

## FUNCTIONING OF THE NOUN *DISTRESS* IN GENDER-SPECIFIC CONTEXTS

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**Abstract.** Lexis of English as a global academic language becomes increasingly part of institutional communication across the world. This process also involves some common English words such as *happiness*, *tiredness* or *distress* which, apart from everyday speech, are used in professional communication to refer to subject-matter of academic research. As there is no single established academic definition for concepts of this type, their transfer into other linguistic communities (e.g. through translation or borrowings) frequently results in miscommunications, impeding cross-cultural comprehensibility in academic settings. This study aims to describe the semantic structure of the English word *distress* in non-academic contexts. We assume that, in the absence of a universally accepted definition, this structure serves as a semantic base for the academic uses of the term *distress*.

This report presents the contextual semantic analysis of the word *distress* based on 264 contexts retrieved from the British National Corpus and Corpus of Contemporary American English. Our findings show that *distress* refers to a state of lasting discomfort (caused by unmet vital needs or disruption of routine) which makes the subject seek assistance.

To clarify the content of the word *distress* and its value as a research instrument, uses of this term in gender-specific contexts were analysed. The material provides

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**Примечание [N2]:** Выполнено. См. примечания к библиографическому списку.

valuable information on the gendered understandings of “vital needs” and of socially acceptable manifestations of distress in English-speaking cultures.

Over the course of the study, the semantic structure of the word *distress* has revealed great potential as a diagnostic tool for inquiry into English-speaking cultures, opening new avenues for comparative and translation research.

**Keywords:** lexicology, semantics, gender, academic communication, intercultural communication

## **Introduction**

Lexis of English as a global academic language is becoming part of institutional communication across the globe. Apart from academic terminology, this process also affects a number of common high-frequency lexemes like *enjoy*, *happiness*, *tiredness* or *distress* which are widely used in professional communication to refer to subject-matter of academic research. Although these lexemes often act as terms, their scientific content remains rather blurred (Wierzbicka A., 2009). This semantic fuzziness grows more pronounced when words of this group are transferred to a different linguistic culture as a result of translation or borrowing; academic comprehensibility in this case is likely to be impeded (Kudrya S.V., Davtyan E.N., 2014). A close investigation into the semantic structure of such English lexemes with a focus on their functioning in non-academic contexts may help optimize cross-cultural academic communication and eliminate semantic distortions as the scientific content of these words is firmly grounded in everyday usage.

## **Goals and objectives**

This paper addresses the semantic structure of the word *distress*, widely used in specialist publications on economics, management, psychology and medicine. The purpose of the study is two-fold: 1. to analyse the semantic structure and identify the semantic base of the lexeme; and 2. to clarify the idioethnic semantic features of the

lexeme by placing it in gender contexts containing explicit gender markers, and to assess its potential applications in cross-cultural studies.

### Methods

A two-stage contextual semantic analysis of the word *distress* was performed. At stage 1, the key semantic components of *distress* were identified on the basis of 264 contexts retrieved from the British National Corpus (BNC) and Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA). At stage 2, the word *distress* was analysed in an additional 408 contexts which referred to adverse situations affecting people of different genders and included combinations of the noun *distress* with gendered possessive pronouns *her/his* (*her distress* – 158 contexts from COCA, 60 contexts from BNC; *his distress* – 130 contexts from COCA, 60 contexts from BNC). The study sample excluded contexts with false-generic masculine and feminine pronouns like *A savage, therefore, whatever be the nature of his distress, expects no sympathy from those about him; [...] only the child knows the reason for her distress.*

### Findings and discussion

First of all, the findings of Stage 1 analysis indicate that the term *distress* refers to a state of lasting mental and/or emotional discomfort which cannot be relieved without **external assistance**. In examples (1) and (2), the sufferers are unable to cope with the dangerous situations if left to their own devices, and may therefore expect support from without. The appeal for help in (1) is expressed grammatically via the imperative verb; in (2) a compound noun *distress call* is used which denotes a special mode of soliciting help in an emergency.

(1) **Rescue** an animal in distress.

(2) Ten minutes later it sent out a distress call saying two of its four engines caught fire.

Second, the lexeme *distress* systematically occurs in contexts referring to **unmet fundamental or vital needs**. Thus, (3) describes negative developments in the economic situation of a nation; the word *distress* features in the utterance alongside with

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**Примечание [N4]:** Выполнено. См. примечания к библиографическому списку.

a term for another negative psycho-emotional reaction (*fear*) caused by the gradual erosion of the economic circumstances; both lexemes produce a cumulative pragmatic effect on the reader, mutually reinforcing one another. Example (4) mentions unmet economic needs experienced by a business which is incapable of performing its financial liabilities and finds itself at risk of bankruptcy.

(3) *Among many Israelis there was genuine distress and fear that **their standard of living was continuously deteriorating.***

(4) *Financial distress is a condition in which a company or individual cannot generate revenue or income because it is unable to meet or **cannot pay its financial obligations.***

The available examples of usage appear to indicate that the state of distress correlates more strongly with the perceived needs of the subject rather than the objective adversity of the situation (5):

(5) *Husbands feel distress when their **wives are gainfully employed.***

Although the socio-economic trend towards the growing empowerment and financial security of women represents a “positive good”, it generates distress since it conflicts with the fundamental need of the male subjects to fulfil their traditional gender roles of breadwinners.

**The disruption of routine** or the established course of things is the third important component present in the semantic structure of *distress*. This can be exemplified by (6), where distress results from the possible premature disruption of life, and (7), where the unmarried state of the subjects is juxtaposed with the social status perceived as common, traditional or normal in the given culture, i.e. being in marriage:

(6) *... <they >feel distress at the possibility that they could have an **early death.***

(7) ***Married** people are less distressed than **unmarried**, and this is especially true of men.*

To summarize, Stage 1 analysis shows that the usage of the lexeme *distress* is determined by the following semantic base: *a state of lasting discomfort caused by routine disruption or unmet vital needs, which makes the subject seek assistance.*

Further information on the semantic potential of *distress* was obtained during Stage 2 of our study from the co-occurrences of the lexeme with pronominal gender markers *her, his*. The functioning of *distress* in gendered contexts (referred below as “feminine” and “masculine”) provides valuable information about cultural norms regulating the experiencing and display of negative psycho-emotional states by women and men as well as the representation of these states in text and discourse.

A number of contexts studied here mentioned manifestations of distress of varying degree of specificity (8-10):

(8) *His distress and discomfort are apparent in his **tightly contained posture.***

(9) ***Something on Sis Goose's face** bespoke her distress.*

(10) *“Goodbye,” said this kindly decent woman, her distress at the ways of this wicked world **written all over her.***

The intensity and form of such manifestations, however, are often determined by spoken or unspoken cultural conventions applying to a particular gender category. The “feminine” contexts in our sample frequently referred to crying (14 contexts) as an explicit behavioural marker of emotional vulnerability and/or physical pain:

12) *She **nearly sobs** in her distress [accident to a loved one].*

13) *From a distance she appeared to be shivering but as I drew closer I heard the **lamb bleats** of her distress [sexual violence].*

14) *She clenched her hands and **thought she would not cry**, would not let anyone see her distress [relationship failure].*

“Masculine” contexts, on the contrary, hardly ever mentioned crying in situations of distress, even where serious injuries were involved (15, 16). One possible explanation is that overt expression of pain or fear (both of which constitute parts of distress) is traditionally policed more severely in men than in women (Coates, 2003:198).

15) His distress was evident immediately; he glanced at **his leg, its lower half and ankle bending in the wrong direction**, and immediately threw off his helmet and put his hands over his face before he was attended to by trainers, who carted him from the field.

16) He tried to indicate his distress by raising **his blood-soaked arm**.

Both “feminine” and “masculine” contexts could represent the afflicted subject as trying to conceal their emotional disturbance from the other people and spare their feelings (17-20); in (20), this behaviour is described as socially desirable (*noble*).

17) [...] carefully looking out the window **so the children wouldn't notice her distress**.

18) She was **working hard to conceal her distress**, but the tremor in her voice was unmistakable.

19) She picked up her coat from her chair, then saw his distress. "What's wrong?" **His first instinct was to lie, to say, Nothing.**

20) The organics chief **hid his distress nobly**.

In close interpersonal contacts, failure to identify covert distress in a significant other and to provide the required support may be interpreted as a symptom of a dysfunctional relationship. It should be noted that unemotional, disinterested or indifferent reaction to the subject's distress on the part of the significant other more frequently occurred in the “feminine” contexts:

22) [...] she **accused of him of failing to notice her distress** [...]

23) Marie wanted to turn to her parents for support and comfort during her distress, but **felt they were unreliable because of lack of emotional connection**. She **feared that her parents could not understand her distress and would not take her feelings seriously**.

Factors causing distress showed a considerable area of overlap: both men and women, for example, were shown to suffer from distress if they were unable to support themselves financially or to provide for their families and dependents (24-26):

(24) *He's not alone in his distress. In the midst of the worst recession experienced by the legal profession in at least a decade, more and more attorneys are out looking for work.*

(25) *When he learned she'd just graduated from Mills College and was supporting herself by tutoring, he had presumed her distress was financial.*

(26) *Underlying her distress was the shame of not being able to support herself and her daughter.*

However, other causes to which distress might be attributed seemed heavily gendered. The “feminine” contexts predominantly represented women as experiencing distress due to tragic events involving their family members (27, 28) or as a result of dysfunctional interpersonal relations (29):

(27) *She also talked of her distress at the confusion surrounding her son's death.*

(28) *Varina writes of her distress at her husband's being held in shackles and fed rations.*

(29) *Throughout, Diana spoke of her distress of the lack of support from Prince Charles, especially with her bouts of bulimia.*

References to distress caused by sexual violence also occurred exclusively in “feminine” contexts:

(30) *[...] the jury rejected a woman's claims that he assaulted her by failing to recognize her distress when he had sex with her in a hotel room when she was 16.*

On the contrary, references to distressful events in politics, culture and sports were confined to “masculine” contexts (31-34), which may result from the traditionally higher visibility of men in public discourses:

(31) In "Manifest Destiny", Jensen reveals his distress **over how far US expansion has gone.**

(32) In the 1960s, House Speaker John McCormack of Massachusetts would express his distress **over the behavior of a Republican on the floor** by saying: "I hold the distinguished gentleman in minimum high regard."

(33) Of a piece with his distress **over the loss of Arcadia** was his obsessive hatred of modern art [...]

(34) But his zest for thoroughbred racing became diluted by his distress **at the direction the sport was taking.**

The functioning of the lexeme *distress* seems to support the claim that alignment between gender identity and gender expression is a vital need at least in the US culture. Thus, our materials retrieved from COCA included one context which referred to a breach of cisheteronormativity; the fragment describes the emotionally vulnerable position of a homosexual man (35):

(35) Witnessing his distress, his debating partner asked Seefried if he was gay and assured him he wouldn't reject him.

The availability of coping mechanisms in the event of distress can also be regarded as gendered; thus, (36) evokes the stereotypical belief that shopping may have a potentially "healing" effect on women experiencing a mental trauma:

(36) She had been on **a shopping spree as therapy for her distress.**

Although the study findings require further validation on a larger sample, it may be concluded that the analysis of the gender context provides a fuller picture of the semantic characteristics of the word *distress* as well as offers insights into the cultural norms regulating the experiencing and manifestations of negative emotions depending on the individual's gender status.

### **Conclusions**

The findings described above indicate that the English word *distress* denotes a psycho-emotional state which is caused by disruption to the regular, established course



of things and requires external assistance. The contextual analysis of the lexeme in gender-specific contexts proves extremely effective at identifying the culturally situated beliefs about the vital needs of women and men and revealing the social norms for acceptable manifestations of distress depending on gender. The study throws a new light on the place of the lexeme *distress* in the lexical system of English and outlines potential applications of this concept in academic communication.

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**Примечание [N5]:** В список литературы внесены данные о использованных корпусах (BNC, COCA); выходные данные публикации С.В.Кудря и Е.Н.Давтян даны в английской транслитерации.

**Примечание [K6]:** Перевести на английский