

Organic Japanese lesson notes

Jordan Cross

March 22, 2021

Contents

1 Lesson 1: The core Japanese sentence	2
2 Lesson 2	2
2.1 The invisible carriage	2
2.2 The carriage	3
3 Lesson 3	4
3.1 particle secrets	4
3.2 The particle	5
4 Lesson 4: Japanese past, present and future tenses	6
5 Lesson 5: Japanese verb groups and form	8
6 Lesson 6: Japanese “adjectives”	8
6.1 The carriage	10
7 Lesson 7: Negative verbs and adjective “conjugations”	10
7.1 The Japanese stem system	11
7.2 Negative adjectives (and adjective “conjugations”)	12
7.3 The only exceptions	12
8 Extra: The secret to all Japanese “conjugations”	13

My follow-along notes from the Organic Japanese course on Youtube:

https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLg9uYxuZf8x_A-vcqqy0FZu06WlhnypWj

1 Lesson 1: The core Japanese sentence

Every Japanese sentence is fundamentally the same, they have the same core.

Every sentence is formed of two elements, (visualised as a train) they are the *carriage* and *engine*.

In all languages there are only two kinds of sentence:

- A is B: Sakura is Japanese
- A does B: Sakura Walks

Sakura ga nihonjin da - Sakura is Japanese
Sakura ga aruku - Sakura walks

Going back to the train metaphor:

/Carriage/ /Engine/
[Sakura **] [Nihonjin **]

There is a third form of the Japanese sentence core sentence:

/Carriage/ /Engine/
[Pen **] [aka **] = Pen is red

This is similar, but not identical to an adjective. This will be discussed more later.

To recap, all of these sentences begin with the subject, they are connected with , and the three *engines* of the Japanese core sentence are:

- - verb - A does B
- - noun - A is B
- - “*adjective*” - A is B

2 Lesson 2

2.1 The invisible carriage

Last lesson we covered the *carriage*. Part of the reason so many people struggle with Japanese is that, although we can always see the *engine* of the sentence, we cannot always see the carriage. Remember, the core of the Japanese sentence is formed of the carriage and an engine.

The closest English equivalent to this invisible carriage is 'it'. Here is an example English sentence:

The ball rolled down the hill. When the ball got to the bottom the ball hit a sharp stone and the ball was punctured and all the air came out of the ball.

This is not a sentence we would ever say in English, once we have established that we are talking about 'the ball' we would instead refer to the ball with it:

The ball rolled down the hill. When it got to the bottom it hit a sharp stone and it was punctured and all the air came out of it.

If we were to completely omit *it* the sentence would still be easy to understand, we don't *need* to use this *it* marker each time, but English grammar **demand**s it. Japanese does not, hence the 'invisible' carriage.

'It' by itself doesn't really mean anything, we know what it means from context. If a child comes downstairs in the middle of the night and says '*Got really hungry*', '*Came for something to eat*' we understand that the child means '*I got really hungry*' not '*The dog got really hungry*'. In English this isn't a proper sentence, but in Japanese it is.

All of the little pronouns I/it/we/he/they can all be replaced by the invisible carriage; the **pronoun**. It is important to remember that the carriage **is** still there.

One might say: meaning '*I am Dolly*'. The full sentence being: .

By default 'I' is the default value of this *pronoun*. However, if someone were introducing their daughter and said we would understand from context that meant this/she.

If I say '*It is Saturday*' it is clear that means *today*.

Each of these sentences are complete grammatical sentences with a subject marked by and an engine, but in each of these cases the carriage is just invisible. It **is** still there. This may seem to be arbitrary, or over-complicated but it saves a lot of grief later on to model sentences this way. Without this information as sentences become more complex they're going to seem increasingly vague and hard to understand.

2.2 The carriage

This carriage is formed of a noun and the particle . The particle marks the object of the sentence. The thing that some verb (the engine) is being done to (marks the thing doing the verb). It is not part of the core sentence which is always formed of the carriage and an engine.

/carriage/ /carriage/ /engine/
 [] [] []
 I cake eat

The core sentence here is 'I eat'. The extra carriage, the carriage is telling us more about the engine. *What* are we eating? We are eating cake.

Once again, we would often see this said as: . This is just another case with the invisible carriage. We **cannot** have a sentence without a , we **cannot** have a sentence without a doer.

When we are saying , what we are really saying is . And the default value for is : *I*.

3 Lesson 3

3.1 particle secrets

The particle can never be a part of the core Japanese sentence. It is neither the carriage we are saying something about, nor the engine, what we are saying about it. It isn't a carriage *outside* of the core sentence either like the particle is. The particle is not part of the logical structure of the sentence.

is a non-logical particle. In our train metaphor the particle is a *flag*. It simply marks something as the topic of the sentence, but doesn't say anything about it.

An exact translation of the particle would be 'As for x'. therefore means 'As for me', **not** 'I am' ().

A commonly mistranslated sentence is:

- I am Japanese

If we look back at our train however we can see that something is missing:

/flag/ /engine/
 [**] [**]

There is no carriage. We don't know who the subject actually is. One may ask 'well why don't we just treat the particle as if it is a carriage'. In this example it is obvious that the topic marked by is the same as the subject marked by , but there are many more cases where this is not true, leading to much confusion down the road. Let's look at a similar sentence. You are at a restaurant, the waitress is asking what you would like:

~~I am an eel~~

Treating `as` as 'I am' doesn't work. As we now know the default value of the `pronoun` is 'I', but in this context it's clear that we're talking instead about *what* we want to eat. `therefore` means 'As for me, eel'.

3.2 The `particle`

The `particle` marks the target (indirect object) of an engine. Along with the `and` we have a sort of *trio* of logical *A does B* sentences.

- tells us who does the doing
- tells us what it is done to
- tells us what the ultimate target of that doing

- I threw the ball

The **core** sentence is 'I threw', and the extra carriage `()` tells us what we threw, the ball. We can add another carriage to tell us more about the engine:

- I threw the ball at/to Sakura

Sakura is the destination, the target. It is important to note here that the logical particles tell us what is happened. The order of the words doesn't really matter the way it does in English.

- Sakura threw the ball at/to me.

- The ball throws Sakura at me

Obviously this final example doesn't make any sense (although we might want to say something non-sensical like this in a fantasy novel or something) but we can say whatever we like in Japanese so long as we use the right logical particles.

Now let's introduce :

```
/flag/      /carriage/ /carriage/ /carriage/ /engine/
[**]  [**]  [**]  [**]  []
```

As we know, even if the `carriage` is invisible (or silent) this means 'As for me, (I) threw the ball at Sakura'. Now let's give the *flag* to the ball:

/flag/ /carriage/ /carriage/ /carriage/ /engine/
[**] [**] [**] [**] []

As for the ball, I threw *it* (the ball) at Sakura.

Note, this time the carriage has become invisible, because what we're throwing is now marked by the particle, here has taken the value of 'it'. Even without we might already know what 'it' was that was thrown from context. The important thing to understand here is that as we change the logical particles from one noun to another we change the meaning of the sentence, but when we change the non-logical particle from one noun to another it makes no difference to the logic of the sentence. It may make some difference to the emphasis, but it makes no difference to who is doing what or what they're doing it to.

4 Lesson 4: Japanese past, present and future tenses

Up until now we've only been using one tense and that is the one presented by the plain dictionary form of verbs. To use natural sounding Japanese we need 3 tenses. In Japanese these are not the same past, present and future tenses we're familiar with from English.

The tense we have been using thus far is **not** the present tense. It is the *non-past* tense. This non-past tense is actually very similar to the English non-past tense. What is the *English* non-past tense? It is again the plain dictionary form of a verb. Eat, run, walk etc. It is unnatural in English to say 'I eat cake', to mean 'I am eating cake'. It is natural however to use the non-past tense to say 'Sometimes I eat cake' or, in the explicitly future tense 'I will eat cake'. Japanese is just the same as English in this way. It is rare we use this form for talking about things actually happening right now, except in cases like literary descriptions.

Most of the time the Japanese non-past tense refers to future events. In fact, just as defaults to 'I', the non-past tense defaults to the future.

- Sakura will walk

- dog will eat

The way we have been using this tense up until now, 'Sakura walks', is possible, but isn't the most natural way.

If we want to say something more natural like 'Sakura is walking' we must use the verb 'to be'¹, or in Japanese .

- Sakura is walking
- dog is eating

There is something here however that we haven't yet seen. In our train metaphor this is a secondary engine, here which could be an engine in of itself, is helping (modifying) the main engine. Our core sentence is still the same, we have a carriage and an engine, i.e. - Sakura is (existing). The secondary engine modifies telling us more about what state she is currently existing in, she is in the eating state. As we go further into Japanese we will see this secondary engine structure again and again.

/carriage/ /engine/ /engine/
[**] [] [] - dog is eating

Also, just as in English we don't say 'The dog is eat', we use a special form of the verb *eat* => *eating*. In Japanese this is the form. This is covered in the next lesson.

For the past tense of verbs instead of adding to verbs we add .

- The dog ate

The way in which we do this is exactly the same as the way in which we attach and will be covered in the next lesson.

If we want to make it clear that we are talking about a future event we can add a time expression. By prefixing a sentence with (tomorrow), we can make it clear that what we will be doing, we will be doing tomorrow.

[] - Tomorrow I will eat cake

Note how we simply preface the sentence with 'tomorrow', just like we would in English. This is the case with all *relative-time nouns*, yesterday, tomorrow, the day after tomorrow, next week, next month, next year.

For *non-relative*, i.e. *absolute* time expressions we must use the particle:

**[] - On Tuesday I will eat cake

We must attach in all the same places we would attach on/in/at in English. On Tuesday, in March, at 12 o'clock. Fortunately in Japanese we only need to use the one particle.

¹In English the verb 'to be' is irregular and has multiple forms be/is/are/am: To *be* walking, Sakura *is* walking, not Sakura *be* walking.

5 Lesson 5: Japanese verb groups and form

Japanese verbs fall into three groups: *Ichidan*, *Godan*, and *irregular*

The first group are *ichidan* (lit: one level) verbs. Morphing these verbs is easy, we simply remove the and add our new ending. Ichidan verbs can only end in either or .

The second group is by far the largest, the *godan* (lit: five level) verbs. This groups contains verbs that end in all of the possible verb endings: . Each of these ending groups has its own way of being morphed, though although they're 'five level' verbs, two of the groups use the same method so we only need to learn 4 methods. Confusingly this means that godan verbs can end in or , most of these will still be *ichidan* verbs, and fortunately even if a verb is morphed incorrectly, you will probably still be understood.

- ->
- ->
- / -> / (Note: this is the combined group)
- ->

There are only two irregular verbs, and . , is partly irregular, but not completely.

- ->
- ->
- -> ()

These are the only exceptions

6 Lesson 6: Japanese “adjectives”

Japanese adjectives are not the same as English adjectives. As we have learned Japanese sentences come in three kinds, depending on the type of engine they have. As a reminder they are:

- - verb - A does B
- - noun - A is B
- - “adjective” - A is B

The truth is that all three of these types of engines can be used like adjectives.

Let's start with the first one, the one we refer to as an adjective in English, the engine:

- Pen is red

An important note, does not mean 'red', it means **is red**. means red.

If we swap the order of and then we can take this engine, and now use it not as the primary engine, but as a secondary engine. This would not be a complete sentence however without a new engine, for example, a new (primary) engine.

- Red pen is small

This is simple enough, let's take a look at verbs.

Any (verb) engine, in any tense can be used like an adjective:

- Girl sang
- The girl who sang (Note: this sentence is not yet complete, it lacks a primary engine).
- The girl who sang is sleeping

Next, the noun engine:

- The dog is naughty

We can turn into an adjective too, but there is one important thing to note. Just as we have to add to a noun, here we must add to the noun. is the connective form of . Don't be fooled by '-adjectives', they're simply nouns!

- The dog who is naughty (Note: this sentence is not yet complete, it lacks a primary engine).
- The dog who is naughty is sleeping

An important note is that we cannot do this with *all* nouns, only nouns which are frequently used in an adjectival way. This group of nouns is what they are referred to as '-adjectives'. We can use all nouns as adjectives, but for the rest we need to use a different technique and for that we will have to learn about the particle.

6.1 The carriage

The particle, or the *possessive particle* functions just like the English 's.

- Sakura's nose
- Me's (my) nose

Luckily in Japanese we don't have to worry about his/her/my/their, we just use .

Because this is the *possessive particle* we can use this in another slightly different way. has an *adjectival* form in , but not all colours have this form. The Japanese for pink, (lit: pink-colour) doesn't have an adjectival form in , nor can we use it as a secondary engine with . So what are we to do? Well we can use the particle:

** - The pink dress (literally: The dress belonging to the class of pink things)

**OSCAR - Oscar the rabbit (literally: Oscar belonging to the class of rabbit)

Just as before, there's no need to worry about misusing and , no-one listening is going to misunderstand what you're saying and it's a very typical beginner mistake to make.

Using these techniques we can make all kinds of sentences that can become very complex, especially with verbal adjectives in which we can use whole sentences in an adjectival manner.

7 Lesson 7: Negative verbs and adjective “conjugations”

The fundamental basis of negatives is the adjective . This adjective means 'non-exist'. The word for exist (for any inanimate thing) is . If we want to say that something exists:

But if we want to say that something doesn't exist we say:

Now, why do we use a verb for being, and an adjective for non-being? This is something that happens all throughout Japanese, when we do something we use a verb, but when we don't do something we attach and are therefore using an adjective as the engine of the sentence. This has a very logical reason, when we **do** something, an action is taking place, and so we use a verb, but when we **don't do** it we are describing a state of non-action, so that's an adjective.

Above we have said 'There is no pen', how do we say 'This is not a pen'?

- As for this, it's a pen

- As for this, as for being a pen, it's not. (Note: is the -form of)

Now let's look at negative verbs. To make a verb negative we must attach to the -stem of the verb. How do we do this?

7.1 The Japanese stem system

Note: these stems apply to Godan verbs. For Ichidan verbs we simply drop the and add . Remember, all ichidan verbs end in but not all ending verbs are ichidan verbs.

>

Here is the kana-grid, presented on its side. Every verb ends in one of the -row kana. (-row kana that aren't used as verb endings have been removed).

As we can see there are four other ways in which the verb could end. These are the verb stems. For now we're only looking at the -stem as this is the one we need for the negative.

To from the -stem we simply shift the final kana from the -row to the -row. There is one only exception and this is the only exception in the entire

stem system. This exception is that `読む` itself does not become `読ま` but `読`. This is because, take for example a verb like `書く`, `書` would not be as easy to say as `読`. Every other `-row` kana is simply changed to its `-row` equivalent.

So to form the negative form of a verb convert it to the `-stem` and add `ない`.

>

>

7.2 Negative adjectives (and adjective “conjugations”)

The adjective stem is simple, just drop the `い` and add `い`. This is how we make the `form`, `>`, and it’s also the way we make the negative, `>`.

If we want to put an adjective into the past tense we drop the `い` and add `かった`.

> - Was scary

Because `怖い` is also an adjective, the past tense of it is just `怖かった`.

Non-past	Past	
**	**	Positive
		Negative

Now as we know `走っている` is not very natural Japanese, instead we would say `走った`. For this, all we need to do is put the `い` into the past tense:

-> `走った` - Sakura was running

7.3 The only exceptions

There are only two real exceptions to what has been covered in this lesson. They are the helper verb `ます` which makes words formal by adding it to the `-stem` of a verb. When we put `ます` into the negative it does not become `ません` as we

would expect, but becomes , because it is formal it is a bit old-fashioned and uses the old Japanese negative instead of .

The only other exception is (is good), which has an older form, which is still widely used in . When we morph it becomes again:

> - Not-good

> - Was-good

Note: is a common phrase: - *It was good (That went well, it turned out great etc.)*

8 Extra: The secret to all Japanese “conjugations”

Uncovered. Partially covered in previous lesson. Will be covered if required in future lessons.