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The oral heritage of intimate letters

Кључне речи:
conversation, epistolary genre, intimate letters, addressivity, dialogicality, I-You reversibility, writer-reader relationship, utterance, turn taking, sequential relationships, adjacency pair, internal reading, writing to the moment, temporal and spatial distance.

У овом раду ауторка сматра да епистоларни дискурс којим се она бави, може бити третиран као врста спонатаног говора, с обзиром да адресант и адресат делују на бази изјава. Та особина епистоларне форме која приближава говорнике конверзацији базира се на одсуству времена и физичке дистанце. Ауторка на крају закључује да је тежња сваког оваквог саговорника да одсуство претвори у присуство.

Bakhtin's theory on genres

One of Bakhtin's greatest merits is his concern with the pragmatic aspects of text production and consumption. Bakhtin makes a good case for the *utterance* as the basic unit of speech communication through which language enters life: "For speech can exist in reality only in the form of concrete utterances of individual speaking people, speech subjects" (1986: 71).

Bakhtin contrasts the utterance to the *sentence*, a technical term in linguistics related to an abstract grammatical structure. Unlike the sentence, which lacks the capacity to elicit a response, the utterance is demarcated by a change of speaking subjects and "is oriented toward the response of the other (others), toward his active responsive understanding" (Bakhtin 1986: 75). This feature of being framed by the (1) change of speaking subjects is closely linked to the other features of the utterance, namely (2) finalisation, (3) relationship to the speaker and the other co-participants, and (4) addressibility.

The finalisation of the utterance is made possible by three factors: (1) the semantic exhaustiveness of the theme, (2) the speaker's plan or speech will manifested in the choice of a particular speech genre, and (3) typical compositional and generic forms of finalisation.

The third characteristic is manifest in that the composition and style of the utterance, i.e. the selection of linguistic means and speech genre, are influenced by the plan of the author and his/her emotional attitude towards the specific referentially semantic content. Expressiveness, the emotional evaluation of the content of the utterance, is acquired as a result of the 'live usage' of language.

As well as having an author and expression, the utterance is always oriented towards an addressee. The quality of designing language use for a particular recipient with the view to effecting and affecting a response is a *sine qua non* of the utterance: "Addressivity […] is a constitutive feature of the utterance; without it the utterance does not and cannot exist. The various typical forms this addressivity assumes and the various concepts of the addressee are constitutive, definitive features of various speech genres" (Bakhtin 1986: 99).

Bakhtin defines genres as the relatively stable types of utterances that each sphere of human activity develops. He distinguishes between *primary* genres, which have taken form in unmediated speech communion and are found in the local communicative activities of everyday life, and *secondary*/*complex* genres, which have absorbed and digested various primary genres. He contends that spontaneous face-to-face interaction is a fundamental form of discourse that is recognisable in secondary genres of more complex communication. This view on conversation is confirmed by Levinson, according to whom conversation is "the prototypical kind of language usage, the form in which we are all first exposed to language" (Levinson 1983: 284), as well as by Nofsinger, who sees in talk "the primary method through which interpersonal relations are formed, maintained and dissolved" (Nofsinger 1991: 3).

We claim that intimate letters are a conspicuous case of genuine relatedness to everyday conversation. To support this, we now proceed to a description of the nature of conversational interaction from the perspective of Conversation Analysis (CA). This model of naturally occurring talk will serve as an aesthetic for the analysis of the epistolary form.

Features of conversational interaction

Ordinary conversation is the predominant medium of interaction in the social world, the central and most basic kind of language usage. According to Edmonson (Edmonson 1981: 6), the notion of conversation "is used loosely and non-technically to refer to any interactional stretch of talk involving at least two participants, and taking place in a non-formalised setting, such that no special rules or conventions may be said to operate".

One of Levinson's definitions of conversation covers precisely the same aspects mentioned by Edmonson, namely the free alternation in speaking of two or more partners and the non-specific nature of the setting in which conversation occurs. Another definition by Levinson focuses this time on its emergence and functioning. Thus, conversation is "the sustained production of chains of mutually-dependent acts, constructed by two or more agents each monitoring and building on the actions of the other" (Levinson 1983: 44). It follows that conversation is a discourse created in a reciprocal undertaking, in which speakers coordinate their behaviour and cooperate for the sake of an equally fluid and orderly interaction in the process of achieving a joint enterprise.

To sum up the views on what makes conversation a distinctive speech genre, we can refer to a relative emphasis on three charac-

teristics: (1) cooperation between the conversationalists, (2) equal distribution of speaker rights, i.e. reciprocity, and (3) spontaneity and informality.

The process or joint-activity view of discourse is also known as *Conversation Analysis*. CA treats language use in social interaction as a dynamic activity and concentrates on what the conversationalists do with the language, not as single, isolated voices, but as meaning-making interactive voices.

So, the decisive feature of the CA perspective is its *activity focus*, as it starts from a consideration of the interactional accomplishment of particular social activities based on "a continually updated (and, if need be corrected) understanding of the conversation" (Nofsinger 1991: 66) by making use of the participants' sense of prior, current, and anticipated talk in performing a particular action. Ethnomethodologists[1] call this pillar on which social interaction is founded *intersubjectivity*, whose basic building blocks are connected actions, that is, "convergence between doers of an action or bit of conduct and its recipients, or as coproducers of an increment of interactional and social reality" (Schegloff 1992: 1299).

Intersubjectivity is closely interrelated to *accountability* in interactional behaviour. This latter notion is derived from the assumption that people will orient to certain structural or interpersonal norms of behaviour that guide and control the interaction. What a party to interaction does in talking or responding to another's turn at talk is warrantably used as input concerning his/her intentions, motives, character, etc. This aspect of interaction is referred to as *human agency* and is seen as inherent to the machinery that organises social interaction.

Another feature of CA is the *interactional approach to the units of discourse*. This means that the meaning of an utterance as an *action* is an interactive product of what was projected by a previous turn or turns at talk and what the speaker actually does. Indeed, *turn taking* or *speaker change* is the central phenomenon in conversational interaction and the basic strategy on which conversational cooperation rests. The term *sequential analysis* is used to refer to the local moves and countermoves that constitute a speech exchange and provides a framework for a description of both the *prospective* and the *retrospective* dimension of an utterance.

In other words, the initiation of an action creates the immediate context for the succeeding interaction and occasions, as well as exhibits, the participants' analysis and understanding of the ongoing interaction. This integration of the illocutionary dimension of a current utterance with the perlocutionary dimension of its prior has been a hallmark of CA data analysis[2]. The sequential approach requires thus a focus on sequences of activity,

1) Ethnographic theory sheds light on the relation between the speakers' social identities and the responsibilities associated with their roles in various interactional settings. Ethnomethodologists study the way in which collectivity members create and maintain a sense of order and intelligibility in social life.

2) Speech-act theory is the most important approach to the study of language in use. It was proposed by Austin (1962) and developed in a more systematic and technical manner by his student Searle (1969). Its basic tenet is that, in addition to the propositional meaning, utterances are used to perform actions. The illocutionary act is equivalent to the notion of speech act. The other acts are the locutionary act, i.e. the propositional/linguistic dimension of the utterance, and the perlocutionary act, i.e. the effect of the utterance on the hearer.

i.e. units that are larger than the individual sentence or utterance and whose component units are turns within sequences.

The fundamental sequencing device in conversation is the *adjacency pair*, the prototype of which is the question-answer sequence. Adjacency pairs have two parts, a first pair part (FPP) and a second pair part (SPP), and their most important property is conditional relevance[3]. This means that once the speaker has produced a FPP of a certain type of adjacency pair (e.g. invitation), it is conditionally relevant for the hearer to produce a SPP of the right type (e.g. acceptance/rejection of invitation). The generative mechanism for adjacency pairs can be put down to the fundamental need in communication for the provision of feedback.

The third feature of CA is the conception of *context* in interaction. Leech (Leech 1983: 13) sees context as "any background knowledge assumed to be shared by speaker and hearer which contributes to hearer's interpretation of what speaker means by a given utterance". Leech's notion of background knowledge is more explicitly described by Wardhaugh (Wardhaugh 1985: 101): "Contexts include not merely the linguistic one, that is, those utterances that precede and follow the utterance in question, but also the surrounding physical context, previous conversations between the participants, relevant aspects of their life histories, the general rules of behaviour the parties subscribe to, their assumptions about how the various bits and pieces of the world function, and so on."

Utterances and the social actions they embody are treated as doubly contextual in the interactional framework of conversational analysis. First, they are *context-shaped*, as their contributions to the ongoing sequence of actions cannot be adequately understood except by reference to the context in which they participate. This contextual aspect of utterances is significant in that speakers draw upon it as a resource in designing their utterances, and because listeners also draw on the local contexts of utterances to infer adequately the speaker's intended meaning. Second, utterances and actions are *context-renewing*, since each utterance forms the immediate context for some next contribution in the sequence.

Thus, CA treats context in close relation to the interaction process, and, consequently, to the participants' own actions and contributions. Ordinary conversation being generally unrehearsed and, therefore, essentially spontaneous, conversationalists create its content and structure in the course of playing it out.

We have shown that the very nature of everyday conversation derives, in large part, from its turn-taking system. The turn system for conversation as a primary genre provides a useful point of departure for analysing the turn organisation in other interactive communication episodes The question that arises is how turn taking is managed particularly in nonconversational yet thoroughly interactional episodes that involve *shared intentionality*, of which intimate epistles are a special case.

Intimate letters and conversation

Writer-reader relationship

The epistolary form is a product of a union of reader and writer and is associated with

3) "Conditional relevance" is a notion introduced by Schegloff (1972) to refer to the fact that any utterance restricts the range of actions that subsequent turns may perform. Other equivalent notions are "local occasioning" and "sequential implicativeness" (Jefferson 1978).

conversation or dialogue primarily because of the obvious importance of the sender-recipient relationship.

Altman inscribes epistolary discourse within "the larger domain of verbal exchange between two parties, each of whom alternately assumes the role of speaker or hearer" (Altman 1982: 134). Just as in conversation, the truly epistolary writing is governed by a genuine desire for exchange with an audience that is a specific reality. In this sense, the personal letter is exceptional among written genres for portraying the experience of reading and making the second party as important as the addresser.

The epistolary experience is a reciprocal one, as "the letter writer seeks to affect his reader and is simultaneously affected by him" (Altman 1982: 88). Mey also argues that intimate letters are, first and foremost, "an instance of addressivity and addressability; the letter writer addresses his or her correspondent and in so doing, anticipates the other's active reply, to which the original writer in turn prepares a possible response…in a true dialogic interchange of voices" (Browning 1999: 326).

In her letters to Robert Browning, Elizabeth Barrett repeatedly equates letter writing to making conversation, or socialising, or (fanciful) speaking:

(1) […] this talking upon paper being as good a social pleasure as another […] (Letter 6, Feb. 3, 1845).

(2) I write in fact almost as you pay visits, … & one has to 'make conversation' in turn, of course (Letter 19, May 1, 1845).

(3) I feel at home, this blue early morning, now that I sit down to write (or, *speak*, as I try & fancy) to you …. (Letter 86, August 21, 1845, original emphasis).

(4) How would any woman have felt … who could feel at all … *hearing* such words said (though "in a dream" indeed) by such a speaker? – And now *listen* to me in turn (Letter 115, September 26, 1845, our emphasis).

The recipient becomes thus an *internal reader-interpreter* who generates a new message (turn) determined by the interpretation of the sender's message. Just as the decoding of an utterance in face-to-face verbal interaction determines a new turn in the conversational sequence, so is the reader's (response to the) critique/interpretation of the writer's message generative of a new response in the continuation of the epistolary exchange: "Reader consciousness explicitly informs the act of writing itself" (Altman 1982: 186). A common technique for the negotiation of meaning in epistles is that of quoting and paraphrasing the correspondent's words, as in these examples:

(5) But I did not mean to strike a "tragic chord"; indeed, I did not (Letter 12, March 5, 1845).

(6) *What do you mean about your manuscripts … about 'Saul' & the portfolio?* for I am afraid of hazardously supplying ellipses (Letter 21, May 5–6, 1845, original emphasis).

(7) But how 'mistrustfulness'? And how "that way"? What have I said or done, *I*, who am not apt to be mistrustful of anybody & should be a miraculous monster if I began with *you*! What can I have said, I say to myself again and again (Letter 25, May 15, 1845, original emphasis).

(8) …how can the use of such be "humiliating" to *you*? (Letter 29, May 21, 1845, original emphasis).

(9) And then, what did I say of the Dante and Beatrice? Because what I referred to was the exquisite page or two or three on that subject (…)" (Letter 62, July 16–17, 1845).

In her ontology of the epistolary genre, Altman explains that this core characteristic of writing to an objectified other generates other crucial traits, such as the *pronominal relativity of the I-You* and the *pivotal and impossible present*, notions that we summarise and illustrate below.

Epistolary discourse is based on the particularity of the *I-You* relationship, the letter narrative being built up by the reversibility of the first and second person. The very essence of the epistolary language is to attract the *You* into becoming the *I* of a new utterance. The events in the letter narrative are reflected from both the reader's and the writer's angles, and the epistolary experience is thus the product of the interpersonal bond between the two correspondents.

(10) Shall I hear from you, I wonder! … Write to me! … Say particularly how you are – now do not omit it. (Letter 199, January 13, 1846).

The constant concern of the letter writer with the recipient is evident in his/her provision of temporal, spatial, or emotional coordinates for the specific other – reference points that are meant to define/map the shared world of the two epistolary partners. Altman remarks that unlike in the memoir, where the present is subordinate to the past, the time of narration is pivotal in the epistolary narrative, where the narrated events or the feelings expressed are related to the moment of enunciation: "Epistolary characters constantly engage in such ritual acts of stocktaking, communicating their "état présent" in terms of what they have already done, where they are now, and what they fear, hope, or plan for the future" (1982: 122). Instance (11), below, serves evidence for the ramification of the *now* of writing to the *then* of the past and the *then* of the future.

(11) May I ask you how your head is? Just under the bay? Mr. Kenyon was here to-day & told me such bad news that I cannot sleep to-night (although I did think once of doing it) without asking such a question as this, dear Mr. Browning (Letter 22, May 11, 1845).

The importance of the *now* and *here* of writing is accounted for by the fact that the writer and the reader share neither time nor space and is derived from the desire to bring the reader closer to the writer – spatially, temporally, and emotionally – in an attempt to imitate the immediacy, freshness, and naturalness of real time conversation. A most frequent technique used in intimate letters to create the illusion of presence, besides that of quoting and paraphrasing the partner's remarks (see above), is that *of writing to the moment*, or live writing, i.e. writing simultaneously with the event or emotion described. Examples of this device engaged to shorten the temporal gap between the event and the expression of it are plentiful in our corpus of letters.

(12) I write in the greatest haste after Miss Mitford has left me… so tired… (Letter 51, June 26, 1845).

(13) Here your letter breaks in, & sunshine too. Why do you send me that book – not let me take it? What trouble for nothing! (Letter 55, 1 July, 1845)

(14) I was writing you see before you came – & now I go on in haste to speak "off my mind" some things which are on it. (Letter 87, August 20, 1845).

(15) I fling these hasty rough words over the paper, fast as they fall… (Letter 114, September 25, 1845).

(16) While writing this, the "Times" catches my eye (it just came in) – […] and, as I say, this is the first and only sentence I read…(Letter 130, October 15, 1845).

In many instances, the epistolary author invokes external pressure, mostly the arrival of the postman/messenger, which, by reducing the time of reflection, lends writing the dynamism and spontaneity of spontaneous talk.

(17) I am forced to the brevity you see, by the post on one side, and my friends on the other, who have so long overstayed the coming of your note… (Letter 53, June 27, 1845).

(18) Shall I be too late for the post I wonder? Wilson tells me that you were followed upstairs yesterday by somebody whom you probably took for my father (Letter 87, August 20, 1845).

Other reference points can be related to the physical environment of the writer, to his/her doings since the last writing, to the correspondents' common memories, and to places or people that they both know. This epistolary procedure is another attempt by the addresser to create and expand an accessible common context that will make up for the distance that separates the two. The following instance is remarkably suggestive of the narrator's desire for his partner's presence:

(19) Your books lie on my table here, at arm's length from me, in this old room where I sit all day: and when my head aches or wonders or strikes work, (…) I take my chance for either green covered volume, as if [there]it were so much fresh trefoil to feel in one's hands this winter-time… (Letter 5, January 27, 1845).

Conversational sequencing patterns

As we have exemplified above, intimate correspondents engage in a written dialogue where they resort to the means of immediate conversation with the ultimate aim of maintaining the flow of the epistolary exchange.

We have pursued this process of palpable *inter*action in our corpus and have found numerous adjacency pairs, the minimal sequential structures in conversation, and even larger, topically coherent, joint projects that consist of a whole series of exchanges stretching over several dialogue units.

(20, see 21) Who told you of my skulls and spider webs – Horne? (Letter 9, February 26, 1845)

(21, see 20) Who told me of your skulls and spiders? (…) Mr. Horne never spoke it to my ears. (…) Well, then! If I were to say that *I heard it from yourself*, .. how would you answer? And it was so (Letter 10, February 27, 1845, original emphasis).

(22, see 23) I trust you for a true account of how you are – if tired, if not tired, if I did wrong in any thing, – or, if you please, *right* in any thing (…) For an instance – just what strikes me – they all say here I speak very loud (…) And did I stay too long? (Letter 28, May 20, 1845).

(23, see 22) Indeed there was nothing wrong – how should there be? And there was everything right – as how should there not be? And as for the 'loud speaking,' I did not hear any! – and, instead of being worse, I ought to be better for what

was certainly happiness & honour to me yesterday (Letter 29, May 21, 1845).

In the following instance, negotiating the date of the partners' next encounter takes place over five 'turns'.

(24, see 25) What will you think when I ask you *not* to come to-morrow, Wednesday; but .. on Friday perhaps .. instead? (Letter 49, June 24, 1845, original emphasis).

(25, see 24 and 26) Friday is best day because nearest, but Saturday is next best – it is next near, you know: if I get no note, therefore, Friday is my day (Letter 50, June 25, 1845).

(26, see 25) After all it must be for Saturday, as […] I write in the greatest haste […] to say this – that if you can and will come on Saturday, .. or if not on Monday or Tuesday, there is no reason against (Letter 51, June 26, 1845).

(27, see 26) Let me make haste & write down *To-morrow*, Saturday, & not later […] Well – Saturday is said – but I will stay not quite so long, nor talk nearly so loud as of old times – nor will you – if you understand anything of me – fail to send down word should you be at all indisposed (Letter 52, June 27, 1845, original emphasis).

(28, see 27) You are very kind – but really *that* does not seem a good reason against your coming to-morrow […] you will do no harm by coming – only give pleasure – (Letter 53, June 27, 1845).

Many of the correspondents' emotional coordinates are related to the perlocutionary effect of a certain illocutionary act on the addressee, that is, to the change caused in the reader's state of mind by a certain utterance performed by the writer in previous dialogue units, as these instances show:

(29) […] I will say, I must say, that your words in this letter have done me good & made me happy, … and that to receive such a proof from *you*, not only overpowers every present evil, but seems to me full and abundant amends for the merely personal sufferings of my whole life (Letter 115, September 26, 1845).

(30) Almost you forced me to smile by thinking it worth while to say that you are *not selfish* (Letter 131, October 15, 1845, original emphasis).

In intimate letters, very much like in conversation, the epistolary interactants use language in order to act upon each other through the various speech acts they perform. Sometimes they overtly negotiate, deny or clarify the intentionality of their utterances, as in these cases:

(31) However this may be, a *promise* goes to you in it that none, except God and your will, shall interpose between you & me… (Letter 115, September 26, 1845, our emphasis).

(32) I have *not* brought any *accusation*, have I .. no, (…) I am sure… (Letter 87, August 20, 1845, our emphasis).

(33) Well – I am *not quarrelling* – I am uneasy about your head rather. The pain in it .. what can it mean? (…) I *do not propose* that you should go to Italy, observe, nor any great thing at which you might reasonably hesitate (Letter 199, January 13, 1846, our emphasis).

Throughout our demonstration of the close relatedness between face-to-face casual

conversation and intimate letters, we have selected the chatty line in the Brownings's correspondence. To do justice to the documentary bibliographical value of their letters, we should mention that they contain extensive monologues that show their noble and subtle spirits, the experience of their inner life, and, last but not least, their exquisite learnedness.

Concluding remarks

Intimate letters can be approached from the CA perspective on conversation, since in both kinds of communication the speaker/writer and the listener/reader concentrate entirely on each other and accomplish together joint projects by alternating contributions to the conversational/epistolary exchange. Epistolary discourse can be treated as next of kin of spontaneous talk, as they are both built up on an utterance-by-utterance basis. Those features of the epistolary form which bring it closer to conversation are derived from the very main difference between the two genres, namely the absence of shared time and space between the epistolary partners, whose main concern is to bridge this distance. Our illustrations from the Brownings' generous correspondence represent a dialogue on paper through which the lovers and friends and fellow artists try their best to turn their absence into presence for each other.

summary

The oral heritage of intimate letters

This paper explores the similarities between ordinary conversation and intimate letters, with focus on the devices used in the epistolary form to imitate the ideal oral model by compensating for the temporal and spatial distance between the correspondents.

Our starting point is Bakhtin's description of speech genres in terms of (1) the utterance as the basic unit of live language use, whose main feature is orientation towards a response from an addressee, (2) the dialogicality of both oral and written communication, and (3) the existence of primary and secondary speech genres.

We claim that intimate epistolary discourse bears much resemblance to naturally occurring conversation, as a fundamental genre, and build a speech-based aesthetic for the analysis of intimate letters. This model draws on the Conversation Analysis perspective, with its focus on the emergence of conversation, and includes the basic elements of conversational discourse, the local intersubjective and accountable construction of talk through the turn system, and the sequential relationships within the turn-taking activity, of which the minimal structure is the adjacency pair.

Our comparison between conversational and epistolary discourse centers on the generative role of the reader and the resultant reciprocality of the letter writing experience. Epistolary form is portrayed as an endeavour to supplement the absence of the shared space and time particular to face-to-face communication through such means as

negotiation of meaning through internal reading, writing to the moment, mapping the writer's coordinates, the I-You reversibility, and the achievement of such joint projects as adjacency pairs or longer series of turn exchanges. To illustrate these means we turn to the fascinating courtship correspondence between Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett (1845–1846).[4]

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4) The correspondence between Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett, which tells of a courtship of a year and three quarters, is one of the longest, fullest, and most-contained correspondences in English literary history. Our corpus of letters was selected from the edition by Adam Roberts (1996), which includes 573 extant letters, in chronological order, and extensively annotated. The author of this article was so fortunate to read the entire courtship correspondence and have access to all the related documentation during her one-month fellowship with the Armstrong Browning Library, at Baylor University, Waco, Texas. This library is consecrated mainly to Robert Browning's life and poetry, but it also hosts valuable collections of books, manuscripts, and research materials relating to the Victorian culture.