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Euphemisms and dysphemisms as linguistic means of coping with the taboo of death

Eufemizmy i dysfemizmy zastępujące pojęcie śmierci w języku angielskim

The concept of language taboo

Language or verbal taboo has its roots in the magical use of language: the idea that certain words can control people, objects and spirits, since language has always been considered to contain special powers and be able to cure sickness, keep evils away, bring good to oneself and harm to an enemy (hence the use of magical formulae, incantations, swearwords, etc.). In the contemporary society, language taboo refers to certain acts, persons, creatures, objects, or relationships which "society wishes to avoid – and thus to the language used to talk about them"[1]. McArthur defines taboo as something that is not to be mentioned "because it is ineffably holy or unspeakably vulgar"[2]; in result, words relating to taboo topics have been stigmatized as bad or foul language, banned in polite conversations, and particularly in print. According to Wardhaugh, "taboo is the prohibition or avoidance in any society of behavior believed to be harmful to its members in that it would cause them anxiety, embarrassment, or shame"[3]. It can be concluded that language taboo is connected with polite-

[1] D. Crystal, *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Language*, Cambridge 1987, pp. 8-9.
[2] T. McArthur, *Concise Oxford Companion to the English Language*, Oxford 2005, p. 599.
[3] R. Wardhaugh, *An Introduction to Sociolinguistics*, Oxford 2006, p. 239.

ness: certain things cannot be said or talked about, others can be referred to only in certain circumstances (for instance, only by certain people or in certain situations), or in a special manner (that is by employing specific discourse).

While the traditional language taboos resulting from fear of the unknown or supernatural can be referred to as the "taboo of fear", and as Stanisław Widłak[4] or Anna Dąbrowska[5], argue, can be viewed as the primary taboo, as it is derived from religion; in the case of modern taboos, which are related to constraints resulting from politeness, they can be referred to as "the taboo of delicacy" and "the taboo of propriety". The former is concerned with "a general tendency to avoid direct reference to unpleasant subjects"[6], such as death, suicide, miscarriage, diseases (particularly mental or venereal), disabilities – in particular if those aspects concern the speakers themselves or their families; the latter (also called "the taboo of decency") does not allow for naming certain bodily functions (e.g. defecation, farting), certain parts of human body (e.g. genitalia or female breasts), sexual behavior (e.g. copulation, masturbation, bisexuality, homosexuality, prostitution), certain places (e.g. lavatories, prisons, brothels), certain elements of clothing (underwear), lest the hearer/reader should be offended or shocked.

Finally, it is to be pointed out that variability in the attitudes towards taboos, including such topics as sex, religion or death, can be observed across cultural and temporal dimensions. As Allan and Burridge conclude, there is no absolute taboo since "every taboo must be specified for a particular community of people, for a specified context, at a given place and time"[7]. This principle will be illustrated with the presentation of the changing taboo of death.

Death as language taboo

The taboos of death can be associated with both types of taboos discussed by Ullmann. The primary and most fundamental reason for tabooing death seems to be fear of death. According to Allan and Burridge taboos of death are motivated by several

[4] S. Widłak, *Tabu i eufemizm w językach nowożytnych,* [w:] „Biuletyn Polskiego Towarzystwa Językoznawczego" 1964, t. XXII, pp. 89-102.

[5] A. Dąbrowska, *Eufemizmy współczesnego języka polskiego,* Wrocław 1994.

[6] S. Ullmann, *Semantics: An Introduction to the Science of Meaning*, Oxford 1970.

[7] K. Allan, K. Burridge, *Forbidden Words: Taboo and the Censoring of Language*, Cambridge 2006, p. 11.

types of fears, which they summarize as the fear of "our finiteness": (1) fear of the loss of loved ones, (2) fear of the corruption and disintegration of the body, (3) fear that death is the end of life, (4) fear of malevolent spirits or of the souls of the dead, (5) fear of a meaningless death, (6) fear of what follows the end of life[8]. Everyone knows that death is the only inevitable event in his/her life; the only uncertainty is when and how it will happen. The scholars argue that modern society does everything to avoid death and anyone tainted by it, and by doing so we largely expel it from our consciousness and suppress any direct reference to it. It is hospitals and hospices that care for the terminally sick and dying, who less and less frequently die at home; it is a funeral industry that is to dispose of the deceased, who first are to undergo a series of embalming procedures, only to be cremated afterwards, as cremation seems to be quickest and "cleanest" method of removing the remains – and, in the extreme case, the ashes are scattered, which obviously excludes the possibility to visit the gravesite.

As Jamet claims, it is the unique phenomenon that triggers fear, for everyone experiences it only once:

> […] and the first time is also the last; in addition, it is certainly because the Grim Reaper often strikes without warning, at random. More than a secret, death is a mystery […] Man has no control over his/her death, which certainly explains why death is tabooed and spoken of euphemistically. Death is the ultimate non-sense which nevertheless gives meaning to life[9].

Additionally, mentioning or discussing death violates the taboo of propriety (decency). It was a British anthropologist Geoffrey Gorer who coined the phrase "the pornography of death". His essay under the same title, published in 1955, is frequently referred to as the first and most accurate criticism of the omnipresent taboo of death in contemporary Western culture[10]. Gorer contrasts the Victorian and modern attitudes to sexuality and death, arguing that pornography is traditionally related to all aspects of sexuality, which was the most powerful taboo in Victorian times.

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[8] K. Allan, K. Burridge, *Euphemisms and Dysphemisms: Language Used as Shield and Weapon,* New York 1991, p. 159.

[9] D. Jamet, *Euphemisms for Death: Reinventing Reality through Words,* [on:] http://www.academia.edu/5589274/Euphemisms_for_Death_Reinventing_Reality_through_Words (18.10.2015).

[10] G. Gorer, *The pornography of death,* [in:] "Encounter" 1955, Oct., pp. 49-52.

Death, on the contrary, was none. It used to be a commonly experienced and accepted phenomenon. Nowadays, the situation is reversed: sex has become a more and more "mentionable" topic, and death, particularly from natural causes, has become more and more "unmentionable". Thus, according to Gorer, it can be concluded that the more society has been liberated from the Victorian constraints concerning sex, the more it has rejected all issues that have to do with death.

Linguistic means of coping with the taboo of death: euphemisms and dysphemisms

Since death, being a most fundamental and unavoidable human experience, is considered to be such an "unmentionable" topic in modern society, there have to be linguistic means of coping with the reality of death. They can be divided into two major contrastive categories: euphemisms and dysphemisms.

Traditionally, both major British and American dictionaries define euphemism as "that figure of speech which consists in the substitution of a word or expression of comparatively favorable expression or less unpleasant associations, instead of harsher or more offensive one that would more precisely design what is intended"[11] or "(1) the substitution of an agreeable or inoffensive word or expression for one that is harsh, indirect or otherwise unpleasant or taboo, allusion to an offensive thing by an inoffensive expression, contrasted with dysphemism; (2) a polite, tactful, or less explicit term used to avoid the direct naming of an unpleasant, painful or frightening reality"[12]. Although both definitions overlap, the authors of *Oxford English Dictionary* seem to have followed the rhetoric tradition without alluding to the concept of taboo, which is referred to by those of *Webster's Third*; it is the second part of their definition that can admittedly be employed while dealing with death – an unpleasant, painful or frightening reality.

In other sources of general reference, the euphemism is defined in a similar manner, for instance, as a "mild, comforting, or evasive expression that takes the place of one that is taboo, negative, offensive, or too direct"[13].

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[11] *Oxford English Dictionary* (2nd edition), Oxford 1989, Vol. V, p. 436.
[12] *Webster's Third New International Dictionary,* Cambridge, Mass. 1961, p. 784.
[13] T. Mc Arthur, *Concise Oxford Companion to the English Language, op. cit.,* p. 223.

Contemporary linguists perceive euphemisms differently, emphasizing their role in the process of communication; for instance, Allan and Burridge employ Erving Goffman's concept of face, and state: "A euphemism is used as an alternative to a dispreferred expression, in order to avoid possible loss of face: either one's own face or, through giving offense, that of the audience, or of some third party"; furthermore, euphemisms are "a deodorizing spray and perfume" of language"[14], since euphemistic language is directly linked with the notion of politeness, the concept which is affected by a number of factors, including "the relationship between speakers, their audience, and anyone within earshot; the subject matter; the situation (setting); and whether a spoken or written medium is used"[15]. Likewise, Jamet argues that euphemism is not only the matter of stylistic or lexical choice, but also a functional one: it is used by speakers (1) to soften the potentially offensive effects of a taboo, (2) to preserve social harmony in communication, and (3) to avoid any face-threatening acts[16].

Euphemisms are so commonly used and so "deeply embedded in our language that few of us, even those who pride themselves on being plainspoken, ever get through a day without using them"[17]. Yet, despite their frequent use, sooner or later they lose their euphemistic qualities, as they undergo the semantic change (pejoration), and after some time each new euphemism becomes in turn as explicit as its predecessor and has to be replaced with a new one. Referred to as 'euphemism treadmill' by Steven Pinker, the process can be explained as continuous human attempt to invent new polite words to refer to emotionally laden or distasteful things; yet "the euphemism becomes tainted by association and the new one that must be found acquires its own negative connotations"[18]. This diachronic process, can be observed, for instance, while analyzing the lexical changes connected with the concepts of funeral parlor or undertaker.

Since euphemisms are closely related to socio-cultural context, any dramatic historical event may result in an euphemism appearing and then becoming archaic or obsolete; as a consequence it may disappear from everyday use, as in the case of the periphrastic expression substituting the verb 'to be killed in action': 'to be a land-

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[14] K. Allan, K. Burridge, *Euphemisms and Dysphemisms: Language Used as Shield and Weapon, op. cit.,* pp. 11, 25.

[15] K. Allan, K. Burridge, *Forbidden Words: Taboo and the Censoring of Language,op. cit*., p. 31.

[16] D. Jamet, *Euphemisms for Death: Reinventing Reality through Words, op. cit.*

[17] H. Rawson, *Wicked Words*, New York 1989.

[18] S. Pinker, *The Game of the Name,* [in:] "The New York Times" April 3, 1994.

owner in France'. Coined in the time of the Great War yet incomprehensible today, it referred to British soldiers killed and buried in France.

The taboo of death can be, however, dealt with in the opposite way: as it is so frightening an experience, it should be ridiculed and laughed at. To do so, a language employs dysphemisms, which are defined as "an expression with connotations that are offensive either about the denotatum or to the audience, or both, and it is substituted for a neutral or euphemistic expression for just that reason"[19]. If a dysphemism is particularly negative and/or offensive, it can be referred to as cacophemism.

Allan and Burridge have coined two new terms: the orthophemism, which accounts for direct or neuter expressions that are neither "sweet-sounding, evasive or overly polite (euphemistic), nor harsh, blunt or offensive (dysphemistic)"[20], and the X-phemism, being a set of euphemisms, dysphemisms and orthophemisms denoting the same concept but used in different styles or contexts (see Table 1), Thus, having the same denotation but different connotations, they display cross-varietal synonymy, the phenomenon discussed below, in the concluding section, devoted to funeralese and undertakers' slang.

Table 1.

Selected examples of death-related X-phemisms in English[21]

X-phemism		
euphemisms	**orthophemisms**	**dysphemisms**
demise	death	the Grim Monster/ Reaper
depart, decease, expire, perish	die	kick the bucket, kiss the dust,
deceased, defunct	dead	croaked, gone cold, stiff
(mortal) remains, the loved one,	corpse	cold meat, food for worms
cremains	ashes	dust
casket	coffin	bone box, wooden suit, cold box
entombment	funeral, burial	cold meat party

[19] K. Allan, K. Burridge, *Forbidden Words: Taboo and the Censoring of Language*, *op. cit*., p. 26.
[20] *Ibidem*.
[21] Based on *Ibidem.*

mortician, funeral director	undertaker	black operator
slumber room	morgue	icebox
invalid coach	hearse	cold meat cart
memorial park/garden	cemetery, graveyard,	boneyard, skeleton park,
final resting place/estate	grave, tomb	deep six, dustbin
euthanasia, palliative sedation	mercy killing	pulling the plug on

Classification of linguistic means of expressing euphemisms and dysphemisms

Linguistic euphemistic means are much diversified as they encompass all the levels of language. Following the detailed classification of linguistic means of expressing euphemisms and dysphemisms proposed by Dąbrowska, we can distinguish six categories that classify devices used to create death-related euphemisms and dysphemisms in English; they are ordered following their supposed level of significance and frequency: (1) semantic devices, (2) lexical devices, (3) morphological devices, (4) phonological devices, (5) syntactic devices, (6) graphic devices[22]. The lexical material analyzed here comes from *Roget's Thesaurus*[23], Pound[24], Neaman and Silver[25], Holder[26], Allan and Burridge[27], Crespo Fernandez[28] and Jamet[29].

1. Semantic devices

Metaphor. Metaphors of death seem to be the most commonly used euphemistic device. They have been studied thoroughly, yet various classifications are offered, for example:

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[22] A. Dąbrowska, *Eufemizmy współczesnego języka polskiego, op.cit.,* pp. 262-268.

[23] *Roget's International Thesaurus of English Words and Phrases,* New York 1922.

[24] L. Pound, *American Euphemisms for Dying, Death, and Burial: An Anthology,* [in:] "American Speech" 1936, Vol. XI (3), pp. 195-202.

[25] J. Neaman, C.G. Silver, *Kind Words: a Thesaurus of Euphemisms,* New York 1983.

[26] R.W. Holder, *A Dictionary of Euphemisms,* New York 1995.

[27] K. Allan, K. Burridge, *Forbidden Words: Taboo and the Censoring of Language, op. cit.* and *Euphemisms and Dysphemisms: Language Used as Shield and Weapon, op. cit.*

[28] E. Crespo Fernández, *The language of death: Euphemism and conceptual metaphorization in Victorian obituaries*, "SKY Journal of Linguistics" 2006, Vol. 19, pp.101-130.

[29] D. Jamet, *Euphemisms for Death: Reinventing Reality through Words, op. cit.*

DEATH IS A JOURNEY, DEATH IS A JOYFUL LIFE, DEATH IS A REST, DEATH IS A REWARD, DEATH IS THE END, and DEATH IS A LOSS[30]

DEATH AS LOSS, DEATH AS WORRIES ABOUT THE SOUL, DEATH AS A JOURNEY, and DEATH AS BEGINNING OF NEW LIFE[31]

DEATH AS MOVEMENT, DEATH AS DOWNWARD MOVEMENT, DEATH AS A SLEEP, DEATH AS A LOSS, DEATH AS SURRENDER, DEATH AS LIGHT GONE OUT and DEATH AS END-POINT[32].

Having analyzed the lexical material we can argue that commonest English metaphors of death include the following:

DEATH AS A JOURNEY – death is understood in terms of a journey: a departure from this world (the dying process as the act of leaving) and a spiritual destination (the encounter God in Heaven, eternal stay in a better place). This metaphor is deeply rooted in ancient mythologies and religions and can be exemplified by the verbs 'depart' (and its collocations: 'depart this life', 'depart out of this world'), 'pass' (and phrasal verbs like 'pass away/over/out/on') 'pass off the earth', 'pass into the next world), 'go' used to describe the actual process of dying: 'one is going' and its effect 'one is gone', or with a prepositional phrase denoting destination: 'go to Heaven,' 'go to a better place', 'go to one's rest', 'go to one's reward', 'go West' (in many mythologies souls of the dead were supposed to go westwards), biblical 'go the way of all flesh'[33], 'go to the happy hunting ground' (supposedly borrowed from Native American mythology), 'go up the gate' (i.e. the gate of a cemetery) and 'go up the chimney' (used in Nazi death camps); other rarer verbs include 'come' (in expressions: 'come to one's resting place' and 'come to the end of the road'), and 'enter' (in 'enter the next world'). On their way there they may 'cross over the river Jordan/Styx'. Since the dead, euphemistically referred to as 'deceased' (from Latin *decedere* 'go away, depart' – its participle *decessus* was used in Latin as an euphemism for *mors*) or 'departed' (from Old French *departir* 'divide', 'depart'), go away from this world,

[30] Based on the analysis of a sample of 228 Victorian obituaries published in two Irish newspapers in the 1840s (E. Crespo Fernández, *The language of death: Euphemism and conceptual metaphorization in Victorian obituaries, op. cit.*).

[31] Based on the analysis of 536 death notices published in *Melbourne Sun* in 1988 (K. Allan, K. Burridge, *Euphemisms and Dysphemisms: Language Used as Shield and Weapon, op. cit.*).

[32] Based on lexicographic analysis of contemporary English (B. Bultnick, *Metaphors We Die By: Conceptualizations of Death in English and their Implications for the Theory of Metaphor*, Antwerpen 1998).

[33] III Kings 2:3.

by doing so they 'leave behind' their survivors. It should also be pointed out that the root of the word 'obituary,' *obit* meant 'goes to/toward' in Classical Latin, and *obitus* 'departure' or 'encounter' was euphemistically used while talking about death (c.f. *mortem obire* 'to meet death').

DEATH AS A FALL/DEATH AS DOWNWARD MOVEMENT – it is usually connected with the verb 'fall' being used in the context of military service and death in battle (hence 'the fallen' i.e. those killed on military service). This metaphor also employs other verbs that denote movement downwards: 'go under' and 'drop' ('drop dead,' 'drop off,' 'drop in one's tracks' i.e. die suddenly), as well as prepositional phases referring to the position of a dead person: 'down' ('down for good') and 'under' ('under the daisies,' 'under the grass').

DEATH AS A LOSS – death is viewed from the perspective of survivors, who focus on its negative results. Since life is believed to be a most precious and valuable 'object,' death equals its painful and irretrievable loss. Life can be 'taken away' by fate or God. Consequently, the living mourn their 'loss.' The concept of 'losing' a person, who is to be 'missed' is therefore commonly found in oral condolences and condolence notices: 'Condolences for your tragic loss,' or 'Condolences on the loss of your …,' and 'We will miss him/her'.

DEATH AS A SLEEP/REST – death is conceptualized as sleep, which implies that it is temporary as the dead is to expect resurrection, or a time of peaceful rest after hard earthly life. The origins of this metaphor can be traced to Greek mythology: Hypnos, the god of sleep was the brother of Thanatos, the personification of death. Allan and Burridge, who refer to it as the metaphor of DEATH AS WORRIES ABOUT THE SOUL, argue:

> Activity in animals and humans is explained by the presence of a soul in the body; sleep and death indicate its absence – which is why sleep is a frequent euphemism for death. In sleep, the soul's absence is only temporary but on death, the soul vacates the body forever; and a soul without a body to reside in must be laid to rest somehow, lest it become distressed and trouble the living[34].

[34] K. Allan, K. Burridge, *Forbidden Words: Taboo and the Censoring of Language*, *op. cit*., p. 225.

Hence the euphemisms used in inscriptions to be found on tomb stones: 'here sleeps…,' 'here rests…..,' '… is asleep in Jesus,' 'rest in peace' (and its Latin equivalent, *requiescere in pace*, abbreviated to *R.I.P.*). The dead are 'put/laid to rest'; they 'sleep peacefully,' or 'repose in God' in a 'resting place.' That metaphor was commonly employed by Victorian obituarists: 'rest in Him' (i.e. God), 'eternal rest,' 'fall asleep in Christ,' 'rest from the labours of a well spent life' and 'rest on the merits of one's Saviour'[35].

DEATH AS A REWARD/DEATH AS BEGINNING/DEATH AS NEW LIFE – this metaphor is strictly connected with religious beliefs: death is perceived as a reward after having led a life full of virtues. It may overlap with the metaphor of DEATH AS A REST and likewise was popular with the Victorians, as Crespo Fernandez argues, citing such circumlocutions from Victorian obituaries: 'enjoyment of the fruits of a well spent life,' 'enjoyment of that peace and bliss that await the virtuous and the good' or 'blissful reward in the world of unending glory'[36]. The dead are 'in Heaven,' 'with the Lord/God' 'in Abraham's bosom'[37], 'in the arms of Jesus/the Lord/one's Maker'; similarly, they 'meet the Maker/Prophet,' or are 'promoted to Glory' (the term used by the Salvation Army). Such metaphors are used especially by members of various denominations: they have confidence that death is not the end, hence 'afterlife' or 'eternal life/glory'. According to a popular belief (and what children are often told), the dead are alive in heaven with angels, their predecessors ('gathered to one's fathers') or 'join the immortals.' Or, as a Jewish mourning prayer says, 'their names are inscribed in the Book of Life'.

DEATH AS THE END – death is viewed as the ultimate end of the process of life; thus there are a number of expressions that include the word 'last': 'last call,' 'last end,' 'last voyage/journey,' 'last resting place,' 'last debt' (and a related phrase; the dead 'pay the debt of nature'). In a similar manner, soldier's death is referred to with the following expressions: 'make the ultimate sacrifice,' 'fire his last shot' and 'be present at/answer the last roll call/muster'. Obituarists frequently refer to the favorite activities of the dead, stating that it was the last time they did it, thus a cricketer "pulled up the stumps for the last time", and a gambler "finally cashed in his chips".

[35] E. Crespo Fernández, *The language of death: Euphemism and conceptual metaphorization in Victorian obituaries, op. cit.,* p. 121.

[36] *Ibidem*.

[37] Luke 16:22.

Metonymy. Metonymies of death are directly related with metaphors discussed above. For instance, in the aforementioned metaphor of DEATH AS THE END, the concept of death is replaced with one of its physiological effects: 'breath one's last' (cf. 'expire' from Latin *expirare*, which meant both 'breath out' and 'die'), 'bring one's heart to its final pause', 'close one's eyes for the last time', or images commonly attributed to the behavior of a dying person: 'turn up one's toes' or 'turn one's face to the wall'.

Simile. In dysphemistic colloquial language or slang, a dead person can be compared to an extinct animal ('dead as a dodo'), a permanently fixed object ('dead as a doornail/doorknob'), an inanimate, that is lifeless, object ('dead as stone/wood') or piece of meat or fish – a creature that used to live ('dead as mutton/pickled herring').

Circumlocution or periphrasis. This elaborate, wordy and indirect way of referring to death seems to have grown in popularity in modern times. As Jamet comments on its usage: "…there seems to be a dilution of the signifier [death], as if it was one of the most useful ways of diluting its threatening effect too. The longer the mitigating euphemistic expression, the more polite it is expected to be. Therefore, proper manners and politeness require to disguise death, its circumstances and the dead: death can be described in medical jargon as 'negative patient care outcome', the dead are referred to as 'the loved ones'[38] (cf. the title of a satirical novel *The Loved On. An Anglo-American Tragedy* by Evelyn Waugh, depicting funeral business in Los Angeles), who are buried in their 'final resting place' (i.e. grave) situated in one of 'Forest Lawn Memorial Parks' (the chain of corporation-owned cemeteries in California). There, a grave that was purchased before death may be referred to as a 'pre-need memorial estate', as contrasted with the 'in-need' one, bought just before the funeral). In a professional jargon, a physician or solicitor may advise a patient that suffers from a terminal illness by saying 'I think it's time you got your affairs in order'.

Nevertheless, that tradition is not new: it is rooted in the pompous style of Victorian obituaries, where the dead was said to have been 'called by the will of the Almighty before his throne of mercy', 'cut away in the bloom of life', or 'carried off in the prime of time'.

Meiosis: The grim aspects of unavoidable phenomenon such as death can be understated and ridiculed; thus implying its lesser significance. Hence numerous hu-

[38] D. Jamet, *Euphemisms for Death: Reinventing Reality through Words, op. cit.*

moristic expressions, used predominantly in colloquial language, e.g. 'push up/count daisies,' 'buy one-way ticket,' 'kick the bucket,' 'quit the scene' or 'pay a visit to St. Peter', and in the discourses of those occupations in which violent death involving killing or murdering is commonly experienced, that is in the slang of soldiers (e.g. 'to go home in a box') gangsters (e.g. 'take someone for a one-way ride') or prisoners, who coined numerous expressions describing the death penalty (e.g. 'do a dance in mid-air,' 'put on the hempen collar/necktie,' used for hanging or 'fry/burn in a chair,' 'take the electric cure' for electrocution), and for whom death is 'the last getaway.' The favorite American term for the coffin – 'casket' seems to be literally a genuine meiosis, as it originally meant a small case for jewels.

Oxymoron. Death can be viewed as a paradox, incomprehensible contradiction; for instance in the case of the metaphors of DEATH AS BEGINNING or DEATH AS NEW LIFE, in which the dead or dying person is 'born into eternal life' or 'lives in Jesus'.

Personification and animalization. Personification of death can be regarded as a kind of metaphor in which the abstract, non-human concept of death is identified with a human figure. As death has been personified since the antiquity, its numerous personifications found in the English language (as well as in literature and art) include: 'the Great Leveller' (the image originating in the Middle Ages: neither rank nor wealth do not protect anyone from death) and 'the Grim Reaper,' the image of an old man with a scythe that cuts down people. Animalized death is a much rarer phenomenon: the commonest image is that of 'Pale Horse', which is the shortened version of a 'Rider on a Pale Horse,' originating from the biblical depiction of death riding a pale horse[39].

2. Lexical devices

Loan words and technical terms. Since borrowings from Latin, Greek or French are generally supposed to be more abstract and less emotional, their use not only increases the formality of the utterance, but also helps deprive it of highly emotional connotations. This is why the loan verbs from French, Latin (or Latin through Old French) replacing 'die', such as 'depart', 'decease', 'expire' and 'perish', or 'inter' substituting 'bury', and the noun 'demise' as a synonym of 'death' are likely to occur

[39] Revelation 6:8.

in formal and solemn contexts of funeral ceremonies and post-mortem rites. Latin terms for 'death' *mors, mortis* and 'die' *mori* gave English adjectives 'moribund' (Latin *moribundus* 'dying') and 'post-mortem', as well as nouns: 'mortician' (see also Blending below) and 'mortuary' (Medieval Latin *mortuarium* from Classical Latin *mortuus* 'dead'), which replaced the earlier 'dead-house'. The Greek word *nekros* ('dead person') can be found in a number of compounds and blends, beginning with 'necro-', including 'necrology' (borrowed through Latin: *necrologium* 'register of death'), 'necropsy' ('autopsy'), and 'necropolis' (Greek *polis*, 'city'), whereas the word 'cemetery' itself derives from Classical Greek *koimoterion*, which originally meant 'dormitory' (cf. the metaphor of DEATH AS SLEEP).

Technical terms are predominantly used in jargons of those professionals (lawyers, police officers, physicians) who have to identify and define various causes of death by means of Latin and Greek loanwords, or of those, like undertakers, who have to deal with the corpse in a variety of ways; thus, an Old English 'burial' may be replaced with more specific terms: 'inhumement' (burial in earth) and 'entombment' (in a tomb), cremation can be followed by 'inurnment' (placement of ashes in an urn) and 'immurement' (disposal in a 'columbarium' or 'mausoleum'; originally the term meant death by locking a person within walls, though). Such terms were the subject of satire of Evelyn Waugh's fictional rendering of a cemetery representative's offer: "Normal disposal is by inhumement, entombment, inurnment or immurement, but many people just lately prefer insarcophagusment. That is very individual"[40]. Yet, since the publication of Waugh's novel other methods of corpse disposal have been recorded in English: 'promession' (freeze drying), 'resomation' (alkaline hydrolysis), which is alternatively called 'bio-' or 'green cremation,' or most recently – processing it into 'remember diamonds'[41].

Hyperonymy. The use of hyperonymy is related to that of metonymy; since death and dying are referred to by means of a vague term, it is the situational context that the proper understanding of a hyperonym in an utterance relies on. The word 'death' can be replaced with 'it,' 'that,' 'thing' 'fact,' 'anything,' as in the conditional clause: 'if anything should happen to me….' Their use seems to be one of the

[40] E. Waugh, *The Loved One. An Anglo-American Tragedy,* London 1948, p. 43.

[41] C. Raymond, *10 Unique Ways to Handle Cremated Remains.* "Dying about.com", [on:] http://dying.about.com/od/Funeral_Memorial_Planning/a/10-Unique-Ways-To-Handle-Cremated-Remains.html (08.05.2016).

commonest devices of the death-avoiding language, particularly in everyday conversations; the hyperonyms in the following examples, cited in Jamet, have been italicized: 'I was only 5 when he… when *it happened,*' I didn't think she would *do it'* (i.e. commit suicide), 'You don't have to *go through this* alone' (i.e. someone's death and mourning period)[42].

Antonymy. As 'life' is the antonym, of 'death,' death can be called 'the end of life.' In a similar manner, the term 'life insurance' is commonly used although it is claimed only after the insured person's death.

Collocations and compounds. Numerous metaphors are formed by replacing the single-word *denotatum* with a collocation; thus, since heavenly life is supposed to be superior to earthly one, the noun 'heaven' is replaced with the Adjective-Noun collocation, beginning with 'better': 'better place/country/world'. In a similar manner, as the temperature of a corpse is much lower than that of a living person, coldness is associated with death and the dead; which produces the following collocations: 'cold meat' (corpse), 'cold-cart' (hearse), 'cold cook' (mortician), 'cold storage' (grave) and 'cold-meat party' (funeral), where the double process (compounding and collocating) occurs. As coffin is made of wood, the term tends to be replaced with dysphemistic 'wooden box/suit/breeks/coat/overcoat,' 'tree suit' or 'timber breeches'[43]. Alternatively, in American funeral jargon it may be euphemistically called 'slumber box/cot' (derived from the metaphor of death as sleep); likewise compounds 'slumber room' (viewing room in a mortuary) or 'slumber robe' (shroud) have been coined.

3. Morphological devices

Abbreviations and acronyms. In order to avoid a taboo word only its first letter is used: in this manner 'death' is replaced with the phrase 'big D' (and it frequently results from 'big C,' i.e. cancer). Although the best known death-related acronym is 'R.I.P', euphemistically used acronyms can be also observed in medical jargon, e.g. 'DOA' that is 'dead on arrival,' or slang, as the following expression shows: 'He OD'ed' – he died from a drug overdose. Military jargon and slang also commonly use abbreviations and acronyms; for instance, NYR means 'Not Yet Returned' and refers

[42] D. Jamet, *Euphemisms for Death: Reinventing Reality through Words, op. cit.*

[43] Most of these collocations and compounds are obsolete; see R.W. Holder, *A Dictionary of Euphemisms, op. cit.* pp. 379, 408.

to missing pilots, presumably killed in action. In contemporary U.S. military slang, by means of an acronym based on NATO Phonetic Alphabet, 'dead' can be replaced with T.U. (pronounced as Tango Uniform), which stands for 'tits up'.

Blending. Although used infrequently, blending two terms of negative connotations can lead to produce a more euphemistic neologism: 'cremate + remains' = 'cremains', 'mortuary + physician' = 'mortician', 'electric' + 'execute' = 'electrocute'.

4. Phonological devices

Though used scarcely, phonological devices can be encountered in colloquial speech; they include the uses of **rhyming slang,** as in Cockney, where 'brown' means 'dead' (rhyme: 'brown bread' – 'dead'), **onomatopoeia**: in soldiers' slang, a soldier killed with a bullet is 'buzzed' (a word derived from onomatopoeic word 'buzz,' imitating the sound made by a passing bullet, similarly, someone who died 'went pfft' (the sound imitating flattening automobile tires). The jocular use involves **puns**: a corpse may be dysphemically described as 'diet of worms', the expression being a pun on the historical German Diet of Worms of 1521. Likewise, the conflating **homonyms** may produce humorous effect as in the sentence: 'At his funeral, four of his drinking companions carried the bier/beer'.

5. Syntactic devices

Use of Simple Past Tense. Using a verb in Simple Past Tense (and the copular 'be', in particular) may signify that the person being referred to is no longer alive: *My husband was such a wise man.*

Ellipsis. Ellipsis can be described as an ultimate euphemism: neither are the terms 'death' or 'died' used nor they are replaced with any euphemism. In their analysis of Australian death notices, Allan and Burridge have come across a number of notices in which the verb 'died' has been omitted; it is only because they are located in classified advertisements section headed "Died" or "In Memoriam" that their reader can find out that the subject died:

> SMITH (Ross), Frances Winifred. – On March 8 at Sherbrooke Private Nursing Home. Upper Ferntree Gully, aged 71 years[44].

[44] K. Allan, K. Burridge, *Forbidden Words: Taboo and the Censoring of Language*, *op. cit.*,p. 224.

6. Graphic devices

The commonest graphic device is the symbol of the cross, † meaning 'died in/on…' and used in tombstone inscriptions or in epitaphs, where it follows the date of a person's death, e.g.: 'John Smith 1850 †'.

Use of euphemisms and dysphemisms in death-related jargon and slang

Concluding this brief analysis of the taboo of death and linguistic means of avoiding it, we can observe how members of a profession for whom death is an everyday phenomenon cope with the taboo of death in dealing with in – and out-groupers. Therefore we will briefly analyze some samples of 'funarelese'.

> I am not an undertaker. He served his purpose and passed out of the picture. I am a funeral director. I am a Doctor of Services. We are members of a profession, just as truly as the lawyer, the doctor or the minister[45].

Those words, attributed to a member of National Funeral Directors Association and quoted by Jessica Mitford in her critical assessment of American funeral industry, illustrate the evolution of funeralese, the jargon used by the staff of funeral parlors. Its development has evolved since the 1940s and can be closely linked with the growing importance (and wealth) of that industry in post-war America, and with what Michel Vovelle, following Mitford, refers to as "the American way of dying"[46]. Mitford cites press releases issued by associations of funeral directors, who disliked the use of the term 'undertaker' in headlines, and criticized the New York Times for its "continuous insistence upon using the relatively obsolete and meaningless words 'undertaker' and 'coffin' to the exclusion of the more generally accepted and meaningful ones, 'funeral director' and 'casket'"[47]. Thus, funerals are 'conducted' or 'arranged' by 'funeral directors' in 'funeral parlors', and not any more by 'morticians'

[45] J. Mitford, *The American way of death revisited,* New York 2000, p. 155. [originally published as *The American way of death* in 1963].

[46] M. Vovelle, Śmierć w cywilizacji Zachodu: od roku 1300 po współczesność. [*La mort et l'Occident, de 1300 a` nos jours*], trans. T. Swoboda, Gdańsk 2008, pp. 657-661.

[47] J. Mitford, *The American way of death revisited, op. cit.,* p. 156.

or 'undertakers'. Before the funeral takes place, their staff first has to come to collect the corpse, which is referred to with the terms 'removal' or 'doing the contract'.

In funeralese, Pinker's euphemism treadmill operates in full. It can be observed that there is a strong tendency to continue substituting one euphemism with another; in this way the oldest euphemism, such as 'mortician' was replaced first with 'funeral undertaker', which was later euphemistically clipped to 'undertaker' to avoid the word 'funeral'. "Yet as early as in 1882, the 'undertaker' (still in use in Britain nowadays) gave way to 'funeral director'[48]; however, as Allan and Burridge argue, it is conceivable that the 'funeral director' "will one day be clipped to mere 'director', which will then follow 'undertaker' and become a taboo term[49]. Since the 1920s undertakers have been also referred to as 'bereavement counselors'; nowadays a mortician who treats a corpse with preservatives can be called an 'embalmer,' or 'embalming artist', and his workplace, where he prepares the body for the 'viewing' or 'visitation,' can be called a 'prep room.' Today mourners may choose another option: 'drive-thru viewing,' which allows to pay their last respects on the go (for three minutes) and sign a guest book, without leaving their car[50]. Funeral directors manage a 'funeral parlor', a 'funeral home' or even a 'funeral chapel'. Laderman argues that the commonly used term 'parlor' originates from the 19th century tradition of viewing (as well as preparing) a body in the parlor of a deceased person's house; such room in an early funeral house was often called 'slumber room' as it often resembled a bedroom[51]. In a similar manner, the term denoting a special room where the coffin (or preferably a 'casket') is chosen has undergone the following evolution: 'back room' > 'show room' > 'sales room' > 'casket display room' > 'casket room' > 'selection room'[52]. Yet, it must be stated that the title of the leading funeral industry trade journal in the U.S.A., *Mortuary Management,* has not changed since 1914.

Undertakers use their funarelese in formal situations: in contacts with out-groupers (the families of the deceased); yet, their language is likely to change into slang

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[48] G. Laderman, *Rest in Peace: A Cultural History of Death and the Funeral Home in Twentieth-Century America.* New York 2003, p. 5.

[49] K. Allan, K. Burridge, *Euphemisms and Dysphemisms: Language Used as Shield and Weapon, op. cit.,* p. 22.

[50] M. Householder, *Michigan funeral home provides drive-thru option,* [in:] "Yahoo News" Oct. 17, 2014.

[51] G. Laderman, *Rest in Peace: A Cultural History of Death and the Funeral Home in Twentieth-Century America, op. cit.,* pp. 6, 18, 24.

[52] J. Mitford, *The American way of death revisited, op. cit.,* p. 156.

while addressing in-groupers (i.e. other representatives of their profession). It seems obvious that, due to their grim profession and "dirty work", which requires having to cope with death and the dead every day, undertakers will tend to use dysphemisms in their in-group conversations so that their humor could produce "the death desensitization"[53], lighten the grisly reality and make their work easier to bear. Thus, in in-group conversations, embalming is replaced with 'pickling' or 'curing the ham', cremation with 'shake and bake', and coffins with 'tin cans', but "when dealing with the public, the 'patient' (not the corpse) is 'interred' (not buried) within a 'casket' (not coffin) beneath a 'monument" (not tombstone)"[54]. Similarly, Burridge enumerates such Australian undertaker slang terms as 'soup' denoting a badly composing body, or a 'floater' – a corpse that has been fished out of water. In his analysis of an American drama series *Six Feet Under* (a story of a family running a funeral parlor), Jamet cites a number of jocular expressions used by the family members (undertakers): 'dirt in a jar' (ashes in an urn), 'a big chunk of dead meat in a box' (a corpse in a coffin), 'We'll torch him' (he will be cremated). In contrast, euphemistic language should be used while addressing the bereaved. The following conversation between two rivalling morticians displays a peculiar humorous mixture of both styles (dysphemisms and orthophemisms are italicized, whereas euphemisms are marked in bold):

> Nate: "I never realized how much money there was to be made in the *funeral business*."
> Gilardi: "**Death-care industry**."
> Nate: "So it's like *a little factory. Of embalming*."
> Gilardi: "**Preparation for visitation**. We maintain a **small fleet of vehicles**."
> Nate: "*Hearses*?"
> Gilardi: "**Funeral carriages**."
> Nate: "*Dead wagons*."
> Gilardi: "**Removal vans**"[55].

[53] M. Kearl, *Metaphors and Euphemisms,* [in:] R. Kastenbaum, *Macmillan Encyclopedia of Death and Dying* New York 2003, p. 575.

[54] K. Burridge, *Weeds in the Garden of Words: Further observations on the tangled history of the English language,* Cambridge 2004, p. 34-35.

[55] D. Jamet, *Euphemisms for Death: Reinventing Reality through Words, op.cit.*

The exchange quoted above seem to reveal that a single homogenous discourse of death does not exist. On the contrary, we may distinguish several discourses, which, despite sharing the common topic of death and the identical genre (for instance, a conversation), are to be used only in particular social contexts and discourse communities: within the discourse community of in-groupers (morticians), the discourse of death may include dysphemisms; whereas in the case of a heterogeneous community consisting of professionals and out-groupers (mourners), such dysphemistic discourse would be absolutely unaccepted and condemned. It would be rejected because it breaks the norms and traditions accepted in the American (and generally Western) society, which require using euphemistic discourse while dealing with the bereaved.

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Streszczenie

Artykuł stanowi próbę przedstawienia różnorodnych językowych sposobów eufemizowania tabu śmierci we współczesnej kulturze anglosaskiej i ich klasyfikacji. Autor wykorzystuje bogaty i zróżnicowany materiał językowy pochodzący z angielskich i amerykańskich słowników eufemizmów oraz literatury tematu (zwłaszcza badań Anny Dąbrowskiej oraz Keitha Allana i Kate Burridge). Artykuł zamyka krótka analiza języka środowiskowego amerykańskich przedsiębiorców pogrzebowych, bogatego w omawiane środki językowe.

Słowa kluczowe: śmierć, tabu językowe, amerykańska kultura funeralna

Summary

The article aims at presenting a variety of English euphemisms and dysphemisms helping to cope with the taboo of death, which is vividly displayed in contemporary British, Australian and American culture. Its author attempts at their classification, following the criteria proposed by Anna Dąbrowska, Keith Allan and Kate Burridge. The analyzed lexical material comes from dictionaries of euphemisms and studies devoted to the topic. The article is concluded with a brief analysis of the jargon of American morticians, abounding in euphemisms and dysphemisms of death.

Keywords: death, language taboo, American funeral culture