysis quite a number of case studies have been made where

⁸I owe this observation to Daniel E. Collins.

the issue of orality and the different roles of participants in written communication is addressed; see, e.g., Taavitsainen and Fitzmaurice (2007, 18–21) for an overview of earlier research on language features in historical texts which reflect oral practices. The two authors also address the data problems that are connected with this type of research:

In the attempt to find most speech-like written language of the past, researchers collected drama comedies as the closest to speech, and selected passages from trial records and fiction to affect speech-like data. Yet even with such ostensibly speech-based or related genres, the conventions governing their production have to be taken into account. For instance, encoding practices were conventionalised in courtrooms, letters follow set formulae, and typified utterances are common in fiction. (Taavitsainen and Fitzmaurice 2007, 18)

In the case of the birchbark corpus we have a unique collection of over a thousand medieval texts from a period of more than four hundred and fifty years. The bulk of these texts are personal messages about a huge variety of activities and with a broad social basis in medieval Novgorod society. Because of the heterogeneous and ephemeral nature of the contents, birchbark texts reveal a high degree of various manifestations of speech-based writing, with limited interference of specific genre conventions. It is without doubt that a continuation along the lines of Gippius's investigations in the birchbark corpus can make a great contribution to the wider field of historical pragmatics.

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