

A Semiotic Analysis of Obituary Announcements in *The Guardian* and *The Nigerian Tribune* Newspapers

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Abstract

Human beings use signs for different reasons to achieve different goals. This study is a semiotic analysis of obituary announcements in *The Guardian* and *The Nigerian Tribune* newspapers. The writer employs Roland Barthes (1997) and Pierce (1931)'s Semiotic theory. Semiotic approach is employed in interpreting the sign, symbol, icon, and index in obituary announcements. The study aims at investigating the dominant visual semiotic signs in the announcements and to explore how the semiotic messages are communicated through the signs. The data for the study were selected from two Nigerian newspapers: *The Guardian* and *The Nigerian Tribune* within a particular year (2014) and from the months of June to December. The study adopts descriptive survey research to examine obituary announcements in Nigerian newspapers and a sample size of ten (10) announcements were randomly selected from a total population of one hundred adverts on bereavements from the months of June to December 2014 in both *The Guardian* and *The Nigerian Tribune*. The researcher analyses the data based on three parts: the graphological analysis, the use of symbol and the use of picture and photograph using Pierce (1931)'s theory. The study found out that the existence of different signs is entrenched with diverse meanings depending on the perception of the reader/viewer. The study advanced knowledge by revealing that Obituary announcements expressed the feelings and grief of the announcers through the use of signs. The study concluded that based on the analysis of the advertisement human beings are endowed with great imagination and creativity.

Keywords: Semiotic, Obituary, Announcements, Graphological, Myth

Introduction

Human beings use signs for different reasons in order to achieve diverse goals in health, entertainment politics, education, etc. Human beings usually communicate different ideas and messages in different fields of which obituary announcements is part of; these have always been transmitted to people through both verbal language and visual semiotic signs depending on the contexts. The writers of obituary announcements employ verbal signs, nonverbal, visual semiotic signs, and both signs' systems to construct the reality about the announcement.

Semiotics is the study of signs. According to (Eco, 1976:7), 'semiotics is concerned with everything that can be perceived as a sign' This means that Semiotics involves the study of not only what we refer to as 'signs' in everyday speech, but of anything which 'stands for' something

else. In essence, semiotics takes the form of words, images, sounds, gestures and objects. It is also the study of communication, that is, the way any sign functions in the mind of an interpreter to convey specific meaning in a given situation. This means that semiotics as an approach to the study of texts focuses on the communication phenomenon as a whole. This includes verbal (language in speech and writing) and non-verbal communication (anything that stands for something else). As Barthes (1953:45) puts it, almost anything in society is meaningful and can be a significant sign to a speech community e.g., car, dress, and so on.

In this sense, semiotics takes as much interest in the message of photography, advertising and television as in the written discourse of literature and in how meaning is produced as well as what it is (Wales, 1989:416). Semiotics as a study of visual and symbolic representations of language has been in use in the world when designing, for example, bill boards, advertisements, trademarks, and other forms of signposting which we attempt to use to get across our messages in all our social practices require both the elaborated and symbolic functions of languages. (Chandler, 2007).

Theoretical Framework

Semiotics

Eco (1976) stated that “semiotics concerns everything that can be perceived as a sign.” Signs constitute printed and spoken words, images, sounds, gestures, and objects. Individuals interpret signs as “signifying something.” According to Peirce (1931), “nothing is a sign unless it is interpreted as a sign”. This interpretation process occurs by relating a sign to familiar systems of conventions and, hence, the sign becomes part of an organized collective interaction and cannot exist outside such an interaction. Signs function as a code between individuals and they trigger some previous experiences from an individual.

Semiotics as a discipline is simply the analysis of signs or the study of the function of sign systems. The idea that sign systems are of great consequences is easy enough to gasp; yet the recognition of the need to study sign systems is very much a modern phenomenon. While Sebeok (2001) stated that in theory, linguistics is only a branch of semiotics, but in fact semiotics is created from linguistics. As a result, semiotics is a branch of linguistics to study signs, learn everything related to the sign and its meaning. Saussure (1988) writes that a person lives in a world shaped by decoded signs found in images, actions, words, and more, which he or she has encountered. His innovation of semiotics is an ancient system used to decode a photograph through examination of the signs within the photograph. Barthes (1997) introduced semiotics to the visual community, and called the message that is created through the signs in the image the making of a “myth,” (Bignell, 2002). Decoding the signs are indications of how the message is communicated to the reader or what myth is being created about a subject. Signs are classified into three different types according to Barthes (1997): An iconic sign represents what the object is. For example, a photograph of a car would represent the actual vehicle. An indexical sign represents a meaning that is implied through the photographed object. For example, an expensive car would indicate that the owner was wealthy. A symbolic sign is when an image represents another object or idea. The same expensive car could represent luxury or wealth.

Saussure (1988) submits that a person exists in a world designed by decoded signs that are found in images, actions, words, and more, which s/he has encountered. The purpose of semiotics is to become aware of the construction of reality created by those signs (Chandler, 1994). In the light

of this, this study is hinged on the ability to understand how the audience will decode the message, create the reality, and give insight into the culture (Bignell, 2002). Chandler (1994) opines that interpreters must have social knowledge, medium and genre knowledge, and ability to understand the relationship between the two. Hall (1980) submits that culture itself is a kind of communication, producing meaning and highlighted the importance of active interpretation within relevant codes. He identifies a circuit of communication including: production, circulation, distribution/consumption, and reproduction (Hall, 1980). Bignell (2002) acknowledges that the message that is created through the signs in the image is called “myth,” by Barthes (1997) which is how an individual perceives the objects in a photograph and the feeling and ideas it creates within the person’s mind.

Danesi (2002) reports that the semiotician is concerned with what a certain structure means, how it is able to represent what it means, and why it means what it means. In image-based research, identifying these signs within a photograph gives insight into the meaning of the photograph and the import of the photograph to the reader. This concept is explained by Bignell (2002) with the example of a Rolls-Royce. The car is a material signifier, a symbol that not only communicates the brand of the car, but also communicates a mental concept of wealth and luxury. If the photograph of the car is sighted by an average reader, several messages will be communicated through that image. There are three types of signs in semiotic according to Pierce (1931): symbolic, iconic, and indexical:

The symbol or symbolic sign is assigned arbitrarily or is accepted as a societal convention. Therefore, the relationship between the representamen and what the sign stands for – its object or referent and the sense behind it, the interpretant – must be learned. For example, letters of the alphabet, the number system, mathematical signs, computer code, punctuation marks, traffic signs, national flags and so forth.

As an icon, the representamen resembles or imitates its signified object in that it possesses some of its qualities. Therefore, the relationship between what the sign stands for – its referent and the sense behind it, the interpretant – does not necessarily have to be learned. For example, a portrait, a cartoon, sound effects, or a statue.

An index is when the signifier might not resemble its signified object. It is not arbitrarily assigned and is directly connected in some way to the object. Nevertheless, the relationship between what the sign stands for – its referent and the sense behind it, the interpretant may have to be learned. The link between the representamen and its object may only be inferred; for instance, smoke, thunder, footprints, flavors, a door bell ringing, or a photograph, film or DVD (Digital Versatile Disc) recording.

Barthes’ (1997) Semiotic Theory

Barthes’ (1997) develops significant-signifier theory from Saussure to be a theory of grammar and its connotation meaning. The significant term was changed to be expression (E) and the signifier changed to be content (C). However, he emphasizes that there must be a relation (R) between E and C or certain relation. Thus, it can form a sign. Barthes also explains the concepts of denotation, connotation, and myth. For Barthes, connotation is the “tone” of a text, the manner which has been decorated. “According to Barthes (1997) anything which furnishes meaning becomes a sign, and any group of sign becomes a system. The second level is the denotation which consists of signifier and signified. The signifier is an expression that refers to a thing, while the signified is the image that stands for the thing in the signifier. Saussure (1959) believes that the process of signification

is only in this level, but Barthes assumed that there is another level of signification after this which is the myth. Myth usually appears in the form of analogy. In concealing the meaning, myth is more likely to deflect the meaning so that it is possible to be extremely different from the original thing in the previous level.

Literature Review

Obituary comes from the Latin word ‘Obitus’, meaning *departure*. It refers to a record of announcements of death or deaths, especially in a newspaper, usually comprising a brief biographical sketch of the deceased. Obituary announcement is a special feature because it focuses exclusively on the qualities of a human being and how that person’s life, at its end, can best be represented. Human life has a general pattern: birth, marriage, and death. Death in Nigerian societies receives, however, peculiar attention. Major communicative events related to death are epitaphs, tributes, dirges, and Obituaries (Moses & Marelli, 2003). However, in this study, Obituary announcements will be emphasized because they do not only create grief in the audience or readers but also evoke appreciation for the deceased (Askildon, 2007; Fernandez, 2007; Bryant & Peck, 2009).

Obituary moulds our understanding of the importance of life and death. It contains some vital information; and this includes the deceased’s name, date of birth, place of residence, date of death and, sometimes, cause of death (Campbell, 1971). Two types of obituaries are discussed by Fernandez (2007) which are: the informative and opinative obituaries. Informative obituary, on the one hand, aims at giving relevant details about the death: the deceased, place, and time of funeral, and the next of kin. This is an impersonal type of obituary. This is achieved through the use of an impersonal language and concise expression. The language is presented in an objective and standardized manner which means it is devoid of flowery and decorated language (Fernandez, 2007). An opinative obituary, on the other hand, is written by a relative, friend or the funeral home staff. It offers a more emotive and intimate account of the deceased by means of consolatory and laudatory tactics to satisfy and assuage the feelings of surviving family members. Opinative obituaries are a personal type of obituary and are subjective, which perform a peculiar function of impressing readers about the social status or the exemplary conduct of the deceased (Fernandez, 2007). All in all, the communicative function of both types of Obituaries is to inform people of a person’s death. Invariably, Obituary announcements perform the function of communicating the death of, or information about the funeral arrangements for a particular person to a specific audience.

Objectives of the Study

1. To have an understanding of the signs used in the announcements whether they are, iconic, indexical, or symbolic.
2. To investigate the dominant visual semiotic signs in the announcements.
3. To explore how the semiotic messages are communicated through the signs.

Research Questions

1. In what way(s) do the visual semiotic signs in the announcements constitute iconic, indexical or symbolic signs?
2. What are the dominant visual semiotic signs in the announcements?
3. What are the semiotic messages communicated through the signs?

Research Methodology

Qualitative method was employed in the research which focuses on the signs of the obituary announcements and analysis of their denotative and connotative meanings based on Barthes' theory. The announcements will be analyzed through descriptive analysis technique. The samples used in the study are Nigerian newspapers where, *The Guardian* and *The Nigerian Tribune* have been chosen for study. The *Guardian* is chosen because it covers four geo-political zones in the country and is the newspaper of the elite group, while *The Nigerian Tribune* covers the South-Western states. The choice of national (*The Guardian*) and local (*The Nigerian Tribune*) newspapers is to reveal the different and unique ways through which each newspaper presents its announcements. The two newspapers are also known to have an avalanche of obituary pages from time- to- time over and above other newspapers. The data were selected within a particular year (2014) and were limited to a period of seven months (June-December) for better management. The months of June to December were selected because of high rates of obituary announcements during those periods. Simple random sampling was employed to select sample size of ten obituary announcements from a total population of one hundred (100) adverts on bereavements from the months of June to December, thereby generating ten (10) sample size for obituary announcements from both *The Guardian* and *The Nigerian Tribune* newspapers.

A SEMIOTIC ANALYSIS OF OBITUARY ANNOUNCEMENTS: ANALYSIS OF NON-LINGUISTIC FEATURES (SEMIOTIC FEATURES)

THE GRAPHOLOGICAL ANALYSIS: ILLUSTRATION OF GRAPHOLOGICAL DEVICES IN THE HEADINGS OF THE ANNOUNCEMENTS

	MAIN HEADINGS	SUB-HEADINGS
1.	23 Years Gone	...Your Memory Lingers on
2.	AN AMAZING WOMAN OF SUBSTANCE IS GONE	
3.	Farewell to a GODLY MAN	
4.	Remembering	A Great Humanitarian
5.	In Loving Memory OF OUR DEAR MOTHER	
6.	4 years Gone...	Still very much in our hearts
7.	In Loving MEMORY	A Year Ago Our Dad Went Home
8.	20 YEARS Gone	
9.	'To Joyful Activity Shall I Awaken'	
10.	Irreparable Loss	

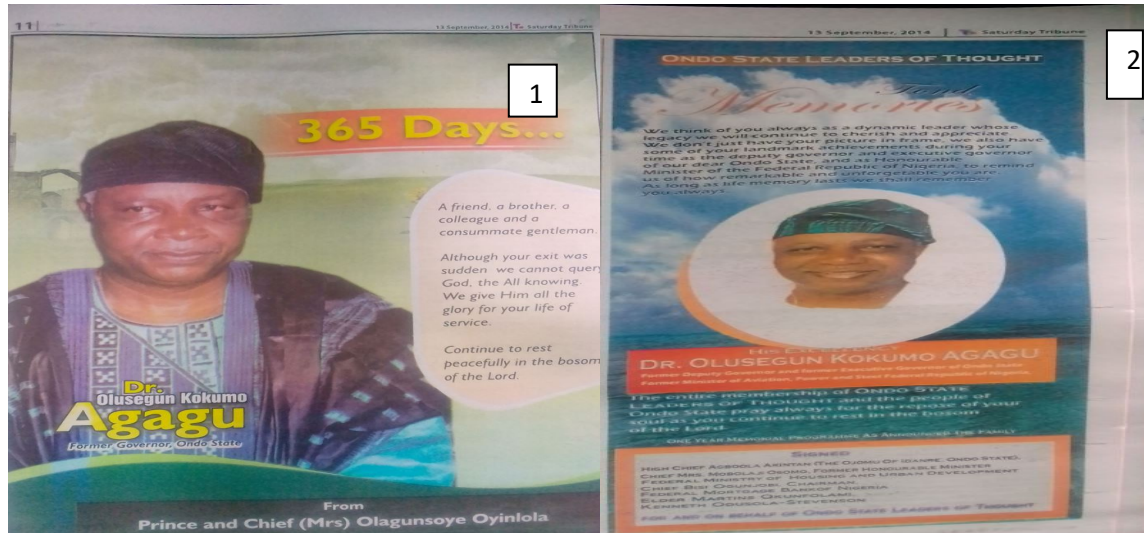
Table 1.1: Illustration of Graphological Devices in the Headings of the Announcements

From Table 1.1 above, we can observe the use of graphological devices in the headings of the announcements which serve as a means of catching the attention of the readers and providing visual communicative effects on them. It is observed from Table 1.1 that some of the data have riders, that is, sub-headings. This is an expansion of the semantic scope of the main headings in

order to equip the readers with additional information. Also, some data are written in capital letters to convey the importance of the message to the readers. There are some that are capitalized and in bold print which signify how special the deceased was to the writer.

The Use of Symbol

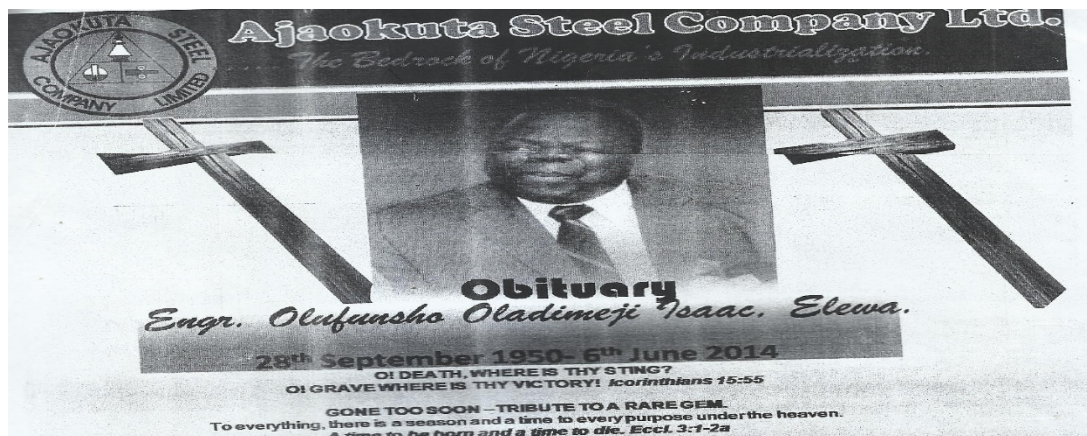
Symbol is another non-linguistic device employed in the announcements. It is a sign expressing the intended message which will be understood without coming in contact with the written message. This is evident in the following pictures:





From Figures 1-5 above, we observed that the deceased are surrounded by cloud which suggests that the deceased are being embraced by supernatural power that is beyond the control of human beings. It may also symbolise that the deceased have ascended the heavenly place to join the immortals.

Another symbol is the use of the Cross. In Figure 6, the deceased is surrounded by the Cross bending at both sides. This symbol represents Christianity and the fallen cross suggests death. The symbol (logo) of 'Ajaokuta Steel Company' is an indication that the deceased was a member of the company.



In Figure 7, there is a silhouette of cross at the background of the deceased's picture. The symbol of the cross identifies with Christian religion; to indicate that a person is dead. The symbol of the cross in the picture conveys the meaning of death; the departure of the deceased.

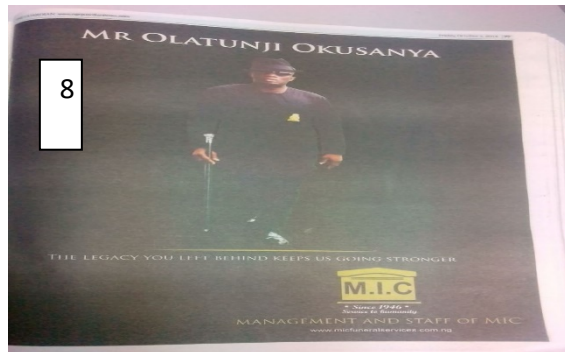
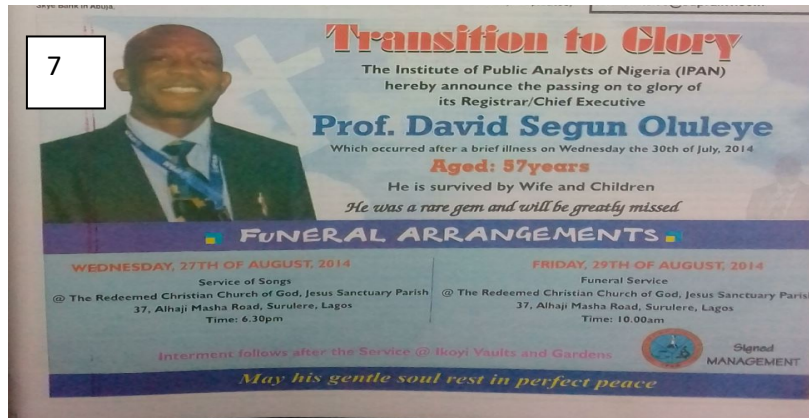
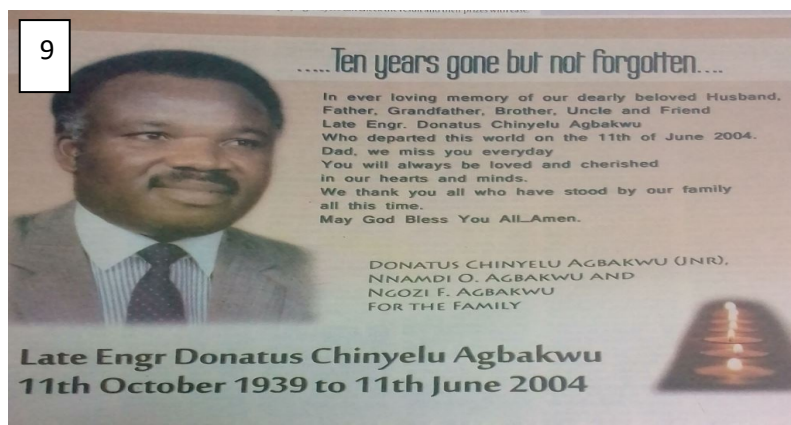


Figure 8 depicts ascension of the deceased from the earth into the supernatural realm, which is the heaven. The background colour is dark and it symbolizes death; meaning the deceased has transited from the daylight to the nighttime which is eternal. There is also an icon at the down part of the right-hand side of the picture. It is probably the icon of the company where the deceased worked before his demise. The icon in the picture represents the organization's loyalty and a way of identifying with the deceased at his departure from the surface of the earth.



Also, in the above figure, there is a symbol of candlelight arranged together and a shadow cast at the side, the candlelight symbolizes that the deceased was flourishing and probably at the peak of his achievements before a shadow symbolizing death was cast on him. The icon symbolises the sudden exit of a man probably flourishing before the clarion calls.



Figure 10 above shows a man who seems to be a cleric through his dressing and his title. There is a symbol of a pinnacle of a church, probably depicting him as an ardent worshipper of God who stayed in the house of God always; this can be buttressed further through the title of the deceased-Venerable.

SEMIOTIC IMPORTS OF SAMPLED OBITUARY ANNOUNCEMENTS

FIGURES	ICONIC	INDEXICAL	SYMBOLIC
FIGURE 1	Heavenly bodies	Transition	Politician
FIGURE 2	Heavenly bodies	Transition	Politician
FIGURE 3	Heavenly bodies	Islamic Religion	Devout Muslim
FIGURE 4	Heavenly bodies	Transition	Cleric
FIGURE 5	Heavenly bodies	Health practitioner	Academia
FIGURE 6	Career Achievement	Transition	Christianity Religion
FIGURE 7	Academia	Transition	Christianity Religion
FIGURE 8	Transition	An achiever	Loyalty

FIGURE 9	Career Achievements	Transition	Cleric
FIGURE 10	Cleric	Transition	Christianity Religion

Conclusion

In this study, we have been able to analyze the data based on the semiotic theory by explaining the symbols, the use of pictures and photograph and the semiotic imports of Obituary and In Memoriam announcements in Nigerian newspapers. We observed that the non-linguistic items discovered in the data were signs for conveying different meanings to the readers in a different situation. It is also revealed that the pictures in the obituary advertisement convey some inherent meanings. The advertisement reveals that human beings are endowed with great imagination

n and creativity.

Recommendations

The study recommends that credence should be given to signs in an academic work. School administrators should inculcate the issue of signs into school curriculum. This should be made compulsory in schools as human lives cannot exist without relating and applying signs and symbols to our daily interactions with one another.

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