

DOUBLE CONSONANTS & OTHER COMBINATIONS

In the two previous lessons, we studied the 2 writing systems which will help you the most as a beginner. Today, we continue our learning adventure with some more particularities of the Japanese language and culture.

✚ Double consonants

Double consonants are used to change the sound of the preceding vowel, from long to short. For example, in the English word *kitten*, the double “t” is used to indicate that the “i” is short. In Japanese, it works the same, double consonants reduce the sound of the previous vowel. Three exist: “k”, “s” and “p”, and they are expressed by the Hiragana つ and the Katakana ツ, except that when they are used for this purpose, they are written in small (after the short vowel) → つ and ツ.

ex: Hiragana: *marriage* → けっこん → [kekkon] ; *straight on* → まっすぐ → [massugu] ;
a ticket → きっぷ → [kippu]

Katakana: *a cookie* → クッキー → [Kukkī] ; *a message* → メッセージ → [messēji] ;
a tip → チップ → [chippu]

✚ Lengthening of vowels

We saw earlier that a hyphen (ー) can be used to lengthen a vowel. This is particularly true for Katakana words; in Romaji, it is expressed with a hyphen on top of the vowel. See the example above: クッキー → [Kukkī], but it is not the only way. The Japanese language also uses another method for Hiragana.

The length of a vowel is important in Japanese as it can change the meaning of a word. For example, in the calendar, the days 4th and 8th sound very similar to foreigners but they are different because of one tiny letter → よっか [yokka] and ようか [youka] so it is important as in this precise case you might miss an important appointment or get a Japanese confused with the date.

In Hiragana, syllables containing “a”, “i” and “u” are followed by あ, い and う.

ex: *mother* → おかあさん (KA is followed by A) pronounced as [okaasan]
grandfather → おじいさん (JI is followed by I) pronounced as [ojiisan] ≠ *uncle* → おじさん
figures → すうじ (SU is followed by U) pronounced as [suuji]

Syllables containing “e”, and “o” are followed by い and う, except for some expressions.

ex: *big sister* → がくせい (SE is followed by I) pronounced as [gakusee]

father → おとうさん (TO is followed by U) pronounced as [otoosan]

🌈 Other letter combinations

Those letter combinations are used for sounds that did not exist in Japanese before foreign words were introduced, this is why they are only used with Katakana.

| | w | f | sh | j | ch | ts | t | d |
|----|------------|-------------|-------------|------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|
| a | | ファ [fa] | | | | ツア [tsa] | | |
| i | ウィ [wi] | フィ [fi] | | | | | ティ [ti] | ディ [di] |
| u | | | | | | | トゥ [tu] | ドゥ [du] |
| e | ウェ [we] | フェ [fe] | シェ [she] | ジェ [je] | チェ [che] | ツェ [tse] | | |
| o | ウォ [wo] | フォ [fo] | | | | ツォ [tso] | | |
| yu | | フュ [fyu] | | | | | テュ [tyu] | デュ [dyu] |

Dark grey areas are non-existent.

ex: *a file* → ファイル [fairu]

lemon tea → レモンティー [Remontī]

a café → カフェ [Kafe]

a fork → フォーク [Fōku]

Exercise: Find the English words behind those Katakana.

- パーティー →
- ソファ →
- ファーストフード →
- ウオッカ →
- ウィスキー →