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Japanese Linguistics in Use: An Introduction for Language Learners

By **Toshiko Yamaguchi.** London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2025. xxiii, 425 pp. $44.95 (paperback).

Reviewed by
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This book brings together revised and expanded materials from the two 2007 companion volumes, *Japanese Linguistics: An Introduction* and *Japanese Language in Use: An Introduction*. The present edition expands their scope through three new chapters: Chapter 1 on Japan and its linguistic diversity, Chapter 3 on word classes, and Chapter 16 on speech, thought, and translation. These additions, together with expanded discussions of pragmatics, discourse, language and culture, and multimodal communication, broaden the book's approach to Japanese linguistics beyond the description of linguistic structure. In particular, Chapter 1 situates Japanese within Japan's historical, social, and cultural diversity, while Chapter 16 extends the scope of the book to literary language and translation, including their relevance to advanced language learning. Taken together, these additions and revisions give the volume a broader and more contemporary orientation, integrating structural linguistic analysis with literature, manga, translation, and everyday communication and demonstrating how Japanese functions across diverse social, cultural, and communicative settings.

The book is organized into sixteen chapters covering the history of Japanese, its sound system, vocabulary, writing system, grammar, pragmatics, discourse structure, language and culture, literary language, and translation. The chapters progress from foundational linguistic concepts to broader social and literary perspectives. Examples drawn from novels, folktales, manga, newspapers, and everyday conversations demonstrate that linguistic forms are inseparable from the social, cultural,

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and literary contexts in which they are used. Each chapter concludes with activities based on authentic materials that encourage readers to apply and reinforce the concepts introduced.

Chapter 1 provides an important foundation by introducing Japan's linguistic diversity—including dialects, multilingualism, language variation, and the relationship between language and identity—and situating Japanese within the broader social and cultural context in which the language has developed and is used. This contextual orientation is particularly useful for learners encountering Japanese as part of a broader study of Japanese society and culture.

Chapters 2–5 cover the sound structure, word classes, vocabulary, and writing system. Chapters 6–9 examine Japanese morphology, semantics, and syntax, explaining how words and sentences are formed and how passive, causative, benefactive, and aspectual forms convey not only grammatical relationships but also perspective, interpersonal relationships, and how events are conceptualized. Throughout these chapters, examples and clear explanations help readers see how these grammatical patterns function in context.

Chapters 10–13 shift from grammatical structure to the ways meaning is constructed and organized in discourse. They demonstrate how context, interpersonal relationships, speaker and listener perspectives, and communicative intentions interact with grammatical choices. Chapter 10 examines how sentence-final expressions, such as *hazu da* and *yō da*, serve different communicative purposes; Chapter 11 shows how the interpretation of demonstratives, such as *kore*, *sore*, and *are*, depends on the speaker's viewpoint; Chapter 12 demonstrates that different verb forms used for clause linkage, including the *renyō*-form and *te*-form, are not always interchangeable; and Chapter 13 illustrates how ellipsis allows speakers to leave information unstated when it can be recovered from context.

The final three chapters examine language in relation to culture, literature, and translation. Chapter 14 examines gendered speech, interactional particles, in-group and out-group distinctions, kinship terms, and forms of address, illustrating how language reflects social relationships and cultural norms. For example, the choice among expressions for "father," such as *chichi*, *otōsan*, or *otōsama*, depends not simply on lexical meaning but also on whether the speaker is referring to or addressing a family member and whether the interlocutor belongs to the speaker's in-group or out-group (p. 340). Chapter 15 explores politeness,

honorifics, youth language, and role language, highlighting the relationship between linguistic forms and social identity. A distinctive section examines young people's language as a systematic linguistic phenomenon rather than merely a collection of slang expressions. It shows how new forms emerge through clipping, affixation, semantic extension, grammatical innovation, and the creation of neologisms, linking these developments to broader social, cultural, and technological changes, as well as to the role of social media and online communication (e.g., the neologism Google *sensē*, p. 372). As a new addition, Chapter 16 examines how writers and translators participate in text production. It demonstrates how direct speech and indirect speech convey distinct character attitudes in dialogue (e.g., curiosity vs. indifference, p. 387), while emphasizing that translation requires interpretive decisions alongside attention to linguistic accuracy (e.g., Text 16.21: the contrast between "*Otonatachi ni wa, itsudatte setsumē ga iru*" and "*Otona tte, setsumē-shite-yar-anai to wakar-anai kara ne*" 'Grown-ups always need explanations', p. 396).

The volume's greatest strength lies in its integrated approach to Japanese linguistics. Rather than treating Japanese primarily as a system of grammatical rules, it demonstrates how linguistic forms acquire meaning through their use in literature, manga, conversation, translation, and other communicative contexts. One of its most distinctive contributions is showing how linguistic analysis enriches literary interpretation. For example, the analysis of role language (Chapter 15) explains how speech styles associated with recognizable character types help construct fictional identities in novels and manga. An elderly man referring to himself as *washi* rather than *watashi* or *boku*, or a young child calling a mother *mama* instead of *okāsan* (p. 377), can evoke age, personality, and social identity without explicit description. Chapter 16 further illustrates how different ways of presenting speech and thought shape readers' interpretations of characters and events. Direct speech and indirect speech create different degrees of narrative immediacy, while direct thought and free indirect thought provide readers with different levels of access to a character's inner world. Furthermore, comparing Japanese translations of the same passage from *Le Petit Prince* (*The Little Prince*) allows readers to see how translators' grammatical and stylistic choices influence tone, characterization, and narrative voice. Together, these discussions show how close attention to language provides readers with valuable tools for analyzing characterization, narrative style, and translation while deepening literary interpretation.

Beyond literary analysis, the volume consistently demonstrates that Japanese is best understood in communicative and cultural contexts. The treatment of manga is especially noteworthy. Far from treating manga merely as an accessible cultural example or a source of authentic dialogue, the book presents manga as a form of multimodal communication in which meaning is created through the interaction of dialogue, illustrations, page layout, character design, and visual context. Manga examples illustrate a wide range of linguistic phenomena, including colloquial speech (e.g., *ttaku* rather than *mattaku* to indicate annoyance, p. 37), mimetic expressions that convey emotion (e.g., *biku* to convey surprise, p. 84), pragmatics (e.g., the functions of *no da*, pp. 216–217), and gendered language (e.g., a female character addressing a male character as *omae*, p. 321). These examples demonstrate how linguistic meaning emerges from the interaction of language, visual context, and interpersonal relationships. This approach is especially relevant for contemporary learners, many of whom first encounter Japanese through anime, manga, games, and other forms of popular media.

The volume also makes a significant contribution to Japanese language teaching. By connecting grammar with authentic communication and contextualized usage, it provides instructors with a model for moving beyond decontextualized grammar instruction. Discussions of pragmatics, discourse structure, and sociolinguistic norms address areas that learners often find difficult to understand and use appropriately and that are not always adequately treated in conventional language textbooks. For example, the discussion of explanation, judgment, speculation, and hearsay in conversation (Chapter 10) helps learners understand why speakers choose specific grammatical forms in different contexts (e.g., explanation *n da* vs. judgment *da rō*), while the treatment of ellipsis and contextual interpretation (Chapter 13) demonstrates how meaning is conveyed through what is left unsaid and inferred from context (e.g., *Tabeta?* ‘Did (you) eat?’). The inclusion of Chapter 16 is particularly timely for advanced instruction, where translation can offer opportunities to examine how different translation approaches affect the interpretation of literary texts across languages and cultures. Together, these discussions further demonstrate the book’s pedagogical value by allowing learners to experience Japanese in diverse communicative settings.

The volume is also valuable as a reference work. Throughout the book, clear summaries and tables bring together grammatical features that are often difficult for learners to master and instructors to explain, including

topic marking beyond *wa* (p. 159), case particles (p. 160), noun modification (p. 177), *te*-forms expressing states and actions (p. 202), explanatory expressions (p. 214), and psychological closeness (p. 249), as well as overview tables of conjunctions (p. 287), interactional particles (p. 331), and honorifics (pp. 356–359). Commentaries accompanying end-of-chapter activities explain not only the correct answers but also the reasoning behind them, making the exercises useful for both independent learners and classroom instruction. In addition, more than 100 pages of online resources, including translations, quizzes, and commentaries on other end-of-chapter activities not discussed in the book, further expand the book's usefulness.

One limitation concerns the depth of analytical explanation. While the book offers clear and comprehensive descriptions of grammatical features, discourse patterns, and sociolinguistic phenomena and serves as an excellent reference work, some discussions would benefit from more detailed explanations. For example, the discussion of passive constructions (Chapter 9) relates these forms to speakers' and writers' viewpoints and emotional involvement, but additional examples would clarify how these factors contribute to the choice of passive constructions in different contexts. Likewise, in the analysis of benefactive constructions (Text 9.14, pp. 200–201), the pragmatic interpretations of *-te kureru* as expressing "acceptance" and *-te morau* as conveying "indirectness and courtesy (pp. 201–202) are insightful, but these functions are not clearly introduced before they are applied in the text analysis. Briefly linking these interpretations to the preceding discussion of the constructions would make the analysis easier to follow and further strengthen the chapter's pedagogical value.

Another limitation concerns the treatment of gendered language and social categories (Chapter 14), which at times presents gender in binary terms (e.g., male/female) that have increasingly been questioned in contemporary sociolinguistic research. While these discussions are clear and informative, future editions could engage more fully with the growing diversity of perspectives on gender, identity, and language use in contemporary Japanese society. Such an expansion would further strengthen the book's treatment of language as a dynamic social and cultural practice.

These limitations, however, do little to diminish the book's overall achievement. It redefines what an introductory textbook in Japanese linguistics can accomplish by integrating grammatical analysis with

pragmatics, discourse, literature, translation, media, and culture to show how language functions in social and cultural contexts. The book's use of examples from novels, manga, folktales, newspapers, and everyday conversation, together with end-of-chapter activities based on authentic materials, makes it both intellectually engaging and pedagogically valuable.

Overall, *Japanese Linguistics in Use* makes a significant contribution to Japanese linguistics and Japanese language pedagogy. Its central achievement lies in demonstrating that Japanese is best understood in context—not only through grammatical description but also through literature, manga, translation, conversation, and other forms of communication. By examining how linguistic forms interact with visual representation, storytelling, social relationships, and cultural practices, the volume offers readers a deeper understanding of how meaning is created in Japanese in real communicative settings. The book will be particularly valuable for advanced learners of Japanese, as well as for graduate students, instructors, and researchers seeking a reliable reference on challenging grammatical, pragmatic, and sociolinguistic topics. Selected chapters and thematic sections will also serve as supplementary readings for advanced courses in Japanese language, linguistics, literature, and culture.