

Bots and Spammers Dating Club

An audio feature by Vladimir Kryuchev, oontz.ru

This is the story of love but it won't begin right from the beginning.

In mid-2019, a number of Russian media outlets launched a new wave of stories telling people not to pronounce one particular word – when speaking on the phone to someone they don't know.

That word was 'yes'.

Never, they said, under no circumstances, say this word because it may change your life, and you wouldn't like it at all.

This had nothing to do with the affairs of the heart or making promises. This was more about spam, hacking attacks and banking fraud.

The point is, the papers said, that some hackers could record your precious 'yes' or 'I will' and use it as your online fingerprint – or voice-print – to access your finances just by calling the bank's customer service line.

(Good afternoon)
(Hello)

The rumour has it – that a hacker could reproduce your voice

(original recording: Hello!)

By playing these pieces of audio to the bank

(edited: Oh ! Hell !)

And by making the bank think it's you –

(edited: Sir-sir-sir)

To confirm a money transfer

(edited: Vis-Vis-Vis)

Or getting a loan.

(original recording: Hello! This is the automated voicemail service)

These kind of stories keep popping up, now and then, and that makes you feel as if some robocaller could steal your life.

Most of these calls, even if fraudsters exist, are nothing but harmless yet obtrusive spam. We are getting more and more of those kind of calls each day, and no wonder that this starts even more scary rumours.

(Hello)

There is a difference between a spammer and a real human.

A spammer could call you at any time of day or even night but you won't hear a sound on the other end of the line.

As you listen, there is a dead silence between words. Not a sign of life. No kettle humming, no plates and cutlery clinking, no children crying, nobody giving directions from the back seat, no background TV, no wind howling, no snow squeaking, no ice-skating or jumping over the fence.

They seem to be terribly lonely, those spammers.

The only music they enjoy is music-on-hold, you know this one – hold on, I'm putting you through. And one more thing: they never cry.

And isn't it us who should be constructing their lives – for them?

OK, here is one generic robocall.

(Good afternoon. Or manager could not get through to you. Your installment plan is approved)

Here's another.

(This is a call from the information office with an up-to-date information for residents of Moscow and the Moscow area. My call isn't an offer or an advertisement)

All those calls are real.

(Are you ok to speak at the moment?)

Robots and spammers don't appear to be scammers. They look more like people with no life of their own, with nobody to care about them and even without a chance to have one.

What we need now is a sound editing software. Their phrases that we can use to build dialogues. A little bit of pitch correction.

(Good afternoon. Or manager could not get through to you)

A few stories, a tiny universe, at least for the next 20 minutes.

They first met in a swimming pool. Resurfacing on neighbouring tracks.

(Hello)

(Hello)

They look at each other through swimming goggles. He tries to talk to her – but about what?

(I have an offer for you, if you don't mind – it will take a couple of minutes)

He says he needs only 2 minutes to swim a lap.

(A couple of minutes)

But she says she can do it in 1 minute.

(It will take no longer than 1 minute)

(Yes. Nice to meet you)

She says she loves this place. Swimming is good for health.

(Spine and joints issues, risks of heart attacks and strokes or central nervous system conditions)

One of the most frequent spam calls come from health care centres – with a long list of conditions that could be cured there.

(We are dealing with spinal pains and joints issues)

She sees something in his glass-protected eyes.

(Can I have a couple of minutes of your time to inform you about a certain matter?)

He pauses for a moment.

As time goes by, he suggests meeting

(I would like to invite you)

To a bar round the corner

(Press 5 if you are satisfied)

Yes, at Five O'Clock

(Pressing 5 means I agree)

(Can I have your personal mobile number, please, so that I could send you a text message with an invitation code?)

(Five-five-five Five-five-five)

(Got it. We will meet on Friday, and the day before I will give you a call and inform you about an exact location)

Well, there's a joke, a riddle. Two people, a woman and a man, asking – do you love me? There's no answer. Do you love me? No answer. Do you love me? Yes! Next, a woman dies. What's happened? The thing is they are both balance masters in a circus, and a man is holding a bar in his teeth that a woman is clinging to. He said yes. So, these things could happen.

Those two seem to be equally crazy about each other.

It is possible to do yourself harm with words in different ways. A single 'yes' quoted out of context could be used by prank callers.

Innokenty Mayorov is the crime correspondent with the Vperyod Newspaper.

Speaking of reputation, this could be dangerous if someone is using your 'yes' in some videos or in any content you are not aware of. In terms of finance, a single 'yes', or even your full name recorded – that is not enough, even for getting a loan. The bank would ask for more data anyway. The situation becomes more risky when you provide your full name, the date of your birth, or any personal details because this could help hackers guess your passwords. Anyway, neural networks could now modulate any voice. There are even artificially created videos with audio of public persons. Actually it's not the words that you speak that matter but the phonemes. This would be used to construct something, but just 'yes' is not that dangerous.

We are back at the bar, as the spammers – who previously met at the swimming pool – are about to have their first date.

(Connection established. Please wait)

The air smells of coffee, spices and bread, dimly lit cosy corners, it's lively but not too crowded. Beautiful music-on-hold. Welcome to the the Bots and Spammers cafe.

They are entering nearly at about the same time, through separate doors. They turn around, look at each other's direction but can't see each other.

(Sorry I can't hear you)

The only time they've met they were wearing swimming caps and goggles, but now, not wearing it, they have no idea of how they look like in real life.

(The number is not available at the moment, please try again later)

It took less than a minute for them to put their caps and goggles on, right here, in a cafe, so that they could recognize each other.

A little over a year, at the same table, he proposes to her. Or was it her proposing to him?

(If you are interested in this offer, press 1)

(Thank you for your understanding)

(Your answer is accepted)

They could spent hours sitting in a car, as the raindrops fall against the roof, holding hands, not being able to leave.

(Hello) (Hello)

(Hello) (Hello)

(Hello) (Hello)

(Hello)

But then at a certain point every couple has to face reality.

They decide to live together. Why don't they find a flat? Hey, spammer! Call an agent! Right now.

(The following dialogue is edited and rhymed)

(Good evening

Hello

I am calling about renting an apartment

An estate agency offers an Affordable Mortgage Programme. Please hold on

Ok. I am calling about renting a flat

I'm taking you over to an operator instead

Ok. Are you still letting a flat?

I'm taking you over to a call centre operator

The housing developers will talk to you later

Do you have an apartment to let?

Thanks to our support

Getting a flat with a state plan is a good thought

Ok. I am calling about renting a flat

We could meet in the near future
To get you a mortgage that will suit you

Good evening!
This is only the beginning

Skilled in making use of maternity grant
He is an expert in getting the most of your rent

Ok

Good evening. I am calling about renting a flat
Ok. Call you later, the line is too bad
...Thanks to our support)

They say that the Native Americans of the 19th century, when facing the Europeans were scared of photography – they believed it can steal souls. For us, the scary thing is losing our privacy. What if this is our soul? Hearing the voice of a stranger on the phone. The first thought that comes to mind is – where did he get my number from?

When using a self-service payment terminal for, say, you mobile expenses, you automatically agree to the Offer Document. Nobody would read it of course, but there is a fine print which says that your mobile number is sent to a number of companies. You could have dozens of such agreements in one day, this is how they get your number. This could be used as a cover-up as well, nobody will check how these companies obtain phone numbers, is it legal or not, the evidence is too shaky.

Two years later, somewhere in the City of Spam

Now, that they have a mortgage, he needs to get a second job to make ends meet.

The choices are tough. He tried several jobs, he was a chef, a taxi driver, a librarian, a swimming instructor, a gardener.

But then he got an offer.

This is his new office. Long semi-dark hall with blank walls. Rows of computer screens. Constant hum, everything is black and grey. An air of silence.

No kettle humming, no plates and cutlery clinking, no children crying, nobody giving directions from the back seat, no background TV, no wind howling, no snow squeaking, no ice-skating or jumping over the fence.

The spammer has been offered the job of spammer. Now he is dialing a number.

(The following monologue is edited and rhymed)

Most loyal of customers in times of commotion
Let me present you this wonderful option
You are granted a flat-rate. A 24-hour flat-rate

Your mobile plan remaining the same
Flat-rate is only an add to the game

This will take up a minute, no more
Let me enable this option of awe

This is a loyalty programme, innit?
You can call anytime with no limit

Three roubles a day – a true bolt of thunder
Allow me enabling this option of wonder

It works like a charm, you'll never have glitch
Oh let me turn on this magical switch

Your mobile plan remaining the same
Pleasure to talk to you, see you one day.