

## Invited Article

### Rethinking “Japanese”: Beyond the “Unit-Thinking” of Language

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#### Abstract

This article revisits the notion of “Japanese language” by pointing out its negative effects in language classes and explores alternative pedagogies. By drawing on the concept of “unit-thinking” (i.e., a way to see the world as consisting of bounded, internally-homogeneous units) and linking it to the nation-state ideology and the resultant standardization practices, this article discusses how the notion of “Japanese language” that imposes Standard Japanese onto students can perpetuate the hierarchy between Standard Japanese and non-Standard Japanese and subsequently “native speakers” and language students. Suggesting the importance of teaching idiolects—individual’s way of speaking—instead of only Standard Japanese, this article suggests three ideas for alternative ways of teaching language: the pedagogy of neo-immersion that focuses on teaching idiolects (i.e., how individuals speak), the notion of the “comfortable speaker (formerly known as native speaker)” that moves away from having linguistic criteria against which to judge a speaker’s proficiency, and driver language that is diverse, fluid, and uncertain yet functions well, as examined through ethnographic work and a social media text analysis. Through suggesting these possibilities for teaching without standardizing, this article explores Post-Unit-Thinking pedagogies.

#### 1. Introduction

This article calls for rethinking the notion of “Japanese language” so that we can move away from its negative effects, especially in Japanese language classrooms. Language use is diverse. Within the same region, same town, or even within the same family, no one speaks in the exact same way. In linguistics, the way in which each individual speaks is called their “idiolect.” Idiolects are fluid, shaped by on-going linguistic encounters as we pick up new ways of speaking

from others. However, we tend to think that there is only one “language” with one “correct” version—usually the standard language, in the case of Japan, Standard Japanese—by these “native speakers.”

This view that there is one language called “Japanese” is based on what I call (Doerr, 2022) unit-thinking—a view to see the world as made up of bounded, internally homogeneous, countable units. Unit-thinking manifests itself in language classes in various ways, such as the view that the Japanese language<sup>1</sup> is homogeneous, that there are “correct” and “incorrect” Japanese language uses, that Standard Japanese is the only “correct” Japanese, that non-standard versions of Japanese are undesirable, if not inferior, forms of Japanese, that language does not change, therefore new words and uses are “corruptions” or “mistakes” to be corrected, that language learners have to learn Standard Japanese, that there is only one way to write *kanji* (Chinese characters) or say a word that students need to master, and that writing and speaking in Standard Japanese is more important than getting your point across.

Although some of these views may appear benign, they are based on the unit-thinking that propels standardization based on and further perpetuating relations of power. Standardization is inherently about relations of power because the standard language is usually chosen not for its linguistic superiority or clarity but for the high social status of its speakers (e.g., educated class in the capital, Tokyo) (Bourdieu, 1991). The standardization process reproduces relations of power not only among diverse people in Japan but also between the “native speaker” and the students who are learning the language (i.e., “non-native speakers”). This article explores ways in which to move away from such standardization practices in the classroom based on the keynote speech of the same title delivered on August 17, 2023 at the annual meeting of the Canadian Association for Japanese Language Education in Montreal, Canada.

In what follows, I first review the theoretical assumptions behind the notion of the Japanese language (i.e., unit-thinking) as well as processes and devices that reinforce them (i.e., linguistic theories and concepts, ideologies and practices of standardization, and language education). This article then introduces three alternative ideas that help explore pedagogies that overcome unit-thinking: the pedagogy of neo-immersion, the notion of the “comfortable speaker (formerly known as native speaker),” and driver language based on a small ethnographic study and a text analysis of a social media post and the comments left on it. This article concludes with suggestions for language learning that overcomes unit-thinking: Post-Unit-Thinking pedagogies.

## **2. Theoretical Backgrounds: Unit-Thinking and its Coherants**

As mentioned, unit-thinking is a worldview with which to see the world as made up of discrete and bounded units that are internally homogeneous (Doerr, 2022). Although things often come in fluid spectrums, we tend to see them in discrete units. Color, musical notes, and the flow of time are such examples. Various devices, which I call “coherants,” work to make such continuums appear to cohere into discrete, bounded units (Doerr, 2022). Colored pencils and paints are coherants for color, offering bounded units of color while ignoring subtle shades. Instruments such as the piano or guitar are more conducive to unit-thinking in musical notes than instruments such as the violin or trombone that allow for a continuum of sounds, although our notion of twelve discrete notes in an octave nonetheless encourages the unit-thinking of music. A digital clock is a coherant that creates discrete units of time (e.g., the unit of a minute, like 10:34, suddenly turns into 10:35 after sixty seconds), in comparison to an analogue clock with an arm for seconds that shows the flow of time from 10:34 to 10:35 by shifting gradually).

Though this kind of unit-thinking is more or less benign, some unit-thinkings produce homogenizing impulses—a push to make units internally homogeneous, even though they never are. I call this “normative unit-thinking” (Doerr, 2022) and it often occurs in culture (e.g., through assimilation policies), people (e.g., through anti-miscegenation laws), and language (e.g., through standardization processes). Behind this normative unit-thinking is the nation-state ideology that views nation, people, culture, and language as consisting of homologous and internally homogeneous units with overlapping borderlines (Anderson, 1991; Baumann & Briggs, 2000). Because culture, people, and language are never internally homogeneous, this ideology led to various violent homogenizing processes, imposing one model and creating hierarchies in due course by each variety’s proximity to that model.

Language is fluid and contextual, emerging constantly in specific situations within conversation. The meanings of words can only be understood in the moment when the conversation is occurring (Volosinov, 1986). Harris (1990) goes further to say that there is no such thing as “language”; all we have is contextually unfolding communicative practices, about which linguists seek to abstract out grammatic rules and meanings of words.

Nonetheless, language tends to be seen as a static and bounded system, mostly because of accumulated practices of treating these linguistic practices as if they were derived from a system of language with coherent grammar and a shared set of vocabulary (Pennycook, 2004). In this

article, I discuss three such linguistic practices that use three corresponding coherants: linguistic theories and their theoretical concepts, language standardization processes, and language education.

## **2.1 Linguistic Theories and their Theoretical Concepts: Coherants that Reinforce Unit-Thinking I**

Various linguistic theories, including the influential Ferdinand de Saussure's structural linguistics, are shaped by the nation-state ideology, as seen in the notion of *la langue* of structural linguistics (Bauman & Briggs, 2000; Wimmer & Glick Schiller, 2002). Linguistic concepts such as “monolingual,” “bilingual,” and “multilingual,” are also based on the understanding that there exist discrete, countable units of language. Notions like “dialects,” though they seem to acknowledge the diversity within the unit of “a language,” also support unit-thinking by suggesting that these dialects are bounded units, just at a different scale: one language with many dialects inside it (see Doerr, 2023b).

The notion of “translanguaging” (Garcia & Kleyn, 2016; Li Wei, 2018) is celebrated as a move away from monolingualism and unit-thinking with its explicit critique of the concept of “named languages” similar to unit-thinking. However, the framework of translanguaging also assumes and relies on the existence of bounded units of language, which are then mixed (for critiques, see Doerr, 2022; 2023b). I agree with their acknowledgement of each individual's “linguistic repertoire,” similar to idiolects—each individual's changing ways of speaking shaped by various encounters—instead of seeing individuals as deficient of proficiency in the target language.

However, their notion of translanguaging inevitably relies on the notion of named language in three ways. First, it assumes that some linguistic practices are non-translanguaging and thus are monolingual practices (otherwise all linguistic practices are translanguaging). Such a notion of monolingual practices relies on the existence of bounded units of language. Second, when they identify translanguaging practices, they rely on the unit-thinking of language to show which named languages (e.g., “Japanese” and “English”) are being mixed. Third, such identification of language relies on assigning words to specific named languages, which is based on unit-thinking. For example, the sentence, “I ate tacos for dinner,” can be an example of translanguaging if we consider “tacos” as a Spanish word. If we consider “tacos” to be by-now-

English, then the sentence is not translanguaging. In such a process, the existence of the named languages “Spanish” and “English” are necessary, relying on unit-thinking. I have also critiqued (2023b) this arbitrary process as being left to the observer/researcher (if “language mixing” was done intentionally to defy monolingualism in the classroom, for example, then it becomes the object of analysis).

There have been some linguistic theories that have critiqued and moved away from unit-thinking. Bakhtin (1981) discusses the two forces—centripetal and centrifugal—in linguistic practices that push language towards unification (often by the very act of describing it as a language system) and towards diversification (the situation he calls heteroglossia), respectively, and how they intersect in concrete utterances. Volosinov (1986) talks about how meanings of words need to be seen in the context of each utterance, rendering dictionaries meaningless. The aforementioned Harris (1990) focuses on communicative practices and critiques the abstraction known as “language” with its assumed systematic existence, establishing Integrationist Linguistics. Pennycook (2004) discusses the process of such fluid and situated linguistic practices coming to be seen as a system of language. This line of research serves as the basis for the critique of standardization processes to which I turn now.

## **2.2 The Standardization Ideology and its Practices: Coherants that Reinforce Unit-Thinking II**

The standardization process is a coherant—with further specific devices that serve as coherants, such as language arts classes, language education classes, grammar books, and textbooks, along with mass media that exposes people to the standard language—for perpetuating the unit-thinking of language. Language standardization is always in progress because the absolute standardization of a spoken language is never achieved as language always changes (Milroy & Milroy, 1991).

The standardization process always involves the hierarchization of linguistic practices and their speakers, as mentioned. The standard language is usually chosen not by its linguistic qualities but by the social status of its speakers (Irvine & Gal, 2000). In Japan, the linguistic practices by the educated class in Tokyo was designated as Standard Japanese because of the speakers’ political and economic dominance. Once the standard is chosen as the only legitimate language, the remaining linguistic practices get labeled as “dialects,” “vernaculars,” or “broken”

versions of the language (Bourdieu, 1991). The standard language gains symbolic capital through a unified education system that teaches it as the only legitimate language, a unified labor market whose labor force is differentiated by the education system, and a perceived connection between the standard language and social qualities such as moral rectitude, civilization, and education. Linguistic practices that stray from the standard get corrected with varying consequences, some with high impact when done in language classrooms, as will be discussed in the next subsection. This hierarchization of linguistic practices paradoxically establishes a “linguistic community” in which common (mis-)recognition of the legitimacy of the standard occurs while access to that language remains uneven (Bauman & Briggs, 2000; Bourdieu, 1991; Milroy & Milroy, 1991).

There have been some attempts at countering standardization, such as the notion of “pluricentric language” (Clyne, 1992, p.1), which is language that has “several interacting centers, each providing a national variety with at least some of its own (codified) norms,” such as Spanish and English. However, in so far as it has the standard within these “languages,” this notion supports unit-thinking. The notion of polynomic language views language to have “an abstract unity, whose users recognize it in several guises/varieties, all equally tolerated, with no differences of status or function” (Marcellesi, 1989, p. 170 quoted in Jaffe, 2021, p. 444). However, Jaffe suggests that, in daily practice, variations are not quite tolerated (Jaffe, 2021).

Unit-thinking can also be used strategically—what I call “strategic unit-thinking” (Doerr, in press a)—to operate within systems based on unit-thinking. Standardization can occur in minoritized language in their efforts to gain legitimacy as “a language” or to receive funding and other governmental support, as well as in order to increase the number of its speakers through codified textbooks and vocabulary lists (MacSwan, 2022). However, such a strategic standardization of minoritized language can impose its chosen variety to people who speak it differently, thus marginalizing them further (Woolard, 2005). The view of unit-thinking of language can be alien to the speakers, imposing unit-thinking where it does not exist (Albury, 2016).

This strategic unit-thinking is due to the historical and current system that is based on unit-thinking, which has oppressed minoritized language through standardization. Therefore, empowering minoritized language through standardizing them is fighting within the confines of the game oppressors created. It is important to question and critique such unit-thinking itself and

standardization that enforces it when exploring ways to empower minoritized language and their speakers (Doerr, 2023b).

Challenging unit-thinking and standardization can start with examining the discourses used to support unit-thinking and/or standardization, such as that of intelligibility that says we need to be able to communicate with everyone in the nation-state. Linguists have been critiquing this discourse by saying that (1) the perception of intelligibility of the same sentence shifts depending on the genre (Nelson, 1992), (2) the perception of someone's intelligibility is often shaped by non-linguistic features, such as racial appearance (Rubin, 1992), (3) we need to question who are pressured to change the speech when communication failed (Yasuda, 1999), and (4) we do not need to be intelligible to everyone (Kachru, 1992) or "native speakers" (Seidlhofer, 2001).

To challenge unit-thinking and standardization, I have been working on a project called the Post-Unit Thinking Project (Doerr, 2022; 2023a, 2023c) Specifically, in applying this in Japanese language education, I have been working with Jisuk Park and Kimiko Suzuki (Doerr, Suzuki, & Park, 2023), among others, through conference presentations and workshops (Doerr, Suzuki, & Park, 2022; Park, 2023a, 2023b; Suzuki, 2023a; 2023b) with the hope of bringing this Project to many classrooms. I will introduce some possibilities I suggest in the next section, after discussing how language education is commonly a coherent for unit-thinking in the next subsection.

### **2.3 Language Education: A Coherent that Reinforces Unit-Thinking III**

Language education in two contexts standardizes language (Doerr, 2009): language arts education for "native speakers" in which regional and class differences are hierarchized with the standard language at the top; and language education for the "non-native" speakers in which "native speaker" speech is seen as homogeneous and posited as the ideal model to emulate (ACTFL, 2012; see Doerr & Kumagai, 2009). This article focuses on the latter, although these two are intertwined.

Language education can implement standardization in three ways. First, through teaching only the standard language, often with the textbooks that use only the standard language, grammar books, and vocabulary lists that prescribe certain ways of talking and meaning (see Mori et al., 2000). Second, through "correcting" those that stray from the standard as "incorrect"

(e.g., stroke orders and minor differences in writing style that do not affect communication given contextual clues), thus delegitimizing non-standard language and their users, language education prescribes the standard to be the only legitimate version and becomes the enforcer of standardization. Third, by positing the “native speaker” as a homogeneous linguistic group, as mentioned, language education can reinforce the view of language as bounded and homogenously spoken—unit-thinking. For example, the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) sets guidelines of proficiency using the “native speaker” reception as the benchmark. For example, in describing what it sets as the “superior level” proficiency, it foregoes the speakers’ “sporadic errors” so long as they “do not distract the native interlocutor or interfere with communication” (ACTFL, 2012, p.5; see also Doerr & Kumagai, 2009).

The concept of “native speaker” assumes that (1) everyone in the nation-state speaks the standard language of the nation, (2) language is an internally homogeneous system that corresponds to a homogeneous linguistic community (i.e., “native speakers”), and (3) the “native speaker” has an innate competence in their “native language” (Pennycook, 1994). These notions are problematic because they are based on unit-thinking and thus are inaccurate descriptions of actual linguistic practices.

While language education has been an instrument of standardization historically and currently (Bourdieu, 1991; Gottlieb, 2005), there are ways to incorporate Post-Unit-Thinking pedagogies, to which I will turn now.

### **3. Post-Unit-Thinking Pedagogies**

Various pedagogies that defy not only standardization but also unit-thinking do exist. The pedagogical aspect of the aforementioned translanguaging framework—viewing students’ work not in light of the named target language but as their communication process using their own “linguistic repertoire”—is one such example. In this section, I will introduce three other possibilities, two of which I have suggested elsewhere (Doerr, 2022; 2023b, 2023c)—“neo-immersion” and “comfortable speaker (formerly known as native speaker)”—and will recapture here, and one of which I introduce based on a small ethnographic data and text analysis of a TikTok post and its comments.

### **3.1 Neo-Immersion**

I have been suggesting a pedagogy I call “neo-immersion” (Doerr, 2023b; forthcoming, in press b), which is based on the Master Apprentice Language Learning Program designed for revitalizing Native American language created by the Native California Network in 1992, based on the ideas of Julian Lang (a Karuk speaker). Leanne Hinton, Nancy Richardson, Mary Bates Abbott, and others created the pedagogy, and the California Foreign Language Project revised it, which The Advocates for Indigenous California Language Survival (AICLS) then implemented. It has been adopted by other indigenous groups since then (Hammine, in press; Hinton, 2001; Hinton et al., 2002).

In this program, the Master (teacher) and Apprentice (learner) engage in planned one-on-one hands-on tasks—such as cooking, gardening, and cleaning that are decided by both the Master and Apprentice—in the idiolect of the Master, which the Apprentice seeks to learn. The focus is oral communication facilitated by contextual clues (Hammine, in press; Hinton, 2001; Hinton et al., 2002).

This Program’s use of idiolects is what caught my attention regarding countering standardization and unit-thinking. Although this Program focuses on idiolects due to a lack of resources and not to specifically evade standardization, I highlight this aspect in neo-immersion as aiming at countering standardization and defying unit-thinking in language education in general. The number of idiolects used can be increased gradually. I use the new term, neo-immersion, in order to show respect to the original context of language reclamation with limited resources and highlight my different motivations to counter standardization and unit-thinking, for which the Master Apprenticeship Program may not be aiming (for further discussions, see Doerr, in press b). It is important that exposure to idiolects comes with valuing the idiolect as legitimate, with no need to change it to fit the standard language (see Doerr, forthcoming).

Also, neo-immersion differs from the “immersion” methods of language learning in which only the target language is used in the classroom, often focusing on the standard variety (Chang-Bacon, 2022; Cummins, 2001). Neo-immersion differs from the notion of immersion in study abroad, in which students are expected to pick up the language of the study abroad destination without clear pedagogical theorization, often suggesting that students will miraculously gain proficiency through exposure (Laubscher, 1994), though some researchers have critiqued it (Freed, 1998; Kinginger, 2009; Taguchi 2008).

### **3.2 The Comfortable Speaker (Formerly Known as Native Speaker)**

Also based on the Master Apprentice Language Learning Program in which the assessors of the proficiency of the Apprentice (language learner) include those who do not know the language—they judge the learner based on the confidence and comfort of the learner (Hinton et al. 2001)—I suggested elsewhere (Doerr, 2023b, 2023c) a new notion of the “comfortable speaker (formally known as native speaker)<sup>2</sup>” to replace the problematic notion of the “native speaker” that is based on the nation-state ideology with assumed inherent competence, as aforementioned.

The notion of the “comfortable speaker” focuses on the comfort level one feels about their own idiolect. It is about one’s own sense of comfort, not assessed by somebody else in relation to a set criterion of correctness, which is usually based on the standard language. While these two Post-Unit-Thinking pedagogies derive from reformulating the Master Apprentice Language Learning Program, I introduce below another possibility I am currently exploring.

### **3.3 Driver Language**

As an inspiration for alternative pedagogies, how drivers communicate with each other is useful. I will introduce two examples in this section from ethnographic research and from an analysis of a TikTok post and its comments.

#### **3.3.1 Multiple Meanings of the Stop Sign**

This ethnographic fieldwork was done from September to December 2022 with four research assistants on two topics: how learning to drive changes the learner’s worldview and how drivers communicate. Below, I introduce some results from the latter. I had four research assistants, all college students, who interviewed and carried out participant observation of their research participants’ driving. Each research assistant had two research participants. I also interviewed the research assistants themselves (i.e., the research assistants were acting as researchers but also as researched when I interviewed them). The project at this time has a total of twelve interviews (including my interviews of these research assistants) and eight participant observations done by the research assistants.

Here, I introduce something that stood out in the data: several interpretations of the stop sign regarding what one should actually do at a stop sign. One of the research assistants reported

in my interview that one surprising thing he noticed when he began driving recently was that people interpret the meaning of stop signs differently from him: for example, when he stopped at a stop sign at the entrance to the highway following the traffic rule, the driver behind him yelled at him for stopping. When he was doing participant observation of his interviewee driving, he observed a similar, though more drastic, situation. The research participant stopped at a stop sign and took time to check if a car was coming from both sides. The car behind them honked twice, but she continued to take her time checking for oncoming cars. The car behind them then overpassed them, ignored the stop sign (i.e., did not stop at the sign) and drove off, traumatizing this research assistant, he reported.

Also, four interviewees raised their experience at four-way stop signs as an example of miscommunications while driving: people tend to be too nice and give way too much, which confuses who is supposed to go next. Some gestured (e.g., waving hands, dimming headlights, light honking) to let others go. However, this is often misunderstood or makes timing off, making it difficult to know when to actually accept the offer to go first.

The first set of examples shows multiple interpretations of the stop sign—from actually stopping to just slowing down as well as how long one should stop when there are no cars coming to yield to. The second set of examples show multiple interpretations of not only the order people should go in at a four-way stop sign, but also how to interpret each other's gesture as well as social protocols regarding how readily one should accept kind offers from others.

These examples show how (1) there are multiple meanings of the stop sign and (2) people negotiate or learn these multiple meanings through interacting with those who do not share their meanings. Even though the stop sign has an official meaning—to stop—people understand it differently and get frustrated when others do not use their meaning, making their interpretations known to them. The case of the stop sign thus suggests that the meaning of language can be fluid and negotiated and learned, which counters the view that language needs to have one “correct” version to be taught, and that it has to be taught in classroom.

### **3.3.2 Driver Communication: Saying “Thank You” in Sydney**

The second case I introduce extensively is a TikTok post called “Why not you THANK me” by Nathan (2023), which was posted on July 9, 2023, and attracted 623 comments within 9 days, on July 20, 2023. I analyze these comments below.

The post was a commentary by Sophie Nathan, who talks to the camera while sitting at a couch, with the phrase “Australians...I am baffled” on the screen. She says:

Okay, little question for Australians. How come when you're out driving, no one does the thank you with the hazard lights? In New Zealand, if you let someone in, that it is courtesy that they do a little flick of their hazard lights, like little thank you. Or you do the head out the window wave. No, no one does it in Australia. I let people in because you know it works in roundabouts. I hope someday, someone will let me in. Yet to happen in Australia. And no thank yous. And I don't do it because I'm a good person. I do it purely for the thank yous. Not a single one. Is it not a thing here?

The comments are mainly responses to this question of hers. I introduce them in light of what they tell us about driver communication and how people learn the meanings of gestures so that we can learn something from it for language education in general. There are five points that can inspire Post-Unit-Thinking language education.

First, there are multiple meanings to a gesture and there are multiple ways to say one thing. Commentors listed diverse meanings of flicking hazard lights. 12 people said it means there is hazard, not thank you. 17 said it is also used to warn oncoming traffic that the police or a speed camera is coming up ahead. Because of that reason, it is illegal to use hazard lights for things that are not hazards, and you can be fined for doing so, 38 commented. 28 commented that flicking hazard lights does not mean thank you in Australia, saying “not a thing here” or “never heard of it.” However, 13 did comment saying flicking hazard lights means “thank you” and 23 others commented that it means “thank you” only when done to truckers. 17 comments said it doesn't mean “thank you” in Aotearoa/New Zealand, either, as Nathan claims. A small number of comments said it is a rude and aggressive gesture (3) and it means your car is in trouble (2).

Here, we can see many, some contradictory, meanings of flicking hazard lights. This same gesture can mean different things depending on who you are doing to (i.e., truckers vs non-truckers). Some of those apparently from Aotearoa/New Zealand disagreed with Nathan. The comment section here also functions as an educational forum, sometimes finding other potential meanings of the act that one did not realize, as some comments are responding to others.

There are also many ways to say “thank you,” according to the comments. 200 comments said they wave to say “thank you” without specifying how they wave. 24 specifically commented that they wave inside the car, which can be small and subtle. 21 others said they wave inside the

car, via rearview mirror. 3 said they wave with their hand outside the window. 27 said lifting one or more fingers off the steering wheel is how they say “thank you.” 14 said they nod to thank inside the car.

Second, some suggested where they need to look, indicating what it entailed in communication—not just understanding the meaning of the word but to know where to look to find the “word” which comes in various gestures, in driver communications but also in other types of communication:

Letitia: not looking at the right spot (inside the car) (55 likes) (#5)

Paul: You're looking at the wrong spots for the thank you, we wave with the left hand (#8)

Shell85039: we wave look in the car (#14)

Teth: The Sydney wave is inside the car, near the central rear view mirror. You have to know where to look for it. (#23)

Jenst4r: ...most wave with left hand to be seen through the car. Maybe you're looking at the wrong spot? (#30)

Chris Pearse: We wave in the car, you just need to look thru their car (#45)

Third, there were comments on the changing meanings. 15 commented that people used to thank others by flicking hazard lights, but not anymore. This suggestion of changing meanings and people adapting to it is also important to acknowledge in language education because it destabilizes the “correctness” of a specific meaning: it can change.

Fourth, the regional differences in meanings of words—in this case, flicking the hazard lights—were mentioned. 36 mentioned it is only the Sydney people where Nathan is living that do not thank other drivers. 15 commentators generalized it as a city thing—only city people do not thank others, some commenting how people do thank other drivers in rural areas where they live. 5 commentators mentioned using hazard lights to thank other drivers is a South African thing, which connects to the next point.

Fifth, related to the fourth point, some mentioned the meaning of the word being borrowed and spreading. One mentioned that they picked that flicking hazard light to mean “thank you” while traveling to South Africa and now they use it that way. PhilUOK (#59) wrote

“It's a South African thing that we brought to NZ.” Robin (#54) wrote: “in South Africa they do the hazards. seen it once in Aus. must have been a Kiwi.” One commentor mentioned they started doing it after staying in Aotearoa/New Zealand. These comments suggest that the hazard lights as “thank you” is a South African thing, which was brought to Aotearoa/New Zealand (though not everywhere), from where it was brought to Australia, all through drivers learning this new meaning and possibly using it in that way because of this post.

In sum, these comments suggest that, for drivers, meanings of a gesture can be multiple and shifting, some people learning new ones and using them in new ways, spreading this new meaning. Considering driver communication is very important because it can create life-or-death situations as miscommunications can lead to car crashes, their communication practices cannot be dismissed as a trivial matter. Yet, drivers survive with this fluidity and uncertainty of communicative practice, which suggests language education can learn something from it.

### **3.3.3 What We Can Learn from Driver Communication: Comparison with Language Classroom**

The above analysis of the comments on the TikTok post suggests that language learning in general can be fluid with the expectation that an interlocutor may not fully understand what you mean. For clarification, we can compare the ways drivers learn and continue to communicate with each other with language education, such as in the Japanese-as-a-Foreign-Language classroom.

In terms of the teacher of the driver language, initially it is the driving instructor, but soon after, as the stop-sign discussion suggests, other drivers become the teachers: one learns from other drivers through their encounters with them, modeling them and being “corrected” by them through gentle flaunts or aggressive taunting and honking. That is, everyone becomes the teacher and individual drivers create their own ever-growing idiolect of driver communication through continuing encounters with others. In contrast, language education in classrooms usually has a clearly defined teacher, although some “native speakers” can be brought in as an additional resource.

Teaching resources for driver language include the official drivers’ manuals and other resources that driving schools or government departments (e.g., Department of Motor Vehicles in the US) provide. However, as seen in the case of the stop sign, meanings are fluid and colloquial

usage can override such official meanings. In the case of the TikTok post on “thank you,” teaching (or rather, learning) resources can be others’ reactions to your act as well as an *ad hoc* discussion forum, like on TikTok or other social media platforms. This allows for defying standardization processes. For language education, teaching resources include textbooks, grammar books, and dictionaries, which tend to be based on standard language and work as standardizing mechanisms.

The “native speaker” in driver communication would be every driver. Although drivers may adjust to the “local” people’s way of driving and communicating, such local ways can be critiqued as in the case of Sophie Nathan’s TikTok post. What we can learn from driver communication in this light is that communication can exist and be learned without a clear-cut standard or model supposedly embodied by the “native speaker.” In contrast, in classroom learning, the “native speaker” is considered as the model of good use of the target language, based on unit-thinking as mentioned.

Communication modes for driver language include actual uttered words, gestures, and facial expressions, which are all the same as in general language, though general language also includes reading and writing. Driver language further includes speed (e.g., speeding up in frustration after passing a slow car), the distance between the car in front of yours (e.g., tailgating), blinkers, headlights (e.g., flashing, blinking), honking, as well as the type of car you drive and stickers on the car that send messages, which resembles communication by the clothing one wears in general linguistic practices. Driver communication expands the multimodality of communication, pushing us to think of ways we may be communicating in daily life without even realizing it.

In terms of the naming of language, driver communication does not have clear labels, though how people drive in certain areas can be commented on. In comparison, classroom language teaching is based on labels like “Japanese language,” deriving from and further perpetuating the unit-thinking of language connected to the nation-state ideology. The name usually overlaps with that of the nation-state because naming it makes it seem concrete and existing through history (Balibar, 1991), but “dialects” are also named. What we can take from driver language is that we do not need to label a specific language to be able to communicate with each other. That is, we don’t need the “Japanese language” label to be able to communicate,

which is often taken for granted to the degree that it is difficult to forego in favor of idiolects or linguistic repertoire.

In terms of spaces of communication, the TikTok comments suggest differences by country as well as an urban-rural difference, though meanings can be brought in and spread from another area. In language classrooms, it is often based on the nation-state ideology that shapes what is taught as a “foreign language,” “second language,” or “heritage language.” The main difference is how official that space-language designation is in language classrooms, perpetuating the nation-state ideology.

In terms of fluidity, both driver’s language and general language are diverse, fluid, and changing. However, driver’s language tends to acknowledge that aspect more, with the awareness of possible miscommunication and uncertainty. In general language, as taught in the classroom, this fluidity is often ignored with deviation from the standard being treated as “wrong” and thus something to be “corrected.” What we can learn from driver language is that communications, even ones that affect life-or-death situations, can be diverse, fluid, and uncertain thus negotiated. Therefore, incorporating this understanding in language classrooms can be possible.

Misunderstandings can happen in driver communication, which can lead to new learning, as in the case of the stop sign and in what the TikTok comments suggest. There can be misunderstandings because you assign different meanings to the same sign/gesture or because you were “looking at the wrong place” as suggested by some TikTok commenters. Also in the language classroom, misunderstanding (i.e., making mistakes in assignments and tests) can lead to learning something new. What the investigation of driver language highlights, however, is learning from miscommunication can exist without hierarchizing those who miscommunicated as lower—low grade, punishment, embarrassment, etc.—though it may involve yelling and taunting by some.

In summary, what we can learn from driver language is that language can exist (1) without clearcut rules or a model user of the language, (2) even if they are diverse and multimodal, (3) without a label for the language, (4) without consistent relationship to certain space. This justifies counter-standardization practices such as learning idiolects that differ from people to people, the concept that neo-immersion is based on. If one person has survived using their idiolect thus far and confusions can be solved through discussions and negotiations, it is not

so problematic that language education is based on learning idiolects rather than standard language that inherently reinforces power relations. Language as suggested above can then be learned from (1) reactions of other people, (2) discussions about diverse meanings, (3) through negotiations when understood meanings differ.

This kind of pedagogy—Post-Unit-Thinking Pedagogy—does not revolve around one “correct” version based on the standard language chosen for the social status of its speakers. Such pedagogy would be conducive to creating comfortable speakers, who feel comfortable with what they speak without fear of being judged and graded, because there is no “correct” criteria to judge their speech against. Misunderstanding in such pedagogy is not a deficient experience to get a bad grade but an opportunity to learn.

Driver language is taught at driving schools that impose the official version—what may be called the standard language of drivers—which is then tested to get the driver’s license. This resembles learning standard language in classroom. However, from the beginning, this standardized version is supplemented by family and friends who teach new drivers when they are preparing for their driving test, and throughout your driving life by watching others drive and react to your driving (i.e., immersion). In general language learning, after the initial classroom learning, one can learn through interacting with others, copying others’ speech and adjusting your own based on others’ reactions (Firth & Wagner, 2007; Harris, 1990). However, the “native speaker” ideology often puts “native speakers” in the teacher role even in daily conversations (Iino 2006), which differs from driver language where everyone learns from each other. Also, this mutual adjustment of language in general language is not often acknowledged as legitimate (for its critique, see Firth & Wagner, 2007). This article calls for this more immersive learning by showing the efficacy of the ways driver language is negotiated and learned.

In short, investigations of driver language suggest a possibility for language education that goes beyond unit-thinking—Post-Unit-Thinking education—through avoiding seeing language as a discrete bonded unit with one “correct” version—standard language.

#### **4. Conclusion**

Japanese language does not exist as a bounded, internally homogeneous unit. Believing in the existence of such Japanese language is based on problematic unit-thinking and is conducive to the standardization that imposed one static version of the language, Standard Japanese, onto

others, in due course hierarchizing the diverse speakers. While language classrooms tend to implement this idea of unit-thinking of language and carrying out standardization (Mori et al., 2000), this article offered critiques of such practices and explored some alternative pedagogies.

Besides neo-immersion to teach idiolects and moving away from the “native speaker” concept in favor of “comfortable speakers,” this article offered examples of language and its learning through investigating driver communication practices. Pointing out the possibility of language being fluid, uncertain, and multiple with its learning scattered around and done through misunderstandings and negotiations, this article sought to show how this is a possible, alternative way to see language and language education. These ideas can be incorporated in classroom teachings as a start, but ultimately, I would suggest neo-immersion that is based on the teaching of idiolects that moves away from standardization and thus unit-thinking. I hope this article’s revisiting the notion of “Japanese language” as a bounded homogeneous language and exploring ways to teach the language without standardization impulses and unit-thinking—Post-Unit Thinking Pedagogy—opens up new areas of discussion and exploration in language education.

## Notes

- 1 Because the concept of “Japanese language” is based on unit-thinking, it should have quotation marks throughout this article. However, for readability, I forego with such quotation marks. This applies to the notion of “language” as well as concepts like “bilingual” and “multilingual.”
- 2 The notion of “comfortable speaker” differs theoretically from the Master Apprentice Program because the Master Apprentice Program does not necessarily move away from the notion of “native speaker.”

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