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Language and affect in digital media: Articulations of grief in online spaces for mourning

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Introduction

Digital media offer new domains for people to articulate aspects of their everyday self and share resources, views, attitudes, and emotions by variously combining the affordances and constraints of different media. The study of users' articulations of self and moments of sharing opens up new lines of communication for applied linguists, sociolinguists, discourse analysts, linguistic anthropologists, and scholars of computer-mediated communication interested in developing a nuanced understanding of digital practices (see Barton and Lee 2013, Georgakopoulou 2006, Jones and Hafner 2012).

The present paper considers articulations of grief in online spaces for mourning, which constitute a unique window into contemporary ways of displaying and sharing sympathy and/or pain at the face of irrevocable loss. The focus on digital mourning encourages a shift from modernity's lamenting over the loss of 'traditional' grieving and mourning practices and a turn to the study of ways of dealing with death and dying in current Western socio-cultural contexts that are characterized by individualized¹² and medicalized regimes of emotion (see Wilce, 2009). Furthermore, the exchange of support resources, attitudes and emotions accompanying the extraordinary moment of one's encounter with death renders digital mourning spaces apt for an in-depth understanding of fundamental expressions of affect.

Digital mourning practices raise a set of questions worthy of empirical investigation: first, what types of grieving practices are encouraged in these new domains and how does grief become linguistically articulated? Secondly, what types of meanings are shared and how does grief become socially

¹² As Billig (cited in Wetherell, 2013) has pointed out, thinking and emoting are not a set of hidden processes taking place in an individual's mind emerging in uncontested statements like 'I am angry', 'I am sad'.

intelligible in spaces for digital mourning? Finally, how can we study digital mourning systematically and what types of insights can such explorations offer to the study of digital affect more broadly? This paper seeks to shed light to the aforementioned questions to the extent made possible by the discussion of preliminary findings from an on-going empirical study of grieving online.

Grieving practices in online spaces for mourning

Spaces for mourning on the Internet have existed since the 1990s in the form of cyber-memorials, web memorials, virtual cemeteries, and shrines, which have been mainly characterized by static content and low interactivity. More recently, popular social networking sites (henceforth SNSs), characterized by user-generated content and high interactivity and encouraging participants to communicate with people already part of their extended social network (Boyd and Ellison 2007, cited in Athique 2012, p.103) have turned into the primary sites for mourning, grieving and memorializing the deceased. Post-mortem profiles on SNSs now form ‘techno-spiritual spaces in which the identities of the deceased are intersubjectively produced by the contributions of SNS friends’ (Brubaker and Vertesi, 2010) raising issues of entitlement to grieving and bereavement in semi-public domains. At the same time, activity on SNSs generally encourages relational maintenance and technologically augments active and latent social bonds (Athique 2012, p.103), providing users with affordances for constructing and sustaining post-mortem relationality and bonds that can help the bereaved cope with their loss.

As previous research on MySpace post-mortem personal profiles and comments has shown (Brubaker and Hayes 2011), post-mortem social networking practices include among others the following: *sharing memories*, *posting updates* and *maintaining connections with the deceased* via comments flooding users’ personal profile page for at least up to the 3 years after the user’s death. Similar findings regarding the content of the comments posted have been reported in recent empirical investigations of post-mortem messages in a range of online platforms, including memorial websites created by parents who have experienced a loss due to sudden infant death syndrome (Finlay and Krueger 2011), online forums for the bereaved by suicide (Schotanus-Dijkstra et al. 2013) and posts following the death of Michael Jackson on Twitter, TMZ.com and Facebook (Sanderson and Cheong 2010).

This paper focuses on Facebook, whose growing popularity after 2009 has turned it into one of the most popular sites for sharing everyday moments, including moments of sadness and grief. A digital memorial on Facebook can be created as a new page which allows the addition of new ‘friends’ and is particularly useful in the case of deceased celebrities or public figures. The page is headed as R.I.P. (Rest In Peace) followed by the name of the departed. When it comes to non-celebrities, Facebook memorials are most commonly created by family members or friends of the deceased through the application *Facebook Groups*. Group sites can be set up as *open*, making posts visible to all users, members and non-members alike, or *closed*, making posts visible to group members only. Members of the group can post on the site’s wall, upload photos to shared albums, and invite members who are friends to group events.

A computer-mediated discourse field of grieving online

The present study of online grief has been informed by a discourse-centred online ethnography approach (DCOE) (Androutsopoulos 2008) involving the monitoring of a range of sites to establish (i) the kinds of activities unfolding online in relation to grieving (e.g. communicating with the bereaved, the deceased or group members), (ii) participants (e.g. bereaved vs. online memorial ‘tourists’) and (iii) different types of interactivity involved (e.g. guestbook comments, post-mortem wall posts, private messages, R.I.P. posts on SNSs, etc.). The field of research covered interrelated websites making up a *computer-mediated discourse field* representing spaces for online grieving, including funeral home webpages, Facebook memorialised profile pages, online obituaries, Facebook R.I.P. sites and pages created following someone’s death.

One specific R.I.P. group site joined by 1,265 members was selected for close study so as to encourage a situated approach to the study of grieving. Upon reflection *advenience* (Barthes, 2000 [1980]), that is a sense of dynamism and liveliness emanating from the particular site, rather than convenience, constituted the guiding principle for the group site’s selection. The group site in question was created immediately after the death of an 18-year-old college student in May 2012 (to be referred here as J. for reasons of anonymity) by six of his closest friends in a state of Georgia, US.

The remainder of the paper discusses the linguistic-affective style of grieving for J. in two online sites where mourning for his loss is publicly displayed: the online guestbook hosted by the funeral home entrusted with the

organization of the official mourning services for J.'s death and the R.I.P. group page created on Facebook by J.'s friends.

Grieving in formal online spaces: online guestbook comments

The funeral home's online guestbook is hosted on a separate section of its official website and takes the form of a linearly organized forum reserved for the public posting of formal expressions of condolences and messages of sympathy. Online guestbook comments cover a period of ten days since the day immediately following J.'s death. Activity on the guestbook, which features fifty-two comments in total, is launched by the funeral home with the post '*Please accept our deepest condolences*' and peaks on the day of the visitation service, when 51.9% of the total number of comments are posted. In the ensuing ten days, posting activity decreases significantly and no further comments are posted after the final brief post '*I am sorry.*'

The funeral home's online guestbook includes comments that are authored by people who knew the family or the deceased as well as by members of the wider community who don't appear to have been acquainted with the deceased or the family but nonetheless, feel compelled to express their sympathy. The comments are predominantly addressed to the bereaved family and in only three of the comments do the authors address the deceased directly. In terms of the linguistic style of comments, we notice the high use of the personal pronoun 'you' and other function words as well as the predominance of words that relate to conventional Christian funerary expressions, such as 'god', 'praying', 'prayers', 'family', 'comfort'. Function words include a higher count of personal pronouns 'you' (90) and 'your' (44) compared to first person personal pronouns.

Online guestbook comments illustrate the linguistic style of conventionalized expressions of Christian sympathy and signal the writers' expression of support and comfort towards the bereaved family. The funeral home's online forum for grieving comments constitutes a formal online space for mourning, where grief becomes socially intelligible through a solemn acceptance of the event of death expressed in and through the adherence to convention and etiquette. It can be argued that the afore-described linguistic style indexes ideologies of mourning that construct the labour involved as a process with a set ending point when the disrupted social order is restored and life can finally return to a sense of normality.

Grieving in informal online spaces: Facebook R.I.P. group site posts

The Facebook R.I.P. group site presents a richer and rather more complex picture of grieving activity, as will be shown in this section. Posting on the group site dates from the creation of the page in 2012 and covers a year and five months following the death of J.

At the time of writing this paper, the group site numbered 525 logs of a total 29, 136 words ranging from 281 words maximum to 2 words minimum. Out of the 1,265 group members listed on the site, 198 can be considered as active participants, having logged at least one post and 24 members as most active, having logged more than five posts from the day of the site's creation.

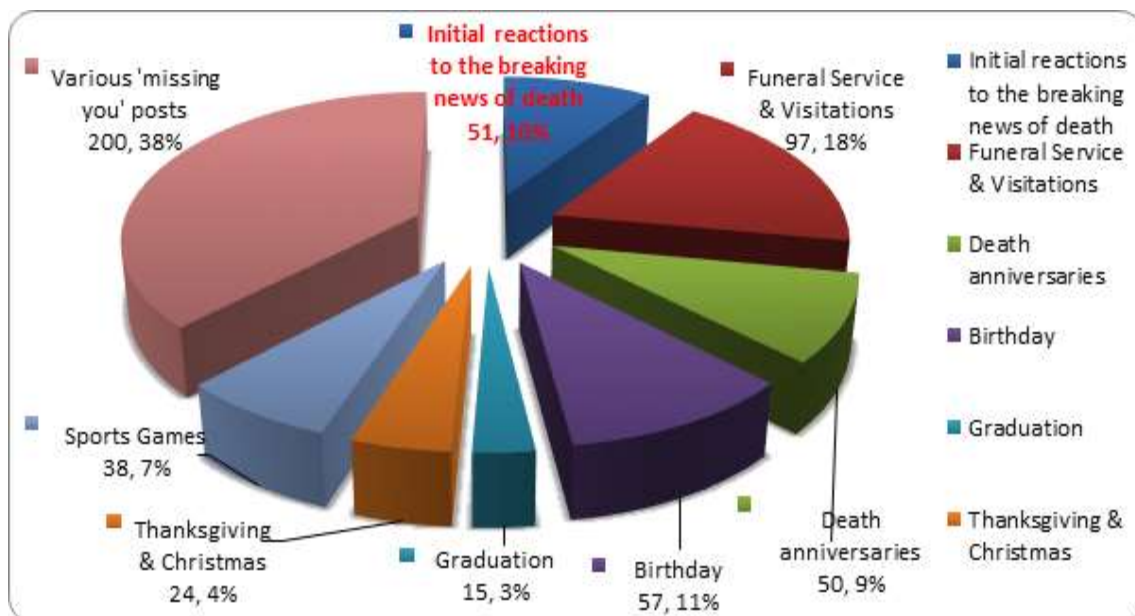


Figure 1. Distribution of threads in the Facebook R.I.P. for J. log corpus

Posts cover a range of topics which have been coded in the corpus as *threads* depending on their predominant content type (see Figure 1). Posting activity is at its highest in the days immediately before and after the set mourning ceremonies, namely the visitations and funeral service and decreases over time although never entirely ceasing. Posting activity peaks at specific moments over the year associated with commemoration events such as the weekly, monthly and annual death anniversaries or celebrations, such as J.'s missed school graduation, Thanksgiving, Christmas, and his birthday anniversary. In terms of its content, the group site illustrates the *spatial and temporal expansion of grieving and mourning practices* (cf. Brubaker, Hayes and Dourish 2013) and provides the bereaved with a mediated space for

mourning before, contemporaneously to and after the set ceremonies, which are fixed in time and place.

In terms of the linguistic style of comments posted by Facebook users on the group site, they are characterized by direct addressivity to the deceased rather than to other members of the group or the bereaved family. Posts contain conventionalized expressions of affect associated with expressions of sympathy typical of American English (for instance, 'we miss you', 'we love you', 'you will always be loved and missed'). Features of new media language are occasionally embedded in the published posts alongside standard spellings and grammar (for example, 'love u bro...r.i.p/ :(', 'truly miss but neva forgotten # R.I.P. J.'). Furthermore, a high level of second-person and first-person personal pronouns, past tense verbs, adverbs, prepositions, conjunctions and negations as well as a relatively high word count per comment is observed in contrast to the typical brevity of Facebook updates, foregrounding the writers' high emotional involvement in the communicated message. In sum, writers of Facebook posts are seen to break away from the conventionality of expressions and displays of sympathy and support typical of the online guestbook and analogous formal spaces for grieving. Instead they favour a linguistic style which can index a high degree of involvement and affectivity.

The Facebook R.I.P. group site functions as a semi-public diary of grief and sadness. Online writing practices in this informal space are based on a mixture of standard and non-standard spellings signalling the familiarity of users with the social networking site environment and at the same time indexing ordinary practices of grieving among young adults. Most notably, conventional funerary expressions appearing at important discourse junctures of the message combine with turns of everyday talk, such as greetings and leave-takings, terms of address and endearment and construct a sense of unbroken post-mortem relationality and bonds with the deceased. In sum, on the social networking site of Facebook, grief becomes socially intelligible through its weaving into everyday life and relationality. It can be argued that the hybrid, informal linguistic style described above indexes ideologies of mourning that construct the labour involved as an on-going and never-ending painful process that does not aim to the restoration of the disrupted social order (see discussion of the linguistic style of the online guestbook comments) but rather to the continuation and expansion of bonds with the deceased.

Grieving in informal online spaces: R.I.P. posts as narratives

This section concludes with some remarks on the type of narrative activity observed in the Facebook R.I.P. group site for J. and its role in weaving grief into everyday life and relationality. Through their posts, writers on the site record and share memories of the deceased, post updates on their daily life and maintain their bonds to him or in some cases appeal to him for help or comfort at times of hardship. If we are to understand narrative as a cognitively and discursively complex genre activity that routinely contains some or all of the following discourse components: description, chronology, evaluation and explanation but also routinely involving questions, clarifications, challenges, and speculations about what might possibly have transpired (Ochs and Capps 2001, pp.18-19), most of the posts published on the group site qualify as everyday narratives.

More specifically, posts which combine the abbreviation R.I.P. (also spelled as RIP) at the opening or closing of the post, one or more conventional parting expressions (e.g. *I am missing you*) and additional material qualify as a *RIP story*. RIP stories make part of the semi-public archived diary of grief emerging on the site and can be further classified into the following types: (i) breaking news stories: writers share the reported events or feeling states as they are still unfolding (ii) projections: tellers refer to events which are going to happen or create a fictional tale world made up of hopes, dreams and wishes (iii) past events: references to past moments of time in close proximity to the present moment of narration (cf. de Fina and Georgakopoulou 2011, Page 2010).

Finally, there are stories that cross cut the afore-listed categories and form a running thread that contributes to the overall coherence of individualized published posts published. An example of this type of narrative activity which forms a special type of discursive-affective resource is a story referred to in this paper as ‘the bracelet story’ which emerges in and through mini-statements included in eleven posts authored by nine different active group members at different points in the timeline. The trajectory of the ‘bracelet story’ starts on Day 3 in three posts written by the same writer and runs through eight additional posts authored by different authors on dates ranging from May 2011 to March 2012. The story refers to more than one hundred handmade memorial bracelets passed around at school and the church following J.’s death in honour of his memory. Bereaved friends wrapped the bracelets around their wrists on the day of the funeral and held on to them feelingly. In addition to J.’s friends, people who had never met J. took to wearing them, turning the bracelets into bonding icons.

In the course of the story's trajectory across posts, writers contribute a little slice of their own experience relating to the bracelet: hand-making it, wearing it, looking at it, talking to others about it, getting attached to it, refusing to remove it, losing it... Along with their reports, group members offer their own version of the meaning and salience of the bracelet for them as a symbol of honouring and remembering J., of loving and grieving for him. Their contributions thus expand its signification from a death bracelet to a bonding icon, a charm, or a prompt for engaging with grief and mourning in everyday ways that others can recognize and acknowledge. The story about the bracelet illustrates how members of the R.I.P. group construct, negotiate and re-affirm their membership to the group of grieving. It also foregrounds the salience of narrative activity in the context of online affective practices.

Concluding remarks

The paper reported preliminary findings from an on-going project on grieving online. It was suggested that formal and informal spaces for grieving online are associated with different types of linguistic-affective styles, different ways of rendering grief socially intelligible and hence different meaning potential for writers and readers. Based on the data taken from a funeral home's online guestbook and a Facebook Rest in Peace (R.I.P.) Facebook group site, it was argued that such linguistic styles index different types of ideologies of mourning with differing emphasis on post-mortem relationality and bonds. Finally, it was suggested that informal spaces for mourning encourage the weaving of grief into everyday life through different types of narrative activity that lends coherence and affective power to individualized articulations of grief.

The above discussion suggests that if we are to do full justice to the complexity of affective articulations, we need to combine analyses of the linguistic-affective style of grieving online with the systematic study of narrative activity online. Narratives help grieving young adults to articulate their affective experience in more general terms and thus, contribute to the long process of coping with loss. Furthermore, narratives' trajectories across posts become vehicles of meaning making in which writers rework slices of their affective experience in online public writing.

To conclude, social networking sites such as Facebook can be described as a site for public and semi-public mourning, an expanding platform for enacting death and grief that takes the form of a publicly shared diary. On Facebook, the bereaved engage with grief that is socially situated in the daily lives of users (Brubaker, Hayes and Dourish 2013, p.161), foregrounding

that online spaces constitute socio-digital formations which are embedded in the larger societal, cultural, and subjective, structurations of lived experience and hence cannot be treated as something entirely new. There is scope for enriching the growing body of empirical content-based investigations of grieving online with contextual approaches to the study of networked language practices, calling attention to the linguistic-narrative style of grief and mourning and its associated ideologies.

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