

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: kanji • 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 — [to:] (Sino-Japanese) or [ɕigaɕi] (native), both meaning ‘east’

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

- (a) Historically developed from kanji (we’ll 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 [ɕzi]
- (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 [ɕzi]
- (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 [ɕitsudo] ‘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