

Review of the Book: Tomasz Włodarski *Evaluative Insights into Lives: Towards a Cognitive and Axiological Analysis of Obituaries*. Series: *Languages in Contact* No. 6. Wrocław 2016: Wydawnictwo Wyższej Szkoły Filologicznej we Wrocławiu, pp. 227.

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“The obituary pages, it turns out, are some of the best-read pages in the newspaper [...] the emotion is there, the tension, the entertainment, the tragedy, and the comic relief,” says an eminent American obituarist, Marilyn Johnson (2006: 7). In recent years, the obituary has enjoyed a remarkable revival in literary prestige and popularity with American and British newspaper readers. Thus, in the English-speaking world, hardly does a broadsheet appear without an obituary section or page. Furthermore, the modern obituary is no longer a templated death notice, which informs about the deceased, death circumstances, funeral or commemorative services, and lists the predeceased and survivors. On the contrary, obituary readers can find not only bare facts from the life of a person who, for some reason, obituarists have chosen to be commemorated but also a rich variety of stories, comments, quotations, anecdotes and even jokes. By applying a skillful combination of all tricks of the trade, they attempt at judging and evaluating the person, his/her life and achievements.

This evaluative character of the contemporary obituary has not been researched in-depth by contemporary linguistics, and in particular, by cognitive linguistic theory, axiological semantics and the theory of speech genres. Therefore, the research into contemporary British obituaries done by Tomasz Włodarski and presented in *Evaluative Insights into Lives: Towards a Cognitive and Axiological Analysis of Obituaries* provides a valuable insight into the phenomenon of media discourse. The monograph is based on the Author's PhD dissertation (*Kompozycyjne, tematyczne, stylistyczne i aksjologiczne cechy angielskiego gatunku 'Obituary'. Studium opierające się na analizie wybranej ogólnokrajowej prasy brytyjskiej*),

supervised by Michał Post and successfully defended at the University of Wrocław in 2011. The book has been published in the series *Languages in Contact* (Volume 6).

The monograph is organized into five chapters, and its first two chapters constitute the theoretical section of the book. Chapter I introduces and clarifies the key concepts: discourse, text, speech genre, and presents the reader with a selection of common and scholarly views. In its first part, the Author focuses on the relations between the abovementioned concepts, and emphasizes their pragmatic and cognitive aspects. Although the Author frequently refers to the key figures of discourse and genre analysis (including Teun van Dijk, Mikhail Bakhtin, James Gee, Anis Bawarshi and Mary Reiff), his approach is strongly influenced by seminal works by two Polish linguists, Tomasz Krzeszowski (1997) and Piotr Chruszczewski (2011). The second part of the first chapter deals with the crucial concepts for the further analysis of the obituary as a genre, namely, the notion of categorization (including prototypicality and family resemblance), where the Author follows classical approaches of Ludwig Wittgenstein, Eleanor Rosch, and Georges Kleiber, and the notion of axiological parameters of a genre and related concepts (axiological potential, value judgement, positive and negative assessment genres): the issues studied in Poland *inter alia* by Krzeszowski (1997), Laskowska (1992) and Post (2013). Taking into consideration a number of different (social, cultural, pragmatic, situational) aspects concerning the concept of the genre and its varied theories, the Author proposes his own definition of genre (pp. 42-43) to be applied in the analytical section of the book (Chapters III-V).

Chapter II introduces the obituary as a genre of speech, presents its origins, evolution and categories, and places the obituary within the network of selected genres by comparing and contrasting it with three related genres: news story, biography, and eulogy. What is rather surprising is the lack of any analysis of the genre that might be most closely associated with the obituary, and from which the obituary originates – the death notice – and its relationships with the contemporary obituary. The death notice is mentioned though, for instance on page 61, where the Author cites a dictionary definition of the obituary which, to be exact, comprises both genres, and on page 78, where the Author concludes the chapter by stating that the obituary “tends to draw mainly on conventions of the news story, biography, eulogy, as well as death notice.” In fact, drawing a boundary line between both genres representing the discourse of death might seem important, yet it may be a difficult or even impossible task; this problem distinctly illustrates Wittgenstein’s idea of family resemblance, in which exemplars (particular texts of death notices and obituaries) are connected by a series of overlapping similarities, yet there seems to be no distinctive feature determining further attribution to

either genre. Furthermore, a Polish reader might find the issue of the co-existence of both genres in the English-speaking media unclear and confusing, since in Polish (and, generally, Central European) press the term *nekrolog* is the translation equivalent of ‘death notice’ and not ‘obituary’ (we must state here that this is a common mistake to be found in the majority of Polish-English/English-Polish dictionaries, in which the entry *obituary* is translated as *nekrolog*, and vice versa).

In his initial presentation of the genre in Chapter II, the Author is indebted to some major non-linguistic scholarly works on the obituary: *Obituaries in American Culture* (2000), by an American historian of culture Janice Hume, who surveyed more than 8,000 obituaries from 1818 to 1930 to show what they reveal about the history and culture of the USA, *The Obituary as Collective Memory* (2007), by a British sociologist Bridget Fowler, who analyzed the contents of contemporary British obituaries in view of Bourdieu’s concept of collective memory (which can be shaped, manipulated or even distorted by means of press obituaries), and first and foremost, two works by Australian media specialist and journalist Nigel Starck (2004, 2006), whose comparison of obituary practices in British, American and Australian press is of great significance for the Author of *Evaluative Insights...* (and with whom he had personal email correspondence as well).

In his compact (three-page long) history of the obituary, the Author follows the three abovementioned works by summarizing their research. A few points need, however, clarification: originally the word *obituary* or *obit* meant ‘an entry or record of the death in obit-books’, which were kept in medieval monasteries (*Oxford English Dictionary*). Although the Author is right while citing Fowler (2007: 4), who claims that “*The Gentleman’s Magazine* under the editorship of John Nichols in 1778 [...] established a standard of necrology for modern times” (p. 56), it is worth noting that early death notices, which later evolved into both of the modern genres of obituary and death notice, appeared already in the first issues of that London-based periodical, founded by Edward Cave in January 1731. The Author also quotes Fowler, when the latter mentions “the contribution of Delane (1841-1877)” to establishing the modern obituary. Yet, for a Polish reader the name of John Thadeus Delane (1817-1879), who was one of the most influential editors of *The Times*, will not sound familiar. Furthermore, the years 1841–1877 refer to the period of time in which Delane occupied his post in *The Times*, and not to the dates of his birth and death. Unfortunately, no reference has been made in the monograph to the research into 18th-century British press, and in particular, into the contents and structure of early death notices, carried out by a Swiss linguist Udo Fries (1990, 2006). However, the Author of *Evaluative Insights...* should not be blamed for inaccuracies in this

section, as a diachronic analysis of the genre was not his aim. It must be said, instead, that no major work on the history of the death notice and/or the obituary in Britain has been published so far!

The final part of Chapter II presents various stylistic, thematic and axiological categories of obituaries, following the classifications proposed by Starck (2006) and Fowler (2007). Thus, the *snapshot* obituary, resembling a CV, is juxtaposed with the creative, in-depth *portrait*; the *standard news obituary* of prominent people and celebrities is contrasted with the *feature obituary* dedicated to a commoner; and the *professional journalistic obituary*, created by a professional obituarist is differentiated from the *family authored obituary* and *homespun obituary*, written by a relative or a friend of the deceased. Traditionally, an obituary should present a positive portrait of the deceased by following the Roman principle *de mortuis nil nisi bonum* ('of the dead, speak no evil'), yet apart from this common appreciative type, Fowler (2007) recognizes negative, tragic and ironic obituaries that defy the tradition.

The analytical part of the book is based on the corpus of 531 texts taken from four main national British broadsheets: *The Guardian*, *The Times*, *The Telegraph* and *The Independent*, yet some references to American and Australian obituaries can also be spotted. Chapter III discusses the delimitation frame of obituaries (which embraces the headline, the biobox, and photos with sub-photo lines) in order to prove that such a frame has not only the structural, semantic, pragmatic and generic functions, but also an axiological one, as it may have an impact on the reader's interpretation of and attitude to a text and its contents. Most space is devoted to the detailed analysis of the structural, thematic and, above all, axiological properties of headlines – the latter group of properties is discussed in detail on more than twenty pages (pp. 91–113). It should be added that obituary headlines have already been dealt with by the Author in his preliminary analysis of the topic (see Włodarski 2008). In *Evaluative Insights...* he distinguishes two major categories of valuation, which are present within the predominant majority of the analyzed headlines. Thus, axiological judgements can be expressed either *explicitly*, by applying positive adjectives (such as 'exuberant', 'genial' and 'gregarious'), participial constructions (e.g. 'celebrated for', 'renowned for', 'loved by'), nouns (such as 'authority', 'prodigy' and 'expert') and verbs (such as 'win', 'beat' and 'advance'), or *implicitly*. In the latter case, the reader has to draw inferences from extra-linguistic knowledge. For example, in the case of a deceased who was 'Secretary to Winston Churchill's War Cabinet' the valuation is based on the historical role the person had played during the war, rather than on linguistic means.

The analyses of the biobox and iconographic elements are less detailed. The former constitutes a very recent obituary component, introduced by the editors of some British newspapers, and can be defined as a concluding, very brief, CV-like summary of major events from the life of the deceased (thus, it resembles the structure of the death notice to some extent). Yet, despite the emphasis on facts, it may contain some evaluative elements. The latter, as the Author claims, “complements the axiological content of the main body of the text” (p. 118). This issue, however, has been dealt with rather superficially (on a single page only). Moreover, no reference is made to the existing research into the presence and role of photography in obituaries (e.g. Kastenbaum 1977). The analysis in this chapter is illustrated with five tables, presenting examples of headlines and bioboxes from the analyzed newspapers.

The following chapter investigates the main body of obituaries, which, as the Author claims, “still lacks a proper linguistic description in the light of modern genre theory” (p. 122), adding that its segments are specified by practising obituarists in their own nomenclature. The Author refers to Johnson (2006: 31), who points out that there is a template for the genre to be followed by almost every newspaper. It should be said that obituary templates as well as appropriate terminology exist and may be found in handbooks written by other representatives of the profession (for instance obituary elements are listed as “Obit Building Blocks” in Baranick et al. 2005: 19), and on numerous websites where they can easily be found by googling out the phrase ‘how to write an obituary’. The Author emphasizes that the obituary main body varies to a large extent, “ranging from a simple CV-like list of the subject’s attainments” to “elaborate accounts [...] enriched by anecdotes revealing the psychological profile [...] quotations and even longer narratives focused on one particular event or incident” which made the deceased famous (p. 123).

By means of the conceptual metaphor LIFE IS A JOURNEY obituaries present life that follows the cognitive scheme SOURCE-PATH-GOAL, where SOURCE refers to the subject’s origin and background, PATH – his/her formative years and career, and GOAL – its peak. Alternatively, the pattern GOAL-SOURCE-PATH is also commonly employed, since GOAL is the most significant element of the subject’s life. Moreover, this pattern follows the reverse pyramid principle, typical of news stories. In the subsequent subchapters of the monograph, the Author discusses the categories of obituary information present in the main body (two macro-themes: subject’s life trajectory and his/her death) and its stylistic properties, whose complexity results from a wide range of factors (e.g. authorship, editorial practices, correlations with other genres).

A claim is made that the discourse represented by obituaries may be regarded at two different levels: the more general discourse of press journalism and the more specific occupational discourse, related to the profession or occupation of the deceased. The issue is exemplified by juxtaposing two obituaries: one to a scientist (scholarly discourse) and the other to a poet (discourse of arts and humanities) (pp. 137–144). It seems that the claim that they differ in lexical means (the use of scientific terms in the former and literary terms in the latter) is self-evident. However, what we find missing is an in-depth analysis of the discourse of death and the macro-theme of death (for example, death circumstances, especially its cause, the order in which predecessors and survivors are listed, the details concerning funeral or commemorative ceremonies).

The Author proceeds to comparing and contrasting the syntactic and stylistic features of two broad types of obituaries: resume-oriented obituaries (following, more or less, a CV-like template) and elaborate portrayal-oriented obituaries (resembling literary biographies), and analyzes selected texts exemplifying each type. This elaborate, fifty-page long, chapter concludes with the discussion of axiological properties of the obituary main body, where the Author applies Krzeszowski's (1997) mechanisms of Clash Resolving Segments and Clash Holding Segments in analyzing axiological clashes present in selected obituaries to the deceased whose biographies and personalities contain both positive and negative elements and traits. The Author complements Krzeszowski's segments by introducing his own strategy of Clash Reducing Segments, which reduce or weaken the negative character of axiological clashes within the abovementioned obituaries.

In the monograph's final chapter the Author returns to the analysis of the obituary as a genre and its correlations with some other genres, which were preliminary presented in Chapter II. He discusses the difficulty in establishing a single clear, central, canonical or prototypical model of the obituary, and perceives it as a "dynamic and open collection of models which can be understood as types for its textual realizations" (p. 175), which represent a variety of subtypes or subgenres, analyzed in the previous chapter. The Author proves that the two core properties of the genre are obligatory: it has to commemorate the dead and contain the appraisal of them and their legacy. Those properties, however, are not sufficient to identify a text as an obituary, as they are shared by other genres of press journalism such as profiles or news stories about death, and non-journalistic genres such as biographies and eulogies. Therefore the Author juxtaposes the obituary with other death-related genres, and clearly and skillfully points out at the generic and stylistic differences by analyzing two texts (obituary and news story) commemorating the same person, both published in *The Guardian*

on the same day (see Subchapter 3.2). To facilitate the process of distinguishing the obituary from the other abovementioned genres, the Author proposes seven additional characteristics that would complement the two above-stated obligatory properties (pp. 175-176). He also emphasizes the importance of editorial practices in creating obituary models characteristic of a particular newspaper style: for example, the headlines of American obituaries tend to inform about the age of the deceased, whereas in Britain, the presence or absence of the obituarist's name in the headline follows the tradition established by the editors of a given newspaper.

The monograph is concluded with an Appendix that presents full texts of three obituaries, whose fragments are quoted and discussed in the analytical part of the book. This allows the reader to observe them in their full co-text. Readers might wish there were more texts; yet modern obituary collections and anthologies are accessible (for example, a six-volume set of *The Daily Telegraph* obituaries, edited by its major obituarist, Hugh Massingberd).

There are some issues that could have been raised in the book. The limited analysis of the obituary evolution in Britain and lack of comparison between those closely related genres of the obituary and the death notice have already been mentioned. Moreover, in the analysis of axiological properties the Author could have juxtaposed obituaries to the same subject, yet published by those four national newspapers, as their political allegiances and readership differ. This would enable the reader to discover which qualities and traits are approved and disapproved of depending on the stance of the newspaper editors, its obituarists and specific reading audience: the subject might be commemorated by an appreciative obituary in one paper and a negative one in another. However, such an analysis would enter the field of sociology or sociolinguistics, which definitely was not the primary purpose of the monograph.

All in all, this well-researched analysis, written in proficient academic English, can be recommended not only to linguists, particularly those interested in contemporary theories of speech genres and axiological semantics, but also to all readers fascinated by the contemporary media and obituary culture in English-speaking countries.

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