’Author design’ in a medieval chancellery: Respecting the target reader by linguistic adaptation (a case study of Byzantium)

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A unique source for studying speaker design in Byzantium is the collection of (Greek) documents and letters in the original register book of the Patriarchate of Constantinople of the 14th c. These texts are preserved in two contemporary manuscripts of the Austrian National Library. They don’t represent the usually preserved letters as transmitted in special (revised) letter collections, but give insight into ”authentic” daily business in the synod of the patriarch of Constantinople and his chancellery. Furthermore, this extraordinary collection broadens our knowledge of the use of language in different categories of documents according to the addressee, which illustrates the response of the chancellery to the linguistic level of the addressee, an aspect one would not expect a priori of a chancellery. Only the diachronic overview of some hundred documents allows us to underline a pragmatic use of language and not language deficiencies.

Besides, the narrative parts in the documents highlight, too, a very pragmatic use of language especially in the use of spoken language elements vs. highly rhetorical passages. Language was used in a ”clear” / ”subliminal” concept of speaker design and audience relevance whereas the audience of such documents is quite broader than the mere addressee; we have to take into account the synod where the documents were read and in some cases co-addressed communities where such documents were read (aloud) as well.

The paper wants to highlight that a full understanding of even such medieval texts will only be opened by interpreting them with regard to the speaker design and the pragmatic function of style levels and their interaction, thus by co-applying modern sociolinguistic theories.

Keywords: Byzantium, Medieval Chancellery, Historical Sociolinguistics.