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## Language, end of life, death, and bereavement:

### An interdisciplinary perspective

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Since the advent of transdisciplinary death studies in the 1970s, a plethora of research has been conducted in the humanities and social sciences on death-related issues, including end-of-life conditions and bereavement. This research has been undertaken in fields such as anthropology, history, psychology, philosophy, and sociology (see for example Thomas 1975, Aries 1977, Baudry 1999, Molinié 2006, Clavandier 2009). In linguistics, research has addressed issues related to representations of death since the 1990s. While this research may be diverse in its approach, the question of what is said or not said (also because of societal and cultural prohibitions) constitutes the underlying connection between linguistic research on death-related subjects.

Many linguistic studies on death focus on the representation of death as a taboo subject (Gatambuki 2018, Biseko 2024). The observation that “some experiences are too intimate and vulnerable to be discussed without linguistic safeguards” (Crespo Fernández 2006: 1) is the starting point for these studies. They are based on the influential work of Allan and Burridge (2006: 11), who define *taboo* as “a proscription of behavior for a specifiable community of one or more persons, at a specifiable time, in specifiable contexts”. One of the main linguistic safeguards that has been investigated in this respect corresponds to the use of euphemisms (Jamet 2010, Xin 2021). These can be observed at the level of lexical units, for example in circumlocutions (e.g. *garden of remembrance*), or at the level of metaphorical expressions, corresponding to the DEATH IS LOSS metaphor, among others. The use of these euphemistic devices to refer to death has been studied in different genres, such as obituaries (Crespo-Fernández 2006) and TV series (Jamet 2010).

Linguistic studies have also examined the representation of other death-related subjects, such as the end of life and bereavement, especially in communication in healthcare. Since the late 20<sup>th</sup> century (Drew and Heritage 1992), research has been conducted on the linguistic practices of patients, healthcare practitioners (HCPs), (bereaved) relatives, and the communication between them. Here too, metaphors are studied to see how they can both facilitate and hinder communication and well-being (Littlemore and Turner 2020). For example, Semino *et al.* (2020) have studied metaphors used by cancer patients in the UK and have found that violence-related metaphors in doctor-patient communication can be both empowering and disempowering. In France, recent studies have sought to establish corpora of interactions between patients, (bereaved) relatives and HCPs (Auriac-Slusarczyk 2019, Garric and Herbland 2020).

What is left unsaid is a central issue in “disenfranchised grief” (Doka 1989), i.e. grief that is not recognised by society, and clearly highlights the linguistic problem surrounding death. Two recent linguistic research projects, *Death Before Birth* (<https://deathbeforebirthproject.wordpress.com>) and *PERINAT* (<https://perinat.univ-lille.fr>), on communication in the context of perinatal death, have emerged from the observation that bereaved parents encounter communication difficulties, which can manifest themselves in silence on the part of the medical profession and of relatives. In the face of silence, the reappropriation of language constitutes a key component in comprehending and acknowledging one's grief, and the issue of death more generally. With this workshop, our aim is to explore this question and to open up a discussion on the discursive representations of death and bereavement in order to facilitate communication around the sensitive subject of death. This appropriation of language can take a variety of forms, both conventional and creative, such as by

means of metaphors or through lexical formations (Lemmens *et al.* 2021, Caliendo and Ruchon 2020) and semantic shifts in designating terms.

This workshop will be informed by the following research questions: what are the linguistic representations of death and end of life? What are the similarities and differences between healthcare practitioners, patients and (bereaved) relatives in terms of their representation of death and end of life? To what extent can HCPs' communication practices impact the process of bereavement? What linguistic resources can be put in place to avoid the silence that surrounds death-related topics? To answer these questions, we seek to initiate an interdisciplinary discussion by convening linguists along with scholars from other disciplines with an interest in language, such as philosophy or psychology, who share a common interest in end-of-life, death and bereavement issues. A variety of methods will be adopted, including corpus-, interview-, and questionnaire-based methods, in order to observe the representation of death-related issues at various levels of the linguistic analysis, such as morphological, lexical, or discursive.

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