

Spoken language as reflected in gravestone inscriptions. What do the stones of the dead tell us about the language of the living?

Michał Gluszkowski

Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń

Commemorating the dead is one of the oldest forms of ritualized social activity, and as R. Francaviglia (1971, 501) notes, “cemeteries serve both functional and emotional purposes.” The cemetery itself is one of the most natural and exemplary places of remembrance (Fr. *lieux de mémoire*) (Nora, 1989), and the memory is preserved not only in religious symbols and works of art, but also (and perhaps above all) in words. The attention paid to the longevity of gravestones and the long-standing history of many necropolises allows us to trace linguistic and sociolinguistic changes in a given community.

Of course, gravestones are primarily a source for research on written language, as that is the form in which they exist, and moreover, their inscriptions are largely formalized. However, in the case of minority communities, especially small language islands isolated from other speakers of a given language, written sources are closer to the spoken language than in societies using standardized national languages. Users of minority languages, especially those using dialectal varieties, often lack access to grammatical, lexical, and spelling norms, leading to significant variation in these areas. Minorities and language islands live somewhat on the margins of mainstream society (like R. Park’s “marginal man”), and their gravestones are more often created by non-specialists or by the representatives of the majority, who do not know the minority language and rely on texts provided to them, but this increases the chance of creating specific forms of inscriptions, including errors and variations. Descriptive inscriptions, such as maxims, words commemorating the deceased, and descriptions of their social roles, are often maintained in a spoken style. Unlike those of the dominant group, gravestones often bear unofficial names or nicknames rather than the full name. This means the inscription reflects what the deceased was called within the community during their lifetime, not their official name (the latter could be entirely different and reflect the culture of the majority).

The paper is based on material from Polish communities in various parts of the world (Ukraine, Russia, Turkey), and Russian Old Believers in Poland, Estonia, and Latvia. These communities operate under a kind of biscriptality (cf. Bunčić et al., 2016), resulting from the different alphabets (Latin and Cyrillic), or different sets of characters within the Latin script, used in the minority language and the surrounding majority language, which intensifies spelling variation. Diachronic analysis of selected cemeteries will allow us to demonstrate the influence of changes in the linguistic situation and social environment on the language of inscriptions, as well as certain aspects of changes in the everyday spoken language of the communities under question.

References

- Bunčić, D. et al. (2016). *Biscriptality. A sociolinguistic typology*. Heidelberg: Winter.
- Francaviglia, R.V. (1971), The cemetery as an evolving cultural landscape. *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 61: 501-509.

Nora, P. (1989). Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire. *Representations*, 26: 7–24.