

LESSON NOTES

# All About #14

## Top 5 Tips for Avoiding Common Mistakes in Japanese

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# 14

# GRAMMAR

## The Focus of This Lesson is the Top Five Tips for Avoiding Common Mistakes in Japanese

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In this lesson, we'll offer tips to help you overcome some common errors that learners of Japanese make.

### Tip #1:

#### Don't Attach *-san* to Your Own Name!

One of the first things English speakers learn in Japanese is name suffixes used when addressing other people. The most common one is *-san*, which we attach to people's first or last names to show respect. We learn that someone whose last name is Tanaka is always referred to as Tanaka-san, someone whose last name is Saito becomes Saito-san, and so on.

In a classroom setting, teachers refer to students using *-san* as well, such as John-san, or Sarah-san. When it comes time to introduce themselves, it is common for students to slip up and refer to themselves with *-san* attached to their names. Because we use *-san* to show respect for others, you should never use it to refer to yourself.

Correct:

○ 私はジョンです。

(*Watashi wa John desu.*)

"I'm John."

Incorrect:

× 私はジョンさんです。

(*Watashi wa John-san desu.*)

### Tip #2:

#### Watch Your Politeness Level!

One of the unique aspects of Japanese is the varying politeness levels that change according to a number of factors: age and status of the speaker and listener, the speaker's relationship with the listener, and so on. Learners of Japanese are generally taught the formal speech style first, followed by a more casual, informal speech style. It is important to remember to speak formally to one's teachers, elders, and anyone else who follows under the category of *senpai*, those who are of higher status. Learners who learn the informal speech style first, or who spend a lot of time speaking informally with friends, might have trouble switching back to formal speech.

Correct usage to a superior:

○ 昼ごはん、食べましたか？

(*Hiru go-han, tabemashita ka?*)

"Did you eat lunch?" (formal)

Incorrect usage to a superior:

× 昼ごはん、食べた？

(*Hiru go-han, tabeta?*)

"Did you eat lunch?" (informal)

### Tip #3:

#### Watch Your Gender!

In the Japanese language, the speaker's gender plays an important role in determining word choice, tone of voice, and the types of expressions used. Non-native male speakers in particular should be careful about the kind of language and intonation they pick up from female teachers as well as female friends or girlfriends. We recommend that you listen to both males and females speak Japanese so you can grasp the subtle differences between male and female speech.

### Tip #4:

#### Learn Your Long Vowels Now!

In Japanese, there is a big distinction between long vowels and short vowels. In fact, the distinction is so big that the length of a vowel can change the meaning of a word! Simply mistaking the length of a vowel can result in a misunderstanding, which is why it is important to pay attention to long vowels as you learn new Japanese vocabulary.

かど vs. カード

(*kado*) (*kaado*)

"corner" "card"

来てください vs. 聞いてください

(*Kite kudasai*) (*Kiite kudasai*)

"Please come" "Please listen"

### Tip #5:

#### Watch Out for Similar Sounding Words!

Because there are a relatively small number of possible sounds in Japanese, many words are exactly the same or almost the same but with different meanings. As a beginner in Japanese, it can be easy to mix up similar sounding words.

Some infamous examples include:

*kirei* (きれい), meaning "pretty" vs. *kirai* (きらい), meaning "hated"

*kawaii* (かわいい), meaning "cute" vs. *kowai* (こわい), meaning "scary"

*hiro* (ひろい), meaning "spacious" vs. *hidoi* (ひどい), meaning "terrible"