

Orthographical variants in modern Japanese

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Orthographical variants are wide-spread in modern Japanese. The number of variant pairs here is over 50000, which is twice as much as in English. Moreover, unlike English, where most of spelling variants are rare, outdated or loan words (such as *khmer* – *kmer*), variation in Japanese is quite frequent in common words (such as *kakkou*: 格好 – 恰好), which makes its writing system even more complicated for language learners.

Orthographical variants in Japanese can be subdivided into two groups. The larger one is made up of variants that can be written in different scripts (such as *bara*: 薔薇 – バラ) or that are based on interaction of different scripts (these are mostly okurigana variants — *yamitorihiki*: 闇取り引き – 闇取引). The smaller group of variants, which we consider to be purely linguistic, is based on variations of characters that belong to one script. As modern hiragana and katakana systems are quite stable and are not undergoing variation, this group for the most part consists of kanji variants. In this case words can differ only in one character (*nonki*: 呑気 – 暢気) or have completely different spelling (*kirigirisu*: 蠡斯 – 蟋蟀), which is less frequent.

Though there are some small groups of regular variants, orthographical variation in Japanese is largely irregular and cannot be described with a set of rules. Variation is influenced by many factors and tendencies, some of which are:

1. The tendency to assimilate loan words vs. tendency to stress their foreign origin: *kurabu*: 倶楽部 – クラブ (*inner* vs. *outer*).
2. The tendency to keep a traditional spelling in special contexts vs. the tendency to use a modern one: *shashin*: 寫眞 – 写真 (*old* vs. *new*).
3. The tendency to replace a difficult spelling with a simpler one: *gan*: 癌 – がん – ガン (*complex* vs. *simple*).
4. The tendency to differentiate special (for example, scientific) usage of a word from everyday usage: *ringo*: りんご – リンゴ (=Malus domestica), *ichi*: 一 – 壱 (in legal documents) (*common* vs. *specialized*).
5. The tendency to replace one of the characters with a character close in meaning (with the same on-yomi, sometimes also with the same kun-yomi): *gekkou*: 激昂 – 激高 (*similarity of meaning*).
6. The tendency to replace one of the characters with a character that highlights another aspect of the meaning of a word: *misoka*: 晦日 – 三十日 (*dissimilarity of meaning*).
7. The tendency to replace a character that shows the meaning of the word with a character that shows its pronunciation (and vice versa): *midorigo*: 緑児 – 嬰兒 (*form* vs. *meaning*).

The abundance and complexity of alternative spelling forms in Japanese makes it a perfect object for inquiry into the nature of linguistic variation.

List of Technical Terms

Orthographical variants are words with exactly the same meaning and pronunciation that differ in spelling. Variant spellings should be generally accepted (standardized). Non-standard spellings, misspellings or emphatic spellings (such as サヨナラ, オハヨウ etc. in manga) are not considered to be variant spellings.