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Two Hundred Years of English Death Notices

Udo Fries

This is a report on work in progress on a more extended study (Fries, in preparation) of the history of English death notices. The material presented here is taken from the *London Times*, where it appeared between 1785 and the present day. Death notices appeared in the *Daily Universal Register* (the forerunner of *The Times*) from the very first issue, on January 1, 1785 and have continued to appear to the present day. For the purpose of this paper, the appropriate sections of *The Times* have been analysed for the most part in 25-year intervals: 1785 – 1800 – 1825 – 1850 – 1875 – 1900 – 1925 – 1950 – and 1985. On many days in the early years there were no deaths reported at all, and their number increased only slowly. By 1825 there were about twice as many as in 1785, but afterwards the increase was more rapid, and by the second half of the nineteenth century the present average number of instances had been reached.

Strangeness is not an inherent property of a text. A text is strange only in its relationship to a reader or listener, who may experience a text as strange when it does not conform to an accepted norm. An Englishman reading a death notice in an English national newspaper will probably not detect anything strange at all – for him (or her) these texts are written in a conventional way, which relies heavily on traditional usage. To a foreigner, however, who is not familiar with these conventions, these texts look strange. The following two present-day examples may serve as a starting point.

MURDOCH – on October 4th peacefully at home Jimmy.

AZZO PARDI-PREZIOSI on October 8th peacefully at Farnborough Hospital, Bromley, Kent, Nancy.

In normal every-day usage, Christian name precedes surname, and the two are not separated by any other information. In the above examples, however, surname and Christian name are separated by *on October 4th peacefully at home* and *on October 8th peacefully at Farnborough Hospital, Bromley, Kent*, respectively. Clearly, there must be a text-strategic principle at work which overrides normal word order and which causes the Christian names to appear only at the end of the entry, and not immediately following the surnames. We could well imagine a sequence surname, first name, date (*Murdoch, Jimmy, on October 4th*, or *Azzo Pardi-Preziosi, Nancy, on October 8th*), which does in fact appear in some English newspapers.

There are other points which strike readers from German-speaking countries as strange: there is, first of all, the difference in layout: English death notices appear as small items in the personal columns of newspapers, whereas German death notices are printed in boxes of various sizes.¹ Then, there is the conspicuous absence of words denoting death: in English death notices, dying is only mentioned in the headline of the entire section — usually called DEATHS, whereas in their German counterparts there are no limits to the ingenuity of authors in inventing new expressions for dying.²

The special characteristics of death notices become immediately obvious when they are taken out of their native context and transferred into a "foreign" setting. (1) shows what I consider an ordinary English death notice — in a German-Swiss setting, which makes it look very strange here, because the authors did not consider that other conventions apply in this country. The *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* recently printed (1) on its page of death notices:

¹ For a linguistic discussion of German and other death notices see Reiss 1977.

² See Fries (in press).

Hobbs

7. Januar

Alfred Noel, geliebter Gatte der verstorbenen Agnes Matilda und innig geliebter Vater von Gerald, Anne, John und Elizabeth.

Trauer Gottesdienst am Donnerstag, 19. Januar 1989,
um 11.45 Uhr in Ealing Abbey, Chantbury Grove,
London W5 2DY.

Tel. 00441 9982158

VTX830022D

The original version must have been something like:

HOBBS — on January 7th, Alfred Noel, beloved husband of the late Agnes Matilda and dearly beloved father of Gerald, Anne, John, and Elizabeth.

Thus, death notices are instances of a traditional text type, in which, for obvious reasons, convention plays a major role. Death notices in England look very much the same, irrespective of the newspaper they are printed in. Even the newly founded *Independent*, now in its third year, adheres to the same form as its long-established competitors for its death notices. Conventional language changes only very slowly, but change there is, here just as anywhere else. If we go back to the year 1785, we find a text type at the same time similar to and yet very different from the present day. For the sociolinguist, the various changes during these two hundred years reflect changes in society, while other linguists may be more interested in changes in vocabulary; text linguists may want to analyse the changing structures of the text type in order to better understand why these texts look as they do today.

English death notices belong to the type of template texts, a term used by Enkvist, who defines them as texts "whose macrostructure is set in advance and where the text producer, so to say, enters new data into pre-existing gaps, as when filling a hotel-registration card or an income-tax return" (211).

Taking the evidence of 1785, we may attempt to establish the appropriate template. I reproduce the complete section of death notices printed on Saturday, January 1, 1785:

DEATHS

Died a few days ago, at his house in Greenwich, Capt. Robert Walter, of the Royal Navy.

In Dublin, the Honourable Miss Isabella Howard, second daughter to the Right Hon. Lord Clonmore.

The first entry is exceptional — it contains the word *died*, which is hardly ever used again, apart from a few notable instances of entries by "foreigners," who are apparently not aware of the conventions of the text type (see below).

The information we receive in these two death notices consists of the date (*a few days ago*), the place of the event (*at his house in Greenwich, in Dublin*), the name of the deceased (*Capt. Robert Walter, the Honourable Miss Isabella Howard*), an indication of his occupation (*of the Royal Navy*) and some information on relatives (*second daughter to the Right Hon. Lord Clonmore*).

Thus, we can establish a template, as in (2):

(2)

Date	Place	Name	Relation	Occupation
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If we considered more data, however, we would arrive at a slightly more complex template:

(3)

Date	Place	Age	Circumstances	Name	Relation	Origin	Occupation	Other Information
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Here, we have added Age, Circumstances, Origin, and Other Information. The increased number of categories makes it useful to distinguish between elements which must be present and those which are merely optional. For the communication to succeed, the name of the deceased must be mentioned: this is clearly an obligatory element,

without which the texts would make no sense. It does not mean, however, that the name must be given in the form we are used to.

Strictly speaking, none of the other sections are obligatory. The conventionalized nature of the text type, however, will always attach more importance to some sections than to others, i.e. some will be rather more obligatory than others.

I will now briefly survey the individual sections of the template with the exception of Origin and Occupation. In a first sample of 100 death notices dating from 1785 a time indicator occurred in 94, and a second sample from the same year yielded such an indicator in all instances. This is therefore a clear indication that it is an obligatory element. From 1850 onwards it occurs regularly, and it usually appears in a front position, occupying the first slot. The only exceptions we find are in examples which are special cases in more than one way. Here, the text-strategy employed is clearly narrative, and the deceased persons are foreigners and academics:

The ingenious Abbé Arnaud, member of most of the learned societies in Europe, died *a few days since* at Paris.

Mr. Lexell, the celebrated astronomer, died at Petersburg *in the month of February last*, in the 47th year of his age.

As the examples also show, the time indicators are sometimes very vague. I classify a time indicator as *vague*, if we cannot infer from it the day on which a death occurred. The most common such type is *a few days ago* or *a few days since*, followed by *last week* or *last month*, *lately* or *in October*, *November last*, etc. Up to the beginning of the 19th century, 20 to 25% of death notices have such a vague time indicator. From 1850 onwards, they cease to occur in my samples.

The day of the week, often accompanied by a further specification, such as *last* (*Thursday last* or *last Thursday*), *se'nnight* or *morning*, *afternoon*, *evening*, *night*, is frequently given in the 18th century. By the middle of the 19th century, however, it has disappeared completely. In a very few instances from the early years (between 4 and 5%), the date is added to the day of the week. Other variants include *Yesterday*, *last night*, *on Christmas-Eve*, *on Christmas-Day*, *on New Year's Eve*, or *on Whitsunday*.

Whereas all these variations are on the decline, instances of the date just by itself steadily increase. From 5 to 10% in the 1780s, this usage

increases to about 50% in 1825, more than 80% in 1850, and 93% in 1875. There are two major variants, one mentioning the name of the month, and the other using *instant*, often abbreviated to *inst.*; *current*, abbreviated *curt.*; or *ultimo* for the preceding month, only found in the abbreviated form *ult.* The year is never mentioned with any of these forms. It does occur occasionally (*On the 12th September 1784*), but even in 1875 the year is given in only 10% of the cases.

The history of time indicators in death notices from 1785 to 1985 can be described as a development towards greater rigidity of expression (from a vague time indicator to the exact date), less scope for individual expressions (almost exclusively of the type *29th of May*), and the total loss of a few expressions (*se'nnight*, *current*, *instant*, *ult.*). From the very beginning, time indicators regularly occur in front position.

From the evidence available, the place of a person's death appears to be of less interest than the date: during the whole period investigated, there have been fewer references to the place than to the time of death. Figures vary between 75% (for the mid-nineteenth century and again for today) and 90% (for the beginning of this century).³

Syntagmatically, place indicators usually occur in second position. They move to front position if no date is given (as in the second example of 1785 quoted above), or — in the "narrative" versions — they appear even later in the text (see below).

In 1785 about one third of place indicators refer to a village or a town, sometimes with the county name added, and sometimes without it. Another third of the examples refer to a *house*. These are the more interesting cases, because they reflect the social status of the deceased or their relatives: the most common formulations from 1785 are: *in* or *at* someone's *house*, *lodgings*, *seat*, or *apartments*. Both in 1800 and 1825, references to a *house* are as frequent as in 1785, but the *lodgings*, *seats* and *apartments* have disappeared. For the first time, a few instances of a deceased person's *residence* appear. By 1875, when place indicators become a more regular feature, the term *house* has completely disappeared, and the phrase *his* or *her residence* has completely taken over. Today, neither *house* nor *residence* occurs any longer, although *residence* did continue well into this century. Often a full address is given today. Death still occurs *at home* or *at his* or *her home*; but the modern

³ For exact figures see Fries (in preparation).

place to die is in a *hospital* or a *nursing home*. We may also add *in a car accident*, which, strictly speaking, is not a place at all, and could be considered part of the Circumstance slot. Where the place is not mentioned, the Origin section becomes more important.

Thus, the history of place indicators parallels the history of time indicators. We see the loss of certain items (*house, residence, etcetera*), and observe a tendency towards greater precision and less individuality: a full address is more precise than a reference to one's *lodgings*.

In only one of the instances quoted so far the age of the deceased was mentioned. Here, much more clearly than with the place indicator, we have an optional slot. Reference to a deceased person's age has only gradually become more common; in 1785, barely 25% of death notices mentioned the age of the deceased person, whereas a hundred years later the figure had risen to 75%. It has dropped again this century, and by 1950 had fallen again to 24%.

In 1785, there were five ways of expressing a person's age, three of which were still used in 1875. The two which were lost did not specify an exact age, but were general references to old age. These are the "vague" counterparts to the vague time indicators. I call them the "advanced age type" and the "upwards of-type," both of which occur in the following versions:

at an advanced period of life
in/at/of an advanced age
at/of a very advanced age
(aged) upwards of x (years [of age]).

Age is more frequently mentioned from about 60 years of age onwards. Below this figure, age may nevertheless be mentioned for some special reason, e.g. in the case of the celebrated astronomer mentioned above, and if children die, their age may also be of interest.

Until 1800, the most common expression of age is *in the xth year of his/her age*, followed by *aged x (years)* — with the shorter version always the more common one — and only very occasionally do we find *in his/her xth year*. By 1825, *aged x (years)* has moved to first position, followed by *in his/her xth year*. The two vague types disappear in the early 19th century. Thus, the overall trend towards greater precision is the same as with time and place indicators.

The Circumstances clearly constitute an optional slot, which often appears in third position, depending on the presence or absence of Age,

but which may also be found after the name of the deceased. When it is present, it is most often filled with a reference to the final illness of the deceased, but there are also other circumstances considered worth mentioning. In 1785, only 12% of all death notices include such a section at all. This figure subsequently increases to about 20%, which is maintained all through the 19th century. Only in the 20th century do occurrences of this section increase to about 75%.

Most of the early instances refer to death *after a short illness, after a few days of illness, after a lingering illness, or after a long indisposition*. A few others mention death *of a lingering decline, of a paralytic stroke, suddenly in a fit of apoplexy, or of the stone in the kidneys*, and during the 19th century, *dying of a malignant fever or of bronchitis* occurs more frequently. By 1875, *suddenly* or *very suddenly* have become fairly well established, but the modern *peacefully* (see the first examples above), or *very peacefully* — which occur in more than 40% today — are entirely absent among the earlier death notices.

The name of the deceased can provide us with information on who the people were whose deaths are reported in the death notices. As similar information may also be gathered from the section on Relation, the two are treated together here.

In death notices, the ratio of men to women changed in the middle of the 19th century. Before that time there were more men than women mentioned in those texts, and since then, the number of women has consistently been slightly greater than that of men.

One third of the women referred to in 1785 were mentioned in their own right, i.e. by their own names, whilst the remaining two thirds were "defined" in relation to various male persons. As the following examples show, the point of reference could be a husband (i), a deceased husband (ii, iii), a father (iv), a son (v), or any combination of these persons (vi):

- i Mrs. Acton, wife of John Acton Esq. of Childerley
- ii Mrs. Redwood, of Bromley in Kent, relict of the late Jeremiah Redwood Esq. of that place
- iii Mrs. Burgess, widow of John Burgess, late an Hamburgh merchant in the city
- iv Miss Clara Wilson, daughter of Dr. Alexander Wilson, Professor of Astronomy in the University of Glasgow

- v Mrs. Philips, mother of Mr. Philips, Coroner of Middlesex

the Hon. Catherine Talbot, mother to the present Earl Talbot

- vi Mrs. Elizabeth Edgley Hewer, relict of the late Edgley Hewer Esq. of Fotheringay-castle, in Northamptonshire, sister to the late, and aunt to the present Sir Simeon Stuart, Bart. of Harteley Maudit, in Hampshire.

There was a steady increase during the Victorian age of women being seen only in relation to their families; a woman might be a *daughter*, a *mother*, a *wife*, a *relict*, or a *widow*, all terms which were used throughout the 19th century. In a death notice dated 1825 I found the first instance of a *beloved wife*, a form which makes steady progress throughout the century. By 1875, about 50% of wives were the *beloved wife* of someone. Today, the deceased is usually a *beloved*, a *very beloved*, a *much beloved mother*, *grandmother* or *greatgrandmother*, *husband*, *sister* or *brother*. All in all, relatives of the deceased are mentioned more often today than they were in earlier times.

The examples just given, all of which date from 1785, show that a woman had a surname of her own, though originally often used without her Christian name. In all these examples, the surname occurs twice: once for the deceased woman, and once for her male relative. During the 19th century, however, women were increasingly referred to by their Christian names only. Their surnames were to be inferred from the name of their relatives. In 1875, for example, 60% of the women were referred to by their Christian names only, while 40% featured both Christian and surnames. This is an example of the former type:

On the 24th Dec., at Boulogne-sur-Mer, Frances Alicia, the beloved wife of Major-General H.G. Hart, aged 65.

Between 1785 and 1825, there are a few instances in which there is no name at all given for a woman, but this type disappears later on:

the wife of Mr. Charles Martin

the lady of J.H. Allen Esq., M.P. for Pembroke

When women were mentioned without their Christian names this was not a discrimination of their sex, since the situation was the same with

men. The proportion of surname-only type was roughly the same for men and women. That was in 1785; but even by 1800, the situation had changed. From then on, it was very exceptional to find a man referred to without his Christian name. The exceptions were often clergymen: *the Rev. Mr. Steers*, for instance. Thus, another clear distinction between the sexes established itself in the 19th century.

The final section of the table in (3) is, for want of a better term, called Other Information. Here, I include every kind of additional information. Such information occurs only very occasionally, and is therefore strictly optional. From the point of view of the present-day reader, much of this information increases the degree of strangeness experienced with earlier death notices. Consider, for example, the following entry, which could hardly be imagined as part of a modern death announcement:

He had buried four wives, by all of whom he had issue, and was the repute father of 47 children. (1785)

More usually, the Other Information section was used to praise the deceased:

- i He was a man of perfectly inoffensive manners . . . and his temper gentle. In him the world has lost a valuable member of society, and his family a kind and indulgent parent.
- ii He was universally respected by his friends as a man of the strictest honour and integrity, uniting the benevolent heart to the soundest understanding. To his neighbours, whether affluent or indigent, he was ever ready to give his advice and assistance, among whom he often acted as mediator, in adjusting or preventing their controversies or disputes. As a husband and parent his conduct was truly exemplary, and highly worthy of imitation.

This section could also consist of information about the will of the deceased, the money he left, or what happened to his titles:

- i He is succeeded in his title and estates by his only brother, the Hon. John Roper.
- ii This gentleman, by his will, has left about three thousand pounds to charitable purposes.

- iii Dying without issue male, the title (which was granted to his father by King George I) becomes extinct.

Owing to their narrative character, the items here cannot always be easily classified. Some of the following examples refer to the circumstances of the death, but they go far beyond a simple account of the final illness; they are clearly cases of Other Information as well.

- 1 He had a hearty breakfast in the morning, and was standing at the fire, when he was seized with the stroke, which carried him off in a few hours.
- ii She ate a hearty supper, and went to bed seemingly in good health, but was taken suddenly ill about five o'clock in the morning, and expired before six.

After 1850, hardly any of these — strange — parts of death notices will be encountered.

In the early days, very few death notices appeared each day, and their order was random. Neither the date, nor the place, nor the social status of the deceased persons or their relatives influenced the arrangement of individual entries. There was no change in this respect for the first 70 years. By 1850, however, we can see that the dates of death influenced the order of the individual items. Thus, the first slot in our template became more important. Death notices that referred back a considerable time, from a few months to half a year or more, came first, while the more recent ones, i.e. those of the days preceding publication, followed. The entries on the 3rd of January 1850, for instance, begin with the death notice of Lieutenant Charles Roberts, of the 3rd West India Regiment, serving at the Gambia, who had died on the 27th of September 1849. The second entry is that of Jacques Laurent Agasse, honorary member of the Society of Arts of Geneva, who died on the 27th of December 1849. This is followed by further entries referring to the 30th and 31st of December, and the 1st of January, in that order. In cases where more than one death was recorded for a particular day, these were not subject to any fixed arrangement: random internal ordering was still the norm here.

By 1875, however, the principle of ordering by date had been given up and replaced by the principle of social order. Now, members of the aristocracy came first, irrespective of the day of their death. On the 2nd of

January 1875, we first read about the Duke of Montrose, who died on the 30th of December 1874, followed by Marion, the infant daughter of Viscount and Viscountess Cole, who died on the same day. The third entry refers to the death of a Richard Adams, second surviving son of the late Henry and Marianne Wenden, who had died in Sydney on the 13th of October 1874. After the initial entries of the aristocracy, the established order of date was then resumed, and within this random ordering continued. For the first time, however, some need for marking the person who had died becomes apparent, and so names were now printed in capital letters. This enabled a reader to scan the list of death notices more quickly to see whether any of his or her acquaintances were among the dead (see i and ii in the next set of examples).

The next step was for names to be printed in slightly larger type than the rest of the announcement — and they were moved into front position. This was established usage by 1900, since when names have remained in front position and function as headlines. As a consequence, text strategy had to be altered for a third time: no longer was the date or social standing important. Now, the alphabet took over. On the 1st of January 1900 entries begin with Atkins and end with Zunz, irrespective of the date of their death or social standing. The only purpose in fronting surnames must have been the greater ease of finding a name in an alphabetical list. This change, however, did not affect the rest of the entry, which began as it used to with the date, and continued according to our template. In particular, Christian names were always followed by surnames (see iii).

By 1925, the headlines had become even more prominently marked, with bold being added to capitalization and larger type (see iv). There were no further changes in 1950: all surnames reappear in the text (see v). By 1982, however, about 60% of all instances omitted any repetition of the surname in the text, and today this figure has increased to over 90%. In addition, the capitalization of the name in the text, introduced a hundred years ago, has been given up (see vi).

- i 1850 On the 21st ult., at his residence, Bedford-place, Hastings, John Morrice, Esq., in the 52nd year of his age, formerly and for many years of Long-acre.
- ii 1875 On the 30th Dec., at his residence, Albion-place, Reading, aged 69, EDMUND PYCROFT, Esq., late of Oak Hall, East Ham, Essex.

- iii 1900 **LLOYD.** — On the 18th Dec., 1899, JAMES LLOYD, late of the Bank of England, aged 80 years.
- iv 1925 **MUNDEN.** — On the 29th Dec., at Ilminster, Somerset, CHARLES MUNDEN, M.R.C.S., L.S.A., aged 81.
- v 1950 **WHITE.** — On Dec. 31, 1949, at St. Margaret's Hospital, Epping, JOHN TYNDALE WHITE, of Oak Lodge, Ongar, Essex, aged 71. . . .
- vi 1989 **BARCLAY** — On March 15th 1989, unexpectedly and peacefully at home, Cedric, beloved husband of Cora. . . .

The omission of surnames, originally only encountered with women and children, is now general usage, both for the deceased and for their relatives (see vi above). In the examples v and vi, the final dots indicate that these extracts are incomplete and go on to give details of the funeral arrangements. This is an extension of the text type which has mainly developed in the course of this century, and which I cannot go into here, but which expands the template worked out for the earlier death notices. The need to include this information may even have something to do with the loss of surnames from the text. Death notices may have become too expensive, so that omitting a surname (information that is anyway clear from the context, because it appears text-initially as a headline) has become a way of saving money. For the linguist, this is a clear case of telegraphic ellipsis. Not surprisingly, *The Independent* has two types of death notices: the usual one, and a much shorter — and no doubt cheaper — one:

Kennedy: Hilda Margaret, of Cheam, 6 March.

Kiviranta: David, aged 29, 6 March.

Little: Alexander, aged 84, 10 March.

Maxwell: Titus Bonner, of Michigan, aged 90, 6 March.

Death notices originated as normal news items, for which a newspaper reporter was responsible. Together with births and marriages, they immediately followed news items on crime. Yet, whereas with reports on crime the individual items were often connected, this was not the case with death notices — with one or two exceptions: time indicators,

such as *the same day, the next day, and on the Sunday following*, clearly indicate newspaper knowledge to which a customer would not have had access.

In addition, there was the general custom of copying from other papers, which also proved to be a source of mistakes:

March 17, 1787

On Thursday last died, at Norwich, Mr. David Owen Hindow, Surveyor for Montgomery-shire, after having exerted himself greatly in the interest of the Hon. Mr. Hobart.

March 23, 1787

The account of the death of Mr. David Owen window-surveyor of the county of Montgomery, which was copied from one of the other print into this paper, we understand is without foundation.

There are further reports of deaths which had not taken place at all, and which therefore point to the newspaper as the responsible author. Consider:

June 2, 1787

Died

Wednesday, at Ewell, near Epsom, Roger Peck, Esq. Clerk to the Commissioners of the Surry roads, and Coroner for that county.

June 5, 1787

The report of the death of Mr. Peck, Coroner for the county of Surrey, is without foundation, that gentleman, we are happy to say, is getting the better of a severe illness.

Death notices are, without doubt, a strange text type with an interesting history. Although the linguistic expressions used are very restricted, they reflect the tension between the desire for individual expression and the constraints of conventional usage. Death notices appear in a surprisingly large variety of forms, and they reflect the different approaches of each new generation to the question of life and death.

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