

Lexical variation of expressions for ‘died’ in Winnipeg obituaries: a diachronic analysis

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Language use in obituaries has changed across the 20th century and has been characterized thematically as a shift from “death affirming” to “death resistant” language (Phillips, 2007). When reporting that a person has died, speakers may use the verb itself or one of many less direct but equivalent euphemistic expressions such as *passed away*, *left us*, or *went to be with the Lord*. Such expressions have been analysed according to Lakoff’s conceptual metaphor theory (Sullivan & Wachowski, 2020), and on epitaphs as part of the material culture of graveyards of differing Christian denominations (Smithson, 2019), but not, to my knowledge, as a sociolinguistic variable.

The present study examines five lexical variants of the variable ‘died’: *died* itself, *passed away*, *passed*, other euphemism, and the null variant—where no verb is present in a sentence that announces death (e.g., [NAME] Ø suddenly at tuxedo villa on Thursday [...]). 1100 tokens were collected from obituaries published between 1922 and 2022 in the Winnipeg Free Press, the English language newspaper of record in Winnipeg, MB. Tokens were coded for social and linguistic factors, namely, year of publication, religiosity score (number of indicators of religiosity present in the obituary), whether the death was characterized as unexpected by the speaker, main vs. embedded clause, initial vs. subsequent mention of death, initial vs. subsequent variant of ‘died’, and whether the subject of the ‘died’ variant is the person memorialized in the obituary or another person (for example, a relative).

Over the 100-year period, variants are distributed as follows: *passed away* (39%), *died* (28%), null variant (26%), other euphemism (5%) and *passed* (2%). Three distinct periods are identified in the data each with their own dominant variant. Before 1960 the non-euphemistic variant *died* is used almost exclusively. Between 1960 and 1990 the null variant is dominant, but then gradually replaced by *passed away* which becomes dominant after 1990 and shows the s-shaped curve characteristic of a change in progress (Labov et al. 2013). Calculating entropy of variants of ‘died’ for each sample year indicates that variation is increasing with time, and indeed new euphemistic variants (other than *passed away*) appear in the data after 1980, and *passed* without any preposition is attributed after 2000.

Logistic regression models show that for the choice between the null variant and *passed away*, the passage of time is strongly predictive of increased use of *passed away* and that no other measured variables show a significant effect on this historical shift. Between *passed away* and other euphemism, more recent year and a higher religiosity score are significant predictors of greater use of other euphemism. Between *passed* and *passed away*, a previous mention of death, whether or not that mention is a variant of ‘died’, and whether the subject of ‘died’ is the person memorialized, increases the likelihood that *passed* will be used. In addition, the more recent the year, the more likely *passed* is to be used as well.

This data shows an ongoing change in the way Winnipeg writers refer to dying in the context of the obituary—a change that reflects and responds to underlying changes in society. Prior to 1960 the non-euphemistic use of *died* reflects acceptance of death as an inescapable natural phenomenon ordained by God, while the subsequent shift to the null variant can be understood as a new linguistic avoidance of death as it becomes appropriate to resist death via trust in medical science (Phillips 2007). Similarly, increased variation in the later 20th and 21st century matches an increased emphasis on individual preference and identity (Frank & Meyer 2002). In particular, the emergence of explicitly religious euphemisms may reflect a need to affirm a religious identity in response to religion’s decline and plurality during this period. These results demonstrate lexical variation as an expression of changing social norms.

References

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