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LITHUANIAN ACADEMY OF MUSIC AND THEATRE  
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# Gift-giving as an expression of interpersonal relations in everyday practices in Lithuania at the end of the 20th – beginning of the 21st century

## **SUMMARY OF DOCTORAL DISSERTATION**

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# 1. INTRODUCTION

## **Research problem**

Gifts seem to be a normal, taken-for-granted part of our cultural and social life. However, it is a multi-layered, changing phenomenon, which has received much attention in the development of the humanities. The role of gifts in everyday practices of the late 20th and early 21st centuries is ambiguous: their giving is accompanied not only by the pleasure of giving and receiving, but also sometimes by uncertainty, confusion and even conflict. Contemporary gift-giving practices and experiences common in Lithuania have so far been analysed more closely only as individual aspects of gift-giving (bribes, tolls, gifted objects, family and yearly celebrations). Moreover, at the turn of the century, the customs of modern society have undergone a transformation due to generational change, the influence of global cultural practices, the presence of technology in everyday life and the challenges facing the world (e.g. pandemics). These multi-layered changes in everyday life raise the need to re-conceptualise or re-create and transform established customs.

The Western humanities and social sciences have been involved in understanding and analysing this transformation through the closely interrelated schools of cultural anthropology, structuralism, semiotics and phenomenology. In this work, theoretical insights are applied to the search for and study of the meanings of specific cultural acts - instances of gift-giving.

The aim is to answer a problematic question that has not been addressed so far: what do gifts mean in Lithuanian culture, how do they acquire their meaning, what can they tell us about the people who are bound by gifts, their interrelationships, their ability to transmit and understand the meanings of the object and the act of giving, and, more broadly, what does it say about the society itself?

The work set out to develop a methodological model appropriate to the research, and to collect and analyse narratives about gift-giving practices and experiences.

## **The object of the work**

The research focuses on the human world as it is created and changed through the exchange of gifts. Contemporary Lithuanian gift-giving practices are used as a key to explore the dimension of interpersonal relations.

The gift, encompassing the various dimensions of social life, allows us to look at the phenomenon of gift-giving as a whole, and at society as a system, whose parts are bound together by ties and obligations through exchange. As an object of exchange, the gift breaks out of the circle of exchange and becomes recognisable as a tension of obligation and commitment between subjects, which leads to the need to reciprocate. This tension acts as a power in relation to the other person and corresponds to the value of the object of the gift.

By becoming a receptacle of value and meaning, the gift allows it to be understood and analysed as a language, and the gift as an act of communication. According to Paul Ricoeur's, "the shift from speech to non-speech discourse marks the distinction between naming and signifying" (Ricoeur 2000: 13) and allows the act of giving a gift to be read. Moreover, the signification of the gift acts as a 'zero signifier', capable of taking on a wide variety of meanings and signifying the possibility of signification itself, so that 'the exchange would not be an effect of society, but society in action', wrote Maurice' Merleau-Ponty (1960: 114).

The dissertation's focus moves from theoretical insights to people's experiences, in order to return later to rethink theoretical models.

## **Research material**

The study of everyday practices in phenomenological anthropology requires the recognition that in the retelling of events, experience is re-enacted, and that the moment of narration itself alters the experience and seems to fall out of the everyday. The focus of the research is therefore on the totality of experience, which includes not only the memory that is transformed into a text, but also its

environment, including the listener of the presenter. The focus of the research is on life stories as presented by the interlocutors.

The experiences described in the dissertation include more than 40 hours of audio recordings and transcribed notes, as well as non-verbatim narratives, selected correspondence and gift-giving texts from material collected by other researchers. The interviews were conducted between 2019 and 2021 in several formats:

(a) as recollections of the presenters or my own memories, written down as a 'life story' (see Jackson 1998: 23), which becomes both a narrative and a tool for looking at the experience from the outside;

b) extracts from unstructured interviews in which the presenters recount their experiences;

c) accounts of my experience as a listener and hearer, equally involved in the dialogue, of my relationship with the speaker;

d) a few individual texts, such as excerpts from interviews or letters by writers published in the press, which also recount and reflect on experiences of giving, or interviews recorded by other researchers in relation to giving practices.

The contributors were selected in a snowball method, starting with interviewees who were close enough to the researcher and then moving on to interviewees who were recommended by other people, in order to hear open, sensitive and personal stories that require a trusting relationship between the researcher and the contributor, which is not always possible on the first occasion. This way of selecting the respondents inevitably refers to a certain social environment - in this study, the respondents are mainly middle-aged, middle-class, highly educated people living in the major cities (Vilnius and Kaunas).

All the interviews described here are kept in a personal archive. At the request of the submitters, some of the names have been changed to indicate their age at the time of the interview.

The context of the interviews, which is part of my personal experience, also becomes part of the phenomenological description in places. The phenomenological approach is used to reveal what and how is experienced in the act of giving, as well as to grasp the

relationship of the narrator to the Other, to himself and to the world around him. It is this intersubjective experience that is unique and personal in each event of the conversation.

Analysing the aspects of the phenomenon of gift-giving discussed in the interviews and taking into account that the sample of respondents covers only one social stratum, it is understandable that individual insights do not reflect the whole society. As part of the dissertation research, a quantitative study complementing the main qualitative research was carried out to test whether the results might differ when looking at wider segments of society - a representative survey of the Lithuanian public in January 2021 with 1043 respondents, proportionally reflecting the composition of the Lithuanian society.

### **Limitations**

As regards the chosen object of the research (the phenomenon of gift-giving) and the model of its analysis, based on the instrumentality of phenomenological anthropology and, to a certain extent, semiotics, it is important to identify and limit what this research does not aim at:

- The study does not pretend to catalogue and describe all possible situations of gift-giving, but only the most typical ones, as revealed in the interviewees' accounts of their personal experiences.
- The accounts of the givers are not questioned - each experience is accepted as genuine. The same approach is applied to the context of the public information field discussed in the study: references to gift-giving themes in the media, allusions in literature and other creative works. The latter cases do not become the main focus of the study and are used episodically, where the narrative of the presenters encourages the use of such intertextual and extra-textual reference.
- The study does not aim at a strict classification or comparison of accounts of gift-giving experiences, but the thematic and situational grouping of gift-giving cases and the links of



meaning with the experiences of others are used as an analytical process to help discern the pathways through which meaning is found.

- The study does not seek to explain the causality of gift-giving behaviour, and several references to research from other disciplines and theoretical schools (e.g. insights from psychology, marketing research) are used to help understand the public information context surrounding people's experiences. One such example, mentioned by a number of interlocutors, is the active mention of gift-giving in advertising and public relations campaigns.
- I have not set out to explain or in any way 'decipher' the hidden meanings of gifts according to the criteria of their symbolism or traditional understanding. Nor have I attempted to define an exhaustive number of categories or possibilities of such criteria or meanings.
- It is important to clarify that in the study of interpersonal gifts, the practices of collective, social, official and corporate gifts remain outside the field of research.
- The topic of religious gifts and sacrifices will not be addressed separately when delving into the personal gifts that people give to each other, nor will the notion of talent, giftedness, or luck as a 'godsend' be explored separately, although it occupies a prominent place in theoretical discourses of gift (Hyde 2012; Marion 2002, 2011).

In this thesis, I aim not to provide a historiographical account but to question theoretical assumptions, to discover or refute them on the basis of the material under investigation. It is therefore a kind of reverse experiment, not intended as an empirical justification of theory, positing the experiential world as an opportunity to rethink the insights that researchers and philosophers from different theoretical schools and cultures have put forward as truths about gifts.

The fact that in the analysis of texts I do not look for causality, functions, customary rules, or the objects of gifting - the things

themselves - is typical of phenomenological research. Therefore, the focus of my research is on the change in the role of the same individuals when comparing memories of childhood and later experiences, when gifts are already given to parents or one's own children (or younger siblings).

### **Methodology**

The methodological basis is the phenomenological anthropological study of everyday practices, chosen as an offshoot of ethnography and anthropology to understand how what people call and remember as experiences are experienced. In this approach, it is not enough to look at everyday life as an ethnographic fact. The methodology of everyday life studies is based on the subjective 'here and now', and the possibility of knowing the everyday world is ever-changing and specific. A phenomenological approach therefore focuses on experience not as a fact but as a feeling, bound by intersubjective relations.

Phenomenological anthropological research has to recognise that the experience being retold is re-created, so that the research focuses on the totality of the experience, which encompasses not only the text, but everything, including the listener. This is the approach taken by Michel de Certeau and Luce Giard (de Certeau 1990; de Certeau, Giard, Mayol 1998: 149-155), to bring into the field of inquiry the sensitive everyday and personal practices that are inseparable from the researcher's participation. In phenomenological research, 'privileged' personal experience is used in the work of Elizabeth Behnke (2010) and more authors. More extensive research on everyday practices has been described by de Certeau (1990; de Certeau, Giard, Mayol 1998), Ben Highmore (2002), Éric Chauvier (2014, 2017), and in the context of Lithuanian culture by Giedrė Šmitienė (2000, 2014, 2017, 2018), Jurga Jonutytė (2011, 2017, Jonutytė, Šmitienė 2021), Nerijus Milerius (1999, 2018a, 2018b, 2019) and others.

The listeners' knowledge of the background context of the interlocutors from my immediate environment, which is situated in the

field of personal experience, also becomes part of the phenomenological description. The listener's non-negligible relationship with the interlocutor makes it possible to know the sensory experience and the change in personal relationships that are transferred from the experienced events and actions to the narrative situation.

The life narratives collected through interviews and other means, relating to the experience of giving and receiving gifts, are analysed using the close reading of the text. Attention is paid to the interviewee's choice of words and descriptions, the way the narrative is constructed, the recurring accents, the contrasts that emerge, the temporal and spatial figures that create meaning, and the observations that point to the sensory perception of the world and the emotional charge.

The phenomenological approach to the material at the beginning of each section did not require an explanation of the causes, functions, actions and categories of everyday objects. It was used to reveal what is experienced and how it is experienced, as well as to grasp the subject's relationship with himself and the world.

### **The aim of the research**

To depart from the theoretical insights of structural and phenomenological anthropology, which have analysed gift-giving, to investigate individual experiences of giving and receiving gifts in contemporary Lithuanian society, to distinguish the thematic contexts that link them, the trends and peculiarities of gift-giving, and to learn about the surrounding world that is created, reflected, and transformed through gifts.

### **Objectives**

In order to achieve the objective, the following objectives are set:

1. To formulate a methodological model, based on research and reflection on gift giving, which allows to cover the experiences of gift giving in contemporary society in

Lithuania, to analyse the processes of finding meaning (the path from the main theoretical insights to the research method is described in Chapter 1 of the thesis).

2. To uncover the experiences of giving and receiving gifts through life stories and to collect an optimal amount of life stories expressed by the givers, allowing to identify recurrent trends and characteristic features of interpersonal gift-giving (respondents' stories were collected through a field study).
3. An in-depth textual analysis of the gift narratives to identify the most salient strands of meanings and trends in gift-giving (Chapter 2 is devoted to the analysis of the respondents' narratives).
4. To describe the highlighted processes of the meaning of gifts and their place in the aspect of building and communicating personal relationships, while comparing the prevalence of different aspects of the meaning of gifts in Lithuanian society (the trends in gift-giving practices are discussed in Chapter 3, and the prevalence of practices is the subject of a public opinion survey, which can be found in the Appendix).

### **Exploration of the topic**

Gift giving is a distinctive theme in Western European humanities debates, and has been the subject of much theoretical thought. Gift exchange has been studied from a structuralist (Lévi-Strauss 1962, 1963, 1973, 1976, 1987, 1996; Mauss 1969, 1987, 2002), a linguistic (Benveniste 1997; Mauss 1997), a social (Caillé 1994, 2007), an economic and a political (Bourdieu 1980, 2017; Sahlin 1997), and have also been the focus of existential and phenomenological philosophy (Schutz 1962; Merleau-Ponty 1960, 1964, 1969, 2002, 2008; Jackson 1998) and its criticism (Derrida 1991, 1992a, 1992b). In the texts of contemporary authors, the phenomenon of gift-giving becomes a tool for understanding the workings of society. One aspect of the gifting phenomenon is found in the study of economic consumer behaviour, including 'gifting

oneself as a motivation to purchase goods and services (Park 2018; Pusaksrikit, Kang, 2008; Howland, 2008; Luomala, Laaksonen, 1999; Mick, Demoss, 1990; Sherry et al., 1995). Cultural anthropology knowledge applied in communication sciences assumes the applied mission of helping to learn about buyers' behaviour and to create an offer that suits them. Advertising and other genres of marketing communication that emphasise self-gift have been found to attract consumers' attention and encourage them to buy, and to convey messages of self-reward or the therapeutic effects of comfort (Weisfeld-Spolter, Ripp'e, Gould, 2014).

Other psychologists and sociologists have also investigated the motives behind gift-giving and the choice of the object to be gifted - for example, Ed O'Brien, a psychologist at the University of Chicago's Booth School of Business, and Samantha Kassirer, a psychology researcher at Northwestern University, have conducted two experimental studies on gift receiving and gift giving. They confirmed that gifts given to others provide much more happiness and satisfaction than gifts received by oneself (O'Brien and Kassirer 2018). O'Brien's study compared gifts received from other people, so it did not reflect an approach that bypasses the 'receiving from another' situation by giving to oneself. Other authors have made more of an effort to explore the social, religious and creative dimensions of life (Godbout, Caillé 2000; Marion 2002, 2011; Hyde 2012).

The very first sources that consistently focus on the phenomenon of gift-giving in the Lithuanian cultural field are Matas Pretorius, Teodoras Lepneris and Antanas Juška, but these are descriptive works. We can find mentions of the phenomenon of gift-giving and initial interpretations of it in the works of Zenonas Slaviūnas (2007) and Angela Vyšniauskaitė (1958; [et al.] 2009). Ethnologists and ethnologists have discussed traditional gift-giving customs, described, typologised and stated gift-giving and sacrificial practices as a historical fact (Vyšniauskaitė 1958; Paukštytė-Šaknienė... [et al.] 2016; Šidiškienė 2007; Vyšniauskaitė... [et al.] 2009; Balsys 2017 and others).

Contemporary Lithuanian gift-giving culture has not yet received in-depth conceptual research, and more attention has been paid to particular aspects of gift-giving, such as the difference between a gift and a bribe (Praspaliauskienė 2017; Kavoliūnaitė-Ragauskienė 2019). Kristina Šliavaitė, who has examined gifts in conjunction with the phenomenon of the levy, has pointed out that creating a connection is not the only goal of levy practices (Šliavaitė 2017).

When studying the phenomenon of gifting in contemporary Lithuanian culture in more detail, it is not only theory that can help unlock the Lithuanian gifting code: examples of contemporary gifting traditions found in Lithuania can complement or adjust the model of the concept of gifting that is current in international academia.

### **Relevance**

The research on the phenomenon of gift giving is focused on common cultural phenomena - the development of personal relationships and the closest surrounding environment. Such a study of cultural anthropology is interdisciplinary and is relevant not only to contemporary cases of gift-giving in Lithuanian society, but also to the ways of creating, maintaining and changing human relationships, the process of changes in tradition, the dissemination of new customs, and the impact of commercial activities on everyday practices and culture. In this way, this dissertation fits into the emerging field of contemporary Lithuanian cultural studies, proposes a rethinking of the concept of ethnic culture, and expands the possibilities for researching ethnic culture.

### **The novelty of the work**

This study offers new possibilities for the application of theory to the text of the narratives of the lives of the presenters through close reading and phenomenological analysis. This work could be applied to the study of other phenomena of contemporary culture. The research contributes to a better understanding not only of the mode of operation and meanings of personal traditional practices, but also of the dynamics of traditional culture, of the transcendence of the

distinction between the old and the new, of the individual and the society, of the subject and the subject in action, which are transformed by the exchange of gifts.

An in-depth, close look at the texts of the retelling of experiences helps to reveal the narrative of what happens in the giving and receiving of gifts, what the gifts give and what their meaning is, the emotional charge, the contexts of personal relationships that remain in memory. These aspects of gift-giving customs allow us to reflect more broadly on the phenomenon of self-creation in society or in individual communities, on the reflection of trust as a condition of communication in acts of gift exchange, and on the possibility of communication through a non-verbal, non-spoken form of communication - the form of a gift.

### **Structure of the work**

The thesis consists of an introduction, a theoretical chapter, a two-part empirical chapter on implemented and unimplemented gifts and a concluding chapter on gift-giving trends, conclusions, a list of references, and an appendix - a description of a statistical survey of the public opinion.

The introduction introduces the research problem, the topic and the context of the dissertation, defines the object of the research, sets out the aims and objectives of the research, and formulates the thesis. It also highlights the work on the topic in other authors' texts, the uniqueness and relevance of the research, justifies the methodology of the thesis and presents the structure.

The theoretical chapter "The Problem of the Gift" gives an overview of the debates on the phenomenon of the gift in the development of the humanities between the beginning of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first century, leading from sociology to structuralism, semiotics, deconstruction and finally to phenomenological anthropology. The chapter concludes with an overview of the work of Lithuanian authors in describing the customs of gift-giving, formulating and justifying the choice of the research object and the methodological path of analysis.

The analytical part of the study is divided into two separate sub-sections, motivated by the two broadest contexts of gift-giving experiences in the sense of a gift as an act of communication: the realised, otherwise successful, gifts, and the unrealised ones - the undelivered, unreceived, forgotten, disappointed gifts, and the experiences that testify to the failure or violation of the gift-giving process in other ways.

The concluding section "Trends in Gift Practices" moves away from the analysis of individual experiences and into the broader insights suggested by the results of the study. This part establishes the role of gift-giving customs in the functioning of society, the changes in customs and the communicative mode of transmission of meaning.

The conclusions summarise the research findings and insights. The statistical annex to the thesis contains a representative public opinion survey carried out in January 2021. The survey tests how widespread the main trends and innovations in gift-giving identified in the survey are in Lithuanian society, and provides demographic cross-sections of the opinions.

## **Hypothesis**

1. The concept and customs of gift-giving are changing and require individual adaptation. Resistance to or acceptance of change depends on the stability of personal relationships, which gifts reflect rather than change, but which in any case help to make meaning and knowledge possible.
2. The exchange of gifts is inseparable from the concepts of trust and generosity, which are essential to a personal relationship.
3. Gifts, inseparable from the human environment and the relationships between people, function as a form of signification and an opportunity for non-verbal communication, but the mere giving (or not) of gifts does not determine the existence or rupture of the relationship itself, but rather reflects and expresses it directly through experience.



## 2. THE RESEARCH

Using the tools of phenomenological anthropology and the means of research of everyday practices, I took the opportunity to look at the contemporary gift giving practices. I focused on the contemporary cases of gift giving, revealed through the narratives of respondents that were interviewed for the research conducted in Lithuania – a country on the border of Western, Eastern and North Europe.

The distinguishing feature that helps to recognize a gift is the way it is named by the interlocutors, who emphasize that it was not an ordinary purchase but certainly a gift. This phenomenon is analysed thru a deeper insight into selected cases: extracts of qualitative unstructured interviews conducted for the research and a description of the author's personal experience. In this research, they are presented along with the comments of the participating researcher as characteristic of the phenomenological research. The analysis seeks to reveal how the experiences of gifts take place, acquire meaning and place in memory, and how it affects a person's relationship with themselves and those around them.

Talking about gifts is one of the most complex topics for humanities since the famous essay of Marcel Mauss first published nearly a hundred years ago. Since then many sociological, anthropological and philosophical discourses around the gift resulted in mind opening theories, this topic is still actual and surprising today, especially in the light of different cultures and changing practices. My study is made in the context of a culture with a close historical background – Lithuania. And it also aims to look deeper into daily practices (gifts in particular) and experiences of simple everyday life tend to be the most hidden and taken for granted.

In this research I analysed the gifts circulating in modern Lithuanian society. I examined how people experience and value gifts, seek to leave an impression, or in the contrary – to run away from the obligation of gift giving by avoiding them in every way they can. Among the different experiences and approaches, I also noticed a non-

typical (compared to tradition) behavior characteristic of some (but not all) respondents – to give gifts to themselves, to delegate gift giving for a higher purpose or even to avoid gift giving occasions. Such practice was not widespread or visibly recorded in the traditional Lithuanian culture. Gift giving was quite common during family or annual holiday celebrations, but the traditional presents were always given to someone else. Modern gift giving habits permitted to grasp and reflect on the changes in society as well as on the emerging and deepening division between Self and Other Self in our self-perception.

In my study, I chose to start from a phenomenological standpoint, demanding to abandon all preliminary attitudes and beliefs. I chose to lean on the language, or the saussurean *langage* to be precise, as the self-gifts appear in the use of vocabulary. This concept includes handicrafts and goods as well as non-material goods like services that a person purchases or acquires to give it as a gift to himself/herself, and it is different from ordinary purchases. I take the usage of a language as an anthropological fact without questioning it – if it exists in the language, it is true. And if it contradicts what the “gift” is meant to be from a theoretical point of view – then we really need to take a more attentive look to this phenomenon to understand it.

I was interested in cultural nuances and personal experiences – structurally identical but unique in terms of meaning – that remain a bit further from the picture of theoretically generalized phenomenon of gift giving. The personal factor of the experience of gift giving has not yet been touched upon in the works of Lithuanian ethnologists and anthropologists. Only traditional gift-giving customs were studied but in a completely different aspect – by describing, categorizing them, and stating the practices of gift giving or donation as a historical fact.

From the researcher’s perspective we can understand how phenomena work only in conditions, in which they exist as human experience – “here and now”, through the practices and impressions of the living people. Therefore, the goal of my research is to listen carefully to individual stories and see how things that are happening take place and what exactly is being experienced. Viewing gift giving as a daily practice, I look for what gifts provide. How does the

experience of this event occur? How is it given meaning and how does this meaning change in the face of time and new actions? It was also important to me to grasp the observed dual relationship that the self-giving persons have with themselves and the surrounding world.

The study has begun with qualitative unstructured interviews with various respondents and descriptions of my own experiences. There were more than 50 interviews made about the topic with over 60 hours of registered records and stenography. The main remarks and repeatedly mentioned attitudes (such as the preference either to give or to receive gifts, the practice to give gifts to yourself or to ask for charity donations to someone else instead of a gift, and more) were then formed as a questionnaire for quantitative research – a representative opinion survey with 1013 respondents from all the Lithuania (age 18 to 75, including all demographical layers). The survey was conducted in January 2021.

The chosen methodological basis is an anthropological study of everyday practices, as a branch of ethnography and anthropology, designed to understand how the experiences that we encounter take place. Therefore, the focus of the study is on the totality of the experience, which goes beyond the text as a part of the phenomenological description.

In the course of this study, I analyse how each experience is unique and personal, but at the same time characteristic of today's society. Therefore, each in-depth description can help understand the relationship processes of an individual as well as of the changing society.

Moreover, the research conducted in Lithuania (January 2021) among 1013 respondents with the help of “Spinter tyrimai” revealed that 21 percent of interviewees are sometimes giving gifts to themselves, especially women and respondents with the highest level of education. This proves the new practice is widely known yet requires an intellectual approach and self-consideration to be examined more attentively.

In the contemporary narratives studied, meaning took precedence over value, in other words, it is a value-creating meaning. However,

unlike historically perceived collective behavior, in these experiences, the intention to act is completely individualistic and even separates the subject from the surrounding society. This marks a change in the relationship with oneself. It is not the society but the Self, more precisely, the Ideal Self is acting like a self-establishing subject. The relationship with the Other is transposed to a dualistic Self: Self can be Other to itself and even Alien, and the Other remains either non-existent or opposed, or disadvantaged (feeling guilty about a gift that was given to oneself instead of others). These could be the examples of how people perceive themselves or even live in modern society alone and integrate into it not through collectivity but through emphasized individuality and uniqueness, which is the basis of the value created through the exchange with oneself. That is how a gift becomes an opportunity and a measure to build a relationship not just with others but with yourself.

To conclude, the three main insights are to be announced about the notion of the gift in a contemporary society. The first one is the mark of changing traditions, when the members of society are facing a choice – to keep an interpersonal relation despite the newly offered behavior, or to break the relationship and stick with the traditional values. The choice of relation versus tradition then leads to the possibility of change in order to keep relations.

The second remark is related to trust, generosity, and gratefulness. All these three notions are interrelated and transposed from interpersonal relations to the operating mode of the whole society and even citizenship. A culture where personal relations are built on trust and generosity is more likely to represent these values in the administrative level of the whole state.

The third insight brings us to the newly offered term of the “lived meaning”, because a gift works as a form of a message and is able to transmit the content of the message without using verbal language. However, such a message (in case of a successful gift) is transmitted and understood with its many layers of meaning.

### 3. CONCLUSIONS

The conclusions summarise the main results of the research in relation to the dissertation's problem, aim, objectives and the claims made in the defence. The dissertation research was aimed at finding answers to a broad problematic question: what do gifts mean in Lithuanian culture, how do they acquire their meaning(s), what can they tell us about the givers and the receivers, their relations, the value of the gift object and the action that is transmitted silently. More broadly, what does it say about society itself? The following are the answers that have emerged from an examination of the experiences of personal (not collective) gift-giving in Lithuanian society at the end of the twentieth and beginning of the twenty-first centuries, and the world that is recognised, created and changed through them.

1. The research method itself, which helps not to superficially analyse, but to go deeper into such a complex and multi-layered phenomenon as gifts, was the first challenge of the thesis. To do so, a three-step methodological model was developed that can be applied to other studies of social phenomena. The first step required collecting descriptions of gift-giving experiences through unstructured interviews with the narrative of the giver being as open as possible. The second step involved a close reading and analysis of the transcribed interview texts, using the tools of semiotics and phenomenology, insofar as this helps to reveal the process of meaning-making captured in the text. The third step built on the insights formulated during the in-depth analysis: the verification of the observed trends by means of a quantitative public opinion survey revealed how widespread certain views are among different demographic groups beyond the field of the interviewees.
2. The collection of narratives about experiences of giving and receiving gifts and the in-depth analysis of these texts revealed two main groups of gift-giving experiences, distinguished by the

outcome of the fulfilment of intention. These situations were grouped into separate meaningful clusters by what happens during the act of gift-giving - what the participants in the act do, experience, convey or receive as a gift, through the gifted object. The first group brought together the experiences of gifts that have taken place, in other words, of gifts that have been realised (successfully given and accepted), while the second group brought together the totality of gifts that have not been realised, that have not been given, not been accepted, not been understood, have disappointed, forgotten or otherwise have fallen out of the chain of exchange of gifts, as breaches of the chain of exchange. A non-delivered gift, or non-gift, as identified in the study, describes a situation where the usual and planned giving or receiving of a gift did not take place or was not as expected.

3. The most salient features of the realised gifts allowed us to identify the main thematic clusters of experiences related to a close context of meaning. The most prominent thematic clusters included:
  - 1) gifts of the caring relationship, mainly involving the provision of goods by parents to children and by children to parents, introducing an unequal relationship between the carer and the recipient of the care;
  - 2) Gifts of gratitude, referring to another gift, service or good received in the past, as well as gifts to doctors, which are described by the patients themselves or by the doctors themselves as a gift rather than a bribe, and which are usually given after treatment;
  - 3) Gifts that keep people connected, which are particularly relevant for those who have to overcome distance in terms of space or time, for whom the gift-giving route becomes a way of bridging this gap;
  - 4) apologetic gifts include efforts to repair broken personal ties, an act of relational change that refers to past events and hurtful experiences;

- 5) Gifts of joy are inherently emotionally charged, but often also carry other charges of meaning;
  - 6) For the most striking realised gifts, I have proposed the term life gifts, which denote a significant life change, event, turning point, often the only one of its kind in the interviewee's entire life.
4. After assessing the prevalence of different aspects of the meaning of gifts in Lithuanian society, it became clear that the analysed narratives revealed the relationship of one of the demographic groups in Lithuania to gift-giving, which is typical of the educated middle class in big cities. The research also uncovered and described new patterns of gift-giving in Lithuanian culture. One of them is the phenomenon of gifts to oneself, where people refer to purchases or other actions as such. The self giving the gift and the self receiving it act as two different subjects of the situation, as the self experiencing the event and the self experiencing the memory. In this way, the gift becomes an opportunity to establish a relationship not only with others, but also with oneself, and, in the process of establishing oneself, a relationship with the world. Another phenomenon that has been discovered, which is also new in society, is the delegation of gifts. It is a way of giving new form and meaning to traditions that have become redundant, but which we want to re-purpose and continue, but in a different form.
5. Imaginative and creative, all stages of gift-giving are accompanied by the selection of the gift, the presentation, the "negotiation" of the refusal and the offer, even the hiding. The play found in gifts acts as a way of minimising the world, and in the process replaces the intersubjective relationship with a subject-object relationship that helps to create a simulacrum that can be manipulated to regain the illusion of control over the world. The change in the tradition of gift-giving also becomes an act of creation, where the creator is free to choose a new form and

give it a meaning that coincides with its value, utility and generosity.

6. The impossibility of the gift, the non-gift, has become recognisable as a state of discomfort, like a suspension in time. It marks a shift in the perception of a personal relationship and raises the need to reassess the very relationship that the failed gift would have had to define. The stories of the failed gifts show that both the gifts and the attempts to keep them are an act of creation: unable to influence the other, the subject takes up the game and changes the intersubjective relationship into a relationship between subject and object (the gift). Non-gifts or their avoidance have shown that they are not exceptions to social mores, but rather confirm the imperativeness of those mores. Meanwhile, in order to assess the relationship between self and other, the subject is inevitably confronted with the relationship between the I in relation to self and the I in relation to the other. The expectation of having the power to control one's own destiny sits side by side with the needs of the Self and the needs of the Other, and the feeling of being in control of one's life provides the sense of justice that underpins one's relationship to the world around one.
7. The effort to avoid gifts has opened up another important aspect of gift-giving: gifts are not necessarily involved in creating, maintaining or changing personal relationships. The necessity of the gift derives from the existence of a relationship, and precisely one in which the occasions and objects of the gift are relevant. The avoidance of gifts is not an exception to social customs, but merely confirms their imperative character. In a society where the customs of gift-giving are changing and seemingly disappearing, becoming more complex, we can observe the forms and experiences of new gift-giving, where these rules of gift-giving are being rediscovered, rediscovered and reasserted. We are thus caught in a vicious circle in which it becomes impossible to avoid giving.



8. In the gift experience, the focus is on one of the different aspects of gift-giving, such as: 1) the condition of the gift; 2) the gift as a sign, emphasising (a) the form of the gift (the signifier) or (b) the meaning of the gift (the signified); 3) the intention and motivation of the gift; 4) the result of the gift: its value and its impact; 5) the tangible relationship (a) between the giver and the receiver, and (or) (b) the connection to the world through the giving of a gift.
9. Giving practices in contemporary society are on the verge of change: attitudes towards the old rules and expectations of giving are changing, almost every second person is confronted with some kind of unpleasant gift-related problem, and often the anxiety about gifts leads to a change in the relationship, either in terms of conflicts or in terms of the resolution of them. The first defence asked what determines the drift of relationships and/or customs themselves and whether resistance to or acceptance of change depends on the stability of personal relationships. Giving and reciprocating at the same time indeed acquire both the power to act and the corresponding value, and this is very strongly linked to time. The exchange of gifts and the customs that are embedded in the chain of exchange come from the past, but leave room for change and remain always forward-looking: exchange as the exchange of gifts, exchange as change, which paradoxically ensures continuity.
10. The dissertation also reveals the relationship between attitudes towards gift-giving and the trust that prevails in society. According to the second of the claims put forward by the defendants, the exchange of gifts is inseparable from the concepts of trust and generosity, which are essential to a personal relationship. Pure trust, which is given by one person to another in advance of or in spite of any shared experience, is the intention of favour, just as the gift was revealed in the interlocutors' accounts. The concept and role of trust in society can thus be reasonably linked to the tradition of gift-giving and to the

prevailing principles of gift (as opposed to economic) exchange in a society based on gifts.

11. The third defence was designed to question whether gifts, which are inseparable from the human environment and human relationships, function as a form of signification, but do not change the development of the relationship itself, but rather reflect it. In fact, a gift, as a non-verbal language, enables meaning to be conveyed to another through experience and to be received without recourse to verbal perception of meaning. The meaning that is embedded in a personal relationship is intentional like a gift: it is always directed towards the Other, and is only fulfilled through the Other (the receiver). And the fact that we have the possibility of repeatedly returning to the relationship (in the form of its expression), through the object and memory, indicates its ritual repetition and ensures its continuity, and the continuity of the communion itself, which creates society. The meaning acquired by the gift cannot therefore be dissociated from the relationship involved in the gift, nor from the effect on it.
12. Finally, the experiences of gift-giving in contemporary Lithuanian society have provided a new perspective on the theoretical work of the humanities and the abundantly described theories analysing gifts. The theoretical texts discussed in the first chapter present a dichotomy of values and meanings - oppositions or paradoxes that are mutually incompatible but exist simultaneously (the motives of gifts and exchanges, of disinterested and intentional gifts, of gifts and economic exchanges, of the dimension of time, of memory and forgetting, of pleasure and suffering, of form and content; the list of contradictions could go on). In people's experience, these contradictions emerge as the necessity of a necessarily conscious choice. The presenters talked about the conditions of the gift, the meaning of the gift, the form (object) of the gift, the intention and motivation, the result of the gift and the relationship that links not only the giver to the receiver, but also the subject to himself and

to the world. It is a mistake to call these aspects of the gift stages, because they are all realised at the same time, sometimes with careful reflection and sometimes spontaneously and intuitively. But it is precisely in reflecting on them that a unique experience of the gift, a compromise that embraces all possible contradictions, emerges out of the myriad possible meanings. Only in time does the gift, as a social compromise and a condition of sociality itself, never become complete, but rather is an eternal search for a tangible consensus, for an agreement that is handed down from hand to hand.

## PUBLICATIONS

### **Scientific publications (SCOPUS)**

Rūta Latinytė „Ne dovana: fenomenologinis kasdienės patirties tyrimas“ (“Non-gift, a phenomenological study of everyday practice”), in Tautosakos darbai 57, 2019.

Rūta Latinytė „Kalėdinės tėvų ir vaikų dovanos kaip rūpesčio komunikacija“ (Christmas Gifts Exchange between Parents and Children as a Nonverbal Means of Communicating Care) in Tautosakos darbai 62, 2021.

Rūta Latinytė „Self-Gifting Practices: A Phenomenological-Anthropological Approach“ (accepted to be published in 2023 in „Folklore: Electronic Journal of Folklore“, Tartu, Estonia, ISSN 1406-0949).

### **International conferences**

9th International Conference of Young Folklorists „(Ir)relevance of Classical Folkloristics in the 21st Century“ (The Institute of Lithuanian Literature and Folklore, Vilnius, Lietuva, 2019 September 18-20 d.), presented paper: „Rethinking Relationships: The Situations of Avoided Gifts in Contemporary Lithuanian Society“.

The 7th Baltic Student conference „Bridges in the Baltics“ (Riga University, Ryga, Latvia, 2019 October 11), presented paper: „Me and Myself: stories and experiences of a “gift giving for myself” in contemporary Lithuanian society“

„Creative Future Insights 2021 – Creative Industries and Experience Economy“ (VERN' University and the Institute of Economics, Zagreb, Croatia, 2021 October 14, online), presented paper: „Communicating gratefulness: a message encoded in a gift given to a doctor“.

The 8th Baltic Student Conference „Bridges in the Baltics 2021“ (Vilniaus universitetas, Vilnius 2021 October 23), presented paper: „Emigration of closest family members and recreated interpersonal relations via gift giving“.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Rūta Latinytė is a professional member of American Anthropological Association. A bright, resourceful, and self-motivated person, with a strong background in both – academic and professional fields. Besides her interest in ethnology and cultural anthropology, Rūta has acquired two decades of professional experience in public relations, internal communication, team culture management and an experienced expert of informal education.

### **Academic interests**

Phenomenological anthropology, social processes, the studies of everyday practice, semiotics, user experience, customer behaviour.

### **Education**

2015 – 2022 PHD in Ethnology, Vilnius University & The Institute of Lithuanian Literature and Folklore (ethnology and cultural anthropology). The theme of the PhD thesis: “A self-creating society: the analysis of Lithuanian gift giving practices”.

2011 – 2013 Master, Semiotics, Vilnius University

2002 – 2008 Undergraduate Studies, Management and Business Administration, University of Management and Economics (ISM), Vilnius

### **Professional experience**

#### ***As University lecturer:***

(From 2020) University lecturer at Vilnius Tech University, Vilnius, courses:

- Innovation Management (for Creative Industries)
- Journalism and Content Strategy
- Mass Media and Communication

(From 2020) University lecturer at Mykolas Romeris University, Vilnius, courses:

- Creative Industries (Master's Studies)
- Creative Writing and Advertising Texts

(From 2020) University Lecturer at Vilnius University, Vilnius, courses:

- Creative Writing
- Strategic Communications (Master's Studies)
- Organizational Communication
- Creative Industries

(From 2015) Lecturer at the Lithuanian Journalism Centre, Vilnius, topic: "Organizational Communication and Public Relations – the practical view".

(2015 – 2020) Lecturer at Kazimieras Simonavičius University, Vilnius, courses:

- Public Relations
- Creative Project Management

***As Public Relations and Communication Manager:***

(2016 – 2018) Public Relations Manager and Employee Ambassador, Publishing house Šviesa, Alma Littera Group, Vilnius (the major Lithuanian publishing house and book seller).

(From 2014) Public Relations consultant & strategist, UAB "Avenire", public relations agency, Vilnius

(2014 – 2015) Head of the project at Global Lithuanian Economic Forum (PLEF) 2015, Vilnius and Tel Aviv, organized by Lithuanian Business Confederation and Avenire (Her Excellency Dalia Grybauskaitė, President of the Republic of Lithuania, the patron of the Forum, made the official visit to Israel during the event).

(2008 – 2014) Public Relations Manager at UAB "Bitė Lietuva" (mobile operator, partner of Vodafone at the time), Vilnius

(2005) Project Coordinator for Baltic States – Communication campaigns for European Commission, ProPager SARL, public relations agency, Paris, France.

***As Company Founder and Manager:***

(From 2018) Co-founder, Company culture and Public Relations consultant at Anderrrs, Vilnius

(2007 – 2008) Co-founder and Director, “Flexus Communications“ (UAB Miesto grupė), public relations and copywriting agency, Vilnius

(2005 – 2007) Project Manager, UAB “Avenire“, public relations agency, Vilnius

***As Journalist and Translator:***

(From 2019) Columnist, Delfi.lt, the biggest Lithuanian news portal, Vilnius, Lithuania

(2007 – 2008) Journalist, later Editor-in-Chief at “Urbanation“, city culture magazine (UAB “ProMedia”), Vilnius, Lithuania

(2005) Translator, TV channel Arte, Paris, France

(2004 – 2005) Translator, Baltic and Slavic language sector team member, Bibliothèque universitaire des langues et civilisations – BULAC, Sorbonne, Paris, France

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