

The Language of Death and Dying

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Death and dying are widely recognized as topics that, if referred to at all, are often referred to indirectly. My goal, then, is to explore how we speak about death and dying, how we think about death and dying, and the relationship between our speaking and thinking. I will begin by exploring death-related language and the distinction between literal and figurative references. I will then address the anxiety evoked by thinking about death, in general, and death-related language, in particular.

Keywords: death, dying, linguistics

Within the constraints of language, figurative usage is ideally suited for expressing the ineffable (Ross & Pollio, 1991, p. 291).

Editor's Note: The following represents an invited paper. Dr. Brooke Breaux offers a linguistic perspective of how individuals reference death. Readers are encouraged to self-reflect on how they reference death in their daily lives. Although admittedly uncomfortable as a topic of conversation, Dr. Breaux's article offers insight into both formal and informal linguistic patterns on this difficult topic. It is acknowledged that APA format does not traditionally allow first-person references. However, since Dr. Breaux is reflecting on both the current literature and her present research, an allowance has been made regarding her utilization of first person in the present article.

When training to become a facilitator for a bereaved children's grief support group, I was instructed—along with my fellow volunteers—to use literal language when talking with children about death and dying. In a group setting, we practiced sharing our personal narratives and stating aloud that our loved ones had died. At first speaking these words aloud felt uncomfortable and forced; however, after some practice, it came to feel natural and effortless. As a researcher interested in the intersection of psychology and linguistics, I always wondered why using literal language in this domain did not come easily to me and my fellow volunteers.

In her pioneering book *On Death and Dying*, Elisabeth Kübler-Ross describes “a society in which death is viewed as taboo, discussion of it is regarded as morbid, and children are excluded with the presumption and pretext that it would be ‘too much’ for them” (1976, pp. 6–7). She goes on to warn against the use of “unconvincing lies” and “unbelievable stories” regard-

ing death, such as telling a child that their father has simply gone on a long trip or that their sister was taken to heaven because God loved her so much. Kübler-Ross argues that as a society we fear death and that these “unconvincing lies” and “unbelievable stories” regarding death are evidence of our fear. In other words, our tendency to use euphemisms instead of literal language when talking about death and dying is viewed as evidence of our fear and of our inability to accept the inevitability of death.

Avoidance of Literal Death-Related Language

Pound (1936) argues that when the topic of death and dying arises, speakers of American English tend to avoid “straightforward speech” (p. 196). Other researchers agree that when speakers talk about actual death and dying, figurative expressions are preferred over literal expressions (e.g., Crespo-Fernández, 2006, 2011, 2013; Sexton, 1997). Although some researchers would argue that making a distinction between literal and figurative language is not useful for theories of language processing (e.g., Gibbs, 1984) or that this distinction is difficult to make on the basis of linguistic evidence alone (e.g., Bultinck, 1998), it does make sense from the perspective of our folk theory of language. This folk theory contends that there is “a sharp distinction between the literal and the nonliteral” in our language (Glucksberg, 2001, p. 14). Although separating literal language from nonliteral language is not considered advantageous across all areas of language research, the distinction appears to

resonate with researchers interested in death-related language.

Literal Death-Related Language

Literal language about death and dying can sound harsh and speakers who use it may be perceived as unsympathetic. This type of language includes the nouns *death*, *deaths*, and *deceased*; the verbs *die*, *died*, *dies*, and *dying*; and the adjective *dead*. Additionally, words and phrases that refer to violent ways of dying, such as *killed*, *strangled*, *massacred*, and medical or more technical causes of death, such as *suffocation*, *asphyxia*, and *hemorrhage* can also be characterized as literal expressions in this domain (Bultinck, 1998). Although they do not directly refer to death and dying, there are many words that are used to refer to the rituals that occur surrounding death: *wake*, *funeral*, *mourning*, *condolences*, and *last rights*. Despite the availability of literal language in this domain, figurative ways of referring to death and dying tend to dominate the literature.

Evidence for this figurative preference comes from research that investigates the type of language that is used when the topic of death and dying is unavoidable. Crespo Fernández (2006, 2011, 2013) acknowledges that there are few situations in which talking about death is practically unavoidable, but the writing of obituaries and epitaphs constitute two such cases. Even under these circumstances, figurative language seems to prevail. As a case in point, Crespo Fernández's (2006) analysis of Victorian era (1840's) Irish newspaper obituaries revealed that only 14.5% of the 228 obituaries examined contained the words *death* and *died*. Interestingly, the term *obituary* is based on the Latin word *obitus*, which means departure and is, itself, a euphemistic term for death (Crespo-Fernandez, 2006). It seems that even when death stares us in the face, our tendency is to avoid talking about it in a direct, literal manner.

Figurative Death-Related Language

Figurative language, as it relates to death and dying, tends involves a variety of euphemisms. Consider, for example, when a family member calls to say that grandmother *passed away*, when a doctor explains that they *lost* a patient, and when a friend tells us that someone they know is now *on the other side*. These types of euphemisms are considered ordinary and natural ways of talking about the topic (Lakoff & Turner, 1989). Additionally, the term *euphemism* tends to be applied to this type of language because figurative death-related language is thought to be less harsh than literal death-related language and speakers who use it may be perceived as more sympathetic. These euphemisms come in many different forms, including metaphors, metonymy, or idiomatic phrases.

Metaphors. It has been reported that "metaphors involve the juxtaposition of concepts from separate domains of experience; they ask us to think of something in terms of something else that is radically different" (Gentner & Bowdle, 2002, p. 18). For example, consider a situation in which a speaker is asked to process a novel metaphor, to interpret a metaphor they have never encountered before, such as *children are snowflakes* (Bowdle & Genter, 2005). Interpretations of this novel metaphor tend to involve activating salient characteristics of snowflakes, specifically those salient characteristics that can be easily applied to our current conceptualization of children. A common way to interpret this novel metaphor is to say that children are unique and each is beautiful in their own way. Interestingly, other salient aspects of snowflakes, such as their frigid temperature or that they can melt easily, are much less likely to play a role in speakers' interpretations of this metaphor. It is in this way that metaphors highlight certain aspects of meaning while at the same time downplaying other aspects of meaning.

Steen (2010) points out that there are at least two types of metaphors found in language: direct and indirect. Indirect metaphors are those in which the contextual meaning of a word is distinct from its basic meaning, such as when words with meanings that are clearly not death-related in nature are used to describe death. For example, *the long sleep* and *the eternal rest* are considered indirect metaphors because the lexical items *sleep* and *rest* are used outside of their literal, concrete contexts to refer to the more abstract domain of death. Sleep and rest are considered more concrete concepts because we have experiential knowledge of these concepts: We know what it is like to sleep and rest from our own experiences in the world. Death is considered more abstract because we do not have experiential knowledge of death: We do not know what it is like to be dead based on our own experiences in the world.

Direct metaphors are different from indirect metaphors such that direct metaphors are those in which the source and target of the metaphor are directly represented in the metaphor. For example, nominal metaphors such as *Death is the long sleep* or *Death is the eternal rest* are considered direct metaphors because the concepts that serve as the source of the metaphors (i.e., sleep and rest, respectively) and those that serve as the target of the metaphor (i.e., death) are explicitly mentioned. As you might predict, indirect metaphors occur much more often in natural discourse than direct metaphors. Furthermore, unlike direct metaphors, the figurative nature of indirect metaphors often goes overlooked by everyday speakers of the language (Steen, 2010).

Metonymy. In cases of metonymy, instead of using a direct, literal word or phrase to describe a situation,

speakers use a word or phrase that refers to only part of the literal term. The classic example of novel metonymy comes from Nunberg (1979) in which he describes a waitress referring to a customer as *the ham sandwich* because the phrase corresponds to the customer's order. Other, more conventional examples of metonymy include using *Hollywood* to refer to the United States film industry or using the *White House* to refer to decisions made by the executive branch of the government.

Although the distinction between metaphor and metonymy is treated as unambiguous by other researchers (e.g., Lakoff & Johnson, 1980), Bultinck (1998) argues that metaphor and metonymy are at times difficult to tease apart, especially when the context in which the phrase was uttered is unknown. For example, Bultinck (1998, p. 42) argues that if someone died in their sleep, then someone saying that they are *taking the long sleep* is metonymic. The person is using a portion of the context related to the situation to describe the entirety of the situation. However, if someone died in a car accident, then someone saying that they are *taking the long sleep* is metaphorical because the person is referring to completely separate types of events.

Idioms. The characteristic that tends to differentiate idioms from metaphors is that idioms lack the feature of compositionality. Compositionality is a characteristic of phrases such that speakers who know the meaning of each word in a phrase should be able to derive the meaning of the phrase. Examples such as *kick the bucket*, *bought the farm*, or *pushing daisies* are examples of idioms that refer to someone dying. Notice how a literal interpretation of an idiom, such as *kick the bucket*, leads to a very different interpretation from its figurative, idiomatic meaning. Imagine someone uttering the phrase *kick the bucket* when talking about a young boy on a farm as compared to someone who utters the same phrase when talking about an elderly man in hospice care. It is likely that the same phrase will result in two entirely different conceptualizations: in the former, the young boy literally kicks a bucket and in the latter, the elderly man is close to death. Similar to the metonymy example, presenting this idiom in two different contexts demonstrates the importance that context serves when interpreting the meaning of a phrase. It also suggests that there are cases when literal meanings can be easily differentiated from figurative meanings.

The Literal-Figurative Distinction

Describing the distinction between literal and figurative language—and subsequently between metaphor, metonymy, and idioms—was designed to highlight the complexity that exists in the language we use to talk about death and dying. It was also designed to provide a variety of examples, both literal and figura-

tive, to demonstrate the range of linguistic options available to speakers who want to talk about death and dying. Although the distinction between literal and figurative language may not be useful for theories of language processing (e.g., Gibbs, 1984) or easy to determine on the basis of linguistic evidence alone (e.g., Bultinck, 1998), it will serve as a useful construct when attempting to explain why people tend to avoid certain types of death-related language in certain contexts.

Why We Avoid Literal Death-Related Language

There is an interesting linguistic phenomenon involving words related to *death* and *dying*. Although speakers tend to avoid these words in the context of actual death and dying, words related to *death* and *dying* are not avoided in all contexts. For example, consider the fact that “most people in contemporary American society speak quite openly about dead batteries, dead letters, a deadpan expression, a dead giveaway, deadlines, and being dead drunk. Everyone knows people who are dead tired, dead on their feet, dead certain, a deadbeat or dead broke, deadly full, deadlocked, dead to the world in sleep, or scared to death” (Corr, Nabe, & Corr, 2008, p. 86). The list goes on and on (see Corr et al., 2008, p. 86 for more examples). Interestingly, it seems that death-related language is frequently used when talking about events that have nothing to do with actual death and dying.

Corr et al. (2008) argue that the purpose of these figurative uses of death-related language are used to increase the intensity of the phrase's typical, default meaning. For example, someone who is dead certain about the outcome of the Super Bowl XLIV (for the record, the New Orleans Saints beat the Indianapolis Colts, 31 to 17) is likely to be considered more accurate (or at least more confident in their accuracy) than someone who is simply certain about the outcome. Although more empirical data would be necessary to confirm this hypothesis, speakers appear to use these death-related terms in figurative contexts to indicate that whatever is being described is at its strongest level of intensity or in its most extreme state. It seems, then, that speakers readily use words related to *death* and *dying* in figurative contexts (e.g., to talk about *business*, *love*, and *certainty*), but tend to avoid them in more literal contexts (e.g., to talk about the death of a human or non-human animal).

Death Attitudes

The question then arises as to why these patterns exist in language. Bultinck (1998) points out the paradox of death-related language: that people have access to a wide variety of figurative expressions to talk about the literal concept of death but seem at a loss for

words when actually confronted with then phenomenon. He goes on to explain "that the subject [of death] is often so painful and difficult to approach that a single perspective cannot account for the diversity of reactions, thoughts and feelings people have concerning death" (Bultinck, 1998, p. 1). There is significant psychological literature based on the idea that, in general, people tend to have negative attitudes about death. Common ways of referring to these mostly negative attitudes include death anxiety, fear of death, death threat, death concern, and death acceptance (Tomer, 1994). Extensive research has been conducted to measure these attitudes (see Neimeyer, 1988 for a review). In fact, the *Death Anxiety Handbook: Research, Instrumentation, and Application* includes many chapters related to these different measures, such as the Multidimensional Fear of Death Scale (Neimeyer & Moore, 1994), the Collett-Lester Fear of Death Scale (Lester, 1994), and Bugen's Coping with Death Scale (Robbins, 1994).

Neimeyer (1994), in his summary of the measures discussed in the *Death Anxiety Handbook*, acknowledges the progress made in the area of death attitudes research but suggests that future research focus on utilizing more innovative measures. For example, Neimeyer (1994) argues that most of the assessments designed to measure death attitudes are self-report questionnaires, which allow participants to report their own thoughts and feelings regarding death and dying. In most cases, participants provide answers to questions or Likert-type ratings, indicating whether they agree or disagree with particular statements about death and dying. As compared to other data collection methods, self-report questionnaires are associated with low internal validity. Researchers must take caution when stating their conclusions, primarily because of the uncertainty associated with whether participants have exaggerated or understated the effects that death has on their thoughts and feelings. There is also the possibility that participants do not have conscious access to the information necessary to precisely gauge their own attitudes about death. Neimeyer (1994) argues that without the compliment of more indirect, unconscious measures of death attitudes, such as lexical decision tasks (i.e., investigating the time it takes participants to decide whether strings of letters are words or non-words as a measure of how easy or difficult it is for participants access the meanings of particular words) or perceptual identification procedures (i.e., investigating whether participants can accurately identify sensory stimuli when they have been degraded or masked, making them more difficult to process, as a measure of how easy or difficult it is for participants to interpret the stimulus), researchers are limiting the implications of their research.

Another criticism related to death attitudes research comes from Tomer (1994), who suggests that many of

the scales used to measure death anxiety are not directly tied to any theory in particular. This is despite the fact that there are at least several categories of theories that attempt to provide explanations for how people deal with the anxiety elicited by the thought of their own death or the death of a significant other—self-realization theories, search-for-meaning theories, personal construct theories, denial and positive illusions theories, multiple selves and the self-concept discrepancy theories, psychosocial theories, and theories of intellectual development in adult age. One perspective that appears to address the criticisms noted by Neimeyer (1994) and Tomer (1994) regarding the study of death attitudes is Terror Management Theory. Research from this perspective uses a variety of indirect measures to look for evidence of hypotheses tied directly to Terror Management Theory.

Terror Management Theory

Terror Management Theory (TMT) is a social psychological theory focusing on the idea that human thought and behavior is influenced by a clash between the desire for life and the inevitability of death, which produces terror (Solomon, Greenberg, & Pyszczynski, 1991). The basic idea, then, is that much of what humans do is an effort to reduce the anxiety that comes from knowing that death is inevitable. The theory is based in part on Ernest Becker's work, especially his 1973 book *The Denial of Death*. Solomon, Greenberg, and Pyszczynski (1991) built upon Becker's ideas: They argue that psychological constructs, such as self-esteem and people's cultural worldviews, are important in that people can use them, albeit unconsciously, to reduce their anxiety about death (i.e., they serve a death-denying function).

Anxiety buffer. Therefore, when people feel valuable like they are contributing to society and like they are living in accordance with their cultural beliefs, this can reduce (or buffer) the anxiety that comes with thinking about death. In the context of TMT, using figurative death-related language could serve a similar function. This connection seems especially fitting when figurative death-related language being used is consistent with a person's worldview (e.g., *a person's soul went to heaven, is at peace, is with God*). In essence, language—which is intimately tied to our culture—could potentially serve a death-denying function.

Mortality salience. One hypothesis associated with TMT is known as mortality salience. The general idea is that if a person's cultural worldview or their self-esteem is threatened, it will remind them of their own death (elicit mortality salience). A person's automatic and unconscious response to this elicitation is to strongly adhere to their worldview or defend their self-esteem. One way of eliciting mortality salience is

by giving people a task in which they are forced to think about their own death. "Research derived from the theory suggests that an awareness of death motivates people unconsciously to cling tightly to their culturally learned beliefs and disparage those with different beliefs" (Arndt, 1999, p. 8). One possibility, then, is that increasing mortality salience would result in an increase in the use of figurative death-related language that is consistent with a person's worldview.

Death thought accessibility. Another hypothesis associated with TMT is known as the death thought accessibility (DTA). If the ultimate goal is to avoid thinking about death and if people avoid thinking about death by clinging to their worldview or by defending their self-esteem, then when these things are threatened, an individual is more likely to experience thoughts about death than they would when not threatened (Hayes, Schimel, Arndt, & Faucher, 2010). The primary way of testing for DTA is by using a word fragment task. Word fragment tasks are often used to access unconscious, implicit memories or thoughts. Basically, participants in DTA studies are typically presented with word fragments with at least two possible solutions (e.g., coff_ _), such that one solution is related to death (e.g., coffin) and one solution is not (e.g., coffee). One possibility, then, is that threatening someone's worldview or self-esteem would result in an increase likelihood that they might use literal death-related language that is consistent with a person's worldview.

Why Do We Use Figurative Death-Related Language?

Although TMT provides one potential perspective through which researchers might better understand people's use of literal and figurative death-related language, there is a simpler way to think about the situation. When people are forced to talk about something that causes them anxiety, it makes sense that they would want to engage in activities that would lessen this anxiety. It could be that using euphemisms allows people to distance themselves from the reality of death and, as a result, that makes death less threatening. But, why do people choose to use the figurative language that they do? Are these ways of speaking a reflection of how people think about the literal concepts of death and dying or are they just figures of speech?

Conceptual Metaphor Theory

Proponents of Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) contend that the way we speak provides insight into the way that we think. This theory, developed by Lakoff and Johnson (1980), proposes that the meta-

phors produced in language (i.e., linguistic metaphors) are actually the result of a cognitive phenomenon involving the manipulation of concepts (i.e., conceptual metaphors). The idea that metaphor is conceptual, rather than simply linguistic, gained much popularity following the publication of Lakoff and Johnson's (1980) book *Metaphors We Live By* in which they presented the basic structure of CMT. The central tenant of CMT is that people do not simply write or speak metaphorically; they actually think metaphorically (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). When applying CMT to the study of death-related language, the implications are that (1) conceptual metaphors exist in the minds of speakers such that DEATH serves as the target concept and other concepts, such as DEPARTURE and SLEEP serve as source concepts, (2) these conceptual metaphors are what allow speakers to easily generate indirect metaphors related to death and dying, and (3) these indirect metaphors can reveal the way we think about death.

Lakoff and Turner (1989) discuss these implications for death-related language in their book *More Than Cool Reason*. They use Emily Dickinson's poem "*Because I Could Not Stop for Death*" (as well as excerpts from literature by other authors) to show how conceptual metaphors associated with death and dying can influence the way we understand literature about death and dying. At the end of their first chapter, Lakoff and Turner (1989) provide a list of basic conceptual metaphors for life and death (presented here in SMALL CAPS), which they argue allow us to talk about life and death in figurative ways (presented here in *italics*): LIFE IS A JOURNEY (*the end is near*); DEATH IS DEPARTURE (e.g., *passing away*); PEOPLE ARE PLANTS (e.g., *withering away*); A LIFETIME IS A YEAR (e.g., *the winter of their life*); A LIFETIME IS A DAY (e.g., *the sun is setting on their life*); DEATH IS SLEEP (e.g., *deathbed*); DEATH IS REST (e.g., *rest in peace*); LIFE IS A PRECIOUS POSSESSION (e.g., *lost their life*); LIFE IS A PLAY (e.g., *final curtain*); LIFE IS A FLAME (e.g., *put out of their misery*); LIFE IS A FIRE (e.g., *extinguished*); LIFE IS A FLUID (e.g., *an empty vessel*); LIFE IS BONDAGE (e.g., *released from pain*); LIFE IS A BURDEN (e.g., *the weight is finally lifted*). Lakoff and Turner (1989) explain that these conceptual metaphors are evident not only in poetry and literature but also in everyday speech and writing. "The basicness of a metaphor is its conceptual indispensability" (Lakoff & Turner, 1989, p. 56). The argument is not only that these conceptual metaphors structure the ways we talk about death but that they also structure the ways we think about death. Therefore, it is not simply that people talk about death as sleep (i.e., figurative language) but that we actually think of death in terms of sleep (i.e., figurative thought).

The Relationship Between Metaphors and Death Anxiety

Research by McLennan, Bates, Lavery, and Horne (1993b) on the Death Fantasy Scale (DFS) suggests that metaphors are a valid and reliable way of accessing and measuring people's thoughts and perceptions about their own personal death. Their research follows up on Feifel and Nagy's (1981) identification of positive and negative metaphors related to how people think about their own personal death. McLennan et al. (1993b) found that participants, with one exception, tended to categorize the metaphors in a manner consistent with Feifel and Nagy (1981). Positive metaphors consisted of the following: *a comforting parent, a new baby, a soothing breeze, a family picnic, a soft pillow, a deserved holiday, a runaway horse* (whereas runaway horse was considered negative by Feifel and Nagy, 1981). Negative metaphors consisted of the following: *a thick fog, a dead-end road, a devouring tiger, an abandoned home, and a dreamless space*. McLennan et al. (1993b) found that females and males did not differ significantly in the degree to which they reported agreement with the positive or negative metaphors.

In an effort to demonstrate the reliability and validity of their Revised Death Fantasy Scale (RDFS), McLennan et al. (1997) had participants rate how well each of the following metaphors describe their thoughts about their personal death. Positive metaphors consisted of the following: *a homecoming, a peaceful garden, a great adventure, a clear crisp morning, a soothing breeze, a family reunion, a comforting parent, a deserved holiday, and a new experience* (McLennan et al., 1997). Negative metaphors consisted of the following: *a cold lonely journey, a high stone wall, a fall from a cliff, an ugly monster, a black hole, an empty gray space, a thick fog, a devouring tiger, and a hammer blow* (McLennan et al., 1997). Several significant relationships were found related to RDFS scores: The more participants agreed that the negative metaphors described the way they thought about their own personal death: (1) the more likely they were to have higher death anxiety scores, (2) the less likely they were to be open to new experiences, (3) the more likely they were to provide death-related responses when interpreting ambiguous picture of people, and (4) the more likely they were to provide negative responses when interpreting ambiguous pictures of people. However, the positive metaphors subscale was not related to any other measures gathered by McLennan et al. (1997).

Following up on this non-significant finding, McLennan et al. (1997) identified a subset of participants as death anxiety deniers (i.e., participants with low death anxiety scores and high social desirability scores) and another as genuinely low in death anxiety (i.e., participants with low death anxiety scores and low social desirability scores). The researchers explain that the denial of death anxiety might function as a defense mechanism. Inter-

estingly, they found that the death anxiety deniers were more likely to endorse the positive metaphors as compared to those genuinely low in death anxiety. McLennan et al. (1997) interpreted this finding as supporting the hypothesis that death anxiety deniers may be more strongly aligning their thoughts with the positive metaphors as a defense mechanism against their death anxiety. Furthermore, when McLennan et al. (1997) looked only at students with strong religious faith as compared to those with an absence of religious belief, they found that religious students were more likely than the non-religious students to agree that the positive metaphors described the way they thought about their own personal death and less likely to agree that the negative metaphors described the way they thought about their own personal death. Based on these findings, the researchers suggest considering religion as a form a defensive denial. McLennan, Akande, and Bates (1993a) found similar defensive denial responses when comparing the data collected from Australian and Nigerian students: "Australian students were relatively more likely to offer positive metaphors, possibly as an idealizing defense against death-related anxiety and also relatively more likely to offer a negative metaphor [when asked to generate their own metaphor for death], possibly expressing directly a fear of that which is alien" (McLennan et al., 1993a, p. 406). Based on these findings, McLennan and his colleagues propose that the metaphors used in the RDFS are able to tap into death anxiety at a less conscious level, with participants whose thoughts about their own personal death align more with negative metaphors tending to have more negative death attitudes and participants whose thoughts about their own personal death align more with positive metaphors tending to have more negative death attitudes or more defensive denial of their negative death attitudes.

Similar to McLennan and his colleagues, Ross and Pollio (1991) focused their research efforts on determining how people's attitudes toward death might be related to the personal meanings they associate with death. Participants were interviewed and were then asked to complete Knapp's metaphor inventory (as cited in Ross & Pollio, 1991), consisting of 25 metaphors relating to death. Examples from the inventory include *a trumpet, a chilling frost, silent birds, a dark lake, an infinite ocean, a compassionate mother* (Ross & Pollio, 1991). Three major themes were discovered through these procedures: negative view of death (e.g., as a barrier or limit to life's meaning), ambivalent view of death (e.g., a variety of mitigating factors perceived as making death more acceptable), and positive view of death (e.g., a reinstatement or transformation of meaning).

Approximately half the participants were from a church study group (i.e., the religious group), and the other half were psychology graduate students (i.e., the non-religious group). Ross and Pollio (1991) found that non-church participants discussed significantly more barrier themes than church participants and that

church participants discussed significantly more transformation themes than student participants. They also found significant individual differences in how participants interpreted particular metaphor. There were also differences between metaphors, with some being interpreted similarly across all participants and others being associated with a variety of interpretations. This research suggests that metaphors may provide insight into death attitudes in a way that is different from asking participants directly about these attitudes. However, what this research does not address is whether the indirect metaphors (e.g., *passed away*, *lost*, *on the other side*) that are used so often in language to talk about death and dying function in a similar way.

Potential Influence of Death-Related Language on Thinking

Language is, first-and-foremost, a communicative system; however, to those who study linguistics from a cognitive perspective, language is a complex network that is interwoven into the fabric of people's thoughts and behaviors. It may seem obvious that the way people talk about something accurately reflects the way they think about it—that is, as long as they are not being deceptive. In fact, the research by McLennan and his colleagues (1993a, 1993b, 1997) and Ross and Pollio (1991) provides some evidence to suggest that the way people think about death (i.e., their death attitudes) can be predicted by factors such as whether they prefer positive or negative metaphors or whether they are religious or not. However, what this research does not address is whether the particular language people use to talk about death and dying has a significant influence on the way people think about the topic.

I am not aware of any current research that has investigated the impact that particular death-related metaphors might have on people's thoughts, opinions, and attitudes about death. However, research has shown that even simple changes in a word or phrase can have a significant impact on what people remember. For example, consider Loftus and Palmer's (1974) influential study regarding eyewitness memory. Across two experiments, participants were asked to view films of automobile accidents and then answer questions about the films. Loftus and Palmer (1974) found that when participants were asked how fast two cars were going, participants gave higher estimates of speed when the cars were described as having smashed into each other as opposed to when the cars were described as having collided, bumped, contacted, or hit. Even more interesting was that when participants' memories were tested one week after viewing the initial videos, participants in the smashed condition were more likely to report that they witness broken glass in the video even though no such event had occurred. Touted as a leading example of the reconstructive nature of

memory, what Loftus and Palmer's (1974) results also demonstrate is the power of language to change people's thoughts, opinions, attitudes, and even memories.

Is there evidence to suggest that non-literal language can have similar effects? There is evidence to suggest that the use of particular metaphors can influence people's political attitudes (e.g., Landau, Sullivan & Greenberg, 2010). Landau et al. (2010) found that when participants received information about airborne bacteria as a threat to their physical health and then read an essay describing U.S. domestic issues, participants expressed more negative attitudes toward immigration when the domestic issues were described in terms of a physical body (e.g., use of words such as *growth spurt*, *scurrying*, *digest*) as compared to when the domestic issues were described literally. Similar results have been found for opinions about crime such that describing a city's crime issues as either a beast or a virus has a significant influence on the types of strategies that readers will propose to solve the issues (Thibodeau & Boroditsky, 2011; however, see Steen, Reijnierse, & Burgers, 2014 for a follow-up that does not reveal the same findings). Similar studies have even been used to look at people's thoughts, opinions, and attitudes related to mental health metaphors (Reali, Paris, Rodríguez, Soriano, & Valderrama, 2013). Reali et al. (2013) found that when depression was metaphorically framed as a disease, long-term recovery was rated as less likely to occur than if depression was metaphorically framed as either an adversary or a hollow place. They also found that when depression was metaphorically framed as a hollow place, short-term recovery was rated as more likely to occur. Based on this findings, I contend that future research in the area of death-related figurative language should focus on investigating the effects that different death-related metaphors might have on people's thoughts, opinions, and attitudes about death and dying.

Conclusion

From an evolutionary perspective, a bit of anxiety allows people to be ready to quickly identify and manage threats (Bateson, Brilot, & Nettle, 2011); however, too much anxiety can impair functioning. In fact, Lehto and Stein (2009) describe a variety of maladaptive consequences related to death anxiety in particular (pp. 34-35). "While death anxiety is both normal and universal, a significant consequence may be mental health problems" (Lehto & Stein, 2009, p. 34). Examples include findings demonstrating that higher levels of death anxiety are associated with eating disorders and self-mutilation disorders (e.g., Farber, Jackson, Tabin, & Bachar, 2007) as well as findings demonstrating that higher levels of death anxiety are associated with clinical anxiety disorders (e.g., Abdel-Khalek, 2005). Death

anxiety is, therefore, an important clinical consideration; however, "more research is needed to determine if death anxiety increases as a result of existing psychiatric conditions or is a precursor to psychiatric conditions" (Lehto & Stein, 2009, p. 35).

Metaphors are another important clinical consideration. Given the pervasiveness of indirect metaphor in our everyday language, figurative language, undoubtedly, is used throughout conversations between clients and mental health providers. At times, they are even the focus of the conversation. For example, Young (2007-2008) found metaphors to be useful when generated as part of the coping process within the context of a bereavement writing group. Young (2007-2008) explains, "Writing can draw the group's attention to the power of figurative language to express the seemingly inexpressible: the comparison in a metaphor, for example, becomes a kind of shield that protects the writer from the overwhelming emotion, mitigating the force of the feeling with the familiarity of something else" (p. 361). The researcher uncovered two groups of metaphors that described the emotional experience of the survivor: breakage (i.e., a ripped page, a constellation with fallen stars missing, a light bulb burst by a drop of water, a door blasted open, and a barefoot shredded as it dragged along a road in a moving car) and erasure (i.e., empty houses and empty chairs, fading clouds, smoke, and a sand sculpture washed out to sea in the tide) (Young, 2007-2008, p. 362-363). For Young (2007-2008), these metaphors revealed themselves to be productive tools in the therapeutic setting.

In his assessment of death attitudes research, Neimeyer (1994) states, "What is important is recognizing the delicate interweaving of personal meanings, fears, and responses to death, which play themselves out not only within the private experience of the individual client, but also interpersonally within his or her most intimate relationships" (p. 275). I argue that researchers in the area of death-related language should strive toward a similar goal and think critically about how the language used to talk about death and dying might influence bereavement and grieving. I am not aware of any current research that has investigated the impact that particular death-related metaphors might have on people's thoughts, opinions, and attitudes about death. A goal for future research, then, can be to explore this impact and to eventually make recommendations regarding how to talk about death and dying with vulnerable populations, such as children and the bereaved.

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