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Cipris/Making Sense of Japanese Grammar

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Introduction

The purpose of this book is to explain basic principles underlying a wide range of phenomena in Japanese. We hope that our readers will realize that many phenomena which at first look idiosyncratic and Japanese-specific are closely connected to general principles which are not so exotic.

The audience we target is people who have little or no linguistic training and who may be unfamiliar with grammatical concepts. If you have never heard of the difference between transitive and intransitive verbs, but are genuinely interested in learning the Japanese language, this book is for you. We hope that even if you hated your English grammar in high school, you will still find the explanations in this book comprehensible.

With this objective in mind, we have limited the use of grammatical terms to the minimum. This means that, whenever possible, we have opted for simple, non-technical terms that an average English speaker knows. We have not used terms like “verbal aspect” or “modality,” which linguists prefer. Instead, we have talked of “speaker’s perspective,” “simple vs. complex event,” etc.

Although we assume very little knowledge of Japanese grammar, we do assume some familiarity on your part with the Japanese language. You need not be an advanced student. You can have started learning Japanese only a few weeks ago. You can begin reading this book while continuing your language study. But the book does not teach you specific expressions or patterns in Japanese. For example, it does not teach you how to say “Good morning” or how to create past tense forms. You need to learn those with an introductory textbook. Neither will the book teach you how to study Japanese. We focus on things that might puzzle you and things that might cause you a variety of problems in the future. For example, we explicitly explain that the noun before the form -desu is not the subject of a sentence. This is to prevent various difficulties which might arise later and persist if not properly handled at an early stage.

Intermediate and advanced students who have been accumulating questions about the structure of Japanese will also benefit from Making Sense of Japanese Grammar, because it gives coherence to many features of Japanese that are treated separately in existing textbooks or resource books.
The knowledge that we rely on in this book is the accumulated knowledge of linguists specializing in Japanese and comparative grammar. We differ from them in addressing non-specialists. We do not tax you with superfluous information. Even though some linguistic facts are of extreme interest to professional linguists, if we think that you intuitively understand and utilize them in learning or processing Japanese, we do not burden you or ourselves with the tedious task of explaining them. We provide only those pieces of information which are essential to understanding Japanese. In other words, we are trying to help you make sense of Japanese grammar in order to master the language.

We believe that, when apparent differences between Japanese and English are resolved using universal principles, true intercultural communication takes place. All of us will become more tolerant of surface differences, with the understanding that we are all humans with same cognitive processes. Our ostensible differences are only skin deep, or language deep. We believe that this message transcends the realm of language acquisition.

Now, how to use this book. Since any grammar book, alas, is far from a thriller, we do not recommend that you read ours from cover to cover on a rainy afternoon. (If you tried, your eyes would swiftly glaze over, especially if you like to read in a reclining position!). It is far more effective to absorb its contents a little at a time.

You will notice that the book is divided into five parts consisting of short units, with a great deal of cross-referencing. Each unit begins with a maxim-like heading such as “Do not hesitate to use the same verb over and over again” or “Te-forms connect closely related events.” The glossary provides short definitions of terms which might require clarification. Indexed items lead you to the pages where they are discussed and explained.

You might choose to think of this manual as a bowl of highly potent, knowledge-enhancing nuggets which should be thoughtfully chewed, one at a time. The order in which you ingest them is not crucial. Feel free to range back and forth, or to dip into the book at random. Glance over the table of contents, or leaf through the pages, to find items that strike you as intriguing, and start reading. Or go to the index to find the pages where something you are interested in is explained. When you wish to test your understanding, do the mini-exercises found at the end of each unit. The keys to the exercises are at the end of the book.

If you find a unit beyond your level, simply go to one of the earlier units on related topics, which are suggested at the end of each unit. If a unit is unclear at first reading, do not give up but read through it once more, slowly and attentively. When the Zen master Ikkyu was asked to write a maxim of the highest wisdom, he wrote a single word: “Attention.” We cannot improve on old Ikkyu’s advice,
and are confident that a relaxed and focused approach will enable you to attain grammatical enlightenment. Once internalized, the information contained in these pages will illuminate Japanese grammar with surprising clarity.

Enjoy your study, and please keep in mind that anyone can master Japanese grammar and the Japanese language itself. All it takes is good humor and perseverance.

Good luck!

A note to teachers

Making Sense of Japanese Grammar will also be of interest to Japanese-language teachers whose specialty is not necessarily linguistics. We hope the book will clarify some points which they have been teaching over the years but which still trouble them because they are difficult to explain to students. Even instructors with a linguistics background may find some parts helpful in their teaching because of the accessible way the concepts are explained.

We encourage teachers of Japanese to utilize Making Sense of Japanese Grammar as supplementary reading for students at all levels. The teacher may choose to assign a few units as early as the first weeks of a beginning class. Additional units can be assigned whenever they help to clarify what is being studied. We hope that this approach will prove beneficial throughout the student’s formal learning career, and well beyond it. Even a perfectly fluent speaker of Japanese may find the book a useful reference from time to time.

We strongly encourage both teachers and students to write to us with their comments and suggestions, in order to help us make the book’s future editions ever more readable and helpful.

A note on romanization and notation

The romanization in transliterations follows the Hepburn style, except for long vowels, which are marked by doubling the vowel rather than by a long mark. Asterisks mark ungrammatical sentences.