

PACKAGED SENTIMENTS

The Social Meanings of Greeting Cards

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Abstract

This paper analyzes the social uses and meanings of greeting cards. It argues that cards occupy an intermediate and shifting place in between the opposing social categories of 'gift' vs. 'commodity'. The fact that the card is not a pure gift is the source of social criticisms of cards as impersonal. But the card's ambiguous status is also at the heart of its unique communicative potential. Analysis of specific cards and card categories shows how card senders can exploit various and multiple dimensions of the card's gift and commodity-like qualities to express socially authenticated identities and sentiments, as well as to send subtle and complex new messages about identities and relationships. Card use also shows how commodities can be 'appropriated' as gifts in the act of shopping and choosing; moreover, the consumption of cards is depicted as a dynamic site of 'virtual' interactions between sender and receiver. The specific case of greeting cards is used to illustrate the more general point that most things are not intrinsically 'gifts' or 'commodities'. Rather, things acquire these identities by virtue of social interactions and processes.

Key Words ◆ commodity ◆ gift ◆ greeting cards ◆ sociolinguistics

INTRODUCTION

What does it mean to purchase pre-packaged words? What role does the fact that cards are commodities – reproducible, generic, alienable objects – play in the way that they are used and interpreted? What unique communicative functions are made possible by the greeting card? In this paper, I look at the intersection of language, consumption, exchange and social relations in the form of the greeting card. Key to my discussion is

the distinction between gift and commodity as one of the ideal, oppositional models of types of exchange relationships that people can use to generate and decipher the social meanings in the linguistic marketplace. I argue that when we look at greeting cards in the specific contexts of their use, we see that they shuttle ambiguously between pure gift and commodity. This ambiguity gives rise to debate over the social appropriateness of cards for various tasks of intimate interpersonal communication. But the fact that the card is not exclusively either gift or commodity is also the source of its unique communicative potential. That is, 'giftness' and 'commoditiness' become resources available to senders and receivers of cards. They can use these resources to reiterate or perform existing statuses and relationships, or to propose or express new relationships and identities in interaction.

WORDS AS COMMODITIES

The focus on commodified words is an extension of an established current in linguistic anthropology. As Irvine writes in a seminal article, 'the verbal sign . . . relates to a political economy in many ways: by denoting it; by indexing parts of it; by depicting it . . . and by taking part in it as an object of exchange' (1996[1989]: 278). One of the most frequent applications of this political economy approach is to look at linguistic forms as forms of 'symbolic capital' (after Bourdieu, 1991) that have a material impact on people's lives. These forms index social categories and identities. Rights to and knowledge of specific valued particular verbal and written forms are unequally distributed in society; these forms (such as 'correct,' or 'beautiful' or 'carefully crafted' language) become scarce resources. In essence, this approach uses the idea of an 'economy' as a metaphor which emphasizes the way that social power ('wealth') is distributed and controlled through the manipulation of 'commodities' – material and symbolic resources (see Fairclough, 1989; Friedrich, 1989; Irvine, 1996). Access to privileged ways of speaking and writing is thus 'like' a commodity to all members of a society. A smaller subset of social actors use language as the tool of their trade (talk show hosts, actors, teachers, writers); here, language is directly involved in the economic process. And finally, some members of society actually specialize in language products, commodities which they 'sell' to clients. These specialists include griots (African praise singers), speech writers, writers of advertising copy, ghost-writers and companies like Hallmark Cards and their employees. But the trade in words in the greeting card industry differs in one key respect from what griots or ad writers do: rather than being conducted in public space for public purposes, card discourse is sold for private, personal use. The interest of the greeting card lies in this detail. The exchange of words as commodities in the public domain – metaphorical or actual – is congruent with our understanding of the kinds of abstract, structural roles

and relationships that are often foregrounded in public life. But it is not so readily apparent how commodity exchange 'fits' into the private sphere. And so we could rephrase the question raised earlier to read, 'what does it mean to purchase pre-packaged words for personal, private, sentimental purposes?'

As a point of departure for the discussion of greeting cards, I take Kopytoff's assertion that the object of any kind of exchange is not neutral, but a 'culturally-constructed entity endowed with culturally-specific meanings and classified and reclassified into culturally-specific categories' (in Carrier, 1990: 581). There are four main points that I wish to make about the cultural construction of the card:

- 1 The fact that cards are commodities is both the source of ambivalence and disagreement about their appropriate use in the private domain and a rich semiotic resource that makes the card a unique sociolinguistic medium. Here, I make the connection to an established theme in the works of Mauss (1969), Appadurai (1986), Kopytoff (1986), Carrier (1990, 1995) and others, which is that the distribution and consumption of commodities and gifts function symbolically to create and display social identities and relationships.
- 2 The communicative richness of the greeting card is also related to the point I make at the beginning of the paper: cards are neither pure gift nor pure commodity. There is a built-in tension created by the way that cards shuttle back and forth between the poles of gift vs. commodity. The indeterminacy in the nature of the card can be exploited in creative ways by card buyers/senders.
- 3 The meanings of greeting cards as objects cannot be separated from the specific social transactions in which they are used. Here I look at the way that cards as commodities are appropriated through shopping and choosing, at the way the card acts as a site of virtual interactions and relationships between sender and receiver, and at the way cards can be used to constitute or propose new relationships.
- 4 Greeting cards may be a special kind of communicative medium, but their study has implications for how we look at the gift: commodity distinction in general. I emphasize the notion that while 'gift' and 'commodity' are powerful cultural categories, they are powerful because they are ideas that people hold and use to guide how they act and interpret others' acts. Most actual exchangeable things are not intrinsically 'gift' or 'commodity': these are identities things acquire by virtue of social interactions and processes.

CARDS AS COMMODITIES

First, I want to consider the greeting card in relation to the two categories of objects of exchange identified by Carrier, Kopytoff and Appadurai.

This is the distinction made by Kopytoff between commonalities and singularities, referred to by Appadurai as the contrast between the reproducible/alienated and the authentic/unique, and glossed by Carrier (after Mauss) as the difference between the gift (personal relations in the home) and the commodity (impersonal relations outside the home). I will use 'gift:commodity' to refer to these paired and opposing categories, in which commodities are reproducible, have convertible value, are anonymous, impersonal and disconnected (alienated) from their producers and consumers.

Cards are clearly commodities in that they are mass produced and sold, often through impersonal retail outlets. The anonymity and impersonality of cards is reflected in their categories and content, which is generic rather than specific. Card category headings used in card racks ('Daughter Birthday'; 'Group Goodbye'; 'Sympathy'; 'Friendship'; 'Get Well Grandmother') refer to generic social 'occasions' for sending cards. Both these category headings and many card texts also refer to senders and recipients by generic social categories.

Greeting card verse is also written generically even *across* the generic greeting card categories. This is illustrated in *The Greeting Card Handbook* (Hohman and Long, 1981), a manual for aspiring writers of card verses, where the authors provide the following model 'sentiment' (inside verse) to go in a card whose front page reads, 'Remembering You, Uncle, On Your Birthday':

This card is sent to let you know
How much I think of you
Not only on your birthday
But throughout the whole year too.

The authors then comment that 'these uncle cards could easily be converted to ones for aunt, sister, brother, mother, father, cousin, grandmother or grandfather' (Hohman and Long, 1981: 16). Later in the manual, they advise that 'You should have no trouble at all revamping some of your Birthday verses for use on Valentine's Day cards' (1981: 25). Seen from this perspective, cards speak less to specific relationships than they do to kinship and friendship relations at their highest level of generality.

GIFTS VS COMMODITIES: JUDGING THE CARD AS INTERPERSONAL MEDIUM

Sending a greeting card is by definition a choice of a mass-produced medium over other written media: postcards, handwritten notes, letters or email. In this, and all other linguistic interactions, the choice of medium is not neutral. Rather, it is subject to social judgments of its

appropriateness for specific contexts, purposes and relationships. When cards are used in the interpersonal, private domain, they will automatically be judged against media unambiguously approved for private use: personal letters or notes. In fact, the inventor of the modern greeting card industry conceived of his product in terms of the contrast between the generic/mass-produced commodity and the handcrafted personal gift of words. According to Stern's 1988 history of the Hallmark Company, its founder J.C. Hall invented the greeting card to fill a market niche: the void between the personal letter and the postcard. He reasoned that people no longer had time to write long, personal letters but that the alternative, the postcard, lacked the letter's 'from-me-to-you sentiment' (Stern, 1988: 7). Underlying Hall's marketing insight is a classificatory framework in which postcards, cards and letters are located along a continuum of intimacy (personalization) and personal investment on the part of the sender, with the 'long personal letter' being the most intimate and representing the greatest investment of time and energy. The first page of *The Greeting Card Handbook* makes explicit that the card is meant to 'take the place of the personal, handwritten note, letter or telephone call' (Hohman and Long, 1981: 1).

The fact that the card falls in between the letter and the postcard on a continuum of intimacy, but is meant to substitute for the letter raises a question: how much social consensus is there about the meaning and appropriateness of sending cards in the place of letters? Danet's discussion of the social esthetics of letter writing highlights some key issues. She writes that 'many still feel that personal letters should be handwritten on good quality paper' (1997: 17). The handwriting is one of the physical aspects of texts that gives them an 'aura' linked to the 'history of the hands that have touched them' (1997: 9). Danet notes the effort to restore some of this aura in digital texts by the use of 'distressed' fonts that intentionally create a 'flawed' look that resembles the imperfection of handwriting and typewritten texts (1997: 29). These idiosyncracies and imperfections are some of the physical qualities of the letter that make it an extension of the sender. In the absence of such physical signs, Danet writes, as in 'mechanically duplicated annual collective letters,' people may react negatively (1997: 18).

The implications of the letter esthetic for the social judgment of cards are described in the first paragraph of D'Angelo's article 'The Rhetoric of Sentimental Greeting Card Verse'. He writes that before studying greeting card verse seriously, he considered it 'a trite and trivial form of poetry . . . artificial, affected and insincere' (1992: 337). Such implications are also reflected in a less scholarly publication by Judith Martin, a syndicated etiquette advisor who writes under the title 'Miss Manners'. Greeting cards are treated in a book chapter on etiquette and the 'pre-printed word'. She writes about the antipathy she harbors for

the card as a method of social communication, even if it does take more time and expense than 'pulling out a piece of paper at home and writing the same words in one's own dear little slanting hand'. She asks if a stranger, 'however professionally talented, can be expected to understand the particular conditions that may arise in the lives of one's intimates and thus tell them what they want to hear, in the way someone who actually cares about these people could do' (Martin, 1996: 163). Even after she acknowledges that cards can send appropriate social messages (see later), she comments that 'actually putting [these sentiments] into one's own handwriting suggests that there was some thinking going on, as opposed to mere acquiescence in someone else's statement' (1996: 165).

My own interest in the social meanings of cards was actually prompted by similar reactions to the cards some of my in-laws sent me. They simply signed them. This violated my own notion that cards required at least a short personal note. In other words, I saw the act of writing to relatives as being about providing information and conveying intimacy: as being a gift. As Carrier writes, 'to be suited to personal, gift relations, objects need to bear the identity of the giver: they must be the giver's possession' (Carrier, 1990: 581), they must be socially 'appropriated' (1990: 581). In my first reaction to these cards, I focused on only one kind of 'ownership' of words (where the individual composes them in novel ways in speech or writing), thus subscribing to a Western ideological connection between originality and authenticity (Appadurai, 1986: 45). To be sure, the words on a card were owned – but they were *bought*; as a manufactured object the card was thus loaded, for me, with the impersonal, commercial relationship that the card buyer had with the words of the card (Miller, 1987: 115).

While my in-laws clearly did not share this interpretive framework, there is evidence that card companies recognize the potential for tension created by the card's hybrid gift:commodity status. This recognition is in evidence in a whole genre of cards that implicitly recognizes that cards may be perceived as expedient but not entirely adequate substitutes for letters. An example of this 'Sorry I Haven't Written' genre is depicted in Figure 1. Like many cards in this category, this one refers in its text and images to the *letters* that the sender still has not written. It provides many iconic signs of letterness: it is a trifold, letter shape; it portrays all of the tools of letter writing (stationery, pen and ink) and has a cursive script typeface.¹ Its text offers an apology for not writing ('I've been busy'), but also apologizes for the sender's weakness ('I know that that's a terrible excuse'). The next section implicitly denigrates cards by describing the value of exchanging letters in a friendship. This is followed, however, by a long stretch of text asserting that a failure to write a letter should *not* be interpreted as lack of devotion. This section invites the reader to

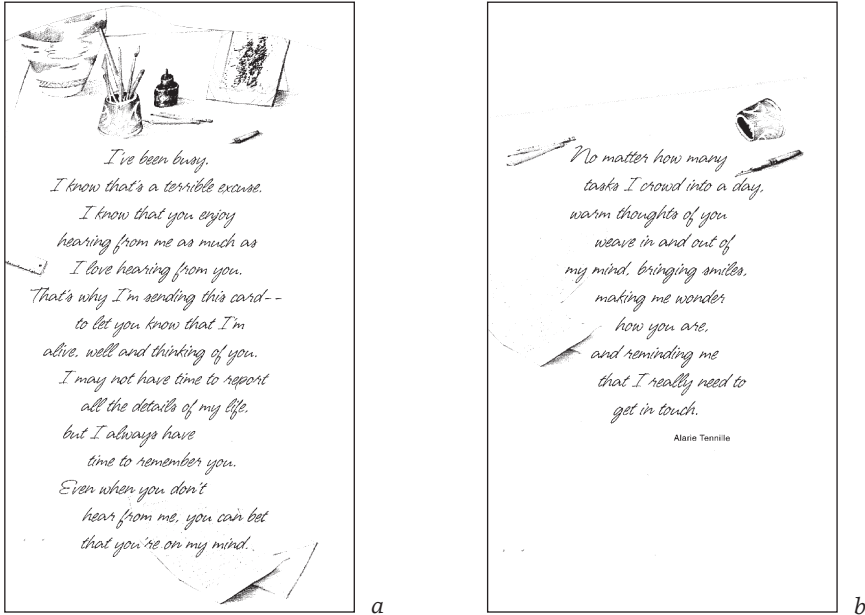


FIGURE 1 'Sorry I Haven't Written' card, *a* outside, *b* inside

consider the sending of the card as a sincere (and adequate) message that the sender is thinking about the receiver. This kind of assertion is not uncommon, and is illustrated in another card in the same genre whose face reads, 'Remember me?' and whose inside sentiment is: 'The smart, witty friend you have who never writes? Surprise!' However, the closing message of the card text in Figure 1 is: 'I really need to get in touch.' This suggests that 'getting in touch' still requires more than sending a card; that the card is better than nothing but not as good as a letter. Another such card (for which I have no illustration) capitalizes explicitly on the irony of sending a card as a letter substitute. The front reads, 'One day, you are going to receive a long, gossipy letter from one of your closest friends'. Inside, it says 'I wonder who that will be?'

The recent marketing of greeting card machines is another sign that the greeting card industry recognizes the potential for the card to be seen as lacking in personalization, for personalization is of course the chief new feature that distinguishes the card machine's products from the traditional off-the-shelf card. Card machines not only can produce cards 'personalized' with the recipient's name ('Happy Birthday, Susan' instead of 'Happy Birthday, Niece') or other pertinent details, but they are also sites where card buyers invest personal time and energy in the composition of the card. Card machines thus create a professional product, but they attenuate the 'alienable' nature of that commodity: the

card-machine card is neither generic nor anonymously mass produced – it is authored at the terminal by a specific person.

Up to this point, I have been talking about the card as being both gift and commodity. I should make it clear I have not done so with an intent to reify those categories, rather, I am approaching them as the 'public structures of meaning' (Carrier, 1995: 7) or conventional ideological frameworks that I think people use to make and interpret meanings of the greeting card.

From a purely theoretical standpoint, we know that the boundaries between the personal and the public and the gift and the commodity are not black and white; such a schema oversimplifies the complex and multilayered nature of interpersonal communication. We know that the personal, the individual, the idiosyncratic is created and interpreted against a backdrop of public or social conventions. Moreover, we do not just communicate as private individuals, we also speak and write as holders of multiple social identities. Communicative acts also play a constitutive role, bringing particular aspects of identity and relationship to the fore and backgrounding others. As we will see, my personal reaction to my in-laws' greeting cards did not take into account some of the ways in which card buying, sending and reading is a potentially dynamic (and personalized) site for social interaction. That is, the choice and use of conventional linguistic forms in specific interactions is in itself a creative act through which new meanings and identities can be articulated.

CARDS, SOCIAL IDENTITIES AND TRANSACTIONS

This means that an analysis of the greeting card must look further than the card as object to consider the social processes and relationships in which card sending is embedded and which it indexes, creates and recreates. From this perspective, I would like to look at the way that people can use greeting cards to send unique and authentically personal messages. This involves examining the ways in which card users bring the particulars of their relationships to the generic medium of the card, and how greeting cards can be appropriated as gifts through the act of shopping. Finally, I consider the ways in which the tension in the card between its commodity-like and its gift-like qualities gives it a unique capacity to mediate between the universal/generic/social and the particular/unique/personal.

THE INDEXING, FOREGROUNDING AND PERFORMING OF IDENTITIES AND RELATIONSHIPS

Frank D'Angelo defines greeting card verse as a subgenre of ceremonial, 'epideictic' discourse (1992: 337). Such discourse is public, and it is

'deictic': that is, it indexes the identities of the sender and the receiver. This indexical function is also underscored by Irvine in her analysis of African praise oratory among the Wolof, a commodity for which the referents of this oratory (nobles) must pay. Griots' (bards') public speeches both index the Wolof caste system (nobles and griots in general) and the identities of (and relations between) a specific griot and a specific noble (1991: 276). Greeting card sentiments can thus be considered what the Speech Act Philosophers call a 'performative'.² By sending a Nephew Birthday card, a person asserts, 'I, your uncle, send you, my nephew, a card for your birthday.' A Get Well card declares, 'I, your friend, wish you, a sick person, a speedy recovery.' Another card proclaims that 'We, your co-workers, congratulate you as the parent of a new baby.' Cards can be considered what Mary Douglas has called 'commodity coupons' in that they stand for communicative exchange itself and in so doing, foreground and thus reproduce relations between persons (in Appadurai, 1986: 25).

This offers a new perspective on the large category of cards that make explicit reference to conventional social statuses and relations between kin, friends, lovers or co-workers. We can argue that the generic content of the categories and the written sentiment may not be the central meaning conveyed by these cards. That is, even if people do select and even read cards for their sentiments, it is the performative character of the card category ('Uncle Birthday' or 'Father's Day from Wife') that does most of the work of social meaning. This voicing of identity is one of the important functions that buyers of cards purchase. That is, while people may already own particular social identities (as Wolof nobles own their genealogies) they do not necessarily own or personally control the public expression of those identities. Thus the card can be compared to the griot's recitation of a noble's genealogy: the card voices or performs its social content on behalf of the buyer/sender.³ Here, the public and the private are interleaved. That is, we can see that even in the private, personal, intimate domain of personal correspondence, it can be important to express or foreground 'public' social identities. To do so, however, requires recourse to public language – to pre-packaged words. And here, the card is the perfect vehicle, not just because of its words, but because it is 'a document with distinctive material aspects which mark it as performative in nature' (Danet, 1997: 23).

THE RIGHT WORDS: SOCIAL AUTHENTICATION

In the same vein, we can see the role of the generic quality of the words in packaging and legitimating conventional sentiments associated with the relationships and situations (occasions) for which cards are available. The sentiments expressed in greeting card verse are authenticated as

appropriate. Thus one of the products packaged in cards is illocutionary certainty, a valuable commodity in the uncertain world of human relations, in which there are social risks associated with choosing the wrong words. *The Greeting Card Handbook* makes it clear that the sentiments in card verse are to leave no room for misunderstanding or ambiguity. The authors emphasize that greeting card verse is not poetry, which, as they write, 'may involve abstract thoughts which destroy the clearer language editors are looking for in greeting card material. Don't get complicated' (Hohman and Long, 1981: 9). Their comments about a birthday verse written for a 'Parent to Son' card also illustrate the function of the card in invoking social ideals: 'A boy does not necessarily improve year after year . . . but within the family circle, few parents would fail to send a complimentary card' (1981: 13). Elsewhere, the same authors offer similar advice on writing 'Wedding Anniversary' cards (intended to be sent to the couple from a friend or family member): 'Regardless of the age of the couple, your greeting should convey the wish that they will continue to share many years of happiness together' (1981: 17). These examples underscore the extent to which novelty is proscribed in the expression of sentiments associated with particular persons and/or social events. It is this dimension that leads Martin (Miss Manners) to qualify her disapproval of greeting cards. Card sentiments, she writes, are like rules of etiquette in that they protect everyone from the negative social consequences of someone's inability to find the right words. They

. . . provide a whole catalogue of things to say on every occasion: congratulations, thank you, I'm so sorry, happy birthday, I love you, happy holidays, best wishes and I offer you my sympathy. None of these, it will be noticed, is funny, insightful or original. Surprisingly enough, that is not what is wanted. (Martin, 1996: 165)

Martin's comments emphasize that the card sender is in fact highly constrained by social norms to express culturally-approved sentiments in a conventional way. The formulaic nature of the card merely makes concrete a set of norms operating around these kinds of communicative events.

One indication of social consensus about the role of cards in sending culturally-appropriate sentiments is mixed or negative public reaction to certain new card categories. Recently, Hallmark made the 'Perspectives' page of *Newsweek* with a quote from an executive justifying a new line of condolence cards for the families of suicides. Clearly on the defensive, he said, 'People need help with their words of encouragement' (26 January 1998: 23). Cancer cards have evoked similar reactions. These cards walk the line of acceptability not just because the occasions for them are negative ('Get Well' and Sympathy cards are widely used) but

because they are unspeakable. They are too precise: they name a painful (and perhaps socially shameful?) cause of death, the nature of a dreaded illness. The experience of having cancer, or having a family member or friend commit suicide may be shared by many people, but it is not a kinship that everyone wants to acknowledge.

However, and this is of course why the cards were developed, American culture also increasingly advocates the therapeutic power of voicing and sharing personal trauma of all kinds. This is parodied in a series of card verses in the *New York Times Magazine*. One of these is titled, 'I Like the New You,' and begins, 'A little birdie told me . . . You're substance-free! Congratulations. It takes someone special to look his old personal demons in the eye and say, hey, you don't scare me anymore!'

Another of the parodies has the front page sentiment, 'You're Someone Special,' and is addressed to a surrogate mother. It reads:

Mom . . . Gee it feels funny to call you that. But after all, you are the woman who brought me to term. And even though it was just a job, I feel as though we have a lasting bond. I know it can't have been easy carrying around someone else's baby, especially a big eater like me! So I just want to say, thanks for being my birth mother! The time we spent together will always mean something special to me. (Rubiner, 1996)

This one does not name the unspeakable but attaches conventionalized sentiments to a relationship that is too new and socially contested to have any.

We can also see the usefulness of sending pre-approved sentiments to do interactional work that is delicate or difficult. The Apology cards in Figures 2 and 3 clearly fit into this category. The card in Figure 2 alludes to the difficulty of apologies: the front reads 'Being humble and apologetic does not come easily for me,' and the inside says, 'Unfortunately being stupid does. Please forgive me.' The card in Figure 3 is a long, letter-like card with a trifold shape and script-like font. The front reads, 'Once in a while I get moody, and I know I'm not very pleasant. When that happens, I not only feel bad myself, I make others feel bad too. That's what I did with you, and you're the last person I'd want to hurt.' Inside, it continues: 'I know I have no excuse for my behavior . . . but I do have an apology . . . and I'm hoping you'll please forgive me.' These cards meet a number of conventional expectations about an adequate apology in American culture: they acknowledge the speaker/sender's guilt and make a direct and humbling appeal for forgiveness. However, the humbling effect of the speech act of apology (part of the social cost to the apologizer that is exchanged in interaction) is less intense on paper than it is in person. And so, an Apology card might well be judged a weaker apology than the same words offered face-to-face.

SENDING
MESSAGES OF
PURE
RELATIONSHIP

However, there are other transactions for which the displacement from interaction offered by cards may be uniquely appropriate. The indexical nature of cards gives people the opportunity to send

a message of relationship when the sender has nothing else to say. Cards can be seen as belonging to a significant category of verbal forms (greetings, salutations, titles and forms of address) whose primary function is to index and reinforce relationships and obligations. In these situations, the card offers a useful sort of disengagement from interaction, offering the sender the chance to send a message of pure relationship, unencumbered by the social requirements to exchange information that are part of telephone and face-to-face conversations or letter writing. Let us return

FIGURE 3 Apology card 2, a outside, b inside

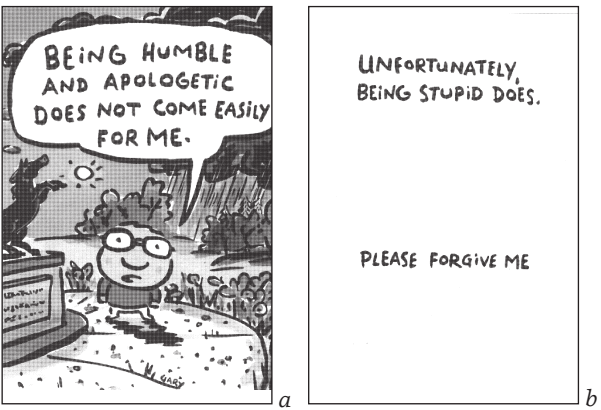


FIGURE 2 Apology card 1, a outside, b inside

here to the 'Sorry I Haven't Written' card of Figure 1. The less apologetic sections of this text represent the card as a direct vehicle for pure sentiment. It is implied that since the message is a purely emotional one – the card represents the sender's inner thoughts of caring – it does not lose any of its intensity because it is not articulated with the sender's specific words.

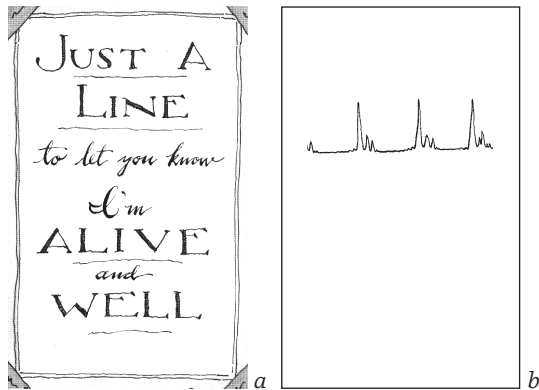
The card in Figure 4 is a variation on the 'Sorry I Haven't Written' category that proposes a

rather different card:letter relationship than the one described earlier. The front reads 'Just a line to let you know I'm alive and well'. Inside is a graphic representation of a person's pulse. The visual play on the phrase 'dropping a line' to represent a (short) letter gives this card a self-conscious, metalinguistic character which does not invite the receiver to read it as a weak stand-in for a letter but rather, as a positive way of conveying 'I'm thinking of you' when the sender has nothing else in particular to say.

Comments by some of Miss Manners' readers suggest that this communicative function is acknowledged and approved, but is defined as something that is quite distinct from letter writing. For example, Miss Manners agrees with a reader who writes that she was taught that no response was required to a card that was simply signed. This suggests that the minimal engagement of the pre-printed word can be just as liberating for the receiver as it is for the sender. Adding a personal message to a card, from this perspective, might actually create ambiguity about the recipient's social duties: is an embellished card now a letter, with attached obligations to reciprocate? Another reader wrote to complain about card senders who wrote in a date and a salutation at the top of the inside page of verse, which they followed with their signatures. What he objected to was not that he had been sent a card and not a letter, but that a minimal kind of communication was graphically masquerading as a more involved and personal letter, that purchased words were being visually represented as the senders' own.

There are other occasions in which it may actually be inappropriate to send words that are more personalized than those on a card. An interesting example of this was reported in a letter to a local newspaper in which a family wrote to thank anonymous strangers who had accidentally hit and killed their family dog, and who had made the effort to find the dog's owners to tell them of the death. The letter writers called this an act of courage and compassion, considering the circumstances and mentioned that they had recently received a pet sympathy card in the mail, unsigned and with no return address which they assumed was from the strangers. The people who hit the dog were able to express a sentiment (of remorse and

FIGURE 4 Variation of the 'I'm Sorry I Haven't Written' genre, *a* outside, *b* inside



sympathy) under an umbrella of anonymity, without linguistically personalizing an interaction that was not (and could not be) part of a personal relationship. If they had sent a letter, they would have had to deform the genre, by leaving off heading, signature and address; in a letter, they would have had to use their own, personal words. The card successfully mediated the personal and the social by providing appropriate sentiments without inappropriate intimacy.

CLOSENESS TO AND DISTANCE FROM WORDS

The authentication of words of apology (or other sentiments) as genuine and appropriate may also require being rendered by other people's words. For example, Wolof nobles cannot sing their own praises/genealogies in public, they must be spoken by a griot. Public speakers cannot deliver their own introductions, which typically include a list of accomplishments and compliments that establish the speaker's legitimacy and authority. People bolster their own claims about themselves with testimonials from others. In all these cases, the referents' distance from the words referring to them acts as a kind of guarantee of impartiality. Just as importantly, other people's words carry the authority of society at large; this is clearly a key dimension of the meaning of those greeting cards that voice senders' identities and sentiments.

But the words on a card are not the exact equivalent of commissioned verbal performances, to which the referent/patron has only an onlooker's relationship. To illustrate, we can look at a very interesting feature of the Apology cards in Figures 2 and 3 (and the 'Sorry I Haven't Written' card in Figure 1): the texts are actually signed by the copywriter. This attribution of authorship foregrounds one of the values commodified in cards: a stance of *simultaneous* closeness to and distance from words. The voice of the long Apology cards is both the sender's and not the sender's in a fashion that resembles some of the functions of reported speech (Silverstein, 1993). The value of this simultaneous closeness and distance is underscored in the words of one card buyer quoted in *The Greeting Card Handbook* as saying, 'I'd feel silly if I verbalized or wrote out a very sentimental message, and I might get mushy. A card does it better than I can' (Hohman and Long, 1981: 14). Viewed from this vantage point, the emotional effusiveness of expressed emotion in cards may not be an exaggerated reflection of ideal sentiments that contrasts with the real, but rather, may be the real emotions that social conventions about direct address prevent people from voicing. At the same time, as the card buyer's comment suggests, the card also offers some distance from both the form and the content of those same sentiments. When you invent the words yourself, you are held responsible for both their form and their content; when you buy a card, you are not in fact held responsible for

the form/style of its words but you profit from their illocutionary force. If the card buyer, quoted here, wrote the words on the card himself, they could be considered mushy. But when he sends pre-packaged mush of the card, the receiver can read through (or ignore) the form and apprehend the sentiment directly.

This simultaneous closeness to and distance from words purchased by the card buyer is a complex social and interactional stance. It is paralleled by the stance towards commodity exchange that is enabled by money-holder cards. These cards not only dramatically illustrate the greeting card's intermediate status between gift and commodity, but also do the work of social appropriation by serving as social wrapping for money gifts. Money-holder cards take paper money out of its normal circulation as pure commodity and

earmark it as a gift. The card is both a gift and *stands for* a gift. Consider for example the text of a money-holder card for a baby shower gift. Its face reads, 'A Shower Gift From Me to You' and the inside verse, 'Although I didn't buy this gift, I hope that you will use it, For something that you really like, Think of me when you choose it.' In this card, the identity of the gift is referentially ambiguous; it is potentially (and probably simultaneously) the money, the chosen card and sentiment, and the actual item purchased by the receiver. The notion that it is 'the thought that counts' is extended in an interesting way to the gift-receiver's consciousness: he or she is to 'think of' the giver while buying something nice. The recipient's private desires or preferences are thus symbolically made part of the gift event. These thoughts become part of the value of the giver's sentiments. The giver profits simultaneously from two conflicting ideologies about the value of gifts: one based on the giver's intentions (thought) and one, on the receiver's appreciation of the material qualities of the gift.

The ambiguity of the card's standing-in function relative to money and other gifts is also expressed in highly reflexive references to money in non-money-holder cards that are intended for birthdays and other gift-giving occasions. For example, the card in Figure 5 makes humorous reference to the fact that it is both standing in for and *not* equivalent to a real

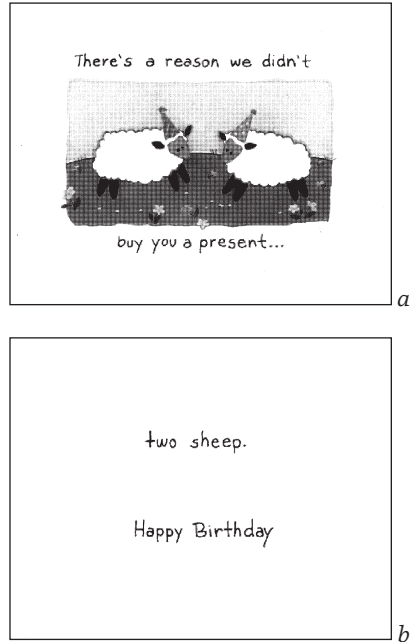


FIGURE 5 Card as semi-gift, a outside, b inside

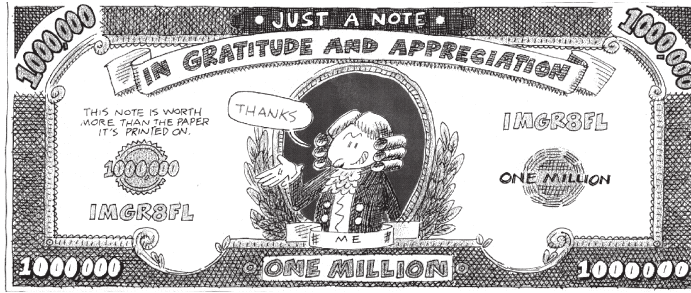


FIGURE 6 Card as almost-money

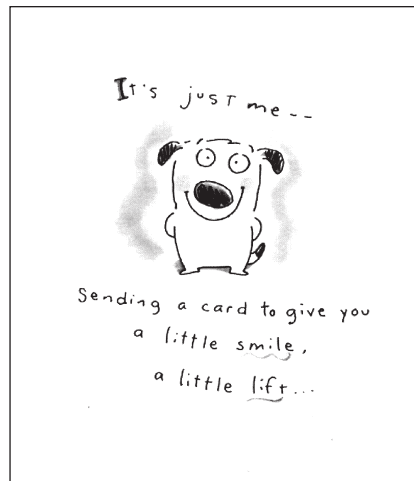
gift: the front has a picture of two sheep and the text: 'There's a reason we didn't buy you a present'. Inside, it reads, 'Two sheep. Happy Birthday.' In a similar vein, another card explains that 'I was going to give you money for your birthday', (front) 'but mall security made me leave the fountain before I could collect a substantial amount.' In these cards, the senders, by making reference to not spending money, acknowledge that their relationship with the receiver could involve gift exchange. But by sending such an acknowledgment, they also construct that gift-giving as optional and their behavior as acceptable: a card would hardly be a substitute for real obligation or absolve real guilt. Another card represents the sender's perspective in a slightly different tongue-in-cheek explanation for the absence of a gift. The front reads: 'I was pondering what to get you for your birthday. I racked my brain, I agonized, I combed the whole mall and finally decided . . .' and the inside sentiment holds the punch line: 'the hell with it. I don't need this kind of stress.' This card foregrounds the work of shopping and choosing and makes implicit reference to its own status as a carefully-chosen object (see later) as an index of the sender's gift of 'thought'. Money is also used iconically to do other interactional work, as in Figure 6. This 'Thank You' card is a money icon, with the play on words 'Thanks a Million'. Here, the card makes iconic reference to a model of balanced reciprocity (and the commercial, impersonal, contractual relations it implies) to draw attention to its intended function as a gift in a model of generalized reciprocity and the personal, intimate and altruistic human relations it implies.

Greeting-card verse also packages rhetorical distance from ego-centered prose. D'Angelo documents the frequent use of ellipsis in greeting-card verse which avoids using the first person pronoun 'I', giving as examples 'Hoping that your birthday brings you the things you like best', and 'Thinking of you on your birthday and wondering if you know how very often you cross my mind.' As he points out, this ellipsis 'puts the emphasis more properly on the "you", the receiver of the message, than on the sender' (1992: 341).

Senders can also purchase simultaneous closeness to and distance from the emotional content and the interactional consequences of the words on the card. We can see this sort of function at work in Peter Just's research on Indonesian epistolary conventions. In Indonesia, cultural conventions about the meaning of the color of the ink and the paper and the way the paper is folded allow letter writers to express anger, affection, or even to make proposals of marriage without having to put these feelings into words. As Just notes, 'This also avoids putting the recipient into the potentially awkward position of feeling forced to reply to an overt protestation of love' (1983: 247-8). Note that it is the conventional meanings of symbols and forms – and not the language composed by the letter writer – that is the vehicle of meaning. By the same token, it is the conventional nature of the card, the distance that senders have from the words that make it possible for cards to be sent as face-saving feelers that test or query the recipient's definition of a relationship while buffering the sender from the implications of a public declaration of sentiment. The card can be taken as more or less personal or intimate; both the sender and the receiver can negotiate its ultimate meaning apart and in private and make carefully planned choices for their eventual face-to-face interaction.

The sender's dual relationship with the words on the card that results from the card's intermediate gift:commodity character can also be creatively manipulated to send complex social messages. This can be seen in the highly reflexive card depicted in Figure 7. Like the 'Sorry I Haven't Written' cards, this one capitalizes on the letter:card distinction to comment on friendship and reciprocity. The front reads: 'It's just me . . . sending you a card to give you a little *smile*, a little *lift*'. Inside it continues: 'a little guilt so you'll write back'. Here, the card draws attention to the fact that it is *not* a letter in order to foreground the role of true gift-like letters in the maintenance of relationships. Another card puts iconic and linguistic references to letters to a similar use. Its front cover has the words 'All write, already,' superimposed on a pastel background in which a hand holding a pen writes in a cursive script. On the inside, in capital letters (in a typewriter-like font), are two words: 'LETTER PLEASE'. In both of

FIGURE 7 Guilt card



these examples, the relative impersonality of the cards sent proposes an image of deteriorated relationship which can be corroborated or reversed by the way that the receiver reciprocates linguistically. The fact that the card is both gift and commodity is central to the meaning of these cards and the force of the social gesture that can be accomplished by sending one. The card is a simultaneous promise and threat/carrot and stick. This simultaneous message would be difficult, if not impossible, to send in a letter, for although letters can be more or less personal, lengthy, friendly etc., they are always letters, always gifts.

GENERIC WORDS AS TRANSPARENT

And finally, it is also possible for card buyers and readers to view the words on the card not so much as generic, but as transparent. As Radway's study of women readers of romances shows, highly stylized (reproducible) linguistic forms are not necessarily perceived as trite; Radway's readers insisted that each romance novel they read was unique. But her readers' reactions also underscore that novelty (which we have glossed as 'personalization' in greeting cards) is not always a key or valued dimension of the message. In fact, the romance readers tended not to pay close attention to the style of the books they read: they viewed language as a transparent vehicle for meanings which were independent of (and pre-existed) linguistic coding (Radway, 1991).

Card buyers with this view of language would agree completely with one of the premises of the 'Sorry I Haven't Written' cards: that it does not matter if the words you send to someone are yours (invented by you), so long as your meaning is deployed.⁴ And, as we have seen, to the extent that your meaning is congruent with the social sentiments associated with your relationship to the receiver, cards may be satisfactory to you and a satisfactory discharge of your social duties. We can see this perspective in Hohman and Long's comments about a 'Dad's Valentine' verse:

Could you say more about your father on an occasion like this? Yes, you could. You might write eight or twelve lines . . . The preceding verse implies thoughtfulness, love and a continued wish for happiness. *You needn't say more!* [emphasis mine]. (1981: 26)

Here we return to the idea that the card category conveys a large portion of the card's meaning. In fact, the receiver does not necessarily have to read the sentiment; the act of identification of the card category ('Father Birthday') is all that is needed. The fact that it is a card and not a personal letter is a guarantee that it will contain general and appropriate words. It is a reminder of what people already know, a commodity coupon for emotion and relationship. Card sending may thus, like 'the culture crystallizing around digital writing' described by Danet, 'place

far less value on originality of substance . . . and more on stylization and an ambiance of 'togetherness', based on a community of interest among individuals dispersed in place and time' (Danet, 1997: 6). Hallmark's 1984 decision to drop an advertising agency that was also representing the phone giant AT&T shows that this is much the way the Hallmark company defines their product. Hallmark considered that the similarity of the product they and AT&T were marketing was so strong as to constitute a conflict of interest for the advertising agency. That product was emotions and connectedness. The consumer might not 'reach out and touch someone' in both media.

It is also possible that for those who see language as a transparent vehicle, sending pre-made sentiments *without* personalizing them might actually constitute the strongest possible message that the truth (the nature of the card sender's relationship with the receiver) can be taken for granted. That is, the propositional content of cards – the truth of the card sender's sentiments, or the relationship between sender and receiver – is postulated as a simple referent. The recipient of the card is not invited to engage in a stylistic interpretation of the card text, reading in subtle meanings to particular choices of words (in fact, as we have seen, cards are written to preclude the possibility of such readings). The card, because it is a pre-packaged product of authenticated sentiments, has something that readers of romance novels wanted from the books they bought: verisimilitude. Verisimilitude allowed them to immerse themselves completely in a fictive world. It required that the author's hand be backgrounded, rather than foregrounded, for the writer who made her presence known by drawing attention to her choices of language also drew attention to the artificial, constructed nature of the world described and prevented the experience of total immersion. What we glimpse here, by analogy, is another kind of certainty embedded in the card as commodity: freedom from the requirement to grapple with the contingent, socially constructed nature of meaning.

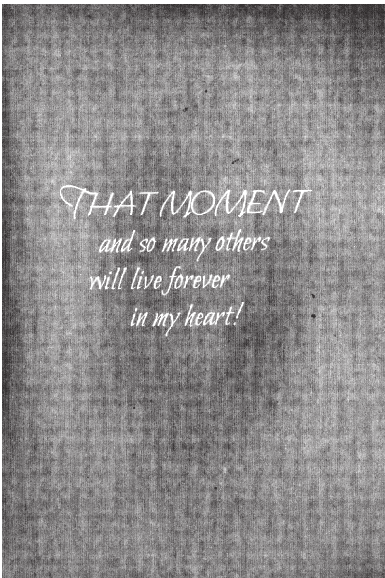
APPROPRIATION: HOW CARDS AS COMMODITIES ARE PERSONALIZED

Frank D'Angelo writes that,

Like proverbs, maxims, quotations and anecdotes, when they are decontextualized and put into collections, greeting card verse is decontextualized when it is put on racks of cards in card shops, drug stores and supermarkets. Under appropriate circumstances, however, the person who buys greeting card verse recontextualizes it, appropriates it to his or her own intention, and sends it to someone else as a personal message. As a result, there is a dialogic relationship set up between the writer's intention and the sender's intention. (1992: 337)



FIGURE 8 Use of deixis and vagueness, a outside, b page 2, c page 3



In other words, the generic quality of the greeting card and its potential to be viewed as impersonal and commodity-like can be offset by the fact that both sender and receiver bring the particularities of their relationship to the card. People read in the personal to the card text; this is one

of the reasons people sometimes say that the card 'says it just right'. The card in Figure 8 invites this interpretation through the combination of vagueness and the heavy use of deixis. This combination almost forces the card users to translate phrases like 'that moment' into *particular* moments (such as the one when sender and receiver fell in love). I found another interesting example of appropriation (via punctuation) inside a 'Daughter Birthday' card received by a colleague. The sender (her mother) put quotation marks around the word *daughter*. These small marks appropriate the word from the page; they make those bought words 'speak for' the signer. In representing the word *daughter* in her voice, the mother makes them particular: the card now refers specifically to the recipient.

It is not enough, however, for the card to simply be vague. In order for the particular to be read into the generic sentiments of the card in a seamless way, those card sentiments must tap into collective experiences, ideas and ideals about the nature of kinship and friendship relations. This is evident in the Son Birthday and Apology cards discussed earlier. Two further illustrations involve another relationship heavily invested with social norms: those between mothers and children. The first is a seven-page keepsake birthday card from mother to daughter. It contains such verses as, 'Your place in our family is important – no one else could ever fill that spot in our minds and hearts,' and 'You're someone to be proud of, learn from and respect as much for the differences between us as for the interests and opinions we share.' The latter verse is interesting because it is a generic reference to the uniqueness of family members and relations. Both verses elaborate on a resonant theme in American culture: the uniqueness of the individual. Care is taken not to assume that *too much is shared* while at the same time calling up the bonds of common memory and family experiences.

Another example shows how certain kinds of collective sentiments and experiences invoked by good cards are so powerful as to dominate the particulars of individual experience. This is illustrated in a birthday card published in *The Very Best From Hallmark* (Stern, 1988). It was sold during World War II, and was intended to be sent from a mother to her son in the service. The card is very clearly in a letter format, with pages, a script font, letter layout and large amount of text. The content is also generically personal, alluding to the pride and joys of motherhood. This would allow for the personalization by reading as mentioned earlier. The potential for the card to be read as inappropriately impersonal (a deficient substitute for a letter) was also mediated by the fact that it was wartime. That is, the fear of loss so focused and heightened the collective experience of motherhood that there may have been no perceived gap between the collective sentiments of the card and the individual feelings of the mothers who sent it.

CARDS AS VIRTUAL SITES OF SHARED EXPERIENCE

Messages about relationships between sender and receiver are also facilitated by the fact that cards are appropriated as presents in the act of shopping (Carrier, 1990: 586). This work of appropriation is closely bound up with aspects of relationship, for finding the perfect card for someone requires an intimate knowledge of the receiver's attitudes, experiences, emotional life etc. Again, the card may be mass produced, but the relationship between sender, card and receiver is in fact unique and personal. And it is this relationship that is indexed and embodied in the card. The card, in essence, is an object to which sender and receiver have a shared response. For example, when you send a funny card, you also send the message that you know the recipient would find it funny. The card creates, long-distance, a shared event through which a relationship is understood and enjoyed. It both calls up experiences shared in the past by sender and receiver and is a locus for a new, shared experience. Again, the concrete, physical character of the card constitutes its crucial difference from letters or phone calls. In these other media, people can share in the *narration* of events, ideas and emotions. But there is a subtle difference between saying, 'I'm going to tell you something I know you will find funny' and sending a card that carries in it the moment of your amusement while you were shopping at the same time as it recreates that moment in the receiver's act of consumption. To give a personal example (which I know from talking to people is not idiosyncratic), I have sent my husband anniversary cards through the mail. In doing so, I create an event, a virtual interaction with me at the moment he finds and opens the card. In doing so, I engage a fiction – that I am sending it to him from afar, which in our case, is bound to make him think of a period in our courtship when we were separated and frequently wrote and sent cards. If I were there in person, I could refer to that period and our feelings ('Do you remember when . . . ?'), but with the card, I recreate the context of that feeling.

THE OBJECT IN SOCIAL SPACE

There are other, social meanings attached to the card's status as an object/commodity. As a thing, it has to be found, bought, written in (even if only signed), addressed, stamped, mailed and delivered (or at least, placed by the sender somewhere where it will be found). As the card moves physically from the store, to the home of the sender, through the mail and to its recipient, something of the nature of its physical journey attaches to it.⁵ That journey is through *social space*, and it seems to me that it foregrounds the social context of personal communication (like the guilt card, discussed earlier). Coleman describes a similar process at

work in the use of videotapes of evangelical Protestant services. In these concrete communicative media, 'adherents are enabled to see themselves as embodying idealized, generic images of enthusiasm. Personal experience becomes collective representation, and, moreover, one that can be reconsumed by a person' (1996: 120). Even though the reading of the card is private, this social passage adds yet another layer of public declaration to its meaning. This explains, in part, why people send 'Thank You' cards even when they have thanked someone in person. It is also a dimension of anniversary cards I have sent my husband: although they may draw meaning from the private details of our courtship, they also invoke the public meaning of the nature of marriage.

Cards of thanks also have another communicative dimension. The face-to-face thank you details the reasons for gratitude. A written follow up is therefore not about providing information, but about intensifying the message through redundancy. Switching media makes this redundancy possible; in interaction, there is a limit to how many times one can express gratitude. A card neatly allows for this intensification function. Cards also add to their sender's ability to emphasize the receiver's virtue because the card reader cannot do what they can do when thanked in person: demur or downplay their generosity. The receiver is forced to accept the sender's expression of gratitude as the last word, and as the final move in an exchange of favors and thanks.

CONCLUSIONS

In this paper, I have used the gift:commodity distinction to illuminate the communicative properties and interactional possibilities of greeting cards. In this conclusion, I would also like to suggest that the pragmatic linguistic approach I have used to tease out the meanings of cards has something to contribute to our understanding of the commodity form, and the gift:commodity distinction. First, we have defined the card as having an intermediate, ambiguous status; neither/both gift and commodity. While I have argued that its uniqueness as a medium of communication lies in this feature, I would like to propose here that the card is less of an exception than it might at first seem. Few objects of exchange are inherently, essentially and purely either gift or commodity. Even money can be earmarked for gift purposes. And, as Appadurai points out, gift giving can have the same social functions as commodity exchange (1986: 11). The case of the card treats gift and commodity as qualities or values that are assigned to objects in the course of human interaction and transaction. Here I join with Appadurai (1986), Carrier (1995) and Herrmann (1997) among others.

Just as meanings in linguistic interaction have as their backdrop a whole set of formal conventions and conventionalized understandings,

so too does the meaning of particular kinds of objects in specific exchanges rely on public structures of meaning. Here, let me return to the idea that the greeting card mediates between categories of objects and relationships in the same way that Carrier describes for the acts of Christmas shopping and giving. He writes that 'The combination of shopping and giving asserts the distinction between the personal, gift relations at home and the interpersonal commodity relations outside the home, and it marks our ability to maintain familial relations in the face of the outside world' (1990: 585). In other words, we understand and experience and affirm the value of intimacy primarily in terms of contrast. The public and the private, the intimate and the impersonal, the gift and the commodity – these are some of the key oppositions with which people define and interpret their worlds. At the same time, they are constantly engaged in the symbolic manipulation of these poles of value and identity; sometimes foregrounding one or another pole; sometimes emphasizing and sometimes blurring the boundaries. The greeting card plays a particularly interesting role in the mediation between these contrasting types of values and relationships because it is both intimate and anonymous, personal and generic, subject to appropriation for an array of social purposes.

The analysis of the transactional meanings of cards can also be used to question or qualify the fairly widespread view that the pervasive influence of commodity exchange in every area of human life amounts to a loss of other more meaningful and rewarding types of identities, relationships and modes of understanding and communication.⁶ This view is based on a strict separation, and abstract treatment of commodity and gift relations. It would define the proliferation of cards, or the substitution of cards for letters, as communicative bankruptcy, the homogenization of sentiment and interaction caused by commodification (my original reaction to my relatives' cards).

But, as Radway writes in *Reading the Romance*,

Commodities like mass-produced literacy texts are selected, purchased, constructed and used by people with previously existing needs, desires, intentions, and interpretive strategies . . . the essentially human practice of making meaning goes on even in a world dominated by things and consumption. (1991: 221)

We have seen that cards cannot be defined as failed letters or meaningless assemblages of generic sentiments when we look at how they are used. In use, it is clear that cards serve discrete and unique and valuable communicative purposes and that as forms, they are as much defined by their social applications as those social applications are defined by them. This underscores a perspective shared by Löfgren (1997: 99) and others (Fiske, 1989; Willis, 1990), who have looked at consumption as cultural

production, and consumers as active producers of meaning rather than passive victims of consumer culture.

One of the reasons that card buyers cannot be considered passive recipients of the words they buy is because those words are extraordinarily malleable. All objects in semiotic systems (to include systems of exchange) can be adapted as vehicles for multiple and, as we have seen, simultaneous messages. In particular, we have seen the way that social relationships – the intimacy that people bring to their use of cards – can override the impersonality of form (the card as commodity). In sum, just as the medium is (or defines) the message, messages in social transactions shape the media to their own purposes.

Notes

1. The relatively clear function of this strategy is articulated in *The Greeting Card Handbook*, where the authors note that the verse on a Mother's Day card 'appeared in a script-lettering style, giving it a more personal, hand-written feeling' (Hohman and Long, 1981: 10).
2. As Danet notes, 'our sensuous experience of texts and the quasi-magical manipulation of them have . . . had important continuities with practices of oral or 'performance' cultures' (1997: 7).
3. In this respect, the stand-alone signature on the card, which I discounted as trivial, can be viewed as having a critical role in the performative act (see Danet, 1997: 24).
4. It is worth noting here that the assumption I brought to my initial reading of in-law's cards – that people can and should compose their own words – reflects an academic/elite relationship to literacy which is not shared by many people. The moral judgment assumes familiarity with and facility in written composition and censures card senders for failure to make what is seen as minimal effort. In fact, that effort is far from minimal for many people. Moreover, it idealizes the medium over the entire communicative package: some handwritten letters contain minimal content and represent minimal effort.
5. Email cards are now available at no cost, and can be sent simply by clicking on the desired card and typing in the intended recipient's email address. These messages obviously do not have the material dimension of greeting cards; they do not require leaving the home to 'shop', and they are free. It is not clear to me whether they challenge my assumptions about the key role played by the material nature of cards, or whether they constitute a new genre of communication that is intended for different purposes and interpreted in different ways than 'real' cards. They may have to be interpreted in reference to email itself: is an email card something less than a casual, personally composed message, but something more than no message at all?
6. See for example Fjellman (1992: Chapters 2 and 3) on consumer culture and 'decontextualized' meanings (Fjellman, 1992: 56); Fairclough, 1996: ix).

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