

A Special Appeal: Promoting the Hepburn Romaji System

by Peter Warner

“Romaji” is the general term for the writing systems used for writing Japanese words in an English alphabet script. It was developed to enable those who can’t read kanji to read the Japanese language. Logically, it should follow the phonics principles familiar to those readers.

Romaji is currently introduced in fourth grade elementary public school, as part of the Japanese language instruction. Because it is the first educational exposure to the English alphabet for most Japanese children, it has a strong influence on their sense of English phonics. Romaji introduction has a tremendous potential for establishing a good foundation for later English learning.

Sadly, this potential remains unrealized, even violated. The romaji system that is taught in fourth grade (*Nihon-shiki romaji*) tries to be simple, but in fact, much of it directly violates standard phonics rules of English. This results in an illogical system that hinders Japanese students’ ability to understand English.

Indeed, three years later in the first year of junior high, students are taught the Hepburn *romaji* system as part of their English curriculum. Called “*Heboun-shiki*”, it closely follows standard English phonics rules. The points of difference between these two romaji systems are easily identified and widely known:

Go to any stationery store in Japan, and look for the “romaji noto” next to the kanji writing, math, and other school notebooks. Open to the inside back flap, and you’ll see the *Nihon-*

shiki romaji table, with the alternate Hepburn spellings printed in smaller print, in parentheses, where they occur. On the chart accompanying this article, these 18 items are circled and contrasted with the *Nihon-shiki* counterparts shown below the main chart.

As an illustration of the impact of these differences, contrast these pairs: “sushi” vs. “sus”; “Michiko” vs. “Mitiko”; “Hideo Matsu” vs. “Hideo Matu” and “Mount Fuji” vs. “Mount Huji”. In each of these pairs, the first example is written in Hepburn *romaji*, the second in *Nihon-shiki romaji*. In fourth grade, students are taught that “si” is pronounced as “shi”, “ii” is pronounced as

“chi”, “zya” is pronounced as “ja”, and so on. These aberrations result in misunderstanding when later dealing with English words, both in reading and writing.

At best, imposing an inadequate lettering system on fourth graders, and then asking seventh graders to unlearn it, is poor planning. Adopting the Hepburn system for elementary school Japanese instruction would be a simple, yet very effective reform with regard to English instruction that the Education Ministry could enact.

As educators, we don’t have to wait for such reform. Please tell your students to use the Hepburn system when writing Japanese words in *romaji*.

ヘボン式		ローマ字		Hepburn* Romaji				
	A	I	U	E	O			
K	ka	ki	ku	ke	ko	kyā	kyū	kyō
S	sa	shi	su	se	so	shā	shū	shō
T	ta	chi	tsu	te	to	chā	chū	chō
N	na	ni	nu	ne	no	nyā	nyū	nyō
H	ha	hi	hu	he	ho	hyā	hyū	hyō
M	ma	mi	mu	me	mo	myā	myū	myō
Y	ya		yu		yo			
R	ra	ri	ru	re	ro	ryā	ryū	ryō
W	wa				wo			
	ru,m	vu	si	li	tu	di	du	la
G	ga	gi	gu	ge	go	gyā	gyū	gyō
Z	za	ji	zu	ze	zo	ja	ju	jo
D	da	ji	zu	de	do	ja	ju	jo
B	ba	bi	bu	be	bo	byā	byū	byō
P	pa	pi	pu	pe	po	pyā	pyū	pyō

* James Curtis Hepburn (1815-1811) was an American medical doctor and missionary. He came to Japan in 1859, taught Western medicine, and was a founder of the Meiji Gakuin University, of which he was the first president. He adopted the Hepburn system in the first edition of his pioneering Japanese-English dictionary, which was published in 1867. This system remains named after him, although he did not create it.



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