

## **READING BETWEEN THE LINES: A COMPARISON OF 480 GERMAN AND DUTCH OBITUARIES**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Obituaries do not only announce the death of a significant other but also provide insights into how a society deals with death according to the norms governing the rituals of individuals within that society. This study aimed at investigating possible differences between German and Dutch obituaries, specifically in terms of visual and textual elements, information about the deceased, and funeral ceremony-related information. Data used to address the research questions were the contents of 240 German and 240 Dutch obituaries published in 10 different newspapers (6 in Germany, 4 in the Netherlands). Results of this study show that statistically significant differences between German and Dutch obituaries exist. While German obituaries use illustrations more than Dutch ones, Dutch obituaries provide more information, in general, than their German counterparts. The types of deceased-related information on German and Dutch obituaries also vary significantly. Moreover, Dutch obituaries provide more funeral ceremony-related information than German obituaries.

### **INTRODUCTION**

People from various cultures respond to and cope with the reality of death and dying in different ways. While others may respond to such reality by denying it as a result of a tremendous fear of death (Kellehear, 1984), others respond to death

and dying with acceptance by grieving or mourning over the loss of a significant other (Stephenson, 1985). Inarguably, mourning is an indispensable element of loss and death (Fowlkes, 1990). Van Gennep (1960, p. 147), in Pantti and Sumiala (2009), views mourning as a transitional healing period for survivors; passing through the ritual process reunites the surviving members of the group. Interestingly, however, death and dying are themes still surrounded by taboos, especially in western cultures. In fact, as O’Gorman (1998) claimed, individuals in rich western countries often fail to view death and its associated rituals as a rite of passage comparable to childbirth, marriage, and retirement. The non-acceptance of death can consequently influence the mourning process and even inhibit individuals from coming to terms with the situation (Zilberfein, 1999). Mourning and grieving practices are often governed by specific cultural norms as the latter defines the type and the length of the former (Stein & Winokuer, 1989).

For some cultures, mourning is a private experience that is only partly shared with the public (Fowlkes, 1990). Culture significantly dictates the way and the extent it is displayed (Hall, 1976). When compared to countries in Southern Europe, death has no public role to play in the daily lives of Middle and Western Europeans (Roth & Roth, 1988). Schäfer (2002) attributes this to a general feeling of uncertainty when dealing with death-related issues. Despite varying attitudes toward death and dying across different culture, however, the practice of announcing the passing away of a person by those emotionally proximate to him or her has become a cultural universal. Nonetheless, the construction of such an announcement would expectedly vary according to the deeply embedded norms governing the rituals of individuals within a specific cultural group.

This research, therefore, primarily intends to examine the differences in the contents and structures of German and Dutch obituaries, considering the plurality of cultural differences characterizing the two countries despite their geographical proximity. The difference between Germany and the Netherlands is apparent if one looks at a couple of cultural dimensions proposed by Hofstede (2001). For instance, while both countries are regarded very individualistic, Germany slants more strongly toward masculinity than the Netherlands do. To address the research questions emerging from the above stated objective, obituaries published in German and Dutch newspapers and on their online portals were subjected to content analysis.

### **Obituaries as Information Sources**

Obituaries are written in defined cultural contexts to achieve a certain goal. They exist in many cultures and languages (Marzol, 2006). They can, therefore, be seen as a reflection of a society’s attitudes towards and values attached to death (Eid, 2002; Starck, 2005). Obituaries can provide insight into the nature of a society, as well as shed light on how a given culture regards life and death-related

issues (Moses & Marelli, 2003; Müller-Calleja, 1987). While the primary role of an obituary is to announce a person's death, its content and design could also be a source of cultural information (Bronisch, 1984). Over the course of time, obituaries developed into an accepted and widespread medium of communication. Regional newspapers, in particular, often have their own sections for death announcements and personal columns. In some instances, obituaries are among the most often read sections of the newspaper, receiving significantly higher attention than editorials (Spillner, 2002).

In Germany, every second death is announced through an obituary (Möller, 2009). Those placing an obituary are aware that many people will read their public statements. Aside from the obituary's function of providing a venue for the bereaved to express their final tribute to the deceased, it also enables the former to highlight their relationship with the latter (Al-Ali, 2005; Grümer & Helmrich, 1994; Nwoye, 1992). Furthermore, an obituary provides the bereaved with a way to share their grief with the public. By publicizing the death of a person, his or her family members can express their respect and emotions while inviting others to share in their sorrow, as well as bid the deceased a final farewell (Anderson & Han, 2009). People who did not know the deceased personally could also learn more about him or her. In many cases, the announcement could emotionally affect the reader and provoke an emphatic reaction (Marks & Piggee, 1999).

### **Obituaries as Reflections of Cultural Norms**

Obituaries also represent society's increasing desire to publicly deal with death (Hosselmann, 2001), as they are regarded as an important aspect of the mourning process (Phillips, 2007). The manner in which people deal with death is determined by the rituals put in place by every culture. As such, the public character of obituaries affords readers insight into important aspects of the life within and the culture of a given society (Gerhards & Melzer, 1996; Haus, 2007), just as they provide insight into how individual choices and social prescriptions for death-related rites blend (Ergin, 2012).

Obituaries divulge individual and private memories at which point they become part of public awareness (Hume, 2000). According to Pilartz (2000) and Grümer and Helmrich (1994), 80% of obituaries are written by loved ones alone or in conjunction with a funeral parlor representative. Most texts pay final respect through tributes. Furthermore, most obituaries include the name of the deceased, the cause of his or her death, the deceased's positive attributes, and information about funeral rites.

In Germany, the name of the deceased is the only element considered obligatory in an obituary (Fries, 1990). Nonetheless, this could be true to other Western European countries, as well. The widespread inclusion of voluntary elements such as cause of death, for example, could possibly indicate a society's general openness to various aspects of death. The inclusion of the deceased's personal

attributes could be seen as a presentation of values considered desirable in a given society (Hume, 2000). On the whole, an obituary attempts to shed positive light on both a life lived and the death that ended it (Barry, 2008). As a collective reflection, the importance of obituaries continues to increase in modern societies. These days, almost every newspaper has its own Internet page and many provide an additional virtual mourning portal. The format enables loved ones the additional possibility of publishing their obituary for an indefinite period of time (Hume & Bressers, 2010).

### **Cultural Differences in Death Announcements**

Empirical studies into obituaries in relation to their cultural milieu are relatively scant, with a focus on the characteristics of those death announcements in the context of a very specific cultural group. For instance, researchers have looked into the use of language in obituaries of Muslims and non-Muslims in Turkey (Ergin, 2012), the structure of obituaries for those who died of natural deaths and those who died as martyrs in Jordan (Al-Ali, 2005), and the different dimensions (e.g., pictorial representation, immediacy of announcement, belief in the immortality of the soul) emphasized in Nigerian obituaries (Ao, 1993). However, cross-cultural comparison of obituaries still receives minimal academic attention.

While people are bound to experience some forms of loss, the way they respond to the experience varies from one culture to another (Eisenbruch, 1984). The customs and rituals (including the writing of obituaries) making up a mourning culture, both as an individual and a collective response to the experience of loss, also differ across national cultures (Anderson & Han, 2009). According to Haus (2007), the mourning culture of a particular country represents a unique source for gaining important insights into the life and culture of a society.

The focus of this research is on the possible differences in the contents of obituaries published in German and Dutch newspapers. Although Germany and the Netherlands are geographically proximate to each other, the cultural differences between the two countries are copious considering various cultural dimensions. While both countries score highly in three cultural dimensions (individualism, egalitarian, and propensity to avoid uncertainty), Germany is regarded more masculine than the Netherlands (Hofstede, 2001). Furthermore, in his book “Frau Antje und Herr Mustermann: Niederlande für Deutsche,” Linthout (2002) succinctly captured the differences between the two cultures:

It is with envy that the Germans realize that the Dutch really know how to take life easy and go with the flow. The Dutch are considered uncomplicated, creative and pragmatic, even slightly tightfisted. On the other hand, the Dutch see the Germans as rather duty-conscious, hierarchical and perfectionists, but also as cozy, hospitable and romantic (cover text).

Differences in culture, or in a number of cultural dimensions, have a strong influence on the ways people from different cultural groups communicate

(Gudykunst, 1997). Obituaries, as communication artefacts, therefore, could also vary across different national cultures.

### **The Present Study**

Within the context of cultural diversity, this study analyses obituaries in both Germany and the Netherlands to determine differences in public mourning culture and examine their implications as possible indicators of culture in general. The obituaries analyzed were published in both the printed versions of the newspapers and their online mourning portals. The study took both design elements and content aspects into account. According to Drescher (2002), aspects of mourning culture of different countries and their public's handling of death-related issues can be gleaned from their obituaries. Furthermore, a study by Eckkrammer (1996) found the coverage of such obituaries to be relatively small and no international conformity was to be expected. As such, cultural conventions should be recognizable when comparing German and Dutch obituaries. Furthermore, texts in obituaries are governed by neither law nor publication guidelines, reflecting cultural mindsets more accurately. This supposition led to the following research question:

Which cultural differences—both general and those specifically related to mourning—can be ascertained from the analysis and comparison of German and Dutch obituaries?

To help answer this question, the analysis of the German and Dutch obituaries was divided into four main sections to address the following sub-questions:

1. To what extent do visual elements in German and Dutch obituaries differ?
2. To what extent do textual elements in German and Dutch obituaries differ?
3. To what extent do the types of information about the deceased person in German and Dutch obituaries differ?
4. To what extent do funeral ceremony instructions in German and Dutch obituaries differ?

## **METHOD**

Contents of 480 obituaries published in both German and Dutch newspapers and on their online portals were subjected to analysis using a pre-defined coding scheme. The construction of the coding scheme was guided by results of interviews with a mortician, an obituary advertisement manager at a regional newspaper, and a pastor. All interviews were recorded and transcribed, and the results were used for the coding scheme. In this article, the selection of the 480 obituaries (the corpus) is discussed first, followed by the construction of the coding scheme, and then the coding process, which also includes an indication of inter-coder reliability.

## Corpus

In this study, 480 obituaries were coded, of which 240 were published in German newspapers and 240 in Dutch newspapers. To exclude possible within country effects, for each country, newspapers from four regions (North, East, South, West) were selected. Selection of the newspapers as sources for the obituaries was based on two criteria. First, the newspaper should hit the newsstand every newspaper day, that is, from Monday to Saturday. Second, the newspaper should have a print run of at least 100,000 copies, which implies that the selected newspapers are relatively “big” in terms of circulation in both Germany and the Netherlands.

The four newspapers selected for the Dutch datasets included *the Dagblad van het Noorden* (North), the *Twentsche Courant Tubantia* (East), the *Brabants Dagblad* (South), and the *Noordhollands Dagblad* (West). Within Germany, the western region did not have a widely circulated newspaper, thus for that region it was deemed necessary to select three newspapers (treated as one), resulting in a sufficient number of obituaries for analysis. The newspapers included for the German datasets were *Hamburger Abendblatt* (North), *Freie Presse* (East), *Münchener Merkur* (South), *Express Köln* (West), *Kölner StadtAnzeiger* (West), and *Kölnische Rundschau* (West).

Covering a period of two weeks, all published obituaries were downloaded and saved in a database, which resulted in a total of 1,336 German and 819 Dutch death announcements. Subsequently, within each newspaper, 4 obituaries were randomly selected for each weekday (Monday to Friday), and 10 obituaries were randomly selected for Saturday (there are more obituaries published in newspapers circulated on that day since there are more readers in general). This resulted in a final sample of 60 obituaries from each (of the four) newspaper and a total corpus of 240 German and 240 Dutch obituaries.

## Coding Scheme

A content analysis of the 480 obituaries was performed to address the research questions. Content analysis has proven to be a valid research method for studying obituaries since it eliminates interaction with the author of an obituary or family of the deceased, and also because the method enables a straightforward analysis of the contents of the obituaries (Deutscher, 1973; Halbur & Vandagriff, 1987; Webb, Campbell, Schwartz, & Sechrest, 1966).

Themes for content analysis and the codebook were derived and developed based on the initial readings of a random selection of the obituaries and on the three interviews described previously. It should also be emphasized that the code book was primarily inspired by the coding instrument of Eid (2002) and Cihak (2009). The code book was divided into four sections, namely, visual aspects of the obituary, textual elements, information pertaining to the deceased, and

funeral ceremony instructions. The visual aspects refer to several elements such as the *length of the obituary* (number of lines), *design of obituary* (quadratic or rectangular), and *illustrations* (all non-text elements, e.g., crosses, roses, pictures of the deceased or other ornamental elements).

Interviews conducted with a German mortician, an advertising sales manager at a Dutch newspaper, and a German pastor revealed that the obituary is rarely written by the newspaper itself. In most cases these days, the obituary is written by the family, often with the assistance of a funeral parlor representative. The finished obituary is then sent to the newspaper's advertising department for printing. The interviews confirmed previous work of Marks and Piggee (1999), who claimed that the length and the design of the obituary reflect what the family of the deceased wants to express. Moreover, the interviews showed that the newspaper is just the channel, and that it does not interfere in any way, in the obituary's contents. Furthermore, analysis shows that a significant correlation between obituary size and esteem for the deceased exists, which confirms results of Eid's (2002) study. Because newspaper companies regard obituaries as similar to advertisements, the sizes of such announcements could give an indication of the financial status of the author(s) publicly. According to Eid (2002), the list of the bereaved also serves to indicate the deceased's social network—the more names mentioned, the more tightly-knit the social network and the stronger the bond among family members.

Furthermore, the textual elements of the obituary were coded. These elements consisted of the author of the obituary (family or company of the deceased), the quantity of published names of the bereaved (number and relation to the deceased, family, colleagues, pets), private message in the text (biblical quotations, poems, and personal messages about/from the deceased), expressions of emotions of the bereaved (which was readily gleaned from the texts, e.g., "We will miss you so much." "We are desolate." "We will never forget you."), information about the character of the deceased (adjectives such as ". . . due to his great engagement . . ." "You were a fantastic person."), and acknowledgments (if an acknowledgement to the bereaved, nursing staff or to the deceased were mentioned, e.g., "with our sincere thanks to the staff members of Residential Area 2").

Another focus of the content analysis was on information about the deceased. Here the following elements were coded: gender of the deceased (inferable from the name, otherwise by other contents such as "our beloved wife and mother"), names and affiliations of deceased (first name, last name, professional salutation, social title, and nickname), personal information about the deceased (place of birth, date of birth, place of death, date of death, and age), and indication of the deceased's profession and/or hobby (evident through an illustration or a mention within the text, e.g., "Monday, September 26th, my husband and our singer passed away . . ." or "After a sporty and active life . . ."). Additional pieces of information about the relationship to the deceased (the relationship to the deceased was gleaned through the copy with examples such as ". . . our beloved brother . . ." ,

“. . . our beloved mother, grandmother, great-grandmother, sister and aunt . . .” and “. . . widow of . . .”), and cause of death (given or not, e.g., “After a long illness . . .” or “. . . peacefully in his sleep . . .”) were also analyzed.

The analysis also focused on information about funeral ceremony instructions, which included details about the funeral (kind of funeral, whether a private or closed funeral/cremation was planned, and an invitation to a meeting after the funeral). Special requests for readers of the obituary or attendees of the funeral were also analyzed. Such requests pertained to dress codes, gifts, and donations. The publishing of demographic information such as profession or hobby does not only convey fundamental private information about the deceased but also provides readers with certain information about the author as well. Obituary choices can be used to indicate a culture’s degree of openness as it pertains to providing the public with private information. Furthermore, through information about the relationship to the deceased, a deeper insight into the curriculum vitae of the deceased is afforded. As a result, the reader learns things such as the marital status, family details, and, even, social status of the deceased.

In many cultures, the size and living generation-length of a family is synonymous with success. In line with this, publishing family information in obituaries can serve to advertise a family’s standing within a community (Bolkestein, 2010). The mention of emotions and the traits of the deceased is also an indication of what is culturally accepted within the realms of public mourning. Mentioning cause of death and funeral details can also be used to gauge how various cultures deal with death. Funeral details, for example, provide an indication of the extent to which families of the deceased prefer to mourn privately or publicly.

The last part of the code book pertained to information about content issues of the obituary. The quantity of adjectives mentioned within the text was also noted. According to Halbur and Vandagriff (1987), the choice of adjectives signifies the closeness of the relationship between the deceased and the family members left behind.

### **Coding Scheme Reliability**

In order to establish the reliability of the coding scheme, two researchers independently coded 10 randomly selected obituaries. All but two codes were found to have inter-rater reliability scores above .80 Cohen’s kappa. The two codes deemed insufficient were discussed and adjusted, resulting in an inter-rater agreement higher than .80 in the second wave of coding.

## **RESULTS**

This section discusses the results of the content analysis according to the different parts of the coding scheme: visual and textual elements of the obituary, information pertaining to the deceased, and information regarding funeral



ceremony instructions. For each set of aspects, the most prevalent differences between Dutch and German obituaries will be described (see Table 1).

### Visual Aspects of the Obituary

The shape of the obituary significantly differed in the two countries,  $\chi^2(2, N = 480) = 197.650, p < .001$ . German obituaries had a rectangle format with a horizontal direction, while most Dutch obituaries were also rectangle in shape although their content format was vertical.

German obituaries were more likely to include an illustration,  $\chi^2(1, N = 480) = 59.733, p < .001$ , such as a rose, cross or something else (e.g., a tree, boat, sport attribute). Dutch obituaries were significantly more likely to display special features, such as non-textual references to pets (a paw stamp after a name) or symbolic references to unborn babies (a heart after a woman's name). Within the set of German obituaries, pictures of the deceased person and colors were often used, although this trend did not differ significantly.

### Textual Elements of the Obituary

Another difference in the obituaries published in Germany and the Netherlands is the average length of the published text,  $\chi^2(5, N = 480) = 226.968, p < .001$ . Most of the German obituaries had a length of between 11 and 20 lines, while most Dutch obituaries were longer than 20 lines (see Table 2). Additional information about the prices of obituaries on German and Dutch newspapers was also collected to determine whether or not price was a factor influencing differences in the length of the obituaries in the two countries. At the average, German obituaries (2

Table 1. Visual Elements of the Obituaries

Characteristics	German ( <i>N</i> = 240)	Dutch ( <i>N</i> = 240)
	# (%)	# (%)
Format of obituary*		
Square	37 (15.4)	1 (0.4)
Rectangle (vertical)	75 (31.3)	224 (93.3)
Rectangle (horizontal)	128 (53.3)	15 (6.3)
Illustration		
Rose*	41 (17.1)	1 (0.4)
Cross*	69 (28.8)	18 (7.5)
Picture of the deceased	15 (6.3)	4 (1.7)
Pictures in color	6 (2.5)	0 (0.0)
Special feature*	0 (0.0)	29 (12.1)
Other*	46 (19.2)	21 (8.8)
No illustration*	93 (38.8)	177 (73.8)

Note: \* $p < .001$ .

Table 2. Textual Elements of the Obituaries

Characteristics	German ( <i>N</i> = 240) # (%)	Dutch ( <i>N</i> = 240) # (%)
Number of lines*		
1-5 lines	2 (0.8)	1 (0.4)
6-10 lines	34 (14.2)	8 (3.3)
11-15 lines	97 (40.4)	15 (6.3)
16-20 lines	71 (29.6)	22 (9.2)
21-30 lines	36 (15.0)	98 (40.8)
More than 30 lines	0 (0.0)	96 (40.0)
List of the bereaved		
Total quantity of names*	4.8 (range: 0-25)	11.0 (0-53)
Family members*	4.2 (0-25)	10.7 (0-53)
Already dead people*	0.0	0.52 (0-5)
Friends	0.1 (0-4)	0.1 (0-5)
Pets*	0.0 (0-1)	0.1 (0-2)
Groups*	1.12 (0-10)	0.47 (0-6)
Acknowledgments**		
To bereaved	6 (2.5)	4 (1.7)
To nursing staff	1 (0.4)	39 (16.3)
To deceased	22 (9.2)	9 (3.8)
No acknowledgment	211 (87.9)	188 (78.3)

**Note:** \* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\* $p < 0.01$ .

columns width  $\times$  100 mm height) are cheaper ( $m = 400.50$  euros,  $SD = 194.12$ ) than Dutch obituaries ( $m = 477$  euros,  $SD = 158.70$ ). A non-parametric (Mann-Whitney U) test—selected since the sample size was less than 10—indicated that the prices of the obituaries do not differ statistically,  $U(n_1 = 4, n_2 = 4)$ , two-tailed  $p = 0.66$ .

A simple linear regression analysis was performed to determine the effect of obituary price on obituary length using the two sets of data (German and Dutch obituaries). On the one hand, analysis shows that a negative relationship exists between the price of obituaries in German newspapers and the length of the German obituaries ( $\beta = -.30, p = .001, R = .30, R^2 = .09$ ). On the other hand, analysis also reveals that the price of the obituary in Dutch newspapers is positively related to the length of the Dutch obituaries ( $\beta = .13, p = .05, R = .13, R^2 = .02$ ).

Within the set of Dutch obituaries, far more names of the bereaved were present—an average of 11 versus 4.80 (for German obituaries),  $t(478) = -10.41, p < .001$ . In one case, up to 53 names were included. The average number of family members mentioned was 4.2 in German obituaries and 10.7 in Dutch obituaries,

$t(478) = -10.649, p < .001$ . Within the set of German obituaries, names of family members who already passed away were never mentioned, while a few Dutch obituaries included names of other dead family members (up to five already deceased persons in one advertisement). Mentioning pets and groups (e.g., “the cousins” or “best friends”) was also common among Dutch obituaries.

Finally, in both countries, most obituaries were published by the family of the deceased: 82.5% of the German and 95.8% of the Dutch obituaries. German obituaries were more likely to be written by the company of the deceased (11.7%) or other authors, such as friends (5.8%), than Dutch obituaries (9.0% and 0.4%, respectively);  $\chi^2(2) = 23.416, p < .001$ . Within the set of Dutch obituaries the nursing staff was often acknowledged. Among German obituaries, the deceased him- or herself was being thanked more often than in the Netherlands (for example; “we like to thank Jack for being such a good colleague” or “we thank our beloved grandma”).

A chi-square test was also conducted to determine the ratio of emotions expressed in both German and Dutch obituaries. Emotions were expressed in 70% of the German obituaries. Such emotional expression, however, was lower in Dutch obituaries at 55%  $-\chi^2(1) = 11.520, p < .001$ . Concerning the use of adjectives in obituaries, those published in the Netherlands tended to use more descriptive words (5.7 on average, with a maximum of 19) than those published in Germany (3.9 on average, with a maximum of 15),  $t(478) = -6.691, p < .001$ . The adjectives commonly used in the two clusters of obituaries are shown in Table 3.

### Specific Information About the Deceased

As Table 4 shows, in all (but one Dutch) obituaries, first and family names were mentioned. Social titles (e.g., Mr., Mrs.) and/or professional salutations (e.g., BSc, PhD, MD) were mentioned more often in German [ $\chi^2(1, N = 480) = 59.733$ ,

Table 3. Frequency and Percentages of Information About the Character of the Deceased

Adjectives	German ( $N = 240$ )		Dutch ( $N = 240$ )	
	$M$	Min-Max	$M$	Min-Max
	3.9	0–15	5.7	0–19
Top 5		$n$ (%)		$n$ (%)
1.	Nice + loving + likeable	104 (43.3)	Nice + loving + likeable	144 (60.0)
2.	Good + goodhearted	30 (12.5)	Took care for	61 (25.4)
3.	Committed + initiative + ready to take on tasks	13 (5.4)	Proud	21 (8.8)
4.	Took care of + shepherd someone + caring	10 (4.1)	Religious	12 (5.0)
5.	Trustworthy	9 (1.8)	Brave Strong + forceful personality	6 (2.5)

Table 4. Information About the Deceased Person

	German ( <i>N</i> = 240)	Dutch ( <i>N</i> = 240)
Names		
First name	240 (100.0)	239 (99.6)
Family name	240 (100.0)	240 (100.0)
Title: social**	58 (24.2)	2 (0.8)
Title: professional**	11 (4.6)	1 (0.4)
Nickname**	12 (5.0)	107 (44.6)
Personal Data		
Date of birth*	196 (81.7)	168 (70.0)
Date of death**	216 (90.0)	179 (74.6)
Place of birth**	5 (2.1)	115 (47.9)
Place of death**	11 (4.6)	126 (52.7)
Age of deceased**	28 (11.7)	69 (28.8)
Profession and hobby		
Profession direct**	40 (16.7)	12 (5.0)
Profession indirect**	9 (3.8)	4 (1.7)
Other activities direct	19 (7.9)	27 (11.3)
Other activities indirect	4 (1.7)	8 (3.3)
Cause of death**		
Illness	45 (18.8)	64 (26.7)
Passed away while sleeping	9 (3.8)	19 (7.9)
Other causes such as suicide	1 (0.4)	6 (2.5)
Not mentioned	185 (77.1)	151 (62.9)
Personal message		
Biblical quotation	9 (3.8)	11 (4.6)
Poem	91 (37.9)	99 (41.3)
Personal message to the deceased**	114 (47.5)	202 (84.2)
Personal message from deceased	9 (3.8)	9 (3.8)
Other text fragments**	149 (62.1)	214 (89.2)

**Note:** \* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\* $p < 0.01$ .

$p < .001$ ] than in Dutch obituaries [ $\chi^2(1, N = 480) = 8.547, p < .005$ ]. Dutch obituaries were more likely than German obituaries to mention the deceased's nickname;  $\chi^2(1) = 100.840, p < .001$ . German obituaries were more likely to disclose information about the background of the deceased, whereas Dutch advertisements contained more information about death circumstances. Additionally, German obituaries were more likely to mention the dates of birth and death than Dutch obituaries;  $\chi^2(1) = 8.912, p < .005$  and  $\chi^2(1) = 19.572, p < .001$ , respectively. On the contrary, Dutch obituaries were more likely to present places of birth and death than German obituaries;  $\chi^2(1) = 134.444, p < .001$  and  $\chi^2(1) = 135.876, p < .001$ , respectively. Additionally, the age of the deceased was communicated more often in Dutch obituaries than in German obituaries,  $\chi^2(1, N =$

480) = 21.719,  $p < .001$ . Furthermore, in both clusters of obituaries, professional background information and hobbies were hardly mentioned; although German obituaries included information about the profession of the deceased more often than Dutch ones,  $\chi^2(1, N = 480) = 19.624, p < .001$ .

Chi-square analyses revealed significant differences in German and Dutch obituaries regarding cause of death;  $\chi^2(4, N = 480) = 13.990, p < .005$ . Illness was mentioned as a cause of death in 26.7% of the Dutch obituaries, while the percentage of German obituaries mentioning illness as a cause of death was only 18.8. Furthermore, 7.9% of Dutch obituaries and 3.8% of German obituaries indicated that the deceased passed away while “in their sleep.” No significant differences were found regarding other causes of death such as suicide. For the other 62.9% of the Dutch and 77.1% of the German obituaries, information about a cause of death was not mentioned. Dutch obituaries were more likely to include a personal message about or directed to the deceased;  $\chi^2(1, N = 480) = 71.726, p < .001$ . The same applies to the presence of other text fragments such as a condolence address;  $\chi^2(1, N = 480) = 47.750, p < .001$ . Significant differences were not found for the inclusion of biblical quotations, poems, or personal messages from the deceased themselves in both German and Dutch obituaries.

### Funeral Ceremony Instructions

As shown in Table 5, Dutch obituaries were more likely to invite the reader(s) to bid the deceased farewell in a public or private location,  $\chi^2(2, N = 480) = 53.153, p < .001$ . The differences, as they pertained to types of funeral, were also significant,  $\chi^2(5, N = 480) = 40.970, p < .001$ . No significant differences were found with regards to requests from the bereaved such as donations,  $\chi^2(4, N = 480) = 13.151, p > .005$ . Information about a meeting after a funeral service was never mentioned in German obituaries, while half of the analyzed Dutch obituaries included such information,  $\chi^2(1, N = 480) = 108.542, p < .001$ .

### Discussion

The systematic analysis of the contents of German and Dutch obituaries unveiled that in most cases they differ significantly in four main dimensions, namely, visual elements, textual elements, relevant information about the deceased person, and funeral ceremony instructions. These differences provide important insights into possible differences in the mourning cultures in Germany and the Netherlands. This section discusses the important results of the study in relation to the four dimensions mentioned.

#### *Visual Elements in the Obituaries*

German obituaries were more likely to be decorated with illustrations. According to Cihak (2009), common enhancements took the form of roses or crosses, the

Table 5. Funeral Ceremony Instructions

	German (N = 240)	Dutch (N = 240)
Details about funeral		
Farewell**		
At home	1 (0.4)	35 (14.6)
Public location	134 (55.8)	155 (64.6)
No goodbye	105 (43.8)	50 (20.8)
Funeral**		
Public funeral	90 (37.5)	87 (36.3)
Private funeral	7 (2.9)	10 (4.2)
Public cremation	51 (21.3)	91 (37.9)
Private cremation	16 (6.7)	23 (9.6)
Other	5 (2.1)	8 (3.3)
Not mentioned	71 (29.6)	21 (8.8)
Request from the bereaved		
Dress code	2 (0.8)	0 (0.0)
Expression of condolences	18 (7.5)	11 (4.6)
Flower	0 (0.0)	9 (3.8)
Donation	21 (8.8)	17 (7.1)
No request	199 (82.9)	203 (84.6)
Meeting after funeral**		
Yes	6 (2.5)	101 (42.1)

Note: \* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\* $p < 0.01$ .

latter probably signifying death rather than expressing religious sentiments. While symbols seem to play a less important role in the Dutch mourning culture, obituaries in the Netherlands were more likely to be enhanced by alternative visual features such as a heart after the name of a female bereaved. Differences in format, however, could not be attributed to cultural differences as this aspect was often influenced by newspaper logistics.

#### *Textual Elements in the Obituaries*

Dutch obituaries were, on average, significantly longer than the German ones. According to Eid (2002), length could be indicative of the value attached to an obituary within a certain culture. The data imply that a longer and more detailed obituary is more important in the Netherlands than in Germany. In general, the longer the text, the more information made available to the public. The varying average lengths could be primarily attributed to differences in the mourning culture in the two countries. Nonetheless, as statistical analyses reveal, the price of the obituary is also an important indicator of the length of the obituary, particularly

in the case of German obituaries. A negative relation exists between the price and the length of German obituaries, implying that a more expensive obituary would tend to be shorter than an affordable one. In the case of Dutch obituaries, a positive relationship exists between the price and the length of the obituary. The implication of this result counters logic since one would expect that decisions over the length of an obituary would be predicated on price considerations. However, the result might also suggest that longer obituaries are a reflection of how much the bereaved family members are willing to pay to make a more expressive public announcement about the death of a loved one. Furthermore, it could be argued that the length of an obituary, which gives an indication of the costs the bereaved family members shoulder, could reflect the value attached to the deceased by the bereaved, especially within the Dutch society.

It is notable that twice as many names were mentioned in Dutch obituaries than in German obituaries. It seems that the Dutch culture emphasizes the importance of defining the deceased through his or her family network. The practice most likely expresses how closely-knit a family wishes to appear (Eid, 2002). While the names of other deceased family members were to be found among the names of the bereaved in Dutch obituaries, the practice was not evident in German obituaries that were analyzed. Such a practice must be considered a significant indicator when investigating differences in mourning culture. Including names of dead family members in the list of the bereaved could indicate that Dutch people tend to continue assigning the departed a presence in daily lives. This interpretation is supported by the “continuing bonds” hypotheses proposed by Kellehear (2002) and Moss (2004). In the Netherlands, the important emotional role played by pets in the lives of the deceased is also recognized as they were also listed among the bereaved in some cases. The analyzed German obituaries made no mention of pets.

The percentage of information about the character of the deceased was higher in Dutch than in German obituaries. This could be seen as a deep desire to share personal information about the deceased with the public. In German obituaries, descriptions of the deceased tended to revolve more around their positive character traits. Descriptions such as loving, big-hearted, good-natured, caring, and trustworthy emphasize the traits cherished by others. The character descriptions in Dutch obituaries tend to emphasize desirable individual strengths such as unwavering religious faith or bravery. These expressions could indicate a tendency towards strong individualism within the Dutch culture.

On the average, two more adjectives were used in Dutch than in German obituaries. According to Halbur and Vandagriff (1987), the amount of adjectives could signify closeness to the deceased. Adjectives are crucial when bringing a text to life and their targeted implementation affords both more individuality and intimacy. The need for individuality might be higher in the Netherlands than in Germany, and this tends to be manifested in the design of obituaries. Although both countries are considered individualistic, the Netherlands score higher in individualism index than Germany (Hofstede, 2001), which could provide support

for the differences in emphasis on the use of adjectives as an attempt to highlight the individuality of the deceased in obituaries.

The person or party responsible for organizing and writing obituaries in both Germany and the Netherlands is a relative or family group. This would signify that the family considers the death of a loved one an extremely personal matter and that they regard it as their primary duty to inform the public of the death of a family member. As Marks and Piggee (1999) noted, the family ultimately decides what the public will read about the deceased. Of the obituaries sampled, the number of those written by companies, friends, or club members was higher in Germany than in the Netherlands. Company-authored obituaries could mean that the company is paying its final respect to the departed employee after the performance of its duty of paying the former employee's wages. Obituaries written by clubs would indicate that in addition to the activity the deceased was engaged in, the social aspect of such groups plays a very important role as well.

Although the German culture seems less open in its approach in dealing with death, German obituaries included more mention of loss than their Dutch counterparts. This may, however, be attributed to the way the Dutch continue to maintain a relationship with the deceased, since to speak of a loss might be deemed inappropriate if a bond with the deceased remains intact after death.

#### *Specific Information about the Deceased in Obituaries*

No significant differences were found in German and Dutch obituaries in terms of the use of first and last/family names. The study suggests that it is normal in both countries to include the deceased's full names. However, the use of titles or professional salutations for the deceased in obituaries is another matter. It can be hypothesized that the high number of titles or professional salutations included in German obituaries is a strong reflection of a culture that subscribes to formality. German obituaries mentioned the dates of birth and death more often, while the Dutch obituaries tended to simply list the age of the deceased. Both countries consider it obligatory to mention the age of the deceased in one way or another. By mentioning age only in such formulations as, ". . . passed away at the age of 86 . . .", Dirschauer (1973) hypothesizes that a clear-cut statement of death might be avoided, thus blurring the reality associated with the loss of a loved one.

Dutch obituaries were more likely to mention both the places of birth and death. Although by no means a representation of a person's life, the practice provides additional information that can contribute to a reader's perception of the deceased. This is just one of the many elements indicating that the Dutch mourning culture is more open to the idea of conveying personal information. Another element is the personal message included in many Dutch obituaries. Professional title/salutations are often seen as status symbols and mentioning them in obituaries does not only express respect to the deceased and what he or she has achieved in life but also suggests formality (Eid, 2002). Dutch obituaries were more likely to mention the



nickname of the deceased, which would suggest a less formal and a more social way to deal with death. In Germany, this level of informality in an obituary for most people is unfathomable and rarely seen. Nicknames are deemed private and not considered something to be shared with the public (Alford, 1988).

Information about cause of death was absent in more than 60% of both German and Dutch obituaries. This could indicate that most people in both countries consider the cause of death irrelevant. Furthermore, it might suggest an unwillingness to dwell on such aspects when more attention should be paid to other themes such as achievements in life and family structure.

The relationship to the deceased was mentioned significantly more often in Dutch than in German obituaries. This suggests that family status in Dutch culture is more important than in German culture. Information about a family background might be interpreted to indicate a fortunate and fulfilled life—something deemed on equal par with a life surrounded by family (Bolkestein, 2010). More than in the German culture, the Dutch culture seems to consider it important to share this kind of information with the public and commemorate the deceased as a family member.

#### *Information Pertaining to Funeral Ceremonies*

Affording readers a chance to bid the deceased farewell in either a private or a public location was more common in Dutch than in German obituaries. This could indicate a higher willingness among the Dutch to mourn in public. While most funerals and cremations in both countries could be attended by anyone wanting to pay their final respects, 30% of the German obituaries did not include funeral details. This can be reasonably interpreted as an unspoken wish to exclude anyone not specifically asked to attend. According to Roth and Roth (1988), retreating to a place of private mourning is normal in a society where death is excluded from everyday life. This might point to significant differences in the way societies deal with death (Schäfer, 2002). The tendency towards secluded mourning, therefore, might be less present in the Dutch culture than in the German culture.

#### *Future Research and Limitations*

Differences in the mourning culture of Germany and the Netherlands were determined and analyzed based on a study of obituaries. The legitimacy of the research approach is confirmed by Moses and Marelli (2003) and Müller-Calleja (1987), who stated that obituaries reflect general, cultural conventions and could be seen as mirrors of a society's position on issues of life and death. It goes without saying that even more insight could be gained if the results of this study were compared with research investigating existing cultural norms and values in both countries. The researchers are aware of only one study investigating similarities and differences in German and Dutch cultures (Koentropp, 2003). His work,

however, focused on the professional context, while the current study reflects societal values and norms.

A follow up study might consider integrating various additional data gained from online mourning rituals. Just as social networking is booming, virtual mourning portals are attracting increasing interest within society. In addition to more design flexibility and a potentially global audience, the obituaries found in virtual mourning portals can be present indefinitely. According to Fischer (2001), online mourning portals reflect how a mourning culture adapts to developments in a particular society. A content analysis of virtual mourning portals could provide deep insights into the ways various cultures deal with death in an increasingly webbed age.

## CONCLUSION

Content analysis of obituaries affords us an unobtrusive method of investigating the mourning culture of a given society. Beyond this, the results provide us with the information necessary to make founded hypotheses on cultural values in general. As such, obituaries represent much more than simple death announcements. When analyzed as part of a study, they reflect the collective mindset of a given society and provide insights into actual cultural values (Hume, 2000). In this context, the obituary could be regarded as a symbol and a ritual that reflects a society's mourning culture (Hofstede, 1991). The analyses of German and Dutch obituaries prompted interesting suppositions about the cultures of both countries. According to Hofstede (1991), one can safely assume that a "collective programming" has occurred in any given culture, a claim reflected in the differences discovered between German and Dutch cultures discernible through their respective obituaries.

In general, it seems that public communication, even in the context of mourning, within the Dutch culture is more open and informal than in that in the German culture. This assertion gains support from Koentrop (2003) whose work revealed that Germans, in general, exhibit a stronger desire to protect private issues than their Dutch neighbors. The work also claims that Dutch society is more open, which is reflected in their communication styles.

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