THE FACE OF MINNESANG: KINNEGRAMS, CORPOREAL PHRASEOLOGY, AND EMOTIONAL EXPRESSIONS

by Adam Oberlin – Minneapolis

Abstract:
This contribution to the historical phraseology of Middle High German contends that kinnegrams (phraseological units of non-verbal communication), in a primarily emotional context in the love lyric, offer evidence for pervasive physicality in a genre often discussed in terms of disembodied themes, as well as for some degree of gendered language in the expression of emotions outside direct discourse. The latter point adds to the ongoing debates surrounding the role of language and gender in the German love lyric, which have hitherto focused principally on dialogue, and the breadth of the corpus employed moves beyond the standard sources of Minnesang scholarship to demonstrate diachronic phraseological continuity regardless of thematic developments.

1. Introduction

Hohe minne counts among the oldest objects of research in MHG literary and philological studies, including its development into parodic or other self-referential and -critical forms. It is simultaneously a connection to a widespread European tradition and fertile ground for exposing idiosyncratic developments in the intellectual, literary, and cultural history of German-speaking lands in the Middle Ages. Within this framework emotions are generally abstract, that is, poets implicitly express emotion via imagery (e.g., the fading of summer into winter) and explicitly via devices such as apostrophe of the heart in a confessional mode.

Additionally the physical world fades in importance to the interior world of the heart, the mind, and emotional expression, whether ‘genuine’ or as part of a performance (see section 2 below.) However, there remain many more corporeal aspects of Minnesang than are commonly recognized, including non-phraseological formulas, phrasemes (phraseological units), and body parts and bodies within rhetorical devices. These occurrences are relatively frequent despite having been largely overlooked as a lexical group of thematic importance in the genre, and their numbers include far more than the
commonly cited röter munt. Corporeal facets of human life and the pleasant and not-so-pleasant aspects of human bodies are common themes in MHG literature and occur in phrasemes of all types, including the scatological (cf. ein vurz lazzen, which appears nine times in the Mittelhochdeutsche Begriffsdatenbank.) Crude expressions of bodily functions have little place in the love lyric, but for all their hypothetical musing, verbal expressions of emotion, and stylized scenes, medieval German love poems are also furnished with physical gestures and movements that convey as much meaning as direct speech acts.

This study views bodies, limbs, and facial features from a phraseological perspective as they relate to emotional expression, for example, weeping, flushed faces, and gestures of fealty, obeisance, greeting, and parting, among others. In phraseological terms polylexical (semi-)fixed expressions of non-verbal communication with an effect on discourse and pragmatic dimensions are termed kinnegrams. An illustration in ModE is to shake one’s head, and in NHG die Stirn runzeln. In both examples a culturally subjective gesture is encoded within a collocation that has both a literal physical meaning and a secondary level of abstract meaning. In psychological terms, a kinnegram involving the face with an emotional interpretation in the secondary level of meaning can be understood as a lexical representation of an affect display, which is the movement of facial muscles that creates

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1 See Friedrich 2006, 30-1; Burger 2010, 44-5 and 60-1; and Burger et al. 1982, Ch. 4, “Pragmatische Aspekte,” 106-67 (the term is not mentioned in older studies, e.g., Häusermann 1977 and Pilz 1978. From the perspective of cognitive linguistics, psycholinguistics, semantics, and other fields gestures and non-verbal communication are also central objects of research. See, for example, Kita 2003. Wierzbicka 1999 features a chapter on “Reading the Human Face,” 168-215, in which the psychology and semantics of facial expressions are discussed as comparable to linguistic units, both readable and capable of projecting meaning. Purely non-verbal communication of the type displayed by facial expression is encoded within the verbalized content of kinnegrams. Some research has been done in the lexical-physical interface between facial expressions and emotions; for a notable example involving Lao phraseology, see Enfield 2001.

2 Other semiotic levels are discussed in Burger 2010, 61. Burger et al. 2007, 101, also notes the special case of kinnegram metaphoricity in which both literal and symbolic meanings exist side-by-side.