Writing Japanese: Kanji, kana and transliteration

I. Very quick overview of the Japanese writing system(s)

- We will look at some of these points in more detail later in the course
- Japanese terms given below in: ᴋᴀɴᴊɪ • hiragana (katakana if underlined) • *modified kunrei*

(1)   **Kanji** — 漢字・かんじ・*kanzi*

    (a) Orthographic system borrowed from Chinese

    (b) Used for morphemes borrowed from Chinese
       Also applied to existing Japanese words or morphemes
- Consequence: Many kanji have multiple pronunciations or "readings"
- Example: 東 — [toː] (Sino-Japanese) or [çigaɕi] (native), both meaning 'east'

(2)   **Hiragana** — 平仮名・ひらがな・*hiragana*

    (a) Historically developed from kanji (we may look at this a little more later in the course)

    (b) Used to write suffixes, "particles", and other grammatical information

    (c) Also used to spell out words for children or L2 learners

(3)   **Katakana** — 片仮名・カタカナ・*katakana*

    (a) Also historically developed from kanji

    (b) Used to write foreign/modern loanwords (roughly post-1500)

    (c) Used for emphasis, scientific terms whose kanji are out of use, etc. — compare italicization in English

(4)   **Romanization** — ローマ字・ローマじ・*roomazi*
- Mostly used for signage aimed at non-Japanese speakers; several different systems

    (a) Most(?) commonly seen is the Hepburn system (ヘボン式・ヘボンしき・*Hebon-siki*), designed by an international commission and popularized in a J/E dictionary (1886)
- This system uses certain spelling conventions based on English

    (b) An older system (日本式・にほんしき・*Nihon-siki*) maps each kana letter consistently onto a unique combination of Roman letters, even when two kana letters are pronounced the same in Standard Japanese
- Example of a distinction that is not pronounced: じ *zi* vs. ぢ *di*, both now [dʑi]

    (c) The official system in Japan is the kunrei system (訓令式 ・くんれいしき・*kunrei-siki*), which is similar to the *Nihon-siki* system but doesn't make spelling distinctions where no pronunciation distinctions are made
- The kunrei system has じ *zi* and also ぢ *zi*, both [dʑi]

    (d) **Linguists often use a modified version of the kunrei system**; this is what we will use in our course when we are transliterating Japanese data (see kana charts)

II. More about romanization — Transliteration conventions in this course

- When we move away from analyzing phonetics and phonology, and start looking at larger units of structure (morphemes, words, sentences, discourse), we will often represent Japanese language data with a **romanization/transliteration system**

(5)   Remember — A romanization system is a type of **spelling** system

(a) It is not intended to show (predictable) phonetic details

(b) It is designed to be easy to type, so it avoids special symbols

(6)   In this class, we will use the **(modified) kunrei system**, not the Hepburn system

   Consider 湿度 [ɕitsɯdo] 'humidity'
   - Hepburn: しつど → shi tsu do
   - Kunrei: しつど → si tu do

(a) Which of these is easier for an English speaker to remember how to pronounce?

But — which of these is easier for a French speaker?
- Hepburn is English-centric

(b) We will see in our next few classes that there are linguistic reasons to use (modified) kunrei as well

(7)   Are there any principles behind cases where the kunrei romanization seems to deviate strongly from the pronunciation?

→ *Absolutely*.

Many of these will become clear when we start analyzing the **phonological rules** of Japanese next week.

III. Using the class kana charts

(8)   Given a kana symbol, be able to transliterate it into kunrei romanization

- Here are a few **hiragana you need to learn to recognize** (you don't have to be able to *write* them), because of their importance for linguistic data and discussion:

(a) Look on chart for these: が   の   に   で

(b) Look on chart for these, and note special pronunciation: を   は

(9)   Given a kunrei romanization, be able to transliterate it into (at least one) kana spelling