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**CRISIS AS A KEYWORD IN ANGLOPHONE PUBLIC
DISCOURSE: A SEMANTIC, IDEOLOGICAL
AND CULTURAL ANALYSIS**

Abstract: In Anglophone public discourse, the word *crisis* plays a significant role in discussion of critical events and situations across a wide range of domains. This paper discusses the word's status as a keyword in mainstream Anglophone discourse, unpacks its semantic contents through natural semantics metalanguage and corpus-assisted collocational analysis, and explores the ideological and cultural assumptions underpinning its usage. It finds that the idea of "government" is central to the meaning of *crisis* and that the contemporary use of the word not only signals a systematic problem, but also legitimates government actions and the general public's expectations, reflecting a particular way of thinking about the state and its involvement in liberal society and a shift away from the classical interpretation of the role of government. The study also raises questions about interpreting critical world events and analysing political discourse through the lens of *crisis* and its related concepts.

Keywords: public discourse analysis; English keyword; semantics; crisis concept; capitalist crisis

A crisis is not a natural event, but a social event, and therefore is always socially constructed and highly political. The narratives that are used to designate an event or a period as a crisis imply certain courses of action, and privilege some responses over others. (Gamble 2009: 38)

Through the *crisis* lens

The first few months of 2020 marked a turning point in the twenty-first century. On January 31, the Director General of the World Health Organisation (WHO) declared the novel coronavirus outbreak a public health emergency of

international concern (PHEIC), the WHO's highest level of alarm. On February 11, the WHO announced “COVID-19” as the name of the new disease, and by March 11, the WHO had declared the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak a global pandemic (see Timeline of WHO's response to COVID-19; see also Cicinotta and Vanelli 2020). By mid-2020, most countries had closed their borders and gone into nation-wide lockdown.

This series of world-changing events was mirrored in media and public health messaging around the world. An example of this can be seen in the analysis of usage trends in the Oxford Corpus between January-March of 2020, as reported in an Oxford English Dictionary (OED) blog posted on April 15, 2020 (Wild 2022).¹ The analysis shows clearly the parallel between the real-world events concerning the coronavirus disease that were unfolding at the time and the attendant language usages in English. It shows that the frequency of the word “coronavirus” in March 2020, which records over 1,900 per million tokens, dwarfs the frequencies of the other three terms “climate”, “Brexit”, and “impeachment”, all of which featured heavily in the media in the previous three months (although their frequencies of use are generally under 200 per million tokens) (Wild 2020).²

The blog also lists the top 20 collocates of the word “coronavirus” for each of the three months January to March 2020. Table 1 below reproduces the rank of frequencies of these 20 collocates:

Table 1: The top 20 collocates of “coronavirus” in the Oxford Corpus (from Wild 2020; bold added)

	January	February	March
<i>1</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>3</i>	<i>4</i>
1	outbreak	outbreak	outbreak
2	novel	novel	pandemic
3	deadly	spread	spread
4	Wuhan	case	case
5	spread	China	novel
6	China	epidemic	positive
7	2019-nCoV	impact	crisis
8	strain	COVID-19	test
9	case	fear	COVID-19

¹ The Oxford (English) Corpus contains 2.1 billion words (almost 2.5 billion tokens) and consists of a wide variety of sources, including websites, everyday newspapers and social media (OEC).

² Two significant events happening in December 2019 and January 2020 were the bushfires in Australia and the storming of the Capitol in the U.S..

1	2	3	4
10	infection	deadly	impact
11	infect	confirm	new
12	confirm	new	confirm
13	epidemic	test	fight
14	originate	Wuhan	fear
15	symptom	infection	response
16	new	positive	disease
17	fear	infect	patient
18	toll	concern	cause
19	spreading	patient	death
20	declare	disease	concern

What is noticeable in Table 1 is the emergence of the word “crisis” in March 2020, along with related words such as “pandemic”, “fight” and “response”. What can also be observed from Table 1 is the declining frequencies and ultimate disappearance of words referring to “Wuhan”, “China” and “originate” over the two-month period January to February of 2020, signalling that public attention and discourse had shifted from probing the origin of the virus to emergency responses.

This shift is also noticeable in another corpus, the Coronavirus Corpus (Davis 2021), in which a similar upward trend of the usages of the term “crisis” and its collocates is observed between January and April 2020. Table 2 lists selected collocates which are ranked according to their total frequency between January 2020 and August 2022. It can be observed that for the majority of the collocates in question, their frequency increased sharply in March 2020 and peaked in the following month. There is no doubt that in English public discourse, a health *crisis* had taken hold by April 2020.

Table 2: Frequencies of the collocates of “crisis” based on the Coronavirus Corpus

	2020-01	2020-02	2020-03	2020-04	2020-05	All (20-1 to 22-08)
1	2	3	4	5	6	7
THE (#1)	1337	3756	42796	68566	51927	458333
THIS (#9)	83	339	8900	14811	9586	69982
COIVID-19 (#11)	3	75	4567	11190	9258	66432
CORONAVIRUS (#12)	192	474	7838	11572	7871	52583
HEALTH (#14)	147	506	6539	4999	3700	51759

<i>1</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>3</i>	<i>4</i>	<i>5</i>	<i>6</i>	<i>7</i>
DURING (#15)	44	1085	5578	10274	7145	49089
FINANCIAL (#21)	89	412	3638	3488	2530	25279
GLOBAL (#23)	65	311	3043	3523	2600	24820
WE (#24)	25	116	2496	3847	2737	23575
ECONOMIC (#27)	14	77	1325	2515	2159	22151
PUBLIC (#33)	46	132	1837	1892	1365	15547
COVID (#34)	--	1	136	879	1018	15526
CURRENT (#35)	18	70	1726	3147	2359	15426
RESPONSE (#42)	30	95	1359	1840	1376	11219
PANDEMIC (#46)	--	7	566	1247	980	10523
AMID (#49)	109	120	1008	1656	1127	9732
CLIMATE (#50)	19	81	245	559	480	9726
OUR (#54)	8	35	938	1382	1115	9116
ONGOING (#77)	6	53	485	782	635	6139
COUNTRY (#79)	11	18	426	646	473	5825
IMPACT (#85)	7	43	496	927	731	5515
HANDLING (#88)	20	101	474	781	668	5385
MANAGEMENT (#90)	27	70	570	716	500	5322
NATIONAL (#93)	21	27	666	750	424	5184
CRISIS (#100)	2	32	363	549	406	5050

It is difficult to imagine how the situation might have been characterised otherwise by English speakers without the word “crisis”. In a sense, the shift in the perception of the ongoing situation from an outbreak to a *crisis* was enabled by the very label “crisis”, which carries with it a particular schema through which a situation is perceived, framed, and understood. In this schema, for example, there are shared expectations among the Anglophone public that actions must be taken by government in order for a crisis to pass.

In comparison, in China, where COVID-19 was thought to originate, the public discourse about the pandemic did not centre around “crisis”, and the outbreak was called *yiqing* (literally, “plague situation”) throughout the pandemic. In Chinese language corpora, the word *weiji*, which is often used to translate the English word “crisis”, is rarely used in government discourse to refer to domestic events. The supposed Chinese equivalent is mostly applied to events that happen outside China, most notably referring to *jinrong weiji* (“financial crisis”).

So what does *crisis* mean in English exactly? If the suggestion is that *crisis* is a distinct concept peculiar to the Anglosphere, what are the cultural and political assumptions embodied in the term? And more importantly, how can we discover and unpack the cultural meanings and assumptions from a neutral position? This paper seeks to answer these questions.

The paper first explains the methodological framework used in this study. It then discusses the status of *crisis* as a keyword in Anglophone public discourse. This is followed by an in-depth, corpus-assisted semantic analysis of the term, and an exploration of the underlying assumptions and ideology that shape its usage in contemporary English. The implications of the paper for analysing political discourse are briefly discussed before the closing remarks.

Metalanguage, corpus data, and the issue of polysemy

In this paper, I use natural semantic metalanguage (NSM) to fully spell out the meaning of the English word *crisis*. As a metalanguage developed specially to describe and compare meanings across languages, NSM builds on a small inventory of 65 semantic primes which have been established to be universal. The universality of the metalanguage makes it possible to describe and compare the meanings of words and concepts of any language from a neutral stance. The 65 semantic primes simultaneously represent the most basic meaning elements, making it also possible to decompose any complex thought and idea in a clear and self-explanatory manner. Statements about meaning written in these primes can then ensure a high degree of semantic transparency and maximal translatability.³ Table 3 below lists the English exponents of the 65 primes.⁴

**Table 3. Semantic/conceptual primes, English exponents
(after Goddard & Wierzbicka 2014)⁵**

I, YOU, SOMEONE, SOMETHING~THING, PEOPLE, BODY	substantives
KINDS, (HAVE) PARTS	relational substantives
THIS, THE SAME, OTHER~ELSE	determiners
ONE, TWO, SOME, ALL, MUCH~MANY, LITTLE~FEW	quantifiers

³ Each of those primes also have its universal combinatorial properties (see Goddard and Wierzbicka 2002).

⁴ For detailed exposition of the NSM approach and the vast body of work using the framework, see Goddard 2011, 2018; Goddard and Wierzbicka 2014; Goddard, Wierzbicka and Ye in press; Wierzbicka, 1972, 1996; Ye 2017, and the nsm-approach.net website.

⁵ Exponents of primes can be polysemous, i.e., they can have other, additional meanings • Exponents of primes may be words, bound morphemes, or phrasemes • They can be formally complex • They can have language-specific combinatorial variants (allolexes, indicated with ~) • Each prime has well-specified syntactic (combinatorial) properties.

GOOD, BAD	evaluators
BIG, SMALL	descriptors
KNOW, THINK, WANT, DON'T WANT, FEEL, SEE, HEAR	mental predicates
SAY, WORDS, TRUE	speech
DO, HAPPEN, MOVE	actions, events, movement
BE (SOMEWHERE), THERE IS, BE (SOMEONE/SOMETHING)	location, existence, specification
(IS) MINE	possession
LIVE, DIE	life and death
TIME~WHEN, NOW, BEFORE, AFTER, A LONG TIME, A SHORT TIME, FOR SOME TIME, MOMENT	time
PLACE~WHERE, HERE, ABOVE, BELOW, FAR, NEAR, SIDE, INSIDE, TOUCH	place
NOT, MAYBE, CAN, BECAUSE, IF	logical concepts
VERY, MORE	augmentor, intensifier
LIKE	similarity

NSM theorists have also discovered that semantic complexity exists at different levels of meaning. Semantic molecules, which can be decomposed into semantic primes, participate in meaning formation as distinct, non-basic level conceptual units (e.g. Goddard 2021). In this paper, the semantic molecule of “government” is indispensable for the semantic explication of *crisis*.

Over the years, NSM researchers have developed a rigorous method of meaning analysis, including incorporating corpus techniques, particularly by analysing the collocational behaviour of the term in question (e.g. Wierzbicka 2010; Ye 2017). In this study, the analysis of the meaning of *crisis* is supported by the enTenTen20 corpus (henceforth en20 corpus) accessible via Sketch Engine (<https://www.sketchengine.eu>). The corpus contains a total of 43,125,207,462 tokens and a diverse range of genres.

It should be noted that *crisis* is a polysemous term. It has several distinct but related meanings. Polysemy is often difficult to discern or ascertain in corpora where this information is generally not provided. Nor are the different senses given by dictionaries always well justified or agreed upon by semanticists and lexicographers. When it comes to how many senses a word possesses, rigorous analysis and careful justification on principled grounds are required (see e.g. Goddard 2011).

The *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED) posits several meanings for *crisis*, of which two are marked as being in active use and the rest obsolete. Interestingly, of the two contemporary senses of the word, the OED regards the pathological usage as the basic sense of the term: “*Pathology*. The point in the progress of a disease when an important development or change takes place which is decisive of recovery or death: the turning-point of a disease for better or worse.” The OED describes the other sense, which is the focus of this paper, as being

“transferred and figurative”—“Vitaly important or decisive stage in the progress of anything; a turning-point; also, a state of affairs in which a decisive change for better or worse is imminent; now applied esp. to times of difficulty, insecurity, and suspense in politics or commence.”

There is strong evidence from all of the corpora mentioned above that the once “figurative” sense of the word *crisis* is now the most popular one in public discourse,⁶ whereas the pathological usage of the word is not. However, the sense of “survive or die”, which is strongly associated with its original meaning, is still present in *crisis*-related expressions, where individual persons, rather than a large number of people, are being referred to. In this paper, the usage of *crisis* when an individual is referred to, such as that in “identity crisis”, “crisis intervention”, “crisis hotline”, and “crisis counselling”, is not considered.⁷ In other words, the meaning of *crisis* discussed in this paper pertains to the collective level of society.

***Crisis* as a keyword in Anglophone public discourse**

For a word to be regarded as a keyword in public discourse, it must embody salient concepts and hold significance in general discussion of society. In his influential book *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, Raymond Williams considers certain uses of keywords “bound together certain ways of seeing culture and society”, and that keywords constitute “the vocabulary we share with others, often imperfectly, when we wish to discuss many of the central processes of our common life” (Williams 1976: 12–13).

As shown in Section 1, *crisis* is such a keyword around which a certain way of seeing society in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic is reflected, constructed, and encouraged in the Anglophone public sphere. Although the discourse of the COVID-19 crisis gave way to that of its aftermath (at the time of writing), the word *crisis* remains highly visible in newspaper headlines, and in the public domain of Anglophone societies in general. In Australia, for example, on a single day, 21 August 2022, *The Sydney Morning Herald* (SMH) had the following headlines containing the word “crisis”:

- (1) Build homes on public land to solve affordability **crisis**: Minister (August 21)
- (2) Cosmetic industry **crisis** needs more than whack-a-mole approach (Editorial: August 21)
- (3) The prescient Victorian document that foretold the Liberal Party’s **crisis** (August 21)
- (4) Man forced to live in car amid rental **crisis** (August 21)

⁶ The illustrative examples given for *crisis* in OED are all before the 19th century. See Williams’s (1976:16) remarks on the limitations of OED in documenting 21st century usage.

⁷ It is clear from the en20 corpus that the expression “crisis intervention” is synonymous with “suicide prevention.”

These headlines give a glimpse of some of the major issues Australian society is facing. Throughout August 2022, in various sections of the SMH, including its Opinion and Letters sections, discourse of a number of crises is particularly noticeable. These crises included “teacher crisis”, “education crisis”, “a hospital system in crisis”, “[Europe’s] cost-of-living crisis”, “the Ukrainian crisis”, “2008 financial crisis”, “aged-care crisis”, “the crisis among children who struggle to love their bodies”, “climate crisis” and “skills crisis”. What is also interesting about the newspaper titles mentioned here is the shared expectations among reporters and readers that it is the (Australian) government’s responsibilities to respond to and fix these crises, as is evident also in the following headlines appearing in the SMH from mid to late August 2022:

- (5) Mission impossible: Europe’s desperate fight to **solve** its energy crisis as winter looms (Opinion; August 31)
- (6) Cynicism will not **fix** our jobs crisis—we need this ‘talkfest’ (Opinion; August 31)
- (7) Teacher crisis won’t **resolve** until we end game of political football (Opinion; August 18)
- (8) It shouldn’t have taken a crisis to **fix** triple zero, says union (August 16)
- (9) Education crisis **calls for** comprehensive plan (Editorial; August 14)
- (10) **Solve** schools crisis by funding most in need (Letters; August 13)

And in an article entitled “Homeless number plummet after push to help people sleeping rough” in the SMH, the reporter starts the piece with the following lines:

(K) Sometimes it take a crisis for decisive action to be taken. ... For homeless people more generally, the crisis was the pandemic, which gave the NSW government the impetus to find accommodation for.

The above quotation suggests that there appears to be a deep-seated assumption that crises can be resolved but they require government action, a point to which I will return later.

It is also important to keep in mind that the word *crisis* should not be taken as an objective description of what is happening. Rather, it offers one way of interpreting a situation. An article published in *The Conversation*, entitled “Rental crisis? Average rents are increasing less than you might think” (Phillips 2022), makes it clear that some may not view what is happening as a crisis. But the fact that both sides *can* have a debate about the current situation through the word *crisis* testifies to the significance of the word in general discussions of matters important to society.

Not only is the word *crisis* highly visible in media headlines, but also it often forms a central discussion point in think-pieces and essays by scholars aiming to raise public’s awareness of certain issues or to reach policy makers. In a recent short piece entitled “Europe Heads into a Rocky Autumn”, the author Judy Dempsey, a senior fellow at Carnegie Europe and editor-in-chief of *Strategic*

Europe, discusses the concurrent situations in Europe by centring them around three crises: the energy crisis, Italy’s political crisis, and a security or military crisis in Asia. Similarly, articles in the July/August 2022 issue of *Foreign Affairs*, the flagship journal of the Council of Foreign Relations based in the U.S., are concerned with various crises, ranging from “energy crisis” and “financial crisis” to “France’s political crisis” and “humanitarian crisis”. It is clear that the concept “crisis” plays a significant role in the Anglophone discussion of politics and society. An in-depth analysis of its meaning can help reveal the assumptions, values and shared expectations associated with the word.

Semantic analysis

The many kinds of crisis mentioned in the previous section are consistent with those mentioned in the en20 corpus. Table 4 lists the top 20 modifiers of the lemma “crisis” in terms of the number of hits generated through the Corpus Query Language search, along with their tokens per million, based on the statistics provided by the Word Sketch function in the same corpus. The table shows that, apart from the individually-oriented “identity crisis”, other kinds of crises all refer to a specific situation pertaining to a particular sphere in society that is currently affecting a large number of people. The specific public domain can be financial, economic, political, humanitarian, educational, public health or public housing.

The Word Sketch function also shows that crises are always associated with a particular geographic location. The en20 corpus lists the following common “possessors of crisis” as they appear in news articles: Europe (e.g. Europe’s debt crisis), Venezuela, Greece, California (e.g. California’s housing crisis), Flint (e.g. Flint’s water crisis), Rico, Argentina, Zimbabwe, Yemen (e.g. Yemen’s humanitarian crisis), and country (e.g. country’s economic crisis). The fact that names of continents and countries often appear as the possessor of a crisis indicates how crises are thought of as belonging to, and being internal to, a particular place.

The possessive construction affirms that the perspective conveyed in the word is a singular, global one, in which the speaker assesses the situation in its entirety. In this situation, there may be numerous bad events or incidents occurring, but they are viewed not as isolated events but as *a set* of events of a similar nature. This global perspective, which looks upon the situation as a whole, is also reflected in the use of the definitive article “the” in most of the crises mentioned in the corpus, highlighting the specificity and singularity of the situation.⁸ It is

⁸ In contrast, the en20 corpus shows that the expression of the individually-oriented “identity crisis” generally takes the indefinite article “a”. The use of “identity crisis” appears to be more closely related to the original meaning of *crisis* than to its most popularised meaning.

also noteworthy that some crises have unique names, such as the 2008 Global Financial Crisis and the Cuban Missile Crisis, signalling the significance of these events in the public consciousness (as if they were named social artefacts).

Table 4: Top 20 modifiers of the lemma “crisis” based on the enTenTen20 corpus

Modifier	Number of hits with Corpus Query Language	Number of hits per million tokens
financial (“the financial crisis”)	197,173	4.57
economic (“the economic crisis”)	114,267	2.65
global (“the global financial crisis”)	78,753	1.83
current (“the current crisis”)	55,923	1.3
health (“public health crisis”)	43,489	1.01
climate (“the climate crisis”)	36,310	0.84
debt (“debt crisis”)	34,194	0.79
humanitarian (“humanitarian crisis”)	32,636	0.76
housing (“the housing crisis”)	27,577	0.64
refugee (“the refugee crisis”)	26,590	0.62
COVID-19 (“the COVID-19 crisis”)	23,526	0.55
opioid (“the opioid crisis”)	17,398	0.40
ongoing (“ongoing crisis”)	15,667	0.36
Cuban (the Cuban Missile Crisis)	14,659	0.34
identity (“an identity crisis”)	14,143	0.33
Financial (“the Global Financial Crisis”)	13,032	0.30
coronavirus (“the coronavirus crisis”)	12,436	0.29
banking (“the banking crisis”)	12,034	0.28
Asian (“the Asian financial crisis”)	12,169	0.28
Missile (“the Cuban Missile Crisis”)	10,830	0.25

The range of verbs that have “crisis” as an object, as listed in the Word Sketch function, is highly indicative of the general expectations that crises should be “addressed” (23,577 hits), “managed” (18,439 hits), and “solved” (6,148 hits).

The serious nature of the situation and its impact on a large population, which imply a wide systemic problem, mean that only those in a relevant governing body have the means and capacity—such as through legislation, regulatory arrangements or funds provision—to effectively manage the situation. This is amply reflected in the corpus. Some examples are presented below:

- (11) The government's attempts to address the country's housing crisis is laudable; despite Brexit considerations, this has arguably been the government's flagship domestic agenda.
- (12) They are protesting austerity measures their government has tried to impose as it works to solve its country's debt crisis.
- (13) The better-than-expected Crown accounts released today show the Government's careful management of the COVID-19 health crisis was the right approach to support the economy.
- (14) The U.S. Senate passed sweeping legislation intended to combat the nation's opioid crisis in a 99-1 vote on Monday evening.
- (15) It is clear that solving the climate crisis requires far-reaching transformations, which are currently excluded from the agenda of policy-makers in governments and multilateral intuitions.

Crises demand not only actions but also specialised knowledge and astute judgement. The en20 corpus examples show that while good decisions can “avert” and “overcome” a crisis, bad judgement can “deepen” and “worsen” it.

Based on the above discussion, the meaning of *crisis* can be explicated as follows:

[A] A semantic explication for *crisis* (as in “economic/financial crisis”)

- (a) it is like this:
- (b) some things of one kind are happening in a place for some time now
- (c) they are very bad for many, many people in this place
- (d) people in this place think like this:
- (e) “we [M] don't want it to be like this, we didn't know these things would happen
- (f) we know this: when things like this happen, people can't do much
- (g) if the government [M] doesn't do anything now, these very bad things will happen to many more people
- (h) because of this, the government has to do something now
- (i) before the government does something now, it is good if people in the government can think very well about what they will do
- (j) if they think very well, they can know this: at time like this, it is good if the government does things of some kinds, not other kinds
- (k) because of this, if the government does things of these kinds, these very bad things will not happen to many more people,
- (l) this is good

The explication begins with the description of a current situation consisting of a set of events that affect many people concurrently, as reflected in components (b-c). These components also identify what is happening as a whole, as reflected in the phrasing “it is like this”.

Components (d-l) make it clear that it is a particular way of thinking about the current situation that makes an event a crisis. The molecule “we”, in particular, reflects a collective perspective encoded in the meaning of *crisis* (see also the “we” and “our” collocates listed in Table 2). The collective perspective, which is shared among the people of a particular place, also contributes to *crisis* being a concept in the public domain. Components (e-h) indicate that the situation is

regarded as a sudden, unanticipated emergency that requires immediate action, and that the general public expectation is that it is government's responsibility to respond to the situation. These three meaning components aim to convey a sense of urgency and the overall idea that the situation has reached a critical point—it will get worse if it is not dealt with immediately. Components (i-j) show that in resolving a crisis, a decision-making process is expected. The explication leaves open what form of action is taken or how a crisis is actually dealt with, which can be through legal means or through seeking expert advice, for example. Components (k-l) describe a projected outcome, that is, if those in a position take the right course of actions, crises can pass. The explication also tries to capture the idea that a crisis has a beginning and an end, as reflected in frequently used duration-related collocates. It is perfectly natural to say “at the beginning/end of the crisis” or “during the crisis” (see also Table 2).

All these core elements of meaning, captured (a)-(l), are borne out in the following news item on a Financial Crisis Edition published on 24 August and circulated by Bloomberg, a well-known financial, data and media company:

- (16) When Covid-19 was declared a global pandemic, the world braced for an economic shock of epic proportions. But Despite the tremendous hardship and loos of life we endured, there has never a Covid-19 financial crisis. Adam Kulam and Lily Engbith write. We rarely ask this here, but: what went right?
Adam and Lily's Yale research team put together a database of 9,000 government responses in 180 countries. They found the best thing to do when facing an unprecedented situation like COVID is to “go big”.

Ideological and cultural assumptions

The explication of *crisis*, as presented in [A], embodies several assumptions. First, a crisis can erupt suddenly and naturally. Second, it is about what is happening here and now. Third, crises are temporary events that can be resolved with the state's intervention. The assumption that there is an exit from a crisis also implies that while crises themselves are not desirable, it is good if the state can manage them effectively through swift response and deliberate decision-making. After all, in the Anglophone sphere, a government's competence and performance are often measured against its abilities in “crisis management”. This is an important reason why crises are so central to political discourse in English-speaking liberal societies.

Not all situations require government intervention; some do and some don't. However, when a situation has come to be perceived as a crisis, this implies that there is a systemic problem that can only be fixed by the government. Thus, the crisis discourse legitimatises the involvement of the state. There is a general cultural script associated with the use of *crisis* in the Anglosphere which can be read as follows: “it is good if the government does something when something

very bad is happening to many, many people in a place.” The script presupposes a complex attitude towards the state, which requires further exploration.

The en20 corpus shows that the term *crisis* appears mostly under what it categorises as business and social topics.⁹ Thus, these domains constitute a good starting point to probe further what shapes the underlying assumptions mentioned above.

Corpus data point to “capitalist crises” as prototypical crises. A particularly telling piece of evidence can be found in one of the most frequently used possessors of *crisis* listed in en20—“capitalism”. Not only is the word ranked no. 4 in terms of frequency on the list, but it is also one of the few terms that do not refer to a geographic location. In the classical (liberal) model of capitalism, crises are regarded as being “not only inevitable but necessary” in the production cycle of capitalism in order for it to restore balance and renew itself and expand (Harvey 2010: 71). In such a model, governments have no role to play. However, the great crises of capitalism that arose in the twentieth century—the Great Depression and the 1970 financial crash (and later the global financial crash of 2007/8), particularly in the United States—created a powerful discourse of crises, in which political responses became indispensable to end them; these crises were heavily managed by the state (Gamble 2009). The scale and profound impact of these major crises on all aspects of society meant that confidence in the state’s role and ability to manage crises has now become fore-grounded in the meaning of *crisis* in its general use in the wider public domain. In this sense, any responses to crises are political in nature.

It is, thus, no exaggeration to say that the word *crisis* qualifies as one of those keywords that begin, as Raymond remarks, “in particular specialized contexts” but “have become quite common in descriptions of wider areas of thought and experience” (1986:14). In its popularised meaning, the in-built expectations of the state’s action project a *cultural* model of how certain situations or circumstances are perceived in English.¹⁰ In liberal Anglo societies, the state’s intervention may not always be viewed as desirable but when a situation is construed as a *crisis*, such intervention is desirable. *Crisis* is, therefore, more than a keyword, but what Anna Wierzbicka calls a cultural keyword—a word which is “particularly important and revealing in a given culture” (Wierzbicka 1997: 16).

Implications for political discourse analysis

As a cultural keyword, *crisis* is one of those words that “impose on their speakers a certain interpretative grid through which they make sense of the world”

⁹ Other topics include arts, games, health, recreation, reference, technology and sports.

¹⁰ The usual translation of *crisis* offered by English-Chinese bilingual dictionaries is *weiji*, which does not imply government or decision-making.

(Levisen and Waters 2017:3). It is easy to think that speakers from many other linguacultures may not share this “crisis grid” but uses other interpretative lenses to make sense of similar events. The danger of looking at global events through the prism of English *crisis* is that this can lead to neglect of other political perspectives and beliefs or to a serious misreading of world events and other governments’ intentions and actions, particularly in non-liberal societies.¹¹ The crisis lens compels speaker to pay attention to the current situation and how the state chooses to respond. This here-and-now focus can also overlook historical contexts that could shape the contemporary events in question. An important implication of this case study of crisis-based public discourse is that if frameworks for political discourse analysis are built on the basis of the key concepts derived from the Anglosphere, they may have serious limitations when applied elsewhere.

Closing Remarks

In his essay on political linguistics, David Bell writes: [E]veryday political language is, in short, cognitive and evaluative” (Bell 1975: 8–9). This paper has shown how the cognitive and evaluative can be revealed and explained through a systematic, corpus-based approach. It demonstrates the value of rigorous semantic analysis to a deeper understanding of the assumptions underpinning dominant discourse patterns in society (see also Bromhead 2021). It also shows how a neutral metalanguage can aid the representation of a meaning peculiar to a social, cultural and political domain and its embodied assumptions.

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¹¹ A case in point is the absence of “crisis discourse” but the prevalence of “looming danger discourse” in Chinese government narrative (see Ye forthcoming).

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