

The Semantics of Anxiety

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The semantics of the basic psychiatric technical terms related to the anxiety disorders, anxiety, fear and panic, raises complex problems of translation, especially between the English, French and German languages. Some of the specific difficulties and their consequences on the international understanding of the underlying concepts are outlined. Copyright © 1999 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

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Semantics may seem irrelevant to a scientific discussion about the psychopharmacology, treatment and cognitive aspects of anxiety. It must, however, be considered that the word anxiety did not acquire its present (relatively), precise meaning in psychiatry until the second half of the 19th century and that, although the concept of anxiety states was already in use in some countries, the class of anxiety disorders in which 'anxiety is the predominant symptom . . . or is experienced if the individual attempts to master the symptoms' was first defined as a nosological entity in 1980 by the DSM-III (APA, 1980). In so far as semantics concerns the vocabulary and the meaning of the words, it plays a fundamental role in the understanding of the concepts those words describe. Psychiatry is, in this respect, in a much more difficult position than sciences like mathematics, physics or chemistry. It very seldom creates new words for new concepts, but modifies the meaning of old ones, proposing usually for their technical use so-called operational definitions but, in practice, the words retain from their long history, at least partially, their polysemic character. In addition, English now tends to be the international means of scientific communication, but many of the psychiatric concepts were first formulated in other languages, and the translations are fraught with difficulties. Although many terms, such as obsession, compulsion, stress and others, are part of the definitions of the anxiety disorders, we shall examine only the central one, anxiety, and panic, now describing a special form of acute anxiety.

Anxiety and the many related words, in English as well as in other western languages, derive from an Indo-European root through the Greek and then through the Latin, in which two parallel series of words appeared. At their origins were the verbs 'ango' and 'anxio', angustia and anxietas being among their many derivatives. The original meaning of both was concrete: to constrict but, because of the unpleasant feeling associated with chest or throat constriction, it could also mean to torment. In classical Latin, the same word could describe, according to the context and to the author, a physical or a psychological phenomenon. Thus 'ango', which Cicero uses for 'to strangle', means for Vergil 'to torment'. This ambiguity is reflected today in the discussions about the psychophysiology of anxiety, as well as in its semantics.

Among the many modern words derived from Latin, some belong to the common or literary languages, some are used in somatic medicine (such as angor and angina, both stressing the physical aspect), and some in psychiatry. For the sake of clarity, the last ones will be qualified here as technical terms. If we consider the languages in which the most important studies on anxiety have been written (French, German and English), striking differences appear in three domains.

The first is the number of basic technical words. Two exist in French: angoisse (from angustia) and anxiété (from anxietas), only one in German: Angst (from angustia) and in English: anxiety (from anxietas). In English anguish, derived from angustia through the French angoisse, is not now

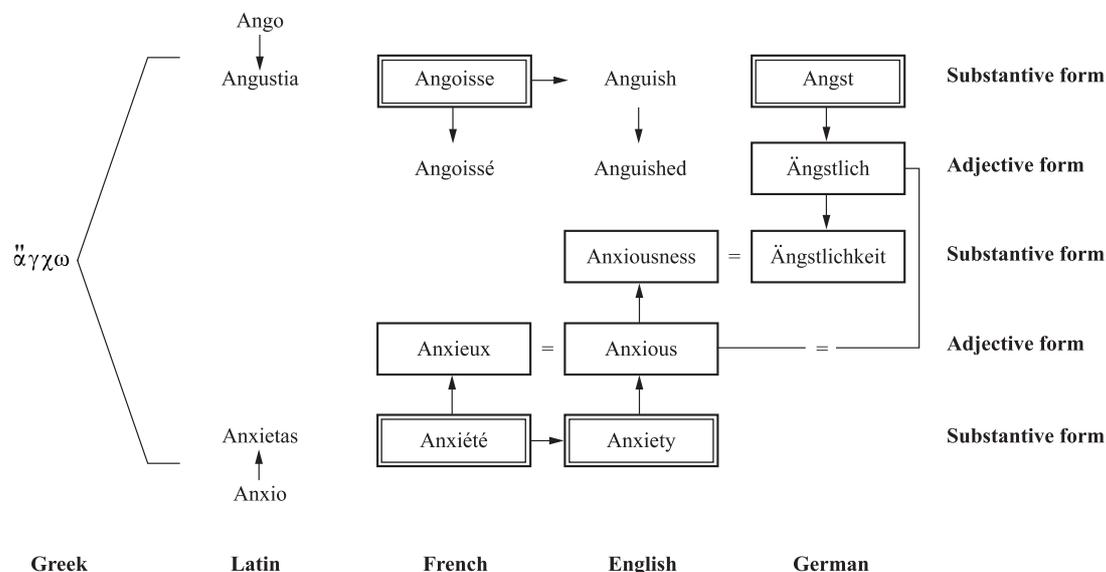


Figure 1. Some of the words derived from the indo-european root and related to anxiety. (The boxed words are used in the psychiatric technical language.)

commonly used technically, and in German no word was derived from *anxietas*. This has had two consequences. The first has been a protracted discussion in the French psychiatric literature (and also in Spanish literature, due to the identity of situation) about the difference of meaning between *anxiété* and *angoisse*. Three main positions have been taken. The first, as expressed in the classical dictionary of Littré and still influencing somewhat the present psychiatric use, considers *angoisse* as a more severe form of *anxiété*. The second, introduced at the end of the 19th century by the neuropsychiatrist Brissaud, but now generally abandoned, opposes *angoisse*, a purely somatic perception of constriction, without any psychological concomitant, and *anxiété*, an intense painful psychological feeling made of a diffuse apprehension of impending doom. The third, already adopted by Freud (1895) in a paper he wrote in French, was formulated by Lalanne (1902): the two words, when used in psychiatry, are practical synonyms, their respective use being determined by tradition — a sometimes illogical one, as when one speaks today of the ‘*anxiété*’ of the ‘*névrose d’angoisse*’. The second consequence of the existence of a single technical term in English

has been the introduction of the word ‘panic’ in the psychiatric vocabulary, to be discussed later.

Another domain in which differences appear between the languages concerns the derivative of the basic words. Three adjective forms are commonly used in psychiatry: *anxious* (from *anxiety*) in English, *ängstlich* (from *Angst*) in German, and *anxieux* (from *anxiété*) in French. neither *anguished* (from *anguish*) in English nor *angoissé* (from *angoisse*) in French are really technical terms. From *anxious* comes *anxiousness* and from *ängstlich* *Ängstlichkeit*, but no corresponding substantive form exists in French: ‘*anxiosité*’, which could have been created on the same model, does not belong to the vocabulary (see Figure 1). Difficulties in translation have resulted. Freud (1895a), when isolating from neurasthenia anxiety neurosis, considered that the basic symptomatology of the new entity associated a permanent state of *anxiousness* (*Ängstlichkeit*) and anxiety attacks (*Angstfälle*). He defined *Ängstlichkeit* as an ‘*anxious expectation*’ (*ängstliche Erwartung*) made of free-floating anxiety liable to attach itself to any object or situation. The two component parts have been now dissociated in Panic attack and Generalized Anxiety Disorder, Freud’s *Ängstlichkeit* being

Table 1.

Meaning	Language		
	German	English	French
Fear	Angst } Furcht } vor dem Wolf	Fear <u>of</u> the wolf	Peur <u>du</u> loup
Anxiety	Angst vor einer Situation	Anxiety <u>provoked by</u> a situation	Anxiété/angoisse <u>provoquée par</u> une situation

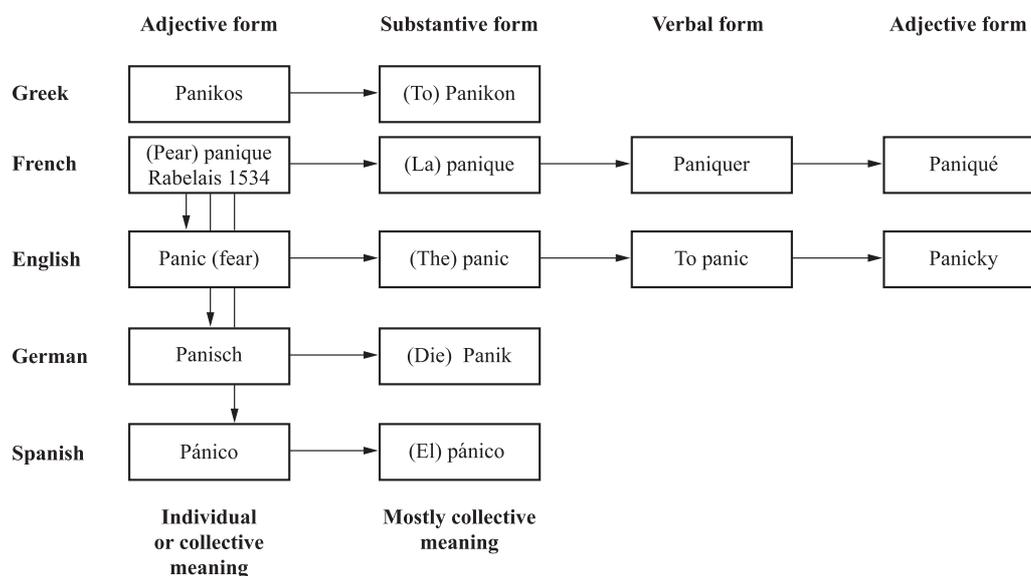


Figure 2. Words derived from panikos

the core symptom of the latter. But the German word cannot be directly translated into French and the DSM-IV (APA, 1994) shows a reluctance to use anxiousness technically, replacing it by 'excessive anxiety and worry (anxious apprehension)'.

Finally, the three languages differ in a last and fundamental domain, the relations of fear ('peur' in French, 'Furcht' in German) with anxiety. As stressed by Sir Martin Roth (1988), 'scientific knowledge of the nature and the origins of anxiety has emerged in close parallel with the attempts that have been made to differentiate morbid forms of anxiety from normal fear'. The difference of nature of the two emotions, whose manifestations are similar, has been first pointed out by the Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard (1844) in his book *Begrebet Angest*. It received its classical formulation from Carl Jaspers (1913), the founder of psychopathology: 'Fear is directed against something, anxiety is without an object (gegenstand-slos)'. However, the current German language does not make such a distinction. Angst, despite the existence of Furcht, means both fear and anxiety: 'Angst vor dem Wolf' is 'fear of the wolf'. It is a paradox that, despite this ambiguity, the differentiation between the two words was most strongly made in German by Jaspers (and before him in Danish by Kierkegaard who used Angest, borrowed from the German). When Carl Westphal (1872) isolated agoraphobia, the first accurately described entity belonging to our present anxiety disorders, he obviously did not differentiate anxiety and fear. He coined agoraphobia from the Greek phobos, meaning fear, and used Angst and Furcht as synonyms. Agoraphobia was for him characterized by the 'presence of a pathological feeling of anxiety (Angst) or fear (Furcht)'. The ambiguity is also reflected in the way the causes of the emotions can be specified (see Table 1). In German, the substantive word designating the cause of Angst (meaning fear) and of Furcht is introduced by the preposition 'vor', as it is in English and in French by 'of' and 'de'. 'Angst — or Furcht — vor dem Wolf' is equivalent to 'fear of the wolf' and to 'peur du loup'. But the same preposition 'vor' is used in German when Angst means anxiety. 'Angst vor einer Situation' has to be translated in English by 'anxiety provoked by the exposure to a situation' or by a similar expression, the same remark applying to the French. Only the technical word 'phobia', defined as a pathological emotion, can be followed in a similar case by 'of' or 'de'.

When the DSM-III appeared in 1980, it introduced in the international psychiatric vocabulary the term 'panic' (as in Panic attack and Panic Disorder) to refer to episodes of acute anxiety of limited duration affecting a patient. Panic has been occasionally used before in the English psychiatric literature — albeit with various connotations — but never in the other languages. This has led to a confusing situation. Whereas, for reasons of international homogeneity, the French and German translators of the DSM-III reluctantly adopted the corresponding 'panique' and 'Panik', the Spanish ones took a negative attitude. Panic attack became 'Crisis de angustia' and Panic Disorder 'Trastorno por angustia'. Only 14 years later, in the translation of the DSM-IV, did they finally bow to the new use of the word and accepted 'Pánico'.

The Greek word 'panikos' referred to the God Pan who, according to the mythology, terrified travellers in the darkness of night by producing frightening noises. He could also provoke a collective terror in whole armies: the Athenians believed that his intervention had provoked the rout of the Persians in Marathon. Thus 'panikos', associated with a word meaning fear, qualified its intensity and its irrational character and, used substantively 'to panikon' described the psychological phenomenon, which could affect a single person or a whole group. The introduction of the word in modern western languages occurred first in French: Rabelais used it in 1594 in *Gargantua* in the expression 'peur panique' (written 'panice'). It was adopted in English in 1603 (initially written 'panick') and in the 18th century in German ('panisch'), the substantive forms (la panique, the panic, die Panik) following. Recently, popular language has used derivative verbs (paniquer, to panic) whose meaning tends to lose much of the original intensity. According to contemporary dictionaries, the substantive form applies predominantly to the mass phenomenon especially, but not exclusively, in military settings.

Panic, being an irrational fear, is a form of anxiety, its specific elements being its acute episodic character and the fact that it can be experienced either by a single individual or simultaneously by a group. Many studies have been dedicated to collective panics, during the wars, but also in other circumstances: the panic provoked by Orson Welles' radio broadcasting describing the invasion of Earth by the Martians has been carefully analysed by social scientists. Collective panic is the central theme of the book published by

the Russian neuropsychiatrist Bechterew (1910) *Suggestion and its Role in Social Life* and also of *Psychology of the Masses and Analysis of the Ego* written by Freud (1921) — incidentally the only text in which he uses the word 'Panik'. It seems that the first to apply the term to a specific psychiatric symptom was Henry Maudsley. In the *The Pathology of Mind* (Maudsley, 1879), he notes in the chapter on melancholia: 'Those paroxysms of anguish or panic — paroxysms of *melancholic panic* they might be called — deserve careful notice'. Following a detailed description which corresponds to the present panic attack. 'Melancholic panic' is printed in italics, and Maudsley prefers 'anguish' to 'anxiety', probably to stress the intensity of the pathological emotion. Since then panic has been occasionally used in psychiatric texts in the United Kingdom.

Panic first became a well-established and common diagnosis in the United States when used in the now largely forgotten expression 'Homosexual panic'. It was introduced by E. S. Kempf (1920) who, in his book *Psychopathology* dedicated a chapter to a syndrome which would be considered today as a 'Brief Psychotic Disorder'. The patients exhibited, in an atmosphere of severe anxiety, various delusional, hallucinatory and other psychotic symptoms. Since, in the cases reported by Kempf, it occurred mostly in closed male communities (on a ship, in the army, a prison, a school, etc.), the author, who had been influenced by the Freudian interpretation of Schreber's psychosis, saw in it the reaction of a patent or latent homosexual personality to the pressure of the group. The diagnostic category was popularized and somewhat extended by Oscar Diethelm (1932, 1934) who wrote detailed papers on 'Panic' and 'The nosological position of panic reactions'. According to a survey by B. S. Glick (1959), homosexual panic was then 'a phrase used often in teaching seminars (and) in case discussions (but) it is doubtful if many terms of the psychiatric lexicon have been subject to more variegated usage'. However, the diagnostic category is mentioned in the *Standard Nomenclature of Diseases and Operations* of the American Medical Association (1952), quoted the same year in the DSM-I (APA, 1952), in the *Psychiatric Dictionary* of Hinsie and Schatzky (1953) and still the subject of a chapter in the classical manual *Modern Clinical Psychiatry* by Noyes and Kolb (1959). Although homosexual panic, except for the presence of anxiety and for the transitory nature of the symptoms, bears no rela-

tion to the present 'Panic Disorder', this essentially American diagnosis has probably contributed to the easy acceptance of the word 'panic' when it was proposed by Donald F. Klein.

The first mention of the term by this American psychiatrist occurs in a paper he wrote with Max Fink (Klein and Fink, 1962). Describing the 'reduction of episodic anxiety response' in patients who 'typically noted the sudden onset of inexplicable 'panic' attacks' he states: 'The reaction to imipramine is of considerable interest since the 'anxiety' of the panic attacks is sharply diminished while expectant 'anxiety' related to the 'phobic' pattern remains'. In a letter written in 1991, Klein explains why he adopted the word: 'In my youth, I had made extensive reading of Freud. The English volumes available in the early 1950's consisted of 'Collected papers' translated under the supervision of Joan Riviere. There is an article entitled 'obsession and phobias' ... which I must have read as a student. It states 'In the case of agoraphobia, etc. we often find a recollection of a state of panic'. The word panic popped out when I was searching around for a synonym for the anxiety attack. The reason I wanted a synonym was to make a clear qualitative distinction between chronic anticipatory anxiety and the spontaneous attack'. The adoption of the term 'panic' by Klein is the result of an error of translation from the French. Freud (1895b), in the paper he wrote in French for the *Revue Neurologique*, had used 'attaque d'angoisse' translated, without any justification, by 'state of panic' in the Collected papers (Freud, 1924). The correct translation 'anxiety attack' has been reinstated in the later Standard edition of the works of Freud edited by John Strachey (Freud, 1955).

Because of its brevity, this discussion has by necessity left aside many problems, especially among those related to the distinction between fear and anxiety. As first formulated by Kirkegaard and Jaspers, it seems to be broadly accepted, even by the psychoanalytic theory for which, according to Uhde and Nemiah (1985) 'anxiety (as opposed to fear) is the response to a danger that threatens from within in the form of a forbidden instinctual drive that is about to escape from the individual's control.' Because of the ambiguity of meaning of Angst in German, Freud coined the word 'Realangst' (translated into English as 'realistic anxiety') to describe an emotion appearing in the presence of an external danger. However, according to Laplanche and Pontalis (1967) who, in their

Vocabulary of Psychoanalysis analyse the semantics of Freud's writings, the distinction between Angst and Realangst differs from the classical distinction between anxiety and fear. The fragility of this distinction is best evidenced in the case of the phobias. For the Glossary of psychiatric terms appended to the DSM-IV, phobia is 'a persistent irrational fear of a specific object, activity or situation', while, in the volume itself, it becomes a 'clinically significant anxiety provoked by exposure to ... feared objects and situations'. In psychiatric texts, especially when written in English, fear often replaces phobia when the context suggests the irrational and pathological character of the emotion, and this allows to obviate the cumbersome use of the word 'anxiety'. This seems to justify the conclusion of the previously quoted American authors: 'From a practical clinical point of view, it is probably more relevant to ascertain the causes of the affect than to try to decide if it is fear or anxiety'.

This pragmatic opinion could be seen as a condemnation of semantics as a useless speculative discipline without concrete consequences. But the vocabulary and the meaning of the words, the objects of semantics, reflect the state of scientific knowledge. The emergence of the technical meaning of anxiety and more recently of panic and the creation of the word 'phobia' are intimately linked with our understanding of the nature of these phenomena. The existing ambiguities, relics of the past histories of the words, are indications of the still incomplete clarity of the corresponding concepts. This is true for the anxiety disorders, as it is for the whole of psychiatry.

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