

LESSON NOTES

Ultimate Japanese Pronunciation Guide #10 Perfecting Pitch Accent in Japanese

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GRAMMAR

The Focus of This Lesson is Pitch Accent

In this lesson, you're going to learn the basics of pitch accent in Japanese.

What is Pitch Accent?

Let's have a look at the following words:

たまご "egg"

さかな "fish"

Each syllable is pronounced with either a high or low pitch.

The pitch accent for each word is determined when said in isolation. So, if you pronounce it in a different pitch, such as たまご (high-low-low), it sounds strange.

Why do we need pitch accent in Japanese? Well, Japanese has many words with the same sounds but different meanings.

Let's look at the word ame → 雨 vs 飴.

あめ means "rain" if it goes from high to low (雨)

あめ means "candy" if it goes from low to high (飴)

Also, we have hashi → 橋 vs 箸

はし means "chopsticks" if it goes from high to low (箸).

はし means "bridge" if it goes from low to high (橋).

To differentiate between these words with the same sounds, we need pitch accent. This is a key characteristic of Japanese.

Rules

There are two rules you need to know.

1. Pitch does not change in the middle of a syllable. That is to say, each syllable is pronounced with an either definite high or low pitch and doesn't fluctuate mid-syllable.

Example:

てんき "weather" (high-low-low)

て is high and both ん and き are low.

2. The first two syllables never have the same pitch as each other. In all words, the first and second syllables should be "high-low" or "low-high".

Examples:

あか "red" (high-low)

いぬ "dog" (low-high)

げんき "fine" (high-low-low)

ひらがな "hiragana" (low-high-high-low)

Practice

We're going to give you examples of some words with their pitch accent pattern. Try saying these words. You'll also review the sounds you've learned so far.

あさ "morning"

とり "bird"

さくら "cherry blossom"

おとうと "younger brother"

(*Be careful with the long vowel おー)

きょうだい "siblings"

(*Long vowel おー again. You need to change the tone from high to low in the middle of the long vowel.)