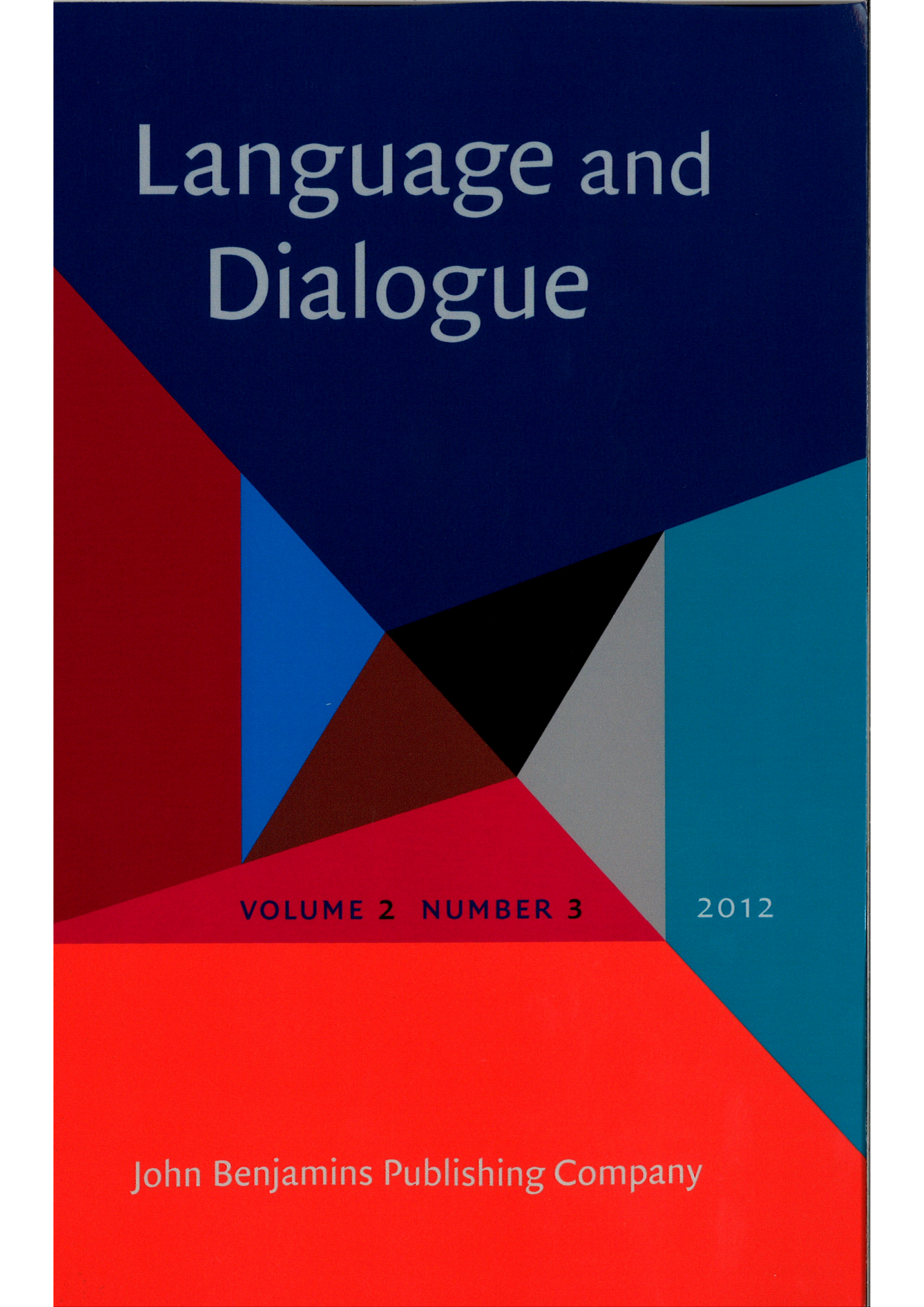


# Language and Dialogue



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# Epistolarity

## From hidden dialogue to an obsession to dialogue

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The epistolary genre is considered to be an all-encompassing one insofar as it includes various epistemological approaches, thanks to the hybrid, nomadic, intricate and oxymoronic nature of the letter. This paper seeks to examine the relationship between letters and dialogue, a relationship based on the complicity and reciprocity that characterize dialogism in general. The *topos* of conversation is undoubtedly one of the most frequent and fruitful in epistolary writing. Letter writing has long been considered a reflection and prolongation or anticipation of face-to-face interaction. This study will try to show how conversation, as an underlying paradigm and a sort of presence-in-absence, represents a form of compensation, a consolation against the suffering stemming from distance in space and time.

**Keywords:** epistolary discourse, dialogue, conversation in absentia, *topoi*, discourse markers

### 1. Introduction

Tout discours est au moins implicitement dialogique, sinon explicitement dialogal. L'intérêt du discours épistolaire est qu'il est à la fois l'un et l'autre, on dira même l'un par l'autre, avec des dosages divers, exhibant plus ou moins la relation entre les partenaires de l'interlocution, dans un espace qui est notoirement propice à une instabilité du statut des actants de la communication.(...) Car si l'on peut parler de dialogue à propos de l'échange entre deux êtres qu'une correspondance est censé véhiculer (que ce soit réellement, ou dans le cadre d'une fiction), c'est tout de même un dialogue particulier, hors la vue et en différé.

(Jaubert 2006, 138)

Dialogical by their very nature, letters contain a basic underlying principle: the quest for the other. Letter writing is a form of sociability which represents *un*



*fragment heureux* [a happy fragment, my translation], as emphasized by Christian Meurillon (1984, 18).

It is happy since it has survived not only the labyrinthine and dangerous journey but also its natural deterioration (another element of its fragile nature). It has also survived its own destiny. It is thus, saved and intact, that the letter presents itself to us, “happy” posthumous readers. (my translation) (Parreira da Silva 2003, 12)

According to Melançon (1996, 292), “la lettre suppose une connivence et elle est donc par définition elliptique: je n’ai pas besoin de tout «vous» dire, puisque nous partageons un savoir et que le «reste s’entend»”.

Epistolary discourse thus constitutes the most genuine expression of this dialogic view of communication. The dimension of communicability arises through the functional inversion of interlocutors’ roles and the constant reciprocity between sender and receiver, and this alternation of roles in the course of interaction highlights the transitivity of the process. A letter is discourse addressed to the other and it survives, in Diaz’s words, “(...) à l’enrayement solipsiste et à l’inertie entropique qui menacent toujours peu ou prou les écritures de soi” (Diaz 2002, 146).

The letter writer demands the addressee’s attention. It is this intimate specificity that differentiates this genre from other autobiographical genres, insofar as the diffuse presence of the other (the addressee or addressees) builds subtle networks of sociability.

Broadly speaking, the letter is a space of invocation: it calls upon a temporally or spatially absent or distant other. However, the epistolary text can at the same time involve a delusion (see, for instance, Vincent Kauffmann 1990), a paradox, since it implies a simultaneous coming together and growing apart. The necessary condition for letter writing is that the other be far removed from the writer’s space, distant. “Writing is thus nourished by the sorrow which arises when we are far away from and miss the other, when we feel deprived of the other.” (my translation) (Parreira da Silva 2003, 26).

Throughout the centuries, letters have been written not only with the aim of establishing communication, but also as a way to shape identity, as a way of *capturing the self* (Diaz 2002, 161). Born out of the silence of writing, the letter becomes an excellent exercise in introspection. While one of the worst *epistolary sins* — besides silence or a late reply — is narcissism, personal self-examination (which bridges the dichotomy between opening up towards the other and concentrating on ‘one’s self’) legitimizes the paradox of communicating the discourse of absence and, simultaneously, the desire for presence and dialogue.

## 2. Conversation *in absentia*

Il me semble que je vous parle quand je vous écris, et que vous m'êtes un peu plus présent. (Guilleragues 1983, 87)

Cette lettre sera plus heureuse que moi, car elle couchera avec vous. Jugez si je lui porte envie, wrote Henry IV of France to the Marquise of Verneuil. (Siess 1988, 111)

The *topos* of conversation is undoubtedly one of the most frequent and fruitful metaphors in epistolarity. Letter writing was for a long time considered a reflection of and the prolongation or anticipation of face-to-face interaction. However, in contemporary epistolary studies, this *topos* is no longer valid, insofar as the exchange of correspondence is pragmatically viewed as a specific form of interlocution and interaction.

Cicero had already voiced this opinion when he defined letter writing as a conversation between absent friends. Many centuries later, in a letter dated 1891, André Gide dubbed it un *illusoire dialogue* (cf. Haroche Bouzinac 1995, 88ff.). This long-standing *topos* originates in rhetoric, which has always drawn its nourishment from the art of conversation. Saying good morning, having a conversation, talking to you — these are all expressions which evoke the sociability characterizing relations amongst family and friends. The conversational mode which dominates the familiar register allows for confidentiality, prolixity, intimacy, and a variety of themes, and its dynamic nature is a prerogative of family and informal relationships.<sup>1</sup>

Epistolary discourse, just like dialogue, is an enunciation and, as such, the interlocutors must be able to use the same co-references. However, while in face-to-face communication the conditions of enunciation are implied, in epistolary discourse they need to be made explicit to enable the receiver to adjust to the sender. Moreover, in letter writing, discourse is an *unfolding process*, since the moments of writing and reading belong to a different time and space. Thus, *absence* is the most frequent *topos* in epistolary discourse. Letter writing becomes a form of compensation, a consolation for the suffering caused by distance. This *topos* of the letter as a conversation with someone who is absent, as an 'embodied' substitute, is reinforced by the presence of markers of oral discourse and the frequent use of *verba dicendi*. As pointed out in *Cartas Portuguesas*, "Il me semble que je vous parle quand je vous écris, et que vous m'êtes un peu plus présent" (Guilleragues 1983, 87).

The traditional parallelism between letters and conversations between two distant interlocutors has attracted scholarly attention for many centuries and continues to be a point of disagreement amongst theorists. With regard to this issue, we share Roger Duchêne's opinion. In *Lettre et Conversation* (1995) he establishes the main differences between these two registers, showing that conversation *in*

*absentia* presupposes a space separating the interlocutors, which is itself translated into time, the amplified time of sending, writing a reply and sending it. Another element should also be noted, as it corroborates the maxim *scripta manent* and highlights a characteristic which is rarely discussed in studies on epistolary discourse. Distance, the individual and solitary act of letter writing and its underlying reflexive nature, open up a type of communication which the interlocutors would not dare establish in a face-to-face dialogue. This fact reinforces the status of the letter as a conversation *in absentia* and renders it a perennial document which, “tirillée entre l'éphémère et le durable, l'authenticité et les déformations, [la lettre] subit le sort précaire réservé aux écritures non imprimées” (Haroche-Bouzinac 1995, 12).

Duchêne (1995, 98), however, denies this basic relation between letter and conversation, when he says,

De la ressemblance affirmée par les théoriciens entre lettre et conversation, il ne faut du reste conclure que toute lettre ou tout passage de lettre s'apparente à un dialogue entre deux correspondants. Il y a au contraire beaucoup de lettres qui échappent au statut de la conversation.

Roger Dûchene believes that conversation is the laboratory of letter writing and if we wish to faithfully recreate a conversation, we can do it by reading epistolary novels such as Pascal's *Les Provinciales*. The French theoretician concludes, “Le paradoxe, et ce pourrait être l'objet d'une thèse entière de le montrer, c'est que la conversation, si différente de la lettre qu'elle soit, y est pourtant largement sous-jacente” (Dûchene 1995, 102).

Melançon devotes an entire chapter of his thesis (Chapter 6 — *Dialogue, conversation, monologue*) to this problem, stressing that letters use resources belonging to conversation and dialogue but subordinating them to the demands of the language and style of writing (Melançon 1996, 251). In their turn, Janet Altman (1982, 135) and Bruce Redford (1986, 1), analyzed and compared different corpora with a view to identifying features which are said to be common in dialogue, conversation and letter writing. They concluded that letters and spoken exchanges share some traits, such as the acknowledgement of complicity, the search for reciprocity, freedom of expression, a dependency on dominant esthetics, etc., and that the main differentiating element is the written language.

Altman presents a list of comparisons between epistolary discourse and some types of oral interaction, ranging from theatre dialogue to telephone conversation and the radio. In conversation and theatre dialogue, where interlocutors share the same time and space, speech is accompanied by supra-segmental and nonverbal features such as intonation and gestures. In telephone conversations, interlocutors share time but not space, so the only non-verbal feature is intonation. On the radio, voice is also extremely important and, once again, interlocutors share time



but not space. Interaction through letters, in which time and space are not shared and non-verbal signs are not the same as in oral communication, constitutes an experience in reciprocity and reversibility.

As written dialogue, epistolary discourse is obsessed with its oral model. No sooner is the writer aware of the gap that separates him from his reader than he tries to bridge that gap. *The cliché* Il me semble que je vous parle quand je vous écris, et que vous m'êtes un peu plus présent (*Lettres Portugaises*) is an essential epistolary statement; epistolary language is preoccupied with immediacy, with presence, because it is a product of absence. (Altman 1982, 135)

### 3. Conversation and epistolary language: Some common features

#### *Acknowledgement of complicity*

The importance of dialogic features in letters is proof of the existence of parallels between letters and conversations. In this respect, Nicole Brossard's two-fold definition of the epistolary text as *un rapport d'adresse* seems particularly fitting: "C'est à dire: je te choisis pour te parler mais aussi je vais être habile dans ce que je vais t'adresser. Il y a un effet de stimulation et aussi de dépassement" (Nicole Brossard apud Lauvin 1987, 108). An epistolary text presupposes this complicity and is, by definition, elliptical: "Je n'ai pas besoin de tout dire, puisque nous partageons un savoir et que le reste s'entend" (Nicole Brossard apud Lauvin 1987, 108).

#### *Need for reciprocity (topos of the epistolary pact)*

Reciprocity, however, is not the same. In a dialogue, silence can sometimes be accepted without negative consequences for the interlocutors' relationship, but the lack of reciprocity in a letter exchange, i.e., the breaching of the agreement between the writer and the reader, invariably leads to a breakdown in communication. The following sections list some examples of textual markers of orality in Portuguese epistolary discourse.

### 3.1 Textual markers of this *topos* in Portuguese writers' epistolary texts

#### 3.1.1 *Verba dicendi and lexicon in conversation*

##### (1) Bristol, August 1887

My dear Joaquim Pedro,

I have often felt the desire to write to you — to chat; but I have not had the time or the epistolary inclination which brought so much glory to Cicero

and Sévigné. And today I limit myself to four lines, with the concision of a clear question which calls for a clear answer. [...]

Eça de Queiroz (Letter by Eça de Queiroz to Oliveira Martins”, in Queiroz, *Cartas e Outros Escritos* 2001, 121)

- (2) Only today am I in the right mood and spirit to start the postal chats which we agreed on more than two weeks ago, remember? (Letter by António Nobre to Alfredo de Campos, in Nobre, *Correspondência* 1982, 89 (my highlight, given the importance of the metaphor))
- (3) Tell me, mockery aside, how you are doing, for my concern is no mockery indeed.  
(Letter by Dom Francisco Manuel de Melo to a relative, in Melo, *Cartas Familiares* 1981, 19)
- (4) My dear Sá-Carneiro,  
I am writing to you today out of a sentimental need — a craving for speaking to you. As you can infer from this, I have nothing to tell you. [...]  
Fernando Pessoa (Letter by Fernando Pessoa to Mário de Sá-Carneiro, in Pessoa *Correspondência* 1998, 208–209)
- (5) My dear Lopes,  
Did you receive my letter of 26 April? I believe so, because I sent it registered, and I have not had any news of it not having been delivered. (...) There is no misunderstanding, right?  
Say something, when you have time and opportunity. [...]  
Fernando Pessoa (Letter by Fernando Pessoa to Francisco Fernandes Lopes, in Pessoa, *Correspondência* 1998, 284)
- (6) My dear Beça,  
Your letter was no seed planted on rocky soil. I reflected and accepted your theories of contrasts. (...) Now look: I cannot picture myself here. I plan to stay in Penafiel for a month. I would not like to stay at a hostel. Tell me: Would it be possible to arrange a family home I can stay at...  
Reply quickly, alright?!  
Your devoted friend  
Camilo Castelo Branco (Letter by Camilo Castelo Branco to Dr. Rodrigo Beça, in Branco, *Cartas Dispersas* 2002, 36)
- (7) Osório  
Tomorrow for sure, I promise. (...) Isn't it awful, C.P., to have a dirty mouth? I think I may purge myself and get on with this, with the help of Divine Grrrrrace. So now tell me. [...]

Camilo Pessanha (Letter by Camilo Pessanha to Alberto Osório de Castro, in Pessanha, *Cartas* 1984, 21)

- (8) Sometimes I feel like talking to you when it's just the two of us, so I can tell you about my joys and sorrows, my feelings and thoughts. Today I feel like it. And I'm telling you this because talking to you is a bit like talking to myself as Sebastião da Gama (Letter by Sebastião da Gama to Luísa, in Gama. *Cartas I*. 1994, 57)
- (9) Goodbye. Today I feel very sad — but my mood improved after this chat, this “tête-à-tête”, — and I had not chatted for so long.  
A hug from your most grateful friend António Nobre (Letter by António Nobre to José de Castro, in Nobre, *Correspondência* 1982, 216)
- (10) Yesterday I didn't have the chance to write and today I want to post this letter at all costs. I won't prattle on so I send you and the kids a thousand kisses and a thousand more.  
[...] Eça de Queiroz (Letter by Eça de Queiroz to Emília de Castro, in *Queiroz-Emília de Castro, Correspondência epistolar* 1996, 166)

The following example is drawn from Fernando Pessoa's love letters. It is interesting to note that the poet shows a clear preference for face-to-face conversation as well as the need for physical instead of epistolary contact. In his philosophical reflection, letters are signs of separation:

- (11) I cannot accept the idea of writing. I would like to speak to you, have you always by my side without having to send you letters. Letters are signs of separation — signs (because of the need for writing them) that we are far away.  
Do not feel surprised by the brevity of my letters. Letters are for people who are no longer interested in speaking: to such people I write long texts.  
(...)  
I want you to feel this, to know that this is the way I feel and think, so that you do not consider me cold, curt, indifferent. I am not the type to send kisses, my sweet Baby, my little rose-colored pillow (what nonsense!) (125, 323), written on 23 March 1920. (Letter by Pessoa to Ofélia Queiroz, in Pessoa, *Correspondência 1905–1922* 1999, 323–324)

### 3.1.2 Diaphonic repeat

Letters are intrinsically close to oral interaction through the forms writers resort to on the basis of the letters they receive. These resources are numerous: by incorporating in their own letters the words found in the letters they receive, interlocutors place themselves in a dialogical position. They can do so by simply answering



questions, by paraphrasing, using verbatim or modified quotations and allusions, thus always guaranteeing the continuity of the epistolary dialogue.

(12) Lisbon, 27 February 1965

My dear Friend,

(...)

From the second paragraph in your letter I understand the great grief and sorrow that have beset you in recent times.

(...) And I come to the last line, yours and mine. Why give up everything?

Give up your work, your life? (...) I know that our body wears out and our spirit becomes weary, but we cannot give up when our spirit is still vigorous — and yours is as fresh and lively as I have always known it to be, just as it was when you were a boy and a young man and I silently admired you.

(...)

A big and warm hug from your friend forever

José Saramago (Letter by Saramago to José Rodrigues Miguéis, in Miguéis, *Correspondência* 2010, 180–181).

(13) February 1972, Lisbon

Dearest Jorge

My not writing has become an ailment. Even worse: I write letters but I do not post them. I received your cards, which I thank you for and which were greatly appreciated.

I was quite shocked at the words you used in your latest letter, calling us a “conspicuous couple”.

I send you and Mécia our love. From Francisco and your dear friend

Sophia

(Letter by Sophia to Jorge de Sena, in Breyner, *Correspondência* 2006, 18–19).

### 3.1.3 Question and answer sequences and discourse markers

From Portolès' (2007) and Pons' (1998) perspective discourse markers are considered as invariant language units which do not have a syntactic function in the sentence and which convey an intention: the intention of directing, according to their different morphosyntactic, semantic and, above all, pragmatic properties the inferences underlying communication.

(14) Lisbon, 29 Oct. 1914

So my dear Friend — where is it that you live now? Interruption in communication.

Listen: tomorrow, Friday, and then on Saturday, I shall be waiting for you, literally, between 5 and half past 5. Then and only then. Show up!

Yours

End. Provisório: 78, praça dos Restauradores  
 Sá-Carneiro (Letter by Mário de Sá-Carneiro to Fernando Pessoa, in  
 Sá-Carneiro, *Correspondência* 2004, 25).

- (15) Lisbon, 31 Oct. 1914  
 - Man! I really don't know what to do with you! You too have vanished into a trapdoor? It can't be so — don't disappear on me!  
 Mário de Sá-Carneiro (Letter by Mário de Sá-Carneiro to Fernando Pessoa, in Sá-Carneiro, *Correspondência* 2004, 26.)

- (16) Lisbon, June 1915, Day 13  
 - Listen, Fernando Pessoa, you're going to the mask ball at Jansen tomorrow at half past nine — aren't you? Guisado, the poet, told me that you promised to visit him tomorrow. A mistake? I'm going. I hope you're going as well — so I can enjoy your company!...  
 Goodbye. Big hug from your  
 Mário de Sá-Carneiro (Letter by Mário de Sá-Carneiro to Fernando Pessoa, in Sá-Carneiro, *Correspondência* 2004, 36).

- (17) Lisbon, 29 January 1963  
 My dear Friend,  
 When I received your letter, I thought to myself: "That's it! I had been meaning to write you for some days now ... it seems that my fate is never to be the first one to write. And, as it turns out, I had good news for you.  
 (...)
 We owe you "dough" and a contract. These will follow soon, though as for the contract it means pôr os bois a taras do carro which is what we usually do. But long live the holy Trust!  
 We'll be waiting for you in spring. Will it finally be the time?!  
 A hug from Saramago (Letter by Saramago to José Rodrigues Miguéis, *Miguéis Correspondência* 2010, 154–155)

#### 4. Conclusion

Letter writing and dialogue are well-known forms of communication, but whereas in letters the addressee is constructed within and through the enunciation, in face-to-face conversation he or she is physically present and plays an active pragmatic role. After all, a letter is a representation and can therefore replace dialogue or conversation, but it is not the same as these. The letter, regardless of the themes it wishes to convey, is in itself a message-object in the literal sense of the term, meaning that it is bound to pass from hand to hand. As an object, and an object

of affection, it demands its own preservation and, as a precious and sometimes secret object (think about love letters<sup>2</sup>) its tangibility almost becomes a fetish. The physical sensuality of the letter allows for gestures ranging from repeated reading to contemplation, from reservation to exhibition, from tearing to the extreme and desperate act of burning.

As opposed to the deferred discourse of epistolarity, the *orality* of conversation implies an immediate relationship between two interlocutors, their physical proximity within a specific space and, above all, a turn-taking structure which presupposes distinct enunciation times. Thus, the analogy with conversation seems banal and straightforward, but at the same time paradoxal. It is banal insofar as no conversation can exist if *I* am the only one speaking and, much in the same way, no correspondence can exist if *I* am the only one writing. It is paradoxal insofar as it takes two to produce one single discourse, at least if this discourse is a typical conversation or correspondence.

The charm of epistolary discourse stems from the dialectics between proximity and distance, between oral and written language; letters evoke the presence of the other while at the same time placing this other in a space which is, by definition, inaccessible. The reason for my writing is the absence of the other, but the presence of this other could also be the reason for my writing with the very purpose of keeping the other away from me. Thus, quoting Altman, we can conclude that “as written dialogue, epistolary discourse is obsessed with its oral model” (Altman 1982, 135).

## Notes

1. The theme of dialogue in letter writing was explored by Jean-Blaize Grize in the paper presented at the Colloque Interdisciplinaire de Fribourg, and published in *La Lettre, Approches Sémiotiques, Actes du VI Colloque Interdisciplinaire de Fribourg*, Éditions Universitaires de Fribourg, 1988, pp. 9–17.
2. With regard to this, Roland Barthes (1977, 205) writes, “l’out objet touché par le corps de l’être aimé devient partie de ce corps et le sujet s’y attache passionnément”.

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Isabel Roboredo Seara has a PhD degree in Linguistics (Universidade Aberta, in 2007), a Master degree in Applied Linguistics and Language Didactics (Faculty of Social and Human Sciences, Universidade Nova de Lisboa, in 1997), and graduated in Modern Languages and French Literature and Portuguese Studies (1987). She is an Assistant Professor at the Humanities Department of the Universidade Aberta (The Open University in Portugal), where she lectures ever since 1997. Isabel Seara is a research member of the Linguistics Centre of the Universidade Nova de Lisboa (CLUNL), working at the research group on Discursive Interaction.