

**Rewritten Rites: language and social relations
in traditional and contemporary funerals.**

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Abstract

Despite their personal and social significance, life-course transition rituals (marking e.g. birth, marriage, death) have received scant attention in discourse analysis. Yet radical changes in them, including a growth in secular ceremonies, can provide insight into contemporary discourse and society. This article considers the case of funerals. By contrasting the openings of a traditional religious (Christian) funeral, an updated version of the same, and a secular alternative, it seeks to elucidate the nature of pragmatic, semantic and linguistic changes. The argument is that the most significant contrast is not between religious and secular, but between traditional and contemporary, with the latter being marked by reduced authority of the celebrant, greater personalisation and choice, euphemistic reference to death, less poetic language, and diminished ritual movement. The article concludes with discussion of possible connections between these dimensions of change.

Keywords:

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1, Introduction

People need language for ritual, just as much as for communication, and rituals can be found in all human societies. Yet the ritual functions of language have, with some notable exceptions, received less attention in discourse analysis than either its ideational or interpersonal functions (Halliday 1973). While rituals do in some measure fulfil these more fully researched functions, they have also something else besides: a negotiation with the unknown (Handelman 1996), and an expression of identity which is as much intra-personal as interpersonal (du Bois 1986). At a time of rapid ideological and religious change, in an era of intense multilingual and multicultural contact, the choices which need to be made by individuals and societies about rituals are quite as important as those in more practical matters, and can – as we hope to demonstrate – be elucidated by discourse analysis. While our article focuses upon one particular type of ritual in one particular society, the issues which it raises are, we believe, of far wider significance.

While there is considerable cultural and historical variation in their forms, and in the events which inspire them, those rituals which mark transitions in the human life course - birth, marriage, and death - are in all societies of particular potency and significance, bearing out Firth's definition of ritual as "a formal procedure of a communicative but arbitrary kind, having the effect of regularizing a social situation" (1972:3, cited in Kuiper and Flindall, 2000:184). The traditional religious ritualisation of these transitions continues in contemporary Western societies to varying degrees. In England (the country on which we focus in this article), almost everyone still has a funeral¹, even though this not required by law as long as the body is decently disposed of.

The forms and functions of transition rituals have been profoundly affected by religious and other changes. For some people, there is the absence or loss of any religious faith. For others, loss of belief in the religion of their own tradition is mitigated, if not by actual conversion to another, by some notion of "personal spirituality" (Heelas and Woodhead 2004), sometimes tinged with sympathy for elements of Paganism and Buddhism (Hardman and Harvey 1995). In addition, in multicultural societies, there is often a practical need to incorporate into a transition ritual the presence of people holding different beliefs to those expressed in the ceremony itself. Even in contexts where the religious faith of those attending is both strong and homogenous, there are likely to be significant differences from the past. Contemporary Christians for example, compared with their forebears, typically have radically revised ideas about the absolute need for ritual observance, the nature of a resurrection and afterlife, and the authority of the Church.

In addition to the ancient transitions common to all societies, the secular life of modern urban democracies gives rise to "new" events, felt to be significant enough to benefit from ritual recognition, but unknown in earlier ages and other societies. The past decade has witnessed a proliferation in secular rites of passage. One book that is influential and widely used in Australia (Messenger 1979) includes, in addition to alternative versions for baby namings, marriages and funerals, ceremonies for divorce, gay commitment, the acceptance of new "step relationships", house moving, and career changing. In England from 2004, citizenship ceremonies are now available for new in-

migrants. Unlike the revision of church rites, over which liturgical commissions ponder long and hard, these new ceremonies are written by a haphazard range of authors, including - in England - individual celebrants, registrars, voluntary organisations², at least two commercial companies³, as well as the parents, couples, and mourners themselves.

All this leads to a very interesting situation for discourse analysis – from both a linguistic and a sociological standpoint. Rituals are still used to mark life transitions, but the typical reliance on those religious rituals which have evolved over hundreds of years is no longer able to fulfil everyone's demands. In this situation, those who still feel the need for rituals often write their own or radically revise existing ones – sometimes beyond recognition. With each individual having more choices over their life course (Giddens 1991), transitions become more individualised, reflected in rites which are tailor-made, at least in part, by the individual or individuals concerned. This raises a question as to whether these later ceremonies can be described as rituals at all.

Transition rituals are therefore an ideal area of study for revealing how changes in language use relate to changes and variations in values, beliefs and social relations. It is not possible in the space of one article to examine such rituals in their entirety, nor even changes in one kind of transition ritual across a variety of cultures and languages. In this article we therefore examine changes in the openings of one kind of transition ritual only, the funeral, in one particular social context, mainstream English culture⁴, contrasting the language used in the opening of a traditional Christian funeral (The Order for the Burial of the Dead in *The Book of Common Prayer* of 1662) both with the new authorised rite of 2000 and with one contemporary secular alternative⁵. Despite this apparently narrow scope, however, our claim is that this comparatively limited study reveals facts about the general relation of ritual, language and society which are transferable not only to other rituals in English life, but more generally to changes in language use which are happening on a global level. Our study also, we believe, draws attention to the relative neglect of ritual language, not only in discourse analysis, but in sociolinguistics and in the sociology of language.

2. Some earlier work on ritual language

In her book *Natural Symbols*, first published in 1970, the anthropologist Mary Douglas, discusses intensively the nature of ritual as communication, and advances an explanation for the alternating ascendancy of those whom she terms “ritualists”, who believe in the necessity and value of rituals, and “anti-ritualists”, who use the term “ritual” pejoratively, regarding rituals as empty and insincere. Two examples of anti-ritualist movements in Europe are the Reformation, which overturned the rituals of medieval Catholicism, and the protest movements of the 1960s, which sought to replace ‘empty’ adherence to social rituals with more individual, spontaneous and unpredictable expression. The distinction is not, however, confined to Europe or the West. Examples of this dichotomy are legion in diverse societies and religions, and one of Douglas's aims and achievements is to dispel the myth that ritualism is most intense in tribal societies, being gradually replaced in subsequent forms of social organisation. She does this by illustrating the alternation between ritualism and anti-ritualism in a variety of societies.

In explanation of this contrast, Douglas makes extended use, of Bernstein's sociolinguistic theory of restricted and elaborated codes (Bernstein 1964, 1972)⁶, and advances a cogent argument for ritual as a form of communication employing a restricted code, and anti-ritualism as one employing an elaborated code. Traditional rituals, in this view, will have all of the conditions for the development of a restricted code: namely differentiated power, a close-knit group who know each other well and share values and beliefs, and a particular physical context. Some quotations from Douglas will make this point more eloquently than we can:

It is illuminating to consider ritual as a restricted code. (.....) Bernstein argued that the restricted code has many forms; any structured group that is a group to the extent that its members know each other very well, for example in cricket, science or local government, will develop its special form of restricted code which shortens the process of communication by condensing units into pre-arranged coded forms. (1970/2003:57)

Clearly the words (.....) carry a small part only of the significance of the occasion. The comparable situations in family life would be the spatial layout of the chairs in the living room which convey the hierarchy of rank and sex, the celebration of Sunday dinner, and for some families, presumably those in which a restricted code is used, every meal and every rising, bathing and bed-time is structured to express and support the social order. (1970/2003: 36)

At one point in her analysis, Douglas seems on the verge of going into linguistic detail:

At first sight, all ritual would seem to be a form of restricted code. It is a form of verbal utterance whose meanings are largely implicit; many of them are carried along standardized non-verbal channels. (.....) Its units are organized to standard types in advance of use. Lexically its meanings are local and particular. Syntactically it is available to all members of the community. The syntax is rigid, it offers a small range of alternative forms. 1970/2003:35

Yet, unsurprisingly for an anthropologist, she goes no further, and despite the richness of her social commentary, she has nothing to say about the actual wording of any ritual. Subsequent studies of religious ritual from a sociological/anthropological perspective do the same (Douglas 1973; Flanagan 1991; Turner 1977), even those such as Fenn (1982) that discuss ritual language at length. Although funeral rites produce what Davies (1997) calls 'words against death', anthropologists who have studied these ritual words focus on their symbolic meaning (Danforth 1982; Nenola-Kallio 1982) rather than on the language itself - even though the Orthodox texts and laments amply cited by Danforth and Nenola-Kallio manifestly have power through rhythm alone, apart from any meaning⁷. Conversely, when linguists write about religious ritual (Crystal 1965) they focus almost exclusively on language. There has been, as far as we are aware, little analysis of religious ritual which combines sociology and linguistics⁸ - despite the fact that, as rituals are largely constructed from language and perform

major social functions, the combination of the two would seem to be essential to understanding.

One relevant attempt as such a combination, however, can be found in du Bois (1986), who identifies a number of typical features of ritual speech. These are usefully summarised by Rampton (1999) as follows (our lineation and order):

- a) a mode of delivery that entails ‘a high degree of fluency, without hesitations, in a stylised intonation contour’, accompanied by ‘prescribed postures, proxemics, behaviours, attitudes, and trappings’;
- b) the mediation of speech through additional people, so that there is more than a simple relation of speaker and hearer;
- c) local *belief* in the archaism and ancestral origins of ritual speech;
- d) a tendency for speakers to disclaim any credit or influence on what is said, paying tribute instead to a traditional source;
- e) obscurity in propositional meaning;
- f) the use of ‘archaic, borrowed, tabooed or formulaic’ elements that mark the ritual ‘register’ off from colloquial speech;
- g) parallelism (for example with couplets formed according to simple but strict syntactic rules of repetition with substitution);

This list of features forms a useful guide to which we shall refer. Yet even here there is less attention than it might seem to the actual language used. Of these eight characteristics, (a) and (b) are aspects of performance, (c) and (d) a question of belief about the origin of the words, while (e) concerns propositional meaning rather than linguistic form. This leaves only (f) and (g) about the nature of the language used, and it is upon these two that we shall mostly concentrate. Our intention is to provide a commentary on linguistic detail in relation to social change, of the kind which distinguishes discourse analysis from sociological analysis.

3. The wider social context

In line with this intention, and in order to provide the necessary context for linguistic analysis, we start by considering some of the broader issues concerning contemporary funerals in England.

The 1990s in England have witnessed more innovative rites of passage than any decade in the previous 150 years, and this spate of innovation seems set to continue. Civil weddings no longer need be held in the often dour surroundings of the register office, but may now be conducted in stately homes, castles, hotels, and other stylish locations. Secular baby namings are now offered by registrars, while The Baby Naming Society enables couples to produce their own ceremony.

It has also been a revolutionary period in funeral rites. Woodland burial sites expanded from zero to over a hundred; the number of humanist funerals has risen rapidly⁹; while stories of innovatory funeral practices (such as burial in hand-painted cardboard boxes) could be found in the broadsheet newspapers, radio and television almost every week throughout the 1990s (Weinrich and Speyer 2003). Although such secular, humanist,

woodland or do-it-yourself ceremonies remain a tiny fraction of all funerals, the majority of which are still led by clergy of the Church of England, nevertheless funerals in general – especially in the South of England - became much more personal through the decade (Walter 1994). The widely broadcast funeral (technically, memorial) service in Westminster Abbey for Princess Diana in 1997 (Walter 1999) both reflected, and possibly encouraged, the personalising of religious funerals. Although North American funerals comprise very different specific elements, a similar trend toward personalisation and individualisation has been observed there (Garces-Foley and Holcomb 2005)

More generally, and even within a religious context, innovation has been made possible by a long-term shift in the meaning of rites of passage. In much of traditional Christian religion - Catholicism and the Orthodox churches for example - a rite of passage has power. The prayers of the priest and of the faithful actually help the deceased into the next world; the magic words¹⁰ of the baptism actually induct the infant into membership of the church, on earth and in heaven; the couple are not married in the eyes of God until the priest has uttered the words, 'I pronounce that they be Man and Wife'¹¹. It is this perceived function of ritual language which contributes to the aura of 'negotiation with the unknown' to which we referred earlier. A key question for any discourse analysis of such rituals is whether and how specific linguistic forms may add to, or even create, this aura.

This aspect of the funeral services was removed by Protestant reformers, who stripped them of magical power half a millennium ago, as they believed the living had no power to affect the destiny of the departed (Duffy 1992; Gittings 1984; Rowell 1977). In a secular world, this reform is taken further. Rites no longer change the participants' status with each other or with God; rather they are primarily ceremonies that mark a change that has already happened (Pickering 1974). The baby-naming ceremony welcomes the child into family and society, but does not actually create membership; the wedding acknowledges a union that may have begun years ago when the couple first starting living together; the funeral celebrates a life lived. There is therefore no absolute need for the person conducting the ritual to have magical status; anyone can lead the recognition and celebration of what has already occurred¹². This is not to say, however, that the ceremony only affirms what has already happened, or is little more than a party. There are still very serious matters to be undertaken. Weddings, renewal of vows, and baby namings all entail the making of promises. Funerals include, or are a prelude to, the necessary disposal of a corpse.

In England, it was not until 2002, that a small number of registrars began to lead civil funeral ceremonies¹³ – though not in their statutory capacity as registrars but rather as employees of a private company, Civil Ceremonies Ltd¹⁴. In these civil funerals there is no legal exclusion of any reference to religion, as there is in civil naming ceremonies and weddings. Clearly, however, a registrar is not going to recite the entire Anglican funeral service: a client who wants that should hire a minister of religion. But religious elements are allowable. The first registrar-led civil funeral, in Liverpool in March 2002, for example, included the Lord's Prayer. The wording with which it was introduced, however, is highly significant, namely that the deceased's daughter 'has requested that we should all say the Lord's prayer together'. The authority for saying the prayer, in other words, lay not in the celebrant being a minister of religion (she wasn't), nor in the ceremony being conducted in a church (it wasn't), but in the prayer

being the choice of a member of the deceased's family. And if we accept du Bois' characterisation of ritual speakers as having "a tendency ... to disclaim any credit or influence on what is said, paying tribute instead to a traditional source" we might this attribution as evidence of, in Douglas' terms, anti-ritualism. The bottom line of this kind of funeral in other words is neither religion, nor atheism, but personal choice, reflecting a wider trend toward individualisation in death, dying and bereavement (Walter 1994), and indeed in late modern culture in general (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002). Thus what at first sight appears to be a process of secularisation is, at least in the case of funerals, arguably more a process of individuation and personalisation, not least because, as we hope to show below, the same process of personalisation is evident within religious funerals too. This is clearly demonstrated when we consider changing funeral liturgy in detail.

4. The three openings.

Let us turn now to the opening words of the services we intend to contrast.

Like its predecessors of 1549 and 1552, the 1662 *Book of Common Prayer* was ratified by Act of Parliament in an attempt to impose by law uniform liturgical practice upon a whole country, and is permanently authorised, even today. Its funeral service (which we shall refer to as the "traditional funeral") is entitled 'The Order for the Burial of the Dead', and begins with two instructions:

¶Here it is to be noted that the Office ensuing is not to be used for any that die unbaptized, or excommunicate, or have laid violent hands upon themselves.

¶The Priest and Clerks meeting the Corpse at the entrance of the Church-yard, and going before it, either into the Church, or towards the Grave, shall say, or sing.

It then proceeds to the opening words, a trio of quotations from the Bible:

I am the resurrection and the life, saith the Lord: he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live: and whosoever liveth and believeth in me shall never die. *St. John xi, 25,26*

I know that my Redeemer liveth, and that he shall stand at the latter day upon the earth. And though after my skin worms destroy this body, yet in my flesh shall I see God: whom I shall see for myself, and mine eyes shall behold, and not another. *Job xix 25,26,27.*

We brought nothing into this world, and it is certain that we can carry nothing out. The Lord gave, and the Lord hath taken away; blessed be the Name of the Lord. *1 Tim. vi.7. Job i. 21*

From the outset the instructions in the traditional funeral are authoritative and uncompromising, with no apology or provision made for the absolute exclusion of the unbaptized, excommunicate and suicides. There is explicit direction too for the procession: where it shall begin, and who shall lead it. Very few options are given. The service may be held in the church or at the graveside, spoken or sung - but that is all¹⁵. And there are no alternative words given. All three extracts from the Bible are to be used, and in the order given. This "Order for the Burial of the Dead" lives up to its

name. It is very much an "order" in both (related) senses of the word. It tells us both what must be done and said, and the sequence.

The opening of the traditional funeral is very much in tune with the notion of a restricted code: authoritative, following a beaten track, and quoting an authoritative source rather than using the participants' own words. Indeed, not only this opening, but the greater part of this traditional funeral is a pastiche of biblical quotation - reminding us of du Bois' description of ritual language as frequently "borrowed". In adaptations and departure from this traditional form, though they remain Christian, we can see a movement away from these characteristics towards what is, in Douglas' terms, a gradual de-ritualisation of the event.

Thus in the most recent authorised prayer book *Common Worship* (Church of England 2000), although the first of these opening quotations is retained, it is optional, and is followed by a list of six alternatives, with the much looser instruction "One or more sentences of Scripture may be used." In addition, twenty supplementary texts are provided for use at any stage of the funeral, and five further suggestions are made for introductory Biblical quotations for a child's funeral. The second quotation ("I know that my Redeemer liveth...") has been relegated to one of the supplementary texts and its reference to the taboo topic of physical decomposition - "And though after my skin worms destroy this body, yet in my flesh shall I see God" - has been dropped. Taboo, we may remember, is one of du Bois' characteristics of ritual language so its omission can be regarded as further evidence of de-ritualisation.

In addition to these changes, *Common Worship* also prefaces the recitation of Biblical quotation with the following - significantly optional - passage

¶ This may be read by those present before the service begins

God's love and power extend over all creation. Every life, including our own, is precious to God. Christians have always believed that there is hope in death as in life, and that there is new life in Christ over death.

Even those who share such faith find that there is a real sense of loss at the death of a loved one. We will each have had our own experiences of their life and death, with different memories and different feelings of love, grief and respect. To acknowledge this at the beginning of the service should help us to use this occasion to express our faith and our feelings as we say farewell, to acknowledge our loss and our sorrow, and to reflect on our own mortality. Those who mourn need support and consolation. Our presence here today is part of that continuing support.

These words, by talking of what "Christians have always believed..." seem implicitly to acknowledge and accommodate the presence of non-Christians, as well as perhaps, by the words "even those who share such faith..." some variation in reaction to death among the faithful. This is followed by a very explicit reference to differences among the mourners.

In contrast to these changing Christian funeral services, the 2002 Civil Funerals Training Manual, produced by Civil Ceremonies Ltd. for the training of its celebrants,

provides the following suggested options for an opening (three others are included but not quoted here).

FUNERAL CEREMONY

(F) = immediate family mourner/s.

(D) = deceased person's name.

Good morning/afternoon everyone. On behalf of **(F)**, I thank you for being here today for this ceremony. I am , a Funeral Celebrant and I will be leading today's ceremony.

Please sit.

SECTION 1 – OPENING

OPTION 1A

You may well ask why, exactly, we are here, what is a funeral really for. A funeral has to do three things. First, and simplest, it must enable each of us to say farewell, in a way that allows for the natural variations of feeling among you. Second, it should try to give a reasonably accurate account of the quality and character we have lost. And third, it should articulate the love, affection and regard in which the deceased was held. These things we shall try to do.

OPTION 1B

It has been traditional in our culture to regard a funeral as a grimly sad occasion. We all know that **(D)** was a man/woman of immense wit and great realism, and he/she left very clear instructions that we were neither to wear black nor indulge in overt grief. (If appropriate insert he/she used to say.....). We shall try to carry out **(D)**'s wish, and they way to do that is to honour his/her achievements and celebrate his/her life.

The leeway for variation, however, is much more than this, for the manual (given to trained celebrants on CD Rom) merely provides templates, which the celebrant is expected to personalise for the funeral in hand. One actual and by no means untypical ceremony (with names changed) began as follows

The family has asked me to conduct the ceremony here today on their behalf, so I need to introduce myself. I am Andrew Brown and some of you know me in my previous roles in education for the borough for very many years or in my current work in the registration of births, deaths and marriages in Brent. I have to point out that my role as funeral celebrant is separate from my other duties and I am privately employed by Civil Ceremonies Limited for this purpose.

As you know we are assembled here today to honour the memory of Thomas Arthur Smith, to salute his life and make our last sad farewells. I will, if I may from now on simply call him Tom as that was the name by which he was known by everyone.

So on behalf of Tom's family may I welcome all of you who have come here today. He would I am sure have very much appreciated the efforts you have made to be here but as you know he would not have expected it because he was so modest a man.

As you will see, we will concentrate on celebrating Tom's life rather than mourning his death because this is the family's last wish

This secular service has moved, it seems, so much further down the path of de-ritualisation than the revised Christian version in *Common Worship*, that it creates a problem for our analysis. For it is so dissimilar from the traditional service that we are to an extent no longer contrasting like with like. The words are no longer a pastiche of quotations from a traditional source (the Bible), as the Christian services are, but recently written for the purpose. And although there is an option to introduce other texts, which may indeed be more traditional (a popular choice being poems¹⁶), their identity is not stipulated, and thus varies from service to service. Lastly, there are no instructions, no orders: the 'order of service' becomes 'suggestions for a ceremony'. In the opening, and throughout, decisions about what to do and say, and when, seem to be open.

This lessening of authority does not, however, seem to be simply a feature of the transition from religious to secular services. It is also evident in the 2000 religious funeral, suggesting that the loss of faith is only part of the changes taking place, and that the later Christian version forms an intermediate stage in a process of change. Compare, for example the instructions given in the 1662 prayer book with those in the 2000 version, and the very striking replacement of the modal verb "shall" with the far less stringent modality of "may".

1662 (Italics added)

After they are come into the church, *shall* be read one or both of the following

When they come to the Grave while the Corpse is made ready to be laid into the earth, the Priest *shall* say, or the Priest and Clerks *shall* sing

Then while the earth *shall* be cast upon the Body by some standing by, the Priest *shall* say

Then *shall* be said or sung

2000 (Italics added)

The coffin *may* be received by the minister

One or more sentences of Scripture *may* be used

The minister *may* say one of these prayers

A hymn *may* be sung

A brief tribute *may* be made

The service *may* end with a blessing.

There are also in the 2000 version, in addition to these auxiliary modal verbs, numerous phrases which function in effect as epistemic modals by diminishing the certainty of what will be done:

in these *or other* suitable words

These *or similar* words

This *or another* psalm *or* hymn is used

Indeed, *Common Worship* is explicit that its publication on the WorldWideWeb enables clergy to customise the texts for their own local use.

In some areas, though, *Common Worship* attempts to reinstate authority. Whereas an interim 1986 version suggested only that 'A SERMON *may* be preached', *Common Worship* requires that 'A sermon is preached' and gives firm guidance as to its purpose (Churches Group 1986, Sheppy 2004: ch. 3). Both linguistically and theologically, *Common Worship* is somewhat more traditional than some of the liturgies developed in the previous three decades and that it replaces. These emerged from a period in which both Protestant and Catholic Christianity was very much on the defence against modernism; attempts to make the liturgy comprehensible to 'modern man' arguably ended up not with making it intelligible, but with making it secular (Flanagan 1991; Nichols 1996). In the more postmodern 1990s, in which tradition and non-scientific language were re-instated, not as absolutes but as possible options for individuals to choose, it became possible for liturgists to reassemble theologically and linguistically more traditional elements. The result, in *Common Worship*, is a prayer book far longer than any of its predecessors: the postmodern salad bar takes up more space than the simple meals both of tradition and of modernism. *Common Worship* expects clergy to provide both a sermon, and a personal tribute.

The much greater authority of the older service is warranted of course, as already observed, by the fact that the Priest speaks for God, the Church, and the State. He is not, as in the secular services, there on the invitation of the family, or as an employee of a commercial organisation. And he makes no acknowledgement of the individual identities of himself, the mourners, or (at this point in the service) of "the Corpse"; participants have roles rather than individual identities: priest, congregation, corpse - although ironically, in the contexts in which the traditional service was used, it was much more likely that the priest would actually have known the deceased. The apparent individualisation of contemporary services, moreover, is often only superficial. Many are personalised scripts composed using a computerised option¹⁷ by celebrants who never met the deceased while they were alive. Even Humanist officiants, though not reliant on a computerised template, may have their own preferred format which shapes most, if not all, of the funerals they conduct¹⁸. The production of the contemporary funeral resembles the production of the contemporary automobile –

in each case a production line / computer programme is used to mass produce not a standard product but one individually tailored to the customer: mass produced individualisation. One person's car may look different from another's and seem to express their personality in its walnut veneer, wire wheels and other accessories, but in essence the two are the same.

Greater religious certainty allows the traditional service to look towards the future: both the immediate grim physical decomposition, and the later glorious physical resurrection, references to which have significantly declined in contemporary versions, despite an attempt to reaffirm the physical resurrection in *Common Worship* compared to versions of the previous three decades (Sheppy 2004: ch.3). In contrast to the traditional religious emphasis on a future afterlife, civil funerals look backwards to the past, seeking to give only a

"reasonably accurate account of the quality and character we *have lost*"
(our italics)

dwelling upon

"the love, affection and regard in which the deceased *was held*" (our italics).

Even in talking of the past, there is no certainty - only a "reasonably accurate" account. This tension between the traditional Christian future and the modern backward glance is evident in *Common Worship's* advice to relegate the personal tribute to the deceased to the early stages of the service, so as 'not to interrupt the flow of the readings and sermon'. But even this ordering is 'preferable' rather than mandated. *Common Worship* makes clear that 'the sermon is not a celebration of the life of the deceased; it is a celebration of Christ, risen from the dead' (Sheppy 2003: ch.3), and is not to be interrupted by human vanity. This tension between backward-looking celebration of the deceased and forward-looking Christian hope is even clearer in *Common Worship's* discussion of memorial services, where mourners gather in church some weeks or months after the death for a celebratory memorial service; these are becoming increasingly popular.

The different time foci are further emphasised by the stark contrast between the terms "Corpse" in the traditional service and "Deceased" in the modern ones. "Corpse" speaks of what the person is now, "deceased" of what has happened to them. The traditional service moreover speaks of what will happen to this corpse ("body worms destroy") and reflects a much harsher image of death, though this is mitigated by faith in physical resurrection ("in my flesh") and belief in the one true God ("and not another"¹⁹). It would be hard to imagine any reference to "body worms" or "flesh" in contemporary funerals, secular or Anglican. *Common Worship's* references to the physical reality of death are rather more gentle:

"Like a flower we blossom and then wither;
like a shadow we flee and never stay."

The traditional service presents a view of death as universal within a Christian cosmology which makes no allowance for alternatives ("and not another"). What

he that be LIEV eth in me, though he were DEAD, yet shall he LIVE:

- - - x - - x - - - x - - - x

and who so e ver LIV eth and be LIEVE eth in ME shall never DIE.

- - - - x - - - x - - x - - - x

Represented diagrammatically in three lines as follows this attribution reveals some striking regularities,

----- x - -x / - -x
--- x - - x --- x / --- x
----- x ---x - - x / --- x

most noticeably the repeated pattern ---x, coinciding with syntactic boundaries and semantic parallels. There is moreover a caesura effect (/) in each line, which lends itself to a very marked enunciation of the last words

saith the Lord
yet shall he live
shall never die

There are in addition in this opening text, numerous assonantal and consonantal parallels

he/ believeth/ me ; Life/ Lord ; believeth/ liveth

and lexical repetitions

life/ live/ liveth/ liveth/ die/ dead/

In short, the overall character of this text is highly poetic (in the sense established by Jakobson 1960), with a set towards the form of the message as much as its meaning. It lends itself to dramatic incantation.

The language is also, or at least has become, archaic, and therefore both a distinct register, and obscure in propositional meaning: all features designated by du Bois as typical of ritual language. The two aspects - parallelism and archaism are inseparably entwined. Thus in their anti-ritualist efforts to update these passages through the removal of archaic words and forms without regard to the effect on rhythm and other sound effects, later versions have sacrificed some, though not all, of this poetic linguistic patterning. An interim, 1986, version, for example, has the following (Churches Group 1986):

Jesus said, I am the resurrection, and I am the life; he who believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and whoever lives and believes in me shall never die.

Common Worship (2000), however, has attempted to restore some of the lost rhythm:

‘I am the resurrection and the life,’ says the Lord. ‘Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die.’

The second and third texts which open the traditional service are also poetic in this sense, though less so than the first. The second has no regular rhythm, but might nevertheless be lineated as blank verse as follows:

I know that my Redeemer liveth,
and that he shall stand at the latter day upon the earth.
And though after my skin worms destroy this body,
yet in my flesh shall I see God:
whom I shall see for myself,
and mine eyes shall behold,
and not another.

The third text, curiously constructed by putting together two separate half verses from different parts of the Bible (the first from the *Book of Job* and the second from St Paul's *First Epistle to Timothy*) has markedly parallel and symmetrical grammatical and lexical echoes²².

We brought nothing into this world, and it is certain that
we can carry nothing out. (Ø of this world)

The Lord gave, and
the Lord hath taken away;
blessed be the Name of the Lord.

As with any parallel structures there is a degree of rhythm, though it is not as marked as in the first quotation.

Common Worship, in the optional Pastoral Introduction quoted above, does seem to make some attempt to create alliterative sound sequences (faith..feelings..farewell) and parallel grammatical structures, as in the repeated infinitive + direct object structures of the sentence:

To acknowledge this at the beginning of the service should help us to use this
occasion
to express our faith and our feelings as we say farewell,
to acknowledge our loss and our sorrow,
and to reflect on our own mortality.

The secular service by contrast has very little in the way of rhythm or other poetic features - a loss which many seek to compensate by incorporating poems. The presence of one mild attempt at parallelism, lost in the otherwise colourless prose, only emphasises this absence.

First, and simplest, it must enable each of us

Second, it should try to give a reasonably accurate account

And third, it should articulate the love, affection and regard ..

What is the nature of the relation between parallelism, obscure archaisms, and ritual? Is it only the superficial one that parallel phonological and linguistic structures lend themselves to memorisation, incantation, and verbatim repetition, while archaic language marks off a particular register? Or is there some deeper relation which explains the ritualist's passionate attachment, and the anti-ritualist's vehement aversion, to such language?

One explanation has been offered by Cook (2000) in a book on language play, defined as discourse which combines linguistic patterning and repetition, semantic obscurity and reference to an alternative realities, and the pragmatic functions of inclusion or exclusion from a group. These linguistic, semantic and pragmatic features occur together across a range of apparently diverse genres including *inter alia*, children's rhymes and lore, intimate banter, jokes, verbal duels, advertisements, tabloid news, song, poetry, oratory, liturgy, prayer and ritual. Despite their diversity, they have a tendency to be widely distributed, frequently repeated, remembered, enjoyed and valued. Cook investigates the relation between parallelism, the high value attached to these genres, and the kinds of meaning and effect which they create. One aspect of the argument is that by allowing formal coincidences such as rhyme and grammatical parallelism to determine, to a greater degree than usual, the meaning of what is said, such genres aid innovative and creative thought by generating meanings, which might not otherwise have emerged. Another aspect is that this process of partial surrender to form, being unpredictable, also introduces a sense of the unknown and of forces beyond human control. It is this perhaps which explains its appeal and use in many religious traditions. Punning, for example, in which meaning is determined by formal coincidence, is regarded in Zen Buddhism as a 'navigator of thought' (Redfern 1984:146). Riddles perform sacred functions both in classical religion and in non western religions (Hasan-Rokem and Shulman 1996). In the Judaeo-Christian tradition, Kabbalistic interpretations treat the scriptures as, in effect, a word game to be solved (Eco 1997: 25-34, 117-143; Steiner 1975:60-65; Dan 1993). In this context it is perhaps significant that in societies which reject ritual, genres such as puns and riddles become disparaged as trivial, ephemeral and childish. The language of the funeral openings we have examined could be said to illustrate this theory. The marked surrender to incantatory and patterned language in the traditional service goes together with a submissive faith and belief in mystery, while the later versions, both Christian and secular, abandon both this encounter with the unknown and the language which suggests it.

6. Participant relations

Changes in the three funerals are not only linguistic, however, but also pragmatic. New forms of words, and the new meanings they express, have been accompanied by changes to the relationships between participants. These are most evident in the contrast between the traditional Christian service and modern secular service, harder to pin down in the Common Worship.

Participants in the traditional service can be represented as follows:

Figure 1: Participant relations in the traditional funeral. ABOUT HERE

(The inclusion of the corpse as a "participant" may seem macabre, but he or she is undoubtedly a real presence.) For believers (and that means, at the time that it was written, almost everybody) the funeral, composed almost entirely of quotations from

the scriptures, is in a very real sense the word of God on the subject of death. The direction of communication is *from God through* prayer book and priest *to* the laity. The writers of the prayer book are mere orchestrators and choreographers of those words; the priest is a mere channel through which the words are conveyed. He is not the sender of the message, i.e. its originator, but rather the addresser, the person who passes it on (Jakobson 1960), not the author but the animator (Goffman 1981: 144), with no more freedom to change the words and actions than a faithful messenger. The mourners are receivers of what is said, even perhaps only 'bystanders' (Goffman 1981, Levinson 1983:68). Although they actively participate, their words are only "responses", stipulated for them in advance, displaying that peculiarly circular attribute of established prayer and worship in which the faithful address God in his own words.

The 1662 funeral rite is written for a society in which (notwithstanding the substantial doctrinal differences of the time between Christian denominations) there was no significant doubt in the Biblical promise of an afterlife. Interpretation of this faith is imposed upon the ceremony by church and state. All this is reflected in the relation between participants. The priest speaks on behalf of higher powers. Few options are allowed, or concessions made to the wishes of the congregation or the deceased, which are in any case assumed to coincide with those expressed in the text. The presence of atheists, agnostics or believers in other religions is not an issue. In the later funerals, however, we begin to see the demise of this uniformity, confidence and authority. The crucial changes, significantly occurring in later Christian versions as much as in their secular successors, concern the introduction of alternatives, and with them a shift of authority for what is being said and done from the priest (speaking for God, church and state) to the mourners. Their decisions are based, not upon what God wants, but upon what the deceased is deemed to have wanted. Indeed, in contemporary English society, the very choice of having a Christian funeral, reflects the decision of mourners or deceased, and not, as in 1662, a religious and legal obligation²³.

Once loss of faith removes the presence of God from this interaction, its nature changes radically. Although the form of what is happening remains to some extent the same – there is a person leading the ceremony, a book from which it is taken and an order of events – the source of what is said is no longer so clear. In the secular services, this source is often claimed to be (as already noted above) the wishes of the deceased or the mourners themselves, and the celebrant and writers appear to have made every effort to construct a service which gives as much opportunity as possible for these to be included. In effect, writers and celebrant seek to preserve the role of mouthpiece (addresser) traditionally assigned to priests – only this time it is not the word of God that they claim to voice to the congregation, but the words of the congregation itself! If we try to locate the source of what is said diagrammatically we end up with something circular

Figure 2: Participant relations in a secular funeral ABOUT HERE

The cynical might say that in both cases – the traditional religious and the secular – the writers disguise their own influence by attributing what they say elsewhere!

This contrast between traditional Christian and modern secular services is relatively straightforward. The more complicated case is that of the revised Christian service, in which belief in God, and consequently in the authority of prayer book and priest, while

still overtly present, seems to be somewhat hedged. *Common Worship* bristles with alternatives and choices to be decided by celebrant and mourners, with opportunities to insert individualised references which reflect the wishes of the family and the deceased (expressed as we have seen with "may" being used much more often than "shall"). In many ways, with its 180 pages of options and alternatives, it resembles more the Civil Funerals Manual than the 1662 Book of Common Prayer's eight required pages for The Order for the Burial of Dead. All this perhaps reflects diminished religious certainty among the faithful and a less specific belief in an afterlife. It may also tacitly recognise that the Christian faith of the congregation or even the deceased can not be taken for granted. We could say that in today's Church of England funeral, though the participants apparently remain as they were in the traditional service, God needs to be bracketed - to indicate that for believers he is a major presence, for the non-believer not present at all, while for others he flashes – as it were - on and off.

Figure 3: Participant relations in the revised Christian funerals ABOUT HERE

7. Discussion

Our aim in this conclusion is twofold: firstly to consider what our analysis reveals about the connection between social and linguistic changes within the limited data that we have examined (the openings of funerals in English), and secondly to speculate on whether the changes we have described here have a more general relevance, to other rituals, languages, and societies.

The changes we have described are of three kinds, moving in parallel. Firstly, there are changes at the macro level, in the society in which the funeral takes place. Secondly, there are changes at the micro level, in the relations between participants. Thirdly, there are changes in the nature of the language (and paralanguage) which is used. The relationship between macro and micro social relations is straightforward enough, and for brevity, in what follows, we shall refer to these together as "social changes". The relation between these social changes, however, and the linguistic ones which have accompanied them, is more problematic, and less well understood. In this analysis – writing together as a sociologist and an applied linguist – we have striven to bridge this gap. We hope to have shown how, in our limited data, social and linguistic changes are moving in tandem. The social changes include a weakening of religious belief, an unwillingness to confront the physical nature of death, a diminution of authority, and increases in individualisation and choice, and more scope for reciprocal interaction between celebrant and mourners.. The linguistic changes include a change of register, from the highflown to the everyday, an absence of reference to the physical facts of death (the corpse and its decomposition) and a reduction in the use of rhythm and other sound effects, of grammatical and lexical parallelism. The overall result is a lessening of incantatory power, and a greater convergence between the language of the funeral and that of other more everyday genres such as conversation. There is in short a process of de-ritualisation. This is already evident in the later Christian service, and even more apparent in the civil funerals. The large question which this raises, and we have tried in part to answer, is whether there is any motivated connection between these social and linguistic changes

Poetic language is of its nature, as has often been observed, unparaphrasable. The effects which it creates are the consequence of precise linguistic choices and as such

admit no options. The text must remain exact, if the specific poetic effects are to be preserved. There is an analogy here perhaps with the attitude of the faithful to the "word of God". The 1662 funeral service can admit, in its own words, "not another". Poetry, like Scripture, despite literary theoretical arguments for "the death of the author" (Barthes 1977), remains the expression, through performers, of one single authoritative voice, rather than being arrived at through a democratic consensus. It cannot be tampered with and remain itself²⁴. In a similar way, Christian theology must yield to the authority of its founder – and such debates as there are among the faithful, are attempts not to replace but to interpret that teaching. The priest's role is analogous to that of the director or performer of a literary work; the congregation's to that of an audience.

Perhaps also, poetic language introduces a sense of a power beyond that of literal meaning. By allowing the formal demands of rhythm and rhyme to determine the wording, and thus the meaning, of what is said (Cook 2000, chapters 5, 6) poetic language mimics a surrender of autonomy, and an acknowledgement of greater authority, which fits well with traditional religious beliefs. Yet the need for such language, especially at times of transition, is by no means a monopoly of the religious. It is apparently felt equally by the agnostic and the atheist. As already noted, the banal literalism and poetic poverty of secular ceremonies may be compensated, ironically often at the mourners' behest, by the inclusion of poems and poetic literary prose, reintroducing into the ceremony precisely the kind of language use which has been lost in the erosion of belief in traditional religion. There is some connection here too perhaps with unease at the passing of decision-making about the ceremony from a higher authority to celebrant and mourners. Rhythmic and incantatory language belong to traditional societies; they are to be repeated with some variation²⁵ not freely re-worked. If poetry, especially in its more incantatory incarnations, belongs more to tribal, non-democratic, non-individualist societies (Jakobson 1959:237) then it is not surprising that many people revert to it from choice at moments of life-phase transition. Such points make us more aware of our common humanity than our individual identity, of our powerlessness rather than our power.

At this point, we may note that Douglas, following Durkheim (1965), tends to see ritual as reflecting normal social relationships. There is, however, a contrary scholarly tradition which argues that rituals typically reverse normal social relationships (Turner 1977; Jacobson-Widding 1988), transgress everyday social rules (Bakhtin 1981), or entail a psychological reversal in which adult participants temporarily regress to infantile dependency (Reed 1978). This tradition may, perhaps, prove fruitful in understanding the re-insertion into contemporary rites of elements that reflect the language of traditional societies.

9. Conclusion

Our account has described changes in funeral rites in a traditionally Christian English-speaking society. Although we have dealt only with the opening words of Church of England and secular funerals, our research suggests that we could have demonstrated, had space and readers' patience allowed, similar social and linguistic changes in the later parts of these ceremonies, in those of other Christian denominations²⁶ and in other secular funerals, as well as in other rites marking life stages such as births and marriages²⁷. Whether, in Christian and post-Christian societies more generally, similar changes can be found in rites of languages other than English is a matter for further

research. Our view is that they most probably can. A broader question concerns whether similar changes have occurred in non-Christian societies, indicating perhaps a globalised tendency to deritualisation. Are they to be found for example in the spectrum of beliefs and practices which differentiate orthodox, liberal and secular Judaism (Glinert 1993), or in differences between Sufi, Sunni or Shiite Islam (Ruthven 2000)? And are there, in non-Abramic religions, for example in Buddhism or Hinduism, similar linguistic changes accompanying weakening of faith and authority? Again, from what we know of these issues, and from other investigations we have made, our impression is that similar contrasts might be found.

Another question is whether personalised secular funerals are, in any recognisable sense, rituals? In three key ways we have considered, they are not: the leader speaks only by authority of the family, there is no longer any supernatural dimension, and linguistic parallelism and obscurity (together with prescribed actions) have declined. Sociologically, however, we can see three ways in which personalised funerals represent not so much ritual's destruction as its continuing evolution.

Comment [TW1]: Guy – please re-write, expand.

First, in both their preparation and execution, personal funerals still bring mourners together and bind them together (Garces-Foley and Holcomb 2005). For Durkheim (1965), this is the essence of religious ritual. In the personalised funeral the binding together is of mourners, 'some of whom may be strangers, into a temporary community in a world where it is difficult to form communal bonds' (Garces-Foley and Holcomb 2005). Walter (1996) has observed that contemporary mourners are typically separated geographically; not only funerals but also a whole a range of contemporary rituals comprise a temporary congregation of nomads who normally do not meet, or even know, one another. These need not be 'second-rate' rituals, however, for the small bands of hunter-gatherer aboriginals on whom Durkheim based his theory were also nomads, meeting one another occasionally through funerary and other rituals (Couldry 1999, Walter 2001). For Wouters (2002), following Elias (1991) and Maffesoli's (1996) theories of individualization, the temporary gathering together to celebrate a unique life reflects a broader cultural trend in which, while protesting their individuality, people want to belong, if only symbolically, to a wider group; for Wouters, these celebrations are not non-rituals but new rituals.

Second, following Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2002), we suggest that the focus on the individual entails a new form of social solidarity, which they term 'co-operative individualism'. All relationships, not just politics, are now being freed from paternalistic authority: partners, for example, are provided no fixed template for marriage and are expected constantly to negotiate and renegotiate their relationship. Funerals too are no longer given; they too must be negotiated. We might term them democratic, rather than authoritative, rites. If social relationships are becoming less fixed, more fluid, it is not surprising if rites that mark life transitions are also becoming more fluid in a process which is mirrored in the use of far more fluid and less predictable linguistic structures. That said, it seems very likely, third, that Garces-Foley and Holcomb's (2005) judgement on the personalised American funeral may also, with time, prove true in the UK: 'Personalised funerals have by now been around long enough that they have begun to develop their own "tradition" in the sense of frequently used elements.' Tradition has a habit of returning through the back door of even the most dramatic revolutions.

There is clearly a great deal of research to be done. The lack of such research results, as we remarked in our opening, from discourse analysts' marginalisation of language's ritual functions in favour of language's transactional functions – which, we argue, do not easily account for ritual uses of language. Yet, ritual clearly remains one of the most important and powerful uses of language in society. This is especially true when the religious faith expressed in more traditional rituals has either changed or disappeared, but people still feel a need to create new "ceremonies and celebrations". The various attempts to compensate for the ritual power which has been lost along with religious certainty is surely a classic case of an area of language use of vital importance to society, and one in which discourse analysis could offer both insight and advice.

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¹ Church weddings, on the other hand, while still popular, have fallen in number and infant baptisms have declined dramatically (Pickering 1974).

² Such as the British Humanist Association.

³ Civil Ceremonies Limited and the Baby Naming Society.

⁴ As a multicultural society, the population of England includes believers in a variety of religions. The funerals we examine here are versions of the Church of England service dating back nearly five hundred years, and recent secular ones. Alternative and secular funerals seem to appeal more to those from the more individualistic Christian

Protestant tradition than to people from outside the majority English culture who have lost faith in their own religious tradition,. Adherence to a non-Christian religious tradition is often sustained by ethnic minority families as an important badge of cultural identity, making it difficult for individual family members to depart from it, especially during family-controlled rites of passage.

⁵ The full texts of the two Christian funerals are available at

<http://www.eskimo.com/~lhowell/bcp1662/occasion/burial.html> and

<http://www.cofe.anglican.org/commonworship/funeral/funeralfront.html> The template for the secular funeral service cannot be reproduced in full for copyright reasons.

⁶ Douglas, who incidentally was Bernstein's PhD supervisor, gives only the 1964 reference, as her work precedes Bernstein (1970).

⁷ Another kind of analysis is that of liturgists such as Sheppy (2004) who are primarily concerned with theological meaning, although Nichols (1996), writing in this tradition, also addresses aesthetic and sociological critiques of modern Catholic liturgies.

⁸ There are however numerous sociolinguistic analyses of other kinds of ritual. See for example Abrahams (1962), Dundes, Leach and Ozkök (1970), Gossen (1976) on verbal duelling; Shippey (1993) on ritual boasting; Kaivola-Bregenhøj (1996) on ritual functions of riddle; Rampton (1999) on the ritual nature of foreign language use between school children. There is also work, such as Crystal (1998), Cook (2000), and Carter (2004), which comments on the relation between ritual, language play and creativity.

⁹ From a handful for members only to around 6,000 per year for any who ask. This is still only about 1 per cent of all funerals.

¹⁰ The boundary between magic and religion is hotly debated. Here we use the term (contra Glucklich 1997, Malinowski 1948, Mauss 1972) to mean the power to effect change through words and actions.

¹¹ The words of the 1662 *Book of Common Prayer*. Such utterances provide classic examples of what Austin (1962) termed declarations: in which the performative speech act must depend upon a particular form of words. There are also secular declarations, notably in law, such as "I sentence you to..."

¹² Although in England, for a couple to be legally married, the ceremony at present must be led by a registrar or authorised minister, and a certain form of words must be followed.

¹³ Secular civil weddings conducted by a registrar, on the other hand, date back to 1837, and secular baby naming ceremonies conducted by a registrar to 2001.

¹⁴ Only a few registrars in a few local authorities have done this. They may in future be employed in this capacity by the local authority.

¹⁵ This option of going straight to the grave however may have had a very practical cause – to dispose of decomposing corpses as quickly as possible (Rowell 1977:84).

¹⁷ Civil Funerals Software. CD Rom, Civil Ceremonies Ltd. 2002, revised 2003.

¹⁸ For examples of formats, and variations within them, see Wynne Willson (1989).

¹⁹ A phrase which presumably excludes all other faiths in as uncompromising a manner as the exclusions at the opening.

²⁰ *I am the resur'rection* for example might highlight the uniqueness and humanity of Jesus; *I 'am the resur'rection* belief in his continuing living presence; *I am the resur'rection* the prospects for the future.

²¹ “Saith” is pronounced by some English speakers as /seIjeθ/ and by others as /seθ/. This unstressed syllable is only present in the former.

²² While the first two texts were also used in earlier Medieval burials, the third was an innovation of the 1552 prayer book (Rowell 1977: 84)

²³ Rowell (1977) notes that from 1662 until 1880 burial in an Anglican churchyard following the Anglican service was obligatory, but notes how non-conformists would remain silent. Jews and other non-Christians would at that time have followed their own practices in secret.

²⁴ This is even more marked in the case of the Koran which, unlike the Christian Bible, loses its holiness in translation.

²⁵ Notwithstanding the widely accepted claim (Lord 1960) that verbatim repetition does not characterise oral traditions as popularly believed, nevertheless rhyme, rhythm and other devices serve to reinforce the likelihood of some repeated wording (Buchan 1972).

²⁶ For the Catholic requiem the linguistic change is of a different nature as it involves the switch from Latin to English. Flanagan (1991) and Nichols (1996) have argued that, in recent developments within vernacular liturgies, the everyday language and focus on the congregation are at the expense of a focus on God (Nichols 1996), a parallel argument to our own.

²⁷ In Britain and the USA, one may get married in a number of geographical locations; in many continental European countries, the wedding must take place in the town hall of the home town of one of the partners, suggesting, perhaps, that the rite marks not so much a contract between individuals as a re-arrangement of relationships within the community. As far as we are aware, scholars have yet to comment on individualisation in the Anglo-American wedding, though Beck & Beck-Gernsheim (1995; 2002) have analysed in some detail individualization in marriage.