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THE *NATURAL DISASTER* METAPHOR IN THE CONCEPTUALISATION OF CRISIS IN NEWS MEDIA DISCOURSE

Within the theoretical framework of Critical Metaphor Analysis (Charteris-Black, 2004, 2005, 2019; Musolff, 2004, 2006, 2016) our paper looks at how the *NATURAL DISASTER* metaphor employed in news media discourse to conceptualise four different crises (the 2008 global financial crisis, the 2016 Brexit referendum crisis, the 2015 European migrant crisis, and the ongoing COVID-19 health crisis) exhibits its remarkable capacity to not only communicate complex phenomena and their frequently extreme consequences in a more comprehensible manner to the recipients but also to reveal and shape ideological stances. Drawing on the data gathered from various British and American online news media outlets during four different time periods, each characterised by a distinctive social crisis, and using the somewhat adapted Pragglejaz (2007) metaphor identification procedure, we aim to provide insights into how the *NATURAL DISASTER* metaphor used in news discourse reveals its both ideological and rhetorical roles and its power to frame a certain topic in a desired way. This stems from its two main characteristics – first, its ability to highlight the allegedly uncontrollable nature of a crisis, and second, its power to mask the agency, both serving the purpose of holding *force majeure* responsible for the consequences of important events.

Keywords: metaphor, crisis, *NATURAL DISASTER* metaphor, news media discourse, English

1. INTRODUCTION

Metaphor is now known to be widely used as an apt communication vehicle in various types of media discourse. The remarkable capacity of metaphor to provide meaning to less known or unknown issues makes it suitable for conceptualising complex phenomena in a more comprehensible manner, the aspect heavily exploited in news media discourse. Thus Kövecses points out that a large part of the conceptualisation process in the media involves metaphor (Kövecses, 2018: 125). The prevalent use of this cognitive mechanism in the media may be attributed not only to metaphor's meaning- or sense-making role but also to its capacity to reveal and shape ideological stances (Huang & Holmgreen, 2020). Namely, conceiving of and representing reality by means of metaphors is never neutral but always involves an interplay of highlighting and masking different aspects of a concept, thus affording various inferences and evaluations. Hence metaphor is one of the most prominent rhetorical devices in media discourse, "especially when the aim is explanation or persuasion" (Semino, 2021a: 51).

In this paper, we explore the *NATURAL DISASTER* metaphor employed in news media discourse in English to communicate a range of different economic, social and political processes and crises: more specifically, we analyse and discuss the examples of the *NATURAL DISASTER* metaphor as used to conceptualise the 2008 global financial crisis, the 2015 European migrant crisis, the 2016 Brexit referendum crisis, and the COVID-19 public health crisis, an ongoing global pandemic of coronavirus disease which started in 2019 – with the aim of revealing ideological values entrenched in such metaphorical conceptualisation. Such "crisis discourse" relating to these as well as other crises has already been extensively researched (Charteris-Black, 2006, 2019, 2021; Đurović & Silaški, 2012, 2018, 2019, 2021; Musolff, 2016; Semino, 2021a, 2021b; Silaški, 2022; Silaški & Đurović, 2011, 2019a, 2019b, 2022a, 2022b). The ideological role has thus been communicated by means of *WARFARE*, *HEALTH/DISEASE*, *JOURNEY*, *NATURAL DISASTER*, and other metaphors. However, particularly pertinent to our present study is the construal of

social, economic, and political issues as unrestrained forces of nature, such as tsunamis, earthquakes, storms, etc., which enables us not only to fathom better the magnitude and significance of a certain event, but also to shift blame and hold various natural phenomena solely accountable for the havoc they wrought, thus masking social, human-made factors contributing to the outcome of such events. In this paper we aim to provide answers to the following: 1) where does the ideological power of the NATURAL FORCE metaphor come from, and 2) what purposes does the NATURAL DISASTER metaphor serve in news discourse pertaining to different social crises? We argue that the choice of metaphors used in news media discourse may have an impact on the reasoning, judgment and the way social, economic and political issues are conceived of by the readers, thus strongly advocating a view according to which metaphor has a crucial role in structuring, restructuring and shaping reality, as proposed by the Critical Metaphor Analysis proponents (Charteris-Black, 2004, 2019; Musolff, 2006, 2016; Semino, 2008).

The paper unfolds in the following way: after this Introduction, in section 2 we provide a short account of the theoretical framework our paper is guided by, Critical Metaphor Analysis. This is followed by section 3 which describes our data and method. Section 4 offers instantiations of the NATURAL DISASTER metaphor as used in the four already mentioned complex socio-economic and political contexts and processes in news media discourse. Section 5 discusses the potential of this metaphor as a framing tool in crisis discourse, while the last section 6 offers some concluding remarks.

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Critical Metaphor Analysis (CMA) (Charteris-Black, 2004, 2005, 2019; Musolff, 2004, 2006, 2016) “explores how metaphors are used to create rival, contested views of the world, ideologies” (Charteris-Black, 2019: 12). Specifically, it seeks to identify both the intentions and ideologies that underlie language use (Charteris-Black, 2005), because, according to Fairclough, “different metaphors have different ideological attachments” (Fairclough, 2001: 119). This is also pointed out in Musolff’s (2016) view on metaphors, particularly those used in political discourse, where he argues that metaphors do not only denote a particular target concept but “always have pragmatic ‘added value’, for example, to express an evaluation of the topic, to make an emotional and persuasive appeal” (Musolff, 2016: 4), and thus steer the metaphor recipients’ thinking in a desired way.

Metaphors in this paper are regarded as discursive means which aid in understanding certain social, economic and political processes. They can be referred to as ‘discourse metaphors’, which are viewed as relatively stable metaphorical projections “that function as a key framing device within a particular discourse over a certain period of time” (Zinken, Hellsten, & Nerlich, 2008: 363). These are “metaphors that are conceptually grounded but whose meaning is also shaped by their use at a given time and in the context of a debate about a certain topic” (Koteyko & Ryazanova-Clarke, 2009: 114). This view overrides a rather simplistic notion of metaphor as the mapping of ‘concrete’ source domain concepts onto ‘abstract’ target domain concepts and regards metaphor “as a discursive, dynamic tool of assimilating any target topic to a more familiar set of concepts, in order to redirect and reshape its understanding by the respective communication partners” (Musolff, 2016: 91). The understanding of what is ‘familiar’ and ‘topical’ is dependent on the socio-cultural context, “not on intrinsic conceptual properties of the metaphor” (Musolff, 2016: 91), which attests both to metaphor’s multidimensional nature and its power to frame the discourse of the given socio-cultural setting. Therefore, as CMA strives to reveal the underlying ideologies, attitudes and beliefs, it presents “a vital means of understanding more about the complex relationships between language, thought and social context” (Charteris-Black, 2004: 42).

3. DATA AND METHOD

The data sets which attest to parallels that can be drawn between the concept of catastrophic natural disasters and varied social and economic processes, the 2008 global financial crisis and the 2015 EU

migrant crisis in particular, have been used in several previous studies, such as Đurović and Silaški (2012, 2019), Silaški and Đurović (2011, 2019a). Specifically, the data were gathered from various British and American electronic political and economic news media sources (e.g. *Reuters*, *The Financial Times*, *BBC*, *The Economist*, *The Guardian*, *CNN*, *Bloomberg*, *The Independent*, *The Daily Mail*) published in the period 2008-2021. The examples of metaphorical expressions instantiating the *NATURAL DISASTER* metaphor were obtained by conducting several Google searches at different periods of time (2008-2009, 2015-2016, 2016, and 2020-2021, respectively) in which the queries were the words and expressions referring to and expected to be salient in the *NATURAL DISASTER* metaphor such as *disaster*, *catastrophe*, *hurricane*, *tsunami*, *storm*, *flood*, *earthquake*, combined with the relevant words pertaining to the four social events and their coverage in news media. The media texts obtained in this way were extracted and compiled in different four Word files, each pertaining to a specific context of use and each amounting to around 15,000 words. The texts were then read carefully in order to identify those metaphorical expressions which provided instances of the *NATURAL DISASTER* metaphor. As for the method of identifying metaphors in discourse, we recognise that in a discourse-oriented approach to the analysis of metaphors one should be more loose and liberal when establishing the presence of metaphoricity. This is especially true compared to the rather rigid and, for our qualitative analysis, perhaps not entirely suitable dictionary-based word-by-word analyses suggested both by MIP (Pragglejaz Group, 2007) and by MIPVU (Steen et al., 2010). The process, therefore, employed a somewhat adapted procedure for metaphor identification which focused on establishing the contextual meaning of the lexical units, but without consulting the dictionaries for each lexical unit (see, for example, Đurović & Silaški, 2019; Silaški & Đurović, 2019a). Following a close reading of the media texts obtained by Google searches in order to identify the linguistic metaphors which both raters agreed provided instantiations of the *NATURAL DISASTER* metaphor, we classified the selected stretches of discourse according to the sub-domains belonging to the *NATURAL DISASTER* source domain.

As may be noted, data collection covers a rather large time span; however, we believe this is not relevant for the topic in question since, as we have already stated, our main goal is to provide insights into how the *NATURAL DISASTER* metaphor used in news media discourse in English reflects its ideological and rhetorical roles and its power to frame a certain topic in a desired way. Our main focus, therefore, is on the qualitative analysis of the examples of the *NATURAL DISASTER* metaphor within the framework of Critical Metaphor Analysis as outlined above and on examining what ideological perspectives this metaphor reveals in a particular context. Hence, what is important is the context of use rather than the time frame. Also, we point out that we do not provide a corpus-based analysis of this metaphor nor do we establish absolute or relative frequencies of metaphorical expressions or metaphor density in the respective data sets, but focus primarily on the qualitative exploration of the *NATURAL DISASTER* metaphor in different media texts and contexts.

4. INSTANTIATIONS OF THE *NATURAL DISASTER* METAPHOR

As already mentioned, our analysis focuses on a range of four different contexts, processes and crises as depicted in news media discourse by means of the *NATURAL DISASTER* metaphor which we will now illustrate with a number of linguistic instantiations excerpted from our data sets.

4.1. The 2008 global financial crisis as a natural disaster

The following examples show how the natural catastrophes – violent winds, overflows of water, tectonic shifts, etc. – whose properties of being highly unforeseeable, involuntary, and changeable with regard to the source of their movement, and of being abundant and massive relating to their intensity and destructive power, map onto the concept of the 2008 global financial crisis.

1. Banks, insurers and building societies will have to dramatically overhaul how they assess their ability to weather another *financial storm* under proposals put forward by the Financial Services Authority. (*The Financial Times*, 12 Dec 2009)
2. He warned that *the local squall* in the US could easily turn into a *global tempest* with profound consequences for economic growth. (*The Financial Times*, 15 Dec 2008)
3. This statement was greeted with a certain irritation in Hungary, where many are under the impression that their economy is *underwater* because of a *tidal wave* that started from American shores. (*The Financial Times*, 11 May 2009)
4. The social *after-shocks* of this *economic earthquake* are still being felt in April. (*The Financial Times*, 17 May 2009)
5. If crisis is change's catalyst, recovery is its inhibitor. As preparations for the G20 summit get under way, finance ministers meeting in London deserve credit for averting *economic apocalypse*. (*The Financial Times*, 3 Sep 2009)

Thus, the economic crisis is structured as the general NATURAL DISASTER theme (via the *economic apocalypse* metaphorical expression), but also as more specific sub-metaphors, those of WIND (*financial storm, the local squall, a global tempest*), WATER (*be underwater, tidal wave*), EARTHQUAKE (*after-shocks, economic earthquake*).

4.2. The 2015 EU migrant crisis as a natural disaster

The complex NATURAL DISASTER metaphor, as attested by the examples [6-9], uses WATER as the most salient source domain for constructing the 2015 European migrant crisis.

6. As the Syrian army continues to fight its way through the old city of Aleppo, the tide of those fleeing for their lives has become a *raging flood, an avalanche*. (*CNN*, 8 Dec 2016)
7. A Conservative MP has referred to refugees fleeing the Middle East as a “*tsunami*” that could “*swamp Europe*”. (*The Independent*, 5 Oct 2015)
8. Forget the Greek crisis or Britain's referendum, this *tidal wave of migrants* could be the biggest threat to Europe since the war [the headline] (*The Daily Mail*, 26 Jun 2015)
9. Turkish President Tayyip Erdogan threatened in November to *flood* Europe with migrants if European Union leaders did not offer him a better deal to help manage the Middle East refugee crisis. (*Reuters*, 8 Feb 2016)

Conceiving of immigrants as a huge rush of water – *flood, avalanche, tidal wave, tsunami, inundation* – serves both to portray the scale of the whole process – the migrant crisis, and to impart extremely negative evaluation of migrants as a force beyond control. This will be further discussed in section 5.

4.3. The 2016 Brexit referendum as a natural disaster

One of the ways of representing UK's withdrawal from the EU, particularly the 2016 Brexit referendum, and the negative consequences that this process was thought to bring about, is also likened to various natural catastrophic events such as a *tsunami, a storm, or an earthquake*. This can be seen in the following examples:

10. ‘The lull before the *tsunami*’: economists on the Brexit watch data (*The Guardian*, 24 Oct 2016)
11. UK economy can weather *Brexit storm* without rate cuts, says MPC [Monetary Policy Committee] member (*The Guardian*, 22 Sep 2016)
12. *Brexit earthquake* has happened, and the rubble will take years to clear (*The Guardian*, 24 Jun 2016)
13. Britain and Brexit: the *earthquake and its aftershocks* (*The Guardian*, 28 Jun 2016)

The images of tsunamis, storms and earthquakes serve to accentuate the aspects of shock, abruptness, and intensity thus contributing to the negative portrayal of Brexit.

4.4. The COVID-19 health crisis as a natural disaster

As examples 14-18 reveal, the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic is also made more intelligible by reference to natural disaster events as the source domain, particularly those of WATER – *tidal wave, drowning, flood, avalanche, tsunami*, WIND – *hurricane*, and FIRE – *wildfire*.

14. ‘*We’re drowning*’: COVID cases *flood* hospitals in America’s heartland

After *pounding* big U.S. cities in the spring, COVID-19 now *has engulfed* rural and small-town America, seeming to *seep into* the country’s every nook and cranny. (*Reuters*, 30 Nov 2020)

15. “They are not understanding that this is *an avalanche*,” said [Dr. T. Jacob] John, who was also chairman of the Indian Government Expert Advisory Group on Polio Eradication [...]. “As every week passes, *the avalanche* is growing bigger and bigger.” (*Bloomberg*, 17 Mar 2020)

16. India Covid-19 second *wave*: ‘*A coronavirus tsunami* we had never seen before’ (*BBC*, 15 Apr 2021)

17. Like a *wildfire*, the virus relentlessly seeks out fuel (human hosts), devastating some areas while sparing others... In the coming months, US morbidity and mortality will largely depend on how much fuel *the Covid-19 wildfire* has access to. (*The Guardian*, 4 Aug 2020)

18. Epidemiologist Michael Osterholm compared a UK coronavirus variant to a “*Category 5 hurricane*” churning off the coast, saying some strains could cause a “major *surge*” in new cases in the US. (*CNN*, 4 Feb 2021)

As we will argue in section 5, comparing the coronavirus pandemic to hurricanes, tidal waves, avalanches and forest fires offers a particular window into how discourse producers deploy the power of metaphor to impact on people’s beliefs and attitudes and urge a desired course of action. In this particular context, as Semino (2021b) points out, the *NATURAL DISASTER* metaphor may serve different purposes: to convey danger and urgency, to distinguish between different phases of the pandemic, to explain how contagion happens, and perhaps the most important one, to justify measures taken by governments for reducing contagion.

5. DISCUSSION

The *NATURAL DISASTER* metaphor, as used for conceptualising different types of crises and evidenced by the metaphorical expressions excerpted from different news media in English, reveals three main purposes:

First, Lakoff and Turner (1989: 64-65) point out *the power of evaluation* as one of the possible sources of the power of metaphor, stating that “[w]e not only import entities and structure from the source domain to the target domain, we also carry over the way we evaluate the entities in the source domain” (Lakoff & Turner, 1989: 65). More specifically, according to Maalej (2007: 149), “metaphors evaluate by passing on a judgment through the framing chosen in the mapping”. Therefore, judging from the context in which they are embedded, all sub-metaphors of the overarching NATURAL DISASTER metaphor feature extremely negative values, which lies primarily in imparting the scale and destructive power of the crises. Hence the imagery of *economic apocalypse* and *financial storm, a raging flood* and *an avalanche* of migrants, Brexit *earthquake* and *eruption*, or a coronavirus *tsunami, hurricane* or *wildfire*, serve to imply the magnitude of the natural catastrophe, conveyed by the mental image of e.g. a large number of immigrants, people infected with the COVID-19 virus or a multitude of negative repercussions of the global financial crisis or Brexit. Invoking apocalyptic scenarios characterised by immense masses of water, aftershocks, tectonic shifts, etc. arouses particularly intense negative emotions such as anxiety and fear.

Instilling fear and thus obstructing appropriate action is closely related to the second rhetorical role of the NATURAL DISASTER metaphor, that of *allocating the responsibility to nature and its devastating impact*. Metaphorising the crises as an uncontrollable and unforeseeable natural disaster shifts the focus of attention away from its causes, especially “from its social and geographic source” (Chiang & Duann, 2007: 596), letting economic actors and policy makers evade responsibility they should accept and shift all the blame for the damage solely on nature. Consequently, they are presented as innocent and powerless lookers-on unable to properly prepare and respond to the impending events. Resorting to the NATURAL DISASTER metaphor hides the fact that the crises are largely the product of decisions made by governments, companies and other social and political actors. Thus conceptualising the crises “caused by humans as the outcome of natural processes” is “a type of reverse personification” (Charteris-Black, 2004: 154), which serves to veil the originators of adverse social and political events and obfuscate the doers of the action.

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Finally, *masking the agency* and depicting the crises as unavoidable natural disasters draws on the argumentation that no human being is able to control earthquakes, tsunamis, storms, or wildfires. All four socio-economic contexts illustrated in the paper are thus metaphorically portrayed as a sudden, out-of-nowhere event, which diverts people’s attention from their causes, their originators, and, most importantly, from human decisions which were supposed to be made in order to prepare for these adverse events. Opting for the NATURAL DISASTER metaphor and its sub-metaphors of WIND (*storm, tempest, hurricane*), WATER (*tsunami, tidal wave, flood*), EARTHQUAKE (*tremor, seismic activity*), or FIRE (*wildfire*), contribute to the perception of the futility of efforts on behalf of human agents to influence social and political processes in any way. The NATURAL DISASTER metaphor thus serves the purpose of holding *force majeure* responsible for the consequences of important events, a force which essentially absolves all the parties from liability in case of an extraordinary event or circumstance beyond the control of those parties. It is almost like an *Act of God* – a disembodied, externally imposed force on which human beings have no influence. This in turn helps to make “unpopular decisions more acceptable to people” as they are shown as “necessarily descending from events outside everyone’s control” (Piromalli, 2021: 1073).

However, in order to structure complex problems, metaphor reflects different aspects of problems and communicates different messages. Thus, prior experience has shown that economic, political, migrant and health crises should be observed as cyclical events, which makes them rather predictable in comparison to floods, earthquakes, volcanoes, fires. While natural disasters are “extremely difficult or even impossible to foresee because they are the products of many interdependent ‘agents’ and cascades of events in inherently unstable systems that generate large variations” (Zanini, 2009: 1), both economy and politics are human-made systems and are results of human decisions. Resorting to the NATURAL DISASTER metaphor, metaphor creators only use what are for them the most favourable aspects of this metaphor – the unknown agency, and disruptive and uncontrollable character of a particular natural disaster. At the same time, they conceal other, important implications, that some natural disasters “can

be controlled with prompt and appropriate action” and “can even be prevented, by [...], protecting the environment, and educating the citizens to behave responsibly” (Semino, 2021b: 5).

6. CONCLUSION

We hope to have demonstrated the enormous power and usefulness of the NATURAL DISASTER metaphor for structuring news media discourse pertaining to various crises. So, where does this metaphor draw its power from? Such power of the NATURAL DISASTER metaphor seems to originate from two main sources – first, its ability to highlight the allegedly uncontrollable nature of an event, and second, its power to hold *force majeure* responsible for the often severe consequences of important events.

In addition, our analysis has revealed the NATURAL DISASTER metaphor can be used for several intertwined and mutually dependent purposes in news media discourse pertaining to different crises: as an instrument of emotional, affective manipulation, by accentuating the aspects of danger, fear and uncertainty coming from various threatening and unstable periods in the economy, political life, and public health management; as a tool for channeling the general public’s perceptions and behaviour into a desired direction; as a device for strategic use in discourse, by constructing a collective illusion that economic, political, public health and other crises are products of the uncontrollable force of nature, thus emphasising its allegedly nothing-can-be-done-about-it character. The NATURAL DISASTER metaphor has thus attested that it may serve as an effective justification mechanism in crisis discourse, making authorities seem innocent and helpless as regards their responses to certain phenomena with oftentimes severe and devastating consequences.

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METAFORA PRIRODNE KATASTROFE U FUNKCIJI KONCEPTUALIZOVANJA KRIZE U DISKURSU VESTI

Rezime

Koristeći teorijski okvir kritičke analize metafora (Charteris-Black, 2004, 2005, 2019; Musolff, 2004, 2006, 2016) u radu se bavimo metaforom PRIRODNE KATASTROFE u diskursu vesti, i to u funkciji konceptualizacije četiri različite krize (svetske ekonomske krize iz 2008, migrantske krize u Evropi iz 2015, krize oko referenduma o Bregzitu 2016. i tekuće zdravstvene krize uzrokovane koronavirusom) gde ta metafora ispoljava izuzetnu sposobnost ko-

municiranja složenih pojava i njihovih ekstremnih posledica na razumljiviji način, kao i sposobnost razotkrivanja i oblikovanja ideoloških stavova. Analizu zasnivamo na korpusima prikupljenim iz nekoliko britanskih i američkih novina i časopisa tokom četiri različita krizna perioda sa ciljem da pružimo uvid u ideološke i retoričke uloge metafore *PRIRODNE KATASTROFE* i njenu moć oblikovanja određenog događaja na željeni način. Takva moć metafore *PRIRODNE KATASTROFE* proističe iz dve njene glavne osobine: prva je sposobnost isticanja tobože neobuzdane prirode krize, a druga je moć prikrivanja vršioca radnje. Obe osobine imaju svrhu da označe višu silu kao krivca za posledice važnih kriznih događaja, a zanemare značaj ljudskog faktora u procesu odlučivanja.

Ključne reči: metafora, kriza, *PRIRODNA KATASTROFA*, diskurs vesti, engleski

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