

Metaphoric Euphemism in the Nigerian Obituary Posters

¹Odoemenam, Temple Chibueze, ²Nwopa, Samuel Uchenna and ³Okachi, Tochukwu Stephen
^{1,2,&3}Department of Language and Communication, National Institute of Construction
Technology and Management, Uromi, Edo State, Nigeria.

Abstract

Obituaries are, primarily, announcements of death through which members of the public are informed of the loss, demise or death of persons. These obituaries tend to go beyond mere announcements to reveal important information on the life of the person and certain aspects of his/her socio-cultural world view. In discussing death which has been a taboo from time immemorial certain forms of linguistic cautions are employed in communicative situations that reflect the taboo associated with death. This is apparently because of its bluntness, unpleasantness and vulgarity. Using the Conceptual Metaphor Theory as the theoretical framework for the analysis, this paper looks at obituary posters from the point of view of metaphoric and Euphemistic usages in some selected Nigerian posters.

Keywords: *Death, Euphemism, Metaphor, Nigerian posters, Obituaries, Taboo*

Introduction

Some of the examples of the linguistic features that characterize obituary announcements through any platform are **euphemism** and **metaphor**. Euphemism according to Bolton (1960:118) is “the language that sounds pleasant” it is an expression intended by the speaker to be less offensive, troubling or disturbing to the listener than the word or phrase it replaces. Metaphor, on its own is defined according to Benoir and Hogan (2002), cited in Yusuf (2004) as “an implicit or indirect compassion.” It is a phrase that is used to describe something in a way that is different from its normal use. Death has been seen as not only a compulsory end, but a necessary one to every human existence. It is a concept that attracts societal fear. According to Allan and Burridge (1991), “death is a fear-based taboo” which tends to connect the co-existence of different fears. These fears include but not limited to: **fear of the loss of loved ones, fear of the evil spirits as connected to the death of loved one, fear of what comes after death etc.** Death has been seen as a taboo subject in the society and this gives rise to the refusal to freely speak about this concept. This attitude is largely due to the perceived discomfort its discussion might cause. In spite of the reluctance to freely talk about the subject of death in the society, certain communicative situations in which the subject of death cannot be avoided do exist. One of such cases is the issue of obituary. The word **obituary** stems from the Latin word **obitus**, which means departure. This means that the word **departure** is a common euphemistic substitute for death as a concept. In their submissions, Lawal et.al (1999) see obituary announcements, as “Communicative acts with a target audience whose sponsors intend to convey a deep sense of loss and grief which they expect the reader to appreciate and understand”. Despite the importance of this Linguistic substitution, there appears to be a kind of scarcity in the literature on the analysis of obituary announcements, especially from the linguistic point of views. It is therefore the desire to increase the body of existing literature in

this area that propels this study, in addition to the already existing works on linguistic analysis of obituaries, to the exploration of the metaphoric and euphemistic use of language in the Nigerian poster announcements. This study was carried out with a view to appreciate how ‘death’ as a taboo word is viewed within the Nigerian environment.

Objectives

In order to achieve the aim of this study, the following research objectives have been set out to appropriately guide it. These include;

- i. To examine the metaphors as used in the obituary poster announcements
- ii. To identify the euphemisms used as substitutes for death in the obituary poster announcements and,
- iii. To examine the metaphoric configurations in the obituary poster announcements in accordance with their domain mappings.

Literature

Adepoju,(2016), analysed the euphemistic usages in the texts of obituary announcements in Nigerian newspapers. Using the conceptual metaphor theory as the theoretical framework, his paper explored the metaphorical usages in the newspaper obituary announcements giving its pervasiveness to refer to morality. His study submits that death is considered sacred in Nigerian communities and in other communicative events that involves the phenomenon and that people try to avoid the direct reference to the concept of death.

Aremu (2011), undertook an analysis of obituary announcements, in English from a socio-pragmatic perspective. Obituary announcements, in English in Nigeria, according to him, serve as a window through which the socio-cultural usage of Nigeria English is advertised. His study observed that obituary announcements is the result of the preponderance of elements that make up Nigerian English such as code-mixing, code-switching, hedges, idioms and lexical borrowing.

Fernandez (2006) looked at euphemism and conceptual metaphorization in Victorian obituaries. He explored, in his study, the use of euphemism on obituary pages as the conceptual metaphors which are aimed at substituting the notion of death and dying in newspaper obituaries. He concludes therefore that the various conceptual metaphors illustrate death as a desirable event, especially around the Christian belief.

On his part, Oriaku (2010) presents obituary advertisement (announcement) as a form of biography. He believes that, the living rather than the dead, is the one who stands to benefit from the obituary announcement and therefore sets out to exploit the opportunity created by the event of the person’s exit (death).

The Concept of Euphemism and Metaphor

Etymologically, euphemism is derived from the Greek, meaning ‘speaking well of’, good speech, and words of good omen’. This stems from the prefix ‘*eu*’ which means good, well, while the stem ‘*pheme*’ means ‘speak’. The suffix ‘*ism*’ on the other hand means ‘action or result’. According to Fromkin et al (2011), euphemism is a “word or phrase that replaces a taboo word or serves to avoid frightening or unpleasant subjects”. Antrushina et.al.(1985) posited that there are words in every human that are intentionally avoided by people on account of their consideration as indecent, impolite, rude or too direct. However, as offensive as these words appear, humans have invariably found a way of describing them. This is why the use of substitution known as euphemism came into existence.

In the words of Leech (1985), euphemism is “the linguistic equivalent of disinfectant”. What this means is that it is a substance aimed at eradicating the weightiness of certain concepts which cannot be freely spoken of by many people, so as to make them socially acceptable. They are powerful linguistic tools that are so deeply embedded in our language which are used to reduce the effects of certain concepts of words. The import of this is that euphemism is a kind of linguistic elevation targeted at using socially acceptable words to replace those not acceptable.

Thus, euphemisms are linguistic substitutes for curse, taboo or unfriendly words. Irrespective of the perspective we see euphemism from, it is generally perceived as a kind of polite mode of expression used to beautify or soften unpleasant reality. Some of the examples of euphemism include: “*kicking the bucket*” for death; *custodian* for janitor/doorman etc. It is then safe to state that euphemisms are quite useful in sanitizing the language of speakers. According to Mayfield (2009), such sanitizing function helps to semantically trivialize things/events that might appear unacceptable within certain environments.

Metaphor, on the other hand, is that figurative use of language which compares things, ideas or persons. According to Lakoff and Johnson (1980), it involves understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another. Black (2006) believes that metaphor is a property of the human mind and this explains why they are commonly used in every day interactions. However, Deigman (2005) believes that there are certain abstract concepts which can only be appropriately understood through metaphors due to the fact that it is not possible to procure the exact and literal paraphrase of love, hate etc. However, metaphors are so elusive in human interaction in that it requires sometimes, a context to tell us whether an utterance to be interpreted metaphorically or literally has its meaning shaped within the context of use.

According to Cooper (1986) one of the functions of metaphors is the social function. This means that metaphor is part of everyday communication and there are specific speech acts like proverbs, songs, or other literally discourses whose functions are understood by the audience. In the words of Adepoju (2016), this kind of metaphoric function is evaluated by such criteria as imaginative power, internal balance and the capacity to evoke moods. As they relate to obituaries, metaphors can be seen as that literary device that unlocks our unconscious emotion in a bid to conceptualize the topic of death.

Theoretical Framework

This paper explores the metaphoric and euphemistic effects in the language of obituary announcements in the Nigeria posters, looking at Warren’s (1992) position that “Metaphorization constitutes a potent source of euphemistic reference,” and a common figurative use of language to cope with the taboo word of death. Based on the background already laid, this paper will be discussed in line with the conceptual theory of metaphor, wherein the metaphors of **death** and **dying** will be examined as a euphemistic resource.

Conceptual metaphor, as a theory, was propounded by Lakoff and Johnson in their seminal work titled “Metaphors We Live By” (1980), which discussed the centrality of metaphor to thought” with a resultant effect in the ubiquity of metaphorical forms in conventional and everyday language use. Again, Lakoff and Turner (1989) as cited in Black (2006) posit that “conceptualizing metaphor involves how the mind perceives reality”. This theory, according to Fernandez (2006), see metaphor as ‘going beyond pointing to the similarities between concepts or subjects but stand as means of creating, organizing and understanding reality. Furthermore, he explains that metaphor is seen as a device which helps to structure the conceptual system and to provide a relationship between our understanding of the world with our experiences in order to make sense of it.

Arising from the discourse around the understanding of metaphor, in the light of cross-domain mapping, it is believed that cognitive conceptualization invariably fulfills its euphemistic function through the exchange between the **source** and target **domain**. It is important to note that **mapping**, as used here, emanates from the source domain to the target domain. The cognitive conceptualization of metaphor, according to Barcelona (2003) adopts a unidirectional approach to perceiving reality from the course to the target domain in the sense that the process transports our appreciation of the concept from the more abstract to the more concrete reality. Therefore, our experiences may be appreciated within the context of such structural elements as **containers, room, possession, paths etc** which allow us to define abstract concepts in concrete terms. Thus, our understanding of the euphemistic substitutes of the taboo subject of death, in this paper, will be a function of the analysis of the metaphoric expression in the data with the use of the conceptual theory of metaphor which explains metaphor in terms of cognitive/conceptual mappings.

5. Methodology

The data for this study comprise texts of obituary announcements which are collected from different Nigerian posters across Edo State. These posters were collected considering their accessibility and availability. A total of 50 obituary poster announcements were randomly selected, extracted and analysed for metaphorical expressions that are related to death and dying. The mixture of quantitative and qualitative methods were adopted for analysis in this study. While the frequencies of occurrence of these metaphorical expressions related to death and their respective conceptual mappings were statistically presented using percentages, discussions were made based on the quantitative presentation.

6. Data presentation and analysis

This section of analysis first identifies metaphoric euphemisms as employed in the obituary announcements on posters. The euphemism so identified are categorized in accordance with the linguistic content of their source and target domains thereby, describing them in relation to the discourse on death.

6.1 Metaphor and the Euphemistic conceptualization of death

Metaphor serves as the primary constituent, from which their euphemistic expressions are understood. Therefore, it is necessary to briefly describe the euphemistic metaphors that are used in the obituary announcements on posters to reduce the taboo around the concept of death. The table below shows the frequency of occurrence of the taboo word **death** and its substitutes in the obituary posters.

Table 1: Frequency of the use of Euphemistic substitute and the taboo word in the obituary posters

	Frequency	Percentages
Use of Euphemism	40	80%
Direct mention of death	10	20%
Total	50	100%

Out of the 50 instances analysed, 40 euphemistic substitutes for the taboo of death were seen. From the table above, it is apparent that certain semantic resources are used for reducing the

functions of euphemism. These semantic resources include: metaphors and hyperboles. For example, "***slept in the Lord- Die***" and "***peaceful exit to the eternal glory-Die***".

However, the taboo word 'death' scantily appears as illustrated in the following excerpts:

*Excerpt 1: With a deep sense of loss we announce the **death** of our father...*

*Excerpt 2: The Rector, on behalf of Management and staff of the National Institute of Construction Technology and Management, Uromi, regrets to announce the **death** of Mr. Samuel Edede....who died on 10th December, 2024...Until his death, he was a chief driver...*

The excerpts above obviously indicate that not all obituary posters indirectly mention the word death. Some make use of the taboo word (death) directly.

6.2 The mapping of metaphor as a concept

Arising from the foregoing discussion and apparently seeing from the eyes of Fernandez (2006:), metaphor is 'by far the most powerful mechanism in the formation of euphemism for the taboo of death.' with this, we safely say that metaphors constitute a potent source of euphemistic reference to the taboo subject-death.

Thus, the metaphors collected in the obituary posters can be analyzed in terms of cognitive mapping (*target domain vs source domain*) within the framework of cognitive conceptualization of metaphor. This helps in the classification of the information given in the obituaries which invariably avails us the understanding of how the taboo of death was actually used. Some of such cross domain conceptual mappings as found in the metaphoric excerpts include: ***End, Eternal Rest, Journey, Loss, Passage, Reward, Transition Etc.***

Table 2: Metaphors in the obituary posters

Type of metaphor	Death
Metaphorical Concepts of death	i End ii. Eternal rest iii. Journey iv Loss v Passage to joyful life vi. Transition vii. Reward

The table 2 above presents the targets as: end, eternal rest, journey, loss, transition, passage to joyful life, and reward which are understood by the source domain of death in the obituary posters. These mappings conceptualize the domain of death which in the words of Bultnick (1998), emanates from "the nature of the source domain". It is important to also note that, the positive connotation to death is a function of the Christian belief which explains death as a kind of reward, especially in Heaven, after one lived a good life here on earth. This paper made an attempt, in what follows, to explain how the source domains are applied to the target domains, which carry the euphemistic taboo concept of death.

Table 3: The distribution of the frequency and percentage of the source domains

Domain	Frequency	Percentages
End	2	4%

Eternal rest	8	16%
Journey	13	26%
Loss	7	14.4%
Passage to joyful life	4	8%
Reward	6	12%
Transition	10	20%
Total	50	100%

Table 3 shows the frequencies of occurrence of the metaphorical conceptualizations of death employed in the data. This distribution evidently shows that the domain mapping of death as **journey** ranks the highest with 13 instances (26%) while the domain of death as **end** ranks the lowest. A reason for the high occurrence of the domain of journey can be due to the psychological simplicity attached to the expression, in that, death is simply perceived as a process of movement. As shown on the table above, other domains rank as follows: death as **transition**- 20% with 10 instances; as **eternal rest**-16%; as **loss**-14% with 7 instances; as **reward**-12% with 6 instances, and as **passage to joyful living**- 8% with 4 instances.

In the section that follows, the discussion will be focused on each domain and how they are illustrated in obituary posters.

Death as the End

Life can be understood as a process with a starting and end point with a time span. Death therefore, is conceptualized as the final stage of our lifespan by means of the conceptual mapping '**Death as the End**'. This mapping implies that death is the final and compulsory royalty one pays before leaving the earth in the process of being received at the destination-the end. For example:

Excerpt 3: May the good Lord receive her soul in rest'.

Excerpt 4: We commiserate with the family on the exit of their father, husband and grandfather.

Excerpt 5: Farewell to a wonderful colleague.

It is interesting to note that 'farewell' as used in excerpt 5 is a concept of metaphorical which depicts that the professional services rendered by the dead at his organization (who sponsored the poster production) have come to an end due to his death, thus leading them to bid him goodbye at his death.

Death as an eternal rest

Rest is considered as a period of relaxing after a rigorous period of activity. The domain of death is here understood in terms of a rest to suggest that there is a peaceful rest after a period of rigorous earthly activities. The frequent term in this mapping is 'rest' and it gives a psychological overview that the dead person has gone to a place to rest. It is observable in the following examples:

*Excerpt 6: We however trust he is **resting** peacefully in the bosom of the Almighty*

*Excerpt 7: May his soul **rest** in perfect peace...*

*Excerpt 8...she will thereafter be laid to **rest**...*

More so, laid to rest as used in excerpt 8 can also be termed to be the performance of the burial rites of the dead who is ultimately tired of an exhausting life and laid to a place of permanent rest.

Death as a journey

The conceptual metaphor here explains death in terms of a journey with a spiritual destination. It is the most frequently used of all other source domains. This conceptualization is based on the assumption that the dead person is no longer around, such person is conceived as a traveler whose destination is generally perceived to be heaven. The mapping transfers the attributes related to the source domain of the journey to help us understand the target domain of death. The process of journeying can be viewed in three ways:

The act of dying presupposes that the deceased is leaving the world, which is observable in the following excerpts.

*Excerpt 9: **Passing** on to glory*

*Excerpt 10: Dear Transport coordinator, your **trip** took us by storm...*

It is observed in excerpt 10 that the word 'trip' is used, suggesting that the act of dying is viewed as a process of leaving the world for another place. The deceased is leaving for a final destination which is considered to be Heaven, a place to meet with the Creator (according to Christian belief). For example:

Excerpt 11: Our patriarch goes home...

Excerpt 12: Travel safe until we meet to part no more

Likewise, the journey is seen as being instigated by some external agent (God). E.g.

Excerpt 13: Call to Glory...

Excerpt 14 ... we announce the call to glory of our dearly... This suggests that (God) has called somebody (the dead person) to a journey from the world to heaven (a place of God's glory).

Death as a loss

This conceptual mapping sees death in terms of a loss. The conceptual basis for this mapping stems from the fact that life is perceived as a valuable object and death thus seen as the loss of this possession. The metaphorical elements used in explaining this loss does not provide any sort of consolation or relief to the bereaved, rather they are left to lament and regret the loss. For example:

Excerpt 15: 'With deep sorrow in our hearts, we announce the passing on to glory....'

Excerpt 16: It is with deep sense of colossal loss...

The excerpts above show that the loss of prestigious persons caused families to express their feelings of regret and sadness even through their language use in the obituary announcement.

Death as a passage to joyful life

Joyful life is seen from the Christian perspective as a peaceful and everlasting existence with God in Heaven. This has been used to conceptualize death following the 'Judaean-Christian tradition' which Fernandez (2006) explain to be "the belief in an afterlife in which the deceased will joyfully expect the resurrection in Heaven flanked by God and the Celestial Angels". It is deduced from this that eternal life is basically seen as the primacy of joyful life, such is observable in the following announcement texts:

Excerpt 17: ...Peaceful exit to eternal glory of our beloved Founder/ President'.

Excerpt 18:..the Provost announces the passage to eternal glory of our most beloved...

Excerpt 19: Call to glory

Excerpt 20: Celebration of life

Death as a Reward

The domain of death is understood in terms of a reward for those who lived a virtuous and exemplary life on earth. This domain is in ⁷⁸al contrast to the perceived negative attitude

expressed through the mapping of death as loss; this mapping focuses on the positive effect of death and dying Fernandez (2006) opines that death as a reward involves 'a sort of liberation, thanks to which the deceased and his survivors will find some hope and consolation'. For example:

Excerpt 21: *We commiserate with our friend Mr Sunday Esogban on the death of his mother...and urge him to take **solace in the fulfilled** life she led.*

In the same vein, for such virtuous, meeting with God in heaven constitutes the source of the reward for a life well spent on the earth. Death is seen as reward in the following excerpts:

Excerpt 22: *With Gratitude to God for a fulfilled life, well spent in service of God and mankind, we announce the call to glory of...*

Excerpt 23: *Celebration of a Peaceful and Loving Life'*

Excerpt 24: *Glorious exit.*

Excerpt 25: *Our patriarch goes Home*

Home, in excerpt 25 is seen as a place of fortress and relaxation, which is a reward for the virtuous life of the deceased.

Death as a transition

Death is also understood as a transition, which is a change from one state of consciousness to another. The frequent term used in this mapping is 'sleep'. The notion of 'sleep' here presupposes the fact that death is temporary, so the dead person is no longer dead but sunk in a comforting sleep, with the possibility of resurrecting some day in heaven.

Excerpt 26: *...who **slept** in the lord...**sleep** well in the bosom of the Lord*

Excerpt 27: *She peacefully fell **asleep** in the Lord on Tuesday, 12th November, 2024..*

Excerpt 28: *We commiserate with Mr Aslem Omoghie and family over the transition to glory of their mother...*

It is generally understood that to be asleep usually involves some relief of feeling pain, and death, in these excerpts, is thus conceptualized through one of the effects of sleep, as a release from the pains of life.

7. Findings

This study brings to fore the elements of metaphor and euphemism that are embedded in obituary poster announcements. The facts gathered, made us to understand that metaphor and euphemism relate at some points, especially as majority of the euphemistic substitutes of taboo subjects of death are derived primarily from the metaphorical uses within the expression. With the help of Lakoff's (1993) conceptual theory of metaphor, it became possible to explain metaphor further in terms of source and target domains where the former is used to explain the latter. With this categorization, the study found seven source domain mappings for the taboo word (death) based on the analysed data. These source domains as identified include: **end, eternal rest, journey, loss, passage to joyful life, reward and transition.**

The data were also subjected to a quantitative analysis to understand the frequencies of occurrence of these source domain, and it was found that death as journey ranked the highest with 26%, followed by death as transition with 20%, death as eternal rest with 16%, death as loss with 14.%, death as passage to joyful living with 8%, death as reward with 12% and death as end ranks lowest with 4%. This study believes that the higher occurrence of death as journey is based on the fact that the bereaved see their dead as being in a movement process from carnality to eternity.

Despite the preponderance of the use of euphemistic substitutes for the taboo word (death) in obituary posters, this study found that some poster announcements also use the taboo word directly in reporting the obituary not minding its perceived effects on the readers.

Conclusion

Arising from the foregoing findings, the study concludes therefore, that death as a phenomenon is considered sacred among most Nigerian communities and in any communicative event that involves this phenomenon, people try to circumvent their linguistic choices to avoid bluntness or direct reference to the concept. It therefore has implication for people's way of life in their perception of the concept of death and obituaries.

References

- Adepoju, O.T (2016) Euphemistic Metaphors in Nigerian Newspaper Obituary Announcements.' *Ife studies in English Linguistics* 1291). 69-80
- Allan, K. and Burridge, K. (199). *Euphemism and Dysphemism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press
- Antrushina, G.B.et al. (1985). *English lexicology*. Moscow: Vysshaja shkola.
- Aremu. M. A. (2011). A social pragmatic analysis of obituary announcements in English in *Nigeria. Journal of the English Studies Association*. 14.2: 132-143.
- Barcelona, A. (2003b). *On the plausibility of claiming a metonymic motivation for Conceptual Metaphor. Metaphor and Metonymy at the crossroads*. A. Barcelona Ed. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.
- Black, E. (2006). *Pragmatic Stylistics*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press Ltd
- Boulton, M. (1960). *The anatomy of language: saying what we mean*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Cooper, D. (1986). *Metaphor*, Oxford: Blackwell.
- Deignan, A. (2005). *Metaphor and corpus Linguistics*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishers.
- Fromkin, V., Rodman, R. and Hyams, N. (2011). *An introduction to language*. 9th ed. USA: Cengage Learning. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Euphemism>
- Lakoff, G. (1993). *The contemporary theory of metaphor. Metaphor and Thought*. A. Ortony ed. 2nd ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Lakoff, G. and Johnson, M. (1980). *Metaphors we live by*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press
- Lakoff, G. and Turner, M. (1989). *More than cool reason: a field guide to poetic metaphor*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Lawal, A., Babatunde, S. T. and Kawu, A. N. (1999). The rhetorical structure and pragmatic features of obituaries in Nigerian newspaper. *Ilorin Journal of African Studies*. Vol. 3.
- Leech, G. (1985). *Semantics*. 2nd ed. New York: Penguin.
- Mayfield, M. (2009). *Thinking for yourself*. USA: Cengage Learning.
- Oriaku R. (2010). Speaking to the dead of the living: the Nigerian newspaper obituary publication as covert auto/biography. *Ibadan Journal of English Studies*.
- Warren, B. (1992). What euphemisms tell us about the interpretation of words. *Studia Linguistica*. 46.2: 128-172
- Yakub, M., & Agyekum, K. (2022). Metaphorical Euphemisms in Death-Discourse Among the Nzema. *Studies in African Languages and Cultures*, (560), 127-153.
- Yusuf, Y. K. (2004). Linguistic sources of euphemisms. *Journal of English Studies, Ibadan*. 1: 118.