Pertanika J. Soc. Sci. & Hum. 23 (2): 479 - 493 (2015)

PERTANIKA JOURNALS

SOCIAL SCIENCES & HUMANITIES

Journal homepage: http://www.pertanika.upm.edu.my/

Functions of Malaysian Condolences Written in Text Messages

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ABSTRACT

This paper argues that proper construction of condolence messages can help to mitigate misunderstandings and prevent good intentions from being misinterpreted. It also aims to illustrate how Malaysian SMS condolences are composed, i.e. what semantic functions do they fall under. Data comprised 36 authentic condolences written in English via SMS by local friends to a local Chinese female recipient. These were then analysed for the core messages and the semantic functions they fall under. The theory of framing was used as the construct to enable the recipient to reframe her mind as she recalled her feelings when she received those condolence messages. The intention was to distinguish the least and most preferred functions. Analysis suggests that Malaysian SMS condolences are composed of eight semantic functions. Those which expressed concerns via directives and wishful thinking were least preferred whilst those which eulogised the deceased and expressed uncertainty were most preferred. This finding implies that the art of writing a condolence may be an essential skill that needs to be honed as even good intentions may be misunderstood.

Keywords: Condolence, directives, Malaysian, preferred, communication

INTRODUCTION

A death in a family is a difficult moment for the bereaved who tends to experience various forms of emotion ranging from sadness, grieve, pains, regrets, confusion, denial, pretence to momentary insanity. It is during such a vulnerable occasion that comfort and care are crucial for easing the pain and grieve experienced by the bereaved. Most people are uncertain of the right behaviour to adopt in such contexts (Yahya, 2010; Farnia, 2011; Al-Shboul & Marlyna, 2013). Often, people become awkward because of

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Received: 10 June 2014
Accepted: 03 October 2014

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ISSN: 0128-7702 © Universiti Putra Malaysia Press

their lack of knowledge; they may not know what to say, or how to express their feelings and sympathy to the family concerned. In certain contexts, silence may overwhelm when death is mentioned. In other contexts, a conversation may resume as if nothing has happened (see Moghaddam, 2012). This uncertainty is likely to affect our lives in some ways because displaying the right behaviour in support of an individual's bereavement is part and parcel of social etiquette and politeness. In order to appear civil, cultured and respectful, we need to learn how to express our condolences appropriately (Zunin & Zunin, 1991; Yahya, 2010; Moghaddam, 2012) since saying the right thing can help to maintain harmony and mitigate misunderstandings.

Every culture has its own way of conveying sympathies during a bereavement. In the western culture, English speakers express their heartfelt feelings by saying "I am sorry (most sorry/deeply sorry) to hear of your loss" (see Zunin & Zunin 1991; Moghaddam, 2012; Al-Shboul & Marlyna, 2013), whereas in the Chinese culture, there is no specific word one can use in order to convey sympathy (http://www.ehow.com/about_6596409_chinese-grieving-etiquette.html). In one local observation, some Chinese visitors attending a wake had directly "consoled" the bereaved with utterances such as"*ren dou yi jing si le, ning bu yao zai nan guo le, hao hao de huo xia qi ba*" which when translated mean, "death has already come upon you, don't be sad anymore, resume life as best you can". In another instance, a bereaved was advised by a Chinese relative, "Don't cry anymore, it is his time to go". Although these utterances may be practical, they seem less sympathetic. It is possible that they were uttered as a result of the speaker's personality or belief.

This paper takes the view that communication is a two-way process; one writes and the other interprets what is written (see Devito, 2008). In constructing a condolence, which can be a difficult task (Burchill, 2013), the writer needs to take into consideration the vulnerability of the situation (see Moghaddam, 2012). It is the writer's intention to express care and concern for the bereaved and the writer takes special care to express only appropriate and meaningful words so as to avoid any offence to the recipient (Moghaddam, 2012). The writer's message is meant to express care, love and hope with the view that the recipient would be able to find some solace in the words expressed. Thus, there is this unspoken dynamic of a writer hoping to provide comfort to a bereaved who, in his/her own way, would also expect to be comforted in such vulnerable moments (see Elwood, 2004; Farnia, 2011).

Aims

This paper aims to understand how Malaysian SMS condolence messages are constructed, i.e. what semantic functions do they fall under. It also aims to understand which of the functions unravelled are least preferred or most preferred by the recipient. This paper argues that proper construction of condolence messages can help to mitigate

misunderstandings and prevent good intentions from being misinterpreted.

WHAT ARE CONDOLENCES?

A condolence is written for the purpose of expressing sympathy on the occasion of a death. According to The Condolences Letter (n.d.), the skill of writing a condolence is an art and it has to be learnt. The website also claims that a condolence needs to be crafted well and skilfully so that the writer can be perceived as "behaving" appropriately (Zunin & Zunin, 1991; Moghaddam, 2012; Burchill, 2013). A condolence is a personal and private expression of care and concern, hence, the choice of words is important. However, what has been prescribed in literature as appropriate has been referring to the western concept of writing a condolence, i.e. in English. Thus far, the internet does not offer books or links which could advise Malaysians on how to write a condolence in Malay, Chinese or Tamil, and much less in Malaysian English. From this perspective, it is thus deduced that Malaysians may not have or have fewer access to mastering the art of writing appropriate condolences when the need arises.

A few websites, including those of Miller-Wilson (2006-2014) and Burchill (2013), have alluded that composing what to say is difficult but a condolence made up of graceful words is a priceless gift to a recipient during difficult times. This has been verified by the Bible (see Psalm and Proverbs). Appropriate use of words can convey solace, comfort, ease, and provide strength to the bereaved.

Rules of Etiquette

Zunin and Zunin (1991), as pioneers advocating the art of writing condolences, mentioned that a condolence message need not be profound or overly spiritual. Constructing a meaningful message is difficult but the writers suggest that a good condolence message should contain a personal element, is sincere and heartfelt, is written in the sender's voice, i.e. as if speaking to the recipient, is short and thoughtful, mentions a fond or funny memory of the deceased, respects religious beliefs, never offer financial help, never mention money owed to you by deceased, and offers to help in other ways. According to the writers, a condolence may be structured in the mnemonic of COMFORT:

1. Comments on the loss and refer to the deceased by name.
2. Offers your sympathy.
3. Mentions one or two special qualities of the deceased (eulogise).
4. Finds a favourite memory of the person.
5. Offers to help or provide companionship.
6. Reminds the bereaved of the special qualities, strengths and character of the deceased.
7. Thoughtfully closes with some final comforting words.

Speech acts and functions of speech

The notion of speech act was derived from Austin's (1962) work which looks at how utterances articulated by the speaker can be used to perform specific functions.

Austin (1962) says that speakers articulate particular utterances within a certain context because they expect the hearer to perform a particular task. In the word, "Go", for example, the hearer is expected to perform the act of vacating the space where the hearer is. Austin's (1962) work, in line with the discipline of pragmatics, says that these speech acts can be analysed on three levels:

1. locutionary act which looks at the performance of an utterance; the actual utterance and its ostensible meaning (comprising phonetic, phatic and rhetic acts corresponding to the verbal, syntactic and semantic aspects of any meaningful utterances),
2. illocutionary act which looks at the pragmatic or illocutionary force of the utterance, i.e. its intended significance as a socially valid verbal action, and
3. perlocutionary act which is about the utterance's actual effect such as persuading, convincing, scaring, enlightening, inspiring or otherwise getting someone to do or realise something, whether it is intended or not.

Most works on speech acts usually focus on the second level of Austin's recommendation for analysis, i.e. illocutionary acts. Searle (1969), however, claims that the basic unit of language carries no meaning in itself unless it is articulated within a situation and involves a speaker and a hearer. Therefore, when an utterance such as "open the door" is articulated in a situation where a snake is crawling into a room, the hearer who is in the same room, is expected to perform the act of "opening the door" so that the snake can crawl out of the room. Searle (1975) says that locutionary act refers to the words, while illocutionary act refers to the performance while perlocutionary refers to the effect of the acts. In addition, Searle (1975) says that utterances operate on two types of speech acts: 1) utterance acts which encompass something said or when a sound is made and which may not have any meaning, and 2) propositional acts where a particular reference is made. He proposes that acts can sometimes serve as utterances. Hence, a perlocutionary act is the same as a perlocutionary utterance. Searle's (1975) proposition focusses on five illocutionary/ perlocutionary points which encompass *Assertives* (statements judged as true or false), *Directives* (statements attempting to make others fit into the proposition), *Commissives* (statements which make others commit to a course of action), *Expressives* (statements which express the sincere condition of the act) and *Declaratives* (statements which attempt to change the world by declaring that it is changed).

Wittgenstein (1953), a philosopher, says that the meaning of language depends on its actual use rather than its inherent meaning. From this perspective, a message that is conveyed may be interpreted by the receiver based on the context. Thus, interpretation not only depends on the situation and the participants involved but also on the psychological mood of the participants concerned.

PREVIOUS STUDIES ON CONDOLENCES

Studies focussing on condolences are rare and it began with Elwood (2004) who compared the expression of condolences between Americans and Japanese participants. The former wrote in English and the latter in Japanese. Discourse Completion Task (DCT) was used to elicit data and her participants were asked to "express" themselves in two given situations. Her data were analysed according to semantic formulas (see Olshtain & Cohen, 1983). Her analysis confirmed five patterns, which include:

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

Elwood (2004) found that some responses could not fit into any special category. These include "expression of empathy", "sharing similar experience", "statement of not knowing", "statement of lacking words", "positive statements", "expression of surprise", "related questions" and "related comments". Nonetheless, no examples or reasons were provided by Elwood (2004) as justifications.

Other studies that followed include Yahya's (2010) which looked at the Iraqi community's expression of condolences. Using an ethnographic approach, Yahya (2010) investigated the effects of cultural norms and values of condolences imposed on the Iraqi community. Spoken articulations and responses of unmentioned number of people who were possibly all females were extracted from family and friends. Data were manually recorded. Yahya (2010) then concluded that there were five most common and basic patterns of responses and five minor categories listed as:

1. Acknowledgement of death,
2. Expressions of sympathy,
3. Offer of assistance,
4. Future-oriented remarks,
5. Expressions of concern,
6. Sharing similar experience,
7. Making statements of not knowing,
8. Making statements of lacking words,
9. Expressing surprise, and
10. Making related questions and comments.

In another simulated study, Lotfollahi and Eslami-Rasekh (2011) used DCT tasks to extract data from 40 male and 40 female Iranian students. In this study, the variables of gender, age and social distance were considered. Their study revealed eight categories that encompassed:

1. Acknowledgement of the death which includes interjections such as “oh”, “oh no”, “oh my God”, “oh dear”.
2. Expression of sympathy such as “I’m really sorry”, “a great sorrow”.
3. Offer of assistance which covers utterances like “if there is anything I can do please let me know”.
4. Future-oriented remarks like “you should be strong enough to cope with the situation”.
5. Expression of concern with questions about the well-being of the bereaved for example “are you OK now?”
6. Seeking absolution from God which include expressions such as “may God bless him” and other religious expressions which do not have exact equivalents in English such as asking God to let his soul rest in peace.
7. Related questions which include questions posed about the person such as “how old was he?”
8. Religious-oriented sympathy such as “we will all die”.

Another Iranian study conducted by Samavarchi and Allami (2012) also employed DCT as tasks, where 10 male and 35 female Iranians were recruited. Their results were grouped into the following categories:

1. Direct condolence; for example, “I give you my condolences.”
2. Apologetic
   - Apologetic + offer to help (I’m so sorry. If you need help, I’ll be there.)
   - Apologetic + philosophical utterance (I’m sorry, I hope it’ll be the last tragedy on your life.)
   - Apologetic + appreciation of the dead (I’m sorry, she was so nice.)
   - Apologetic + religious (I’m sorry, May God bless him!)
3. Religious (God bless him!)
4. Offering help (If you need any help, let me know .You can count on me anytime.)
5. Consoling/comforting/sympathizing (Be calm and don’t worry.)
6. Enquiring (What happened?)
7. Silence

Looking at Arab native speakers, Tareq (2013) focussed on 85 email condolences which were directed at a Hebrew native speaker colleague who had lost his daughter. Tareq (2013) found that the strategies used were almost similar to those of previous studies (see Olshtain & Cohen 1983; Elwood, 2004; Yahya, 2010). Tareq’s (2013) categories included “acknowledgement of death”, “expression of sympathy”, “offer of assistance”, “future-oriented remarks”, “expression of concern”, “appreciation of the dead” (Eulogy), and “direct condolence”. Tareq (2013) concluded that Arab lecturers

used more "religious expressions" and that females initiated more condolence utterances than males.

All these studies had applied Elwood's (2004) semantic functions as a model. Their findings revealed five common categories encompassing: a) Acknowledgement of death, b) Expressions of sympathy, c) Offer of assistance, d) Future-oriented remarks, and e) Expressions of concern. These findings imply that there is a common thread among the condolences expressed by Americans, Japanese, Iraqis, Iranians and Arabs. However, as can be seen, much of the data were either extracted from simulation tasks such as the DCT or were obtained from secondary sources. Although Yahya (2010) claimed to have used an ethnographical approach, her research design was not explained in detail. In this regard, the analyses provided in the previous studies were based on perceptions which do not necessarily reflect reality. However, it is the best that a society can do in order to gauge what is approximate within that society.

In contrast, this paper is guided by authentic data which were written and expressed by real writers during a real and authentic situation. As a research area that is vulnerable, it is fair to say that acquiring authentic data in a local context is difficult. The data compiled for this paper may not be substantial but it will, nonetheless, be able to provide an analysis that can shed light on how Malaysians construct their condolence messages. The analysis will thus help to identify the functions contained in the condolences that were least preferred or most preferred by the local recipient. These features have not been discussed in previous studies; hence they will serve as an eye opener for those interested in intercultural and cross cultural communications.

MATERIALS AND METHOD

In this study, data were retrieved with the permission of a local Malaysian Chinese female recipient who works in the education industry. During her recent bereavement, SMS messages were written by friends to express their condolences. Data were compiled then rewritten as they appeared on the mobile screen and then kept in a journal. Consent for the use of data written by the 36 writers was acquired individually through emails, letters, telephone calls and face-to-face meetings. Anonymity was assured. Data were coded under ethnicity, age and gender before they were counted for the total number of words used. The texts were then numbered line by line. Each line refers to a meaningful function such as "Just heard" or "My condolences" hence, one condolence message may contain several lines and have more than one semantic function.

The 36 SMS condolence messages were composed in a total of 985 words and written in 131 lines. The average number of words was 27.38 and the average number of lines was 3.6 both suggesting a common feature of the brevity of SMS texts. The participants were Chinese (47%), Malay (33%) and Indians (20%). Gender difference was noted as 89% female and 11% male, while their ages ranged between 19 to 65 years. All the writers were known to the recipient.

However, in this paper, no variables were considered.

Analysis of data first focussed on identifying evidence of "sympathy" (Zunin & Zunin, 1991) by locating words linked to the emotion (see Table 1). Collins English Dictionary (2006) was used as a reference to verify the meaning of words used to convey the condolence, express hope and encourage (see Table 1). Zunin and Zunin's (1991) criteria for writing a condolence and Elwood's (2004) categories of semantic functions were applied as a model to classify data accordingly. Finally, Goffmann's (1974) theory of framing was used as a construct to enable the recipient to reframe her feelings when the condolences were received. This was to facilitate the distinction between the least preferred and most preferred functions of the condolence messages.

Goffmann's (1974) Theory of Framing

The theory of framing advocated by Goffman (1974) involves organising our experiences and structuring our individual perception of these events which include filtering information, discarding noise and building frames and basic cognitive structures so as to guide us in our perception of reality. This theory was developed for sociology but researchers have also used it in an extended manner to analyse how language is used. Goffmann's (1974) theory of framing suggests looking at what is going on and what is salient in those experiences. Each of us has a framework with which we use in order to process information and make sense of the social world around us. In journalism, Tomer (2013) explains, journalists depict their stories by essentially responding to different social cues which are based on their own expectations. How these stories are perceived is based on the knowledge and experiences of the journalists themselves (Tomer, 2013). For the purpose of this paper, the same construct was applied on the local recipient for her to reframe her mind as she recalled her emotional experiences during her bereavement. This task was accomplished through four reflective questions. Her responses were documented manually and her input was used to determine which of those functions were least preferred or most preferred.

The four reflective questions posed to the recipient are:

- What did you really expect from your friends or relatives during your recent bereavement?
- Which of the written forms of condolence message made you feel good or were comforting to you during your bereavement? (Preferred responses)
- Which of the written forms of condolence message made you unhappy or upset you when you read them during your bereavement? (Dispreferred responses)
- How would you have liked these condolence messages to have been written to you, considering that you are well versed in the English language but y*et al*so practised the Chinese culture and customs?

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Analysis of data is divided into three sections. First, it discusses how Malaysian condolences are composed. Next, it discusses the semantic functions unravelled. Finally, it looks at the recipient's frame of mind during her moment of vulnerability. This helps to distinguish the functions least preferred or most preferred. The input can help in assessing how condolences should be written for the benefit of harmony and understanding.

How Malaysian condolence messages are composed

The 36 condolence messages which were composed of 985 words and 131 lines were examined for elements of sympathy. This was done by focussing on the frequency of the words used, as illustrated in Table 1.

Similar to the previous reports, the analysis shows that the word "condolence" came up most frequently and this fits into the nature of the message. Other accompanying words which depict sympathy were also identified but their usage was less frequent in comparison. Words which express hope, are religion oriented and which encourage the recipient were also detected and listed in Table 1.

Data presented in Table 1 indicate that Malaysian SMS condolence messages written in English carry the element of "sympathy" as a core. This corresponds with Zunin and Zunin's (1991) recommendation but the "expression of sympathy" can emerge at the beginning, middle or end of the condolence message as the numbering (line) of the messages indicates. The analysis also indicates that Malaysian condolences do not adhere strictly to the eight criteria recommended by Zunin and Zunin (1991). This suggests that Malaysian practices differ from westerner's practice even though their messages may be written in the same language, English. In addition, Malaysian SMS condolences were a combination of expressing sympathy, eulogising, offering assistance, expressing uncertainty, showing concern and expressing wishful thoughts.

TABLE 1
Words commonly used in Malaysian SMS condolences

No.	WORDS	FREQUENCY
A.	Words which express sympathy	
1	Condolences	22
2	Sorry / apologies	13
3	Deep (deeply/deepest)	11
4	Loss	10
5	Sad	7
6	Demise	3
7	Grief	2
B.	Words which express hope	
1	May you…/ Hope you…	6
2	Hope	4
C.	Words which are religion oriented	
1	Pray / prayers	9
2	May God…	3
3	Rest in peace	2
4	Peace	2
5	God Bless him	1
E.	Words to encourage	
1	Be / remain strong	15
2	Take care / Take good care	12

Semantic Functions of Malaysian SMS condolences

A total of 51 semantic functions were detected from the 36 SMS condolence messages. These were then categorised according to the frequency they occurred and eight functions were noted. These include showing concern via directives (25.5%), showing sympathy (21.6%), offering assistance (21.6%), expressing wishful thinking (13.7%), giving an explanation before sympathy (5.9%), eulogising the deceased (5.9%), showing sympathy and eulogising the deceased at the same time (3.8%), and showing uncertainty (2.0%). Examples of these functions are further discussed in the section below.

Expressing concern via directives

When constructing a message of sympathy, writers have the intention to share the grief and in expressing their solace, they want to lift the spirit of the recipient. They thus write with great concern. Elwood (2004) states this particular function as a function to express a future orientation for the recipient. In this paper, such a concern came across as "directives" (see Searle, 1975) because the recipient felt as if she was instructed on what to do. This was the least preferred function identified.

> *"those condolence messages which expressed kind words were in reality telling me what to do...they were giving me directives…be strong, take care... I didn't think that they were real…do these people even know how tired or exhausted I was? Do they care that I cannot bother to look after myself? Do they even know that I couldn't be bothered to stay strong...for who? For what? For my children? For my future? Do I even care if I had a future? What are they trying to tell me? Why don't they put themselves in my shoes? See if they can be strong or take care."*

Although this function appears to express concern and care for the recipient, it is possible that the recipient may find them vague and less meaningful because in her moment of vulnerability and sadness, how could she be expected to "be strong"? As the recipient asks, "*On what basis do I build my strength when my husband has just died? I haven't even got time to feel sorry for myself!*" Table 2 illustrates some examples.

TABLE 2
Expressing concern via directives

Be strong my dear.
Take good care of yourself and children ya.
Be strong, have faith.
Stay strong and may his soul be blessed and rest in peace
Take good care and be strong.
Please be strong and our prayers are with you.
Take care.
Please take care.
Take good care of yourself.
Do take care.
Be very strong
Take care, XX.
Remember him with a smile.
Be strong and take care ya!

Expressing sympathy

Examples of the expression of sympathy are presented in Table 3. Writers expressed their sympathy through words like "condolence(s)", "loss", "sad", "sorry", and "grief". As Zunin and Zunin (1991) recommended, "heartfelt" was used, which might be conveyed through the adverbial phrase of "very sad", "so sorry", "very sorry" and adjective phrase, "deepest condolence".

TABLE 3
Expressing sympathy

My condolences.
Sorry about your recent loss.
My heartfelt condolences.
I am indeed very sad to hear of the sudden demise of your beloved.
So sorry for the news that we got this morning.
XX, very sorry to hear about your beloved's passing.
I am really sorry to hear of your loss.
My condolence to you and your family.
My deepest condolence to you and your family.
I am sorry.
Sharing your grief.

Offering assistance

In this function, writers offered to listen/ talk or just help in whatever way possible or necessary. The recipient mentioned that even though she wanted to talk to someone very much, she could not garner enough strength and courage to talk openly because she was not sure if these people would judge her or not. Table 4 illustrates some examples.

TABLE 4
Offering assistance

Let me know if I can be of any assistance.
Please let me know if there is anything that I can do to help.
Don't hesitate to call if I can be of help.
Let me know if I can be of any assistance.
And if you need someone to talk to please call me anytime.
If there's anything I can do just let me know.
I will standby.
If you need to talk things out, I am around.
I have gone through that and I know how difficult it is.
And if you need someone to talk to please call me anytime
but if you needed anything
or if there is anything I could do to help.
I'm more than willing to.
With much love and is there anything that I can help with?

Expressing wishful thinking

From the analysis, it was observed that some condolences were written to express the writer's personal hope. This category of message was written preceeded by the modal verb, "may" and "wish" followed by the verb "hope". They were all expressives (Searle, 1975) which denoted conditional states which may or may not be achieved. This type of message came across as wishful thinking because it was not meant to be fulfilled. Likewise, they were deemed ambiguous and unacceptable by the recipient.

> *"It is wishful thinking for the writer because at this moment of pain and sadness, I couldn't care for anything else. I cannot care for God or for*

anyone else, my emotion is numbed with grieve and sadness, I care not for strength from anyone else…all I want is for all this happening to disappear...to go back in time and to make my life normal as before I lost my husband.... I just want to grieve my pain and mourn my loss. Don't hope for me because I see that as false...if you really care for me, come and stand by my side…not write me these messages!"

TABLE 5
Expressing wishful thinking

May you stay strong.
May God give you strength to wade through the time of grieve.
May you regain strength and reorganize your situation for your well being and more so for your children.
Hope you be strong in going through this.
Hope you and your family will unite in going through this.
Wish I can be there for you during this difficult time.
Wish I could be there for you now.

Explanation before expressing sympathy

Another pattern revealed in the data was that of giving an explanation before expressing sympathy. This is not a common composition. In her reflection, the recipient said, "I am not sure why there is a need to explain...I won't blame anyone...so there is no need to explain".

TABLE 6
Explanation before expressing sympathy

Shock and disbelieve over XX's news.
I was informed by Dr. B that your beloved husband has passed away.
Just heard the sad news

.

Eulogy for the deceased

Zunin and Zunin (1991) mentioned that saying something good of the deceased (if you know him/her) is good. The practice of eulogising the deceased was found in the data. Although "eulogising the deceased" was not a culture of the Chinese, the recipient mentioned that this message was beneficial to her as it helped her to recall the good memories of her husband. The eulogy exemplified here merely consists of a short description of the deceased. However, it was noted that the words used were positive. Some examples are presented in Table 7.

TABLE 7
Eulogy for the deceased

God bless him most.
He was a good man.
Your husband is one of the most genuine, sincere and honest persons that I have met in my life.

Expressing sympathy and eulogy at the same time

To a small extent, some messages conveyed a deeper sense of emotion which included a description of the deceased (Eulogy). A few examples are presented in Table 8.

Table 8.
Expressing sympathy and eulogy

Our deepest condolence to your family for the loss of such a great father, a loving husband and a cheerful man (eulogy) who served others dutifully all his life.
Heartfelt condolences to you and your sons on the demise of your beloved husband and their beloved father (eulogy)

Expressing uncertainty

When one is at a loss for words, one just stays silent. Data indicate that a writer may express this uncertainty directly by just saying "I dunno what to say". Only one example was identified. The recipient preferred this function the most. She felt that it was sincere and she agreed that no one really knows what to say or how to say words of comfort to a person who had just lost her beloved.

Table 9
Expressing uncertainty

I dunno what to say

CONCLUSION

This paper has illustrated with authentic data how Malaysian SMS condolence messages were constructed. The paper shows that Malaysian condolences contained the element of sympathy as a core of the message. The analysis found that the word "condolence" implying sympathy, appeared 22 times in the context of 985 words. This means that it was used only 2.3% of the time. As the core of the message, sympathy may be expressed in the beginning, middle or at the end of the composed message. Indeed, all the written condolence messages justified the purpose of the writing, which is to express sympathy. However, not all of the eight criteria proposed by Zunin and Zunin (1991) were present. It has not been ascertained why the writers' recommendation was not adhered to by Malaysian writers. Further investigation may be necessary and it is probable that most Malaysians, including those who are professionals, may not have acquired the skill because they have not been exposed to the art of writing condolences in English.

Of the eight functions unravelled in this paper, expressing concern via directives was the most common and expressing uncertainty was the least common. The former was least preferred and the latter most preferred. The rest of the semantic functions detected were categorised as expressing sympathy, offering assistance, expressing wishful thoughts, giving explanation before sympathy, expressing sympathy and eulogising the deceased at the same time followed by eulogising the deceased.

This paper also used the narrative evidence of the recipient to gauge which functions contained in the condolence message were misinterpreted or misunderstood and which were well received. The input served as insight into understanding how messages were perceived. The recipient mentioned that the writers had not thought about her feelings when they "directed" her on what to do. In Elwood's (2004) term, it was a "future-oriented remark to show encouragement"

but it was clearly misinterpreted by the recipient. It would appear that "directives" were perceived as a disempowerment to the recipient. Studies on pragmatics often view this speech act negatively because it serves what Searle (1969, 1975) terms as statements attempting to make others fit into the proposition. The recipient also remarked that the writers sometimes came across as being insincere when their condolence message contained wishful thinking.

This paper has indicated that some of the writer's intentions could have been misinterpreted by the local recipient because of the ambiguity of the intention. Based on the negative responses made, it is thus recommended that the construction of condolence messages be further explored in order to confirm whether or not there is any cultural variation within the context of intercultural or crosscultural communication. With the advent of globalisation, people need to be educated on the speech functions of condolences. They also need to be exposed to the appropriateness of condolence writing. This is vital as faux pas can be committed with the least intention even within the same community and country.

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