Interesting facts about the Japanese Language

The character above is the Chinese/Japanese ideograph meaning love.

I've lived in Japan about half my life or about 27 years at the time of this post. I have been called a good speaker of what is considered one of the most difficult languages to learn in the world.

Is there *anything* easy about Japanese?

Yes!

- No verb conjugation!
- No gender of nouns!
- No articles (a, the)
- Number (singular and plural) not important and barely exists!
- Not hard to learn to pronounce as there are only 48 sounds consisting of 5 vowels and 11 consonants!
- Syntax or the word order of a sentence, excepting the final verb, is totally free!

Why then is Japanese considered difficult to learn?

- The written language has 3 methods of writing: Thousands of Chinese characters called *Kanji* and 2 Japanese syllabaries of 48 characters each called *Hiragana* and *Katakana*. Japanese is therefore considered the most complex written language in the world. In order to get barely by, you need to learn all of the Hiragana and Katakana and at least a few hundred Kanji. Kanji is used for words, hiragana for verb endings and particles after nouns to denote the case of the noun, and katakana is used for foreign loan words and names.
- Most words have two roots of pronunciation, a Chinese root and a Japanese root. They are totally different sounds. So learning Japanese is almost like learning the vocabulary of 2 languages at once!

All of the 8 Kanji characters above are pronounced “*shin*” and all 8 of them are totally unrelated to each other in meaning! They are from left to right: God, advance, believe, new, true, stretch, heart, and parent. There are no tones in Japanese as there are in Chinese, and so the pronunciation of shin is exactly the same for all the above. Besides these, there are **many more** Kanji that are also pronounced “shin”! The Japanese way to pronounce the characters above are, “kami”, susumu, “shinjiru”, “atarashii”, “makoto”, “nobasu”, “kokoro”, and “oya”. Notice that the Japanese way of pronouncing a word is multi-syllabic, whereas the Chinese way is a single syllable.

- The main verb comes at the end of the sentence. This can result in the meaning of a long sentence being hard to grasp. Imagine a sentence in English like “A storm system plowed through the central Appalachians into the Eastern Seaboard with heavy rain Wednesday, causing flooding that blocked roads and drove some people from their homes” and put the words “plowed through” at the very end of the sentence.
- Particles follow nouns to denote their usage. This is often hard for foreigners to learn unless you happen to be Korean or Mongolian.
- Ideas are expressed in way that is unrelated to European languages.
- Because there is no verb conjugation according to person, the subject of a sentence can be unclear at times. And because the subject is often *assumed* to be already understood, it is frequently dropped entirely adding to the confusion and ambiguity. This is why Japanese is considered by some a “fuzzy” language. One Japanese linguist, however, says that it is not really the language that is fuzzy but the way it is used as a result of the culture.
- There are several levels of polite language to learn. These words are called “honorifics”. If you don’t learn them, you will never rise above the rank of “dumb foreigner”.

Is learning Japanese easier for some nationalities than others?

As far as I know, it is easier only for Koreans and Mongolians as their grammar is related to Japanese. It is **not** especially easy for Chinese people to learn. Though the Chinese can already read and understand the meaning of most Kanji characters, they have to learn to pronounce them the Japanese way and learn an entirely new way of expressing themselves using a totally different grammatical sentence structure.

Is it important to learn to read Japanese?

Yes, if you really want to learn the language well. There are many homonyms in Japanese or words that sound the same but have totally different meanings. (As brought out in the 8 meanings of the word “shin”.) Unless you learn to read at least several hundred Kanji (Chinese characters used in Japanese), you cannot understand meanings of words nearly as well as a person who can read Kanji. There is only one sure way you will learn to read Kanji – take a course in a school for at least a year like I did. I just didn’t have the discipline to learn on my own. I don’t know of *any* foreigner who learned

Kanji well without a formal school course.

Is it possible to write Japanese in the Roman alphabet?

Yes, possible but not practical. Japanese written in Roman characters is called *romaji*. Romaji is
used primarily for foreigners to study Japanese. If General MacArthur had pushed his will to change the written language to the Roman alphabet, Japan would never had advanced to the technological nation it is today. The immense amount of homonyms in the language would have made technological papers and documents hard to understand. Whereas by using Kanji there is always a specific character available out of the thousands at hand.

Are there different dialects of Japanese?

Yes! Tokyo and Sapporo are considered the main 2 centers of the standard national language but all other areas have their own accents and even different words. The Osaka accent is one of the most recognizable. Once at an airport in Paris France I heard 2 Japanese girls speaking and I could tell they were from Osaka. You should have seen the look of surprise on their faces to hear me, a stranger, tell them so! The Tsugaru area of Aomori is considered to be one of the most different dialects of all the dialects of Japan. It is not necessary to learn the local dialect. Most missionaries don’t learn them, only their kids who go to school have picked them up.

Will learning Japanese make it easier for me to learn Chinese later?

Yes! Well, somewhat easier. If you learn to read Kanji, you will be able to already read many signs in either Taiwan, Hong Kong or China even if you never study Chinese. You will be able to communicate basic ideas with the Chinese people just by using Kanji. Most the meanings of the Chinese characters that Japan shares with China are the same.

Some weaknesses of the Japanese language

- Considered a “fuzzy” language. The Japanese people don’t like to be blunt or rude. Consequently, they hesitate to express opinions in a strong and clear manner. Politicians like to use this to their advantage!
- Very few words of affection or endearment as in all European languages! Most Japanese either cannot or will not say “I love you” to their loved ones. These words do exist in Japanese, but are not part of daily vocabulary.
- No such thing as rhyming poetry!
- It takes about twice as long to say something as compared to English. English song lyrics have to be cut in half when translated into Japanese in order to keep the same rhythm.

One strength of the Japanese written language

The cool thing about using Chinese ideograph characters called Kanji is that the meaning of words becomes clear as a bell. There is no need for an

etymology dictionary of Japanese words that are written in Kanji. This includes names of people as well. Most first names in any language have meanings that are often forgotten in time and can only be learned through special dictionaries, but nobody in Japan can ever forget the meaning of a Kanji. For example, how many people would know that my name, James, comes from the Hebrew name Jacob which means “deceiver”? But there is no Japanese person who does not know the meaning of famous Ichiro Suzuki’s name. It means “first man” The names of towns and cities, rivers and mountains can also be translated to English or any other language. Of course this applies to the Chinese language as well.

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10 things you didn't know about

Japanese

Some fun facts about **the language spoken in the Land of the Rising Sun.**

Japanese has many dialects. They're grouped into **Kyoto-Osaka** dialects and **Tokyo** dialects. Mutual intelligibility varies.

9th

MOST SPOKEN LANGUAGE

The majority of the speakers are in Japan or in the Japanese diaspora.

The origins of the language are unknown, since its earliest written records show a fully-formed system.

88 weeks

According to the US Department of State, that's how much it would take for an English-speaker to learn Japanese.

HONORIFICS: suffixes that express the relationship the speaker and person in question have.

-san: most commonly used, similar to "sir" or "ma'am".

-chan: An endearing female honorific, used for children of both genders.

-sama: A respectful way to address someone.

3 WRITING SYSTEMS

HIRAGANA: syllabic, phonetic and used for native words, conjugations and particles.

KATAKANA: used for loanwords.

KANJI: imported from China in the 6th Century AD. Thousands of letters, of which approximately 2000 are most commonly used.

WORD ORDER IN JAPANESE

1	2	3
SUBJECT	OBJECT	VERB

MIMETICS = words that resemble the source of the sound it represents.

むしゃり (Mushari) [Taking a big bite]

ぼーぼー (Bo-Bo-) [fire burning]

THE FASTEST LANGUAGE..

The average native Japanese speaker produces

7.84 Syllables per Second

The number for English is 6.19 syllables per second.

...BUT DOESN'T SAY MUCH

A 2010 study concluded that, among the major languages **Japanese conveys the least amount of information per syllable.**

DayTranslations

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