



A socio-cultural understanding of death: A genre analysis of obituaries in a Kenyan newspaper

Jacquiline Ondimu

To cite this article: Jacquiline Ondimu (2014) A socio-cultural understanding of death: A genre analysis of obituaries in a Kenyan newspaper, *Language Matters*, 45:1, 3-22, DOI: [10.1080/10228195.2013.805799](https://doi.org/10.1080/10228195.2013.805799)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/10228195.2013.805799>



Published online: 27 Mar 2014.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 264



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



Citing articles: 3 View citing articles [↗](#)

A socio-cultural understanding of death: A genre analysis of obituaries in a Kenyan newspaper

Jacquiline Ondimu

Department of Linguistics and Foreign Languages

Moi University, Kenya

ondimujackie@yahoo.com

Abstract

Obituaries are used to publicly announce death, giving details that can be used to identify the deceased. This article aims to analyse obituaries appearing in a Kenyan newspaper. Specifically, it investigates the schematic structure and language used with the aim of finding out the social perception and attitudes that Kenyans have towards the dead. The data comprise 356 announcements collected from the *Daily Nation*, one of the leading dailies in Kenya. The data are analysed both qualitatively and quantitatively. The genre analysis of the data reveals six obligatory moves in the structure of obituaries with some elements within the moves being optional. The research concludes that obituaries in Kenya can be considered as a genre with a distinct structure. The social cultural perceptions, values and attitudes that society has towards death greatly influence the language used in the writing of obituaries.

Key words: genre, Kenya, language, newspapers, obituaries, schematic structure

Introduction

Death is often looked at as one of the stages of human life but one that is a painful experience for the people surviving to go through. Crespo (2007) describes death as a taboo that is unspeakable and banned from the public domain. People refuse to speak about death freely as they feel uncomfortable about the subject. The obituaries section that appears in daily newspapers to notify the public of the death of friends and relatives, provides a communicative situation in which people cannot evade the notion of death. In Kenya, death is a subject that is not discussed with much ease in public leading people to use metaphors and euphemisms when speaking about it (Nyakoe, Matu and Ongaro 2012).

The concept 'obituary' has been described as coming from the Latin word 'obitus' which means 'departure' and the word is nowadays used to refer to a record of death

announcements appearing in a newspaper and which comprises a brief biography of the deceased (Crespo 2006). Afful (2010) defines a death announcement as a paid advertisement of a person's death which is normally written by family members and/or close friends of the deceased. Although in Kenya the most commonly used term is death and funeral announcement, this article is going to use the terms death announcements and obituaries interchangeably as proposed by Campbell (1971).

Obituaries are texts which act as a window to provide a view into a culture (Moses and Marelli 2004). The organisation and language used in the texts can tell a lot about the socio-cultural understanding of death. Eid (2002) observes that since obituaries are written by individuals within a cultural context for a certain purpose, they can reflect aspects of social cultural context such as the society's values and attitudes towards death. They generally focus on how the society believes the person's life and death can be best presented.

Kenya is a multi-cultural and multi-religious country. According to Lewis (2009), Kenya has approximately 42 ethnic groups of African origin who each have their own different and diverse cultures. There is also a population of people of non-African descent, such as the Indians, Arabs and Europeans. In terms of religion, 82.5 per cent of Kenyans are Christians, 11 per cent Muslims, 0.15 percent Hindu, 1.4 per cent other religions and 1.6 per cent traditionalist. The rest of the population, about 2.5 per cent, does not belong to any religion (2009 Population and Housing Census Results).¹

The section of death announcements in the Kenyan media has gained popularity in the recent past with all the daily newspapers combined recording an average of 30 advertisements per day in the first half of 2012. This section contains advertisements which are written and paid for by the family and/or close associates of the deceased. It is relatively expensive to place such an advertisement with the costing being determined by the size of space occupied and whether the photograph used is coloured or not.

Aim and scope of the article

The aim of this article is to analyse obituaries or death announcements that appear in the *Daily Nation* newspaper in Kenya with the objective of finding out how the schematic structure and language used portray the social perception and attitudes that the writers have towards the dead and the living. The study sought to further understand what writers of the death announcements consider as crucial elements of a person's life that are worth being told to the public and the emotions attached to the death of people close to them. It is through language that such aspects are brought to the fore.

Crespo (2007) identifies two types of obituaries, namely, the informative and the opinionative. The former is objective and uses impersonal language limited to facts about the deceased, and the place and time of the funeral, while the latter is subjective, more

personal and intimate where the feelings of the writers are expressed using emotional and figurative language. The opinative obituaries are normally written by relatives and/or friends and they serve the purpose of impressing the reader by showing the social relevance, exemplary conduct or religious fervour of the deceased. The focus of the article will be on the family written obituaries which appear under the classified advertisements section of the Kenyan newspaper *Daily Nation*, which might as well be referred to as opinative obituaries.

There are three types of advertisements that appear under this section within the Kenyan newspapers, namely: death and funeral announcements; appreciations; and memorial/anniversary advertisements. The first is written after the person's death and before the funeral rites are carried out, while the appreciation is written after the funeral has been conducted to thank the people who assisted the family in the arrangements. The last is written to commemorate the anniversary of the person's death that happened sometime in the past. The article will focus specifically on the announcements written before the funeral takes place.

As far as the researcher knows, no studies have been carried out on obituaries in Kenya and so the findings of the present study can offer a basis for comparing the findings from other countries to see if there are universal cultural beliefs held about death and life and the universality of the language human beings use to express the notion of death.

The following section situates the present study within the existing studies on obituaries.

Review of studies on obituaries

Obituaries have been studied in terms of their semantics, pragmatics, schematic structure, linguistic structure and gender encoding, among other things. This section reviews studies on the schematic structure and linguistic structure of obituaries as these are the literatures that have greatly informed the current study.

Moses and Marelli (2004) in their study of obituaries in the *New York Times* in the United States (US) classify the family authored texts as being characterised by certain obligatory elements such as: the names of the deceased, date of the death, funeral announcements and listing of family members. They also have an optional part that contains a donation request which serves to instruct members of the community on how to pay their last respects. In the US these donations are made to an organisation and not family members. The obituaries also enumerate the family as including the spouse, children, grandchildren, parents, siblings and in some cases the extended family of the deceased. Moses and Marelli also point out that the kinship section is the most extensive of the obituary. Other elements included are the circumstances of the death and a personal history of the deceased.

Eid (2002), in her book *The World of Obituaries*, studies the gender encoding in obituaries by comparing samples from the *New York Times* and Egyptian newspapers. Eid's study brings out the importance of culture in the writing of obituaries. She views obituaries as a genre of some sort which reflects aspects of the social contexts within which they are written. The identity represented by the deceased's name, title and occupation represents the identity given or acquired during the person's life. Eid acknowledges that the purpose of obituaries is to announce a person's death and to identify the deceased and their family. This is done through giving detailed biographical details about the deceased such as their date and place of birth, occupation, marriage, children, and so on. They also allow the family an opportunity to express their feelings about the departure of a loved one.

In his Linguistic/Literary analysis of devices used in obituaries, Crespo (2006, 2007) identifies the use of figurative language which includes the use of hyperbole, metaphors, positive and negatively loaded words and rhetorical questions. From the Victorian obituaries collected, metaphors about how death is portrayed were found to be dominant. Euphemisms were also used to refer to death as a way of evoking emotions from the obituaries. The current study also analyses the linguistic devices used in describing the notion of death and the deceased.

In a pragmatic analysis of obituary notices in Malawian newspapers, Matiki (2001) concludes that death notices negotiate both the public and private domain. It is interesting to note that unlike obituaries elsewhere, Malawian notices are addressed to the deceased. As Matiki observes, this affects the choice of language to be used in the obituary. For children below five years of age, the language used is Chichewa, which is the official national language, while for adults the language used is English. Matiki also points out the use of euphemisms and metaphors in expressing the notion of death. In terms of the structure, the notices fit into what he describes as a 'template text' where there seems to be a similar structure which all the notices follow. He identifies some of the obligatory elements as being: the photograph; name of the deceased; date of death; and the addresser's name and acknowledgments, while the deceased's date of birth, date of funeral and use of titles are optional elements.

Afful (2010), in a genre analysis of the death announcements in Ghana, identifies seven moves; five of which he terms as obligatory and two as optional. The moves he identifies are: caption; list of members of family and clan; organisation and other; profile of the deceased; a second list of family members (surviving); prescription of attire; and invitation. The last two moves are considered to be optional. Afful's study can be used as a basis of comparison with the present study since they both make use of the genre analysis.

The studies reviewed above share some similarities with the present study in terms of analysis of the schematic structure and linguistic devices used in obituaries. All the

studies reviewed presented notable differences in terms of the structure and linguistic devices used. This could be attributed to the fact that they have all been carried out in different geographical settings. This calls for the conducting of other studies in other regions in order to provide a basis for more and wider comparison. The present study sought to find out the moves and linguistic structures used in Kenyan obituaries to see whether they are similar or different to the other studies carried out so far. If there were any similarities or differences, could they be accounted for on the basis of the socio-cultural differences of the societies where the obituaries appear?

Methodology

This section describes the sample selection procedure, the methods of data analysis and the theoretical frameworks used.

Sample selection

The source of data for this study was a collection of death and funeral announcements published in the *Daily Nation*, one of the leading dailies in Kenya. The *Daily Nation* was chosen because in relation to the other dailies it carries an average of 20 announcements per day which is the highest in number as compared to all other dailies. A total of 356 death announcements were collected over a period of one month (July 2012) from the Monday through to Friday editions of the newspaper. As mentioned earlier, the researcher purposively selected announcements written before the burials were conducted.

All obituaries in Kenyan newspapers are paid for and written by family, friends and associates of the deceased. In the *Daily Nation*, the obituaries are published on special pages referred to as 'Transitions' within the classified advertisement pages usually in the inner side of the newspapers.

Methods of data analysis

The study adopted both quantitative and qualitative methods of data analysis. A simple statistical analysis of the data under study is presented and then a qualitative analysis of the data based on the sample texts is used to explain the factors that influence various aspects of the text. Under statistical analysis, percentages are calculated for the occurrence of certain structural and linguistic patterns such as types of headings, use of the deceased photograph, use of titles with deceased name, date of birth and date of death of the deceased and linguistic patterns used in the text.

This study considers an obituary as a journalistic genre in the print media as asserted by Stein and Burnett's (2006). In this regard, Swales (1990) method of genre analysis

is the main analytical framework used to analyse the schematic structure of the obituary genre. This framework can be used to study different genres of communication. A genre is viewed as a group of communicative events in which similar forms or content of language is used as a significant representation of shared communication purposes realised by members of the same discourse community (Swales 1990, 47). He suggests a move and step analysis as a basis for defining a genre. He states that steps and moves can be written in a variety of lexical and grammatical forms and some moves can be obligatory and others discretionary. Moves can be described as a segment of the text that contains a specific array of linguistic features which are associated with it. These features are responsible for providing the content analysis (Bhatia 1997). Genre analysis, studies the production of moves. Consequently, this approach is applicable in this study because the obituaries are treated as a communicative event since they are used as an avenue of communication with potential readers about the death of someone. The study will do an analysis of the obituaries to identify the moves and describe the specific linguistic features in each move. The distinction of which moves are obligatory and which ones are optional will also be given.

The study also draws from Fairclough's (1992) Critical Discourse Analysis approach. The approach is applied since this study also bases the analysis of the texts on the identification of both the communicative purpose and the linguistic structure of the text. The framework is insightful as Fairclough offers a social-theoretical sense of discourse. He presents discourse as a three dimensional concept; as a text, as a discursive practice and as a social practice. This socially and linguistically oriented view allows the language analysis of the obituaries to relate the linguistic elements in the texts to the social conventions related to death and the cultural beliefs held about death within the Kenyan society. The analysis of the data and discussion thereof are presented in the section below.

Data analysis and discussion

This section presents the analysis and discussion of the collected data. The data were analysed in terms of the schematic structure and language used. The structure of the obituaries in Kenya seems to have a 'template text' as noted in Malawi by Matiki (2001). All of them have a similar skeleton structure that is followed and the differences are in terms of the size of the advertisement (which is determined by the size of the photograph, length of text and the font size) and the elements included in each of the identified moves. The moves identified under the schematic structure were: headings, profile, text and end remark. The analysis of the language used is incorporated in the discussion.

Headings

A variety of expressions were used as headings in the announcements. These headings indicate the emotional, cultural and religious attitude that Kenyans hold towards death. This is similar to what Afful (2010) notes about death announcement in Ghana. Some of them use metaphoric expressions to talk about death.

Table 1: Headings used in the obituaries

Type of heading	Examples from data	Frequency
Normal occurrence: 187 (52.5%)	<i>Death and funeral announcement</i>	161
	Death announcement	20
	Funeral announcement	4
	Death and fundraising announcement	1
	Death and burial announcement	1
A time to celebrate: 103 (30%)	<i>Celebration of life well lived</i>	79
	Celebration of a life bravely lived	3
	Celebration of life	5
	'Nyar Ndwaru' celebrating a life	1
	Celebration of a legendary life well lived	1
	Sisters of Mercy celebration of life	1
	Celebrating a great man	1
	A life well lived	1
	Celebrating the life	5
	A life of purpose and service	1
	Celebrating 58 fulfilling years of a great man	1
	Celebrating a dignified life	1
	Celebrating a loving outstanding charismatic man	1
	Celebrating the life of an icon	1
	Thanks for the servant of God	1
A time to rest: 6 (1.6%)	<i>A worthwhile rest</i>	1
	Time to rest	5
Death as a reward: 31(8.7 %)	<i>Promotion to a new life</i>	1
	Passing on to glory	2
	Promotion to glory	28
Death as cruel: 20 (5.6%)	<i>Gone too soon</i>	19
	Jewel plucked from our hearts	1
Death as a journey: 5 (1.4%)	<i>Fare thee well</i>	4

	Makes his transition	1
Deceased's achievements: 2 (0.5%)	<i>Father of 'Katumani' Maize variety</i>	1
	A life long healer	1

As shown in Table 1 above, death is looked at as a journey, a normal occurrence, a time to celebrate the deceased life, as a cruel phenomenon, a rest and a reward.

A normal occurrence

These are expressions that do not have any feelings or emotions attached to them. These titles simply make an announcement about something that has happened. Fifty two percent of the obituaries used this type of heading though appearing with slight variations but basically making the announcement.

A time to celebrate

These expressions look at life as a joyful experience that should be celebrated when it comes to an end. They attach positive attitudes towards death as not being a time to be sad but a time to look back at the deceased's life and celebrate it. The focus here shifts from the 'death' to the 'living' part of the deceased. This type of headings are used in thirty per cent of the obituaries with the most common one being 'celebration of a life well lived'.

In this category of headings there is the use of pre-modifiers describing the deceased and the kind of life he/she lived. Life is generally described as 'well', bravely, dignified and fulfilling. This portrays a perception that people make a choice on what kind of life to live when they are alive and this can be used to describe them when they are dead. The connotation implies that it is possible to live the opposite of what has been described such as a cowardly, useless and undignified life. Interestingly, this negative description is not used in any of the obituaries and so this brings out the culture of not talking ill about the dead.

There are a number of pre-modifiers used to describe the deceased; legendary, great, icon, loving, outstanding and charismatic. These clearly express the exemplary value the writers attach to the deceased as a person. In one instance up to three pre-modifiers were used to describe one man as '*Loving, outstanding, charismatic*'.

Death as a rest

Death is viewed as something that offers human beings a rest. Rest is a temporary situation that human beings get into after a long tiring activity. This then presumes that life

is a tiring commitment and when it comes to an end then it is a good time for resting. Nyakoe et al. (2012) conclude that 'death as a rest' metaphor is used to console and cushion speakers against death. They further argue that this masks the effect of death and transforms it to a normal bodily function. Christians too perceive heaven as a place of rest where believers go after death frees them from the tiring world. A very small percentage of the obituaries made use of this heading (1.6%), this can be an indicator that not many people subscribe to this view.

Death as a reward

Death is looked at as being offered a promotion from the world to some sort of glory which is better than what life on earth offers. This religious view of death is brought out in these expressions. Christians believe that once a person dies then it is a promotion to heaven which is a better place than the world and is full of glory. This brings out the attitude that the living look forward to dying and they do not fear death. Only 8.7 per cent of the headings were in this category further emphasising the fact that most of the people did not look at death as a reward.

Death as cruel

These headings portray death as a harsh phenomenon, something that takes away the loved ones before their time. The expressions used here portray death as something negative. When the dead are described as having gone too soon then it means the people are not happy about what death has done. The verb 'plucked' brings out the perception of quickly pulling something away, which means that death harshly and quickly took away something precious from the living. Death is expressed as having neither mercies nor any considerations. This type of heading is constituted in 5.6 per cent of the total obituaries.

Death as a journey

These are expressions that are used to illustrate that the deceased are leaving for a journey. Goodbyes are said when people leave their homes for a journey and the use of old English 'Fare Thee well' shows the living are wishing the deceased a nice journey to wherever he/she is going. A transition also indicates movement from one place to another and thus can be considered as a journey. Only 1.4 per cent of the obituaries used this type of heading. These type of headings bring to the fore the belief in life after death which is held by both Christians and traditionalists.

Deceased achievements

In two of the obituaries (0.5%), the deceased's achievements were used as a heading. The titles indicated what was most probably considered to be the deceased's best achievement during his/her life and which could easily be used to identify him/her when making the announcement.

Slightly over half of the obituary writers (52.5%) did not attach any emotions to the heading. The writers simply used the word 'death' instead of euphemisms or metaphors. On the other hand, 30 per cent of the writers used the heading to indicate that it was time to celebrate the deceased's life as they made the announcement. From the obituaries sampled, the Christian view of rest, promotion and journey was not widely subscribed to by many of the writers when writing the headlines. These three views about death combined constituted a mere 11.7 per cent of the total headings. This can be attributed to the idea that most people view the heading as a section that introduces the announcement, thus they do not pay much attention to the wording but simply use standard headings which have been used for a long time in Kenyan obituaries.

Out of the total of 356 obituaries collected only two of the announcements did not have a heading. This shows that the heading is an obligatory move in the schematic structure of obituaries in Kenya.

Profile of the deceased

After the heading of the obituary, the section that follows is the profile of the deceased. This section has three parts categorised into: a photograph of the deceased; name of the deceased; and date of birth and date of death of the deceased. The first two items appear in all the announcements while the third is optional. In the following discussion, each of the items is looked at in details.

Photograph

All the announcements are accompanied by a photograph of the deceased. The pictures are either coloured or in black and white. Posting a coloured picture is more expensive than when using a black and white photograph. These photographs are used for easier identification of the deceased by the readers. The photographs seem to have been carefully selected as in most cases the photographs portray the deceased during their happy moments. This could be an indicator of what kind of memories the living would want to hold onto. In some cases photographs are used to depict the professional, academic status, age and religious affiliation of the deceased. There are photographs of the deceased in academic graduation gowns, wedding gowns, religious attires, military and police uniforms. The photograph is an important element since some people cut out the obituary and keep it as a memento. This has made the obituary section in Kenya

be commonly referred to as ‘the album’. A photo album is a book which has a collection of photographs, and since the transitions or obituaries section of the newspaper is full of photographs of the deceased, then it is informally referred to as an album. This element can also be considered as an obligatory move in Kenyan obituaries since all the 356 obituaries had a photograph.

Name of the deceased

Directly under the photograph, the name/s of the deceased appear/s. In 352 out of the total 356 announcements, three names were used and the remaining four announcements had two names. This shows the importance attached to the first, middle and last (surname) name. In Kenya, people are rightfully identified by the use of their three names in most parts of their lives and so even in death it would be in order to identify them using the same names.

Some of the names of the deceased were preceded by a title. This is considered an optional element as only 70 (19.7%) of the obituaries had titles. As shown in Table 2, the titles were related to the deceased’s profession, marital status, religious affiliation or social standing.

Table 2: List of titles

Title	Frequency	Title	Frequency
<i>Elder</i>	1	<i>Pastor</i>	1
<i>Ex-senior chief</i>	1	<i>Sergeant (Rtd)</i>	1
<i>Major (Rtd)</i>	1	<i>W.O.1 (warrant Officer One)</i>	2
<i>Miss</i>	1	<i>Prof.</i>	3
<i>Madam</i>	1	<i>Bishop</i>	4
<i>Mother</i>	1	<i>Eng.</i>	5
<i>Major (Rtd)</i>	1	<i>Mrs</i>	5
<i>Miss</i>	1	<i>Dr</i>	6
<i>Madam</i>	1	<i>Mama (mother)</i>	9
<i>Mother</i>	1	<i>Mzee (elder)</i>	9
<i>Paramount chief</i>	1	<i>Mwalimu (teacher)</i>	11
Total: 70 (19.7%)			

Mzee (elder) and *Mama* (mother) are considered to be respectable Kiswahili terms used in Kenyan society. When used, they indicate that the society holds the person in high esteem. The use of the nicknames given in brackets was minimal, identified in only about 8 per cent of the announcements. Some of the nicknames were a shortened version of the deceased’s name, such as the use of ‘Kim’ short for Kimani, while oth-

ers described the social role of the deceased, such as ‘Mama Raj’ (mother to Raj). Yet others described the deceased’s physical features ‘*mrefu*’ (tall man), or where the deceased hailed from, for example, ‘Nyarkodeyo’ (a Luo word used for a woman who hails from Kodeyo) and there were others which the researcher could not really tell what they stood for. This could be attributed the fact that within Kenyan society nicknames are not used in the public domain. Thus, since obituaries in the newspaper are considered as a public domain, then the writers refrain from using them unless it is a very necessary aspect to the identification of the deceased.

Date of birth and date of death

The date of birth seems not to be an obligatory element in the Kenyan obituaries. From the sample, 78 out of the 356 announcements studied gave the year of the deceased’s birth, while 64 gave the specific date, month and year of the deceased’s birth. The remaining 214 announcements did not indicate the date of birth at all. This means that 60.1 per cent of the obituary writers did not consider the date of birth as being important thus making it impossible to know the deceased’s age. This can give an indication of the cultural perception on the relationship between age and death. By not indicating the date of birth, the writers directly avoid giving the age of the deceased. This could be an indicator that either there is no age that is considered as ‘okay’ for death to occur or that Kenyans do not consider the date of birth as being an important aspect worth mentioning once the person is dead. It also portrays Kenyans as being cautious about stating their age in public (even in death) which is similar to what Matiki (2001) notes about the Malawians.

Over half of the obituaries (62%) indicated the deceased’s date of death. In announcements where the date of death was not explicitly given, the period could easily be inferred from the day the announcement was placed in the newspaper. This shows that the date the person died is not so important as long as the advertisement informs to the public that the person has died.

Text

The main text of the obituary appears next to the profile of the deceased. This section is normally positioned either directly below the photograph or directly opposite it. The text of the obituary generally appears in about two or three short paragraphs. The paragraphs give the details of the announcement which include: a preamble, list of family members and funeral arrangements.

Preamble

The text begins with a preamble which is a statement making the death announcement, giving the deceased's name, place of work and/or place of origin, date of death (optional), cause of death (optional) and place of death (optional). Some of these elements are obligatory while others are optional. Samples of the different sentences used in the obituaries are incorporated in the discussion below.

One of the obligatory elements in the first sentence was the name of the deceased (as indicated in examples 1 – 11). It is also interesting to note that the deceased's name was mentioned in all the opening sentences, yet it had already been indicated below the deceased's photograph in all the obituaries. This repetition is probably to emphasise the identity of the departed. In some of the obituaries, the name of the deceased was pre-modified as follows:

1. It is with profound sorrow and acceptance of God's will that we announce the sudden death of our beloved dad (**name of the deceased**)² of (**work place**) which occurred on (**date of death**).
2. The late sister-in-Christ (**name of the deceased**) was promoted to glory on (**date of death**) while undergoing treatment at (**name of hospital**).
3. The death has occurred of police constable (**name of the deceased**).

There is also the use of post-modifiers with the deceased's name; these are words that show how best the people making the announcements would want to describe the roles played or kinship relations held by the deceased. These include words such as dear, beloved mother, loving husband, ever happy mother, among others.

4. It is with profound sorrow that we announce the passing of (**three names of the deceased**), beloved wife of (**three names of husband of the deceased**), of (**name of husband's company – six words**), dearly loved mother of (**two names of the children**), respected mother-in-law of (**two names**), adored grandmother of (**four names**) and proud great-grandmother of (**one name**), on (**date of death**).

In the above announcement the deceased was described as: beloved wife, dearly loved mother, respected mother-in-law, adored grandmother and proud great-grandmother. A different adjective was used to pre-modify each of the particular roles the deceased played. This helps to state the cultural expectations of the role of a wife, mother, mother-in-law, grandmother and great grandmother.

The wording in the opening sentence carries the emotions of the people making the announcement. In most of the announcements there is a religious undertone in expressing the emotions. The emotions indicate how difficult it is for the living to cope with the

death but have to accept it because it is generally viewed as God's will. Expressions such as great humility, deep sorrow, profound shock and humble acceptance are used to express these emotions.

5. It is with humble acceptance of God's will that we announce the sudden death of **(name of the deceased)** of **(place of work)** which occurred on **(date of death)**.
6. It is with great humility and acceptance of God's will that we announce the promotion to glory of **(name of the deceased)** of **(place of origin)** which occurred on **(date of death)**.
7. We regret to announce the sudden death of our beloved sister-in-Christ, **(name of the deceased)**.

The writers also used euphemistic expressions to describe death in the opening sentence. It demonstrates the cultural perception of how death is viewed in Kenya. Words such as demise, passing to glory, passing on, promotion to glory, passed away, elevation to heavenly glory, transition, take back and rested among others were used in place of the word 'death'.

8. We wish to announce the promotion to glory of **(name of the deceased)** formerly of **(place of work)**.
9. On **(date of death)**, the almighty God chose to take back **(name of the deceased)**, retired **(profession)**.

In places where the word death was used it was pre-modified using words such as 'sudden' and 'untimely'. This carries a cultural perception of how death is viewed as something unexpected.

10. We the family of the late **(family or clan name)** regret to announce the sudden death of **(name of the deceased)** after a short illness.

The sentence length varied depending on the information the writers considered crucial to be included in the opening sentence. The longest sentence contained 63 words (example 4 above) while the shortest had eight words.

11. Mzee **(3 names of deceased)** passed on **(date of death)**.

The pronoun 'we' appeared in almost all the announcement (as in examples 1, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8 and 10) thus bringing in a general cultural aspect that death is treated as a communal affair among Kenyans. The pronoun is used to indicate the specific writers of the obituary who could be the entire family, friends, associates or even clan of the deceased. This reflects how burial arrangements are conducted in Kenya where the community around the deceased makes financial contributions towards assisting in the

burial expenses. In most cases this money is also used to pay for the advertisement in the newspaper.

It was also noted that in all the obituaries, the text began with a declarative sentence which was used to formally make the death announcement (examples 1–11). From the texts analysed, the optional elements that appeared in the first sentence were: the date of death, cause of death and place of death. The deceased's name and place of work and/or place of origin are obligatory in the preamble.

List of family members

After the preamble, the next section is a list of family members. Like most other studies on obituaries (Afful 2010; Crespo 2007; Moses and Marelli 2004), the list enumerated the family members such as 'the spouse (for married people), parents, children, siblings, in-laws, grandparents and other extended relatives'. The order was particularly interesting as there seemed to be a different order for males and females. The announcements generally revealed that for males, the order began with 'son to ...' then 'husband to ...' while if the deceased was female then it began with 'wife to ...' then 'daughter to ...'. This shows that men are recognised as being a son first before being a husband, while for women being a wife is the first identity followed by being a daughter. This could be explained by the fact that 'sons' are expected to take care of their parents throughout, consequently their parents come first before their wives. As for the women, they do not belong to their maternal homes and so once they get married they relocate to live in their husband's homes, thus their first identity is their husband and not their parents.

The names of the nuclear family members preceded those of the extended family. The list of immediate family members is obligatory. It includes names of parents, spouse(s), children and siblings if any. This clearly demonstrates the value of a family as it is what defines a person even in death.

The socio-economic status of the relatives was also portrayed as an important aspect in the obituaries. There was a tendency to state the place of work or place of residence for the relatives if they were considered 'prestigious'. It was noted that place of residence was mentioned especially if the relatives reside outside the country.

It was also noted that the list of relatives did not only include the surviving relatives, but in some cases, the deceased family members were also included. They were generally referred to as 'the late ...' and if they were prominent people, then that information was also given in brackets. This demonstrates a cultural aspect that the dead are not easily forgotten within Kenyan society. They are still taken to form the family unit and are forever remembered as part of that family. The family is considered an important identification of the deceased and thus receives much space and time.

Funeral arrangements

The next section is on the funeral arrangements which is an obligatory part and is very elaborate. In most cases the funeral arrangements are made by an organising committee which is composed of the deceased's family, friends and colleagues. There are meetings held to make such arrangements, thus the announcement will give the place and time for such meetings. If there are any plans to raise funds for the funeral arrangements or any other bills, then the date and time of such fundraisings is given. Generally burials are conducted as from three days after the death to as long as two weeks after. In most Kenyan communities, the cortege leaves the mortuary a day before the burial for an overnight stay at the deceased's home before being interred. This section will give details on the date and time when the cortege will leave the mortuary for readers who are interested to attend the ceremony at the mortuary. Then finally the most important aspect is communicated to the public about and the date and place of where the funeral will take place. Unlike the Malawian notices where Matiki (2001) states that the date of burial is not important, in the Kenyan obituaries this is one of the reasons as to why the advertisements are sent out. There is no direct invitation given as in the Ghanaian obituaries as stated by Afful (2010), but it is indirectly implied through providing those details.

End remark

This is a section that appears after the text of the obituary. It is considered as a different move from the text since it is marked off from the rest of the obituary through bolding or/and centring of the statement and is used to conclude the obituaries. The message contained in this move makes it different from the rest of the obituary. In the other part of the obituary, the message is addressed to the public but in the end remark the message is addressed to the deceased. The end remark can be an expression of gratitude and farewell which appears as a direct address to the deceased, a verse from the bible, a general comment that the writers wish to give about the deceased, or contact information.

Direct address

The deceased can either be addressed directly through the use of his/her name or kinship terms as given in example (1), or through the use of the pronoun 'you' or 'your' as in examples (2) and (3). In example (4) the 'you' has been ellipted but it can be recovered from the meaning of the expression.

1. Baba (father), may you rest in eternal peace, Amen.
2. In God's hands you rest, in our hearts you live forever.

3. We regret your sudden departure. May the lord rest your soul in peace.
4. Rest in peace till we meet again. Amen.

Verses from the bible

1. I have fought a good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. 1 Timothy 4:7
2. For whether we live, we live unto the Lord; and whether we die, we die unto the lord; whether we live therefore, or die, we are the lord's. Romans 14:8. Amen
3. Blessed are those who die in the Lord. Revelation 14:13

General comments

1. *Eternal rest grant to him and may he rest in peace.*
2. *May the Almighty Waheguru rest her soul in peace.*
3. *The memory of a great man is a blessing to all.*
4. *May Allah rest (name of deceased) soul in eternal peace.*

Religious chants (Hindu chants)

1. Om shanty, shanty shanty
2. Aum shanty shanty

The first three types of end remarks made up about 92 per cent of all the end notes in the obituaries studied. There was a strong inclination towards the religious beliefs about death in making these concluding remarks. Similar to what Matiki notes about Malawian notices, this section brings to the fore the belief that the living can communicate with the dead.

In terms of language, this is the section where the writers brought out an ethnic inclination by making use of vernacular languages (though very minimal in about three obituaries only) such as:

1. *Ciugo ciaku – ngai ni mwega hingo ciothe – Amen (Agikuyu)*
In your own words – God is good all the time.
2. *Khuluno nende wele, luosi mumioyo kyefwe (Luhya)*

Now with God but forever in our hearts.

Obituaries in Kenya were found to have both obligatory and optional elements. Figure 1 gives a summary of the obligatory elements in the Kenyan obituaries:

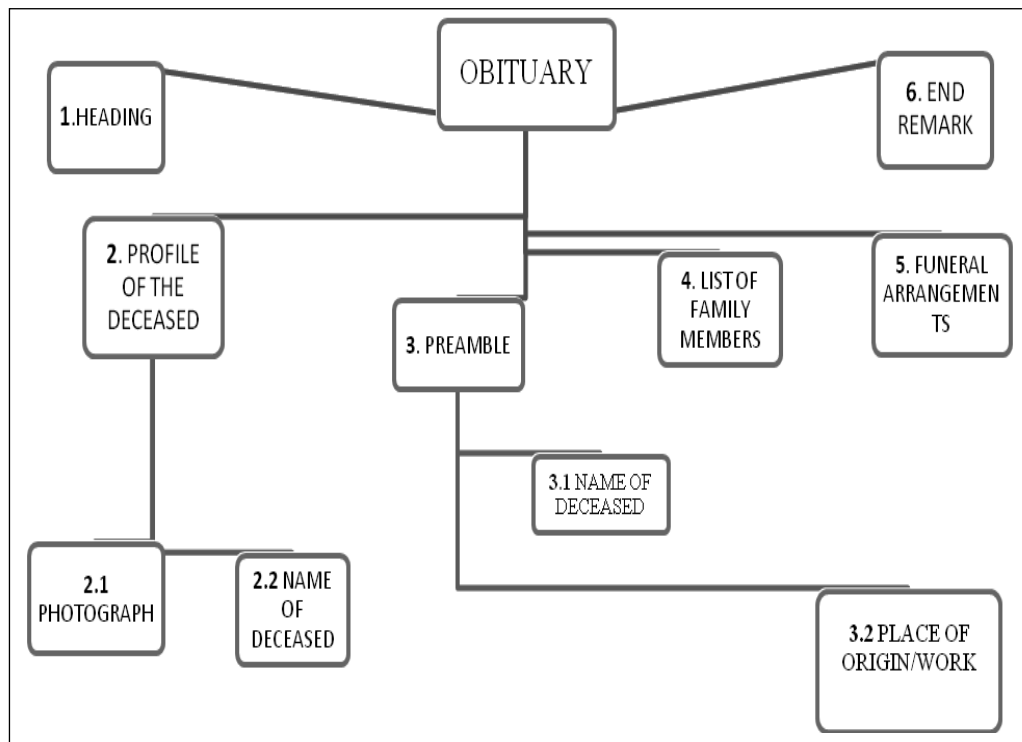


Figure 1: Schematic representation of obligatory elements of obituaries in Kenya

Conclusion

The obituaries in Kenya have a schematic structure that has six moves which can be considered to be obligatory, namely: the heading; profile of the deceased; preamble; list of family members; funeral arrangements; and end remark (as shown in Figure 1). Within these moves some elements are obligatory and others are optional. Within the profile of the deceased, the photograph and name of the deceased are obligatory, while the date of birth and date of death are optional. In the preamble some elements such as date, cause and place of death are optional, while the name of deceased and place of work and/or place of origin are obligatory. Within the funeral arrangements, the date and place of the funeral are obligatory.

The language used goes a long way to acting as a mirror towards the cultural and religious beliefs that surround death and the living. The use of metaphors to refer to death as a celebration, a reward, a time to rest and as a journey shows how human beings

have still not accepted the reality of death and they try to soften it by use of positive concepts. The article thus agrees with what Nyakoe et al. (2012) term as a clear negation of death through the use of metaphors. There is also a deliberate attempt to avoid the use of the word 'death' by replacing it with euphemistic expressions; this can be used as a consolation to the bereaved as they come to terms with the death.

The adjectives used to describe the deceased are all positively loaded bringing out the culture of what Crespo (2007) calls showing the social relevance and exemplary conduct of the deceased. In the African context people do not talk ill of the dead and this is clearly brought out in the descriptions given in the obituaries.

Since the obituary is the final public tribute to the deceased, the family and friends include all the characteristics that they would want the departed one to be remembered for. The family is the most important aspect of a person's life since it is given the most space, the name of the deceased is repeated twice to emphasise the identity of human beings through their names and the mention of their professional life also shows that human beings are identified through the services they offer in life. The use of a photograph shows that the survivors would forever want to retain the image of the deceased.

Religion also plays an important role in shaping the language used. Most of the metaphors used to refer to death have a religious undertone and the end note used in most of the announcements has been guided by some religious belief.

Notes

1. The 2009 population and housing census results are the most recent census carried in Kenya.
2. Despite the data being publicly available in newspapers, the author felt that for purposes of respect to the dead (as culture dictates) some information had to be left out. What the author considered to be very personal information that could reveal the identity of the deceased, such as the name of the deceased, place of death, place of work, professional details and date of death, have been omitted in the transcribed data. The information that is bolded and in brackets has been used to give an explanation of what is missing.

References

- Afful, J. 2010. A genre analysis of death announcements in Ghanaian newspapers. http://www.language-and-society.org/journal/1-2/7_afful.pdf (accessed 20 August 2012).
- Bhatia, V.K. 1997. Introduction: Genre analysis and world Englishes. *World Englishes* 16: 313 – 319.
- Campbell, J.M. 1971. What an obituary is. <http://enzinearticles.com> (accessed 12 April 2012).
- Crespo, F.E. 2006. The language of death: Euphemism and conceptual metaphorization in Victorian obituaries. *SKY Journal of Linguistics* 19: 101 – 130.
- Crespo, F.E. 2007. Linguistic devices coping with death in Victorian obituaries. *Revista Alicantina de Estudios Ingleses* 20: 7 – 21.
- Eid, M. 2002. *The world of obituaries: Gender across cultures and over time*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press.
- Fairclough, N. 1992. *Discourse and social change*. Oxford: Blackwell.

- Government of Kenya. 2009. Population and housing census results. Ministry of State for Planning, National Development and Vision 2030.
- Lewis, M.P., ed. 2009. *Ethnologue: Languages of the world*. 16th ed. Dallas, TX: SIL International.
- Matiki, A. 2001. The pragmatics of obituary notices in Malawian newspapers. *Language Matters: Studies in the Languages of Africa* 32(1): 29 – 52.
- Moses, R. and G. Marelli. 2004. Obituaries and discursive construction of dying and living. *Texas Linguistic Forum* 47: 123 – 130.
- Nyakoe, D., P. Matu and D. Ongaro. 2012. Conceptualization of 'Death is a journey' and 'Death as rest' in EkeGusii euphemism. *Theory and Practice in Language Studies* 2(7): 1452 – 1457.
- Stein, M. and R. Burnett. 2006. *Newswriter's handbook: An introduction*. 2nd ed. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Swales, J. M. 1990. *Genre analysis*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.