ABSTRACT

Death has been argued to be a “fear-based taboo” in which different fears co-exist namely; fear of the loss of loved ones, fear of corruption of the body, fear of evil spirits and fear of what comes with death. Man has traditionally avoided talking about the subject of death using explicit terms. Their avoidance to speak freely about human mortality may be making obituary writers to resort to a variety of linguistic devices in order to compliment the departed and show respect to those left alive, satisfying in a way, both the social and religious impositions traditionally associated with human mortality. The purpose of this study is to examine the obituary as a form of advertisement whose functional language is carried out through praising, euphemistic and consolatory devices. The objectives of this study are to: describe how the lexical choices contribute to the meaning making process in obituaries and explore how transitivity processes aid in their informative purpose of obituaries where death is viewed as a material or mental process. Halliday’s (1985) theory of systemic functional linguistics was adopted for this study where ideational, interpersonal and the textual metafunctions of language were used, incorporating transitivity which deals with how meaning is interpreted and how the process transmits ideas. A descriptive research design was applied which accurately described phenomena through the narrative type, descriptions and classifications. The study entailed a library based research where total populations of two hundred obituaries were collected for a period of one and a half weeks. From these, a corpus of twenty purposively sampled obituary texts from the Daily Nation newspaper were used to generate data for analysis and discussion. Corpus compilation was used to capture the use of lexical items in the obituaries. Data was qualitatively analyzed by examining the lexical items of nouns, verbs, adverbs and adjectives used to aid in the interpretation of obituaries basing on Halliday’s theory of systemic functional linguistics. The study revealed that ordinary words (lexical items) can be used in the context of the obituary text to render new meanings. Those lexical choices contribute to the meaning making process in obituaries by depicting death as a normal occurrence in a person’s life that should be accepted and appreciated, at times a calamity or misfortune. Death is not only presented as repose, a journey and a reward to the deceased, but also as a loss to the family of the deceased. In all cases, the lexical items used are meant to comfort the bereaved and eulogize or praise the deceased. The research further depicts that certain lexical items have been used as euphemisms to substitute the unpleasant and offensive concept of death using polite expressions. This is meant to mitigate the potential dangers of directly mentioning the taboo word of death. The research also reveals the use of the transitivity tenet of Halliday’s theory and its inherent material and mental processes in conveying the concept of death and how they help eulogize the deceased impart hope and console the bereaved. The study suggests that a further study on the relationship between euphemism and metaphors in the obituary texts be carried out since the point of divergence between the two processes has rather been fuzzy.