Book Review

Simeon Dekker. 2018. *Old Russian Birchbark Letters. A Pragmatic Approach* (Studies in Slavic and General Linguistics 42). Leiden & Boston: Brill Rodopi. ISBN 9789004362383 (hardback), xix + 200 pp. €99.00/$119.00.

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https://doi.org/10.1515/jhsl-2018-0010

The Old Russian birchbark documents have fascinated linguists ever since the first birchbark document was found in 1951.[1] Research first concentrated on the decipherment and the linguistic analysis of the texts. For some time now, the focus has been on their peculiar textual and pragmatic characteristics. Many of the birchbark letters seem cryptic to an "accidental overreader" (p. 70) and need a great deal of additional assumptions in order to receive meaningful interpretation. Birchbark literacy turns out to be something of a hybrid between oral and written communication, with the letter bearer being an additional carrier of (oral) information. We owe this important insight to Gippius, whose seminal article (2004) initiated a novel way of analyzing and interpreting birchbark letters. Simeon Dekker continues this line of work and sets out to explore the linguistic manifestations of orality in a systematic manner.

The study is divided into two major parts. Chapters one through four introduce topic, methods, data and theoretical background. Chapters five through eight contain in-depth analyses of linguistic features that could be linked to oral practices or, to use Dekker's term, to the "oral mindset" of birchbark communication.

Chapter one ("The Field of Study: Berestology", pp. 1–13) is a concise yet at times oversimplified introduction into the database and the existing research in the field of "berestology" (< Ru. *beresta* 'birchbark', i. e. the study of birchbark documents). Dekker's database comprises the birchbark documents unearthed up to the excavation season in 2016, that is approx. 1,200 documents, most of them from Novgorod and nearby cities in northwest Russia, and a few from other places in Russia.[2] The texts date from the early eleventh through the late fifteenth centuries. The overwhelming majority are quite short and do not

1 Editors' note: See also the book review of Schaeken's (2019) monograph *Voices on Birchbark. Everyday Communication in Medieval Russia* in the present issue.

2 The birchbark documents have been digitized and are publicly accessible on www.gramoty.ru. The site is updated regularly.

consist of more than 20 words. The documents can be classified into several groups by their contents. The largest group are private or semi-private messages relating to issues of daily life. Other groups are: different kinds of lists and registers; documents related to schooling; a few literary or folklore texts; some official documents; tags and labels. The second chapter ("The Background: Communicatively Heterogeneous Letters", pp. 14–30) deals extensively with so-called "communicative heterogeneity", which is one of the most obvious indicators of orality in birchbark communication. The term was coined by Gippius (2004) and refers to letters that contain more than one message, each having a different addressee or author. In "Research Question" (Ch. 3, pp. 31–35) Dekker turns to the linguistic phenomena he intends to investigate and puts forward several hypotheses on the outcome of the analysis. The following chapter ("Theory and Methodology: Pragmaphilology", Ch. 4, pp. 36–50) outlines the theoretical background and brings up methodological issues. The theoretical framework is mainly based on Koch and Oesterreicher's (1985) opposition of medial vs. conceptual orality/literacy. Dekker also addresses the methodological difficulties that arise from the limited size of the birchbark corpus, which precludes statistically valid analyses. He opts for "a combination of a qualitative analysis with as great a quantitative component as is possible for this corpus" (p. 47).

Chapters five through eight form the core of the work. Each chapter is a case study on a linguistic feature that is likely to have some bearing on the oral character of the birchbark letters. The four chapters are organized in a similar manner. Firstly, the phenomenon is explored from a theoretical and, where necessary, typological point of view. Then follow the presentation and discussion of the birchbark data. The chapters conclude with deliberations on how the phenomenon is related to the orality–literacy contrast. Each study is conducted diligently, thoroughly and is illustrated with many examples.

The first case study deals with the use of imperative subjects (pp. 51–70) and is based on a formerly published article (Dekker 2014). When used in heterogeneous birchbark letters, an imperative subject explicitly selects a new addressee and thus marks the boundary between two messages. Without an imperative subject there is no overt boundary between the messages and the interpretation hinges on orally conveyed or contextual information. The lack of an imperative subject thus is a manifestation of orality.

Chapter five, "Case Study II: Speech Reporting" (pp. 71–114), is a fine analysis of different strategies of speech reporting. Dekker finds attestations of four types of speech reporting: narrative report of speech act, indirect speech, direct speech and free direct speech. The connection between orality/literacy and a given strategy is less obvious than in the previous case. Neither direct nor

indirect speech is *per se* a manifestation of orality or literacy. The only clearly oral-based strategy is free direct speech, i. e. direct speech that is not signaled by a *verbum dicendi*. Dekker comes to the conclusion that "the fact that readers were able to deal with it [the use of direct speech, *I.M.*], in certain cases without the help of further intra-textual disambiguating elements, suggests that an oral mindset was available in correspondence" (p. 108). His argument is based on the fact that direct speech involves deictic expressions, whose resolution entirely depends on the context.

The third case study, "Epistolary Past Tense" (Ch. 7, pp. 115–136), takes on an idea first presented in Sxaken et al. (2014). Dekker analyzes past tense verb forms that obviously refer to an action that still has to be carried out at the time of writing (e. g. *ja poslal* 'I sent … '). This so-called epistolary past tense has been known to exist in older stages of other languages and is usually explained by a shift of temporal perspective from the author (coding time) to the addressee (receiving time). Dekker finds that not all cases of epistolary past tense in the birchbark letters can be accounted for by a shift in perspective. In some cases, so his argument, the past tense rather refers to the preparations of the denoted action. According to Dekker, the verbform *poslalъ jesmь* in phrases such as *Poslalъ jesmь s posadnicitъ Manuilomъ 20 bělъ k tobě* 'I have sent to you 20 squirrel pelts with the govoernor's [man] Manuil' (Novgorod 358, 1340–1360) does not refer to a previous act of sending the squirrel pelts, but only to the preparations for it; the pelts are being delivered simultaneously with the letter. At the same time, the birchbark letter serves as "a ratification of the decision and preparations" (p. 136), which provides the past tense verb form with a performative-like quality (p. 131). When it comes to linking the epistolary past tense to an "oral mindset", however, things get a little blurry; a fact Dekker admits freely (p. 136).

The notion of performativity leads to the last case study, "Assertive Declarations" (pp. 137–176). Assertive declarations state a fact and at the same time bring about a state of affairs. Dekker argues that speech acts like *Se daja Ieve serebro Matfeju* … 'Hereby Iev has given (the) silver to Matfej … ' (Novgorod 197, 1280–1300) can be interpreted as assertive declarations. These speech acts were formally marked by the aorist and – though less frequent – the perfect. When considering the rationale behind this, Dekker refers to Bary (2012), who finds the "aoristic aspect" to be the optimal aspect for performatives. Unfortunately, Dekker does not elaborate on Bary's theory, which, in turn, is based on Klein's (1994) concept of tense and aspect. Even though Dekker is probably right in assuming that Bary's approach does not work for Slavic, the argument could have benefitted from Klein's distinction between topic time and event time. Linking the past tense in assertive declarations to orality poses a certain challenge. The use of the aorist in assertive declarations

is also attested in other Old Russian documents and is clearly a sign of literacy, as Dekker concedes. Nevertheless, he claims that the use of the past tense in assertive declarations has its origin in the "oral habits" of birchbark communication, since it refers to an earlier, orally executed transaction.

In the last chapter ("Conclusions", pp. 177–188) Dekker connects the results of the four case studies with different aspects of orality. He concludes that the birchbark letters hold an intermediate position on the orality–literacy scale and mark a transitional state of *Verschriftlichung* (Ge., 'movement towards literacy'). Dekker correctly points out that the birchbark corpus is very heterogeneous from both a linguistic and functional perspective and that it is therefore impossible to position the corpus as a whole. However, he does not take into account their diachronic diversity. He implicitly assumes that over time the birchbark corpus became "less oral" and "more literate". Occasionally he comments on the development of certain phenomena (pp. 90–92, 114), but he does not delve into the problem more deeply. To be sure, this is not an easy thing to do, given the scarcity of the linguistic data. Still, the diachronic dimension must not be overlooked in this debate, particularly when we consider the fact that certain Church Slavic elements had been replaced by less bookish ones (e. g. formulae of address, cf. Gippius 2009). Such a process could be interpreted as a decline in literacy and challenges the claim for a linear development towards *Verschriftlichung*.

The book is well written, clearly structured and easy to read. However, at times it was unclear to me who the intended audience is. The volume has been published in the series "Studies in Slavic and General Linguistics", which naturally suggests a readership with some knowledge in linguistics, maybe even Slavic linguistics. Yet Dekker devotes a lot of space to the explanation of terms and concepts that every linguist is bound to know. This is particularly cumbersome in chapter eight, where he discusses the theory of speech acts at length (pp. 139–145), starting with Austin's "How to do things with words" from 1962, even though Austin's theory has no relevance for Dekker's own case study.

Notwithstanding, Dekker's book is a very welcome contribution to the field of historical pragmatics and an important step towards a comprehensive account of the pragmatics of the Old Russian birchbark letters.

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