

Introduction

This paper endeavours to study greeting cards as a method of correspondence, from a linguistic viewpoint. Greeting cards constitute a highly unusual medium of communication in that the individual who sends a greeting card is very often not the one who has composed the message enclosed within it. Typically purchased already pre-printed with a message, buyers usually append only a brief greeting to this verse, or skip this step altogether and simply sign off on the card before mailing it off to the intended recipient. While retailers do carry blank cards, whose form necessitates the sender to craft their own message in much the same way as other pen-and-paper communication forms like letters and postcards, the blank greeting card remains an unpopular choice: industry estimates have positioned greeted cards as selling three times more than blank ones (Kelley, as cited in West, 2010, p. 460). This indicates that consumers actually prefer buying pre-written sentiments rather than formulating one of their own. For this reason, this paper will focus on greeting cards that come pre-loaded with messages, rather than blank ones. Another commonly-used form of a greeting card is its digital variety, the virtual greeting card. This electronic form (henceforth ‘eCard’ for brevity) has evolved remarkably since its inception, and its present form markedly differs from the traditional greeting card in ways other than simply its digitization. Such differences will be outlined later in this paper. The nomenclature within this essay may quickly become confusing; to clarify, the term ‘greeting card’ will be used to encompass both traditional and eCard forms, unless specified otherwise. Additionally, the terms ‘sender’ and ‘author’ cannot be used interchangeably when discussing greeting cards, and this essay makes the distinction that ‘author’ refers to the person or manufacturer who has written the verse within a card, while ‘sender’ only refers to the person who completes the act of mailing out the card, physical or otherwise.

Overview

The origin of the greeting card is unclear, and has been attributed to the early Chinese, the first Egyptians, and even the ancient Romans (Lemon Loco, n.d.). In any case, the greeting card industry as we know it today can be largely attributed to Hallmark Cards, founded in 1910. So influential and ubiquitous is the Hallmark greeting card that neologisms like ‘Hallmark holiday’ have been coined to describe holidays deemed more commercially-driven than historically or traditionally significant. This foregrounding of the Hallmark Company’s impact on greeting card culture is relevant to understanding where the greeting card stands in contradistinction to other forms of paper-based communications. Stern’s 1988 history of Hallmark Cards details that founder Joyce Clyde Hall conceived of the modern greeting card to fill what he perceived to be a lacuna in written correspondence: the letter took too much time to write, but the postcard lacked a “from-me-to-you” sentiment (Stern, 1988, p. 7). While in contemporary times the postcard does fulfill the sentimental value Hall intended his greeting cards to convey, the Hallmark Company was established during the Golden Age of Postcards, with billions of postcards being mailed each year (Baldwin, 1988). In that

period, postcards were seen as no more than an everyday mode of communication, and the greeting card was intended to fill this market niche for more personal and sentimental communication.

One way to track the prevalence of greeting card use is through its sales. The greeting card industry is worth billions, with greeting card publishers in the U.S. generating over three billion U.S. dollars in revenue each year since 2007 (Watson, 2021). With the two overwhelmingly largest greeting card manufacturers in the world being American Greetings and Hallmark Cards, both of which are based in the U.S., the annual revenue of U.S. greeting cardmakers is a good gauge of global card sales. Additionally, this study focused only on revenue, so consumer spending can be expected to be even higher. However, Watson did find a steady decline in revenue generated each year since 2007, suggesting an overall decrease in the sending of greeting cards over time. This decrease may be linked to the increasing number of free-to-use eCards available online. eCards have a relatively short history, with the first virtual greeting card often being credited to Judith Donath of MIT media lab in 1994. Since then, the eCard has evolved rapidly, and its current form may range from simply a digitized greeting card to short videos that barely resemble its traditional counterpart anymore.

Comparison of traditional greeting cards and eCards

Speech-like			Text-like		
	Greeting Card	eCard		Greeting Card	eCard
Time-bound	No	No	Space-bound	Yes	Yes
Spontaneous	No	No	Contrived	Yes	Yes
Face-to-face	No	No*	Visually Decontextualized	Yes	Yes*
Loosely Structured	Yes	Yes	Elaborately Structured	No	No
Socially Interactive	Yes	Yes	Factually Communicative	No	No
Immediately Revisable	No	No	Repeatedly Revisable	No	Yes
Prosodically Rich	No	No*	Graphically Rich	Yes	Yes

Table 1: comparison of greeting card features based on Crystal 2006

By administering Crystal’s seven distinguishing aspects of spoken and written discourse (2006), a clearer understanding of how greeting cards and eCards fare against each other may be elucidated, as well as how they hold up to other prototypical language forms. As both greeting cards and eCards comprise communication via a written and/or typed form, it is unsurprising that their characteristics

converge more towards those of writing than speech. However, both mediums still do not exhibit all of the prototypical qualities of written discourse, and in some cases may even more so resemble the communicative qualities of speech than writing. The above table loosely categorizes either forms as exhibiting more speech-like or text-like features, but the non-standardized nature of both traditional greeting cards and eCards means that plenty of exceptions are to be expected; some of these anomalies will be elaborated upon below.

As with any tactile medium, traditional greeting cards are more space-bound and static than they are time-bound and dynamic. However, while Crystal notes written discourse to be created with a nonspecific audience in mind, the practice of sending and receiving cards is often only carried out between those familiar with each other. The need for a recipient's postal address in sending off a card makes it so that the sender is almost always intimate with the addressee, or at least familiar enough to know their place of residence. In the case of eCards, the sender has to know the email address of the recipient, which necessitates some level of familiarity between both parties. Furthermore, the cultural phenomenon of sending greeting cards has, perhaps in part aided by commodification, become highly personalized. West (2010) observes that cards are organized in stores not just by occasion, but also by recipient ('For Mom', 'For Nephew'), and in some cases even by sender ('For Sister from Brother'), all of which make greeting card communication highly tailored and specific. This same categorization can be similarly observed for eCards on retail websites.

Greeting cards are most definitely not instantaneous modes of communication, for there exists considerable delay between production and reception. However, the nature of this particular medium makes for an interesting case study with respect to this time-lag. There are several factors involved in this delay: for traditional greeting cards, if the selected card comes pre-printed with a greeting verse, then a substantial amount of time has already elapsed from when this message was first composed. Next, if the sender wishes to pen their own message alongside this printed composition, then another interval must occur before this message reaches its recipient via snail mail. eCards, as facilitated by the speed of the Internet, have a considerably shorter time lag. However, the communication is still not immediate: the recipient still has to click on the link enclosed within an email before being redirected to a webpage displaying the actual eCard.

While greeting cards are indeed visually decontextualized, which Crystal observes to more closely parallel writing than speech, the type of language found in greeting cards nevertheless resembles spoken language. Crystal specifically comments on the use of deixis in both discourse archetypes, noting that deictic expressions are rampant in speech but sparse in writing. Indeed, deixis is highly situational and relies heavily on context for meaning. Greeting cards, as a medium displaced in space and time, should be expected to avoid such expressions, but this is not actually the case: heavy-handed use of personal and temporal deictic terms can be found in the language of greeting cards. Papson (1986) even goes so far as to claim the greeting card to be "packed with pronouns" (p.

104). In particular, the pronouns ‘you’ and ‘your’ appear with incredible frequency. This heavy use of second-person pronouns has been attributed to the fact that “greeting card verse is eminently audience-centered” (D’Angelo, 1992, p. 341). This may be observed in the following sample of a greeting card verse examined by D’angelo (line breaks as per source material):

Hoping that your birthday brings the things you like
best.

Thinking of you on your birthday and wondering if you
know how very often you cross my mind. (D’Angelo, 1992, p. 341)

The number of occurrences of a second person pronoun totals six in just this short verse alone. To further place emphasis on the recipient, greeting card authors also use rhetoric to distance the content from “ego-centered prose” (Jaffe, 1999, p. 130). Consequently, messages in greeting cards can be found to favour the use of elliptical sentences, wherein the first person pronoun ‘I’ is omitted to reduce the focus of attention on the sender in relation to the recipient. This rhetorical device is also realized in the above example, where the use of the first person pronoun (“I am hoping that...” and “I am thinking of...”) would greatly alter the rhetoric meaning it otherwise conveys.

As for eCards, they similarly do not support face-to-face interaction, but are not entirely visually decontextualized. Many eCard generators, including that of industry big-name American Greetings, allow for the insertion of photos and videos to personalize their eCards. In this manner, senders have the option of including a filmed video of themselves offering the recipient their well wishes, for added deictic context. Still, this multimodal communication does not happen in real time, and is a one-way correspondence in that the recipient does not actually interact with the sender over video.

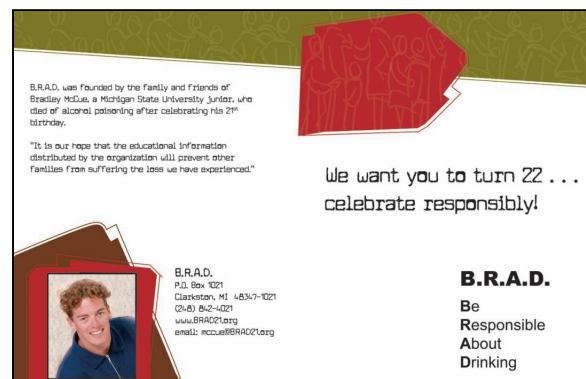
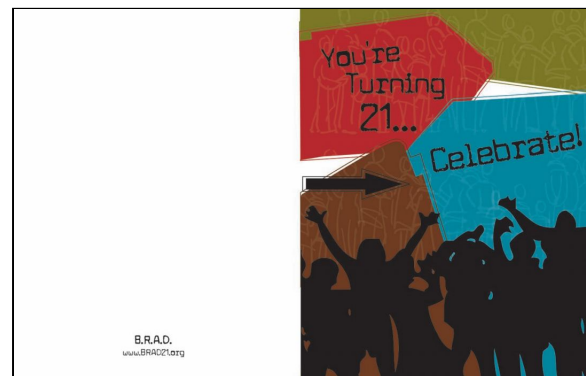
The structure of content in greeting cards differs from that of prototypical written forms in that greeting verses tend towards informal language. And while greeting cards may have chalked up a bit of a reputation for using superfluous and flowery discourse, closer examination finds that the actual diction itself is rather simple. It is more so the sentimentality attached to the words that give off the impression of saccharine and fanciful language. As D’Angelo (2002) observes, greeting cards seek to appeal to the emotion, and unembellished language is more capable of conveying such sentiments. Within the corpus of greeting card verses he examined, D’Angelo concluded that the words employed were almost exclusively monosyllabic and Anglo-Saxon in origin (p. 342). Anglo-Saxon words, characterized by their native Germanic roots, contrast with those of Greek or Latin origin. Owing to a whole host of sociohistorical reasons, the English lexicon can be roughly divided into two distinct styles: Graeco-Latinate words for high style of formality, and Anglo-Saxon words for low style of formality (Lanham, 1983). Several other scholars have also acknowledged this dichotomy (Corson, 1984; Kelly, 1991; Maylath, 1996). That writers of greeting cards should opt for the lower-formality Anglo-Saxon words, demonstrates the informal nature of greeting card discourse, which thereby makes it more closely resemble speech than writing. Indeed, *The Greeting Card*

Writer's Handbook asserts greeting card verse to be not just prose (as opposed to poetry), but “ordinary speech” (Fitzgerald, 1958).

The next point of comparison between speech and writing brought up by Crystal has to do with the communicative content of either communication forms. He suggests that speech may be more appropriate for informal and phatic functions, while disseminating factual information is more befitting of writing. Generally, greeting cards seem to align with Crystal's interpretation of speech functions, in spite of their written form. This is because the discursive content of greeting cards are largely phatic in nature and serve to achieve a social purpose rather than for exchanging factual and intellectual information. The ritualistic nature of exchanging greeting cards has led scholars like West to dub them “vehicles of sentiment” (2010), suggesting a diminished expectation for the breadth of their communicative content. By applying Carey's 1989 ritual model of communication here, West opines that the act of sending a greeting card is itself more communicatively significant than the words included within it. In this perspective, the social work accomplished by greeting cards is more so to do with the medium itself, rather than the message conveyed by the medium.

As with every rule, there will always be exceptions.

So while greeting cards generally have a limited capacity for communicating information with intrinsic value (as opposed to mere social pleasantries), there are still some cards that accomplish such. Be Responsible About Drinking Inc. (stylized as B.R.A.D.), is an organization established by friends and family of the deceased Bradley McCue who passed away from alcohol poisoning on his 21st birthday. The aims of the organization include educating young adults on responsible drinking practices via proper education (B.R.A.D. homepage, n.d.). As part of their outreach efforts, B.R.A.D. offers a free printable PDF of a birthday greeting card on their website which may be downloaded and addressed to individuals turning twenty-one years of age (the legal drinking age in the U.S.). Within the card, information on McCue's plight is enclosed in the hopes of promoting responsible drinking practices to the addressee.

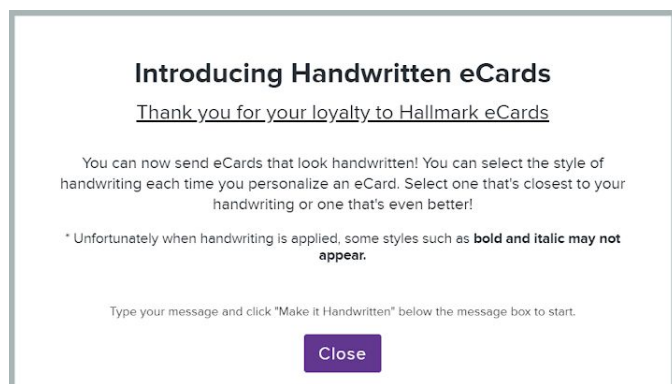


While this example may not seem very archetypal of greeting cards, it nevertheless exhibits the possibility for a greeting card to disseminate information going beyond purely phatic functions.

However, this is still very much not the norm, and the existence of the round-robin letter is proof of this. A round-robin letter is typically sent together with a Christmas greeting card, and details the happenings of that year surrounding the sender's life. This being an established practice in certain areas of the world demonstrates the greeting card's narrow scope of communicative functionality, to the extent that an accompanying letter must be delivered alongside if one wishes to correspond at greater length.

As for revisability, traditional greeting cards make for an odd study. If purchasing pre-written verses, the sender can peruse as many cards and their messages as needed until they have found one they are satisfied with, but once they have settled on a purchase, the printed nature of the card makes it such that it cannot be edited or reworked without compromising the card's integrity. An additional message may be tacked on through handwriting, but removing or reworking the pre-printed text is not possible. Additionally, while the sender may deliberate their own message for however long before putting pen to paper, the penned message is not easily editable afterwards. Unlike other written mediums like letters, in which the medium (i.e. paper) may be easily replaced should a second draft be needed, duplicate greeting cards are rarely, if ever, purchased in large quantities for such dispensable purposes. This makes greeting cards not easily revisable and therefore more similar to speech in this regard. As for eCards, the given verse is not usually revisable, but the sender's own additional message may be repeatedly reworked much the same way as other written forms. Hallmark, a major purveyor of greeting cards, allows for the free selection of a "Hallmark Sentiment" in their eCards, which are pre-composed greetings which senders may choose to include. These pre-loaded greetings can be freely swapped out for one another while in the process of editing and personalizing an eCard, which offers an element of revisability, albeit constrained by the pool of greetings available from the drop-down menu (to be fair, it is no small number).

Greeting cards are inherently packed with graphic elements related to written forms. They typically play around a lot with typefaces, using different fonts, italics, and coloured text to enrich the meaning of a greeting verse. West (2008) describes a Hallmark card where a long verse is printed on the front in a standard, regular font, while the inside features a shorter message typed in a cursive font meant to emulate handwriting. She hypothesizes that the card writer has used a combination of linguistic and visual cues to differentiate a more abstract, philosophical message on the outside of the card from a shorter, more personal-sounding one enclosed inside. In this manner, the outside verse may articulate a sentiment the sender wishes to put out, but the "handwritten" one



Introducing Handwritten eCards

[Thank you for your loyalty to Hallmark eCards](#)

You can now send eCards that look handwritten! You can select the style of handwriting each time you personalize an eCard. Select one that's closest to your handwriting or one that's even better!

* Unfortunately when handwriting is applied, some styles such as **bold** and **italic** may not appear.

Type your message and click "Make it Handwritten" below the message box to start.

Close

remains a more informal and relatable message which the sender can comfortably sign their name upon. In fact, the emotional significance of handwriting is so valuable that Hallmark's eCard site offers a customization option for a range of fonts selected to "look handwritten", and even encourages buyers to select one that most closely matches their own script.

This is not the only aspect in which eCards are disadvantaged as compared to their paper counterpart. eCards are often viewed as indexing less sincerity (West, 2002). West illustrates this point with a sympathy eCard from American Greetings that attempts to emulate a traditional greeting card, whose animation presents itself as an envelope replete with postal stamp, that then opens to reveal the actual eCard (p. 322). This suggests that an eCard may be seen as an inferior stand-in for traditional cards, such that this design seeks to mimic the latter to come across as more sincere. In the early days of the virtual greeting card, the software used to display them was most often Adobe Flash Player, and this was the case for a long time. However, eventually the many problems with Flash (issues with speed, security risks, requirement for a plug-in, etc.) led many virtual cardmakers to turn to HTML5 instead. Hallmark made this conversion in 2014, but the different file formats meant that while Flash enabled buyers to insert their own greeting inside the eCard itself, HTML5 could only tack the message on at the end of the card, something Hallmark itself dubbed a "less personal experience" (Hallmark eCards, 2014). Other online cardmakers reported similar issues: With Adobe announcing the end-of-life for Flash on 31st December 2020, an FAQ page by indie eCard company Jacquie Lawson talks about how the impacted cards could still be viewed once converted to HTML5, but that they would no longer appear the same as when they were first received months or even years earlier. Furthermore, the company also discussed the withdrawal of certain cards whose low sales in the past did not "justify the cost of conversion", so individuals who received such cards in the past would no longer be able to view or reread them (Jacquie Lawson, n. d.). eCards are therefore unfortunate in that they are constrained by technology, whereas traditional greeting cards' tactile nature means that they are not as liable to being affected by the whims of technology.

Effects on language

Greeting cards are inherently gendered, in that they are overwhelmingly tied to women. The Greeting Card Association notes that 80% of all cards are purchased by women. With a consumer base so skewed to the feminine, it would be unsurprising if greeting cards use linguistic forms reflective of female speech to appeal to female buyers. However, while representations of gender on greeting cards have been studied in the past (Bridges 1993; Schrift 1994; Willer 2001), the possibility of gendered greeting card discourse is not well-studied.

While some of the linguistic peculiarities of greeting cards have already been discussed in earlier sections, there still exists many more idiosyncrasies in greeting card discourse. For an industry that operates on selling words, greeting cards are awfully fond of highlighting the deficiencies of language in conveying emotion. One commonly-encountered quirk is the 'words fail me' trope,

whereby the greeting asserts that “there are no words” or that “words aren’t enough” to express a sentiment that is worth “more than words”. The list goes on. A simple search on Hallmark’s eCard site for the search terms “more than words” turns up 47 results alone, and considering that the search function is not sophisticated enough to detect synonyms, this number could well be much higher.

It is also interesting to consider the socially accepted quality of ‘buying’ words to be used in one’s stead. As Jaffe (1999) observes, most other trades which treat language as commodity, such as speech writers or ghostwriters, create language ‘products’ to be used in the public sphere, while “card discourse is sold for private, personal use” (p. 116). It is perfectly normal and even expected for one to send a greeting card filled with words not written by the sender, yet it would be regarded negatively if an individual paid someone else to compose text messages to friends, for example. The reaction differs considerably, and yet the underlying logic is similar in both scenarios. Perhaps this discrepancy can best be explained by returning to the previously brought-up notion of greeting cards being ritualistic: cards are sent at societally stipulated events, rather than being used for everyday communication. As such, it is not so much the content that matters, but that a card is sent at all.

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