Euphemisms for Death: Reinventing Reality through Words?

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HAL Id: hal-01395036

https://univ-lyon3.hal.science/hal-01395036

Submitted on 10 Nov 2016

Euphemisms for Death: Reinventing Reality through Words?[1]

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Since ancient times human beings have traditionally felt reluctant to deal with death in an undeviating way. Either owing to religion, superstition or social concerns, language users have generally avoided to look death full in the face. […] Hence, it is hardly surprising that language users resort to a wide variety of linguistic devices in order to compliment the departed and show respect to those left alive, satisfying, in this way, both the religious and the social impositions traditionally associated with human mortality. (Crespo Fernández 2007: 7)

Introduction

In almost all societies, human beings have always had a hard time coping with death, and one of the best ways of putting it aside is to avoid mentioning it, or to mention it by using indirect, oblique terms known as euphemisms. Death euphemisms seem to be at the crossroads of language and society, and as the call for papers of this conference indicates, "inventive linguistics thus seems to be linked to some form of political or social utopia". Are the euphemisms used to refer to death primarily "intended as a mark of respect for the dead" (Gross 205) or do they also reinvent reality?

The present paper is organized as follows: after briefly going over the history of the taboo of death and euphemism, I will analyze the death euphemisms found in my corpus, which is drawn from the American drama series *Six Feet Under*, from now on referred to as *SFU*. This Emmy- and Golden Globe-winning series produced by HBO is created by the Oscar-winning writer of *American Beauty*, Alan Ball. It focuses on the cathartic journey of the Fisher family: Ruth, the mother, Nate and David, the two sons who run the funeral home, and Claire, the younger daughter. Their personal trials and tribulations are played out against the solemn backdrop of an independent funeral home in LA[3]. The theoretical assumptions on which my paper is based are essentially derived from the works of cognitive linguists such as

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[3] Adapted from the HBO website.

Lakoff and Johnson, the pivotal study on euphemism and dysphemism by Allan and Burridge, as well as from a number of books and articles.

I. Theoretical framework: the taboo of death and euphemism

I.1. Why is death a taboo?

The term "taboo" was supposedly coined by Captain Cook, during his 3rd voyage around the world in 1784. The term, borrowed from the Polynesian language Tongan, denoted "prohibited behavior" and applied to "all cases where things are not to be touched." For some Australian tribes, it was forbidden to pronounce the word "death" because you could induce it just by mentioning the word. The taboos of death seem to relate both to the "taboos of fear" (superstitious and religious bans) and to the "taboos of delicacy and propriety" (psychological and social bans).

According to Allan & Burridge (153, 159), taboos are motivated by five types of fears:

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.

These may all be summarized as the fear of "our own finiteness" (Allan & Burridge 159). Those fears are so entrenched in our culture that language seems consequently unable to convey the very notion of death, as Jankélévitch (107-108) rightly points out:

Vous voyez, le langage même n'est pas taillé pour exprimer la mort. Tous les mots dont on se sert sont des mots empiriques : l'Autre-Monde, un monde, l'autre, c'est-à-dire très certainement le nôtre, mais encore un monde, la sur-vie, encore que vie, mais différente de la nôtre.

We may wonder why death represents such a taboo, even in our supposedly "liberated" contemporary western societies. It may be because you experience 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 (Jankélévitch 38), and as such, is prone to give way to numerous euphemisms, as we will see in part II. 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. Various studies

have shown that in our contemporary societies death has quite paradoxically become the greatest taboo:

> Death, we are frequently told, has replaced sex as the great forbidden subject. (Gross 203)

Since the Victorian era, death has been considered to be "unmentionable" in our contemporary societies, and "has become the pornography of modern times" (Allan & Burridge 157). The relationship to death was different in the Middle Ages, a period which was obsessed with man's finitude (remember the 'Dance of the Dead'), but which made it clear that death was part of life, and that human beings had to be reminded of death, hence the *Memento Mori* ("remember you will die") (Allan & Burridge 154-156). There seems to be a "generalized denial and fear of death so prevalent in our culture" (Sexton). Hence, the dead bodies are not shown as such in the drama series *SFU*, but need preparing (or 'fixing') by an embalmer. In the terms of Allan & Burridge (158):

> Death has become altogether less ritualized. For example, wakes are no longer considered an acceptable practice in most Anglo-communities. There is something rather morbid and shocking about that sort of open acknowledgment of death […].
> […]
> And—in striking contrast with the medieval fascination for corrupting corpses— we now rely on modern embalming techniques to help create for us 'the Beautiful Memory Picture' (cf. Baird 1976:87). In addition, cremation has now replaced burial as the most usual means of disposing of the dead
> […]
> We go out of our way to avoid death.

Death is one of the most—if not the most—fundamental human experiences and, as such, it tends to be sacralised, and is therefore subject to taboo and euphemism. As E. Crespo Fernández (2006: 101) writes:

> Some experiences are too intimate and vulnerable to be discussed without *linguistic safeguards*[4].

Human beings have to find ways to explain, or at least to "make sense" of death, i.e. to make sense of non-sense. As we are about to see, euphemisms prove to be an interesting means of coping with such a reality as death, for they provide a "protective shield" against a feared, fearful and unpleasant reality (Allan & Burridge 3). Just as a rotting corpse needs burying or embalming because of the pestilent smell it gives off, we need euphemisms to refer to death, as they represent, according to R. Adams (48), "the deodorant of language."

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4 My emphasis.

I.2. The role of euphemisms

The English word "euphemism" is found for the first time in a book written in 1656 by Thomas Blount, *Glossographia* (Burchfield 13), and comes from Greek *euphèmismos*, which is itself derived from the adjective *euphèmos*, "of good omen" (from *eu*, 'good', and *phèmi*, 'I say'). A euphemism consists in replacing the original signifier, perceived as being offensive or unpleasant, by another one; it is often referred to as a "veil" or a "shroud" thrown over the signified, as if to conceal it. Just like the shroud thrown over the dead body to conceal it, or rather to conceal death, euphemism is a way of blurring the harsh reality of death.

In this presentation, euphemism will not be restricted to a mere lexical device, but will be considered as an everyday, comprehensive phenomenon, a form of "verbal behavior" (Crespo Fernández 2005: 78) which serves a specific, *functional* purpose in social discourse (Fairclough). Indeed, euphemism is not just a matter of pure lexical choice—i.e. elegant stylistic variation, a sort of "linguistic makeup" (Crespo Fernández 2005: 79)—but a real choice made by the speaker in a given discursive context. As Allan & Burridge (4) write:

> [E]uphemism and dysphemism are principally determined by the choice of expression within a given context: both world spoken **of**, and the world spoken **in**.

Discourse will therefore be considered in its social dimension, as recommended in Fairclough's (1) analysis:

> Today individuals working in a variety of disciplines are coming to recognize the ways in which changes in language use are linked to wider social and cultural processes, and hence are coming to appreciate the importance of using language analysis as a method for studying social change.

Euphemism participates in a larger, more general phenomenon used by speakers to soften the potentially offensive effects of a taboo area to preserve social harmony in communication and to avoid any face-threatening acts[5]. That is why it is voluntarily given a broad definition in this paper. As previously mentioned, euphemism can be seen as a "deodorizing spray and perfume" (Allan & Burridge 25), and euphemistic language as a "'deodorizing' language" (Allan & Burridge 25). Euphemism thus represents a means of keeping death at bay, and constitutes a "protective magic" (Fryer 19). We have said it is a way of blurring the harsh reality of death, but it seems to be more than that: it is also a way of reinventing reality.

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[5] The notion of "face" is borrowed from Goffman.

Through his/her choice of words, the speaker passes judgment and conveys a vision of reality. In this presentation, I will thus define "euphemism" as Allan & Burridge (11) do:

> 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 offence, that of the audience, or some third party.

There are basically two ways of dealing with a taboo such as death: either by using euphemisms, or by using dysphemisms, which are, according to Allan & Burridge (7), "obverse sides of the same coin" which "do not form clear-cut categories" (Crespo Fernández 2007: 15)[6]:

> A **dysphemism** is 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. (Allan & Burridge 26)

Death is such a frightening concept that we sometimes need humorous, dysphemistic metaphors to release the pressure, to pretend it is not such a big deal. Most of the idioms referring to death in English partake of this dysphemistic dimension: *push up the daisies, go west, kick the bucket,* etc. Some dysphemisms can be found in *SFU*, such as *Now he is just **dirt** in a jar* (S.3, Ep.7) / *A big **chunk of dead meat in a box*** (S.2, Ep.3) / *We'll **torch** him then* (about cremation) (S.2, Ep.13) / *Mr. Bolston is all **juiced up*** (S.1, Ep.6) / *Body **farms*** (S.1, Ep.10) / *Being **creamed** by a bus* (S.4, Ep.2).

All this explains why death is very rarely called by its own name. According to the following rule pointed out by Allan & Burridge (7), the language of death is supposed to swarm with euphemisms:

> Generally speaking, the greater the oncoming face-affront, the greater is the politeness shown, and the greater the degree of euphemism required.

Some studies have shown that our contemporary western society appears to have more euphemisms for death than any other period and that those euphemistic expressions tend toward the "gradual suppression of direct reference to death" (Allan & Burridge 159). Hence, speakers will resort to a wide range of euphemistic tools to talk of death, such as lexical substitutions and euphemistic discursive strategies. These euphemistic techniques will be a means of showing respect not only toward the subject-matter, i.e. death, but also toward the interlocutor, whose face we wish not to threaten. As a consequence, "these indirect verbal

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[6] Ferguson shows that euphemism also coexists with dysphemism in the obituary columns of newspapers.

tactics tend to minimize the illocutionary force of a speech act without modifying the content of the message" (Crespo Fernández 2005: 81).

Yet, it is interesting to note that taboo euphemisms, such as death euphemisms, tend to conventionalize very quickly, and turn into mere clichés, losing their motivation and becoming quasi-synonymous and quasi-transparent terms, as noted by Enright (2005: 121):

> On other occasions we use euphemism unconsciously—it might be the only acceptable term, or the term that everyone uses, and we therefore employ it without thinking.

They are felt as the (only?) accepted way of expressing oneself. But when death euphemisms become clichés, the link between the language and the threatening reality they tend to conceal is evoked afresh.

II. Death euphemisms in *SFU*: reinventing reality?

II.1. Characteristics of the language of death in *SFU*

In *SFU*, a real "funeralese" (Allan & Burridge 171) can be observed, in addition to a "riot of euphemisms" (Gross 210): undertakers turn into *grief therapists* or *bereavement counselors*; dead people are invariably referred to as *the loved ones* (S.1, Ep.1) or *the beloveds* (S.1, Ep.6). Here is a short extract of what you might hear when entering Nate and David's funeral home[7]:

> When there is a *walk-in* (S.1, Ep.8) (*when somebody shows up for a death) in a *funeral home* (S.1, Ep.3) (*morgues), you need to *do intakes* (S.1, Ep.7). You ask if there has been a *pre-need* (S.2, Ep.11) (*when you arrange your own funeral), and if your *loved one* wants an *open* or a *closed casket* (S.1, Ep.1) (*coffin). Often the body needs to be *reconstructed* (S.1, Ep.1) and *embalmed* (embalming (S.1, Ep.6)) in the *prep room* (S.1, Ep.8) (preparation room in which the bodies are embalmed) (for *morgue) to *be prepared for the viewing* (S.1, Ep.6) (*ceremony when the dead body is viewed by family and friends). This should help the *grieving process* (S.4, Ep.2) for the *bereaved*.

I would like to begin with a relevant excerpt in S.1, Ep.3 of a conversation between Nate and Gilardi, a man trying to buy out Nate and David's business:

> Nate: "I never realized how much money there was to be made in the **funeral business*."

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[7] The asterisked words are the "dispreferred expressions". Some of them are context-dependent and deliberately humorous.

> 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**."

This escalation of euphemisms is reminiscent of the so-called "euphemistic treadmill" (Pinker) found with death metaphors. Just like any words in the lexicon, euphemisms are prone to variations, and, as R. Adams (45) writes:

> We have euphemisms for our euphemisms.

For instance, the word *undertaker* was replaced by the euphemism *mortician*, which was replaced by another euphemism: *funeral director*. Interestingly, the word *undertaker* was originally a euphemism, as mentioned by Allan & Burridge (22):

> English *undertaker* once meant "odd-job man" (someone who undertakes to do things), which was used as a euphemism for the person taking care of funerals; like most ambiguous taboo terms, the meaning of *undertaker* narrowed to the taboo sense alone, and is now replaced by the euphemism *funeral director*. What often happens with euphemisms like this, is that they start off with a modifying word, 'funeral' in *funeral undertaker*, then the modifier is dropped as the phrase ceases to be euphemistic […]. It is conceivable that *funeral director* will one day be clipped to mere *director*, which will then follow *undertaker* and become a taboo term.

And when Nate is incidentally referred to as a *mortician*, he corrects the person he is talking to by saying he is a *funeral director*. The term *mortician*, which originally was a euphemism, is not perceived as such anymore; a proof of this is found when some of Claire's schoolmates at high school make fun of her by calling her *Morticia* (S.1, Ep.3).

I now would like to examine the death euphemisms found in *SFU*, and try to explain how they reinvent reality.

II.2. Euphemistic devices in *SFU*

Death euphemisms are carried out by a wide range of linguistic devices and mitigating discursive expressions in *SFU* and can be classified as follows. My classification will go from the least to the most productive phenomenon.

One of the lexical devices to generate euphemisms is to resort to **technical terms, learned and loan words**; the words are generally borrowed from Latin or French, two languages perceived as more abstract, and which allow the creation of distance between the signifier and reality:

Expire (S.3, Ep.12) (*die), *Necrophilia* (S.2, Ep.5), *Mortuary* (S.2, Ep.6), *Mortician* (S.2, Ep.3) (*undertaker), *The deceased* (S.2, Ep.8) (cf. *We can pick up the body—er—the deceased.* (S.1, Ep.12)) (*dead person), *A crematory* (S.2, Ep.12), *Cremate sb* (S.1, Ep.1), *Inurnment* (S.1, Ep.7) (*burial of an urn), *Interment* (S.1, Ep.9), *inter* (*bury, cf. *The ashes which we interred* (S.4, Ep.10)), *Receptacle for his cremains* (S.1, Ep.7) (a blend, *cremated remains, *ashes), *The bereaved* (S.4, Ep.12), etc.

Circumlocution is also quite a productive device; in the euphemisms from *SFU*, there seems to be a dilution of the signifier, 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. As an example, let me quote the new names given to cemeteries / graveyards in the USA: *Memorial park / Garden of remembrance*. Other examples include: *A bereavement group* (S.4, Ep.5), *A grief counsellor* (S.4, Ep.5), *Death-care facilities* (S.1, Ep.1), *Human remains* (S.1, Ep.3).

Acronym can also be a morpho-lexical device generating euphemisms, as the signifier is "minced", or "cut up", and is felt to be less offensive: *He OD'ed* (S.1, Ep.1) (*he died from a drug overdose).

Deletion serves the same purpose in the form of quasi-omissions: *I did a pickup Ø this morning* (S.2, Ep.11) (of bodies) or full omissions: *What did you have in mind for your son's…* (S.1, Ep.11) (*burial). Sometimes, the taboo word can be omitted and replaced by a hyperonymic term: *The coroner still has his… still has him* (S.1, Ep.12) (*corpse).

As Brenda says in Season 1, Episode 9, when you lose a husband or a wife, you're a widow or a widower; when you lose your parents, you're an orphan, but what are you called when you lose a child? The reality is so frightening that no word exists. This taboo is so strong, that the traditional euphemisms have to be replaced by "stronger", deliberately vague euphemisms in case of babies' deaths: *I haven't done a baby since Julio was born* (S.1, Ep.11).

Hyperonymy and metonymy

The two notions are closely linked: *You met him at Dad's **thing*** (S.1, Ep.3) (*death ceremony), *Dad already took care of **everything*** (S.2, Ep.9), *Wonderful **service*** (S.1, Ep.1) (*religious ceremony for a funeral), *Wonderful **job*** (S.1, Ep.1) (*reconstruction, itself a euphemism. It shows that even some euphemisms need to be euphemized). *What **happened** to her?* (S.4, Ep.2) / *I was only 5 when he… when **it happened**.* (S.3, Ep.5), *I didn't think she would **do it*** (S.3, Ep.9) (*commit suicide), *You don't have to **go through this** alone* (S.1, Ep.1).

Death is rarely called by its own name, but more by the dead (metonymic process); let me quote two examples: *His heart **gave out*** (S.2, Ep.4), where the action (*die) stands for the result (*die) and - *Where's my daddy? - Daddy**'s not here*** (S.5, Ep.10), with the result for the process.

Finally, death itself is referred to metaphorically, as *the **Grim Reaper*** (S.2, Ep.1), both linguistically-speaking and visually-speaking. The vast majority of euphemisms found in *SFU* are metaphorical, i.e. **metaphor** is by far the most powerful mechanism in the creation of death euphemisms, as noted by Sexton (337):

> One would be hard pressed to find a type of reference to death that is both frequently used and without metaphoric content.

I think the reason lies in the fact that death is an abstract notion; if we follow the framework of the Conceptual Metaphor Theory elaborated by Lakoff and Johnson, the only way of perceiving and understanding abstract domains of experience—such as death—is to resort to more concrete (i.e. physical, bodily, social) domains of experience that will serve as a mapping, or blending according to the various theories. One of the most frequent and pervasive ways of mapping a concrete domain of experience onto an abstract domain is so-called metaphorical cross-mapping. As Lakoff and Johnson (5) point out:

> The essence of metaphor is understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another. […] The metaphor involves understanding one domain of experience […] in terms of a very different domain of experience […]. The metaphor can be understood as a mapping (in the mathematical sense) from a source domain […] to a target domain.

I will now focus on the euphemistic expressions referring to death, most of which are metaphorical, trying to bring out the conceptual metaphors[8] and the ways they reinvent reality. A conceptual metaphor[9] is defined by Kövecses (4) as follows:

> CONCEPTUAL DOMAIN (A) IS CONCEPTUAL DOMAIN (B), which is what is called a **conceptual metaphor**. A conceptual metaphor consists of two conceptual domains, in which one domain is understood in terms of another. A conceptual domain is any coherent organization of experience.

If we can find various studies on the conceptualization—be it literal or metaphorical—of death, we have to acknowledge, like Crespo Fernández (2006: 102), that "not much scholarly ink has been spilled over conceptual metaphor as a purely euphemistic device." Metaphor and euphemism nonetheless seem to partake of the same mechanism, as they are both means of perceiving, organizing, and making sense of reality. I will try to show that the often unconscious everyday euphemistic metaphorical expressions used to refer to death are a way of inventing the abstract domain of death. Death being the great unknown, the only way of conceptualizing it is very often through metaphors. Metaphor is a way of dealing with, perceiving—and making real—the unfamiliar, the big unknown that is death, by likening it to a known domain of experience, very often *with positive connotations*. It consequently allows us to have some power over death by controlling it. The metaphors used are very often "consolatory metaphors, i.e., highly poetic and connotative metaphors aiming at evading death-related linguistic taboos" (Crespo Fernández 2007: 11). As a consequence, it is no surprise that we find such an array of metaphors to refer to death and mortality as a whole. Those metaphors are so entrenched in our conceptual system and are so pervasive in our cultural and linguistic consciousness that we are rarely aware of them. Let me now examine the various conceptual metaphors generating death euphemisms in *SFU*:

DEATH IS A JOURNEY

Just as life, death is frequently conceptualized as a journey; hence the conceptual metaphor DEATH IS A JOURNEY. Ancient religions already mentioned the crossing of the river by Charon for a voyage to an unknown land. Interestingly, the very term "obituaries" is itself originally euphemistic, as it originates from Latin *obitus* meaning "departure."

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[8] Allan & Burridge (161) suggest four broad categories for death euphemisms, and Crespo Fernández (2006: 113) brings out six types of conceptual metaphors to generate death euphemisms.

[9] Small capital letters are conventionally used by cognitive linguists to refer to conceptual metaphors, which account for all the metaphorical expressions generated by them. They indicate that the particular wording does not occur in language as such.

Various examples are to be found in *SFU*: *You can't **skip over** too. Then you can **move through** it and get on with the rest of your life* (S.4, Ep.2) / *He **passed away suddenly*** (S.4, Ep.6) (*he committed suicide) / *I don't even know how to **go*** (S.4, Ep.6) (*die) / *Try to let it **go*** (S.2, Ep.13) (*somebody dying) / *I don't wanna **go*** (S.2, Ep.13) (*die) / *I won't let you **go*** (S.2, Ep.13).
*And suddenly, he**'s gone*** (S.3, Ep.2) / *Your daddy **has gone away for a very long time*** (S.5, Ep.10). This last example mixes up space and time. *Mr. Bloomberg is dead. I'm getting him **ready** so his family can see him for the last time and **say goodbye** to him* (S.1, Ep.1).
*A nice **send-off*** (S.4, Ep.9), *A cremains **vessel*** (S.2, Ep.1), *Royal **Funeral Coach*** (S.1, Ep.1) (ad for a hearse).

The end of episode 13, season 2 is quite revealing, as the conceptual metaphor DEATH IS A JOURNEY is visually expressed: Nate is near death, and in his dream, a bus arrives to pick him up. This may also explain another conceptual metaphor to refer to death: DEATH IS A NEW BEGINNING, A NEW LIFE, often used with religious connotations. Very often, these religious metaphors have hyperbolic overtones, and the danger lies in the nature of hyperbole which, according to Crespo Fernández (2007: 13), "can be viewed as a rhetorical figure leading to half truths, false inferences and even actual lies." Almost no example is to be found in *SFU*, except for *The world **to come*** (S.2, Ep.7) and *She is **on her way to Jesus*** (S.4, Ep.2). These euphemisms tend to reinvent the notion of death, by conceptualizing it as a journey, as something dynamic, with a purpose. Let me finish by quoting an interesting euphemism used to refer to a coffin, sorry… a casket: *an appropriate resting vessel* (S.1, Ep.1). What is interesting to note is the combination of two conceptual metaphors: DEATH IS A JOURNEY and DEATH IS REST, a conceptual metaphor I want to study now.

DEATH IS REST / SLEEP

This conceptual metaphor generates euphemisms such as *sleep, be laid to rest, be put to rest*, and account for the inscriptions found on grave stones: *here lies/sleeps, in this grave rests…* Allan & Burridge (162) point out that *cemetery* derives from Ancient Greek *koimētērion* "dormitory." Some euphemistic metaphorical expressions are found in *SFU*: ***Fall off to sleep*** (S.3, Ep.12) / *A **resting** place* (S.1, Ep.3) / *He looks like he is **sleeping*** (S.1, Ep.11).

*We'll do our best to help you **through** this **dark time*** (S.3, Ep.2) / *See God as a message **through** this **dark time*** (S.5, Ep.10). The last two examples comprise not only the notion of space (travel), but also the notion of time, as exemplified in ***Length** of visitation* (S.2, Ep.6). Through these euphemisms, death is conceptualized as sleep, which implies that it is temporary. Yet, a closely-related example such as *It was her **time*** (S.4, Ep.2) calls for the need of another conceptual metaphor reinventing death as something terminal.

DEATH IS THE END

This conceptual metaphor accounts for euphemisms such as *Your **candle has been blown out*** (S.2, Ep.1), *There's no **mortgage** on my life* (S.2, Ep.2), *Did she **off herself**?* (S.3, Ep.11) / *She **offed herself*** (S.3, Ep.11), *Until I **cease** to exist* (S.4, Ep.3), *It will not **bring her back*** (S.4, Ep.2), *Our **fallen** brother* (S.1, Ep.4).
If death is terminal, the loved one will not be back, and his/her death will be perceived as a loss, and (s)he will be missed by those left behind.

DEATH IS A LOSS

Examples include: ***Lose** a brother, a father…* (S.1, Ep.4) / *The **loss** of Jeffrey Shapiro* (S.2, Ep.7) / *A profound **loss** (S.1, Ep.11)* / *I'm very sorry about your **loss*** (S.2, Ep.8).

All the conceptual metaphors mentioned above tend to reinvent the very notion of death, and as such, death euphemisms seem to act as "deflectors of reality" by building up a virtual, fictional wall between reality and the perception we have of reality. If the first hypothesis I departed from in this article assumed that most of the language we use nowadays to refer to death is euphemistic, I think I need to revise this opinion as the euphemistic expressions we use most generally are no longer perceived as "an alternative to a dispreferred expression" (Allan & Burridge 11), but the usual, normal, accepted way of referring to death. If we follow Allan & Burridge's (29) principle that "euphemisms and dysphemisms are deliberate", doubts arise when we are confronted with death euphemisms…

Conclusion

There are various means of keeping death at bay, be they euphemisms or dysphemisms. Both of them enable the speaker to create a distance between reality and the name given to reality. This study on death euphemisms seems to justify Lakoff and Johnson's claim that our conceptual system is fundamentally metaphorical in nature, given the significant number of metaphorical euphemisms in *SFU*. This also confirms that the everyday language we use is not divorced from our perceptions and conceptions of the world.

Even though euphemisms are generally considered as "harmless substitutes" (Ullmann 205) for a harsh reality, we could nonetheless wonder if death euphemisms are 'dishonest', given that they sometimes offer a biased vision of reality, as Sexton writes:

> Metaphors as tools may assist us in better understanding life's turns into unknown territory. However, metaphors may also be the bandage which prevents us from exposing wounds which may on some level require attention. Metaphors may assist us to a certain extent in coping with the pain of loss and the fear of dying which we all have or will encounter at some point. However, they also may alter our perceptions and prevent us from facing uncertainties which we would do well to face.

As is said in S.1, Ep.7, the dead person runs the risk of turning into a "dead plastic version of your loved one", and just like Nate, we may want to "refuse to *sanitize* it anymore" (S.1, Ep.1). Death has to be clean (*A cleansing ritual* (S.2, Ep.10)) and look like the dead body of a woman whose face has been reconstructed by Rico: *She really is your Sistine Chapel* (S.1, Ep.8).

This reinvention of reality is the potential danger of any metaphor which, by nature, is based on a highlighting—hiding process. But once again, it is not so much the metaphorical process *per se* that is dangerous, but the confusion of metaphor with reality, as Sexton puts it:

> It is not the fact that our perceptions are altered by our metaphors that makes them potentially dangerous; it is that we are too often unaware of this alteration. This then may be our challenge: to become conscious of the words we use in reference to our own death, and the deaths of those near to us, and then to realize where these comparisons may lead us.

Yet, as Enright (2005: 125) points out, this is a general phenomenon found in language:

> [N]early every word in the language is, in one way or another, a terminological inexactitude. Which is part of their magic, and goes towards explaining the power of language.

So, if euphemisms can be said to (re)invent reality, we may wonder whether there is a reality of death other than the terrible sadness one experiences when losing someone. No euphemism can conceal that…

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Six Feet Under official website: http://www.hbo.com/sixfeetunder/ accessed 3 March 2009.