

# THE PRAGMATICS OF EPISTOLARY COMMUNICATION: CONTEXT AND STYLISATION<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstrakt:** Článek shrnuje teoretické přístupy relevantní pro pragmaticky založenou analýzu epistolární komunikace. Autorka pohlíží na dopis jako na komunikační akt, který je zapojený do širšího kontextu epistolární komunikace a ovlivněný subjektem adresáta. Zvláštní pozornost věnuje stylizaci a sebestylizaci a jejich vlivu na případnou lingvistickou, literárněvědnou či historickou analýzu dopisů. Diskutovány jsou též funkce dopisu a temporální a prostorová deixe. Teoretický rámec příspěvku tvoří výběr pragmaticky a stylisticky orientovaných teorií českých (Macurová, Janáčková, Hoffmannová), polských (Skwarczyńska, Kałkowska) i dalších (Watzlawick, Ruščák, Nickisch, Brownová a Levinson).

**Klíčová slova:** pragmatika, dopis, stylizace, sebestylizace, subjekt, funkce, deixe

**Abstract** The article summarizes the relevant theoretical background for a pragmatically oriented analysis of epistolary communication. It views “the letter” as an act of communication bound within the wider context of epistolary communication, and interprets the primary influence as the reader. Special attention is paid to stylisation and self-stylisation and their influence on possible linguistic, literary and historical analysis. The functions of a letter and temporal and spatial deixis are also discussed. The theoretical background is drawn from a selection of pragmatic and stylistic theories from Czech (Macurová, Janáčková, Hoffmannová), Polish (Skwarczyńska, Kałkowska), and other traditions (Watzlawick, Ruščák, Nickisch, Brown and S. Levinson).

**Keywords:** pragmatics, letter, stylisation, self-stylisation, subject, function, deixis

## INTRODUCTION

As with all epistolary communication, letters defy a ready definition because of their variety and their almost unlimited range of topics and genres. There are two

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principal defining features: first of all form – especially the presence of a relatively well defined, albeit not entirely fixed or obligatory salutation and valediction (e.g. Kałkowska 1982; Data 1982; within Slovak linguistics, see Ruščák’s approach based on the notion of stylistically salient features of letters: Ruščák, 2002); but also their function in communication – a letter is prototypically a written text sent by a writer to an addressee, and largely takes the form of a dialogue. For example, in the nineteenth century, Hanuš (1864, 167) defined a private letter as one that provides a substitute for shared living and private communication and “should not be bound by any other respect than the personal”.<sup>2</sup>

A letter’s function as a tool for communication, and its relation to the spatial, temporal, social and other features of its context, relates to the realm of **pragmatics**, that is, the study of the relationship between language, its users and the context (e.g., Saicová Římalová 2016; Hirschová 2013). The field of pragmatics has analysed many aspects of human communication, especially within the European tradition (e.g., Huang 2007). In this article, I will discuss the relationship between epistolary communication and context, with a focus on subjects related to the letter, stylisation, and temporal and spatial characteristics. Selected points will be illustrated by the nineteenth-century letters of the Czech writer Božena Němcová.

Epistolary communication is not a large topic within **Czech linguistics**; when it is discussed, it is often from the point of view of stylistics or textual linguistics (for a summary of approaches within the Czech context, see, for example, Jílková 2016; Saicová Římalová 2005). Several studies focus on selected pragmatic topics, however, such as the relationship between different letters within the larger framework of epistolary communication (Hoffmannová 1993), how letters differ from spoken discourse (Hoffmannová 2013), the analysis of communication strategies in Němcová’s letters (Saicová Římalová 2005), and the analysis of politeness in emails written by university students (Chejnová 2016). Letters are also collected to form corpora (Hladká et al., 2005) and are used as linguistic sources for the study of the language used in informal contexts (e.g., Hladká 2003; Hladká et al. 2013). Within literary history or history (especially the history of “everyday life”), letters are often seen as sources of information about their writers, or are regarded as part of the literary oeuvre of the author (although with certain limits – e.g., administrative letters may be excluded; cf. Janáčková et al. 2001). Literary pieces in the form of letters or the motif of letters in literary texts (e.g., Janáčková et al. 2001) are also studied.

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<sup>2</sup> „Tito listové mají tudíž nahrazovati i spolužití i spolumlúvení důvěrné, vázání nejsouce jinak nikterak jinými, leč osobními ohledy“ (Hanus 1864, 167).

From among the various theories concerning letters and epistolary communication, I consider the most seminal to be **Skwarczyńska's** theory of a letter as a unit that oscillates between various poles: literary – non-literary, spoken – written, dialogic – monologic, temporary – stable, conventional – creative (Skwarczyńska 1975). She also emphasises the fact that letters are parts of a complex epistolary communication (Skwarczyńska 1937, 19–39) and that the addressee is an important subject, a kind of second author of the letter (Skwarczyńska 1937, 73–90). The “movement” of a letter between the various poles listed by Skwarczyńska is strongly influenced by the context, such as when a letter moves from the original context of a piece of communication between particular people to a more general context. With a series of published letters, for example, the literary pole can become more salient. The important role of the addressee in epistolary communication can be supported by selected pragmatic theories that emphasise the relational aspects of human communication (e.g., Watzlawick's pragmatics of human communication: Watzlawick et al. 1999; or selected theories of face: e.g., Brown and Levinson 1978).

As far as the **delimitation of the category** “letters” is concerned, I see it as a radial category with blurred boundaries, and this makes a unified definition problematic. The prototype of the category is perhaps the private letter, with its standard introductory and closing sections (for a typical model, see Data, 1982), but there are also formal (administrative) letters (sometimes seen as a different genre, see, e.g., Nickisch 1991), short written notices, various printed public notices, electronic private communications, various texts that use the form of a letter but represent other genres (such as advertisements or literary texts in the form of a letter), and texts such as memoirs and diaries (especially when intended for future readers, e.g., grandchildren). There is also a close relation to spoken discourse (e.g., phone calls, private informal dialogues).

## THE PRAGMATICS OF EPISTOLARY COMMUNICATION

A pragmatically oriented analysis of epistolary communication focuses on various topics. I will discuss those topics that I see as the most significant: the relation between a letter / epistolary communication and the subject engaged in or related to it, and the consequences of the fact that a piece of epistolary communication is a special form of dialogue. I will conclude with some brief remarks concerning non-verbal communication in letters.

As far as the **subjects of communication** are concerned, a written letter can function in several contexts: the original (primary) context of its author/writer and the intended addressee; and other (secondary) contexts when the text is read

(edited, censored, etc.) by other persons (secondary readers). In the secondary contexts, certain aspects (including the pragmatic; see below) function in a different way, because the secondary readers read the text with different expectations and intentions from the original addressee; they may live in a different context and may not understand the content in full (for more details, cf. Saicová Římalová 2015).

The key question concerning the relation between the text, the writer and the addressee in the primary context is how the writer and the addressee are reflected in the text. It is important to distinguish between the **real psycho-physical persons** and **their reflection in the text**, because these layers may not coincide. Several theories handle this distinction. In Czech tradition, I prefer Macurová's (1983) theory of three layers of subjects in a text: subjects standing outside the text, that is, the psycho-physical persons; subjects depicted in the text explicitly; and subjects reflected in the text implicitly, for example, in the language that is used. This theory can be applied to both literary and non-literary texts (Macurová 1983).

In epistolary communication, we can expect that the “images” of both the writer and the addressee depicted in the text will be to a large extent similar to the images that these people use in everyday face-to-face communication. These images are not, however, equivalent to the people's “real” personality. This fact is not a matter of pragmatics only – it is related to psychological aspects of human behaviour and the complex question of human self-conception, self-esteem, and so on. As human beings, we want to be accepted by others and to be perceived by others as having various positive qualities (cf. the various psychological accounts of self-esteem, self-presentation, masks, etc., in, e.g., Vybíral 2000; Nakonečný 1998). This desire is also reflected in our communicative behaviour (cf. some pragmatic theories that have captured parts of this behaviour, e.g., theories of politeness: Brown and Levinson 1978; Leech 1982). In letters (and other types of discourse, although in a different way), the desire to be accepted and to be seen in a certain way can be seen in the **act of stylisation**: the images in the text (the writer's and the addressee's) and the depicted world can both be stylized,<sup>3</sup> that is, “accommodated” in various ways with respect to other aspects of the communicative context.

The stylisation used in a letter can be a part of the **communicative strategy** of the writer, although this strategy is not necessarily conscious. The writer may

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<sup>3</sup> K. Hausenblas (1971, 45–46) delimits several types of stylisation. My understanding of stylisation corresponds to his definition of stylisation as a process that does not imitate the model, but changes it, modifies it, typically with some simplification and an emphasis on the important or regular features. Unlike Hausenblas, I think that the stylisation does not have to be conscious.

choose to depict themselves, the addressee or some other entity in a certain way according to the goal they want to achieve. For example, when the writer wants to maintain their friendship with the addressee, they may try to stress what the two persons share. If the writer wants, for example, to borrow money from the addressee, they may try to stylize themselves as being poor, but honest, and the addressee as being generous. The writer's (self-)stylisation may also differ **depending on the addressee**: whether they are male, female, a friend, a fellow writer, or a spouse or child.<sup>4</sup> The (self-)stylisation, stylisation, and ability to manipulate these in the communication can also be influenced unconsciously by factors such as the **writer's health, mental condition or social abilities**.<sup>5</sup>

Similar factors to those mentioned above may cause the same subject or the same entity to be depicted in different ways in different letters by the same author, and may, to whatever extent, differ from the "truth". Almost anything in a text can be **subjective**, stylized, seen through the prism of the individuality of the writer and their communicative intentions or strategies, or influenced by individual interpretation.<sup>6</sup> The writer typically does not state "the truth" but uses a combination of two perspectives on the depicted events and subjects: "How I see it", and "How I want you (the addressee) to see it".

This can be illustrated by the numerous places from Němcová's letters where the author depicts the same event or entity in a different, sometimes even opposite way (cf. Saicová Římalová 2005). For example, when the author visits the Slovakian spa town of Sliač in 1855, she writes to her family and friends in Prague about her rented room in several different ways, all of which can be seen as stylized parts of a communicative strategy. To her friend E. Lamblová, the writer describes her room with the positive association of a "nest", which corresponds well to the overall character of a letter between friends who share pleasant experiences but do not necessarily bother each other with negative ones:

... po té se už ulebedím v svém hnízdečku

... and then I rest here in my little nest

(Němcová 2004, 177)

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<sup>4</sup> For examples from Němcová's letters, see Saicová Římalová (2005).

<sup>5</sup> This can be illustrated by another example from Němcová's letters. The letters written at the end of her life appear to lack any orientation towards the addressee, perhaps because the writer's abilities are negatively influenced by her poor health and by serious psychological problems. Cf. Saicová Římalová (2007); Janáčková et al. (2001).

<sup>6</sup> See also, cognitive-linguistic notions such as construals or subjectivisation in, e.g., Croft and Cruse (2004).

To her husband, she writes about the practical aspects, such as the financial costs, and this corresponds, similarly, to their everyday communication as a husband and wife who share their lives including all the various practical aspects:

Jak jsem psala, bydlím na samé hůře, ačkoliv mám pokojík hezký, je přece drahý...

As I have written before, I live at the very top, and although the room is pleasant, it is nevertheless expensive...

(Němcová 2004, 169)

And to her daughter Dora, she describes a negative experience with fleas. This extract can be interpreted in several ways, including as an attempt to show the children that their mother, who has left them in Prague, is not enjoying a better life than they are:

Má [pes] ještě hodně blech? Takových ale nemá, jako já tu mám v mé izbě, to je hrůza, takových jst eneiděli, jak mne zlobí.

Does he [the dog] still have many fleas? But he does not have such as I have here in my room. It is terrible. You have never seen such fleas. How they do bother me.

(Němcová 2004, 174)

The reader (especially a secondary reader) **cannot often verify** the images in the text: the “real” intentions or “true” feelings or opinions of the writer are opaque; certain facts cannot be verified. Stylistic and its use in a communicative strategy is thus also a reason why researchers should be very careful when they attempt to use letters as “proofs” of particular facts concerning the writer (or their opinions), the addressee, or the depicted world; letters can be unreliable sources in this respect.

On the other hand, the distinction between the real psycho-physical persons and their image in the text can be very useful for pragmatic or stylistic analysis of the particular piece of epistolary communication: it can help to delimit what can be interpreted from the text and what is beyond the reach of analysis. That is, the analysis can concentrate on the depicted stylistic and the verification can be limited to only those aspects that allow it.

Another specific feature of epistolary communication connected with the subjects of that communication is the fact that the **primary addressee** plays an important role in the exchange. The primary addressee (or the writer’s image of the primary addressee) may unintentionally influence the text of the letter, its

style, content, and so on, because it is quite common for the writer to modify the communication **according to the addressee**, as we have seen above. This mechanism is not a specific feature of epistolary communication, but a general feature of human communication. It has already been repeatedly described (e.g. Müllerová, 1978) that people tend to behave and communicate in similar ways with each other. This process may be stronger in long-term relationships and can be observed in epistolary communication. In Němcová's letters to K. Světlá and S. Podlipská (two sisters, both of whom were writers), the letters to Světlá are more rational, like Světlá's letters to Němcová, while the correspondence with Podlipská is more sentimental (Saicová Římalová, 2003–2004).

Some authors see **respect for the addressee** and the **relationship between the writer and the addressee** as crucial features of epistolary communication. In his advice to writers of letters, Jungmann (1845) encouraged the writer to imagine the addressee and anticipate his or her reactions to the letter;<sup>7</sup> the style of the letter should prefer the addressee over the writer so that the addressee feels that the letter is written for him or her;<sup>8</sup> and the answer should be relevant to the letter received, its colour and character.<sup>9</sup> Kałkowska (1993, 192) states that the relationship between the writer and the addressee is more specific and richer than the relationship between a writer and a reader of a literary text. She uses the term “temperature” (“temperatura”) for the level of emotional “warmness” of a letter, which reflects the “warmness” of the relationship (Kałkowska 1993).

The addressee also has a kind of **power over** the very existence of **the writer's letters**. When a letter is sent, the writer cedes control over it; when the letter is successfully received, it becomes the possession of the addressee, who can save, destroy or modify it (by, for example, cutting out the parts they consider in any way improper). **Secondary readers** (such as editors) also have this “power over the correspondence”, perhaps even more so, as they can influence not only one “side” of the epistolary dialogue, but the whole epistolary communication. This can be seen when editors choose which letters from a series will be published or excluded, or decide to publish only parts of certain letters. It is also common practice to publish only the letters written by, for example, a famous personality, and not the replies.

<sup>7</sup> „Představme sobě, že ten komu pišeme, přítomen jest, jakau myslí list náš přijme, a co při čtení jeho pocítí“ (Jungmann 1845, 97).

<sup>8</sup> „Sloh tak řed'me, aby ne naše ale nepřítomného osoba wrchní místo měla, tak aby se zdálo, že pro něho psán list, třebas bychom my něco chtěli, žádali, ptali ec.“ (Jungmann 1845, 97).

<sup>9</sup> „Odpověď ale přiměřena buď listu poslanému, měj jeho barvu i powahu...“ (Jungmann 1845, 97).

I will conclude this discussion of the epistolary subjects with some remarks concerning a **speaker's intentions** (speech acts, communicative functions, pragmatic functions. See, e.g., Huang 2007) and the functions of letters. Epistolary communication covers numerous functions,<sup>10</sup> and is highly variable and functionally complex. A letter can have several functions or one main and several accompanying functions. It is therefore difficult to delimit one specific "epistolary" function, though there have been such attempts (cf. Jelínek 1995). One of the basic distinctions (cf. Nicikish 1991) seems to be between "formal" or "administrative" letters with instrumental functions and private letters with more interpersonal functions.<sup>11</sup>

The "**interpersonal**" function (also described as a contact or phatic function) can be very general, such as keeping in touch with somebody who is absent, or **maintaining** a mutual **relationship** (cf. the definitions of letters given by Jungmann and Hanuš above), which can be achieved in various ways using various sub-functions (such as sharing events from everyday life, sharing one's opinion on various topics, expressing one's emotions and feelings towards the other). It is clear that an "interpersonal" function defined in such broad terms should be viewed not as specific to epistolary communication but as the core purpose of all human communication.

When analysing functions and intentions, we should also decide from **whose perspective** this analysis is taking place: is it that of the writer, the addressee, or someone else? (Cf. Mukařovský's discussion of the intentional and unintentional in art: Mukařovský 2000.) We should also bear in mind that the interpretation of intentions is related to the problem (described above) of their being several layers of subjects and of stylisation: without being the primary writer or addressee, it is very difficult, even impossible, to discover or guess at the original and "real" intention of the writer or the real interpretation arrived at by the addressee. We are left with only the language used in the letter, the letter's content, our knowledge of the world and our own communicative experience from which to reconstruct a possible function (intention) as it is reflected in the text.

Many aspects of epistolary communication are influenced by the fact that it represents a specific form of **dialogue** (cf., e.g., Hoffmannová 1993;

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<sup>10</sup> Jílková (2016, 89) states that letters may have, e.g., a phatic function that is present more or less in every letter, and emotional, conative or metalinguistic functions.

<sup>11</sup> For example, Němcová's letters can be divided into two groups: letters with a prevailing interpersonal function and letters with a prevailing directive function and its various sub-varieties. The group of letters with an interpersonal function is much larger (Saicová Římalová 2005).

Mukařovský 1948). Some questions relate to the more general discussion as to whether we should consider a dialogue (i.e., a set of replicas by several speakers) to be one text, or several related texts (for different opinions, see, e.g., Hrbáček 1994; Hausenblas 1984; for a discussion on dialogic style, see, e.g., Āmejkov 2013). In a piece of epistolary communication, the replicas (individual letters) are clearly connected to and influenced by each other but are more independent than replicas in spoken dialogue.

One salient feature related to the dialogical character of epistolary communication is the above-mentioned mechanism of a writer accommodating the form and content of the letter according to the intended addressee. Another feature is associated with the **communicative perspective** from which the letter and its content is constructed. Macurov (1983, 27) defines this phenomenon in terms of how the extra-linguistic reality is constructed within the text and states that it is built from one particular point or **perspectival centre**. These notions can help us organize the analysis of stylisation. In a dialogue (including a piece of epistolary communication), several perspectival centres (such as those corresponding to each participant) typically take turns: the text can be organized from the perspectival centre corresponding to the subject of the writer, but as we have already discussed, epistolary communication often emphasises the perspective and perspectival centre of the addressee.

Possible changes in the communicative perspective can also be reflected in the **relation of a text to the spatial and temporal context** and the functioning of **deixis**. Because of the potential of multiple perspectives, these aspects of epistolary communication can become very complex. The text can be oriented towards several temporal and spatial layers (such as when and where the writer produces the letter or the addressee reads it, or the time and place of the events depicted) and these layers can combine in one letter. In “traditional” epistolary communication, the journey of a letter from the writer to the addressee could, and indeed still can, take days or even longer, and this delay can also be reflected in the text in various ways.<sup>12</sup>

Although a letter can be written in many different ways, “here” and “now” typically correspond to the moment the writer is writing the text, and this represents the basic orientation point. The notions of “where” and “when” an addressee reads a letter can be constructed in several ways: it can be placed spatially as “there”, and constructed temporally as a present event, or a future one. However, when the writer is away from home and the addressee has stayed

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<sup>12</sup> It would be interesting to analyse in more detail how temporal and spatial deixis functions within modern electronic communication, which enables a “letter” to be received almost immediately.

at home, the addressee's location can be seen as the basic (and more significant) orientation point and can be referred to as, for example, "home" by the writer. We see these various possibilities in letters between Němcová and her husband, Josef Němec:

Milá ženo! / Zítřa časně ráno jedou naše fury z fabriky do Prahy s cukrem a používám této příležitosti ti pár řádků psát. / Včera před polednem jsem sem přijel.

My dear wife! / Early tomorrow morning, our carriages are taking sugar from the factory to Prague and I am using this opportunity to write you a few lines. / I arrived here yesterday before noon.

(Němcová 2004, 203)

Milá ženo! Tvůj list od 18ho t. m. z Bytčice jsem obdržel dnes v pravé poledne (...) Poněvď chceš, abych ti hned odpověděl, tak odpovídám. Ty se mne ptáš, máš-li domu přijet, neb tam zůstat. Na to ti odpovídám, dělej, co chceš (...)

My dear wife! I received your letter, from Bystřice, of the 18th of this month today at noon (...) Because you want me to answer you immediately, I am doing so. You ask me whether you should come home, or stay there. My answer is do as you like (...)

(Němcová 2004, 193)

Mam čekat zde, nebo doma, mam těch 25 f. měsíčně zde utratit, nebo doma?

Should I wait here, or at home? Should I spend those 25 f. a month here, or at home?

(Němcová 2004, 146).

I will conclude this discussion of the pragmatics of epistolary communication with some remarks concerning **non-verbal communication**. In spoken discourse, the speaker can use gestures and facial (etc.) expressions to communicate (both consciously and unconsciously) many different meanings. Epistolary communication, especially when the letter is handwritten on paper, also includes aspects of non-verbal communication: the handwriting itself, the organization of the writing on the page, any pictures accompanying the text, the size and quality of the paper, even the envelope if one is used. Each of these aspects can influence the addressee's reception and interpretation of the letter. This is the case with both primary and secondary addressees, although in different ways. What is less discussed, however, is how these non-verbal aspects influence the writer. We might consider, for example, the size of paper available or the quality of the writing equipment (see, e.g., Janáčková's analysis

of the possible influence of the size of the paper on Němcová's letter writing: Janáčková 2006).

## CONCLUSION

A pragmatic analysis of epistolary communication can be very complex and can cover many topics. I have summarized aspects that I consider especially significant within this type of communication and its analysis: epistolary communication is dialogical, although its component parts (the individual letters) can be independent to varying degrees. Dialogical features are reflected in, for example, the communicative perspective to be found in the texts, and the potentially important influence of the addressee. Epistolary communication of a private nature is typically very closely related to the subjects of both the writer and the addressee. With this aspect, we should bear in mind that the texts themselves contain "only" reflections of the real persons, their intentions, their opinions, and that many entities described in the letters may be (and typically are) stylized according to the communicative strategy of the writer, and also according to the addressee. When attempting to use them as "proofs" of certain facts, we should understand that because letters are stylized and depict the world from a certain perspective and according to a certain communicative strategy, they can be unreliable sources of information.

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