

# Stamps in Love

## The Secret Language of Stamps on Pre-WWI Postcards

As the postcard craze spread across the world in the early 1900s, numerous innovative ideas emerged about the design and use of postcards. One of these ideas was to use the stamps on the cards for sending secret messages, and to print postcards with “keys” to such messages. These “stamp language” or “secret of stamps” cards show postage stamps in different positions associated with different messages, usually about love and affection. One can also find postcards with stamps affixed in peculiar positions, suggesting that they have been used for sending such secret messages. Stamp language postcards of various kinds may therefore be of interest for deltiologists as well as for postal historians and philatelists.

This three-frame exhibit shows early stamp language cards from a range of European countries in order to document the variety of such cards that were in use before WWI. The structure is thematic, with the cards divided into two main groups – multiple stamp cards and single stamp cards. Multiple stamp cards show several stamps in different positions. Single stamp cards were printed in series, in which each cards showed only one stamp and its associated message. The exhibit ends with a few examples of cards where the stamps have (seemingly) been used for sending secret messages.

For most cards, information is provided (if available) on publisher, stamps and date. As messages were supposed to be secret, the keys were often sent under cover and therefore lack postmarks and dates. In these cases – and when cards are unused – the stamps printed on the cards and the layout of the address side (divided vs. undivided) may help to decide approximate date. For single-stamp cards, translations of the messages are often provided, in order to give a sense of their romantic nature.

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The message on this card is a short poem:  
*The stamp placed like this  
Reveals very tender feelings  
That will never fade*

The literature on stamp language postcards does not seem to include any comprehensive international study. Yet there are several useful articles with more limited scope, for example:

Baldus, W. 2016. Der Briefmarken-Code und andere Heimlichkeiten. *Philatelie*, no. 472-473.

Heijtz, G. 1989. Vykort med frimärksspråket. *Skillingtrycket*, no. 4.

Spanke, W. 2003. Die Briefmarken-Sprache. Über 100 Jahre alt – Wer kennt sie heute noch? *Philatelie und Postgeschichte*, no. 314-315.

Speirs, D. 2006. Stamp position on covers: From romance to political protest. *Postal History Journal*, no. 133.



French single stamp card  
Publisher: A.S.  
Stamp: 10 centimes Sower (semeuse) type of 1907  
Divided back, used 1910

Swiss multiple stamp card  
Publisher: H. Guggenheim & Co., Zürich  
Stamps from the Cross and Numeral and Standing Helvetia issues (1882-1907)  
Divided back, unused

“The Language of European Stamps”, text in Dutch  
Publisher: Marco Marcovici, Brussels  
Stamps from twelve different European countries  
Undivided back, unused





# Secret Languages of Stamps



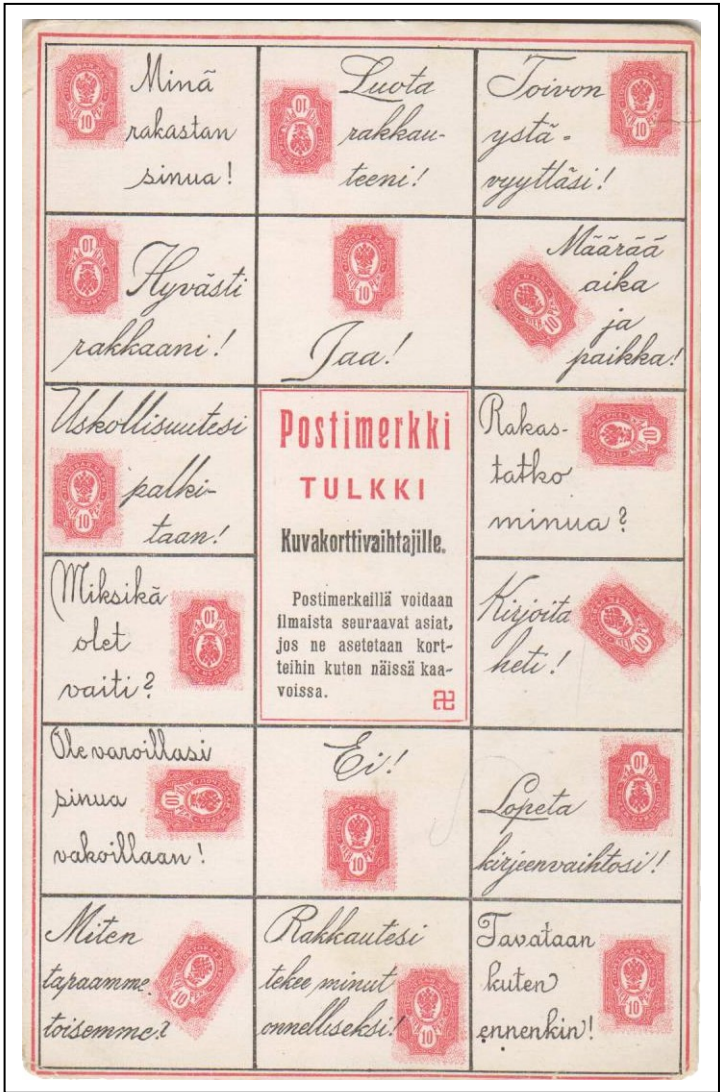
Publisher: Robert Kerler, Memmingen  
Stamps: 10 centimes Cross and Numeral type (1882-1906)  
Undivided back, unused

Some countries did not allow reproductions of stamps on postcards, as they were afraid that such stamps would be cut out and used to pay postage. Showing cancelled stamps (below) may have been a way to circumvent such rules.

Publisher: Unidentified (logo to the right)  
Stamps: 3 kopek Imperial Arms (1889)  
Divided back, unused

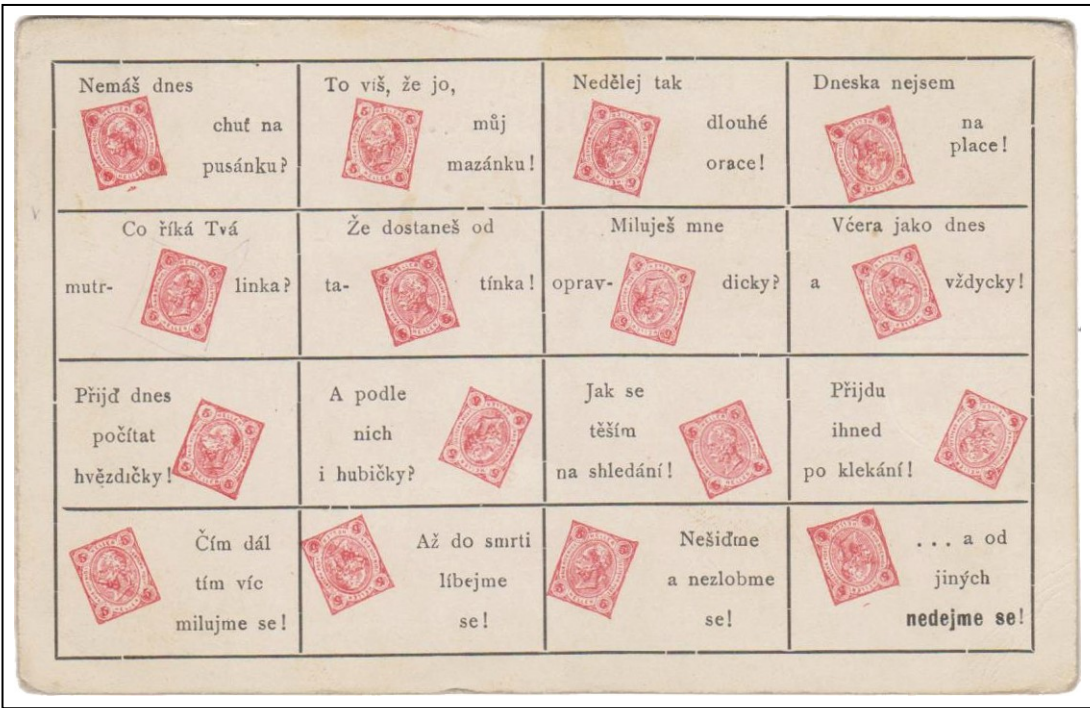


Just like many other postcard-related innovations in the early 1900s, the idea to use stamps in different positions for sending secret messages quickly spread to many different countries. This page shows keys to stamp languages from Switzerland, Russia, Finland, Austria and France.



Publisher: O. Y. Launis A. B., Helsinki  
Stamps: 10 penni Imperial Arms (Russian type) of 1901  
Divided back, sent under cover, no date

In 1901, the previous Finnish stamps with the Finnish arms were forbidden by the Russian authorities in their attempts to “russify” Finland.



Publisher: O. K. P.  
Stamps: Austrian 5 heller Franz Josef I (1899), although the real colour of this stamp was green  
Undivided back, unused

Several different languages were used in the Austrian empire. The messages on the card above are in Czech.

Publisher: J. Farine, Locle and Villiers-le-Lac  
Stamps: 10 centimes Mouchon type (1900)  
Undivided back, unused





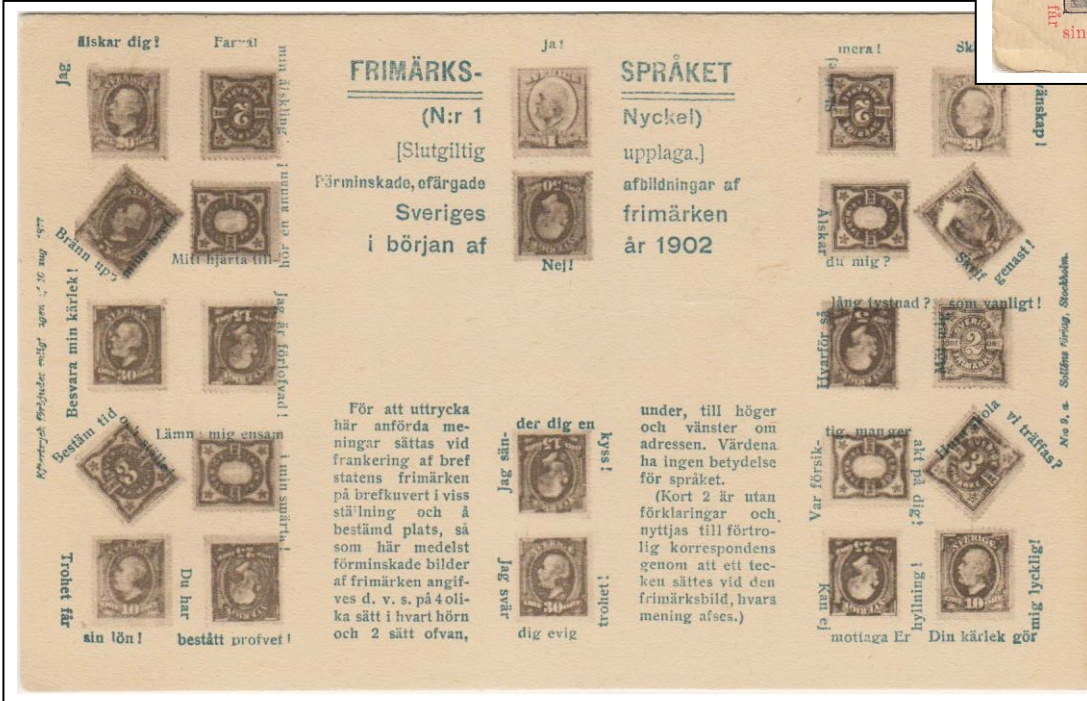
Different Publishers, Same Language • Sweden



Publisher: Le Moine & Malmeström, Gothenburg  
Undivided back, unused (or possibly sent under cover, no date)

Stamps from the King Oscar II copperplate recess (1891-1900)  
and Bicoloured Numeral type issues (1892)

Publisher: Solléns förlag/Stockholms Litografiska  
Divided back, unused



In Sweden, one specific “language of stamps” became so well established that different publishers used more or less the same key. Here are five versions of this key, from two different publishers.

The cards show many different stamps, but the two most recent cards (marked “slutlig upplaga” – final edition!) explain that it did not matter what stamp the sender used. All that mattered was its position.



Publisher: Le Moine & Malmeström, Gothenburg  
Undivided back, unused

On the card to the right, the Oscar II stamps are retouched. Göran Heijtz, in an article about Swedish “stamp language” postcards, suggests that this may have been done after the death of king Oscar II (1907), and that the intention was to make the portrait resemble the new king, Gustaf V. If that was the case, the attempt was highly unsuccessful!



Publisher: Solléns förlag, Stockholm  
Undivided back, unused

The most recent version (bottom left and top right), dated 1902, include the 1 krona stamp, issued in January 1900. The stamps shown on the other three cards were first issued 1891-1896.

Publisher: Le Moine & Malmeström, Gothenburg  
Undivided back, unused





# Competing Languages • Belgium



Publisher: V. G. (Victor Gisquière), Brussels  
Stamps: 10 centimes King Leopold II “fine beard” (1893-1900)  
Undivided back, postally used 1901

The *Language of Stamps in 1901* (above) and *The New Language of the Stamp* (to the right) are from the same publisher. Changing the key may have been a way to keep the language secret.

Publisher: H. Guggenheim & Co., Zürich  
Stamps from the King Leopold II “course beard” issue (1905)  
and the Small State Arms issue (1893)  
Divided back, unused



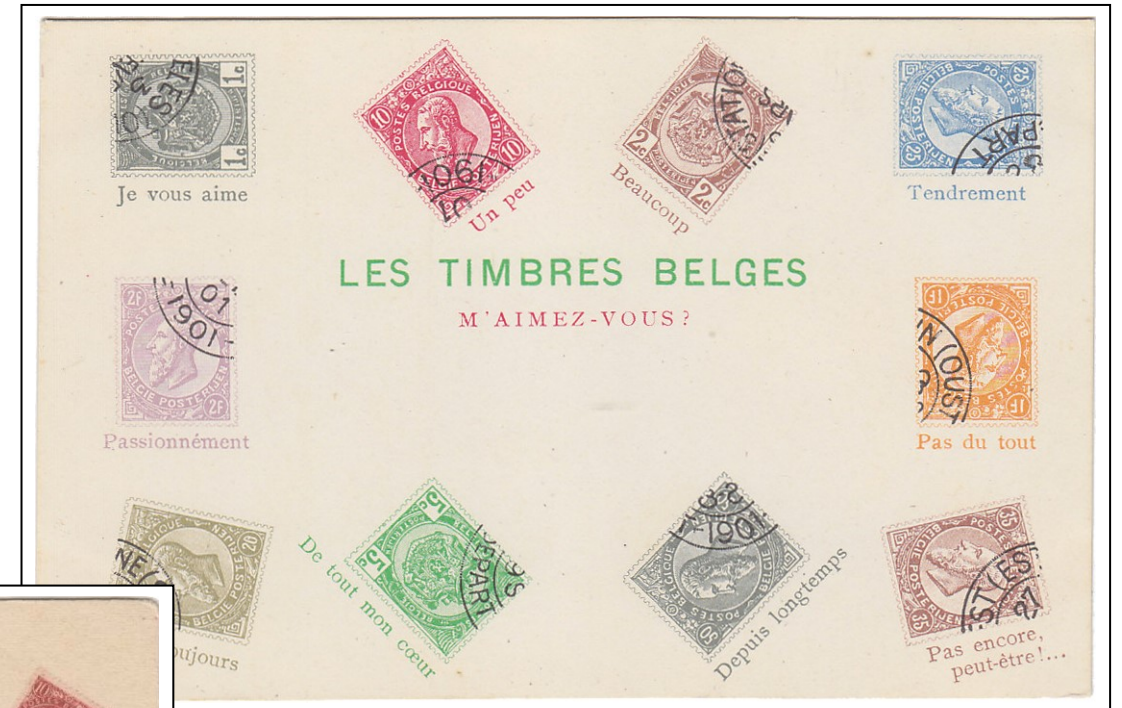
In many larger countries, several competing or complementary stamp languages were in use.  
One reason for this was the competition between postcard publishers. But another reason probably had to do with the sending of secret messages.

If one single key became predominant – and well-known – messages were not so secret anymore. It therefore made sense to change the keys from time to time.



Publisher: V. G. (Victor Gisquière), Brussels  
Stamps: 10 centimes King Leopold II  
“fine beard” (1893-1900)  
Undivided back, postally used 1905

The card above and the two cards to the left show stamps with the peculiar Belgian “Do not deliver on Sunday” tab. Correspondents who did indeed want their mail delivered on a Sunday had to tear off the tab before posting the letter or postcard!



Publisher: Vanderauwera & Cie., Brussels  
Stamps from the King Leopold II “fine beard” issue (1893-1900)  
and the Small State Arms issue (1893/1907)  
Undivided back, unused

The card above is more colourful than the one below. Yet the two cards have the same messages for the same positions of the stamps – and the stamps even have the same postmarks.

Publisher: Vanderauwera & Cie., Brussels  
Stamps: 10 centimes King Leopold II “fine beard” (1893-1900)  
Undivided back, unused





# Competing Languages • Netherlands



No information about publisher  
Stamps: 5 cent Queen Wilhelmina (1899)  
Undivided back, unused

These cards show the competition between different languages.  
The card to the right simply says it is *The Stamp Language*,  
the card above is *The only Dutch Stamp Language*, and  
the card below is the *Newest Inter-National Stamp Language*.

No information about publisher  
Stamps: 2½ cent Figure in White Circle (1899)  
Undivided back, unused



In the Netherlands, too, there were a number of competing “stamp languages”. Postcards with several different designs and stamps of different denominations were in use.  
This page shows a few examples.



No information about publisher  
Stamps from the Figure in White Circle and Queen Wilhemina issues (1899-1908)  
Divided back, unused

Text below the stamps:  
*Place the stamp in the appropriate manner,  
and you will give the recipient much pleasure.*



Publisher: Vanderauwera & Cie, Brussels  
Stamps from the Figure in White Circle and Queen Wilhelmina issues (1899)  
Undivided back, sent under cover (no date)

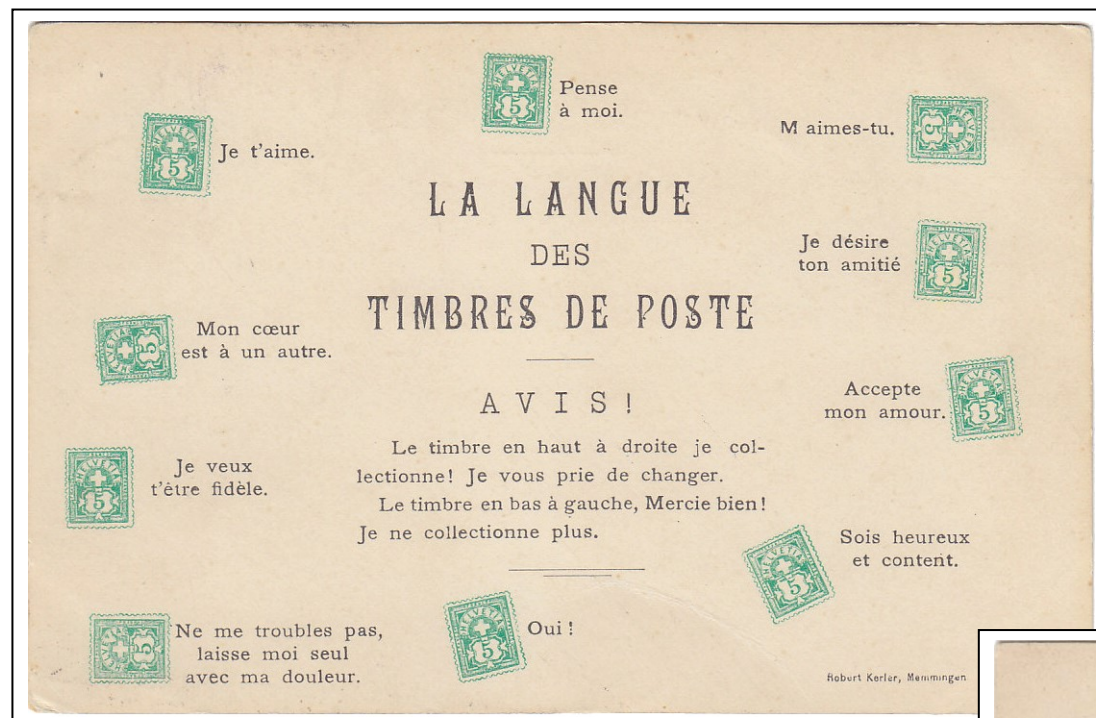
Most secret messages were about love and affection. The above card, on the contrary, asks the question *Why don't you love me?* and suggests a number of replies – *I cannot make up my mind, My heart belongs to another, I can't stand mothers-in-law*, and so forth.

No information about publisher  
Stamps: 1 cent Figure in White Circle (1899)  
Divided back, unused





# Multilingual Cards • Switzerland



Undivided back, postally used 1900

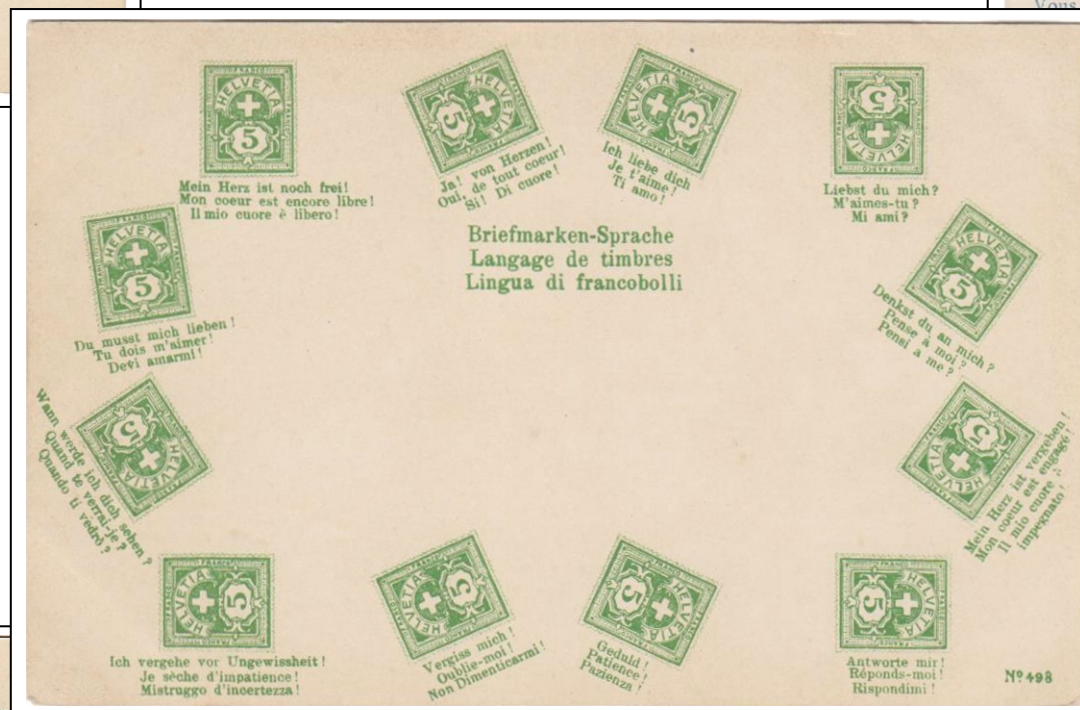
Publisher: Robert Kerler,  
Memmingen, Bavaria  
(upper left and lower left card)

Undivided back, sent under cover (no date)



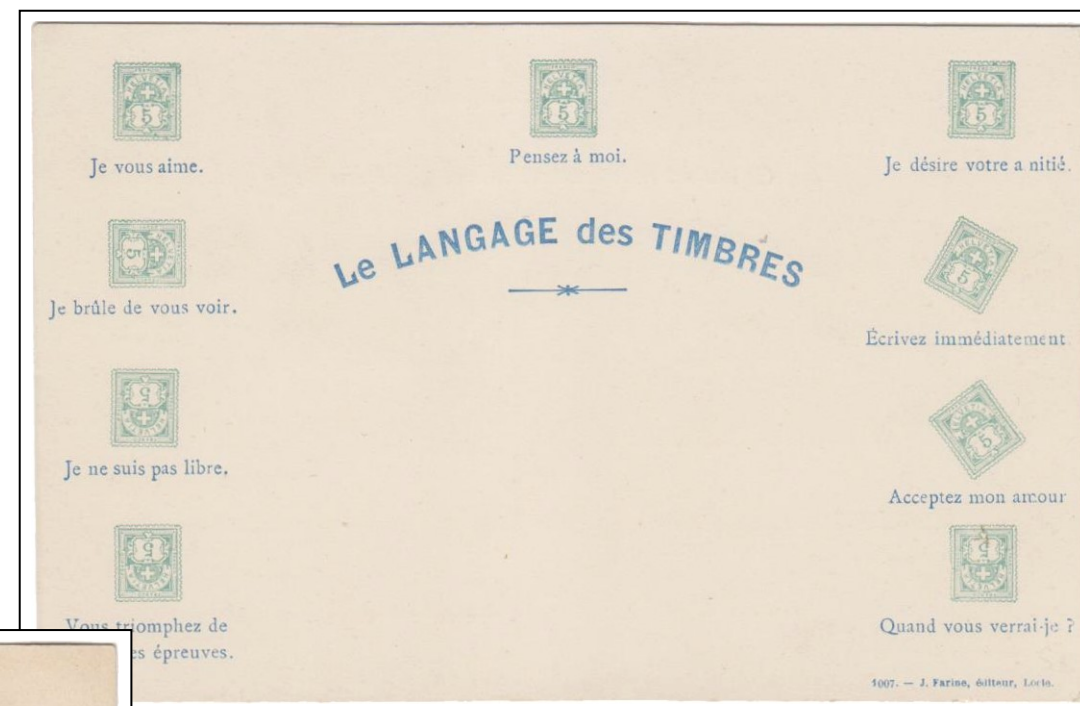
In multilingual Switzerland, the same stamp could speak more than one language. To the left and right are French and German versions of the same sets of messages. In the middle is a trilingual card, where the stamps speak German, French and Italian – all at the same time!

Stamps (all cards on this page):  
5 centimes Cross and Numeral type  
(1899/1906)



Publisher: Carl Künzli-Tobler,  
Zürich, Switzerland (CKT)  
Divided back, unused

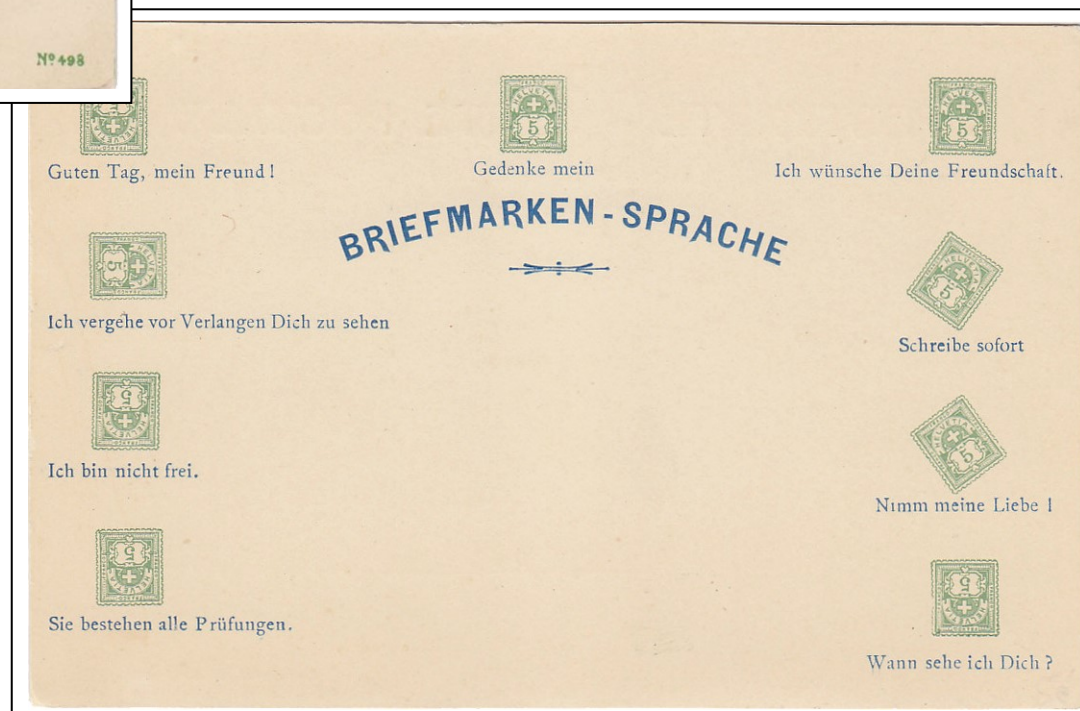
A printed instruction on the card above says that personal correspondence on the address side was only allowed if the card was sent within Switzerland, to France or to Italy. This suggests that the card was printed in 1904 or (not much) later.



Undivided back, unused

Publisher: J. Farine,  
Le Locle, Switzerland  
(upper right and lower right card)

Undivided back, unused





# International Cards



Publisher: H. Guggenheim & Co., Zürich  
Stamps: Switzerland, 5 and 10 centimes Cross and Numeral type (1899/1882-1906)  
Divided back, unused

Publisher: V. Müllers Kunstforlag (Copenhagen)  
Stamps: Denmark, 5 and 10 øre King Frederik VIII (1907)  
Divided back, postally unused 1910



The early postcard craze was an international phenomenon. Various innovations rapidly spread from one country to another and the secret language of stamps was no exception.

The layout of the cards shown here appeared around 1910 all over Europe. Its origin may have been the Swiss publisher H. Guggenheim, but cards with red and green stamps in these positions were soon printed by numerous publishers in different countries.



Publisher: Alfred Stiebel & Co., London  
Stamps: UK, ½d and 1d King George V (1911)  
Divided back, unused

In most countries, green stamps represented the inland postcard rate and red stamps the foreign postcard rate. That was the case for all countries represented on this page except for France, where green 5 centimes stamps represented the inland and foreign printed matter rate and red 10 centimes stamps were for the inland and foreign postcard rate.



Publisher: B. B. & O. L. (Bruno Bürger & Otilie, Leipzig)  
Stamps: Germany, 5 and 10 pfennig Germania (1902)  
Divided back, unused

Publisher: H. Guggenheim & Co., Zürich  
Stamps: France, 5 and 10 centimes Sower type (1907)  
Divided back, unused





# Multinational Cards



Undivided back, postally used 1901

No information about publisher

Stamps from Austria, Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, Great Britain, Holland, Hungary, Italy, Russia, Switzerland and the United States, in use around 1900

The card above has German text. The card below has French text – and the colours of the British and Danish stamps mixed up!

Undivided back, unused



There were also multinational stamp languages, with stamps from several different countries.

The two cards to the left could be used as keys for secret messages. The cards below and to the right, on the contrary, were intended for open messages. An instruction on the two cards to the right tells the sender to underline the appropriate message.



Publisher: H. Guggenheim & Co., Zürich  
Stamps from Austria, Denmark, France, Germany, Great Britain, Greece, Italy, Monaco, Russia, Spain, Sweden and Switzerland, the most recent ones in use from 1908 onwards  
Divided back, postally used 1912

The cards to the left illustrate the UPU rules about the colour of stamps: Green for international printed matter rate, red for post-card rate and blue for letter rate.

On the card to the right, the Italian stamp asks: *Why no news from you?*



Divided back, unused

Publisher: Marco Marcovici, Brussels (M. M. / Br.)

Each card (above and below) shows stamps from twelve different European countries, most of them in use in the early 1900s

The cards are not quite as cosmopolitan as they pretend to be. Several postmarks are misspelled – Lisabon instead of Lisboa, Copen(hague?) instead of Kjøbenhavn, and so forth.

Divided back, postally used, probably in 1906



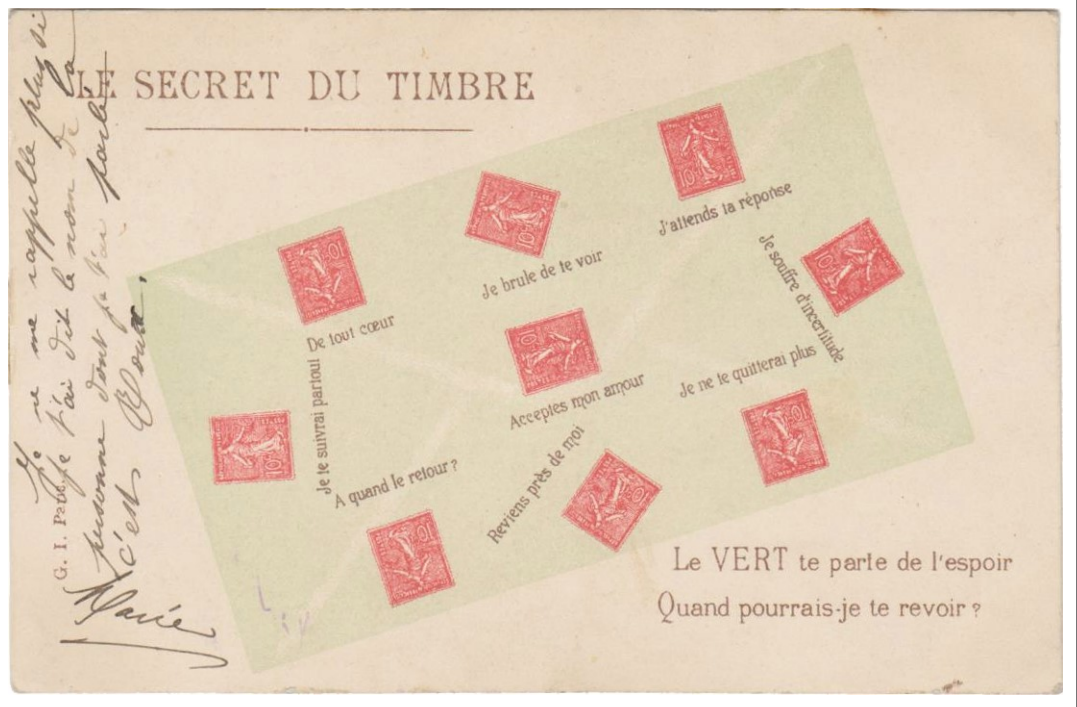
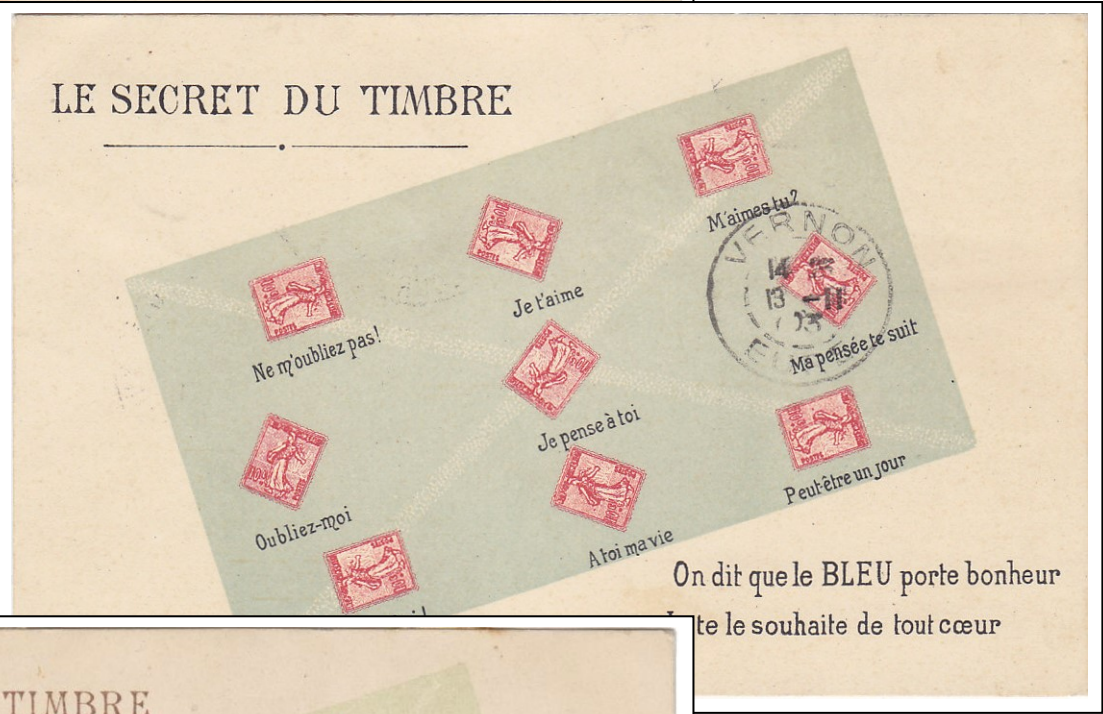


Multiple Stamps in Series • France



Publishers: G. I. Paris (top and bottom) and G. J. H. A. (right)

All three cards with undivided backs  
Top card unused  
Right and bottom card used 1903 and 1904 respectively



In order to provide a broad range of possible messages – and to sell many postcards! – certain postcard publishers produced series of multiple stamp cards.

Here are two such series, both featuring the French 10 centimes Sower (*semeuse*) stamp of 1903 – *The Secret of the Stamp* and *The New Secret of the Stamp*.

The series to the left contains 27 different messages and the series to the right as many as 36.



Publisher: Jacques Brien, Brussels

All three cards with undivided backs  
Top and bottom cards sent under cover (no date)  
Left card unused



The *Secret of the Stamp* series to the left suggests that the stamps should be placed on the back of an envelope, which is somewhat unusual. The meaning of the different colours (red, blue and green) indicated on the three cards is unclear.





# Multiple Stamps in Series • Various Countries



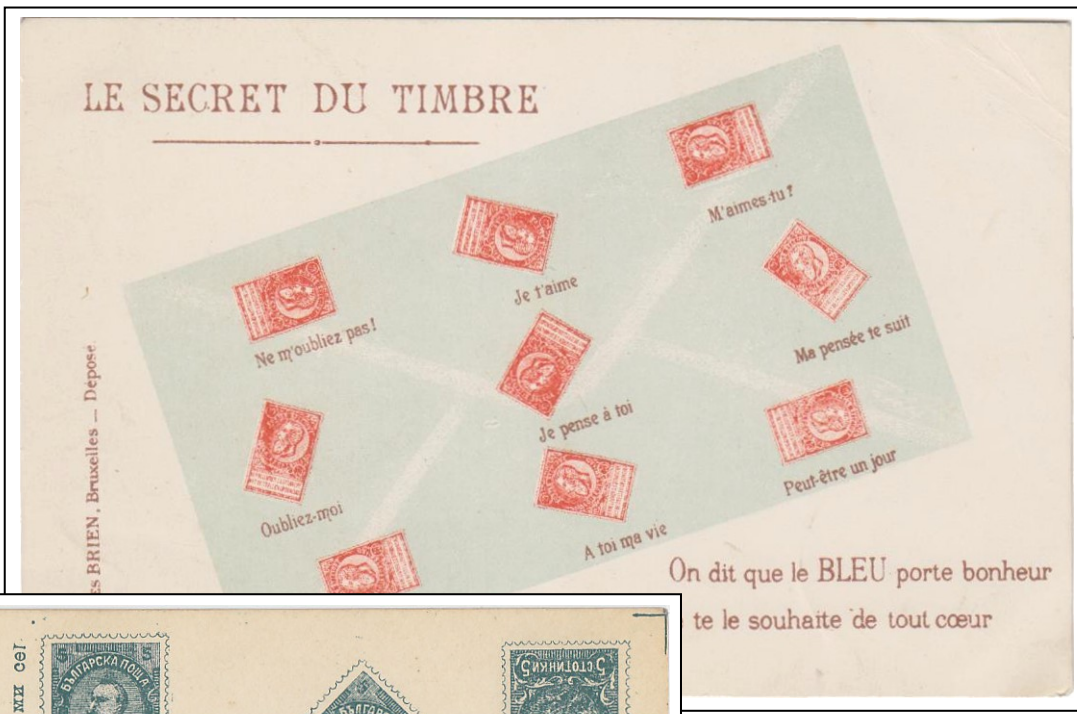
Series of stamp language cards also appeared in other countries than France. Here are examples from one of the series shown on the previous page, with identical messages but stamps from Switzerland (left) and Belgium (right).  
Publisher (both series): Jacques Brien, Brussels.

Stamps: 10 centimes  
Cross and Numeral Type  
(1882-1907)

Undivided back, postally  
used, possibly in 1903

Stamps: 10 centimes  
King Leopold II "fine  
beard" (1893-1900)

Undivided back,  
postally used in 1906



An unusual type of  
serial card – a double  
(panorama-type) post-  
card from Bulgaria.



Publisher:  
Rozova Dolina bookshop  
Stamps: 5 stotinki  
Prince Ferdinand I (1901)  
Undivided back, unused



A series of two German cards with 10 pfennig  
stamps of the Eagle issue (1889-1900).  
The original stamps were red, not blue  
as the stamps printed on these cards.  
Publisher: Fritz Schardt, Nuremberg

Undivided back, unused

In addition to numerous messages for lovers, the  
card to the right also contains messages (within  
the frame) for postcard collectors.





# Single Stamps, Single Ladies

In addition to cards with multiple stamps for different messages, there were also series of cards with single stamps – each with only one message. If these cards were to be used for secret communication, the sender had to start by sending the whole series of cards to the recipient. Not very convenient for the correspondents, but good business for postcard publishers!

Here are cards from two German single-stamp series.

Stamps: 10 pfennig Germania (1902)  
The stamp's original colour is red.



*Write soon!*  
Divided back,  
postally used in 1912



*I love you endlessly!*  
Divided back,  
postally used in 1911

Publisher (upper series):  
S. Blueh, Wien/Vienna  
(S.B.W. above a Rotophot logo)



Publisher (lower series):  
Rotophot/Heinrich Ross,  
Berlin (RPH)



*I'm longing for you!*  
Divided back,  
sent under cover,  
no date

*When will we meet again?*  
Divided back,  
postally used  
in 1910



*When and where can  
I talk to you?*  
Divided back,  
postally used  
in 1910





# Single Stamps, Loving Couple



*I am waiting.*

Publisher: Katz, France (J.K)



*My heart is free.*



If a couple wanted to use single-stamp cards as “keys” to a secret language, they first had to exchange the entire series between them.

An alternative was to send a single card with an appropriate message. Not so secret, but considerably lower costs for postcards and postage!



*Distant from my eyes, close to my heart.*

All cards with undivided backs and postally used in 1904



*I am hoping.*

Stamps: 15 centimes French Sower (*semeuse*) type, 1903

*I will overcome everything.*





# Stamp and Flower Language



Pansies / Memory of a sincere friendship.

Publisher: Fauvette (France)



Marguerite / I love you... a little... a lot...



Marguerite / I love you. Do you love me?

Stamps: 10 centimes King Leopold II “coarse beard” (1905)

Rose / Receive this pledge of my love.



Forget-me-not / Joy and happiness. Do not forget me.

All cards have divided backs.  
The card in the centre was postally used  
in 1911, the other four in 1912.



# Single Stamps in Male and Female Series

To further extend the range of postcards for sale, this editor published two series of single stamp cards with the same messages – but separate series for men and women!

Note that the letters that the persons are about to post have the stamps affixed in the same positions as the secret messages shown on the large envelopes to the right.



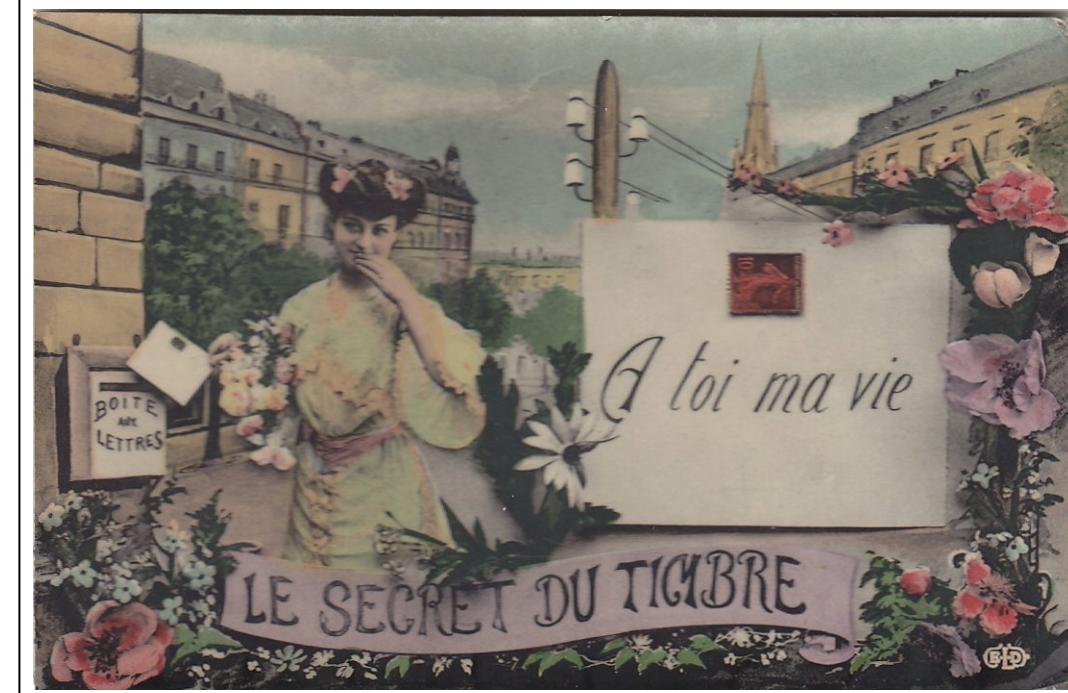
*Do not forget me.*



*See you soon.*



*My life is yours.*



Publisher: Eugène Le Delay, Paris (E. L. D.)  
 Stamps: 10 centimes Sower (semeuse) type of 1907  
 All cards with divided backs; one unused, five sent under cover  
 One card dated 1910



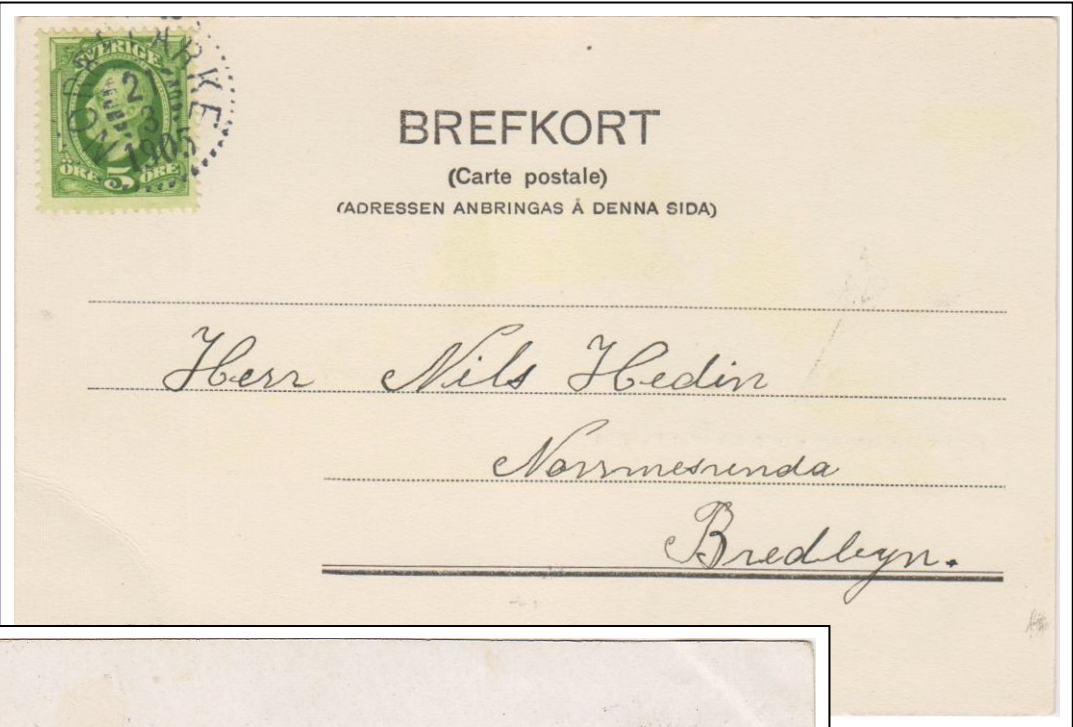
# Messages on Address Side • Sweden

Once two correspondents had exchanged the keys to their secret stamp language, the conversation could begin.

In the case of Sweden, where one single stamp language dominated the market, the meaning of the “secret” messages can be interpreted with some certainty.



Do you love me?



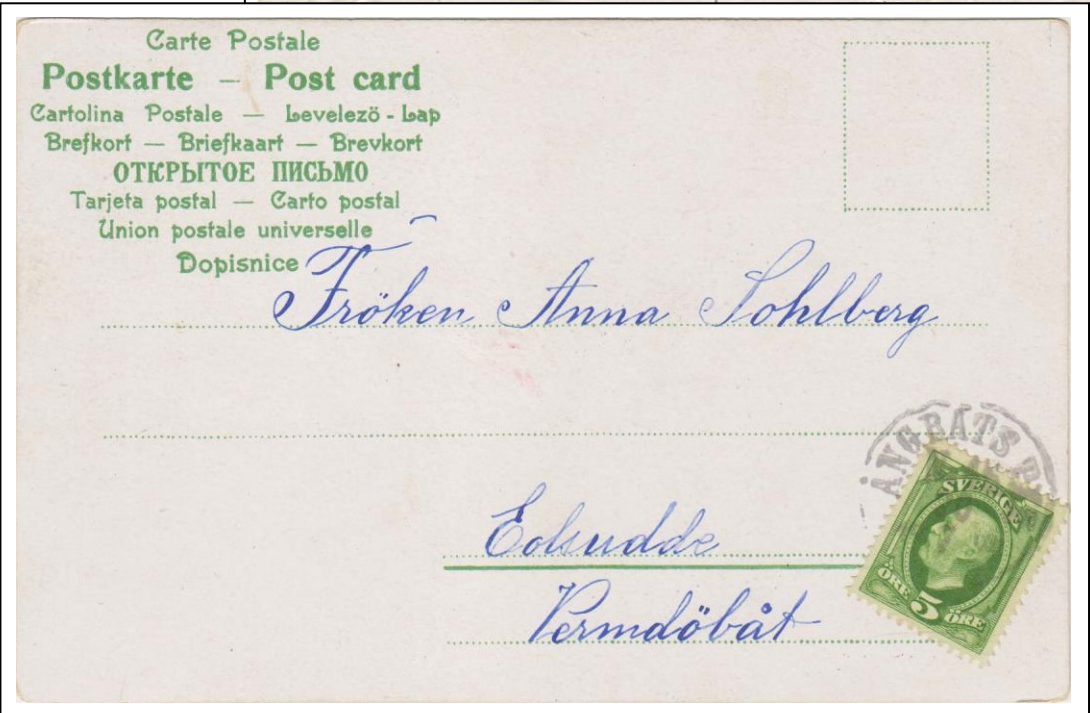
I love you!



Yes!



Respond to my love!



How should we meet?



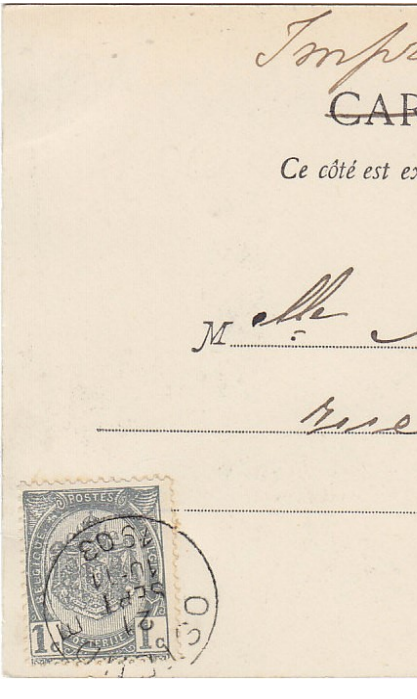
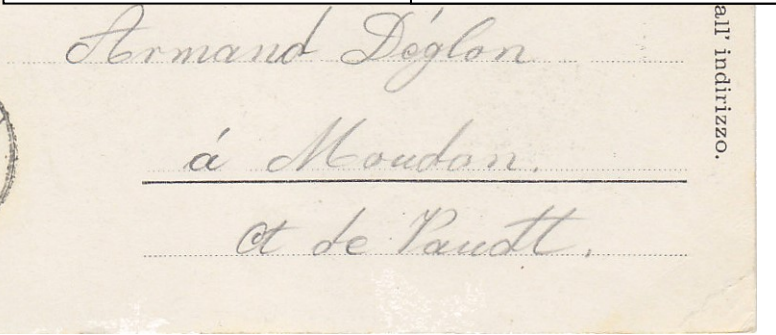
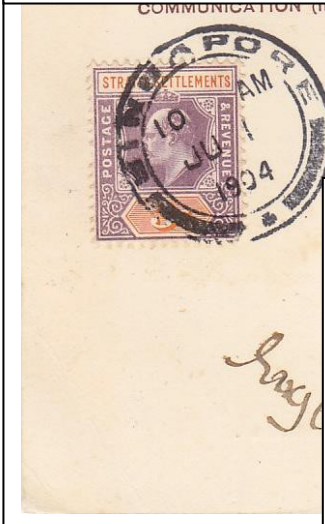
Fidelity will have its reward!

Most cards of this kind brought positive, affectionate messages.

After all, who would exchange the key to a secret language with someone just to tell him or her that I’m already engaged or My heart belongs to someone else?



Messages on Address Side • Various Countries



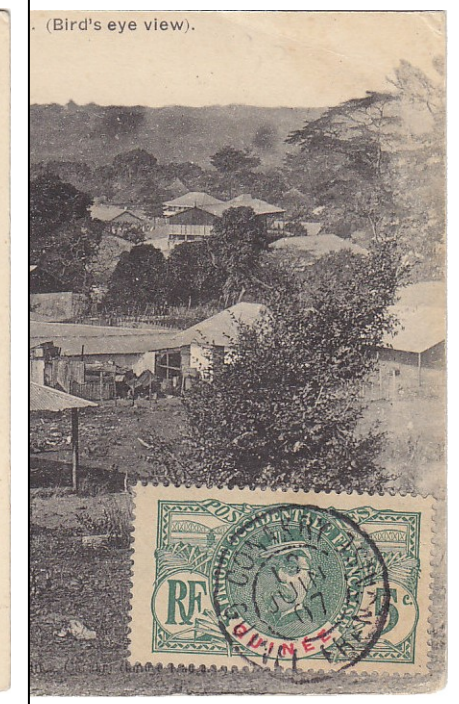
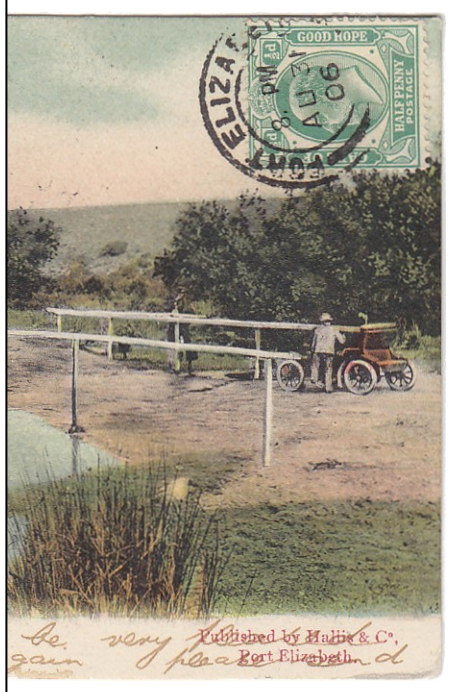
In most countries we can only guess, from the odd positions of the stamps, that postcards such as these were used to convey secret messages.





# Messages on Image Side

In certain countries it was common to put the stamps on the image side of the postcard.



Stamps on the image side could also be used for sending secret messages...

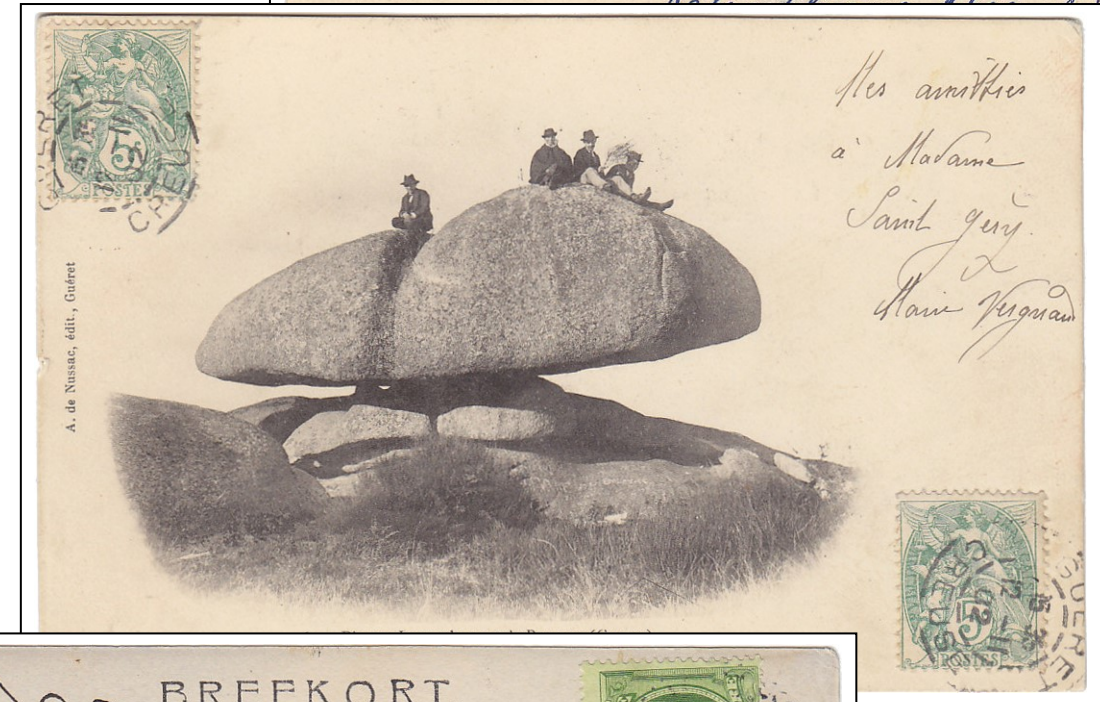
Other countries did not allow this until a UPU decision came into force in October 1907.

...but again, we cannot know for sure if that was the purpose in each individual case.



# Messages Using Two Stamps

Correspondents with very strong feelings could emphasize their messages by using two stamps.



As an alternative, correspondents could use two stamps for sending different messages!