



**LACUS
FORUM
XXXIII**

Variation



UNIVERSITY OF
TORONTO

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DEATH-DEFINING PERSONIFICATIONS: THE GRIM REAPER VS. LA GRANDE FAUCHEUSE

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IN THE *ENCYCLOPEDIA OF DEATH*, under 'Personifications of Death', Kastenbaum and Kastenbaum (1989:205) note:

[N]o image has provided so rich or historically important a channel for the expression of emotional and intellectual orientations toward life and death as the personification... Representations of death as a person have appeared among many peoples at many times, providing an essential bond between history and biology.

In this paper, we will examine the personification of Death in the French and English cultures, and specifically the evolution of the French personification of Death, which we hold as being so heavily influenced by American culture that it was transformed over time. The long title for this article is 'Death-defining personifications: the relatively stable representation of the Grim Reaper vs. the diachronic and synchronic variations in the representation of the Grande Faucheuse,' and the explanation of this title will become clear in this paper. Through our study, we will demonstrate that *conceptual mapping* (Lakoff & Turner 1989, Kövecses 2002, 2005), which is how concepts are laid out and how their attributes are described in one's mind, is fluid, and often in flux, and that, although *conceptual blending* (Kövecses 2002, 2005), which is how two or more concepts are mixed or blended in one's mind so that they end up sharing attributes that they each had separately to begin with, most often occurs between various concepts within a single culture, it can and does also occur between cultures. Our hypotheses are the following: The French representation of Death as a reaper has evolved over time, while the English representation has remained stable, and the variations in the French representations have been influenced by English language and culture.

1. CONCEPTUAL DOMAINS AND CULTURAL MAPPING/BLENDING. We might expect a concept to be created and evolve similarly in two cultures if the cultures in question demonstrate similarities and if the concept is created from a similar psychological perspective. Ample evidence exists to demonstrate that culture plays an important role in the creation, evolution and maintenance of a concept and that cognitive factors play a major role in the ability of the speakers to conceive and express those concepts. Essentially, the creation of a concept requires facilitation. For a concept to embed itself within a culture, it must be introduced by a source. The likelihood that a concept from the source culture will be accepted in the target culture depends on both opportunity and trial for that concept to

gain effectiveness and be collectively implemented by the target culture. Opportunity can take place in many ways, yet particular methods that have proven to be successful over time are the visual arts and literature, which serve not only as facilitators, but as documented occurrences of the successful implementation of new concepts.

The *Dictionnaire de l'Académie française du XVIIe siècle* (1694) states: 'Poets and Painters represent Time and Death with a scythe.' Indeed, their representation is sustained, nullified or modified over time as evidenced in both English and French cultures. Occurrences of the Grim Reaper and la Grande Faucheuse in the visual arts and in literature, in particular in paintings and poetry, provide evidence that despite cultural similarities or theories of concept formation, two different languages will comprehend and utilize the apparently identical concepts in quite different ways. On the surface, the Grim Reaper and la Grande Faucheuse appear equivalent as personifications of Death, but upon closer examination, are quite different. They are only partially equivalent, as individual instantiations, and notably visual representation and semantic application of the two personifications, are quite different.

Cultural similarities provide a source of environmental and cognitive commonalities which should logically lead to equivalent concept formation. For example, in this case, both English and French cultures once depended on reaping grain to exist, both were basically Christian, and both had experienced mass deaths (i.e. The Black Plague). Experience with death, as well as Christian influences, led to the development of certain attitudes toward death, while the need to reap grain led to the invention of specific tools, such as the scythe. One might, therefore, expect that both the French and English images associated with the concept of the reaper would carry similar attributes with them. Cultural models are 'implicitly and explicitly transmitted through language' and therefore 'linguistic analysis, particularly of words and expressions, reveal underlying assumptions, interests and values' (Bonvillain 2000:74). Indeed, one can note the underlying differences in the perception of death due to separate and evolving cultural experiences in the choice of adjectives describing the personification of Death between the two language groups. For example, as fear and loathing is communicated by the English adjective *grim* versus the significance, respect or admiration embodied in the honorific title in the French *grande* (Vinay & Darbelnet 1977). We believe that the example of the Reaper demonstrates, in part, how underlying and covert differences between two cultures affect linguistic representation in those cultures.

The discrepancy between what we might expect to find, and what actually exists, is evident from a linguistic perspective as well. According to cognitive linguistic theories (Lakoff & Turner 1989, Kövecses 2002, 2005), *conceptual domains* and *cognitive mapping* constitute one explanation of how metaphors and other linguistic phenomena play a role in the conceptualization of the world around us. Another such theory is based on the idea of *conceptual integration* (Kövecses 2002, 2005). Psychologically, the similar formation of a concept, as well as the understanding of that concept, should be theoretically equivalent, as a result of equivalent cognitive input. The personification of Death, a seemingly universal concept, provides a clear example that we cannot expect equivalence of mapping of the same concept across cultures to result in equivalent instantiations in the two cultures. Instead, the evolution and continuing existence of this concept in each culture results in variation as a direct result of cultural imagery, meaning and usage. Conceptual domains

and cognitive mapping demonstrate how metaphors and other linguistic phenomena play a role in our conceptualization of the world around us (Lakoff & Johnson 1980, Lakoff & Turner 1989, Kövecses 2002), but do not account for inevitable differences in various representations of the same phenomenon by two different cultures. Thus, the Grim Reaper and la Grande Faucheuse are similarly mapped and play equivalent roles, but their visual representation has not always been equivalent. Conceptual integration, as outlined by Fauconnier and Turner (2002) and Kövecses (2005), encompasses a more concrete notion of the role culture plays in influencing the creation of concepts and provides a foundation for how a concept may be created, but does not express how the concept is then understood and evoked in different cultures. Even in this case of apparently equivalent metaphors in French and English, there are a number of underlying differences that contribute to making the personification of Death much more culture bound. In addition, *conceptual mapping* should be viewed as structurally dynamic, in order to account for both diachronic and synchronic variations.

As a cognitive linguistic theory, *conceptual domains* define metaphors as the understanding of one conceptual domain in terms of another. A conceptual domain is a group of organized, coherent ideas that allow us to form comprehensible expressions. 'People are plants' forms a conceptual domain, as does 'human life is plant life'. As such, human life is conceptualized in terms of a plant's life and this conceptualization may consist of fundamental notions such as birth, growth and death. The theory of conceptual domains underlies linguistic metaphorical expressions such as 'seeds of life,' 'cut down in the prime of life,' and 'those children are growing like weeds,' explains Kövecses (2000). *Conceptual mapping* outlines the conceptual domain from whence metaphorical expressions are drawn as the source domain, and the conceptual domain understood by the metaphor is referred to as the target domain. In the case of the Grim Reaper, human death is the target domain and plant death is the source domain, and the linguistic expression The Reaper maps plant death onto human death. As well, the source domain of a skeleton representing death is mapped onto the target domain of seeking the dead in the human realm, which seems to stem from the medieval concept of the *Danse macabre*, or the Dance of Death, a common element of the macabre in both French and English, in which skeletons carry the dead off to the kingdom of the dead.

The theory of conceptual integration, or blended theory, which expands on the theory of conceptual mapping by adding conceptual blending, and by incorporating the embodied, thought-based view of metaphor, accommodates complex metaphors by combining basic metaphors.

In conceptual blending, at least two metaphors or concepts, each with its own mental space, exist with an overlap between the mental spaces. This overlap is referred to as a blended space. A blended space consists of the features of each metaphor or concept that are similar or which correspond in some way. The two concepts, death and reaping, have a blended space that consists of reaping-killing-causing death and plant-victim-the one who dies (Kövecses 2005:280). In this blended space, the one who causes death is reaping the one who dies, and this results in the personification of Death as a Reaper. According to this theory, in the speaker's mind, the personification of Death occurs before the mind enters the blended



Figure 1. Composite image of the painting 'La Mort', 1355 A.D., Lavaudieu, France.

space that further includes reaping (Kövecses 2005:281). Therefore, theoretically, the differences between the two images should become clear from the resulting personifications. Regardless, this theory does not account for obvious differences between the Grim Reaper and la Grande Faucheuse (see Websites following References at the end of this paper). For example, Kövecses states that 'the Grim Reaper kills a specific person and does not kill indiscriminately' (2005:281). While this is true for the Grim Reaper, who traditionally does not decide who dies but functions as the messenger or footman, it certainly does not hold true in the case of la Grande Faucheuse who seems to kill indiscriminately, especially as the blindfolded, 17th-century representation of la Faucheuse in **Figure 2** appears to be doing, and part of the Latin inscription on the top left-hand side of the image notes: 'I do not see you.'

In fact, the Reaper seems to possess a number of attributes that differentiate the concept between English and French. For example, the Grim Reaper is male, whereas la Grande Faucheuse is female; the skeleton has historically been an inherent physical feature of the English version but has only very recently become part of la Faucheuse's appearance. In addition, whereas the skeleton naturally has no eyes, but we might still believe it has some type of vision, la Faucheuse is represented as blindfolded in the 17th-century drawing. In order to accommodate these differences, the conceptual network described by Kövecses (2005:280) would need to be expanded. His diagram is used to explain both the French and English personifications of Death, but our study reveals that they are only partially equivalent. Indeed, the variations themselves are too different to be considered simply as one more element to input into the mapping. To complicate the matter, an examination



Figure 2. 17th-century depiction of la Faucheuse (the Reaper) by an unknown artist.

of la Grande Faucheuse over time provides evidence that English culture has influenced French culture, at least inasmuch as the visual representation is concerned. Concept blending is a fairly slippery theory, as Lady Justice is also often depicted wearing a blindfold, just as the 17th-century Faucheuse is depicted wearing a blindfold, which causes one to wonder whether the representation of la Faucheuse involved a blended concept that incarnates attributes from Lady Justice?

2. EVIDENCE OF DIFFERENCES. Evidence that this concept did not evolve over time in a similar fashion in the two languages, as one might expect, appears upon examination of the concept through history in the visual arts and literature. The changes in this concept are especially evident with la Grande Faucheuse from the Middle Ages to the present day, whereas the concept of the Grim Reaper has remained fairly stable over time. In particular, the visual arts depict the clear transformation from the original French image of Death to a close resemblance of the currently accepted English version. A painting inspired by the Black Plague (**Figure 1**), and found in Lavaudieu, France, entitled 'Mors' ('Death'), and dated 1355 A.D., clearly represents an arrow-holding, living woman as the figure of death. From this image, we can see that, prior to the French culture's exposure to reaping, Death was represented as a woman, fully clothed, blindfolded, with a bow and arrows, killing those around her with those arrows. Then, in the 17th-century, there appeared a pencil sketch by an unknown artist (**Figure 2**), which depicts a person in a field, blindfolded, naked and carrying a bow and arrows, which weapons are perhaps reminiscent of Diana, goddess of the hunt, while reaping with a scythe. The human figure, apparently female, in this representation has long hair and a very thin waist, yet appears somewhat



Figure 3. Modern depiction of *La Faucheuse*.

muscular. A possible interpretation of this image is that there is a slight transformation occurring toward the English concept of the Reaper, manifested, for example, in the shift from arrows to scythe, and from fully clothed to skeletal. Today, a figure currently sold on eBay entitled ‘*La Faucheuse*’ confirms that a transformation has taken place (**Figure 3**), as this figure clearly and closely resembles the English Reaper, although it appears to still have female attributes, such as thinner, more delicate forearms, wrists and hands. This somewhat effeminate, cloaked skeletal figure carries a scythe, has no blindfold, and has acquired an hourglass. The male/female contrast may be reinforced by the fact that the word for death is masculine in Gaelic and German, and the masculine gender may have been inherited in English, in which it came to denote a male personification, and ‘*la mort*’ (death, in French) is a feminine-gender word, which may, at least partially, account for the female personification. Other personifications of death include Ankou, in Brittany, who is a living, male figure, and whose creation might be partially attributed to the fact that the word death is masculine in Celtic.¹

Throughout the same period of history, the image of the Grim Reaper has remained consistent. Early depictions of Death prior to the institution of reaping include skeletons and cloaks and by the 17th century the Reaper image that is so familiar in modern English culture was clearly in place. A small carving over the door of St. Andrew’s Church in Barningham, UK, dated 1640, depicts a skeleton carrying a scythe and an hourglass and wearing a cloak. This image is seen today in posters, figurines, movies, etc. In English, the term Grim Reaper is reserved for only this mythical figure, which is consistent with the language’s conceptualization of the Reaper. However, in French, the term ‘*la Grande Faucheuse*’ is now currently used to refer to the untimely demise wreaked by tuberculosis (as confirmed by several Librarians at the *Bibliothèque nationale* in Paris, June 2006), as well as to cases of bankruptcy in the business world.

3. ENGLISH INFLUENCE. It is possible that representations of the English concept of the Grim Reaper, with its attributes, abundant in American literature, have facilitated the change in the concept of Death in French culture. Edgar Allen Poe, famous for all things macabre, wrote many short stories in the early 1800's, which included skeletons and scythes. The *Pit and the Pendulum* describes monks wearing cloaks, as well as skeletons and a scythe in reference to time. *The Gold Bug* refers to a skull and a scythe and *A Predicament* refers to a scythe, also in reference to time. There are many more examples in Poe's work, which greatly influenced French literature in many ways during that time, particularly in French poetry (Riddel 1995, Wetherill 1962, Cambiaire 1970). Therefore, by association, concepts such as the Reaper would have influenced French literature, as well. In addition, Longfellow's collection of poetry entitled *Voices of the Night* (1838) contains 'The Reaper and the Flowers,' a poem that clearly references the personification of Death as the Reaper, carrying a sickle and acting on someone else's behalf. The first stanza of 'The Reaper and the Flowers' reads:

There is a Reaper whose name is Death
And, with his sickle keen,
He reaps the bearded grain at a breath,
And the flowers that grow between.

In this stanza, we note the personification of Death as a male Reaper, who carries a sickle, and reaps grain and the flowers growing among the grain.

In 1856, the poem 'Mors' was included in the collection entitled *Les contemplations*, written by Victor Hugo. In it, we see the same clear connection between Death and la Faucheuse, who has now become a skeleton with bony fingers and rays of light visible between the bones of its rib cage (line 1: *Je vis cette faucheuse* 'I saw that reaper', line 3: *Noir squelette laissant passer le crépuscule* 'Black skeleton allowing the dusk to show through it', and line 14: *Des mains aux doigts osseux sortant des noirs grabats* 'Hands with bony fingers emerging from black pallets'). While a transition toward the English version of the Reaper appears to exist in this poem, so do some of the traditional French attributes, such as female gender and the implications of greatness—*elle changeait en désert Babylone* 'changing Babylon into a desert'—which exist still today in the French concept of la Grande Faucheuse. Longfellow studied and taught modern languages and traveled throughout Europe, providing ample opportunity for his work to influence French literature. Also of note here is the fact that Longfellow's poem appeared almost 20 years before Hugo's, that Hugo had read Longfellow and held him in high esteem ('Victor Hugo saluted Longfellow as a man who brought honor to America... he was clearly the uncrowned poet laureate' [Hirsh 14:1964]), and that Hugo may have borrowed some of the attributes of Death from Longfellow's Reaper, possibly to render homage to him. Part of our thesis is that English, or more exactly American, literary icons such as Longfellow and, of course, Edgar Allen Poe were admired by their French literary contemporaries, and therefore influenced Hugo and other French writers and poets, who then modified the French representation of la Grande Faucheuse to the point of bringing it very close to the English representation of the Grim Reaper, a modification noted in the visual arts, as well.

4. CONCLUSION. In conclusion, we feel that we have presented an example of intercultural concept blending, in which the French culture's 17th-century representation of la Fauchuse was already an intracultural blended concept, perhaps with Lady Justice or the goddess Diana, or both. It then evolved to become very close to the English culture's representation of the Grim Reaper. Without doubt, the French concept of la Fauchuse originated as a very different, perhaps even vague, concept that developed over a long period of time and acquired its current features only recently (20th century). Current technological advances such as television and the internet have sealed the Reaper's fate in French and hence the current Reaper-like eBay image of la Fauchuse will prevail, demonstrating the potential of long-term exposure to another culture to increase the likelihood that one culture's icons will cross over and become one token in the set of another culture's icons. One might think of the Michelin man as a French icon that has entered English culture through television commercials. Yet, might one envision concept blending between the Michelin man and the Jet-puffed Marshmallow man, or the Pilsbury doughboy? Although many factors contribute to the formation of a concept, such as culture and cognition, certain concepts may be equivalent for different cultures, as well as being subsequently influenced by other cultures. Also, certain concepts are clearly subject to cultural instantiation after they are formed, and this instantiation accounts for different representations of the concept in different languages, either overtly or covertly. Therefore, concept blending should also be examined from an intercultural point of view, and not uniquely from an intra-cultural point of view. In the case of the Grim Reaper and la Grande Fauchuse, the individual instantiations are covertly different but the implications of this difference, for translation and conceptual domains, mapping and blending are more indicative of how separate and distinct various cultures actually are from each other. Indeed, how can a bilingual dictionary pretend to offer the 'translation' of a concept, when the two concepts in question are actually very different? And, by extension, how can intercultural communication take place effectively when differences in gender, semantic fields and connotations, are not taken into account in the presentation of two apparently very similar, but inherently very different, concepts.

¹ Our theory, which is not undisputed (Guthke 1999), was partially substantiated during a discussion regarding this point at the LACUS 2006 conference (Toronto, Ontario, Canada, August 2006), thanks to the linguistic expertise of Robert Orr and others.

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WEBSITES

- <http://web.ubc.ca/okanagan/critical/faculty/lcard.html>. [Note: The PowerPoint presentation of this paper can be viewed by clicking on the link entitled 'The Grim Reaper vs. La Grande Faucheuse' at this address.]
- <http://www.lamortdanslart.com/divers/divers.htm> (accessed March 3, 2007).
- http://www.norfolkcoast.co.uk/curiosities/cu_grimreaper.htm (accessed March 3, 2007).
- http://www.pantheon.org/areas/gallery/folklore/folklore/grim_reaper.html (accessed March 3, 2007).
- <http://www.vaes.vt.edu/steeles/mccormick/harvest.html> (accessed March 3, 2007).

APPENDIX: TIMELINE

