

Omniglot a guide to written language

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Japanese Hiragana

Origin

Hiragana syllables developed from Chinese characters, as shown [below](#). Hiragana were originally called *onnade* or 'women's hand' as were used mainly by women - men wrote in [kanji](#) and [katakana](#). By the 10th century, hiragana were used by everybody. The word hiragana means "ordinary syllabic script".

In early versions of hiragana there were often many different characters to represent the same syllable, however the system was eventually simplified so that there was a one-to-one relationship between spoken and written syllables. The present orthography of hiragana was codified by the Japanese government in 1946.

ひ
ら
が
な

The hiragana syllabary

In each column the romaji appears on the left, the hiragana symbols in the middle and the kanji from which they developed on the right. There is some dispute about which kanji the hiragana developed from.

平仮名 (ひらがな) hiragana

a	あ	安	i	い	以	u	う	宇	e	え	衣	o	お	於
ka	か	加	ki	き	幾	ku	く	久	ke	け	計	ko	こ	己
sa	さ	左	shi	し	之	su	す	寸	se	せ	世	so	そ	曾
ta	た	太	chi	ち	知	tsu	つ	川	te	て	天	to	と	止
na	な	奈	ni	に	仁	nu	ぬ	奴	ne	ね	祢	no	の	乃
ha	は	波	hi	ひ	比	fu	ふ	不	he	へ	部	ho	ほ	保
ma	ま	末	mi	み	美	mu	む	武	me	め	女	mo	も	毛
ya	や	也				yu	ゆ	由				yo	よ	与
ra	ら	良	ri	り	利	ru	る	留	re	れ	礼	ro	ろ	呂
wa	わ	和	wi	ゐ	為				we	ゑ	惠	wo	を	遠
												n	ん	无

The symbols for 'wi' and 'we' were made obsolete by the Japanese Ministry of Education in 1946 as part of its language reforms. The symbols 'ha', 'he' and 'wo' are pronounced 'wa', 'e' and 'o' respectively when used as grammatical particles.

Additional sounds are represented using diacritics or combinations of syllables:

ga	が	gi	ぎ	gu	ぐ	ge	げ	go	ご	kya	きゃ	kyu	きゅ	kyo	きょ
za	ざ	ji	じ	zu	ず	ze	ぜ	zo	ぞ	gya	ぎゃ	gyu	ぎゅ	gyo	ぎょ
da	だ	ji	ぢ	zu	づ	de	で	do	ど	sha	しゃ	shu	しゅ	sho	しょ
ba	ば	bi	び	bu	ぶ	be	べ	bo	ぼ	ja	じゃ	ju	じゅ	jo	じょ
pa	ぱ	pi	ぴ	pu	ぷ	pe	ぺ	po	ぽ	cha	ちゃ	chu	ちゅ	cho	ちょ
										nya	にゃ	nyu	にゅ	nyo	にょ
										hya	ひゃ	hyu	ひゅ	hyo	ひょ
										bya	びゃ	byu	びゅ	byo	びょ
										pya	ぴゃ	pyu	ぴゅ	pyo	ぴょ
										mya	みゃ	myu	みゅ	myo	みょ
										rya	りゃ	ryu	りゅ	ryo	りょ

Characteristics and usage of hiragana

The hiragana syllabary consists of 48 syllables and is mainly used to write word endings, known as *okurigana* in Japanese. Hiragana are also widely used in materials for children, textbooks, animation and comic books, to write Japanese words which are not normally written with kanji, such as adverbs and some nouns and adjectives, or for words whose kanji are obscure or obsolete.

Hiragana are also sometimes written above or along side kanji to indicate pronunciation, especially if the pronunciation is obscure or non-standard. Hiragana used in this way are known as *furigana* or ruby. In horizontal texts, the furigana appear above the kanji and in vertical texts, the furigana appear on the right of the kanji. In newspapers it is a legal requirement for furigana to be attached to kanji which are not included in the official list of the 1,945 most frequently-used kanji. Newspapers in fact rarely use kanji not included in this list.

Furigana in action

The furigana in the following text are the small red symbols.

Horizontal text

すべての人間は、生まれながらにして自由であり、かつ、尊厳と権利とについて平等である。人間は、理性と良心、とを授けられてあり、互いに同胞の精神をもって行動しなければならない。

Vertical text

すべての人間は、生まれながらにして自由であり、かつ、尊厳と権利とについて平等である。人間は、理性と良心、とを授けられてあり、互いに同胞の精神をもって行動しなければならない。

Hiragana are sometimes used to write words which would normally written with [katakana](#) to make them appear more "feminine", particularly in comic books and cartoons for young girls. In children's video games texts are often written entirely in hiragana or katakana.



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Other syllabaries

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