An Introduction to Japanese Kanji
and
 Analogies to Assist in Learning Them

By
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Introduction

Many people consider Japanese one of the most difficult languages to learn. The problem is not complexity in the structure of the language; in fact, Japanese does not have the case, number, and gender matching problems of most European Languages. Unlike English, its grammar is extremely regular; there are only about three irregular verbs in the entire lexicon.

There are only two major problems facing the Japanese language learner. The first, is that the word order is completely different from that used in English and the Romance languages; in Japanese, the verb always comes at the end of the sentence. But to most people, the most frightening barrier to learning Japanese is: The Kanji — 漢字!

漢字 (Kanji), unlike most of the other writing systems used in the modern world, is ideographic. This means the symbols represent concepts. There are a large number of kanji symbols a student must learn. The 常用漢字 (jōyō kanji) is a list of nearly 2000 kanji every Japanese schoolchild learns before graduating junior high school. To make things even more difficult, nearly all of the kanji used in Japanese have multiple 読み (yomi), which are their readings, literally “how they are read out”. The 音読み (on-yomi) are the original Chinese pronunciations while the 訓読み (kun-yomi), are based on indigenous Japanese words.

But don’t panic, there are patterns to how the kanji are constructed and used. And there are parallels to concepts in English which we can use, not only to understand how Kanji are used as an active part of the Japanese language, but also more effective ways of learning the kanji needed to communicate in written Japanese.

Historical Background

The Kanji have been in use in China since at least 1600 B.C. and have evolved into a system where each kanji has a single specific sound. Modern Chinese uses at least 6500 Kanji although 3000 is enough for basic literacy.

The Japanese people did not create a writing system of their own. When they were a primarily agrarian people, living in a loose collection of tribes, they did not need a written system of record-
keeping. Instead, they relied on an oral tradition to record information. As the Japanese people’s social needs became more complicated, they imported the writing system developed by their neighbor China. The kanji symbols and their readings were brought to Japan in several iterations starting in the 4th century A.D.

**Transition and Translation Issues**

Unfortunately, for the Japanese, the kanji writing system, which was perfectly adapted to the Chinese language, could not be used directly with Japanese. The first problem is, unlike Japanese, Chinese is a tonal language. The tone variation of words used in the Chinese language makes it possible for a trained ear to hear the difference in the words that, to most people, sound exactly the same.

When the Japanese first adopted the kanji symbols, they borrowed the readings used by the Chinese. Without the tone variations of Chinese, they were unable to differentiate various kanji by sound. This is analogous to how the two prefixes anti- and ante- act in English. Many English speakers pronounce these prefixes in nearly the same way. Without looking at the spelling of the words it is impossible to know which of the two words, *antebellum* or *antiwar*, defines an historical time-period.

The other problem occurred when the Japanese started trying to adapt the kanji to their native vocabulary. Unlike Japanese, Chinese verbs do not change form to show tense. Like the romance languages, Japanese uses word endings to define verb and adjective conjugations by using an unvarying stem and different suffixes. They required a way of coding this information alongside the kanji symbol. The verb conjugation was initially done using some of the kanji as phonetic symbols. Specified kanji symbols, which had the sound value needed, were written after the kanji representing the verb. These were called 送り仮名 (okurigana) which translates roughly to “sent information”.

Because most kanji have a large number of pen- or brush-stokes per symbol, this procedure was awkward and time consuming. Eventually, these chosen phonetic kanji were simplified into much more easily and rapidly written symbols. Called the 仮名 (kana), they encompassed the fifty syllabic sounds, called the 五十音 (gojyū-on), used in spoken Japanese at the time. With the use of accent
marks and combinations, these kana syllabaries can reproduce every sound used in modern Japanese.
Kanji as a Vocabulary Builder

The introduction of kanji-based words significantly increased the vocabulary of the intelligentsia in Japan. Because only the most educated men learned to read and write, only they could use these new words. Even today, the loanwords from China are a marker of a more educated speech pattern. A person with a more mature vocabulary uses 音読 (on-yomi-) rather than 訓読 (kun-yomi-) based words. For example, while a child might refer to food as 食べ物 (tabemono), an adult would say 食物 (shokumotsu) instead.

Until the mid twentieth century, nearly all new words were brought into Japanese using the 音読 (on-yomi) readings of combined kanji.

### Examples of Modern Words Created Using Kanji

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Kanji</th>
<th>Kana</th>
<th>Romaji</th>
<th>Translation</th>
<th>English Equivalent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>自転車</td>
<td>じてんしゃ</td>
<td>jitensha</td>
<td>self-rolling vehicle</td>
<td>automobile</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>望遠鏡</td>
<td>ぼうえんきょう</td>
<td>bōenkyō</td>
<td>far looking lens/mirror</td>
<td>telescope</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>飛行機</td>
<td>ひこうき</td>
<td>hikōki</td>
<td>flying travel device</td>
<td>airplane</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>中央処理装置</td>
<td>ちゅうおうしりそうち</td>
<td>chūōshorisōchi</td>
<td>central processing device</td>
<td>CPU</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sometimes kanji were repurposed to make words for new technologies. The kanji 電 (den) is an example. It was originally the kanji for lightning, but is now primarily used for words relating to electricity, such as 電車 (densha), or Electric Vehicle. The word for telephone is 電話 (denwa). And when television was introduced to Japan, it was named 電映 (denei), which means electric image-projector.
Dissecting Kanji

A Japanese kanji is a multipart ideograph which has meaning and a few possible pronunciations.
Over the course of their history, they have evolved from representative drawings to symbols which
carry its meaning and often its original Chinese reading.

Reading, Form, and Meaning,

Each kanji has three attributes that are all interrelated. They are the:

- 読み (yomi), its readings.
- 形 (katachi), its form.
- 意味 (imi), its meaning.

Understanding the Readings of the Kanji

There are two types of readings, or pronunciations, attached to each kanji. The first is the
音読み (on-yomi) which is the original Chinese pronunciation, as modified for use by Japanese speakers.
They were the only readings used when the kanji were first imported into Japan. The other type of
reading, the 訓読み (kun-yomi), came into use later. In general, most single-unit kanji words use the
kun-yomi, whereas multiple-kanji words tend to use the on-yomi reading. This is very similar to the
way Anglo-Saxon words and Greek/Latin roots are used in English. The words water and
basis/component are each commonly used words in English, but when we want to combine them,
we use the Latin equivalents hydro and genesis to make hydrogen. The equivalent Japanese words
水 (mizu) and 素 (moto) also combine to make 水素 (suiso). Like in English, they are pronounced
differently in combination than separately. But, by looking at the kanji symbols, you can see the
relationship of the pieces to the meaning of the entire word.

Understanding the Form and Meaning of the Kanji

Because the first kanji symbols were pictographs and ideographs, the form and the meaning of the
kanji symbols are far more interrelated than the form and the reading.
Ideographs and Pictographs

The simplest kanji forms are comprised of a single pictograph or ideograph and one can often still recognize their original design. For example the kanji pictograph for “sun” or “day” [日] is a squared off version of a sun while the ideograph for “up” or “rise” 「上」 has a base surface with a line going up and another going across. More examples are shown in the table below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Kanji</th>
<th>Yomi</th>
<th>Meaning</th>
<th>Description of early form</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>田</td>
<td>デン (den)</td>
<td>rice paddy</td>
<td>Four fields, surrounded by the earthen dykes holding in the water.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>川</td>
<td>カワ (kawa)</td>
<td>river</td>
<td>The banks of the river and the water flowing in the middle.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>門</td>
<td>モン (mon)</td>
<td>gate</td>
<td>A stylized representation of the gates of a town.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>力</td>
<td>ちから (chikara)</td>
<td>power</td>
<td>An arm showing its extended muscle.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The original ideographs were drawings of what they represented, but over the years, the symbols were stylized and simplified. This graphic shows examples of how the kanji have evolved over time.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Evolution of Kanji Designs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>[Image of evolution examples]</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Single-unit Kanji

Up until now, I have only showed the simplest of the kanji for two reasons. First, the simple, single-unit kanji are, in general, among the most-used kanji. Even though they comprise only about 10% of
the 常用 (jōyō), or general use, kanji, they are seen far more often in actual use. These include the very high usage kanji like:

- 人  (hito)  person
- 手  (te)    hand
- 生  (sei)   life

Native speakers learn these and other high-usage kanji in the first grade of elementary school.

**Compound Kanji**

The other reason to show the single unit kanji first is that there are a limited number of basic ideographs which combine into the kanji symbols. Traditionally there are 214 of these building blocks, called radicals, each with its own meaning. They combine with other radicals in the kanji to give the complete meaning of the symbol. More links to information on radicals can be found in the appendix.

The 部首 (Bushu)

The most important radical in a kanji is its classifier. Called the 部首 (bushu), it carries the primary symbolism of the kanji and is often (but not always) the largest ideograph in the kanji.

**Kanji Containing only Meaning Radicals**

There are two types of compound kanji. Kanji that contain just meaning radicals are called semantic kanji. The additional radicals can either emphasize or expand the meaning of the 部首 (bushu).

Examples of these include:

- 森  (mori)   forest   (a lot of trees)
- 開く  (hira-ku)  to open  (hands reaching up to unbar the gate)
- 休  (kyū)    rest     (a person reclining next to a tree)

About 20% of the 常用漢字 (jōyō kanji) are semantic kanji

**Kanji Containing Sound-bearing Radicals**

The other two thirds of the kanji symbols contain one radical which originally was used to identify the Chinese sound of the kanji. These are called phonetic kanji. Some of these radicals are also
meaning radicals, but their primary function in Chinese was to indicate the sound of the kanji. Some examples are:

- 聞 (bun)  hear  “ear” is the 部首 (bushu) and “gate” identifies the sound.
- 持 (jì)  hold  “hand” on the right is the 部首 (bushu), “temple” is the phonetic.
- 時 (jì)  time  “sun” is the 部首 (bushu), and “temple” is the phonetic.

While not all of the phonetic radicals survived the translation into Japanese use, there are enough of them to help remember the 音読 (on-yomi) of many Kanji. If you look at the 音/訓 読み (on/kun yomi) index of a kanji dictionary, you can see groupings of these phonetic radicals.

**Dictionaries are Organized by 部首 (Bushu)**

Historically, as the number of kanji in use grew, attempts were made to organize them into an easily referenced order. The most popular and useful organizing method was to group the kanji by their 部首 (bushu), or classifier, and put them into a set order ranked by each kanji’s total number of brush strokes. Most modern kanji dictionaries still use a variation of this organization technique.
How to Read Real Japanese

Because many people fear the difficulty in learning kanji, most dictionaries and many beginner textbooks do not attempt to teach or use true Japanese writing. Instead, they rely on sounding-out the words using roman characters called ローマ字 (romaji). Not only does ローマ字 (romaji) make learning Japanese difficult, but it also shortchanges the student when it comes to practice materials. As I will show, the Japanese written language is not difficult to use, once the student understands how the pieces work together.

How Many Ways Can You Write in Japanese?

To most people, the answer is: too many! As the graphic below shows, modern Japanese uses writing technology from China, Europe, and even India. But each form of writing has a set of specific useswhic help to show the function of the words they represent.

![Writing Systems Used in Modern Japanese]

Final Margaret Lynch-Freshner
Each of the different script forms are used differently:

① The 漢字 (kanji) are used for most of the nouns, and the stems of verbs and adjectives.
② 平仮名 (hiragana) is the default syllabary. Not only do they “spell out” the conjugations, but they are also used whenever a native Japanese word is not written in 漢字 (kanji).
③ 片仮名 (katakana), are used for words that do not have a 漢字 (kanji) form. This includes foreign loanwords as well as mimesis sounds.
④ The Japanese have been using the Hindu-Arabic numeral system, in addition to their traditional kanji-based numerals, since the Meiji era (late 19th century). They use the 漢字 (kanji) based numbers when writing in their traditional vertical style, but Hindu-Arabic numbers when writing horizontally.
⑤ The Japanese also use Roman letters for abbreviations when they want something to look modern, western, or high-tech. The TV network NHK is an example of this usage.

While there are two officially designated methods of romanization in use, these are never mixed with real Japanese script.

**Problems with Using ローマ字 (Romaji)**

The fact that there are two romanization systems gives us our first problem with reading Romanized Japanese. The Hepburn romanization is optimized for Japanese language learners and uses pronunciation of the sounds as most logical to a western ear. The 訓令式 (Kunreishiki) romanization was designed for Japanese speakers and follows the 五十音 (gojū-on) more directly. Therefore, some obvious differences occur when one uses them in writing. The table below shows some examples using English loanwords. Because the primary audience for this essay is English speaking Japanese learners, I am using the Hepburn Romanization system.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>カナ symbol</th>
<th>カナ word</th>
<th>Hepburn</th>
<th>Kunreishiki</th>
<th>English</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ジ</td>
<td>ジーパン</td>
<td>jippa</td>
<td>zippa</td>
<td>zipper</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ジャ</td>
<td>ジャケット</td>
<td>jaketto</td>
<td>zyaketto</td>
<td>jacket</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>チャ</td>
<td>チャレンジ</td>
<td>charenji</td>
<td>tyarenzi</td>
<td>challenge</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Pronunciation Errors

In addition, pronunciation errors will occur even within a single romanization system. It is a natural reaction to use the phonics rules of one’s native language when trying to sound out an unfamiliar word. Beginning French learners need to train themselves to avoid pronouncing “hors d’oeuvre” as “hoarse do over.” For English speakers, the situation, when using either ローマ字 system, is even worse, because diphthongs and the “silent e” are so much part of our phonics education.

Conjugation Problems

Another problem is with verb conjugation. The conjugation rules for verbs and adjectives are written based on knowledge of the 五十音図 (gojū-on) syllabary, and if a student has problems understanding how these conjugations work with the syllabary, then errors in conjugation will crop up in both written and spoken Japanese.

Lack of Practice Materials

In addition, the only practice items normally written in romaji are dictionaries and beginning textbooks. This eliminates the option of students expanding their skills until they learn how to read and write real Japanese.

Why Does Romaji Still Exist?

If it were not for the Internet, romaji might have become obsolete. Until recently, most computers lacked the memory or processing power to store and use the characters of every writing system on the planet. In addition, English-speaking programmers created the Internet, so all of the code and user interfaces were created using the very limited ASCII character set.

The Kana

As I noted earlier, the adaptation of the kanji to the Japanese native vocabulary required the creation of a phonetic script. In fact, it created two of them.
The first, developed in the Nara and Heian periods (starting approximately 750 A.D.), was the 平仮名 (hiragana). This was a cursive flowing script and quickly became adopted by women because they were not taught the more difficult kanji writing. The first piece of Japanese literature, “源氏物語” (Genji monogatari) or “The Tale of Genji” was written by a woman, Murasaki Shikibu, using only the 平仮名 (hiragana) script.

The second script, the 片仮名 (katakana) was developed approximately a century later, as a type of shorthand. Buddhist monks used it to assist them as they were taking notes. They used it to note down pronunciation for the kanji words they were writing. This script was more angular, but, like the hiragana, was based on simplified versions of phonetic kanji. Because 片仮名 (katakana) were used in mathematical and scientific texts, this script was used, for many centuries, exclusively by males.

In the chart below, are both kana syllabaries. In each block, I have put the 平仮名 (hiragana) symbol first then the 片仮名 (katakana). To help the student learn pronunciation of the symbols, I have labeled each row and column with the closest English approximation for the sound. For brevity, I have excluded the diacritical marks and the contracted syllables from this chart, but have included links to more-extensive kana tables in the appendix. Copies of the kana charts can also be found in nearly any Japanese language textbook.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>sound</th>
<th>(a)</th>
<th>k</th>
<th>s</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>h</th>
<th>m</th>
<th>y</th>
<th>r</th>
<th>w</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a</td>
<td>あ/ア</td>
<td>か/か</td>
<td>さ/サ</td>
<td>た/タ</td>
<td>な/ナ</td>
<td>は/ハ</td>
<td>ま/マ</td>
<td>や/ヤ</td>
<td>ら/ラ</td>
<td>わ/ワ</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>i</td>
<td>い/イ</td>
<td>き/キ</td>
<td>し/シ</td>
<td>ち/チ</td>
<td>に/ニ</td>
<td>ひ/ヒ</td>
<td>み/ミ</td>
<td>り/リ</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>u</td>
<td>う/ウ</td>
<td>く/ク</td>
<td>す/ス</td>
<td>つ/ツ</td>
<td>ぬ/ヌ</td>
<td>ふ/フ</td>
<td>む/ム</td>
<td>ゆ/ユ</td>
<td>る/ル</td>
<td>ん/ン</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>e</td>
<td>え/エ</td>
<td>け/ケ</td>
<td>せ/セ</td>
<td>て/テ</td>
<td>ね/ネ</td>
<td>へ/ヘ</td>
<td>め/メ</td>
<td>れ/レ</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o</td>
<td>お/オ</td>
<td>こ/コ</td>
<td>そ/ソ</td>
<td>と/ト</td>
<td>の/ノ</td>
<td>ほ/ホ</td>
<td>も/モ</td>
<td>よ/ヨ</td>
<td>ろ/ロ</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

An important fact to note is that several of the katakana and hiragana forms look very similar. Since both scripts describe the same sounds in the same way, they are functionally interchangeable. It is
best to think of them as two fonts, rather than two different “alphabets”. Their similarity in function, in spite of their differences in appearance, is like comparing a serif font to a script font. I will discuss their different uses in more detail below.

Hiragana

Hiragana is the primary syllabary used for written Japanese, and is taught to elementary school children when they first learn to write. Every word in the Japanese language can be spelled out by using Hiragana. The biggest problem with hiragana is the Chinese 音読 (on-yomi-) based loanwords. These brought large numbers of homophones into the Japanese language. Most of them can be understood in context, just as a native English speaker can understand the meaning differences in: “The Playwright will write a rite with her right hand” when it is spoken aloud. However even native Japanese speakers may draw the appropriate kanji symbol in the air while speaking if a homophone ambiguity needs to be clarified.

The hiragana script is also used in the 送り仮名 (okurigana), which spells out the grammatical endings on the words, and the 振り仮名 (furigana) which shows the pronunciation of the kanji.

Katakana

The primary use of the katakana is for foreign loanwords, but is also used for mimesis and other sound effects. Because it looks so different from the hiragana it is also used anywhere an author wants to emphasize a word.

Nearly all new vocabulary items that have come into Japanese for last 60 years are katakana loan words. Examples include:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hiragana</th>
<th>Katakana</th>
<th>English</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>トイレ</td>
<td>(toire)</td>
<td>toilet</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ラジオ</td>
<td>(rajio)</td>
<td>radio</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ホース</td>
<td>(hōsu)</td>
<td>hose</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>オートバイ</td>
<td>(ōto bai)</td>
<td>auto-bike/motorcycle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>レンタカー</td>
<td>(rentakā)</td>
<td>rent-a-car</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

When television was first introduced to Japan, the word created for it was rendered in kanji as 電映 (denei), which means “electric reflector/projector.” Now this term is obsolete and has been replaced by the loanword テレビ (terebi).
Furigana

振り仮名 (furigana) are the pronunciation-guide kana placed on top of a kanji based word and spelled out its reading. This is especially useful because most kanji have at least two readings. Once a student knows the correct reading for the word, it can be found in a standard 五十音 (gojyuu-on) format Japanese-English dictionary.

If you have a kanji-based word in an electronic format, many word processors can provide 振り仮名 (furigana). For example, starting with Windows 2000, the support files for Japanese language use are included on the installation CD. Once a computer is set up to read Japanese fonts, the following command will open a dialog box, and the software will enter its best guess for the correct pronunciation:

Format -> Asian Layout -> Phonetic Guide

A screen shot of the “Phonetic Guide” dialog box is in Appendix 2.

Wider Selection of Practice Materials

When a student is freed from trying to read Japanese in romaji, the supply of potential practice materials opens up exponentially. Manga and Children’s books will usually have all but the most elementary kanji marked with furigana. These books will also tend to have simpler grammar than newspapers or books written for adults. The World Wide Web is also open to Japanese language surfing.
How Many Kanji Do You Really Need?

This seems to be the first question asked by all Japanese language learners, once they realize kanji are such a major factor in written Japanese. To frighten the Japanese learner even further, the most commonly given number comes from the 常用漢字 (jōyō kanji) list; the 1945 general use kanji that all Japanese native speakers must learn before graduating from 9th grade. Many reference materials say that a student must know all of these kanji before s/he can read a newspaper.

But there is one fact which can help calm your hysteria:

**Not all kanji are used equally.**

Surveys taken of real-life kanji usage, by the Japanese Ministry of Education, identify frequency of usage for all the kanji characters. A summary of their most recent findings is shown in the chart below, based on a table from (Kodansha¹.)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Kanji Category</th>
<th>Number of Kanji in This Category</th>
<th>Total Usage as a Percent of all Kanji Surveyed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>500 most used kanji</td>
<td>496</td>
<td>80%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>教育漢字 (kyōiku kanji)</td>
<td>993</td>
<td>95%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1600 most used kanji</td>
<td>1565</td>
<td>99%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>常用漢字 &amp; 人名用漢字 (jōyō kanji) and special kanji reserved for names</td>
<td>2230</td>
<td>99.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Every kanji in Japanese</td>
<td>7000 (approx)</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Here we can easily see that the most-used kanji, by far, outstrip the others in use. In 1946, based on similar ranking surveys, the Japanese government published the 当用漢字 (tōyō kanji) list, the predecessor to the 常用漢字 (jōyō kanji) list. At that time, they subdivided the 教育漢字 (kyōiku

¹Halpern Jack, The Kodansha Kanji Learner’s Dictionary, page 38a
kanji) into six sub-lists defined by the grade when an elementary school student learns them. This means a student who learns even the first three grades of the 教育漢字 (kyōiku kanji) will be able to recognize more than three fourths of the kanji in an adult reading-level book.

Any kanji symbol not included on the 常用漢字 (jōyō kanji) list is required, by law, to have 振り仮名 (furigana) printed with it. Also, if the reading matter is targeted to a younger audience, all the kanji ranked above the level of the intended reader is printed with 振り仮名 (furigana).

**Using Kanji to Increase Your Vocabulary**

This leads to the realization that rather than being a barrier to learning Japanese, knowledge of kanji is a versatile and effective tool for learning Japanese vocabulary. Once a student knows even 250 kanji, it is likely that any new kanji encountered will be part of an unfamiliar word. In contrast, many new vocabulary words will contain familiar kanji; this knowledge will help the student to more easily understand a new word.

**Like English Spelling Words**

Every English native speaker remembers the “weekly spelling lists” we were given in elementary school. Usually they were chosen based on a particular spelling pattern and, in the later grades, helped us learn the meaning of our Latin and Greek affixes. Japanese native speakers learn their kanji the same way; by using them in words and sentences, both spoken and written.
How to Learn Kanji Without (as much) Pain

Most of us do not have nine years available to learn kanji the way native speakers do. This section is devoted to my suggested methods, to ease the pain of memorizing kanji, and how to use them to their fullest.

Using a Kanji Dictionary

The first skill you need is to find kanji in a dictionary. Dictionaries are available in three formats:

- printed dictionaries
- electronic dictionaries
- on-line dictionaries

The best known on-line kanji dictionary is the Jim Breen/Mondash University, English-Japanese Dictionary. In the appendix, I have included links to several on-line dictionaries, including the Jim Breen Dictionary.

Digital dictionaries have one advantage over on-line dictionaries; they are portable. Some of them are built into self-contained units while others are designed for use in personal computers or PDA’s. Most of these are designed for Japanese speakers and are not readily available in the US. My favorite electronic dictionary is a shareware program called “Dokusha” written for the Palm OS.

There are a number of good paper-based kanji dictionaries available. In the appendix, you will find links to descriptions of several dictionaries. In general, the primary difference among the available dictionaries is in the search systems. Before buying a kanji dictionary, have someone teach you how to use it; its value to you is based on how easily you can find the kanji symbol you need.

Resist the temptation to buy the big, heavy unabridged dictionaries. As demonstrated in the kanji use chart above, 99.8% of kanji usage is by only 2300 characters. In addition, since any kanji outside of the 常用漢字 (jōyō kanji) list will be printed with furigana, they can then be found in a regular dictionary. Several of the kanji dictionary publishers have a student version available, including Kodansha, Spahn and Hadamitsky, and The New Nelson. These books cover all of the 常用漢字 (jōyō kanji), the 人名用漢字 (jinmeiyō kanji), which are kanji used only for family and place names,
plus any of the Non-general-use kanji the author thinks a Japanese language learner might want. These include kanji for common words which only written in kana. An example isねずみ (nezumi) the Japanese word for rat; this word is always spelled out, either in katakana or hiragana.

**Learning the 214 Radicals**

As I noted earlier, the radicals are the building blocks of the complex kanji. Knowing what the radicals look like changes a complex kanji from a collection of lines to a group of meaningful symbols. Knowing these radicals helps in memorizing the kanji’s 形 (katachi) {form} and by extension its 意味 (imi) {meaning}. The Appendix contains a link to a list describing the 214 radicals in more detail.

**Using a Kanji-learning Workbook**

Most of the kanji learning textbooks and workbooks loosely follow the Japanese grade levels in their teaching sequence. Usually when they deviate, it is to combine words into easily recognizable groups, to aid learning. They also tend to include reading and writing practice. While they are very good tools, I recommend that the student supplement these books with some of the other techniques I have discussed here.

**Learning Kanji along with Vocabulary**

In my opinion, the best way to really learn the kanji is to learn the words they build. As you use these words in sentences, either speaking or writing them, you start to make them your own. Every time you learn a new vocabulary word, find its kanji components and learn to recognize them. Look for commonalities in the words. You can easily see that 教科書 (kyōkasho), textbook, and 教室 (kyōshitsu), the word for classroom, are related when the kanji are written out. The lower the grade level of a kanji, the more words you are likely to see it being used.

Conversely, as you learn a new kanji symbol, see how many words you can find that use it. This will help cement the meaning of the kanji in your mind and help you build a larger vocabulary. All of the kanji dictionaries have lists of words for each kanji.
**Getting the Most out of Your Word Processor**

I think the greatest kanji learning tool of the twenty-first century is the word processor. Once you install the Japanese language support files from the CD-ROM, you have a system that can enter kanji using many different methods.

Using the Microsoft IME 2000 as an example, a writer can find kanji using radicals, stroke count, drawing the kanji with the mouse, or writing out the word, by using an internal keypad. In addition, the user can use the software to reconfigure his/her keyboard to match the Shift-JIS keyboard standard. This allows the user to type the Japanese kana characters directly. Appendix 2 contains screen shots of the IME in different configurations. The word processor can also understand romaji input, and knows how to tell the difference between Hepburn and 訓令式 (Kunreishiki) romanization.

No matter which method you use to input the phonetic characters, the kanji search is done the same way; a built-in dictionary will make its best guess for the kanji you want. There is also a drop-down list so you can choose from various alternative characters, including homophones. With a little practice, this system is very easy to use.

**Writing Kanji**

Japanese schoolchildren still use ink brushes to practice their kanji as they master size, shape, and stroke order. Even, or possibly especially, in this era of word processors, it is important to learn to write the kanji by hand. By using your hands, as well as your eyes, to learn the shapes of the kanji, you will remember them more effectively.

**Using Mnemonics to Learn Kanji**

Many people find that using mnemonics helps them to learn foreign-language vocabulary faster and more thoroughly. Because the kanji symbols are based on ideograms, this method is very effective with kanji. The best reference book for mnemonics is “A Guide to Remembering Japanese Characters” by Kenneth Henshall. This book looks at all of the 常用漢字 (jōyō kanji) characters individually, giving the history of each, and discussing what the elements mean. Most importantly, he has created mnemonics for each of the kanji, which relate to the shape of its components. While
there are copies of his mnemonic list available on the Internet, I find they are less useful without the background information he provides in the book. There is nothing magical about his mnemonics; the most valuable mnemonic is the one that can bring to mind the information when you need it.

**Other Reference Sources**

There are many other types of learning and reference sources including practice books, flash cards, and classes. Use the mix of resources that works best for you.

**Conclusion**

The kanji writing system is not nearly as difficult as most people think it is. It follows rules for construction of its shapes and how they are used. A smaller subset of the kanji symbols is used most often and I have described how to identify and find these kanji. This allows us to concentrate on the most important kanji symbols to memorize and gives us the tools to use the kanji symbols we know to learn unfamiliar words.

In addition, we can use skills with pattern recognition and dictionary searching to look up new kanji symbols as we encounter them.

Finally remember that English is considered very difficult to learn as a second language too. If you managed to learn all the “pain in the neck” rules of English grammar and spelling, then kanji is child’s play.

You can read, write, and type in real Japanese! 頑張って 下さい (がんばって ください) means “go for it, and do your best”.
Appendix 1  Web Sites for More Information

On-Line Dictionaries
http://www.kanjinetworks.com/
http://dict.pspinc.com/
http://www.yourdictionary.com/languages/altaic.html

Learning Aids for Kanji
http://www.joyo96.org/
http://www.ajalt.org/kanmana/index_e.html
http://www.joyo96.org/cgi-bin/xref.pl

Discussions of Kanji Dictionaries
http://www.kanji.org/kanji/index.htm

Kanji Lists
http://www.taishukan.co.jp/kanji/archive/joyokanji.html
http://www.taishukan.co.jp/kanji/archive/kyoikukanji.html

Kana Syllabaries
http://www.joyo96.org/GIFS/BasicKanaChart.GIF
http://www.lang.nagoya-u.ac.jp/~mohso/kyozai97/emoji.html

http://jweb.kokken.go.jp/kenshu/resources/freq.htm

The 214 Traditional Radicals

Setting up MS Word for Japanese
Appendix 2  IME 2000 Screenshots from MS Word

Soft Keyboard showing Hiragana in syllabary layout

Soft Keyboard showing Hiragana in Shift-JIS layout

Soft Keyboard showing Katakana in syllabary layout
IME in Radical Search Mode

IME in Stroke Search Mode
IME in Handwriting Recognition Mode

Phonetic Guide

Alignement: 1-2-1  Offset: 0 pt
Font: Arial  Size: 6 pt

Furigana Dialog Box
Bibliography


Dictionaries


Harbaugh, Richmond, ed. 中文字譜 (*Chinese Characters: A Genealogy and Dictionary*) by 李克 (Xu Shen). Published by Zhongwen.com; distributed by Yale University Press, 1998.


Textbooks and Handbooks


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