

# Is Japanese difficult?

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## Abstract

特に日本人は自分の母国語を難しい言語と見なしている。では、日本語のどこが難しいのだろうか？ 本文では、発音、形態論、統語論、意味論、語用論などを論じる。考察の結果として、言語学の中心になっている分野により、日本語は難しい言語ではないことがわかる。しかし、客観的な立場からみても、難しいところがあると言わざるをえない。難しい点としては、機能表現・慣用句、擬音語、複合動詞、敬語そして漢字が挙げられる。

## 1. Preliminary remarks

The Japanese language has the reputation of being very difficult. Most Japanese natives maintain that Non-Japanese will never master the language. Japanese even has an expression for a level of speech that is considered appropriate Japanese for foreigners: 挨拶語 *aisatsu.go* (eng.: greeting expression). It is considered rare—and somehow inappropriate—if foreigners venture beyond this level. During the 1980's under the area of prime minister Nakasone, Japan vowed to bring more than 100.000 foreign students to Japan by the year 2000. This number has not nearly been achieved by 2002. In order to provide a language curriculum for foreign students studying at Japanese universities, Japanese linguists founded a new branch of Japanese linguistics: 日本語教育 *nihon.go kyooiku* (eng.: Japanese language teaching; now used as “Japanese as a second language”). It is noteworthy that Japanese natives do not undergo such a curriculum in the Japanese school system. What Japanese students learn at school is called 国語 *kokugo* (eng.: national language). There are some crucial differences and some similarities between *kokugo* and *nihon.go kyooiku*. However, it is not necessary at this point to address these issues here.

*Nihon.go kyooiku* and *kokugo* may not be confused with the terms 日本語学 *nihon.go.gaku* and 国語学 *kokugogaku* which both mean “Japanese linguistics” but with a very different connotation. The latter is the theory of *kokugo* and has existed at least since the Meiji-period. The former is a

comparatively new school of thought, almost entirely comprised of younger linguists who do not adhere to the teachings of *kokugo*. Thus, it is safe to say that there exists a schism between two schools of thought on the Japanese language—a fact that is lost on the general population of Japan.

*Kokugogaku* was also instrumental in the establishment of a theory called 日本人論 *nihon.jin.ron* (eng.: theory of the Japanese people). *Nihon.jin.ron* stresses the assumption that Japanese people are different from any other people, that the Japanese are a unique people, and—sometimes—that the Japanese are superior to any other people. One central issue of *nihon.jin.ron* was the assumption that Japanese process their mother tongue in the right brain hemisphere, i.e. opposite to where the rest of humanity processes language. Although there exists no proof whatsoever that this is the case, this assumption has fostered the idea that foreigners can never speak and understand Japanese because in order to be spoken and understood correctly, Japanese has to be processed in the right brain hemisphere—which is exactly what foreigners cannot do. Although *nihon.jin.ron* has fallen into disrepute and is not considered a viable theory anymore, mental fragments maintain to exist, and these fragments shape the self-image Japanese have of their mother tongue.

## 2. What is difficult in Japanese?

If it is claimed that Japanese is a difficult language, it is possible to ask exactly in what way Japanese is difficult. Languages are quite complicated tools and have evolved different mechanisms and different solutions to similar problems. This accounts for all languages across the board, not only for Japanese.

### 2.1. Is Japanese phonologically difficult?

For instance, all languages have evolved the same approach with respect to the problem that there are far more elements and events in the world than basic physical entities with which you can refer to them. If every element or event required only one sound—the linguists then speak of a *phoneme*—then the number of sounds puts a limit on how many elements or events can be distinguished. All languages—including Japanese—have solved this problem in the same way: they combine sounds to form sound groups. Since this process is recursive, you can form a sound group not only by grouping to sounds, but also by grouping a sound with a sound group. Thus, with this method a limited arsenal of sounds can provide an unlimited amount of sound groups.

Of course, when you learn a foreign language, new sounds have to be learned. The sounds of the mother tongue are already acquired during early infancy, and the discrimination task of this acquisition process is finished after the first 12 months after birth. The acquisition of pronunciation takes place later, and if not physiologically hampered by speech impediments, during the first four to five years.

If you learn a foreign language, it matters quite a bit which sounds your mother tongue has provided you with, and which sounds are required in the language you want to learn. In Japanese there are only 20 different sounds. Compared to English, French, German and Chinese, which all have more than 50 different sounds, this is not much. If accent—which is also acquired—is disregarded, it is safe to say that a Japanese native speaker will have more problems learning the pronunciation of one of the languages named above, than a native speaker of one of the languages above will have learning Japanese pronunciation.

The most difficult sounds in Japanese—and this does not mean that these sounds are objectively difficult—may be the ろ行 *ra-gyoo* (the flapped ‘r’ combined with the vowels ‘a’, ‘e’, ‘i’, ‘o’, and ‘u’) and its combinations with the semivowel ‘y’ (which occurs only on front of ‘a’, ‘o’, and ‘u’ in contemporary Japanese): ‘rya’, ‘ryo’, and ‘ryu’. At least speakers of European languages will probably have their most problems with the sound groups mentioned above.

Furthermore, unlike Chinese or Thai, Japanese is not a tonal language; Japanese accent is sometimes necessary to distinguish homophones, but it does neither play a major role in morphology nor syntax.

Therefore, phonological evidence suggests that Japanese is not a phonologically difficult language.

## 2.2. *Is Japanese morphologically difficult?*

While phonological strategies and mechanisms are virtually universal, morphological mechanisms are quite diverse. There are different paths a language might choose to take, and each choice has different consequences. Once sound groups of differing complexity are being produced and used in reference to elements and events in the world, the most important choice becomes whether to treat sound groups referring to grammatical functions equal to elements and events or differently. Japanese has—unlike for instance Chinese—chosen to treat grammatical sound groups differently. In Japanese grammatical sound groups are not *lexemes*. A *lexeme* is a sound group that can occur independently in an utterance on the object level. If grammatical sound groups are not lexemes, they must be *affixes*. This has an important consequence for word formation. A *word* is a complex that contains at least one lexeme with optional affixes. By definition, a grammatical sound group in Japanese cannot be a word.

Furthermore, Japanese has chosen to mainly attach affixes to the back of lexemes. Other languages, such as for instance Swahili, chose to attach affixes mainly to the front of lexemes.

The degree to which the attachment respects sound border of the lexeme and the affix, is also very important. Basically, Japanese respects borders of sound groups and thus attaches affixes in a process called *agglutination*. However, this process is gradually corrupted by affixation processes that are less respectful to borders and even reach beyond the pure border: the perfect tense of 読む *yom.u* (eng.: “read”) is 読んだ *yonda* deriving from *yomi.ta*. Thus, it is indistinct from 呼んだ *yonda* (eng.: “shouted”). This process is called *fusion*. Other languages, such as for instance German or English, go even further and *incorporate* grammatical functions into a lexeme. German and English irregular verbs often contain an *Ablaut* which can indicate past tense and other functions.

All things being equal—although evidently they are not—incorporation is more difficult to learn than fusion which in turn is more difficult than agglutination. This reason for this claim is that incorporation requires certain words to be memorized, while agglutination only requires a process to be memorized. Concludingly, agglutination places less burden on memory than fusion and incorporation.

Word formation takes place between different lexemes to form *compounds* or between lexemes and affixes. Compound structures are negligible here, however, both word formation processes require that *word classes* (or better yet: *morpheme classes*) have been established. In Japanese, there are seven word classes: verbs and adjectives (which constitute the inflecting word classes), and nouns, nominal-adjectives, adverbs, adnominals, and interjections. Every word class can be explicitly defined by formal criteria. Following Rickmeyer (1995), verbs are any morphemes that can appear with the present and perfect tense affixes +*Ru* and +*Ta* respectively.

Adjectives are any morphemes that can appear with the finite and adverbial affixes *+i* and *+ku* respectively.

Nouns are any morphemes that can occur with the nominative case particle *=ga* and the accusative case particle *=o*.

Nominal adjectives come in six subclasses (Rickmeyer 1995: 339). Some nominal adjectives occur in adnominal position only with the particle *=na*. Others can occur also with the genitive case particle *=no*, where the meaning of *=no* is equal to *=na*. Yet another subgroup also takes both particles, but then the meanings of the particles are not equal. Of these three groups, some member can take the suffix noun *-sa*, while others can not.

Adverbs come in three major subgroups (Rickmeyer 1995: 357). The first group consists of adverbs that take *=to* in adverbial position or end in *(i)to*. The second group includes members that take *=ni* in adverbial position or end in *ni*. The third group contains the rest. Every group can be further subclassified.

Adnominals come in four major subgroups (Rickmeyer 1995: 370f). The first group contains members of the *ko-so-a-do* paradigm. The second group consists of deverbal elements, the third group of prefixoids, and the fourth group contains the rest.

Interjections are those lexemes that usually form an utterance by themselves.

These definitions do not only account for lexematic morphemes but also for affixes. Affixes are distinguished into two major subgroups: prefixes and suffixes. Suffixes contain pure suffixes, such as suffix verbs, suffix adjectives, suffix nouns, suffix nominal adjectives, suffix adverbs, particles and flexemes.

Prefixes can appear in front of every lexeme besides adnominals and interjections. Most noteworthy are the honorific prefixes *o-* and *go-*, the negation prefixes *hu-* 不, *bu-* 不, *bu-* 無, *mu-* 無, *hi-* 非, and *mi-* 未, and the productive numeral prefixes *hito-* 1, *huta-* 2, *mi-* 3, *yo-* 4, *nana-* 7, and *iku-* (eng.: how many?) (cf. Rickmeyer 1995: 274f). In particular, the attachment of negation prefixes causes the word to become a nominal adjective whatever its lexeme's word class may be. Their usage is also dissimilar: *hu-* 不 is a general negator, *bu-* 不 expresses that a property is disliked, *bu-* 無 expresses that the scarcity of a property is considered as unwanted, *mu-* 無 denotes scarcity in general, *hi-* 非 expresses that something is not the case, and *mi-* 未 expresses that something is not yet the case (cf. Rickmeyer 1995: 275).

All, most or some pure suffixes can be attached to verbs, adjectives, nouns and nominal adjectives. Adverbs are rather restricted, and adnominals and interjections do not allow pure suffixes. Among the suffix verbs attached to verbs the following are the most important because they often express usages that are expressed by periphrastic constructions in European languages: *-Rare.ru* [passive], *-Re.ru* [potentialis], *-Sase.ru*, *-Sas.u*, and *-Asime.ru* [causative], and *-An.u* [negation].

#### Verb

+ suffix verb:	食べさせる	<i>tabe.sase.ru</i>	"let eat"
+ suffix adjective:	食べない	<i>tabe.na.i</i>	"do not eat"
+ suffix noun:	話し手	<i>hanasi.te</i>	"speaker"
+ suffix nominal adjective:	いけそう	<i>ik.e.soo</i>	"seems to work"
+ suffix adverb:	死につつ	<i>sini.tutu</i>	"is dying"

## Adjective

+ suffix verb:	高かった	<i>taka.kat.ta</i>	“was high”
+ suffix adjective:	白っぽい	<i>siro.ppo.i</i>	“whitish”
+ suffix noun:	深さ	<i>huka.sa</i>	“depth”
+ suffix nominal adjective:	寒そう	<i>samu.soo</i>	“seems cold”

## Noun

+ suffix verb:	兄貴ぶる	<i>aniki.bur.u</i>	“do like a brother”
+ suffix adjective:	水っぽい	<i>mizu.ppo.i</i>	“watery”
+ suffix noun:	二枚	<i>ni.mai</i>	“two [flat objects]”
+ suffix nominal adjective:	論理的	<i>ronri.teki</i>	“logical”
+ suffix adverb:	到着後	<i>tootyaku.go</i>	“after arrival”
+ suffix adnominal:	十対九	<i>zyut.tai.kyuu</i>	“ten to nine”

## Nominal adjective

+ suffix verb:	嫌がる	<i>iya.gar.u</i>	“dislike”
+ suffix noun:	気楽さ	<i>kiraku.sa</i>	“insouciance”
+ suffix adverb:	元気そう	<i>genki.soo</i>	“looks healthy”

## Adverb

+ suffix adverb:	たっぷりめ	<i>tappuri.me</i>	“rather full”
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Among the suffix nouns, the quantifiers play an important role in Japanese because it has no article system. Quantifiers are used when counting members of a specific semantic subclass. Their number is limited and can be learned.

The class of particles consists of particle verbs (だ = *da* [essive] and です = *des.u* [honorific essive]), particle adjectives (らしい = *rasi.i* [evidential] and べき = *be.ki* [necessity]), particle nouns (だけ = *dake*, ばかり = *bakari*, のみ = *nomi* [all: “only”], まで = *made* [limit], どころ = *dokoro* [amount], くらい・くらい = *gurai/kurai* [uncertain amount], ほど = *hodo* [approximate amount], の = *no* [neutral nominalization; derived from the genitive case particle]), one particle nominal adjective (みたい = *mitai* [“looks as if”]), and pure particles.

Among particles with the most frequent occurrence are the case particles: =*ga* [nominative], =*o* [accusative], =*ni* [dative], =*e* [allative], =*kara* [ablative], =*yor*i [comparative], =*to* [symmetry], and =*de* [essive]. Some functions of these particles can overlap, but in general their functions convey something that can be expressed in any other language, and thus is not incomprehensible. Although as languages quite distinct, the valencies of Japanese verbs are often identical to those of German or English verbs.

A different matter is the usage of the exclusive focus particle =*wa*. In a very broad sense, =*wa* is attached to nouns or other expressions in much the same way as nouns or nominal expressions receive the determined article in English or German. If an expression is marked with =*wa*, it never constitutes new information in the utterance but serves as the background, reference or contrast of parts carrying

the new information. Nevertheless, the correct usage of the exclusive focus marker is certainly an objective difficulty in Japanese; it can be broadly compared to the difficulties Japanese native speakers face when trying to use English or German articles.

The flexemes are assigned to verbs or adjectives, and they express tenses or syntactic relations. Flexemes assigned to verbs come in two major groups: those that are attached to the stem of a verb (+*Ru* [present tense], +*Reba* [conditional], +*Yoo* [future tense], +*E* and +*Yo* [imperative], +*Azu* [negative participle], +*Azaru* [negative present tense], +*Mai* [negative future tense]), and those that are attached to the base of a verb (+*Te* [participle], +*Ta* [perfect tense], +*Tara(ba)* [conditional perfect], +*Tari* [exemplative], +*Taroo* [perfect-future tense], and +*ro* [imperative]). Adjectives only have a stem, and their flexemes are +*i* [finite], +*ku* [adverbial], +*kute* [participle], +*kereba* [conditional], and +*U* [Ablaut-adverbial].

Compared to European languages in particular, it is evident that Japanese lacks some major features that presents objective difficulties to language learners: there is neither genus nor numerus in Japanese. I.e. noun inflection is not distinguished according to genus such as masculine, feminine, or neuter, and verb inflection is not distinguished according to numerus such as first, second, or third person singular or plural.

All in all, the verbal inflection is very regular and systematic, but unfortunately Japanese teaching methods still adhere to letting students memorize inflection tables instead of teaching the appropriate inflection morphology.

In summary it can be claimed that the Japanese language has a very elaborate morphology which, however, is very well and economically organized. Compared to European languages, the Japanese morphology is different, but neither difficult nor incomprehensible. The evidence suggests that Japanese morphology is not difficult.

### 2.3. *Is Japanese syntax difficult?*

The field of syntax analyzes and then explains how syntactic elements (words or phrases) are put together to correctly form a sentence. Again, there are several paths a language may choose to take. Since in Japanese all case markers and all tense and modus suffixes are attached to the end of a lexeme or word, it was natural for Japanese to become a so-called *left-branching* language. What does *left-branching* mean? In a sentence, usually all syntactic elements are connected. What is meant by *connected* depends on the syntactic theory that is used. In a dependency syntax, *connectedness* is understood as an anti-symmetrical relationship between two syntactic elements which is—depending on the type of syntactic element—called either *government* or *dependency*. In a constituency grammar, *connectedness* is understood as being part of a *phrase*, i.e. every syntactic element must be either a part of a phrase or a phrase itself. In a left-branching language, a syntactic element that is governed by or dependent on another syntactic element, or that does not constitute the core (or head) of the phrase, is positioned to the left of the syntactic element which governs the former syntactic element, on which the former syntactic element is depending, or which constitutes the core (or head) of that specific phrase. That means that the highest ranking syntactic element is always positioned in the end of a sentence. This mechanism of structuring from left to right in an ascending manner is one of the most evident features in Japanese syntax, and adhered to throughout it.

The most conspicuous features that are missing from Japanese are the absence of relative pronouns and conjunctions. There is neither a word class of interrogatives or pronouns in Japanese nor a word class for subordinating or coordinating conjunctions. A Japanese structure that is most often rendered into a relative clause when translating is usually a form where a verb with finite flexemes is positioned to the left of a noun.

- (1) 買ったケーキ *kat.ta keeki* a/the cake (I, you etc.) bought

The syntacto-semantic relationships between a verb left to a noun and this noun are plentiful and sometimes not easily interpreted. In (1), the noun *keeki* is actually the object of the verb *kat.ta*. This means that *kat.ta* cannot have an object to the left of itself. In the next sentence

- (2) ケーキを買う必要がない。  
*keeki=o ka.u hituyoo=ga na.i.*  
 It is not necessary to buy cake.

the noun (or more precisely the nominal adjectival noun) *hituyoo* is neither the object nor any other complement of the verb *ka.u*. Rickmeyer (1995: 182ff) specifies six different typical structures that a verb left to a noun and that noun itself can take.

The structure type in sentence (2) is typical of constructions with so-called 形式名詞 *keisiki meisi* (eng.: formal noun). These constructions which form a relevant part of Japanese functional expressions are often used as grammaticalizations in Japanese. In Gross (1998) the standard functional expressions have been analyzed. Just to give an example, the noun *koto* (eng.: thing) is element of a variety of expressions:

ことがある	<i>koto=ga ar.u</i>	it happens that...
ことができる	<i>koto=ga deki.ru</i>	someone is able to...
こともある	<i>koto=mo ar.u</i>	it also happens that...
ことになる	<i>koto=ni nar.u</i>	it has been decided that...
ことにする	<i>koto=ni s.uru</i>	someone has decided that...
ことはいけない	<i>koto=wa ik.e.na.i</i>	it is not allowed to...
ことはない	<i>koto=wa na.i</i>	there is no need to...
ことならない	<i>koto=wa nar.ana.i</i>	it is not usual to...

Since conjunctions do not exist in Japanese, functional expressions have to cover that function, too. The case particle =*kara* (ablative) helps to express different functions together with different flexemes. The construction +*Te=kara* expresses that some action takes or took place before another action.

- (3) 仕事を終わってから帰る。  
*sigoto=o owat.te=kara kaer.u.*  
 After I finish work I'll go home.

However, if =*kara* is not attached to the participle but to a finite flexeme, it helps to express a reason.

- (4) 仕事を終わったから一休みをしている。  
*sigoto=o owat.ta=kara hito.yasumi=o si.te i.ru.*  
 Because I finished my work I am taking a break.

Flexemes in general frequently constitute building-blocks of functional expressions. In particular the participle +*Te* participates in quite a lot of functional expressions preferably, but not exclusively, with other lexemes:

～である*	+ <i>Te ar.u</i>	[static passive voice]
～ていく*	+ <i>Te ik.u</i>	1. somebody does something and then goes 2. something happens from now on 3. something moves away from the speaker
～ている*	+ <i>Te i.ru</i>	1. somebody is doing something now 2. somebody has done something 3. somebody has at least done something once
～てくれる*	+ <i>Te kure.ru</i>	the addressee does something for the addresser
～てくる*	+ <i>Te k.ur.u</i>	1. somebody does something and then comes 2. something has happened until now 3. something is moving towards the speaker
～てしまう	+ <i>Te sima.u</i>	1. somebody has done something irreversible 2. something has unfortunately happened
～てみる*	+ <i>Te mi.ru</i>	somebody tries to do something
～てみせる	+ <i>Te mise.ru</i>	somebody shows how he can do something
～てもらおう*	+ <i>Te mora.u</i>	the addresser gets something done by the addressee
～てやる*	+ <i>Te yar.u</i>	the addresser does something for the addressee
～ていい*	+ <i>Te i.i</i>	it is allowed to do something
～てほしい	+ <i>Te hosi.i</i>	the addresser wants somebody to do something
～てない	+ <i>Te na.i</i>	[negative static passive voice]

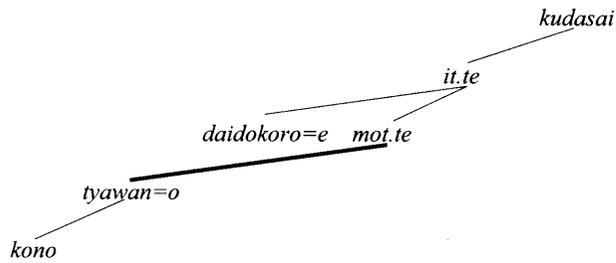
For the expressions marked with the asterisk honorific substitutes exist.

The above mentioned and most other functional expressions are unique to Japanese and they have to be grasped and learned in order to effectively communicate in Japanese. They constitute an objective difficulty in Japanese.

Sometimes functional expressions result in structures that are not syntactically continuous. Such a structure is called *discontinuous*. In a discontinuous structure, one or more phrases are not continuous; i.e. between a depending syntactic element and the governing syntactic element there are one or more syntactic elements which are dependent on neither the framing syntactic elements.

- (5) このちやわんを台所へ持って行ってください。  
*Kono tyawan=o daidokoro=e mot.te it.te kudasai.*  
 Please carry these bowls into the kitchen!

In sentence (5) (taken from Rickmeyer 1995: 58), *tyawan=o* depends on *mot.te* which is a transitive verb capable of commanding accusative case. *daidokoro=e* depends on *it.te* which is a motion verb and therefore capable of commanding allative case. Both verbs and nouns respectively build a phrase. However, either phrase is linearly disturbed by an expression from the other phrase. Both the bracketing notion of a constituency grammar and the tree notion of a dependency grammar have difficulties to depict the syntactic relationships properly. Observe a dependency tree of (5):



Picture (1) : Dependency tree of sentence (5)

Picture (1) shows that the connection between *tyawan=o* and *mot.te* (here marked by the fat branch) is disturbed by *daidokoro=e*. Similar constructions also occur in coordinated structures.

In summary, evidence suggests that Japanese syntax is not particularly difficult. However, there are many functional expressions that have to be learned. Sometimes, syntactic structures result in discontinuities.

#### 2.4. Is Japanese semantics difficult?

Semantics is the linguistic field that explains how meanings are expressed in a natural language. In a very simplistic way, Japanese is not much different from other languages. It has words for objects and events in the world, and this is not much of a surprise. However, beyond that simplistic point, there are genuine differences. In syntax, grammaticalized functional expressions substitute as grammatical expressions. However, new meanings can be created by lexicalizing two or more different expressions into one larger expression. Those expressions are called *idioms* or *idiomatic expressions*. Idioms sometimes serve as complementation if a word class is too limited in number. In Japanese, this happens to be the case with adjectives. The number of basic adjectives is quite small: there are only about 130 basic adjectives. However, many of these adjectives combine with certain nouns to form idiomatic expressions. The meaning of some of them can be inferred by their elements, but sometimes the meaning of the idiom is far removed from the meaning of its constituent elements. Many adjectival idioms are combined with the noun 気 *ki* (eng.: spirit) or nouns for body parts. For instance, the adjective 弱い *yowa.i* means “weak” in physical sense. But it can be combined with *ki* to form the idiom *ki=yowa.i* meaning “faint at heart”. This idiom is easily understandable from its constituents elements. An

example for a more removed meaning is *mimi=ga too.i* (eng.: hard of hearing). While 耳 *mimi* means “ear”, the adjective 遠い *too.i* means “far”. So to have “far ears” means “to be hard of hearing”.

These kind of idioms are like simplex words; i.e. they have to be learned. For a more comprehensive discussion of adjectival idioms refer to Gross (2002). They exist in any language, and constitute a natural barrier for the predicate of whether one is a good speaker of the language. In this respect, Japanese idioms are nothing special—insofar every language has idioms—but Japanese idioms are simply different from German, English or French idioms.

An even more challenging aspect of Japanese semantics are onomatopoeic expressions. Onomatopoeic expressions are words that express a specific meaning by association with sound. Japanese has an abundance of this expressions, and while foreigners learn to pick up onomatopoeic expressions that occur frequently, very few of them are able to create new ones or to understand those that are unknown to them. The generation of onomatopoeic expressions is a mechanism that is not easily confined to one of the traditional linguistic fields. For want of a better word, it might be called *phono-lexicalization*. Vowels and consonants express differences with respect to size, surface structure, movement form etc. Furthermore, sounds express varying meanings in different distributions. There are two main types of onomatopoeic expressions: the first type is a monosyllable of the structure CV (“C” for consonant, “V” for vowel), and the second is a polysyllable of the structure CVCV. In particular, the latter expressions are often reduplicated.

Vowels have the following connotations:

/a/	form:	low
	size:	big
	other features:	strong, vivid, conspicuous
/i/	form:	linear
	size:	small
	other features:	sharp, bright, tense, shrill
/u/	form:	prominent
	size:	small
	other features:	indicate “nose”, “mouth”
/e/	form:	none
	size:	none
	other features:	negative or vulgar connotation
/o/	form:	round
	size:	from “neutral” to “big”
	other features:	tranquil, inconspicuous

Consonants are more difficult because CV-types and CVCV-types have to distinguished (the data below are taken from Hamano (1986: 127, 223–225:))

/p/	CV	CVCV
	surface: tense	surface (C1): fragile, tense

	object: small, light, subtle	object (C1): small, light, subtle
	motion: abrupt	motion (C2): explosion, hit, burst
/b/	CV	CVCV
	surface: tense	surface (C1): fragile, tense
	object: big, heavy, gruff	object (C1): big, heavy, gruff
	motion: abrupt	motion (C2): explosion, hit, burst
/h/	CV	CVCV
	breath	surface (C1): weak, soft, vague
		object (C1): (very) small, light; vague
		motion (C2): <i>almost never C2</i>
/t/	CV	CVCV
	surface: relaxed	surface (C1): flexible, unbreakable
	object: small, light, subtle	object (C1): small, light, subtle
	motion: abrupt	motion (C2): touch, hit
/d/	CV	CVCV
	surface: relaxed	surface (C1): flexible, unbreakable
	object: big, heavy, gruff	object (C1): big, heavy, gruff
	motion: abrupt	motion (C2): <i>rarely C2</i>
/k/	CV	CVCV
	surface: hard, tough	surface (C1): hard, tough
	object: small, light, subtle	object (C1): small, light, subtle
	motion: abrupt	motion (C2): "in-out" movement
/g/	CV	CVCV
	surface: hard, tough	surface (C1): hard, tough
	object: big, heavy, gruff	object (C1): big, heavy, gruff
	motion: abrupt	motion (C2): <i>rarely C2</i>
/s/	CV	CVCV
		surface (C1): voluble, rough, sandy
	object: small, light, subtle	object (C1): small, light, subtle
	motion: smooth, fast	motion (C2): friction
/z/	CV	CVCV
		surface (C1): voluble, rough, sandy
	object: big, heavy, gruff	object (C1): big, heavy, gruff
	motion: fast, gliding	motion (C2): <i>rarely C2</i>
/m/	CV	CVCV
	restraint, indefiniteness	turbidity, dimness
		motion (C2): <i>almost never C2</i>
/n/	CV	CVCV
	restraint, indefiniteness	viscosity, visciduity, torpidness
		motion (C2): flex, twist (from weakness)
/r/	CV	CVCV

	non-existent surface (C1):	<i>almost never C1</i>
		object (C1): <i>almost never C1</i>
		motion (C2): roll, glide
/w/	CV	CVCV
	loud (voice)	noise; emotional distress
		motion (C2): float; blur
/y/	CV	CVCV
	loud (voice)	tranquility, slowness
		motion (C2): noise; infantile

Even a brief look at the consonants' meanings reveals that there is a systematic underlying structure to onomatopoeic expressions. The unvoiced phonemes /p/, /t/, /k/, and /s/ all connote small, light, subtle objects, while their voiced counterparts /b/, /d/, /g/ and /z/ connote the opposite, namely big or heavy objects. However, voiced and unvoiced pairs always connote the same surface type: /b/ and /p/ connote tense or fragile surfaces, /d/ and /t/ flexible or unbreakable surfaces, /g/ and /k/ hard or tough surfaces, and /z/ and /s/ voluble, sandy or rough surfaces. Also /m/ and /n/ are clearly related, and so are the semi-consonants /w/ and /y/.

The pay-off of this type of systematic phono-lexicalization is that words so generated need not reside in memory. Although it shows to be an eminently well-structured system, it is very hard for non-native speakers of Japanese to acquire or learn.

A further issue are compound verbs. In English, French or German, directional aspects of verbs are often specified by adverbs. For instance the English verb *shoot* can be combined with the adverbs *up* and *down* to *shoot up* and *shoot down*. Directions are not expressed by adverbs in Japanese, but either by locative nouns such as 上 *ue* (eng.: top), 下 *sita* (eng.: down), 右 *migi* (eng.: right), 左 *hidari* (eng.: left) etc. or by verbs such as 上げる *age.ru* (eng.: lift), 上がる *agar.u* (eng.: rise), 下げる *sage.ru* (eng.: lower), 下がる *sagar.u* (eng.: come down), 下ろす *oros.u* (eng.: lower), 降りる *ori.ru* (eng.: come down) etc. However, locative nouns cannot easily combine with verbs because they have often complement function. Yet, combining directional verbs with other verbs is easy and occurs frequently. Thus, English *shoot down* becomes Japanese 打ち下ろす *uti-oros.u*, *shoot up* becomes 打ち上げる *uti-age.ru*.

However, it does not end with directional compound verbs. Many other compound verbs cannot be as easily understood as directional compound verbs. Compound verbs constitute an objective difficulty in Japanese. For Japanese compound verbs refer to Hasselberg (1996).

In summary, Japanese semantics as such does not differ much from that of other languages. However, there are differences that constitute barriers for foreigners. Among these idiomatic expressions, onomatopoeic expressions and compound verbs have been mentioned. These three classes of expressions effectively decide whether a foreigner's Japanese is judged as near-native or not.

### 2.5. *Is Japanese pragmatics difficult?*

Pragmatics deals with the analysis and explanation how people use language. It analyzes for example discourse structures, sub-cultural language etc.

Again, in a very simplistic way, Japanese speakers do not differ much from those of other language cultures. Japanese, too, want to achieve their goals and purposes, want to make a point stick in a discussion, want to come over as convincing and trustworthy as possible etc. However, again, there are also differences. The major and most conspicuous difference is the existence of an overt honorific language 敬語 *keigo* in Japanese. Honorific language does essentially exist in every language, but only few languages have evolved such an overt system of honorific expressions. The Japanese honorific language system has an explicit vertical orientation; i.e. it is very status-oriented. What constitutes status, and how different status are ranked against each other is not always easy to decide, but in general, if a person's status is perceived as higher than another person's status, this will have an influence on how these two people talk with one another.

Broadly, the Japanese *keigo* distinguishes at least three different expression types: 謙讓 *kenzyoo* (eng.: modesty), 尊敬 *sonkei* (eng.: respect), and 丁寧 *teinei* (eng.: politeness). Modest expressions are made by the speaker about his or her own actions or intentions, while respectful expressions are made by the speaker about the listener's (or a third person's) actions or intentions. Polite expressions do not share these status-directed properties. There are two different mechanisms to achieve modest and respectful expressions, and one of these is also used to produce polite expressions. Firstly, morphology can be used to alter an expression. For instance, polite expressions are created by attaching the honorific suffix verb *-mas.u* to the end of verbs or by using the particle verb *=des.u* after nouns or (nominal) adjectives. Sometimes the prefixes *o-* or *go-* are also used in very polite language.

And, if, for example the verb 書く *kak.u* (eng.: write) needs to be put into modest mood, the structure *o-[VERB]-si.mas.u* or the even more modest one *o-[VERB]-itasi.mas.u* is used. If a respectful expression needs to be created, the structures *o-[VERB]-nasai.mas.u* or *o-[VERB]=ni nari.mas.u* is used.

- |     |          |                             |                          |
|-----|----------|-----------------------------|--------------------------|
| (6) | お書きします   | <i>o.kaki-si.mas.u</i>      | (I) write [modest]       |
|     | お書きいたします | <i>o.kaki-itasi.mas.u</i>   | (I) write [very modest]  |
|     | お書きなさいます | <i>o.kaki-nasai.mas.u</i>   | (you) write [respectful] |
|     | お書きになります | <i>o.kaki=ni nari.mas.u</i> | (you) write [respectful] |

The respective expressions in (6) can be used as modest and respectful expressions, but they still lack direction in the personal sphere. In chapter 2.3. three functional expressions were mentioned that express explicit direction in the personal sphere: *～てあげる +te yar.u*, *～てくれる +te kure.ru*, and *～てもらおう +te mora.u*. Combined with *keigo*-expressions, the functional expressions above can serve to express that the speaker does (here: writes) something for the listener, that the listener does (here: writes) something for the speaker, or that the speaker get something done (here: written) by the listener.

- |     |              |                             |
|-----|--------------|-----------------------------|
| (7) | a. 書いてやります   | <i>kai.te yari.mas.u</i>    |
|     | b. 書いてあげます   | <i>kai.te age.mas.u</i>     |
| (8) | a. 書いてくれます   | <i>kai.te kure.mas.u</i>    |
|     | b. 書いてくださいます | <i>kai.te kudasai.mas.u</i> |
| (9) | a. 書いてもらいます  | <i>kai.te morai.mas.u</i>   |

b. 書いていただきます *kai.te itadaki.mas.u*

The versions (a) are neither modest nor respectful, although followed by polite *-mas.u*. The versions (7b) and (9b) are modest, and (8b) is respectful. These expressions are achieved by the second mechanism, namely lexical substitution. The above mentioned morphological mechanism and the lexical mechanism can be combined to form expressions that are more modest or more respectful than any of the structures in (6–9).

(10) お書きくださいます *o.kaki-kudasi.mas.u*  
お書きいただきます *o.kaki-itadaki.mas.u*

Instead of the expressions (7), the first two expressions in (6) are commonly used. In *keigo*, direction in the personal sphere is uncommon for actions or intentions of the speaker. More common ways of expressing in *keigo* that the speaker does or intends something are those below:

(11) 書かせてもらいます *kak.ase.te morai.mas.u*  
書かせていただきます *kak.ase.te itadaki.mas.u*  
お書かせいただきます *o.kak.ase-itadaki.mas.u*

In (11), the speaker is being let write by the listener, which is the most modest way of saying that the speaker writes.

Lexical substitution is common for the Japanese verbs used in the functional expressions above, but required for verbs such as 見る *mi.ru* (eng.: see), 行く *ik.u* (eng.: go), 来る *k.uru* (eng.: come), いる *i.ru* (eng.: be [for people]), 食べる *tabe.ru* (eng.: eat), 飲む *nom.u* (eng.: drink) and others.

(12)	拝見する	<i>haiken-s.uru</i>	see [modest]
	ご覧になる	<i>go.ran=ni nar.u</i>	see [respectful]
	参る	<i>mair.u</i>	go/come [modest]
	いらっしゃる	<i>irassyar.u</i>	go/come/be [respectful]
	召し上がる	<i>mesiagar.u</i>	eat/drink [respectful]

In particular lexical honorifics—but also some of the respectful morphological structures—can be enhanced by the use of passive voice えられる *-rare.ru*.

(13) ご覧になられます *go.ran=ni nar.are.mas.u* see [very respectful]

In summary, Japanese *keigo* is not very difficult as such. The morphological mechanisms are limited and can be learned quickly. Lexical substitutions exist, but in a manageable number. The difficulty of *keigo* is rather to learn to know when to use which expression. Thus, lately the proper usage of *keigo* by younger Japanese has been lamented by elder Japanese.

### 3. Is the Japanese writing system difficult?

The first thing a Japanese will say when asked about the difficulties of the Japanese language is: kanji. Although it is undoubtedly true that the Japanese writing system which combines 漢字 *kanzi* (Chinese pictograms), ひらがな *hiragana* and カタカナ *katakana* (two sets of letters for mora), is objectively very difficult, linguists distinguish with good reasons between spoken and written language. Secondly, it has to be maintained that kanji as such are not of Japanese origin but were introduced during the 7. century from China. The number of kanji that are genuinely of Japanese origin and which are called 国字 *kokuzi* (eng.: national letter) is diminishingly small.

Nevertheless, it is legitimate to claim that while overall the Japanese language may not be very difficult, it is extremely difficult to write and read. It is not only the mixture of three different types of characters and letters—called 漢字かな混じり文 *kanzi-kana-majiri-bun*—but also the linguistic fact that Japanese and Chinese are two typologically very distinct languages. In Chinese, two syllables consisting of the same array of phonemes can be further distinguished by tone, since Chinese is a tonal language. However, Japanese is not, and when kanji have been imported from China to Japan with a Chinese pronunciation, a large number of homophones evolved.

In the beginning, Chinese characters were used in the same way as kana are used today. Each character would express a mora such as /ka/ or /to/. Chinese language was used only in Buddhist texts and government notes. When a non-clerical upper class with an education evolved, people started to use Chinese characters according to their meaning in Chinese while reading them in Japanese. Because, however, Japanese is an agglutinating language, but Chinese an isolating language, the problem arose how to write verb endings. Luckily, a caste of upper class women took to the fancy of writing Chinese characters in cursive script. From these *hiragana* evolved. *Hiragana* could then be used to write endings, and thus not having to resort to 漢文 *kanbun* (Japanese reading of a Chinese text), i.e. plain Chinese. Readings of *kanbun*, however evolved *katakana*.

What has to be noted is that Japanese imported mainly kanji—often together with their Chinese pronunciation—but not words from Chinese. After a way of writing became established, Japanese people began to coin new words by simply combining two kanji. This is so pervading in the Japanese culture, that it is not thought badly if a writer or an essayist coins new words even today. Words that are written by two or more kanji, and that exist only in Japanese are—in a strange twist—called 漢語 *kango* (lit.: Chinese word). Because there are many *kango* that are homophones it is quite demanding for foreigners to develop a broad vocabulary.

In this respect, kanji have an actual influence on the pure language, and even if this would not be the case, kanji prove to be a major obstacle to foreign learners of Japanese. Although language and writing system should be treated differently, the fact remains that Japanese is written in kanji. This is not only a problem for foreigners, but also for the Japanese. The better part of the mandatory school system is invested into the study of kanji, a time that one could argue would be better invested into something else. Since, however, the way how people write their mother tongue, has a major cultural identification potential, it is doubtful whether the current way of writing—or at least kanji—will be replaced.

#### 4. Conclusion

The question whether Japanese is difficult has different answers depending on which part of the language is considered. If viewed from the classical core fields of linguistics, i. e. phonology, morphology, and syntax, Japanese is—compared to European languages—not difficult at all. The number of sounds is less than half of that of European languages; the word classes are distinct and easily distinguished, and the system of affixes is very well structured and very systematic. Affixes that trouble learners of European languages such as genus and various tense affixes are non-existent. The syntax of Japanese is quite easy since its structures are always ascending and left-branching ones.

However, Japanese has also its shares of difficulties. Among those mentioned were in particular functional expressions, idiomatic expressions, onomatopoeic expressions, compound verbs, the usage of the honorific language — but not the system of *keigo* itself —, and at last the Japanese writing system. These six areas decide whether a non-native is capable of communicating well in Japanese, since they constitute objective difficulties in Japanese.

#### 5. Literature :

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