The deeper linguistic roots of order and chaos

# Orderly synonyms?

*In our primitive cosmogonies, we can imagine that in the beginning there was nothing. Even so, some of us may imagine this "nothing" as the truest, purest order, while for others it represents utter disorder. For some, imposing order means tidying or arranging, while for others it entails developing or adapting. The languages we speak employ oft-heard words to describe these two opposing conditions – one being a recognizable and satisfying arrangement, something that instills a sense of security and predictability, the other a state where we cannot grasp any existing arrangement and lose track of what we are seeking, or even ourselves.*

*In Polish we can look at the contrastive word-sets* ład *and* porządek, *vs.* chaos *and* bałagan *(roughly equivalent for the present purposes to the English words* harmony *and* order, *vs.* chaos *and* mess*). Both languages of course have more such words, especially in the latter "untidy" category – including quite a few indecent ones, to boot – but these exemplary foursomes seem to reflect well our linguistic impression of* order *vs.* disorder, *harmony* vs. *disharmony. Note here how these "tidy" words do have their own "untidy" antonyms, yet it is hard to even conceive of what "dis-chaos" or "dis-turmoil" might mean (the analogous Polish constructions, "niechaos" and "niebałagan," being similarly incongruous).*

*Looking at things from a historical perspective, the Polish word* ład, *meaning "harmony," has been present in the mainstream language only since the 17th century. The word* porządek, *meaning "order," is considerably older, deriving from the much more ancient adverbial* porząd, *meaning "one after another." It is interesting to note that two common positive adjectives in contemporary Polish,* ładny *and* porządny, *nowadays meaning "pretty" and "decent" and semantically invoking basic axiology, esthetics, and ethics, in fact derive from the above two nouns denoting order and harmony.*

*Moreover, there is a fairly consistent specialization of the Polish "tidy" words* ład *and* porządek. *The former is perceived as the highest form: the tidiness of* ład *evokes notions of* harmonia transfigurata, *a conclusive harmonization of everything and smoothing everything out.* Porządek, *in turn, represents an order imposed by someone, created by way of rules and limitations that are likely necessary, albeit not necessarily desirable. In Polish as well as English, upon entering paradise we do expect to find harmony (*ład*), but one can hardly imagine discovering some sort of* order (porządek) *in place there.*

*Things get even more intriguing when we take a closer look at the "untidy" words cited above, nowadays frequently perceived as synonyms, yet with distinctly different origins. Chaos, after Hesiod, originally denoted a shapeless empty space. Linde's dictionary of the Polish language (early 19th cen.) defined the term as a "primary mixed mass of elements," while Trentowski's dictionary (mid 19th cen.) notes the story of Chaos, a "submissive, meek, lazy, and heavy" Greek god, "inclined to do anything but entirely without his own will, who was ruled by his wife," but was despite this "considered the primordial deity and the initiator of all things." Chaos is primordial and mighty, disorderly in the sense that order had yet to be imposed upon this sweeping, empty, indefinite expanse. Both Polish and English drew the word* chaos *from the Greek, naturally by way of other languages – in Polish it only stabilized in its current meaning in the 19th century, under the influence of French. The Dutch, in turn, shifted its meaning even more, as their own pronunciation of the French in fact gave rise to* gas, *a word subsequently adopted in nearly every tongue.*

*The other "disorderly" Polish word cited above,* bałagan, *derives from Russian; the Russians took it from Kyrgyz, the Kyrgyz from Persian. The East has often been a source of words denoting things and conditions that are disheveled, disarrayed, or slipshod – consider the English and Polish words for* bazaar, *for instance, likewise ultimately of Persian pedigree. In Polish,* bałagan *originally denoted a market stall or shed, ramshackle constructions erected for brief use, always in disarray, from there evolving to its current sense of "mess."*

Chaos, *therefore, is mythological, grave and menacing, while the Polish* bałagan *(like the English* mess*) is familiar and frivolous. Nowadays we do not pay much heed to whether we have made our own mess (*bałagan*) or have ended up in a state of inexplicable* chaos, *and indeed, in both Polish and English we may often describe a mess as something* chaotic. *Yet tellingly, it is harder to go the other way, and define chaos as something* messy.

*Upon closer linguistic scrutiny, order and harmony turn out not to be simple synonyms, or simple antonyms to chaos*

**JERZY BRALCZYK**
Warsaw University
The Council for the Polish Language
Polish Academy of Sciences
bralczyk@interia.pl