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The British humour

A project

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Introduction

Humour and laughter are essential parts of our lives. You can laugh about anything... but not with everyone. Humour is a very subjective concept, and what might be funny for some might be considered rude by others. How funny somebody finds a certain incident depends on many factors including age, personal experience, level of education and geographical location. The type of jokes may vary a lot according to the country you are in as humour is a phenomenon which is influenced by culture. It is always good to be prepared for what you might expect during your next visit to a foreign country. I study English and want to visit Great Britain that is why the British humour is the object of my study.

The aim of my project is to learn more about the specific of the British humour. **The following tasks are set up** to achieve the aim:

1. to find out and study specific characteristics of the British humour;
2. to read the novel "Alice's Adventures in Wonderland" by Lewis Carroll in the original;
3. to translate a humorous story "Post-Haste" by Colin Howard into Russian;
4. to familiarize myself with the most popular British TV comedy shows;
5. to summarize facts required for understanding the British humor.

While studying English I sometimes face with the difficulty of translation English jokes. But I want to understand all aspects of the language. The translation of a humorous story by Colin Howard into Russian will develop my skills in knowing English. This is **the practical value** of my project.

The theme is topical for everyone who study English and get interested in culture of the Great Britain as the work under this research expands horizons, acquaints with the great English literature, but not only improves the language knowledge.

In this study **I hypothesize** that difficulties in British humour understanding lie in its specific features unknown to representatives of other cultures.

I have chosen this topic because I like humour and I'm interested in deep knowledge of English.

So, let's find out what exactly is considered funny in the UK. This is a great cultural aspect we need to be aware of!

Humour in literature

First of all, what is humour? According to the Oxford English Dictionary, humour is “the quality of being amusing or comic, especially as expressed in literature or speech”.

Let's start with literature as I suppose the roots of British humour are to be found there. The history of English literature confirmed that almost all major English writers and poets used humour in one way or another. Famous Bernard Shaw, Charles Dickens, Oscar Wilde, Jerome K. Jerome are masters of the comic.

The real British humour knows no bounds and has no expiration date. The best proof of this is the novel “Alice's Adventures in Wonderland” written by English mathematician Charles Lutwidge Dodgson under the pseudonym Lewis Carroll. It was published in 1865, but the book is still enjoyed. Thanks to Carroll's clever play with language, the story of a young girl getting bored during a hot summer day and slipping into a dreamland full of odd creatures has high popularity in many countries around the world. It has been translated into at least 65 languages.

“Alice's Adventures in Wonderland” is full of puns, parodies, and witty remarks, but first and foremost, it is full of laughter. There are some examples of popular expressions from it:

“She generally gave herself very good advice, (though she very seldom followed it).” (Chapter 1. Down the Rabbit-Hole).

“Curiouser and curiouser!” (Chapter 2. The pool of tears).

“Everything's got a moral, if only you can find it.” (Chapter 9. The Mock Turtle's Story).

The author seems to be playing with the language. I think that the real nature of language can be understood through such playing. *“Ah well! It means much the same thing,” said the Duchess, digging her sharp little chin into Alice's shoulder as she added “and the moral of that is –Take care of the sense, and the sounds will take care of themselves.”* (Chapter 9. The Mock Turtle's Story).

“Take care of the sense, and the sounds will take care of themselves” is a parody of an English idiom: “Take care of the pence, and the pounds will take care of themselves”. In Carroll’s works, he replaces “pence” with “sense”, and “pounds” with “sounds”, which produces a humorous effect.

English humour is a verbal humour. That is why English people like a play on words. There is one more trick used by Carroll. In the following example each of two words have the same pronunciation, but different meanings and spelling.

*“You Promised to tell me your history you know” said Alice, “and why it is you hate – C and D,” she added in a whisper, half afraid that it would be offended again. “Mine is a long and a sad **tale**!” said the Mouse, turning to Alice, and sighing. “It is a long **tail**, certainly,” said Alice, looking down with wonder at the Mouse’s tail: “but why do you call it sad?”* (Chapter 3. A Caucus-Race and a Long Tail).

In this example, Alice asked the Mouse to tell her why it hated cats and dogs. The Mouse replied that its history was “a sad tale”. It is very easy for Alice to confuse the two words “tale” and “tail”, because they pronounce equally and the Mouse had a long tail.

Naturally what the Mouse meant by “tale” was changed into “tail” in Alice’s mind, and the humorous effect appeared due to the mistake.



This book helped me get closer to my aim of study British humour specifics. English literature has rich and long traditions of superior humour. It is based on folk humour and enriched by them. Limericks are considered to be the best reflection of the nations humour.

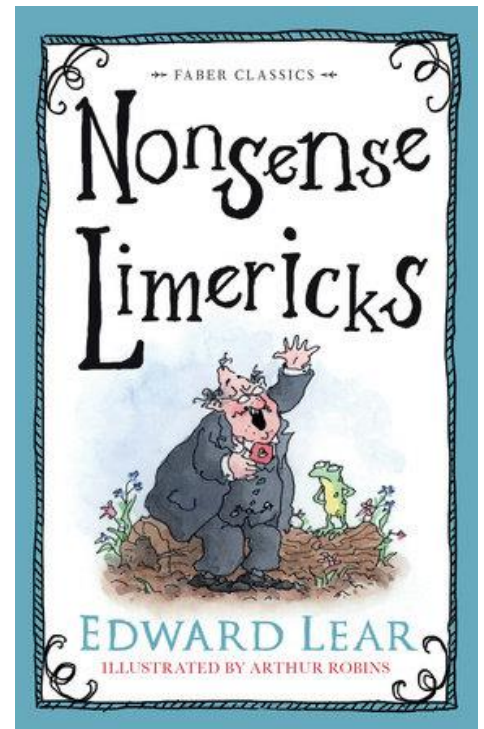
Limericks

Limericks are completely English. Many famous people, such as Rudyard Kipling and Mark Twain, wrote them. Limericks were popularized by Edward Lear in his collection "A book of Nonsense" published in 1846. It is a popular form of humorous 5-line poem that is often nonsensical. A limerick follows a set of rules. The last words in lines one, two and five must sound alike. The last words in lines three and four must rhyme with each other. Lines one, two and five must have eight or nine sounds or parts, while lines three and four must have five or six syllables. There are some examples of limericks:

There once was an old man from Esser,
Whose knowledge grew lesser and lesser.
It at last grew so small,
He knew nothing at all,
And now he's a college professor.

This is a limerick by Rudyard Kipling:

There was a small boy of Quebec
Who was buried in snow to his neck
When they said, "Are you friz?"
He replied, " Yes, I is –
But we don't call this cold in Quebec"



Limerick poetry is typically used for fun and entertaining events. But British humour appears not in literature only, there are a lot of examples in everyday life as well.

Humour in everyday life

Humour is suitable in any life situation. It may help to resolve problems and even lighten the mood. A good sense of humour is an important part of the British national character. By means of good humour we have an opportunity to step back and see what is most important in life.

Laugh at yourself

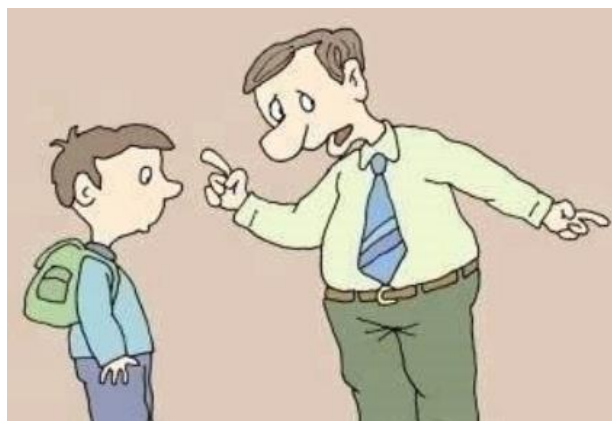
British people aren't too serious about themselves and the things they do. The ability to laugh at yourself is absolutely natural for the British, as it was cultivated for centuries and considered as an essential human advantage.

Son: Dad, what is an idiot?

Dad: An idiot is a person who tries to explain his ideas in such a strange and long way that another person who is listening to him can't understand him.

Do you understand me?

Son: No.



Sarcasm and irony

British people like sarcasm and irony. Sarcasm is to say the opposite of what is happening at the time. For example, saying “*At least you don't have to worry about fixing the wheel puncture now*” to a friend whose bike has just fallen into a pond. Or imagine that someone has done something wrong or made a mistake. For instance, a friend took a test and got a really low score. Time for some sarcasm!

Friend: I only got 15% on my history test.

You: Well done! I'm very impressed!

But it is better to be careful in using sarcasm, because it can hurt people's feeling. Don't use it too much and don't use it on anyone who might punch you on the nose!

Understatement

An understatement is very British. It is when someone intentionally makes out that something is less important or serious than it is. British humor is famous for its use of understatement. For instance, they say “*It's a little bit windy, isn't it?*”

when there's a strong hurricane outside. The British are known for displaying restraint even in difficult circumstances. "Deadpan humour" (making a joke without smiling) is one element of understatement. Certainly, this can be very confusing!

Pun

Pun is, in nature, a word-play.

When nothing goes right... go left!

In English language, there are many words that are pronounced alike or spelt alike, or both. So, it is required to know language well to understand puns. But when you see them written it's easier to realise.

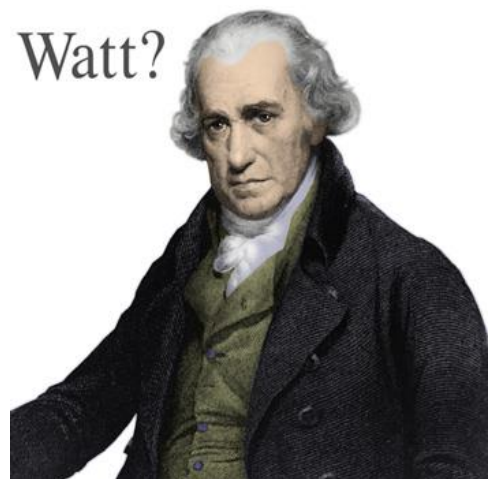
Teacher: Tell me something that conducts electricity.

Student: Why, er...

Teacher: Yes, wire! Now name a unit of electrical power.

Student: A what?

Teacher: Yes, a watt! Very good.



Puns are jokes that play with the different meanings and sounds of words. For example, a joke is funny, but a joke that has a pun might be "punny."

I'm reading a book about anti-gravity. It's impossible to put down.

If you can understand jokes that use puns or make your own puns, that means you really know your English vocabulary! To play with words, you need to understand and know plenty of words.

- *What is the difference between a conductor and a teacher?*
- *The conductor minds the train and a teacher trains the mind.*

Apart from being witty and humorous, puns add deep meaning to text. By playing with the words, the writers show creative ability in using language, demonstrate their cleverness and the cleverness of their characters.

TV comedy shows

English humour is good-known in the world. Who doesn't know Charlie Chaplin, Benny Hill or Mr. Bean? These people are faces of British humour.

Most of British comedy is about noticing the absurd things in everyday life. Absurd humour focuses on the silly, ridiculous or surreal.



Mr Bean

“Mr Bean” is a television comedy starring Rowan Atkinson in the title role. The first episode appeared in 1990. Mr. Bean is pretty much isolated from society, and life is not easy for him as he constantly struggles with very simple things. This is because he lacks some basic knowledge, and has the mind of a child. He finds himself in various kinds of trouble wherever he goes, and comes up with very hilarious way to solve the problems he faces!

Mr. Bean rarely speaks. Stylistically, the show is very similar to early silent films – so called physical comedy focused on manipulation of the body for a humorous effect. Due to the very limited dialogue, you don't even have to speak fluent English to enjoy the show. That is why it has been so popular all over the world.

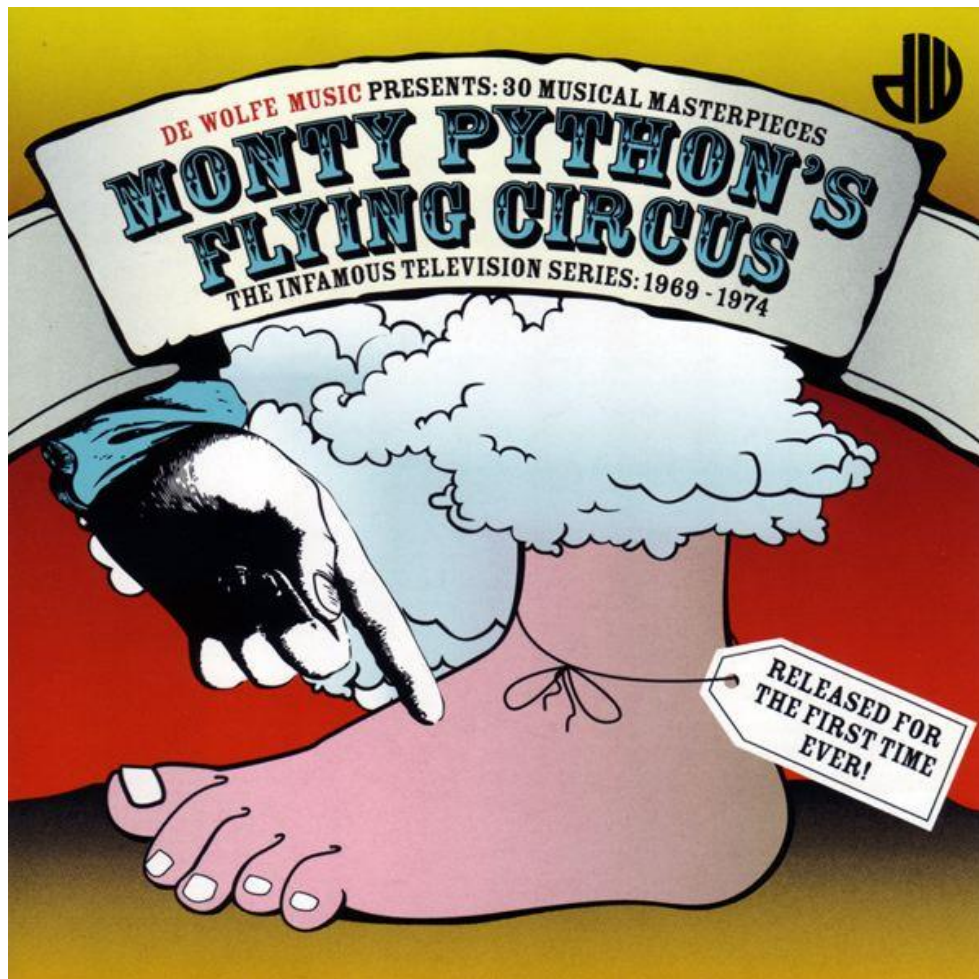


And now for something completely excellent: Monty Python

First and the most popular comedy show in Britain is certainly the “Monty Python’s Flying Circus”. It appeared on the BBC in 1969. The group was best known for its absurd humour. “Monty Python’s Flying Circus” was comedy sketch show that combined surreal skits, deep sarcasm and dark humour. The group’s influence on comedy has often been compared to The Beatles’ influence on music.

Besides the TV series, they made movies such as the “Monty Python and The Holy Grail” and the famous “Life of Brian”.

The best way to understand British humour is to sit down and watch some of British TV comedy. Go on – we deserve the break from studying!



Conclusion

While working on the topic, I learnt a number of English jokes. I read the novel “Alice's Adventures in Wonderland” by Lewis Carroll and translated a humorous story “Post-Haste” by Colin Howard into Russian. As a result, I have made the following conclusions.

The English humour is not so much a genre (style), but a way of life.

The important feature of typical British jokes is calmness with which they face the most unbelievable accidents. They laugh at small details on the background of total absurdity.

The ability to laugh at themselves is rather an advantage than a disadvantage.

In this study we proved our hypothesis that difficulties in British humour understanding lie in its specific features unknown to representatives of other cultures. Knowledge of a foreign language has great value if it is associated with cultural knowledge, norms, behavior and stereotypes of native speakers. Connection between the use of language and social relations plays a key role.

Summing up the above said, I can conclude that in order to understand the specifics of British jokes it is necessary, firstly, to understand the culture and mentality of British people, and secondly, to have excellent knowledge of English.



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Addendum



"I say, I'm glad to see you," cried the little man, standing by the letter-box.
"Oh, hullo," I said, stopping.
"Simpson, isn't it?" I did not know him very well, because his wife and he were newcomers to the town.
"Yes, that's right," answered Simpson.
"Can't you lend me a penny? You see, my wife gave me a letter to post, and now I find it has no stamp."
"They never have," I said.
"It must go today, it really must! And I don't think I shall find a post-office open at this time of night, do you?"
As it was about eleven, I thought he was right.
"So I was going to get stamps out of the machine," explained Simpson, "only I find I haven't got any pennies in my pockets."
"I am really sorry, but I am afraid I haven't," I told him putting my hand into my pocket.
"Perhaps somebody else..."
"There isn't anyone else," he said. He looked up the street and I looked down.

«О, как здорово, что я Вас встретил!» – внезапно воскликнул коренастый джентльмен у почтового ящика.
«Э... Здрасте», – промямлил я, останавливаясь.
«Симпсон, Вы?» – я не очень хорошо его знал, так как они с женой были приезжими.
«Да, это я, – ответил Симпсон, – не могли бы Вы одолжить мне один пенни? Видите ли, моя жена отправила меня послать это письмо по почте, но только сейчас я заметил, что на нём нет марки».
«Её никогда не бывает...», – уточнил я.
«Оно должно уйти сегодня, правда должно! И я не думаю, что почтовое отделение ещё работает в такое позднее время». Так как было где-то около одиннадцати, я решил, что он прав.
«Я собирался купить марку в автомате, – объяснил Симпсон, – только оказалось, что я не взял с собой денег».
«Мне правда очень жаль, но, боюсь, у меня тоже ничего нет, – оправдывался я, шаря по карманам, – может быть Вам попросить у кого-нибудь ещё...»
«Здесь нет кого-нибудь ещё», – буркнул Симпсон. Он посмотрел налево, а я направо.

Then he looked down the street and I looked up. We both saw nobody.
"Yes, well," I was going to start, but he looked so unhappy, standing there, having a blue envelope without a stamp in his hands, that I really could not leave him.
"You had better walk along with me to my place," I said. "It's only two streets off – and I'll try to find some pennies for you there."
"It's really very good of you," said Simpson and we went.

Затем я посмотрел налево, а он направо. На улице никого не было видно.
«Ну, что ж...», – я собрался уходить, но Симпсон выглядел таким несчастным, стоящим с голубым конвертом в руках без марки, что я не смог его оставить.
«Ладно, пойдёмте поищем мелочь у меня дома, – сказал я, – это недалеко – всего лишь пройти две улицы, и мы на месте».
«Как мило с вашей стороны», – пробормотал Симпсон, и мы пошли.

When he got it back again, it had a large dirty mark on it.
"Well, what can we do now?" he said in a way that showed me he could not do anything without me. Suddenly I remembered. "I know! I've got a book of stamps at home!" "Why didn't you say so before?" said Simpson almost severely. And we ran home as quickly as we could.

Когда джентльмен поднял его, на нём красовалось гигантское грязное пятно.
«И что мы теперь будем делать?», – простонал Симпсон, и я понял, что он ничего не мог сделать без меня. Вдруг я кое-что вспомнил. «Знаю! У меня дома есть альбом для марок!» «Так что же Вы сразу не сказали?» – почти резко заявил Симпсон. И мы со всех ног понеслись домой.

At home we looked for pennies for a long time and at last found some. I gave them to Simpson who in the most business-like way made a note of the loan in his pocket-book, and left. I saw him walking along the street. Then he suddenly stopped and returned to me.
"I say, I am very sorry, but I am a newcomer here, and well, I've lost the way, you know. Perhaps, you'll explain to me how to get to the post office." I did. I spent three minutes trying to explain to him where the post-office was. At the end of that time, I thought I was as lost as Simpson.
"I'm – I'm afraid – I don't understand..."
"Here, I had better come along with you," I said. "Oh, it is so kind of you," he cried out. I thought it really was. We went to the post-office and came up to a stamp machine. Simpson put a penny in it, we heard the penny passing through the machine, but the stamp did not appear. "The machine is empty," I explained.
"Oh," he looked at me. The letter fell out of his hands down on the ground.

Дома мы очень долго искали монеты и наконец-то нашли. Я отдал их Симпсону и тот самым деловым образом записал свой долг в блокнотик и ушел. Я видел, как Симпсон гордо маршировал по улице. Вдруг он резко остановился и быстро вернулся ко мне.
«Мне очень неприятно это говорить, но я приезжий, и, видите ли, забыл дорогу до почты. Может быть Вы растолкуете мне, как туда добраться?», – Я рассказал.
У меня ушло три минуты, чтобы объяснить, где находится почтовое отделение. В конце концов я запутался также, как и Симпсон.
«Я... я боюсь, что ничего не понимаю...»
«Мне лучше сходить вместе с Вами», – раздражённо предложил я. «О, как мило с Вашей стороны» – провозгласил он. И в этом я с ним согласился. Мы пошли на почту к автомату для марок. Симпсон просунул туда денежку. Мы слышали, как монетка прошла сквозь автомат, но вместо марки мы получили дырку от бублика.
«Автомат пуст», – объяснил я. «О!» – Симпсон взглянул на меня. Письмо выскользнуло у него из рук и упало на землю.

It was difficult to find the book of stamps but at last it was found. I opened it – it was empty.
"My god!" said Simpson. I saw he was going to cry. "My wife told me to post it today. I don't know that it's very important but she... Well, I'd better post it because she..."
"I see," said I. (I knew Mrs. Simpson.)
"Funny, I was sure the book was almost full."
"But what about my letter?" asked Simpson with tears in his eyes.
"You'll have to post it without a stamp, that's all," I said.
"Oh, could I do that?" he asked.
"What else can you do? Your friend will have to pay double postage on it in the morning, but you can't do anything else."
"I don't like to do that!"
"But you have to. And be quick or you will be late for the last collection!" Simpson went off running.
"I say, the other way!" I shouted after him.
"Sorry," he cried returning. "I think I've forgotten the way again."

Было очень сложно найти этот альбом с марками, но наконец мы до него докопались. Я открыл его – марок там не оказалось.
«О, Боже!» – испугался Симпсон. Он чуть не расплакался. «Моя жена сказала мне, что бы я отправил письмо сегодня. Я не думаю, что это так важно, но она... Ладно, мне лучше отправить это письмо, потому что она...» «Понимаю», – перебил я. (я знал Миссис Симпсон.) «Странно, я думал, что в альбоме полным-полно марок.»
«Так что насчёт моего письма?» – пролепетал Симпсон со слезами на глазах.
«Вам придётся отправить его без марки, вот и всё», – подытожил я. «Ох, да как же я могу так поступить?» – нервничал он.
«А что же ещё Вы можете сделать? Да, Вашему другу придётся вдвойне платить за всё это утром, но у Вас просто нет другого выхода.» «А я не хочу так поступать!»
«К сожалению, Вам придётся. И потопоритесь, а то опоздаете на последнюю выемку писем!» Симпсон поспежал к почте.
«В другую сторону!» – прокричал я ему вслед. «Извините», – выкрикнул Симпсон, возвращаясь, – я думаю, что я снова забыл дорогу к почте».

I didn't even start to explain. I just took him by the arm and brought him to the post-office, in time for the last collection. He put his letter into the box and then, to finish off my job I took him home.

"I'm so thankful to you, really," he said to me. "I can't think what I should have done without you. That letter – it's only an invitation to dinner to... Oh, my god!"

"Well, what's the matter?"

"Nothing. Just something I've remembered."

"What?" But he did not tell me. He just looked at me in a strange way, said "good-bye" and went indoors.

All the way home I thought what it was he did not tell me. But I stopped thinking of it next day, when I had to pay the postman double postage for a blue envelope with a great dirty mark on its face.

Я даже не начал ему что-либо объяснять. Просто взял за руку и потащил к почтовому отделению как раз к последней выемке писем. Симпсон бросил письмо в ящик и, потом, чтобы покончить с этим делом, я довёл его до дома.

«Как же я Вам благодарен, – бормотал он, – Не знаю, чтобы я без Вас делал. То письмо – это приглашение на обед для... О, Боже мой!»

«Что на этот раз?»

«Ничего. Я просто кое-что вспомнил»

«Что?» Но Симпсон мне не сказал.

Просто посмотрел на меня каким-то странным взглядом, попрощался и вошёл в дом.

По дороге к себе я всё думал, что же такого Симпсон мне не сказал.

Но на утро следующего дня я перестал решать эту головоломку, потому что мне пришлось вдвойне платить почтальону за гигантское грязное пятно на голубом конверте.

