



University of Tennessee, Knoxville  
**TRACE: Tennessee Research and Creative  
Exchange**

---

Chancellor's Honors Program Projects

Supervised Undergraduate Student Research  
and Creative Work

---

5-2021

## Learning Japanese in Comparison to Romantic and Germanic Languages

Stephanie Bias

University of Tennessee, Knoxville, sbias1@vols.utk.edu

Follow this and additional works at: [https://trace.tennessee.edu/utk\\_chanhonoproj](https://trace.tennessee.edu/utk_chanhonoproj)



Part of the [Japanese Studies Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Bias, Stephanie, "Learning Japanese in Comparison to Romantic and Germanic Languages" (2021).  
*Chancellor's Honors Program Projects*.  
[https://trace.tennessee.edu/utk\\_chanhonoproj/2420](https://trace.tennessee.edu/utk_chanhonoproj/2420)

This Dissertation/Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Supervised Undergraduate Student Research and Creative Work at TRACE: Tennessee Research and Creative Exchange. It has been accepted for inclusion in Chancellor's Honors Program Projects by an authorized administrator of TRACE: Tennessee Research and Creative Exchange. For more information, please contact [trace@utk.edu](mailto:trace@utk.edu).

Learning Japanese in Comparison to Romantic and Germanic Languages

Stephanie Bias

University of Tennessee Chancellor's Honors Program

Senior Thesis

2020-2021

## **Introduction**

This is a work that aims to communicate the difficulties of learning the Japanese language to non-learners via a compilation of common hurdles one faces in acquiring this language. Its primary objective is to facilitate understanding of why fluency acquisition for Japanese takes relatively longer for non-sinospheric students to obtain in comparison to Romantic and Germanic root languages. Thus, this piece is written in terms that do not require in-depth Linguistics knowledge, and any information that does require such detail will be explained in a manner that facilitates comprehension at the level necessary. The contents of this paper consist of the following main topics: the Japanese alphabet(s), its writing system and vocabulary, grammar, and aspects of Japanese language acquisition. With these preceding points, it will be further explained how the facts presented make Japanese a difficult language for most Romantic and Germanic root language speakers to learn; however, positive features will also be pointed out so as to avoid biases in the explanations. To further add to the guide below and to create a more thorough, scholarly explanation for the causes of these difficulties, academic statistics and resources will be referenced. Due to the author being an English speaker with experience in learning several other languages aside from Japanese (German and Spanish), they are qualified to make comparisons and notice the main variances that affected their own personal ease and speed of learning. However, as mentioned earlier, the views of others will be noted as well to ensure transparency and to avoid potential data exclusion.

The author believes such a summary of the Japanese language and its resulting slow learning curve is necessary due to the potential negative consequences caused by lack of understanding the complexity of this language in comparison to more popularly taught languages. Therefore, the intended audience is especially aimed at those specializing in

Romantic and Germanic languages but is additionally targeting those not learning a foreign language.

However, it must be disclaimed that stating what makes a language difficult or not is subjective by nature and can usually only apply to a majority in regards to this paper. After all, factors such as what age you were when you started studying, the quality of your educational environment, and your nationality can all influence the degree of difficulty one faces when learning any language. The author wishes to assure the reader that Japanese is indeed a language worth studying, and that this work is not meant to dissuade learning the language. Rather, it is meant to educate those who do not know the full extent of its difficulties and who therefore make assumptions - such assumptions are of course followed by detrimental consequences as mentioned previously. For example, schools and workplaces sometimes expect two people who know different languages who studied for the same amount of time to be at the same level of fluency in their respective languages, despite the innate variance in difficulty in learning certain languages.

Another example is that the accomplishment and even potential worth in the labor force of learning Japanese can be undermined by assumptions of ease. Lastly, overall decreased moral and frustration can ensue when non-learners/ learners of Romantic/Germanic languages set the same standards and assumptions they have for their respective languages onto Japanese learners - this can keep people away from learning Japanese as they will feel belittled, compare themselves to other languages and feel behind or less knowledgeable, or feel like it is too hard and not worth the effort.

Lastly, it must be noted that the difficulty in learning Japanese for non-sinospheric people ultimately means that the flip side is true - they too have difficulty learning our languages. Yet,

the author finds it necessary to point out that, especially in regards to English, often other languages have the advantage of more resources at their disposal due to English's demand and dominance in media. In comparison to schools in America, often other countries start receiving language education within elementary school, unlike America's more common starting point of high school.

### **Point 1: Hiragana, Katakana, and Romanji**

It is first important to explain the Japanese "alphabets" in relation to the Roman alphabet. These Japanese "alphabets," or scripts, are called Kana, and consist of two common types used in everyday life: Katakana and Hiragana. These are syllabic scripts, meaning that instead of the Romantic language's letters that most Western languages are accustomed to, the alphabets are composed of symbols that represent syllables and moras (how one may need to stress or put weight on their words, especially to differentiate similar sounding vocabulary). Most often, Katakana is used for loan words to the Japanese language, or for dictating Japanese words that are used in a scientific/more scholarly context.

Loan word example: トイレ (pronounced: toire, derived from the English word "toilet")

Meaning: bathroom/toilet

Scientific context example: Hiragana: おす, Katakana: オス Meaning: Male (animal, plant)

Loan words using Katakana have become more and more frequent in the Japanese language, with loan words being used despite there being Japanese equivalents. Afterall, there is already a Japanese word for 'toilet'.

In comparison to Katakana, Hiragana are more commonly used, and frequently compose and make up Kanji, which are another form of writing that will be discussed later. Both Hiragana and Katakana represent the exact same sounds, just the symbols differ in appearance -it would be the equivalent of English having two alphabets, with learners needing to memorize two symbols for each sound rather than just one.

Lastly, it is worth mentioning Romanji, although it is not an alphabet of the Japanese language. Instead, it is the Roman alphabet spelling of the sounds each Hiragana or Katakana makes. For example, writing ‘toire’ next to トイレ is Romanji . Romanji is often used with beginning learners of Japanese, as it puts the Japanese symbols into Romance language letters that they can read until they are comfortable recalling the sounds each Japanese character symbolizes.

Some negative aspects of these alphabets would of course start with the fact that since there is more than one alphabet, this already requires more initial memorization work on the learner’s part in comparison to learning Spanish or German, which mostly only differ, in the writing aspect, in that they contain umlauts or accent marks (ö, ü, á). In addition to this hurdle, often Japanese classes expect the students to draw the symbols following a particular stroke order, that is to say, a certain order in which you should draw the different parts of the symbol - thus adding on to the memorization required [See figure 1.].



Figure 1. Stroke order for the Hiragana ‘ma’

Another point is that some Japanese characters, much like ‘b,d,p,q,’ look very much alike and cause reading problems for beginners. Some examples include: (シ、ツ : ソ、ン). Furthermore, due to Roman characters being the most commonly used form of writing in Western languages, the acquisition of symbol-based languages is in most cases more difficult in comparison to learning Romantic and Germanic languages. Of course, then the same could be said for Asianic languages learning Western languages.

Another complication arises in that Japanese has sounds most Western languages do not make. One of the most challenging for non-natives is “ふ,” (fu), which should sound somewhat like a mixture between saying ‘fu’ and ‘hu,’ with the first part being almost inaudible. Of course, Japanese people are also noted to have trouble with English ‘r’s and other such sounds much like some Americans cannot roll their r’s for Spanish.

Although there are many aspects that hinder learning Japanese as fast as more similar languages that adopt the Roman alphabet, there are some perks that make language acquisition easier. First, Japanese is a phonetic language, which means that the sounds attached to each character in the alphabet(s) will always be pronounced the same. That is to say, the sounds of the language do not deviate from the associated symbols, unlike in English where “die” and “dye” sound the same despite alternate spelling. This also makes it easier to look up Japanese vocabulary one overhears, as one can be assured that how a word sounds is how it is spelled, unlike English’s words like ‘queue,’ or ‘melancholy.’ For Japanese, this means no matter what word you encounter, as long as you have learned the symbols’ pronunciations correctly, you do not have to be concerned about pronouncing it wrong. Additionally, even though there is an extra script of symbols to memorize, Katakana can enable you to tell apart loan and native words. This can be helpful in everyday life, as it can allow the reader to distinguish when a consumer good or

company is from a foreign country or not, and thus set adequate expectations (particularly for food products). As mentioned previously, English words in the form of Katakana are growing more common in Japanese, making it easier to know more vocabulary and to communicate should one be unable to remember the Japanese equivalent.

However, just knowing the two alphabets paired with vocabulary and grammar knowledge will not enable you to read books in Japan. There is still another hurdle to overcome should you want to read material meant for the average adult, or even for older elementary students: you will need to memorize Kanji.

## **Point 2: Kanji and Vocabulary**

Kanji can be somewhat difficult to explain when juxtaposed with the Roman alphabet - primarily because there is no equivalent in Western languages. It is worth noting that exclusively using Hiragana and Katakana are restricted to young children's books, and that should one want to reach a reading level suitable to their age, they must be able to read Kanji. Kanji are like Hiragana and Katakana in that they are symbols, except that they are symbols that represent one or more Hiragana/Katakana, much like a word that is made up of multiple alphabetical letters (Hiragana: おす Katakana: オス Kanji: 雄 Meaning: male). However, sometimes a word in Japanese may need more than one Kanji to be complete (Ex. としょかん → 図書館, or "library"). Or, the Kanji can make up only half of the word, and the other half is finished by being written once more using Hiragana (Kanji: 押す Hiragana: おす Meaning: to push. Notice it is pronounced just like the word 'male,' but the Kanji is different.).

To compound this explanation, sometimes the same word can have multiple Kanji, and it is up to the nuance, connotation, or personal preference of the writer which one they desire to use

(作る, 創る, and 造る all mean the same thing and are pronounced the same, but have different connotations). Also, a Kanji can have many meanings, and therefore make up several different words (日 can insinuate that the word it is in is referring to ‘day, sun, or Japan.’ Many Kanji have more than just three possible meanings.)

Therefore, the first negative aspect of Kanji is that one can see why reading at a proficient level takes longer in Japanese scholarship than, say, German scholarship that uses the Roman alphabet much like English. After all, you can know the Hiragana/ Katakana spelling for a word, but not know its Kanji equivalent. This leaves the reader unable to read a word they technically already know, simply because it is written in Kanji. In fact, the reader would not even know they already knew the word hidden behind the Kanji until they looked it up.

Another factor is that many Kanji are similar in appearance such as 賃, 貸 and 貸 that make recalling or reading them correctly difficult. Furthermore, Kanji can have various pronunciations to be memorized depending on what word they are in, such as for 日 that can be read as displayed by the bolded font as 日 (**HI**), 昨日(ki**NOU**), 日本 (**NI**hon), 日曜日 (**NICHI**you**BI**), and 明日(ashi**TA**). The same word in a dictionary can also be shown to have different combinations of Kanji and Hiragana, such as this entry: 受け付け 【うけつけ】, 受け付け 【うけつけ】, and 受け付 【うけつけ】. Even Japanese speakers make mistakes and get Kanji confused, with an example being the author’s very own Kanji professor at Waseda University who would sometimes need to look up intermediate level Kanji and correct herself. Although one could argue that this occurs in other languages too, it is less detrimental in English to make a spelling error, whereas in Japanese a mistyped Kanji can make the whole word change - this is especially a common annoyance for beginners if they make a slight mistype on the

computer. Minute differences in similar Kanji can sometimes also be harder for new learners of Japanese to see in scribbled handwriting and on computer screens. These qualities slow down the attaining of a practical literacy level considerably compared to languages sharing the same Roman alphabet. Looking Kanji up can also be more time consuming or harder on a phone/computer than Roman characters that do not have to be searched by their “parts,” particularly for beginners.

Yet, there are pros to consider in regard to Kanji. They can convey what one wants to say more precisely and does so with fewer words due to the complexity of the symbols’ meanings. For example, in English one must say “The four seasons (Spring, Summer, Winter, Fall),” but this concept can be summarized in only two Kanji that respectively mean ‘4’ and ‘seasons’: 四季. Additionally, once you know the sounds most frequently associated with a particular Kanji, if you see the Kanji in a new word, you can sometimes infer what the word sounds like despite never having encountered it before (This helps in looking up the word in a dictionary). Similarly, if you know the Kanjis’ individual meanings but cannot recall their readings, you can at least understand the sentiment of the word despite never having learned that respective vocabulary’s definition or dictation.

Mastering Kanji also allows the learner to be able to understand some Chinese since both languages utilize Kanji (although in slightly different ways and sometimes with divergent meanings for the same Kanji), and helps Chinese natives be capable of reading Japanese in a shorter span and write the Kanji with less mistakes compared to other languages’ natives.

### **Point 3: Grammar**

Although learning the grammar rules of a new language is always one of the more difficult aspects, Japanese has some that give foreigners in particular a lot of trouble and hinder the fluency process. For example, Japanese has something called ‘counters,’ or special sounds/words used at the end of a number when counting objects that help indicate what kind of object it is that you are counting. There are multiple counters that exist, and which one you use depends on what kind of object you are counting. Counting birds has a special counter, counting flat objects has a special counter, and so on. Sometimes, the number’s whole pronunciation can change to a unique form depending on what counter is used - thus, you end up having to learn several ways to say the same number.

Additionally, there are varying degrees of formality that can require words to be drastically changed from their more informal counterparts, and thus greatly increases the amount of vocabulary needing to be learned in Japanese. German has this with verbs and pronouns, but the different formalities are often similar to each other, and follow rules that make memorization easier in comparison to Japanese; the same applies to Spanish.

The Japanese language also consists of many hidden contextual clues that requires you being familiar with the culture and the grammar’s insinuations, far more than nonverbal, low-context cultures like Germany’s. These are just a few grammar points that are difficult for non-native speakers to learn, and not an exhaustive list.

One advantage Japanese has that languages such as German and Spanish do not share is that there are no genders for nouns, just like in English. Furthermore, there are no words that mean "the" or "a" in Japanese. Plural nouns in Japanese are almost nonexistent as well, aside from some exceptions. This spares the learner from needing to learn rules English has such as the plural of ‘goose’ is ‘geese,’ whereas ‘cat’ just becomes ‘cats.’

#### **Point 4: Practice and Time**

While discussing why Japanese is harder to learn than most Romantic languages, it is important to discuss the setbacks one may face when seeking to practice their skills in this language and the length of time it is expected to take to become fluent.

One large discrepancy between Japanese and languages like Spanish and German are the amount of resources available to learners, at least in the author's perspective and experiences. Relatively speaking, there are less resources available for Japanese learners, since it is only now gaining a small amount of popularity due to cultural influences like anime and technology (this idea is revisited in the conclusion with a source). While most bookstores have multitudes of books on Spanish, German, or French, the Japanese section usually is lucky to have even one book. This includes not only textbooks, but resources geared towards assimilation and immersing one in the foreign language like children's shows, books, and other media that is provided to help second-language acquisition. For example, think of the famous kids show 'Dora the Explorer' that helps children in America learn Spanish.

In general, there is more media produced using English, meaning there are far more ways for foreigners learning English to practice and hone their language skills doing something that they like. This also creates a form of immersion for English learners despite not leaving their country that is harder for an English speaker to attain in a similar fashion.

Another issue is that since only one country uses Japanese as its main language, there are far fewer native speakers to practice with. The likelihood of meeting someone to practice with is smaller, and this arguably makes it harder to stay motivated to keep studying the language. There are only about 1 million German speakers in the U.S., and Spanish speakers in the States boast

numbers like 43 million+ - yet even the former's small numbers do not compare to Japan's estimated 449,475 speakers in America. [2,4,5]

Yet, should one be able to go to Japan or meet a native in their home country and try to practice their skills, Japanese natives are known to switch to speaking in English regardless of the non-native's Japanese level due to them being bilingual or knowing more English than the other does Japanese. If not, it is a common occurrence that regardless of how little Japanese one speaks, they will get showered in over-the-top praise due to how unaccustomed the Japanese are to others learning their language.

Even if one does find a native speaker to practice with, they will find that often the language is very fast and hard to catch until they have enough practice. Although this is a common problem for new learners of all languages, this issue is compounded due to the fact that Japanese was ranked one of the fastest spoken languages, with ones like English ranking far slower in comparison [See figure 2][6].

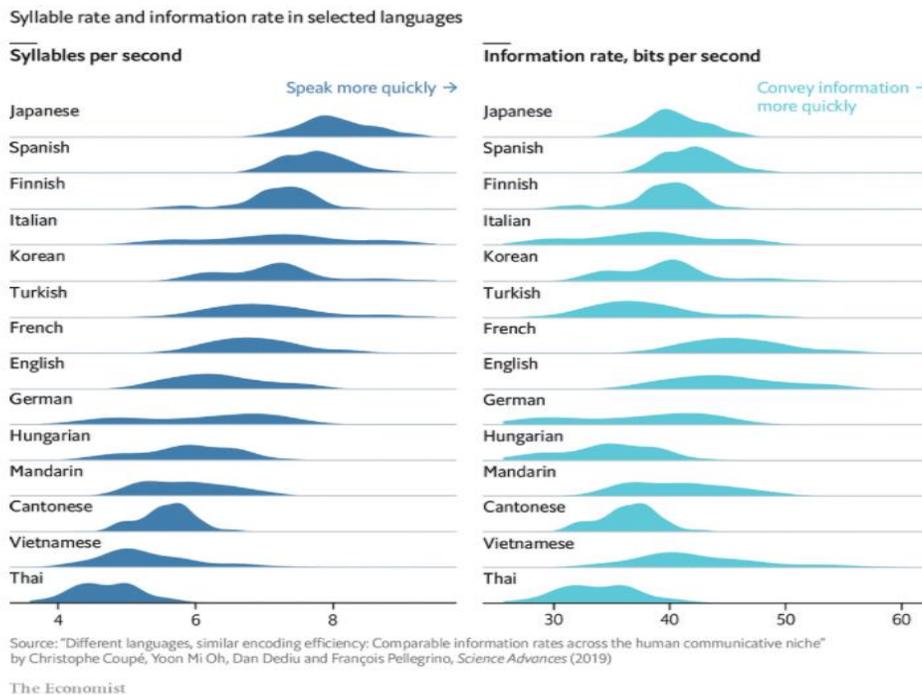


Figure 2. Japanese is shown to be considerably faster as a spoken language than English and German.

Lastly, Japanese is dubbed one of the longest languages to learn for English speakers according to the Foreign Service Institute's language difficulty ranking system.

As one can see in figure 3, Spanish and German are expected to take up to 600 and 750 hours respectively to learn.

**Category I: 23-24 weeks (575-600 hours)**

**Languages closely related to English**

Afrikaans

Danish

Dutch

French

Italian

Norwegian

Portuguese

Romanian

Spanish

Swedish

**Category II: 30 weeks (750 hours)**

**Languages similar to English**

German

Figure 3. On average, Spanish can be learned in 575-600 hours (23-34 weeks), whereas German can be learned in about 750 hours (30 weeks).

Yet in figure 4 we can see that Japanese is expected to take 2,200+ hours to learn [3].

Category V: 88 weeks (2200 hours)

Languages which are exceptionally difficult for native English speakers

Arabic

Cantonese (Chinese)

Mandarin (Chinese)

\*Japanese

Korean

\* Usually more difficult than other languages in the same category.

Figure 3. Japanese is estimated to take 2,200 hours to learn, or 88 weeks. It may take longer than 88 weeks due to Japanese being ranked as the hardest language in this category.

Some benefits of learning Japanese include the fact that natives are often eager to talk with learners of their language, since there are not many. As long as one establishes their desire to practice their Japanese and not speak English, many Japanese people are happy to help. Additionally, the interest in studying Japanese is slowly increasing thanks to cultural influences like anime, the upcoming 2021 Olympics, technology, food, and kawaii culture being brought to America and popularized. According to Duolingo, one of the most popular language learning sites, “Japanese is now the 6th most popular language to study [on Duolingo], with nearly as many people learning Japanese as there are learning Italian...Japanese has earned #3 on the list of fastest growing languages in the world” [1]. In time, appreciation for Japan’s culture and the increased scholarship of their language will hopefully soon reduce some of the cons discussed above regarding practice restraints.

### **Conclusion**

In summary, fluency acquisition for Japanese takes relatively longer for non-sinospheric students to obtain in comparison to Romantic and Germanic root languages due to such challenging elements as the Japanese alphabets, Kanji, grammar, and other aspects of the Japanese language that make it harder to practice with the same ease as languages like German or Spanish. This paper is intended to summarize facts along with offering theories that are hard to find elsewhere compiled together, rather than produce new research itself. The preceding factors do not address why some people are quicker at attaining languages than others, or other components that slow down the language learning process, like foreign language speaking anxiety that the author suffers from. These are prime subjects for future research, that combined with this study could help address more completely why non-sinospheric and sinospheric language learners alike struggle with foreign language acquisition.

## Works Cited

- [1] Blanco, C. "The 2020 Duolingo Language Report." *Duolingo Blog*, Dec. 15, 2020. <https://blog.duolingo.com/global-language-report-2020/>
- [2] Lyons, D. "How many people speak Spanish, and Where is It Spoken?" *Babbel Magazine*, March 9, 2020. [www.babbel.com/en/magazine/how-many-people-speak-spanish-and-where-is-it-spoken](http://www.babbel.com/en/magazine/how-many-people-speak-spanish-and-where-is-it-spoken)
- [3] "A Map Showing How Much Time It Takes to Learn Foreign Languages: From Easiest to Hardest." *Open Culture*, Nov. 29, 2017. [www.openculture.com/2017/11/a-map-showing-how-much-time-it-takes-to-learn-foreign-languages-from-easiest-to-hardest.html](http://www.openculture.com/2017/11/a-map-showing-how-much-time-it-takes-to-learn-foreign-languages-from-easiest-to-hardest.html)
- [4] "German the Most Spoken Language at Home Other Than English and Spanish in 9 States." *Wunderbar Together*, June 27, 2019. <https://wunderbartogether.org/news/german-the-most-spoken-language-at-home-other-than-english-and-spanish-in-9-states>
- [5] "How many Japanese speakers are in the United States?" *Name Census*, Oct. 2015. <https://namecensus.com/languages/Japanese.html>
- [6] "Why are some languages spoken faster than others?" *The Economist*. [www.economist.com/graphic-detail/2019/09/28/why-are-some-languages-spoken-faster-than-others](http://www.economist.com/graphic-detail/2019/09/28/why-are-some-languages-spoken-faster-than-others)