

Affiliating in crisis:

**A linguistic perspective
on community formation on Twitter
after the nuclear accident in Japan in 2011**

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CERTIFICATE OF ORIGINAL AUTHORSHIP

I certify that the work in this thesis has not previously been submitted for a degree nor has it been submitted as part of requirements for a degree except as fully acknowledged within the text.

I also certify that the thesis has been written by me. Any help that I have received in my research work and preparation of the thesis itself has been acknowledged. In addition, I certify that all information sources and literature used are indicated in the thesis.

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Abstract

The present study was motivated by observation, as a resident of Japan, of the growing significance of Twitter as a medium of communication at the time of 3/11 disaster and the subsequent nuclear crisis in 2011. Increasingly on Twitter, a growing proportion of an anxious population sought information, assurance and solidarity. This thesis explores the means and bases for affiliation in two key Twitter communities that formed at this time of crisis – a time of prevailing social uncertainty and heightened anxiety. The communities in focus form around professionals in two relevant fields, physics and freelance journalism.

Drawing on a social semiotic theory of meaning in language (applied here to tweets in Japanese, and to their glossing and translation in English), the study analyses the dynamic formation of the communities in patterns of linguistic choices in Twitter data. The study explores patterns that couple representations of reality with the enactment of values. It also attends to how interpersonal relationships and community membership are negotiated in this medium in Japanese.

A comparison of the two communities reveals significant differences in the basis of affiliation. This is evident in terms of *bonding orientations* and in terms of the extent of negotiation. In brief, the physicist group foregrounds knowledge over values and negotiates it with a non-expert readership in fear of the nuclear crisis. They tend to maintain more open boundaries by negotiating differences in knowledge. By contrast, the group forming around the freelance journalists is based on shared negative values about the nuclear crisis, particularly shared distrust of authorities, including the officialdom of government but also to some degree the expertise of scientists. This community tends to maintain more closed boundaries, in which values are not negotiated.

The two communities contrast in terms of how they construe the world and what values they foreground, yet the rapid expansion of each community at the time of crisis reflects complementary needs for social solidarity. People seek both credible knowledge and reassurance, as they seek to commune around their fear and anger. The different

bonding orientations identified in this study suggest a more generalised tension in communing at times of crisis.

The thesis also makes significant contributions to the field of linguistics. In the application of systemic functional linguistic theory to this study of texts in Japanese, the thesis contributes an expanded description of the system of APPRAISAL, especially in the sub-system of ENGAGEMENT. This also involves a reinterpretation of *keego* choices in Japanese beyond conventional description, towards their roles in negotiating knowledge and values in discourse.

