

Review

One Kiss or Two? In Search of the Perfect Greeting

by Andy Scott

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This book is about far more than its title suggests. Andy Scott is a historian, diplomat and government advisor who has greeted people in 60 countries. In his nine chapters, he examines the history and psychology of etiquette in a lively and entertaining fashion enriched with stories from his own and others' experiences. In doing so, he uses the study of evolutionary biology, ethology, history, anthropology and futurism to explore the origins and development of culture and etiquette and where it might be going in the future.

The Oxford English Dictionary defines a greeting as 'a polite word or sign of welcome or recognition; the act of giving a sign of welcome; a formal expression of goodwill, said on meeting or in a written message'. Examining the origins of kissing and hand greeting in mammals, Scott cites Edward Wilson's *Sociobiology*, in which he states that culture and social organisation in humans are

responses to the same primate urges in animals for social bonding and security.

This was in direct contrast to the work of social scientist, Franz Boas, who believed that social context and culture determine how we behave. And yet, says Scott, our habits of greeting are to some extent evolutionary and can be observed in various forms in primates, as Jane Goodall observed in her studies of apes in Kenya.

In terms of social anthropology, says Scott, whatever evolutionary impulse might have stimulated it, handshaking was used in Mesopotamia and Greece and was taken up by the Romans and spread throughout the Roman empire. Handshaking and other forms of greeting, including kissing, are ways of matching your partner or showing respect to or asserting authority.

Scott uses history and natural sciences and psychology to study why people greet each other in the way they do and why different societies use different types and degrees of greetings. Of particular interest is his chapter on the seductive science of body language, where he reviews the research on judging character by first impressions, particularly the work of Albert Mehrabian at the University of California. Working with a small team of researchers in the 1960s, Mehrabian came up with the famous 7%-38%-55% rule that non-verbal communication makes up 93% of our communication. In other words, people judge us before we even open our mouths.

According to Mehrabian's research, 55% of our communication comes from the way we make gestures and from our facial expressions, 38% from the way we speak and only 7% from the words themselves. Many experts, including trainers and teachers, have assumed that therefore body language speaks louder than words and that the most important element in communication is non-verbal. In fact, as Scott demonstrates, Mehrabian's research was much more limited. He sought merely to examine the influence of verbal and non-verbal communication in expressing feelings and attitudes, especially when what is said and what is felt do not match.

Our body language may support what we are saying or it may not. As Michael Argyle, a

researcher at Oxford University, working at the same time as Mehrabian, found, body language is a better indicator of attitude, and that when body language supports what we are saying it reinforces what is said by as much as 4.3%.

To give examples of how our body language betrays our real emotions, Scott cites the example of Joe Navarro, a former FBI agent who trains and writes on how to spot what people really mean or feel through their body language. *'The feet'*, Navarro says, *'are the most honest part of your body'*, followed by arms and hands. Scott goes on to show how this can influence politics and public affairs as in the victory of J.F. Kennedy over his opponent Richard Nixon in the American presidential election in 1960. The turning point was the first televised presidential election debate.

Kennedy looked smart, fresh and tanned. Nixon, who hadn't been very well, looked unshaven and badly dressed in comparison to Kennedy. Although Nixon did better in subsequent debates, that night is considered to have given Kennedy the small number of votes he needed to win. Scott cites the New York Times journalist, Russell Baker, who wrote: *'That night image replaced the printed word as the natural language of politics'*.

Another interesting theme of the book concerns the influence of culture and in his chapter *'Forget about Chimpanzees'* he explores a sociological

argument about how cultures develop and therefore how etiquette and greetings differ. Citing professor Robert Foley, co-founder of the Leverhulme Centre for human evolutionary studies at Cambridge University, Scott notes that the human race is marked by relatively low biological diversity, but high cultural diversity.

As the first human groups spread out from East Africa, where human life is believed to have first evolved, so they developed different forms of 'socially transmissible behaviour', which is how human evolution scholars like Foley define culture. By 15,000 years ago mankind had spread to every continent, but it was only around 4,000 BC that the first settled communities grew up in Iraq (Mesopotamia) and Syria.

As settled agriculture and cities developed, communities began to trade. People who didn't know each other but worked with other developed a common culture – a way of building links within and between groups. As Sir Keith Thomas of Oxford University put it, the last two thousand years or so has been the age of culture – when culture consciously overrode nature and greetings are '*an expression of our social relations*'.

And what of the future? How will a wired world with international connections through the Internet and unparalleled advances in electronics and robotics affect human communication?

First, the language we use will consolidate into a few large volume languages. Scott cites English, Spanish and Arabic as examples and quotes the statistic that between 1970 and 2005 the number of living languages declined by about 20%. Statisticians have estimated that a language dies every two weeks or so.

Secondly, the trend towards informality, which has increased since merit and money began to replace traditional hierarchy and status, will accelerate as we become 'one international tribe'.

However, biologically, our brains are wired to deal with smaller groups of about 150 and that we may have an inner circle of as few as five people. Since greetings are primarily concerned with affirming and reinforcing relationships, they will continue within the different micro-cultures we create of family, personal friendship, work, social activities and so on, and greetings will still play a role in acknowledging relationships, showing respect and deference and demonstrating affection.

As Scott himself acknowledges, etiquette isn't easy, and for outsiders is shrouded in uncertainty. Any foreigner who has tried the one kiss or two, or three or four and which cheek to kiss first in France, for example, will know that.

So, Scott concludes with six guidelines on using greetings and observing etiquette.

1. Greetings are important. They are an excellent way of recognising people.
2. Be wary of your judgements. It is easy to jump to conclusions too fast.
3. Don't try too hard. Go with the flow, but don't try to be something you are not.
4. Keep it open. Keep your posture open and your intentions clear.
5. Reciprocation rules. Try and reciprocate

greetings in kind. If you fail to do so, it may suggest a breakdown in etiquette.

6. Don't worry if it goes wrong. Remember that people are less focused on us than we think. If you get it wrong, say you are uncertain and acknowledge your mistakes.

The book will be of value to students and teachers of culture, especially as it introduces research that most teachers of language and culture don't normally get involved with, and does so in a lively and entertaining fashion.