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SOME REMARKS ON THE SYMBOLIC DUALISM OF DEATH¹

There are an unimaginable number of words, each of which has one or more synonym or antonym. Note that the words we employ in our day-to-day verbal exchange may be of various communicative value, ambiguous force, stylistic register, emotional colour and the referent they stand for may be of different semantic-symbolic nature. Each particular content word is (or may become) a key-word in our day-to-day communication, exchange of opinions, argument (both written and oral), poetry and prose alike. This is true of standard words, but also words specific to particular geographical regions, as well as words characteristic of certain social or professional circles.

The modest purpose set to this paper is to outline certain issues related to the dualism of the symbolism of the concept of **DEATH** – simultaneously as it emerges and is reflected in fixed language units, such as proverbs and sayings. I believe that the word *death* and the concept of **DEATH** deserve particular attention due to what may be labelled as the inevitable universality of the concept, but also due to the fact – which I hope to be able to show – that the concept of death, or rather its axiological load, may be proved not to be exclusively associated with negative attributive values, as in certain circumstances it may be demonstrated to be linked to certain positive attributive values in the sense of attributive elements forming elements of various concepts as outlined in Kleparski (1997) or Kiełtyka (2006). Approaching the semantics of *death*, we must start with the definition of the word, which is in this case a synthesis of the definitions given in Sinclair (2006) and Markowski (2007):

¹ Let me take this opportunity and extend my heartfelt thanks to **Prof. Grzegorz A. Kleparski** and **dr Sławomir Koziol** for their critical, yet helpful remarks on both the form and contents of this text.

Death 1: Stan charakteryzujący się ustaniem oznak życia, spowodowany nieodwracalnym zachwianiem równowagi funkcjonalnej i załamaniem wewnętrznej organizacji ustroju. Nieodwracalne ustanie wszystkich czynności ustroju oraz procesów przemiany materii we wszystkich jego komórkach, zgon ‘Death is the end of life of a biological organism. Death may refer to the end of life caused by loss of balance, functional and inner balance. The permanent cessation of all vital functions, metabolism in all cells, demise’.

Death 2: Ostateczne ustanie czynności życiowych organizmu, fakt, że ktoś umarł, zgon, śmierć biologiczna ‘Irreversible cessation of all functions (of the entire brain), decease, demise, death’.

Death 3: Chwila, w której człowiek umiera, przestaje żyć, rozstaje się ze światem, proces ustawiania na zawsze wszystkich czynności organizmu ‘The very moment when a person dies, stops living, leaves the world, the process of cessation of all functions of human body’.

In our daily communication we make use of countless sayings, adages and phrases which enrich and add colour to our speech. Understandably, in the process of the application of words we are not always fully aware of the meanings of words, idioms, fixed sayings and proverbs. There exist numerous fixed lexical items, phraseological units, sayings and proverbs related to the concept of **DEATH**. Among others, we may list here the following expressions taken from *Słownik współczesny języka polskiego* (2001):

biała śmierć ‘white death’, *blady jak śmierć* ‘as white as a sheet’, *być panem życia i śmierci* ‘be the master of life and death’, *na łożu śmierci* ‘on one’s deathbed’, *na śmierć i życie* ‘life and death struggle’, *patrzeć śmierci w oczy* ‘look death in the eyes’, *umrzeć swoją śmiercią* ‘die one’s own death’, *wywinąć się od śmierci* ‘a narrow escape from death’, *zamartwiać się na śmierć* ‘be worried to death’, *zblednąć jak śmierć* ‘be pale as death’, *zapracować się na śmierć* ‘work to death’

Generally speaking, it is fairly obvious that human society perceives death as an evil which is both omnipotent and omnipresent, because it affects – so to speak – anyone and knows no go-betweens, once it happens it happens, it is here and there is no reversal. Yet, on the other hand, death does not always equal the ultimate evil that may happen to a human being. Obviously, in order to understand the totality of the concept of **DEATH** we must know the dictionary definition of the word death, but also – to get a full picture – one is advised to analyse the semantics of sayings, proverbial expressions and proverbs related to the concept discussed here. This may verify the first-impression picture on the one hand, and – on the other hand – add a new colour. All in all, it may lead to the formulation of certain better-founded conclusions related to the concept discussed. We may ask the following questions: Is death – being the end of our earthly existence – pictured as entirely negative or whether one may speak about

certain duality here, that is whether death is viewed as partially positive? If so, what are the reasons for this perception of death?

According to Biederman (1992) and Kopaliński (1993), death is the symbol of: <balance>, <indiscrimination>, <speed>, <rapidity>, <mysteries of nature>, <the end of a wandering journey>, <eternal dream>, <great awakening of the wisdom of body>, <separating human soul from its body>, <shadow>, <sunset>, <valley>, <darkness>, <everlasting night>, <the guard of hell>, <strange country doom>, <fatality>, <offence>, <enemy>, <punishment>, <evil>, <scarecrow>, <the lord of scarecrows>, <undesired>, <responsible>, <theft>, <debt>, <devotion>, <comfort>, <mercy>, <doctor>, <panacea>, <gift>, <harvester>, <mediator>, <freedom>, <joy>, <progress>, <monarchy>, <salvation>, <suicide caused by tension>, <stress and pain>.²

Let us now analyse the semantics of the adages, fixed sayings and proverbs related to the concept of **DEATH** given in two monumental publications; that is Masłowsky (2005b) and Masłowsky (2007). As previously, we shall employ the convention of marking the most essential attributive elements of the quoted **DEATH**-related language data with the aid of arrows, for example, <death is inevitable>:

DEATH attributes as emerging from fixed sayings of various world languages in proverbial form:³

Pale death knocks at paupers' doors and the royal gates

<death spares nobody>

We don't die twice, we can't even avoid the first death

<death comes only once>

How many "deaths" must we experience to be prepared for it, to learn that we will also die

< too late do we realize that we are mortal >

One death is a tragedy, a million is a statistic

<death is only comprehensible on an individual scale>

The gloomy gates of death are impervious to any requests

<death is inevitable>

Death has never forgotten about anyone

<death spares nobody>

The moment we die, we reap what we have sown during our life

² In turn Kopaliński (1993) and Biederman (1992) provide the following list of symbols of death: //coffin//, //cypress//, //skeleton//, //skull//, //rider on a fawn horse//, //dark torch held down//, //an urn covered with a cloth//, //weeping willow//, //wreck//, //ivy wreath//, //broken pillar//, //sheaf//, //sickle//, //ash and dust//, //bats//, //swan song//, //extinguished candle//, //gallows//, //mummy//.

³ All language material has been rendered into English by the author with the help of **Mr Donald Trinder, B.A.**, to whom I would like to express my gratitude.

<at the point of death, there is a final reckoning in which one is called to account for one's actions during life>

Death is an eternal refuge in which we experience nothing

<death takes away our emotions and feelings>

The dread of death is more cruel than death itself

<death frightens us>

Our death is simple, we can't put up with the death of people close to our hearts

<the death of those closest to us is most tragic to bear>

Death shows us the main sense of our life

<death takes us to paradise>

Death is a medicine for all incurable diseases

<death provides the ultimate release from all problems>

Death is full of meaning

<our soul doesn't pass away, dying has deeper sense>

The conceptual picture of **DEATH** includes the attributive elements that encode the message of the inevitable termination of the life of each person. The inevitable death knows no exceptions and comes without any warning, secretly and calmly, unexpectedly, and – when it comes – it deprives us of all mundane riches. Optimistically, at the same time, death is a ticket to the land of eternal dreams, to God's land called paradise. There, when we are settled with the tasks entrusted on the earth, we are allowed to live in eternal joy and abundance, or we are doomed to go to purgatory, where we do penance for our earthly sins. Furthermore, it can be observed that death also has different faces due to the fact that we may terminate our earthly existence in a variety of ways. No matter how we die, and although death may not be that painful and cruel to us, to those closest to us who remain it is always tragic. The bereft ones will cry, mourn and miss us, call back memories, and pray for the peace of our soul. They may believe that, after death, we will experience an everlasting joy, but to them our demise remains a tragedy.

We may shed tears over the countless numbers of innocent lives lost during local or world wars but, to the majority of people not affected directly by the cruelties of war, these deaths are nothing more than statistics. However, to someone who loses a close person death means nothing more or less than an irretrievable loss and passing to a new reality, the loss of everything and a personal tragedy. We lose our children, husbands, wives or parents, and each time the pain pierces our hearts and each time the stabbing pain is different.

Death is inevitable; it cannot be cheated, one cannot avoid it and it remains virtually inescapable. At the same time, it is an irreversible process, the awareness of which is deeply rooted in our consciousness, and – on top of this – we realize that it has arrived only when it is too late. Almost universally, we are aware of the death of all those others who happen to die around us, but

not necessarily are we aware of the inevitability of our own death. In effect, when it knocks at our door, we are taken by surprise and want to bolt it in an attempt to prevent death from coming inside. Unfortunately, there is no escaping from it, there is no shelter to hide behind; locks, barricades and bolts present no hindrance to it. When it comes, it takes us to a different land.

Yet, on the other hand, different does not necessarily mean inferior. Death is not exclusively associated with the negative attributive elements of evil, pain and bitterness, as it provides – to a certain extent – a very effective remedy for our earthly toil and suffering. Those who suffer feel relieved of their pain and those who experience major earthly suffering find salvation from further agony. At the same time, death is the last resort for those who are incurably ill, disabled or handicapped; people afflicted in such ways perceive death in a different way to the healthy and strong. Corporal or mental suffering may lead to mental illness, loss of consciousness or to losing touch with others, that is mental alienation, social death which – in a way – may be viewed as a type of death. We have countless examples around us that our bodily functions are normal, yet the mind dies and it passes away with time.

Finally, let me concentrate on the contents of selected Polish fixed sayings and proverbs collected in Masłowski (2005a). Note that – somewhat paradoxically to the all-terminating nature of death – all these language elements enrich our communication:

DEATH attributes as emerging from Polish proverbs:

Czasu i śmierci nigdy się uprosić nie da. ‘You can beg neither time nor death’
<death is inevitable>

Kto się na śmierć odważy ten się wszystkiego waży ‘He who isn’t afraid of death, isn’t afraid of anything’ <death is the greatest of all threats>

Umarłego płaczem nie wskrzesi ‘Crying can’t bring anybody back to life’
<death is irreversible>

Przeciwko śmierci mocy nie ma ‘There are no forces against death’ <there is no withstanding death>

Raz w życiu kochamy i raz umieramy ‘We love and die only once’ <death is a singular and unique event>

Śmierć nie pyta o lata ‘Death doesn’t ask about the age’ <death takes one by surprise, at any age>

Śmierć nie zna prawa żadnego, bierze z panem ubogiego ‘Death doesn’t know the law, it takes both the poor and the rich’ <death takes all people alike, without distinction>

U śmierci w jednej cenie i młody i stary ‘Death doesn’t care about age, and takes both the young and the old’ <death takes all people alike>

Dziś zdrowy a jutro do śmierci gotowy ‘Healthy today, tomorrow at death’s door’
<death may come any time, be prepared>

Na śmierć nie ma lekarstwa ‘There is no medicine against death’ <there is no protection against death>

Jakie życie taka śmierć ‘Like life like death’ <the method of your death reflects your life>

Lepiej z głodu umierać niż ze wstydu ‘It is better to die of hunger rather than shame’ <pride is the most important characteristic of human life, and even death should not allow us to lose this>

Śmierć i żona od Boga przeznaczona ‘Death and wife are preordained by God’ <death is an act of God>

Wyśpisz się po śmierci ‘You will sleep well after death’ <you will have plenty of time to rest when you have passed away>

In an attempt to answer the previously posed question whether the picture of **DEATH** is entirely negative, we can certainly speak about a certain axiological duality of the concept discussed here. Obviously, the majority of the attributive elements emerging from the language material quoted here contribute to the negatively loaded semantic and symbolic structure of the word *death* and the concept **DEATH**. Yet, the data quoted above also point to certain positively loaded attributive elements linked to the concept. Among others, this is visible in such collocations as *blessed death*, *death as the only salvation*.

It was the iconic Greek philosopher Plato (over two thousand years ago) who described death as the liberation of the human soul and gift of immortality. It is fairly obvious that collocations of the word *death* are inseparable from the negative semantic-emotional charge of the concept of **DEATH**, because – generally speaking – death is perceived as something negative, as an act deprived of any goodness, full of cruelty, full of ruthlessness and pain and tears. Yet, we can say that – paradoxically – to some extent the concept of **DEATH** is also linked to positive semantic-symbolic elements, because the act of death itself can be, and – in fact – is frequently perceived as goodness, healing, liberation from our suffering and the ticket for the ride to heaven, and hence something we look forward to with longing.

Finally, let us deal with the most surprising language data part. According to Boryś (2005), the historically original meaning of Polish *śmierć* ‘death’ was ‘a good death’ and/or ‘natural death’, as opposed to sudden death that takes us by surprise. Similarly, yet even more surprisingly, the semantics of the English verb *die* has – since the late 16th century – been somewhat dualistic in nature. Although since the Old English times it has been used in its historical sense ‘to cease to live’, at the end of the 16th century the verb developed the sense ‘to experience the peak of sexual pleasure, to have orgasm’ that has been present in English till this day (1599 *Nay, but I know who loues him.. and in despight of all, dies for him. Shee shall be buried with her face vpwards* >1974 *Come let me love you.. Let me die in your arms*). Hence, one may conclude that there is

historical evidence that points to the dualistic nature of **DEATH** and all that goes along with it.

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