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Pragmatics of obituary posters in Bulgaria*

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Titolo italiano: Pragmatica dei manifesti funebri in Bulgaria.

Abstract: This paper is part of a larger project named *Urban Palimpsests*. After pointing out the difference between obituary notices (in newspapers, for example) and obituary posters (spread practically everywhere in urban settlements), the paper describes in pragmatic and rhetoric terms the actual usage of obituary posters in Bulgarian public spaces and the effects of their inappropriate usages, which I name “deviations” and “violations”. Using the notions of space and discourse deixis, the paper claims that one can observe a kind of transformation from space to discourse deictic function in the usages of obituary posters, due to their transformation into a kind of manifest of different types of life-styles. The structure of the typical, ‘normative’ obituary poster is presented and analyzed and all kind of deviations and violations are compared to this normative model of an obituary poster. A short story of this artefact in Bulgaria is also proposed.

Key-words: obituary posters; obituary notices; linguistic and visual pragmatics; speech acts; rhetoric.

1. Preliminary notes

Obituary posters as a part of necrology in Bulgaria and in the Orthodox regions of the Balkan Peninsula seem to be an artifact hard to interpret, especially by foreigners (Christians, or non-Christians) (figs 1–2). I use the word “necrology” as a common name both for obituary posters, disseminated outside, all over the city or the village, and for obituary notices, published in the daily newspapers.

There are several reasons for that which I shall try to explain. The main reason, in my view, is that there is a certain semiotic problem in

* The author has made all efforts to secure permission for the publication of the pictures in this article.

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composing and editing those obituary posters on one hand and interpreting them, on the other.

As I suggest, obituary posters are composed mainly for deceased Christian Orthodox persons. In Bulgaria I have never seen an obituary poster for a deceased Muslim.¹ There are a few attempts to compose an obituary poster for deceased Jewish persons but they are embedded in the traditional Christian Orthodox pattern: instead of the Orthodox cross on top of the obituary poster, a Jewish star is placed there — and this is the only difference.

The Bulgarian and Orthodox tradition requires that obituary posters be disseminated to announce a person's decease, as well as the day, the hour, and the place of his (or her) funeral service. After that, Bulgarians have to spread obituary posters according to a strictly fixed calendar, as follows: three, nine, and forty days after the death, six and nine months after the death, and, after that, in every annual anniversary.



Figure 1. Obituary posters.



Figure 2. Obituary notices.

¹ Of course, this is not a valid claim when the deceased Muslim is a member of the Parliament or of the Government or a famous public person.

Nowadays, of course, this list is shorter: Bulgarians have to publish obituary notices (optional) and to disseminate obituary posters (obligatory) to announce the decease and the funeral service, on the 40th day and on the 6th month after death, and subsequently on every annual anniversary.

The first obituary poster and notice announcing the decease of somebody should be without a picture of the deceased person. After that it is necessary to publish a picture that must be the same as the picture used during the Orthodox commemorative ritual. The tradition insists on the fact that this picture should be black and white (or at most sepia) maybe due to the technological possibilities when Bulgarians and Orthodox started to type and disseminate obituary posters and to publish obituary notices in the newspapers.

I have to mention here that the necrology tradition in Bulgaria is quite new. Its origins are at the turn of the 20th century in urban contexts. After the Second World War the practice to disseminate obituary posters spread also in Bulgarian villages.

During the communist period in Bulgaria (1944–89) obituary notices were permitted only for members and leaders of the Bulgarian Communist Party and of the Bulgarian People's Agriculture Party, as well as for famous Bulgarian artists, actors, scientists, and other public persons. Nevertheless, there were no limits for obituary posters. In our days, black and white (or sepia) pictures have symbolic features which express that we — the living people — are mournful about our “dear deceased” and that the deceased no longer belong to the society of the living. Another interpretation is also possible: the signs of life on any obituary poster should be reduced *ad minimum*. This black and white (or sepia) picture may also be interpreted as an iconic sign of the colorless corpse.

2. Requisites of the typical obituary notice.

In Fig. 3 you can see a typical Bulgarian obituary poster with all the obligatory requisites. This obituary poster is for a deceased woman but there are no gender differences in obituary posters and notices.



Figure 3

Translation:

OBITUARY NOTICE

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

MILKA STOYANOVA

KALOYANOVA²

1914 – 2007

Our sorrow is great...

Last Adieu!

R.I.P.

The funeral service will take place at...

From the mourners

Requisites:

1. Orthodox cross
2. Mournful frame
3. Genre of the text: obituary notice
4. Ritual cliché & date of decease

² A female name.

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
11. According to tradition, the picture of the deceased woman is absent.

3. Function of obituaries posters in Bulgaria.

The main functions can be identified as follows:

- a notification of decease/anniversary of decease, including a note about the funeral/commemorative service;
- an epitaph;
- an implicit presentation of the deceased's lifestyle by means of his picture, ornaments, epitaphs, decorations, including even the cemetery (new function, quite unconventional).
- according to tradition, the epitaph should be generally placed on the gravestone (Fig. 4).

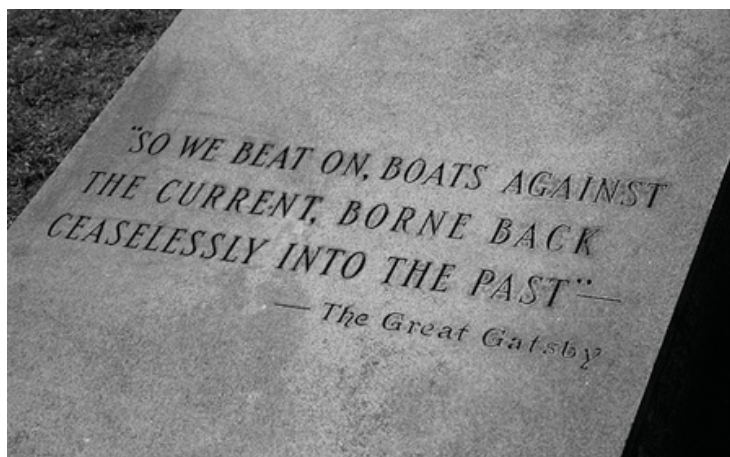


Figure 4. An epitaph.

The cross on the top of the obituary poster should be an Orthodox one. The ornament and the mournful frame should be black (in Bulgaria, black is the color of mourning) and simple, meaning that we are all equal before God. No superfluous decorations are permitted.

The cemetery question is also very important in Bulgaria, especially in Sofia: if the grave(s) of your relatives is (are) in the Central Cemetery of Sofia — Orlandovtsi (the equivalent of the Père-Lachaise Cemetery in Paris) — 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 — they are ‘second class’ cemeteries and people do not like to go there, even on All Souls’ Day. Hence it is very important in which cemetery the funeral service takes place, even though in our days the funeral service takes place in the city churches and only the closest relatives follow the deceased to his or her grave. The opposition between a native citizen of Sofia and the immigrants is extremely strong.

However, all these requisites of Bulgarian necrology have been more or less visually destroyed, because their authors’ idea of how to compile them includes a kind of introduction to the deceased person’s lifestyle story. I argue that introducing the lifestyle story into Bulgarian necrology can be interpreted as an intuitive mass deconstruction of the 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.

4. Typical and untypical contexts of obituary space setting

Deixis, in general, is concerned with the way languages encode or grammaticalize features of the context of utterances or speech events and thus it also examines the ways in which the interpretation of an utterance depends on the analysis of its context (Levinson 1983). According to Levinson, there are five deictic categories: person, spatial, temporal, discourse (or text), and social deixis (*ibidem*). My claim is that this is also valid of other sign systems, forming the discourse which in general is either not verbal or not only verbal.

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 or his cellule on the cemetery wall in case he was cremated.

The usual contexts for obituary posters are every kind of front doors with crape (optional) above them (Fig. 5–6).

Obituaries are also placed on special walls, on the left (for women) and right (for men) sides of the occidental entrance of a church (Fig. 7–8).



Figure 5. The small town & village pattern.



Figure 6. The urban pattern (a front door of a flat).



Figures 7–8.

In the second picture we can see that this right–left tradition is no longer in use: on both sides of the Occidental entrance of the church we can see male, as well as female obituary notices.

Until 1945 and after 1990, newspapers have been a usual context for obituary notices (Fig. 2). In newspapers we can observe another drift away from tradition: colored pictures are used as well as black and white pictures.

The unusual contexts are practically countless, but there are some amazing examples for inappropriate settings of necrology in urban spaces (Fig. 8–9).

The effects of such unusual setting for obituary posters are sometimes disgusting and humiliate the deceased. This unusual context to set the obituary posters in the urban/rural space generates an unexpected effect, which I call the *palimpsest effect*.

Look, for instance, at Fig. 10: on the wall there are very old, quite old, as well as more recent and new obituary notifications and we can read them together, a phenomenon that generates some kind of multi–temporal texts, which I call a “palimpsest”:

This phenomenon may generate some conceptual metaphors, as: *Human life is a palimpsest*; *Human history is a palimpsest*; *Our CV is a palimpsest*, etc. The palimpsest function of the obituary notices implies a shift from spatial deixis to discourse deixis. The extrapolation



Figures 8–9. Obituary posters with announcement for a salsa party at night; obituary posters above a garbage container.

of necrologies from their usual context refers to several changes in their usage: they are no longer mere announcements of a death or the anniversary of a death; they (and not only the grave stones) are a place for epitaphs; they presuppose different kinds of lifestyles (religious, atheistic, fortune, power, etc.) introduced by discourse deixis (references to another narrative, to the CV of the deceased person).

5. The semiotic problem

There are a lot of communicative failures in recognizing and understanding the outside obituary posters settled in unusual contexts. For one, reference identification failures: foreigners often take them as a notice about criminals wanted by the authorities (figs 11–2).



Figure 10. All these obituary notices or parts of them create a palimpsest.

There are some obvious reasons for this confusion: on your left you can see a very typical Bulgarian obituary poster, and on your right a joke about the former US president George W. Bush, embedded in the genre “Wanted” with approximately the same design as the Bulgarian necrology. But there are also some very obvious differences between the two pictures: on the right picture a cross and a mournful frame is absent; the picture of George W. Bush is in *en face* and in *profile*. Thus I can conclude that this confusion is due to the unusual contexts which are used: all these unusual places are more appropriate for police posters — an unknown practice in the Bulgarian cultural context — or for commercial and ‘informal’ posters — a very widespread practice in Bulgaria.

6. Semiotic functions of obituaries

I will apply Roman Jakobson’s list of linguistic functions (Jakobson 1960) to the artifact of obituary notices. Since we are dealing with verbal and visual texts which form the discourse of the obituary posters, I refer to “semiotic functions”. An obituary notice must have, first



Figures 11–2. Traditional Bulgarian necrology for both husband and wife, deceased at different times. Parody of a “Wanted” notice.

of all, a referential function: an announcement of the decease/of the commemorative ritual for an anniversary of the decease.

An explicit emotive function is also required: Bulgarian society requires mournful people to be visibly mournful. Since we may consider the obituary poster as a kind of invitation to participate in the ritual, the conative function is also present. The presence of epitaphs involves the poetic function but epitaphs are usually very bad poetry, containing the most widespread *clichés* to express mournfulness. My claim is that this multi-functionality of the obituary posters generates a different kind of violation in their usage, which I describe below.

The obituary poster as a speech act

According to John Searle's taxonomy of illocutionary acts (Searle 1976), obituary posters could be classified as representatives (obituar-ies commit the speaker to the truth of the expressed proposition), as well as directives (as attempts by the author to get the addressee to do something — for example to participate in funerals or commemorative services — with a more or less explicit perlocutionary effect). In addition, they function as expressives which express the author's psychological state. Hence we have a '3-in-1' case: three speech acts, combined more or less successfully in the one discourse of the obituary poster. This '3-in-1' situation may generate different kinds of communicative failures.

Rhetoric of obituary

According to Aristotle's terminology, the *Logos* in the obituary poster is implicitly present when a death occurs from natural causes, say, in the case of an old person, whereas it is completely absent when the cause of the decease is accidental or when the deceased is a young person. In this case, expressions like "the cruel destiny", "the cruel death", etc., are used extensively, expressions which imply an injustice (*sic!*) regarding the fact that human beings are unexpectedly mortal.

The *Pathos* is very close to the *Pathos* of soap operas or — in the best case — to the *Pathos* of the *littérature sentimentale* which coincides very well with the *Logos* of the obituary poster. In general, a

neutral attitude is forbidden because ‘the others’ may conclude that the deceased person was not loved by her relatives. The *Ethos* of the obituary poster is always positive, according to the principle *De mortuis aut bene aut nihil*.

Communicative failures in obituary usage – breaking the traditions

The obituary poster in Fig. 13 commemorates the 44th anniversary of the decease, which is unusual for the Bulgarian tradition, of a teenager — maybe due to his youth. There is no cross, the picture is set in a medallion and around it there is something resembling a crown of laurels. No commemorative service is announced, but there is an epitaph in the rhetorical terms described above.

The obituary poster in Fig. 14 commemorates the 40th day anniversary of the decease. According to tradition, this is when the authors are obliged to place a picture of the deceased for the first time. 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.

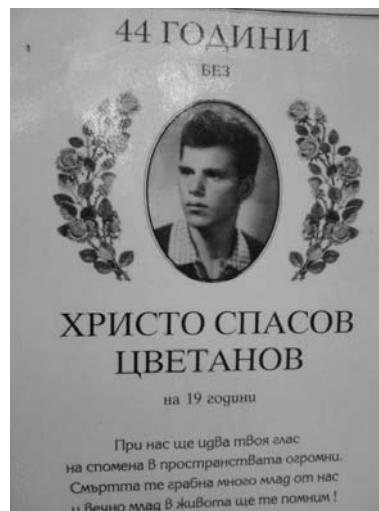


Figure 13

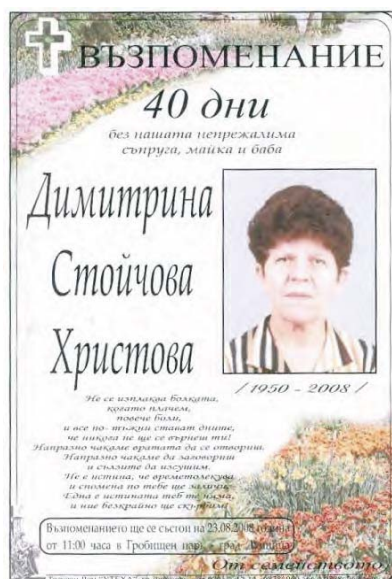


Figure 14



Figure 15

In this model for an obituary poster (Fig. 15) we can see a garland unusual for this genre, which implies more 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, but we may presuppose that the picture will be in colors.

In this obituary poster, instead of an orthodox cross of some kind, a medallion with the Virgin Mary and the infant Jesus is put on the right. This medallion indicates Christmas and expresses joy rather than sadness and mournfulness. The poster commemorates the 26th anniversary of the decease of a man. The epitaph claims that “The time is not in condition to fill the gap in our hearts after your loss. We live with the affection, the pain, and the memory for you”. There is no information about any kind of commemorative service.



Figure 16

In this obituary poster (Fig. 17) we notice an explicit breaking of tradition: no cross, no mournful frame, an unusual picture of the deceased person, and no references as to whom exactly he was. This obituary poster commemorates the 1st anniversary of the decease of a man. The epitaph says: “One year – eternity, but the pain is still hot. What more tremendous from this to be with us, but in fact to be absent. (*sic!*³) We miss you eternally”. There again, no information about any kind of commemorative service.

Last, I comment on a kind of violation of the tradition that could be interpreted as a pure profanation of the necrology tradition in Bulgaria (Fig. 18).

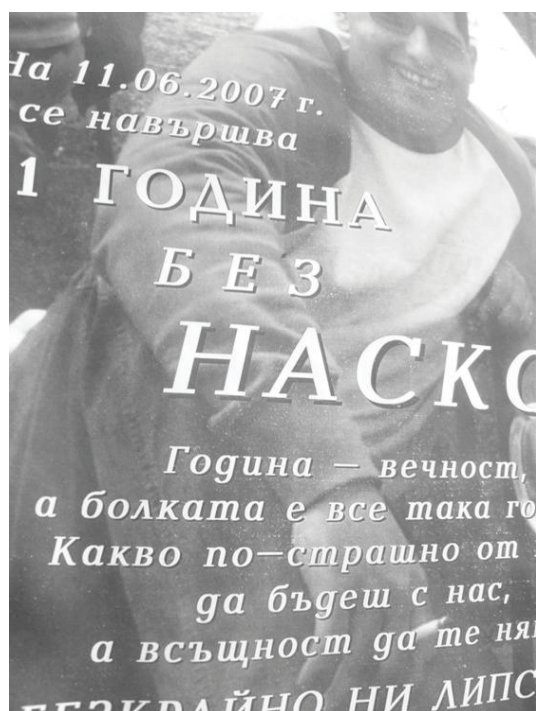


Figure 17

³ This statement sounds also like a non-sense in Bulgarian.

Some explanations are in order. The red color is the team color of the CSKA – the sport club of the Bulgarian Army which is supposed to be a ‘communist’ sport club, because it was founded after the Sec-



Figure 18

Translation:

OBITUARY NOTICE
1948–2008

60 years

You have empoisoned the football, so now you shall burn in Hell!
Your dreams are now OUR reality – “A” professional league of Bulgaria!...

From the non–mournful
03.06.2008

ond World War. The blue color is the color of CSKA's main adversary, Levski 1913, which is supposed to be democratic or at least non-communist. The Levski sport club is the traditional sport club of Sofia, so this is the sport club of the true citizens of Sofia which are supposed to be anti-communists. Thus the political fight between communists and anti-communists in Bulgaria since 1989 is mirrored also in sport competitions.

Conclusion

My aim in this paper was to show, by means of an inchoate semi-otic analysis, that obituary posters in Bulgaria serve one of their main social functions: to inform people about different kinds of activities for commemorating the deceased. The first one is still present: to announce someone's death. Today, commemorative obituary posters are more or less an expression of the vanity of the living, introducing elements of their own lifestyles into this mournful genre by representing the lifestyle of the deceased person.

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