The language of death and dying. A corpus study of the use of euphemisms in British and American English.
1. Abstract

This essay is a corpus based study, aimed at determining which euphemisms for death American and British English have in common as well as which might be more specific for either of these two varieties of the English language. The study also shows the frequency in use for all of the chosen euphemisms and briefly mentions when they first were used. Six euphemisms concerning death and dying were selected out of numerous available expressions: deceased, pass away, perish, demise, the departed and fade away. In addition, the word die was also included in the investigation with the purpose of determining if euphemisms are more common.

Cobuild Direct Corpus serves as the main source of the investigation and comparisons are made between the National Public Radio broadcasts and US books corpora for the American variety of the English language and the BBC World Service radio broadcasts and the UK books corpora for the British counterpart. In addition, the British English transcribed informal speech corpus was included to display the frequency in use in British spoken English.

The analysis concludes that the use of euphemisms for death is not very common, which implies that people in our day of age are not as afraid of death as what is claimed to have been the case during earlier years.

**Keywords:** Euphemisms, death, dying, British and American English, The Cobuild Direct Corpus.
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3. Introduction

There are several ways to avoid those words that are considered to be taboo. As David Crystal states in, *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of The English Language*, one way is to replace it by a more technical term, as often happens in medicine. Another way, that he claims is very common in older writing, is to leave out certain letters (*f—k, bl---y*). But the most frequent option is to use an expression which in a vague way refers to the topic that is looked upon as taboo, namely a euphemism (Crystal 2003:173). In the *Concise Oxford English Dictionary* the definition of the word euphemism is: ‘A mild or less direct word substituted for one that is harsh or blunt when referring to something unpleasant or embarrassing’ (COED 2004).

There are many different ‘classes’ of euphemisms, like for example phrases concerning sex, religion, the profane or excretion, but this essay will focus on euphemisms concerning death and dying. Numerous expressions can be found both for death itself and for the things surrounding death, such as undertakers for example. However, the reason for choosing to look deeper into this topic is a personal fascination about how we use our language, especially how we steer clear of some words since they are considered to be offensive or unpleasant as seems to be the case with euphemisms. In certain situations we avoid using terms or words which are considered insulting or distasteful without even reflecting about them, unless of course that is what we intend to be; in that case our language can indeed be very rude. Furthermore, it is considered taboo to use for example the word *death* and we are supposed to wrap it up in more sensitive phrases to avoid hurting people who are in grief or shock. Whether this comes from a fear of death and everything surrounding it, or if it is something that we are taught to do, can be debated. According to Wikipedia, the topic of death is so taboo due to fear and it has been like that for hundreds of years (www.wikipedia.com). This is probably valid when it comes to how it was before, but it is debatable if the same ideas are accurate in our day of age.

Allan and Burridge (2006:237-38) mention that the taboos in modern day English come from traditional behaviour, and due to this they are determined by factors such as age, gender, schooling and social status. Some people still believe that by using certain words you can cause harm to yourself or others, but the vast majority avoid using a taboo term not to ”lose face” by offending their interlocutors. The only exception is when the intention is to offend; then no censoring of the language occurs. They also state the following: “Participants have to consider whether what they are saying will maintain, enhance or damage their own face, as well as be considerate of, and care for, the face need of others”, which connects taboo and
euphemisms to a debated topic of the 21st century, i.e. politically correct language (Allan & Burridge 2006).

Robert Burchfield (1985:13) claims that almost all English periods have been regarded as having specific or non-aligned vocabulary along with synonyms or near synonyms of different types of generalization. He states that the synonyms which sound well often are euphemisms (Burchfield 1985:13). This statement makes it even more interesting to investigate the topic of euphemisms since they have been around for a very long time and it will be interesting to see which conclusions can be drawn at the end of this study.

Section 4 will outline the basic aim of this study more clearly.

4. Aim

By comparing and analysing the results from searches in Cobuild Direct Corpus, specifically American English books and radio corpora and British English books and radio corpora, an attempt will be made to answer the following questions.

- In which contexts are the chosen euphemisms used in British and American English?
- Which, if any, euphemisms are more specific for each of these two varieties of the English language and in which sub corpora can they be found?
- With what frequency are the different euphemistic expressions used in American and British English?

Other findings, if any, will be addressed in section 7, Analysis, and section 8, Conclusion. Section 5 will shed some light on the background of the use of euphemisms.

5. Theoretical background

The word *euphemism* comes from the Greek word *euphemos*. Its first use is said to have been in religion because people where afraid of using those words that were considered taboo. Since people did not want to behave in a way that would upset the gods, they used words which they thought would give them good fortune instead. Euphemisms have been traced back to the Indo-European languages and it seems possible that more taboo words existed
then than what is the case today. Whichever the case might be, modern English contains countless euphemisms dealing with the theme of death. It is claimed that people started using euphemisms because they believed that they would end up in trouble of some sort if they spoke about or used the word death. A theory, which apparently is quite widespread, claims that this belief is what has made death taboo in the majority of the English speaking cultures around the world. (www.wikipedia.com). Whether it is true or not that people today are afraid of death and taboos, it is not something that they would admit to openly. Even though such fear is associated with uneducated inhabitants of exotic places, some people carry good luck charms, cross their fingers or knock on wood as a way of protecting themselves (Allan & Burridge 2006:203).

Euphemisms are often applied when we want to hide something that might be considered as upsetting or distasteful; we do this even if the literal meaning is not really that disturbing. This kind of euphemism is often called doublespeak and is frequently used in for example politics. According to Gladney and Rittenberg (2005:2) the term doublespeak was invented by William Lutz who was allegedly inspired by George Orwell’s novel 1984, where he mentions “doublethink” and “newspeak”. Lutz defines doublespeak as “language that only pretends to communicate, that makes bad seem good, the negative appear positive, the unpleasant attractive, or at least tolerable. It is language that avoids, shifts or denies responsibility, language that conceals or prevents thought” (Gladney & Rittenberg 2005:2). This definition seems similar to what the poet David Lehman (1999:51) has to say about euphemisms, even though Lehman’s statements are harsher. He claims that euphemisms are nothing but white lies and illusions and that they are dangerous, both for the language and our freedom if they are allowed to take up to much space. In addition, he implies that people themselves are not to blame for their vocabulary; it is the language itself that is a “factory of lies”. He also claims that in America it is acceptable to perform bad acts and to think about bad things, though it is not tolerated to openly speak about these acts or thoughts (Gladney & Rittenberg 2005:2, Lehman 1999:51).

One might think that the euphemistic way to talk about death is somewhat peculiar and wonder why it is so taboo to use the “normal” words. Dyer (2006) explains this by claming that if we use other words than death, the healing process after loosing a loved one many times becomes more bearable. This claim might sound strange at first, but it is not hard to imagine that it might be a bit easier to handle a loss by thinking that the person has ‘found everlasting peace’. By using euphemisms like this people are able to cope better and even distance themselves from what has happened. Kearl (2006) on the other hand, states that some
scholars agree that people are denying death, and the fact that death is inevitable, by using euphemisms. But he also mentions that we have been using these terms for a very long time and sometimes we cannot avoid using euphemisms when we want to explain certain aspects of being human. The fact that death is a taboo based on fear is mentioned by Allan and Burridge (1991:153, 2006:222). People are afraid of losing loved ones and of what happens to our bodies when we die, but there is also a fear dealing with what follows after we are dead. No one or at least very few people have experienced death first hand and therefore the “afterlife” is a huge mystery which makes some of us very scared. (Dyer 2006, Kearl 2006, Allan & Burridge 1991:153, 2006:222)

The issue whether euphemisms are “good or bad” seems to have been debated back and forth over the years. Back in the 80s, Gross (1985:203) mentioned that many writers perceived it as if people found it very difficult to “look death straight in the face”; even more difficult than previous generations. Gross also claims that death had surpassed sex as the most forbidden topic. Allan and Burridge (2006:223) draw a parallel between today’s taboo on death and the way sex was inhibited during the Victorian period. The repression of sex was followed by a very successful pornographic business and the taboo concerning death today is present at the same time as we are overflowed by books and movies depicting murder and cruel death. They state that the difference is the fact that the pornography during the Victorian times where not as open as the topic of death is in the present day. Furthermore, Gross’s (1985:203) ideas are similar to those of Dyer’s (2006) when he states that there are certain situations in life where it is more suitable to use euphemisms than to speak directly about death. He mentions instances where a person is in shock and really suffering, for example a mother who has just lost a child due to an accident of some sort, and claims that it would be brutal not to act carefully and choose your words when talking to someone with an open wound (Gross 1985:203).

Gladney and Rittenberg (2005:1) claim that there is another thing that many scholars agree on, and it is the fact that when euphemisms are used in a courteous way, without harming others, it is perfectly alright. On the other hand, when people in power use euphemisms it can change how people look upon many big problems in society and cause them to stop caring. They mention how a government can use euphemisms as a way of making the public less sensitive and not reflect too much over the horrors and pain connected to for example war. This is not the best approach since in fact, it has been discovered that people who speak about accidental brutality in an uncaring way are about to accept it. (Gladney & Rittenberg 2006:1)
Allan and Burridge (1991:154, 2006:223), state that the Middle Ages is the period in history which was the most fanatical about everything concerning death. Medieval people were preoccupied with death, but they where not afraid to speak about it. This statement seems to strengthen the ideas of the writers mentioned by Gross (1985:203). In addition, several books appeared during the Middle Ages where people could read in detail about for example how they where supposed to behave by a deathbed. In manuals describing “how to die”, scenes illustrating the devil fighting with an angel over a person’s soul were present only to show people how imperative it was to live and act in a correct way. The performance of good or cleansing one’s sins could hinder someone who had sinned from ending up in hell. There was nothing euphemistic about the language and death was displayed in a horrifically literal way. Today we do not interact with death in the same way as people did back then. We live longer, fewer children die as infants and we have far better healthcare over all.

Furthermore, many of us become adults without ever having seen a corpse in real life. Allan and Burridge (2006:223) also say that people in our day can be quite irrational when it comes to the topic of death. They mention an episode where some parents strongly opposed the construction of a church wall which was supposed to hold the ashes of its deceased members. They claimed that it would be damaging for their children when they walked past there, but at the same time they admitted that they let their kids watch cruel death on TV. This behaviour displays how hard it is for some people to cope with “natural death” and it is certainly the total opposite to the situation in the Middle Ages, where every day life was surrounded by death and its symbols. Further back in time in ancient Egypt people had a tiny mummy placed on their meal table to have a constant reminder about death (Gross 1985:203, Allan & Burridge 1991:154, 2006:223).

A major difference between today and medieval times is the course of dying, not death itself. Today we learn about forthcoming death when we are examined by a doctor, whereas back then it was mainly based on a personal belief. Historians have found records which reveal that persons who without thinking about it had broken a taboo, in fact died of fear when they discovered their lethal error (Allan & Burridge 2006:5). Whereas nowadays, a normal check-up that discovers a deadly disease can in an instance alter the life for someone who came to the doctor feeling quite healthy. Furthermore, death is often a long process today, due to all the available medications, while death was almost always quite instant during the Middle Ages. The prolonged death process causes many problems both for the person concerned and the people around him/her. Medical sociologists have written about how family and friends can change a dying person’s state of mind simply because they have a hard
time coping with the facts and does not know how to behave. The typical behaviour in these instances is that people stay away and stop visiting the sick person. We are simply not equipped with sufficient knowledge about proper behaviour in situations like these since we live in a society which avoid death and dying topics. Euphemistic expressions which are too sad may come across as insincere, but anything else might be considered too positive. People’s fear of meeting a dying person has to do with the fear of their own mortality; a dying person is a reminder of the fact that we all die eventually. Additionally, some people feel that they are not worthy to continue living when someone close to them has passed on. No wonder the English language of today appears to be replete with euphemisms dealing with death (Allan & Burridge 2006:223-4).

Furthermore, Allan and Burridge (2006:222-35) claim that by getting a life insurance we insure ourselves against death; death’s antonym life is used to set a price on our lives. People prepare for death by arranging everything like for example setting aside money for their own funeral, and it is done to make it easier for those who are left behind. “If anything should happen to me” is a very relentless idiomatic euphemism; there is no question about the fact that something will happen to the person saying this. If we think about it, it is an expression we hear very often in movies which almost always leads to the person being murdered or kidnapped. Or as the writers put it “There is no ‘if’ about death: in fact, it is the one thing certain in life; the only uncertainty is when it will happen” (Allan & Burridge 1991:154). We all have the ability to end our own lives if we chose to, but we have no way of knowing when it will happen naturally, unless our doctor has given us a “death sentence”. (Allan & Burridge 2006:222-35, 1991:154).

Looking at death from the opposite direction, it can also be seen as the beginning of a new life. Euphemisms which have to do with an idea of life after death are used by both those who believe and those who do not. For the people who do not believe in life after death, the usual language is a reassurance against the fact that those who believe could be right and that our souls may go on living after our bodies have been either cremated or buried under earth (Allan & Burridge 2006:226).

The following section describes how the investigation was performed and the consulted material.
6. Material & Method

In order to determine which euphemistic expressions to use in this study the internet was searched for sites with listings of euphemisms related to death and dying. A site containing 213 examples was found (Dead & Buried: Death Euphemisms) and the following ones were chosen: *pass away, fade away, perish, deceased, demise, the departed* and in addition the word *die*. The searches on these seven phrases, including all the tenses, were performed in the Cobuild Direct Corpus which contains 56 million words from the Bank of English. To receive hits with all the tenses the author included @ and + in the search, i.e. for example: *pass@+away or perish@*. All the concordance lines for each phrase were then studied thoroughly to distinguish if they had anything to do with the theme of death. The ones which matched this criterion were then singled out, counted and added to a table. The National Public Radio broadcasts and US books corpora were used for investigating American English and the BBC World Service radio broadcasts and the UK books corpora were used for British English. Additionally, given that there might be some difference between the use in the chosen corpora and everyday speech, it was decided to also perform a search in the British English transcribed informal speech corpus. However, since there is no equivalent corpus when it comes to spoken American English in the Cobuild Direct Corpus, no comparison could be made between the spoken varieties, only within British English.

In some of the examples of the concordance lines included in Section 7, the meaning of the euphemistic expressions becomes metaphorical or figurative; however, this will not be discussed extensively in this study study. The different meanings will only be mentioned briefly to show what an impact the choice of words can have in certain contexts.

As stated in the introduction, the aim of this study is to distinguish which, if any, euphemisms British English and American English have in common and which may be more specific, and with which frequency they are used. Moreover, by looking in the *Oxford English dictionary*, it will be determined approximately when the selected euphemisms first were used.

It is important to mention that the original purpose of this study was to investigate ten of the more idiomatic euphemisms. The following ones were chosen: *kick the bucket, freeing the spirit, go to meet one’s maker, in the sweet hereafter, launched into eternity, meet the reaper, pass over Jordan, pushing up daisies, singing with the angels and turn up one’s toes*. At first, a search for these expressions on Google was performed, which gave all of them plenty of hits. However, when it came to the next step which was to search for these phrases in Cobuild
Direct Corpus, the attempt failed since it produced zero hits. The only conclusions that can be drawn from the Google search is the fact that *pass over Jordan* seems to be mostly used in religious areas (it is present in the Bible and in Jehovah’s witnesses scriptures) and *singing with the angels* is a phrase used in many song lyrics.

The following section displays the analysis of each of the chosen euphemisms.

7. Analysis

7.1 *Die* and euphemisms associated with it

The corpora used in this investigation are of different sizes which makes it somewhat difficult to make an exact determination concerning whether one phrase is more common in one variety of the English language or the other, just by looking at the figures. Therefore, a calculation was done by dividing the number of hits with the total number of words in the corpora where it was possible. This calculation then served as the basis for the comparison between American English and British English. Cobuild Direct Corpus as a whole contains 56 million words from the Bank of English and the number of words in each corpus is shown in both Tables 1 and 2 below their names. Additionally, the Cobuild Direct Corpus is not quite up to date in the sense that it does not entail examples from the most recent years.

To receive the results in Table 1, a closer study of the concordance lines was performed and the ones having to do with death was singled out and counted in all corpora except for the word *die*, where no separation seemed to be necessary. The word *die* was included in the study simply for the purpose of finding out if euphemisms really are as common as many people claim.

In Table 2, the results from the search in each of the different corpora, i.e. the number of hits, has been divided with the number of words each corpus entails. In other words, the figures shown are the number of hits per 1 million words. It is worth mentioning that since some of the figures are very low, it is tricky or even impossible, to draw any final conclusions about whether one phrase is more common in one variety of the English language or the other.
Table 1: Frequency of words denoting death or dying.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Phrase</th>
<th>Npr</th>
<th>BBC</th>
<th>US books</th>
<th>UK books</th>
<th>UK spoken</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Die</td>
<td>925</td>
<td>777</td>
<td>1900</td>
<td>1437</td>
<td>1220</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deceased</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pass away</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perish</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Demise</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The departed</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fade away</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Table 2: Frequency of words denoting death or dying per 1 million words.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Phrase</th>
<th>Npr</th>
<th>BBC</th>
<th>US books</th>
<th>UK books</th>
<th>UK spoken</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Die</td>
<td>298</td>
<td>298</td>
<td>339</td>
<td>271</td>
<td>131</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deceased</td>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>0.4</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>6.9</td>
<td>0.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pass away</td>
<td>2.6</td>
<td>0.8</td>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>0.9</td>
<td>1.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perish</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Demise</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>0.8</td>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>0.4</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The departed</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.8</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>0.4</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fade away</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.2</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


When it comes to the results displayed in Tables 1 and 2, the intuitive reading is that the use of euphemisms for death and dying is not all that common after all. Furthermore, the frequent use of the word *die* inevitably leads to the conclusion that people might not be as afraid of death as many scholars and also other people claim. Also, a euphemistic expression like for example *fade away* seems to be used very seldom.

7.1.1 Die

The word *die* has been in use since the 1100s and is used for all forms of death. The *Oxford English Dictionary* (henceforth OED) gives the examples of “to die in battle”, “to die at the stakes”, “to die at the hands of justice” (OED). In addition, *die* is used to describe how for example a conversation or laughter stops, as in ‘the conversation died out’. These kinds of metaphorical or figurative meanings will however not be counted in this study.

According to these figures, the use of the word *die* greatly outnumbers all of the chosen euphemisms in this study, as mentioned earlier. It is equally common in American radio (298...
tokens/1 million words) as in British radio (298 tokens/1 million words), but when it comes to books it is more common in America (339 tokens/1 million words) than in Britain (271 tokens/1 million words). It would have been interesting to compare UK spoken with an equivalent American corpus, but since no such corpus is available it is not possible. However, to make some comparison we can see that *die* is more common in British books (271 tokens/1 million words) than in the spoken variant of British English (131 tokens/1 million words).

Furthermore, *die* is used when describing death concerning humans and animals as well as things, and we can see two different areas of use in (1) and (2). It is quite interesting to see that the word *die* is used when referring to a boat which has sunk as in (2). However, using *die* in a metaphorical or figurative sense certainly makes the event sound even more dramatic than it actually is. Example (3) would not have been interpreted in the same way if *died* had been replaced by for example *passed away* since it takes place in a war battle and is supposed to be depicted as horrible as it really is. *Passed away* would have made the death almost seem pleasant which it most certainly was not. Additionally, the same thing would have happened with a replacement of *die* in example (4), since dying at only thirty-three years old is not very common and might be related to an accident or a lethal decease.

1. The study shows that middle aged men who gain 15 percent in weight over five years triple their chances of *dying* from heart disease. (BBC)
2. A great battleship had been bombed and turned over to *die* on its back in less than eight minutes. (Npr)
3. Dar threw an arm around him just as he *died*, crumpling forward onto the grass. (UK books)
4. She would *die* in Rome at barely thirty-three years old. (US books)

7.1.2 Deceased

According to the OED, *deceased* has been used for describing death since as far back as the late 1400s. The literal meaning would be ‘someone who has departed this life’ (OED).

Upon investigating the results in Table 2, *deceased* is an expression mainly used in books in both varieties of the English language. It is twice as common in UK books (6.9 tokens/1 million words) than in US books (3.3 tokens/1 million words), while it seems to be
about eight times as common in Npr (3.2 tokens/1 million words) as in BBC (0.4 tokens/1 million words).

Furthermore, the main part of the concordance lines in the books corpora appears to be taken from detective novels, police reports or books about how a certain criminal case was solved. For instance, example (5) gives the impression of a press conference or an interview with the police after the arrest of a suspected murderer. Example (6) can be interpreted as an interrogation of a suspect whereas in example (7) deceased only stands for a relative who is dead.

When it comes to the use of the word deceased in radio broadcasts it occurs in news reports, when informing the public about a committed crime where someone was killed, and in different kinds of retrospect programs. An example of the use in retrospect would be example (8).

(5) We made the arrest, Ailey continued, based on a phone call the deceased is alleged to have made to the accused shortly before she was killed. (UK books)
(6) When did you last see the deceased Mr Pittman? At the office party? (UK books)
(7) During the initial evaluation, Mary revealed that she was experiencing vivid dreams of meeting her deceased father. (US books)
(8) All of the show’s stars are now deceased. (Npr)

7.1.3 Pass away

Pass away is a phrase which has been in use at least since the 1300s (OED) and it is not only applied for death. Another use is to say that something will end and go away, like for example “we hope that this trouble will eventually pass away”. In this sense, the literal meaning is nonetheless basically the same as it is for death. Similar to the word deceased, the number of hits in each corpus are a bit too low to use as a proper comparison, but we can state that pass away is almost twice as frequent in US books (2.0 tokens/1 million words) than in UK spoken (1.2 tokens/1 million words). Furthermore, even if the figures are so low, it seems to be used more frequently in American English than in British English over all.

Gross (1985: 205) mentions that this phrase was the most popular one in the 80s. However, both Table 1 and 2 shows that pass away is not used very frequently, which might indicate that there has been a change since then. One reading of example (9) is that a person’s fear of the forthcoming death of a loved one can make it difficult to make decisions in your
own life, which supports the idea that we do not quite know how to behave in these situations as mentioned by Allan and Burridge (Allan & Burridge 2006:223-4). Furthermore, the majority of the concordance lines found are those where someone talks about a loved one who died, as in (11) and (12), which may suggest that there is a difference in the choice of words, between die and pass away, depending on whether the dead person is known or unknown.

The indication towards the difference in use between died and passed away might depend on whether the person is known or unknown led the author to ask an English friend living in Britain. His response was that there in fact is a difference; people tend to use ‘he/she died’ for an unknown person and ‘he/she passed away’ when talking about someone they know. In addition, he claimed that this approach is common throughout Britain. However, it is probably different depending on where one lives and which social class one belongs to, just as Allan and Burridge mention (2006:237-38). Nevertheless, we can compare the alleged difference between these two phrases with the Swedish equivalent dog (died) and gick bort (passed away). This is quite interesting since, from personal experience, it seems as if many Swedes act in the same way and use gick bort for a close friend or a relative and dog for someone whom they are not close to.

Furthermore, the concordance lines for pass away found in the Npr and US books corpora gives the impression that the alleged difference in use in British English might be common in American English also. Sentences (9) and (11) are both examples of a person talking about a close relative who died. In example (10), passed away refers to a person who is known by the speaker.

(9) Ken’s decision was exacerbated by the fear that his dad would soon pass away due to failing health. (US books)

(10) Ray Johnson’s widow, Betty, is in church today as she has been every weekend since her husband passed away. (Npr)

(11) He’s been coming to the fair since he was six years old, and he tells me again about how much he loved looking at farm machinery with his father, who grew up at a farm and passed away in 1985. (Npr)

(12) Mother gave up early, passed away when I was two. (UK books)
7.1.4 Perish

*Perish* is an old expression for death which has been traced back as far as the latter part of the 1000s in the Anglo-Norman and French languages. It can be used for death concerning humans, animals, things and even plants, and according to the OED the literal meaning is “to suffer a violent, sudden or untimely death, to die, to be killed” (OED).

Like many of the other phrases used in this study, *perish* does not seem to be a very common euphemism. Nevertheless, it is slightly more frequent in UK books (3.3 tokens/1 million words) than in US books (2.3 tokens/1 million words). In addition it seems to be used more often in British radio (2.3 tokens/1 million words) than in American radio (0.3 tokens/1 million words). It would have been interesting to see if it is just as uncommon in spoken American English as it evidently is in spoken British English, but, as mentioned earlier, that comparison is not possible to make in this study.

The word *perish* is also used when saying that something is too horrible to even think about, as in ‘perish the thought’. This would be equal to say that you hope that it will never happen. In addition, *perish* seems to be used when something has caused many animals to die, as shown in examples (15) and (16). However, the majority of the concordance lines found are, like examples (13) and (14), related to people dying in war and other horrible situations. Also, as can be noticed in all of the examples, *perish* is mainly used when referring to several, or even countless, people or animals.

(13) The flames, they said, represented relatives who *perished* at the hands of the military. (Npr)

(14) Paul spoke in the name of the millions who had *perished* in the wars of the twentieth century, of those who painfully survived and of today’s young people who legitimately dream of a better human race. (UK books)

(15) The state’s Agriculture Minister said an estimated two-hundred-thousand sheep had *perished*. (BBC)

(16) The idea that the dinosaurs *perished* in the holocaust that followed the biggest impact of them all feels right because it fits so neatly into the nightmares that project our own demise. (US books)
7.1.5 *Demise*

*Demise* is not as old as some of the other expressions mentioned in this study. It has been around since the 1500s, but in the sense of death it has only been in use since the latter part of the 1700s. One area of use is in law where it denotes the “conveyance of an estate by will or lease”. According to the OED, *demise* in the sense of death is a quite rare expression (OED), but it is evidently used in some contexts since a few concordance lines referring to death were found.

The word *demise* can also stand for the end of an era for example or the extinction of a whole species of animals; this would be similar to the word *perish*. A perfect example of this sense of *demise* is example (17). It seems to be very sparsely used in the sense of death and dying in both varieties of the English language; nevertheless it does exist and some of the concordance lines concern this matter. In examples (19) and (20) two readings of the meaning of the word *demise* would be that it is used when a death is surrounded by mystery or when it is sudden and not at all expected. Furthermore, *demise* is used both when referring to several people/animals, as in example (17), as well as when talking about single ones as in examples (18), (19) and (20).

(17) The *demise* of the dinosaurs has been a source of entertaining arguments for more than 150 years. (UK books)
(18) Leaning on his elbows, the teary-eyed boy mumbled about his father’s *demise*, “he didn’t even try to fight, he just gave up he didn’t try”. (US books)
(19) In the Baltimore Pub on the Kingston waterfront, the talk of warm beer amid plumes of marijuana smoke centers around Jim Brown’s mysterious *demise* and the violent death of other gang leaders over the years. (Npr)
(20) While the death of his father was anticipated, the *demise* of his mother came like a bolt out of the blue. (UK books)

7.1.6 *The departed*

*Departed* has been in use since the beginning of the 1400s and at first it denoted something that was separated into smaller parts. According to the OED it is often used together with *dear*, as in “the dear departed” although it was originally used with the word “soul”, i.e. “the departed soul” (OED). However, when attempting to search for this phrase in the different
corpora, no hits were obtained. It might also be worth mentioning that the concordance lines found for *departed*, without the definite article, most often describes an aeroplane leaving the airport for its destination and thus has no connection to death. This finding would mean that *departed* is more frequently used as a verb (to depart) than as a noun.

Upon looking at the concordance lines for *the departed*, one can notice that it sometimes can be interpreted as either singular or plural, as in (21) and (23), whereas, in (22) and (24), it can only be interpreted as singular. Nevertheless, it is an expression used very sparsely in both of the varieties of the English language and apart from the hits in the BBC corpus it is mainly used in books.

(21) We held services for *the departed* at our church last Thursday. (US books)
(22) Slogans also accused the Governor of the state for the murder of *the departed* leader. (BBC)
(23) Courts can, and often do, override the wishes of *the departed* in the interests of the living. (UK books)
(24) As soon as the Fatiha, or the prayer for *the departed* soul was over, the crowds at the massive prayer ground, a portion of which has now been turned into a martyr’s graveyard, erupted with chants of “we want freedom”. (BBC)

7.1.7 *Fade away*

*Fade away* has been around since at least the last part of the 1500s and besides the meaning of death, it can be used to express how something is forgotten and disappears into oblivion. It can also be applied when we talk about sounds and how they ebb out until no longer distinguishable; like an echo which is loud at first and then slowly *fades away*. Furthermore, it is also used when talking about plants: how they become less fresh and wither away. Apart from these interpretations *fade away* would literally mean that someone is incurably sick, or very old, and slowly becomes weaker until he/she eventually dies (OED.

Moreover, the phrase is evidently very rare, since only one concordance line with reference to death was found. This result is somewhat interesting, since *fade away* is listed as one of the more common euphemisms in the listing used for this essay. The fact that it was found in the British variety of the English language is probably just a coincidence and cannot be used to draw any major conclusions.
There had always been something special between us and having to watch him fade away was particularly upsetting. (UK books)

In Section 8, the results related to the aim of this study and other findings are discussed further and more thoroughly.

8. Conclusion

The aim of this study was to determine which, if any, of the euphemisms for death American and British English have in common, which one of these might be more specific and roughly when they were used first. Additionally, an investigation of the frequency in use of the chosen euphemisms has been performed. All of these issues will be discussed in this conclusion, as well as any other findings. Though, I would first like to point out some obstacles I came across during the initial stages of the investigation.

First of all, it is necessary to mention that the vast majority of euphemisms related to death we can find in numerous dictionaries and other listings are not as common as one might think. As mentioned in section 4, the idiomatic euphemisms for death are not to be found in either of the different corpora chosen for this investigation and one might wonder why these expressions even exist if they are not used? In fact, they must be used somewhere or they would not be available. By the hits from the search on Google we can learn that some of them can be heard in movies and others can be found in song lyrics. Another possible answer might be that they are the kind of expressions which are used by smaller groups of people in a community.

Reflecting upon what has been discovered in this study, it seems as if euphemisms for death might not be that frequent after all. There are numerous expressions available, but according to the data found they are nevertheless not very common. Maybe this indicates that people in the 20th century are not as afraid of death and the things surrounding it as people are claimed to have been earlier as mentioned by Allan & Burridge (2006:237-38). Of course, we are probably all afraid of death to some extent, but maybe not so much of the process of dying as of what comes after. We will all pass away eventually, but no one really knows what happens after we are gone.

However, it is evident from the results that die is used far more frequently than any of the euphemisms listed in this study. In addition, of the chosen euphemisms deceased is the
one which seems to be used more often than any of the others. Here it would certainly have been interesting to see if it is more common in American spoken English than it evidently is in the British counterpart, simply since the figures are so low in UK spoken. But that is unfortunately not possible due to the lack of an equivalent American subcorpus in the Cobuild Direct Corpus. Additionally, *pass away* does not seem to be nearly as frequent as it is claimed to have been during the 80s (Gross, 1985: 205) and that might indicate, as mentioned before in this study, that there has been a change since then. If another euphemistic expression has become more popular in use today, it would be the word *deceased*, at least according to the frequency figures found; otherwise it is safe to say that *die* undoubtedly is the most established term nowadays in both American and British English.

When it comes to the other euphemisms mentioned in this study, none of them seems to be more specific for one of the two varieties of the English language. It also appears as if American English and British English speakers use them all approximately to the same extent. One surprising discovery, however, is the low figures for *fade away*, since the author believed that it was quite common. The answer may be that it is used more frequently in other areas today, whereas it was used more often as a euphemism for death at an earlier point in time. Moreover, according to the information available in OED, *perish* is the euphemism which is the oldest and which has also survived the longest. It was found that it actually can be heard in news reports for example on CNN and in documentaries on the Discovery Channel on an almost daily basis.

Since the Cobuild Direct Corpus is not quite up to date, another investigation concerning the use of euphemisms could be to interview American English and British English speakers of different social classes and ask them which euphemisms they personally use, in which contexts and why they use them. Additionally, it would be interesting to perform such an investigation in other English speaking countries also. This way it might be possible to determine whether the alleged fear of death still exists and it would help to establish for certain which euphemisms are used most frequently and thus which are more popular.
9. References


*Cobuild Direct Corpus*


**Internet sources**


Dyer, Kirsty A. 2006. *Death and dying*  

