

Component 2, Part 2

Centripetal Forces in Japan: The Japanese Language

The Japanese language is a key centripetal force in Japan. Not only is the spoken language unique to Japan, but over 95 percent of the population is literate as well. While many Japanese believe that their spoken language is unique, it is most likely a language originally resulting from migration of people from the Korean peninsula. Many Japanese words are derived from Chinese. However, spoken Chinese and Japanese are completely different; Chinese is tonal and Japanese is atonal. There are Altaic (continental Asia) and Austronesian (Pacific Islands) components, but the relative physical isolation of the islands allowed for the spoken language to evolve into its own distinct form. However, there are some Western linguistic influences, such as Portuguese, English, and other loan words that are part of the language (Menton, 2001).



Figure 4: Japanese characters can be an art form as seen on this sign in Nagoya.
Source: Alice Tym

Written Japanese uses Chinese characters called *kanji* which represent both ideas and sounds (Figure 4). This system of writing came from China via Korea during the fourth century or even afterwards. The Japanese then later developed the syllabaries *hiragana* and *katakana* to invent their own written language to indicate sound without meaning similar to our alphabet. Both hiragana and katakana contain the 51 basic symbols representing specific sounds. Hiragana is used primarily for Japanese words and grammar, while katakana is used for foreign borrowed words. Each symbol indicates the sound of a whole Japanese syllable. Japanese is written vertically from top to bottom and from right to left so books are opened from what would be the back cover to us (Ellington, 2002). However, today many books are horizontal and read left to right.

One distinct characteristic of the Japanese language is its system of honorifics. Honorifics are forms of expression to show rank and respect in conversation. For example, *sensei* is an honorific word commonly used for teachers and for other learned people. *San* is a gender-neutral honorific similar to "Mr." or "Mrs." This use of language to denote class, status, and gender is still important in Japan. As a cultural practice this becomes a centripetal force because, despite

strong contemporary counter-currents, language tends to reinforce various social hierarchies.



Figure 5: This calligrapher sells his art at the Kiyomizu-dera temple.
Source: Alice Tym

As in the rest of Northeast Asia, calligraphy also became an art form (Figure 5). During the Heian Period (794-1185), the ability to write beautifully was an important achievement for an aristocrat. *The Tale of Genji* describes this period where even the shade and texture of letter paper was important when sending love poems. Later in thirteenth and fourteenth century Japan, various Buddhist Zen sects emphasized the aesthetics of calligraphy (Leonard, 1968), and even samurai were often skilled calligraphers.

Note To Teacher

Explain the importance of education in a society with a written language based upon knowledge of two to three thousand characters and two syllabries rather than a 26 letter alphabet. Explain the historical and evolutionary significance of pictograph writing verses the Romanized alphabet. Samples of basic Japanese characters may be found on the following website:<http://www.omniglot.com/writing/japanese.htm>. Another good language website is <http://japanese.about.com/blkod.htm>. To practice katakana, hiragana, and kanji writing skills the following website may be used as a tutor: <http://members.aol.com/writejapan/#about>. To translate your name into Japanese characters, go to <http://japanesetranslator.co.uk/your-name-in-japanese/>. Students would enjoy a list of borrowed technology words such as, *fakkusa* (fax), *konpyuta*(computer), *kohikoppu* (coffee cup) (Menton, 2001).

References

- Ellington, Lucien, 2002, *Japan A Global Studies Handbook*. Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, Inc.
Leonard, Jonathan Norton, 1968. *Early Japan*, NY: Time-Life Books.
Menton, Linda, "Borrowing Words," *Education About Asia*, Volume 6, Number 2, Fall 2001.