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Duties and Epistolarity. Semantic Transformations of *officium* in Latin Epistolography, IV–V c.

Abstract. This paper deals with a group of Latin substantives which acquired a new meaning and became, in effect, synonyms for *epistula* in letter collections of the fourth and fifth centuries. The semantic development of these words, which designate in their original meaning as *nomina abstracta* the reciprocal character of some kind of relationship (family, friendship, patronage) is examined on the ground of semantic changes of *officium*, a concept of central importance for the Roman world. It has been demonstrated that *officium* as a common word denoting 'a letter' occurs for the first time in the correspondence of Q. Aurelius Symmachus and, later, in the letters of Christian authors of the fourth and fifth centuries. The rethinking of the concept of *officium* by Symmachus is viewed in the context of several fixed semantic oppositions that became an integral part of the content of the Christian letter.

Key Words: epistolary duties, Late Latin, semantic change, *litterae*, *officium*.

The common words for 'letter' in Latin are *epistula* and *litterae*. If we look for other synonyms, we shall discover a great variety of nouns in endless combinations. Some of these expressions occur in a source as early as the correspondence of Cicero; others are attested for the first time in the letter collections of Christian Latin authors; a third group, which is the focus of this study, is found in some fourth-century authors and results from the use of abstract substantives in a new, concrete sense.

Although various synonyms for *litterae* seem to be an integral part of the vocabulary of the epistolary genre, they originated in different types of discourse, using other meanings of these words in everyday life. For this reason, it was possible that words which in the first century meant 'talk', 'affection', 'deference' and 'duty', retained these meanings in the fourth century, but could signify 'letter' as well. What did these words have in common? Even if consider the fact that different letter-writers give preference to different synonyms or that they do not tend to use the

substitutes for *epistula* and *litterae* equally, there still remains something that is a common feature to all the words in question, namely their figurative use. In fact, all synonyms of *epistula* could be treated as forms of metonymy or metaphor. For this reason, and in order to reduce the confusing variety of lexical items to a few general classes, we have chosen as a criterion for distinction the kind of metonymy or the metaphorical level to which every single word can be linked. In this way we eventually obtained the following four categories of words:

(1) Words that denote writing material, writing instruments, or written signs, but are metonymically used to signify the content of a written message: *pagina*, *tabella(e)*, *charta*, *scriptio*, *stilus*, *apices*.

(2) Words that literally signify a form of oral communication, a dialogue: *alloquium*, *affatus*, *colloquium*, *sermo*, *salve* (subst.), *salutatio*. Metonymically used, they substitute the subject of written communication, and in the case of *salutatio* – formal greetings. This group of synonyms is, clearly, derived from the idea that the letter represents ‘one half of a dialogue’; it is closely connected to the topos of *imago praesentiae* in the philophronetic letter.

(3) Words meaning ‘attention’, ‘friendly care’, ‘affection’, ‘cordiality’: *cura*, *affectus*, *affectio*, *dilectio*, *caritas*. In these cases, abstract nouns were transformed into concrete ones with the meaning ‘letter of friendship’ or, in the case of *caritas*, ‘letter to one’s beloved brother in Christ’. This semantic development is the result of the adaptation of Greek epistolary theory to a Roman context. For Greek theorists, *philophronesis*, ‘friendly disposition’, was the very essence of the letter, and the exchange of care and affection between two highly educated men was the ideal epistolary situation. In the Roman experience, however, genuine affection was not a necessary component of a true friendship; or, to use the sharp observation of Stowers,¹ “the Roman concept of friendship, *amicitia*, was different. Traditionally, the concept of *amicitia* did not emphasize sentiment and male affection as the Greek concept did.” But even if we agree that political pragmatism had a stronger impact on the early Roman concept of epistolary *amicitia* than did Greek rhetorical theory, we can still observe the curious fact that in the fourth and fifth centuries this ‘affective’ vocabulary reinforced its original ethos: in one case, in

¹ STOWERS 1989, 29.

order to consolidate the representatives of pagan nobility into a club of unshakable fellowship; and, in the other, in order to strengthen the bonds of true love in Christian correspondence, thus echoing the Pauline *caritas*.

(4) The last group, which is the main subject of our study, comprises words which originally designated the reciprocal character of some kind of relationship (family, family alliances, friendship, patronage), an exchange that could entail any sort of material goods or personal services – ‘duty’, ‘service’, ‘merit’, ‘due reward’, ‘thanksgiving’. The idea behind this kind of metonymic substitution is explicit: the letter is one of the reciprocal obligations implied by the relationship of *amicitia* or by any other kind of social relationship in Roman society.

It is quite typical for two different spheres of Roman life – the complex of public and private duties and the informal code of friendship – to share this common phraseology, which corresponds to the mutual character of true (epistolary) friendship, and at the same time reflects the fact that in social and political life *officium* is omnipresent and universally required, its precise obligations varying according to the status of the individual. The practice of maintaining regular correspondence in Rome was not merely a matter of kindness or personal attachment; in Stowers’ words, “the conventions of *amicitia* were backed by very powerful social sanctions”.² Regardless of the often repeated cliché that a letter is a voluntary gift, letter-writing was interpreted in terms of the obligations of role and relationships, obligations to other individuals; honouring these obligations was indispensable for keeping the Roman world and Roman values alive.

This last group of synonyms for *litterae* clearly represents a specific linguistic phenomenon in Late Latin: *nomina abstracta*, which were in common use in Classical Latin, developed new, concrete meanings after going through a long process of assimilation on the basis of some common features and, consequently, metonymic identification and substitution. The language of both public and private life of Rome in the first century was dominated by the use of words like *beneficium*, *officium*, *meritum*, *obsequium*, *munus*, *honor* etc., but it was only in the late fourth and in the fifth century that these words appeared as generally accepted

² STOWERS 1989, 30.

synonyms for *epistula* in the letter collections of pagan and Christian authors. Next to them appear *vices* (*necessitudinis*), *responsum*, *debitum*, *commercium* (*litterarum*), nouns that belong to the same political and ethical discourse (the language of obligations), but reflect earlier stages in the process of moving away from the original, abstract meaning. Expressions such as *commercium* (*litterarum*) (abstract + concrete), or *vices* (*necessitudinis*) (abstract + abstract), reveal what the different steps in this process looked like. Periphrastic constructions like *munere amoris atque officii* (Cic. *fam.* 15. 11. 3) and *officii erga te studiique meritis* (Cic. *fam.* 6. 14. 1), in which *officium* and *meritum* are still used as *nomina abstracta*, anticipate the appearance of *officium litterarum*, *mandati officii munia*, *officium scriptationis*, all of which are expanded forms of *officium* in the sense of 'letter', four centuries after Cicero.

Most of these words, and primarily *officium*, regularly occur in correlations like *beneficium tuum ~ officium meum*, which emphasize the reciprocal character of the epistolary duty. There is a general consensus that, in Late Latin, words describing services and favours and their reciprocation were no longer susceptible to precise delimitations of appropriate social contexts: *beneficium*, *officium*, *meritum* and *gratia* were not closely related to specific categories of social relationships.³ As a consequence, every effort to pinpoint a universal distinction out of the specific context would be fruitless, on account of the semantic overlap between words related to the idea of service and duty. In our opinion, similar conclusions could be made if we try to take an overall picture of the former *abstracta* used as synonyms for 'letter' at the end of the fourth century. *Officium* is the fundamental and obligatory service exchanged between friends; but it is also interchangeable with its synonymous terms, *beneficium* and *meritum*, which began to overlap with one another. At first blush, this was not the case with the carefully selected words expressing different nuances of the idea of duty – a friendly office, a debt, a courtesy or paying respect to someone – in the elaborate etiquette of the epistolary genre. *Officium* seems to most frequently signify the due response to a received letter, while *meritum* or *beneficium* denote the letter of the person who first sent a message. The age and the social status of the correspondent sometimes presuppose the choice of a proper word

³ SALLER 1982, 21–22.

for the letter. In the letters of Sidonius Apollinaris *obsequium* can indicate a letter to an older person or a person superior in rank, and *officium* a letter to a person of the same age and equal standing (cf. *Ep.* 7.2.4). However, this impression that there were simple rules can sometimes be misleading. Symmachus occasionally opposes *munus* as 'letter' to *officium* as 'care for the administration of the family estates' (1.5); in 2.12 *officium impletum* denotes the loyalty of the courier, and not the duty of the sender. In the letters of Sidonius Apollinaris, *officium* stands for the letter itself or, in several cases, only for the salutation formula (cf. 5.15, 6.4). Passages which present a conflict of duties are especially characteristic: if Symmachus (7.50) builds the opposition *privatis officiis ~ actus publicos*, in which the letters are the private duties par excellence, a similar conflict is instanced by Ennodius in a completely different way when he differentiates between letters (of recommendation) in favour of a third party, *officia peregrina*, and letters of genuine friendship: *nec munus caritatis ad officia peregrina transducerem* (161.1).

It is impossible to prove that *obsequium* or *munus* were regarded as subsequent associative terms when compared to *officium*. In Symmachus' private letters we find the consequent use of *officium* that signifies the writing down and conveying of a letter as *the* duty. *Obsequium* is more frequently chosen by Ennodius as a synonym of *epistula*. Sidonius Apollinaris has both of them in Singular and Plural, along with frequent use of *munus*, *munia* and *honor*. There is clear evidence that the writers did not always differentiate between these terms, nor did they always retain the characteristic meanings of the *nomina abstracta*. The concrete noun for 'letter', i.e. *obsequium*, derived from the abstract meaning, could render appropriate honour – without necessarily expressing hierarchical dependence and inferiority.

Additionally, it is obvious that our categories (3) and (4) are interrelated and to a certain degree interchangeable. Maintaining contact with an absent friend is an essential part of one's duties, and *vice versa*, the sense of mutual obligation goes to the very nature of Roman *amicitia*. There is, however, one difference: while the type of affection could vary, or the expression of affection could even be wholly absent, the exchange-obligation remained a constant.

This is a rough sketch of the basic types of words denoting 'letter' in

Latin epistolography, with obvious blank spaces to be filled in: namely, words denoting 'formal letter' like *relatio* (the report of higher magistrates), *epistula formata* (a recommendation letter for a cleric), *apices* (in the sense of imperial rescript), etc. What is most important, this classification offers a synchronic picture of the semantic peculiarities of a group of words but, as we know, the vocabulary is the part of the linguistic system that is most exposed to innovations. Hence, the truly intriguing question is: why did the metonymic use of words like *munus*, *obsequium*, *officium*, *gratia* and *meritum* acquire a special role in the phraseology of the epistolary genre precisely in the fourth century, and thus competed with or even substituted the typical words denoting 'letter' in Classical Latin? Another question, which goes beyond the scope of this article, but is still worth discussing, concerns the possible shifts in the treatment of the concept of duty in the fourth and fifth centuries. For the time, we have another and less ambitious purpose in our study: namely to reconstruct, if possible, the birth and short life of *officium* as a term for 'letter'.

To our knowledge, there is no specialized literature on the semantic changes and the frequency of usage for one word or another denoting 'letter' in Latin epistolography. The subject of such a study would inevitably pose some limitations. The realm of expanded forms of the basic words listed above, such as *honor salutationis*, *munus caritatis*, *litterarii consuetudo sermonis*, and other word groups, comprehensible only in their specific context, is far too large to be embraced in its entirety in a single, thorough study. As far as basic one-word synonyms for *litterae* and *epistula* are concerned, we should mention Haverling's passing notes⁴ on the process of reinterpretation of old forms like *sermo* and *oratio* in Late Latin. To quote her observations, *sermo*, originally used in the sense of 'speech' or 'faculty to talk', indeed acquired the sense 'sermon' in Christian Latin, "in Symmachus, however, the influence from the topical language of ancient epistolography makes both words occur as synonyms to *litterae* and *epistula*: cf. Epist. 1.99 *nam quid religio agit, ubi desideraretur oratio?* and Epist. 8.15 *ex debito venit sermo, qui redditur, ex beneficio, qui sponte defertur.*" Haverling, again, in her review

⁴ HAVERLING 1988, 36.

of Bruggisser's study on Bk 1 of Symmachus' letters,⁵ notices the need for a detailed explanation of terms like *adfatus* and *colloquium*. In addition to that, she recommends that the different expressions defining the author's friendship with Praetextatus (*diligentia, favor, officium*) become the subject of a careful study comparing the use of such terminology in the other eight books of Symmachus' private correspondence. Another contribution to this topic is the article of E. Wistrand,⁶ who made some valuable observations on the use of *solacium* in the sense of 'letter' in Symmachus' correspondence, and particularly in *Ep. 9.145 nam quid sibi vult mutui solacii postulatio, si reditus apparatur*.

Since the problem is not specifically dealt with by modern classicists, we take it as appropriate, first of all, to draw attention to the semantic transformations of *officium*, a concept of central importance for the Roman world, that could illuminate the history of related words denoting the reciprocal character of any important kind of relationship in Rome. The semantic development of words like *honor, munus, beneficium* and *sermo* deserves a separate study, one which would shed light on the further process of selection and intensifying of certain meanings of classical Latin words in Medieval Latin. In this article, however, we shall only occasionally mention examples of their usage, if they occur in a word group with *officium*, since they are complementary to one another.

The starting point for our research is a survey of the lexicon article in TLL.⁷ There are two words from group 4, for which a figurative use in the sense 'letter' is an object of particular emphasis in TLL – *officium* and *obsequium*. Even a quick glance at the quotations shows that the examples cited derive almost entirely from texts of the fourth and fifth centuries, in the case of *officium* with a certain disproportion in favour of Jerome and

⁵ HAVERLING 1997, 319.

⁶ WISTRAND 1950, 95–97.

⁷ The article in OLD 1243–1244 has no special entry reflecting the metonymic use of *officium* in the sense of 'a letter', but it is easy to single out the groups of meanings from which the idea of the letter as a duty of the Roman upper class was derived: "1. A helpful or beneficial act done to someone in fulfillment of an obligation, a service, friendly office; readiness to give help or service; 2. an act of respect to a person, a courtesy or civility, esp. a ceremonial visit of client to his patron, a gathering paying respect, a ceremony; 3. that which one is bound to do in the way of service, one's duty or obligations, a sense of one's obligations, a moral obligation, duty".

Ennodius, while the wide range of semantic nuances in Symmachus is presented with one example.⁸ Both *officium* and *obsequium* in the meaning ‘letter’ are assigned to one category of nouns together with the act of *salutatio* as paying respect to someone, and with *exsequia* as a care for funeral rites. In this way the semantic development of *officium* could be reconstructed as a transition from the general duty of paying respect to the formula of paying respect or gratitude at the beginning of a letter, and, finally, to the letter as a material object or content of the message. The transition from abstract to concrete, from the attitude or action of compliance and attention to the visible product of this attitude, is easier to comprehend in the metonymic use of *obsequium*. It is our opinion that the use of *officium* in the sense of ‘letter’ is explicit in the first part of the lexicon article (*munus animantium*), but also implicitly present in the second part which addresses the uses of the word as a *munus rerum*⁹. The logic behind the process is the same: abstract nouns, designating a state of mind or an attitude (*officium amoris*), and the task imposed on a specific text (*officium sermonis*), turned into concrete nouns signifying the result of this attitude or the instrument to fulfill one’s duty.

After consulting the records in TLL, we can go one step further with the conclusion that in the correspondence of Cicero, Seneca and

⁸ For *obsequium* cf. TLL 9.2.182.11: “honorando vel salutando (maxime in epistulis), debitum salutationis obsequium”; and 184.40–50: “metonymice, A. de eo, quod obsequendo praestatur – Prop. 1, 8, 40 blandi carminis obsequio; Paul Nol. carm. 1, praef. p. 1, 6 ut aliquid sermoni huic obsequium viderer adiungere; Alc. Avit. epist. 12 p. 46, 4 praesentis obsequii portitorem (i. epistulae), cf. Sigism. ibid. 29 p. 55, 10 paginae praesentis obsequium (94 p.101, 11 Ennod. epist. 1, 21, 1 p. 33, 12.1, 26, 3 p. 37, 15) 78 p. 93, 12 suscipite propitii cum obsequio portitorem 93 p. 100, 26 litterarum obsequia Ennod. epist. 6, 38, 2 p. 171, 14 obsequiorum meorum perlator.” — For *officium* cf. TLL 9.2.520.10–15: “β: de epistulis: Cic. Fam. 6, 6, 1 ne litterarum a me officium requiras (Hier. epist. 48, 1; Hil. Arel. vita Honorat. 22.1.2; Hier. epist. 8. 2 litterario officio Sigism. Alc. Avit. epist. 29, p. 59, 14 litterarii sermonis). Cic. fil. Cic. fam. 16, 25 (Tironi) noli committere ut excusatione potius expleas officium scribendi quam assiduitate epistularum; Suet. vita Hor. p. 45, 8 Augustus epistularum ... ei officium optulit (cf. Hier. epist. 29, 1, 1 epistulare officium); Symm. epist. 1, 83 diu officio scriptionis abstinui (Ennod. epist. 1, 26, 2 p. 37, 4. 2, 2, 3 p. 41, 19).”

⁹ TLL 9.2.524.48–49 “de actione, statu, facultate// officium mentis, amoris, humanitatis; [...] orationis eiusque partium Cic. de orat. 3. 224 officium nostri sermonis; Ov. epist. 17. 144 fungitur officio littera nostra novo (sc. epistula pro nuntio amoris).”

Pliny the Younger the use of *officium* is never completely identical with that of *litterae* and *epistula*. Neither the Singular (*officium*) nor the Plural (*officia*) of the noun developed specific meanings in an epistolary context; nor did they focus on any specific kind of epistolary obligations. Cicero repeatedly uses expressions which only remotely link duties, friendship and epistolarity, e.g., *studium officiumque*, *iudicium officiumque*, *litteris et officiis*, *litteras plenas amoris et officii*, *officia mutua et paria*. The translations of some of these phrases, however, are quite controversial and it is impossible to reconstruct on this slippery ground exactly how and at which particular point the *officium* of a phrase such as *litterae plenae officii* became *officium* as a synonym for *litterae*. According to Shuckburgh's comment on the specific difficulties that one meets in translating *Letters to Friends*, the problem comes from Cicero's "doubling and trebling of nearly synonymous terms, the endless shades of meaning in such common words as *officium*, *fides*, *humanitas*, and the like".¹⁰

And yet, as we saw in TLL, there are two instances of a narrower use of *officium* in Cicero's letters. In a letter to Aulus Caecina, Cicero uses the word twice: "I am afraid you may think me remiss in my attentions to you, which, in view of our close union resulting from many mutual services and kindred tastes, ought never to be lacking. In spite of that I fear you do find me wanting in the matter of writing".¹¹ The repeated word, this second time expanded to *officium litterarum*, specifies exactly what kind of friendly gesture Caecina was expecting – it had to be a letter. In another letter, addressed to Tiro, Cicero begs his former slave to take his *officium scribendi* seriously and to avoid the bad practice of neglecting his letter-writing in the future: "[...] though there is nothing I miss so much as a letter from you, don't fulfil your obligation to write by sending an excuse rather than by regularity in actual letters"¹². *Officium scribendi* here does not refer to any kind of literary activity, but to the

¹⁰ SHUCKBURGH 1908, XIX.

¹¹ Cic. Fam. 6.6.1 *vereor ne desideres officium meum, quod tibi pro nostra et meritorum multorum et studiorum parium coniunctione deesse non debet; sed tamen vereor, ne litterarum a me officium requires*. The English translation above is by Shuckburgh.

¹² Cic. Fam. 16.25 *noli committere ut excusatione potius expleas officium scribendi quam assiduitate epistularum*.

epistolary duty which cannot be properly fulfilled through formal greetings only.

Seneca, with his strict rejection of Cicero's *iocari*, questioned the great importance allotted to *philophronesis* as the main content of the letter. For this reason, *officium* in *Epistulae ad Lucilium* has the meaning of one's moral and civil duty and the action which results from it. The private correspondence of Pliny the Younger, on the other hand, is rich in references to his own or the 'duties' of others, but always in the sense of 'public duty', 'friendly service', 'courtesy or paying of respect to someone', 'sense of duty to friends and family'. Common places borrowed from the vocabulary of *amicitia* and expressions as *grata officia*, *necesarium officium*, *officia deserere*, *officiis meruit*, unsurprisingly, form a considerable part of the basic word stock of a man of duties like Pliny. None of these expressions, however, stands for the letter itself either as form as content.

It was in the nine books of private letters of Q. Aurelius Symmachus that the word *officium* was for the first time reinterpreted as a synonym for *epistula* and became part of the epistolary vocabulary. One step separated the expressions *officium scribendi* and *officium litterarum* attested in Cicero's letters from the *officium* used without a specifying Genitivus explicativus, but it was an important step. In the first case, one regarded letter-writing as a duty among many other private duties, in the second – and this is most obvious in Symmachus – one began to understand the private duty primarily as letter-writing.

Officium is the main word for 'letter' in Symmachus' private correspondence, occasionally being elucidated and complemented as *officium amicitiae* or *officium scriptionis*. After *officium* and its expanded forms comes the usual group of substantives associated with epistolary activity: *litterae*, *epistula*, *pagina*, *adfatus*, *vicissitudo* etc. It is worth noting that the use of this specific word is not as frequent in the writings of Symmachus' contemporary and friend Ausonius, who seems to have preferred different nouns expressing the idea of letter. Playing with the proper meaning of *officium* is found only three times¹³ in his hexametric

¹³ Auson. Ep. 23.13–15 *et mansit dum laeta fides nec cura laborat / officii servare vices, sed sponte feruntur / incustoditum sibi continuantia cursum*; 26.3–4 *officium set nulla pium mihi pagina reddit / fausta salutigeris adscribens orsa libellis*; 29–30 *dumque pudet tacuisse*

letters to Paulinus of Nola. It is probably not without reason that he speaks of letter-writing as a duty (*officii/officiorum vices; officium pium*) in these letters, in which he is pathetically begging his former pupil to break his silence, which implies a negligence to epistolary obligations and, consequently, dissolution of friendship.

Symmachus viewing the letter as 'a duty' belongs to his passionate cult of tradition. The letter, *officium sollemne* (1.26), not only dominates everyday life in its private aspect, but gains ground in those areas of public life which were reserved for the most essential duties of the Roman citizen, the core of the tradition itself. For Symmachus, the specific content, the essence of the letter as a whole is *philophronesis*. He repeatedly stresses that the letter is *cultus, fructus, munus amicitiae* (4.61.3, 5.52), *indiciū verae amicitiae* (3.17.2, 5.63.1, 6.6.2). This is why the reminder of this specific obligation is so pleasant: *gratiosa est expostulatio, quae requirit officium* (2.54). If a couple of hours after a letter had been sent, a second message were to follow it, the excuse for this over-indulgence is that love for the epistolary duty knows no limits (*amor officiorum modum non tenet*, 2.89), just as friendship, which is celebrated in letters, cannot be confined within certain limits (*amicitia enim, quae celebratur officiis, numquam certo fine contenta est*, 5.71). Since friendship creates a bridge over empty space and brings together persons who are apart, it is exactly friendship that is occurring in a letter first of all (*nunc vero officiis mulcemus abeuntem*, 2.34). The letter is a special kind of obligation, distinguished by its selflessness and purity (*aperto pectore officia pura miscemus*, 2.12.2). This is why, in Symmachus' world, to ignore one's epistolary duty is a serious offence. Neglecting correspondence with friends and relatives is comparable to the disgrace of an unpaid debt. This epistolary topos introduces into the letters of Symmachus numerous legal lexeis which usually define the mutual relations of creditor and debtor: *vectigal sollemne dependo... enixe meum fungor officium* (3.2).

The well-known concept of the letter as the type of writing in which personalities are best reflected was developed in late fourth-century epistolography. For Symmachus, who sees the diligent maintenance of correspondence as part of the Roman order and way of life, it is one's

diu, placet officiorum / non servare vices: et amant longa otia culpam.

attitude towards his epistolary duties that provides the general picture of his character. When he addresses Agorius Praetextatus with the flattering words *sed tuos mores, quibus nihil desit ad laudem, dedecet officii negligentia* (1.50), it goes without saying that the neglected duty is the obligation of regular correspondence; perfect *mores* and neglecting one's epistolary duties are mutually exclusive ideas.

The etiquette of Symmachus' letters is a very complex one; not all its nuances belong to the topic of *philophronesis*. First of all, correspondence is not always between equals. The hierarchy which can manifest itself on different levels (letters between younger and older friends, between patrons and clients, etc.) is part of this genre's topic. Symmachus, however, further elaborates these hierarchic rules, playing with possible epistolary situations and the corresponding transformations of epistolary duty. Correspondents of the same age and social status are supposed to share their epistolary duty. In a letter of reproach to his brother, Symmachus writes: *immane quantum a litteris desidētis... cogitate vestri officii necessitatem* (1. 65).

This rethinking of the concept of *officium* found in Symmachus could be seen more clearly in the context of several fixed semantic oppositions: (1) *officium* vs *meritum*, i.e. sender vs recipient; (2) *officium* vs *negotium* or *occupatio*, private duty vs public duty; (3) *officium* ~ *otium*, letter-writing vs rejection of duties; (4) *officium* ~ *silentium*, diligent letter-writing ~ neglecting correspondence.

The semantic correlation *officium* ~ *meritum* is a traditional part of the topic of the philophronetic letter. Symmachus often employs these two terms in the most concrete sense, so that *officium* denotes the giver and *meritum* the recipient of the epistolary benefit. This epistolary situation should be understood as the ideal balance between ideal correspondents, rather than translated in terms of 'active' and 'passive' correspondents. The reading of a letter is that sublime, decisive moment in which friendship really carries weight and takes its best expression: *quotiens tua sumo conloquia... et tui officii et mei meriti sentio vigere momentum* (1.84).

In a large part of Symmachus' correspondence *officium* is the term that defines and opposes the letter to other non-literary duties. In a letter dated before 377, Symmachus magnanimously explains away the silence of Ausonius with his obligations as quaestor and member of the imperial

council – activities defined as *occupationes* and *diurna negotia*, but immediately after that continues with the following adhortation to his friend: *detur aliquod tempus officiis* (1.23.3). This sort of statement is characteristic for the changes in the ideology of the senatorial aristocracy occurring in Late Antiquity. *Officiis* here stands for the correspondence, which encompasses the whole area of private duties. The hierarchical equivalence of private and public obligations is confirmed once again in a letter to Probus, who had to oversee the gathering of the crop and, for a short while, neglected his correspondence. Symmachus, however, shows himself as an optimist and a forgiving friend, preferring to regard this situation as one of the transformations of *officium*, which is in fact one and the same model of behavior that can take different expressions alternatively in the public or the private sphere: *mutasti igitur officium, non negasti* (1.61).

The semantic opposition *otium* ~ *officium* in Symmachus, on the other hand, is presented as a contrast without shades of meaning. In a letter to Agorius Praetextatus, Symmachus points out that he could write a shorter letter but believed that the honest fulfillment of the epistolary duty was of greater profit than silent leisure: *sed in maiore lucro officia honesta quam otia muta ponenda sunt* (1.46.1). What Symmachus says in this straightforward text is that *otium* is silent and non-productive, for which reason correspondence – private or public – should not be considered a part of leisure time. On the contrary, he insists that his letters are not a fruit of indolence, but proof of the strict fulfillment of his obligations in friendship.

The semantic opposition *officium (religio)* ~ *silentium* is attested in many letters of Symmachus. That only one side is maintaining the correspondence is identified in these cases with *negotium* (in the sense of an ungratifying task), and not with *officium*. Here is where we should make a short remark. The notorious indulgence and mild compliance of Symmachus towards friends who had failed to write a letter¹⁴ must be seen in light of his interpretation of letters as duties par excellence. There is something ostentatious, of course, about his polite understanding and readiness to forgive others for being less perfect and conscientious. Nevertheless, the opinion that Symmachus' dogmatism in other matters

¹⁴ BRUGGISSER 1993, 19–21.

results in much more flexible and moderate behaviour in his epistolary relations takes Symmachus' clemency far too literally. The persistent repetition of one oxymoron, namely the topos of the letter as a 'voluntary duty', *bonum spontaneum*, rather points to the opposite point of view. In a letter to Nicomachus Flavianus it becomes clear that voluntary devotion to epistolary duty is derived from the very nature of the letter as *philophronesis*, but also from the degree of 'humanity' of the author: *non est necesse voluntariis officiis aculeos exhortationis adhibere* (2.26.2). This implies that a man of letters must be a man of duties as well. Symmachus himself is zealously protecting his reputation of an author who respects his correspondents and cannot be blamed for shameful negligence: *dissimulati officii neglegentiam* (3.5). In this way, Symmachus equates epistolary duty and loyalty to his own milieu, by exploiting the blurred line between the vocabularies of epistolary *amicitia* and social relations.

The letters of the bishop of Auvergne, Sidonius Apollinaris, contain both literal references and thematic echoes from Symmachus. Sidonius represents the wealthiest class of the Gallic nobility of the fifth century. He was quite actively engaged in politics and, after he devoted himself to an ecclesiastical career, also experienced the invasion of the Visigoths under Euric and imprisonment, upon which he returned to his position as bishop. For him, as for Symmachus, there were both periods of fervent activity in the institutions of state – for Sidonius in the Church as well – and periods of exile and forced disruption of communication with friends and diocese. These similarities, both of them losing and resuming contact with correspondents, as reflected in the letters, together with the fact that in Sidonius classical tradition and Christianity coexist without difficulty, makes this author our second best source for the semantic changes of *officium*.

In contrast to Symmachus, the word *officium* in the letters of Sidonius Apollinaris does not stand out so clearly amongst other synonyms for *litterae*. It is mostly used to express the following meanings:

(1) The letter as a message, as an object of delivery; the action of conveying a letter. One repeatedly finds this usage of *officium* in those letters in which the reliability of a courier is discussed; only a reliable person will be trusted with another epistolary mission: *gerulus antiquus... cui iure repetita credantur officia* (9.8.1).

(2) The letter as content, the body of the letter. The word *officium* is here used as a direct synonym for *epistula* along with *sermo*, *alloquium*, *affatus*. What is different, when compared to Symmachus, is that the words listed above could be at any time expanded into phrases – *officium sermonis*, *officia fidei* (3.7.1), *officia verborum* (7.11.1). Symmachus, on the contrary, uses the word mostly as a term which needs no explanations in order to specify it.

(3) The initial part of the letter, the formula of honour and salutation. *Officium* in many cases is identical with the introduction or the salutation formula of the letter. In this meaning, the word occurs always at the very beginning of the letter. In 5.15.1 Sidonius recommends, to his friend Ruricius, a scribe who had worked devotedly on a copy of the *Prophets*. We see that the letter is in fact an *epistula commendaticia* only after the sender has repaid his debt of politeness: *officii sermone praefato bybliopolam vestrum... insinuo*. In 6.4.1 we have another recommendation; Sidonius addresses Lupus with words designating honour: *praeter officium, quod incomparabiliter eminenti apostolatui tuo sine fine debetur, etsi absque intermissione solvatur, commendo supplicum*. In both letters, *officium* means 'honour', 'respect', but at the same time it is meant as a technical term for the words of courtesy that simulataneously introduce the request for a favour and the letter itself. Another example is in 7.10.2: after the siege of Auvergne had been lifted in 474, Sidonius sends to Graecus his apologies for the delay in replying: *quocirca salutatione praefata, sicut mos poscit officii, magno opere deosco, ut interim remittatis occursionis debitum vel verba solventi*. The striking point in all three letters is that the reference to the act of courtesy (*praeter officium quod debetur*) replaces the actual words denoting courtesy. The sender claims to have paid his tribute to the recipient by the very act of referring to his duty. Few of us today would ever write anything like "Having fulfilled this duty of mine to pay respect to you, I would now like to recommend...", or "In addition to the due respect that I have just shown and will always reciprocate, let me beg your forgiveness." In our opinion, this specific wording in Sidonius is an example of further specialisation of the word *officium* in this sense, a new epistolary convention, we could say, that was used as a kind of agreed upon abbreviation in the letters of recommendation.

(4) *Officium*, in a semantic correlation with *obsequium*, *munus* and *affectus*, indicates different hierarchical levels both in the epistolary context and outside of it. In 2.8.1 Sidonius mourns the death of a lady to whom different people owed different kinds of courtesy: *cui debuerit domi forisque persona minor obsequium, maior officium, aequalis adfectum*. But what Sidonius really did with even greater virtuosity than Symmachus is the refined word-play with *officium* and *obsequium* in the sense of ‘obedience’ and ‘fulfilling one’s epistolary duty’: cf. 8.14.8 *vestri gerulus eloquii ... quia tuorum apicum detulit munera, meorum reportat obsequia*. In this way he is skillfully constructing different epistolary situations by exploiting all possible shades of meaning of *officium* and words related to it. For example, in many letters Sidonius played with the various terms which denote the obligations of each side in the triangle between the letter-carrier, the sender and the recipient of the letter. In 6.5.1 the services and benefits, i.e. the roles in the epistolary situation, are divided between the three participants so that each one believed to have been the favoured side: *dum votivi mihi fit gerulus opportunus officii, beneficium praestat quod se arbitratur accipere*. Another complicated situation which provided Sidonius with the occasion for witty word-play with *obsequium*, but also for flattering his addressee, is the following. The bishop of Troyes, Lupus, in a reproachful letter rebuked a certain Gallus for having left his wife; as a result, Gallus repented and returned home. Soon thereafter, the man offered his services: to carry a letter from Sidonius to the bishop. Recalling the earlier episode, Sidonius wrote jokingly: “Gallus will bring you my reply, and the consequences of your own letter, too”, *Gallus ... litterarum mearum obsequium, vestrarum reportat effectum* (6.9.1).

The full reconstruction of the semantic changes of *officium* should comprise a comparative study of the letters of several further authors – Ambrose, Jerome, Augustine and Paulinus of Nola.¹⁵ For all of them the

¹⁵ The term *officium* in these four authors, despite the fact that the intensity of its use varies considerably from Ambrosius to Paulinus of Nola, is always subordinate to *caritas* and represents an ‘affectionate’ obligation, since it would be nothing without love; Christian friendship, in contrast to the norms of Roman social life, could exist without exchange of *officia*, be they mutual services, favours or letters. So if Symmachus’ *officium* decreased in value already in the lifetime of his fervent defender, this process resulted from the shift in the very notion of *amicitia* which

word *officium* had already acquired a new, special meaning, having become the most common name for the work of Christ in the Latin Church. The classical notion of duty was rejected in favour of a higher, Christian principle. It is obvious that if *officium* is indeed quite frequently used in the sense of 'letter' in the letter collections of Christian authors, it was for other reasons than loyalty to tradition or the general agreement that relationships in the Roman world were based on the reciprocal exchange of services, favours and solicitude. It was no longer this kind of relationship that guided Christian correspondence or, in the words of Paulinus of Nola: *non enim humana amicitia, sed divina gratia invicem nobis innotuimus*.¹⁶

There is certainly still much left from the rhetorical tradition in these authors, who were strongly influenced by their classical education. But, beside the topic of the philophronetic letter, there was something else that Christian authors shared with Symmachus: they believed, each in his own way, that the letter is an expression of virtue. For Symmachus, however, the most important vehicle for the correspondence and content of the letter is *officium*; for Paulinus of Nola or Ambrosius, the essence of the letter is *caritas*. When Paulinus of Nola writes about the letter as *officium caritatis* (Ep. 6.2, 13.1), and Symmachus names it *officium amicitiae* or simply *officium*, it is not a matter of replaceable phrasing or a banal idiom, but a replacement of the concept itself.

In summation, it is in the fourth century, and first of all in the correspondence of highly educated authors with an outstanding social position like Symmachus, that we find the substantive *officium* as a common word denoting 'letter'. It would be naïve to search for reasons that could explain this semantic development in Cicero's *On duties* or in the genre prescriptions of contemporary rhetoricians, like in the influential manual on rhetoric of C. Iulius Victor. The broadness of the concept of *officium* and its applicability in both the public and private

found its highest expression in the letters of Augustine. As he clearly stated reinterpreting Cicero's *Laelius* (Aug. Ep. 155; 258), there could be no full or true accord in human matters between friends who have none in the divine. It is the principle of *caritas* by which Christian authors decided which aspects of *officium* have to be retained and which rejected.

¹⁶ Ep. 51.3.

spheres made it possible for this word, and other related substantives like *obsequium*, to acquire new meanings in Late Antiquity. The new semantic use of *officium* probably developed from the idea of reciprocity and exchange, which was a common part of the – more pragmatic than affective – slogan of Roman *amicitia*, and of epistolary communication. In this way, Symmachus imported new meanings into the old vocabulary and defended the identity of the Roman way of life as reflected in the interpretation of the letter as a duty. Christian authors like Sidonius Apollinaris adopted *officium* as a concrete noun, exploited the semantic oppositions found in Symmachus and created new ones: terms like *obsequium* (*oboedientia*), *affectus*, *caritas* and *dilectio* were now being used as well. In the centuries that followed, new concepts and new words inevitably took the place of the *firma societas*¹⁷ upon which the world once stood.

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¹⁷ Cf. Cic. *Off.* 1. 56.

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**Дужност и преписка. Семантички преображај термина *officium*
у латинској епистографији IV–V века**

Abstract

Анстракт. У овом прилогу реч је о групи латинских именица које су у епистоларним збиркама IV–V века задобиле нов смисао, постајући синонимне с именицом *epistula*. Семантички развитак тих речи, које су у ранијој употреби означавале реципрочност својствену породичним, пријатељским или покровитељско-штићеничким односима, овде се испитује кроза семантичке промене термина *officium*, који у римском свету има суштински значај. Испоставља се да је *officium* у значењу »писмо« посведочено први пут у преписци Симаховој, а потом и у писмима хришћанских писаца IV–V века. Симахов преосмишљени *officium* сагледава се у контексту неколико фиксних семантичких опозиција које су на равни садржине постале интегрални део хришћанског писма.

Кључне речи: епистоларне дужности, позни латинитет, семантичке промене, *litterae*, *officium*.