

Necro-Semiotics

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Abstract

My presentation deals with announcements of death and funerals distributed all over Bulgarian locations. For instance, they are situated on trees, lampposts, doors, kiosks or benches and foreigners often ask why there are so many postings for wanted criminals — because they look like such postings because necrologies contain photographs of the deceased, as well as his name, year and place of birth and death. The main purpose of these announcements is overruled and they are the place for poetry, images and the most incredible decorations — flowers, saints, etc. On the other hand, Bulgarian necrology is the most free place for expression. One can do it by oneself, print and announcement and distribute it across the city. So, in a certain sense, in this kind of necrology, we may find a conflict between formal and informal discourse. The effects of this conflict will be analyzed in the presentation.

1. PRELIMINARY NOTES

My paper doesn't deal with corpses, vampires, devils, angels or demons, but with something more prosaic, unexciting and mournful: necrologies (obituary notices, death notices, etc – Pic.1):



FIG. 1: A CHAPEL IN SOZOPOL (BG) WITH NECROLOGIES

I have chosen to use the word «necrology», because it rhymes very well with the Bulgarian word «nekrolog (некролог)» (both words have a Greek origin: νεκρό-, stem of νεκρός, a corpse; and -λογία, due to λόγος, discourse, from λέγειν, to speak.). Hence the title of my paper: «necro-semiotics» is equivalent to «semiotics of necrology».

Necrology in Bulgaria (and on the Balkan Peninsula as a whole) seems to be an artifact hard to interpret. There are a lot of communicative failures in recognizing and understanding Bulgarian necrologies. For one, reference identification failures: foreigners often take them as a notice about criminals wanted by the authorities:



FIG. 2: TRADITIONAL BULGARIAN NECROLOGY FOR BOTH HUSBAND AND WIFE, DECEASED AT DIFFERENT TIME. FIG.3: PARODY OF WANTED NOTICE.

There are some obvious reasons for this confusion: on Pic.2 you can see very typical Bulgarian obituary poster, and on Pic.3 - some joke with the former US president George W. Bush, placed in the genre «Wanted» with approximately the same design as the Bulgarian necrology. To understand the differences, let us take a look at the requisites of Bulgarian necrology:



Translation:

OBITUARY NOTICE
 With deep sorrow we announce the decease on
 March 7th, 2009 of

 The name of the deceased
 Year of birth, year of death

 Our sorrow is great...
 Last Adieu!
 R.I.P.
 The funeral service will take place at...
 From the mourners

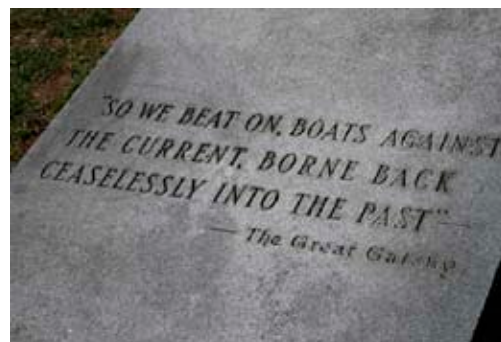
2. REQUISITES OF THE TYPICAL BULGARIAN NECROLOGY

1. Orthodox cross; 2. Mournful frame 3.Genre: obituary notice; 4. Ritual cliché & date of decease; 5. The verb *deceased*; 6. The three names of the deceased; 7. Year of birth – year of decease; 8. Epitaph; 9. Some useful information about the funeral service; 10. The author(s) of the necrology.

3. FUNCTIONS OF NECROLOGY IN BULGARIA

The main functions can be identified as follows: a notification of death/anniversary of death, including a note about the funeral/commemorative service; an epitaph; and, implicitly, a presentation of the deceased’s lifestyle by means of his own picture, ornaments, epitaphs, decorations, including even the cemetery.

In general the epitaph, according to tradition, should be placed on the grave stone:



The cross on the top of the obituary notice should be an orthodox cross:



The ornament and the mournful frame should be black (in Bulgaria, black is the color of mourning) and simple, because we are all equal before God.

The picture of the deceased should appear for the first time on the necrology commemorating the 40th day of the decease and should be B/W picture: the signs of life should be reduced *ad minimum*.

No decorations are admitted. The cemetery question is very important in Bulgaria, esp. in Sofia – Bulgaria's capital and largest city: if the grave(s) of your relatives is/are in the Central Cemetery of Sofia – Orlandovci, and you own it, you belong to the urban «aristocracy» of Sofia, or at least – you are a native citizen of Sofia. The other cemeteries are for the immigrants in Sofia.

All these requisites of the Bulgarian necrology, actually, are more or less visually destroyed, because the idea of their authors how to compile them includes some kind of introduction

to a lifestyle story of the deceased person. I argue that introducing the lifestyle story in Bulgarian necrology can be interpreted as an intuitive mass deconstruction of the Bulgarian funeral traditions in Bulgaria. I analyze this intuitive mass deconstruction through the pragmatics of necrology and, more precisely – through necrology, regarded as a holistic deictic sign.

Essentially, deixis is concerned with the way languages encode or grammaticalize features of the context of utterances or speech events and thus it also examines the



THE ORLANDOVCI CEMETERY IN SOFIA

ways in which the interpretation of an utterance depends on the analysis of its context (Levinson, 1983). According to Levinson (1983), there are five deictic categories: person, spatial, temporal, discourse (or text), and social deixis.

The primary and essential deictic functions of Bulgarian necrology – regarded as a holistic deictic sign - are to indicate the sacred places of the deceased: his (native) house, his eparchial church, and (optional) his grave. So the usual contexts for the obituary notices are every kind of front doors with crape (optional) above them:



THE SMALL TOWN & VILLAGE RESOLUTION



THE URBAN RESOLUTION
(A FRONT DOOR OF A FLAT)

also on special walls, placed left (for women) and right (for men) from the Occidental entrance of a church. Until 1945 and from 1990 the newspapers are also a usual context for obituary notices.



The unusual contexts are practically countless, but there are some amazing examples for inappropriate settings of necrology in urban spaces:



NECROLOGY WITH ANNOUNCEMENT FOR
A SALSA PARTY AT NIGHT



OBITUARY NOTIFICATIONS ABOVE
A GARBAGE CONTAINER



NECROLOGY ON AN ELECTRIC POLE



NECROLOGY AND TOYS...

This unusual context to set the obituary notices in the urban/rural space generates some unexpected effect, which I call the **palimpsest effect**. A palimpsest is a manuscript page from a scroll or book that has been scraped off and used again. The word «palimpsest» comes into English usage through Latin from Greek and meant «scraped (clean and used) again.» Now, look at this picture: on the wall there are very old, quite old, as well as more recent and new obituary notifications and we can read them together, which generates some kind of multi-temporal texts, which I call a «palimpsest»:



ALL THESE OBITUARY NOTICES OR PARTS OF THEM CREATE A «PALIMPSEST»



This observation (I deal with eternity, after all) guides me to draw some conclusions about the background of our (Euro-Atlantic) civilization. I think that this civilization is also based on the culture of palimpsest. How many Troyes do we actually have?

Or, how to interpret the Louvre pyramid in Paris:

In addition: I claim that **our (Euro-Atlantic) civilization is a palimpsest** – a good conceptual metaphor, no? That means that we never entirely delete the past in all its (re)presentations (narratives, traditions, manuscripts, books, inscriptions, history, images, architecture, music, etc).

In Europe there have been two attempts to change this palimpsest background of the European culture: once, during the French Revolution (especially the work of François-Urbain Domergue and his *Société des amateurs de la langue française* – Ricken, 1994), and after that – during the Bolshevik *coup-d'état* in Russia after 1917. As we now know, both attempts failed...

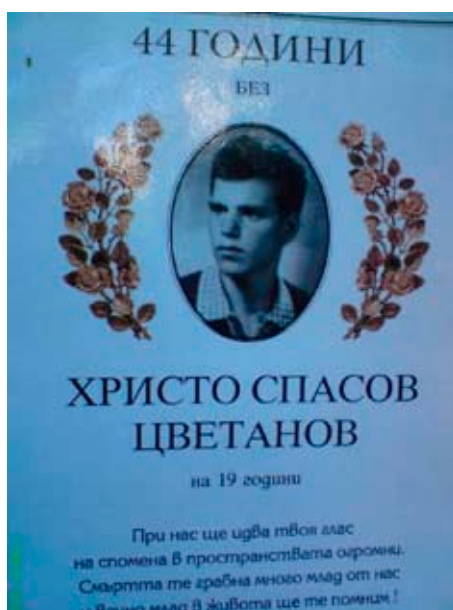
The palimpsest function of the obituary notices implies a shift from spatial deixis to discourse deixis.

The extrapolation of necrologies refer to several changes in their usage: they are not more just a announcements for death/anniversary of death; they (and not only the grave stones) are a place for putting an epitaph; they don't only show the sacred places for every human being but presuppose different kinds of lifestyles (religious, atheistic, fortune, power, etc.) which introduces discourse deixis (references to another narrative)

The shift from spatial deixis to discourse deictic function generates different forms of abuse, deviations, or even violations in the usage of necrology.

4. DEVIATION OF NORMS

This necrology commemorates the 44th anniversary of the decease which is unusual for the Bulgarian tradition. There is no any cross, a picture in medallion is set and around it there is something resembling a crown of laurels.



This necrology commemorates the 40th day anniversary of the decease. According to tradition, this is the first time when the authors are obliged to place a picture of the deceased. However, in this case the picture is colored, which is against the core tradition. There are too many flowers on the necrology: do they refer to the cemetery and grave, or simply to a nice park, which could even be a cemetery? A huge epitaph is set. The most important part of the necrology is practically illegible.



Here we can see a garland unusual for this genre, which implies a wedding invitation, rather than a necrology (remember the mournfulness and the simplicity of the mournful frame). The cross has nothing to do with the orthodox tradition (the form of the cross, and esp. the rose). There is no picture, because this is a pattern.



Here, instead of a kind of orthodox cross, a medallion with the Virgin Mary and the infant Jesus is put on the right. This medallion indicates Christmas and joy, rather than sadness.



Deviations: absence of a mournful frame, too many colors, too many different kinds of flowers, too many crosses, and a certain Catholic influence in the cross at the left of the picture (the praying hands): the appropriate cross on the top is 100% orthodox.



Deviations: an explicit breaking of tradition: no cross, no mournful frame, an unusual picture of the deceased person, no references as to who exactly he was.



Last, I publish a kind of violation of the tradition which could be interpreted as a pure profanation of the necrology tradition in Bulgaria:



Translation:

OBITUARY NOTICE

1948-2008

60 years

*You have poisoned the football,
so now you shall burn in hell!*

*Your dreams are now our reality –
«А» professional league of Bulgaria!...*

From non-mournful

03.06.2008

The rest is silence...

REFERENCES

Levinson, Stephen (1983): *Pragmatics*. Cambridge University Press.

Ricken, Ulrich (1994): *Linguistics, Anthropology and Philosophy in the French Enlightenment*.
Routledge.