# Japanese Language: An Overview

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## Geography and Its Place in World Languages

Japanese is spoken by some 125 million people in Japan and in pockets outside of Japan, in such places as Hawaii and Brazil where Japanese immigrants settled around the turn of the twentieth century. Speakers of Japanese are also scattered around in Taiwan and Korea where Japanese was the official language during the Japanese colonial period (Taiwan 1895-1945; Korea 1910-1945), although this number is decreasing and the speakers aging. With this many speakers, Japanese is ranked as ninth in the world in terms of number of speakers. A 2006 MLA statistics showed that more than 66,000 study Japanese at the college level and more than 500,000 at the secondary level in the United States.

According to one kind of language classification, Japanese is considered to be an agglutinating language. This means that a word may consist of several meaningful elements chained together. For example, the word (or a 'sentence'?) tataseraretakunakatta single-handedly takes care of the meaning "he did not want to be made to stand." Although the definition of what constitutes a word is by no means indisputable, it is assumed, for the purpose of this essay, that one can distinguish several meaningful elements in this word, i.e., tat- is the verb 'stand', -as- is a causative marker, -erare- marks passive, -taku marks desire, naka- is a negative marker, -tta- indicates completed action. In contrast, languages like Spanish or French are called inflectional languages. For instance, the o ending in the Spanish verb ending -o in vivo, 'I live', contains a host of different types of information: that the verb is first person singular, present tense, indicative mood, etc. Chinese and, to a lesser degree, English belong to yet another language group, called the analytic languages, in which fusion of the inflective or agglutinative sort occurs to much less extent. Ainu, a language spoken in Japan, and now practically extinct, belongs to a fourth language group, called the polysynthetic languages.

There are other ways of classifying languages. If one uses as a criterion the method by which major constituents (such as subject nominal 'S', object nominal 'O', and verb complex 'V') are ordered in canonical sentences, then Japanese is a verb-final language (SOV language, or more generally, XV language) and English is a SVO language. Korean is also XV and Chinese SVO. Among world languages, Japanese and Korean belong to the most common SOV/(XV) type.

## Genetic Affiliation of Japanese, Korean, and Chinese

Scholars have long been interested in the question of if and how Japanese is genetically related to other languages in areas that surround the Japanese islands. To solve this question, historical linguists have developed a scientific method of systematic cross-language comparison called the comparative method. Using this method, they have compared language pairs such as French and Spanish, English and Dutch, etc., and have observed systematic and consistent sound changes and little semantic shifts, which allowed them to conclude that these languages are genetically related. In the case of Japanese, scholars have not succeeded in finding a common ancestral language or a sister language, i.e. a language that shares the same ancestral language. Some have speculated that Japanese is related to Tamil, a Dravidian language spoken in southern India and Sri Lanka, to Korean, or to languages in Southeast Asia, but none of these theories has passed the scrutiny of historical linguists.

Of these possibilities, the Korean-Japanese connection is most worthy of attention. Given the geographical proximity and the makeup of the peoples living in these countries, it is natural to suppose some kinship between these languages. Moreover, Korean grammar is quite similar to Japanese and its resemblance to the Japanese rhythmic structure in speech is uncanny. Similarities end here, however. In Japanese, a typical rhythmic unit (called mora) has an open consonant-vowel (CV) structure, while in Korean, a canonical syllable is closed having the CVC structure. Vocabulary, too, is another matter. Korean and Japanese both borrowed a large amount of Chinese vocabulary (compare Chinese tushuguan 'library', Korean tosekwen, and Japanese toshokan), thus the fact that Korean and Japanese share a large number of Chinese vocabulary leads us nowhere. But if one compares only indigenous words, one finds that Korean and Japanese share very few common words. The prevailing opinion about the connection between these languages is that, frankly, no one knows. This is due to a lack of conclusive data that can show one way or the other about such a putative relationship. If there is a connection between the two, the time depth of their separation from a common ancestral language may be so remote that much evidence for it has been lost. At this time, any such evidence, if it exists at all, is well beyond detection by the power of current historical linguistics.

Neither Japanese nor Korean seems related genetically to Chinese. Chinese belongs to a group of languages called Sino-Tibetan, a family that includes such languages as Tibetan and Cantonese. Chinese is SVO and Japanese and Korean are both XV. Chinese is a tone language (having distinct meanings differentiated by pitch) though Japanese too is similar in that high and low pitches can sometimes differentiate meanings (e.g., HAshi 'chopsticks' and haSHI 'bridge'; see below on the Japanese sound system). Ryukyuan (or Okinawan), spoken in Okinawa Prefecture, has been

found to be related to Japanese. Ryukuan and Japanese are not mutually comprehensible (thus they appear to be different languages), but the comparative method has demonstrated that Ryukyuan retains much older forms of Japanese. Dialects of Japanese spoken in islands between Okinawa's main island and Kyūshū were found to embody characteristics that suggest that grammar and lexical elements gradually moved away from the mainland dialects. For these reasons, if we take mutual intelligibility to be the yardstick for determining dialect status, Ryukyuan must be considered to be a separate language from Japanese, as opposed to a mere dialect, although the historical connection is definitively proven. The similarity between Ryukyuan and Japanese may be likened to that between Italian and Portuguese.

## Is Japanese at All Like Chinese?

No and yes. First, Japanese is unlike Chinese since, as we saw above, the grammars of these languages are quite different. Chinese is SVO; Japanese XV. Words are not formed of compounds as much in Chinese (which is a characteristic called "isolating" or "analytic") as they are in Japanese (which is called "agglutinating"). However, consider this: the Japanese did not have their own writing system until the third century, when Japanese scholars decided to appropriate China's writing system.

To adopt the Chinese writing system to write down a language like Japanese that operates on different principles was very much like fitting a square peg in a round hole. To make this mesalliance work, interesting developments took place over several centuries. Initially, Chinese was adopted as the fledgling state's official written language and all documents were written in Chinese. Special problems, however, occurred with native vocabulary, especially people's names and place names. Soon, the Japanese figured out that by affixing a Chinese character to each Japanese mora (recall that a mora is the basic rhythmic unit of Japanese), they could indeed devise a workable writing system that combined Chinese characters with Japanese sounds, but with the result being that the new word often times ignore the Chinese meaning. Kanji (the name for a Chinese character) in this context lost its original Chinese meaning and came to possess only a phonetic value. The first use of this system of writing, now known as man'yōgana, appeared in the inscriptions on swords and mirrors in the sixth century. This type of writing is called man'yōgana because it is the predominant way of writing Japanese found in *Man'yōshu*, a collection of some 4,500 poems believed to be compiled by the poet Otomo no Yakamochi in the Nara era (710-784). But the choice of which sounds are expressed by which kanji was not at all uniform among the practitioners of man'yōgana. By the end of the Nara era and the beginning of Heian (794-1192), a total in excess of one thousand such kanji were in use to express approximately a hundred distinct Japanese mora 'syllabic unit'.

In sum, Japan has borrowed much from China: the writing system and many actual words, not to mention many aspects of political and social organization. But if we consider Chinese and Japanese languages as systems of communication, we still find that they are very distinct.

## Is Japanese Difficult to Learn?

U.S. students find Japanese to be more difficult than commonly-taught European languages such as French, Spanish, or German. In general, it is estimated that it will take an average American learner four times longer to reach a level of competence in Japanese than it does to reach the same level of competence in a European language. There are several reasons for this. Although speaking Japanese is perhaps not any more difficult than learning one of the major European languages, several factors contribute to making Japanese challenging. The first is Japanese typology, that is, the typological characteristics of Japanese--English is SVO and Japanese is XV. This difference begets a number of other linguistic characteristics peculiar to this XV group that speakers of English are not used to, such as the postpositioning of particles to indicate the grammatical relation of the noun to the predicate. But, such difference can relatively easily be overcome.

The second factor is cultural distance. In learning Japanese, as is true for learning any foreign language, learning the culturally appropriate use of language (and even the body language that goes with it) is extremely important. This aspect of language learning is what most distinguishes learning Japanese from learning other languages like French and German. Consider the fact that the cultural distance between, say, the United States and France is much smaller than that between Japan and the United States. This means two things. First, it is often acceptable to exercise American cultural and behavioral norms in France or when learning French without being obtrusive. In contrast, the cultural distance between Japan and the United States is quite large.

So, when it comes to learning Japanese, the learner must learn a new set of appropriate linguistic and non-linguistic behavior that is based on different cultural assumptions, values, and expectations in order to become an unobtrusive user of the language. Second, learning certain words of behavior appropriate for living in Japan goes hand in hand with learning Japanese. Furthermore, being culturally attuned to Japan involves not only learning to behave appropriately but also learning about Japanese history, people, and society.

In the case of France, many of us are already familiar with its history. One knows what the French Revolution was about. But can we assume the same level of knowledge about Japan? Does the Meiji Restoration resonate among Americans the same way that

the French Revolution does? In learning language, and theorizing about language, one needs to be alert to the fact that language does not exist in a vacuum; language is meaningful only when it is understood in the web of connections with its people and culture, its present and past. To learn Japanese, then, is to become fluent with Japan's cultural codes and to learn the connections that are there now as well as those that lead one back to its historical past.

The third factor having an impact on the difficulty of learning Japanese is the writing system. In addition to the typological features of Japanese and the cultural distance between Japan the United States, many believe that the writing system constitutes a major hindrance to the learner of Japanese. A typical student studying a commonly-taught language can instantly benefit from his/her knowledge of the English alphabet and can guess at the meaning of a word written in that alphabet. The writing system is familiar and the usefulness of a shared alphabet is undeniable. The Japanese writing system however consists of two sets of mora-based symbols, roughly one for each moraic unit, called hiragana and katakana--used more or less systematically for different purposes. Japanese also uses two thousand or so (for basic adult literacy) kanji characters borrowed from Chinese. In contrast to Chinese, in which a character is associated with only one pronunciation, a kanji may be pronounced in a number of ways, depending on the context in which it appears. Japanese children spend thousands of hours learning both how to write the characters and how to identify which sounds a given character gets at a given time. More than 1/4 of the total class time in elementary school education is devoted to teaching children how to read and write. If a student of Japanese in the United States would like to learn to read even a simple Japanese newspaper article, he should know what kind of challenge this entails.

To make matters even more difficult, a Japanese text may be written in two orientations. A newspaper article may be read vertically, starting from the right uppermost corner of a text, reading down to the bottom of the line, then moving to the next line to the left. Other texts are printed so that they are meant to be read horizontally, much like an English text. Usually texts in the literary genre are written vertically, while those in the social and natural sciences are written horizontally. Books open left to right and read like an English book if the text is written horizontally, but they open and read from right to left if the text is printed vertically. In some publications in which texts of both types need to be merged into a single book, the book might have two sections—one for a horizontal text, which reads like a regular English book, and another for vertical texts, which reads from the opposite end. For the uninitiated, this is certainly confusing.

## The Sound System

Japanese has 16 phonetic units (phonemes), and most of these units consist of both a consonant and a vowel. The inventory of vowels is relatively small. Compare this to English, which has with 24 consonants and 15 vowels and to !Xhao, an African language, which has 156 consonants and 28 vowels. The Japanese vowel quality is variously described as "pure" or "like Italian." Japanese vowels are not diphthongized. The high back vowel /u/ is pronounced without rounding, so it sounds very different from the closest English rounded vowel (boot). Japanese has many consonants like English but the way they are pronounced can be different. For instance, a voiced velar stop (/g/) can be nasalized when it appears medially (compare the nasalized /g/ in ongaku 'music' and a non-nasal /g/ in gakkoo 'school'). The liquid /r/ is a tap in Japanese (e.g. karai 'spicy'), very different from the English /r/ in Paris; it is more like the Spanish /r/ in pero 'but'. There is also a moraic /n/, as in the word anshin ('peace of mind'). This consonant takes up one rhythmic unit. One consonant, written as /Q/ in phonemics, denotes a moraic absence of sound (also called more loosely a "double consonant"). Katta 'won' and kata 'shoulder' are different in that the former contains a double consonant and is therefore three moras long, while the latter lacks the double consonant is therefore only two moras long. Just like long and short consonants make a difference in meaning, long and short vowels also make meaning distinctions, and if a speaker neglects to make this distinction, miscommunication will result (compare obaasan 'grandmother, old woman' and obasan 'aunt, middle-aged woman').

## Accent, Intonation, and Rhythm

Many learners of Japanese, when they hear Japanese spoken, think that it has an even, rhythmic, and staccato pattern. When Japanese is spoken, the length of each mora is about the same; it takes as much time to say one mora as it does to say any other mora. This gives the impression of a staccato rhythmic pace. For speakers of English, making long vowels long enough (e.g., Ōoka-san 'Ms Oooka' with three moras of /o/; or hōō 'phoenix', which has four moras; see above discussion of long vowels) and giving sufficient time to moraic silence (/Q/) (e. g., kattyatta tte 'I heard he has bought it', which has seven moras; see above; /Q/ is spelled with a double consonant) requires practice. Though placing so much importance on mora counting may appear strange, difficult, and/or unnecessary to the non-native learner, being sensitive to the number of mora within a word or phrase is of vital importance to the native speaker. For centuries in many poetic and prose literary genres (e.g., tanka and haiku), combinations of five and seven mora phrases provide the underlying rhythmic structure. And even young children in Japan know how many moras there are in a phrase.

Other trouble spots include differentiating word pairs like kani 'crab' and kagi 'key' (if the /g/ is nasalized); tan'i 'unit' and tani 'valley' (the first is a three mora word, second two moras); tsuki 'moon' and suki 'liking' (initial /ts/ for many English speakers is difficult to

make and it sounds like /s/); danko 'resolutely' and ranko 'loud calling' (/d/ and /r/ in Japanese can sound alike). Japanese is not considered to be a pure tonal language, but a placement of high or low pitch can make a difference in meaning. For example (the high pitched mora is written in capitals):

HAna 'Hana', a personal name

haNA 'flower'

hana 'nose' (In actuality this word is pronounced haNA but its underlying form is unaccented hana)

One can easily see how confusing it would be if a speaker did not use the right pitch.

## Grammar

Japanese is an XV language, in which verb (or verb substitute) comes at the end of a sentence and all other constituents such as subject (S) and objects (O) come earlier. We will see below a few of the characteristics that XV languages share. In Japanese, as long as S and O and other major constituents precede the predicate, the ordering of these elements in a sentence is not very important. One maybe wonder how to determine, therefore, who is acting on whom. To avoid this confusion, Japanese has particles that follow the major constituents to mark their relationship to the predicate. This is shown below.

*Erika ga Maya ni nihongo o oshieta.*

Erika (S) Maya (IO) Japanese (DO) taught

Erika taught Maya Japanese.

The particles shown here are ga (marks the subject, S, of a sentence), ni (marks the indirect object, IO), and o (marks the direct object, DO). As long as these particles are placed appropriately, the essential meaning of the above sentence can be expressed through five other variations (that is, there are three ordered slots to be filled with three possible particles, for a total of six possible variations (3 x 2 x 1 = 6)):

2) Erika ga nihongo o Maya ni oshieta.

3) Maya ni Erika ga nihongo o oshieta.

4) Maya ni nihongo o Erika ga oshieta.

5) Nihongo o Erika ga Maya ni oshieta.

6) Nihongo o Maya ni Erika ga oshieta.

This contrasts with the case in English in which word order often times determines meaning (compare Maya taught Erika Japanese and Erika taught Maya Japanese). It is easy to see that controlling these postpositional particles is essential for conveying correct information in Japanese.

Another characteristic of Japanese grammar is its rightheadedness in a noun phrase; that is, the head noun is always preceded by a demonstrative, the quantity marker, and adjective, in that order. This can be seen in the following example:

kono go-nin no atarashii sensei

these five-person of new teacher

these five new teachers

This method of modifying nouns is called "rightheadedness" and it is observed in the possessive construction as well. In the following examples, all the modifiers for the head noun kenkyūshitsu are placed before the head noun.

atarashii sensei no kenkyūshitsu

new teacher of office

new teachers' offices

The same situation obtains even when the modifier takes the form of a sentence (indicated by brackets in the following example):

[go-nin no atarashii sensei o yatotta] daigaku

[five-person of new teacher DO hired] university

the university [that hired five new teachers]

I mentioned earlier that Japanese is an agglutinating language. This is seen in how a complex predicate is formed by gluing together various meaningful word elements in a prescribed order. The example, tatasaretakunakatta 'did not want to be made to stand' we briefly discussed above is another good example of this characteristic.

One of the major characteristics of XV languages, in addition to the ones already listed above, is that an interrogative sentence is formed by adding a sentence final particle, instead of making changes in the orderings of major constituents. Japanese, as an XV

language, makes a declarative sentence into an interrogative simply by adding the final interrogative particle ka (and saying it with a special pitch contour). Study the example below:

Erika ga Maya ni nihongo o oshieta. -> Erika ga Maya ni nihongo o oshieta ka?

Erika taught Maya Japanese. -> Did Erika teach Maya Japanese?

In other sections of this unit, we will introduce the readers to other aspects of the language and will further explore how the Japanese language is situated in Japanese society.

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## Suggested Reading

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