A Comparative Genre Analysis of Memorial Cards in English and Funeral/Memorial Announcements in Persian

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Abstract

As covert socio-cultural relations have significant effects on language, these norms are reflected in linguistic and generic structure of public death notices as a distinctive genre. This study intended to identify the different genres of death notices (e.g. memorial advertisements, obituaries, funeral announcements/posters, memorial cards, etc.) and to conduct a comparative genre analysis of memorial cards (MCs) in English and funeral/memorial announcements (FMAs) in Persian using both qualitative and quantitative methods. The data included 22 English MCs and 40 Persian FMAs (average 80 words). The results of bottom-up analyses of different moves and steps in the two genres in focus revealed that there were more similarities between English MCs and Persian FMAs than differences. Both languages introduced the deceased person, included literary or religious texts, signatures, names of the clergyman invited, and included the date, time, and address of the memorial ceremony in their MCs and FMAs. While English MCs included the dates of birth and death of the deceased person and a word of acknowledgement, the Persian FMAs distinguished different types of ceremonies and named and invited the relatives, friends, or acquaintances. The results can benefit L2 writers to master the predominant structural patterns and the reflected cultural differences.

Keywords: Genre Analysis, Funeral/Memorial Announcements, Memorial Cards, Death Notices, and Cross Linguistic Comparison

Introduction

It is a fact of life that human being is not immortal in this world. Death is announced in different ways such as epitaphs, tributes, or death notices. An Englishman reading a death notice will not find out anything strange at all. In contrast, to a foreigner who is not familiar with this kind of text, they look strange (Fries, 1990). This strangeness will happen anywhere because there are different types of death notices in the world and based on nationality, religion, culture, etc. the text of them are different. Announcing the death of someone occurs in different ways and is given different genre names from culture to culture, such as *obituaries, memorial advertisement, funeral posters, memorial cards*, etc. The genres used for funeral announcements may differ from one culture to another; therefore, they need to be explored to clarify some sociocultural facts. Here, there is a need for genre analysis. In Swales' (1990) theory of genre analysis, a genre is considered as a specific form of discourse with shared "structure, style, content, and intended audience" (p. 17). Bhatia (1993) believes that the theory of genre "attempts to give a grounded or 'thick' description of language which is called by sociolinguists rather than a surface level description" (p. 31). He also points out that genre analysis is something dynamic.

A large and growing body of literature has investigated condolences as speech acts in different languages. Hashempour (2016) studied the Iranian funeral posters based on speech acts theory. The results showed the most frequent condolences used were declarative and directive. Moradi Moghadam and Pishghadam (2012) investigated the condolence responses and found that Persian responses are more celestial and collectivist in nature, while English condolence responses are more terrestrial and individualistic. Allami and Samavarchi (2012) attempted to study the speech act of giving condolences from the sociopragmatic perspective. The results indicated that the Persian speakers and EFL learners are more direct than the English natives for offering their condolences. In the field of genre, Behnam (2015) explored the schematic structure and lexical-grammatical features of death notices. The results revealed that the DA genre, in Tabriz, has nine core moves, containing caption, profile of the deceased, list of members of family, date, time, address of ceremony, an invitation, list of surnames of relatives and friends, names of organizations expressing their regrets, the name of clergyman who would be present at the ceremony, and the announcement of when and where women are going to hold a ceremony. Kango and Gyas (2015) have done a study on messages of condolence. Some other researchers such as Behnam, Ali Akbari Hamid, and Goharkhani Asli (2012) have conducted the same relevant study. The results of the former study showed that the condolence genre has nine moves out of which six were obligatory and the rest were optional. On the other hand, the latter illustrated that there is a difference in the way people give their condolences and it is argued that Persian messages are more direct, and short signs of religious culture can be seen in them; however, English messages are indirect, sympathetic, and apologetic.

A study on funeral announcements conducted by Jalilifar, Varnaseri, Saidian, and Khazai (2014) showed if covert socio-cultural relations had any significant effects on language. The results indicated the cultural background and socio-political norms were reflected in linguistic and generic structure of funeral announcements.

In spite of considerable research done in the area of genre structure condolence, little research has focused on a cross-linguistic comparison of English and Persian death notices. In the present study, the researcher intends to compare the death notices of Iranian funeral posters and memorial cards of foreign people based on the theory of genre. Thus, the aim of this study is to find out the underlying structure of death notices genres in English and Persian. In addition, this study tries to uncover whether there are any significant differences between memorial cards (MCs) in English and funeral/memorial announcements (FMAs) in Persian in terms of their structures.

Method

The Corpus

The data used for the study included 40 Persian FMAs and 22 authentic English MCs, collected from different sources (see Table 1.). The texts of Persian FMAs (average length: 110 words) were collected around the city of Yazd, Iran. The texts of English MCs (average length: 80 words) were taken from international tourists in Yazd. As the availability of the English texts was limited, only 22 English memorial cards as death notices were retrieved. Furthermore, the sample death notices including less than 30 words were excluded from the study.

Table 1. A summary of the corpus

	English MCs	Persian FMAs
No.	22	40
Word count:	2000	4487

Procedure

The texts were categorized and analyzed based on the theory of genre analysis. Moves and steps were manually coded in a bottom-up fashion (Persian FMAs and English MCs, in this study, were codified as Pers. FMA. # 1, Pers. FMA. # 2, … Pers. FMA. # 40; and En. MC. # 1, En. MC. # 2, … En. MC. # 20).

After selecting and codifying the texts, the main coder went through the text, broke it into sentences, and started the investigation with the aim of identifying the macro structures of the texts in terms of recurring patterns or moves. The researchers, then, attempted to make a connection between those sentences which implied a similar content and communicative purpose, and put them under the same

category. The category was marked with the move type according to its functional orientation. Although the texts, at the first level of analysis, were divided into individual sentences, it could not imply that an individual sentence was always regarded as a move, since a move was defined, in this study, by its function not its physical length.

As identified by Swales (1990), moves were assigned into three categories, namely, obligatory, conventional, and optional, based on their percentage of occurrence within the genre variation in focus. Where a particular move occurred repeatedly with a frequency of more than 67%, it was labeled as obligatory. Moves observed less frequently, i.e. the moves for which the frequency fell between 66% and 33%, were considered as conventional. Finally, the moves which occurred sporadically (with the frequency rate of less than 33%) were assigned into the optional category.

Moreover, qualitative researches are often threatened by the reliability of their results (Bachman & Palmer, 1996; Gamaroff, 2000). Thus, in order to reduce the risk of human errors, during consequences of manual data analysis, a pilot phase was conducted. As Shohamy, Gordon, and Kraemer (1992) believed, there could be no validity, if there was no inter coder reliability. Therefore, two experts cooperated in checking the moves. The aim was to minimize the risk of subjectivity associated with the kind of analysis. Finally, Cohen's Kappa statistics was used to estimate the inter coder agreement (Cohen, 1960). The average coefficient of 89% showed a high agreement among the coders.

Results and Discussions

Qualitative Results

From the data set, it was observed that, in general, there were ten extracted moves in death notices corpus of the study, which were common in either/both English MCs and Persian FMAs. These were as follows: *Announcing the type of the ceremony, a literary or religious text, introduction to the deceased, the date and the address of the ceremony, inviting the relatives, friends or acquaintances, signature of the family of the deceased, names of the clergyman invited, the birth/death date of the deceased*, and *a word of acknowledgement*.

Move 1. *Announcing the type of the ceremony*

The first move of these death notices genres was the type of the ceremony which in Persian FMAs mostly refers to the funeral day, the third day after the demise, the seventh day, or even the fortieth day as well as the anniversary. In Iranian Muslim society, when a person passes away, his/her family hold one ceremony for his/her funeral procession, other memorial ceremonies after passage of three days, seven days, forty days, and the anniversary after passage of one year or

even more years. However, the English-speaking societies, being predominantly Christian, only declare funeral and memorial ceremonies at the time of demise of their loved ones as well as anniversaries. Hence, Iranians seem to be more distinctive about the types of ceremonies. Examples 1-5 show language used in this move in both English and Persian (translated into English).

Example 1. مراسم سالگرد شادروان …. (Anniversary ceremony of the late….) (Pers. FMA. # 9)

Example 2. یک سال گذشت (One year passed) (Pers. FMA. # 12)

Example 3. به مناسبت گرامیداشت سالگرد درگذشت مرحومه (To commemorate the anniversary of the name of deceased) (Pers. FMA. # 13)

Example 4. چهل روز گذشت (Forty days passed) (Pers. FMA. # 22)

Example 5. Second death anniversary of … (En. MC. # 8)

Move 2. *Literary/Religious text*

The next move is inclusion of a literary/religious text in English MCs and Persian FMAs. The religious texts include Quranic verses, words of hadith or quotations from Imams or different prayers in *Mafatih al-Jinan* (the book of prayers and worship in Islam). Most of Persian FMAs included this move; however, few English MCs included such texts. Examples 6-9 show such religious texts in Persian corpus:

Example 6. السلام علیک یا ابا عبدالله الحسین (Pease be on you, O Abu Abdullah, Al-Husayn) (Pers. FMA. # 2)

Example 7. *انا لله و انا الیه راجعون*(We are from God and return to Him) (Pers. FMA # 12)

Example 8. هوالباقی (He is everlasting) (Pers. FMA. #20)

Example 9. هر کس انسانی را حیات بخشد گویی همه را زنده کرده است (if any one saved a life it would be as if he saved the life of the whole people) (Pers. FMA. #40)

The literary texts consisted of either prose or poetry texts at the beginning of the MCs or FMAs. The theme of the texts are usually about the demise of a loved one, e.g. a mother or father, starting a new life in the other world, and the tragedy of the demise, Examples 10 – 13 show the language used in this move.

Example 10. پدر جان یاد آن شب ها که ما را شمع جان بودی / میان ناامیدی ها چراغ جاویدان بودی (Oh! Dear dad! We remember those nights you enlightened our soul as a candle; a perpetual light for a life full of disappointment …) (Pers. FMA. # 3)

Example 11. چهل روزی که ثانیه های بی تو بودنمان را هر نفس که بی تو کشیدیم گریستیم (We cried at every breath we had to take after you) (Pers. FMA. # 17)

Example 12. God has her in his keeping, we have her in our hearts … (En. MC. # 14)

Example 13. God looked around His garden and found an empty place … (En. MC. # 18)

Move 3. *Introducing the deceased*

This move was identified as containing several items including the *full formal name of the deceased*; the name is highlighted through indenting, bolding, capitalizing, or any other visual effects. In some cases, *nicknames* or the names that the deceased was known with in his/her life are put in parentheses. *Title of the deceased* is another item of introduction which proves some identification of the deceased. Most of them are supported by some upgrading positive adjectives in Persian. In some of FMAs, there was a mention of not being married for those deceased in early youth (Example, 18). In English, however, mostly the occupation of the deceased or the word *loving memory* is the expression that precedes the titles (Examples 17-21). The extra items in minimal Persian cases were a simultaneous ceremony in memory of a late relative (Example, 22).

Example 14. ... همسری مهربان و پدری دلسوز (A kind husband and a sympathetic father) (Pers. FMA # 3)

Example 15. ... مادری مهربان (A kind mother …) (Pers. FMA. # 23)

Example 16. ... پدری مهربان و فداکار (A kind and sacrificing father …) (Pers. FMA. # 26)

Example 18. جوان ناکام (A single young man), (Pers. FMA. # 4 & # 21)

Example 17. First Baptist church of … (En. MC. # 17)

Example 19. In loving memory of … (En. MC. # 2)

Example 20. In memory of … (En. MC. # 7)

Example 21. A celebration of life … (En. MC. #10)

Example 22. ... به یاد ونهمین سالگرد همسر بزرگوارشان (On the occasion of the twenty-nineth anniversary of the death of his dear wife and in her memory) (Pers. FMA. # 11)

Move 4. *Date, time, and the address of ceremony*

This move of the MCs and FMAs gives a description of the date, time, and address to hold the ceremony for the deceased. This move of the death notice or memorial genre seems to be the most important part as it provides the direction or information. Based on different religious orientations, the place is different; for example, for Shiites the location is a mosque or some hold the ceremony in the home of the deceased.

Example 23. سه شنبه ۹۵/۸/۱۱ ساعت ۷:۳۰ الی ۱۰ صبح در مسجد ابوالفضل واقع در صفائیه، شهرک دانشگاه (Tuesday, 11/8/95, at 7:30-10 in the morning, Abolfazl mosque located in Safaieh, Daneshgah town) (Pers. FMA. # 31)

Example 24. Saturday, March 19, 2011, 11:00 am, St. Vincent DePaul Catholic Church, 1502 E. Wallen Road (En. MC. # 20)

Move 5. *Inviting the relatives, friends or acquaintances*

In this move it is informed that those who are going to attend the ceremony are appreciated for their presence in advance and the deceased's family wants to show gratitude towards their relatives and friends who share the sorrows they are suffering from. However this move did not exist in English MCs, maybe because the concept of Ta'arof (standing on ceremonies) predominates in Iranian culture.

Example 25. حضور سبزتان را ارج می نهیم (Your heartwarming presence would be highly appreciated …) (Pers. FMA. # 11)

Example 26. حضور شما سروران گرامی باعث شادی روح آن مرحوم/مرحومه و تسلی خاطر بازماندگان خواهد بود (The presence of friends and acquaintances will make the spirit of the deceased happy and the family survivors will be satisfied by the condolences) (this sentence was repeated in 28 out of the total of 40 texts of Persian FMAs.)

Move 6. *Signature*

In this move, the surnames of the deceased's family take place at the end of MCs and FMAs. Sometimes, in the Persian FMAs, a list of surnames of relatives and friends are mentioned to show their respect.

Move 7. *Names of clergymen invited*

The names of the clergymen who would be present in the ceremony are another move in the memorial genres, which are used in a few cases in both English and Persian, and hence are considered optional.

Move 8. *The birth/death date of the deceased*

This move is specific to English MCs, in which the date of birth and death dates of the deceased are mentioned.

Example 27. January 1, 1944 – December 31, 2004 (En. MC. # 18)

Move 9. *A word of acknowledgement*

It is an appreciation word which does not exist in Persian FMAs. These texts are used to express the gratitude and acknowledge the importance of others' help and support.

Example 28. The family wishes to acknowledge with deep appreciation the many expressions of love … (En. MC. # 17)

Example 29. The family wishes to express their sincere gratitude to all those who have supported … (En. MC. # 16)

Quantitative Results

In order to develop a model (or models) of genre for the three variations of English MCs and Persian FMAs under study, it was necessary to conduct some quantitative analyses. Therefore, as the first step towards quantifying the data, we scrutinized the texts one by one to calculate the frequency of occurrence of each identified move within each dataset (see Table 2).

Table 2. Frequencies and Percentages of Occurrence of Moves

Moves	English MCs N. = (%)		Persian FMAs N. = (%)	
1. Introducing the type of ceremony	1	(4%) *	21	(52%) **
2. Literary/ Religious text	15	(68%) ***	35	(87%) ***
3. Introducing the deceased	22	(100%) ***	40	(100%) ***
4. Date, time and the address of ceremony	22	(100%) ***	40	(100%) ***
5. Inviting the relatives, friends or acquaintances	0	(0%)	32	(80%) ***
6. Signature	9	(40%) **	19	(47%) **
7. Names of clergyman invited	2	(9%) *	2	(5%) *
8. The birth/death date of the deceased	22	(100%) ***	0	(0%)
9. A word of acknowledgment	10	(45%)**	0	(0%)

Note: *** = obligatory, **= conventional, and * = optional

As shown in Table 2, *Introducing the type of ceremony* occurred the most in Persian FMAs. This frequency indicates rituals in the Muslim society and the different ceremonies held for the deceased. *Literary/Religious text* is an obligatory move in depictions of these adjacent genres in both English and Persian. However, the higher frequency of such religious texts was related to the Persian FMAs. Behnam (2015) identified these moves as *Caption* and, based on the researcher, Captions may consist of three parts as: the type of ceremony (for the 3rd day, for the 40th day, or for the anniversary of the death) and a poem representing the sorrows of the family; and it must be noted also that this is the move which actually announces the death. *Introducing the deceased* was regarded as an essential move in every sample text in

the corpus, which Behnam (2015) named as the *Profile of deceased*. However, one must regard the varieties which could be witnessed using several steps, such as the name/nickname of the deceased as well as the title or position of the deceased, and one more optional item which is a simultaneous ceremony in the memory of another late relative, which were more common in Persian FMAs. *Date, time, and the address of ceremony* was another essential move which provides information needed by sympathizers to attend the memorial ceremony. *Inviting the relatives, friends, or acquaintances* was an obligatory move in Persian FMAs, which did not exist in any of the English MCs. On the other hand, there were two moves in English MCs, *The birth/death date of the deceased* and *A word of acknowledgement,* the former being obligatory with the highest frequent 100% (N = 22) and the latter being regarded as a conventional move, based on Swales (1990). Another conventional move was *Signature* with about the same frequency of occurrence both in English and Persian sample memorial announcement genres under study, which showed a similarity between them. One more move, *Names of the clergyman invited*, was treated as the leased frequent move in both English MCs and Persian FMAs. According to Hashempor's (2016) findings, *declarative* is the most used speech act in the texts of the Persian FMAs and, based on Searle (1976), *declaration* refers to those kinds of speech that change the world by their utterance.

Table 3. Chi-Square on the Differences between the Moves of Persian FMAs and English MCs

Moves	Chi-Square(x^2)	df	Asymp. Sig (p)
1. Introducing the type of ceremony	8.696[a]	1	.003
2. Literary/Religious text	.250[a]	1	.617
3. Introducing the deceased	.129[a]	1	.719
4. Date, time, and the address of ceremony	.008[a]	1	.928
5. Inviting the relatives, friends or acquaintance	13.636[a]	1	.000
6. Signature	.018[a]	1	.894
7. Name of clergyman	.500[a]	1	.480
8. The birth/death of the Deceased	40.196[a]	1	.000
9. A word of acknowledgement	16.409[a]	1	.000

Table 3 demonstrates that there was a significant difference between English MCs and Persian FMAs in using the first move, *Introducing the type of ceremony*, because Iranians hold different ceremonies (for the 3rd day, for the 40th day, or for the anniversary of demise).

In the second move, *Literary/Religious text,* there was no significant difference ($p = .617$) between English MCs and Persian FMAs, which reflects the similarities between these adjacent genres.

In the use of the third move, *Introducing the deceased*, and the fourth move, *Date, time, and the address of ceremony*, the difference was not significant between English MCs and Persian FMAs, either.

The difference between English and Persian text samples in the fifth move, *Inviting the relatives friends or acquaintance*, was significant ($p = .000$). As was explained in the qualitative results section, this move did not exist in English MCs, because the concept of Ta'arof (explained above) predominates in Iranian culture.

There was also no significant difference observed between English and Persian DCs with respect to the sixth move, *signature*, and the seventh move, *Announcing the name of the clergyman*, and the seventh move was not employed frequently, either in English or in Persian. Compared with English MCs, the last two moves did not exist in Persian FMAs, therefore, the difference between the two adjacent genres in the two languages was revealed to be statistically significant with respect to the writers' employment of these two moves.

Conclusion

As mentioned before, this study intended to identify the different adjacent genres of death notices (e.g. memorial advertisements, obituaries, funeral announcements, funeral posters, memorial cards, etc.) and then to conduct a comparative genre analysis of memorial cards (MCs) in English and funeral/memorial announcements (FMAs) in Persian. The results of the study revealed that there were more similarities between English MCs and Persian FMAs than differences. The most important limitation of the study lied in the fact that accessibility to the English corpus was limited in Iran as an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context. The other limitation was the word count limits in the memorial announcements which were decided to be between 80 to 110 words; therefore, many of those samples which were less than these word limits had to be substituted. This study focused on the comparative genre analysis of Persian and English death notice genres, but future research can focus on these and other adjacent genres in other languages with different corpora and analyze them based on the theory of genre analysis which certainly allows further investigation. The results of the study can be beneficial for the researchers who wish to compare the standard formats of these genres in

different cultures. In addition, this study will help sympathizers to know what to include in their own writings of death notices.

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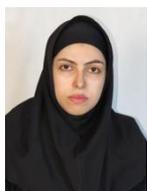
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