

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	きや	キヤ	kyu	きゆ	キユ	kyo	きよ	キヨ
sha	しゃ	シャ	shu	しゆ	シユ	sho	しよ	シヨ
cha	ちや	チャ	chu	ちゆ	チュ	cho	ちよ	チヨ
nya	にや	ニヤ	nyu	にゆ	ニユ	nyo	によ	ニヨ
hya	ひや	ヒヤ	hyu	ひゆ	ヒユ	hyo	ひよ	ヒヨ
mya	みや	ミヤ	myu	みゆ	ミユ	myo	みよ	ミヨ
rya	りや	リヤ	ryu	りゆ	リュ	ryo	りよ	リヨ
gya	ぎや	ギヤ	gyu	ぎゆ	ギユ	gyo	ぎよ	ギヨ
ja	じゃ	ジャ	ju	じゆ	ジュ	jo	じよ	ジョ
ja	ぢや	ヂヤ	ju	ぢゆ	ヂユ	jo	ぢよ	ヂヨ
bya	びや	ビヤ	byu	びゆ	ビユ	byo	びよ	ビヨ
pya	ぴや	ピヤ	pyu	ぴゆ	ピユ	pyo	ぴよ	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