

## Death in a multicultural society: Metaphor, language and religion in Singapore obituaries

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### *Abstract*

Obituaries are a tractable source of metaphorical depictions of death, which in turn offer unique insights into the near-universality versus culture and context-specificity of metaphors. In multicultural settings, they can shed further light on the underexplored question of how metaphor use interacts with linguistic and religious identities. This paper is a case study of newspaper obituaries (N=337) in the multicultural and multilingual context of Singapore. It uses a mixed-methods approach to uncover the types of death-related metaphors across languages and religions, their near-universal and culture-specific aspects, and significant associations between religion and metaphor use/non-use ( $\chi^2$  (2, N=337) = 84.54,  $p < 0.001$ , Cramer's  $V = 0.501$ ,  $\text{Log}(\text{BF}_{10}) = 47.14$ ), language and metaphor use/non-use ( $\chi^2$  (1, N=337) = 71.2,  $p < 0.001$ , Cramer's  $V = 0.46$ ,  $\text{Log}(\text{BF}_{10}) = 42.25$ ), and religion and language of the deceased ( $\chi^2$  (2, N=337) = 48.11,  $p < 0.001$ , Cramer's  $V = 0.378$ ,  $\text{Log}(\text{BF}_{10}) = 19.7$ ). The findings extend prevailing discussion from the substantive contents of metaphors to the intra-societal pragmatics of their use, connecting metaphor explicitly with the construction of religious and linguistic identities.

**Keywords** obituaries, death, metaphor, religion, identity construction

### *1. Introduction*

Death and related experiences have been studied from multiple social and humanistic perspectives. One of the most tractable data sources for accessing death-related depictions and attitudes is the obituary. Sociologists consider obituaries as vessels of ‘collective memory’ which are particularly interesting when examined across different eras and events (Fowler, 2005, 2007; Taussig, 2017). Philosophers see them as revealing idealized moral values within and across cultural contexts (Zagzebski, 1996). Obituaries have themselves evolved from simple death notices in newspapers to internet-based innovations like ‘web cemeteries’, offering new possibilities of inquiry (de Vries & Rutherford, 2004). Despite these innovations, they retain a degree of predictability which allows reliable retrieval of information relevant to research like demographic details of the deceased (Alfano, Higgins, & Levernier, 2018). Since there are strong expectations in many cultures to publish obituaries and talk about death, linguists have examined how resources like euphemisms and metaphors may provide a means to handle this experientially inaccessible, sentimentalized, and yet taboo subject (Fernández, 2006).

Metaphorical descriptions of death also provide a window into key ideas in metaphor theory. Conceptual metaphor theorists, for example, have shown how broad abstract concepts like ‘life’ are depicted across languages and cultures by a consistent set of metaphors grounded in near-universal bodily experiences, or ‘image schemas’ (Johnson, 2005; Lakoff & Johnson,

1999). These include describing life as a physical journey (e.g. *we have come so far*) and life situations as bounded containers (*my life is in the pits*), which draw upon fundamental ‘image-schematic’ concepts like ‘path’, ‘force’, ‘boundary’ etc. Similar observations have been made about death metaphors, the conceptual counterpart of life, as well as other abstract concepts in various languages (Kövecses, 2000; Yu, 2009). For example, English and Spanish have many expressions describing death as physical rest (*rest in peace*, *descansar en paz*), as movement (*exit this life*, *salir de esta vida*), as freedom from physical bondage (*released from the ties of this world*, *desprenderse de las ataduras de este mundo*), and so on (Marín-Arrese, 1996). It remains a key objective of conceptual metaphor theory to show how apparently unrelated cross-cultural/linguistic metaphors are reducible to a highly schematic set of common human experiences. However, there has been a counterwave of research focusing on variability and cultural/linguistic specificities, which directs attention to the substantive or ‘rich’ (Kimmel, 2012) details of these metaphors instead. Languages X and Y might both describe death as a journey, but specific details (e.g. the ways in which this journey is undertaken) might well originate from different cultural understandings. While some argue that metaphors of life, death, love etc. depend entirely on cultural knowledge (Howe, 2008; Quinn, 1991), others suggest that universalist and variationist perspectives are equally important (Frank, 2008; Kimmel, 2010; Kövecses, 2015). We should therefore discern both universal and culture/context-specific properties of metaphorical conceptualizations, as well as the relationships between them. Death metaphors would offer a useful comparative perspective on the above (Ross & Pollio, 1991), with further potential applications in areas like psychological assessments of attitudes towards death (Cheung & Ho, 2004; McLennan et al., 1997). Retreating for a moment from the prevailing premise that subjects like life and death tend to be conceptualized by metaphor, we also see that not much has been done on when, and why, people in comparable situations choose *not* to use metaphors instead.

The practical advantages of obituaries render them suitable resources to investigate the aforementioned issues. In multicultural and multilingual contexts, they can shed light on the relationships between demographic variables and metaphor; in particular, the construction of self, cultural, and religious identities through the decision to depict death figuratively (Fernández, 2006; Lawuyi, 1991). An intra-societal perspective is also of additional interest given that most variationist studies compare metaphors across societal boundaries, and pay less attention to the interaction of different languages and cultures within a society. This paper is a case study of death-related metaphors in obituaries published in the multicultural context of Singapore, a city state located in Southeast Asia. The dynamic and at times problematic interactions between its many cultures, language groups, and religions pose many questions, but these are often addressed from a sociological rather than linguistic perspective (Goh, 2009). The population of Singapore comprises four official ethnic categories labeled Chinese, Malay, Indian, and a combination of other ethnicities (e.g. Eurasians). The official and predominant languages, with the percentage of people speaking them most frequently at home are Chinese (all dialects) (47.1%), English (36.9%), Malay (10.7%), and Tamil (3.3%). Most Singaporeans are nevertheless bilingual to varying degrees of proficiency in English and at least one other language. The main religions are Buddhism

(33.2%), Christianity (all denominations) (18.8%), Islam (14.0%), Taoism and folk religion (11.0%), and Hinduism (5.0%), with 18.3% reported as not religious (Department of Statistics Singapore, 2015). It is important to note that despite the officially distinct categories of Buddhism and Taoism/folk religion, Buddhist and Taoist beliefs and practices in Singapore overlap in many ways and can be considered as parts of a syncretic religion (Wee, 1997). Obituaries are routinely published in major newspapers representing the official languages, although they are more common in some languages than others for reasons explained later. Besides the language they are written in, the religious beliefs (or lack thereof) of the deceased are often revealed through details such as the nature and location of funeral services and the quotation of religious scripture. The use and non-use of death-related metaphors can therefore be documented and further analyzed for associations with language and religious affiliation through a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods. This approach allows us to address the following research questions in this paper:

1. What kinds of metaphors are used to describe death and related aspects in newspaper obituaries?
2. What are the image schematic and substantive properties of these metaphors?
3. How does the decision to use metaphor or not interact with religious identity and choice of language?

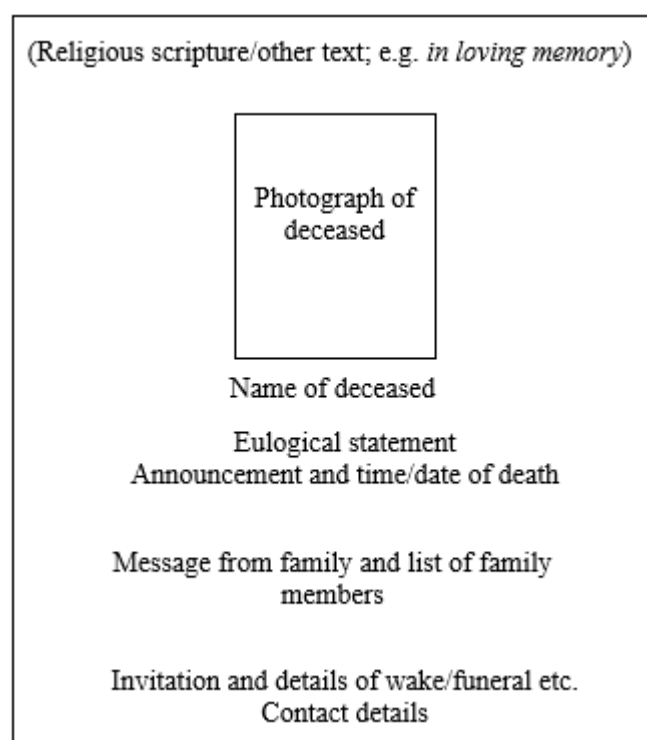
In the following sections, the data collection process and the different methodologies used to address the research questions are first outlined. The qualitative discourse analytic findings will then be discussed with respect to the first two questions, followed by the quantitative findings with respect to the third question. The concluding section will outline limitations and directions for future research.

## ***2.Data and methodology***

### ***2.1 Corpus of obituaries***

Obituaries published in print from January to August 2018 in four major newspapers representing the official languages – the *Straits Times* (English), *Lianhe Zaobao* (Mandarin Chinese), *Berita Harian* (Malay), *Tamil Murasu* (Tamil) – were collected. The corpus was not filtered in the initial qualitative analysis stage which aimed to document and describe all instances of metaphor use to address RQs 1 and 2. For the subsequent quantitative analysis stage to address RQ 3, however, several exclusion decisions were made on grounds of coding and statistical validity: i) Malay language obituaries were excluded because of their relatively low frequency and exclusive association with Islam. The two reasons are likely related as it is traditional Islamic practice to bury the deceased as soon as possible, making obituaries less relevant. Exclusive associations between the language and religion variable would also lead to structural zeros (i.e. cases where no data can be classified under certain categories) and

confound the analysis of relationships between linguistic choice and religious identity; ii) Tamil language obituaries were excluded on similar grounds of small sample size and near-exclusive association with Hinduism; iii) cases where more than one obituary was published for a single person within or across papers were excluded; iv) obituaries published by employees/employers of large organizations were excluded as they often do not provide sufficient demographic details for coding (e.g. religious beliefs). In short, the final sample for quantitative analysis (N=337) had to be substantial, and the sample free to vary independently between the variables of language, religion, and metaphor use. Figure 1 shows a schematic layout of a typical obituary and its elements, with occasional and minor variations.



**Figure 1.** Schematic layout of an obituary

## 2.2 Metaphor identification

Each obituary was examined for instances of metaphor. Major metaphor identification procedures in the literature (Cameron & Maslen, 2010; Pragglejaz Group, 2007; Steen et al., 2010) differ on finer theoretical points but agree on the key criteria that a linguistic unit is metaphorical if it has a basic dictionary sense (i.e. not death related) and a contextual sense (i.e. death related), and there is a describable transfer of meaning from the basic to contextual sense. In addition, it is also appropriate to exclude highly conventional death metaphors for which literal alternatives would be contrived, such as the very common *passed away*, *departed*, or 去世 ('go world') in Mandarin Chinese. A metaphor is defined as highly conventional if its death-related sense is listed as one of the standard senses in a dictionary. This exclusion allows the analysis to focus on metaphors which can thus be considered 'deliberate' (Steen, 2008), or used with an explicit communicative intention. An exception to

this stipulation was made in the case of four-character idioms commonly attested in the Chinese data, like 寿终正寝 ('life ended in the main room of the house'). These as elaborated in a later section. They tend to be listed as one lexical unit in the dictionary with the primary sense being death-related. While this implies they should be excluded based on the present definition, they are known to have particular "evaluative and affective connotations" (Tay 2015:48) and are important in the construction of cultural and religious identities. They can be regarded as parallel to English examples included for analysis like 'entered glory peacefully'. The phrase also appears idiomatic, but i) is not listed as such in the dictionary, and ii) its constituent lexical units do not have primary death-related senses. Referring to Figure 1, the identification process reveals that metaphors are used almost exclusively in the 'religious scripture/other text', 'eulogical statement', and/or 'announcement of death sections' of obituaries. The latter two sections especially have metaphors that are most directly related to death. They describe death itself, the process of dying, and/or qualities of the deceased in idealized or euphemistic ways. Alongside factual/informational details like the photograph, name, and details of post-death proceedings, they affirm previous observations that obituaries are "a hybrid genre in which both publicity and information coexist, in which emotion and objectivity go hand in hand" (Fernández, 2006:104).

### 2.3 Coding

Each of the 337 obituaries retained for quantitative analysis as described above was then treated as an independent data unit and coded under three categorical variables: use of METAPHOR (yes/no), LANGUAGE of the obituary (English/Mandarin Chinese; Malay and Tamil excluded as explained above), and RELIGION of the deceased. Religion (Buddhism/Taoism/Christianity/Islam/Hinduism/none) was inferred from details such as the location of funeral services and quotation of religious scriptures. Buddhism and Taoism were treated as one collective category for reasons described above. A 'none' category meant no details were found, indicating either the absence of religious beliefs or a decision to not display one's religious identity. Two raters involved in the coding process reached near perfect agreement levels, except for the METAPHOR variable where eleven cases of disagreement were resolved after discussion.

### 2.4 Analysis

The qualitative analysis involved classifying, comparing, and contrasting metaphors at two levels – the image-schematic level which reveals basic inferential patterns underlying the metaphors, and the substantive level where culture, context, and/or language-specific elements are presented. As described above, the former often highlights commonalities across seemingly disparate sources of metaphor, while the latter highlights differences.

The quantitative analysis involved a backward hierarchical loglinear analysis followed by separate  $\chi^2$  and Bayes factor analyses to determine association patterns between the three variables. This process constructs the best and most adequate model to account for the data, and interprets it with respect to theoretical ideas underpinning the data. As explained earlier, standard requirements for loglinear and  $\chi^2$  models including sample size, mutual exclusivity

and exhaustiveness (Gilbert, 1993) were fulfilled. All following result tables are modified from JASP 0.9.2 and SPSS 21.0 output.

### 3. Findings and discussion

Table 1 shows all death-related metaphors in newspaper obituaries and their translations, classified by languages and religions.

<p><b>English</b></p> <p><u>CHRISTIANITY</u>  was called home to be with the Lord  was called home to the Lord  entered glory peacefully  passed over to his heavenly father  left us peacefully to be with the Lord  safe in the arms of Jesus  *other scriptural metaphors from the Bible</p> <p><u>BUDDHISM/TAOISM</u>  departed for samsaric journey  resting at [place]</p> <p><u>NONE</u>  smile is gone forever  gone from our lives  leaving behind  rest in peace</p>	<p><b>Chinese</b></p> <p><u>CHRISTIANITY</u>  蒙主恩召 (received the gracious call of the Lord)  安息主怀 (resting peacefully in the Lord's bosom)  安返天家 (returned peacefully to the heavenly home)</p> <p><u>BUDDHISM/TAOISM</u>  往生净土 (left for the pure land)  蒙佛接引 (received the guidance and lead of Buddha)  安详示寂 (peacefully showed silence)</p> <p><u>NONE</u>  寿终正寝 (life ended in the main room of the house)  阴阳相隔 (separated by <i>yin</i> and <i>yang</i>)  仙逝上天堂 (depart this mortal coil and ascend to heaven)  遗爱人间 (left love behind in the mortal realm)  慈云失仰 (loss of a benevolent cloud)  高山仰止 (admiring the tall mountain)  淑德长昭 (long-lasting virtue)</p>
<p><b>Malay</b></p> <p><u>ISLAM</u>  sudah balik ke pangkuan Allah (has returned to Allah's bosom)  telah kembali ke Rahmatullah (has returned to Allah)  *other scriptural metaphors from the Koran</p>	<p><b>Tamil</b></p> <p><u>HINDUISM</u>  Left for the divine's abode  Attained Lord's feet  *other scriptural metaphors/prayers from Bhagavad Gita etc.</p>

**Table 1.** Death-related metaphors

Two related overall observations are that the range of metaphors in newspaper obituaries is quite limited with generally low type-token ratios, and they seem to be less creative compared to online innovations (e.g. <https://cemetary.org>) or other obituary styles which emphasize opinion over information (Fernández, 2006). Most of these metaphors therefore

reflect widespread cultural attitudes and beliefs about death rather than individual understandings (Ross & Pollio, 1991). Christian, Islam, and Hindu obituaries also tend to quote religious scriptures with less direct relevance to death. Many of these examples are also metaphorical, but are not included here. It is worth clarifying that the conventionality of metaphor and of cultural beliefs about death are two separate matters. The former, as previously and narrowly defined, only pertains to whether the death-related sense of the metaphor is listed in a dictionary.

### *3.1 Common image-schematic grounding of death-related metaphors*

Image schemas are inferential patterns derived from recurrent bodily experiences. They underlie many metaphorical source domains and provide support for the idea of an ‘embodied cognition’ (Lakoff & Johnson, 1999); i.e. that seemingly culturally-laded concepts like death are reducible to a core set of common metaphors operating across cultures and languages. Five such image schemas can be found in the present obituaries to be discussed in turn – SOURCE-PATH-GOAL, OBJECT, CONTAINER, and VERTICAL ORIENTATION. The fifth is not on typical lists of image schemas but is exemplified by the bodily experience of sleeping/resting.

The SOURCE-PATH-GOAL schema is the foundation of metaphors which depict purposeful activities as journeying from one physical location to another. Just as life is ubiquitously depicted as a journey, so does death involve cross-linguistic and cross-religious depictions like ‘leaving’ and ‘departing’ for a journey to ‘return’ or ‘go’ somewhere. Subject to substantive variations to be discussed later, the place of origin is the world of the living, the journey the process of dying, and the destination the afterlife. The traveler is almost always the deceased but can also be metonymically depicted (e.g. *smile is gone forever*).

The OBJECT schema is foundational to metaphors which construe abstract entities, or non-physical qualities of physical entities, as objects with physical properties. While in everyday language they manifest in subtle ways like *my life is falling apart*, profiling the fragility of the speaker’s life, in obituaries the metaphorical objects tend to be directly expressed.

Examples in the data include describing the virtues of the deceased as a cloud, a mountain, death as the attainment of the divine’s feet, and more subtly the ‘passing over’ of the deceased to god. This schema expectedly has a high degree of variability in terms of the type of object profiled.

The CONTAINER schema underlies the pervasive metaphoric conceptualization of subjective states-of-being as a bounded spatial region, with (crossable) physical boundaries distinguishing between experiencing or not experiencing that state. This is seen from a range of mundane (e.g. *I am in/out of love*) to more creative expressions (e.g. *She is hiding behind her shell*) across languages. In obituaries, the process and state of death are likewise commonly depicted as such, with examples like ‘entered glory’, ‘separated by yin and yang’, and ‘life ended in the main room of the house’

The VERTICAL ORIENTATION schema underlies the equally widespread metaphoric conceptualization of states-of-being as locations along a vertical axis, often with higher

locations construed as more ideal as lower ones. A range of expressions like *she is on top of the world* and *he is down in the dumps* reflect this. In obituaries, death is sometimes depicted as moving to a higher location as in ‘ascends to heaven’, or the deceased depicted as occupying a high position as in ‘the tall mountain’.

The final bodily or image schema underlying a common death metaphor is the experience of resting or sleeping, as seen in obituary expressions like ‘resting at’, ‘resting peacefully’, ‘rest in peace’, and (more indirectly) ‘peacefully showed silence’. This has been analyzed as involving metonymy (Marín-Arrese, 1996) where the ‘physiological effects’ of death stand for the process of death.

To further highlight the common aspects across languages and religions, we can also analyze the above image schemas in terms of how they co-construct an abstract metaphoric scenario of death. In general terms, death involves a certain object (the deceased) embarking on a journey (the process of dying) from one spatial location (the world of the living) to another (the afterlife), in several possible directions including from low to high. All these aspects are highlighted linguistically in newspaper obituaries, with variables to be discussed shortly. Two metaphor types reported in previous studies (Marín-Arrese, 1996) but unattested in the present data are personifications of death (e.g. the Grim Reaper) and the LINK image schema (e.g. *released from the ties of this world*), both of which arguably also fit into the aforementioned general metaphoric scenario.

### 3.2 Variability in death-related metaphors

The common grounding of metaphors in newspaper obituaries exhibits variability in three ways: i) different profiling of image schemas, ii) different substantive/rich source domain entities, and iii) different pragmatic usage rules. While the discussion in the previous section focused on a common core of image schemas underlying metaphors across languages and religions, closer analysis reveals that not all elements within these schemas are highlighted or ‘profiled’ (Clausner & Croft, 1999) in the same way. In the case of the SOURCE-PATH-GOAL schema, Christianity examples depict the deceased as both an agentive traveler who ‘entered glory’, ‘left/returned peacefully’, or a non-agentive traveler ‘called home’ or ‘received the call’ from god. Buddhism examples also demonstrate this variability with examples like ‘left for the pure land’ versus ‘received the guidance and lead from Buddha’. Although Islam and Hinduism examples might be expected to be similar because of the prominence of divine guiding figures, the attested examples (‘has returned to Allah/Allah’s bosom’, ‘left for the divine’s abode’) tend to only be agentive. The range of non-religious examples on the other hand are expectedly agentive with no figure construed as leading the deceased, and in some cases the deceased actively ‘leaves behind’ things. The CONTAINER, VERTICAL ORIENTATION, and sleep/rest schemas are also noticeably variable. Examples from Christianity, Islam, and Hinduism tend to construe the afterlife destination as a clearly bounded space that can be ‘entered’, like a ‘home’, ‘abode’, or the ‘arms’/‘bosom’ of a divine being. Spatial boundaries are profiled to a lesser extent in Buddhism. The ‘pure land’ is not clearly bounded, and a *samsaric* journey specifically profiles the Buddhist belief of reincarnation, with this life and numerous past/future ones as traveling along an endless



CYCLE (another image schema in itself) instead of towards a fixed destination. Non-religious examples in English tend to also not profile clear spatial boundaries, but those in Chinese do. The philosophical *yin-yang* duality stands for the world of the dead and living respectively, separated by an impassable boundary. Heaven (天堂; literally ‘sky’s court’) and mortal realm (人间; literally ‘humans’ space’) also denote well-defined spatial boundaries. For VERTICAL ORIENTATION, it is again surprising that religious examples generally do not construe death as upward motion despite the prominence of divine figures. Instead, upward examples of ‘ascension’ come from non-religious obituaries. Lastly, sleep/rest metaphors are absent in Islam and Hindu examples but attested in all other religious categories.

The second aspect of variability lies with the different specific source domain entities that are used to ‘enrich’ (Kimmel, 2012) the skeletal image-schematic structures. This is often regarded as the most salient variable among supposedly near-universal conceptual metaphors. Here, we can observe a wider range of entities in Chinese and Tamil metaphors compared to English and Malay ones. Examples include ‘pure land’, ‘*yin* and *yang*’, ‘benevolent cloud’, ‘tall mountain’, and ‘Lord’s feet’, all of which evoke specific cultural elements not necessarily limited to religious beliefs. The specific elements highlighted by English and Malay metaphors appear to be correlated with Christianity and Islam respectively, such as ‘the Lord’, ‘heaven’, ‘Jesus’, and ‘Allah’. On the subject of religion, the metaphors also showcase varying beliefs about the nature of the afterlife. Christian, Islam, and Hindu metaphors profile a divine being and/or physical location as a final destination, while Buddhism highlights the *samsaric* or cyclic nature of existence. Non-religious metaphors expectedly highlight a range from finality to non-finality.

The final aspect of variability concerns different pragmatic usage rules which apply specifically to Chinese metaphors in the present data. Most of them turn out to be four-character idioms which are an integral part of the Chinese lexicon and encode the collective knowledge, experiences, and values of Chinese culture (Tay, 2015). It may not be apparent from the linguistic surface that certain metaphors can only be used on certain types of people. For example, 示寂 (‘showed silence’) is common for laypersons, but the alternative 圓寂 (‘round silence’) is more likely used for spiritually advanced persons. Gender is also a factor as 寿终正寝 (‘life ended in the main room of the house’) is more common for males because ‘main room’ can be historically traced to emperors’ living quarters, while 慈云失仰 (loss of a benevolent cloud) and 淑德长昭 (long-lasting virtue) are reserved for females because of the ‘feminine’ qualities of the source domain entities. The circumstances of death may also dictate the metaphors used - 寿终正寝 (‘life ended in the main room of the house’) is typically applicable only to very old individuals who died a painless natural death. There is in fact a large inventory of four-character idioms usable in obituaries, many of them metaphorical, but the present data reflects only a limited set. They are likewise subject to pragmatic restrictions along demographic variables like age, gender, and the occupation of the deceased.

### 3.3 Relationships between metaphor use, religious identity, and language choice

The above qualitative analysis addressed the first two research questions by describing the range of death-related metaphors and their similarities and differences. The third research question focuses not on the content of metaphors but on the social and pragmatic aspects of their use; i.e. how, and why, the decision of using metaphor itself varies across religious identity and the choice of language. Table 2 is a three-way contingency table cross-classifying the 337 obituaries along the three variables of RELIGION, LANGUAGE, and METAPHOR use (subtotals and expected frequencies omitted).

RELIGION			METAPHOR	
			No	Yes
Buddhism/Taoism	LANGUAGE	Chinese	3	41
		English	25	4
Christianity	LANGUAGE	Chinese	0	25
		English	4	73
None	LANGUAGE	Chinese	0	27
		English	98	37

**Table 2.** Three-way contingency table

A hierarchical log-linear analysis was conducted to determine how the three variables interrelate. Recall that Malay and Tamil obituaries are excluded because of their exclusive association with Islam and Hinduism in the data. On the other hand, English and Chinese obituaries are attested across the remaining three religious categories, making it possible to explore non-trivial reasons behind any significant associations found. A backward elimination failed to retain the highest three-way interaction between RELIGION, LANGUAGE, and METAPHOR, but all three bivariate associations were retained as significant and constitute the best model. The likelihood ratio ( $\chi^2$  [2] = 1.363,  $p=0.506$ ) suggests that the model is not significantly different and thus provides an adequate fit for the observed frequencies.

The main effect of the METAPHOR variable reveals that metaphorical obituaries (N=207) significantly outnumber non-metaphorical (N=130) ones ( $\chi^2$  [1, N=337] = 17.14,  $p<0.001$ ). This suggests that metaphor is a preferred strategy when describing death across all languages and religions. The following sections will closely examine the bivariate relationships between RELIGION and METAPHOR, LANGUAGE and METAPHOR, and RELIGION and LANGUAGE by their respective  $\chi^2$  statistics. As evidenced by (adjusted) standardized residuals, cells shaded in green/red indicate a higher/lower than expected frequency at the  $p<0.001$  level of significance, and unshaded cells indicate that the frequency does not differ significantly from chance distribution.

### 3.4 The relationship between religion and metaphor use

Table 3 shows the distribution of metaphors in newspaper obituaries across the three religious categories. The overall relationship is statistically significant with a medium to large effect size ( $\chi^2$  (2, N=337) = 84.54,  $p < 0.001$ , Cramer's  $V = 0.501$ ). Further testing was done with Bayes factor analysis, which supplements the p-value by providing a graded (i.e. relative evidence of  $H_1$  against  $H_0$ ) rather than categorical assessment of statistical significance (i.e. either accept or reject). Poisson sampling was assumed due to the purely observational nature of the present data (Jamil et al., 2017).  $\text{Log}(\text{BF}_{10}) = 47.14$ , confirming ‘very strong evidence’ (Jarosz & Wiley, 2014) for a significant relationship. More specifically, it is found that i) Christian obituaries are relatively much more likely to be metaphorical, ii) non-religious obituaries are relatively much less likely to be metaphorical, and iii) Buddhist/Taoist obituaries have no strong preference for either metaphor or literal language.

			METAPHOR		Total
			No	Yes	
RELIGION	Buddhism/Taoism	Count	28	45	73
		Adjusted Residual	.0	.0	
	Christianity	Count	4	98	102
		Adjusted Residual	-8.6	8.6	
	None	Count	98	64	162
		Adjusted Residual	8.0	-8.0	
Total		Count	130	207	337

**Table 3** The relationship between religion and metaphor use

The perception of death as a joyful and everlasting reunion with god in heaven, and the consequent use of euphemistic metaphors to depict this reunion, has been observed in previous studies in Western cultural contexts and history (Fernández, 2006; Wheeler, 1994). Besides the considerable pool of stock metaphors like ‘was called home to be with the Lord’ which can be used to demonstrate this Christian belief, many obituaries also quote Biblical scripture metaphorically depicting the intimate relationship between god and believers; e.g. “the Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make his face shine on you and be gracious to you; the Lord turn his face toward you and give you peace” (Numbers 6:24-26, New International Version). While previous studies did not always have a comparative basis to assert the prevalence of metaphor in Christian obituaries, the present findings demonstrate that the tendency persists in the contemporary multicultural Singaporean context vis-à-vis other religious categories. A point of interest is that previous studies (Fernández, 2006; Wheeler, 1994) also observed the converse depiction of mortal life in negative terms (e.g.

‘when it shall please God to call them from that scene of wretchedness’), but such negative depictions are absent in the present corpus.

The significant inclination towards metaphor use in Christian obituaries is partly defined by the corresponding disinclination towards metaphor use in non-religious ones. Many non-religious obituaries in the corpus are limited to providing factual information (See Figure 1), with only concise euphemisms like ‘passed away peacefully’ which are not regarded as explicitly metaphorical for the present purpose. Compared to their religious counterparts, non-religious obituaries do not need to project idealized (and likely metaphorical) depictions of death. While idealized summaries or praises of the deceased’s life achievements are common, they tend to be factual and informational in nature.

The third observation, that Buddhist/Taoist obituaries are not inclined towards either metaphorical or literal language, seems puzzling given the generally highly metaphorical character of Eastern religion and philosophy (Slingerland, 2003). The present findings do not imply that metaphorical Buddhist/Taoist obituaries are rare on their own terms, but rather that they are relatively rare compared to Christian ones (and relatively more common than in non-religious ones). A plausible but speculative explanation for this tendency towards ‘linguistic moderation’; i.e. neither overly euphemizing nor understating death, is the key Buddhist philosophy of the ‘middle path’ (Harvey, 2013), which exhorts believers to avoid extreme practices in all aspects of life. This appears to be reflected in the context of obituaries where non-metaphorical Buddhist/Taoist cases simply communicate the fact of death without other non-informational details. The contrast between Christian and Buddhist/Taoist obituaries could suggest that while rhetorical devices like metaphor are useful in constructing or projecting social identities, the absence of rhetoric is also communicative in its own right.

### 3.5 The relationship between language and metaphor use

Table 4 shows the distribution of metaphors in newspaper obituaries across English and Chinese. Like the religion-metaphor relationship above, this relationship is statistically significant and very strong ( $\chi^2$  (1, N=337)=71.2,  $p < 0.001$ , Cramer's V = 0.46, Log(BF<sub>10</sub>)=42.25). The nature of this relationship is clear – while there are more English than Chinese obituaries, Chinese obituaries are relatively far more likely to be metaphorical than English ones.

			METAPHOR		Total
			No	Yes	
LANGUAGE	Chinese	Count	3	93	96
		Adjusted Residual	-8.4	8.4	
	English	Count	127	114	241
		Adjusted Residual	8.4	-8.4	
Total		Count	130	207	337

**Table 4** The relationship between language and metaphor use

The overwhelming tendency for Chinese obituaries to use metaphor, both in absolute and relative terms, can be explained by the ready accessibility of a large conventional inventory of euphemistic four-character idioms. Many of these idioms depict the deceased and/or the process of death in highly idealized and figurative ways, and are often prominently displayed in obituaries, funeral services, wreaths etc. As discussed earlier, these idioms are carefully classified according to their suitability for different genders, ages, and professions. While the examples in Singapore newspapers are not as diverse as other cultures with a more homogenous native Chinese-speaking population (e.g. Taiwan, China), and in many cases do not project profession as an important part of the deceased's identity, the present findings suggest that a similar tendency towards metaphorizing death is nevertheless observable.

The flip side of this tendency is that English obituaries are relatively much less likely to be metaphorical. One obvious explanation is the absence of a comparable English inventory of stock expressions. As will be clarified in the next section, another reason is that English obituaries also tend to be non-religious, and the latter in turn has relatively less need to depict death in euphemistic and philosophical ways. Yet another possibility for which this study has no systematic evidence is that English metaphors might be more prevalent in innovative obituary genres (e.g. <https://cemetary.org>) where death and/or the deceased are depicted in more creative and personal ways. In the present context of newspaper obituaries, however, such creative expressions remain relatively rare.

### 3.6 The relationship between religion and language of obituaries

The final Table 5 shows the distribution of obituaries according to language and religion. Metaphor use is not a variable of concern, but the discussion raises relevant points. The religion-language relationship is also statistically significant but with a weaker effect size than the two above, and just a 'strong' relationship indicated by the Bayes factor ( $\chi^2$  (2, N=337)=48.11,  $p < 0.001$ , Cramer's V = 0.378, Log(BF<sub>10</sub>)= 19.7). More specifically, we see that i) Chinese tends to be the language of choice in Buddhist/Taoist obituaries, ii) English tends to be the language of choice for non-religious obituaries, and iii) neither language is significantly preferred for Christian obituaries.

			LANGUAGE		Total
			Chinese	English	
RELIGION	Buddhism/Taoism	Count	44	29	73
		Adjusted Residual	6.8	-6.8	
	Christianity	Count	25	77	102
		Adjusted Residual	-1.1	1.1	
	None	Count	27	135	162
		Adjusted Residual	-4.6	4.6	

Total	Count	96	241	337
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**Table 5** The relationship between religion and language of obituaries

Unlike for Islam and Hinduism which are almost exclusively associated with Malay and Tamil in the corpus, the variables of language and religion are not inherently linked across English/Chinese and the three other religious categories. This is also reflected in visible English-speaking Buddhist, and Chinese-speaking Christian communities and practices in Singapore (Lai, 2008). Nevertheless, we observe from the data a significant but relatively weaker association between the two variables. Chinese is the preferred language among Buddhist/Taoist obituaries, suggesting that the projection of linguistic and religious identity goes hand in hand in these categories. Christian obituaries, however, demonstrate no obvious linguistic preference, while non-religious obituaries demonstrate the opposite preference for English. As explained above, this might be due to the fact that English does not have a comparable inventory of nuanced euphemisms, and is therefore seen as a more straightforward option in cases where idealized depictions may be less necessary.

#### **4. Conclusion**

This paper reported a focused case study of death-related metaphors and the variabilities of their use in a multicultural and multilingual context. On the one hand, it fulfilled the descriptive objectives, stated in the first two research questions, of documenting the image-schematic and substantive properties of metaphors in the relatively underexplored genre of newspaper obituaries. It was found that death-related metaphors share a common core of image schemas across languages and religions, but there is substantial variation in terms of image-schematic profiling, rich source domains, and pragmatic usage rules. On the other hand, it explored the question of how metaphor use itself varied along linguistic and religious lines, with different association patterns explained with reference to projections of identity. Although linguistic and discourse analysis is not traditionally a primary tool of sociological inquiry, the present findings support the view that multicultural Singapore retains the discourse practices of its ‘constituent’ parts; e.g. the pervasiveness of metaphors in Christian obituaries and Chinese obituaries observed in more homogenous cultures are also seen in the present data.

There are several important limitations to the present study which warrant future research. Firstly, as explained above, the necessary but unfortunate omission of some religious and linguistic categories limits the generalizability of the findings towards Singapore society. While not much can be done about near-exclusive associations between language and religion in obituaries, other genres can be considered as sources of death-related metaphors, including elicitations and personal interviews (Cheung & Ho, 2004; Ross & Pollio, 1991). On a related note, the present study showed that newspaper obituaries contain many culturally sanctioned metaphors, but very few creative ones which are more likely to be found in online innovations. Future studies can examine creative metaphors in these online obituaries and potentially regard obituary type as a factor of variation.

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