OF THE PASSAGE TO THE OTHER WORLD. A COGNITIVE LINGUISTICS PERSPECTIVE ON NEAR-DEATH EXPERIENCE (NDE) OR NDES AS STORIES OF THE OTHER WORLD

Donna-Alexandra URSU
Independent Scholar

Abstract

The article focuses on the language employed by the people who went through a near-death experience (NDE) when depicting their journey to the other world, the Afterlife, as well as on C. S. Lewis’s essay ‘On Stories’ (1965) in an attempt to draw a parallel between the world that opens up after death, on the one hand, and the world of stories, on the other. Using Raymond A. Moody’s Life after Life (1975/2015) and Eben Alexander’s Proof of Heaven (2012) as my NDE corpus, I explore the linguistic vehicles and the underlying conceptual metaphors and image schemas used by NDErs when depicting the typical stages that make up their near-death experience. Starting from the assumption that the lexis provides us with points of access to the conceptual content and ultimately to a cognitive world, I use the analytical tools provided by Conceptual Metaphor Theory, namely conceptual metaphors and image schemas, so as to unveil the passage of the soul the other world. To this end, I uncover a ten-stage idealized cognitive model of NDE, based on Lakoff’s concept of ICM (1987) and Barsalou’s model of a frame (1992). One of the aims of the article is to evince that, despite the unanimous claim made by NDErs that their experience is ineffable, they do succeed in providing a depiction—as imperfect as it may be—of this passage between worlds, which results in a world in itself. At the discursive level, I argue that the true ‘creators’ of this world are the kinesthetic image schemas which are pre-conceptual in nature and inherently meaningful. What is more, I aim to unveil the convergences between the NDE narratives and stories as they are analyzed by C. S. Lewis in his essay ‘On stories’.

Keywords: stories, the Afterlife, NDE, conceptual metaphors, image schemas
1. PRELIMINARIES

I would like to start my article with the word which best describes (although not perfectly) my whole experience related to C. S. Lewis’s work, namely: *serendipity*. My choice of words, and grammar (the superlative *best*) is by no means random. The word *serendipity* should come with a caveat: my discovering of C. S. Lewis was not a stroke of luck; it was God’s gift to me. Serendipity is not a perfect reflection of what I have experienced; however, it could give you an inkling of how I feel about the whole sequence of events.

When I heard that the 5th International Interdisciplinary Conference devoted to the life and work of C. S. Lewis was entitled *Of This and Other Worlds*, I was about to defend my PhD thesis on the language of death and dying, research that focused on the way death (and the Afterlife) is conceptualized by the people who had a near-death experience. To my shame, at that time, I knew next to nothing about C. S. Lewis apart from him being the author of *The Chronicles of Narnia*. As I have always had a certain amount of intellectual curiosity, I started documenting in order to learn more about the Oxonian writer. To my surprise, while reading C. S. Lewis’s collection of essays entitled *Of Other Worlds: Essays and Stories*, a host of convergences between Lewis’s depiction of stories and the narratives of those who went through a near-death experience kept springing to my mind. After reading more about C. S. Lewis’s life and work, about his metanoia from an atheist to a theist and then to a Christian, about the way in which his values and beliefs are pervasive in his work, I realized that these similarities are not mere coincidences or concoctions of my mind which, at that time, was fully absorbed in my doctoral research. C. S. Lewis wrote stories always bearing in mind that this world that we inhabit now is just the starting point for our journey to the next one, in the Afterlife.

2. AIM AND CORPORA

The aim of the article is twofold. First, it aims to explore the language and the underlying concepts, employed by the near-death experiencers (henceforth NDErs) when depicting their journey to the *other* world, the Afterlife. Second, it aims to draw a parallel between the new world that opens up to us after we leave this earthly world, as it emerges from the NDErs’ narratives, and the world of stories, as it is seen by C. S. Lewis. To this end, I will unveil the convergences existing between C. S. Lewis’s view of stories, on the one hand, and the narratives of those who went through a near-death experience, on the other.
As far as the corpus is concerned, we resorted to two types of corpora: a NDE corpus, necessary for the examination of the language used by NDErs in their attempt to depict the passage to the ‘other’ world, i.e. the Afterlife, and a ‘story’ corpus needed to examine the world of stories as discussed by C. S. Lewis.


Before presenting Raymond A. Moody’s ground-breaking book *Life after Life* (1975, 2015), I deem fit to introduce its author in a few lines. Raymond Moody is a physician, a psychologist and a philosopher, holding one Ph.D. in psychology and one in philosophy. In 1968, he began his systematic research on various near-death phenomena and seven years later his book on near-death experiences came out, gaining instant popularity. Raymond A. Moody is the one who coined the acronym NDE which stands for ‘near-death experience’. His milestone work paved the way for a host of investigations on this phenomenon.

Moody’s *Life after Life* (1975, 2015) is made up of three main parts. The first part comprises a selection of the testimonies provided by Moody’s patients who had a near-death experience, followed by Moody’s comments. The second part tackles strikingly similar experiences found in various texts, throughout the centuries, such as *The Bible*, *The Tibetan Book of The Dead*, Plato’s *Book X of The Republic* (the myth of Er), or Emanuel Swedenborg’s spiritual experiences. The third part is devoted to alternative ‘explanations’ of near-death phenomena, among which I mention the psychological, the pharmacological, and the neurological explanation. For the present article I used the first part of the book, namely the first-hand accounts of near-death experiences.

The second book I used for analysing the NDE discourse is Eben Alexander’s *Proof of Heaven* (2012). The book comprises an account of a single near-death experience. The book is written in the first person and it is the story of MD Eben Alexander, an American neurosurgeon who recounts an episode in his life when he had a NDE after falling into a week-long coma caused by bacterial meningitis. Throughout the book, he gives a detailed account of his journey into the Afterlife by depicting the two realms he went to: the Underworld and Heaven. As he himself puts it, the main aim of the book is to raise awareness of the survival of consciousness after death (cf. Alexander 2012).
2.2. The ‘Story’ Corpus: C. S. Lewis’s *Of Other Worlds. Essays and Stories* (1965)

As far as the ‘story’ corpus is concerned, I have picked the essay ‘On stories’ in which C. S. Lewis addresses stories and what they are actually meant to re-present, by drawing a parallel between life and art, which explains their appeal to the Christian writer.

In October 1965, Walter Hooper, C. S. Lewis’s secretary and literary executor, edited and published *Of Other Worlds. Essays and Stories*. The volume is divided into two parts. The first past is made up of a collection of essays in which he puts forth his perspective on various topics such as fairy stories, juvenile taste, science fiction, plus the transcript of an informal conversation between Lewis, Kingsley Amis and Brian Aldiss on science fiction, which was published posthumously. The second part comprises a series of stories and the beginnings of an unfinished novel. Most of the essays and stories had appeared in various publications during C. S. Lewis’s lifetime, among which the essay ‘On Stories’ which I have selected for analysis in the present article.

3. **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

In what follows, I will briefly present the Conceptual Metaphor Theory and its analytical tools (ICMs, conceptual metaphors and image schemas) that I used for my linguistic analysis of the ‘NDE’ corpus.

3.1. **Conceptual Metaphor Theory**

In their seminal book *Metaphors We Live By* (1980/2003), George Lakoff and Mark Johnson state that “metaphors allow us to understand one domain of experience in terms of another” (Lakoff et al. 118) where a domain of experience is “a structured whole within our experience that is conceptualised as what we have called an experiential gestalt” (118). In straightforward terms, a metaphor could be defined as understanding one thing (a more abstract concept) in terms of another (usually a more concrete concept). A more detailed definition of the metaphor is proposed by Barcelona: “Metaphor is the cognitive mechanism whereby one experiential domain (in the sense of Langacker Ch. 4) is partially mapped onto a different experiential domain, the second domain being partially understood in terms of the first one” (Barcelona 211).

Conceptual Metaphor Theory rests on three ‘pillars’: i) metaphor is a cognitive phenomenon, rather than a purely lexical one; ii) metaphor should be
analysed as a mapping between two domains, and iii) metaphor is experientially grounded (cf. Geeraerts). Metaphor is not a mere matter of language, it is a matter of thought (Lakoff et al., *Metaphors We Live By, The Body in the Mind . . ., More Than Cool Reason*). Conceptual metaphor lies under the surface level of the language, which represents just a linguistic manifestation of an underlying metaphor. It is a “deep-seated conceptual phenomenon that shapes the way we think (not just the way we speak)” (Geeraerts 204).

As already stated, the second tenet of Conceptual Metaphor Theory is that metaphor is conceived of as a cross-domain mapping. The notion of domain was introduced in relation to cognitive semantics by Lakoff and Johnson in their ground-breaking book *Metaphors We Live By* (1980). For the two linguists, metaphor is a cognitive mechanism that implies the mapping of the source domain onto the target domain. In other words, the source domain is mapped onto the target and it takes the propositional form: TARGET DOMAIN IS SOURCE DOMAIN (1980/2003).

Lakoff and Turner (1989) argue that the human mind operates with a wealth of conventional metaphors when trying to conceptualise abstract concepts such as life, death, time, or love. The term conventional is essential within Conceptual Metaphor Theory as it entails that the cross-domain conceptual mappings are “unconscious, automatic and effortless” (Lakoff and Turner *More Than Cool Reason* 112). In some cases, the two domains can exhibit quite a large number of correspondences as is the case of the two complex conceptual metaphors LIFE IS A JOURNEY and DEATH IS A JOURNEY that share the same source domain.

As an example, let us take the DEATH IS A JOURNEY complex conceptual metaphor and its sub-mappings.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source Domain: JOURNEY</th>
<th>Target Domain: DEATH/THE AFTERLIFE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Traveller</td>
<td>The dying/dead person</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Starting point</td>
<td>This world</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Destination</td>
<td>The world hereafter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vehicle</td>
<td>hearse/boat/the dark angel’s wings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guide</td>
<td>angel/demon/Charon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Obstacles</td>
<td>demons/sins</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Money for travelling</td>
<td>coins placed in the coffin</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The third tenet of Conceptual Metaphor Theory is that metaphor, as a cognitive process is grounded in our bodily experience. In other words, the human body becomes the source domain for experientially grounded metaphors. One of the major claims of cognitive science is actually that “the peculiar nature of our
bodies shapes our very possibilities for conceptualisation and categorization” (Lakoff *et al.*, 1999: 28). The human body, with its structural, physiological, sensory-motor make-up, is essentially universal. It is this universal body that forms the basis of many conceptual metaphors. The metaphors that emerge from this universal body are also potentially universal (Kövecses).

### 3.2. ICMs

The concept of ICM (Idealized Cognitive Model) was first introduced by George Lakoff in his seminal book *Fire, Women and Dangerous Things* (1987). According to Lakoff, an ICM is a gestalt which organizes our knowledge about the world and which uses four types of structuring principles: propositional structure (e.g. scripts, scenarios, taxonomies), image schematic structure (e.g. trajectories, orientational images, containers), metaphoric mappings and metonymic mappings (Lakoff *The Body in the Mind*). ICMs encode an entire knowledge network connected to a certain concept that people have in their minds. To use Littlemore’s words, ICMs can be seen as “a series of embodied, encyclopaedic, abstract, loosely connected and somewhat idiosyncratic knowledge networks” ((12). As Radden and Kövecses note, “the ICM notion is not restricted to either the world of reality, the world of conceptualisation or the world of language . . . but may cut across these ontological realms” (20).

ICMs build in our heads gradually, in time, by virtue of our experience, our interactions with the world and our own body, and, why not, with other people’s bodies. For instance, the ‘love’ ICM arises from our experience with various people, which explains why sometimes ICMs are idiosyncratic, given that everyone’s experience is unique. Thus, the ‘love’ ICM of a child can be slightly different from that of an adult. In the same vein, the ‘death’ ICM can be different from person to person, being, to a certain extent, culturally constructed. Not to mention *The Idealized Cognitive Model of NDE* which is differently construed in the minds of those who have gone through the experience themselves, and those who have not had a first-hand experience of such kind.

To put things into perspective, we would like to note, in the same line of thought as Goldberg (2010) that “Fillmore’s frames are relevantly the same as Lakoff’s *Idealized Cognitive Models* (ICMs)”. Bearing this in mind, in my analysis of the cognitive model of near-death experience I used both Lakoff’s notion of ‘ICM’ and Barsalou’s notion of ‘frame’ (1992).
3.3. Image schemas

To start, we would like to point out the fact that image schemas are so basic and so fundamental to our way of thinking that we are hardly aware of them. We take the fact that we are human beings, endowed with a physical body, in a physical world, so much for granted because we acquire the image schemas very early in life, certainly before the emergence of language. Even though we barely pay attention to the forces outside and inside our body, that does not mean that they are not there with and around us every single moment of our lives (Johnson *The Body in the Mind*). Image schemas have a primordial, structuring role in providing meaning and coherence to our experience. They represent one of the most important dimensions of the imaginative structure of understanding.

Probably the most comprehensive definition, description, and illustration of image schemas are given by Mark Johnson in his pivotal book *The Body in the Mind* (1987). Here I extracted a fragment from the *Introduction* to this seminal work on image schemas:

An image schema is a recurring, dynamic pattern of our perceptual interactions and motor programs that gives coherence and structure to our experience. The VERTICALITY schema, for instance, emerges from our tendency to employ an UP-DOWN orientation in picking out meaningful structures of our experience. We grasp this structure of verticality repeatedly in thousand of perceptions and activities we experience every day, such as perceiving a tree, our felt sense of standing upright, the activity of climbing stairs . . . The verticality schema is the abstract structure of these VERTICALITY experiences, images and perceptions (xiv).

According to Turner, image schemas are “skeletal patterns that recur in our sensory and motor experience” (16), while Littlemore sees them as “the most basic building blocks of cognition . . . the first and most fundamental mental representations of knowledge that we develop as children” (13). For Evans, schemata are “relatively abstract conceptual representations that arise directly from our everyday interaction with and observation of the world around us” (176).

One of the main claims put forth by Johnson is that these image schematic structures are experientially based, imaginative in nature, and integral to meaning and rationality. They grow out of our bodily experience and contribute to our understanding and guide our reasoning. In other words, schemata are recurring patterns that emerge as meaningful structures at the level of “our bodily

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1 Certain scholars even argue that image schemas are formed in our brain while we are in our mother’s wombs, cf. Evans, among others).
movements through space, our manipulation of objects, and our perceptual interactions” (*The Body in the Mind* 29).

Image schemas have a gestalt structure in that they are “coherent, meaningful, unified wholes within our experience and cognition . . . they generate coherence for, establish unity within, and constrain our network of meaning” (Johnson *The Body in the Mind* 41). Image schemata are characterizable as irreducible gestalts in that they do have an internal structure; however, breaking them down into their parts would mean destroying the “meaningful unity that makes it the particular unity that it is” (44). By means of illustration, take the CONTAINER schema, made up of an inside, an outside, and a boundary. This schema is a gestalt structure in the sense that its parts make no sense without the whole. What is more, these gestalt structures are preconceptual in nature and they “operate in our bodily movements, perceptual acts and orientational awareness” (75). We unconsciously resort to image schemas whenever we want to comprehend the experience we go through and to reason about it. Simply put, it is by virtue of these image schemas that we are able to structure many perceptions, images, and events that make up our experience.

The notion of understanding is crucial for defining schemata. To use Johnson’s words, understanding is the “way we ‘have a world’, the way we experience our world as a comprehensible reality” (Johnson *The Body in the Mind* 104). Thus, understanding encompasses ‘our whole being’, which includes our bodily abilities, our physical and mental skills, our values, our cultural traditions, and the linguistic community to which we belong (ibid.).

4. FINDINGS OF THE LEXICAL-CONCEPTUAL ANALYSIS

The linguistic analysis carried out on the NDE corpus using Conceptual Metaphor Theory and the analytical tools presented above has unveiled the following. First, further to the perusal of Raymond A. Moody’s *Life after Life*, we uncovered a ten-stage Idealized Cognitive Model of Near-Death Experience which could be summarized as follows:

The Protagonist experiences peace and quiet (stage 1), hears some sounds (stage 2), goes through a tunnel (stage 3), gets out of the body (stage 4), meets the other people who have already died (stage 5), meets the Being of Light (stage 6), ‘sees’ his/her entire life before his mind’s eyes (stage 7), reaches a border (stage 8), and finally goes back to life (stage 9) only to have a new perspective on life and death (stage 10).

The conceptual analysis conducted at every stage of the model unveiled the following image-schematic profile of The Idealized Cognitive Model of Near-Death Experience:
LOCOMOTION (the Protagonist leaves his/her earthly body)—CONTAINER no.1 (The Protagonist inhabits another body, a spiritual one)—LOCOMOTION (The Protagonist meets the others and the Being of Light)—LOCOMOTION & CONTAINER no.2 (The Protagonist reaches the border with the other world)—UNICITY/IDENTITY (The Protagonist feels both unique and part of the universe)—LOCOMOTION /CONTAINER no.1 (The Protagonist goes back to his/her earthly body). The entire profile is dominated by the LOCOMOTION and CYCLE schemata in that the Protagonist starts the journey from point A (this world we currently inhabit), towards point B (the Other World—The Afterlife), but they all finally return to the same point A.

Secondly, the lexical-conceptual analysis that we conducted on the language employed by the near-death experiencers, using the analytical tools presented above unveiled the following.

The recurrent image schemata emerging in the NDErs’ accounts are:

- LOCOMOTION (“I accomplished this back-and-forth movement from the muddy darkness of the Realm of the Earthworm’s Eye View to the green brilliance of the Gateway” Alexander Proof of Heaven 70);
- FORCE (“Something pulled at me” 68);
- UP/DOWN (“(I) was back in the lower realm” 69)
- CONTAINMENT (“(T)his sense of deep, timeless . . . immersion gave way to something else: a feeling that I wasn’t really part of this subterranean world at al, but trapped in it” 31);
- CENTRE/PERIPHERY (“Now I am back here in the earthly realm” (49);
- CYCLE (“I heard a voice . . . telling me what I had to do – go back – and I felt no fear of getting back into my physical body” Moody Life after Life 50);
- EXISTENCE (“While I was in that blackness all I felt was warmth and the most extreme comfort I have ever experienced” 19).

Concerning force dynamics, the analysis has revealed that all narratives are rife with various force schemata such as COMPULSION, ATTRACTION, ENABLEMENT, BLOCKAGE, or REMOVAL OF RESTRAINT. The lexical-conceptual analysis also revealed that force dynamics appeared both at the level of open-class lexical items (verbs like pull, push, or block) and at the level of grammatical categories (modal verbs such as can, cannot, had to). It is noteworthy that the majority of the force-dynamic patterns present in the NDE narratives referred to physical force interactions expressing sensorimotor experience. There are also cases in which the force-laden lexical units refer to the psychological interaction, conceived in terms of psychological blockage or pressure.
Interestingly enough, the Antagonist takes various shapes, namely: (1) an entity: The Lord, Jesus, Virgin Mary or an angel; (2) the self, part of the concept of the divided self according to which a part wants to leave this world for the other world (The Afterlife), while the other part wants to go back to the earthly world; (3) the prayers of the people who want the Agonist (i.e. the Protagonist) to come back to this world; (4) a mere force.

The conceptual metaphors recurrently underlying the NDErs’ discourse are:

- DEATH IS MOVEMENT (“I knew I had to decide whether to move on out or get back in” Moody 74);
- DEATH IS UP (“I felt myself get out of my body, and I looked back and I could see myself on the bed below” Moody 30);
- DEATH IS A CONTAINER (“I was in an utterly black, dark void. It is very difficult to explain, but I felt as if I were moving in a vacuum, just through blackness” Moody 23);
- DEATH IS A MEETING PLACE (“On the distant shore, I could see all of my loved ones who had died – my mother, my father, my sister, and the others” Moody 69);
- DEATH IS A NEW BEGINNING (IN THE AFTERLIFE) (“It was as if I were being born into a larger world, and the universe itself was a giant cosmic womb” Alexander 47);
- DEATH IS LOVE (“The answer came instantly in an explosion of light, color, love, and beauty” Alexander 46);
- DEATH IS KNOWLEDGE (“The being seems to stress the importance of two things in life: learning to love other people and acquiring knowledge” Moody 59);
- DEATH IS LIGHT (“I floated right straight on through the screen, just as though it weren’t there, and up into this pure crystal-clear light, an illuminating white light” Moody 55);
- DEATH IS DARKNESS (“Pitch-black as it was, it was also brimming over with light” Alexander 47).

Interestingly, the DEATH IS LIGHT metaphor is juxtaposed to the DEATH IS DARKNESS metaphor, producing the oxymoronic metaphor DEATH IS DAZZLING DARKNESS. Below, I present the depiction of this ‘dazzling darkness’ given by Eben Alexander in the book *Proof of Heaven* (2012) and the parallel that he draws between this ‘place’ and the description of God provided by the Christian poet Henry Vaughan:
Later, when I was back here in the world, I found a quotation by the seventeenth-century Christian poet Henry Vaughan that came close to describing this place—this vast, inky black core that was the home of the Divine itself. ‘There is, some say, in God a deep but dazzling darkness...’ That was it, exactly: an inky darkness that was also full to brimming with light. (Alexander 47-48).

5. CONVERGENCES BETWEEN NDE ACCOUNTS AND C. S. LEWIS’S ESSAY ‘ON STORIES’

To start with, I believe it is not a coincidence that in the English FrameNet², the core frame element for death is called the Protagonist. Needless to say, the lexeme “protagonist” is primarily used for depicting the main character in a story; hence, the obvious link between stories and the event of dying which is conceptualized as a story. In this sense, we can also make the link between stories, as literary genre, and near-death experiences which are framed as journeys towards the other world, the life hereafter.

While perusing C. S. Lewis’s essay ‘On Stories’, I was baffled by the host of convergences between Lewis’s depiction of stories and the NDErs’ accounts. In what follows, I will draw a series of parallels between the world of stories, as described by the author of The Chronicles of Narnia, and the world depicted by those who had a near-death experience.

The first similarity that struck me was in relation to the interpretation given by C. S. Lewis to David Lindsay’s A Voyage to Arcturus (1920). Lindsay’s story is set on an imaginary planet orbiting the star Arcturus, which is called Tormance. Here are Lewis’s depiction and interpretation of Tormance:

His Tormance is a region of the spirit. He is the first writer to discover what ‘other planets’ are really good for in fiction. No merely physical strangeness or merely spatial distance will realise that idea of otherness which is what we are always trying to grasp in a story about voyaging through space: you must go into another dimension. To construct plausible and moving ‘other worlds’ you must draw on the only real ‘other world’ we know, that of the spirit. (18-19)

As we can note from the first sentences, Tormance should not be seen as a physical space, but as a spiritual one. Similarly, the world depicted by those who went through a near-death experience is not a physical one, but a world that one can reach by means of one’s soul which gets freed from the shackles of the physical body. However, both in stories and in NDE accounts, we find the idea of

² The FrameNet project is an online, frame-based lexical database in operation at the International Computer Science Institute in Berkeley.
voyaging through some kind of space, by means of entering another dimension. This can be accounted for by cognitive linguistics’ claim that our thought and language is inescapably metaphorical and, therefore, we can conceive of abstract things (such as ‘the idea of otherness’) only by resorting to conceptual metaphors, seen as cognitive processes. In our case, the OTHERNESS IS LOCATION conceptual metaphor rests on the STATES ARE LOCATIONS primary metaphor, which in turn, is structured by the SPACE schema.

When discussing Kenneth Grahame’s The Wind in The Willows (1908), C. S. Lewis defines the story in the following terms:

To that extent the book is a specimen of the most scandalous escapism: it paints a happiness under incompatible conditions—the sort of freedom we can have only in childhood and the sort of freedom we can have only in maturity—and conceals the contradiction by the further pretence that the characters are not human beings at all. The one absurdity helps to hide the other. (20).

Near-death experiences may look like instances of ‘escapism’, as the soul escapes the body and starts the journey to the other world, the world hereafter. While it is true that here C. S. Lewis is referring to the fact that the author of the story, by means of the characters who are disguised as animals (see Mr. Toad), manages to create this state of unfathomable happiness, I believe we could say that, in a similar fashion, the state depicted in the NDErs’ accounts is that of “a happiness under incompatible conditions”. Why are the conditions incompatible? Because ‘the happenings’ during the NDErs’ journey to the other world are quite unfathomable themselves. The NDErs get out of their physical body, some of them acquire another body, a ‘spiritual’ one. They lose some senses (e.g. the kinesthetic sense) only to acquire some new ones. In other cases, the physical senses with which we are all familiar, for instance, sight or hearing, get enhanced (for example, some NDErs are able to see through walls and hear conversations in other rooms, while declared clinically dead).

C. S. Lewis goes on to argue that „the whole story, paradoxically enough, strengthens our relish for real life. This excursion into the preposterous sends us back with renewed pleasure to the actual” (21). Similarly, the near-death experience wets the NDErs’ appetite for living. When they return from their ‘voyage’, they all feel the need to lead a meaningful life. What is more, they all sense the experience has changed them in the most profound way in the sense that they feel they are sent back on earth to accomplish their ‘mission’. Most NDErs argue that during their journey they have learned two important lessons, namely: Our duty, here on earth is (1) to spread love and (2) acquire knowledge The feeling is quite paradoxical, in the sense that, even though most of the experiencers feel The Being of Light’s (i.e. God’s) immense love, some of them even being
reluctant to go back, once they are back in this physical world, they all appreciate life even more than they used to. In this light, I think it is not an exaggeration to say that, paradoxically enough, the near-death experience enhanced their relish for this world we are currently inhabiting. In a similar vein, when engrossed in a good story, we do not want to leave its world; however, when we finish reading an compelling story, we come back to real life with heightened delight.

When addressing the theme of fulfilled prophecies, giving as examples Sophocles’ *Oedipus King*, Kipling’s *The Man Who Would Be King* and Tolkien’s *The Hobbit*, Lewis states the following:

Such stories produce (at least in me) a feeling of awe, coupled with a certain sort of bewilderment such as one often feels in looking at a complex pattern of lines that pass over and under one another. One sees, yet does not quite see, the regularity. And is there not good occasion both for awe and bewilderment? We have just had set before our imagination something that has always baffled the intellect: we have seen how destiny and free will can be combined, even how free will is the *modus operandi* of destiny. (21)

As we can note from the above-cited fragment, these stories engender a whole array of feelings. Thus, there is a mix of sentiments such as deep respect, admiration and reverence, combined with fear (‘awe’), but also with a sense of astonishment (‘bewilderment’) and bafflement. Why is that? Because free will and destiny are two concepts that seem to be opposing each other, and, still, they are brought together, being reconciled. What is more, they go hand in hand since, as Lewis aptly puts it, free will is actually the *modus operandi* of destiny.

In a similar vein, the experience the NDErs go through produces a mix of feelings: amazement, fear and perplexity for the Protagonist who has never felt anything anywhere close to it. What is more, we see that in some cases of near-death experience, destiny and free will are intermingled. Most of the NDErs find themselves in that situation against their will; however, some of them feel they have to take a decision: either move on to the other world or go back to the earthly world. Here are two accounts given by NDErs who felt the decision was theirs. One of the informants recounts “I was out of my body, and I realized that I had to make a decision. I knew that I could not stay out of my physical body for a very long period of time so-well, for others this is very hard to understand, but for me then it was perfectly clear that I had to decide whether to move on out or to get back in (Moody 72). Another one states: “It was wonderful over there on the other side, and I kind of wanted to stay. But knowing that I had something good to do on earth was just as wonderful in a way. So, I was thinking, ‘Yes, I must go back and live’, and I got back into my physical body. I almost feel as though I stopped the bleeding myself. At any rate, I began to recover after that (Moody 73).
In some other cases, the experiencers argue that the decision belonged to God. Here is the account given by one of the NDErs who recounts the following: “I was above the table, and I could see everything they were doing. I knew that I was dying, that this would be it. Yet, I was concerned about my children, about who would take care of them. So, I was not ready to go. The Lord permitted me to live” (Moody 73).

C. S. Lewis also claims that “(t)he story does what no theorem can quite do (21). He goes on to explain what he meant by that, namely that the story “may not be ‘like real life’ in the superficial sense: but it sets before us an image of what reality may well be like at some more central region” (21). Likewise, NDE accounts are not ‘like real life’ in the sense that they do not depict this world as we know it, but the passage to the other world, the Afterlife. They are attempts of depicting the ‘ultra-reality3 in which they found themselves. C. S. Lewis’s reference to the “more central region” could be interpreted as the core region of our being, namely the soul.

Next, C. S. Lewis argues that uneducated or immature readers devouring “what seem to you merely sensational stories” should not be judged for seeking just the excitement, since they may receive “certain profound experiences which are, for him, not acceptable in any other form” (22). In a similar fashion, near-death experiences are profound and accessible to anyone, irrespective of their level of education or level of maturity.

Further on, C. S. Lewis makes a mention of Roger Lancelyn Green’s remark on Sir Henry Rider Haggard’s adventure fiction romances. The author of King Arthur of His Knights of The Round Table notes that “the reading of Rider Haggard4 had been to many a sort of religious experience”. C. S. Lewis agrees with the aforementioned claim with the only amendment that “it would have been safer to say that such people had first met in Haggard’s romances elements which they would meet again in religious experience if they ever came to have any” Lewis 22). Needless to say, most of the near-death experiences were considered by the Protagonist as religious experiences. Suffice it to think of the Being of Light that most of the informants identified with Jesus, The Lord, Virgin Mary, or an Angel.

Another very interesting aspect discussed by the author of The Chronicles of Narnia is connected to the tension between the apparent theme of a story and its ‘real’ theme. Here are Lewis’s words:

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3 Ultra-reality is the term used by Eben Alexander in Proof of Heaven (2012) to refer to realm into which he found himself during his coma.
To be stories at all they must be series of events: but it must be understood that
this series—the plot, as we call it—is only really a net whereby to catch
something else. The real theme may be, and perhaps usually is, something that
has no sequence in it, something other than a process and much more like a state
or quality. Giantship, otherness, the desolation of space, are examples that have
crossed our path.” (24)

C. S. Lewis notes that, even though stories appear to be sequences of
events, they are just some sort of pretext, a ‘tool’ used to capture something else.
The real theme is not the adventures of a hero fighting giants, or other protagonists
going in outer space, conquering new territories. The ‘real’ subject goes beyond
the concreteness of such adventures; it is about abstract concepts such as
‘otherness’, ‘giantship’, ‘friendship’, ‘courage’, ‘bravery’ etc. Stories are not
about processes, but rather about states or qualities.

Likewise, the NDE accounts are not actually about depicting the process
of leaving this world (getting out of the body, inhabiting a spiritual body, going
through a tunnel-like space, reaching the border to the other world). Rather, they
are about depicting this state of being in a different world, about the ‘otherness’
of this other realm they are about to enter, but also about the ‘sameness’ of this
other world in the sense that the Protagonists describe the feelings they had as
similar to the ones they knew here, in this world, only much more enhanced (e.g.
the feeling of utter love coming from the Being of Light). Similarly, the senses
they had there seemed to be the same as those on earth, only heightened (e.g. the
sight and the hearing). This proves that the feeling of happiness that we experience
here, in this world, is but a foretaste of the sheer happiness we will get to
experience when we enter the other realm, i.e. Heaven.

C. S. Lewis concludes his essay on stories as follows:

Shall I be thought whimsical if, in conclusion, I suggest that this internal tension
in the heart of every story between the theme and the plot constitutes, after all,
its chief resemblance to life? If Story fails in that way does not life commit the
same blunder? In real life, as in a story, something must happen. That is just the
trouble. We grasp at a state and find only a succession of events in which the
state is never quite embodied . . . Other grand ideas—home-coming, reunion with
a beloved—similarly elude our grasp. Suppose there is no disappointment; even
so—well, you are here. But now, something must happen, and after that
something else. All that happens may be delightful: but can any such series quite
embody the sheer state of being which was what we wanted? If the author’s plot
is only a net, and usually an imperfect one, a net of time and event for catching
what is not really a process at all, is life much more? (25)

[193]
The first remark I would like to make is that the entire paragraph is structured by the complex conceptual metaphor LIFE IS A STORY and its sub-mappings:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source Domain LIFE</th>
<th>Target Domain STORY</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>people</td>
<td>the protagonists/characters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>the events in somebody’s life</td>
<td>the plot</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People seek the meaning of life</td>
<td>The protagonist seeks to achieve something/has a goal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People acquire experience with the passing of years, which transforms them</td>
<td>The Protagonist is changed/transformed (by the events that occur to him/her) at the end of the story</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Interestingly, Lewis writes about this analogy between stories and life by insisting on the inner tension between the theme and the plot (in the case of the stories), which corresponds to the tension between the state and the succession of events (in the case of life). Both story readers (or writers) and ‘living people’ try to grasp at a state and find only a sequence of events. All Protagonists (be they in a story or in real life) strive to understand LIFE, to grasp and pin down various abstract concepts—‘grand ideas’ in Lewis’s terms—which lead us to the ultimate grand idea, namely the meaning of life.

Similarly, all the NDErs’ accounts are but attempts to grasp at a state, that which follows LIFE, which is the Afterlife. All the informants’ reports are attempts at describing the state they were in, the feelings they had, and not necessarily the things that happened to them. What the NDErs are trying to do is to give coherence and structure to the state/the world in which they found themselves—the Afterlife. To depict a state they had no choice but to describe the ‘events’ they went through, that is the stages of their ‘journey’ in the realm of the Afterlife. As they all claim, their experience is impossible to put into words; therefore, their depiction is not a perfect mirror of the ‘ultra-reality’ into which they found themselves. This was only to be expected for three reasons. First, because of the limitation of language that lacks the words to depict a world we are not familiar with. Second, because it is virtually impossible to describe an atemporal experience using language which unfolds in time. Third, as C. S. Lewis puts it, “we are trying to catch in our net of successive moments something that is not successive” (Lewis 26).

To conclude, let us ponder on one more quote by C. S. Lewis connected to life and art: “The bird has escaped us. But it was at least entangled in the net for several chapters. We saw it close and enjoyed the plumage. How many ‘real lives’ have nets that can do as much?” (25). We would like to argue that the image
of the bird could be a metaphor either for the world we live in or for God. Stories could be seen as enhanced reflections of our world or they could be understood as reflections of God, if we were to think of God as being ubiquitous in our world and, therefore, in our life.

**Conclusions**

Given that the present paper had a double aim, it is only natural for the conclusions to comprise two parts: the conclusion of the linguistic analysis and the conclusions of the parallel drawn between NDE accounts and C. S. Lewis’s essay ‘On Stories’.

The lexical-semantic analysis has revealed the presence of a host of image schemas and conceptual metaphors in the NDE corpus, having structuring function and providing the discourse with coherence. The main image schemas identified are: LOCOMOTION, FORCE, UP/DOWN, CENTRE/PERIPHERY, CYCLE, and EXISTENCE. The recurrent conceptual metaphors are: DEATH IS MOVEMENT, DEATH IS A CONTAINER, DEATH IS A MEETING PLACE, DEATH IS KNOWLEDGE, DEATH IS LOVE, DEATH IS DARKNESS, DEATH IS LIGHT, and DEATH IS A NEW BEGINNING (IN THE AFTERLIFE). In this light, we would like to argue that the true ‘creators’ of this world are the image schemas which are pre-conceptual in nature and inherently meaningful. But for them, we would not have access to the other world, the ‘ultra-reality’ described by the near-death experiencers. What is more, we would like to suggest that the analysis has evinced that, despite the unanimous claim made by the NDErs their experience was ‘ineffable’, they do succeed in providing a depiction—as imperfect as it may be—, of this passage between worlds, which results in a world in itself.

Finally, we would like to argue that the large number of convergences between NDE accounts and stories that have been presented lead us to the metaphor DEATH/DYING IS A STORY where the Experiencers/ Protagonists recount the sequence of events they went through in an attempt to grasp at the realm of the other world which is opening up once we leave this physical world.

**Works cited**


Donna-Alexandra URSU has just finished her Ph.D. thesis at The University of Bucharest. Her doctoral research explores the language of death and dying in English and Romanian. She is particularly interested in NDEs (near-death experiences) and the way these ‘ineffable’ experiences are put into words. Apart from her keen interest in the Afterlife, she is passionate about teaching and methodology, having been teaching English and French to adults for more than 20 years. Her book on how to teach a foreign language, entitled Supercalifragilisticmetodologistic—Ghid metodologic de facilitare a învățării limbilor străine—is about to be published. The book is meant to provide young teachers (and not only) with the main principles, some practical advice, sample lessons, as well as various methods and approaches in language teaching.

Email: donna.pavelescu@yahoo.ro