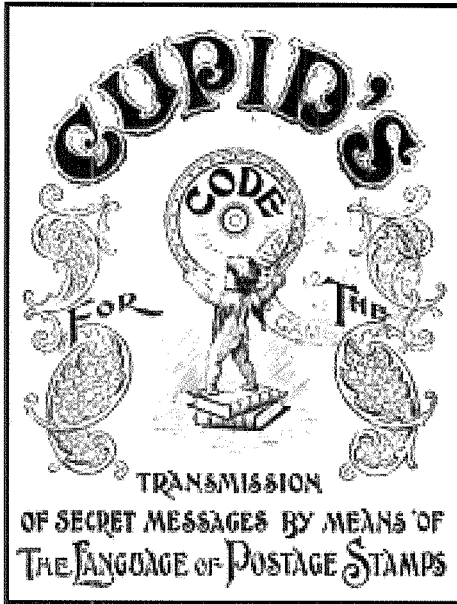# The Language of Stamps
by
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Most people today are familiar with the Language of Flowers, which is still often used to convey messages. Example, roses are still regarded as representing love and white flowers, a sense of purity. However few are aware that similarly, up to the Second World War and to a much lesser extent the early 1960's, there also existed a now forgotten Language of Stamps.

Many collectors of post related items will have noticed that quite a proportion of mail posted from around 1890 and the early twentieth century had stamps affixed to envelopes and picture postcards in all sorts of odd positions and orientation. In fact, the position and orientation of the stamp could actually be a coded additional message from the sender, with the configuration being in what is known as the language of stamps.

The practice of coded messages on mail seems to have had its origins in the pre-stamp period, when generally it was the recipients of letters who paid the postage connected with the delivery of the mail. At the time it was not infrequent for special marks to be placed by the sender on the address side of the letter. The recipient on seeing the special marking would then refuse the letter, hence avoiding the payment of the postage fee, because s/he already knew what the message inside was all about!

With the introduction of cheaper postal rates and the postage stamp in 1840, this abusive practice generally died out. However in the late 1800's, with the introduction of the postcard containing a very short message which was visible to everybody, the idea of the special marks was given a new lease of life in the form of encrypted "secret" messages by means of how the stamp was placed on the card. As the language developed, besides the top right hand corner of the postal item, use was also made of other positions on the letter / post card. Later on, the language was supplemented with a variation for the codes when instead of using one, two stamps were used in combination.

The interest and use of the postage stamp language spread rapidly, and at the turn of the 20th century the rules began to receive their particular chapter in the etiquette books along with the languages of flowers, handkerchiefs and fans to name a few. Moreover, in many countries the diffusion of this language was assisted through the publication of specific manuals, mention in mundane magazines and society gossip.

Title page of George Bury's twenty-page   *Edwardian era magazine*
booklet on The Language of Postage Stamps
(Ashford, Middlesex, 1899)

As usually happens, entrepreneurs were quick to jump onto the bandwagon and started publishing and marketing the idea through postcards depicting the postage stamp 'codes'. This furthered the language of stamps to develop its own dialects, like any language, which were sometimes linked to a multi-language publisher. When studying this aspect of philately, besides the "dialect" one also needs to keep in mind another important point, namely that the positions may also sometimes have different meanings depending both upon the country and language used. Thus the code used for "kiss" on a Finnish card may mean "write soon" in an English one.

The custom of the use of the language of stamps reached its climax and demise at different periods in different countries. For example in Russia, where it was a great fashion during the time of the Czars, no such postcard was published after the 1917 revolution, as etiquette itself was considered a bourgeois left-over. This also happened in socialist countries after 1945 as the regimes did not tolerate any encoded messages. In western European countries, however, we can find vestiges of this custom as late as the sixties.

One major drawback which eventually led to the downfall of the custom, however, was inherent in the basic setup of the language itself. The problem of postmarking the stamps placed on various parts of the envelope or post card finally

THE LANGUAGE OF STAMPS

Top, Left-Hand Corner

I hate you. | Good-bye for the present | My heart belongs to another and can never be yours | I love you.

Top, Right-Hand Corner

My heart is given to another write to me no more | Do you love me dearest. | A kiss. | Business.

Left-Hand Side of Surname.

Accept my love | I am already engaged

Bottom, Left-Hand Corner

Do you love me? | I wish for your friendship but no more | Write soon.

Right-Hand Side of Surname.

I long to see you friendship being write to yr. love

Bottom Right-Hand Corner.

No. | Yes.

FRIMÄRKS-
(Nr 1
[Vänstra]
Förenklade, afförgade
Sveriges
i början af

SPRÅKET
Nyckel)
upplaga.]
aftindningar af
frimärken
år 1902

Examples of the same code having different meanings in different countries

Card showing examples of codes using a combination of two stamps

became so great, that eventually the postal administrations decided to intervene and introduced regulations requiring the sender of mail to affix postage stamps in the right top corner of the correspondence.

Finally, it goes without saying that unless there is a clear indication in the letter or postcard itself, one may only guess at whether the postage stamp language was actually used on a mailed item, or whether the stamp or stamps were affixed haphazardly. The surest telltale for verifying such usage is when stamps are affixed in such a manner on postcards themselves illustrating the language of stamps on the picture side.

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