

A-I-U-E-O Pronouncing Japanese!

Intro: While this class is primarily about pronouncing Japanese (written in Roman script)--such as from our RCZ chant books, I'd like to give you just a brief background on the history of the written language. Also, we will spend just a bit of time looking at some examples of more subtle pronunciation techniques for words used in regular sentences.



The Japanese adopted *kanji*—Chinese characters—as a base for their written language as early as the 1st century AD. Historically tens of thousands of these characters were in use but currently a basic 1,850 or so are commonly used. Around 880 are learned by the end of elementary school. When the Japanese adopted kanji characters from the Chinese, they gave these their own translated “sounds” taken from the Chinese sounds as well as keeping their original words for the same character. They also have another written “alphabet”--*kana*--***hiragana*** (around 56 basic letters for Japanese words) and ***katakana*** (similar letters but for foreign

words.) Often, these are used for words in which the kanji sounds can not be easily incorporated, and for endings of words which conjugate, such as verbs and adjectives, particles, auxiliary verbs, etc. In addition, pronouns, adverbs, and the names of plants and animals are better written in *hiragana*. Japanese written language is a mix of kanji, *hiragana*, and sometimes *katakana*. More complex writing often contains mostly kanji, while easier texts often contain

more *hiragana*, for instance, for children's books or those learning the language.

In this example below, there is a mix of hiragana and kanji, which has *hiragana* in small letters above it, as a learning aid.

① これは ^{おお}大きい ¹ ^{こうじょう}工場 ² ですね。 ^{なんの} ³ ^{こうじょう}工場の ⁴ ^{こうじょう}工場 ⁵ ですか。
 —この ⁴ ^{こうじょう}工場 ^は ^{じどうしゃ}自動車の ⁶ ^{こうじょう}工場 ⁷ ですか。
 あの ⁵ ^{こうじょう}工場 ^は ^{ちい}小さい ⁶ ですね。
 —あれは ^{じてんしゃ}7 ⁷ ^{こうじょう}自動車の ⁸ ^{こうじょう}工場 ⁹ ですか。
 あまり ⁸ ^{おお}大きく ⁹ ないです。
 この ¹⁰ ^{つよ}タイヤ ¹¹ は ^{つよ}強い ¹¹ ですか。
 —はい、^{つよ}強い ¹¹ ですよ。



② あの ^{ふる}12 ^{ふる}古い ¹² ^{れんが}13 ^{れんが}レンガ ^の ^{たてもの}14 ^{たてもの}建物の ¹⁴ ^{なん}なん ¹⁴ ^{です}ですか。
 —あれは ^{びじゅつかん}15 ^{びじゅつかん}美術館 ¹⁵ ですよ。 ^{ゆうめい}16 ^{ゆうめい}有名な ¹⁶ ^{びじゅつかん}美術館 ¹⁶ ですよ。
 この ^{たてもの}17 ^{たてもの}建物の ¹⁷ ^{ホテル}17 ^{ホテル}ホテル ¹⁷ ですか。
 —いいえ、これは ^{げきじょう}18 ^{げきじょう}劇場 ¹⁸ ですよ。
 あたら ¹⁹ ^{げきじょう}新しい ¹⁹ ^{げきじょう}劇場 ¹⁹ ですか。
 —いいえ、あまり ^{あた}20 ^{あた}新しく ²⁰ ないですよ。

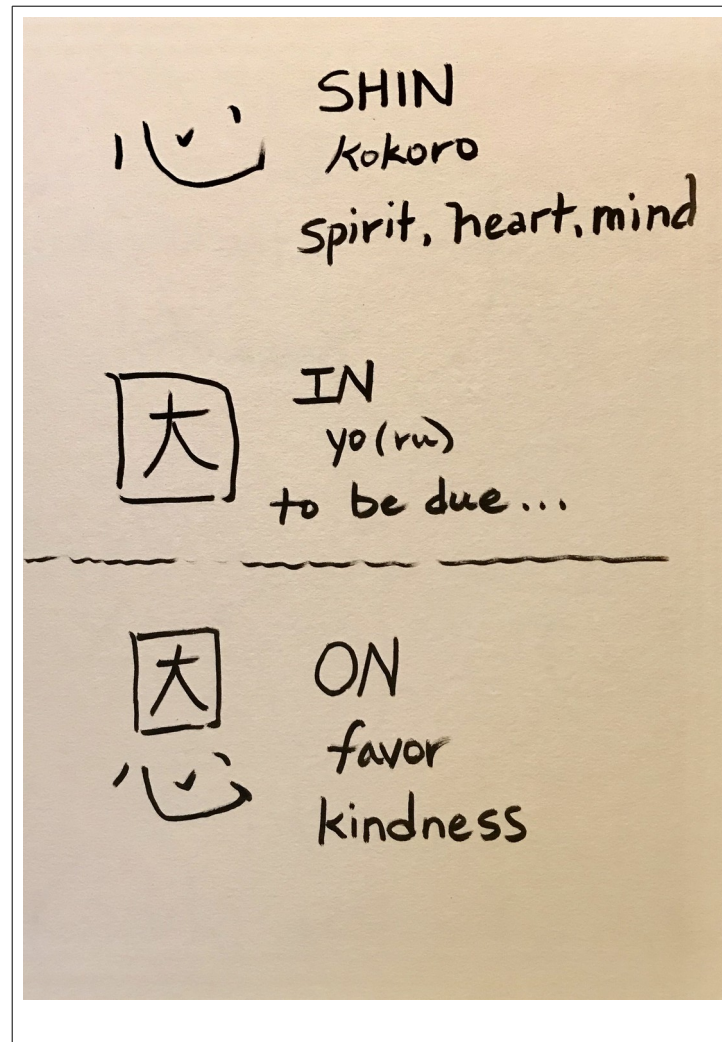
③ この ^{あた}20 ^{あた}あたり ²⁰ ^{しずか}21 ^{しずか}は ²¹ ^{しずか}しずか ²¹ ですよ。

語句

- | | | | |
|------------------------------------|--------------------|---------------------------|----------------|
| 1 ōki·i large | 2 kōjō factory | 12 furu·i old | 13 renga brick |
| 3 ne ..., isn't it? See § 11 | | 14 tatemono building | |
| 4 kono this See § 5 | | 15 bijutsu-kan art museum | |
| 5 ano that See § 5 | | bijutsu fine arts | |
| 6 chiisa·i small | 7 jitensha bicycle | 16 yūmei (Na) famous | |
| 8 amari too, too much, excessively | | 17 hoteru 'hotel' | |
| amari nai not so | | 18 gekijō theater | |

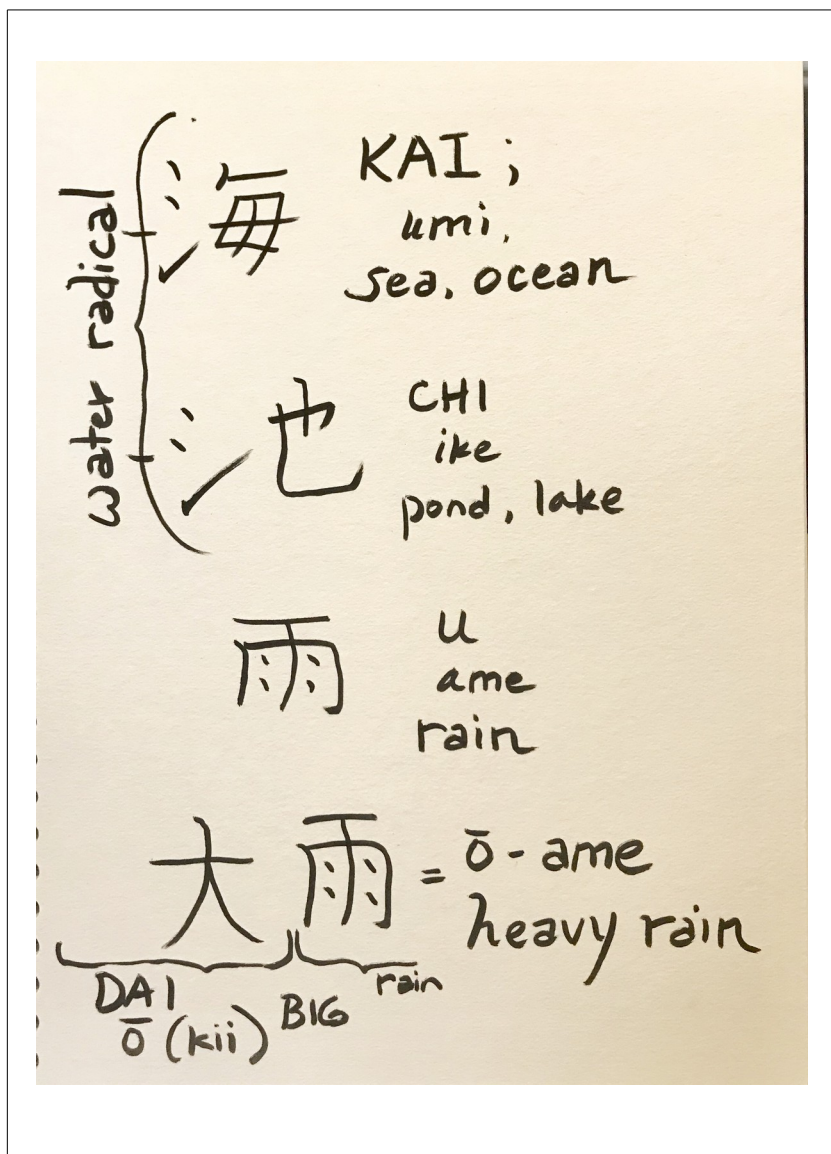
*image from "Japanese for Today" Gakken publishing 1973

Kanji thus have both a translated sound associated with them AND original Japanese language words and one or the other may be used in different contexts. Also, many kanji have the same sound but different meanings. For example, in my kanji book, I found over 30 different kanji for the sound “ka” and many for “sai” or “shin”, etc. This is why seeing the pictographic character is so helpful in instantly recognizing the meaning and context of the word. Take a look at this example...



It is really fun to see how these characters are combined with each other for meaning...In the above example, “kindness” comes from the combo of IN [to be due to...] plus SHIN [heart]....**Kindness=to be due to Heart...**

In the example below we see that the side symbol (called a radical) is the symbol for “water”...it goes with KAI—ocean, but also with CHI, lake. If I look at the word for lake and see the water radical, I know instantly that it has something to do with water...



Next is the radical for rain...combine this with DAI (or ōkii)-- “big” = Heavy rain...

What we use in our chanting is the Japanese translation sound of the Chinese word, for instance: KAN ZE ON NA MU BUTSU YO...

If you look at the insert above, you see the kanji for “big—DAI.” Sometimes when this comes up in a sentence, it may be read “ōkii”...as in the 2nd insert

from the study book, “Kore wa **ōkii** kōjō desu ne....This is a big factory, isn’t it?”-- but in our chanting...such as our Robe Chant, it would be “**DAI** sai ge da pu ku...”

Ok, here is a “Japanese Syllabary Chart”--this is helpful as we get into the verbal language now...

Rōma-ji	Hira-gana	Kata-kana	Rōma-ji	Hira-gana	Kata-kana	Rōma-ji	Hira-gana	Kata-kana	Rōma-ji	Hira-gana	Kata-kana	Rōma-ji	Hira-gana	Kata-kana	Rōma-ji	Hira-gana	Kata-kana
a	あ	ア	ka	か	カ	sa	さ	サ	ta	た	タ	na	な	ナ	ha	は	ハ
i	い	イ	ki	き	キ	shi	し	シ	chi	ち	チ	ni	に	ニ	hi	ひ	ヒ
u	う	ウ	ku	く	ク	su	す	ス	tsu	つ	ツ	nu	ぬ	ヌ	fu	ふ	フ
e	え	エ	ke	け	ケ	se	せ	セ	te	て	テ	ne	ね	ネ	he	へ	ヘ
o	お	オ	ko	こ	コ	so	そ	ソ	to	と	ト	no	の	ノ	ho	ほ	ホ
ya	や	ヤ	kya	きゃ	キャ	sha	しゃ	シャ	cha	ちゃ	チャ	nya	にゃ	ニャ	hya	ひゃ	ヒャ
yu	ゆ	ユ	kyu	きゅ	キュ	shu	しゅ	シュ	chu	ちゅ	チュ	nyu	にゅ	ニュ	hyu	ひゅ	ヒュ
yo	よ	ヨ	kyo	きょ	キョ	sho	しょ	ショ	cho	ちょ	チョ	nyo	にょ	ニョ	hyo	ひょ	ヒョ

			ga	が	ガ	za	ざ	ザ	da	だ	ダ				ba	ば	バ	pa	ぱ	パ
			gi	ぎ	ギ	ji	じ	ジ	ji	ぢ	ヂ				bi	び	ビ	pi	ぴ	ピ
			gu	ぐ	グ	zu	ず	ズ	zu	づ	ヅ				bu	ぶ	ブ	pu	ぷ	プ
			ge	げ	ゲ	ze	ぜ	ゼ	de	で	デ				be	べ	ベ	pe	ぺ	ペ
			go	ご	ゴ	zo	ぞ	ゾ	do	ど	ド				bo	ぼ	ボ	po	ぽ	ポ
			gya	ぎゃ	ギャ	ja	じゃ	ジャ							bya	びゃ	ビャ	pya	ぴゃ	ピャ
			gyu	ぎゅ	ギュ	ju	じゅ	ジュ							byu	びゅ	ビュ	pyu	ぴゅ	ピュ
			gyo	ぎょ	ギョ	jo	じょ	ジョ							byo	びょ	ビョ	pyo	ぴょ	ピョ

Notes to the chart:

1. This chart is also a nearly complete table of current Japanese syllable sounds, as well as an indispensable aid used by native-speaker students of the language studying traditional Japanese grammar.
2. This chart is important in assisting the student using dictionaries and encyclopedias, since their entries are all in this same syllabic “alphabetical” order of the top five sounds, with the one exception that the ya group comes between the ma group and the ra group, and the finding of an entry is extremely chancy unless the student has memorized this order.
3. Although ぢ(ヂ) and づ(ヅ) have the same sound values as じ(ジ) and ず(ズ) respectively, writing conventions limit their use to the following situations.

- (a) The euphonic change in the initial consonant of the second element in a compound word, as when はな and ち join to make はなぢ (nosebleed) or ゆう and つき join to make ゆうづき (evening moon).
- (b) Repetition of the same sound, as in ちぢみ (crêpe) or つづく (to continue).
4. The “h” in the ha and hya groups is thought to have been a “p” in proto-Japanese. Because of this, the Japanese “h” frequently changes to a “b” or a “p,” this last being given the special name of semi-sonant. Examples are in counting cylindrical things, which begins (1) ip-pon, (2) ni-hon, and (3) san-bon, or in combining stone (ishi) with bridge (hashi) to make a stone bridge (ishi-bashi).
5. For reference, please see the relevant sections of the Introduction.

*image from “Japanese for Today” Gakken publishing 1973

The next thing to know about Japanese is that the syllables are “open syllables” and, in general, always end in a vowel—except for “n (nasal n), q (symbolizing a doubling of the consonant as in Bernadette’s name below, and v—symbolizing a prolonged vowel—as in ōkii”...all of the other “letters” in the alphabet are a combo of a consonant and a vowel, like this:

ka ki ku ke ko... or, ma mi mu me mo...

This is why when English words are translated, they sound the way they do... For example, “Chris” becomes “***Ku-ri-su***”...pronounced: *Ku-ree-su* or, Florida, becomes “Fu-**ro**-ri-da!”... “Bernadette”...will become, “Ba-no-**det-to!**”

The following will likely be very familiar from all of our chanting.

Basic vowel sounds:

a = ah as in “la”

i = ee as in “see”

u = oo...as in “poo”

e = eh...as in “ferry”

o = oh...as in “slow”

(these vowel sounds are the same as they are in Spanish, fyi)

I know many of you know these already—nothing new—I think what can confuse us sometimes, in chanting, is if the word is spelled the same as an English word—for instance IN, or SHIN...and, how about ON and TO

So, lets try a few of these...

kan ze **on (own)**

na mu butsu

yo butsu u **in (een)**

yo butsu u en

bup po so en

jo raku ga jo

cho nen kan ze **on**

bo nen kan ze **on**

nen nen ju **shin (sheen)** ki

nen nen fu ri **shin...**

...and yes, Sesshin is...(ses-**sheen**)

...sha sono nan **to (toe)** ji **to** en gya gya gya ki gya

So, more subtle pronunciation occurs when not chanting but as someone is using regular speech...these are not really needed for our chanting, but I thought it would be fun to just explore them a bit...

The infamous “R” sound is non-existent in Japanese...I’ve noticed that in English, we use our lips to form the sound as in “roku”...in Japanese however that sound is made with the tongue hitting the top of the palate making a sound more like “l”...a non-distinct “loku”--the start of a tongue twirl similar to “carro” in Spanish...

Many “double” consonants are in the language and I think everyone is familiar with these from:

“Enmei **Jukku** **Kannon** Gyo...”

or... “omoshiro**katta** desu”

There are long vowels vs short vowels that change the meaning of the word:

Obasan = aunt

Obāsan (oba-a-san) = grandmother

and, many words in which a certain combo makes the first vowel almost silent, for instance:

sukiyaki is more like *ski-yaki* (the u becoming very short and almost silent)

soshite is not a distinct so-shi-te, it is more like sosh-te

and **desu** is more like des (*desu is a “copula” like “to be” in English and is at the end of a sentence, “Watashi wa Dezari desu.”...I am Desiree.*)

Of note, “**f**” is not pronounced with a hard ffff...it is more like an airy f/w mix: fu as in fuku, again the u would be very quick and quiet, more like *fku*

Well, there is much more that we could spend time on—accents are very different and often opposite of in English...for instance in English:

Hiro**sh**ima would be Hiroshima... Um**ik**o...is Umiko...just for a little taste.

...well, enough for now! Thank you so much for listening :)