

Japanese is Possible!
Lesson 3

Information you will need

- Pronunciation
- Using the Internet
- Plain vs. Polite
- Japanese Music

Vowel Sounds

The vowel sounds in Japanese are as follows:

A as in "father"
E as in "seven eleven"
I as in "Easter treat"
O as in "open, Pope"
U as in "fruity moogle"

You'll notice that the vowels are pronounced the similarly to Spanish, Italian, and Latin (and several other European languages)

Pronunciation of these vowels is very consistant. There are no silent vowels (although sometimes the Japanese choose not to voice a vowel). Each vowel sound is pronounced distinctly.

For example, the word

kaeru

would be pronounced "KAH eh roo". In English, you might want to pronounce it "KAY roo" or "KAY ruh".

The vowels 'i' and 'u' are weak vowels. That means that many times they are not pronounced. The most important example is:

desu (the u is silent - pronounced DESS)

However, don't just go around dropping u's and i's. People will have no idea what you're saying.

Consonant sounds are generally pronounced the same way as in English, but there are a few differences:

R - Pronounced like a combination of 'L' and 'D', with a bit of 'R' mixed in. It's pretty close to how the R is pronounced in Spanish. (It isn't "trilled", however) In Spanish, an R sounds a lot like a 'D'. Consider this: Say "lu." Notice how you

drag the tip of your tongue along the roof of your mouth. To say a Japanese R, just briefly touch the tip to that spot at the moment you say the consonant, and use a little more "punch" in your voice.

F - You can pronounce it like an F, but often it sounds more like an 'H'.

There is no accent in Japanese, meaning there is no emphasis on a particular part of a word. English and Spanish have accents, Japanese does not.

Japanese does have pitch inflections, and this is their substitute for accents. For example, in English, we put stress on a certain part of a word to make it sound right and this is marked by an apostrophe-like symbol in the dictionary. In Japanese, they do not put stress on their words but raise the pitch of their voices instead. In Chinese, there are patterns to move between five different pitches to distinguish a word's meaning. In Japanese, there are only two pitches, but the only real way to grasp where to raise the pitch of your voice is from listening to Japanese speech and repeating it.

For practice in this area:

- Listen to Japanese music
- Watch subtitled (or Japanese language) Anime

Listening to Japanese music is enjoyable, and helps you out tremendously in many areas. You can download MP3s from many websites, and purchase import CD's from many other websites. If you don't know what's good, try downloading MP3's of different songs. When you find out what artists you like, support them by purchasing their CDs.

Some songs I would recommend to anyone are the Xenogears Creid songs. Inspired by the famous Xenogears game for Playstation, these songs are eclectic and beautiful! The lyrics are easy to understand in many of the songs, and the songs are very unique. Some of the songs don't even have lyrics, but they're still wonderful!

For links to great Japanese and Anime related MP3 sites, scroll to the end of this column.

Grammar Terms - part 1

You'll need to know a few basics about grammar to be able to make sentences. I'll go over the basics, to be fair to those of you that slept through English class. ^_^

Subject

The person or thing that performs the action of the sentence's verb.

Example:

The man jumped through the frog.

"man" would be the subject of the sentence, since he is the one who jumped.

Adjective

A word used to describe a person, place, or thing

Example:

The man jumped through the holographic frog.

"holographic" is an adjective, since it DESCRIBES the frog. Since frog is a noun,

any word describing the frog would be an adjective.

Adverb

A word used to modify a verb

Example:

The man quickly jumped through the frog.

"quickly" is the adverb, since it describes how he jumped. Jump is the verb, so any word describing how he jumped would be an adverb.

Direct Object

Is the entity on which the verb is performed

Example:

The woman ate the apple.

Now figuring out the direct object is straightforward - simply ask the question, "She ate WHAT?"

The question would be answered, "the apple". So "apple" would be the direct object.

For practice in this area:

- Purchase a good Japanese grammar book
- Find websites that cover grammar
- Review an English grammar textbook

Plain vs. Polite form

Unlike English, Japanese has distinct levels of formality in speech and writing, four main ones to be precise. One speaks differently among friends than to one's boss. In America, that difference would mainly be reflected in tone of voice, and use of slang words, contractions and so on. In Japanese however, there are actually different words and verb endings for this purpose.

If you've watched Anime, you may have noticed that royalty (princesses, kings) speak differently than most other characters. There are hundreds of examples, including "Ayeka" from Tenchi Muyo.

In most Japanese language courses, the polite form is taught first. The instructors reason that you can use the polite form anywhere (including with friends). The plain form is only acceptable with friends and close family members.

However, the plain form is by far more common in songs, books, manga, anime and on television. Since this website is somewhat focused around anime, and for other good reasons, we will begin by teaching the plain form. Here are a number of reasons.

1. Anime and video games tend to use the plain form, and that is where most people will use their Japanese skills unless they go to Japan. Even if you make Japanese friends in America, they will speak to you with the plain form and will definitely not feel insulted if you do the same. I personally have had conversations with Japanese teenagers, and they have told me that I sound funny because I speak so politely (I learned Japanese starting with the polite form and I consider myself a polite person anyway, so that's why I use it.)

2. Once you've learned a lot of Japanese, and are making progress, it's no problem to learn the polite form later.
3. For motivation, you need to hear what you're learning. It makes it more "real" - it makes you realize you can actually understand some Anime if you learn this word or phrase.
It's a big source of motivation to hear an Anime character say a phrase you're trying to learn. If you focus on the polite form, you won't hear it used much. It's been my experience that I learn "popular Anime" words about 10 X faster than other more obscure words. Besides, to remember a word 4 months later you have to use it (or hear it used).
4. Japanese people cut Americans some slack when it comes to speaking Japanese. When a Japanese speaking American is encountered, the last thing on their mind is "What form is he using?" They are often glad to hear that you are learning Japanese, and you will often be complimented if your vocabulary exceeds 10 words. Times have changed since feudal Japan, where speaking rudely to a Samurai would cost you your life.
5. In the present tense, the plain form of verbs is the form that is printed in dictionaries. This means that you can just pluck a word out of the dictionary and throw it into a sentence with no conjugation.

The Internet

The independent Japanese student's best resource!

There are many webpages on the Internet devoted to the Japanese language, and you can find help on just about every topic. Some examples of things I have seen on webpages:

- Popular words
- Verb endings
- Pronunciation
- Java-based games and software
- Info on Kansai Ben dialect (and others)
- Making your Windows PC "Japanese friendly"
- Software to help you learn Katakana/Hiragana
- Software to help you learn Kanji
- Web-based Japanese-English dictionaries

If you want to find resources such as these, go to any search engine. Type a few words like "Japanese study learn" followed by specific things you're looking for.

For example, if you're looking for software to drill you on the hiragana alphabet, try:

Japanese study learn hiragana program

Also remember to try more than one search engine. They all use different databases. Try one of the "comprehensive" search engines that search all of them, such as [The Mother of All Search Engines](#).

Once you find a good site with a links page, follow the links and see what's out there. You'll find some pages with even better links pages - follow those as well. Search engines are a good start, but there is no substitute for links pages.

Here's something you can start playing with - a free Japanese word processor. It's very small (about 4 MB) and is very advanced yet easy to use. It's called "NJStar Japanese Word Processor 4.2" You can download it from [NJStar's Website](#).

Once you download it, the next step is to download the latest version of the EDICT Japanese-English dictionary (optional). You can find it at various FTP

sites, but it's rather hard to find. You can download the latest dictionary files [right here](#).

To install it, unzip it to "C:\Program Files\NJStar Japanese WP" or wherever you installed it. You also need to go into that directory and click on 2 programs - "E2jdic" and "J2edic". They both take about a minute to run, and you should be all set. You will now have MANY more words in your E-J and J-E dictionaries than you had two minutes earlier.

Another good word processor (the one I use), is JWPCE, available at this link: [JWPCE](#)

To the JIP forum participants - "Thank you!"

I would like to thank those of you that have contributed to the "Japanese is POSSIBLE" forum. Teaching a broad subject such as Japanese is a major undertaking, and any help is greatly appreciated. The Internet is the #1 source of information for someone learning Japanese on their own. The URLs posted so far will prove VERY helpful to any student, regardless of their experience.

I would also like to say something to the many students that visit the JIP forum in search of information. Although much of the information is helpful, some of it may confuse and overwhelm beginners. There are many parts to learning a language, and this column can only address them one at a time. In the meantime, many people are offering their assistance, posting information to the forums. Since there is no central organization or lesson plan among the various posters, there are bound to be some things posted that are "too advanced" for some students. When you see a post that you don't understand or feel you're not ready for, don't worry. The subjects will all be covered in detail in future "Japanese is POSSIBLE" columns. They will be explained so that everyone can understand them.

To those who post in the forums, please understand that the posts ARE appreciated. Since there are JIP readers far beyond the beginner stage, there needs to be information for them as well. Also, the posts help me to design the course.

Internet Links!

I have one link right now. Hopefully, I'll add more later:

Next week - Your first step into real Japanese grammar.

We'll have sentence structure, particles, and a whole lot more. You don't want to miss it.

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