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# How alphabetic is Japanese rōmaji?

Implications for the description and classification of writing systems

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# Introduction

> 1 > 2 > 3 > 4 > Conclusion

# About this presentation

## Background: ローマ字 *rōmaji* 'Roman characters'

- ❖ Latin script employed in the Japanese writing system (JWS)
- ❖ Marginal but increasingly used in present-day Japan
- ❖ Limited attention, largely on history and spelling conventions
- ❖ Often described as an [alphabet for romanisation](#)

## Question: How alphabetic is *rōmaji*?

- ❖ What is *rōmaji*? → Part 1
- ❖ Limited to romanisation? → Part 2
- ❖ Primarily monosegmental? → Part 3
- ❖ Implications for grapholinguistics? → Part 4



A road sign in Tokyo

## Background: ローマ字 *rōmaji* 'Roman characters'

### Coulmas (1996)

- Alphabet

“1 A writing system characterized by a systematic mapping relation between its signs (graphemes) and the minimal units of speech (phonemes). (p. 11)

- Romanisation

“ Providing a language which is written with a non-alphabetic script with an alphabetic writing using the Roman script. (p. 443)

Coulmas, F. 1996. *The Blackwell encyclopedia of writing systems*. Oxford & Malden: Blackwell Publishers.



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- ❖ Implications for grapholinguistics? → Part 4



A road sign in Tokyo

# 1. What is romaji?

> 2 > 3 > 4 > Conclusion

## A component of the multi-script JWS

- Basic Latin script (+ macron / circumflex)
- First introduced by Christian missionaries in mid-16<sup>th</sup> century
- Limited but increasing use after mid-20<sup>th</sup> century (Irwin 2011; Tomoda 2005)
- Romanisation, abbreviation, acronym, foreign word notation, inputting, etc. (→ Part 2)

Rōmaji Hiragana Katakana Punctuation Rōmaji Punctuation Hiragana Kanji Hiragana Punctuation  
DVDでアニメ『Akira』を見た。  
di:buidi:=de anime akira=o mi-ta  
DVD=INSTR anime Akira=ACC see-PAST.AFF.PLAIN  
'I saw the anime "Akira" on DVD.'

# Definitions

## No uniform definition

- Narrow: Latin script used for romanisation (e.g. Smith 1996; Satake 2005; Lunde 2009)
- Broad: Latin script used in JWS (e.g. Sasahara 2001; Taylor & Taylor 2014; Joyce & Masuda 2018)
- Dual: Latin script and its usage (e.g. MoE 1950; Kusakabe 1977)

Example	Type	Rōmaji?		
		Narrow	Broad	Dual
Akira	Romanised JP	Yes	Yes	Yes
DVD	Borrowed EN	No*	Yes	Yes

\*Designations vary: 英字 *eiji* 'English script', ラテン文字 *raten moji* 'Latin script', アルファベット *arufabetto* 'alphabet', etc.

Joyce, T. & Masuda, H. 2018. Introduction to the multi-script Japanese writing system and word processing. In Pae, H. K. (ed.), *Writing systems, reading processes, and cross-linguistic influences: Reflections from the Chinese, Japanese and Korean languages*, pp. 179-200. Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company.

Kusakabe, F. 1977. Nihon no rōmaji. In Ono, S. & Shibata, T. (ed.), *Moji*, pp. 341-383. Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten.

MoE = Ministry of Education, Science, Sports and Culture. 1950. *A guide to the romaji education*. Tokyo: Ministry of Education.

Lunde, K. 2008. *CJKV information processing*. Sebastopol: O'Reilly Media, Inc.

Sasahara, H. 2001. Japanese writing system. In Kōno, R., Chino, E. & Nishida, T. (eds.), *The Sanseidō encyclopaedia of linguistics, vol. 7: Scripts and writing systems of the world*, pp. 696-706. Tokyo: Sanseidō Press.

Satake, H. 2005. Gendai Nihongo no moji to shokihō. In Hayashi, C. (ed.), *Moji, shoki*, pp. 22-50. Tokyo: Asakura Shoten.

Smith, J. S. 1996. Japanese writing. In Daniels, P. T. & Bright, W. (eds.), *The world's writing systems*, pp. 209-217. New York: Oxford University Press.

Taylor, I. & Taylor, M. M. 2014. *Writing and literacy in Chinese, Korean and Japanese* (rev. ed.) Amsterdam & Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company.



## Discussion point 1: Romanisation

- A sample from the literature
  - “ Systems of **transliterating** Japanese with Roman letters. (Coulmas 1996: 438)
  - “ Modern Japanese is written in a mixture of three basic scripts [...]. Additionally, **rōmaji** ‘**romanization**’, eimoji ‘English script’ (roughly, non-Japanese words written in their [native] alphabetic script), and a variety of kigō ‘symbols’ are commonly interspersed in texts.” (Smith 1996: 209)
  - “ Latin characters used to **transliterate Japanese text** are called ローマ字 (*rōmaji*) or ラテン文字 (*raten moji*) in Japanese.” (Lunde 2009: 3)
- Question: Is rōmaji usage limited to romanisation? (→ Part 2)

## Discussion point 2: Segmental / phonemic

- A sample from the literature
  - “ Besides, because rōmaji is a **monosegmental script** [...]. (また、ローマ字は**単音文字**であるから[...]; MoE 1950: 2, my translation)
  - “ [T]he standard orthographic conventions for the contemporary JWS are to employ its multi-scripts – namely, morphographic kanji [...], the two syllabographic scripts of hiragana and katakana, **the phonemic alphabet of ローマ字 /rōma.ji/ ‘Roman alphabet’**, and **数字 /sū-ji/ ‘Arabic numerals’** – in essentially separate and complementary ways in representing the Japanese language in writing. (Joyce & Masuda 2018: 182)
- **Question: Is rōmaji primarily segmental / phonemic? (→ Part 3)**

## **2. Limited to romanisation?**

> 3 > 4 > Conclusion

## Coulmas (1996)

- “**romanization** Providing a language which is written with a non-alphabetic script with an alphabetic writing using the Roman script. A system of Romanization is either a TRANSLITERATION or a TRANSCRIPTION. (p. 443)
- “**transliteration** A one-to-one conversion of the graphemes of one writing system into those of another writing system; not to be confused with TRANSCRIPTION. (p. 510)
- “**transcription** The visual representation of verbal utterances by means of special phonetic symbols derived from alphabetic letters, such as the INTERNATIONAL PHONETIC ALPHABET. (p. 509)



# JP romanisation

2. Limited to romanisation?

## Three common systems

- Hepburn: De facto standard (AfCA 2021)
- Kunrei-shiki: Official system taught at school (CoJ 1954)
- Waapuro: Various input methods, also used for romanisation

	豆腐 /to:fu/ 'tofu'	寿司 /suši/ 'sushi'	抹茶 /mačča/ 'matcha tea'	純米酒 /junmaišu/ 'pure rice wine'
Hepburn	tōfu	sushi	matcha	jummaishu
Kunrei-shiki	tōhu	susi	mattya	zyunmaisyu
Waapuro	toufu	susi	maccha	jyunmaisyu

AfCA = Agency for Cultural Affairs. 2021. *Kaku fushōchō ni okeru rōmaji shiyō no rei*. Tokyo: Agency for Cultural Affairs. [https://www.bunka.go.jp/seisaku/bunkashingikai/kokugo/kokugo\\_kadai/iinkai\\_45/pdf/93390601\\_12.pdf](https://www.bunka.go.jp/seisaku/bunkashingikai/kokugo/kokugo_kadai/iinkai_45/pdf/93390601_12.pdf) (last accessed on 7th November 2023)

CoJ = Cabinet of Japan. 1954. *Rōmaji no tsuzurikata*. Cabinet Directive no. 1, 1954. Tokyo: Cabinet of Japan. [https://www.bunka.go.jp/kokugo\\_nihongo/sisaku/joho/joho/kijun/naikaku/roma/index.html](https://www.bunka.go.jp/kokugo_nihongo/sisaku/joho/joho/kijun/naikaku/roma/index.html) [last accessed on 7th November 2023]

## Irwin (2011)

1. Full word
2. Abbreviation
3. Acronym
  - a. Loan & Foreign
    - i. Borrowed directly
    - ii. Semantically remodelled
    - iii. Innovative
  - b. Native & Sino-Japanese
    - i. Names of corporations, organisations, etc.
    - ii. 'KY Japanese'

## Irwin (2011) + my proposals

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**Hitachi**

/hitači/

'NAME OF A CORPORATION'

**Bump of Chicken**

/banpu obu čikin/

'NAME OF A POP GROUP'

## Irwin (2011) + my proposals

1. Full word → **Romanisation**  
(translit./transcr. in rōmaji)
2. Abbreviation
3. Acronym → **Borrowed spelling**  
(use of original spelling)
  - a. Loan & Foreign
    - i. Borrowed directly
    - ii. Semantically remodelled
    - iii. Innovative
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**Hitachi**

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Cf. ?**Bampu obu Chikin**



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**m**

/me:toru/

'metre'

**TV**


/tere:bi/

'television'

# Rōmaji uses

2. Limited to romanisation?

## Irwin (2011) + my proposals

1. Full word
2. Abbreviation 
  - (loan & foreign)
  - Abbreviation**  
(Native & Sino-Japanese)
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    - i. Names of corporations, organisations, etc.
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**m**

/me:toru/  
'metre'

**TV**

/terebi/  
'television'

**G**

/gokiburi/  
'cockroach'

## Irwin (2011) + my proposals

1. Full word
2. Abbreviation
3. Acronym
  - a. Loan & Foreign
    - i. Borrowed directly
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    - iii. Innovative
  - b. Native & Sino-Japanese
    - i. Names of corporations, organisations, etc.
    - ii. 'KY Japanese'

**CD**

/ši:di:/

'compact disc'

**CM**

/ši:emu/

'advertisement' (< *commercial message*)

**TOPIX**

/topikkusu/

'Tokyo Stock Price Index'

## Irwin (2011) + my proposals

1. Full word
  2. Abbreviation
  3. Acronym
    - a. Loan & Foreign (graphematic rendition)
      - i. Borrowed directly
      - ii. Semantically remodelled
      - iii. Innovative
    - b. Native & Sino-Japanese
      - i. Names of corporations, organisations, etc.
      - ii. 'KY Japanese'
- Alphabetism** (López Rúa 2004)  
(letter name sequence)
- Acronym**

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      - i. Names of corporations, organisations, etc.
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- Arrows from '2. Abbreviation' and '3. Acronym' point to 'Alphabetism (López Rúa 2004) (letter name sequence)' and 'Acronym (graphematic rendition)' respectively.

**Alphabetism** (López Rúa 2004)  
(letter name sequence)

**Acronym**

(graphematic rendition)

**NHK**

/enueičike:/

'Japan Broadcasting Corporation'

(< 日本放送協会 *Nippon Hōsō Kyōkai*)

**KY**

/ke:wai/

'out of touch with reality'

(< 空気読めない *kūki yomenai*)

???

# Rōmaji uses

2. Limited to romanisation?

## Irwin (2011) + my proposals

1. Full word
  2. Abbreviation
  3. Acronym
    - a. Loan & Foreign (graphematic rendition)
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???

## Irwin (2011) + my proposals

1. Full word
2. Abbreviation

### 3. Acronym Letter morpheme (Riha & Baker 2010)

“ [In Chinese, compounds] containing a Roman letter as a morpheme (*X* in *X-ray*) are adapted as hybrid words that retain the letter morpheme. (p. 193)

- b. Native & Sino-Japanese
  - i. Names of corporations, organisations, etc.
  - ii. 'KY Japanese'

X線

/ekkususen/  
'X-ray'

L字型

/erujigata/  
'L-shape'

H

/ečči/  
'sex(ual)'  
(<*hentai* 'pervert')

# Rōmaji uses

2. Limited to romanisation?

## Irwin (2011) + my proposals

1. Full word
2. Abbreviation

### 3. Acronym

#### Xenography (Coulmas 1996)

“The practice of adopting the original spelling of a Loan word while pronouncing it in one’s own languages. (p. 564)

- b. Native & Sino-Japanese
  - i. Names of corporations, organisations, etc.
  - ii. ‘KY Japanese’

VS

/tai/

‘versus’

A.M. , P.M.

/gozen , gogo/

‘AM , PM’

WC

/toire/

‘toilet’

} Yamashita  
(2019)



# Summary of Part 2

2. Limited to romanisation?

## An extended classification

Use type	Loan & Foreign	Native & Sino-JP	Rōmaji?	
			Narrow	Broad / Dual
1. Romanisation	?Bampu obu Chikin	Hitachi	Yes	Yes
2. Borrowed spelling	Bump of Chicken	——	No	Yes
3. Abbreviation	m	G	No	Yes
4. Alphabetism	CD	NHK	No	Yes
5. Acronym	TOPIX	?	No	Yes
6. Letter morpheme	X線	H	No	Yes
7. Xenography		VS	No	Yes

# **3. Primarily monosegmental?**

> 4 > Conclusion

# Graphematic mappings

3. Primarily monosegmental?

## Monosegmental

- Graph → Phoneme
- Polygraph → Phoneme

## Not monosegmental

- (Poly)graph → Phoneme cluster (mora, syllable, ...)
- (Poly)raph → Linguistic unit (morpheme, word, ...)

$c_1 a_2 t_3$

/  $k_1 \text{æ}_2 t_3$  /

'felis catus'

$c_1 h_2 a_3 t_4$

/  $\text{tʃ}_{1,2} \text{æ}_3 t_4$  /

'conversation'

$C_1 h_2 a_3 x_4$

/  $\text{tʃ}_{1,2} \text{æ}_3 ks_4$  /

'product name'



/  $k \text{æ} t$  /<sub>1</sub>

'felis catus'<sub>1</sub>

# Mapping in each use type

3. Primarily monosegmental?

## Examples from the extended classification

Use type	Loan & Foreign	Native & Sino-JP
1. Romanisation	?Bampu obu Chikin	Hitachi
2. Borrowed spelling	Bump of Chicken	——
3. Abbreviation	m	G
4. Alphabetism	CD	NHK
5. Acronym	TOPIX	?
6. Letter morpheme	X線	H
7. Xenography		VS

$H_1 i_2 t_3 a_4 c_5 h_6 i_7$   
/  $h_1 i_2 t_3 a_4 \check{c}_{5,6} i_7$  /  
'NAME OF A CORPORATION'

→ Monosegmental

# Mapping in each use type

3. Primarily monosegmental?

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Use type	Loan & Foreign	Native & Sino-JP
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2. Borrowed spelling	Bump of Chicken	——
3. Abbreviation	m	G
4. Alphabetism	CD	NHK
5. Acronym	TOPIX	?
6. Letter morpheme	X線	H
7. Xenography		VS

B<sub>1</sub> u<sub>2</sub> m<sub>3</sub> p<sub>4</sub> o<sub>5</sub> f<sub>6</sub> C<sub>7</sub> h<sub>8</sub> i<sub>9</sub> c<sub>10</sub> k<sub>11</sub> e<sub>12</sub> n<sub>13</sub>  
/ b<sub>1</sub> a<sub>2</sub> m<sub>3</sub> p<sub>4</sub> o<sub>5</sub> b<sub>6</sub> č<sub>7,8</sub> i<sub>9</sub> k<sub>10,11</sub> i<sub>12</sub> N<sub>13</sub> /  
'NAME OF A POP GROUP'

→ Pseudo-monosegmental

# Mapping in each use type

3. Primarily monosegmental?

## Examples from the extended classification

Use type	Loan & Foreign	Native & Sino-JP
1. Romanisation	?Bampu obu Chikin	Hitachi
2. Borrowed spelling	Bump of Chicken	——
<b>3. Abbreviation</b>	<b>m</b>	<b>G</b>
4. Alphabetism	CD	NHK
5. Acronym	TOPIX	?
6. Letter morpheme	X線	H
7. Xenography		VS

**m**<sub>1</sub>

/ me:toru /<sub>1</sub>

'metre'<sub>1</sub>

**G**<sub>1</sub>

/ gokiburi /<sub>1</sub>

'cockroach'<sub>1</sub>

→ Morphographic

# Mapping in each use type

3. Primarily monosegmental?

## Examples from the extended classification

Use type	Loan & Foreign	Native & Sino-JP
1. Romanisation	ʔBampu obu Chikin	Hitachi
2. Borrowed spelling	Bump of Chicken	—
3. Abbreviation	m	G
4. Alphabetism	CD	NHK

<b>A</b> e:	<b>B</b> bi:	<b>C</b> ši:	<b>D</b> di:	<b>E</b> i:	<b>F</b> efu	<b>G</b> ji:
<b>H</b> eiči	<b>I</b> ai	<b>J</b> je:	<b>K</b> ke:	<b>L</b> eru	<b>M</b> emu	<b>N</b> enu
<b>O</b> o:	<b>P</b> pi:	<b>Q</b> kyu:	<b>R</b> a:ru	<b>S</b> esu	<b>T</b> ti:	<b>U</b> yu:
<b>V</b> bui	<b>W</b> daburyu:	<b>X</b> ekkusu	<b>Y</b> wai	<b>Z</b> zetto		

$C_1 D_2$   
 / ši:<sub>1</sub> di:<sub>2</sub> /  
 'compact disc'  
  
 $N_1 H_2 K_3$   
 / enu<sub>1</sub> eiči<sub>2</sub> ke:<sub>3</sub> /  
 'JP Broadcasting corporation'

→ Polysegmental



# Mapping in each use type

3. Primarily monosegmental?

## Examples from the extended classification

Use type	Loan & Foreign	Native & Sino-JP
1. Romanisation	?Bampu obu Chikin	Hitachi
2. Borrowed spelling	Bump of Chicken	——
3. Abbreviation	m	G
4. Alphabetism	CD	NHK
5. Acronym	TOPIX	?
6. Letter morpheme	X線	H
7. Xenography		VS

$T_1 O_2 P_3 I_4 X_5$   
/ t<sub>1</sub> o<sub>2</sub> p<sub>3</sub> i<sub>4</sub> kkusu<sub>5</sub> /  
'Tokyo Stock Price Index'  
→ Pseudo-monosegmental

# Mapping in each use type

3. Primarily monosegmental?

## Examples from the extended classification

Use type	Loan & Foreign	Native & Sino-JP
1. Romanisation	?Bampu obu Chikin	Hitachi
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3. Abbreviation	m	G
4. Alphabetism	CD	NHK
5. Acronym	TOPIX	?
6. Letter morpheme	X線	H
7. Xenography		VS

X<sub>1</sub>線<sub>2</sub>  
/ ekkusu /<sub>1</sub> / sen /<sub>2</sub>

'X'<sub>1</sub> 'ray'<sub>2</sub>

H<sub>1</sub>

/ ečči /<sub>1</sub>

'sex(ual)'<sub>1</sub>

→ Morphographic

# Mapping in each use type

3. Primarily monosegmental?

## Examples from the extended classification

Use type	Loan & Foreign	Native & Sino-JP
1. Romanisation	?Bampu obu Chikin	Hitachi
2. Borrowed spelling	Bump of Chicken	——
3. Abbreviation	m	G
4. Alphabetism	CD	NHK
5. Acronym	TOPIX	?
6. Letter morpheme	X線	H
7. Xenography		VS

$V_1 S_2$   
/ tai /<sub>1,2</sub>  
'versus'<sub>1,2</sub>  
→ Morphographic

# Mapping in each use type

3. Primarily monosegmental?

## Examples from the extended classification

Use type	Loan & Foreign	Native & Sino-JP	Mapping
1. Romanisation	?Bampu obu Chikin	Hitachi	Monosegmental
2. Borrowed spelling	Bump of Chicken	——	Pseudo-monosegmental
3. Abbreviation	m	G	Morphographic
4. Alphabetism	CD	NHK	Polysegmental
5. Acronym	TOPIX	?	Pseudo-monosegmental
6. Letter morpheme	X線	H	Morphographic
7. Xenography		VS	Morphographic

# Proportion of monosegmental mappings

3. Primarily monosegmental?

## A pilot survey

- Balanced Corpus of Contemporary Written Japanese (BCCWJ; Maekawa et al. 2014)
- 100 million words across genres and registers
- BCCWJ-Core: 1% of the entire corpus, manually checked for 99% accuracy
- 7,385 words containing at least 1 rōmaji graph

	Type		Token		Mapping
	n	%	n	%	
Native	4	0.1%	5	0.1%	Monosegmental (romanisation)
Sino-Japanese	9	0.3%	11	0.1%	Monosegmental (romanisation)
Loan / foreign	694	19.8%	1,332	18.0%	Mostly pseudo-monosegmental (borrowed)
Proper noun	654	18.7%	1,038	14.1%	? (various types)
Hybrid	1,234	35.3%	2,473	33.5%	? (various types)
Blank	133	3.8%	439	5.9%	Mostly polysegmental (letter morphemes)
Symbol	770	22.0%	2,087	28.3%	? (various types)
<b>Total</b>	<b>3,498</b>	<b>100.0%</b>	<b>7,385</b>	<b>100.0%</b>	

# Summary of Part 3

3. Primarily monosegmental?

## Rōmaji monosegmentality: Topic for further study

Use type	Monosegmental?	Rōmaji?	
		Narrow	Broad / Dual
1. Romanisation	Yes	Yes	Yes
2. Borrowed spelling	Pseudo	No	Yes
3. Abbreviation	No	No	Yes
4. Alphabetism	No	No	Yes
5. Acronym	Pseudo	No	Yes
6. Letter morpheme	No	No	Yes
7. Xenography	No	No	Yes

# **4. Implications for grapholinguistics?**

> Conclusion

## Alphabet

- “ A writing system characterized by a systematic mapping relation between its signs (graphemes) and the minimal units of speech (phonemes). (Coulmas 1996: 11)
- “ [A] type of writing system that denotes consonants and vowels (Daniels & Bright 1996: xxxix)

## Segmentary (Gnanadesikan 2017)

- Most or all signs encode individual phonological segments, or phonemes
- Replacing 'alphabet'
  - Narrow: Encodes most / all consonants and vowels (e.g. Greek)
  - Broad: Encodes most consonants and some vowels (e.g. Bronze Age Semitic)
  - Disagreement over segmentally encoded, non-linearly arranged scripts (e.g. Devanāgarī)
- 'Alphabet' (narrow) = Fully vowelised linear segmentary (e.g. Latin)



# Latin script and monosegmentality

4. Implications for grapholinguistics?

## Comparison: Latin script in Japanese and English

- Same script, different writing systems
- Same form, different functions
- Formal identity  $\neq$  functional identity

	Japanese	English
WS structure	Multi-script	Multi-script
Script composition	Basic Latin (+ diacritic)	Basic Latin
Script status	Secondary	Primary
Primary mapping	Unclear	Monosegmental

# Conclusion

# Summary and further questions

Conclusion

## Summary: How alphabetic is rōmaji?

- ❖ What is rōmaji?
  - Varying definitions
- ❖ Limited to romanisation?
  - 'Yes' in narrow definition, 'No' in broad / dual definition
- ❖ Primarily monosegmental?
  - Further study needed
- ❖ Implications for grapholinguistics?
  - Segmentary > Alphabet; Form ≠ Function

## Further questions

- ❖ Monosegmentality in rōmaji?
- ❖ Latin script in non-Latin / non-monosegmental WSs?



A road sign in Tokyo

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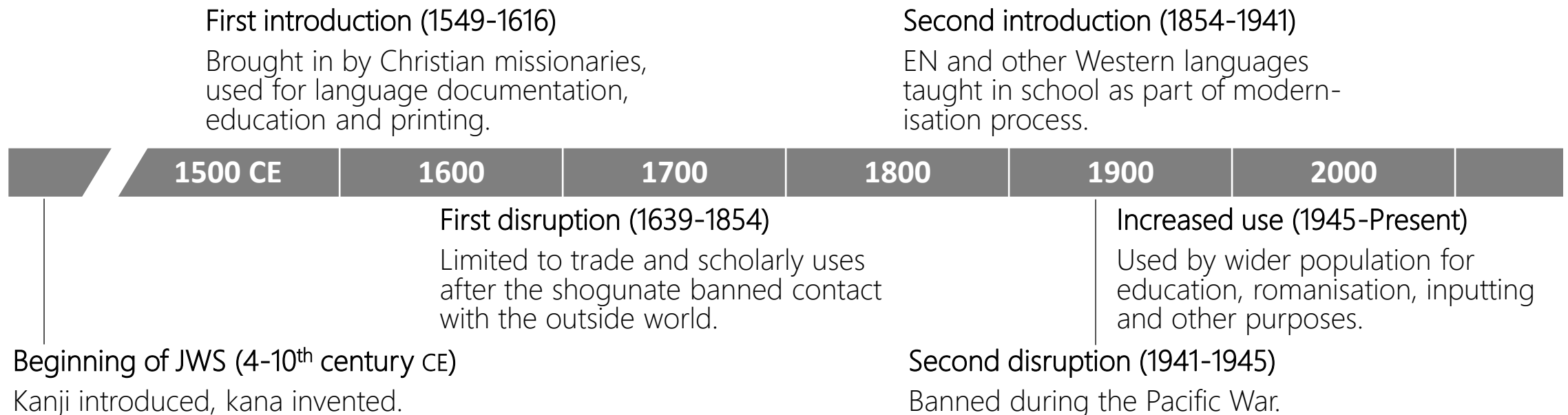
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# Appendix: A brief history of rōmaji

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## New addition to JWS

- Introduced in 16<sup>th</sup> century, increasingly common after mid-20<sup>th</sup> century
- Used for JP romanisation and foreign language education
- Different romanisation conventions developed over time
- Unified guidelines being discussed (Takeda 2023)



ありがとうございました

arigatō gozaimashita

/arigato: gozaimašita/

'Thank you'