Japanese 09H and 10H: Conquering Kanji (I) and (II)
Amherst College

Course instructor

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Course description

Japanese uses three different writing systems, one of which is called “kanji,” characters that were borrowed from China. A linguist, R.A. Miller (1986; p.1) in his book Nihongo (Japanese), writes: “The Japanese writing system is, without question, the most complicated and involved system of script employed today by any nation on earth; it is also one of the most complex orthographies ever employed by any culture anywhere at any time in human history.” The difficulty lies not merely in the number of characters that students must learn (roughly a couple of thousand), but also in the unpredictable nature of the ways these characters are used in Japanese. It is not possible in regular Japanese language classes to spend very much time on the writing system because the students must learn other aspects of the language in a limited number of class hours. This writing system is, however, not impossible to learn. In this half course, the students will learn the Japanese writing system individually, and aim to overcome preconceived notions of difficulty related to the learning of kanji.

Each student in this class is expected to master roughly 500 kanji that are used in different contexts.
Requisite: Japanese 01 at Amherst College or its equivalent.

Course objective

Because the number and the kind of kanji each student knows are different, the kanji each student will learn will be determined individually. The course focuses on writing rather than reading kanji. Each student will receive a folder with blank test sheets in it. See below as to how this folder is used throughout the semester.

Instruction for the kanji folder

1. You will receive a folder with blank kanji test sheets in it (14 sheets in the fall semester and 15 sheets in the spring semester).

2. Kanji should be learned on the word level but not in isolation. Example: よむ→読む is better than よ→読. どくしょ→読書 is better than どく→読.

3. Each week, complete the meaning column in English on a sheet. Submit the folder, not just the sheet, in the drop-off folder that is in the box next to my office door. The submission deadline is 5:00 pm on Thursdays in the fall semester and 5:00 p.m. on Wednesdays in the spring semester. I will check the words in your list, date it, and return the folder in the pick-up folder in the box by the following day.

4. After studying the kanji in your list, pick up your folder from the pick-up folder in the box, and fill in the 漢字 and ひらがな columns in Room 114 without referring to any notes or materials. You may not take your folder anywhere other than Room 114. All folders must be in my box except for the time
when you are taking the quiz in Room 114. You must take each quiz by 5:00 on the following Monday in the fall semester and by 5:00 pm on Friday of the same week in the spring semester. Return your completed work to the drop-off folder in my box (submit the folder itself).

5. I will circle the incorrect kanji, date it, and return the folder to the pick-up folder by the following day. **The kanji words marked incorrect must be repeated in the next list.**

6. Repeat the process 1~5 each week.

7. I will e-mail you or leave a hard-copy note in the folder if I will need to see you regarding your work. If you receive no e-mail or note, it means that you are doing what I am expecting you to do. Please e-mail me and set up an appointment if you have any questions or concerns regarding the course.

**Final:** There will be no final for this course. You must complete the last sheet during the final examination week. Your last submission deadline is 5:00 pm of the last day of the final examination period.

**Grade for the course:** Grading is based on the number of completed kanji sheets: (A; 14 (F), 15(S)): (A-; 13(F), 14(S)): (B+; 12(F), 13(S)): (B; 11(F), 12(S)): (B-; 10(F), 11(S)) and so on. If the number of incorrect kanji over the semester is substantial, it will also lower your grade.

**Recommended reference books**


   This is a good source book for learning the origin of each character, or kanji, which may help students of Japanese to learn kanji more effectively. It even gives a mnemonic method for each character. A weakness of this book is that the model characters are not well drawn. It is very important for students to have well-formed models when practicing the characters. 673 pages total.


   A concise kanji dictionary, in which you can find all Joyo kanji (the kanji determined by the Japanese government to be necessary for all educated people to know – about 2000 kanji) with necessary information, such as radicals, different readings, and example words for each kanji. This is a very convenient first kanji dictionary, but it is not a comprehensive one, so you will not be able to use it to look up words in kanji compounds that you may need in intermediate and advanced Japanese classes. 394 pages total. Note: the number of Joyo kanji has increased by approximately 200 kanji in the fall of 2010. This book does not reflect this change.

4. Many online sources.