

JAPANESE LANGUAGE

A rich blend of outside influence and internal innovation



Calligraphy

Calligraphy is an art form in which the aim is to use brush and ink to bring out the beauty of the characters. (Photo courtesy of Getty Images)

Introduction

As of 2017, Japan's population stood at about 126.67 million, and linguistically it is a nearly homogenous nation and most of the population using the same language. This means that the Japanese language is the ninth most spoken language in the world. However, the language is spoken in scarcely any region outside Japan.

There are many theories about the origin of the Japanese language. A number of scholars believe that syntactically it is close to such Altaic languages as Turkish and Mongolian, and its syntactic similarity to Korean is widely acknowledged. There is also

evidence that its morphology and vocabulary were influenced prehistorically by the Malayo-Polynesian languages to the south.

The Japanese writing system comes from Chinese, although the languages spoken by the Japanese and Chinese are completely different. After Chinese writing was introduced sometime in the fifth or sixth century, it was supplemented by two phonetic scripts (*hiragana* and *katakana*) that were transformed from the Chinese characters.

A large number of local dialects are still used. Whereas standard Japanese, which is based on the speech of Tokyo, has been gradually spreading throughout the country under the influence of media such as radio, television, and movies, the dialects spoken by the people of Kyoto and Osaka, in particular,

continue to flourish and maintain their prestige.

Phonology

Speakers of Spanish and Italian will find that the short vowels of Japanese—*a, i, u, e, o*—are pronounced very similarly to the vowels of those languages. Long vowels—*aa, ii, uu, ei* or *ee, oo*—are produced by doubling the length of the short vowels (although *ei* is often pronounced as two separate vowels). The distinction between short and long vowels is crucial, as it changes the meaning of a word.

The consonants are *k, s, sh, t, ch, ts, n, h, f, m, y, r, w, g, j, z, d, b,* and *p*. The fricative *sh* (as in English “shoot”), along with the affricates *ch, ts,* and *j* (as in English “charge,” “gutsy,” and “jerk,” respectively) are treated as single consonants. The *g* sound is always the hard *g* of English “game,” not that of “gene.”

A major difference from English is that Japanese has no stress accent: equal stress is given each syllable. And whereas English syllables are sometimes elongated, in Japanese, strings of syllables are spoken with the regularity of a metronome. Like English, Japanese does have a system of high and low pitch accents.

Grammar

As for basic structure, the typical Japanese sentence follows a pattern of subject-object-verb. For example, *Taro ga ringo o tabeta* literally means “Taro an apple ate.”

Japanese often omit the subject or the object—or even both—when they feel that it will be understood from the context, that is, when the speaker or writer is confident that the person being addressed already has certain information about the situation in question. In such a case, the sentence given above might become, *ringo o tabeta* (“ate an apple”) or simply *tabeta* (“ate”).

In Japanese, unlike English, word order

does not indicate the grammatical function of nouns in a sentence. Nor are nouns inflected for grammar case, as in some languages. Grammatical function is instead indicated by particles that follow the noun, the more important ones being *ga, wa, o, ni,* and *no*. The particle *wa* is especially important, because it flags the topic or theme of a sentence.

There is no indication of either person or number in Japanese verbal inflections. In the modern language, all verbs in their dictionary forms end in the vowel *u*. Thus in English it would be said that the verb *taberu* means “to eat,” although actually it is the present tense and means “eat/eats” or “will eat.” Some other inflectional forms are *tabenai* (“does not eat” or “will not eat”), *tabeyo* (“let’s eat” or “someone may eat”), *tabetai* (“want/wants to eat”), *tabeta* (“ate”), *tabereba* (“if someone eats”), and *tabero* (“eat!”).

Written Japanese

While the Chinese use their characters or ideograms to write each and every word, the Japanese devised two separate forms of phonetic script, called *kana*, to use in combination with Chinese characters. At times the written language also contains roman letters—in acronyms such as IBM, product numbers, and even entire foreign words—so that a total of four different scripts are needed to write modern Japanese.

Chinese characters—called *kanji* in Japanese—are actually ideograms, each one of which symbolizes a thing or an idea. It is common for one *kanji* to have more than one sound. In Japan, they are used to write both words of Chinese origin and native Japanese words.

There are two forms of syllabic *kana* script. One is called *hiragana*, which was mainly used by women in olden times. It consists of 48 characters and is used for writing native Japanese words, particles, verb endings, and often for writing those Chinese loanwords that cannot be written with the characters officially approved for general use.

The other *kana* script, called *katakana*, is

also a group of 48 characters. It is chiefly used for writing loanwords other than Chinese, for emphasis, for onomatopoeia, and for the scientific names of flora and fauna.

Both kinds of *kana* are easier to write than the full forms of the original Chinese characters from which they were taken.

Although the more complete Japanese dictionaries carry definitions of up to 50,000 characters, the number currently in use is much smaller. In 1946, the Ministry of Education fixed the number of characters for general and official use at 1,850, including 996 taught at elementary and junior high school. This list was replaced in 2010 by a somewhat expanded though similar list of 2,136. Publications other than newspapers are not limited to this list, however, and many readers know the meaning of considerably more characters than are taught in the standard public school curriculum.

It is customary for Japanese to be written or printed in vertical lines that are read from top to bottom. The lines begin at the right-hand side of the page, and so ordinary books usually open from what would be the back of a Western-language book. Exceptions are books and periodicals devoted to special subjects—scientific and technical matter—which are printed in horizontal lines and read from left to right. Nowadays there is a tendency to print books in horizontal lines. These publications open in the same way as their Western counterparts.

Loanwords

Japanese has not only an abundance of native words but also a large number of words whose origin is Chinese. Many of the Chinese loanwords are today so much a part of daily language that they are not perceived to have come from outside Japan. The cultural influence of China over the centuries was such that many words used in an intellectual or philosophical context are of Chinese origin. When new concepts were introduced from the West during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, they were often translated by making up new

combinations of Chinese characters, and such words represent a significant body of intellectual vocabulary used by modern Japanese.

To these loanwords are added many words borrowed from English and other European languages. While this coining of new words continues, it has been common to use Western words as they are, for example, “volunteer,” “newscaster,” and so on. Japanese also invented such pseudo-English words as “nighter” for night games and “salaryman” for the salaried worker. This tendency has markedly increased in recent years.

Although the volume of Japan’s loanword “exports” is much smaller than its “imports,” a number of Japanese words are now in familiar use in other languages. Examples in English include the following: *anime*, *dojo*, *futon*, *geisha*, *haiku*, *hara-kiri*, *judo*, *kaizen*, *kamikaze*, *karaoke*, *karate*, *kimono*, *manga*, *ninja*, *origami*, *ronin*, *sake*, *samurai*, *sashimi*, *sayonara*, *shogun*, *sudoku*, *sumo*, *sushi*, *tempura*, and *tsunami*.

Honorific Language

The Japanese have developed an entire system of honorific language, called *keigo*, that is used to show a speaker’s respect for the person being spoken to. This involves different levels of speech, and the proficient user of *keigo* has a wide range of words and expressions from which to choose, in order to produce just the desired degree of politeness. A simple sentence could be expressed in more than 20 different ways depending on the status of the speaker relative to the person being addressed.

Deciding on an appropriate level of polite speech can be quite challenging, since relative status is determined by a complex combination of factors, such as social status, rank, age, gender, and even favors done or owed. There is a neutral or middle-ground level of language that is used when two people meet for the first time, are not aware of each other’s group affiliation, and whose social standing appears to be similar (that is,

no obvious differences in dress or manner).

Mastery of *keigo* is by no means simple, and some Japanese are much more proficient in it than others. The almost countless honorific terms are found in various parts of speech—nouns, adjectives, verbs, and adverbs. So-called exalted terms are used when referring to the addressee and things directly associated with him or her, such as relatives, the house, or possessions. By contrast, there are special humble terms that one uses as the speaker, when referring to oneself or things associated with oneself. It is the distance created by these two contrasting modes that expresses the proper attitude of respect for the person being spoken to.

Names

Japanese have family names and given names, used in that order. (English-language newspapers and magazines in Japan, however, usually present names in the order common among Western cultures, with given name first.) When addressing another person it is common to use *san*—the equivalent of Mr., Mrs. (or Ms.)—after the family name. The suffix *chan* is often attached to children's names and given names of close friends. Other titles, such as *sensei* for “teacher” or “doctor,” are also attached as suffixes after the family name.

Given names and their Chinese characters are chosen for their auspicious meanings and happy associations in the hope that they will bring the child good luck. As of 2015, the government has authorized a total of 2,998 characters for use in given names.

Typing Japanese Text

Typing in Japanese used to be performed on bulky machines. In 1978, the first Japanese word processor system went on sale, allowing the Japanese language to be input phonetically via a keyboard. When Japanese words are typed using word processing

software, either one of the two *kana* scripts or the roman alphabet can be used. Input method editor (IME) software displays phonetic matches and allows the user to select the correct characters.

The use of *keitai* (cell phones) to send text messages via either e-mail or instant messaging has become hugely popular in Japan, particularly among young people. Text entry on the cell phone's small keypad is done by using the thumb and forefinger to push number keys multiple times to select characters from a particular sequence of *kana*. Once the *kana* have been entered they can be converted to Chinese characters as necessary. In PC-based messaging there was already a tendency to make frequent use of abbreviations, truncated words, and symbols, and this has further accelerated in *keitai* messaging. Japanese has its own extensive series of emoticons known as *kaomaji* (“face characters”), and there are also many graphical *emoji* (“picture characters”) which can be easily embedded in cell phone text messages in place of words or phrases.

As children who grew up communicating with short text messages sent via cell phones and PCs become adults and enter the workplace, they are changing the way that written Japanese is used, often to the chagrin of their elders.

Hiragana

あ	い	う	え	お
a	i	u	e	o
か	き	く	け	こ
ka	ki	ku	ke	ko
さ	し	す	せ	そ
sa	shi	su	se	so
た	ち	つ	て	と
ta	chi	tsu	te	to
な	に	ぬ	ね	の
na	ni	nu	ne	no
は	ひ	ふ	へ	ほ
ha	hi	fu	he	ho
ま	み	む	め	も
ma	mi	mu	me	mo
や		ゆ		よ
ya		yu		yo
ら	り	る	れ	ろ
ra	ri	ru	re	ro
わ				を
wa				wo
ん				
n				

が	ぎ	ぐ	げ	ご
ga	gi	gu	ge	go
ざ	じ	ず	ぜ	ぞ
za	ji	zu	ze	zo
だ	ぢ	づ	で	ど
da	ji	zu	de	do

ば	び	ぶ	べ	ぼ
ba	bi	bu	be	bo
ぱ	ぴ	ぷ	ぺ	ぽ
pa	pi	pu	pe	po

きゃ	きゅ	きょ
kyā	kyū	kyō
しゃ	しゅ	しょ
shā	shū	shō
ちゃ	ちゅ	ちょ
chā	chū	chō
にゃ	にゅ	にょ
nyā	nyū	nyō
ひゃ	ひゅ	ひょ
hyā	hyū	hyō
みゃ	みゅ	みょ
myā	myū	myō
りゃ	りゅ	りょ
ryā	ryū	ryō
ぎゃ	ぎゅ	ぎょ
gyā	gyū	gyō
じゃ	じゅ	じょ
jā	jū	jō
びゃ	びゅ	びょ
byā	byū	byō
ぴゃ	ぴゅ	ぴょ
pyā	pyū	pyō

Katakana

ア	イ	ウ	エ	オ
a	i	u	e	o
カ	キ	ク	ケ	コ
ka	ki	ku	ke	ko
サ	シ	ス	セ	ソ
sa	shi	su	se	so
タ	チ	ツ	テ	ト
ta	chi	tsu	te	to
ナ	ニ	ヌ	ネ	ノ
na	ni	nu	ne	no
ハ	ヒ	フ	ヘ	ホ
ha	hi	fu	he	ho
マ	ミ	ム	メ	モ
ma	mi	mu	me	mo
ヤ		ユ		ヨ
ya		yu		yo
ラ	リ	ル	レ	ロ
ra	ri	ru	re	ro
ワ				ヲ
wa				wo
ン				
n				

ガ	ギ	グ	ゲ	ゴ
ga	gi	gu	ge	go
ザ	ジ	ズ	ゼ	ゾ
za	ji	zu	ze	zo
ダ	ヂ	ヅ	デ	ド
da	ji	zu	de	do

バ	ビ	ブ	ベ	ボ
ba	bi	bu	be	bo
パ	ピ	プ	ペ	ポ
pa	pi	pu	pe	po

キャ	キュ	キョ
kyā	kyū	kyō
シャ	シュ	ショ
shā	shū	shō
チャ	チュ	チョ
chā	chū	chō
ニャ	ニユ	ニョ
nyā	nyū	nyō
ヒャ	ヒユ	ヒョ
hyā	hyū	hyō
ミャ	ミュ	ミョ
myā	myū	myō
リャ	リュ	リョ
ryā	ryū	ryō
ギャ	ギユ	ギョ
gyā	gyū	gyō
ジャ	ジュ	ジョ
jā	jū	jō
ビャ	ビユ	ビョ
byā	byū	byō
ピャ	ピユ	ピョ
pyā	pyū	pyō