

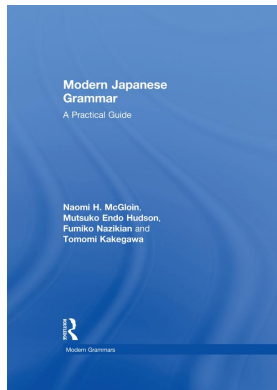
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Modern Japanese Grammar A Practical Guide

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Pronunciation

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2

Pronunciation

2.1 Inventory of basic sounds

The basic sounds of Japanese are provided below, followed by some rules.

Vowels: /a/ /i/ /u/ /e/ /o/

Consonants:

stops: /p/ /t/ /k/ /b/ /d/ /g/

fricatives: /s/ /z/ /h/

liquid: /r/

glides: /w/ /y/

nasals: /m/ /n/

(1) Vowels may be short or long. Long vowels are transcribed with double letters herein; e.g. **okaasan** ‘mother,’ **gakusee** ‘student,’ **yuuki** ‘courage.’

(2) The vowel /u/ is not pronounced as far back as the English /u/, and the lips are not as rounded; e.g. **uta** ‘song,’ **kuki** ‘stem.’

(3) High vowels /i/ and /u/ are often voiceless when they occur between voiceless consonants or word finally when preceded by a voiceless consonant; e.g. **hito** ‘person,’ **suki** ‘like,’ **ikimasu** ‘I’ll go.’

(4) The /r/ sound is a flap and is pronounced with the tip of the tongue making a quick tap at the alveolar ridge, right behind the teeth; e.g. **ree** ‘zero,’ **ryokoo** ‘trip.’

(5) The pronunciation of some of the consonants depends on the vowel that immediately follows.

/s/: [s] before /a, u, e, o/; [sh] before /i/; e.g. **saru** ‘monkey,’ **shigoto** ‘job.’

/z/: [z] before /a, u, e, o/; [dj] before /i/; e.g. **zoori** ‘sandals,’ **aji** ‘taste.’

/t/: [t] before /a, e, o/; [ch] before /i/; [ts] before /u/; e.g. **te** ‘hand,’ **michi** ‘road,’ **tsuno** ‘horn.’

/d/: [d] before /a, e, o/; [dj] before /i/; [dz] before /u/; e.g. **kado** ‘corner,’ **mijika** ‘close,’ **tsuzuki** ‘continuation.’

/h/: [h] before /a, e, o/; [ç] before /i/; [φ] before /u/; e.g. **hato** ‘dove,’ **himo** ‘string,’ **futa** ‘lid.’

2.2 Syllable and mora

As a timing unit, *syllable* and *mora* are both important in Japanese. A mora may consist of a single vowel (e.g. **e** ‘painting’), a consonant + vowel (**ka** ‘mosquito’), a consonant + y + vowel (**kyuu** ‘nine’), the second element of a long vowel (**kyuu** ‘nine’), syllabic nasal (more accurately, ‘moraic’ nasal) [N] (e.g. **hon** ‘book’), or the first element of a (non-nasal) double consonant (e.g. **sakka** ‘writer’). Each mora is pronounced with roughly an equal length of time, or one beat. **Hokkaido** (place name), for example, contains three syllables (**Hok-kai-doo**) and six moras (**Ho-k-ka-i-do-o**), while **kyandii** (candy) contains two syllables (**kyan-dii**) and four moras (**kya-n-di-i**).

- (3) The initial mora of a word is always low unless it is accented.
- (4) The moraic nasal (e.g. **n** in **ho.n** ‘book,’ **ka.n.ke.e** ‘relation’), the moraic consonant (the first element of a double consonant; e.g. **ga.k.ko.o** ‘school,’ **i.s.sa.tsu** ‘one book,’ and the second element of a long vowel (e.g. **ga.ku.se.e** ‘student’), are never accented.

With accented words, there are $n+1$ pitch patterns for n -syllable words; i.e. two pitch patterns for one-syllable words, three for two-syllable words, four for three-syllable words, and so on.

Initial mora accented: **námida** (H–L–L) ‘tear’; **háshi** (H–L) ‘chopsticks’

Second mora accented: **anáta** (L–H–L) ‘you’; **hashí** (L–H) ‘bridge’

Third mora accented: **atamá** (L–H–H) ‘head’

Unaccented: **sakura** (L–H–H) ‘cherry blossoms’; **hashi** (L–H) ‘edge’

When the accent falls on the word-final mora, its pitch pattern may seem identical to that of an unaccented word. Accented and unaccented words, however, can easily be distinguished by attaching a particle like **ga**; e.g. **hashí** ‘bridge’+**ga** (L–H–L) vs. unaccented **hashi** ‘edge’+**ga** (L–H–H); **atamá** ‘head’+**ga** (L–H–H–L) vs. unaccented **sakura** ‘cherry blossoms’+**ga** (L–H–H–H).

Near homophonous words may be distinguished by accent patterns, as in the following examples.

áme (H–L) ‘rain’ vs. **ame** (L–H) ‘candy’

áki (H–L) ‘autumn’ vs. **aki** (L–H) ‘vacancy’