

## Chapter 1

# I Say It How? Speaking Japanese

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### *In This Chapter*

- ▶ Getting the basic sounds down
  - ▶ Recognizing the Japanese you already know
  - ▶ Perfecting some phrases
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**F**iguring out how to speak a foreign language is a great way to explore a different culture. In this chapter, you open your mouth and sound like a totally different person — a Japanese-speaking person! I tell you how to say familiar Japanese words (like **sushi**) with an authentic Japanese accent. **Jā, hajimemashō** (jahh, hah-jee-meh-mah-shohh; Let's start!).

## *Basic Japanese Sounds*

Japanese sounds are easy to hear and pronounce. Each syllable is simple, short, and usually enunciated very clearly. With a little practice, you'll get use to them quickly. This section gets you off on the right foot (or should I say the right sound) by looking at vowels, consonants, and a couple of letter combinations.

## Vowel sounds

Japanese has only five basic vowels — *a*, *e*, *i*, *o*, and *u* — all of which sound short and crisp — plus their longer counterparts, *ā*, *ē*, *ī*, *ō*, and *ū*.

Short and long vowel sounds in Japanese are quite different than they are in English. In Japanese, long vowels have the same sounds as short vowels — you just draw out the sounds for a moment longer. To an English-speaking ear, a long Japanese vowel sounds as if it's being stressed.



Whether a vowel is long or short can make all the difference in the meaning of a Japanese word. For example, **obasan** (oh-bah-sahn) with a short *a* means “aunt,” but **obāsan** (oh-bahh-sahn) with a long *ā* means “grandmother.” If you don't differentiate the vowel length properly, no one will understand who you're talking about.

Table 1-1 lists the Japanese vowels. Practice saying them a few times to get the hang of how they sound.

**Table 1-1 Japanese Vowel Sounds**

<i>Letter</i>	<i>Pronunciation</i>	<i>English Word with the Sound</i>	<i>Example</i>
a	ah	a <u>h</u> a	obasan (oh-bah-sahn; aunt)
ā	ahh		obāsan (oh-bahh-sahn; grandmother)
e	eh	b <u>e</u> d	Seto (seh-toh; a city in Japan)
ē	ehh		sēto (sehh-toh; pupil)
i	ee	f <u>ee</u> t	ojisan (oh-jee-sahn; uncle)

<i>Letter</i>	<i>Pronunciation</i>	<i>English Word with the Sound</i>	<i>Example</i>
ī or ii	eee		ojīsan (oh-jeee-sahn; grandfather)
o	oh	d <u>o</u> me	tori (toh-ree; bird)
ō	ohh		tōri (tohh-ree; street)
u	oo	f <u>oo</u> t	yuki (yoo-kee; snow)
ū	ooo		yūki (yooo-kee; courage)

In Japanese, any two vowels can appear next to each other in a word. You may hear them as one vowel sound, but to the Japanese, they sound like two vowels. For example, **ai** (ah-ee; love) sounds like one vowel — the English *i* (as in *eye*) — but to the Japanese, it's actually two vowels, not one. The word **koi** (koh-ee; carp) sounds like the one-syllable English word *coy*, but in Japanese, **koi** is a two-syllable word.

Table 1-2 lists some other common vowel combinations. Some of them may sound awfully similar to you, but Japanese speakers hear them differently. Try saying them aloud so that you can hear the differences.

**Table 1-2** Vowel Combinations

<i>Vowel Combination</i>	<i>Pronunciation</i>	<i>Translation</i>
ai	ah-ee	love
mae	mah-eh	front
ao	ah-oh	blue
au	ah-oo	meet
ue	oo-eh	up
koi	koh-ee	carp
koe	koh-eh	voice

The vowels *i* (ee) and *u* (oo) come out as a whisper whenever they fall between the consonant sounds *ch*, *h*, *k*, *p*, *s*, *sh*, *t*, and *ts* or whenever a word ends in this consonant-vowel combination. What do those consonants have in common? They're what linguists call "voiceless," meaning that they don't make your vocal cords vibrate. Put your hand over your vocal cords and say a voiceless consonant like the *k* sound. Then say a "voiced" consonant like the *g* sound. Feel the difference? Tables 1-3 and 1-4 provide examples with and without the whispered vowels.

**Table 1-3 Words with Whispered Vowels**

<i>Japanese</i>	<i>Pronunciation</i>	<i>Translation</i>
sukēto	skehh-to	skating
kusai	ksah-ee	stinky
ashita	ah-shtah	tomorrow
sō desu	sohh dehs	that's right

**Table 1-4 Words without Whispered Vowels**

<i>Japanese</i>	<i>Pronunciation</i>	<i>Translation</i>
sugoi	soo-goh-ee	amazing; wow
kuni	koo-nee	country
kagu	kah-goo	furniture

## Consonant sounds

Fortunately, most Japanese consonants are pronounced as they are in English. Table 1-5 describes the sounds that you need to pay attention to.

**Table 1-5 Japanese Consonants That Are Different from English**

<i>Consonant</i>	<i>Description of the Sound</i>	<i>Examples</i>
r	Here you tap your tongue on the roof of your mouth just once — almost like an English <i>d</i> or <i>l</i> , but not quite.	rakuda (rah-koo-dah; camel); tora (toh-rah; tiger); tori (toh-ree; bird)
f	A much softer sound than the English <i>f</i> — somewhere between an <i>f</i> and an <i>h</i> sound. Make the sound by bringing your lips close to each other and gently blowing air through them.	Fujisan (foo-jee-sahn; Mt. Fuji); tōfu (tohh-foo; bean curd); fūfu (fooo-foo; married couple)
ts	The combination is hard to pronounce at the beginning of a word, as in <b>tsunami</b> , although it's easy anywhere else. Try saying the word <b>cats</b> in your head and then saying <b>tsunami</b> .	tsunami (tsoo-nah-mee; tidal wave); tsuki (tsoo-kee; the moon)
ry	The combination of <i>r</i> and <i>y</i> is difficult to pronounce when it occurs before the vowel <i>o</i> . Try saying <b>ri</b> (ree) and then <b>yo</b> (yoh). Repeat many times and gradually increase the speed until you can pronounce the two sounds simultaneously. Remember that the <i>r</i> sounds almost like a <i>d</i> in English.	ryō (ryohh; dormitory); ryokan (ryoh-kahn; Japanese-style inn)

## 10 Japanese Phrases For Dummies

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Like most other languages, Japanese has double consonants. You pronounce these double consonants — *pp*, *tt*, *kk*, and *ss* — as single consonants preceded by a brief pause. Check out the following examples:

- ✓ **kekkon** (kehrk-kohn; marriage)
- ✓ **kippu** (keep-poo; tickets)
- ✓ **kitte** (keet-teh; stamps)
- ✓ **massugu** (mahs-soo-goo; straight)

### *Sounding Fluent*

If you want to sound like a native Japanese speaker, you need to imitate the intonations, rhythms, and accents of Japanese. These almost musical aspects of the language make a big difference, and they're not that difficult to achieve.

#### *Don't stress*

English sentences sound like they're full of punches because they contain words that have stressed syllables followed by unstressed syllables. Japanese sentences sound flat because Japanese words and phrases don't have stressed syllables. So unless you're angry or excited, suppress your desire to stress syllables when you speak Japanese.

#### *Get in rhythm*

English sentences sound smooth and connected, but Japanese sentences sound choppy because each syllable is pronounced separately. You can sound like a native speaker by pronouncing each syllable separately, not connecting them as you do in English.

#### *Pitch perfectly*

Although Japanese speakers don't stress syllables, they may raise or lower the *pitch* on a specific syllable

in a certain word. A raised pitch may sound like a stress, but if you think in terms of music, the high notes aren't necessarily stressed more than the low notes.

Pitch differences in Japanese are a lot subtler than the differences between musical notes. Sometimes a slight pitch difference changes the meaning of a word.



The pitch also depends on what part of Japan you're in. For example, in eastern Japan, the word **hashi** (hah-shee) means "chopsticks" when said with high-to-low pitch, but when said low-to-high, it means "a bridge." In western Japan, it's the opposite: High-to-low pitch means "a bridge," and low-to-high pitch means "chopsticks."

How can you tell what anyone means? For one thing, the eastern dialect is standard because that's where Tokyo, Japan's capital, is located. In any event, the context usually makes the meaning clear. If you're in a restaurant and you ask for **hashi**, you can safely assume that, no matter how you pitch this word, no one will bring you a bridge.



Here's another interesting fact about pitch: The Japanese raise their overall pitch when speaking to their superiors. This pitch change is most noticeable among women. Female workers raise their pitch quite a bit when dealing with customers. Women also raise their pitch when speaking to young children.

## *You Already Know a Little Japanese*

Believe it or not, you already know many Japanese words: Some are Japanese words that English borrowed and incorporated, and others are English words used in Japan.

## *Japanese words in English*

Do you love **sushi**? Do you practice **karate**? Do you hang out at **karaoke** bars? Even if you answered no to every question, you probably know what these words mean and know that they come from Japanese.

Check out these other words that traveled from Japan to become part of the English language:

- ✓ **hibachi** (hee-bah-chee; a portable charcoal stove)
- ✓ **jūdō** (jooo-dohh; a Japanese martial art that redirects an attack back onto the attacker)
- ✓ **kimono** (kee-moh-noh; a robe with wide sleeves and a sash; traditional Japanese clothing for women)
- ✓ **origami** (oh-ree-gah-mee; the art of paper folding)
- ✓ **sake** (sah-keh; Japanese rice wine)
- ✓ **samurai** (sah-moo-rah-ee; professional warriors)
- ✓ **sashimi** (sah-shee-mee; sliced raw fish)
- ✓ **sukiyaki** (soo-kee-yah-kee; Japanese-style beef stew)
- ✓ **tsunami** (tsoo-nah-mee; tidal wave)

## *English words used in Japanese*

Many English words have crossed the ocean to Japan, and that number is increasing quickly. You can use many English words in Japan — if you pronounce them with a heavy Japanese accent:

- ✓ **jūsu** (jooo-soo; juice)
- ✓ **kamera** (kah-meh-rah; camera)
- ✓ **kōhī** (kohh-heee; coffee)
- ✓ **nekutai** (neh-koo-tah-ee; necktie)
- ✓ **pāti** (pahh-teee; party)





## Puzzling English words in Japan

Some English words changed their meanings after being assimilated into the Japanese language. Don't be puzzled when you hear these words:

- ✓ Smart: **Sumāto** (soo-mahh-toh) doesn't mean bright. It means "skinny" or "thin" in Japan.
- ✓ Training pants: **Torēningu pantsu** (toh-rehh-neen-goo pahh-tsoo) aren't for toddlers who are about to give up their diapers. They're gym pants, and adults wear them, too.
- ✓ Mansion: **Manshon** (mahn-shohn) isn't a huge, gorgeous house. It's just a small, neat-looking condominium in Japan.

- ✓ **rajio** (rah-jee-oh; radio)
- ✓ **resutoran** (reh-soo-toh-rahn; restaurant)
- ✓ **sutēki** (soo-tehh-kee; steak)
- ✓ **sutoraiku** (soo-toh-rah-ee-koo; strike)

## Picking Up Some Basic Phrases

Start using the following short Japanese phrases at home. You may need your family's cooperation, but if you make it a habit, you'll be amazed at how quickly you pick up a bit of Japanese.

- ✓ **Dōmo** (dohh-moh; Thank you *or* Hi!)
- ✓ **Īe** (eee-eh; No *or* Don't mention it.)
- ✓ **Hai** (hah-ee; Yes)
- ✓ **Wakarimasen** (wah-kah-ree-mah-sen; I don't understand.)

- ✓ **Shirimasen** (she-ree-mah-sen; I don't know the answer to that question.)
- ✓ **Sō, sō** (sohh, sohh; You're right, you're right!)  
Used when you agree with someone's statement. This phrase is similar to what you mean when you say "yeah" in the middle of an English conversation just to let the other person know that you're listening.
- ✓ **Dame** (dah-meh; You're not allowed to do that *or* That's bad!)  
Used when you want to stop someone from doing something or when you want to say that something is bad or impermissible. You'd never say this phrase to a superior or to someone older than you. You can say it to children, siblings, or very close friends.
- ✓ **Zenzen** (zehn-zehn; Not at all *or* It was nothing.)
- ✓ **Ii desu ne** (ee-ee deh-soo neh; That's a great idea!)
- ✓ **Yatta** (yaht-tah; Yahoo! I did it.)
- ✓ **Gambatte** (gahm-baht-teh; Go for it! *or* Try your best!)
- ✓ **Omedetō** (oh-meh-deh-tohh; Congratulations!)
- ✓ **Yōkoso** (yohh-koh-soh; Welcome!)
- ✓ **Shinpai shinaide** (sheen-pah-ee shee-nah-ee-deh; Don't worry!)
- ✓ **Makasete** (mah-kah-seh-teh; Count on me!)