

Rest in space Starman!

***Laura Hidalgo-Downing and Paula Pérez-Sobrino** explore creative metaphors on David Bowie's London mural*



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The death of David Bowie on 10 January 2016 came as a huge shock to his extensive fan community around the world. For many of us, Bowie's music has been the soundtrack to important stages of our youth or even our whole lives. Who hasn't heard or sang along to 'Starman', '"Heroes"', 'Let's Dance' or 'Space Oddity'? Who is not familiar with his personas Ziggy Stardust or Aladdin Sane, or does not remember some of his roles in films, such as the Goblin King in Labyrinth or The Man Who Fell to Earth's Thomas Newton? Here, we explore how fans have used metaphors to express their feelings about Bowie in messages written on his mural in London.

David Bowie's mural and shrine in London

David Bowie's mural is located in Brixton, the London suburb where he lived as a child. The mural was created by street artist James Cochran (Jimmy C) as a commission by the Victoria and Albert Museum for the exhibition 'Bowie Is' in 2013. The mural features Bowie with a thunderbolt across his face in his persona of Aladdin Sane/Ziggy Stardust, as on the cover of the Aladdin Sane album, created by photographer Brian Duffy. The mural was displayed on a wall belonging to the department store Morley's, on the condition that it would be removed once the exhibition ended.

However, when the exhibition finished, the mural was not removed. When Bowie died on 10 January 2016, fans gathered in front of the mural to pay tribute. They wrote messages on the walls adjacent to his face, deposited flowers and objects, and spent the night in front of the mural in a kind of celebration of the artist's life. In this way, the mural became a shrine to Bowie. Since then, the mural has become a site of devotion for numerous fans, who gathered again on 8 January 2017 on what would have been his 70th birthday. The mural, an initially ephemeral creation, became an officially protected site.

The language used on Bowie's mural offers an exceptional source of data for discourse analysts. First, it is an example of what has been called vernacular creativity, a form of linguistic expression used in unauthorised and unsanctioned contexts – in this case a public urban space. It is also an example of collective creativity: even if each message was written by an individual, the mural itself can be seen as a unit – the result of the writing of numerous fans visiting the mural over time. Finally, the contextual nature of the mural shapes the language used; the messages are typically short and concise, revealing the constraints on time and space for the messages.

The content of the wall changes as new messages are added, and others erased, over time. The messages typically address Bowie or his personae directly ("Goodbye, Ziggy") and are often inspired by the painted image of his face – in this sense, the messages are different from others written in online fora, in which fans tend to talk about Bowie *without* addressing him directly ("I can't believe David Bowie died"). The messages also make numerous references to the fictional universe of Bowie's songs and films, a rich source of inspiration for communication between fans and with their star, with fans often addressing a persona, as in "Rest in space, Starman" or "Sleep well Ziggy Stardust".

How do we use metaphor to understand and talk about death?

Metaphors are powerful linguistic and conceptual tools that we use to understand and communicate complex concepts such as life and death. Since the origins of what is known as Conceptual Metaphor Theory in the 1980s, metaphors have been studied extensively in numerous forms of linguistic expression and communication, as well as in images, gesture, and sound. According to Conceptual Metaphor Theory, a metaphor enables us to understand a target domain – a complex, abstract concept such as death – in terms of a source domain that is more familiar, physical or embodied. In this way, an implicit comparison is established between the target and the source domains.



Photo by Laura Hidalgo-Downing

The purpose of obituaries and epitaphs is to communicate the death of loved ones. The words used in these genres are often metaphoric. For example, the well-known formula 'Rest in peace' establishes a metaphoric comparison between the source domain of rest or sleep and the target domain of death. By using this expression, we soften the impact of death and conceive of it as something transitory, like sleep or rest, rather than permanent. We also often talk about death as a departure ('He left us too soon'), as a loss ('It was such a great loss!'), or as a new life ('Hope you meet the Creator'). These metaphors are euphemistic expressions that have a consolatory function, enabling us to cope with the fear and shock of death, which is a social taboo in Western cultures.

Metaphors are used creatively not only in poetry and other forms of literary and artistic expression, but also in everyday communication. George Lakoff and Mark Turner, in their book More than Cool Reason, explain how metaphor is used in poetry to write creatively about death, which in some texts is conceptualised as winter or darkness, as in Dylan Thomas's well know poem 'Do not go gentle into that good night', or as the end of an act or a game that involves the personification of death as an opponent or adversary.

Metaphors are not only cognitive tools that allow us to conceptualise death in terms of other more familiar concepts, but also communicative resources that depend to a large extent on the social and cultural contexts in which they are produced. Thus, religious metaphors of death vary across cultures, with the journey of death being understood as a journey to heaven (or hell) in Christian thought, or as a journey to rebirth in Eastern religions. Similarly, the context in which death metaphors are used shapes the types of metaphors that are chosen. For this reason, we would expect that the metaphors used on David Bowie's mural – a highly idiosyncratic socio-cultural context – will differ from those used in other texts such as obituaries and epitaphs, which form part of different sociocultural practices.

Metaphors used to address David Bowie's death

For our study, we set out to explore the death metaphors used on David Bowie's mural. In February 2016, one of us travelled to Brixton and took photos of the mural and the walls surrounding it, where numerous messages had been written and flowers and objects deposited. We transcribed the messages, giving us a corpus of 585 messages. Our objectives in this study were to find out how fans talk about Bowie's death, and, more specifically, to discuss how metaphors of death are expressed on the mural. We were also interested in exploring the extent to which the metaphors can be considered creative or conventional, and the extent to which the messages can be said to project positive or negative emotional connotations.

We sought to answer three research questions:

(1) How is Bowie's death (metaphorically) conceptualised?
(2) To what extent are the death metaphors on Bowie's mural creative?
(3) To what extent do the messages on David Bowie's mural project positive or negative emotions?

For question 1, we were interested in identifying the source domains used to frame Bowie's death – are they similar to the source domains used in other genres (rest and sleep, loss or journey), or are new metaphorical source domains used?

For question 2, we explored the metaphors in terms of conventionality/creativity. Conventional metaphors are entrenched in a particular culture (e.g. those found in Lakoff's Master Metaphor List). For death, conventional source domains are those of rest and sleep, as in "Rest in peace, Ziggy", or journey, as in "Gone but not forgotten". Creative metaphors, on the other

hand, involve the novel use of a conventional metaphor to cast new light on a conventional conceptualisation, as in "Back to the stars, safe travels David" or "See you in Mars". In these metaphoric expressions, fans use the conventional journey metaphor in which we say a temporary 'farewell', but they do so creatively through references to the stars and Mars, inspired by Bowie's space-related songs.

Metaphors are also creative when they establish a new correspondence or mapping between a target domain (e.g. death) and a *new* source domain. This type of creativity is found in the use of Bowie's lyrics and song titles, either verbatim or with slight changes, to structure the reasoning of Bowie's death. Thus, the mural features numerous messages such as "The Starman is really waiting in the sky", in which the first line from the song 'Starman' ("There's a Starman waiting in the sky") is modified in order to talk about Bowie's death as if he really *were* the Starman who has returned to the stars, and "The stars look very different tonight", taken from 'Space Oddity', where Major Tom's reflections on his journey through space become the fans' reflection on Bowie's death.

Finally, question 3 explores the extent to which the messages express positive emotions of hope or negative emotions of loss and sadness. We wanted to find out whether there was a predominance of positive or negative feelings in the messages. We also wanted to test the findings of previous research, which has argued that source domains related to journey, rest, sleep, continuity and a second life have positive connotations, while loss has negative connotations.

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How do the mural metaphors conceptualise Bowie's death?

In our mural data, we found a total of 390 different metaphors related to Bowie's death. The results show that, with regard to the conceptualisation and framing of Bowie's death, the main source domains used by fans are:

- **Rest or sleep – 162 metaphors**
- **Song – 107 metaphors**
- **Journey – 72 metaphors**
- **Continuity – 35 metaphors**
- **Second life – 11 metaphors**
- **Loss – 3 metaphors.**

The predominance of the rest/sleep source domain is partly due to the prevalence of the formula "RIP"/"Rest in peace" and other expressions such as "Goodnight Ziggy" and "Sleep well David". The journey domain is also used frequently, sometimes focusing on departure ("So long, Goblin King"), other times on destination ("Have fun on Mars!"), and also on a path ("Safe travels, Major Tom").

Continuity was also a representative source domain. In these instances, Bowie's death is understood as a continuation of his life, either by reference to his presence as a star ("Keep shining", "You will always be my star"), or through the permanence of his music and artistic production ("The music lives on"). Bowie's death is also conceptualised as a new life, in which he is imagined carrying out everyday activities such as performing and meeting his friends, as he would have during his life ("Now you can play 'Under Pressure' again with Freddie"). This afterlife is also understood by some fans in terms of the religious concept of life after death in heaven, as in "Dear Mr Bowie, you can sing to my beautiful sister now!" or "You are the master of heaven's choirs".

The source domain of loss is not used so frequently ("Such a loss"), but the source domain of song is very common, with fans using lines or titles from songs to understand his death, as in "Ashes to ashes, funk to funky" or "You were a hero for more than one day. Thank you Starman". In these messages, 'Ashes to Ashes' and '"Heroes"' are recontextualised in order to endow the expressions with a different meaning in this new context.

Are the mural metaphors conventional or creative?

Conventional metaphors are used more frequently (240 instances) than creative metaphors (150 instances). We found that there is a relationship between the type of source domain and the creativity or conventionality of the metaphors. While the source domains of rest and sleep and of loss tend to be used in

conventional ways, the source domain of song is mostly used in creative, novel ways. In between, we found both conventional and creative uses of the journey, continuity, and second life source domains. This is not a surprise, given that Bowie's mural is a highly idiosyncratic piece of discourse precisely due to the use of his songs to structure the reasoning of his death – a characteristic that is new and that is not found in obituaries, epitaphs, etc. Indeed, fans typically write messages such as "Planet Earth is blue and there's nothing I can do" (from 'Space Oddity'), "Put on your red shoes and dance the blues" ('Let's Dance'), "Oh no love you're not alone" ('Rock'n'Roll Suicide'), and others that make reference to the fictional universe of Bowie's songs and films or to his life as an artist, and which are reused by fans to reflect on his death. The reuse of these lines evokes multiple new meanings. For example, the line "Planet Earth is blue" can be understood as if the fans are addressing Bowie as if he were now Major Tom travelling in space. But it can also be interpreted as a reflection on their sadness upon Bowie's death, playing on the meaning of 'blue'.

The creative use of journey metaphors typically involves reference to the destination of the journey in space or, more specifically, Mars, in line with the fictional universe of Bowie's songs, as in "Enjoy life on Mars" and "If there wasn't life on Mars there sure is now".

Do the mural metaphors express positive or negative emotions?

We found that 92% of messages project positive emotions, endowing the mural with an overall aura of hope, gratitude, and optimism. There are very few occurrences of negative emotions ("So sad you left", "Such a great loss", "You're a Blackstar").

Some messages could be interpreted as projecting both positive and negative connotations, and in some instances the precise connotations are unclear. This is the case in the use of titles and lines of songs such as "The stars look very different today" or "Ashes to ashes, funk to funky". The former can be understood as evoking positive or negative feelings depending on whether it is understood that Bowie is now back in the stars (hope) or that he is now absent (sadness). The latter can be interpreted either as referring to the artist's death ("ashes to ashes") or to the continuity of his presence through his music ("funk to funky").

Conclusion

Our study contributes to the study of the metaphorical conceptualisation of death in several ways. First, we studied a previously unexplored discourse type – an urban mural. The interesting findings demonstrate that there is a need to analyse how people understand and talk about death – not only as a cognitive phenomenon, but also as a highly contextualised and culturally-based social practice.

Second, we have proposed a new source domain for the understanding and framing of death – that of song. We have argued that this source domain has been used by fans writing on the mural to create novel and highly idiosyncratic cultural metaphors inspired by Bowie's songs, which function both as euphemistic consolatory metaphors that expand on the idea of the continuity of the artist's presence through his music and fictional universe, and also as celebrations and tributes to the artist's life and death.

Our results also partly confirm the predominance of rest/sleep and journey metaphors in the conceptualisation of death, as observed by previous studies. They also point to the need to carry out further research on the contextual and sociocultural motivations of death metaphors and on the occurrence and motivation of creativity in the production of death metaphors in different genres.

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Articles

Laura Hidalgo-Downing and Paula Pérez-Sobrino (2022) 'Rest in space Starman! Creative reframing of death metaphors on David Bowie's mural in London', in *Discourse Studies* 24(5).