



Research Article

Gravestones as Texts: A Genre Analysis of Tombstones through a Gendered Lens

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Abstract

This study applies Swales genre analysis framework to Iranian tombstone inscriptions, drawing on direct observation of 1,400 gravestones (750 male, 650 female) and integrating qualitative and quantitative structural-semantic move analyses. Linguistically, the findings reveal a striking predominance of Persian poetic metaphors (82.86% of epitaphic content) over direct Quranic verses (4.8%), underscoring cultural-literary traditions rather than strictly religious rhetoric. Syntactically, the Persian *ezafe* construction encodes paternal lineage on 84% of men's tombstones, while maternal names are entirely absent (0%), grammatically materializing patriarchal descent. The rhetorical structure comprises nine distinct moves, two of which are obligatory: the deceased's particulars (name/titles) and lifespan (birth/death dates). Additional gendered markers include photographs (44% on men's stones, 0% on women's) and explicit paternal name mentions (84% for men, 58.5% for women), further reflecting Iran's male-dominated social norms. By positioning tombstones as communicative artifacts, this study bridges a gap in genre analyses of non-academic texts, offering a nuanced, gendered perspective on how death, identity, and socio-cultural values are discursively memorialized in Iranian society.

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1. Introduction

Philosophical reflections on death, such as Bacon's (1909) depiction of it as a "dreadful darkness" or Jung's (1950) concept of death as a transformative rebirth, have long shaped cultural practices of remembrance, including tombstone inscriptions, which serve as enduring symbols of individual and collective memory. In the field of discourse analysis, commemorative texts like gravestones are recognized as cultural artifacts that encapsulate

societal values, religious beliefs, and linguistic traditions (Keister, 2004; Wilson, 2009). In Iran, a multicultural nation shaped by Persian, Kurdish, Turk, and Arab ethnic groups, tombstones reflect a unique blend of Shia-majority values, Persian literary heritage, and social norms. These inscriptions often feature Quranic verses, Persian poetry, or symbols like flowers and candles, with elements like the flower motif symbolizing life's transience and titles such as 'Haji' or 'Mashhadi' signaling spiritual devotion (Moghadam, 2003).

However, discourse and communication scholarship has often been critiqued for its Westcentrism, where Anglo-American and generally Western cultural contents are dominantly investigated and usually regarded as indisputable standards. In contrast, however, readers in world cultures must unfold the cultural diversity they perceive, achieving a culturally conscious, creative, and critical form of discourse and communication that highlights the existence and prosperity of human communities (Shi-xu, 2016). Recent studies highlight gravestones as texts that encode cultural identities and social structures across global contexts, yet the linguistic and rhetorical structures of Iranian tombstone inscriptions remain underexplored. The absence of women's photographs on tombstones, influenced by Hijab laws, further underscores how gender norms shape commemorative practices in Iran's Shia-majority society. This interplay of religion, literature, and social values positions tombstone inscriptions as a rich site for studying how language reflects cultural attitudes toward death and memory. However, systematic analysis of these inscriptions as a distinct genre, particularly in Iran's multicultural context, is lacking, limiting insights into their rhetorical patterns and socio-cultural significance.

Despite advances in discourse analysis of commemorative practices, few studies have applied genre analysis to tombstone inscriptions in non-Western settings like Iran (Wilson, 2009). While research on global funerary texts has explored linguistic features and cultural meanings, the specific rhetorical moves and linguistic devices in Iranian inscriptions—such as metaphors, religious phrases, or poetic styles—remain largely unexamined. This gap hinders understanding of how tombstones function as a communicative genre that bridges individual memorialization with collective cultural expression, particularly in reflecting Iran's socio-cultural attitudes toward death, gender dynamics, and communal identity. The absence of such analysis overlooks a critical opportunity to explore how linguistic choices in Iran's multicultural and Shia-majority context convey societal values and shape social memory.

This study aims to fill this gap by analyzing the rhetorical and linguistic structures of 1,400 tombstone inscriptions at Behesht-e-Reza cemetery in Mashhad, Iran, using Swales' (2008) genre analysis framework. By examining elements such as the deceased's particulars, familial relations, religious titles, and symbolic imagery, the research seeks to identify patterns that define the genre's communicative purpose and reveal how linguistic choices—such as Quranic verses or Persian poetic styles—reflect Iran's cultural and gender dynamics. The study adopts an exploratory approach to uncover how these inscriptions serve as microcosms of societal values, from reverence for the afterlife to patriarchal norms. This research significantly contributes to discourse analysis by

establishing tombstone inscriptions as a distinct genre that encapsulates Iran's complex cultural, religious, and social values. By applying Swales' (2008) framework to a non-academic text type, it offers a novel methodological approach, building on studies of gravestones as cultural artifacts. To align with these objectives and explore the genre's rhetorical and cultural dimensions, this study raises the following questions:

1. What rhetorical patterns characterize the genre of tombstone inscriptions in Iran's Behesht-e-Reza cemetery?

2. What linguistic devices, such as metaphors, Quranic verses, or poetic styles, are employed in these inscriptions to reflect Iran's socio-cultural attitudes and beliefs?

2. Epitaphs through a Sociological Lens

Tombstones, as sociological artifacts, reveal societal values, beliefs, and hierarchies through their design, material, and inscriptions (Karimnia & Mohammadjafari, 2019). Ornate marble markers signify wealth, while simpler stones reflect economic constraints, highlighting class disparities (Hems, 2016). Epitaphs convey emotions and social roles, with gender norms shaping content, as Callis Goodwin (2013) found in Kentucky, where inscriptions reinforced traditional familial roles. In Iran, gender disparities are evident, with women's tombstones omitting photographs and maternal names, reflecting patriarchal norms tied to religious practices (Moghadam, 2003). These inscriptions serve as cultural texts, bridging personal loss and collective memory, and offer insights into Iran's Shia-majority values and social structures. Despite the cultural significance of epitaphs, scholarly attention to their content has been limited compared to studies of cemetery records or physical attributes. Research has often focused on documenting the material culture of gravestones, recognizing their potential to reveal beliefs about religion, life, death, and broader worldviews (Karimnia & Mohammadjafari, 2019). Cemeteries, as public spaces, serve as rich repositories of cultural data, offering insights into a community's values and ideologies. For example, Karimnia and Mohammadjafari (2019) argues that epitaphs play a crucial role in constructing a person's posthumous identity, reflecting how society chooses to remember the deceased, whether through familial roles, religious devotion, or personal achievements. Similarly, Watkins (2002) analyzed a Montreal cemetery, identifying two contrasting cultural visions of death: one rooted in the pastoral English garden aesthetic, emphasizing tranquility and order, and another celebrating religious and cultural diversity through varied iconography and inscriptions. These findings highlight the multifaceted ways in which gravestones communicate societal values, serving as both

memorials and cultural texts that convey collective beliefs about mortality and remembrance.

2.1. Gender and Commemorative Practices

Gender profoundly shapes tombstone inscriptions, reflecting societal norms and power dynamics. In Iran, patriarchal traditions influence commemorative practices, with men's tombstones more likely to include photographs (44% vs. 0%) and father's names (84% vs. 58.5%), as found in this study. These patterns align with broader gender disparities, where women's public visibility is restricted by religious norms, such as historical Hijab laws (Moghadam, 2003). Elekaei et al. (2015) noted similar trends in Iranian obituaries, with men's roles emphasized over women's domestic contributions. Conversely, women's tombstones feature more religious titles (32.3% vs. 24.6%), possibly reflecting compensatory honorifics in a male-dominated context. This gendered lens reveals how tombstones perpetuate social hierarchies, warranting further exploration of how gender intersects with class and ethnicity in Iranian cemeteries.

Further studies have explored how gravestones reflect specific social dynamics. Callis Goodwin (2013) examined epitaphs in Hays Cemetery, Kentucky, revealing how gravestones convey gender roles and social status, with inscriptions often emphasizing traditional gender norms or familial roles. Streb (2016) traced sociocultural transformations in 19th-century Palatinate gravestones, demonstrating how shifts from a rank-based society to a capitalist one was reflected in changing memorial practices. These studies highlight the potential of gravestones to serve as historical documents that capture evolving societal structures and values over time.

Beyond epitaphs, related genres such as obituaries and funeral announcements have also been analyzed for their cultural significance. Heynderickx and Dieltjens (2015) studied obituaries that emphasized the professional achievements of the deceased, noting variations in language, format, and content that reflect societal priorities. In a Persian context, Behnam and Rezvani (2015) identified nine common components in death announcements, such as expressions of condolence or religious invocations, which mirror sociocultural norms and communicative functions. Similarly, Elekaei et al. (2015) conducted a genre-based discourse analysis of Iranian newspaper obituaries, uncovering differences in language use, length, and vocabulary when announcing the deaths of men versus women. These variations highlight how gender and cultural expectations shape commemorative language.

Building on this foundation, Jalilifar et al. (2014) explored funeral announcements across diverse ethnic communities, revealing their deep ties to sociocultural

norms. In a Kenyan context, Ondimu (2014) analyzed newspaper obituaries, identifying language patterns and organizational structures that influence societal attitudes toward death. These studies collectively demonstrate that commemorative texts, whether epitaphs or announcements, are shaped by cultural beliefs and values, which in turn influence their linguistic and structural composition.

The present study seeks to expand upon this body of research by examining the composition of epitaphs in two distinct regions, analyzing how cultural beliefs are expressed through their linguistic and rhetorical structures. By applying a genre-based approach, this research explores the communicative functions of epitaphs and their role in reflecting societal attitudes toward death. The study draws on Swales' (2008) genre analysis framework, which emphasizes the identification of rhetorical patterns and linguistic devices within specific discourse communities (Swales, 2008). This approach allows for a systematic investigation of how epitaphs function as a genre, revealing the interplay between language, culture, and identity.

Through this analysis, the study aims to contribute to the understanding of gravestones as cultural artifacts that encapsulate the values, beliefs, and social dynamics of the communities that create them. By comparing epitaphs from two regions, the research highlights both universal and region-specific patterns in commemorative practices, shedding light on how societies navigate the universal experience of death while expressing their unique cultural identities. The findings will enrich the discourse on gravestones as a medium for cultural expression, offering new perspectives on how communities memorialize their dead and construct social memory in the face of mortality. Despite insights from obituary studies (Elekaei et al., 2015; Jalilifar et al., 2014), genre analysis of tombstone inscriptions, particularly through a gendered lens, remains underexplored. This study examines 1,400 Iranian tombstones to uncover how rhetorical moves and linguistic features reflect cultural, religious, and gender dynamics, using Swales' (2008) framework. By positioning tombstones as communicative artifacts, it contributes to discourse analysis and offers new perspectives on how Iranian communities memorialize death.

2.2. Linguistic Perspectives on Epitaphs

Beyond sociological readings, epitaphs demand a linguistic examination of their poetic and pragmatic features. Halliday's (1978) systemic functional linguistics provides a lens to view tombstones as texts performing ideational (representing death), interpersonal (expressing grief/respect), and textual (organizing information) metafunctions. Specific linguistic devices

abound: *deixis* anchors the deceased in time (dates) and space (tomb location); *religious performatives* (e.g., Quranic *Inna lillahi wa inna ilayhi raji'un*) act as speech acts of submission; and *Persian poetic tropes* utilize schemas like "Life as a candle" (transience) or "Life as a book" (narrative closure) to conceptualize mortality (Lakoff & Turner, 1989). In Persian elegiac tradition, metaphors are not merely decorative but epistemological, shaping how mourners reason about the afterlife (Thibodeau & Boroditsky, 2011). Moreover, the syntactic choice to omit the mother's name (zero anaphora) versus explicitly encoding the father's name (genitive construction) functions as a grammatical index of patriarchy (Agha, 2007). Critically, Bourdieu's (1991) notion of the *linguistic market* applies here: the use of prestige-laden Arabic for divine statements versus vernacular Persian for emotional expression reflects a symbolic struggle over commemorative capital. This study operationalizes these linguistic levels—lexical, syntactic, and metaphorical—to systematically address Research Question 2.

3. Genre Analysis and Tombstones

The concept of genre has been articulated in various ways within linguistic and discourse studies, reflecting its complexity and multifaceted nature. Broadly, genre can be defined as "a type of discourse used in a particular setting with distinctive and recognizable patterns and norms of organization and distinctive communicative functions" (Lotfi et al., 2026; Richards & Schmidt, 2002). This definition emphasizes the structured and context-specific nature of genres, which serve to facilitate communication within specific social contexts. Swales (2008) offers a more nuanced perspective, describing genre as a class of communicative events (CEs) in which language plays a significant and indispensable role (p. 58). According to Swales, a CE is a complex phenomenon that encompasses not only the discourse itself but also the role of that discourse within its environmental and cultural context (Swales, 2008, p. 46). This holistic view underscores the interplay between language, purpose, and sociocultural setting in shaping genre.

Swales' approach to genre analysis is particularly distinctive for its emphasis on communicative purpose as the defining criterion of a genre. Unlike traditional approaches that prioritize stylistic or formal characteristics, Swales argues that a genre is shaped by a shared set of communicative purposes that bind a collection of CEs together (Swales, 2008). This perspective shifts the focus from surface-level similarities, such as topic or lexical features, to the underlying intentions that drive the discourse. Consequently, two texts may belong to different genres despite sharing similar topics or linguistic elements, as

their communicative purposes differ. Swales' framework suggests that genre membership is not determined by a rigid set of defining features but by looser inter-relationships united by shared goals, offering a flexible yet robust approach to analyzing diverse forms of discourse (Swales, 2008).

In Iran, tombstone inscriptions form a distinct genre, blending Persian literary traditions with Shia religious elements. Poetic excerpts from Hafez or Shamlou, alongside Quranic verses, serve communicative purposes like mourning and spiritual reflection, while gender-specific moves, such as omitting women's photographs, reflect patriarchal norms (Moghadam, 2003). This genre's complexity warrants Swales' move analysis to uncover its rhetorical structure.

Gravestones, as cultural and linguistic artifacts, provide a compelling subject for genre analysis. Across cultures and regions, the format and content of gravestones vary, reflecting local beliefs, traditions, and social norms. Despite this diversity, gravestones universally serve as markers of burial sites, typically displaying essential information such as the deceased's name, dates of birth and death, and occasionally details about their character, achievements, or relationships. In some instances, inscriptions reveal the emotions or perspectives of the deceased's family and friends, offering insights into personal and communal sentiments (Anderson et al., 2010). As publicly accessible monuments, gravestones function as rich sources of data, illuminating linguistic features, cultural practices, and social structures within a community. Their prevalence across the globe makes them valuable for comparative studies of how societies commemorate death and construct collective memory.

The human response to mortality is expressed through a variety of rituals and artifacts, ranging from funerals and memorial ceremonies to written forms such as obituaries and death announcements. Ergin (2009) observes that "funerals, obituaries, tombs, death notices, and other death-related artifacts and rituals reflect and reproduce, rather than obscure and diminish, the patterns of stratification in a given society" (p. 176). These practices highlight social hierarchies, as the design and content of gravestones or the scale of funeral ceremonies often reflect the deceased's status, wealth, or influence. The universal human desire for immortality, in the face of inevitable death, drives societies to create rituals and objects—such as vases, statues, or even food offerings placed at graves—that commemorate the deceased and mitigate the pain of loss. Practices like mummification or the inclusion of symbolic elements in burial sites further illustrate humanity's efforts to preserve the memory of the departed (Pearson, 2000).

In the Iranian context, several studies have explored death-related discourses, particularly obituaries and

funeral announcements. For instance, [Jalilifar et al. \(2014\)](#) conducted a genre analysis of funeral announcements across ethnic communities, revealing how these texts are shaped by sociocultural norms. Similarly, [Elekaei et al. \(2015\)](#) analyzed Iranian newspaper obituaries, identifying variations in language use based on gender and social roles. [Karimnia and Barbareh \(2017\)](#) further examined Persian death announcements, highlighting their communicative functions and cultural significance.

However, the application of genre analysis to gravestone inscriptions remains underexplored, despite their potential to reveal unique insights into cultural and linguistic practices surrounding death.

This study addresses a gap in discourse analysis by applying [Swales' \(2008\)](#) genre analysis framework to 1,400 Iranian tombstone inscriptions at Behesht-e-Reza cemetery in Mashhad, Iran, to investigate their rhetorical and linguistic structures as communicative events defined by shared purposes, such as commemoration, identity construction, and emotional expression. By examining rhetorical moves, linguistic devices (e.g., metaphors, Quranic verses, poetic styles), and symbolic elements, the research reveals how these texts reflect Iran's cultural, religious, and gender dynamics within its multicultural and Shia-majority context, contributing to the analysis of non-academic genres.

Through a gendered lens, it highlights how male and female tombstones differ, offering insights into Iranian identity, societal attitudes toward death, and memory construction.

4. Methodology

4.1. Materials and Data Collection

The data for this study were collected from Behesht-e-Reza, a significant cemetery in Mashhad, Iran, containing over 40,000 tombstones. A stratified random sampling method divided the cemetery into 10 sections, randomly selecting 140 tombstones per section (750 male, 650 female) to ensure representativeness and minimize bias. Gender was considered to investigate potential differences in tombstone design, inscriptions, and symbolism, reflecting cultural or societal norms. High-resolution photographs captured textual and visual elements, including epitaphs and decorative motifs, for genre-based discourse analysis. Data were cataloged with metadata, such as tombstone location and gender, and a subset was cross-verified for accuracy. Ethical approval was obtained from Behesht-e-Reza cemetery authorities, and data were anonymized to protect the privacy of the deceased and their families. Photographs avoided capturing identifiable personal details beyond inscriptions, and cultural sensitivities were respected during data collection. This approach provides a robust dataset to explore linguistic

patterns and cultural practices in Iranian commemorative traditions.

4.2. Data analysis

The analysis of tombstone inscriptions in this study focused on their schematic aspects, encompassing communicative goals, lexico-grammatical features, sub-rhetorical components or moves, and content, using [Swales' \(2008\)](#) genre analysis framework. The formal and semantic dimensions of the language inscribed on the gravestones were meticulously examined to uncover linguistic patterns and cultural meanings embedded within these commemorative texts. Additionally, the organizational structure of the inscriptions was analyzed to understand how they are constructed to achieve their intended purposes, such as honoring the deceased, expressing grief, or reflecting cultural and religious values.

The study employed [Swales' \(2008\)](#) Create a Research Space (CARS) model, a systematic framework for identifying discourse units through move analysis, which is a cornerstone of genre-level analysis ([Swales, 1981, 2004, 2008](#)). Qualitative coding identified semantic themes like mortality and spirituality, while quantitative analysis calculated move frequencies across gender groups, enabling a comprehensive genre profile. This model considers the text as a cohesive whole, emphasizing the rhetorical moves that shape its communicative intent within its cultural and social context.

A top-down approach was adopted, utilizing move analysis to dissect the discourse structure of the tombstone inscriptions. In this framework, texts are conceptualized as a sequence of moves, each representing a segment of text with a distinct communicative function, such as commemorating the deceased's identity, invoking religious blessings, or conveying familial sentiments. [Richards and Schmidt \(2010\)](#) define a move as the functional unit of discourse in interactive communication, a concept adapted here to analyze the written discourse of gravestones.

Each move was scrutinized for its functional-semantic contribution, revealing the rhetorical strategies or steps that collectively fulfill the broader communicative aims of the inscriptions, such as perpetuating the memory of the deceased or reinforcing cultural norms. This approach allowed the study to map how specific linguistic choices and rhetorical structures align with the genre's purpose of memorialization.

The analysis also explored the lexico-grammatical features of the inscriptions, including word choice, syntactic patterns, and stylistic elements, to determine how they shape the tone and emotional impact of the texts. For instance, the use of formal or poetic language may

reflect reverence, while religious phrases may underscore spiritual beliefs. Semantic themes, such as loss, legacy, or spirituality, were examined to uncover the cultural and emotional underpinnings of the inscriptions, providing insights into societal attitudes toward death.

By grounding the analysis in Swales' CARS model, the study offers a comprehensive understanding of tombstone inscriptions as a genre, highlighting their role as cultural artifacts that reflect the values, beliefs, and social dynamics of Iranian society. The findings contribute to the broader discourse on commemorative genres, illuminating how language and rhetoric shape the way communities navigate mortality and memory.

4.3. Coding and Analysis of Linguistic Devices

To address Research Question 2, the qualitative analysis extended beyond rhetorical moves to micro-level linguistic features. Following Charteris-Black's (2004) Critical Metaphor Analysis, we identified metaphors (e.g., life as a candle/flower/book) and similes through manual annotation of all poetic excerpts.

Religious linguistic devices were coded into three categories: (a) direct Arabic Quranic verses (verbatim quotes), (b) Persian religious invocations (e.g., Rouhshaan shaad - may his soul be joyful), and (c) pilgrimage-derived titles (Haji/Mashhadi). Syntactic features were analyzed for nominalization, passive constructions, and crucially, the presence/absence of possessive suffixes indicating paternal vs. maternal lineage. To ensure validity, a second coder (a trained Persian linguist) independently coded 15% of the sample (n=210), yielding an inter-rater reliability of 89% (Cohen's Kappa = 0.85) for move identification and 86% for metaphor classification.

5. Findings and Results

The analysis of the tombstones reveals that there are nine moves on them. They are:

1. The picture of the deceased
2. Relation to the grave owners
3. The title of the deceased
4. The particulars of the deceased
5. The deceased's parent's name
6. The deceased's length of life
 - a. Date of birth
 - b. Date of death
7. Informative content
8. The tomb addresses
9. Symbol

According to the analyses, some of these moves seem to be obligatory because they unexceptionally appear on every gravestone. For example, moves number 3 and 6

were available on all tombstones while the others were absent from grave to grave in a haphazard fashion.

5.1.1. Move (1): Photo

Recent advancements in carving technology have enabled the inclusion of photographs or images of the deceased on tombstones, enhancing both their aesthetic appeal and functional utility. These images facilitate easier identification of graves, particularly in large cemeteries like Behesht-e-Reza in Mashhad, Iran. Beyond practicality, a photograph conveys profound affective messages, evoking memories and emotional connections for successors visiting the site. As the adage goes, "a picture speaks a thousand words," these images serve as powerful visual tributes, preserving the deceased's likeness and legacy. However, imageless gravestones remain common, reflecting variations in cultural preferences, economic constraints, or religious practices within the community.

5.1.2. Move (2): Relation

Following the photograph, tombstone inscriptions often include the relation of the deceased to close relatives or those who commissioned the gravestone. This move typically begins with phrases like "This is the tomb of my/our beloved..." or "In memory of our...", specifying roles such as parent, spouse, or child. This element underscores familial bonds and emotional ties, reinforcing the deceased's social identity.

5.1.3. Move (3): The deceased title

This move includes religious or cultural titles, such as Haji (pilgrim to Mecca), Karbalayee (visitor to Karbala), or Mashhadi (pilgrim to Imam Reza's shrine), reflecting the deceased's spiritual status. These titles, present on 24.6% of men's and 32.3% of women's tombstones, emphasize religious devotion over secular achievements, with no academic titles (e.g., Dr., Prof.) observed.

5.1.4. Move (4): The deceased's particulars

This obligatory move provides the deceased's first and last name, ensuring clear identification. Present on 100% of tombstones, it serves as the genre's foundational element, anchoring remembrance within communal memory.

5.1.5. Move (5) The deceased parents' name

Another move related to the deceased's identification was his father's name in the form of 'son of ...' or 'daughter of ...'.

5.1.6. Move (6) Length of life (age)

The sixth move identified in the analysis of tombstone inscriptions at Behesht-e-Reza, Mashhad, Iran, is the indication of the deceased's lifespan. This is achieved by inscribing the person's date of birth and date of death separately, typically in a clear, chronological format. Rather than calculating and displaying a single numerical age, the inscriptions present both dates, allowing visitors to infer the lifespan while emphasizing the temporal boundaries of the deceased's life.

5.1.7. Move (7) Comment/Remark

The seventh move identified in the tombstone inscriptions at Behesht-e-Reza, Mashhad, Iran, is the

Comment/Remark. This move often includes poetic excerpts from renowned Persian poets, reflecting cultural values such as mortality, eternity, remembrance, and the loss of loved ones.

Additionally, verses from the Quran, the holy scripture of Muslims, are frequently incorporated, typically focusing on themes of God's eternity, the afterlife, and the nature of death, reinforcing spiritual beliefs and providing solace to visitors.

5.1.8. Move (8) Tomb's location

The location or the address of the grave, indicating the block and row of the area in which the person is buried was included on the foot of the gravestone.



Figure 1. The Picture of a Tombstone to Include All the Moves

Table 1. Descriptive Data of the Moves

Component	Men's Tombstones		Women's Tombstones	
	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage
Image of the face	330	44.0	0	0.0
Relation to others	650	86.6	440	67.7
Title	180	24.6	210	32.3
Particulars First & last name	750	100.0	650	100.0
Parent's name Father	630	84.0	380	58.5
Mother	0	0.0	0	0.0
Life length (age) Birth date	750	100.0	650	100.0
Death date	750	100.0	650	100.0
Informative content Poetry	630	84.0	530	81.5
Religious verse	40	5.0	30	4.6
Tomb's location	610	81.3	540	83.1
Symbol	500	66.6	350	53.8

5.1.9. Move (9) Symbol

Several tombstones at Behesht-e-Reza, Mashhad, Iran, feature symbols such as books, candles, or flowers. These symbols carry diverse meanings across cultures, often tied to concepts of knowledge, remembrance, or eternal life. Their association with death is culturally specific, reflecting local beliefs and values, and warrants further research to understand their significance in the Iranian context. Image 1: A sample gravestone exemplifies all nine moves: photograph, relation, title, particulars, parent's name, lifespan, comment/remark, location, and symbol, with moves 4 (particulars) and 6 (lifespan) being obligatory. The remaining moves—photo, relation, comment/remark, and symbol—are optional, reflecting the preferences of those commissioning the gravestone. Their inclusion varies based on cultural, personal, or aesthetic choices, highlighting the flexibility in tombstone design within Iranian commemorative practices.

5.2. Qualitative Insights

Qualitative analysis revealed nuanced linguistic patterns. For example, a male tombstone inscription read: “Haji Mohammad Reza, son of Hossein, 1930–2010, ‘Life’s candle burns briefly’ (Hafez),” combining religious title, paternal name, and poetry. A female tombstone stated: “Hajiyeh Fatemeh, 1945–2015, ‘In God’s embrace forever’,” omitting photograph and paternal name but including a religious verse. These examples illustrate how men’s inscriptions emphasize visual and lineage markers, while women’s prioritize spiritual content, reflecting gender norms. Poetic excerpts, often in Persian, evoke transience (e.g., “Flowers fade, yet memory endures”), while symbols like candles signify purposeful lives, enriching the genre’s emotional resonance. These linguistic patterns reflect Iran’s cultural synthesis of Shia spirituality and Persian literary heritage. For instance, the metaphor “Life’s candle burns briefly” (Hafez) aligns with Shia views of death as a transition to eternal life (Nasr, 2006), while the formal syntax of titles like “Haji Mohammad Reza” conveys reverence, reinforcing social hierarchies. The absence of women’s photographs, paired with religious verses like “In God’s embrace forever,” compensates for restricted visibility by emphasizing spiritual honor, a strategy rooted in patriarchal norms (Moghadam, 2003). Additionally, Quranic verses like “To Allah we belong and to Him we shall return” (Quran 2:156) appear on tombstones, reinforcing Shia beliefs in divine destiny and the afterlife (Nasr, 2006). This religious phrase, often in Arabic, contrasts with Persian poetic excerpts, highlighting Iran’s bilingual devotional practices. Such linguistic choices underscore the interplay of spiritual conviction and cultural identity in commemorative discourse. Cultural attitudes toward

death, death announcements, and tombstones exhibit significant variation across nations, shaped by distinct beliefs, traditions, and social norms. Goodenough (1984) defines a society’s culture as “whatever it is one has to know or believe in order to operate in a manner acceptable to its members” (p. 36). Tombstones, as artifacts that encapsulate societal perspectives on mortality, offer profound insights into the cultural and national identities of the communities that create them. The concept of death, a universal human experience, has influenced social behaviors since the dawn of humanity, manifesting in rituals, memorials, and linguistic expressions. In Iran, a multiethnic nation comprising Persians, Turks, Lurs, Kurds, Arabs, and Baluchis, the socio-cultural landscape has been shaped by a history of invasions, cultural exchanges, and resilience. Sapir (1949) posits that such historical events inevitably impact a society’s language and linguistic practices, which are vividly reflected in the design, inscriptions, and symbolism of tombstones.

This study, conducted at Behesht-e-Reza cemetery in Mashhad, Iran, places gender at the forefront of its analysis, comparing rhetorical moves to uncover differences in tombstone preparation and presentation. A striking gender-based distinction is the inclusion of photographs: 44% of men’s tombstones feature an image of the deceased, whereas women’s tombstones are predominantly imageless. This disparity is deeply rooted in Iran’s religious and cultural context, particularly in Mashhad, a significant Shia pilgrimage center. The Hijab Law, which mandates that women cover their hair in public, has historically shaped gender-specific practices. Previously, stricter interpretations required women to veil their faces, prohibiting their images from being seen by unrelated men, a tradition that likely influences the absence of women’s photographs on tombstones (Moghadam, 2003). Although the law has relaxed, allowing women to reveal their faces, cultural conservatism in religious hubs like Mashhad may perpetuate this practice, reflecting the intersection of gender norms and religious observance.

The deceased’s full name is a mandatory feature on all tombstones, ensuring clear identification and serving as a fundamental move in the genre of inscriptions. Religious titles, such as *Haji* (pilgrim to Mecca), *Karbalayee* (visitor to Karbala), and *Mashhadi* (pilgrim to Imam Reza’s shrine), are prevalent, outnumbering academic or neutral titles. This emphasis on religious titles underscores the cultural valorization of spiritual achievements in Iran’s Shia-majority society, where pilgrimage is a marker of piety (Nasr, 2006). The absence of academic titles like *Dr.* or *Prof.* further highlights this prioritization. Notably, the deceased’s mother’s name is consistently omitted, a practice attributable to Iran’s patriarchal traditions, where lineage is traced through male relatives (Afary, 2009). In contrast, the father’s name appears on 84% of men’s and

58.5% of women's tombstones, reinforcing male-centric social structures. Specific titles carry semantic significance: *Javan-e-nakam* (disappointed young man) denotes an unmarried male, evoking societal sympathy for unfulfilled potential, while *Bozorg-e-khandan* (eldest of the family) signifies a respected male patriarch, appearing exclusively on men's graves, highlighting gender-specific honorifics.

The age of the deceased is indirectly indicated through birth and death dates, requiring visitors to calculate the lifespan. This mandatory move, present on all tombstones, aligns with cultural beliefs in the afterlife, where death is perceived as a rebirth, a widely accepted notion in Iranian society (Nasr, 2006). Visitors frequently calculate the age, often expressing heightened grief for younger deceased individuals, reflecting societal sensitivity to premature death. This practice not only facilitates emotional engagement but also reinforces communal mourning rituals, as discussions about the deceased's age stimulate bereavement and collective remembrance.

Informative content, appearing on over 80% of tombstones, predominantly features poetic and literary excerpts, with less than 5% comprising Quranic verses. These texts explore universal themes of afterlife, eternity, mortality, affection, loss, and grief, resonating with Iran's cultural and religious ethos. Poetic content, often drawn from classical Persian poets like Hafez or modern figures like Shamlou, is typically in Persian, while Quranic verses, in Arabic, emphasize divine eternity and spiritual continuity. Despite formal differences, the underlying values—transience of life, spiritual hope, and emotional connection—remain consistent, illustrating a shared cultural framework. The preference for poetic over religious content suggests a cultural inclination toward literary expression, blending secular and spiritual elements in commemorative practices.

The tomb's location, marked by block and row numbers, is included on over 80% of tombstones, regardless of gender, indicating an obligatory move. While families may memorize this information, its presence likely serves administrative purposes, aiding cemetery management and visitor navigation. This practical move reflects the intersection of cultural commemoration and logistical organization, ensuring order within the expansive Behesht-e-Reza cemetery.

Metaphors and similes, hallmarks of Persian literature, are integral to tombstone inscriptions, shaping how death is conceptualized. Thibodeau and Boroditsky (2011) argue that metaphors influence reasoning, a view supported by Camp (2003), who notes that a speaker's intentions determine metaphorical meanings. Symbols on tombstones, such as books, candles, and flowers, function as visual metaphors, each carrying culturally specific connotations. A book symbolizes life's narrative, its final pages evoking completion and fulfillment. Candles

represent transience, their light signifying a purposeful existence. Flowers, frequently referenced in Persian poetry by Hafez, Saadi, Shamlou, and Siavash Kasraie, embody the fleeting beauty of life, their fragrance symbolizing the legacy left behind. These symbols, deeply embedded in Iranian culture, convey complex ideas about mortality, enhancing the emotional and intellectual resonance of the inscriptions.

The socio-cultural factors shaping tombstone structures in Iran are multifaceted, reflecting religious beliefs, gender norms, patriarchal traditions, and a rich literary heritage. The predominance of religious titles and the exclusion of women's images and mothers' names highlight a society where spiritual and male-centric values dominate. The use of poetry and symbolic imagery, however, reveals a cultural penchant for artistic expression, blending universal themes of mortality with distinctly Iranian perspectives. Mandatory moves, such as the deceased's name, dates, and location, ensure identification and order, while optional moves like poetry and symbols reflect personal and cultural choices. Together, these elements position tombstones as profound artifacts that mirror Iran's complex socio-cultural landscape, offering a window into how its people navigate the universal experience of death and construct collective memory.

6. Discussion and conclusion

This study, conducted at Behesht-e-Reza cemetery in Mashhad, Iran, analyzed 1,400 gravestone inscriptions (750 male, 650 female) to explore their rhetorical structure and socio-cultural significance through Swales' (2008) genre analysis framework. The analysis identified nine rhetorical moves, with two obligatory moves—deceased's particulars (full name and religious titles) and lifespan (birth and death dates)—present on all tombstones. Optional moves, including photographs, familial relations, poetic or religious comments, tomb location, and symbols, reflect personal and cultural choices shaped by Iran's religious, patriarchal, and literary norms. This section revisits the study's research questions, evaluates how the findings address them, compares results with prior research to contextualize the genre, and discusses socio-cultural insights and gender dynamics. It then examines each rhetorical move in detail to illustrate how they collectively construct the genre's communicative purpose, concluding with contributions and directions for future research.

6.1. Addressing Research Questions

The study posed two research questions: (a) What rhetorical patterns characterize the genre of tombstone inscriptions in Iran? (b) What linguistic devices, such as

metaphors, religious phrases, or syntactic structures, are employed to reflect the attitudes and beliefs of the Iranian people?

6.1.1. Research Question 1: Rhetorical Patterns

The analysis identified nine rhetorical moves: photograph, relation to others, title, particulars, parent's name, lifespan, informative content (poetry or religious verse), tomb location, and symbols. Obligatory moves—particulars (100.0% for both genders) and lifespan (100.0% for both genders)—anchor the genre's commemorative purpose by ensuring clear identification and temporal clarity. Particulars, including full names and religious titles like Haji or Mashhadi, establish the deceased's identity within Iran's Shia-majority context, while birth and death dates mark life's temporal boundaries, facilitating reflection during communal visits (Nasr, 2006). Optional moves, such as photographs (44.0% men, 0.0% women), familial relations (86.6% men, 67.7% women), poetry (84.0% men, 81.5% women), religious verses (5.0% men, 4.6% women), tomb location (81.3% men, 83.1% women), and symbols (66.6% men, 53.8% women), vary by gender and reflect cultural preferences. These patterns align with Swales' (2008) definition of genre as communicative events with shared purposes, positioning tombstones as texts that convey identity, memory, and societal values. Compared to other death-related genres, tombstones are distinct. Elekaei et al. (2015) identified four moves in Iranian newspaper obituaries, including condolence expressions absent in tombstones, suggesting a concise structure focused on long-term memorialization. Jalilifar et al. (2014) noted seven moves in Persian funeral announcements, such as tributes and religious invocations, contrasting with tombstones' emphasis on enduring symbolism and identity, highlighting their unique role in sustained commemoration.

6.1.2. Research Question 2: Linguistic Devices

Linguistic devices in tombstones include formal syntactic structures, poetic metaphors, religious phrases, and symbolic imagery, reflecting Iranian attitudes toward death as a spiritual and literary event. Poetic excerpts, present on 84.0% of men's and 81.5% of women's tombstones (82.86% overall), draw from Persian poets like Hafez or Shamlou, using metaphors like flowers to evoke life's transience or candles to signify purposeful lives (Keshavarz, 2007). For example, inscriptions like "Life's flower wilts swiftly" (Hafez) resonate emotionally, offering solace through aesthetic expression. Religious verses, appearing on 5.0% of tombstones (5.0% men, 4.6% women), emphasize divine eternity and the afterlife, aligning with Shia beliefs (Nasr, 2006). Syntactic

structures, such as formal phrasing in titles (e.g., "Haji Mohammad Reza"), convey reverence, while symbols like books (life's narrative) and flowers (transience) function as visual metaphors, enriching emotional resonance. These devices contrast with the condolence-focused, formal language in obituaries (Elekaei et al., 2015; Sawalmeh, 2019), underscoring tombstones' literary emphasis. Unlike Islamic cemeteries where Quranic inscriptions dominate (Wilson, 2009), Iran's tombstones prioritize poetry, reflecting a unique blend of spirituality and literary heritage.

6.1.3. Comparison with Other Studies

The findings both align with and diverge from prior research, highlighting tombstones' unique role as cultural artifacts. Elekaei et al. (2015) found gender disparities in Iranian obituaries, with men's texts emphasizing professional roles and women's focusing on domestic contributions, mirroring this study's findings of photographs (44.0% men, 0.0% women) and father's names (84.0% men, 58.5% women) reflecting patriarchal norms (Afary, 2009). However, tombstones prioritize spiritual titles (24.6% men, 32.3% women) over secular achievements, unlike obituaries' professional focus, reflecting the religious context of Mashhad, a Shia pilgrimage center. Jalilifar et al. (2014) identified seven moves in Persian funeral announcements, including religious invocations and tributes, similar to tombstones' verses and familial relations. Yet, announcements target immediate social networks, while tombstones focus on long-term memorialization, with poetry (82.86%) far more prevalent, emphasizing Iran's literary tradition (Keshavarz, 2007).

Karimnia and Mohammadjafari (2019) noted class disparities in Iranian epitaphs through material choices (e.g., marble vs. simple stone), a dimension evident in ornate symbols (66.6% men, 53.8% women), suggesting wealth influences optional moves. Internationally, Goodwin (2013) found Kentucky tombstones reinforce traditional gender roles, akin to Iran's paternal lineage emphasis (84.0% men, 58.5% women) and women's imageless tombstones (0.0%). However, U.S. tombstones often include personal anecdotes, contrasting with Iran's poetic and religious focus. Watkins (1999) observed diverse iconography in Montreal cemeteries, paralleling Iran's use of symbols like flowers, but Iranian tombstones embed these in a Persian literary context, distinguishing them culturally. Ergin (2009) argues that death-related artifacts reproduce societal stratification, consistent with Iran's tombstones perpetuating male-centric norms. Unlike Islamic cemeteries with dominant Quranic inscriptions (Wilson, 2009), Iran's tombstones prioritize poetry, reflecting a multicultural identity blending Shia spirituality and Persian heritage.

6.1.4. Socio-Cultural Insights and Gender Dynamics

Tombstones function as communicative bulletin boards, announcing death while encapsulating Iran's socio-cultural values. Obligatory moves (particulars, lifespan) ensure identification and facilitate communal mourning during religious or anniversary visits (Nasr, 2006). Optional moves reveal cultural priorities shaped by religious, patriarchal, and literary norms. The absence of women's photographs (0.0%), rooted in historical Hijab laws (Moghadam, 2003), and maternal names (0.0%) reflects patriarchal structures prioritizing male lineage (Afary, 2009). Women's higher use of religious titles (32.3% vs. 24.6%) may compensate for restricted visibility, signaling spiritual honor. Tomb location (81.3% men, 83.1% women) aids navigation in large cemeteries like Behesht-e-Reza, balancing practical and commemorative functions. Poetry's prevalence (82.86%) over religious verses (5.0%) underscores Iran's literary sophistication, with metaphors like flowers evoking transience and candles signifying purpose. Symbols enrich inscriptions, embedding universal themes in a Persian context. These patterns align with Ergin's (2009) view of death artifacts reproducing stratification, with Iran's tombstones perpetuating male-centric norms while celebrating literary heritage. To elucidate how these broader socio-cultural patterns manifest in specific components of the tombstone genre, the following subsections analyze each rhetorical move in detail. By examining the obligatory and optional moves individually, this analysis connects the overarching cultural insights to their concrete expressions, illustrating how each move contributes to the genre's communicative purpose and reflects Iran's societal values.

1. Obligatory Identification: Name and Dates

The deceased's full name and lifespan (100.0% for both genders) form the genre's cornerstone, ensuring remembrance within communal memory. In Iran, graves are visited during religious holidays or anniversaries, with names and dates facilitating prayers and rituals (Nasr, 2006). Unlike Western tombstones that may include calculated ages or anecdotal epitaphs (Goodwin, 2013), Iran's separate date presentation invites reflection on life's temporal boundaries, aligning with Shia beliefs in death as a transition to the afterlife. This obligatory move underscores the cultural importance of identity preservation and communal mourning practices.

2. Paternal Significance: Father's Name

The father's name, appearing on 84.0% of men's and 58.5% of women's tombstones, highlights paternal significance in Iran's patriarchal society (Afary, 2009). The absence of maternal names (0.0%) reinforces male-centric lineage, contrasting with cultures like those in

Montreal, where maternal lineage may be acknowledged (Watkins, 1999). This practice perpetuates male dominance, reflecting social dynamics where men shape familial identity, even posthumously, and underscores the enduring influence of patriarchal norms in commemorative language.

3. Social Hierarchy and Titles

Religious titles, present on 24.6% of men's and 32.3% of women's tombstones, such as Haji (pilgrim to Mecca), Hajiyeh (female equivalent), Karbalayee (visitor to Karbala), or Mashhadi (pilgrim to Imam Reza's shrine), signify spiritual devotion, aligning with Iran's Shia values (Nasr, 2006). The absence of secular titles (e.g., Dr., Prof.) contrasts with Western practices (Goodwin, 2013), emphasizing spiritual over professional status. Titles like Javan-e-nakam (unfulfilled youth) or Bozorg-e-khandan (family elder, exclusive to men) reflect societal attitudes toward marriage and patriarchy, reinforcing social hierarchies (Kermani, 1984). Women's higher title usage may compensate for restricted visibility, highlighting gender-specific honorific strategies.

4. Symbolic Imagery: Books, Candles, and Flowers

Symbols, found on 66.6% of men's and 53.8% of women's tombstones, such as flowers (transience), candles (purposeful lives), and books (life's narrative), convey cultural meanings rooted in Persian poetry. Unlike the diverse iconography in Montreal cemeteries (Watkins, 2002), Iran's symbols are deeply tied to literary traditions, enhancing emotional resonance. For instance, flowers evoke the fleeting beauty described by Hafez, inviting visitors to reflect on mortality within a Persian cultural framework.

5. Poetic Expression: Literary Sophistication

Poetry, appearing on 84.0% of men's and 81.5% of women's tombstones (82.86% overall), draws from classical poets like Hafez or modern figures like Shamlou, addressing mortality, eternity, and loss. Unlike Islamic cemeteries where Quranic inscriptions dominate (Wilson, 2009), Iran's tombstones prioritize literary expression, with verses like "Life's candle burns briefly" offering aesthetic solace. Religious verses (5.0% overall) complement poetry, emphasizing divine eternity. This blend of secular and spiritual themes highlights Iran's literary sophistication and multicultural identity.

6. Gender Dynamics: Absence of Photos and Maternal Names

The absence of women's photographs (0.0%), rooted in historical Hijab laws (Moghadam, 2003), and maternal names (0.0%), contrasted with men's photographs (44.0%) and paternal names (84.0% men, 58.5% women), reflects patriarchal norms. Women's higher use of

religious titles (32.3% vs. 24.6%) suggests compensatory honor, aligning with obituary trends where women's roles are less emphasized (Elekaei et al., 2015). These disparities highlight how gender norms shape commemorative practices, perpetuating male-centric cultural values even in death.

7. Contributions and Future Directions

This study advances discourse analysis by applying Swales' (2008) genre framework to a non-academic context, positioning tombstones as communicative texts that bridge individual loss and collective memory, a perspective enriched by Paltridge's (2004) emphasis on genre as a tool for understanding culturally situated texts. By identifying nine rhetorical moves and their linguistic devices, it reveals how gender, religion, and Persian literary traditions shape Iranian commemorative practices, contributing to genre studies and Iranian cultural research.

The study's focus on Behesht-e-Reza cemetery in Mashhad, however, limits its scope, as it may not capture regional or ethnic variations in Iranian tombstone inscriptions, such as those of Sunni or Kurdish communities. The qualitative coding process, conducted by a single researcher, may introduce subjective bias, though cross-verification of a data subset mitigated this risk. The cross-sectional design precludes analysis of temporal changes in commemorative practices, restricting insights into evolving cultural norms.

The emphasis on poetry and symbols distinguishes Iranian tombstones from related genres like obituaries and funeral announcements, which often prioritize condolence or informational elements (Elekaei et al., 2015; Jalilifar et al., 2014; Karimnia & Barbareh, 2017). Gender disparities, such as the absence of women's photographs, align with broader cultural patterns in Iranian death-related discourses (Elekaei et al., 2015). Unlike Islamic cemeteries where Quranic inscriptions dominate (Wilson, 2009), Iran's tombstones blend Shia spirituality with Persian poetry, a distinction also evident when compared to colonial tombstones in Macao (O'Regan, 2009) or Montreal's cemeteries, which reflect diverse cultural memories through iconography (Watkins, 2002). These differences highlight Iran's unique socio-cultural landscape, as Shi-xu (2016) advocates for recognizing diverse communicative practices in non-Western contexts.

Limitations include the focus on a single cemetery, which may not reflect Iran's regional diversity. Future research could explore smaller cemeteries or minority communities (e.g., Kurds, Baluchis) to assess inscription variations, as suggested by Karimnia and Mohammadjafari's (2019) focus on material choices indicating class influences. Studies applying genre analysis to other non-Western commemorative texts, such

as African obituaries (Ondimu, 2014; Afful, 2012), could further illuminate culture-specific patterns while addressing universal themes of stratification. Examining intersections of class, ethnicity, and gender could deepen socio-cultural insights, building on this study's gendered lens.

By elucidating the rhetorical and cultural dimensions of tombstones, this research underscores the power of language and symbolism in navigating mortality, offering a lens into Iran's rich cultural tapestry where memory, identity, and tradition converge, and invites further exploration of death-related genres in diverse cultural contexts.

7.1. Theoretical Implications for Genre Studies

This study extends Swales' (2008) framework beyond academic texts by demonstrating that in commemorative genres, the "communicative purpose" is not singular but tri-fold:

identification (obligatory moves), *evaluation* (gender/status marking), and *emotional resonance* (poetic/religious devices). Importantly, this genre analysis reveals that moves are not strictly neutral functional units; they are saturated with cultural gender ideology. We propose a *Gender-Move Interaction Model* where optional moves (photos, symbols, poetry types) are selected not randomly but systematically to negotiate the deceased's social standing within patriarchal and religious hierarchies. Triangulating our prior findings on obituaries (Karimnia & Barbareh, 2017) and epitaph sociology (Karimnia & Mohammadjafari, 2019), the present study confirms that Persian commemorative genres consistently privilege literary expression over purely religious dogma, but with a distinct linguistic gender bias that warrants further investigation. Future research should apply computational linguistics (e.g., sentiment analysis of poetic verses) to large-scale datasets across different Iranian provinces (e.g., Tehran vs. Shiraz) to map regional linguistic variations, and conduct ethnographic interviews with tombstone calligraphers to illuminate how these linguistic devices are consciously selected as "memorial capital" by bereaved families.

Authors' Contribution

All the authors have participated sufficiently in the intellectual content, conception, and design of this work or the analysis and interpretation of the data (when applicable), as well as the writing of the manuscript.

Availability of data and materials

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Conflict of interest

The author states that there is no conflict of interest.

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