

Institutional Risk Communication of the Fukushima Radioactive Water Release in the Rhetorical Context of the Pacific Rim

Soyeon Lee
University of Texas at El Paso

INTRODUCTION

This poster presents preliminary results of an ongoing discourse analysis study of institutional risk communication about the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Station radioactive water release since 2023 after a nuclear plant incident occurred, following the 2011 tsunami in Japan.

CONTEXTS

Conceptualizing this release as “natech risk” (Cruz, 2025; Miller, 2016) or as “ecological violence” aggravated by Japan and US colonial militarisms (Na’puti, 2024, p. 119), scholars have examined the communication aspects of the Japanese discharge plans and its impacts with a focus on government strategies (Okuda, 2025), risk perceptions in China (Sun et al., 2025), public responses in Korea (Kim & Kim, 2025), media representations in the English language (Gong et al., 2024), and international responses online (Zhu et al., 2025).

METHODS

I network justice-centered (Itchuaqiyag et al., 2022) and embodied approaches to risk rhetorics (Sauer, 1993; 2010), taking up a mixed-method approach (Ding & Kong, 2019) in doing discourse analyses and rhetorical analyses of institutional risk communication. I discuss risk communication of Tokyo Electric Power Company (TEPCO, n.d.) and the Japanese Government (MOFA, n.d.) through their publicly released textual documents, set against news articles in English via Google Alerts with “TEPCO” between October 2023 and December 2023.

Research Question:
How do institutional risk communication and its textual governance address complex information and the lives of (non)human beings in power-laden contexts?

Figure 1. A screenshot of Word Frequency between Oct 24, 2023 and Nov 5, 2023 via NVivo.

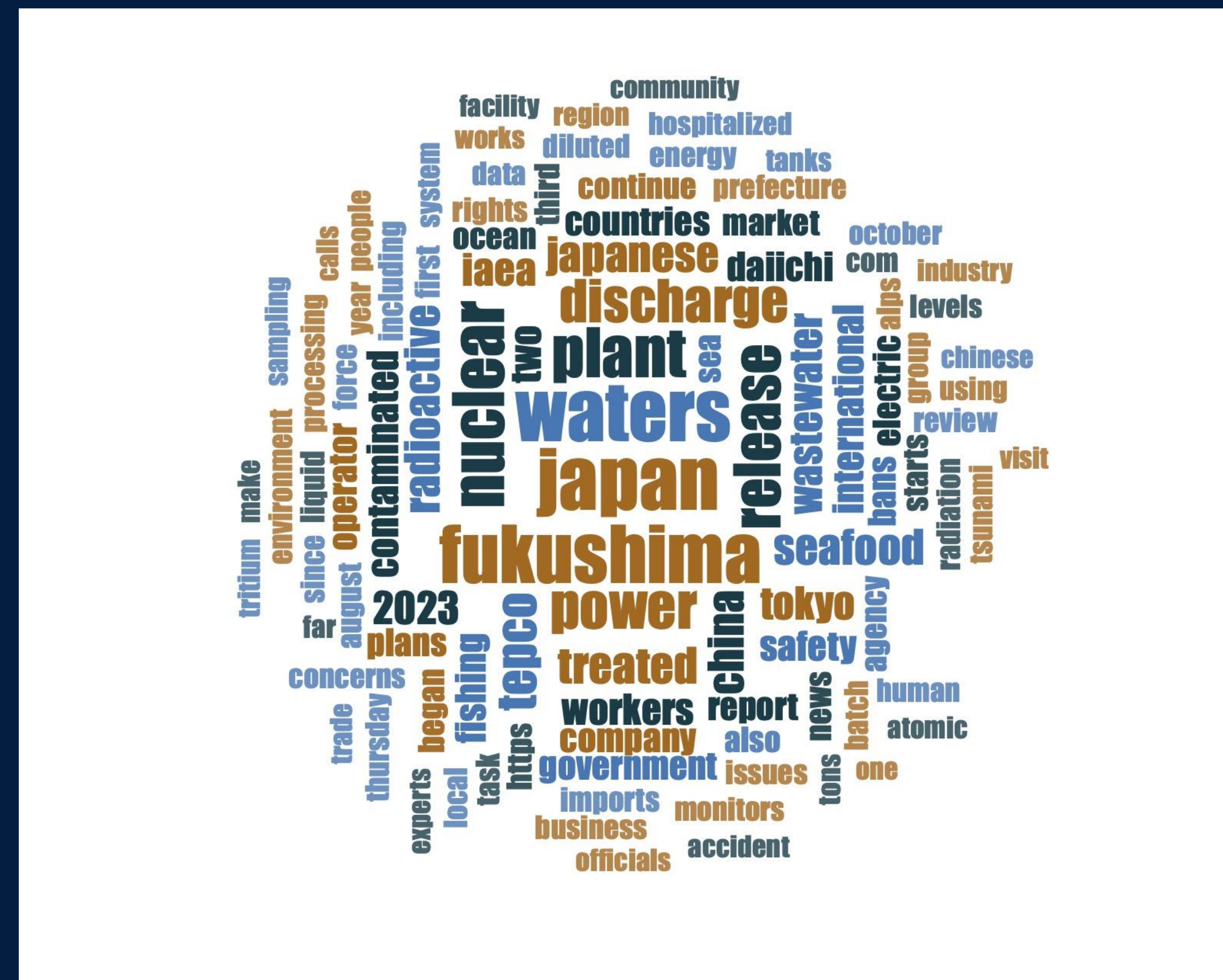


Figure 2. A screenshot of Word Frequency between Nov 6, 2023 and Dec 31, 2023 via NVivo.

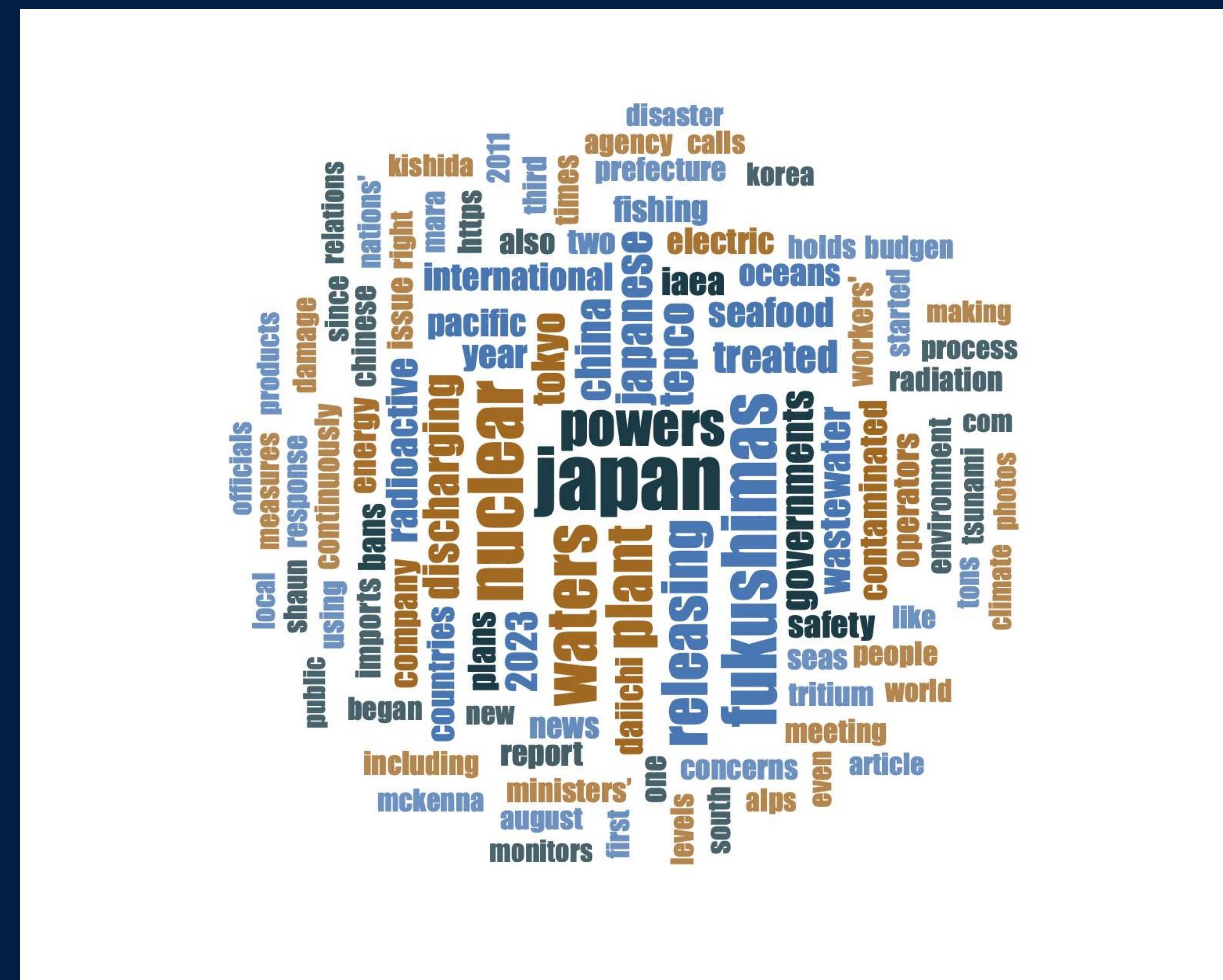


Table 1. Data Sources for Rhetorical Analyses

| Categories | Date | Sources | Key Codes |
|---------------------|--|--|---|
| Energy Corporate | 8/22/2023 | Tokyo Electric Power Company (TEPCO) Press Releases | Acknowledging concerns Explaining technical procedures Emphasizing responsibilities |
| Japanese Government | 10/24/2023 12/12/2023 12/15/2023 12/20/2023 | Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan (MOFA) Press Releases | Distributing ethos Emphasizing collaboration Addressing publics' voices |

RESULTS

- Discourse Analyses of News Articles
 - Increasing weighted percentage toward the end of 2023 is observed among words: "nuclear," "China," and "bans"
 - Manual qualitative coding results are centered around:
 - Reporting TEPCO's data management practices (Ping, 2023)
 - Reporting workers' exposure to nuclear incidents
 - Reporting international economic/social tensions (e.g., "U.S. military forces... amid China's total import ban") (Yomiuri Shimbun, 2023)
 - Mediating technical languages (e.g., using metaphors, such as "the release of the Olympic swimming pools worth of water") (Peninsula, 2023)
 - Reporting publics' concerns in Japan and across borders (Xueqing, 2023)
 - Covering governments and civic actions; mainly, the Chinese Government's reactions and Korean publics' protests rather than views of other stakeholders such as Pacific Islander states within the Pacific Rim
- Rhetorical Analyses of TEPCO's Press Releases
 - representing publics' concerns as "great burden and inconvenience" (TEPCO, Aug 22, 2023)
 - representing technical procedures with consistency as "treated" and "diluted"
 - highlighting "cooperation" with international and interlaboratory agencies and teams
 - emphasizing their care about "reputational damage": "began accepting applications for compensation from fishermen and businesses that have suffered reputational damage about the water release"
- Rhetorical Analyses of MOFA's Press Releases
 - Highlighting "coordination" with international agencies and multinational research teams including IAEA (MOFA, Oct 24, 2023)
 - Emphasizing "transparency" as a value (MOFA, Oct 24, 2023; MOFA, Dec 12, 2023)
 - Addressing publics' voices including fisheries and agricultural industries' concerns with a focus on national stakeholders

DISCUSSION AND NEXT STEPS

Gathering preliminary results from discourse analyses and rhetorical analyses, textual risk governance operated by institutional organizations seem to:

- reinforce top-down data structures for international audiences including Pacific Rim audiences
- support colonial logics backed up by capitalist energy politics, prioritizing economies over long-term and unknown impacts on (non)human-beings
- aggravate information disparities in institutional risk discourses between institutions and international publics and within Pacific Rim audiences

This study has limitations as it relies on institutional documents and news articles translated in English or for international audiences not the ones in the original language (e.g., Japanese, Chinese). Next steps would involve extending analyses to the other time periods and to news articles and institutional texts from other governments and in other languages (e.g., Korean).

REFERENCES

