



SEMANTIC DIFFERENTIATION OF THE UNITS “FEAR,” “ANXIETY,” AND “TERROR” IN ENGLISH

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Abstract

This article analyzes the semantic differentiation of the English units fear, anxiety, and terror. It highlights the semantic scope of these lexical units, their stylistic features, their emotional-expressive coloring, and the differences in their use in speech. The study employs explanatory dictionaries, semantic analysis, contextual analysis, and comparative methods. As a result, the common and distinctive semes of fear, anxiety, and terror are identified, and their role in expressing emotional states in English is clarified. The findings of the research are of considerable importance for semasiology and linguosemantics.

Keywords: Fear, anxiety, terror, semantics, differentiation, emotion, lexis.

Introduction

In today's era of globalization and rapid information exchange, the study of how human psyche, thought, and emotional experience are reflected in language units has gained particular scientific significance in linguistics. In particular, the issue of determining the semantic nature of lexical units expressing emotional states, as well as identifying their similarities and differences, has emerged as one of the urgent areas of modern semasiology, cognitive linguistics, pragmalinguistics, and linguoculturology. Language is not only a means of transmitting information, but also a complex semiotic system that verbalizes a person's inner experiences, psychological condition, and attitude toward reality. Therefore, the analysis of units denoting emotions serves as an important methodological basis for



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elucidating the relationships between language and thought, language and consciousness, and language and culture.

The English units fear, anxiety, and terror are semantically related lexical means that express different psycho-emotional states connected with fear; however, they differ from one another in terms of content, stylistic value, and functional use. At first glance, these units may appear to belong to one common semantic field, namely that of negative emotional states, worry, and fear. Yet each of them possesses specific differential semes. In particular, fear generally denotes a general state of apprehension arising in response to a real or imagined danger; anxiety expresses psychological tension associated with uncertainty, inner uneasiness, and an anticipated but indefinite threat; terror, in turn, signifies an intense and extreme form of fear that is shocking, overwhelming, and sometimes reaches the level of panic. Thus, an in-depth analysis of the semantic structure of these units contributes not only to identifying their lexical meanings, but also to revealing the hierarchical and paradigmatic relations of emotional concepts in English.

The relevance of this topic is determined by several factors. First, modern linguistics has demonstrated increasing interest in the conceptual, semantic, and discursive features of emotional lexis. Second, identifying the semantic differentiation of emotional units belonging to one synonymous series is of considerable practical importance for translation studies, lexicography, and methods of foreign language teaching. Third, such units as fear, anxiety, and terror are used with different pragmatic loads in literary texts, publicistic style, psychological discourse, and everyday communication; this shows that their semantic range should not be limited to dictionary explanations alone, but should also be interpreted through contextual and stylistic factors. Fourth, these units reveal how the human model of perceiving danger, threat, uncertainty, and horror is conceptualized by means of language.

The scientific problem of the study lies in the fact that fear, anxiety, and terror are often interpreted as closely related synonymous means, but their semantic boundaries, intensional features, evaluative-expressive components, and functional differentiation in discourse are not always described with sufficient precision. However, absolute synonymy hardly exists in any language system;



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each unit differs from another through its nominative, connotative, and pragmatic characteristics. In this respect, a comparative-semantic analysis of fear, anxiety, and terror makes it possible to identify their common integral semes as well as their distinguishing differential features.

The object of the study is the lexical units fear, anxiety, and terror, which belong to the semantic field of fear in English. The subject of the study consists of their semantic structure, paradigmatic relations, connotative components, stylistic features, and differential characteristics in contextual use. The main aim of the work is to reveal, on a scientific basis, the semantic differentiation of the English units fear, anxiety, and terror, to identify their common and distinctive semantic features, and to determine their place in the system of emotional lexis. To achieve this aim, it is necessary to examine the theoretical foundations of emotional lexis, analyze the lexical and contextual meanings of fear, anxiety, and terror, distinguish their integral and differential semes, and determine their stylistic and pragmatic functions.

In the course of the research, it is appropriate to use semantic analysis, componential analysis, comparative analysis, contextual analysis, and descriptive methods. In particular, componential analysis is regarded as an effective tool for identifying the main and additional semes in the semantic structure of these units. The contextual approach, in turn, makes it possible to demonstrate how fear, anxiety, and terror acquire specific semantic shades in real discourse and which unit predominates in particular stylistic and communicative situations.

The theoretical significance of the research lies in the fact that it contributes to the study of emotional lexis, semantic field theory, synonymy, and semantic differentiation. Its practical significance is manifested in English lexicology, semasiology, translation theory, the compilation of explanatory and bilingual dictionaries, as well as in the teaching of English, particularly in explaining the subtle distinctions between emotionally marked lexical units.

Thus, the study of the semantic differentiation of the English units fear, anxiety, and terror constitutes an important scholarly direction for understanding the emotional worldview of language, the mechanisms of verbal expression of human psychological states, and the subtle distinctions within the system of meaning. The present research is significant because it aims to reveal more deeply the



internal structure of emotional lexis and to provide a systematic account of the multifaceted nature of the concept of fear and its lexical realization in English.

Methodology

This study is aimed at identifying the semantic differentiation of the English units fear, anxiety, and terror, and it is grounded in a set of modern linguistic approaches that make it possible to describe the language phenomenon in a multilayered and systematic way. The research methodology was primarily formed on the basis of the integration of semasiological analysis, componential analysis, the comparative-semantic approach, contextual-distributional analysis, and functional-pragmatic observation. The reason for choosing such a complex methodological framework is that lexical units expressing emotional meaning, particularly fear, anxiety, and terror, manifest themselves not only within the sphere of denotative meaning, but also at connotative, expressive, intensional, and discursive levels. Therefore, their semantic nature cannot be fully revealed through dictionary definition alone; rather, these units must be analyzed in the unity of the language system, speech usage, and conceptual meaning.

As the methodological foundation of the study, on the one hand, the principles of classical semantics and semasiology were selected, while on the other hand, the scientific views of cognitive linguistics, linguistic pragmatics, and semantic field theory were employed. The classical semantic approach serves to determine the lexical scope, semantic boundaries, synonymous proximity, and differential features of fear, anxiety, and terror. The cognitive approach helps reveal how the emotional concepts expressed by these units are modeled in human thought. The pragmatic approach, in turn, makes it possible to illuminate the semantic shades these units acquire in different communicative situations, as well as their relationship to the speaker's position, evaluative attitude, and discursive aim.

In this work, explanatory dictionaries of English, synonym dictionaries, corpus materials, literary works, publicistic texts, and samples of scientific and psychological discourse were used as the research material. The choice of this material base is determined by several scientific and methodological considerations. First, explanatory dictionaries make it possible to identify the codified core meanings, semantic range, and stylistic marking of lexical units.



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Second, synonym and thesaurus dictionaries reveal the paradigmatic relations among fear, anxiety, and terror. Third, real texts and corpus samples allow observation of the life of these units in discourse, that is, their actual contextual semantics, collocational features, and stylistic specialization. Fourth, psychological and publicistic texts help clarify the conceptual distinctions between fear and anxiety, while literary texts more vividly reveal the expressive and intensive features of fear and terror.

One of the principal methods employed in the research is semasiological analysis, which is aimed at determining the semantic composition of the units fear, anxiety, and terror, identifying their basic and derived semantic components, and scientifically describing the semantic similarities and differences among them. In the process of semasiological analysis, the dictionary definitions of each lexeme were compared, and recurring semantic features in those definitions—such as danger, worry, dread, uncertainty, intensity, and emotional disturbance—were identified and then generalized. As a result, a common integral seme, namely “the expression of a negative emotional state,” was distinguished for these units, while their differentiating semes were determined on the basis of such criteria as the source of fear, degree of intensity, definiteness or indefiniteness, duration, and psychological depth.

The second important method widely applied in the study is componential analysis. This method made it possible to reveal the internal semantic structure of fear, anxiety, and terror on the basis of microcomponents. According to the componential analysis, the lexeme fear is characterized by such dominant semes as “the presence of danger,” “the subject’s negative reaction state,” and “a response to real or imagined threat.” In the unit anxiety, such semantic components as “uncertainty,” “inner uneasiness,” “worry related to the future,” and “prolonged mental tension” were shown to be dominant. In the lexeme terror, the leading semes were interpreted as “extremely high intensity,” “fear at the level of horror,” and “the subject’s psychological disintegration or shock.” Componential analysis demonstrated that these units are not limited to ordinary synonymous proximity, but rather display hierarchical differences within their semantic structures.



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Another important methodological instrument of the study was comparative-semantic analysis. This method made it possible to compare fear, anxiety, and terror within one common semantic field, to identify their integral and differential features, and to determine the points of intersection and zones of divergence between their semantic boundaries. In the process of comparison, these units were analyzed according to several criteria: the source of emotion, cognitive definiteness, intensity, relation to time, psychological depth, degree of subjective control, and sphere of stylistic use. It was precisely through this method that it was scientifically substantiated that fear expresses a more general and neutral state of fear, anxiety denotes internal and more prolonged worry, and terror signifies an extremely acute and extraordinary state of fear.

Contextual-distributional analysis also occupied an important place in this work. This is because the meaning of emotional lexis is often manifested more clearly through its distributional properties within a text than through its isolated dictionary form. For this reason, the study examined the kinds of verbs, adjectives, adverbs, and predicative structures with which fear, anxiety, and terror combine. For instance, fear was observed to occur frequently with units such as feel, show, overcome, and cause; anxiety tended to be used with modifiers such as mounting, chronic, deep, and social; while terror showed a tendency to occur with high-intensity units such as sheer, overwhelming, strike, and inspire. Such distributional features helped define the semantic profile of each lexeme more precisely. Contextual analysis proved especially effective in identifying cases of polysemy, metaphorical transfer, and stylistic intensification.

The functional-pragmatic approach occupies a special place in the methodology of the study. Units expressing emotional meaning not only denote referential meaning, but also reflect the speaker's evaluative attitude, psychological state, communicative intention, and strategy of influencing the listener or reader. From this perspective, the functional load of fear, anxiety, and terror in literary, publicistic, scientific, and everyday discourse was analyzed. During the research, fear was observed to function more as a universal and neutral naming device, anxiety as a more active unit in scientific-psychological and introspective discourse, and terror as an expressive, dramatic, and emotionally powerful means



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in literary and publicistic texts. Thus, pragmatic analysis showed that these units differ not only in meaning, but also in the degree of their impact.

Semantic field theory was also employed in this study as a methodological basis. According to this theory, fear, anxiety, and terror are not isolated units separate from one another, but rather elements of a lexical-semantic field organized around the concept of “fear.” Their interrelations were examined on the basis of center-periphery relations, semantic proximity, and the hierarchy of intensity. This approach made it possible to characterize fear as a relatively neutral and central component of the field, anxiety as a segment oriented toward inner psychological experience and indefiniteness, and terror as a peripheral but highly expressive and extremely intense component. As a result, it was established that the semantic differentiation of these units is not an isolated phenomenon, but rather one of a systematic nature.

In order to ensure the reliability of the research, descriptive-analytical and interpretative approaches were harmoniously combined. While the descriptive approach served to record, classify, and describe the language material, the interpretative approach made it possible to provide a deeper explanation of the semantic structure and functional characteristics of these units. The integration of methods strengthened the scientific objectivity of the research, since observations identified by one method were verified and reinforced through another. For example, semantic distinctions recorded in dictionary definitions were confirmed through contextual-distributional analysis, while the degrees of intensity identified through componential analysis were substantiated functionally and pragmatically by means of literary and publicistic texts.

Thus, the methodology of this study constitutes a system of complex scientific approaches aimed at investigating fear, anxiety, and terror as multidimensional linguistic phenomena. The semasiological, componential, comparative-semantic, contextual-distributional, functional-pragmatic, and semantic field methods applied in the study jointly made it possible to provide a profound account of the common and distinctive semantic features of these units. It is precisely this methodological integrity that ensures the theoretical soundness of the work, the accuracy of the analysis, and the reliability of the scientific conclusions drawn.



Analysis and Results

The analysis of the semantic differentiation of the English units fear, anxiety, and terror shows that although these lexemes generally belong to one semantic field expressing a negative emotional state of a human being, each of them possesses its own distinctive semantic profile in terms of content structure, degree of intensity, cause of emergence, duration, and functional load in discourse. During the research, explanatory dictionaries, contextual usages, synonymous series, and semantic components were comparatively analyzed, and as a result, the common and divergent features among these units were clarified on a scientific basis.

First of all, the results of the analysis demonstrated that the lexeme fear is a relatively general, central, and neutral unit within this semantic series. It usually expresses a state of fear associated with a real or imagined danger, threat, or the possibility of harm. In the semantic ядро of fear, such semes as “perceiving danger,” “dreading a negative consequence,” and “an inner readiness for self-protection” were found to be dominant. Thus, fear functions more as the general name of fear, and its sphere of application is broad, while its stylistic character is relatively neutral. For this reason, it is actively used in scientific, publicistic, literary, and everyday discourse alike. For example, fear may denote both a natural psychological reaction of a person and an attitude toward social phenomena. As a result, it was concluded that fear may be interpreted as the central component of the semantic field.

The analysis of the lexeme anxiety showed that although it is closely related to fear, it possesses important semantic distinctions. The main distinguishing feature of anxiety is that in it, fear is connected not with a concrete and immediate danger, but rather with uncertainty, an anticipated but indefinite negative situation, inner uneasiness, and prolonged mental tension. If fear is a direct emotional response to an external threat, anxiety is characterized more by internal psychological tension, mental worry, and vague negative expectation. In this sense, anxiety acquires a broader meaning not only as an emotional phenomenon, but also as a psychological and cognitive one. During the analysis, this lexeme was observed to be used more often in meanings that reflect a longer-lasting inner experience and a deeper representation of the subject’s psychological state. As a result, such components as “uncertainty,” “inner uneasiness,” “continuous worry,” and



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“negative expectation oriented toward the future” were identified as the differential semes of anxiety.

The semantic analysis of the lexeme terror showed that it is one of the highest-intensity units within the field of fear. Terror is not simply fear, but a strong emotional state at the level of horror, panic, shock, and psychological disintegration. In this unit, the presence of danger is often perceived as extremely acute, extraordinary, and deeply traumatizing for the human psyche. The seme of terror contains not only fear, but also the highest point of horror and a state that disrupts the subject’s inner balance. For this reason, it is generally used in dramatic, acute, and emotionally powerful contexts. According to the results of the analysis, terror is considerably more expressive than fear and more concrete and intense than anxiety. Its main differential semes may be identified as “extremely strong fear,” “horror,” “panic,” “psychological shock,” and “extraordinary threat.”

On the basis of comparative-semantic analysis, the main distinctions among these three units were clarified according to several criteria. The first criterion is the degree of definiteness of danger. Fear is usually connected with a clear or perceived threat, whereas anxiety denotes a vague and hypothetical worry. Terror, in turn, expresses the extremely acute and powerful perception of threat. The second criterion is the degree of intensity. Fear denotes moderate and general fear, anxiety refers to inner tension and prolonged uneasiness, while terror expresses maximum emotional strain and a state of horror. The third criterion is duration. Fear may be a quick reaction connected with a situation; anxiety appears as a prolonged and relatively stable psychological state; terror is often manifested as a short but extremely powerful emotional outburst. The fourth criterion is stylistic and pragmatic load. Fear is neutral and universal, anxiety is psychological and introspective, and terror functions as an expressive and dramatic unit.

Contextual-distributional analysis also yielded important results. Fear appeared as a widely used unit participating in various syntactic constructions. It serves to provide a general nomination for a person’s natural emotional reaction. Anxiety was observed to occur more actively in contexts describing a person’s inner psychological state, especially in psychological, medical, and introspective texts.



Terror, on the other hand, is widely used primarily for the purpose of producing a strong emotional effect, for expressing dramatic situations, and for depicting states of extraordinary fear or horror. This demonstrates that each unit possesses not only lexical, but also stylistic and discursive differentiation.

The analysis also showed that the synonymous relation among these units is not one of absolute synonymy. They approach one another within a single semantic field, yet each has its own semantic center. While fear is semantically a general and central naming device, anxiety expresses inner psychological indefiniteness more deeply, and terror marks the highest peak of emotional intensity. Thus, the relationship among the lexemes fear, anxiety, and terror is determined not by simple synonymy, but by a complex system of integral and differential senses. This confirms the existence of a subtle semantic hierarchy within the system of emotional lexis.

On the basis of the results, the following hierarchical relation was observed in the English semantic field of fear: fear is the general and central unit; anxiety is a psychological unit denoting inner, indefinite, and prolonged worry; terror is the expression of horror with maximal force. Proceeding from this, these units cannot fully replace one another. Their improper substitution may distort the subtle semantic layers of a text, alter its emotional tone, or weaken its pragmatic effect. In particular, in the process of translation, equating fear with anxiety or terror in every case, or rendering anxiety simply as fear, leads to errors from both scientific and stylistic points of view.

The theoretical significance of the research findings lies in the fact that they enrich the issues of semantic differentiation of emotional lexis, the theory of synonymy, the structure of the semantic field, and cognitive-pragmatic analysis. From a practical perspective, these findings may be useful for English lexicology, semasiology, translation studies, lexicography, and methods of teaching English. In particular, for students and researchers, they provide broader opportunities to understand the subtle semantic distinctions among fear, anxiety, and terror, to choose them according to context, and to interpret them on a scientific basis.

Thus, the analysis conducted in this study has shown that although the English units fear, anxiety, and terror are united within the common concept of fear, they differ significantly from one another in terms of semantic structure, emotional



intensity, psychological nature, and pragmatic use. This conclusion demonstrates that the semantic differentiation of these units is not accidental within the language system, but rather a regular and systematic phenomenon.

Conclusion

In the course of this study, the semantic differentiation of the English units fear, anxiety, and terror was examined on the basis of systematic, comparative, and componential analysis, and it was established that, despite belonging to one common emotional-semantic field, they differ significantly from one another in terms of their content structure, intensional scope, psychological nature, and functional load in discourse. The findings of the research have shown that although these units are closely related as nominative means expressing negative emotional experience, the relationship between them is determined not by simple synonymous equality, but by a system of integral and differential semes.

On the basis of the analysis, the lexeme fear was shown to be a relatively central, general, and stylistically neutral unit within the semantic field of fear. It expresses a natural emotional reaction arising in response to real or imagined danger and is therefore used in a wide communicative range. The semantic distinctiveness of anxiety is defined by the predominance of such components as uncertainty, inner uneasiness, prolonged psychological tension, and negative expectation related to the future. Thus, anxiety appears as a more complex form of fear directed not toward an immediate external threat, but toward inner psychological strain. Terror, in turn, stands out within this series as the unit with the highest degree of emotional intensity; it expresses strong horror, panic, psychological shock, and a state of extraordinary threat.

One of the important scientific conclusions reached in the course of the study is that the lexemes fear, anxiety, and terror are not absolute equivalents of one another. Each of them has its own semantic center and verbalizes a different aspect and degree of the concept of fear. Accordingly, fear was characterized as the nominative expression of general fear, anxiety as the psychological model of vague and internal worry, and terror as the expressive manifestation of extreme horror. This demonstrates the existence of semantic hierarchy and gradation within the system of emotional lexis in English.



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The study also confirmed that, in order to fully understand emotionally marked units, they must be analyzed not only within the framework of lexical meaning, but also together with their contextual, pragmatic, and stylistic characteristics. This is because fear, anxiety, and terror perform different discursive functions in actual speech: fear functions as a neutral naming device, anxiety as a means of expressing an introspective and psychological state, and terror as a means of producing strong expressive and dramatic effect. Therefore, their differentiation is not only semantic, but also functional in nature.

The theoretical significance of this work lies in its contribution to the enrichment of scholarly views in the fields of emotional lexis, semantic field theory, synonymy, semasiology, and cognitive linguistics. The findings of the study demonstrate that the lexical realization of the concept of fear in English is a complex and multilayered phenomenon, and they offer a more precise approach to the issue of semantic differentiation. From a practical perspective, these conclusions may serve as an important methodological basis in the teaching of English, translation theory, lexicography, and text analysis. In particular, taking into account the subtle semantic distinctions of these units ensures accuracy in translation and helps language learners develop the skill of selecting emotional lexis appropriately according to context.

Thus, it has been established that the semantic differentiation of the English units fear, anxiety, and terror represents a subtle and systematically formed manifestation of emotional nomination within the language system. A scientific elucidation of the differences among them not only reveals the semantic structure of particular lexical units, but also makes it possible to understand more deeply the mechanisms through which human psychological states are reflected in language. From this perspective, the present study may be regarded as an important scholarly step in the investigation of the system of emotional lexis in English.



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