Avoiding the reaper: Notions of death in Sri Lankan obituaries

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This paper presents findings from a study of the language of death in Sri Lankan obituaries. Obituaries were collected over two periods, from the Sri Lankan broadsheet *The Sunday Observer* spanning January to December 2003 and 2012 respectively, to answer the following research questions: (1) Does the language used in Sri Lankan obituaries attempt to evade the notion of death through features such as euphemisms and conceptual metaphors?; (2) What cultural/religious elements do the obituaries display through the language used? (3) How does the language that is used reflect the social and personal identity of the deceased and their families? (4) Does the language used to portray the identity of the deceased and their families reflect social values? The two sets of data were also used to compare whether there were any significant changes from 2003 to 2012 in the way that death was announced. Results indicated that the only change that appears to have taken place is in the formality of style in Sri Lankan obituaries, which seems to be decreasing.

1. Introduction

English in Sri Lanka has a long history and Sri Lankan English has been seen by scholars (Mesthrie & Bhatt, 2008, p. 200) as an emerging variety of New English "with a certain regional and social identity." Sri Lanka is a multilingual setting which comprises different ethnic communities and religions. Although English has no official status being considered a 'link language' since the 1980s, it is very much a part of the linguistic fabric of Sri Lanka, with the language being a first language for some people and an additional or best language for others. In a setting such as this where cultures and traditions mix, it was interesting to explore how the different communities in Sri Lanka deal with the notion of death—in obituaries.

The term 'obituary' is based on a euphemistic term for death, the Latin word '*obitus*' meaning 'departure', and the way that death is treated by different communities can foreground cultural traditions and religious influence.

Therefore, the treatment of death and bereavement in obituaries can be seen to be far from homogenous and it's the variety evident in obituaries that make them a source of rich linguistic data. Fernandez (2006, p. 108) sees obituaries as a "breeding ground" for euphemism and conceptual metaphor related to the taboo of death.

Obituaries have been studied by both linguists and anthropologists as a distinct form of discourse. Moses and Marrelli (2004, p. 123) observe that obituaries are "a window that provides a view into a culture and that they are one of the elements out of which literate cultures are built." The term 'obituary' is a euphemism in itself and comes from the Latin *obitus* meaning 'departure', a common euphemistic term for death. The meaning the word has nowadays is "a record or announcement of a death or deaths, especially in a newspaper; usually comprising a brief biographical sketch of the deceased" (*OED*).

Obituaries, it should be noted, go beyond the limits of a mere announcement of a demise; it is also a means of affirming the cultural background, religion, social status, and migration patterns of the deceased and their family. This is supported by Lawuyi (1991), who identified obituaries as socially legitimised advertisements of deceased and bereaved persons, often built on the aspirational rather than the true identities of the people in the text. In his contrastive study of German and English obituaries, Fries (1990) places obituaries alongside other notices such as birth and wedding announcements. However, as Bonsu (2007) observes, despite the implied potential of obituaries as residential provinces for exploring social phenomena, they have often been neglected as research sites.

The purpose of this study is twofold. First I seek to investigate how obituarists attempt to evade the notion of death through the use of metaphors and euphemisms. Kachru's (1982) studies of obituaries in Asia revealed that conceptual metaphors and euphemisms were common factors used to avoid the direct mention of or reference to death. Nwoye's (1992) investigation of Nigerian obituaries also showed how authors employ 'flowery' and 'flamboyant' language to avoid mentioning death directly. Second, I suggest that obituaries are a site for the bereaved to manipulate the personal, social, religious and cultural identity of the deceased and their own identity through the presentation of the dead individual. It is suggested that obituaries provide an opportunity for the bereaved to pursue their own identities while presenting the deceased in a favourable light. This is confirmed by Bonsu (2007) who studied obituaries of the Asante people in Ghana. The analysis will also examine how certain social and moral values are endorsed through the construction of identity.

Using methodology from corpus linguistics, I explore specific linguistic

strategies used by obituary writers over a period of ten years to foreground their perceptions of death as well as the identity of the deceased and self. The two obituary corpora for the investigation are taken from obituaries published in *The Sunday Observer* from January to December 2003 and January to December 2012. Like Bonsu (2007) I perceive obituaries as cultural texts that appropriate language for a very specific agenda. The paper is an attempt to answer the following research questions:

1. Does the language used in Sri Lankan obituaries attempt to evade the notion of death through features such as euphemisms and conceptual metaphors?
2. What cultural/religious elements do the obituaries display through the language used?
3. How does the language that is used reflect the social and personal background of the deceased and their families?
4. Does the language used to portray the identity of the deceased and their families reflect social values?

2. Background

2.1. Personal and social identity

In his work on the rituals of death, Capone (2010) examines death in terms of pragmemes focusing on language use in relation to the types of speech acts used by survivors. In his study, speech acts are viewed as pragmemes that are used to provide comfort to the family of the deceased. In this study, however, since the focus is on the representation of death in a written rather than spoken form, the language of the obituaries is examined in relation to how different identities are expressed. According to Long (1987, p. 965) obituaries are "a form of portrayal" that seems "to fall within the domain of identity (claimed or attributed rather than felt). Characteristically, they incorporate aspects of both 'personal identity' and 'social identity'" (Long, 1987, p. 966). Riley (2007, p. 86) suggests that personal and social identity can only be discussed with reference to others. The adherence to this notion can be seen in the way that language in obituaries is used to represent the deceased as well as the survivors in terms of their relationship to others. As noted before, Lawuyi (1991) sees the language of obituaries also as expressing 'aspirational' rather than 'actual' identities.

In obituaries although the deceased have no hand in negotiating their personal identity, this is done by way of the details used to represent the dead individual. One of the main ways in which individual or personal identity is represented is through naming practices (Llamas & Watts, 2010). A person's name is generally important in distinguishing one person from another and locating them within a particular family, role, place, occupation, ethnic group

and religion. Likewise, identity is also portrayed through other measures of personal identity—listing the number of children a person has and their social statuses (Aborampah, 1999, p. 263). Social identity, on the other hand, is generally expressed through social factors, such as social class position, occupation, education, income, wealth, place of residence, etc.

Fernandez (2006, p. 101) notes that people have traditionally felt reluctant to talk about death in straightforward terms. In his view, whatever the reason may be, people try to soften the effect of death by talking about it in different terms, for example, euphemisms, conceptual metaphors, which strips the taboo of the serious, explicit and offensive overtones. Sexton (1997, p. 335) sees this as being symptomatic of the overall discomfort people feel with the subject of death as a whole. Despite people's reluctance to mention the subject of death, as Fernandez (2006, p. 102) points out, they are communicative situations in which one cannot evade the notions of death and dying. Fernandez distinguishes between two types of obituaries: (1) informative, and (2) opinative. The Sri Lankan obituaries can be characterised as belonging to the former category as they provide only factual information such as the relationship to the deceased, information about next of kin, funeral arrangements, and so forth. However, it is difficult to say that they are objective, as the obituary is written by members of the family, and there is subjectivity in the information that they choose to provide.

2.2. Cultural and religious identity

Kachru (1982, p. 312) emphasises the importance of cultural and religious identity by stating that "the announcements about death, the metaphors about death and the outward manifestations at funerals are very culture and religion specific." The religious and cultural identity of individuals and societies can be seen through the rituals of death in different societies. Capone (2010, p. 13) examines what Kachru refers to as 'outward manifestations at funerals' by investigating the rituals of death in Italy. He observes the language used at funerals by relatives and friends and states that the "ritual is there both for the deceased and her relatives." This is further reiterated by Salmani Nodoushan (2013, p. 90), who discusses the Shiite Iranian people's speech at funerals as being "closely tied to religious and social conventions and institutions."

In Sri Lanka, similar to these studies, the rituals of death differ according to one's religion and culture. A Buddhist will perform their Buddhist identity through certain rituals of death such as "offering cloth on behalf of the dead" to Buddhist monks. This is done prior to the cremation or the burial of the body. Another ritual is pouring water from a vessel into a cup placed within a plate until the cup overflows. According to Kariyawasam (2010) the entire

ritual is . . . an act of grace whereby merit is transferred to the departed so that they may find relief from any unhappy realm wherein they might have been born." Whereas the Buddhist rituals are solely for the benefit of the deceased, rituals performed by Christians and Muslims are more for the survivors. This is expressed by Capone (2010, p. 13) who notes that the function of the ritual is to accommodate the relatives . . . and to bring them peace of mind."

Although there is only limited direct reference to rituals of death within obituaries, the language that is used serves the same functions expressed through spoken rituals, i.e. that of representation of the dead and self and providing moral strength to the survivors. Similar to Capone's study (2010, p. 16), language is not only used to transfer merit to the deceased but also for purposes of 'accommodation' helping the families of the deceased to come to terms with the loss of a loved one. This ability of obituaries to mediate between expressing identity and at the same time providing comfort relies on the fact that the texts are often written by people other than the deceased (usually a member of the family) and "are imbued with personal and social identities of both the bereaved family and the deceased." (Bonsu, 2007, p. 202).

2.3. The Sri Lankan landscape and the use of English

Sinhala is the national language of Sri Lanka and Tamil is an official language. English on the other hand, though very prestigious, has no official position. The constitution of Sri Lanka only recognises English as a 'link language.' However, English has a huge presence in Sri Lanka and it is a first or dual first language for a small segment of the population, and a second language for the majority. As in other parts of the world where English is present, in Sri Lanka too, English is seen as the language of social mobility and opportunity. The use of English in Sri Lanka is tied to social class and speakers of English are generally seen as belonging to an 'elite' population.

The use of English for the purpose of writing obituaries indicates the predominance of English for a certain section of society. Obituaries are also published in Sinhala newspapers. So the choice to publish the obituary in English suggests the social status of the individual as well as their linguistic background. As Kachru (1980) has noted, English is preferred to the native or vernacular language because of its prestige. Unlike in some New English contexts such as Malawi, in Sri Lanka, English can be acquired at home as well as through education, and the use of English for the purpose of writing an obituary reflects the social status of the writer and shows their adoption of Western forms of commemorating death. What is, however, important to note is that although the obituary is in English, the language use is completely Sri

Lankan.

Sri Lanka is a multicultural society with people of different religions and ethnicities. The Sinhala people make up the majority of the population (74%), and Tamils, Muslims, Burghers and Malays make up the rest of the population. In Sri Lanka although most Muslims are Dravidians, they are treated as a separate ethnic group. The religion practiced by the majority of the population is Buddhism. Apart from Buddhism, many people also practice Christianity and there are different denominations such as Roman Catholic, Christian, Methodist, Baptist, Presbyterian, etc. Among the Tamil population there are Hindus, Muslims, and Christians.

3. Method

3.1. The corpus

This paper examines the obituaries that appear in the Sri Lankan broadsheet newspaper, *The Sunday Observer* over two periods: the first set of obituaries is taken from January–December 2003 and consists of 646 obituaries amounting to 52,016 words; the second set of obituaries is taken from January 2012 to December 2012 and consists of 656 obituaries with a total of 54,667 words. The complete corpus consists of 106683 words.

The obituaries in *the Sunday Observer* are written by family members and always begin with the surname and first name in emboldened uppercase letters, and if it is a married female, the maiden name is provided in parentheses (as nee). Matiki (2008) notes that in obituaries 'maiden names are included to define the social scope of the obituary; not only is the death of a beloved one a loss to her husband and the family she married into but also for her family of origin.' Another common feature in the obituaries is the use of nick names or pet names in parentheses. In Sri Lanka people often have nicknames by which they are known, and it is customary to give the nickname in the obituary. The texts vary in length, but are not generally longer than about 10 lines. The obituaries are in alphabetical order and have a similar style. As the obituaries are written from the perspective of the family, they provide a subjective and personal view of the deceased, often highlighting important social and personal aspects of the life of the deceased. The obituaries rarely give the cause of death and no mention is made of how the person died, and overall, death is treated in a matter-of-fact way as a normal occurrence. As in other studies (Al Khatib & Salem, 2011; Fernandez, 2006) conceptual metaphors and euphemisms are used to describe the nature of the death but to a lesser extent. There is also description of the characteristics of the person. An extensive list of next of kin is usually provided, such as names of immediate family, in-laws, grandparents, cousins, etc. The texts always include the place, time and date of the funeral arrangements. Features that

appear to be rare or optional are cause of death and age at death. This is similar to obituary notices in British and German newspapers where the age of the deceased is rarely provided.

Obituaries from two separate years spanning a ten year period was collected in order to investigate social and stylistic changes. The diachronic study of obituary texts is useful as it can point to what members of society find important to highlight in announcing a loved one's death, and even more importantly, it can give us an insight into the cultural practices and religious rituals associated with death in particular societies and the social and moral values embodied within the portrayals. In addition, it can give an understanding of how family members enact their own identity through the presentation of the deceased, and it can also show changes that have occurred in society in terms of language use.

3.2. The structure of the obituaries

Some aspects that appear to be the same in all obituaries that were examined were the following: the surname, title, initials and first name of the deceased in bold capitals, listing of family members, including extended family and their work or place of residence. Names are listed alphabetically and in directory style, thus the obituaries begin with the surname and first name with nickname or maiden name in parentheses. Then the relationship of next of kin is described and this is followed by a list of the family members, for example, a typical description would be as follows:

JAYASEKARA - MRS. W.A. KARUNAWATHIE.   Beloved wife of late Wilson Jayasekara, loving mother of Siridasa, Sunil (Australia), Sarath (Industrial Development Board), Ranjith (Kelaniya University) Nimala (Dammapala Balika Vidyalaya Beliatta), Nimal, Dayananda (Plantation Human Development Trust), Ananda (Toroid International Pvt. Ltd.), mother-in-law of Tilaka, Amala (Australia) Chandrika (D.S. Senanayake College, Beruwala), Kushlani, Somasiri (Divisional Secretariat Hambantota), Tilaka (Nihiluwa Maha Vidyalaya), Ayoma (Moragahahena Maha Vidyalaya), Maureen, expired. Cortege leaves Residence at 3.00 p.m. on Monday 6th January.   No. 246, Nihiluwa, Belliatta.

(*The Sunday Observer*, 5th January, 2003)

As noted by Moses and Marelli (2004, p. 127), in Sri Lankan obituaries too, the kinship section of the obituary is the most extensive part where the writers focus on the personal and social identity of the individual and the family. The circumstances surrounding the death are often presented using euphemisms.

Personal identity is listed through social status of the deceased as well as family members. One of the main features of the Sri Lankan obituaries not very common among obituaries except in Ghana (Bonsu, 2007) is the inclusion of foreign places of residence of family members. Career orientation and type of work is generally evident in most obituaries in other outer circle countries. Likewise one of the features that is common in other New English obituaries but missing in Sri Lankan ones is the reference to academic titles and professional qualifications. Nwoye (1992, p. 18) observes that Nigerians communicate the social status of the deceased through the use of academic and professional titles and qualifications after the name of the deceased. In Sri Lanka although this practice is not common, social status is shown through religious and professional titles.

The final part of the obituary provides details of the funeral arrangements such as where the funeral is and the date and time. As mentioned previously there is very little reference to cause of death or age at death. Occasionally, cause of death may be given indirectly. Sometimes this information can be gleaned from requests that appear in the obituaries. While providing information on funeral arrangements, the obituaries also provide members of the community details on how to pay their last respects.

3.3. Procedure

The first step of analysis was to search the corpora for euphemisms, conceptual metaphors and references to death, religion and intimacy using *AntConc* (version 3.4.1w developed by Anthony (2009)). Since the investigation focuses on answering the research questions given above, relevant language use such as words for careers, religious phrases, references to religion, words used to show the personal characteristics of the deceased etc. were searched in the two corpora separately and the data were also verified through manual analysis. The results of the searches are presented in the tables given below using normalising frequencies per thousand words.

The data were analysed using *AntConc* (version 3.4.1w, *ibid*) and the results showed great variation in terms of the language used, as the religious influence and cultural traditions of different ethnic communities clearly determined the choice of language. Although euphemisms and metaphors were used, they were not as frequent as in Fernandez's (2006) study and the philosophical and cultural outlook was also different. The announcement of death was also crucial in situating the deceased and their next of kin socially. The social values were marked through references to the identity of the deceased and the next of kin in relation to their place of residence and professional status.

4. Results and discussion

4.1. Use of conceptual metaphors and euphemisms

Before beginning the search for conceptual metaphors and euphemisms, I compiled a list of euphemisms and conceptual metaphors used by Fernandez (2006) and Al Khatib and Salem (2011). This first list appears in Table 1 along with their frequencies in the two corpora.

Table 1
Frequencies of Conceptual Metaphors in the Corpora

Conceptual metaphor	2003 (freq. /1000 words)	2012 (freq. /1000 words)
Death is a journey	2.0762	3.0914
Death is a rest	1.1342	1.0243

Two of the conceptual metaphors found by Fernandez were not found in the Sri Lankan obituary corpus at all. These are 'death is a joyful life' and 'death is the end'. This can be explained by the fact that death is not viewed as a celebration of life nor as an end of life. Because of cultural reasons, most people in Sri Lanka believe in either rebirth or life after death.

One of the differences evident in Sri Lankan obituaries is the underuse of conceptual metaphors. Out of the 6 metaphors discussed by Fernandez (2006), only two are predominantly used. The conceptual metaphors that are used can be related to the culture and the religious views from which the obituaries are written.

4.1.1. Conceptual metaphors

• *Death is a journey*

In some Sri Lankan obituaries too death is conceptualised as a journey and the act of dying is regarded as an act of leaving (Fernandez, 2006, p. 121); the frequencies displayed in Table 1 illustrate that the conceptualisation of 'death as a journey' is on the rise, whereas, the metaphor 'death as a rest' is on the decrease. However, this applies only to Christian obituaries. Although for Christians, the destination of the journey may be an encounter with God, this is not the case for Buddhists, who see the journey as a continuous process until the attainment of nibbana. It is the deceased who has to undertake the journey and this journey will continue through many lives, deaths, and rebirths. The metaphors that are used in the obituary demonstrate the metaphoric language use that shows death as a 'samsaric journey', which can be related to Buddhism and the religious views of the bereaved family:

DE SILVA AD MRS SRIMATHIE SWARNALATHA   Wife of late Mr B.R. de Silva, Tripitakachariya, Chartered Accountant, mother of Nihal, late Jayantha & Sriyanthi, mother-in-law of Indra and Prasanna Muthuthanthri, daughter of late Mr & Mrs Arthur V. Dias of Panadura, *passed away* and was cremated on 17.03.2003. Her eyes were donated to Give Sight. She encouraged and supported her late husband in founding an institution which developed and guided many a career, business. She touched many lives with kindness. Anyone reading this have a kind thought for her, which will *be good Kamma* for the thinker and such thoughts will assist *the departed in her Samsaric Journey*.

(*The Sunday Observer*, 23ʳᵈ March, 2003)

What is interesting here is the use of the words 'samsaric journey'. The word '*samsara*' or '*sangsara*' is a concept that is used in both Buddhism and Hinduism. It means "the endless round of birth, death, and rebirth to which all conditioned beings are subject. Samsara is conceived as having no perceptible beginning or end. The particulars of an individual's wanderings in samsara are determined by karma. [. . .] In Buddhism, samsara is transcended by the attainment of nirvana or nibbana (*Merriam Webster Dictionary*). As discussed by Fernandez (2006, p. 116), the person who embarks on the journey is the deceased who, by virtue of having undertaken the journey, is considered to be alive (Bultnick, 1998, pp. 34-38). This can be gathered from the words used to verbalise the deceased such as *departed* and also through the use of verbs of movement such as *pass*, *leave, went, enter and promote.* Examples that include the notion of death as a journey ending in an encounter with God are provided by metaphors such as *safe in the arms of Jesus*, *passed on, eternal rest*

• *Death is a rest*

Another conceptual metaphor that is present in my data is the metaphor 'death is a rest'. It was used with a 1.1342 frequency per 1000 words in 2003 and appears to further decrease in 2012 with 1.0243 occurrences. The most frequent reference is the word 'rest', observed in phrases such as *laid to rest, called to rest with Jesus, may he rest in peace, called to eternal rest with the Lord, etc.* Fernandez (2006, p. 121) notes that the underlying notion of all the mappings in this metaphor is based on the fact 'that a rest, a repose or a sleep are temporary, and therefore, death is also conceptualised as an event that is temporary.' He sees the use of the word 'rest' as a denial of death, as the conceptualisation suggests that the person is only resting and is not dead. A similar view is expressed by Capone (2010, p. 8) in relation to funeral prayers in Italy, where he says that the prayers are used to consolidate the notion that the deceased is not really dead. The metaphor 'death is a rest' is associated

with the culture and religion of the deceased and their family, and shows their religious perceptions and culture as in the following example:

SAROJINI - HARRY Safe in the arms of Jesus. Wife of late Jesudian Harry, darling Mom of Stella, Bella, Bernard, Ivy - (IDL) and Anne (UK), *Entered Rest with Jesus. Her body was laid to rest* in a private service by the Ceylon Penticostal Church on 27/09/ 2003 according to her wishes.

<div align="right">(The Sunday Observer, 5th October, 2003)</div>

• *Death is a loss*

There are no metaphors for death as a loss in the 2003 corpus and in the 2012 corpus it only has a 0.128 frequency per 1000 words. When it is employed, it is in the sense of lamenting or regretting the loss of the loved one. Fernandez (2006, p. 118) observes that one can only regret or lament if the death is conceptualised as a loss. In his view, "both the words 'regret' and 'lament' are terms commonly found on the obituary pages to stress the grief experienced by the relatives and closest friends of the deceased." I did not find any uses of the word 'lament'; instead there were several instances of the use of the word 'missed' which collocated with the adverbials 'greatly', 'always' and 'sadly', as well as the word 'regret' in phrases such as *it is with deep regret and sadness"* which also bring out the sense of loss to the family.

• *Death is a reward*

Another metaphorical use that was infrequently used in the data includes metaphors associated with death that understand it as a kind of reward. This metaphor is based on the positive effects of death as a means of relief (Fernandez, 2006, p. 122). They included the following:

*   *Entered glory*
*   *Called to glory*
*   *Promoted to glory*
*   *Entered heavenly bliss*

In all four cases mentioned here, the act of dying is conceptualised as a religious reward after a virtuous life on earth.

4.1.2. Euphemisms

Euphemistic terms used to avoid the taboo of death were only evident through the words used to describe death itself (See Table 2). The word 'deceased' had the highest frequency per 1000 words with 0.4229 and 0.4573 in 2003 and 2012 respectively. The word 'death' was used less frequently (See

Table 2); the word 'deceased' is quite technical and it is interesting that this is the word that has the highest frequency in both corpora.

Table 2
Frequencies of Euphemisms for Death in the Corpora

Euphemistic Nouns	2003 (freq. /1000 words)	2012 (freq. /1000 words)
Death	0.3268	0.256
Deceased	0.4229	0.4573
Demise	0.0192	0.0731

There were more variations in the use of verb forms such as *died, passed away, entered, called* and *expired* (See Table 3)*.*

Table 3
Frequencies of Euphemistic Verbs in the Corpora

Euphemistic Verbs	2003 (freq. /1000 words)	2012 (freq. /1000 words)
Died	0.2306	0.2195
Expired	7.8437	3.7133
passed away/passing away	2.0762	3.128

More unusually, there was also one instance where the noun 'demise' was used as a verb *demised*. Demise is a technical word and is not used in English as a verb, so this use shows the formality and hyperbolic nature of the sample obituary.

MRS SIVALINGAM SELLAMMAL, - Beloved wife of Mr E. Sivalingam, Managing Director of Island Trade Centre (Pvt) Ltd, 437, Old Moor Street, Colombo 12 and beloved mother of Dr S. Sivasanka (Asiri Central Hospital) and Thusiyanthan Senthilkumar (Director, Island Trade Centre), *demised on* 14th of September 2012. Cortege leaves residence 9A, Mary's Road, Bambalapitiya, Colombo 04 on 16th Sunday at 11 a.m. for cremation at Borella Kanatte (Hindu Section). Telephone: 2587028.   242287

(*The Sunday Observer*, 16th September, 2012)

When the word 'died' was used, it was usually followed by the adverb 'peacefully' or 'suddenly'. Al-Khatib and Salem (2011, p. 92) note that these last two expressions have connotations that are more or less universal. Moses and Marelli (2004, p. 129), for example, explain that the adverb *suddenly* points to the importance of time in the conception of death while the adverb *peacefully* reflects an idealised concept of 'good death'. In terms of how the family members view the death of the deceased, it is clear from the data that the idea of 'good death' is preferred over references to time. The adverb

peacefully has a frequency of 1.3265 per thousand words in 2003 and 0.9695 in 2012 as opposed to the adverb *suddenly*, which has a frequency occurrence of 0.0768 in 2003 and 0.0548 in 2012 (See Table 4). The obituarists portray their view of the death of the deceased through the adverbial that they choose to describe the manner of death. Manner of death is also indicated through the prepositional phrases 'under tragic circumstances' and 'after a brief illness' which hint at how the deceased died although this information is never given overtly.

Table 4
Manner of Death

Manner of death	2003 (freq. /1000 words)	2012 (freq. /1000 words)
peacefully	1.3265	0.9695
suddenly	0.0768	0.0548
under tragic circumstances	0.768	0.0365
after a brief illness	0.0961	0.2012

The most frequent euphemism used to express death was the erudite word 'expired', which is not used in British English obituaries. Although the *OED* defines the word 'expire' in relation to a period of time as well as the death of a person, in British English, it is uncommon for the word 'expired' to be used in the context of a death; it is generally used with reference to the end of a period of time, such as an expiry date for an item of food or an insurance policy. The usage of 'expire' to express the end of a person's life is a more old fashioned, learned use. A noticeable feature in Sri Lankan English writing in general, not just obituaries, is the formality in language. Herat (2001) notes that even in speech people are likely to use the more formal standard form as opposed to the more colloquial. The desire to use the more formal and erudite language is reflected in the high frequency of the word 'expire' which occurs 7.8437 times per thousand words in 2003 and 3.7133 times per thousand words in 2012 in comparison to 'passed away' which only has a frequency of 2.0762 per thousand words in 2003. It appears to have been more frequent in 2012 with a frequency of 3.7133 per thousand words suggesting that the word usage is on the increase. What is interesting here is the results for 'expired' in 2012 which have significantly reduced. The Log Likelihood significance test shows that the word 'expired' is overused in 2003 with a relative frequency of 63.16% compared to 2012 which has a relative frequency score of 35.95% with a LL score of 73.32. This shows significance at the level of *p<0.01.* It is not very clear from the data what has replaced expired, but in comparison to 'passed away' it seems to be on the decrease. Instead of talking about death directly there seems to be a style shift towards talking about the 'remains'. This may be due to the increasing reluctance to talk about death in a straightforward manner. After 'expired' the most

common euphemism that was used was 'passed away'. In other obituaries, such as in Ghana, Malawi and Nigeria, 'passed away' was the most common euphemism used to describe death. In this sense, my data are different in using the rather outdated 'expired' as opposed to 'passed away'.

In both 2003 and 2012, the most common euphemistic words to refer to the corpse of the deceased were 'remains' or 'mortal remains.' Over the 10 year period, its use appears to have increased. The Log Likelihood significance test shows that in 2003 the word was underused with a score of 4.64% as opposed to 2012 which was 15.40% giving a total significance score of 39.55. Thus the significance of the word is at the *p <0.01* level. There is reference made to *remains lying*, *remains were donated*; *remains will be laid* and *remains open for viewing.* As noted before, this usage shows a style shift over the 10 year period where direct reference to death is avoided and instead references are made to the 'remains' of the physical body. Other words generally used are 'body' and 'ashes' (See Table 5).

Table 5
Euphemisms Used to Refer to the Deceased

References to the dead	2003 (freq. /1000 words)	2012 (freq. /1000 words)
body	0.2499	0.914
remains	0.5767	1.8475
ashes	0.1922	0.1463

4.2. Religious and cultural references

Secondly, in order to investigate whether the language of the obituaries reflects cultural and religious background, I compiled a list of common religious references evident in the obituaries similar to that discussed by Khatib and Salem (2011).

Table 6
Frequency of Religious References in the Two Corpora

Religious references	2003 (freq. /1000 words)	2012 (freq. /1000 words)
At rest with Jesus	0.4998	0.5853
Safe in the arms of Jesus	0.2691	0.2012
Eternal rest	0.1922	0.0182
Rest in peace	0.1153	0.0182
May Allah grant him Jennathul Firdouse	0.0768	0.1646
May s/he attain the supreme bliss of nirvana/may he attain nibbana	0.0731	0.0731

Afful (2012) notes that words such as 'eternal rest' in Ghanaian death notices,

reinforces the African belief in reincarnation and immortality of the soul where the dead are considered to have gone to rest, even though it resonates also with Christian belief. There are some words in Ghanaian obituaries that are not present in the Sri Lankan obituaries such as the use of the word 'transition', which according to Afful (2012) reinforces the African metaphysical concept that death is not an extinguisher of life but a channel to join the ancestral world.

In Sri Lankan obituaries, the way death is viewed is to a large extent influenced by the religious culture and background, for example, the Buddhist perception of life and death is brought out through the phrase *May she attain the supreme bliss of nirvana*. Here the use of the word 'nirvana' (Pali: nibbana) indicates the Buddhist wish for the deceased—i.e. the end of all suffering. In Buddhism, death is not the end of the story; in fact, Buddha asserted that the story goes on after death (life after death, reincarnation). Kariyawasam (1996) notes that among Buddhists death is regarded as an occasion of major religious significance, both for the deceased and the survivors. For the deceased it marks the moment when the transition begins to a new mode of existence within the round of rebirths. When death occurs all the kammic forces that the dead person accumulated during the course of his or her lifetime become activated and set about determining the next rebirth. For the living, death is a powerful reminder of the Buddha's teaching on impermanence; it also provides an opportunity to assist the deceased person as he or she fares on to the new existence.

When an enlightened person like the Buddha dies, there is no further re-birth. So the wish to attain 'nirvana' is a wish to attain the state of a Buddha. In addition, there are also words such as *karma*, *samsara*, *maha sangha* (the order of Buddhist monks) which show Buddhist concepts. For example, in the following obituary, reference is made to the reader attaining 'good karma' through kind thoughts for the deceased.

Anyone reading this have a kind thought for her, which will be good Kamma for the thinker and such thoughts will assist the departed in her Samsaric Journey.

(*The Sunday Observer*, 23rd March, 2003)

4.3. Does the language portray religious and cultural rituals?

4.3.1. Religious rituals

Al Khatib and Salem (2011, p. 91) found that religion played an extensive role in Jordanian obituaries. They found verses from the Quran and the Bible used

to varying degrees in the obituaries. This is not common practice in Sri Lanka but Christian, Buddhist or Islamic references to religious rituals are apparent in the data; here are some examples:

* *Safe in the arms of Jesus*,
* *May her soul rest in peace*
* *May Almighty Allah grant him Jennathul Firdouse,*
* *From Allah we come and to him is our return*
* *May s/he attain the supreme bliss of nirvana*
* *We make dua that Allah (SWT) accord her the highest status in Jannah, insha-Allah*

The use of phrases such as s*afe in the arms of Jesus*; *supreme bliss of nirvana*, *Insha Allah*, *requiem mass*, *memorial service,* etc. show the importance of religion in rituals of death for all the different communities in Sri Lanka. Salmani Nodoushan (2013, p. 90) notes that 'Islam decrees that deceased people are not really dead, and that they are worthy of the same respect they had when they were alive." This idea can be seen in references such as 'from Allah we come and to him is our return" and " May Allah accord her the highest status."
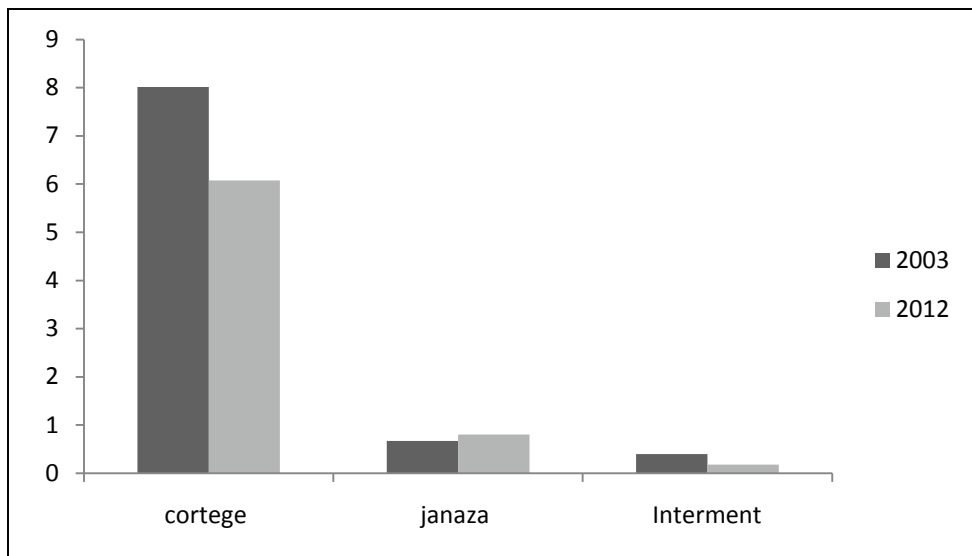

Figure 1. References to religious funeral rituals.

Funeral rituals among the different communities in Sri Lanka are portrayed through the choice of language. The *OED* (2000) defines the word 'Cortege' as a solemn procession, especially for a funeral. The religious ritual of going in procession to the place or burial or cremation is brought out through the use

of this word, which is the way in which funerals are conducted in Sri Lanka. The high frequency of the word (See Figure 1) identifies the majority of obituarists as being from a Christian background. Similarly, the word 'janaza' is used in Muslim obituaries for showing the Muslim funeral rituals. As Salmani Nodoushan (2013) mentions, after the death of a Muslim, a close relative washes the body and wraps it in a shroud and the burial takes place quickly, often the same day. This is reflected by the fact that in the data, the past tense is used more often than the present with the word 'Janaza'; Janaza is a Muslim prayer service carried out at the graveside, for example, *Janaza took place on the same day* is used more as opposed to *Janaza leaves*. Another word that shows funeral ritual is the use of the word '*interment*', the burial of a corpse in a grave or tomb. In Sri Lanka, burials are mostly among Christians and Muslims whereas Buddhists and Hindu funerals are more likely to be cremations. The way funeral rites and rituals are worded is indicative of religious and cultural background, for instance in the following obituary, the use of the words 'cremation by pyre' immediately indicates that the deceased must be either Hindu or Buddhist and this is seen in the parentheses, which states (Hindu Section).

Cortege leaves residence 45, Rosmead Place at 4.15 p.m. on Sunday January 29th for cremation by Pyre at General Cemetery, Kanatte (Hindu Section).

(*The Sunday Observer*, 29th January, 2012)

In both 2003 and 2012 the verb *interred* had a higher frequency than *buried*. *Cremated* on the other hand had a frequency of 0.346 per 1000 words in 2003 and 0.128 in 2012. The verb *interred* collocated only with the word 'ashes'.

Examples:

Her ashes were interred at Christ Church Kotte.

According to her wishes, her ashes have been brought home to be interred with her husband's at the family burial ground at Holy Trinity Church, Patuwatha, Dodanduwa.

With the corresponding nouns, the pattern is different with the word 'interment' used less than the words 'burial' or 'cremation' in 2003 and 2012; in 2003 and 2012 the word 'interment' had a frequency of 0.4037 and 0.1829 per 1000 words respectively, which shows that its use has decreased and 'burial' and 'cremation' had a frequency of 5.306 and 4.9389 respectively in 2003 and 4.5947 and 4.1341 in 2012 showing that these are the preferred choices for disposing of the body. This choice is also a symbol of social status.

Those who cremate the body are generally wealthy; if a Buddhist or Hindu chooses to bury the body, it symbolizes their low economic social status, as cremations are more costly than burials.

Religious affiliation is also evident in the data. This information is usually presented in the section on funeral arrangements which mention where the deceased will be buried or cremated. Although direct references to religious affiliation are minimal, the frequency counts for what religious section was mentioned in relation to burial or cremation demonstrates that the majority of English obituaries are published by those members who belong to a small elite irrespective of religion but who use English in their daily interaction. From Table 7 it is also clear that those who speak English in Sri Lanka come mainly from a Catholic or Christian background.

Table 7
Religions Mentioned in the Two Corpora

Religions	2003 (freq. /1000 words)	2012 (freq. /1000 words)
Roman Catholic	0.6536	0.4573
Anglican	0.2306	0.2195
Buddhist	0.0576	0.128
Muslim	0.4421	0.3841
Hindu	0.3075	0.3678

Another interesting factor revealed in the data is the local superstition relating to death. Sri Lankans believe that it is not good to take a funeral on certain days of the week. This belief is evident through the high frequency of the words 'Sunday' and 'Monday' as the preferred days for funerals to be held. It is believed that Tuesday and Friday are unlucky days to hold funerals because of negative astrological effects. The 'bad days' are referred to as 'kemmura dawas' in Sinhala.

4.3.2. Culture

Cultural references in the data are apparent through references to place of burial or cremation. The most frequently used word for place of cremation or burial is *cemetery* with a frequency of 7.8206 per thousand words in 2003 and 6.4206 in 2012. However, there is also a high use of the Sinhala word for cemetery which is *kanatte* (1.8841) and 0.439 uses of a variant of the same word with the spelling *kanatta* with an 'a' at the end and another *kanattee*. As this is a Sinhala word, it has no standard spelling in English, which shows the variation in the way the word is written in the obituaries. The use of this word reflects Sri Lankan culture, as 'kanatte' is a Sri Lankan word that is used by English speakers. In writing, the tendency to be formal shows the use of the word 'cemetery' but this does not prevent speakers from also using the more

everyday term 'kanatte.' The final resting place of the body or the site of cremation, which cemetery the body was buried or cremated in and whether it was a family graveyard, etc., can also show the social status and affluence of the deceased and their family. The word 'kanatte'is often used for a particular cemetery in Colombo where it is no longer possible to buy burial plots, so burying or cremating someone there in itself is a marker of social status, especially if the deceased has a ancestral family graveyard.

Likewise the Sri Lankan culture is also evident through words like vidyalaya (for school) and in Muslim obituaries, the use of the word 'janaza' (for funeral). Similarly, even with place names where there are English equivalents, sometimes the local form is used, for example, Galkissa instead of Mount Lavinia.

Cultural and religious practices referred to in the Sri Lankan obituaries can be seen in Table 8.

Table 8
References to Religious Funeral Rituals

Reference to funeral rituals	2003 (freq. /1000 words)	2012 (freq. /1000 words)
cortege	8.0167	6.0731
janaza	0.67	0.8048
Interment	0.40	0.1829

4.4. Does the language used portray the personal and social identity of the deceased?

The social and personal background of the deceased is projected in the obituaries through various devices: these are the incorporation of career orientation of the deceased, occupation, place of work of the deceased and family members and place of residence (usually abroad) of family members.

Professional identity is prominent in the data. In the two sample corpora, all obituaries indicate the occupation of the deceased in some form or the other. Work history is constantly used either by mentioning the type of work or place of work. There are very high frequencies of occurrence for the following professions: teacher, doctor, attorney, accountant, commissioner, engineer, principal, director, manager, etc. Apart from academic professions, in Sri Lanka, it is also prestigious for individuals to have family members who belong to the clergy. In the data, the titles Rev Bro, Rev Fr and Rev Sister have a frequency of 0.5959 in 2003 and 1.0243 in 2012. Having family members who belong to the clergy enhances social status by being from a 'good family'.

I only found one reference to a Sinhala word for 'proprietor', *Press Mudalali.* In his *Dictionary of Sri Lankan English*, Meyler (2011, p. 171) defines *mudalali*

as a businessman, merchant, trader, shopkeeper. It is unusual in obituaries to find the mention of non-academic jobs such as builder, carpenter, etc. Generally, the obituaries are of persons who have high ranking and prestigious jobs linked to education. In this sense, they embody lives that are "worthy of display" and bring out core values associated with those lives. As Long (1987) observes, work is 'a readily readable emblem of social worth' and a person's work can locate them according to hierarchies of income, social class, prestige, and authority (Long 1987). Work that is well paid or highly regarded is seen as something valuable that can be portrayed for others to see. The family is also an identifier of status. In my data, as in the Asante obituaries described by Bonsu (2007, p. 208), not only the profession of the deceased is given but also that of family members. According to him, "the children's successes inferred from their occupations, suggest that the deceased was a responsible member of society who was responsible in raising equally good (if not better) citizens." This same sense is evident in my data. Another identity marker is the explicit mention of the names of schools that the deceased or bereaved family members have attended or attend; names of universities, financial institutions and government service.

The importance of the family in identifying social status can be seen in the data through the prominence given to family members and their work and place of residence. The indication of foreign places of residence in obituaries (See Table 9) is interesting as it not only situates the family in relation to wealth, prestige and social mobility through access to foreign cultural capital (Bonsu, 2007; Bordieu, 1984) but at the same time it also gives an insight into patterns of migration and the social status of the individual. Bonsu (2007, p. 208) observes that "residence abroad and perceived access to Western cultural capital contributes to social attribution of life successes and hence to enhanced social status."

Table 9
Foreign Places of Residence of Next of Kin

Foreign places of residence	2003 (freq. /1000 words)	2012 (freq. /1000 words)
Australia	3.0759	4.4633
Canada	3.0375	1.99
UK	2.2108	2.9085
USA	1.0765	1.4268
Europe (including Switzerland, France, Italy and Germany)	1.1727	1.4268
Middle East (including Dubai, Saudi, UAE and Bahrain)	0.4998	0.6219

Among the countries mentioned in the obituaries, Australia was the country that was frequently recorded followed by Canada. These statistics are important, as it shows the migratory patterns of Sri Lankans. The first wave of migration in the mid 1960s was to Australia because of the Sinhala Only Act in 1958, which made Sinhala the national language of Sri Lanka. During this time, a majority of English speakers called the Burghers (those of Portuguese and Dutch descent) migrated to Australia, in protest of having to learn Sinhala. In more recent times, especially after the 1983 ethnic riots in Sri Lanka there have been several waves of migration to Canada in search of political refuge and better economic and living standards. So the majority of migration has been to Australia and Canada and this is reflected in the number of mentions to family members who reside in these foreign countries. This also shows us that those who have migrated keep in touch with and return to their countries of origin.

The other countries that are mentioned also show the social status and wealth of family members in terms of the work they do and their place of residence. References to the UK and the USA top the list after Australia and Canada. These are countries that Sri Lankans generally migrate to for purposes of study. The motivation for moving to these countries is because of Sri Lanka's colonial history. Studying at a British educational institution is seen as prestigious. Most educated politicians in Sri Lanka have studied at Oxford or Cambridge and as a result people have a high regard for British institutions. So there is a desire to continue higher education in either the UK or the USA which will eventually lead to permanent migration and residency. Seargeant (2012, p. 53) has noted that today USA is the country of choice for the educational exodus. This is true of Sri Lankans' migration, as in recent years, many American Universities have set up colleges in Sri Lanka, where students study for two years and then migrate to the US for the rest of their studies. Similarly there are also frequent mentions of countries such as Dubai, Saudi and other Gulf States in the Middle East where people have migrated for economic reasons because the incomes are higher and untaxed. These mentions therefore can situate family members in terms of their social status, education, income and so forth and foregrounds the personal and social identity of the deceased as an important member of society.

4.5. Does the identity portrayed of the deceased reflect social and moral values?

4.5.1. Close knit families and extended families.

Through the portrayals of identity within the obituary, the language brings out the importance that Sri Lankans place on the closeness of the family and extended family unit. As mentioned before, the most extensive section of the obituary is devoted to listing family members and their relationship to the

deceased.

As Matiki (2008) observes for Malawian obituaries, the use of kinship terms such as *mother, father, daughter, son, wife, husband, grandmother*, etc., are important as it shows the close bond between the family, situating the obituary within the 'private' domain. Bonsu (2007, p. 208) sees the listing of children and grandchildren as a means of portraying a person's self-worth. Sri Lankan obituaries (with very few exceptions) are always written by family members and foreground what aspects about the deceased's personal and social identity are important to them. In portraying the deceased, male and female identities are constructed differently; female identity is presented in relation to their role within the family; for example, in the data, the third person singular pronoun 'her' often collocated with the words 'husband', 'family' and 'grandchildren', whereas for males 'him' collocated with words such as 'grant', 'wish', etc., showing a different social construction, related to job and professional status.

The family members are also individualised through their work or professions or place of work or study and place of residence. All these characteristics put together show how the family unit is viewed. Although because of migration, families are scattered, what is shown in the obituary is the closeness and the bond that remains between family members. Also the nicknames or pet names and terms of endearment that are used serve to strengthen this bond of closeness between family members.

In terms of diachronic change, the mention of family members and next of kin tend to become less formal. In 2003, local words to describe kinship relationships are seldom used. The word 'achchi' (for grandmother) has a frequency of 0.0192 and 0.176 for 'seeya' (grandfather). No Sri Lankan kinship terms such as *amma, thaththa* etc. are used for mother and father. Parakrama (1995) noted that the use of the English terms 'mummy' and 'daddy' as opposed to the local terms signified the users desire to associate themselves with a more elite society. In the obituaries those familiar forms are rare with the word 'mummy' only having a frequency of 0.0384 per thousand words. In 2012, there is a style shift, in that more local kinship terms are used in the obituaries. In addition to *achchi* (for grandmother) and *seeya*, other kinship terms such as *amma* (for mother) and *nangi* (for younger sister) are also used. This shows that the elevated style is slowly changing to become more familiar and informal in relation to the vocabulary used to describe the relationship of the deceased to other family members. There is a tendency in Sri Lankan English writing to be overly formal and this tendency is also evident in the expression of family relationships, for example, in referring to a widow of the deceased, the preferred term in the obituaries is the very formal and old fashioned word 'relict'.

FERDINANDO SYLVIA - Safe in the arms of Jesus. *Relict of D. Stanley S. Ferdinando,* precious mother of Shiran & Premani, Sharmal & Nilmini, Shamitha & Rohan, Shalin & Subani, much loved grandmother of Sharika, Sandharu, Shayarana, Shihara, Rayendra, Suren, Suhanya and Sandev, beloved sister of the late Harvard, the late Sirilal and of Hugh, Rev. Premasiri, Somasiri and Swinitha. Cortege leaves residence at 4.30 p.m. on Sunday 15th July 2012 for Service at Moratumulla Methodist Church and thereafter for burial at the Church Cemetery. 120, 'Kidron', Willorawatte, Moratuwa. 184090

(*The Sunday Observer*, 15th July, 2012)

In representing identity, although the deceased does not directly contribute to active identity constructions, often, obituaries present the deceased as 'stars' (Bonsu, 2007, p. 207). What Bonsu means here is that the bereaved family projects a particular identity of the deceased based on their positive attributes for purposes of impression management. Support for this idea also comes from Lawuyi (1991) who observes that one important function of obituaries is to present the deceased in a manner that overwrites all blemishes they may have had in life. Obituaries in Ghana (Bonsu, 2007) are seen as employing photographs of the deceased for this purpose.

Table 10
Personal Characteristics of the Deceased

Characteristics	2003 (freq. /1000 words)	2012 (freq. /1000 words)
beloved	6.5941	10.317
loving	10.6121	9.5853
loved/much loved/dearly loved	1.115	1.5182
dearly (beloved)	1.4226	1.628
darling	0.8843	1.006
precious	0.9035	1.006
adored	0.0768	0.2378
affectionate	0.0768	0.1646
cherished	0.0192	0.1829
dearest	0.1153	0.128

In Sri Lankan obituaries although no images are used, as can be seen in Table 10, the words used to describe the deceased portray a positive identity, for example, 'beloved', 'much loved', 'dearly beloved', etc. In terms of the frequency per 1000 words, the word 'beloved' seems to be the favourite and has increased over time with a frequency of 10.317 showing a difference of

3.7229. The word 'beloved' has strong connotations of being treasured; it is a stronger adjective than 'loving' and is a culmination of other words such as precious, adored, cherished, etc., reinforcing the quality of the intimacy between the deceased and their family. This refers back to Riley's notion whereby individuals develop their own identities through the management of others'. This is further confirmed by Bonsu (2007, p. 200), who sees obituaries as carefully presented texts about people that are motivated by the desire to fashion likeable identities for the deceased and, by implication, the bereaved.

4.5.2. Importance of education

Sri Lanka has the highest rate of literacy in Asia with 98% literate in reading and writing. The importance that is placed on education is brought out through references to the professions of the deceased and members of the family as well as through references to places of study such as schools and universities and their geographical location. All the professions mentioned in obituaries are professions that require higher learning and further qualifications showing the high esteem in which education is held. This is supported through the data which shows that in terms of academic titles, the most frequent was the title 'Dr' with a frequency of 3.5858 and 4.3719 per thousand words respectively in 2003 and 2012 affirming that out of the main occupations, doctor is regarded as having the most status quo.

4.5.3. Importance of religion and religious rituals

Religion and religious rituals also play an important role in portraying social values. Whether Christian, Muslim, Hindu or Buddhist, the funeral arrangements section in the obituary point to the religious rituals associated with the religious affiliation of the deceased or their families. References to religious rituals indicate the person's religious affiliation, for example, in Muslim obituaries the title 'Al Haj' is used for deceased males or family members to portray their faith in God. It is a title that is bestowed on males who have visited and prayed at Mecca at least once in their lifetime. Moreover, the title also reflects the enhanced social status of the individual, and in the data, the mention of family members with this title is important in identity construction.

4.5.4. Moral values

The data also shows high moral values as well. All the parents, grandparents, etc., are portrayed as 'legally' married and this is evident through numerous mentions of words like husband, wife, mother-in-law, father-in-law, etc. Words such as 'partner' are completely absent. Through extensive listing of

children and grandchildren, heterosexuality is also propagated as the social norm.

5. Conclusion

I have identified several linguistic strategies that the bereaved in Sri Lanka use in investigating the research questions discussed above. In relation to the use of metaphors and euphemisms, as was found in the four main religions in Sri Lanka, for Buddhists and Hindus death is not an end and the conceptualisation of death was in terms of a journey, whereas a completely opposite philosophy was observed in Christian and Muslim perceptions of death. Of the euphemisms used to describe death, one of the features of the data was the use of old fashioned and outdated terms.

As seen through the data analysis, although obituaries are homogenous in style, the language is diverse in terms of representation and self-presentation. The language of obituaries appeared to differ depending on the religious and cultural identity of the deceased and the bereaved. The linguistic constructions were markers of religious and cultural identity and the associated cultural and religious rituals of the deceased and their families and social circle were portrayed through words and phrases identifiable with a particular religion. As Long (1987) notes, obituaries are 'stylised, abbreviated biographies' that portray individual and social identity through the use of language. The data discussed is consistent with Riley's (2007) and Capone's (2010) thoughts regarding the construction and negotiation of identity and language of death. The data makes it evident that obituaries are not only used to provide a favourable identity of the deceased but are also a means of endorsing the social identity of the bereaved family members. What this suggests is that obituaries "harbour social status markers and are not immune to the social logics of identity negotiations" (Bonsu, 2007, p. 215).

A function of the obituaries, as mentioned before, was to represent the social status of the deceased and their families. One of the ways in which this social status is expressed is through presenting the obituary in an English newspaper. English is a prestigious language in Sri Lanka and is associated with the elite in society. By using this language a claim is being made that the deceased and their family as well as their friends and associates belong to the same elite social milieu.

As seen in the analysis, this 'elite' status is carefully crafted through other identity markers; a noticeable feature in the data was that the deceased individuals were all high ranking with good jobs and social status. Likewise, the high status and wealth of the deceased was reinforced through references to the foreign places of residence detailed in the obituaries.

Therefore, as Bonsu (2007) notes, obituaries can be seen as offering an excellent research site for examining how aspirational identities are portrayed through the dead. As discussed in the paper, my analysis of the Sri Lankan obituaries reflect shared moral and social values evident in society; the accompanying language that was discussed shows how titles, nicknames and terms of endearment are used in particular ways to reinforce socio-cultural values. This suggests that the content of the obituaries are presented within a broader socio-cultural environment.

The data also suggests that over the ten year period from 2003 to 2012, little has changed in terms of self-presentation; the only change that appears to have taken place is in the formality of style, which seems to be decreasing. Future research may examine diachronic changes that have taken place from the 19th century to the present in presenting the dead in obituaries as well as ritual notices of death and gravestone inscriptions.

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