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## THE SPECIFICITY OF THE PHENOMENON “DEPRESSION” IN FRENCH MEDIA DISCOURSE

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**Abstract.** The article focuses on the study of the phenomenon of “depression” in French-language media texts. The authors use cognitive analysis to identify the most distinctive linguocultural concepts specific to French culture, and to explore how these concepts are conveyed in French media texts addressing severe mental health issues such as depression. The study was based on online support forums for people suffering from depression. Around 100 examples of the linguistic representation of depression through cognitive metaphor were analysed.

**Keywords:** globalization, depression, doomscrolling, linguaculture, ethno-specific markers, network discourse, metaphorical model, stigmatization of society.

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## К ВОПРОСУ ОБ ОСОБЕННОСТЯХ ФЕНОМЕНА «ДЕПРЕССИЯ» ВО ФРАНКОЯЗЫЧНОМ МЕДИАДИСКУРСЕ

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**Аннотация.** Статья посвящена изучению феномена «депрессия» во франкоязычных медиатекстах. Авторы используют метод когнитивного анализа для определения наиболее характерных лингвокультурологических концептов, свойственных французской культуре, и исследуют, как они выражены во франкоязычных медиатекстах, посвященных такому тяжелому аффективному психическому заболеванию, как депрессия. Основой для изучения стали сети, интернет-форумы

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поддержки для людей, страдающих депрессией. В работе было проанализировано около 100 примеров лингвокультурологической репрезентации феномена «депрессия» через использование когнитивной метафоры.

**Ключевые слова:** глобализация, депрессия, думскроллинг, лингвокультура, этноспецифические маркеры, сетевой дискурс, метафорическая модель, стигматизация общества.

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Depression, as a mental illness, is entering the lives of millions of people on our planet at an alarming rate. It is not a welcome guest, it is not a conscious choice, we do not choose depression, but it chooses us. According to World Health Organisation, in recent years, depression has become the 4<sup>th</sup> leading cause of death among all diseases.

Recent world events, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, the military conflict in Ukraine, only contribute to the increase in cases of the disease. A significant role in the development of depression plays a huge flow of information, which is daily "poured" on a person, from the media, and, often, the human brain is simply unable to cope with the wave of lightning-fast news.

Most people of the XXI century start their day with so-called "doomscrolling". "Doomscrolling" is a painful immersion in a news feed dominated by bad news. This addiction creates the illusion of control over events, but at the same time significantly increases the level of anxiety, which not everyone can cope with on their own.

According to the World Health Organisation, about 5 % of the world's adult population suffers from depression. This means that about 400 million people are at risk of suicide every minute, in the absence of medical care or its poor quality. And these are only official statistics, we should not forget about the iceberg effect used in epidemiology, where on the top of the iceberg we see only actual cases, i. e.

cases recorded by doctors after the patient's treatment. The main part of the iceberg is the actual statistics.

It is generally accepted that people in economically developed countries are much more likely to suffer from depression than people in countries ranked last in the economic rankings.

The problem of the spread of depression around the world and the desire of specialists to draw public attention to the terrible trend, led to the fact that the World Health Organisation announced the creation of the International Day of Depression.

The phenomenon of globalisation causes the influence of some cultures on others, at the same time, there is no culture that does not have depressive disorders. Scientists recognise that the phenomenon of depression is culturally marked and ethnically specific. In a global sense, culture has a direct influence on depression, even though cultural traditions are in constant evolution.

As a consequence, researchers have observed significant differences in the description, living with the disease and ways of coping with it in different linguocultures. This contributes to the logical conclusion that nationality directly affects the attitude of society to the suffering caused by the illness and the methods by which these difficult situations can be overcome [1].

The American Psychological Association notes that for Eastern cultures the typical

complaints of depression are problems with the “heart” and a feeling of “heartbreak”. Alternatively, depression takes on exclusively “bodily”, somatic symptoms; such depressions have been termed by psychiatrists as “masked” depressions. People from Latin America and the Mediterranean are more likely to suffer from nervous conditions and headaches. Chinese culture associates depression with a lack of balance and constant weakness<sup>1</sup>.

It was mentioned above that mass media, social networks, news feeds in the Internet space have become an integral part of modern man's life. It is the media discourse that shows the cultural labelling of depression, being the most powerful and influential in our time [2].

As a rule, all stereotypes found in the Internet space are ethnospecific. The media have a huge power over the consciousness of the XXI century man. It is the media that shapes our attitude to the disease too, as most people do not have their own experience with depression.

The aim of the study is to analyse Franco-phone media discourse, personal stories of sufferers, and single support forums for people facing depression. In addition, the aim was to identify how depression, being a severe affective mental illness, affects the main national concepts of French linguoculture.

Phenomena such as illness and depression cannot receive their sociocultural interpretation without referring to the main linguocultural characteristics of French linguoculture.

Reflecting on the main concepts of French culture, A.P. Sedykh and E.E. Feoktistova identified “a corpus of French concepts reflecting the most characteristic for the French ethnos associative perceptions and images” [3]: “**engagement** (responsibility), **plaisir** ↔ **beauté** ↔ **vérité** (pleasure-beauty-true),

**altérité** (otherness) **patrimoine** (national patrimony)” [3].

We would like to emphasise the importance of the second concept of French culture, namely *plaisir, beauté, vérité*.

Hedonism is the most important characteristic of French society. “*Savoir vivre, art de vie*” is a philosophy consisting in the art of living, loving life, enjoying it. According to various anonymous surveys, 94 % of French people speak about the importance of daily small pleasures.

We fully share the opinion of S.M. Maltseva and O.O. Kubysheva [4] that the trend towards hedonism has covered Western and Western European society. The result of such changes was a coordinate change of the face of society. “Human life is a very short period of time, a person should enjoy every second of his life, to exist as he needs ... for this purpose it is necessary to destroy bad and unpleasant impressions, moments and concentrate only on those things that can bring well-being and joy” [4, p. 238].

Perhaps, this is the answer to the extraordinary increase in cases of depression in the modern world. It is about concentration on positive thinking and complete dislike of negative aspects of life. All this increases a person's demands on himself, which leads to an increase in anxiety and self-loathing.

One of the main symptoms of depression is loss of interest in life, inability, inability to live the very “*art de vie*”.

The linguistic means used in online discourse, containing the statement of a problem and its discussion, commentary on it, the absence of a boundary between the personal and the public, are the subject of research in many related sciences: psychiatry, linguistics, psychological and social sciences.

<sup>1</sup> Depression // American Psychological Association. URL: <https://www.apa.org/topics/depression> (дата обращения: 23.01.2025).

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According to Lakoff and Johnson, cognitive metaphor is the most important mechanism of conceptualisation and categorisation of the world [5]. Many scientists have worked on identifying metaphorical models of depression representation. They were most clearly formulated by A. Barcelona. He proposed a comparison of depression with a living organism, a closed space, an enemy, an inconvenience [6].

Having analysed the French media discourse, we came to the conclusion that four models of metaphor dominate in it: *depression – battle, war; depression – enemy, invader; depression – fall, depth; depression – loss.*

1. The analysis of the material showed that the model *depression – battle, war* is the most frequent. Describing their inner feelings, respondents very often use the phrases *mon combat* (my battle) or *combattre* (to fight) and even the military term *être aux prises* (to fight):

- *C'est chaque jour un combat solitaire* (It is a daily battle alone);
- *Cela ne signifie pas pour autant que mon combat a été facile* (It does not mean at all that my battle was easy);
- *Ces dernières années, Ruth a bien réagi au traitement pour combattre la dépression et elle est aujourd'hui en rémission stable* (The hardest thing to explain is that when you are battling depression, your appearance does not reflect how you feel).

All these examples emphasise the severity and seriousness of depression. At the same time, emphasis is placed on the need to resist, to fight for one's mental well-being, not to give up, because depression, like war, does not bypass anyone.

2. The next metaphorical model is the comparison of depression with *an enemy, an invader*. This model is a logical continuation of the first model, with the exception that here depression takes a human form and takes over, like an invader, the mental and bodily health of

a person. It seems that in this case, we can look this invader in the eye:

- *...elle est revenue toujours plus forte à chaque fois* (each time it (depression) returned even stronger);
- *Il y avait comme un ennemi invisible qui m'arrêta, qui m'empêchait de sortir du lit et de la maison* (As if there were an invisible enemy that prevented me from getting out of bed and leaving the house);
- *Ma dépression m'a fait perdre nombre de mes amis, mais aussi mon travail et certains membres de ma famille* (Because of depression I lost many friends, as well as my job and some family members);
- *Et à travers tout cela, c'est-à-dire à chaque étape, la dépression occupait de moins en moins de place dans ma vie* (And through all this time, at every stage, depression occupied a smaller and smaller place in my life);
- *Et elle est d'une violence inouïe. Elle est dangereuse car elle est invisible à l'œil nu et silencieuse. Elle est méconnue, incomprise, ignorée, jugée, et paradoxalement, banalisée par les praticiens* (She is incredibly cruel. It is dangerous because it is invisible to the naked eye and silent. It is poorly understood, ignored, condemned and, paradoxically, devalued by practitioners);
- *La dépression a fait son entrée dans la vie de Ruth alors qu'elle était mère au foyer, avec ses deux petits garçons*. (Depression entered Ruth's life when she was a housewife with two young sons);
- *Il faut s'entourer d'une équipe aux forces multiples* (You need to surround a team of allies).

As we can see from these examples, depression appears to its victims as a real abuser. It has the power to keep people in bed (*qui m'empêchait de sortir du lit*), to make them lose (*faire perdre*), it has specific negative human qualities (*violence, dangereuse, ignorée, jugée*). Depression always comes unexpectedly (*la dépression a fait son entrée*) to take the victim by surprise, like a real bandit or invader.

3. The third metaphorical model, which is found in French-language media texts: *depression* – *downward movement, depth*. This model is quite natural. The term “depression” itself means suppression. Depression is characterised by suppression not only of feelings and emotions, but also of the body’s metabolic activity. Hence the feelings of weakness, helplessness, powerlessness. Describing the sensations of falling, movement, the respondents used such verbs – metaphors as *s’effondre* (to collapse), *refouler* (to suppress, displace), *tomber* (to fall), *plonger* (to plunge), the noun *fossé* (moat, pit, abyss):

- *C’est dans la seconde moitié de ma dernière année de secondaire que tout s’est effondré* (It was in the second half of my final year of high school when everything came crashing down);
- *Après avoir refoulé mes émotions pendant des années...* (After years of suppressing my emotions...);
- *Mais avec la maltraitance, la dépression, les problèmes de santé mentale... il se forme une sorte de fossé* (But because of abuse, depression, mental health problems ... a kind of chasm forms);
- *Ruth avait environ 35 ans quand elle a commencé à tomber régulièrement dans la dépression* (Ruth was about 35 years old when she began to fall into depression on a regular basis).
- *Mes dépressions m’ont écartée du monde et plongée dans les ténèbres* (My depressions have separated me from the world and plunged me into darkness).

The linguistic means analysed above confirm that a person suffering from depression carries an unimaginable weight on his shoulders, which gradually plunges him to greater and greater depths of mental disorder.

4. The last cognitive metaphor model that was the most frequent was *depression* – *loss*. In our opinion, the most terrible loss for a depressed person is the loss of self, of self-love, the loss of the former self, which is expressed

by the use of such nouns as *honte* (shame), *dégoût* (disgust), *manque* (absence), *prison* (prison), the verb-metaphor *cacher* (to hide), *perdre sa dignité* (to lose dignity), the adjective *laid* (ugly). Examples:

- *Je suis horrible! J’ai honte de moi! Je me déteste! Je me dégoûte!* (I’m horrible! I’m ashamed of myself! I hate myself! I’m disgusted with myself!);
- *Pour moi être belle c’est avant tout être bien mentalement et je suis laide* (For me, to be beautiful is above all to be mentally healthy, and I am ugly);
- *Je réagissais à l’intérieur mais ces émotions restaient cachées, refusant de se montrer!* (I reacted internally, but these emotions remained hidden, refusing to manifest themselves!);
- *J’avais la sensation d’être une criminelle qui entraînait en prison, privée de ses biens, de sa liberté, et de sa dignité* (I had the sensation of a criminal going to prison, deprived of her property, her liberty, and her dignity).

Depression is insidious and, as we can see, tries to take away not only a person’s health, family, friends, but also his best human qualities. It is perfectly accurate to compare depression to a prison. The patient remains locked in himself and can no longer find his former self, abandoned by his loved ones.

The French media discourse pays great attention to the problem of the spread of depression: scientific articles, unified support forums, stories of people who are struggling with depression and have already overcome it. Symptoms are described, advice is given, and support is offered. There are practically no comments that depression is just an excuse, laziness, caprice, as it is found, for example, in Russian and Anglo-Saxon media discourses.

The linguocultural comparison with the similar Russian media discourse showed that the French-speaking population takes the problem of depression much more seriously

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and attaches great importance to the need for quality medical and medication assistance.

The frequently encountered model-metaphor of *depression – battle* refers us to the key

concept of French culture *engagement* (responsibility), because in the fight against depression a person, more than ever, must realise responsibility for his or her life.

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