

Japanese Language

The fundamental structure of the Japanese spoken language was probably set sometime between the pre- and proto-historic period. It was not until the 7th century CE that Japan began formulating their own written language. Before this time they used Chinese for all affairs of letters. At first the Japanese written language was a simple appropriation of the Chinese character, known as *kanji*.

However, Japanese is a language with many more polysyllabic words than Chinese, and at the end of the 8th century two syllabaries or *kana* – *hiragana* and *katakana* – were developed to represent the syllable sounds of the Japanese language. While *kanji* could represent a concept, the *kana* could, in effect, spell it. *Kanji* and each of the *kana* can be used on their own, but most commonly all three are used together.

The traditional way of writing Japanese is to write sentences vertically in tiers, to be read from top to bottom, and from right to left. The custom of reading from leftward is basic not only to writing, but also to view painting scroll format.

Romanization – Hepburn system

Vowels have constant sounds

“a” as in father: ka sa ta na ha ma ya ra wa

“i” as in week: ki shi chi ni hi mi ri wi

“u” as in who: ku su tsu nu fu mu yu ru

“e” as in hay: ke se te ne he me re we

“o” as in oh: ko so to no ho mo yo ro wo

The “ō” and “ū” are often lengthened when speaking and this is indicated in the Romanization with a macron, essentially a hyphen or bar over the letter.

In general, consonants are pronounced the same way they are in English, except that “g” is always hard, as in “get.”

Jōmon = jō-mōn

Yayoi = ya-yo-ee

Kofun = ko-foon

Asuka = ah-su-kah

Nara = na-ra, or na-la

Heian = hay-ahn

Kamakura = ka-ma-koo-rah

Nambokucho = nan-bok-cho

Muromachi = moo-ro-ma-chee

Momoyama = mo-mo-ya-mah

Edo = ay-doh

Names: Family or sir name, followed by the individual’s given name. The surname is often referenced to a geographical location. Yamamoto means “at the base of the mountain,” and Fujiwara means “a field of wisteria.” Sons are sometimes named according to their birth order. Women’s names often end in “ko” written with the symbol for child. When someone became a monk or nun, it was standard to assume an ordination name. Artists’ often adopt studio names.