

Euphemistic Representations of Death in Kenyan Online Obituary and Funeral Discourse: A Corpus-Assisted Conceptual Metaphor Analysis

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to analyse linguistic and conceptual patterns of death euphemism in contemporary Kenyan online obituary, funeral and memorial texts. Although death announcements in Kenya have moved online, descriptions of Kenyan death euphemism remain largely associated with the print era and single-language studies. This article addresses this gap by analysing 99 euphemistic occurrences across 49 expression types, drawn from 31 publicly accessible Kenyan obituary, funeral, and memorial texts published between 2019 and 2026 and retrieved through logged, site-restricted searches. Each occurrence was coded for linguistic strategy, semantic category, conceptual metaphor and communicative function. Nine categories emerged, with passage and transition being the largest (32 occurrences), followed by rest, sleep and peace (18), burial as rest (14), and departure and send-off (11) and journey and race (11). By source domain, movement accounted for 58 occurrences and rest for 32, showing that these two domains accounted for 9 out of 10 occurrences. The principal conceptual mappings were DEATH IS A JOURNEY, including PASSAGE and DEPARTURE sub-mappings, DEATH IS REST, and BURIAL IS REST. Expressions naming religious destinations were present but rare. The findings indicate that Kenyan online death discourse does not merely avoid *death* and *dying* but recasts death primarily as movement and repose. Because occurrences were collected using predetermined platform quotas, the frequencies describe this dataset and should not be generalised to Kenyan online death discourse as a whole.

Key terms: Conceptual metaphor, death euphemism, digital discourse, funeral discourse, obituary discourse.

INTRODUCTION

Death is a universal human experience, but how it is communicated varies across languages, cultures and contexts. Direct references to death can evoke grief, bodily deterioration and irreversible separation, making the subject particularly sensitive in public communication. Speakers therefore often replace expressions such as *died*, *dead*, *corpse* and *buried* with less threatening alternatives. Allan and Burridge (1991) describe euphemism as the use of comparatively acceptable expressions in place of terms considered uncomfortable or socially inappropriate. Their later work situates euphemism within a broader system involving euphemism, dysphemism and orthophemism, whose interpretation is shaped by context (Allan & Burridge, 2006). Death is consequently a productive domain for euphemistic substitution, with speakers frequently drawing on domains such as journey, sleep, rest and departure to represent biological cessation.

The relationship between euphemism and conceptual metaphor is particularly important in understanding how death is represented. A conceptual metaphor, in the sense of Lakoff and Johnson (1980), involves a systematic mapping whereby one domain of experience is understood in terms of another, with linguistic expressions providing observable evidence of these mappings. In death discourse, such mappings allow speakers to communicate about death indirectly while simultaneously constructing particular understandings of the event. Crespo-Fernández (2006), for example, shows that obituary discourse repeatedly conceptualises death through domains that reduce its threatening character, while Galal (2014) finds that English and Arabic death euphemisms depend heavily on conceptual metaphor. Comparable African research also demonstrates the relevance of cultural and religious contexts. Matiki (2001), in a study of Malawian newspaper obituaries, shows that obituary discourse combines local sociocultural values with institutional and religious conventions. These studies demonstrate that euphemistic expressions do more than replace direct terms; they also provide culturally meaningful ways of conceptualising death.

African and Kenyan scholarship provides further evidence of this relationship between language, culture and death discourse. Kenyan obituary

discourse has been shown to function as a culturally organised communicative genre rather than simply as a means of announcing death. Ondimu (2014) examines obituary notices in Kenya and demonstrates their culturally organised communicative structure. Nyakoe et al. (2012), working with Ekegusii, identify journey and rest as major conceptualisations of death. More recently, Ogola et al. (2025) identify recurrent euphemistic lexical choices in *Daily Nation* obituaries, including *passed on*, *demise* and *promotion to glory*. Collectively, these studies establish that Kenyan death discourse has recognisable euphemistic patterns and that particular conceptual domains, especially journey and rest, are used to communicate death.

However, the communicative environment in which death announcements circulate in Kenya has changed substantially. Death announcements are no longer confined to printed newspaper obituary notices. Newspaper obituary sections now coexist with dedicated obituary websites, digital memorial pages, institutional announcements, funeral-service pages and online news coverage. Families, churches, corporations, public institutions and newsrooms can therefore publish death-related texts to overlapping national audiences. This expansion raises questions about whether patterns identified in print and single-language studies remain evident in contemporary online discourse. It also creates an opportunity to examine naturally occurring death-related language across a wider range of producers and platforms.

Despite this development, the linguistic description of Kenyan death euphemism has not fully followed the movement of death announcements into digital spaces. Existing Kenyan research has largely focused either on a single newspaper (Ondimu, 2014; Ogola et al., 2025) or on a single ethnolinguistic community (Nyakoe et al., 2012). As a result, the available literature provides an inventory of recurrent expressions. Still, it offers a less developed account of what those expressions assert about death, which conceptual domains motivate them, and why some domains are recruited more frequently than others. Furthermore, euphemisms referring to dying, burial and the post-mortem condition of the deceased are not always analytically distinguished. However, they concern different aspects of death and may involve different semantic and conceptual resources. The

problem, therefore, is not the absence of Kenyan death euphemisms in the literature, but the limited account of their conceptual organisation, semantic differentiation and communicative functions in contemporary online discourse.

In this study, a death euphemism refers to an expression referring to dying, the dead body, burial or the post-mortem condition of the deceased through indirect rather than direct designation. Obituary discourse refers to the institutionalised text type through which a death is publicly announced and a life summarised. In contrast, funeral discourse refers more broadly to announcements, tributes, memorial reports and news coverage surrounding death and burial. Euphemistic representation refers to the process through which an expression both softens reference to death and communicates a particular understanding of what has occurred. These distinctions are important because the analysis is concerned not only with which expressions are used but also with what they represent.

The purpose of this article is to analyse the linguistic and conceptual patterns of death euphemism in contemporary Kenyan online obituary, funeral and memorial discourse. Drawing on 99 naturally occurring euphemistic occurrences from 31 publicly accessible Kenyan texts, the study examines the linguistic strategies, semantic categories, conceptual metaphors and communicative functions through which death is represented. Specifically, it asks: which euphemistic expressions represent death and burial in Kenyan online obituary and funeral discourse; what linguistic and semantic strategies characterise these expressions; which conceptual metaphors structure them; and what social, religious and communicative functions do they perform? By addressing these questions, the study extends existing Kenyan scholarship from print and single-language contexts to a multi-platform digital environment. It provides a more systematic account of the conceptual domains through which death is euphemistically represented.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Euphemism, Taboo and X-Phemism

Euphemism is bound up with linguistic taboo. Speakers avoid expressions tied to subjects felt to be disturbing, socially awkward or emotionally

threatening, and Allan and Burridge (1991) treat euphemism as language that shields interlocutors from unpleasant or socially problematic meanings. The motive may be politeness, fear, respect, convention or simple sensitivity to the hearer.

In *Forbidden Words*, Allan and Burridge (2006) place euphemism within a wider set of choices. Euphemism is sweet-talking, dysphemism offends or disparages, and orthophemism refers directly but neutrally. None of the three is defined in isolation: an expression that reads as neutral in one situation can be heard as insensitive in another. Death discourse shows this clearly. The verb *die* is orthophemistic and semantically straightforward, yet speakers commonly judge it too blunt for a bereaved audience. Passed away carries referential meaning and interpersonal meaning at once, indexing what the speaker takes the situation to require.

Death euphemisms take several forms: lexical substitution, metaphor, circumlocution, understatement, religious reference. *Demise* is a formal substitution and adds nothing to the content; *promotion to glory* carries a whole interpretation of what has happened after biological death. The two are euphemistic in different ways, and that difference is treated below as a variable rather than as an assumption.

Two later developments in euphemism theory bear directly on a dataset of this kind. Casas Gómez (2009) argues that euphemism is not a property of particular words at all, since the same expression may euphemise in one discourse situation and not in another; it is a process realised in context, and the unit of description is therefore the occurrence rather than the lexeme. Burridge (2012) approaches the same phenomenon from the perspective of language change, showing that euphemisms conventionalise, lose their mitigating force, and are replaced, so that any synchronic inventory captures only one stage of a moving system. The first position underwrites coding by occurrence; the second predicts a dataset containing expressions at different degrees of conventionalisation, some still doing perceptible work and others functioning as neutral formulas.

Death Euphemism and Conceptual Metaphor

Conceptual metaphor matters to death discourse because distressing or abstract experience is routinely understood through more familiar domains. Lakoff and Johnson (1980) treat metaphor not as ornament but as a mechanism of conceptualisation, with linguistic expressions as evidence of mappings between domains. They also note that many mappings become so conventionalised that speakers stop experiencing them as figurative, which bears directly on an expression like *passed away*.

Crespo-Fernández (2006) applies the principle to obituary discourse, showing death represented as a journey, departure, sleep or rest rather than as absolute cessation. Galal (2014) finds that death euphemism in English and Arabic is strongly metaphorical, with movement and continuation domains recurring in both despite their quite different lexical material. The JOURNEY mapping is the most productive of these. Expressions such as *departed*, *gone*, *passed on* and *final journey* position the deceased as a traveller, and because journeys imply relocation rather than disappearance, death can be presented as a change of place. REST and SLEEP supply a second recurrent domain, framing death as the end of struggle or pain, with particular force where death follows long illness.

These studies converge more than they diverge, and where they differ the difference is instructive. Both find death euphemism predominantly metaphorical, and both find movement domains recurring, but one works qualitatively within a single historical genre and the other contrastively across two languages. Neither addresses digital publication, and neither separates euphemisms for dying from euphemisms for burial. Lakoff and Johnson's framework has also been developed since, notably by Kövecses (2010), whose account of the source domains available to a community makes it possible to ask not only which mappings occur but why some are recruited and others, equally available, are not.

Death, Mourning and the Digital Environment

A separate body of work addresses what happens to the communication of death when it moves online. Walter et al. (2011) argue that the internet does not so much create new mourning practices as make private

grief publicly visible and collapse the boundaries between audiences that print obituary conventions kept apart. Ning (2025) traces how a digital platform becomes a mourning space in its own right, with commemorative language shaped as much by the site's affordances as by the bereaved. Neither study is linguistically focused, and neither concerns Kenya, but both predict something that the present dataset can test: that a widening of producers should show up in the language itself.

Two recent studies of obituary texts sharpen the comparison. Miller et al. (2024) analyse 3,300 Canadian obituaries published between 1900 and 2021 and find explicitly religious commemoration receding over the century in favour of accounts of relationships, work and community. Mofokeng (2025), reading obituaries in the early South African Black press, shows the genre serving as a site for asserting personhood and preserving collective memory under colonial conditions. The two together indicate that the religious content of obituary language is neither fixed nor incidental: it varies with period and with what the genre is being asked to do. That is the background against which the low count of explicitly religious expressions reported below should be read.

Death Discourse in African Contexts

Death discourse in several African settings has been described in terms of the interaction between indigenous belief, Christianity, Islam and institutional language. The evidence comes from particular countries, languages and genres and is presented as such. Matiki (2001), in a study of Malawian newspaper obituaries, shows that death announcements do not merely transmit information: they honour the deceased, construct social identity, and express collective grief.

Alali and Adjaye (1998) analyse 371 death notices from two Ghanaian newspapers and find death personified as cold and unfeeling, with dying presented as a continuing painful experience. This is a useful corrective to any assumption that death discourse is uniformly mitigating. Personifying death as a hostile agent is nearer to dysphemism than to euphemism, and it shows that public death discourse in African settings can dramatise loss as readily as soften it.

Yakub and Agyekum (2022) document a substantial inventory of metaphorical euphemisms in Nzema, a Kwa language of Ghana. Death is conceptualised through journey, departure, return, invitation and continuous sleep, but also through domains absent from the present dataset, including losing a fight, retirement and subtraction. Their analysis extends to burial and its objects: burial is hiding, or preserving, or sowing a seed, and the grave is a place of rest. Two points follow for the present study. Metaphorical representations of death are culturally meaningful rather than decorative, and the metaphorical work of death discourse reaches past the moment of dying to the treatment of the body and the site of burial.

The three share a finding and disagree on one point. All show public death discourse to be culturally organised rather than merely informational, and all show religion shaping what may be said. They part company over whether that discourse characteristically mitigates: Matiki (2001) and Yakub and Agyekum (2022) describe softening and dignifying strategies, while Alali and Adjaye's notices personify death as a hostile agent. Nor are they measuring the same object, since a pragmatic study of a newspaper genre, a content analysis of 371 notices, and a lexical-semantic inventory of one language are different instruments. What remains unsettled is whether the mitigating pattern belongs to the languages studied or to the institutional genres from which the data came.

Kenyan Obituary and Death Discourse

Nyakoe et al. (2012) investigate Ekegusii death euphemisms through conceptual metaphor theory and identify DEATH IS A JOURNEY and DEATH AS REST as the organising structures. Two of their observations are taken up below. They find that most Ekegusii euphemistic substitutes carry religious undertones, and they argue that the two metaphors direct attention to life rather than death, so that the euphemisms amount to a negation of death rather than a gentler name for it.

Ondimu (2014) examines Kenyan newspaper obituary notices as a genre and shows them to contain conventional communicative structures that reflect social and cultural understandings of death. Recurring euphemisms are therefore elements of an institutionalised discourse, not isolated lexical choices.

Ogola et al. (2025) examine euphemistic lexical choice in Daily Nation obituaries through a mixed-methods design that combines a content analysis of 144 randomly selected obituaries with questionnaires and interviews; they identify passed on, demise, and promotion to glory, among others, and their reader-oriented component asks which euphemisms audiences find appropriate.

The three Kenyan studies differ in almost every dimension that matters here: their sources are one newspaper's obituary notices and elicited Ekegusii expressions; their languages are Kenyan English and Ekegusii; their frameworks are genre analysis, mixed-methods lexical analysis, and conceptual metaphor theory. They converge on the recurrence of a small set of conventional forms and on the prominence of religious reference, and they converge again in what they leave out. None works across more than one platform. None separates euphemisms for dying from euphemisms for burial. Only one applies conceptual metaphor theory, and to an indigenous language rather than to the English-medium discourse that circulates nationally. The present study addresses all three gaps at once, which is why the framework below combines euphemism theory with conceptual metaphor theory rather than adopting either alone: answering these questions requires an account of why speakers substitute at all, alongside an account of what the substitutes assert.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Euphemism Theory

Following Allan and Burridge (1991, 2006), euphemisms are treated here as contextually motivated choices through which speakers manage taboo, emotional sensitivity and interpersonal relations. Euphemism is a relation between an expression, a referent and an audience, not a fixed property of a word. The framework explains why an announcement selects one form of reference over another, and why the same expression can be right for a family tribute and useless in a coroner's report.

Conceptual Metaphor Theory

Conceptual Metaphor Theory explains the conceptual organisation beneath many of these expressions. Final journey, promotion to glory and passed on are not arbitrary phrases; each reflects a systematic mapping

between death and a more concrete domain. Five mappings organise the analysis, and they sit at three different levels.

At the most general level, the source-domain schemas the material recruits are JOURNEY, REST, VERTICALITY, and the DAY CYCLE. Within a schema, sub-mappings foreground different components. The JOURNEY schema has a source, a path and a goal, so expressions foregrounding movement away from the living are treated as DEATH IS DEPARTURE, those foregrounding movement across a boundary as DEATH IS PASSAGE, and those naming the endpoint as DEATH IS A JOURNEY TO GOD. These belong to one schema and are not counted as independent metaphors. At the third level are entailments: DEATH IS SUNSET follows from LIFE IS A DAY rather than standing beside it.

DEATH IS REST maps death onto the familiar experience of resting after effort or suffering. Where the same domain applies to the disposal of the body, the mapping is BURIAL IS REST, and the two are kept apart because they euphemise different events. DEATH IS SLEEP is treated as a neighbouring source domain within the same field rather than as a variant of REST, since sleep entails an expected waking that rest does not. DEATH IS ASCENT maps death onto upward movement or advancement in status, as in promotion to glory; it is a separate schema rather than part of JOURNEY because what it foregrounds is elevation rather than travel. LIFE IS A DAY maps the lifespan onto the daily cycle, birth to sunrise and death to sunset.

Integration of the Two Frameworks

The two approaches are complementary. Euphemism theory accounts for the social motivation behind indirect reference: why a speaker declines to say "died". Conceptual Metaphor Theory accounts for the content of what is said instead: why the substitute so often involves movement, rest or ascent rather than some other available domain. Together, they allow a single expression to be treated as both a politeness strategy and a conceptual claim.

Four decision rules follow from this, and they are stated here because the framework has to do analytical work rather than furnish background. An

expression was counted as euphemistic where it referred to dying, the body, burial or the post-mortem condition of the deceased without direct designation, and where a direct alternative was available in the same slot; following Casas Gómez (2009), that judgment was made of the occurrence in context, not of the expression in the abstract. A conceptual metaphor was attributed only where a lexical unit's basic, more concrete sense contrasted with its contextual sense and the contextual sense could be understood by comparison with it, which is the procedure formalised by the Pragglejaz Group (2007); expressions whose euphemistic force came from register alone were recorded as formal lexical substitution and given no mapping. A sub-mapping, rather than a new mapping, was assigned when an expression foregrounded a component of an already present schema. A communicative function was assigned from a closed set, on the evidence of addressee, producer and position in the announcement rather than by impressionistic reading.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative, corpus-assisted descriptive design. The term *corpus-assisted* is used in the sense adopted in corpus-assisted discourse studies, where quantitative description of a coded set of occurrences is used to identify patterns for qualitative interpretation. It does not imply a balanced or representative corpus of Kenyan online death writing; hence, the material is treated as a coded set of occurrences rather than a representative corpus. The design followed the research questions: identifying recurring expressions and linguistic strategies required sufficient naturally occurring data for patterns to emerge, while examining meaning, conceptualisation and communicative function required contextual qualitative interpretation. Frequency was therefore used to identify patterns and their relative analytical weight, while qualitative analysis explained their semantic and communicative significance. No significance testing was conducted because the quota-based purposive sampling did not support statistical inference.

Data were collected between 1 and 31 May 2026, and only materials published on or before 30 April 2026 were eligible for inclusion. Texts were identified through site-restricted Google searches that combined

domain restrictions with predetermined candidate euphemistic expressions. Ten searches generated the dataset, and each search query was recorded against the occurrences it produced to facilitate reproducibility. Each search result was followed to the source page, and an occurrence was included only after the expression had been examined in its original context. Search engine snippets, aggregator summaries, and syndicated reproductions were excluded. For every included occurrence, the surrounding sentence, page title, publication date and direct URL were recorded.

The dataset was purposively constructed using predetermined platform quotas. An initial target of 100 occurrences was distributed across four broad categories of producers: dedicated obituary and memorial platforms, national newspaper websites, broadcast news websites, and institutional or organisational announcement pages. The quotas were filled, but one occurrence was subsequently excluded during verification, leaving 99 occurrences from 31 texts. *Obituaries Kenya* contributed 20 occurrences from eight texts; *The Star*, 15 from four texts; *The Standard*, 15 from five texts; *Citizen Digital*, 15 from four texts; KBC, 10 from four texts; Kenyan institutional notices, 10 from two texts; NTV Kenya, nine from three texts; and other Kenyan obituary and memorial sources, five from one text. The quotas were intended to capture variation across producer types rather than estimate the prevalence of euphemisms in Kenyan online death discourse. Consequently, platform shares reflect the sampling design rather than the relative volume of material published by individual platforms, and the searches are not claimed to be exhaustive. The source texts were published between 30 March 2019 and 10 April 2026, with 80 of the 99 occurrences drawn from material published in 2024 or later. This concentration reflects the greater retrievability of recent online material. It means that the dataset is best treated as synchronic with an extended historical tail rather than as evidence of change over time.

The unit of analysis was the individual euphemistic occurrence. A source text could contribute multiple occurrences where these were distinct expressions, but repeated instances of the same expression within a single text were counted once. The same expression, occurring in different source texts, was retained for

each text because its recurrence across independent sources constitutes evidence of conventional usage. Differences in capitalisation or intervening material were treated as one expression type, whereas differently worded variants were retained separately. An expression was included if, in context, it referred to death or dying, the dead body, burial, the funeral or the post-mortem condition of the deceased, and did so indirectly where a direct designation was available. Expressions that merely praised the deceased without semantically referring to death, dying, or burial were excluded, as were direct references such as "*died*" and "*was buried*". This selection criterion means that the study describes the internal structure of euphemistic usage but cannot determine the proportion of Kenyan online death announcements that use euphemism rather than direct reference. Four borderline expressions were reassessed against the criteria during verification; three were retained, and one was excluded because it described the deceased's life rather than death, burial or post-mortem condition. This reduced the dataset from 100 to 99 occurrences and the NTV Kenya contribution from 10 to nine.

Each occurrence was recorded in an auditable dataset that included the exact expression, the contextual sentence, the platform, the domain, the page title, the publication date, the direct URL, the search query, and the coding decisions. The occurrences were coded for linguistic strategy, principal semantic category, conceptual metaphor and communicative function. A single principal semantic category was assigned to each occurrence to ensure mutually exclusive counting, although qualitative interpretive tags could overlap where an expression supported more than one interpretation. Conceptual metaphors were assigned only where a systematic mapping between a concrete source domain and the target domain of death could be demonstrated. Expressions whose euphemistic effect arose primarily from register rather than a discernible conceptual mapping were coded as formal lexical substitution without a metaphorical designation. This approach prevented metaphor counts from being inflated through retrospective interpretation.

Communicative function was coded using predetermined criteria. Occurrences were classified as *mitigating* where they softened direct reference

without adding a further interpretation; *consoling* where they provided a comforting interpretation; *honorific* where they accorded dignity to the deceased or body; *religious framing* where they invoked a spiritual endpoint, agent or state; *solidary* where they addressed the deceased or fellow mourners relationally; and *ritual-marking* where they identified the funeral or burial as a social or ceremonial event. The principal function was determined from the addressee, producer and position of the expression within the announcement. Where an occurrence met more than one criterion, the best-supported function was recorded as principal and additional functions were retained as secondary interpretive tags.

To enhance trustworthiness, the researcher maintained the complete coded dataset as an audit trail linking every occurrence to its source. The coding scheme was revised twice during analysis as two categories emerged from the data: *departure and send-off*, distinguishing expressions foregrounding departure or the ceremony marking it from expressions of passage and *other figurative* occurrences with distinct figurative mappings. Following each revision, previously coded occurrences were reassessed against the amended scheme to ensure consistency. A separate verification pass involved reopening source pages, checking each expression against its original context, correcting two publication dates and reassessing the borderline cases. Although a single analyst conducted coding, no inter-coder reliability coefficient is reported because a second coder was not involved. Instead, the study provides an explicit coding scheme, source records

and a recoding trail that make the analytical process transparent and potentially replicable.

The study used only publicly accessible materials. No private, restricted, or password-protected content was accessed, and no direct interaction with human participants or the collection of personal data was involved. Given that the texts concern deceased individuals and bereaved families, the analysis treats the expressions primarily as linguistic forms rather than as statements attributed to named persons. Names and unnecessary biographical details were therefore not reproduced, and surrounding contexts were described rather than extensively quoted. Finally, the frequency findings are interpreted within the limits of the sampling design. Because platform quotas were predetermined and the unit of analysis was the occurrence rather than the text, the frequencies cannot be used to estimate platform-level output or the prevalence of euphemisms in Kenyan online death discourse. The reported counts therefore describe the 99 occurrences assembled for this study and should not be generalised to Kenyan online death discourse as a whole.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Distribution of the Categories

This section reports what the material contains. Interpretation is deferred to the discussion, and where an inference is drawn here, it stays within what the counts show. The 99 occurrences fall into nine mutually exclusive semantic categories, as set out in Table 1 with their distinct-type counts.

Table 1. Distribution of Euphemistic Occurrences by Principal Semantic Category (n = 99)

Semantic category	Occurrences (n = 99)	Distinct types
Passage and transition	32	10
Rest, sleep and peace	18	13
Burial as rest	14	1
Departure and send-off	11	10
Journey and race	11	6
Religious destination and divine agency	4	3
Other figurative	4	4
Formal lexical substitution	3	1
Life-cycle formula	2	1
Total	99	49

A second property concerns expression types rather than categories. The 99 occurrences represent 49 distinct types, a type–token ratio of 0.49. The types are used unevenly: 15 of them account for 65 occurrences, and the other 34 occur once each. The six most frequent are laid to rest (14), passed away (8), the passing of (6), passing on (6), rest in eternal peace (5) and final journey (5). What sits either side of that divide differs in kind as well as in frequency. The recurrent forms are short, fixed and interchangeable between producers. The single-occurrence forms are longer, more specific to the person being mourned, and composed for the occasion rather than drawn from a stock.

The clearest result is about source domains rather than categories. Four of the nine recruit movement: passage and transition (32), departure and send-off (11), journey and race (11), and religious destination and divine agency (4), together 58 occurrences. Two recruit rest: rest, sleep and peace (18) and burial as rest (14), together 32. Movement and rest thus account for 90 of the 99 occurrences, leaving nine spread across the figurative, formal, and life-cycle categories. The material is organised around two source domains, not nine independent ones, and the categories are best read as divisions within them. Table 2 provides the representative expressions, mappings, and functions for each; the following sections present them in order of size.

Table 2. Semantic Categories, Representative Expressions, Conceptual Mappings and Principal Functions

Semantic category	Representative expressions	Conceptual mapping	Principal function
Passage and transition	passed away, the passing of, passing on, sudden passing, transitioned peacefully	DEATH IS PASSAGE, a sub-mapping of DEATH IS A JOURNEY	Mitigation; continuity
Rest, sleep and peace	rest in eternal peace, rested, entered eternal rest, Rest well, Lala Salama	DEATH IS REST; DEATH IS SLEEP	Consolation; end of suffering
Burial as rest	laid to rest	BURIAL IS REST	Dignity; suppression of physical disposal
Departure and send-off	Farewell, final farewell, final send-off, departed, leave this world	DEATH IS DEPARTURE, a sub-mapping of DEATH IS A JOURNEY	Leave-taking; ritual closure
Journey and race	final journey, final journey home, journey to the hereafter, finished the race	DEATH IS A JOURNEY; LIFE IS A RACE	Completion; purposeful movement
Religious destination and divine agency	promotion to glory, transitioned to glory peacefully, the Lord has taken away	DEATH IS ASCENT; DEATH IS A JOURNEY TO GOD	Theological framing; consolation
Other figurative	breathed her last, a giant has fallen, orphaned Africa, she did not die she multiplied	Single mappings, one per expression	Evaluation; public mourning
Formal lexical substitution	demise	None (register-based)	Institutional formality
Life-cycle formula	Sunrise ... Sunset	LIFE IS A DAY, entailing DEATH IS SUNSET	Naturalisation of mortality

Passage and Transition

The largest category holds 32 occurrences across ten types: passed away (8), the passing of (6), passing on (6), the passing on of (3), passing (3), sudden passing (2), passed on, transitioned peacefully, bows out, and a passing that marked the end of an era. All share one conceptual structure. Death is movement from one state to another, and the movement is presented as accomplished rather than in progress.

Passed away and the nominalised forms built on the same root were the most frequent items in the category and occurred across every producer type. The nominalisations repay separating from the verbs. Where passed away predicates an action of the deceased, the passing of and the passing on of turn the event into a noun governed by a preposition, so a

death can be reported without any clause in which someone dies. Nine of the fourteen occurrences of these nominal forms come from dedicated obituary and memorial platforms, where the announcement is the whole text and the death is its subject; news and institutional producers, which more often report a death within a longer narrative, use the finite verb.

What the category leaves unspecified varies. Passed away and passing on assert movement without naming a destination; transitioned peacefully adds a manner but no terminus; bows out, from a report of a public figure's death, imports a theatrical frame in which a performance ends and the performer withdraws. The endpoint is always absent or left to the reader, and that reticence, rather than any positive claim about an afterlife, does the euphemistic work.

Rest, Sleep and Peace

The second category holds 18 occurrences across thirteen types, the widest spread of distinct expressions in the material relative to its size: rest in eternal peace (5), Rest in Peace (2), rested, entered eternal rest, rest your soul in eternal peace, find eternal peace, found peace in death, go and rest, Rest well, Rest gently, you have rested, rest in peace with intervening material, and the Kiswahili formula Lala Salama.

These predicate rest of the deceased rather than of the body or the grave, which is what distinguishes them from the burial expressions treated next. Grammatically, they fall into two groups. One reports a state, as in she has rested or entered eternal rest. The other addresses the deceased directly in the imperative or the optative, as in Rest well, Rest gently and go and rest. Five of the seven occurrences in the second group come from broadcast news sites, where tribute and condolence material is quoted at length within reports; this is the only part of the material in which the deceased is systematically spoken to rather than about.

The category also contains the one non-English occurrence. Lala Salama, a Kiswahili formula meaning "sleep peacefully," appeared in a broadcast tribute and meets the criteria for the category on the same footing as English expressions. Since the material was retrieved through English-language queries, a single Kiswahili occurrence says nothing about how productive the domain is in Kiswahili death discourse. What it does show is that the category is not confined to English obituary convention.

Burial as Rest

The third category is the most concentrated of all: 14 occurrences, every one of them the phrase laid to rest, which is also the most frequent single type in the material, ahead of passed away.

The construction replaces the physically direct concept of burial with the image of a person settled into rest. Two features separate it from the rest expressions above. It is passive, so the agent of the burial is grammatically absent while the mourners who perform it are present at the scene described; and what rests is the body at the place of interment rather

than the deceased in a continuing state. Keeping the two apart matters because they are often collapsed in descriptions of death euphemism, and the material itself keeps them apart. Laid to rest reports the funeral. Rest in eternal peace addresses the dead.

Its concentration on a single phrase is itself a result. Every occurrence of the burial sense uses the same three words, while the eighteen occurrences of the rest sense use thirteen different formulations. Thirteen of the fourteen come from news and broadcast reporting, which is where funerals are covered as events. Reporting a burial appears to be a far more formulaic act than commemorating a death, and the phrase that does it works less as a live metaphor than as the ordinary name for the event.

Departure and Send-Off

The fourth category holds 11 occurrences across ten types. It covers both the departure of the deceased and the ceremony marking it: Farewell (2), Fare Thee Well, final farewell, distinguished farewell, final send-off, joint final ceremony, departed, a departure that leaves a gap, gone, for good, and leave this world.

The mapping is DEATH IS DEPARTURE, a sub-mapping of DEATH IS A JOURNEY, but it does different discourse work from the passage expressions. Passage locates the deceased after the event; departure locates the bereaved at the moment of parting. The farewell formulas address the dead in the second person and belong to headlines and tribute captions rather than to the body of announcements, where they serve as a public act of leave-taking performed on a readership's behalf.

The send-off expressions shift the reference again, from the deceased to the event. The final send-off and joint final ceremony name the funeral itself as an occasion of departure, organised by those who remain. This is the clearest place in the material where an obligation is laid on the living: what is euphemised is not the death but the duty to mark it properly.

Journey and Race

The fifth category also holds 11 occurrences, across six types: final journey (5), finished the race (2), final journey home, journey to the hereafter, a mortal journey that came to an end, and run your race. While

passage and departure leave the endpoint open, they make the movement explicit and give it shape.

Two sub-patterns run through it. The journey expressions treat movement as travel towards a destination, which the final journey home and the journey to the hereafter name outright. The race expressions treat life as a course to be completed, so that death is a finishing line rather than an interruption, and they carry an evaluation the first group does not: to have finished the race is to have completed something. Seven of the eleven occurrences come from newspaper websites, and most appear in headlines or opening sentences, where a whole life is being summarised rather than a death announced.

Other Figurative Expressions

A sixth category contains four occurrences, each carrying its own mapping: breathed her last, a giant has fallen, orphaned Africa, and she did not die; she multiplied. They are grouped because no two share a source domain, not because they resemble one another.

Each does something different. Breathed her last is metonymic, standing for death through its last physical sign. A giant has fallen, and orphaned Africa measure the loss by the stature of the deceased and the dependency of those left behind; both come from coverage of nationally prominent deaths. She did not die, she multiplied is the only expression here that denies the death outright and puts continuing influence in its place. Small as the category is, it shows that this discourse is not confined to a stock of formulas: it also produces language made for one death.

Religious Destination and Divine Agency

Explicitly religious expressions form a small category of four occurrences across three types: promotion to glory (2), transitioned to glory peacefully, and the Lord has taken away. Unlike the other categories, they interpret what follows death rather than leaving it open. The deceased does not merely depart; a destination is named, and in one case an agent.

Promotion to glory is the most conceptually elaborate item in the material. It maps death onto upward

occupational or status progression, instantiating DEATH IS ASCENT while naming the destination, so that dying becomes advancement rather than loss. Three of the four occurrences in this category come from dedicated obituary and memorial platforms, including diaspora church material, and the fourth from an institutional notice. The Lord has taken away differs in assigning agency: death is not something that happens to the deceased, but something God does, and responsibility for the event moves accordingly. The size of the category relative to the others is itself a finding, and the discussion returns to it.

Formal Lexical Substitution

Three occurrences of the noun demise form a category defined by what it lacks. Unlike final journey or rested, demise builds no metaphorical scenario; its euphemistic force is register alone, a Latinate noun standing in for a plain one. All three come from broadcast news sites, where a death is marked appropriately rather than consoled over. The category is kept separate precisely because giving it a conceptual mapping would inflate the metaphor counts through a reconstruction the word does not support.

Life-Cycle Formula

The smallest category is two occurrences of Sunrise... Sunset, framing the dates of birth and death as the opening and closing of a single day. Both come from dedicated obituary notices, where the formula fills a fixed slot beneath the deceased's name and carries dates that would otherwise be given plainly. LIFE IS A DAY entails DEATH IS SUNSET, and the mapping naturalises mortality by setting the individual life inside the rhythm of the natural world: sunset is unavoidable but not catastrophic, and it implies a further sunrise without asserting one. Supplied by the genre rather than composed for each death, it is the most conventionalised item here.

Distribution Across Producer Types

Several of the observations above concern where an expression is used rather than what it means. Table 3 cross-tabulates the nine categories, collapsed into their two dominant source domains and a residual group, against the four producer types around which the quotas were built.

Table 3. Source domain by Producer Type (Occurrences; n = 99)

Producer type	Texts	Movement	Rest	Other	Total
Dedicated obituary and memorial platforms	9	18	5	2	25
National newspaper websites	9	19	10	1	30
Broadcast news websites	11	13	16	5	34
Institutional and organisational pages	2	8	1	1	10
Total	31	58	32	9	99

The row totals are set by the quotas and carry no information, so the table can only be read across rows, not down columns. Read that way, it shows one clear contrast. Institutional pages and dedicated obituary platforms lean heavily towards movement, which supplies eight of ten occurrences in the first and eighteen of twenty-five in the second. Broadcast news sites are the only producer type where rest occurs more often than movement, sixteen against thirteen, and the reason is visible in the material: broadcast reports quote tributes and condolence messages at length, and it is in quoted tribute that the rest expressions cluster. Newspaper websites sit between the two. With cell counts this small, the contrast is a tendency in this dataset and not a difference that could be tested, and the quota design means it cannot be projected onto the platforms themselves.

DISCUSSION

Euphemism in Kenyan online death discourse is strongly metaphorical. Speakers are not swapping one neutral word for another; they are reconstructing the event through other conceptual domains, drawing on a strikingly narrow set of them.

That two domains supply nine occurrences in ten is consistent with earlier findings that movement-based conceptualisation is highly productive in death discourse. Crespo-Fernández (2006) identifies comparable movement metaphors in obituary language and Galal (2014) shows their productivity across languages; within Kenya, Nyakoe et al. (2012) identify DEATH IS A JOURNEY in Ekegusii. What the present material adds is the weight of the second domain. Rest accounts for a further 32 occurrences, and the narrowness of the range is as notable as the dominance of any one part of it.

Death as Continuation Rather than Termination

The broadest reading the material supports is that these euphemisms suppress the idea of death as an absolute endpoint. The dominant verbs make the case: pass, depart, leave, transition, and rest all imply some form of continuation. A person who passes moves beyond a point. Someone who departs or leaves this world moves away from those who remain. Someone who rests changes condition while remaining conceptually present. Biological finality is recast as movement or as altered existence, and the one expression that denies death outright- she did not die, she multiplied- only makes explicit what the conventional forms leave implicit.

This converges with Nyakoe et al. (2012), who conclude that the Ekegusii metaphors attend more to life than to death and amount to a negation of death rather than a gentler name for it. The present English-medium material arrives at the same point through different lexical resources. That is consistent with the pattern being a property of the discourse type rather than of a single language, though two studies of two languages cannot establish that; a comparison designed to test it would need material from several languages collected on the same terms.

The effect is socially consequential either way. A death announcement has to communicate an irreversible loss to an audience that includes the bereaved. Euphemism lets both demands be met at once: the event is reported, and the report is survivable.

The Reach of the REST Domain

REST is the second domain and reaches further through the death sequence than any other. Death itself may be rest, as in she has rested or entered eternal rest. The desired condition for the deceased is

rest, as in "Rest well." Burial is rest, as in laid to rest. The metaphor runs from dying through burial to memorialisation, which is why the analysis separates DEATH IS REST from BURIAL IS REST instead of collapsing them. The two senses also behave differently. The burial sense uses one fixed phrase on all fourteen of its occurrences; the death sense uses thirteen formulations across eighteen. The same domain is formulaic where it reports an event and productive where it addresses a person.

The distribution corresponds closely to Yakub and Agyekum's (2022) Nzema findings, where the domain likewise reaches the grave as a place of rest, and to Nyakoe et al. (2012), who identify DEATH AS REST in Ekegusii. Its recurrence across Ekegusii, Nzema and largely English-medium Kenyan online material points to a conceptualisation that survives both translation and a change of medium. The one Kiswahili occurrence here, Lala Salama, meets the criteria for the category on the same footing as the English expressions. Retrieved through English-language queries, it cannot show that the domain is equally productive across the languages in contact in Kenyan public mourning. Still, it does show that the category is not an artefact of English obituary convention, and it raises a question that a deliberately multilingual dataset could settle.

The comparison is as informative in what it does not share. Yakub and Agyekum (2022) record burial as hiding, as preserving and as sowing a seed, and death as losing a fight, as retirement, as subtraction. None of these appears here. The Kenyan online material returns to a small set of domains rather than the wider inventory available in a community's full oral repertoire, though whether that reflects the constraints of institutional written genres or something about the platforms cannot be settled from these data.

Religion as an Interpretive Framework

Religion needs to be stated carefully here, because the material supports a weaker claim than the literature might lead one to expect. Expressions that name a religious destination or agent are rare: promotion to glory, transitioned to glory peacefully, and the Lord has taken away account for four occurrences between them. Where they do appear, they explain rather than merely soften. Promotion to glory asserts an

improvement in spiritual status; the Lord has taken away attributes, the separation to divine agency. But they are the exception in this material, not its centre.

Religious influence is better described as diffuse than as concentrated. It is carried less by expressions naming God than by the vocabulary of eternal rest and eternal peace, which accounts for much of the second-largest category and borrows a liturgical formula without committing to a doctrine. That is consistent with the prominence of Christian funeral discourse in Kenya, with the religion-obituary interaction Matiki (2001) observes in Malawi, and with Nyakoe et al. (2012), who report religious undertones in most Ekegusii euphemistic substitutes. The difference between their finding and this one is a difference of channel: here the religious frame lives in the phrasing of consolation rather than in explicit claims about a destination. Miller et al. (2024), tracking 3,300 Canadian obituaries over more than a century, find that explicitly religious commemoration recedes over time while the genre itself persists, suggesting that the pattern observed here may be less a Kenyan peculiarity than an instance of a broader movement in obituary language.

None of this makes Kenyan online death euphemism characteristically Christian in its wording. The two most frequent expressions in the material, laid to rest and passed away, are theologically uncommitted, and both occur in news and institutional writing addressed to a general readership. They have become conventional enough to circulate independently of any religious setting.

What the material suggests instead is a continuum of religious explicitness, running from theologically uncommitted formulas such as passed away and laid to rest, through the mildly liturgical rest in eternal peace, to explicitly theological constructions such as promotion to glory. Position on that continuum appears to vary with the producer: news reports and institutional notices cluster at the uncommitted end, and every occurrence at the explicit end comes from obituary-platform or institutional memorial material. With four occurrences at that end, this is a hypothesis rather than a result, and testing it would need a sampling frame built around producer type rather than platform.

Conventionalisation and Metaphorical Transparency

The same constructions recur across different producers. Laid to rest, passed away, the passing of and rest in eternal peace all appear in newspaper reporting, broadcast coverage, institutional statements and dedicated obituary notices alike. The type-token distribution puts this on a quantitative footing, and it is more evenly balanced than a purely formulaic account would predict: 49 types across 99 occurrences, fifteen types supplying 65 of them and thirty-four appearing once. Two lexical roots do most of the work, pass and rest contributing thirty occurrences apiece.

A distribution of that shape describes a discourse with two layers rather than one. There is a formulaic core, reused at high frequency and largely indifferent to who is writing, and a productive margin where expressions are composed for a particular death. The observation is about this material: whether the core is narrower than it was before publication moved online cannot be shown without comparable print-era data, which no existing study provides. What can be said is that the sampled platforms draw on a fairly concentrated repertoire despite representing quite different kinds of producers.

The two layers matter because conventionalised mappings may no longer be experienced as figurative, as Lakoff and Johnson (1980) observe. Passed away derives from a movement metaphor but is likely now processed as a polite synonym for died. Promotion to glory maintains a visible structure and must be construed to be understood. Sunrise ... Sunset falls between, transparent in mapping but routinised by its fixed place in obituary layout. The formulaic core sits towards the inactive end of that scale. The single-occurrence expressions towards the active one, and the difference does work: an expression whose metaphor is no longer live can be produced without commitment to its content, so an institution may write passed away without asserting that anyone has gone anywhere. In contrast, a live metaphor commits its producer to a claim.

Relation to Previous Kenyan Research

These findings support the earlier Kenyan work and extend it to a broader context. Ondimu (2014) shows Kenyan newspaper obituaries forming a culturally

structured genre, and many of those conventions evidently continue across digital media. Nyakoe et al. (2012) identify journey and rest in Ekegusii euphemism, and the same two domains dominate here. Ogola et al. (2025) identify passed on, demise and promotion to glory in Daily Nation obituaries; all three recur, though at frequencies that place them at the margins of this material rather than at its centre.

The contribution lies less in finding new forms than in showing how established Kenyan conceptualisations circulate across a multi-platform environment, and in separating the euphemistic treatment of dying from that of burial. Walter et al. (2011) predict that moving death communication online collapses the boundaries between audiences that print conventions maintained, and Ning (2025) shows platforms becoming mourning spaces with conventions of their own. The addition here is linguistic: families, churches, corporations and newsrooms share a small stock of formulas, and producer type shows up less in which formulas are used than in which part of the death sequence each producer talks about.

Communicative Functions

Mitigation is the principal function throughout. X died reports the event efficiently but foregrounds mortality; X passed away keeps the event in the background and softens its abruptness. X was buried foregrounds the physical act; X was laid to rest foregrounds peace. This supports Allan and Burridge's (1991, 2006) account of euphemism as socially motivated language for situations that call for care.

Alongside mitigation, the material performs several related functions: consolation, offering emotionally reassuring interpretations of what has happened; respect, maintaining the dignity of the deceased; religious affirmation, placing death within a spiritual account of things; solidarity, allowing families and communities to grieve collectively; and ritualisation, marking death as a socially recognised transition rather than an isolated biological event.

One boundary on all of this should be stated plainly. Because the material was assembled from euphemistic occurrences by definition, direct references to death that also occur in Kenyan online death communication were excluded at selection. The analysis can describe

how this discourse euphemises; it cannot establish how consistently it does so, or whether particular producers prefer direct reference. Alali and Adjaye's (1998) Ghanaian findings, where death is personified as cold and unfeeling, show that public death discourse in African settings need not be uniformly mitigating. Whether comparable confrontational representations occur in Kenyan online mourning is a question this material was not designed to answer.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion: This study examined euphemistic representations of death in 99 occurrences drawn from 31 Kenyan online obituary, funeral and memorial texts published between 2019 and 2026. The findings show that these representations are organised around nine semantic categories, with passage and transition being the most frequent (32 occurrences), followed by rest, sleep and peace (18), burial as rest (14), departure and send-off (11), and journey and race (11). The remaining 13 occurrences comprise figurative expressions with single mappings, explicitly religious expressions, formal lexical substitution and the life-cycle formula. When grouped by source domain, movement accounts for 58 occurrences and rest for 32, confirming the predominantly metaphorical nature of the data, while formal substitution represents a register-based minority of only three occurrences.

The dominant conceptual mappings are DEATH IS PASSAGE and DEATH IS DEPARTURE, both understood as instantiations of DEATH IS A JOURNEY, alongside DEATH IS REST and BURIAL IS REST. Less frequent mappings include DEATH IS ASCENT, DEATH IS A JOURNEY TO GOD and LIFE IS A DAY, with its DEATH IS SUNSET entailment. Collectively, these mappings recast death from a biologically final event as a process of movement, transition and repose. In communicative terms, the euphemistic expressions mitigate the taboo associated with death, console mourners, honour the deceased, express solidarity and frame death as a ritualised transition. Religion is expressed less through direct references to God, which are rare in the dataset, than through expressions of eternal rest and eternal peace that invoke a liturgical frame without necessarily asserting a specific doctrine. The two most frequent formulas, “laid to rest” and “passed away,” are similarly theologically uncommitted and occur across

institutional, journalistic and family settings. Their differing degrees of metaphorical transparency are nevertheless communicatively significant: expressions whose metaphors are no longer highly active can be used without requiring commitment to their underlying conceptual content, whereas more transparent metaphors may more directly convey a particular understanding of death.

These findings should, however, be interpreted in light of the study's limitations. The dataset is relatively small, quota-based and restricted to publicly accessible, largely English-language material. Because the quotas were established in advance, platform shares reflect the research design rather than the actual distribution of content across platforms. Moreover, the analysis counted occurrences rather than texts, meaning that sources containing numerous euphemistic expressions contribute more heavily than brief notices; the fullest single source contributed eight occurrences, while one news report contributed seven. The resulting frequencies therefore describe the composition of the dataset rather than Kenyan online death discourse as a whole. Coding was conducted by a single analyst, and no inter-coder agreement statistic was calculated; instead, reliability was supported through a documented recoding trail and an audit record linking each assignment to the page from which it was drawn. Since direct references to death were excluded at the selection stage, the relative balance between euphemistic and direct references remains an open question. The material is also weighted towards 2024 and later, meaning that the findings primarily characterise current usage rather than change over time. Consequently, the apparent absence of older forms should not be interpreted as evidence of their disuse. The study likewise makes no claim to represent all Kenyan communities, languages or funeral practices.

Recommendations: Future research could compare English, Kiswahili and indigenous Kenyan languages within one dataset; examine social-media mourning, where the producers are individuals rather than institutions; compare Christian and Muslim funeral language directly; test the relationship between producer type and religious explicitness proposed above with a sampling frame designed for it; or trace change in Kenyan obituary euphemism across the

move from print to digital publication, which would require print-era material collected on comparable terms. Kenyan digital death discourse remains a productive site for studying how language, metaphor, culture, religion and social sensitivity interact, and one whose conventions appear to be consolidating rather than dispersing as mourning moves online.

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