

The Written Language

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All languages were spoken before they were written. Ways of recording words and ideas were invented in only a few places in the world, and over thousands of years were altered to adapt to many diverse languages. Many languages, like English, use an alphabet — symbols that indicate the way words sound. Other writing systems use symbols to show what words mean as well. The Chinese writing system uses characters that indicate both sound and meaning. Japanese has three separate sets of symbols for writing: kanji, hiragana and katakana.

Kanji Thousands of characters borrowed from Chinese writing, each with a different meaning

Hiragana 46 "smooth" style phonetic symbols used for inflected endings, grammatical particles and other Japanese words

Katakana 46 "block" style phonetic symbols used for writing foreign loan words, foreign names, and for emphasis

The Japanese began to use the Chinese writing system about 1,400 years ago. These Chinese characters, called kanji in Japanese, are also called pictographs because they indicate meanings as well as sounds. The way that Japanese use Chinese pictographs to write their own language is a good example of Japanese ingenuity in adapting elements of other cultures to enhance their own.

Kana: Syllabaries

When the Japanese started to use Chinese characters for their own language, they ran into some problems. Chinese words are only one or two syllables, and they can use a character for each syllable, but Japanese words frequently have many syllables, especially inflected words. So the Japanese developed symbols from the kanji, called kana, to indicate sound without meaning, the way our alphabet does. But the symbols in these syllabaries indicate the sound of a whole Japanese syllable instead of each separate part. か is ka, for example, and つ is tsu. The written language created by Sequoyah to write the Cherokee language is another example of a syllabary in which each symbol represents a syllable of the spoken language. Kana usually have many fewer strokes than kanji.

The other syllabary is called katakana. It is squarer-looking than hiragana. Ka is カ instead of か, and tsu is ツ instead of つ. Japanese, like English, has many foreign loan words in its vocabulary, and katakana is used for these, such as テレビ (terebi) for television, アイスクリーム (aisu kurîmu) for ice cream, or rômaji for roman letters. It is also used for foreign names, like ツヨシ (zu-yo-n) for John or カレン (ka-re-n) for Karen, and it is used for emphasis, the way we use underlining or italic type in English.

Japanese can be written horizontally, from left to right, as it is here. But it is usually written vertically, in columns running from right to left. Books, therefore, begin at what is the back of English books.

Mastering the language

As you can imagine, it takes many years to learn how to read and write Japanese. For English we need to know only twenty-six symbols — the letters of our alphabet — to have the basic tools of our written language, although it takes a lot of practice to use these tools well. There are thousands of kanji, or characters, and students must learn 881 of them in elementary school, and a total of 1,850 by the time they graduate from high school. So you can understand that it takes a Japanese student a long time to learn how to write his/her language. During the Meiji era (1868-1912), some people wanted to switch to the roman alphabet, or even to English. In the years after World War II, the written language was simplified and standardized to make it easier to learn.

However, the difficulties of learning Japanese have their compensations. Having symbols that indicate both sound and meaning gives the language flexibility, and can express deep and subtle meanings. The writing system is also a beautiful one, and when it is written with a brush and ink it is an art form in itself.