



Photo: Magdalena Biela

# Language mask and the axiological aspect of difficult concepts

## A theoretical contribution supported by an empirical study

### 2 Language mask

- as any other mask – a **tool to „hide and show”** at the same time
- a **“veiled presence”** of the content
- puts an additional “layer” on the expressed content, as if “wrapping” it
- a strategy, a powerful **cognitive, semantic and pragmatic** tool
- **selects** aspects to be shown and those to be hidden
- **profiles** the expressed concept, modifies its conceptualisation and perception
- enables **manipulating** the expressed message – intentionally (although not necessarily consciously)
- may **modify the axiological charge** of the content, i.e. by highlighting the axiological load of a given aspect, which may vary from the axiological charge of the concept as a whole
- **pretends, entertains, protects**
- a meta-tool in communication, used in different **contexts**; reasons: emotional (coping with feelings), social (politeness), manipulative (persuasion), cognitive (dealing with the complicated or abstract), relevance (profiling, exposing the most relevant)
- especially present with **controversial, and taboo** concepts, e.g. DEATH



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### Functional typology of masks in language and culture. Each type of mask corresponds to a prototype in the physical world:

MASK TYPE	FUNCTION	PHYSICAL WORLD PROTOTYPE
1. protective masks in „good intention”	protect, work for the benefit of the:	a) wearer (sender): protect them from external threats <i>gas mask</i>
		b) the other party (receiver): protect them from the threat of the wearer/message <i>surgeon's mask</i>
2. protective masks in „bad intention”	protect the wearer, enable to act against the other party, being unidentified and not taking responsibility for one's actions/intentions:	a) conceal the wearer <i>thief mask</i>
		b) mislead the other party <i>wolf in a sheep's skin</i>
3. social masks	concealing enables to disobey norms and social rules, provides entertainment and freedom of expression without taking responsibility for it	<i>carnival mask</i>
4. mediating masks	enable an invisible spirit or abstract concept become physically accessible, express the inexpressible	<i>ritual mask</i>
5. depicting masks	copy reality (a person's face when alive or dead), create a lookalike, and potentially make it immortal	<i>death/life mask</i>
6. exaggerating masks	express the characteristic features of the face which are relevant in a given context, symbolically strengthen the message, simplify perception	<i>theatre mask</i>

The function of language mask – fulfilled by various linguistic means: metaphor, metonymy, euphemism, impersonal forms, periphrasis, apophysis, understatement, litotes, hyperbole (might also give a humorous effect), index phrases (e.g. “these things”, “all this”, i.e. “pointing to” a reality without “touching” it), passive and impersonal constructions, implicatures, riddles (to be guessed from the context, e.g. *you-know-what*), magic cap (gaze, gesture, vague vocalisation instead of verbum proptum), humour (also irony), etc.

The concept of a language mask is a tool of **potential application** in analyses within cognitive pragmatics and semantics, semiotics, discourse analysis, sociolinguistics, political linguistics, translation studies, etc.



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### 3 Death and valuing

- **death**: one of the most difficult topics and undesired matters
- reasons: emotional, biological (fear, grief), social (politeness, taboo, sacrum), cognitive (complex concept, unknown).
- expressed indirectly (figurative language) - masked
- as other multidimensional concepts (all concepts?) – often subject to **profiling**
- **DEATH** - “the root of all evil”, reversion of life: **System of conceptualisations for life and death**
- LIFE IS A JOURNEY → DEATH IS DEPARTURE, PEOPLE ARE PLANTS → DEATH IS HARVEST, LIFE IS A FLAME → DEATH IS PUTTING OUT A FLAME (Lakoff & Turner 1989)
- conceptualisations refer to basic **pre-conceptual image schemata**, all of a **negative axiological charge**:
- NO CONTACT, NO FORCE, NO LINK, NO BALANCE, NO RHYTHM, NO ATTRACTION, BLOCKAGE, SPLITTING, BACK, LEFT, THERE, PERIPHERY, REPULSION, etc. (Krzeszowski 1990, 1997, 2006)

How to **modify the valuing** of a concept, **make death “good”**?  
-by modifying its conceptualization, e.g. a **reversion of the pre-conceptual schemata** in basic conceptual metaphors of the folk model of reality ⇒ reversion of the **worldview** ⇒ **reversion of values** ⇒ the “spiritual” model, also within the same conceptual metaphor of life and death:

DEATH IS SEPARATION → DEATH IS MEETING (LIFE IS A SOCIAL RELATION),  
DEATH IS THE END → DEATH IS THE BEGINNING (LIFE IS A REALITY WITH A BEGINNING AND AN END)  
DEATH IS DARKNESS → DEATH IS LIGHT (LIFE IS RELATED TO LIGHT) (Biela 2001, 2009)

Both models **coexist in language and culture** parallel and are present in many linguistic expressions. They are not mutually exclusive, but **mutually completing**, as death is a complex, multidimensional reality.

### 4 Research

**Participants:**  
457 adults, native speakers of English (165) and Polish (292)  
**Survey:** testing various axiological aspects in the domain DEATH/ŚMIERĆ (lexical field and semantic field).  
**2 sets of statements** - assessed in terms of their axiological load (on a 5-point binary scale min-max): respondents tried to guess the emotions (positive or negative) expressed by a given statement.

**SET I** – statements referring to valuing of the **lexical field** of the concepts DEATH/ŚMIERĆ, used literally or figuratively (as a source domain), in typical expressions and sample contexts.  
**RESEARCH QUESTION: What value do the words ‘death’ and ‘śmierć’ (and their derivatives) bring into linguistic expressions (contexts: metaphoric or literal) – and how does valuing vary?**

Background assumption: FAMA matrix (Krzeszowski 1997, 2006)

in force, hence:

- a positively valued concept + DEATH/ŚMIERĆ ⇒ negative overall valuing e.g. *my aunt (+) + died (-) ⇒ ☹*
- a negatively valued concept + DEATH/ŚMIERĆ ⇒ positive overall valuing e.g. *viruses (-) + died (-) ⇒ ☺*

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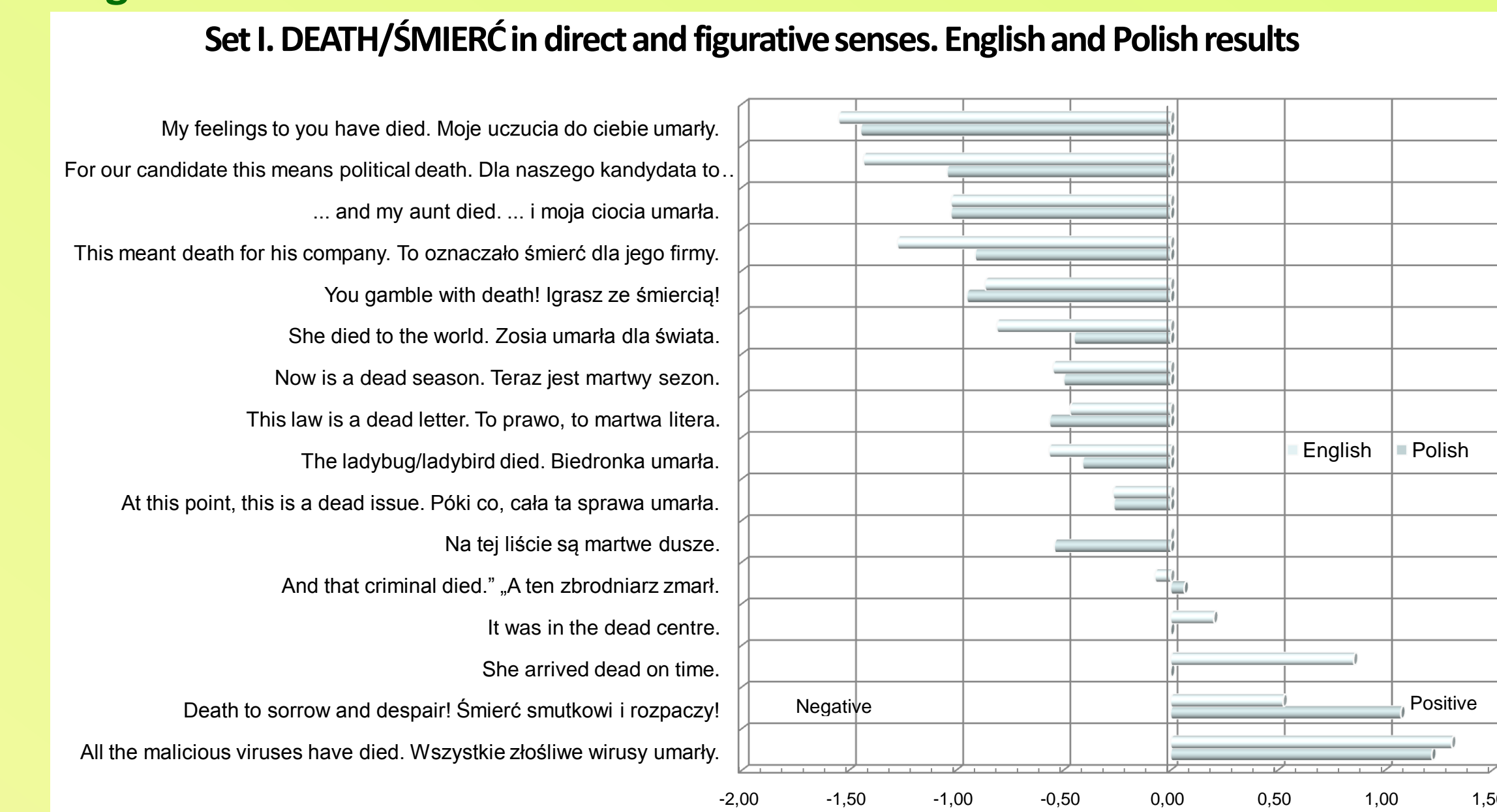
### In short:

**APPROACH:** cognitive semantics and pragmatics, axiology (valuing)  
**ASSUMPTION:** the axiological aspect - integrally present in categorising and thought. It concerns valuing of individual concepts and combinations, in context  
**THEORETICAL CONTRIBUTION:** the concept of language mask, functional typology of masks

**METHODOLOGICAL CHALLENGE:** to measure the axiological charge: survey  
**EMPIRICAL STUDY:** cross-cultural research on Polish- and English- native speakers  
**RESEARCH TOPIC:** how is the concept DEATH/ŚMIERĆ expressed, masked and valued

### 5 Results and interpretation

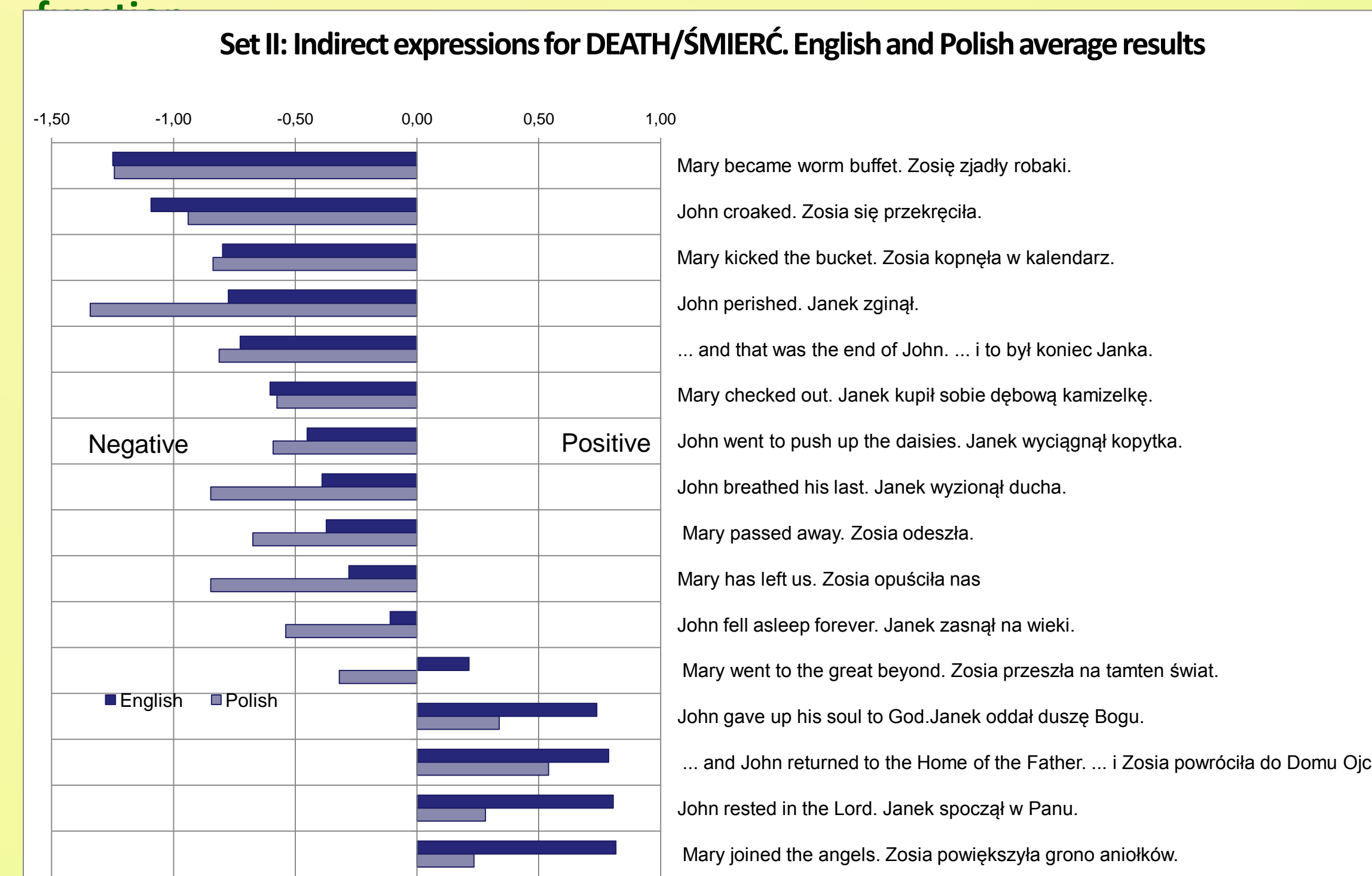
Diagram 1



- clear **patterns**, same for both languages
- DEATH/ŚMIERĆ generally carried a negative valuing; **exception:** *dead on time, dead centre*, present only in English (PRECISION – positive charge)
- most **Polish assessments slightly less negative** than English: either the axiological load of ŚMIERĆ is less negative than of DEATH, or the entities whom ŚMIERĆ affected were perceived as less positive, e.g. *ladybird*
- “The amount of evil” is not the same in each entity whom death affects: *that criminal* assessed negatively (positive overall value of the statement), however, less than *malicious viruses*.
- Standard deviation: **English: uniform responses** for *dead letter, dead centre, my aunt* (most cohesive valuing), **most diverse** for *that criminal, dead on time* (most controversial), **Polish: uniform responses** for *my feelings, this issue, dead letter, ladybird, most diverse* for *that criminal, political death, my aunt, died to the world* (most controversial valuing).

**SET II** – statements referring to the death of a person, masked by indirect expressions (tested: the cognitive domain of DEATH/ŚMIERĆ)  
**RESEARCH QUESTION: How do selected language masks modulate the valuing of DEATH/ŚMIERĆ?**

Diagram 2. Tested statements paired according to meaning, form and



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### Results cont.

- English speakers - found almost **all masked expressions about death less negative** than Poles
- Standard deviation: English: **uniform responses** for humorous and “neutral” expressions; most diverse for spiritual expressions; Polish: **most diverse for spiritual and humorous (!)**
- General: the **most negatively** valued masks – humorous, physical aspects of dying, negatively valued schemas: END, OUT, GO, LAST, AWAY, LEAVE. **Neutrally** valued masks: sleep, eternity
- Certain masks were valued **positively** not only just less negatively, in both languages: spiritual domains and positively valued concepts: RETURN, REST, JOIN, GOD, ANGELS, HOME, FATHER (see: Axiological Invariance Principle, Krzeszowski 1997, 2006).

### 6 Conclusions

- Masking affects the axiological load by changing the cognitive structure of the expressed content.
- The positively and negatively assessed language masks base on the same conceptual metaphors (but reverse perspective): “(Mary) has *left us*.” - “(Mary) *joined the angels*.” (LIFE IS A JOURNEY) “(Mary) *checked out*.” - “(John) *returned to the Home of the Father*”
- **Humour: controversial** and ambiguous. A seemingly mild or positive expression (*joining the angels*) on the one hand becomes strongly negative (disrespectful) if used with irony, but on the other hand humour, even black, copes with tension, “tames” death.
- Death – even though not experienced directly – is so close to us that we conceptualise many other things in terms of it (both the target and source domain of metaphors).

#### Cross-cultural differences:

**Set I:** Results suggest that in **Polish** the concept ŚMIERĆ “carries less evil” into expressions in its lexical field: in less central senses and abstract contexts.

**Set II - two hypotheses:** 1). ‘Death’, when the central sense is meant (only then), carries a **stronger negative** axiological load in **Polish** than in English, even if masked. 2). Because DEATH is “more evil” (see Set I), and thus more taboo in **English**, the masks have a **stronger function of coping**, work deeper, and alleviate the negative axiological load more intensely.

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