

# The Informative Role of Transitivity in Obituaries: A Study of the Kenyan *Daily Nation* Newspaper

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## Abstract

Death, although is a normal part of the human life cycle, impacts the bereaved emotionally, often with destabilizing effects. Traditionally, in the African context, death has been construed to be a “fear-based” taboo in which different fears coexist, namely, fear of the loss of loved ones, fear of corruption of the body, fear of the evil spirits, and fear of what comes with death. Consequently, people are averse to explicit discussions about death and dying; hence, they resort to euphemistic references in which death is highly sentimentalized. Yet, death must be faced when it eventually occurs. One such discourse site in which death has to be talked about is the obituary: i.e. the formal announcement of a death. Conflicted between the need to explicitly talk about and announce the death of the departed on one hand and the fear of death on the other hand, obituary writers resort to a variety of lexical items in order to compliment the departed and show respect to those left alive, thereby satisfying in a way both the social and religious impositions traditionally associated with human mortality. This paper examines the obituary text as a form of advertisement whose function in language is executed through praising the deceased through the use of euphemistic and consolatory devices in transitivity processes. The objective of this paper is to explore how, within the Systemic Functional Grammar framework, linguistic resources in terms of processes (material or mental) in obituaries serve their social and communicative roles. A descriptive study design was applied to describe phenomena through narrative type, descriptions and classifications. Library based research was used to purposively sample obituary texts from the *Daily Nation* newspaper in order to generate data for analysis and discussion. Corpus compilation was used to capture the use of transitivity and their informative role in depicting death as a normal occurrence in a person’s life that should be accepted and appreciated, despite at certain times being considered a calamity or a misfortune. Death is not only presented as a repose, a journey, and a reward to the deceased, it is also presented as a loss to the family of the deceased. This paper reveals the use of the transitivity tenet of Halliday’s 1985 theory and its inherent material and mental processes in conveying the concept of death and how they help eulogize the deceased, impart hope, and console the bereaved.

Keywords: Death, Obituaries, Informative Role, Transitivity

## Introduction

This paper seeks to examine the linguistic function of obituaries and how they reflect the African conceptualization of death and dying. Obituaries typically reflect, represent and capture the essence of death and dying, which are traditionally taboo concepts in the African context. The experience of death is often too traumatizing and is often discussed cautiously and with linguistic hedges, given that they often evoke deep fear and negative emotions. Death is a timeless taboo concept in which psychological, religious and social impositions coexist (Fernandez, 2009). Additionally, the failure by humankind to come to terms with death, fueled by fear to acknowledge human mortality, has been pervasive in different times and spaces. In fact, human beings have felt reluctant to deal with the subject of death using clear and straight forward terms. Whether owing to superstition, fear or social respect, the fact remains that faced with death, language users try to soften the impact of what they really wish to communicate. Despite this reluctance to discuss the subject of death, there are communicative situations in which one cannot evade the notions of death and dying. This is best exemplified in the obituaries that announce death occurrences in newspapers.

## Definitions of Major Terms

In this section, we define the major terms used in the paper and place them in context. First, we explain in context the terms death and dying through which the term obituary finds expression, given that an obituary is essentially the announcement of a death.

*Death* is a natural and inevitable part of human life, considered a transition from the physical and visible world to the spiritual and invisible realm. Death, a mysterious reality, typically reflects the fragility and impermanence of life. Consequently, human beings frequently battle with its unpredictability and inevitability because when it happens, it emotionally destabilizes the bereaved. The inevitability and unpredictability of death makes it at once both fascinating and frightening (Fobella et al., 2023). It is the conflicting stances and emotions in the face of death that call for an examination of the linguistic resources employed in obituaries, the discourse site that typically ‘force’ human beings to address and express the notions of death and bereavement.

Next, the term *obituary* is broached with a view to situate it as a discourse site in which the function of language is examined in context. The term obituary refers to a news article that reports the death of a person, typically with an account of the person’s life and upcoming funeral arrangement details, usually captured in a newspaper. It is thus a published death notice, a transactional piece of writing. Obituaries are among communicative events related to death, others being epitaphs, tributes, and dirges. They present a hybrid mode of communication in which publicity and information, emotion and objectivity repose. They reflect the contradictions inherent in human existence, whereby there is at once a celebration of life and dread of death and human mortality. This is clearly captured in the two types of obituaries that exist: (1) informative and (2) opinative. Informative obituaries, on the one hand, are objective and use impersonal language to perform the locutionary function of language of basically conveying the details of a death and the resultant funeral rites. Opinative obituaries, on the other hand, are subjective, using emotive and figurative language to perform the perlocutionary function of language by

establishing a favorable impression on the reader by highlighting the positive attributes of the departed (Fernandez, 2006).

Finally, the informative role of language is explained in the context of obituaries. *Language*, a medium of expression, performs functions beyond the mere facilitation of communication. It has a profound impact on peoples' views, beliefs and perceptions; facilitates the forging of relations and understanding as well as interpersonal relations and interactions. Language both reveals and expresses identity. In the context of obituaries, language does more than the mere announcement of a demise, it reveals details about the history, character and social standing, among others, about the deceased. Consequently, the language of obituaries is at once informative, emotive and conative. While giving details of the departed, it invites the reader to share in the expressions of love for the departed, persuading them to believe in and adopt the view of the departed held by the obituary author in the process. This will be examined within the ambit of transitivity as espoused by Halliday (1985). Within linguistics, *transitivity* is a term that refers to how meaning is represented in the clause and how various linguistic processes transmit ideas. It is also concerned with how clauses are connected to make meaning and, in the case of this paper, expressed through an examination of the mental and material processes grammatically realized in the predicate and how they reflect on the informative purpose of obituary texts.

### **Conceptualizing the Representation of Death and Bereavement**

Obituary writers have traditionally avoided talking about the subject of death using explicit terms since they regard death as a "fear-based" taboo. For a long time, humankind's failure to come to terms with death has been pervasive in different times and societies. It is hardly surprising that in announcing death in an obituary, language users typically resort to a variety of linguistic choices in order to compliment the departed while remaining respectful to those left behind. This reflects the failure to face the reality of human mortality. Faced with death, obituary writers try to mitigate the effect of what they really intend to communicate. The avoidance to explicitly speak about human mortality is derived from the fact that death triggers psychological and social aspects of fear, superstition and taboos mainly of avoidance and respect to the surviving family members. The use of lexical items such as nouns, verbs, adverbs and adjectives in obituaries serves to produce particular effects on the readers by stressing the social status, virtues, religious standing, and the general presentation of the life and times of the deceased. Thus, in the obituary is reflected a hybrid mode in which emotion and objectivity repose, and where the tension between bereavement and celebration of life coexist. This paper sets out to examine the obituary as a form of advertisement whose functional language is carried out through different praising, laudatory and consolatory devices brought out through the material and mental processes of transitivity which display the virtues of the deceased and the grief of the surviving family members.

In death exists numerous fears: (a) fear of the loss of loved ones, (b) fear of corruption of the body, (c) fear of the evil spirits, and (d) fear of what comes with death (Allan and Burridge, 1991). Humans have traditionally avoided talking about the subject of death explicitly. The avoidance to speak about human mortality makes obituary writers resort to a variety of lexical items in order to compliment the departed and show respect to those left alive, thereby satisfying in a way both the social and religious impositions traditionally associated with human mortality.

## Death in the African Context

There is a distinction in the conceptualization of life and death in the Eurocentric and Afrocentric worldviews. Eurocentrically, life is conceptualized as consisting of discrete stages from conception to birth, with death marking the final stage of life. Technically, the person ceases to exist upon death. In contrast, within the African worldview, life and death are not conceived of as two separate phases. Rather, the two reflect a harmonious and interdependent coexistence (Ramose, 2002). There is a strong belief in the notion of spirit and spirituality in relation to death, with an inextricable spiritual connection between the visible and the invisible; between the physical and the spiritual. There is an underlying notion of life after death in which death is perceived as a natural transition from the visible to the invisible where the spirit, the essence of human existence, shifts to live in the world of the ancestors. Life does not stop, and death is merely an interruption of life (Esilaba, 2021). Death does not necessarily mark the end of life and people do not cease to exist once they die- they simply transition to the spiritual world where they continue to live with the ancestors (Baloyi and Makobe-Rabothata, 2014; Fobella et al., 2023). The African perspective reflects a firm belief in the afterlife and holds that death is simply a transition to a different phase of existence and being.

## Obituaries

The term *obituary* is derived from a Greek word *obitus*, which means departure, a common euphemistic term for death (Sexton, 1997). According to the Advanced Learners Dictionary, an obituary is a news article that reports the death of a person, typically with an account of the person's life and the upcoming funeral details and rites. An obituary is a record or an announcement of deaths or deaths, especially in a newspaper, usually with a brief biographical sketch of the deceased. Rae and Giana (2004) observe that obituaries are written documents that reflect the belief system of those who compose them and influence the thinking of those who read them. Obituaries present a special text because their content focuses exclusively on the qualities of one human being and how that person's life at its end can be represented. This paper therefore sought to consider an obituary as a goal-oriented text with a special purpose: i.e. language that does some job in context.

Eid (2002) argues that obituaries constitute a form of advertisement in which, in addition to the conveyance of basic content related to death, emotion is relayed. This makes obituaries informative on the composition of facts about death and being more intimate, especially in their use for social or religious purpose in which feelings and emotions of the writer play a significant role. Eid further notes that obituaries exhibit the reluctance by human beings to use explicit terms when dealing with the subject of death; hence, the resort to linguistic hedges or safeguards that sentimentalize death. This approach arouses feelings in the obituary readers by stressing the social status, virtues, religious standing and the general presentation of the deceased. Euphemism provides a safe way to address the taboo issue of death and beyond the announcement of death. In essence, an obituary captures and reflects the grief of the bereaved in terms of the association with the deceased.

Fernandez (2006) posits that obituaries tend to offer more emotive and intimate account of the deceased by means of consolatory and laudatory tactics to compliment the departed and in so doing, satisfy the surviving family members. The obituary performs a perlocutionary function whereby language is viewed as a means of persuading someone to do something. It is an act

performed by doing something. In this case, obituaries are oriented toward causing a favorable impression on the reader by showing the exemplary behavior of the deceased. They exhibit emotive overtones with a purpose to praise the deceased and raise the social status enjoyed by his or her family, giving room for a wide use of consolatory and complimentary diction. This paper examines the obituary as a typical communicative tool that reflects the nascent fears of those who experience and make attempts at coming to terms with death and loss and the resultant euphemistic approach in the death nomenclature.

The rest of the paper engages in an analysis of the obituary text with a view to unraveling the linguistic resources that obituary writers employ in dealing with the otherwise painful, traumatizing and taboo notion of death. Specifically, the paper explores the following major question: How do Kenyan newspaper obituaries linguistically negotiate the cultural taboo inherent in death using transitivity processes and choices? Focus is on the use of both explicit and euphemistic terms in reference to death in context. An understanding of obituary discourse is important because it will potentially reveal the unique ways in which Africans perceive and make sense of death, a feared and often loathed experience, as a natural transition from one life to another by using euphemistic replacements. Appropriate communication of death calls for the careful use of linguistic strategies that do not convey the impression of disrespect, insensitivity or offensiveness toward others. Euphemistic alternatives for death abound in obituaries, and these linguistic strategies are explored in this paper through an examination of transitivity choices.

### Euphemism

The term *euphemism* originates from the Greek word *euphemismos*, which means “to speak well.” Euphemism in language has various definitions as identified by Jing-Schmidt (2021) as follows: (a) sweet-sounding or inoffensive alternatives for expressions that speakers or writers prefer not to use in executing a particular communicative intention on a given occasion.; (b) an inoffensive or positive word or phrase designed to avoid a harsh, unpleasant, or distasteful reality; (c) the use of deliberately indirect, conventionally imprecise, or socially ‘comfortable’ ways of referring to taboo, embarrassing, or unpleasant topics; and (d) a verbal instrument of overcompensation that involves “a reluctance to face reality.

Underlying all the preceding definitions is the fact that euphemisms are deliberate face-saving strategies designed to mitigate the explicit expression of a taboo and intended to influence and guide perception. Euphemisms are usually used by speakers or writers for events that they find frightening or to express taboo items. Typically, they are used for the expression of what is socially difficult to express in direct terms. Thus, euphemisms consist of mild forms of a harsh or blunt expression that may be socially disagreeable in context and are often round-about expressions which attempt to be discrete or ambiguous. Semantically, euphemisms exist in two types: (1) positive or (2) negative (Hamoudi, 2022). Positive euphemisms are basically stylistic and serve to exaggerate and inflate the characteristics of the referent, making them appear grander and more important than they really are. The negative semantic features are concealed and replaced with positive ones. The purpose of negative euphemisms is to deflate or diminish the negative values associated with phenomena that are construed negatively. They are basically defensive in nature and deal with subjects that people prefer not to deal with directly, such as death, illness and crime.

To speak euphemistically is to use language as a shield against what is feared, disliked, or



unpleasant. This is a common occurrence in obituaries where language is appropriated for a specific agenda. Usually, there is resort to using flowery or flamboyant language in order to avoid mentioning death directly with the effect of softening the effects of death, stripping it of the potentially offensive connotations. To this end, Fernandez (2009) notes that positively loaded words such as “beloved,” “respected,” and “a steady gentleman of outstanding integrity” are typical of obituaries and they will be understood to constitute the proof of the subjectivity attached to death. Through such lexical choices, the obituary writer passes judgement and their preference for lexical items with an emotional content clearly reveal what their judgement is. In other words, the tendency to resort to such positively loaded diction illustrates an obituary writer’s intention of complimenting the deceased by showing his or her social status and personal virtues. The obituary writer can resort to negatively loaded words to refer to death as an instance of calamity or affliction and this emphasizes the misfortune of the deceased and the surviving family members.

### **Theoretical Framework: Systemic Functional Grammar**

Systemic Functional Grammar, conceptualized by Halliday (1985), is an approach used for the examination of language that foregrounds the notion of language as a system or network of choices according to which aspects of grammar can be analyzed; a set of options with an entry condition. Consequently, one option must be selected when an entry condition is satisfied. Within this framework, language is basically a function of choice, and evolves in response to the specific demands of a given society. Additionally, the use of language is dependent upon context of situation and of culture, both of which are necessary for the complete understanding of texts. Halliday considers the functional theory of language as a theory about meanings, rather than of words or constructions. Thus, meanings are constructed in contexts of situation or culture. In so doing, the theory seeks to understand why particular linguistic patterns are selected in terms of the social and communicative needs that a text is expected to serve. The Systemic Functional Grammar differs from other grammars in that it is pragmatic; it is a set of alternative features, of which one has to be chosen if the entry condition is satisfied. System was a feature of Halliday’s early theoretical work which was invoked on account of one rather than another among events, and therefore a system is a theoretical tool used to describe a set of options available in a language variety.

Systemic Functional Grammar is concerned with syntactic expressions and constructions in context. Thus, the text is the smallest unit of analysis. The analysis of authentic products of social interactions such as texts is considered in relation to the cultural and social context in which the products are negotiated (Eggins, 2004). In this paper, the obituary as a form of advertisement will provide syntactic expressions comprising a certain combination of lexical items used and their informative purpose in their contexts of use. According to Halliday (1985), the use of language by human beings serves to fulfil the following three basic functions in life, known as meta functions:

- (1) The *ideational meta function* serves for the expression of content and a means of reflecting on things. Through this function, a speaker or writer embodies his/her experience of the world, his/her reactions and perceptions. The ideational meta function of language is essentially the content function of language, expressed in the structural unit of the clause. Transitivity is the grammar of the clause in the ideational aspect.

- (2) The *interpersonal meta function* serves for the establishment and maintenance of human social and personal relationships. Essentially, a speaker or writer uses language as a means of his/her own intrusion into the speech event through the expression of personal comments, attitudes, opinions and evaluations. In the clause, this function is represented by mood.
- (3) The *textual meta function* entails the use of language in the generation of a text, where language is used to organize our experiential, logical and interpersonal meaning in coherent and linear structures. It involves the words we use and how we sequence the words that convey meanings, a function typically expressed by theme.

In the context of obituaries, this paper is concerned with the ideational function of language and its semantic derivative, transitivity. This is done with a view to establishing how writers of obituaries, the bereaved, construct the meaning of the death of a loved one and how, in bereavement, they perceive loss and death and whether or not their conceptualizations encompass acceptance. Notably, the paper is cognizant of the fact that the construction of an obituary is heavily dependent on the relationship between the deceased and the writer as well as whether or not the death was anticipated.

The term transitivity in this paper is used to refer to how meaning is interpreted and how the process transmits ideas. Halliday (1985) reiterates that a group's most powerful conception of reality consists of the "on goings, doings, happenings and feelings of being." The goings on are sorted out in the semantic system of language expressed through the grammar of a clause. Transitivity is necessary in this paper as it determines the necessary participant roles presented by clauses. Transitivity also shows how goings on are sorted out in the semantic system of language and expressed through the grammar of a clause.

Transitivity further includes the notion of 'process.' According to Thompson (2004), processes are characterized as six various ways to express an event: (1) Material Processes are verbs described as events or 'goings on' in a clause; (2) Mental Processes are verbs connected to psychological experiences of the world; (3) Relational Processes are connected to the verb and show a relationship between elements in a clause; (4) Verbal Processes are verbs of 'saying' (5) Existential Processes are normally identified by the formal subject there; and (6) Behavioral Processes are often said to be a combination of Mental and Material Processes because they only relate to specific human psychological processes. Transitivity processes are expressed by clauses in three potential components: (1) the process itself, which is expressed by the verb phrase; (2) the participant whose roles are realized by the noun phrase; and (3) the circumstances associated with the process, normally expressed by the adverbial and adjectival phrases. The processes within transitivity can be classified into three:

- (1) Material process which represents the actions. It is the process of doing. It has inherent participant roles associated with them; THE ACTOR, an obligatory element expressed in the clause and an optional GOAL which represents the person, the entity affected by the process. The verbalization process which is the process of saying. The participant roles associated with the verbalization process are THE SAYER (individual who is speaking), THE TARGET (the addressee to whom the process is directed).

- (2) The mental process which is the process of sensing. It is internalized and as such quite different in quality from the externalized process of doing and speaking. Mental processes may be defined as perception processes (of thinking and understanding). The inherent participant roles in a mental process are the SENSOR (conscious being, reacting or thinking) and the PHENOMENON (the perceived, reacted to or thought about).
- (3) The relational process expresses the process of being. Usually, it signals that the relationship exists between two participants. The participant roles associated with the relational process are the CARRIER (roughly the topic of the clause) and the ATTRIBUTE (a description about the topic).

In this paper, the transitivity tenet of the theory was restricted to an examination of the material and mental processes grammatically realized in the predicate and how these reflect the transitivity and informative purpose of the obituary text. In the following section we justify the focus on material and mental processes to the exclusion of relational processes. The central focus is on the mental processes, which are basically non-actional and involve sensing, feeling, and thinking. Mental processes are grammatically those in which the participant, known as the processor or sensor, is invariably human and is endowed with consciousness so that s/he can feel, sense, think, and perceive. The examination of mental processes within the context of obituaries is central for the reasons that since obituaries typically announce death, the obituary text is a reflection of the author's feelings, perceptions and thoughts about the life and times of the deceased. Interest therefore lies in unpacking the author's mental configurations of death and the life of the deceased with a view to establishing the resulting representations of death.

Within transitivity, we explore transitivity choices. Halliday (1985) conceives of a system as a set of options and, thus, meaning is interpreted as a choice. When choices are made between different types of processes and participants, and between the different roles that the participants may take, these decisions are reflected syntactically through transitivity choices. Typically, there are three sets of choices: (1) material, (2) mental, and (3) relational choices. As Fowler (1986) observes, when we speak or write about something, the lexical choices made and the structures of our sentences convey an implicit analysis of the topic and our attitude about it. Language is thus the sum of what a speaker or writer can do with the same semantic strategies available to him or her and a functional analysis seeks to make sense of the various options; Why in the context and the overall purpose of communication, one option rather than the other should be chosen? This will be contextualized in the obituaries. Before the data collected for this essay are analyzed, we provide a brief review of the research methodology employed to ground the analysis.

### **Research Methodology**

A descriptive research design was applied in this paper. The descriptive study aimed at describing the lexical items accurately through narrative type, classification and measuring relationships. As Terre (2007) observes, descriptive research design is used in collecting people's opinions, attitudes, habits and social issues. This design was applied to examine how mental and material processes of transitivity were employed to convey meaning in obituaries. The study population comprised 200 obituaries collected over a period of 20 days in October of 2024. On each day, the *Daily Nation* newspaper carried a minimum of 20 obituaries. The obituaries were



sampled from newspapers published between Monday and Friday, days which carry large numbers of obituaries. Dyer (1982) and Ary et al. (1997) argue that 10% to 20% of the accessible population is acceptable for qualitative research. Similarly, Remenyi and Swartz (2003) agree that a sample of 10% to 20% is considered adequate for in-depth studies. For this reason, a sample size of 20 obituaries sufficed for this study. Milroy (2007) further observes that linguistic behavior is homogeneous than any other type of behavior; hence, large samples are not necessary.

Purposive sampling was used to identify and select newspaper obituaries that provided key information on nouns, verbs, adverbs and adjectives that generated data for analysis and discussion. Mugenda and Mugenda (1999) posit that purposive sampling allows a researcher to use cases that have the required information with respect to a study's objectives. Data were collected using two main techniques: (1) corpus compilation whereby a collection of linguistic data of written texts extracted from obituaries in the form of open set lexical items of nouns, verbs, adverbs and adjectives were extracted and analyzed to bring out the semantic connotations therein; and (2) document compilation whereby obituary texts were identified and selected from the *Daily Nation* newspaper then used to generate data for analysis bringing out the transitivity processes depicting the material and mental processes in obituary text clauses.

Also, this being a library-based documentary research, the reliability of corpus and document compilations as data collection tools was ascertained using a pilot study of *The Standard* Newspaper, a Kenyan newspaper which comparatively carries few obituaries on a daily basis. This helped us to capture the lexical choices in obituary texts. We ensured confidentiality by anonymizing the names of the deceased persons together with the names of the relatives and family members mentioned in the sampled obituary texts. Data were qualitatively analyzed based on the transitivity tenet incorporating the lexico-semantic perspective. The descriptive research design validated the findings through the analysis and sampling of the obituaries in the lexical items of nouns, verbs, adverbs and adjectives and the reflection of transitivity processes they transmit in the clauses.

## **Analysis and Discussion**

Transitivity is Halliday's term for the kind of processes and participants that occur in clauses. "Process" is a term used to represent the events or states, whether mental or material, whereby the participant has to do the process. Transitivity is defined as a major component of the clause patterns deriving from the ideational function of language, (Abdulaziz, 1996). It is a grammatical process by which we experience the goings on around us, happenings, doings, sensing, meaning and becoming. It is a set of options on which the speaker or writer encodes his or her experience of the process to the external world. Transitivity embodies the distinction of processes into two types: (1) those required due to external cause, an agency other than the person or object involved; and (2) those that are not. It is a grammar that includes actions, events, states and relations and the structural element typically realizing the process in the verbal group. Transitivity stresses the power of what might be termed as an agent or actor over another being or entity. Simply put, the system of transitivity examines who or what does what to whom or what. This paper restricted itself to the examination of the material and mental processes grammatically realized in the predicate and how these reflect on the informative purpose of obituaries as texts.

## Material Processes

The transitivity process in obituary texts and their informative purpose is analyzed based on the material processes of the transitivity tenet of Halliday's theory. Material processes entail the processes of doings and happenings that involve both animate and inanimate participants. They express the notion that some entity does something. This process type involves actions that may be observed and have consequences. They may also be abstract doings and happenings that may not be necessarily observable. In a clause, the term process refers to the action or event denoted by a verb and represents events or states. There are two distinct processes under the material processes: (1) material action intention and (2) material action supervision.

### *Material Action Intention Processes*

Material action intention processes are those in which there is a clear will to do something; thus, the participant actually has the intention of performing a certain action and that the participant is willfully engaged in the process (Halliday, 1985). In view of the material action intention process, the following clauses were realized from the sampled obituaries; Thereafter *laying* her to rest, she will be *laid* to rest on..., All are welcome to *honor* a great..., *celebrating* mum's life..., *celebrating* a life well lived...

The verb *laying* in the present continuous tense signals the process of burying, politely denoted by the verb *laying*, a material process according to the transitivity tenet whereby both the actions and the consequences can be observed. The action can further be classified as a material action intention process because the action of burying the dead is willfully performed by the participants who are usually the family members and relatives of the deceased after a church led funeral service in the context of the obituary. The use of the verb *laying* implies putting something in a suitable position for a particular purpose (Oxford, 2015). In the context of obituary writing, the verb *laying* implies that the deceased has been placed in a correct and comfortable position to facilitate the *rest*, being perceived as a temporary state of relaxation, a peaceful repose. The ACTOR in this case is the obligatory element burying the dead, euphemistically denoted as *laying* to mitigate the potential dangers of explicitly mentioning the word. The GOAL is the deceased who represents the entity affected by the process of death that will lead the act of *laying*. The verb denotes death as a less threatening and very normal occurrence after earthly existence—hence, diffusing the pain caused by the loss experienced by those left alive. This is meant to console and give hope to the bereaved.

Wells (1986) observes that the creativity of wording in sentences have a great impact on the perception of the reader on the issues discussed in a text. He stresses how transitivity process types can enrich the meaning of texts and have profound effects on the perception of the reader on the content of the text. The choice of the verb *laying* in this construction helps the obituary reader understand that death is a normal event. The same applies to the verb *laid* in: *she will be laid to rest ....* The verb *laid* in its past form informs a material process because the action implied by the verb is to bury the dead, i.e. the participants in this case. The bereaved family willfully carries out the *laying* after the death of loved one. The verbs *laying* and *laid to rest* signify the material action intention process according to the transitivity tenet of the SFL theory. Instructively, the use of 'laying' is hinged the metaphor 'death is rest,' implying that death is a stage of rest, a temporary stage of recuperation after a difficult earthly existence before the next stage of life. This is in agreement with the African conceptualization of death as a transition from

one stage of life to another. The use of the euphemistic expression 'lay' serves to mask the effects of death, presenting it as a normal and ordinary occurrence.

According to The Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary (2015), the verb *celebrating* implies marking a joyous experience, a moment of happiness, signifying pleasant and memorable experiences, usually an important day or event with a social gathering where people enjoy the experiences of life. The process denoted by the verbs *celebrates* and *celebrating* was captured in the phrases *celebrating a life well lived...*, *celebrating mum's life...* and *The X family celebrates...* The verbs designate a material action intention process as per the transitivity tenet. The family of the deceased has a clear conviction and willingness to carry out the celebration ceremony of the deceased and is fully engaged in it. For the obituary writer to indicate that a funeral ceremony which is a sad occasion where the bereaved are said to be celebrating the life of the deceased, this is meant to strip off the sad emotions it elicits. They find it worthy to celebrate and remember the life well lived by the deceased. For it to be captured as a joyous event as denoted by the verbs *celebrating* and *celebrates*, it shows the different perception about death which in essence is considered a calamity.

Considering the phrase *celebrating mum's life...*, the ACTOR is the process of celebration, an obligatory element expressed by the clause. It is used to inform the readers about the death that should be a joyous experience of reflecting on the successful life of the deceased. The GOAL, the bereaved, is not explicitly mentioned in this obituary extract. In this case, representing the entity or person affected by the process, the use of these verbs serves to inform the reader that death ought to be viewed in the domain of joy, not as a form of misery. Death is believed to promote the deceased to a destiny of glory, devoid of pain and suffering. In the context of these verbs and obituary presentation, celebrating the life of the deceased shows that he or she was an exemplary character. The deceased is socially perceived or viewed as one who must have made tremendous achievements while alive and one who even in death will be cherished through celebrations. This is because of the indelible marks they must have left in the lives of those they interacted with.

Closely related to *celebration* is the verb *honor* in the sample *All are welcome to honor...* which signifies a material action intention process. The verb *honor* denotes showing great respect to somebody or something, (Oxford, 2015). In this case, when one honors the other, there is a clear will to do it or perform the action and it is observable. There is also a clear will to do all that it takes to show respect to the deceased as in the case of this obituary. This is a material action intention process as there is a clear willingness by the participant in carrying out an action of honor which is evident. In honoring the deceased, the bereaved family undertakes it willingly. The ACTOR, in this case the verb denoting the process of honor, is reflecting the obligatory action to be performed. The indefinite pronoun ALL shows the goal, which represents the persons or entity affected by the death which results in the honor. The actions of *honor* are, in this case, positive overtones meant to diffuse the pain of losing a loved one, thereby serving the consolatory purpose of obituary texts. The *honor* to the deceased is meant to eulogize and in equal measure praise the deceased as an achiever who lived a life worth such commendation and respect.

Instructively, the use of *celebrate/celebration* and *honor* characterize death as a reward, an event to be celebrated rather than mourned. This rendering ties well with the Afrocentric conceptualization of death as a transition to the afterlife where the deceased transitions to live with the ancestors. In becoming an ancestor, the deceased takes up the important role of interceding with the divine on behalf of the living (Fobella et al., 2023). This is considered a

promotion, an elevated status calling for celebration. Indeed, the use of the euphemism “promoted to glory” is common in obituaries.

### ***Material Action Supervention Processes***

Halliday’s theory points out that material action supervention processes within its transitivity tenet are those processes that denote actions in which the characters involved are not in control over the processes in which they are engaged. These processes are quite different from the material action intention processes because the action denoted by the verb is either done intentionally or it simply happens to the participant without their control.

The verb *resting* in *we announce the resting of Mama X ...* denotes a material action supervention process. It is euphemistically used to refer to the act of dying, that the person is dead. In this case, death is an event that occurs without the approval of the participant, the deceased. Death happens according to the will and plans of God. The use of the verb *resting* implies that death is a temporary rest, repose, (Oxford, 2015), from which one will wake up and resume their normal duties in life. In this context of the verb *resting* is the ACTOR, which is the obligatory element of the clause representing the process of death being reported. The GOAL is Mama Fridah... referring to the person or entity affected by the process of resting, the reported death.

Similarly, the verb *rest* in the clause *May her soul rest in peace...* and, *In God’s hands you rest...*, equally denote the material action a supervention process. This is because the action of resting euphemistically used to refer to death is an event that occurs without the involvement of the relevant characters. In this case, the deceased has no control over the death that happens to them. This is in agreement with the transitivity tenet which posits that things simply happen without the participant’s control. This is meant to portray death as a peaceful relaxation from earthly existence—therefore, a desirable condition. As Thellen (1972) observes, language can be manipulated and lexical choices formulated because they are socially useful. According to Thellen, a text communicates only when it leaves a strong impression and generating favorable conditions for attaining a communicative goal. The choice of the verbs *resting* and *rest* serves the informative purpose of consoling the bereaved families. The interpretation of death in the domain of rest represents a peaceful sleep and repose that is full of comfort. This ultimately heightens the denial of the taboo of death as a calamity, thereby providing an avenue for relief toward the bereaved that death is less threatening and is a very normal occurrence to the bereaved, metaphorically mapped to rest.

The adjective *fallen* is used in the phrase... *a great fallen soldier in the army of God. To fall* as a verb phrase derived from the aforementioned adjective connotes the act of dying which is a material action supervention process whereby the deceased has no control over their deaths; they simply happen to them and they remain victims of circumstances. The fight between life and death is predetermined; death always wins, and otherwise we would be immortal. We have no control over the manner in which we lose the fight either through ailments, accidents, or sudden death. Within the transitivity domain, the ACTOR is the concept of *falling* which in this case is death. The GOAL here is the soldier who represents the person or the entity affected by the process of falling. The choice of this verb in the context of this obituary is meant to diffuse the impact of explicitly mentioning the word death. To say *fall* in reporting death is politer than directly mentioning the cruel and hurting word *dead*. This helps console the bereaved during such catastrophic and devastating moments and also gives them hope to soldier on despite the

death of a loved one.

There are other verbal groups such as *passed*, *went*, *called*, *going* and *ascending* which are also used in obituary texts in *X passed on....*, *who went to be with the Lord....*, *God called mum...* These verbs denote material action supervention processes since the characters involve the deceased persons reported in the obituary texts that have no control over the events that happened to them. In the case of *X passed on*, the ACTOR is depicted by the verb *passed on* which is an obligatory element of the clause. The *passing* here euphemistically refers to the process of dying, over which the participant has no control; it unintentionally happens to the person. The GOAL is the noun Beatrice which is the person or entity affected by the process of having passed. The choice of this verbal group to substitute the taboo of death is meant to mitigate the potential dangers of the taboo word, which in normal circumstances is considered unpleasant, offensive, and full of hurt feelings.

The verbs *went*, *called*, *going* and *ascending* portray death as a journey, a process of leaving, the final destination being an encounter with the creator, exemplifying the joyous meeting with the creator. The deceased is thus supposed to have moved and, thus, considered to be alive but in the spiritual world. The past forms of the verb *go* in this case, *went*, the past form of *call*, in this case *called* and the use of the present continuous forms of *going* and *ascending* denote the process of dying. These are material action supervention processes initiated by forces beyond the control of the deceased. In the phrase, *God called our mum....*, the ACTOR is the process of *calling* which is an obligatory element in this clause. It makes things happen by causing sorrow and grief. The GOAL is the mum whose death is reported in the obituary text. She is the entity that has no control of the *calling* that happens to her. Ultimately, there is the consolation found in the obituary texts that death is a joyful encounter with the initiator, the supreme power.

The use of the verbs *promotion* and *transition* in the obituary in *promotion to glory* and *transition to eternity* shows that the actions signified in the verbs metaphorically refer to the dying process which happens unintentionally to the deceased. The verbs denote the material action supervention process as they conceptualize a departure—thus, the process of movement from this earthly world. The choice of *promotion to glory* denotes the movement to a destiny that is eternal, one of great beauty and comfort (Oxford, 2015). Similarly, the choice of the verb *transition* signifies the act of changing from one state to another; in the context of death and obituary writing, the deceased moves from the physical being to a spiritual one. When a loved one gets *promoted* or undergoes *transition*; it implies that the person faces death as a process. These verbs denote the material action supervention process of the transitivity tenet of Halliday's theory. The verbs ideally connote religious-spiritual attachment and the journey aspect leads the deceased to a more comfortable destiny in death. In terms of the informative purpose of obituaries, the use of such verbal groups helps in negating the devastating impacts of the calamity of death. This is meant to offer consolation to the bereaved family. The phrase *Promotion to glory* hinges on the conceptual construction of death as a reward that the deceased is said to have been elevated to a higher state of being where the person reposes with the ancestors in the spiritual realm. Euphemistically, death is constructed in positive terms, highlighting the positive elements while downplaying the negative, unwanted or undesired elements characterizing death.

The passive construction is also important in the transitivity tenet. It is analyzed because it is the marked option in the voice system (Olool, 2002). It is derived from the active voice which is the more basic unmarked option by means of transformation whereby the grammatical



object becomes the grammatical subject. The passive form is used in instances where one does not know the actor who did or the agent who caused the process presented in the verb phrase. It is also applicable when one wishes to avoid mentioning who or what it was. As sampled in the clause *was called* to eternal rest..., the verbal group preceded by the past form of the auxiliary is (was) is used to indicate passive constructions in reporting a death occurrence. The concept of death is euphemistically denoted using the verb phrase *being called* and the actor here who is believed to be a supreme being is not mentioned. This implies that the passive construction in reporting death occurrence denotes a material action supervision process of the transitivity tenet of Halliday's theory. The *calling* simply happens to the deceased. This denotation serves the informative purpose of giving hope and consolation to the bereaved family that their deceased kin is in an after- life beyond death.

## Mental Processes

Mental processes under the transitivity tenet are those that are basically non-action and they involve sensing, feeling, and thinking. They could be behavioral (admiring), perceptive (looking at), cognitive (thinking), or verbal (saying). This type of process is one (grammatically) in which one participant, the processor or sensor, will be invariably human or human-like, endowed with a consciousness, the one that feels, senses, thinks, or perceives. The participant in the mental process is one pronominally referred to as "he" or "she."

The noun *battle* denotes a struggle, a fight or a contest (Oxford, 2015). In the clause *After a battle with cancer...*, the noun *battle* in this context of death and obituary writing literally denotes a mental process, a perception or feeling by the family of the deceased, those announcing the death of their loved one, that the deceased had the resilience or determination to bear with the pain and agony that comes with the terminal ailment as cancer. McConnell-Ginet (2008) avers that seemingly, ordinary words are used in specific contexts to render new meanings. In this case, context is a very important aspect in the use and interpretation of the noun group *battle*. Within the transitivity tenet by Halliday, mental processes involve a feeling and thinking. They are cognitive and perceptive processes of consciousness through the senses. The noun *battle* in the context of this obituary signifies the perception that the bereaved had as a testimony to the ailing of the now deceased. The way this determination is reported in the obituary amounts to praising or eulogizing the positive and admirable attributes exhibited by the deceased is one who was persevering—in this case, drawing admiration.

In transitivity, the focus is on the predicates, usually verbs and adjectives that communicate action, processes, states and the roles performed by two entities participating in these processes, usually designated as nouns. In the choice of the adjectives such as *beloved* mother, *loving* daughter and *dedicated* teacher to exemplify the character of the deceased, they are meant to indicate special endearment and attachments the deceased had with the close kin in the family and those with whom they interacted in the person's line of duty in life. These adjectives denote positive traits and admirable overtones about the deceased as one who loved and equally dedicated to his/her professional duties as a teacher. Death typically arouses raw emotions and tears people from all their loved ones and all they know in this world. Death is viewed as a wicked aspect of life. When one dies, the bereaved view and evaluate the kind of life the person led and draw conclusions about that person.

The lexical items *profound*, *grief*, *sorrow*, *deep*, *saddened* and *humble* indicate states that are perceived by those who lose their loved ones. The clauses *It is with profound grief...*, and a

*deep sense of loss...*, *with the deepest sorrow...* and *we are saddened...* serve to inform readers about the devastating feelings and perceptions that come with the eventual loss of a loved one. Oxford (2015) exemplifies profound as a state or quality of being intense, beyond measure, very great, or strongly experienced. Contrastingly, sorrow shows a feeling of great sadness because something bad has happened—in this case, a death occurrence. Being saddened depicts a people in a somber, melancholic or sorrowful mood meditating on the apparent loss of a loved one through the death. A humble state is that of exhibiting humility, being down trodden, showing a modest picture of oneself or importance—thus, not being proud. Bultnick (1998) observes that death is an emotional episode that causes hurt feelings. In this case, death is perceived as an agonizing experience to those left alive and a difficult event with which to come to terms.

The lexical items *profound*, *deep*, *deepest sorrow*, *saddened* and *humble* denote perception processes experienced by the bereaved family in an effort to come to terms with and comprehend the loss of their kin. Mental processes of the transitivity tenet are internalized and involve perception. The cognitive feelings perceived from the use of these lexical items are meant to mitigate the negative effects of the taboo of death that even though there is an apparent loss, a disaster and a calamity, the bereaved have no alternative about it but only need to accept death as a reality in life and soldier on in life. Euphemistically, the diction captures the metaphorical construction of death as loss whereby the bereaved are presented as having lost not only their loved ones, but also their positive attributes and contributions. The deaths leave the bereaved with a deep sense of loss, not only in the physical absence of their loved ones, but also of the disruption of the relationships between them and their loved ones.

### **Conclusion and Recommendation**

This paper has examined the euphemistic references to death in obituaries within the transitivity lens in the domains of material and mental processes. Death is essentially a taboo topic in the African context and the data analysis has confirmed, in the words of BurrIDGE (2004), that taboo provides a fertile seedbed for words to flourish. The material processes brought to the fore the interpretation of death in two domains: (1) the material action and (2) the material action supervision processes. In the former processes, there is a clear will by the participant to carry out the action and the consequences of the action can be observed. In the latter process, things just happen to the participant without their involvement or consent. Through these processes, it emerged that obituary texts served the purpose of praising, eulogizing the life and times of the deceased, and also consoling the bereaved. Obituaries serve the social function of public mourning, depicting mourning as both a personal and social process. Essentially, obituaries provide for the bereaved an avenue to grieve and revisit their social bonds with the dead even as they release them into the afterlife. Social bonds are depicted in the direct addresses the bereaved have with the deceased: e.g., “We loved you but God loved you more.” The dead are departed physically from the midst of the bereaved but remain spiritually connected to them.

The transitivity tenet of the Systemic Functional Linguistics Theory has been applied in this paper to understand the portrayal of death in material and mental domains bringing out the mental and non-action aspects of admiring, perception and thinking in the effort to understand messages and how ideas are constructed in obituaries. Verbalization and relational processes of the transitivity tenet of Halliday’s theory were not applied. Consequently, this can form a basis of a scholarly linguistic inquiry in the obituary texts with a view to unravel how obituaries capture and represent social identities and kinship ties.

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