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

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Author's contribution

The sole author designed, analysed, interpreted and prepared the manuscript.

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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 jubilation. 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

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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; normalization.

1. 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 [1,2,3,4]. Death announcements may be categorised as part of the homely discourses [5]. 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 [6]. Other varieties from the same category include marriage announcements and congratulations [7,8], birthday commemorations, death and obituary announcements [9,10,11], marriage sampling and mate selection advertisements [12,13], 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 individuals to keep track of history and social changes as it occurs in different societies [14,15,16]. In Africa and some part of the Middle-East, for instance, cultural and religious factors have always characterised most of the studies conducted on newspapers death announcements. In other words, Mazrui's [17] African triple heritage, represented in the mixture of the local culture, the religion and the Western culture, remains as the most common factor among different African texts. For example, traces of this African tradition could be established in so many empirical works conducted in the continent such as Matiki's [9], Ondimu's [10], Nwoye's [18] and Igene's [19] studies. In the Middle-East, Elekaei et al.'s [20] and Behnam and Alizadeh's [21] studies on the sociocultural and religious undertone of death announcements in the Iranian society could serve as reference points, where culture and religion shape the discursive construction of death. Different analytical methods have been incorporated to get the texts of the death

announcements properly described and analysed. Some of the techniques employed include the genre-move approach [22,10,20,21], quantitative content analysis [23,14] and critical discourse analysis [10].

2. NORMALISATION OF DEATH

In a recent study, Ondimu [10] used the Swalesian [24] genre move analysis framework to ascertain the schematic arrangements and the linguistic components of the moves identified in newspaper announcements, be it compulsory or optional. As the theoretical background, critical discourse analysis (CDA), specifically Fairclough's [25] approach communicative events was incorporated to inform the study. Ondimu [10] sampled 356 obituary announcements from a major daily newspaper in Kenya, the *Daily Nation*, with the purpose of understanding how the society perceives and behaves towards the world of death. Results from the analysis revealed six moves comprising both the compulsory and non-compulsory categories. Moreover, the findings indicated that using positive metaphors in the language of the notices reflects the African way of evading any mention of the words associated with passing away, the way of consoling the bereaved ones and evading the mention of bad things about the deceased at all. At the same time, images referring to death used in the language of the announcements have some explicit religious connotations. Ondimu [10] cited some headings of the announcements where words were used metaphorically in reference to death. For example, expressions such as "celebration of life", "a worthwhile rest", "passing on to glory", and "gone too soon" were all meant to refer to death. In Christianity for instance, 'Heaven' is perceived as the perfect place for the believers to rest after death (pp. 9-11). That is to say, these types of "metaphorical construction" [25] are deliberately employed by the producers/sponsors of the death announcements to discursively normalise and naturalise [1,3,4] the whole idea of

dying in an attempt to douse the pains and agonies from the part of the bereaved ones.

Literature presupposes that living humans attempt to maintain certain fantasies and construct mental images to keep the fading contacts with deceased persons alive. Such practices arise from the significance associated with human interactions with one another. In some societies, these communications that are essentially intended for the deceased individuals are placed in public domains [26,27,28]. Evidence of such traditions could be found in different societies [29,9,18]. Considering this reality, Bromley and Nimocks [28] wondered why such an "intimate communication" would be offered for public consumption (p. 6). The authors carried out an empirical study that sought to examine the rationale behind using newspaper announcements as the means for communicating with deceased persons. In a mixed mode study using Burke's method of dramatisic criticism, Bromley and Nimocks [28] sampled 191 "In Memoriam" announcements that appeared in the *Wisconsin State Journal (WSJ)* newspaper Madison, Wisconsin, USA (p. 3). Results from their investigation showed that the announcements have twofold functions, therefore, targeting two addressees. Basically, the death announcements were meant to preserve the relationship between the sender and the deceased. At the same time, they were also intended to express how much the deceased is cherished and loved by his/her relatives as his/her passing away is given so much prominence and publicity as it is made open through media announcements. At this point, comparisons can be drawn between Bromley and Nimocks' [28] and Ergin's [23] findings, for example, on death announcements and their social functions. Whereas Bromley and Nimocks (2005) showed that In Memoriams published in the *WSJ*, Madison, addressed both the deceased and the public orientating towards positive emotions about the deceased, Ergin's [23] analysis showed that death announcements in Turkey speak more to the public than the deceased persons. In addition, instead of contributing to reduce social inequality, Turkish death announcements reinforce "social divisions" and promote the "privileged groups" in the country, and hence, serve as platforms for marginalising the minority groups in the society (p. 194).

In Nigeria, Nwoye [18] conducted an empirical study with conclusions similar to that of Endres's

[30] study. Nwoye's [18] study explored how structural layout and rate of recurrence of obituary announcements in Nigeria informed more about the socioeconomic class of the deceased persons and their family members. The study found that the use of the Nigerian English (NE) in death announcements makes it much more elaborate and comprehensible, most especially, to the local readers. Parallel to Aremu's [31] conclusions, Nwoye's [18] findings emphasised that using the NE in such announcements symbolises richness in the local culture as well as the linguistic heterogeneity of the Nigerian society. Therefore, peculiarities in this version of the English language should not be perceived as blunders. Instead, it should be understood as a kind of linguistic productivity that may represent the Nigerian sociocultural identity anywhere around the world. At the same time, this Nigerian brand of the English language would stand distinctive among the English dialect spoken around the world, thus representing the local culture and the influences of its indigenous languages. Sampling from the *Nigerian Tribune*, the *Herald*, *The Nation*, *The Guardian*, the *Vanguard*, *The Punch*, the *Sun* and the *New Nigerian* newspapers, Aremu's [31] study examined the construction of obituary announcements in Nigeria in NE and found that its language is "characterised by euphemisms, lexical borrowings, hedges, metaphors, code-mixing, code-switching and idioms". The study considers the use of NE as a "window" through which some sociocultural and linguistic backgrounds among the users of the NE is demonstrated. By showcasing the properties of the NE by way of obituary announcements, the study presupposes that a quite new hybrid tongue, among other world Englishes, is in the making (p. 142). At the same time, this could be seen as another platform where the discursive representation of death and dying is being naturalised, normalised and legitimised [1,2,3].

In another form of typical normalisation of the concept of death, a study conducted by Al-Ali [6] revealed two types of obituaries: i) the "normal" and ii) the "martyr's wedding" death announcements in Jordan, where the death announcer takes "pride and honour" in the announcement and calls for "celebration" rather than anguish. The study sampled 200 announcements published in the Jordanian *Al-Ra'y* and *Ads-Dustour* newspapers to celebrate the *shahadah* (martyrdom) of those who got killed in the ongoing Arab-Israeli conflicts over the occupied territories in the Palestine. In this

corner of the globe, the so-called martyrs' deaths are extremely celebrated and the grieving families are congratulated by relatives and well-wishers as they are seen to be among the most fortunate ones. These unusual tributes could keep on coming in for quite a number of days (pp. 5-28) (for more on Arab-Israeli conflict, see [32]. In a different approach to the concept of death, Ergin [23] argues that, in the last 38 years or so, death announcements in Turkey have been taken advantage of, by their producers/announcers, as platforms for upholding "ethnic inequalities" and social "prestige and distinction" within the Turkish multiracial society. By examining about 2554 death announcements taken from the prominent Turkish *Hürriyet* daily newspaper, which were published between 1970 and 2006, the study concludes that some ethnicities are presented as the "privileged groups" in the society at the detriment of other minorities such as people of Jewish, Armenian or Greek ancestry. Using the quantitative content analysis, the study also shows how death announcements of men, mostly Muslims, tend to demonstrate elements of high social standing compared to those of non-Muslims and women. The study criticises the Turkish social structure, which is seen as an embodiment of a rhetoric of "power" as it is represented in the texts of the death announcements. More so, the "symbolically articulated social boundaries" within the Turkish society, according to the study, appears to have remained unbroken even in the "world of death" (pp. 176-194).

3. RELIGIOSITY AND CULTURAL ORIENTATION

Literature reveals the extent to which religious and cultural predispositions influence the discursive construction of print media death announcements in different contexts. For example, in a recent additional study on the influence of religiosity and culture on texts, Elekaei et al. [20] studied the structural features, communicative functions and the sociocultural implications of the Iranian newspaper death announcements. The study is contextualised within the gender-based approach to the analysis of death announcements. The study is focused on the influence of religion and culture on the textual composition of the announcements. Elekaei et al. [20] employed the Swalesian [24] genre moves framework and Kress and van Leeuwen's [33,34] proposed visual grammar (VG) in doing the text analyses. The study

worked on three separate sets of data. The first set is comprised of about 200 announcements and seven moves were identified, that is: six obligatory and one optional. Additional moves were found in the second and third sets of data. In the study, some similarities were found between men's and women's death announcements, while the differences were mostly related to the length of the notices as well as words selection. For example, Persian words were mostly used in men's announcements whereby Arabic words were used in the women's death notices. One more important difference discovered between these two types of the genres is associated with using photographs. While pictures of the deceased persons were commonly found in men's death notices, instead, the women's announcements carried pictures of plants, animals and other inanimate beings. It is worth mentioning that in most of the middle-eastern Muslim societies, and Iran inclusive, religious and cultural restrictions do not permit women or their pictures to be seen by men, other than their close relatives, even in death. Thus, apart from the structural features and the communicative purposes identified from the analysis, it has become evident that the texts of the announcements replicate further sociocultural and religious norms of the Iranian society. It should be noted that Iran is an Islamic Republic with Muslim majority and has been under the control of religious clerics since after Imam Khomeini's 1979 Revolution [for more details on Imam Khomeini and the Iranian Islamic Revolution of 1979, see 35,36].

However, what could be the main criticism of Elekaei et al.'s [20] study may be represented in the way it unnecessarily incorporated the Kress and van Leeuwen's [33] approach. In essence, the framework has not been referred to or used anywhere throughout the analysis despite its applicability in a study of this nature, which includes images and other visual components. Kress and van Leeuwen's visual social semiotics framework is basically concerned with visual grammar and the analysis of images mostly found in billboards, advertisements and other audio-visual materials. Notwithstanding, Elekaei et al.'s [20] presentation and the analysis of the identified moves were very comprehensive. As much as possible, the authors attempted to contextualise the structural components of the death announcements within both the religious and sociocultural realities of the contemporary Iranian society.

In line with Elekaei et al. [20], Behnam and Alizadeh [21] studied the structural features and the linguistic components of print obituaries published in Tabriz, Iran. The study adopted the Swalesian [24] rhetorical moves analysis and Kress and van Leeuwen's [33] visual social semiotics. The study was aimed at assessing the sociocultural approach to death in Tabriz. Nine moves were identified from the corpus that is comprised of 108 death announcements. Most of the findings of this study were consistent with Elekaei et al.'s [20], most especially, in the way deceased women were represented in the obituaries. For example, almost all the 50 men's obituaries analysed in this study contained photographs of the deceased persons, while no single picture is attached to any of the women's obituaries. Instead, images of plants and animals were used in the women's death announcements. Moreover, it was found that there were no mention of any women's names in the segment of the announcements where family members were listed. Generally, women were always last to be mentioned briefly in the obituaries. It was noticed that death related occasions involving women in Tabriz were always held separately inside mosques or at the bereaved family's homes. In the case of men, most of the findings were also consistent with Elekaei et al.'s [20]. More so, hobbies and challenges faced by the deceased persons were not mentioned in the announcements. In that regards, Behnam and Alizadeh [21] indicated that this practice goes contrary to Watson's [37] and Harold, Crosby and Alhenet's [38] suggestions on how obituaries were supposed to be textually structured. In writing obituaries, Watson [37] suggested "four moves", that is: i) the introduction, ii) the related biodata of the deceased, iii) the list of the surviving family members and, iv) other related information. In their opinion, Harold et al. [38] suggested "five moves" to be adopted in doing obituary, they are: i) the "announcement", ii) the biodata information, iii) the "survivor information", iv) the burial arrangements and, v) the endowment receiving points [21].

Findings from Behnam and Alizadeh's [21] study more or less reflect those of Elekaei et al.'s [20] study that have examined the communicative features and the sociocultural representation of death announcements within the same Iranian context. The dominating influence of some religious and cultural backgrounded factors in Iran is undeniably present in the findings of both Behnam and Alizadeh's [21] and Elekaei et al.'s

[2] studies. These social realities were mostly associated with the position of women in that social setting whether dead or alive. As discussed earlier, most of the middle-eastern societies, and specifically Iran, could simply be described as men's world in the sense that their dominance is strongly felt even in the world of death. In these societies, men are found to be generally empowered and they could be excessively sensitive and protective over women [11].

Contrary to the conclusions arrived at by Al-Ali [6], where martyrdom is celebrated through death announcements and the martyrs are believed to have attained "God's grace", Ergin [14] uses the "large-scale cultural change" framework to examine how Turkish people perceive the idea of death over time. The study reveals three approaches, which include: i) the traditional, where the "authority" belongs to God, ii) the modern, where medicine takes the lead over religion, and iii) the post-modern, where the "self" becomes the "authority". Ergin's [14] study concludes that Turkish death announcements speak the "postmodern language of loss" that considers death as an ordinary "departure" from this life, but not as a definite "arrival in another world" (pp. 276-289). [see also 39,40].

In a related study within the Nigerian context, Igene [19] used the Piercian typology of signs to identify the potential semiotic implications of signs and subsigns constituents of obituary announcements. She sampled 525 death announcements published in four Nigerian newspapers, specifically: *The Guardian*, the *Champion*, *The Punch*, and the *Vanguard*. The sampling covered the period between 2000 and 2003. The study concluded that various sociocultural beliefs and practices in the Nigerian context appeared to be so instrumental in giving meanings to death and the way it is depicted in the announcements. In other words, the construction of death beyond the literal wordings of the notices is found to be highly influenced by a whole range of sociocultural practices in the Nigerian society. According to Igene [19], these sociocultural norms are represented in "tradition, taboos, beliefs" and "religion". For example, funeral preparations are stated in death announcements in accordance with the religion of the family, be it Christianity, Islam or traditional. Likewise, the place for burial is always determined according to the social class, gender or age of the deceased. Some deceased persons are buried in their family home or compound,

while others are buried in their own residences or public burial grounds (pp. 2-11). Putting it up together, both Nwoye's [18] and Igene's [19] studies were focused on the socioeconomic and sociocultural undertones of death announcements in Nigeria, likewise, the way the identities of the deceased persons and their families were represented in the texts.

In the southern African country of Malawi, not very far away from Kenya, a related study to Ondimu's [10] was conducted. Matiki [9] carried out a pragmatic study of newspaper 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 socio-linguistic and communicative features of the announcements. Drawing from the Gasparovian [41] 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 [42,43]. From her own part, Ondimu [10] admitted that Kenyan obituary announcements have a comparable structure as the 'template texts' mentioned earlier. Nevertheless, Matiki [9] found a number of similar moves, even though, not up to the ones identified by Ondimu's [10] study.

The findings of Matiki's [9] 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 [17], 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 [9], 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 [29,31,19]. Austin and Lennings [44] 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 [10] 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 [10], 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 [9], Afful's [22], Igene's [19] and Aremu's [31] studies. It is worth stating that the indigenous cultures and religions of the former British colonies (the Anglophone nations) were honoured and preserved by the British colonial rulers. On the contrary, the French system was believed to have accorded less regard to the local cultures, the religions and the people's way of life in the former Francophone colonies. Instead, the French colonial rulers introduced their famous 'policy of assimilation' whereby everyone, according to Weber [45], was expected to think and behave like a Frenchman. Today, long after the colonial era and with the continuous influence of modernisation and the forces of globalisation across the continent, the African triple heritage embodied in the African, the Christian/Islamic, and the Western civilisations [17] remains strongly present in so many African societies.

4. CONCLUSION

To sum it up, the discussion above suggests that death announcements and obituaries do not only make known the passing-on of individuals to the public but also perform various other social acts. Obituaries could be seen to have mostly served as platforms where deceased individuals would be highly celebrated and their life stories would be stylishly rewritten [28]. In death announcements, too, evidence can be found about how the African identity of deceased persons maintains itself and survives the waves of modernisation in Malawi. Even though these announcements are carried in public newspapers, the communication is directed at the deceased persons apart from addressing the reading public. However, death announcements may also function as a tool for promoting sociocultural biases, class differences, gender and racial discriminations. For example, in the case of death announcements serving to reinforce social discrimination against particular groups in Turkish society [23], the ongoing discursive practices within this conventionalised and highly structured genre would inevitably perpetuate the hidden negative actions.

COMPETING INTERESTS

Author has declared that no competing interests exist.

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