

Source of the following:

“Understanding Japanese Verbs & Adjectives” Paul Knight (JapanEd) May 2002
ISBN 0-473-08509-7

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THOUGHTS ON LEARNING JAPANESE

In 1960, I began learning Japanese with the help of the crew of a Japanese log-freighter, and "Teach Yourself Japanese", one of about 4 texts on the market then, and the only one available in New Zealand. There seemed nothing at all remarkable about the way Japanese was presented to the student. It could have been French, or Spanish, or even English. It would have been perfectly sensible for the first people who took up the challenge of presenting Japanese to students from the West, to follow the language learning traditions well established amongst the European nations which had been crossing each other's borders for centuries.

However, as time passed I began questioning the conventional approach and finally, after twenty years of teaching Japanese, a year's leave provided the space to attempt to give concrete expression to these accumulated doubts. I am convinced that some radical changes to the way we present Japanese at the very beginning would be beneficial to the learner and with some trepidation began the task of creating a Japanese course based on these ideas.

With the benefit of hindsight, it would seem to me better if Japanese courses had been designed so as to impart to the student from the beginning, a consciousness of very basic features of Japanese which are different from European Languages. I believe that by blurring the differences, it has made it more difficult for Western students to master natural Japanese forms of expression which are not in themselves particularly difficult. A lot of time and effort is wasted because the student has to undo first impressions, especially if they come to Japan after several years of study at home. These first impressions are particularly difficult to undo if they have been absorbed unconsciously, and it is precisely to avoid creating this sort of situation that I think Japanese should initially be presented to the Western student in a manner better suited to the characteristics of Japanese.

It is my intention that the student should start at a point normally reached only after a considerable period of study, and would work for sometime before coming to where most courses start. This "Foreword" explains why, but rather than being merely an appendage to yet another Japanese course, it is also a personal statement of philosophy concerning the teaching and learning of Japanese.

1 THE CHARACTERISTICS OF JAPANESE which should influence the design of a Japanese course for English-speaking students:

(1) The Dominant Role of Verbs and Adjectives.

Unlike their counterparts in European languages, Japanese verbs and adjectives have much in common with each other. Verbs also function as adjectives, while adjectives incorporate the verb "to be" and inflect like verbs. Most importantly, whereas European languages link ideas or sentences using words (conjunctions/relative pronouns) specifically for that purpose, in Japanese, the linking of ideas more naturally depends on inflections to verbs and adjectives.

Instead of using this last function, the first linkages typically taught to students of Japanese are those using [soshite] and [ga] which can be used between two clauses in the same way as "and" and "but" in English. In Japanese, by far the most natural and common way to join two sentences related in the way which would be expressed by "and" is to modify the verb or adjective at the end of the first clause. e.g.

machi ni itte kaimono shita.

I went to town and did some shopping.

The link between the two Japanese sentences is made by using the "-te form" of the Japanese

verb [iku] meaning "to go", but while this method of linking the two ideas would have to be considered by far the most natural, inevitably what students are first taught is: e.g.

machi ni ikimashita soshite kaimono o shimashita.
in which construction the function of "soshite" coincides neatly with that of "and". The "-te form" of adjectives is used the same way and frequently also carries the additional implication of a reason or cause for what is said in the second clause. e.g.

yasukute yokatta ne.
It was good because (or that) it was cheap wasn't it?

atsukute neraremasen deshita.
It was hot and I couldn't sleep. I could not sleep because it was hot.

Not to teach the most common and natural link first, creates a habit which many student have difficulty in breaking, but moreover, it creates the impression that sentence linking is basically carried out in the same way as in European languages. I believe the creation of this impression is an unnecessary impediment to subsequent progress.

2 THE LAZINESS OF JAPANESE NOUNS.

In European languages, nouns may be singular or plural or quantitative or collective, masculine or feminine or neuter or common, and may inflect depending on whether they are subject, object, lenitive etc. On top of that they may require adjectives and verbs to agree with them. When teaching or learning a European language therefore, it seems reasonable that a main focus of attention in the early stage is on nouns. The result is the archetypal "That is the pen of my aunt."

Japanese courses start in exactly the same way and I question the wisdom of this for many reasons:

(a) Japanese nouns do not inflect for gender nor for number nor for case.
(b) They do not influence the form of the verb or adjective.
(c) Nouns, especially in the subject and object position, are naturally omitted when previous reference to them has occurred, and there is little possibility of misunderstanding. For example, in Japanese, the statement: "I will give this to you." requires only one word, the verb. The three nouns "I" "this" "you" are often clearly unnecessary. In English, for example, it is not generally possible to omit the subject of the sentence, nor the object either if the verb has one. In Japanese it is natural to do so and often unnatural not to. But most students have great difficulty in being Japanese and laboriously repeat nouns, especially personal pronouns, when the Japanese is so much briefer and more efficient in this respect. I believe the noun-oriented initial introduction to the language carries a major responsibility for the difficulty students have in adapting to this characteristic of Japanese.

(d) The most compelling reason to my mind for a change in approach also involves nouns. The use of nouns requires the use of particles which indicate, amongst other things, the relationship of the nouns they follow, to the verb or to the sentence as a whole. This relationship may be syntactical. For example, the subject or object of the verb will be indicated by the appropriate particle, but their use is certainly more complex than that.

The choice of particle to follow a particular noun also involves a judgment of context akin to the decision as to whether to use the definite or indefinite article or neither, in European languages.

As if this were not enough, one of the particles, "wa" can be used several times in one sentence to give nouns either one of two categories both of which are quite different from any syntactical function typical of European languages. The Japanese word followed by "wa" will, in the equivalent English expression, have a specific grammatical role. It may be subject or object, or be part of an adverbial phrase expressing time, for example. But the effect of using a noun with "wa" is precisely to isolate it from any specific grammatical relationship with the rest of the

sentence, in a way that, though not totally impossible in English, requires considerable imagination, or possibly bad grammar to find a rough equivalent.

To complicate the matter further, “wa” is frequently used in the same sentence more than once and with two different functions, a difference which is typically ignored, or at best blurred in Japanese courses for foreigners. “wa” is used to imply a contrast between like matters or things in such situations as would require vocal stress in English to make the same implication. For this reason, text books frequently explain the use of “wa” by saying it indicates that a particular noun is to be stressed. But in the other use of “wa”, namely to indicate what is called the “shudai” in Japanese, it is quite wrong to say that the particular word is to be stressed. Quite the opposite would be a correct explanation. The following examples will illustrate what has been said in this paragraph.

e.g. watashi wa atama ga itai.

The noun followed by [wa] in an equivalent English sentence, may be either a possessive adjective, as in: "My head hurts." Or, it could be a pronoun subject as in: "I have a head-ache."

In ano hito wa benkyo ga suki desu similarly, the noun before “wa” will be the subject of the English, "He likes studying." but, in both cases the Japanese subject is the word followed by the particle “ga” not the one followed by “wa.”

In the following, “wa” occurs more than once in the same sentence and in each case the later “wa” indicate that a contrast is being made.

e.g. watakushi wa sake wa nomimasuga tabako wa suimasen.

I drink but I don't smoke.

The first “shudai” has again become the English subject, while the nouns attached to the following “wa” have become absorbed into the English verbs. If one somewhat unnaturally forced them back into the English however, both of them would become English objects: I drink alcohol, but I don't smoke cigarettes.

However the role of “wa” is not ever to indicate any particular case, and in the above, the later “wa” indicate that a contrast is being made or implied between similar things or situations.

In the following examples, the underlined “wa” indicates a “non-contrastive shudai”, the last “wa” indicates something is being contrasted with a similar item, while the “wa” in the middle could be treated either way depending on context.e.g.

watakushi wa ashita wa asoko e wa ikanai.

Tomorrow, I won't go there. (But I will go somewhere else.)

watakushi wa asoko e wa ashita wa ikanai

I won't go there tomorrow. (But I will go there on another day.)

The roles of the “wa” phrases in the above, are partly fulfilled by the English subject, by adverbial phrases of time, and by adverbial phrases of place. But in addition, when “wa” carries the implication of contrast the English adds vocal stress to the word in italics. It can not be said that it is always clear whether a particular “wa” is indicating a contrast. However, when there is more than one “wa” in the same sentence a “wa” at the beginning of the sentence will indicate a non-contrastive “shudai”, while the later a “wa” comes in a sentence, the more clearly is it a contrastive “wa”.

The purpose of the above examples is not in fact to confuse the reader but to show how great is the potential for confusion if the particles are introduced too early, as I consider they generally are. The student's chances of properly understanding the use of the particles are further reduced by the practice of choosing to introduce from the first lessons, sentence patterns based on the

{noun+[wa]+verb} structure, followed shortly after by the introduction of the grammatical object in the

{noun+[wa]+ object+[o]+verb} pattern.

Inevitably, in the sentences chosen to be presented first to the student, the Japanese noun followed by “wa” turns out to be the subject of the English sentence given as its equivalent. I have even seen “wa” introduced as actually indicating the subject. I quote: ““wa” = a particle indicating the subject of the sentence, combines with the preceding word to form the subject of the sentence.” But even without misleading instructions, the association of “wa” with the subject is quickly formed, especially by those students who actually know that sentences have subjects. Then, the next particle introduced, “o”, is the proper particle to indicate the Japanese object, and the wrong association of “wa” with the grammatical subject is mentally confirmed.

When subsequently, the subject particle “ga” is introduced, the student feels the carpet has been pulled out from under this very neat arrangement and the resulting confusion is at best a significant set back to progress in becoming proficient in Japanese, but for many, the particles are doomed to remain an unfathomable mystery, confirmation of the myth that the Japanese are anyway, inscrutable so it is not surprising if their language is ineffable.

However one presents them, the particles are a difficult challenge for both teacher and student. Nevertheless, I think that the typical confusion in the minds of those learning Japanese, is to a considerable extent created by the method of presentation. It is my conviction that a better way exists.

In English and some other European languages one can not normally avoid using nouns in forming a sentence. If Japanese were the same, one would be forced to expose the complete beginner to the use of particles. But, by good fortune or a benevolent whim of the god of language, it is not only possible, but for the reasons already explained, I think it is better to begin Japanese by avoiding the use of nouns in the subject, object or topic positions. Instead, by concentrating on the functions of verbs and adjectives one avoids the need to introduce the particles until such time as the student has the skills to make it possible to introduce the three particles “ga” “o” “wa” simultaneously, and to introduce them in "sentence pairs" which clearly illustrate the difference between the use of “o” as against “wa”, or of “ga” as against “wa”.

I find it effective, if from the beginning the student can realize that grammatically speaking, if the object particle “o” is correct in a particular sentence, then “wa” also is possible. Similarly, if “ga” is correct because the word preceding it is the subject, then it too can be replaced by “wa”. It should be made clear to the student that the choice between “o” and “wa” or between “ga” and “wa” is not a matter of right and wrong in terms of grammar, but is based on a decision requiring a judgment about the context or situation. In English the same thing could be said of the choice between: "I bit the dog." and "I bit a dog."

In summary, considering the frequency with which “wa” appears in Japanese, the cavalier manner in which its use is generally explained, ignored, or its separate functions blurred, seems to me a remarkable phenomenon, only partly explainable by the fact that the Japanese themselves, expert and lay alike, are far from agreement as to how to define just what “wa” properly does. It is my contention, however, that even if it were explained with great care and detail, the explanation would make little sense to the student in the very first lessons in Japanese where “wa” has always been introduced, because the student simply does not yet have the equipment in the language to handle the contrasts and contextual implications which the use or non-use of “wa” carries.

3. THE PRESENTATION OF VERBS

Where European languages are concerned, it is merely a matter of course that verbs are referred to, presented and learned in their infinitive. It would be inconceivable to do otherwise, as it is from the form of the infinitive that one identifies the verb according to its class so that the

student knows how it is conjugated into its various tenses and moods. Furthermore, it is in its infinitive form that any verb will appear in a dictionary.

Japanese verbs also have classes and conjugate in the regular pattern of the class to which they belong. Although they don't strictly have an infinitive with the same functions as say French, German or English, they do have finite forms called "shushi" (pronounced shuushi) and the present tense of this is identical to the form which appears in dictionaries, and according to which, its type, and therefore its pattern of inflection can be known.

This form can be referred to as "the dictionary form" or jishokei -じしけい or genkei -げんけい.

The "shushi" is a finite form of the verb and is the form most commonly used to end a sentence when a degree of formality is not required. Each tense of a Japanese verb, both positive and negative has two forms, "plain" or "dearu-cho" and "formal" or "desu/masu-cho." e.g.

iku and ikimasu,
ikanai and ikimasen,
itta and ikimashita
ikanakatta and ikimasen deshita.

(The latter in each case being the "desu/masu-cho" which is used only in more formal situations.)

The meaning of the dearu-cho or "plain form" is not different from the desu/masu-cho or "formal form, but the decision to use one or the other implies something about the relationship of the speaker to those being spoken to. A whole sentence will be formal if the final verb is in the desu/masu-cho, even if subordinate verbs inside the sentence are not in the desu/masu-cho. The form which appears in a dictionary is in appearance the same as the present tense of the "shuushi" or the "de-aru-cho" though its name is different (viz. "jishokei" or "genkei." In spite of the fact that this form of Japanese verbs exists and functions as the identifying or basic form of the verb in the same way as does the infinitive of European verbs, and in spite of the fact that the various forms other than the desu/masu-cho have a multitude of uses in structuring sentences, and that their use far outnumbers that of desu/masu-cho, the practice persists of introducing and referring to verbs by their "formal present" or desu/masu-cho.

(By the way, "da" and alternatively "de aru" are the dearu-cho of the verb "to be" which you have probably learned already as "desu." In written Japanese, "de aru," "de atta" are more common sentence endings than "da" "datta." You may already have learned the negative of "da" namely, "dewa arimasen" or "jya arimasen," or "jya nai." In other words, the "-te form" of "da" combined with the verb "aru" is a very common alternative to the verb "da" by itself.)

I have been suggesting till now that Japanese courses have followed a method of presentation based on that which is common in European second language teaching, but that this is basically inappropriate for Japanese. It seems ironic therefore, that in the one area where it would have been totally appropriate to have followed European practice, the peculiar convention of presenting verbs in the "formal present" was chosen and has persisted. This would be somewhat akin to referring to verbs in European languages by, for example, the third person singular of the present tense while at the same time refusing to tell the student the infinitive with which they might classify the verb and find it in a dictionary. The most common complaint of students who have learned Japanese formally and then find themselves in Japan, is that the Japanese they hear and read in Japan, is based on the "plain forms" and seems like a different language from the one they have learned, and they feel they have to learn it all over again.

It may be that the convention of presenting and using verbs in the formal form, arose out of the strong desire to present the best "face" to the outside world. I would also admit that there is often something distasteful when one hears foreigners of any breed speaking one's own language with slang or with an inappropriate degree of informality, especially if the speaker's real language ability is not such that he can distinguish between what is and is not suitable. But even if such cultural sensitivity had been the reason, and I can think of no other, the continued concentration on the use of the formal form of the verb can hardly be justified on the same grounds now that Japan and the West are consciously trying to learn and accept the realities

about each other.

From the point of view of language teaching, the convention of presenting verbs in the formal form, and of using them initially only in those forms, seems to make little sense. Japanese children don't learn verbs that way. The desu/masu form is relatively much less useful and much less used than other verb forms, and even if one needs to be formal, only the last verb in the sentence will be in the desu/masu form. It is easy to learn the desu/masu or formal form of the verb as part of the overall pattern of changes based on the natural starting point, the jisho-kei or dictionary form. On the other hand it makes no sense to start from an isolated corner of that pattern. We would not consider doing it with French, German or Spanish verbs, and in the Japanese education system, verbs are taught from the "jisho-kei" as a matter of course. It is common sense, and there are clear advantages to the foreign student of Japanese to have verbs presented not just as an isolated word, but as a pattern based on the "Dictionary Form".

This, in a nut-shell, is starting point of "Understanding Japanese Verbs & Adjectives," and from this starting point also, the other important features of the course develop in a way that I believe is logical and consistent.

4. THE FEATURES OF "Understanding Japanese Verbs & Adjectives":

This way of teaching and learning has two main goals, the earliest possible understanding of and ability to use complex sentence structures, and the earliest possible independence of the learner from teachers and texts.

In my experience, many who decide to learn Japanese do so, not because it is a compulsory or a traditional subject, but because they have a motive and plans to use the language. However, it is very frustrating to communicate in philosophical "monosyllables" joined, if at all, by "and" or "but".

Nevertheless this is how the student of Japanese typically finds him or herself constrained because the necessary skills come in dribs and drabs and often very late in the learning process. This course is designed in the belief that there is no particular reason why the normal order can not be reversed so that the student first learns how to construct relatively complex sentences, and decides for him or herself on the vocabulary that will be useful to express what is of interest or what circumstances demand.

(1) "Understanding Japanese Verbs & Adjectives," starts with the aim of developing the ability to manipulate verbs and adjectives. In the process the student quickly learns to link ideas into complex sentences in a way, using the appropriate forms of verbs and adjectives.

(2) It begins by introducing verbs in the form which is the equivalent of the infinitive of European language studies. It is variously called: "genkei", "jisho-kei," or "dictionary form".

(3) From the "Dictionary Form" of the verb, the student must first learn to classify all verbs into types, [ichidan] or "1-row verbs", [godan] or "5-row verbs" etc. Then, using the patterns typical of each type, the student learns from the beginning to conjugate or change verbs into forms and tenses that other courses do not introduce until later and in many cases, very much later. After the verb types are introduced, adjectives are presented in the same manner. With the knowledge thus acquired, a wide variety of satisfying forms of expression can already be constructed. The student can expect to attain early mastery of sentence-linking skills which are typically Japanese, which do not use conjunctions as European languages do, and which avoid the "Europeanization" of Japanese typical of language courses in their initial stages.

(4) The first exercises train the student in how to return to the "Dictionary Form" from any form of the verb. As the inflections of adjectives follow similar patterns to that of verbs, the student thus develops the skill needed to find any verb or adjective in a dictionary, regardless of the form in which it may have appeared in a context. This skill which we would take for granted

in European languages is not available to students learning Japanese under current methods.

(5) "Understanding Japanese Verbs & Adjectives," does not start with such sentence patterns typified by: "What is this?", "That is a pen.", "What did you buy?", "I bought a book."

This approach emphasizes nouns, subjects, objects and complements. When nouns are used with these functions in Japanese, they must be followed by particles. The correct use of particles is difficult to grasp at any stage, but the possibility of understanding is much greater if the use of particles is delayed until the student has the language ability to interchange and compare their use. Moreover, by initially avoiding the use of nouns in subject/object positions, in addition to avoiding the need to use and explain the particles, "Understanding Japanese Verbs & Adjectives" accustoms the student from the beginning to the natural Japanese tendency to do the same, namely, not to mention the subject/object/shudai unless understanding requires it.

(6) "Understanding Japanese Verbs & Adjectives" does not require of the student a heavy load of vocabulary learning. On the contrary, it keeps vocabulary to a minimum. Instead, the focus is on the goal of the earliest possible mastery of sentence construction and sentence-linking skills. Relatively "advanced" sentence patterns and the verb forms that make them possible are introduced at the beginning, whereas the same forms typically may not appear until after some months or even years of study. The policy of minimizing the vocabulary learning requirement should not be taken to imply that this is considered unimportant, merely that it distracts from the defined goals of this course, and that the learner should take more responsibility for choices in this respect.

(7) Vocabulary acquisition for most students requires effort and memorization. Memorization is quicker if the words are relevant to the student's interests. The author of a Japanese course will feed in new vocabulary at times and rates judged by that author to be appropriate, and the course has to be confined to using only what has been introduced, a task complicated vastly by the role played by Kanji. But no course can please all of its students all the time in its choice of vocabulary. This is especially so when, for example, an American text is used in another English-speaking country where both custom and forms of expression are different. Plain annoyance and resistance to learning can in fact be created by an author's decisions in regard to the introduction of vocabulary.

I believe there is much to be gained by off-loading the task and choice of vocabulary acquisition on to the student, or onto those teaching in a particular linguistic and cultural climate. Japanese nouns are easy to look up in a Japanese-English dictionary. Japanese nouns are very lazy. They have no inflections for singular, plural, or for case, they have no gender. They just sit where they are put. But on the other hand, Japanese verbs and adjectives inflect and so finding them in a dictionary requires skill. It is precisely this skill which Japanese courses traditionally have not provided at least until very late, because they "drip feed" the inflections of verbs and adjectives into students over a long period. "Understanding Japanese Verbs & Adjectives" starts with an over-view of the patterns of verbal and adjectival inflections and aims to give the student the skills necessary for the task of acquiring independently the vocabulary that is useful to him or her.

(8) The minimal vocabulary required for "Understanding Japanese Verbs & Adjectives" makes it compatible with other Japanese courses. While the aim of this course is to give the student a different kind of start with emphasis on Japanese sentence structure, this still leaves a lot to learn about what to put into that structure. For this purpose, I highly recommend as a companion text, and frequently refer the student to, "A Dictionary of Basic Japanese Grammar", by Seiichi Makino and Michiko Tsutsui (Japan Times). I recommend this text not just because of its contents, but because of its lay-out as a dictionary. In other words, the student does not begin at Lesson 1 and proceed lesson by lesson, but refers to it according to the topic needing clarification, thus providing exactly the scope for self-motivation and flexibility compatible with "Understanding Japanese Verbs & Adjectives".

(9) "Understanding Japanese Verbs & Adjectives" can only be followed in the Japanese

script. If the student does not yet know hiragana and katakana, the Japanese phonetic scripts, the author has produced "WATCH, READ & WRITE - a Video Kana Course," which shows how the two phonetic scripts were developed, how they are written and how they are used in combination with kanji (the borrowed Chinese characters) in modern Japanese.