WHAT WE TALK ABOUT WHEN AND WHERE WE TALK ABOUT DEATH:

SOME CULTURAL AND LINGUISTIC FUNCTIONS OF OBITUARIES IN

MODERN AMERICAN CULTURE


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Death is not an option, but writing and publishing an obituary is a choice—a choice that many people still make every day. The reasons behind it are many because published obituaries continue to serve many private and public functions. They announce a death to a community. They extend an invitation to attend a funeral both explicitly and often also implicitly to the general public. They are a permanent public record of a death. They are a commemoration of a life lived and valued as well as a written public rhetorical space for reflecting the personal and social values surrounding death and life within a society's mainstream culture.

This study will examine how U.S. American mainstream culture writes about death as it occurs every day to ordinary people. Drawing from a number of sources that concern the interconnected fields of sociolinguistics, English language rhetoric and writing, communication studies, as well as my own original research, my primary aim here is to explore questions concerning what the modern, twenty-first century, U.S. obituary reveals about our cultural understanding of death and ways in which the modern obituary format influences how we announce, honor, and say farewell to the individual.

Specifically, this paper will address two related areas of inquiry concerning obituaries as cultural and linguistic artifacts. The first half will look at obituaries as public acts of communication and focus on the historical development, definitions, functions, and limitations of published obituaries, as well as the basic content of the typical obituary and how this content influences our collective idea about good or ideal American citizenship and personhood. The guiding question examined in this section is "what gets remembered and why?" The second half will address questions concerning how we name the act of death itself by identifying, counting, categorizing, and explaining

the basic metaphors that inspire the common euphemisms obituary writers use to avoid or ameliorate the act of dying. The main question here is "how do we say *die* and how might that explain or describe a potential life after death?" All of the questions explored in this paper are meant to add to the existing social and historical research on obituary writing, to track changes and continuities, as well as help broaden our understanding of how vital metaphor and the language within obituaries is to our personal and collective responses to life, death, and social cohesion, and finally, to further develop a critical view of the uses and purposes of written public discourse.

Between August and December 2010, I collected seven hundred obituaries from newspaper websites listed within the portal website onlinenewspapers.com. Newspapers were selected from thirteen different states from across the continental U.S., roughly representing at least eight different geographical and dialectal areas of the country as defined by the maps found on the American Dialects website. Obituary data was gathered from the Northeast (Maine and Massachusetts), the Mid-Atlantic (Maryland and New York), the Atlantic Seaboard (South Carolina), the South (Tennessee and Louisiana), the Southwest (Texas), the West (Utah), the Pacific Northwest (California and Wyoming), and the Mid-West (Minnesota and Illinois) in order to provide a sample broad enough to represent most of the U.S. Within these thirteen states, one to two newspapers from a major city with a large enough readership to be representative of the typical makeup of that city or state were chosen. Large, urban areas, as opposed to smaller city, town, or county newspapers, were selected because large city newspapers usually publish ten or more obituaries each day that are often culled or transmitted from smaller county or nearby town and neighborhood papers. Cities are also more socially, religiously,

politically, and ethnically diverse and their language use is often less homogenous then smaller or more rural towns and areas, although it may still be influenced by certain regional and dialectal differences. However, as Bernard Spolsky carefully points out in *Sociolinguistics* rarely is just "geographical space…enough to account for language variation" (29). From each of the selected cities' newspapers, fifty obituaries were randomly chosen. The randomness of this sample is based on choosing all or most of the obituaries published on the particular day or days I visited each newspaper's website according to whatever order the site listed either alphabetically or by publication date for a given period of time. In this way, I believe I have a sample that fairly represents the majority of that city's residents or at least that city's mortuary and funeral homes.

As I read and analyzed these obituaries, I noticed many intriguing features and patterns that continued to support many of the assertions made and features studied by those scholars who have researched the cultural and linguistic role that obituaries play in fostering a society's attitudes, beliefs, expressions, and rites or practices concerning death throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. These studies also examined the values most often subscribed to an individual's life, what general biographical information is included and excluded, formulaic descriptions of certain diseases and final death scenes, and the most common names and types of funeral rites performed in Western culture within obituaries published throughout history. I also noted what I believe are a few features unique or recent to twenty-first century obituaries.

For this study, *obituary* was defined as a formal announcement of someone's death that also includes some personal or biographical information about the deceased and some information about memorial or funeral arrangements and that also appears in

published form and in a forum where the general public has access to it. Obituary notices were limited to those that appeared in newspapers or within newspaper websites. *In Memoriam* notices that memorialize someone's death and *Death* notices that simply stated that someone had died and did not include some biographical and funeral arrangement information were excluded from my sample.

Although the above definition of *obituary* is a practical and personal one it is based on the current denotative understanding of an obituary as "a published death notice, usually with a brief biography of the deceased included" (obituary). Arthur Berger in his book *Narratives in Popular Culture*, fleshes out this definition by noting that "obituaries are hyper-reductionist micro-biographies…. that reduce a life to a paragraph or two" and usually just focuses on the highlights or most important accomplishments or facts about a person's life such as occupation, education, and any family left alive or already dead (172). Eliecer Fernandez points out that obituaries perform both an informative "locutionary function…of transmitting the relevant details of a demise" in an objective, impersonal way such as who died, how or where they died, and facts about funeral arrangements as well as an opinative "prelocutionary function" that is "orientated towards causing a favorable impression on the reader by showing the social relevance, exemplary conduct, or religious fervor of the deceased" through language that depends on the subjective feelings of the obituaries' writer (104-105). Both of these types and functions of obituaries are considered in this analysis.

Of course, there is much more to the genre of obituary writing than its denotative definition suggests. As cultural and linguistic artifacts they serve many different purposes

and contribute towards the fulfillment of both personal and public needs for social cohesion, cultural coherence, and closure concerning death. It has been argued that obituaries do everything from preserving history, social values, and rituals to promoting ideology and identity, to providing personal inspiration and psychological comfort to the bereaved.

Published newspaper obituaries have existed in America since newspapers have been published in America. The development of the obituary as a public written form, like many cultural phenomena in America, is tied up with revolutions in both the democratization of political and social class and the technological changes and innovations of mass media. Scholar and journalist Janice Hume writes about the developments of these two forces in her book *Obituaries in American Culture*, pointing out how both printed news and published obituaries were the purview of mostly the upper classes in Revolutionary and post-Revolutionary War America. She also claims that obituaries of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries almost exclusively covered only the deaths of iconic or socially-prominent, wealthy, upper and upper-middle class white men and a few white women of the same social caliber. However, social and technological revolutions and events throughout our history such as the Civil War and the development of the penny press in the 1830's, which allowed the cheap mass production of newspapers and encouraged the development of local and specialty newspapers and more local news coverage including obituaries for locals, have allowed obituaries to become much more inclusive of all citizens, although there are still many people, past and present who are still not represented or honored by a newspaper obituary. (12-24).

Yet no matter when, where, or how obituaries appear, the more interesting question is why publish obituaries at all? For in the end, despite all the good they may do for a society and its people, they are also an almost daily reminder to us of our own mortality. And yet, while death is an uncomfortable and even taboo subject in our culture, after months of reading and analyzing obituaries and reading those who have also analyzed obituaries, my position is that obituaries are more concerned with life than they are with death, and that even though a death is their impetus, they really exist to serve the purposes of the living.

Before beginning this research project, I was only an occasional and casual reader of local and national obituaries. However, digging around just a little bit on the World Wide Web will reveal much information on obituary reading groups, chat rooms, blogs, annual conferences, publications like *Obit Magazine*, print and electronic articles, and popular books on the subject. One such book, *The Dead Beat* by journalist Marilyn Johnson, a self-described "obit addict" (9), chronicles her vast knowledge about and experiences with obituaries, obituary writers, and obituary readers, and also echoes in an enthusiastic style, the same lines of reasoning that Janice Hume highlights in her scholarly book to explain the value and appeal of obituaries. Both writers discuss the importance of public and private memory and how each influences the other one through the medium of obituaries, which can serve and sustain our myriad and complex needs for individual, familial, and collective memory making and preservation.

Analyzing and understanding the purposes of obituaries are tricky because "obituaries combine both past and present, public and private" concerns and there is

much tension to be seen between these indistinct spheres of facts and ideals (Hume 15).

Although there is no clear line between what constitutes a private self and a public self,

the writing of an obituary is usually considered to be a private, familial concern even if

this obituary, when published, can be read by an unknown public audience. Johnson says

that she reads obituaries every day because "obituaries are history as it happens." She

likens obituary writing to a kind of poetry: "a tight little coil of biography with its literary

flourishes," poems that can teach her both interesting facts, philosophical truths, and may

even reveal to her "the secret of a good life!" (5-6). Hume echoes this sentiment by

writing about how the shared knowledge or type of memory evoked in obituaries is an

"important, yet often unconscious influence on personal identity" and can reveal what

individual members of a society aspire to do for themselves and others within a given

society's culture. Therefore, a newspaper obituary serves both to highlight the

"uniqueness of an individual" and shows the extent to which he or she conformed to the

social ideals and structures of a "good life" (14-15).

Beyond the individual memory, obituaries are also useful for establishing and

promoting what Hume labels "generational memory—the memories which individuals

have about their own families' history" and how that family history fits into a society's

national history. Generational memory in obituaries often link the deceased with a

specific historic event such as war or presidential administration or with a specific

historical or national symbol such as a famous person, social movement, or technological

innovation or discovery (15). This definition of generational memory is what Johnson

seems to be hinting at when she writes about how her desire to read obituaries often

springs from a desire to understand her own past and present in the context of others' pasts. "Stories of World War II, rock-and-roll, Vietnam, civil rights, and the women's movement are being added to and filled in every day. Tracking these threads [through obituaries] is like watching our history as it's woven into pattern" (85).

Finally, obituaries contribute to shaping and maintaining collective or public memory. Although it seems unlikely that many people give much thought to the public value or role of obituaries, helping to create and safeguard a public or collective social memory is probably the most interesting and important role of obituaries. "Memory is, of course, necessary for the survival of both individuals and societies…. Obituaries strengthen a society's well-being… by highlighting the importance of its individual members—the ideals that America might believe in common about the worth of a life" and its' worth to a national history and culture (Hume 13). Meaning that for better or worse, obituaries reflect and reinforce what American society believes it takes to be an 'ideal American citizen' and good person. Collective social values and norms, whether they be honesty, devoted motherhood, gentlemanly behavior, humor, or business acumen, continue to influence what is specifically commemorated of the lives of individuals and what is generally included and excluded from the content of obituaries (Hume 14). Johnson writes poetically in her book about this tension that exists between honoring an individual life—"the only one of his kind," and the value and joy in honoring a collective spirit of knowledge and virtue. [Obituaries] "remind us of those core values…religion, honor, loyalty…we don't have to keep reinventing these things if we keep them alive,

and we can keep them alive in the obits." Obituaries can both "pin down individuality"

and remind people of someone or something they already knew and loved (222).

In conjunction with serving the memories of individuals, families, and society,

obituaries are also one of the ways, whether in public or private, we help ourselves cope

with the reality of death. According to Kim Stacey of *Online Obituary Reviews* as well as

other obituary historians, very early obituaries, most likely dating back to the 1500's,

were used more for simply announcing a death as a legal matter rather than for "honoring

or remembering the dead." However, by the 1800's obituaries became longer and more

elaborate because the public and newspaper printers saw the value in obituaries as a way

to mark the solemnity and importance of the event of someone's death for public

consideration (para. 4-5). As this idea developed, funeral practices changed and evolved,

and American society became more democratic, the published newspaper obituary

became an expected and standard part of mourning practices and funeral services for

many Americans. "Publishing newspaper obituaries is one way modern humans deal with

death and defend life, the obituary's publication providing a sense of finality while

celebrating the deceased's noteworthy attributes" (Hume 20).

Obituaries are also powerful tools for psychological coping because "they are

death stories that invoke fascinating symbols of religion and ritual" (Hume 152). They

are also stories that use metaphors, euphemisms, and other figurative language that help

us conceptualize and reason about death and the possibility of life after death. And

finally, these stories provide a way for us to see "someone's life with a narrative arc—

birth, life, death—beginning, middle, and end that can be very psychologically

satisfying" in a culture that depends on alphabetic literacy and spoken or written

narratives to make sense of the world (Johnson 36).

It is a curious observation that while the purposes of obituaries are multiple and

complex in nature, the forms and formats of most obituaries are neither. For while there

are exceptions to this observation, the average, ordinary person's obituary follows a

rather rigid framework  using an often limited range of linguistic expressions and features

within its content. In her book Hume proposes that 'framing theory,' which helps

scholars understand how entities like mass media "help distribute a type of ideology or

consciousness to their mass audiences," be applied to newspaper obituaries so the frames

within them could be better understood and offer "insight into the cultural values…and

news values and practices" of any American era under consideration (22-23).

Todd Gitlin, defines the frames of frame theory in his work as, "principles of

selection, emphasis, and presentation composed of little tacit theories about what exists,

what happens, and what matters" (qtd.in Hume 22). What exists and what matters in

obituaries, according to Hume, are four framing categories that are "typically published

in newspaper obituaries—name and occupation of the deceased, cause of death, personal

attributes of the deceased, and funeral arrangements." Each of these frames, which she

uses to examine American obituaries dated from 1818 to 1930, reveal something of the

"social ideology" developed about life and death in these times (23). These four frames

will help organize my data and insights on the continuities and changes in content of

twenty-first century obituaries.

That obituaries are a rigidly formatted, very formulaic, formalized, and according to Johnson, a "highly internalized" form of public and published expression finds support in the many 'how-to' advice websites, articles, and books that exist to guide those who want to write others' or even their own obituaries. Johnson likens the "template for the obituary that almost every newspaper publication follows" to "an invisible metronome" whose rhythms "writers have absorbed and readers have come to expect," so that obituary writing outside these norms is rarely seen (31).

After reading over seven hundred obituaries for this research, I can readily agree that nearly all the obituaries for ordinary people are highly formulaic pieces of public discourse. Most people are not professional writers and there is a real tension between our desires for honoring personal feelings and memories as well as honoring the social and genre expectations surrounding obituary writing. For while the published and public aspects of the obituary genre are a large part of their appeal as a form of memorialization, these aspects are also what serve to limit or constrain an obituaries' form, content, and purpose for the average writer. There are several reasons, both psychological and practical for these constraints.

There are at least three important and powerful constraints that affect the average person's concept and approach to the writing of a published obituary. One powerful constraint on obituary writing is the observations of social learning and imitation theories, which both posit the reasonable idea that humans learn new skills or improve old ones by first observing, then modeling or imitating others' behavior, and then finally

according to social psychologist Albert Bandura "on later occasions this [observed] and coded information serves as a guide for action" ("Social Learning Theory").

Imitation theory, as it relates specifically to learning and practicing new forms of written composition, is used both as theory and practice in current and classical writing pedagogy as a generally trusted way to teach various genres of writing including obituaries. The theoretical underpinning of imitation in writing pedagogy according to rhetoric scholar Edward Corbett is "[o]bserve and do likewise. Imitation asked the student to observe the manner or pattern or form or means used by a model and then attempt to emulate the model." Emulate here means "to try to rival or equal or surpass rather than just produce carbon-copies" (244). So although it is unlikely that many people receive much formal or explicit instruction on how to write a good obituary, social learning theory and imitation pedagogy seem to be useful and natural ways to explain how or why we ordinary people learn about and collectively produce obituaries of such similar content and form across the country.

A second powerful constraint on writing a published obituary is our personal and cultural sense of the importance of public politeness. There are several politeness factors at play when someone wants to publish an obituary. A death is usually treated as a sad and solemn occasion in our culture. Death is itself a difficult, even taboo subject to talk or write about for many people. Obituaries are understood to be commemorative, that is to promote and safeguard ideals, and are meant to honor the dead. Obituaries are also a public reflection on an individual and that individual's survivors. Finally, obituaries are public records that can be accessed, referenced, or reproduced indefinitely and almost

always appear in print, which is generally considered to be the most permanent and formal way to capture our ideas and words.

To further understand and define this idea of politeness, I drew from the well-known work of P. Brown and S. Levinson's politeness theory as explained by Daena Goldsmith in *Explaining Communication*. Brown and Levinson define politeness by the symbolic concept of face. "Face is an image or identity we enact in our interactions with other people." This idea was drawn from sociologist Erving Goffman's work on the concept of face, which he defined as "the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself by the line others assume he has taken during a particular contact…in terms of approved social attributes**"** (qtd. in Goldsmith, 220)**.** This means that we generally desire to have others see us as behaving appropriately in our current roles or situations. For obituary writers, usually cast in the role of grieving mourners, the appropriate behavior would be a show of sadness about and respect and love for a deceased loved one. This desire for social role appropriateness is another reason why obituaries for average citizens are full of positive memories, facts, and personal attributes that almost never contain negative news outside of the cause or fact of death.

Furthermore, the politeness in politeness theory extends beyond good manners and appropriate roles to include "all the verbal and non-verbal resources available in a language" for making face threatening acts such as apologizing, criticizing, or requesting something, less threatening to both speakers and audiences. (Goldsmith 223-224). In obituary writing, which usually has an unknown author and unknown audience, threat to face is low, but still must be considered and is generally met through public writing conventions such as use of a formal language register, standard grammar and spelling,

and what English and rhetoric professor, David Kaufer, describes as a speaker or writer's ability and authority to "claim standing as a [reliable] representative of a community's felt condition" through the power of public, on-the-record, predictive expressions that can be read and reviewed in the present and future (154).

It is interesting to note how formally obituary writers described their subjects. For outside a few nicknames and the occasional child or family-given relationship title for a grandparent such as "Grammo" or "PawPaw," nearly every obituary used the full or formal relationship titles of mother, father, grandfather, grandmother, etc. instead of the more common, private, and probably more affectionate relationship titles of mom, dad, grandma, or grandpa, etc. It could also be observed that many obituaries referred to the deceased as Mr., Mrs., or Miss attached to a last name, most likely a result of having a funeral home employee compose the obituary for publication (Head 4).

However, the widespread use of formal forms of address as well as other formal linguistic expressions common in obituaries such as "she was the daughter of" or "he was educated in local schools" make sense in light of what Keith Allan and Kate Burridge label the "middle-class politeness criterion." A criterion that they argue is made up of a set of cultural and stylistic principles used to designate words and expressions as polite, neutral, or offensive and that this particular politeness criterion "is automatically assumed in the public domain where the exact composition of an audience is not known; etiquette demands that language is chosen carefully and consciously for a respectable, gender-mixed, middle-class audience" (241).

In addition to the cultural and psychological dictates of the imagined audience for obituaries that influence the genre's form and content, there are also several important

practical limits of space, time, and cost for the average obituary writer to consider. Newspapers, the mass medium where obituaries first and still appear, have developed their own writing and publishing conventions for what is and is not usually included in obituaries and that take into account practical concerns that have helped shape the definition, form, and content of the modern obituary.

Obituary writing, while generally not considered a well-respected part of journalism, is an appreciated and necessary part of what keeps newspapers in business because obituaries, like all advertising, produce a lot of revenue for a newspaper. In a 2006 interview with Bill McDonald, obituaries editor of *The New York Times*, McDonald was asked a question from a *New York Times* reader who wanted clarification about the relationship between paid death notices and obituary columns written by newspaper staff. McDonald responded with the observation that paid death notices and feature obituaries are acquainted like "distant cousins" because while both concern and include the same basic material, "the paid notices are classified ads" that are "gathered and placed in the paper or Web by the classified advertising department, which operates independently of the news department." It is the news department that decides who and what will be covered in a featured obituary and "despite any misconceptions to the contrary, no one pays for an obit that appears as a news story." He went on to note that because paid death notices generate money for the *Times* and the news department only spends it, "the paid notices get as much space as they need" even at the space expense of other news including feature obituary (6-7).

Although there is no standard amount of time for when an obituary should be published following someone's death and most newspapers will publish a death notice up

to a year after a death has occurred, time is still an issue that may influence the content and convenience of publishing an obituary in a local or national newspaper. Thanks to advances in communication technologies, it has never been easier to contact and submit obituary information since most, if not all, newspaper offices will accept content for an obituary either electronically through e-mail, by telephone, by postal mail, or delivered in person. Yet despite the these several communication channels, newspapers are still limited by practical realities such as approval and printing deadlines, office closing times, and staff changes or shortages that could affect how soon an obituary could or would be published. Finally, some people may be dissatisfied with the conventional need or practice of most newspapers to rarely print obituaries for more than one or two days if those who are in the funeral industry and those who study the growing popularity of web-based memorials and obituary sites are to be believed (Head 4; Putzel 1).

But despite both the necessary generosity of physical newspaper space potentially available and the relative ease and speed at which the average citizen's obituary can be written, sent, and published in print, the average obituary appears to be economical in both space and content most often because of the budgetary decisions made by a grieving family. For whether the unit of cost is measured in characters, words, lines, or inches of space, the average newspaper obituary notice is generally quite expensive, and sadly, this expense is likely the number one reason there are not more published obituaries—one for every dead citizen, and perhaps also why poorer social classes and some minority groups are underrepresented or excluded from the obituaries page of a local or national newspaper.

I contacted seven major newspapers from across the U.S. by e-mail with questions about the space, time, and cost of placing a standard obituary. The standard obituary format is usually 3-4 lines of print, which would contain about 90-120 characters and take up about a half-inch of column space. It would not include any photographs or graphics and would appear in the paper for only one day. Prices for this general standard format and publishing time ranged from a modest $30 in *The Los Angeles Times* to the exorbitant $263 in *The New York Times* and $254 in the *Chicago Sun-Times*. Between these points, the other four newspapers contacted ranged between $40 in the *Star-Tribune* of Minneapolis to $95 in the *Dallas Morning News*. If someone wanted to go beyond a standard format or time, prices often increase dramatically from an additional $10 to $50 dollars per line or per day published. The inclusion of a photograph, border, or other graphic symbol could cost an additional $25 to $295 in price within these seven newspapers. Online archiving of an obituary within a newspaper's website for up to one year was included free of charge in New York, Los Angeles, Chicago, and Charleston, South Carolina, and for an additional fee in Boston, Dallas, and Minneapolis (personal communication). So if money is no object, a person could have a grandiose obituary in any newspaper or in as many newspapers as he or she desires. But for the majority of us, these publishing costs are not insignificant and may even be a disqualification to publishing a newspaper obituary. Yet despite the rising costs of publishing a newsprint obituary and the rising tide of alternative public forums and publishing options, namely the virtual space of the World Wide Web, thousands of newspaper obituaries are published every day because of the importance we as a culture attach to these notices of a life lived and now gone.

"Obituaries can reflect greater social ideals while focusing on the lives of individual citizens and thus provide a truly intimate portrait of the "ideal American" in any era" (Hume 154). In her book, *Obituaries in American Culture*, Janice Hume works to discover the development of what she calls the "ideal American" as he or she appears through the historical times of Andrew Jackson's presidency, the American Civil War, and the Women's Suffrage Movement of the 1920s and 1930s by listing and examining those personal and social attributes and conditions ascribed to the deceased within certain leading newspapers' obituaries of these times. This study continues this line of inquiry and marks the continuities and changes to the social construct of the 'ideal American' in the 21$^{st}$ century as chronicled in several major newspapers' obituaries from across the U.S. I am seeking to find answers to questions such as: who is this 'ideal American'?, how is she or he described?, what did she do?, how did he live?, and what contributions to society or history did he or she make? The same features of Hume's four media frames for obituaries: name and occupation, personal attributes, cause of death, and funeral arrangements for the deceased were analyzed in my sample. Other more or less standard features of the seven hundred obituaries in this sample including birth and death dates, education levels, marriage and divorce, children and other family, as well as mentions of associations, memberships, interests, or hobbies of the deceased were also examined and counted for this study.

The first four categories: birth, education, marriage, children or other family, along with occupation and cause or fact of death form what I and others think of as the usual narrative arc, that is to say the typical biographical lifespan for the average private citizen summarized in the average newspaper obituary. Marilyn Johnson, labels this

narrative arc "the desperate chronology" that professional obituary writers must learn to transcend or minimize (36) while, obituary staff writer for *The Iowa Review*, Susan McCarty points out that "[i]n death all lives look alike" because of this typical narrative arc of the major life events included in the average obituary (5). The other three categories included: associations and memberships, hobbies and interests, and personal attributes of the deceased are generally more interesting and sometimes even humorous or perplexing to the average public reader. The information in these categories are what give "life" to an obituary and also provides the color and details that help compose a more detailed picture of a possible 'ideal American' citizen for late 20th and early 21st century America to look to for what is best or good in our culture and daily lives.

Birth and death cannot be avoided in our physical reality; however, this does not mean that these two necessary events—the opening and closing of a life—are always directly referenced in an obituary. Out of the seven hundred obituaries sampled only 336 or about 48% included the deceased's birth date, birth year, or used expressions such as "born" or "was born." Most obituaries did include the deceased person's age at death so a reader could calculate a year of birth if he or she wanted to if no birth dates were given.

As for the act of death that spurred the obituaries' composition, direct or euphemistic mentions of a death and of a specific date and occasionally a specific time of death were at 75% and 90%, respectively. So whether or not the fact or the date of a death needs to be mentioned the majority of published obituaries include this while over half of the obituaries examined left out the fact or date of birth. However, while listing a specific date of death was very common to my sample of obituaries, listing a cause of death whether specific such as "liver cancer" or "Parkinson's disease." or vague such as

"brief illness" or "incidents of old age," accounts for only 114 instances or 16% of the total sample. Describing the circumstances or place of death as in a phrase like "died peacefully at home" was just slightly more common at roughly 24%.

Analyzing what is or is not written about cause or circumstance of death is important and revealing on at least three points. The first point is the observation of the widespread omission or silence surrounding cause of death. This common omission may stem from a variety of reasons. Cause of death may be left out for practical reasons—a way to save valuable printing space and cost of publishing. It may be because of the influence of the genre itself as a commemorative account of a life that prompts writers to focus on the positive and exclude the negative nature of death. Yet again, this omission may be just another indicator of our collective cultural discomfort with death and our desire to distance ourselves from its reality. It seems likely to be a combination of all of these factors along with the additional interplay of considerations like personal feelings, family circumstances, and newspaper printing practices that determine our willingness to name or explain the causes of death.

A second important point about naming cause or circumstance of death centers on the idea that obituaries do more than just record a death, they also influence or reveal our feelings about how to die as a culture. Hume argues in her book that obituaries are powerful pieces of prose because they are "death stories" that provide frames for teaching "the public about the social value of a life and about the way to deal with death." As examples of this, Hume writes about how American "men and women in the Jacksonian era met death without a murmur, bravely…as a final witness, an example of Christian faith," (152-53). Yet a little later in history, several scholars have discussed the waxing

and waning of the Victorian era's often religious sentimentalization of death and mourning with its attendant obsessions with death imagery, intense emotional expressions of grief, and rigid and complex funeral and mourning practices (Fernandez 104; Hume 153; Stearns 36). But now it may be better to frame death as it often was at the turn of the twentieth century: "presented simply as the end of a career" where the most important loss to society and family was one of security and economic potential (Hume 153).

In this sample there appears to be remnants of all of these historical influences and values present. There is still certainly a strong current of Christian faith or feeling in praising those who meet death bravely and peacefully and proclaim comfort and hope in Heavenly bliss and family reunion. But there are also many brief chronicles about fighting disease and death, often for years, as well as continued celebration over experiencing a long life and reaching an advanced age that highlights the stated value of "loving life" and for holding onto it for as long as possible because death is sad and fearful. There also continues to be emphasis on assessing an individual's value through their business, economic, and educational successes as well as primarily showcasing someone's social value through their business and personal associations as employers or employees, church and club members, civic leaders, and volunteers. However, unlike the many obituaries included in Hume's study, current obituaries are much more likely to emphasize familial or relationship roles that the deceased played like "beloved mother" or "devoted uncle," as well as more directly reference personal or familial feelings of love and grief in repeated example phrases such as "will be greatly missed by" "was deeply loved by, and "will stay forever in our hearts." Modern obituaries also place more

emphasis on personal attributes that highlight the someone's individual and social appeal to others such as "a good sense of humor" or "never met a stranger" as well as including details about the deceased's particular interests, hobbies, passions, and pleasures; information that will be looked at more closely later in this paper.

Third, it is also revealing to take note of the modern or current listed causes of death in this sample because they reveal not only our subjective comfort with or willingness to directly mention death, but also how what we die of—disease, accident, or old age—reveals our social place and the general health and welfare progress of our times, as well as what is still taboo concerning causes of death (Hume 143). So what do we die of today according to this sample of obituaries? The specific medical cause of death most mentioned is various forms of cancer, which covers 33% of all listed causes of death. Various ways to say heart failure comes in second at six mentions, followed in descending numerical order medical conditions such as "complications" from Alzheimer's disease and dementia (5), pneumonia (2), surgery (2), and one mention each for Parkinson's disease, aortic aneurysm, and stroke for a total count of fifty-six specific medical causes of death. This category also includes the six listed specific causes of accidental death: two plane crashes, two car accidents, and two military combat deaths comprising a total of sixty-two specific causes of death.

Naming specific medical or accidental causes for death is only slightly higher in number than printing a vague or unspecific cause of death. Unspecific causes of death include phrases such as brief or short illness (21), long or lengthy illness (18), "natural causes" (6), old age (3), and expressions about a general "decline in health" (1) or "health problems" (2). There was also one mention of death by "unknown causes" for a total of

fifty-two unspecific causes of death, which along with specific causes of death, equals 22% of all references to death found in my sample of obituaries.

Although it cannot be exactly known what writers mean when using words like "illness" or "decline in health," it is heartening to notice what is not specifically mentioned in these lists of cause of death, namely highly contagious or epidemic diseases such as dysentery, tuberculosis, or influenza, nor of diseases more specific to childhood such as uncontrollable fevers, diarrhea or whopping cough. All of these were common killers in the U.S. and western Europe as late the middle of the twentieth century according to Harvard historian Peter Stearns in his recent book *Revolutions in Sorrow*. Instead of contagious diseases and infections, people are largely dying of "degenerative diseases, headed by heart attacks, strokes, and cancer" that are largely the result of reaching a more advanced or old age and often stemming from some lifestyle choices that might lead to the increased development of slow killers such as diabetes or high blood pressure. Stearns also comments that accidental deaths are higher now because of increased travel by various means, especially by automobile (83-85).

Other specific causes of death that did not show up in my sample include those causes of death that have largely been taboo throughout American history. These deaths include murder, suicide, and alcohol and drug overdoses. Hume finds in her work that there are very few mentions of these causes of death in the 8,000 obituaries she sampled. There were zero specific mentions of these types of death in my own sample most likely because mention of these death causes, along with deaths connected to AIDS, are still very rare, emotionally and socially uncomfortable, and taboo to directly discuss in a place as public as a published obituary ( Hume 143-45).

How we write about birth and death is fascinating, but now it is time to look into the common experiences and milestones that make up the complex middle of our lives: education, occupation, family, and the pursuit of meaning, enjoyment, and leisure. Although, displaying high intelligence, achieving academic success and completing academic degrees from high school and on will likely always be valued personally and socially, there were relatively few explicit mentions for the deceased person's completion of high-school or various levels or types of college programs, degrees, or vocational certifications. Compared to the number of mentions, descriptions, or chronicles of occupation and employment history, a difference of 31%, education clearly has less precedence than employment in this sample. Descriptions of work were also more frequently coupled with virtues or personal qualities such as "hard-working," "dedicated," and "successful." Rarely were these or any adjectives attached to degree completion, although there were a few instances of naming a specific academic achievement, award, or scholarship within an obituary. However, it is worth noting that even completing high school and going on to attend or complete college was less socially important and necessary during the years that many of those who have now died, people generally in their fifties to nineties, reached and lived adulthood, but that establishing yourself in an occupation, especially if you were a man, was very important and necessary. Additionally, lifetime careers and even short-term jobs, whether inside or outside the home, were and are still powerful forms of both personal and social definitions of self-worth, more so perhaps than personal educational achievements.

It is encouraging to note that although there are only 271 mentions of graduation from either high-school, college, or both, about 39% of all obituaries, the number of

specific mentions of graduation from college or a vocational program is slightly higher than mentions of graduation from high school only. This slight increase may mean that even among previous generations, the value of educational achievement, especially the obtainment of a college degree is rising in value and worthy of space in today's obituaries. It is also probable that there would be a greater degree of mentions about high school and especially college within these obituaries for at least two reasons. First is the reiteration that because of the commemorative function of obituaries, it is imperative for people to focus on the achievements of their loved ones, of which education is one. Second is the confirmation of the observation that Hume and others make about how it is the social elite, despite great strides in obituary inclusion, who would be the most likely to have a published obituary and that this obituary, given the relative cost, would be substantial enough to include detailed information about education, training, and degrees. It is these wealthier or more middle-class people who would have also been the most likely to have finished high school and gone on to college in the first place (Hume, 41).

While achieving high levels of education may favor the wealthy and middle-class, employment and occupation is a concern for nearly everyone and so it is of no surprise that it is in this category more social and economic diversity is hinted at. Journalist Michael Putzel jokes about how "[t]here was a time when a person had to be a hero of the Revolutionary War to get an obituary in a major American newspaper." Of course now, thanks to greater social inclusion and mobility over time, as well as changing values about social and individual importance, "the published obituary has become a near-universal form of homage in the United States" ("Not Just an Obit"). Although there were at least 125 people noted for their military service to the U.S., there was not one instance

of anyone being labeled a "war hero." Instead, there was a wide range of occupations

listed within this sample that may indicate many different socioeconomic levels from

truck drivers to CEO's as well as a few uncommon jobs such as "Polynesian nightclub

owner," "FBI homicide detective," and "Sister of Mercy nun for 70 years."

When defining and counting occupations, I was intentionally liberal in choosing

to recognize many forms or types of employment, not only those that traditionally take

place outside of someone's home and are paid, but also employment that primarily occurs

in or near someone's home including homemaking, farming, and ranching. Also included

were those whose careers were identified as military service or as owners and operators

of a business. What the numbers reveal is that of the 393 mentions of primary

employment, most, or 87% are of occupations that take place outside of home and are

likely paid positions such as attorney or zookeeper. The second largest category was for

those who were named as owners or primary operators of a business or company, at

roughly 17% of the total. Those whose primary job was identified as either

homemaker/housewife/stay-at-home mother or as a career in the military were tied at

twenty-five mentions each, which is only about 6% of the total number of all jobs

mentioned. What these numbers tell me is that Americans do continue to care about and

largely define themselves and perhaps their social value by what they do for a living and

that outside-the-home employment appears to be both more common and more valued

than inside-the-home employment. The rare designation of "homemaker" as primary or

only employment, 16 of 25, since nine were of farmers or ranchers, may point to either a

belief that this job is not important or necessary to include in an obituary or more likely

that women or their families increasingly no longer define themselves only in relation to

their homes and families, but often also take on roles and jobs outside of the home. The other rarely mentioned occupations of farmer, rancher, and military career also point to 20th and 21st century trends that contend that "less than 2% of all Americans are now engaged in either agriculture or serve in the military, especially for long durations (Thompson 35; Walsh, 55).

Beyond education and occupation as indicators of both socioeconomic status and of social values, obituaries showcase the value that Americans place on their family roles and relationships, especially those involving marriage and children. In fact, it seems as if the majority of the content of many obituaries is made up of a list of relatives, both dead and living of the deceased person. Often all that can be known of a person after reading their obituary, outside of the funeral information, are the roles they played in family life: mother, father, wife, grandfather, son, mother-in-law, cousin. And while obituaries have likely always included information about someone's family life, obituaries that commonly included long lists of family relationships or an exclusive focus on family roles, appear to be rare in the samples provided by Hume and Fernandez's studies' of some obituary features during the years 1833-1901 in America and Ireland, respectively. Mentions of marriage or family in their samples of Victorian era obituaries were often either non-existent or brief, and usually only included mentions of parents, spouses, or children unless the deceased  had a family connection to a noteworthy or famous individual. Even in the samples Hume collected from the 1920's and 1930's in America only show a small increase in the frequency of and space devoted to listing the kin of the deceased.

But no matter when this shift in focus occurred, we now read obituaries with genre requirements that almost always include the names of certain relatives of the deceased. The standard advice of many grief etiquette handbooks and funeral home websites is to tell potential obituary writers, if they have not already absorbed the standardized format of the average published obituary already, to include the names of those in the immediate family—parents, spouses, children,  and often grandparents and siblings—who have died before or survive after the deceased. It is also considered "thoughtful" to include the names of others such as friends or caregivers who shared "a close relationship" with the deceased person (Martin 89).

Only 3% of my collected obituaries did not mention any names of any family members of the deceased. Of the 97% that did include the name of one or more family members, the person or people named were most likely either the children or spouse of the deceased. The name(s) of the deceased's child(ren) appeared in over 80% of all obituaries; the name or names of spouse(s) appeared in 69% of all obituaries surveyed. A small, but significant nearly 20% of these obituaries mentioned the length of time of the marriage. Approximately 6% of these marriages lasted fifty years or longer, while another 4% lasted at least 25 years, which shows that American society is still impressed with longevity in marriage. Interestingly, there were also 149 direct or indirect mentions of divorce and/or second marriage, and 1 mention of a third marriage. There were also several inclusions of the names of step-parents and step-children or of having a child, but no named spouse, These inclusions seem to be a reflection of both the changing nature and complexity of modern family life and an increasing comfort with acknowledging the reality of divorce, blended families, unmarried couples, and single parenthood common

to a growing percentage of Americans. Finally, it would seem that openly acknowledging gay partnerships is still very uncommon in the average obituary for only one example of explicitly naming the gay partner of a deceased man was found in my sample.

Although typical obituaries very often include mentions of close relatives living and dead, when it comes to adding details about what the average citizen does with his or her time outside of work, it could be noted that out of at least 500 mentions of personal interests, recreational pursuits, or hobbies, only 63 explicitly indicated "spending time with family" as a personally enjoyable leisure activity, which to be fair, falls to only fourth place on a list of seven categories. A professed enthusiasm for either playing or watching a variety of sports or outdoor activities like camping, fishing, hunting, and skiing took the top spot, especially in Utah. Following closely behind in number of mentions was for arts and crafts, which included passions ranging from "Swedish weaving," to "playing the zither," as well as more conventional arts such as painting, sculpture, and food decorating. The third highest category revealed that there are Americans among us who engage in recreational hobbies as varied as "listening to CB radios," "never missing an episode of *Polka Spotlight*" on television, "eating just about anything," "playing Beano" and "recycling aluminum cans" among many other fun diversions. After spending time with family and friends, many Americans also listed travel and other more career-related hobbies such as "working on airplanes," "restoring old cars," and "collecting stories for a book" as significant and enjoyable ways to spend their time.

The average American also seems willing to devote time and energy to maintaining memberships and social associations with a variety of religious institutions,

social clubs, professional unions, and volunteer organizations. To a much lesser extent did obituaries include information about the political activities or affiliations of the deceased, only 22 mentions in 700 examples, a few of which mentioned campaigning in support of or meeting with presidential candidates such as Carter, Eisenhower, Kennedy, Clinton, and Obama. Church memberships and other religious affiliations were by far the most mentioned type of social association, showing up in 47% of all obituaries with several of these describing the great faith and love for God that the deceased showed. Approximately 20% of all obituaries mentioned at least one social or professional membership or club association such as the Elks, Rotary, and American Legion, the Fraternal Order of Police, or a local trade union. 10% of all obituaries included the volunteer work of the deceased for organizations such Boy and Girl Scouts, the Salvation Army, 4H, and Habitat for Humanity. Counted all together, these categories add up to over a thousand mentions and descriptions of what average American citizens find as worthy, fun, and fulfilling ways to live at least parts of their everyday lives, whether lofty or humble, fanciful or practical. And like lists of close relatives living and dead, information about many of the personal and recreational habits of our ancestors do not seem to be often found in obituaries written before and during the turn of the 20th century, but it has become a standard part of obituaries by the turn of the 21st century for important reasons.

So we can begin to understand what the average 'ideal American' portrayed in recent obituaries generally does, but what about how he or she is meant to behave? The final category of obituary content explored in this paper concerns the adjectives and adverbs—the descriptor words obituary writers most often use to praise and

commemorate the best personal qualities or attributes of their deceased loved ones. These descriptor words, especially the ones used most frequently, add the happy, tantalizing pops of color to the emerging portrait of a 21$^{st}$ century 'ideal American.'

Throughout her book, Janice Hume argues convincingly argues that obituaries are historically and socially important because "mainstream newspaper obituaries naturally represent the dominant culture and its values" and that the social models and virtues found within them "are not stagnant, but adapt to the new cultural demands of a changing society" (154). I agree that American social models and public and private virtues have changed dramatically in some ways from the times that Hume analyzes in her study, yet it is also my position that in several ways the ideal American citizen of today still bears a strong resemblance to his or her goodly forbearers.

A brief summary of Hume's findings about public and private virtues most commonly ascribed to the men and women whose obituaries were sampled from the years 1818, 1838, 1855, 1870, 1910, and 1930 show a conservative, but steady change of focus on or move from social exclusion and mostly white male elitism to a more, although far from complete, democratic inclusion of lower social classes, mostly white women, and some non-white minority groups. There also appeared to be a reverse shifting in the roles that men and women became known and praised for having. The women of 1818, if they were recognized at all in an obituary, were almost exclusively known for their domestic devotion and Christian piety. This focus held steady until about 1870 when women began to garner praise for having wealth from either marriage or family inheritance, being socially well-known, and for showing generosity in social charity causes. By 1910 and 1930, women began to be valued not only for family

devotion and social connections, but also for displaying intelligence, gaining entrance to college, and taking roles in political and public life with this trend fortunately advancing to this day.

The reverse of this trend slowly happened for men over these same times. The obituaries of the men of 1818 were known almost exclusively for their public, often military, service or leadership roles, with very little or no attention given to private or family life. By 1855, men began to be praised more for their social qualities such as gentlemanly behavior and hospitality. By 1870, men were being recognized more for their devoted roles in family life, but in 1910 the increased focus on material gain and economic power shifted virtues for men primarily back to their social and personal value as employers and employees who are hard-working, successful, and wealthy, a value shift that has yet to stop for most men. By 1930, there is a moderate shift back to valuing men for some of their generous and nurturing qualities, especially when it comes to providing for their families and helping the needy of society, which focus fortunately has only increased with time for the men of today (Hume 154-60).

Within these large social trends, Hume's work makes it easy to compare and contrast past virtues with those I chronicled recently to see how the emphasis on several public and private virtues has shifted in importance over time. As noted earlier, there seems to be little attention paid to naming and praising family roles, outside of the general social expectation of women to be devoted to the duties of domestic life, until 1855 and 1870 when both men and women were increasingly commemorated for being a "good husband or father" or "a beloved wife" and "devoted mother" (81). The use of these types of words and phrases, which place a high emphasis on both degrees of family

love and the importance of finding value and self-definition in family roles, have increased dramatically into our current decade. The five most common personal attributes or qualities assigned to the deceased, which were fairly equally used to describe both men and women were "beloved" (155 instances), "loving" (132), long-time or loyal employee service (96), "devoted" (77), and "dear" (62). With the exception of praise for long and loyal service to a company, employer, or a particular job, these other four attributes point to a popular fixation on honoring our dead by highlighting their family relationships and their importance for both giving to and receiving love from others. All four of these words plus many others similar to them, words like "adoring," "caring," and "cherished" were almost always followed by family titles such as wife, husband, mother, father, son, daughter, grandmother, and grandfather, etc. In fact, just over 75% of all obituaries contained phrases that included at least one adjective that implied loving or being loved with a family title.

This trend is not surprising for both historical and personal reasons. Historian Peter Stearns notes that following the Civil War, American society underwent a large "emotional redefinition" of family life, "in which the rewards of love began to take precedence over more traditional economic functions." Furthermore, he writes that "[b]oth for parenthood and for marriage, then, new definitions and justifications increasingly involved intense emotional ideals" that inspired "fervent, almost religious-like affection with the family" (38). These "intense emotional ideals" continue to inform our current views of family life and are very much reflected in recent obituaries. Therefore, from a personal or individual perspective, it seems quite natural and even expected that grieving family members and friends when trying to write an obituary

would choose to frequently focus on their relationships with the deceased sometimes to the exclusion of almost any other kind of personal information about the deceased person.

For those writers and obituaries that go beyond family life in offering their loved ones as positive social and personal examples, it is interesting although not surprising to notice that the many of the most frequently named traits that would make you a well-loved family member would also make you a well-liked member of society. And if obituaries are the reflections of social values that I and others claim them to be, then it is easy to see that American society is one that wants to be liked by others and admired for its energy, ingenuity, and dedication to work, church, and serving others.

After family love and devotion, the top five personal qualities and achievements named were serving others/community, serving God, having a good sense of humor and/or a great wit, laugh, or smile, generosity, and having many friends. There were also at least ten or more mentions of the related qualities of kindness, being loved by many, making friends easily, putting others first, and living a full life. The average American's personality is most likely to be described in ways such as "good-natured," "optimistic," "intelligent," "genuine," and "welcoming." When it comes to describing our actions, words like 'dedicated," "committed,"  "brave," and "hard-working" top the list.

Several of these same qualities can be seen on Hume's lists from 1818-1930. We seem to always have valued personal traits of honesty, industry, generosity, kindness, friendliness, and religious piety among many others. However, it was rare until after the Civil War for people to be remembered for being happy, funny, witty, interesting, or beautiful in published obituaries—qualities that are even more valued today. What is also instructive is noting what is often not on one list or another. For example, it was very

common for men from 1818 to 1870 to be recognized for patriotism, gallantry, good

sense, and zeal. I found only one direct reference to patriotism, although there were at

least 125 mentions of military service. None of these other specific qualities made the

list, although it could be easily argued that they do appear in modified forms.

For modern women the changes have been even more pronounced. Until the

1900's, women were largely praised for so-called Christian qualities of modesty,

meekness, innocence, resignation, obedience, gentleness, kindness, and patience. With

the exceptions of kindness, gentleness, and one mention of patience, none of those

qualities appeared in my sample obituaries. What is also missing from my sample are any

overt mentions of wealth or high social or class status or of achieving social prominence

beyond "being well-known" in a particular community or place. This is certainly a

change from the focus in the early part of the 20$^{th}$ century on publishing the details of

someone's social status and estate and praising them for "being a capitalist" (Hume 122).

As for those who do not embody or fail to "fit" into our social ideals—perhaps the

economically poor, the indigent, those with mental illnesses or physical and

developmental disabilities, chemical addictions, or criminal histories, undocumented

aliens, foster children, those who die of AIDS—there is a conspicuous silence in

newspaper obituaries about people and problems or life situations like these because they

represent realities and values that the dominant culture does not want to commemorate or

even admit to in this particular public forum yet. While not everyone gets an obituary

notice and obituaries are far from perfect, objective, or accurate records of an individual's

life or as windows into or mirrors of American social culture; however, obituaries do

reveal interesting and important trends in American social values. They also provide our

society with a formalized public space for acknowledging those we love thereby

humanizing the impact of a life and death. It is also a public place for recognizing

positive collective and individual cultural values such as marriages that stay together,

having children, economic success, serving others, and living a full life in the midst of

our fear, discomfort, and linguistic and social grappling with the taboo of death itself,

also revealed by the words we use to write about death in obituaries and by extension

ways we culturally frame and deal with the act and process of dying itself.

When it became time to address the important topic of euphemisms and

metaphors for death commonly seen in 21st century American obituaries, I chose to base

and organize my research on and around the well-known, comprehensive, and

foundational Metaphor Conceptual Theory proposed and written about by George Lakoff

and Mark Johnson in the their book *Metaphors We Live By*, a book often referenced,

elaborated on, and refined in scholarly works by several scholars who will be cited in this

paper.

According to Lakoff and Johnson, metaphor is best understood as more than just

linguistic expression, but rather as a cognitive and conceptual system upon which we

structure, map, understand, and communicate our own experiences and the experiences of

others (3-6). Metaphor Conceptual Theory posits that metaphor then both shapes

perception and thought as well as linguistic expression. Popularly, metaphor is defined as

partially understanding one thing, usually something more abstract or hard to define such

as love, time, or death, in terms of something else that is usually more concrete or

definite like a flower, money, or a journey. Metaphor is understood more academically as

a cognitive device rooted in several conceptual systems that are drawn from humans'

physical or bodily as well as social and cultural experiences and perceptions. Lakoff and Johnson define these two major conceptual systems by the categories of orientational metaphors, which mainly concern physical movement and orientation in space and time, and ontological metaphors, which are largely conceptual and concern the ways in which we view "events, activities, emotions, ideas, etc., as entities and substances" (25). Understanding these two major metaphorical systems is important here because they provide the basis upon which other researchers and I are able to form and understand our own conceptual categories from the euphemisms for death.

Other guiding concepts needed to understand this research paper as I do, are *taboo*, *euphemism*, and *obituary*. In *Forbidden Words*, Keith Allan and Kate Burridge define taboo as "a proscription of behavior that affects everyday life," and that taboos "arise out of social constraints on the individual's behavior where it can cause discomfort, harm, or injury" (1). Death, even in a modern American age where the average person does not have much firsthand knowledge in dealing with most aspects of the actual death, preparation, or disposal of a human body,  is still considered a taboo subject. Allan and Burridge even argue that death may now be the "great taboo subject" of our modern age because "[d]eath is a fear-based taboo" in which the inevitability, mystery, finality, corruption, and loss of death combine to provide a powerful psychological and social incentive for not speaking explicitly when speaking or writing about death (222).

Thanks to both the taboo and the universal unavoidability of death, metaphorically-based euphemisms for or about death continue to flourish in our culture and there is always an abundance of material from which to draw these expressions and

study their uses. I often think of euphemism as rhetorical disguise. However, euphemism

will be defined more neutrally here as "alternatives for expressions speakers prefer not to

use on a given occasion" whether the subject referred to is taboo or not (Allan and

Burridge 239). Allan and Burridge go on to identify three degrees or levels of euphemism

use: euphemism which is characterized as "sweet-sounding, evasive, overly polite,"

dysphemism or "harsh, blunt, or offensive" language, and orthophemisms which can be

defined as speech considered natural, direct, or neutral (240). Of course, judgments about

where any word or expression fits on this continuum depends largely on social context

and factors such as audience and the speaker's own feelings, purposes, and judgments

(240-41). This research paper will be examining euphemistic and orthophemistic words

and expressions concerning death. Dysphemistic words are not really considered here, as

most would likely judge there to be very little offensive language in published obituaries,

although an argument could be made that some people find the words *die, died*, or *death*

too harsh or blunt for a published notice.

This part of my paper will concentrate on the second road of inquiry and elaborate

on identifying, explaining, categorizing, and counting the basic metaphors that inspire the

common euphemisms used to avoid or ameliorate the act of dying as these euphemisms

appear in the formats within recently-published, newspaper obituary notices culled from

major cities across the U.S.

> What is remarkable in what we have seen so far is not how many ways we have of
> conceiving of life and death, but how few. Where one might expect hundreds of
> ways of making sense of our most fundamental mysteries, the number of basic
> metaphorical conceptions of life and death turns out to be very small. Though
> these can be combined and elaborated in novel ways and expressed poetically in
> an infinity of ways, that infinity is fashioned from the same small set of basic

metaphors…. If they [were] not, we would not understand them (Lakoff and Turner 26).

In my survey of studies that examine either the relationships between metaphors and euphemisms for death and/or the cultural ramifications of obituaries on society, I noticed that their authors often identified many of the same types of metaphors for what death is. To check this observation, I went through each source carefully and noted the basic metaphorical concepts or categories listed in each and counted how many times each one appeared in all the studies cited in this paper. The most numerously cited metaphors formed the basis for each conceptual category under which I could organize the euphemisms that I collected. I found there to be six major conceptual metaphor categories that fit  both with Lakoff and Johnson's theoretical divisions of orientational, ontological, and personification metaphors and that appeared in the literature three or more times. Those six basic metaphors found most to least frequently include 'Death is a Journey,' 'Death is Sleep or Rest,' 'Death is a New Joyful Life,' "Death is Loss,' 'Death is a Battle Lost' (an adversary), or 'Death is an End'. I will also discuss the additional categories of silence as euphemism and facing reality by using the direct or orthophemistic word "died" to show how we modern Americans express our personal attitudes and beliefs about death publicly.

Although the metaphors and euphemisms that will appear here are often given different labels in the studies I read such as 'sentimental,' 'poetic,' or 'imaginative,' I agree most strongly with Fernandez's assertion in *Language of Death* that the most powerful and frequent metaphors concerning death are "consolatory metaphors, i.e., highly poetic and connotative metaphors which [aim] at evading the linguistic taboos

*death* and *die* with the purpose of providing some sort of consolation to those left alive and helping them accept the reality of the loss of a loved one" (112). I too consider the central type and purpose of the first three categories of euphemisms in my sample to be consolatory and to offer comfort to the grieving by painting a happy or peaceful future for the dead, while the last three conceptual categories are less comforting, but instead highlight the feelings of the bereaved and may help us frame and reason about what death really means to many of us.

Originally, euphemistic data was sorted into four broad categories: reality or those who used the word "died" within the obituary, silence or no direct mention of a death in the obituary, direct religious references to a death, and non-religious references to a death, which includes what I consider the generic euphemism of "passed away" and its variants of "passed," "passed on," "passed from," and "the passing of." Under these criteria, a total of 301 euphemisms for death in the 700 obituaries collected for this study, which is approximately 43% of the total or close to half of all obituaries in my sample. By far, the most popular and pervasive basic metaphor for death and the one that inspired the greatest number and variations of euphemisms was **Death is a Journey**.

Conceiving of life and death as a journey seems natural to many for several reasons. First because as linguistic scholars, Lakoff and Johnson, and Juana I. Marin-Arrese point out, we conceptualize life and death "in terms of our bodily experience of spatial domains"  as well as ontological domains that conceptualize events as discrete entities meaning that they can be conceived as something that "exists in space and time, and…has well-defined boundaries" such as start and finish or as Marin-Arrese puts it, much of our physical and mental experiences are "structured in terms of a Source-Path-

Goal schema" whether or not this process is real or imagined (46—47; 31). In other words, we perceive our lives both as a movement through time and space and as an object or container that is bound by a beginning and ending, so that it then seems very reasonable to transfer or extend these orientations onto the act or state of death itself so that death as we conceive it can include a departure, a path of travel, and a destination. This is the knowledge we have about movement, journeys, and the future and so therefore the proliferation of action words that signify going in the many euphemisms we have to describe dying or death such as 'left', 'departed', 'went', 'gone', 'was called', 'returned', 'transitioned', and the curious and popular word 'passed' make sense.

The consolatory metaphor 'death is a journey' took the lion's share of euphemistic expressions for death at 272 of 301 or nearly ninety percent of all euphemisms recorded from my sample. This dominance was due in large part to the surprisingly common and in a sense almost meaningless or generic euphemistic term for death 'passed away,' of which there were 228 instances, most often expressed in the formula 'name of the deceased *passed away* on some date.' Now 'passed away' does gentle the bluntness of reality that the word 'died' conveys, and it does indicate an understanding or hope of death as a departure from life, but it also seems to me to be the least revealing and therefore safest way to express this belief of a person no longer living his or her life here or now.

The euphemism *pass away* dates back to the fourteenth century and enjoyed its peak of popularity in Victorian times (Rawson, *Dictionary of Euphemisms*, 309) so it surprises me a little that it still enjoys so much popular usage in the modern world. Furthermore, the destination or goal of *away* in *passed away* is vague, probably

intentionally so. Therefore, it seems reasonable to consider 'passed away' and its variations of 'passed on,' of which there were only three instances in seven hundred obituaries, 'the passing of' which also came to three instances, and the slightly more definite and descriptive 'passed from this life' at four instances to be the safest, most publicly appealing, and generic euphemisms for death.

But there is more to a journey than the act of departure. Journeys also have an end goal or destination, and it is concerning the destinations of those who die, or what is commonly thought of as the afterlife, where I found the most variety and specificity in this conceptual category. It will be of little surprise to most Americans that when it comes to identifying the potential destinations of the dead that Judeo-Christian religious beliefs concerning life after death continue to prevail over any other religious systems or even over any hopeful, non-religious ones. Discounting the non-specific "passed away" or "passed on," and the departure-only euphemisms of "passed from this life," "departed this life," or "left this earth," there remained thirty-five euphemisms that indicated a destination or a new state-of-being after death. Twenty-seven of these are clearly religious and make reference to Christian theology or figures such as God, the/our Creator, Heaven, Heavenly Father, Jesus Christ, the/our Savior, and most popular the/our Lord at fourteen instances. There were also four vague destination references to "eternity," "eternal glory," and "eternal life" in this category. And while the remaining eight of these thirty-five death destinations could be considered non-religious, they still often rely on ideas that fit into or are inspired by a widely Christian culture and include at one instance each: "journey to paradise," "a new existence," "a better place," "home," "her place among the starry skies," and "Labor to Reward." A couple of the expressions

in this category focus not on a place as much as on the idea of going to see a special person who has already died as in "joined Mom today" and "joined his one true love;" I'll assume in Heaven or at least somewhere nice.

Closely related to and often overlapping in words and sentiment is the second conceptual metaphor category **death is a new joyful life**. As several scholars point out in their studies, the belief in an afterlife, resurrection of the dead, "and the promise of immortality for citizens who lived Christian lives" is central to Judeo-Christian traditions that stress a happy, everlasting communion with God in Heaven (Hume 39; Fernandez 119; Marin-Arrese 44), and so although this category is numerically small with only seven euphemistic expressions that specifically allude to eternal life, a new state of being, or transformation after death, like the 'death is a journey' metaphor its consolatory function is socially and personally important in several ways. First it allows the grieving people who embrace this belief to imagine their loved ones as still alive and living in a desirable state or place. Second, it may lessen the fear of dying by defining death as either a continuation of a good life or as new, positive experience (Fernandez 119). Third, these expressions serve to remind the public of the rewards of living "exemplary Christian lives" and allow us to highlight or imply the good Christian qualities or faith of the deceased (Hume 38). Finally, defining death as a new and joyful state-of-being has the intended and unintended consequence of contrasting this earthly life as one of misery or bondage as compared to the idealized and preferable state of life in Heaven after death. This idea, although not as popular in modern obituaries as compared to Victorian and turn-of-the-century obituaries, still lingers in the examples of "transitioned from Labor to Reward," "got her wings today," and "will suffer no more in her Heavenly Father's care."

These euphemistic expressions if taken literally or logically make death sound so nice it's a wonder we don't all end our own earthly lives now.

Yet even if the idea of eternity in Heaven or anywhere is too much for many to fully understand, and even if most people don't view their current lives as a state of misery, most of us can easily comprehend and appreciate a desire for sleep or rest, so it is not surprising that the basic conceptual metaphor **death is sleep or rest** is second only to the conceptual metaphor 'death is a journey' in number in that it inspired sixteen examples that refer directly to death as either "rest" (2), "eternal rest" (11), or as a state of "peace" (3). Additionally, when looking at adverbs that describe how someone died, "peacefully" as in "she passed peacefully" or "he went peacefully in his sleep" was used 96 times, far above any other adverb counted such as "quietly" (3), "suddenly" (15), "sadly" (1) "tragically" (1), or "unexpectedly" (7). This shows the importance we place on the ideal that the best deaths are quiet, peaceful ones that mimic the state of sleep and lead to rest and restoration.

Equating death with sleep or rest seems very easy and natural or logical for most Americans because this metaphor is based on what Lakoff and Johnson call 'orientational' metaphors that concern how our bodies and senses experience being and space. According to them, states of consciousness such as life and wakefulness are UP because when we are in these states we are standing or moving with perception and awareness while states of unconsciousness like sleep and death are DOWN because we are physically lying down and unaware of ourselves and in the case of death also usually under the ground as well (14-15). Furthermore, when Americans hold a funeral service, often the corpse is made to look as if he/she is sleeping or as a few obituary writers put it

"reposing" or "lying in state." The usual appearance of corpses at funerals is one of inactivity and inattention—lying down, hands folded on chest, eyes closed as if peacefully asleep.

But not all metaphors and euphemisms for death are pleasant and expressed with hope for a better future or state-of-being. The other three metaphorical categories examined here acknowledge the pain and sadness of death: loss and ending.  The conceptual metaphor **death is a loss** includes only a small number of six euphemisms that focus on the idea that death either takes someone away from us or that focuses not on the deceased person, but on the living ones the deceased "leaves behind to mourn" as one obituary writer puts it. Fernandez argues that "the conceptual basis of this [metaphorical] mapping lies in the fact that life is perceived as a valuable object and death is thus seen as the loss of this possession" (117), which I think adequately explains other euphemisms found such as "taken too soon," "our Lord and Savior took our beloved," and "lost to the good Lord above," as well as the phrasing "will be missed by"  to stand in for died, which appeared three times in my sample.

This 'death is a loss' metaphor also acts to personify death as an external agent or adversary over which we have no control. In these particular euphemisms, someone is taken from us (even if the taking is done by a benevolent deity), missing from us, or lost to us and losing things makes most of us feel powerless, angry and sad. These "negative results of death" also correspond strongly with the abundance of euphemistic phrases that appear in the closely-related metaphorical concept of **death is a lost battle** of which I found forty-six examples (Fernandez, 117). Under this category I placed all the euphemistic expressions that referred or compared, directly or indirectly, to an illness

leading to death to an adversary or battle to be fought, won, or lost. This observation seems to support the idea argued by Lakoff and Johnson that ontological metaphors like 'death is a loss' and 'death is a lost battle' satisfy the human need to understand our relationships to experiences or ideas that not bound or discrete. By conceiving of death as an entity that can act or as a personification of an enemy, we can then reason about how it acts and may affect us (25).

One effect of death that most of us do not want to highlight or admit to, if number is any indication, is that human death is final and at the very least an end to an earthly existence. The last conceptual metaphor category examined her is **death is an end**. Although the idea of life ending is often present in all the other euphemisms listed thus far, only two examples were found in the 301 euphemistic expressions counted that specifically acknowledge that death is an end to life perhaps with no promise of eternal life, eternal sleep, or a specific destination. The first one is "enjoyed 71 years of life" and the second one is "flown his last earthly flight," which was a reference to the deceased's career as a pilot and perhaps also meant to imply that he may fly elsewhere after death. Both of these expressions, although still euphemistic, also provide a feeling of honesty about the reality of human death, which is that no matter what happens after death, we should remember that a life was lived and it is to be no longer lived here and now. That death should be viewed as the end, our final act, or our last hour most likely also stems from the 'source-path-goal' schema mentioned earlier when discussing the 'death is a journey' metaphor. Unlike the 'death is a journey,' this time this schema proposed by Lakoff in *Women, Fire, and Dangerous Things* and expanded upon by Fernandez and Marin-Arrese seeks to organize and understand our everyday experiences and our whole

lifespan as a journey or in terms of a process through time with a beginning (birth), a middle (maturity and life events), and an end (death) (Fernandez 123; Marin-Arrese 48). This schema and the conceptual metaphors it inspires allows us to imagine life as a linear movement forward and serves to remind us that life is temporal and temporary, which is probably not the happiest reminder for most and so may explain why there are so few euphemistic expressions in this particular category since most of us would rather think of death as a new kind of beginning.

So it seems that euphemistic expressions for the act and word of *death* are still widely used by many obituary writers for a variety of reasons including social politeness, religious belief, wishful thinking, to express personal feelings or beliefs, and even to reason with our physical reality all in an effort to mitigate the taboo of death. And although euphemistic expressions do generally soften death's reality, there is an even more effective means by which we as writers can dilute the strength of the death taboo, and that is not to mention it at all. Of 700 obituaries, 173 of them made no direction mention of death. Of course, it could be easily argued that by virtue of appearing under the *obituaries* or *death notices* section of a newspaper or website it becomes unnecessary to directly state that someone has died, but I believe along with Allan and Burridge that this specific omission of or silence about the event that prompted the writing of an obituary acts as the "ultimate euphemism" to avoid the taboo (224).

And so if silence about death may also be considered its own conceptual category of euphemism—the euphemism of avoidance, then the total of euphemistic treatments for death in my sample of obituaries becomes 474 of 700 or 68%, which is more than twice the number present in the final category in my classification system: use of the word *died*.

In my notes this category was labeled "reality." Allan and Burridge may have labeled it as 'orthophemism.' Under either label, I understand that the use of this powerful little verb *died* is the most direct and unsentimental way we have to write about death in an obituary. At 226 instances, only slightly lower than the 228 instances of *passed away* alone, of use or 32%, I am still curious to know if this use of the word *died* means that we modern Americans have become more or less comfortable with dealing more directly with death, at least linguistically.

The use of 'died' in published obituaries is factual and concise. It feels more honest and its use would seem to have little impact on or consequence to the social reputation of either the writer or of the deceased, at least not directly. And although I have been working to understand the history of obituary writing in America and to a lesser extent Europe, I do not yet have any source that clearly or specifically examines changes in historical comfort with or use of the word *died* in obituaries or even general society. Before beginning this research, I hypothesized that we twenty-first century citizens would be much more comfortable with the idea of death and that the use of the word *died* would be the largest category; however, after this research I realize that the death taboo is a complex and tricky phenomenon and that people's relationships with it, as evidenced by obituary writing at least, are not clear cut and that the euphemisms commonly used for death have deep roots within both our subconscious and conscious perceptions and experiences that are not easy to unravel, organize, or fully understand.

Death is both a philosophical and biological problem for human beings and our language readily reflects this. In the course of the normal human lifespan, most of us will have to face death multiple times and many of us will also have to compose or contribute

to an obituary for someone we knew and loved. So whether or not you view euphemisms for death a show of "reverence before the name of a mystery" or "a cowardly evasion of reality" (Pound 195), one thing that is clear in this research is that euphemisms for death are (pardon the pun) alive and well in today's American obituaries and that these euphemisms for death are well-represented across the conceptual continuum of the small, but rich group of metaphors we have for exploring the complexities and mysteries of life and death from the hope of eternal life to the painful idea that one day everything we know will cease to be.

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