

Basic background: Japanese and linguistics

I. Background on Japanese

(1) **Regions** of Japan (approximation of major **dialect areas**)



(2) **Demographics**

((a)-(b) from the [World Factbook \(CIA\)](#), accessed 1/18/2021)

- (a) Population of Japan: 125,507,472 (July 2020 est.)
- (b) Ethnic groups in Japan: Japanese 98.1%, Chinese 0.5%, Korean 0.4%, other 1%
- (c) Japanese L2 speakers: approx. 1,000,000 in Japan ([ethnologue.com](#), 2018)
- (d) Lists of world languages by **native speakers** generally list Japanese at around #9
(see one example at [WorldAtlas](#))

II. Background on linguistics

(3) Some of the major **domains of inquiry** in linguistics — we will look mostly at (a), (c). (d)

(a) What do we know when we know a language?

- Descriptive linguistics: What do language speakers actually do?
- Theoretical analysis: How can we build a formal model of linguistic knowledge?

(b) How do we come to have that knowledge of language?

- The study of language acquisition
- Language acquisition as a testing ground for theoretical models

- (c) How do languages change over time?
 - Historical language change as a testing ground for theoretical models
- (d) How do we use our language in a social/cultural context?
- (4) Human language behavior is strikingly **systematic**
 - (a) The mental grammar of the speaker of a natural language can be modeled on the basis of various **rules, principles, or constraints**
 - (b) However, much linguistic knowledge is **unconscious knowledge**
 - (c) Example: What happened to the Japanese word *karaoke* (カラオケ) when it was borrowed into English?
- (5) Linguists access linguistic knowledge indirectly, by **collecting or generating language data** and analyzing it for patterns and generalizations

III. Why study the linguistics of Japanese?

- (6) For Japanese language students: Learning to analyze language systematically can help with language learning
 - Whatever question you have about how Japanese works, there is probably a subfield of linguistics that specializes in that topic (*try it?*)
- (7) For linguists: Japanese has been influential in the development of linguistic theory
 - Typologically different from English
 - Many linguists, from Japan and elsewhere, have worked on Japanese
- (8) **Course plan:** To survey some areas where Japanese is linguistically different from English and/or has made an important contribution to linguistic theory

IV. Logistics: Working with Japanese on the web

- (9) You need a Japanese-capable **web browser** — follow links from “[Daily syllabus](#)” web page
- (10) You need to be able to work with **kana charts** — see “[Online course materials](#)” web page and separate handout (coming soon) on “Kana and transliteration”
 - (a) The kana systems are (almost) syllable-based writing systems; more on this later
 - (b) Two types of kana:
 - **Hiragana** (平仮名・ひらがな), which is used for things like inflectional morphology, or spelling out non-loan words when Chinese characters are not used
 - **Katakana** (片仮名・カタカナ), which is used for loanwords (modern and/or non-Chinese), or for emphasis (kind of like italics in English)
 - (c) 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:

Look on chart for these: が の に で

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