

Pronunciation

The vowels are pronounced close to Italian vowels: 'a' as in 'father', 'e' as in 'set', 'i' as in 'bee', 'o' as in 'toe' and 'u' as in 'goo'. In English accents are often added to words, especially to the second syllable, but in Japanese it is generally safest to pronounce a word flat, so that instead of 'tsuNAmi' (pronounced in English), read all three syllables with the same stress. Also, the 'L' and 'R' sound problem is a bit misunderstood: All Japanese can pronounce one of them, and many can pronounce both. The problem is that in the Japanese language they do not discriminate between the sounds, and either is acceptable for the Japanese 'R'.

Hepburn Romanization

There are several methods of transliterating Japanese words in a Roman alphabet. The Hepburn is probably the easiest for English speakers to pronounce; alternative Kunrei and Nippon systems may also be encountered, however. Note that hiragana and katakana character sets map to the same sounds. Katakana is generally used for loan words from other languages, while hiragana is more commonly used for words now accepted as "native" Japanese. There are many exceptions in usage, however.

Simple sounds (order: Roman, hiragana, katakana)

a	あ	ア	i	い	イ	u	う	ウ	e	え	エ	o	お	オ
ka	か	カ	ki	き	キ	ku	く	ク	ke	け	ケ	ko	こ	コ
sa	さ	サ	shi	し	シ	su	す	ス	se	せ	セ	so	そ	ソ
ta	た	タ	chi	ち	チ	tsu	つ	ツ	te	て	テ	to	と	ト
na	な	ナ	ni	に	ニ	nu	ぬ	ヌ	ne	ね	ネ	no	の	ノ
ha(1)	は	ハ	hi	ひ	ヒ	fu	ふ	フ	he(2)	へ	ヘ	ho	ほ	ホ
ma	ま	マ	mi	み	ミ	mu	む	ム	me	め	メ	mo	も	モ
ya	や	ヤ				yu	ゆ	ユ				yo	よ	ヨ
ra	ら	ラ	ri	り	リ	ru	る	ル	re	れ	レ	ro	ろ	ロ
wa	わ	ワ	wi(3)	ゐ	ヰ				we(3)	ゑ	ヱ	o(4)	を	ヲ
n(5)	ん	ン												

Notes:

- (1) Romanized as 'wa' when used as particle.
- (2) Romanized as "e" when used as particle.
- (3) No longer in use.
- (4) Used only as particle.
- (5) Also written as 'm' before b, m and p in many cases.

Voiced consonants and "p"

ga	が	ガ	gi	ぎ	ギ	gu	ぐ	グ	ge	げ	ゲ	go	ご	ゴ
za	ざ	ザ	ji	じ	ジ	zu	ず	ズ	ze	ぜ	ゼ	zo	ぞ	ゾ
da	だ	ダ	ji	ぢ	ヂ	zu	づ	ヅ	de	で	デ	do	ど	ド
ba	ば	バ	bi	び	ビ	bu	ぶ	ブ	be	べ	ベ	bo	ぼ	ボ
pa	ぱ	パ	pi	ぴ	ピ	pu	ぷ	プ	pe	ぺ	ペ	po	ぽ	ポ

Often syllables 'chi' and 'tsu' will change their sounds when the following syllable begins with a consonant, resulting in the following:

- kk (as in 'Nikko', spelled にっこう)
- pp (as in 'ippai', spelled いっぱい)
- ss (as in 'bassuru', spelled ばっする)
- tch (as in 'matcha', spelled まっちゃ)
- tt (as in 'matte', spelled まって)

Short compound syllables

kya	きゃ	キヤ	kyu	きゅ	キユ	kyo	きょ	キヨ
sha	しゃ	シャ	shu	しゅ	シュ	sho	しょ	ショ
cha	ちゃ	チャ	chu	ちゅ	チュ	cho	ちょ	チョ
nya	にゃ	ニヤ	nyu	にゅ	ニユ	nyo	にょ	ニヨ
hya	ひゃ	ヒヤ	hyu	ひゅ	ヒユ	hyo	ひょ	ヒヨ
mya	みゃ	ミヤ	myu	みゅ	ミユ	myo	みょ	ミヨ
rya	りゃ	リヤ	ryu	りゅ	リュ	ryo	りょ	リヨ
gya	ぎゃ	ギヤ	gyu	ぎゅ	ギユ	gyo	ぎょ	ギヨ
ja	じゃ	ジャ	ju	じゅ	ジュ	jo	じょ	ジョ
ja	ぢゃ	ヂヤ	ju	ぢゅ	ヂユ	jo	ぢょ	ヂヨ
bya	びゃ	ビヤ	byu	びゅ	ビユ	byo	びょ	ビヨ
pya	ぴゃ	ピヤ	pyu	ぴゅ	ピユ	pyo	ぴょ	ピヨ

When a vowel sound is extended for one beat, the vowel is written with an overbar. The pronunciation does not change, only the length of the syllable.

Variant systems

While most romanizations in Kunrei and Nippon systems match those of the Hepburn system, there are a few differences:

Hepburn	Kunrei	Nippon	Hepburn	Kunrei	Nippon
ka	ka	kwa	shu	syu	syu
ga	ga	gwa	sho	syo	syo
shi	si	si	ja	zya	zya (じゃ)
ji	zi	zi(じ)	ju	zyu	zyu
chi	ti	ti	jo	zyo	zyo
ji	zi	di(ぢ)	cha	tya	tya
tsu	tu	tu	chu	tyu	tyu
zu	zu	du(づ)	cho	tyo	tyo
fu	hu	hu	ja	zya	dya(ぢゃ)
o	o	wo(を)	ju	zyu	dyu
sha	sya	sya	jo	zyo	dyo