

THE CONCEPT OF DEATH IN BRITISH WORLDVIEW: VERBAL AND TEXTUAL MANIFESTATIONS

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Abstract. *This article focuses on investigating DEATH as a concept in its verbal and textual manifestations to provide insights into its lexicographic and textual portrayals. The notion of death, being one of the fundamental aspects of human existence, belongs to the category of universal concepts that are of paramount importance in the linguistic domain of every society. The present study employs lexicographic sources and the British literature discourse of the 20th and 21st centuries to analyse the definitions of the respective lexeme and its contextual usage.*

The results show that the core of DEATH is represented by the following semantic features: "end of all functions of life", "a murder or killing," "termination," "destruction," "experience considered as terrible as death," "a personification of death," "a cause of death," "loss or absence of spiritual life," "massacre," "a state of being dead". The article explores how linguistic devices related to the concept of death are structured and employed in the British discourse.

The concept of death is verbalized through a range of linguistic elements, including different parts of speech such as verbs, nouns, adjectives, as well as expressions and euphemisms.

Key words: *concept, death, British literature discourse, conceptual features, core of the concept.*

Introduction

The central focus of cognitive linguistics and linguocultural studies revolves around the concept, which has recently garnered significant attention from scholars and researchers (V. Levitsky, O. Selivanova, S. Zhabotynska, V. Maslova, Geeraerts and others). Concepts not only encapsulate the individual knowledge within a language community but also embody the broader national and cultural experiences of the entire linguistic community.

The assumption that linguistic meaning is closely interwoven with our experiences suggests that "meaning is experientially rooted or grounded". The meaning that is shaped through language is "not a separate and independent module of the mind, but it reflects our overall experience as human beings" (Geeraerts 2006, p. 30). It also concerns the meaning of such a phenomenon as death related to the respective concept.

The concept of DEATH has been experimentally verified by an associative experiment, where various verbal metaphors for death were identified in six languages and subsequently classified into four conceptual metaphors comparing death with a journey, the end, a rest and a summons (Gathigia et al. 2008).

Maan Aubed investigated the death euphemisms in Arabic and English and concluded that this concept is characterized by universality, as death taboos exist in nearly all nations, and culture specificity, as different cultures possess different euphemisms related to death (Aubed, 2011).

Fernandes shed light on the conceptual metaphorization of death based Victorian obituaries. The research findings show that most metaphors portrayed death as a desirable outcome during Victorian times that was influenced by Christian beliefs (Fernandes, 2006).

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Davydova examined a synonymous group of death-related lexical items, delved into the fundamental structure and conceptual elements in English. The research results imply that the core of the DEATH concept comprises the following semantic features: “end,” “destruction,” “loss,” “fear,” and “devastation.” (Davydova, 2023).

Despite numerous studies (M. Aube, T. Davydova, E. Fernández, M. Gathigia et al., J. Ruiz) devoted to the conceptual components of death, research on how the British nation perceives death through the lens of the British literature in the 20th and 21st centuries discourse remains unexplored. This study is aimed to fill in this gap by shedding light on representation of conceptual features in the British literature, identification of the most prevalent and thus, culturally relevant features for the British linguistic domain.

Materials and methods

The research material comprises lexicographic sources (Cambridge English Dictionary, Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English, Macmillan English Dictionary, Oxford English Dictionary) and the texts of fiction prose sourced from the British National Corpus.

The first step was to examine the dictionary definitions of the lexeme “death”, which allows to elicit fixed lexical variations in the collective consciousness of the British. Component analysis is an approach used to elucidate the structural arrangement of meaning by representing it as a collection of fundamental semantic elements. Each of these elements fulfills a specific role and is interconnected through distinct hierarchical connections (Ballard, p. 230). According to V.V. Levytskyi, this process involves deconstructing lexical meaning into its elementary content units (Conrad, p. 85). Definitional and component analyses were employed to ascertain the fundamental meanings associated with a concept's name. These methods aid in the differentiation of semantic elements within the meanings of the lexeme. The contextual analysis was also used to explore the way the most significant meanings were conveyed in literature discourse of the 20th and 21st centuries using various parts of speech and expressions.

Discussion and results

The analysis of the dictionary definitions of the lexeme death makes it possible to identify the conceptual features. According to the explanatory dictionaries (Cambridge English Dictionary, Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English, Macmillan English Dictionary, Oxford English Dictionary), DEATH exhibits the following lexical-semantic variations:

1. the permanent end of all functions of life in an organism or some of its cellular components;
2. a murder or killing;
3. termination;
4. destruction;
5. a state of affairs or an experience considered as terrible as death;
6. a personification of death, usually a skeleton or an old man holding a scythe;
7. a cause of death;
8. loss or absence of spiritual life;
9. massacre;
10. a state of being dead.

1. The process of dying and state of being dead are distinguished in the English language. Based on the analysis of explanatory dictionaries, the primary definition of death is “the permanent end of all functions of life in an organism or some of its cellular components”, is verbalised through verbs and phraseological units in British literature discourse.

A diverse array of verbs exists to signify the cessation of life in an organism: *to die* (*He was certain that many of the prisoners would soon die*, (Ballard, 2008), *to croak* (*If I was sensitive about that I'd've croaked years ago* (Barker, 2008), , *to perish* (*In the beginning of*

the book is a *precis* of general instructions regarding the propagation of evils which all decent men thought had perished in Sodom and Lesbia (Barker, 2008), to *succumb* (Rosie had resisted being taken to hospital, and had duly succumbed to shock (Bernières, 2016).

In British English, people often employ a wide range of euphemisms when referring to the act of dying, such as “to pass away,” (a) “to go,” (b) “to depart” (c) indicating a preference for indirect or softened expressions instead of the direct mention of death:

a. He drifted into unconsciousness at 8.45 on Friday, and he passed away not long afterwards [Bernières 2016].

b. Mrs. Verloc's mother having parted for good from her children had also departed this life [Conrad 1994].

c. If I could have one wish before I went it would be for a small glass of water [Faulks 1994].

The phraseological units found in literary works often incorporate lexemes such as “heaven,” “ghost,” and “the Styx,” which underscores the significant role of religion for British society: *to go to heaven* (It was a beautiful death she made. She just smiled and went to heaven), *to give one's life* (the notion that his son gave his life gloriously for king and country – was sullied by the fact that my brother had perished in a particularly infamous manoeuvre), *give up the ghost* (The reminder that the war was nearly over seemed to encourage some people to give up the ghost (Ballard, 2008), *to see off across the Styx* (<...> he was no longer tormented by the looming faces of the countless dead that he had seen off across the Styx (Bernières, 2016).

2. The interpretation of death also refers to the consequences resulting from the irreversible termination of all vital functions in an organism, indicating the state of being dead. This lexical-semantic variation is conveyed through the use of such parts of speech, as adjectives: *dead* (All around them were the bodies of dead Chinese soldiers (Ballard, 2008), *deceased* (I check names against the list and write Deceased in a firm bold hand in the top left-hand corner (Barker, 2014), *departed* (he was tempted to stay there, sleeping quietly in the bedroom of his departed friend until the war was over (Ballard, 2008), *lifeless, cold* (though his body lay in the ditch right by me, cold and lifeless (Farrar-Hockley, 1955); nouns: *dead* (Once again Jim was struck by the contrast between the impersonal bodies of the newly dead, whom he saw every day in Shanghai, and these sun-warmed skeletons (Ballard, 2008), *cadaver* (A laborious business, made more so by the need to duplicate the wounds of two patients on every cadaver (Barker, 2008), *corpse* (On one corpse there was still a bottle (Faulks, 1994), *remains* (They passed the remains of a convoy that had been attacked by the Mustang and Lightning fighters (Ballard, 2008);

expressions: *to be in grave* (To take up with another woman when my sister Maud was only two years in her grave (Barry, 2002), *to rest in peace* (I shall call him Izmat after my own grandfather, may his soul rest in eternal peace (Forsyth, 2007).

3. The feature "killing" is frequently employed in the literature discourse of the 20th and 21st centuries that are marked by numerous wars worldwide. Unnatural death exhibits a strong association with acts of homicide and murder, indicating descriptions of mass casualties, drowning, violence, instantaneous killing, and suffocating. It is depicted through such linguistic forms as verbs: *to eradicate* (so that the breezes out from the Glen of Imail will not eradicate them entirely from the confines of the farm (Barker, 2008), *to drown* (He carried him for half a mile through Hyde Park and then drowned him in the Serpentine in full view of everybody on the banks (Barker, 2008), *to sacrifice* (Many of the prisoners had died, and anyone who sacrificed himself for the others soon died too (Ballard, 2008), *to dismember* (Worse than Jenkins's, crawling between the dismembered pieces of his friend's body to collect personal belongings to send back to the family? (Barker, 2008), *to murder* (There is always a trace left among the hens when one has been murdered (Barry, 2002), *to shoot down* (the first rumour was that he'd been shot down by the observer of an RE8 (Bernières, 2016), *to assassinate* (Until one day, carrying a letter from Mac, Spragge had knocked on her door and uncovered a plot to assassinate the Prime Minister (Barker, 2008), *to execute*

(All had been betrayed by Chinese villagers terrified of reprisals, handed over to the Japanese and executed (Ballard, 2008) and the collocation *to commit suicide* ('You commit suicide? ' asked Rosie (Bernières, 2016).

Moreover this meaning is expressed through nouns that can be categorized into two groups based on their semantics:

-nouns denoting the process of killing: *murder* (*It's still cold-blooded murder much of the time* (Bernières, 2016), *execution* (*to invent it as a method of execution* (Barker, 2008);

-nouns denoting the agent of killing or entity responsible for the act of killing: *murderer* (*Every one of us has to live with the knowledge that we were murderers* (Bernières, 2016), *gunman* (*Jim could see the bare-chested figure of the Chinese gunman with the black trousers and revolver belt* (Ballard, 2008).

4. Massacre can be viewed as a type of homicide of a large number of humans or animals indiscriminately and cruelly, and it is portrayed through a diverse range of lexical resources and expressions:

-verbs: *to decimate* (*Prior and Owen await the final battles in a war that has decimated a generation* (Barker, 2014), *to slaughter* (*At dawn they were woken by the screams of pigs being slaughtered* (Barker, 2014).

-nouns denoting the process of killing: *slaughter* (*I think it's morally wrong for young men to be sent out to slaughter each other* (Barker, 2008), *carnage* (*There was a moment's shocked silence, as if the childish gesture had indeed produced carnage* (Barker, 2008).

-nouns denoting the agent of killing: *manslaughterer* (*A manslaughterer, at the very least, said Mr McCosh.* (Bernières, 2016).

5. Furthermore, death signifies termination or cessation. The lexemes *to pass away* and *to fade* are used to encompass the cessation of feelings, emotions and hopes: *Will they hold in their hearts the love I have for them, or will it all pass away like all the things of childhood?* (Barry, 2002). *Then he caught Burr's eye, and the hope faded* (le Carré, 1993).

6. Death is likened to a form of destruction, where not only inanimate objects or buildings can be demolished, but also living individuals, especially those marked by negative attributes, such as sinners, and non-believers: *In that instance the doctors of the law had declared that the Almighty would pardon the removal of His temple for the destruction of His enemies. But at Krishnapur it was for the protection, not the destruction of unbelievers that the mosque was to be demolished* (Farrell, 1976).

7. Sometimes individuals find themselves facing circumstances or challenges that can be likened to the very concept of death, appearing just as horrible. For example, the ravages of war are usually regarded as horrific as death itself: *Or maybe war so terrible that the prospect of death entices* (Bernières, 2016).

8. The cause or origin of death can be indicated within the context, typically introduced by the prepositions "of" or "from" in combination with the verb "to die": *He knew that the private had died of the same fever that he and many of the prisoners had caught* (Ballard, 2008).

9. The definition "loss of spiritual life" that implies an absence of inner vitality, is sparsely verbalized in the British literature discourse novels. It is exemplified in the following sentence: *If his soul had been unable to escape, and had died within him, would feeding his body engorge it like the corpses in the hospital?* (Ballard, 2008).

10. The Grim Reaper stands as the most prevalent personification of death: *I closed my eyes and spurred my horse forward, my huge sword rising and falling as if I was the Grim Reaper himself.*

This spectral figure is typically depicted as a skeletal being clad in dark attire, complete with a hood and a scythe. This iconic representation of death emerged in Europe during the 14th century, coinciding with the outbreak of one of the most devastating plague pandemics of that era.

Conclusions and prospects

Definitional and component analyses have enabled the identification of the conceptual features of DEATH: “end of all functions of life,” “a murder or killing,” “termination,” “destruction,” “experience considered as terrible as death,” “a personification of death,” “a cause of death,” “loss or absence of spiritual life,” “massacre,” “a state of being dead”.

A contextual examination of conceptual attributes manifested in the British literature discourse of the 20th and 21st centuries reveals that the verbalisation of DEATH occurs through a variety of linguistic means, primarily via synonymous sequences of words, with a focus on verbs as they encompass the action of dying. However, nouns, adjectives, and phraseological units also play a significant role in expressing the concept of death. In British literary discourse, euphemisms are frequently employed to avoid direct reference to death.

The findings make an important contribution to our understanding of how the British interpret and perceive DEATH based on the British literature of the 20th and 21st centuries. Nevertheless, further research is necessary to explore this concept in a comparative aspect with German and American worldviews.

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