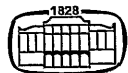


# TIMES, PLACES, PASSAGES

## Ethnological Approaches in the New Millennium

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AKADÉMIAI KIADÓ, BUDAPEST

# Semantics of the greeting with hand-kissing in Bulgarian traditional culture

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It is a well-known fact that each historical epoch and society have their characteristic greetings, in which the existing ideas of the world and hierarchical levels of the social system are reflected. Applying these greetings means offering and receiving some information which exists as knowledge within the framework of a certain society and of the cultural epoch. Out of this framework greetings and their gesture, expressions change or lose their semanticity, stop existing and functioning as signs and often as elements of a given system of culture.

## Greeting and kissing

According to the respective entries in some dictionaries and encyclopaedias (Andreychin et al. 1973:687, 822; The Oxford 1989:416–417, 417–418; The Oxford 1991a:820–821, 821) greeting is a sign action by which an individual addresses, treats, starts the conversation with somebody when meeting or parting, thus expressing good will, attention, veneration, respect, politeness, kindness, etc. This activity can be done verbally, paralinguistically, in a written form or depiction, with gestures and so on. Again according to the generalisations in the literature (Nicheva et al. 1975:497; The Oxford 1991b:462–463, 464; Chevalier 1996:565–566), kissing as an action is touching by an individual with the lips or other parts of the face, of another individual's body, animate or inanimate object. It is a sign of tenderness, affection, veneration, respect, gratitude and so on, but it is as well a form of greeting.

It is necessary from the start to specify an item concerning the object under study. In daily life this kinemomorpheme has several distinctive aspects of meanings. Thus we talk about greeting at meeting, at welcoming, at parting, seeing off, leave-taking, bidding farewell, and congratulating on a particular occasion. For that reason in the present paper greeting is treated as behaviour which comprises the different aspects of meaning of the phenomenon. On the other hand the gesture of kissing, which has the semantics of expressing ten-

derness, respect, veneration, etc., is the one that kinematically unites the different expressions of the kind of greeting under study.

This study aims to view and compare the situations in which the kinemorpheme 'greeting with hand-kissing' is used to outline the existing semantic similarities, differences and the whole spectrum connected with the phenomenon. An attempt will also be made to highlight the factors which influence forming of a concrete semantic in a given situation. For these reasons the following factors are examined: characteristics and place of the situation in the context of the event; time and place of greeting – daily, customary or ritual, profane or sacred; preceding, accompanying and postceding gestures and activities with a sign meaning; modality of the kinemorpheme under study; sex, age, social status, ritual role and functions of the persons "giving" and "accepting" the greeting, etc. The paper is based on a recorded material, both published and unpublished, about the life of the preindustrial and patriarchal Bulgarian society from the late 19th century and the first half of the 20th century. The phenomena are traced in the whole structure of the Bulgarian national culture.

In the tradition of Bulgarian patriarchal society several kinds of greeting are known – verbal, paralinguistical, gestural and combined. In the gesture greeting with kissing the following types can be distinguished: kissing of the hand; on the cheeks/sides, on the forehead, face and head; on the lips /in the mouth; of a ring, of the coat-tail of a dress, of shoes/feet, footprints; of inanimate subjects – of soil/ground, bread, icon, cross, crucifix, gonfalons, etc.

The situations in which the kinemorpheme under study is used are viewed in the following sequence. Firstly, in an everyday situation and time without the participation of persons of a special status, and/or ritual ones. Secondly, in an everyday situation and time with the participation of persons with a special status as well. Thirdly, in an everyday, customary or ritual situation and time with the participation of a mixed group of persons – these without or with a special status, as well as of ritual persons.

### Greeting at meeting

In the traditional practice the usual behaviour when meeting a parent for the first time in the day (particularly when that person is a man – father, grandfather, great-grandfather), a married member of the same family kin, another relative or acquaintance, is for the younger person and particularly the girl/young woman/ married woman, to greet first by kissing the hand. Usually at that greeting, men remove their hat. To clarify the semantic it is important to mention that there is no practice an outsider or stranger to the family kin, unless he is somebody's guest at his home, is to be greeted in that way. The greeting consists of the following gesture cluster of kinemes and kinemorphemes: the greeter bows, bends his back, takes with his right hand the right hand given by the greeter, and without shaking the hand he kisses it once on the back of the hand. Almost always this activity is accompanied with a verbal greeting, but other sign gestures and actions are missing. In people's mind the meaning of this greeting is a sign of respect for the gender, age, social hierarchical seniority

and superiority of the man, the older, the parent, the married person in the patriarchal society. The obligatory use of the form makes it a sign of emphasising the subordinate position of the child, the unmarried person, the woman, the younger and generally of the one who greets first, and it demonstrates humility, obedience, respect and veneration.

This kinemomorpheme is applied in daily greetings to persons with a special social status such as Christian priests. The gesture is accompanied with a verbal greeting and the address *father*. The gesture is often preceded by making the Orthodox sign of the cross by the greeter. This form of greeting is used by all people at meeting, welcoming, parting, and sending a priest off regardless of their sex, age, marital and social status. In the people's mind the priest is considered to be an intermediary and minister of the sacred, which is why in the social space of the patriarchal society his individual self as a human and a male recedes to the background. The concept that identifies him with God and with the institution which serves the sacred – the Church – comes to the forefront. That is why demonstration of belonging and fidelity to Christian religion, love of God, obedience, humility and veneration to the Church comes in the first place in the semantic of the greeting. Showing respect and veneration to the man and the person of the priest comes in the second place. This kinemomorpheme is a sign of emphasising the superior social position of the person greeted.

In the after-wedding complex some different semantics can be found. After the wedding a ritual of *taking the new bride to fill a vessel with water* is performed (Vakarelski 1977:487-488). In this ritual situation the young bride is still in her role of a person in transition, e.g. with a special status. During her solemn taking to the public source of water in the neighbourhood, the quarter or the settlement she is accompanied by ritual persons. On her way there and back she must bow to every member of the village community she meets and kiss their hand. Kinemomorphemes are followed by an obligatory offering every person met to drink out of the vessels filled with water or of a vessel with a drink. Here offering and drinking the fresh, recently filled water and the drink, usually brandy, and their symbolic meaning is an important factor forming the semantic of the greeting. On the other hand, there is the fact that this is the first time the newly married woman goes out of her home and appears in her new social status before the members of the wide group of non-related community of the settlement. Although in its shape and concrete situation this kinemomorpheme has the characteristics of a greeting at meeting (together with bowing), according to its meaning in the context of the event, this is more like a greeting on an occasion. Only the kinemomorpheme of bowing has the function of a greeting at meeting. Thus respect and veneration, expressed by the new bride to the persons greeted, does not come first here in the semantic, but the attempt to draw their attention to her new social identity as a married woman. On the other hand replying to the greeting is a sign of taking into consideration, of recognising the new identity, of receiving the bride into the group of the married, as well as confirming a new type of relations with her (Genchev 1985:190).

## Greeting at welcoming

The welcoming and greeting of a guest is a behaviour with a special meaning. This person of special status can be known or unknown to the family kin. Nevertheless the guest is received at home and is greeted with kissing of the hand on the part of the hosts. The belief that the guest is a bringer of destiny able to influence all spheres of human life, a "messenger" and a "representative" of the supreme powers (Petruchin et al. 1995:145-146), predefines the semantic of the kinemorpheme. Namely, it expresses good will, respect and veneration to the person who arrived in order to ensure good fortune for the home.

When a ritual person or a person having a special status during the ritual action and time, is welcoming and greeting a complicated semantic picture can be observed. When greeting is not accompanied by other sign gestures or actions, the semantic expresses respect and honour to the person greeted, but that is not of primary importance. Thus, for example, in the scope of the rite *kumichene*, performed on *Palm Sunday* the young girls participating in it visit their chosen leader – the *koumitsa* (also a young girl) at home and greet her by kissing her hand. From that day until Easter young girls keep a ritual silence – the so-called *goveene* to her (Vassileva 1985:119). At the little and the big engagement ceremony the young girl/fiancée meets all the guests who came to visit her home and silently and humbly kisses their hand one or three times (Dobrev 1971:1225). On the day of the wedding, when the wedding procession has come to the fiancée's home to take her, the best man's wife enters the room first. Then the fiancée silently stands up and kisses her hand. The former does the same when later her fiancé enters (Genchev 1985:186). In these cases the kinemorpheme, apart from the above mentioned, is a sign of emphasis, of accepting the ritual seniority and acknowledging the functions coming from the ritual role, to change and affirm the social status. Here it is worth noting the fact that young girls, despite being guests, do not greet them, but they kiss the hand of the hostess – the *koumitsa*.

The following example should be added to the cases of a complicated semantic. On the day of the traditional wedding, after the church wedding the procession takes the young bride to the house of the bridegroom, where they are both met by the father- and mother-in-law. The mother-in-law dances a *boro* (traditional dance) around the cart where the bride sits, holding a sieve, a ritual loaf of bread and a candle in her hands. When the father or the brother-in-law lifts the bride out of the cart to the ground, the mother-in-law gives the newly-married a morsel of bread and a sip of wine – i.e. she starts giving them *food* and *drink*. Then she puts two loaves of bread under the arms of the young bride. For her part the latter kisses her hand (Genchev 1985:187). This is a greeting at welcoming in its form and place in the ritual. But if the above-mentioned facts and ritual objects are analysed we will be convinced that this kinemorpheme definitely has the meaning of a greeting on a special occasion. In this case it can be interpreted as a sign of expressing respect, veneration, obedience to the father- and mother-in-law, expressing gratitude for accepting, incorporating, even "adopting" the young individual in a hitherto "strange" family. This might be

interpreted by the bride also as a reception and gratitude for the magical activities and best wishes directed to her and her family which are intended to provide fertility, abundance, wealth and cleanliness.

### Greetings at parting, seeing off, leave-taking, bidding farewell

In the ritual milieu, with the participation of ritual persons and those with a special status, the kinemomorpheme under study acquires the meaning of bidding farewell before a long separation and of leave-taking as well. Thus, for example, on the day of the wedding the procession is ready to start from the home of the fiancé to take the fiancée, he bids farewell to his parents by kissing their hand. In the case of this gesture two signs are reproduced simultaneously – i.e. two kinemomorphemes – bidding farewell and asking for *forgiveness*. The parents grant forgiveness and for their part kiss him on his face and his forehead (Genchev 1985:184). This action is repeated at the fiancée's home, where at her seeing off she bids farewell to everybody present there, kisses their hand and asks for forgiveness. Before kissing her parents' hand she bows to the ground and asks for forgiveness. For their part they forgive her, bless her and kiss her on her face (Vakarelski 1977:483; Genchev 1985:186). In both cases the kinemomorpheme is a sign of parting, bidding farewell and leave-taking. But seen in the context of the wedding actions it is not a usual parting, but an action which marks the beginning of changing the social status of the main participants – the fiancé and the fiancée. Because after leaving their homes they go to the church where the Christian institution for its part also legalises their marriage, after which in their new social status of already married – as a bride and bridegroom – they enter the bridegroom's home. In that sense parting and bidding farewell is not only symbolical but an actual parting and leave-taking with an already finished stage of their life which will never come again. Another sign aspect of the kinemomorpheme is connected with asking and giving forgiveness, clearing the relationships between parents and children of any offences and bitterness. The necessity for this is usually due to the traditional idea that it is better to start every new beginning from a new ground, without the burden of uncleared and not settled relationships inherited from the previous stage of life.

This notion of the world lies behind the deeply rooted tradition of kissing the hand of a dying or a dead person. In Bulgarian tradition usually the person dying a natural death is described euphemistically as *preparing for a long journey, a traveller to the other world*, etc. That is why according to that tradition, when a person is dying his family and relatives get together around him to forgive each other and bid him farewell. Thus in the ritual of *forgiving* the dying man asks first for forgiveness from each of the people present – an old man, a young man, a man, a woman, and then kisses their hands. The same is done by the people present and everybody gives him forgiveness, and for their part they also ask for forgiveness and kiss his hand (Vakarelski 1977:491). In that case the mutual kissing bears deep semanticity, marking the beginning of the transition in an individual's life between "this" and "that" world. Here I draw attention to the

mutual application of the kinemomorpheme, which fact very clearly stresses the semantic of setting a border between two stages in the life of a person/soul.

The rite of *taking leave of a dead person* also includes kissing his hands crossed on his chest, where a burning candle is put between his fingers. Here the semantic of the kinemomorpheme is clearing the relationship with the dead one, asking for forgiveness for offences done to him, asking for his soul's benevolence, parting and taking leave of his body.

### Greeting on an occasion

In most cases this gesture, according to the context of the event, has the meaning of greeting somebody on a certain occasion – a holiday, event, success, etc. Thus for example, when receiving a gift, present, money, a favour or a good deed, the recipient usually kisses his benefactor's hand and adds verbal blessings to his greeting. The semantic of this kinemomorpheme is expressing gratitude, appreciation and respect. And in the cases when the kisser of the hand wants and expects a favour or something else, then the semantic of the gesture is making a strong request, asking, begging a favour, good will, protection and a demonstration of obedience to the person kissed/greeted.

If we accept that giving, fetching a drink (mostly brandy and wine) in most cases is semantically equal to granting a gift, then the meaning of kissing the hand that the young girl/fiancée/bride performs during the engagement and wedding ceremonies becomes clear. This applies to the cases when brandy is served to the participants in the rites of the small and the big engagement ceremony, and the wedding feast (Dobrev 1971:1224, 1225; Genchev 1985:188).

Kissing the hand is an obligatory gesture which the young girl/fiancée/young bride and the young boy/fiancé/bridegroom as well as other ritual persons use in cases when they receive or give gifts, within the framework of a custom or rite. A similar case is the kissing of the hand of a priest by laymen, when at *Epiphany* (6th Jan.) he reads a prayer and sprinkles them with holy water. In the last case the semantic of the gesture is to express gratitude for the purification received. Expressing gratitude, appreciation and showing respect and veneration is the most significant in the semantic of the greeting with a kiss, when giving or receiving ritual objects.

Confirming the new social status is connected with kissing a hand, which the bride performs several times after the wedding in the following ritual situations: when the best man or the best man's woman removes her veil (Genchev 1985:191); when her mother-in-law invites her for the first time for *St. George's Day* (6 May) to knead dough for the ritual loaves of bread (Marinov 1981:595); when at the table for *St. George* her best man or her brother-in-law removes her wedding coat, takes off her wedding shoes and instead of them puts on her ordinary shoes similar to those of the other women (Marinov 1981:613). With these sign activities the young bride (for a year after the wedding) finally adopts her new social identity, receives and acquires the status of a *married woman* and takes her place among the married as equal. Kissing is a sign of gratitude and appreciation of the person performing the rite.

Kissing the hand in the ritual complex of the big Christian feast – *Easter* – has a special meaning. After the service on Easter morning all the members of the family kin start the ritual of *ristosvane*. This is mutual kissing of the hand by the young to the old, children to parents, newly-weds to best men, etc. and vice versa. The remarkable thing about the gesture is that both the kisser and the kissed hold an egg in their right palm (of the hand kissed) – altogether two painted Easter eggs. At the moment of the mutual kissing of the hand they exchange the eggs. The kinemomorphemes are accompanied with a verbal request for forgiveness. In this case the interpretation of the semantic of the kinemomorpheme is complicated by a preceding fact. Only a few hours earlier during the solemn Christian vespers service in church when greeted with “*Christ arose from the dead*” and the answer “*He arose indeed*” the same participants kissed each other on the cheeks three times (Marinov 1981:581-586). If we interpret this situation correctly, then within the frame of the church and canonical ritual the participants use the kinemomorpheme of mutual kissing on the cheeks as an expression of the joy of all people at the Resurrection of Christ. The gesture originates in the Christian idea of equality of all believers (Petruchin et al. 1995:320-321; Chevalier 1996:565). Thus they manifest their Christian love of each other, their obedience and humility. At home patriarchal society transforms the canonical gospel greeting into a single mutual kissing of the hand, but keeps the semantic of the momentary hierarchical equalisation. The request for receiving and giving forgiveness which marks the border of a new seasonal beginning can be added to it. The symbolic meaning of Easter eggs, which are to be exchanged, brings some complication. They are connected with the Christian idea of the Resurrection and the renewed hope, and on the mythological level are thought of as a primary source of life as well as objects having magical protective power. Naturally, in the gesture the idea of a greeting on the occasion of the great Christian holiday is uppermost.

## Conclusions

Several conclusions on the topic:

- In most cases the kinemomorpheme used is a sign of designating and underlining a hierarchical seniority – age, gender, social, ritual.
- The manner and frequency of using the gesture, as well as its concrete semantic depend largely on gender, age, social status and the ritual part of the greeter and the greeted one.
- Except for being a greeting the kinemomorpheme plays the role of a sign for marking a forthcoming change in the social status of the individual.
- Out of the framework of the ritual activity and without the participation of ritual persons, the semantic of the gesture is generally about emphasising and recognising superiority of age, gender, gratitude, and about expressing obedience, respect, gratitude or a strong request. Basic factors which influence forming the semanticity are the social status of the participants and the presence of concomitant kinemes and kinemomorphemes.



- In the scope of the ritual activity and with the participation of ritual persons the gesture has a largely displayed semanticity from stressing and accepting of social and ritual hierarchical seniority and the functions connected with it to asking for and receiving forgiveness, and to signifying turning points in a person's life. The main factors which influence forming of the semantic are the social status and the ritual role of the participants in a greeting, the presence and meaning of the concomitant kinemes and kinemomorphemes, as well as the presence and the symbolic meaning of ritual objects.
- The presence or the absence of a concrete ethnical or cultural stereotyped knowledge can be accepted as one of the factors for the forming and existence of the semantic spectrum which has been studied.
- As the traditional system of customs and rituals change, the semantic variety of gesture begins to decrease. The complicated and multifaceted meanings begin to disappear and semantics shrink to a few elements such as expressing respect, veneration, gratitude and appreciation. Together with that, in the urban milieu new aspects appear, such as expressing respect and fondness, tenderness, love of the married and unmarried woman – whether a Mrs. or a Miss.

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