Going towards the unknown

Anna Vogel

Going Towards the Unknown: Expressions for Dying in European Languages

Anna Vogel

Abstract. The chapter investigates expressions for dying in five European languages with an onomasiological approach. The data was collected from questionnaires, dictionaries, web resources and literature, both fiction and non-fiction. The results indicate that expressions for dying show great similarities across the languages. Expressions involve verbs with high agentivity. A location (where one will be after death) is often specified. Expressions often make use of trivial tasks, such as "put down the receiver". Further, death is associated with lack of breath and sleep. Here, the study supports earlier research. Finally, a seemingly paradoxical way of relating death to both cold and heat is explained by discussing specific conceptualizations, separating the body from the location of the body.

Introduction

The present chapter aims at studying patterns of metaphorical expressions for 'dying' in a few European languages. Thus the perspective is onomasiological: the concept of 'dying' and its linguistic realisations are in focus.

According to Berendt, Maeda and Tanita (in press), expressions for 'dying' in Japanese and English involve the following conceptual metaphors: DEATH IS DEPARTURE, DEATH IS THE END OF A JOURNEY, DEATH IS SEPARATION and DEATH IS SLEEP. François (in press) shows that the 'act of breathing' is strongly tied to 'life' in many languages. The present study takes a theoretical vantage point in the metaphor theory as expressed by Lakoff (1993). According to Lakoff, a metaphor should be understood as a conceptual phenomenon, involving mappings across domains.

The data include Swedish, Norwegian, Danish, German and French expressions for 'dying'. For all languages except Swedish, the data were collected by questionnaires that were filled in by linguists who had the pertinent language as their first language. One linguist from each language

participated. The questionnaire was designed for the study. For Swedish, the data were extracted from questionnaires filled in by students. The number of student was 25. Here, too, the questionnaire was designed for the study. Data were also collected from dictionaries (the main contemporary dictionary from each language), web resources and from other fiction and non-fiction texts. All data were collected in 2007.

The results are related to agentivity, location and degree of triviality. Further, the results are discussed in relation to metaphor theory where the domains of temperature, (lack of) light, breathing and sleeping are mapped onto the domain of dying.

What do we do and where do we go?

We know very little about dying. To die is a transition from one state (life) to another (death) and of all the transitions we are subject to, this is the one that we know the least about. Three points can be made concerning this transition. First, dying is most of all a passive transition (suicides omitted). Second, we do not know what "happens" after the transition, although religion and myths provide us with various alternatives such as coming to paradise or hell. If something that we call "the soul" is taken to another place, we do not know anything about this place. Third, although every human being must die, death is not something trivial. For oneself and for friends and family, death can be, and often is, associated with anxiety and despair. Therefore, it is interesting that the results from the study show that expressions for 'dying' ignore exactly these three points.

High agentivity

Expressions for 'dying' often show high agentivity, as shown in (1). In general, 'dying' is a transition during which the dying person is subject to a process he or she cannot influence. The transition may very well involve activities such as a struggle, but the main point here is that the transition from life to death often has a passive course in terms of intentionality and voluntariness. The Swedish verb *gå* 'go, walk' in (1) is intentional and involves self-propelled motion. Another example is given in (2). The German verb *abtreten* 'step down' is, like *gå* 'go, walk', intentional and includes physical motion.

(1)   när   deras   pappa   gick   bort
        when   their   father   go.PAST   away
        'when their father passed away'

(2)   von   der   Bühne   abtreten
        from   ART.DEF.DAT   stage   step down
        'to get off the stage'

The reason why expressions show high agentivity despite the low agentivity of 'dying' is probably that human beings tend to avoid mentioning threatening concepts by their real names. Death is typically such a threatening concept, as is sex. The denial of the involuntariness of 'dying' helps us to approach the transition. In general, taboo concepts tend to generate a high number of synonyms or equivalent expressions (Halliday 1978: 165; Carter 1987: 93), which is confirmed in the present study.

Location is specified

Expressions for 'dying' often include a specified location, as in (3). The Danish noun *jagtmarker* 'hunting-grounds' indicates a certain place that will be reached after the transition. In (4), an example from the French data is given.

(3)   drage   til   de   evige
        pull   to   ART.DEF   eternal

        jagtmarker
        hunting-ground+PLUR
        'to go to the happy hunting-grounds'

(4)   aller   au   ciel
        go   to.ART.DEF   sky
        'go to heaven'

Both (3) and (4) point out a location in a religious context. Note that both (3) and (4) also include verbs with high agentivity. Other expressions involve the physical place where the corpse is buried, as in (5).

(5)   men   då   ligger   du   sex   fot
        but   then   lie+PRES   you   six   foot.PLUR

        under
        under
        'but then you are six feet under'

The Swedish example (5) is collected from pop lyrics. The expression also occurred in the data collected from students.[1]

When comparing expressions such as (3)–(4) and (5), it turns out that the type where the specified location has a religious context is the most common in the data. This can be spelled out even more directly, as in the Norwegian example shown in (6).

(6)   gå   hjem   til   Gud
         go   home   to   God
         'go to God'

In (6), God is mentioned directly, but expressions such as Swedish *chefen* 'the boss' or *änglarna* 'the angels' also occur in the data. In those cases, God is mentioned indirectly, or is implied. Then, the denial of the involuntariness of 'dying' helps us to approach death, and the denial of the ignorance of what happens after death gives us courage to talk about it.

Dying is something trivial

A good deal of the expressions for 'dying' involve a trivial act; something which is performed in our everyday life. The Norwegian example (7) shows such an expression.

(7)   legge   på   røret
         put   down   receiver+DEF
         'put down the reciever'

The act of hanging up a phone call is trivial. Another example, this time from Danish, is given in (8).

(8)   stille   træskoene
         put away   clog+PLUR+DEF
         'put away the clogs'

Clogs are (or have been) traditional footwear, and they are put away every night before going to bed. Here, there is also a connection to sleep, which will be discussed later. Again, something non-threatening/trivial is used for something threatening (death). These trivial expressions may be

---

[1] The expression is clearly influenced by English. The distance six feet indicates the depth of traditional Christian graves although today, this dimension varies from cemetery to cemetery.

contrasted to example (3), (4) and (6), where a religious context is evoked. It could be discussed whether example (7) and (8) represent a secularized attitude towards death. Further studies would be needed in order to investigate if and how societies a few hundred years back in time, societies, which were probably more religious than the Swedish and Danish societies are today, used expressions like (7) and (8).

Conceptual metaphors for 'dying'

Berendt, Maeda and Tanita (in press) found that in Japanese, as well as in English, death is associated to sleep. The results of the present study support their research. In the next sections, the metaphor DEATH IS SLEEP will be discussed along with the metaphors LIFE IS BREATHING, DEATH IS DARKNESS and DEATH IS COLD.

Death is sleep

Expressions involving sleeping are common in the data. In German, the expression is *entschlafen* 'fall asleep, pass away', in Swedish, it is *somna in* 'fall asleep, pass away'. In general, these expressions are not used for 'sleeping' anymore. In German, the verb *einschlafen* 'fall asleep' is preferred while in Swedish, *somna* 'fall alseep' without the particle is preferred. Sleep is interesting, since it is trivial (something we do every night), and since its inactivity resembles death. Further, sleep has an indirect connection to darkness, since sleep is mostly performed during the dark hours.

Life is breathing

As shown by François (in press), 'breathing' is closely connected to life. As a consequence, to stop breathing is connected to death. The data in the present study include expressions such as the French *expirer* 'exhale' and the Danish *udånde* 'exhale'. The results support François's study. Like putting down the receiver, as in (7), exhaling is something we do everyday, but in spite of this, the expressions involving breathing are separate from the everyday task mentioned so far. To exhale marks the stop of a breathing cycle (inhaling, exhaling and so forth), and the (simplified) idea is that when the person has exhaled for the last time, the person is dead. Thus, the connection between the source domain (breathing) and the target domain (dying) includes a strong logical part

(cause–impact), which is weaker for expressions such as (7), where the connection is to finish something).

Death is darkness

The results further show that death is associated with darkness and that life is associated with light. The French data include *s'éteindre* 'extinguish' for 'dying'. The Swedish expression given in (9) relates to a torch.

(9)   vända   ner   facklan
            turn   down   torch+DEF
            'extinguish the torch'

Examples of life being associated with light can be collected from the Bible. In (10) a sample in Swedish from John (1:4) is given.

(10)   Orden   var   liv,   och
         word+DEF.PLUR   be.PAST   life and

         livet   var   människornas
         life+DEF   be.PAST   people+DEF+PLUR+GEN

         ljus.
         light
         'In him was life, and that life was the light of men.'

Death is cold

Death is associated with cold, as in Swedish *kallna* 'get cold'. In the Nordic countries, where Swedish, Norwegian and Danish are spoken, the connection between cold and death may be due to the existence of seasons. During the warm seasons, such as spring and summer, plants may grow, and this is also the time for animals to get off-spring. Thus, warmth is associated to fertility and life. The connection between cold and death also has to do with the fact that a dead body loses its heat (37 degrees Celsius) after death. This is true in climates where the air temperature is below 37 degrees Celsius, which is certainly the case in the areas where the pertinent languages are spoken. There is, however, a competing metaphor, which can be expressed as Death is heat. This metaphor is connected to another one, expressed as Life is shade. These metaphors have their origin in the Biblical context. They will be discussed in the next section.

Death is heat – Life is shade

According to Christian belief, all people will not go to heaven, but some will go to hell. Hell is a very hot place where sinners suffer, see (11) which is taken from the Bible (Mark 9:44).

(11)	i	helvetet,	i	den	eld
	in	hell+DEF	in	ART.DEF	fire

	som	aldrig	slocknar
	which	never	become extinct+PRES

'into hell, to the unquenchable fire'

The climate of the Middle East, where the Bible was written/taken down, may help us to understand why heat is associated with death. The region contains abundant desert landscapes. These are not fertile; the temperature and lack of water prevent the growing process. In such a place, shade means relief and possibilities of cultivating. In (12), also taken from the Bible (Ps. 57:2), it is clear that shade is associated with safety, possibly to life.

(12)	i	dina	vingars	skugga
	in	your	wing+PLUR+GEN	shade

	tar	jag	min	tillflykt
	take	I	my	refuge

'in the shadow of your wings I take shelter'

Since shade is a type of darkness, it turns out that both life and death can be associated with darkness. At the same time, death can be associated both with heat and with cold. This can be explained by revealing that cold is associated to the body itself (a cold body = a dead body), while heat is associated to a place where the body is located (a hot place = either a place that may kill you or a place where you come after death). Thus, two separate specific conceptualisations, body and location, occur.

Conclusions

The results indicate that European languages show similarities concerning how death is described. First, although 'dying' involves low or no agentivity, verbs showing high agentivity are used in order to express the transition of 'dying'. Second, even if we do not know anything about what "happens" after death and if the "soul" arrives at some location, expressions specifying locations are common. Third, 'dying' is not trivial, but this is denied in expressions using everyday actions to describe 'dying'. It is suggested that the reason for denial of these three major points is that such a denial helps us to approach death, in the same way as euphemisms are used for threatening concepts (Halliday 1978; Carter 1987).

Further, results supporting François (in press) and Berendt, Maeda and Tanita (in press) have been presented. In accordance with François (in press), life is connected to breathing, and as a consequence, death is connected to exhaling (a "last" exhalation is implied in such expressions, although this is a simplification of the breathing process towards the end). In accordance with Berendt, Maeda and Tanita (in press), death is associated with sleep.

Finally, the relation between temperature/light and life/death can be highlighted. At first, the results seem contradictory, since both cold and heat may be associated with death, and both light and shade may be associated with life. However, this can be explained by pointing out that while cold is associated to the body itself, heat is associated to location.

Acknowledgements

References

Berendt, E., Maeda, A. and Tanita, K. In press. Various papers under the theme The Right to Kill; the Right to Die (preliminary title), *Intercultural Communication Studies* vol. XVI.

Carter, R. 1987. *Vocabulary: Applied Linguistics Perspective*. London: Allen and Unwin.

François, A. In press. Towards a typology of colexification. Intertwining the polysemies of 'breathe'. In M. Vanhove, (Ed.) *From polysemy to*

semantic change: a typology of lexical semantic associations. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

Halliday. M.A.K. 1978. *Language as social semiotics*. Baltimore, Md.: University Park Press.

Lakoff, G. 1993. The contemporary theory of metaphor. In A. Ortony, (Ed.), *Metaphor and thought*, 202-251. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.