

# Cultural conceptualization of *death* in religious and carnival worldviews in Middle English

Iryna Shevchenko <sup>a, \*</sup>, Iryna Morozova <sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup> V. N. Karazin Kharkiv National University, Ukraine

Received May 10, 2025; Revised June 8, 2025; Accepted June 18, 2025



**Abstract.** This study explores the cultural conceptualization of DEATH within two contrasting medieval worldviews – the religious/moral and the carnival – through the lens of Cultural Linguistics. Drawing on English literary texts from the 14th to 17th centuries, the paper analyzes how DEATH was perceived, framed, and emotionally coded in different sociocultural paradigms. Using the theoretical framework of Cultural Linguistics, which regards language as a reflection of culturally embedded cognition, the research identifies distinct cultural schemas, such as DEATH IS NATURAL TERMINAL, DEATH IS DIVINE PREORDINATION, DEATH IS MORAL EQUALIZER, and DEATH IS RELIEF/REST – in the religious worldview. These schemas present DEATH as a natural, moral, or divine event, often met with passive acceptance or spiritual reflection. In contrast, the carnival worldview re-negotiates DEATH as grotesque and laughable, with schemas like DEATH IS OBJECT OF RIDICULE, exemplified by parodic and humorous depictions in comedy. The study applies both onomasiological and componential analyses to identify the semantics of DEATH-related lexemes and traces its re-conceptualization in literary discourse. Ultimately, the research illustrates how DEATH, though a universal human concern, is cognitively constructed in culturally variable ways, revealing evolving ideological, ethical, and aesthetic orientations. The findings contribute to broader understanding of how historical-cultural conditions shape emotional and metaphorical frameworks in the worldview.

**Keywords:** cultural linguistics, ‘death’ conceptualization, medieval worldview, religious vs. carnival ethics, cultural schema, metaphorical cognition.

**Шевченко Ірина, Морозова Ірина. Культурна концептуалізація СМЕРТІ в релігійній та карнавальній картинах світу середньоанглійського періоду.**

**Анотація.** Це дослідження вивчає культурну концептуалізацію СМЕРТІ в рамках двох контрастних середньовічних картин світу – релігійної/моральної та карнавальної – крізь призму культурної лінгвістики. Спираючись на англійські літературні тексти 14–17 століть, у статті проаналізовано, як концепт СМЕРТЬ сприймався, конструювався та емоційно кодувався в різних соціокультурних парадигмах. Використовуючи

---

\* Corresponding author. Iryna Shevchenko,  0000-0003-2552-5623,  iryna.shevchenko@karazin.ua

© Shevchenko, Iryna; Morozova, Iryna, 2025. This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International Licence (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0>).

East European Journal of Psycholinguistics, 12(1), 176–192. <https://doi.org/10.29038/eejpl.2025.12.1.she>

теоретичні засади культурної лінгвістики, яка розглядає мову як відображення культурно зумовленого пізнання, дослідження визначає окремі культурні схеми – такі як СМЕРТЬ Є ПРИРОДНИЙ КІНЕЦЬ, СМЕРТЬ Є БОЖЕСТВЕННЕ ПРИЗНАЧЕННЯ, СМЕРТЬ Є МОРАЛЬНИЙ ЗРІВНЮВАЧ та СМЕРТЬ Є ПОЗБАВЛЕННЯ/ВІДПОЧИНОК у релігійній картині світу. Ці схеми представляють СМЕРТЬ як природну, моральну або божественну подію, яку часто зустрічають з пасивним прийняттям або духовною рефлексією. На противагу цьому, карнавальна картина світу переосмислює СМЕРТЬ як гротескну і смішну, зі схемами на кшталт СМЕРТЬ Є ОБ'ЄКТОМ СМІХУ, прикладом чого є пародійні та гумористичні зображення в комедіях. У дослідженні застосовано ономазіологічний та компонентний аналізи для визначення семантики лексем, пов'язаних зі СМЕРТЮ, та простежено її ре-концептуалізацію в літературному дискурсі. Зрештою, дослідження ілюструє, як концепт СМЕРТЬ, хоч і є універсальною людською проблемою, когнітивно конструюється в культурно варіативний спосіб, виявляючи еволюцію ідеологічних, етичних та естетичних орієнтацій. Результати дослідження сприяють ширшому розумінню того, як історико-культурні контексти формують емоційне сприйняття та метафоричні моделі в картині світу.

**Ключові слова:** культурна лінгвістика, концептуалізація СМЕРТІ, середньовічний світогляд, релігійна та карнавальна етика, культурна схема, метафоричне пізнання.

## Introduction

Our understanding of the world, including fundamental worldview concepts such as LIFE, DEATH, GOOD, and EVIL, is shaped by empirical knowledge derived from the historical experience of humanity within specific cultural contexts. Among these, the concept of DEATH constitutes a persistent existential concern and a fundamental aspect of human experience (Kagan, 2012; MacLean et al., 2009). This concept is a culturally constructed phenomenon (Arora, 2021) – a stable mental representation rooted in culturally significant practices, experiences, and artifacts that evolve in tandem with societal transformations. Unsurprisingly, DEATH has been the object of extensive interdisciplinary research, encompassing both empirical clinical investigations (Zimmermann, 2007) and theoretical explorations in the humanities.

As a central theme in cultural and evolutionary theory, DEATH is often explored in relation to religious belief systems and historical-cultural transformations. Anthropologists approach the topic from a cross-cultural perspective, while philosophers and sociologists examine it through the lens of ethnic stereotyping and cultural progression (Suvorova, 2012; Arora, 2021). A seminal contribution in this field is the study by Palgi and Abramovitch (1984) that presents a comprehensive critical review of death-related research in psychological anthropology and behavioral science, positioning DEATH within a comparative cultural framework. Similarly, Kagan (2012) analyzes the

philosophical and cultural dimensions of mortality, addressing its ontological and existential implications.

The linguistic conceptualization of the world is embedded within cultural, linguistic, and social experiences, reflecting the ethnocultural specificity of a given language and revealing the essence of culturally constructed concepts. Lexicological studies investigate the semantic properties of DEATH through the paradigmatic relationships among related lexemes (Fedoriuk, 2017). Cognitive linguistics models the concept through frame-based analysis (Prykhodko & Prykhodchenko, 2018) and explores its cross-cultural representations (Kuczok, 2016; Uberman, 2018; Wachowski & Sullivan, 2021). Scholars have also examined metaphorical language that describes DEATH (Faur, 2012; Keefer et al., 2021; Uberman, 2016), identifying conceptual metaphors in which DEATH serves as the target domain (Molgamova, 2024).

Employing corpus linguistics methodologies, researchers have analyzed the concept of DEATH from a linguosynergetic perspective (Molgamova, 2024; Tatsenko & Molgamova, 2023). Using propositional schema modeling, the linguistic network of this concept reveals a fractal structure characterized by nonlinear dynamics among its components, producing a unified yet multifaceted conceptualization (Molgamova, 2024).

In sum, whether conceptualized as a natural element of the life cycle, a divine punishment, a scientific mystery, or a source of existential anxiety, dominant cultural representations of DEATH reflect shared ethnocultural values and individual belief systems. Yet, for contemporary scientific inquiry, DEATH presents a distinctive challenge, particularly in the context of global terrorism and wartime threats. Despite existing research that elucidates linguistic and metaphorical representations of DEATH, there remains a significant gap in diachronic studies addressing its cognitive and psychological dimensions. Bridging this gap is essential; as such concepts not only mirror prevailing ideologies but also trace evolving cultural transformations. However, diachronic cognitive analyses that capture these shifts remain relatively underdeveloped. This study posits that such an analysis can be effectively conducted through the theoretical framework of Cultural Linguistics.

Cultural Linguistics maintains that “language is a cultural form, and that conceptualizations underlying language and language use are largely formed by cultural systems” (Yu, 2007, p. 65). According to Shariffian (2017), this approach explores aspects of human language that encode culturally constructed conceptualizations of experience and underpin linguistic behavior. Cultural Linguistics is inherently interdisciplinary, integrating insights from cognitive science, pragmatics, psychology, and anthropology. Cultural conceptualization, understood as a mental process, is rooted in cultural

cognition—a view aligned with the enactive approach to cognition, which emphasizes the dynamic interaction of body, mind, and environment. From this perspective, cultural cognition emerges through the ongoing interaction between individuals and their cultural environments across temporal and spatial dimensions (Stewart et al., 2011), rather than being limited to internal mental representations.

Within this framework, cultural schemas function as analytical tools for examining how language encodes conceptualizations. As Shariffian (2017, p. 4) explains, these schemas encapsulate beliefs, norms, behavioral expectations, and values pertaining to diverse aspects of human experience. The historical development of a speech community and its culture inevitably transforms elements of cultural cognition, reflecting its dialectical nature. Accordingly, “language can be viewed as a primary mechanism for ‘storing’ and communicating cultural cognition, acting both as a memory bank and a fluid vehicle for the (re-)transmission of cultural cognition” (Shariffian, 2017, p. 2). While Cultural Linguistics has addressed the cross-cultural and cross-religious dimensions of DEATH (Lu, 2017), its diachronic dimensions remain underexamined. The present study seeks to contribute a preliminary exploration of this area.

Specifically, this paper investigates the cultural conceptualization of DEATH in two contrasting worldviews that coexisted during the Middle Ages: the moral/religious worldview and the carnival worldview. The former was shaped by traditional Catholic doctrines and beliefs, while the latter, in Bakhtin’s (1984) terms, was informed by a ‘comic world’ with its carnival aesthetics—such as masquerade, parody, the grotesque, and procession—which served to subvert dominant cultural norms (Tancons, 2014). In a Roman Catholic Perspective (Oakley et al., 2025), DEATH is a central theme connected with the notions of Salvation, Eschatology, Judgment, and Resurrection. The religion’s premise is that humans have forfeited immortality through the original sin, transmitted from Adam and Eve that brought death into the world. The opposite grotesque and humorous perception of DEATH in the English worldview manifests itself only in the short period of medieval carnival culture. This perception goes back to the Saturnalia of ancient Rome, where funerals included both mourning (glorification) and ridicule of the deceased. In the folk culture of medieval carnival, moments of death and rebirth, change and renewal were marked by a festive perception. In the grotesque archaism of the folk booth, DEATH and BIRTH created an oxymoron—the image of a ‘MERRY DEATH’; DEATH and HELL became ambivalent (Humphrey, 2000). While previous researches of DEATH addressed issues of linguistic semantics, corpus-based analysis and cognitive linguistics, we have instead focused on

how DEATH was perceived and represented within moral/religious and carnival perspectives, aiming to model and compare the cultural schemas that underlie each.

Drawing on linguistic data from English literary texts of the 14th –17th centuries, this research hypothesizes that the cultural conceptualization of DEATH demonstrates significant variation according to prevailing ethical and aesthetic principles. To support this claim, the study addresses the following research questions:

1. What were the dominant English perceptions of DEATH during the Middle English period?
2. What cultural schemas of DEATH are represented in religious/moral worldview?
3. How were cultural conceptualizations of DEATH re-negotiated within religious/moral and carnival worldviews?

## Method

### Procedure

To achieve the aim of this study, we begin by examining prevalent perceptions of DEATH in medieval English society. This is followed by an identification and analysis of the cultural schemas associated with the concept. Finally, we propose a tentative trajectory that traces transformation of the cultural conceptualization of DEATH across differing ethical frameworks.

In the first stage, our analysis is informed by psycholinguistic insights into the interaction between human perception of the world and language (Croft, 2009), as well as the interplay between consciousness and culture (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). We apply a structural approach to the study of meaning and its tool—componential analysis of meaning of various lexemes that nominate DEATH to single out minimal distinctive features of meaning—semes and their clusters—archesemes. Textual interpretation of lexically represented concepts allows us to reveal how DEATH is perceived in different cultural contexts, what values are attributed to it, and what emotions it evokes.

In the second stage, our analysis draws on the principles of Cultural Linguistics. The theoretical framework of Cultural Linguistics is based on the assumption that the relationship between language and conceptualization is shaped by specific cultural contexts. This framework is grounded in a key premise of cognitive linguistics—namely, that cognition is embodied and culturally embedded (Langacker, 2014). Accordingly, cultural

conceptualizations refer to “patterns of distributed knowledge across the cultural group” (Shariffian, 2011, p. 3).

In this study, Cultural Linguistics enables an examination of the concept of DEATH through the lens of the interrelations among cultural cognition, cultural conceptualizations, and language. According to Shariffian (2017), language serves as a tool through which cultural cognition generates various formats of conceptual knowledge, including cultural schemas. These schemas are collectively constructed within a cultural worldview and play a key role in the communication of cultural meanings.

The analytical framework of Cultural Linguistics is grounded in the idea that morphosyntactic, pragmatic, and semantic meanings, as well as discourse strategies, may be embedded in cultural conceptualizations in the form of cultural schemas, categories, and metaphors (Shariffian, 2017, p. 4). Cultural schemas, as a type of cultural conceptualization, are understood as cognitive building blocks used for storing, organizing, and interpreting information (Shariffian, 2015, p. 475). In fiction, the cultural concept of DEATH is expressed through these schemas, which are mental constructs continually negotiated and re-negotiated across historical periods.

This study adopts a Cultural Linguistics diachronic approach. In line with its objectives, we applied information analysis and interpretation to identify the central idea of DEATH and its conceptual perception. We also employed comparison to highlight key similarities and differences in the cultural schemas of DEATH across ethnic systems.

## Research Material

The corpus of this study includes excerpts dealing with DEATH from Geoffrey Chaucer’s literary works of the Middle English period, as well as from Early Modern comedies of William Shakespeare. These texts were selected based on several criteria.

First, *The Canterbury Tales* by Geoffrey Chaucer is widely regarded as one of the most significant poetic works in English literature, addressing both everyday concerns and profound philosophical questions, including the theme of DEATH. His texts offer reliable examples of a predominantly religious and moral worldview.

Second, although William Shakespeare belonged to the Early Modern period of English literature, Bakhtin compared his comedies to Rabelais’s carnival aesthetics relying on binary notions of death/birth (Marie-Laverrou, 2008). Shakespeare’s comedies *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* (Shakespeare, 1998a) and *Twelfth Night* (Shakespeare, 1998b) effectively represent medieval

carnival culture and its associated practices. *Twelfth Night* is rich in themes of gender disguise, festive misrule, and servant–master role reversals, while *A Midsummer Night's Dream* features elements of chaos, physical comedy, and a world turned upside down—hallmarks of medieval carnival aesthetics.

Third, the historical perspective adopted in this study is underpinned by the idea of dynamic evolution of culture, society, and cognition over time (Shevchenko, 2016). The essential differences between the cultural schemas of DEATH in moral and carnival ethical frameworks allow for a meaningful comparison of these two medieval worldviews, providing a solid foundation for analyzing the cultural re-conceptualization of DEATH.

## Results and Discussion

There exist three kinds of experience that together shape the formation of human cognition: bodily experience (embodiment), cultural experience in a specific environment or situation, and inherited linguistic experience. “All three kinds of experience, nevertheless, are situated in the sphere of culture. Culture is a superior force that permeates human conceptualization and cognition” (Yu, 2017, p.84).

Linguistic experience of DEATH comes from Old English *deað* (n.) “total cessation of life, act or fact of dying, state of being dead; cause of death,” in plural, “ghosts,” from Proto-Germanic *\*dauthuz* (source also of Old Saxon *doth*, Old Frisian *dath*, Dutch *dood*, Old High German *tod*, German *Tod*, Old Norse *dauði*, Danish *død*, Swedish *död*, Gothic *dauus* “death”), from verbal stem *\*dau-*, which is perhaps from PIE root *\*dheu-* (3) “to die” (see *die* (v.) with Proto-Germanic *\*-thuz* suffix indicating “act, process, condition.” The verb *die*(v.) mid-12c., *dien*, *deighen*, of sentient beings, “to cease to live,” possibly from Old Danish *døja*, Old Norse *deyja* “to die, pass away,” both from Proto-Germanic *\*dawjan*, from PIE root *\*dheu-* (3) “to pass away, die, become senseless” (source also of Old Irish *dith* “end, death,” Old Church Slavonic *daviti*, “to choke, suffer”) (OED, n.d.).

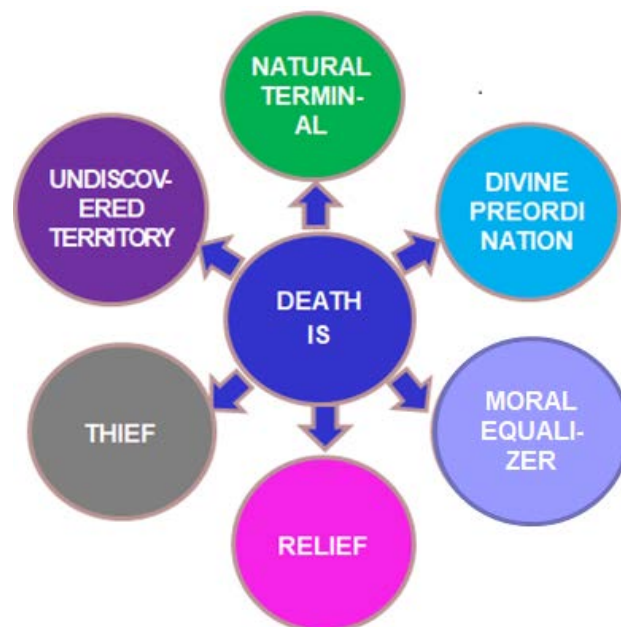
The data of an onomasiological analysis show that in the English language the concept of DEATH is lexically represented by lexemes and their derivatives, among them *death*, *afterlife*, *annihilation*, *bereavement*, *casualty*, *cessation*, *curtains*, *darkness*, *decease*, *demise*, *departure*, *destruction*, *dissolution*, *doom*, *downfall*, *dying*, *end*, *ending*, *eradication*, *euthanasia*, *exit*, *expiration*, *extermination*, *extinction*, *fall*, *fatality*, *finale*, *finis*, *finish*, *grave*, *heaven*, *loss*, *mortality*, *necrosis*, *obliteration*, *oblivion*, *paradise*, *parting*, *passing*, *quietus*, *release*, *repose*, *ruin*, *ruination*, *silence*, *sleep*, *termination*, *tomb*, *eternal rest*,

*passing over* (CFODT, n.d.; CDSA, n.d.; SOESD, n.d.). Their individual semes can be combined into archesemes 'Finish/Cessation', 'Departure', 'Loss', 'Relief', 'Rest'.

Cultural and bodily experience of DEATH encoded in the English language of Middle English period may be exemplified in cultural schemas that capture beliefs and values of Chaucer's personages. In their worldview, DEATH is perceived as neutral DEATH IS NATURAL TERMINAL, DEATH IS DIVINE PREORDINATION, DEATH IS MORAL EQUALIZER, negative DEATH IS UNDISCOVERED TERRITORY, DEATH IS THIEF, or positive DEATH IS RELIEF/REST.

Figure 1

*Cultural Schemas of DEATH in Religious/Moral Worldview*



The cultural schema DEATH IS NATURAL TERMINAL explicates this concept in terms of a natural timeline that has its ends, which corresponds to the archesemes 'Finish/Cessation'. As Theseus explains it in *The Knight's Tale*, God has allocated a definite number of days to everyone's life on earth, beyond which day they cannot pass:

(1) "That same Prince and that Moevere," quod he,  
"Hath stablissed in this wrecched world adoun  
Certeyne dayes and duracioun  
To al that is engendred in this place,  
**Over the whiche day they may nat pace,**  
Al mowe they yet tho dayes wel abregge".

(Chaucer, "The Canterbury Tales")



In accord with religious worldview of Middle Ages, all existential concepts were perceived as God predestined. Such was the death of the tyrant Creon killed by noble Theseus (excerpt 2); and equally inevitable was the death of every living creature, being written in the stars (excerpt 3). This 'natural' conceptualization of DEATH had a religious edge typical of most issues in the medieval worldview and reflected neutral evaluation of this concept and people's passive obedience to accept it as inevitable.

(2) "And swoor his ooth, as he was trewe knyght,  
He wolde doon so ferforthly his myght  
Upon the tiraunt Creon hem to wreke  
That al the peple of Grece sholde speke  
How Creon was of Theseus yserved  
As he that hadde **his deeth ful wel deserved.**"

(Chaucer, "The Canterbury Tales")

In *The Tale of Melibee*, DEATH is portrayed as a moral equalizer, transcending distinctions of social status and wealth. This theme reflects the medieval belief in the universality of DEATH as an inevitable and impartial fate. The cultural schema DEATH IS MORAL EQUALIZER is exemplified in excerpt (3), which underscores the prevailing medieval notion of DEATH as predestined and emphasizes the shared mortality of all human beings.

(3) "For **in the sterres**, clerer than glas,  
**It is writen**—God wot, if that I can—  
**The deeth of every man, withouten leas**".

(Chaucer, "The Canterbury Tales")

Cultural conceptualization of DEATH embedded in danger and loss caused fear and anxiety. Structural cognitive metaphor DEATH IS UNDISCOVERED TERRITORY (archeseme 'Departure'), and personification DEATH IS THIEF (archeseme 'Loss') added negative connotation to cultural cognition of the concept of DEATH. This negative perception is based on bodily experience of fear (compare: Hamlet's soliloquy reads, there is "...*the **dread** of something after **death**, **The undiscovered country from whose bourn No traveler returns**...*"). Fear belongs to basic human emotions that serve crucial biological and social functions (Ekman, 1999; Izard, 2011); it is motivated by the experience of dying and thus has distinct regulatory characteristics.

The cultural scheme DEATH IS UNDISCOVERED TERRITORY in excerpt (4) from *The Knight's Tale* is a cognitive metaphonymy. In it, metaphor DYING IS LEAVING ONE'S HOUSE is based on the synecdoche SPIRIT FOR

PERSON (THAT LEAVES HIS HOUSE). In this cultural scheme, the notion of a JOURNEY TO THE UNKNOWN (source of the cognitive metaphor) causes both fear and grief/sadness—another basic emotion caused in this example by the loss of one's home.

(4) "**His spirit chaunged hous and wente ther,  
As I cam nevere, I kan nat tellen wher.**  
Therefore I stynte; I nam no divinistre;  
Of soules fynde I nat in this registre,  
Ne me ne list thilke opinions to telle  
Of hem, though that they writen wher they dwelle."

(Chaucer, "The Canterbury Tales")

The conceptualization of DEATH as an unseen force that takes lives without warning forms a cultural schema DEATH IS THIEF. The typicality and frequency of this schema in the worldview of Middle Ages is embedded in plague and other mischiefs of that period. In example (5) from *The Pardoner's Tale*, a servant boy recounts the sudden death of a friend. Here DEATH is metaphorically personified as a thief who stealthily takes lives.

(5) "There came a **privy thief, they call him Death,**  
Who kills us all round here."

(Chaucer, "The Canterbury Tales")

The 'positive' perception of DEATH corresponding to the cultural schema DEATH IS RELIEF (based on the archeseme 'Relief') is summed up in Chaucer's quoth "*Deeth is an ende of every worldly soore.*" In Chaucer's time, *relief* (n.) had the meaning "alleviation or deliverance from distress" or was a variant of *relieve* (v.) —"to ease and mitigate pain or distress" (OED, n.d.). In *The Physician's Tale*, Virginius thinks that by killing his daughter, he is freeing her from a worse fate—dishonor and shame.

(6) "I am thy fader, and thy **deeth** I see,  
But if I thee fordo, I thee **release.**"

(Chaucer, "The Canterbury Tales")

Rooted in the same concept of DELIVERANCE, the cultural schema DEATH IS REST is limited to the alleviation from physical pain or hardships of a weary life. In *The Pardoner's Tale*, an old man, weary of life, longs for Death's release and uses a conceptual metonymy one's BONES FOR PERSON:

(7) "Thus walke I, lyk a **restelees** kaityf."  
"Allas, whan shul my **bones been at reste?**"

(Chaucer, "The Canterbury Tales")

The carnival worldview re-conceptualized DEATH; it could be mocked or shown in grotesque ways (e.g., bodies, bones, physical decay). As Bakhtin (1984, p.88) put it, "Medieval laughter is directed at the same object as medieval seriousness. ...One might say that it builds its own world versus the official world, its own church versus the official church, its own state versus the official state. Laughter celebrates its masses, professes its faith, celebrates marriages and funerals, writes its epitaphs, elects kings and bishops."

Though post-medieval, Shakespeare preserves carnival traditions in his comedies. In *Twelfth Night*, Shakespeare employs the character of Feste, the fool, to present DEATH in a manner that is both humorous and grotesque, often blending wit with dark themes. Excerpt (8) illustrates the cultural schema DEATH IS OBJECT OF RIDICULE through Feste's mockery of mourning as he challenges Olivia's prolonged mourning for her brother, whom she believes is in heaven:

(8) Feste: I think his soul is in hell, madonna.

Olivia: I know his soul is in heaven, fool.

Feste: **The more fool, madonna, to mourn for your brother's soul, being in heaven**

("Twelfth Night", Act 1, Scene 5)

This exchange (8) highlights Feste's use of humor to confront the absurdity of excessive mourning, suggesting that grieving for someone in heaven is itself foolish.

In Feste's melancholic song below (excerpt 9), he reflects on unrequited love and dares to drive away DEATH in a flippant grotesque manner impossible in religious worldview.

(9) **"Come away, come away, death,**

And in sad cypress let me be laid;

Fly away, fly away breath;

I am slain by a fair cruel maid."

("Twelfth Night", Act 2, Scene 4)

In accord with the carnival ethics, Feste sticks to sardonic and cynical manner of speaking about DEATH with a touch of dark humor: "*Youth's a stuff will not endure*" ("Twelfth Night", Act 2, Scene 3).

The cultural schema DEATH IS OBJECT OF RIDICULE is dominant in the carnival worldview. Quotations (8 – 9) demonstrate how Shakespeare uses Feste to intertwine humor with the grotesque perception of DEATH, offering a nuanced perspective on mortality in *Twelfth Night*.

In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Shakespeare employs humor and grotesque elements to depict DEATH, particularly through the act of entertainment at a wedding – the parody of the tragic story of Pyramus and Thisbe, which underscores the absurdity and theatricality of DEATH. In this context, DEATH is theatrical, not final; rather, it is a mock of high tragedy. Bottom's exaggerated speech (10) illustrates the cultural schema DEATH IS PART OF FESTIVE RENEWAL. Here death is a ritualistic performance — not an actual death, but a caricature of it — suggesting that death, when seen through the lens of festivity, is just another phase in the cycle of storytelling and life, as Bakhtin's (1984) theory of the grotesque body and carnival suggest. Bottom's repetitive and melodramatic monologue parodies tragic speeches, turning DEATH into a source of humor. The absurdity of his multiple declarations of death highlights the play's comic tone:

(10) “Thus **die** I, thus, thus, thus. Now **am I dead**;  
Now **am I fled**; my soul is in the sky.  
Tongue, lose thy light! Moon, take thy flight!  
Now **die, die, die, die, die.**”

(“A Midsummer Night's Dream”, Act 5, Scene 1)

Theatricality is a distinctive feature of carnival aesthetics. Bakhtin (1984, p.88) argued that “... medieval culture of humor which accompanied the feasts was a “satyric” drama, a fourth drama, after the “tragic trilogy” of official Christian cult and theology to which it corresponded but was at the same time in opposition. Like the antique “satyric” drama, so also the medieval culture of laughter <...> was the drama of the great generic body of the people, and for this generic body birth and death are not an absolute beginning and end but merely elements of continuous growth and renewal”. In carnival framework, the conceptualizations of DEATH AS GROTESQUE BODY (11) and DEATH AS THEATRICAL PERFORMANCE (12) are also emphasized by the mismatched descriptions and over-the-top imagery contributing to the grotesque humor and parody of tragic conventions. Such is Flute's comical lament, when he mourns Pyramus's ‘death’ on stage with exaggerated metaphors (11) or the Athenians' ridicule and making fun of the character Pyramus and his ‘death’ (12), after he falls and cries out “die” five times.

(11) “His eyes were **green as leeks**;  
With hands as **pale as milk**” (“A Midsummer Night’s Dream”, Act 5, Scene 1)

(12) DEMETRIUS: No die, but an ace for him, for he is but one.  
LYSANDER: Less than an ace, man, for **he is dead, he is nothing**.  
 (“A Midsummer Night’s Dream”, Act 5, Scene 1).

In sum, through these examples, the carnival worldview blends humor with the grotesque perception of DEATH, using parody, sarcastic commentaries, and irony. Figure 2 provides a visual summary of how different worldviews conceptualize DEATH.

Figure 2  
*Cultural Conceptualization of DEATH in Moral/Religious and Carnival Worldviews*

Moral/religious worldview	Worldview intersection	Carnival worldview
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• DEATH IS NATURAL TERMINAL</li> <li>• DEATH IS DIVINE PREORDINATION</li> <li>• DEATH IS THIEF</li> <li>• DEATH IS RELIEF</li> <li>• DEATH IS REST</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• DEATH IS SOCIAL EQUALIZER</li> <li>• DEATH IS UNDISCOVERED TERRITORY</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• DEATH IS OBJECT OF RIDICULE</li> <li>• DEATH IS THEATRICAL PERFORMANCE</li> <li>• DEATH IS GROTESQUE BODY</li> <li>• DEATH IS PART OF FESTIVE RENEWAL</li> </ul>

Figure 2 visually captures the re-conceptualization, function, and emotional framing of DEATH in the two worldviews, while also showing subtle conceptual overlaps of shared but differently negotiated cultural schemas: DEATH IS SOCIAL EQUALIZER (positively perceived in moral/religious worldview, but celebrated with irony or irreverence in carnival ethics) and DEATH IS UNDISCOVERED TERRITORY (the theme of transition feared in moral/religious worldview but mocked in carnival).

## Conclusion

Through psycholinguistic and cultural linguistic analysis, this study has provided key insights into the dynamic conceptualization of DEATH in the

moral and carnival worldviews of Middle English period. The research singled out cultural schemas of DEATH specific for different worldviews and highlighted the re-conceptualization of DEATH in carnival framework as contrasted to the traditional Catholic religious one.

Drawing on selected texts by Geoffrey Chaucer and William Shakespeare, we identified a range of cultural schemas that reflect different emotional, ethical, and cognitive attitudes toward DEATH in religious/moral and carnival worldviews. In the religious/moral system of Chaucer's works, DEATH is perceived as a natural, divine, and moral force – an inevitable endpoint governed by God's will and a universal equalizer of all human beings. Its typical cultural schemas are: DEATH IS NATURAL TERMINAL, DEATH IS DIVINE PREORDINATION, DEATH IS SOCIAL EQUALIZER, DEATH IS UNDISCOVERED TERRITORY, DEATH IS THIEF, DEATH IS RELIEF, and DEATH IS REST. These conceptualizations reflect medieval beliefs deep-rooted in Roman Catholicism in divine predestination and moral accountability.

By contrast, the carnival worldview, preserved in Shakespeare's comedies, presents a radically different conceptualization: DEATH becomes a grotesque, humorous, and theatrical construct that can be mocked, ridiculed, or parodied. In carnival worldview, DEATH is re-conceptualized; instead of being feared, it becomes part of the carnivalesque process that clears space for renewal and reconciliation along cultural schemas DEATH IS OBJECT OF RIDICULE, DEATH IS THEATRICAL PERFORMANCE, DEATH IS GROTESQUE BODY, DEATH IS PART OF FESTIVE RENEWAL.

This ambivalent view of mortality reflects the subversive spirit of carnival culture, which undermines religious solemnity with irony and laughter. Cultural schemas are both found in the moral/religious and carnival worldviews, though their conceptualizations differ from respect in the former to ridicule in the latter.

In sum, our findings demonstrate the value of diachronic approaches in exploring the conceptualization and re-conceptualization of DEATH in moral and carnival Middle English worldviews. The juxtaposition of the two worldviews illustrates how conceptualizations of DEATH are shaped by the ethical, aesthetic, and cognitive systems of their time. Ultimately, this diachronic and cross-framework approach offers new insights into the evolving cultural meanings of DEATH and underscores the utility of Cultural Linguistics in examining how language encodes and negotiates cultural cognition. However, the diachronic perspective of this study limited the integration of psycholinguistic methods, which, if applied to modern texts, could provide a richer empirical foundation. A promising direction of future research would be to trace how culturally embedded schemas of DEATH evolve in subsequent

worldviews, particularly within Enlightenment, Romantic, and contemporary worldviews, to further explore the continuity and transformation of moral, emotional, and aesthetic attitudes toward mortality.

## Disclosure Statement

The authors reported no potential conflict of interests.

## References

- Arora, V. (2021). The Changing Paradigm of Death and Dying. *Social Change*, 51(3), 347–361. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00490857211032951>
- Bakhtin, M. (1984). *Rabelais and His World* (1965), trans. Hélène P. Iswolsky. Indiana University Press.
- Croft, W. (2009). Towards a social cognitive linguistics. In V. Evans, & S. Pourcel (Eds.), *New directions in cognitive linguistics* (pp. 395–420). John Benjamins. <https://doi.org/10.1515/COGL.2009.009>
- Ekman, P. (1999). Basic emotions. In T. Dalgleish & M. J. Power (Eds.), *Handbook of cognition and emotion* (pp. 45–60). Wiley.
- Faur, El. (2012). The metaphors for death and the death of conceptual metaphors in poetry. An analysis based on Emily Dickinson's poem Because I Could Not Stop For Death. *Dacoromania*, 17, 108–123.
- Fedoriuk L. V. Epidyhmalni vlastyosti kontseptu SMERT: respondentna otsinka [Epidigmatic properties of the concept DEATH: respondent assessment] *Research Journal of Drohobych Ivan Franko State Pedagogical University. Series "Philology" (Linguistics)*, 7, 213–218.
- Humphrey, C. (2000). Bakhtin and the Study of Popular Culture: Re-thinking Carnival as a Historical and Analytical Concept. In Brandist, C., Tihanov, G. (Eds), *Materializing Bakhtin. St Antony's Series*, Palgrave Macmillan. [https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230501461\\_9](https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230501461_9)
- Izard, C. E. (2011). Forms and functions of emotions: Matters of emotion–cognition interactions. *Emotion Review*, 3, 371–378.
- Kagan, S. (2012). *Death*. Yale University Press.
- Keefer, L. A., Brown, F. L., & Rials T. G. (2021). An initial investigation of the role of death concerns in evaluations of metaphoric language about God. *Archive for the Psychology of Religion*, 43 (2), 135–160. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00846724211031671>
- Kuczok, M. (2016). Metaphorical conceptualizations of death and dying in American English and Polish: A corpus-based contrastive study. *Linguistica Silesiana*, 37, 125–142.
- Lakoff, G., & Johnson, M. (1980). The metaphorical structure of the human conceptual system. *Cognitive Science*, 4(2), 195–208. [https://doi.org/10.1207/s15516709cog0402\\_4](https://doi.org/10.1207/s15516709cog0402_4)
- Langacker, R. W. (2014). Culture and cognition, lexicon and grammar. In M. Yamaguchi, D. Tay, & B. Blount (Eds.), *Approaches to language, culture and cognition: The*

- intersection of cognitive linguistics and linguistic anthropology* (pp. 27–49). Palgrave MacMillan.
- Lu, Wei-lun (2017). Cultural Conceptualisations of DEATH in Taiwanese Buddhist and Christian Eulogistic Idioms In F. Shariffian (Ed.), *Advances in Cultural Linguistics* (pp.49–64). Springer.
- MacLean, V. M., & Williams, J. E. (2009). Cemeteries. In C. D. Bryant, & D. L. Peck (Eds.), *Encyclopaedia of death and the human experience* (pp. 168–173). Sage.
- Marie-Laverrou, F. (2008). Bakhtin and Powys ‘en dialogue’: Two Contemporary Views on Rabelais. *Études britanniques contemporaines*, 33, 9422. <https://doi.org/10.4000/ebc.9422>
- Molhamova, L. O. (2024). *Kontsept DEATH v anhlovmovnomu dyskursi: linhvosynerhetychnyi aspekt* [The concept of DEATH in English-language discourse: a linguistic-synergetic aspect.] Unpublished PhD thesis. Sumy State University.
- Oakley, F.C., Pelikan, J.J., Cunningham, L., Knowles, M.D., Marty, M.E., Frassetto, M., & McKenzie, J.L. (2025). Roman Catholicism. In *Encyclopedia Britannica*. Retrieved from <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Roman-Catholicism>
- Palgi, P., & Abramovitch, H. (1984). Death: A Cross-Cultural Perspective. *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 13, 385–417. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2155675>
- Prihodko, A., & Prykhodchenko, O. (2018). Frame Modeling of the Concepts of Life and Death in the English Gothic Worldview. *Lege Artis-Language Yesterday Today Tomorrow*, 3(2), 164–203.
- Shariffian, F. (2011). *Cultural conceptualisations and language*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Shariffian, F. (2015). Cultural linguistics. In F. Shariffian (Ed.), *The Routledge handbook of language and Culture* (pp. 473–492). Routledge.
- Shariffian, F. (2017). Cultural Linguistics: The State of the Art. In F. Shariffian (Ed.), *Advances in Cultural Linguistics* (pp.1–28). Springer.
- Shevchenko, I. (2016). Evolutional mechanisms of cognitive semantics. *Cognition, Communication, Discourse*, 13, 132–141. <https://doi.org/10.26565/2218-2926-2016-13-07>
- Stewart, J., Gapenne, O., & Di Paolo, E. (2014). *Enaction: Toward a new paradigm for cognitive science*. The MIT Press.
- Steen, G. (2023). Thinking by metaphor, fast and slow: Deliberate Metaphor Theory offers a new model for metaphor and its comprehension. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 14, 1242888. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2023.1242888>
- Suvorova, L.K. (2012). Kontsept smerti v opovidanni L. Yanovskoi “Smert Makarykhy”: filosofsko-kulturolohichni pidteksty [The concept of death in L. Yanovskaya’s story “The Death of Makarykha”: philosophical and cultural implications] *Scientific Herald of V.O. Sukhomlynskyi Mykolaiv National University*, 4(10). P. 183–186.
- Tancons, C. (2014). Occupy Wall Street: Carnival against capital? Carnavalesque as protest Sensibility. In P. Werbner, M. Webb, & K. Spellman-Boots (Eds.), *The Political Aesthetics of Global Protest: The Arab Spring and Beyond* (pp. 291–319). Edinburgh University Press.
- Tatsenko, N., & Molhamova, L. (2023). Concepts through a linguosynergetic lens (on the example of the concept of DEATH). *Visnyk Universitetu imeni Alfreda Nobelya. Seriya: Filologicni Nauki*, 1(25), 244–259. <https://doi.org/10.32342/2523-4463-2023-1-25-18>
- Uberman, A. (2016). Death in metaphorical language. *Lege Artis. Language Yesterday, Today, Tomorrow*, 1(2), 171–211. <https://doi.org/10.1515/lart-2016-0013> ISSN 2453-8035



- Uberman, A. (2018). Frame Analysis of the Concept of Death across Cultures. *Lege Artis. Language Yesterday, Today, Tomorrow*, 3(1), 417–447.
- Wachowski, W., & Sullivan, K. (2021). *Metonymies and Metaphors for Death Around the World* (1st ed.). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003183761>
- Yakub, M., & Agyekum, K. (2022). Metaphorical euphemisms in death-discourse among the Nzema. *Studies in African Languages and Cultures*, 56, 127–153. <https://doi.org/10.32690/56.6>
- Yu, N. (2017). Life as Opera: A Cultural Metaphor in Chinese. In F. Shariffian (Ed.), *Advances in Cultural Linguistics* (pp.65-88). Springer.
- Zimmermann, C. (2007). Death Denial: Obstacle or Instrument for Palliative Care? An Analysis of Clinical Literature. *Sociology of Health and Illness*, 29(2), 297–314. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9566.2007.00495.x>

## Sources

- Chaucer, G. (2000). *The Canterbury tales, and other poems*. Retrieved from <https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/2383>
- CFODT – Collins free online dictionary and thesaurus (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english-thesaurus/>
- CDSA – Complete dictionary of synonyms and antonyms (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://www.synonyms.com/synonym/>
- OED – Online Etymology Dictionary (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://www.etymonline.com/word/death>
- Shakespeare, W. (1998a). *A Midsummer Night's Dream* [E-book]. Retrieved from <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/1514/1514-h/1514-h.htm>
- Shakespeare, W. (1998b). *Twelfth Night* [E-book]. Retrieved from <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/1526/1526-h/1526-h.htm>
- SOESD – Synonymy online: English synonym dictionary (n.d.). Retrieved from <http://www.synonymy.com/synonym.php?word=death&x=31&y>
- Thesaurus.com. Retrieved from: <https://www.thesaurus.com/browse/death?s=t>