

International University of Japan

Introduction:

Sound system of the Japanese language :

Japanese sound system is based on syllables, technically called moras, whose basic set is as follows:

pa	/a/
pi	/i/
pu	/u/
pe	/e/
po	/o/

n(or N)	wa	ra	ya	ma	ha	na	ta	sa	ka	a	/a/
		ri		mi	hi	ni	chi	shi	ki	i	/i/
		ru	yu	mu	fu	nu	tsu	su	ku	u	/u/
		re		me	he	ne	te	se	ke	e	/e/
	o	ro	yo	mo	ho	no	to	so	ko	o	/o/

ba
bi
bu
be
bo

da	za	ga	/a/
ji	zi	gi	/i/
zu	zu	gu	/u/
de	ze	ge	/e/
do	zo	go	/o/

Note that when you pronounce these syllables you have to pay attention to the followings:

- a. The sound written *f* in romanization is not to be interpreted as the same sound as *f* in English. Unlike the English *f*, which is produced by the friction of air caused by the upper teeth and the lower lips, the Japanese counterpart is created by the friction of air passing through between the upper and lower lips.
- b. The sound written *r* is quite different from the English counterpart. The Japanese *r* is rather closer to the sound corresponding to the *tt* or *dd* that appears in such English words as *butter* and *ladder*.
- c. The sound written *n* or *N*, which is not directly followed by a vowel in a word, is given the length of a full syllable. For example, the words *yonde* and *wakarimasen* are considered to have 3 and 6 syllables respectively, since they are divided into *yo/n/de* and *wa/ka/ri/ma/se/n*.

Japanese long vowels are represented as *aa* , *ii*, *uu*, *ee* (or *ei*) and *oo* (or *ou*) in Romanization, with *ei* and *ou* being pronounced in the same way as *ee* and *oo* respectively. These long vowels are given the length of two full syllables, irrespective of whether they occur with or without a preceding consonant. Thus a word like *kooi* (or *koui*) is regarded as a 3-syllabled word, since it consists of *ko*, *u* and *i*. We also have words which have double consonants in Romanization, namely *pp*, *tt*, *kk*, *ss*, *ssh*, *tts*, and *tch*. In such words the first of the two consonants is given the length of a full syllable; thus, words *mittsu* and *ippon*, for example, are considered to have 3 and 4 syllables, since they are divided into *mi/t/tsu* and *i/p/po/n* respectively.

Besides the basic set mentioned above, we have the other set of syllables shown below.

pya(ピャ)
pyu(ピュ)
pyo(ピョ)

rya(リャ)	mya(ミャ)	hya(ヒャ)	nya(ニャ)	cha(チャ)	sha(シャ)	kya(キャ)	kiya(キャ)
ryu(リュ)	myu(ミュ)	hyu(ヒュ)	nyu(ニュ)	chu(チュ)	shu(シュ)	kyu(キュ)	kiyu(キュ)
ryo(リョ)	myo(ミョ)	hyo(ヒョ)	nyo(ニョ)	cho(チョ)	sho(ショ)	kyo(キョ)	kiyo(キョ)

bya(ビャ)
byu(ビュ)
byo(ビョ)

ja(ヂャ)	ja(ジャ)	gya(ギャ)	giya(ギャ)
ju(ヂュ)	ju(ジュ)	gyu(ギュ)	giyu(ギュ)
jo(ヂョ)	jo(ジョ)	gyo(ギョ)	giyo(ギョ)

Although these syllables are close in pronunciation to the compounds of a *y*-column sound and an *i*-line syllable, which are given in the righthand columns, they are different in a very important point; namely, the sounds that do not have the vowel *i* are all considered to be single-syllabled, while those with *i* are regarded as 2-syllabled sounds. In other words, if it takes one second to pronounce the former, then it should take 2 seconds to pronounce the latter.