



## SEMANTIC FORMULAS FOR EXPRESSING CONDOLENCES IN THE MACEDONIAN LANGUAGE: AN INTERCULTURAL STUDY

**Violeta Janusheva<sup>1</sup>,**

**Silvana Neshkovska**

“St. Kliment Ohridski” University,

Republic of Macedonia

### **Abstract:**

Expressing condolences is among the least frequently explored expressive speech acts. Just like the other speech acts, it is culture specific, i.e. its realizations vary from culture to culture. This particular paper pioneers the studying of the speech act of expressing condolences in the Macedonian language and culture, and, logically, it draws heavily on the findings and insights gained previously in other cultures, primarily Western (the English speaking countries), but also some more exquisite Eastern ones (Iraqi, Persian, Malaysian, Iranian, etc.). The aim of the study is to make an intercultural comparison and to investigate the presence, or more precisely, the frequency with which the semantic formulas for expressing condolences used in the abovementioned languages and cultures are used in the Macedonian language and culture. In that context, attempts are made to disclose whether Macedonian culture bears a greater similarity to the Western cultures or, perhaps, to the Eastern ones. The research incorporates both a qualitative and quantitative paradigm. The chosen instrument for compiling data is a structured Discourse Completion Task. Bearing in mind the limitations of the DCT, the data from the DCT are compared with the acts of condolences given to one of the author after her father has died in 2016. These data which are not analyzed were identical with the one compiled with the DCT and serves as a confirmation of the validity and reliability of the DCT. Analysis, synthesis and comparison of the results obtained from previous research are the methods utilized for both processing the linguistic corpus and reaching scientifically valid conclusions. The analysis shows that in the Macedonian language and culture, just like in the other languages and cultures, there are primary and secondary semantic formulas for expressing condolences. Some of the primary semantic formulas appear to be typical only of the Macedonian native speakers, whereas some resemble the ones used in Western cultures, and some are closer to the ones used in the Islamic cultures. The study also bears evidence to the fact that in the Macedonian language, the formality of the context and the social status of the interlocutors still influence the choice of the semantic formulas for expressing condolences. Nevertheless, there are also some indications that some of the semantic formulas are undergoing a process of generalization, which practically endorses their usage in both formal and informal domains.

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<sup>1</sup> Correspondence: email [violetajanuseva@gmail.com](mailto:violetajanuseva@gmail.com)

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## Introduction

The present study deals with a very solid but rather neglected pragmatic issue – expressing condolences. Condolences alongside with greetings, thanks, congratulations, and apologies reveal psychological states of mind and express personal attitudes and feelings, and, consequently, are treated as a special category of speech acts called expressives. According to Austin (1962) and Searle (1969, 1979), the founders of the theory of speech acts, a speech act is a minimal unit of human communication, i.e. the performance of certain kinds of language acts.

The speech act of condolence refers to the verbal reactions of a condoler to a bereaved person who has lost a beloved person. Thus, what makes this speech act truly trying is the fact that its realization takes place in extremely sensitive circumstances for the bereaved. They have faced the death of a loved one – the very aspect of human nature, which is still shrouded in mystery and greatly dreaded by human beings in general. Logically, the bereaved is grief-stricken, shocked, overwhelmed by emotions, which can range from deep sorrow, grief, shock and numbness (Parkers, Laungani & Young, 1997). Choosing the right words in such situations is of a vital importance for both the condoler and the bereaved. The condoler should be compassionate, supportive and thoughtful, but not in an intrusive and prying manner.

A quick overview of literature on speech acts reveals that even though condolences have not been sufficiently analyzed, it has been established that they are culture specific, i.e. their linguistic realizations vary from one culture to another. What could be a perfectly acceptable expression of condolence in one culture might be completely unacceptable in another. Thus, for instance, in Western cultures, English speakers express their heartfelt feelings by saying *I am sorry (most sorry/deeply sorry) to hear of your loss* (Zunin & Zunin 1991; Moghaddam, 2012; Al-Shboul & Marlyna, 2013), whereas in the Chinese culture, there is no specific word one can use in order to convey sympathy. In any case, the limited number of studies of condolences conducted mainly in English (Elwood, 2004, Moghaddam, 2012, Behnam, Hamed & Asli), Japanese (Elwood, 2004), Iraqi (Yahya, 2010), Iranian (Lotfallahi & Eslami-Rasekch, 2011; Samavarchi & Allami, 2012), Persian (Moghaddam, 2012, Behnam et al.) and Malesyan (Kuang, 2015)

The issue of expressing condolences is further complicated by people's religious beliefs. Thus, for instance, both Christians and Muslims are taught to believe in life after death in Heaven – the final resting place of all the righteous and virtuous souls, which is near God; and Hell – the final place of torture of all sinful souls who have not abided by God's rules. Logically, the speech act of condolences in the cultures, which adhere to such religious teaching, is much more affected and infused with religious content than, for instance, in other less religions or more atheistic cultures.

The formulation of the expressions of condolence is also greatly influenced by the nature of the relationship between the condoler and the bereaved. The relationship between

these two is normally determined by various social factors such as social status, distance, age, profession, gender, etc., all of which, in fact, influence the condoler to either produce a linguistic reaction which reflects true commiseration and compassion, or, perhaps, some prefabricated phrase with which he/she merely meets certain politeness standards and conforms to social conventions. In a similar vein, Moghaddam (2012, 5) advocates that the way a person expresses or responds to condolences depends on the bereaved's relationship with the deceased; the condoler's relationship with the bereaved; the condoler's relationship with the deceased, and the emotions the bereaved is experiencing.

Previous studies of condolences have brought to the foreground a handful of semantic formulas condolers can choose from when expressing condolences (Elwood, 2004):

Acknowledging the loss by means of interjections: *Oh* or *Oh my God*;

Expressions of sympathy: *I am so sorry*;

Offers of assistance: *Is there anything I can do?*

Future-oriented remarks: *Try not to get depressed*;

Expressions of concern: *How are you doing?*

Evidently, what plays a decisive role in determining what semantic formula would be most suitable in a particular situation is, unquestionably, the culture the interlocutors belong to as well as their relationship which, in turn, depends entirely on the intricate network of social factors related to them.

Given that the pragmatic research, in general, in the context of the Macedonian language is literally at its inception (Kuzevska, Trajkova, Neshkovska & Smichkovska, 2014), this study purposes to further upgrade those initial modest endeavors by unfolding novel significant insights regarding the expressive speech act of condolences in the Macedonian language and culture. More to the point, first, it aims to disclose how Macedonian native speakers express condolences, i.e. what semantic formulas they normally resort to; which of these semantic formulas are more or less frequently used in both formal and informal domains when the condolers have either the same or the different social status with the bereaved. The research is based on drawing comparisons between our findings regarding condolences and previous findings regarding other languages and cultures, and attempts to highlight relevant similarities and differences, as well as to point out some possible directions for future research.

## 2. Theoretical background

The speech act of expressing condolences belongs to the category of expressives as it is a product of a psychological state and is used in highly emotional contexts. The word condolence comes from the Latin word 'condore' which means 'to suffer together' (Zunin & Zunin, 2007), or in other words, to acknowledge somebody's loss, to show sympathy and to empathize with someone.

One of the very first studies on condolences is attributed to Elwood (2004) who investigated the cross-cultural differences of expressions of condolence between Americans

and Japanese. She offers a classification, which relies heavily on 5 types of responses or semantic formulas previously proposed by Olstain and Cohen's (1983):

1. Acknowledgment of the death by means of interjections: *Oh* or *Oh my God*;
2. Expressions of sympathy: *I am sorry*;
3. Offering assistance: *Is there anything I can do?*;
4. Future-oriented remarks usually took the form of words of encouragement or practical advice: *Try not to get depressed*.
5. Expressions of concern related to showing care for the well-being of the speaker or/and his/her family and includes questions as *How are you doing?*

Elwood (2004) also makes a note of other expressions of condolences, which she claims cannot be included in these five strategies or semantic formulas. These comprise: 'expressions of empathy', 'sharing a similar experience', 'statement of not knowing', 'statement of lacking words', 'positive statements', 'an expression of surprise', 'related questions' and 'related comments'.

Yahya's study (2010) looked into the Iraqi community's expressions of condolences. Using an ethnographic approach, Yahya (2010, in Kohen, 2015) investigated the effects of cultural norms and values of condolences imposed on the Iraqi community and concluded that there were five most common and basic patterns of responses:

1. Acknowledgment of death;
2. Expressions of sympathy;
3. Offer of assistance;
4. Future-oriented remarks;
5. Expressions of concern and five minor categories:
6. Sharing similar experience;
7. Making statements of not knowing;
8. Making statements of lacking words;
9. Expressing surprise, and
10. Making related questions and comments).

Lotfallahi & Eslami-Rasekch (2011, 140) examine the expressions of condolences in Iranian and base their research on the findings proposed by Elwood (2004). The analysis of data revealed that offering condolences by Iranians, members of the Muslim community, is carried out through strategies which are unique to this religious culture and is considerably different from what was found in the English data. In fact, they enrich Elwood and Yahya's categorization of strategies by including additional strategies:

1. Seeking absolution from God via expressions such as *May God bless him* and other religious expressions praying God to let the soul of the deceased rest in peace, i.e. asking for God's forgiveness for the deceased person;
2. Religious-oriented sympathy: *We will all die, He has gone to paradise, It was his fate*, etc.

Samavarchi & Allami (2012) also analyzed condolences in the Iranian context and grouped the responses they received into seven main categories:

1. Direct condolence (*I give you my condolences*);
2. Apologetic:

- Apologetic + offer to help (*I'm so sorry, If you need help, I'll be there*);
  - Apologetic + philosophical utterance (*I'm sorry, I hope it'll be the last tragedy on your life*);
  - Apologetic + appreciation of the dead (*I'm sorry, she was so nice*);
  - Apologetic + religious (*I'm sorry, May God bless him!*);
3. Religious (*God bless him!*);
  4. Offering help (*If you need any help, let me know; You can count on me anytime*);
  5. Consoling/comforting/sympathizing (*Be calm and don't worry*);
  6. Inquiring (*What happened?*);
  7. Silence.

What differentiates their classification from the previous two is obviously the fact that the second category of semantic strategies (*Apologetic*) is divided into 4 subcategories and that each of them is a combination of an apology and one more strategy (offering help, appreciation, a religious or philosophical utterance).

Moghaddam (2012) initiated another cross-culture study pertaining to condolences and investigated the use of interjections and intensifiers in the condolence speech act among Persian and English speakers. Moghaddam (2012) employed movie analysis as a method of gathering information and the results of his study reveal that: a) there is a significant difference among intensifiers and interjections in each culture; b) interjections and intensifiers can be organized semantically; and (c) the nature of English and Persian intensifiers is syntactically different.

Behnam et al.'s study (2013) which was also based on Elwood's (2004) categorization of the condolence strategies was intended to look into giving condolences across English and Persian via short messages. The analysis of their data indicated that there is a difference in the way people offer their condolences and they argue that Persian messages are more direct and shorter and signs of religious culture can be seen in them, as they believe that everything including death is controlled by God. English messages, on the other hand, in their study are mostly indirect, very sympathetic and apologetic as the native English people think about the bereaved family much more when expressing their sorrows strategies.

Kuang (2015) investigated how Malaysian SMS condolences are composed, i.e. what semantic functions they perform. His analysis suggests that Malaysian SMS condolences can perform eight semantic functions. Kuang (2015) also deduces that those strategies which expressed concerns via directives and wishful thinking were least preferred whilst those which eulogized the deceased and expressed uncertainty were most preferred among the Malaysians.

Evidently, all the aforementioned studies are rather recent and seem to be based on the semantic formulas initially discussed by Elwood (2004). Many of these studies are cross-culture oriented and compare at least two different languages (English and Japanese (Elwood, 2004); English and Persian (Behnam et al., 2013; Moghaddam, 2012), etc.). On average, in all the languages in which the speech act of condolences has been investigated so far, there are from 5 to 10 separate semantic formulas which condolers have at their disposal when expressing sympathy. A distinction is also being made between more and less

preferred semantic formulas, i.e. primary and secondary semantic formulas, Kuang (2015), Yahya (2010), Elwood (2004).

Despite the general brevity of the expressions of condolences, yet some of the studies highlight the possibility of creating a more complex expressions which are combinations of different semantic formulas (e.g. an apology and offering help/appreciation/a religious or philosophical utterance, etc. (Samavarchi & Allami, 2012).

Most of the studies analyze orally expressed condolences; nevertheless, some of them make attempt to analyze written condolences sent to the bereaved via SMS or emails (Kuang, 2015; Behnam et al., 2013).

### 3. Methodology

This particular paper is based on several research questions: Which of the existing semantic formulas for expressing condolences used in other cultures and languages are also used in the Macedonian language and culture? Are any of the semantic formulas typical only of the Macedonian language and culture? Is the Macedonian culture in terms of expressing condolences closer to the Western or Eastern cultures? Do the formality of the domain and the social status of interlocutors influence the choice and use of a particular semantic formula?

The research has a quantitative and qualitative paradigm. The instrument used for gathering data is a structured Discourse Completion Task (DCT), which comprises descriptions of four situations which instigate the use of expressions of condolences. The four situations refer to the four domains proposed by Greenfield in 1968 (in Fishman, 1978), the first two domains refer to family and friends and their daily activities and interactions in which they normally use informal language variety, whereas the others are the domains of education and work, respectively, which are characterized by the use of the formal language variety. Bearing in mind the limitations of the DCT, the data from the DCT are compared with the acts of condolences given to one of the author after her father has died in 2016. These data which are not analyzed were identical with the one compiled with the DCT and serves as a confirmation of the validity and reliability of the DCT.

Being native speakers of Macedonian ourselves, it was our conjecture that the informants would only resort to using the primary, i.e. the most common semantic formulas in response to the four situations in the DCT. Hence, in order to make sure that a greater variety of semantic formulas are elicited, not just the primary ones, we decided to further enrich the DCT with 4 additional questions encouraging condolers to state whether they would offer help, express concern for the well-being of the family, etc. when expressing sympathy (see Appendix).

The methods used for processing the gathered data include analysis, synthesis as well as intercultural comparison with the results obtained from previous research carried out in other cultures (Elwood, 2004; Yahya, 2010; Lotfallahi & Eslami-Rasekch, 2011, etc.).

The survey was conducted via email. Initially, the questionnaire was distributed to many potential respondents – well-educated young male and female individuals.

Nevertheless, upon receiving the responses of the first 100 respondents (46 males and 54 females), the corpus was closed and submitted to analysis. After compiling the corpus, the subsequent step was to take into consideration the previously established classifications of semantic formulas in the Western and Eastern cultures, and, if possible, to classify each of the Macedonian expressions of condolences within a suitable category; and, finally, to determine the incidence of each type of semantic formula.

#### 4. Results

The results gained from this particular research confirm our initial hypothesis. The four situations in the DCT would elicit solely the primary and most commonly used speech acts for expressing condolences. In addition, they would not reveal much about the other possible semantic formulas for expressing condolences such as, for instance, offering help to the bereaved, offering encouragement to the bereaved or expressing their concern for the well-being of the bereaved, etc. In this context, it is worth noting that these semantic formulas used for expressing condolences in the other languages have been obtained alongside with the primary semantic formulas. In Macedonian, information about these semantic formulas has been gathered by posing the four additional questions in the DCT. Hence, it can be safely inferred that the expressions of condolences obtained initially are the most common ones in the Macedonian culture and can rightfully be dubbed primary semantic formulas, whereas the semantic formulas obtained as responses to the additional questions can be treated as secondary semantic formulas. Moreover, the analysis of the results suggests that, some of the primary semantic formulas are typical only of the Macedonian language and culture, whereas some of them point to similarities between the Macedonian and the Western, and especially to similarities between the Macedonian and the Eastern, or Islamic cultures.

The analysis also shows that the social status of the interlocutors influences the choice and use of the semantic formula for expressing condolences, which, in turn, points to differences in the usage of the semantic formulas in relation to the four domains (family, friends, education and work) as well. However, the analysis also shows that when it comes to expressing condolences, in the Macedonian language there are signs that a process of generalization or merging of certain semantic formulas is underway, which, consequently disregards the differences in the social status of the interlocutors as well as the differences in the domains.

As to the secondary semantic formulas, no incongruities between the Macedonian and the Western and Islamic cultures have been detected, as these same strategies are also present in the other cultures as well, and, even more importantly, in these cultures they are used among the primary semantic formulas (Elwood, 2004; Yahya, 2010, etc.).

In the subsequent sections, we will discuss the results of this study in more detail. First, the results obtained from the four situations in the DCT will be elaborated on; and then, the insights gained from the four additional questions in the DCT will be disclosed.

#### 4.1. Situation 1 (Family domain)

Situation 1 refers to the family domain, which presupposes the usage of informal register. This situation is rather peculiar as the respondents are instructed to imagine that a close family member has just passed away and to state the exact words and expressions they would use to express condolences to the rest of the family members. Furthermore, the uniqueness of this situation rests on the fact that there is no mention of a similar situation in the previous studies too.

The responses indicate that almost all of the informants (99 out of 100) use the speech act of expressing condolences in addressing close family members, except for one respondent who explains that in such a distressing situation, the members of the family are normally expected to receive condolences and not to express condolences to one another.

In this domain, the most frequently used expressions are the religious expressions of condolences represented by three distinct semantic formulas. The religious and nonreligious semantic formulas throughout this paper are rendered literally from Macedonian into English primarily as, in some cases, there are no direct translation equivalents in English, but also because, thus, the existing differences in both languages become even more conspicuous.

Examples: *Bog da go prosti* (God forgive him) (54), *Lesna mu zemja* (Light be the earth on him) and its variant *Neka mu e lesna zemjata* (28) (May the earth be light on him/her) and *Neka pochiva vo mir* (May he rest in peace) (12).

Apologetic expressions of condolences in the family domain are used very infrequently (2) and are represented by the following semantic formula *Zhal mi e* (I am sorry) and its variant *Mnogu mi e zhal* (I am so sorry).

A semantic formula, which is a combination of a religious expression and an expression referring to the future of the family, is also used in this domain but by an insignificant number of respondents (2): *Bog da go prosti + Neka ni e zdrava i zhiva familijata* (God forgive him + May our family be healthy and alive). A few of the respondents chose to express their condolences by remaining *silent* (2).

#### 4.2. Situation 2 (Friendship domain)

Situation 2 pertains to the friendship domain, which is also characterized by the use of informal language variety. Similarly to the family domain, the highest frequency in the friendship domain has been marked in the case of the religious expressions, more precisely, the semantic formula *Bog da go prosti* (God forgive him) (29).

In the friendship domain, some of the respondents use the semantic formula *Bog da go prosti* (God forgive him) and combine it with the two other religious semantic formulas: *Bog da go prosti + Lesna mu zemja*. Some of them use its variant *Neka mu e lesna zemjata* (God forgive him + Light be the earth on him/ May the earth be light on him) (11); or *Bog da go prosti + Neka pochiva vo mir* (God forgive him + May he rest in peace) (3).

The combinations of the religious expression *Bog da go prosti* (God forgive him) and an expression about the future of the family, which is, in fact, a prayer for the well-being of the living members of the family addressed to God, are also very frequent in this domain (14). Examples: *Bog da go prosti + Vie da ste zdravi i zhivi* or its variant *Vie bidete zdravi i zhivi* (God



*forgive him + May you be healthy and alive/Be healthy and alive*), or *Bog da go prosti + Da mu e zdrava I zhiva familijata* (*God forgive him + May his family be healthy and alive*).

Some of the informants use an even more complex combination of two religious expressions and an expression about the future of the family. Examples: *Bog da go prosti + Lesna mu zemja*; or its variant *Neka mu e lesna zemjata + Da mu e zdrava i zhiva familijata* or its variant *Vie drugite da ste zdravi i zhivi* (*God forgive him + Light be the earth on him/May the earth be light on him + May his family be healthy and alive/You be healthy and alive*) (12).

It is interesting to note that in the friendship domain the apologetic expressions of condolences are also not normally used independently but in combination with the religious expression *Bog da go prosti* (*God forgive him*): *Bog da go prosti + Zhal mi e* or its variant *Mnogu mi e zhal* (*God forgive him + I am sorry/I am so sorry*) (7). The non-religious expressions are sometimes combined not only with the religious expressions *Bog da go prosti* (*God forgive him*), but with an expression about the future of the family as well (8). Examples: *Bog da go prosti + Zhal mi e + Vie bidete zdravi i zhivi* or its above stated variant (*God forgive him + I am sorry + May you be healthy and alive*).

Some of the respondents in this domain opted for a combination of an apologetic expression *Zhal mi e* (*I am sorry*) or its variant *Mnogu mi e zhal* (*I am so sorry*) and the religious expression *Bog da go prosti* (*May God forgive him*) and a statement which reflects a personality trait of the deceased (4). Examples: *Bog da go prosti + Zhal mi e + Toj beshe mlad, dobar, dobrodushen, praveden chovek* (*God forgive him + I am sorry + He was a young/kind/goodhearted/just man*).

Among the least frequently used, an expression of direct condolences in the friendship domain is the expression *Primi sochuvstvo* (*Accept condolences*) (4).

### 4.3. Situation 3 Education (Formal domain)

This situation refers to the education domain and depicts a formal situation in which the informants are expected to state what expressions they would use to offer their condolences to one of their teachers who has suffered a loss of a family member.

As expected, in the education domain, the most commonly used semantic formulas are the expressions of direct condolences, more precisely, their formal variant: *Primete sochuvstvo* (*Accept condolences*) or its variants *primete go moeto sochuvstvo* (*Accept my condolences*), *Primete go moeto najiskreno/najdlaboko sochuvstvo* (*Accept my sincerest/deepest condolences*) (39).

Some of the informants use a combination of an expression of direct condolences and an apologetic expression of condolences (18): *Primete sochuvstvo* (*Accept condolences*) or one of the above stated variants + *Zhal mi e* (*I am sorry*) or its variant *Mnogu mi e zhal* (*I am so sorry*).

Additionally some of the respondents use a combination of an expression of direct condolences and a religious one (17): *Primete sochuvstvo* (*Accept condolence*) or its previously stated variants + *Bog da go prosti* (*God forgive him*); while some decide to use the religious expression *Bog da go prosti* (*God forgive him*) independently (17).

Although less frequently, some of the respondents use a combination of an expression of direct condolences and an expression about the future of the family of the deceased (4).

Examples: *Primete sochuvstvo* (Accept condolence) or some of its variants + *Bog neka Ve chuva Vas i Vashata familija* (May God keep you and your family safe) or its variant *Gospod neka Vi dava sila ponatamu vo zivotot* (May God give you strength in your life henceforward). The least frequently used is the religious expression *Neka pochiva vo mir* (May he rest in peace) (3). Few of the respondents even claim they would solely employ a non-verbal expression of condolence, namely a firm handshake (2).

#### 4.4. Situation 4 (Work domain)

This situation refers to the work domain, which is also a formal domain. The respondents are expected to express condolences to their superior whose close relative has just passed away.

In the work domain as well the most frequently used are the non-religious expressions of condolences, among which the most common one is the semantic formula of expressing direct condolences *Primete sochuvstvo* (Accept condolence) or its variants *Primete go moeto najiskreno sochuvstvo* (Accept my sincerest condolences) and *Primete go moeto dlaboko sochuvstvo* (Accept my deepest condolences) (40).

Some of the respondents use a combination of an expression of direct condolences and an apologetic expression of condolences: *Primete sochuvstvo* (Accept condolences) or its variants + *Zhal mi e* (I am sorry) or its variants *Mnogu mi e zhal* (I am so sorry) and *Zhalam za Vashata zaguba* (I am sorry for your loss) (21).

Some use a combination of an expression of direct condolence + the religious expression *Bog da go prosti* (May God forgive him): *Primete sochuvstvo* (Accept condolence) + *Bog da go prosti* (God forgive him) (18), but some also use the semantic formula *Bog da go prosti* (God forgive him) independently (13).

Only few of the respondents use the religious expression *Neka pochiva vo mir* (May he rest in peace) (3), and a combination of this expression with an expression about the future of the family: *Neka pochiva vo mir* (May he rest in peace) + *Vie da ste zdravi i zhivi* (May you be healthy and alive) (3). In the category of the least frequently used expressions of condolences in the work domain belongs also the religious expression *Lesna mu zemja* (Light be the earth on him) used independently (2).

#### 4.5. The four additional questions in the DCT

The responses to the four additional questions in the DCT, reveal that nothing significant distinguishes the Macedonian language and culture from Western and Eastern cultures as the same semantic formulas which are mentioned in the previous studies are also used on the part of the Macedonian native speakers as well.

Namely, out of the total number of respondents, 99 will offer help by using one of the following semantic formulas: *Ako treba pomosh, slobodno kazhi* (If you need help, let me know) (39), *Dali ti e potrebna pomosh?* (Do you need help?) (21), *Ako treba neshto, tuka sum* (If you need something, I am here) (19), *Sakam da pomognam ako mozham* (I want to help if I can) (8), *Sakam da pomognam ako mi dozvolite* (I want to help if you allow me) (6).

Few of the respondents (7) while expressing condolences would not offer help because, according to them, in such difficult situations, all other words except from the ones used for expressing condolences are redundant and pointless.

Almost all of the respondents (98) will encourage the bereaved. The most common semantic formulas, irrespective of the domains, are:

*Zhivotot prodolzhuva ponatamu* (Life goes on) (33), *Ne grizhi se, sè kje bide vo red* (Do not worry, everything will be alright) (20), *Smiri se* (Come down) (16), *Obidi se da se smirish* (Try to come down) (13), *Obidi se da ne si tolku voznemirena* (Try not to be that upset) (11). Few respondents (7), the same who claim that offering help to the bereaved in such circumstances is meaningless, state that they would not utter an expression of encouragement either because, according to them, it is to no avail to use many words in such a situation.

All 100 respondents state that they would express concern, and these are the most frequent semantic formulas they claim they would employ *Kako si* (How are you) (37), *Kako se drzhish* (How are you hanging?) (31), *Dali e se' vo red* (Is everything alright) (17), *Dali si dobar* (Are you alright) (15).

As to the last question, none of the respondents offers any additional verbal or nonverbal reactions suitable to accompany the abovementioned expressions of condolences.

## 5. Discussion

Situation 1 refers to the family domain and tries to disclose what semantic formulas for expressing condolences Macedonian family members commonly resort to in such private interactions. The family domain has not been subjected to analysis in the previous research on expressing condolences conducted in different languages and cultures, and, consequently, this study points to a very important feature of the Macedonian culture, which in the other cultures is either not present to that extent or not present at all.

As shown in the results section above, in the family domain, the usage of religious expressions represented by three distinct semantic formulas prevails. The semantic formula *Bog da go prosti* (May God forgive him), which is most frequently used in this domain, does not have an adequate equivalent in the English language. It is related to the Christian religious belief of the Macedonians about the existence of life after death, namely the belief that depending on the number and gravity of one's sins, God sends the deceased either to Heaven or to Hell. Hence, this religious expression of condolences is, in fact, a plea to God on the part of the living to absolve the deceased from his sins.

The usage of this semantic formula, on the one hand, is a confirmation that different cultures make use of unique semantic formulas, but, on the other hand, it also suggests the Macedonian culture bears a significant similarity to the Muslim culture, as similar religious formulas are used in the Muslim communities as well. Namely, Lotfallahi & Eslami-Rasekch (2011) mention *Seeking absolution from God via expressions such as May God bless him and other religious expressions praying God to let the soul of the deceased rest in peace* as the very first semantic formula in their classification of semantic formulas used for expressing condolences.

Similarly, the semantic formula *Lesna mu zemja* (*Light be the earth on him*) and its variant *Neka mu e lesna zemjata* (*May the earth be light on him*) have no translation equivalents in the English language. These two religious expressions are also related to the religious beliefs of the Macedonians, and are used as a plea to God, asking Him to make the earth on the deceased light or in other words, to make the afterlife easy for the deceased. This semantic formula seems to be unique to the Macedonian culture as it has not been encountered in the previous research on expressing condolences in other languages. This, in turn, indicates that certain semantic formulas are typical only of a particular culture, which, consequently, entails the need of investigating and elaborating on certain speech acts only in the context of ameliorating the understanding of the cultural values and beliefs of the community they are used in.

The third semantic formula in the family domain, *Neka pochiva vo mir* (*Let him rest in peace*), was not expected at all in this domain, simply because it is commonly used in formal situations and it signals distance between the interlocutors and differences in their social status. Its presence in this informal domain indicates that the speech act of expressing condolences, at least as far as the Macedonian language is concerned contribute to blurring the boundary between the formal and informal domains, as well as to generalizing the usage of this semantic formula, irrespective of its original domain.

Samavarchi & Allami (2012) in their research conducted in the Iranian language mentioned *silence* as one of the semantic formulas used for expressing condolences in the Iranian language. In the Macedonian corpus, this strategy was among the least frequently used ones (2). Again, this finding points to the fact that the Macedonian culture in this respect as well bears a similarity to the Muslim culture.

In the family domain, the presence of the other semantic formulas for expressing condolences mentioned in the previous studies (Elwood, 2004; Lotfallahi & Eslami-Rasekch, 2011; Samavarchi & Allami, 2012; Yahya, 2010 etc.) has been truly scarce. Namely, apart from several apologetic expressions of condolences and expressions about the future of the rest of the family members, there were no other types of semantic formulas used. The occurrence of this phenomenon can probably be attributed to the fact that Macedonian family members' generally attach greater formality to non-religious expressions and, eventually, consider them more adequate in more formal situations. This finding sets the Macedonian culture further apart from the Western cultures in which the usage of non-religious expressions of condolences seem to predominate even in informal contexts.

Situation 2, i.e. the friendship domain, is mentioned in all previous studies, and, just like Situation 1, refers to the usage of the informal language register.

Similarly, to the family domain, the friendship domain also prefers the three religious expressions, i.e. semantic formulas, already mentioned in Situation 1. The only difference with the family domain in which all these three formulas are used independently, is that in the friendship domain only the formula *Bog da go prosti* (*God forgive him*) is used independently. The other two religious expressions, *Lesna mu zemja* (*Light be the earth on him*) and *Neka pochiva vo mir* (*Let him rest in peace*) are normally combined together. The combination *Bog da go prosti + Neka pochiva vo mir* (*God forgive him + May he rest in peace*),

confirms the already mentioned blurring of the boundary between the formal and informal domain.

In the friendship domain, unlike in the family domain, there is a marked tendency of the religious expressions of condolences to combine with other non-religious expressions (apologetic expressions, future-oriented expressions, expressions eulogizing the character of the deceased, etc.) as well. These combinations of expressions normally consist of two, but sometimes up to three different semantic formulas are included within one combination. These combinations of semantic formulas of a different nature (religious and non-religious) were previously mentioned by Samavarchi & Allami (2012) and Elwood (2004). Consequently, this points to the existence of another similarity but this time not only between the Macedonian culture and the Muslim culture, but also between the Macedonian and Western culture.

But then again, despite these combinations of semantic formulas in the Macedonian culture, the non-religious expressions of condolences, which are typically among the most frequently used semantic formulas in the other languages, seem to be far less frequent in the friendship domain and they are almost never used independently. The only exception to this is the direct expression of condolences *Primi sochuvstvo* (*Accept condolences*), which although in this domain is used very infrequently, still it is used independently. Its usage, however, is completely unexpected in the friendship domain, as it is derived from the formal expression *Primete sochuvstvo* (*Accept condolences*). In the expression *Primi sochuvstvo*, the verb is in the second person singular which reflects relations of closeness between the interlocutors; unlike the direct expression of condolences *Primete sochuvstvo*, which contains a verb in the second person plural (formed with the suffix – te), and which normally signals distant relationship between the interlocutors. What further confirms that *Primi sochuvstvo* is an informal variant is, in fact, that the formal *Primete sochuvstvo* in the Macedonian language is largely used when one expresses condolences to one person but in a polite manner. The use of this form, also, is an indicator that there emerges an obvious blurring of the boundary between the formal and informal domains.

Situation 3, which refers to the education domain is a formal situation, and, is encountered in all previous studies. The use of the formal language register is the primary feature of this domain. As expected, the results show that unlike the previous two informal domains, in this formal domain, the most frequent expressions of condolences is the direct formal expression *Primete sochuvstvo* (*Accept condolences*) with its variants *Primete go moeto sochuvstvo* (*Accept my condolences*), *Primete go moeto najiskreno/najdlaboko sochuvstvo* (*Accept my sincerest/deepest condolences*), used to show deference towards the bereaved.

The predominant use of the formal variant of the direct expression of condolences *Primete sochuvstvo* (*Accept condolences*), is opposed to its informal variant *Primi sochuvstvo* (*Accept condolences*). This indicates that the Macedonian native speakers recognize the formality of the situation and more readily opt for the formal expression, which clearly emphasizes the distance between the interlocutors and the difference in their social status.

Apart from being used independently, the direct expressions of condolences are almost equally used in combination with other semantic formulas. Most frequently they are

combined with and the apologetic expression *Zhal mi e (I am sorry)* and its variants, which is never used independently in this domain. The rest of the combinations of the direct expressions of condolences are either with some of the religious formulas or with an expression about the future of the family.

Thus, as previously shown in the friendship domain, the existence of combinations of different semantic formulas in the Macedonian culture, relates the Macedonian to the Islamic culture, on the one hand, and the Western culture, on the other hand.

However, one should not lose sight of the fact that the moderate use of the religious expression *Bog da go prosti (God forgive him)* as well as the use of the apologetic expression *Zhal mi e (I am sorry)* or its variants in this formal domain, can be interpreted as another validation of the blurring of the boundary between the social status of interlocutors, as well as the boundary between the domains when it comes to the use of the semantic formulas for expressing condolences.

What serves as another signal of this process of blurring the differences in the social status of the interlocutors, which, in turn, leads to blurring the differences in the choice of the semantic formulas in formal and informal domains, is the truly rare use of the formal religious expression *Neka pochiva vo mir (May he rest in peace)*, which is normally expected here given the formality of the education domain.

*Silence* accompanied by *a firm handshake* is mentioned as a possibility when expressing condolences in this formal domain as well.

Situation 4 is a formal situation, which refers to the work domain and presupposes the usage of the formal language register. This situation has been presented in the previous studies as well.

The results obtained here are, in fact, very similar to the ones obtained for Situation 3. Namely, the most frequent expression for expressing condolences, as in Situation 3, is the direct expression of condolences *Primete go moeto sochuvstvo (Accept my condolences)* and its variants.

Similarly, to the education domain, in the work domain, this formula is also almost equally used independently and in combinations with other semantic formulas. When combined, it is accompanied by either the apologetic expression *Zhal mi e (I am sorry)* and its variants, or the religious expression *Bog da go prosti (God forgive him)*. Only rarely is the direct expression of condolences combined with an expression about the future of the family.

The quite frequent use of the religious expression *Bog da go prosti (God forgive him)*, either independently or in combination with the direct expression of condolences, once again points to the thin boundary between the domains, as well as to the fact that this semantic formula in the Macedonian culture has been generalized and now can be used in all the domains, regardless of the differences in the social status of the interlocutors.

Taking into consideration the fact that the work domain is formal, one would normally expect the presence of the formal religious expression *Neka pochiva vo mir (May he rest in peace)*. Interestingly, just like in the education domain, this is really not the case here. In contrast, the independent use of the religious expression *Lesna mu zemja (Light be the earth on him)* confirms the previously proposed contention that the boundary between the domains

with regards to the choice and use of the semantic formulas for expressing condolence is gradually becoming less visible.

As to the four additional questions in the DCT, the findings suggest that the situation in the Macedonian language does not differ greatly from the situation presented in the previous studies with regards to the other languages and cultures. Namely, in the Macedonian culture, expressions of concern, offering help, encouragement of the bereaved, etc. are also used as strategies or semantic formulas for expressing condolences.

Nevertheless, the only difference worth mentioning in this context is that these semantic formulas, unlike in the other Western and Eastern languages and cultures mentioned in this study, in the Macedonian language, were elicited only as a result of posing additional questions. This implies that in comparison to all of the aforementioned semantic formulas, these are less frequently used and, in the Macedonian language and culture, can be referred to as secondary semantic formulas for expressing condolences.

## 6. Conclusion

It is not really that surprising that the speech act of condolences has been insufficiently analyzed worldwide to date. This research topic is not that appealing primarily as it is directly related to death, loss and suffering. Furthermore, compiling a corpus of the linguistic expressions people say in such difficult circumstances is a really awkward task which makes the entire research procedure even more complicated. Nonetheless, expressing condolences plays a major role in assisting the bereaved in coping with extremely painful experiences for, if structured appropriately, they convey solace, comfort, ease, and provide the bereaved with strength to carry on regardless. Consequently, it is of paramount importance to proceed with the research on condolences and to accumulate new findings simply because their application can eventually mitigate possible misunderstandings in human interactions, especially in cross-cultural interactions.

The current study is first of its kind in the Macedonian language and culture. Apart from offering relevant insights into the Macedonian language and culture, one of its primary aims was to make an intercultural comparison which will pin down similarities and differences between the Macedonian semantic formulas used for expressing condolences and the ones preferred in the Western culture (primarily the English speaking countries) and the Eastern predominantly Muslim cultures.

In the Macedonian language, as it is the case with the other languages, there exist primary and secondary semantic formulas for expressing condolences. Understandably, the primary semantic formulas are much more frequently used in comparison with the secondary ones.

The primary semantic formulas encompass religious expressions primarily in the informal domains (family and friends) and direct expressions of condolences which are preferred in the formal domains (work and education).

The usage of the religious expressions brings the Macedonian culture closer to the Eastern cultures, i.e. Muslim cultures, since just like in the Muslim cultures, the Macedonian

culture is religion-oriented, and the influence of the belief in the afterlife is profoundly felt when formulating the expressions of condolences. In contrast, the strong presence of the direct expressions of condolences in the formal domain indicates that the Macedonian culture also bears resemblance to the Western cultures which are more religion-free and atheistically oriented, as they shun using religious expressions of condolences to a great extent.

Furthermore, as one might as well expect, the Macedonian language and culture, just like any other language and culture for that matter, also shows some signs of uniqueness and originality. This claim is based on the fact that some of its religious expressions of condolences are not present in the other culture at all despite the similar religious belief in the afterlife. Such is the case with *Bog da go prosti* (*God forgive him*) and *Lesna mu zemja* (*Light be the earth on him*).

Another interesting insight gained from this research pertaining to the primary semantic formulas for expressing condolences in the Macedonian language and culture is that their choice and usage is still primarily preconditioned by the differences in the social status of the interlocutors, which also point to differences in the domains. However, one cannot overlook the existing tendency to blur these differences as the religious expressions and especially the religious expression *Bog da go prosti* (*God forgive him*), and the non-religious expressions: *Primi/Primete sochuvstvo* (*Accept condolences*) and its variants, and *Zhal mi e* (*I am sorry*) and its variants, are generalized as semantic formulas in all four domains (family, friendship, education, work). This implies that, semantic formulas typical of the formal domains are used in the informal domains; and, vice versa, semantic formulas typical of the informal domains are utilized in the formal domains.

One of the most striking differences detected between the Macedonian language and culture and the Eastern and Western cultures is that Macedonian native speakers don't seem to be prone to using a whole range of semantic formulas which have been mentioned in the previous research on condolences. Thus, no instances of exclamations to confirm the information about the death of the deceased, expressions of empathy, sharing a similar experience, statement of not knowing, statement of lacking words, expressions of surprise, inquiries (*What happened?*) and philosophical comments, were detected in the Macedonian corpus of condolences. This stands in stark contrast with Elwood's findings (2004) about the intercultural differences in expressing condolences in the American and Japanese culture; as well as the findings of the other researchers who investigated the expressions of condolences in the Persian, Iranian and Iraqi culture (Lotfallahi & Eslami-Rasekch, 2011; Yahya, 2010; Samavarchi & Allami, 2012).

Although this result is definitely quite indicative and provides a general picture of the variety of semantic formulas and their use in the Macedonian language and culture, yet one should not lose sight of the limited scope of this study. In other words, a larger sample comprising more variables and a larger number of situations depicting different relations among the bereaved, the condoler and the deceased, would definitely guarantee a greater validity of the final results and would encompass a larger number of intercultural differences.



Nevertheless, the ultimate aim of this research is to serve as a good starting point and to instigate further research in this direction in the near future. Thus, for instance, upcoming research endeavors could encompass condolences expressed in emails and SMS, or via the social media such as Facebook, Twitter, My Space, or in books of condolences. Additionally, the influence of various combinations of social factors (e.g. profession, age, social status, distance, etc.) upon the formulation of the expressions of condolences could be further explored; as well as the verbal reactions of the bereaved themselves.

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