

## On-yomi and Kun-yomi

*Kanji* came to Japan through the Korean peninsula some time before the 5<sup>th</sup> century A.D. At that time, *kanji* were used not just for their reading (pronunciation) but also for writing in *kanbun* 漢文(Classical Chinese). However, *kanji* also corresponded to concepts for which there was already an indigenous Japanese word, and thus *kanji* became the writing system for Japanese as well as Chinese.

### 1. *On-yomi* 音読み and *Kun-yomi* 訓読み

Most *kanji* have two types of readings: on-yomi and kun-yomi. The on-yomi is derived from the pronunciation of the character when it was brought over from China long ago (more on this below). The kun-yomi is the indigenous Japanese reading for the concept that the character represents. For example, the *kanji* 水 has two readings: スイ (on-yomi) and みず (kun-yomi). Generally speaking, the on-yomi is represented by katakana and the kun-yomi is represented by hiragana. In Nelson's dictionary, the on-yomi is represented by small caps and the kun-yomi is represented by italics.

Items such as 茶<sup>チャ</sup> (“tea”) 菊<sup>キク</sup> (“chrysanthemum”) 象<sup>ゾウ</sup> (“elephant”) did not exist in ancient Japan, so these characters only have an on-yomi, not a kun-yomi.

Similarly, characters such as 峠<sup>とうげ</sup> (“mountain pass”) 畑<sup>はたけ</sup> (“field”) and 込む<sup>こむ</sup> (“go into”) are characters that were created in Japan and therefore they only have a kun-yomi. These characters are classified as “national characters” (*kokuji* 国字), and will be indicated as such in your dictionary. One exception to the rule is the character 働<sup>はたら</sup>く, which is a national character but also has the on-yomi of ドウ. This reading was borrowed from the on-yomi of a very similar character, 動.

Here are some basic examples of characters that **commonly use both their on-yomi and kun-yomi**:

Table 1

Kanji 漢字	Meaning	On-yomi 音読み	Kun-yomi 訓読み
水	Water	スイ	みず
火	Fire	カ	ひ
湖	Lake	コ	みずうみ
田	Rice paddy	デン	た
犬	Dog	ケン	いぬ
光	Light	コウ	ひかり
国	Country	コク	くに
草	Grass	ソウ	くさ

Here are some basic examples of characters that usually **use only their on-yomi**:

Table 2

Kanji 漢字	Meaning	On-yomi 音読み
点	Point	テン
胃	Stomach	イ
肉	Flesh	ニク
職	Work	シヨク
材	Material	ザイ
医	Doctor/medicine	イ
感	Feeling	カン
演	Performance	エン

Here are some basic examples of characters that usually **use only their kun-yomi**:

Table 3

Kanji 漢字	Meaning	Kun-yomi 訓読み
峠	Mountain pass	とうかげ
箱	Box	はこ
坪	Measurement	つぼ
姫	Princess	ひめ
株	Stocks/bonds	かぶ
届け	Receipt	とどけ
咲く	Bloom	さく

Looking at the above examples, we can see that the meaning of a character is hard to discern from the on-yomi alone. For example, in Table 1, if we only hear the on-yomi (and do not see the character written on the page)—スイ、カ、コ, etc.—we cannot easily guess what the character is or what its meaning is. However, if we hear the kun-yomi (and do not see the character written on the page)—みず、ひ、みずうみ, etc.—we can quickly discern the meaning.

This holds true even for the characters in Table 2, but if we combine those kanji with others to form a compound (熟語), then it is easy to understand their meaning. For example: 材木、医者、感情、演奏、etc.

Likewise, although the kun-yomi can be used alone to represent a single word, the number of kanji that can stand alone to represent one concept is few.

Also keep in mind that some of the characters that only use their on-yomi (such as those in Table 2) are often used as stand alone words. Examples of this include: 愛<sup>あい</sup>、案<sup>あん</sup>、恩<sup>おん</sup>、液<sup>えき</sup>、駅<sup>えき</sup>、王<sup>おう</sup>、億<sup>おく</sup>、役<sup>えき</sup>、etc.

## 2. Various Readings

### 1) Characters with multiple on-yomi

Characters can have more than one on'yomi—how can this be? The answer is that although *kanji* were brought over from China, they were not brought over all at the same time. It was a long process. Moreover, they were brought over from different regions within China. The on-yomi of *kanji* in Japan are thus as disparate as the time periods and regions of China. The different groups are:

**go'on** 吳音 (also known as the Wu Dynasty pronunciation)

**kan'on** 漢音 (also known as the Han Dynasty pronunciation)

**tō'on** 唐音 (Also known as the Chinese pronunciation)

All these on-yomi are based on the Chinese pronunciation of the *kanji*, but sometimes the pronunciation can change dramatically in order to conform to the Japanese phonetic system.

#### Go'on

It is not clear when *kanji* were imported to Japan, but the process is estimated to have begun sometime around the last half of the 4th century. *Kanji* readings which were imported from that time until the 6th century are *go'on*. This was the Northern and Southern Dynasties period in China, and the cultural center of the country was the region around the Yangtze River, where the people of Wu lived. Thus, their southern Wu-style pronunciation of the *kanji* was that which was imported to Japan.

#### Kan'on

In the following three centuries, exchange between China and Japan increased. The capital in China moved to Chang An 長安 (present day Xi'an 西安) in the north. Thus, the northern pronunciation of the *kanji* were then imported to Japan. This pronunciation was viewed in Japan as the more correct or proper pronunciation, and was used for Confucian terms, historical terms, poetry, etc. Most of the on-yomi we use today are kan-on readings.

#### Tō'on

During the Kamakura 鎌倉 and Muromachi 室町 periods (1185-1573) both Zen buddhism and commerce grew in Japan, and the *on'yomi* imported during that period are called *tō'on* (also sometimes called *sō'on* 宋音, referring to the Song Dynasty). The Song pronunciation was closer to the modern Chinese pronunciation, and consequently the *tō'on* is usually close to the present Chinese (Mandarin) pronunciation. Contrary to popular belief, the *tō* 唐 of *tō'on* does not refer to the Tang Dynasty, rather it refers to China as a whole.

## Examples

In modern Japanese, all three *on'yomi* are used. Here is a chart with some examples of different readings for some common *kanji*. (Below each reading is a compound in which that reading is used, to help jog your memories.)

	行	京	明	和	頭
呉音	ぎょうれつ 行列	とうきょう 東京	とうみょう 灯明	へいわ 平和	ずつう 頭痛
漢音	こうどう 行動	けいじん 京人	めいじ 明治	かあん 和安	とうはつ 頭髪
唐音	あんぐう 行宮	なんきん 南京	みんちょう 明朝	おしょう 和尚	まんじゅう 饅頭

There are a few compounds for which either the *kan'on* or the *go'on* are acceptable, for example:

熟語 (compound)	漢音	呉音
兄弟	ケイテイ	キョウダイ
白衣	ハクイ	ヒヤクエ
明星	メイセイ	ミョウジョウ
強力	キョウリョク	ゴウリキ

Most dictionaries do not distinguish between kinds of *on'yomi*, and really there is no need to do so for the average student. This information is provided simply to explain why there are so many different *on'yomi* for some *kanji*.

## 2) Characters with multiple kun-yomi

There are many *kanji* that have multiple *kun-yomi*. For example, 下 has the following *kun-yomi*: した、しも、もと、さげる、くだる、おりる、etc. *Kun-yomi* is essentially a Japanese translation of a Chinese character. Two words that include the character 下 are 下車 and 下段. The first means <sup>かだん</sup>車をおりる; the second one means <sup>くだる</sup>したの段. In this case, both おりる and した mean something that can be represented with the character 下 because they have to do with going **down** or being **down**. Other characters that have many *kun-yomi* include 上

(うえ、かみ、あがる、のぼる、etc.) and 生 (いきる、うまれる、おう、はえる、き、な  
ま、etc.)