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DEATH IS SLEEP – thoughts about the longevity, effectiveness, and great structuring power of the metaphor in various languages and cultures¹

se wo nnim owu a hwe nna,
'if you don't know what death is, then look at sleep'
– an Akan expression

Introduction²

DEATH is metaphorically SLEEP in various cultures around the world and the metaphor shows up in many unrelated languages. But why SLEEP? Of all the familiar non-threatening concepts in our daily lives, why is this one so often chosen as a metaphor for DEATH? Why is the metaphor so universal? And why, despite being around for centuries, does it still effectively shield people from the fear of death?

In an attempt to answer these questions, I first show how we can comfort ourselves and others by metaphorically referring to a threatening concept in terms of a less threatening one. Then, I look at the biological process of sleep and its cultural contexts to understand how they provide a groundwork for the DEATH IS SLEEP metaphor.

Why are we not direct about death?

Death is surrounded by taboos in communities around the world. Death taboos may include restrictions on activities such as touching the deceased, handling their

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possessions, or even engaging with individuals who have been in contact with the deceased.

For example, as noted by Sir James George Frazer in his classic anthropological work *The Golden Bough* (1911), within the Shuswap community – an indigenous people of British Columbia, Canada – widows and widowers in mourning were explicitly prohibited from touching their own head or body. In addition, the cooking vessels they used during this period could not be used by anyone else. Among the Agutainos (an indigenous people who inhabit Palawan in the Philippines), a widow could not leave her house for seven days after her husband's death. And among the Maori, “anyone who had handled a corpse, helped to convey it to the grave, or touched a dead man's bones, was cut off from all intercourse and almost all communication with mankind” (1911: 138–9)³.

Such customs are now extremely rare. Still, it would be wrong to assume that the taboo of death is weak. In fact, although some traditional taboos such as sex or defecation may have become more ‘approachable’, the studies for example by Lakasing (2014) show the taboo of death is actually getting stronger than ever before. There is also evidence that societies are now becoming increasingly death-denying (Zimmerman 2007; Rawlings, Miller-Lewis, Collien, Tieman, Parker and Sanderson 2017)⁴, which is naturally reflected in the way people think and speak about death.

Why do we use metaphor to talk about death?

According to the Oxford English Dictionary (1989), linguistically a taboo may manifest itself as “a total or partial prohibition of the use of certain words, expressions, topics, etc., especially in social intercourse.” Still, we sometimes have to think and speak about taboo concepts such as death. And when we do, we often use euphemisms, which allow us to tactfully allude to sensitive topics and shift the focus away from explicit and uncomfortable content. The euphemisms that we use are frequently metaphorically based. There is evidence (e.g. Fernández 2006) indicating that metaphor is by far the most powerful mechanism in the formation of euphemisms for the taboo of death. As Sexton notes (1997: 337), “one would be hard pressed to find a type of reference to death in this culture which is both frequently used and without metaphoric content”. Thanks to the DEATH IS SLEEP metaphor, for instance, death may be conceptualized as temporary and soothing.

³ These examples show how strong the death taboo may be. Still, it should be remembered that the evidence given by Frazer may be at times anecdotal. For some criticism of Frazer see e.g. Leach (1961), Smith (1973), or Beard (1987 and 1992).

⁴ This seems also implied by the study by Benczes, Burr ridge, Allan, and Sharifian (2018) who analyse the taboo of ageing in Australian English (based on the data from newspapers issued between 1987 and 2014).

In *Metaphors We Live By* Lakoff and Johnson describe how metaphors highlight some aspects of a concept, but necessarily de-emphasize, or ‘hide’ other aspects (1980: 10).

In allowing us to focus on one aspect of a concept (e.g. the battle aspects of arguing), a metaphorical concept can keep us from focusing on other aspects of the concept that are inconsistent with that metaphor. For example, in the midst of a heated argument, when we are intent on attacking our opponent’s position and defending our own, we may lose sight of the cooperative aspects of arguing. Someone who is arguing with you can be viewed as giving you his time, a valuable commodity, in an effort at mutual understanding. But when we are preoccupied with the battle aspects, we often lose sight of the cooperative aspects.

Highlighting and hiding are only natural, given what we know about how our conscious attention functions. We are unable to simultaneously concentrate on two aspects of a concept, just as we are unable to simultaneously concentrate on two elements of a picture. As for example the well-known work by Rubin shows (Figure 1), if there are two elements in a picture, one of them is normally *the ground* against which the other is understood. The other element is, at least for a while, *the figure* and the focus of our conscious attention. Thus, when looking at Figure 1, we can either focus our attention on the vase or the faces, but never on both of them at once.

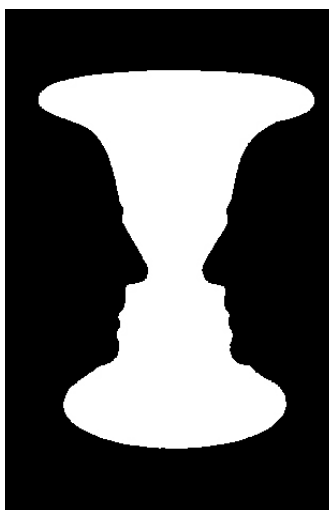


Figure 1. Rubin’s vase (1915)
(www.psychologie.tu-dresden.de)

The figure/ground assignment seems to apply also to metonymy. In fact, as Koch notes (1999: 151–2), metonymy is a kind of *figure/ground* effect. To use Koch’s words, “every concept designated by a given lexical item appears as a figure in relation to (at least) another contiguous concept that – for the time being – remains the ground

within the same frame”. For example, in a metonymically derived euphemistic expression, in order to hinder access to the target, one of the stages of the complex event may be selected as the vehicle. Usually the chosen stage is a peripheral component of the overall event. For example, *he closed his eyes* metonymically means ‘he died’, even though closing one’s eyes is a minor, non-essential part of the overall process of dying.

As metonymy operates within a single domain, it provides a restricted range of options for backgrounding or shifting emphasis. We can normally either select a peripheral element of the domain or scenario (in a PART FOR WHOLE relation) or a very opaque/general one (in a WHOLE FOR PART relation; see Wachowski [2019] for more details on these metonymic options). Metaphor appears to be a more sophisticated tool for euphemism compared to metonymy due to the more diverse options it provides. Similarly to metonymy, metaphor lets us approach a taboo concept through the lens of a neutral and less distressing source. By redirecting our focus towards something else, it helps us divert our attention from the uncomfortable aspects of a particular domain. However, apart from that, metaphor, being a two-domain mapping, also prompts us to conceptualize a taboo concept in the context of an entirely different domain. This is for example the case with the DEATH IS SLEEP metaphor, which enables us to think about the taboo concept of DEATH in terms of the more benign domain of SLEEP.

Apart from allowing us to soothe the thought of an uncomfortable target topic like DEATH, metaphor also serves another important function. It helps us comprehend and structure phenomena beyond our personal experiences. We typically have our own experiences related to taboo activities like sex or defecation, and we can relate to these experiences when conceptualizing the activities. Death, however, poses a unique challenge, as no living person has a direct experience of dying. When thinking and talking about death, we need metaphors not only to de-emphasize its taboo aspects, but also to give structure to a topic that remains outside our direct experiential realm.

Is the effect produced by metaphor or metonymy long-lasting?

Kövecses and Radden (1998) and earlier Turner (1973), Quine (1987), and Pinker (1994) note that the soothing effect produced by metaphorically or metonymically based euphemisms is normally short-lived. Over time the unpleasant or threatening target meaning usually comes to the fore and some other inoffensive source has to be selected as a ‘linguistic fig leaf’. This is for example the case with the metonymic expression “to go to the bathroom” (Kövecses and Radden 1998: 53), which nowadays evokes the target sense directly and is no longer felt to mystify the taboo topic (as in: “the dog went to the bathroom on the living room rug”). Such ‘worn out’ expressions tend to be replaced by new metaphorically or metonymically derived euphemisms. The process was earlier described by Turner (1973) and by Pinker (1994), who dubbed it ‘euphemism treadmill’. Turner (1973: 115) wrote, for example:

[w]hat in the good old forthright days was called *stool*, *privy*, or *jakes* was not so called by my parents. They were taught to say *W.C.* To me this seemed a little too forthright and I learned, presumably at school, to say *lavatory*. When my small son began kindergarten and was asked if he wanted the *toilet*, he failed to understand, and so I switched to *toilet* (...).

Interestingly, this seemingly natural process of euphemism ‘wear and tear’ does not apply to the DEATH IS SLEEP metaphor which appears timeless. It has been invariably effective in producing a calming effect and hiding the threatening truth for centuries.

The physiological basis for the DEATH IS SLEEP metaphor

Our brain profoundly alters its behavior and purpose, dimming our consciousness. For a while, we become almost entirely paralyzed. We can’t even shiver (...) We approach the frontiers of death. We sleep. (...) (Finkel, *National Geographic*, 06.2018)

According to Michael Perlis, the director of the Behavioral Sleep Medicine program at the University of Pennsylvania, the level of brain deactivation during certain stages of sleep is “really rather intense” He writes: “stage 4 sleep is not far removed from coma or brain death. While recuperative and restorative, it’s not something you’d want to overdose on” (*National Geographic*, 06.2018, [emphasis by WW]).

This is in line with findings from other scientific studies. It also corresponds to our everyday observations. In several respects, dead bodies resemble sleeping bodies. Both sleeping and deceased people are silent and motionless. People who are sleeping are normally lying down and so are people who are dead. Some people sleep in a stiff manner with their arms to their sides, like a body laid in a coffin – that position is actually sometimes referred to as ‘coffin sleeping position’. A similar position in yoga is called *shavasana* ‘corpse pose’. Interestingly, in Arabic the verb *raqada* means to *lie*, *sleep* and also *die*, as in (1).

(1) *raqada raqdatahu l-ʿāhira* الأخرة رقدته رقد – he slept/lay for the last time; he died

People who are sleeping are normally inactive. Their postural muscles are relaxed, their heart rate and blood pressure go down and are steadier, and they breathe more slowly.⁵ During certain sleep phases breathing also becomes more shallow and less regular. Sleep shuts down our cough reflex so most people do not cough while they are asleep. Because our kidneys are less active while we sleep we do not need to go to the bathroom as often. People who are dead, of course, are always inactive and motionless.

Both people who are sleeping and people who are dead usually have their eyes closed. This correspondence shows up in language, for example in the metonymic

⁵ Especially during non-REM sleep, which is about 80% of an adult’s sleeping time.

expression *to close one's eyes* meaning *to die* (also e.g. in Polish: *zamknąć oczy* (close one's eyes = die) or, interestingly, in the singular form in Hungarian: *lehunyja a szemét* (close one's eye = die). When corpses have open eyes, people often ritually close them, perhaps to facilitate a greater resemblance to sleep. The placing of coins on the eyes 'to pay the boatman' is a reference to the afterlife, but also has the function of keeping the eyes closed. Dead bodies with glazed, staring eyes are clearly not asleep and seem to disturb many living people.

Both sleep and death are non-conscious states. People who are sleeping do not interact with the environment – their consciousness is suspended, the brainwave frequency goes down and people gradually lose awareness of the stimuli from the environment. People who are dead naturally do not interact with the environment either.

During sleep our body temperature can be 1 to 2 degrees lower than during the daytime. Also in the second stage of death (so called *agor mortis* – from Latin *algor* meaning 'coldness' and *mortis* meaning 'of death'), body temperature changes, until the ambient temperature is matched. This is usually much lower than normal body temperature. The Arabic word *barada* reflects this relation, in that the word means *to get cold*, but also *sleep* and *die* (Wachowski and Sullivan 2021: 80).

Finally, dying in one's sleep is commonly thought of as very gentle and painless, as if the transition from living to dying was much less abrupt during sleep. All these similarities manifest themselves linguistically in the form of similes such as *to sleep like a corpse* or Polish: *spać jak zabity* 'to sleep like the dead'.

The cultural basis for the DEATH IS SLEEP metaphor

In Greek mythology the gods Hypnos (sleep) and Thanatos (death) are twin brothers. The Greeks may have been right. (Finkel, *National Geographic*, 06.2018).

The connection between sleep and death was especially strong and evident in Ancient Egypt. Egyptians believed in the ability of the *ba* (soul) to travel beyond the physical body during sleep. Sleep was also thought to be a means through which a person could communicate with the dead. As Asaad (2015: 13) notes,

[t]he *ba* was represented in hieroglyphics as a human-headed bird floating above the sleeping body. In that sense, sleep was viewed to be similar, in some aspect, to death, in which the person is in a different state or a different world. Being strong believers in the afterlife, sleep was considered as a way or outlet to that mysterious world and a means through which a person can communicate with the dead as well as his gods. For this reason, it is not surprising to find some rituals related to sleep to resemble what is adopted in preparation for death [emphasis by WW].

In fact in Ancient Egypt sleep was often thought of as analogous to death, and awakening to resurrection (Szpakowska 2003). The concepts also shared the same terminology. As Zandee (1960: 11) notes,

[in Ancient Egypt] death tallies with sleep. Words for sleeping may be used as analogous terms for death. The rigidity of the stiffened body makes death to be considered as being bound. Resurrection from death is like awakening from sleep, like rising after lying down (sdr). In Pyr.721.d (qd) the aversion to death is expressed as ‘he detests sleep, he hates fatigue’. (...) About the resurrection of Osiris from death it is said: ‘A tired god is waking up’.

Indications of the belief may also be found in letters to the dead written on papyrus or ostraca, which functioned as instructions, intended to ensure safe passage to the afterlife. In Coffin Text (CT) 74, for example, the deceased is referred to as ‘sleeper’:

Oh sleeper, turn about in this place which you do not know, but I know it. Come that we may raise his head. Come that we may reassemble his bones (O’Neill 2012, www.egyptological.com) [emphasis by WW].

Certain rituals also indicate the connection between sleep and death. The headrests shown in Figure 2 were of the type used for sleeping in Ancient Egypt, but they were also an essential requirement for a funeral. They were kept with the dead in their burial chamber and functioned as a pillow for “eternal sleep”. These pillows were placed within the burial chamber, which itself represented the bedroom. The burial chamber was then housed in a tomb, which in Ancient Egypt represented the home for the deceased (Asaad 2015).



Figure 2. Two headrests from the tomb of Tutankhamun (O’Neill 2012 www.egyptological.com)

The echoes of the relation between DEATH and SLEEP found in Ancient Egypt seem to resound in Ancient Greece. In Greek mythology, *Ἡρπνος* (Ύπνος), the god and personification of sleep, is a twin brother of *Θάνατος* (Thanatos) the god and personification of death. Even though they have numerous siblings, they are normally placed next to one another in sculptures and other imagery. Hesiod in *Theogony* (z 11)

(West 1978), Homer in *Iliad* (16.672 and 68z), and consequently, Liddell and Scott's *Greek-English Lexicon* list *Sleep* and *Death* as twin brothers (qtd. in Lakoff & Turner 1989: 60).

DEATH and SLEEP are associated also in communities which, in some cases for thousands of years, had very little or no contact with the outside world, and remained relatively unaffected by other cultures. For example, Edwards (2013: 33) who describes the burial practices of the Pitjantjatjara (an Aboriginal people of the Central Australian desert) notes that *tjukurmananyi* – the word used for dreaming during sleep “is derived from the same root as the term for The Dreaming. Dreams enable entry into the world of The Dreaming”. The belief that a person leaves their body during sleep, and temporarily enters the Dreamtime seems to be shared by many indigenous peoples of Australia. Interestingly, it is also believed that one emerges from the Dreamtime through birth, and eventually returns there after death (only to emerge again).

The concept of a free-roaming soul departing the body during sleep is present also in other cultures, including the Toucouleur people of West Africa. The Toucouleur people believe that the shadow-self (or soul) leaves the body during sleep and roams the earth at night (Dilley 1992: 74). Also in Papua New Guinea, as Herdt notes, the Sambia people believe that “when one sleeps the soul leaves the body and roams in different places, near or far, familiar or unfamiliar (...). The soul takes one's thought with it, leaving the body empty” (1987: 5).

The connection between sleep and death in the Christian tradition is also very clear, with numerous references found in the Bible, e.g.⁶:

- (2) *And many of them that sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt.* (Daniel 12:2);
- (3) (...) *tombs were opened; and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised; (...)* (Mt 27:52);
- (4) *“Lord, do not hold this sin against them!” And having said this, Stephen fell asleep.* (Ac 7:60).

Certain Christian prayers give the impression that sleep may have been perceived as a prelude to death, or a gentler, shorter version of death. Consider for instance the classic children's bedtime prayer from the 18th century “Now I lay me down to sleep”:

- (5) *Now I lay me down to sleep,
I pray the Lord my soul to keep,
If I should die before I wake,
I pray the Lord my soul to take.* (*The New England Primer*, 1750: 23).

⁶ Interestingly, the metaphor may not have been that conventionalized during the time of Jesus Christ since he had to explain the meaning to his disciples. “Our friend Lazarus has fallen *asleep*; but I go, that I may awaken him out of *sleep*”. The disciples therefore said to Him, “Lord, if he has fallen *asleep*, he will recover”. Now Jesus had spoken of his death, but they thought that He was speaking of *literal sleep*. Then Jesus therefore said to them plainly, “Lazarus is *dead*” (Jn 11:11–14) [emphasis WW].

This is also consistent with other Christian beliefs. Medieval ghost stories for example, often describe lost souls who return from Purgatory at night to visit relatives or friends whom they beg to pray on their behalf⁷.

The relation between death and sleep is possibly even more apparent in the Muslim tradition. Certain passages in the Qur'an and Sunnah seem to indicate that the soul leaves the body during sleep and returns when it is time to get up. Consider for example the following quote, which states that the soul is taken away during sleep.

(6) *It is He, Who takes your souls by night (when you are asleep), and has knowledge of all that you have done by day.* (al-An'aam, 6:60).

The following excerpt is more specific, and explains that dead souls are taken permanently, but living souls are removed during sleep and then returned.

(7) *Allah takes the souls at the time of death, and takes those that do not die during their sleep. He withholds those for whom He decreed death and sends the others back for an appointed term.* (Za-Zumar/ The Throngs 39:42).

Certain rites in the Muslim tradition are also based on the DEATH IS SLEEP metaphor. For example, during the funeral, once the body is laid in the grave, a relative of the deceased turns the body to the right side so as to direct it towards Qibla (Mecca), and places the face on a pillow of soil. Both the soil pillow and the turning the body to its side (which is a natural sleeping position) metonymically evoke the domain of sleep, which is in turn mapped onto the domain of death. Also, as Bakhtiar notes (2014: 263), “before completing the process of burial, a person reads some Arabic inculcations and the person assisting, at the same time, gently and continuously shakes the deceased’s left shoulder until reading is finished.” Shaking the shoulder of the deceased in order to make them listen to the inculcations indicates that the dead person is conceived of as dormant. It is also believed that the dead can actually hear what people say about them, just like people who are asleep who might accidentally hear what is being said in their presence. In the case of dead people, soil is considered to be the messenger which informs the person. Thus, when someone wants to discuss a negative aspect of the deceased person’s life, they would typically say:

(8) *khak behesh khabar nadeh* (lit. may soil not inform him) (Bakhtiar 2014: 265).

Linguistic manifestations of the DEATH IS SLEEP metaphor

Not surprisingly, one can find numerous linguistic manifestations of the DEATH IS SLEEP metaphor in literature, poetry and everyday use. In the famous fairy tale *Snow White*, the protagonist is kept in a deathlike slumber by poison and placed by the dwarfs in a glass coffin. Similarly in *Sleeping Beauty*, another classic fairy tale, the evil

⁷ For other examples of how the relation between sleep and death is exploited in Christian teaching see (Wachowski and Sullivan 2021).

fairy enchants the infant princess so that she will prick her finger on a spindle of a spinning wheel and eventually die (Grimm and Grimm 2010). Another fairy partially reverses the curse and as a result the princess instead falls into a deep sleep. In *Dracula* (1897), the classic horror novel by Bram Stoker and the subsequent film adaptation directed by Friedrich Wilhelm Murnau *Nosferatu* (1922), the connection between sleep and death is also quite explicit. In both works the main character is a corpse-like creature which sleeps in a coffin. Also in *Romeo and Juliet*, when *Romeo* hears that *Juliet* has *died*, the line between sleep and death becomes blurred, because she is in fact asleep. In *The Tempest* Shakespeare writes: “*We are such stuff as dreams are made on; and our little life is rounded with a sleep*” (Act IV, Scene I, Lines 174–175). Perhaps most dramatically, Hamlet in his famous soliloquy describes death as sleep (Act III, Scene I, Lines 56–67):

- (9) *To be, or not to be: that is the question:
Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer
The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,
Or to take arms against a sea of troubles,
And by opposing end them? To die: to sleep;
No more; and by a sleep to say we end
The heart-ache and the thousand natural shocks
That flesh is heir to, 'tis a consummation
Devoutly to be wish'd. To die, to sleep;
To sleep: perchance to dream: ay, there's the rub;
For in that sleep of death what dreams may come
When we have shuffled off this mortal coil.*

Wallace Stevens in *The Owl in the Sarcophagus* (October 1947, *Horizon Magazine*) describes death as sleep as brothers, following the Greek mythology described earlier.

- (10) *This was peace after death, the brother of sleep,
The inhuman brother so much like, so near,
Yet vested in a foreign absolute.*

Alfred Tennyson in *In Memoriam* (1896) makes a similar reference:

- (11) *When in the down I sink my head,
Sleep, Death's twin-brother, times my breath.*

There is evidence that the DEATH IS SLEEP and DEATH IS REST metaphors were realised linguistically as early as in Old English. The word *swefan* for example was used to mean both *to sleep* and *to die*. In contemporary English there is also an abundance of linguistic examples of the metaphors. For instance, a stillborn baby may be referred to as *born asleep*. Also if one's pet is sick or injured and is to be given drugs that will make it die without pain one could say that they are going to *put it to sleep*. Numerous linguistic examples of the metaphor may also be found in other languages (see also Wachowski and Sullivan 2021).

- (12) Akan: *wada ne bankum so* – ‘s/he has slept on his/her left side’ (Owiredu 2020: 415);
- (13) Albanian: *e ka zënë gjumi i madh* – ‘a big sleep’;
- (14) Ancient Greek: *κοίμησις* (*koimēsis*) – ‘lying down to sleep’, also ‘the sleep of death’;
- (15) Arabic: *raqada raqdatahu l-’āhira* رَقَدَ رَقْدَتَهُ الْآخِرَةَ – ‘he slept his last’;
- (16) Chinese: 就木 – ‘to sleep in the wood’, which is a metonymic reference to the coffin;
- (17) German: *einschlafen* – ‘to fall asleep’;
- (18) Hebrew: נָדַם , *nūm* – ‘to slumber’ (Owiredu 2020: 415);
- (19) Hungarian: *elalszik* – ‘to fall asleep’;
- (20) Japanese: 永眠する [*eimin suru*] – 永眠 [*eimin*] – ‘eternal sleep’, する [*suru*] – ‘light verb’;
- (21) Oshikwanyama:⁸ *tulumukwa nobili* – ‘rest in peace’;
- (22) Oshindonga:⁹ *vululukwa nombili* – ‘rest in peace’;
- (23) Otjiherero: *Suva mohange, Mbara ndjaṭa nozondunge, Ihe jOtjiuaña tja Namibia* – ‘Rest in peace, wise leader and Father of the Namibian Nation’ – an inscription on the grave of Chief Hosea Kuṭako¹⁰ near Friedenskirche, Okahandja, Namibia;
- (24) Otjiherero: *suva nawa Munene* – ‘rest well Leader/ Big Man’¹¹;
- (25) Polish: *wieczny sen* – ‘eternal sleep’;
- (26) Romanian: *doarme somnul cel mare/celde veci* – ‘fall into eternal sleep’;
- (27) Rukwa-ngali: *pwizumuka nombili tate Presidente* – ‘rest/sleep well/in peace father President’ (obtained during the *memorial service* of Hage Gottfried Geingob the president of Namibia, 25.02.2024);
- (28) Russian: *заснуть вечным сном* – ‘to fall into eternal sleep’;
- (29) Spanish: *el sueño profundo* – ‘deep sleep’;
- (30) Vietnamese: *ngủ với giun* – ‘to sleep with the earthworm’;

⁸ Oshikwanyama is a standardized dialect of the Ovambo language. It is spoken in Angola and Namibia.

⁹ Oshindonga is a standardized dialect of the Ovambo language. It is spoken in Namibia and parts of Angola.

¹⁰ Hosea Kuṭako was a Namibian nationalist leader and a founder member of Namibia’s first nationalist party, the South West African National Union (SWANU).

¹¹ Obtained during the memorial service of Hage Gottfried Geingob the president of Namibia, 25.02.2024.

- (31) Xhosa: *Uthixo usiphe wena, wdasisebenzela kakuhle, lixsha lakho lokuphum-la* – ‘God gave you, you served us well, now it’s time to rest’ (an entry in the book of condolence – the official memorial service and burial of president Hage Gottfried Geingob the president of Namibia 23-25.02.2024).

Finally, the word *cemetery* and all its cognates (e.g. Latin: *caemeterium*, French: *cimetière*, Italian: *cimitero*, Portuguese: *cemitério*, English: *cemetery*, Polish: *cmentarz*) are derived from the Ancient Greek word *koimētērion* (κοιμητήριον or κοιμητήρια) meaning ‘sleeping-room’, ‘dormitory’. Also the word *ârâmostân* ‘cemetery’ in Persian and *Friedhof* in German are based on the DEATH IS SLEEP metaphor. In Persian *ârâm* means *calm* and *stân* is a suffix denoting a *place*. Similarly, in German *Fried* means *peace* and *hof* refers to a *place*. Synonyms for the word *cemetery* are also often based on the DEATH IS SLEEP and DEATH IS REST metaphors, as in the expressions *the last resting place*, *the final resting place*, and *the permanent rest camp*.

Although the use of euphemisms based on the DEATH IS SLEEP metaphor is so widespread and potentially universal, there are minor differences between languages. In some cultures, for example, the applicability of the metaphor is based on status. In Wolof (a language of e.g. Senegal or Mauritania), the euphemism *to sleep* is normally reserved only for prestigious people (e.g. revered religious personages). Also in Chinese, the word 困 [kun] (sleep) is usually only used as a euphemism for ‘death’ for noted figures (Wachowski and Sullivan 2021: 88).

The power of metaphoric structuring

It is well recognised that metaphor can help us understand one domain in terms of another, which seems particularly important for a target domain for which we lack first-hand experience, such as DEATH. This process, however, as Lakoff and Johnson note, is necessarily incomplete and is never entirely accurate. Lakoff and Johnson write that “the metaphorical structuring is partial, not total. If it were total, one concept would actually *be* the other, not merely be understood in terms of it. For example, time isn’t really money” (1980: 12-13).

Nevertheless, the structuring power of the DEATH IS SLEEP metaphor is so strong that it sometimes challenges the supposedly incomplete nature described by Lakoff and Johnson (1980). For example, in 1978, Jim Jones, an American religious cult leader, managed to convince his followers in Jonestown, Guyana to drink cyanide-laced Kool-Aid saying this:

Adults, adults... I call on you to quit exciting your children when all they’re doing is going to a quiet rest. Quit telling them they’re dying. All they’re doing is taking a drink they take to go to sleep. That’s what death is: sleep. (*New York Times*, 3/15/79).

909 of Jim Jones’ followers died as a result.

The example from Jonestown shows that metaphoric structuring may be so conceptually powerful that people are sometimes persuaded to believe that one concept actually *is* the other. It shows that although metaphors are not ‘real’ in the sense of being completely accurate representations of the world, they have real effects on human cognition and decision-making.

Conclusion

This article, apart from presenting the richness of linguistic forms which come about based on the DEATH IS SLEEP metaphor in various natural languages, aims at answering two questions. Why is DEATH IS SLEEP so powerful and appreciated around the world, across languages and cultures and why has the calming effect it produces survived for centuries?

The universality of the DEATH IS SLEEP metaphor may be attributed to a few reasons. First, all human beings share certain anatomical and physiological properties. Also, most physical properties of the world are the same for all human beings. Second, people around the world share certain beliefs and convictions, which themselves may be to an extent shaped by the above mentioned anatomical, physiological, and physical properties.

The longevity and unfailing efficiency of the DEATH IS SLEEP metaphor may be attributed to the same reasons – the very solid foundations of the metaphor which originate in a universal human experience, its deep embedding in our culture or being part of a complex system of metaphors, rather than an isolated case (see e.g. Kövecses [2017]). Above all, however, it is the comprehensive hiding effect that the DEATH IS SLEEP lets us achieve. Namely, the metaphor lets us background virtually all the terrifying aspects of death. First, it hides the fact that death is a great mystery. Although some people may have had near-death experiences, no living person has had a full death experience. Sleep, on the other hand, is something quotidian that we are very well familiar with. Second, although death itself is a mystery, we have reasons to associate it with sorrow and suffering. The dying person often feels physical pain and their relatives feel anguish and distress. Sleep lacks these horrific connotations. It may actually be enjoyable and provide us with rest after a hard day’s work. Finally, the irreversibility and permanence of death are terrifying. We realise that when we die, we will not rise from the dead. When we go sleep, however, we know the state will only be temporary and that eventually we will wake up.

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**Death is sleep
– thoughts about the longevity, effectiveness,
and great structuring power of the metaphor
in various languages and cultures**

Abstract: This article centres on the DEATH IS SLEEP metaphor in various (often unrelated) cultures around the world and on the linguistic manifestations of the metaphor in various natural languages. It discusses the physiological and cultural basis for the metaphor and shows how metaphoric thinking shields people around the world from the fear of death. This article also stresses the great power of the DEATH IS SLEEP metaphor and the very real effects it has on human cognition and decision-making – the power which sometimes challenges the supposedly incomplete and inaccurate nature of metaphorical structuring. Finally the article highlights the somewhat unusual synchronic universality and diachronic consistency of the DEATH IS SLEEP metaphor. Namely, as was noted by Kövecses and Radden (1998: 53) and earlier by Turner (1973), Quine (1987), and Pinker (1994), the metaphors and metonymies which are used to hide threatening or unpleasant concepts are often culture specific and the effect they produce is often short-lived. The DEATH IS SLEEP is different in these respects. Probably due to its strong biological and cultural basis the metaphor (and its numerous offshoots and cognates) has survived for centuries and is still very effective in alleviating the negative emotions related to death and dying.

Keywords: metaphor, metonymy, language variation, CMT, Cognitive Linguistics, taboo, death, sleep, euphemism

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