

## Learning Japanese, I think I'm...

Well, not really: I learnt Japanese at uni 20 years ago, and since then several other languages have caught my eye. But sometimes it's useful to remember enough to ask the right question. Which is how I ended up on the grammar and translation sites this morning, and why I'm now amazed at how much Japanese language teaching has changed since the \*cough\* 1980s. Thanks to the Internet, we now have more access to native language sites and university notes than was ever possible back then, and like French-English teaching (more of which perhaps later \*), the emphasis is very different now. Most significant is the much greater emphasis on learning character sets. When I first learnt Japanese, I learnt the hiragana characters and some useful bits of kanji (in case some joker decided to encrypt the labels on the toilets again - if you never learn anything else in a language, memorise please, thank you, do you speak English, men and women), but much of what I was reading and speaking at first was latin alphabet phonetics (romaji).

So I thought, a little light reading-up on grammar, a quick play with the translators (e.g. [Babylon8](#)) to check I wasn't calling anyone a starfish, and off I'd go. Oh no. Not any more. And I really should have expected this after learning pinyin (latin phonetic) and chinese characters alongside each other in my Mandarin lessons, but along with the more grown-up phrasesets (I fondly remember the ideosyncrasies in my copy of Japanese for Busy People), there's an almost total reversion to kanji for everything. Which would be great if I needed to relearn Japanese, but not so useful for a quick amusement involving a site with unknown character set support. So if you ever find yourself in this situation too, the best places to go are [this English-romaji dictionary](#) and [this kanji-romaji converter](#).

I think I just about got there on the translation, but I still suspect I managed to call someone a starfish.

\*Footnote: If you're ever stuck in a foggy French town and have run out of museums to visit and books to read, try this. Find a bookshop. Go to the languages section. And buy a "how to speak English" book. In French. Then spend the rest of said foggy afternoon drinking coffee and giggling over what the French writers thought were appropriate and useful English phrases. Sadly, I suspect this game also works well in reverse for French people stuck in foggy English towns for the afternoon. As does the "everyone get their phrasebook out" game where people from several nationalities share their favourite translations into language X, and learn things like "Italian-X phrasebooks include a section on how to swear".