

Death euphemisms on tombstones: A case of the Vhavenda's metaphorical conceptualisation of death

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Abstract: Direct reference to death has long been taboo in Tshivenda culture, and it is sanctioned by social, psychological and religious constraints. Like in other African societies, explicit reference to death is considered a taboo by the Vhavenda. This is because the Vhavenda view death as a transition from the land of the living to the land of the dead, which ultimately foregrounds their belief that a dead person transforms into an ancestor who has the power to care, protect, bless and even curse the living. Consequently, the subject of death and reference to it is treated as sacred among the Vhavenda. For this reason, the Vhavenda utilise euphemisms when discussing death. Against this backdrop, this qualitative study explored whether death-related conceptual metaphors on tombstones in Tshivenda lessen pain and the impact of death on those affected using the framework of the conceptual metaphor theory (CMT). A corpus of 160 epitaphs from the Khubvi Cemetery in Thulamela Local Municipality served as the source of the study's data. The study's findings showed that gravestone conceptualisations of death imply a favourable value judgment of human mortality and help those who are still alive cope with the loss and pain associated with death. The study lays the groundwork for further research into why conceptual metaphors of death emphasise the negative features of death, while language use emphasises the positive aspects.

Introduction

Among the Vhavenda, like in many other cultural groups, death is undoubtedly a fear-based taboo that remains a mystery. This is largely because death is a phenomenon that arguably none of the living has any absolute knowledge of (Allan and Burrige 1991; Bultnick 1998). The Vhavenda are one of several African linguistic and cultural communities in South Africa, and are found mostly in Limpopo province, especially the Vhembe District Municipality, and Gauteng province, and Zimbabwe. They speak Tshivenda, which is recognised as one of the twelve official languages of South Africa, as stipulated in the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (1996). Due to the pain surrounding death, the Vhavenda often feel reluctant to refer to the phenomenon of death directly and therefore tend to soften the effect of what they wish to communicate. As a result, death remains a subject that most Vhavenda have avoided in the past and continue to avoid today; in fact, it is one of the most serious taboos in our modern society (Baloyi 2014; Busch 2020). Hence, they resort to 'euphemisms' (Mudau 2017). Allan and Burrige (1991) say that death is a 'fear-based taboo' in contemporary societies and further argue that death taboos are motivated by (1) the fear of the loss of loved ones, (2) the fear of corruption and disintegration of the body, (3) the fear of what follows after the end of life, (4) the fear of the souls of the dead, mostly in secular societies, and (5) the fear of an absurd and meaningless death.

Euphemisms, in this case, act as taboo language that a speaker resorts to in an attempt to tone down the effect of using a direct reference (Crespo-Fernández 2005). Some subjects, such as sex, scatology and death, have long been considered taboo (Fan 2006). This is also true in Tshivenda culture, where the Vhavenda rely on euphemisms to discuss death. In this way, they mitigate, soften, or conceal the pain and impact associated with death. The Vhavenda's preference for euphemisms when talking about death is traceable, among other sources, in opinion epitaphs. Although Allan and Burrige (1991), Marin-Arrese (1996), Sexton (1997) and Bultnick (1998) have researched English metaphors and euphemisms in relation to the taboo of death, there remains a need to explore

Tshivendān conceptual metaphors as a purely euphemistic device in the language of epitaphs inscribed on tombstones. For this reason, this study sought to determine if the conceptual metaphors on epitaphs soften the impact of death on the affected individuals, and whether this serves the social function of consoling the living and assisting them in accepting the reality of the loss of someone close to them.

Literature review

This section explains euphemisms and epitaphs and what motivates people to use them. It concludes with the views of various scholars about the types of euphemisms and their functions.

The topics of death and dying stand at the crossroads of our shared human experience and linguistic expression. These profound and universal subjects have long been a source of fascination for scholars from various disciplines, particularly those in linguistics and cognitive sciences. The exploration of how language shapes our understanding of mortality and the strategies we employ to cope with the discomfort of discussing death has led to a growing body of research at the intersection of euphemisms and the conceptual metaphor theory.

Euphemisms, as linguistic devices, offer a unique lens through which we approach and navigate the sensitive and often taboo topic of death. These euphemistic expressions provide a means of softening the harsh realities of mortality, allowing individuals and societies to grapple with the inevitable in more digestible terms (Wang 2022). Simultaneously, the conceptual metaphor theory, as articulated by Lakoff and Johnson (1980), posits that metaphors are not merely linguistic constructs, but fundamental elements of thought, underpinning our comprehension of abstract concepts by mapping them onto more concrete domains. Within the realm of death and dying, euphemisms emerge as a rich field for exploring the intricate web of metaphors that shape our cognitive and emotional responses. While there have been many insightful scholarly contributions about death euphemisms and conceptual metaphors, the use of conceptual metaphors inscribed on tombstones to soften the impact of death and dying on the affected individuals in Tshivendā remains underdeveloped.

Linguists define euphemisms differently, depending on their perspectives on pragmatics and style. The term 'euphemism' is derived from the Greek prefix *eu-* (well, good) and *phēmos* (a Greek word for speech) or *phēmē* (speaking), resulting in the meaning: 'uttering sounds of good omen' (Yuwan 2004; Wedgwood 2012). According to Nhacudime (2023), euphemistic words and expressions allow people to talk about unpleasant things by covering up and neutralising the unpleasantness. Zhang (2021) cites Rawson (1981), who says euphemisms are moderate, pleasant or indirect words used to refer to offensive concepts. These are essentially linguistic taboos. Furthermore, euphemisms can be studied from the point of view of social etiquette and the socio-cognitive point of view. Enright (2004) and Yuwan (2004) add that there are words in every human language that people purposefully avoid because they are viewed as impolite, indecent, or too direct. However, despite how offensive these words are, people must always find a way to describe them, which is why the use of euphemisms is common. Allan and Burridge (1991) define euphemism as a word or phrase that replaces a taboo word or serves to avoid frightening or unpleasant subjects. According to Wedgwood (2012: 68), euphemism is seen as 'the linguistic equivalent of disinfectant', that is, it is a substance directed at killing the weightiness of certain concepts that many people cannot freely speak of, to make them socially acceptable. In essence, euphemisms are mitigating linguistic substitutes for coarse, unfriendly, or taboo words, and whichever definition of a euphemism we take, it is perceived as a kind of polite and roundabout mode of expression, which is used to soften, mitigate, or beautify the unpleasantness of reality. Euphemisms are indirect expressions that are used to avoid unpleasant moments, embarrassment, or offense (Wen 2002; Jačková 2010; Zhao and Dong 2010). They are used in sensitive social areas where direct speaking is unsuitable, such in cases of death, diseases, or sex (Wen 2002; Jačková 2010; Zhao and Dong 2010). However, despite one's reluctance to mention the subject of death, there are communicative situations in which one cannot avoid it. This is the case with epitaphs. Hence, Crespo-Fernández (2023) argues that it is no surprise that epitaphs constitute a breeding ground for euphemism about the taboo of death, and most of them are metaphoric in structure.

The term 'epitaph' is of Greek origin, derived from *epi-* for 'at or over' and *taphos*, for 'tomb or funeral rites' (McMahon 2022). An epitaph is an inscription on a tomb or grave that can be solemn, complimentary, witty, or even flippant (Cuddon 1998). Epitaphs serve two functions: Firstly, they indicate the identity and resting place of the dead; secondly, they serve as focal points for those who remain alive, either to facilitate mourning for those close to the deceased, or to provide information to visitors to the cemetery (Kichner 2008). Taking these functions into account, epitaphs can be considered socially oriented, and their social purpose is likely to be deciphered by investigating their observable elements and patterns. From this vantage point, the researcher sees the epitaph as a goal-oriented text whose function as an example of functional language is carried out through various euphemistic metaphorical conceptualisations.

The distinctive characteristics of epitaphs vary enormously, as do their intentions (Kichner 2008). In terms of narrative voice, the message may come from the mourner in some cases, whereas in others, the dead themselves 'speak' from the grave and address the reader in the first person. Other tombstone inscriptions are dialogic, with at least two voices interacting, those of the deceased and the mourner. According to Kichner (2008), epitaphs can tell stories for those who can no longer speak for themselves. In other cases, epitaphs are works of some literary merit: they use well-chosen descriptive words and figurative language to honour the departed, while also comforting those who remain alive. To summarise, epitaphs vary in structure, subject matter, style and, of course, function. Two main types of epitaphs can be distinguished, namely 'informative epitaphs', which are objective inscriptions that provide basic information such as the name of the deceased, the dates of birth and death, or the age at death; and 'opinion epitaphs', which are personal and intimate funeral texts in which feelings and emotions, as well as social and political concerns, play a significant role (Crespo-Fernández 2006). Informative epitaphs are objective and rely on impersonal language and standardised formulae and perform a locutionary function of transmitting the relevant details of a death. Opinion epitaphs, however, are subjective and, usually utilise emotive language and imagery. They perform a perlocutionary function, that is, they are oriented towards causing a favourable impression on the reader by showing the social relevance or exemplary conduct of the deceased. In this way, they provide a way for consolation to those left alive. Another source of difference lies in the linguistic functions that epitaphs fulfil. Following the theory of communicative functions introduced by Jakobson (1960), the 'referential' function is a characteristic of informative epitaphs since their purpose is simply to report about reality, whereas opinion epitaphs carry out different types of functions, depending on the purpose of each epitaph, namely 'emotive', 'conative', or 'poetic'. Therefore, gravestone epitaphs represent various approaches to the subject of death. The inscription of epitaphs often entails the use of euphemisms, which assume a wide range of functions.

Motivations for using euphemisms

Euphemism is a strategy for displacing topics associated with intense negative affect. The connection between euphemistic language use and negative affect can be better understood in light of research on the pervasive cognitive bias in human information processing known as the negativity bias. According to Jing-Schmidt (2022), bad things have a greater impact on human behaviour than good things, and human beings have an automatic tendency to pay significantly more attention to unpleasant than pleasant information.

The negativity bias leaves its stamp on language use. Jing-Schmidt (2022) argues that our greater sensitivity to negative information has implications for language use as a way of constructing what Funda (2021: 1100) calls a 'social front'. A key part of managing the social front is the management of negative emotions through word choices. Speakers spare themselves, their interlocutors and relevant others negative emotions such as sadness, fear, anger, disgust, shame and guilt by avoiding direct reference to things and events that evoke those emotions. To this end, euphemism offers a verbal solution by way of referential vagueness and evasiveness.

This explanation of euphemisms reveals that the motivation for using euphemistic language is taboo avoidance. From the standpoint of affect as motivation, the need for euphemism is inspired by the fear of taboo. Taboo is defined as something that is forbidden and therefore unspoken in culture because the referent is unspeakably awful (Isenberg 2021; Jing-Schmidt 2022). Taboos arise

from social limits on human action that can inflict physical, metaphysical, or moral harm. They are described as behaviour and speech regulators in a community where euphemism is at once the vehicle and product of behavioural and linguistic regulation (Allan and Burridge 1991; Asaah 2006). Euphemisms and taboos often coexist and interact, each influencing and being influenced by the other. Jing-Schmidt (2022: 135) and Aytan et al. (2022) refer to this coexistence between taboo and euphemism as a 'symbiosis', or 'symbiotic relationship'.

This relationship between taboo and euphemism means that taboos drive euphemistic expression; they create restrictions and societal norms about what is considered inappropriate or offensive to discuss openly. Euphemisms, in turn, emerge as linguistic tools to navigate and circumvent these taboos. They allow people to discuss sensitive or taboo subjects with greater ease and social acceptability. Euphemisms soften taboo topics. Euphemisms are used to soften the impact of taboo or uncomfortable subjects. By substituting harsh or direct language with milder expressions, euphemisms help maintain politeness and decorum, while addressing taboos (Ismoilova 2022). The relationship between euphemisms and taboos is dynamic. As societal norms evolve over time, so do euphemisms and taboos. Euphemisms adapt to reflect changes in what is considered sensitive or inappropriate, and new euphemisms may emerge to address evolving taboos. Jing-Schmidt (2019: 413) considers the use of euphemism 'a linguistic consequence of the social sanction of verbal taboos', contending that the symbiotic relationship between taboo and euphemism 'reflects the negative potency of taboo words and the social risks it implies, and the desirability of euphemism as a means of risk avoidance' (Jing-Schmidt 2022: 130).

Various types of euphemisms and their functions

The numerous metaphors employed by scholars to define euphemism highlight the trope's basic functions. Cameron (1995: 143) describes euphemism as 'a soft cloud of verbal cotton-wool', a rather poetic metaphor that captures the gentle and soothing effect of euphemism. Rawson (1995: 320) calls euphemisms 'linguistic fig leaves' and 'verbal flourishes'. According to Jing-Schmidt (2022), euphemism as 'a soft cloud of verbal cotton-wool' captures the function of euphemism to hide or cover up something embarrassing, whereas euphemisms like 'linguistic fig leaves' and 'verbal flourishes' point to the ornamental function of euphemism in enhancing the palatability of what is conveyed. Rawson (1995) identifies the first type as negative because it provides a defensive purpose, whereas the second type is positive because it serves an inflating function. Burridge (2012) explored further functional distinctions, identifying six types of euphemisms, namely protective euphemisms, underhand euphemisms, uplifting euphemisms, provocative euphemisms, social cohesive euphemisms and ludic euphemisms.

Protective euphemisms, also known as ameliorative euphemisms, serve the essential function of softening the impact of potentially negative or offensive language. These linguistic devices are employed to make communication more considerate, polite and emotionally comforting, particularly in situations where direct or harsh language may be distressing or inappropriate. Their functions encompass preserving dignity and respect when discussing sensitive or unpleasant topics, reducing the emotional discomfort associated with certain words or phrases, and promoting polite and decorous communication. Protective euphemisms are instrumental in addressing matters such as death, health and medical conditions, ageing, disabilities, mental health and other socially sensitive topics, helping individuals navigate these conversations with empathy and sensitivity (Keyes 2010; Hamilton and Foltzer 2021).

Underhand euphemisms, also known as covert or veiled euphemisms, are a type of figurative language where a speaker or writer uses subtle and indirect language to convey a message, often to soften the impact of a harsh or unpleasant reality (Burridge 2012). These euphemisms are not as explicit or straightforward as more common euphemisms, but serve a similar purpose. They can be used to disguise or downplay sensitive or controversial subjects, making them more palatable to the audience (Hamilton and Foltzer 2021). For example, an underhand euphemism to an original statement like 'She was fired for embezzlement' might be 'She was let go due to financial irregularities'. In this example, the underhand euphemism 'financial irregularities' is used to avoid directly stating the illegal act.

Underhand euphemisms can be used in various contexts, including politics, business and everyday conversation, to manipulate or control the perception of events or actions. However, they can also be criticised for being manipulative or misleading as they often obscure the true nature of a situation.

The uplifting euphemism can be used 'to talk up and to inflate' something (Burridge 2012; Hamilton and Foltzer 2021). Many labels for non-prestigious social roles are designed to elevate those roles, and fall under this function. The word engineer is a favourite uplifter. It can be combined with various modifiers vaguely indexical of the social roles in question, e.g. domestic engineer for a stay-at-home parent, and sanitation engineer for a person whose profession is to collect refuse. Teachers were referred to as engineers of the soul in China. The word technician has found a similar euphemistic calling, as in 'debris disposal technician' whose profession is to collect refuse, and a 'nail technician' who is a professional provider of manicure and pedicure services. Technician, according to Rawson (1995), is an all-purpose label for upgrading job titles. While euphemisms are typically used to soften negative or unpleasant topics, some euphemisms are crafted to emphasise positive aspects, or to create a more encouraging and uplifting tone. The intention is to inspire, comfort, or motivate individuals while discussing potentially challenging or sensitive subjects as in the case of uplifting euphemisms.

A provocative euphemism can 'reveal and inspire', as some politically correct euphemisms may demonstrate (Burridge 2012: 70). In Switzerland or Germany, for instance, it is very common to officially refer to certain people as having a *migration background*, much as the term *visible minorities* is officially used in Canada. Jing-Schmidt (2021) compares terms like *Italian American* and *Japanese American* to *African American*. *Native American*, *First People* or *First Nations* are other such terms, according to Holder (2007). These may be examples of people selecting the terms they want others to use to describe them. The main function of provocative euphemism is to provoke and inspire the listener.

Euphemisms can be used for solidarity with an in-group as in the case of cohesive euphemisms (Hamilton and Foltzer 2021; Jing-Schmidt 2021). In contexts involving deviant activities, they protect in-group secrecy; thus, in a way, they border on code words. This is the social cohesive function, according to Burridge (2012). To the extent that certain euphemisms are intended to hide information about illicit activities, they quite literally serve a protective function at the same time as they provide an in-group recognition device. In addition, if such euphemisms elevate the status of what they refer to, they may be considered uplifting for the relevant group. Slang words for drugs and drug use are excellent examples. For example, some marijuana users refer to themselves as *herbalists* or *herbivores* and use *potpreneur* when referring to a seller or a dealer.

Language is more than a tool for communicating ideas. One aspect of language that is ubiquitous but often overlooked is the joy and jocularity that words afford us. Euphemisms can be lucid and playful as in the case of lucid euphemisms. Burridge (2012: 71) observes that many euphemisms are invented 'largely to amuse', 'to have fun and to entertain' people in playful and creative contexts. Crespo-Fernández (2015: 47) claims that ludic euphemisms are good for 'diffusing the seriousness of taboo subjects.' Indeed, tension reduction is an important pragmatic effect (Colston 2015), and ludic euphemisms may be used for humorous effect. Euphemisms for bodily functions or sex offer many instances of this type. For example, Holder (2007) lists funny instances such as *breaking the wind* for farting, *night games* for copulation, and *plumbing* for the parts of the body concerned with defecation and urination.

Euphemisms have existed for so long because they fulfil useful social functions. The different types of euphemisms may be used for various reasons: to entertain, to mislead, to save face, to avoid offending someone, to provide comfort, to talk about taboo subjects, and to enhance cohesion in a group. This study's focus is on protective euphemisms that are employed to make communication more considerate, polite, and emotionally comforting when discussing the sensitive or unpleasant topics of death and dying with the use of epitaphs inscribed on tombstones.

Theoretical framework

The theoretical assumptions that underpin this study were derived from the conceptual metaphor theory (CMT), which was pioneered by Lakoff and Johnson (1980) in their seminal work *Metaphors We Live By*. A conceptual metaphor is a metaphor or figurative comparison in which one idea or conceptual domain is understood in terms of another (Lakoff 1994). The central idea of CMT is that

metaphors are not viewed just as a decorative linguistic phenomenon, but as a cognitive mode of thought and reason. CMT holds that thought has primacy over language – the language that we use is only a surface, linguistic manifestation of a deeper conceptual system ‘in terms of which we both think and act’ (Lakoff and Johnson 1980: 3). According to the main tenet of CMT, metaphor is viewed as a cross-domain mapping in our conceptual system. Lakoff and Johnson (1980) define metaphor as understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another, or as a tightly structured mapping or set of correspondences between two conceptual domains, which they term the cognitive *source* and *target* domains. A concrete and more clearly organised source domain, being more closely related to physical and bodily experience, is used to understand and talk about a more abstract and less clearly structured target domain. The term *metaphorical expression* (or *linguistic metaphor*) refers to a linguistic expression (a word, phrase, or sentence) that is the surface realisation of such a cross-domain mapping.

Lakoff and Johnson (1980: 10) state that ‘in allowing us to focus on one aspect of a concept, a metaphorical concept can keep us from focusing on other aspects of the concept that are inconsistent with that metaphor’. Therefore, the cross-domain mapping is only partial, because ‘when a source domain is applied to a target, only some, not all aspects of the target are brought into focus’ (Kövecses 2002: 79). According to Nyakoe, Matu, and Ongarora (2012: 1453) the mapping sanctions the use of source domain language and inference patterns for target domain concepts. This property of metaphors serves as a suitable ground for euphemistic reference to concepts considered too blunt, offensive or frightening, since metaphors may hide, deny or mitigate those aspects of such concepts which may cause social embarrassment, inconvenience or fear, thus helping to highlight some comforting, less harsh, less upsetting, less insulting or less straightforward aspects of those concepts. In such metaphor-based euphemisms, ‘linguistic expressions in the source domain are used to replace the taboo expressions in the target domain’ (Fan 2006: 72). In other words, conceptual metaphor allows us to systematically map the structure of the source domain (euphemistic expressions) onto the structure of the target domain (taboo expressions). This is the euphemistic conceptualisation, as Langacker (1997) puts it.

In the past several decades, there has been an emergent literature challenge or criticism of Lakoff and Johnson’s theory of conceptual metaphor within and outside of cognitive linguistics (Gibbs 2011). Therefore, Kövecses (2020: 2) proposes a more technical definition of conceptual metaphors: ‘A conceptual metaphor is a systematic set of correspondences between two domains of experience’. The initial definition of conceptual metaphors made by Lakoff and Johnson (1980) is that a conceptual metaphor is understanding one domain of experience in terms of another. In contrast to the definition proposed by Lakoff and Johnson (1980), he uses ‘two domains of experience’ to replace ‘understanding one domain in terms of another’ and uses ‘correspondence’ instead of ‘mapping’. This is due to the fact that ‘the two-domain account does not work and must be supplemented by a model of explanation that relies on four (or more) domains, or spaces’ (Kövecses 2020). Furthermore, conceptual metaphors cannot always be mapped from the source domain to the target domain.

Euphemistic conceptualisation depends greatly on contextual elements, that is, on the *facets of context*, i.e. ‘the speech event, its participants, and their immediate circumstances’, in the words of Langacker (1997: 243). This means that our conception of the target domain as expressed in a source-domain pairing is grounded in our knowledge and experience of how the reality expressed by the source domain is culturally understood. This helps to explain the culture and society in which the people live.

In this study, we analyse euphemisms for death on tombstones using the theoretical framework of CMT as initiated by Lakoff and Johnson (1980). As a cognitive approach, it will enable us to demonstrate ‘the mitigating capacity’ of the euphemisms (Crespo-Fernández 2006: 123) and their ability to hide certain unwanted, negative and undesirable aspects of the target domain, which is why ‘metaphorisation constitutes a potent source for euphemistic reference’ (Crespo-Fernández 2006: 102). As part of the cognitive approaches, CMT opens a new way to the interpretation of euphemisms, because euphemisms on their own are primarily mental phenomena. While metaphors have received ample scholarly attention, cognitive issues have been largely excluded from the study of euphemisms, especially as a way of euphemistically referring to death in Tshivenda.

Methodology

This study employed the qualitative research method, as commonly used in the social sciences and other fields to investigate and understand people's experiences, perceptions, beliefs and behaviours (De Vos 2011). This study focused on people's experiences with death and dying in an attempt to provide a detailed investigation of the Vhavenda's articulation of their experiences of death and dying through euphemisms. Data for this study were collected from a corpus of 160 purposefully selected epitaphs at the Khubvi Cemetery in Thulamela Local Municipality in Limpopo, South Africa. Opinion epitaphs were sampled because of their rich use of euphemisms related to the taboo of death as opposed to informative epitaphs.

Textual analysis was used to analyse the selected corpus of epitaphs. Textual analysis is a research method used to systematically analyse, evaluate and interpret the content of texts and the hidden text messages. It includes exploring the languages, symbols, patterns and pictures in the texts. This method aims to uncover patterns, themes, meanings and insights from the text, providing a deeper understanding of the content and its context (De Vos 2011). I searched for euphemistic substitutions for the taboo of death and dying on all types of tombstones. To organise the large variety of metaphorical euphemisms related to the linguistic taboos of death and die, I allocated each metaphorical substitute to its corresponding conceptual mapping using the CMT model for analysis and interpretation. These data types were similar from tombstone to tombstone; hence, 11 euphemistic substitutes were identified from the tombstones. Seven of the 11 euphemistic substitutes represented the conceptual metaphor: 'death is a journey', 'death is rest/sleep', 'death is a loss', 'death is a call from God', and 'death is the end of life'.

In this study, code names were used instead of the exact names of the deceased in the samples, otherwise the analysis as verbatim reproductions of the epitaphs might prove disrespectful to the deceased's relatives or friends. The orthography and punctuation of the epitaphs were copied verbatim from the originals. Permission to access the cemetery was sought from the municipality. Tombstones are known to contain personal information about the deceased, as well as symbols, or images with personal or religious value. Therefore, the deceased's and their relatives' privacy rights were considered. During the data collection process, no photographs or pictures of the tombstones were taken, only of the epitaphs on the tombstones. Code names were used instead of the deceased's exact names throughout. Informed consent from the surviving relatives was not required because the data for this study did not include the collection of personal data or the usage of photos and pictures of the deceased on tombstones. A textual analysis approach was used to arrive at the findings. The following paragraphs provide a presentation and analysis of death-related conceptual metaphors based on the foregoing conceptual metaphors on death.

Analysis

This section presents and analyses death-related conceptual metaphors as euphemisms on tombstones. The section entails the following themes: death is a journey, death is rest/sleep, death is a loss, death is a call from God, and death is the end of life.

Death is a journey

Death is a journey is a conceptual metaphor. It is the most common of the epitaphs gathered for this study. It is based on the biblical view of death as a departure and a journey of the soul. In Tshivenda culture, when a person dies, it is said that they have undertaken a journey. The euphemistic verbs for this metaphor emphasise the act of leaving, the beginning of a journey, rather than the end of a journey; however, the destination of the journey is implicit. This occurs in example (i):

- (i) *Ri vha elelwa nga Lufuno*
Vho-BN
Vho sia vhutshilo ha jino lwa tshoṭhe.
Vha awele nga mulalo.
 'In loving memory of
 Mrs. BN

You departed from this life for good.
Rest in peace'

Example (i) *Vho sia vhutshilo ha jino* 'You departed from this life' is a euphemistic expression where the act of dying is softened by the verb phrase *Vho sia vhutshilo ha jino* 'you departed from this life'. The conceptualisation is based on the assumption that the deceased has left for another destination. Human mortality is thus conceptualised as a departure from this world in which a basic source domain of experience, death, is understood in terms of a different and more concrete domain, a journey. This cross-domain mapping provides the basis for the verbal mitigation of the taboo (Nyakoe, Matu, and Ongarora 2012: 1454). In example (i), various attributes are transferred from the source domain of a journey to the target domain of death through metaphorical mapping. It presents various sets of conceptual correspondences as a result of verbalising the death taboo using our knowledge of journeys. Dying is associated with departure; the destination of the journey is left implicit, and the person who died is the one who embarks on the journey. All these conceptual correspondences revolve around the concept of movement. It is observed in this conceptual metaphor that most of the metaphorical substitutes for the linguistic taboo 'die' '-fa' are verbs of motion such as *-sia* 'leave', *-tswana* 'depart', 'leave' or 'go', *-fhedza* 'finish', and *-fhira* 'pass away'. This is observed in examples (i), (ii), (iii), (iv) and (vi). *Fhira* 'pass away', is the most common euphemistic verb in the *death is a journey* conceptual metaphor, as observed in example (ii):

- (ii) *Vho-KK*
Vho fhiraho zwavhuḍi kha jino shango.
Ri ḍo dzula ri tshi vha elelelwa misi yoṭhe.
Nga vhana vhavho.
Mrs-KK
'Who **passed away peacefully** from this earth.
You will always be remembered.
By your children'

Vho fhiraho 'who passed away' is a euphemistic expression for a blunt and offensive expression *vho faho* 'who died'. According to Gross (1985), 'pass away' is an old euphemism used by Victorian sentimentalists that dates to the fourteenth century. Its euphemistic value stems primarily from the meaning that the particle 'away' acquires in a death-related context. It is interpreted as a gradual motion from existence to termination. Therefore, *vho fhira* 'pass away' conceptualises death in terms of a gradual and slow process; in this way, it creates a peaceful atmosphere surrounding death, and transmits the idea of death as a quiet experience. It is this sense of tranquillity that has made *vho fhira* 'pass away' one of the most common euphemistic verbs to refer to the act of dying. Apart from that, the high occurrence of this verb in the language of death also derives from the fact that it is used regardless of religious beliefs. As Gross (1985) maintains, the verb stem expression 'pass' works equally well for believers and non-believers, since it holds out no promise one way or another about a future existence. In most cases *-fhira* 'pass' is accompanied by the adverb *zwavhuḍi* or *nga mulalo* 'peacefully', as observed in example (iii). ***Zwavhuḍi*** 'peacefully' in example (iii) below is an adverb that tones down the effect on the force of the verb *-fhira* 'pass' and makes it more palatable and less intense and, by doing so, contributes to attenuating the act of dying. This is outlined in example (iii).

- (iii) *Vho-BM*
Vho fhiraho zwavhuḍi kha jino shango.
Ri ḍo dzula ri tshi vha elelelwa misi yoṭhe.
Nga vhana vhavho.
Mrs-BM
'Who **passed away peacefully** from this earth.
You will always be remembered.
By your children'

It is worth noting that not every metaphor in this conceptualisation is about 'leaving'. Others emphasise the journey's ultimate goal, which becomes concrete and explicitly religious in most epitaphs: meeting God in Heaven, as observed in example (iv).

- (iv) *Vho-LB*
Vho ya hayani makoleni ha Muṅe wavho ri songo lavhelela.
Ri ḡo dzula ri tshi vha elelelwa misi yoṭhe.
Nga vhana.
 Mr-LB.
'You have gone home to your Father unexpectedly.
 You will always be remembered.
 By your children.'

From the euphemistic phrase *Vho ya hayani makoleni ha Muṅe wavho* 'You are gone home to your Father', the journey's ultimate and concrete destination is explicitly mentioned, which is *hayani makoleni ha Muṅe wavho* 'home to your Father'. This viewpoint is based on the Christian belief in a joyful reunion with God after earthly existence. This concept lends euphemistic support to expressions containing the verbs *u fhira* 'to pass', *u fhirela tshedzani* 'pass into the light', *u ya Hayani* 'pass toward home' and *u ṭuwa* 'to go', *u ya makoleni* 'go to heaven', and *u ya ṅuni ya Khotsi* 'go to our Father's house'. Example (iv) focuses on the meeting with God as the destination of the spiritual journey. There is an implicit mention of an upward movement in the term *makoleni* 'heaven'. In accordance with Lakoff and Johnson's (1980) consideration of orientational metaphors, this upward movement is typically identified as having positive connotations. According to Lakoff and Johnson (1980) people, objects and actions with positive attributes are associated with metaphors about their physical highness, while those perceived positively are often related to physical highness.

The movement image that is shared by all of the metaphorical items in this conceptualisation is combined with the explicit reference to the journey's destination, i.e. *Vho ṭuwa hayani makoleni ha Muṅe wavho* 'You have gone home to your Father' which reinforces the expression's positive view of death. Bultnick (1998) supports this by stating that the specific value judgments of a metaphor are heavily influenced by the type of destination that is brought to the fore. And the destination in 'heaven' is without a doubt the greatest reward in the Christian tradition for any soul. The Christian tradition speaks of a journey that moves not only from life to death, but also from death to life, as Sheppy (2004) suggests. This is presented in example (v):

- (v) *Ri vha elelwa nga Lufuno*
Vho-SZ
Vho ṭahekanyaho u bva lufuni u ya vhutshiloni ha tshoṭhe.
Vha awele nga mulalo.
'In loving memory of
 Mrs-SZ
who passed from death unto eternal life.
 Rest in peace.'

Vho ṭahekanyaho u bva lufuni u ya vhutshiloni ha tshoṭhe 'who passed from death unto eternal life' is a euphemistic expression. *U ṭahekanya* in this expression means 'to pass through something'. In this case, it means to *u fhira lufu* 'pass through death'. Instead of dying, the deceased passes from death to eternal life. There is a transition from death to life which implies that death ushers in a new spiritual existence. This viewpoint lends euphemistic support to the statement by depicting physical death as the entry point to a new form of life that is paradoxically equated with death. There is an odd shift in emphasis from life to death in this regard, with the latter implicitly regarded as an event that opens up new expectations of spiritual life for the deceased, while also providing some sort of consolation to the living. This view of death as the beginning of a rewarding afterlife is the conceptual basis for Allan and Burridge's (1991) consolatory metaphor of death as the beginning of a new life,

which gives rise to euphemistic terms and expressions that conceptualise death as a desirable event under the influence of Christian beliefs.

It is interesting to note that religious beliefs do not always influence the destination of the soul's journey. The endpoint of the journey into the afterlife in the following epitaph is not a joyful encounter with God in paradise, but a meeting of the dead person with the souls of his ancestors who died earlier, and the destination in joining the ancestors is without a doubt the greatest reward in the African tradition for any soul. This is observed in example (vi).

- (vi) *Ri vha elelwa nga Lufuno*
 Vho-MT
Vho *tuwa* u ya ha vha^fhasi, vhomakhulukuku vhavho.
Vha awele nga mulalo.
'In loving memory of
 Mr MT
Who has gone to join his ancestors, great grandfathers.
 Rest in peace.'

In example (vi), the inscription explicitly states that *Vho-MT* (Mr MT) is not dead; rather, he is said to have 'gone to his ancestors' *vho tuwa u ya ha vha^fhasi*. This shows the denial of physical death because of the use of the euphemistic term *-tuwa* 'gone', which is ambiguous because there is no clear indication of the destination or any expectation of a return. However ambiguous it may be, the term 'gone' instead of 'dead' effectively evokes death without resorting explicitly to the concept it stands for, namely *lufu* 'death'. Ambiguity is a defining feature of euphemism as a linguistic phenomenon (Crespo-Fernández 2006). In some inscriptions, the way death-related euphemisms are verbalised conveys the denial of physical death as a means of consolation, as observed in example (vii):

- (vii) *Vho-ZT*
Sa *mudali*' lwavho lwendo vho 'vuledza.
Vha awele nga mulalo.
Nga vhana na mashaka.
 'Mr-ZT.
'As a pilgrim you have finished your journey.
 Rest in peace.
 By your relatives and children.'

Mudali 'pilgrim' is a euphemistic term that refers to the deceased and *lwendo* 'journey' refers to death *-lufu*. In this context, the 'pilgrim' *mudali* is capable of embarking on a journey, thus is capable of moving. This metaphor implicitly denies the total cessation of bodily movement as an intrinsic attribute of death. In this regard, the metaphors included in this conceptualisation imply a negation of death through the movement image. 'Death-as-a-journey' metaphors primarily fulfil their euphemistic function in this view of the deceased as an alive being.

Death is rest/sleep

This study found that *death is rest/sleep* is a conceptual metaphor that reflects a conceptualisation of death in terms of a peaceful rest or sleep. *-eḡela* 'sleep' and *-awela* 'rest' are the most frequently used terms in this mapping, such as *u eḡela khofhe lwa tshoḡhe* 'to sleep the eternal sleep', *u ya vhuaweloni ha tshoḡhe* 'to go to the last/eternal rest', *u eḡela lwa u awela* 'lay to rest', *vhulalo* 'deathbed', *fhethu ha u awela lwa tshoḡhe* 'the final resting place', *fhethu ha u awela lwa tshifhinga tshilapfu* 'the long resting place', *u awela kha Murena* 'rest in the Lord', *u awela zwanḡani Zwawe* 'rest in His very hand', and *u awela nga lutamo lwa Mudzimu* 'rest at God's will'. This is outlined in example (viii):

- (viii) *Vho-MM*
Avha vho eḡelaho afha

Vho awela murunzini wa mukonazwothe.*Vha awele nga mulalo.**Nga vhana na mashaka .*

‘Mr MM,

Who **slept** here.**Rests in the shadow of the Almighty**

Rest in peace.

By your relatives and children.’

Vho awela murunzini wa Mukonazwothe ‘Rests in the shadow of the Almighty’ is a euphemistic expression that refers to the deceased as someone who is not dead, but is resting. The conceptual metaphor *death is rest/sleep* is the source of the terms ‘graves’ and ‘cemetery’. Gross (1985) states that the term ‘cemetery’ is a euphemism in itself and is derived from the Greek *κοιμητήριον* meaning ‘resting place’. This is the place where a person is buried, a grave, which is conceptualised as *fhethu ha u eḡela lwa tshothe* ‘a place of eternal/last/long sleep’. It is for this reason that the euphemism *vhulalo* ‘deathbed’ is observed in some epitaphs to hide the negativity associated with death and to bring out the positivity associated with it. The source domain *sleep/rest* is mapped onto the target domain *death*. It is this cross-domain mapping that provides consolation for those who are left behind, thus euphemistically highlighting the neutral aspects of sleep ‘while other aspects of death such as sorrow, horror are hidden’ (Fan 2006: 72) This means that death is generally seen in a negative light, the use of the word *vhulalo* ‘deathbed’ on the tombstones hides the negativity associated with death and rather brings out some positivity.

-*Awela* ‘rest’ and -*eḡela* ‘sleep’ acquire a religious sense in the case of *u awela kana u eḡela murunzini wa Mukonazwothe* ‘rest in the shadow of the Almighty’. Özçalışkan (2003) says that a rest and a sleep have been incorporated into the same conceptualisation because the underlying concept of both rest and sleep metaphors is based on the fact that rest and sleep are both temporary and thus death is also conceptualised as a temporary event. Sexton (1997) warns not to take the cessation of bodily functions and speech as consistently associated with physical death, as these symptoms can also be found in a peaceful sleep. Sexton’s (1997) opinion is corroborated by Özçalışkan (2003) and Lakoff (1989), who believe that the cross-domain mapping in the CMT does not represent equivalence, but only a partial mapping from one domain to another. This means that *death as rest/sleep* does not map everything in our general knowledge of sleep onto death, but only certain aspects such as inactivity, inability to perceive, horizontal position, and so on. *Death is rest/sleep* conceptual metaphor provides an effective euphemistic reference to the death taboo, primarily because this association eventually leads to the denial of death, demonstrates a positive attitude toward death, and provides consolation for those who are left behind, while on the other hand aspects of death such as sorrow and horror are hidden.

Death is a loss

Death is a loss can be best understood from the perspective of the survivors (relatives and friends) to whom death is conceptualised as a loss, either of a dear person or of life itself. Here, life leans on another conceptual metaphor, ‘life is a precious possession’. Life is perceived as a valuable object, which may be stolen, lost, or wasted, and is consistent with another conceptual metaphor, ‘time is a thief’ since with time, life diminishes. From the epitaphs, the *death is a loss* metaphor has been represented by the following euphemistic expressions: *U xelexwa nga vhutshilo* ‘lose one’s life’, *u lila u xelexwa nga inwi* ‘mourn your loss’, *u xelexwa nga vhutshilo* ‘loss of life’, *u xelexwa zwiwulu* ‘heavy losses’. This is observed in example (ix):

(ix) *Vho-ND****Mbilu dzashu dzo vhaishala zwiwulu nga u xelexwa ngavho.****Ri ḡo vha xelexwa misi yothe.**Nga vhana.*

‘Mr ND

Our hearts are deeply saddened by the loss of you

You will always be remembered.

By your children.'

Mbilu dzashu dzo vhaaisala zwiwulu nga u xeletwa ngavho 'Our hearts are deeply saddened by the loss of you' is a euphemistic expression in which death is conceptualised as a loss. In some cases, a loss is often characterised as irreparable and unredeemable as demonstrated by the following metaphorical expression: *lufu lwawe ndi u xeletwa hu sa lifhei* 'his death is an irreparable loss'. The metaphorical substitutes that result from this figurative association offer no comfort or relief. The conceptual metaphor of *death is a loss* describes death as an event over which humans have no control, leaving them powerless in the face of the unavoidable (Allan and Burridge 1991; Bultnick 1998). Insofar as it is an effective way of expressing the grief of the surviving relatives, this conceptualisation characterises lament epitaphs. It is evident that *death is a loss* does not offer any kind of consolation to those left alive. Unlike other conceptual domains, the metaphors used here imply a negative value-judgment of death.

Death is a call from God

Death is a call from God as a conceptual metaphor considers death in terms of a call from the deity. It is based on the conceptual metonymy action for result. A result can be defined as a state, a resultant event, or even a resultant action. In this case, an action – a call from God – stands in for the result of the action itself – death (Panther and Thornburg 2000). This is observed in example (ix):

(x) *Afha ndi vhuawelo ha u fhedzisela*

Vho-BG

Vhe vha vhidzwa nga Khotsi.

Vha awele nga mulalo.

'This is the final resting place

Mr BG

Who was called by his Father

Rest in peace.'

The euphemism *Vhe vha vhidzwa nga Khotsi* 'called by his Father' in example (ix) is viewed as the result of the intentional behaviour of an unnamed external agent with control over life and death, namely *Khotsi* 'Father' who is God. In this conceptual metaphor, death is conceptualised as an event that occurs as a result of God's action of calling. This statement is supported by Lakoff (1994), who claims that a departure is an event caused by the action of some causal agent. *Death as a call from god* implies a positive value judgment of human mortality because it employs concepts with positive connotations.

Death is the end

Death is the end as a conceptual metaphor foregrounds death as reaching an endpoint, both physically (spatially) and chronologically (temporally). The endpoint is linguistically manifested in the metaphorical expression such as *magumo awe a tsini* 'his/her end is near', *u swika kha magumo* 'reach the end', *vhulwadze ho mu swikisa mafheloni* 'illness ended him', and *u swika magumo a vhutshilo* 'reach the end of life'. This is observed in example (x):

(xi) *Nga Lufuno ri elelwa*

Vho MP

Vho tshila zwavhuqi

U swika magumo a maḍuvha avho

'In loving memory of

Mrs/Ms MP

Who lived uprightly and justly

till the end of her days'

The phrase *u swika magumo a maḁuvha avho* 'till the end of her days' which is 'her death' helps to understand human death in terms of finality, as Bultnick (1998) suggests. Life is understood as a process with a beginning, an endpoint and a time span. Johnson (1987) claims that the passage of time is commonly understood based on movement along a physical path and the course of processes is generally understood as movement along a path to some endpoint that marks the cessation of human existence, and therefore, physical death is precisely that endpoint. This endpoint marks the cessation of human existence (Bultnick 1998). This conceptual metaphor provides the basis for understanding and mitigating the notions of death and dying because friends and relatives would understand that time determines one's life and death.

Discussion

From the preceding data analysis, it is evident that death is a subject handled with a lot of care and caution in Tshivenda. According to the study's findings, metaphors encompass the death lexicon, forming networks that allow us to conceptualise this taboo in concrete terms. The cognitive analysis of epitaphs conducted in this study revealed various features of death-related figurative language. Many of the epitaph conceptualisations in this study suggest that human mortality has a positive value judgment of death. This is due to the positive connotations of the source domains used, which include a journey, a rest, a call from God, and an end. The *death is a loss* metaphor in this study is the only conceptual metaphor with a negative value-judgment of death. From the epitaphs, death is viewed as a release from earthly life, and this is due to the influence of religious beliefs about eternal life. This is reflected in the conceptual metaphors *death is a journey*, *death is rest/sleep*, and *death is a call from God*. This helps the bereaved to accept death, to trust and hope that the departed is undoubtedly on their way to heaven, a journey that all Christians hope to take. The hope that all the dead will rise one day to meet their loved ones provides comfort to those who remain behind. *Death is the end* as a conceptual metaphor is the only metaphor that conceptualises death as an end to human existence because of time. This is contrary to the belief of the Vhavenda in the spirit world, which is an integral part of their worldview. They believe in the world of the dead who, through their ancestral spirits – called *midzimu* in the plural and *mudzimu* in the singular – are in constant contact with the living. That is the reason why there is a Tshivenda idiom *midzimu i a hana* 'the ancestor spirits are not in agreement/are refusing'. This idiom is used in instances where a person has all the means and ways to do something, but everything fails. Vhavenda would say *midzimu i a hana or midzimu i khou hana*, which means that the ancestors do not want you to do it, and shows that one is always in contact with the ancestors.

There is a general preference for not referring to the person in question as dead or having died; instead, death is viewed as a release from earthly life. Metaphors used to conceptualise *death as a journey* or *a call from God* are consolatory metaphors that elevate the event of death and magnify the act of dying. Consolatory metaphors result in exaggerated and deceptive expressions that succeed in consoling and turning off the thought of death in the minds of those still alive, as well as denying death.

It is interesting to note that the study's findings reveal that when dealing with conceptual metaphors, only one aspect of the metaphorical concept is attended to, which keeps us from focusing on other aspects of the concept that are inconsistent with that metaphor, namely the negative aspect as in the case of metaphors of death. This is achieved through euphemistic conceptualisation, which is the process of framing or representing a concept, often one that may be sensitive, unpleasant, or taboo, using milder, more indirect, or socially acceptable language (Langacker 1997). This means that when dealing with conceptual metaphors of death, language highlights the positive aspects of death, where death is regarded as, 'a journey', 'a form of rest', 'sleep', and 'an end of suffering', 'meeting the Creator' and 'joining the ancestors'. These metaphors, positive as they are, alleviate and mitigate the pain and impact associated with death and dying on the surviving relatives and friends. They do not alleviate the fear of death. Death and dying in Tshivenda are culturally met and discussed with positive language to console and uplift one another in the face of bereavement. The preceding discussion about the positive language used when discussing death makes death less of a feared taboo in Tshivenda culture. However, there is a contradiction in why conceptual metaphors of death focus on the negative aspect of death, yet language use highlights the positive aspect.

Conclusion

This study investigated the conceptual metaphors and euphemisms related to death as depicted on tombstones, utilising Lakoff and Johnson's (1980) CMT as the theoretical framework. The study's purpose was to investigate Tshivenda death-related conceptual metaphors depicted on tombstones to establish whether they alleviate pain and mitigate death's impact on those affected. The study revealed that CMT provides reliable tools for analysing how death, as the most feared taboo is treated in epitaphs. This study demonstrated that the CMT adequately accounts for euphemisms used to refer to the death taboo. It further provides important insights into the conceptual metaphors surrounding death taboos and how they are perceived and used. For this study, conceptual metaphors succeeded in mitigating and alleviating the pain and the impact of death, not fear of death for those left behind. The study further concludes that the Vhavenḁa, and other African people in general, use euphemisms when discussing death issues to avoid social ills that may befall the relatives of the dead if they do not respect and appease them because it is believed that the dead are transformed into spiritual beings, the ancestors, who have the power to bless and curse the living. The analysis in this study is by no means thorough; further research is needed to investigate why conceptual metaphors of death emphasise the negative features of death, while language use emphasises the positive aspects.

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