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# *Diplomatic condolences: ideological positioning in the death of Yasser Arafat*



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**ABSTRACT** Yasser Arafat was a key figure in the political life of the late 20th and early 21st centuries. As Palestinian president, he was a central player in negotiations over the most contentious issue of the time: Middle East peace. But although his significance is unquestioned, his status is ambiguous: for some he was a freedom fighter, for others a terrorist. It is interesting, therefore, to observe the ways in which different world governments marked the death of Arafat in November 2004, in their official condolence messages. Using the tools of critical discourse analysis (CDA) and systemic functional linguistics (SFL), this article treats the diplomatic condolence message as a recognizable text type that has much to tell us about how governments signal and construct ideological positions and in doing so ‘enact’ the international community.

**KEY WORDS:** *appraisal, Arafat, condolence, critical discourse analysis, ideology, Israel, Palestine, political discourse, systemic functional linguistics*

## *Outline and purpose of the study*

This article focuses on the discursive strategies of world leaders in the wake of Yasser Arafat’s death. In doing so, it demonstrates how global political leaders compose their versions of a world order and position themselves within it. By the end of his life, Arafat had undoubtedly become one of the world’s most recognizable political figures, and one who stood at the epicenter of an extremely complex maelstrom of conflicting forces (historical, racial, religious, political, economic) which together constituted the most important locus of global disputation at the beginning of the twenty-first century: the Middle East. So when Arafat died in Paris on November 11, 2004, world leaders marked his passing with official condolence messages that demonstrated great linguistic dexterity and ideological subtlety. These messages represented more than a series of perfunctory sympathy notices – they constituted a conversation within

the international community, in which each contributor commented on the loss of a fellow member, and formulated their own assessment of the significance of the event for the world.

The notion of the 'international community' is interesting for discourse analysts because governments – despite the hugely variant views held by many (on this or any other matter) – inevitably demonstrate their communality through linguistic performance: in this case, by adherence to the generic expectations of the condolence message. This shows how global communities, just like local communities, structure the bonds of membership through the shared formation of registers, and negotiate their position within the group by the manipulation of the structural features of these registers.

The condolence messages studied here come from 12 countries and one organization: the USA, Israel, India, China, Russia, Iran, South Africa, Australia, the UK, Pakistan, Indonesia, Japan and the United Nations (UN). All originated from the official government websites of the relevant countries (and the UN), with one exception: the Israeli leader Ariel Sharon did not post an official message, but instead issued a 'statement' to the press. All the messages were posted in English. Most of the messages were authored (at least nominally) by the nations' individual leaders, but this was not always the case. The message may have been issued by a government office, perhaps 'on behalf' of the national leader. Table 1 explains which website posted each message and who the purported author was.

It is hoped that by analyzing and comparing these messages, we will be able to answer certain questions about the nature of global political discourse at the start of the 21st century. What do the texts tell us about the social function of (international) diplomatic discourse, and about the particular functions and generic structure of the condolence message? How does language enact the international community? What does this corpus tell us about world leaders' attitudes towards Yasser Arafat and Middle East peace?

### *Analytical framework*

The expression 'international community' is regularly used in political discourse, but it remains relatively undefined. This article is built on the basic assumption that, on the one hand, 'communities' (and 'society' in general) are partly created through language, and, on the other hand, that language is constrained by the nature of the particular community in which it is used. Thus, we are able to see that condolence messages are used to signify membership of the international community, but also that there is a certain global diplomatic etiquette that constrains what may or may not be said in them.

Clearly, then, an analytical approach is required that views language and society as mutually sustaining. One such framework is critical discourse analysis (CDA), a basic tenet of which is that 'actual discourse is determined by socially constituted orders of discourse, sets of conventions associated with social institutions' (Fairclough, 2001: 14). Thus, not only are language and society

TABLE 1. *Origin of condolence messages*

<i>Nation/ organization</i>	<i>The website of . . .</i>	<i>Author of message</i>
Australia	Prime Minister of Australia	Prime Minister John Howard's Office
China	Ministry of Foreign Affairs	Foreign Ministry Spokeswoman Zhang Qiyue (with paraphrasing of President Hu Jintao's private condolence messages)
Great Britain	Number 10 Downing Street	Prime Minister Tony Blair
India	President of India	President's Office and President Dr A.P.J. Abdul Kalam
Indonesia	Department of Foreign Affairs	Department of Foreign Affairs
Iran	Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs	The Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Foreign Minister Dr Kamal Kharrazi
Israel	CBS news, Chicago	Prime Minister Ariel Sharon
Japan	Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs	Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi
Pakistan	Diplomacy Monitor	President General Pervez Musharraf
Russia	President of Russia	President's Office and President Vladimir Putin
South Africa	Department of Foreign Affairs	Department of Foreign Affairs and President Thabo Mbeki
United Nations	United Nations	Spokesman for the Secretary-General Kofi Annan
USA	The White House	President George W. Bush

linked, they are linked in structured ways – given a certain social institution, we can expect certain sets of conventions and the production of a certain kind of text. The analysis always maintains the dual perspective that Fairclough sees as the ‘felicitously ambiguous’ underpinning of both discourse and practice, i.e. both ‘what people are doing on a particular occasion’ and ‘what people habitually do given a certain sort of occasion’ (Fairclough, 2001: 23).

However, I am also mindful of Martin and Wodak's point that ‘CDA has never been and has never attempted to be one single or specific theory. Neither is one specific methodology characteristic of research in CDA’ (Martin and Wodak, 2003: 5). For this reason, the broad CDA framework is informed, where necessary, by the descriptive tools of systemic functional linguistics (SFL). This approach shares the language–society link with CDA, similarly maintaining that it is ‘the social functions that determine what language is like and how it has evolved’ (Halliday, 1985: 3). A further advantage of incorporating SFL techniques is pointed out by Martin (2000a: 275): ‘one of the strengths of SFL in the context of CDA work is its ability to ground concerns with power and ideology in the