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## Which One To Learn? Deciding on a 2<sup>nd</sup> Foreign Language for Japanese University Students

George Berninger

Japanese university students take various courses in English, either as an ESL subject or as a language medium for academic / special purpose English. Students then have a choice of various languages as their second foreign language. At the majority of universities these languages are: Spanish, French, German, Mandarin Chinese, and Korean. Many universities also offer Russian and Portuguese. This paper will give an overview as well as look at the relative difficulty of these optional foreign languages for potential students deciding their second language. Similarities and differences of these languages with Japanese and also with English will be shown in moderate detail in this paper. It should be noted that the difficulty of the 2<sup>nd</sup> foreign languages will also be influenced by the English ability of the student.

Japanese is a member of the Japonic language family and is the dominant language by prestige and number of native speakers. This is true to the extent that there are more native speakers of Japanese than all of the other Japonic languages (Okinawan, Yaeyama, Miyakoan, Amami, Yonaguni, etc.) put together (Heinrich & Ishihara, 2017). All extant members of the Japonic language family are found in Japan.

Japanese has the canonical word order of SOV (Subject-Object-Verb). This is the most common order among the world's 6000 plus languages (Dryer, 2013). Then the attributive adjectives will come before the nouns they modify. In Japanese adverbs come before the adjectives that they modify.

Japanese has relatively fewer phonemes than most languages in the world. Japanese has five vowels based on high-low, front back features (Ten if the phonemic vowel length is considered). Japanese has 21 consonants. Due to of the

limited sounds of Japanese, L1 Japanese speakers will likely have challenges with new sounds of foreign languages.

Japanese is an agglutinative language. This means that affixes are added to words with one meaning per affix. An affix can show past tense, passive voice, negative form, etc. However, each morpheme (affix) represents a single “aspect”.

Spanish is an Indo-European language, belonging to the Italic branch and more specifically to the Iberio-Romance sub-branch. Some sources note that Spanish is the language with the second most native speakers in the world with over 450 million (Ethnologue, 2022). Spanish is one of the six official United Nations (UN) languages.

Taking a look at the syntax of Spanish, there are some key differences with Japanese. Spanish has a canonical word order of SVO, which is the different from Japanese (SOV) word order but the same as English (SVO). More complicated than the typical two verb conjugation forms of English, Spanish has six verb conjugations for person and number (Instituto Cervantes, 2022). What is even more difficult is that this is true for future and past tenses as well. but Spanish conjugations will be a more difficult to master.

Spanish forms plurals like English, by adding “-s”. For example:

la pluma (the pen) → las plumas (the pens)

el libro (the book) → los libros (the books)

Notice that the definite article matches the noun in Spanish, so it is necessary to learn four instead of one definite article (as in the case of English). Also, learners will need to remember the grammatical gender for each noun. (Nissenberg, G., 2020). Japanese itself does not have articles.

Spanish phonology looks at the distinguishing sounds of Spanish. There are five vowels, which are very similar to those of Japanese. Spanish has some diphthongs that are not very difficult for Japanese learners to master. There are various consonants that Spanish has that may be somewhat challenging for Japanese people. These include the trill r, the palatal nasal and the palatal l.

French is another Indo-European language, and it belongs to the Italic branch as well. More specifically it is part of the Western Romance grouping.

French is not among the top-10 languages by native speakers, having about 77 million. However, there are a large number of non-native yet fluent speakers, which added to native speakers totals about 270 million in the world (SIL Ethnologue, 2022). A substantial number of French speakers are found in over 30 countries around the world. Countries where French is an official language are: France, Canada, Switzerland, Belgium, Vanuatu and Haiti. French is used by many people in Cameroon, Senegal, the DR Congo, Burkina Faso, French Guiana, Tahiti and New Caledonia, etc. French is also one of the six official UN languages.

French has an SVO word order like English, Spanish and many other Indo-European languages. This differs from the SOV word order of Japanese. Learners should note that French, like Spanish, will be difficult due to the six different verb conjugations for number and person. There are six conjugations for past tense as well (Judge & Healey 1995).

Phonologically, French also has 14-16 vowels (including 3-4 nasal vowels). This will prove to be one of the challenges for Japanese people. There are also some difficult consonant sounds like the uvular r (Judge & Healey 1995).

German is an Indo-European language, belonging to the Germanic branch along with English. German is spoken as an official language in Germany, Austria, Switzerland, Lichtenstein. Some German speakers are in Belgium and Namibia as well German has over 75 mill native speakers (SIL Ethnologue, 2023). It is a language which in written form gives access to various scientific, technical and other academic journals.

German, generally has a basic SVO word order like many Indo-European languages including English (Dryer, 2013). However, there is a twist. Modal verb forms and common past tense constructions involving two verbs will place the main verb at the very end of the sentence. This order is indicated here as SVOV. Take this example:

Ich muss mein Gemüse essen. (SVOV)

I must my vegetables eat. = I must eat my vegetables. (SVO)

= 私の野菜を食べなければなりません。 (SOV)

German also has more verb conjugations than English, although fewer than most other Indo-European languages. German usually has four different conjugations relating to person and number, but with some irregular verbs this will be five. The attributive adjective comes before the noun it modifies like in Japanese and English (Dryer, 2013).

German has plurals but they are formed in various ways. Common plural suffixes (endings) are “-e” and “-n”. In many words plurals are formed by adding “-en” and also changing first vowel in a noun. Here are three examples:

hund (dog) → hunde (dogs)

klasse (class) → klassen (classes)

haus (house) → häuser (houses)

German has 15 vowels, including the rounded front vowels: ä, ö and ü. This is more than most languages and will present a challenge for Japanese students.

Mandarin Chinese is a Sino-Tibetan language, belonging specially to the Sinitic branch and is one of the main languages learned by Japanese university students after English. This language has more native speakers than any other language with over 900 million (SIL Ethnologue, 2023). It is also one of the six official UN languages and is spoken in: The People's Republic of China, Taiwan, Singapore as well as in a multitude of Chinatowns throughout the world.

A simple look at the grammar of Mandarin, shows the canonical word order is subject-verb-object, which differs from the subject-object verb (SOV) order of Japanese. However, SVO is the same word order as English, which Japanese have learned to some degree as their first foreign language. Chinese (Mandarin) adjectives precede the nouns they modify like in Japanese (Ling, V. and Wang, P., 2020).

Mandarin is a tonal language with four tones plus a neutral tone. This feature will prove to be the biggest challenge for Japanese native speakers trying to learn it. Saying a word or in the wrong tone will result in a completely different meaning, so caution is advised (Ling, V. and Wang, P., 2020).

One advantage that Japanese students have in learning Chinese is the writing system of Chinese characters which have been adopted into Japanese as

“kanji” (漢字). Although Some of the characters and combinations of kanji have undergone semantic shift, the majority have the same meaning in both languages. Some notable exceptions are: “猪” which means “pig” in Chinese but “wild boar” in Japanese. Also “手紙” which means “toilet paper” in Chinese but “letter” in Japanese (Ling, V. and Wang, P., 2020)..

Korean is either a language isolate or a major member of the Koreanic language family. Korean has been increasingly taught in Japanese universities from the late 1980s when Korea made significant gains economically with GDP and trade with Asian and other countries. This language has also gained popularity with the rise of K-Pop. Korean is spoken in both the Republic of Korea (South Korea) and the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea. A large number of native Korean speakers are found in the states of New York, California and Hawaii in the US as well as in northeastern China. There are over 80 million native speakers of Korean in the world (SIL Ethnologue, 2023).

In Korean grammar, the canonical word order is SOV, which is the same as Japanese. Korean also has postpositions like Japanese. The order of nouns and attributive adjectives is the same for Korean and Japanese with the adjective generally preceding the noun it modifies. Korean also has various particles for case and topic, which have similar analogues in Japanese (Ethnologue, 2013).

Korean has more pure vowels than Japanese (nine vs. five), so this will be more of a challenge, especially in referring to the vowels with katakana as a pronunciation guide. Korean also has syllable timing, like Japanese. For this timing scheme each syllable gets equal timing in speech.

A significant challenge of Korean for Japanese people is its use of a different writing system. Japanese makes use of *hiragana*, *katakana* and *kanji* (Chinese character). Korean uses a unique Hangul writing system along with *hanja* or Chinese characters (Kim-Renaud & Young-Key 1997). However, this writing system is relatively easy to learn and is consistent. Overall, these aspects Korean will make it relatively easy for Japanese learners.

Portuguese an Indo-European language, belonging to the Italic branch. It is more similar to Spanish than it is to any of the other languages discussed here. It has 221 million native speakers ranking 6<sup>th</sup> or 7<sup>th</sup> in the world. It is spo-

ken in Portugal, Brazil, São Tomé and Príncipe as a primary language as well as in Mozambique, Angola and Macau, China (Ethnologue, 2022).

As mentioned earlier with Spanish, Portuguese also has grammatical gender (masculine and feminine) as well as six verb conjugations for person and number (Prista, 1966). This difficulty should be taken into consideration.

Portuguese also has more vowels than the Japanese with twelve vowels, including five nasal vowels. (Prista, 1966). These nasal vowels are phonemic, meaning that they distinguish meaning from oral vowels. Japanese lacks nasal vowels so these need to be learned with some difficulty. Considering these points, Portuguese will be more difficult to learn than Spanish for Japanese native speakers.

Russian is an Indo-European language, belonging to the Slavic branch and more specifically East Slavic sub-branch. It is offered as a second foreign language at many Japanese universities, but not to the level of the other languages covered previously. Russian has about 154 million native speakers, giving it a ranking of 6<sup>th</sup> or 7<sup>th</sup> in the world. #4#. If L2 speakers are included, the number rises to about 252 million (ranked 8<sup>th</sup>) (SIL Ethnologue, 2023). It is spoken not only in Russia, but also by many people in Belarus, Ukraine and Kazakhstan. Russian is also an official language of the United Nations.

Russian is very difficult for learners who are not familiar with any polysynthetic language. This means that a single affix or part of a word could indicate with multiple grammatical categories (although some may encode a single category). Russian also has a full complement of six verb conjugations for number and gender (Pulkina, 2005).

Looking at an easier grammatical feature of Russian, an adjective precedes the noun it modifies, like in Japanese and English. Russian also has grammatic gender (masculine and feminine) (Pulkina, 2005).

However, another hurdle of learning Russian is the need to learn the Cyrillic alphabet. Letters such as:

б г д е ё ж з и й к л п ф ц ч ш щ ъ ы ь э ю я are not found in the Latin alphabet. Then in the Cyrillic alphabet there are other letters that appear in the Latin alphabet such as “B,” “P” and “H,” yet have a different sound



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grammatical gen-  
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different sound

assorted with them (Pulkina, 2005).

Considering the above criteria of syntax, phonology and writing systems these other foreign languages will vary in difficulty for Japanese native speakers. Some criteria weigh more heavily here: (1) canonical word order, (2) difficult phonemes (language sounds) and (3) the presence of many verb forms in conjugations. Here is a ranking of these languages in order of difficulty for Japanese L1 speakers:

- 1) Russian (most difficult)
- 2) French
- 3) German
- 4) Mandarin (Chinese)
- 5) English
- 6) Portuguese
- 7) Spanish
- 8) Korean (easiest)

Note: For just the written language, Mandarin would likely be the easiest. Additionally, if the student has a very high level of oral English (speaking and listening), then French and German will be lower on this ranking. English is included here for comparison as if it were just as newly learned.

Students should choose a 2<sup>nd</sup> foreign language to learn based on their interest in the countries, people and culture where the language is spoken. In any case it is important to be aware of the challenges that exist based on the differences of the chosen foreign language and their native language of Japanese.

The following tables compare various aspects of syntax, phonology and writing systems with Japanese.



Table I : Syntax comparison

Language	Canonical word order	Attributive adjective placement	Adverb placement (adjective)	Verb conjugations for person & number
Japanese	SOV	adj. -> noun	adv. -> adj.	None
English	SVO	adj. -> noun	adv. -> adj.	2 (3)
Spanish	SVO	noun -> adj.	adv. -> adj.	6
French	SVO	noun -> adj.	adv. -> adj.	6
German	SVO(V)	adj. -> noun	adv. -> adj.	4-5
Mandarin (Chinese)	SVO	adj. -> noun	adv. -> adj.	None
Korean	SOV	adj. -> noun	adv. -> adj.	None
Portuguese	SOV	noun -> adj.	adv. -> adj.	6
Russian	SVO	adj. -> noun	adv. -> adj.	6
Italian	SVO	noun -> adj.	adv. -> adj.	6

Table 2. Grammatical, phonological and other differences

Language	Grammatical Gender	Timing system	Tonal system	New Phonemes	Writing system
Japanese	No	Mora	*no	N/A	Hiragana, katakana & kanji
English	No	Stress	no	/v/, / θ /, /ð/, /l/, /x/ other vowels	Latin alphabet
Spanish	Yes (m, f) (w plural)	Syllable	no	/ β /, /ɲ/, /x/, /ʎ/, et. al.	Latin alphabet (w/ diacritics)
French	Yes (m, f) (w plural)	Syllable	no	/R/ Many vowels	Latin alphabet (w/diacritics)

Verb conjugations for person & number
None
2 (3)
6
6
4-5
None
None
6
6
6

Writing system
Hiragana, katakana & kanji
Latin alphabet
Latin alphabet (w/ diacritics)
Latin alphabet (w/diacritics)

German	Yes (m, f, n)	Stress	no	/pf/, /ç/, /x/	Latin alphabet (modified)
Mandarin (Chinese)	No	Syllable	4 tones + neutral tone	/p <sup>h</sup> /, /t <sup>h</sup> /, /k <sup>h</sup> /, /l/	Chinese characters (kanji)
Korean	No	Syllable	no	/p <sup>h</sup> /, /t <sup>h</sup> /, /k <sup>h</sup> /, /l/ + 3-4 new vowels	Hangul
Portuguese	Yes (m, f) (w plural)	Syllable (Brazilian)	no	/ʎ/, /ɐ/ & nasal vowels	Latin alphabet (w/diacritics)
Russian	Yes (m, f, n)	Stress	no	/v/, /x/, /s/, /z/ et. al.	Cyrillic alphabet
Italian	Yes (m, f) (w plural)	Syllable	no	/ɲ/	Lain alphabet

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