

## LESSON NOTES

# Introduction to Japanese #3

## Introduction to Japanese Grammar

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# GRAMMAR

## The Focus of This Lesson is: Introduction to Japanese Grammar

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### Word Order

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"Word Order" refers to the order in which words are structured to form a sentence in a given language.

Consider the English sentence "I ate an apple." But first, let's remove the article "an" here for simplicity, so we're just left with "I ate apple."

The basic Word Order for English is subject, verb, object, or SVO for short.

If we breakdown the English sentence "I ate apple", we can see that the subject "I" is presented first, followed by the verb "ate", and then finally the object "apple" is positioned last.

This is the basic word order for sentences in English.

Now let's compare that same sentence "I ate an apple.", in Japanese.

私がりんごを食べました。

Like before, let's remove the particles to keep it simple, so we're just left with the words.

If we break down the Japanese sentence, we get the subject 私 meaning "I", then comes the object りんご meaning "apple", and finally we have the verb 食べました meaning "ate".

The word order for Japanese then, is subject, object, verb, or SOV for short.

In both languages, the subject is presented first. In \*English\* though, it's followed by the verb and \*then\* the object. Compared to the object being \*first\*, and the verb \*last\*, in Japanese.

The same sentence in Japanese is essentially "I apple ate" - subject first, then object, and verb last - SOV.

This is the basic word order for sentences in Japanese.

### Topic vs. Subject Prominent Language

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English is what is called a "subject-prominent" language. This simply means that the subject is slightly more important than other components in the sentence. It's the key piece of information other components in the sentence relate to.

"Who" is doing the action, is slightly more important than what is being done or which object it's been done to, in English.

If we had to slowly remove pieces of information from a sentence, while trying to keep its essence intact, logically we would do so in order of least important to most important.

If we were to omit the subject, we would get "ate an apple" - which sounds strange.

On the other hand, if we were to omit the object \*instead\*, the sentence would become "I ate...".

Even though in each instance we omitted a piece of information, the reason "I ate..."

sounds \*less\* strange, is because we've yet to break any grammatical rules, and so there's still potential for the sentence fragment to become a complete sentence and to become grammatically correct.

Since the \*latter\* is logical, this indicates that the subject is \*more\* important than the object in English. The same is true if we had omitted the verb. Since the subject is the integral component in the sentence, this makes English a "subject-prominent" language. \*Japanese\* on the other hand, is a "Topic-prominent" language. Unlike English, the focus of each Japanese sentence is the topic, not the subject.

Essentially, the "ate an apple" portion, りんごを食べました is the main focus of the sentence, whereas "I" is deemed less important and can be omitted.

In fact, if it's obvious what the subject is, or if it's already been established, it's quite normal to omit the subject from the conversation altogether in Japanese. Let's look at this aspect in a bit more detail.

Omission of the Subject in Japanese

More often than not, if you wanted to say "I ate an apple." in Japanese, you would not say...

私がりんごを食べました。

instead, you would \*more\* likely say "apple ate" in Japanese...

りんごを食べました。

Since Japanese is a "Topic-prominent" language, the information to be shared is the act of eating the apple. Less important, is the subject, which is omitted altogether. Most Japanese sentences are constructed and spoken like this in real life.

In most situations, such as a one-on-one conversation, it's clear that the person who's speaking is the subject. In cases where it's obvious who or what the subject is, it's almost guaranteed that the subject will be omitted. And so you're left with...

りんごを食べました。

On the other hand, when it's unclear who or what the subject is, or if you wanted to place emphasis on the subject, like if you wanted to declare from a group of people that it was \*you\* who ate the apple, then you would include the subject.

私がりんごを食べました。

But more often than not, most sentences spoken in daily Japanese conversation can be spoken without including the subject at all, particularly if that subject is you.

箱を開けました。

電車で帰りました。