

Basic Japanese Phonetics & Pronunciations

S.Quinlan

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Introduction

WESTERN PEOPLE TEND to have difficulty with the pronunciation of various kendo related terms as there are often odd combinations of vowels and consonants which are not common in English.

This short article will give the very basics regarding the Japanese language's phonetics, as well as a few simple examples.

Basic Phonetics

There are relatively few rules one needs to know in order to pronounce Japanese words correctly.

Inflection of syllables. The first rule is that there are no varying inflections on the syllables which make up Japanese words as we tend to understand the term. For example, most of us would pronounce balloon as ba-LOON; an emphasis is placed on the second syllable. Kendo is pronounced KEN-do, kata is KA-ta (ka-TA for some), suburi is su-BU-ri, and so on.

While there are inflections in the Japanese language, a good rule of thumb¹ is that words are pronounced in a somewhat monotone way; no inflections on the various syllables. Each is pronounced with the same tone as the rest of the word. So for example, balloon would not be ba-LOON but instead is pronounced as an even ba-loon. Each syllable is equally toned.

Vowels & "N" This is probably the most crucial aspect of pronouncing Japanese words, that of giving vowels the correct sound. In fact, knowing about inflections and vowel sounds will allow somebody to be able to parse Japanese words² correctly.

I have included "N" with the vowels not because it is considered a vowel, but that it is a letter which is always sounded the same as an individual phonetic element.

Japanese Vowel Pronunciation						
Vowel	A	I	U	E	O	N
Sound	"ah"	"ee/e"	"oo/h" ³	"eh"	"oh"	"n"

¹ There are exceptions to every rule of course.

² This is of course referring to words written in "romanji"; Japanese words written out using English letters.

Table 1: Japanese vowel sounds. These vowel sounds are only pronounced one way with very limited exceptions.

³ The "I" and "U" sounds are written as "ee/e" and "oo/h" as they are exceptions which are discussed below.

The important thing to remember with the pronunciation of Japanese vowels is that they are only pronounced one way⁴ as shown in in the table.

⁴ Again, there are always exceptions.

Let's return to our previous examples looking only at vowels. Kendo, if we sound out, becomes k-*eh*-n-d-*oh* and kata becomes k-*ah*-t-*ah*. Remember, there is no inflection on any of the syllables so try not to say K-AH-t-ah or k-ah-T-AH, etc...

Consonant & vowel blocks. Consonants and vowels are always broken up into the same "blocks" of sound allowing very easy parsing of words. This basic phonetic alphabet is known as hiragana⁵.

⁵ I have only included the romanji hiragana v.s. giving the usual Japanese characters.

		Hiragana									
V\C		k	s	t	n	h	m	y	r	w	
	a	ka	sa	ta	na	ha	ma	ya	ra	wa	
	i	ki	shi	chi	ni	hi	mi	(y)i	ri	(w)i	
	u	ku	su	tsu	nu	fu	mu	yu	ru	(w)u	
	e	ke	se	te	ne	he	me	e	re	(w)e	
	o	ko	so	to	no	ho	mo	yo	ro	(w)o	n

Table 2: Hiragana, the basic phonetic blocks. Each vowel and basic consonant/vowel combination listed corresponds to a phonetic character in the Japanese alphabet.

There are a number of variations and combinations constructed out of this alphabet which I will ignore⁶.

Oddities. There are a few oddities in the hiragana table which will be briefly mentioned. The blocks "(y)i", "(w)i", "(w)u", "(w)e", and "(w)o" are pronounced as the vowel components only, e.g., "(w)o" is simply "o"; (w) indicates the "w" is fully cut out from the sound.

⁶ There are two phonetic alphabets known as hiragana and katakana. The katakana are usually used to spell out foreign words. There are also many phonetic combinations to create short or long vowel sounds, and various combination sounds. These are all beyond the intended scope of this article.

There is no "tu" sound. Instead we use the "tsu" sound. "Tsu" can give some people trouble, but using the notation above "tsu" would be pronounced as the ts in "cats" with a short "u" added to the end; (ca)ts-u. The "U" sound will be discussed again.

Lastly, if one encounters a double vowel, for example aa, this indicates the usual vowel sound is elongated. For example maai would not be "mah-ah-ee/e" but "m-aaah-ee/e".

Common exceptions. Lastly a quick discussion on the common exceptions, that of the "I" and "U" sounds.

The "U" is not always pronounced fully, which is why I have listed it as the sound "oo/h". In fact, the "U" is often cut short or almost completely silent.

The "oo/h" is an attempt to indicate the cutting short of the "ooh" sound, that is begin pronouncing "ooh" but cut it short by lopping off the "h".

A prime example of this are the terms *tsuki*, and *bogu*. *Tsuki* is broken down into two syllables, “tsu” and “ki”, according to the hiragana table. “Tsu” has a short “U” sound and “ki” is pronounced as “keee” according to the vowel sound rules. Combining the two we get what sounds like “t-ski”; the “U” sound is cut very short almost to the point of being silent.

Bogu is broken into “B”, “oh”, and “gu”, with “gu” having a shortened “U” sound given by the vowel table. Together we have “B-oh-g-oo/h”. While it is not “bog-ooooh” the “U” is also not silent/near silent as in *tsuki*; it is simply cut short.

“I” is often cut short as indicated by the “ee/e”. Using notation given above, think of the word *ship*, but cut the “P” off; *shi(p)* is “shih” and not “she”.

A general rule of thumb⁷ which will get you through most pronunciations are that the “I” is cut short if it is mid-word and the “U” is near silent mid-word, short otherwise.

⁷ This rule is of course not even close to being set in stone!

Examples

Try to parse the following words using the information above.

1. *Tenegui*.
2. *Iaido*.
3. *Arigato Gozaimashita*.
4. *Ushiro*.
5. *Omote*.
6. *Ura*.
7. *Issoku itto no maai*.
8. *Tsubazeriai*.