

Free reference in informal letters

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The aim of this paper is twofold: on the one hand it stresses the richness of Portuguese historical archives in what concerns the unexpected preservation of a special kind of primary linguistic sources – old informal popular letters. On the other hand, it elaborates on the multiple Reference strategies adopted by the authors of such letters. New data will be presented for the better understanding of what Susan Fitzmaurice has called the “epistolary world”, a separate world from the physical one, a challenging setting for the deictic systems of languages.

By virtue of bureaucratic obligation, ever since the turn of the 16th century, Portuguese judicial institutions preserved, within the leaves of their thousands of court-files, the material proof that would either condemn or acquit defendants. Private letters abound among that kind of proof. A systematic research of those letters – project CARDS of CLUL, the Linguistics Center of Lisbon University – is beginning to reveal new empirical data for the description of Portuguese non-standard past varieties, for the theory of language change using wider comparative possibilities and for the study of epistolarity as major cultural practice at all times.

Focusing on a sample of 34 letters from the beginning of the 19th century, all of them written by non literary authors, mostly poor writers, a question arises about ‘how impossible was their task, when trying to program a successful deciphering of their letter by the addressee?’. Two powerful handicaps seem to have always been present: i) the authors possessed little literary education, so they did not feel their eloquence to be a reliable weapon to stand alone in conveying the intended meaning; ii) times were of slow, inefficient mail, so authors knew the forceful chronological gap between language enunciation and processing – an inherent condition of written texts exchanging – was far from being a controllable, predictable time interval. The fight against these rhetoric and practical obstacles resulted in samples of written text with Reference oddities. So this paper will bring together Semantics and Pragmatics, trying to make sense of deictic expressions which reference is very elusive.

References

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