Facing Finality: Cognitive and Cultural Studies on Death and Dying (2012)

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This book is to be welcomed for its commitment to the topic of death and dying, one which remains socially taboo in many countries and cultural contexts. Indeed, the taboo or 'hypersensitive' nature of the topic, as Berendt calls it (p.26), recurs in many of the discussions across the book. The data sources from which the discussions arise are immensely varied and this contributes to the richness of the book. They include a survey of historically, and mostly religiously, rooted cultural worldviews on death (**Error! Reference source not found.**); a semantic analysis of death and dying related words and expressions in Japanese Thesauruses (Kei Yamanaka); analyses of conceptual metaphors in English and Japanese texts around the topic of death and dying (Erich Berendt, Aya Maeda, & KeikoTanita); conceptualizations of suicide in Japan and the west (Maeda); similar chapters on abortion (Tanita) and capital punishment (Berendt); metaphorical analysis of Islamic texts in Arabic (Alaaeldin Soliman); an analysis of the Japanese movie *Okuribito*, meaning "Departures" (Tanita); a philosophical/cultural analysis of what fictional as well as actual treatment of *Ghosts, Revenants, and Spectres* reveals about values and attitudes in different cultures (Katarzyna Ancuta); and a literary critical analysis of a novel by the Thai writer Pira Canning Sudham, which illustrates differing perceptions and values surrounding death (Stephen Conlon). This range creates a rather unusual, but also refreshing, mix of scholarly discursive writing and empirical analysis.

It is clear from the fact that Berendt, Tanita, and Maeda have each written several chapters, as well as one joint one, that they are at the heart of the project. Indeed, it was from a cognitive linguistics seminar at Seisen university

in Tokyo, on the topic of death and dying that the idea germinated. As Berendt outlines in the preface (p.5), the goals of all the research were:

(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 mayhave 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;
(5) to contribute to the development of cognitive metaphor theory through cross-cultural issues both commonalities and divergences of perspective.

These conceptual metaphorical studies form the basis for six out of the fifteen chapters in the book. The data analysed comes from news reportage, medical and counselling discourse, conversation (based on plays such as '*Death of a Salesman'* and film scripts) and current religious discussions, as well as data on the specific topics of capital punishment, suicide, and abortion in US and Japanese media and websites. In all of these chapters, six 'supra-semantic' categories, derived from Lakoff & Johnson's 1980 work on *Metaphors we live by* constituted the framing for the analyses. These categories were: ACTION/EVENT, CONTAINER, ENTITY, JOURNEY, STATUS and TIME. While this meant consistency in how quantitative information on the number of tokens found within each category across the differing text types was presented, it also led to rather a lot of repetition, with several chapters explaining the categories as if it was new information.

The data itself was meticulously analysed and the findings charted in percentage terms. Stringent efforts were made to maintain a balance as far as possible between Japanese and English sources. The researchers recognized the constraints both in the selection of texts for comparison and in the scope for generalization. The main findings were that English discourse utilized more frequently the descriptive concepts of ACTION/EVENT (45%) than Japanese (32%). Japanese made greater use of figurative conceptual patterns (ENTITY 31%, JOURNEY 22%, STATUS 15%), particularly in the private discourse types, whereas these categories were fairly evenly distributed in the

English data. It was hypothesized that 'the Japanese penchant for euphemism and honorific language' contributed to this (p. 72).

In the chapters on suicide, abortion, and capital punishment in particular, it seemed that the emphasis on percentages of conceptual metaphor occurrences militated against the more interesting cultural aspects, such as the prominence of debates around capital punishment in the United States, as opposed to Japan, where it is legal and there is no apparent interest in changing this status quo. The discussion of the Japanese concept of *meinichi*, referring to the day on which an unborn baby dies, or is aborted (this distinction wasn't always clear, and may be a feature of the English concept) was particularly interesting, as there is no equivalent in English. The notion of *jizou,* a deity whose role is to act as the guardian of children is also important in this regard. This chapter includes a delightful image of a *MIZUKO-JIZOU*, guardian of the "water child", surrounded by placatory offerings of toys to the spirit of the aborted fetus. Differing attitudes to suicide in Japan and the west were highlighted in Maeda's discussion. For example, a mother who survives an attempted suicide along with killing her children is likely to be looked on more sympathetically in Japan than in the United States, as an actual case documented. In general, the sense of group belonging and loyalty tend to configure attitudes towards suicide in Japan, and it is not always seen as a negative outcome.

One of the most enticing aspects of the book is the focus on cultural contrasts. While death is obviously universal, it's not unexpected that the Lakoffian supra-categories were found across both English and Japanese, as well as in Arabic (Soliman's chapter). One interesting contrast was that there were no examples of death as a person in the Japanese data, compared with examples such as 'death knocks at the door', and of course the notion of the 'grim reaper' in English. As Soliman's data showed, the personification of death, as well as the representation of death as a moving entity is readily available in Arabic and the Islamic tradition. Another striking contrast came in Yamanaka's lexical-semantic analysis of Japanese expressions for death and dying where such metaphorical extensions as 'the echo died' or 'the connection died' would be highly unlikely in Japanese, and would sound stilted or 'vacuous' in translation (p.34). Also, stricter animacy conditions in Japanese lexico-grammar as opposed to English, has resulted in different and non-transferable verbs for humans dying, plants dying, and natural phenomena ceasing to exist. Such issues of course create problems for notions of metaphorical extension.

Yamanaka's scholarly excursion through the range of lexico-semantic variation in how death and dying are realized in Japanese also mentioned the

cultural significance of suicide, especially the honour attached to it in the age of the Samurai warriors, and how this has resulted in a range of differing lexicalizations for the different types of suicide practised. This points up the fact that what gets encoded in different languages is not a question of the language per se, or even basic cognitive patterns, but rather the various cultural practices deemed worthy of communication and hence expression. The constitutive role of metaphor in meaning and experience, however, which Lakoff and Johnson brought to the field of cognitive linguistics in 1980, has been culturally and critically recognized for much longer. This is brought out in Soliman's comments on the mediaeval Arab scholar, Ibn Jinni, who, like Vico a few hundred years later in the European Renaissance period, understood the key role of metaphor in thought. Soliman also provides a striking analogy for the translatability and transferability of differing underlying cultural conceptualisations, when he describes his early experiences of writing in Japanese as: 'like using a Japanese keyboard connected to an Arabic operating system'. This stemmed from his use of the word 'pyramids' to stand for great things, which was not acceptable in the Japanese context. The ease with which translation can miss deeper-lying cultural meanings is also exemplified in Tanita's treatment (chapter 13) of the Japanese film *Okuribito* (*the departed)* when it was shown in English. Such issues are particularly resonant in the contemporary context of English, which operates as a global *lingua franca.* Here, the assumption is often made, rather glibly, that English is a culturally neutral medium.

One major cultural contrast with ramifications in a range of languages comes from dominant conceptualizations of time. Here, 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. Here two chapters in particular, Ancuta's on the philosophy of death in different cultural contexts and its effects on social practices and understanding and Conlon's on the novel of a Thai author which illustrates a particularly Buddhist perspective are very illuminating. So, in her culturally wide-ranging treatment of 'Ghost, Revenants, and Spectres: The Side –effects of Dying' (chapter 11), Ancuta makes the point that the idea that death is not the end, that it is only a phase in the cycle, or indeed the beginning of a new life seems to have been comforting to humans ever since our ancestors became aware of the fact that death was unavoidable (p.110). She then surveys a range of scholarly commentary and provides descriptions of how the afterlife has been anthropomorphized in different cultural contexts. For example, she quotes the Buddhist scholar Ikeda Daisaku,

who states that "life is eternal" and "death is thought to be not so much the cessation of an existence as the beginning of a new one". This Buddhist world view is particularly vividly brought to life in Conlon's essay entitled: 'The End may be Near but so is the Beginning: An Ecological Reading of the Proxemics of Death in the Fictions of Pira Canning Sudham.' This literary critical essay on the Thai author, particularly his novel *Shadowed Country,* is highly informative about Buddhist inflections in Thai life and understanding of death. He describes the Thai approach to death as follows: "the moment of death is understood as a time for the dead to move on into the between, the time-space through which the dead move towards their next life" (p.176). The next life concept is instantiated in the narrative of the novel by three different characters who are as it were, sequentially reborn from each other. The Buddhist conceptualization of the cycle of life, death, and rebirth is complexly mirrored in the structure and plotting of the novel, as well as the fact that the novel itself has gone through several iterations and prior publication. Conlon also shows how the author includes these Buddhist perspectives self-consciously and perceptively, with allusion also to western literature and sensibilities in order to connect with a western readership.

Looking at the structure of the book as a whole, the grouping of the chapters within its four part division, is not entirely satisfactory. Arguably for example, the more philosophical chapters from the final part of the book could have sat well with Berendt's opening chapter, entitled 'Facing Finality and Creating Alternatives'. In this chapter, he identifies Karen Armstrong's (2005) delineation of *logos* and *mythos* as cornerstones of differing approaches to life and death, and reference to this distinction is made also in Ancuta's chapter. The vocabulary based chapters from part one could then have joined the metaphor-based chapters. To cavil further, some repetition of the background to the metaphor research project could have been edited out. It might also be said that an opportunity was missed in not having all the contributors read the other chapters, so that when commonalities in custom or conceptualization, such as for example the assumption of death as a source of contamination (Tanita & Ancuta) a cross-reference might be made. Nonetheless, the primary interest of the book lies in the widely varying social and cultural attitudes, practices, and evaluations that exist around death and dying, and the book offers up a colourful linguistic and cultural landscape in this regard.