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DE-TABOOIZATION OF DEATH IN ENGLISH-LANGUAGE DISCOURSE OF DEATH POSITIVITY MOVEMENT

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The article explores de-tabooization of the DEATH concept in English-language death positivity discourse. The research considers the demographic trend of modern Western societies towards ageing and the progress of modern medical science as factors that entail lifting the conventional ban on direct references to death, which started with the debates over euthanasia. The definitional analysis of *euthanasia*, its collocations and synonyms, reveals its frame and the tendency to replace euphemisms with direct nominations. The study of new coinages with the components *death* and *dying* that verbalize recently formed death-related practices in the texts produced within the death positivity discourse suggests that the DEATH concept is undergoing the process of reconceptualization.

Key words: DEATH concept, death positivity movement, de-tabooization, euphemism, discourse.

Introduction. Paradoxical as it may seem, death has been part and parcel of social life throughout human history. The sensitivity and the significance of this topic override cultural and linguistic differences. Thus, communities may view death either as a turning point from earthly burdens to liberation and the beginning of (again, paradoxically) the afterlife, or as a tragic unavoidable departure into nonexistence, or as the next stage of one's cyclic transformation into another form of life. However, from a linguistic perspective, death tends to remain a sensitive topic or even a conversational taboo verbalized metaphorically and/or euphemistically.

Mortality appears in the discourse of Western English-speaking societies as a result of demographic trends. In particular, in Europe, statistics show a steady increase in the number of elderly, and the trend is expected to continue [18]. The same processes are observed in the USA and Australia [33]. The ever-growing proportion of senior citizens in the population is related to high living standards and advanced health care. Not surprisingly, death has been losing its 'unexpectedness': in 2017, 46.2% of deaths in England happened in hospitals and approximately two-thirds of these patients were people aged 75 years and older [30]. Medical technologies have provided hospital professionals with a vast range of means to prolong patients' lives, yet the flipside of these possibilities is their costliness (the vast majority of American bankruptcies are related to end-of-life expenses) as well as elderly patients' inevitably worse quality of life, which makes about 75% of Americans want to die

at home rather than in hospital [26]. These are the factors that have primed the death positivity movement.

First made legal in the Netherlands in 2002, the practice of euthanasia has spread, although with many exceptions, all over the world: it is legalized in Benelux, Spain, New Zealand, Australia, and eleven US states. Gradually, dying turned from a matter of Divine Providence into that of choice, which completed the secularization of Western countries and made humans responsible for their life as well as their death. Having rejected the religious worldview and, apparently, not having arrived at ultimate atheism, modern Western societies experience existential anxiety readily exploited by various entrepreneurs: to ease the pressure on individuals, diverse (non-profit and commercial) organizations and platforms are engaged in death-positive discourse, offer their services and weave the narrative of dying as not only physical but also a spiritual, social and psychological process.

Death-related beliefs and rituals have been explored in the fields of sociology, anthropology and culture studies, medical, palliative and nursing science, philosophy, theology, psychology, etc. (see [8; 10; 11; 16; 17]). However, the discourse of the death positivity movement has not been analyzed linguistically. Hence, the **objective of the present research** is to explore how the conventionally tabooed DEATH concept is verbalized in the discursive practices of the death positivity movement.

Previous Research in the Area. As the concept of DEATH is fundamental to interpreting human existence, there are numerous linguistic studies of the concept in different languages and discourse types at various stages of their development. In particular, Crespo-Fernández relies on epitaphs from the gravestones in the English Cemetery of Malaga to confirm that DEATH as a taboo lexeme is metaphorically verbalized in the gravestone inscriptions. The researcher argues that these metaphors perform two functions. On the one hand, they enable relatives of the deceased to show their respect towards the taboo word; on the other, the metaphorical verbalizations offer the mourning families some consolation: “The source domains of REST, PEACE, NEW LIFE and JOURNEY that are used to target the DEATH domain imply a positive value judgment of mortality insofar as they represent death as the gateway to a better life in Heaven in which those who have led virtuous lives on earth will be rewarded” [3, p. 13]. The researcher correlates metaphors with euphemisms. He argues that a euphemism is not “a question of word choice” but “a complex process which helps us to understand how a taboo subject <...> is conceived in social groups and what beliefs are more or less implicitly accepted” [3, p. 2]. Consequently, metaphors turn into a “taboo-motivated <...> lexical alternative deliberately used for a purpose in the context of funeral texts not only to avoid offence or disrespect but also to provide some sort of consolation to the bereaved family” [3, p. 3].

Drawing their analysis both on dictionary definitions and discourse samples, Ukrainian linguists also indicate metaphorization and euphemization of the DEATH concept in English [4; 14; 15]. Interestingly, researchers of the Ukrainian language choose folklore and literary texts as their material to consider the Ukrainian concept of СМЕРТЬ [6; 13].

A multinational team of linguists uncovers metaphorization of the DEATH concept in six different languages of Europe, Asia and Africa [7]. The researchers attribute indirect nominations of mortality to the fear of death inherent to humans. Thus, regardless of the

language, the literature overview shows that the DEATH concept is fundamental to human worldview and is verbalized through euphemisms and metaphors.

The philosophical, social and psychological underpinnings of the death positivity movement has been summed up by G. Koksvit who defines it as an oppositional and liberating trend that urges to reflect on the issues of identity, lifestyle and dying as well as to further “a neoliberal discourse of individual responsabilization” [10, p. 951]. In other words, the death positivity movement rejects the universal and well-established tradition of treating death as a taboo and offers a new way of handling this concept.

Methods. The research aims to analyze the DEATH concept in the discourse of the death positivity movement by exploring the definitions and contextual peculiarities of the lexeme *euthanasia* and its synonyms as well as by studying the linguistic features of mass media coverage of death-related issues. The study draws on the sample of definitions provided in dictionaries and governmental official sites (for example, British NHS) of the lexeme *euthanasia* and its types. The research is also based on 18 mass media articles (*BBC*, *The Guardian*, *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*) dating from 2014 to 2024, four corporate websites of death positivity organizations, namely *Death Café*, *Death over Dinner*, *INELDA*, *The Order of the Good Death* and seven video materials uploaded on YouTube which feature death activists such as Caitlin Doughty, Jae Rhim Lee and Michael Hebb.

The study of the sample yielded 13 collocations that refer to *euthanasia* as well as a peculiar collocability of the *death/die* word family in death positivity discourse. To explore the meanings of the units and their relations, the research makes use of definitional, semantic roles and componential analyses. The study employs discourse analysis to interpret the lexemes and to embed the findings in a larger social and cultural context of death positivity discourse, which, in its turn, reveals neologisms used to nominate new death positive practices.

Results and Discussion. Resolving the controversy over *euthanasia* in favor of its legalization and decriminalization of *voluntary euthanasia* in the Netherlands in 2001 may be considered as the first serious step within the death positivity discourse. Since then, doctors have been allowed to terminate their patients' lives provided the patients' illness was terminal, their decision was not forced and stemmed from their fear of unbearable suffering. Considered from the point of view of its semantic transparency, the word *euthanasia* used to be rather opaque: it entered English in the 17th century, was derived from *eu-* (good) and *thanatos* (death) and stood for “a gentle and easy death” [5]. In the late 19th century, the word became a term within the medical profession and a euphemism that helped to avoid the unambiguous term *mercy killing* [9, p. 3].

In Modern English, *euthanasia* is defined as “the act or practice of killing or permitting the death of hopelessly sick or injured individuals (such as persons or domestic animals) in a relatively painless way for reasons of mercy” [12] and as “the act of deliberately ending a person's life to relieve suffering” [23]. In other words, *euthanasia* is a term that denotes a situation where there is an agent (the one who performs euthanasia), a patient (the one upon whom the action is performed) and the circumstances (illness and suffering). However, the straightforwardness of the term is deceptive: *euthanasia* has evolved into an umbrella word for several more specific terms, each of them highlighting a certain aspect of the act.

First of all, the head noun *euthanasia* may be modified by the adjectives *voluntary* and *non-voluntary*: *voluntary euthanasia* means that “a person makes a conscious decision to die and asks for help to do so” [23] and *non-voluntary euthanasia* denotes the procedure “where a person is unable to give their consent (for example, because they are in a coma) and another person takes the decision on their behalf, perhaps because the ill person previously expressed a wish for their life to be ended in such circumstances” [23]. These are the two terms that shed light on the duality of the patient’s role.

Recently, there has appeared a new term that specifies the number of people that undergo the procedure: in 2020, 26 people chose *duo euthanasia*. The term stands for euthanizing couples who decide to die at the same time as their partners [21]. The phenomenon is getting popular: in 2021, duo euthanasia became the choice of 32 people and in 2022 the number increased to reach 58 [21]. In a sense, *duo euthanasia* implies the idea of ‘voluntary choice’: it presupposes that, within the couple, there is at least one decision-maker who consciously chooses death over life.

Along with *euthanasia*, there are two collocations with *suicide* as head noun, namely *assisted suicide* and *physician-assisted suicide*. The choice of the lexeme *suicide* is remarkable for two reasons. First, historically *suicide* used to be a euphemism that helped to avoid the harsh-sounding *self-murder* and *self-homicide* [5, p. 4]. On the surface, modifying *suicide* with the past participle *assisted* turns the word combination into an oxymoron, yet it underlines the importance of the two components of the act: the decision, i. e., the patient’s request that triggers the act, and the performance carried out by a physician.

As assisting death is a sensitive issue and subject to legal regulation, there are rigid rules that determine physicians’ participation in euthanasia. In the USA, for example, the Death with Dignity Act adopted in several states stipulates that an “attending qualified medical provider prescribe medication” that patients “may self-administer to end <their> life in a humane and dignified manner and to contact any pharmacist to fill the prescription” [24]. In Australia, doctors may not only administer the drugs “in cases where an individual is physically unable to self-administer” [20] but also medical professionals may prescribe drugs for patients to self-administer. The act of self-administration justifies the preference for the term *medically assisted suicide* over *physician-assisted suicide*, since the doctor’s function is reduced merely to prescribing a lethal medicine. These situations turn ‘patients’ into recipients: they obtain the means to further act upon themselves.

Tracing the development of legislation and media discourse on euthanasia reveals the trend towards stripping the discourse of euphemistic flourishes: the frequency of the words *death* and *dying* keeps increasing (e.g., *assisted death*, *assisted dying*, *medically assisted death*) at the expense of *euthanasia*.

Moreover, there are global projects that promote speaking openly about death, planning one’s death, preparing for it and even acting out death-related rituals before one’s death. In the English-speaking world, one of the first projects within the death positivity movement was a death café set up by Jon Underwood in London in 2011. He borrowed the idea from the Swiss Café Mortel movement and, since 2011, death cafés have been multiplying all over the world either as real-life eating places or as virtual speaking groups which migrate from

one location to another for a conversation about death, as it is the case with the death café in Lviv that has its page on FB [22].

Another noticeable project is *Death over Dinner* launched in the USA by Michael Hebb in 2013. Hebb addresses his audience with the urge to accept human mortality and to start preparing for death by making legal and financial arrangements. The project succeeded: over 100 thousand dinners have taken place and numerous videos appeared on YouTube documenting Hebb's followers' gatherings and dinner-table conversations. In 2018, Hebb published the book titled *Let's Talk about Death (over Dinner): An Invitation and Guide to Life's Most Important Conversation* and set up a platform that helps his adherents plan such events.

Another death activist to push further the death positivity movement is mortician Caitlin Doughty who joined the call for embracing death in her YouTube series *Ask a Mortician*. Also, there is *WeCroak* app born of Bhutanese folklore which says "that to be happy, one ought to contemplate death five times a day" [27]. The app is designed to notify its users five times a day that there is no way of "dodging The End" [27].

Eventually, these and similar projects continue bringing into public discourse and actively use verbalizers of the DEATH concept such as *death*, *to die*, *dying*, *euthanasia* and *suicide*. They create the nomenclature which facilitates 'death discourse'; they lay the foundation for new death-related phenomena and, consequently, new death-related nominations: ultimately, the *death positivity movement* is promoted by *death activists* who elaborate on the *death narrative* to enhance *death awareness* and *death literacy* in their communities. The infrastructure of the movement is built by *death entrepreneurs* of various types ranging from *deathcare/end-of-life care* and *morticians/undertakers* to *death/end-of-life doulas* and *living funeral services*.

The term *death/end-of-life doula* (also *death midwife*) is remarkable in that it follows the pattern of (*birth/labor*) *doula/midwife* which means "a person, usually a woman, who is not medically trained but who gives help and support to a woman during pregnancy and during and after the birth of her child" [1]. This pattern implies importance, uncertainty and, therefore, need for guidance attributed both to birth and death. *Death/end-of-life coach* is a synonymous term, yet it is rooted in the culture of psychological coaching. Just like psychological coaching that aims at helping people "master their problems, grow, and become more efficient in their lives" [31], *end-of-life coaches* "provide <...> guidance", "offer resources to help the dying person, along with their family and loved ones, make informed decisions" [34].

The new practice of *living funerals* (or *pre-funerals*), which "offer a chance for people to say goodbye to their friends and families on their own terms and to celebrate their life while they are still alive" [19], and businesses that help to arrange this event, reveal the controversy of de-tabooization of the DEATH concept and the anxiety about it as well as acute willingness to control every single event in one's life, even if this event is one's death. *Pre-funerals* are devised to turn *funerals* from a bitter occasion of mourning into a *celebration*. The word *celebration* is scattered all over the quotes of people's reports of their living funerals: "*Living funerals offer the chance to break with tradition and have an uplifting celebration*"; "*I'd encourage those in my position, or older people, to give others the chance to celebrate you while you're still alive*"; "... she liked the idea of *celebrating someone's life in a happy*

way”; “*The day felt celebratory*”; “*I wanted to do something more upbeat, while I was here to enjoy it – a celebration of being alive*” [19]). Overall, the text of 2800 words, where 80% is a direct speech of people who have had their living funerals, contains 14 instances of the word *celebrate* and its derivatives, five instances of the word *happy* and nine instances of the word *death*. The respondents’ stories recount how traditional grievous funerals associated with loss, death and mourning are reframed into cozy social gatherings where people shower the central figure, the organizer, with love and gratitude.

The general trend to turn round attitudes to death is observed in numerous activities and practices that lead to ‘*good dying*’. The analysis of the sample contains instances of the collocations *good dying* or *dying well* that by far outnumber the collocation *good death*: *The latest death trend is a cross between hygge and Marie Kondo: a sign that **dying well** has become a defining obsession of our time* [29]; *Talking about death: The first steps to **dying well*** [28]; ***Dying well**: why Australians are turning to ‘Buddhist’ deaths* [25].

Here, the grammatical features of words do matter: *dying* is a noun in ‘*good dying*’ and a gerund in ‘*dying well*,’ and in both of these phrases the *ing*-lexemes stand for a process developing in time rather than a momentaneous action. Contextually and grammatically, the concept of DEATH is presented as a process: one is not expected ‘to drop dead’ all of a sudden but rather to fade away slowly. Thus, what gets to the top of the agenda is how one is supposed to live through the period when death starts looming ahead. Therefore, ‘*good dying*’ and ‘*dying well*’ are not so much about one’s ‘*good death*’ as an instantaneous action but about one’s **life** (that may last for months and pose social, psychological and spiritual dilemmas) in the face of imminent death.

Conclusions. Progress in modern medical science has changed the demographic situation in English-speaking countries and resulted in the rise of the death positivity movement that urges to revise social attitudes to the DEATH concept through its de-tabooization. Legalizing *euthanasia* may be viewed as a step towards lifting the taboo. Although this lexeme used to be semantically obscure due to its Greek origin and functioned in English as a euphemism for *mercy killing*, the analysis of collocations where *euthanasia*, *death* and *dying* are used as head nouns, displays multiple aspects of this phenomenon. Its frame consists, basically, of the agent and the patient; yet, in the case of self-administration of a deadly medicine, the doctor prescribes the medicine to a recipient who later becomes an agent acting upon themselves.

The death positivity movement promotes death de-tabooization in everyday discourse through new death-related and death-focused practices creating spaces where death is referred to directly. The analysis of texts produced within death positivity discourse reveals its specific conceptualization of death: it is framed as a process drawn in time that may be lived through ‘*well*’.

This research has presented a tentative analysis of the DEATH concept in death positivity discourse and may be furthered by delving into the study of death positivity activism and practices in corporate, institutional and interpersonal communication as well as by comparing translatability and acceptability of death positivity discourse across cultures and languages.

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ДЕТАБУЇЗАЦІЯ КОНЦЕПТУ DEATH В АНГЛОМОВНОМУ ДИСКУРСІ РУХУ ПОЗИТИВНОГО СТАВЛЕННЯ ДО СМЕРТІ

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У статті розглянуто концепт DEATH в англomовному дискурсі руху позитивного ставлення до смерті, який активно розвивається з початку XXI століття. Концепт DEATH є одним з ключових для індивідуальної та колективної свідомості, проте його вербалізація зазвичай здійснювалася в англійській та інших мовах за допомогою евфемізмів і метафор. Встановлено, що соціальні та демографічні процеси сучасних західних суспільств, а саме високий рівень життя, прогрес медицини та, як результат, значне подовження тривалості життя, сприяють розвиткові активізму, що має на меті вивести DEATH з кола табуованих тем. Встановлено, що першим кроком до детабуїзації концепту була легітимізація евтаназії. Здійснено аналіз лексеми euthanasia, словосполучень з нею та її синонімів, що дозволило схарактеризувати складові фрейму, вербалізованого цими мовними одиницями, та їх варіативність. Виявлено, що цей фрейм зазвичай містить слоти агенс та пацієнс, але також у випадках, коли роль лікаря полягає лише у прописуванні необхідного для евтаназії медикаменту, хворий виступає як реципієнт, а у випадку подальшого застосування препарату – як агент. Було виявлено, що евфемізм euthanasia поступово заміщується прозорими синонімами, які містять лексеми death та dying. Аналіз дискурсу активістського руху виявив низку нових видів бізнесу, професій та культурних практик, назви яких використовують слово death. У результаті дослідження англomовних текстів руху позитивного ставлення до смерті встановлено, що практики, наприклад, поминки (funerals), які традиційно пов'язані зі смертю, трауром та горем, свідомо реконтекстуалізуються та перетворюються у святкові події-зустрічі з близькими, організовані людиною за життя заради отримання позитивних емоцій від соціальної взаємодії. Вивчення текстів також виявило перевагу вживання граматичної форми dying у поєднанні з good або well над лексемою DEATH, що свідчить про трансформацію концепту DEATH з неочікуваної та раптової події на процес, який може бути позитивно прожитий.

Ключові слова: концепт DEATH, рух позитивного ставлення до смерті, детабуїзація, евфемізм, дискурс.