

The Abyss in Polish

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How you talk about the abyss in Polish and what it actually means

What is it about?

This publication is about the concept of ABYSS in Polish: it can be expressed through two words, "otchłań" and "czeluść", but this chapter focuses on "otchłań" (which is the "default" word). It presents the several related meanings the word can have, how it is used in all kinds of discourse, and what kind of imagery is connected with it. It also shows that the Polish abyss may be ambiguous, vague, or contradictory.

Why is it important?

ABYSS is an Ancient Greek concept (ABYSSOS) that has made its way to European culture (mainly through the Bible) and has become one of the standard images to represent loss, suffering, depression, hopelessness, despair and suchlike. However, concepts do not float in the air but are expressed through words - and so the Polish "otchłań", which has a different etymology, shares some part of its meaning with the Greek notion but it also has its own characteristics. In fact, this is probably true of any word that comes close to the Greek one, in any language. In other words, the Greek "abyssos" is and it not at the same time the same as the English Biblical "pit", the Polish "otchłań", the German "Abgrund", etc. Bringing those similarities and differences to light can teach us a lot about speakers of those languages and their cultures.

Perspectives



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The chapter comes in a volume that emerged from a conference, in Tartuu (Estonia), that was exceptional and especially memorable: it was the first conference that I attended on-site after the COVID-19 pandemic (the conference had been postponed several times before it actually took place). When the conference organizer, Prof. Marko Pajević, conceived of the idea, neither he, nor any of the delegates could presume that at a conference on the abyss we would actually be discussing and recovering from an experience that for many of us was exactly that.

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