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The Politics of Nature: Constructing German Reunification During the Great Oder Flood of 1997¹

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ABSTRACT

Natural disasters like earthquakes, tornadoes, hailstorms and floods always lead to massive media coverage, as a close look in the *fait divers* of daily newspapers proves. They seem to have a short-lived but extreme effect on society as well as on the media. One point that is often neglected is the fact that disasters occur in unique socio-historical contexts which determine the patterns of interpretation. This also seems to be the case concerning the Great Oder Flood of 1997, inasmuch as the disaster occurred within the singular process of German Reunification. The Oder Flood occurred at the time Reunification was really being experienced, and therefore efforts to dam the rising waters were metaphorically interpreted, especially in the German newspapers, as the joint fight of East and West against the flood. The flood gained its political dimension particularly via different types of metaphors that blend synchronic domains of discourse. This paper investigates the metaphorical patterns underlying the news coverage of the Flood in order to trace their constitutive role in the 'news speak'. The main hypothesis is that the metaphorical discourse about the disaster and nature in general serves as a metaphorical reservoir for illustrating and legitimising the abstract political process of the German Reunification.

KEYWORDS

Germany, Oder flood 1997, mass media, language of news media, metaphors, construction of national identity

1. INTRODUCTION

During the summer of 1997 eastern parts of Germany, especially the region of the so-called Oderbruch near Frankfurt/Oder, were struck by a heavy flood. During a session about the disaster in the German Bundestag on 5 August, the minister-president of Brandenburg, Manfred Stolpe, coined the term 'Jahrtausendflut' (millennium flood). In the same session, former chancellor Helmut Kohl acknowledged that nation-wide solidarity was reuniting the country. Stolpe's notion of the 'Jahrtausendflut' was picked up by different politicians and spread by the mass media, despite the fact that the region had already been hit by a number of comparable floods since 1556. In the twentieth century, the most remarkable flood occurred two years after the end of World War Two, in 1947: a dike burst and more than 20 people lost their lives near Reitwein. High water levels are a quite normal phenomenon in this region of East Germany during spring and summer.² So what happened? In June 1997, heavy rainfalls in the mountains of the Altvatergebirge in the Czech Republic and Poland led to floods which reached the Oder and the Neiße a few days later on. With a delay of several days these floods arrived in the Polish–German Oder region and threatened the dikes and the people living behind them. The rising waters attracted the attention of the mass media. Once again, a disaster led to massive media coverage and the so-called 'silly season' was filled with daily water-level news from the Oderbruch. But the flood occurred in the unique socio-historical context of German Reunification, and in many German newspaper articles and TV programmes the Oder Flood was interpreted as the real if somewhat delayed Reunification (which had actually been politically ratified seven years earlier).

It seems that the flood opened a cultural reservoir, through which the efforts to dam the rising waters could be interpreted metaphorically as a *joint fight* against an abstract enemy, personified by the flood. In short, the natural disaster lent itself to the development of 'narratives and discourses that signify the sense of nationness'.³ In this context, language, and especially metaphors, play an essential role because they make abstract knowledge accessible and help us to categorise and order the outside world. Or, as John Berger puts it:

For an animal its natural environment and habitat are given; for man [...] reality is not given: it has to be continually sought out [...]. Events are always to hand.

But the coherence of these events – which is what we mean by reality – is an imaginative construction. Reality always lies beyond [...].⁴

Berger is trying to underline the fact that man has a kind of experiential understanding of his environment and that 'language, of course, is a tool both for talking about what is already known and for exploring the unknown'.⁵ Language is a fundamental prerequisite which forms our concepts and representations of nature and nation – it bridges the gap between both, and links the concepts in

order to generate a coherent unity. The purpose of this paper is to emphasise the influence language in the mass media may have had on conjuring up a German national identity during the disaster in 1997. The main hypothesis is that the discourse⁶ about the Oder flood served as a metaphorical reservoir for illustrating and legitimising the abstract political process of Reunification.

In the following section I shall briefly outline the discussion among linguists about the term metaphor and its dimension in discourse. After this, a small selection of paradigmatic examples from a corpus of German newspapers may give insights into the metaphorical complexity of news coverage during the flood.⁷ Finally, the linguistic perspective outlined in this paper needs integration into a more general framework for environmental research. To sum it up briefly, the subtext of my paper is a plea to acknowledge that language – and especially metaphor – plays a decisive role in the construction and understanding of environmental discourse. Metaphor is in fact ‘a principle of arrangement and diffusion of knowledge’⁸ that has to be linked with diachronic investigations in order to get vital insights into how the environment was perceived and constructed throughout history.

2. THE LINGUISTIC PERSPECTIVE ON METAPHOR

Language plays an essential role in forming our perceptions of the environment and our acting in it; it could be understood – metaphorically – as a kind of filter by which we give coherence to the apparent chaos outside, put an order on the environment and have an impact on it. ‘Language has the power to evoke images and complex ideas.’⁹ During the past 20 years, the linguistic trope metaphor has achieved special attention in linguistics because research has been able to show that most of our everyday talk is fundamentally metaphoric.¹⁰ Following the classical perspective, metaphor was long regarded as a purely rhetorical phenomenon acting at the level of words and linked only to poetic discourse or the aesthetic creativity of authors.¹¹ It was therefore not considered as referring to a linguistically describable reality. However, according to most linguistic research on metaphor,¹² it can no longer be regarded as a mere aesthetic figure in poetic discourse but must be understood as a ubiquitous phenomenon and constitutive element of cognition in everyday life as well as in expert discourse and texts.¹³ ‘Metaphor is a tool so ordinary that we use it unconsciously and automatically, with so little effort that we hardly notice it.’¹⁴

One of the basic assumptions is that man does not have direct access to abstract fields of experience or knowledge, and that metaphor is one possible mechanism of many others that generates and structures meaning in order to make abstract knowledge accessible. It is a cognitive device that produces meaning by a mapping that connects two domains, the ‘source domain’ and the ‘target domain’. ‘The essence of metaphor is understanding and experiencing

one kind of thing in terms of another.¹⁵ In short, we try to understand the abstract with the help of something we have already experienced. These basic metaphorical concepts possess a structuring force, a knowledge-generating function, and they often create networks for any kind of discourse.

Consequently, metaphors have a great impact on how our patterns of knowledge are structured and organised. Let us take a look at the variety of definitions in linguistics: 'Not only did they guide people's everyday behaviour, but they were systematised and formalised as theories and guiding principles for dealing with nature';¹⁶ they constitute the human systems of imagination;¹⁷ they form a 'system of associated common places';¹⁸ or they could be understood as idealised cognitive models¹⁹ or 'folk theories'.²⁰

Apart from the terminological and methodological differences among all the notions used above, the theories are united in two essential points. First, metaphors have a categorising force for human experience and the human perception of the world.²¹ Second, metaphors possess a specific function in the ordering and reordering of knowledge 'and thus can serve as prime targets and tools of analyses in the realm of knowledge dynamics'.²² Thus, human access to reality is deeply mediated and influenced by metaphor, which enlarges the natural ecosystem with cultural aspects: the natural and the cultural ecosystems are blended together into a Nature–Culture ecosystem in which metaphor (and language in general) is the 'missing link'²³ between both. These considerations lead us deep into the well-known dichotomy of nature and culture. Nature and culture are deeply interwoven by metaphor, through which they become a kind of mixture or hybrid.²⁴

Metaphor is a linguistic trope which raises questions about language and reality as well as questions concerning the framework of language and power.²⁵ The reality of ideologies²⁶ consists of metaphors through which these ideologies may live. This means that the language of news media does not take a neutral position: on the contrary, it frames²⁷ disaster in a special way which is deeply influenced by the prevailing political context. 'Language and the world can be regarded as mutually interrelated',²⁸ and the mass media are one discursive channel to connect and structure them. The next section will give a brief introduction into the role of metaphors in mass media.

3. METAPHORS AND MEDIA DISCOURSE

Language is not merely an object, it is also speech in an unique context under unique conditions.²⁹ Projected on the next higher level, all these kinds of linguistic actions represent a structure, i.e. a sum of speech acts, which is directed towards or considered relevant for a subject; and this creates a domain of discourse that undergoes a permanent change. So, discourse is more than just language, it is a kind of social practice which consists of language, contextual

aspects, rules, preferences, etc. In this context metaphors play an essential role because they create changing networks of knowledge which represent modes of perception, thinking and acting.³⁰ In short, our world-view is metaphoric and the 'stabilisation of meaning is effectuated by the contexts, the discourses, that is, in which those terms appear'.³¹

Consequently metaphor possesses a structuring force; it is a particle which runs through all levels of language and discourse. But the question remains how both levels, the level of the single word and the level of discourse, can be analytically connected. An onomasiological approach³² seems to be the most rewarding method because it investigates the way in which terms – in this case metaphors – designate, categorise and blend domains of discourse. In other words, the symbolic resources, by which man acts on things, become apparent.

This article investigates the media discourse about the Oder flood, and here the notion of discourse is limited to the textual representation of language by which the disaster is framed in the mass media. But nonetheless, it is a discursive practice which is 'constitutive in both conventional and creative ways: it contributes to reproducing society (social identities, social relationships, systems of knowledge and belief) as it is, yet also contributes to transforming society'.³³ Therefore, media discourse is a kind of acting on things, and it offers a variety of possible interpretations of nature, too. Besides the main medium of language, maps and also photographs are important means of information. Their function could be understood in terms of a three-dimensional relationship which consists of information, education and certainly entertainment.³⁴ Journalists find a kind of raw material already mediated by agencies or collected by themselves during their fieldwork, and this material has to be formatted for the reader. Different parts from it have to be evaluated and rearranged in order to construct a newsworthy article for the next issue.³⁵ News is in fact a product at the end of a complex process of construction: it is 'a subjective construction which is put together by people who themselves are influenced by their own perceptions of social reality. It is this reality which is constructed through the product'.³⁶

So the mass media rearrange and construct newsworthy items like risks and disasters, and this might also be the reason why we have so many environmental realities and mediated natures, because they are 'shaped by rhetorical constructs like photography, industry, advertising, and aesthetics [...]. Today nature is filmed, pictured, written, and talked about everywhere'.³⁷ To cut a long story short, the different media discourses construct a heterogeneity of 'contested natures'.³⁸ Special linguistic structures like metaphors and in fact pictures frame the subject and highlight certain aspects, while they hide others. So the media discourse offers a selective perspective on certain aspects because 'journalists, in particular, are charged with the responsibility of imposing meaning upon uncertainties [...]'.³⁹ All the aspects mentioned create a discourse that acts on things, or in other words: 'discourse and practices [...] accomplish the world for us'.⁴⁰ And it is of common interest to get '[...] vital insights into how the media

accounts construct preferred definitions of environmental realities'.⁴¹ The next section therefore offers a selection and a interpretation of metaphors used in German newspapers during the Oder flood. The examples are mostly taken from daily newspapers published during the summer of 1997.

4. FRAMING THE ODER FLOOD: METAPHORS AT WORK

Metaphors are a ubiquitous phenomenon in so-called 'news speak', irrespective of the facts that are described or the column in which the article appears. A close look at the newspaper coverage during the Oder flood in 1997 shows clearly that personifications, for instance, play a central role in understanding what happened.⁴² Thus, the river is metaphorically conceptualised as a kind of being or person which is acting intentionally, as the following example shows:

Example 1:

'Nun gehört es zum Wesen der meisten Flüsse, daß ihr Wasserstand im Wechsel der Jahreszeiten schwankt. Manche Flüsse trocknen zeitweise aus, andere treten bei Hochwasser über die Ufer.' (Die Welt, 29.7.1997)

(It belongs to the nature of most rivers that their level of water changes during the seasons. Some rivers dry up and others trespass beyond the bank when their waters are high.)

Here, rivers are conceptualised as beings or creatures that can control their behaviour – an aspect which could only be metaphorically attributed to them, because in western culture rivers are not in fact beings or creatures. But if we think about the fact that in antiquity gods and personifications of rivers were important and their statues were honoured and highly respected,⁴³ we find at least a historical reference to the practise of personification. The German verb *übertreten* (step across) connotes in this context an ongoing and slow motion which, however, is not as threatening as in the following example:

Example 2:

Unvermindert *drückt die Oder auf die Deiche.* (Tageszeitung 1.8.1997, Headline)

(The Oder is pressing on the dikes with undiminished force)

Intentional actions can be expressed by different verbs. The next quote conceptualises the flooding as the victory of the river in an old fight with its opponent, the dike:

Example 3:

Zweihundertfünfzig Jahre nach den ersten Eindeichungsversuchen im Oderbruch *scheint sich der Fluß sein zwangsweise abgetretenes Land mit aller Macht zurückerobern zu wollen.* (Die Welt, 28.7.1997)

(Two hundred and fifty years after the first steps towards building dikes in the Oderbruch, the river seems to reconquer the land taken away from it.)

The Verb *zurückerobern* (reconquer) makes reference to an implicit war scenario: man (or his work – the dike) and the river seem to have been at war for more than 250 years. The power and intensity with which the river is fighting against man is often expressed with compounds like *Wassermassen* (masses of water).

Example 4:

Noch *lassen die Wassermassen der Oder weder Hilfsmannschaften noch den Brandenburger Landespolitikern kaum eine Atempause.* (Die Welt, 28.7.1997)

(The masses of water give no breather to the troop of helpers or the local politicians of Brandenburg.)

In this example, the threat is impressively described by the noun *Atempause* (breather): The essential action of breathing seems to be hardly possible for the people engaged in securing the dykes. In the following more elaborate and creative example the river is compared to an alligator:

Example 5:

Zäh und glatt fließt die Oder mit gespenstischer Lautlosigkeit. *Wie ein lauerner Alligator schiebt sie sich braun und massig die deutsch-polnische Grenze entlang.* (Tageszeitung, 18.7.1997)

(The Oder is running glutinously and eerily without any sound, moving its brown masses along the German-Polish frontier like a lurking alligator.)

The river becomes a threatening animal. This image is a very common one, which draws on the cultural experiences we all have from films in TV programmes. The narration opens on a very calm if sinister scenario by the expression *gespenstische Lautlosigkeit* (running glutinously and without any sound). One might see the alligator swimming in the water with just its eyes and nose sneaking out of the water. It is waiting for prey – the dike – and the adjectives *braun* and *massig* (moving its brown masses) seem to fit well in this scenario. Threat and danger seem to be the most obvious characteristics here.

As we have seen in the preceding examples, water is metaphorically conceived as a wild beast or a kind of threatening and acting being to which dangerous qualities can be ascribed. This seems to be the way by which another

scenario, the scenario of a fight, can be established: man and river become opponents. As we see in the following examples, the idea of a fight against the enemy river appears almost in every newspaper.

Example 6:

Verzweifelter Kampf um die Deiche (Handelsblatt, 1.8.1997)

(Desperate fight for the dikes)

Example 7:

Verzweifelter Kampf um das Oderbruch (Die Welt, 1.8.1997)

(Desperate fight for the Oderbruch)

Example 8:

Dramatischer Kampf um Deich am Oderbruch (Süddeutsche Zeitung, 1.8.1997)

(Dramatic fight for dike in the Oderbruch)

Example 9:

Im Kampf gegen das Hochwasser [...] (Die Welt, 4.8.1997)

(Fighting against the flood)

Example 10:

Im Kampf gegen die Wassermassen (TAZ, 10.8.1997, headline)

(Fighting against the masses of water)

The metaphor of a fight seems to be a relevant and conventionalised semantic notion since it allows nature to be viewed as a living being that can be fought against.⁴⁴ Nature, or more precisely the water, is implicitly personified as an enemy. The scenario that is established implies two entities who fight for something (in the first three examples, for the dike) by using their force against one another. In example 9 the opponent is clearly mentioned as the flood and the fight is qualified by the adjectives ‘desperate’ and ‘dramatic’, whereas in example 10 an accent is put on the masses or the weight of water that man has to fight against. But the metaphor of fight also opens the way to metaphors of war by which the fight between man and nature can be understood in a more differentiated and subtle way – flood narratives are often framed in military terms, due to the scale of threat.⁴⁵ Consequently, war with nature becomes a battle, as in the following quotes:

Example 11:

Materialschlacht der Superlative gegen das Hochwasser (Die Welt, 11.8.1997)

(Superlative material battle against the flood)

Example 12:

Eine *Materialschlacht* ohnegleichen: Bilanz der Katastrophe (Süddeutsche Zeitung, 11.8.1997)

(Unparalleled material battle: Taking stock of the disaster)

The connotation in this context is evident: the material is sandbags and not human lives, – more than 7 million sandbags were prepared, which means that about 150,000 tons of sand were put into them to dam the rising waters. But the metaphor *Materialschlacht* (material battle) seems a bit strange because it might remind us of great battles like *Stalingrad* or the *Seelower Höhen* near the Oderbruch⁴⁶ – in the present context it makes reference to a more general type of war which is conducted with high material and technological input to sustain the defence against the rising waters. Once opened, the war scenario seems to be an appropriate way of describing the conflict going on between man and the river. Thus, the helicopters that transported reinforcements turn into sandbag-bombers:

Example 13:

Sandsack-Bomber: Aus der Luft wurde der Nachschub für die Verstärkung der Deiche bei Hohenwutzen im Oderbruch herbeigeschafft. (Süddeutsche Zeitung, 30.7.1997)

(Sandbag-Bomber: The reinforcements to strengthen the dikes near Hohenwutzen in the Oderbruch were transported through the air.)

And other parts of the *Bundeswehr* (the German Army) were metaphorically integrated into this war scenario too:

Example 14:

Sie sind mit *Schaufeln bewaffnet*, ihr *Schlachtfeld* ist ein schmaler Streifen zwischen Schwedt und Eisenhüttenstadt, ihr *Feind ist unberechenbar*. Er greift *auf ganzer Linie an*, immer wieder, und wenn er der *Sandsack-Infanterie ein weiteres Stück entreißen will, kommen die Bomber*. (Der Stern, 7.8.1997)

(They [the soldiers, M.D.] are armed with shovels, their battlefield is a small area between Schwedt and Eisenhüttenstadt, their enemy is unpredictable. He attacks the sandbag-infantry all along the line and whenever he seems to be winning territory, the bombers [the sandbag bombers] do their job.)

All parts of the *Bundeswehr* seem to be engaged in the battle. Shovels become arms; the space between land and water is the front line where war between the unpredictable waters and the *Sandsack-Infanterie* takes place; and help comes from above, from the *Sandsack-Bomber*. A more elaborated war scenario is hardly possible!

In times of war tactics are very important. You lose positions, as in the following example where the masses of water break the dike and the people give up in order to concentrate their defence on intact dikes:

Example 15:

Schließlich wurde der Kampf aufgegeben. [...] alle *Kräfte würden nun auf die Verteidigung* der noch intakten Deiche in den anderen Hochwassergebieten gerichtet. (Süddeutsche Zeitung, 24.7.1997)

(Finally, they stopped the fight. [...] all forces were now to be directed to the defence of the intact dikes in the other areas threatened by the flood.)

You have weak positions or areas where the enemy might attack, as in the next example where the threatened dike is compared to Achilles' heel:

Example 16:

Der *Oderdeich bei Hohenwutzen erweist sich immer mehr als Achillesferse* des gesamten Hochwasserschutzsystems. (Süddeutsche Zeitung, 30.7.1997)

(The dike near Hohenwutzen is more and more like Achilles' heel in the whole flood-prevention-system)

The river seems to have intentions or to pursue certain tactics, as in the following example where it seems to wait for the best moment for a second attack:

Example 17:

Bis Freitag *hat der Fluß mit dem zweiten Angriff gewartet*. (Frankfurter Rundschau, 26.7.1997)

(The river waited until Friday to start its second attack)

And of course besides water the river possesses its own weapons like torpedo-tree-trunks which threaten the dikes:

Example 18:

Torpedo-Baumstämme bedrohen die Deiche. (Der Stern, 7.8.1997)

(Torpedo tree-trunks threaten the dikes)



FIGURE 1. Map taken from *Der Stern*, 7 August 1997

Example 19:

Neue Gefahr droht durch vollgesogene Baumstämme aus den polnischen Hochwassergebieten. Sie treiben mit hoher Geschwindigkeit durch das Wasser. Nach Einschätzung des Technischen Hilfswerks können sie ‘wie Torpedos die aufgeweichten *Deiche rammen*’. (Die Welt, 2.8.1997)

(A new danger comes from tree trunks from the drowned Polish areas floating fast up/down the river. According to the expertise of the *Technische Hilfswerk*, they could ram the soaked dykes like torpedos.)

These few examples taken from a much bigger sample of collected quotes may show how the flood was conceptualised in terms of fight and war, which consequently opened the scenario of a battle – compare the map taken from the magazine *Der Stern* (Figure 1), which only shows positions taken by the *Bundeswehr*, other relief actions supported by the *Technische Hilfswerk* (German Society for Technical Support and Disaster Prevention) or the *Deutsche Rotes Kreuz* (German Red Cross) do not appear.

But the battle was a special one which was fought by the *Bundeswehr* and by the people. It was framed in media discourse as a joint and reunited fight.

Example 20:

Vereint hinterm Deich (Hamburger Abendblatt, 6.8.1997)

((Re)united behind the dike)

Example 20 refers not only to the united forces to fight against the flood. In this special context, it refers to the *reunited* German forces. A comparable accent can also be found in the following examples:

Example 21:

Alle stemmen sich gegen die Flut (Hamburger Abendblatt, 2.8.1997)

(Everybody is bracing themselves against the flood)

Example 22:

Der Kampf gegen das Wasser eint und weist jeden an seinen Platz. (Frankfurter Rundschau, 21.7.1997)

(The fight against the water unites and tells each person where he belongs)

We find a reading here that makes reference not only to the soldiers and the population carrying sandbags along the Oderbruch; emphasis is also implicitly put on the fact that Germans from east and west fought together against the flood with sandbags and donations.⁴⁷ This culminated in the following metaphor from the former German President Roman Herzog during a visit in Hohenwutzen:

Example 23:

Für Präsident Herzog wirkt das Hochwasser wie ein *Bindemittel* (Frankfurter Rundschau, 8.8.1997)

(For President Herzog the flood works like a great binding agent)

In this example, the flood is conceptualised as a catalyst that can bring on the Reunification process. The people from East and West Germany are therefore indirectly metaphorised as two substances which, through their joint fight against the flood, are about to merge into a single substance.

Likewise, water seems to possess a kind of cathartic force, as in the following quote:

Example 24:

Als im Jahr sieben nach der Einheit die Oder über die Ufer trat gab es keine 'Wessis' und 'Ossis' mehr. *Die Unterschiede waren weggespült.* (Die Welt, 14.8.1997)

(During year seven after the Reunification when the Oder crossed the bank the differences between people from the West and from the East did not exist any longer. The differences were washed away.)

And at the heart of the process of learning from and knowing each other lies the knowledge about a reunited flood-experience:

Example 25:

Wobei den Menschen in den neuen Ländern Veränderungen leichter fallen als manchen reformfreundigen West-Bürgern, die noch nicht erkannt haben, daß auch bei ihnen auf Dauer nichts so bleiben wird wie es war, und daß auch sie sich verändern müssen. Doch vielleicht haben die Menschen aus der *gemeinsamen Flut-Erfahrung* gelernt. (Die Welt, 14.8.1997)

(Most of the people in the *neue Länder* (new federal states) will not have such problems with the changes as the people from the West, who do not yet recognise that nothing will last as it was and that they will have to change. But maybe they have learned from their flood-experience.)

And for the *Bundeswehr*, too, the battle against the flood had positive consequences in times of renascent racism:

Example 26:

Die *Bundeswehr schwimmt auf einer Woge von Zustimmung.* Nach ihrem erfolgreichen Einsatz gegen das Hochwasser der Oder ist das verständlich. (Die Welt, 28.8.1997)

(The *Bundeswehr* is swimming/surfing on a wave of approval. This is understandable after its successful campaign against the Oder flood.)

This seems to be an essential effect the flood had on the image of the *Bundeswehr* and it helped the armed forces to find a new image as an intervention army within NATO.

There are of course many other aspects that should be treated here but emphasis has to be put on the metaphorical construction of the German Reunification in the context of the flood. Other domains of discourse, like questions concerning the interplay of climate change, deforestation and the conservation of nature in the Oderbruch, have been left aside. These are also very important areas which are often linked to the deluge metaphor, as the last quote exemplifies:

Example 27:

Sintflut und Menschenwerk (Frankfurter Rundschau, 25.7.1997)

(Deluge and human impact)

As we have seen, metaphors play an essential role in the German newspaper articles published during the Oder flood in 1997. The high presence of metaphors of fighting in the mass media prepared a background on which a much more elaborated form of war metaphors generated a war scenario or a metaphorically structured schema of 'war with nature'. Of course man has never been at war with nature because nature does not act intentionally – according to our western understanding of it! But the metaphorical construction helps the human being to react and to act more or less adequately in times of danger. The frequent and stereotyped use of fighting and war metaphors in the newspapers and TV programmes also generated a feeling of a national threat which created a discourse of war. This discourse was in fact a metaphorical blend that was combined with the actual context, i.e. the German Reunification.

4. THE POLITICS OF NATURE: NATION, NARRATION AND DISASTER

Natural disasters always lead to massive media coverage because of their spectacular and dramatic potential for the news. In this domain of discourse metaphors play an essential role because they frame the unknown by means of aspects that are already known. But news coverage shows more, it is a phenomenon that in fact makes reference to urgent social questions. In short, the disaster is framed or integrated into a schema of perception by which society constitutes and reorganises its own structure.⁴⁸ In the present context, the question concerning the German Reunification was the most prominent one and the disaster

Donnerstag, 7. August 1997

Sie schleppten zusammen Sandsäcke – jetzt sind sie ein Paar

VERLIEBT
Dem Obergefreiten Michael Ritter und der Schülerin Katrin Schuster hat der Deich-Einsatz das große Glück gebracht.



Liebe auf dem Deich

Frankfurt/Oder – Die größte Flutgefahr an der Oder ist vorüber, die ersten Bundeswehrsoldaten ziehen ab. Doch der Obergefreite Michael Ritter möchte am liebsten dableiben – er hat sich beim Katastropheneinsatz verliebt.

Katrin Schuster heißt die blonde Schülerin, die das Herz des Soldaten aus Potsdam erobert hat. Kennengelernt haben sich die beiden am Deich, beim Sandsackschleppen. Doch jetzt muß Michael sich von seiner Freundin trennen – seine Kompanie wird verlegt. „Wir sehen uns wieder“, sagt er tapfer zum Abschied.

Eine Oder-Liebe. Die hält bestimmt. So fest wie die Deiche, die die beiden zusammen mit tausenden von anderen Helfern gebaut haben. Auch gestern entspannte sich die Situation weiter, die Pegel sanken, es gab nur zwei kleine Deichrisse, die schnell unter Kontrolle waren.

Bonn stellte zur Bekämpfung des Hochwassers und Beseitigung der Flutschäden „erstmal“ 500 Millionen Mark zur Verfügung. Damit werden vor allem die Deiche ausgebessert, Straßen erneuert und die öffentliche Infrastruktur wieder hergestellt. Für die Schäden an ihren Häusern, Autos und Gärten, müssen die Menschen an der Oder zum großen Teil selbst aufkommen. hwj/sam

FIGURE 2. Photograph from *Hamburger Morgenpost*, 7 August 1997.

served as a reservoir for constituting the image of a reunited Germany. Indeed, the Germans successfully defended the land which Friedrich II took away from the Oder 250 years before,⁴⁹ and during the disaster a myth of foundation was born: the fight with the rising waters was combined in the media with the search for a reunited national identity. One might therefore conclude that natural disasters help constitute societies and nations, they are an essential part of their narratives. During the Oder Flood many East and West Germans fell in love while carrying sandbags – like the couple illustrated above (Figure 2); this is love at first dike. The Oder helped the Germans to strengthen – for a short period of time – their identity or, to put it ironically following the slogans of the Monday demonstrations in the former German Democratic Republic (GDR), ‘We are the people, we are the dike!’⁵⁰

NOTES

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² Müller 1997, 44–8.

³ Bahbah 1990, 2.

⁴ Berger 1985, 278–9.

⁵ Harré, Brockmeier and Mühlhäusler 1999, 91.

⁶ For my notion of discourse see section 3.

⁷ All examples have been taken from CD-Rom or online archives of the following newspapers: *Hamburger Abendblatt*, *Frankfurter Rundschau*, *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, *Die Welt*, *TAZ*, *Das Handelsblatt*, *Die Zeit* and *Der Stern*.

⁸ Maasen and Weingart 2001, 21.

⁹ Chawla 2001, 115.

¹⁰ Due to the seminal work of the linguist George Lakoff and the philosopher Mark Johnson (Lakoff and Johnson 1980) the discussion about metaphor has been taken up again. The main point in the works of Lakoff and Johnson and their followers is that metaphor is a fundamental cognitive tool by which man generates meaning and experiences the world, it is a bridge between the inside and the outside world. For a complex discussion of the different dimensions of metaphor see also Ortony 1993 and the bibliographies provided by Noppen, de Knop and Jongen 1985 and Noppen and Hols 1990.

¹¹ The classical view represents the so-called comparison model of metaphor. Aristotle and Quintilian are the most prominent representatives.

¹² Ortony 1993.

¹³ Weinrich 1976.

¹⁴ Lakoff and Turner 1989, XI.

¹⁵ Lakoff and Johnson 1980, 5.

¹⁶ Harré, Brockmeier and Mühlhäusler 1999, 93.

¹⁷ Haefliger 1996, Weinrich 1976.

- ¹⁸ Black 1962, 40.
- ¹⁹ Lakoff 1987.
- ²⁰ Holland and Quinn 1987.
- ²¹ Finke 2001, 88.
- ²² Maasen and Weingart 2001, 37.
- ²³ Finke 1996, 39.
- ²⁴ Latour 1998, 18–21.
- ²⁵ Fairclough 1989.
- ²⁶ Volosinov 1975, 54.
- ²⁷ Goffman 1996.
- ²⁸ Trampe 2001, 233.
- ²⁹ Austin 1969. See also Mühlhäusler 2001, 163, who pledges for an interactionist view of language and who categorises the European languages as object-dominated:
 ‘Many standard European languages can be regarded as object-dominated because of their strong tendency to covert processural verbs into abstract, object-like nouns. For example, the subject matter of linguistics is not perceived as the activity of speaking but as an object termed “language”. One of the consequences for this area of enquiry is that, while speaking always involves people, and a spatial, temporal situation, the abstract term language suggests an object that can be analysed as something self-contained.’
- ³⁰ Maasen and Weingart 2001, 9.
- ³¹ *Ibid.*, 16.
- ³² Jäkel 1997, 141–56. The onomasiological approach investigates the diversity of linguistic expressions or lexemes used to conceptualise a domain of discourse or an abstract subject. In the present context the inquiry focuses on metaphors by which the abstract domain ‘natural disaster’ is rendered cognitively accessible via different types of metaphors.
- ³³ Fairclough 1993, 65.
- ³⁴ Meunier 1994, 57.
- ³⁵ Campbell 1999, 62.
- ³⁶ Campbell 1999, 159.
- ³⁷ Wilson 1991, 12.
- ³⁸ Macnaghten and Urry 1998.
- ³⁹ Allan, Adam and Carter 2000, 12.
- ⁴⁰ Maasen and Weingart 2001, 34.
- ⁴¹ Allan, Adam and Carter 2000, 2.
- ⁴² Lakoff and Turner 1989, 72–80.
- ⁴³ Falter 1999.
- ⁴⁴ Linguists also talk of dead metaphors (see Traugott 1985). This means that a metaphor has found its way into the lexis of a language and is no longer perceived as a linguistic trope.
- ⁴⁵ See also Doering and Langenberg 2001, 53–8.
- ⁴⁶ During World War II the last heavy battle between the Wehrmacht and the Russian army took place near the Seelower Höhen in the Oderbruch. The Russian army won (with heavy losses) and was afterwards able to advance directly to Berlin.
- ⁴⁷ During the flood *Oderflut* Galas were held on several TV programmes. The money collected there was transferred to the administration. This led to a *Spendenflut* (flood of

donations), which was followed by severe organisational problems concerning the transfer of money to the people who needed it.

⁴⁸ Pfister and Brändli 1999, 298.

⁴⁹ From 1747 to 1753 the landscape of the Nieder-Oderbruch underwent a total change because of the activities of cultivation directed by Friedrich II. Formally known as a swamp-land inhabited by the Wenden and yearly hit by river floods, the Bruch was drained and became a landscape where farmers from all over the country, Poland and Austria settled. More than 1250 families 'colonised' the Nieder-Oderbruch and more than 40 new villages were founded. See Kaup 1994; Herrmann and Kaup 1997.

⁵⁰ During the demonstrations against the former regime of the GDR, the people shouted 'Wir sind das Volk' (we are the people). This was ironically turned into 'Wir sind der Deich' (We are the dike) by Johannes Wilms in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* (5 August 1997).

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