

Japanese is Possible!

Lesson 4

Time to start learning

- Introduction to Japanese Grammar
- Learning new vocabulary!

Introduction to Japanese Grammar

Japanese sentences are very different from familiar languages like English and Spanish. Incidentally, Spanish is very similar to English grammar-wise. Japanese, on the other hand, uses short words called "particles" to mark a word's purpose in a Japanese sentence. More on particles later.

However, no worries! Japanese grammar isn't as difficult as most people think, and in many ways, it is more logical than most other languages and has few exceptions.

I will start by giving a literal translation to the example sentences that may look a little strange. In order to avoid this as much as possible, I will incorporate already taught concepts into translations, so they for the most part will not be 100% literal. In any case, a completely natural translation will always be provided.

Japanese Sentence Structure

Here's a typical Japanese sentence:

Kore wa mizu desu.

This (topic marker) water is.

If you've seen Star Wars (and who hasn't), think back to the way Yoda spoke. Japanese would sound a lot like that if you translated it literally.

"Your father is."

"An abode of evil it is."

"In you must go."

Japanese is also a bit vague, or can seem that way. Japanese speakers tend to have a bit of an aversion to redundancy, and if they see the opportunity to leave something out of a sentence (say, a subject or a direct object), they will most likely take it. In fact, Japanese pronouns actually have roots in meanings that are unrelated to "I, you, he..." For example, two of their words for 'I' (there are many) literally mean "personal" and "slave." As a result, Japanese will usually avoid pronouns like the plague, and most often refer to other people by name, even when talking directly to that person. Back to redundancy: I know I'm getting a little ahead of myself, but I'll take you by the hand and guide you as you look at this example:

Person A: Mise e iku ka.

Person B: Hai, iku.

Person A: Are you going to the store?

Person B: Yes, I am going there.

"mise e iku" literally translates, "to the store, [I] go"

mise - store

e - particle meaning "toward" or "to"

iku - to go

ka - particle signifying that the sentence is a question

hai - yes

Notice that there is no mention of 'you, I or there' because they aren't really needed. To a Japanese person, it is perfectly natural to say (literally), "Yes, I go."

Particles

Note: these are by far not the only meanings for these particles, they are only the most common usages. Other uses for these particles will be discussed at a later time.

- **wa** marks the topic of a sentence. Very often this topic is the subject of the sentence, but not always. It most closely resembles the phrase "as for"
- **ga** marks the subject of a sentence and puts emphasis on it. It is very confusing at first to distinguish between the uses of wa and ga since both can label a subject, but they are very different sometimes and I will strengthen this distinction as we go along
- **no** signifies that the item before it possesses the item after it. This meaning can be broadened to the sense of attaching attributes to nouns.
- **o** marks the direct object of a sentence. It tells what or who receives the action of the verb.
- **e** shows the direction or destination of a motion.
- **ka** shows that a sentence is a question. In English, questions can often be very different from their corresponding statements, for example, "Does he go to the store?" has a rather different word order from "He goes to the store." In Japanese, this is usually not the case and a statement can be changed to a question simply by tacking a ka onto the end.

To put it simply, after many of the words in a sentence, you have a particle telling what the word "was" to that sentence.

Nakamura san wa sensei desu.

[Matt (as for) teacher is./As for Matt, he is a teacher.]

Matt is a teacher.

After the word "Matt", the "wa" tells us that Matt is the topic of the sentence - the sentence will be about Matt.

Let's add something to the sentence. Let's modify what kind of teacher he is:

Matt wa anata no sensei desu.

[As for Matt, he is you(s) teacher.]

Matt is your teacher.

We can turn it into a question by adding ka:

Matt wa anata no sensei desu ka.

[Matt is your teacher?]

Is Matt your teacher?

Desu is the most often used word for "to be". In English, we have to conjugate that verb to the following forms:

is, are, was, were, will be

Japanese verbs are not conjugated for first, second or third person subjects or for plural subjects. There is only one "person" as far as Japanese verbs are concerned. Also, Japanese verbs do not distinguish between present and future and as a result, the present-tense is often called the "non-past" form. Luckily for us learners wading in "context," they do have a past tense:

Present tense - Desu

Past tense - Deshita (pronounced DESH ta)

Note: Desu is not actually a plain verb. This will be the one exception to my policy of using plain verbs, because I think that even in plain speech, one should use desu, not its plain form. However, since you will encounter the plain version *da* in various reading and visual material, I will teach its forms, but I do not recommend using it.

Desu doesn't conjugate like most other verbs, but luckily, there are very few irregular verbs in Japanese, somewhere on the order of 3 to 20, depending on how you look at it. The other hundreds of verbs follow a strict, logical pattern that is easy to follow!

English - Japanese

is - desu

are - desu

was - deshita

were - deshita

will be - desu

Learning new vocabulary!

You will begin learning many Japanese words. Just like in English, some words are more common than others. We will start with the more common words and progress toward the less frequently used ones.

Interrogatives:

doko - where

nani - what

dare - who

ikutsu - how many

Nouns:

ai - love

heya - room

hon - book

hito - person

inu - dog

kami - god

neko - cat

Verbs:

aruku - to walk

hanasu - to speak

hashiru - to run
korosu - to kill
miru - to see, to watch
taberu - to eat

Pronouns:

watashi - I
anata - you
kare - he
kanojo - she
watashitachi - we
anatatachi/anatagata - you (plural)
karetachi/karera - them (when referring to a group that includes males)
kanojotachi/kanojora - them (for an all-female group)

Note: As I stated earlier, Japanese pronouns are far less common in polite speech than their English counterparts. Also note that these pronouns can be made plural by adding -tachi, but where others exist (above), the other ones are more common.

Adjectives:

akai - red
aoi - blue
kuroi - black
shiroi - white
osoi - slow
hayai - fast

Effective methods to learn new words

Making Lists

You take a piece of paper, and write the Japanese word on one side, and its English meaning on the other. You write from 5 - 25 words on a page. Look at your list as often as possible. The more you look at it, the sooner you will learn the words.

Flashcards

Take some index cards (cut in half if you like) and write the Japanese word on one side, and the English meaning on the other. Look at the flashcards when you get time. You can practice in two different ways -

- Look at the Japanese word and try to guess the English meaning
- Look at the English meaning and try to guess the Japanese word

A combination of the two would be best.

Lists and flashcards are an effective method of learning words for most people. Some people learn visually, others have to hear something in order to learn it. You can adapt a technique (like flashcards, for example) to fit your personal learning style.

If you're a visual learner, you have to see something to learn it. If you fall into this category, no use wasting time with oral vocabulary drills. Learning things by sound isn't your strong suit, so you should take advantage of your visual strengths. LOOK at your flashcards. Picture the words in your head.

If you have to hear something before you learn it, read the flashcards aloud. (or have someone else read them, if you have a study partner)

Tips to get the most out of your study time!

(These apply to flash cards as well as word lists - however for the sake of simplicity I am going to use word lists as an example)

Don't let lists go stale

Make sure you have a new list every few days. When you have the same list for more than a week, you start getting sick of it. You won't want to look at it, and so it does you no good.

You won't find yourself using the words right away

The lists are used to make you familiar with a given word. The word becomes an acquaintance. You won't become friends with the word (where you use it all the time and remember it perfectly) until you use it in sentences and/or hear it used in songs, Anime, and video games. Just memorize a word until you can get it right on a "quiz". Learning it for keeps comes later - when you review your old lists. That's when you start to make the words permanent residents of your brain.

Keep old lists for review

They say you have to forget something 7 times before it enters your long-term memory. That seems to be true in my experience. Most words make several "word list" appearances before I know them like the back of my hand.

Don't make the lists too big

Everyone is different, but I'm sure many people get overwhelmed if they perceive too much work ahead of them. If you have a list with 25 words, you might not look at it if you only have a minute, thinking "I need at least 10 minutes to study this properly". That's a waste of the minute you had to study. It would be better to break that list down into 5 mini-lists with 5 words each - on an index card perhaps. After a lot of experimentation, I discovered that a list of around 15-20 words works best. Try to make a new one every day or every other day.

Many words have more than one English meaning - pick ONE!

Don't write down too many meanings at once. The more meanings you have written down on your list, the more memorizing work you have, and you don't need that right now. Try to pick one or two English meanings per word. If there are many synonyms, get rid of all but one.

Example:

BAD:

sugoi - awful, incredible, amazing, cool, unbelievable

GOOD:

sugoi - amazing, cool

If there are other meanings associated with the word, add the word to your list again later (with one of the other meanings).

Slow and steady is the best way to go

If you have a choice of studying 10 minutes a day, or 2 hours on the weekend, choose the 10 minutes a day. Your brain is always working (even when you're sleeping) so it's best to make use of your brain's power. I heard that your brain files things away while you sleep - so it's a good idea to look at your word list right before bed. I have done that for a month or so, and I've noticed results. I take a brand new list and by the next day I already know most of the words. I make sure I look over the list for about 3 or 4 minutes before bed.

Study in the morning

Your brain is very receptive to information first thing in the morning. Studies have proven that kids do better in their 1st hour classes. If you wake up and look over your list, you've just set yourself off on the right foot. Now the rest of the day you can't be scared of Japanese, because your list (what Japanese is to you) is already familiar to you. A few months of this and you won't be afraid of Japanese at all.

Study often

You don't have to spend more than a few minutes, but look at your list around 10 times a day. You should be able to make a big dent in a 20 word list in a 24-hour period. If you're still in high school, you should have plenty of time, either between classes or even during class if the teacher gives you some free time or there's a lull in the action. Of course, in college, there are long periods of "downtime" so you should have no trouble finding a moment to glance at a list, but more and more colleges are offering Japanese as a foreign language, so if you have the chance, take it.

Put old lists somewhere AWAY FROM your current list!

You don't want to feel like you have to study all 10 or 20 pieces of paper! That will scare you away from your list (which you DO need to use). I keep my old lists in a binder. When I'm going on a trip or I have to wait in line somewhere, I grab around 10 lists and look them over.

Reviewing is important

Don't be concerned if you can't remember half of the words after a week or two. You may be thinking, "but I knew them a week ago!". That is because they were only in your short-term memory. However, when you learn them a second time, it will be easier. The third time will be even easier yet. Keep learning the word, and your brain will get the message. Eventually, your brain says, "Ok Ok...have some storage space in long term memory if the word is so important to you!".

Study with siblings or friends if at all possible

When you can make sentences and practice with others, the words become cemented in your brain. When I first started, I practiced a lot with my younger sister and brother, and that really helped me learn the words I was using at the time.

NEVER try to learn two words at the same time that sound or look alike!

That is, if they look or sound alike to YOU. It's way too challenging to learn 2 similar words at the same time. You will only be confused about the two words, and will remain that way for months. You are better off picking one of the words for now, and totally forgetting about the other at least for a couple weeks. Then you should go back and put both of them on the same list at a later time, to make sure that you know the difference. There are plenty of words to learn!

Get your words from the right sources

Good sources for words include: Anime, songs, manga, video games, video game manuals, internet sites and lesson books that use the words in example sentences (provided you read the sentences.) It's not all that wise to just grab a word out of the dictionary because you'll never be able to connect it to anything. The best thing is to have a context sentence that will connect it to a spot in your brain. You need to remember where you heard the word as you studied it. That makes it more real to you, and you will have an easier time learning it.

Below each word, write the sentence you heard it in

This isn't critical, but it will help you get a feel for what Japanese sentences sound like, and you will also learn the word MUCH more easily. This isn't required, but it allows you to "learn the word" fewer times.

Next Week

- More popular words
- Japanese Grammar
- Study tips

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