

Agency Attribution through Condolence Messaging in Tanzania

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Abstract

It is normal to pray that the deceased's soul should rest in eternal peace, and even write 'RIP' in condolence books, which gets us closer to issuing a directive to the deceased: 'You REST in peace'. This utterance attributes agency to the deceased. Analysing 525 condolence messages and discussing with 50 respondents from two major universities in Tanzania, this study reveals agency as clearly implicated among some condolers who address the deceased in the second person singular. Others issue directives to the deceased to perform acts other than resting peacefully. I present the respondents' views as to the attribution of agency and recommend a further study in the pragmatics and semantics of condolence messages to further enhance our understanding of such messages.

Keywords:

Agency, condolence, meta-agentive discourse, Tanzania

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Introduction

The death of a loved one can be disorienting and the pain encountered through the grieving process can be intense. We normally help those suffering loss to reconcile to the passing by getting closer to them in some way, including spiritually. Roger Jones (2006) says that helping someone come to terms with loss we can "have a memorial of the deceased in the form of a gravestone, a plaque in a local cemetery" (p.119). Condolences are expressions of sympathy offered to people following the death of a relative, a friend, or an intimate partner. Semantically and pragmatically, condolences help to establish and regulate social relations and to maintain or reinforce existing social roles. The social significance of uttering condolences lies in the emotive purpose presumed to lie behind it (Mwihaki 2004, pp.133-134). These condolences are not just expressions of sympathy; they also constitute acts of

encouragement, support, affirmations of goodwill and offerings of succour for the bereaved in the face of adversity. The explicit purposes of offering a condolence are threefold: to share the grief of the bereaved and to express solidarity, emphasise the transitory nature of mortal life on this earth, and give the bereaved encouragement (Emery 2000; Akindele 2007). An explicit central purpose of condoling the bereaved is, thus, to share in their feelings of loss and distress, which entails presenting the deceased in a way that evokes appreciation for their past life (Askildson 2007; Fernandez 2007; Bryant & Peck 2009). With condolences, we make manifest to the bereaved and their relations our awareness that they experience a huge misfortune and acknowledge our inability to help.

Kongo and Gyasi (2015, p. 61) classify condolences into three groups: they might “. . . be written, they could be spoken by individuals, and they could be spoken by governments . . .” These expressions might also be personal statements (Fenton-Smith, 2007) conveyed by their authors.

Previous studies on messages of condolence and pain-relief have addressed this type of convention in a varied range of circumstances including pain-relieving strategies in Christian funeral sermons and services in Nigeria (Ajayi 2017), obituaries publicised from within marginalised ethnic groups in Canada (Moore 2002), death notices in the Israeli West Bank press and death announcements in affluent Israeli Hebrew communities (Najjar, 1995; Roniger, 1994). Studies have focussed upon death announcements as they occur in the course of otherwise ordinary American conversation (Holt 1993), forms of condolence issued in Iraqi Arabic (Yahya 2010), museum exhibits that reassess traumatic events (Flowerdew 2003), American-Japanese differentials in responding in English to English-rendered condolences (Elwood 2004). Studies have analysed the giving of condolences in English and Persian via short messages (Mostafa & Reza 2013). One study has treated condoling as a speech act category in its own right (Del Campo Martinez 2012). Additionally, ethnic variations have been studied within the genre of Malaysian short-message-service (SMS) condolences (Hei 2018).

Many of these studies are concerned about the forms that these messages take, presupposing that the recipient of a condolence is living and

suffering loss of a beloved one. They suggest that we condole to help the living cope with the passing and, therefore, we mostly use the second person [you, your] pointing to the living, and the third person only when we mention the deceased. In this regard, Kongo and Gyasi (2015, p. 61) claim that condolence messages focus exclusively on the expression of grief directed to the bereaved. Circumstances and events elicit condolences that impel the sharing of expressions with those who are living. In this vein, Zunin and Zunin (1991, pp. 36-38) offer a mnemonic (COMFORT) for writing condolences as follows:

- 1) Comment on the loss and refer to the deceased by name.
- 2) Offer your sympathy.
- 3) Mention one or two special qualities of the deceased (eulogise).
- 4) Find a favourite memory of the person.
- 5) Offer to help or provide companionship.
- 6) Remind the bereaved of the special qualities, strengths and character of the deceased.
- 7) Thoughtfully close with some final comforting words.

Elwood (2004, p. 104) has produced a widely applicable model to capture the essence of condolence giving, and produced five patterns focusing on the bereaved:

- 1) Acknowledgement of the death with interjections like “oh” or “oh my God”.
- 2) Expression of sympathy like “I’m so sorry.”
- 3) Offer of assistance like “is there anything I can do?”
- 4) Future-oriented remarks usually take the form of words of encouragement or practical advice, like “try not to get depressed”.
- 5) Expression of concern relates to showing care for the wellbeing of the speaker and/or his or her family and includes questions like “How are you doing?”

Scholars such as Ajayi (2017), Matiki (2001), Moore (2002), Najjar (1995) and Roniger (1994) presuppose that the significance of a condolence message lies in its characteristic form—they do not pay attention to

important albeit subtle functions that differentiate the purposes of these messages. In Malawi, condolers address the deceased directly (Matiki 2001, p. 41). Dong also shows that following the passing of Richard Aoki, a famous Black Panther activist, condolers addressed him directly, in the second person (Dong 2009, pp. 225-227). Yet neither Matiki nor Dong recognises these distinctive grammatical perspectives as suggesting agency attribution to the deceased.

In Tanzania and elsewhere it is becoming conventional to hear at funerals and read in remembrance books condolers addressing the deceased in the second person. Moreover, some of these messages are directives, perhaps suggesting that the addresser wants and expects the deceased to respond with some action. Examples of condolences taking this form might include the contemporary style of the Tanzania Broadcasting Corporation (TBC) programme BANGO; Faith Evans and Puff Daddy's song, *I'll Be Missing You*¹; Flypside's *Happy Birthday*²; as done by ACT Wazelendo's Leader Zitto Kabwe³ following the passing of Speaker Samuel Sitta; January Makamba on Ruge's passing⁴; and Julius Malema on the passing of 'Ma Nomzamo' Winnie Madikizela Mandela⁵. In all these cases, artists and condolers address the deceased in the second person as YOU, and some of them go further to ask the deceased to perform some act. It is this second extreme that gets us to the issue of agency.

Condolence Messages and Meta-Agentive Discourse

Meta-Agentive Discourse is a "way of talking about agency – how people talk about their own actions and others' actions, how they attribute responsibility for events, how they describe their own and others' decision making process" (Ahearn 2010, p. 41). Agency is "the property of those entities (i) that have some degree of control over their own behaviour, (ii) whose actions in the world affect other entities (and sometimes their own), and (iii) whose actions are the object of evaluation (e.g. in terms of their responsibility for a given outcome)" (Duranti 2004, p. 453). Meta-Agentive

¹ (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NKMtZm2YuBE>)

² (https://www.youtube.com/results?search_query=flypside+happy+birthday+status)

³ (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=86E14r0pSg4>)

⁴ (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hcvRugbYfZo>)

⁵ (https://www.youtube.com/results?search_query=malema+on+winnie+mandela+funeral)

Discourse analysis helps to understand people's view of agency, that is, the sociocultural mediated capacity to act. A study on 'agency' is crucial in explaining aspects of human cognition and construction of ideas, and different ways of interpreting agency may, to a considerable extent, lead to different world-views. Arguably, agency has a close affinity to such notions as 'intentionality' and 'responsibility', to which we frequently appeal in our everyday lives, particularly when something goes wrong, and we need to place the blame for the unfortunate event onto somebody else. It follows, then, that the different ways in which we express and obfuscate agency would most likely result in different measures of accusing others and protecting yourself (Yamamoto 2006, p. 2). These two subjects relate in that agency is enacted in some condolence messages.

To find the types according to agency attribution, I worked on 525 condolences or remembrance messages⁶ and had 50 postgraduate students doing linguistics at St. Augustine University of Tanzania and the University of Dar es Salaam as respondents for the second question on reasons for such attribution. For ethical considerations, all the messages have been presented using pseudonyms except for those from the Apple family grieving Steve Jobs' passing (82 condolence messages), which had been publicised on the website before they were accessed. I made use of 155 condolence messages from DN's family grieving his wife's passing; 69 from MQ's family grieving her husband's passing; 19 from CM's family grieving Rev JM's passing; TBC's BANGO programme (200 condolence messages); and three short (about 10 minute long each YouTube video) speeches⁷ by Hon Zitto Kabwe on Samuel Sitta's passing; Julius Malema on Winnie Madikizela Mandela's passing; and January Makamba's on Ruge Mutahabwa's demise.

Based on the results, the study divides the messages into five (5) groups: those that talk about the deceased; those that address the public or the bereaved; those that offer religious messages; those that address the

⁶ Data for this paper were collected from the website, the Tanzania Broadcasting Corporation (on BANGO), condolence books from friends and then were followed with discussions with university postgraduate students at SAUT and UDSM.

⁷ These short speeches do not take pseudonyms.

deceased in the second person; and those that ask the deceased to perform some act. These groups are elaborated as follows.

a) Messages that talk about the deceased

This group has 27 messages. These messages mostly echo Zunin and Zunin's (1991) COMFORT mnemonic, requiring us to refer to the deceased by name, mention special their qualities, find a favourite memory of the deceased, and remind the bereaved of the special qualities, strength and characters of the deceased, as the following messages illustrate:

- *...Steve has passed away but his gift to this world will always remain (Loreta).*
- *Alikuwa kiungo changu na familia ya DN na pia kwa ukoo mzima wa akina Kessy (Kim).*
[She was the link between me and the DN family, and the entire Kessy clan]
- *I admired him greatly. I will pray for his family's healing during this difficult time (Josy).*
- *Nothing more to say other than [that] Steve will be missed by many people around the world. Most people would have to live 10 lifetimes to reach as many people as he reached (Mark).*
- *Ni mtu mwema aliyetoa mchango mkubwa kwa Taifa, Vijana, Bunge na NEC. (Paul).*
[He is a good person, he gave himself up to the nation, youths, Parliament and the National Electoral Committee].

These messages refer to the deceased in the third person, which resembles most traditional African condolences that expect people to say something positive about the deceased regardless of how they lived. Most of the messages in this group signal the greatness of the deceased, reminding us of the gap there is amongst us that the deceased is no more. This group echoes Zunin and Zunin's (1991) COMFORT mnemonic as Loreta mentions the deceased's name "Steve ... [hints on the deceased's greatness]"; Kim also mentions a special quality of the deceased, that "she was the link between the family and the entire Kessy clan"; Josy says, "I admired him greatly" and offers to "pray for his family's healing during [that] difficult time". Some of the condolers remember the deceased because the deceased had been "a gift to society", and because the

deceased gave himself up to society. Alluding to these special qualities, strength and character of the deceased, Mark is of the view that “most people would have to live 10 lifetimes to reach as many people as he reached”. These messages focus on both the bereaved and deceased, to show that we share grief with the living because of their loved ones’ sad demise. Following this mnemonic, we suggest that we too knew and miss the deceased.

b) Messages addressing the public and/or the bereaved

This group has 77 messages echoing Kongo and Gyasi’s (2015, p. 61) view that condolences should express grief to the bereaved, as the following examples illustrate:

- *Vera, pole tena pole sana, rehemu za Baba yetu wa mbinguni ziwe juu yako milele. Baba Mzee J amelala, amerudi mikononi mwa aliyemleta duniani. Ulimuuguza, hongera (Menaman).*
[Vera, my heartfelt condolences, may the mercy of the Heavenly Father be upon you forever. Old man J, our father is gone. He has gone back into the hands of him who brought him on earth. Congratulations for taking good care of him.]
- *Tunaiombea amani familia, Mungu awe baba yenu daima. Tutaendelea kushirikiana nanyi pamoja na kuwaombea. Msiogope, Mungu awabariki (Rev MJ).*
[We pray for family peace; may God be your eternal father. We shall never stop cooperating with you and praying for you. Do not fear a thing, and may God bless you].
- *Mungu awape faraja (WakiElis).*
[May God give you consolation].
- *Glory to God...we live to glorify our lord and for his love...(Nsagama).*
- *Sifa na utukufu ni kwake yeye aliye juu. Alitoa na sasa ametwaa, halleluya (Rev Tonghzii).*
[Praise and glory to the Lord above. He gave and He has taken away, hallelujah].

These messages seek to assure the bereaved that God is or will be on their side to console them. Menaman, for example, tells the bereaved, Vera,

that her father has gone back to the hands of Him who brought him on earth. She also congratulates Vera for having taken good care of her father. Reverend MJ promises the grieving family closer cooperation. Another condoler prays for the family's consolation. This focus on the bereaved person's feelings is the major purpose of condolence giving. Consolers wish that the bereaved reconcile with the deceased's passing, mostly assuring them that the deceased is in God's hands. As such, some consolers from the churches offer the bereaved a hand in overcoming grief. For mention God a lot these messages sound like religious messages, but they do not depict God as the author of these condoling messages.

c) Messages that offer a religious message

This group has 63 messages. These messages are of two types: messages in religious narrative with or without a verse, and sometimes dropping a mere numerical verse. Unlike the messages in the former group, these ones depict God as the author or authority as they cite the Holy Bible:

- *Mtu anapoingia katika wokovu wa kweli anavalishwa mwili wake Yesu mwenyewe (1Kor 15:40-49) [Jimbin].*
[When someone is truly born again Jesus (1 Cor 15:40-49) covers he/she].
- Psalm 27:4-7 (Masalu).
- *Isaya 35:8-12 & Isaya 51:11 Waliokombolewa toka Sayuni wamekimbiwa na huzuni na maombolezo. Isaya 57:1-2 mwenye haki ameonsolewa asipatwe na mabaya! (Rev Phil B)*
[Isiah 35:8-12 & Isiah 51:11 For those redeemed from Zion, sorrow and sighing have fled away. Isiah 57:1-2 The righteous has been taken away from those which are evil].
- *Hata imekuwa mtu akiwa ndani ya Kristo amekuwa kiumbe kipya... (2Kor 5:17) (Rev Timp).*
[Therefore, if any person be in Christ, s/he is a new creature... (2Cor 5:17)].
- *Tumshukuru Mungu kwa kila jambo (Zab 107:1/Zab 136:1-26) kwa kuwa yeye ndiye mweza wa yote. Amina (Rev MS)*
[We should thank God for everything (Psalms 107:1/Psalms 136:1-26) for He is Omnipotent. Amen].

- *Tumshukuru Mungu kwa kuwa ni mwema kwa kutupa majira mapya* (1Kor 2:6-12, Efe 5:22-24)
[We should thank God for He is good. He has given us new seasons (1Cor 2:6-12, Eph 5:22-24)].

Messages that cite the bible and some of the bare citations like Psalm 27:1-4 besides proclaiming God as the author or authority for what condolers say here, they also suggest the member resources present between condolers and the bereaved, which highlights the most of these condolence-giving activities as mostly belonging to Christian communities. However, this inclination does not suggest that the exercise of condolence giving is solely Christian, largely done by Christians; nevertheless, this specific event of venturing into the intertextualities of the bible is essentially Christian. Condolers also borrow authority as they attempt to mitigate the grief of the bereaved. They want the bereaved to believe that their situation is possible before God. These messages do not carry a direct word about the deceased, they focus on warming the feelings of the living person, the bereaved.

d) Messages that address the deceased in the second person

This type of message is the crux of this study, with messages showing condolers addressing the deceased in the second person as though the deceased were alive and capable of hearing, and others going further (in Group *e*) to ask the deceased to do something. This is the biggest group with 247 messages plus the three short speeches by Zitto Kabwe, January Makamba, and South Africa's Julius Malema. The following examples address the deceased in the second person:

- [May] God rest YOUR soul in eternal peace (Kiwi).
- We will always miss YOU. May the almighty rest YOUR soul in peace. We pray that our Lord Jesus will sustain YOUR family (Minis).
- I remember YOU through YOUR service, especially when YOU danced on the altar for Lord Jesus (Fellows).
- YOU have left tremendous lessons behind (James).
- YOU are not on this earth but the church will remember YOUR sermons (Daima).

- Father, we will miss YOU so much. THANK YOU for all the laughter and good memories! (Binto).
- Rest in peace, Papa! (Dida).
- YOU changed our life, our world, and never to be forgotten. YOUR marks are left on our desk, our ears, and in our hands! YOU are a legend! I will miss YOU forever! (Cena).
- YOUR legacy will be part of the human DNA forever (Chan).
- Judica, I did not know YOU that closely, but from what I hear people saying, angels will rejoice in being with YOU in heaven (Chiku).

It is hard to tell why condolers choose to address the deceased like this; however, this address is becoming conventional among condolers in Tanzanian funerals, which is similar to Matiki (2001) and Dong's (2009) findings in Malawi and the US, respectively. Such an address is normally directed to the living, expecting to light their souls up. For instance, if I met Judica at some hiring office in Dar es Salaam and in our short encounter I said, "From what I hear people saying, you are the right person for this job," she would be elated. A reformulation of any of these examples leave the addressee elated, and they would likely have something positive to say in return. This kind of address is, however, done in the direction of the deceased.

e) *Messages that expect some act or ask the deceased some questions*

These are normally directives for action or verbal response:

- ENJOY the conquest of new worlds, Steve, you genius (Koffi).
- COME BACK in 10 years, still your so-called competitors will be behind you (Mark).
- Where you go SHINE LIGHT ahead of us (Mtumishi).
- REMEMBER your children Ben, Aika, Emmy, and me (Mushi).
- Which ANC should we go back to? (Malema).
- COME back and GIVE us a signal, then GO (Malema).
- Why did YOU leave us? (Malema).
- Sitta, what kind of person are YOU? YOU were very kind; YOU did apologize to Hon John Cheyo... (Kabwe).
- Ruge, please SPARE time and LISTEN to me... (Makamba).

All these examples differ from those in Group B in that they question the deceased and go a step further to demand or request for some act from the deceased. The assumption must be that the deceased is capable of hearing and responding with some action. The distance between hearing and responding with some act is where agency lies. Upon responding with some action, one should think and decide before carrying out the verbal, mental or physical act. These examples makes the deceased capable of 'inspiring', 'coming back' (resurrecting), 'enjoying', lighting up the way', 'remembering people (her children)', 'interacting with angels and saints', 'going ahead of friends left behind', 'telling (someone)', 'signalling', 'answering questions [e.g. *which ANC should we go to?*]', 'resurrecting and going after giving [them] a signal', and lastly, 'sparing time to listen'. Condolers have made the deceased an agent that can put into play some deeds, and one cannot do so without being able to think and decide. Condolers make it seem like they have taken the deceased through Miranda rights. They attempt to give the deceased the ability to share responsibility in what 'they will or will not do' (Speight 2001, p. 4).

Agency refers to the actions we ask of the deceased to perform in response to envisaged acts (Varien & Potter 2008). In other words, upon hearing these pleas the addressee (the deceased) is expected to say, 'Yes I will do so' or 'No, I am sorry I can't'. All these messages then respond to the thin sense of agency that denotes efficaciousness – success measured in terms of the commensurability of one's beliefs and actions. This kind of agency bears affinity to personhood (Jurist 2000, , p. 128). Moreover, the acts that the deceased perform are only those that are for the benefit of the living, hence making the deceased the patron and the condolers the beneficiaries. Acts like inviting the deceased for dinner, to dance, swim, or write do not seem to be candidates in condolence messages, even though they too lie on the *yes/no* assessment. Moreover, if the deceased can cooperate with anyone, the condolers seem to believe that it is only with the supernatural – angels and saints.

Why do condolers address the deceased? We need to remember agency as “grounded in the quality of our motivation – in the capacity to make strong evaluations that contribute to a sense of responsibility in a way that weak evaluations do not. Language is intrinsically related to the human agency as it articulates our feelings, makes them clearer and more defined; and in this way it transforms our sense of the imports involved; and hence transforms the feelings” (Taylor 1985, , p. 71). Sewell (1992) says that in expressing their agency, humans exhibit their capacity for forming intentions and taking creative and innovative action (Sewell 1992, p. 20). So, when condolers choose to articulate ‘requests’, they do so reasonably and knowing to be doing the right thing in the right circumstances. Their intention, or understanding of the norm on which they act, is something that is not artificially separable from the entirety of action itself (Speight 2001, p. 4).

At this point, the respondents from the two universities of Saint Augustine and University of Dar es Salaam facilitated data collection. Why do they think condolers attribute agency to the deceased? Here is what they say: First, a direct address to the deceased comes from the belief that when someone dies, it is only the body that perishes. The soul of the dead person resides somewhere better, so when thus addressed they can still “see and hear everything”. It is the belief in this omnipresence that condolers show their ability to share their feelings with the bereaved, hoping that the deceased sees and hears all. One said, “Because the deceased happens to be someone we loved dearly, it is perfectly well to voice our desperation”. Secondly, talking directly to the departed person establishes publicly the closeness or intimacy between condolers and the deceased, another level of showing sympathy and an affirmation that condolers are not concerned only with the bereaved but the deceased as well.

Thirdly, since signing a remembrance book or giving a speech seems like the only opportunity to interact with the deceased again publicly, addressing the deceased is a way of saying what they would but could not say to the deceased while living. One condoler said, “This is something we wish we had said to the deceased face-to-face, so we have to say it now or

never". Thus, it is a way to open hearts in grief. Yet, not all the condolers who addressed their condolences to Steve Jobs had spoken or known him on a one-to-one basis, so they had to open their hearts in writing when he was no more. Fourthly, this is another way of addressing the deceased but aiming to communicate with the living, be they fellow condolers or the bereaved. This is turning the mourning into a conduit or smokescreen. It is where condolers take cover in the grief-of-the-day plus the belief of the ever-hearing omnipresent deceased person that reminding 'Mzee Sitta' (the deceased) about how he 'apologized to John Cheyo for having thrown him out of parliament session the previous day'. Kabwe was craftily sending a message about the current speaker and deputy speaker's "lack of wisdom and humility" in dealing with the opposition (a talk with Kabwe in 2000). South African Julius Malema, similarly, used a loud aside directed to Winnie Mandela to throw raw political slurs at individual politicians and the entire African National Congress.

These being individual recollections from individuals' own beliefs, they reflect condolers' cognitive dispositions and social practices. In other words, these reflect their members' resources when it comes to matters of death. Maybe these exchanges resemble the experience "in the USA, especially among the white middle class, [where] there is a tendency to engage in greetings even with new-born babies and very young infants who are unable to be either cognisant of or full participants in the greeting exchange, implying and enforcing specific ideologies of agency" (Duranti 2004, p. 456). Agency is raised to a level beyond the addressees' actual capability to control their own actions. The condolers' writings or utterances "establish a reality that has at least the potential for affecting whoever happens to be listening to [them], regardless of the originally intended audience ...[and] affect them when we repeat what our listener already knows" (Duranti 2004, pp. 451-452). What this tells us is that by condolers writing and saying what they do repeatedly, they are likely to affect our minds and make this agency attribution part and parcel of condolence giving. In all of these directives and questions, condolers tend to evoke social identities and solidarity with the deceased and bereaved, hence elevating the deceased's status in an attempt to create a sense of obligation.

Conclusion

Condolers manipulate discourse to share the grief of the bereaved and express solidarity, emphasize the transitory nature of life on this earth, and give encouragement to the bereaved. Despite identifying the types of condolence messages in terms of functions, it is still important to make a closer examination of the content and language of condolence messages. The act of condolence offering requires examination beyond the forms that messages take.

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Happy Birthday
(https://www.youtube.com/results?search_query=flipsyde+happy+birthday)

I will be missing you (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NKMtZm2YuBE>).

January Makamba (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hcvRugbYfZo>)

Julius Malema
(https://www.youtube.com/results?search_query=malema+on+winnie+mandela+funeral).

Zitto Kabwe (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=86E14r0pSg4>)