

CONCEPTUAL METAPHOR AND EUPHEMIZATION IN THE SPANISH LINGUOCULTURAL WORLDVIEW

Davurov Khumoyun

*Independent researcher of
Samarkand State Institute of Foreign Languages*

Abstract. *This work explores the interplay between **conceptual metaphor** and **euphemization** processes within the Spanish linguocultural worldview. Special attention is given to taboo domains such as **death (muerte)**, **old age (vejez)**, and **illness (enfermedad)**, which are among the most heavily euphemized concepts in Spanish. Drawing on cognitive linguistics, the analysis demonstrates how universal embodied experiences combine with culture-specific elements—particularly Catholic-Christian traditions, historical-political influences, and Mediterranean worldview—to shape distinctive euphemistic strategies in Spanish. Spanish shows a stronger preference for religiously oriented mappings and less optimistic framings compared to more secularized languages like contemporary English.*

Keywords: *Conceptual metaphor, euphemization, Spanish linguoculture, linguistic worldview, taboo language, death metaphors, cognitive linguistics, cultural models*

Avoidance of direct reference to unpleasant or taboo realities is a universal linguistic phenomenon. **Euphemism** serves as a psychological and social shield, allowing speakers to refer to distressing concepts indirectly. In cognitive terms, euphemization frequently relies on **conceptual metaphor** — a cognitive mechanism by which we understand abstract or threatening target domains through more concrete, familiar, or positively evaluated source domains. In the Spanish linguocultural worldview, euphemisms are especially rich in the domains of death, dying, old age, and serious illness — topics traditionally surrounded by fear, religious significance, and social interdiction. This thesis argues that Spanish euphemistic language reveals a characteristic blend of universal human embodiment (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980) and specific cultural models rooted in Catholic eschatology, the historical experience of political violence (e.g., Civil War), and a cultural tendency toward indirectness and verbal courtesy.

Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT)

Lakoff and Johnson (1980) revolutionized the study of metaphor by claiming that metaphors are not mere rhetorical ornaments but fundamental cognitive structures. A **conceptual metaphor** consists of a systematic mapping from a concrete **source domain** to an abstract **target domain** (e.g., LIFE IS A JOURNEY → "el camino de la vida", "llegar al final").

Euphemisms often exploit these mappings to present taboo concepts in a less threatening light. DEATH IS DEPARTURE, for instance, transforms the finality of death into a mere change of location.

Euphemism as Cognitive and Cultural Strategy

Euphemisms are not random substitutions; they reflect conceptual derivation processes (metaphor, metonymy, conceptual blending). In taboo domains, they serve politeness functions (Brown & Levinson) while simultaneously revealing cultural values and worldview.

In Spanish, religious and historical influences often add layers of meaning absent in more secular cultures.

Main Conceptual Metaphors and Their Euphemistic Function in Spanish

The following table summarizes the most productive conceptual metaphors for death in Spanish, with examples and cultural notes:

Conceptual Metaphor	Main Linguistic Realizations (Spanish)	Euphemistic Function	Cultural Notes
DEATH IS A JOURNEY/DEPARTURE	<i>partir, marcharse, irse al otro mundo, emprender el último viaje</i>	Softens finality → movement to elsewhere	Universal, but reinforced by Christian “pilgrimage of life”
DEATH IS SLEEP/REST	<i>descansar en paz, dormir el sueño eterno, reposar, quedarse</i>	Presents death as peaceful, temporary	Very frequent; linked to Catholic epitaphs (“Descansa en paz”)
DEATH IS GOING UP / TO HEAVEN	<i>estar con Dios, subir al cielo, reunirse con el Señor</i>	Positive religious framing, consolation	Strongly Catholic; afterlife reward emphasized
DEATH IS A CALL	<i>Dios lo llamó, se lo llevó el Señor</i>	Death as divine decision → less arbitrary	Reflects theocentric worldview
DEATH IS FALLING / END	<i>caer, fenecer, expirar, extinguirse</i>	Neutral/fatalistic	Less euphemistic, more literary
DEATH IS POLITICAL SACRIFICE	<i>caer por Dios y por España, dar la vida por la Patria</i>	Glorification of violent death	Specific to Spanish Civil War epitaphs (1936–1939)

Key observations:

- Spanish favors **positive religious re-conceptualizations** (DEATH IS UNION WITH GOD) more than English, where life-like metaphors (e.g., “passed away” as continuation) are more common.
- Political-historical metaphors appear prominently in 20th-century epitaphs, especially Francoist ones (Crespo-Fernández, 2013).

Euphemization of Old Age and Illness in Spanish

Old age and chronic illness are also heavily euphemized, reflecting cultural respect for elders mixed with discomfort toward decline:

- **OLD AGE IS A STAGE / ADVANCED POSITION** → *tercera edad, personas mayores, de edad avanzada, de la tercera juventud* (avoiding *viejo/a* – pejorative in many contexts)
- **ILLNESS IS A FIGHT / BATTLE** → *luchar contra la enfermedad, batallar, pelear* (very common in media and family discourse)
- **SERIOUS ILLNESS / TERMINAL STATE** → *estar delicado/a, malito/a, indispuerto, delicado de salud* → *se nos va, se está apagando* (metonymy + DEATH IS A LIGHT GOING OUT)

These mappings reveal a cultural tendency to frame vulnerability as **temporary** or **heroic**, softening the perception of decline.

Cultural Specificity of the Spanish Linguocultural Worldview

While embodiment provides universal metaphors (DEATH IS DOWN, LIFE IS UP), cultural models heavily filter their linguistic realization in Spanish:

- **Catholic influence** → Emphasis on afterlife, resurrection, and divine will (stronger than in Protestant or secular cultures).
- **Historical-political layer** → Death metaphors linked to sacrifice and heroism (especially 1936–1939 period).
- **Politeness and indirectness** → Greater use of religious consolation formulas in everyday language and obituaries.

Cross-linguistic comparisons (English-Spanish epitaphs, Spanish-Chinese death euphemisms) show that Spanish patterns are closer to traditionally Catholic cultures than to more secularized Anglo-Saxon ones.

Conclusions. Conceptual metaphors serve as the main cognitive mechanism for euphemization in Spanish, allowing speakers to approach taboo domains (death, old age, illness) indirectly. While many metaphors are universal (rooted in bodily experience), the Spanish linguocultural worldview imprints distinctive features: strong religious consolation, Catholic eschatological orientation, and occasional politicization of death. This interplay illustrates how language both reflects and shapes cultural worldview. Future research could fruitfully compare contemporary digital discourse with traditional sources to trace ongoing evolution.

References:

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