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Semantic macrostructures of newspaper articles on natural catastrophes

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6 Semantic macrostructures of newspaper articles on natural catastrophes

This chapter examines semantic macrostructures of the newspaper articles from the corpus. The analysis reveals a pattern in the employment of main topics and global meanings in discourse on all four catastrophes. Basically, the semantic macrostructures of the news reports fall into five main categories, introduced below. Idiosyncratic global meanings specific to individual catastrophes are dealt with at the end of the chapter.

6.1 The immediate aftermath of the catastrophe

The main focus of the articles published immediately after the catastrophe is on what happened, where and when it happened, and why and how it happened (cf., Harrison 1999b): *The earthquake, with a magnitude estimated at 7.0, struck just before 5 p.m. about 10 miles southwest of Port-au-Prince. [...] The earthquake on Tuesday occurred when what appears to be part of the southern fault zone broke and slid. [...] Such earthquakes, which are called strike-slip, tend to be shallow and produce violent shaking at the surface (New York Times, 13 January 2010).* The natural phenomenon gets foregrounded during this phase of reporting. The reports are seemingly factual, with a great preponderance of numbers (*a section of seabed, 625 miles long, rose up to 30 metres at a spot approximately 155 miles south-east of the city of Banda Aceh and 1,000 miles north-west of the Indonesian capital of Jakarta (Guardian, 27 December 2004)*), which enhances the objectivity and credibility of the discourse. Yet, the articles contain a lot of dramatizing strategies (discussed in chapter nine), which contribute to an emotive underlying tone conveying shock and horror.

The first articles published on the catastrophes tend to have a rather incoherent structure, switching back and forth between the focus on the actions of the natural phenomenon, a scientific description of how the natural phenomenon came into existence, the immediate consequences of the catastrophe and the reactions of victims, those in power in the affected country and other world leaders. The slightly incoherent, chaotic organization of the articles mirrors and helps to evoke an image of the actual chaos, typical of the immediate aftermath of the catastrophe. The semantic macrostructures of the articles that follow the initial

reports oscillate among eyewitness stories, consequences of the disaster, aid to the affected and man-made factors, discussed in the following subchapters.

6.2 Eyewitness stories

Another semantic macrostructure of the articles is a focus on eyewitness accounts of the event and personalized victim stories. Apart from helping to establish the portrayal of the catastrophe as credible, eyewitness stories have a significant emotional appeal. By providing first-hand experience, they bring the events closer to ordinary people's lives, arouse sympathy and make readers feel more involved. To contrast this type of reporting with the first one, if journalists "offer us a point of view which is essentially distanced, non-partisan and seemingly objective, witnesses do the opposite – providing a position for involvement, partisanship and emotional engagement" (Langer 1992, 120).

6.3 Consequences of the disaster

Another major global meaning of the articles is a description of the consequences of the disaster, with the focus on the living conditions of people affected by the catastrophe. The conditions are portrayed as desperate, chaotic and full of problems, obstacles and possible threats. The natural phenomenon is backgrounded in these accounts.

The fourteen-day reporting on the consequences of the disasters can be labeled as an emerging narrative (Arquembourg 2009, 394) since the consequences are gradually unfolded and the horror of the situation is built up. Apart from focusing on the description of the present situation, the reports make predictions on what might happen in the following days, with a shift from expressions of low epistemic modality in initial reports to expressions of higher epistemic modality in subsequent reports: *Katrina may turn out to be the most expensive hurricane ever to hit the United States* (*Globe and Mail*, 30 August 2005) in contrast to [...] *in order to oversee the federal response to the disaster, the most costly hurricane ever to hit the United States* (*Globe and Mail*, 31 August 2005). The situation is portrayed as gradually worsening, as illustrated in the following headlines: *Tensions Mount in Devastated Capital*; *Tsunami Death Toll Rises to 23,700*; *Patience Wears Thin as Desperation Grows*; *The True Horror Emerges*; *Ten Days On, the Scale of Disaster Still Grows*. The conveyance of horror and danger prevails in these reports. The emerging narrative is constructed to meet the news value of continuity; it makes readers follow the news reports day by day, looking for answers to predictions made and solutions to problems outlined in the previous articles.

Amid the reports on the dire consequences of the disasters, the newspapers tend to insert news that conveys positive aspects, such as hope and unity, mitigating the feelings of danger and threat, as can be seen in the following headlines: *Disaster's Damage to Economies May Be Minor; The Ultimate Relief: Adoptive Families Brought Together at Last; In Sri Lanka's Time of Agony, a Moment of Peace*. Such accounts provide reassurance for readers, and, for a moment, establish an equilibrium between the positive and the negative. The focus on positive aspects is most prominent in the articles on the Tōhoku earthquake and tsunami, which do not focus on the horror and fear connected with the natural disaster as much as the reports on the other disasters: *Japan's Industrial Heart Escapes Heaviest Blows* (headline in *New York Times*, 11 March 2011) and *Japanese Calm Helps Authorities with Recovery* (headline in *Globe and Mail*, 14 March 2011). This might be due to the fact that the disaster happened in one of the most developed countries in the world, with the newspapers published in other developed countries avoiding a portrayal of such a country as vulnerable.

6.4 Aid to the affected

The accounts of the negative consequences of the disaster are juxtaposed with reports on aid and international donations, which are full of motifs of solidarity and help. The focus is mainly on aid provided by countries culturally close to readers, such as Western English-speaking countries and the United Nations, reflecting the news value of cultural proximity. The articles foregrounding aid play an important humanitarian role, calling for solidarity and generosity among readers and encouraging them to donate money.

Yet, the reports on governmental donations are not framed only from a humanitarian angle, but also from political, competitive and self-appraising perspectives (cf., Koch 2010). Concerning the political framing, donations are not represented only as aid to those affected by the catastrophe but also as a mark of political relations between the donor and the beneficiary (*politicians from both sides of the border praised the expedition [of Canadian military personnel] as a clear demonstration of the deep bond between Canada and its large southern neighbour* (*Globe and Mail*, 7 September 2005)) and as a political gain for the donor (*the U.S. contribution [...] might improve Washington's standing among Muslims* (*Globe and Mail*, 6 January 2005)). The competition framing portrays donations as part of a competitive game in which countries around the world participate, as revealed in the insertion of a table listing major donor nations ordered according to the amount of their pledges in *The Globe and Mail* (6 January 2005) and in expressions such as *countries leapfrogged one another yesterday with fresh pledges for tsunami relief; the donation bidding war; by far the biggest immediate pledge came from the US; other major players include the World*

Bank and International Monetary Fund. The articles use governmental aid also as a self-appraisal tool, as in *Canada swiftly sends in the troops; the scale and speed of the relief mission is remarkable* (*Globe and Mail*, 14 January 2010).

The political, competition and self-appraisal framings of donations have in common a twist of the humanitarian, altruistic purpose of aid, when the good of the others is foregrounded and the good of the self is backgrounded, to the focus on the significance of and benefits to the self, with the importance of those affected by the disaster downgraded. The competition framing, in addition, provides the reports with an entertaining element (Koch 2010, 210), which increases newsworthiness, yet might be perceived as diverting attention from the seriousness of the situation for those in need.

6.5 Man-made factors

The extent to which socio-economic, political and historical conditions contributing to the impact of the disaster are discussed in the reports differs in the discourse on each catastrophe. Concerning the Indian Ocean tsunami, the newspapers occasionally focus on the problematic political, economic and social conditions of the countries prior to the disaster; nevertheless, they do not establish a direct link between these conditions and the consequences of the catastrophe. They place blame for the disaster and its impact solely on the natural phenomenon.

The articles on Hurricane Katrina in the first half of the fourteen-day reporting cycle are similar to the discourse on the Indian Ocean tsunami, with the role of the culprit being performed by the natural phenomenon. Yet, in the second week of the reporting, the three newspapers shifted the focus to man-made factors that contributed to the consequences of the catastrophe, pointing out the failure of local, state and federal governments, and discussing racial and class inequalities that had existed in New Orleans for years. During this phase, the articles provide a rational account, offering an analytical approach to the disaster. The natural phenomenon gets suppressed while people are foregrounded, with the newspapers producing a critical stance towards the government, then pervasive in New Orleans. Nevertheless, rather than being initiators of the critique of the dominant bloc for its slow reactions and the lack of cooperation between different levels of government, the newspaper articles seem to merely reflect the protesting voices springing up in the society: *that bewilderment, tinged with anger towards officials at local and national level, was shared at the scene of the disaster and by political commentators and disaster relief experts* (*Guardian*, 3 September 2005); *Local Officials Criticize Federal Government Over Response* (headline in *New York Times*, 2 September 2005); *Political Fury Grows at Slow Federal Effort* (headline in *Globe and Mail*, 5 September 2005).

In contrast to both the Indian Ocean tsunami and Hurricane Katrina, the articles on the Haiti earthquake immediately foregrounded the problematic political, economic and social conditions of the country before the catastrophe. They established a direct link between the human factors and the consequences of the earthquake, revealing that the disaster was to a large extent man-made: *Grinding Poverty and Tectonic Volatility Make a Devastating Combination* (headline in *Guardian*, 13 January 2010); *the earthquake's devastating effect is magnified by the notoriously abysmal infrastructure in much of the country* (*Globe and Mail*, 13 January 2010). More on this is noted in the following chapters.

Similarly, from the beginning of the reporting, articles on the Tōhoku earthquake pointed out man-made factors, mainly preparation measures taken before the disaster and their mitigation effects on the consequences of the earthquake and tsunami: *Japan's Strict Building Codes Saved Lives* (headline in *New York Times*, 11 March 2011); *these precautions, along with earthquake and tsunami drills that are routine for every Japanese citizen, show why Japan is the best-prepared country in the world for the twin disasters of earthquake and tsunami – practices that undoubtedly saved lives* (*New York Times*, 11 March 2011); *the country implemented some of the most stringent building standards in the world for taller structures* (*Globe and Mail*, 12 March 2011). One of the reasons for the inclusion of such information might be that it contains a value of uniqueness, realized in the use of superlatives, which makes the articles more newsworthy. The employment of superlatives in relation to man-made factors applies to articles on the Haiti earthquake as well, as when they state that the disaster happened in *a nation that was already the hemisphere's poorest and most disaster prone* (*New York Times*, 13 January 2010); *the poorest country in the western hemisphere* (*Guardian*, 13 January 2010).

6.6 Idiosyncratic semantic macrostructures

6.6.1 Anticipation of Hurricane Katrina disaster

In contrast to the other three catastrophes, the people affected by Hurricane Katrina had been warned beforehand about the approaching hurricane. The first articles on the disaster in the studied newspapers focus on conveying the threat posed by an approaching storm, described as *a storm that most of us have long feared* (*New York Times*, 29 August 2005). The feelings of anxiety connected with the anticipation are increased in the reports by the selection of the words *unnervingly quiet* (*New York Times*, 29 August 2005) to depict the atmosphere in New Orleans. The newspapers inform their readers about a mandatory evacuation issued by the mayor of New Orleans and on the whole perform an important function as warning disseminators.

6.6.2 Nuclear plant disaster in Japan

One of the main semantic macrostructures of the articles on the Tōhoku earthquake and tsunami is the nuclear disaster at the Fukushima power plant. It is the main topic of seven out of the fifteen studied articles (47 percent) in *The New York Times* and *The Globe and Mail* and ten articles (67 percent) in *The Guardian*. It gains prominence in the newspapers at the expense of reports on the natural disaster and its consequences, which seems to reveal that an imminent danger is more newsworthy than a danger that has already occurred.

The reports on the nuclear disaster tend to contain a detailed, technical description of the problems in the power plant, providing a rational, explanatory account (see Example 1), which stands in contrast to a more emotive and dramatizing representation of the natural disasters.

Example 1: *Heat from the fuel rods in the reactor core led to a build-up of superheated water inside. On Saturday, engineers released water vapour – which contained radioactive caesium and iodine – from the pressure vessel as an emergency measure. Superheated water can split into hydrogen and oxygen, and it appears that hydrogen escaped during the venting procedure and exploded. (Guardian, 14 March 2011)*

All three newspapers employ a critical stance towards the Japanese government and the operators of the plant: *the heightened concerns [...] brought criticism of the authorities' management of the situation at Fukushima (Guardian, 17 March 2011); with confusion compounded by incomplete and inconsistent information provided by government officials and executives of the plant's operator (New York Times, 14 March 2011); American officials say they suspect that the company has consistently underestimated the risk and moved too slowly to contain the damage (New York Times, 17 March 2011); government regulators approved a 10-year extension for the oldest of the six reactors at the power station despite warnings about its safety (New York Times, 21 March 2011); a list of FUKUSHIMA MISSTEPS in The Globe and Mail (16 March 2011)*. The blame for the nuclear disaster is ascribed in the newspapers not only to the natural phenomena but also to man-made factors.

6.7 Summary

The analysis of the semantic macrostructures of the articles in all three newspapers reveals that they belong to one of the five categories. The first reports provide the answers to what happened and where, when, why and how it happened. The subsequent articles switch among the following four categories of global

meanings: eyewitness stories, aid to those affected, consequences of the catastrophe and a discussion of man-made factors. Overall, a human-interest perspective prevails in the newspaper reports; the newspapers make readers comprehend the events in relation to themselves, to human beings, not to nature, which is a result of natural human self-centeredness (Kvakova 2009).

The articles on the consequences of the disaster constitute an emerging narrative, containing not only a description of the present situation but also predictions about the future, with the full impact of the catastrophe being gradually revealed, which makes readers read on. The reports on negative consequences of the disaster alternate with reports on more positive aspects, such as international aid, which help to unite the world and encourage readers to help and donate money. Yet, as shown, the articles on aid are not framed only from an altruistic perspective but also employ political, competition and self-appraisal framings, foregrounding the importance of the donator.

As far as man-made factors are concerned, the reports on each catastrophe differ in the extent of their inclusion. The articles on the Indian Ocean tsunami fail to establish a link between political, socio-economic and historical conditions and the catastrophe, blaming only the natural phenomenon. The same is the case of the first phase of reporting on Hurricane Katrina, with the shift of a discursive ascription of blame to human failure in the second phase of reporting, after the upsurge of critical voices in the society. Man-made factors are included from the beginning of reporting on both the Haiti earthquake and the Tōhoku earthquake and tsunami, pointing out that the disasters happened in the most vulnerable and the least vulnerable country in the world respectively, with the employment of superlatives adding newsworthy value to the articles. Human error is shown to have contributed to the nuclear disaster in Japan in all three newspapers, with the power plant operators and the Japanese government not spared criticism. The question remains whether the fact that the nuclear disaster happened in a country constituting an economic and political competitor to the Western English speaking countries, contributes to the inclusion of open criticism in the newspapers.