

Conference Paper

The Transformation of Written Congratulations Etiquette in Early XX1st-century Russia

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Abstract

The article explores the transformation of written congratulations etiquette happening in early XXst-century Russian culture. We are using an example of the etiquette of written greetings to highlight the changing aspects of this etiquette situation (spatial and temporal characteristics; actors and their status roles; communication media; communication objectives; etiquette attributes). We argue that etiquette as a normative system is developed cumulatively, while undergoing a number of communicative transformations regarding the concrete elements of written congratulation situation: a rising importance of communication channels, a transformation of communication objectives, an increased attention to a formal side of etiquette attributes, etc. At the same time, the greeting card is transformed both in its content (which today includes many new festive events and dates) and in its form, which becomes much more diverse in structure, color palette, etc.

Keywords: etiquette, postcard, greetings card, etiquette situation, cultural norms

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1. Introduction

Russia is facing a period of changes in diverse areas of society. An area of etiquette is not an exception. We witness the emerging new forms, tools and situations of interaction, as well as the new etiquette norms, which govern the behavior both in mundane and in festive interactions.

Written greetings have long become an integral part of our life as an aspect of festive etiquette characterised by “the elimination or inversion of some elements of mundane etiquette... At the same time, etiquette status of other etiquette attributes increases” [1, p. 36]. However, turning to multiple good manners guides, we may see that, compared to other etiquette aspects, this form of interaction is much less regularized. Infrequent recommendations concerning greetings mostly describe their formal aspects. For example, one of the most authoritative Soviet etiquette guides offers only one rule regarding written greetings: “all invitations and answers to invitations, gratitudes, greetings and commiserations are always written by hand”. [7, p. 107]. In Ya.

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Kamychek's book translated from the Polish, greetings are lumped together with other occasional situations, again based only on formal similarities: "Color greeting cards are used to send travel and holiday greetings, birthday and holiday congratulations. A greeting card is always dated by the day it is sent, and not by the date of an occasion. It is recommended to choose a beautiful postal stamp to decorate such a greeting card" [4, p. 92]. Modern etiquette guides are hardly more informative. They introduce additional rules only regarding the greeting card's aesthetics: "Festive greeting cards can be signed with colored ink; official postcards should only be signed with blue or black ink" [3, p. 148]. We are facing a paradoxical situation: almost everyone participates in written greetings communication; however, the rules of this communication – apart from the basic formal requirements – are not codified.

The normative character of written greetings is not obvious. Public opinion on irregularities in style and content of such greetings is pretty lax. This trend, however, may be traced back to the late nineteenth-hundreds. In an etiquette manual published in 1889 we encounter the following statement: "Our forefathers invested these formalities [written etiquette – M.K., L.L.] with great significance; fortunately, today these formalities are becoming more and more relaxed" [8, p. 273]. Over a century later, we witness further relaxation of the rules applied to written congratulations.

Written greetings etiquette in general, and greeting card in particular, has been analyzed by linguists, anthropologists, psychologists, sociologists, market researchers. Their works have explored status representation in greetings exchange [16], communicative role of a greeting card based on its functional characteristics [6, 15], gender differences in postcard use [22], choice strategies used by greeting card buyers [21], characteristic aspects of the greeting cards for different occasions [23]. Contemporary research in written congratulations is developing mostly along the lines of computer-mediated communication studies. However, this leaves barely explored the changes in written congratulations etiquette driven both by socio-cultural transformations in Russia and by the interaction between the etiquette tradition and technological innovations. To elucidate general trends in contemporary Russian written congratulations etiquette, we have analyzed both the good manners guides and the actual practices of congratulatory communication.

2. Methods

The present research uses as its primary sources the etiquette guides published in Russia since 2000, as well as the collections of sample greetings and the greeting

cards with the pre-printed text. Also, for comparative purposes, we have used pre-revolutionary letter writing manuals: collections of sample letters for all occasions that were often used as supplements to the etiquette guides. The selection of these sources is determined by the fact that the lack of strict rules for written congratulations is partly offset by the existence of templates, which to an extent are used by the communicants as guidelines. Despite the low quality of such texts, they allow us to reconstruct the main etiquette requirements applied to the modern written congratulations.

Methodological basis for our research is provided by the two complementary paradigms: normative and interpretative one. The first paradigm can be found in its fullest expression in the works of T.Parsons [19], R.Merton [18], E.Durkheim [13] and others. This paradigm envisions etiquette, first, as a normative system, a set of norms and rules regulating social interactions and providing social order; second, as an individual role behavior conforming to the existing norms and standards. An interpretative paradigm is based on the theories by G.Mead [17], G.Blumer [11], A.Schutz [20], E.Goffman [14] and others. This paradigm is based not on the theory of action, but on the theory of communication. In this case, rules are not external; they are created in communicative acts. Therefore, an etiquette may be described as a set system of multiple interactive situations between the people of different socio-communicative positions. Each etiquette situation is based on a normative convention created by the participants in communication as a contingent set of rules applied to a concrete interaction. This situation is largely determined by the variations in status and communication between the addresser and the addressee. Such interactions may be mediated by various objects: things, signs, bodies, etc. One of the types of situational communication is embodied in the etiquette of written congratulations usually expressed through greeting cards ('open letters').

3. Results and Discussion

Written greeting situation employing a greeting card is an etiquette situation which can be divided into a number of elements. Analysis of these elements allows to elucidate the transformation of written congratulations etiquette in early XX1st-century Russia

3.1. Spatio-temporal characteristics of a social situation

At first, greeting letters were used as a substitute for oral congratulations. Such letters and postcards helped to establish indirect communication between people separated

by physical distance. In modern etiquette, a greeting card rarely serves as a replacement of a face-to-face interaction – rather, it provides a duplicate, being attached to a gift, or used as a souvenir, or becoming a recorded copy of an oral congratulation.

3.2. Actors in a situation and their status roles (addresser/addressee; senior/junior, etc.)

Letter manuals of late XIXth–early XXth century clearly show the status roles of the participants and allow us to reconstruct etiquette-based subordination. The highest level of deference is found in letters to parents and to the superiors/benefactors. At the other end of the spectrum there are friends and siblings, unquestionably treated as equals. Older relatives (grandparents, aunts, uncles) had an uncertain etiquette status. Letter manuals offer the two types of sample texts: one is centered around the expressions of respect and gratitude, while the other is focused on well wishes. In this case, a senior/junior distinction is marked only by a salutation system. In modern written communication etiquette these general trends are partly preserved; however, the difference in status roles is largely rendered insignificant, especially in non-official written greetings. Only a degree of proximity is marked, although inconsistently, by a difference in salutation between ‘my dear’ (*dorogoi*, informal) and ‘dear’ (*uvazhaemyi*, formal). In other words, greeting etiquette tends to reaffirm not the social differences between an addresser and an addressee, but rather their emotional closeness.

3.3. A type of actors’ interaction

Compared to the previous historical periods, this aspect became semantically important in contemporary greeting etiquette situation. That is, different greeting media are imbued with different value meanings. This cannot but bring to mind Marshall McLuhan’s famous ‘the media is the message’. Today we have a fully formed value-normative hierarchy of remote means and channels of communication. Written communications on paper hold the highest etiquette weight; the next in hierarchy is an e-mail, while the lowest tier is occupied by the text messages sent via SMS or texting apps. This hierarchy underpins the written communication etiquette: paper card – e-card – SMS or MMS message.

3.4. Objectives of interaction

According to E.Vdovina, “greeting as a genre has a harmonizing function in social relations” [2, p. 4]. Put another way, the main objective of greetings is no note an occasion and the corresponding emotions. However, historical sources demonstrate that this objective was not always the only one. Pre-revolutionary greeting texts were monofunctional. For example, 1885 *Khoroshiy ton* (‘Good Manners’) guide provides the following advice regarding greetings: “Between relatives or close friends, it is appropriate to also include [in greeting letters] other matters; however, writing to less familiar people, it would be inappropriate to mention anything unrelated to an occasion” [9, p. 215]. However, in Soviet times postcards began to combine symbolic and information functions. Greetings were accompanied by the news about the addresser and personal information. As a result, a greeting card became a substitute for a full-length letter [for more detailed discussion see: 10]. Contemporary greetings are again reduced to a symbolic function, similar to the pre-revolutionary practice. However, the content of this symbol is different. Although mentioning of an occasion is required, it is no longer necessary to express emotions and sympathies towards the addressee. Often greetings are reduced to their basic phatic function.

3.5. Etiquette attributes (objects, including postcards, that acquire symbolic meaning as signs of particular relationships)

A novel aspect of contemporary etiquette is an attention to a greeting card’s visual image. As we have already mentioned, etiquette requirements are often concerned with the aesthetics of written congratulations: “Buying a greeting card, pay particular attention to its look, text and picture” [3, p. 148]. The exchange of greeting cards becomes a process that constructs a symbolic reality (‘it’s the intent that matters’). However, the importance of greeting cards today is not reduced to a simple fact of giving a greeting card or expressing emotions. The form in which this congratulation is expressed becomes much more important. Therefore, the design of a greeting card becomes particularly relevant. Contemporary market offers a multitude of greeting cards – not only the standard ones, but also original individual designs, including humorous. This is an area where the issue of choosing a right, ‘appropriate’ combination of etiquette variables (social status of actors, situation formality, etc.) and matching it with the greeting card’s visual style becomes a problem acutely felt, for example, by those choosing a greeting card for their superior.

4. Conclusion

Our analysis of the etiquette situation of written congratulation shows that the changes have occurred mostly in the means of interaction. New digital tools of communication – emails, SMS and MMS messages – become incorporated into a hierarchy and codified in relevant norms and rules. Messages become less personal; intimate emotional expression is often replaced by the clichés pre-printed in ready-made greeting cards. Most importantly, the etiquette attributes of the greeting card itself are changing. Greeting card is transformed both in its content (which today includes many new festive events and dates) and in its form, which becomes much more diverse in structure, color palette, etc.

At the same time, analyzing modern etiquette in terms of normative paradigm (which sees etiquette as a set of norms and rules), we see that, similar to a tree trunk, it possesses ‘growth rings’: rules of decorum, design, appearance and means of delivery, etc., which belong not only to the present, but also to the previous eras. Using this approach to look at the history of the transformation of written greetings etiquette, we again confirm a general pattern in etiquette development: it is “not only a history of changes, but also a history of value accumulation” [5, p. 5]. However, if we apply communication theory to etiquette (which sees etiquette as a process of symbolic interaction), we may note a number of changes regarding concrete elements of written greeting situation: an increasing importance of a communication channel, transformation of communication objectives, increased attention to a formal side of etiquette attributes, etc. Finally, the key factor is a definition of the situation by the communicants themselves, who interpret it differently and adapt existing rules, either increasing formality or simplifying them.

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