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Accommodating Language: A Comparative Investigation of the Use of Euphemisms for Death and Dying in Obituaries in English and in German

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Abstract

Death notices as typically found in newspapers depict a conventionalized use of language which reflects the cultural norms attached to announcing someone's death and saying good-bye. Frequently, the event of death or dying is not explicitly referred to in obituaries, but rather circumscribed by the use of euphemistic expressions. Drawing on previous studies on the use of euphemisms in relation to the event of death (e.g., Crespo Fernández 2006; Haddad 2009; Rabab'ah and Al-Qarni 2012) we propose an understanding of euphemism as "pragmeme", representing "instantiated" (Capone 2010; Capone and Mey 2016; Mey 2007, 2010) communicative strategies which can be characterized as genre-, language-, and culture-specific. By drawing on 80 death notices in the English language from *The New York Times* and 80 obituaries from the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* in the German language, respectively, the study presents a systematic cross-linguistic comparison of different instantiations of euphemisms (e.g., 'metaphor of departure', 'metaphor of sleep', or 'orthophemism'). The encountered euphemisms have distinguished characteristics, thus providing evidence of the different extent to which socio-cultural norms are encoded through euphemistic references.

Keywords: Euphemisms, obituaries, newspapers, pragmemes, pragmatic competence, metaphors

1. Introduction

Death notices as typically found in newspapers represent a conventionalized use of language which reflects the culture-specific norms attached to the announcement of someone's death and saying good-bye. Such norms may include references to a "life" after death, the loss of those left behind, as well as promises that the deceased will not be forgotten. Typically, death notices communicate the "events" surrounding the actual death (such as the mourning of the deceased) as opposed to the actual event of dying or the cause of death.

The ubiquitous reluctance to address death directly is likely associated to the topic's universal and timeless taboo. Despite the universal existence of the topic, death is often perceived as a very private matter, as well as an issue that is dealt with differently from one person to the next. Consequently, an appropriate communication of death requires an adept use of linguistic strategies in order not to convey the impression of being disrespectful, insensitive and offensive towards others. To ensure this does not happen, people resort to elusive language that allows avoiding unpleasant associations and mitigating what is really communicated. Euphemisms constitute a powerful rhetorical tool thanks to the evasive nature of which tabooed topics can be freed from unwanted connotations. In light of the pervasive reluctance to communicate death-related topics, a considerable number of researchers have investigated the culture-specificity of euphemizing strategies in encoding death (e.g., Crespo Fernández 2006; Haddad 2009; Katamba 1994; Linfoot-Ham 2005; Qi 2010; Rabab'ah and Al-Qarni 2012). Hence, we can assume both a widespread use of euphemisms across languages, as well as language- and culture-specific differences in the specific choice of euphemisms, influenced by socio-cultural, religious, and psychological values; the choice of linguistic devices used to mitigate the taboo of death therefore yields insights into how these different orientations are encoded in the discourse of death in a specific language/culture.

The assumed culture-specificity of euphemisms implies a necessary context-dependence of this communicative strategy. This context-dependence is not only expected on the macro level of language and culture, but also on the micro level of the underlying situational circumstances, for instance with regard to text type. Death notices, we argue, carry genre-specific characteristics which further influence the choice of euphemizing expressions. In this study, we see euphemisms as a type of "pragmeme" as first introduced by Mey (Capone 2005, 2010; Capone and Mey 2015; Mey 2007, 2010). We aim to analyze in what way euphemisms represent referential sources which emphasize the context-specific (specifically culture-specific) and interrelational character of a communicative situation.

In this paper, euphemisms for death and dying occurring in English and German newspaper obituaries are examined and compared in order to reveal possible cross-cultural differences. From this viewpoint, the present study of euphemistic references to mortality implies the importance of taking into account culture-specificity as well as associated tacit norms and values when approaching the taboo concept of death. Combining a qualitative and a quantitative approach to the analysis of euphemistic alternatives for death found in death notices, we aim to answer the following research questions: how are cultural variations in the respective obituaries realized linguistically regarding the use of euphemism? By comparing the two languages, are the same euphemizing strategies adopted in the respective death notices? Do cross-cultural differences manifest themselves linguistically through the privileging or exploitation of particular euphemizing pragmemes? We argue that a comparative investigation reveals divergences with respect to euphemistic substitutes for death as it is safe to assume that the notion of death and dying is culturally relevant. Cultural factors likely play a crucial role when it comes to the conception of obituaries since underlying culture-specific norms and values as well as different religious and psychological orientations may well determine what is considered appropriate or unacceptable in a particular culture. Therefore, cultural differences pertaining to euphemism usage are expected to be manifest linguistically because social factors are said to impinge on linguistic choices.

Previous research on pragmemes has analyzed spoken data, underlying the importance of considering the pragmatic effect created by all involved parties. In this study, we focus on written material, emphasizing the fact that linguistic choices in death notices imply a clear implying and inferring relationship between addresser and addressee. This interactive relation is based on the intersubjectivity between the various parties who are acquainted with the deceased.

In the following, we present a theoretical discussion of the concept of euphemism as an instantiation of pragmeme which is used specifically as a reference tool to communicate the event of death. Moreover, we provide a brief overview of previous work pertinent to the discourse of death in a cross-cultural context. Section 3 introduces the source newspapers and the corpus of death notices. Further, we present the categorization based on which we classified instances of euphemisms. The results of the qualitative and quantitative categorization are presented and discussed in Section 4. Finally, Section 5 presents concluding statements and reflects on how the use of euphemisms in the encoding of death can be further investigated with regard to circumstantial and interactional factors.

2. Conceptualizing euphemisms

A plethora of scholars have provided definitions of the concept of euphemism. Casas Gómez (2009) reassesses traditional conceptions of the term and underscores the evolving character of euphemisms, which is responsible for the wide array of different euphemistic forms. Casas Gómez distinguishes between “extralinguistic” (strongly emphasizing psychological motivations with respect to euphemism usage) and “strictly linguistic” (focusing on “structural lexical semantics”) approaches to the understanding of the concept (Casas Gómez 2009: 727-728). Taking into account this diversity of the theoretical treatment of euphemistic language, his “new approach” to the definition of the term adapts the before-mentioned dichotomy by bringing the pragmatic and cognitive dimension into focus, since “only through a certain context and given situation can the real sense of [the] intentions [of a linguistic expression] and its function as a communicative value be known” (Casas Gómez 2009: 725).

In the present research, in accordance with Casas Gómez’ apprehension of the concept, Allan and Burrige’s (1991) definition of euphemism is adopted because its emphasis on the close link of euphemistic expressions with the notions of “politeness” and “face” is considered to be of vital importance. Moreover, perlocutionary effects and thus the pragmatic nature of euphemistic language are implied, which is deemed central regarding the setting of the present study: “A euphemism is used as an alternative to a dispreferred expression, in order to avoid possible loss of face: either one’s own face, or through giving offense, that of the audience, or of some third party” (Allan and Burrige 1991: 11, as quoted in Burrige 2006: 455). Thus, the term euphemism is used to refer to face-saving strategies (of both the speaker and the interlocutor’s face) in order to mitigate the expression of a taboo. It has to be stressed, however, that within the theoretical frame of this paper the notion of “politeness” (with the concept of “face” constituting its theoretical nucleus), i.e. the linguistic manifestation thereof, is not understood as a universal and “pan-cultural” maxim according to Brown and Levinson’s conception of the concept (Brown and Levinson 1978: 288); the alleged universality of the politeness theory is contested since the choice of euphemism strategies is expected to differ in a cross-cultural context. In line with Wierzbicka (2006), who argues that the aforementioned notions are predominantly based on Anglocentric viewpoints, Brown and Levinson’s principles are conceived as a culture-dependent phenomenon strongly influenced by culture-specific attitudes and values, taking into account the specificity of the underlying context and thus varying from culture to culture. In this sense, the notions of

“politeness” and “face” are considered to be closely associated with social organization as the situated context plays a major role due to cultural relativity.

The mentioned social and interactional factors contribute to a characterization of euphemism as pragmeme, as the interpretation of this pragmatic act depends on contextual factors defined by the broader communicative setting, including the interlocutors and their sociocultural environment. The interdependence between euphemism, communicative need and pragmatic appropriateness justifies an equation between euphemizing and pragmeme.

2.1 Euphemism as pragmeme

The use of instantiated euphemisms is grounded in the language users’ pragmatic knowledge and competence. Specifically, an appropriate reference to the sensitive topic of death depends on speakers’ knowledge of the “sociocultural setting”, the implied knowledge of culture-specific values, tacit norms, “emotional or attitudinal stance[s]” as well as the appropriateness of linguistic choices in obituary discourse (Purpura 2004: 74). Pragmatic competence denotes a language user’s ability to use language appropriately to the context respecting the above-mentioned socio-cultural factors (cf. Fraser 2010). A speaker’s knowledge of the appropriate linguistic behavior is especially challenged in intercultural communicative settings (cf. Mey 2007; Kecskes 2010). For this reason, previous research has focused strongly on the importance of understanding and developing pragmatic competence in a second language or in an intercultural setting. The use of context-appropriate language in intercultural communication is researched by Kecskes (2010, 2004):

Intercultural Pragmatics is concerned with the way the language system is put to use in social encounters between human beings who have different first languages, communicate in a common language, and usually, represent different cultures. (Kecskes 2010: 14)

While the present study does not as such focus on an intercultural setting, the comparative analysis of communicative strategies to describe a sensitive topic in a specific text type may shed light on different language- or culture-specific pragmatic practices. Consequently, these findings may prove interesting for the development or teaching of pragmatic competence.

In their discussion of six aspects of pragmatic competence, Hudson, Detmer, and Brown (1995) already discussed speakers’ correct use of speech acts as a determining factor in the assessment of their repertoire of pragmatic formulae. Other factors which they mention include for instance the amount of speech and information provided by speakers, the level of formality, or the level of directness. This approach, to view speech act theory as part of

pragmatic competence, supports the transition from speech act theory to pragmatic act theory, thus highlighting the importance of the context-specific use of language (for a detailed theoretical discussion, see Walczak this volume).

In line with Mey (2007, 2010), we suggest the use of euphemisms as a form of pragmeme that serves the purpose of providing reference (although indirectly or mitigated) to someone's death. In accordance with the common understanding of "pragmeme", euphemism is a communicative strategy which is sensitive to both contextual and interrelational aspects of the language situation. While the majority of research on pragmemes focuses on spoken language data (cf. Mey 2001) – a natural consequence likely based on their relatedness with speech act theory and the general assumption that pragmatic force is most easily observable in spoken interaction, as it takes into account the effect of interlocutors' utterances on one another – we argue here that an analysis of euphemizing strategies sheds light on pragmatic implications despite a lack of direct responses by the addressees. This is primarily due to the fact that the use of euphemisms is, per se, motivated by a consideration of the utterance effect on the addressee. Euphemisms are thus "pragmatic acts" as their use is evoked by the reaction in an intended addressee. Based on the sensitivity of the topic which is being mitigated, we can expect an "instantiated" (Mey 2010) intention in the use of communicative strategies.

As stated in Mey's pragmatic acts theory, a particular pragmeme can be realized by different pragmatic acts (cf. Mey 2001; Kecskes 2010). Euphemizing strategies can be considered different instantiations of the pragmeme of announcing someone's death. Hence, we view the pragmeme itself not as a specific linguistic realization but rather, in line with Kecskes (2010), as a concept which is encoded in various pragmatic strategies.

In what way can we consider the announcement and communication of death a pragmeme? A pragmeme is a situated speech act which is sensitive to situational factors, specifically to the social expectations in a speech community (cf. Capone 2005; Mey 2001). Similarly, conversations on death and dying are characterized by their susceptibility to the norms and conventions of a given situation and society – from a communicative point of view, these norms foremost relate to the disclosure and taboo of the topic of death and the circumstances. In light of the socio-cultural sensitivity of the topic of death, euphemisms function as a linguistic resource with a specific illocutionary force – they signify a message about a tabooed topic while simultaneously providing a meta-comment about the addresser's condition. This may include for instance, the addressers' relationship and associations with death.

In the context of a comparative approach involving different cultural settings, it is also

imperative to define the notions of “cross-cultural” and “intercultural” communication. It has to be emphasized that no conclusive consensus seems to exist in the research landscape pertaining to this terminological issue; the heterogeneous use of the terms often blurs possible lines of demarcation between the two concepts. Whereas many scholars have different conceptions of the said terms and thus distinguish between the two, a number of researchers (e.g. Wierzbicka 2006) also seem to use them interchangeably. Scollon, Wong Scollon and Jones (2012), however, provide the following definitions:

The basic distinction that we are trying to capture is the distinction between comparing communication systems of different groups *when considered abstractly* or *when considered independently of any form of social interaction* [“cross-cultural” communication] and looking at communication *when members of different groups are directly engaged with each other* [“intercultural” or “interdiscourse” communication]. (Scollon, Wong Scollon and Jones 2012: 17; emphasis in original)

Thus, the two notions are distinguished in the sense that “intercultural” communication is concerned with communicative situations involving speakers from different cultures (emphasizing social interaction) while “cross-cultural” communication involves the comparison of different cultures that are not necessarily in communication or direct contact with one another.

Regarding the present research, which is based on a comparative investigation of euphemism strategies found in obituaries involving two distinct cultural frames, the use of both terms could be justified (considering the above-mentioned apprehension of the terminology). Within the theoretical frame of the present paper, however, the term “cross-cultural” will be employed primarily in order to avoid terminological inconsistencies that might cause misunderstandings. Consequently, we restrict ourselves to Scollon, Wong Scollon and Jones’ (2012) understanding of the concepts; the comparative aspect (involving two distinct cultural frames independent from each other) in the present methodological approach is considered to prevail and thus suggests the application of the term “cross-cultural”.

2.2 Euphemizing the event of death

The omnipresence of euphemisms in the context of death-related topics is epitomized by the etymology of the concept of obituaries: as Crespo Fernández (2006: 104) affirms, “[t]he term *obituary* is a euphemism in itself. It comes from Latin *obitus* ‘departure’, a common euphemistic term for death.” Moreover, it is important to note that obituaries are characterized

by diversity and heterogeneity; they constitute a “hybrid genre in which both publicity and information coexist, in which emotion and objectivity go hand in hand” (Crespo Fernández 2006: 104). Crespo Fernández distinguishes between two types of death notices: “informative” obituaries, marked by objectivity, neutral and impersonal language, and “opinionative” obituaries, in which subjectivity and emotive language are salient (2006: 104-105). Crespo Fernández’ theoretical frame is of relevance to the present research insofar as his classification can be adopted and applied to the present data collection in order to verify whether the type of the death notice has an impact on the choice of specific euphemistic strategies in the respective obituaries.

Ghaleb Rabab’ah and Ali M. Al-Qarni (2012) conducted a research from a cross-cultural perspective by analyzing euphemism strategies used in Saudi Arabic and English. Their data collection is based on responses provided by respectively 150 Saudi and British college students who were asked to answer an open questionnaire consisting of “6 conversational situations specifying the three tabooed topics (death, lying and bodily functions), the degree of formality and the relationship between the respondent and the audience (informal vs. formal)” (Rabab’ah and Al-Qarni 2012: 734-735). By providing a textual analysis of the respective responses (taking into account the specificity of each setting and the gender variable), which is based on a classification according to Beatrice Warren’s (1992) taxonomy of euphemism strategies, Rabab’ah and Al-Qarni demonstrate that there are similarities as well as remarkable differences with regard to the use of euphemisms in Saudi Arabic and English. Thus, their study suggests that linguistic choices used to mitigate the taboo of death are culture-specific and based on underlying values, beliefs, norms and social differences. It is pointed out that the “different characteristics of euphemism and taboo are apparently reflected in the findings of [their] study” (Rabab’ah and Al-Qarni 2012: 741). Moreover, they emphasize the increasing need for awareness when it comes to second and foreign language speakers’ euphemism usage (and linguistic choices in general) in order to avoid misinterpretation and pragmatic conflicts in cross-cultural communication, which, in turn, would enhance their communicative and pragmatic competence in a cross-cultural context (Rabab’ah and Al-Qarni 2012: 742). Considering the data collection of the present paper, Rabab’ah and Al-Qarni’s findings constitute a vital point of reference with respect to the comparative examination of euphemism strategies in German and English obituaries. Possible reconciliations would imply a larger representativeness and therefore provide more extensive insights into the culture-specific functioning of recurring euphemism strategies regarding the taboo topic of death in English.

Salma Haddad's (2009) cross-cultural examination of English and Syrian obituaries also suggests that there is no uniform approach to the tabooed concept of death from a euphemistic point of view. Even though the study is only based on a qualitative analysis of two obituaries, it corroborates the centrality of culture-specificity and a shared value system by pointing out that death is approached differently according to the underlying cultural setting. Haddad concludes by stating that

[...] both the Syrian and British texts handle death with care. The Syrian text, however, tends to be slightly more careful in approaching it since it does not include any direct reference to death. The euphemistic strategies adopted in the two texts are not identical. This suggests that, more often than not, different cultures use different euphemistic strategies. (Haddad 2009: 56)

In "What euphemisms tell us about the interpretation of words" (1992), Beatrice Warren stresses that the interpretation of words is a context-bound phenomenon. She points out that "novel contextual meanings", which tend to differ from decontextualized "dictionary meanings", are constantly negotiated in language (1992: 128-129). Thus, in line with Mey's understanding of pragmatic acts, euphemistic language demonstrates the said importance of context-dependence with respect to the decoding of word meanings: its context-bound evasive nature aims at enhancing the overall reception of a message by strategically ascribing particular meanings to words and expressions or by deliberately giving up semantic transparency in response to a taboo concept (prioritizing utterances that have more positive connotations, or at least fewer negative ones). Thus, Warren put forward an extensive classification of euphemism formation strategies that is based on a distinction between two major types: "Formal Innovation" and "Semantic Innovation" (Warren 1992: 134). "Formal Innovation" encompasses "Word Formation Devices" ("Compounding", "Derivation", "Blends", "Acronyms", "Onomatopoeia", etc.), "Phonemic Modification" ("Back Slang", "Rhyming Slang", "Abbreviation", etc.) and "Loan Words". The second major category, "Semantic Innovation", includes the following euphemism formation strategies: "Particularizations", "Implications", "Metaphors", "Metonyms" (in the present study, "Metonymy" is regarded inclusive of "Synecdoche"), "Irony" ("Reversals"), "Understatements" ("Litotes") and "Overstatements" ("Hyperboles") (Warren 1992: 134).

The high degree of formality of the communicative setting of obituaries implies meticulously elaborated language that is designed to mitigate the tabooed topic of death in order to avoid the impression of being offensive and insensitive, and promote positive associations in a eulogizing manner. Thus, "Semantic Innovation" is expected to play a

preponderant role with regard to the textual analysis of death notices due to the highly suggestive character of linguistic devices such as metaphors or metonymies. “Word Formation Devices”, by contrast, are considered to be of minor importance because euphemism formation strategies such as “Blends”, “Acronyms”, “Onomatopoeia” or “Rhyming Slang” do not comply with the register-specific degree of formality that underlies obituary discourse.

3. Data and method

It is no surprise that euphemistic expressions occur in obituaries. Death notices apparently constitute a major source for euphemistic references to mortality given that the tabooed topic of death inevitably underlies the communicative situation of death notices and thus stimulates the need for euphemisms. The data collection of the present study consists of recent obituaries (published within the time frame from March 1, 2015 to April 6, 2015) in order to render, through a synchronic approach, an authentic account of current euphemism strategies.

In a first step, a qualitative approach was adopted by examining respectively 80 obituaries in English, accessed via the obituary section on the website of *The New York Times*, and in German, accessed via the obituary section of the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* online. Consequently, a comparative approach was adopted from a cross-cultural perspective. For ease of comparison, it was decided to investigate euphemism strategies occurring in obituaries of the respective online versions of the *NZZ* and of *The New York Times* – two internationally renowned, but also locally established, daily newspapers. The two said newspapers conveniently fit the research purpose because they provide clearly structured obituary sections, which allow the submission of paid death notices. These paid obituaries, usually written by family members, close friends and co-workers, were deemed more suitable for the present study than edited obituaries written by journalists. Even though a variety of renowned newspapers offer separate obituary sections to commemorate the deceased, edited obituaries were considered impractical for the present methodological approach. Paid obituaries were selected for analytical purposes because it is suspected that they are not as governed by formal constraints as the said editorials (due to their prototypical and standardized form); private submissions are expected to yield more variation regarding euphemism usage.

Although the said newspapers are locally established and can be considered, to a certain extent, representative for underlying sociocultural values, attitudes and conventions, the global accessibility of the World Wide Web implies that the background of the respective

obituary writers might be more diverse, which could result in “cross-dialectal differences”, “regionalisms” and the occurrence of other idiosyncratic features (Eichenchlas 2011: 56). Due to the difficulty of identifying such variation, which would go beyond the scope of this study, possible “cross-dialectal differences” in the respective obituaries in English or in German were not taken into account in the present study.

The qualitative analyses focus on the text type as a whole and highlight the language- (and culture-) specific features that characterize the communication of death in different languages. The investigation focuses exclusively on textual elements. However, the incorporation of secondary references, e.g. quoting poems, was not taken into account. Inspired by Rabab’ah and Al-Qarni’s study (2012), the textual analysis is based on Beatrice Warren’s taxonomy of euphemism strategies (1992), which is claimed to give one of the most “detailed and exhaustive” records of euphemism formation strategies (Warren 1992: 134). Rabab’ah and Al-Qarni’s recent research (2012), which is predominantly based on Warren’s taxonomy, suggests that this statement can be considered corroborated. In combination with other previous work on euphemism, which differs to a minor extent from Warren’s theoretical proposal (e.g. terminology), Warren’s work accounts for most of the euphemism strategies and hence illustrates its validity (see Rabab’ah and Al-Qarni 2012). Consequently, Warren (1992) and Crespo Fernández’ (2006) models were adopted and reviewed; the occurring euphemisms were classified, compared and their degree of (in)directness was addressed.

In addition to Warren’s taxonomy, the notions of “Orthophemism” (see above), which allows to account for references to death and dying that are not euphemistic, and “Deletion” were incorporated into the taxonomic approach. According to Rabab'ah and Al-Qarni (2012: 732), the “Deletion” strategy “[...] refers to eliminating the tabooed words by making a pause [in spoken language] or by failing to provide any facts about the tabooed issue, both of which require contextually based inference by the [addressee] to be comprehensible”. “Deletion” can thus be considered the ultimate euphemism since it completely eludes the tabooed topic, i.e. the realm of death, by strategically withholding any reference to mortality, which, contextually embedded, can still be inferred because the notion of death imperatively underlies the communicative setting of obituaries. Furthermore, implications of the gender variable regarding euphemism usage were explored by taking into consideration the gender of the deceased, which implies the hypothesis that the gender variable might impact the choice of euphemism strategies and could thus yield possible cross-cultural variation.

In a further step, a frequency-based approach was adopted in order to illustrate findings in quantitative terms. The numerical distribution of the euphemistic substitutes for

death found in the respective obituaries was determined (in “tokens” and percentages); death-related euphemisms were counted in order to ascertain their relative occurrence, which allows for generalizations, to facilitate the identification of recurring patterns concerning euphemism usage (and the possible privileging or exploitation thereof) and to detect possible culture-bound conventions.

It has to be emphasized that the data collection of this study does not denote overarching culture-specific features and a reductionist approach is difficult to overcome since cross-cultural comparisons always tend to imply a certain degree of oversimplification and generalization. Therefore, the investigated content cannot be considered fully representative at all for any of the two language groups; inferences drawn from this qualitative and quantitative examination are only based on observations made in the respective obituaries. Completely assertive statements cannot be made since a study of this kind implies speculation. However, it is suspected that underlying socio-cultural factors are of paramount importance when approaching the taboo of death in a cross-cultural setting because language is considered to be indissociable from cultural relativity, which therefore must play a central role with respect to the use of euphemisms. Thus, it is important to regard obituary discourse as well as the aggregate of its authors as a “community of practice”, governed by socio-cultural norms, conventions, a certain structure of expectations and other contextual factors. According to Mills (2009: 1058), the notion of communities of practice is of particular importance in this respect since it enables researchers to examine “[...] the practices of groups of individuals without falling prey to large scale generalizations about all of the individuals in a particular language group or culture.” Moreover, the present cross-cultural approach is validated by the idea that the said communities of practice are aware of and take into account wider societal norms when constructing their own “appropriacy norms” (Mills 2009: 1058). Thus, certain ways of doing things on the micro level often correspond to underlying conventions on the macro level of culture. In line with Mills, Kecskes (2014) emphasizes the centrality of the concept of communities of practice. He (2014: 203) underlines that “[...] communities [of practice] are not isolated, and therefore the focus should include the interplay among individuals, groups, and social norms.”

4. Results

The following section focuses on the instantiated euphemisms found in the corpus of death notices from the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* and *The New York Times*, respectively. In general terms, it is interesting to note that the obituaries in English and in German are characterized

by striking formal differences, e.g. length of the text and their degree of narrativeness (marked by extensive biographical accounts of the dead or the absence thereof), the use of quotes accompanying the text information, the overall layout of the respective obituaries, etc. As mentioned above, the divergences, however, were not taken into account in the present cross-cultural and contrastive study. Not only would it have been beyond the scope of this paper, but it also allows focusing more thoroughly on the use of euphemism strategies and their subtleties.

The data collected in the present study corroborates the abundant resort to euphemisms when approaching the tabooed topic of death in obituaries; evasive and down-toning language is omnipresent. The notion of death and dying is eluded in almost the entirety of the 160 obituaries, which further underscores the validity of the assumption that the reluctance to address the topic of death is universal. Nevertheless, the taboo is bypassed in varying ways and with divergent mitigating effects. The comparison and analysis of the respective obituaries suggest that the two language groups do not approach the taboo equally and employ euphemism strategies in different ways. More precisely, a total of 170 expressions referring to death and dying occurred in the obituaries accessed via *The New York Times* (see Table 1), whereas the collection of death notices in German is characterized by a total of 156 references to mortality (see Table 2).

Table 1. Numerical distribution and relative occurrence of euphemistic substitutes for death and dying found in 80 obituaries accessed via *The New York Times* (published within the time frame from March 1, 2015 to April 6, 2015).

Type of euphemism	Freq.	%	Gender	Obituary type		Opinative	Informative
			M	F			
Deletion	13	7,6	8	5	7	6	
Metaphor of departure	43	25,3	21	22	36	7	
Metaphor of loss	4	2,4	4	-	4	-	
Metaphor of sleep and rest / Understatement	2	1,2	1	1	2	-	
Metonymy	15	8,8	13	2	15	-	
Orthophemism	34	20	19	15	20	14	
Overstatement	1	0,6	-	1	1	-	
Particularization	45	26,5	24	21	33	12	

<i>The late</i>	13	7,6	5	8	8	5
Total	170	100	95	75	126	44

Key: Freq. = raw frequency; M = male; F = female

Only in five obituaries, and all of them belong to the data collection of *The New York Times* (e.g. obituaries 7 and 63), no attempt at evading negative connotations of death is discernible, which is notably illustrated by the use of the verb *die*. However, the orthophemistic expressions *die* or *sterben* ('to die'), which constitute an intermediary form between euphemisms and dysphemisms and are thus said to be neutral (Burrige 2006: 457), are frequently accompanied by adverbial constructions that amplify the euphemistic approach to death. The said phrases imply an effort to embellish the denotation and promote positive associations concerning death-related topics. Obituary 76 typifies this: [...] *died* [...] *at home among friends, after a valiant struggle with cancer*. The aforementioned adverbial clauses suggest that dying at home, and/or surrounded by family and friends, is highly valued. Moreover, the deliberate specification of the cause(s) of death often implies that death is considered a relief and that it is assimilated to alleviation of suffering. These accompanying adverbial constructions (such as *died peacefully*; *died at his home*; *died surrounded by family and friends*; *verstarb friedlich* ('died peacefully'); *Nach einem reich erfülltem Leben ist er friedlich im Beisein seiner Familie gestorben* ('After a fulfilled life, he passed away peacefully in the presence of his family')) are prevalent in the data collection of this paper. Thus, the question arises as to whether the use of the said adverbial phrases, which value and highlight family solidarity, the absence or the removal of pain, etc. can be considered to strategically compensate the lack of mitigation inherent in the orthophemistic and neutral verbs *die* and *sterben*.

Table 2. Numerical distribution and relative occurrence of euphemistic substitutes for death and dying found in 80 obituaries accessed via the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* (published within the time frame from March 1, 2015 to April 6, 2015).

Type of euphemism	Freq.	%	Gender		Opinativ
			M	F	
Deletion	4	2,6	3	1	3
Implication	1	0,6	-	1	1
Metaphor of departure	65	41,7	44	21	49
Metaphor of loss	8	5,1	7	1	8
Metaphor of sleep and rest / Understatement	21	13,5	13	8	14

Metaphor of relief	3	1,9	1	2	1
Metonymy	10	6,4	9	1	9
Orbital metaphor	6	3,9	2	4	3
Orthophemism	29	18,6	23	6	22
Overstatement	3	1,9	2	1	3
Particularization	3	1,9	3	-	3
Personification of death	2	1,3	2	-	2
[...] <i>ist nicht mehr</i> ('ceased to be')	1	0,6	-	1	1
Total	156	100	109	47	119

Key: Freq. = raw frequency; M = male; F = female

As shown in Table 1, the “Orthophemism” strategy occurred 34 times (20%) in the obituaries accessed via *The New York Times*, whereas the data collection of the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* recorded 29 occurrences thereof (18,6%; see Table 2). At first glance, one can infer that there is no significant variation in quantitative terms with respect to the usage of orthophemisms. However, a closer analysis reveals that there are fewer occurrences of isolated orthophemisms in the death notices in German, i.e. orthophemisms that are not accompanied by adverbial constructions that suggest a euphemistic approach to death (e.g. obituaries 5; 7; 99; 149): whereas there are only five occurrences of the said isolated orthophemisms in the texts in German, the data collection of *The New York Times* recorded 16 occurrences thereof. In addition, the German verb *versterben* (‘to pass away’ / ‘to depart this life’), whose register-specific use seems to restrict itself to the formal context of obituary discourse, implies a euphemistic dimension. Even though *versterben* is considered an orthophemism according to the analytical framework of this paper, the prefix *ver-* connotes a euphemistic attitude. *Versterben* (‘passing’, n.), due to the addition of the prefix, indicates an attempt at mitigating the overt marker of directness *sterben* (‘to die’) (which might be deemed face-threatening) by suggesting the departure to an unspecified destination; it can thus be regarded as a linguistic strategy associated with the concept of euphemism since it also aims at avoiding straightforward references to the taboo of death and evading its negative connotations.

Furthermore, the data collection is characterized by the ubiquity of metaphors of departure. Especially in the obituaries in German, figures of departure were used abundantly; 41,7% of all words or expressions referring to death were classified as “Metaphors of departure” (see Table 2). With 41 total occurrences (63,1% of the “Metaphor of departure”

strategy), the most prominent verbalization that pertains to the said strategy is the act of bidding farewell to the dead. The high frequency of formulations such as *Traurig aber dankbar nehmen wir Abschied von [...]* ('Sad but grateful we bid farewell to...') (obituary 94), predominantly used as an introduction, implies register- and culture-specific tendencies (if not conventions); the analysis of the present data collection even suggests that the said recurring strategy can be considered a stereotypical expression that complies with a conventionalized structure and prototypical form of obituaries in German. Other euphemisms of the "Metaphor of departure" strategy include expressions that focus on life and the bereaved through the use of the verbs *von uns gehen* ('to leave us') and *verlassen* ('to leave') (e.g. *Eine starke, aufgeschlossene und bescheidene Persönlichkeit hat uns verlassen* ('A strong, open-minded and humble personality has left us'), obituary 118; *Sie durfte ohne Schmerzen von uns gehen* ('She left us without suffering'), obituary 151). In six instances, death was conceived of as the end of a journey, which is exemplified by sentences such as *Nach einem erfüllten Leben und tapfer ertragener Krankheit hat er seine letzte Reise angetreten* ('After a fulfilled life and a brave battle against illness, he set forth on his final journey') (obituary 155). Moreover, the verb *heimgehen* ('to return home') occurred twice as a euphemistic substitute for *die*. Even though the destination is not specified, the said expression connotes religious orientations by implying that the dead 'return home' to God, their alleged Maker (see obituaries 103 and 104). In line with the above-mentioned observations on the mitigating effect of *versterben*, the noun *Hinschied* ('passing', n.) corresponds to the "Metaphor of departure" strategy since the prefix *Hin-* also implies a movement to an unspecified destination (see obituaries 135; 159; 160).

In the 80 obituaries accessed via *The New York Times*, 25,3% of the references to mortality correspond to the "Metaphor of departure" strategy. *Passed away* and the corresponding deverbal noun *passing* are the most frequently used euphemistic expressions of the category (33 total occurrences). These findings thus concur with Rabab'ah and Al-Qarni (2012), whose cross-cultural study suggests that the phrase *passed away* constitutes one of the most pervasive euphemistic references to death and dying in present-day English (2012: 736). Metaphors of departure that consist in conceiving of death as the end of a journey are also present (see obituaries 8; 22; 71). Nevertheless, they differ from the euphemisms found in the texts in German due to the implied emphasis on the temporal aspect; temporal limitations of life, which is assimilated to a journey, are underlined in formulations such as *Her final days were spend [sic] [...]* (obituary 71). Another recurring euphemistic reference that can be allocated to the "Metaphor of departure" strategy is the verb *predecease*, which was solely

employed in the passive voice in the data collection of *The New York Times*, as in obituaries 30 and 41. The allocation to the said strategy is validated by Merriam-Webster's definition of *decease*, which underlies a movement to an unspecified destination: "departure from life", "death".

As the comparison of Table 1 and Table 2 indicates, there is also noticeable disparity in the occurrence of the "Particularization" strategy. The obituaries in English recorded 45 instances (26,5%) of "Particularization". By contrast, the said strategy only occurred three times (1,9%) in the data collection of the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*. According to Warren, "Particularization" consists in using

[...] a general term which in its context has to be particularized to make sense. The relation between the out-of-context set of referents and the set of referents connected with the euphemistic sense is that of proper class inclusion, i.e. the referents of the euphemistic sense must be a subcategory of the referents of the dictionary sense from which it derives. [...] [S]pecification of sense typically involves retrieving some particular argument(s), [...] retrieving the manner in which something occurs or is enacted, [...] retrieving a relevant subcategory. (Warren 1992: 138-139; emphasis removed)

Thus, the contextualized sense of a euphemistic expression often "assume[s] a meaning hyponymic" to its decontextualized sense by implying, but not explicitly mentioning and thus eluding, "more salient" and "defining" functional traits (Warren 1992: 131). The euphemisms *wife* or *husband* (instead of *widow* or *widower*), which occurred abundantly in data collection of *The New York Times*, exemplify the "Particularization" strategy and account for the vast majority of its occurrences: *widow* constitutes a subcategory of the rather generic term *wife*. By purposefully withholding a central feature of the meaning of *widow*, i.e. the death of the spouse (which the addressee has to retrieve through contextual evidence and his or her general knowledge about the world), the euphemistic alternative *wife* evades the realm of death; negative connotations associated with the use of the term *widow* are thus obscured (e.g. obituaries 2; 8; 9; 15).

Interestingly, unpleasant associations of the term *widow* were not eluded in all cases; it occurred three times in the obituaries in English. On the contrary, the said expression was completely avoided in the obituary collection of the *NZZ*. The striking divergence with regard to the frequency of the "Particularization" strategy in the respective data collections evidences the saliency and exploitation of particular euphemism strategies and thus suggests culture-specific preferences for certain euphemistic devices mitigating death and dying.

Significant variation also occurred in the use of the "Metaphor of sleep and rest /

Understatement” strategy: as Table 1 and Table 2 demonstrate, the said strategy only plays a peripheral role in the 80 obituaries in English (two occurrences; 1,2%), whereas it corresponds to 13,5% (21 occurrences) of the expressions referring to death and dying in the data collection of the *NZZ*. As the examination suggests, a noticeable characteristic of the use of euphemism strategies in German is the assimilation of death to sleep. Sentences such as *Nach einem reich erfülltem Leben ist er friedlich im Beisein seiner Familie eingeschlafen* (‘After a fulfilled life, he fell asleep peacefully in the presence of his family’, obituary 134; note also the aforementioned adverbial constructions) were employed in abundance, whereas the prototypical formulation *Rest in Peace* (as in obituaries 26 and 32) accounts for all instances of the said strategy in the obituaries accessed via *The New York Times*. As can be deduced from Table 1, euphemisms consisting in assimilating death to sleep are not as frequent as in obituaries in German, which in turn suggests culture-specific preferences for the said strategy due to the exploitation thereof in the death notices of the *NZZ*.

In addition, differences can be discerned in the use of the “Deletion” strategy. In 13 instances (7,6%), references to death are completely avoided in the obituary collection of *The New York Times* (e.g. obituaries 31 and 33). By contrast, “Deletion” recorded only four occurrences in the death notices in German (as in obituaries 108 and 132). “Deletion” illustrates the force of taboos and the reluctance to deal with delicate topics; the strategy can be assimilated to instances of silence and thus constitutes the ultimate euphemism.

It has to be stressed that not all euphemisms could be allocated to a type of strategy put forward in the analytical framework of this paper. As Table 1 and Table 2 indicate, the expressions *the late* and [...] *ist nicht mehr* (‘ceased to be’) constitute independent types of euphemism strategies in the taxonomy. *The late*, whose register-specific use seems to restrict itself to the genre of obituaries and necrologies, constitutes a form of address that has connotations of prestige. The expression can even be considered an honorific and thus implies a euphemistic dimension by conveying esteem to the referent and obscuring unpleasant associations with its orthophemistic alternative *dead*. The suggestive German formulation [...] *ist nicht mehr* could not be assigned to any category as well because of the difficulty in detecting evidence of metaphorical and/or metonymic links – or any other figurative association with the strategies proposed in the present taxonomy – to its non-euphemistic alternative *die*. However, the expression constitutes a textbook example of the functioning of the concept of euphemism by illustrating its evasive and strongly suggestive character. It is important to note, though, that the said strategy, along with “Implication”, “Overstatement” and “Personification of death”, did not play a substantial role with regard to the occurrence of

euphemism strategies in the obituaries accessed via the *NZZ* (see Table 2).

A final point relates to the impact of the gender variable. The findings suggest that the gender of the dead does not affect the choice of euphemism strategies in the data collection of this paper. No assertive correlation between the gender variable and the privileging or aversion of particular euphemisms could be discerned. The comparison of Table 1 and Table 2 shows that no recurring pattern can be identified, which gives weight to the hypothesis that the gender of the deceased does not affect euphemism usage in obituary discourse of the two language groups.

5. Discussion

As has been pointed out, the cross-cultural comparison of respectively 80 obituaries attests similarities (e.g. adverbial constructions that imply a euphemistic approach to death) as well as significant variation in the use of euphemism strategies in English and in German. Thus, the contrastive analysis suggests that there is no uniform approach to the taboo of death from a euphemistic point of view. Recurring patterns, as illustrated by the high incidence of certain euphemisms (see section 4), can be discerned in both data collections and thus imply the presence of genre-related and frame-based conventions. This is amplified by the striking similarity of some of the obituaries in the respective languages, possibly due to guidelines imposed by the newspaper agencies; the death notices often seem to have adopted a preset pattern, which becomes manifest through their prototypical form, conventionalized structure and stereotypical expressions. The frequent recurrence of the metaphor of departure that consists in bidding farewell to the dead (e.g. *Traurig und in grosser Dankbarkeit für viele unvergessliche Momente nehmen wir Abschied von [...]*; obituary 81) or the formulation [...] *mourn the passing of [...]*, which was often employed by former co-workers of the deceased and thus represents instances of institutional discourse (e.g. obituaries 3; 13; 29; 37), exemplify the said privileging and overabundance of certain euphemistic formulations.

A major finding of the research concerns the aforementioned ubiquity of the “Metaphor of departure” strategy (e.g. via the use of the euphemistic expressions *pass away* or *Abschied nehmen*). In both data collections, the said strategy accounts for more than a quarter of all the references to death (*The New York Times*: 25,3%; *NZZ*: 41,7%). These findings validate Warren’s hypothesis, which is based on the assumption that the “Metaphor” and “Particularization” strategies constitute particularly convenient euphemistic devices due to their “elusively suggestive character” (Warren 1992: 147). It is thus no surprise that the distinct “Metaphor” strategies encountered in the data collection occupy a pivotal place in this

study.

Moreover, it is important to note that genre-specificity exerts great influence on the said recurring patterns since they are frame-based and register-specific. Therefore, genre-specificity constitutes a vital aspect that has to be taken into account in any analysis of context-sensitive discourse as it is found in obituaries. As mentioned in section 2, genre- and register-specific traits such as the high degree of formality of obituaries govern the conception of death notices. This is illustrated in the present study considering that euphemism formation strategies that do not comply with the register-specific degree of formality underlying obituary discourse (e.g. “Blends”, “Acronyms”, “Onomatopoeia” or “Rhyming Slang”) cannot be found in the data collection; Warren’s category of “Semantic Innovation” prevails.

Despite the substantial role of genre-specificity, findings also suggest that culture-specific values and attitudes affect euphemism usage significantly. For instance, the striking cross-cultural variations between the “Deletion”, “Metaphor of sleep and rest / Understatement” or “Particularization” strategies underscore the hypothesis of culture-specific exploitations of particular euphemisms since genre-specificity does not account for the said frequency-based divergences. It is argued that these differences, as evidenced by the language-specific saliency of recurring euphemism strategies that are typical of the respective data collections (e.g. the “Orbital metaphor” strategy, which did not occur in obituaries in English), must be influenced by cultural values and attitudes because the notion of taboo is culturally relevant. Thus, the results suggest that the acceptability of euphemism strategies, i.e. their degree of appropriateness, must be (to a greater or lesser extent) governed by culture-specific factors.

Furthermore, the impact of cultural values on euphemism usage is illustrated by the occurrence of religious references. In both obituary collections, religion does not seem to play a substantial role with respect to the formation of euphemisms; even though there are more euphemisms with religious connotations in the death notices of the *NZZ* (as exemplified by the use of the verb *heimgehen*; the overt opposition of terrestrial and celestial existence, obituary 89; the metaphor of ‘the unfading light’, obituary 139) than in the obituaries in English (e.g. obituary 71), the cross-cultural comparison revealed that euphemizing death through religious references is a scarcely used strategy in both languages. By contrast, Haddad (2009) and Rabab’ah and Al-Qarni (2012) observed significant differences in the use of euphemisms associated with religion: compared to death notices in English, both studies suggest that religious imagery can be found more frequently in Syrian or Saudi obituaries. Although the present analysis did not yield significant cross-cultural variations with regard to

the impact of religion on euphemisms in English or in German, the comparison with the above-mentioned studies demonstrates the different degree to which the respective language groups value euphemisms that connote religious beliefs. Thus, the comparison strongly suggests that culture-specific attitudes and customs account for the said differences.

Yet, it is difficult to provide assertive reasons for culture-bound preferences for certain euphemism strategies since speculation and the danger of oversimplification are implied. The level of (in)directness inherent in the respective obituaries does not elucidate possible causes of the divergences either. Based on the observations on the “Deletion” strategy, for instance, one could hypothesize that context dependence is more relied on in the American English obituaries, assuming that contextual anchorage allows addressees to infer the message, which would imply that obituaries in English tend to be more indirect by completely eluding any reference to mortality. This inference would lend support to Rabab’ah and Al-Qarni (2012), whose research

[...] shows that the British speakers’ fear of death was at its extreme, especially with the use of the ‘deletion’ strategy. Contrary to the Saudi data, the British responses did not record any ‘overstatement’ or ‘understatement’ euphemistic expressions concerning death. (Rabab’ah and Al-Qarni 2012: 736)

Thus, the results of the present paper partially concur with findings of the above-mentioned study: although it would be hyperbolic to claim that the “fear of death was at its extreme” in the obituaries in English, the analysis revealed that “Deletion” is employed more frequently than in the data collection of the *NZZ*, and “Understatement” as well as “Overstatement” were scarcely used (see Table 1). These reconciliations imply a larger representativeness and therefore provide more extensive insights into the culture-specific functioning of recurring euphemism strategies regarding the taboo topic of death in English.

However, the fact that considerably fewer isolated orthophemisms occurred in the data collection of the *NZZ* (see section 4) suggests that straightforward references to the taboo of death are frowned upon in German, whereas they seem to be more acceptable in English. Thus, one can deduce that it is difficult to assertively determine which language group (or community of practice) tends to be more (in)direct when approaching the tabooed topic of death.

Noteworthy is also the fact that Crespo Fernández’ model did not yield conclusive findings. As can be deduced from Table 1 and Table 2, only the “Metonymy” strategy is characterized by consistent results in this regard considering that all obituaries in which “Metonymy” occurred were allocated to the obituary type “opinative”. Nevertheless, this is

mainly due to the fact that the act of explicitly extending condolences, which is an overt marker of subjectivity and emotions, is considered to entertain a metonymic relationship with the notion of death “since conveying condolences is a partial process of the world of death” (Rabab’ah and Al-Qarni 2012: 735). It has to be stressed that even though Crespo Fernández’ classification of obituary types constitutes a useful model when it comes to the description of formal characteristics inherent in death notices, its application in the data collected in this study proved to be rather problematic because its dichotomous nature does not account in any satisfactory way for hybrid cases and thus implies a reductionist approach.

As mentioned by Warren (1992) and attested in the present paper, the concept of euphemism is a very context-sensitive phenomenon. Thus, the use of euphemism strategies is intrinsically linked to the notions of politeness and pragmatic competence since it comprises the ability to use language appropriate to the context by respecting underlying socio-cultural factors and register-specific traits and expectations imposed by the setting (Purpura 2004). In the same vein, Gisle Andersen (2014: 24) emphasizes the need to identify “situational-contextual factors” that govern a particular communicative setting and stresses the importance of taking into account parameters such as genre-specificity, register and style in order to communicate successfully in a cross-cultural context. The centrality of shared assumptions and the knowledge of culture-specific ways of doing and thinking is also advocated by Kecskes (2014: 210): “In order for intercultural interactants to produce and interpret (im)politeness properly, they need to have not only appropriate language skills but also be familiar with the cultural models, norms, and expectations of their partners.” The appropriateness of euphemisms can well be considered culture-specific because the illocutionary force of a certain euphemistic expression is governed by socio-cultural norms, conventions, attitudes and value systems. Since it is assumed that cultural values impinge on the linguistic realization of euphemisms, which is further underscored by the findings of the present study, the awareness of culture-specificity is thus of paramount importance in order for language users to employ euphemisms appropriately.

As the appropriate use of euphemisms is also determined by the degree to which dispreferred associations are obscured and eluded, connotations of words are pivotal with regard to the acceptability of a euphemistic reference to a tabooed topic. Allan (2006) affirms that “[c]onnotation is a thoroughly pragmatic category of meaning” by underlining that

[...] the connotations of a language expression are pragmatic effects that arise from encyclopaedic knowledge about its denotation (or reference) and also from experiences, beliefs, and prejudices about the contexts in which the expression is typically used. The connotation of a language expression is distinct from its sense,

denotation and reference. Identifying the connotations of a term is to identify the community attitude towards it. Connotation is intimately involved with notions of appropriateness in language use that conditions the choice of vocabulary (including proper names) and style of address. Connotation is involved in choosing expressions that upgrade, downgrade and insult. It plays a part in the loaded weapon of dysphemism and the euphemistic avoidance of dispreferred expressions judged discriminatory, blasphemous, obscene, or merely tasteless. Reactions to connotation are pragmatic effects that motivate semantic extension and the generation of new vocabulary. (Allan 2006: 1056)

Thus, the appropriate use of euphemisms also comprises the ability to negotiate meaning in a situated frame (governed by a certain structure of expectations) and the capacity to make pragmatic inferences about the connotations of a word by “identify[ing] the community attitude towards it”, which in turn further underscores the importance of the knowledge of cultural models since the said “community attitude” may well differ from culture to culture. Therefore, word connotations, an increased awareness of culture-specificity, and register-sensitivity constitute vital aspects that have to be considered in order for language users to successfully utilize euphemisms and enhance their pragmatic competence in the respective target language.

As has been pointed out in section 4, it is difficult to assertively determine which language group tends to be more (in)direct when approaching the tabooed topic of death. Nevertheless, the study suggests culture-specific tendencies, which is shown through the privileging of certain euphemism strategies in the respective languages. For instance, the cross-cultural analysis demonstrates that euphemistic expressions that assimilate death to sleep are highly valued in German, whereas the “Deletion” strategy seems to play a more significant role in obituaries in English. A further significant outcome of the study concerns, for example, the use of orthophemisms: the comparison revealed that isolated orthophemisms occurred more frequently in the data collection of *The New York Times*, which suggests that straightforward references to the taboo of death are more acceptable in English than in obituaries in German. In addition to the compliance with genre- and register-specific characteristics of obituary discourse (e.g. the high degree of formality or the formal presentation of death notices), the above-mentioned conventionalized and prototypical expressions, distinctive of the obituaries due to their high incidence in the respective data collections, constitute exemplary euphemism strategies (inputs) that can be adopted by language learners who are not familiar with the underlying socio-cultural setting. They can be considered to assume the role of conventionalized models, which language learners can draw on when using euphemisms in the target language. These conventionalized strategies could facilitate the teaching of culture-specific euphemisms and thus aim at the development of

students' pragmatic competence in the target language.

On the basis of the results of this study, it has to be emphasized that the said strategies denote tendencies that only comply with the genre of obituaries; they do not render an overarching account of the functioning of euphemistic devices and thus do not account for euphemism strategies employed in different settings. The context-sensitivity of euphemisms underscores the dynamic illocutionary force of a euphemistic utterance. In order to estimate the potential interpretation of an utterance, a language user must be familiar with both the "pragmalinguistic features" and "sociopragmatic norms" associated with the target language.

6. Conclusion

The objective of this study was to explore cross-cultural variations that pertain to the euphemistic language of death found in respectively 80 obituaries in English and in German, thereby highlighting the socio-cultural context-dependent use of euphemisms. Combining a qualitative and quantitative approach, the contrastive analysis of the obituary collections accessed via the *NZZ* and *The New York Times* revealed similarities as well as significant differences in the degree to which the two language groups mitigate the taboo of death. It has been demonstrated that the encountered euphemisms have distinguished characteristics and thus provide evidence of the different extent to which sociolinguistic information is encoded through the use of euphemistic references. The analysis suggests that cultural values, attitudes and norms are reflected linguistically, which became manifest via the privileging of particular euphemism strategies and the distinct linguistic realizations thereof. Striking cross-cultural divergences with regard to the strategies "Metaphor of sleep and rest / Understatement", "Particularization", "Deletion" and "Orthophemism" could be discerned. By contrast, both data collections are characterized by the pervasiveness of "Metaphors of departure" and adverbial constructions that imply a euphemistic approach to death. Furthermore, the study suggests that the gender of the deceased does not affect the choice of euphemism strategies in obituaries in English and in German.

In line with a wealth of research (e.g. Allan 2006; Andersen 2014; Crespo Fernández 2006; Eisenclas 2011; Haddad 2009; Kecskes 2014; Rabab'ah and Al-Qarni 2012; Qi 2010), this study advocates the paramount importance of culture-specificity; the findings of the study strongly suggest the validity of culture-specific conventions that underlie the appropriate use of euphemisms and linguistic choices in general. Since the cross-cultural comparison attests the presence of recurring euphemistic substitutes for death that are distinctive of the

respective data set, it is argued that they can be considered to be fixed and conventionalized pragmatic strategies. In this regard, it is imperative to adopt a (socio)pragmatic approach by stressing the exploration of underlying cultural attitudes and norms of the target culture; in line with other situated speech acts, an appropriate use of euphemisms is governed by the awareness of culture-, register-, and genre-specificity, as well as “socio-cultural norms of appropriateness” (Keckses 2014: 210).

It is important to stress, however, that assertive reasons for differences detected in a cross-cultural context are hard to determine since speculation and a reductionist approach are implied due to the danger of oversimplification; it is therefore difficult to account for idiosyncratic characteristics of the data, which is why the results of this research are to be considered culture-specific tendencies. Another difficulty encountered in the study pertains to the application of Warren’s (1992) model: the data collection revealed that the euphemism strategies put forward by Warren (1992) are not mutually exclusive and could thus be employed interchangeably in certain cases (as exemplified by the “Metaphor of sleep and rest / Understatement” strategy). Even though the model constitutes a useful taxonomy of euphemism strategies in a general context, the analysis demonstrated that it does not account for genre-specific subtleties; euphemistic expressions such as *the late* or [...] *ist nicht mehr* could therefore not be allocated to a strategy proposed by Warren (1992). In the same vein, Crespo Fernández’ (2006) classification of obituary types also proved to be impractical because characteristics of both types are often simultaneously present in the obituaries; the types, too, are not mutually exclusive and a continuum is not accounted for satisfactorily due to the dichotomous nature of the model.

For further research, it would be appealing to analyze a more extensive corpus in order to render a more representative account of the allegedly culture-specific conventions of death-related euphemism strategies found in the respective languages. For instance, it would be interesting to verify whether the abundant use of adverbial constructions that suggest a euphemistic approach to death can be considered to strategically compensate the lack of mitigation inherent in orthophemisms. Furthermore, it would be compelling to conduct a cross-cultural study that compares death-related euphemism usage in a variety of genres and settings by taking into account a larger number of social variables (such as age or level of education) of the participants, which would also provide language learners multiple insights into the register-specific and situation-bound functioning of euphemisms in a particular language and thus favor the development of their pragmatic competence.

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