Obituaries and the Discursive Construction of Dying and Living

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Obituaries are perhaps the most frequently read section of the daily newspaper. They note the passing of friends and acquaintances, the famous and the infamous. They recount the life stories of ordinary people and people of power. These short essays also give us a glimpse into the shape and cultural interpretation of life and death. In this paper we examine a sample of obituaries drawn from The New York Times 1983-2002. The sample includes both those articles written by Times writers and the paid notices authored by family and friends. A text grammar is proposed based on Brown and Yule's (1983) discourse topic framework. The four parts of the text grammar are analyzed. We argue that the language of obituaries reveals important understandings of the beliefs our society holds about our lives and our deaths, especially with respect to the causes of death, life expectancy, and gender differences in our life stories. The textual analysis of obituaries offers an intriguing view of how we understand living and dying in our society today.

1. Introduction

Written documents both reflect the belief system of those who compose them and influence the thinking of those who read them. Obituaries represent a special text because their contents focus exclusively on the qualities of one human being and how that person's life, at its end, can best be represented. These texts are a window that provides a view into a culture. They are one of the elements out of which literate cultures are built. The present paper examines the text of obituaries that appear in the New York Times. We argue that the textual arrangements and content of obituaries provide an understanding of how those who compose obituaries regard the death and life of the deceased and more generally, the important cultural elements of dying and living in our society. Further, obituary texts mold our understandings of the important elements of life and death. As Berger and Luckmann (1967) argued, it is through ordinary discourse that the reality of everyday life is understood.

Obituaries have been the subject several studies. Mushira Eid's recent book, *The World of Obituaries* (2002) compares the obituaries written by family members from *The New York Times* with those published in similar papers in Egypt and Iran, examining the encoding of gender in obituaries. Her study confirms the importance of culture in the

content of obituaries. In an earlier study by Gunnar Knutson on the content of obituaries of librarians he studied the edited obituaries of a professional group that appeared in the *New York Times* from 1884 to 1976. He chose obituaries because they provide "a unique method of measuring professional status and image" (Knutson, 1981, p. 12).

We selected obituaries for similar reasons. These texts, which commemorate the lives of a single person, have at their center what a society holds to be the crucially important elements of one life and death. Our study examines a sample of obituaries taken from *The New York Times*. We describe the kinds of documents that appear in this newspaper, with the goal of providing a definition of a journalistic genre of obituaries and an understanding what these texts contribute to our social understanding of death and living. *The Times* has two sections in its obituary pages: the edited pieces written by the staff writers of the paper and a section labeled "Deaths" on the same page, which are paid for and written by the family, friends and associates of the deceased. The edited obituaries appear at the top of the page with a headline and report the lives of notable, famous and powerful people in some detail. The "Deaths" section appears in smaller print at the bottom of the obituary page and lists entries alphabetically. We describe both sections in some detail and examine the relationship between them, providing a classification of the types of obituaries that appear in this newspaper. We argue that there are features of obituary texts that clearly define the obituary genre. While the present study provides a template for the obituaries of only one newspaper, our methods can be extended to other newspapers to account for stylistic variation of the genre.

In order to provide a basis for analyzing the content and arrangements of obituary texts, we construct two discourse grammars that account for the obituaries in our sample. Each grammar provides a labeled tree diagram that identifies the basic elements found in obituaries, shows what elements are obligatory, which are optional and what the general order of the elements of this kind of text is. The construction of such grammars also allows a comparison of the ways each of the elements of the text is related to one another. The tree diagrams provide a means for comparing varieties of the genre so that a general model can be developed. Finally, we argue that the language used in obituaries contributes to our understanding of what is considered important about our lives and how they end.

2. The Sample

The present study is based on a sample of obituaries taken from 25 daily issues of *The New York Times* from the later half of 2002 and the first three months of 2003. On each day chosen, both edited obituaries and the section labeled "Deaths" were collected. From the "Deaths" section we included 98 family authored texts that parallel the 99 edited obituaries. In addition, 10 daily pages from 1983 and 10 daily pages drawn from 1993 were collected in order to examine genre change over time.

3. Edited Texts

The Times obituaries that are written by the editorial staff have headlines that give the name of the decedent, his or her age and the basis for the person's fame. The texts vary in length, some no more than 24 lines, some running a whole page. The longest text we have in our sample fills a full page in the obituary section (475 lines). It starts on the front page, with a color photo and continues in the obituary pages with another picture and a second news story. The longer texts indicate how *The Times* treats its edited obituaries―as news

stories. The size and placement of the piece appear to reflect the importance of the decedent. As in the rest of the paper, the most important stories appear at the top of the page and closer to the left margin. The first paragraph of the text begins with a simple statement of who died, why he or she was an important person, and when and where he or she died, making clear whether the place of death was the person's home. There is often a cause of death given, especially in the case of younger persons. The cause is often medically detailed and is attributed to a source, usually a relative, a spokesperson or a hospital official. Life and career history are recounted in reverse order, that is, from the present back. The life history section is expandable and it is here that the length of an obituary is extended, with more detailed life stories and longer lists of accomplishments. Academic histories are the last section of life histories. Finally, there is a list of family members usually starting with the spouse or partner and sometimes mentioning a spouse who predeceased the person being written about. Children and siblings are sometimes named and the number of grandchildren given. The template for the edited obituaries is quite predictable, with most of the elements and their order obligatory.
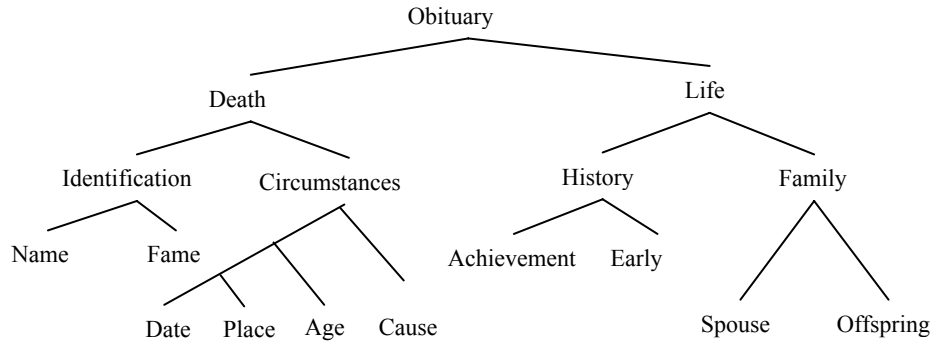
4. Family Authored Text

The obituaries that are purchased usually appear at the bottom of the obituary page. The notices are in alphabetic order and in smaller print. There are several kinds of texts that appear here; some are simply announcements, some resemble messages of sympathy. We have chosen 98 texts from our sample that have a similar form and function to the texts written by staff writers. They are authored by family or friends and contain many of the same elements as the edited texts. While the contents and form of the two samples are similar, the perspective of the family authored texts is subjective and personal. Some give a cause of death, but no source is attributed. There is adverbial modification, such as, "peacefully" or "suddenly." The order of the elements is less predictable than in the edited texts. There is more adjectival description of both the deceased and his or her relationship with kin, for example "devoted father" or "adoring grandmother." The list of kin is more extended, sometimes including cousins or great aunts. Furthermore, these texts obligatorily include the name, date, and funeral arrangements. Additionally, an optional tribute, or praise of the decedent, is included. All in all, there is a less predictable template for the obituary authored by family. While they resemble the more professionally authored texts, the variation is great and there is more individual variation than is found in the edited texts.

5. Edited Text Structure

One way to represent the structure of a text is to construct a formal model of the discourse that represents the topics of the text (Polanyi, 1988). In this kind of representation, each of the constituent topics of the text are labeled and related hierarchically, showing the relationship of each of the topics to one another, in what Brown and Yule (1983) have called a topic framework. Such structural representations reveal the internal relationships of the topics of the text. They further show the optional and obligatory elements of the text and predict the linear order of the parts. While different branching diagrams can be proposed, the tree structure is determined by the ordering of the constituents, their co-occurrence and the ways in which the topics can optimally be represented hierarchically. The following tree structure accounts for the common text constituent structure of the edited obituaries of the sample:

(1)   Structure 1

Obituary — Death — Life
Death — Identification — Circumstances
Life — History — Family
Identification — Name — Fame
Circumstances — Date — Place — Age — Cause
History — Achievement — Early
Family — Spouse — Offspring

The first node, labeled **Death**, names the deceased, then, usually in a relative clause, gives the accomplishment(s) that make the person of interest, and then gives his or her age. If the person is younger, the cause of death is optional. Some causes are quite detailed, others less so. In *The Times***,** a source is always given for the information about the cause of death. The following are examples of the **Death** node of the edited sample,

(2)   Craig Kelly, who played a major role in making snowboarding a modern-day sport and then a recreational outlet, died on Monday in an avalanche that killed seven skiers and snowboarders in Revelstoke, B.C. He was 36 and lived in Nelson, B.C.

(3)   Susan Johnson, who sang in musical theater on and off Broadway in the 1950's, died on Feb. 24 at her daughter's home in Sacramento. She was 75. She had emphysema, said Greg MacKelan, who produced some CD's she sang on.

(4)   Gavin Lyall, a prolific and popular British writer of thrillers, died on Monday in London. He was 70. The cause was cancer, said his wife, Katharine Whitehorn, a British writer and journalist.

(5)   F. William Sunderman, a doctor and scientist who lived a remarkable century and beyond—making medical advances, playing his Stradivarius violin at Carnegie Hall at 99 and being honored as the nation's oldest worker at 100—died on March 9 at his home in Philadelphia. He was 104 and had worked eight-hour days until a few weeks ago.
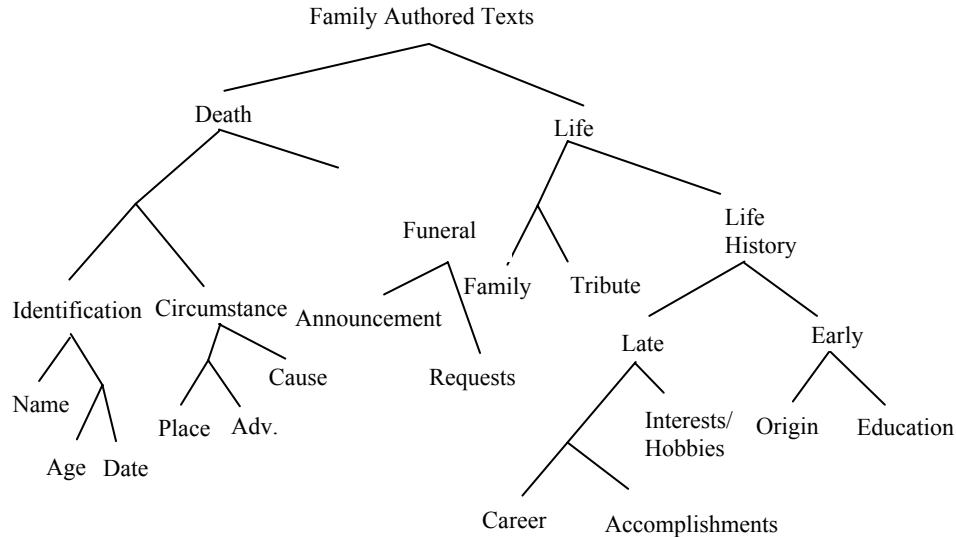
While **Cause** is an optional constituent, its occurrence is directly linked to the age of the deceased. No cause was given for decedents over the age of 87 and all the obituaries for people under 50 did have a cause listed. If the death occurred away from the decedent's home, the death place and home are clearly stated.

6. Family Authored Text Structure

The structure of the family authored texts is neither concrete nor predictable. There is great variation in the structure and information included in these texts, perhaps because

there are different authors and therefore different text types. The family texts are characterized by the following structure:

(6)   Structure 2

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                          Family Authored Texts
                   /                              \
              Death                              Life
            /        \                        /    |      \
           /          \                 Funeral    |       Life
          /            \               /     \   Family  Tribute  History
   Identification  Circumstance  Announcement                    /        \
      /    \        /      \         |                         Late       Early
   Name    |       |      Cause   Requests                   /    \       /    \
        /  \     Place   Adv.                               /   Interests/ Origin  Education
      Age  Date                                          Career  Hobbies
                                                              \
                                                          Accomplishments
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Obligatory elements in the family texts include the name of the deceased, a date of death, funeral announcement, and listing of family members. Names in the family texts are listed alphabetically by last name and thus, the obituaries begin with the name, last name first. The date of death follows the name. This introduction is the factual portion of the obituary; it informs the community of the death and date of passing of one of its members. Forty-seven percent of the obituaries from this sample also include the age of the person in this informative introduction.

The funeral announcement informs the community of the time and place in which the service will be held. Optionally included in this announcement is a donation request, "in lieu of flowers…" Many times this request hints at the cause of death; for example, following the announcement a request will read, "In lieu of flowers, donations in Anne's name should be made to the American Lung Association." This portion of the obituary serves as an announcement of a death and instructs members of the community how to pay their respects.

Another required element of the family authored obituaries is the enumeration of family. The spouse or partner of the deceased is always mentioned followed by the naming of children and grandchildren. Often the parents and siblings and even extended family such as aunts, uncles, and cousins of the deceased are named. Whether or not a person was married or had children, some family relationships are always specified. Furthermore, the intimacy of these relationships is usually adjectively modified. For example, a typical description of family is as follows: "The beloved wife of Geoffrey Schermerhorn. Devoted mother of Matthew, Paul, and Rebeca Meseca. Loving grandmother of four grandchildren. Dear sister of Neville Ottman." The kinship section of

the obituary is usually the most extensive part of the family authored obituary. Writers of these texts focus on the family unit and how the person was regarded within this unit.

The circumstances of the death are optionally included in the family authored obituaries. The place of death and an adjective modifying the death are examples of these cited circumstances: naming the city, hospital, or home and using modifiers like "peacefully," "suddenly," "in his sleep," or "surrounded by family." These descriptions reflect the subjectivity of these texts. Only 10% of the family authored texts give a medical cause of death. An additional 8% of the texts allude to the cause by indicating where donations may be sent.

Personal history is listed when it represents a central issue in the person's life: a war veteran, the president of an organization, a volunteer worker, a university graduate, an immigrant who fled the Holocaust, a musician, a professor, a lawyer, etc. The career branch of the Life History node is the most frequently referenced category: the person's profession is referenced in 31% of the texts. Other than the career node, each of the other terminal nodes within the Life History category is referenced in less than 20% of the texts.

7. The Comparison of Text Types

The topical discourse grammars we have constructed reveal the basic similarities of the obituary genre. Both text types divide the topic into discourse about death and life. They further have similar components. The Identification node categories are found in both texts and are similarly filled (Name, Age, Date.) Both contain circumstances of death; however, while the edited texts list the causes of death in terms that are medically descriptive, the family authored texts use phrases like "after a long illness." Life histories occur in both kinds of texts, but the family authored texts allow for a broader interpretation of what passes for accomplishments. Kinship has a clear template in the edited texts, where partner, children and perhaps siblings are named, but grandchildren are merely counted. In the family-authored texts, families are also varied, with the modern shape families have today (which may include step children, ex-wives, or domestic partners). Families are also modified by adjectives which reflect affection and emotion.

The text structure of the edited obituaries is stable and predictable; the structure of those authored by family is not. Whether it is because of less professional skill or because of differences in function or focus, texts authored by families show greater variation than those authored by the staff of *The Times*. On the other hand, the elements that were found in the grammar for edited texts are all found in the family sample. The order of the elements is less rigid, some of the elements that are obligatory in the professionally written obituaries are optional and the entries are characterized by subjective and personal references.

8. The Social Construction of Death

The two types found in *The Times* reveal the clear patterns of the cultural meaning of death as it is represented in the press in a U.S. national community. The branches of the discourse trees which derive from the **Death** node are configured differently, but contain much of the same material. The end of life is situated both temporally (date and age) and spatially (place). While the edited texts are quite explicit about the time and geography of the death, e.g. "on July 10 in Chicago, long his hometown," the family-authored sample is

subjective and less specific, e.g. "at home," or even "at home in the loving arms of her daughter, Mary." Temporal adverbial phrases like "after a long (short) illness," or "suddenly" mark the importance of time in the conception of death. Other adverbial modifiers, "peacefully," "in his sleep" or "surrounded by family" seem to reflect an idealized concept of the "good death." Time and place are important components in both text types, affirming the importance of when and where death occurred.

The medical cause of death occurs in almost half of the edited sample and is obligatory when the person is young. For the elderly who have survived past normal life expectancy, the medical cause is optional. Indeed, the medical cause was not stated for anyone over 87. The 33 obituaries for those over 87 all failed to give the cause of death. Cause was mentioned far less in the family-authored sample and there was no apparent pattern related to age. Cause is sometimes alluded to in the request for donations.

Listing the medically explicit cause of death appears to be an innovation in modern obituaries. Our 1983 sample showed it was present in only 52% of the edited texts and did not appear in the family authored texts. By 1993, medical cause was more frequently mentioned in the edited texts, but was still rare in family texts. We believe that this is a mark of genre change over time, perhaps because of clearer medical understandings of the causes of death, perhaps because of less taboo and avoidance surrounding the end of life.

The end of a life is explained both temporally (date and age) and spatially (place) in both of our samples. These elements are obligatory in the edited sample. On the other hand, the subjective descriptions in the family-authored texts treat the temporal/spatial dimensions by alluding to the "good death": peacefully, being at home, surrounded by family. Temporal adverbial phrases like "suddenly" or "after a long (short) illness" are markers of the importance of time in the conception of death. Cause of death is medically explicit in 47% of the edited obituaries and is related to the age of the decedent. Cause of death is mentioned less in the family texts and shows little patterning

9. The Social Construction of Life

Family is the universal component that represents **Life** in an obituary. No obituary in our samples failed to mention survivors. The edited sample used a simplified definition of family. The order probably shows import, with partner/spouse occurring first. Predeceased or divorced spouse names were also found. Offspring and/or siblings were listed by name. The number of grandchildren was given, but none were named. If there were no surviving kin, it was noted. Family was more broadly defined in the family texts. When partner and offspring were missing, they were replaced by other kin. While the necessary condition for having a staff-written obituary is accomplishment, fame or notoriety, the family authored sample makes it clear that kinship and one's place in a loving family is crucial to the evaluation of a life. The family texts also provide an opportunity to laud the deceased one last time. Warmth, thoughtfulness, humor and generosity were valued in the family text in the way being a CEO or playing the cello were lauded in the edited texts. Also important to the meaning of a life were the time and place of its beginning and its educational and career milestones. Value is placed in the hardship of being an immigrant, the fortitude of being a soldier and the status of earning Phi Beta Kappa.

10. Obituaries and Gender

In an earlier paper (Moses, 1994), the gendered nature of the obituary pages was noted. That sample from 1993 revealed that 16% of the edited obituaries and 43% of the paid obituaries announced the death of a woman. The numbers from our sample are very similar. 14% of the edited obituaries and 43% of the family authored pieces were women's obituaries.

11. Conclusions

The topical discourse model identifies the major components of a given discourse so that those constituents and their relationship with one another and the hierarchical relationship they have can provide a broad outline of the culturally important elements that are reflected in the text type. The obituaries in *The New York Times* are defined by the first topical nodes of **Death** and **Life**. We suspect that this basic form defines the genre for all journalistic examples, whether from large national newspapers or small town weekly papers. Inspection of *The Evanston Review, The Door County Advocate, The Chicago Tribune* and the *Washington Post* support that conclusion. The topical discourse tree model provides a rich and revealing way to describe the contents of a written genre, and also provides a vehicle for comparing the variety of the text-types represented in the genre. The authors of obituaries, whether professional staff of *The Times* or loving family members, discursively construct the cultural conception of what it means to live and die.

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