

K.A. Kiikshi^{*}, E.D. Suleimenova

*Al-Farabi Kazakh National University, Almaty, Kazakhstan
(E-mail: kiikshikaussar@gmail.com, esuleim@gmail.com)*

The Death Euphemisms in Kazakh language and their sociocultural interpretation

Talking about death has been a taboo subject in many societies and cultures, including the Kazakh culture. One of the most common ways to talk about death is through the use of euphemisms. The research aims to determine the most common euphemisms that Kazakh people use to describe death, and explore how their meanings reflect common socio-cultural beliefs about the notion of death. The descriptive survey model and the summative content analysis method are used to collect and analyse data. The connotations of the euphemisms are explored, and the Kazakh people's cultural beliefs were interpreted and discussed in the context of the "death" euphemisms. As a result of the research, it is shown that the euphemisms that convey "death" used by Kazakh people correlate with their socio-cultural beliefs, often based on religion.

Keywords: euphemism, death, taboo, sociocultural beliefs, Kazakh people.

Introduction

The subject of death has been one of the most common themes across communities over the centuries across the world. It is the rule of nature that has remained unchanged over human history. It might be because of this reason that death has an important place in a nation's culture with its different beliefs. These beliefs shaped the people's attitude towards death and were also reflected in literature, art, and social interactions. As in many societies, among Kazakhs death and the dead carry significant meaning to people.

Nevertheless, in Kazakh culture death has been a taboo, which should not be broached too directly. While this lack of straightforwardness can be attributed to superstitious beliefs or social norms of politeness, it remains unclear whether this is because of the death denial or making it sound less hurtful and severe. There is a Kazakh tradition of "estirtu", which means "making someone hear". It is a tradition when someone's close one dies; it should be told to him/her by someone trustworthy and authoritative by a song or a poem, metaphors, etc. Many examples of this have reached this day, through which we can see the notions old Kazakh people held about death, especially of their close ones. One thing that can be deduced from the past to the present is that people seldom used the words "died" and "death" directly. This trend continues to this day, as can be seen in the traditional media or everyday language. Kazakh people have found many ways to express death without explicitly mentioning it for different purposes. One of these ways is the use of euphemisms.

According to R. Slovenko, euphemisms can be defined as "speaking with good words" or "in a pleasant manner" [9: 533]. They function as a way to avoid unpleasant or painful subjects [8]. Euphemisms are used to substitute offensive or taboo words with more inoffensive terms and are more commonly used in cultural

^{*}Corresponding author's e-mail: kiikshikaussar@gmail.com

areas considered taboo by the society and thus tend to reflect its beliefs and cultural norms. It can be seen that death is a common topic that is usually substituted by euphemisms [3: 412]. It is debatable whether these euphemisms that replace the word “death” and “died” have a positive effect on the receiving end. The research focuses on determining the most common euphemisms that people use to describe death and explore how the formation of and meanings behind these euphemisms reflect common beliefs about the concept of death the Kazakh people hold.

Materials and Methods

The descriptive survey model was used to determine the data trends and patterns in the use of euphemisms by Kazakh people. By combining certain aspects of both qualitative and quantitative observation, this method is ideal for this study to find the quantitative results of the conducted research and interpret the findings using summative content analysis. To obtain the data of different variations of euphemism people used to convey the subject of death surveys were conducted.

Data collection

In order to obtain the content for analysis a survey was used to determine how a person would inform someone of someone’s death. The answers were gathered and categorised by their contextual meanings and interpretation. The survey consisted of 1 open-end question. The question asked from participants was: “How would you inform a person of someone’s death?” Participants were given 5 minutes to fill in the survey anonymously, and 50 people responded. The participants replied via an online survey application, and there were overall 252 different answers collected. The responses were transferred to the data analytics software.

Data analysis

The collected data was analysed through a qualitative summative content analysis approach [7: 1284]. The frequency and number of the euphemisms were counted, and their contextual use and interpretation were discussed. First, frequency analysis was conducted on the data obtained from the survey. Next, the results were classified according to their meaning using the content analysis method and their interpretations were presented according to the beliefs in Kazakh culture.

Results and Discussion

After the collected data was analysed it was divided into categories according to the euphemisms’ conceptual meanings. The following results were obtained. The categories will be individually analysed below.

Table 1

Categories of euphemisms used in the context of “death”

Death euphemisms	Frequency	Percentage, %
Journey/Gone	51	20,24
Return	42	16,67
To the other world	36	14,29
Eternity	33	13,10
Closed eyes	28	11,11
Fate	21	8,33
Soul	16	6,35
Other	25	9,92
	252	100,00

In the context of “giving the news of death”, the participants mainly chose the euphemism in the form of “gone somewhere” or use words that convey the meaning of “journey”. The next in frequency was the interpretation of death as “return”, which implies that a person is gone to a place in which he has been before. There were also cases when the participants chose not to use any euphemisms and directly mention the death.

a. Death as a journey

Table 2

Euphemisms used to describe death as a “journey”

Gone	Жүріп кетті	8
	Кетті	
	Өтіп кетті	
Gone from the world	Дүниеден өтті	16
	Дүниеден озды	
Set off to an irreversible journey	Қайтпас сапарға аттанды	5
Set off to journey	Сапарға аттанды	2
	Сапар шекті	
Gone to another world	Басқа әлемге кетті	1
Flew to the sky	Аспанға ұшып кетті	2
	Аспанға ұшты	
Gone from this life	Өмірден өтті	17
	Өмірден озды	
		51

As shown in the table above, there were many variations of euphemisms that conveyed the meaning of “journey” (51). This category was the most widely used among participants and can be divided into other numerous subcategories according to the meaning they carry. Nevertheless, from these euphemisms that were used to replace the word “death” it can be deducted that people believe death to be a continuation or a start of a journey and not a point of destruction or start of being non-existent. The euphemisms “gone from the life” (17) and “gone from the world” (16) can be interpreted that people believe there to be “another world”, which is clearly presented in another variation of “gone to another world”. The word “gone” and its various original Kazakh counterparts (8) carry the meaning that a person has moved from one place to another, which implies that when a person dies, he goes to a specific place and does not stop existing. We can conclude that this category of interpretation of death strongly suggests that there is a wide belief in some kind of afterlife among Kazakh people, which reflects in their choice of words.

b. Death as return

Table 3

Euphemisms used to describe death as a “return”

Returned	Қайтыс болды	34
	Қайтты	8
		42

The phrase “қайтыс болды” (34) is the most common phrase used to describe the death of a person. The root of the word is the verb “қайт”, which means “go back, return”. The word “қайтты” is literally translated as “returned”, “went back”. The use of these words to describe death means that the deceased person went somewhere he had been to before, presumably before coming to this world. This category further insinuates that not only there is an afterlife, but it is a place of return, a place not unfamiliar to humankind. These phrases hold significant meaning, and it can be seen from their everyday use that this meaning carries significant weight in the Kazakh culture.

c. Death as going to “the other world”

Table 4

Euphemisms used to describe death as a “the other world”

Gone/Made way/Went off to the other/further/that world	О дүниеге аттанды	17	28
	О дүниеге кетті	4	
	Арғы дүниеге аттанды	6	

Continuation of table 4

	Ана дүниеге жол салды	1	
Became otherworldly	О дүниелік болды	7	
Gone to the place of Allah (God)	Алланың мекеніне кетті	1	
		36	

Another category of euphemisms that represent “death” is “the other world”. The reason it was separated from the category that conveys death as a “journey” is that while the first category includes all the phrases that have a content of going to some indefinite place, this category directly mentions what place that is i.e., “the other world” (35). Therefore, considering the contextual frame of Kazakh cultural and religious beliefs, we can confidently say that they believe there to be two worlds: this world and another one to which all people go when they die. There is also a euphemism “gone to the place of Allah” (1), which further reinforces the idea of the existence of another world, as well as the divine nature of that world. This euphemism suggests the belief in god and that there is a continuation of life in the other world, and that it is ruled by god.

d. Death as eternal place

Table 5

Euphemisms used to describe death through the concept of “eternity”

Gone/Went off /to eternity, eternal world, eternal place; became eternal	Бақиға аттанды	12	18
	Бақиға кетті	2	
	Бақилық болды	4	
	Мәңгі дүниеге аттанды	10	14
	Мәңгіге кетті	1	
	Мәңгілік мекенге аттанды	3	
Parted with the temporary world	Пәни дүниемен қоштасты	1	
		33	

The portrayal of death through the subject of “eternity” is another common method as seen from participants’ answers. Two translations of the word “eternity”, “мәңгі” and “бақи”, which are synonyms, and the words derived from them were used to express the notion of death being eternal. There was also a phrase “Пәни дүниемен қоштасты” (Parted with the temporary world), which, while does not express the eternity of the other world, suggests it by saying that this world is temporary while the other is, on the contrary, eternal. This category of euphemisms shows people’s belief in the eternity and finality of death, compared to other forms of beliefs, like reincarnation.

e. Death through “closing eyes”

Table 6

Euphemisms used to describe death as “closing eyes”

Closed his/her eye(s)	Көз жұмды	28
-----------------------	-----------	----

The phrase “көз жұмды” is a widely-used euphemism to inform of someone’s passing. This metonymy conveys a lighter meaning and attempts to conceal the gravity of death. While it does not directly connote any form of religious belief, closing a deceased person's eyes is considered a form of respect and tribute to the person and his death [1: 108].

f. Death through “fate”

Table 7

Euphemisms used to describe death as “fate”

He found what was predestinated	Қаза болды	8	16
	Қаза тапты	8	

Continuation of table 7

The fated time of death caught/came to him/her	Ажал кұшты	3	5
	Ажалы келді	2	
			21

The category of phrases that convey the meaning of death as an occurrence that was meant to happen strongly suggest people's belief in predestination or preordainment. It is a form of determinism, a theological determinism to be exact, which means that it is a belief that everything happens with the will and knowledge of the divine being or god. "Қаза" and "ажал" are specific terms native to the religion of Islam that were presumably borrowed and integrated into Kazakh word bank. The word "қаза", according to the Islamic belief, contextually translated as "fate", can be defined as the fact that god has long known and determined the time, place, features, and how things will happen in the world. Additionally, the word "ажал" can be defined as "the predestinated duration of life and time of death of a person". Therefore, these euphemisms show that people believe death to be god's will and that there is a particular predetermined time specific to every person.

g. Death through the "soul"

Table 8

Euphemisms used to describe death through the notion of "soul"

His/her soul departed/was given	Жан салды	2	15
	Жан тапсырды	12	
	Жаны шықты	1	
Azrael took his/her soul	Өзірейіл жанын алды	1	
			16

According to The Encyclopedia Britannica, the soul is an "immaterial aspect or essence of a human being" and a "part of the individual which partakes of divinity and often is considered to survive the death of the body" [5]. Many religions have different notions about the essence of human being, and the soul is a common topic in theology. The belief that the soul departs the human body after death is common in several religions. From these euphemisms it can be seen that Kazakh people also have adopted this belief that there is a separate spiritual essence of human being that is temporarily contained in the body until person's death. The euphemism "Azrael took his/her soul", in which "Azrael" is defined as an "angel of death" in some religions, most important of them being Islam and Judaism [4], further strengthens this interpretation, as it signifies that people believe in the religious beliefs of Judaism or Islam, and it shows in the figures of speech of Kazakh people. It can be assumed that the religion in question is Islam, considering the fact that Judaism is an ethnic religion of Jewish people [6], and Kazakh people have been predominantly considered a Muslim ethnicity [2].

h. Other

Table 9

Other euphemisms used to describe death

Died, became dead, deceased	Өлді	6	14
	Мерт болды	5	
	Марқұм болды	3	
His/her life was finished; lost his/her life	Өмірі бітті	2	7
	Өмірінен айрылды	5	
He/she is no more	Енді жоқ		4
			25

This category includes the phrases that did not fit into any other category by their meaning. It can be seen that usually, these phrases are synonyms of the word "died" or its other prototypes that have different word choice and structure. Thus, they do not carry any contextual meaning that can be analyzed in the context of cultural beliefs.

Conclusion

One of the most painful truths that a person can accept is death. It is also one of the most painful messages to deliver. This delivery can be done in various ways, and often it is carried out indirectly, using some tools to soften the harsh truth or convey some additional meaning behind the words. One of those tools, and the one discussed in this paper, is euphemisms used to define death. The conducted research based on euphemisms used in the Kazakh language and Kazakh religious beliefs as sociocultural factor shows that the way people talk about and deliver the news of death often correlates with the spiritual beliefs of the people. The semantic formation of the euphemisms that Kazakh language speakers use in the context of “death” mainly has its roots in widely accepted cultural beliefs and concepts regarding death. In the course of the study the category in which the word “death” was most euphemistically used was its description as “journey”, and the specific phrase with which Kazakh people tend to describe death was “return”. Other notions that Kazakh people seem to hold about death as discovered by the research were that death was eternal, that the soul is departed from the body at the moment of death, and that death was predestinated by God.

These results can be used for further research in the fields of psycholinguistics and discourse analysis.

References

- 1 Ad, Macleod (2009). Eyelid Closure at Death. *Indian journal of palliative care*. 15. 108–10. 10.4103/0973–1075.58454.
- 2 Allworth, E., Sinor, Denis, Smith, David Roger and Hambly, Gavin R.G. (2021). Kazakhstan. People Of Kazakhstan. Religion. *Encyclopedia Britannica*. <https://www.britannica.com/place/Kazakhstan>.
- 3 Battistella, Edwin & Allan, Keith & Burrige, Kate. (1993). Euphemism & Dysphemism: Language Used as Shield and Weapon. *Language*. 69. 406. 10.2307/416552.
- 4 Britannica, T. Editors of Encyclopaedia (2020). Azrael. *Encyclopedia Britannica*. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Azrael>.
- 5 Britannica, T. Editors of Encyclopaedia (2020). Soul. *Encyclopedia Britannica*. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/soul-religion-and-philosophy>.
- 6 Gaster, T. H., Novak, David, Cohen, Gerson D., Dimitrovsky, Haim Zalman, Baron, Salo Wittmayer, Feldman, Louis H., Silberman, Lou Hackett, Hertzberg, Arthur, Pines, Shlomo, Vajda, Georges and Greenberg, Moshe (2020). Judaism. *Encyclopedia Britannica*. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Judaism>.
- 7 Hsieh, Hsiu-Fang & Shannon, Sarah. (2005). Three Approaches to Qualitative Content Analysis. *Qualitative health research*. 15. 1277–88. 10.1177/1049732305276687.
- 8 In McArthur, T., Lam-McArthur, J., & Fontaine, L. (Eds.), (2018). Euphemism. *The Oxford Companion to the English Language*. Oxford University Press. Retrieved 31 Mar. 2021, from <https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780199661282.001.0001/acref-9780199661282-e-448>.
- 9 Slovenko, R. (2005). Euphemisms. *Journal of Psychiatry and Law*, 33(4), 533–548.

К.А. Киікші, Э.Д. Сулейменова

Қазақ тіліндегі «өлім» сөзіне эвфемизмдер және олардың әлеуметтік-мәдени тұрғыдан талдануы

Өлім тақырыбы қазақ халқымен қатар көптеген қоғам мен мәдениеттер үшін ашық айтылмайтын тақырып болып табылады. Өлімді талқылау мен жеткізу үшін көп жағдайда эвфемизмдер қолданылады. Зерттеу жұмысы қазақтар арасында өлімді сипаттау үшін жиі қолданылатын эвфемизмдерді анықтау және оларды талдау арқылы эвфемизмдердің қазақ халқының «өлім» туралы нанымдарын көрсететінін зерттеуге бағытталған. Деректерді жинау және талдау үшін сипаттамалық сауалнама моделі және жиынтық мазмұнды талдау әдісі пайдаланылды. Эвфемизмдердің мағынасы зерттеліп, қазақ халқының мәдени сенімдері «өлім» жайындағы эвфемизмдер аясында түсіндіріліп, талқыланды. Зерттеулер нәтижесінде қолданылған «өлім» эвфемизмдерінің көп жағдайда қазақ халқының дінге негізделген әлеуметтік-мәдени сенімдерімен тікелей байланысты екендігі көрсетілген.

Кілт сөздер: эвфемизм, өлім, әлеуметтік-мәдени сенімдер, қазақ халқы, қазақ мәдениеті.

К.А. Киикши, Э.Д. Сулейменова

Эвфемизмы к слову «смерть» в казахском языке и их социокультурная интерпретация

Разговоры о смерти были запретной темой во многих обществах и культурах, в том числе и в казахской. Один из наиболее распространенных способов говорить о смерти — использовать эвфемизмы. Целью исследования являются определение наиболее широко распространенных эвфемизмов, которые казахи применяют при описании смерти, и изучение того, как их значения отражают общие социокультурные представления о понятии «смерть». Описательная модель опроса и метод сводного контент-анализа применены для сбора и анализа данных. Изучены значения эвфемизмов, а культурные верования казахского народа интерпретированы и обсуждены в контексте этих эвфемизмов. В результате исследования выявлено, что эвфемизмы, передающие значение слова «смерть», используемые казахами, коррелируют с их социокультурными верованиями, часто основанными на религии.

Ключевые слова: эвфемизм, смерть, табу, социокультурные верования, казахский народ, свободный контент-анализ.