

## METAPHORS OF MEDIATION IN SLOVENE EPITAPHS

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The epitaph (in the meaning of 'a statement in verse'<sup>1</sup>) is still an important part of Slovene popular culture and the tradition to put up epitaphs in cemeteries in Slovenia continues in the 1980s. This paper is based on hundreds of epitaphs collected in some 98 cemeteries in Slovenia in 1983. The metaphoric language, including metaphors of mediation, is an important component of many epitaphs and it is the purpose of this paper to show how such language may provide a possible clue to the human condition and how an analysis such as this may render the human situation more intelligible.

D. Deshler suggests that metaphoric use is "the stuff with which we make sense of our world"<sup>2</sup> and G. Lakoff and M. Johnson characterize the "essence of metaphor" as "understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another."<sup>3</sup> And, as far as linguistic pursuits go, J.M. Sadock says that "the most important property of metaphor [is] its nonliteralness."<sup>4</sup> Epitaphs and tombstone inscriptions in general may also be viewed as being (if I may borrow and apply a phrase from J. Fernandez) "at the center of the human condition"<sup>5</sup> because of the very fact that they refer to dying, and dying as we know is a transition from life to death, from culture to nature, that is, a cultural (and physical) being becomes a mere natural object. Death is thus the opposite of life. This opposition or contradiction, inherent in our mortality, cannot be resolved or overcome, for the dead do not return.<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, this opposition between life and death may be mediated so that in the end death might be overcome, that is, it might be coped with more easily since after all as one person (1940-1973) put it, *Nisem živel, da bi umrl* (TV)<sup>7</sup> 'I did not live in order to die.' This is done by metaphors of mediation.<sup>8</sup>

Our discussion of metaphors of mediation will concentrate on two major aspects of this kind of symbolic activity in our epitaphs, namely, the use of nature or natural phenomena and, in turn, the use of place references (the case or orientational-spatial metaphoric formula, HAPPY is UP; SAD is DOWN). In the death-and-nature category, the following components of 'nature' appear to be especially common: flowers, gardens, valley, mountains, and stars. Our first text or epitaph, i.e. a statement in verse, contains three such examples of metaphor:

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| (1) | <i>Sem cvetela kakor rožica<br/>za božji vrt usojena.<br/>V dolini solz ni bil moj dom,<br/>saj v nebesih večno vesela bom.</i> (PT) | 'I blossomed like a little flower,<br>destined for God's garden.<br>My home was not in the vale of tears,<br>but I will be eternally happy in heaven.' |
|-----|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|

First, the speaker (a child) identifies herself as a little flower which has blossomed. Second, that flower, i.e. the speaker, has been destined for 'God's garden,' i.e., heaven. Third, the speaker says that her real home was not in the 'vale of tears', i.e., in the world of mankind or on earth, but rather in heaven.

The three examples of metaphors mentioned above and many others as well are often parts of literary structural-semantic formulas. For example, the following text has a number of variants all referring to young female children identified as *cvetka* 'flower.'

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| (2) | <i>Cvetke smrt ni zamorila,<br/>cvetje njeno še duhti,<br/>je le v raj se preselila,<br/>ker na svetu varna ni.</i> (MA) | 'Death did not destroy the flower,<br>its blossoms still smell sweet;<br>it [the flower] merely moved to paradise,<br>because it isn't safe (for it) in the world.' |
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One particular variant is especially interesting, because in that particular tombstone inscription, *Cvetka* is also the child's name:

- (3) *Cvetke smrt ni zamorila* 'Death did not destroy Cvetka [or, the flower],  
*Cvetje njeno še dihti* (and) its [or, her] blossoms still smell sweet.  
*Cvetka v raj se preselila* Cvetka [or, the flower] moved to paradise,  
*ker na svetu varna ni.* (MA) because it isn't safe<sup>9</sup> in the world.

While death in the flower-metaphor variants may be viewed as a negative phenomenon, it is nevertheless presented as being ineffective, unable to destroy a life. In fact, it might even be thought of as a positive phenomenon since it was through its 'mediation' that the little flower was able to move to heaven. This positive nature of death is at times made quite explicit as, for example, in a text by Pavel Grošelj (biologist and a man of letters, 1883-1940), his own epitaph (an eight-line stanza), in which the author identifies death as *cvetna hčerka prirode* 'the flowery daughter of nature' which one should 'greet joyfully' for 'death is life, it is love' (*smrt je življenje, je ljubezen*) (LJ).

'Garden' and 'gardener' are also the mediating metaphors in several texts and death again does not have to be feared even if it comes prematurely. The following text (a variant of a formula) tells us in effect that there is no death, that is, that death is merely a transition from one kind of life to another:

- (4) *Nič ne jokajte za nami,* 'Do not weep for us at all,  
*da je zgodaj prišla smrt.* (because of the fact) that death came early.  
*Vrtnar božji svoje cvetke* The Divine Gardener has merely  
*presadil je le v svoj vrt.* (GR) transplanted his flowers onto his garden.'

It tells us that death is just a transition period during which 'God the Gardener'—also called *rajski vrtnar* 'the Paradise Gardener' (in IB)—merely transplants his (favorite) flowers into his garden. Such a text may carry even more structural-semantic weight, because it is given from the vantage point of the dead who apparently know where they are located. (Our sample contains about 450 epitaphs, two-line and multi-line stanzas, from some 70 cemeteries, which are given as if addressed by the dead to the living.) In another text, God has transplanted someone into a 'little garden without troubles [or, hardships]' (*vrtič brez nadlog*) (CE). There are also two older variant texts in which this 'garden' is identified as 'Morana's garden,' e.g.:

- (5) *Tu sred poljane, vrt Morane* 'Here in the middle of a (large) plain,  
*predrage naše Ivanke* Morana's garden covers the corpse of our  
*truplo krije—* dearest Ivanka.  
*življenja muke so prestane* The torments of life are gone  
*in lepše solnce zdaj nji sije.* (GR) and a more beautiful sun shines for her now.'

This text is from 1927. Another variant is found in KR. *Morana* is an old Slavic goddess of winter and death.<sup>10</sup>

The 'vale/valley of tears' (see (1))—*dolina solz* or *solzna dolina*—is also called the 'valley of sadness' or 'sad valley' (*žalostna dolina*), e.g. (6) (variant of a formula): *Prehitro in tiho odšli ste od nas. / V žalostni dolini zapustili ste nas.* (LA) 'You went away from us quietly and too soon. / You left us in the valley of sadness.' The lexeme *dolina* (or semantically equivalent lexemes) plays an important part in the symbolic activity in our epitaphs, because it is often used as one of the basic components in the orientational-spatial metaphoric formula, HAPPY is UP; SAD is DOWN.<sup>11</sup> The following text is a fine example of this traditional metaphor, because it makes explicit all four basic components of this formula, (7): *Zbogom solzna dolina trpljenja / Bog daj da bi bila nebeška višina veselja.* (BR) 'Good-bye, (oh) valley of suffering and tears. / May (God give that) there (would)

be a heavenly height of joy.’ First, its spatial components are clearly specified, namely, *višina* is UP and *dolina* is DOWN. Such components are universal because they have a basis in our physical experience. That is, the polar opposition or up-down spatialization is universal and can play a role in any metaphorical concept if so desired. Second, the orientational components are given both implicitly (*solzna dolina*, *nebeška višina*) and explicitly (*dolina trpljenja*, *višina veselja*). That is, while ‘a tear’ may not necessarily imply sadness (there are also ‘tears of joy’) it does imply sadness here in this context. On the other hand, while *nebeški* is neutral as a spatial component, it is ‘happy’ as an orientational component both implicitly and perhaps explicitly as well. The second set of components is of course quite explicit in its meaning, namely, *dolina trpljenja* is a negative concept and *višina veselja* a positive one.

It follows from the above that the spatial components of this metaphoric formula (the up-down spatialization) are universal while the orientation components (happy-sad), based on them, are culture-bound. That is, in Slovene and in many other (especially Western) cultures as well, UP is HAPPY and DOWN is SAD. Or, we might also say that GOOD is UP and BAD is DOWN. This discussion also tells us that spatialization metaphors are (as pointed out by Lakoff and Johnson) “rooted in physical and and cultural experience; they are not randomly assigned.”<sup>12</sup>

The orientational-spatial metaphoric formula discussed above is not made explicit in every (pertinent) text. Very often only one of the two sets is made explicit, i.e. either SAD is DOWN or HAPPY is UP. However, in the case of the religious texts, one set implies the other, e.g. (8): *Veliko trpljenja je bilo, / sedaj nad zvezdami bo lepo.* (MA) ‘There was much suffering, / (and) now it’ll be nice above the stars.’ The lexeme *trpljenje* implies of course *ta svet* ‘this world’ (also used at times) while the construct *nad zvezdami* ‘above the stars’ (in our epitaphs) is a very popular epithet for ‘heaven,’ e.g. (9): *Sveti križ nam govori / o svidenju nad zvezdami.* (TŽ) ‘The Holy Cross speaks to us / about meeting above the stars.’ However, at times it may be difficult to ascertain whether the text does imply a religious connotation, e.g. (10): *Ni luči, sreče / dom ta zemška ječa.* (VL) ‘There is no light, no happiness (here), / this earthly prison is (our) home.’ One could reason that *zemška ječa* refers to the grave where certainly there is no light and no happiness. However, the very fact that it is a ‘prison’ implies a hope for a possible or eventual release from that prison.

We can see from the above that our orientational-spatial metaphoric formula clearly identifies the earth or the world of mankind as being *negative* (SAD is DOWN or DOWN is BAD) and anything above or beyond as being *positive* (HAPPY is UP or UP is GOOD). Such a formula essentially identifies the religious texts. The spatialization metaphor thus mediates between life and death by bringing to mind this idea or concept that happiness does or can exist only extraterrestrially.<sup>13</sup> However, many texts refer to the earth or this world with no explicit or even implicit religious reference. In such a case when death strikes, the earth or nature may be viewed as a positive place or concept, something that unites rather than separates, e.g. (11): *Kruta smrt nas je ločila / vsemogočna narava / nas bo združila.* (KP) ‘Cruel death has separated us, / (but) the almighty nature will unite us.’ Although *smrt* is often viewed negatively, it is also viewed positively (as mentioned above), especially in a few very productive formulas, e.g. (12): *Življenje je muka in trpljenje— / smrt pa odrešenje.* (MA) ‘Life is torment and suffering, / and death is salvation.’ Its shortest possible variant (with dozens of occurrences) is a four-word rhymed construct, (13): *Življenje trpljenje / smrt odrešenje.* (MA) ‘Life (is) suffering, / death (is) salvation.’

A positive view of death as well as the earth (the grave), but not life on earth, is expressed in a structural-semantic formula with several variants, all in one cemetery (in TV). This formula may also be the only example of (mild) humor, e.g.

- (14) *Kar življenje ni vam dalo*  
*dala vam je smrt*  
*tu imate hišico in vrt.* (TV) 'What life did not give you,  
death did give you,  
you have here (both) a little house and a garden.'

There are also a couple of variants presented as if addressed by the dead to the living, e.g. (15): *Kar mi dalo ni življenje / dala mi je smrt, / sedaj imam hišico in vrt.* (TV) 'What life did not give me, / death did give me. / I now have (both) a little house and a garden.' If we view these texts from the point of view of our orientational-spatial metaphoric formula, we see that it applies in reverse, namely, life above, on earth, is negative (SAD or BAD is UP) while life below, in the grave, is positive (HAPPY or GOOD is DOWN), that is, life in the world of the dead is more profitable than life in the world of the living.

K.M. Campbell says that the cemetery is "the most heavily laden symbol that any civilization creates for itself."<sup>14</sup> Tombstone inscriptions are certainly an important part of that symbol. However, it is their possible metaphoric language which may provide even greater insight or further clues as to the human spiritual condition. In particular, it is the metaphors of mediation which may render at least some aspects of the human situation more intelligible. We have seen that such metaphors (as any metaphors) have both formal and semantic aspects, or simply, form and meaning (or, content). The two are of course inseparable, but let us look at them separately for greater facilitation of our discussion.

The formal side of our metaphors of mediation shows us first of all certain linguistic clues, lexemes as well as literary formulas. The lexemes are essentially those that refer to or are connected with nature or natural phenomena, only a few examples of which have been mentioned here. (We could have added references to, for example, mountains and rivers and storms and seeds.) Such examples identify of course the Slovene landscape, i.e. flowers and gardens, mountains and valleys, rivers and storms. By making use of such lexemes, literary formulas make metaphors more easily understandable. Such lexemes, in turn, make any literary formula more easily intelligible as well. Second, these lexemes and formulas also reflect an almost obligatory formal poetic side of our texts, that is, most writers take great pains to put in at least some rhyme (and, to a lesser extent, metrical) scheme in these texts. A plain prose text would simply not do, it would not be perhaps even proper or appropriate for an occasion such as this. Such tradition of formal poetic structures is firmly rooted in the Slovene popular literary culture.

Third, such formulas are more than stereotypic phrases or sentences. They are part and parcel of popular culture and their value goes beyond the immediate use or expression of human non-material needs (in our case, the need or desire to express thoughts and feelings concerning the living and the dead). T.M. Leitch says that "the value of studying literary formulas is that they show how the human mind uses given categories of perception and abstraction to make sense of its world."<sup>15</sup> And this brings us to the semantic side of our metaphors, namely, how such metaphors render at least some aspects of the human situation more intelligible or rather how humans try to cope with their life-and-death predicament, how they 'handle' death.

Perhaps the basic intent of the message in metaphors of mediation is the desire to alleviate this harsh opposition between life and death, to somehow neutralize it or at least make it easier to comprehend and thus overcome it, that is, to cope with it more easily. There appear to be several levels of metaphors of mediation in this coping or grief-handling process. The most common way of avoiding the reality of death is by the use of the

orientational-spatial metaphoric formula, HAPPY IS UP; SAD IS DOWN, which includes several major lexicosemantic elements, e.g. death, flower, garden, gardener, valley, height(s), earth, mountains, and stars. This formula essentially identifies religious texts whether explicitly (1-4, 7) or implicitly (5, 8, 9). Perhaps the basic message or intent of this formula is summarized in the following text, (16): *Skozi dolino solzno to, / k Bogu vsi potujemo* (MS) 'We all journey to God / through this vale of tears.'

In nonreligious or secular texts, death may also play a positive role by at least ending the suffering experienced in life (12, 13) and it may even be more 'profitable' than life (14, 15). While the 'earth' may be more often than not a negative place, especially in religious texts, it may be a positively mediating metaphor as well if it is the native (Slovene) land, e.g. (17): *Najlepše sonce njemu sije, / ker ga slovenska zemlja krije* (KR) 'The nicest [or, most beautiful] sun shines for him. / because the Slovene land [soil] is covering him.' Or, (18): *Kruta smrt v Munchnu te zadela, / v zemlji domači, zdaj v miru počij.* (TV) 'Cruel death struck you (down) in Munich. / Rest in peace in (your) native land now.' In other words, you can get true peace and rest only in your *native* land.

We have seen that death (*smrt*) plays a two-sided role. First, it is the major culprit, the enemy, depriving a person of their life and, second, it is also a mediating agent serving as a kind of stepping-stone to heaven, or at least to a peaceful rest. There are, however, other mediating agents used in place of death, the most popular of which perhaps is *usoda* 'fate; lot.' Our sample contains some 150 occurrences of *usoda* ((1) uses the construct *usojen za* 'fated, destined for'), e.g.

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| (19) <i>Ah usoda ti nemila,<br/>kaj vendar nam si ti storila,<br/>utrgala si ljubi cvet,<br/>ki ga nam ne more dati svet.</i> (SG) | 'Oh, you unkind [or, cruel] fate,<br>what have you done to us!?<br>You have plucked (our) dear(est) flower<br>which the world cannot give us.' |
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'Flower' is one of our fairly productive nature-connected mediating agents and it may be 'plucked' not only by *smrt*, but also by a number of other 'agents' as well, especially *usoda* as we can see from the text above. The lexeme *usoda* often has negative adjectival attributes, the most common being *nemila* 'unkind, cruel' (see (19) and *kruta* 'cruel,' e.g. (20): *Kruta usoda te nama / mnogo prezgodaj / je vzela ljubo / najdražjo mamico* (KP) 'Cruel fate took you, our dearest beloved mommy, much too soon.' Thus *usoda* continues to be an important part of the contemporary Slovene psyche, be it a simple *usoda*<sup>16</sup> or a *kruta usoda* 'cruel fate' or *sovražna usoda* 'hostile fate'<sup>17</sup> or *usoda je hotela*. . . 'fate had wanted';<sup>18</sup> or, according to J. Vidmar, 'there is [no] smaller nation in Europe whose fate (*usoda*) it is [or, for whom fate has decided] to live in four republics.'<sup>19</sup> And S. Hribar speaks of 'a tragedy of a small nation which had become in its struggle for its existence [or, survival] at the same time both its own executioner and punisher due to an incomprehensible human fate (*po nedoumljivi človeški usodi*).'<sup>20</sup>

This discussion has brought to our attention several dimensions of metaphors of mediation concerning life and death and bereavement. The most common mediating agent is the orientational-spatial metaphoric formula which apparently helps many individuals to cope with death more easily by viewing the earth, life on earth, as negative (SAD or BAD is DOWN) and heaven as positive (HAPPY or GOOD is UP). Such a view is found in many of our religious texts and is further relied upon or supported by the assumption of automatic deathlessness which, in turn, is reinforced by the body-soul distinction in Greek (Platonic) philosophy and religion. Some secular texts, on the other hand, view death and the grave as being positive (see 12-15). Such a view reflects to some extent, for example, the integrity-keeper Job who wanted his suffering to end by dying, that is, by being concealed

in Sheol or Hades (i.e. the common grave of mankind) (see Job 14:13). Further distinction is also made as to where that grave is located, that is, it is better for a person to be buried in one's native (Slovene) land than in a foreign land (17, 18).

We have thus basically two different views of death. First, death may be primarily a mere stepping-stone to heaven, the idea being fostered by the orientational-spatial metaphoric formula and by the idea of automatic deathlessness. Second, death may be primarily a form of release from suffering, a more Biblical view of death. In either case the 'natural' components of the (Slovene) landscape are often used as mediating agents in the attempt to alleviate the reality of death, that is, the harsh opposition between life and death. Thus flowers, gardens, valleys and mountains as well as the stars above are some of the basic ingredients of these metaphors of mediation by means of which many individuals try to cope with the reality of death more creatively. Finally, fate (*usoda*), the belief in an inevitable and often adverse outcome, is also an important part of Slovene popular culture and it continues to be a mediating agent as well (see 19, 20).

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## REFERENCES

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2. D. Deshler, "Metaphors and Values in Higher Education," *Academe: Bulletin of the American Association of University Professors* (November-December, 1985) 22-8; see 22.
3. G. Lakoff and M. Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago, 1980) 5.
4. J.M. Sadock, "Figurative Speech in Linguistics," *Metaphor and Thought*, A. Ortony, ed. (Cambridge, 1979) 46-63; see 47.
5. See J.W. Fernandez, "Afterword: At the Center of Human Condition," *Semiotica* 46 (1983) 323-30; see 323.
6. The idea of living again after death, i.e. implying a kind of automatic deathlessness (in whatever shape or form) in many of our epitaphs is not to be confused with Bible teaching which says in effect that the only way to 'return' to live again is by being resurrected either in a human (physical) body, to live on earth, or in a spirit body, to live in heaven. See, e.g. John 11:11, 14-44; 1 Corinthians 15:40, 42-44, 47-50. See also Note 12.
7. The following are the cemeteries, in Slovenia, mentioned in this paper: BR = Brežice; CE = Celje; DH = Dol pri Hrastniku; GR = Gornja Radgona; IB = Ilirska Bistrica; KP = Koper; KR = Kranj; LA = Laško; LJ = Ljubljana (Žale); MA = Maribor; MS = Murska Sobota; PT = Ptuj; SG = Slovenj Gradec; TV = Titovo Velenje; TŽ = Tržič; VL = Velike Lašče.
8. See L.M. Danforth, *The Death Rituals of Rural Greece*, Photography by A. Tsiaras (Princeton, 1982), see especially 71-115.
9. I.e., safe for it [the flower] or for her [Cvetka].
10. Compare J. Navratil, "Slovenske narodne vraže in prazne vére, primérgjane drugim slovanskim in neslovanskim," *Letopis Matice slovenske za leto 1887* (Ljubljana, 1887) 88-167, see 124.
11. See Lakoff and Johnson, 15.
12. Lakoff and Johnson, 18.
13. This idea is certainly reinforced by the traditional body-soul dichotomy essentially based (in the Western beliefs) on the body-soul distinction in Greek (Platonic) philosophy. Our sample contains over 70 texts with the 'mortal body' and 'immortal soul' components and of course cannot be discussed here for lack of space. As for the Biblical view of the meaning of, for example, 'saving one's soul,' see, e.g. the Glossary of Biblical Theology Terms (under SOUL) in the *New American Bible* (New York, 1970), especially the smaller paperback edition. See also Note 6 above.
14. See K.M. Campbell, "Poetry as Epitaph," *Journal of Popular Culture*, 14.4 (Spring, 1981) 657-68; see 657.

15. See T.M. Leitch, "The Case for Studying Popular Culture," *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 84.2 (Spring, 1985) 115-26; see 120.
16. See C.E.G., "Slavisti na obeh straneh Atlantika zaskrbljeni nad usodo slovenskega jezika," *Ameriška Domovina* (August 16, 1985) 5.
17. See V.Z. Bratina, "Dr. Rajko Ložarju—velikemu znanstveniku," *Ameriška Domovina* (March 5, 1985) 7-8.
18. See A. Rupnik, "Komentiramo: Proslave in premisleki," *Naš delavec* (May, 1984) 3.
19. See M. Stojanović, "Rodoljubje danes: Občutek in usoda," *Naši razgledi* (October 26, 1984) 593.
20. See S. Hribar, "Ugovori in pripombe na naslov piscev in uredništva: Narodne sprave pa ne," *Delo* (December 27, 1984) 8-9. And for an older Slovene characterization of *vera v usodjo* 'belief in fate,' see J. Navratil, "Slovenske národne vraže in prazne vére, primérijane drugim slovanskim in neslovanskim," *Letopis Matice slovenske za leto 1885* (Ljubljana, 1885) 117-83; see 124ff.

## POVZETEK

### POSREDOVALNE METAFORE V SLOVENSKIH NAGROBNIH NAPISIH

*Avtor obravnava v naslovu označene metafore predvsem z dveh vidikov tovrstne simbolične aktivnosti: z uporabo narave (roža, vrt, dolina /slovenska/ zemlja, zvezda) in z njo povezano uporabo prostorske referenčnosti (primer orientacijsko-prostorske metaforke formule SREČA je ZGORAJ; ŽALOST je SPODAJ ali pa obratno: SREČA-SPODAJ; ŽALOST ZGORAJ). Smrt je nasprotje življenja in tega nasprotja ne moremo odpraviti, mrtvi se ne vračajo. Lahko se pa to nasprotje omili, smrt se lahko simbolično premaga s posredovalnimi metaforami. Tako nastaneta vsaj dva različna pogleda na smrt, namreč, smrt kot sovražnik (biblijski pogled) in smrt kot nekaka odskočna deska za nebesa (to drugo pospešuje orientacijsko-prostorska metaforška formula in posebno še ideja o 'avtomatični' nesmrtnosti) ali pa vsaj kot način rešitve iz trpljenja (kar je tudi biblijski pogled na smrt). V obeh primerih so komponente slovenske 'narave' (kakor tudi še vedno popularen pojem usoda) glavni posredovalni elementi, ki soočanje s smrtjo 'kreativno' ublažujejo in naredijo to osrednjo človekovo situacijo sprejemljivejšo.*

