

LESSON NOTES

All About #3

Learn Japanese Grammar

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GRAMMAR

The Focus of This Lesson is Basic Japanese Grammar

Welcome to our explanation of Basic Japanese Grammar! Now, we know the mere mention of grammar is enough to make your palms sweat and perhaps bring back some not-so-good memories of your old high school language classes. But don't worry—we're here to give you a basic overview of Japanese grammar using language that's easy to understand—no drawn-out, long-winded explanations here! Learn Japanese grammar quickly while having fun at the same time!

Before we take a look at Japanese grammar, let's quickly review the basics of English grammar. By understanding more about how English grammar works, you'll be able to see how it differs from Japanese grammar.

First, let's take a look at sentence order.

English is what we call an SVO language, which means the sentences come in the order of subject-verb-object. Let's illustrate this with an example.

English Sentence Order

Subject	Verb	Object
I	eat	fruit

The subject, or the thing taking the action, is "I." The verb, or action, is "eat." The object, or the thing receiving the action, is "fruit." This is an example of a sentence in an SVO language.

Japanese is a bit different from English in this respect. Japanese is what's called an SOV language. This means the subject comes first, followed by the object, and then the verb. Remember that: the verb comes last. So our previous example, "I eat fruit" in English, becomes "I fruit eat" when put in Japanese SOV order.

Japanese Sentence Order

Subject	Object	Verb
I	fruit	eat

This is one of the biggest differences between English and Japanese grammar and one of the most important aspects to keep in mind!

Characteristics of the Japanese Language

Now let's compare some characteristics of the Japanese language with the English language. First, we'll talk about features that are much simpler than their English counterparts.

Tense

Let's start with tense. Tense is a method we use in English to refer to time—past, present, and future. If you are a native English speaker, you might not even be aware of how many

tenses there are in English. Let's think about the future tense for a moment. The present-tense sentence "I jog", when changed to the future tense, becomes "I will jog" or even "I'm going to jog". (And there's even a slight difference between them!)

Japanese, on the other hand, only has two tenses: past and non-past. It's called non-past because Japanese uses the same tense for the present and future. How does this work? Let's take a look! Here's an example of our sentence in the present tense.

(スーパーに行きます。)

Sūpā ni ikimasu.

"I go to the supermarket."

So how do we change this to the future tense? Simple! We just add a word that indicates the action will occur sometime in the future:

[(明日/来週) スーパーに行きます。]

raishū Sūpā ni ikimasu.

"I will go to the supermarket tomorrow/next week."

There you have it! By adding a word like "tomorrow" or "next week" that indicates some point in the future, we've turned our present tense into future tense without even changing the verb.

Conjugation

English is full of irregular verbs. In many cases, we can turn present tense verbs into past tense by adding the suffix -ed to the end, but think of how many exceptions there are to this rule: "fly" becomes "flew," "run" becomes "ran," "buy" becomes "bought"...the list goes on! If you've ever studied a Romance language, then you know how common exceptions are when it comes to conjugating verbs. In contrast, Japanese only has two-count them-two verbs that conjugate irregularly. The rest follow the same patterns, so they're easy to get the hang of! Japanese verbs are divided up into three different groups according to how they conjugate, which we will refer to as Class 1, Class 2, and Class 3 later on.

English and many other languages also conjugate verbs according to who is taking the action: for example, "I go" vs. "he goes." When you get into Romance languages, this system gets even more complex. However, in Japanese, it doesn't matter who is doing the action-the verb will not change! Let's look at a few examples so we can really appreciate this advantage of Japanese. First, note that the verb "to go" is *ikimasu*. The other words in red are "I", "him", and "you", respectively.

1. 私は学校に行きます。
Watashi wa gakkō ni ikimasu.
"I go to school."
2. 彼は学校に行きます。
Kare wa gakkō ni ikimasu.
"He goes to school."
3. あなた達は学校に行きます。
Anata-tachi wa gakkō ni ikimasu.
"You (pl.) go to school."

Take a look at *ikimasu!* It doesn't change! Who is doing the action has no effect on the following verb. Great, isn't it?

Singulars and Plurals

Remember learning all of the complicated rules for forming plurals in English when you were in grade school? We first learn that you add the suffix *-s* to a word to make it plural, but then came one exception after another, such as words like knives, candies, and mice. Well now, think about this: Japanese words almost never change to reflect plurals. *Nezumi*, the word for "mouse," could refer to one mouse or ten mice! What a big change from having two different words to differentiate between singular and plural.

Forming Questions

Think for a moment about how you form questions in English. You have to change the order of the sentence. Here's an example:

"**He is** a student" becomes "**Is he** a student?"

In Japanese, it's extremely easy to create questions. By simply putting *ka* at the end of a sentence, you can turn it into a question! Let's take a look at the Japanese equivalent of the sentence above:

彼は学生です。 → 彼は学生ですか？

(*Kare wa gakusei desu.*) → (*Kare wa gakusei desu ka?*)

"He is a student." → "Is he a student?"

Let's look at one more:

あなたは東京に住んでいます。 → あなたは東京に住んでいますか。

(*Anata wa Tōkyō ni sunde imasu.*) → (*Anata wa Tōkyō ni sunde imasu ka?*)

"You live in Tokyo." → "Do you live in Tokyo?"

Okay, now let's take a look at some characteristics unique to the Japanese language that may not have any equivalent in English.

Formal and Informal Speech

In English, we can use certain words and phrases to make our speech sound more polite to others. Japanese uses entirely different grammar structures when it comes to polite speech. There are three politeness levels in spoken Japanese: informal, formal, and honorific.

Gender

By gender, we do not mean feminine and masculine words that show up in many of the romance languages. By gender, we mean that female speakers will use different words and phrases than men, and that there are some exclusively masculine words. In Japanese, it is very possible to look at written dialogue and guess whether the speaker is male or female without any verbal cues.

Counters

Japanese has a long list of counters, or words that we use to count specific items. The corresponding counter depends on the appearance or makeup of the item. For example, there are different counters for sheets of paper and bottles because they differ in shape. While English does contain some counters (think "loaf of bread" or "bottle of wine"), the range of counters in Japanese is much more extensive.

Omission

In English, we almost always need to state the subject in our sentences: "Yesterday **I** went

shopping at the mall, and then I went to Starbucks where I had a latte." Note that we *need* to state "I" for every action.

In Japanese, the writer often omits the subject from the sentence when it's understood who is doing the action. In fact, stating the subject every time will actually make your Japanese sound unnatural. The key is to only state the subject when it's absolutely necessary. In this way, Japanese lets you get straight to the important part of your sentence!

That wasn't so bad, was it? We hope this overview has given you a good idea of some of the most unique characteristics of Japanese. Keeping these in mind will give you an idea of what to look out for and will prepare you as you dive further into the world of Japanese grammar!