Coming out of the Closet 'Six Feet Under': Textual Silences and the Social Construction of the Family Stage in the Obituary Genres

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ABSTRACT

The 'Family' stage -the lines devoted to the surviving members of the deceased's family- is a 'constant element' (Hasan 1985) in obituaries. The present study is built up around the structural analysis of genres as developed by Bhatia (1993, 2004), Hasan (1985), Martin (1985, 1992), and Swales (1990). The purpose of this study is to bring a social explanation or understanding to bear on the textual description of the 'Family' stage from a corpus of obituaries published in more than two hundred American and British newspapers collected over a period of three years.

The research process has developed two more steps. First, following Huckin's (2004) notion of content analysis, quantitative and qualitative modes have been applied, trying to identify the content which is not manifest. Secondly, the identification of 'textual silences' (Huckin 2002) is followed by an exploratory ethnographic analysis (Scollon 1998) on two case studies.

This multi-staged analysis is aimed at a more comprehensive account of the obituary genre as a social process (Kress 1993). It shall be argued that the 'Family' stage encapsulates one of the most controversial topics of our time.

1. Introduction

The obituary is a well-known type of contemporary written media text that exists in a wide range of cultures and languages. According to *Webster's Encyclopaedic Unabridged Dictionary of the English Language*, an obituary is "a notice of the death of a person, often

with a biographical sketch, as in a newspaper".

However, within the Anglo-Saxon culture, this text type varies in shape and purpose and even in the use of the term. 'Obituary' in the British press and in some North American quality papers indicates the free, newsroom-produced text, and 'death notice' is the paid advertisement written by the family or the funeral home. In many American newspapers, there is a mixed formula —a paid obituary written by the newspaper's staff— and in local papers sometimes they are free if they just include the basic information, which is name, date, and next of kin, as in the *Arizona Republic* (Readership Institute 2001). For clarity's sake, I shall use the term 'obituary' for the text type in general and 'death notice' for those paid-for announcements that are also analysed in this paper.

What seems unarguable is that obituaries' formal characteristics and their place in newspapers have led them to be included in the genre taxonomies of journalistic practice. This 'folk notion of genre' (Matthiessen 1993: 233) has categorized them in such an unmistakable way that any daily newspaper reader could reasonably give a 'commonsensical' explanation of what an obituary is about. But from a discourse analysis perspective, a text is "language doing some job in some context" (Hasan 1985: 56), that is, genre analysis demands what Martin (1992: 503) terms a "teleological perspective": genres are socially "goal-oriented" (Martin 1985) and, in order to unfold the social purposes of a genre in question we need to look into the organization of the text to identify its elements, "the stages with some consequence in the progression of a text" (Hasan 1985: 56).

The present study is built up around the structural analysis of genres as developed by Bhatia (1993, 1999 and 2004), Hasan (1985), Martin (1985, 1992), Martin and Rose (2003), and Swales (1990). The analysis of obituaries following this procedure has revealed that both –obituaries and death notices– appear to include as a 'constant element' (Hasan 1985) in their textual structure what I have termed 'the Family stage', which I shall take up in detail in the next section.

The purpose of the present study is to bring a social explanation or understanding to bear on the textual description of the 'Family' stage. As I hope to demonstrate in what follows, the present study argues that a comprehensive genre analysis of obituaries should not limit itself to a classification according to its textual structuring. Bhatia (2004: 3-12), whose valuable survey I have relied on, comments that genre analysis has moved on from the study of global patterns of discourse organization to more context-sensitive aspects of genre. This tendency has expanded to embrace the exploration of the sociocognitive factors, and the application of a multiperspective analysis of genres within their professional and institutional contexts. In view of the new perspectives opened by the most recent trends in genre analysis and, as Freedman and Medway recommend (1994: 2), we have to "reanalyse and rethink the social, cultural, political purposes of previously taken-for granted genres" and aim for "an archaeological unearthing of tacit assumptions, goals and purposes as well as the revealing of unseen players and the unmasking of others".

In order to accomplish this task, the research process I have undertaken here has developed two more steps. Looking specifically at the 'Family' stage as the unit of analysis,

I have relied on content analysis as the 'research strategy' (Titscher *et al*. 2000: 55). Within the social sciences, content analysis is defined as "a research technique that uses a set of procedures to make valid inferences from text" (Weber 1990: 9). From a discourse analysis perspective, content analysis is defined by Huckin (2004: 14) as "the identifying, quantifying, and analyzing of specific words, phrases, concepts, or other observable semantic data in a text or body of texts with the aim of uncovering some underlying thematic or rhetorical patterns running through these texts". Following Huckin's proposal, I have applied a hybrid type of content analysis, combining quantitative and qualitative modes. The former is a deductive one. If in the previous step I posited the existence of a certain pattern in the corpus, a 'Family' stage in obituaries, now I focus on the "manifest content" of this stage, as Huckin (2004: 14) puts it, and try to answer the following research questions: What does this stage consist of? Or who is considered a survivor or a member of the deceased's family? On the other hand, the qualitative analysis is inductive. If we assume with Berelson (1952, in Titscher *et al*. 2000: 57) that content analysis is a research technique "for the description of the manifest content of communication", my concern here is to identify possible textual silences (Huckin 2002), the content which is *not* manifest. In other words, I seek to answer the question: Who is omitted and consequently not considered as a member of the family? This will be carried out by exploring a reduced number of examples that may be taken as "instrumental" (Stake 1994: 237) case studies, in that they will play a supporting role in our research to provide some insight into the issue of the deployment of textual silences in the 'Family' stage.

The third step follows from the previous ones. The analysis intends to move from description to explanation, that is, to seek some understanding of meanings and behaviour. We want to know why. What are the reasons for those omissions? We'll need to go beyond the text to explore the framing context, with the help of some ethnographic techniques as a mode of analysing the situational context. These techniques are based on contrastive observation. Following Scollon's (1998: 277-280) categorization of observation methods, the present study culls insights from experiences as related by insiders, that is, by the members of the community of practice, together with my interaction with members of that community, journalists in charge of obituary writing in print media. The tools that constitute the data are a series of articles published in different print media dealing with the topic under study, either as reflections of insiders' views or as the reporting of events where the topic was discussed. Thus they have been collected in the 'sites of engagement' (Scollon 1998: 281) of the community of practice.

A cautionary note concerning the ethnographic strategy approached in the present study is in order. As this third step in the analysis is exploratory, the data gathering has not been exhausted. It makes use of some information available on the internet and some personal interviews carried out with some of the writers involved with the aim to achieve certain triangulation through this so-called "respondent" (Titscher *et al*. 2000: 97) validation. My aim is to 'recover' the immediate social practices around those texts, that is, the practices involved in the processes of production and reception: How did the writers approach their construction of the obituaries? How did readers respond to those obituaries? In using

ethnography, we will be able "to examine discourse as a process, a sociorhetorical practice, rather than concentrating exclusively on its product" (Reynolds 2004: 330). As well as deductive and inductive, this research methodology is also tentatively 'deconstructive' (Scollon 1998: 271-2) in its third step, in that the object of the analysis will be observed from a particular point of view. I shall try to 'construct a reading of' (Geertz 1973, in Titscher *et al.* 2000: 92) the 'Family' stage where I shall argue that the 'Family' stage encapsulates one of the most controversial topics of our time.

This type of multi-staged analysis, be it called 'multidisciplinary' (van Dijk 1997), 'transdisciplinary' (Beaugrande 1997), 'interdisciplinary' (Fairclough and Wodak 1997), 'eclectic' (Sarangi 2004) or 'multiple modality in research methodology' (Candlin 2000), is aimed at a more comprehensive account of the obituary genre as a social process (Kress 1993). Thus, I here endorse Sarangi's (2004: 297) notion of 'mediated interpretation' of media discourse, when he advocates the need to integrate "different analytic perspectives as a way of maximizing—to echo the Hallidayan notion of 'meaning potential'—the *interpretation potential* of various texts" (italics as in original).

The present study examines the 'Family stage' from a study corpus of more than two hundred obituaries and death notices published in diverse American newspapers and in the four national British broadsheets, *The Daily Telegraph, The Times, The Guardian,* and *The Independent,* collected over a period of three years. The ethnographic approach is applied to a pilot corpus of three death notices published in the American newspaper *Dallas Morning News,* [1] and several obituaries published in British and American prestige newspapers on the death of the well known American author Susan Sontag.

2. The 'Family' stage

The 'Family' stage is a chunk of text that signals the closure of the obituary. It may take up one or two paragraphs and usually comprises two pieces of information: the trajectory of the deceased in family terms (marriages, divorces, offspring and deceased members) and the surviving members. The linguistic realisation of this stage is relatively stable. The majority of the cases surveyed stick to the formula 's/he married' and 'is survived by', or s/he survives him/her, marking a clear textual boundary. The following examples may give some idea of prototypical realizations of the 'Family' stage:

> "He is survived by his wife Barbara, their son Emlyn and daughter Emma" ("Emlyn Hughes", *The Daily Telegraph,* November 10, 2004)
> "Cabrera Infante married first in 1953, was divorced in 1961 and married the actor Miriam Gómez the same year. He is survived by her and his daughters from his first marriage, Carla and Ana" ("Guillermo Cabrera Infante", *The Guardian,* February 23, 2005).

When there are no survivors, the stage tends to remain in its final position in the obituary, as in

"He was unmarried" ("Gen Stanislaw Skaslski", *The Daily Telegraph*, November 16, 2004).
"There are no immediate survivors" ("Duncan Noble, 80, Dance Teacher and Member of
Ballet Theater", *The New York Times*, August 7, 2002).
"Her husband predeceased her. They had no children" ("Helen Robinson", *The Times*,
November 8, 2004).

It is a very common practice in 'small America' that the survivors comprise much of the
content of the obituaries. Thus, Fielden (1995, in Johns 1997: 41) found that in many small
communities in the United States a major part of the texts was devoted to blood lines and
to the members of the family that survived the deceased. As for the quality papers, Moses
and Marelli (2003) compared 99 obituaries and 98 paid-for death notices from *The New
York Times* between 2002 and 2003. They found that no obituary or death notice in their
sample failed to mention survivors and they described the family as 'the universal
component' in an obituary. Here is the 'Family' stage produced for the *New York Times*
obituary of Larry Rivers:

"He is survived by his wife, Clarice, a Welsh-born teacher he married in 1961; they were
separated but remained friendly. He is also survived by their daughters, Gwynne Rivers and
Emma Rivers, both of New York City, and his sons, Joseph Rivers, of Pleasant Valley, N.J.;
Steven Rivers, of Nyack, N.J.; and Sam Deshuk Rivers, his son with Daria Deshuk, a painter
he lived with for 10 years. Ms Deshuk and Sam live in New York City. There are eight
grandchildren.
His two sisters, Geri Block and Joan Gordon, both of Southampton, also survive him. For the
last five years, he lived with Jeni Olin, a poet." ("Larry Rivers, Artist, Shaker and Cultural
Provocateur to the End, is dead at 78", *The New York Times*, August 16, 2002).

A detailed list of surviving family members and their place of residence is also a common
practice at the *Los Angeles Times*. Nigel Starck (2004: 158) describes this characteristic as
'the American fashion' to differentiate it from the British practice, in that it "does serve as
a reminder that the *Los Angeles Times* has a role to some degree as a local newspaper in a
way in which the British daily broadsheets do not. They happen to be based in London; they
have no charter to serve the immediate interest of the city or its population".

It is hardly surprising, though, if we consider what the American journalistic training
literature says in this respect. Bond (1961) observes that many newspapers used to have a
printed form which enabled reporters to collect the facts. They just filled out the form. This
author includes as an 'essential' the names of surviving relatives. "Merely as a guide, and
not as a definite pattern", Bond (1961: 124) outlines six paragraphs for an obituary, one of
which is to be devoted to the family. Fink (2003: 242), also advising American prospective
journalists, includes 'survivors' in his listing of the 'basic information' any obit must
contain.

As for the four British quality papers, they all display a truly extensive daily coverage
of obituaries. *The Daily Telegraph, The Times*, and *The Guardian* include the family stage
as a last paragraph. *The Daily Telegraph* tends to introduce it after the subject's death date,

using the formula "Name + who died + Date", as in "Robert Lang, who died on November 6, is survived by his wife, the actress Ann Bell, and by their son and daughter" ("Robert Lang", November 17, 2004). *The Independent* mentions marital status and offspring also at the end but differentiated from the text, within what I have termed the 'biobox'. This "go-last", as Starck (2004) prefers to term, is also used by *The Times*, but it is briefer and less detailed, including occupation, birth date and date of death. The obituaries editor of *The Independent*, James Fergusson (2000: 154) describes its 'biobox' as "a free standing tailpiece", which, written in italics, provides 'the elements of chronology': birth date, birthplace, professional career, marital career, and death date and place. The 'biobox' of *The Independent* obituary (April 7, 2005) of Saul Bellow was thus:

> "Solomon Bellows (Saul Bellow), writer: born Lachine, Quebec 10 June 1915; Nobel Prize for Literature 1976; married 1937 Anita Goshkin (one son; marriage dissolved), 1956 Sondra Tschabasov (one son; marriage dissolved), 1961 Susan Glassman (one son; marriage dissolved), 1974 Alexandra Ionescu Tulcea (marriage dissolved), 1989 Janis Freedman (one daughter); died Brookline, Massachusetts 5 April 2005".

From what we have observed so far, we may have a fairly precise idea of the form, 'semantic properties' (Hasan 1985: 68), occurrence and place of the 'Family' stage. But there remains to clarify its function. If we assume with Martin (1992: 503) that "texts typically move through stages to a point of closure" and that these stages can be thought of as "strategies that realize the genre" (Martin 1985: 251), what is the purpose of the 'Family' stage? And what 'social action' (Miller 1994) is it performing as a final stage in the obituary's schematic structure?

Fowler (2002: 1) observes that "There are elements shared by the obituaries with religious *rites de passage* –the comfort to the survivors, the celebration of the life lived well". Undoubtedly, the 'Family' stage may be traced back to the long-standing tradition of obituaries written by members of the family or by those death announcements made public in small communities, where it still fulfils a clear-cut social purpose. In those contexts, surviving members would expect to be offered the community's condolences. From this perspective, readers become *users* of those obituaries. Two examples will make the point.

The Readership Institute (2001) at Northwestern University, US, reports the case of the Sioux Falls *Argus Leader*, a newspaper that converted to a paid policy in its obituaries in 2001. Free pieces excluded survivors. This decision produced a huge negative reader reaction, which included stories run in the other local media and a hundred subscription cancellations. As the survey reports, "one car dealer threatened to pull his advertising. He said he relied on the obituaries. He knew his customers, but he might not know a wife's maiden name, which he learned from the obits, so he could send flowers when her mother died". Apparently, "peace returned" to Sioux Falls when the *Argus Leader* changed its policy one week later. The second example comes from a different context. St Bride's, in Fleet Street, London, has been the church for journalists for decades. Canon David Meara

(2005) reports of his relying on press obituaries for the funeral services of journalists, and finds it "frustrating" when family details are omitted. He needs them for his daily work. However, this criterion falls apart in those obituaries produced for well known personalities, such as Yasser Arafat, Arthur Miller, Saul Bellow or Prince Rainier of Monaco, to name but a few. Do average readers need that information to give their condolences? They obviously don't.

Petrucci (1998: xviii) reaches a rather extreme conclusion in his otherwise valuable study of the funerary uses of writing over time, when he argues that it is "a substantially and profoundly political practice" aimed at, among other things, "consolidating the vitality and capacity for reproduction and expansion" of the group the deceased belonged to.

I shall return to the function and uses of the 'Family' stage below. To this point, let us keep two notions on the purpose of this stage: first, it clearly shows a reminiscence of written practices of old and, secondly, we may consider the notion, expressed by Fairclough (2003: 55), of 'hierarchies of purpose'. For the moment I would like to draw attention to the question of genre variation.

In genre studies, diverse and sometimes conflicting as they are, there is the commonly accepted assumption that genres are dynamic and "change over time in response to their users' sociocognitive needs" (Berkenkotter and Huckin 1993: 478). Let us apply this notion to the form, style and content of the 'Family' stage, a chunk of text that seems so lacking in variation.

First, the stage is gradually taking up more space in the obituary. The increasing number of marriages and divorces in contemporary society has forced this stage, usually shortly developed, to collect long listings of marriages, with names of spouses and dates of marriages, their conclusions –either divorces or deaths and date–, and their respective offspring and stepchildren, with reference to their sex, and if they have survived or predeceased him or her, in which case the date is also included. This circumstance raises difficulties in the text production processes, particularly in the gathering of information. Starck (2004: 202) summarises these problems: "The practice of obituary becomes delicate in the matter of the so-called survivors, especially when there has been more than one marriage, and when parentage has to be summarised in the confines of a concluding paragraph. Writers can make mistakes, and are more likely to do so when the bereaved family are guilty of deliberate obfuscation or omission".

This problem becomes worse in those American newspapers that have that hybrid policy mentioned earlier of charging for obituaries written in the newsroom. Journalists' search for a truthful account of a life and the customers' demands for some omissions or for a certain angle may create growing disparity. Sometimes writers simply appear to give up when detailed information is too complicated to gather. Take for example the 'Family' stage produced for the obituaries of the former President of the United Arab Emirates, Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan. *The Daily Telegraph* (November 4, 2004) wrote: "Sheikh Zayed married six times and fathered at least 12 children"; *The Times* (November 4, 2004) was far less explicit: "Sheikh Zayed had made several marriages, and had an undisclosed number of sons and daughters"; *The Guardian* (November 3, 2004)

acknowledged just one wife, appeared to know the exact number of sons, but gave up with daughters: "Sheikh Zayed's wife, Fatima, survives him, as do his 21 sons and an undisclosed number of daughters"; *The Independent* (November 3, 2004) played safe and just stated "married" in the 'biobox' at the end of the obituary. We may argue that in this particular case there are strong cultural and/or religious reasons that account for the development of the stage, but we find a parallel case in the obituaries of the American rap singer Russell Jones (Ol'Dirty Bastard) who died at the age of 35: *The Times* (November 16, 2004) wrote: "He is survived by 13 children by a number of different mothers"; *The Guardian* (November, 15, 2004) included his mother: "he is survived by his mother and 13 children" and *The Independent* (November 15, 2004) again was the most succinct: "married (13 children)".

Secondly, the revival of obituaries in the American and British press over the last two decades (Bullamore 2003; Cole 2004; Fergusson 2000; Starck 2004) may have favoured some 'freedom' in style, using the term 'style' as synonymous with a more individualised use of language (Lee 2001: 45) or, rather, as the possibility to move away from the norm towards a somewhat 'nonstandard' (EAGLES96) production of the 'Family' stage as a round-off of the obituary, as these examples from *The Daily Telegraph Fifth Book of Obituaries* (Massingberd 1999), suggest:

> "He was thrice married, the third marriage taking place in a pet's cemetery with Adam's dog, Alice B. Cur, as the only attendant. The bride wore black. October 1, 1988" (American cartoonist Charles Adams) .
>
> "Everet was fond of animals, and at one stage had a Chihuahua-Yorkshire terrier cross, two cats, a parrot and several horses. His companion in his last years was a cat called Pussy Cat. By way of recreation, Everett enjoyed needle work. April 5, 1995" (Kenny Everet, disc jockey and television comedian).
>
> "Philip O'Connor had an untidy private life. He was married at least twice and enjoyed innumerable liaisons. He had at least 10 children. June 2, 1998" (Philip O'Connor, autobiographer).

Thirdly, a more striking factor to be observed though still rare in its occurrence is the dealing with some issues that would certainly have been considered taboo not long ago. To illustrate this point, let us take the case of the British writer and journalist Nerina Shute, who died on October 12, 2004, aged 96. She published *Passionate Friendships* in 1992, already in her eighties, where she made and open declaration of her bisexuality. *The Daily Telegraph* (October 28, 2004) devoted her obituary, headline included, to this issue and to retell her affairs with members of both sexes, topping off the text with the following 'Family' stage: "She is survived by her close friend, Jocelyn Williams, who nursed her devotedly in her later years." *The Guardian* (November 2, 2004) described her as 'free loving' in its headline and her biography was again furnished with the details of her marriages and female affairs, with the close-up: "In 1989, Shute was introduced by a friend to the artist Jocelyn Williams who became her lover and, as Shute's long life neared its end, her devoted carer." *The Times* (November 6, 2004) was less explicit, although mentioned

several affairs with women and quoted her declaration of bisexuality as the last paragraph of the text, the location of the 'Family stage'. As for *The Independent* (October 29, 2004), it chose to focus on her being a pioneering film critic, although it described her in the lead as "a courageous advocate of sexual freedom"; the 'biobox' only recorded her two marriages.

We lack informant observation from this particular case, so we will have to speculate on the writers' topic choice. It seems reasonable to argue that the producers of those obituaries played safe: she was the first to reveal her secret, and, as *The Daily Telegraph* and *The Times* conveniently reproduced, she declared that "no one is left who might be hurt or damaged by these confessions unless it is myself". A similar explanation can be found in the 'Family' stage of the obituaries of the British writer and journalist Arthur Hopcraft, for which both *The Times* and *The Independent* selected the same self-quotation: "Hopcraft was a private and diffident man who never seemed much interested in marriage or close company. "I tried both sexes", he said, "but I ended up wishing they would always just go away" (*The Times*, November 27, 2004) and "Hopcraft never married, nor took a partner of either gender - he once said, in his customarily precise, rumbling tone, "I tried both, but I always ended up just wishing they would go away." (*The Independent*, November 26, 2004).

The issue in both cases appears to be free from controversy as the deceased are left to 'expose' themselves, so to speak, and, from a journalistic point of view, it might even have the advantage of making a difference, thanks to a topic which might be trivialised as being *in vogue*.

Although it is true, as Starck (2004: 204) observes, that "on occasions there are references to intimate relationships of the same sex", the issue is far from being easily handled. The multiplicity of factors affecting the decision about the inclusion of the deceased's sexual orientation and its consequences in the final outcome of the 'Family' stage will be taken up in the next section.

3. Textual silences: two case-studies

As everyday readers, our attitude towards the text -our natural stance- is to focus on what a text means. So far, the meaning appears to be utterly unproblematic: the text is telling us what we, as readers and members of a community, consider to be the family, the people (and pets!) closest to the subject, that is, those who cared most or loved him or her most, or were by his or her side on their deathbed. But, are they all there? Apart from some of the difficulties already mentioned in stating the number of children, or spouses, a new exploration of the obituaries under examination revealed what Huckin (2002: 348) describes as 'textual silence': "the omission of some piece of information that is pertinent to the topic at hand".

Huckin divides this 'textual silence' into five broad categories: Speech-act, presuppositional, discreet, genre-based and manipulative silences. In fact he mentions

obituaries as an example of his fourth type, the 'genre-based' type of silence, because, Huckin (2002: 351) argues, "it is conventional practice for formal obituaries to omit any negative comments or facts about the deceased". I could say in this respect that it is not always so at all. But this issue is not within the scope of the present study. In my view, Huckin's third category of textual silence is the one that concerns us here: the 'discreet silence', in which, Huckin (2002: 350) explains, 'the writer refrains from mentioning sensitive topics or stating sensitive information, either to avoid offending the reader or to avoid infringing on the privacy of another person or interest". It includes, according to Huckin, cases of confidentiality, tactfulness and taboo topics.

Let us just have a look at two cases: one deals with three paid-for death notices published in the *Dallas Morning News*, the other one deals with the coverage of Susan Sontag's death in a number of obituaries published by different national papers in the USA and Great Britain.

Melodi Dawn Knapp was a 27-year-old nurse who died in a car accident. The *Dallas Morning News* (May 29, 2002) published two separate death notices on the same day. They carried two different photographs and they made reference to two separate funerals, for the same woman. They both provided long listing of survivors, as we have seen is always the case for death notices in small communities in America. A close scrutiny of both 'family' stages (texts 1 and 2 below) showed that the longest death notice (text 2), apart from the names of seven dogs, listed a 'life partner' among the survivors, while the other text did not.

(1) "She is survived by her parents, Sammy and Cathy Knapp of Fairview, TX; grandparents, Otis and Judy Knapp, Martha Knapp, Rudy and Marie Schenkel, and Henry and Jean Diamond; brother Kevin; sisters, Serena and Amy; and a host of aunts, uncles, nieces, and nephews".

(2) "Her life will continually be celebrated by her parents, Harrol and Cheryl Stroud of Cedar Hill, TX; her very best friend in the world, Elizabeth Hudson; her brothers and sisters, Spencer and Jonathan Stroud, Kevin and Amy Kinsey, and Serena Smith; her grandparents Otis and Juddy Knapp of Arkansas; **her life partner, Tina Merrit**; and numerous other relatives". (bold not thus marked in the original)

Were they 'competing' obituaries? The truth was to be found outside the text, in another text, in an article written a few days later by the local *Dallas Morning News* columnist Steve Blow (June 5, 2002). He did know the context: one funeral was to be held at a Baptist church and the other one at the "predominantly gay" Cathedral of Hope. In Blow's words, "the story is one that's familiar in the gay and lesbian community: one parent who can accept a child's homosexuality and another who can't".

The story keeps unfolding through other texts: a third death notice (*Dallas Morning News*, May 31, 2002) submitted by her mother—who had accepted her daughter's homosexuality— informing that Melodi "will be present for the service". To top off this story, we eventually know through Blow's article that an "empty casket" was delivered to the Baptist Church, where the service arranged by Melodi's father had been held. What was the readers' response? According to Blow, "it was the talk of the town".

Now, my question is: What would have happened if these texts had not been paid for? What would the *Dallas Morning News* have done if it had been an obituary written by its staff members? Actually Blows writes in his article "When I saw the same name on two obits, I figured we had just goofed here at the paper".

Let us now have a hint as to how prestige newspapers deal with this issue in their obituaries of well known personalities, as is the case of the writer and intellectual Susan Sontag, who died on 28 of December, 2004.

Susan Sontag referred to her relationship with the photographer Annie Liebovitz as 'an open secret'. Her obituaries either omitted this relationship or mentioned it only in passing: The *Daily Telegraph* (December 29, 2004) wrote 'she never re-married, and her close relationship with several women provoked speculation'. It described Annie Liebovitz as 'her long-time friend' and rounded off the obituary with the formulaic 'she is survived by her son'. The *Guardian* (December 29, 2004) was much more ambiguous, mentioning in the fourth paragraph that "It was a gay sensibility that she interpreted, and that shaped her response to the visual arts" The family stage was short and straight: 'Her son survives her'. For *The Guardian* and its readers, Annie Liebovitz simply did not exist in Susan Sontag's life. *The New York Times* (December 29, 2004) ignored it also in an otherwise remarkable 3,320-word obituary and, surprisingly –considering its regular practice–, omitted the family stage altogether. So did The *Washington Post* (December 29, 2004), which inserted a family move in the middle of the biography stage: "she married Philip Rieff, a sociologist ten years her senior whom she would divorce in 1959. They had a son, David Rieff of New York, who survives, along with Sontag's sister".

Hank Stuever, a journalist from the *Washington Post* Style section (quoted in Mark Fitzgerald in *Editor & Publisher*, September 26, 2005) observes that "gay people have always known how to read a newspaper. We're like detectives. We can read between the lines of anything". He is obviously referring to the coded meaning of the euphemistic "he never married" or "she was unmarried", "he was a lifelong bachelor", or "she lived with her long-term companion", which have been largely used as the most appropriate formula to deal with this issue. The assistant obituaries editor of *The Guardian* is quite explicit about the newspaper's policy: "We try to avoid the formula 'He/she never married'. It has appeared, but we don't like it. You should be clear about people's private lives or you should say nothing. You don't want to leave an implication at all" (quoted in Starck 2004: 203). This is exactly what they did in Susan Sontag's obituary.

Surely, as analysts, we must go beyond this 'gay-reading' technique of speculation and explore the context to find out clues that might help us understand why these obituaries have by and large ignored an 'open secret', the reasons to understand why the texts develop the way they do and what kind of social action they are performing with these 'discreet' textual silences. We need to go from description to explanation (Bhatia 2004), and to do so we have to draw on 'social categories', using Kress's (1993:34) proposal.

In this particular case, Susan Sontag was such a remarkable figure that these silences stirred up some hidden feelings among readers, and journalists, the professional writers, were impelled to speak out about the constraints concerning a wide set of factors: their

organization's policy regarding the issue, their own beliefs, the processes of text production and the participants involved.

In journalism the big issue is the truth. "Truth and Accuracy" is listed as one of the six major principles stated by the American Society of Newspaper Editors (Fink 2003: 347-8), and actually in any code of ethics in free journalism. But, and this is another rule of thumb in journalism, the truth has to be verifiable by several sources. And this led our 'specialist informants' (Bhatia 2004), the obituary writers, to reflect upon a number of questions: Would the deceased want to be 'outed' or keep intentionally 'de-gayed'? We must consider the historical background of the gays, lesbians and bisexuals who are currently dying. They usually belong to a generation whose obituaries devote many lines to their struggles during the Second World War. It is a generation who did not discuss their sexual orientation openly. Should they come 'out' once they are 'six feet under'? Does the surviving partner want to be identified as gay? Does the journalist have the moral obligation to 'out' someone against their wishes? And, how does the professional writer actually prove a person's sexual orientation?

The then *New York Times*' Public Editor Daniel Okrent declared that the newspaper "could find no authoritative source that could confirm any details of a relationship" (quoted in Mark Fitzgerald in *Editor & Publisher*, September 26, 2005), and "while Sontag's bisexuality was on record, Leibovitz's is not" (reported by Matt Keating in *The Guardian,* March 2, 2005).

The author of Susan Sontag's obituary in *The Washington Post*, Adam Bernstein, explained his omission as due to 'space constraints' (it ran 1,568 words), as he had been told "to cut back on what she was known for" (quoted in Elizabeth Weill-Greenberg, *The Washington Blade*, 26 August 2005).

According to the obituaries editor of *The New York Times*, Charles Strum, the decision about listing a surviving partner is made by the family: "If there's a partner, that's family' (quoted in Mark Fitzgerald, *Editor & Publisher*, September 26, 2005).

Obit writers also question how to name this 'novel' surviving party: close friend, devoted friend, partner, companion, spouse... This is pure 'social constructivism', or in Bazerman's (1990: 77) words "how language enters into the continuing process of social negotiation that produces novel arrangements for our social future".

4. Conclusions

On the basis of the evidence obtained, we may now be in a position to carry forward an empirical description of the 'Family' stage, and categorise it as a *regular, highly formulaic, genre- specific* and *multipurpose-driven* element in obituaries. I shall briefly explain each concept in turn. It is *regular* because it has a fixed, permanent place and occurrence in obituaries, but it cannot be considered either as 'obligatory' in Hasan's (1985: 62) terms because although it is intrinsic to the genre it does not define it, or as 'discriminative' (Bhatia 1993: 20) as its absence does not defy the communicative purpose of the genre. It

is *highly formulaic* because it sticks to the same linguistic realisation in the vast majority of cases in all the newspapers surveyed. It is *genre-specific* because its opening formulation immediately ascribes it to the genre in question, to the extent that it may be considered as unique and any other use of the formula in any other text might be considered as a tactical use or appropriation of the genre (Bhatia 2004). Finally, it is *multipurpose-driven* because it performs different functions, depending on the goals of the participants involved in the processes of production and reception. Thus, from a readers' perspective, it still serves some communities in providing useful information for their social interaction. But its notion of utility diminishes in direct proportion to the social relevance of the subject. The more famous the person was, the less purposeful the 'Family' stage appears to be. From the producer's perspective, it still fulfils a ritualised activity, and its function and practice might be at stake. The chief obituaries writer at *The Times* made a clear statement in this respect: "I think we ought to get away from ... who survives them. It's become ingrained... there's a tendency to become locked into a template" (Peter Davies, quoted in Starck 2004: 118). We may at this point take Fairclough's (2003: 55) notion of "hierarchies of purpose" mentioned earlier and link it to the appearance of textual silences in the stage. We may find that we have what Fairclough describes as "higher level purposes" which refer to ideological assumptions reproduced in the text, be them explicit or 'in absentia'. As Bhatia (1999: 26) also observes, "textual choices are informed by socio-cultural, professional and organisational frameworks".

The overall picture that emerges from the ethnographic exploration is that certain textual silences are being socially challenged. In other words, to include references to same-sex surviving members in the 'Family' stage remains a contentious issue. What could be considered at the beginning as an unproblematic stage has revealed itself as a chunk of text that encapsulates one of the hottest topics of our time. And consequently, newspapers don't show a clear-cut criterion, while, as Starck (personal communication) observes, "there appears to be a global obsession with spouses". Inevitably, this gives rise to a number of questions: Is the 'Family' stage construction currently relying on legal standing? Is the obituary such a traditional and conventional genre that is reluctant to come to terms with social reality? Or is this stage just reproducing a social structure and thus mirroring that this homo/bisexual community is not fully integrated, fully legitimized? In this respect, new laws concerning homosexual marriages are trying to respond to those needs in various countries.[2] Other societies, other cultures appear to be more reluctant to certain changes. But we *are* experiencing some variation in our social structures and consequently a generic choice in the sense pointed out by Bhatia (1999:38) of either reproducing or exploiting the generic resources. In other words, of conforming, constraining and just reproducing, or creating, innovating and liberating and thus responding to new sociocultural contexts.

Fairclough and Wodak (1997: 267) contend that the relationship between discourse and society and culture is a dialectical one: "every instance of language use makes its own small contribution to reproducing and/or transforming society and culture [...]. That is the power of discourse". And that is the power of genre as social action.

The first part of the title of this study is "Coming out of the closet 'six feet under'".

Looking forward, I would like to rephrase it rhetorically as "Coming out of the context into the text". Obituaries, in more than one sense, may have the *final* word.

Notes

1. I am grateful to the colleagues attending the 7th Great Obituary Writers Conference at Bath, in June 2005, for providing me with these death notices.

2 As of writing, same sex marriages have already been legalized in Denmark, South Africa, Belgium, the Netherlands, Canada and Spain. Laws recognising civil partnerships have come into effect in New Zealand, Switzerland and Great Britain.

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