

## Cultural-historical approach to several aspects of Japanese language: comparative analysis and second-language acquisition

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Japanese language, which is popular worldwide and at the same time quite difficult to learn, has many unique features that are tightly connected with the social and historical context of Japan. Its grammatical patterns, writing system, specific lexical units such as mimetic words, and many other aspects should be analyzed not only from a linguistic perspective, but also as cultural and psychological phenomena. For the current review, the cultural-historical approach proposed by Soviet psychologist Lev Vigotskiy is used to analyze linguistic nuances of the Japanese language and to explain some features different from Indo-European language systems. Results obtained using this approach suggest that Japanese language acquisition in schools and universities should be based not only on doing grammar exercises, but also on acquiring basic knowledge of Japanese history and society, to clarify language patterns.

**Key words:** cross-linguistic comparison, Japanese studies, kanji, mimetic words, sociocultural theory, sound symbolism

### Vigotskian approach to Japanese language acquisition

Japanese language, which has become very popular because of manga and anime booms in the United States and other Western countries, is studied by thousands of people worldwide. Many young people with no background in Asian languages learn new words and kanji, try to understand grammar, listen to the unfamiliar sound patterns, and strive to improve their Japanese language abilities despite being often surprised and confused with the unexpected complexity of some lexical and grammatical patterns.

The reasons for this boom of Japanese language should be a subject of a different study. The aim of this review is analysis of some difficulties which European speakers encounter while learning Japanese, and of the underlying factors of great differences among language systems. The analysis is conducted based on comparison of Japanese and English, a representative Indo-European language.

It is readily apparent that Japanese is quite difficult for European speakers, although Chinese and Korean students can master it with much less effort. That ease of learning is partly attributable to the similarity of their writing systems: kanji are recognized more easily and are learned more effectively by Asian people. However, several obstacles can also be found in other linguistic aspects.

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Formation of every language is a complicated process that has a biological basis, but it also demands centuries and the intellectual efforts of many generations. Moreover, one can not underestimate the role of the geographic, cultural, and social circumstances which affect this process. According to the globally recognized cultural-historical approach proposed by Russian psychologist L.S. Vigotskiy, lexical and grammatical aspects of language, as inseparable parts of culture, evolve through social development. Therefore, they should be analyzed in tight connection to the psychology of a certain nation (Vigotskiy, 1962).

A sociocultural theory deriving from the statement above asserts that human mental function is a mediated process that is organized by cultural tools and activities: primary among them is language (Jackendoff, 2007). Not only have specific social and historical factors influenced the lexicalization and grammaticalization patterns of the Japanese language; these features greatly influence modes of thinking and the mindset of contemporary Japanese.

Given this context, socio-psychological features are explainable through comparative linguistic analysis. Special attention must be devoted to several aspects that are especially difficult for European students acquiring Japanese language because of their absence in most Indo-European languages.

### **Social–historic background of Japanese grammar**

The most commonly cited obstacle for European people learning Japanese is its grammar. Quite surprising is the fact that no future tense exists in Japanese language: grammatically, it has only past and present. Although future tense is explainable and inferred from a certain context, it is not at the core of language, as it is in all European languages.

Different reasons and theories have been presented to explain this interesting aspect. Some researchers link the lack of future tense with the geographic position of the Japanese archipelago. Frequent earthquakes, typhoons, and other natural disasters influenced the psychology of speakers: Japanese people cannot be sure about their future, so the future tense is seldom used (Miller, 1967). Another possible explanation for this uncertainty and vagueness is a strong influence of Buddhism, which emphasized the illusionary aspects of the surrounding world. Nevertheless, no sufficient evidence for this proposal is forthcoming.

This uncertainty, a remarkable feature of Japanese language, is often confusing for European speakers. Another example is illustrative of this idea. If one translates to Japanese a sentence beginning with “When spring comes,” then the most appropriate translation would be “春になると (haru ni naru to).” However, the Japanese sentence pattern “V (dictionary form) + と (to)” is often translated as not “When,” but “If something happens.” Although a meaning can be understood from the context, once again one comes across the fact that this pattern sounds uncertain, as if the speaker unconsciously is unsure that spring truly comes.

In many other words and grammatical structures, one finds the same phenomenon: it is quite natural to end sentences with “と 思います (to omoimasu),” “でしょう (deshou)”; many words such as “そう (sou),” “よう (yo-u),” “らしい (rashii),” and “みたい (mitai)”

represent different nuances of suggestions. They are quite confusing for Europeans mastering Japanese language.

One more specific feature of Japanese grammar is common for the Japanese language but very unfamiliar to European speakers. In fact, it is rooted in the Japanese consciousness: a concept of “zero pronoun.” Subjects and other nouns are often left out of a sentence. The practice can cause vagueness and difficulties in mutual understanding, but Japanese is a context-dependent language for which there is often no grammatical requirement to express a subject because both speakers know it. The explanations offered for this feature are socio-linguistic: “The avoidance of designation of a person except in those situations where it has special focus is a reflection of the Japanese de-emphasis of the individual, and the emphasis on the occurrence itself rather than the individuals involved” (Jordan & Noda, 1987). Presumably, it can be linked to some features of a collectivistic consciousness, which is typical of the Japanese mentality, as illustrated by cross-cultural studies such as that of Triandis (2002): the role of the individual is reduced to being a part of a whole.

Although the subject or individual is often grammatically absent, a society in which this individual communicates is, in contrast, important for the linguistic and lexical aspects of Japanese language. Many words connected with the concept of social dependence are typical for Japanese. They cannot be translated into other languages. Such terms as “uchi,” “soto,” “giri,” “enryo,” “honne,” and “tatemae” are specific to the Japanese culture, indirectly influencing everyday communication; such verbs as “uramu,” “tanomu,” and “kodawaru” are reported as having a semantic influence from this psychological aspect (Doi, 1973).

Presumably, the most complicated aspect of Japanese language connected with individual–social context is polite speech, *keigo*, which is difficult to understand and to learn for foreign students. In fact, polite speech exists in most languages, but it is very seldom so strictly systematized and complicated as it is in Japanese.

It is particularly interesting that such strong emphasis on hierarchy within Japanese society, which is expressed lexically and grammatically, is identifiable not only in the case of work communication, but even in one’s family. A remarkable feature of Japanese language is that it has no specific terms for “brother” and “sister”: these family members are either “younger” (弟 (*otouto*), 妹 (*imouto*)) or “elder” (兄 (*ani*), 姉 (*ane*)): this lexical nuance can be regarded as another demonstration of the importance of hierarchy in Japanese society.

### **Writing system and development of cognitive mechanisms**

Special attention should also be devoted to cultural differences in cognition, especially visual perception, because they also strongly affect language. For example, a difficult subject of learning for foreign students is the elaborate system of Japanese counter words (助数詞). Although this feature is not specific to Japanese and can be found in several languages, the idea of counting objects in dependence of how they appear and classifying them according to their visual features can be difficult for non-Asian speakers to understand.

An importance of visual perception in the Japanese language can also be noticed by comparing words that mean “loud” and “quiet”: whereas special words exist to describe these concepts in most European languages, Japanese speakers use the words “大きい音” (ookii oto, “a big sound”) and “小さい音” (chiisai oto, “a small sound”), as if they are not heard, but seen.

Such strong emphasis on visual perception is typical of the Japanese culture in general; the role of the writing system should not be underestimated. At the base of the Japanese writing system lies a writing system that was borrowed from China, acquired for the necessities of the spoken language; even syllable kana symbols are perceived and often used in art not only as letters, but also as images (Shuji, 2018). Although the combination of several writing systems is a most remarkable feature of the Japanese language and although it affects many cognitive functions, understanding that feature better demands some attention to the historic and socio-cultural conditions which have formed it.

Adoption of the Chinese writing system might be readily apparent: Japanese people, as practically all peoples of the Far East, did not invent their own systems. Still, a more remarkable feature is that Japanese people did not abolish its use after inventing kana. Although kanji have always been valued for its role as an official language for writing documents, the position of kanji has weakened continually along with the implementation of mass education and literacy since the Meiji period because kanji are difficult for most people to remember. Another attempt was made during the American occupation of Japan (1945–1951), but because of the implementation of 当用漢字表 (touyou kanjihyou, “list of kanji for general use (tentative use)”) in 1946 and because of strong efforts of the Ministry of Education, this system has remained stable, retaining Chinese characters as a component of written Japanese, along with syllabic kana symbols.

The consequent combination of several writing systems in modern Japanese engenders a very unusual phenomenon. In practically all existing languages, a common principle of “one word – one mode of writing it” exists, but Japanese provides several possible variants for expressing the same word. The most suitable one also depends on the context.

An example is animal names. Sasahara (2015) explains a very interesting case: “Let’s imagine that we meet a real bear in a forest. It is a big and dangerous animal. Therefore, in this case, kanji “熊” is more suitable for expression. However, if the bear is not real and is imagined as just another animal, we would presumably write it as “クマ (kuma).” However, if we imagine a plush toy, the most appropriate written expression would be “くま (kuma).” Because different brain hemispheres are responsible for processing letters and images, some theories hold that the Japanese brain is unique because, even during the execution of everyday tasks such as reading a simple text, its two cerebral hemispheres must work simultaneously (Tsunoda, 1987).

It is noteworthy that, some years after Tsunoda’s famous publication, his main conclusions were criticized for a lack of empiric data, which renders some of his conclusions as arguable and controversial, as noted by Dale (1993). Nevertheless, this study remains classical in this

field. Further research should be undertaken to explore this topic more thoroughly using up-to-date technologies and equipment.

Many recent studies have examined differences between logographic (kanji) and alphabetic (kana) writing systems, many demonstrating that they activate different areas of the brain (Sakurai et al., 2000; Bolger et al., 2005). Kana and kanji differences have been found specifically in semantic processing (Nakamura et al., 2005), phonological processing (Sekiguchi, Koyama & Kakigi, 2004), orthographic processing (Ischebeck et al., 2004), implicit and explicit word processing (Thuy et al., 2004), and word-reading in kanji and kana words and non-words (Sakurai et al., 2000).

Therefore, one can infer that specific historic development and cultural mechanisms of Japanese civilization, the most typical of which is borrowing and carefully preserving and implementing foreign elements into their own culture, have gradually shaped and developed special and unique cognitive features of a whole nation.

### **Japanese sound symbolism: structure and characteristics**

Regarding the lexical structure of Japanese language, a distinctive feature is the huge number of mimetic words. This type of word is an example of sound symbolism when a certain connection exists between the acoustic representation of a word and its meaning. Although some of them can sound meaningless, they provide associations with different shapes, textures or feelings. Remarkably, they can be understood in various cultures.

Over 5000 such words exist in the Japanese language, but ascertaining the precise number is practically impossible. Many Japanese onomatopoeic words are useful quite intuitively, making sense for native speakers, but the nuances would be almost impossible for translation into other languages.

In most European languages, the number of mimetic words is practically limited to the phenomena which actually produce certain sounds (such as knocking on a door, ringing a bell, and animal voices). By contrast, Japanese language possesses such words for different visual features, psychological and emotional states, texture, and palatability, and even a sound for no sound at all.

Although the number and variety of mimetic words in the Japanese language make it seem difficult to understand and to remember, a system of sound–idea correspondence definitely makes Japanese onomatopoeia easier to understand. Hamano (1998) made a systematic study of the Japanese sound symbolism, revealing clues to basic patterns of this correspondence. The important point is that, in contrast to the Bouba–Kiki effect, as described by Ramachandran and Hubbard (2001), where vowels play a crucially important role in associating sounds and meanings, in the Japanese onomatopoeia, more attention must be devoted to consonants.

Analyzing the typical Consonant – Vowel – Consonant – Vowel (CVCV) structure of Japanese mimetic words, the first consonant sound is related to tactile properties. The second

is related to the movement. The following table presents a more detailed description.

*Table 1.* Consonant–meaning correspondence in Japanese mimetic words (from Hamano, 1998).

	First consonants in CVCV	Second consonants in CVCV
p	taut surface; light, small, fine	explosion, breaking, decisiveness
b	taut surface; heavy, large, coarse	
t	lack of surface tension, subduedness; light, small, fine	hitting on a surface, coming into close contact, complete agreement
d	lack of surface tension, subduedness; heavy, large, coarse	
k	hard surface; light, small, fine	opening, breaking up, expanding, puffing out, emission from inside, surfacing, in-out movement
g	hard surface; heavy, large, coarse	
s	non-viscous body, quietness; light, small, fine	soft contact, friction
z	non-viscous body, quietness; heavy, large, coarse	
h	weakness, softness, unreliability, indeterminateness	breath
m	murkiness	
n	viscosity, stickiness, sliminess, sluggishness	bending, elasticity, unreliability, lack of force, weakness
y	leisurely motion, swinging motion, unreliable motion	sound from many sources, haziness, childishness
r		rolling, fluid movement
w	human noise, emotional upheaval	softness, faintness, haziness

Table 1 can be helpful to analyze some sound-meaning correlation patterns, but it is noteworthy that Japanese mimetic words are, as the Japanese language in general, very context-sensitive: “koro-koro” can signify a chirping sound of a cricket, a rolling movement of a small object, or frequent changing of someone’s decisions (Sato, 2017).

Speaking about the origins of a vast number of mimetic words in the Japanese language, one can suggest that the reason lies in the animistic character of shinto: every object can be perceived as animate, flowers might do “hira-hira”; a star might shine “kira-kira” (Akita, 2017). An interesting point related to mimetic words is indeed the fact that they are numerous in languages of Africa and tribes of Latin America, but they are few in English and other European languages. One might conclude that mimetic word usage is correlated with a level of social and economic development. Japanese and Korean are thought to be the sole exceptions to this rule. Still, for Japanese language, specific features of early belief and religion can help to reveal and explain this pattern.

Several experiments have been conducted to elucidate the extent to which Japanese mimetic words can be understood by non-Japanese speakers. Frei (1970 cited in Hirose 1981) found that French speakers had difficulty guessing the meaning of such words, but could guess

slightly better when the context was given. Iwasaki et al. (2007) proved that mimetic words for laughing are understood by foreign students better than mimetic words for walking. The comprehension depends on the semantic field of the words.

It can be concluded that, unlike the universal character of sound symbolism in the Bouba–Kiki effect when nearly 90% of participants visualize sound the same way (Ramachandran & Hubbard, 2001), perception of Japanese mimetic words is more dependent on the context and also on the level of Japanese skills and knowledge: it is much more individual. Additional explorations of this area must be undertaken to analyze and explain the level of universality of Japanese sound symbolism among non-Japanese speakers. However, the results would be an important contribution to our understanding of sound–idea correspondence phenomena.

## Conclusion

The discussion presented above described only several patterns of Japanese language which partly address its grammar, writing system, and lexical units. Much more in this area has yet to be discussed and studied.

In the vast majority of Japanese textbooks and course books, language is explained and taught separately from a cultural and social context, thereby making some linguistic features difficult for European students to understand. However, as explained above in the current review, every language has developed in tight connection with the cultural-historical evolution of the nation. Linguistic features are often inseparable from their socio-cultural background. Judging from this perspective, one can infer that Japanese language teaching would be more effective if it would use not only a “language by itself” approach, but also introduce basic knowledge of social, cultural, and psychological features of the Japanese nation in general.

Aside from possible contributions to the Japanese learning process, this area of research seems prominent. It is evident that analyzing Japanese language from the position of acquiring it as a second language can help not only to explain its linguistic features, but also to provide important clues for understanding cross-cultural differences in cognitive patterns and social psychology.

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