

# Funny pronunciation no joke

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Having discussed in my last article the fact that language is intrinsically sound, I now will speak about the sound of Japanese, that is, its pronunciation.

In terms of pronunciation, Japanese is relatively simple. Japanese uses a good deal fewer sound elements than most languages of the world.

For vowels, the language only distinguishes five (あいうえお), which just so happen to correspond to the five vowels of the Roman alphabet, *a, e, i, o* and *u* (following the Roman order).

Just because there are only five vowel symbols, however, should not be taken to mean that there are only five vowels that exist; the overlap between the roman alphabet and the Japanese sound system is, of course, a sheer coincidence.

English, for instance, distinguishes among at least 10 different vowel sounds, but only uses these five vowel characters, having borrowed an alphabet with only five vowel letters; unlike some other European languages, English has not developed ways to show different vowel pronunciations by modifying some of the letters.

By the way, this fact makes English more confusing with respect to pronunciation and spelling correspondence, because the same letter ends up representing many different sounds.

Just think of how “banana” is pronounced. The letter *a* can be pronounced quite differently in each syllable. And *a* in “all” for instance, represents an utterly different sound.

Another big shortcoming of using the Roman alphabet for writing English is that it does not show where accents (or stresses) are. Accents play an important role in English in particular. This is a common problem for most writing systems, however. Just keep in mind that the writing system of any language is nothing but an incomplete and poor reminder of the actual sounds of the language.

To complement the shortage of vowel symbols in the Roman alphabet, German and Scandinavian languages add markings to certain vowel letters. French combines two different vowel letters together to create a new character—an attempt to cope with a sound that cannot be expressed with an existing letter.

But back to Japanese: Romanized Japanese is fairly straightforward, regular and systematic. This is partly because the number of sound elements in the language is much smaller and therefore, manageable, within the existing letters of the Roman alphabet, as compared with most languages in the world. English students of Japanese encounter very few sounds that are utterly unfamiliar.

Probably the only sounds that do not exist in English are the Japanese りるるろ sounds, which are normally romanized with *r* as in *ra, ri, ru, re, ro*. Those of you studying Japanese, I am sure, will agree with me when I say that these certainly are

not the English *r* sounds, whether the American or the British. In fact, the sounds are rather closer to the English *l* sound, in the sense that the tongue touches some part of the palate.

The difference is that the English *l* sound is produced by touching behind the upper teeth/gum area using the tip of the tongue, while the Japanese sound requires rolling the front part of the tongue, touching the middle of the palate and flapping (or rolling once) to produce the sound. Of course, whether written *r* or *l*, the actual sound is neither of the sounds we commonly associate with these symbols—at least not as they sound in English.

The rest of the sounds in Japanese should not be too unfamiliar to English speakers.

An important aspect of Japanese pronunciation that is different from English is pitch, which is either high or low. Pitch is not accent or stress, like in English. In fact, in Japanese the accent (stress) is basically kept the same for each syllablelike sound unit or mora of the Japanese language. In terms of tone, おはよう (ohayo), for instance, can be illustrated as LHHH (L: low tone; H: high tone). Similarly, はじめまして (hajimemashite) would be LHHHHL.

Changes in pitch can be found at the level of individual words, too, like はし (hashi) can be “chopsticks” (HL) or “bridge” (LH).

In actual practice, however, you need not worry about this too much because regional accents flip the pitch anyhow, between Kanto and Kansai (the Tokyo and Osaka areas). Also, I think you will agree that there are very few situations where you might confuse “chopsticks” with “bridge” anyway.

A more important aspect of Japanese pronunciation is the number of mora. Japanese is very sensitive to how many mora a word consists of. Differences in the number of mora could lead you to make a hilarious joke.

Once I was tutoring an American executive who was quite proficient in Japanese. He married his Japanese secretary. Shortly after he and his wife went to the ward office to register their marriage, I met him for a lesson and we talked, in Japanese, about his marriage. He said: *Chotto taihen deshita. Boku niwa seeeki ga nai kara.* (It was a bit tough, as I have no sexual organ.) Startled, with my mouth hanging open, I pointed out the meaning of what he had said, and he restated by adding another mora to the word in question:

*A, boku niwa seeeki ga nai kara.*  
(Oh, because I have no sperm.)

As some of you may have noticed, what he really meant to say was *seki*, a two mora word that means family registry or Japanese nationality.

Many other jokes, embarrassing stories and misunderstandings have come from mistakes in the number of mora.

Japanese sensitivity to mora is so acute that good control of “mora counting” is considered an art! Consider haiku and tanka: Haiku, as you probably know, is composed of 5, 7 and 5 mora; tanka, of 5, 7, 5, 7 and 7. Not only poetry but even slogans, mottos and catchphrases tend to be created based on these numbers. To the Japanese mind, at least, it is a comfortable rhythm. When you come to feel the rhythm, you have made good strides toward internalizing the language.