

# A Comparative Analysis of the English and the Japanese Syllables

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## Introduction

Sounds can be difficult for language learners to pronounce or hear not merely because of the way they are formed when they stand alone, but because of the position they occupy in relation to other sounds in words or sentences. Every language has its own set of rules sometimes called phonotactic rules, governing such features as the positions in which each sound can be used.

On the other hand, much less known, and often not even suspected, may be the fact that the speaker of one language listening to another does not actually hear the foreign language sound units — phonemes. He hears his own. Phonemic differences in the foreign language will be consistently missed by him if there is no similar phonemic difference in his native language. English makes a phonemic distinction between /ʒ/ and /dʒ/. In Japanese that difference is not phonemic, and as a result Japanese speakers learning English quite frequently fail to hear the difference between these two sounds of English. Since learners tend to make a phonemic transfer from their native language to the foreign language their problems and difficulties distinctly stand out by means of a systematic and descriptive comparison of the sound systems of both languages.

The present paper compares the syllable structures of English and Japanese as an efficient and practical method. In this paper is also formed my wish that some students of this college may develop a fresh interest in rudimentary phonology of English, because the contents are explained on the comprehension level of beginners.

## Consonant Clusters

Each language has not just its own set of distinctive sound features; it also has only a limited number of characteristic sequences of consonants and vowels which make up the structural pattern of the syllables and words. From this fact arises the importance of finding the positions in which the distinctive sounds can occur, and the clusters which they may form. Difficulties of pronunciation and discrimination in hearing are matters primarily of the patterning of the sounds in English rather than matters of the articulation of the sounds per se. There are in English a great many consonant clusters which occur initially, medially and finally; especially finals are partly the result of adding the

inflectional endings that English has in the plural of nouns, in the third singular of verbs, and in the preterit of verbs.

Japanese has very few clusters of consonants, restricted to a syllabic nasal and a voiceless geminate consonant. So sequences and clusters of consonants in English will cause great trouble to learners. This is due to the difference of the syllable structures between English and Japanese. The most elaborate permitted syllable of English is (C)(C)(C)V(C)(C)(C)(C). The vowel may, optionally, be preceded by as many as three consonants and it may be followed by up to four consonants. As for Japanese, the formula for the syllable structure is (C)(j)V(N). There must be a vowel sound, which may be preceded by a consonant. If a second consonant precedes the vowel, it can only be /j/ and the only consonant permitted after the vowel is /N/. Thus, most Japanese words are made up of a series of simple CV's. According to the Japanese formula, the most dominant strategy for learners is to insert vowels between consonants to break up the cluster. In words or syllables that end with a consonant, a vowel may be inserted after the final consonant as well. Therefore, 'strengths' may be pronounced as 'sūtoreŋjʊsʊsʊ'.

As shown in the table on the next page English has a large number of consonant clusters, still more their numerous combinations among them. They are rather troublesome to many non-English speakers. The difficulty, however, does not depend exclusively on the sequence itself but also on the position in which the sequence occurs. /sp/, /sk/, and /st/ occur in both English and Spanish. Yet in English they occur initially, while in Spanish they are always preceded by a vowel: English *spirit*, *scandal*, *study* and Spanish *espíritu*, *escándalo*, *estudio*, etc. Even though the sequences occur in Spanish, because they do not occur initially Spanish speakers will inevitably have difficulty pronouncing them initially in English.

Further analysis reveals that in English /sp/, /sk/, and /st/ occur initially in a syllable, whereas in Spanish the /s/ belongs to one syllable and the /p/, /t/, or /k/ to another, thus: *es - píritu*, *es - cándalo*, *es - tudio*. The problem may now be described as difficulty with syllable-initial clusters /sp/, /sk/, and /st/ because in the native language such syllable clusters do not occur.

How about Japanese in the same case? It need scarcely be said that Japanese has no such consonant clusters as /sp/, /sk/, and /st/ in whatever position in a syllable. The important point, however, most Japanese speakers are completely unaware of is that Japanese vowels may, in certain circumstances, be devoiced, contrary to all the English vowels being regularly voiced. Particularly when Japanese /i/ and /u/ do not have accents and they are adjacent to voiceless consonants such as /p, t, k, s, ʃ, ts, tʃ, ç, Ø/, they tend to become devoiced: e. g. スピード /sɸi:do/ → /sɸi:do/, スキー /sɸki:/ → /sɸki:/, ステップ /sɸtɛɸɸ/ → /sɸtɛɸɸ/.

As a result, it is very easy for Japanese to pronounce /sp/, /sk/, and /st/ consonant clusters in English. This is the only situation where Japanese speakers have no trouble pronouncing these kinds of sound sequences. The presence or absence of consonant clusters reflects the differences between the syllable structures of both languages.

## English Syllable Structure

As a basis for comparison of English and Japanese, the relative productivity of syllable types must be taken into account. The number of English syllables is beyond enumeration compared with that of Japanese syllables, which is at most one hundred and twenty, as is shown later in the Japanese syllabary. The greatest possible number of English phoneme combinations is 89,165 according to the research by Bohumil Trnka, although 3,203 words among them are in practical use. Since it is impossible to enumerate every syllable structure, various patterns of vowel and consonant combinations should be analyzed. The following list contains every possible type of English syllable structures.

**Types of English Syllable Structures**

	/ e /	/ æ / ( / ɪ / )	/ u: /
V	eh	a*	ooh
VC	egg	ass	ooze
VCC	else	ant	oops
VCCC	elves	asked	oodles
VCCCC	—	ankles	—
CV	—	—	zoo
CVC	dead	fat	boom
CVCC	send	lamp	boost
CVCCC	helped	paddles	poodles
CVCCCC	texts	(sixths)	—
CCV	—	—	glue
CCVC	stem	gram	blues
CCVCC	spend	brand	stooped
CCVCCC	friends	clasped	smooched
CCVCCCC	twelfths	(glimpsed)	—
CCCV	—	—	screw
CCVC	spread	scrap	skews
CCVCC	stressed	strand	spruced
CCVCCC	strength	scramble	student
CCVCCCC	strengths	strangles	students

\*exception, ( ) supplement

A syllable is not easy to define, but for our present purposes it is sufficient to say that a vowel sound is the nucleus, or center, of the English syllable. Hence, an English syllable may consist of a vowel or diphthong alone, or it may consist of a vowel plus a number of consonants. A few consonants, / l / and / n / for example, may constitute a syllable by

themselves. When so used, such consonants function essentially as vowels.

It is known about the types of English syllable structures that CV comprises 34%, CVC 30%, VC 15%, V 8%, CVCC 6%, and the others 7%. (Dauer, 1983)

An English syllable can successively have three consonants initially and four finally. Furthermore, the following is clear as to the three initial consonants.

(1) Only /s/ occurs at the beginning. (2) Only voiceless stops /p, t, k/ come second. (3) Only /l, r, j, w/ come third. Consequently there are nine combinations as follows:

/spl/ (split), /spr/ (spray), /spj/ (spew), /str/ (strong), /stj/ (student),  
/skl/ (sclerosis), /skr/ (scrape), /skj/ (skewer), /skw/ (square)

/h/ never appears finally, nor /ŋ/, /ʒ/ initially, and the succession of the same consonants occurs in neither position.

A word formed of a syllable of only one short vowel is an exception, such as an indefinite article 'a'.

Concerning the C(C)(C)V structures ending with a vowel, most of the vowels are diphthongs or long vowels, and the rest are /ə/ often called 'schwa' as in 'data', 'stamina' and 'asthma'.

English diphthongs are substantially different from Japanese double vowels. Japanese, for instance, 'hau / ha'u / (crawl)' is two syllables, however, English 'how / hau /' is one syllable and what is important is that this final /u/ in the English diphthong has a consonantal quality. This same interpretation also applies to the lengthened part of English long vowels such as /ɑ:/ or /ɔ:/.

We are accustomed to thinking that every syllable must include at least one vowel, yet in words such as *button* and *fiddle* there are only consonant sounds in the final syllable. These are known as syllabic consonants, since they may make up a syllable without the accompaniment of vowels. Their counterparts exist in Japanese as well. In phonetic transcription, syllabic consonants may be indicated by drawing a short vertical line below them: *button* / bʌt̩n̩ /, *fiddle* / fid̩l̩ /. Syllabic consonants occur when a syllable ends in /t/, /d/, or /n/, and the next syllable is *unstressed* and contains /l/ or /n/.

One of the reasons syllabic consonants occur seems to be the bigger sonority than other consonants. They may be qualified to substitute for vowels. It is a common opinion of the phonologists that they admit the syllabicity of syllabic consonants as vowels and interpret them as /əl/ and /ən/.

The English words of one syllable with a consonant or consonant clusters before or after the vowel account for 87% of all. Although the most elaborate syllable of English is CCCVCCCC, the compound consonants can be interpreted to work as one consonant. Therefore when its structure is abstracted, it equals a simple 'CVC' structure.

## Japanese Syllable Structures

Japanese phonemic system is very simple and its syllable structure corresponds to what is called the *kana* syllabary, a systematic table of fifty sounds shown on the next page.

## Japanese Syllabary

phonetic brackets [ ] omitted

a	i	u	e	o	ja	ju	jo
ka	ki	ku	ke	ko	kja	kju	kjo
ga	gi	gu	ge	go	gja	gju	gjo
ŋa	ŋi	ŋu	ŋe	ŋo	ŋja	ŋju	ŋjo
sa	ʃi	su	se	so	ʃa	ʃu	ʃo
za	ʒi	zu	ze	zo	ʒa	ʒu	ʒo
ta	tʃi	tsu	te	to	tʃa	tʃu	tʃo
da	dʒi	dzu	de	do	dʒa	dʒu	dʒo
na	ni	nu	ne	no	nja	nju	njo
ha	hi[ç]	hu[Φu]	he	ho	hja	hju	hjo
ba	bi	bu	be	bo	bja	bju	bjo
pa	pi	pu	pe	po	pja	pju	pjo
ma	mi	mu	me	mo	mja	mju	mjo
ra	ri	ru	re	ro	rja	rju	rjo
wa							

N...the syllabic nasal 「ン」

T...the first part of a geminate consonant 「ッ」

R...the latter half of a long-held vowel 「ー」

The *kana* syllabary, a 31-syllable poem (*waka*), a seventeen syllabled poem (*haiku*) and Japanese “alphabet” cards (*iroha karuta*) spread far and wide from olden times and *kana* was firmly established as a phonetic unit. The so-called *kaibun* (palindrome) is also a sort of pastime using *kana* as a unit. Japanese is by far easier than English to make a palindrome because of its one-letter one-sound feature. One of the well-known classics is “ながきよのとお(遠)のねぶり(眠り)のみなめざめ; なみ(波)のりぶねのおとのよきかな”.

The next one was made up in the days of Prime Minister Kakuei Tanaka who was brought to trial. 「田中派互いに泣いた。げに逃げたいな、新潟は彼方。」(タナカハ タガイニ ナイタ ゲニ ニゲタイナ ニイガタハ カナタ) This is like putting a fifth wheel to the coach; there was once a student whose name was *Yamada Maya* (ヤマダ マヤ). These kinds of palindromes are too numerous to mention in Japanese, but the English counterparts are much smaller in number. Some of them are the followings. “Madam, I’m Adam.” “Was it a cat I saw?” “Able was I ere I saw Elba.” “Snug & raw was I ere I saw war & guns.” “No melon, no lemon.” “A man, a plan, a canal, Panama!” “Dog as a devil deified. Deified lived as a god.” The last one is probably the longest palindrome in English, although this is not a perfect sentence, without an article before ‘Dog’.

The Japanese syllable structure which contains a syllabic, alone or with one non-syllabic preceding, has several types.

(1) The type consisting of one vowel

a, i, u, e, o

- (2) The type consisting of one consonant and one vowel  
the k, g, ŋ, s, ʃ, z, ʒ, t, d, n, h, b, p, m, r series
- (3) The type consisting of one semi-vowel and a vowel  
the j, w series
- (4) The type consisting of one consonant, one semi-vowel and one vowel  
the kj, gj, ŋj, tj, nj, hj, bj, pj, mj, rj series
- (5) The type consisting of a special single sound  
N, T, R
  - (i) The allophones of 'N' are / m / before / p, b, m /, / n / before / t, d, z, n, r /,  
/ ŋ / before / k, g /, / N / before a vowel, a pause, and / s, h, y, w /.
  - (ii) 'T' stops the explosion for the length of one syllable at the articulation  
position of / p, t, k, s / which comes after 'T'. It appears as a voiceless  
glottal stop / ʔ /.
  - (iii) 'R' is a long-held note of the vowels / a, i, u, e, o / — e. g. the part which  
corresponds to 'ー' in 'オカーサン'. It takes an amount of time for one  
syllable.

Ex. gakkōfukin no hankō genba / garkor fukin no hanjor gemba /

The number of Japanese syllables is on the small side among the languages in the world. It is at most about 120. Even the Chinese language (Peking dialect) whose syllables are also said to be small in number has more than 3,000 syllables. English is estimated to have more than 30,000 syllables. The small number of Japanese syllables is based on the fact that the syllable structure is extremely simple and the combination pattern of single sounds is limited.

One syllable usually ends with a vowel, which means 'open syllable'. Two or more than two vowels or consonants never occur successively in one syllable. When the geminate consonant as in 'Nippon' / nippon / is also transcribed as / nippon /, / - pp - / looks like a double consonant. But the former / p / is the first part of a geminate consonant and the latter / p / constitutes a consonant part of the succeeding syllable.

A Japanese double vowel is of an entirely different nature from an English diphthong. A diphthong may be defined as a voiced monosyllabic glide between two vowel positions. For instance, in an English monosyllabic word 'eye / ai /', / a / is fully pronounced with only minor assimilative modification, and / i / merely indicates the direction of the ensuing glide. In case of a Japanese word '愛 / ai /', there is an acoustic boundary between / a / and / i /; 愛 / a' i / is composed of two syllables.

Although Japanese has three special single sounds 'N' 'T' 'R' as exceptions, its fundamental syllable structure can be summarized as 'VC'.

### The Comparison of the Syllables of Both Languages

The comparison of the fundamental syllable structures of the English and the Japanese language shows that the former is CVC, 'closed syllable', and the latter is CV, 'open syllable'.

English has only one more consonant than Japanese, but this only one consonant makes a world of difference. The combination of 'CV' structure is far more closely connected than 'VC' structure. For instance, when 'dad' is pronounced, the consonant / d / before the vowel is almost always short, while the consonant / d / after the vowel often longer. The Japanese 'CV' syllable, for this reason, is usually perceived as a unity in which a consonant and a vowel are inseparable from each other. It is quite natural that the syllabic letter 'kana' was born in Japan, and it is also undeniable that this *kana* strengthened this tendency furthermore. This causal sequence rotates itself. Some phonologists are of the opinion that the phonemic unit of Japanese is a 'syllable', therefore there is no need to analyze it into phonemes.

The reason of their opinion is that the independent quality of a consonant in Japanese is extremely weak compared with English because it always appears before a vowel to form a syllable. A consonant itself sounds faint as well as short. While a vowel plays the leading role in the syllable structure, a consonant plays support having little of its presence. A consonant is no match for a vowel in terms of the weight in the syllable. This arises from the feature that a consonant doesn't occur independently nor after a vowel except for a particular syllable such as a syllabic nasal or a geminate consonant.

The English syllable structure in which a consonant occurs after a vowel as well remarkably enhances the independent quality, in other words, the weight of a consonant, compared with a Japanese counterpart. In the language of this kind of syllable structure, the speakers cannot but develop an acute consciousness of consonants. From the very nature of things, the English language should inevitably be single sound letters, that is, Roman letters.

The syllable forms of English have greater abundance than those of Japanese. This situation results partly from the fact that English has more kinds of long vowels and diphthongs, but mostly from the enormous amount of consonant clusters.

In consequence, there are innumerable monosyllabic words in English but very few in Japanese. Japanese monosyllabic words have such simple CV structures that they produce vague and weak impressions to the listeners. Accordingly, in order not to disrupt the communication, for example, 'ta (rice paddy)', 'na (greens, green vegetables)', 'na (name)', 'ni (load)', 'ne (root)', cannot but be expressed in different words such as 'tanbo', 'nappa', 'namae', 'nimotsu', and 'nekkō', for the purpose of strengthening the impressions of these words.

Since Japanese monosyllabic words are of little real use, most of the words are two or more syllables. In English the CVC syllable structures which produce various kinds of combinations give the listeners a vivid and deep impression so that they fulfill their proper functions of communication. The syllable ending with a consonant attains completion, which means even a mono-syllabic word can fully perform its part. The syllable ending with a vowel, however, lacks something of completion and two syllables must be combined to carry out the duties.

When successive syllables turn into words and sentences, there arises a notable difference between Japanese and English. Japanese syllables are, as a general rule, CV • CV • CV • CV • CV, and English CVC CVC CVC CVC CVC. The 'CV' connection of Japanese

is far closer than 'VC'. The isolated qualities of Japanese syllables are so strong in themselves that their boundaries are always perceived rather clearly. However many syllables may continue, they sound like a succession of dots, not a line. The most striking general feature of Japanese pronunciation is its 'staccato' rhythm. The auditory impression of any phrase is of a rapid pattering succession of more or less sharply defined fractions, all of about the same length. On the other hand, English syllables have a consonant at each end, and they tend to merge with a consonant at the beginning of the next syllable. Consequently the boundaries of syllables become so vague that the cone-shaped syllables cannot but form a wavy line, not a succession of dots as in Japanese. The auditory impression of any English phrase is of its 'legato' rhythm.

In English abundant in monosyllabic words, a vowel should be emphasized in order to convey a strong impression of the word. It is practically impossible to make the CVC syllable composed of consonants in front and behind stand out prominently by means of the height of a sound. It must have recourse to the strength of a sound. It naturally follows that English has 'stress accent'.

In Japanese scarce in monosyllabic words, the polysyllables of CV structure are so close-knit that the emphasis on a specific vowel cannot give a word great prominence. Nevertheless, it is technically impossible to emphasize all the vowels in each syllable of polysyllabic words. Since Japanese syllables appear as a succession of dots, it must be shown that some of the dots have one unity as words and clauses. The pauses between a word and a word, and a clause and a clause must also be distinct. For that purpose, 'stress accent' to emphasize only one specific syllable is not good enough. This is the very reason why Japanese has recourse to 'pitch accent'.

The meaning of a word is clarified by 'stress accent' in English and by 'pitch accent' in Japanese as follows:

That whîte hóuse is the Whíte Hòuse.

He is a críiminal lãwyer. (a lawyer specializing in criminal cases)

He is a críiminal lãwyer. (a lawyer who is guilty of a crime)

nao tsukeru (give a name)

náo tsukeru (pickle greens)

yama kara higa deta (The sun rose above the mountain.)

yama kara higa deta (The fire broke out in the mountain.)

katai ishi (a hard stone)

katai ishi (a determined will)

kare wa kakushigoto o shiteiru (He is keeping something from me.)

kare wa kakushigoto o shiteiru (He lives by his pen.)

In Japanese, as shown above, the difference in meaning between the monosyllabic as well as polysyllabic words can be elucidated by means of 'pitch accent'. Such an ingenious means may not be dreamed of in English. It occurs very often that a phonemic contrast which does not exist as a contrast in the native language and which should be expected to

constitute a major problem is actually not a problem in the perception of sounds. Perception of the contrast may take place through some accompanying feature which, although phonemic in the native language, in the foreign language is nonphonemic.

The contrast between English / i / as in *seat* and / ɪ / as in *sit* does not exist in Japanese and would be expected to constitute a pronunciation problem both in speaking and in listening. Yet Japanese speakers will identify the two sounds readily when those sounds are presented in minimal contrast. In most situations English / i / is longer than / ɪ /, although this difference in length can be proved not to be a phonemic feature. The proof is very simple. One can speak the word *seat* quite short and the word *sit* quite long, and they will still remain two distinct words for English speakers. If length and not vowel quality were phonemic, the two words would have eventually been confused by native speakers. The quality of the two vowels is the deciding phonemic feature. The Japanese speaker cannot hear clearly this difference in quality, but he hears a difference in length, because vowel length is phonemic in Japanese. In other words, the lengthened part of a Japanese vowel takes an amount of time for a syllable, that is, constitutes one syllable.

### Conclusion

The concluding list below is the summary of what is stated so far from the viewpoint of the syllables of both languages.

	English	Japanese
fundamental syllable structure	CVC : closed syllable	CV : open syllable
syllable form	numerous	scarce
boundaries of syllables	clear	vague
syllable combination	wavy line	succession of dots
monosyllabic word	numerous	scarce
consonant independent quality	strong	weak
weight of consonant	much	little
vowel length	not always phonemic	always phonemic
letter	monosyllabic character	syllabic symbol
word accent	stress accent	pitch accent
sentence rhythm	legato	staccato

English and Japanese are phonetically opposed to each other in various aspects. It is obvious that this results from the fundamental difference in the syllable structures themselves.

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## 日英語音節の比較分析

鳥居 英男

外国語を耳にした時、一般にひとはその外国語の音声最小単位即ち音素は聞こえていない。実は母国語が聞こえているのである。外国語に於ける音素上の相違が、もし母国語に同種の相違が無ければ、その識別聴取能力は欠落する。例えば「レジャー」という音が聞こえた時、/léʒə/ (leisure) か /lédʒə/ (ledger) なのか判別するのは学習者にとって困難である。日本語では /ɜ/ と /dʒ/ は音素的相違が無いからである。一方、「オジサン」と「オジーサン」の区別が日本語初級の英語話者にとって難しいことがある。英語の /i/ と /i:/ の違いが、母音の長さではなく音質であることが、その主な原因である。

事程左様に、外国語学習では母国語との対比は一つの有効な手段である。本稿では「音節」の分野の基本的な範疇で比較分析した。両言語は音韻学上種々の面に対照的だが、音節構造の相違がその根底にあることは明白である。