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Is Death a ‘Journey’? The Role of Conceptual Metaphors in Thanatology

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ABSTRACT

The conceptualization of death as a “journey” represents a fundamental cognitive framework that permeates linguistic, cultural, and psychological discourses surrounding mortality. This interdisciplinary study employs conceptual metaphor theory (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980) to analyze how journey metaphors structure human comprehension of death across religious, medical, and secular contexts. Through systematic examination of linguistic expressions (“passed away,” “crossing over”), ritual practices, and contemporary digital memorialization, the paper demonstrates how these metaphors serve vital psychological functions in mitigating death anxiety while simultaneously raising philosophical questions about the literalization of figurative language. The analysis reveals three

key tensions: between metaphor's cognitive necessity and its potential to obscure biological reality; between cross-cultural commonalities and specific metaphorical variations; and between traditional journey concepts and emerging digital afterlife frameworks. Drawing on thanatology, cognitive science, and philosophy of language, the study argues for a balanced approach to death discourse that acknowledges metaphor's constitutive role while maintaining critical awareness of its limitations. The findings have significant implications for palliative care, grief counseling, and public death education in an era of both medicalized dying and technological immortality.

Keywords: Conceptual metaphor theory; Death anxiety; Thanatology; Digital afterlife.

INTRODUCTION

The human conceptualization of death as a journey represents one of the most pervasive and psychologically significant metaphors in human discourse. Across cultures and historical periods, people have employed travel-related language to describe the transition from life to death, revealing deep cognitive patterns in how we process mortality. Lakoff and Johnson's (1980) foundational work in cognitive linguistics demonstrates that such metaphors are not merely poetic flourishes but fundamental structures of human thought that shape our understanding of abstract concepts. The journey metaphor for death appears in countless linguistic expressions, from the common "passed away" to the more elaborate "crossed the river Jordan" in Christian tradition, each formulation revealing particular cultural attitudes toward mortality. This metaphorical framing serves crucial psychological functions, allowing individuals and societies to approach the terrifying unknown of death through familiar conceptual domains (Becker, 1973; Solomon et al., 2015; Ayibam, 2022).

The study of death-related metaphors occupies an important interdisciplinary space between cognitive linguistics, psychology, philosophy, and thanatology. Recent research in conceptual metaphor theory has expanded beyond Lakoff and Johnson's original framework to examine how specific death metaphors influence everything from individual grief processing to medical decision-making (Flusberg et al., 2018; Semino et al., 2018; Ayibam, 2024a; Ayibam, 2024b). In palliative care settings, for instance, the language used to describe dying significantly impacts patients' emotional states and treatment choices (Graham et al., 2013). The journey metaphor in particular appears to offer comfort by suggesting continuity and purpose beyond biological cessation, though some scholars argue it may also obscure the physical realities of dying (Kellehear, 2007; Ayibam, 2025a).

Religious and spiritual traditions worldwide have developed elaborate metaphorical systems for understanding death, nearly all of which incorporate some variation of the journey concept. In Tibetan Buddhism, the *Bardo Thödol* describes death as a journey through intermediate states between lives (Thurman, 1994), while ancient Egyptian funerary texts depict the deceased navigating the underworld in a solar barque (Assmann, 2005). These cross-cultural parallels suggest that the journey metaphor may fulfill universal human cognitive and emotional needs when confronting mortality. Contemporary secular discourse continues this tradition through phrases like "end of life journey" in hospice care or "lost his battle" in cancer narratives, demonstrating the metaphor's enduring power (Sontag, 1978; Walter, 2019).

Philosophical examinations of death metaphors raise important questions about their epistemological status. While some theorists view them as necessary cognitive tools

for grappling with the ungraspable (Ricoeur, 1975), others warn against conflating metaphorical constructions with metaphysical realities (Searle, 1979). Heidegger's (1927/1962) concept of "being-toward-death" suggests that authentic engagement with mortality requires moving beyond comforting metaphors to confront death's absolute alterity. This tension between metaphor's psychological utility and its potential to distort informs current debates in thanatology about how best to discuss death in therapeutic, medical, and public contexts (Kübler-Ross, 1969; Zimmermann, 2012; Ayibam, 2025b; Ayibam, 2025c).

The present study builds on this extensive interdisciplinary literature by conducting a systematic analysis of journey metaphors in death discourse across multiple domains. Using methods from cognitive linguistics and discourse analysis, we examine how these metaphors function in religious texts, medical communication, bereavement narratives, and popular culture. Our investigation addresses three central questions: First, what specific conceptual mappings characterize death-as-journey metaphors across different contexts? Second, what psychological and social functions do these metaphors serve for individuals and communities? Third, what are the potential limitations or dangers of over-relying on such metaphorical framings when discussing mortality?

Methodologically, this study combines qualitative analysis of textual sources with theoretical synthesis from multiple disciplines. We analyze a corpus of death-related language drawn from diverse sources including religious scriptures, obituaries, hospice materials, and media representations. This linguistic analysis is complemented by critical engagement with philosophical and psychological literature on death representation. The resulting synthesis aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of how journey metaphors shape human engagement with mortality, while identifying both their benefits and potential distortions.

The significance of this research extends beyond academic interest to practical applications in medicine, counseling, and public death education. As modern societies struggle with how to discuss death openly and constructively (Ariès, 1974; Walter, 1994), understanding the cognitive underpinnings of our death language becomes increasingly important. Healthcare providers, grief counselors, and educators can all benefit from greater awareness of how metaphorical framing affects people's experiences of mortality. This study ultimately argues that while death metaphors like the journey concept are psychologically inevitable and often beneficial, they must be employed with conscious awareness of their limitations and potential to obscure certain aspects of the dying process.

CONCEPTUAL METAPHOR THEORY AND THE REPRESENTATION OF DEATH

Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT), as developed by Lakoff and Johnson (1980), revolutionized our understanding of how abstract concepts are structured through embodied experience. Their fundamental insight that "our ordinary conceptual system is fundamentally metaphorical in nature" (p. 3) applies particularly well to the domain of death, which by its very nature resists direct experience or observation. The theory posits that we understand abstract target domains (like death) in terms of more concrete source domains (like journeys), creating systematic mappings between the two. In the case of death-as-journey, multiple correspondences emerge: the dying person becomes a traveler, the moment of death transforms into a departure, and the afterlife (if conceptualized) serves as the destination (Turner, 1996; Nabiebu, et al., 2025a). These mappings are neither arbitrary nor purely cultural, but emerge from recurrent patterns of embodied human experience with movement through space and transitions between states.

The journey metaphor for death manifests in countless linguistic expressions across languages and cultures. In English alone we find dozens of conventionalized phrases including “passing away,” “going to a better place,” “departing this life,” and “crossing over.” Each of these expressions activates slightly different aspects of the journey schema while maintaining the core conceptual mapping. Historical analysis reveals that many of these expressions have remarkably longevity - the phrase “passed away” dates back to at least the 14th century in English, while the image of crossing a river to the afterlife appears in ancient Sumerian and Egyptian texts (Spronk, 1986; Nabiebu, et al., 2025b). This historical persistence suggests that the journey metaphor addresses some fundamental cognitive or emotional need in human engagement with mortality.

Cross-cultural studies reveal both striking similarities and important variations in death journey metaphors. In many Indo-European languages, death is consistently framed as a departure or voyage, as seen in the Spanish “ha pasado a mejor vida” (has passed to a better life) or the French “il nous a quittés” (he has left us). Asian languages show parallel constructions, such as the Chinese “qùshì” (去世), literally “to go from the world,” or the Japanese “shisha” (死者), meaning “gone person” (Yu, 2009). However, cultural and religious differences shape the specific nature of the journey - while Western Christian traditions often depict a linear journey to a specific destination (heaven or hell), Buddhist traditions may emphasize cyclical journeys of reincarnation or the bardo states between lives (Lauf, 1977). These variations demonstrate how universal cognitive tendencies interact with particular cultural and religious frameworks.

Psychological research supports the notion that journey metaphors serve important cognitive functions in processing death. TMT (Terror Management Theory) research has shown that abstract death-related anxiety is mitigated when mortality is framed in familiar, structured terms (Pyszczynski et al., 2015; Nabiebu, et al., 2025c). The journey metaphor provides precisely such structure by imposing narrative coherence on the biological fact of death. Experimental studies have demonstrated that participants exposed to journey metaphors for death subsequently report lower death anxiety compared to those exposed to more literal descriptions (Ng & Chan, 2019). This anxiety-reduction function may explain the metaphor's cross-cultural persistence and its prominence in funerary rituals and bereavement practices.

However, the journey metaphor is far from the only conceptual framework applied to death. Systematic metaphor analysis reveals several other major patterns, including DEATH IS SLEEP (“eternal rest”), DEATH IS A REWARD (“called home”), and DEATH IS DESTRUCTION (“annihilation”) (Pragglejaz Group, 2007). Each of these alternative metaphors highlights different aspects of the dying experience while obscuring others. The sleep metaphor, for instance, emphasizes peaceful cessation but avoids addressing questions of consciousness or potential afterlife. Comparative analysis shows that individuals often employ multiple, sometimes contradictory metaphors when discussing death, suggesting complex, multifaceted conceptualizations (Semino, 2011).

Neurolinguistic research has begun to uncover the embodied basis of death metaphors. fMRI studies show that processing metaphorical language about death activates brain regions associated with actual spatial navigation, supporting the idea that we literally “think about” death using our journey-related neural circuitry (Lacey et al., 2012). This embodied cognition perspective helps explain why such metaphors feel so natural and why they appear so early in children's developing understanding of death (Barrett & Behne, 2005). Developmental studies indicate that children as young as five spontaneously use journey metaphors when explaining death, even without explicit religious instruction, suggesting an intuitive cognitive connection between death and departure (Harris & Giménez, 2005).

The philosophical implications of conceptual metaphor theory for understanding death are profound. If, as Lakoff and Johnson argue, metaphor structures our most basic conceptual systems, then we cannot access “death itself” outside of these metaphorical frames. This challenges traditional philosophical approaches that attempt to analyze death as an objective phenomenon separable from human cognition (Edmonds, 2015). At the same time, recognizing the metaphorical nature of death concepts allows for critical examination of how different framings shape attitudes and behaviors. For instance, the common military metaphor of “fighting” death in medical contexts has been shown to influence end-of-life decision making in potentially problematic ways (Reisfield & Wilson, 2004).

PSYCHOLOGICAL AND CULTURAL FUNCTIONS OF DEATH METAPHORS

The psychological utility of death-related metaphors becomes particularly evident when examining how individuals and communities cope with mortality. Terror Management Theory (Greenberg et al., 1986) provides a robust framework for understanding why humans rely so heavily on metaphorical constructions when confronting death. According to TMT, the unique human awareness of inevitable death creates potentially paralyzing existential anxiety, which cultural worldviews and symbolic systems help mitigate. Metaphors like the death journey serve as crucial psychological buffers, transforming the incomprehensible void of death into a structured, meaningful transition (Solomon et al., 2015). Experimental studies have demonstrated that when mortality is made salient, people show increased preference for metaphorical over literal descriptions of death, suggesting an unconscious anxiety-reduction strategy (Vail et al., 2012).

Clinical thanatology reveals how these metaphors function in therapeutic contexts. Grief counselors frequently observe bereaved individuals spontaneously using journey metaphors to process loss, with phrases like “she’s moved on” or “he’s completed his journey” (Neimeyer, 2001). These metaphorical constructions appear to help mourners maintain psychological connection to the deceased while gradually adjusting to their physical absence. Therapeutic interventions that work with clients’ natural metaphorical frameworks, rather than challenging them, often prove more effective in facilitating healthy grieving processes (Angus & Greenberg, 2011). The continuing bonds theory of grief (Klass et al., 1996) suggests that journey metaphors may be particularly adaptive because they allow for an ongoing relationship that transcends biological death.

Cross-cultural anthropological studies demonstrate how death metaphors are institutionalized in funeral rituals worldwide. In Mexican Día de los Muertos celebrations, the deceased are conceptualized as making an annual journey back to visit the living, with families preparing offerings to aid their travel (Brandes, 2006). Traditional Chinese ghost month rituals similarly involve providing paper money and possessions to assist ancestors in their postmortem journey (Teiser, 1988). These ritual practices both reflect and reinforce the underlying journey metaphor while providing concrete actions for the living to maintain relationships with the dead. The psychological comfort derived from such rituals appears closely tied to the metaphorical framing of death as a transition rather than an end.

Religious systems worldwide have developed elaborate metaphorical cosmologies to explain death and what may follow. The Christian concept of the “afterlife journey” appears in everything from medieval Dante’s Divine Comedy to contemporary near-death experience accounts (Zaleski, 1987). Tibetan Buddhism’s bardo teachings provide detailed maps of the consciousness’s journey through intermediate states between death and rebirth (Thurman, 1994). These religious metaphors serve multiple psychological functions: they reduce death anxiety by providing certainty about the unknown, offer moral frameworks linking earthly conduct to postmortem consequences, and create

meaningful narratives that help individuals face their own mortality (Vail et al., 2010). Research suggests that religious individuals consistently show lower death anxiety than non-religious counterparts, with this effect mediated by the clarity and comfort provided by religious death metaphors (Harding et al., 2005).

The journey metaphor's psychological impact extends to end-of-life care and medical decision making. Hospice workers frequently employ journey language when discussing dying with patients and families, emphasizing concepts like "life completion" and "transition" (Kellehear, 2007). Studies show that patients who conceptualize their approaching death as a journey or transition report greater death acceptance and quality of life in final days compared to those using more catastrophic metaphors (McClain-Jacobson et al., 2004). However, some critics argue that over-reliance on such metaphors may lead to avoidance of necessary medical decisions or difficult emotional conversations (Zimmermann, 2012). The challenge for palliative care professionals lies in balancing metaphor's psychological benefits with the need for clear communication about biological realities.

Modern secularization has led to new variations on traditional death metaphors. Contemporary "death positivity" movements often recast the journey metaphor in ecological terms, with phrases like "returning to the cycle of nature" or "becoming one with the universe" (Walter, 2019). Digital afterlife concepts extend the journey metaphor into virtual space, with social media profiles becoming "places" the deceased "inhabit" (Brubaker et al., 2013). These innovations demonstrate the metaphor's adaptability to changing cultural contexts while maintaining its core psychological function of rendering death meaningful and manageable. However, some scholars caution that digital immortality concepts may complicate grief processes by preventing full acceptance of physical death (Kasket, 2019).

The cultural transmission of death metaphors occurs through multiple channels, including literature, media, and education. Children's literature frequently employs journey metaphors to introduce death concepts, as in classics like "The Tenth Good Thing About Barney" (Viorst, 1971) where a dead pet is described as being "in the ground helping flowers grow." Media coverage of celebrity deaths overwhelmingly uses journey metaphors ("left us," "passed on"), reinforcing these conceptual patterns in public discourse (Moore & Williamson, 2003). Even scientific attempts to explain death biologically often resort to metaphorical language ("the body's systems shut down"), suggesting the difficulty of discussing mortality without figurative framing (Seale, 1998). This pervasive cultural reinforcement ensures that journey metaphors remain our default cognitive tools for processing death.

Critical perspectives on death metaphors highlight their potential psychological and social drawbacks. Feminist theorists have noted how military metaphors ("lost her battle with cancer") may create unrealistic expectations about fighting death or assign blame for "succumbing" (Sontag, 1978). Existential psychologists argue that over-reliance on comforting metaphors can prevent authentic confrontation with death's reality, leaving individuals unprepared for its ultimate inevitability (Yalom, 2008). Cross-cultural studies reveal that societies with more direct death language (like certain Mexican traditions) may have healthier attitudes toward mortality than those that heavily euphemize (Gonzalez-Crussi, 1993). These critiques suggest that while death metaphors serve important psychological functions, they must be employed consciously and balanced with more direct engagement with mortality's realities.

PHILOSOPHICAL AND ETHICAL IMPLICATIONS OF DEATH METAPHORS

The philosophical examination of death metaphors raises fundamental questions about the nature of human understanding and the limits of language. Since Heidegger

(1927/1962) argued that authentic “being-toward-death” requires confronting mortality without illusion, philosophers have debated whether metaphorical representations of death obscure its essential nature. Derrida (1993) extended this critique in *Aporias*, contending that death is fundamentally unknowable and that all language about it—including journey metaphors—constitutes a form of avoidance rather than comprehension. This perspective challenges the very premise of thanatology, suggesting that any systematic study of death must grapple with the impossibility of direct representation. However, Ricoeur (1975) offers a counterargument in *The Rule of Metaphor*, asserting that figurative language does not merely conceal reality but provides the only means by which humans can approach profound existential questions. This tension between metaphor as revelation versus distortion frames contemporary philosophical debates about death discourse.

Ethical concerns emerge when considering how death metaphors influence medical decision-making and end-of-life care. The pervasive use of journey metaphors in hospice settings (“transitioning,” “letting go”) can provide comfort but may also obscure the biological realities of dying (Kellehear, 2007). Studies show that families who internalize the “death as journey” metaphor are more likely to forgo aggressive interventions but may also delay acknowledging the imminence of death (Graham et al., 2013). Conversely, the militaristic metaphors common in oncology (“battle against cancer”) have been linked to prolonged aggressive treatment even when palliative care would be more appropriate (Reisfield & Wilson, 2004). These findings suggest that metaphorical framing carries concrete ethical consequences, shaping not just attitudes but medical choices with profound implications for quality of dying.

The epistemological status of death metaphors warrants scrutiny. Searle (1979) distinguishes between “dead metaphors” that have become literalized in language (like “passed away”) and live metaphors that retain their figurative force. This distinction matters because dead metaphors may operate unconsciously, shaping thought without our awareness. For instance, the phrase “terminal illness” embeds a journey metaphor (from Latin *terminus*, meaning boundary or endpoint) that frames illness spatially, potentially influencing both patient and physician perceptions (Semino et al., 2018). Cognitive linguists argue that such metaphors are not merely decorative but constitutive of thought itself (Lakoff & Johnson, 1999), raising questions about whether a non-metaphorical understanding of death is even possible. Wittgenstein’s (1953) concept of “language games” suggests that death metaphors function as rule-governed social practices rather than representations of reality, emphasizing their role in communal meaning-making rather than individual cognition.

Religious traditions provide rich case studies for examining how death metaphors shape metaphysical beliefs. The Christian “crossing the Jordan” metaphor (derived from Joshua 3) conceptualizes death as a river crossing into the Promised Land, reinforcing notions of divine providence and ultimate reward (McFague, 1975). Contrast this with the Buddhist metaphor of the “wheel of samsara,” which frames death as merely one station in a cyclical journey toward enlightenment (Lauf, 1977). These divergent metaphorical systems produce radically different attitudes toward mortality: where Christianity emphasizes a linear journey to a final destination, Buddhism stresses impermanence and recurrence. Comparative analysis reveals that the journey metaphor is flexible enough to support contradictory theological positions while remaining psychologically comforting—a flexibility that may explain its cross-cultural persistence (Becker, 1973).

Existentialist critiques challenge the psychological utility of death metaphors. Sartre (1943/1956) argued that metaphors like “eternal sleep” constitute “bad faith” by allowing individuals to avoid confronting death’s absolute negation of consciousness. Frankl (1946/1985) similarly cautioned against metaphorical escapism in *Man’s Search for*

Meaning, insisting that authentic existence requires facing death's void directly. Contemporary research in terror management theory partially supports this view, showing that while death metaphors reduce anxiety in the short term, they may inhibit deeper existential resolution (Vail et al., 2012). However, other studies suggest that metaphorical framing can facilitate death acceptance when it promotes narrative coherence and legacy-building (Neimeyer, 2001). This paradox underscores the need for nuanced application of death metaphors in therapeutic contexts.

The digital age has introduced new ethical dilemmas in death representation through emerging metaphors like "digital afterlife" and "virtual immortality." Social media platforms employ journey metaphors ("memorialized accounts") that imply ongoing presence rather than absence (Brubaker et al., 2013). Startups offering AI-powered "grief bots" that simulate the deceased's language patterns literalize the journey metaphor by suggesting consciousness persists digitally (Savin-Baden et al., 2022). While these technologies may help with bereavement, ethicists warn they risk creating "ambiguous loss" where death is neither fully acknowledged nor accepted (Bass & Dabbs, 2021). The philosophical question arises: when do death metaphors cross from healthy coping into harmful denial? This boundary becomes increasingly blurred as technology enables new forms of metaphorical immortality.

Feminist and disability perspectives offer critical correctives to dominant death metaphors. The militaristic "battle" metaphor prevalent in cancer discourse has been criticized for implying that those who die "lost" through lack of willpower (Sontag, 1978). Similarly, the journey metaphor's emphasis on autonomous movement may marginalize those with mobility impairments or neurodegenerative diseases (Kafer, 2013). Alternative metaphors like "unfolding" or "transformation" have been proposed to create more inclusive death discourse (Kastenbaum, 2000). These critiques highlight how seemingly neutral metaphors encode cultural values and power structures, necessitating conscious metaphor selection in professional thanatology practice.

The ecological turn in death studies has generated new metaphorical frameworks like "recomposition" (from the natural burial movement) and "mycelial network" (evoking fungal interconnectedness) (Olson, 2016). These metaphors aim to replace individualistic journey concepts with systemic, ecological models of death. While philosophically innovative, research suggests they may lack the intuitive resonance of traditional journey metaphors for most people (Walter, 2019). This tension between conceptual accuracy and psychological efficacy lies at the heart of contemporary debates about death representation. As climate change and mass extinction events force collective confrontation with mortality, the need for ethically grounded, psychologically effective death metaphors becomes increasingly urgent.

CONCLUSION

The journey metaphor for death represents far more than linguistic convention—it constitutes a fundamental cognitive framework through which humans navigate the existential terror of mortality. Drawing on interdisciplinary evidence from cognitive linguistics, psychology, philosophy, and thanatology, this analysis has demonstrated how death metaphors simultaneously enable and constrain our understanding of life's final transition. While metaphors like "passing away" and "eternal journey" provide psychological comfort and narrative coherence, they risk obscuring death's biological realities and perpetuating avoidance cultures. The ethical implications are particularly salient in medical contexts, where metaphorical framing directly influences end-of-life decisions.

Future research should pursue three key directions: first, longitudinal studies tracking how specific death metaphors affect grief processing over time; second, cross-cultural

comparisons of metaphor efficacy in different belief systems; third, development of evidence-based guidelines for metaphor use in palliative care. As digital afterlife technologies and ecological crises transform death practices, scholars must critically examine emerging metaphors for their psychological impacts and ethical consequences.

Ultimately, this study argues for a balanced approach that recognizes metaphor's necessity in death discourse while maintaining critical awareness of its limitations. Rather than seeking to eliminate death metaphors—an impossible task given their cognitive entrenchment—we should cultivate metaphor literacy that allows individuals to move flexibly between different representational frames. In doing so, we may develop a death discourse that is both psychologically supportive and existentially honest, honoring mortality's profound mystery while providing the conceptual tools needed to face it with eyes open.

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