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The Addressee Types of the Internet Open Letters

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Abstract

The author considers open letters on Internet sites as a variation of an epistolary genre. A novel type of an open letter, a letter to the future is described. Computer mediated communication as a form of public discourse increases the number of recipients of the letters, introducing changes to the conventional model of a letter addressee. It is concluded that messages on the open letters sites, high in personalization (i.e. private) and low in exclusivity (i.e. public), allow bridging the gap between mass and personal communication, thus remediating an epistolary genre.

1. Introduction

In the last decades the number of studies focusing on the epistolary genre has grown dramatically. The arrival of digital technologies boosting people's isolation spurred interest in letter-writing especially in western cultures with their strong sense of privacy and tacit taboo on free expression of feelings, secrets and concerns in face-to-face communication. The clear evidence of the tendency is thousands of the so-called "open letters" anonymously posted to social networking services such as lettersillneversend.com, lettersweneversent.blogspot.ru, futureme.org and others alike.

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Widely expressed opinions state that electronic mail is significantly less believable and trustworthy than printed letter form. The e-mails (rather "messages" than "letters") are brief, written in a hurry and do not evoke great positive impressions (Moore, 2013). On the other hand, Bolter and Grusin's theory of remediation suggests that '[t]he goal of remediation is to refashion or rehabilitate older media' (Bolter, et al., 1999). It is stated that '…the new medium can remediate by trying to absorb the older medium entirely, so that the discontinuities between the two are minimized. The very act of remediation, however, ensures that the older medium cannot be entirely effaced; the new medium remains dependent on the older one in acknowledged or unacknowledged ways' (Bolter, et al., 1999). In the earliest days of Internet communication digital technologies were remediating paper letters filling the text with images, photos, hyperlinks to immerse the reader into virtual reality, to impress, to make him fell "as if" in another reality. On the other hand, reduction of the speed of letter exchange resulted in worsening the quality of writing as a skill, prioritizing visual to written. For instance, letters with attached photos made it unnecessary to verbalize events, experience, emotions.

A close examination of the current open letters, as compared to private e-mails which people exchange in everyday life, shows the reverse tendency: writers invest a lot of effort in constructing their messages trying to sound sincere and authentic. The efforts are driven by the very choice of the topics discussed in the letters: family, love, personal relationship, inner problems, etc. Sometimes these letters can be as long as two pages with more than one thousand words. More importantly, they retain the typical structure of the letter, i.e. an epistolary framework, consisting of salutation, main body of the letter, closing remarks (wishes, thanks, appreciation, etc.) and signature. The amount of visuals attached to the texts, as well as "smiles", is also diminishing.

An assumption is that an epistolary genre is remediated due to the erosion of the boundaries between private and public discourses. Writers do not hesitate to exhibit private affairs for a wide audience, directly/indirectly addressing it their inner thoughts. The change of the mode of address, alongside with pronounced anonymity on Internet sites, allows for freer self-expression, thus remediating an epistolary genre.

2. The mode of address

The mode of address is one of the distinguishing features of epistolary genre. A personal letter is typically considered to belong to a private discourse as a communicative event between a single sender (*I*) and a single recipient (*You*). A letter is aimed at covering the existing physical distance and bridging the emotional gap thus stressing the idea of separation. Traditionally, information in a sealed personal letter is intended for a designated recipient and can be disclosed only with an author's consent.

However, since ancient times a letter has balanced between personal and public discourses. Communally read letters in ancient Greece and in the eighteenth century Europe, modern letters to the editor, open letters in newspapers, advice columns "allowed for the mutual or shared concerns of private citizens to be articulated and forwarded to a sphere of Authority" (Habermas, 1989). Computer mediated communication as a form of public discourse increases the number of recipients of the letters, introducing changes to the conventional model of a letter recipient.

According to the number of interlocutors there are four main types of communication:

- Intrapersonal communication, i.e. language use or thought internal to the interlocutor. In this case an individual combines the roles of a sender and a receiver of messages and provides feedback to himself in an ongoing internal process. Intrapersonal communication is also known as inner speech, auto-communication or self-verbalization and can run in the form of inner dialogue or inner monologue.

- Interpersonal communication refers to the exchange of messages between people (usually two individuals) who either know each other or when "you treat the other as a unique human being" (Beebe, et al., 2002).

- Group communication, i.e. a kind of interpersonal communication within groups of between three to twenty individuals.

- Mass communication, defined as "the process whereby media organizations produce and transmit messages to large publics and the process by which those messages are sought, used, and consumed by audiences" (Littlejohn & Foss, 2005).

By the traditional definition, letters posted openly on various Internet sites are likely to be defined as mass communication messages. The proofs are: a) letters are conveyed via a mass communication channel b) they can be

addressed to a number of individuals. Most writers choose this undifferentiated audience as their target addressee and specify it in the greeting (e.g. *Hello, everybody!*; *anyone who cares*; *whoever is out there*). This audience is viewed not as a sphere of Authority, with higher status and position in the society, but as ordinary people like you who just happen to encounter similar problems and can give some advice. Being anonymous, writers do not hesitate to exhibit their selves to a wide audience not to be alone, to feel involvement with others, and get some unspoken support.

To reduce the number of recipients writers can address their letters to a group of people discriminated by some specific characteristics (e.g., *To: people who read fan-fictions*). These restrictions help the undifferentiated audience more clearly identify themselves as the addressees of the letter.

The moderators on the open letters sites proclaim total anonymity stressing that no names or addresses are to be posted: *Please refrain from mentioning specific people in a public letter (and if you do we reserve the right to delete your letter)*. Nevertheless, these requirements are often neglected by both parties. The very idea of a personal letter implies explicitness of personal details, exteriorization of the inner world. Therefore, in some cases writers address their letters to a target individual who they assume a shared context with (e.g. *to Alex*) and even to inanimate objects (e.g. *Dear Envy*, *My Oak Tree*, *My mind*, *My Brain*, etc.). Appealing to such cognitive realities as mind and brain writers stress the importance of the inner world striving for outward expression. The possibility that the letters will be answered by the direct addressee is vague, but writers hope that he/she may by some chance come across their letter in the remote future.

Specifying a designated person in the salutation, writers are nevertheless aware of the general public who happen to read their autobiographic texts. These lurkers can be defined as ratified/official (Goffman, 1981) who, due to the inherent openness of the Internet, have a right to read these messages. The addressers of the letters can either neglect them, indulging in the spontaneous process of self-expression or write with such readers in mind, directly/indirectly addressing them some parts of the messages or vice versa omitting too intimate things. Anyway, the presence of the lurkers "overhearing" writer's ideas make these letters double addressed: one vector of address is aimed at a target individual, the other (directly or indirectly) at a mass addressee.

Being autobiographic texts personal letters are a perfect example of auto-communication when "silent" inner speech, i.e. writer's ephemeral thoughts are exteriorized in the process of letter writing. Transforming inner speech into graphic code "the addresser inwardly reconstructs his essence, since the essence of a personality may be thought of as an individual set of socially significant codes, and this set changes during the act of communication" (Lotman, 1990). When a letter is "alienated" from its author and appears on the screen, an author becomes the first recipient to decode the message. Of special importance in the context of auto-communication is memory. Memory is an image of the past re-produced in the present that gives new shape to the present. An open letter will be saved in the archive for a certain period, and a writer will be able to reread it any time in future. In a new context this dialogue between *I* and *the Other Me* sheds a new light on the past events and influences the present. Therefore, in the process of auto-communication "the message is reformulated and acquires new meaning;" i.e. it is "qualitatively transformed" (Lotman, 1990).

A novel type of an open letter is the so-called letter to the future, i.e. a personal letter which is to be received at any date assigned by an author. The dates can range from the nearest future (e.g. one month) to the farthest future (e.g. thousands of years). The most specific feature of the letter to the future is the mode of address: these open letters are self-addressed and are sent by a writer to his/her own e-mail. The rules of the site *futureme.org* specify the use of the standard salutation *Dear FutureMe*. The writers, however, often neglect it and introduce variations, stressing their either positive or negative features. Self-nominative lexical units serve as indicators of the writers'gender. Women prefer such hypocoristics as *happy 18th girly, girl, sweetie, Amy (Little Dittle), future Kimmie, little you!, baby, Your pretty past you, honey, my dear one*. Men most often use colloquialisms containing a seme "friend": (*bro, bud, dawg, kid, dig, bub*) and low colloquialisms (*You dick!; you bastard; Yo dude!; bitch; smartass*).

When writing a letter to the future an author considers himself/herself to be *the Other I*, when a personality splits into two halves *Present Me* (an addresser) and *Future Me* (an addressee). The idea of separation manifests itself in the confusion of personal pronouns used to nominate the addressee. It can be a pronoun *you*, indicating inseparability from the addresser (*I know you (well because I am you)*), consistency with his inner self (*I'm still inside of you*

somewhere). Another strategy is to use the convergent pronoun *we* and its derivatives, combining various individual's hypostasis: *Dear Future us*; *Well, we never were much for talking, even to ourself so I shall cut you loose my friend*. Sometimes different alternative pronouns are used, implying uncertainty and hesitation: *I really hope, for once, that you, or I, am still fighting the battle cause people do care. Honestly, I don't want to tell you how to live your/my/our life*.

The functions of the letters to the future are reflexive, expressive, prognostic (i.e. an attempt to predict one's own future). Posting these letters to the site authors also aim to present themselves for the audience. Therefore, another function of the letters is that of self-presentation.

The above-described types of open letters are not strictly intended for getting an immediate answer, although most writers hope to get comments and "likes" which will increase their personal ranking on the site. An opportunity for getting a response in the comments discriminates open letters from the one-way types of mass communication (TV, radio, etc.). The two-way mode of communication typifies open letters as interpersonal communication. To settle the argument O'Sullivan proposes to reconsider traditional conceptualizations of mass communication and interpersonal communication and bridge them under the term "masspersonal communication". This construct challenges the assumption that a used communication channel determines the type of communication. Masspersonal communication model incorporates two dimensions – message personalization and message access exclusivity. Communicators can change these variables, i.e. present themselves as more or less unique and distinctive individuals to a broader or narrower audience. In this model, the form of communication is not restricted by the communication channel but is rather determined by communicators' decisions (O'Sullivan, 2003).

The messages on the open letters sites are high in personalization (i.e. private) and low in exclusivity (i.e. public). Individuals, who fail to speak freely and truly outside Internet, intentionally exercise the practice of sharing intimate information with large audiences. For some individuals getting a response is really important, for others it is just a way to speak out and to elucidate their inner state, sort out ideas and thoughts.

3. Conclusion

Internet as a new medium for letter-writing can contribute to an epistolary genre remediation. Anonymity of Internet medium encourages writers to be more sincere and open, as if writing to themselves in personal diaries. Increasing message personalization and lowering message access exclusivity, individuals transform the conventional address mode of a personal letter bridging the gap between mass and personal addresser. Internet, therefore, provides an opportunity to practice with one and the same letter all types of communication: intrapersonal, interpersonal, group and mass communication.

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