

# A Brief Introduction to *Harsnerēn*

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**Abstract** *Harsnerēn*, meaning ‘Language of the Bride’ in Armenian, was a gesture-based form of communication used by married women. *Harsnerēn* was used when communication was absolutely necessary, as restrictions were typically placed on the speech of married women. The fieldwork for this study was conducted in six villages in Armenia where the author of this article filmed and documented first-hand accounts of uses of *Harsnerēn*. *Harsnerēn*, while observed as a tradition of the past, allows for an examination of the relationship between language and power dynamics in intimate, familial, and social relationships in modern society.

**Keywords** Harsnerēn. Silence-keeping. Language. Sign language. Women. Armenian.

**Summary** 1 Introduction. – 2 Fieldwork. – 3 *Harsnerēn* and Silence-Keeping. – 4 Gestures of *Harsnerēn*. – 5 Conclusions.



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## 1 Introduction

Contemporary musicians frequently create their own renditions of traditional Armenian folk songs. They apply modern twists to ancient melodies, making the songs and the lyrics they entail accessible in the present. Folk songs were passed on orally and typically described life and customs of the time. The revitalisation, reimagining, and professional recording of Armenian folk songs over the years has allowed modern populations to understand and engage with the traditions of ancient, rural Armenia. The folk song *K'amin Zana* includes a verse which describes a man's admiration for a beautiful woman. The verse concludes with the lines, *Atji, srteri orskan, aman | arnem dar'nas č'xoskan* 'Girl, you hunter of hearts | I'll marry you, you'll become mute' (Music of Armenia 2016). Through these lines, the man describes the woman as a 'hunter of hearts' and expresses his desire to marry her, upon which she will become *č'xoskan/č'xōskan*, 'mute'.

The notion of *č'xoskanut'yun/č'xōskanut'iwn* refers to the practice of not speaking. Upon marriage, a bride typically observed a period of silence where she did not communicate using oral language (Hoo-gassian Villa, Kilbourne Matossian 1982; Berberian 2000). The extent of a woman's silence varied among households and was contingent upon unique familial dynamics (Kekejian 2021). Depending on how strictly a bride's family mandated silence-keeping, a woman might be silent for up to one year, until her first child was born (however long that may take), or even for decades until she was implicitly or explicitly granted permission to speak (Kekejian 2021). The concept of *č'xōskanut'iwn* is elaborated further in section 3.

During these years of silence, a woman employed a gesture-based form of communication to convey necessary information to members of her household. This gestural form of communication was known as *Harsneren/Harsnerēn* (Kekejian 2017; 2021; Karbelashvili 1935). The word *harsn* in Armenian translates to 'bride' in English. The suffix *-erēn* is added to the name of a place, including countries or regions, and indicates the language used by the residents of that place. The word *harsn* combined with the suffix *-erēn* creates the word *Harsnerēn*, which comes to mean 'language of the bride' in Armenian (Kekejian 2017; 2021).

## 2 Fieldwork

The fieldwork for this ongoing study of *Harsnerēn* was conducted in the provinces of Tavuš and Gełark'unik' of present-day Armenia. Specifically, interviews and data collection were carried out in Bałanis, Oskepar, Oskevan, and Noyemberyan in Tavuš Province and Gavai, Martuni, and Joragyuł in Gełark'unik' Province. Over 50 interviews

were conducted as part of this fieldwork; they took place in individuals' homes as well as in community spaces (e.g. a church) and public gathering areas. During my fieldwork, I had the opportunity to film uses of the nearly forgotten sign language. Such documentation had not been done since the work of Georgian scholar D.P. Karbelashvili from the USSR Academy of Sciences in Tbilisi in the early 1930s (Karbelashvili 1935).

A large part of my research on *Harsnerēn* has consisted in finding previous documentation on the topic to guide my work. When I was an undergraduate student at the University of California, Irvine (UCI), I obtained the only known primary source that was available at the time (until my current work) that discussed the sign language of Armenian women. The book is entitled *Ručnaja-reč' na Kavkaze. issledovanie po materialam baraninskogo rajona SSR Armenii. Manual Speech in the Caucasus. Research on Baranchinsky Region Armenian SSR*, by D.P. Karbelashvili (1935). Upon obtaining the book through library resources at the university, I collaborated with Mr. Mitchell Brown, Scholarly Communication Coordinator and Research Librarian at UC Irvine Libraries, who translated Karbelashvili's book from Russian to English. The original Russian text as well as the English translation (which includes my preliminary findings as the forward) has been made available online through eScholarship, a comprehensive open access publishing programme for the University of California (Karbelashvili 1935).

The translation of the book provided valuable insight into Karbelashvili's initial research objectives, sites, and findings. In the fall of 1931, D.P. Karbelashvili embarked on an expedition to four villages in the Tavuš province of present-day northeast Armenia with linguists, historians, an artist, a film director, and a film operator to explore the sign language used by married Armenian women (Karbelashvili 1935, 3). According to Karbelashvili, he and his team documented the practice in four ways: through descriptions, graphic illustrations, photography, and filming of the gestures. Moreover, the translation of Karbelashvili's book helped reveal the locations for his fieldwork – the villages of Bałanis, Oskepar, Oskevan, and Noyemberyan in the Tavuš Province of present-day northeast Armenia.

Karbelashvili's work and findings were cited by linguists and scholars who followed him, primarily discussing the presence of the sign language of Armenian women (Paget 1936) and placing it within the framework of other gesture-based forms of communication (Kendon 1988; Umiker-Sebeok, Sebeok 1987). The sources, while scarce, cite Karbelashvili's text as a reference for the sign language employed by Armenian women but provide no further analysis.

I began my fieldwork in 2016 by travelling to the villages where Karbelashvili conducted his original study over 80 years earlier, the four aforementioned villages in Tavuš Province. A more complete un-

derstanding and proper documentation of this communication system was only possible through in-person conversations with women and their families in that region. Specifically, I began my fieldwork in Bałanis (one of the villages where D.P. Karbelashvili conducted his exploration in the early 1930s). Coincidentally, I had travelled to Bałanis in 2014 to conduct volunteer work in the village; at that time, I had not begun to explore the topic of *Harsnerēn*. Through my volunteering in 2014, I had met the mayor of Bałanis village who became a point of contact for me in the village and in the regions when I began my fieldwork for the study of *Harsnerēn*.

I met with the mayor of Bałanis upon my arrival in the village in the summer of 2016 and informed him of my research interests surrounding the gesture-based sign language of married Armenian women. I requested that he direct me to elderly individuals in the village who may be able to provide more information and insight on the topic; he agreed and assisted in coordinating many of the interviews that I conducted, particularly in the early stages of the study. The first woman I interviewed informed me that she used to speak *Harsnerēn* (using the name/word *Harsnerēn* specifically). Prior to my fieldwork (and that initial encounter), scholarly evidence had not identified the name *Harsnerēn* in reference to the gesture-based communication medium of Armenian women; the practice had simply been described as the sign language of Armenian women (including in Karbelashvili's text). Thus, the name *Harsnerēn* was uncovered and documented during my first experience of fieldwork in 2016 in the village of Bałanis.

Following the first interview I conducted in Bałanis, many others were conducted through word-of-mouth and personal referrals in Bałanis and its neighbouring villages. Given the population and density of the village(s) in northeast Armenia, individuals I interviewed referred me to family, friends, and neighbours they knew who employed or knew about *Harsnerēn*. Through those personal references and with the help of the mayor, I went to different homes in the village(s) and conducted interviews. The interviews were carried out in a conversational format with women and their families; thus, interviews were conducted not just by women who 'spoke' (employed) *Harsnerēn* directly, but by those who *understood* it and were *receptors* of it (e.g. husbands, sons, in-laws, and other family members). Interviewing various people who employed and understood *Harsnerēn* (with regards to its gestures but also its social and cultural underpinnings) provided further insight into the use and practice of *Harsnerēn*.

In 2018, I returned to Armenia and travelled to Gełark'unik' Province to conduct more interviews in the cities of Gavař, Martuni, and Joragyul. The interviews happened organically (i.e. through word-of-mouth personal referrals) there as well. For example, when I first arrived in Gavař with a friend, we were dropped off in the city centre by our taxi driver. We then walked into a small market to buy food where

the owner asked us where we were from and why we had come to visit Gavař. I told her that I was there to inquire more about *Harsnerēn*, and she referred us to her friend who lived around the corner who employed *Harsnerēn* to communicate years prior. That is how I conducted my first interview in Gavař, which was then followed by personal referrals to other individuals who employed or could speak to *Harsnerēn*. Additionally, prior to leaving Gavař, my friend and I decided to visit the church in the town centre. While in the church, we were once again asked by a local woman why we were visiting Gavař. I mentioned my study of *Harsnerēn* and she shared that she herself employed *Harsnerēn* for decades; that is how I conducted my last interview in Gavař – in church. The methodology employed for studying *Harsnerēn* was (and is) very organic, as demonstrated by my conversational interview process that was initiated through personal referrals by residents of the village(s) I conducted fieldwork in. Throughout my fieldwork, I have largely relied on my instincts and acquired knowledge to guide the procedures for researching this relatively unexamined topic (Naber 2021).

### 3 *Harsnerēn* and Silence-Keeping

An integral part of understanding *Harsnerēn* is an examination of the practice of *č'xōskanut'iwñ* mentioned earlier. *Č'xōskanut'iwñ* has been previously documented in Armenian scholarly work (e.g. Hoogassian Villa, Kilbourne Matossian 1982; Berberian 2000). Armenian women's communication through hand-based gestures during periods of silence has also been documented (Berberian 2000). In their book, *Armenian Village Life Before 1914*, Sousie Hoogassian Villa and Mary Kilbourne Matossian describe that typically after a woman got married "she became mute, lost her individuality, and fell under the absolute control of her elders" (1982, 71). Throughout my fieldwork, participants also discussed periods of observed silence when speaking was not permitted and when silence was mandated by their husbands and/or in-laws. The present study of *Harsnerēn* fills a gap in that literature by revealing the specifics of the communication mechanism that was employed during these periods of silence.

As indicated previously, my interviews have revealed that the extent of a woman's silence as well as her use of *Harsnerēn* varied depending on household dynamics and relationships (Kekejian 2021). For instance, in one household, a bride might only be forbidden from speaking to her in-laws; however, in another home, a bride might not be allowed to speak to her husband, mother-in-law, father-in-law, uncle, and aunt (Kekejian 2021). For women who observed *č'xōskanut'iwñ*, permission to speak was often explicitly granted by the dominant in-law or implicitly when that in-law died or when the bride's first child was born (Kekejian 2021).

One participant I interviewed in Bałanis recalled her mother's experience being granted permission to speak. Her father-in-law had given her mother jewellery as a gesture for granting permission to speak from that point on. She explained that, *matani dvec' tē inč' dvec' or lezun bac'vi, ira het xoselu iravunk' unec'av* 'he gave a ring or something and her tongue opened up, she was given permission to speak to him'. Another participant in Bałanis I interviewed discussed how she did not speak for 14 years upon marriage; she began to speak after her father-in-law died in 1976. She stated that, *kesrars merav, hetə lriv t'alec'im č'xoskanut'yunə*, 'my father-in-law died, and I completely buried my silence with him' (Kekejian 2021).

An Armenian woman was expected to be "modest and virtuous" and the clothing she wore had to accurately reflect those characteristics (Lima 1974, Introduction). As a symbol of their silence, modesty, and respect to others, women often covered their hair and lower half of their face with a veil, leaving only their eyes visible (Hoogasian Villa, Kilbourne Matosian 1982; Lima 1974). A bride often remained veiled in public until her first child was born or for the first few years of her child's life (Hoogasian Villa, Kilbourne Matossian 1982, 80-94). During my interviews, participants frequently discussed the wearing of a white veil to cover their hair and lower half of their face, including their mouth. It was expressed that a father-in-law must have never seen the bride's mouth as there was an aspect of shame associated with the visibility of a woman's mouth. One participant I interviewed discussed how her mother wore a veil to cover her head and mouth and would communicate using *Harsnerēn* when needed; she elaborated that her mother died never having been granted permission to speak.

The youngest participant I have spoken to was 19 years old at the time of the interview which was conducted in 2018 in Gełark'unik' province. She said that she was *č'xōskan* for one year upon marriage - until the birth of her first child. The oldest women I interviewed were in the four villages of Tavuš province, where all participants were between 60 and 96 years of age. Some have revealed that they were silent until 1976, 1978, and 1985 respectively. As indicated by the aforementioned ages and dates, the practice of *č'xōskanut'iwn* lives on to this day. This evidence highlights that the practice of silence-keeping and the use of *Harsnerēn* have persisted even through more modern times. *Harsnerēn* and *č'xōskanut'iwn* are not synonymous terms; a woman's *č'xōskanut'iwn* did not necessarily mean that she spoke *Harsnerēn*; some women said they had not used any form of communication, including gestural, during their periods of silence. On the contrary, if a woman spoke *Harsnerēn*, it meant that she practiced some degree of *č'xōskanut'iwn*. Simply put, *Harsnerēn* implies *č'xōskanut'iwn*, but the opposite is not always true.

There is an undeniable social and psychological impact that lives on in the present due to uses of *Harsnerēn* in the past (Kekejian 2021).

During my interviews, some women revealed that while they are not being mandated to speak *Harsnerēn* at this time, they still feel the need to remain silent in various settings. This immediately excludes women from both public and even private spaces and conversations. The study of *Harsnerēn* reveals the mutually constitutive relationship between the past and the present - namely, that ancient traditions are not isolated from modern realities and, in fact, greatly influence the current situations of Armenian women of various ages (Kekejian 2021).

Women who have spoken *Harsnerēn* are living proof of this ancient practice and its repercussions are very much manifest in today's society. *Harsnerēn* also highlights deeply rooted gender discrimination in Armenian culture which has, between the past and the present, paved the way for gender-based violence in modern Armenian society (Kekejian 2021). During my interviews, some women revealed being physically abused at moments when they broke their silence; one woman I spoke to described her experience of having a miscarriage and telling her husband about it through gestures out of fear of breaking her silence (Kekejian 2021).

#### **4 Gestures of *Harsnerēn***

My study of *Harsnerēn* allows for comparisons to be drawn with the first documentation of the practice by D.P. Karbelashvili in the early 1930s. This is done specifically by analysing the overlap and juxtaposition of the signs that women demonstrated as well as the societal norms of both times. Karbelashvili documented approximately 101 gestures, including single words and short phrases in his book; these included gestures representing people, animals, places, objects, and even abstract concepts. To this point in my research, I have documented over 20 individual words and phrases of *Harsnerēn*. My fieldwork has revealed signs that overlap with and vary from those included in Karbelashvili's documentation. Gestures that overlap in our documentation include those for 'cow', 'house', and 'water' among a few others.<sup>1</sup> Signs that I have recorded that do not appear in Karbelashvili's documentation include 'doctor', 'wash', and 'phone call' among others.

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**1** See [figs 1-3] retrieved from Karbelashvili 1935, 46-56.

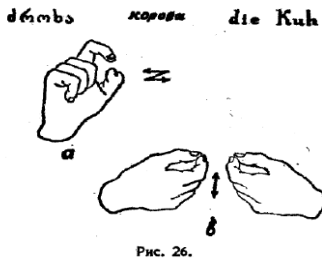


Figure 1  
Gesture for 'cow'. © Karbelashvili 1935



Figure 2  
Gesture for 'house'. © Karbelashvili 1935

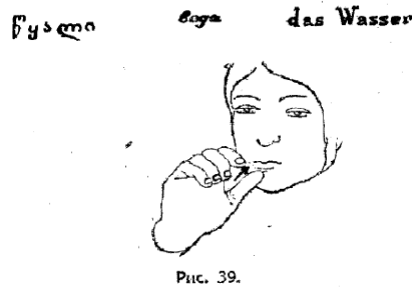


Figure 3  
Gesture for 'water'. © Karbelashvili 1935

Karbelashvili's documentation of gestures of *Harsnerēn* is more extensive than mine. One reason for this variation could be that he was documenting the gestures when they were actively being used, while my documentation primarily consists of women's recollection of their own, or their mothers' use of *Harsnerēn*. This comparison raises intriguing questions about how Karbelashvili was able to gain access to the women's sphere and document the somewhat secret sign language of married Armenian women when it was actively being used during the USSR.

One key difference between our data sets is that Karbelashvili recorded abstract concepts such as 'soul', 'God', and 'conscience' (Karbelashvili 1935). My fieldwork revealed that *Harsnerēn* was primarily used to communicate basic needs such as asking for food or water, informing of illness, and conveying important information related to household tasks. Across all the participants I interviewed, the gestures most commonly demonstrated were those meaning 'eat' and 'drink'. The frequency and consistency of these gestures across participants provides further evidence that *Harsnerēn* was primarily used to convey basic needs to household members.

The signs for 'mother-in-law' and 'father-in-law' were reoccurring in my fieldwork. Upon marriage, a bride typically lived with her husband and in-laws (Hoogasian Villa, Kilbourne Matossian 1982). It is



significant that gestures for these two words are part of the bride's repertoire as they highlight the critical role the in-laws played and the impact they had on the bride's everyday life. Throughout my interviews, participants demonstrated the gesture for 'mother-in-law' quite frequently. It was often in the context of asking for things such as food. A bride's mother-in-law controlled many aspects of her life including when she ate and the extent of her silence (Hoogasian Villa, Kilbourne Matossian 1982). Interestingly, the mother-in-law, who was once a silent bride herself, often imposed speech restrictions on to the next generation.

At this point in my research, it can be assumed that some uniformity of *Harsnerēn* did exist, as women in different villages who recalled uses of it demonstrated similar gestures at times. These included the gestures that represented 'eat', 'drink', and 'mother-in-law' among others. One assumption as to how such similarities or uniformities around *Harsnerēn* arose is due to observing women in their families (such as their mothers) employ signs of *Harsnerēn* years prior and then adapting their repertoires based on their environmental needs and circumstances.

## 5 Conclusions

There is a great deal that is unknown about *Harsnerēn* and its lasting impact; and it is important to recognise that we may never comprehend it in its entirety. For example, at this time, we do not know for certain how far back in Armenian history the use of *Harsnerēn* dates or the extent to which it is being employed across the different provinces of Armenia proper today. There are different reasons for this lack of information surrounding *Harsnerēn*. One reason for this is that women who practice(d) *č'xōskanut'iwñ* and/or employed *Harsnerēn* have likely not had the opportunity to share their stories and experiences. To my knowledge, there has been no first-person documentation of *Harsnerēn* between Karbelashvili's documentation in the early 1930s and my (ongoing) documentation which began in 2016. Moreover, as appears in my interviews, the trauma of *Harsnerēn* lives on and many women do not want to relive that experience by talking about it; therefore, while much can still be uncovered about *Harsnerēn* today, it should be (and is) acknowledged and respected that many women do not wish to resurface those memories.

While the origin of *Harsnerēn* is unknown, at this point, it can be concluded that *Harsnerēn* was a language created by women and for women to communicate during these periods of silence. *Harsnerēn* was established and employed under difficult circumstances. Women who were *č'xōskan* or employed *Harsnerēn* were not deaf or speech impaired - their ability to use oral language was intact; yet, upon

marriage (which often occurred at a very young age) they were forbidden from exercising that ability as a sign of respect for those around them. Therefore, the use of *Harsnerēn*, from one perspective, can be observed as a subversive medium of communication.

The study of *Harsnerēn* is an ongoing project. In the coming years, I hope to conduct more interviews with people, in particular women, in different regions of Armenia to evaluate the extent of uses of *Harsnerēn* beyond villages in the provinces of Gelark'unik' and Tavuš. I plan to continue documenting the gestures of *Harsnerēn* and unpacking the customs which underlie it; I aspire to share my findings not only within academic circles, but also at community events. Driven by my belief to make research (findings) accessible and comprehensible, I wrote and directed a documentary short film entitled *Harsnerēn. Language of the Armenian Bride* which premiered at the Pomegranate Film Festival in Toronto in 2019 (Torosyan 2019). Moving forward, I hope to screen my documentary short at different domestic and international community events and film festivals as well.

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