1. INTRODUCTION: WHY DO RUSSIAN SPEAKERS PREFER TO EXPRESS “HOT” RATHER THAN “WARM” WISHES AND FEELINGS?¹

I have dedicated this paper, “with warm best wishes,” to Jacob Mey – because this is something that the English language allows me to express. If I were writing this paper in Russian, however, I would say more, because instead of using the adjective teplyj “warm,” I would use the much “stronger” adjective gorjačij (literally, “hot”).² Here are some characteristic examples from the Russian National Corpus:

Slova blagodarnosti i vosxiščenija, (…) gorjačie poželanija zdorov’ja i dolgix let žizni. (1983) lit. ‘Words of gratitude and [rapt] admiration, hot wishes of health and long years of life’.

… Primite moi gorjačie poželanija i serdečnyj privet, vysokouvažaemyj Vladimir Arkad’evič.

lit. ‘… Please accept my hot wishes and greeting from the heart, respected Vladimir Arkad’evič’.

Moj gorjačij privet vashej supruge.

lit. ‘my hot greeting to your [female] spouse’ (roughly: : ‘my warmest regards to your wife’)

¹ For Jacob Mey, with warm (gorjačie) best wishes. I would like to express my warm (gorjačie) thanks to Anna Gladkova and Cliff Goddard for their helpful comments and suggestions.

² Since Russian is an inflected language in which an adjective agrees with the head-noun in gender, number, and case, several different forms of the adjective gorjačij appear in this paper.
The Russian predilection for “hot” over “warm” in communicative acts expressing good wishes is not an idiosyncratic quirk of the Russian language, but a hallmark of Russian pragmatics and a reflection of a key cultural value. In particular, in friendly interpersonal communication, “warmth” is not enough, and “warm” (teplye) greetings or wishes would be totally inadequate in Russian – so much so that a phrase like teplyj privet (“warm regards”) is unacceptable in Russian and sounds ridiculous.

But this is not the only area of interpersonal pragmatics where “hot speech” is valued and expected. For example, it is very natural in Russian to turn to someone with a gorjačaja pros’ba, literally, “a hot request (for a favor).” It is also very natural for a believer to turn to God with gorjačaja molitva, “hot prayer.”

What does the word gorjačij “hot” mean in such collocations and what do such collocations tell us about Russian ways of speaking, thinking, and feeling?

In trying to find answers to these questions, we can receive a lot of help from considering various contrasts in acceptability between seemingly analogous phrases. Here is one:

gorjačaja ljubov’ -- * gorjačaja nenavist’
‘hot love’ ‘hot hate’

Ljubov’ “love” implies good feelings towards the addressee, and nenavist’ “hate” implies bad feelings. Common collocations like gorjačij privet “hot greetings” would also suggest good feelings towards the addressee. On the other hand, gorjačaja pros’ba “a hot request for a favor” does not necessarily imply good feelings towards the addressee, although it certainly implies feelings (and quite intense ones).

It is important to note, however, that while many minimal pairs such as gorjačaja ljubov’ (love) and gorjačaja nenavist’ (hate) can be easily listed, the condition which gorjačij “hot” imposes on any potential collocations including this word are semantic rather than purely lexical. Certain words, for example nenavist’ “hate,” may be absolutely excluded from such collocations, but many other nouns may or may not collocate with gorjačij depending on the larger context, as the following contrast in acceptability illustrates:

gorjačee želanie uvidet’sja ‘a hot desire to see someone’
* gorjačee želanie mesti ‘a hot desire to take revenge’

“Revenge,” like “hate,” suggests bad feelings toward someone, so it might seem that gorjačij “hot” is incompatible with “bad feelings.” But even if this is true, this observation could only be part of the story, not the whole story, as the following unacceptable collocation with želanie “desire” illustrates:

*gorjačee želanie razbogatet’ ‘a hot desire to become rich’