

Free Reference in Informal Letters (Portugal, XIX Century)

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ABSTRACT. The aim of this paper is twofold. On the one hand it highlights the richness of Portuguese historical archives with respect to preserving a special kind of primary linguistic source: 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.

KEYWORDS. Letter writing, Reference, Deixis, Portuguese texts, XIX Century

1 XIX Century Portuguese Informal Letters

Since the turn of the 16th century, Portuguese judicial institutions have been preserving, within the leaves of their thousands of court-files, the material proof that has been used to prove the accused innocent or guilty. Private letters abound among that kind of proof. A systematic research of those letters—project CARDS of CLUL, the Linguistics Centre of Lisbon University—is beginning to reveal new empirical data for the description of non-standard varieties of the old language, for the theory of language change using wide comparative possibilities and for the study of epistolarity as a major social practice at all times.

Judging from a sample of one thousand letters kept by the archives of the Portuguese higher appeal court, *Casa da Suplicação*, speakers from all social backgrounds, even when they were half-illiterate, used to communicate [in](#) writing in the early XIX century in relation to:

- i) physical barriers (prison, migration or deportation), isolating people from their original social group;
- ii) mental barriers (extortion or defamation), forcing anonymity.

Focusing on 34 letters from the beginning of the XIX century, all 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 the letter by the intended addressee?’ Two powerful handicaps seem to have always been present, according to reflexive testimony commonly included in the text of the letters:

i) the authors—sometimes just mental authors—possessed little literary education, and they did not feel their eloquence a reliable weapon to stand alone in conveying meaning;

ii) times were of slow, inefficient mail, so authors knew that the chronological gap between language enunciation and language processing—an inherent condition of exchanging written texts—was far from being a controllable time interval.

The struggle against these rhetorical and practical obstacles resulted in samples of written text with reference oddities (for the patterns of the reference system in Portuguese cf. Fonseca 1992, Peres 1993 and Mória 2000).

2 Reference oddities

2.1. Lack of cohesion involving time reference

As Altman (1982: 118) underlines, the temporal context of any given epistolary statement is relative to:

- i) the actual time that an act described is performed;
- ii) the moment when it is written down;
- iii) the times that the letter is sent, received, read or even reread.

Consequently, letters' meaning is temporally relative to more than just the moment of writing.

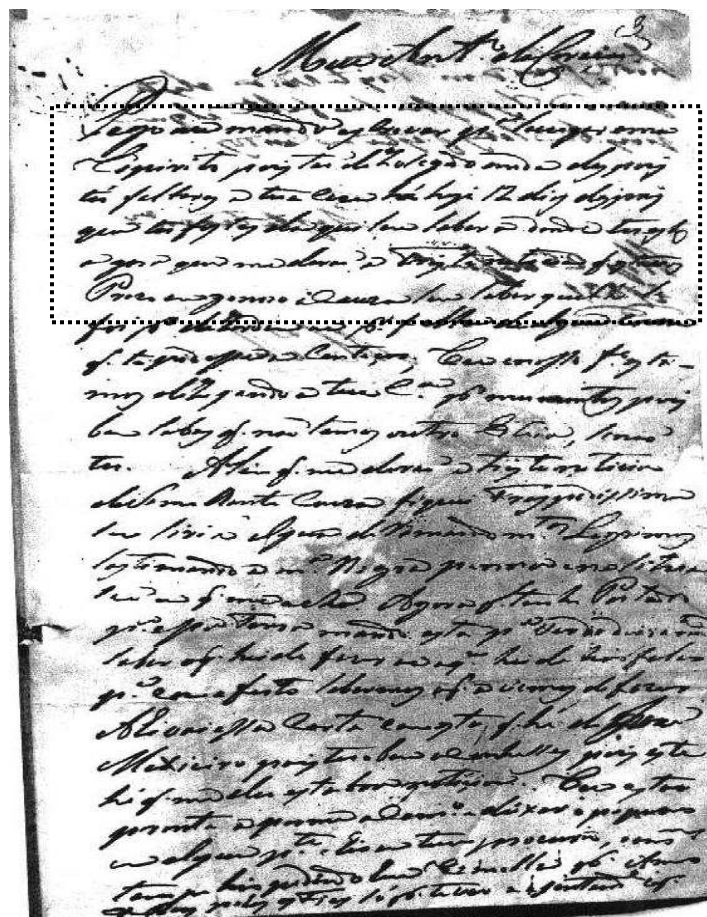
Moreover, present tense is not to be found in letters' discourse for several reasons that are also pointed out by Altman (1982: 129). Firstly, the letters' narrative is not simultaneous with the event narrated (when, of course, it is not part of the writing itself). Secondly, the author's "now" moment is unseizable and precarious. In fact, Fonseca (1992: 184) postulates that the "now" adverb is a tool for referential transferring when needed, so it can take the sense of a utopic "non-now". Finally, the dialogue *in praesentia* is not possible in letters, so there are different presents for both the writer and his addressee.

We find below an example of lack of cohesion involving time reference in letters discourse. Here, the combined argument structure, temporal locating adverb and verb inflection express incompatible time and *aktionsart* values in the discourse of a complaining wife:

"(...) mando escrever p^a sucegar o meu Espirito pois tão dezocegado anda depois tú faltares a tua caza há hoje 12 dias depois que tu fostes daqui sem saber adonde tu estas **agora** que me **davão** a triste noticia q. estavas Prezo emgonoro a cauza sem saber qual lá se foi p^r dezordem ou p^r falta de alguma couza (...)"

Translation: "I am asking someone to write (this letter) in order to steady my spirit for it runs so unsteady after you missed coming home 12 days today and I

ignore where you are after you went away. Now they used to be giving me the sad news that you were arrested, I ignore the reason, maybe it was for disorder, maybe for lack of something”.



[Letter to her husband from a pedler's wife, 1831: Instituto dos Arquivos Nacionais-Torre do Tombo, Casa da Suplicação, Feitos Findos, Processos Crime, Let. J, Maç. 230, Nº 24, Cx. 603, Cº [3], Ap. 3, fl.. [3r]

2.2. Lack of cohesion involving space reference

Space and time coordinates have been conceived by several authors as conventional metaphors for expressing the participants' engagement in communication; this becomes especially clear when written communication is observed (Fitzmaurice 2002: 39). In fact, the physical and temporal distance between participants in letters' exchange forces them to make a hard psychological exercise: the writer has to foresee his addressee's interpretation of what he has written, so the author pays attention to the moment of the reception of the letter rather than to the moment of letter writing. He adopts his addressee's "here" and "now" and presents his own perspective as subordinate to his interlocutor's location.

That's why epistolary discourse was seen by Franz Kafka as a "truly communication with spectres, not only with the spectre of the addressee but also with one's own phantom". (*Briefe an Milena*, apud Altman 1982: 2) The letter writer has to know his own imaginary reactions in order to be able to reach his goals: convince and manipulate his partner.

Therefore, the "I" takes his addressee's place and imagines the doubts his interlocutor might have, in order to anticipate and avoid them. The letter's meaning is thus "consciously and unconsciously constructed by writers and readers of epistolary works" (Altman, 1982: 4).

Below, we show a Portuguese example of lack of cohesion involving space reference in letters. Here, spatial deictics for expressing proximity and distance from the speaker are both used for the same referent, the paper support of a threatening discourse:

"Repare para o que dis **esa** Carta S^r Savastião quem esCreve **esa** Carta a vm^{ce} he porque lhe dezeja Algum bem S^r eu Sou Manoel Joze da FonCeça Cap^{pam} de huma Coadrilha de ladrones (...). Faça Vm^{ce} o Favor de me mandar 60 mil res por esa portadora Sem Falta isto tendo Vm^{ce} Algum amor a vida Logo q. a portadora lhe emtregue **Esta** Carta lhe emtregara o din^{ro} p^a ella me trazer".

Translation: "Remark what **that letter (near you)** says, Mr. Savastião. The one who writes **that** letter to you wishes you well. Sir, I am Manoel Joze da Fonseca, Captain of a band of thieves (...). Do me the favour of sending me 60 thousand 'réis' by **that errand woman (near you)**. Do not fail me, that is if you have some love to your life. Immediately after the errand woman delivers you **this** letter you will give her the money for her to bring it to me".

[Anonymous extortion letter sent to a farmer, 1824: Instituto dos Arquivos Nacionais - Torre do Tombo, Casa da Suplicação, Feitos Findos, Processos Crime, Let. J, Maç. 255, N° 36, Cx. 661, fl. [6r]

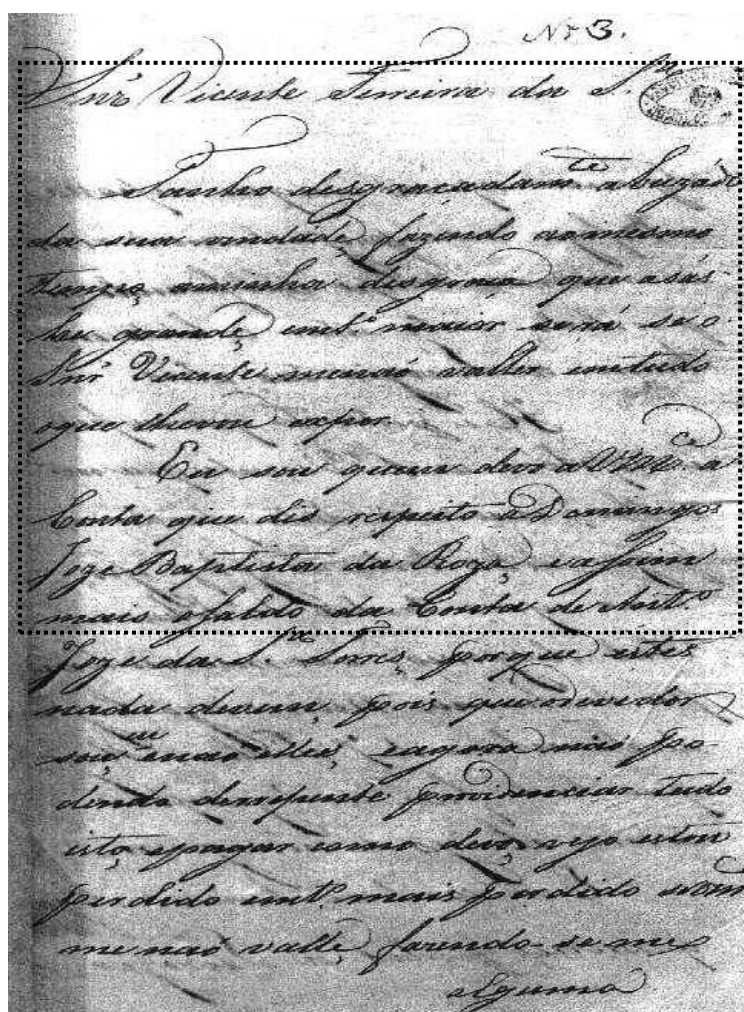
2.3. Lack of cohesion involving social reference

Social deixis involves the use of some expressions - like personal pronouns - to differentiate between the relative social status, power and age, interpersonal familiarity, or even frequency of communication. Social deixis can alone reflect how distant or close a relationship is felt to be from the speaker's point of view.

However, when letter correspondents are unknown to each other and the issue is to influence the receivers's behaviour, social reference strategy becomes a problem. So, inevitably, variation arises, since it is difficult to decide between distance-creating polite forms and warmer expressions. Even when the writer takes the first option (to use polite forms to manipulate his addressee), he can hesitate between more or less formal indexical expressions, as we can see below in this Portuguese apologizing letter:

“S^{nr} Vicente Ferreira da S^a Tanho desgraçadam^{te} abuzádo da sua vondáde, fazendo ao mesmo tempo, a minha desgraça que asás he grande, e m^{bo} maior será se o S^{nr} Vicente me não valler em tudo o que lhe vou expor. Eu sou quem devo a Vm^{ce} a Conta que dis respeito a Domingos Joze Baptista da Roza (...)”.

Translation: “Mr. Vicente Ferreira da Silva, I have been imposing on your good will, originating at the same time my own misfortune which (incidentally) is a big one, and a bigger one will be if **Mr. Vicente (=formal you)** won’t help me with all I am going to explain. I am the one who owes **you (=semi-formal you)** the bill of Domingos Joze Baptista da Roza”.



[Letter to a salesman sent by a priest's servant, 1824: Instituto dos Arquivos Nacionais-Torre do Tombo, Casa da Suplicação, Feitos Findos, Processos Crime, Let. J, Maç. 168, N° 27, Cx. 440, C° [2], fl. [7r]

2.4. Variation in politeness strategy

Along with temporal, spatial and social deixis, the system of politeness formulae is a hard one to be mastered by non expert letter writers. Politeness in language, itself, is a phenomenon that challenges the understanding of researchers.

There is the well-known universal approach, proposed by Brown and Levinson (1987), according to which a competent adult's public self-image (face) influences his behaviour as a speaker, and that is called politeness. A different explanation is proposed by the cultural approach: Watts (2005) sees politeness as a "politic behaviour", a purely social phenomenon, independent of individual wants and highly dependent on cultural and contextual environments.

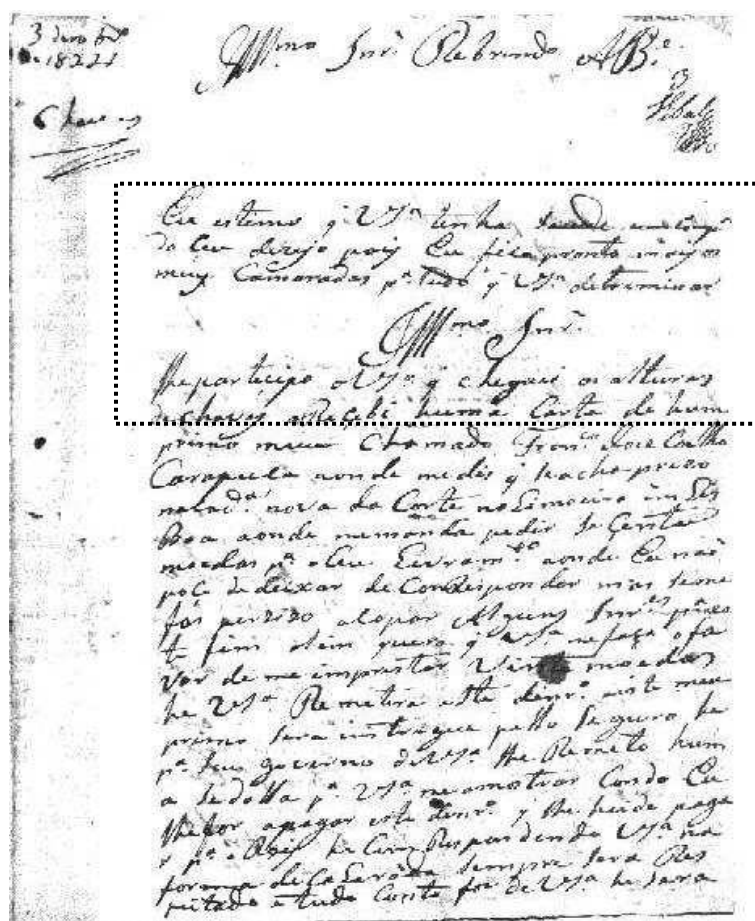
The reason for such theoretical disagreement may have something to do with the formal rigidity of polite expressions. They can be chosen to either occur or not occur, but their form, once established, tends to invariance. The highly expressive force of this limited system is a challenge to interpretation efforts.

If we take a politeness issue such as health formulae in letters, Sánchez Roura (2002) has already noticed, in the case of the Cely letters, that asking about health may be considered as a face-threatening act (in the Brown and Levinson theory) because this is personal information which the addressee may not wish to share. In Sánchez Roura's words (2002: 263), "health formulae are not included in the letter by default, contrary to the address, the commendation, the introduction of the exposition, the end of the letter and the pious valediction, topics present in almost every letter".

But even the apparently simple maxim of avoiding health-talk when beginning a non familiar letter seems hard to follow by a poor writer. Below we have an extortion letter confusingly polite in its terms, since health, family and honorifics punctuate a life threatening argumentation:

"Eu estimo q. V. S^a tenha saude em Comp^a do Çeu dezejo pois Eu fico pronto mais os meus Camaradas p^a tudo q. V. S^a detreminar Ill^{mo} S^{nr} lhe partecipo a V. S^a q. (...) he não ComRespondendo se lhe ira abrazar tudo Conto tiver em sua Caza he V. S^a ficara feito im Coartos he o Ceu povo ficara deRutado (...)"

Translation: **"I hope You Sir will be in good health, having everything you wish. I and my comrades are at your service for all you may order. Illustrious Sir, I am here to tell Your Excellency that (...) and if you don't agree we will put fire to all you have in your house and Your Excellency will be cut into pieces and your village will be destroyed"**.



[Extortion anonymous letter sent to a priest, 1824: Instituto dos Arquivos Nacionais-Torre do Tombo, Casa da Suplicação, Feitos Findos, Processos Crime, Let. L, Maç. 8, Nº 8, Cx. 19, Cº 4 fl.. [3r]

3 Conclusion: leading lines for the understanding of discourse in letters

As epistolarity researchers often notice (e.g. Altman 1982, Violi 1985, Fitzmaurice 2002) epistolary discourse is marked by hiatuses of all sorts: time lags between message transmission and reception; spatial separation between writer and addressee; blank spaces and lacunae in the manuscript. Consequently, epistolary meaning “is not stable, but negotiable, it is not static but dynamic, and it does not occupy a single spatio-temporal domain, it occupies many” (Fitzmaurice, 2002: 238).

In letters, the zero-point for the speaker is paradoxically ‘double-picked’, with alternate *here/now* and *there/then* perspectives. This disconcerting detail can lead experienced writers to behave ironically about it—“be so kind to burn this before you read it” (Jonathan Swift, 1703, *apud* Fitzmaurice 2002).

Poor writers, by contrast, tend to become literal interpreters of the situation's anomaly. Their relation with the language reference system can thus help us to better understand traditional concepts such as Karl Bühler's deixis "am Phantasma", Saul Kripke's "possible worlds" theory or Reichenbach's temporal logic.

On the other hand, technology—the technology of writing—has a major role on the fictional effort letter writers are forced to do concerning reference issues. So, the lack of coherence and cohesion frequently detected in their texts needs to be approached bearing in mind the cultural dimension of language too.

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