

Expressing Grief through Institutional Tributes: An Appraisal Theory Approach

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Abstract

Death is seen as a universal phenomenon in which man's failure to come to terms with has been pervasive in different times and societies. When death stares at the face of someone, language users try to soften the effect of what they really want to communicate (Fernandez, 2006). The main aim of the present study is to analyse tributes of some private and public institutions in Ghana, paid to the late Professor John Evans Atta-Mills, a former president of the Republic of Ghana, in terms of the linguistic features employed in construing grief. Using the Appraisal strand of the Systemic Functional Linguistics (henceforth, SFL), the study examined thirty (30) tributes, fifteen (15) each from both private and public institutions that were published in two Ghanaian Newspapers – *Daily Graphic* and *Ghanaian Times*. The study revealed that the opening information of these tributes of almost all the public institutions chose to acknowledge *sorrow*, *sadness* and *grief* as the overarching topic around which the text unfolds. These sentiments are predominantly revealed in the choice of *negative affect* employed in the opening comments given by these institutions. Again, from the analyzed tributes, the expression of sadness and grief in the comments given are directed to the wife, son, the political party the late president belonged to, the vice president as well as the people of Ghana. The present study has implications for Systemic Functional Linguistics in general.

Keywords: Death, tributes, appraisal, Ghana, Systemic Functional Linguistics

Introduction

Most scholars share the view that fear, superstition, and religious taboos coexist with different limitations of social nature to limit speakers to bring out issues of tact and respect towards the deceased and the surviving family members (Fernandez, 2006). Thus, the bond

between the living and the dead, the desire to offer respect and honour to the deceased, and the trepidation that surround the unknown shape how the bereaved make frantic efforts to choose their words appropriately. Thus, in their bid to fill the vacuum created by the death of the loved one, and maintain a strong relationship with the deceased, mourners of the dead find it difficult to choose the appropriate language to express their sorrow and pain.

Moreover, the Akans (the largest ethnic group in Ghana) believe that when death occurs, mourning is seen as an inevitable and universal human reaction to explain how grievous they are to the loss of someone who is loved and very much appreciated. In such circumstances of shock and dismay, grieving forms an attempt to recover the meaning that is suddenly and unexpectedly shattered by the loss. Therefore, the distress and pain for the loss of a loved one leaves the mourners in a situation of dilemma as to what to do or the kind of language to use.

When a *Black Tuesday* befell the people of Ghana on 24th July, 2012, following the death of Professor J. E. A. Mills (the president of the country), people as well as institutions turned to the media to express their emotions, grief and sorrow. The death of a loved one, in the case of Ghanaians, the death of a sitting president, is one scenario in which people shared their feelings in an effort to mourn him. Individuals and various organizations in the country were not left out as they conveyed their deepest shock through goodwill messages, condolence and tributes paid to a man touted as ‘Asomdwoehene’ (translated as ‘King of Peace’). Amid the kind of cordial rapport that existed between the late president and the various institutions, his (president) demise really brought a disconnection in the agenda set to building the country. In effect, language used in the tributes of these institutions for conveying their emotions and sentiments forms part of the discourse that becomes shared in the society as a community of practice (Edu-Buandoh, 2010). Every social organization has its peculiar use of language in discourse patterns and discursive practices that fully represent the ideas, intentions, feelings and experiences of every individual in the organization.

Several studies have been conducted in other funeral text types like death announcement in newspapers (Afful, 2012) and condolences (Dilevko & Gottlib, 2004; Yahya, 2010.). However, little attention has been paid to examining tribute as a funeral text type that is published in the newspapers, using Systematic Functional Linguistics (SFL). The study, thus, aims to explore the appraisal devices employed in published tributes of institutions in some selected Ghanaian newspapers to bring out the sentiments of the people

of Ghana, following the demise of the President of the Republic of Ghana, Professor John Evan Atta Mills.

Theoretical Background

Systemic Functional Linguistics as a linguistic theory refers to language as a social practice (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004). In this regard, the interpretive and descriptive frameworks of language allow for an in depth and systematic study of linguistic patterns in texts, not forgetting how these models influence the context in which the text is produced (Bock, 2007). Kress (1995), moreover, opines that language involves choice making in which language is viewed as a "socially shaped resource" organized as a system of meaning-making choices from which speakers make selections in response to their social contexts (p. 36). SFL, therefore, offers the opportunity to employ language as a resource for making meaning since meaning is inherent in the systemic patterns of choice which are available to the language user.

The Appraisal Model (Martin and White, 2005) of the SFL explore the view that as a form of evaluative language, the expressions being created in a particular text brings out "the subjective presence of writers/ speakers in the text as they adopt stances towards the material they present and those with whom they communicate"(p. 1). This means that the selection of words and expressions in a specific text may reflect the phenomenon being discussed by its speakers or writers. The *Attitude* strand of the Appraisal Model, which forms the foundation for the study, refers to the expression of different kinds of feelings that elicited in an interaction. This sub-system of appraisal may be seen as the core precept since attitude employs the needed linguistic resources in evaluative language to make meaning in the interaction as regards the emotions of the users of the language.

Methodology

The data which was purposively sampled comprised fifty (50) funeral tributes from two Ghanaian Newspapers, with twenty-five (25) each from both public and private institutions in Ghana. It should be noted that these funeral tributes were selected based on their text lengths. The table below shows the breakdown of the institutions and their tributes that were used for the analysis. (*Refer to the appendix for the full names of the abbreviations in the distribution*).

Table 1: Distribution of Institutions and the Text Length of Their Tributes.

PUBLIC INSTITUTIONS	TEXT LENGTH	PRIVATE INSTITUTIONS	TEXT LENGTH
AGI	193	ABUNTU	143
CITG	250	ACTIONAID	238
COCOBOD	168	ACPG	209
FWSC	429	AGLOW	148
GHANA POST	166	AIRTEL	239
GES	124	EAA	130
GFA	315	AYC	192
GFD	125	BNG	264
GJA	154	ACPG	332
GIBA	296	CACI	446
GCM	385	CAF	163
GCC	158	CDD	203
GCIA	188	CeSIS	293
GMA	141	FGMF	221
IPR	112	GBL	105

MLNR	215	GIMPA	121
MMT	134	GSL	126
NAGRAT	106	ICU	176
NPA	129	LUKOIL	125
NFS	178	BG	101
PPA	195	PAPAYE	264
SWAG	146	SDA	115
TUC	260	STG	128
UG	171	RLG	249
UTAG	164	WANF	228
TOTAL	4902	TOTAL	5089

Table 1 represents the 50 selected institutions that published their tributes in the *Ghanaian Times* and *Daily Graphic* respectively. It identifies FWSC as having 429 words and NAGRAT with 106 words accounting for the public institutions with the highest and least text lengths respectively. On the one hand, CACI has the highest text length of 446 words while BG records 101 words as the institutions with the least text length for the private institutions. It should be stated that the choice of these institutions for the present was due to the fact that they seek educational, social, health as well as spiritual welfare of the people of Ghana, and as a result have some form of relationship with the people in the country.

Qualitative content analysis was used to explore the data. Kaid (1989) suggests that in content analysis certain steps are involved in examining a text: formulating research questions to be answered; selecting the sample to be analyzed; defining the categories to be applied; outlining the coding process; implementing the coding process; determining trustworthiness or credibility; and analyzing the results of the coding process. In this way,

analysis was conducted on the tributes through the use of the Attitude sub-system in categorizing sentences and clauses that contain issues related to the sentiments of the selected institutions. These clauses and sentences were parsed into the various syntactic-semantic units, by using the three main devices used in examining the emotions of individuals – *Affect*, *Judgement* and *Appreciation*. The identified patterns in the funeral tributes were validated by two other persons who are well versed in the Systemic Functional Linguistic model in order to achieve a degree of inter-coder reliability since qualitative content analysis is “a very personal process because two researchers analysing a transcript will probably come up with different results” (Dawson, 2002: p. 128).

Data Analysis and Discussion

This section presents situations of *Attitude* as an appraisal sub-system, with particular attention to the three strands developed by Martin and White (2005) – *Affect*, *Judgement* and *Appreciation*. It must be mentioned that the present study aims at explaining an institution’s choice of particular linguistic features to instantiate grief or shock.

Affect as Realized in the Tributes of Both Institutions

Affect is a sub-system of attitude which deals with the resources of interpreting emotional reactions to situations and events. The data of the funeral tributes for both public and private institutions, indeed, opened up with a lot of *affect* dealing with the emotional responses to the news of the demise of President John Atta Mills. Analysis showed that the *opening* information of these funeral tributes paid by the institutions give comments and reactions to this shocking and unprecedented occurrence – the demise of the sitting president of Ghana. It is noteworthy that these comments signal the stance of these institutions; how shocked and sad they were on the death of the president.

The staff of the Ministry of Lands and Natural Resources and its affiliated agencies **has expressed grief** (affect, -tive) with **profound sorrow** (affect, -tive) and **regretted** (affect, -tive) the passing away of the late President John Evans Atta Mills. ... “We are deeply **saddened** (affect, -tive) by the **tragic loss** (affect, -tive) of this great statesman’s, a dedicated and visionary President. This example confirms Martin and Rose’s (2003) assertion that such statements are hyper themes, in which in the opening information of these tributes of almost all the public institutions have chosen to acknowledge sorrow, sadness and grief as the overarching topic

around which the text unfolds. Again, the use of such negative attitudinal epithets as *saddened*, *sorrow* and *aggrieved* goes a long way to establish Yahya's (2010) claim that such semantically inscribed words are "mainly used by educated people and in formal places" (p. 57). Furthermore, from the analyzed tributes, the expression of sadness and grief in the comments given are directed to the wife, son, the political party the late president belonged to, the vice president as well as the people of Ghana. In the terms of Martin and White (2005), the conscious participant experiencing the emotion is known as the *emoter*, the phenomenon responsible for that emotion is the *trigger*. Thus,

... *NAGRAT* (*emoter*) *extended its purest condolences to the wife and family of the late President* (*emoter*). "*We also extend our sympathy and condolences to the government and people of Ghana* (*emoter*) *on the occasion of this unprecedented misfortune* (*trigger*),"

The above example confirms Fenton-Smith's (2007) findings that the depth of the feelings expressed by the emoter with reference to only lexical items cannot be the sole parameter for instantiating attitudinal affect, but also who the sympathy is directed to.

Apart from the opening information section of the tributes that exhibited the use of attitudinal affect as a reaction to the news of the death of President Mills, the *ending* information also employed this technique. The analysis of the data revealed that these institutions expressed hope in the fact that the kind of lifestyle the late president lived and exhibited while alive, should give him the opportunity to have a good resting place after his death. From this perspective, the institutions employed the use of the modal verb *may* and the anticipatory expression *it is ...* in appealing to the Spiritual Being – God to accept and keep the soul of their president. These are highlighted in the example:

It is our fervent prayer that the Good Lord receives him unto His external bosom and grants him a peaceful rest. May the Lord, in his mercies, grant the departed soul of the late President eternal rest.

These comments and reactions, as evident in the examples above, underpin Fernandez's (2006) claim that the taboos of death are accounted for by some conceptual metaphors. For him, death is seen as a "desirable event under the influence of Christian beliefs" (p. 11). The institutions therefore conceptualized death as a journey with a spiritual destination with the backdrop of the perceived faith practiced by the late president

Judgement as Realized in the Tributes of Both Institutions

The data analyzed revealed that after the institutions have made their comments with respect to the sudden demise of the president, there is a sharp shift to describing character. That the construal of the symbolic nature of Professor Mills is not predominantly evident in his death, but in the figure of Mills himself; thus, meaning is not attached to his *death*, rather to his *life*. The majority of the institutions (93%) reiterate the fact that the late president was an embodiment of the peace, hard work, and determination which characterize the Ghanaian people. As Fenton-Smith (2007) intimates, “This view directs attention to the symbolic value of his life” (p. 708). Thus,

The Chief Executive Officer ...has described Professor John Atta Mills, as a man who became a father of all (judgement; normality) and yet a servant (judgement; normality) of all as well as a champion (judgement; capacity) of the people. In a statement to console Ghanaians and the family of the late President, Mr. Mensah described Professor Mills as “a man of letters ((judgement; capacity) as well as wisdom (judgement; tenacity); a learned (judgement; capacity) professor before he entered politics, yet meek (judgement; normality)”. “As President he was astute (judgement; normality) in his judgment and decisions, yet temperate (judgement; normality) and mild-mannered (judgement; normality) in his dealings with subordinates and all others ...

Indeed, the institutions’ choice of words as judgement depicts that the lexical items considered are obviously and clearly emotional. This contention patently confirms Fernandez’s (2007) claim that lexical items have “the tendency to resort to positively loaded words” (p. 13), which illustrate the institutions’ intention of complimenting the deceased (president Mills) by showing his social status or personal virtues. It is realized in the data that there is the preponderant use of *normality* and *capacity*, which construe *social esteem* as opposed to *propriety* and *tenacity*, which represent *social sanction*. This is not to say the late president was faultless, but this kind of genre – funeral text does not allow the aggrieved to make use of negative comments. The reader is, somehow in the context of mourning, positioned to accept this information as a means of assuaging praise on the late president.

Appreciation as Realized in the Tributes of Both Institutions

Since these institutions epitomized the late president as a man of peace, they expected that his behavior is an exemplary one, which the successor should emulate. For instance,

Of all the leaders in the world, he was the one who preferred to address his people affectionately and sincerely as 'my brothers and sisters', a mark of a true man of the people who endeared himself to many by his humility (appreciation) ... *A man of peace... who united not only Ghana but the West Africa sub-region, indeed Africa ...* (appreciation).

It is very much interesting to also note that the kinds of devices employed by the institutions to depict appreciation were mostly directed to the vice president, who was sworn in immediately after Mills' death, as well as the people of Ghana. Thus,

... Mr. John Dramani Mahama on his assumption of office as president, and expressed the hope that he would continue the good works of the late Professor John Atta Mills' government ...

According to these institutions, the late president left a very good and solid legacy, which when followed would place the country among the countries that uphold democracy in national development.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the analysis of the tributes paid to the late president of the Republic of Ghana showed that the opening sections of the tributes to President Mills signalled the position of these institutions to show how shocked, and depressed they were on hearing the news of his death. Moreover, these sentiments were predominantly revealed in linguistic patterns that showed negative affect. It was also revealed that the expression of sadness in the tributes was directed to the wife and the son of the late president, the vice president as well as the people of Ghana.

The study bears a number of implications. In the first place, it lends credence to Martin & White's (2005) Appraisal Theory and most importantly the language of mourning in institutional tributes to a diplomat. Another implication of the study is the contribution it makes to the scholarship on funeral genres since many scholars and researchers have explored other funeral text types like obituaries, condolences, and epithets. Future studies could also focus on the other strands of the appraisal system like *Graduation* and *Engagement* to ascertain the objectivity of the findings in this study.

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