Evaluation of Paweł Migut's PhD thesis:
When "She" Comes Knocking: A Cognitive Analysis of Metaphorical Terms Linked with Death in English and Polish Obituaries

General opinion

The thesis attempts to analyze the metaphorical conceptualizations of death in English and Polish euphemistic language use. It is the first of its kind to provide a detailed contrastive analysis – based on a substantial collection of data – of these conceptualizations between two languages. The major achievement of the thesis lies in the systematic analysis of equivalences in euphemistic (idiomatic) use. In this respect, the thesis contributes significantly to the understanding of death (which in itself is a major achievement), as well as to cross-cultural metaphor variation. The thesis also provides very valuable data for future analyses. Its major weakness, however, lies in the very wide scope of research fields and disciplines that it covers: the thesis brings in so many perspectives on death that it loses its main focus to some degree. Further, I felt that the data selection was not properly justified or documented.

Nevertheless, writing about – and researching – a topic such as death is by no means an easy task, simply by virtue of its taboo nature. Despite this difficulty, Mr Migut has managed to demonstrate his ability to compile an impressive database, which he then analyzed with meticulousness and rigour. I very much hope that Mr Migut will take my comments (to follow below) in good spirit and will manage to incorporate them in the fine-tuning of his analyses.

Detailed remarks

1. Hypothesis and aim of research

On p. 161, in lieu of a hypothesis, we read the following: "I believe it is important to pursue this study, for to my knowledge, there has been no major attempts at this particular subject matter comparing Polish and English under the Conceptual Metaphor framework." This is a good point of departure for a particular research, but cannot really be considered as a viable hypothesis. First of all, what is the reason for comparing English and Polish data? This is a bit like comparing an apple and a banana: we both know that they fruits, but this in itself is not a reason for comparison. (Nor it is enough to claim that Polish and English metaphors for death haven't yet been compared – perhaps it hasn't been done before because there was no point in doing so in the first place.) What I missed throughout the thesis was the author's *expectations* with regard to the results of the comparison – which could also have functioned as the hypotheses of the thesis. I would like to stress at this point that I do not wish to question the validity of the research – in my view this is a very exciting topic to pursue and I fully embrace cross-cultural comparisons of metaphorical conceptualizations. However, there has to be a reason – i.e., a justification, in the form of expectations – why this research is important and relevant, and how it links to previous researches in the field.

In fact, this latter point could have been the main justification for the thesis. There have been plenty of cross-cultural analyses in metaphor research that the author could have tapped into, and which could have buttressed the position (and general aims) of the present work. Such analyses, based on the comparison of idiomatic expressions, can be found in Kövecses (2005, 2006) and Schmidt and Brdar (2008).

2. Structure and selection of topics

Generally, I found the theoretical part of the thesis well written and I enjoyed reading it. It was evident from the text that the author was enthusiastic about his subject and had read a substantial amount of literature on the topic – even from areas that are not that closely linked to the specific field of inquiry of the PhD thesis, which is linguistics. In fact, the selection of the themes that are covered in the thesis – and the overall resulting structure – is one of my main points of criticism. Chapter 1 presents an overview of death – as its title suggests, it provides a "philosophical, historical, social, and cultural" perspective on death. The problem with this chapter is that it is much too wide in its scope – thus the discussions are often superficial, and the relevance of the individual subjects to the PhD thesis at hand is left very often unexplained. For example, in section 1.1.2, the author writes about the philosophical aspect of death, from the point of view of four philosophers. Why did the author select these particular four philosophers for detailed analysis, and not any of the others (who are discussed in section 1.1.2.5)? How exactly do these four philosophers relate to the metaphorical conceptualization of death? On p. 22 we read: "What is curious, however, is the fact that numerous references are made to metaphorical projections, which are part and parcel of our modern ways of conceptualizing the phenomenon in question. References to metaphors such as: DEATH IS SLEEP, DEATH IS A JOURNEY, DEATH IS BIRTH and others are present across the discussed philosophers." If this is indeed the case, then why weren't these metaphors (and philosophers) discussed in detail? The thesis could have focused on those philosophers who have based their theories on metaphorical conceptualizations – these then could have been made use of (and referred to) in the analytical part of the thesis (Chapter 6). Similar problems arise with the other sections of Chapter 1 as well, in the discussion of death rites, cinematography, photography, etc. – they seem to be rather irrelevant to the topic of the thesis, which is a *cognitive linguistic analysis* of death. Apart from irrelevance, the methodological problem also pertains to these other sections – why did the author, for example, choose Jonathan Carroll's novels for analysis in section 1.4.3 – and not any other literary giant? All in all, Chapter 1 seems to be a quite subjective selection of topics connected to death, which take up (quite unnecessarily) a third of the thesis.

Similar problems of relevance arise in Chapter 3. While I found it a very concise and well-written chapter, I did not understand its role in the thesis. How is field theory and componential analysis related to the theoretical or methodological background of the research? On p. 9 – as a way of justification for the chapter's overall place in the thesis – we read that "The Theory itself and the linguistic movements associated with it, inspired the future development of cognitive linguistics." I cannot quite accept this claim – based on this reasoning, the author could have written further (separate) chapters on a) gestalt theory; b) prototype-based categorization; c) frame semantics, etc. – as all of these had an effect (and a much stronger one surely than field theory) on the evolution of cognitive linguistics. The lopsidedness of the author's justification in including Chapter 3 also comes to the forefront in the size of the respective chapters: while Chapter 3 is 33 pages in length, Chapter 4, which serves as the main theoretical basis of the thesis, is 5 pages shorter!

Nevertheless, Chapter 4 is also a well-written and concise chapter. It is evident from Chapters 3 & 4 that the author has a sound theoretical knowledge not only in cognitive linguistics, but in other frameworks as well and is able to synthesize the main assumptions of these theories remarkably well. My main criticism regarding Chapter 4 is categorization of metaphors (on pp.

145–152). Since the chapter (and the thesis itself) is written from a cognitive linguistic perspective, I found it irrelevant to describe the various types of metaphors that "scholars from a wide variety of disciplines" have identified. Further, to my mind, all of the "types" are conceptual in nature (i.e., it is incorrect to treat "conceptual metaphor" as a subtype on a par with e.g., "dead metaphor" or "complex metaphor"). If conceptual metaphor, complex metaphor, conventional metaphor, dead metaphor, etc. are all treated as various subtypes of a larger category of "metaphor", then the author would need to provide a definition for this higher-level concept of "metaphor".

3. Definitions and examples

One of the key terms of the thesis is *euphemism*. In Chapter 2, the author presents us with a number of definitions for this term; however, he does not state which particular definition will be used in the thesis *and why*. This lack of definition comes to the forefront on pp. 84–86, where *euphemism* is conflated with *taboo, jargon, newspeak*, etc. and even *synonymy*, and it is claimed that these are "intrinsically and inextricably linked". My main problem with this section is that while these linguistic phenomena are indeed related to euphemisms, they are related in quite different ways – as well as to one another. Thus, a *neologism* is related to a *euphemism* in the sense that novel euphemisms need to be constantly generated; a *taboo* word, however, is what a *euphemism* is set to replace (with, for example, a neologism). I also missed the explanation of these terms and their relationship to euphemisms by specific examples.

I also had problems with section 2.2, which provides a classification of euphemisms. First of all, no reference is provided – on whose work is this classification based? Surely, many other linguists have come up with similar classifications. As for "conscious vs. unconscious" euphemisms, I believe that without psycholinguistic back-up no such category can be viably established. In section 2.2.3, the author claims that "Sustained euphemistic expressions pertaining to general and universal taboos such as death, disease, sex or excretion have a tendency to survive for hundreds of years." This is not true – see especially Allan and Burridge (1991) for a plethora of examples. One that comes immediately to my mind is *geriatric*, which was used in Samuel Johnson's dictionary in a euphemistic way (to refer to older adults), but which has now shed most of its positive connotations.

In section 2.3, the author provides a list of principles behind euphemistic expressions – here, once again, no examples are provided as a way of illustration.

As for the "properties of euphemisms" listed under 2.4, these are in fact functions (this is also made note of by the author on p. 88). Thus, this section could have been conflated with section 2.2. In fact, some of the examples in these categories are highly ambivalent – for example, *having a negative cash flow position* (classified as "manipulative", p. 89) could just as easily be a "descriptive" type. How can we objectively decide which group a particular euphemism belongs to? It seems to me that many euphemisms carry a number of properties or functions – does this have any effect on how long a euphemism survives in language? (I.e., the more properties a euphemism manages to conflate, the more successful it will be.)

However, the most problematic point with respect to these categories, functions and principles of euphemisms is that they are not referred to in the analytical part of the thesis. Thus, once again I need to raise the issue of relevance: include material only that is made use of later on. It would have been very useful to adopt these categories in the analyses of the English and Polish expressions, and examine which property, function or principle is the most dominant in

the English and Polish data, and why. Without such an analysis the relevance of Chapter 2 is, on the whole, questionable.

4. Methodology and data analysis

In section 5.3 we read that "The corpus of lexical items comprised 479 items and was extracted from online obituaries and backed up by a plethora of sources including, newspapers, articles, literature, regular obituaries, lexicographic publications and observations providing a varied and heterogeneous look into the very much tabooed subject of death." A number of questions/issues immediately arise with respect to this statement. First and foremost, it is not clear from the text what the percentage of the English and Polish data is out of the 479 items. Any cross-cultural comparison must be very cautious in selecting as identical sets of data as possible. Such information is only provided on p. 244, towards the very end of the thesis. In fact, it would have been very useful to provide (in the form of an Appendix) a list of all the items of the database, with an indication of what the source was for that particular item for which language, and what metaphor it is grouped under. Without such a list it is impossible to check the validity of many of the claims made in Chapter 6. Second, as the above quote indicates, the data comes from a quite wide variety of sources. What is, however, the percentage of these sources in the overall database? This is a very relevant question in light of the fact that according to the title of the thesis, the data under analysis comes from obituaries, and not dictionaries or newspapers. There is only a very brief remark on page 168, footnote 127, that the author analyzed 10,000 Polish and English obituaries. However, what was the percentage of the expressions coming from these sources as compared to the other sources that the author used? Third, how did the author select the data sources? I.e., what sort of newspapers or dictionaries did the author use *and why*, what obituary and tombstone engravings were selected *and why*, etc. from each respective language? On p. 168, footnote 128, it states that the author visited cemeteries in and around Rzeszów – does this mean that the database does not contain English items from tombstones, only Polish ones? Fourth, bearing in mind the wide variety of sources, it is not clear *what method* the author adopted for the collection of the data. In other words, how did the author identify the relevant items in these sources? How did he decide whether a particular word or expression in e.g., a dictionary, a newspaper article, an obituary or even a tombstone counted as an idiomatic (euphemistic) expression for death? Fifth, what method did the author use to categorize these lexical items under the various conceptual metaphors? Were there any ambivalent items or those that he was unable to categorize, etc.? Without a proper justification for the selection of the data sources and a detailed description of the identification procedure the research does become quite subjective (thereby questioning its overall academic merit).

Chapter 6 is a meticulous study of the equivalences of the metaphorical idiomatic expressions connected to death in the two languages. I was quite impressed overall by the richness of these analyses and the rigorousness applied here; nevertheless, the unclarified methodological questions (see above) do question some of the claims/results of the analyses. I did miss a detailed comparison of the mappings in the individual metaphorical conceptualizations – this might have significantly contributed to the cross-cultural differences (or similarities) between the two languages.

One of the main questions that I kept returning to in the analyses was the role of metonymy. If metonymies – as stated by the author on p. 156 – are indeed as "present in everyday speech and are part and parcel of linguistic expression", then it seems odd to me that metonymy did not

show up in the corpus under investigation. Some of the metaphors can definitely be analyzed from a metonymical viewpoint – a case in point is DEATH IS BIRTH FOR BABIES, where the preceding event (the birth of the baby) is used to stand for the final event (the death). It is surely not accidental that this particular "metaphor" is used only for newborns, and not for e.g., adults who have lived a long and full life. In fact, metonymy is a basic feature of the euphemization process. Not only do Allan and Burridge (1991) make note of this fact, but it is thoroughly analyzed within a cognitive linguistic framework by Gradečak-Erdeljić (2005), according to whom euphemisms are often based on a PART FOR WHOLE metonymy. I strongly recommend the incorporation of these ideas into the author's analyses as well, as this way metonymy could be the link between metaphor and euphemism.

I would also be interested to know to what degree the expressions (i.e., items the author analysed) are conventionalized in the languages – i.e., what was their overall frequency in the sources? We only have information about the types in the thesis, and not the tokens – yet a type–token analysis could have also shed light on the degree of conventionality of the respective metaphors in the two languages. For instance, I was also very intrigued by the computer metaphor (Metaphor L), which showed up in both languages. I wonder to what degree this is becoming conventionalized in the two languages, and where is it (and where can it be) used (and for whom).

I would also have been interested to find out (much) more on the research the author did on Legacy.com (p. 255). This in itself would have solicited a separate chapter and it is a shame that there is only one brief paragraph about it. This research, however, points to the extreme caution that any researcher needs to undertake when working with linguistic data. As the figure on p. 256 shows, there are significant regional differences with regard to the most preferred verb for "to die" in the US. Thus, we do not know – as the author did not provide information about this – in which country/region the English lexical items the thesis analyzed are in fact used (if at all). The same applies for the Polish data. I strongly recommend a more cautious and conscious handling of the data selection and identification in the author's future researches.

5. Miscellaneous

- I found it odd that the author chose an idiomatic expression for the title of the thesis (*when "she" comes knocking*) that is not explained anywhere in the text. Is this an English or a Polish idiom? What is its metaphorical basis? Why did the author choose this particular idiom? Is it a typical conceptualization in obituaries? If not, why not? While various personifications of death are alluded to in section 1.2.3, no mention of any personification is made in Chapter 6, in the discussion of the metaphorical conceptualizations. This is especially problematic in light of the fact that the Grim Reaper is a very fundamental conceptualization of death in western culture, which has also been thoroughly analyzed within cognitive linguistics, by Fauconnier and Turner (2002). This blend – and the personification of death in general – should have elicited a lengthy discussion in the thesis. A further remark concerning the title of the thesis – the expression *cognitive analysis* is too general and ambiguous (note: generative linguistics is also cognitive in outlook). *Cognitive linguistic analysis* would have been a more precise choice here.
- In fact, I did miss a couple of quite significant cognitive linguistic studies on death from the thesis. Bearing in mind that the author adopts a cognitive linguistic framework, a separate section should have been devoted to these works on death. Examples include Fauconnier & Turner

(2002) mentioned already above, Özçalişkan (2003) or Yu (1998). Further, the author should also have elaborated upon cognitive linguistic analyses of euphemisms – these should also have solicited at least a separate section in the thesis. Examples include Benczes (2006), Gradečak-Erdeljić (2005) or Portero Muñoz (2011) and references herein.

- While the overall text reads well, there are a couple of problems with respect to argumentation – these pertain to a) lack of justification; and b) oversimplification. Lack of justification: Many of the claims that the author makes are absolutely sensible; nevertheless, they are not backed up by references – i.e., are not substantiated by academic research. Any particular academic writing must provide references for any claim which is a) not the author's own; or b) not common sense. Just a few examples which do not conform to any of these criteria:
  - p. 25: "And so an example of a discipline that deals with the subject of death are bio-medical sciences. These scrutinize occurrences in which life and death happen simultaneously…";
  - p. 61 throughout: these claims should be supported by psychological research into dealing with death;
  - section 2.4.7 throughout;
  - first two paragraphs of p. 166.

- Oversimplification: I also felt some of the author's claims to be simplistic (partially stemming from the fact that they were not corroborated with academic references). For example, p. 42: "Today, death and the process of dying is perceived by society in very cold, but also mysterious ways. These topics, which evoke a number of different emotions: shame, embarrassment, frustration, fear and terror. A natural death is one that nobody talks about and acknowledges." I don't agree with these statements on a number of levels (though that is irreverent at this point), as they simplify the question to a startling degree without a proper elaboration or justification. Similarly simplistic claims can be found on p. 70: "Death is a mystery, which requires enormous effort to grasp and it is in fact almost impossible." This single sentence alone conflates (and misrepresents) a huge amount of psychological, historical and sociological research concerning death, similarly to the following lines on pp. 44–45: "Games, film, music and recently the internet, are rich in violent content connected with death and dying. The vast majority of people are desensitized when it comes to seeing or hearing about the subject in question. Modern life is fast and focused on success, rather than on the basic and primal aspects of life." Such statements cannot be made ex cathedra without proper justification and elaboration.
- On p. 25 the author elaborates on work carried out by various organizations – the INED, INSEE and INSERM. However, there is no explanation as to what these organizations are exactly – in which countries do they operate (are they national or international), and how exactly does their work contribute in any way to the findings of the thesis.
- In some places the thesis uses euphemisms for death, such as *saying the final goodbyes* (p. 22) or *departure* (p. 60). Such euphemistic usage is unprofessional and unnecessary – the language of the thesis should be as direct as possible.
- The thesis includes a Table of Typographic Conventions (p. 6), which is a very good idea. However, this list is not complete, as it does not include the following typographic notations: bold, underlined capitals (e.g., **<u>KNOWLEDGE</u>**) – as used abundantly in section 3.1; or bold capitals (e.g., **WOMAN**), as used in sections 3.3 and 5.1.

- Fernández 2006, 2015 (p. 163): These works are missing from the References section.
- Page numbers for direct quotes are missing on pp. 15–16.
- One of the further issues that needs to be addressed by the author is grammar. While the overall style of writing does conform to academic requirements – especially within the realm of vocabulary –, there are a couple of grammatical mistakes that keep re-occurring in the text and which do impede reading to some extent: a) Sentence structure: The author often connects two main clauses with a comma. E.g.: p. 7, 3rd paragraph: "It is indubitable that death reaches all human beings, however, the ways of dealing with it are varied among individuals." This is referred to in English as a "comma splice" or "run-on sentence". The correct method is to use a semi-colon; b) Restrictive and non-restrictive relative clauses: in English, no comma is required before the pronoun in a restrictive relative clause, as opposed to its non-restrictive counterpart. In the thesis, however, there are plenty of sentences that do not abide by this rule. E.g.: p. 63, line 17: "Death is a phenomenon, which is intrinsic in human life much like birth."

Evaluation

Writing a PhD thesis is the first major step towards becoming a researcher. This implies in itself that as the first serious academic work of any candidate, it cannot be without its flaws. There are definitely some improvements to be made on this thesis as well, especially those pertaining to research methodology. Nevertheless, the candidate has given evidence of the fact that he has a sound theoretical knowledge that he is capable of applying in the form of an original empirical investigation. He has also demonstrated his capability to analyze and synthesize ideas appropriately, and his ability to support his claims by results obtained from other, related fields. The thesis contributes significantly to the understanding of death (which in itself is a major achievement), as well as to cross-cultural metaphor variation. It also provides very valuable data for future analyses. All in all, the present work conforms to the requirements of a PhD thesis. I recommend the thesis for oral defense and that the degree of PhD to be awarded to the candidate.

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