



History of Japanese Writing System; From Kanji Into Hiragana

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ABSTRACT

The Japanese writing system has undergone a long and complex evolution since the introduction of Chinese characters (hànzì) in the 5th century. Over time, this system, comprising kanji, kana (hiragana and katakana), and romaji, has seen continuous transformations. This research explores the historical progression of the Japanese writing system, tracing its development from the early use of kanji and the adaptation of Man'yōgana to the eventual creation of kana. Kanji, originally imported from China, initially posed challenges due to its complexity and the mismatch with the Japanese language structure. As a result, Man'yōgana, an early form of Japanese script using kanji phonetically, emerged as an intermediary step. Eventually, this evolved into two distinct syllabaries: hiragana and katakana, collectively known as kana, which simplified writing and better suited the Japanese linguistic context. This study utilizes desk research to analyze the key stages of this transformation, focusing on the cultural, linguistic, and social factors that contributed to each phase of development. From the influence of Chinese characters to the creation of a uniquely Japanese writing system, the transition from kanji to kana reflects the need for reform and adaptation. By examining these historical shifts, the research sheds light on how Japan tailored a borrowed writing system to suit its own language and facilitated easier, more accessible written communication.

INTRODUCTION

Japanese has long been considered one of the most difficult languages to learn, especially for learners whose native language does not use kanji, which is the Chinese script or hànzì that is part of the Japanese script or kanji (Bourke, 1992; Douglas, 1992 in Paxton, 2019). In expressing their language in writing, the Japanese use a mixture of script types (Joyce et al., 2012). The Japanese writing system consists of logographic Kanji, Kana (Hiragana, Katakana), alphabetic Romaji (Igarashi, 2007; Jilson, 2013; Al Jahan, 2017; Hisada, 2018; Harun et al., 2024; Tamaoka et al., 2002; Leong, 1998; Diner, 2015). The two types of syllabic kana have their own characteristics, namely hiragana is cursive and katakana has a more angular script (Koda, 2017; Taylor & Taylor, 2014 in reference Inoue et al., 2023).



Fig 1. The Japanese Writing System consists of Kanji (Left), Kana which consists of Hiragana and Katakana (Center), Romaji (Right)

The more cursive hiragana characters are called *onnade*, or female hand, while the more square-shaped, detached, and isolated katakana characters are called *otoko moji*, or male writing. This does not imply, however, that men only use katakana and women only use hiragana (Miller, 121–124 in reference to Jilson, 2013). In the ninth century, katakana also arrived along with hiragana. Originally, katakana was used by Buddhist monks to annotate texts written in Chinese characters. Since it originated in China and moved to Japan, the use of Japanese has greatly expanded. Japanese writing continues to adapt with the times, from the form of Chinese characters or hànzì, which turned into kanji, down to man'yōgana, to the present kana script (hiragana and katakana), whose writing varies. The writing of hentaigana was created after the standardization of hiragana in 1900 by the Japanese Ministry of Education, making obsolete characters separate from the hiragana group and becoming their own characters. This research summarizes other literature that discusses the journey of Japanese writing to create a sequential timeline.





LITERATURE REVIEW

Based on Al Jahan's research (2017) entitled "The Origin and Development of Hiragana and Katakana," it outlines how the development of the Japanese writing system from the Chinese script (hànzì) to its spread in Japan. One of the greatest contributions to the history of Japanese linguistics was the formation of kanji, a script adapted from the Chinese script, or hànzì. Kanji is often used to convey complex and rich meanings in written language. Kanji was later paired with two simpler syllabic systems, namely hiragana and katakana (Igarashi, 2007; Koda, 2017).

Igarashi (2007), in the research "The changing role of katakana in the Japanese writing system," also explains the history of the Japanese writing system and the function of each system. Where Kanji was present in the 5,000-3,000 BC century (Taylor & Taylor, 1995). Studies on the use of hiragana and katakana show that they function in different contexts. Hiragana is used for native Japanese words and in grammatical contexts, while katakana is used for imports, onomatopoeia, and emphasis, as well as for foreign language imports (Taylor & Taylor, 2014; Diner, 2015). Hiragana, with its cursive and smooth form, is also known as *onnade*, or "women's writing," due to its more common use among women during its early development. On the other hand, katakana, with its more bold and angular form, was often used by Buddhist monks to annotate classical Chinese texts, which came to be known as *otoko moji*, or "men's writing" (Miller, 121–124 in reference to Jilson, 2013; Fogel et al., 1994).

Romaji is the Latin alphabet representation of Japanese words, emerging in research as an aid for foreign speakers learning Japanese. Romaji has limited use in the formal writing system, but it still plays an important role in helping beginners to understand and pronounce Japanese before they learn kana and kanji (Igarashi, 2007). In the study of Japanese writing history, researchers such as Tamaoka et al. (2002) and Hisada (2018) highlight that the integration of Chinese characters into Japanese was not a straightforward process. It required significant adaptation to match the monosyllabic logographic system with the polysyllabic Japanese language.

This development demonstrates the dynamic interplay between the absorption of outside influences and local innovation that is typical in Japanese linguistic history. Previous research noted that the transformation of the Japanese writing system went hand in hand with social and cultural changes in Japan. For instance, the development of simpler kana occurred in the Heian period (794–1185), when Japanese writing was increasingly separated from the direct influence of Chinese characters, symbolizing an important phase in the development of a more independent and structured Japanese language (Al Jahan, 2017).

METHOD

Desk analysis or desk research is a form of research that consists of researching, retrieving, evaluating, and reprocessing information that has been collected from official sources. The main purpose of desk research is to identify and summarize previous research, reports, and documents (Maciejewska et al., 2022; Specht, 2019). This research uses desk research, where scientific articles from various journals are collected and studied to sort, summarize, and process information from each article reviewed. Articles that refer to the outline of the journey of the Japanese writing system are the main reference, and then from these articles, related articles are added. The characters used as examples in this article were taken from the internet, using MS Mincho font for Mincho, *gatasosyo* and *gatasosyoTujokana* for cursive, or *Sōgana*, *Yuji Hentaigana Akebono* for hentaigana characters.

RESULT

The earliest known Japanese writings came from China, most likely from bilingual Chinese and Korean court officials at the Yamato court. During the reign of Empress Suiko (593-628), the Yamato court sent large-scale diplomatic missions to China, which resulted in a huge increase in Chinese literacy at the Japanese court. The Chinese writing system was introduced to Japan in the 5th century via the Korean peninsula. Initially, the Chinese writing system used with Japanese terms was represented by characters that depicted meaning rather than sound.

DISCUSSION

Kanji continued to evolve in hopes of increasingly faster and more accurate writing. In the 6th and 10th centuries AD, kanji evolved, and the Japanese began using it to write Japanese as a syllabic script after the 7th century (Heinrich, 2015; Joyce et al., 2014; Ogino et al., 2017; Yagyū et al., 2021, in reference to Harun et al., 2024).



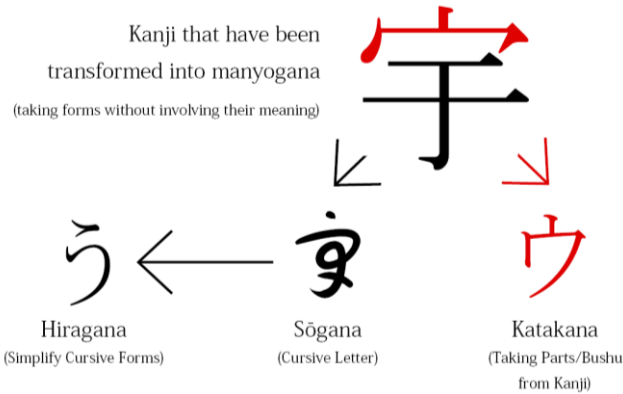


Fig 2. Formation of Hiragana and Katakana from Kanji that have been transformed into Man'yōgana

Kanji

Kanji (漢字) are Chinese logographic characters or hànzi that were adopted and used in the modern Japanese writing system. Kanji have a function in that they are used to represent both meaning and phonetic sounds.

漢字

Fig 3 Kanji as a derivative of the Chinese Han or hànzi script

Basically, hànzi consists of 5,000 to 6,000 characters (Hanley, 2005 in Inoue reference, 2017). Based on newspaper archives, kanji frequency studies show that 3000 kanji cover almost all (99%) of what Japanese readers encounter, but the rest are spread across the other 3000 kanji (Kess & Miyamoto 1999, p. 199; citing Nozaki et al., 1996 re-cited by Hoek, 2019; Tamaoka et al., 2002). It is estimated that around 6000-7000 kanji are used in modern Japanese, and Japanese people with secondary and higher education recognize around 3000 kanji (Hadamitzky & Spahn, 1997, pp. 43 in Hoek, 2019; Seeley, 1991 in Paxton, 2019). New cultural elements and ideas in the form of writing were brought in the 6th century by scholars, monks, and merchants from China who frequented Japan (Mitani & Minemura, cited in Meldrum, 2009, p. 54, and cited by Benediksen, 2019). 54, and cited by Benediksdottir, 2012, p. 8).

Tollini (1994) in Paxton (2019) elaborates that these new ideas from China were not accessible to everyone, as they had to learn the Chinese writing system first. The Japanese language did not have a written form when Chinese characters, or hànzi, were introduced, and the language used for reading and writing was Chinese. In the 8th (Wang et al., 2023) to 9th centuries AD, the Kanbun-Kundoku system was used, where classical Chinese was adapted into Japanese form in the method of reading and translating Japanese (Kin, 2010; Al Jahan, 2017). One group of Japanese scholars in the Nara period (710–784 CE) tried to solve the problem by abandoning the meaning and order of the hànzi script and using the script only for its phonetic value. A writing called man'yōgana developed, where hànzi was used to write Japanese words, and produced modern kanji letters.

Man'yōgana

安以宇衣於

Fig 4. Kanji used for Man'yōgana

Man'yōgana (万葉仮名), otherwise known as shakuji (借字), is a kana system that was first recognized and developed as a means to represent Japanese phonetically. In the Man'yōgana writing system, Chinese characters, or hànzi, are used to represent Japanese by adopting the letter formation but retaining the meaning unchanged (Paxton, 2019). At the present time, Man'yōgana is no longer used (Jolly, 1972). Al Jahan (2017) explains that the date of





Man'yōgana's initial use is unclear, but it has been in use since the mid-7th century, and the name Man'yōgana comes from Man'yōshū, an anthology of Japanese poetry from the Nara period (Bentley, 2021). Man'yōgana was increasingly written in a more cursive, hand-written form, called sōgana or 'grass stroke', and became the forerunner of hiragana (Habein, 1984 in the literature reviewed by Joyce et al., 2012).

Sōgana



Fig 5. Sōgana or cursive character

Sōgana (草仮名) is a cursive form that mediates between the modern man'yōgana and hiragana scripts and becomes a flexible character (Singh et al., 2022). Sōgana appeared in the Heian era (794-1185) and was often used for poetry recitation and was in general use. Then in the ninth century, hiragana syllabary along with katakana emerged and developed (Jilson, 2013), reinforced by the statement of Harun et al. (2024). In the early tenth (Loveday, 1996, referenced in Kunert, 2017) to eleventh centuries.



Fig 6. Formation of Hiragana from Man'yōgana, Man'yōgana Script (left) Simplified into Sōgana Script or cursive writing (center) and into Part of Hiragana (right).

Meiji era (1868–1912) saw the further development of sōgana into hiragana with the use of wakankonkōbun, a mixed Chinese–Japanese style (Al Jahan, 2017; Meldrum, 2009; Clark, 2009, 14–22; Twine, 1991:48 in Weng, 2020). These days, sōgana is only used decoratively. Without having to represent characters of Chinese origin to use Japanese, katakana or hiragana could be widely used by the upper classes at the time.

Hiragana



Fig 7. Hiragana

Hiragana (平仮名, ひらがな) is a simplified and more cursive representation of the sōgana form (Habein, 1984). Hiragana dates back to the 9th century, where it represented morae (fewer units within a syllable) to describe a collection of 46 basic sounds (Tamaoka et al., 2002). Hiragana represents the formation of kanji in a connected or simplified form. Like the flow of writing that appears when with brush and ink, it is written at a fast tempo.

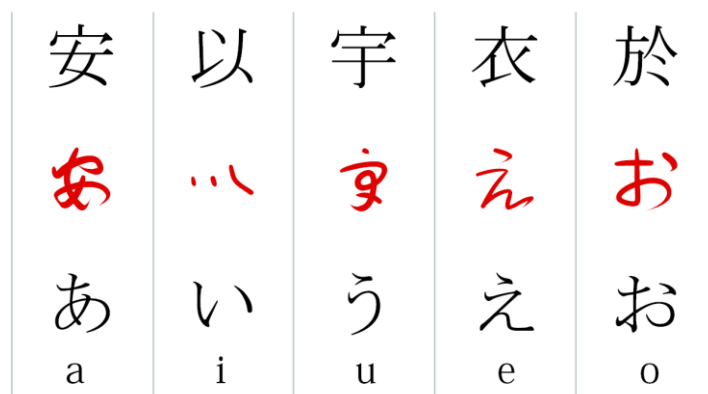


Fig 8. Hiragana is the result of simplifying kanji by connecting each part of the kanji through cursive forms.

The phonetic kanji for the 'a' sound (安) becomes hiragana 'あ', so hiragana is referred to as a 'cursive' character. The word 'hira' itself in 'hiragana' means 'common' or 'ordinary', due to its general use as well as the use of hiragana for writing non-government documents (Al Jahan, 2017; Shibatani, 1990; Akizuki, 2005 in Kunert's research, 2017). Tamaoka (2002) also explains that hiragana is used for grammatical inflections and words that do not require kanji in their writing.

Katakana



Fig 9. Katakana

Katakana (片仮名, カタカナ) was developed to assist monks in pronouncing hànzi or Chinese characters and was used to record Buddhist scriptures (Akizuki, 2005 in reference to Igarashi, 2007). Katakana is a script used in Japanese writing that is derived from foreign language absorption. Katakana also has a function similar to the use of italic in English. 'Kata' in katakana means 'part' or 'fraction', and katakana represents a part of the original kanji, where 'i' (伊) represents the left part of the kanji into katakana 'i' (イ).

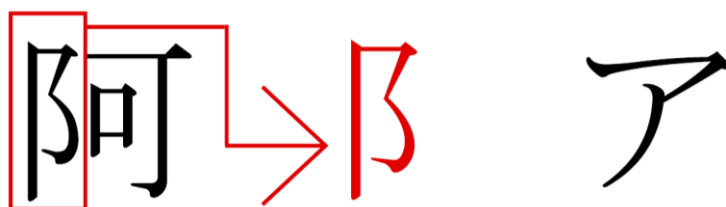


Fig 10. Formation of Katakana (right) from Man'yōgana (left),
Katakana Taken from Radical/Part of Kanji Script Then Simplified

Compared to the Nara period (710–794), at the beginning of the Heian period (794–1185), the study of Buddhist texts and Chinese literature became popular among intellectuals, and in order to make Buddhist texts comprehensible in Chinese, monks used man'yōgana and reading aids that were diacritical marks, or so-called octonants (乎古止点) (Habein, 1984). However, the use of man'yōgana became inefficient, as the kanji used served as phonograms as well as requiring too many strokes for a kana written in a limited space within the text. Thus, a more abbreviated and simplified version was written by the monks. Simplification is done by taking parts (radicals) of kanji; generally, kanji are divided into two sub-character parts (Saito et al., 2002). By taking radicals from kana and simplifying them, katakana is formed (Taylor & Taylor, 1995 in Igarashi, 2007).

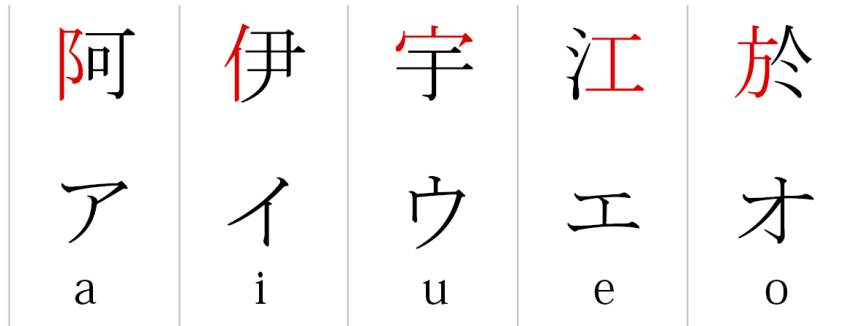


Fig 11. Katakana is the result of simplifying the kanji by taking a cut or bushu (marked in red) on the kanji.

Over time, katakana evolved into a script specifically used to write foreign words as well as loanwords known as *gairaigo* (外来語), onomatopoeic expressions, stress words, foreign-derived names, and specialized terminology (Harun et al., 2024; Joyce et al., 2012; Komatsu et al., 1992; Tamaoka et al., 2002; Hermalin, 2015; Huynh, 2013; Hoek, 2009).

Hentaigana



Fig 10. Hentaigana

Hentaigana (変体仮名) is obsolete or non-standardized hiragana. Hentaigana is the result of the elimination of hiragana variations due to the ministry of education's 1900 regulation on hiragana standardization. Hentaigana includes variants of hiragana styles that fall outside the standard. Although not used in publications, store signage and brand names still use hentaigana to create a traditional or old-fashioned feel. (Al Jahan, 2017; Le, 2020).

CONCLUSION

The long journey of the evolution of the Japanese writing system began with the adoption of Chinese characters (*hànzì*) in the 5th century, which were initially used for official documents and literacy at the Yamato court. At first, kanji were used logographically, representing meaning rather than sound. However, with the development of literacy and the need to record Japanese phonetically, the Man'yōgana system emerged in the Nara period (710–784 CE), where kanji were used to represent the sounds of Japanese without taking on their meaning.

Man'yōgana played an important role in developing the Japanese phonetic writing system. These characters later developed into the *sōgana* (cursive) form, which became the forerunner of hiragana. In the 9th century, hiragana and katakana emerged as simpler and phonetic forms of writing. Hiragana, which developed from *sōgana*, was used to write native Japanese words and grammatical elements, while katakana was developed to record foreign terms, absorptions, and loanwords. In the early 20th century, the Japanese writing system underwent standardization, eliminating the hentaigana character variation, a non-standardized form of hiragana.

Hentaigana is now only used in specialized contexts, such as traditional aesthetics. The Japanese writing system that is used today has a long history, and it all started with written ideas brought by China and underwent simplification that gave birth to hiragana and katakana. Simplification continued until the standardization of hiragana by the Japanese ministry of education in 1900. So the kanji and kana characters used today have evolved and are the standardized form of the Japanese writing system.

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