

Broadsheet obituaries - barometer and paragon of sociolinguistic changes

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Abstract

The present paper deals with analyzing some sociolinguistic aspects of modern broadsheet obituaries. The following proposition acts as a hypothesis of the research- broadsheet obituaries reflect with exactitude two prevailing trends of the modern world - cultural uniformity and cultural diversity, plus they serve as a paragon of the genre. Methods essential for sociolinguistic research, in particular, for Ethnography of Communication and Discourse Analysis have been considered most relevant for proving the above hypothesis. An online version of the youngest, and the widely-acclaimed British broadsheet - The Independent - was selected for observation and qualitative and quantitative analyses.

Obituaries since they were born as a popular feature of newspapers have mirrored cultures worldwide, they have revealed unwittingly what attitudes a certain nation has towards death and life. However, having undergone significant alterations, British obituaries emerged with a cult status focusing on life and neglecting death.

The Independent obituary research unfolded the following: the online version of the newspaper contains edited obituaries rejecting family ones and thus facilitating their homogeneity. Persons worth writing obituaries about are selected thoroughly, leading among them are celebrities - arts, sports people, then come politicians, scientists, etc. These obituaries highlight professional accomplishments more than personal traits. With all the resources available-layout, visual aspect, headline, etc. editors attempt to make obituaries analogous to articles from other sections of the paper. By leaving out religious-, culture-, and nation-specific aspects these obituaries no longer serve as detectors of culture. Their uniformity appeals to a cosmopolitan reader and sets a matrix for the global village citizens- a matrix of life-style and achievements. However, by devoting 50 percent of obituaries to persons of other nationalities rather than to the British editors respond to another dominant trend – cultural diversity - and offer a glimpse of all cultures as a mosaic.

Technically streamlined, linguistically elaborate, socially ever-updated, The Independent obituaries present a template for obituary writers worldwide.

Key words: discourse analysis, ethnography of communication, obituaries, sociolinguistics

1. Introduction

Death, like birth, is a phenomenon which knows no national boundaries unlike ceremonies, rituals and traditions associated with it. Death makes those alive reexamine their attitudes towards, judgments about the deceased. In most cultures humans view the dead keeping their negative opinions about a person to a minimum while magnifying his/her positive features. Death is a point in time from which on remembering those having passed away, paying tribute to them become crucial. For more or less civilized nations worldwide a universal way of realizing the above is writing an obituary.

Sociologists, anthropologists, linguists have extensively studied obituaries locally in as many languages as it is possible to better understand the cultural diversity worldwide.

However, in the globalized, increasingly homogeneous world obituaries have become less culturally charged. The trend falls under the category of cultural uniformity threatening to fade the patchwork of traditions, customs, and ethnicity. However, a recent tendency towards cultural diversity is emerging as a counterbalance to the former. Broadsheet obituaries embrace the latter trend as well.

The present article hypothesizes that obituaries of globally acclaimed British broadsheets serve as paragons of both culture-free and all-culture encompassing works of the genre. Moreover, they set standards elevating obituaries from bizarre notices to the refined art of journalism and of written discourse, in general.

2. Research method

The research is based on both quantitative and qualitative analyses of the target newspaper section, plus on a library research as a reliable source of information concerning obituaries, the history of obits and the genre development, a cultural kaleidoscope obituaries create all over the world.

The research is at the junction of Sociology and Sociolinguistics, namely Ethnography of Communication. Methods of Discourse Analysis and Critical Discourse Analysis are applied as they are most relevant for the media research.

Media discourse analysis represents the most topical field of written medium research as actual, most versatile alterations of linguistic nature originate in the media and social changes (new social trends, power relations, society structure, etc.) are reflected in it. Moreover, the mass media serves as a compass for further social changes. “Media texts constitute a sensitive barometer of socio-cultural change, and they should be seen as a valuable material for researching change” (Fairelough, 1995:52). “The view of discourse as the social construction of reality sees texts as communicative units which are embedded in social and cultural practices. The texts we write and speak both shape and are shaped by these practices. Discourse, then, is both shaped as well as shaping the world” (Paltridge, 2006:9).

The youngest broadsheet The Independent was selected for the research as its “youth” makes it more susceptible and sensitive to changes, both linguistic and social. 50 obituaries have been observed, studied and analyzed in detail (*The Independent*).

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3. The Independent Obituaries-cultural uniformity vs. cultural diversity

For more than 3 centuries obituaries in newspapers invoked awe and fascination among readers. Across cultures they have varied as much as nationalities do. They have mirrored beliefs, superstitions, and mentalities of nations worldwide, thus encoding and engendering them. Obituaries like litmus papers have revealed even the most primitive customs of nations which are hard to detect in other forms of written and spoken discourse. Hence, obituaries have evolved as one of the most exotic genres carrying significant social and linguistic messages.

“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” (Moses & Marelli, 2004:123).

Broadsheet obituaries have gone a long evolutionary way from birth as a genre through transformation, decline and revival, British ones experiencing a golden age at present. From brief notices they were reshaped into announcements with short biographies of the deceased. Later, however paradoxical, they acquired a status of entertainment in newly-opened coffee houses in the 18th century, and the renewal came after the fall at the end of the 20th century, and since the market-oriented press had to provide adequate supply for insatiable demand for sensationalism, obituaries have been skillfully used to serve the purpose (Fowler, 2007: 4-9). Thus, for seasoned journalists obituaries have become the most rewarding articles to do.

The advent of globalization set a handful of most powerful welfare states as epitomes for all the rest. There commenced in the global village a centripetal movement towards those in the limelight. As a consequence, homogenization of cultures has started at an accelerated rate.

Obituaries of the 21st century reflect attitudes, occupational trends, and lifestyles of the age. Quality papers eliminate culture-, nation-, and religion-specific features in their edited obituaries. Socially it is done as the papers are reader-oriented (potential readers, given the ubiquity of English and of online newspapers, range from Taiwanese English teachers to British Lords); thus, to retain an international status, topics must be made cosmopolitan.

With the emergence of other means of the media - TV, radio, online journalism - obituaries have naturally spread to them as well being re-moulded in a new mode.

The Independent is a relatively new, but globally acclaimed and influential source. Eid (2002: 108) writes that “the birth of *The Independent* newspaper in 1986 reinforced this rupture with the past” of obituaries and “that the current changes embrace transformations of both form and content”. Its online version has a separate section for obituaries alongside the following ones: World, Business, People, Science, Media, Education, etc. All the obituaries in *The Independent* are edited - staff-written, no family announcements or family obituaries. The paper publishes from 1 to 6 obituaries daily, though there are a few days a year without the dead to commemorate.

“The broadsheets draw 80-90 percent of readers from the middle class compared to 30% with the tabloids”(Tunstall, 1996:9). The statistics is especially noteworthy as the very middle class is the main promoter of change, both social and

linguistic, with their inclination to move upwards towards the upper class. Hence, the middle class sees in obituaries patterns of achievement, accomplishments, and success stories. The social class with its high degree of mental urbanization perceives both cultural homogeneity and cultural diversity of obituaries as a natural and positive trend of the 21st century.

Quality newspaper obituaries celebrate life neglecting death as the end, as if there is no demise, no sadness, no funeral, no fear, etc. The person concerned is depicted with positive vocabulary, epithets describing the deceased tend to be dynamic, persuasive, even provoking. It serves the purpose of not seeing death as something macabre and daunting. Broadsheet obituaries look death full in the face which is not typical for primitive societies. “The dread to look death full in the face is especially noteworthy in primitive societies in which the word associated with the taboo of death is believed to possess the same force as the taboo itself (Fernández, 2006:103)”. Linguistically it is realized through rejection of euphemistic expressions typical for culture-specific and old-time obituaries. Dread and fear of death and afterlife which are inherent in different religions or cultures account for the abundance of euphemisms and metaphors in obituaries of the past and of the local press in various countries. “The sentimentalization of death so characteristic of Victorian times provided a fertile soil for the flowering of metaphorical euphemistic language to conceptualize and verbalize the taboo of death. Indeed, there was a tendency to present elaborate and sentimental obituaries which commonly supposed exaggerated displays of grief and were supported by a considerable amount of poetic metaphors aiming at providing some sort of relief in the face of death. The great frequency if metaphorization proves that this device fits the purpose of euphemism particularly well” (Fernández, 2006: 124). Hence, not to confuse readers, editors have to observe the maxim of manner (avoid obscurity of expression, avoid ambiguity, be brief and orderly), and not to distract their audience, they have to homogenize obituaries by erasing vague expressions. Not a single synonym of the verb “to die” whether euphemistic or plain is used in the obituaries of *The Independent*. Thus, the straightforward “to die” deprives itself of the cloak of taboo which many cultures and hence, languages possess for the word.

The fact itself that the broadsheet publishes no family obituaries in forms of notices and announcements makes its obituaries culture-neutral. Edited obituaries are naturally, not artificially, sensible, not unduly sentimental, never pious, and linguistically plain. Starck (2006: 233-234) gives some advice on what not to say in obituaries. Writers have to avoid: a. redundant sensibility, b. unduly pious assurance, c. family trivia, d. after-life activity.

Any religious aspect, God, or any affiliation with religiousness is completely omitted in these obituaries. Secularism if it is not overtly proclaimed as an ideal, covertly it is acknowledged as such. “Today’s obituaries offer no theodicies (justifications of God) but they do supply “sociodicies” (justifications of society). The obituaries that obey the usual conventions are tiny, exemplary tales of our times. These narratives are expected to reveal the heroic individuals of our society, even accomplished observers of human societies take their distance from them and recognize the many possible hermeneutic layers beneath the surface”(Fowler, 2007: 18).

Which social groups, persons of which professions, jobs and occupations do obituaries highlight? Answers to the ques-

tion will reveal what priorities and preferences both readers and editors have, what achievement models are common, prestigious and paragonic in the modern world. Out of the 50 studied obituaries most -18 are written about art people, in the group singers prevail - 9, then come actors - 4, the rest include – a bassist, a bandleader, etc. The second place belongs to media representatives with 7 persons, and very close to them are sportsmen numbering 6, among sportsmen footballers prevail - 2, then come scientists and politicians with the joint place of 5 people, businesspersons total 3, those in minority include: a librarian, a criminal, a rabbi and even a princess. “This modern pattern culminated in the 2000–2001 obituaries, where obituaries for members of the dominated fraction — especially artists, actors, musicians and professionals — overtake those of the dominant fraction, particularly in *The Independent*, where they form 72 per cent, *Le Monde* (70%) and *The Guardian* (68%)” (Fowler, 2007:132).

Persons from the above spheres thoroughly selected by editors attract readers’ attention both when alive and posthumously. They create news, set a matrix for middle and lower classes, the matrix which leads to fame, success, celebrity, even notoriety. What absolutely dominates in the *Independent* obituaries is the very description of a career path of the deceased. Professional developments and achievements are the main axis around which a life-story of a person revolves. It is the main thread guaranteeing coherence of an article.

Words used to epithetize a person in the broadsheet obituaries tend to be mostly positive, but not exaggerated unlike obituaries of the past, they focus not on personal traits, but mainly on professional activities. Although obituary writers attempt to find emotion- and sentiment-sterile epithets, due to innate human nature, it seems unavoidable. Hence, a refined and elaborate set of epithets is chosen so that they make an impact of objectivity and truthfulness on a reader, e.g., *a leading feminist sociologist, a strong, caring woman, one of the most inspiring and original thinkers, most charismatic performers, a respected cheerleader, stunning looks, along with her poise and elegance, the primary legal philosopher of his generation, etc.* This colorful and descriptive language makes the discourse strong emphasizing great accomplishments of great people.

The quantitative research of the 50 obituaries confirmed that in them positive vocabulary (nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs and combinations of them) prevails. If the most frequent positive vs. negative words are selected intuitively and their number is counted in the target obituaries, the following picture is drawn:

The best-14, great-20/ greatest-6, good-50, well-56, superb-5, popular-17, successful-16, powerful-7, famous-6, wonderful-8, excellent-5, top-45, admired-3, generous-2, charm-3/ charming-2, charismatic-3, modest-2, prolific-4, generous-2, etc.

The worst-0, bad-4, badly-3, notorious-0, negative-1, criticised-0, unpleasant-1, provocative-1, terrible-0, vulgar-0, unkind-0, dull-0, dishonest-0, scandal / scandalous-0, etc.

In a particular obituary the proportion of words and word combinations with positive to negative connotations depends on how a person is viewed by the society or by the world community - an honored, a controversial or a notorious one. A person with a good reputation is rewarded with far more praising words than with critical ones (if any), in case of a controversial persona the trend is towards approximation of the amount of nice vs. unpleasant vocabulary and a notorious person is vir-

tually flooded with words revolving around hyperonyms with negative, daunting, shocking connotations, e.g., a highly honored person: 22 positive words and word combinations and 2 negative lexical units- *most prolific, most revered, to perform miracles, to star, destined for glory, to excel as a duo, record scorer, etc. vs. to languish, to lose one’s place*, from **Reg Jenkins obituary** (obit. 6); a controversial person: 11 positive against 10 negative words and word combinations- *important, a good producer, a key figure, the best, inspiration for unique records, superb, effectively do the work, a million seller, etc. vs. hooligans, to bluff, prostitutes, bored, lazy, alcoholic, etc.* and plus 3 words – *controversial, questionable, enigmatic* having a connotation of contentiousness as a person himself, from **Shadow Morton Obituary**(obit. 3); and a notorious person: 3 positive words and word combinations vs. 36 negative ones- *to dress well, happiest years, marvelous time vs. robbery(5 times), robber(4), arrest(2), gang(7), criminal (2), burglary, to sentence(2), infamy, smoking drugs, offence, a leading underworld figure, disastrous, jailed, jewel-thieving, etc.* from **Bruce Reynolds obituary** (obit. 4).

The overall dominance of the positive lexis should be taken for granted- it would be shocking and bizarre if editors equaled numbers of good vs. bad personalities.

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One of the attractive features of *The Independent* obituaries is quoting- quotes by either the departed or about him/ her made by others. Quotes relevantly characterize a person, they often equal their life mottos, substitute a writer’s judgments about the person which can hardly be devoid of subjectivity and aptly depict the dead, e.g., Another contemporary, the cabinet minister Jim Prior, confirmed it: “He was an eccentric schoolboy. He loved old books and watching cricket but not playing it: a thinker, not a doer.” **Lord Rees-Mogg obituary** (obit. 2). Letitia Baldrige had helped shape the Kennedys’ Camelot White House before she became a much-consulted etiquette expert, firmly telling an enquirer that she detested the clinking of glasses in a toast: “We do not clink, we approach.” **Letitia Baldrige obituary** (obit. 1).

Ethnographers and sociolinguists have many times meticulously studied obituaries in respect of gender representation as it is one of the powerful indicators of social equity of a community. “The relationship between language and gender equity in the obituaries can be placed within a contextual framework based in the (sociolinguistic) principle that language is a choice, and linguistic choices, like socio-cultural or political choices, not only reflect the context in which they are made but also serve to reproduce or change it” (Eid, 2002: 16).

The quantitative analysis of *The Independent* obituaries reveals the following: 18 percent of the obituaries studied are devoted to women, the rest to the men. The statistics negligibly differs from that of the recent past- 14-16 percent (Moses & Marelli, 2004:130).

The percentage above lends itself to contradicting conclusions. On the one hand, with more vigor and stamina to persevere and with no glass ceiling to prevent from promotion, males still eclipse females as achievers; on the other hand, even if more women compared with the past excel, editors cannot artificially equalize their number to that of men.

Structurally broadsheet obituaries slightly deviate for a conventional news story pattern. Coincidences include sub-headlines, under-photo captions, an inverted pyramid structure, article length, passage distribution, and its layout in general.

Although unlike other articles, obituaries at a glance, partly due to a psychological set of a reader, partly because of a photo with the deceased in some (not in most) cases in a static position with the most dignified appearance, plus a few old-time black and white photos, give an impression of stillness, serenity and lack of dynamism.

The above-mentioned slight difference is the fact that at the end of most obituaries there is given a very brief information about the departed in bold.

The inverted pyramid technique is one of the most characteristic features of both broadsheet and tabloid articles. The trend again reveals reader-orientedness of editors. Photos, headlines, captions and the first passages briefly, succinctly and concisely tell the story, thus informing readers whether or not to continue reading an article to the end.

The above-mentioned static photos mainly concern scientists, high officials, or senior citizens, in other cases photos which best illustrate professional lives of the departed are used, i.e. when performing for singers and actors, when mountaineering for alpinists, etc. To perfect a visual aspect very rarely, yet as a novelty, YouTube videos with a person's most prominent performance are inserted in an obituary. Such features make the layout of obituaries dynamic and least different from other sections of the paper.

The length of *The Independent* obituaries ranges from 300 to 2000 words. A clear-cut mechanism works here – the more significant, famous, popular a person was, the longer an obituary about him/her is and vice versa.

All the obituary headlines state the first names and surnames of the departed, they are followed by a colon, after which in most cases come either complete sentences or noun phrases. Sentences (which in about 40 percent of cases include relative clauses) and noun phrases briefly tell why a person was worth writing an obituary about, e.g., Jesse Hill, Jr.: Activist who worked in the civil rights movement with Martin Luther King (obit.7); Mike Hopkins: Oscar-winning sound editor who worked with Peter Jackson (obit.8); Fontella Bass: Singer famed for her powerful interpretation of the million-seller 'Rescue Me' (obit. 5).

In the age of paparazzi (a metaphor for highly market-driven sensationalism of the media) even posthumous intrusion into a human life is taken for granted by journalists and readers. The more cosmopolitan a reader is, the less he/she is embarrassed by scandals in obituaries. This is exactly how one of the fundamental culture-specific maxims of conversation - not to speak ill of the dead - is shattered. Thus, words highly charged with a connotation of notoriety, not very commonly but still, are present in the broadsheet obituaries, e.g., "Morton spent his money on drink and, if the story is to be believed, 24 prostitutes over four days" **Shadow Morton obituary (obit. 3)**. "Reynolds was sentenced to three years; once out he resumed his career and his expensive lifestyle, and eventually began planning the crime of the century" **Bruce Reynolds obituary (obit. 4)**.

In *The Independent* obituaries medical causes of death, purely biographical information, names of survivors are omitted wherever it is possible. To sum up, these obits highlight life and neglect death. "The best obituaries, after all, capture life, they are not about death" (Starck, 2006: 10). The *Independent* obituaries meet this criterion.

Online newspapers ingeniously use multimedia potential to illustrate lives of the departed, e.g., obituaries in pictures – a slide-show of a life-story with a brief description of it which

perfectly suits a modern human's clip-short attention span.

Researchers distinguish between two types of obituaries: performative obituaries (to transmit relevant details about death) and opinative obituaries (to produce a special effect on the reader by emphasizing the social status and the virtues of the deceased) (Fernández, 2006: 105-106). The *Independent* obituaries break the mould in that respect as well: they represent a hybrid of the two: being upgraded and tailor-made they appropriately perform both locutionary and perlocutionary functions.

Ubiquity of English, textbooks of English, high percentage of native English teachers (British, American, etc.) teaching non-natives have contributed to the spread of uniformity across the globe. Rules of etiquette from English textbooks taught in classrooms worldwide set predominantly British or American manners as an epitome of correct behavior. It naturally concerns expressing condolences as one of the most culture-specific speech acts and a phatic function of high importance. Knowing the above models many locally refuse to act traditionally, regard their customs as anachronisms. Acting in a civilized way they even urge their peers to join the homogeneous village of modern speakers.

Saville-Troike writes (2003: 4): "Complete escape from subjectivity is never possible because of our very nature as cultural animals". The proposition is true for broadsheet obituaries. However hard their authors attempt to minimize evidence of culture-belongedness, salient aspects of culture transformed and reshaped are still present in obituaries.

The two juxtaposed trends of the present era are cultural uniformity and cultural diversity. "At present the industrial society is transforming itself into the information society. In contrast to the industrial society's cultural uniformity, the information society's tendency to embrace cultural diversity is striking. Large-scale uniform ideologies and conceptions are being replaced by a broad range of highly specialized and internally diverse code and meaning systems. There is also a trend towards internalization of culture, which is clearly observable in the explosion of mass communication" (Jokein, 1994: 211).

Broadsheets being highly modernity-conscious could have nohow avoided the trend of cultural diversity as they are equipped with all the media for realizing it. The tendency is noticeable when observing their obituaries. This is a paradox itself that having rubbed out or rejected culture-specific features editors made obituaries blueprints of cultural uniformity; however, at the expense of devoting obituaries to persons of different nationalities, thus of cultures, they pay a tribute to cultural diversity as well. About 50 percent of their obituaries are written about the Non-British (24 out of the 50 obituaries studied by us are devoted to persons of other nationalities rather than British). It serves two purposes: on the one hand, editors meet requirements of the multinational audience not to be confined to the country borders; on the other hand, they draw a template for all the countries in the global village to be more open, tolerant and receptive to cultural diversity.

From sociolinguistic features of obituaries researchers can glean implicit ideologies underlying them. Such an analysis makes it evident which concept and issues are foregrounded and which are backgrounded by obituary writers. Hence, *The Independent* obituaries alongside their "peer" articles perform socially and politically important acts.

4. Conclusion

The research which focused on the sociolinguistic analysis of the British broadsheet— The Independent -resulted in the following conclusions:

The widely-acclaimed broadsheet represents an epitome of the genre, in general, and serves as a template of modern obituaries, in particular.

The broadsheet obituaries reflect with exactitude the two domineering and mutually complementing trends of the present era - cultural uniformity and cultural diversity. They, thus, comply with the demands of their audience and shape a homogeneous mentality of global citizens.

These obituaries are not a mirror into a culture any more, as obituaries generally are or used to be. They offer a glimpse of all cultures as a mosaic.

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