Memorials of the 1820 Settlers – Colonial transformations of a text-type

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Drawing on the long tradition of anthropologically and linguistically oriented genre studies, Bauman and Briggs emphasise the view of genres as "more than isolated and self-contained bundles of formal features" (1990: 63). Indeed, functioning as the loci of social performativity, genres essentially encode specific patterns of illocutionary force. Evolving and shifting in line with the major social and historical developments within communities or social groups, (it can be posited that genres and their transformations mirror the (re)construction of individual and group identities. This view of genres seems particularly potent when applied to the inquiries into the identity-related processes of entextualisation observed within newly founded colonial communities, such as that of the early British settlers in South Africa (known as the "1820 Settlers"), analysed in this study.

In the year 1820, nearly 4000 volunteers attracted by the promise of "a most fertile soil in the most healthy and temperate climate in the universe" (Hockly 1948: 15) were sent by the British government to the Cape of Good Hope. The settlement scheme required a written application in the form of a petition/memorial and an ample historical record of this text-type prior to the colonisation has been preserved (London, Public Record Office). The text-type in question continued to be employed by the 1820 Settlers in the colonial context in all official matters. This stage of its development is evidenced in an almost forgotten (but cf. Mesthrie and West 1995) treasury of the 1820 Settler writings which can be found in the Cape Town depot of the National Archives of South Africa in the collections pertaining to the Colonial Office (1820-25).

Following Schneider's approach (2002) to the investigation of written sources, it is claimed that the analysed data are the most reliable sources for gaining some historical linguistic insights. Also, no other historical data is likely to more accurately reflect the diversification, be it linguistic or social, present within a new community, influenced and shaped by the natural conditions and the political context of the settlement. In an attempt to trace the shifts of the well-established metropolitan text-type in the colony, this paper undertakes an investigation into a selection of letters and memorials of the 1820 Settlers.

Even a brief comparison of the conventional memorial and of? the settler correspondence to the Colonial Office in the colony cannot miss a certain modification which is described here as a shift from politeness to affect. More specifically, the unambiguously power determined style of petition/memorial, prior to the colonialisation clearly devoid of an affective dimension (Besnier 1990: 431; cf. also Katriel 2004: 4), acquires an affective component in the colonial context. On a micro-level, this may be echoed, among others, in the strategies of speech reporting, which is understood here as a marker of stance (Włodarczyk 2007; cf. Biber 2004, Besnier 1993), as well as through an assessment of its share in the "local grammar of affect" (Bednarek, forthcoming). In the parallel discursive process of generic transformation and the evolving writing, but also in the reading practices, a decontextualisation and a recontextualisation take place, which typically involves overtaking control and revising the patterns of social power (Bauman and Briggs 1990: 76). The findings of the investigation outlined above also constitute a commentary on the evolution of a new variety of English overseas in its earliest stage of 'new-dialect formation' (Trudgill 2004).

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