

Your name:

The UK Linguistics Olympiad 2019

Round 1



Problem 2. Japanese characters (5 marks)

In our alphabet, letters stand for sounds. Japanese is different. Most Japanese words are written in characters called ‘kanji’, which the Japanese adapted from Chinese. Kanji characters represent meanings, not sounds. For example, 火 means ‘fire’ and is generally pronounced *hi*. In borrowings from Chinese, however, it is pronounced *ka*: ‘Tuesday’, for instance, is 火曜日 *ka-you-bi* (‘fire day’, after the Chinese philosophy of the Five Elements). Here are some more Japanese words in kanji with their English translations (and literal translations in quotation marks in brackets). You may like to know that each kanji has just one form, without anything like our distinction between capital (‘upper case’) and small (‘lower case’) letters.



日	sun, day	京	capital (of a country)
田	rice field	日本語	Japanese language
都	city, big town	英語	English language
人	person	月曜日	Monday (‘moon-day’)
本	root	山	mountain
金	gold, money	先生	teacher (‘before-student’)
東	east	日本語の先生	Japanese language teacher
中	centre, middle	外国	foreign (‘abroad-country’)

The questions for you to answer are on the next page.

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Q.1. What do these well-known names mean?

山田 (Yamada)	
本田 (Honda)	
東京 (Tokyo)	
京都 (Kyoto)	

Q.2. Translate these kanji into English:

a.	日本人	
b.	英語の先生	
c.	外国語	
d.	月	
e.	国	

Q.3. Write the following words in Japanese kanji:

	volcano ('fire mountain')
	foreign person ('abroad-country person')
	foreign language teacher ('abroad-country language teacher')
	Friday (this is traditionally pay day in Japan, so it is known as 'money day')
	China ('centre-country' [the Chinese name for China])
	Middle East

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Solution and marking.

Scoring (max 36)

- Q.1: 1 point per correct word, no half marks (max 10)
 - Ignore order of words
 - Ignore surplus words, e.g. *of in root of rice field*.
 - Ignore English spellings, e.g. *capitol*.
- Q.2,a-c: 2 points for a correct answer, 1 with one error (max 6)
- Q.2,d-e: 1 point per correct answer, no half marks (max 2)
- Q.3: 1 point for each correct character (max 18)
 - Be generous in accepting kanji attempts!
 - Ignore extra incorrect characters.

Q.1. What do these well-known names mean?

山田 (Yamada)	mountain rice field (count <i>ricefield</i> as two words)
本田 (Honda)	root rice field (count <i>ricefield</i> as two words)
東京 (Tokyo)	east/East capital
京都 (Kyoto)	capital city (accept <i>capital, city</i>)

Q.2. Translate these kanji into English:

a.	日本人	Japanese person (accept <i>Japan person, sun root person, Sun Japanese person, Japanese man, Japan root person, ...</i>)
b.	英語の先生	English language teacher (accept <i>English language of before student, Englishese teacher, etc.</i>)
c.	外国語	foreign language (accept <i>abroad country language, foreignese, etc.</i>)
d.	月	moon
e.	国	country (reject <i>abroad country</i>)

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Q.3. Write the following words in Japanese kanji:

火山	volcano ('fire mountain')
外国人	foreign person ('abroad-country person')
外国語の先生	foreign language teacher ('abroad-country language teacher')
金曜日	Friday (this is traditionally pay day in Japan, so it is known as 'money day')
中国	China ('centre-country' [the Chinese name for China])
中東	Middle East

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Commentary

All characters represent meaning, but sometimes what is one word in English is represented by two characters in Japanese: 先生 ‘teacher’ (sen-sei), 曜日 ‘day [of the week]’.

- The kanji for ‘Japan’ is 日本 ‘sun-root’ (ni-hon) . This is normally more poetically translated as ‘Land of the Rising Sun’.
- Japanese word order is often the reverse of English. For example, 日本語の先生 literally reads in English: ‘Japan-language-of-teacher’ (ni-hon-go-no-sen-sei).
- As well as kanji, Japanese also employs two syllabic scripts, to write foreign words and the grammatical endings of verbs, adjectives, etc. To read in Japanese, it is thought that you need to know about 2,000 characters—most of which have two different meanings and two different pronunciations.
- の, used in the problem, is not kanji but belongs to one of the syllabic scripts. It is a grammatical particle similar to the English possessive ‘s or the preposition of.
- There is some advantage in having a script that is not connected to a language’s sounds in the way that the alphabet is. It makes reading and writing much easier for people with dyslexia (where there is often a problem in linking sounds to letter symbols).
- Japanese can be written horizontally, as in this puzzle, in which case it is written from left to right. Often, however, Japanese is written from top to bottom, in which case, the columns go from right to left.

Further reading

Maryann Wolf. 2007. Proust and the Squid: The Story and Science of the Reading Brain. Cambridge: Icon Books.

<https://jisho.org/> (Japanese online dictionary).