The Dyke

Research Article

'Doing Things with Words': Funeral performative utterances among the Tonga of Zimbabwe

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Abstract

This article explores the oral heritage of the Batonga people through performative utterances made by individuals with specific relational roles during adult funeral ceremonies, whether male or female. It focuses on the nature of these utterances, their categories, sociocultural meanings, and their functions within their context of use. The article applies Austin's (1962) Speech Act theory to identify, classify, and interpret the utterances. Using a qualitative approach, the study examines speech acts employed in BaTonga funeral rites as expressions of emotions and feelings conveyed to the deceased, divine entities, family members, and those believed to have caused the death. Data collection involved three methods: observation, intuition, and interviews. The main argument is that, like other African communities, the BaTonga of Zimbabwe have, over time, developed culturally specific mechanisms to cope with death, bereavement, and grief. The research identified six performative utterances used during funeral rites: declaring death, rhetorical questions, describing events, offering condolences, and making promises or requests. This study contributes to the understanding of indigenous practices that involve linguistic and behavioural markers and demonstrate cultural competence. It highlights the linguistic heritage of the Tonga people and shows how the BaTonga communities 'do things with words' to fulfil their socio-cultural funeral rituals.

Keywords: Tonga, oral heritage, funeral rites, death, performative utterances

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Introduction

This article explores the BaTonga people's oral heritage through performative utterances made by individuals with specific relational roles during the funeral rites of adults, whether male or female. Death has been part of human existence since ancient times, and studies on (funeral) rites and rituals (Ademiluka, 2009; Baloyi & Makobe-Rabothata, 2014; Bayo, 2021; Chikakure, 2020; Saidi, 2017) often focus on 'non-industrial and pre-literate' (Finnegan, 1969) communities. However, our research highlights the cultural resilience of ceremonial linguistic behaviour among contemporary BaTonga communities in Binga, parts of Gokwe, Hwange, and Kariba in Zimbabwe. Among the BaTonga, funeral rites commence with an official announcement of the death and conclude with the after-burial ceremony, which involves the disposal of the deceased's belongings. This paper concentrates on the nature of utterances, their classifications, sociocultural meanings, and functional roles within this context.

This article employs Austin's (1962) Speech Act theory to identify, classify, and interpret utterances. Central to Austin's theory is the concept of 'performative utterances' (Finnegan, 1969; Ray, 1973; Vanderveken & Susumu, 2001; Kemmerling, 2002). Therefore, the idea that language generates meaning is fundamental to this study. Kaburise (2005, p. 2) observed that "creating linguistic meanings or achieving communication between language participants is a dynamic process involving units, such as the form, context, and function of the utterance." The pragmatic use of language and the attainment of the desired outcome depend on what Hymes (1967) termed 'communicative competence,' which refers to the ability of interlocutors to convey and interpret messages interpersonally within a given context (Kaburise, 2005). Stalker (1989, p. 182) describes communicative competence as:

> *That part of our language knowledge enables us to choose the communicative system we wish to use and, when the selected system is language, to connect the goals and context of the situation with the structures available in our linguistic repertoire through functional choices at the pragmatic level.*

This definition underpins the central argument of this study: the BaTonga people's success in achieving the desired interpersonal and socio-cultural outcomes at funerals through performative utterances depends on how they manipulate the form, function, and context of their utterances through their communicative competence.

According to Ohaja and Anyim (2021), there are two most important times in a person's life, which are birth and death. Birth and death are marked with

symbolic rituals. According to (Kyalo 2013, p. 35, cited in Ohaja and Anyim, 2021), rituals (in African cosmology) are

> *symbolic, routine, and repetitive activities and actions through which one makes connections with what we consider to be the most valuable dimension of life. They are often associated with significant events or places in our individual and communal lives.*

Rituals are an important form of a people's intangible heritage because "they "[rituals] are not outdated; they remain an ongoing and crucial aspect of African existence" (Ohaja & Anyim, 2021, p. 4).

Studies on death and funeral rituals in Africa have examined both religious and cultural viewpoints. Religion, whether traditional African beliefs or Christianity, appears to serve as a safety net for dealing with the fear, uncertainty, and powerlessness that death brings (Baloyi & Makobe-Rabothata, 2014). Funeral rituals highlight the importance of religion by including the belief system to help the bereaved cope with what many see as one of life's most mysterious events. This study emphasises the embeddedness of language within culture, since culture encompasses the "worldview, values, norms and behaviour patterns, shared by a group of individuals, and profoundly impacts behaviour and the family; it shapes how persons interpret illness, suffering and dying" (Dancy & Davis, 2006, p. 193). Against this background, the study considers culture as a crucial factor influencing the choice and use of performative utterances in managing grief within an African context.

Academic research on death and funeral discourse (Ademiluka, 2009; Baloyi & Makobe-Rabothata, 2014; Bayo, 2021; Chikakure, 2020; Saidi, 2017) has generally concentrated on "the so-called dominant ethnic groups of Zimbabwe, that is the Shona and the Ndebele, while marginalising the so-called minority groups, such as the Tonga" (Gambahaya & Muhwati, 2010, p. 322). This paper aligns with Muhwati's (2014, p. xxxii) argument that,

> *In Zimbabwe Shona and Ndebele are not the only sites of historical, cultural, linguistic, sociological, medical, and political information. There is a multiplicity of other legitimate sites of knowledge and information which include, among others, Tonga … And these deserve recognition if the idea of nation is to be understood in a manner that benefits the present and the future.*

The BaTonga are a distinctive group in their approach to funeral rituals for three reasons. First, the BaTonga people follow matriarchal heritage and experiences (Mumpande, Chabata, and Muwati 2017; Muderedzi, 2006; Saidi, 2016; Saidi

& Matanzima, 2021) and were "basically isolated from the rest of the people of Zimbabwe and lived a very traditional life" (Muderedzi, 2006, p. 6), except in cases such as the BaTonga of Mkoka on the banks of the Kana River, who live alongside the Shona (Nyota, 2014), and those that frequently interact with the Ndebele due to political, administrative, and economic reasons. Nyota (2014, p. 12) reported that BaTonga school-going children speak Shona or Ndebele even at home, and that speakers of Shona and Ndebele often label them as "MaShona-Tonga" and "MaNdevere-Tonga", respectively.

The use of unadulterated ciTonga language (including performative utterances), however, at funerals and other traditional ceremonies, performed in the home language use domain and often attended only by adult family members, family friends and neighbours, is expected. Secondly, the way the BaTonga people perform their rituals, including funeral rites, is intricately connected to their matrilineal heritage and their religious, ontological, and cosmological history. Thirdly, compared with other ethnic groups in Zimbabwe, the BaTonga's cultural beliefs and practices have not been significantly affected by Christianity, modernity, or technology. There are still many connections with the BaTonga people's past. Thus, "there is behaviour, [even for permanent urban dwellers and Christians], that continues to maintain cultural connections and traditions, the wellspring flowing from the African ontology and epistemology" (Baloyi & Makobe-Rabothata, 2014, p. 234). Even urban BaTonga dwellers appear to maintain a close connection with the countryside and its funerary practices.

The dominance or non-dominance of Christianity among BaTonga speakers, as with other Zimbabwean African communities, both urban and rural, is related to the politics of death and burial (Ranger, 2004). Belief in, and practice of, burial rituals and the influence of kinship networks and roles, more than acculturation, determined the choice of a rural versus urban burial. Most of the clan members who perform crucial roles, linguistically, psychologically, and physically during funeral rites, reside in the countryside. Hence, BaTonga funerals, like those of other African groups, are collective and communal, involving kin and neighbours. Moreover, it can be challenging to carry out elaborate, performative mourning, burial, and post-burial rites in urban homes and municipal burial sites, due, among other reasons, to municipal control over locations and burial space. Moreover, with funeral assurance packages that cover the transportation of corpses, deceased relatives who live and die in town can be transported back to their natal homes for commemoration and burial.

The choice of a burial site among Africans shapes perceptions of a decent and dignified funeral. Many Shona urban dwellers believe that burying a relative in an urban cemetery is *kurasa munhu* (dumping a person). Writing on the significance of burial sites among the Zulu of South Africa, Ngcece (2019, p. 2) argues that "it is important to note that cemetery space is not just a place of burial because it also serves as a revered place for its cultural and spiritual significance". Owino (2017, p. 2) contends that "nearly all African communities believed in burying the dead in their ancestral land, where the spirit of the dead would join with the spirit world". An elaborate quotation from Chitakure (2020, p. 237) on the Karanga people of Nyajena's preference for a rural burial over an urban burial reinforces this point:

> *In the urban cemetery, the dead are buried among strangers. For the Karanga, the newly departed must be received and initiated by their own ancestors, who are most often buried in the same family graveyard. Although ancestors are not limited by space or time, the Karanga of Nyajena believe that the rural home is their abode of choice … their umbilical cords are buried in a plot of land in the rural area. So, if the deceased's body is buried in an urban cemetery, far away from where the deceased's umbilical cord is buried, the connectedness with one's roots, ancestors … is disturbed.*

Chitakure's observation accurately reflects the unwavering epistemology of the typical Zimbabwean African. Burial sites cultivate a sense of belonging and identity. When the BaTonga of Binga recalled their forced removal from their ancestral lands during the construction of the Kariba dam, they "talked about the separation of families, the flooding of farms and ancestral burial grounds" (Tremmel 1994, p. 5, cited in Marowa 2015, p. 34). Research on Zimbabwe's Fast Track Land Redistribution Programme (FTLRP) discusses how "places of spiritual significance such as mountains and graves of ancestors were used to make a connection to 'specific places' to legitimise 'traditional' claims over land in newly resettled territories" (Mkodzongi & Lawrence, 2019, p. 9). Besides the burial site itself, the performance of traditional rituals, where linguistic and non-linguistic acts energise each stage, is a vital factor. The study set out with three objectives as follows:

i)   *To use Austin's (1962) speech act classification to identify and classify utterances used in Tonga funeral rites as expressions of emotions and feelings communicated to the deceased, to the divine, to family members, and to those believed to have caused the death.*

ii) *To use speech act classes such as directives, representational/assertive, commissive, expressive, and declarative in categorising the utterance forms (Egenti & Mmadike, 2016, p. 4) and*

iii) *To suggest the epistemological, ontological, and cosmological interpretations of*

the utterances the Tonga use at every stage of the funeral.

The major argument proffered in this study is that, like other African ethnic groups, the BaTonga of Zimbabwe have, over the years, developed culturally embedded mechanisms of coping with death, bereavement, and grief. Their collective response to death through emotional linguistic expression indexes the African philosophy of *ubuntu* (humanness, being human). This philosophy defines an inherently relational understanding of identity and personhood that conveys the profound connectedness of human existence, togetherness, mutual solidarity, and reciprocity (Evans, McCarthy, Kebe, Bowlby & Wousango, 2017) among the living and with their living-dead relatives.

Central to Ubuntu is the relational response to death, in which grief is managed through relationships (between the living and the living-dead, and among the living), obligations, and expectations. 'Family' relationships in the broadest sense (including friends and neighbours) and social support networks are central to identity, belonging, and social status (Evans et al., 2017).

Empirical work on the linguistic, emotional, and socio-cultural aspects of death and bereavement in Zimbabwe is sparse. This study, on the BaTonga people, is expected to contribute to the repertoire of knowledge on indigenous practices that demand linguistic and behavioural markedness and cultural competence.

The BaTonga people of Zimbabwe

The BaTonga people are a historically marginalised but fairly large ethnic group found in Zimbabwe. The BaTonga people are found in Zimbabwe, Zambia, Malawi, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Namibia and Mozambique (Mumpande, 2014; Mphande, 2015; Saidi, 2016), making it a cross-border language and culture. In Zimbabwe, the BaTonga people are found initially in the middle Zambezi Valley, notably in Binga district, as well as in parts of Gokwe, Kariba, and Matabeleland North. Mumpande et al. (2017, p. 1) state that "the Tonga people were among the first group of people to settle in what is known as Zimbabwe today." Mumpande (2020) highlights that the BaTonga linguistic zones, apart from being confined to the Zambezi Valley districts of Hwange, Binga, Gokwe North, are also noted in Gokwe South, Nkayi, Lupane, and Nyaminyami; Hurungwe district of Mashonaland West, in Mbire and Mt. Darwin districts of Mashonaland Central Province; Mudzi district of Mashonaland East Province, where they are known as Mudzi Tonga (Hachipola, 1998). The BaTonga are also found in the Mberengwa District of Midlands Province; Mhondoro-Ngezi District of Mashonaland West Province

and Kwekwe Districts of Midlands Province (Manyena, 2013; Mumpande, 2014,). From the aforementioned, the BaTonga are, therefore, scattered across Zimbabwe.

Sociolinguistically, Zimbabwe's language ecology promoted English as the language of public use and Shona and Ndebele as languages of private use. Until 2002, the colonial-era language policy in Zimbabwe made it a two-indigenous-language country, namely Ndebele and Shona, with English as the dominant language (Mumpande, 2019). Within the context of Zimbabwe, ciTonga, therefore, has been regarded as a marginalised language (Hachipola, 1998) until it was constitutionally designated an 'officially recognised language' in 2013.

In Zimbabwe, the BaTonga are believed to constitute the third-largest ethnic group after the Shona and the Ndebele (Hachipola, 1998; Maseko & Moyo, 2013). Hachipola (1998) believes that the number of Tonga speakers in Zimbabwe is unknown because they have been assimilated into other identity groups. Some Tonga leaders claim that their population figures are always grossly underestimated (TOLACCO 2001).

The 2002 education language policy did little to make ciTonga visible in the education sector. In 2013, the Zimbabwean Constitution officialised the position of ciTonga. Section 6 of the 2013 national constitution officially recognises 16 languages in Zimbabwe, namely chiChewa, chiBarwe, English, Kalanga, Khoisan, Nambya, chiNdau, isiNdebele, Shangani, chiShona, Sign language, Sotho, ciTonga, Tswana, Venda and Xhosa (Zimbabwe Constitution, 2013). According to the new constitution, the state, and all institutions, and agencies of government at every level must ensure that all officially recognised languages are treated equitably and consider the language preferences of people affected by governmental measures or communications.

Maseko and Mutasa (2019) indicate that since Zimbabwe gained independence in 1980, ciTonga, alongside a host of other previously designated marginalised languages, has endured marginalisation in public and official spaces, leading to language shift. In the presence of dominant endoglossic languages, chiShona and isiNdebele, within BaTonga communities, ciTonga speakers have found it challenging to maintain their language. There has been a general assumption that many ciTonga speakers had shifted to chiShona or isiNdebele, resulting in what Skutnabb-Kangas (2000, p. 14) referred to as 'linguistic genocide' or 'linguicide' (Nettle & Romaine, 2000, p. 6). However, according to Mumpande and Barnes

(2019), through language advocacy in the Binga district, BaTonga has been mostly revitalised, to the extent that there are significant strides in reversing the adverse language shift affecting ciTonga. Despite the historical marginalisation of the language, the BaTonga people have maintained their cultural practices, in which they consistently and effectively 'do things with words'.

Literature Review

Anthropologists (Jindra & Noret, 2013), theologians (Togarasei & Chitando, 2005; Moyo, 2019), phenomenologists and (socio)linguists (Kaguda, 2012; Bayo, 2021) have long theorised funerals and responses to death in Africa, with varying foci. In Zimbabwe, research on funerals and death has mostly focused on the Shona-speaking people for two reasons: the historical designation of the Shona as the largest indigenous language-speaking group in Zimbabwe and the colonial construction of the Shona identity following the adoption of Doke's (1931) recommendations on the unification of Shona dialects and the institutionalisation of Shona as an area of study. However, the dominance of research on Shona beliefs and practices, including responses to death, eclipsed the idiosyncrasies and nuances evident in other linguistic and cultural communities in the country, including Tonga.

While Togarasei and Chitando (2005), and Chitando (1999) offer a refreshing perspective on the emergence of the death industry, characterised by 'death' entrepreneurs, this study belongs to an increasing research repertoire on relational performative behaviour embedded in people's long-held beliefs and perceptions of death and bereavement, enacted through funeral rituals and rites (e.g., Chirisa et al., 2021; Moyo, 2019; Saidi, 2017; Kaguda, 2012). The concept of relational performative behaviour reflects the role of kinship relations in conducting death rites. Commenting on the Shona, Bourdillon (1987, p. 217) said that "kinship relations feature prominently at all the rituals associated with death."

Despite the resilience associated with rituals, research evidence reveals the impact of socio-cultural, technological, and environmental change on how the rituals are performed. Chirisa, et al. (2021) provide insightful observations on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the symbolic act of *kwaanzya bantu(Tonga), kubata maoko* (Shona) (a personalised gesture of paying condolences and assuring emotional support). Moyo (2018) explores the introduction of dance and song to Ndebele funerary through Pentecostal Christianity as part of the new "eschatology, belief about the afterlife, views and perceptions of death,

culture…." Moyo's study demonstrates the diverse heritage of funeral practices among different African language communities in Zimbabwe. It is argued that:

> *…while the Tonga people and the Shona people seem to have had such a tradition of singing and dancing at funeral gatherings, the Ndebele people did not, except at certain times, maybe for just one song or so, which was never accompanied by any dancing (Moyo, 2018, p. 5).*

One agrees with Moyo (2018) that idiosyncrasies distinguish one language group from another. For instance, 'wailing' is a common act of announcing the death of an adult among indigenous Zimbabweans. Moyo (2013) describes the nature and function of wailing at Shona funerals. However, this paper demonstrates that what is marked among the BaTonga 'wailing' is its feminisation, the verbal utterances accompanying the wailing, and the messages that are consciously communicated through the utterances, to whom and why they are expressed.

Saidi (2017) and Kaguda (2012) explore Shona funeral discourses, particularly the various terms, expressions, and names used to refer to death and dying and to the deceased during funeral rites, using semiotics and politeness theory, respectively. The two researchers focus on the public funeral arena, where the general congregation expresses various forms of mourning. Bailey and Walter (2016, p. 149) define the congregation as "the group of people who have gathered to bid farewell to the deceased." Among the BaTonga funeral, mourners, Bailey and Walter's 'congregation' are close family members, who sometimes engage in 'private' rites and sympathisers that participate in the 'public' linguistic and non-linguistic performances.

Contrary to other studies on funeral language behaviour among indigenous Zimbabwean communities, which see the funeral congregation as a unified group of mourners, this research highlights the different roles and responsibilities of the two categories of mourners. Neither are close family members merely objects of pity and sympathy, nor is the wider congregation composed of passive followers of events. Like Egenti and Mmadike's (2016, p. 49) study on the Igbo of Nigeria, it is recognised that "since a funeral ritual is public…It provides [individuals and communities] with an accepted venue to express (our) painful feelings, it is a time during which sympathisers condone the bereaved through an open expression of sadness". Funeral research that overlooks the distinct roles of the deceased's closest relatives and the broader congregation misses something important. The article acknowledges that not all words spoken at funerals are performative utterances. However, this study points to newer areas of research, such as what Davies (2002) calls words 'against death', which are now typical in both church-centred and non-church-centred funerals across Africa.

The Speech Act Theory

Austin (1962) developed the contemporary Speech Act Theory in '*How to do things with words*' , and Searle (1969) further elaborated Austin's ideas in *Speech Acts.* This study deploys two notions from Speech Act Theory to analyse the performative utterances in funeral rituals of Zimbabwe's ciTonga speakers. The Speech Act Theory conceptualises language as a form of action rather than a conduit for conveying and expressing ideas and feelings. Austin puts it thus: "[t]o say something is to do something, or in saying something we do something, or even *by* saying something we do something" (Austin, 1964, p. 108). In this regard, speakers perform some acts when uttering sentences, such as questioning, asserting, exclaiming, promising, requesting, warning, and admonishing, among many others. Speech acts can be direct or indirect, and this determines their effectiveness in conveying the speaker's message to the target audience.

Austin contends that a speaker performs one of three distinct acts when uttering a sentence: locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary. A locutionary act is "[r]oughly equivalent to uttering a certain sentence with a certain sense and reference, which again is roughly equivalent to 'meaning' in the traditional sense" (Austin, 1964, p.108). In this context, a locutionary act involves producing intelligible sounds that convey some meaning. An illocutionary act involves warning, ordering, informing, suggesting, appreciating, and demanding, among others. These are "utterances which have a certain (conventional) force" (Austin, 1964, p.109). Illocutionary acts are not necessarily directed at an immediate, present audience.

While the locutionary act pertains to producing an utterance with a specific meaning or reference, the perlocutionary act "refers to the effect of the utterance on the hearer, i.e., what the speaker aims to achieve by speaking" (Egenti & Mmadike, 2016, pp. 50-51). Therefore, a perlocutionary act may be intended to influence behaviour, such as coaxing (encouraging an interlocutor or interlocutors to do something), convincing (persuading them to do or believe something), or surprising (eliciting surprise), among others. While both Austin (1962) and Searle's (1969) speech act theory "hinge upon and make specific reference to the illocutionary act, Austin also discusses the felicity conditions which determine the truth or falsity of an utterance" (Egenti & Mmadike, 2016, p. 51). Felicity conditions are the prerequisites that must be fulfilled for utterances to be effective. When these conditions are not met, the utterance

becomes infelicitous. A performative utterance that successfully achieves its intended purpose is considered felicitous, while one that fails to do so is infelicitous. According to Searle (1969), to ensure the effective performance of a particular speech act, four rules or conditions must be satisfied: proportional content rules, preparatory rules, sincerity rules, and essential rules (Nodoushan, 2013, p. 84).

Propositional content rules specify the kind of meaning expressed by the propositional part of the utterance, preparatory rules specify the conditions necessary for the performance of the speech act, sincerity rules refer to the conditions that must prevail if the speech act is to be performed sincerely, and the essential rules must specify what a speech act entails (Searle, 1979). In other words, Searle (1979) distinguishes speech acts and proposes five classes of speech acts based on these rules: assertive, directives, expressives, commissive, and declaratives. These classes are the varied forms of utterances in which speech acts can be expressed in communication. Mey (2001, pp. 120-123) provides elaborate descriptions of these classes, as follows:

- *Representative/assertive speech act commits the speaker to the truth or what s/he has said. It indexes the speaker's belief or assertion of something or the situation in the world, which is evaluated as true or false. Through her/his utterance, the speaker may assert, conclude, describe or suggest something.*

- *Directive speech act occurs when the speaker tries to get the hearer to do something as a response. It involves making a request, asking a question, making an invitation, or issuing a command or directive.*

- *Commissive speech act – an utterance in which the speaker points to a future course of action. This could be expressed as a warning, threat, or promise.*

- *Expressive speech act occurs in communication or in a conversation when the speaker expresses their psychological state through expressing appreciation, apology, complaint, welcome, condolence, or compliments to the listener.*

- *Declarative speech acts, when uttered, cause a change of status, state, or condition of an object. Involves excommunication, declaring war, chastening, christening, solemnising a marriage, and firing from employment. Following the felicity condition, the speaker of the utterance must have such a position that qualifies them to make such a declaration.*

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative approach to explore speech utterances used in Tonga funeral rites as expressions of emotions and feelings conveyed to the deceased, to the divine, to family members, and to those believed to have caused the death. This method allows for closer and more in-depth engagement with the speakers to gain a comprehensive understanding of their experiences (Baloyi, 2011 p. 78). A qualitative research design was considered suitable for this study for several reasons. It is primarily descriptive, enabling researchers to depict the phenomenon from the perspective of the participants experiencing it (Berg, 2001).

Qualitative research is also a form of naturalistic inquiry that seeks an in-depth understanding of social phenomena in their natural settings. It focuses on the direct experiences of human beings as meaning-making agents in their everyday lives. This study is qualitative because of its interest in human authenticity. Ethnographic methods are designed to observe people in their cultural settings, aiming to produce an authentic narrative account of the culture being observed. Three methods of data collection were used, namely, observation, intuition, and interviews. These methods were used in a complementary manner to safeguard the validity and authenticity of the research findings.

Data was collected using ethnographic methods. Researchers observed BaTonga funerals in action, focusing on the people's utterances and actions while performing funeral rituals. Through observation, data was gathered about the core beliefs of the Tonga people regarding funeral practices. It is crucial to ensure research methods are rigorous; therefore, this study employed multiple data collection methods to improve the validity and authenticity of the findings. Additionally, the researchers used intuition (i.e., direct knowing), since two of them are native speakers of ciTonga. Intuition was utilised to access the knowledge of the BaTonga people's oral heritage, especially the performative utterances made by individuals with specific relational roles during adult funeral rites, whether male or female. The validity and reliability of the data are supported by the fact that two of the researchers are native speakers of the ciTonga language.

To guard against relying on data from two of the researchers who are native speakers of ciTonga, the researchers, where necessary, checked on the grammaticality and acceptability of utterances by conducting interviews with other native Tonga speakers. The interviews were conducted among modern-

day BaTonga communities in Binga, parts of Gokwe, and Kariba. Permission was sought from the research participants, and the purpose of the interview was explained to them. By doing so, the researchers noted that the utterances used in Tonga funeral rites serve as expressions of emotion. The researchers are convinced that oral interviews conducted by Tonga communities in Zimbabwe can provide a representative picture of speech during Tonga funerals in Zimbabwe.

Data Presentation and Analysis

Declaring Death

In many African communities, both modern and traditional, death is a public affair. With some major or minor variations among various ethnic groups in Zimbabwe, a death announcement is a critical stage in the process of mourning a deceased person. Among the Tonga people, mourning consists of two phases: separation and incorporation. As Siakavuba (2020, p. 131) reports of the Valley BaTonga, separation lasts five days, with each day allocated a status marked by defined activities or rites. Day one is *lufu*, denoting death; the day death occurs is characterised by emotional outbursts." As soon as the death occurs in a family, women communicate or broadcast the funeral by performing specific verbal and non-verbal acts.

The most senior female maternal relative initiates the process of mourning, and the rest of the female relatives of the deceased begin wailing, "calling out the deceased's name, pacing up and down the homestead in all directions as if searching for the whereabouts of the deceased" (Interview with Mudenda, 2023). The announcement of death by wailing is not unique to the BaTonga culture. Ademiluka (2009, p. 12) says of the Igbo of south-eastern Nigeria, "As soon as an old man dies, his death is announced by loud cries of mourning." What is idiosyncratic to the BaTonga people is the linguistic and non-linguistic acts they perform during mourning. The non-verbal expression of wondering and pacing up and down the deceased's homestead seems to mark the place of mourning, usually the deceased's house, where members of the community come to pay their condolences. As Saidi (2017, p. 5) argues of Shona funerals, non-verbal expressions "help bring about the proper meanings of the linguistic signs." Among the BaTonga people, the death announcement is marked by such statements as *"Wandiyuba ndeende/baama/mukulana/mwanike/"* (You have hidden away from me my father/mother/brother/sister/young brother / young sister), the community understands the utterance as declaring death

and as an invitation to help to 'find' or mourn the deceased. The declarative statement is often followed by a series of utterances, as in the example below:

> *Mwatuyuba mwayayi? Mwabasiilani bana?*
>
> *Ngwani ngumwasila mpuli wisi Tubone?*
>
> *Masimpe, wisi Twayoowa.*
>
> *(You have hidden away from us, and where have you gone?*
>
> *In whose care have you left your children?*
>
> *You have left your children in the care of the father of Tubone?*
>
> *Masimpe, father of Twayoowa)*

Identifying the deceased by their children's names is part of the announcement, as it helps the community easily locate the affected household. The identity of the deceased remains the same, and mourners address her/him as though she or he were alive.

Rhetorical Questions

The utterances cited above are rhetorical questions (henceforth RQs). Due to their communicative effectiveness, RQs are "widely used in different languages, different situations and by different types of language-users" (Spago, 2016, p. 103). In the literature, there has been considerable controversy over exactly what RQs are and what they entail (Cummings, 2010). Sadock (1971) and Han (2002, cited in Ai Yuan, 2022, p. 14) argue that a rhetorical question has the syntactic form of a question but the semantic value of a declarative statement. This claim is reflected in the two RQs: *Mwatuyuba mwayayi?* (You have hidden away from us, where have you gone to?) and *Mwabasiilani bana?* (In whose custody have you left your children?) (that have the particles -*yi* (where) and -*ni* (whom) as syntactic interrogative markers.

Scholars have focused on the speaker's intention. Dlugan (2012, p. 1) states that the RQ is a standard rhetorical device where a speaker asks a question, but no answer is expected from the hearer. "Such questions in most cases, already imply an answer that seems obvious to both the addressor and the addressee" (Spago, 2016). In Tonga funeral discourse, RQs are used as indirect speech acts and are valued for their pragmatic force and effects. In the question *Mwabasiilani bana?* the pragmatic effect is derived from commonly shared knowledge between the speaker and the hearer, that the death of a parent deprives the children of a breadwinner.

The common ground points to the function the RQ fulfils. In this case, the RQ signals the intensity of sorrow and desperation. The question invokes sorrow in the deceased as well, since the BaTonga people believe that the deceased is not really dead, but that there is an unseen scene unfolding before in which the deceased is listening to their plea, such that when they are finally integrated into the ancestral realm, they should remember their earthly responsibilities. Thus, unlike eulogy stylistic devices meant to impress the audience, a series of RQs creates intensified grief in the audience and can be accompanied by eruptive sobs.

Description of Events

Descriptions and assertions fall under the category of representative speech acts in English. Hidayat (2016, p. 5) says, "Representatives are speech acts that the utterances commit the speaker to the truth of the expressed proposition. Statements of fact, assertions, conclusions, and descriptions are all examples of the speaker representing the world as he or she believes it is." Data from all Tonga communities reveal how mourners, especially old women, sketch the deceased's identity, history, achievements, and exploits through spontaneously composed dirges that function as eulogies whose primary purpose is to acknowledge the death. As Jones (1943, p. 15), quoted in (Lubbangu, 2020, p. 39) reported of Tonga women in Southern Zambia, "they sing [Zitengule songs] little by little and add words and melody until the song is complete". In the case of Zimbabwean Tonga, the dirges are word-based and provide a perfect example of an authentic expression of verbal artistic ingenuity that women display at funerals. Consider the example below:

> Wisi Choolwe, heee, Wisi Choolwe, choolwe chabaDenda.
>
> Simuzyalwalike namulomba mubotu, heee, Namulomba mubotu wakalela bamuchaala heeeee.
>
> Sikulima nchelela sikusanina bamuchaala
>
> Simakuwa wakaBulawayo
>
> Simufumbo wabaDenda
>
> (Father of Choolwe, hee, Father of Choolwe, the blessing of the baDenda Clan.
>
> He who was born alone, handsome loner, hee. A generous person who raised many orphans.
>
> A hardworking horticulturalist, and he who supported needy orphans
>
> The urbanite who spent most of his time in Bulawayo
>
> A driver of the baDenda clan)

These utterances serve two related purposes: consoling the deceased's family and celebrating the deceased by chronicling his biography. This dirge states known facts such as the deceased's fatherhood, his clan identity, his place of employment, his single-handed responsibility for taking care of his family and clan through his gardening proceeds, and his compassionate character. Like modern-day eulogies, the dirge highlights the deceased's unique individual traits, good deeds, and valuable qualities and services, but censors their deficiencies. Avoiding mention of the deceased's weaknesses and flaws is consistent with the *Ubuntu* tradition of not speaking ill of the dead. In the BaTonga culture, this tradition is expressed in the saying Wafwa Wabota (the dead is blameless) or *Wafwa Walyookezya* (the dead has rested). This epistemological viewpoint is poignantly described by Capone (2010, p. 7): who says,

> *Death is an occasion for appeasement. People who do not talk to each other for a long time can be reconciled through death. On the occasion of an event in which the unseen side is the fact that a person is going to be judged by the Creator, we are encouraged by the social practices to be lenient with old trespassers and enemies and to forgive them. A person who does not forgive (a friend, or a relative) in the face of death is seen to be irreducibly hard or obstinate. So, we usually go to mourn old friends, relatives, colleagues, and people who live on the other side of the street because we want our actions to conform to social norms, and directly or indirectly, bring our solace to the relatives of the deceased. Of special importance is the idea that, in events of this type, we do not gather to mourn a body, but a body with a soul.*

What Capone elaborately describes clearly shows that a mourning event is institutional. It has specific rules that participants should follow. Words are deprived of their ordinary meanings and acquire ritual meanings. People, by default, are expected to say nice things about the deceased, as this brings solace to the deceased's relatives. This does not mean that there are no people who sometimes speak out of tune with the ritual and really say what they think about the deceased (and their) relatives) causing anxiety and injecting an antithetical spirit into the proceedings. Overall, the mourning place is a context for setting aside past quarrels and disagreements between the deceased and their living relatives.

Commenting on the discourse structure of the condolence speech act, Moghaddam (2012, p. 110) said that often "there are some fabricated phrases the interlocutors can use to console the bereaved or the grieving family. It is of key importance to know the right expressions since the feelings the bereaved is experiencing can range from extreme sadness to outright anger." In the BaTonga culture, only the *sahwira* (ritual friend) can say censored, bad things about the

deceased and/or her/his family in a jocular manner. The role of the *Sahwira* is to lessen grief by embracing death and 'coping laughter'. Laughter in these instances, argues De Moor (2005, p. 739), quoted in Emmerson (2018, p. 144), is seen as "a survival tactic, a defence mechanism, a way of lessening the horror, and a method to attain a certain amount of control and therefore to remove the individual from the pain of death and dying." 'Laughter' is depicted to 'put aside' death.

Expressing Condolences

The death of a loved one can result in a state of deep sorrow, grief, shock, and trauma. Condolences are, therefore, an expression of "acknowledging a loss, showing sympathy, or empathising with someone" (Moghaddam, 2012, p. 108). The African response to death epitomises the communal concept of 'suffering together', denoted in the Latin word *condelere* (Zunin & Zunin, 2007). Like many African communities in Southern Africa, the BaTonga people express condolences through a variety of linguistic and non-linguistic acts. Being able to support, encourage, and comfort relatives and acquaintances during their period of bereavement and to use appropriate language is part of one's cultural competence. Reports from all Tonga communities studied show that once death has been declared and confirmed, relatives and community members go to the deceased's house to express their condolences, an act known as *kwaanzya bantu* in the ciTonga language. Although modern technology has made it possible to express condolences virtually, nothing replaces the emotional impact of face-to-face interaction.

Condolences fall under what Searle (1979) calls 'expressive' speech acts. Our data reveal a number of semantically loaded expressive strategies that ciTonga speakers use to indicate sympathy. The generic utterance of expressing sympathy is *Amabeya* (condolences), to which the bereaved replies, *Aboneka* (We accept/acknowledge). The more intimate and compassionate version is *Amawuse aya beenzuma* (condolences, my friend(s)). These expressions are relatively neutral and courteous. The other common expression acknowledges death as a natural phenomenon.

Mourners encourage the bereaved to accept the pain of death by saying *Mbuumi zilajanika alimwi atuzitambule* (Such is life. Let us accept and be comforted). The import of this expression is to urge the bereaved to escape the distress caused by death by accepting that death is unavoidable and that all lives are finite and death is imminent (Kyota & Kanda, 2019). Although interviews and observations

revealed that the Tonga funeral rites clearly reflect how deeply ingrained Tonga speakers are in their traditional beliefs and practices, condolence utterances show the influence of Christianity. One expression that one hears at Tonga funerals acknowledges the sovereignty of God in causing death. It is not uncommon to hear condolers say, "*Mwaami wachita kuyanda kwakwe*" (God has done his will).

This response shows the firm belief of the condolers in God's divine authority and sovereignty over people's souls (Bayo, 2021, p. 116). The belief in the authority of ancestors or the living dead concerns their decision on whether the deceased can become an ancestor too. The utterance *Tusyoma basikale balatambula muuya wakwe muluumuno* (We believe those who went before her/him will receive her /him). The deceased's family would be worried that the ancestors must refuse to integrate her/him into the ancestral world, either due to her/him moral deficiencies or being aggrieved or what Walsh (2010, cited in Bojuwoye 2013: 76) calls "unfinished business". According to Walsh, "some family members, who are dead, feel compelled to complete their unfinished business with the living and, therefore, are believed to hang around the family" (Bojuwoye, 2013). The Tonga people consider this kind of "hanging around" a sign of failure to be integrated into the ancestral world; hence, such a spirit cannot serve as an ancestor but can be harmful.

Only spirits integrated into the ancestral realm and subsequently legitimately invited through appropriate rituals to come and perform a protective role are welcome. The condolence utterance cited above is, therefore, expressed to ease the bereaved's distress and anxiety. The use of the inclusive first-person plural marker *tu-* in *Tusyoma* (we believe/trust) reinforces the empathetic and persuasive force of the speech act (Makoni & Mashiri, 2003), thus making the condolence more effective.

Promising

Most African cultures socialise boys and men to adopt an overtly masculine character of emotional toughness and restraint. Our data indicate that, among the Tonga people, while women wail loudly, men either sit quietly or pace up and down, uttering words. Promise, age 45, from Kariba, stated that "men utter words to the deceased or the ancestors. Sometimes they will be promising to avenge his death or something". Mubais (2021, p. 26) defined a promise as "one of the speech acts that deal with something that may happen in the future and commitment of the speaker". A promise may be made either with the intention

or with no intention to keep it. Thus, it can be either felicitous or infelicitous. One of the researchers of this paper recorded words of promise a maternal uncle made to the deceased at a funeral in Gokwe, as the relatives prepared to take out the body for burial. He said:

> *Wiinke kabotu. Tuyoswaanana mazuba*
>
> *aaboola. (Go well. We will meet in the days to come.)*

The speaker actualised the promise by utilising two strategies: "future action strategy and predictive assertion strategy" (Mubais, Ibid., p. 31). The verb indicates the future action strategy -*swanana* (meet) conjugated by the future tense marker -*yo-* (will) and the subject prefix *tu-* (we). The predictive assertion strategy is shown by the future tense marker and the reciprocal suffix -*na* (each other). The verb promise is not overt but understood from these grammatical features. Hence, the social act intentionally posed by the speaker is a firm commitment. Epistemologically, the firm commitment comes from the African belief that "death is a natural transition from the visible to the invisible or spiritual ontology where the spirit, the essence of the person, is not destroyed but moves in the spirit ancestors" (King 2013, cited in Baloyi & Makobe-Rebothata 2014, p. 235). Therefore, when people die, they transcend to the spiritual world to be in the company of the living dead, where they continue to commune with the living.

Requesting

Among the BaTonga people, burial marks the final stage of separation and the transition into the spiritual or ancestral realm. There are elaborate rites during the burial of an adult. Some of the rites involve representatives of both the deceased's paternal and maternal relatives speaking to the ancestors. One of the researchers recorded the following utterances spoken by the deceased's paternal male relative at a funeral in Binga, as he and the other relatives kneeled at the graveside, throwing small grains of soil to signify separation:

> *BaSimulavu abaSyachipampi, ngoyu mwana wenu mumusisye kulibamwi bakatalika. Ndinywe nimulikunembo mutamusoweli lusaka. Mumutambule alimwi swebo amaanzi aaya twakumbila kuti tusyaale katutontola.*
>
> *(Simulavu and Syachipampi, kindly receive one of your sons and usher him well into the world of the dead. You are already ahead, and we plead that you take good care of him. Receive him and give us peace and calmness, and we offer you this water so that you grant us peace and happiness.)*

The utterance that is both a request and a plea is addressed to the deceased's paternal ancestors in a prayer to receive the deceased's soul into the ancestral world. The expectation that the deceased be accepted into the ancestral world and become an ancestor is premised on his good deeds and service to the clan, as described in the acknowledgement of his death. Dzobo (1992, p. 231), cited in Morgan and Okyere-Manu (2020, p. 13), noted that not just everyone who has died can be called an ancestor. Ugwuanyi (2011, p. 112), cited in Morgan and Okyere-Manu (2020), corroborates this view by qualifying that ancestors are "spirits of dead human beings who had lived extraordinary lives while alive, and thus, after death, were given a place among the divinities". In the utterance cited above, ancestors, Simulavu and Syachipampi, are mentioned by name since "a record of people who have lived and died is kept in the memory of the living members of the community. They have moved into the category of ancestors or the living dead" (Bae & van de Merwe, 2008, p. 1300) and can be petitioned by the living. The prayer gives an insight into the Tonga people's metaphysical worldview.

> *Although both the deceased's relatives from his/her father's side and mother's side participate in the graveside rituals and should do so harmoniously, the maternal uncles lead the rituals and perform more elaborate and final rites. Consider the utterances below made by a maternal uncle:*

> *Nimwakasanguna nembo, ngoyu mwana mumutambule. Swebo kunyina nchituzi. Mumutambule alimwi swebo naa kuli mputwakabisya, mutulekelele. Mumuswenzye kuli baabo bakazulula chindi alimwi naa lufu kaluali lwenu, mulanzila zyenu nzimunga mulabweedezya aayo. (Forerunner of the world of the dead, receive your child and place him in safe hands. We know nothing about his death. If we are to blame for his death, forgive us. Bring him close to those who are long departed, and if his death is suspicious, you have your own ways of avenging.*

Three aspects of the BaTonga people's worldview are evident in this prayer. Firstly, they believe that the deceased is on a journey to a place where s/he should be received (*mumutambule* 'receive her/him'). It is the duty of the living to announce their departure and request those already at the destination to welcome them as they require aid as a child (hence, *ngoyu mwana* 'receive your child').

Secondly, they are aware that the ancestors feel the pain of separation as keenly as the living; they enforce the morality of the living and have the power to bless those who uphold the norms and curse or punish those who bring disgrace to the name of the clan through immoral acts such as murder. Thus, the clan representative exonerates the clan members for their relative's death. Third, the BaTonga believe in *Stlngozi* (avenging spirit). Stlngozi, according to the BaTonga

people, as other African ethnic groups in sub-Saharan Africa, is "an aggrieved and angered spirit of a deceased person who was either murdered or mistreated during his/her lifetime" (Magezi & Myambo, 2011, p.165). As Thorpe (1991, p. 57, cited in Magezi & Myambo, p. 165) noted, if one is murdered, this person's spirit becomes restless and angry and returns to seek revenge on the murderer. Nyembezi (pseudonym), age 42, a Tonga speaker from Kariba, explained that "as soon as the troubled soul reaches the ancestral world and the ancestors hear his or her story of aggrievement, they immediately send him/her back to avenge their death". This means that the expression '*mulanzila zyenu nzimunga mulabweedezya aayo* (You have your ways of avenging) is an indirect appeal for justice.

Conclusion

The article set out to discuss the BaTonga people's oral heritage in the form of performative utterances made by people with specific relational roles during the funeral rites of adults, male or female. The data indicate that Tonga funerals are not different from those of other African groups; they share traits of being collective and communal, involving kin and neighbours. The article also outlined the nature of utterances, their classes, sociocultural meanings, and functions in the context of their use in BaTonga funeral rites.

The study identified and classified utterances used in BaTonga funeral rites as expressions of emotions and feelings communicated to the deceased, to the divine, to family members, and to those believed to have caused the death. These are: declaring death, rhetorical questions, describing the events, expressing condolences, and promising and requesting. The study reveals how mourners across all BaTonga communities sketch the deceased's identity, history, achievements, and exploits through spontaneously composed dirges that serve as eulogies, primarily to acknowledge the death.

This study, on the Tonga people, contributes to the repertoire of knowledge on indigenous practices that demand linguistic and behavioural markedness and cultural competence. The Tonga communities use words to fulfil their cultural beliefs about death. Death within Tonga societies seems to have remained resilient in this ever-changing society, even amid modernity.

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