FACING FINALITY:
COGNITIVE AND CULTURAL STUDIES
ON DEATH AND DYING

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Preface

In a Cognitive Linguistics seminar for graduate students at Seisen University in Tokyo, Japan, a student, Aya Maeda, suggested we take up the theme of how Death and Dying are expressed in contemporary discourse from a cognitive metaphor perspective and compare them in English and Japanese. Out of that seminar, the project on studying how contemporary discourse in Death and Dying is shaped by the underlying conceptual/metaphoric patterns grew. Previous seminars had taken up similar themes such as IDEAS (Berendt 1991, 2009) and LEARNING (Berendt 2008). The objective was on each occasion to build up a data base reflecting various repertoires and registers common to the contemporary discourses where we might expect the subjects to talk about Death and Dying and where Death and Dying were the focal points of interaction. The discourse genres which were initially included were news reportage, obituaries, essays, religious writing, medical sources, counseling and psychology, conversations, poetry and fiction. Further we had the objective of doing a cross-cultural study comparing English and Japanese. By comparing the patterns found in English, a European Christian-based culture, with an Asian, Japanese with very different cultural roots, it was hoped that we could gain insight into both culturally specific influences but also shared, universal perspectives about the experience of Death and Dying. To do that the data sources needed to be balanced for genre type and approximate quantity. No mean task. In the end, for various conference presentations and publications we focused our analysis primarily on news reportage, medical and counseling, conversation, and current religious discussions.

The objective of the project was to make a conceptual metaphoric pattern analysis following the work of George Lakoff (Lakoff, et al. 1980, 1987, Gibbs 1994, Goatly 1997), that not only meant analyzing the data for the cognitive metaphors but also examining the cross-cultural features which might be a significant part of the patterns in each language. This led not only to analytical issues of how broad or inclusive a pattern might be but what the salient semantic and cultural features within a pattern might be. Working within one language has been difficult enough but making systematic comparisons is much more complex as each language may focus on its own cultural experiences creating divergent images about what a pattern represents. Some basic experiential patterns, such as JOURNEY/PATH, CONTAINER, ENTITY have been readily recognized, but culturally specific patterns do exist rooted in each culture. FIGHTING as a domain of experience can be manifested in many different forms and affect the nature of how death occurs and how we understand its significance. For a discussion of these issues please refer to Berendt 2008 and 2009.

The seminar gradually enlarged into a research study group and resulted in a number of conference presentations and journal publications. The first symposium held on this research was at the 9th International Cognitive Linguistics Conference held at Yonsei University in Seoul, South Korea 2005. Papers were presented on the underlying conceptual patterns found in the discourse of Death and Dying in the
following genre types: counseling, interactive discourse/conversation, medical works, poetry, current news, religious writing. Six broad semantic typologies were found necessary to compare the conceptual metaphoric patterns in English and Japanese, and I would like to give credit especially to Keiko Tanita for working these out. The papers at Seoul, Korea are the basis of Part II in this volume. Two papers from that conference were published in 2008 respectively by Berendt and Tanita.

Further work focusing on the narrower social issues of abortion, suicide, and capital punishment were presented as a symposium “The Right to Kill; the Right to Die” in August 2006 at the 12th International Association for Intercultural Communication Studies (IAICS), San Antonio, Texas. These presentations were subsequently published as a special issue in the journal *Intercultural Communication Studies XVI* (3) in 2007. The papers form the basis of Part III of this volume. Joint papers on cross-cultural analytical issues were also presented by Berendt, Maeda and Tanita at the 10th International Cognitive Linguistics conference held in Krakow, Poland in July 2007. The goals of all the research have been: (1) to make data-based studies of contemporary discourses of how Death and Dying are expressed through cognitive metaphoric patterns; (2) to make cross-cultural comparisons of the ideation of Death and Dying initially of English and Japanese; (3) to examine implications which cognitive metaphors may have for understanding basic contemporary cultures of life and death experiences; (4) to examine critically how language use shapes our perceptions and values as seen in metaphoric representations of our experiences; and (5) to contribute to the development of cognitive metaphor theory through cross-cultural issues both commonalities and divergences of perspective.

The project members (originally Berendt, Tanita, Maeda and Akimoto) continued to meet and after 2008 expanded beyond the first interests of making a cross-cultural, data-based study of English and Japanese. The result has been the preparation of this volume with the inclusion of broader social and cultural topics with the significant contributions of Kei I. Yamanaka and Soliman Alaaeldin. The opportunity to work with members of Assumption University in Bangkok and University of Cairo, Egypt provided the volume with the wider cultural papers and perspectives in Part IV.

The results of the studies are presented in four sections: Part I, an introduction looking at the contemporary discussions about Death and Afterlife from broad historical and cultural points of view with a survey of the basic vocabulary in English and Japanese on Death and Dying. Part II introduces the original project on the contemporary discourse of Death and Dying in English and Japanese, the data base development, the analysis into conceptual metaphoric patterns and the need for cross-culturally considered semantic categories. Part III focuses on the three issues of abortion, suicide and capital punishment current in English and Japanese. A fourth was considered, euthanasia, but data for an adequate comparison could not be had. Part IV takes up a diverse number of papers dealing with various cultural and cognitive issues about Death and Dying, not only in English and Japanese but also in
Arabic and Thai contexts. Literary, religious, views of “the other world” as well as translating culturally specific perspectives are discussed.

The experience of Death is probably the most powerful stimulant to human thinking, requiring an expansion of our conceptualization from what we experience in the here and now to what we can only hope and dream about, trying to give us reassurance that life has significance and may continue beyond our immediate circumstances. Life in nature springs from nowhere with no consciousness of being prior to birth to go through the vegetative and animated cycles we see around us. Mankind is no exception to nature’s birth, death and generation anew. But humankind also has the power of consciousness, one of the great mysteries of our existence. Death may be seen as an end-point to life or it may be the stimulus to seek broader dimensions about living. The Judeo-Christian-Islamic linear view of life and time with its beginnings and ends is vastly different to the traditions of the Buddhist East where life and death are polychronic, constantly impinging on one another. Hope springs eternal that there is significance in all this. Culture creates complex rituals to govern our behavior and expand our mental horizons. So the memories of the past inform the present. What this volume tries to do is to see how our pivotal experiences of death are shaped in contemporary communication about it. The key to that is to look beyond the vocabulary to dig into the automatic patterns of language seen in conceptual metaphors, especially underlying cognitive metaphors. How this is realized in diverse cultures can inform us of our global humanity, something all people of all places or all times face. How we face our finality is seen in this volume as a very powerful creative stance of the human mind.

My deepest appreciation goes to Gaston Petit, O.P., a well-known Canadian artist who prepared the cover for this volume. The cover is a powerful representation of the intermingling of life and death we all experience. It was a pleasure to work with him as always. Working with the members of the research-study group on Death and Dying over quite some years of ups and downs provided encouraging support and was a great learning experience through sharing our varied knowledge. My thanks, in particular, go to Keiko Tanita for her work and support. It was always a convivial occasion when the group was all together. My thanks too go to Steve Conlon and Ancuta at Assumption University for joining the group and making their refreshing contributions. Finally, this project would not have reached its published form without the support of Robert St. Clair and Margaret D. Silva at the University of Louisville. Many thanks for their support.

References


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