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Leena Kolehmainen & Kukka-Maaria Wessman

(School of Languages and Translation Studies, University of Turku, Finland)

The multiple roots of multilingualism: Different voices, changing commemorative practices and traces of migration in a cemetery linguistic landscape

This paper approaches cemeteries as linguistic landscapes. The central goal is to describe the special features of a cemetery as a linguistic landscape and to answer the question what do the inscriptions on the tombstones tell the passers-by about the deceased, the multilingual past of the particular society and the commemorative practices in different times. The data consist of approx. 3 400 photographs taken in 2009–2011 in the three oldest cemeteries of Varkaus, an industrial small town located in the eastern part of Finland. By combining viewpoints of onomastics and the study of linguistic landscape, we analyze both the names of the deceased and the possible other inscriptions on the tombstones.

Earlier studies on cemeteries as linguistic landscapes have focused on the traces European migration has left in US-cemeteries (Eckert 1998, Graves 1988, Tamosiunaite 2012, VanDam 2007). The Varkaus data give rise to a more complicated picture in which migration is only one factor behind multilingualism. The data show that the Varkaus cemeteries are a mixture of past and present. They are landscapes which change in time and in which the amount of inscriptions on the tombstones, their languages and their conventions reflect changes in memory cultures. They are places that preserve voices and languages of different actors: the family members of the deceased and their networks, the engravers, builders and manufacturers of the tombstones, and the institutions of the society. Cemeteries are partly a translated scenery in which multilingualism remains hidden behind the translated inscriptions. They are multilingual namescapes which entail a large number of personal names, also translated names. The multilingualism of the namescape is partly due to migration, partly it is due to the inherent multilingualism in the Finnish and Finnish-Swedish personal name system. The cemetery linguistic landscape is not a direct copy of the linguistic resources of the speakers of the society, the deceased or their family members.

This paper is a part of a larger study that investigates the cultural and linguistic effects of industrialization in Finland.

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