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Article

The Linguistic Landscape of Visitor Messages at the Tombs of Iconic Chinese Historical Figures: An Analysis Based on the Corpus from Three Kingdoms Figures

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Abstract: This paper uses a corpus of 150 notes deposited at the tombs of five Three Kingdoms historical figures. Drawing on Bakhtin's speech genre theory, scholarship on address terms, and speech act theory, it carries out a coded analysis to explore how young people stage dialogues with these historical figures across three analytical axes: genre, address terms, and discourse function. The results show that the interplay of these three dimensions creates a stylistic continuum from reverent to informal. Genre establishes the formal boundaries of the message, address terms encode underlying assumptions about the writer's imagined relationship with the figure, and discourse function defines the speech acts the writer performs. This whole practice operates like an "emotional projection mirror", laying bare young people's urge to find steady, unshifting emotional anchors amid an unpredictable present.

Keywords: Linguistic Landscape; Peripheral Linguistic Landscape; Theory of Speech Genres; Discourse Function; Emotional Projection; Discursive Practice of Visitor Messages at Celebrity Tombs

1. Introduction

Commemorating the past is a long-standing tradition in Chinese culture. In ancient times, people visited historical sites, reflecting on the past and expressing their emotions and thoughts through connections with historical figures and locations. A thousand years later, at places such as the Zhuge Liang Temple, Cao Cao's Mausoleum, and Liu Bei's Huiling Tomb, a new form of commemorating the past is emerging. Young people place ibuprofen tablets before Cao Cao's tomb, hand-draw high-speed rail tickets reading "Chengxiang: Now it only takes three hours from Chengdu to Xi'an," award certificates of "Prefect of Hefei" at Sun Quan's grave, or leave jars of soil from Zhuo Commandery at Liu Bei's burial site. These acts have evolved from individual curiosities into collective linguistic practices. Participants include members of the "History Enthusiasts Circle," casual history lovers, and passing tourists—some well-versed in both official and unofficial historical accounts, who give historical figures nicknames, write fan fiction, and visit tombs to post messages. Diverse groups gather at the graves of famous historical figures, leaving behind notes, letters, banners, medicine boxes, certificates, and train tickets. These written artifacts together form a linguistic landscape worthy of observation.

This study uses messages left at the tombs of five central figures from the Three Kingdoms period (Cao Cao, Cao Pi, Liu Bei, Zhuge Liang, and Sun Quan) as data, aiming to answer the core question: What linguistic features do these messages exhibit? And what can we infer about how some young people engage in dialogue with historical figures through these features? To address this central question, the study explores three sub-questions: Which everyday genres are appropriated or borrowed in these messages? What address term systems are used when addressing ancient figures? And what discourse functions do these messages perform? Each sub-question corresponds to one analytical

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dimension—genre, address terms, and discourse function—examined individually and then synthesized to answer the core question. Drawing on Bakhtin's Theory of Speech Genres, classification frameworks from address term research, and Speech Act Theory, we establish a three-dimensional analytical framework. Using Nvivo, we analyze 150 collected texts, focusing on the linguistic characteristics of these messages as part of a peripheral linguistic landscape, and on how writers use this linguistic practice to establish dialogic relationships with historical figures.

2. Theoretical Foundation and Research Framework

2.1. Theoretical Foundation

The term "linguistic landscape" was formally introduced by Rodrigue Landry and Richard Y. Bourhis in 1997, referring to "the languages used on public road signs, advertising billboards, street names, place names, commercial shop signs, and public signs on government buildings that together form the linguistic landscape of a given territory, region, or urban agglomeration." The two scholars further distinguished two functions of linguistic landscape: an informational function, which informs space users about the linguistic characteristics of their environment; and a symbolic function, reflecting the power and status of language-using groups within society [1]. Eliezer Ben-Rafael defined it as "a symbolic construction of public space" [2]. Bernard Spolsky established a theoretical framework for the study of public signage from a sociolinguistic perspective [3]. Shang Guowen and Zhou Xianwu proposed the concept of "Peripheral Linguistic Landscape," incorporating mobile, temporary, and multimodal signs within urban spaces into research scope [4]. The data in this article falls within this category and exhibits three characteristics: temporality—messages are eroded by weather and removed by site management; privacy—the messages target specific individuals or groups rather than aiming for broad public visibility; and emotion-driven nature—the writers primarily express emotions rather than convey public information. Although these historical figures' mausoleums are open to the public and the messages exist in public space, the linguistic acts are not necessarily directed at all members of the public.

The framework for understanding the form of messages can be approached through the Theory of Speech Genres. Mikhail Mikhailovich Bakhtin introduced the concept of genre into linguistics, referring to all types of spoken and written discourse [5]. He argued that "there is no speech that does not belong to any speech genre, just as there is no language that does not belong to any functional style" [6]. Xin Bin also cited this view: "Even in the most free and unrestricted conversations, we shape our speech according to definite genre forms" [7]. Hu Zhuanglin similarly stated, "Learning to speak means learning to construct discourse and to give one's speech a certain genre form" [8]. Visitors leaving messages at historical figures' gravesites draw upon everyday genres based on their understanding of the ancient person's image. Genres typically carry specific presuppositions about communicative contexts—for example, letter format presupposes one-to-one communication, signage presupposes spatial guidance, and certificates presuppose acts of commendation. By invoking a particular genre, one simultaneously activates its associated communicative context.

Address terms serve as linguistic markers of relational positioning. Hu Fan-zhu and Hu Yi-ming classify the Chinese honorific system into two major subsystems: prescriptive and spontaneous, and further divide everyday address terms into three types: Deferential, which includes honorifics and humble forms; Pejorative, encompassing arrogant and derogatory terms; and Solidarity, including neutral, intimate, and familiar forms [9]. According to Brown and Gilman's Power and Solidarity Theory, the T/V pronoun system reflects the relative positions of interlocutors in terms of power dynamics and emotional distance [10]. Hu and Hu [9] further suggest that China's traditional society, structured around the homology of family and state, primarily developed honorifics and derogatory terms, whereas solidarity-based address forms emerged as a product of social democratization. Yin Chengzhu observes that the weakening of "death" connotations and

the rise of evaluative meanings in tombstone messages reflect a shift from familial ties toward emotional connections [11]. In this study, the choice of address terms in messages left at historical figures' gravesites serves to position the relationship between the message writer and the ancient figure, as well as to define the communicative context. Our analysis of these terms aims to examine how specific groups' imagined relationships with a given historical figure leave observable linguistic traces through their selection of address forms.

The types of actions performed in messages can be identified through Speech Act Theory. Searle [12] categorized illocutionary acts into five classes: assertives, directives, commissives, expressives, and declarations, with the core proposition being "Speaking a language is performing speech acts." Based on this framework, Liu Yan classified linguistic landscape discourse acts into categories such as order service, policy propaganda, and emotional creation [13]. The five functional codes—confiding, caring, declaring, wishing, and teasing—used in this study represent a classification of the illocutionary acts in messages: confiding and caring correspond to expressives; declaring corresponds to declarations and assertives; wishing aligns with directives; and teasing represents a composite type of illocutionary act. Audience Design Theory [14] posits that style choice is a response to the audience, with speakers adjusting their style according to audience characteristics, introducing the concept of "referee design" to explain group identity. In the context of leaving messages at historical figures' graves, the audience is the imagined image of the ancient person preconceived by the message sender. The sender's judgment about "who the other person is" determines the tone and content of the message. When a community shares similar presuppositions about a particular historical figure, the discourse functions at that figure's grave will exhibit a stable distribution pattern.

2.2. Research Analytical Framework

Based on the above theoretical resources, this study establishes a three-dimensional analytical framework, as shown in Figure 1.

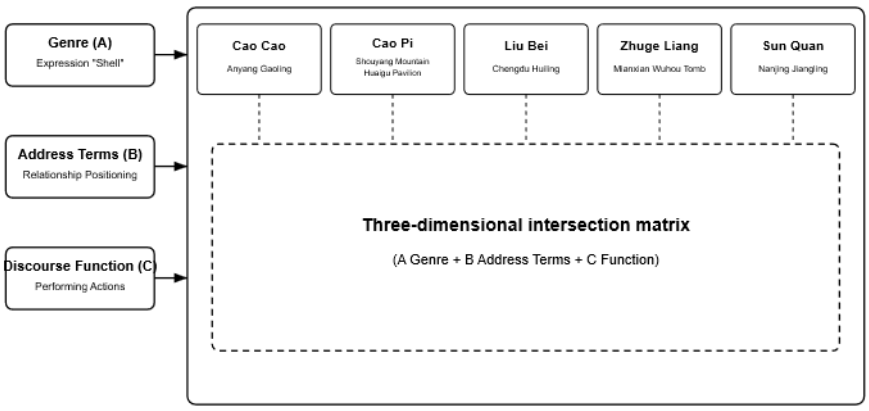


Figure 1. Schematic Diagram of the Three-Dimensional Linguistic Landscape Analysis Framework for Messages Left at Historical Figures' Graves

The vertical axis consists of three analytical pathways: Genre examines the "shell" through which messages are expressed, identifying the repurposed genre types using Bakhtin's Theory of Speech Genres; Address Terms investigates how messages position relationships, classifying honorific choices and their implied relational assumptions via frameworks from address term research; Discourse Functions explores what actions the messages accomplish, identifying discourse function types and their distribution through Speech Act Theory. The horizontal axis comprises five cases—each representing 30 messages left at the tombs of five historical figures from the Three Kingdoms period: Cao Cao, Cao Pi, Liu Bei, Zhuge Liang, and Sun Quan—with each figure forming a distinct case. At the intersection points lie our coding operations, where each inscription is simultaneously tagged with genre, address term, and function labels, creating a three-

dimensional "A+B+C" coding structure. The integration of these three dimensions reveals a complete linguistic practice, answering our central question: what linguistic features do these messages exhibit, and in what ways do young people engage in dialogue with historical figures?

3. Research Design

3.1. Data Sources and Sampling Strategy

This study uses messages left at the tombs of five key historical figures from the Three Kingdoms period as its corpus. The selection of these individuals follows purposeful sampling, balancing popularity and differences in social status and identity. The chosen sites are Cao Cao's Gaoling Mausoleum in Anyang, Cao Pi's Huaigu Pavilion on Shouyang Mountain in Luoyang, Liu Bei's Hui Ling in Chengdu, Zhuge Liang's Wuhou Tomb in Hanzhong, and Sun Quan's Jiang Ling in Nanjing. These five figures represent three distinct roles—ruler, powerful minister, and heir—and belong to the three rival factions: Wei, Shu, and Wu. The five locations cover four types: confirmed imperial tombs, confirmed eminent ministers' graves, imperial mausoleums with known locations, and symbolic memorial sites (Figure 2).

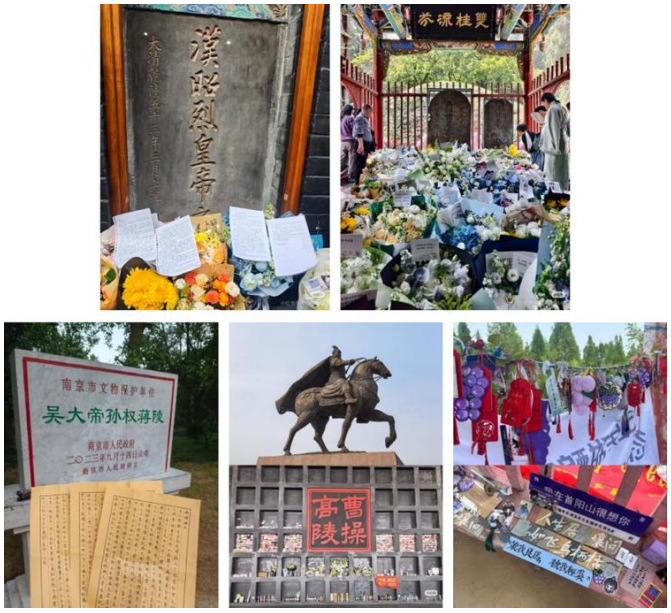


Figure 2. Scenic Views of the Tombs of Five Famous Figures from the Three Kingdoms Period (Note: Top Row, Left to Right: Liu Bei's Huiling Mausoleum in Chengdu; Zhuge Liang's Wuhou Tomb in Mian County, Hanzhong. Bottom Row, Left to Right: Sun Quan's Jiangling Mausoleum in Nanjing; Cao Cao's Gaoling Mausoleum in Anyang; Cao Pi's Huaigu Pavilion on Shouyang Mountain, Yanshi, Luoyang.)

The data collection period spanned from January 2023 to June 2026, primarily sourced from social media platforms such as Xiaohongshu, Weibo, and WeChat official accounts. Keywords including "Cao Cao Tomb messages," "Wu Hou Tomb notes," and "Shouyang Mountain Memorial Pavilion" were used for retrieval, along with messages cited in media reports about tomb visits. Inclusion criteria included: handwritten or handmade text materials left at the physical sites of these five memorial locations by non-official visitors; texts containing recognizable Chinese characters; and formats such as notes, letters, cards, banners, or handwritten messages on objects. Excluded were purely symbolic emojis, offerings without textual content, online secondary retellings lacking on-site photographic evidence, official steles, and tourist site informational signs. After cleaning and organizing, a final corpus of 150 samples was compiled—30 per individual figure.

3.2. Three-Dimensional Coding

We established a three-level coding system in Nvivo, corresponding to three dimensions, using individual data segments as the smallest unit. Each segment is simultaneously tagged with genre, address terms, and discourse function labels, forming a three-dimensional "A+B+C" coding structure.

Genre (A) is categorized into five types based on Bakhtin's Theory of Speech Genres: formal letters, archaising letters, archaising panegyrics/elegies, brief everyday notes, and special creative formats. Address terms (B) are classified according to Hu and Hu [9] into two major subsystems—Deferential (B1) and Solidarity (B2)—further subdivided into nine subcategories under B1, including official titles/posthumous names, courtesy names, honorific pronouns, and modern nicknames. Discourse functions (C) draw on Searle's Speech Act Theory and are grouped into five categories: confiding, caring, declaring, wishing, and teasing. All three dimensions allow multiple coding for individual data items, enabling a comprehensive capture of complex expressive intentions.

3.3. Analytical Methods and Operational Procedures

The coding process consisted of pre-coding, formal coding, and consistency checking. During the pre-coding phase, 10 sample texts were coded to refine the definitions of ambiguous nodes. In the formal coding stage, a separate case was created for each individual, with three-dimensional labels assigned to each text item. After completion, a random sample of texts was re-coded to verify consistency, showing good intra-coder consistency. Saturation analysis indicated that no new nodes emerged from additional data, confirming information saturation. Subsequently, data were extracted using Nvivo's "Matrix Coding Query" function to generate the comprehensive cross-tabulation table (Table 1) for this study. The analysis primarily relied on qualitative interpretation, supplemented by quantitative statistics, where statistical results mainly illustrated distribution patterns and inter-group differences, while conclusions were based primarily on in-depth qualitative analysis of each text. When citing examples, the text identifier is noted—for instance, "Zhuge Liang's 10th statement" is labeled as "ZGL10."

Table 1. Comprehensive Crosstabulation of the Three-Dimensional Coding Results for Visitor Messages at the Tombs of the Five Iconic Historical Figures.

Dimension	Code Node	Cao Cao	Cao Pi	Liu Bei	Zhuge Liang	Sun Quan	Total
Baseline	Corpus Size (N)	30	30	30	30	30	150
A. Genre							
	A1 Formal Letter	9	2	13	9	3	36
	A2 Archaising Letter	2	0	1	3	4	10
	A3 Archaising Panegyric/Elegy	3	4	8	8	11	34
	A4 Brief Everyday Note	12	8	6	4	3	33
	A5 Special Creative Format	5	18	2	4	10	39
	Total (A)	31	32	30	28	31	152
B. Address Terms							
B1 Deferential	B1a Official/Noble/Posthumous Titles	7	4	10	19	16	56
	B1b Courtesy Names	5	9	4	3	4	25
	B1c General Honorifics	5	0	2	9	1	17
	B1d Honorific Pronouns (nin)	10	1	6	7	3	27
	B1 Subtotal	27	14	22	38	24	125
B2 Solidarity	B2a Relational Identity Terms	0	0	7	0	0	7
	B2b Modern Nicknames	7	2	4	2	3	18
	B2c Direct Full Names	1	3	1	1	1	7
	B2d Familiar Pronouns (ni)	4	0	6	3	2	15
	B2e Special Appellations	0	0	1	0	0	1
	B2 Subtotal	12	5	19	6	6	48
	Total (B)	39	19	41	44	30	173
C. Discourse Function							
	C1 Confiding	8	3	12	12	5	40
	C2 Caring	11	3	8	4	1	27
	C3 Declaring	11	10	15	13	12	61
	C4 Wishing	2	5	3	7	2	19
	C5 Teasing	15	16	6	4	15	56
	Total (C)	47	37	44	40	35	203

Note: The baseline corpus consists of 30 items per figure (150 in total). Multiple coding was allowed for genres, address terms, and discourse functions (i.e., a single corpus item could be tagged with multiple codes). Therefore, the subtotals and totals for the analytical dimensions exceed the actual corpus size.

4. Results and Analysis

4.1. Genre (A)

Bakhtin's theory of speech genres suggests that speaking does not involve creating forms out of nothing, but rather drawing upon existing genre repertoires. Visitors leaving messages at the graves of historical figures are precisely appropriating everyday genres to frame their expressions. Figure 3 shows that epistolary form (A1 formal + A2 archaic style) accounts for a relatively high proportion at the tombs of Zhuge Liang, Cao Cao, Liu Bei, and Sun Quan, but is lower only at Cao Pi's tomb. "Writing a letter" serves as a relatively common genre framework for grave-side messages, yet the internal composition of this epistolary form varies across different historical figures' graves.

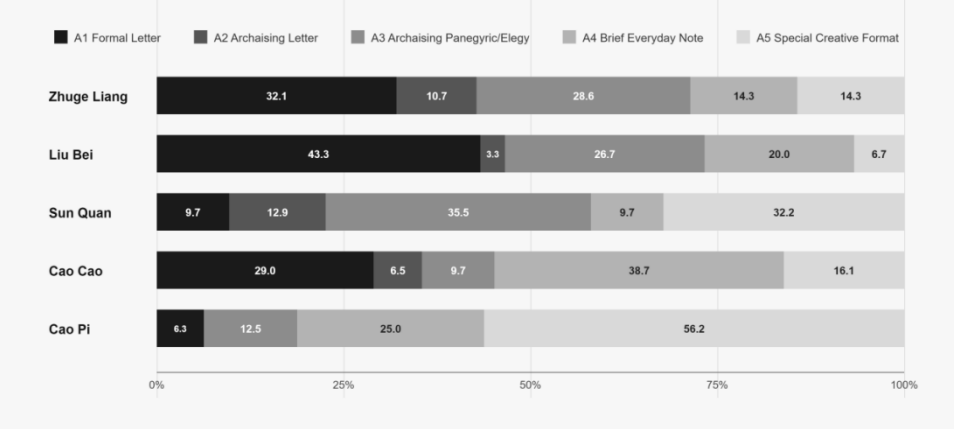


Figure 3. Stacked Bar Chart Showing the Distribution of Message Genres at the Tombs of Five Historical Figures. (Note: The Percentages in the Figure Are Calculated Based on the Total Frequency of Codes for Each Individual and Normalized to Ensure That the Sum of Proportions for Each Genre within Every Bar Equals Exactly 100%.)

At the tomb of Zhuge Liang, the formal and archaic styles are relatively evenly distributed, with the archaising panegyric style adding up to a solemn category totaling 71.4%, while the special creative format accounts for only 14.3%. Take Zhuge Liang's item No. 10 as an example:

"Dear Chengxiang: Wishing you all the best. After much hesitation, I finally quit the job I loved... These past days have given me a deeper understanding of your struggles and strength. As long as I don't give up, even if life's path remains unpredictable, I will strive to shine brightly every single day, just like you." (ZGL10)

This message follows a complete letter structure, in which the author uses the epistolary form to confide personal career choices and existential uncertainty to Zhuge Liang.

At Liu Bei's Hui Ling tomb, solemn styles accounted for 73.3% in total, while special creative format made up only 6.7%, with isolated expressions such as "the most enchanting demon of the late Eastern Han" and "the greatest reckless swordsman of the end of the Han dynasty." For example, Liu Bei's second entry adopted a four-character praise format:

"Emperor Zhaolie, indeed a ruler of benevolence and righteousness, upheld the cause of Han with an enduring spirit; his loyalty and valor shine through the ages; his imperial virtue endures forever, revered by generations to come." (LB2)

When addressing Liu Bei, the commenters were more inclined to use laudatory language to affirm his status as a "benevolent ruler."

The distribution of genres at Sun Quan's tomb shows significant differentiation. Archaising Panegyric/Elegy and Special Creative Format together account for the highest proportion, approximately 67.7%, while formal and everyday styles each make up only 9.7%. Writers either adopt archaising panegyrics or archaising letters—such as "Your Majesty Sun, please take notice" or "May you kindly accept this offering"—or create imaginative formats, such as banners reading "I miss you so much in Hefei" or "Notice: Prohibition of Cao Wei vessels entering the Yangtze River," along with certificates awarded to Sun Quan as "Prefect of Hefei" (Figure 4). The middle ground is rarely seen.



Figure 4. Creative Award Certificate in Front of the Sun Quan Jiangling Cultural Heritage Protection Stele

The Cao Cao Gaoling site features a relatively balanced distribution of genres, with Brief Everyday Notes and Formal Letters being the most common, while special creative formats and Archaising Panegyrics are also present. Visitors can write lengthy formal letters or notes on medicine boxes, as well as create creative banners. For example, Cao Cao item 17:

"To His Excellency Emperor Wei Wu, Mengde Gong: I have come specially to Gaoling and respectfully present you with 19 ibuprofen tablets. Had your headache been cured earlier, without the need to execute Hua Tuo, your mind would have remained clear and sharp, allowing you to long maintain control over the imperial administration. The Sima family would then have had no opportunity to usurp the Wei dynasty, nor would history have witnessed the later chaos of the Eight Princes' Rebellion or the devastation caused by the Five Barbarians. A single small medicine might have secured peace and stability for the nation—only regretting that it could not be delivered a thousand years earlier." (CC17)

Here, in the format of an antique letter, are the visitors' reflections on historical causality.

The special creative format accounted for 56.2% at Cao Pi's tomb, the highest among the five individuals, while formal and imitation ancient letters together made up only 6.3%. The dominant forms of expression were creative formats such as banners, certificates, road signs, advertisements, ID badges, and thesis covers. For example, Cao Pi's fifth item (Figure 5):



Figure 5. A Replica of a Popular Online-Style Road Sign Placed in the Huaigu Pavilion at Shouyang Mountain

"I miss you so much at Shouyang Mountain." (CP5)

This imitates the style of internet-famous street signs—no letter format, no salutations or signatures; the genre here is expression itself.

The variation in genre selection depends on the writer's imagination of character portrayal. Zhuge Liang and Liu Bei remain confined within the orthodox narrative framework of "loyal minister" and "benevolent ruler," thus limiting their genre

possibilities; Cao Pi, after being reimagined through an internal "cute" aesthetic, breaks free from the orthodox mold, allowing his genre space to expand significantly into special creative forms; Sun Quan simultaneously exists within two narratives—"ruler of Jiangdong" and "defeated general at Hefei"—where traditional-style letters coexist with humorous creativity, leaving a relatively vacant middle ground; Cao Cao's narrative framework exhibits multiple coexisting identities—he is a powerful sovereign, a poet, a sufferer of headaches, and also the "Boss Cao" among internet users—resulting in a more diverse distribution of genres. The spatial form of genre choice reflects the linguistic manifestation of a character's narrative framework. Shang and Zhou [4] summarize the third wave of Linguistic Landscape research as beginning with human agency, analyzing consciousness and action within diverse linguistic landscapes. The genre appropriation seen in messages left at historical figures' tombs precisely embodies this kind of agency.

4.2. Address Terms (B)

Address terms are not merely referential tools but also linguistic markers that indicate relational positioning. Li [15] notes that research on address terms is shifting from static description to dynamic, functional analysis; Jin [16] points out that one key direction in international honorific studies is "honorific expression within theoretical frameworks and theoretical development under honorific systems." The choice of address terms in this paper similarly serves a dynamic function in constructing relationships. From the corpus data, Deferential address terms (B1) dominate among all five figures, yet the emotional connotation of respect has shifted from awe to identification; Solidarity address terms (B2) primarily follow an "intimacy-building" trajectory. Deferential titles account for a particularly high proportion in Zhuge Liang and Sun Quan; although Liu Bei mainly uses Deferential forms, Solidarity terms—especially "Zhugong" and "Ni"—also appear frequently; Cao Cao's Deferential titles are largely supported by the abundant honorific pronoun "Nin"; whereas Cao Pi's total title frequency is relatively low, mainly due to frequent use of no titles at all, with Courtesy Names being predominant. As shown in Figure 6, we visually present the distribution of titles used by these five figures through word clouds. The size of the word directly corresponds to its frequency.



Figure 6. Word Cloud of Honorific Terms Found in Messages at the Tombs of Five Historical Figures (Note: Font Size and Color Intensity Indicate Frequency, Based on Statistical Analysis of Honorific Terms Used at the Tombs of These Five Individuals.)

"Chengxiang" appears most frequently before the tomb of Zhuge Liang, with entries 10, 26, and 30 of Zhuge Liang all addressing "Chengxiang" as the object of expression:

"Chengxiang, I quit the job I loved..." (ZGL10)

"Chengxiang, seeing your words is like meeting you in person—I'm late..." (ZGL26)

"Chengxiang, seeing your words is like meeting you in person... You have long become a part of my life and the very foundation of my existence." (ZGL30)

Here, the function of "Chengxiang" is no longer merely to confirm B1a Official; it has become an object identifier capable of bearing emotional attachment. In the titles before

Sun Quan's tomb, "Zhizun" appears most frequently. For example, in Sun Quan's 12th entry:

"Esteemed and wise: A thousand years pass in the blink of an eye... May Nin's resting place be free from war and turmoil, with gentle river breezes and skies as clear as the endless expanse over Jiangdong!" (SQ12)

The terms "Zhizun" and "Chengxiang" originate from historical usage, but their application has evolved through contemporary communal interpretation, becoming exclusive labels associated with historical figures.

The titles before Liu Bei's Hui Mausoleum are most notably "Zhugong" and "Duke Xuande," with "Solidarity" also having the highest proportion among the five. For example, in Liu Bei's seventh entry:

"I don't know how to address Nin—Lord Liu? Duke Xuande? Emperor Zhaolie? Or should I call him more affectionately, Zhugong? Let's go with Zhugong. I come from Zhuo Commandery, Nin's hometown... Before coming here, I went to the mulberry tree in Lou Sang Village and collected a small jar of soil..." (LB7)

In this message, we see the sender weighing four options before ultimately choosing the title "Zhugong," placing the decision-making process at the forefront of the expression. The term "Zhugong" exists exclusively within the relationship of a subordinate to a superior; by selecting it, the speaker positions themselves as a subordinate when addressing Liu Bei. Moreover, the frequent use of the egalitarian pronoun "Ni" in texts at Liu Bei's tomb further confirms this tendency toward intimacy.

In front of Cao Cao's tomb, terms such as "Cao Gong" and "Boss Cao" both appear, indicating a relatively balanced distribution among formal address terms, general respectful titles, and nicknames. Moreover, the modern honorific pronoun "Nin" appears with extremely high frequency at Cao Cao's tomb. For example, in entry 16 about Cao Cao:

"This is the best headache medicine from Japan, Aman, take it well—no more medical disputes." (CC16)

"Aman" is Cao Cao's nickname, the most intimate and private term among the five. By addressing a historical emperor with his nickname and jokingly referring to the incident where he killed Hua Tuo as "medical riot," the commenter brings ancient figures into contemporary daily life. The parallel use of "Nin" and "Aman" at Cao Cao's tomb also reflects how the commenter skillfully shifts between maintaining respect and creating a sense of closeness in everyday terms.

Cao Pi's messages at the front of the Huigu Pavilion on Shouyang Mountain differ in structure from those of others, with address terms accounting for nearly half of the text. This is related to the genre characteristics dominated by his special creative format, where forms such as banners, advertisements, and road signs inherently do not require personal names. When address terms are used, courtesy names like "Zihuan" dominate absolutely. For example, in Cao Pi's 30th entry:

"Zihuan, at this moment you are not the crown prince, not Emperor Wei Wen. You are just an ordinary person who has lost his closest friend and family... Your words can serve as a shelter in this storm." (CP30)

"Zihuan" is Cao Pi's courtesy name, neither as formal and distant as directly calling him by his title or as intimate as "Pipi," but situated somewhere in between. Of course, apart from this, most creative texts do not include address terms, since the genre itself is sufficient to convey the intended meaning.

Address term selection is a way of defining relational positioning. For instance, when visitors choose "Chengxiang," they place Zhuge Liang in a position where emotions can be entrusted, while situating themselves as admirers or confidants; Choosing "Zhugong" means placing oneself in the role of a subject (or subordinate) when engaging in dialogue with Liu Bei; selecting "Aman" positions Cao Cao within a space amenable to intimate teasing. When most visitors share similar relational assumptions toward a historical figure, the corresponding title will recur frequently and eventually become the most recognizable form of address—such as "Chengxiang" at Zhuge Liang's tomb or "Zhizun" at Sun Quan's tomb. The balanced or scattered use of address terms for Cao Cao and Cao Pi indicates

that visitors have not yet reached a consensus regarding their imagined relationships with these two figures. Thus, differences in address term usage essentially reflect, on a linguistic level, the degree of shared understanding or divergence among visitors concerning how they relate to historical figures.

4.3. Discourse Functions (C)

The fundamental idea of Speech Act Theory is that speaking is doing. Overall, based on the collected data, the core speech act of "mourning" at the tombs—intended to express grief for the deceased—is largely absent from all 150 samples; not a single message conveys sorrow for the departed. Instead, visitors come to the tomb of a historical figure who died nearly two thousand years ago to express feelings, show care, make declarations, offer prayers, or even engage in humor. These five functions are distributed across each individual's tomb, but their proportions vary significantly. Liu [13] points out that Linguistic Landscape fulfills its deeper function as a medium for social interaction and communication through information transmission, and the distribution of functions in messages left at celebrity graves precisely reflects this underlying interactive dynamic.

As shown in Figure 7's radar chart, at the tomb of Zhuge Liang (Wu Hou), expressive and confessional functions dominate. The core feature of confession is that the speaker shares inner feelings or experiences with the listener. In the context of the tomb site, visitors treat Zhuge Liang as an object capable of receiving their words. For example, see Zhuge Liang's entry No. 4:

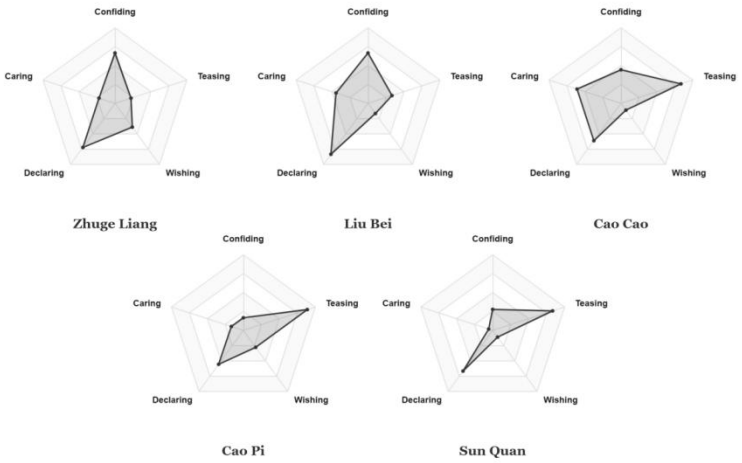


Figure 7. Radar Chart of Function for Five Historical Figures' graves(Note: All Radar Charts in the Figure Use Absolute Scales, with Each Data Point Representing Actual Frequency Rather Than Independently Normalized Relative Proportions.)

"I sincerely hope that Chengxiang takes good care of your health, to comfort the hopes of all people under heaven. I have specially brought with me a small portrait of Boyue and the late Lord, hoping it may slightly ease Chengxiang's longing." (ZGL4)

The writer uses classical Chinese phrases such as "Fu Yuan" and "Ji" to express wishes, with the first half wishing good health and the second half informing that he has brought small portraits of Jiang Wei and Liu Bei. For example, Zhuge Liang's entry No. 11:

"Chengxiang: The sea is calm and the rivers clear, peace prevails across the four seas, the nine provinces are united, and the people live in tranquility. These leaves come from the tomb of Emperor Zhao Lie (Liu Bei), symbolizing the inseparable bond between ruler and subject like fish and water—forever together..." (ZGL11)

The core action of this message is to inform—telling Zhuge Liang that the world is at peace, and bringing leaves from Liu Bei's Hui Mausoleum for Ni. The functions of confiding and announcing intertwine here, manifesting as a gesture of "reporting," placing Zhuge Liang in a position worthy of being informed.

The highest proportion of acts at Liu Bei's Hui Ling tomb is declaration, followed by confessions. The basic characteristic of declaration is that the speaker makes a judgment or determination about a certain matter, such as Liu Bei's first item:

"Last night, I went to Henan and paid homage to Lord Yun Chang at the temple, beholding his majestic presence. I believe Your Majesty also deeply cherishes the memory of Lords Yun Chang and Yi De, so I have specially brought along a painting titled 'The Three Heroes Unite,' accompanied by small portraits of Yuanzhi and Chengxiang, in hopes of bringing comfort to Your Majesty's heart." (LB1)

This simultaneously conveys both information and declaration, informing Liu Bei that I visited Guan Yu's temple, while also asserting that you must miss Guan Yu and Zhang Fei. For example, Liu Bei's point 14:

"The greatest swordsmen of the late Han dynasty, the finest Zhugong of the Three Kingdoms—Liu Lang of Zhuo Commandery... I don't know what kind of flowers suit others' Zhugong, but the Zhugong of Shu must be adorned with the most dazzling roses." (LB14)

"First mad swordsman of the Han dynasty's end" and "Best Zhugong of the Three Kingdoms" are both declarative judgments, whose function of declaration is directly related to Liu Bei's identity as a "Zhugong." Commenters are eager to affirm Liu Bei's historical status and personal charisma through such declarations.

In the functional distribution before Cao Cao's tomb, teasing behavior stands out the most, followed closely by expressions of care. Historical records frequently mention that Cao Cao suffered from headaches, and here the concern primarily refers to his physical condition—for example, Cao Cao's third item (Figure 8):



Figure 8. Ibuprofen Box and Message Left at Cao Cao's Mausoleum

"Cao Chengxiang, eat this! This is more effective than a proclamation against bandits—powerful!" (CC3)

The literal content of this note is a recommendation for medicine, but its core action is care—the sender positions themselves as a "caretaker." For example, Cao Cao's fifth point:

"Cao Gong: Grain-based liquor, won't make you tipsy. Do not consume with cephalosporins!" (CC5)

This resembles a medical prescription in form, with "do not take with cephalosporins" being typical phrasing found in modern drug instructions. The care and humor expressed before Cao Cao's tomb are often deeply intertwined—for instance, the comment "this is more effective than the Declaration of Exposing the Traitor" already carries a teasing tone. The story of Cao Cao's headache being cured by Chen Lin's "Declaration of Exposing the Traitor" has become widely known. When humor overtakes concern to become dominant, it indicates that those leaving messages tend to express their care through contemporary discourses marked by irony and deconstruction.

Cao Pi's teasing behavior at the front of the Huaigu Pavilion on Shouyang Mountain was the highest among the five individuals. The basic characteristic of teasing is that the speaker does not pursue literal seriousness; rather, the purpose of teasing remarks is to create a light-hearted or humorous effect. For example, Cao Pi's first statement:

"Master Cao Zihuan, the connoisseur of Great Wei grapes, once a southwest breeze, has passed away and now rests in your arms." (CP1)

"Master of Grape Appreciation" is a fictional title. Cao Pi loved grapes and was the only emperor in Chinese history to have officially issued an edict specifically praising a single fruit. His image in contemporary times evokes a striking contrast between a "cold and aloof ruler" and a "sweet-tooth enthusiast." For example, Cao Pi's 15th decree:

"Fresh grapes spoil easily, and since Zihuan loves fragrant things, I specially present Your Majesty with a string of grape-scented soaps—hope you'll enjoy them!" (CP15)

Since fresh fruit is perishable, sending a grape-scented soap makes logical sense. The premise of this inference, however, is imagined by the commenter—namely, that Cao Pi needed someone to help solve the problem of preserving grapes. Thus, the core function of the joke lies in constructing a logically coherent fictional scenario.

At Sun Quan's tomb, the balance between mockery and declaration is the highest and most closely matched. The declarative aspect manifests as an affirmation of Sun Quan's historical status, such as in Clause 8 regarding Sun Quan:

"Wishing Emperor Wu Tai Zu a healthy and peaceful Dragon Boat Festival, may you be surrounded by Wu on all sides, enjoy eternal blessings from heaven, and rest in supreme peace." (SQ8)

In this classical-style eulogy, the speech act serves to affirm Sun Quan's status as the founding monarch of Wu. The ironic aspect is primarily manifested in references to Sun Quan's military defeats, such as in point 9:

"Hefei specialty, genuine and authentic Wenyuan's grave grass... These dried blades are not irony, but memories." (SQ9)

The phrase "Wen Yuan's tomb grass" here is linked to the historical Battle of Xiaoyaojin, and it satirizes Sun Quan's defeat in which he lost despite having a larger army. However, the commenter explicitly stated that it was "not meant as mockery," indicating that the jest was not malicious. The functions of proclamation and jesting occupy opposite ends at Sun Quan's tomb, with the two threads barely converging, forming the only divided pattern among the five individuals.

At the same time, functional complexity is also worth our attention. For example, Liu Bei's point 8:

"Beibei Ruwu: Recently sent from the land granted to A Dou, I wish for the reunion of father and son, the enduring bond between brothers, and good health and academic success. Last night, I finally achieved the long-desired result, so I come today to fulfill my vow, deeply grateful for your kindness. May the entire Shu Han household remain healthy and protect me as I move forward. Once I return to shore, I shall come again next year to repay my gratitude with a jar of red beans." (LB8)

This message simultaneously serves three functions: a wish, an expression of care, and an announcement. For example, Zhuge Liang's point 21:

"Zhuge Liang, take Nin's fan and go assist the royal uncle!" (ZGL21)

On the surface, this appears to be a gesture of care—reminding someone to bring a fan—but the experience of "going to assist the royal uncle" had already been fulfilled during Zhuge Liang's lifetime. The person leaving the message is aware of the historical outcome when saying this, so the act of concern is merely superficial, while the underlying intention is teasing. This functional complexity shows that emotional projection by the message sender is not always one-dimensional.

The functional differences in front of the tombs of various historical figures stem from visitors' judgments about how best to address each individual. Zhuge Liang is imagined as someone who can be listened to, so visitors tend to report and confide; Cao Cao is seen as someone who needs care and can take jokes, prompting visitors to tease and show concern; Cao Pi is viewed as a friend to share fun with, leading visitors to engage in playful banter. Thus, each discursive function reflects a presupposition about the personality of the ancient figure—a consensus within the community regarding how to speak to a particular person. Once established, this consensus is repeatedly reinforced, eventually solidifying into a stable pattern of discourse functions.

4.4. Three-Dimensional Integration

Genre, address terms, and discourse functions occur simultaneously within the same piece of data, as illustrated by Zhuge Liang's entry 25:

"To Chengxiang, we've come to see you! Please accept our humble offering!" (ZGL25)

This message is very brief, yet it encompasses three dimensional tags: the genre is a "Brief Everyday Note," the address form is B1a Official with the honorific suffix "Chengxiang DaRen ," and the speech function is confiding. When these three tags are combined, we can see a complete speech act— the sender uses simple, everyday language and an address that blends respect with intimacy to confide in Zhuge Liang about their arrival.

We applied the same three-dimensional annotation to each character's corpus, and after aggregation, presented the spatial differences among the five historical figures in 3D space. Figure 9 shows the overlaid summary results. This semicircular spectrum arranges the five Three Kingdoms figures clockwise from left to right—Zhuge Liang on the far left to Cao Pi on the far right—displaying a gradual shift from solemnity to informality. Each positioning point is determined collectively by the three dimensions. Zhuge Liang is located at the far left, with all three dimensions pointing in the same direction: formal letter style, honorific titles, and confessional tone, placing him in a position requiring serious correspondence. Cao Pi is positioned at the far right, where all three dimensions also align—creative style, direct name usage, and playful tone—placing him in a context suitable for imaginative and casual interaction. Liu Bei, Sun Quan, and Cao Cao are arranged sequentially in the middle, with each figure's placement determined jointly by genre choice, address form, and functional orientation.

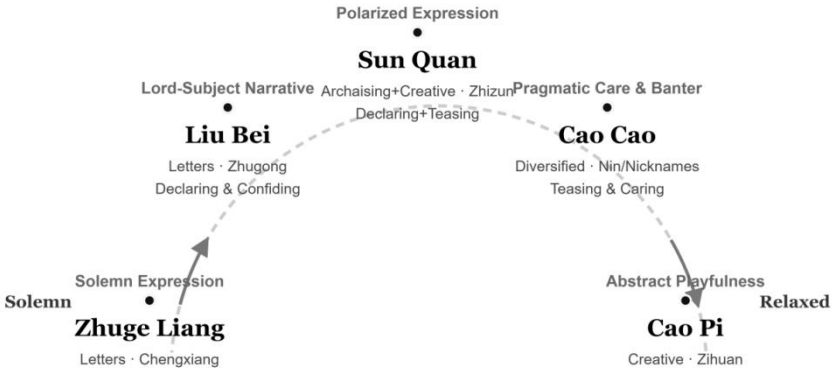


Figure 9. Stylistic Spectrum of Messages Left at the Graves of Five Historical Figures (Note: Each Positioning Point Is Determined by Three-Dimensional Data—genre, Title, and Function.)

Referencing Liu Bei's fifth point:

"The highest principle of ruler and subject, a noble standard throughout history." (LB5)

This message, written on a floral card, is composed in the genre of archaising panegyric. The address is implicit, yet "ruler–minister relationship (Jun Chen)" clearly alludes to the relationship between Liu Bei and Zhuge Liang, serving a declarative function. The combination of these three dimensions forms a discourse act that evaluates the master-minister relationship between Liu Bei and his retinue through solemn phrasing. Unlike the lengthy outpouring at Zhuge Liang's tomb, it lacks deep emotional involvement; unlike Cao Pi's playful roadside signs, it is not light-hearted. Instead, it occupies a position slightly toward the left center—constructing a narrative of ruler and minister that maintains respect without demanding excessive emotional investment. Similarly, see Cao Cao's item 12:

"Cao Gong: ...I've brought Nin's 'Mai Zi' along to keep you company. I hope you have 'Mai Zi' by her side in the next world..." (CC12)

"Mai Zi" is Cao Cao's little dog in the animated film "The Starry Sky of the Three Kingdoms." This message, written in a formal letter format and addressed as "Cao Gong," serves a communicative function of care, combining three dimensions. Though presented in a formal epistolary style with respectful address, its core action—bringing his dog to an ancient figure—is deeply everyday. This reflects the distinctive discourse style often seen at Cao Cao's Mausoleum: a blend of practical concern and playful humor.

Compare Zhuge Liang's 13th point:

"Ask Chengxiang for peace... Hope that in the new year, I can continue to receive Nin's... The only way forward is to keep our original aspirations unchanged..." (ZGL13)

This message, also formal in letter format and including a respectful title, serves the discourse function of expression and aspiration. Despite belonging to the same genre and employing the same type of honorific address, it produces entirely different stylistic effects due to its distinct functional purpose. The key to this three-dimensional convergence lies in how these elements align with function: genre and honorific provide the formal framework, while discourse function determines how that framework is used. The visitor's judgment about how ancient figures should be properly addressed simultaneously operates across all three dimensions—choosing a genre presumes a certain relationship, selecting an honorific already constrains the scope of the discourse function. These three dimensions occur simultaneously, constituting the complete linguistic practice through which visitors express themselves at the tomb of a historical figure. Shen and Sun [17] argue that urban linguistic landscapes construct new spatial discourses through social activities by combining social space and multimodal symbols, and that the interaction between space and symbols is crucial for understanding the sociocultural significance of linguistic landscapes. Tian [18] also notes that stylistic studies have evolved to view "style as a social practice of constructing identity and expressing stance." The three-dimensional convergence we discuss in messages left at historical figure tombs precisely reflects such spatial-symbolic interaction and stylistic practice.

5. Conclusion

This study analyzes 150 messages left at the tombs of five historical figures from the Three Kingdoms period, examining the linguistic features of such messages through three dimensions: genre, address terms, and discourse function. When these three dimensions are combined, the five figures present a stylistic spectrum ranging from solemn to casual. Genre provides the formal framework, address terms signal relational presuppositions, and discourse function determines the type of speech act—these three elements interact simultaneously to form a complete communicative practice between the message writer and the historical figure. The inscriber’s imagination about who the ancient person "is" determines which genres are appropriate, which address terms are suitable, and which functions feel natural.

The paper proposes the concept of an "emotional projection mirror" within the linguistic landscape. The messages at historical figures’ tombs are temporary, personal, and emotionally driven—private utterances directed toward an absent and unresponsive historical figure. This practice reflects contemporary young people's psychological need to find emotional anchors in an uncertain reality that will not disappear. Since historical figures cannot respond, they do not reject; since they do not change, they do not disappoint; since they do not leave, they cannot be lost. This phenomenon of pursuing "underground idols" (i.e., absent, unresponsive historical figures treated as enduring objects of emotional attachment) suggests that cultural heritage institutions and educational systems should regard such messages as a way for youth to establish emotional connections with history, seeking a balance between respect and inclusiveness.

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