Ceremonial Arabic Writing: A Genre-Based Investigation of Wedding Invitation Cards and Obituary Announcements in Jordanian Society

ABSTRACT

The objectives of this thesis are fourfold: First, I will offer a detailed analysis of rhetorically functional text component moves of the genres of Jordanian written wedding invitation cards and newspaper obituary announcements at the macro-structural level. Second, I will provide a comprehensive analysis of salient linguistic features that characterize the genres at the micro-linguistic level. Third, I will find out how socio-cultural and religious beliefs and practices are reflected in the generic formulaic structure of these genres. Fourth, I will show how sociolinguistic variability and dynamics are evident in the genres. In order to explore the discourse of these genres, a move analysis was carried out upon a corpus of 500 wedding invitation cards, and another 500 newspaper obituary announcements. The analysis of macro-structural and micro-linguistic features is influenced by the work of Bhatia (1993) as it profitably illuminates the relationship between social practice and written discourse. The findings of the study are fivefold. First, the study demonstrates that eight and eleven communicative moves exist in wedding invitation cards and obituary announcements respectively. Each move performs a specific communicative function and contributes to the general communicative purpose of the entire genre. Second, the genre analysis indicates that the generic organizational structure of the genres is highly conventionalized and structured in terms of form, content, positioning and functional values, with some variations in frequency and order of moves. Third, the writers of Jordanian wedding invitations and obituary announcements use a number of linguistic resources the way they like to generate some special effects and express private and organizational intentions within the framework of culturally recognized purposes. Fourth, the generic structure of the genres uncovers many socio-cultural and religious messages about Jordanian society. Finally, the findings showed that, besides religion, other sociocultural factors such as family, gender, and socioeconomic status have massively impacted the way these genres are structured and interpreted. It is hoped that the results of this study will be of great help in further understanding the socio-cultural perceptions, attitudes and values that shape these two communicative events as well as aiding in efforts towards intercultural communication.
Author: Murad Hassan Sawalmeh

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OVERVIEW

The objectives of this study are to determine the rhetorical text structure and key linguistic features of Jordanian written wedding invitation cards and newspaper obituary announcements, to find out how socio-cultural and religious norms, practices and beliefs are reflected in the sequential organization of these two genre texts, and to show how sociolinguistic variability and dynamics are evident in the genres.

Wedding invitation cards and obituary announcements are socially constructed and conventionalized genres belonging to a group of texts referred to by Miller (1984) as “homely discourse”. Johns (1997, p. 6) defines a “homely discourse” as “a recognizable socially constructed text genre of everyday language”. The homely genres of wedding invitation cards and obituary announcements have specific recognizable characteristics which make them stand apart from other types of genre texts (Al-Ali, 2006, p. 691). That is to say, they differ from other genres in terms of the communicative purposes they perform, the audience they address and the rhetorical organization and linguistic choices they have.

In spite of their obvious prevalence and uniqueness, wedding invitation cards and obituary announcements have long been understudied homely genres in comparison with other types of genres. Previous studies carried out on the genres of Jordanian wedding invitation cards and obituary announcements have heavily focused on the description of the generic organizational structure of these text-genres. However, except for Al-Ali (2005, 2006) who examined religious affiliations and masculine power in wedding invitation genre and solidarity, promotion and pride in death announcements genre in Jordanian newspapers, no published studies have been conducted on these genres in Jordan in terms of their comprehensive generic
structures, linguistic choices, and more importantly socio-cultural and religious values and practices surrounding them. The present study therefore makes a significant contribution to the understanding of detailed generic organizational patterns, sociolinguistic text variations in light of underlying socio-cultural and religious motives, as well as linguistic realizations of the genre structure.

There are various justifications for conducting a genre analysis of wedding invitation cards and obituary announcements. First, most genre analysis studies have mainly centered on a variety of professional and academic genres (e.g. Holmes, 1997; Peacock, 2002; Martín, 2003; Jalilifar, 2010; Basturkmen, 2012), and too little attention has been paid to the identification of distinctive macro-structural and micro-linguistic features of genres such as wedding invitation cards and obituary announcements. In this context, it should be noted that the micro-linguistic investigation of the genres under study is still in its infancy, and many important questions remain to be addressed. Therefore, performing a micro-linguistic analysis of these two genres can complement the macro-analysis undertaken in the present study as well.

Second, no study has yet attempted a detailed investigation into Jordanian written wedding invitation card and obituary announcement genres for the purpose of determining the key linguistic choices and showing socio-cultural and religious communicative functions that are articulated by generic patterns of these genres. Therefore, this research attempts to unravel some of the mysteries surrounding these popular widespread communicative events from which individuals can learn the practices and rules of specific social groups in a society. Ventola (1987, p. 6) argues that “learning foreign languages is learning how to behave linguistically in cultures other than one’s own”; thus, this study will be useful for those people who are concerned with becoming familiar with and taking part in the social life of members from Jordanian culture. Moreover, this study serves as a useful resource about Jordanian society in terms of language use in a particular rhetorical context, as well as socio-cultural and religious background. In other words, this study is a window that provides a view into various aspects of Jordanian culture and a guide to the way through which Jordanian people construct and organize their wedding invitation cards and obituary announcements.

Third, this study provides an opportunity to advance the understanding of the nature of wedding invitation cards and obituary announcements in Arabic to explore what generic text patterns are common, and what socio-cultural communicative functions and linguistic features are articulated by these patterns. Therefore, it is hoped that the results of this study will be of great help to observe how such short genres are identified and organized, to show how Jordanian writers of wedding invitation cards and obituary announcements use certain linguistic features in particular ways to achieve their rhetorical purposes, as well as to further understand socio-cultural interpretations that give rise to these genres.

Fourth, what is of great significance in genre analysis is the identification of communicative purpose(s) of a genre, as well as the use of language in
institutionalized settings controlled by communicative conventions, which are created by a group of participants in a certain discourse community. In this light, Swales (1990, p. 4), argues that “[t]he principal criteria feature that turns a collection of communicative events into a genre is some shared set of communicative purposes”. Also, central to the analysis of a defined genre is the identification of the rhetorical structure in a genre text based on the conventions set by the discourse community (Swales, 1981). With that in mind, the significance of this study also lies in its contribution towards offering a clearer understanding of the interrelations between social communicative events and the generic structure, as well as linguistic realizations of the text, which are important aspects of genre research.

Fifth, the analysis of the genres of wedding invitation cards and obituary announcements can be of great benefit to learners in that they initiate the process of thinking about how language is used in a real context. The use of a “homely” genre, as Clynes and Henry (2005, p. 17) state, is an efficient way to introduce learners to the basic principles of genre analysis and to get learners carrying out their own analyses from an early stage. In addition, providing explicit knowledge of the schematic structure and linguistic choices of such homely genres, combined with practical analysis in both the target language and the mother tongue, can be beneficial to learners’ output in terms of organising information and in how this information is combined (Henry & Roseberry, 1999). Therefore, when ESP teachers equip their students with the generic knowledge of a genre including the lexico-grammatical and rhetorical structural patterns, they will be successful in engaging in the process of conducting successful genre-based analyses (Upton, 2002; Pintos dos Santos, 2002; Crossley, 2008).

Finally, this study might be of some value for Arab and non-Arab genre researchers, in the sense that the findings of this investigation are expected to raise their awareness and advance their knowledge about the macro-schematic organization of the genres of Jordanian wedding invitation cards and obituary announcements. The language used in these two genres deepens their understanding of Jordanian traditions, beliefs, norms, and values about wedding and death rituals in Jordanian society, and it also reveals important understandings of socio-cultural and religious factors that influence the generic organisational structure of wedding invitation cards and obituary announcements as communicative events. Also, the findings could provide them with some useful insights into the communicative purposes of genre writers, as well as micro-linguistic realizations used in the Arabic language, hence paving the way for further research in this area due to the relative paucity of studies conducted in relation to such genres.

The material for this study consists of 500 Jordanian written wedding invitation cards and another 500 newspaper obituary announcements. The analysis of the data will follow the instructions of Bhatia’s (1993) model of genre analysis. Bhatia’s model is very useful for my study because it views any genre as consisting of a set of moves which, together, serve the communicative purpose of the genre. A move has been defined as a “segment of text that is shaped and constrained by a specific communicative function” (Holmes, 1997, p. 325). Also, the strength of this model lies
in the fact that it goes far beyond the examination of text moves and lexico-grammatical description of language use in a given genre text by incorporating communicative purposes and socio-cognitive and cultural factors of the genre under study. In other words, this model is simply a combination of “essential grammatical and adequate socio-cognitive and cultural explanation” (Bhatia, 1993, p. 1). The analysis of the data will be based on Bhatia’s (1993) notions of what main features determine and constitute a genre text. These are sequential component patterns (moves) and the communicative purpose, linguistic choices, and socio-cultural features reflected in the generic structure of the genre text.

The theoretical framework for this study is formed of four wider topics. First, I will go through the focal points of genre theory, focusing on Bhatia’s (1993, p. 49) definition of genre and how a genre is viewed as social action. Second, I will focus on the concept of genre analysis showing its main goals. Third, I will show how wedding invitation cards and obituary announcements are socially constructed genres and belong to a group of texts referred to by Miller (1984) as “homely discourse”, with special emphasis on the definitions of a move. Finally, I will discuss the main studies on the genres of wedding invitation cards and obituary announcements in order to intellectually position this research in the field of genre analysis. These include, among others, the many works of Matiki (2001), Moses and Marelli (2004), Clynes and Henry (2005), Al-Ali (2006), Aremu (2011), Ondimu (2014) and Jalilifar, Varnaseri, Saidian and Khazaie (2014).

The results of the investigation revealed that, in addition to the main function of announcing and publicizing the occasions of marriage and death, these wedding invitation cards and obituary announcements uncover many messages about the Jordanian sociocultural conventions and religious practices which were found to be encoded in both the structural and linguistic features of the written genres. These religious and sociocultural features were then highlighted and compared with those of Al-Ali (2005, 2006), Nwoye (1992), Al-Zubaidi (2014), Mirzaei and Eslami (2013), Al-Khatib and Salem (2011), and Clynes and Henry (2005). For example, it has been observed that those wedding invitation cards and obituary announcements intend to serve a number of communicative functions and communicate a wealth of information far beyond the occasions themselves. They communicate lengthy details about the deceased and surviving families, the bride and groom and celebrating their families, their socioeconomic statuses, among other issues related to wedding and death.

More specifically, based on the notion of move analysis and the sociocultural values and beliefs that exert constrains on the generic structure and interpretation of texts, I have determined eight divisible communicative moves in the genre of wedding invitation (Opening, identifying the celebrating families, identifying the inviters of the wedding, requesting the presence of the guests, identifying the bride and groom, stating wedding ceremony arrangements, deferential ending and notifications), and eleven moves in the genre of obituary announcements (Opening, heading, announcing the death, identifying the deceased, photo of the deceased, identifying surviving relatives, identifying circumstances of death, funeral and burial
arrangements, arrangements for receiving condolences, notifications and closing). Two of these moves (i.e., identifying the celebrating families and the photo of the deceased) were totally absent from Al-Ali’s (2005, 2006) studies on the genres of wedding invitation cards and obituaries.

Each move of the wedding invitation cards and obituary announcements has a specific communicative intention which contributes to the overall communicative purpose(s) of the genre (Bhatia, 1993; Bonyadi, 2010). Based on the status and frequency of occurrence of the moves, they have been classified as obligatory or optional components of the text type. The generic schematic structure of the genres was found to be highly conventionalized and structured in terms of form, content, and functional values. However, they did not have a fully fixed move structure, but some variations occur in frequency and order of moves.

Religion has an influence on most aspects of Jordanian people’s life, including marriage and death. It is not surprising, thus, to find out that the visual structure and linguistic lexical choices reflected in different communicative moves of the corpus display many features of the influences exercised by religious beliefs of both Muslims and Christians in the texts. The results of the study have shown that Muslim and Christian wedding invitation cards and obituary announcements are set in a frame of religious expressions that plays a significant role in shaping the religious and social identity of the writer. For instance, the various religious affiliations of the couple and the deceased with their families manifested themselves in the genre texts in the form of Qur’anic and Biblical verses or other religious traditions and exerted their constraints in the way the texts were constructed and interpreted. Moreover, the study revealed that the language of Muslim and Christian wedding invitation cards and obituary announcements was fraught with religious lexical choices and phrases which reflect the religious beliefs of the producers of these genres. For example, Muslims used words such as “bimaʃiʔatiʔallah” (God Willing), “Al-haj”, “Paradise”, “mosque”, “Allah”, “Most Gracious” and “Most Merciful”. Christians, on the other hand, used words like “church”, “God”, “Christ”, “priest” and “Heaven”,

Moreover, the study revealed that the social and cultural atmospheres are concealed in the formulaic structure of wedding invitation cards and obituary announcements. The first sociocultural practice which appeared in the genre texts is the extensive use of academic and professional titles in the moves of “Identifying the bride and groom”, “Identifying the celebrating families”, “Identifying the deceased” and “Identifying surviving relatives”. The explicit reference to the titles, which are written in bold-face with different sizes of font, reinforces socio-cultural values and reflects that these people belong to high socio-economic statuses in the Jordanian society. The findings of this study also showed that males have more academic and professional titles than females. This may be attributed to the fact that men, in Jordan, are more likely than women to be involved in social, economic, political life. They are apt to hold more significant positions in social life than those held by their female counterparts. In addition, women have few chances to continue their higher education or to participate as effectively in social and official activities. Thus, their
chances to have academic and professional titles are much lower than their male counterparts.

Also, the selection of the wedding invitations and envelopes was regarded one of the most important factors that reflect the socio-economic status of the bride and groom. Therefore, the results of the study revealed that many Muslim and Christian couples with high social status tend to choose expensive and stylish invitations and envelopes to indicate their prestige and richness.

Another social value which was evident in the genre of obituary announcements is that the size, position and repetition of the obituary announcement in one or more newspapers varied according to the socio-economic status of both the deceased and the announcer since obituary announcements are paid for in Jordan. As for the size of the obituary, for example, the results of the study revealed that 16% of the obituaries occupied the whole page, 29% were of medium size, and 55% of the obituaries were of a small size. However, the results showed that the The use of euphemistic expressions was very evident in the genres of obituary announcements and wedding invitation cards. For example, it has been observed that the harsh lexical verb (مات) “died” is apparently avoided by obituarists when they make reference to death, and they replace it by using the euphemistic expression “؟الله ىنتقل الى رحمة الله” (He moved to the Almighty God's mercy). This expression was adopted by both Muslims and Christians because they believe in life after death. In addition, they believe that God is very merciful; therefore, they presuppose that the deceased person has been given mercy to enter the paradise. Consequently, death in their view is not the end; rather, it is a way of leaving the earthly life and moving to the heavenly one. On the other hand, many Jordanian wedding card writers avoid using unpleasant and hateful expressions such as “Children are not permitted to attend the wedding party” and they euphemize them by writing indirect and polite expressions such as “Children’s paradise is their house” or “Pleasant sleeping for your children”.

In Jordan, there exists a specific kind of society in which a tribe as a basic cultural unit is regarded to be a significant building block in constructing a successful society. Jordanian families’ cooperation in social affairs and events are highly appreciated especially when it comes to happy and sad happenings. The findings of my analysis of the wedding invitation cards and obituary announcements indicated that this social variant influenced the construction of two moves: “Announcing the death” and “Identifying the celebrating families” in which the names of the families of the deceased and bride and groom are mentioned explicitly.

The wedding invitation cards and obituary announcements witnessed fundamental shifts in the hierarchical patterns of solidarity and power in connection with gender. This shift is evident from the significant change observed in the way women have been referred to by their first names. For example, 52.8% of the wedding invitation cards state the first name of the bride, and 100% of obituary announcements mention the name of females as deceased and relatives. Hence, it can be stated that
the major change in linguistic strategies for referring to women by their first names indicates a shift at the social and cultural level, or more accurately, a move away from strict and traditional adherence to power toward seeking equality. Jordanian women tend to show their contempt for authority and patriarchy and become increasingly determined to achieve equal status with men in the society.

In conclusion, the Jordanian wedding invitation cards and obituary announcements have shown solid evidence for the major influence of religious and cultural practices of Muslim and Christian people on both the textual and linguistic features of these genres. It was also observed that the main social functions of the wedding invitation cards and obituary announcements, in addition to the primary function of publicizing the occasions, is to communicate many messages about the religious and sociocultural norms and practices reflected in the rhetorical components of these genres.