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“I WILL COME BACK ALRIGHT” – UNCOVERING LINGUISTIC STRATEGIES IN SCOTTISH SOLDIERS’ LAST WILL LETTERS

The First World War is remembered as one of the most lethal wars in history. Since its participants were faced with imminent death on a daily basis, many of them had made a will before entering battle. In case an explicit will was missing, however, a letter would be accepted by the War Office as evidence of the soldier’s last wishes. These 'nuncupative wills' have been collected by the National Records of Scotland and present a fruitful resource to reveal the idiosyncratic linguistic identity of the authors. While for many soldiers those letters co-occurred with deployment, others had already seen the lethal consequences of war and felt compelled to take precautionary measures.

Although the study of ego-documents has become a staple of linguistic investigation in recent years, with a few exceptions (Helmers 2016, Housiel 2014, Sandersen 2007), war correspondence is a surprisingly neglected sphere. This explorative study uses discourse analysis to uncover the linguistic strategies which are employed by the writers to communicate the possibility of imminent death and its consequences to their loved one in private war correspondence. Based on a corpus consisting of letters by 22 Scottish soldiers, this qualitative research will put special emphasis on the discursive construction of the taboo subject of death. Linguistic strategies range from mitigation and identity construction as a survivor, to the use of directives, performative speech acts (Searle 1976) and in-group expressions (Benwell & Stokoe 2006). In essence, this study offers a glimpse at the idiosyncratic communicative practices of soldiers on the brink of or during battle.

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