

**60 Euphemisms for Death! | Otherwords**  
**<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IxzNEMnzmeg>**  
**Transcript: <https://dontveter.com/ec/death.pdf>**

The words death, die, and dead are all likely derived from the proto Indo-European root *deu* which meant to die, faint, or vanish.

It's also where we get the word funeral, but if you're actually at a funeral, you probably wouldn't use any of these words.

It just feels too blunt to say, sorry he's dead.

When discussing topics that are sensitive or taboo, people often employ euphemisms, words or phrases that replace direct terms in order to spare feelings, avoid embarrassment, or even out of superstition.

And when it comes to sensitive or taboo topics, nothing is as universally avoided, yet universally unavoidable, as death.

So it's got a lot of euphemisms in virtually every language.

Whether you believe that you're going somewhere or getting reincarnated or will just cease to exist, you're going to have to face your own mortality at some point.

So why not talk about it now? Euphemistically, of course.

Perhaps the safest way to talk about death is to avoid the act of dying altogether and instead focus on the person's absence.

So you might say they're gone or no longer with us or in Mandarin, they're already not here.

If you're religious, you might attribute that absence to a deity, saying they are with the Lord, or summoned by God, or had Allah take their soul.

Many euphemisms frame death as a journey or crossing.

You might say someone passed, departed, slipped away, or even sprouted wings.

Some sayings even specify the destination.

In China, you can fly on a crane to the Western paradise.

In America, you can ride to the happy hunting grounds, a term for the afterlife that has been attributed to Native Americans, but was more likely made up by European colonists.

You can meet St. Peter at the Pearly Gates, or if you're into Greek mythology, you can cross the river Styx, an underworld waterway where souls would be ferried across by the boatman, Charon.

And if the deceased is a pet, they might cross the rainbow bridge, perhaps an allusion to the Bifrost bridge of Norse mythology. This stupid dog won't die.

Doors, gates, rivers, and bridges are common imagery, highlighting the belief in a boundary between worlds, which the deceased would have to somehow penetrate.

By the way, figures like Charon or St. Peter or the Grim Reaper, whose job is to guide souls across that boundary are known as psychopomps, which is a pretty cool word, and would also be a great name for a Neo-rockabilly band.

And speaking of rockabilly, another departure metaphor can be traced to The King himself.

To try to get the crowd to go home after his concerts, announcers would tell them that Elvis has left the building.

Ever since he joined the Choir Invisible, "left the building" has become a euphemism for dying.

Slumber is another popular metaphor for death, which is not surprising since it's the closest experience in life we have to relate to.

You can be laid to rest or take the big sleep.

In Afrikaans, you close your eyes for the last time, fall into an eternal dream in Hungarian and use the earth as your blanket in Lakota.

That sounds nice. I mean, who doesn't like sleep?

On the other hand, you can also take a dirt nap or sleep with the fishes, which sound decidedly less pleasant. (Concrete galoshes in a Star Trek episode, really cement overshoes.)

These are examples of dysphemisms, substitutions that are deliberately blunt or insensitive.

So euphemistically, someone might breathe their last, but dysphemistically, that old geezer down the road finally bit the dust.

There are a lot of dysphemisms for dying like croaking or giving up the ghost.

You might use them to celebrate the expiration of someone you didn't like, but they can also serve a positive function.

To give us a sense of power over something scary and confusing.

After all, how can I be afraid of carking it when I talk about it so cavalierly?

A popular dysphemism for death in the UK is popped his clogs, which means pawned his shoes because he won't be needing them anymore and funerals are expensive.

A lot of death metaphors deal with the things you won't need or can't use.

According to the Portuguese, you won't be eating mangoes next season.

You won't be eating anything in fact, so you may as well stick your spoon in the wall and leave your teeth behind.

You can also kick the calendar because time is a living person's problem and swallow your birth certificate because age is irrelevant at this point.

However, the Seediq people of Taiwan hold out hope for one more meal because their dead go to plant yams.

But perhaps the most dysphemistic ways of referring to death involve the grave.

Six feet under, bought a pine condo, went into the fertilizer business, food for worms, even wearing wooden pajamas.

These sayings ignore the lofty journeys of the soul, and instead describe what happens to your physical body after death, which let's be honest, isn't pretty.

Some refer to the position of the body like belly up, toes up, or stretching one's legs.

A lot of languages focus on the flowers.

Whether you're pushing up daisies in English, raising mallow in Spanish, looking at daisies from below in Dutch, smelling flowers from below in Hebrew and Polish violets in particular in Hungarian or eating dandelions by the roots in French.

These sayings might be oddly specific, but you could still sort of guess their meaning if you'd never heard them before.

This is not true of idioms, which are phrases whose origins are now so obscure that they make no literal sense today.

The most famous English idiom for death is probably kick the bucket.

Some suggests that this refers to a particular method of hanging, but it's more likely that the bucket of this phrase is an old term for the wooden beam that an animal's feet would be tied to for slaughtering.

Quite a grizzly image to end up on so many travel blogs.

Another popular idiom is bought the farm.

Again, a widespread and probably incorrect explanation claims that test pilots in World War One used this term because if you crashed your plane into a nearby field, the government would reimburse the property owner for the damage, which could then be used to pay off the mortgage, I.E. buy the farm.

The abbreviation "i.e." originates from the Latin phrase "id est," which translates to "that is" or "in other words." It is used to clarify or explain a statement further.

But whenever the origin for an idiom just sounds a little too tidy, it probably isn't true.

In fact, referring to death as buying a plot, predates airplanes by several decades.

So the farm in question is more likely just a metaphor for the grave, which you purchase with your life.

Buying the farm and popping your clogs aren't the only sayings that frame death as a transaction.

You can also cash in your chips, get your ticket punched, and check out.

Humans have long seen death as a time for squaring up old debts.

In ancient Greece, mourners would place a coin in the deceased's mouth before burial, so they'd have money to pay the boatman.

Hey, even psychopomps gotta make a living.

It makes sense that we have so many terms for death because our feelings about it are so complicated.

One word was never going to cover the vast array of human emotions and experiences that revolve around it.

We may disagree about what happens after we've sung our swan song.

Perhaps we'll meet our maker or maybe we're just plain brown bread, but at least the debate will be colorful.