

FRAME ANALYSIS OF THE CONCEPT DEATH

Abstract. The article is devoted to the frame analysis of the concept DEATH in the Russian language. The aim of the study is to examine the multi-layered structure of the concept DEATH through frame analysis, which facilitates the representation of stereotyped situations associated with death within the Russian linguistic world picture. The methodological framework draws on the frame semantics theory and the theory of concepts. The research material consists of lexical units extracted from explanatory and phraseological dictionaries of the Russian language, as well as examples drawn from the Russian National Corpus. As a result of the analysis, six slots of the frame structure of the concept DEATH were identified: Death, Funeral, Burial, Orthodoxy, Folk beliefs, and War. It was established that within the Russian linguistic world picture the concept DEATH is conceptualized across three interacting axiological dimensions: the religious-Orthodox (death as transition), the historical (death in the war as sacrifice and a form of memorial meaning), and the mythological (death as a force requiring ritual neutralization). The originality of the study lies in the application of an integrated frame-semantic methodology to the Russian conceptualization of DEATH, which reveals the multilayered interaction of Orthodox, folk, and historical meanings within a single cognitive structure. The practical significance of the findings extends to lexicography, cognitive linguistics, linguoculturology, and the teaching of Russian as a foreign language. The results may further serve as a basis for cross-cultural and cross-linguistic studies of the concept DEATH in other linguistic world pictures.

Keywords: concept, frame, frame analysis, DEATH, Russian linguoculture, linguistic worldview, cognitive linguistics.

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ФРЕЙМОВЫЙ АНАЛИЗ КОНЦЕПТА СМЕРТЬ

Аннотация. Статья посвящена фреймовому анализу концепта СМЕРТЬ. Целью исследования является анализ многоуровневой структуры концепта СМЕРТЬ посредством фреймового анализа, способствующего представлению стереотипизированных ситуаций, связанных со смертью, в русской языковой картине мира. Методологическую основу составляют теория фреймовой семантики и теория концептов. Материалом исследования

послужили лексические единицы из толковых и фразеологических словарей русского языка, а также примеры из Национального корпуса русского языка. В результате анализа выделено шесть слотов фреймовой структуры концепта СМЕРТЬ: Умирание, Похороны, Погребение, Православие, Народные поверья – суеверия и Война. Выявлено, что в русской языковой картине мира концепт СМЕРТЬ концептуализируется в трёх взаимодействующих ценностных измерениях: религиозно-православном (смерть как переход), историческом (военная смерть как жертва и мемориальный смысл) и мифологическом (смерть как сила, требующая ритуальной нейтрализации). Научная новизна исследования состоит в применении интегрированного фреймово-семантического подхода к анализу концепта СМЕРТЬ, позволяющего выявить многоуровневое взаимодействие православных, народно-мифологических и историко-мемориальных смыслов в рамках единой когнитивной структуры. Установлено, что лексические и фразеологические единицы, формирующие слоты фрейма, не только объективируют биологический факт прекращения жизни, но и транслируют глубинные религиозные, исторические и мифологические представления, специфичные для русской лингвокультуры. Практическая значимость работы определяется возможностью применения полученных результатов в лексикографии, когнитивной лингвистике, лингвокультурологии, а также в практике преподавания русского языка как иностранного. Перспективы дальнейшего исследования связаны с расширением сопоставительной базы и изучением данного концепта в иных языковых картинах мира.

Ключевые слова: концепт, фрейм; фреймовый анализ, СМЕРТЬ, русская лингвокультура, языковая картина мира, когнитивная лингвистика.

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Death is one of the most universal concepts – exists in all cultures and linguistic communities. As an ineluctable dimension of human existence, death is not merely a biological event but a complex cognitive, cultural, and spiritual experience that humans have continuously sought to understand, name, and ritualize (Bloch 1982: 227). Across cultures, the awareness of mortality has been foundational to the formation of religious beliefs, social rituals, and ethical values, making death not an endpoint, but rather an integral and inseparable part of human existence – a transition, a threshold, a passage to another state of being (Hertz, quoted in Uberman 2018: 421).

Language, as the primary medium through which human beings structure and transmit their understanding of reality, inevitably reflects how cultures conceptualize death: the lexical choices, metaphors, euphemisms, and ritual vocabulary associated with death reveal deeply embedded cognitive patterns and cultural worldviews that vary across linguistic communities while sharing fundamental universal features (Husband 2018: 1). Within the framework of cognitive linguistics, the concept DEATH occupies one of the central positions in the Russian linguistic picture of the world,

encoding not only cognitive representations of life cessation but also a rich network of religious, mythological, historical, and axiological meanings that distinguish Russian cultural perception from other linguistic traditions (Lyi et al. 2024: 91). The present study aims to examine the multi-layered structure of the concept DEATH through frame analysis, identifying the stereotyped situational slots through which death is cognitively organized and linguistically represented in the Russian linguistic worldview across religious-Orthodox, mythological, and historical dimensions.

The empirical basis of the study consists of lexical units extracted by continuous sampling from *Толковый словарь русского языка* (Explanatory Dictionary of Russian Language) by S.I. Ozhegov and N.Yu. Shvedova (Ожегов, Шведова 1999) and *Толковый словарь живого великорусского языка* (Explanatory Dictionary of the Living Great Russian Language) by V.I. Dal' (Даль 1981), as well as from *Фразеологический словарь русского литературного языка* (Phraseological Dictionary of the Russian Literary Language) by A.I. Fyodorov (Фёдоров 2008). The functioning of the analyzed units across various text types is corroborated by examples drawn from the Russian National Corpus. The ritual-symbolic and mythological strata of the concept under investigation are described with reference to the ethnographic works of A.K. Baiburin (Байбурин 1993), and the analysis of euphemistic nominations of the concept DEATH draws on *Словарь эвфемизмов русского языка* (Russian Language Euphemisms Dictionary) by E.P. Senichkina (Сеничкина 2012).

The present study employs frame analysis as its primary theoretical and methodological framework. The foundational work of Marvin Minsky (1975) in artificial intelligence established the computational concept of frames as data structures organized into slots and facets that represent stereotyped situations (Minsky 1975: 212). Charles Fillmore (1982, 1985) subsequently transformed this computational model into a comprehensive linguistic theory of meaning, establishing that “to understand the meaning of a word requires a great deal of underlying knowledge” (Fillmore 1985: 374-375). Fillmore defines frames as organized sets of semantic roles, participants, and their interrelations that characterize particular situations (Fillmore 1982: 115).

Within Russian cognitive linguistics, this framework was productively developed by N.N. Boldyrev, who defines a frame as “a structured unit of knowledge in which certain components and relationships between them are distinguished; a cognitive model that conveys knowledge and opinions about a certain, frequently recurring situation” (Болдырев 2004: 29). A.P. Chudinov views a frame as a cognitive structure that organizes human knowledge about the world. Through their interaction, frames give rise to a cognitive scenario that represents our understanding of how events usually develop in a typical sequence (Чудинов 2003: 71).

As it is previously mentioned, a frame is a data structure with slots and facets, where each slot is a placeholder for information about a situation, and facets contain default values that can function simultaneously on three levels (linguistic, grammatical, and conceptual) and are dynamically activated in discourse. Moreover, frames as instruments of mental categorization through metaphorical models, which continuously restructure reality and create new slots reflecting social change. Overall, a frame is a dynamic cognitive system that organizes language, thought, and our picture of the world (Minsky, Болдырев, Чудинов).

Applying this structural lens to the present study, the concept СМЕРТЬ under investigation is examined here as both a cognitive and a cultural unit, following the two complementary approaches to concept theory identified in contemporary cognitive linguistics (Ashurova, Galieva 2018: 57). Within the cognitive approach, “concept” is considered a complex mental unit, a means of representation of knowledge structures, a multifold cognitive structure, an operational unit of memory (Kubryakova E.S., Demyankov V.Z., Boldryev N.N.). From the perspective of linguaculturology “concept” is defined as a basic unit of culture? its core, a mental, cultural and nationally specific unit characterized by an array of emotional, expressive and evaluative components (Stepanov Yu.S., Aryutunova N.D., Karasik V.I., Pimenova M.V.) (Ashurova, Galieva 2018: 57);

By applying the theory of frames and concepts to the analysis of lexical and phraseological units, ritual-symbolic practices, and cultural meanings associated with the notion of death in the Russian language, six slots constituting the frame structure of the concept DEATH have been identified: *Умирание* (Death), *Похороны* (Funeral), *Погребение* (Burial), *Православие* (Orthodoxy), *Народные поверья* (Folk beliefs), and *Война – коллективная память* (War).

SLOT	SUB-SLOTS / COMPONENTS	KEY LEXICAL / PHRASEOLOGICAL UNITS
1. Умирание (Death)	Process of dying; euphemistic and argotic register	<i>преставиться, почить, отойти в мир иной, отдать Богу душу, уснуть вечным сном, сыграть в ящик, пасть смертью храбрых</i>
2. Похороны (Funeral)	Participants, places, attributes, actions, memorial days	<i>усопший, батюшка, плакальщицы, погост, поминки, панихида, причитания, Родительская суббота, Радоница</i>
3. Погребение (Burial)	Burial rites, from archaic to state-institutional	<i>отпевание, предание земле, братская могила, насыпание кургана, воинское захоронение</i>
4. Православие (Orthodoxy)	Orthodox beliefs; rites; theology of death	<i>душа три дня в доме, сорок дней душа странствует, самоубийца не отпевается, соборование</i>
5. Народные поверья (Folk Beliefs)	Folk-mythological concepts; ritual prohibitions	<i>заложные покойники, закрыть зеркала, остановить часы, открыть окно для души, нельзя здороваться через порог</i>
6. Война (War)	Wartime death; collective memory; heroic sacrifice	<i>похоронка, “Никто не забыт, ничто не забыто”, Могила Неизвестного Солдата, Вечный огонь</i>

Fig. 1. Frame Structure of the Concept DEATH in the Russian Linguistic World Picture

The slot *Умирание* (Death) denotes the process of life cessation and is lexically represented in the Russian language by a wide variety of verbs and verbal expressions: *преставиться* [to pass away], *почить* [to rest in peace], *отойти в мир иной* [to depart to the other world], *отдать Богу душу* [to give up one's soul to God], *успокоиться* [to find eternal rest], *уснуть вечным сном* [to fall into eternal sleep], *угаснуть* [to fade away], *сыграть в ящик* [lit. to play the box, slang for dying], *дать дуба* [lit. to give an oak, slang for dying], *протянуть ноги* [lit. to stretch out one's legs, slang for dying], *приказать долго жить* [lit. to order others to live long, ironic euphemism], *пасть смертью храбрых* [to fall the death of the brave]. The elevated literary-ecclesiastical register is exemplified by the terms *преставиться* [to pass away], *почить* [to rest in peace], *отойти в мир иной* [to depart to the other world], *отдать Богу душу* [to give up one's soul to God]. This slot engages the metaphorical model СМЕРТЬ – ЭТО ПЕРЕХОД / УХОД (DEATH IS TRANSITION

/ DEPARTURE): death is perceived not as a definitive endpoint, but as a transition from one existential realm to another. The phraseological unit *уснуть вечным сном* [to fall into eternal sleep] encapsulates the metaphor СМЕРТЬ – ЭТО СОН (DEATH IS A SLEEP), whereas the colloquial and argotic expressions (*сыграть в ящик* [lit. to play the box], *дать дуба* [lit. to give an oak], *протянуть ноги* [lit. to stretch out one's legs]) are constructed around the metaphor СМЕРТЬ – ЭТО ЗАВЕРШЕНИЕ ДЕЙСТВИЯ (DEATH IS THE END OF THE ACT).

The slot **Похороны** (Funeral) embodies the funeral rite as a socially and ritually organised event and includes multiple sub-slots: **участники** (participants), **места** (places), **атрибуты** (attributes), **действия** (actions) and **поминовение – дни памяти** (commemoration – memorial days). Within the sub-slot of **участники** (participants), the following lexemes are identified: *усопший* [lit. the fallen-asleep; euphemism for the deceased], *батюшка* [father; the Orthodox priest] and *плакальщицы* [professional female mourners / wailing women]. The lexeme *усопший* (literally “one who has fallen asleep”) serves as a euphemistic term for death, used instead of the neutral *мёртвый* [deceased]; the lexeme *батюшка* [father; the Orthodox priest] establishes the priest's essential role as a mediator between the living and the deceased. The lexeme *плакальщицы* [professional female mourners], representing a ritual role, originates from pre-Christian ceremonial traditions and reflects the profound folk-pagan foundation of the Orthodox burial rite, as extensively documented by A. K. Vaiburin (Байбурин 1993: 93). The sub-slot **места** (places) comprise *погост* [churchyard/cemetery], *Вечный огонь* [Eternal Flame], and *Могила Неизвестного Солдата* [Tomb of the Unknown Soldier]. The existence of the latter two locations indicates the convergence of Orthodox and Soviet-patriotic layers in the conceptualization of DEATH, supporting Yu.S. Stepanov's argument that the systemic structure of culture and the three-layered architecture of the concept give rise to evolutionary-semiotic series of cultural concepts (Судакова 2017: 1). The key **атрибуты** (attributes) of the funeral rite – *фотография на памятнике* [portrait on the headstone / photograph on the gravestone], *ограда* [grave enclosure / burial plot fence], *скамейка и стол у могилы* [bench and table at the graveside], *траурная лента с надписью* [mourning ribbon with inscription], *ладан* [incense / frankincense] – similarly embody culturally specific significance: the *фотография* [portrait/photograph] on the gravestone extends the symbolic presence of the deceased among the living, while the *скамейка* and *стол у могилы* [bench and table at the graveside] create a domestic spatial extension of the burial site. The sub-slot **действия** (actions) includes *поминки* [memorial repast], *поминальную трапезу* [commemorative meal / memorial table], *блины* [bliny / buckwheat pancakes], *кутью / коливо* [kutya / koliva], *стакан воды / водки для усопшего* [a glass of water / vodka placed for the deceased], *панихиду* [memorial service / requiem service], *заупокойную литургию* [requiem liturgy / liturgy for the repose of the soul], *причитания* [lamentations / keening], *ношение траура* [wearing mourning / observance of mourning]. This sub-slot encompasses the ritual practices and ceremonial acts that transform individual death into collective mourning through a syncretic blend of Orthodox and folk traditions. *Поминки* [memorial repast] and *поминальная трапеза* [commemorative meal / memorial table] constitute the memorial gathering and feast where the community assembly; *блины* [bliny / buckwheat pancakes] and *кутья / коливо* [kutya / koliva] serve as traditional funeral foods,

distributed to commemorate the deceased—that ritualize the sharing of grief. *Панихида* [*memorial service / requiem service*] and *заупокойная литургия* [*requiem liturgy / liturgy for the repose of the soul*] are prayer services for the repose of the soul. *Причитания* [*lamentations / keening*] derive from pre-Christian Slavic mourning traditions and give emotional voice to grief, while *ношение траура* marks the bereaved as socially withdrawn from normal life for a prescribed period. The sub-slot *поминовение – дни памяти* (commemoration – memorial days) encompasses the commemorative days that follow the funeral. For example, *девятины* [*the ninth-day commemoration*] and *сороковины* [*fortieth-day commemoration*] mark critical spiritual transitions in Orthodox theology, the soul is believed to undergo judgment, and prayers during these days are believed to aid its journey. *Годовщина смерти* [*death anniversary*] perpetuates individual memory within the family cycle, while *Родительская суббота* [*Parents' Saturday, collective commemoration of the deceased*] and *Радоница* [*Radonitsa, the Orthodox feast of the dead*] are collective Orthodox feast days when all the deceased are commemorated together, merging individual loss into communal ritual practice.

The slot *Погребение: обряды* encodes the ritual-procedural dimension of death in Russian linguistic culture. *Отпевание* [*requiem chanting*] represents the central Orthodox rite – prayers sung over the deceased – while *заочное отпевание* [*in absentia requiem service*] extends this ritual to cases where the body is absent, addressing the soul rather than the remains. *Предание земле* [*committal to the earth*] frames burial in Biblical terms, activating the conceptual metaphor СМЕРТЬ – ЭТО ВОЗВРАЩЕНИЕ (DEATH IS RETURN). *Братская могила* [*mass fraternal grave*] shifts the scale from individual to collective, encoding solidarity in shared tragic fate, typically in wartime. *Насыпание кургана* [*raising of a burial mound*] reaches into pre-Christian, archaic burial practice, *воинское захоронение* [*official military burial*] represents the modern institutionalized end of the scale, where death receives state recognition and is framed as heroic sacrifice.

The slot *Православие* (Orthodoxy) frames death in Russian culture as a spiritually managed transition rather than a biological endpoint. Most conceptually rich here are the *православные верования* (Orthodox beliefs): *душа три дня в доме* [*the soul remains in the house for three days*] and *сорок дней душа странствует* [*the soul wanders for forty days*] reveal a popular cosmology where the soul lingers gradually – it does not leave instantly, reflecting pre-Christian traces absorbed into Orthodox practice. Equally interesting is *самоубийца не отпевается* [*a suicide is not given a requiem service*] – the denial of funeral rites to a suicide, which shows that in this culture death is morally categorized: not every death grants access to ritual protection. Among the *обряды* (rituals), *соборование* [*the sacrament of holy unction*] stands out as it belongs to the *living*, not the dead – it is performed on the dying body as a last spiritual preparation, blurring the boundary between life and death.

The slot *Народные поверья* (Folk beliefs) encodes the folk-mythological layer of death in Russian culture. The key mythological concept *зложные покойники* [*lit. “pledged/trapped dead”*] – those who died “improperly” (through violence, accident, drowning, or before their appointed time) – reveals that in folk belief death is cosmologically categorized: an untimely death creates a dangerous, unresolved soul that cannot peacefully transfer to the other world. This concept refers to the metaphor СМЕРТЬ – ЭТО ПЕРЕНЕСЕНИЕ (DEATH IS TRANSFORMATION), but if it is

violated – a soul *stuck* mid-transfer becomes a threat to the living. The ritual prohibitions are equally telling: *закрывать зеркала* [*to cover the mirrors*] and *остановить часы* [*to stop the clocks*] both suspend normal life – mirrors erase reflection (identity), clocks erase time, as if the living world must pause at the moment of transfer. *Открыть окно для души* [*to open a window for the soul*] is perhaps the most transparent embodiment of СМЕРТЬ – ЭТО ПЕРЕНЕСЕНИЕ (DEATH IS TRANSFORMATION): the soul needs a physical passage out, conceptualized as a *departure through space*. *Не свистеть в доме покойника* [*not to whistle in the house of the deceased*] reflects the folk belief that sound attracts spirits – the house remains a liminal zone between worlds. Most conceptually interesting is *нельзя здороваться через порог* [*one must not greet across the threshold*] – the threshold (*порог* [*threshold, liminal boundary*]) is a boundary between the living and dead spaces, and crossing it verbally without crossing it physically is perceived as dangerous contact with the other world.

The slot **Война** (War) encodes how death in war is linguistically transformed into collective cultural identity in Russian culture. *Похоронка* [*lit. “death notice”; colloquial for official military death notification*] – the informal term for an official military death notification – is arguably the most emotionally loaded lexeme in the entire DEATH frame: its diminutive suffix *-ка* does not soften but intensifies, reflecting how deeply this word penetrated everyday wartime speech, becoming the most feared object in any Soviet household. Expression «**Никто не забыт, ничто не забыто**» (No one is forgotten, nothing is forgotten) (O. Bergholz) transformed from a poetic expression into a ritual-memorial cliché, organizing a collective memory of the war.

The study of the structure and content of the concept DEATH within the Russian linguistic worldview leads to the following conclusions:

- The concept DEATH is one of the fundamental and universal categories of human consciousness, possessing a complex frame structure in the Russian language. This structure comprises six interconnected slots: Death, Funeral, Burial, Orthodoxy, Folk beliefs, and War. Linguistic analysis demonstrates that the lexical and phraseological units forming these slots do not merely objectify the biological fact of life cessation but also transmit profound religious, historical, and mythological representations specific to the Russian linguistic picture of the world.

- Frame analysis confirms that in the Russian language, death is conceptualized not as an absolute end, but as a sacred process that closely binds the world of the living and the world of the departed through ritual, faith, and memory. The analysis established that the DEATH frame is built upon several key metaphorical models that structure the perception of this phenomenon: DEATH IS TRANSITION – DEPARTURE, DEATH IS A SLEEP, DEATH IS THE END OF THE ACT, DEATH IS RETURN, DEATH IS TRANSFORMATION;

- The concept DEATH in Russian linguoculture emerges as a multidimensional construct realized across three axiological dimensions. The religious-Orthodox dimension treats death as a spiritual transition; the mythological (folk) dimension preserves archaic fears of “unclean” death and necessitates ritual protection; and the historical-memorial dimension transforms death into an act of heroic sacrifice and an element of national identity.

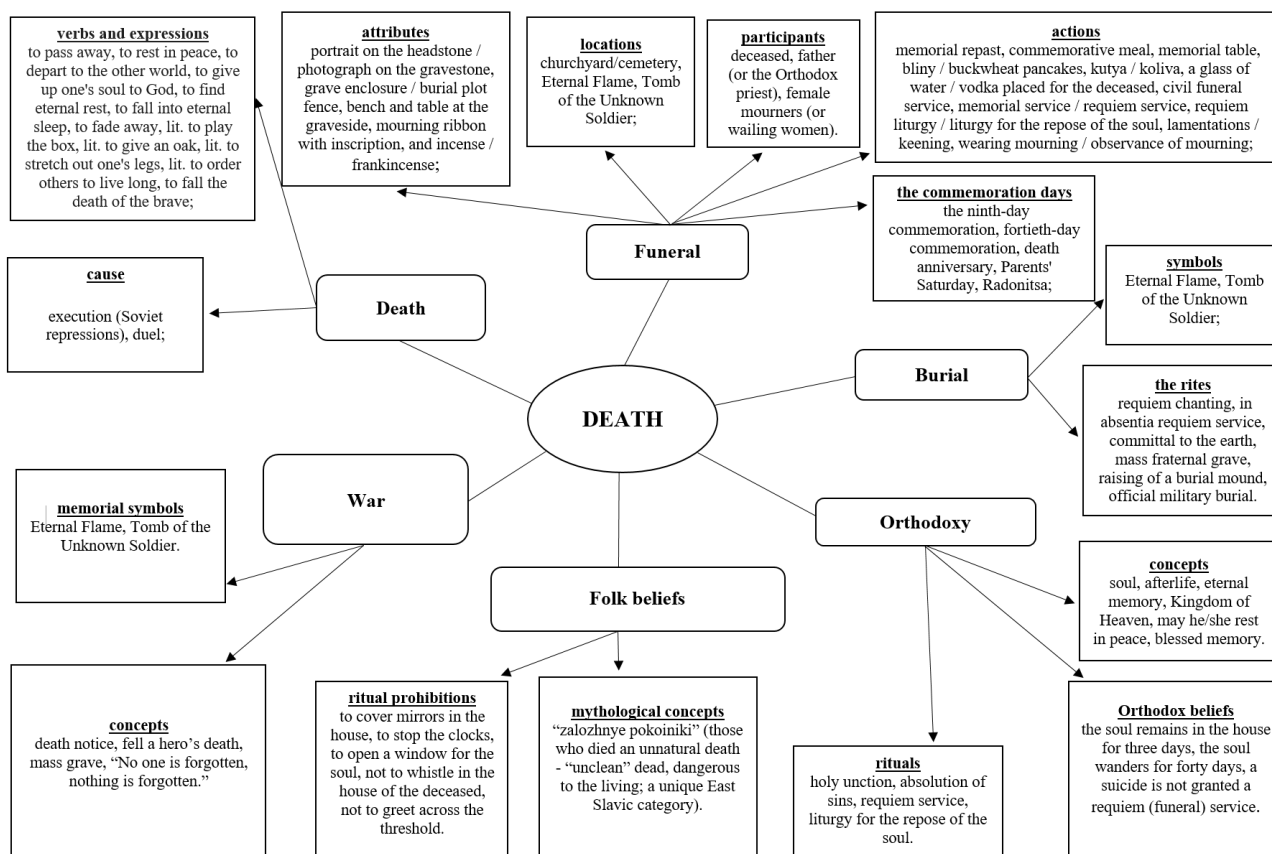


Fig. 2. Frame analysis of the concept death

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