GREETING CARDS IN CONTEMPORARY RUSSIAN CULTURE: ETIQUETTE NORMS AND COMMUNICATIVE PRACTICES IN THE AGE OF THE VISUAL

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Abstract

This paper analyzes the transformation of etiquette rules and communicative practices of usage of greeting cards in contemporary Russian culture. Although etiquette norms are conservative, they are influenced by new technologies and cultural tendencies. The shift towards the visual determines the changes of etiquette and social interactions in situations of congratulation. In particular, this fact makes an impact on written forms of congratulations. One of them is the printed greeting card. This kind of congratulating forms has become less popular in recent years but is still widely used in different situations. The paper aims to investigate the changes of greeting card use in a visual age. It is likely that nowadays in the congratulating practice an emphasis shifts from creating a text to choosing an image; as a result, the text loses its main and determinant role in congratulations and is interpreted only as a part of the image. This hypothesis is tested by a questionnaire based on a multistage sample. The results show how cards are used, what factors define a choice between creating and buying greeting cards, how verbal and pictorial elements of a greeting card correlate with the social status of a sender and a receiver. The leading approach in the study of this problem is the systematic methodological principle, which allows to take into account a variety of factors and to exclude one-sidedness. The materials of the article can be interesting for a wide range of readers dealing with the problems of actual Russian etiquette and designing and using greeting cards.

Keywords: greeting card, congratulation, etiquette, communication, contemporary Russian culture.

1 INTRODUCTION

Contemporary Russian culture of the past decades has become a space of vigorous transformations of various processes and spheres of society. These transformations happen particularly fast in communicative practices, and, as a result, we witness the changes in the etiquette rules governing these processes. Etiquette is notoriously conservative and slow-moving. It follows the communicative situations and the new means of communication. Unlike institutionalized regulatory forms, etiquette norms and rules are not purposefully developed by any social institution. They arise between people in the process of their living and communicating together. Therefore, etiquette changes when the new forms and means of communication emerge.

Our contemporary age is marked by the prevalence of visual, non-verbal expressions (McLuhan. 1962). Communication increasingly often utilizes not just words, but also a wide array of pictorial elements (emoticons, emojis, etc.). Often a creolized text supersedes a purely verbal one. People increasingly often accompany their texts with the visual objects, or substitute texts with memes, gifs, etc. Congratulatory etiquette situations are not an exception.

In Russian culture, congratulatory occasions have been traditionally marked by giving gifts accompanied by greeting cards. The cards were applied to the gifts, or used as an alternative greeting tool – for example, when it was impossible to congratulate somebody in person.

Today, a paper greeting card experiences what may be called a rebirth. As a response to the often anonymized character of digital communications, we see a rising trend in off-line communication and personalized communicative practices. Postcrossing is one of the popular expressions of this trend.

Although greeting cards become a research subject quite often (Cacioppo and Andersen. 1981; Henry. 1947; Kunz and Woolcott. 1976; West. 2009; Willer. 2001), a lot of questions still remain concerning their use in contemporary Russian communicative practices. This article aims to contribute to the understanding of these processes by analyzing the results of a pilot questionnaire survey.

2 METHODS

The methodology of this research is based on the characteristics of the object of our study – that is, the etiquette rules and the communicative practices governing the use of greeting cards. To understand how the culture of written congratulations works in contemporary Russia, we conducted a pilot sociological survey using a distributed questionnaire. The research based on a multistage sampling is organized. The sampling includes the residents of the urban settlements of two types – a major city and a megalopolis – both located in the Sverdlovsk region. We concentrated on the 4 socio-demographic groups: school students, university students, working adults and retired residents. At the next stage, the respondents were divided by gender. This sampling method allowed us to achieve our analytical goals of identifying transformations in communicative practices surrounding the giving of greeting cards, and in the etiquette rules governing these practices.

The sampling strategy described above provides a sufficient level of representation.

A questionnaire was designed specifically for the purpose of this research. The respondents answered the questionnaire independently and anonymously. The survey was mostly conducted in groups. The core amount of the respondents was formed by the school and university students of Yekaterinburg (megalopolis) and Nizhny Tagil (major city). Total sample number was 192.

The questionnaire is divided into several logical parts. The first part includes the questions formulated to find out the respondents' general attitudes towards the ritual of card giving. The second part focuses on finding out the preferences in card choice: paper/digital, ready-made/hand-made, with printed text/without text, predominantly verbal/predominantly visual. The third part contains the questions about the card giving occasions. The final part of the questionnaire includes the questions on the respondents' attitudes to the rules of congratulatory etiquette.

The obtained data were processed in IBM SPSS software package.

3 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The goal of this article is to understand how our predominantly visual age is changing the practices governing the use of greeting cards. At the beginning of our research, we proposed a hypothesis that the practice of written congratulations experiences a shift from the writing of a congratulatory text to the choice of an image ("pictures"). As a result of this, the text: 1) ceases to be the dominant part of a congratulatory message; 2) is perceived as a part of a "picture". The data obtained as a result of this research allowed us to propose a number of implications and general conclusions. Here, we analyze them according to the thematic parts of the questionnaire.

3.1 Attitudes towards the Greeting Cards Giving Ritual

The distribution of the answers to the question "Do you give the greeting cards?" demonstrated that the greeting cards are given situationally. The most frequently chosen answer is "sometimes" (78.1%). The giving practice does not appear to be systematic. Since 15.6% of the respondents "always" give the greeting cards, it follows that the practice of giving the greeting cards remains a widespread ritual in contemporary Russian communicative culture.

This conclusion is further supported by the fact that 60% of the respondents like to give the greeting cards. At the same time, those belonging to a pre-25 y.o. generation were more inclined to believe that giving the greeting cards is required (37%); however, they professed to be indifferent to the greeting cards they themselves received.

65% of the respondents like to receive greeting cards. However, 21.4% struggled to answer this question. Therefore, the respondents appear to be equally active in their roles of card givers and card receivers.

Functionally, the role of a greeting card was perceived by the respondents as a complimentary one, secondary to a "proper" gift. The majority of the respondents (87.0%) believe that "A greeting card is only an accessory to the gift". Only 13.5% of the respondents agreed that "A greeting card is a gift in itself", while 78.6% either disagreed or mostly disagreed with this statement. Second, the greeting card's functionality is based on its capacity to express the addresser's positive emotions towards the addressee. This was reflected in the fact that 87.5% of the respondents agreed with the statement that "A greeting card is a pleasant courtesy gesture".

The answers to the question, "Do you believe that a card is necessary in a greeting situation?", were distributed as follows. 13.5% and 44.8% chose correspondingly either "yes" or "yes rather than no". 21.4% chose "no rather than yes" and 17.2% chose the answer "no".

It is interesting to consider the explanations of those who prefer not to give the greeting cards at all. It appears that their reasons are mostly pragmatic: financial (*"I don't have money", "it's a waste of money and paper", "they cost too much"*), temporal (*"I have no time", "there is no time", "there is no money to buy and no time to make them"*), etc. Another characteristic response is the denial of the greeting card's symbolic value: *"it is an outdated tradition", "cards are useless", "it is vulgar, tasteless, nobody remembers them, and they will go into trash", "what for? They are just cardboard"*. This may be connected to the tendency to see a card as a supplement to a "proper" gift – therefore, when money is tight, it is important to have a gift, and not a supplement to a gift.

In this context, those who give cards and enjoy doing it are perceived as more economically self-sufficient and, maybe, more emotional. Often a greeting card is used as a place where to *"hide the money present"* – it is perceived as a tool required giving a financial gift. The respondents justify the necessity of giving cards by the fact that *"the addressee will be pleased", "it is a courtesy gesture", "I want this person to remember me and to think about me in a few years, months etc.", "it carries a lot of emotions and memories", "it creates a mood", "a card preserves an atmosphere of the day when it was given"*.

The obtained results demonstrate the continuity between the Soviet practices and the contemporary attitudes to the greeting cards (Tkachenko, 2015, pp. 319–325). Back in the Soviet time, greeting cards used to be both widely popular and easily available. The prices were very low – therefore, people of all incomes and social positions could afford to buy them. As a result, greeting cards were established as an essential component of congratulations. Therefore, for the majority of the respondents, older as well as younger, this is a routine stereotypical action that has long become an accepted tradition and, consequently, is neither questioned nor reflected upon – it appears self-evident.

3.2 Preferences in the Choice of Greeting Cards

Today, the market offers an enormous variety of greeting cards, both by content (by occasion types) and by form. As a result, people face a lot of choices when choosing a greeting for a specific occasion: a paper or digital card, ready-made or hand-made, with a printed text or a blank card, predominantly verbal or predominately visual. Our questionnaire included a number of questions purported to elucidate these types of preferences.

The survey results showed that, despite the current prevalence of virtual communications in everyday interactions, the sphere of greetings and congratulations has remained very conservative. 89% of the respondents prefer to give the paper cards. Digital cards are used either very rarely, or the respondents simply forget to mention them as a relevant practice. Taking into consideration that the greeting cards were given, albeit with different frequency, by the majority of the respondents (93.7%), we can conclude that the use of digital greeting cards has not become a common practice yet. When the greetings are sent by e-mail, SMS messages, social media or texting applications, emoticons, stickers and beautiful pictures assume the role of greeting cards.

Another important choice situation is the choice between the ready-made mass printed greeting cards and the hand-made cards. In general, ready-made cards remain the most popular choice. 50.5% of the respondents prefer to give cards of this type. However, almost a third of the respondents showed a preference for the hand-made cards (30.2%). The rest of the respondents struggled to choose an answer.

Of particular interest is the distribution of answers to the question: "What is most important for you when choosing a greeting card?" Most of the respondents (64%) named appearance as the main factor. Aesthetic qualities of the card dominate the choices. This is also confirmed by the criteria that were offered by the respondents themselves: *"original look"*, *"striking look"*, *"aesthetically pleasing"*.

The choice between a card with a pre-printed ready-made text and a blank card was less straightforward (8.3% and 14.6% respectively). What is important here – as the other possible answers demonstrate – is not the mere fact of the text's existence/absence, but rather the content of this text. Accordingly, the respondents noted that it was important for the wishes printed on a postcard to suit its intended addressee. Apart from this, individual respondents also noted such features as *"meaningful message"*, *"creativity"*, *"card's material"*, as well as a pragmatic reason: *"I already have this card; it is easy to gift it"*. It is also important to note that this question was answered only by those respondents who had earlier stated their preference for the ready-made cards.

Another interesting finding of the survey was the respondents' views on the balance between the card's textual and visual components. The respondents were asked to choose between a card with a boring meaningless picture but a good text, and a card with a good picture but a meaningless uninspiring text. Today, in an increasing age of visualization, it could be presumed that the appearance of a greeting card (its picture) would be a decisive choice factor. However, the situation appears to be more complex. The answers provided by the respondents were roughly equally distributed: 71.9% preferred a well-written text, while 72.4% preferred a good picture.

These results require further analysis. First of all, we can assume that the respondents equally value both a greeting card's look and its text. Therefore, the respondents perceive a greeting card pretty much as a whole package. But they still believe that text is a main source of meaning.

On the other hand, the greeting cards manufacturers pay particular attention to a visual component, making picture a key element of a greeting card. For this reason, they try to integrate the text into an image using various design techniques: a text may be split in two parts, with the second parts printed inside the postcard; decorative fonts may be used (i.e. cursive fonts imitating a handwritten message), etc. A text in a ready-made greeting card is usually creolized. However, the consumers value greatly an opportunity to add and embellish the text and, therefore, to break the manufacturer-provided formal unity of text and image. Creolized "text... 'works' not through the meaning encoded in its content, but through its decorative shape, its aesthetic connection with the image" (Zagidullina, 2017, p. 10).

This is also supported by the fact that 74.5% of the respondents "always" try to provide a personal touch by adding their own inscriptions, signatures, and verbal additions even to the cards with a pre-printed text; 16.7% of the respondents do this "sometimes".

Moreover, in choosing a greeting card, the respondents feel that a correct emotional register is important: a card should be touching, emotionally resonant; it should include some humor and reflect the addressee's personality.

Therefore, the respondents treat the greeting cards not as a "commodity", i.e. something with a material value, but rather as a tool (medium) of emotional expression (Jaffe. 1999). 13.5% of the respondents chose the answer "A greeting card is a gift in itself".

A greeting card is mostly perceived as a pleasant token of courtesy (87.5% of the respondents chose this answer), as a supplement to a gift (87%) and a "semi-finished product" that should always be signed (supplemented) personally, taking into account an addressee's individuality.

This conclusion is supported by the answers given by those respondents who prefer the blank greeting cards without any text. 37.5% of them explain their choice by the argument that *"an addressee should feel that these words are chosen for him/her personally"*, while 5.7% believe that *"a greeting should take into account an addressee's personality"*, and 10% take a stance *"against standardized congratulations"*.

3.3 Cards Giving Occasions

In Soviet era, greeting cards were used both in informal and formal relationships: cards were sent from one organization to another, from the employees to their managers, etc. It was a well-established and ideologically grounded ritual (Shaburova. 2017). According to S. Tkachenko, "greeting cards always accompanied ideologically important holidays" (Tkachenko, 2015, p. 321). Today, nobody marks these holidays with the greeting cards. This ritual became a thing of the past – just as the holidays themselves disappeared from the calendar. The new national holidays that have appeared in recent years are not yet perceived as congratulatory occasions. Greeting cards for such occasions as International Women's Day

and the Defender of the Fatherland Day are becoming increasingly less widespread.

Against this background, it is particularly obvious that the greeting cards are mostly given to relatives (80.2%) and friends (14.6%), for birthdays (91%) or milestone birthdays (3%). Very few respondents use greeting cards officially, to congratulate their managers, colleagues or business partners. This is an evidence that greeting cards are perceived as an informal tool suitable only for personal relationships. Greeting cards are leaving the public sphere. For example, the tradition of collective greeting cards given on behalf of the employees is perceived as archaic. Such cards are usually replaced by certificates or congratulatory addresses. In this regard, we witness the transformation of the communicative practices with a tendency towards the less official style – at least regarding the use of the greeting cards.

3.4 Attitudes towards the rules of the Greeting Etiquette

Greetings remain the least regularized among the etiquette situations: almost everyone participates in written greetings communication; however, the rules of this communication – apart from the basic outward requirements – are not codified. The normative character of written greetings is not obvious. Public opinion is pretty lax on the irregularities in style and content of these greetings. (See more on this in: Kapkan and Likhacheva, 2018, pp. 107–113).

This conclusion is supported by the results of our research. The respondents were asked either to agree or disagree with a number of statements regarding the etiquette rules in choosing, giving and preserving the greeting cards. The respondents generally agreed with the basic rules ("The text should be printed in an intelligible, easy-to-read font, or handwritten in a legible manner" – 90.6%; "When giving a milestone birthday card to a woman, it is better to choose one without an age number" – 49%); however, they were inclined not to follow the etiquette rules too strictly. For example, in answering the statement "Greeting cards affixed to a gift should be put in an envelope", 66% of the respondents marked this norm as not important, while the other 15.6% struggled to answer. The respondents were also not sure about the necessity of following such rules as "When giving a greeting card in person, you should always read the text aloud" (34.9% of the respondents agreed with this statement, while 55.2% disagreed and 8.9% struggled to answer).

Judging by the respondents' answers, the practice of exchanging the greeting cards is also disappearing. For example, the respondents mostly disagreed with the statement "If you receive a greeting card, you should give a card in return" (66.1% believed it not valid).

The respondents still believe that it is important for the text to be "printed in an intelligible, easy-to-read font, or handwritten in a legible manner" (90.6%) and that "a greeting card text should be grammatically correct" (95%). This demonstrates the continuing importance of the text's aesthetic, as well as etiquette, value.

We believe that these results further support our conclusions that greeting cards are used predominantly in informal relationships. Therefore, when an addresser follows the etiquette rules too strictly, this may undermine the greeting's informality and even its sincerity.

4 CONCLUSIONS

The conducted research has proved that the greeting cards remain an important part of congratulatory communications in Russia. Moreover, an act of giving a greeting card is "not just a formal ritual, but first and foremost an expression of emotional warmth" (Butyl'skaja, 2014, p. 12). At the same time, a card – even a hand-made one – is perceived as a supplement to a gift, and not as a standalone gift. This conclusion is supported by the respondents' attitude towards the etiquette rules governing the gifting of greeting cards. At the same time, a modern greeting card has lost its emotional significance and material value. The respondents do not believe that the cards should be kept for a year (as was proposed by one of the survey's statements). Only 42% "agree" or "mostly agree" with this requirement. Here we witness another change. The tradition of collecting the cards existed since the heyday of the greeting cards in the early decades of the 20th century, and persisted throughout the entire century. A card was perceived either as an aesthetic object worth saving, or as an object of nostalgia. In both cases, keeping postcards for a long time made an obvious sense. Today, with digital communication making almost any person available at any moment, there is no need to keep concrete paper tokens of past interactions. While previously a greeting card was a tool used to congratulate a person when direct interaction was impossible, today the card usually serves as a duplicate of a personal congratulation. Greeting cards are very rarely sent by post; people prefer to give them personally.

A card becomes an objectification of personal feelings and emotions that the addresser feels towards the addressee. In this respect, we agree with L.V.Butyl'skaja that "Russian postcard is characterized by a singular emotional intensity, personal approach, care, even magical sensibility" (Butyl'skaja, 2013, pp. 69–70). However, an emotional charge of the greeting card loses its impact much faster than it used to: it

unfolds only in a concrete congratulatory and card giving situation, while the card itself continues to serve as a memory repository increasingly more rarely.

Although the ready-made cards display creolization of the text and an increased significance of a visual component, the text remains equally important in the actual communicative practice. The respondents note an importance of appropriate, grammatically correct and meaningful text which often determines the choice of a card.

Therefore, the hypothesis we had proposed at the beginning of our research – that the practice of written congratulations experiences a shift from the written text to an image ("picture") – was not confirmed. The use of greeting cards in a visual age follows many practices that were prevalent in an era of the verbal text dominance.

5 ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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