

DCCD 2020**Dialogue of Cultures - Culture of Dialogue: from Conflicting to Understanding****‘LETTERS OF HAPPINESS’: HYPOTHESES OF THE
EMERGENCE OF THE GENRE, ETHNOCULTURAL
PUCULIARITIES**

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Abstract

The article under consideration describes the phenomenon of ‘letters of happiness’ pointing at the possible source of its first appearance to the present days situation. There is a wide survey into the variations of such letters according to different world countries, nationalities and confessions. The authors have made an attempt to study these sent messages and give a detailed universal structure of those. The advantage of reading the article is that it has plenty of vivid examples provided. One more benefit is that the article provides the reader with other researchers’ surveys which can give a full picture of the phenomenon under analysis. What is more, the article raises the issue of manipulative impact of ‘letters of happiness’ through appeal, first of all, to the vital values, establishes the ethno-cultural originality of the texts of these letters. There is a special pointing at the ‘letters of happiness’ which require a monetary response; the article surveys the nationalities involved in this issue and states whether the senders got any benefit from such manipulations. Considering present days, the article differentiates such terms as ‘letters of happiness’, ‘spam’ and ‘viral email’. To sum it up, the dynamics of the mimicry of the ‘letters of happiness’ is thoroughly studied and explained.

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1. Introduction

Axiological linguistics is one of the priority areas of research which explores the framework of linguistics. The society throughout its existence produces value coordinates that determine its development. Undoubtedly, there are changes in the conditions of life during the evolution process which affect the scale of value priorities on a global universal scale as well as in the individual plan.

2. Problem Statement

Despite the breakthrough in the development of science and technology, the prevalence of rationalism and individualism, humanity has not got rid of such rudiments as superstitions, which are based on magical thinking, and are rooted deep in the past, in the times of primitive men. One of the ways of manifestation of magical thinking is the belief in ‘chain letters’, known in the Russian language as the letter chain, the Holy letters, magic letters, divine intervention, a letter from heaven, renounce letter, Nigerian letter, circular letter, as in French, as *lettre de St-André*, *chaînes de lettres*, *lettre du Ciel*, *lettre chaîne*, *chaînes d’émail* and their main varieties – *chaînes de bonnes fortunes* (lit. chain of luck) and *chaînes de mauvaises fortunes* (lit. chain of failures). As we can see, the nomination of letters is identical, however, in Russian there are no ‘letters of happiness’ containing either promises of only happiness or only of misfortune.

3. Research Questions

It is this magical thinking that determines the translatability and popularity of such a genre of writing as ‘letters of happiness’. Both in the Russian communicative-mass consciousness and in the French one, a brief quote taken from the ‘letter of happiness’ is well recognized, which allows us to refer this genre to precedent texts. With the advent of virtual reality, ‘letters of happiness’ have acquired a new form – from handwritten ones they were transformed into electronic forms, while the content of letters either remains unchanged or is a threat to both humans and computer equipment, gadgets.

4. Purpose of the Study

‘Letter of happiness’, in fact, is a symbol of life choices: obeying the rules given in the letter leads to luck, non-compliance – to trouble, the intensity of which varies from loss of work to death. We believe that the main driving force that pushes people to send those letters forward is primarily a threat aimed at vital values: life, health, safety, at the same time, fear is perceived at a deep level. The article is aimed at establishing the origin of the genre, the territory of distribution and the types of mimicry of ‘letters of happiness’.

5. Research Methods

Research methods were used in the work:

- description of specific language facts, aimed at obtaining generalized data to identify the main features of letters of happiness;

- discursive analysis, the parameters of which were primarily considered participants in epistolary discourse, their goals and values, the form of communication, as well as the genres inherent in this type of discourse;
- semiotic analysis aimed at investigating the system of verbal and non-verbal signs used in the texts of letters of happiness;
- definition analysis used to provide a wide insight upon the concept of ‘letter of happiness’;
- comparative analysis aimed at identifying similarities and differences between French-language and Russian-language letters of happiness.

6. Findings

It seems that the intensive information exchange, in the atmosphere of which a person exists today, has acquired completely new ways of transmitting information, and the requirements for the content of communication have changed significantly compared to the period preceding the appearance of virtual reality. In addition to this, the level of educated people in society is steadily increasing compared to the past centuries. Despite this, in the space of virtual communication electronic messages containing ‘letters of happiness’ are not uncommon these days, they are a meme that is preserved, despite the change in the distribution conditions, and resulted, in turn, in the transition from a source on paper to an electronic form, the content still remains unchanged (Karasik, 2015; Van Dijk, 2009).

In modern communicative-mass consciousness, a brief quote taken from the ‘letter of happiness’ is well recognizable and recursive, it evokes a wide associative series, which allows us to relate this genre to precedent texts.

The popularity of ‘letters of happiness’ is based on magical thinking, which determines broadcasting in time and in the space of communication, which in essence is an example of verbalization of superstitions. A belief in ‘letters of happiness’ and the ability to avoid unhappiness neutralize a person’s instinctive fear of the future predicted in the text of the letter. In fact, a ‘letter of happiness’ is a symbol of a life’s choice: following the requirements set in the letter leads to luck, non-compliance – to troubles, the intensity of which is ranked from a job loss to death (Dmitrieva & Gulinov, 2018). We believe that the main driving force pushing people to send ‘letters of happiness’ they received is, first of all, the threat directed at vital values: life, health, safety, and this fear is perceived at a deep level. Having followed the instructions – to copy and send these ‘letters of happiness’ – a person creates comfortable psychological conditions, since, first of all, he/she appeals to the main vital value – security.

The following lexemes and phrases act as nominees for the ‘letters of happiness’: chain letter, holy letter, magic letter, heavenly letter, letter from the Heaven, forbidden letter, Nigerian letter, circular letter; in the French language: chaînes d’ email, lettre de St-André, chaînes de lettres, lettre-chaîne, lettre du Ciel and their main varieties – chaînes de bonnes fortunes (lit. chains of luck) and chaînes de mauvaises fortunes (lit. chains of failure), in the Arabic language: ‘Letters from the imam of the mosque the Prophet Muhammad (aleikhis-salam) Sheikh Ahmed’, “A Dream in Medina” (Dmitrieva & Gulinov, 2018; Dmitrieva & Shakhovsky, 2018).

Here is a classic version of the ‘letter of happiness’ (it dates 1974), taken from French sources and translated into the English language: ‘This prayer was sent to you to bring good luck. The original is in

the Netherlands. It circled the globe nine times. Now luck will visit you. A happy event will occur within nine days after receiving this message. It's not a joke. It will come to you in the mail. Send 20 copies of this letter to people who need luck. ... Zorin Barrachilli received this letter. He did not believe and threw it away. Nine days later he died. This chain should not be stopped under any circumstances' (our translation). As we can see, this text differs little from the letters that were previously distributed in Russia and are easily recognizable these days, according to our survey. An unknown addressee appeals to the values expressed by the antinomies "happiness is unhappiness," and the instruction to transfer 20 letters to other people guarantees a positive result and avoids unhappiness, an example of which is presented by the imminent death of an unknown person – Zorin Barrachilli.

In the French language chain letters are messages of misfortunes (chaînes de mauvaises fortunes). As a rule, such letters appeal to superstitions and prejudices, predicting problems if the letter is not reproduced.

'ATTENTION!!! VIRUS!!!

If you receive an e-mail titled 'WIN A HOLIDAY' do NOT OPEN IT. The virus contained in the email will erase all the information on your hard drive. Send this message to as many people as possible. This is a new virus, very harmful, and few people know about it. This information was published by Microsoft on March 8. Please share this information with anyone who has access to the Internet. Send this message to all correspondents in your address book to prevent the virus from spreading'.

In the example above, the email reports a virus attack threat. In these letters the distributors, paying attention primarily to the name of hiding the danger of the letters, using capital letters (*'If you receive an e-mail titled 'WIN A HOLIDAY' do NOT OPEN IT'*). The central place in the letter is given to the description of the virus threat itself, as well as its consequences (*Le virus qu'il contient va effacer l'intégralité de votre disque dur [The virus contained in the letter will erase all information on your hard drive]*). For greater credibility, the text of the letter refers to the harmfulness of the new virus, as well as the low degree of awareness of computer users in this problem (*A new virus, very harmful, and few people know about it*). The interesting fact, in our opinion, is the presence in the text of the letter of a reference to an authoritative source, which, according to the distributors of the message, takes an active part in solving the problem (*Cette information a été rendue publique le 8 Mars, par Microsoft [This information was published by Microsoft on March 8]*). Traditionally, both in the chain letters of happiness and in the chain letters of misfortunes, there is a repeated call for the distribution of the letter to as many familiar people as possible (*Faites suivre ce message à autant de persons de votre connaissance. S'il vous plaît, échangez cette information avec tous ceux qui peuvent avoir accès à Internet. Encore une fois, transmettez ce message à tous les correspondants inscrits dans votre carnet d'adresse, de telle sorte que le virus ne s'étende pas [Pass this message to as many people as possible. Please share this information with anyone who has access to the Internet. Send this message to all correspondents in your address book to prevent the virus from spreading]*) (Filippova, 2015).

According to a survey conducted by Martinovich (2007), the scale of 'letters of happiness' is phenomenal and global in nature, as evidenced by the distribution area. Different parts of the globe represent different confessions – Christian (in Europe and America), Muslim, Islam, etc. The most common letters are called 'letters from the imam of the mosque of the Prophet Muhammad (aleikhis-

salam) Sheikh Ahmed'. The text uses linguistic units of the religious discourse, such as the names of sacral text, ministers, buildings, etc.: the Koran, imam, prayer, Paradise, prophet, Allah, etc. (Martinovich, 2007).

It becomes obvious that the narrative structure of 'letters of happiness' seems universal, while the content is characterized by ethnocultural originality. By the force of influence on the addressee, 'letters of happiness' are also marked by uniformity – the manipulation of universal human values through intimidation. The fact that the 'letters of happiness' contain religious vocabulary, not being the texts of religious discourse, is severely criticized by theologians of all religions: Sheikh Allam Muhammad Ibn Ibrahim warned of this letter about 100 years ago, saying in response to a request about this letter: '[aldjal] [almkhrf] nma hw [efk] w [aftra]' w [tdlyl l'eamh almslmy] nfydkm an ma dkrh hda fynbghy 'ela mn wq'et fyh ydh hdh almqalh alkadbh an [ymzqha]' [We inform you that what this raving dajjal mentioned is only a lie and slander, and misleading the common people from among the Muslims. It should be to someone who got this lying letter in their hands to tear it up] ("Caveats from a ...", 2019). 'Letters of happiness' are one of the elements of the occult environment of society and are nothing more than ritual practices', Vladimir Martinovich, a coordinator of the Information and Consulting Center of St. Joseph Volotsky at the Belarusian Exarchate, told to Interfax ("Experts believe that ...", 2019; Sharifian, 2017).

Let us consider the points of view regarding the origin of the 'letters of happiness' at the moment in Russia and abroad. According to the Russian researcher Lurie, the first time such letters were sent in the East and in Europe. After conducting a research, the scientist established the probable sources of the studied genre: 1) Greek philosophy; 2) ancient eastern religious views and books full of stories and tales about gods; 3) the Jewish apocalyptic (Belyaev, 1921; Ferguson, 1976; Lurie, 1993).

Belyaev saw a close link with Greek philosophy and sacral texts (Belyaev, 1921). The author also made the assumption that the main source of 'letters of happiness' is the apocrypha created in the III-I centuries BC – the book of Enoch and some other apocryphal literature, which tells about the existence of 'heavenly books' that speak about the whole universe (Martinovich, 2007).

Veselovskiy believes that the oldest reference to 'epistles', a kind of foreshadowing of future 'letters of happiness', is quite different from archaic 'epistolias', dates back to 584, when 'the Carthaginian bishop Licinian accused the other bishop of excessive credulity in the renounced letter' (Anderson, 1937; Veselovskiy, 1876). Sufficiently frequent references to 'messages', which are also referred to as 'renounced letters', are found throughout Europe.

The 'messages' possessed the only idea of a religious character – to cherish Sundays without any work but full of praying, but to devote this day to God (Bird, 1994; Lurie, 1993). A characteristic element was the call to observe Sunday and the promise of a terrible punishment to all who did not obey it. Hence there is a well-established name of the letters of this subspecies of heavenly epistles – 'the epistle of the week' (Martinovich, 2007). As we see, the intimidation due to non-compliance with the instructions is a system-forming sign of both 'messages' and 'letters of happiness' into which these 'messages' mimicked.

In Russia, the priesthood called for the same thing called 'messages': the celebration of Sunday and the rejection of the cult of Friday. In the nineteenth century there was a need to remind people of Sunday, this was the reason for the popularity and spread of this genre in this period. In the course of

time, the genre of ‘Heavenly Epistle’ or ‘Epistole about the week’ became widespread in Russia and became one of the most popular apocrypha, which had a significant impact on folk literature” (Panchenko, 2002). The cases of the penetration of such texts to Russia are documented. Thus, for example, the situation was with the so-called ‘Braker Heavenly Letter’ (der Braker Himmelsbrief), which Veselovskiy considered Epistolia about the week to be the ‘extreme degree of decomposition’. ‘The Braker letter begins with a story about one count who wanted to execute his minister, and the execution could not be done, because the sword did not touch the convict. To the count’s question, the minister shows him the manuscript that he carried with him and on which had the letters: B. I. H. B. K. S. K. K. When the count read it, he ordered everyone to have it with him, because his strength was great’ (as cited in Veselovskiy, 1876). It is necessary to mention that the ‘Epistolia’ was often accompanied by a ‘false prayer’: beginning on the model of the church, the prayer turned into a conspiracy or spell (ibid.). For this reason, the Church opposed the distribution of these texts, as they were regarded as occult.

Another feature of ‘letters of happiness’ is the requirement of its copying and distribution. The same pattern was followed in ancient Egypt: in the papyrus ‘Am Duat’ or ‘About the Underworld’ it is said that anyone who makes sacred images, will receive many blessings during their life and in their afterlife. If a person doesn’t draw any pictures, a severe punishment was to happen from the serpent Nehahr (Martinovich, 2007). As we can see, all of these opinions agree on one thing – ‘letters of happiness’ have a close relationship with religious tests, contain elements of intimidation, and require copying and distribution.

An analysis of the corpus containing 317 units of ‘letters of happiness’ makes it possible to single out a separate group of texts containing a fraudulent component, namely to call to send a certain amount of money along with the letter. Foreign researchers found out that ‘letters of happiness’ with an element of extortion appeared in America in Chicago (Collins, 2019). It was here in 1888 when one of the first chains of letters appeared in a boarding school for female missionaries, which was at that time in a difficult financial situation. The administration of the institution decided to organize the collection of donations according to the following principle: each person who receives the letter sends 10 cents to the school address and makes three copies of the letter for his three friends to ask him/her to do the same thing.

This practice has become very popular. Later in the UK, a similar collection of donations was organized to fight the famous criminal – Jack the Ripper. In the same place, Bishop of Bedford initiated a snowball fundraising campaign to finance the House of Poor Women. The initiative of the bishop was widely supported by society, caring citizens actively sent letters and money.

In the 1890s, chains of letters pursued various goals, among them – raising money for the construction of a bicycle path, helping a telegraph operator who was ill with consumption, etc. In 1898, a chain of letters was launched in New York to finance the memorial to soldiers of the Spanish-American War. The letter read as follows: ‘Do not break the chain in memory of people who sacrificed their lives’. In the same year, a seventeen-year-old Red Cross volunteer Natalie Schenk initiated a chain of letters to buy ice cream for American soldiers stationed in Cuba. This initiative brought significant results; the number of letters received exceeded all its expectations.

Subsequently, the chain of letters served as a prototype of the financial pyramids, the main idea of which was to attract new funds to cover old debts. The chain of letters organized according to the pyramidal scheme contains a call to list the letters above the chain in order to avoid, for example, the evil eye, or to send such a letter to other recipients and make a profit. In 1896, the American newspaper Chicago Tribune, reporting on one such experience of collective weaning of money from the population, came out under the heading 'How to Become a Multimillionaire'. The creators of this method of easy profit are counting on a growing number of recipients with a geometric progression, since the principle of the operation of the chain of letters largely reproduces the mechanism of the financial pyramid (Anderson, 2003; Malyshkin, 2015).

In 1899, U.S. authorities tried to stop the distribution of letters by following the gambling law. Despite this, the chain of letters continued to exist.

A new round of their distribution occurred during the First World War. For example, during the ceasefire, letters were used to raise money for Marshal Hindenburg, which was the reason for the New York Times to condemn the initiators of this newsletter for a 'German conspiracy' that was aimed at taking control of the United States postal system".

With the invention of Xerox and the advent of e-mail in the 1930s, 'letters of happiness' found a new life. The authors of the letters acted more sophisticatedly: the recipients were threatened with retribution for trying to get rid of the newsletter. Of particular note is the Golden Circle mailing list project launched in California in 1978. This project provided for personal delivery of correspondence, by avoiding mail services.

The peak of the distribution of 'letters of happiness' occurred in 1935 in times of the global economic crisis, which affected the USA, Canada, Great Britain, Germany and France the most. Under the influence of the crisis, the spread of 'letters of happiness' took an unprecedented turn before this. In the state of Montana (USA), the empty shops turned into points of sale of 'certified shares', which are analogues of 'letters of happiness'. 'Letters of happiness' were distributed in beauty salons. Salon owners passed letters to their customers, caring for their appearance and hairdo (Shakhovskiy, 2016).

The chains of letters became so popular that the world-famous film company Paramount Pictures announced the filming dedicated to this phenomenon. At the same time some letters appeared in a reward in the form of a car was promised. These letters were called 'send the Packard car'.

As we see, the dynamics of the mimicry of the 'letters of happiness' is as follows: the initial connection of the 'letters of happiness' with religious discourse and Greek philosophy is minimized by interspersing superstitious notions and a separate block indicating the financial enrichment of the author of the message.

With the advent of virtual space, 'letters of happiness' entered a new round of their distribution, occurring as the mimicry of 'letters of happiness'. In the virtual discourse there is the term 'viral email' (or viral message), which means the rapid distribution of virtual messages, which include 'letters of happiness', synonymous with the following nominations: a chain of emails, an additional record, a chain of letters, a chain letter, letters connected in a chain.

Mass sending of 'letters of happiness' leads to an excessive load of corporate equipment, communication channels, and in the case of personal mail – its spam. Specialists note another threat

posed by letters of happiness – social engineering. It is expressed in identifying potentially unreliable and easily influenced employees, which can cause significant financial harm to the enterprise. All this distinguishes the modern form of the ‘letter of happiness’ from its classic paper version (Shakhovskiy, 2016).

Let us examine the common structure of such messages:

- 1) it has to be sent from person to person without breaking the chain;
- 2) the content of the ‘letter’ might be of a frivolous nature.

As for the wordings, we can observe the first person singular who is addressing us in a privacy close contact, shares with the reader some secret information which is meant to bring joy or complete nightmare into the lives of people involved. The possible consequences are always provided as a means of terrifying and intimidating someone (Filippova, 2015).

As we can see, the system-forming structure has been preserved: narrative in the introductory part, manipulation of values (love), the promise of good luck, the threat in case of ignoring the instructions, the requirement to send the letter further, the promise of good luck if the instruction is followed, the conviction of the truth of the message.

7. Conclusion

As for the conclusion, we can state the following. The scale of the ‘letters of happiness’ is phenomenal as evidenced by the area of their distribution in the vast majority of countries on all the continents of the world. The first references to ‘letters of happiness’ correlate with the texts of religious discourse. The letters of this genre are also associated with sacral texts and Greek philosophy. The narrative structure of letters is considered universal, while their content is characterized by ethnocultural identity. The ethnocultural markers are the lexemes of religious discourse, the onomasticon. The main system-forming signs of ‘letters of happiness’ are intimidation due to non-compliance with the instructions, the requirement for copying and distribution. The negative impact of ‘letters of happiness’ is noted both at the level of an individual (psychological pressure) and at the level of corporations (spamming of mail, information leakage, danger of virus attacks). With the advent of virtual reality, ‘letters of happiness’ took a new form – from handwritten letters they transformed in electronic ones, at the same time, the content of the letters either did not change or a threat appeared in it both in relation to a person and in relation to computer equipment, gadgets.

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