

## **Linguistic Devices Coping with Death in Victorian Obituaries**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Given that obituaries constitute a breeding ground for the proliferation of different means of coping with death, it is my purpose in this paper to provide an overview of the main linguistic devices used in a sample of Irish Victorian death notices and analyse to what extent such devices have a social purpose. In this regard, I consider the obituary as a socially oriented practice whose main function is carried out via a wide range of praising and consolatory devices, such as metaphors, metonymies, hyperboles or mitigating apology expressions, among others. The results obtained support the idea that obituaries go beyond the limits of a mere announcement of a death and faithfully represent the social attitude and conventions towards mortality. In fact, nineteenth-century death notices primarily served a social purpose, acting as a medium through which families could demonstrate their place in society, being the degree of linguistic elaboration parallel to the social status of the deceased.

### **1. Introduction**

Since ancient times human beings have traditionally felt reluctant to deal with death in an undeviating way. Either owing to religion, superstition or social concerns, language users have generally avoided to look death full in the face. This refusal to speak freely of human mortality derives from the fact that death involves a juxtaposition of psychological and social interdictions: fear, superstition and religious taboos coexist with different restrictions of a social nature, mainly issues of tact and respect towards the deceased and the surviving family members. Hence, it is hardly surprising that language users resort to a wide variety

of linguistic devices in order to compliment the departed and show respect to those left alive, satisfying, in this way, both the religious and the social impositions traditionally associated with human mortality. In this sense, the obituary, i.e., “a record or announcement of a death or deaths, especially in a newspaper; usually comprising a brief biographical sketch of the deceased” (*OED2*) undoubtedly constitutes a fascinating storehouse of different types of praising, euphemistic and laudatory tactics dealing with death, given the obvious need to refer to mortality, the formality that the printed page imposes and the primary social dimension of death notices.<sup>1</sup>

As the Victorian period was especially sensitive to issues of social class and to the subject of death (Wheeler, 1994; Jalland, 1999), I expected that the spread of consolatory strategies to meet social requirements surrounding death would not be unusual at that age. This inevitably led me to the hypothesis I depart from in the current study: Victorian social concerns are reflected in a wide range of euphemistic, consolatory and eulogistic strategies as a means to show the social status of the deceased and reinforce the position of the surviving members of the family in the community. From this standpoint, the present study is intended as a continuation of a previous work on the euphemistic lexical substitution of the notions of ‘death’ and ‘dying’ in Victorian obituaries (Crespo Fernández, 2006). My concern here is, however, more comprehensive and socially-oriented: to analyse the extent to which different praising and consolatory strategies help the obituarist fulfil a social function in early Irish Victorian obituaries.

The type of study undertaken here seems to be an interesting enterprise, because whilst there is substantial body of research on the metaphorical conceptualization of death (Marín Arrese, 1996; Sexton, 1997; Bultnick, 1998), together with my own contribution to the subject aforementioned, it is difficult to think of a study in the existing literature devoted to the way that linguistic devices of a varying nature are related to the social dimension of death in obituaries. With this in mind, the present paper is organised as follows. After briefly dealing with the corpus data and the main theoretical assumptions on which the paper relies, I shall first introduce the types of obituaries and their main linguistic properties. The second part will be devoted to analysing the praising and consolatory strategies encountered on the obituary pages of the corpus. The conclusions and the final results obtained from the analysis will bring this study to an end.

## 2. Data and theoretical background

In order to draw attention to the consolatory tactics employed in the face of death, I shall explore a sample of 257 obituaries from early Victorian Ireland excerpted from the funeral sections of the newspapers *The Connaught Journal* (1840), *The Cork Examiner* (1847) and *The Clare Journal* (1848) which henceforth will be referred to as TCJ, TCE and CLJ respectively. One cannot proceed without a justification of the choice of a corpus of Victorian obituaries. First, it must be borne in mind that the obituary constitutes a breeding ground for the analysis of linguistic and social patterns related to the taboo of death, and

the Victorian period was especially sensitive to issues of death and social class, as noted earlier. The choice for the above mentioned newspapers as the source of empirical data for this research paper was not at random either. I decided to focus on press from relatively small communities (those from Galway, Cork and the Clare county), where the obituary is addressed to a spectrum of provincial readers and therefore adopts a more personal and intimate dimension, which is supposed to favour an elaborate and emotive language.<sup>2</sup>

The theoretical assumptions on which the present paper relies are mainly derived from Discourse Analysis. More specifically, I find especially useful for my purpose here the “social-theoretical” sense of discourse developed by Fairclough (1992). This scholar offers a three-dimensional concept of discourse, i. e., discourse as a piece of text, discourse as an instance of discursive practice and discourse as an instance of social practice: “My three-dimensional approach enables relationships between discursive and social change to be assessed, and detailed properties of texts to be related systematically to social properties of discursive events as instances of social practice” (Fairclough, 1992: 8). I shall follow this social-theoretical approach to discourse for a particular class of discourse type like that of the obituary.<sup>3</sup> Fairclough’s socially- and linguistically- oriented view of discourse allows us to go beyond the language analysis of texts and relate the linguistic elements and patterns found in obituaries to the social conventions of the Victorian period regarding funerary rituals.

As discourse is manifested in the linguistic form of a ‘text’ in the conception postulated by Fairclough (1992: 71 and 2005),<sup>4</sup> I shall consider the obituary as a goal-oriented text with a social purpose. From this perspective, the obituary can be viewed as an instance of functional language, i. e., language that is doing some job in some context (Halliday, 1985: 10), insofar as the verbal devices detected in these funeral notices perform a particular function in their context; to be more precise, obituaries can be said to be socially oriented, and their social purpose is likely to be deciphered by exploring their observable elements and patterns, an approach recently followed by Corona Marzol (2006) to posit the existence of the ‘Family’ stage in obituaries.<sup>5</sup> In a nutshell, I shall consider the obituary both as a “socially-oriented” practice and a discursive text type whose function as an instance of functional language is carried out via different praising and consolatory devices, as will be dealt with here.

### **3. The obituary: types and properties**

Prior to describing the linguistic devices found in the funeral notices consulted, an explanation of the existing types of obituaries and their linguistic properties seems necessary. Obituaries constitute a hybrid genre in which both information and publicity coexist, a type of discourse halfway between truth and an exaggerated display of the virtues of the deceased or the grief of the surviving family members. In this line, Hernando (2001) distinguishes two types of obituaries: *informative*, i. e., those obituaries whose primary aim is the transmission of relevant details about the death, the deceased or the place and time

of the funeral; and *opinative*, i.e., personal and intimate notices devoted to producing a particular effect on the readers by stressing the social status, virtues or religious fervour of the deceased. Consider the two obituaries that follow:

- (1) At Bath, Mrs. Fitz-Gerald, widow of Edward Fitz-Gerald, Esq., of Caragran, in the co. of Clare, and mother of Sir William Fitz-Gerald, Bart., in the said county. (TCE, February 12)
- (2) Yesterday, in Bindon-street, aged 7 years, Edward, second son of Michael Healy. Esq., M. D. (CLJ, January 24)

The notices above are examples of purely informative obituaries. Their main concern is to report the basic details concerning the death (name, date and next of kin) through an impersonal language and a concise expression. These death announcements tend to be objective, impersonal and highly formulaic and standardized. The editorial staff member in charge of writing the informative obituary does not resort to hyperbolic or figurative language to portray emotions, provide any relief or praise the deceased whatsoever. By contrast, *opinative* obituaries, usually written by relatives, friends or the funeral home staff, offer a more emotive and intimate account of the deceased by means of consolatory and laudatory tactics used to compliment the departed and, in so doing, satisfy the surviving family members. These obituaries perform a perlocutionary function, that is, they are oriented towards causing a favourable impression on the reader by showing the social status or the exemplary conduct of the deceased, as clearly seen in the emotive overtones of the death notice below:

- (3) At Sleaven, on the 24th inst., Mrs. Lacy, widow of the late Mr. Corns. Lucy, and mother to DI. Lucy, Esq., of Macroom, at the old age of 92 years, 64 of which she spent in the very house in which she died. If piety, extensive charity, and honourable dealing be necessary for the security of blissful rewards in the world of unending glory, this much respected woman must now be in the full enjoyment of the fruits of a well spent life. Amen. (TCE, March 3)

What emerges from the above discussion is that, granted the emotive nature of *opinative* obituaries and their purpose to praise the deceased and reinforce the social status enjoyed by his or her family, one should expect a proliferation of complimentary and consolatory devices to carry out this eminently social function. After all, as Fowler (2002: 1) suggests, obituaries can be described in terms of “commemorative pacts that help explain the inertia – the continuous reproductive re-enactment – of social structures”. Hence, in what follows, I shall be devoted to providing an overview of the most common linguistic devices found in *opinative* nineteenth-century obituaries, and analysing the extent to which such devices fulfil a social function in the newspapers mentioned in the preceding section.

#### 4. Linguistic devices in opinative obituaries

Judging from the funeral notices consulted for the present research, obituaries primarily had a social purpose to pursue during the Victorian period, serving as a medium through which families could demonstrate their place in society. This demonstration of the social prestige or the personal qualities of the deceased was carried out via a wide range of linguistic devices, as commented below.

##### 4.1. Figurative language

The over sentimentalization of death characteristic of the Victorian period (cf. Rawson, 1995: 8) is first and foremost reflected in the considerable number of euphemistic poetic metaphors and metonymies aiming at substituting taboo words related to mortality.<sup>6</sup> Though for the sake of imposing limitations I shall not be devoted here to the rich variety of euphemistic conceptual associations found in early Victorians obituaries (see Crespo Fernández, 2006 for an in-depth analysis on the subject), consolatory metaphors, i.e., highly poetic and connotative metaphors aiming at evading death-related linguistic taboos, were especially noteworthy in nineteenth-century obituaries. Indeed, the Victorian sentimentalization of human mortality provided a fertile soil for the flowering of metaphorical euphemistic language to conceptualize and verbalize the taboo of death.<sup>7</sup> This tendency to metaphorization gave rise to elaborate and emotive obituaries:<sup>8</sup>

- (4) They will only find that consolation in contemplating the purity and virtues of the being that *has left* them – [...] in the pious and firmly grounded hope that their darling has *gone to the eternal rest* – and that in the fullness of thus, when it shall please God to call them from that scene of wretchedness, they will join her in that *abode of peace*, where the wicked cease from troubling and the weary are at rest. (TCJ, November 27)

The death notice above stands out as a significant example of how the taboo of death was accounted for by conceptual metaphors – following the framework of the Conceptual Metaphor Theory initiated by Lakoff and Johnson<sup>9</sup> – which view death as a desirable event under the influence of Christian beliefs. More specifically, the obituarist has recourse to metaphorical items in order to avoid the linguistic taboos *death* and *die* and, by so doing, offer some sort of consolation to those left alive. With this in mind, the obituarist conceptualizes the domain of death in terms of a domain with positive connotations, namely as a journey with a spiritual destination, as seen in the metaphorical substitutes *leave* and *go to the eternal rest* ‘die’, which fall under the conceptual equation DEATH IS A JOURNEY. Similarly, the Christian ideal of a joyful life, that is, a peaceful and everlasting existence with God in Heaven, is used to conceptualize death euphemistically under the conceptual metaphor DEATH IS A JOYFUL LIFE in the phrase *that abode of peace* to refer to death.

Metonymy is another device of figurative language largely responsible for references to mortality in the obituaries consulted. In this respect, there are metonymic references that

allow us to understand death primarily via its effects, as those focusing on the result of death for those left alive under the conceptual metonymy THE SENTIMENTAL EFFECTS OF DEATH STAND FOR DEATH. A good case in point is the term *void* in (5):

- (5) Cut away almost in the bloom of life, and while in the midst of good offices, her death created a melancholy *void* to her husband, her children and many affectionate relations. (TCJ, November 4)

Other metonymic substitutions for death stress the final moment under the metonymic principle THE PHYSIOLOGICAL EFFECTS OF DEATH STAND FOR DEATH. Such are the cases of *release from all earthly pain and suffering* and *breathe one's last breath in peace* below:

- (6) On the 20th, at Forth Eyre, aged 18, Anne, eldest daughter of the Rev. Edward Eyre Manusell, she trusted in her Saviour, the name of Jesus was precious to her heart, she now *rests in Him* who has *released her from all earthly pain and suffering*– she *breathed her last breath in peace*, having *fallen asleep in Christ*. (TCJ, May 28)

Together with the metonymies pointed out, in (6) the obituary writer also offers religious-related metaphors for the taboo 'die', for example *rest in Him* and *fall asleep in Christ*, phrases which can be ascribed to the conceptual metaphor DEATH IS A REST (cf. Crespo Fernández, 2006: 121-122).

#### 4.2. Hyperbolic language

Hyperbole is a rhetorical figure commonly found in obituaries to compliment the deceased by considerably upgrading a desirable feature of the referent. Some hyperboles are primarily euphemistic and present a religious basis, aiming not only at praising the deceased, but also at magnifying the biological act of dying by means of overstatements based on Christian beliefs. In this sense, far from having simply died, in (7) the deceased is said to be *enjoying the fruits of a well spent life in the eternity of happiness*:

- (7) At Innoshannon, on the 30th ult., of fever, the Rev. David L. Cahill. [...]. Whilst the clergy deplore in him the loss of a cheerful co-operator in the great work of religion, they are consoled with the hope that he is now *enjoying the fruits of a well spent life in the eternity of happiness*. May God have mercy of his soul –Amen. (TCE, June 7)

More frequently, rather than carrying out a euphemistic substitution of death-related linguistic taboos, hyperbole is meant to present exaggerate displays of the personal qualities of the departed. Take the death notice below:

- (8) It is a hard task for an affectionate friend of the late Mr. MARTIN and of his family, as the writer of the present obituary has been from his youth upwards, to speak of the

death of one of *the most amiable and heavenly-minded* young women that *ever* existed. Her talents were of a high order, but they were in subordination to her higher sense of piety. *Never* did we meet a thoroughly religious person [...]. (TCJ, November 27)

In (8) the hyperbole works via superlative adjectives (*the most amiable and heavily minded*) and adverbs (*ever, never*), elements which constitute inauthentic means of expression because of the exaggeration that they imply. A most extreme case can be found in the report of the death of William Crawford, described as follows: “His whole life was devoted to the amelioration of his species. In truth he was the pride of Cork, the prince of merchants, and the best of patriots” (TCJ, April 16). In the same vein, the professional qualities of William Gregory are praised in the following hyperbolic statement: “No man knew better the country than he did” (TCJ, April 16). The same function is performed by adverbs like *universally* in phrases like *universally lamented*, *universally regretted* or *universally beloved*. A good case in point is the obituary below, in which the hyperbole does not only appear in the adverbial phrase *universally lamented*, but also in the obvious exaggeration used to refer to a deceased clergyman as a *martyr to the duties of the priesthood*:

(9) At Innoshannon, on the 30th ult., of fever, the Rev. David Cahill. It may be truly said that this much esteemed and *universally lamented* clergyman fell a *martyr to the duties of the priesthood*, onerous at all times [...]. (TCE, June 7)

The same exaggerations also constitute laudatory devices in the account of the circumstances of the funeral. As the social status of the deceased in the mid-nineteenth century was also considered to be testified by the number of people attending the funeral (cf. Jugg, 1999: 222), the obituary writer is likely to tend to overstatements in an attempt to display social worth. This can be illustrated in the death notice below, in which the obituarist gives a distorted estimation of the number of people who attended the funeral:

(10) A more single-hearted man could not be found, and the vast concourse, amounting to *tens of thousands*, who attended the funeral, bore some testimony to the great respect in which he was held. (TCJ, October 1)

In the cases mentioned under this heading the obituary writer gives information about the life of the deceased or the circumstances of the funeral for which he obviously lacks adequate evidence and can by no means be considered to be true. Hyperbole thus can be viewed as a rhetorical figure leading to half truths, false inferences and even actual lies,<sup>10</sup> in a proof of the subjectivity attached to opinative obituaries. Thus, such hyperbolic statements violate the Maxim of Quality proposed by Grice (1975) insofar as the obituarist presents statements which are deliberately false.<sup>11</sup> In fact, rather than describing a state of affairs, the examples offered are unreliable and misleading; however, the reader is expected to accept this information as a means of consolatory praise in the context of the obituary.

### 4.3. Positively loaded words

As commented before regarding hyperboles, the obituarist's aim inevitably conveys an attitude through word choice. Positively loaded words pervade the lexicon of opinative obituaries and constitute a proof of the subjectivity attached to these death notices. Indeed, through the choice of words the obituary writer passes judgement, and his preference for lexical items with an obvious emotional content clearly reveal what his judgement is; in other words, the tendency to resort to positively loaded words illustrates the obituarist's intention of complimenting the deceased by showing his or her social status or personal virtues. Consider the following obituary:

- (11) Dr. Blake possessed towering abilities; honour unsullied and character exalted as a professional man; he was *beloved* by his patients, *respected* and *esteemed* by all who knew him; an *ornament* to society; a *steady* and *unswerving friend* and a *gentleman* of outstanding *integrity*. (TCJ, December 17)

This funeral notice constitutes a significant example of the way that the announcement of a death accomplished praising and consolation responsibilities. In Dr. Blake's death in (11) the obituarist resorts to adjectival insistence (*amiable and heavenly-minded, religious*) and nouns with positive connotations (*honour, ornament, friend, gentleman, integrity*) as praising devices. In this way, Blake's life is obviously filtered through the subjectivity of the obituary writer, who attempts to make objective facts which are totally subjective.

### 4.4. Negatively loaded words

With the purpose of moving the reader and not leaving him indifferent to the virtues of the deceased, the obituarist tends to combine a positively loaded and emotional language with overstatements and lexical items with a superlative value, as seen in the two preceding sections. However, in the need to raise through language feelings of compassion in the reading public, the writer of the death notice also has recourse to negatively loaded words to allude to the death or to the act of dying, for instance *calamity* and *affliction* in (12) and (13) respectively, that emphasize the misfortune of the deceased and that of the surviving relatives and friends:

- (12) [...]. We cannot pretend [...] to offer consolation to the bereaved mother and her desolate children for the heavy *calamity* which has fallen upon them. (TCJ, February 27)
- (13) [...] whose loss must be looked upon as one of the heaviest *afflictions* to which the parents can be subjected ... (TCE, March 15)

In the same vein, the obituarist opts for direct alternatives for the notions of 'death' and 'dying' based on a conceptual categorization radically different from those commented in

4.1. above:

- (14) [...]. Previous to his departure he complained of slight illness, which immediately on his arrival at Bristol, eventuated in malignant fever, by which he was *carried off in the prime of life*. (TCJ, April 30)
- (15) At Mallow, of fever, Michael Ahern, Esq. *Struck down in the vigour of youth, and in the commencement of a useful and honourable career*, his premature death is a source of the deepest affliction [...]. (TCE, March 31)

The phrases highlighted in italics in the two obituaries above are instances of a conceptualization in which death is viewed as an adversary, as a cruel enemy which can destroy us (cf. Marín Arrese, 1996: 43). The same happens in *cut away almost in the bloom of life* in (5) and *cut off in the opening of a most promising career* (TCE, April 30). Similarly, the obituary writer resorts to undeviating and powerful references to mortality, as in the notice below which builds up a shocking picture of the death:

- (16) [...]. Early this morning, he was found dead lying on the road, a short distance from the house he had left, quite dead, his horse grazing near the body.

In the examples above commented, the writer employs negatively loaded words that can be said to convey, rather than a tactful and euphemistic approach to death, a dysphemistic one, given the unfavourable connotations that these phrases transmit.<sup>12</sup> Take the undeviating reference to death *drop down dead* in (17):

- (17) On Wednesday night Hugh Harris of Ashford, Esq., a member of the grand jury of Armagh, went to bed in apparent good health; during the night he became seriously ill and about six o'clock on Thursday morning he *dropped down dead* in the street on his way to the hotel to proceed home and instantly expired. [...]. (TCJ, August 6)

This plain-spoken reference to the moment of dying via a metonymy of a highly evocative power noticeably presents dysphemistic overtones. The obituarist uses an explicit allusion to death which, curiously enough, serves the same purpose as euphemism in the opinative obituaries under research: to move the reader's compassion and serve as a means for consolation. In this way, the pattern commented in 4.1. regarding the euphemistic nature of the consolation provided by figurative language seems to be reversed. This stands as a proof of how euphemism and its opposite dysphemism do not form clear-cut categories; rather, some of the lexical substitutes for the taboo of death have fuzzy boundaries depending on contextual and pragmatic considerations which are beyond the scope of this paper (see Crespo Fernández, 2007 for a full description of the pragmatic dimensions of euphemism and dysphemism).

#### 4.5. Mitigating apology expressions

Mitigating apology expressions perform a twofold function in discourse: both to mitigate and serve as an apology for distasteful topic, hence their name.<sup>13</sup> Indeed, these euphemistic discursive strategies, directly motivated by the politeness principle as a socio-cultural phenomenon, constitute previous or subsequent apologies for potentially conflictive speech acts and thus contribute to minimize the pejorative strength of the taboo. Given the logical space limitations, I shall not develop here an in-depth analysis of politeness concerns in relation to euphemistic discursive strategies (see Crespo Fernández, 2005 for details). Suffice it to say that the language user – the obituary writer in our case – resorts to mitigating apology expressions to preserve the conventions of social tact and respect which are expected in such a formal communicative context as that of a death notice. That this is so can be seen in (18) and (19):

- (18) *We regret to have this day to announce* the death of a zealous and exemplary young Clergyman, the Rev. Patrick M´HALE, which took place... (TCJ, April 30)  
 (19) *It's our painful duty to announce* the death of EDWARD HACKETT, Esq., Mayor of Cork, which took place at his residence ... (TCE, April 14)

It should be noted that apology expressions like those in italics in the obituaries above tend to appear when the social or economic status of the deceased in the community require a more elaborate mitigation. Significantly enough, I have found these discursive euphemistic tactics in the majority of the obituaries of members of the nobility in the corpus. For instance, the following notice reports the death of a duke:

- (20) *We regret to state that* his Grace the Duke of Northumberland departed this life at an early hour on Thursday morning ... (TCE, February 15)

Mitigating apology expressions are also employed to minimize the compliments that the obituarist pays, and, by doing so, tone-down the exaggeration deriving from his eulogium. This happens in the notice below:

- (21) In the domestic and social life, *we are guilty of no exaggeration in saying that* there never lived an individual who enjoyed more largely than he, the respect, the confidence, the love of his friends and associates-nor one whose qualities more richly deserved the sympathies of friendship and the devotion of love. (TCJ, April 16)

In the examples under this heading the presence of mitigating expressions is in direct relation with the degree of elaboration of the death notice and accordingly constitutes a faithful indicator of the social status or civic worth of the deceased.

#### 4.6. Minor devices

To a lesser extent, the obituarist also employs rhetorical questions and second person invocations with the purpose of not leaving the reader indifferent to the virtues of the deceased and the grief of the surviving relatives. Rhetorical questions tend to reinforce the emotive nuances of the death notice, as illustrated in (22):

- (22) [...] Possessed of a Princely Fortune, he merely viewed it as a trust to the poor, to whom he was a warm friend. Where is the charitable institution that ever made an appeal to his heart and noble disposition in vain? Where the desolate widow, whose prayer for relief never met with a refusal? Where the orphan for whom he did not sweeten the cup of bitterness? ... (TCJ, April 16)

Invocations of faith are motivated by religious beliefs, in another proof of the fact that religion determined much of the language used in the obituary. Indeed, during the mid-nineteenth century the influence of the Church on sepulchral matters was out of doubt and religion was generally thought to provide a reason not only for living, but also for dying (Wheeler, 1994: 6-13). In this respect, invocations of faith in the second person were not uncommon:

- (23) Her love and veneration for the sacred emblem of her salvation, during her long life, was only suppressed in the last struggling moments of existence by the pious holy fervour with which she pressed it to the expiring heart, as she exclaimed "*O Heart of Jesus, burning with the love of us, inflame my heart with the love of thee, and draw me to thyself.*" (TCJ, March 3)

The use of the second person in invocations, as Martínez Hernando (2001) argues, enhances the dramatic quality of the obituary. In fact, (23) is felt to be especially moving thanks to the invocation, which constitutes an effective means to reflect the emotive power of the death notice.

### 5. Concluding remarks

On the basis of the evidence obtained, I strongly believe that nineteenth century obituaries go beyond the limits of a mere announcement of a death and constitute a linguistic and social mirror to mortality of a different degree of subjectivity and elaboration depending on factors surrounding the deceased such as civic worth, economic status or religious beliefs. Put more simply, the nature of the obituary is entirely dependent upon the social relevance of the deceased. This seems to be intimately related to the different treatment of funerary rituals, as pointed out by Hertz (cited in Fowler, 2002: 6):

[T]he emotion roused by burial varies extremely in intensity according to the social status of the deceased, and may even in certain circumstances be entirely lacking. At the death of a chief or a man of high rank, a true panic sweeps over the group; [...] but the death of a stranger, a slave or a child<sup>14</sup> will go almost unnoticed; it will arouse no emotion, occasion no ritual.

More specifically, in the light of the present research, the ranking of the death in early Victorian obituaries excerpted from Irish newspapers has revealed an interplay between social and linguistic elements which can be summarized as follows:

- Obituaries primarily served a social purpose. In fact, the praise of the deceased commonly carried out on obituary pages was widely used as a medium to display civic worth or social status.<sup>15</sup>
- The degree of linguistic elaboration of obituaries is directly proportional to the social status, wealth and position of the deceased. Accordingly, the obituaries of the socially relevant members of the community are longer and present a greater degree of linguistic elaboration than those of the gentry.<sup>16</sup>
- The over sentimentalization of death so characteristic of the Victorian period is mainly reflected on the considerable number of semantic devices (poetic metaphors, metonymies and hyperboles) aiming at celebrating the virtues of the deceased from a personal, social or religious viewpoint.
- Though religious beliefs were, in general terms, subordinate to purely social issues, Christian faith played a prominent role in obituaries. That this was so can be seen in two aspects: first, religion provided the basis for much of the metaphorical language displayed in the funeral notices; and second, the obituaries of those who devoted their lives to religion (mostly priests and nuns) present a considerable degree of linguistic elaboration.
- The obituarist carries out an emotional manipulation of its reading audience via a highly emotional and hyperbolic language which commonly supposed exaggerated displays of grief and praises of the virtues of the deceased – if not deliberate lies – in an attempt to compliment the departed and, in so doing, satisfy those left alive.

Though it seems evident that earlier generations found it harder than now to come to terms with death and those aspects associated with it in an undeviating way, the social impositions surrounding mortality are by no means restricted to Victorian times. In this regard, Gross (1985) has remarked that, far from losing its interdictive strength, death remains one of the greatest taboos in contemporary society. In fact, though nowadays the loosening of the Church's hold in funeral matters and the relative "democratisation" of funeral notices (cf. Fowler, 2002) has given way to more informative than sentimental obituaries, as pointed out by Shuster (2003), people are still especially sensitive about the subject of death, as Ferguson (2002) has shown in relation to present-day British obituaries.

In sum, the evidence obtained from a corpus of Victorian Irish obituaries has offered a portrait of the obituary as a discourse type with a well-defined social function in the face

of death. I hope to have demonstrated that the linguistic devices found in nineteenth-century funeral notices were highly determined by different aspects surrounding the deceased such as social relevance, economic status and religious beliefs. I would like to finish by admitting that the analysis undertaken in the present paper can obviously make no claim to being complete, given the limited scope of the present essay. Nonetheless, I believe that the study of the linguistic devices detected in a sample of Victorian death notices has proved that the obituary constituted a social mirror to death in Victorian times insofar as it was a discourse type determined by social conventions regarding death and, in turn, served the purpose of reinforcing personal status in a community so sensitive to social issues.

### Notes

1. It should be noted, as Corona Marzol (2006: 68) points out, that within the Anglo-Saxon culture the term 'obituary' refers to the free announcement of a death in a newspaper, whereas 'death notice' is the paid-for advertisement of the demise. For the sake of clarity, in the present paper I shall consider the terms 'obituary' and 'death notice' (or 'funeral notice') as synonyms.

2. In relatively small communities the social function of obituaries is out of doubt, as the obituary readers are expected to send the surviving family members their condolences. Thus, the obituary was intended as a personal means of communication between the deceased's family and the members of the community as potential readers of the death announcement. In this sense, readers become users of the obituaries (Corona Marzol, 2006: 72).

3. Fairclough (1992) distinguishes between 'discourse', as language use seen in the three perspectives commented and 'discourse types', as the different dimensions of discourse, meaning genres, styles and specific discourses, which are derived from the fact that people engage in discourse.

4. I shall use here the term 'text', following Fairclough's multidimensional perspective of discourse, as the discursual element of social events which is subject to a double contextualization: first, in their relation to other elements of social events; second, in their relation to social practices (Fairclough, 2005).

5. Corona Marzol (2006) defines the 'Family' stage as a section of text that signals the closure of the obituary, usually comprising information related to the trajectory of the deceased in family terms and the surviving relatives.

6. I understand 'euphemism' as a linguistic makeup employed with the purpose of mitigating the potential dangers of certain taboo words or expressions, considered too blunt or offensive for a given social situation. Euphemism thus supposes an acceptable way to introduce taboos in social interaction by means of a semantic or formal process thanks to which the taboo referent is stripped of its most explicit, offensive or obscene overtones.

7. I offered a survey of the conceptualizations of 'death' and 'dying' in relation to a total of 228 Irish Victorian obituaries, namely *DEATH IS A JOURNEY*, *DEATH IS A JOYFUL LIFE*, *DEATH IS A LOSS*, *DEATH IS A REST*, *DEATH IS A REWARD* and *DEATH IS THE END*, being *DEATH IS A JOURNEY* the most relevant from a quantitative point of view in the corpus of obituaries consulted (Crespo Fernández, 2006).

8. Hereafter, the words and expressions that I want to highlight in the obituaries offered as examples will appear in italics.

9. Within the cognitive tradition, following Lakoff (1993: 203), a metaphor can be defined as “a cross-domain mapping in the conceptual system”; in other words, a metaphor is a set of conceptual correspondences from a source domain (the realm of the physical or more concrete reality) to a target domain (the death taboo, in our case). The source domain is therefore used to understand, structure and, in some cases, mitigate the target domain.

10. According to Weinrich (cited in Abrantes, 2005: 101), hyperbole is not the only inauthentic figure of speech: “If one regards things as they are, most rhetorical figures are linguistic lies, such as euphemism, hyperbole, ellipsis, amphibology, the forms and formulas of politeness, emphasis, irony, taboo words, anthropomorphism, etc. In language there remains only a narrow path for the truth”.

11. Grice (1975) put forward four Conversational Maxims (Quantity, Quality, Relation and Manner) that language users are supposed to adhere to in the attempt to achieve a successful communication. The maxim of Quality was formulated as follows: “Do not say what you believe to be false. Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence”.

12. Following Allan and Burrige (1991: 26), a dysphemism is “an expression with connotations that are offensive either about the denotatum or to the audience, or both, and it is substituted for a neutral or euphemistic term for just that reason”.

13. I believe that this denomination is more descriptive than others like *atenuaciones por inserto*, *fórmulas eufemísticas* or *hedged performatives* offered by Montero Cartelle, Casas Gómez and Leech respectively (cf. Crespo Fernández, 2007: 107).

14. In fact, all the obituaries for children collected for the present research, as (2) for example, are informative, being thus limited to basic and objective information, without displaying emotions of any kind.

15. In relation to the death notices in Spain during the same period, Belmonte (1998: 139-141) considers the obituary as “a stage of civility” aimed at displaying social status.

16. This trend would continue in the following decades, as Fowler (2002) has shown in a sample of British obituaries dating from the twentieth century.

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