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Metaphors of “Death” in Persian Curses

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Cursing is a speech act by which a speaker expresses his/her wish that some form of misfortune, harm or hurt may befall or be brought upon someone else (a present hearer or an absent addressee). This paper demonstrates that in Persian curses the most commonly desired misfortune that a speaker wishes to bring upon someone else is “illness” or “death”. Moreover, in most Persian curses the speaker asks God to bring about the harm, so most Persian curses start with the Arabic word “*elahi*”, addressed to God, and meaning “my God”.

What is noticeable about these curses is that the death wish in most cases is expressed indirectly, usually using metaphorical language when referring to the elements of the death event:

- O God, may [you] put him like a seed in the earth.
- O God, may he run under an 18-wheeler [truck].
- O God, may his mother wear black at his ceremony.
- O God, may I attend his funeral ceremony.
- O God, may I put cotton on her face (describing the last stages of preparing a dead body for burial according to Islamic traditions).

On the other hand, when the death wish is expressed directly, usually it does not convey a death wish, but rather becomes a formulaic expression conveying closeness, friendship, objection or humor:

- What have you done? May god kill you.
- May you die for making this mess.

In sum, it seems that in Persian curses, indirect, metaphorical language puts more emphasis on the “death wish,” whereas the directly expressed “death wish” conveys concepts other than a genuine “death wish”. In other words, the more indirect and metaphorical the “death wish” is, the stronger its effect on the addressee.

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