

German Institute for Japanese Studies (DIJ Tokyo)

DIJ Study Group



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Speaking of competence: Lived experiences of language between the private and the professional

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Japan is experiencing a growing influx of international migrants. These individuals establish new social connections in both their private and professional lives, which often involves learning Japanese. However, Japanese is just one resource within a broader, multilingual repertoire. In these contexts, issues of language competence become particularly salient, which raises the question what it means to be a “competent” language user in an age of accelerated mobility in contemporary Japan.

This presentation explores the lived experiences of multilingual individuals in Japan, focusing on two spheres that typically require distinct sets of communicative competences: romantic relationships and workplaces. Although these spheres may seem unrelated at first, perceptions of language competence in both contexts are shaped by emotional responses and social evaluations. Drawing on data from narrative interviews, I demonstrate how multilinguals rationalize their interactional partners’ behavior and attribute intentional states to them to make sense of their experiences and their implications for perceptions of language competence. Traditionally, language competence has been viewed as residing in the individual. However, I argue that competence should instead be understood as an intersubjective capability that emerges in interactions between individuals, across time and spaces, and institutional contexts, all while being intertwined with emotional expressions. Competence, in this sense, arises from the constant negotiation between situated interactions and individuals’ metapragmatic monitoring and interpretation of these interactions.

Florian Grosser is a doctoral student in the Department of Linguistics at the University of Vienna. He specializes in sociolinguistics and linguistic anthropology, focusing on multilingualism in Japan. His research interests include the narratives of mobile individuals’ lived experiences of language. Using discourse analysis, he examines interactions in romantic relationships and workplace narratives in Japan to understand perceptions of competence. Since February 2025, Florian has been a PhD student at the DIJ Tokyo.

About:

The DIJ Study Group is a forum for scholars from all disciplines conducting research on contemporary or modern Japan. The event is open to all.

This session is organized by Celia Spoden.

This is a public event. Please be aware that audio-visual recordings may be made, stored, and published during and after the event.

Hybrid Event:

On-site participation: please register via email to spoden@dijtokyo.org until March 25, 2025.

Online participation: please register via our [webpage](#).

Venue:

Online and DIJ Tokyo: <https://www.dijtokyo.org/access/>