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Japanese Language: A short introduction

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Abstract: Japan is always a dream destination for many people all over the world. The language is also very much popular among the students not only because it is a foreign language but also for the interest in Japanese anime, like Doraemon, Shin Chan etc. They want to understand the language that their favorite characters are speaking. Sometimes they don't know the language but they memorize phrase, greetings etc. and use that in their friend circle. Japanese language and culture are now spreading all over the world and people are very interest to learn it. The history of the language is very important, how the present Japanese script came from the Chinese script. Japanese language is well known for its politeness. Japanese counting suffix is also different from other language, it has different counting suffix for every kind of things.

Index Terms - Japanese scripts, History of the scripts, Basic sentence construction, Honorific, Humble, counting in Japanese, Japanese greetings

Introduction

Japan is a chain of islands, situated in the east part of Asia continent, surrounded by the Pacific Ocean. The main islands of Japan are, Hokkaido, Honshu, Shikoku, Kyushu and Okinawa. About the 70% of the land are mountainous districts, only about 30% is plain land. Mount Fuji (Fujisan) is the tallest mountain (3,776 meters) in Japan.

At the beginning of human civilization people life style is depends on the hunting and gathering. They gradually started living in a small group and started cultivation. Not only in past but also in present time, Japan is very much influenced by China and Korea.

When we talk about a language the first thing that comes to our mind is the genetic relationship of that language with other languages. Like the language of northern part of India is belongs to the Indo-Aryan language family (Indo-European language family) and the southern part is Dravidian language family. In case of Japanese, there are syntactical as well as structural similarities to the Ural-Altic languages of northern Asia and the Korean language.

In today's world almost every country has institutions for Japanese language, because many people love to learn Japanese, because everyone has an interest in Japan or children have a deep interest in Japanese anime. Japan government and organizations also gives many scholarships to spread their language, culture and tradition throughout the globe.

Origin of the Japanese script

In early days Japanese language was a spoken language; it didn't have any writing script. We all know that from the very beginning Japan was very much influenced by China. The Chinese writing script was introduced to Japan around 4th century via Korea. The script is known as 'Kanji', the word kanji is made with two characters, first one is 'Kan', stands for Han dynasty of China (202 BC – 220 BC), and the second one is 'Ji', means character.

Pictography

From a linguistics point of view, a word is consists of two components, 'its sound' and 'its meaning'. Without this two, a word cannot be made. These two features are like two sides of a same coin. Therefore a meaningless sound cannot be called a word. In case of alphabet-based language one may be in a position to read a word but may not know the meaning. However, in case of Japanese it is a pictographic language, one can understand the meaning but cannot pronounce.

At the very beginning stage, Japanese people used the authentic Chinese or a hybrid Japanese-Chinese style. They give the Japanese sound to the Chinese characters, that's why in present time also we can find the two pronunciations of kanji; one is On-yomi or on-reading (Chinese sound) and another one is Kun-yomi or Kun-reading (Japanese sound). For example;

Kanji	On-reading (in Katakana)	Kun-reading (in Hiragana)
山 : 山	サン(San)	やま(Yama)

After getting the Chinese script they started writing with the new hybrid Japanese-Chinese script. The Kojiki, is the first compilation ancient chronicles of Japan, by Ōnoyumarō in 712. Again, the native Japanese word YAMA, which means mountain, was written, with the first character representing YA and the second MA. This method of writing is referred to as MANYŌGANA because it was used extensively in the MANYOSHŪ, an 8th century anthology of Japanese poems.

Later, the Japanese people stopped giving the sound to the script but take the character as it is and give the Japanese sound. Like the character of Mountain, they started using the Chinese character but pronouncing as Yama. But they also use the Chinese pronunciation with Kanji compounds. These circumstances led to an extremely interesting method of writing Japanese. The Chinese characters were used for their meanings. The characters were used to write words of Chinese origin or to write native Japanese words with Chinese characters representing the same or similar meanings.

The grammatical elements of the Japanese words continued to be written phonetically, but eventually the characters used for their phonetic values were simplified, giving rise to two sets of syllabic scripts viz. Katakana and Hiragana, in which each character represents a syllable.

Hiragana & Katakana is the Japanese alphabets, Hiragana is simplification of Kanji and Katakana is part of kanji. Hiragana is use for Japanese words and Katakana use for foreign words. Each script contains 46 symbols, each symbol representing the sound of one Japanese syllable. By using diacritical marks to indicate the voiced consonants in such syllable as Ga, Za, Da etc. and by using combination of scripts to represent the post-consonant glides of some syllable as Kya, Mya, Nya etc. At the initial stage of script, Hiragana is created for women, that's why Hiragana is known as 'Onna te', which means 'woman's hand' or 'female hand'. That time Kanji was the official language and Hiragana was just an unofficial language. As we all know that, Hiragana is easier than Kanji and Katakana, so men are also started using Hiragana, and the Diary of Tosa or Tosanikki written by Ki no Tsurayuki was in Hiragana. In this diary, he stated his 44 days journey from Tosa to the capital. Initially, Katakana scripts were used to facilitate the Buddhist monks to read the Buddhist scriptures. Presently, Katakana is used primarily to write western loan words, non-Japanese proper names except for Chinese and Korean ones. Presently, apart from the three scripts (Hiragana, Katakana and Kanji); the romaji (Roman scripts) being used. In case of numbers Arabic numerals are also being used.

Hiragana ひらがな

N	WA	RA	YA	MA	HA	NA	TA	SA	K	A
ん	わ	ら	や	ま	は	な	た	さ	か	あ
	(ゐ)	り		み	ひ	に	ち	し	き	い
		る	ゆ	む	ふ	ぬ	つ	す	く	う
	(ゑ)	れ		め	へ	ね	て	せ	け	え
	を	ろ	よ	も	ほ	の	と	そ	こ	お

Katakana カタカナ

N	WA	RA	YA	MA	HA	NA	TA	SA	K	A
ン	ワ	ラ	ヤ	マ	ハ	ナ	タ	サ	カ	ア
	キ	リ		ミ	ヒ	ニ	チ	シ	キ	イ
		ル	ユ	ム	フ	ヌ	ツ	ス	ク	ウ
	エ	レ		メ	ヘ	ネ	テ	セ	ケ	エ
	ヲ	ロ	ヨ	モ	ホ	ノ	ト	ソ	コ	オ

Apart from these alphabets, there are some more alphabets, they use 'ten-ten' 「ㇿ」 and 'maru' 「ㇾ」 with the basic alphabets, for example, 'ten-ten' goes with ka, sa, ta and ha and pronounced as ga, za, da and ba, these are known as dakuten or voiced consonant. 'maru' goes only with the ha and pronounced as pa, it is known as handakuten or Semi voiced sound.

か	が・ガ	ぎ・ギ	ぐ・グ	げ・ゲ	ご・ゴ	
Ka	ga	gi	gu	ge	go	
さ	ざ・ザ	じ・ジ	ず・ズ	ぜ・ゼ	ぞ・ゾ	
Sa	za	ji	zu	ze	zo	
た	だ・ダ	ぢ・ヂ	づ・ヅ	で・デ	ど・ド	<i>dakuten</i>
Ta	da	ji	zu	de	do	
は	ば・バ	び・ビ	ぶ・ブ	べ・ベ	ぼ・ボ	
Ha	ba	bi	bu	be	bo	
は	ぱ・パ	ぴ・ピ	ぷ・プ	ぺ・ペ	ぽ・ポ	<i>handakuten</i>
Ha	pa	pi	pu	pe	po	

Furthermore, if we add ya, yu and yo in half width with the i – row of the syllable, these pronounced as below-

	や	ゆ	よ
き・キ	きや・キヤ	きゆ・キユ	きよ・キヨ
ki	Kya	kyu	kyo
し・シ	しや・シヤ	しゆ・シユ	しよ・シヨ
shi	Sha	shu	sho
ち・チ	ちや・チャ	ちゆ・チュ	ちよ・チヨ
chi	Cha	chu	cho
み・ミ	みや・ミヤ	みゆ・ミュ	みよ・ミヨ
mi	Mya	myu	myo
ひ・ヒ	ひや・ヒヤ	ひゆ・ヒユ	ひよ・ヒヨ
hi	hya	hyu	hyo
に・ニ	にや・ニヤ	にゆ・ニユ	によ・ニヨ
ni	Nya	nyu	nyo
り・リ	りや・リヤ	りゆ・リュ	りよ・リヨ
ri	Rya	ryu	ryo

Lastly, if the alphabet tsu, used half width with any syllable it sounds like a small pause before the consonant, like ^{j i k k a}じっか (one's parents' home). It is known as sokuon or geminate consonant.

Sentence Structure

The vowels of Japanese language are a, i, u, e, o, which is pronounced as □, □, □, □, □. There are two types of sentence structure, Bungo or literary style and kougo or colloquial style. In Japanese language, we can find particles, like wa (is, am, are, etc.), ni (at, in, on, towards, etc.), ga (indicates sentence subject or object, but, however, etc.), de (at, in, by, etc.) and many more. The sentence structure is SOV (Subject, Object and Verb), similar to Bengali and Hindi language.

わたしはごはんをたべる。
watashi wa gohan wo taberu.

□□□ □□□ □□□□

If we see from the linguistics point of view, there is a very big role of pitch accent in Chinese, Korean, Thai and Japanese language. There are two types of pitch level, high and low. Also, the tone and pronunciation are very important because wrong tone or pronunciation may be differing the meaning of the sentence.

The Japanese language can be written in both ways, vertically and horizontally. When the language written vertically, it is written from right to left like the Arabic language. But on the other hand, when it written in horizontally it is same like other languages, it is written from left to right. However, the newspapers, magazines are written in vertically.

Humble and Honorific

Japanese language is one of the polite languages in the world. The honorific language is called 'Keigo' in Japanese language. There are 3 types of Keigo, Teineigo (Polite), Sonkeigo (Honorific), Kenjogo (Humble). Japanese people use the polite language according to the social status, job, age etc. Teineigo is used by almost every Japanese people in their everyday life.

When someone talking to someone, who is higher in position, or status then the person who is lower in position or status will use Kenjogoor Humble speech but the other person use simple polite Japanese.

The honorific particle 'o' and 'go'. For example, Okane (money), Omizu (water), Ohashi (chopsticks), Gohan (cooked rice), So, if we want to convert any verb into humble form, we have to do, o + Verb (renyōkei) + suru. One more thing the humble form of suru is itasu, therefore if we use o + Verb (renyōkei) + itasu, it will be humbler. In case of noun, 'go' + noun + suru or itasu.

Palin form	o + Verb (<i>renyōkei</i>) + suru	o + Verb (<i>renyōkei</i>) + itasu
Hanasu (to speak)	O+hanashi+suru	O+hanashi+itasu
Yomu (to read)	O+yomi+suru	O+yomi+itasu
Chūi suru (to pay attention)	Go+chūi+suru	Go+chūi+itasu
Annai suru (to guide)	Go+annai+suru	Go+annai+itasu

There are some verbs, which have a completely different verb for the humble form-

Verb	Meaning	Humble
Iru	to be	oru
Iku	to go	mairu
Kuru	to come	mairu
Iu	to say	mousu
Taberu	to eat	itadaku
Nomu	to drink	itadaku
Morau	to receive	itadaku

For Honorific form, it is similar to humble form but the suru or itasu replaced by ni naru or ni nasaru, like o + Verb (*renyōkei*) + ni naru or ni nasaru. In case of noun, 'go' + noun + ni naru or ni nasaru.

Palin form	o+Verb (<i>renyōkei</i>)+naru	o+Verb(<i>renyōkei</i>)+ni nasaru
hanasu (to speak)	O+hanashi+ni naru	O+hanashi+ni nasaru
yomu (to read)	O+yomi+ni naru	O+yomi+ni nasaru
chūi suru (to pay attention)	Go+chūi+ni naru	Go+chūi+ni nasaru
annai suru (to guide)	Go+annai+ni naru	Go+annai+ni nasaru

Some verbs and its horrific words-

Verb	Meaning	horrific
Iru	to be	irassharu
Iku	to go	irassharu, oide ni naru/ nasaru
Kuru	to come	irassharu, oide ni naru/ nasaru
Iu	to say	ossharu
Taberu	to eat	meshiagaru
Nomu	to drink	meshiagaru
Miru	to see	garan ni naru/ nasaru

Apology and Gratitude in Japanese

In Japan people are very much sensitive, they use sorry, even for a very small mistake. There are various types of expressions to convey their emotions. *Sumimasen* means Sorry and thank you both, but it is not only used for gratitude or apology, it is also used when someone troubled someone.

Sumimasen	Sorry, Thank you
Sumimasendeshita	Sorry for what I have done, Thank you
Gomen	Sorry, Excuse me
Gomennasai	Sorry, Excuse me
Arigato gozaimasu	Thank You
Doumo Arigato Gozaimasu	Thank you very much

Counting in Japanese

In Japanese language the way of counting is different from other languages, for machine they use *~dai* (*ichidai, nidai, sandai*), for floor they use *~kai* (*ikkai, nikai, sangai*) etc. it is quite difficult to memorize every counting suffix for a foreigner, therefor one counting suffix are there in the Japanese language, which can be used for general. *hitotsu, futatsu, mitsu.....*

Before entering to the counting suffix, we have to know how to count 1~10 in Japanese. *ichi* 「一」, *ni* 「二」, *san* 「三」, *shi/yon* 「四」, *go* 「五」, *roku* 「六」, *shichi/nana* 「七」, *hachi* 「八」, *ku/kyuu* 「九」 and *ju/jyuu* 「十」. The number zero is pronounced as *Zero* 「ゼロ」, but the Japanese word for zero is '*rei*' 「零」. So, if we want to pronounce 0.01, we have to say, *rei ten rei ichi*, ten is stands for the point (.)

Some counting suffix for non-living things -

Sl. No	Days	Long items	Bound volume	Sheets (Paper, plate)
1	Tsuitachi	Ippon (bottle)	Issatsu (book, magazine)	ichimai
2	Futsuka	Nihon	Nisatsu	nimai
3	Mikka	Sanbon	Sansatsu	sanmai
4	Yokka	Yonhon	Yonsatsu	yonmai
5	Itsuka	Gohon	Gosatsu	gomai
6	Muika	Roppon	Rokusatsu	rokumai
7	Nanoka	Nanahon	Nanasatsu	shichimai
8	Youka	Happon	Hassatsu	hachimai
9	Koonoka	Kyuuhon	Kyuusatsu	kyumai
10	Touka	Juppon	Jussatsu	jyumai

Some counting suffix for living being–

Sl. No	Human	Small animal (dog and cat etc)	Large animals (cow and horse etc)	Birds
1	hitori	Ippiki	Ittou	ichiwa
2	futari	Nihiki	Nitou	niwa
3	sannin	Sanbiki	Santou	sanwa
4	yonin	Yonhiki	Yontou	yonwa
5	gonin	Gohiki	Gotou	gowa
6	rokunin	Roppiki	Rokutou	rokuwa
7	shichinin	shichihiki/nanahiki	Nanatou	shichiwa
8	hachinin	Happiki	Hattou	hachiwa
9	kyuunin	Kyuuhiki	kyuutou	kyuuwa
10	jyuunin	Jyuuhiki	jittou	jyuuwa

Conclusion

The script of Japanese Language developed for so many years and then we have the present script, the *Hiragana*, *Katakana* and *Kanji*. There are many layers in the language, one can understand by the use of honorific words and humble words. They also separate things by different counting suffix. The language is very popular now because Japan government also tries to spread the Japanese language and culture.

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