

OUTLINE OF JAPANESE WRITING SYSTEM

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1. THE ORIGIN OF CHINESE CHARACTERS

1.1 The Birth of a Pictographic Script
1.2 Formation of Chinese Characters

1.1 The Birth of a Pictographic Script

Until recently, it was believed that the earliest examples of Chinese characters were those found in oracle bones used in divination rites dating back to the eighteenth century B.C. However, excavations made in China in 1986 have shown that at that time the Chinese characters had already had a history of 1200 years, which means that the Chinese script first appeared almost 5000 years ago.

The earliest characters were simple pictures of the things they represented. Although all the principal writing systems of the world began with pictures, these were in almost all cases simplified to abstract symbols that were eventually used for their sound values, giving rise to the major alphabet systems of the world. This happened everywhere but in China, where the primary function of the characters has always been to express both meaning and sound, rather than just sound.

Typical Pictographs

Early Forms	Modern Character	Meaning
→	木	tree, wood
→	林	woods
→	森	forest
→	本	root, origin
→	日	sun
→	月	moon
→	明	bright
→	山	mountain
→	鳥	bird
→	島	island

The table shows examples of early character forms and their modern counterparts. The earliest characters were pictographs, which were simple pictures of things. Pictographs may be combined to form new characters, especially characters that express complex or abstract ideas. Thus 木 'tree' is combined with 木 to give 林 'woods' while three trees give 森 'forest'; a line added to the bottom of a tree gives 本, which means 'root' or 'origin'; and so on.

The shapes of the characters underwent a great deal of change over the several thousand years of their history. Many calligraphic styles, character forms, and typeface styles have evolved over the years; furthermore, the character forms were simplified as a result of various language reforms in China and Japan. The chart below shows various forms and styles for the characters 樂 and 女.

Character Forms and Styles

Tortoise-shell writing	𠄎	𠄎
Bronze inscription	𠄎	樂
Seal style	𠄎	樂
Ancient square style	𠄎	樂
Square style	女	樂
Semicursive style	女	樂
Cursive style	𠄎	𠄎
Simplified handwritten abbreviation	𠄎	𠄎
Ming typeface	女	樂
Gothic typeface	女	樂
Traditional form	女	樂
Alternative form	—	—
Handwritten abbreviation	—	—
Modern Chinese	女	乐

1.2 Formation of Chinese Characters

Traditionally, Chinese characters are classified into six categories known as 六書 *rikusho*. Introduced some 1900 years ago in the Chinese classic dictionary 說文解字 *setsumon kaiji*, these have played a central role in Chinese lexicography. The first four categories are based on the character formation process; the last two are based on usage.

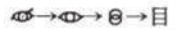
1. **Pictographs** (象形文字 *shōkei moji*) are simple hieroglyphs that are rough sketches of the things they represent. Example: 目 (modern 目 *moku*) 'eye'.
2. **Simple Ideographs** (指事文字 *shiji moji*) suggest the meanings of abstract ideas, such as numerals and directions. Example: 三 *san* 'three'.
3. **Compound Ideographs** (会意文字 *kai moji*) consist of two or more elements each of which contributes to the meaning of the whole. Example: 休 *kyū* 'rest' (person 人 resting under a tree 木).
4. **Phonetic-Ideographic Characters** (形声文字 *keisei moji*) consist of one element that roughly expresses meaning (usually called the **radical**), and another element that represents sound and often also meaning. Example: 茎 *kei* 'stem, stalk' consists of 艹 'plants' and 圣 *kei* 'straight', i.e., the straight part of a plant.
5. **Derivative Characters** (轉注文字 *tenchū moji*) are characters used in an extended, derived, or figurative sense. Example: 令 *rei* changed from its original meaning 'command, order' to 'person who gives orders' to 'administrator, governor'.
6. **Phonetic Loans** (假借文字 *kasha moji*) are characters borrowed to represent words phonetically without direct relation to their original meanings, or to characters used er-

roneously. Example: 豆 *tō* originally referred to an ancient sacrificial vessel, but is now used in the borrowed sense of 'bean'.

The great majority of characters are phonetic-ideographic (type 4 above). 民, for example, originally a picture of an eye pierced by a needle (𠄎), represented a slave blinded by his master to keep him from escaping, but later changed to 'ignorant masses' or 'people' in general. As a phonetic-ideographic element in the formation of other characters, it represents the sound *min* and has a basic meaning of 'sightlessness' or 'darkness'.

For example, 民 (abbreviated to 氏) is combined with 日 'sun' to give 昏 'darkness, dusk'; 眠 'sleep' consists of an eye (目) in a state of sightlessness (民). An interesting example is 婚 'marriage', which consists of 女 'woman' + 昏 'darkness'. According to one theory, this is because wedding ceremonies were held at night.¹ In this way, a basic unit like 民 contributes its shape, its reading, and its meaning to the formation of other characters.

The table below shows several groups of characters that share the basic element 目 'eye':

Typical Atom in Periodic Table of Chinese Characters					
Atom	Formation	Molecule	Reading	Basic Meaning	Compounds
目			<i>moku</i>	eye	
	目 + 儿 (legs)	見	<i>ken</i>	see	現 規 硯 蜆
	目 + 木 (tree)	相	<i>sō</i>	face each other	想 霜 箱 湘 廂
	目 + 丩 (object) + 十 (straight)	直	<i>choku</i>	straight	植 殖 值 置 埴
	直 + 心 (heart)	慝	<i>toku</i>	virtuous	德 聽 廳
	目 + 斤 (visor)	盾	<i>jun</i>	shield	循 楯 遁

Groups of characters sharing the same "molecule" element are closely interrelated.² They share three important features: (1) they share a basic element of the same **shape**, (2) they have more or less the same **reading**, and (3) they share a **meaning** on the character formation

level. Chinese characters thus consist of logically interrelated parts that form a systematic body of symbols to express meaning and sound.

In addition to the six traditional categories, there is a seventh one limited to a

1. Another theory claims that in China's less enlightened days a man would go out in the stealth of night (昏) and kidnap a woman (女) to make her his wife. This savage practice was abandoned, but 婚 stays on as a reminder of the curious customs of a bygone age.
2. A full discussion of such groups can be found in 漢字の再発見 *kanji no saihakken* ('Rediscovering Chinese Characters'), Shōdensha (祥伝社), 1987, by Jack Halpern, which introduces a method of ordering these groups in a scheme called the "Atomic Theory of Chinese Characters."

small number of characters coined in Japan. When the Japanese could not find an appropriate character to represent a particular word, they sometimes created new characters, called 国字 *kokuji* 'national characters', on the model of the Chinese ones. Most of these have only *kun* readings (Japanese-derived pronunciations); some, such as 働 *dô* 'work', have both *on* (Chinese-derived pronunciations) and *kun* readings, while others, such as 腺 *sen* 'gland', have only *on* readings. In rare instances, as in the case of 腺, a character created in Japan was "exported" back to Chinese.

2. INTRODUCTION OF CHINESE CHARACTERS TO JAPAN

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2.1 Early Stages

In the early centuries of the Christian era, the Japanese did not have a writing system of their own. As the Japanese began to interact with the Chinese, they adopted Chinese institutions and adapted them to their own needs. Chinese characters were introduced to Japan via the Korean peninsula in the fourth century A.D. In the next two centuries, Chinese books on philosophy and Buddhism were brought to Japan and studied by the Japanese aristocracy.

Initially, the Japanese used the characters for writing in authentic Chinese or a hybrid Japanese-Chinese style. A good example of the latter is the 古事記 *kojiki* (Ancient Chronicles) written in 712. Since the Japanese did not have their own script, they soon began to use the characters to write the Japanese language as well. In the early stages, they

employed the characters purely for their phonetic values. For example, the native Japanese word *yama* 'mountain' was written 也麻, with the first character representing *ya* and the second *ma*. This method of writing is referred to as 万葉仮名 *man'yōgana* because it was used extensively in the 万葉集 *man'yōshū*, an eighth-century anthology of Japanese poems.

Because of the markedly different linguistic structures of Chinese and Japanese, the Chinese characters were not well-suited for writing Japanese. Whereas classical Chinese is basically a monosyllabic language with no inflected words, Japanese is a polysyllabic language with various elements attached to the stems of words to express grammatical meanings.

2.2 *On* and *Kun* Readings

These circumstances led to an extremely interesting method of writing Japanese: the Chinese characters were used for their meanings. The characters were used to write words of Chinese origin, or to write native Japanese words with Chinese characters representing the same or similar meanings. The grammatical elements continued to be written phonetically, but eventually the characters used for their phonetic values were simplified, giving rise to two sets of syllabic scripts, *hiragana* and *katakana*, in which each character represents a syllable. For example, the character 安 *an* 'peaceful' gave rise to the hiragana character あ *a*, whereas 阿 *a* was simplified to the katakana character ア *a* (See Appendix 4).

Characters used to represent meaning were pronounced in two ways: (1) the 音読み *on'yomi* or 'phonetic reading' and (2) the 訓読み *kun'yomi* or 'explanatory reading'. This phonetic duality of the Chinese characters is fundamental to the nature of the Japanese script. Let us briefly examine how it arose.

In the first method, which is often called the “Sino-Japanese reading” or “Chinese-derived pronunciation,” the characters represent Chinese-derived words or word elements. This method of reading the characters will be referred to as the **on reading**. The reading assigned to each character was a rough approximation of the original Chinese pronunciation. For example, the character 山 ‘mountain’ was assigned the reading *san* based on its old Chinese pronunciation (modern Chinese is *shān*). *On* readings are found more frequently in compound words (e.g. 連山 *renzan* ‘mountain range’) than in independent words (e.g. 天 *ten* ‘heaven’).

Since the Japanese often had native words to express the meanings represented by Chinese characters, they began to associate the characters not only with Chinese words but also with purely Japanese words. 山 ‘mountain’, for example, was used to represent the native Japanese word *yama* ‘mountain’ with no regard to its Chinese-derived reading *san*. This method of reading the characters will be referred to as the **kun reading**.

Originally, the *kun* reading was a kind of explanation assigned to a character that was used to interpret its meaning in a Chinese text. In other words, it was a native Japanese word that was essentially a translation of the concept represented by the Chinese character. Over the years, certain words became so well established as the translation for a given character that they were considered to be the standard reading or readings for that character. In this manner, 山 acquired the reading *yama*, which eventually became established as its standard accepted pronunciation along with its *on* reading *san*.

A distinctive feature of Chinese characters as used in Japanese is their multiple readings. Since the characters entered Japan over different historical periods and

originated from different geographical regions, many characters have acquired several *on* and/or *kun* readings. In extreme cases, a character may have more than 100 readings (生 has over 200).

On and *kun* readings may be combined in four possible ways: *on-on*, *kun-kun*, *on-kun*, and *kun-on*. Unfortunately, there is no reliable rule for determining if a character is to be read in the *on* or *kun*, or for deciding which of several possible readings to select in a particular instance. A rough guideline is that *on-on* or *kun-kun* readings are used in compounds, and *kun* readings in independent words, but there are many exceptions. For example, 每朝 *maiasa* ‘every morning’ is an *on-kun* compound, though 每 has the *kun* reading *goto* and 朝 the *on* reading *chō*.

2.3 Classification of *On* Readings

Traditionally, *on* readings are classified into four types:

1. 漢音 *kan'on* ‘Han reading’, the most frequent and the most productive *on* reading, was introduced to Japan during the seventh and eighth centuries. It is based on the pronunciation current during the Tang Dynasty in northwestern China. Example: 行 *kō*.
2. 吳音 *goon* ‘Wu reading’, which is commonly assumed to originate from the Wu region in the lower Yangtze River area near Shanghai, was introduced up to the sixth and seventh centuries along with Buddhist writings. It is used mostly in Buddhist terms. Example: 行 *gyō*.
3. 唐音 *tōon* ‘Tang reading’ was introduced between the thirteenth century and the Edo period. It is based on the pronunciation current in the Song Dynasty and after, and is used mostly

for borrowed words and technological terms. Example: 行 *an*.

4. 慣用音 *kan'yōon* 'popular reading' developed as a result of erroneous pronunciations that came into popular use and gained general acceptance. Example: 立 *ritsu*.

During the compilation of this dictionary, several types of *on* readings that cannot be classified under the traditional categories were found. (The terms used to describe these categories were coined by the editor.)

1. 中音 *chūon* 'modern Chinese reading' is an *on* reading based on modern Chinese. 莊, for example, is pronounced *chan* in such words as 一莊 *ichan* 'a game of mahjong', on the basis of its Mandarin pronunciation *yizhuāng*.
2. 外音 *gaion* 'foreign reading' is an *on* reading derived from foreign languages other than Chinese. For example, 仙 *sen* is pronounced *sen* in the sense of 'cent'. Particularly interesting is a growing trend to create readings based on English, such as 高技 *haiteku* 'high technology'.
3. 和音 *waon* 'Japanese reading' is an *on* reading assigned to *kokuji* (characters coined in Japan) on the model of Chinese characters. For example, 働 'to work' is a character coined in Japan but has a "Chinese-derived" reading of *dō*, which is the reading of its principal component 動 'move'.

2.4 Special Uses

In addition to the standard *on* and *kun* readings, there are a few special ways in which characters can be used. The most important of these are:

1. 当て字 *ateji* 'phonetic substitutes' refers to characters used phonetically

with little or no relation to their meanings. These are often used to transliterate Sanskrit Buddhist terms, such as 阿修羅 *ashura* 'Asura' (fighting demon), and other foreign words such as 倶楽部 *kurabu* 'club'.

2. 熟字訓 *jukujikun* 'special reading' refers to a reading of a word consisting of two or more characters assigned to a single word on the basis of its meaning without direct relation to the normal readings of each constituent character. For example, 大人 'adult' consists of 大 'big', normally pronounced *dai* or *ōkii*, and 人 'human being', normally pronounced *jin* or *hito*, but together they function as a single unit pronounced *otona*.

2.5 Language Reforms

Shortly after World War II, the Japanese government implemented language reforms aimed at limiting the number of characters and simplifying their forms, among other things. At the same time, kana orthography underwent extensive reforms to reflect actual pronunciation. For example, the sound *kyū* was historically written by such combinations as きゅう and きふ, but is now written きゅう. Large-scale language reforms also took place in China to limit the number of characters and drastically simplify their forms. As a result, many modern Chinese forms are totally different from their corresponding traditional and modern Japanese forms. For example, the traditional form of 發 *hatsu* 'start; emit' was simplified to 発 in Japanese but to 发 in Chinese.

We will not dwell on China, but briefly examine the language reforms that took place in Japan. In 1946, a list of characters known as 当用漢字 *tōyō kanji* was published, in which the number of characters was limited to 1850. Various amendments and additions followed in the ensuing years. In 1948, for example,

an appendix listing 881 characters to be learned in the first six years of compulsory schooling was published, and the number of readings of many characters was reduced. In 1949, the forms of many characters were greatly simplified, while in 1951 a supplementary list of 92 characters was approved for use in personal names, bringing the total to 1942.

In spite of these changes, there was much dissatisfaction among the public, who wanted the number of characters increased. In 1973, 28 more characters for general use were added, while in 1976, 28 name characters were approved, followed by an additional 54 in 1981 and 118 in 1990. Meanwhile, cultural organizations and the public at large pressed for greater freedom in the use of Chinese characters in general, as a result of which an expanded list of 1945 characters known as 常用漢字 *jōyō kanji* was published in 1981. This brought the total number of name characters to 2229.

The general trend to increase the number of characters took place in the schools as well. In 1977, the number of characters to be learned during the six years of compulsory schooling was increased to 996, and in 1989 this number was again increased to 1006 in line with the Ministry of Education's policy to place greater emphasis on reading and writing.

Currently (early 1990), the most important official lists approved by the Japanese government as part of the postwar language reforms are:

1. **Jōyō Kanji** The 常用漢字表 *jōyō kanji hyō*, or "List of Characters in Common Use," is an official list (published in 1981) of 1945 characters widely used in the mass media, government and general publications, and education.
2. **Education Kanji** The 学年別漢字配

当表 *gakunenbetsu kanji haitōhyō*, or "List of Characters Classified by School Grade," is an official list of 1006 characters that must be learned in the first six years of compulsory schooling. The list, which is commonly referred to as 教育漢字 *kyōiku kanji* ("Education Kanji"), was promulgated on March 15, 1989. Although it has become official on this date, it will not be fully implemented until 1992. During the transition period, the old list of 996 characters published in 1977 will be used alongside with the new one. The number of characters taught in each grade is as follows:

Grade	1977 List	1989 List
First	76	80
Second	145	160
Third	195	200
Fourth	195	200
Fifth	195	185
Sixth	190	181
Total	996	1006

The principal change introduced in the new list was the moving of 60 characters from higher to lower grades. For example, fourteen third-grade characters have become second-grade characters. In addition, twenty new characters were added to the list, while ten characters were deleted, as shown below:

Additions (20)	皿 昔 笛 豆 箱 札 松 巢 束 梅 桜 枝 飼 夢 激 盛 装 誕 並 暮
Deletions (10)	飲 称 壱 勸 兼 釈 需 是 俗 忒

See **Appendix 10. Jōyō Kanji List** for a full listing of the Education Kanji.

3. **Jinmei Kanji** The 人名用漢字 *jīn-meiyō kanji*, or “Name Characters,” is an official list (published in 1981) of 166 characters approved for use in personal names in addition to the Jōyō Kanji list. In April 1990, 118 name characters were added, bringing the total to 284. (There was not enough time to incorporate these changes into the present edition.)

The promulgation of the Jōyō/Tōyō Kanji lists made it necessary to adopt various measures to ensure their smooth implementation. One problem was that it became impossible to write certain common words that included characters not in the official list. To solve this problem, the government published a list of simpler characters and words, called 同音の漢字による書きかえ *dōon no kanji ni yoru kakikae*, that may be used to replace the characters not in the list. These characters, which we will call **phonetic replacement characters**, have the same sound, and, often, the same (or a similar) meaning as the characters being replaced. The latter will be called **phonetically replaced characters**.

For example, the character 繫 (phonetically replaced character) in 連繫 *renkei* ‘connection, linking, contact’ was replaced by 係 (phonetic replacement character), which has the same *on* reading and is similar to it in meaning, so that the word is now written 連係. In addition to the 170 phonetic replacement characters appearing in the aforementioned list, there are many others which are in common use but do not appear in the list. For example, 混 replaces 渾 in the word 渾沌 *konton* ‘chaos’.

3. CHINESE CHARACTERS IN JAPANESE

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| <p>3.1 The Japanese Script
3.2 Functions of Kanji
3.3 Word-Formation
3.4 Meaning of Kanji</p> |
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3.1 The Japanese Script

The Japanese writing system is composed of two syllabic scripts, called 平仮名 *hiragana* and 片仮名 *katakana*, and thousands of Chinese characters, called 漢字 *kanji*. The three scripts basically have different functions. Hiragana is used mostly to write grammatical elements, such as inflectional verb endings, and sometimes for writing native Japanese words. For example, in 見た *mita* the kanji 見 represents the stem of the verb 見る *miru* ‘see’ and た *ta* is a verb ending for forming the past tense. The kana endings attached to a kanji base or stem are called 送り仮名 *okurigana*. Katakana is used mostly to write Western loanwords, such as プリンター *purintā* ‘printer’, and onomatopoeic words, such as カチッと *kachitto* ‘with a click’.

Kanji are used to write the core of the Japanese vocabulary. This includes words, especially nouns, of Chinese origin and words coined in Japan on the Chinese model, such as 山脈 *sanmyaku* ‘mountain range’, as well as native Japanese words, such as 山 *yama* ‘mountain’. Kanji have three basic properties: form, sound, and meaning. Each character may be pronounced according to its Chinese derived *on* reading, or one of several native Japanese *kun* readings, and each reading may have numerous meanings associated with it.

A running Japanese text consists of a mixture of kanji and kana, with the latter normally outnumbering the former. For example:

漢字を組み合わせることによって多数の熟語が作り出せます。

Kanji o kumiawaseru koto ni yotte tasū no jukugo ga tsukuridasemasu.

Numerous compound words can be formed by combining Chinese characters.

In the above sentence, particles such as を *o* (object marker), as well as verb endings (-わせる *-waseru* in 組み合わせる *kumiawaseru* 'combine'), are written in hiragana, whereas nouns, such as 熟語 *jukugo* 'compound word', are written in kanji. Hiragana characters serve as natural borderlines that help the reader segment the text into meaningful units. For this reason, a Japanese text is easier to read than a running Chinese text, which consists of Chinese characters only.

3.2 Functions of Kanji

One of the most important characteristics of Chinese characters is their ability to convey meaning. Just how they do this is the subject of a vast literature full of conflicting theories. Chinese characters have been described by such terms as *logographic* (symbols for words), *ideographic* (symbols for ideas), and *morphographic* (symbols for morphemes). Scholars disagree over the precise terminology and function of the characters.

According to one extreme view, the characters convey meaning phonetically and their ideographic nature is nothing but a myth. According to another view, the characters can convey meaning directly;

that is, with little or no dependence on their pronunciations. Alphabetic symbols, on the other hand, are one step removed from that which is ultimately represented because they normally stand for the sounds of speech, which are in turn associated with meaning. Various other theories take intermediate positions between these two extremes. The whole question is highly controversial, but it is generally accepted that, whatever linguistic units the characters actually correspond to, their essential nature is to convey both meaning and sound, not just sound.

Another important characteristic of Chinese characters is their high productivity. By combining a stock of a few thousand characters, countless compound words are generated. 戦 *sen* 'war', for example, is combined with other characters to form numerous compound words related to war, such as 戦友 *sen'yū* 'comrade-in-arms' and many others. Chinese characters in Japanese function much the same way as Latin and Greek roots do in English. Each character has one or more distinct meanings, and often functions as a highly productive word-building element.

hydrophobia	(Greek)	恐水病	<i>kyōsuiibyō</i>	fear-water-illness
aquarium	(Latin)	水族館	<i>suizokukan</i>	water-family-building
waterwheel	(Anglo-Saxon)	水車	<i>mizuguruma</i>	water-wheel

In English, the relationship between the above words is somewhat obscured by the fact that the concept of water is expressed in three different written forms, i.e., *hydr*, *aqua*, and *water*. In Japanese, on the other hand, although 水 has different phonetic forms, i.e., an *on* reading of *sui* and a *kun* reading of *mizu*, it has only one *graphic* form, i.e., 水. The kanji thus provides a *visual link* that transcends the different pronunciations. This ability of kanji to represent a

given meaning with little or no dependence on their pronunciations is perhaps one of the most distinctive features of the Japanese script.

A further characteristic of Chinese characters is their *semantic transparency*. As each component of a compound word conveys a distinct meaning, the meaning of the resulting word is often self-evident. For example, 好奇心 "like + strangeness + heart (mind)" means

'curiosity', 貧血症 "little + blood + illness" means 'anemia', and 閉所恐怖症 "closed + place + fear + illness" means 'claustrophobia'. Once the meanings of the components are known, relatively little effort is needed to learn these words.

Finally, Japanese has a large number of *homophones* (words that sound the same but are written differently). *Kōki* and *kikō*, for instance, represent about a dozen words in common use, and there are many more less frequent ones. Since each character has a distinct form (and meaning), kanji serve to distinguish such words from each other. Thus, 機構 *kikō* 'mechanism' is easily distinguished from 帰港 *kikō* 'returning to the harbor'.

In summary, the principal features of the Japanese script are:

1. The Japanese writing system consists of three scripts, each of which has a different function. Each kanji has a form, sound, and meaning.
2. One of the most important characteristics of kanji is their ability to convey meaning.
3. Kanji can be combined with each other to form numerous compound words.
4. Kanji provide a visual link that transcends their different pronunciations.
5. Compound words are often semantically transparent; that is, their meanings are more or less evident from their components.
6. Since each character has a distinct form (and meaning), kanji serve to distinguish homophones from each other.

3.3 Word-Formation

Languages differ in the processes by which they form new words. The Japanese language is *agglutinative*; that is, it forms words by putting together basic el-

ements, called *morphemes*, that retain their original forms and meanings with little change during the combination process. A morpheme is a distinctive linguistic unit of relatively stable meaning that cannot be divided into smaller meaningful parts. As a rule, each Chinese character represents one morpheme.

Compounding and *derivation* are among the most important word-formation processes in Japanese. Compounding consists of combining two or more words or word elements having their own lexical meaning (having a substantial meaning of their own) to produce a new unit that functions as a single word. Since the Chinese characters are extremely productive in their ability to generate new words, compounding plays a major role in Japanese word-formation. By combining a stock of a few thousand characters, hundreds of thousands of compound words are created.

Traditionally, a compound word is considered to be a combination of two or more free words, such as *headwaiter*, which consists of *head* and *waiter*. In Japanese, a compound may be any combination of free words, combining forms, and affixes that together function as a single word. The resulting compound is distinct from, but related to, its constituent components. For example, the compound 造船所 *zōsenjo* 'shipyard' consists of the free word 造船 'shipbuilding' (造 'make; build' + 船 'ship') followed by the suffix 所 'place' (see **FEATURES OF THIS DICTIONARY § 7.1 Character Functions** for more details).

Derivation refers to creating a new word by adding to a stem a word element such as a suffix that expresses grammatical meaning but has no lexical meaning. For example, the noun 黒 *kuro* 'black' is combined with the adjective-forming suffix い *i* to form the adjective 黒い *kuroi* 'black'. Derivation should not be confused with *inflection*, which consists

of adding word endings or modifying the form of a word in order to indicate various grammatical functions, such as tense. The resulting word is another *form* of the original word, not a new word in itself. For example, the last syllable of the verb 帰る *kaeru* 'to return' is inflected to yield 帰れ *kaere*, the imperative form. Inflectional word endings in Japanese are usually written in hiragana.

The precise distinctions between compounding, derivation, and inflection involve complex theoretical problems that need not concern the nonspecialist.

3.4 Meaning of Kanji

As we have seen above, kanji may be read in one of two ways: the *on* reading and the *kun* reading. For each reading, a character may function as an independent word (any free word that can be used on its own) or as a word element (bound form used only in combinations). Since a character may have a different sense associated with each reading and each function, the meaning of a character can be said to operate on four distinct but related levels:

1. as an *on* independent word (as 明 *mei* 'discernment' in 先見の明 *senken no mei* 'foresight')
2. as an *on* word element (as 明 'clear, obvious' in 明確な *meikaku na* 'clear, distinct')
3. as an independent *kun* word (as 明るい *akarui* 'bright, light')
4. as a *kun* word element (as -明け 'end' in 忌明け *imiake* 'end of mourning').

Each character may have numerous meanings on one or more of the four levels, and the levels may interact in a complex way. On each level, the characters may be combined in various ways, such as bound + free, bound + bound,

free + free, etc., and may have several, sometimes a dozen or more, different meanings. Each character may have several *on* and *kun* readings, and each reading may have several derived words associated with it, which in turn have many meanings; or the character may function as a word element with one or more meanings.

In some cases, on each level the meanings are totally different; in others, they may be similar but not quite the same. Often there is partial overlapping of some meanings but total inequality of others. For example, the *on* word element 山 *san* and the independent *kun* word as well as *kun* word element 山 *yama* share the meaning 'mountain', but the *on* word element *san* also means 'Buddhist temple', as in 本山 *honzan* 'head temple', a meaning which is not shared by *yama*.

Generally, the more common a character is, the more numerous are its meanings and the more complex is the relationship between them. An extreme example is 上 *jō* 'up; go up'. This dictionary lists a total of 114 meanings for 上, subdivided into 16 subentries. It has 27 meanings as an *on* word element, 3 meanings as an independent *on* word, 17 meanings for 5 *kun* word elements and 67 meanings for 9 independent *kun* words. Although 上 is a very long entry and is hardly typical, many characters do have more than ten meanings.

The Japanese script is now in a state of flux, and is being constantly adapted to the needs of the times. In this brief outline we have only touched upon its most important aspects, especially the role of Chinese characters, to the extent deemed necessary for using this dictionary effectively.