

Japanese earthquake slogans and the persistence of *wakimae* (‘discernment’)

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*Katastrophen führen oft zu Äußerungen von Solidarität, wie sich am Beispiel des Zurschaustellens von amerikanischen Fahnen in der Nachfolge des 11. September in den USA ablesen lässt (Collins 2004). Im Gegensatz dazu haben Macomber, Mallinson & Seale (2011) in ihrer Studie zu Hurrikan Katrina über Äußerungen von Solidarität hinaus auch Aussprüche mit politischen, verdammenden, humorvollen und sexualisierten Inhalten gefunden. Die vorliegende Untersuchung zum Erdbeben in Japan und der in diesem Zusammenhang auftretenden Äußerungen dagegen hat nur Ausdrücke von Solidarität vorgefunden, was darauf hindeutet, dass in der japanischen Kultur weiterhin Kollektivismus vorherrscht, wonach *wakimae* (‘Einsicht’) oder Konformismus mit der sozialen Norm (Ide 1989) höchst anstrebenswert sind.*

Keywords: disaster, earthquake, slogans, Japanese, *wakimae*

1 Background

On March 11, 2011, Japan was devastated by an 8.9 magnitude earthquake that has been dubbed “the Eastern Japan Great Earthquake.” It was the most powerful earthquake to strike Japan in 140 years, and the fifth most powerful earthquake in the world since 1900. The earthquake triggered powerful deadly tsunami waves. The combined tragedy of earthquake and tsunami claimed more than 19,000 lives, and thousands are still missing. The tsunami also caused meltdowns at three reactors at the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant. Three years later, nearly 270,000 people remain displaced from their homes, including victims from Fukushima prefecture due to radioactive contamination in the region.

In this paper, we study the public discourse responding to the 3/11 earthquake and tsunami to understand how the Japanese people publicly express their emotion, memory, and experience with respect to the natural disaster. The sole study on earthquake slogans to date reviewed corporate slogans appearing on company websites (Ohashi 2011). The present study, thus, is the first to examine social messages of slogans displayed in pub-

lic spaces where language is used to address the general public, rather than a self-selecting audience as with corporate websites. Public spaces would include train stations, sidewalks, corporate, public and private building exteriors of various types, public transportation (e.g. on and inside buses, subways, trains); as well as on consumer products such as t-shirts, pens, stickers, food packages, hairbands, and beverage labels; and on other earthquake related souvenirs or commercial goods sold at shops.

Our aim is to understand what kind of public discourse can be observed in these various public venues and media. In contrast to corporate image making slogans found on websites, a study of t-shirt slogans responding to the March 2006 hurricane Katrina in the U.S. shows that public messages on t-shirts reveal attitudes and norms of individuals and associated groups (Macomber et al. 2011). Macomber and her colleagues argue that

“t-shirts are thus both products of our material culture that are consumed by millions of buyers and wearers each year as well as products of our nonmaterial culture, transmitting and reflecting values and attitudes in the form of public messages” (Macomber et al. 2011: 526).

The present study of earthquake related slogans in Japan can similarly illuminate the cultural norms, values, and beliefs of individuals and related social groups, giving insight into how people renegotiate their interrupted lives and identities after widespread disaster.

In July 2011, we visited six cities and towns (*Sendai, Ofunato, Natori, Kamaishi, Minami-Sanriku, and Higashi-Matsushima*) in the *Tohoku* (northeastern) district of Japan, where the combined earthquake-tsunami devastation was the greatest. We observed and recorded slogans that referenced earthquake and tsunami by walking through the commercial districts, and also visiting various shops (e.g. cloth, souvenir, food). We recorded each slogan verbatim and took a digital photograph. We then tallied the 333 total slogans recorded, identifying 72 distinct slogans (types). Table 1 lists the eight most frequently observed distinct slogans (i.e. eight types) along with their number of occurrences (tokens) and the percentage out of the 333 total number of slogans respectively.

Table 1. List of slogans (The eight most frequently used slogans or types)

Slogan (Type)	Token (n)	Percentage (%)
<i>Ganbarou</i> ('Let's stick to it.')	68	20.4
<i>Kizuna</i> ('Bonding')	27	8.1
<i>Fukko</i> ('Reconstruction')	19	5.7
<i>Sukidesu</i> ('(I/We) love you')	10	3.0
<i>Tohoku damashii</i> ('Tohoku spirit')	9	2.7
<i>Arigatou</i> ('Thank you')	8	2.4
<i>Akiramenai</i> ('(I/We) do not give up')	7	2.1
<i>Tomoni mae e</i> ('Forward, together')	6	1.8

2 Solidarity

The single most common slogan type is *Ganbarou*, accounting for about 20 % ($n=68$) of all slogans observed. In her study of companies' websites, Ohashi (2011) also reports that *Ganbarou* is the most frequently adopted slogan. *Ganbarou* means to persevere, and is a very popular phrase in Japan, expressing the equivalent of "let's stick to it," "let's carry on," or "let's hang in there." Figure 1 is a picture of the t-shirt, which bears the slogan *Ganbarou Tohoku*. Figure 2 is a picture of the exterior of the department store complex which is being repaired. It shows a banner on which the slogan of *Ganbarou Tohoku*, *Ganbarou Miyagi* is printed (*Miyagi* is the name of prefecture in the *Tohoku* district).



Figure 1. “Ganbarou!!
Tohoku”



Figure 2. “Ganbarou
Miyagi! Ganbarou Tohoku”

In Figure 1, the word *Ganbarou* is printed at the upper center of the t-shirt. Note that the expression is in the inclusive form *-ou* (first-person plural, i.e. ‘let’s’), which presupposes that the speaker considers him/herself to be a part of the group he/she is addressing (i.e. ‘we’). At the very early stage of post-earthquake period, the imperative form, *Ganbare* (‘Stick to it’) was used, but apparently it was not popular with the general public and was quickly replaced by *Ganbarou*, ‘let’s’ version. The imperative form *Ganbare* has now completely disappeared from the scene.

The relevant conjugated forms of the Japanese verb are given below.

- (1) *Ganbaru* ‘stick to it’ (dictionary form)
- (2) *Ganbare* ‘Stick to it.’ (imperative form)
- (3) *Ganbarou* ‘Let’s stick to it.’ (inclusive form)

Although the imperative form, *Ganbare*, was meant to encourage the victims and the people living in the region affected by the earthquake and tsunami, the imperative nature asserts a unidirectional *relationship* between the speaker and the addressee. The imperative form reinforces the perception that addressee, as the survivor who is in need of encouragement, will be instructed and expected by the speaker to work harder and persevere, while the same expectation does not apply to the speaker.

The slogan of *Ganbare* thus becomes a powerful device to frame this unidirectional relationship and separates interlocutors into those who are to be instructed and those who are to instruct them. This almost hierarchical frame can be characterized as a frame of power (Brown & Gilman 1960), in which the message from those in power in a potentially paternalizing tone to those who are powerless. The addressee is in a weaker position relative to the speaker, who is in a position of authority (and perhaps resources), bestowing necessary moral (and perhaps material) support to the victim.

The present study revealed the complete disappearance of the initial use of the imperative form *Ganbare*, eventually becoming completely supplanted by the inclusive form *Ganbarou*, as Table 1 shows. *Ganbarou*, as the inclusive form of the verb, erases the unidirectional distinctions of the imperative form, *Ganbare*. The contrast between *Ganbarou* and *Ganbare* can be characterized as that of *we* versus *they* codes (Gumperz 1982). Unlike the exclusive frame of *Ganbare*, which implies that only the addressee is expected to persevere, the inclusive *Ganbarou* includes the speaker in the effort, establishing a sense of solidarity (Brown & Gilman 1960) and mutual support between the speaker and the addressee to endure the hardship of the disaster together. While there is no question that the victims must work hard to overcome the disaster's aftermath, the inclusive slogan makes an explicit statement that the task of recovery and rebuilding is a collective endeavor, resting also upon the people who were not directly impacted by the disaster. *Ganbarou* is a manifestation that the people make the commitment to the joint efforts with the victims. Thus, the shift from *Ganbare* to *Ganbarou* represents the shift from the frame of power to the frame of solidarity.

While *Ganbarou* involves only the form of the verb to indicate solidarity, the second and third most frequently observed slogans, *Kizuna*, as well as the slogan *Tomoni mae e*, both use specific vocabulary that speak to solidarity. *Kizuna*, accounting for about 8% of all slogans ($n=27$), roughly translates to 'bonding' or 'being connected.' The noun *Kizuna* describes the state resulting from the action of *Ganbarou*. The slogan *Tomoni mae e* ('go forward, together') also represents the recurring theme of solidarity. *Tomoni mae e* explicitly declares the mutual support to rebuild the town and recover the lost confidence among the people.

3 Variation in slogans

In their study of t-shirt messages referencing Hurricane Katrina, Macomber and her colleagues (Macomber et al. 2011) report that in addition to slogans of solidarity and encouragement, they also observed slogans which include criticisms of the government for slow relief efforts, jokes about the post-disaster civil unrest (e.g. looting incidents), some gendered expletives, and even some satire responding to the tragic event. For example, Macomber et al. (2011: 539–540) documented slogans such as:

- (4) I Stayed in New Orleans for Katrina and All I Got Was this Lousy T-Shirt, a New Cadillac, and a Plasma TV
- (5) Make Levees Not War
- (6) NOPD/Not Our Problem Dude? Hurricane Katrina 2005
- (7) Katrina That BITCH!

Studies of jokes on disaster have shown that humor is often used to cope with traumatic events (e.g. Oring 1987; Schafer 2001). For example, Smyth (1986: 257) states that “people who are sensitive to the disaster can find some need later to distance themselves from it and to joke about it.” Interestingly, in our Japanese corpus, we have not found any instance of jokes such as (4)–(7). As discussed above, the majority of the slogans observed in the present study in the *Tohoku* district are limited to the recurring theme of solidarity. Aside from *Ganbarou*, a small number of slogans promote messages of the addressee presenting a positive face (Brown & Levinson 1987) as they confront the disaster such as *Sukidesu* (‘I/we like you/that’) and *Arigatou* (‘Thank you’). However, this is about the extent of the variation. We could find no deviation from the theme of solidarity or presenting a positive face.

All of the slogans were in a rather earnest tone, excepting two playful t-shirt slogans with a pun or play on words as a part of slogan. Observe the two slogans below.

- (8) The RISING 3RIKU
- (9) M3R MINAMISANRIKU THANKS FOR ALL

Both of the above slogans were found in the town of *Minami-Sanriku* (‘South *Sanriku*’), which was almost totally destroyed by the tsunami. Images of the tidal surge engulfing

the entire town became the iconic images of the tsunami the world over, and devastation of the town has come to symbolize the magnitude of the disaster. In (8), the numerical number 3 is read as *san* in Japanese and it is used as a part of the name of the town, *Sanriku*. In addition, *san* is the pronunciation of English word ‘sun’ which is depicted in the image of the rising sun on the t-shirt. The intended message of the bilingual pun is that the town of *Minami-Sanriku* will recover from the disaster and rise again as “the rising sun,” as symbol of the resilience and determination of Japan itself. The slogan along with the image of the rising sun on t-shirt is shown in Figure 3.



Figure 3. “The RISING 3 RIKU”

In (9), M3R is used for the double meaning or pun. First, M3R stands for *Minami 3 (san) Riku*, where “M” and “R” are respectively used as an initial of *Minami* and *Riku*. The numerical number 3 is read as *san* in Japanese as was the case in (8). Secondly, M3R stands for the code name for a military tank, which represents the Japanese Self Defense Force (JSDF). The significant contributions JSDF made to the relief efforts in the initial stages of the post-disaster recovery are well known, and the slogan is a message of appreciation to the JSDF. This type of slogans incorporating pun or play on words is extremely rare ($n=2$).

We found only one instance of an aggressive slogan:

(10) *Odazunayo Tsunami* ('Don't think that you can make a fool of me! Tsunami.')

This t-shirt slogan uses the term, *Odazunayo*, a regional dialect of the more standard form *Namerunayo* ('Don't under-estimate me'). It is aggressive only in the sense that the speaker's determination not to lose the fight against tsunami is boldly expressed in the vernacular form of *Odazunayo*. However, interestingly, the Japanese slogan is not an expression of aggression to the government, bureaucrats or politicians as those of the Hurricane Katrina slogans (e.g. (5) and (6)). Rather, *Odazunayo* is addressed toward tsunami itself as the speaker's determination to persevere. In terms of its frequency, however, this is the sole instance of an "aggressive" slogan ($n=1$).

With the above top eight slogans together accounting for 42.6 % of all those observed in this study, it is fair to conclude that the overwhelming majority of the slogans has something to do with the recurring theme of solidarity as typified by the most common slogan, *Ganbarou*. The apparent lack in variation in post disaster slogans is striking when compared to varieties of slogans in the U.S. How should we account for the absolute lack of deviation from the solidarity theme in the Japanese corpus? One plausible interpretation is the societal pressure to conform to the expected norm of solidarity in the time of devastating national crisis such as the earthquake and tsunami. In Japan, the socially expected norm is to abide by the ethical and moral value of sympathy. When so many victims are suffering from an unprecedented natural disaster, the expected behavior is to sympathize with them, stand side by side, and offer overt support in language and other means (e.g. volunteering). At the time of such a horrifying event, jokes or any other forms that do not support the theme of solidarity may be considered insensitive or antisocial. Anything other than *Ganbarou* can be viewed as tasteless or even cruel.

The recurring solidarity theme will also help build an identity for the speaker as a desirable, good citizen abiding the socially expected moral value. In his discussion of "politics" in discourse analysis, Gee (2011) points out that a certain language choice reflects a perspective on the nature of the distribution of the social goods (e.g. guilt, blame, good motives). According to Gee (2011: 19),

“social goods are potentially at stake any time we speak or write so as to state or imply that something or someone is ‘adequate,’ ‘normal,’ ‘good,’ or ‘acceptable’ (or opposite) in some fashion important to some group in society or society as a whole.”

Applying Gee’s approach to our data suggests that the use of *Ganbarou* is an important linguistic device to claim for the speaker the social good of being an adequate and good member of the society. This also implies that any deviance from the solidarity theme has the potential to be viewed as a negative distribution of the social goods, the speaker is an inadequate or unacceptable member of society. An interesting question arises in how much the speaker is in control of the deliberate aspect of the distribution of these social goods. In other words, how actively is the speaker participating in the choice of the linguistic form, and for what social motivations? Perhaps not to the extent of the situation of the English cases such as the one discussed in Macomber et al. (2011).

Japanese sociolinguist Ide (1989; 1992) argues for the notion of *wakimae* (‘discernment’) as a key concept to understand the language behavior in honorific languages such as Japanese. According to Ide (1992: 298), *wakimae* means “social norms according to which people are expected to behave in order to be appropriate in the society they live.” In this *wakimae* perspective, it is likely that Japanese speakers converge to the appropriate linguistic forms and norms under social pressure in a society where social unity is highly regarded.

Ide (1992) argues that this *wakimae* aspect of politeness has been neglected in Western perspectives of linguistic politeness (e.g. Brown & Levinson 1987), which is characterized as volition-oriented. For example, *volition* as a key concept to the western paradigms is clearly observed in the negotiation principle proposed by Myers-Scotton (1983). According to Myers-Scotton (1983: 116), the negotiation principle directs the speaker to “choose the form of your conversational contribution such that it symbolizes the set of rights and obligations which you wish to be in force between speaker and addressee for the current exchange.” Note that the speaker will *choose* the form of your conversational contribution in this negotiation principle. In other words, the speaker’s volition predicts that they will exercise liberty to decide the form of expression. The present result on the variation regarding the slogans suggests that such a volitional as-

pect is rather limited in the Japanese context compared to their western counterparts. Instead of volition, we have observed the persistence of collectivism in Japanese culture and society, where *wakimae* or socially prescribed norms (e.g. solidarity) play a crucial role. By adhering to slogans such as *Ganbarou* or other similar slogans of that nature, the speaker ensures that they will conform to the expected social norm, or *wakimae*, and thus be identified as a good, appropriate member of society.

An interesting question arises regarding how Japanese speakers evaluate their own *wakimae*-oriented language behavior. What would be their self-assessment of this “almost automatic observation of socially-agreed-upon rules” (Hill, Ide, Ikuta, Kawasaki & Ogino 1986: 348)? To be more specific, how do they perceive their predominant use of *Ganbarou*? Do Japanese speakers deliberately and enthusiastically embrace the slogan, or simply use it by default, or could there be some reluctant adaptation stemming from anxiety of possible social retribution? There is no systematic research conducted yet to answer these questions, but one questionnaire study (Oyamada, Hasebe, Kitani, Yasue & Ito 2012) seems to suggest that some Japanese do not see this *wakimae* behavior as allowing them to express their true feelings. Oyamada et al. (2012) report that about 30% of their subjects answer that they “feel slightly awkward to accept” the slogan of *Ganbarou* (see also Nakajima 2011; Sano & Wago 2012). This evidence suggests that not all Japanese embrace the slogan (and its implications) enthusiastically even though the societal norm is to adhere to the slogan—indeed the apparent frequency of the slogan points to the prevailing nature of *wakimae*.

4 Conclusion

In a natural disaster, especially in one that causes such widespread devastating and loss of life we expect expressions of solidarity to be prominent. Indeed, such prediction is clearly borne out in the Japanese slogans observed at street corners of the Tohoku district of Japan where the earthquake and tsunami damage was severe.

However, when the types of slogans are compared with those in Macomber et al. (2011) and others (e.g. Collins 2004), the Japanese slogans of this study reveal an interesting

contrast. That is, the recurring theme of solidarity as represented in *Ganbarou* is so prevalent that it seems to have suppressed other types of slogans altogether. We did find various slogans, but the majority of them coalesced around the general theme of solidarity. This is in sharp contrast with slogans with political, cursing, humorous, and sexualized themes reported in Macomber et al. (2011). One interpretation of this contrast is that *wakimae* or discernment (Ide 1989) is indeed the operating principle for the Japanese language behavior, unlike the individualism or volition-oriented language behavior in the West. The Japanese language is considered an “honorific language,” which has a relatively rich system of honorifics, address terms, pronouns, and prescribed expressions. In this type of language, social appropriateness is a prerequisite for language use and its speakers accept standardized forms under societal pressure or assumed requirement.

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