

Trčková, Dita

Conclusion

In: Trčková, Dita. *Representations of natural catastrophes in newspaper discourse*. Vydání 1. Brno: Masarykova univerzita, 2014, pp. 92-94

ISBN 978-80-210-7414-9

Stable URL (handle): <https://hdl.handle.net/11222.digilib/133027>

Access Date: 18. 02. 2024

Version: 20220831

Terms of use: Digital Library of the Faculty of Arts, Masaryk University provides access to digitized documents strictly for personal use, unless otherwise specified.

10 Conclusion

This book has focused on the representations of major natural catastrophes of the twenty-first century in newspapers published in Western English-speaking countries, aiming to uncover recurrent discursive strategies and decipher an ideological perspective/ideological perspectives employed in the newspaper discourse. The main methodology adopted in the book is critical discourse analysis (CDA), combined mainly with the cognitive theory of metaphor. This follows a recent trend among linguistic scholars who promote a combination of critical discourse analysis and cognitive studies (Wodak 2002; Chilton 2004; Hart and Lukeš 2007), emphasizing that cognitive structures play a significant role in shaping discourse. At the same time, discourse influences recipients' cognitive structures. Applying a multi-disciplinary approach, the book has also drawn upon sociological and anthropological research, and media studies.

One of the main findings of the analysis has been that the newspaper discourse on natural disasters tends to employ simplifying schemas and frames with mythological roots. These include a construction of the natural phenomenon as a furious monster aiming to attack people, which is materialized by a metaphorical portrayal of the natural phenomenon as an ANIMATE BEING, a MONSTER and a WARRIOR. These conceptual metaphors are materialized by the same linguistic devices in all three newspapers. Underlying the metaphorical representation of natural catastrophes is a scapegoating ideology, which identifies a single entity – the natural phenomenon – as the one to blame for the damage and destruction. It diverts attention from man-made factors that contributed to the impact of the disaster, reinforcing the Western ideological dualism of nature and culture. Other examples of mythological motifs adopted in the newspaper discourse are the WARRIOR iconography and the ruined fairy tale.

The reproduction of deeply-rooted cultural concepts and models has a number of effects. It brings order to the world, makes reality more graspable for readers, and helps readers overcome their anxiety from something unknown by 'transforming' it to something more tangible. By creating an outsider (the natural phenomenon), the bipolarization of nature and society embedded in the mythological schemas evokes a sense of community among people (cf., Conboy 2007, 175). At the same time, the application of rudimentary concepts of good and evil to the disaster and the stereotypical representation of these two bipolar notions result in a construction of a myth, providing a black-and-white portrayal of the natural disaster and simplifying a complex issue. As Barthes (1993, 143) explains:

Myth gives them [things] a natural and eternal justification, it gives them a clarity which is not that of an explanation but that of a statement of fact. [...] it abolishes the complexity of human acts, it gives them the simplicity of essences, [...], it organizes the world which is without contradictions because it is without depth.

Paradoxically, in the modern era following the period of the Enlightenment with an emphasis on reason and the elimination of irrational superstitions, the newspaper discourse retreats from rational thinking and seeks an explanation in a myth.

Yet, hypothesis 2 stated at the beginning of the book – *the binary opposition between humankind and nature is reproduced in the newspaper articles on natural catastrophes* – has not been proven completely since discursive strategies that help to deconstruct nature-culture dualism are present in some of the articles under study, namely discourse on the Haiti earthquake and the Tōhoku earthquake and tsunami and the second phase of reports on Hurricane Katrina. The deconstruction is realized by the newspapers including contextual information, mainly revealing that historical, political and socio-economic conditions contributed to the consequences of the natural disaster and that the vulnerabilities of the society could have been or were (in the case of the disaster in Japan) mitigated by preparedness measures. The lack of such information in the discourse on the Indian Ocean tsunami and in the initial articles on Hurricane Katrina results in a biased picture, stripping those in power and the society as a whole of any responsibility. Hypothesis 1 – *newspaper discourse puts the blame for natural disasters on natural phenomena rather than social factors* – has thus been confirmed only in some of the articles, while the other articles contain multiple ideologies with, on one hand, a metaphorical portrayal of the natural phenomenon ascribing blame only to nature, and, on the other hand, several accounts explicitly pointing out the responsibility of mankind.

The foregrounding of man-made factors in the articles on the disasters in Haiti and Japan and the second phase of the reports on Hurricane Katrina seems to be partially motivated by ideological factors. In the case of Hurricane Katrina, the shift of the ascription of blame from nature to the government appears to be prompted by rising protests in the society, with the newspapers reproducing the critical voices. In the case of the disaster in Japan, the inclusion of preparedness measures allows the newspapers to employ superlatives, which enhance the newsworthiness of the stories. In the case of the disaster in Haiti, the foregrounding of man-made factors seems to stem from the fact that the disaster happened in a Third World country. As van Dijk (1996b, 26) points out, the blame for misfortunes and problems in the Third World tends to be attributed “primarily to the “backward” policies and behavior of Third World Nations,” which plays down, for instance, effects of international trade and politics. The discourse on

the Haiti earthquake conveys a patronizing ideology constructing power asymmetry between the First World and the Third World as the emphasis on poor socio-economic and political conditions in Haiti and on the helplessness and dependence of Haitians is contrasted with a focus on the helpfulness of Western rich countries. The discourse on the Haiti earthquake is also the only one that omits the demonizing metaphorical conceptualization of the natural phenomenon, one of the functions of which is to put blame one-sidedly on nature. The omission of the metaphors does not allow for the same degree of an emotional identification between readers and victims as when the metaphors are included, which seems to reflect the existence of negative stereotypes of Haitians in the West, hindering the evocation of sympathy.

Apart from the inclusion of contextualization in some of the articles, which helps to provide a rational and an explanatory account, the focus of the reports is put mainly on the appeal to readers' emotions. It is achieved by the use of mythical, metaphorical frames, a selection of emotionally-charged victim stories and an abundance of discursive strategies with a dramatizing effect, including a contrast, a hyperbole, superlatives, numbers, a telegraphic style, repetition and an alternation between negative and positive accounts. These devices are used not only in the immediate aftermath of the catastrophe but in articles during the whole fourteen-day period. Hypothesis 3 – *newspaper discourse does not restrain from dramatizing the account of natural catastrophes; rather, it highlights the dramatic and emotional impact of the events* – has been fully confirmed. The evocation of emotions is necessary to induce solidarity among readers and encourage a humanitarian action. Yet, the imbalance between the emotional and the rational is likely to hinder readers from getting a perspective on the catastrophe and its causes, from establishing a relationship of reflexive identification with the victims, and generally from responding to the catastrophe in a rational and calm way.

As a suggestion for further research, it would be advisable to carry out a cross-cultural analysis, such as to compare a representation of the Haiti earthquake in newspapers published in Western English-speaking countries with a depiction in newspapers published in Haiti, which would help to uncover the ideological workings of the newspaper discourse on natural catastrophes more clearly and convincingly. On a more general level, the present research could be extended by an investigation of both a metaphorical and a non-metaphorical conceptualization of natural phenomena and an examination of a portrayal of a human-nature relationship in newspaper articles on other topics than natural catastrophes.