

JAPANESE LANGUAGE

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Overview

Nihongo, the language of Japan, has origins that remain debated. Long considered a member of the so-called Ural-Altaic language family, Japanese shares linguistic features with Mongolian, Turkish, and Finnish. But its closest affinity is with Korean, and these two languages evidently branched out from an ancient proto-language many millennia ago. *Nihongo* is the native language of over 120 million Japanese. As such, it is an important constituent of the national identity and serves to distinguish native from outsider.

As with all languages, Japanese has continually evolved. Major stages include an early form of Japanese, which preceded the incorporation of Chinese vocabulary and writing. A classical Japanese grammar developed around a thousand years ago, and this went through its own development over subsequent centuries until the advent of modern Japanese, which paralleled the creation of the modern nation in the late-19th century. In short, language, society, culture, and history are deeply interconnected and have important implications for the creation of individual and national identity.

Linguistic Features

Japanese, like Korean, is a syllabic language. Its fifty syllables are marked by five vowel sounds and a limited number of consonants. The relatively simple sound system presents a challenge to mastery of languages—such as English—with more complex and varied sounds. Japanese is an agglutinative language, which entails a complex mode of conjugation of verbs and adjectives. Sentence order is subject-object-verb (e.g., ‘Tanaka-book-bought’), and rather than prepositions (from my friend) it uses ‘post-positions’ (my friend from). The language employs no gender markers, plural suffixes, or definite/indefinite articles. Rather, context is key to communication. For instance, if the subject of a sentence is understood in context, it is generally deleted. This linguistic feature, taken to an extreme, has led to claims that truly attuned speakers of Japanese ultimately have no need for words!

Japanese is a hierarchical language, which calls for the use of honorific markers *vis a vis* those of higher status and markers of deference and humility with respect to oneself. There is a clear distinction between formal and informal speech and writing, and between male and female language usage—although such distinctions have changed in recent times, with an increasing egalitarian orientation. And akin to the English language, which absorbed a large Latinate vocabulary following the Norman conquest, Japanese is marked by a major component of loan words from Chinese. These, however, have long since been nativized.

Written Japanese present unusual orthographic challenges, insofar as the Chinese ideographic system forms its basis. Tens of thousands of characters (*kanji*) had to be absorbed—a process that required centuries. And two related *kana* ‘alphabets’ were developed—*hiragana* and *katakana*—to enable the inscription of the fifty-some syllabic sounds of the language. Unlike the Koreans, who centuries ago developed a writing system—*hangul*—that in effect displaced the maddeningly difficult ideographic system, the Japanese have resisted the simplification of their written language. In other words, although the *kanji* ideographic system has Chinese origins, it has formed enduring roots in Japan.

Japanese Language in the Modern Day

With the Meiji period (1868-1912) and the construction of a modern nation, the Japanese language underwent a linguistic ‘reformation’ that simplified and standardized its grammar, syntax, and rhetoric, with the aim of helping

create a linguistic ‘level playing field’ for all Japanese. What had been the so-called Tokyo dialect became the national standard. And although there is still dialectal variation across the nation’s geographic regions, all Japanese are taught the standard usage, which is widely employed by the nation’s mass media. The parallel with Mandarin as the standard Chinese usage, despite that nation’s dauntingly complex dialectal range, bears noting.

Over the course of its modern history, the Japanese language has undergone many changes that reflect the nation’s dramatically-shifting history. One important phenomenon is *gairaigo*— the loan-words taken into the language, predominantly from English. This is certainly not unique to Japanese, but the ease with which foreign words are absorbed— in part thanks to the *katakana* syllabary system, which is used to ‘encode’ the foreign words— is noteworthy.

Schooling in Japan reflects the pedagogical challenges of teaching a difficult native language; many years of study are devoted to learning the thousands of *kanji* required for literacy. The very formalism involved in language study— the attention paid to proper *kanji* stroke order and to the artful calligraphic rendering of *kanji* using age-old brush and ink techniques— has been used to argue for a certain uniform quality of the Japanese national character, which privileges the perfection of form and the building of character via devoted and earnest practice. By the same token, the complexity of Japanese society is ultimately reflected in the manner in which individuals use their language.

Notwithstanding the globalizing influences acting upon it, *Nihongo* remains a vibrant and deeply expressive language that serves the contemporary needs of its speakers while enabling the production of written discourse that is both in touch with the times and rooted in a great literary and intellectual heritage.

Readings

Gottlieb, Nanette, *Language and Society in Japan* (Cambridge, 2005)

Kindaichi, Haruhiko, *The Japanese Language* (Tuttle, 1978)

Miller, Roy Andrew, *The Japanese Language* (Chicago, 1967)

Miller, Roy Andrew, *Japan’s Modern Myth: The Language and Beyond* (Weatherhill, 1982)

Tsujimura, Natsuko, *The Handbook of Japanese Linguistics* (Oxford, 1999)

Unger, James, *Ideogram: Chinese Characters and the Myth of Disembodied Meaning* (Hawaii, 2004)

Discussion Questions and Topics

Give thought to the manner in which individual and societal factors— age, gender, class, personal relationships, and so forth— affect language use.

How is historical change reflected in language use? In the case of modern Japan, how might the prewar imperial period differ in this regard from the postwar, ‘post-imperial’ Japan?

It is often said that a language can only be ‘understood’ if one has achieved proficiency in that language. Discuss the pros and cons of this proposition.

How would you frame a comparison of English and Japanese? What would be the key criteria for such a comparison?

Diagram

Kanji	Hiragana	Katakana
安	あ	ア
以	い	イ
宇	う	ウ
衣	え	エ
於	お	オ

The above represent, from top to bottom, *kanji* and *kana* renderings of five Japanese syllable sounds: 'a' (as in 'father'), 'i' (as in 'heat'), 'u' (as in 'room'), 'e' (as in 'bed'), and 'o' (as in 'road'). Source: Google.image.