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Common ground for understanding vs. common language: heteroglossia in the context of natural disasters

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Disasters and their impact have traditionally been discussed by non-affected people, while the experiences of affected people are rarely heard, precluding the possibility of constructing a common ground for understanding. This paper will present the Bakhtinian concept of heteroglossia as the theoretical assumption underpinning a study aiming to construct narratives of daily life experiences after a disaster.

Different social actors occupy different vantage points and thus their experiences, and their interpretations of these, vary. Occupation, i.e. participation in daily life, is a right but access to it is often compromised, as for example after natural disasters. Natural disasters can be conceptualised as the dynamic interaction of natural hazards with underlying vulnerabilities of a population. Disasters impact on the life of individuals and communities but their effect has traditionally been discussed by non-affected people. The experiences of affected people are rarely heard, precluding the possibility of constructing a common ground for understanding.

To illustrate the multifactorial discourse arising from the different positions of each social actor, the Bakhtinian concept of heteroglossia will be used. Heteroglossia refers to the multiple discourses operative in every society which regulate access to resources, including power and representation. The various vantage points people occupy, their different perspectives and the different "languages" they speak are intertwined in relationships of power.

The construction of a common language does not eradicate the possibility of misinterpretation, as it perpetuates power differentials. Acknowledging heteroglossia enables us to accept reality's fragmented nature and recognize the multiple semantic networks within which individual experiences are grounded. The importance of narratives is that by giving lives a sense of continuity and meaning they make them legible, and thus they enable people to communicate towards a negotiated common understanding.