

Usage quotes were compiled using *Google books* [2], *Oxford English Dictionary Online* [3], and *The Stanford dictionary of Anglicized words and phrases* [1]. Dates and authors of usage quotes are cited in text. Page numbers for usage quotes, if available, are found along with the quotes themselves in the appendix at the end of the paper. A number in brackets [ ] at the end of each entry tells which resource made available the quotation. Text citations which do not reference usage quotes are MLA standard.

### **Crisis: Extensions in meaning from the Renaissance to Contemporary times**

The word form "crisis" is nearly identical to the Greek word "krisis" from which it was borrowed into Latin, then into French, and finding its way eventually to the English tongue. While two thousand years of history and the usage of at least four distinct cultures have left the form of the word virtually unscathed, its meaning has undergone more significant alteration. Over the course of this time period "crisis" has been employed to denote distinct senses pertaining to law, medicine, astrology, politics, economics, and psychology. Over the last two hundred years the word has accrued some undeniably negative connotations which were not a part of its meaning in the previous centuries. In current usage the word crisis is a near synonym of "disaster" or "impending disaster". How did this word come to be exclusively associated with negative events?

The Greek "krisis" originated from the Proto-Indo-European root "krei" which meant to sieve, discriminate or distinguish. (American Heritage College Dictionary) "Krei" was in all likelihood originally the word for some sieve used to filter grain, and its meaning extended metaphorically to the abstract sense of "to discriminate or distinguish." The Greek word assumed a variety of closely related meanings, many of which are associated

with the practice of law. Here is a list of the different senses of the Greek "krisis" found in the *Oxford Classical Greek Dictionary*:

- (i) Separation, discord, dispute.
- (ii) Choice, decision, judgment, sentence, issue, event, outcome.
- (iii) Trial, examination, lawsuit, court of justice, punishment.
- (iv) Issue, event, outcome.
- (iv) Medical: Sudden unlooked for change in a disease, leading to recovery or death.

In classical Greek, "krisis" was used to reference a dispute, a lawsuit, and a judgment about a lawsuit. These are distinct phases in a course of events. In our modern "crisis" there are parallels to this kind of metonymic range of meaning. The medical sense of the word, dates from the time of Hippocrates (460-370 B.C.) It was used in medical texts from this time to the 19th century in several different languages (Latin, French, English, Greek) with a minimal shift in meaning. (Chambers) Writers of English medical texts from the 16th to the 19th century typically mused over the origin of the term as they introduced the concept of a crisis in their prose. The etymological expositions which I encountered in my research seem to agree on a likely scenario. They proposed a metaphorical extension from an original meaning of judgments in human civic affairs to a "judgment" of nature over life and death. "By crisis then is generally understood a conflict between Nature and the Disease, or rather a Trial, from the Greek word "krisis," which signifies to judge because at that time a kind of Judgment is formed on the fate of Nature and the Disease." (James, 1746) The Renaissance and Enlightenment medical authors imagined the Greeks original metaphor as a sort of trial and judgment of the fates over the ultimate course of an illness. "Crisis sygnifyeth judgemente, and in thys case, it

is used for a sodayne chaunge in a disease." (Traheron, 1543) This quote comes from a translation of the highly influential French surgical text, *Chiurgie Magna*, (Guy de Chauliac, 1363). The original translation of this book into English in 1425 was the first known appearance of "crisis" in the English language. (Chambers) According to Hippocratic-Galenic medicine, which was practiced by Western physicians throughout the Middle Ages and Renaissance, and the during the Enlightenment (well past the discovery of microbes in the 17th century), a point in an illness was determined as a crisis if certain symptoms like fever, or abscess fell on certain critical days; these critical days falling on certain calendar days of the month. (Coxe, 337) There were plenty of examples of bad crises but a crisis was more generally thought of as a favorable sign in the progression of an illness. This is evidenced by this quote of Traheron's translation of *Vigo's Chirurg* (1543): "...for as Galene saythe, eurye crisis is a token of healthe, rather than of dethe, sauynge in a feuer pestilential." The concept of critical days influencing a crisis is linked to an archaic association between astrology and medicine. The Hippocratic writers retained the "critical days" aspect of the concept without explicitly acknowledging the concept's origins in astrology. (Coxe, 33)

At the time of the entry of "crisis" into the English language as a technical medical term, the association between medicine and astrology had been revived and was once again in full flower. (Yates, 63) Renaissance scholar Francis Yates writes in her book, *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition*, "Medical prescriptions were normally based on assumptions such as that the signs (of the zodiac) ruled different parts of the body, that different bodily temperaments were related to different planets." (63) This astrological conception of medicine allowed for a facet of meaning of the word crisis, which denoted

a critical conjunction of celestial objects which decides the course of an illness. "They'l feel the Pulses of the Stars, To find out Ageus, Coughs, Catarrhs; And tell what Crisis does divine The Rot in sheep or Mange in Swine." (1663, Butler) According to the medieval paradigm (Yates, 15) a medical crisis was a subclass of events fitting the description, "any critical conjunction of planets which governed the future course of human affairs". (Oxford) I would guess that "crisis" was an attractive candidate to the fill the "reference vacuum" felt in this instance of a superordinate meaning without a word form attached to it. So "crisis", which originally denoted a hyponym of the superordinate category, became extended to a sense which denoted the superordinate as well. For instance: "And the same Crisis still is known to rule o're love as o're renown." (1682, D'Urfey) The more specific astrological reading of "crisis" eventually fell out of use and the term's extant astrological definition is that of any effective conjunction of the planets. (Oxford)

The first occurrence of "crisis" as denoting a turning point or decisive event (absent overt astrological or medical reference) is in a novel from 1627. *Chamber's Dictionary of Etymology*, characterizes this shift in meaning as figurative, (235) which is to say metaphorical. Another way to look at this extension is as a shrinking of the word's semantic domain. It retained some elements of meaning, "critical time from which follows significant or drastic happenings", but the connection with astrological events became excluded. The sentence in which this usage first appears is almost certain to have a ring of familiarity to the modern reader. "This hour's the very crisis of your fate; Your good or ill, your infamy or fame, And all the colour of your life depends On this important now." (Dryden, 1627) Notice this usage lacks the negative connotations which

are baggage to the current meaning of the word. It is only gradually that the word began to gather these negative associations, until presently when a person speaks of a crisis it is taken for granted that they are speaking of something bad which has happened, is happening, or is about to happen. The term continued in literature in its non-evaluative sense, and eventually evolved a facet which is a synonym for the modern "climax" of a story, or course of events. (Oxford) This sense of the word seems to be a sort of "dead end" in one branching of its semantic evolution (at least in American English), as it is unfamiliar to contemporary speakers, and does not appear to have led to any of the contemporary senses of the word.

At the beginning of the 1800s two senses of crisis came into usage which related specifically to political and economic situations. As a word of Greek origin perhaps "crisis" has a special affinity for use as a technical term. Whatever the case may be, "crisis" did have a new heyday in the lexicons of these two specialized fields of discourse. Political analysts favored the term crisis to denote unstable political situations, which might signal some impending opportunity or disaster. "Foreign transactions...most tedious because they go on without crises and without issues." (Stubbs, 1886) Economists used it to denote states of economic disarray which are always, and necessarily bad occurrences for someone or other. "There is said to be a commercial crisis when a great number of merchants and traders, at once, either have, or apprehend that they shall have, a difficulty in meeting their engagements." (Mill, 1848) An important thing to consider about these usages is that whereas in the medical usage the "turning point" and "decisive event" are one and the same thing (referring to a fever or abscess, but not a subsequent death or recovery), in the political, economic, and more general

usages of recent times "crisis" may alternatively refer to distinct phases in a timeline of events. So the "turning point" may happen before the "decisive event" and "crisis" can alternatively refer to both. In the case of economics either a "difficulty in meeting further engagements" or the resulting economic downturn can both be referred to as an "economic crisis." This metonymic extension to denoting succeeding events is also present in the political usage. Some political quotes from around the turn of the 19th century illustrate this. "...these minutes, even now hastening to eternity, held the Crisis of a nation that is the hope of the world. You do not guess that your reply will make or mar the fortunes of your country." (Churchill, 1901) This usage clearly refers to a *turning point* whereas the following refers to the *outcome* of some crucial juncture as is evident the verb "averted": "...the President promised to pass a measure guaranteeing the independence of the High Court and the crisis was for the moment averted." This flexibility of meaning which was not present in the medical usage is reminiscent of the classical Greek usage of "krisis" which was used to denote a lawsuit, trial, or judgment; three stages in a human course of affairs.

Since the very invention of "news", economies and politics have been a major focus of media attention. From the early 1800s to the present day the media has made relished use of the word crisis. What began in the 1800s as a buzzword of political analysts and economists was soon creatively compounded by newspapermen to create riveting headlines. From this time compound constructions appeared such as "crisis-monger", "crisis night", "crisis proof", "crisis-less", "crisis-centre", and "crisis-minded" (Oxford). Over the past two hundred years extensions of meaning have occurred which must to some degree be due to the media's incessant catering to the demand for unfortunate news.

The word crisis has been employed more and more exclusively to denote intrinsically bad situations. Contemporary usages of "crisis" are most often employed to dramatize a description of events.

In contemporary usage "crisis" out of context can be interpreted in a sense which is more general than its specific uses by political analysts, economists, and literary figures. This general sense denotes any bad situation which is urgent to some degree. This sense is not recorded in modern dictionaries but it is one which I feel to be the default reading, and I would guess that most people today share this intuition. Some common contemporary co-occurrences of "crisis" will illustrate this point. Take for instance "environmental crisis", "political crisis", "economic crisis", "crisis of faith", "mid-life crisis", or the popular pleonasm "crisis situation." The default meanings of these collocations would to me go as follows: "bad environmental situation", "bad political situation", "bad economic situation", "bad faith situation", "bad mid-life situation", and somewhat ridiculously, "bad situation situation." Perhaps other people with varied backgrounds may have a variety of senses for crisis in their mental lexicon. After all, "bad" is not an overt facet of the meaning of the 19th century economist's "crisis" and not a marked evaluation at all of the 19th century political analyst's crisis, which are both extensions of the former unmarked general sense of crisis.

I propose two alternative orders for the extensions of "crisis" from the time it began appearing frequently in the media at the beginning of the 19th century to the present day. In both scenarios "Crisis" began its media career as an unmarked term which could refer to any crucial situation which would lead to some significant change for the better or worse. In one scenario a process of association, by way of the media contexts in which it

was typically employed, caused "crisis" to become a marked term which meant a situation which is crucial because of the possibility of some *negative* outcome. By metonymic extension "crisis" then came to denote this negative outcome as well as the balance of events which allowed the outcome to transpire. These distinct semantic extensions, that of markedness, and metonymy could also have occurred in the reverse order, which seems to me was more likely the case. A semantic clash with an integral part of the word's meaning discourages a metonymic extension which includes good outcomes as well as bad ones. A bad outcome still allows for the suspense evoked by "crisis", but there is a definite sense of resolved tension involved in a good outcome. Crisis is therefore predisposed to a metonymic shift to a bad outcome alone. So the metonymic extension could have occurred first. This extension would then naturally lead to the markedness apparent in current usage.

The meaning I might derive from usages of "crisis" in the future is sure to be enriched by the research I have conducted. But before I began this research, if asked to give a definition of "crisis" I would have offered one which amounted to something like the "bad situation" sense I have described above. Encounters with "crisis" in different contexts would for me have restricted the semantic domain of this general default reading of "crisis" for some specific reading. Sperber and Wilson's Relevance Theory serves to explain this phenomenon. (Cruse, 201) Crisis belongs to a class of words which are too abstract to learn the meaning of directly, as would be the case in learning the meaning of a word denoting some physical object. "Crisis" and many other similarly abstract terms occur often in usage and it is this usage which "points at" their referent. In consequence of its prevalent usages it is possible to derive a meaning of "crisis" without seeking an



explicit definition from a dictionary or more learned speaker. The present day speaker is bombarded with various usages of "crisis" in its distinct senses as well as metaphorical uses in conjugations by the media. In a situation like this it takes less cognitive effort to assume a general sense of the word crisis which fits all these various usages than to assume several distinct definitions. It is a more economical cognitive effort to construct a meaning of "crisis" that denotes any crucial situation involving current or impending loss, as opposed to distinct senses which involve semantic fields relating to either distinctly political, economical, or personal fortunes. In any context in which "crisis" is currently used there is to be found some degree of human misery and this may explain the negative connotations which have accreted to the meaning of "crisis". Professor Janet Xing helped me to develop the idea that in the present day "crisis" may loosely be described as the marked term in a pair of opposites. A normal situation being unmarked (perhaps it could be something good or bad) and a crisis situation being marked as something opposite the normal and always bad or having some bad potential.

It seems from this investigation of "crisis" that over multiple millennia, the meaning of a word form, even drastically altered, may retain vestiges of the meanings which were its former guises. This is evident in the word crisis, among some of its other present-day attributes, by certain collocational preferences. No matter how generalized the term crisis has become it is indisputable that some human element is contained in the meaning. This is illustrated by the abnormality of "natural crisis" and normality of "emotional crisis." "Biological crisis" seems to fall somewhere between the two in terms of relative normality. "Crisis" has a range of metonymic extension, similar to that found in the archaic Greek "krisis". "Crisis" can ably refer to an event, the conditions preceding an

event, the outcome of an event and perhaps all these as an extended series of events. This is reminiscent of the Greek "krisis" referring to a dispute, a lawsuit, a judgment about a lawsuit or the three as a whole. As old elements of meaning linger and dissipate, new semantic elements accrete to "crisis". "Crisis" can thus evoke the richness of its history, and at the same time convey a cynicism towards risky situations which is inherent in the modern outlook. I think I can take from this investigation a small shred of philosophical wisdom. This is not to be mistaken for an analytical conclusion which follows necessarily from my research. It is a simple intuition fostered by my analysis, a meaning which words don't serve to capture, but which by words may be revealed. Words convey the meanings they do because these are the meanings people *need* of them. Absent the roles people present words with, they would be just so much nonsensical gobbledegur.

## Appendix

### A turning point (of a disease).

1543 for as Galene saythe, eurye crisis is a token of healthe, rather than of dethe, sauynge in a feuer pestilential. (pg. 2) Traheron, Tr. *Vigo's Chirurg*. [1]

1543 Crisis sygnifyeth judgemente, and in thys case, it is vsed for a sodayne change in a disease; Traheron, Tr. *Vigo's Chiurg*. [3]

1548 When the crisis of his sichness was past and that he perceiud that helth was ouercome; *Hall's Vnion: Henry V*. [3]

1598 By the which if any man will know what day the crysis or extreame force of any malady shall happen; F. Wither, Tr. *Dariot's Astrolog*. [1]

1598 yea and for these causes it may well seeme to happen and that not without reason, that the Crises doe alter their times and are not alwayes the same; G. C. *Math. Phis*. [1]

1600 those that overlived and escaped that crisis, lay long sicke by it, and commonly of the quaritane ague. (pg. 1109) Holland, Tr. *Livy*. [1]

1603 Not much unlike a skillful Galenite, Who (when the Crisis comes) dares euen foretell whether the patient shall doo ill or well. (pg. 23) J. Sylvester, Tr. *Du Bartas*, Tropheis.  
[1]

1625 The shall the sicke by the vertue and power of a happy Crisis, saile forth into the hauen of health. (pg. 21) J. Hart, *Anat. Urines*. [3]

1627 Wise leaches will not vain receipts obtrude; Deaf to complaints, they wait upon the ill, 'Till some safe crisis authorize their skill. (pg. 20) Dryden. *The Spanish Friar*. [2]

1658 the World was impaired with Diseases, which must be the more for their Age, the Crisis would be dangerous, and there could be no Health. (pg. 401) J. Cleveland, *Rustick Ramp*.  
[1]

1686 I observe that Crises's, properly so call'd do very seldom happen in other than Feavers. (pg. 222) R. Boyle, *Free Enq. Notion Nature*. [3]

1733 when a peccant Tumour gathers about the Brain, the Crisis, or Discharge of that, proves either immediate Death, Apoplexy, or Mania. (pg. 62) R. North, *Examen*. [1]

1746 By a Crisis then is generally understood a Conflict between Nature and the disease, or rather a Trial, from the Greek work krisis, which signifies to judge because at that time

a kind of Judgement is formed on the fate of Nature and the Disease. (pg. 120) R. James. *The presages of life and death in diseases*. [2]

1748 When he found I had enjoyed a favourable crisis, he congratulated me. (pg. 303) T. Smollett, *Roderick Random*. [3]

1788 those exertions hastened the crisis of her distemper; Hor. Walpole, *Letters*. [1]

1856 Brooks and Thomas have seen the crisis of their malady. (pg. 87) E.K. Kane, *Artic Explor*. [3]

1863 your constitution is at a crisis. (pg. 65) C. Reade, *Hard Cash*. [1]

### ***Astrol.* an effective conjunction of planets.**

1603 she proceedeth without impeachment to make a Crisis vpon the seauenth. (pg. 475) C. Heydon, *Def. Judic Astrol*. [1]

1603 When the Moone comes to the 22 of Gemini, shee shall there begin to worke a dangerous Crisis, or alteration...so preuenting her ordinarie working. (pg. 474) C. Heydon, *Def. Iudiciall Astrol*. [3]

1663 They'l feel the Pulses of the Stars, To find out Ageus, Coughs, Catarrhs; And tell what Crisis does diuine The Rot in Sheep or Mange in Swine. (pg. 46) S. Butler, *Hudibrus*. [1]

1682 And the same Crisis still is known, To rule o're Love as o're Renown. (pg. 68) T. D., *Butler's Ghost*. [1]

1709 the Diuine Astrea could never have descended at so favourable a Crisis. (pg. 271) Mrs. Manley, *New Atal*. [1]

### **A decisive event; turning point.**

1627 This hour's the very crisis of your fate; Your good or ill, your infamy or fame, And all the colour of your life depends On this important now; Dryden, *Spanish Friar*. [3]

1638 I hope by our next Foot-Post to hear the Crisis of that day. (pg. 574) *Reliq Wotton*. [1]

1659 This is the Crisis of Parliaments; we shall know by this if Parliaments live or die. (pg. 501) J. Rushworth, *Hist. Coll*. [3]

1661 The time betwixt Wicklife and Trevisa was the Chrisis of the English tongue. (pg. 204) T. Fuller, *Worthies*. [3]

1670 These brought commodious Manufacture into the Realm; but they brought a Discipline with it, according to the Allowance of their Patent, which was a Suffocation to the Temperate Crisis of our own Church Government. (pg. 96) J. Hackett, *Abp. Williams*. [1]

1692 He soon perceives it, and too wise is (Not to lay hold on such a Crisis). (pg. 17) *Poems in Burlesque*. [1]

1715 Great Crises in Church and State. (pg. 346) M. Davies, *Athenae Britannicae*. [3]

1733 is become a Convert, and the Crisis of his Turn, this Speech. (pg. 34) R. North, *Examen*. [1]

1742 He put out a little tract of that subject, with a preface slightly touching the chief crises of his life. *Lives of Norths*. [1]

1761 Lally's spirited insolence in the crisis of his misfortune. (pg. 421) Hor. Walpole, *Letters* [1]

1769 To escape a crisis so full of terror and despair. (pg. 10) *Junius Lett*. [3]

1782 Free in his will to choose or to refuse, Man may improve the crisis, or abuse. (pg. 30) Cowper, *Progr. Err.*, *Poems*. [1]

1827 at this eventful crisis a stir was heard among the prisoners. (pg. 45) *Anecd of Impudence*. [1]

1860 The layer of snow had been in a state of strain, which our crossing brought to a crisis. (pg. 202) J. Tyndall, *Glaciers of the Alps*. [3]

1881 If its influence...has not in any one period prevailed so widely, it has been more enduring and survived greater crises. (pg. 51) E. Mulford, *Republic of God*. [1]

1887 It...carries him into various horrible crises. (pg. 402) *Athenaeum*. [1]

**An unstable condition as in political or economic affairs involving an impending abrupt or decisive change.**

1848 There is said to be a commercial crisis when a great number of merchants and traders, at once, either have, or apprehend that they shall have, a difficulty in meeting their engagements; J.S. Mill, *Princ. Polit. Econ*. [3]

1875 The ordinary statesman is apt to fail in extraordinary crises. (pg. 174) B Jowet tr., Plato, *Dialogues*. [3]

1886 Foreign transactions...most tedious because they go on without crises and without issues. (pg. 365) W. Stubbs, *17 Lect. Study Hist.* [3]

1886 The undertaking, which I am now laying down, was entered upon in the very crisis of the late rebellion, when it was the duty of every Brition to contribute his utmost assistance to the government, in a manner suitable to his station and abilities. *Addison's Freeholder N. 55* [3]

1901 But what man amongst those who heard and stirred might say that these minutes even now hasting into eternity held the Crisis of a nation that is the hope of the world? Winston Churchill. (pg. 156) *The Crisis*. London: The Macmillan Company. [2]

1902 In February 1897 the crisis between the executive and high court became acute...the President promised to pass a measure guaranteeing the independence of the high court and the crisis was for the moment averted. (pg. 216) Leopold Stennett Amery. *The Times History of the War in South Africa*. Boston: S. Low Marlow Company. [2]

2003 Whether or not the United States will invade Iraq has temporarily drawn the attention of may from a deepening economic crisis that is shaping up to be the worst crisis of global capitalism since the Great Depression 70 years ago. What makes the current conjuncture particularly volatile and unique is the way the chronic crisis at the heart of the system of production alongside a massive crisis of the system of reproduction of global capitalism. Walden Bello, "The Multiple Crises of Global Capitalism." [2]

### Compounds

1841 It may disappoint the crisis-mongers to hear us say so. *Times* [1]

1896 All the aspects of a crisis night. *Westm. Gaz.* [1]

1898 A Tory government was 'crisis proof'. *Westm. Gaz.* [1]

1898 The 'crisis'-less years of the late Liberal Government. *Westm. Gaz.* [1]

1898 The Near and not the Far East...was the crisis centre. *Westm. Gaz.* [1]

1900 A crisis-avoiding peace-compelling Government. *Westm. Gaz.* [1]

1903 A Crisis Fund, amounting to nearly tow millions. *Westm. Gaz.* [1]

1938 The crisis-minded always maintain that the problems of their particular decade are unique and insuperable. E. Waugh, in *Tablet*. [1]

1938 How many of these people are crisis-conscious? *Punch* [1]

1939 In the crisis-days prior to the war. W Lewis, *Let.* [1]

1940 The point is to join up the crisis-feeling to what can be felt all the time in normal life. W. Empson, *Gathering Storm.* [1]

1960 Switzerland has been a normal haven for 'crisis' money. *Times* [1]

1965 Crisis-management problems. H. Kahn, *On Escalation.* [1]

### **Contemporary Usages**

2011 Crisis Response Plans. Schools need to be responsive to crises and disasters which could effect the school community. (pg. 388) Randy M. Page. *Promoting emotional health and well being in the classroom.* London: Jones and Bartlett. [2]

2010 Coca cola faced a crisis in January when consumers in Belgium became ill after drinking their product. (pg. 35) Alan J. Zaremba. *Communication Theory and Practice.* New York: M.E. Sharpe Inc. [2]

2009 What are the typical patterns of crises that might occur in a doctoral project? Let us look at the six general types of crises listed below. Professional crisis. Emotional crisis. Expectation crisis. Survival crisis. International student crisis. Adviser crisis. (pg. 77) Reuvan Katz. *Shorten your time to your doctorate.* Bloomington, IN: Author House. [2]

2009 In a crisis faith gives you remarkable power and confidence to prevail. (pg. 1) Bart D. Ehrman. *God's problem.* New York: Harper Collins. [2]

2006 There are two opposing approaches to responsibility when in a crisis. (pg. 165) *Six Hidden motives that defeat your goals.* David E. Baugh. Gretnam, LA: Pelican. [2]

2004 But the crisis that resulted from their loss of faith did not hence become a measure of their faith. (pg. 90) *The crisis club.* David Ihenacho. Lincoln, NE: iUniverse Inc. [2]

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<[http://www.google.com/search?tbo=p&tbm=bks&q=crisis+disease&tbs=,bkv:p,cd\\_r:1,cd\\_min:Jan%201\\_2%201600,cd\\_max:Dec%2031\\_2%201800&num=10](http://www.google.com/search?tbo=p&tbm=bks&q=crisis+disease&tbs=,bkv:p,cd_r:1,cd_min:Jan%201_2%201600,cd_max:Dec%2031_2%201800&num=10)> accessed 14 March 2011.
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