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Strategic ambiguity in the messages: A pragmatic analysis of press releases on power cuts

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1. Introduction

This study analyzes press releases produced by two Japanese electric utilities firms to call for power cuts in the summer, aiming to raise awareness of the strategic ambiguity in their messages and the purposes it serves.

After the 2011 Tohoku earthquake, nuclear reactors all over Japan were shut down, and the government called for a cut in utility service levels in the respective electric utilities companies' service areas. Since then, requests for power-conserving behavior on the part of the public have been repeatedly released by the electric utilities, while the government has announced that it has regained control of the plant's overheating reactors, and a new administration has implemented a policy that is once again dependent on atomic energy.

Based on the insights drawn from the field of critical discourse analysis (CDA) that are advocated in Fairclough (2003), this study examines the press releases from the two electric utilities in terms of their assumptions, the social identities and relations with customers they reflect. Then we will see what messages are included in their assertions on power saving, and what corporate images are presented in the texts.

2. Methodology

The aims of CDA are to systematically explore relationships between discursive practices, discursive events and texts on the one hand, and wider social and cultural structures, relations and processes on the other, in order to investigate how the practices, events and texts arise and are ideologically

shaped (Fairclough 2013 [1993]: 45). Discursive events and texts are produced not by the application of factors of abstract language structure, a part of social and cultural structures, but are instead “mediated” by social practice (Fairclough 2003:24).

Social practice has an organization composed of linguistic elements of networks called orders of discourse, a term that refers to the totality of discursive practices of an institution, and relationships between them (Fairclough 2013 [1993]: 48). That is, orders of discourse are the sum of factors that produces and shapes text by making necessary choices in vocabulary, grammar, and content. Among various elements of orders of discourse, Fairclough (2003: 26) focuses on discourses, genres and styles, which respectively mean, in brief, the social practice of “ways of acting”, “ways of representing” and “ways of being.” The present study focuses on discourses; what is represented and in what way.

Fairclough defines discourses in more detail as “ways of representing aspects, such as processing, relating and structuring of the material world, the mental world of thoughts, feelings, beliefs and the social world” (Fairclough 2003:124). It is natural that various aspects of the world are represented differently so different discourses should be interpreted, which presents different perspectives and different relations people have towards the world and with each other.

The present study works with not types of discourses but elements of discourses, such as assumption, representations of social actors and representations of time and place to understand people’s different perspectives and relations (Fairclough 2003:134). These are considered in turn below.

Fairclough defines the term “assumption” such that it “includes types of implicitness such as presuppositions, logical implications or entailments, and implicature” (Fairclough 2003: 40). He divides assumption into three types (Fairclough 2003: 55): Existential assumptions are those about what

exists, propositional assumptions are those about what is or can be or will be the case, and value assumptions are those about what is good or desirable. Based on Fairclough's assertion that these three types of assumptions are "discourse-specific" (Fairclough 2003: 58), we will analyze and specify manifestations of each of them in the present data.

Van Leeuwen (2013 [2008]: 291) states that social actors are "participants of social practice represented in discourse," categorizing them in minute and linguistically various ways. The present study, utilizing Fairclough (2003)'s divisions, examines social actors in several ways, such as, whether they are included in representations of events and what role they are given (for example, "activated" or "passivated"; Fairclough 2003: 222).

Representations of time and place are separate into representations of location (e.g., at 9 p.m., in Lancaster) and representations of extent (duration, distance; e.g., for 3 hours, for 3miles). Factors influencing the form of representations of time are the tense and aspect of verbs, specifically the distinctions between progressive and non-progressive and between perfect and non-perfect. Adverbials, conjunctions, and prepositions can also mark temporal as well as spatial relations (Fairclough 2003:151).

Fairclough (2003) analyzes one of his data in terms of the "local" space-time of the workplace and the "global" space-time of management. The space-time of the workplace is constructed as relationship between the past, present, and future. In contrast, the "global" space-time of management, realized using the simple present tense, represents an undelimited timespan, in other words, the temporal universality of management, which is then understood to be represented as unchangeably right, or not influenced by change in (progression of) time (Fairclough 2003:151-152).

Utilizing these notions, we will examine press releases related to energy saving produced by the Kansai Electric Power Company (KEPCO) and the Tokyo Electric Power Company (TEPCO) in 2011 and 2012. The goal is to clarify what factors weigh heavily and what are naturalized in requests for

customers to save energy, what identities are assigned to the electric utilities and their customers, what are their relations, and how their corporate images are constructed.

3. Data

The present data are press releases put out by KEPCO in 2011(June, 10) and 2012 (May, 19) both entitled *Konka no jukyuu mitooshi to setsuden no onegai ni tsuite* (Forecast of power demand and supply, and a request for power consumption cuts in summer in 2011/2012), I have also analyzed press releases from TEPCO in 2011(April, 8) entitled *Keikaku teiden no gensoku fujisshi to konka ni muketa jukyuu taisaku ni tsuite* (Non-implementation in principle of the scheduled blackout and measures to cope with power demand and supply for summer in 2011), and 2012 (May, 18) *Heisei 24nendo kaki no jukyuu mitooshi ni tsuite* (Forecast of power demand and supply for summer in 2012). Below, the original Japanese data (transcribed into roman letters) are given in italics, followed by the corresponding English translations within parentheses.¹

4. Analysis

4.1 Analysis of assumptions

From the data, we identified several existential assumptions about nuclear power plants as source of power, and also some propositional assumptions about the status of the energy supply.

<Datum 1>

Genzai teiki kensachuu no genshiryoku hatsudensho ga saikadou dekizu, konomama teishi ga nagabiita baai, juubunna kyoukyuuryoku o kakuhu dekizu, denryoku jukyuu ha kiwamete kibishii jyoukyou to narimasu.

¹ Translations of the press release titles and texts were done by the present researcher.

(If reopening of the nuclear power plants under periodical check is not possible and their suspension is prolonged, supply of electricity will not be enough, leading to a difficult situation in adjusting supply to demand.) (KEPCO 2011)

Here we can see the existential assumption that there is a choice regarding whether to reopen the nuclear power plants. Further, we can identify the propositional assumptions that 1) securing an adequate supply of electricity is essential and 2) the suspension of the nuclear power plants is not an ordinary situation: this latter assumption is triggered by the word *nagabiita* ‘prolonged’.

We also find some existential assumptions regarding alternative measures for power supply (that is, those other than nuclear power generation). Specifically, the electric utility providers argue that there will be a serious energy shortage if nuclear power cannot be exploited (and thus, implicitly, if the only measures relied upon are alternative measures); this is accompanied by a propositional assumption about their responsibility to customers to secure an adequate energy supply.

< Datum 2 >

Genjiten deha jyouki no kyoukyuuryoku kakuhosaku o subete jishishitemo, nao jukyuu baransu ga kakuho dekinai mitooshi no tame, taihen moushiwake gozaimasen ga, okyakusama ni okaremashite ha kaki ni okeru setsuden taisaku he no gokyouryoku o onegai itashimasu.

(Currently even if we take the above measures to secure enough electricity, we still anticipate imbalance between supply and demand of electricity. We are very sorry, but we would like to ask our customers to cooperate in saving energy in summer time.) (TEPCO 2011)

Here, we first see the existential assumption that there actually are practical measures to be taken to secure the electricity supply and that the electric company has the intention of taking them. In fact the company expresses in the omitted section just prior to this the idea that reopening thermal power generation and utilization of private power-generation facilities can be considered. That is to say, the company is expressing its willingness to make the utmost effort to avoid an energy shortage. However, it is also pessimistic about the odds of balancing energy supply with demand, revealing a propositional assumption that the future demand for electricity will largely exceed the expected supply. Another assumption is triggered by *taihen moushiwake gozaimasen* (we are very sorry), namely the propositional assumption that the company should supply their customers with enough electricity, complying with their requests or needs. Since the company cannot perform this duty, they apologize.

On the basis of the assumptions identified above, we can understand the company's logic that the demand for electricity is likely to exceed the achievable supply in spite of their resorting to other sources, and also their reason for apologizing for their inability to meet demand and, given the non-availability of nuclear-power, for first looking for ways to reducing energy consumption.

The necessity of nuclear power plants is again taken for granted as part of the existential assumption regarding the decision to restart nuclear production: further, the report on the outlook shows another propositional assumption.

< Datum 3 >

Tousha ha koremade kono natsu no kyoukyuuryoku ni saidaigen no doryoku o tsukushitekimashita ga, Ooi hatsudensho 3, 4gouki o hajime, genshiryoku puranto no saikadou no mitooshi ga izentoshite tatteorazu. . .

(Though we have made our utmost efforts to secure enough supply of electricity for this coming summer, we still have no prospect for the reopening of the nuclear power plants including the No.3 and No.4 reactors of the Oi plant...) (KEPCO 2012)

The underlined phrase *mitooshi ga izentoshite tatteorazu* (we still have no prospect) shows that there exists a choice regarding whether to restart the nuclear power plants and also triggers a message of hoping that the suspended nuclear power plants will be reopened, another propositional assumption. Thus, it is implicitly conveyed that the production of electricity by nuclear power plants is necessary for supply to meet demand—taking their existence and performance for granted.

In the next datum, the restarting of nuclear power plants is both (assumptively) valued and presented as a taken-for-granted measure for the supply of electricity.

< Datum 4 >

Tousha to shimashite ha, kongo mo hikitsuzuki, teiki kensachuu no genshiryoku hatsudensho no saikadou ni zenryokude torikumu to tomoni, karyoku hatsudensho ya suiryoku hatsudensho no kanouna kagiri no katsuyou ya zenjitsu toujitsu dankai deno tasha kara no ouenyuuzuu no choutatsu nado, tsuika kyoukyuuryoku no kakuho ni saidaigen tsutome, tousha guruupu no souryoku o agete, denryoku no jyukyuu antei ni muketa torikumi ni zenryoku o tsukushite mairimasu.

(We continue to do our utmost efforts to devote our energies to reopening of the nuclear power plants which are under periodic inspection, and our whole group will do our best to achieve stable supply of electricity by devoting our energies to secure additional supply such as utilizing thermal and hydroelectric power plants as much as possible and obtaining help of

other electric utilities on or before the day of shortage.) (KEPCO 2012)

In the underlined part of the above text, we again see an existential assumption that there exists a choice regarding whether to restart the nuclear power plants since this is in fact what the company is “devoting [its] energies to” in order to “secure additional supply.” Here, *genshiryoku hatsudensho no saikadou* (reopening of the nuclear power plants) involves also the value assumption that it is worth the company’s devoting energy to.

4.2 Representations

In this section, we will examine what representations of social actors and time and places are found in the texts.

4.2.1 Representations of social actors

4.2.1.1 Representations of electric utilities

< Datum 5 >

Tousha ha koushita jyoukyou o fumae, kyoukyuuryoku kakuho ni mukete, karyoku hatsudensho ya suiryoku hatsudensho o saidaigen katsuyousubeku kentou o susumetekimashita ga, okyakusama tonou jyouhoukoukan no naka de, setsuden ga hituyoude areba, soukyuuni katsu gutaitekini shimeshite hoshii to iu koe mo ooku yoserarte imasu.

(Taking this situation into consideration, we have been trying to utilize thermal and hydroelectric power generation as much as possible to secure enough electricity, and in our discussion with our customers we have been requested to provide them with concrete energy saving plans in early stages.) (KEPCO 2011)

In the single-underlined part above, *kyoukyuuryoku kakuho ni. . . o susumetekimashita* (we have been trying to utilize thermal. . . to secure enough electricity) the electric utility company is an activated social actor. In

other words, the company is represented as an enterprise trying hard to fulfill its duty to provide its customers with power-related products.

In the double-underlined part, *okyakusama tonō jyouhoukoukan no naka de, . . . gutaitekini shimeshite hoshii to iu koe mo ooku yoserarete imasu*. (in our discussion with our customers. . . concrete energy saving plans in early stages) the electric utility is passivate. That is, it is represented as a social actor who is asked to perform its public duty to promote energy-saving. The expression *okyakusama tonō jyouhoukoukan no naka de* (in our discussion with our customers) conveys that the company and its customers cooperate in implementing power-consumption cuts. The company is not asking their customers to make cuts from the position of experts in electricity, but instead from that of comrades of the customers who learn and practice energy saving together with them.

< Datum 6 >

Kongo, saranaru kyoukyuuryoku kakuho no kentou ya okyakusama he no setsuden no onegai no shuuchitettei nado, arayuru taisaku o susumete mairimasu.

(From now on we will take any measure, such as trying to secure a further supply of electricity and letting our customers know and fully understand the request for energy saving.) (KEPCO 2011)

Here KEPCO is represented as a social actor in the following ways. First, it is activated as a responsible supplier of products and service that meets the customers' demands, that is, that supplies them with enough electricity. Second, *okyakusama heno setsuden no onegai no shuuchitettei nado* (making our customers know and fully understand the request for energy saving) shows that KEPCO is activated in appealing to their customers, indicating that the company is a public entity responsibly proceeding with energy-saving.

4.2.1.2 Representations of customers

< Datum 7 >

Kono natsu ni tsuite ha, 15% ijyou no setsuden o onegai shiteimasu ga, kore ha hikaku no taishou ga issakunen no natsu desu node, sakunen, gokyouryoku o tamawarimashita setsuden no torikumi ya sono kekka o sankou ni shite itadaki, kono natsu no setsuden ni gokyouryoku o tamawaritai to kangaeteimasu.

(For this summer, we ask you to cut back on electric power by more than 15% of your consumption of two years ago. To do this, we ask you to cooperate in saving electricity, utilizing the measures you kindly took last year and based on their results.) (KEPCO 2012)

Here, the customers are the activated social actors. They are represented as “practitioners of cutting back” on electric power usage as well as beneficiaries who receive the company’s products. By telling them *sakunen, gokyouryoku o tamawarimashita setsuden no torikumi ya sono kekka o sankou ni shite itadaki, kono natsu no setsuden ni gokyouryoku o tamawaritai* (to cooperate in saving electricity, utilizing the measures you kindly took last year and based on their results), the electric company gently but precisely prompts the customers. Therefore, the customers are given the identity of active cooperators with the company who make efforts to economize on power usage with some independence and agency.

The electric utilities, for their part, are represented as making as much efforts as possible to ensure an adequate supply of electricity. Here we can see expressed a dual institutional identity: that of a business that takes responsibility for meeting consumers’ demands and also that of a public entity that takes the initiative in saving energy. As indicate above, the customers are represented as actively tackling energy-saving issue based on

their past experience and up-to-date information provided by the company. They are given the identity of cooperators who try to deal with the energy shortage problem together with the electric companies.

4.2.2 Representations of time and place

We have also found representations of time in the discourse of these energy-saving requests. These representations function to show that the requests resulted from the examination of past data on supply of and demand for electricity. Moreover, these representations of place indicate a possibility that a large number of people might be affected by a multi-municipal power cut.

< Datum 8 >

Kono natsu ha jukyuu gyappu ga mainasu 14.9% to taihen kibishiku, kouikitekina teiden o kaihi dekinai kanousei mo aru koto kara, kuni ya jichitai no minasama to mo kentou o susumete kimashita kekka, honjitsu, okyakusama ni teiden no onegai o sasete itadaku koto to narimashita.

(We had the supply-demand gap amounting to 14.9% in August this year, which is a serious situation increasing the possibility of blackout in wide areas. We have had a discussion with the Japanese and local governments, and today we are asking you to save energy.) (KEPCO 2012)

The expression of *kouikitekina teiden o kaihi dekinai kanousei mo aru koto kara*, (increasing the possibility of blackout in wide areas) shows that the consumption of electricity and blackout is not a matter of individual homes but of a wide area considered in a macro scale. Such representations of place emphasize that a large number of people might be affected in a multi-municipal power cut, and that this is not a local problem between a local electric utility and its customers but national problem that should be tackled by such various ranges of social actors as the Japanese government

and municipal governments.

Moreover, the use of the present perfect tense in *kentou o susumete kimashita* (We have had a discussion) expresses a certain representation of time emphasizing the length of the discussion and the seriousness of the decision to cut power.

In the latter part of the same press release, the electric utility says, *Kongo, kuni ya jichitai no minasama to ittai to nari, setsuden o onegaisuru to tomoni, setsuden ni gokyouryoku itadakutameno gutaitekina houhouni tsuite gosetsumei o okonatte ikimasu.* (From now on, we, together with the Japanese and local governments will ask you (customers) to save power and will explain about concrete measures for energy saving.) Here, the use of the future tense emphasizes the continuity of the energy-saving request, a request that may be troublesome for the people being asked. While Fairclough (2003) demonstrates that the simple present tense makes the notion of globalization universal, which means strengthening the notion's influence, this study shows that representations of time across a range of spatial territories can be achieved by using the present perfect tense and future tense to emphasize the importance of the call for power-consumption cuts, which makes these press releases examples of effective social practices.

5. Conclusion

This study has shown it is naturalized in the press releases we have analyzed that the electricity demand increases in summer and that nuclear power plants should be reopened. It is also implicit in them that the request for power-saving is reasonable because the issue of power shortage is a serious one of broad impact.

The self-represented identities of the electric utilities here have been shown: they are public institutions with the capacity to promote power saving as well as corporations that manage to provide the products effectively. The customers are positioned as collaborators with the companies

who try to save electricity eagerly.

We have also identified strategic ambiguity toward nuclear power generation on the part of electric utility companies, represented by their seriousness about power-saving on the one hand and their relations with their customers on the other. That is, the companies insist on their accountability as corporations and as public institutions while simultaneously refraining from taking an explicit stance on nuclear power generation, instead conveying its necessity implicitly in their power-saving request. Since press releases are written out by electric utilities themselves and conveyed to consumers through a third party, the mass media, they can be used as a strategy for building a corporate images as a convincing and trustworthy organization.

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