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Socio-cultural perspectives on death announcements in Ghanaian newspapers: Some sociolinguistic evidence

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Death announcements are presumed to provide a socio-cultural icon for examining the society's collective attitude towards death and dying. The present study attempts to investigate the death announcement genre in Ghana from a sociolinguistic viewpoint in order to highlight the underpinning sociocultural perspectives. To accomplish this task, the study deployed both qualitative and quantitative content analysis of a data set of 636 death announcements from three leading public newspapers in Ghana. The analysis revealed that the DAs do more than just announce deaths. In general, age, gender, and status influence the construction of DAs in a number of ways to reflect the socio-cultural norms, beliefs, and practices of Ghanaians. In Ghana, DAs constitute a system of verbal and non-verbal signs, which communicate important social, cultural, and religious elements that shape the worldview about the living and the dead. The findings of this study contribute to the scholarship on the socio-cultural perspectives on death announcements and other related funeral genres and have implications for the practice of writing DAs and further research.

Key words: Culture, death announcements, Ghana, newspapers, sociolinguistics.

INTRODUCTION

In the journey of life, from birth to death, several communicative events come to play. The human being is ushered into a family through a naming ceremony in several societies and later introduced to formal educational institutions and workplace. Then comes marriage, which ushers a person into reproductive life. Thereafter, the individual has the opportunity to accomplish much in life. Soon, death approaches and ends it all. Death announcements (DAs) or obituaries and funeral announcements, as others call them, constitute a major communicative act through which death is announced to the public. This is done in a manner that

does not only create grief in the audience but also presents the deceased in a way that evokes an appreciation for him or her (Al-Ali, 2005; Askildson, 2007; Fernandez, 2007).

This study uses 'death announcements', 'obituaries', 'funeral posters', and 'funeral announcements' interchangeably to refer to a class communicative acts which seek to inform the public of the death and funeral arrangements for a loved one. It is instructive to note that other genres related to death include funeral eulogies, tributes, death anniversaries or memorials, condolences, and epitaphs. Suffice to say, DAs or obituaries constitute

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a form of commemorative writing, which has endured through the ages. As Manieson (2014) has indicated, DAs are encoded in various modes such as the traditional verbal announcements, electronic and print media, billboards, posters, handbills, and telephone. The present study, however, focuses on DAs in newspapers, as this has attracted considerable attention in the last three decades (Alali, 1993; Eid, 2002; Fowler, 2007; Aremu, 2011).

Aim of the study

Several studies have been carried out on DAs with different foci. While such scholars as Al-Ali (2005), Fernandez (2006/2007), and Marzol (2006) have explored the figurative language of DAs, others like Booth (2002), Eid (2000), and Nwoye (1992, 1993, 2007) have concentrated on the rhetorical orientation of the DA genre and other contextual factors that influence the language of the DA genre. Besides, some studies from sub-Saharan Africa such as Matiki (2001), Bonsu (2002, 2007), Nwoye (2007), and Aremu (2011) have examined various aspects of DAs, from its content to advertising-like features. Given the view that a DA is a socio-cultural text, this study seeks to add to the existing scholarship on DAs from Africa, in particular, and those from other parts of the world, in general, to ascertain the extent to which the DA genre in Ghana is influenced by such specific socio-cultural factors as age, gender, and socio-economic status. The specific questions that guide the present study are the following:

1) How does the gender of the deceased influence the language of death announcements in Ghanaian newspapers?
2) How does the age of the deceased influence the language of death announcements in Ghanaian newspapers?
3) What role does the status of the deceased play in the language of death announcements in Ghanaian newspapers?

PREVIOUS STUDIES ON DEATH ANNOUNCEMENTS

This section reviews previous studies on DAs, by focusing on three pertinent issues such as schematic structure, linguistic/literary resources, and some contextual variables on that influence the writing of DAs/obituaries in order to establish the niche for the present study.

Structure of DAs

The structure of DAs has been given attention in literature by some researchers (Al-Ali, 2005; Watson, 2008; Harold et al., 2009; Afful, 2012). These studies show how different socio-cultural contexts influence the structure of DAs.

In particular, Al-Ali (2005) identified nine moves in two quite different, but related, types of DAs (the obituary and the martyr's wedding). This move-pattern contrasts with those of Afful (2012) eight-move pattern and the corresponding lexicon-grammatical resources identified. The present study observed that DAs in the data set comprised seven moves. The DA genre in Ghana has five core moves: caption, a list of key members of the deceased's family and clan as well as organizations to which the deceased might have belonged, a profile of the deceased, the arrangement of the funeral activities, and the second list of family members only. There were two optional moves: prescription of attire and extension of invitation. Prescription of attire could sometimes be placed anywhere in the DA but the extension of invitation, when present, always signalled the end of the DA.

In western society, Watson (2008) and Harold et al. (2009) allude to a different number of moves in the writing of obituaries. Watson discusses, what is referred to as, four steps or in the context of the present study, moves. The first, introduction, comprises the name, age, date of death, place of death and course of death. The second move, biography, comprises the bio-data of the deceased: Information like parents, organizations in which the deceased were active, things they enjoyed doing, and the significant challenges they faced. The third is the list of surviving relatives. The final move is categorized as "additional information", which includes place and time of wake (optional) and addresses of where donations, condolences, and gifts can be sent. Harold et al. (2009) present five issues that obituary writers utilize. The first is "announcement", which comprises two basic pieces of information: name of the deceased and cause of death. The second issue, biographical information, includes information like date and place of birth, schools attended, notable awards received, and important hobbies. The next issue is what Harold et al. (2009) call "survivor information". This includes people who survive or share in the inheritance of the deceased. Deceased relatives appear the last in this list, and their names are preceded by "the late". Next is "scheduled ceremonies" – a note on where and when important ceremonies such as wake, graveside burials, and memorial services will take place. The last issue is a note on where donations can be made.

It is clear from the reviewed literature that the DA has a schematic structure, regardless of its geographical setting. This schematic structure is encoded through specific linguistic and literary features. In the next section, some studies were reviewed to highlight these features.

Literary and linguistic devices in DAs

The extant literature reveals that DAs constitute a fertile

ground for the use of linguistic and literary devices (Fernandez, 2006/2007; Rubinstein, 2007; Bressler, 2009; Nelson, 2009; Aremu, 2011) in different settings.

Fernandez's (2006, 2007) work identified figurative devices such as metaphors, hyperbole, positively and negatively loaded words, on the one hand, and mitigating apology expressions and rhetorical questions and second person invocations on the other. He established, from the 257 Victorian obituaries collected, that metaphors are the most dominant of the literary devices. He added that metaphors portray death as a journey, loss, joyful life, rest, reward and as the end to life. The use of these literary devices, he concluded, was to make obituaries more emotive. Rubinstein (2007) studied DAs from Jewish holy texts and identified two classes of descriptive phrases, which, to him, appeared rather dramatic and florid. One class of such phrases was used to display the social standing of the deceased whereas the other described the causes of death. Phrases like 'pillar of the temple', 'light of Israel', ' leader of Lebanon', 'captain of the army of the kingdom of Torah' and others were used to refer to Torah sages (religious leaders). Phrases like 'suddenly departed', 'dived into tremendous waters' and 'snatched away' were used. Nelson (2009) argued that euphemisms are unnecessary and even disrespectful to human life that was lost. Nelson held that phrases such as 'passed away', 'called home', and 'went to his rest' only assuage the pain that is associated with death.

The use of language in obituaries in Anglo-American contexts provides further interesting findings. Bressler (2009) found the language of British obituaries saucy and sarcastic, depending on the writer's mood. He realized that written in the form of storytelling, obituaries were not entirely sympathetic; rather, they stated the mere facts about the deceased. The probable reason was the outbreak of civil wars, which increased the number of deaths and gave no room for obituaries to be embellished with many figurative devices. On the other hand, Deaton (2009) and Gorshon (2009) noticed that Irish and American obituaries shared a lot in common regarding linguistic devices used in them. They held that adjectival and adverbial phrases like 'treasured', 'unexpected', 'peacefully' and 'sadly missed', which dominated the obituaries, rendered them emotionally appealing.

Studies on DAs in Africa (Alali, 1993; Alali and Adjaye, 1998; Matiki, 2001; Bonsu, 2002, 2007; Nwoye, 2007; Ondimu, 2014) have tended to share some similarities in terms of the language and figures of speech used to reflect the African and Arabic cosmology. Specifically, Aremu draws attention to the dominant use of euphemisms and metaphor in the language of DAs in Nigeria while also mentioning linguistic resources such as lexical borrowing, code-switching, idiomatic expressions, and hedges. Alali and Adjaye (1998) focus on personification in Ghanaian Das is insightful in uncovering six thematic expressions about death and dying. Close

to the present study, Ondimu (2014) research underscores the use of language in the writing of obituaries in Kenya. While Afreh and Musa (2015) took a rhetorical approach, Oppong-Asare and Forson (2015) take a more pragmatic approach, although the cultural context remains unarguably the same.

Social variables and DAs

Death announcements are interesting for their underpinning social variable. In the third strand of a review of the literature, specific variables such as status and gender were highlighted, given their relevance to the present study.

Nwoye (2007), studying DAs in Nigeria, considered how the status of the deceased influences how his or her death is announced. He established the fact that socio-economic status of not only the deceased but also his or her survivors greatly influenced how Nigerian obituaries were written. He observed that this influence manifests in terms of number of words, use of photographs, position in the newspaper and the frequency of appearance in one or more newspapers. Nwoye's findings, however, conflict with that of Deaton (2009), who found that American obituaries, during the outbreak of civil wars, did not display socio-economic worth. Aremu (2011) adopts a more socio-pragmatic approach by employing tools such as mutual contextual beliefs, presupposition, and politeness principles in investigating obituary announcements from eight Nigerian newspapers.

Besides status, some scholars have identified gender as one key factor that influences the writing of DAs. From the Jewish holy texts, Rubinstein (2009) observed that some phrases of honour were restricted to men whereas their female counterparts were described by phrases that lacked such flavour. One striking feature in Rubinstein's study is that whereas phrases like "of blessed memory" or "of pious memory" followed males' names, females had only "may she rest in peace" following their names. Eid (2000) and Booth (2002) also observed that men's full names were more frequently mentioned than their women counterparts were and men were identified based on their accomplishments while women were portrayed in their domestic roles as wives, mothers, and daughters.

Clearly, DAs are loaded with cultural significance. Using 200 DAs randomly collected from two Jordanian newspapers, Al-Ali's (2005) study reflect socio-cultural norms, beliefs, and practices of the Arabic people. Al-Ali observes one type of DA that underscores the basic role of communicating death while the second category, which he called 'martyr's wedding', celebrates an unusual death by promoting the deceased's status and communicating a feeling of pride and honour on the part of the announcer. Bonsu (2007) agrees that obituaries are cultural texts that appropriate social symbols to

facilitate the presentation of the dead. This view is largely shared by McNeill (2004) and Aremu (2011). In particular, Aremu's work highlights the Islamic and Yoruba cosmological beliefs in the Nigerian socio-cultural setting. Alali (1994) examines the obituary and in-memoriam advertisements in Nigerian newspapers to determine the dimensions of content used to manage grief. The dimensions of content in the obituary and in-memoriam advertisements of Nigerian newspapers are a specific cultural behaviour of people who exhibit a significant degree of similarity in the management of grief.

A further set of studies on death announcements has drawn attention to their implication for genealogy, ideology, and personal and social identities. According to Rajula (2008) and Harold et al. (2009), genealogists, especially, stand to greatly benefit from DAs as they argue that the information in DAs serves as a main research tool for the family tree. Lawuyi (1991) identified obituaries as a socially legitimized advertisement of deceased and bereaved persons, often built on the aspirational rather than the identities of the people in the text. An obituary's ability to bridge the gap between actual and aspirational identities relies on the fact that the texts are often written by people other than the deceased and are imbued with the personal and social identities of both the bereaved family and the deceased. Bonsu (2002) suggests obituaries have advertising-like features that allow them to be used as vehicles for the negotiations of social identities for the deceased and the bereaved further takes up this concern with identity construction.

The present study, which is conducted in Ghana, can be said to be similar to those previous studies by Alali (1993), Alali and Adjaye (1998), Nwoye (1992, 2007), Bonsu (2002), Matiki (2001), Aremu (2011), Manieson (2014), and Igene (2007), which were conducted in sub-Saharan Africa. Of all these studies conducted in Africa south of the Sahara, it is Igene's work, which adopts a semiotic approach. Nonetheless, these studies do not embark on an explicit sociolinguistic study, as the present study aims to do, although they touch on the 'African experience' of DAs in terms of the prominence that is paid to it. Although Bonsu (2002), Afful (2012), Manieson (2014), Afreh and Musa (2015), as well as Oppong-Asare and Forson (2015) are conducted in the same geographical area (that is, Ghana), they have different foci. The point of departure for the present study is its cultural significance as mediated through specific sociological variables such as age, gender, and status.

METHODOLOGY

This section first describes the social context of the study, followed by a description of the data source and data collection procedures adopted in the study. The analytical framework used in the study is also highlighted.

The social context of the study

The present study draws its data from Ghana as the geographical region and specific social practices and constraints that give rise to the DA genre. Comprehensive knowledge of the occasion of which DAs are a part that greatly affects their construction and interpretation.

Conventionally, ceremony announcements, in general, have been overtly used in various forms, including Ghanaian newspapers and recently more modern technological affordances such as Facebook and WhatsApp. These announcements appear to represent related genres in terms of their schematic structure and communicative purposes. To illustrate the relationship among ceremony announcement genres in Ghanaian society is to posit these types of genre at various levels of generality. At a fairly high level of generalization, it is possible to think of 'ceremony announcements', which may be thought of as subsuming related genres as they can be identified in terms of having a common communicative purpose of informing potential recipients about an event.

We can further distinguish sad ceremonies such as 'obituary announcements' from happy ceremonies such as 'wedding celebrations' and 'naming ceremonies'. Each of these genres has a specific communicative purpose. In the case of sad occasions, exemplified by DAs, newspapers carry many each day in Ghana; but as Manieson (2014) points out, society presents this news to sympathizers by several ways. Moreover, in several ethnolinguistic communities in Ghana, after the death of a person, the family members of the deceased usually meet at either the house of the deceased or an agreed place at the behest of the head of family of the deceased to decide on the dates for the burial and funeral arrangements of the deceased. Though this meeting was originally meant for a few members of the deceased's family, in recent times, it has become a big event, which ends with the sharing of food and drinks, thus ironically suggesting that death is a celebration of life. In Ghana, when an important public figure or a politician passes on, the family of the deceased, regardless of the distance, will travel to the seat of government in Accra (the capital city) to announce the death to the President of the country.

Sources of data

The major data source considered for this research is a collection of 636 death announcements (DAs) published in three leading Ghanaian newspapers: the *Daily Graphic*, *Ghanaian Times*, and *Mirror*. These were collected from January to June of 2009. Of the 636 DAs, 421 (66%) were obtained from the periodical section of the University of Cape Coast Main Library; 118 (19%) were obtained from the Department of English Library; the remaining 97 (15%) were obtained from individuals. The Table 1 shows the monthly distributions of DAs published in the *DG*, *GT* and *M* respectively during the first half of 2009.

As can be seen from Table 1, 354, which constitute 55% of the DAs, was recorded by the *DG*. The *GT* recorded an average number of 183 (29%) DAs whereas the *M* recorded the least number of 99 (16%) DAs. The *DG* recorded the highest percentage of the entire DAs collected because it was the major source of data considered for this study. Additionally, June recorded the highest number of 128, forming 20% of the total number of newspapers.

Sampling and data collection procedure

A month was used in the data collection with assistance offered by an attendant at the Periodical Section of the University of Cape Coast Library. The sample target for the study was all DAs

Table 1. Distribution of DAs in three newspapers.

Month	Daily graphic	Ghanaian times	Mirror	Total
January	54	20	13	**87**
February	63	34	16	**113**
March	57	39	21	**117**
April	47	29	11	**87**
May	57	30	17	**104**
June	76	31	21	**128**
Total	354	183	99	636

Table 2. DAs and age in three Ghanaian newspapers.

Month/Papers	Age of the deceased						
	11-20	21-40	41-60	61-80	81-100	100+	Total
Jan	1	11	21	40	13	1	87
Feb	0	23	40	39	10	1	113
Mar	1	15	27	47	24	3	117
Apr	0	12	21	44	13	0	87
May	0	9	30	45	19	1	104
Jun	1	11	39	58	18	0	128
Total	3	81	178	273	95	6	636

published in Ghanaian newspapers. However, using convenience sampling, I selected only three newspapers, namely the *DG, GT* and *M* from January to June 2009 on the recommendation of academics and experts in media studies. The selection was also based on their popularity; that is, they among the widest circulating newspapers in Ghana. The *DG* was chosen among over sixty newspapers (both public and private) in Ghana to ensure reliability. This is because besides being the major public newspaper in the country, the *DG* does regular daily publications of DAs. However, others (DAs) were collected from the *GT* and *M,* which do (but not regularly) publish DAs, to complement the major source. Six hundred and thirty six DAs was obtained from that period's publications: *DG* (354), *GT* (183) and *M* (99), ensuring a manageable and recent data set for the study.

Methods of data analysis

This study, like earlier studies such as Al-Ali (2005), Fernandez (2006/2007), and Marzol (2006), found both quantitative and qualitative content analysis methods of research very useful. The former enabled the researcher to present figures and facts in tables and other diagrams upon close reading in order to aid understanding. The latter, on the other hand, aided the researcher in explaining the factors that influenced the various facts obtained. Finally, the study also drew on the multi-modality method by Hodge and Kress (1988), which considers semiotic devices such as space, colour, and size in understanding texts.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section discusses the findings against the backdrop

of the three research questions. Specifically, it discusses the data regarding the extent to which age, gender, and status affect the writing of DAs in Ghana, a sub-Saharan African context.

DAs and age

The analysis of the data clearly showed that age affects the writing of DAs in Ghana. This is seen in the areas of captions, prescription of attire and length of the announcement. Table 2 presents the distribution of DAs (in terms of the age of the deceased) in the *DG*, *GT,* and *M* respectively. The ranges below are chosen to aid organization of the data.

As can be seen from Table 2, Ghanaians who die more often range from 61 to 80 years. It may be concluded that neither teenagers between 11 and 20 years do not often die nor their deaths are not often announced in newspapers.

In Table 3, the captions are distributed along three age parameters, which are youth (19-39), adulthood (40-69) and old age (70+). These three age parameters were adopted in order to organize the data and aid discussion easily.

A total of 21different captions for DAs were identified. It is important to note that the captions ranged from words like "transition" and "obituary" to sentences like "He has passed on." and "His glory has come." "Transition",

Table 3. Captions of the DAs and age.

Youth(19-39)	Frequency	Adulthood (40-69)	Frequency	Old age (70+)	Frequency
Transition	21	Transition	15	Transition	8
Obituary	18	Obituary	12	Obituary	6
Funeral Announcement	19	Funeral Ann	23	Funeral announcement	4
He has passed on	1	He has passed on	1	He has passed on	1
What a shock	5	Call to Glory	32	Call to Glory	21
Gone too soon	19	Called to Glory	10	Called to Glory	7
		Gone too soon	2	Glorious home call	56
		Eternal Rest	7	His glory has come-	1
		A life well lived	1	At rest-	87
		A noble transition	5	Inna Lilahi Wiana Illahim Rajium	1
		Call to eternity	35	Royal fare well-	1
		Home call	20	Home call-	78
		Celebration of life	2	Celebration of life-	74
		Fare thee well	1		
		Rest in Peace	**8**		

"Obituary", "Funeral Announcement", and "He has passed on" were common to all three age groups. Such captions do not carry connotations (extra meanings) apart from announcing death. Hence, they could be used for a deceased of any age group. For instance, *Ebenezer Kodjo Baapeng, Faustina Odamtten* and *Janet Adjei* of 31, 69 and 84 years respectively had their deaths announced in the January edition of the *DG* and captioned "Transition" respectively. In addition, *Efua Kobi Andoh* (25 years), *Thomas Benjamin* (53 years) and *Mary Amponsah* (85 years) had their DAs captioned "Funeral announcement" respectively. On the other hand, "Call to Glory", "Celebration of Life", and "Home Call" were common to only adulthood and old age, implying that such captions are not normally used for people below 40 years. "Call to Glory" has a religious connotation of a person being called into God's glory whereas "Home Call" implies the person being called to a ''second'' home of ancestors. For example *Maame Ama Arhinfoa* (80 years) and *Nana Kwaw Kutruku* (73 years), whose deaths were announced in the January edition of the *DG*, had the announcements captioned "Home Call". This same caption would have been generally inappropriate to refer to people within range 19 to 31.

Most of the members in the first column often die childless, and childlessness is an impediment to an African being recognized as an ancestor. Here, they (teenagers and those without children) could not have been said to have been "called home". "What a shock'' and ''Gone too soon'' are, however, considered as fitting captions for the youth and early adulthood. The implication is that such deceased are considered too young to die. For instance, *Gifty Gyepi-Garbrah* (25 years), *Angela Owusuwaa Antwi* (21 years) and Albert Suronipa (19 years) in the June edition of the *DG* all had their DAs captioned "What a Shock''. Their deaths at such tender ages come rather as a shock; hence, those captions.

''At Rest'' and ''Celebration of Life'' were mostly used for the aged. These persons had lived long enough, and their death at those ages was not saddening but rather considered a source of the celebration of lives long lived. Thus, similar to earlier studies by Fernandez (2007) and Rubinstein (2007) which found Victorian and Jewish obituaries respectively as figurative in nature, the current study shows that Ghanaian DAs equally employ figurative language, especially in captions for the aged. An unpleasant phenomenon, death is embellished in a language that soothes the harshness and pain it results in, especially when announcing the death of old people. Clearly, the variety of headings apart from "obituary" and "transition" in our data set provides a major source of insight into the perceptions of death and dying in the Ghanaian society.

To add to the above, age also influenced the presentation of DAs in one significant way. This was seen in the prescription of attires for mourners. In Africa, in general, and Ghana, in particular, black and red are colours used for mourning. Yet, the attire for burial and thanksgiving services in connection with DAs was prescribed as though sympathizers were unaware of colours associated with funerals. White was exclusively prescribed in a DA of a female of 102 years whereas black was exclusively prescribed in a DA of students of 19 and 20 years. In the latter case above, black was used to depict the intensity of the loss (of such young life) whereas white depicted a victorious life lived. In fact, all the five Das which fell under age 100+ in Table 2

prescribed white as the exclusive colour of clothing for those funerals.

Furthermore, age influenced the text lengths of the various DAs. The aged, for instance, had their DAs comprising greater numbers of survivors, thus rendering them longer than the DAs of the youth. In one DA involving *Jonathan Kodzo Agbekoenyega*, the list of his survivors numbered 212, making the list the lengthiest in the data set. In fact, because of the practice of the extended family system in Ghana and few cases of advance preparation of a will, almost everybody forming part of a deceased's family tree is mentioned as part of the survivors, making the DA usually lengthy. This confirms the findings of Marzol (2006), which noted the list of family members as dominating British obituaries. While this observation is valid, it is possible that a deceased who was 70 years and above may not have a long DA, as having a long DA means paying more for the more space that the entire DA will occupy in a newspaper and not all families can afford the cost of publishing such a long list.

Further, the list of survivors in our data set usually comprises children, grandchildren, great-grandchildren, nephews and nieces, cousins, uncles and aunts. These tall lists highlight social factors (to be discussed in the next section) other than the age of the deceased. This is because there were similar cases where instead of listing the survivors one-by-one, total figures were rather used to refer to their numbers, as seen in *Madam Eunice Helena Afua Boakye* (75 years) and *Madam Maria Frances Ama Fynn* (95 years) who had their grandchildren and great grandchildren represented by figures. If individuals' names had been written, the lengths of the two DAs would have been extended. This would then have had implication for the cost of the DA. Another way of explaining the use of numbers for the grandchildren and not listing their names whiles mentioning the names of cousins, nephews, nieces might be that some members of the extended family could be expected to raise questions about the appropriateness of the inclusion or exclusion of specific names.

Finally, there is a relationship between age and the choice and number of photographs. Even though there were instances where the deceased's photographs did not tally with their ages, 90% of the photos appeared to depict the ages of the deceased. In some cases, two (and, in very rare cases), three photographs of the deceased were found in the DAs. One was taken in the early stage of the deceased's life while the other was taken while the deceased was at an advanced age. It is expected that such photographs will have been carefully chosen to present the deceased in his or best appearance and to make it easier for readers to identify them. In very few cases, the obituary of a teenager or a twenty-year-old university student had two photographs, one slightly more recent than the other.

DAs and gender

Gender is another variable that influenced the writing of DAs. This influence came in two main respects: writing of the deceased's name and allocation of space for the DA. Table 3 shows the distribution of DA in terms of gender in the data.

Three hundred and eighty-nine (61%) announced the deaths of males as against 247 (39%) which announced the deaths of females (Table 4). This disparity in male and female DA figures confirms the findings of Moses (1994) who found 60% of the Egyptian obituaries studied announce the deaths of males. The possible interpretation is that either males die more often than females or the deaths of females are not often announced in newspapers.

Gender influenced the presentation of DAs in a significant way in the present data set. Generally, men were described by their own achievements, as shown in the titles of all kinds. Out of the 389 male DAs, 209 (54%) described the males by their accomplishments shown in a title or cluster of titles. On the other hand, only 105 (42%) out of the 247 females DAs described the females by their accomplishments. Females were mainly portrayed as daughters, sisters or wives. Titles ranged from 'Mr.' or 'Madam' to 'Professor Emeritus' while professions included managing directors, educationists, lawyers, doctors and political heads for both genders, where relevant. Multiple professions as in the following described men:

1) *Hon*. Agyei Kofi Larbi *(legal practitioner and former MP)*
2) Thomas Benjamin (*former Ambassador to Denmark and a retired educationist*)
3) *ACP* Francis Anim-Addo (*former commander of police and formerly of the Bank of Ghana*)

As already indicated females on the other hand were depicted mainly as wives, daughters or linked to other distant relations, as shown in the following:

1) Efua Kobi Andoh *(Mrs),* devoted wife, loving mother and blessed sister
2) Mary Amponsah, *widow of the late Rev. John Amponsah*
3) Faustina Adamtteh *(Mrs)*
4) Abena Konduah *(daughter of Barrister Konduah)*

The above claims are based on the fact that out of the 247 DAs of females, only 97 (39%) stated the women's professions and other achievements. For the male counterparts, 210 (constituting 54%) out of the 389 announcements identified the deceased by one achievement or the other.

The instances above confirm the fact that gender plays an important role in the writing of DAs. Rubinstein (2007)

Table 4. DAs and gender in the DG.

Month	Male frequency	Female frequency	Total frequency
Jan	52	35	87
Feb	70	43	113
Mar	76	41	117
Apr	54	33	87
May	65	39	104
June	72	56	128
Total	389 (59%)	247 (41%)	636 (100%)

and Eid (2000) shared similar views when they found out that Jewish and Egyptian obituaries respectively described men mainly by their accomplishments as against women who were portrayed as wives or daughters.

DAs and status

The final contextual variable that greatly influences how DAs in Ghana are written is status. Status was considered from social, economic, religious, and political angles. It was reflected in the following ways: a) Caption of the DA b) Profile of the deceased c) Choice of photograph d) Space occupied by the DA and e) Frequency of appearance.

Status highly affected the captioning of the DAs. As earlier noted in Table 2, some captions were common to the aged (70+), but it is interesting to know that such captions as "Celebration of Life", "Call to Glory", "A Life Well Lived" were also used for people below 70. There were, at least, 70 (11%) of such cases. One significant caption that was exclusively used for certain royal figures (kings and queens) was "Royal Farewell", portraying that such people belonged to royal families. "Call to Glory" has a religious connotation of a person being called into God's glory; it was mostly used for religious personalities, especially those who belonged to the clergy in Christendom or who held some leadership positions in churches. The other implication is that the same caption was used to highlight the "glorious" lives led by some personalities who were outstanding socially, economically or politically and who rendered humanitarian services when alive. For instance, "Call to Glory" was used for the following:

1) *Apostle* Peter Bentil
2) *Rev.* Mrs. Mary Akpabey
3) *ACP* Mary Amponsah
4) Hon. Adjei Kofi Larbie (Legal Practitioner and former MP)

Furthermore, "Celebration of Life" was used for such

public figures as barristers, medical doctors, educationists, philanthropists, and political figures to highlight the key roles they had played in society. Their lives were, therefore, worth celebrating.

The next way status influenced the writing of the DAs was in the writing of the deceased's name. Seventy percent of the DAs highlighted the surnames or family names, rather than the entire names of the deceased. This was portrayed in the form of bolding, indenting and capitalizing. It may be that aside from making the DAs legible, families put a premium on the family's name in order to display their worth and attract more sympathizers to the funeral. In addition, the names were written in certain unique ways. Three hundred and sixty-one (over 50%) of the entire DAs had the names of the deceased described in unique ways. Some people had their names preceded by titles or followed by professions, as in:

1) *Barima* Dankwah Boni II, *Abompihene (retired general manager of A.D.B and operations manager of SSNIT).*
2) Osei Yaw *(educationist and philanthropist)*.
3) Janet Hellen Abena Saka Agyei (*social welfare officer and deputy general secretary of Progress Party*).
4) *Rev.* Abraham Yawson who slept in the Lord
Others had their names described by family ties as in:
5) David Adom (*nephew of the late Krobo Edusei*)
6) Mary Amponsah (*wife of the late Rev. Amponsah*)
7) Abena Konduah (*daughter of Barrister Konduah*)

This means that *Krobo Edusei, Rev Amponsah*, and *Barrister Konduah* may have been important personalities in the country or community. Indeed, Krobo Edusei was a key minister and a close confidante of the first president of Ghana, Dr. Kwame Nkrumah. Some people also had their names followed by their places of death as shown below:

1) Daniel Osei (*who died in Carolina*)
2) Mrs. Janet Atiemo *(who died in Korle Bu)*
3) *Hon.* Agyei Kofi Larbi (*legal practitioner and former M.P. who passed away in the UK*)
4) *ACP* Ama Amponsah (*who died in Korle Bu*)
5) *Barrister* Thomas Benjamin (*formerly of the Bank of*

Ghana) who died in the US
6) Francis Anim-Addo *(former ambassador to Denmark who died in the UK)*

The places where the death of people occurred represent an opportunity to show the status of the deceased since not everyone is able to receive medical treatment at such high-profile health facilities in the country as SSNIT Hospital, Komfo Anokye Teaching Hospital, Korle Bu Teaching Hospital or at such places as the UK or the USA. The references to such foreign places as Carolina in the USA and the UK mean that the deceased may have sought medical treatment there. Thus, the examples above portrayed the people's social, political, religious and even economic status and this shows that DAs constitute a breeding ground for displaying socio-economic worth.

In addition, status affected the beginnings of most of the announcements, the second move. In a number of cases, the family names were fronted, but in others, certain key members of the family were listed, as in the below example:

1) The families of *Koomson* and *Adusei* wish to announce the death of …
2) The *Asona* and *Agona* clans of …

However, 497 (78%) DAs listed the individual members of the families. This prominence placed on family or clan names rather than individuals' names highlights the significance of the family institution in Ghana. It also depicts the African spirit of communalism, rather than individualism.

The choice of photographs was also influenced by status. Most of the DAs had photographs depicting the professions of the deceased. Royal figures, for example, were clad in various regalia. Ministers of religion were in robes and collars. Lawyers, doctors, and judges are depicted with their photos. In some cases, the dead were described as housewives and presented in their photographs as such. As a matter of fact, 369 (58%) DAs included photographs that depicted the various professions of the deceased. In a number of cases, for a particular DA, there were three photographs, showing the deceased in three different stages of her life. This might have been done where the deceased was old, to assist readers to be able to identify the dead.

Conclusion and implications

The main objective of this research was to explore the socio-cultural perspectives that underpin the construction of DAs in Ghana. Six hundred and thirty-six DAs were collected from three leading public newspapers in Ghana. Using a qualitative and quantitative content analysis together with a semiotic approach, the study took account of three contextual variables namely age, gender, and socio-economic status.

This research indicated that gender influences the DA genre in Ghana, similar to Marzol's (2006) work. The DAs of males differed in two major ways from that of females. First, whereas males were described by their accomplishments, females were often portrayed as wives, mothers and daughters; that is, in their private capacities. Second, the research showed that the age of the deceased matters a lot in the construction of DAs in Ghana. In addition to influencing the choice of caption, it affects the text length of the DA genre. The DAs of the deceased aged 70 years and above are generally longer than the DA of people around 50 years and below. The reason is that most members of the latter group tend to have smaller numbers of "primary" family members, which eventually reduce the lists of family members. Members of the former group (who are an older generation) mostly have more family members, rendering the number of their survivors far larger. The study further revealed that the socio-economic status of either the deceased or his or her family influences the choice of caption, profile of the deceased and space covered in the newspaper. This finding does not only support the findings of Fernandez (2007) but also confirms the view that the higher the deceased's socio-economic status, the more sophisticated the DA in respect of the profile of the deceased. Clearly, as shown in other previous studies (Al-Ali, 2005; Fernandez, 2007; and Harold *et al.*, 2009), the DAs do more than just announce death. It reflects the socio-cultural norms, beliefs, and practices of Ghanaians. DAs are a system of verbal and non-verbal signs, which communicate important social, cultural, and religious elements that shape the worldview about living, death and dying in the Ghanaian society.

Based on the findings discussed above, the present study has two implications. In terms of contributions to scholarship, this study has demonstrated that besides announcing the death and burial arrangements of the dead, DAs in Ghana, like others in different settings, have socio-cultural significance (Matiki, 2001; Bonsu, 2002; Aremu, 2011; Ondimu, 2014). The findings confirm the findings of earlier studies (Marks and Piggee, 1998) regarding the influence of key sociological variables such as age, gender, and socio-economic status in the construction and presentation of DAs. Thus, the study confirms the view that how the living interprets and responds to death and how it is presented publicly socially and culturally. The study shows that the DA genre goes beyond the basic function of announcing death to serve as a means of showcasing family worth and the influence of those identified sociological variables. The Ghanaian society holds important the following: offspring, success, achievements, wealth and influence. The quality of life of the deceased is assessed by the way he/she has replicated himself in his offspring

– children and grandchildren. The important factors here are the number of children and grandchildren, their educational qualifications, their social/career status, and their places of abode, which are parameters to measure their success. The second implication relates to the public who read DAs. In the first place, anyone who is given the task of writing a DA in Ghana needs to be guided, in his or choice of linguistic items, by sociological factors such as age, gender, socio-economic status of not just the deceased but, in some cases, of the bereaved family. In other words, the DAs are a response to societal expectations.

These findings and implications notwithstanding, the study suggests further areas for research. Given that the data source focused on data from public newspapers, it will be interesting to see whether the same findings can be obtained when the data are selected from private newspapers. Further research could also seek data from the DAs on television as increasingly some television stations in Ghana present DAs during their transmission. A more coherent multimodal theory is required to fully explore DAs to capture their linguistic and non-linguistic features in both Ghana and elsewhere.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The author has not declared any conflict of interests.

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