

## Ethnic Variations in Malaysian SMS Condolences

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### Abstract

This paper aims to examine the ethnic variations of condolence messages written by Malaysians. Data comprise 36 authentic SMS condolence messages written in English by predominantly 47% Chinese, 33% Malays and 20% Indians. Data were retrieved from the recipient and then projected as a word document. They are then coded according to ethnicity, age and gender and the number of words were counted. The speech act theory is applied to determine the expressive functions and this is then followed by a linguistic analysis. Analysis suggests that the SMS condolences can be classified into 13 expressive functions. The condolences written by Chinese writers expressed more hope and sympathy; those written by Malay writers were more indirect and polite and they expressed more apologies while those written by Indian writers expressed more God-related statements. Since the findings are derived from a small set of data the outcome of this paper cannot be generalised. Nonetheless, they are authentic data which are difficult to access hence, these findings will serve as a window for other cultures to understand the ethnic differences of multicultural Malaysia. Indeed, the outcome of this paper can contribute to a better understanding of intercultural communication

### Keywords

Malaysian;  
ethnic  
variations;  
sympathy;  
apologies,  
eulogy

## 1. Introduction

Culture is an interesting issue to focus on. It opens up one's mind and provides one with a better view of the world at large. This is even more necessary today as more and more people are travelling across the globe and living and working in other parts of the world. In that regard, a country such as Malaysia that comprises diverse cultures with multiethnic communities speaking various languages and practicing different customs and traditions, is a good place to study cultural differences and similarities. Tan (2004), who looks at the assimilation of a diverse community like Malaysia, says that the respective ethnic groups had not only assimilated each other's recipes to create unique dishes but also each other's costumes and cultures to become more diverse yet unique. Tan (2004) suggests that the assimilation process, which is the result of the people living together for many years, had created a unique identity for the Malaysian people. Consequently,

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the Malaysian culture is one that is typically an exclusive one that had resulted from the borrowing of a little here and a little there from each other to form a distinctive culture for the entire nation.

As a part of the Asian region, Malaysians are collectivists by nature. Most Malaysians aim to lead a life of harmony and togetherness with as little conflicts as possible. Nevertheless, sometimes this may seem impossible. The norm of the Malaysian society is hierarchical, people tend to practise showing a high regard for authority and elders and wherever possible, avoid conflicts (Asrul, 2003), practice politeness, (Asmah, 1995; Asma & Pedersen, 2003; David & Kuang, 1997, 2005), be indirect and show humility so as to avoid offending others (Asrul, 2003) and wherever possible, stay humble and not show off. Therefore, harmony and tolerance are important values for the people of this country. Although Asian in characteristic and collectivists in nature, the Malaysian identity has been described as unique because of its rich cultural environment. The uniqueness lies not only in its diverse languages and mixture of languages heard during interactions but also in its foods, costumes, artefacts and community interactions. Malaysians are not only collectivists in nature, they are also family oriented. Malaysians place a lot of emphasis on traditional or cultural events like Merdeka (Independence Day), the respective ethnic group's festive events like New years (Hari Raya, Chinese New Year, Deepavali and Christmas), Thaipusam, Vesak but most of all weddings and funerals. The last two events are important for Malaysians because not attending them can create conflicts or misunderstandings among friends and relatives.

Although Malaysians share several similarities in terms of values and practices, Malaysians also bear some cultural differences. Some aspects of these have been highlighted by David and Yong (2002) who noted cultural differences in newspaper obituaries. David and Kuang (1997, 2005) provided evidence to suggest the differences in communication styles while Thilagavathi (2003) noted the cultural difference of Malaysians when responding to compliments. Jamaliah (2000) and Suraiya (2006) extracted empirical evidence to show that Malaysian interactions within a classroom setting can be similar as well as different. The cultural diversity of Malaysians is also pervasive in other forms such as forms of address (Kuang, Jawakhir & Saroja, 2012) and in some respect, wedding invitation cards. Rohana and Kuang (2017) focussed on the differences of the wedding cards of the three dominant ethnic groups of Malaysia encompassing Malay, Chinese and Indians. They observed that the designs of these wedding cards were diverse as indicated by the ethnic group's religious beliefs but to some extent, they were also similar. They then concluded that the Malaysian community was assimilating the traditions of each other. These attempts to assimilate and develop a unique practice within the Malaysian society suggests that living together can lead to a sharing of culture. Nonetheless, this process may need to be further verified through more research input such as interviews or surveys. Although the lifestyles of the Malaysians, their cultural events and their communication styles have been exploited, how they communicate their condolences is an area of research which has not been explored much. Thus, it is apt to conduct a study to observe how there might be similarities or differences among the three ethnic groups in their expressions of condolence messages.

Condolences are messages which are expressed by the individual to a bereaved person who may have just lost someone close through death. In any culture, a condolence is generally expressed to show one's

concern and care for the living as well as for the deceased. A literature search for condolences written by Malaysians did not provide any input but it led to some input offering the rules for writing condolences in the western context (see Zunin & Zunin, 1991). This indicates that there have been little studies conducted to provide insights showing how Malaysians express their condolences whether orally or in writing. Based on this, it is hypothesised that Malaysian condolence messages written in English may not be the same as when they are written in the respective languages of Malay, Mandarin Chinese or Tamil. This is because English is a neutral language. It is anticipated that the findings may help to shed light on what the different ethnic groups may consider as important to be conveyed in a condolence message.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 *Speech Acts and Functions of Speech*

Austin (1962) pointed out that language is used for *doing* things as well as for asserting things. He stressed that in the statement, "I promise to do so-and-so", the statement is best understood as *doing* something i.e. making a promise. Austin (1962) then labelled the "performative utterance" as a speech act, subsequently termed as an illocutionary act.

When the utterance, "I now proclaim you husband and wife" is said in an appropriate context by a qualified person in a certain way, then the person saying it is doing something special, namely, binding two persons in matrimony" (Austin, 1962). Other speech acts illustrated by Austin (1962) include making an assertion, giving an order, or promising to do something. To perform an illocutionary act is to use a locution with a certain force, where locution refers to the act of saying something (Austin, 1962). In the theory of speech acts, attention is especially focused on the illocutionary act.

Searle (1969) claims that the basic unit of language carries no meaning in itself until it is articulated within a situation involving a speaker and hearer. Searle (1969) explains that when an utterance such as "It's cold in here" is expressed in a context when it is raining and the air-conditioning is running, the hearer who is in the same room, is expected to perform the act of "turning down the air-conditioning" so that the speaker's request can be fulfilled. In Searle's (1969) view, a locutionary act refers to the words and an illocutionary act refers to the performance of the act. In the utterance, "go home", the force is on the speaker's intent which in this case, is instructing the hearer to "go home". Perlocutionary act refers to the speech act that creates an effect on the feelings, thoughts or actions of either the speaker or the hearer. It seeks to change minds and are external to the performance for e.g. inspiring, persuading or deterring (Searle, 1969).

Utterances operate on two types of speech acts (Searle, 1975): a) utterance acts which encompass something said or when a sound is made and which may not have any meaning and b) propositional acts where a particular reference is made. It was thus proposed that acts can sometimes serve as utterances. Hence, a perlocutionary act is the same as a perlocutionary utterance. This proposition led to five illocutionary/perlocutionary points which incorporate: a) Assertives: statements may be judged as true or false because they aim to describe a state of affairs in the world;

- b) Directives: statements which attempt to make the other person's actions fit the propositional content;
- c) Commissives: statements which commit the speaker to a course of action as described by the propositional content;
- d) Expressives: statements that express the “sincerity condition of the speech act” and
- e) Declaratives: statements that attempt to change the world by “representing it as having been changed”.

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

## **2.2 What is a Condolence**

A condolence is expressed for the purpose of showing one’s humanistic side that is, to offer care and sympathy. Although condolences are best expressed verbally because of the sombre nature of the event, most people also convey their condolences in written words as prose or poems. In the Malaysian context, condolences tend to be expressed personally when people attend the wake/funerals. As a rule of practice, traditional Malaysians, i.e. people who understand the norm and culture of the Malaysian society, do not rely on commercial condolence cards. Of late, however, it is observed that Malaysians have also resorted to expressing their condolences to intimate as well as less intimate friends through social platforms like Facebook or Twitter. The digital era has also enabled users to express their condolences via emails as well as SMS or What’s app text messages. This mode may seem impersonal for a sensitive event such as this. Nonetheless, a condolence is a difficult message to express in words for it is, after all, a difficult moment where one may be at a loss for the right words to use. Particularly for Malaysians who come from different ethnic groups, cultures, traditions, customs and religious beliefs, the standard norm of expressing a condolence is still elusive. Thus far, condolences made in Mandarin Chinese, Tamil or Malay in the context of Malaysia, is still difficult to access from studies or academic articles. In this regard, this research may be able to illuminate some aspect of this vague area of interest.

## **2.2 Cultural Differences in grieving**

According to Bougere (2014), there has been a growing body of knowledge discussing the relationship between culture, grief and bereavement. A 1996 study conducted by Cowles indicates that individuals from different cultures share intrapersonal experiences of grief which are similar across cultural boundaries. Nonetheless, cultural traditions, beliefs and values might stimulate some variations in how people express their grief or how they cope with it. Bougere (2014) proceeded to say that bereavement takes place within the context of families and communities and bereavement is demonstrated through social interactions. Depending on the

individual's background, bereavement practices tend to vary. Some communities put more emphasis on after death rituals while other communities are less sensitive towards them (Bougere, 2014). Practitioners like nurses were hence advised to be more sensitive to their patients' needs when interacting with their patients. Bougere (2014) claimed that doing so will help to minimise the misunderstandings that occur between nurses and patients who go through mental distress after a death has occurred.

Broome (2004) also emphasised that "culture counts" for individuals who experience mental health problems after a bereavement. Research (Egan & Arnold, 2003; Sunoo, 2002; Cowles, 1996) showed that bereavement may trigger a unique and previously unrecognised mental disorder which can disrupt lives. This call for attention reiterates the necessity to look at cultural differences.

#### **2.4 Writing a Condolence**

There is little study to support how people should behave at funerals but current websites (Proper Funeral Etiquette; Funeral Etiquettes) suggest that there are certain procedures to follow. However, these are confined to the western context while information for the Malaysian context is still elusive. The limited information may be due to the fact that Malaysian funerals are culturally different and they vary from one to another, depending on location, social status and beliefs. A further effort to extract some information on what Malaysians would say during a bereavement was also not successful. Only some websites were available (see references on condolences) and these had mentioned the difficulty of attending a funeral and the difficulty of composing a condolence. One of these websites stated that during a funeral, one never really knows "what to say" to the family or friends who have lost their loved ones. It was advised that in such sombre occasions, one has to take the time to connect, with the hope that one can offer comfort and solace to others. The individual's presence is a welcoming thought for the bereaved. In this regard, it was advised that spoken words may not be important (see Words of condolences, n.d.). Based on this, it is deduced that the act of giving condolences is a research area that can be further explored and exploited, particularly in the local context. Thus, this research may be able to contribute to literature.

According to the western or English etiquette of writing a condolence, the message must provide comfort although the concept of 'comfort' in itself is profound. 'Comfort' means different things to different people. Kuang (2015) noted that some condolence messages, although well intended, were rejected by the recipient because they sounded rude and patronising.

Zunin and Zunin (1991) proposed that a written condolence should be personal, sincere and heartfelt; it should be composed as if speaking to the recipient; it should be short and thoughtful; it could mention a memory or two of the deceased; it should respect the religious beliefs of the recipient; it could offer help in some ways to the recipient but never financial help and it should never mention money owed by the deceased.

## 2.5 Previous Studies

Of the few studies that had examined condolences, the first appears to have come from Elwood (2004) who compared American and Japanese condolences. Using Discourse Completion Task (DST) as an approach to elicit data, participants were asked to express themselves in two given situations. Data were then analysed according to semantic formulas (see Olshtain & Cohen, 1983) and Elwood's (2004) findings were classified into five categories which encompass: a) Acknowledgement of the death with interjections like "oh" or "oh my God"; b) Expression of sympathy like "I'm so sorry"; c) Offer of assistance like "is there anything I can do?"; d) Future-oriented remarks which were encouraging words or practical advice like "try not to get depressed" and e) Expression of concern such as showing care for the well-being of the speaker and/or his or her family which include questions like "How are you doing?" Elwood (2004) also noted that some data did not fit into any pattern although they contained elements which encompass "expression of empathy", "sharing similar experience", "statement of not knowing", "statement of lacking words", "positive statements", "expression of surprise", "related questions" and "related comments". Elwood (2004) however, did not provide any justifications for these lack of categorization fits.

From an Iraqi perspective, Yahya (2010) investigated the effect of cultural norms and values of condolences imposed on the Iraqi community. Claiming to use the "ethnographic approach", spoken articulations and responses of unmentioned number of people were manually recorded and then extracted for analysis. Yahya (2010) claimed that there were a variety of differences in the use of semantic formulas. She outlined five which were most common, containing basic patterns of response such as: a) Acknowledgement of death; b) Expressions of sympathy; c) Offer of assistance; d) Future-oriented remarks and e) Expressions of concern. Yahaya (2010) also noted five minor categories which could be classified as i) Sharing similar experience; ii) Making statements of not knowing; iii) Making statements of lacking words; iv) Expressing surprise; and v) Making related questions and comments. Yahya (2010) nonetheless, did not indicate how she assessed these semantic formulas as "most common" or "minor".

In another study focusing on the Iranian context, Lotfollahi and Eslami-Rasekh (2011) employed DCT as an approach to extract data from 40 male and 40 female students. Their variables of gender, age and social distance were considered and their findings revealed eight categories of functions which encompass: a) Acknowledgement of the death which includes interjections such as "oh", "oh no", "oh my God", "oh dear"; b) Expression of sympathy such as "I'm really sorry", "a great sorrow", "what a pity", "it is really a great loss", as well as "accept my condolences" which was the most frequently used expression, the "core" of speech act; c) Offer of assistance which covers utterances like "if there is anything I can do please let me know", "if you need someone to talk to, count on me"; d) Future-oriented remarks like "you should be strong enough to cope with the situation", "I really like to be a witness of your happiness", "you should pacify your mother". In this particular category of their findings, the researchers claimed that the use of religious expressions was a unique trait of the Muslim community. These responses include praying for the bereaved family to be more patient; wishing that the loss suffered would be the last sorrow of the bereaved family and asking God to grant a long life to the bereaved family.

Their analysis further detected other categories such as e) Expression of concern with questions about the wellbeing of the bereaved such as “are you OK now?”, “where are you now?” and “I am coming to you”; f) Seeking absolution from God which includes expressions like “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; g) Related questions which include questions posed about the person who died or how it happened - “how old was he?”, “what happened?”, “when did you last see him?”. The researchers claimed that it was a characteristic of the Iranian culture which focusses on strong emotional relations such as showing care for others’ sorrow. The last category was h) Religious-oriented sympathy which contain expressions such as “we will all die”, “he has gone to paradise”, and “it was his fate”. These were used to pacify the bereaved family.

In their study, Samavarchi and Allami (2012) also enlisted the DCT to extract data from 10 male and 35 female Iranians who expressed their condolences in different situations. Their analysis was then categorised into the following patterns:

- a. Direct condolence (*I give you my condolences.*),
- b. Apologetic messages
  - i. Apologetic + offer to help (*I'm so sorry. If you need help, I'll be there.*)
  - ii. Apologetic messages + philosophical utterance (*I'm sorry; I hope it'll be the last tragedy on your life.*)
  - iii. Apologetic messages + appreciation of the dead (*I'm sorry; she was so nice.*)
  - iv. Apologetic messages + religious (*I'm sorry, May God bless him!*)
- c. Religious messages (*God bless him! / God will give him a place in paradise.*)
- d. Offering help statements (*If you need any help, let me know. You can count on me anytime.*)
- e. Messages offering comfort/sympathy (*Be calm and don't worry.*)
- f. Enquiries (*What happened? / How did it happen?*)
- g. Silence

From the Arab perspective, Tareq (2013) looked at 85 email condolences written by Arab native speakers to a Hebrew native speaker colleague who had lost his daughter. It was noted that the strategies used were almost similar to those of previous studies (see Olshtain & Cohen 1983; Elwood, 2004, and Yahya, 2010). They include: a) Acknowledgement of death; b) Expression of sympathy; c) Offer of assistance, d) Future-oriented remarks; e) Expression of concern; f) Appreciation of the dead (Eulogy); and g) Direct condolence. Despite the analysis, Tareq (2013) made no explanation as to whether or not these categories were analysed based on frequency or order of importance. The conclusion drawn from this study was that Arab native speakers used more religious expressions. Tareq (2013) added that condolence utterances were frequently initiated by females rather than males although gender was not a significant element. This claim was nevertheless, not validated in the study.

Moving on to the Jordanian context, Yasser and Marlyna (2013) focussed on how Jordanian Arabs conveyed their condolences via Facebook. From 678 posted comments, seven major strategies were detected encompassing: a) Praying for God’s mercy and forgiveness for the deceased; b) Reciting Quranic verses; c) Enumerating the virtues of the deceased (Eulogy); d) Expressing shock

and grief; e) Offering condolences; f) Realizing death is a natural part of life; and g) Using proverbs and sayings. Their findings showed that the strategies used could be influenced by the respondents' religious orientation (i.e. Islam).

Focusing on her own experience, Williams (2006) looked at thirteen pieces of condolence expressions. Using the framework of Linguistic Politeness, she identified three strategies of expressing a condolence" a) Acknowledgment of sympathy; b) Question of concern, and c) Inquiry for information. She mentioned that these strategies can also be used to gauge the relationship of the people involved, ranging from most independence-oriented to most solidarity-oriented.

Research on condolence expressions are new thus far and from the findings provided above, it appears that most had focussed on Elwood's (2004) semantic functions and strategies as a model. All the previous reports seemed to have 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 not much variation in the condolence expressions made by Americans, Japanese, Iranians, Iraqis, Jordanians and William's western interlocutors. Several of the studies noted above (Elwood, 2004; Samavarchi & Allami, 2012) had also engaged simulated data or data taken from secondary sources. In that regard, the analyses provided may not be as authentic as the current study which provides actual instances of condolences expressed via the SMS. As we are aware, perception is not a representation of reality and reality is a difficult moment to capture even among researchers. Thus, even if the authentic data were small in amount, they could still represent a reality within a small portion of the society that has people living in it.

### **3. Methodology**

A total of 36 SMS condolence messages written by mainly Malaysian professionals (2 were postgraduate students) to a local recipient (a professional) on her recent bereavement were retrieved with permission for this paper. All were written in English. Consent to use data was also solicited from the writers individually through three modes: verbal consent, telephone consent and written consent. Confidentiality and privacy were assured. All the condolence messages retrieved were converted into Microsoft word document and coded according to ethnicity, age and gender. The writers comprised a total of 47% Chinese, 33% Malays and 20% Indians and the age of the writers ranged from 30 to 60 years with a mean age of 41 years old. Five among the 36 writers were males. In focusing on the main aim of this paper, the two variables of age and gender were excluded because of the imbalance noted. Placing the written data into lines with each line denoting a complete statement, data were first identified for the expressive functions (see Elwood, 2004). To do this, data were first placed into three columns with each column representing one ethnic group. Data were then examined for the functions they perform. Following this, a linguistic approach was applied to identify the linguistic differences or similarities in the written messages. After the expressive functions were identified from the linguistic analysis,

the labels were adjusted to match the data. This was performed at least three times to ensure consistency.

### **3.1 Linguistic Analysis**

Doing a linguistic analysis of any data includes looking at how the words are constructed, the choice of words used as well as the intention of the writers. This can only be accomplished if the analyst is proficient in the language which the data were written in and only if the analyst is sufficiently experienced in reading the intentions behind the written words/message, gained from years of experience as a discourse analyst. A linguistic analysis also requires viewing the data from the researcher's worldview, experience and exposure. In this regard, the researcher's background as a linguist was considered and verification was also consulted with the recipient of the condolences and another published linguist. To some extent, interpretations may vary but an analysis that is supported by reliable and relevant evidence can help to mitigate this disadvantage since the analysis is scientifically studied based on a particular framework which has been established. In this regard, Searle's (1969) speech functions were applied by looking at the illocutionary speech acts. In this paper, the words employed in the writing were the focus as they allowed data to be categorised respectively. Thus, apologies would involve words like "sorry", sympathy would involve words like "condolences", offering assistance would involve words like "help", and hope would involve words linked to the future and God related statements would consist of the word, God and prayer.

A total of 36 condolence messages were composed in 985 words and written through 131 lines. Each line of the message is a complete expressive function. According to the frequency of occurrence, analysis indicates that data could be placed into 13 categories of expressive functions encompassing:

- 1) Expressing Hope,
- 2) Expressing Sympathy,
- 3) Expressing God-related statements,
- 4) Offering Assistance,
- 5) Expressing Eulogy,
- 6) Expressing Explanation,
- 7) Expressing Apologies,
- 8) Greetings,
- 9) Making Inquiries,
- 10) Expressing Endearments,
- 11) Expressing Uncertainty,

12) Wishful thinking and

13) Expressing Shock/sadness.

Of the 13 categories identified, it was observed that the expressive functions depicting expressing explanations, making inquiries and expressing endearments were simultaneously employed by all the three ethnic groups. Although it is uncertain why the writers needed to have these linguistic forms in their compositions, it is deduced that these were used as a strategy to begin the condolence message, as a way to be polite, for instance, by addressing the recipient nicely and also as a way of introducing themselves before expressing the condolence message. Although these identifications were not part of the aim of this paper, the evidence drawn from this analysis suggests that different people have different ways of expressing their condolences. It is very likely that many writers have the difficulty of knowing what to say in their condolence messages hence the need to find something more polite to say. Nonetheless, this deduction needs to be further verified through interviews.

## **4. Results and Discussions**

Data were consequently classified and grouped into the expressive functions, following the trail of Elwood's (2004) categories. The additional categories were derived from the linguistic analysis. Subsumed under these expressive functions were some ethnic variations. To detect these variations, the data were compared based on choice of words as shown in Table I. Each column illustrates a different ethnic group.

### **4.1. Chinese**

As there were more Chinese writers in this study, it was inevitable that the data would depict that Chinese writers used more words. It was further observed that the condolence messages written by the Chinese were comparatively longer and more verbose. However, when compared with the other two ethnic groups, it was found that Chinese writers expressed more words of emotion depicting hope and sympathy.

#### **4.1.1 Expressing Hope**

The Chinese writers had written a total of 14 statements with the majority of them using the linguistic formulation of "Take good care", "Be strong", "Hope you and your family will unite going through this", "Please take care", "Hope you and your children will be strong in facing this tremendous loss", "Take good care of yourself", "Do take care", "Be strong", "Take care" with one longer statement of "May you regain strength and reorganise your situation for your wellbeing and more so for your children". All these expressions were considered as expressions of hope because they conveyed the intention of the writer to the recipient to be well taken care of. In this expressive function, the Chinese writers used "take care" seven times, "be strong" five times, and "hope" three times and the modal verb "may" only two times. It was observed that

all these statements could be direct requests or indirect requests, depending on the modal verbs used: “May” or Please”.

#### **4.1.2 Expressing Sympathy**

In expressing their sympathy, the Chinese writers used other linguistic formulations such as “My condolences”, “Please accept my most sincere condolences”, “My deepest condolences”, “Please accept my condolences”, “My deepest and sincere condolences”, and “ Our deepest condolences”. These condolences were preceded by possessive adjectives such as “My”, “Our” or a modal verb such as “Please”. Other superlatives noted were “Most sincere” and “Deepest”. The superlative, “Deepest” was used eight times, “Sincere” was used three times and “Most” was used once. The word “Condolences” appeared 14 times in a total of 13 statements.

#### **4.1.3 Expressing God related statements**

This appeared minimally in the statements made by the Chinese writers. In total, the word, “prayers” which is related to “God” appeared only two times and the word “God” and “Blessing” appeared only once respectively.

#### **4.1.4 Offering Assistance**

A comparison of the frequency of use in this expressive function indicates that the Chinese writers offered their assistance slightly more times than the Malay and Indian writers. In total they offered “Assistance” eight times. These were linguistically conveyed through expressions like “..you always have our support”, “Let me know if I can be of any assistance”, “Anything need me, just call”, “Call me when you can”, “If you need to talk things out”, and “If there is anything I could do to help”. The most commonly used word to express assistance was “Need” which occurred three times, the word “Call” appeared two times” and because it was a conditional proposition, the word “If” was used four times in total, out of six statements.

#### **4.1.5 Expressing Eulogy**

In this expressive function, only one writer composed a eulogy for the deceased which was expressed from specific to general such as “... such a great father, a loving husband and a cheerful man who served others dutifully all his life”.

#### **4.1.6 Other expressive functions**

The other expressive functions comprised Expressing Explanations, Expressing apologies, Greetings, Making Inquiries, Expressing endearments, Expressing uncertainty and Expressing shock or sadness. The first five functions noted here had been explained earlier as a strategy which writers used to commence their messages. The subsequent three functions were not noted in the Malay or Indian writers at all, so these could not be compared. Nonetheless, it was noted that only four (4) percent of the Chinese writers had expressed a wishful thought that had been linguistically formulated as “Wish I can be there for you....” and “Wish I could be there for you”.

## **4.2 Malay**

Overall, the Malay writers expressed more apologies which were conveyed through the linguistic formulation of “So sorry”, “I am sorry” and “I am really sorry”. The Malay writers applied adverbs of “so” and “really” more than the other writers. Further to that, the Malay writers offered slightly more eulogies for the deceased than the other writers and these were expressed as “May his soul...”, “May he be blessed...”, “May he rest in peace...”, “Know that he would want you to carry on...”, and “He was a good man...”. In the context of this paper, any expression conveying good words for the deceased were considered as a eulogy. Additionally, the Malay writers offered more explanations at the beginning of their condolence messages with expressions such as “I was informed...”, “Just heard...”, “I just received news...”, or “Everyone is stumped...” than other writers.

### **4.3.1 Expressing Hope**

In this expressive function, the Malay writers composed a total of 14 statements. They had used the word, “strong” ten times, “take care” three times, and the modal verb, “may” was used three times while the noun word of “Hope” was used three times and “God” or “Prayers” were used two times respectively.

### **4.3.2 Expressing Sympathy**

In this expressive function, the Malay writers also used the word “condolences” to a maximum of five times in six statements. The word “heartfelt” and “grief” was used once respectively and one outstanding statement stood out as “Sharing your grief”.

### **4.3.3 Expressing God related statements**

Under this expressive function, only one statement was noted and it was written personally as “my thoughts and prayers are with you”.

### **4.3.4 Offering assistance**

Under this expressive function, the Malay writers also used “Let me know if there is anything I can do to help”, “Don’t hesitate to call if I can be of help” and “...if you need someone to talk to, please call me”. It is also noted that as a conditional offer, the word “if” was used three times in four statements.

### **4.3.5 Expressing Eulogy**

The Malay writers offered more eulogies than other writers. These were mainly written indirectly and were preceded by the modal verb, “May” which showed Malay politeness. Only one statement expressed a direct statement, “He was a good man”.

### **4.3.6 Other expressive functions**

The Malay writers provided more explanations and expressed more apologies while other expressive functions were minimally noted.

#### **4.4 Indians**

Overall, the Indian writers used more linguistic expressions which depicted God-related statements. These include statements such as “I pray for your wellbeing...”, “Holding you up in my prayers...”, “I pray that you and your family find peace...” or “God bless him most”. The expressions contained words related to “God”, “pray” or “prayers”.

##### **4.4.1 Expressing Hope**

Like others, the Indian writers also offered hope in their condolence messages and they also applied common words like “Be strong”, “May God give you the strength and courage to...”, “May God keep you in loving embrace” followed by “Take care” and “Be strong”. They used the expression “Be Strong” three times, the modal verb, “May” and “God” three times and “take care only once out of a total of five statements.

##### **4.4.2 Expressing Sympathy**

As the number of Indian writers in this study was small, it was inevitable that the statements which noted condolences were also minimal. In the context of this paper, only two statements were noted with the word “Condolences” used twice and the words “Deepest” and “Heartfelt” used once respectively.

##### **4.4.3 Expressing God-related statements**

The Indian writers used these type of expressions more than the other writers. They used the word “Pray” or “Prayers” five times from six statements, and the expression of “God Bless” only once. However, it appears that Indian writers used more pronouns in expressing their statements. The pronoun, “I” and the possessive adjective, “My” were used four times and the pronoun “You” and the possessive adjective, “Your” were used seven times.

##### **4.4.4 Offering Assistance**

The Indian writers offered their assistance as a question form such as “Is there anything that I can help with?” with one statement containing the conditional “If” as in “If there is anything I can do, please let me know”.

##### **4.4.5 Expressing Eulogy**

The Indian writers also used superlatives to describe the deceased as in “Your... was one of the most genuine and sincere person”. Attempting to offer a good word, one statement was written as “He is at peace”. There were two directives noted in this expressive function stated as “Remember him with a smile” and “God bless his soul”. The last two statements were treated as Eulogy because they attempt to bring up something good and nice about the deceased.

#### **4.4.6 Expressing Explanations and Expressing Apologies**

It was explained that most of the writers had mainly used these as a strategy to commence their condolence messages. It was also hypothesised that this is due to the difficulty of composing a condolence message.

#### **4.4.7 Other expressive functions**

Similar to the context of the Malay writers, there was insufficient data from the Indian writers for these to be analysed adequately hence, 'other expressive functions' could not be adequately compared.

#### **4.5 Ethnic Similarities**

Among the variations noted from the analysis, there were also some similarities detected. For instance, data indicate that Malaysian writers were able to construct comprehensible condolence messages which adhered to the western format of condolence writing (see Zunin & Zunin, 1991). The analysis highlighted that Malaysian writers display care for another Malaysian through expressions such as "Take good care...", "Hope you and your family will unite...", "May you stay strong...", "May god give you strength...", "Be strong" and "May God keep you in his loving embrace...". The analysis also emphasised that Malaysian writers express their religious intents through the use of "God", "pray" or "prayers". However, this is confined to only a small number of writers.

Thus, it is safe to say that Malaysians may not run the risk of offending others when expressing their condolences in a neutral language like English. Analysis had also shown that the "expression of sympathy" which conveyed their condolence, may emerge at various points of their SMS messages. This could be at the beginning, in the middle or at the end of the SMS message. This was noted from the stratification or line numbering of the data.

#### **4.5 Discussion**

This paper has shown that the condolence messages written by Malaysian writers consist of similar expressive functions such as those identified by Elwood (2004): a) Expressions of sympathy, b) Offer of assistance, c) Future-oriented remarks and d) Expression of concern (in the context of this paper, they were labelled as expressing hope). This paper has also provided evidence to show that there were similarities in the expressive functions identified here when compared to other researchers such as Yahya (2010), Lotfollahi and Eslami-Rasekh (2011), Samavarchi and Allami (2012) where God-related statements and Apologies were expressed in the condolence messages. This paper also indicate that it shares one common expressive function identified by Yasser and Marlyna which is "Making Inquiries". Another expressive function that stood out in this paper was "Wishful Thinking" which had not been detected by previous studies (see Elwood, 2004, Williams, 2006; Yahaya, 2010; Lotfollahi & Eslami-Rasekh, 2011; Samavarchi & Allami, 2012). This could be attributed to the context of this paper where the writers were

unable to attend the funeral and were probably feeling wishful. Nonetheless, this finding is confined to a very small percentile thus it could not be generalized nor compared.

## 5. Conclusion

The analysis of this paper has shown that the SMS condolence messages written by Malaysians expressed hope, sympathy, and apologies. Some had attempted to eulogise and some had demonstrated their religious values with some offering assistance. Among the three ethnic groups, it appears that Malaysian Chinese writers were slightly more verbose and they offered more hope and sympathy than the other writers. The Malay writers were slightly more polite and indirect and they offered more eulogies and were more sympathetic as they used “sorry” more times than other writers while the Indian writers offered more God-related statements. All these ethnic variations suggest that each ethnic group placed slightly different emphasis in their condolence messages. Such an occurrence could have been the outcome of their respective cultures, upbringing or social values.

This paper has also shown that the functions of expressing explanations, expressing apologies, making inquiries and expressing endearments were utilized by Malaysian writers mainly as strategies to commence their condolence messages. Thus, it was deduced that Malaysian writers may have found it difficult to express their condolences. In this regard, it would be a good idea to provide training to students at the school level to prepare them for such an event in their lives in the future. This paper has also noted that Malaysian writers were quite capable of constructing their SMS condolences aptly and appropriately as far as showing care, concern and sympathy is involved. Despite the fact that Malaysian writers may vary in their emphasis in composing a condolence message in English, they do not vary in delivering their heartfelt feelings to a fellow Malaysian who is experiencing grief. This shows that the Malaysian society is fairly civilized to the extent that its people are able to share grief through a neutral language like English and yet, each ethnic community emphasises on a different aspect of their culture. Although there were expressive functions which stood out quite differently from the others such as “Wishful Thinking”, there is insufficient data to imply that it is a common occurrence. Thus, more studies need to be conducted to verify the possibility. Overall, it is good to know that there is some degree of ethnic variations in Malaysian SMS condolences and there are also similarities. This would endorse what Tan (2004) says about culture being assimilated to develop a new one that has a combination of each.

## 6. About the author(s)

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## Appendix

Table I. Ethnic variations of Malaysian SMS condolences

<b>Expressive functions</b>	<b>Chinese</b>	<b>Malay</b>	<b>Indian</b>
Expressing Hope	May you...	Take good care of ....	Be strong my dear
	Take good care and be strong...	May you stay strong	May God give you the strength and courage to .....
	Hope you and your family will unite going through this...	May God give you strength	May God keep you in his loving embrace ...
	Please take care...	Be strong, have faith..	Take care....
	Hope you and children will be strong in facing this tremendous loss...	May his soul be blessed...	Be strong...
	Take good care of yourself...	Hope you be strong in going through this..	
	Do take care...	Hope you are strong	
	Be strong and take care...	Stay strong ....	
	Please take care of yourself...	Please be strong and our prayers are with you....	
	Be strong, don't cry...	Take care...	
	Be strong....	Please be strong...	
	May you regain strength and reorganise your situation for your well being and more so for your children.	Be very strong...	
	Take care ...	Hope you and the boys remain strong for each other...	
	Take care...	Take care...	
Expressing Sympathy	My condolences....	My condolences to ....	My deepest condolences to you and your family...
	My condolences....	My heartfelt condolences	Heartfelt condolences to you....
	Please accept my most sincere condolences ....condolences...	Condolences from...	
	My deepest condolence to you.....	My condolences to you....	
	Please accept my condolences	My condolences to ....	
	My deepest and sincere condolences	Sharing your grief	
	My deepest condolences....		

	Our deepest condolences		
	My deepest condolences		
	My deepest condolences to...		
	Please accept my sincere condolences		
	My deepest condolences		
	My deepest condolence		
Expressing God related statements	My prayers go to .... Be strong and pray to god for strength Blessings to you and....	...my thoughts and prayers are with you	I pray for your well being and your children too.. Holding you up in prayers You are in my thoughts and prayers All my thoughts, good wishes and prayers are with you... I pray that you and your family find peace... God bless him most...
Offering Assistance	Words can't express this loss but be assured that you always have our support. Let me know if I can be of any assistance. Anything need me just call, I will standby. Call me when you can. If you need to talk things out I am around. ..but if you needed anything or if there is anything I could do to help, I'm more than willing to ..	Please let me know if there is anything I can do to help.... Don't hesitate to call if I can be of help. I have gone through that and I know how difficult it is... And if you need someone to talk to please.....	Is there anything that I can help with? If there is anything I can do please let me know.
Expressing Eulogy	Our deepest condolences to your family for the loss of such a great father, a loving husband and a cheerful man who served others dutifully all his life.	...may his soul be blessed and rest in peace Know that he would want you to carry on with the things he has been so supportive of... May he rest in peace	Your ... is one of the most genuine and sincere person.... He is at peace... Remember him with a smile... God bless his soul...

		He was a good man....	
Expressing Explanation	I just got news that .... Just heard... Just knew .... Sorry, I just heard...	I was informed.... Just heard ... I know how hard it must be for you..... I just received .....	Just heard ... I know this is really a difficult day .... It came as shocking news....
Expressing Apologies	I am deeply deeply sorry..... Very sorry to hear about....	So sorry... I am sorry.. I'm so sorry to .... So sorry for the news that we got this morning... I am so sorry .. I am really sorry to hear of your loss... So sorry....	Sorry about your recent loss. I am so sorry to hear this very sad news.... My sincere apologies to you....
Greetings	Hi...	Hi... My dear....	Hi.... Dear....
Making Inquiries	How are you... Good morning...	Could we come and see you...	
Expressing Endearments	Hugs Love you		With much love... Hugs...
Expressing Uncertainty	I dunno what to say....		
Wishful Thinking	Wish I can be there for you during this difficult time. Wish I could be there for you now.		
Expressing Shock or Sadness	Shock and disbelief over.... I am indeed very sad to hear the sudden demise of your beloved husband.		

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Others –cannot be  
categorised

You are so strong that I  
didn't even noticed

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