

The Death of Monarchs: Front-Page Reporting of Queen Elizabeth II's Death

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Abstract—This is a linguistic and semiotic study of the newspaper front pages that reported the death of Queen Elizabeth II. A sample of 61 front pages was collected from various British and non-British newspapers on Friday 9 September, 2022. The headlines reporting the death of the Queen were linguistically analysed focusing on euphemistic means. The pictures accompanying the headlines were semiotically investigated to see how the Queen was visually mourned and if there were any subtle semiotic euphemisms. Reporting the death of the Queen, linguistic and semiotic polarities can be observed on the newspaper front pages under investigation: direct versus indirect reporting. The findings reveal that 70.5% of the headlines reported the tragic news indirectly avoiding the verb 'die', the noun 'death' and the adjective 'dead'. Similarly, the semiotic analysis shows that more newspapers displayed coloured (67%) recent (57%) pictures of the Queen showing her cheerful (56%). Avoiding the words 'die', 'death' and 'dead' and displaying the Queen in coloured cheerful pictures demonstrate that newspapers favoured both subtle linguistic and semiotic euphemisms in reporting the death of Queen Elizabeth II. The findings illustrate how humans, consciously and unconsciously, safeguard themselves against the discourse of death by utilizing both linguistic and semiotic euphemisms.

Index Terms—euphemism, death, Queen Elizabeth II, semiotics, front pages

I. INTRODUCTION

The longest-reigning British Monarch, Queen Elizabeth II, passed away on Thursday afternoon 8 September, 2022 at the age of 96 at Balmoral Castle, her favourite Scottish estate. She spent 70 years on the British throne after succeeding her late father, George VI, on 6 February, 1952 at the age of 25. The Royal Family first announced her death by a tweet that read "The Queen died peacefully at Balmoral this afternoon..." The news of her death was reported by different news agencies and various media platforms all over the world. The news about her death appeared on the front pages of various newspapers inside and outside the UK. A good number of them dedicated entire front pages to report the sad news accompanied with portraits of the late queen. The way the news appeared on newspaper front pages was intriguing as different semiotic and linguistic means were utilised to report the heart-breaking news. Some newspapers (e.g. *The Guardian*) displayed old portraits of the late queen when she was young, like the one showing her coronation in 1953. Others chose recent portraits of the queen showing her aging yet graceful figure (e.g. *The Daily Telegraph*). Some accompanied the portraits with short death announcements (e.g. Our beloved Queen is dead), very short epitaphs (e.g. Elizabeth II: 1926-2022), one of her famous quotes (e.g. "Grief is the price we pay for love), expressions of gratitude (e.g. A life in service), or short 'lead stories'. Some portraits were coloured, and some were greyscale.

In Richard II (3.2, pp. 145-157), William Shakespeare philosophically discusses death, mortality and monarchy. He explains that death controls all mortals, monarchs included. There is no way to prevent monarchs from dying; alas, all we can do is to remember them with words of sorrow.

No matter where; of comfort no man speak;
Let's talk of graves, of worms, and epitaphs;
Make dust our paper and with rainy eyes
Write sorrow on the bosom of the earth,...
For God's sake, let us sit upon the ground
And tell sad stories of the death of kings.

When Queen Elizabeth was born on 21 April, 1926, *The Times* announced the news in the following manner: "The Duchess of York was safely delivered of a Princess at 2.40 this morning. Both mother and daughter are doing well" (see Owen, 2021). The same paper reported the death of Queen Elizabeth II in a headline that read "A life in service"

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followed by a short epitaph “Queen Elizabeth II April 21, 1926-September 8, 2022”. This study investigates how various newspaper front pages around the world reported the queen’s death focusing on the semiotic and linguistic aspects of the reports.

A. *Death Discourse*

Discussing issues related to ‘death’ or ‘the dead’ is restricted in almost all cultures the world over. In fact, the discourse of death is even taboo with varying degrees in various present and past societies (Cebrat, 2016). Fraser (1922) categorised taboos into four major types: tabooed persons (e.g. witches, menstruating women and the dead), tabooed things (e.g. sex organs and body waste), tabooed words (e.g. names of rulers, mothers and the dead) and tabooed activities (e.g. incest, adultery and abortion). In primitive cultures the ‘death taboo’ was manifested in various activities including touching the dead, entering graveyards and mentioning the names of the dead (Cebrat, 2016). Primitive people thought that violating death taboos incurs grave consequences (see Fraser, 1922). Modern cultures also have taboos that are mostly related to religion, politics and morality. Although many taboos have evolved over time, modern speech communities are still influenced by some of the ancient taboos to varying degrees. Perhaps, people of today are concerned with the so-called ‘linguistic taboos’ more than other types. Modern societies try to sound socially and politically correct by avoiding using the wrong words in wrong domains. In other words, religious, social, moral and political correctness prevails in modern discourse.

Ljung (2011) categorises modern taboo words into major and minor themes. The former encompasses religion, body waste, sex organs, sexual activities and family. The latter, on the other hand, refers to ancestors, animals, death, disease and prostitution (for more details, see Darwish & Abu Ain, 2020). Leszczynski (1988) claims that taboos originate from either psychological or social factors. The psychological factor is often associated with feeling uncomfortable about discussing certain topics while the social element is frequently coupled with social politeness. Taboos are not absolute though, as they constantly change inter-culturally, cross-linguistically and cross-temporally. For this reason, “every taboo must be specified for a particular community of people, for a specified context, at a given place and time” (Allan & Burridge, 2006, p. 11).

Death is tabooed for a principal reason, death itself. The fear of death is, in fact, the driving force behind restricting the discourse of death. As death is inevitable and is the “most original form of the possibility of Existence” (Shariatnia, 2015, p. 92), language has evolved to cope with the taboo topic of death through two major linguistic means, euphemism and dysphemism. Put differently, humans have no control over their “death, which certainly explains why death is tabooed and spoken of euphemistically” (Jamet, 2013, p. 2). Fernandez (2006, p. 101) avers that “some experiences are too intimate and vulnerable to be discussed without linguistic safeguards.” Euphemism is like a ‘protective shield’ against the fear of death (Allan & Burridge, 1991). According to Adams (1985, p. 48), euphemism serves as the ‘deodorant of language’ necessary to cut through the feared odour of the rotting corpse of the topic of death.

The word ‘euphemism’ comes from *euphemismos* in Greek that means ‘good omen’ and was first spotted in English print in 1656 in a book titled *Glossographia* by Thomas Blount (Jamet, 2010). Euphemism is not a mere linguistic device; it is rather a genuine linguistic choice made by a speaker or writer to reflect social change. Allan and Burridge (1991, p. 4) argue that “euphemism and dysphemism are principally determined by the choice of expression within a given context: both world spoken of, and the world spoken in.” By ‘deodorising’ the rotten odour of death, euphemism mitigates the fear of death by helping in keeping it at bay (Jamet, 2010). What applies to the use of euphemism in dealing with death applies, mutatis mutandis, to the use of dysphemism. Dysphemistic expressions have offensive connotations that also have the power to conceal death by avoiding calling it what it is, i.e., death (Jamet, 2010). In other words, while ‘passed away’ is a euphemism for death, ‘croaked’ is a dysphemism for death. Perhaps people, need to humourously use dysphemistic metaphors to refer to death in order to escape the fear of it by pretending that it is not a serious issue. Metaphors, such as ‘brown bread’, ‘checked out’, ‘dead meat’ and ‘permanently out of print’ are all cases in point.

In March 2017, The Guardian national British newspaper revealed that “for years, arrangements have been in place by the palace and the government for the death, funeral and internment of the Queen. There is even a codename to be used in the event of the inevitable eventuality: Operation London Bridge” (Jobson, 2018, p. 87). Perhaps, there are no euphemistic reasons behind camouflaging the death of the queen in this context, but rather security and political concerns. This is supported by the fact that other code names are used to refer to the way the coffin might be transported. Operation Unicorn refers to the transportation of the coffin by the royal train, while Operation Overstudy refers to its transportation by plane.

B. *The Aim of the Study*

This study investigates how the headlines of various newspaper front pages around the world reported the death of Queen Elizabeth II focusing on the semiotic and linguistic aspects of the reports. Specifically, it tries to answer the following research questions: 1) “Was the death of Queen Elizabeth II reported directly or indirectly in the front-page headlines of British and non-British newspapers?,” 2) “Did British and non-British newspapers use similar linguistic structures in reporting the death of the queen?” and 3) “How did British and non-British newspapers semiotically portray the dead queen in their front pages?”.

II. METHODOLOGY

A. Sample and Data Collection

The sample consists of 61 newspaper front pages published on 9 September, 2022, i.e., the day after the death of Queen Elizabeth II was officially announced by Buckingham Palace. Only those newspapers that dedicated their front pages to report the death of Queen Elizabeth II are included in the sample from inside and outside the UK. No doubt, the majority of the collected front pages are from British newspapers for obvious reasons. Those British front pages are compared and contrasted with non-British ones to see if the pattern is the same or not. The principal sources of the data are the official websites of the newspapers in question and some newspaper reports written on the topic itself, such as the BBC, HuffPost UK and Metro, amongst others.

B. Data Analysis

Both linguistic and semiotic aspects of the collected front pages are systematically and thematically described and analysed. The photos displayed are meticulously investigated for any semiotic significance. For instance, some of the used photos are coloured while others are just in black-and-white. This might be a mere reflection of diachronic changes in technology, i.e., the old photos are black-and-white while the modern ones are in colours. Nevertheless, we argue that the choice was predominantly semiotic, as the photos that appeared in our sample were not originally black-and-white but rather intentionally grey-scaled to mirror grief and mourning. Such choices are scrutinised and so are the choices to display a young queen or an old queen, a smiling queen or a sad queen on the front pages. The accompanying text is also linguistically analysed. To illustrate, some newspapers just displayed a photo of the queen with a short epitaph that read “Elizabeth II: 1926-2022” while others wrote additional phrases of grief, thanks, gratitude and of her famous quotations. Few newspapers accompanied the photos with short lead stories announcing the death of the queen and some extra information that often appears in obituaries. The verbs used to announce or report the death of the queen are studied syntactically and pragmatically looking for any uses of euphemism or dysphemism. Finally, a short comparison is made between British and non-British front pages to see if the patterns are similar or not.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of the present study are detailed in this section. Choices of words or phrases reporting the death of Queen Elizabeth II in the selected front-page headlines of British and non-British newspapers are analysed and discussed in terms of directness, indirectness and structure. Additionally, the semiotic significance of the pictures that accompanied the headlines is discussed in relation to the general discourse of death. As a result of the linguistic and semiotic analyses of the data, the following key findings emerged:

A. Direct vs. Indirect Reporting

The analysis shows that the death of Queen Elizabeth II was reported directly in 18 of the front pages under investigation. In other words, only 29.5% of the studied front pages made use of the verb ‘to die’ or the noun ‘death’ in reporting Queen Elizabeth II’s death. On the other hand, 43 (70.5%) front pages reported the tragic news indirectly or implicitly. Table 1 illustrates the distribution of direct and indirect reporting of the death of Queen Elizabeth II in British and non-British newspaper front pages.

TABLE 1
DIRECT VS. INDIRECT REPORTING AMONGST BRITISH AND NON-BRITISH FRONT PAGES

	Direct	Indirect
British front pages	9	25
Non-British front pages	9	18
Total tokens	18	43
Percentage	29.50%	70.50%

In view of the percentages in Table 1, the majority of front-page writers chose to report the tragic news in an indirect way avoiding the headword ‘die’ and its related forms. It was surprising to learn that the front-page writers did not use conventional linguistic euphemisms typical of Western cultures, such as ‘pass away’. A meticulous analysis of the indirect death reports reveals that none of the front-page writers employed the most frequent explicit euphemistic phrase ‘pass away’. Instead, they opted for implicit euphemistic means. First, one of the most frequent implicit means was writing a short epitaph to accompany a photo of choice of Queen Elizabeth II. A few examples include “1926-2022”, “Queen Elizabeth 1926-2022”, “Elizabeth II 1926-2022”, “Isabel 1926-2022”, “HM Queen Elizabeth II 1926-2022”, “Elizabeth R 1926-2022”, “Queen Elizabeth II April 21, 1926-Septemer 8, 2022”, and “Our Queen April 21, 1926-Septermber 8, 2022”. Second, few front-page writers utilised words of ‘farewell’ to implicitly report the death of the Queen. Among the examples are “Farwell, our noble Queen” and “Farwell to the Queen”. Third, expressing sadness was a common method to implicitly report the death of the queen, especially in British and Commonwealth front pages. Some cases in point include “A nation mourns”, “Nation mourns Monarch”, “Our hearts are broken”, “A moment of the greatest sadness” and Queen Elizabeth II’s famous quote “Grief is the price we pay for love”. A fourth way to implicitly report the death of the queen was expressing love and gratitude, such as “We loved you, Ma’am”, “You did your duty,

Ma'am", "Thank you", "We loved her so much", "Remembering our Queen" and "Our gracious Queen". Fifth, some front-page writers referred to the end of Queen Elizabeth II's reign as a sign of her death. A few examples include "Her reign has ended", "The last majesty" and "The woman who defined an era". In the same vein, on September 9, 2022, any reference in the front pages to the new king of the United Kingdom, King Charles III, was a shrewd implicit and poetic method to refer to the death of the queen, such as "King Charles III and Royal Family mourn" and "King Charles III leads tribute".

A meticulous analysis of the 18 front-page direct reports of Queen Elizabeth II's death reveals that the verb 'die' appeared 7 times, 6 in the simple present tense form and 1 in the present perfect. The noun 'death' appeared in 6 front pages, and the adjective 'dead' was employed as a subject compliment of the queen in 5 front pages. Table 2 displays the distribution of the structure of direct reporting of Queen Elizabeth II's death amongst British and non-British newspaper front pages.

TABLE 2
STRUCTURE IN THE DIRECT REPORTING OF QUEEN ELIZABETH II'S DEATH

	Verb 'die'	Adjective 'dead'	Noun 'death'
British front pages	1	3	5
Non-British front pages	6	2	1
Total tokens	7	5	6
Percentage	39%	28%	33%

The verb 'die' is predominantly intransitive and cannot occur in passive sentences. Table 2 shows that it was preferred by non-British newspapers (6 occurrences) compared to British newspapers that used it only once. In all 7 occurrences, it was used in finite clauses and always in the present tense. Although the front-page headlines under investigation appeared on 9 September, 2022, i.e., a day after the death of Queen Elizabeth II was officially announced, the use of the present tense to report past events conforms to the grammar rules of newspaper headlines. Newspaper headlines belong to a unique linguistic register that has its own syntactic rules. Mardh (1980) calls this register 'headlines' and explains that the 'present tense' is generally preferred in headlines even when the events have already taken place. Conventionally, even though the present tense is used, "the reader knows by his[her] familiarity with HL [headlines] that the event has actually already occurred when [s/he] gets the news. It places the reader in the middle of the action, which may give him[her] a feeling of participation" (p. 169). The following examples illustrate some of the Headlines in British and non-British front pages:

Nation Mourns as monarch dies, aged 96, at Balmoral. (British)

Elizabeth II, whose 7-decade reign linked generations, dies at 96. (Non-British- USA)

UK's oldest and longest-serving monarch dies at 96. (Non-British- USA)

The Queen dies, long live the King. (Non-British- Nigeria)

Syntactically, 'monarch', 'Elizabeth II', '...monarch' and 'the queen' occupy the subject position of die-verb phrases. Semantically, though, these syntactic subjects play an 'experiencer' role rather than an 'agent' or 'patient' role as the death was of a natural cause, old age.

Perhaps this explains why the native English writers in the British newspapers preferred to use the adjective 'dead' (3 occurrences) and the noun 'death' (5 occurrences) instead of the verb 'die'. The structure of the adjective 'dead' headlines in both British and non-British front pages was uniform, 'The Queen is dead'. Syntactically, the adjective 'dead' is the subject compliment of the subject 'the queen'. This simple structure is perhaps the "most common sentence pattern: "Something is something"" (Kolln & Gray, 2012, p. 19). The linking verb 'be' links the subject with its modifier 'the adjective'. The adjective 'dead' post-modifies the subject and completes the linking verb; hence, it is called a subject compliment. The 'something is something' bare structure is often used rhetorically by famous writers as a paragraph opener, especially the first paragraph of a narrative (Kolln & Gray, 2012). Semantically, the thematic role of 'the queen' is 'experiencer'. The nominal headline "Death of the Queen" does not have a verb. Verbs add life, vigour and colour to headlines (Garst & Bernstein, 1963). In other words, "the verb makes the headline live in contrast to most headlines without one" (Mardh, 1980, p. 81). The literature reveals that there is a consensus that non-verbal headlines are bad ones because they do not bring life and colour (see Garst & Bernstein, 1963; Evans, 1974; Conon, 1976; Mardh, 1980). The nominal headline, 'Death of the Queen', employs the noun 'death' followed by post-modification. It emphasises 'death' by placing it first in the phrase. Similarly, the seemingly verbal headline, 'The Queen is dead', emphasises the 'predicate'. The linking verb or "the copula is only a dummy, or empty, verb which serves as a carrier" (Mardh, 1980, p. 179). In other words, "the subject complement position puts greater emphasis on the adjective" 'dead'; "an alternative way of modifying the subject is to shift the adjective to the position before the noun headword" (Kolln & Gray, 2012, p. 21): a dead queen. It is safe to argue, then, that native English headlines writers intentionally favoured verbless or semi-verbless headlines to reflect the lack of action, vigour and life in the news reported; i.e., the death of Queen Elizabeth II.

B. Semiotic Reporting

It has been said that "a picture is worth a thousand words." Therefore, a semiotic analysis of the front-page pictures that accompanied the headlines reporting the death of Queen Elizabeth II is in order. However, as the relationship between the signifier and the signified is often arbitrary and conventional in nature (Saussure, 1983), we expect to see

variation in the choices of these pictures. Barthes (1977) claims that pictures “comprise two messages: a denoted message, which is the analogon itself, and a connoted message, which is the manner in which the society to a certain extent communicates what it thinks of it” (p. 17). In our case, the denoted message of the pictures under investigation is a simple semiotic representamen-referent relation of what is inside the ‘frame’, i.e., a representation of Queen Elizabeth II. The connoted message, on the other hand, is more fluid and subject to change infinite number of times as it varies amongst individuals, cultures and times (see Chandler, 2002). By way of explanation, all front-page pictures in our sample represent portraits of Queen Elizabeth II, but they differ in their connoted messages. Some of them show an old sad queen; others show a young jubilant queen. Such connotative semiotic variation merits meticulous analysis. Table 3 shows how British and non-British newspapers contrasted in their choices of the front-page images displayed on Friday 9 September, 2022; i.e., the day following the one in which Queen Elizabeth was announced dead.

TABLE 3
FRONT-PAGE IMAGES REPORTING QUEEN ELIZABETH II'S DEATH

	Young	Old	Coloured	Grey-scale	Cheerful	Reserved
British	16	18	20	14	19	15
Non-British	10	17	21	6	15	12
Total tokens	26	35	41	20	34	27
Percentages	43%	57%	67%	33%	56%	44%

Fourteen British and six non-British newspapers opted for grey-scaling the chosen portraits of Queen Elizabeth II. Black and white have long been associated with life and death; good and evil; and light and darkness. For instance, the “Romans marked their lucky days with a piece of chalk, their unlucky days with charcoal. From this custom of marking unlucky days with charcoal a rose the phrase ‘Black-letter day’” (Brokaw, 1932, p. 4). In most cultures, it is most appropriate for mourners to wear black clothing as colourful clothes are usually associated with life and joy. It is as if the loss of colour mirrors the loss of life. Similarly, black ribbons and black armbands are used to display grief publicly. As a matter of fact, “in Britain at a time of death both black and white are traditionally used. Although the colour of mourning is black the traditional laying out room is white and the body is normally given a white covering” (Hutchings, 2003, p. 58). To some scientists, black is not a colour, but it is the ‘absence of colour’ whereas white is the ‘sum of all colours’ (see Caivano, 2021). Perhaps the social semiosis of grey-scaling pictures of dead people is a reflection of this scientific opinion pertaining to spectrums and colour radiations. We can safely argue that 33% of the pictures under investigation are grey-scaled because the respective newspapers wanted to show respect by mourning the tragic death of the queen. Nevertheless, as the semiotics of black and white differ from one culture to another and even from one person to another, we can equally safely argue that 67% of the pictures are coloured because the respective newspapers wanted to hide or, at least, mitigate the tragic news. Put differently, those who opted for grey-scaled pictures of the queen might have wanted to emphasise the dark side of death while those who opted for coloured pictures might have wanted to emphasise the bright side of death by projecting the colourful journey of the diseased. We can argue that using coloured pictures to accompany front-page headlines reporting death is a form of semiotic euphemism. Thus, the choice of those pictures was not random but guided by conscious and unconscious knowledge of visual semiosis (Economou, 2009). Caivano (1998) explains that colour as a sign is not predefined but subject to “various factors and of the context in which it is taken as such. Color may function as a sign for a physical phenomenon, for a physiological mechanism, or for a psychological association” (p. 390). Pictures vary from one newspaper to another because colour as a sign is arbitrary and conventional in its connoted meaning. A case in point that demonstrates this arbitrariness is the fact that in Western cultures, black often denotes death whereas in oriental cultures, it is the white that denotes death because “lack of hue means lack of life” (Caivano, 1998, p. 397). Furthermore, “while in the West and in some oriental countries such as Japan the color of the bride’s dress is white, the Hindu brides and those of the Han tribe in China wear red, the brides of the Dong tribe in China wear black, and the Chinese brides living in Singapore wear red or pink with gold” (Caivano, 1998, p. 398). Similarly, in his international colour survey, Hutchings (2003) found wide variations in the symbolism of colour in international folklore. He found that the colour of the bride’s dress varies by culture; in many countries the bride is expected to wear a white dress, but in India they wear red and yellow dresses. In some parts of Iberia, however, the bride wears a black dress.

In the late stages of her life, Queen Elizabeth II looked very old and tired, especially after she contracted COVID-19 in February, 2022. To accompany their headlines reporting the death of the queen, 57% of the newspapers displayed recent portraits of the queen showing her aging yet graceful figure. However, 43% chose old portraits of the late queen when she was young, like the one showing her coronation in 1953. This juxtaposition illustrates how newspapers show respect to the dead in semiosis: either by emphasising death (old age/lamented loss) or by celebrating life (youth/unlamented past). We argue that there is something semiotically euphemistic about the latter as it tries to mitigate the sadness of the tragic news through a change in perspective. This subtle semiotic symbolism is employed more by British newspapers (16 pictures) than non-British ones (10 pictures).

The semiotic polarity of reporting the death of the queen (direct vs. indirect) is repeated in relation to her emotional state displayed in the pictures chosen to appear on the front pages in question. A cheerful queen appeared in 56% of the pictures. At the other end, 44% of the pictures showed a reserved queen (serious, saddish, sickish or neutral). Showing a cheerful queen is presumably a semiotic way of hiding the harsh effect of the tragic news, i.e., it is a semiotic

euphemism for reporting death. Compared to non-British newspapers, British newspapers preferred this subtle semiotic way of depicting the queen on the front pages reporting her death.

IV. CONCLUSION

Grief is a personal experience that varies from one individual to another whether they share the same cultural background or not. Death itself has intrigued human beings since the beginning of time. Some people are very open in expressing their feelings when death knocks at their doors and take one of their loved ones. Others are more discrete about it. People who appear indifferent towards death are thought to keep their feelings of sadness hidden inside. Likewise, oral and written death announcements and condolences are done differently depending on various religious, social and ideological factors. Some people might approach the topic of death from a negative angle and stress the void left by the dead and how those close to them must be missing them. However, others may approach death from a positive angle by emphasizing how the dead are in a better afterlife, thanks to all the love and happiness they have spread during their lives. All of these contradictory aspects of dealing with death were manifested in the headlines reporting the death of Queen Elizabeth II as some of them concentrated on the loss of a dedicated and loved 'Ma'am' and others concentrated on remembering her good 'service' to the nation, Commonwealth and world. The findings of this study reflected both linguistic and semiotic means of expressing grief and mourning. Future research, though, can further investigate the discourse in the full stories that elaborated on the tragic news. Moreover, future research can focus on how the death of the queen was reported in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland in comparison with England. There is no doubt that there is a need to learn more about how front-page headlines report the deaths of monarchs, celebrities and ordinary people in the modern world.

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