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Doctoral dissertation

Written communication.

The analysys of personal archives in the 20th century.

Résumé

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Keywords: literacy, everyday practice of writing, 20th century private correspondence, letter-writing habitude, letter collection, use of genres, self-reflexive genre, primary and secondary context, sphere of correspondence, biographical phrasing, biographical episode, self-representations and everyday life.

Source materials and interpretational considerations in the structural frame of the thesis

The value of the letters as source material was estimated differently by different disciplines, according to the direction of research represented by the respective area of science. In sociological, anthropological and ethnographical studies when dealing with social and cultural research beside the event oriented document value of the letters a growing importance was given to the person creating the letter, to the society depicted by these letters and this thesis shares this point of view.

In my thesis I approach the letters as textual products that were born according to well defined standards regarding genre and text production in a given cultural and social context and furthermore I focus on the author and the correspondential practice.

The basic sources of interpretation are the collection of private correspondence belonging to Júlia Sigmond and Balázs Becze. Beside the letters dating from the second part of the 20th century, for control purposes and additional information the source material also includes the Júlia Sigmond's autobiography, the interviews created about the letters and other collections of private correspondence from the 20th century.

The different characteristics of the sources and the outlining of the actual contexts of usage made it possible to accomplish different analytical processings, the common base for these being the letter-writing habitude that can be observed in the documents. The segmentation of the sources based upon the addressees of the letters and their actual owner provided the possibility of detailed analysis of the letter-writing and the context of the documents.

The letter corpus can be categorised into three groups according to the owner of the letters: the addressee and actual owner of the letters is the same person (Júlia Sigmond), there is a relational connection between the two (Becze Balázs), or the person is a close/distant acquaintance (Lukas Liane).

The theoretical, methodological and science-historical frame of the research of the letters by stating the results that define the interpretation revealed the connections defining this study in a skeleton of research history that follows the diachronic approach. The letters,

besides their value as documents, provide a context for the individual to represent his/her course of life and enabling self-representation. The self-reflexive trait of the correspondential genre makes it possible to outline the contexts of letter-writing. By exteriorising the social relations the characteristics of the correspondential sphere can be disclosed. The theory of object research analyses the course of life of the letters and provide additional information for the analysis of the relations of secondary contexts..

During the historical analysis of the popularisation of letters, the institutional frame of correspondence and the evolution of formula sets I intended to focus on the process through which the culture of correspondence grew in importance for the everyday man, it became a part of our daily lives and the authors manifested themselves in a growingly personal tone in this genre of communication. The review of the aspects of postal history, the related regulations and laws outlined the specialisation of the institution providing correspondential service, and it also outlined the specialisation of the letters and the creation of options that focused ever greatly on the needs of the individual. The historical review of the structural items of the letters and the evolution of the genre criteria of letters (i.e. the imperative textual clichés) in the 20th century shows a gradually more and more personal use of the genre in which the defining traditional textual clichés that have been present for hundreds of years lose rigidity. However, the historical review of the formulas used in the letters reflects the ideology of different eras (hierarchical order in society, Christianity and communism).

The basic layout of the letters rests on traditional items and it receives its ever changing traits according to individual intentions and the realisation of objectives. The private letters that pertain to Júlia Sigmond's letter collection (which dates from the second part of the 20th century) made it possible to analyse the development of the letter-writing habitude that is different from person to person, proving that letter-writing carries some traditional traits, that conscious shaping and imitation takes place during the process of acquiring the correspondential culture and that these conscious directions control this practice according to explicitly and implicitly defined norms. The importance of the microenvironment played in the acquirement of correspondential culture was highlighted on one hand by the family and on the other hand by the sphere of correspondents. The collection of letters provided the microview of the letter-writing habitude of three persons (Júlia Sigmond, Júlia Czimbalmos and Balázsné Nagy). The analysis of the letter-writing practice of the three persons pertaining to the letter collection made it possible to define the function of this process in the life of the respective person; one could define the evolution of the letter-writing process and to delimit

the individual internal and external motivations. In the case of Júlia Sigmond besides the letters written by her, the interpretation of the addressees and their reflexion also provided additional information for the interpretation. Júlia Czibalmos' letters, who represents the same generation and gender with Júlia Sigmond, that date from the same period as the ones of the latter person show us that the different living standard, the general writing practice of the individual, the descriptive talent, the self-representational procedures, the artistic intent and the person's social network are definitive factors in shaping the letter-writing practice, exercising this practice and this becoming an everyday practice of writing. The main motivational factor of Czibalmos Júlia's correspondence is the necessity of answering. In the case of Júlia Sigmond writing letters is a manifestation of artistic intent, provides self-representation, the opportunity of learning a language, the popularisation of her stories and the expansion of her relations.

Focusing on the self-reflexive trait of the genre the letter writers besides the actual content provide evidence of the contexts that define the circumstances of letter-writing. Furthermore the items of letter content outline the social, ritual, cognitive, objective and genre-specific context thus these represent the predominating elements of tradition in the correspondential sphere as well: the location of letter-writing, its time, its circumstance and the image of the ideal letter writer.

Regarding the private or public relevance of the correspondence the letter-writing process is characterised by both individual and collective writer/reader attitudes. The collective trait of correspondence manifests itself as the normative aspect of the letter-writing process. This gesture acts as a cohesive force among the persons concerned by the letter, and as a gesture of solidarity it strengthens and objectifies the societal bondages. The private, personal trait of letter-writing limits itself to the communication between the given individuals within the society, thus integrating the addressees and excluding every other person. The exclusion from the flow of information, this blocking of information can be understood as a gesture of marginalisation. The alternation of constant and periodical mail partners results in the fluctuation of the correspondential sphere. The weak or strong bonds between the mail partners define the characteristics of communication and the usage of elaborate or limited phrasing.

Júlia Sigmond's autobiography and letters provide a different view of her course of life. The different genres deliver diverse contexts of displaying the course of life, so depending on the nature of the source material these assist in different ways to the respective reconstruction process as well. The comparative approach to autobiography and letters makes

it possible to analyse the mechanisms of shaping the textual course of life, to analyse the situational and genre-specific character of displaying the biographical episodes, the effect of the different phases of the time periods between the event and remembrance to the given event on the text production and the different strategies of self-ontology organisation. The autobiography is a product of contemplative attitude that is born by creating a coherent story out of given segments of one's course of life, taking into consideration a given chronology and organizing these segments according to the self-image valid at the moment of text production. The letters are perfect for rendering the actual events; they evoke a biographical episode according to the conversational situations. Depending on the course of life the self-image changes as well. The letters provide a picture of this process, beside the actual events the individual continuously actualizes the events that took place with new and ever expanding roles, so the individual emphasises the fragmented and incoherent traits of the related events. The letter provides a still picture of its content, so one of the roles of the continuous correspondence is to convey the self-focused actualities. The newer episodes can overwrite or acknowledge the previous representations.

The letter provides numerous possibilities of representation for the author. During interpretation my aim was to analyze the representations of self, of the micro-society and of the everyday events. The author is a mediator who conveys his/her own or other's stories through a well defined representational process. In the autographic letters the individual present in the letters can be defined by physical traits, and on the other hand it builds itself up through discourse. As a member of numerous subsystems of the social structure the individual present in the letters fulfils and accepts different roles and represents itself through different norms, models and stereotypes in roles enforced by culture. The individual in the letters does not have a uniform shape, but appears in one of the modes of representation appropriate for the given situation. The self-representation of the letter writer is achieved according to the regularities of communicational relationship and of the given conversational situation (usage of textual clichés, topic selection, linguistic phrasing, and aspects relating to content). As author of the letter the individual appears in a role analogue to the *good letter writer model*, and regarding the correspondence the individual must meet requirements concerning contents, layout, style and aesthetics and furthermore must fulfil the roles of mediator and caretaker of the relationship. The author provides a self-portrait modelled after a person capable of creation and corrects on a linguistic level the self-image he/she wishes to communicate by formulating the flaws of creation.

Self-representation is further defined by constant and situational factors based on social, sexual and biographical characteristics. The biographical characteristics of the individual are accompanied by some role patterns and the individual becomes identifiable due to these role patterns. The different social roles integrate according to given life cycles, and according to this integration and these characteristics society expects given behaviours (in textual representation) from the individual. The individual due to his/her sexual role must comply with given functions, and this also has an impact on self-representation.

In the letters the determinative events of everyday life appear embedded into the letter writer's interpretation. These recorded events might focus on a person or be event of a more general character. In the letters everyday life appears in the author's interpretation. The relayed reality and the subjective thoughts that accompany this reality also depend greatly on the conversational situation and the embedding of the relation between the author and the addressee. Concerning the experienced events, the letter writer proposes a subjective reality, the degree of which is defined by the relation between author and addressee. The letter relates the important events comprising a relatively short time span, so letters are a great tool for visualizing the activities that define everyday life and cognitive structures, both of which are linked to the individual, subjective interpretation of greater historic / political / industrial events for the respective time, thus providing a low level view of the events that take place in the given community.

Besides the previously mentioned habitudes of the author another interpretational frame was provided by the tracking of the biographies and contexts of the letters. The basis of this interpretation was letter legacies in which the addressee of the letter and the owner of the letter did not coincide. Such corpuses were those of Balázs Becze, Liane Lukas, Magda Tampa and János László.

Balázs Becze's letter legacy that was kept by his descendants, besides outlining secondary context, provided a snapshot of the different organisation of cultural and communicational memory, as well as the different phases of acquiring and interiorising the family correspondential culture. The letters accumulate new meanings through inheritance from one generation to the next one. The heirs shed light on those primary and secondary meanings that adhered to these objects throughout the years; the recontextualisation that is due to these factors is greatly influenced by the generation gap as well. The relationship towards the letters, as exteriorised memory, as medium containing and conserving information varies from one generation to the other and from the degree of relationship of the descendants.

Liane Lukas is in no relationship with the addressees of the letters he owns. These preserved letters provide insight to those gestures of selection that have a determinative effect on the biography of the letters and are subject to the story-building intent of the author.

The destiny of the letters and personal documents after the death of the primary owner (the addressee) is not accidental. Throughout time these documents get into an environment where the new owner at some point can correlate the destiny of the primary owner of the letters and his/her own destiny, and can incorporate it in a common narrative. The later usage of the letters plays a major role in the organisation of genealogical and biographical memory.

The motivation and actual function of preserving the letters varies according to the actual owner. The owners usually associate aesthetic, documenting, legitimating roles to these letters, and often these letters are regarded as catalysts of remembrance. The letters in many cases are preserved as heritage for the later generations, their ownership activates and defines relatedness and in the absence of the latter, connections of acquaintanceship.

By validating the above mentioned factors concerning the individual and its letters, interpretation reflects on the practice of writing that is based on the correspondential tradition and varies from one individual to the other, and focuses besides the letter-writing's historical aspects on its biographical, socio-cultural and individual aspects as well.

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