



# The Final Fight: An Analysis of Metaphors in Online Obituaries of Professional Athletes

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## Abstract

In literature, obituaries from different cultures and languages have been studied on different levels and from different perspectives. One of the popular research topics is the use of metaphors, since metaphors help to cope with death, which in modern society is still a taboo. This article presents a bottom-up, primarily qualitative analysis of the metaphors in 150 obituaries of sportspeople, published in online versions of newspapers/magazines and on the Internet. As expected, the obituaries contain the traditional metaphors of death. Also more original, creative metaphors are introduced to describe death in a euphemistic way. Some of those have a link to sports but not systematically to the sport practiced by the deceased.

## Keywords

obituaries, metaphors, sportspeople, discourse analysis, communication

Although there has been extensive research on obituaries of different professional groups, there does not seem to be any study that focuses on the obituaries of sportspeople. Obituaries offer excellent material to examine the use of metaphors, since they deal with death, which is still a powerful taboo in modern

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society (Crespo Fernández, 2011). In this article, we present a primarily qualitative analysis of the use of metaphors in the obituaries of sportspeople. More specifically, we investigate whether there is a relation between the metaphors used in the obituary and the sport practiced by the deceased. We considered metaphors describing death and suffering in a euphemistic way and metaphors that are introduced to describe the feelings and sorrow of the people left behind.

The research material for this article consists of 150 online obituaries, which were collected on Dutch and Belgian<sup>1</sup> websites between November 2015 and January 2016 (Rockelé, 2016). The decedents to whom the obituaries are dedicated are both male and female athletes from different sports disciplines (football, athletics, cycling, snooker, etc.). The material contains 63,537 words; the average length of the obituaries is 423.58 words.

### *Literature*

Obituaries have already been studied extensively. Our search of online databases has resulted in about 150 papers on obituaries in English alone. There are studies that concentrate on discursal, structural, rhetorical, intercultural, and graphical aspects of the obituaries themselves. Obituaries have also been used as research material for studies in different scientific domains: demographic studies (e.g., Matcha & Hutchinson, 1997; Marks & Piggee, 1998), gender studies (e.g., Moremen & Craddock 1998; Hartl, Kirchler, & Muehlbacher, 2013), sociological studies (e.g., Kastenbaum, Peyton, & Kastenbaum, 1977; Anderson & Han, 2008), etc.

A recurring demarcation of the research material in those papers is that of professional groups: U.S. veterinarians (Blair & Hayes, 1982), academics (Macfarlane & Chan, 2012; Tight, 2008), librarians (Dilevko & Gottlieb, 2004), male attorneys (Vieweg, Dougherty, & Barfield, 2003), physicians (Hayes & White, 1987; Hermann, 1989; Katz & Slade, 2006; Wright & Roberts, 1997), psychologists (Kinnier, Metha, Buki, & Rawa, 1994; Radtke, Hunter, & Stam, 2000), and military personnel (Askildson, 2007).

The presence of the topic “sports” is very limited in studies on obituaries. End, Meinert, Worthman, and Mauntel’s (2009) study is the only article that deals exclusively with the sports domain. The authors examine whether sports involvement, in particular as a supporter, is important enough to be mentioned in someone’s obituary. As sports involvement is mentioned in 21.6% of the obituaries in their research material, they conclude that:

While sport involvement may not be the most central or consistently mentioned aspect of the deceased person’s self-concept publicized in the obituary’s content, the frequency of mention here suggests sport can be a defining aspect of life. (End et al., 2009, p. 553)

Epstein and Epstein (2013) analyze *New York Times* obituaries to examine the link between occupation and mortality. Sportspeople's obituaries are one of the subgroups in their material (besides, e.g., performers, business workers, and political workers). According to Epstein and Epstein (2013), performance-related careers may result in a shorter life expectancy. Consequently, young people considering a career in professional sports are faced with the difficult choice between shortening their life expectancy by maximizing their potential and choosing a normal life span by not fully exploiting their potential. Cain (2010) uses obituaries to describe the life and status of amateur cricketers in the Victorian Age. One of his conclusions is that most of them attended public schools and that there is a predominance of military personnel.

The majority of studies focuses on a particular structural, linguistic, content-related, multimodal, or rhetorical aspect of obituaries. A well-exploited topic is that of metaphors in obituaries (e.g., Al-Kharabsheh, 2011; Cheung & Ho, 2004; Crespo Fernández, 2006, 2007; Dieltjens & Heynderickx, 2012; Heynderickx & Dieltjens, 2016; Sexton, 1997). Based on the Conceptual Metaphor Theory of Lakoff and Johnson, Crespo Fernández (2011) offers a framework for the categorization of metaphors of death in obituaries and epitaphs. He distinguishes six conceptual mappings of death: a journey, a loss, a sleep/rest, a joyful life, a call from God, and the end. Those metaphors are illustrated in the Results section.

Online technology and social media have made it possible to mourn the deceased on the Internet. The online versions of obituaries are different from the print ones in form and content (McCartney, 2014). In such online memorials, emotions have a prominent place (Hume & Bressers, 2010; Degroot, 2012).

## Method

We opted to use online obituaries in order to have digital versions of the texts at our disposal. The quantitative analysis (e.g., average length) was done using the word counting function of Word. To analyze the content and the structure of the obituaries, the different topics and their occurrences were introduced in Excel. The metaphors were detected and analyzed by a close reading of the texts. The ambiguous passages were discussed by four researchers to reach interrater consensus.

First, a list of metaphors in the material was drawn up. That list was limited to those text elements that the researchers unequivocally identified as metaphors. The metaphors in that list were categorized, using the framework of Crespo Fernández's (2011) study as a starting point. New categories were added to the framework, if more than one example emerged during the analysis process. Metaphors whose classification was not unambiguous were not included in the article but were not omitted from the list, since the design and the goals of the article are primarily qualitative.

## Results

### *General Characterization of the Research Material*

A majority of the obituaries (113/150, 75.3%) have a section title indicating the text type. The most popular ones are “*In memoriam*” (40/150, 26.7%) and “RIP” (25/150, 16.7%). Forty-three section titles (28.7%) contain the name of the deceased without an indication of their death. The format of the texts, however, makes it clear at first glance that the texts are obituaries.

In 74% of the obituaries (111/150), a picture of the decedent is included. Sixty-four of those 111 obituaries (57.7%) show the deceased practicing his or her sport; 32 (28.8%) use a traditional, nonsporting picture; 11 obituaries (9.9%) combine pictures of both types. The others add pictures of, for example, the funeral or the church where the funeral was held. The presence of a picture is in line with Bonsu’s (2002) analysis of 73 obituaries, which almost without exception contained a picture. However, of the 2,262 obituaries analyzed by Marks and Piggee (1998), only 4% were accompanied by a photograph.

The author of the text is mentioned in 113 obituaries (75.3%). In 103 of those, the full name is given. The others use initials or the name can be deduced from the blog’s URL.

**Table 1.** Presence of the Topics.

Topics	Occurrences (150 = 100%)
1 Who died	98.7%
When	53.3%
Where	33.3%
Age	60.7%
2 Information on birthplace	24%
Information on parents	18%
3 Information on youth and studies	18%
4 Information on career in sports	83.3%
5 Information on hobbies (other than sports)	7.3%
6 Description of the sporting qualities	74%
7 Information on the family (excluding parents)	28%
8 Expressions of sympathy and compassion	80%
9 Information on the funeral	14.7%
10 Quotes from the deceased	20.7%
11 Cause of death	52%

The deceased in our research material are almost exclusively male (144 male vs. 6 female, 96% vs. 4%). The predominance of male obituaries is not surprising since it is present in the vast majority of studies of obituaries (for an overview: cf. Heynderickx & Dieltjens, 2016).

Extensive research has been done on the content of obituaries. Based on our analysis of the research material, we have added two topics (Topics 10 and 11 in Table 1) to the nine topics of Moses and Marelli's (2003) study. Table 1 shows the occurrence of the different topics. We illustrate the different topics with an example to give an impression of the material used for the analysis.

- (1) Topic 1: De 26-jarige spits van Club Brugge en de Rode Duivels, François Sterchele, is omgekomen bij een verkeersongeval in Vrasene. [The 26-year-old striker of Club Brugge and the Red Devils, François Sterchele, has died in a car crash in Vrasene.]
- (2) Topic 2: Het is vandaag dag op dag 28 jaar geleden dat Kristof Goddaert in Sint-Niklaas het levenslicht zag. [Today, it is exactly 28 years ago that Kristof Goddaert saw the light of day, in Sint-Niklaas.]
- (3) Topic 3: Fons Brydenbach studeerde Lichamelijke Opvoeding aan de KU Leuven en . . . [Fons Brydenback studied PT at KU Leuven and . . .]
- (4) Topic 4: Het absolute hoogtepunt van zijn carrière wordt de Luik-Bastenaken-Luik van dat seizoen. [The absolute highlight of his career is the Liège-Bastogne-Liège race of that season.]
- (5) Topic 5: Geen belangenvermenging voor hem, daar stond de muziekliebhaber op. [No conflict of interest for him—that was a prerequisite for the music lover.]
- (6) Topic 6: Zijn wapen was zijn turnverleden. Hij was zo soepel en lenig dat hij met de fiets alles kon. [His strong point was his experience in gymnastics. He was so limber and flexible that he could do anything with a bicycle.]
- (7) Topic 7: Theo laat zijn vrouw Marieke en dochter Lotte achter, en uit een eerder huwelijk zoon Luuk en dochter Tess. [Theo leaves behind his wife Marieke and daughter Lotte and from an earlier marriage son Luuk and daughter Tess.]
- (8) Topic 8: De directie, spelers, staff en medewerkers van RSCA betuigen hun oprechte medeleven aan zijn familie en vrienden in deze moeilijke periode. [The management, players, staff, and employees of Royal Sporting Club Anderlecht express their sincere condolences to his family and friends in these difficult times.]
- (9) Topic 9: De uitvaartplechtigheid heeft plaats op zaterdag 20 juni om 13.30 uur in de Aula van Uitvaartverzorging Bussels, Scholtisplein 22 in 3680 Neeroeteren. [The funeral will take place on Saturday 20 June at 1.30 p.m. in the Auditorium of Funeral Services Bussels, Scholtisplein 22 in 3680 Neeroeteren.]
- (10) Topic 10: In de documentaire *Football's Greatest* van Sky Sports zei Eusébio in 2011: "Ik hoop dat de rouwstoet bij het beeld van mij voor

het stadion van Benfica even stopt, dan een ronde om het stadion maakt en dan naar binnen gaat.” [In 2011, in the Sky Sports’ documentary *Football’s Greatest*, Eusébio said: “I hope that the funeral procession will halt at my statue in front of the Benfica stadium, go around the stadium once and then enter it.”]

- (11) Topic 11: Twee dagen na het einde van de zesdaagse van Grenoble pleegde Dimitri De Fauw zelfmoord. [Two days after the end of the Six Days of Grenoble, Dimitri De Fauw committed suicide.]

## The Use of Metaphors

After identifying the metaphors in the material, we divided them in two categories: traditional and less traditional death metaphors. The less traditional death metaphors can again be subdivided in two groups: those who have to do with the sportsperson and sports and those without a link to sports.

*Traditional death metaphors.* As expected, the traditional death metaphors as described by Crespo Fernández (2011), except for “death as a joyful life,” are present in the obituaries of sportspeople. Some traditional metaphors are easily detectable. In (12), for example, death is presented as a journey to another place.

- (12) Daniel Aguilon is naar de eeuwige jachtvelden vertrokken. [Daniel Aguilon has left for the happy hunting grounds.]

The concept of a journey is also introduced to describe the feelings of those left behind (13).

- (13) Achteraf heb ik tegen Wouters vriendin en ouders gezegd dat hij voor altijd met mij zal meerijden in de bus. [Afterward, I told Wouter’s girlfriend and parents that he will always ride with me on the coach.]

Examples (14) through (16) illustrate, respectively, the metaphors “death as a loss,” “death as a sleep/rest” and “death as the end.”

- (14) Een jonge talentvolle voetballer die ons veel te snel is ontnomen, je had nog zo’n mooie toekomst voor je. [A young talented football player who was taken from us much too soon; the future looked so bright for you.]
- (15) Rust zacht, mooie sterke krijger. [Rest in peace, beautiful, strong warrior.]

- (16) Het trieste einde van de man die ooit als de gedoodverfde opvolger van Eddy Merckx werd beschouwd. [The sad end of the man who was once considered to be the designated successor of Eddy Merckx.]

In the conceptual mapping “death as a call from God,” God is transformed to sports’ gods in obituaries of sportspeople. This is, for example, the case in (18), in which the concept of death as a call is explicitly mentioned by the verb *roepen* (to call).

- (18) ... maar ook diegenen wiens carrière door de sportgoden abrupt een halt werd toegeroepen. [. . . but also those whose career was suddenly put to a stop by the gods of sports.]

*Other death metaphors.* The material contains less traditional death metaphors as well. Some of those can be linked with sports or sporting activities, but there are also some less traditional death metaphors that have no relation to sports.

The death metaphors linked with sports are of two types. First, we have metaphors associated with combat sports. Death is described as the loss of a fight at the end of a (glorious) life (19) or as a blow to those left behind (20). To indicate that the sportsperson has died despite a brave fight, the adjective *laatste* (final) is sometimes added (21).

- (19) Met Barça behaalde hij hoogtepunt na hoogtepunt, maar zijn persoonlijke strijd tegen kanker verloor hij. [With Barça, he reached highlight after highlight, but he lost his personal battle against cancer.]
- (20) Het moet een grote klap geweest zijn. Dat was het voor mij ook. [It must have been a massive blow. It was for me too.]
- (21) ... toen hij doorhad dat zijn laatste gevecht een verloren zaak was. [. . . when he realized that his final fight was a lost cause.]

The second type compares death with a sporting event, for example, a bicycle race (22) or a football game (23). In one particular case, it is not death, but life itself that is compared to a racing-track (24), since one can only die once.

- (22) De laatste wedstrijd die hij reed, heeft hij verloren. Bij de eindmeet stonden geen camera’s, geen publiek. [The last race he rode, he lost. There were no cameras or audience at the finish line.]
- (23) Tim Nicot gaf zich altijd de volle honderd procent om Beerschot te laten winnen, maar zijn eigen match verliest hij. [Tim Nicot always gave it his all to secure Beerschot’s victory, but he lost his own game.]
- (24) Op het parcours van het leven miste hij al eens een bocht. [On life’s track, he missed a few bends.]

The obituaries contain three types of less traditional death metaphors without any link to sports: Death is presented as a new life (25), a fading star (26), and a dark mist (27).

- (25) François Sterchele leeft verder als een ster aan de blauwzwarte hemel, of wie weet wel als de zon. [François Sterchele lives on as a star in the blue-and-black<sup>2</sup> sky or perhaps even as the sun.]
- (26) Uitblinken of uitdoven, voor Frank VDB bestond er geen tussenweg. [To shine or to fade—for Frank VDB,<sup>3</sup> there was no middle ground.]
- (27) De dood van Wouter Weylandt hult de Belgische wielerveder echter in een donkere mist. [The death of Wouter Weylandt wraps the Belgian cycling spring in a dark mist.]

## Discussion and Conclusions

The analysis of 150 obituaries of sportspeople confirms that obituaries are a homogeneous, stable genre (Moses & Marelli, 2003; Heynderickx & Dieltjens, 2016). Even though the material consists of online obituaries, the structure and the format of the texts are as predictable as those of print obituaries. The metaphors which are typical of obituaries and epitaphs (Crespo Fernández, 2011) and which are introduced to talk euphemistically about death are also present in obituaries of sportspeople.

In literature, a distinction is made between different types of obituaries. For instance, Crespo Fernández's typology (2006) includes two types: informative and opinative obituaries. Tight (2008) distinguishes between traditional and untraditional obituaries, a distinction confirmed by Heynderickx & Dieltjens, 2016. The differences between the traditional and the untraditional obituaries lie at different levels: format, content, structure, and language use. In the research material of Heynderickx & Dieltjens, 2016, the majority of the untraditional obituaries have a letter format, which explains some of the differences. One of the characteristics of untraditional obituaries is the greater presence of metaphors that do not fit the categorization of Crespo Fernández (2011). Based on the presence of those less traditional metaphors in the obituaries of sportspeople—in combination with other aspects such as the pictures chosen by the authors, the inclusion of quotes by people close to the deceased and of memorable utterances of the deceased—some of the obituaries of sportspeople can be characterized as untraditional obituaries. Those obituaries are written in a more personal style. In (28), for example, the author refers to himself in the first personal singular and tells personal anecdotes.

- (28) Als kind ging ik ooit samen met mijn vader naar zijn Kerkraadse bloemenzaak om een vaantje van Roda te kopen. Dick stond als vanzelfsprekend zelf achter de toonbank, signeerde het vaantje en gaf mij bij het afscheid een



aai over de bol. Het was niet lang na zijn beroemde doelpunt voor Oranje in de WK-finale tegen Argentinië. [When I was a child, I once went to his flower shop in Kerkrade with my father to buy a Roda pennant. Of course, Dick himself was behind the counter, he signed the pennant and gave me a pat on the head. It was not long after his famous goal for Holland in the final of the World Cup against Argentina.]

Some of the untraditional metaphors that are introduced in the obituaries of sportspeople are linked to sports but not necessarily to the sport practiced by the deceased athlete. Combat sports are apparently a good source for metaphors, since they allow the description of a (lost) battle against a (fatal) disease in an indirect, euphemistic way. The metaphors that are linked to the athlete's sport are usually very general. There is a parallel with obituaries in staff magazines (Heynderickx & Dieltjens, 2016), in which there are metaphors that refer to the professional occupation or qualities of the deceased. Compare: The deceased in example (29) was an accountant in a bank.

(29) Now our Blessed Lord himself draws up the balance sheet of this human existence. He calculates how this great treasurer has used his faculties and his talents. We are firmly convinced that for our deceased friend the final reckoning will be very favorable.

There are references to sports that are only detectable by readers who have some knowledge of sports, teams, or the context of certain sporting activities. We gave examples in which the team colors are mentioned (Example 25) or in which the athlete is referred to by an abbreviation (Example 26). Example (23) has a more covert link to cycling: Only people who know that cyclists are taken from one place to another in a team coach can interpret the reference to a coach. At the same time, the traditional obituary image of a journey is present.

As was already demonstrated in earlier research (Heynderickx & Dieltjens, 2016), metaphors in obituaries serve a specific function: They contribute to the denial of death both on the spatial and temporal dimensions. Death is presented as moving to another dimension either to another place or to a different time line. In this way, the authors of the obituaries try to cope with the loss of someone they admired. Example (25) even explicitly uses the verb *voortleven* (to live on). In Example (30), the author wishes the deceased a happy future. Presenting the deceased as an example to others adds to the idea that they are living on (Example 31). Someone's death is used as a teachable moment (Schrader, 2009).

(30) Jomme, het ga je goed! [Jomme, I wish you well.]

(31) Je was een voorbeeld van torenhoge inzet en ongeziene drang om te winnen, die inspirerend werkte op gans de ploeg. [You were an example of gigantic

commitment and of an unseen urge to win, which was an inspiration to the whole team.]

A consequence of the denial of death is sometimes surprisingly optimistic tone of obituaries. In earlier publications, we labeled this discrepancy between the text type and the optimistic atmosphere the happiness–sadness paradox. The combat metaphors, however, are in contrast with that paradox, since they stress the fact that the fight or the game was lost.

In conclusion, as was to be expected, online obituaries of sportspeople contain metaphors to talk about (disease and) death in a euphemistic way. The presence of sports-related metaphors is less prominent than expected. One possible explanation is that a large part of the analyzed obituaries are written by fans and not by professional writers who have more experience in writing texts. Exploring this systematically by comparing printed and online obituaries could be an interesting topic of follow-up research. On a more general level, obituaries of sportspeople have the typical format, structure, and linguistic characteristics of other obituaries. The fact that they are online obituaries has limited impact, except for the greater frequency of pictures.

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### **Notes**

1. More specifically Flemish websites (i.e., from the Dutch-speaking part of Belgium).
2. Blue and black are the club colors of the team for which Sterchele played.
3. In the Belgian media, the professional cyclist Frank Vandenbroucke was always referred to with the abbreviation of his family name.

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