# PRIVATE, FAMILY, YET UNIVERSAL

*Gravemarkers in private, family, cemeteries express the universal discourse of grief because*
*such gravemarkers address a public audience*

**Background**

Previous research (Baird 1992, 1996; Eckert 1998) has established that cemeteries (with military cemeteries sometimes constituting exceptions) reflect the linguistic composition of their surrounding communities. Previous research (Baird 1992, 1996, 2002; Eckert 1998 ; Rotundo1997) has also established that the language on a single gravemarker may contain as many as eleven bits of semantic information (name, death date, birth date, kinship terminology, creative epitaph, stylized epitaph, place of birth, place of death, means of death, occupation, and lodge/religious affiliation). [see Figure 1.]The same scholars have also confirmed that the first five of these semantic bits of information (name, death date, birth date, kinship, and creative epitaph) constitute a "Universal Discourse of Grief." [see unshaded portions of Figure 1]  The five items, moreover, appear in a predictable hierarchy.  The name has highest frequency of occurrence, then death date, then birth date, then kinship, then creative epitaph.

The 'universality' claim stems from the discovery that the 'discourse of grief' appears on gravemarkers written in a variety of languages (English, German, Czech, Polish, Spanish, French, Italian, Chinese, Greek, Arabic, Hebrew, [and now Pennsylvania Welsh ☺]) and on gravemarkers written in both mixed-code and bilingual languages. (Mixed-Code markers give each semantic item in one language or the other, but not both; bilingual markers sometimes repeat items in both languages.) **SHOW SLIDES**

**The Problem**

One criticism of the "universality" claim emerges from the scholarly literature on grief. Numerous psychologists and sociologist--such as Haig, 1990; Hallam & Hockey, 2001; Kastenbaum, 1981; Lamberti & Detmer, 1993;  Parkes, 1972; Salvo, 1998; Simpson, 1998; Riches & Dawson, 2000; Worden 1991;  and Vess, Moreland, & Schwebel, 1985--distinguish  between expressions of grief in private and expressions of grief in public. Because data used for the discovery of the Universal Discourse of Grief has mostly been gathered from large public cemeteries, argues one of my Pscyhology Department colleagues, data from small, private, (especially family) cemeteries might well prove limits on the "universality" claim.

Data gathered from 20-25 such private, family, cemeteries—all within a 100-mile distance of San Antonio, Texas—reveal, however, that these gravemarkers also display the Universal Discourse of Grief.  The data include English, Spanish, German, Polish, Czech, and Italian languages—both monolingual and mixed-code/bilingual.  **SHOW SLIDES**

**An Explanation**

A close reading of the sociological and psychological scholarship on grief—the same scholarship that caused my colleague to raise the family-vs-public displays of bereavement in the first place—provides a possible explanation. Specifically their distinction between grief and mourning plus their distinction between home-space and public-space lead me to hypothesize that cemeteries constitute a place for <u>public</u> acknowledgement of death; in other words, *cemeteries*, regardless of geographical location, *provide a space for public mourning*.

<u>Grief versus Mourning</u>

Kastenbaum articulates well, for my purposes at least, the distinction that sociologists and psychologists make between *grief* (an individual's private reaction to bereavement and *mourning* (an individual's public expression of his or her grief).

"As one life ends in death, a new phase begins in the life of the survivors. 'Bereavement" is a term that signifies the state of loss: somebody important to this person has died. The impact of bereavement often leads to 'grief,' a state of shock, sorrow, and anxiety. The grieving person experiences both physical and emotional distress. All spheres of functioning are likely to be affected. It is not only an emotionally painful condition, but one that increases vulnerability to all of life's hazards, including physical illness. 'Mourning' refers to the socially patterned expression of the bereaved person's sorrow. Cultures differ in the specific signs of mourning, but it is almost universal for the bereaved to engage in some type of public behavior that acknowledges the reaction to death" (Kastenbaum, 235).

This distinction between private and public reaction to bereavement is echoed by Sovenko and by Haig. Sovenko describes grief as "a universal emotional and biological response to loss" (Haig v). Haig distinguishes grief from mourning by defining mourning as "…a social process with prescribed rituals" (v). He also observes that life constantly includes grief and that all individuals must learn how to process their own "grief work" (v). Part of that "grief work" seems to have cultural guidelines. I cannot tell how seriously Burton expects us to take his observation, but he notes evidence of cultural differences as early as 1621: "the Italians slept away care and grief, the Danes,

Dutchmen, Polish, and Bohemians drank it down, while the English went to see a play"
(Haig 5).

Families, of course, serve as a distinct buffer between an individual's private grief
and his or her public mourning. Lamberti and Detmer state that grieving is "both an
individual-intrapsychic process and a family process" (364). Vess and Schwebel focus
their research on this individual\family communication process: "…without open
communication it may be extremely difficult for family members either to grieve
adequately or to negotiate a suitable role assignment for the reorganized family system"
(126).

So far this discussion of the private grieving process has concentrated on people,
not on material culture. Yet Haig introduces us to this "objectifying" of grief. Within the
privacy of the house, he argues…

"A very personal memorial for an individual often exists which is known
only to intimate relatives or friends, such as a chair in which the deceased used to
sit, or a place which he used to visit. This may act as a stimulus to memories
about the deceased and may be more satisfactory than a memorial in stone,
bronze, or concrete.

"[These personal] memorials may serve principally to remind the family
and the world of the life and death of an individual. As well as serving as a
stimulus to memories, they may also serve as a warning" (Haig 60).

Given, then, that grieving is private and mourning is public, I still need to address
the issue of private, family cemeteries.

Cemeteries as Public Space

In his sociological history of the western world's disposal of the dead, Roach introduces the distinction between private and public space—and the role of monuments in this difference. "As custom increasingly defined human remains as unhygienic, new practices of interment evolved . . . to ensure the perpetual separation of the dead and to reduce or more strictly circumscribe the spaces they occupied. As the place of burial was removed from local churchyards to distant parts, the dead were more likely to be remembered (and forgotten) by monuments than by continued observances in which their spirits were invoked" (Roach, 50).

Haig reiterates this relationship between "publicness" and monuments: "The memorials which survive after the funeral service is over include the material ones which are readily observable by the public, such as tombstones, sometimes with an epitaph…" (p ?). While his argument does not conclusively establish family gravemarkers as public, his argument do provide reasonable conjecture.

Hallam and Hockey provide even further arguments for considering family cemeteries as *public*.

"Within public spaces, the meanings and cultural values assigned to objects are informed by their spatial location; for example, when displayed within museums. The positioning of an object beside others in a cabinet and its location within a gallery—plus features such as lighting and labeling—will inform the public reception of objects. *Conversely, the public placement of an object, such as a memorial sculpture, may transform its spatial setting and the social practices*

*which take place within, lending different meanings and associations*" (77).

[emphasis mine]

Sociologists, in other words, agree with the psychologists that moving the dead to separate "spaces" create a division between private and public space.   Hallam and Hockey put it this way: "…authors have described a sequestration of contemporary Western death. Differentiated 'death' spaces exist and are generally avoided unless specific visits are necessary: hospices, funeral directors' premises, *cemeteries and graveyards*, crematoria and public memorials" (91).  [emphasis mine]  Note that, purposely or not, Hallam and Hockey do not distinguish among types of cemeteries— family, churchyard [stage one, stage two, stage three?  Seth]

Psychologist Nora refers to spatially separated material objects as having a distinct purpose from those found at home.  ". . . modern memory has been divested of bodily and collective dimensions to become 'indirect' and deeply reliant upon 'exterior' material sites of memory such as museums, archives, *cemeteries, monuments*" (Hallam & Hockey, 195).  [emphasis mine]

A new argument now deserves consideration--the argument that grieving individuals can actually take advantage of distantly-removed cemeteries (family or otherwise) to control their own grieving process.  Haig especially addresses this phenomenon:

". . . one process which may occur in the bereaved is that the memorial (or memento) itself comes to represent the deceased person in a compelling fashion.  The grave, mausoleum or memorial becomes invested by the bereaved person with some

attributes of the dead person.  This may be very convenient, as the bereaved person can then control the deceased and can avoid, visit, or relocate the deceased" (Haig 61).

He elaborates:

"Regular visits to the grave of the deceased, anniversary ceremonies, anniversary newspaper notices, the keeping of diaries, or the occurrence of religious or family festivals all serve to act as reminders of the deceased.

"An obligation to the dead which is fulfilling through an anniversary or other ritual may, in addition to providing a sense of having performed one's duty, also give an opportunity for a reevaluation of the relationship, both past and present, with the deceased.  The chronological markers also have an effect of reminding the individual of his own mortality and demise" (61-62).

If, then, we can consider family cemeteries as serving the same psychological and sociological purposes as churchyard or public cemeteries, we have one plausible explanation for the lack of differences between the discourse of grief on the family-cemetery gravemarkers.

Another possible unifying factor is the impact of urbanization upon the family cemetery in particular, but not exclusively.  Haig warns that the disappearing ability to visit cemetery's due to "urbanized scatter or geographical dislocation of migrants . . . may have a long-term effect on grieving"(61-62).

Hallam and Hockey argue that "the continuously unfolding redisplay of the grave [in particular, graves with photographs attached to headstones], as clusters of personally meaningful objects are brought, removed and reconfigured, positions the deceased within the present: the 'dead' are made to share the social time of the living" (154).

<u>Addendum</u>

Three unrelated insights into my own understanding of cemeteries emerged from this preliminary reading of the scholarship of sociologists and psychologists.

First, Hallam and Hockey report an ethnographic study that Francis, Keller, and Neophytou conducted in 2000.  The study done among "people visiting graves in six London cemeteries " confirmed that these cemeteries reflected the community around them and served as a place of "interaction between the living and between the living and the dead" (87).

Second, Bradbury (1933, 1966) has researched the increasingly spontaneous reaction of the public to "'Bad' deaths" such as in traffic accidents, collective disaster, or the unexpected deaths of celebrities—where floral tributes and small memorabilia accumulate along highways, hotels, houses, etc.

And finally, Hallam and Hockey have a thought-provoking insight in to interrelatedness of "writing" that embodies the bereavement process—writing of wills, obituaries, newspaper memorials, diaries and, yes, epitaphs on gravemarkers (155).

<u>So What?</u>

I have utilized bits and pieces of a couple of years to try to find out what non-linguists might add to my own observations that even private (especially family) cemeteries utilize the same universal discourse of grief as do larger, public, cemeteries. Psychologists have allowed me to look closer at private verses public expressions of bereavement; Sociologists have allowed me to look closer at the differences between private spaces for grief and public spaces for mourning.

## FIGURES & TABLES

[Figure 1: Idealized Marker with all Eleven Semantic Bits]

MARIE IRWIN ROBERTS, M.A.
BORN IN WALES 1895
DIED OF A BROKEN HEART IN NEBRASKA 1970
BELOVED WIFE, MOTHER, GRANDMOTHER
INSPIRED A LOVE OF LATIN IN ALL WHOM SHE TAUGHT
SISTER OF ADELPHA
RIP

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