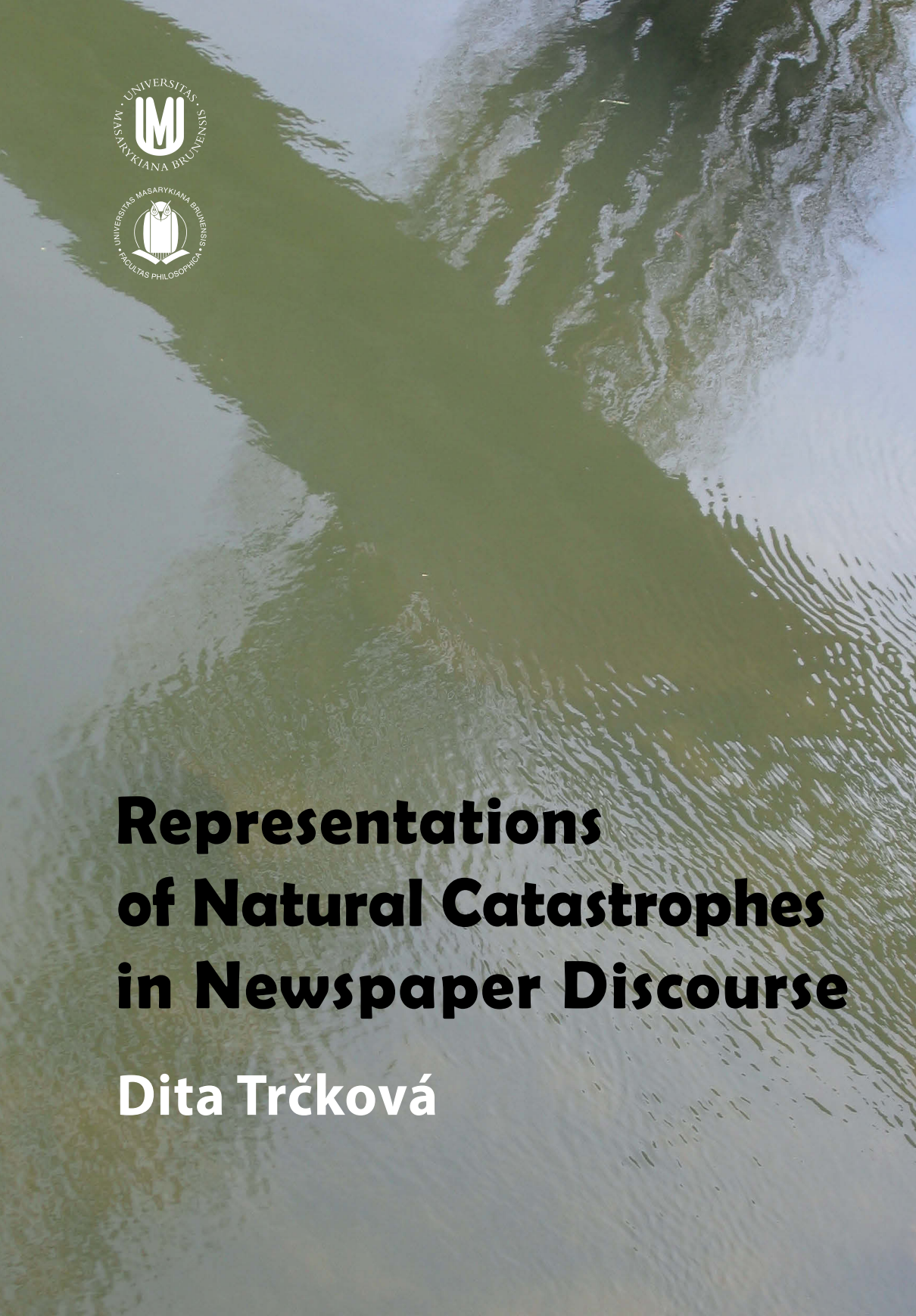

Representations of Natural Catastrophes in Newspaper Discourse

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1 Introduction

"I can't express how bad it was," commented a woman struggling to find words to describe the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans when interviewed by *The Guardian* (5 September 2005). Large-scale disasters are events where words tend to fail, and so does our ability to comprehend the reality. Yet, readers may expect that it is the responsibility of newspapers to supply the 'missing' words and provide us with a linguistic representation of these events.

Mass communication has brought a new dimension to natural catastrophes, as it has enabled people world wide to learn about the experiences of those affected by disasters. For most people, mass media is the only source of information about these events. The representations that newspapers provide play a key role in the way people conceptualize and come to terms with natural disasters.

One of the reasons for the overwhelming effect of natural catastrophes, events that constitute an integral part of life, is that they stand in tension with Western Enlightenment ideology. The beliefs in progress through scientific and technological advances and human domination over nature are shattered. People cease to be in control of the situation, which results in feelings of anxiety, fear and depression. Parker (1980, 239) points out that, as a result, it would be advisable for mass media to avoid further dramatization and sensationalization of the events and rather focus on a rational account, providing calm, explanatory information and giving people perspective on the causes of the natural disaster. Whether this is accomplished by mass media is to be investigated in the present book.

Employing the methodology of critical discourse analysis, this book uncovers general tendencies in discursive representation of natural catastrophes in newspapers published in Western English-speaking countries, with the ultimate goal to point out that newspaper discourse does not represent natural catastrophes neutrally, but socially constructs a portrayal of these events with a particular ideological perspective embedded. This constructed portrayal of natural catastrophes then shapes the way readers conceptualize the events and consequently influences their actions. Following critical linguistics, the study demonstrates that ideologies are not manifested only directly through the content of discourse but also through forms of expression, which encode social meanings (Fowler 1991, 25, 67).

Recent studies on newspaper discourse from a critical discourse analysis point of view (van Dijk 1988a; 1991; Fowler 1991; Brookes 1995; Fairclough 1995b; Teo 2000; El Refaie 2001; Bishop and Jaworski 2003; Conboy 2007; Richardson

2007) have concentrated on the investigation of the social construction of meaning through linguistic structures, pointing out a biased portrayal of national and international affairs in newspapers. Their main focus has been an examination of ideological underpinnings in representations of different groups of people, such as women, ethnic minorities, immigrants and whole nations, concluding that newspaper discourse tends to serve to sustain unequal power relations and reproduce dominant ideology. While the present book draws upon these studies, its main difference is that it deals with issues in which the main agents are not human beings but natural phenomena. One would thus expect more readily than in the case of the coverage of political issues that newspapers represent natural catastrophes neutrally, without ideological bias.

1.1 Corpus of data for analysis

The motivation for the focus on representations of natural catastrophes in newspapers published in Western English-speaking countries comes from the prevalence of nature-culture dualist thinking and Enlightenment ideology in the West. This allows for the formulation of the research question examining how newspapers deal with the tension between natural catastrophes and the Enlightenment ideology of domination of mankind over the natural world (see subchapter 1.2).

The selected newspapers considered to be representative of Western English-speaking countries consist of one major national newspaper published in the United States – *The New York Times*, one major national newspaper published in Great Britain – *The Guardian* and one major national newspaper published in Canada – *The Globe and Mail*. An important factor in the selection of these sources was that they are broadsheet newspapers, which are expected to be more objective and factual, with their language viewed as a more neutral mediator of reality, than in the case of tabloid newspapers, which overtly purport to entertain and sensationalize.

Concerning the content of the newspaper articles, four major natural disasters that happened in the twenty-first century have been selected for the analysis: the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami (occurred on December 26, 2004), Hurricane Katrina (made landfall in New Orleans on August 29, 2005), the 2010 Haiti earthquake (occurred on January 12, 2010) and the 2011 Tōhoku earthquake and tsunami (occurred in Japan on March 11, 2011). These particular catastrophes have been chosen for a number of reasons. Firstly, they represent different kinds of natural disasters, including a tsunami, a hurricane and an earthquake, which provides a representative sample of natural catastrophes in general. Secondly, the locations of the disasters consist of both developed and wealthy countries, such as the United States and Japan, and developing and poor countries, such as Indonesia,

Sri Lanka and Haiti. The locations also constitute a different degree of cultural proximity to readers. While Hurricane Katrina happened in one of the Western English-speaking countries and thus meets the criterion of cultural proximity, the other three disasters occurred in culturally distant countries. At the same time, in contrast to the Haiti earthquake and the Tōhoku earthquake and tsunami, the Indian Ocean tsunami occurred in popular tourist resorts, among the visitors of which were tourists from Great Britain, Canada and the United States, endowing it with a higher degree of cultural proximity to readers from the West than the other two disasters. Whether the location (a developed versus a developing country) and the degree of cultural proximity have an impact on the representations of the natural disasters in the newspapers is to be investigated in the analytical part of this book. The final reason for the selection of the four catastrophes is that they happened in different years.

All the newspaper articles from the corpus belong to the hard news category and come from the online archives of the newspapers. The number of collected articles is fifteen per newspaper for each catastrophe, which makes the total number of articles gathered in the corpus 180. The articles cover a time span of two weeks since the disaster occurred, i.e., December 26, 2004 – January 8, 2005 for the Indian Ocean tsunami, August 29, 2005 – September 11, 2005 for Hurricane Katrina, January 12, 2010 – January 26, 2010 for the Haiti earthquake, and March 11, 2011 – March 25, 2011 for the Tōhoku earthquake and tsunami. The period of two weeks has been chosen since it is to be expected that while the first days of a natural catastrophe arouse strong emotions, after a week or so the emotions start to recede and a broader and more rational perspective on the disaster is gained. Whether this is reflected in the way newspaper discourse allocates blame for the disaster and in the employment of dramatizing strategies is investigated in the analytical part.

As not all online archives of the three newspapers contain photographs, the present research is restricted to the study of verbal aspects of discourse only. This can be seen as a limitation, as it disallows a full examination of the interplay between all the semiotic modes in newspaper discourse and a complete account of all the meanings expressed in the articles. Nevertheless, an analysis of verbal means is sufficient to adequately answer the research questions stated in the following subchapter.

1.2 Research goals

This book aims to answer the following three broad research questions and examine the hypotheses formulated with regard to each question.

1. Allocation of blame
The first research goal is to investigate to whom the blame for natural catastrophes is discursively ascribed in the selected newspapers. Are natural disasters represented as a joint result of natural events and social factors? The focus is not only on a direct ascription of blame in discourse, but also on subtle forms of conveying blame through lexico-grammatical choices. With respect to the allocation of blame, the aim is to reveal what ideology is encoded in discursive patterns employed by the newspapers.

Hypothesis 1:
Newspaper discourse puts the blame for natural disasters on natural phenomena rather than social factors.

This expectation is based on the findings of previous studies revealing that newspapers tend to neglect the discussion of social, economic and political forces and focus instead on individuals (Singer and Endreny 1993; Devereux 1998; Murphy 2007).

2. Nature-culture dualism
The second goal of the research is to determine how the newspapers deal with the tension between natural disasters and the Western Enlightenment ideology of superiority of culture over nature. Do the newspapers acknowledge the tension in their representation of the events and admit that Western nature-culture dualism does not apply in the case of natural disasters (see chapter five)? In other words, do they recognize, as Hawkes contends, that "human nature is in no way separate from nature as a whole, that there are not fixed boundaries between the human and the [natural]" (2003, 184)?

Hypothesis 2:
The binary opposition between humankind and nature is reproduced in the newspaper articles on natural catastrophes.

This expectation stems from the fact that nature-culture dualism is deeply rooted in Western thinking (Hawkes 2003; Goatly 2007).

3. Dramatization
The third research goal is to examine whether the newspapers employ discursive devices that may impede a rational and an explanatory account of natural disasters and rather contribute to a dramatization and emotionalization of the portrayal of the events. Focus is also placed on an examination of the most commonly employed dramatizing devices.