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Discursive strategies of dramatization

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9 Discursive strategies of dramatization

Considering the nature of the events of major natural catastrophes, it is to be expected that the media inclines to the use of strategies with a dramatizing effect. Drama also adds an element of entertainment, which increases the newsworthiness of the articles. This chapter enumerates and examines the most common recurrent dramatizing tools used across all three newspapers. Some of the dramatizing strategies were revealed in the previous chapters, including the demonizing metaphorical representation of the natural phenomenon, an adoption of mythical themes and schemas in narratives about victims, a selection of emotionally-loaded victim stories and an alternation between stories with positive and negative endings.

Another prominent discursive strategy with a dramatizing impact is a contrast. Many of the articles are built on a contrast and a resulting tension between the positive ‘before’ and the negative ‘after’ the natural phenomenon occurred, as revealed in Examples 74, 75 and 76. This corresponds to the motif of the ruined fairy tale in victims’ narratives. The newspapers tend to depict the situation immediately before the catastrophe as idyllic and trouble-free: *it was a tranquil Sunday morning; it had been a pleasant, sunny Sunday morning; it was a languorous Christmas afternoon; just another humid, busy afternoon*. Doing so serves to intensify the horror of what comes after.

Example 74: *For years, it had been the gateway to **paradise**. But last night, the Phuket airport was inhabited only by **the dead, the injured, the terrified and the exhausted**. (Globe and Mail, 29 December 2004)*

Example 75: *[...] the skies had cleared and as dawn broke yesterday **the sun was shining** for the first time in days. But for some **the nightmare** was just beginning. (Guardian, 31 August 2005)*

Example 76: *Once **a pretty port** set between the Yokote mountains and the Pacific Coast, Rikuzen-Takata effectively **no longer exists**. (Globe and Mail, 16 March 2014)*

The contrasts are usually based on binary oppositions (*the **dimmed** lights in the normally **effervescent** neighbourhood; climbing the hill in these dark days is to move between **death and life, sorrow and hope; haven** quickly becomes an **ordeal***), which are rudimentary tools in people’s conceptual systems, helping people to impose clear-cut categories on the reality, but also simplifying and schematizing it.

The general tendency of the newspapers is to oscillate and employ a contrast between the positive and the negative. A common conjunction placed at the beginning of sentences (and also paragraphs) is *but*, which semantically implies a contradiction of what has been said. It is illustrated in Example 77, where a suggestion of the improvement of the situation is immediately contradicted by a reference to the existence of problems to be faced. Similarly to alternating positive and negative victim stories, these shifts make readers experience alternate feelings of reassurance and fear or uncertainty. As pointed out by Kvakova (2009), such a strategy increases readers' dependence on the newspaper reports since, after having their feelings of anxiety and uncertainty evoked, the readers seek to be reassured.

Example 77: *"Things are improving. The backlog is starting to clear," said Michael Elmquist, chief of the United Nation's Office for the Co-ordination of Humanitarian Affairs in Indonesia.*

But international aid workers still have before them a set of staggering tasks. (Globe and Mail, 3 January 2005)

A dramatic effect is also achieved by a portrayal of the natural phenomenon as turning the world upside down. Nature is depicted as disrupting the order imposed on the world by people and bringing chaos: *cars went out to sea, boats came onto land; boats dropped in the middle of empty streets and cars swept along by the wave and dropped on top of houses; some fishing boats [...] were tossed upside down; Nothing is where it should be. The giant pink-and-white hull of a tuna fishing ship is berthed on the tarmac, a three-storey office building has floated into the middle of the road, and cars are rammed into the sides of buildings.*

Another common dramatizing strategy in the discourse on the natural disasters is the use of a hyperbole. Hyperbolic expressions are employed in the characterization of the magnitude of the natural phenomenon as revealed in subchapter 7.1.3; in addition, a hyperbole is adopted in the description of the impact of the disaster, portraying the natural phenomenon as *all-destructive*: *this has wiped out everything; Walls of Water Sweeping All in Their Path; it buried everyone, everything; everything was destroyed; there were dead people floating everywhere you looked; the entire city is destroyed.* The use of the words 'everything,' 'everybody' and 'everywhere' without hedges does not provide a realistic portrayal of the impact of the disaster but functions to exacerbate the horror and shock of the events.

The exceptionality of the natural disasters is conveyed by a frequent use of superlatives in reference to the catastrophe, with an embedded comparison with past disasters. The articles are replete with phrases of the following pattern: *the natural disaster – adjective in a superlative form – time period.* The Indian Ocean tsunami is described as *the deadliest known tsunami for more than 200 years*; Hurricane Katrina as *the most expensive hurricane ever to hit the United States*; the Haiti earth-

quake as *the most powerful to hit Haiti in 200 years*; and the Tōhoku earthquake as *the most powerful quake to strike Japan in recorded history*. The use of superlatives is often mitigated by the expression ‘one of,’ as in *one of the worst natural disasters in recent decades; one of the most powerful hurricanes to hit the US in living memory; one of the most punishing hurricanes ever to hit the United States; one of the most powerful earthquakes to ever hit the region*. The superlatives are employed not just to deliver factual information but also for the sake of increasing the newsworthiness of the reports as they convey uniqueness and add a shocking and a dramatizing element.

Another means of dramatization is an abundant use of numbers. Although numbers convey objectivity and factuality, they are also selected for newsworthiness reasons, as Bell (1991, 203) reveals: “Figures undergird the objective, empirical claims of news. But they simultaneously undermine that principle, since they are chosen to express and enhance the news value of the story.” The newspapers mainly employ numbers in reference to the number of missing, killed and injured people in the disaster, which change from one article to another with a rising tendency, resulting in a dramatic effect. Significantly, the numbers provided in the articles are often round, without any modification: *there was no communication with 45,000 residents of the Nicobar Islands; 4,400 dead in Aceh and North Sumatra; the reported 10,000 dead; knocked out power to 28,000 people; 7,000 people had already been buried*. Rather than conveying precise information, round numbers are employed because they are vivid and easily remembered. Despite not representing precise facts, they create an illusion of credibility and tend to be taken for granted.

When describing the impact of the natural disasters, the newspaper reports tend to enhance the drama of the situation by the employment of a ‘telegraphic style.’ The main characteristic of the telegraphic style or “the grammar of little texts” (Halliday 1985, 373) is to keep lexical words and omit grammatical ones, as illustrated by the use of elliptical sentences in Examples 78 and 79. A similar effect is achieved when the newspapers employ a sequence of short simple sentences (see Examples 80 and 81).

Example 78: *Sunbathers and snorkelers at luxury resorts swept out to sea. Hindus drowned during ritual bathing.* (New York Times, 27 December 2004)

Example 79: *People are terrified and have no hope. **Natural holocaust.*** (eyewitness account in *The Guardian*, 13 January 2010)

Example 80: *Whole towns were inundated. Dozens of buildings were destroyed.* (New York Times, 27 December 2004)

Example 81: *Parliament **has collapsed**. The tax office **has collapsed**. Schools **have collapsed**. Hospitals **have collapsed**.* (*Guardian*, 13 January 2010)

Examples 80 and 81 illustrate another dramatic strategy commonly drawn upon by the newspapers – repetition. The articles contain a lexical repetition: *there were*

many, many people in the sea at this time; it was very, very frightening; be very, very careful, a syntactic repetition, illustrated in Example 80, and a combination of both a lexical and a syntactic repetition, shown in Example 81.

The last discursive strategy of dramatization worth mentioning is the adoption of images from horror movies. These include phrases such as *a ghost city*, *a haunting calm*, *an eerie emptiness* and *a ghastly landscape*. Such accounts serve to solicit fear and shock.

The dramatizing strategies are adopted throughout the whole fourteen-day period of reporting. Their employment in the newspaper discourse on the natural catastrophes is not surprising given the nature of the events and the character of the media as a commodity that needs to sell, with the commercial pressures forcing the newspapers not only to inform but also to entertain. Nevertheless, the strategies with a dramatic effect are often included at the expense of a more rational, analytical and explanatory account.