

大学時代 友達 電気代 払 代 私水道代 払
 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8

Areas 1, 2, 3, and 7 contain compounds of two, three, and even four kanji. In areas 4, 5, 6, and 8, the kanji appear as singletons. What does “singleton” mean? Well, it’s by no means an official term. I use it to refer to a lone kanji, one that’s not bonded to another. If it helps, you can think of singletons as being like free-floating electrons, whereas compounds contain tight unions of protons and electrons. (Or maybe that brings up bad memories of high school science, in which case forget I said anything about it.)

As you may have noticed, 代 appears four times in the sentence above, once as a singleton (area 5), as well as in three compounds (areas 1, 3, and 7). The words containing this kanji are pronounced as follows:

daigakujidai denkidai ka•wari suidōdai
 1 3 5 7

The singleton 代 is usually pronounced *ka* (as part of the words *kaeru*, “to change or exchange,” and *kawaru*, “to take the place of”). In the company of other kanji, 代 almost always becomes *DAI*. The examples above hold true to these patterns.

In the rest of this chapter, we’ll examine how such complications developed.

Importing a Writing System

To understand why characters have multiple personalities, you need to know a little about how the Japanese imported kanji. By the way, when I first heard a Japanese native say “import” in reference to kanji, I thought it a wonderfully fanciful use of English. After all, “import” usually refers to merchandise, such as wine, caviar, and cars. We never say that anyone “imported” Latin, Greek, or French words into English. But it turns out that all my English-language reference material about kanji speaks of “importing” it. This is, I suppose, a succinct way of referring to the arrival of kanji in Japan. But beyond that, I think the word points to the great need Japan had for a script, the deliberateness with which they sought one, and the value they’ve since accorded this writing system that’s now the soul of Japan.

That wasn’t always the case. Until about fifteen hundred years ago, the Japanese were illiterate. Speaking of words, I’m not sure “illiterate” is the right one. It’s not so much that they couldn’t read as that there

was nothing for them to read. Imagine how that must have shaped daily life. No signs over shops—only pictures perhaps. No way of writing an address. No postal workers, because there was no mail to deliver. No detailed way to record plans for the future or memories of the past. What a problem!

Fortunately, in about the fourth century CE, migrants from neighboring Korea shared their knowledge of kanji and of Buddhism with the Japanese people. Koreans had borrowed both kanji and Buddhism from China, an adjacent land mass. The kanji that Japan imported from Korea are called 吳音, *go’on*. The first character (吳, *go*) refers to the Go region in China. And 音, *on*, which roughly rhymes with “bone,” means “sound.”

During the eighth century, many Japanese students studied in China, and along with other elite Japanese tourists in China, these students brought a second round of kanji back to Japan. Chinese envoys and scholars also shared kanji with the Japanese. The characters that entered Japan during this era are called 漢音, *kan’on*, named for the Han tribe in China.

Four hundred years later it happened again. In the late twelfth century, Japanese priests studied Zen and Confucianism in China. Chinese priests also traveled to Japan. The kanji introduced to Japan during this era go by the name of 唐音, *tō’on*, because at that time the Japanese referred to China as 唐 (*Tō*).

The kanji that entered Japan during these eras originated in various regions of China, ensuring different pronunciations of the same characters. As dynasties changed, so did the rulers’ dialects, which also altered the sounds of characters. These facts help explain why 月 (moon, month) has the similar-sounding pronunciations of *GATSU* (*go’on*) and *GETSU* (*kan’on*). Sometimes, multiple Chinese-inspired readings are much further apart, as is the case below, with the third pronunciation of 行:

go’on: *GYŌ*, as in 一行 (*ichigyō*: first line of text) and 行事 (*gyōji*: event)

kan’on: *KŌ*, as in 銀行 (*ginkō*: bank) and 旅行 (*ryokō*: travel)

tō’on: *AN*, as in 行脚 (*angya*: pilgrimage, travel on foot)

Dictionaries for native Japanese speakers indicate the era in which each reading originated; this information is still relevant to native speakers’ grasp of the

language. The rest of us needn't learn kanji at such a microscopic level. But this type of analysis does provide a fascinating slice through the layers of the language, a geological cross-section as beautiful as the multicolored striations in the Grand Canyon. Over and over, the study of kanji reveals itself to be a study of linguistic evolution, and if etymology excites you, you'll have a ball with kanji.

Assigning Japanese Words to Symbols

The Japanese call imported readings *on-yomi* (音読み). Rhyming with “foamy,” *yomi* means “reading”—that is, a way of reading a particular character. Some people refer to *on-yomi* as Chinese readings, but that's somewhat misleading. From the time they were imported, Chinese pronunciations changed in Japanese mouths. Plus, in both China and Japan, these sounds have evolved over the millennia. So we'll use the term *on-yomi*. Nevertheless, it's crucial to remember their Chinese origins, because that affects a great deal that we'll explore.

Meanwhile, *kun-yomi* (訓読み) are the “Japanese” way of reading kanji. (*Kun* more or less rhymes with “noon” and means “teachings.”) Again, this nomenclature creates potential confusion, because both *on-yomi* and *kun-yomi* have long been integral parts of the Japanese language. But *kun-yomi* are called Japanese because they refer to the language spoken in Japan before kanji arrived.

And now we've hit on a key issue that the Japanese confronted when they imported characters. They already had a complete spoken language. How were they to match their native vocabulary with symbols for Chinese words? Those symbols, after all, came with their own sounds. For instance, the Japanese word for “new” is *atarashii*. The Chinese write “new” as 新, which has an *on-yomi* of *SHIN*. (In this book, we've represented *on-yomi* with small capital italics. By contrast, *kun-yomi* appear in lowercase italics.)

How could this kanji accommodate Japanese grammar? Not easily. Matching native Japanese vocabulary with Chinese characters turned out to be like jamming the proverbial square peg into a round hole.

In the face of a dilemma, many people use an either-or mentality. But the Japanese opted for a both-and approach. To continue with the example of *atarashii*, the Japanese decided to keep that word in the lexicon while also absorbing *SHIN* into the language. They would associate both readings with 新. When it came to writing

atarashii, they decided that this kanji would represent the root *atara*. They would use hiragana to write any parts of the word that had grammatical significance. In *atarashii*, the *shi* has grammatical significance; it's known as an “infix.” And the final *i* of *atarashii* can change (e.g., to *ku* or *katta*), depending on the situation. In other words, the Japanese began to write *atarashii* in this hybridized way: 新しい. As you can see, the hiragana are like long legs that stick out over the end of the kanji “bed.”

These “long legs” become particularly apparent when we write the *yomi* of 新しい in romanized letters. The portion representing hiragana is known as *okurigana*, and the convention is to put parentheses around that part of the word, yielding *atara(shii)*. In this book, you'll see a raised dot instead of parentheses. The raised dot is an alternate convention. *Atara(shii)* means the same as *atara•shii*. For more on how trailing hiragana work with kanji, see Exhibit 18, “Just the Facts: Okurigana.”

When the Japanese imported 新, that character represented the whole sound *SHIN*, so they didn't need to worry that any leftover syllables would trail behind this *on-yomi*. That's true for all *on-yomi*.

And because they come with no parts sticking out, grammatically speaking, *on-yomi* can fit together in a neat, modular way. Whereas *kun-yomi* are like spiky snowflakes that would jab each other if you tried to unite them, *on-yomi* are more like hexagons that lie alongside one another with smooth joints.

In fact, *on-yomi* generally *must* pair off with each other; they rarely stand alone. Exceptions include 茶 (*cha*: tea), 絵 (*e*: picture), and 福 (*fuku*: good fortune). But it's not as if the Japanese had to figure out which *on-yomi* could fit together. In many cases, the Japanese imported whole kanji compounds from Chinese, especially when those words expressed concepts that didn't yet exist in Japanese or that said something better than any native Japanese term could.

On and Kun Rules of Thumb

When you see a kanji by itself, you should probably use *kun-yomi*. When two or more kanji have “bonded” into a compound, then you're pretty safe in trying their *on-yomi*. Of course there are exceptions. What would a language be without exceptions?! But the rule illuminates why we read the sentence about electric and water bills as we did. Here are all eight groups again, followed by an analysis of the *yomi*: