Alles in Ordnung? Reflections on German order

Everyone who has learned a second language will have noticed that certain words and expressions cannot be translated easily from one language into another. Some ways of expressing meaning seem to be language specific or particular to a certain speech-community. When I came to Australia, for instance, I learned that people frequently say no worries in response to thanks or an apology. The literal German translation for no worries is “keine Sorge”. However, the correct response to a German thank-you is gern geschehen (“it has happened gladly”) and the answer to an apology is kein Problem (“no problem”) in the German language.

In contrast, I have never been asked whether everything is in order in an English speaking context, although this is an expression frequently used in my first language, German (alles in Ordnung?). English equivalents of the same phrase contains the words “alright” or “OK” instead of “order” (“is everything alright/OK?”). In German, we also reassure people that “everything is in order” (alles ist in Ordnung) or use an order-expression if we are in agreement with others (in Ordnung, English “alright”, “OK”). A common German saying even states that order is fundamental (Ordnung muss sein).

When similar communicative routines are expressed in different ways in different languages (or even in the same language in different speech communities), we may ask if and what the wording tells us about each linguaculture. In particular, if it is a recurring and salient topic as is the case with German Ordnung. Why is order such an important topic in the German language?

In a recently published article about “German Ordnung. A semantic and ethnopragnatic analysis of a core cultural value,” (Cramer, 2015) I aim to illustrate the intricate connections that exist between features of a certain language and underlying culture-specific conceptualizations. The analysis sheds new light on the German cultural core value Ordnung “order,” its relationship to other cultural themes, and its relationship to German interpersonal style. To reach a better understanding of the German core value Ordnung “order” as it relates to other German cultural themes, the study first provides an analysis of the common expressions alles (ist) in Ordnung “everything is in order” and Ordnung muss sein “there has to be order.” This is followed by an analysis of a social descriptor that is seemingly opposed to the all-pervasive idea of “Ordnung”, the term locker “loose.”
The article seeks to illustrate the merits of a perspective in language and culture studies that is truly culture-internal and can thus facilitate cross-cultural understanding. It does so by applying the principles of the Natural Semantic Metalanguage (NSM) approach to semantic and ethnopragmatic description. The article is available through the International Journal of Language and Culture.

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