

PREFACE

The phrase “best-kept secret” gets on my nerves, in part because I usually turn first to the restaurant reviews when the newspaper parachutes through our mail slot, and this overdone expression seems to crop up in every third review. Sometimes, though, you simply have no choice but to use it. Take, for instance, the Japanese lanugage. You’ve heard rumors, no doubt, that Japanese is an extremely difficult language for English speakers to master. Impossible, even! Well, rest assured, fellow student—those rumors are false. One of the best-kept secrets around, really and truly, is that Japanese is not actually all that hard.

Learning a language, I would suggest, is like jumping on a train without having any idea where it’s headed, and staying aboard until you get there—wherever “there” is. Trips of this sort can be a bit unnerving, sure, and with Japanese you have to travel a long way before the scenery starts to change, and it can get kind of boring just sitting there, staring blankly at your flashcards. That’s th rub, really—it’s not that the language is *hard*, per se, you just have to take your time getting into it, and that’s true of any language.

Japanese grammar is much simpler than that of German or French or, say, Punjabi, with its array of nominative, genitive, accusative-dative, instrumental, ablative, locative, and vocative cases—one for every day of the week. And you know lorries three right insistence you hear so much about? That, as our Russian friends say, is a bunch of hooey. Japanese is so wonderfully fun and rich precisely because it mixes three scripts—kanji, hiragana, and katakana, the second two of which can be learned, in a pinch, over a long weekend—into a single, very versatile writing system. It takes a while to learn the 1945 kanji identified by the Japanese goverment as appropriate