Review Paper

Normalising the Concept of Death and the Promotion of Religiosity, Sociocultural Norms and Prejudices in Newspaper Obituary Announcements: A Review

Abstract

This review article was intended to examine related literature on how the discourse of death and dying is naturalised, normalised and communicated to the target audience as designed and portrayed by the producers of the death announcements. Findings from the critique revealed the way the supposedly language of bereavement in the world of death is normalised as well as utilised to realise other discursive purposes such as the preservation of oral traditions, religious and sociocultural properties of given societies in the face of modernity and the dominating powers of westernisation. In addition, evidence from the previous studies reviewed showed the extent to which the concept of death is totally normalised and naturalised and even celebrated in certain contexts, where the death announcers take pride and honour in doing the announcements, the bereaved families are congratulated and the occurrence of death is considered as attaining 'martyrdom', which always calls for jubilations. The review has also demonstrated how the pages of newspaper death announcements were taken advantage of as platforms for promoting ethnic disparities, class struggle and perpetuating social hegemony, with some segment of the social structure being privileged at the detriment of those perceived to be the minorities in the society. Previous studies reviewed in this article drew largely from the critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 1989, 1992), Swalesian genre moves analysis (Swales, 1990; Bhatia, 1997; Kong, 1998), Kress and van Leeuwen's (1996, 2006) multimodal approach to text analysis, quantitative content analysis (see, for example, Ergin, 2010, 2012) and genre-based approach to the discourse of death announcements (Elekaei, Faramarzi & Tabrizi, 2015).

Keywords: death announcements, newspaper, discourse, normalisation

Introduction

This article reviews scholarly literature on newspaper death announcements and how these sad occurrences are normalised and naturalised by the announcers in order to realise other discursive objectives by the producers/announcers (Machin, 2013; Machin & Mayr, 2012; van Leeuwen, 2013; see also Abousnnouga & Machin, 2008, p. 115). Death announcements may be categorised as part of the homely discourses (Miller, 1984). These types of everyday genres have been tagged 'homely discourses' for their nature of being constructed and recognised within given social contexts on a regular basis (Al-Ali, 2005). Other varieties from the same category include marriage announcements and congratulations (Haddad, 1995, 2005), birthday commemorations, death and obituary announcements (Matiki, 2001; Ondimu, 2014; Al-Khatib & Salem, 2011), marriage sampling and mate selection advertisements (Otta et al., 1999; Waynforth & Dunbar, 1995), birth declarations and announcements for traditional and religious festivities. Scholars hold the view that systematic examination of these types of announcements may likely reveal some deeper sociocultural, political and religious communications. In addition, it may enable

40 individuals to keep track of history and social changes as it occurs in different societies (Ergin,
41 2012; Jones, 2005; Lazović, 2012). In Africa and some part of the Middle-East, for instance,
42 cultural and religious factors have always characterised most of the studies conducted on
43 newspapers death announcements. In other words, Mazrui's (1986) African triple heritage,
44 represented in the mixture of the local culture, the religion and the Western culture, remains as
45 the most common factor among different African texts. For example, traces of this African
46 tradition could be established in so many empirical works conducted in the continent such as
47 Matiki's (2001), Ondimu's (2014), Nwoye's (1992) and Igene's (1997) studies. In the Middle-
48 East, Elekaei et al.'s (2015) and Behnam and Alizadeh's (2015) studies on the sociocultural and
49 religious undertone of death announcements in the Iranian society could serve as reference
50 points, where culture and religion shape the discursive construction of death. Different analytical
51 methods have been incorporated to get the texts of the death announcements properly described
52 and analysed. Some of the techniques employed include the genre-move approach (Afful, 2012;
53 Ondimu, 2014; Elekaei et al., 2015; Behnam & Alizadeh, 2015), quantitative content analysis
54 (Ergin, 2010, 2012) and critical discourse analysis (Ondimu, 2014).

55 **Normalisation of Death**

56 In a recent study, Ondimu (2014) used the Swalesian (1990) genre move analysis framework to
57 ascertain the schematic arrangements and the linguistic components of the moves identified in
58 newspaper announcements, be it compulsory or optional. As the theoretical background, critical
59 discourse analysis (CDA), specifically Fairclough's (1992) approach communicative events was
60 incorporated to inform the study. Ondimu (2014) sampled 356 obituary announcements from a
61 major daily newspaper in Kenya, the *Daily Nation*, with the purpose of understanding how the
62 society perceives and behaves towards the world of death. Results from the analysis revealed six
63 moves comprising both the compulsory and non-compulsory categories. Moreover, the findings
64 indicated that using positive metaphors in the language of the notices reflects the African way of
65 evading any mention of the words associated with passing away, the way of consoling the
66 bereaved ones and evading the mention of bad things about the deceased at all. At the same time,
67 images referring to death used in the language of the announcements have some explicit religious
68 connotations. Ondimu (2014) cited some headings of the announcements where words were used
69 metaphorically in reference to death. For example, expressions such as "celebration of life", "a
70 worthwhile rest", "passing on to glory", and "gone too soon" were all meant to refer to death. In
71 Christianity for instance, 'Heaven' is perceived as the perfect place for the believers to rest after
72 death (pp. 9-11). That is to say, these types of "metaphorical construction" (Fairclough, 1992, p.
73 195) are deliberately employed by the producers/sponsors of the death announcements to
74 discursively normalise and naturalise (Machin, 2013; van Leeuwen, 2013; Machin & Mayr,
75 2012) the whole idea of dying in an attempt to dowse the pains and agonies from the part of the
76 bereaved ones.

77 Literature presupposes that living humans attempt to maintain certain fantasies and construct
78 mental images to keep the fading contacts with deceased persons alive. Such practices arise from
79 the significance associated with human interactions with one another. In some societies, these
80 communications that are essentially intended for the deceased individuals are placed in public

81 domains (Archer, 2001; Bowlby, 1980; Bromley & Nimocks, 2005). Evidence of such traditions
82 could be found in different societies (Alali, 1993; Matiki, 2008; Nwoye, 1992). Considering this
83 reality, Bromley and Nimocks (2005) wondered why such an "intimate communication" would
84 be offered for public consumption (p. 6). The authors carried out an empirical study that sought
85 to examine the rationale behind using newspaper announcements as the means for
86 communicating with deceased persons. In a mixed mode study using Burke's method of
87 dramatistic criticism, Bromley and Nimocks (2005) sampled 191 "In Memoriam"
88 announcements that appeared in the *Wisconsin State Journal* (WSJ) newspaper Madison,
89 Wisconsin, USA (p. 3). Results from their investigation showed that the announcements have
90 twofold functions, therefore, targeting two addressees. Basically, the death announcements were
91 meant to preserve the relationship between the sender and the deceased. At the same time, they
92 were also intended to express how much the deceased is cherished and loved by his/her relatives
93 as his/her passing away is given so much prominence and publicity as it is made open through
94 media announcements. At this point, comparisons can be drawn between Bromley and Nimocks'
95 (2005) and Ergin's (2010) findings, for example, on death announcements and their social
96 functions. Whereas Bromley and Nimocks (2005) showed that In Memoriams published in the
97 WSJ, Madison, addressed both the deceased and the public orientating towards positive emotions
98 about the deceased, Ergin's (2010) analysis showed that death announcements in Turkey speak
99 more to the public than the deceased persons. In addition, instead of contributing to reduce social
100 inequality, Turkish death announcements reinforce "social divisions" and promote the
101 "privileged groups" in the country, and hence, serve as platforms for marginalising the minority
102 groups in the society (p. 194).

103 In Nigeria, Nwoye (1992) conducted an empirical study with conclusions similar to that of
104 Endres's (1984) study. Nwoye's (1992) study explored how structural layout and rate of
105 recurrence of obituary announcements in Nigeria informed more about the socioeconomic class
106 of the deceased persons and their family members. The study found that the use of the Nigerian
107 English (NE) in death announcements makes it much more elaborate and comprehensible, most
108 especially, to the local readers. Parallel to Aremu's (2011) conclusions, Nwoye's (1992) findings
109 emphasised that using the NE in such announcements symbolises richness in the local culture as
110 well as the linguistic heterogeneity of the Nigerian society. Therefore, peculiarities in this
111 version of the English language should not be perceived as blunders. Instead, it should be
112 understood as a kind of linguistic productivity that may represent the Nigerian sociocultural
113 identity anywhere around the world. At the same time, this Nigerian brand of the English
114 language would stand distinctive among the English dialect spoken around the world, thus
115 representing representing the local culture and the influences of its indigenous languages.
116 Sampling from the *Nigerian Tribune*, the *Herald*, *The Nation*, *The Guardian*, the *Vanguard*, *The*
117 *Punch*, the *Sun* and the *New Nigerian* newspapers, Aremu's (2011) study examined the
118 construction of obituary announcements in Nigeria in NE and found that its language is
119 "characterised by euphemisms, lexical borrowings, hedges, metaphors, code-mixing, code-
120 switching and idioms". The study considers the use of NE as a "window" through which some
121 sociocultural and linguistic backgrounds among the users of the NE is demonstrated. By
122 showcasing the properties of the NE by way of obituary announcements, the study presupposes
123 that a quite new hybrid tongue, among other world Englishes, is in the making (p. 142). At the
124 same time, this could be seen as another platform where the discursive representation of death

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125 and dying is being naturalised, normalised and legitimised (Machin, 2013; Machin & Mayr,
126 2012; van Leeuwen 2013).

127 In another form of typical normalisation of the concept of death, a study conducted by Al-Ali
128 (2005) revealed two types of obituaries: i) the "normal" and ii) the "martyr's wedding" death
129 announcements in Jordan, where the death announcer takes "pride and honour" in the
130 announcement and calls for "celebration" rather than anguish. The study sampled 200
131 announcements published in the Jordanian *Al-Ra'y* and *Ads-Dustour* newspapers to celebrate the
132 *shahadah* (martyrdom) of those who got killed in the ongoing Arab-Israeli conflicts over the
133 occupied territories in the Palestine. In this corner of the globe, the so-called martyrs' deaths are
134 extremely celebrated and the grieving families are congratulated by relatives and well-wishers as
135 they are seen to be among the most fortunate ones. These unusual tributes could keep on coming
136 in for quite a number of days (pp. 5-28) (for more on Arab-Israeli conflict, see Asmar, 2001). In
137 a different approach to the concept of death, Ergin (2010) argues that, in the last 38 years or so,
138 death announcements in Turkey have been taken advantage of, by their producers/announcers, as
139 platforms for upholding "ethnic inequalities" and social "prestige and distinction" within the
140 Turkish multiracial society. By examining about 2554 death announcements taken from the
141 prominent Turkish *Hürriyet* daily newspaper, which were published between 1970 and 2006, the
142 study concludes that some ethnicities are presented as the "privileged groups" in the society at
143 the detriment of other minorities such as people of Jewish, Armenian or Greek ancestry. Using
144 the quantitative content analysis, the study also shows how death announcements of men, mostly
145 Muslims, tend to demonstrate elements of high social standing compared to those of non-
146 Muslims and women. The study criticises the Turkish social structure, which is seen as an
147 embodiment of a rhetoric of "power" as it is represented in the texts of the death announcements.
148 More so, the "symbolically articulated social boundaries" within the Turkish society, according
149 to the study, appears to have remained unbroken even in the "world of death" (pp. 176-194).

150 **Religiosity and Cultural Orientation**

151 Literature reveals the extent to which religious and cultural predispositions influence the
152 discursive construction of print media death announcements in different contexts. For example,
153 in a recent additional study on the influence of religiosity and culture on texts, Elekaei et al.
154 (2015) studied the structural features, communicative functions and the sociocultural
155 implications of the Iranian newspaper death announcements. The study is contextualised within
156 the gender-based approach to the analysis of death announcements. The study is focused on the
157 influence of religion and culture on the textual composition of the announcements. Elekaei et al.
158 (2015) employed the Swalesian (1990) genre moves framework and Kress and van Leeuwen's
159 (1996, 2006) proposed visual grammar (VG) in doing the text analyses. The study worked on
160 three separate sets of data. The first set is comprised of about 200 announcements and seven
161 moves were identified, that is: six obligatory and one optional. Additional moves were found in
162 the second and third sets of data. In the study, some similarities were found between men's and
163 women's death announcements, while the differences were mostly related to the length of the
164 notices as well as words selection. For example, Persian words were mostly used in men's
165 announcements whereby Arabic words were used in the women's death notices. One more
166 important difference discovered between these two types of the genres is associated with using

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167 photographs. While pictures of the deceased persons were commonly found in men's death
168 notices, instead, the women's announcements carried pictures of plants, animals and other
169 inanimate beings. It is worth mentioning that in most of the middle-eastern Muslim societies, and
170 Iran inclusive, religious and cultural restrictions do not permit women or their pictures to be seen
171 by men, other than their close relatives, even in death. Thus, apart from the structural features
172 and the communicative purposes identified from the analysis, it has become evident that the texts
173 of the announcements replicate further sociocultural and religious norms of the Iranian society. It
174 should be noted that Iran is an Islamic Republic a with Muslim majority and has been under the
175 control of religious clerics since after Imam Khomeini's 1979 Revolution (for more details on
176 Imam Khomeini and the Iranian Islamic Revolution of 1979, see Palmer, 1983, pp. 199-200;
177 Sadeghi, Hassani & Ghorbani, 2014).

178 However, what could be the main criticism of Elekaei et al.'s (2015) study may be represented in
179 the way it unnecessarily incorporated the Kress and van Leeuwen's (1996) approach. In essence,
180 the framework has not been referred to or used anywhere throughout the analysis despite its
181 applicability in a study of this nature, which includes images and other visual components. Kress
182 and van Leeuwen's visual social semiotics framework is basically concerned with visual
183 grammar and the analysis of images mostly found in billboards, advertisements and other audio-
184 visual materials. Notwithstanding, Elekaei et al.'s (2015) presentation and the analysis of the
185 identified moves were very comprehensive. As much as possible, the authors attempted to
186 contextualise the structural components of the death announcements within both the religious
187 and sociocultural realities of the contemporary Iranian society.

188 In line with Elekaei et al. (2015), Behnam and Alizadeh (2015) studied the structural features
189 and the linguistic components of print obituaries published in Tabriz, Iran. The study adopted the
190 Swalesian (1990) rhetorical moves analysis and Kress and van Leeuwen's (1996) visual social
191 semiotics. The study was aimed at assessing the sociocultural approach to death in Tabriz. Nine
192 moves were identified from the corpus that is comprised of 108 death announcements. Most of
193 the findings of this study were consistent with Elekaei et al.'s (2015), most especially, in the way
194 deceased women were represented in the obituaries. For example, almost all the 50 men's
195 obituaries analysed in this study contained photographs of the deceased persons, while no single
196 picture is attached to any of the women's obituaries. Instead, images of plants and animals were
197 used in the women's death announcements. Moreover, it was found that there were no mention
198 of any women's names in the segment of the announcements where family members were listed.
199 Generally, women were always last to be mentioned briefly in the obituaries. It was noticed that
200 death related occasions involving women in Tabriz were always held separately inside mosques
201 or at the bereaved family's homes. In the case of men, most of the findings were also consistent
202 with Elekaei et al.'s (2015). More so, hobbies and challenges faced by the deceased persons were
203 not mentioned in the announcements. In that regards, Behnam and Alizadeh (2015) indicated that
204 this practice goes contrary to Watson's (2008) and Harold, Crosby and Alhenet's (2009)
205 suggestions on how obituaries were supposed to be textually structured. In writing obituaries,
206 Watson (2008) suggested "four moves", that is: i) the introduction, ii) the related biodata of the
207 deceased, iii) the list of the surviving family members and, iv) other related information. In their
208 opinion, Harold et al. (2009) suggested "five moves" to be adopted in doing obituary, they are: i)

209 the "announcement", ii) the biodata information, iii) the "survivor information", iv) the burial
210 arrangements and, v) the endowment receiving points (Behnam & Alizadeh, 2015, p. 196).

211 Findings from Behnam and Alizadeh's (2015) study more or less reflect those of Elekaei et al.'s
212 (2015) study that have examined the communicative features and the sociocultural representation
213 of death announcements within the same Iranian context. The dominating influence of some
214 religious and cultural backgrounded factors in Iran is undeniably present in the findings of both
215 Behnam and Alizadeh's (2015) and Elekaei et al.'s (2015) studies. These social realities were
216 mostly associated with the position of women in that social setting whether dead or alive. As
217 discussed earlier, most of the middle-eastern societies, and specifically Iran, could simply be
218 described as men's world in the sense that their dominance is strongly felt even in the world of
219 death. In these societies, men are found to be generally empowered and they could be
220 excessively sensitive and protective over women (Al-Khatib & Salem, 2011).

221 Contrary to the conclusions arrived at by Al-Ali (2005), where martyrdom is celebrated through
222 death announcements and the martyrs are believed to have attained "God's grace", Ergin (2012)
223 uses the "large-scale cultural change" framework to examine how Turkish people perceive the
224 idea of death over time. The study reveals three approaches, which include: i) the traditional,
225 where the "authority" belongs to God, ii) the modern, where medicine takes the lead over
226 religion, and iii) the post-modern, where the "self" becomes the "authority". Ergin's (2012) study
227 concludes that Turkish death announcements speak the "postmodern language of loss" that
228 considers death as an ordinary "departure" from this life, but not as a definite "arrival in another
229 world" (pp. 276-289) (see also Walter, 1994; Bath, 2010).

230 In a related study within the Nigerian context, Igene (2007) used the Piercian typology of signs
231 to identify the potential semiotic implications of signs and subsigns constituents of obituary
232 announcements. She sampled 525 death announcements published in four Nigerian newspapers,
233 specifically: *The Guardian*, the *Champion*, *The Punch*, and the *Vanguard*. The sampling covered
234 the period between 2000 and 2003. The study concluded that various sociocultural beliefs and
235 practices in the Nigerian context appeared to be so instrumental in giving meanings to death and
236 the way it is depicted in the announcements. In other words, the construction of death beyond the
237 literal wordings of the notices is found to be highly influenced by a whole range of sociocultural
238 practices in the Nigerian society. According to Igene (2007), these sociocultural norms are
239 represented in "tradition, taboos, beliefs" and "religion". For example, funeral preparations are
240 stated in death announcements in accordance with the religion of the family, be it Christianity,
241 Islam or traditional. Likewise, the place for burial is always determined according to the social
242 class, gender or age of the deceased. Some deceased persons are buried in their family home or
243 compound, while others are buried in their own residences or public burial grounds (pp. 2-11).
244 Putting it up together, both Nwoye's (1992) and Igene's (1997) studies were focused on the
245 socioeconomic and sociocultural undertones of death announcements in Nigeria, likewise, the
246 way the identities of the deceased persons and their families were represented in the texts.

247 In the southern African country of Malawi, not very far away from Kenya, a related study to
248 Ondimu's (2014) was conducted. Matiki (2001) carried out a pragmatic study of newspaper
249 obituary declarations in Malawi. He looked at 63 obituary announcements collected from some

of the widely read Malawian dailies, specifically, *The Saturday Nation*, the *Malawi News* and The Nation. The analysis involved both sociolinguistic and communicative features of the announcements. Drawing from the Gasparovian (1977) typology of discourses framework, the analysis revealed that obituary announcements in Malawi address the deceased more than the way it addresses the general public. In terms of its organisational or thematic features, obituaries in Malawi seem to be distinct with what scholars refer to as 'template texts'. These templates refer to a kind of pre-arranged blank spaces where new information would be filled-in into the "macrostructure" of the announcements (Enkvist, 1987, p. 211; Fries, 1990). From her own part, Ondimu (2014) admitted that Kenyan obituary announcements have a comparable structure as the 'template texts' mentioned earlier. Nevertheless, Matiki (2001) found a number of similar moves, even though, not up to the ones identified by Ondimu's (2014) study.

The findings of Matiki's (2001) analysis indicated that notices of obituaries in the Malawian social context embrace both public and private dichotomies. That is to say, obituary matters in Malawi involve public participation regardless of their absolute private nature. It is interesting to note that the Malawian obituary notices speak to both the deceased and the general public as well. The results of the study showed that the language of death notices in Malawi still maintains the properties of the African oral tradition despite the advent of modernity and the overwhelming power of westernisation. This combination of the Triple Heritage (Mazrui, 1986), as represented in the integration of the African, religious and the Western traditions, mirrors the number of sources constituting the new Malawian perceptions towards the concept of death. With these, it has become evident that elements from the African, the Christian/Islamic and the Western civilisations have successfully been intermingled in the language of the obituary announcements in the Malawian social context.

It is obvious that what is attainable in Malawi, in terms of conserving the African heritage side by side with the imported foreign cultures and religions (Matiki, 2001), is applicable to a whole range of case studies on the continent. Despite spending long periods under colonial systems and, subsequently, gaining their political independence, most African countries retained their indigenous religious and cultural identities. Evidence of such practices manifest in different social occasions, most especially, the ones associated with tragedies such as death and other life tribulations (Alali, 1993; Aremu, 2011; Igene, 2007). Austin and Lennings (1993) stated that it is during these types of spiritually appealing occasions that the authority of God or religion is mostly invoked. In so doing, the deceased individuals may be depicted as highly revered and whose departure is dealt with spiritually. For example, it is clearly indicated in Ondimu's (2014) study of the Kenyan obituaries that positive African metaphors have always been employed to evade any mention of words associated with death or evil. In addition, according to Ondimu (2014), the language of obituaries in Kenya still contains some unambiguous religious connotations.

It is assumed that religious and cultural manifestations in the texts of African obituaries are not peculiar to Malawi or Kenya alone. Research has established that such practices are found in other African contexts, most especially the Anglophones, as it is clearly evidenced in Matiki's (2001), Afful's (2012), Igene's (2007) and Aremu's (2011) studies. It is worth stating that the

291 indigenous cultures and religions of the former British colonies (the Anglophone nations) were
292 honoured and preserved by the British colonial rulers. On the contrary, the French system was
293 believed to have accorded less regard to the local cultures, the religions and the people's way of
294 life in the former Francophone colonies. Instead, the French colonial rulers introduced their
295 famous 'policy of assimilation' whereby everyone, according to Weber (1976), was expected to
296 think and behave like a Frenchman. Today, long after the colonial era and with the continuous
297 influence of modernisation and the forces of globalisation across the continent, the African triple
298 heritage embodied in the African, the Christian/Islamic, and the Western civilisations (Mazrui,
299 1986) remains strongly present in so many African societies.

Conclusion

301 To sum it up, the discussion above suggests that death announcements and obituaries do not only
302 make known the passing-on of individuals to the public but also perform various other social
303 acts. Obituaries could be seen to have mostly served as platforms where deceased individuals
304 would be highly celebrated and their life stories would be stylishly rewritten (Bromley &
305 Nimocks, 2005). In death announcements, too, evidence can be found about how the African
306 identity of deceased persons maintains itself and survives the waves of modernisation in Malawi.
307 Even though these announcements are carried in public newspapers, the communication is
308 directed at the deceased persons apart from addressing the reading public. However, death
309 announcements may also function as a tool for promoting sociocultural biases, class differences,
310 gender and racial discriminations. For example, in the case of death announcements serving to
311 reinforce social discrimination against particular groups in Turkish society (Ergin, 2010), the
312 ongoing discursive practices within this conventionalised and highly structured genre would
313 inevitably perpetuate the hidden negative actions.

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