

Syllable-final nasals in Japanese

The hiragana symbol <ん> is used to spell a nasal sound that appears in syllable-final position (more about syllables coming soon). However, from the perspective of phonetics, there are many different pronunciations associated with this spelling.

(Data from Vance 2008)

- How should we phonetically transcribe the sound spelled by <ん> in each case?
- Are these different surface realizations of <ん> in predictable (complementary) distribution? If so, how can we describe the relevant environments?
- (Advanced question): How should we label this phoneme? Is /n/ a good choice? Why or why not?

(1)	<i>spelling</i>	<i>hiragana spelling</i>	<i>phonetic transcription</i>	<i>gloss</i>
	三泊	さんぱく	[sa__paku]	‘three nights’
	三部	さんぶ	[sa__bu]	‘three copies’
	三等	さんとう	[sa__to:]	‘third class’
	三度	さんど	[sa__do]	‘three degrees’
	三回	さんかい	[sa__kai]	‘three times’
	三号	さんごう	[sa__go:]	‘three number’ (“number three”)
(2)	<i>spelling</i>	<i>hiragana spelling</i>	<i>phonetic transcription</i>	<i>gloss</i>
	三枚	さんまい	[sa__mai]	‘three sheets’
	三年	さんねん	[sa__ne()]	‘three years’
(3)	<i>spelling</i>	<i>hiragana spelling</i>	<i>phonetic transcription</i>	<i>gloss</i>
	三通	さんつう	[sa__tsu:]	‘three letters’
	三千	さんぜん	[sa__dze()]	‘three thousand’
	三兆	さんちょう	[sa__tʃo:]	‘three trillion’
	三時	さんじ	[sa__dzi]	‘three o’clock’
(4)	<i>spelling</i>	<i>hiragana spelling</i>	<i>phonetic transcription</i>	<i>gloss</i>
	三塁	さんるい	[sa__rui]	‘third base’
(5)	<i>spelling</i>	<i>hiragana spelling</i>	<i>phonetic transcription</i>	<i>gloss</i>
	三	さん	[sa__]	‘three’
	四	よん	[jo__]	‘four’

(6)	<i>spelling</i>	<i>hiragana spelling</i>	<i>phonetic transcription</i>	<i>gloss</i>
	三位	さんい	[sa__i]	‘third rank’
	三円	さんえん	[sa__e()]	‘three yen’
	三アンペア	さんあんぺあ	[sa__a()pea]	‘three amperes’
	三億	さんおく	[sa__oku]	‘three hundred million’
	三有	さんう	[sa__u]	‘three (Buddhist) worlds’

(7)	<i>spelling</i>	<i>hiragana spelling</i>	<i>phonetic transcription</i>	<i>gloss</i>
	三ヤード	さんやード	[sa__ja:do]	‘three yards’
	三割	さんわり	[sa__wari]	‘three tenths’

(8)	<i>spelling</i>	<i>hiragana spelling</i>	<i>phonetic transcription</i>	<i>gloss</i>
	四フィート	よんふいと	[jo__φi:to]	‘four feet’
	四歳	よんさい	[jo__sai]	‘four years old’
	四章	よんしょう	[jo__ɕo:]	‘four chapters’
	四百	よんひゃく	[jo__ɕjaku]	‘four hundred’
	四杯	よんはい	[jo__hai]	‘four cupfuls’