

Hello and welcome to Naruhodo Japan, the podcast for learning about the language and culture of Japan from a Nikkei perspective. I am your host, Mariko.

ようこそ。 「なるほどJAPAN」が^{はじ}始まります。 ^{にっけいじん}日系人の^{かんてん}観点から^{にほんご}日本語と^{にほん}日本の^{ぶんか}文化を^{まなぶ}学ぶためのポッドキャストです。ホストのマリコです。

In the previous episode I covered how to pronounce the alphabet. Now let's discuss writing Japanese.

In English, the alphabet consists of 26 letters and may be written in two forms: print or cursive.

In Japanese, the alphabet consists of 46 letters and may be written in two forms: hiragana ひらがな or katakana カタカナ. Hiragana is used for Japanese words. Katakana is used for sounds, foreign words, and sometimes local dialects. As you may already know or may have guessed from the previous episode, the Japanese alphabet is syllabic.

The alphabet is called gojuuon ^{ごじゅうおん}五十音, which literally means 50 sounds. The alphabet never consisted of 50 letters. Rather, the alphabet is charted as 5 rows x 10 columns (+ 1 sometimes as N ん may take up another column). Over the years the alphabet has been modified and 2 letters have become obsolete. It should be noted that sometimes E may be pronounced as Ye, such as the word (y)en ^{えん}円 (Japanese monetary unit) and especially by the elderly in pronouncing various words. There are other letters which may be pronounced differently, but we will cover that in the next episode. At this point I would also like to note that the last letter of the alphabet, the letter N ん never starts a word.

In the previous episode, I went over how to pronounce the 46 letters of the alphabet. Some letters may be combined to form what I shall refer to as compound sounds. Technically this is called Youon ^{ようおん}拗音 in Japanese and contracted word or diphthong in English. Since I am not a technical person when it comes to language, I have no idea what a diphthong is. If you are not a technical person either, this word may confuse you. The term “contracted word” is also confusing to me since when you combine letters in Japanese to form Youon, it is not necessarily a word and the pronunciation is definitely not contracted.

Some letters may also have a circle or what resembles quote marks written next to them, in the upper right-hand side, which alters their reading. The circle is formally called handakuten ^{はんだくてん}半濁点 but everyone just calls it maru ^{まる}丸, which means circle. The quote marks are formally called dakuten ^{だくてん}濁点 but everyone just calls it ten-ten ^{てんてん}点々, which means dot-dot. How to pronounce these altered and combined letters will be covered in the next episode.

Additionally, Japanese have incorporated Chinese characters into their writing system which are known as kanji ^{かんじ}漢字. These characters were introduced centuries ago and have evolved over time. There are multiple ways to read most kanji known as kun-yomi (Japanese way to read it)

and on-yomi (Chinese way to read it). Naturally, on-yomi is not the true Chinese way to read the characters but an approximation Japanified. Kanji may represent a literal object or an idea. Kanji may be paired with other kanji for compound readings.

How many kanji must one learn to be literate? Hundreds if not a couple thousand. This is the daunting aspect of learning Japanese. My only consoling words are: "Hey, at least it's not Chinese--they have thousands more!" If you learn all 1006 kyouiku kanji ^{きょういくかんじ} 教育漢字 (the kanji taught in elementary school), then you should be able to read well enough to function in Japan. Even better would be to learn all 1945 jyouyou kanji ^{じょうようかんじ} 常用漢字 (what is taught up to high school). Reading proper names is another beast altogether and requires knowledge of 2928 kanji in total (the jyouyou kanji plus the additional ones for people's names, known as jinmeiyou kanji ^{じんめいようかんじ} 人名要漢字).

When writing Japanese, stroke order is very important. This is not a point of emphasis in writing English but must absolutely be adhered to in Japanese. I cannot stress this enough. Please learn the proper stroke order. On the side of Naruhodo Japan's web site, there are links to dictionaries and resources, a few of which show the stroke order. I also recommend obtaining textbooks and taking a Japanese class in the beginning stages of learning Japanese so as not to acquire bad habits, which will be hard to break later on.

I recommend first learning to write hiragana, then katakana. Please become very comfortable with writing and reading these. Then move on to kanji. Learning them in the same order that Japanese do will make it much easier. Each grade learns 100-200 kanji. If you are dedicated, you could possibly learn more but why stress yourself more than you need to. Be patient, practice daily, and allow yourself to learn at your own pace. Japanese are only required to attend school up to the third year of middle school, which is equivalent to 9th grade in America. Therefore, it takes them 9 years of study to become literate. Do not punish yourself if you are not literate in less time. In fact, don't punish yourself if it takes you even longer to be literate, especially if you do not live in Japan.

Now that you have become thoroughly overwhelmed by how many letters it is going to take to learn Japanese, let me tell you about the way to start reading Japanese today. It is called romaji and it is how to write Japanese in the Latin, AKA Roman alphabet. If you can read English, French, Spanish, Italian, and so forth, then you can read romaji. Romaji is used everywhere in Japan but do not let it become a crutch. Japanese are not comfortable with romaji and I would advise you not to become comfortable with it either. What I mean by that is that romaji is not the main way they write Japanese so it should not be the main way you write Japanese.

There is not a single standard way to romanize Japanese but these days most of the time you see romaji it is a variation of the Hepburn system, my method included. I do try to write romaji in the same way that words are spelled in Japanese so that if you try to write Japanese on your own, you will write the correct word. For example, the spelling of the capital city of Tokyo ^{とうきょう} 東京 is standard as t-o-k-y-o. If you were to type Japanese on your computer, you would never be able to get the proper kanji to display as this is not how Tokyo is spelled in Japanese. Instead, try t-o-u-

k-y-o-u. These two different spellings are two different pronunciations in Japanese. This kind of difference in pronunciation of words will be further covered in the next episode.

When typing romaji on a computer, there are unique input methods that might not be obvious at first.

- To make ち with ten-ten, type “di” ぢ.
- To make つ with ten-ten, type “du” づ.
- To make ん, type “nn”.
- When typing combined sounds that have a small letter but the computer does not automatically make the letter small, type “x” before the letter that should be small. かあ
ていわうねえもお

Alright, that’s enough writing for this episode—let’s move on to Kaa-chan Corner. We continue the conversation from the previous episode that my mother had with Kinomura-san.

Today’s topic on Kaa-chan Corner is: what life is like in Okinawa and growing up there in that “back in my day we didn’t have shoes and used to walk 20 miles in the snow” kind of way

[Kaa-chan Corner]

Well that’s it for this episode of Naruhodo Japan. Thank you for listening and please leave feedback on the website naruhodojapan.com. This podcast was created by your host Mariko. Please tune in again for the next episode. Yoroshiku onegaishimasu!