

UNIVERSITY OF TARTU
DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH STUDIES

**CULTURE IN DEATH: A CORPUS-BASED STUDY OF
THE NEW YORK TIMES OBITUARIES**
BA thesis

KAROLINE LAANEOJA
SUPERVISOR: *Prof.* RAILI MARLING

TARTU
2022

ABSTRACT

The obituary genre can give us a view into cultural attitudes towards death and their change over time through who is portrayed and how. This thesis aims to find out what the vocabulary used in the obituaries of the newspaper *The New York Times* can tell us about the cultural attitudes surrounding death and the obituary genre. For this goal, corpus-assisted discourse analysis is used. The analysis is conducted with the assistance of the *Sketch Engine* tool using a corpus consisting of 716 *The New York Times* obituaries from January 1, 2021, to June 30, 2021 (758,886 words).

The introduction discusses the death taboo and the obituary genre as a carrier of public memory, as well as the values followed by the editorial team of *The New York Times* obituaries. The first chapter provides an overview of previous research on the topic of death in media and the obituary genre as a portrayer of cultural values. Special attention is given to previous studies using corpus research. The second chapter provides a description of the corpus used, the methods of analysis, and the key findings of the corpus-assisted analysis of the vocabulary of *The New York Times*' obituaries. The conclusion summarizes the overall findings of the thesis.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT	2
TABLE OF CONTENTS	3
INTRODUCTION	4
1. REPRESENTATION OF DEATH IN THE MEDIA: LITERATURE REVIEW	7
2. CORPUS-ASSISTED DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF <i>THE NEW YORK TIMES</i> OBITUARIES	14
2.1 Method	14
2.2 Analysis of the vocabulary used in the obituaries of <i>The New York Times</i>	14
CONCLUSION	26
REFERENCES	29
RESÜMEE	30

INTRODUCTION

Death is an inevitability, and a large part of human existence is dedicated to coming to terms with either one's own death or the deaths of others. While death is a very natural event, it is still taboo in many modern societies – the act of dying and even the general concept of death is either not talked about or the discussion surrounding them avoids referring to the physical act of dying.

While death itself is considered taboo, the process of mourning is not. Walter (1991: 297-299) and later also Lee (2008: 745-746) have both noted the decline of the death taboo towards the latter part of the 20th century. Walter (1991: 297-298) attributes the decline to the 1960s emphasis on emotional expression and thus encouraging talking about death as a part of the mourning process. Walter (1991: 299) argues that academic and media discussion on this topic also shows a conscious attempt of breaking the taboo.

According to Lee (2008: 745-746), the decline of the death taboo can similarly be seen in the increasing research on the topic of death and dying. On a social level, he attributes it to the hospice movement and its care for those who are dying as well as the New Age interest in what happens after death together with popular, non-religious reimaginings of the afterlife. According to Lee (2008: 748), the view of death as not a finality, but a transition to an afterlife makes the discussion of death more acceptable. He views the process within a broader context of modern values of disenchantment and rationalization that clash with re-enchantment and the otherworldly. People still yearn for the non-rational as the rational modern world has not yet found ways to end human suffering, and thus people look for re-enchantment in the escapism that helps to fill the gap left by reason by imagining what comes after death (Lee 2008: 750).

While Walter and Lee discuss the broader spiritual landscape, we can also get an understanding of attitudes towards death by looking at media representations of death. Death

appears in many parts of traditional print media in the form of coverage of military conflicts, terrorist attacks, refugee crises, and local crime. However, there is one media genre exclusively dedicated to death that also helps gain an understanding of the changing nature of death: obituaries.

This form of public grief and appreciation can show a lot about the culture within which it exists, as it behaves as a historic record of public memory, showing what society values in people (Hume 2000: 11). The obituary genre helps to shape the values of a society, by showing who and what counts as important (Hume 2000: 13). The remembering of different individuals through obituaries is a time capsule of values, events, and memories and this makes this genre worth investigating more thoroughly. While obituaries appear with pictures and even video in today's publications, the main core of any obituary is the text and thus it is the main object of investigation in the present thesis as well. While a single obituary cannot be counted as a sole representative of a culture or society, it is possible to get a sense of a culture on the basis of a corpus of texts where values can potentially be traced, for example, through the frequency of the vocabulary used.

The present thesis focuses on obituaries published in *The New York Times*. It is an American newspaper that has been around since the 19th century, with clear journalistic practices and genre conventions, including in the obituaries section. *The New York Times* lists its values as including independence (impartial news), integrity, curiosity, respect, collaboration, and excellence (The New York Times Company 2022). When it comes to their obituaries specifically, in an interview with *Slate* magazine, the current editor of *The New York Times*' obituaries section, William McDonald, states that in the recent years the editorial team has started to try more consciously to portray a more diverse variety of people to compensate for the historical erasure of marginalized groups within the obituaries section

(Bloomer 2020). People from more ordinary walks of life are getting more attention, but McDonald admits that there is still an obligation to portray people who have made the biggest societal contributions (Bloomer 2020). While McDonald speaks about increasing diversity among the people covered, the present thesis will look at if and how this inclusivity is reflected in the vocabulary of the obituaries.

The present thesis aims to analyze the obituaries of *The New York Times* to find out what the vocabulary used can tell us about the cultural attitudes surrounding death and the obituary genre. The literature review section discusses previous research on the topics of death discourse and representation of death in the media, the obituary genre as a portrayer of cultural values and attitudes, which aspects *The New York Times* considers in their obituaries, and methods used in previous obituary research. The method section discusses the corpus managing and text analysis tool *Sketch Engine* used for the following empirical analysis. The empirical section uses the *Sketch Engine* to analyze the corpus of obituaries from January 1, 2021, to June 30, 2021 to identify discourses surrounding death that appear in obituaries and the cultural values they carry through the vocabulary that is used.

1. REPRESENTATION OF DEATH IN THE MEDIA: LITERATURE REVIEW

The obituary is a long-standing genre, with specialized writers and research in the case of large newspapers. The genre reflects different understandings of death. Therefore, this literature review will first investigate the discourse surrounding death, and the representation of death in the media. Second, it will introduce literature concerning the obituary as a genre that portrays cultural values and attitudes, and then, more narrowly, newspaper obituaries. The different methods that have been used to research obituaries will also be discussed.

When death is portrayed in the media, Walter et al. (1995: 593-594) claim it becomes a very public part of death discourse, involving political discourse and private feelings. The political aspect becomes apparent when some deaths are portrayed to call for changes through the public pressure generated and to avoid further deaths for the same cause (Walter et al. 1995: 593). Death is often visible in the media through portrayals of tragedies, which include emotional vocabulary and imagery, such as people visibly grieving and experiencing loss or highlighting the fact the person who passed is someone's child, wife, or husband, and this is even preferred to unemotive and neutral portrayal (Walter et al. 1995: 590). This preference for emotion when portraying death is probably due to the attempt to create a juxtaposition of innocent, ordinary subjects, and their extraordinary deaths (Walter et al. 1995: 590).

Death is frequent in the media, although writing about what people do not want to see is often not sustainable in the media, which depends on audience appeal. Walter et al. (1995: 590) discuss the reason for this perceived demand for death and grieving in media and the cultural uncertainty present in the process of grieving in the United Kingdom. Walter et al. (1995: 590-593) present three hypotheses. The first hypothesis is that the British people have lost the knowledge of how to grieve and treat those who grieve due to the decline of mourning

rituals. Thus, seeing how other people grieve in the media can be comforting and helpful (Walter et al. 1995: 590-591). The second hypothesis is that there is a culturally acceptable version of grief with its customs and norms that are very difficult to uphold, and thus media accounts of how other people grieve and enact these norms can be used as a blueprint for how to behave in a grieving situation (Walter et al. 1995: 591). The last hypothesis considers how there are no set rules of how and when it is appropriate to grieve, although the expression of extreme emotion such as crying is considered natural during a grieving process (Walter et al. 1995: 592). This means that a person is left to find guidelines for how to behave in these societal situations – what and when is acceptable – and the different media portrayals of grief offer guidance (Walter et al. 1995: 591-592).

Obituaries are a part of the media that displays a public version of grief. The obituary has been defined by Hume (2000: 12) as a genre that celebrates life and reflects what society wants to value and remember about the deceased, combining individual, generational, familial, and collective memories. The collective memory can be observed in obituaries through different times in cultural and political history through who is remembered and how. Cultural change can be seen, for example, in the widening coverage of women around the time when women were granted suffrage (Hume 2000: 12).

This genre makes death a public topic and changes the discourse from mourning and grieving to celebrating, differently from the general media coverage of death as mentioned by Walter et al. (1995). In defining the obituary genre, Haley (1977: 208) distinguishes it from the biography – with which it has much in common – by the fact that the obituary requires immediacy, which the biography does not. Haley (1977: 211), similarly to Walter et al., points out how the obituary recaptures life like the biography but leaves a more lasting impression of the deceased in people's minds. This is due to the deceased being from the same immediate

timeframe as the reader and thus the event and, by extension, what is being written about a person being more relatable (Haley 1977: 211). The obituary writer writes about a person just how they were during the time of their death, without the need for a definitive analysis of reputation or legacy (Haley 1977: 211). During this process of recapturing life by writing about a person's death, cultural attitudes are shown by who is chosen for commemoration and by how they are commemorated (Hume 2000: 12).

Cultural attitudes can be defined as the feelings, thoughts, and behavior toward certain ideas within a society and they can be observed within obituaries through the omission and inclusion of individuals and their different portrayals. However, values can also appear in more subtle ways, for example through word choices, especially when it comes to taboo topics (such as saying "he was unmarried" about homosexual men to allude to their orientation without saying it explicitly) (Starck 2009: 339; 342-343). Through these allusions, cultural attitudes toward the hidden topics can be identified and it can be determined what is considered taboo. Starck (2009: 342; 352) discusses specificities of the genre of the obituary: the demand for accurately portraying a person's life, to protect the people who are left behind, and also the existence of some journalistic guidelines for the genre and the publication itself to ensure cohesion. Both Hume (1977: 211) and Starck (2009: 342) consider accuracy necessary in an obituary as any falsities can change public perceptions of the deceased individual, but Hume (1977: 211) emphasizes that a good obituary writer should still try to portray as many sides of the truth as possible without trying to play with emotions.

William McDonald (2018), the editor of the obituaries section of *The New York Times* since 2006, claims that they have to be extremely exclusive with who gets an obituary, largely due to limited print space and working hours. The focus is on newsworthy people with large impacts who would interest people more broadly (McDonald 2018). According to McDonald

(2018), the honoring of the dead is not the goal of *The New York Times* obituaries section. Instead, they focus on describing the life of people who made a difference, trying to highlight their significance. This practice agrees with Hume's (2000: 12) analysis. In *The New York Times* obituaries section subjects are occasionally also chosen to represent a marginalized group whose efforts have been overlooked or neglected in the past, for example in the series of obituaries titled *Overlooked* (McDonald 2018). It must be mentioned that the *Overlooked* series does not have the obituary characteristic of immediacy which was mentioned by Haley (1977: 208), as these obituaries are written looking back. This series instead works towards inclusivity and shows awareness of the shortcomings of representing society accurately at the time of writing, as we might not be aware of the social prejudices of our period that become apparent only in retrospect.

The obituary as a genre is influenced by complex cultural factors and the language used helps us identify these cultural aspects, for example by using corpus analysis approaches. *The New York Times* is an influential newspaper with an extensive obituaries section, but not many analyses using corpus approaches could be found at the time of writing. One example of such research is Alfano and colleagues (2018) who look at obituaries using data mining, both in local US newspapers and in *The New York Times*. According to Alfano et al. (2018: 62), local newspapers carry more obituaries of people from varying social backgrounds and are written often by people with no professional obituary writing experience, differently from the obituaries written by the writers of *The New York Times* from whom the following the ethics and strict guidelines of their publication is demanded. The local obituaries represent the values of the general public and can be written by people with a personal connection to the deceased, while the obituaries of *The New York Times* are representative of a more selective and comprehensive sample of (in)famous individuals with the goal of intricate storytelling by

writers not affiliated with the subject (Alfano et al. 2018: 62). Thus, we can conclude that these different obituaries are likely to carry different values and cultural attitudes. I will also keep this finding in mind in my research.

There are studies about obituaries in other print media. For example, Moore (2002) uses corpus research to look at the way the ideology of *The Economist* appears in its obituaries section. Moore (2002: 524) shows that ideology has a part in determining who gets chosen as the subject of an obituary and how that person is represented through text or image. Fowler and Bielsa (2007) look at a choice of newspapers from the UK, the USA, and France (*The Times*, *The Daily Telegraph*, *The Independent*, *The Guardian*, *Le Monde*, *The New York Times*) and their obituaries from different periods and assess the choice of people considered worth remembering. Their findings include the fact that most obituaries are written for men, with the subjects being often British, American, or European, with a tendency to write about people of higher status (Fowler & Bielsa 2007: 221-222), suggesting that obituaries are not culturally inclusive. Starck (2008: 923) also points out that there is notable gender inequality in obituaries, with more men being portrayed.

As could be seen from even these few studies, the methods for researching the obituary can vary. Alfano et al. (2018: 26) use data mining as their tool, applying two different approaches of expert coding and machine coding to identify the virtues and values that obituaries carry through the data collected. A sample of 930 local obituaries and 74 of *The New York Times* obituaries was researched using hand-coding and 13,209 records of automatedly acquired data from *ObituaryData.com* were researched using semi-automated large-scale semantic analysis (Alfano et al. 2018: 63, 72, 74). Starck (2008: 911-912, 923) uses quantitative data obtained from obituaries of *The Times*, *The Daily Telegraph*, *The Guardian*, and *The Independent* covering three months in combination with qualitative

analysis and interviews with editors to identify the prejudices and preferences in British obituary writing, claiming to be “the first quantitative assessment of any significant dimension in contemporary British obituary publishing” (Starck 2008: 923). Starck’s (2008: 911) research uses 1183 obituaries for its data.

Moore (2002: 497) in his analysis of *The Economist* and the ideologies it carries in its obituaries uses corpus research on a small-scale sample for the creation of a sociological profile of a typical person featured, using only 100 obituaries. Moore (2002: 497) also analyzes two obituaries more closely – a representation of a typical and an atypical person featured in an obituary. Fowler and Bielsa (2007: 204) use a sample of at least 100 up to 883 obituaries from varying periods from *The Times*, *The Daily Telegraph*, *The Independent*, and *The Guardian* each, with examples from *Le Monde* and *The New York Times* brought in for comparison. Fowler and Bielsa (2007: 203-204) focus on the production of “sociological ‘objectivation’ of obituaries”, trying to find out what factors about a person determine who gets celebrated with an obituary. While some quantitative analysis into obituaries has been done, there is room for more corpus research, especially using a larger data pool. There is also a need for more research that deals with vocabulary specifically and investigates how social factors are present in the language of the text.

This literature review has shown that when death is portrayed in the media it becomes part of public discourse. The portrayal of death and grieving in the media helps people navigate the grieving process and social norms surrounding death. The obituary has been categorized as a genre for commemorating life and it does not focus on death. This genre reflects the aspects the given society wants to highlight about the deceased. While the genre demands honesty, scholars have noted that cultural attitudes appear in obituaries as well through the choice of who gets an obituary and who does not, and how these people are

represented. The cultural values within obituaries can vary depending on the publication. The obituary genre has been previously analyzed using qualitative analysis methods, but there are few large-scale corpus studies at the time of this writing. While *The New York Times* obituaries have been previously investigated, more corpus research could be done on this newspaper's obituaries to provide insights into how the genre conveys cultural values.

2. CORPUS-ASSISTED DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF *THE NEW YORK TIMES* OBITUARIES

2.1 Method

The corpus was gathered from the online version of *The New York Times*' 'Today's Paper' section from January 1, 2021, to June 30, 2021, only using the obituaries from the section titled 'Obituaries'. Data collection was performed from October 26, 2021, to January 20, 2022. The texts were copied into *.txt* file format and sorted into folders based on the month in which they appeared. Image captions, obituary authors, and publishing dates were omitted from the corpus. In total, 716 *.txt* files were included the corpus, with 758,886 words and 47,724 unique word forms.

Corpus-assisted discourse analysis was used to research the obituaries collected with the help of the *Sketch Engine* software, developed in 2003 for corpus managing and text analysis. The uploaded corpus of obituaries was analyzed quantitatively using the program's 'word sketch' and 'word list' features and then analyzed qualitatively using the 'concordance' feature. The 'word sketch' is one of the main features of *Sketch Engine*, which shows how a given word behaves in collocations and grammatically, finding often occurring patterns that would be missed in qualitative analysis (Kilgarriff et al. 2014: 9-10). The 'word list' feature creates a list of words arranged by frequency (Kilgarriff et al. 2014: 16). The 'concordance' feature of *Sketch Engine* can be used to qualitatively check the context in which words analyzed appear, to check the accuracy of the interpretation within quantitative.

2.2 Analysis of the vocabulary used in the obituaries of *The New York Times*

The first stage of analysis focused on word frequencies. The analysis only included content words, that is, nouns, main verbs, adverbs, and adjectives, which carry most of the semantic meaning in a given sentence (Greenbaum 1996: 431). Grammatical words, which

convey grammatical relationships, such as articles, pronouns, determiners, auxiliary verbs, conjunctions, and prepositions (Greenbaum 1996: 431) were excluded from the analysis.

The most frequent content word in the corpus is *new*, present 2233 times. The concordance tool reveals that this word's frequency is explained by references to *The New York Times* and the city of New York in general. This is also visible in the high frequency of *York* – 1295 times. The second most frequent content word is *died*, with 1575 occurrences. Through this word, a pattern within *The New York Times* obituaries starts to become apparent: the concordance shows that most occurrences are from the very first few paragraphs of the obituary where the time and place of death are noted, sometimes also the cause. References outside of the first few paragraphs tend to mark the passing of the deceased's family members and not directly talk about the subject of the obituary.

While *died* is a very frequent content word, *life* is not as frequent, occurring only 766 times. This, however, does not indicate that the focus in obituaries is on death but the opposite. While the word *life* itself is not overly frequent, words about the deceased's life timeline and career are among the most frequent, for example, *work* with 1068 instances, *school* with 999, *university* with 963, *born* with 854, *family* with 776 and *home* with 760 instances. The focus of the obituary is more on the life of the person than how they passed. This aligns with Hume's (2000: 12) definition of the obituary which emphasized the importance of celebrating life and memories of the deceased.

The word *interview* is present 719 times, due to the use of previously conducted interviews with the deceased themselves or with the people close to them as important source material for *The New York Times* obituaries. The importance of familial connections can also be seen in the frequency of words such as *mother* (849 times) and *family* (776 times). The mentions of the word *home* (760 times) cannot be counted as proof of the importance of the

familial aspect as most mentions when looking into the context they appear in concern the place of death, for example in the typical phrase about the deceased having “died at home”.

	Item	Frequency
1.	new	2233
2.	died	1575
3.	years	1520
4.	first	1509
5.	York	1295
6.	people	1081
7.	wrote	1071
8.	work	1068
9.	school	999
10.	university	963
11.	times	948
12.	born	854
13.	mother	849
14.	year	803
15.	world	790
16.	family	776
17.	life	766
18.	home	760
19.	music	737
20.	interview	719

Table 1. The 20 most frequent content words in the corpus of obituaries from *The New York Times* from January 1, 2021, to June 30, 2021.

The most frequently used pronouns are *he* (13,296 times) and *his* (9778 times), followed by *she* (6385 times) and *her* (5704 times). This shows that in obituaries from *The New York Times* masculine pronouns are used around two times more often than feminine pronouns. The gendered pronouns are most often used to talk about the subject of the obituary, rather than any other people who are mostly referred to by name. These findings align with the findings of Fowler and Bielsa (2007: 221-222) and Starck (2008: 923) who have concluded that the people whose lives are considered worthy of an obituary tend to be male, rather than female. Despite the existence of the previously mentioned *Overlooked* series of obituaries, which covers the deaths which were unreported during their time including the

underrepresented women the data still shows male bias in the coverage of deaths. The singular, first-person pronoun *I* is used 3315 times and primarily appears within quotes as the genre does not call for first-person storytelling, as the subjects of obituaries have already passed by the time of publishing.

	Item	Frequency
1.	he	13296
2.	his	9788
3.	she	6385
4.	her	5704
5.	it	4153
6.	i	3315
7.	they	1992
8.	him	1733
9.	their	1518
10.	you	1344

Table 2. The 10 most frequent pronouns in the corpus of obituaries from *The New York Times* from January 1, 2021, to June 30, 2021.

In the second phase of analysis, the words possibly carrying different connotations were looked at. As previously seen, there was a visible gender bias in pronoun use, but to find out more semantically gendered language usage, different words were analyzed to identify whether *The New York Times* shows gender bias in the vocabulary chosen to represent different people.

Firstly, some adjectives were chosen and examined within their context of use to see if there was a gender bias in adjective use. The typically feminine-aligned adjectives *pretty*, *sexy*, and *slim*, did not appear in significant numbers in any contexts. The typically masculine-aligned adjectives *rough*, *tough*, and *strong* were similarly not found in gendered contexts with a significant frequency.

Secondly, gendered nouns were compared to see if any bias occurs. The noun *husband* occurs 305 times, while the noun *wife* occurs 618 times. While seemingly showing the

opposite of the previously found male subject bias, the finding instead confirms it as using word sketch we can see that the word *wife* is mostly used in the context of male obituary subjects (i.e., *his wife died* or *is survived by his wife*) and not often found in other contexts. This is shown through the frequency of the pronoun *his*, with 502 occurrences, with the noun *wife*. The same applies to *husband* being used in the obituaries of female subjects (i.e., *her husband died* or *is survived by her husband*) where *her* is present 230 times. The usage of the words *wife* and *husband* in the context of opposite gender obituary subjects can also be seen in the prepositional phrases they occur in. The words *wife* and *husband* are more often positioned after the preposition, suggesting that they are not the main subject of the obituary, but a part of the familial story of the obituary.

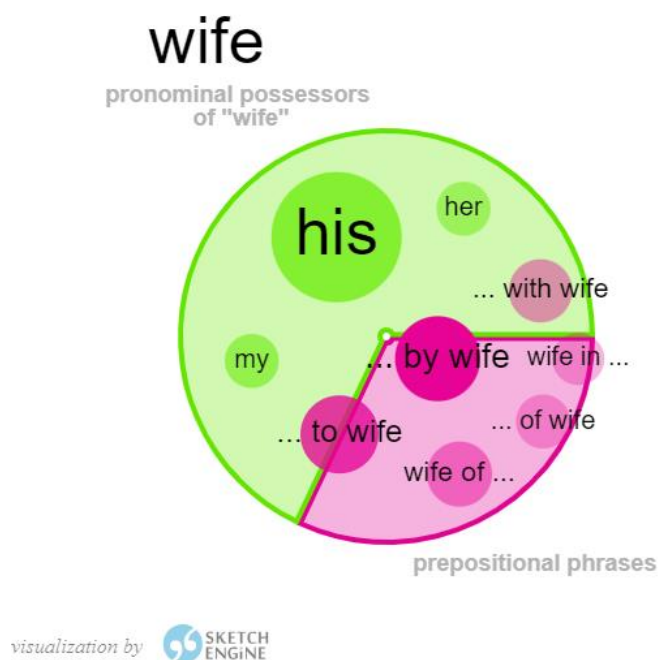


Figure 1. Word sketch visualization of the pronominal possessors (green) and prepositional phrases (pink) that appear with the word ‘wife’.

husband

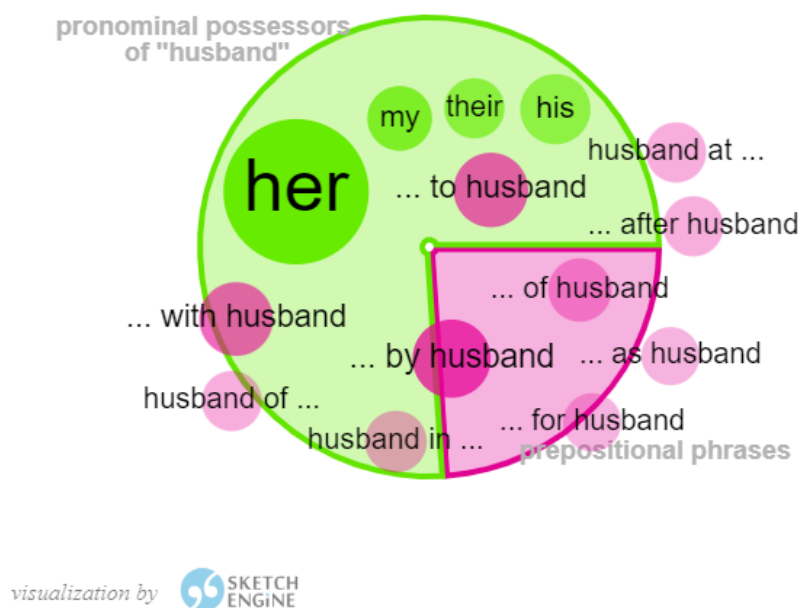


Figure 2. Word sketch visualization of the pronominal possessors (green) and prepositional phrases (pink) that appear with the word ‘husband’.

The noun *woman* occurs 657 times and the noun *man* 542 times. This difference in frequency could come from the fact that there is more need to highlight female achievements in the context of gender inequality. This hypothesis is supported by the modifiers of these nouns. The most prevalent modifier of *woman* is *first*, occurring 47 times, but *first* is the modifier of *man* only 7 times, 3 times in the context of race (i.e., *the first Asian man*) and 4 times as the synonym for *human*, showing that there is no default need to highlight the gender within male achievements. From these observations we can deduce that the obituaries within *The New York Times* do not show explicit gender bias within the vocabulary of the writing itself, trying to stay neutral and objective in the reporting, but an indirect loss of neutrality can be seen in the highlighting of the achievements made by women.

In the third part of the analysis, the words to do with death and dying, life and living, and the general life path are analyzed more thoroughly. The word *death* as a noun occurs in the corpus 657 times and the most common usage is together with the verb *confirm* with *death* as the object, occurring 147 times. The verb *die* occurs 2,288 times with the most common construction being the prepositional phrase *die on*, occurring 628 times. This comes again from the observed *The New York Times* obituary structure in which the information of death is presented within the first paragraph, and with that often the approximate time of death, such as a month (i.e., *died on Saturday*).

This information is occasionally supplemented by the cause of death. The prepositional phrase *die of* occurs 193 times within the corpus, with the most frequent occurrences being *die of complication* (62 times), *Covid-19* (56 times), and *cancer* (20 times). The noun *complication* in total occurs in the corpus 196 times. The prepositional phrase *complication of* occurs most often in the context of *Covid-19* (95 times), *coronavirus* (16 times), and *stroke* (9 times). These results match the time the obituaries were taken from – January 1, 2021, to June 30, 2021 – a time when the COVID-19 pandemic was still very active in the USA and highly publicized in the media. During the time the data was collected *The New York Times* was also actively publishing a series of obituaries about people who had died in the COVID-19 pandemic, explaining the frequency of occurrence.

Life as a noun occurs 784 times with the most frequent construction being *life* as an object of *live*, occurring 21 times. *Live* as a verb occurs 604 times, with the most significant construction being again *life* as an object of *live*. While this is less than the frequency with which vocabulary that deals with death occurs, it must be kept in mind that the celebration of life that Hume (2000: 12) discusses becomes evident when looking at vocabulary that deals with the story of a person's life – the beginning of their career, their achievements, and their

legacy. The verb *begin* occurs 757 times with the objects dealing with one's career such as *working* (38 times) and *career* (37 times).



Figure 3. Word sketch visualization of the ing objects of ‘begin’ (teal), objects of ‘begin’ (pink), and subjects of ‘begin’ (green).

The verb *work* occurs 1,330 times, often in prepositional phrases *work in* (183 times), *work as* (172 times), *work with* (138 times), and *work for* (137 times), highlighting that portraying a career is important within an obituary. At the same time no particular career path stood out, differently from the previous findings of Fowler and Bielsa (2007: 221-222) which noted that there is a tendency to write about people with a higher social status. However, a person needs to have a high social standing to even get an obituary to begin with. The lack of preference for any career path could come from the fact that the careers mentioned within

obituaries are not always the final ones before an individual's death, but include the first part of someone's career, not always a high-paying position.

	Prepositional phrases	Frequency
1.	'work' in ...	183
2.	'work' as ...	172
3.	'work' with ...	138
4.	'work' for ...	137
5.	'work' on ...	104
6.	'work' at ...	88
7.	'work' from ...	7
8.	'work' under ...	5
9.	'work' alongside ...	4
10.	'work' into ...	3

Table 3. The 10 most frequent prepositional phrases the verb 'work' occurs within in the corpus of obituaries from *The New York Times* from January 1, 2021, to June 30, 2021.

The verb *win* occurs in the corpus 542 times. The most common objects of *win* are *award* (56 times), *medal* (41 times), *Oscar* (12 times), and *championship* (12 times). This data shows that there often needs to be a degree of achievement for a person to be eligible for a *New York Times* obituary. The noun *award* itself occurs 239 times, with the most common modifiers being *Grammy* (18 times), *Academy* (16 times), and *Tony* (9 times) which are all names of awards given within the entertainment industry, the Academy Awards being synonymous with the previously mentioned Oscars. While these are the most common awards shown, many other awards are mentioned within the corpus less frequently. They still mostly fall under the category of entertainment industry awards, i.e., the Peabody Awards and Olivier Awards. This corresponds to *The New York Times* obituary practice as outlined by McDonald (2018), which is to publish about those whose death would garner wider interest. Inevitably, if a person has worked in the public eye and the entertainment industry, especially with the current societal interest in celebrity culture, their death would be interesting for the larger public. The most commonly used pronominal subject of *win* is *he* (72 times), followed by *she*

(36 times), showing again previously shown gender disparity in the *New York Times* obituaries, with female subjects occurring 50% less frequently also in this context. The subjects *he* and *she* are followed in frequency by *it* (11 times).

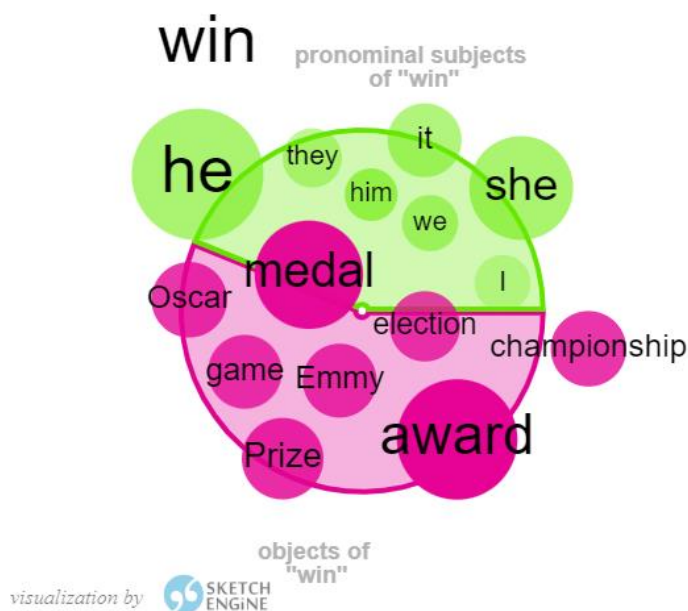


Figure 4. Word sketch visualization of pronominal subjects of ‘win’ (green) and objects of ‘win’ (pink).

The verb *survive* occurs in the corpus 645 times, and mostly within the context of mentioning the relatives of the deceased, who were left behind after the death of the subject of the obituary. The prepositional phrase *survive by* occurs most often together with *daughter* (98 times), *son* (97 times), *wife* (95 times), *sister* (41 times), and *brother* (36 times). This shows the importance of familial relations within the obituary genre. Notably, *survive by* occurs with *husband* only 12 times, which could be due to the larger number of male obituary subjects in heterosexual relationships, or the higher female life expectancy at birth (in 2019 81.4 years and 76.3 years respectively (Arias & Xu 2019: 3)) which suggests that men tend to predecease

their wives. The references to surviving family are similar to the tradition of family-written obituaries which help readers understand who to offer condolences to (Marzol 2006: 72). This parallel with the family-written obituaries could indicate that the cultural importance of the family carries over into the professionally written obituaries, although it has a different purpose there.

	Item	Frequency
1.	daughter	98
2.	son	97
3.	wife	95
4.	sister	41
5.	brother	36
6.	child	27
7.	mother	19
8.	grandchild	14
9.	husband	12
10.	granddaughter	5

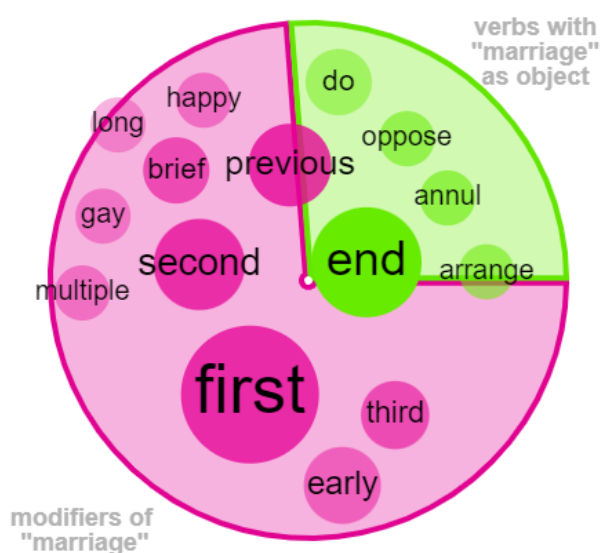
Table 4. The 10 most frequent nouns occurring together with the prepositional phrase ‘survive by’ within the corpus of obituaries from *The New York Times* from January 1, 2021, to June 30, 2021.

However, familial relations are not always mentioned in a positive manner. The verb *divorce* occurs in the corpus 121 times. The most common pronominal subject of *divorce* is *they* (43 times), i.e., *they divorced in*, which shows that the text does not assign responsibility for divorce on either side. The other frequently occurring pronominal subjects are *she* (6 times) and *I* (1 time), further proving the lack of reporting of one-sided marriage separations. The noun *divorce* occurs 161 times, the most common occurrence being within the prepositional phrase *in divorce* (125 times), mostly within the phrase *end in divorce*, which shows that although marriage is an important aspect of the genre, the obituaries also can show changes in the cultural role of marriage.

The verb *marry* occurs 536 times, more often than *divorce*. The most common pronominal subject of *marry* is *he* (116 times), followed by *they* (105 times) and only then *she*

(72 times). The gender disparity reflects the gender disparity among the subjects of obituaries. The high usage of the pronoun *they* could again show the importance of mutual responsibility and consent in marriage. The noun *marriage* occurs 316 times. The most common modifiers of *marriage* are *first* (84 times) and *second* (23 times). The most common verb *marriage* appears as an object with *is end* (43 times). This again shows the changing role of marriage: while it is still considered important, the obituaries also show that marriages cannot be expected to last all through a person's life.

marriage



visualization by  SKETCH ENGINE

Figure 5. Word sketch visualization of the modifiers of the noun 'marriage' (pink) and of verbs with 'marriage' as an object (green).

CONCLUSION

Death continues to be a taboo in modern societies, but some scholars have observed a decline in the death taboo in the context of mourning. Social attitudes toward death and the process of dying have become more rational but a large part of society still looks for comfort during the time of mourning. The obituary genre gives us a unique view into the cultural attitudes surrounding death and how they may have changed.

While death is frequently talked about in the media, obituaries are a platform of public grief that celebrate the life of the deceased right after they die. Obituaries demand accuracy, while also considering factors such as family reception and editorial guidelines. The obituary acts as a time capsule of cultural values and attitudes as who is portrayed and how they are portrayed can tell us a lot about the aspects a society deemed important at the time of publishing. *The New York Times* has developed its values and editorial practice also in its obituaries section. *The New York Times* specifically focuses on people who they deem to have made a worthy contribution to society during their lifetime and the passing of whom would warrant public interest. The newspaper has recently made a conscious effort to be more inclusive in its obituaries.

Previous studies about obituaries have included research into other newspapers' obituary practices as well as those of *The New York Times*. While there is a lot of qualitative research and some quantitative studies, there is room for more corpus-based research and especially research with a larger data pool, with a focus on vocabulary and the presence of social factors in that vocabulary.

This thesis looked at *The New York Times* obituaries using a corpus created from obituaries published from January 1, 2021, to June 30, 2021, to find cultural attitudes within the vocabulary of its content. The created corpus consisted of 716 obituary texts consisting of

758,886 words and 47,724 unique word forms. The tool *Sketch Engine* was used for the analysis of the corpus.

In the first part of the analysis, word frequencies were closely analyzed. The second most frequent content word was *died* (1575 times), which occurred mostly within the first paragraphs of the obituary, and concordance showed that it mostly appeared within the first few paragraphs of any given obituary, where the concrete facts about the manner of a person's death are listed. The word *life* occurred less frequently within the corpus (766 times), but this difference did not indicate a focus on death. Rather, the celebration of a deceased's life could be seen in the use of words that have to do with the general progress of life, i.e., *school*, *university*, *born*, and *family*, which are among the 20 most frequent content words in the corpus. The frequencies also show a dominance of male obituary subjects, with masculine pronouns being used around two times more than feminine pronouns, despite the conscious efforts for more inclusivity within the editorial practice.

The second part of the analysis dealt with words that could carry different connotations. No explicitly gender-biased use of adjectives was found. When looking at gendered nouns, the male bias within obituary subjects is reaffirmed. The noun *woman*, often occurring within the context of achievements (i.e., *the first woman*) occurs more often than the word *man*. This shows that culturally there is still a need to highlight gender when talking about female achievements, but not when talking about male ones. There is no bias within the vocabulary itself, but in the process of bringing forth gender, neutrality is lost.

In the third part of the analysis the vocabulary that deals with death and dying and the life path was analyzed. The location of the main information of the manner of death was confirmed again to be in the first few paragraphs of the obituary and the most common cause of death was established to be COVID-19 and its complications. During the timeframe within

which the obituaries were collected the public had a high interest in COVID-19-related deaths due to the ongoing pandemic and the vocabulary shows that demand. When looking at the vocabulary that deals with different aspects of a life journey it was noticed that there was no visible bias when it comes to career choices, which could stem from the obituary covering most of a person's life journey and thus including jobs other than the final career path which warranted the obituary in the first place. The vocabulary that deals with awards, however, shows a tendency toward portraying careers that have to do with the entertainment industry. This reflects the current celebrity culture. Gender disparity is also visible in this vocabulary.

The importance of family relations in an obituary can be seen through the frequency of the verb *survive*, which appears in obituaries in the context of listing the surviving family members. Familial relations also are shown through vocabulary that deals with divorce and marriage. The reporting of marriage and divorce shows shared responsibility in both processes through the common pronominal subject *they* of verbs *divorce* and *marry*. The frequent reporting of divorce within obituaries also shows the cultural change in the role of marriage within society and that marriage is no longer expected to last the entire lifetime of a person.

The present analysis thus demonstrated that, despite the editors' desire to increase the inclusiveness of obituaries, the obituaries of *The New York Times* give more space to male subjects. This confirms the results of previous studies. However, the texts are written in a language that is gender-neutral and inclusive, which suggests that inclusive practices are indeed being used. The present analysis also shows, as suggested by previous research, that the focus of obituaries is life, not death. Thus, the texts give fewer insights into mourning practices and more into general cultural values.

REFERENCES

- Alfano, Mark, Andrew Higgins and Jacob Levernier. 2018. Identifying virtues and values through obituary data-mining. *The Journal of Value Inquiry*, 52, 59–79.
- Arias, Elizabeth, and Jiaquan Xu. 2019. United States life tables, 2019. *National Vital Statistics Reports*, 70: 19. Hyattsville, MD: National Center for Health Statistics.
- Bloomer, Jeffrey. 2020. “It overtook us, this tide of deaths”. *Slate Magazine*. Available at slate.com/human-interest/2020/04/new-york-times-obituaries-editor-interview.html, accessed 21 May 2022.
- Caldas-Coulthard, Carmen Rosa and Rosamund Moon. 2010. ‘Curvy, hunky, kinky’: using corpora as tools for critical analysis. *Discourse & Society*, 21: 2, 99–133.
- Fowler, Bridget, and Esperança Bielsa. 2007. The lives we choose to remember: a quantitative analysis of newspaper obituaries. *The Sociological Review*, 55: 2, 203–226.
- Greenbaum, Sidney. 1996. *The Oxford English Grammar*. London: Oxford University Press.
- Haley, William. 1977. Rest in prose: the art of the obituary. *The American Scholar*, 46: 2, 206–211.
- Hume, Janice. 2000. *Obituaries in American Culture*. University Press of Mississippi: Jackson.
- Kilgarriff, Adam, Vít Baisa, Jan Bušta, Miloš Jakubíček, Vojtěch Kovář, Jan Michelfeit, Pavel Rychlý and Vít Suchomel. 2014. The Sketch Engine: ten years on. *Lexicography ASIALEX*, 1, 7–36.
- Lee, Raymond L.M. 2008. Modernity, mortality and re-enchantment: the death taboo revisited. *Sociology*, 42: 4, 745–759.
- Marzol, Isabel Corona. 2006. Coming out of the closet ‘six feet under’: textual silences and the social construction of the family stage in the obituary genres. *Revista Alicantina de Estudios Ingleses*, 19, 67–82.
- McDonald, William. 2018. From the death desk: why most obituaries are still of white men. *The New York Times*. Available at www.nytimes.com/2018/03/08/obituaries/overlooked-from-the-death-desk-why-most-obits-are-still-of-white-men.html, accessed 21 May 2022.
- Moore, Stephen H. 2002. Disinterring ideology from a corpus of obituaries: a critical post mortem. *Discourse & Society*, 13: 4, 495–536.
- Starck, Nigel. 2008. Death can make a difference: a comparative study of “quality quartet” obituary practice. *Journalism Studies*, 9: 6, 911–924.
- Starck, Nigel. 2009. Sex after death: the obituary as an erratic record of proclivity. *Mortality*, 14: 4, 338–354.
- The New York Times Company. 2022. Mission and Values. Available at <https://www.nytimes.com/company/mission-and-values/>, accessed 17 April 2022.
- Walter, Tony. 1991. Modern death: taboo or not taboo?. *Sociology*, 25: 2, 293–310.
- Walter, Tony, Jane Littlewood and Michael Pickering. 1995. Death in the news: the public invigilation of private emotion. *Sociology*, 29: 4, 579–596.

RESÜMEE

TARTU ÜLIKOOL
ANGLISTIKA OSAKOND

Karoliine Laaneoja

Culture in Death: A Corpus-Based Study of *The New York Times* Obituaries

Surma kultuur: The New York Timesi järelehüüete korpusepõhine uurimus

Bakalaureusetöö

2022

Lehekülgede arv: 32

Annotatsioon:

Järelehüüete žanri ja kujutamiseks valitud isikute kaudu on võimalik vaadelda kultuurilist suhtumist surma ja selle suhtumise muutust ajas. Bakalaureusetöö eesmärk on selgitada välja mida näitab sõnavarakasutus ajalehe *The New York Times* järelehüüetes surma puudutavate kultuuriliste hoiakute ja järelehüüete žanri kohta. Uurimustööks kasutatakse korpusepõhist diskursusanalüüsi. Korpus koosneb 716st *The New York Times*is perioodil 1. jaanuar 2021 kuni 30. juuni 2021 avaldatud järelehüüedest ning kokku on selles 758886 sõna. Analüüs viidi läbi *Sketch Engine* tarkvara abil.

Sissejuhatuses räägitakse tänapäeva surmatähtsust ja järelehüüete žanrist kui avaliku mälu kandjast ja tutvustatakse *New York Times* järelehüüete toimetuse väärtusi. Esimeses peatükis antakse ülevaade varem tehtud uuringutest, mis käsitlevad surma teemat meedias, räägitakse järelehüüete žanrist kui kultuuriliste väärtuste kujutajast ja arutletakse varasemate järelehüüete-teemaliste uuringute üle. Teises peatükis kirjeldatakse kasutatud korpust, analüüsimeetodeid ja *New York Times* järelehüüete sõnavara korpusanalüüsi põhitulemusi. Kokkuvõttes tehakse ülevaade lõputöö tulemustest.

Korpusanalüüsi kaudu joonistub välja meessoost järelehüüete subjektide domineerimine, hoolimata toimetuse teadlikest jõupingutustest suurema tasakaalu saavutamiseks. Kultuuriliselt joonistub välja soo rõhutamine naiste, aga mitte meeste saavutuste kirjeldamisel. Perioodi kõige esiletõdum surma põhjus oli COVID-19 ja selle komplikatsioonid. Karjäärdest tõsis enim esile meelelahutustööstus. Samuti joonistus välja peresuhete väärtustamine.

Märksõnad: Inglise keel ja keeleteadus, korpusanalüüs, järelehüüed, kultuurilised väärtused, meediadiskursus, *The New York Times*

Lihtlitsents lõputöö reprodutseerimiseks ja üldsusele kättesaadavaks tegemiseks

Mina, Karoliine Laaneoja

1. annan Tartu Ülikoolile tasuta loa (lihtlitsentsi) minu loodud teose

Culture in Death: A Corpus-Based Study of *The New York Times* Obituaries

mille juhendaja on Raili Marling

reprodutseerimiseks eesmärgiga seda säilitada, sealhulgas lisada digitaalarhiivi DSpace kuni autoriõiguse kehtivuse lõppemiseni.

2. Annan Tartu Ülikoolile loa teha punktis 1 nimetatud teos üldsusele kättesaadavaks Tartu Ülikooli veebikeskkonna, sealhulgas digitaalarhiivi DSpace kaudu Creative Commons'i litsentsiga CC BY NC ND 4.0, mis lubab autorile viidates teost reprodutseerida, levitada ja üldsusele suunata ning keelab luua tuletatud teost ja kasutada teost ärieesmärgil, kuni autoriõiguse kehtivuse lõppemiseni.
3. Olen teadlik, et punktides 1 ja 2 nimetatud õigused jäävad alles ka autorile.
4. Kinnitan, et lihtlitsentsi andmisega ei riku ma teiste isikute intellektuaalomandi ega isikuandmete kaitse õigusaktidest tulenevaid õigusi.

Karoliine Laaneoja

24.05.2022

Autorsuse kinnitus

Kinnitan, et olen koostanud käesoleva bakalaureusetöö ise ning toonud korrekselt välja teiste autorite panuse. Töö on koostatud lähtudes Tartu Ülikooli maailma keelte ja kultuuride kolledži anglistika osakonna bakalaureusetöö nõuetest ning on kooskõlas heade akadeemiliste tavadega.

Karoliine Laaneoja

Tartus, 24.05.2022