The Concept and Application of KanjiHybrids: Basic Review of The Kanji Handbook

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Abstract
The successful publication of The Kanji Handbook (Tuttle Publishing) in December 2006 created awareness and recognition of a new learning tool—KanjiHybrids. By the word "hybrid", one gets the idea of two combined elements forming a new body. Under the concept, the first letter of an English word was replaced by the corresponding Kanji character to form a single and indivisible units, called "KanjiHybrids". Examples include: Ilmountain, Sttone, Tleaven, Tsean, Iland and Ilower.

Key words: KanjiHybrids, Kanji characters, Linguistic Grouping, Ambiguity.

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This study will explore the concept and application of KanjiHybrids in learning a second language—particularly the Japanese language. At the same time, there are new claims that KanjiHybrids are just as effective in English linguistic acquisition of Japanese students. Simply put, KanjiHybrids will enable Japanese students read English text faster and with better comprehension. This claim stems from the fact that since Japanese students are intimately familiar with Kanji characters from childhood, using Kanji characters to learn English is a promising learning tool. However, this dissertation will limit itself to Japanese language learning for two reasons: a) The concept and application of KanjiHybrids was first introduced to assist non-Japanese students learn Kanji characters and, b) The successful publication of The Kanji Handbook (Tuttle Publishing) in December 2006 yielded sufficient recognition and empirical data to merit scholarly discourse. It must be borne in mind that the central objective of KanjiHybrids was the mastery of Kanji characters by using English words—not the other way around.

The Problem

Regarding Kanji characters, one of Amazon’s top book reviewers, Zack Davisson wrote, "For most people studying Japanese, Kanji is your nemesis, the thing that will make you want to hurl your study books across the room and run screaming into a country that uses a more decent writing system, like the alphabet. But they are pretty cool, and if you want to know Japanese, you need to know kanji, so you desperately look for tricks or shortcuts to make the process less painful." Linguistic scholars largely agree that Japanese is the most difficult second language to learn. With four different writing systems, those eager to learn Japanese have a long and demanding journey to undergo. Thus, the Kanji Handbook was conceived to map out learning strategies to systematically guide learners from beginner to advanced level in Kanji literacy. Unique learning tools were designed to resolve the many aggravations commonly encountered by Kanji learners. All 1,945 Jōyō Kanji characters—the most commonly used Kanji characters as officially prescribed by the Japanese.
Ministry of Education since 1981—are available to learn through this book. The Kanji Handbook was fashioned to offer an end to some of the most discouraging problems facing those who study Kanji characters. The biggest struggle in learning the 1,945 Kanji characters is the mission of memorizing them, their shades of meaning, myriad pronunciations and compounds.¹

**Kanji-Hybrids**

To encourage memory retention, all Kanji characters in this book appear as Kanji-Hybrids, or the combination of a Kanji character and its English meaning to form one, integral and indivisible unit. In addition, the pioneering concept of Veemuenics—where similar looking Kanji characters are placed as Kanji-Hybrids in a rhyming English sentence or phrase—will further help learners remember each Kanji character and the slight differences between them. For example:

Kanji-Hybrid: 官 Emperor, 星 tar, 星 plectron
Veemuenic: Roman 官 Emperor shine like 星 tar even from 星 plectron afar...

The concept of Veemuenics was created to help learners differentiate between the similar looking Kanji characters nearly undistinguishable to beginners. Some Kanji characters may only differ because of a dash or a stroke, or a radical. In many cases, these slight differences only become visible after years of careful study and consistent use. How does one digest the difference between 官 and 星? To manage this problem, each Kanji character presented has a corresponding list of similar-looking Kanji characters as not to confuse them.

Another major hindrance for Kanji beginners is the lack of adequate learning tools.⁵ To find a Kanji character in the dictionary, one must know the Kanji character’s stroke order, radical, ON-yomi or KUN-yomi readings. These prerequisites make it frustrating and utterly confusing for beginners. How does an absolute beginner search for 官 and 星 without knowing anything? To that end, the Flip-It Index was created to allow absolute beginners to search for a Kanji character’s meaning without knowing any basics whatsoever. To use the Flip-It Index, all one has to do is decide if a Kanji character is flippable, looking the same when inverted horizontally, non-flippable or partially-flippable to a certain degree. This simple, artistic way of finding the meaning of a Kanji character is a revolutionary learning tool designed to take the prerequisite guess work out of Kanji study. Finally, a new indexing system was created for this book to address some inadequacies. Usually, Kanji indices only list the page number in which to find each Kanji character, without the English core meaning. This process of first finding a Kanji character in the index, and then having to search for its corresponding page to know the core meaning, is time consuming and cumbersome. Additionally, sometimes learners confuse similar looking Kanji characters and look up the wrong page, and have to begin all over again. These annoyances are quickly resolved in this book indices of all 1,945 Kanji characters together with their English core meaning and corresponding page number.

These innovative problem-solving novelties make The Kanji Handbook radically different from other Kanji books. The study of Kanji characters has never been easier or enjoyable. With the publication of this book, learners will ideally find their journey to be a rewarding experience, thereby enriching Kanji characters as one of the most powerful mediums of world civilization.

**Theoretical Framework**

Foreigners who study Japanese often question why all four writing systems must be learned to master the language.⁶ First, the four writing systems—Hiragana, Katakana, Kanji characters, and the Roman ABCs—each have unique roles. Hiragana is generally used for native words and grammatical values, while Katakana is reserved for foreign words. Here, the function of Katakana shows the cultural consciousness to draw a line between what is Japanese, and what is not. Roman alphabets are valued for initials, such as APEC, WHO, and EU, and for commercial advertisements. Kanji characters must be learned to differentiate between the large bodies of Japanese homophones; words that sound exactly alike though the meanings may differ.
A separate Kanji character exists for all the homophones whose meanings would be unclear if written in a purely Hiragana or Katakana text. Second, and more obviously, one must learn all four writing systems to read Japanese text, which in one sentence can utilize Hiragana, Katakana, Kanji characters, and the Roman ABCs. In addition, as the usage of Japanese language is more defined by the regiment of Japanese culture than by conventional reason, one must gain a basic understanding of the Japanese way of life. As such, one cannot isolate the study of the language from the confines of Japanese culture itself.

The uniqueness of Japanese civilization was reinforced by its insularity as one of the few nations to never have been colonized, when colonization swept three-fourths of the globe. Predating Japanese society, the significance of Kanji characters can be understood as the oldest existing, and most widely-used writing system in the world. The earliest forms of Kanji characters were found on oracle bones made from tortoise shells dating back to 1,700 BC ~ 1,100 BC in Henan, China. However, the evolution of modern-day recognizable Kanji characters was established in approximately 200 AD, reaching the shores of Japan two centuries later. Though other ancient writing systems, such as the Egyptian hieroglyphics and Sumerian scripts, have become nothing more than museum pieces, Kanji characters have flourished; surviving numerous tests of time. Moreover, attributable to the sheer population size of its users — China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Japan, and the Koreas — Kanji is arguably the world’s most widely-used writing system. Yet, in spite of these characteristics, Kanji characters remain a “black hole” to the rest of the world; a situation that need not continue.

Kanji characters and the Roman alphabets are separate and distinct writing systems. The Roman A-to-Z system is based on a combination of letters to form words expanding into sentences. Individually, English letters contain no inherent meaning. One could, therefore, create a new word, like common names or pronouns, without necessarily attaching any meaning. Kanji characters are the exact opposite. Each one already has assigned meanings before combining them to form word compounds. Consequently, one could not form a Kanji word compound stripped of meaning. For highly Kanji literate people, reading Kanji characters is somewhat like reading pictures. That’s not entirely an exaggeration since each Kanji character represents an inherent meaning. Also, many Kanji characters resemble their meaning. For example, the characters for “person” and “river” actually look like a walking person, and a streaming river; 人 and川.

Communication through symbols, like Kanji characters, takes place all over the world through universal ideograms. When we see the symbols 🌱 and 🌽, the immediate meanings conveyed are Christianity and Judaism. Quite recently, universal symbols such as 🌏 🌐 🌊 🌈 have become part of daily life—we see them everywhere in world airports and hotels—irrespective of the spoken version. Some advanced forms like the sentence "I ♥ NY” have found a niche in popular culture. Far more symbols exist today than a decade ago. Internet sophisticates have enlivened e-mail messages with "emoticons,” which are nothing more than symbols. Nearly every corporation has its own logo, designed to instill its corporate image in seconds. Universal symbols, while widely accepted, are still elementary; unable to communicate complex messages or a philosophical discourse. Yet, imagine a time, decades in the making, when the universal symbols we know today will reach a stage of development that allows for higher coherence. Kanji characters preceded universal symbols, have been enriched through centuries, and are highly sophisticated in terms of communicative content and intellectual value.

Kanji characters are remarkably complex: the pronunciation of many characters sound alike, and even more numerous are the characters that look alike. The readings of each character can be split in two groups: ON-yomi, the Chinese reading, or KUN-yomi, the Japanese reading. A large number of Kanji characters may have the same ON-yomi reading. For example, the ON-yomi reading for the following characters can all be read as "kan,” though their meanings are completely different: 間, 部, 感 and薄. A quick count of the Jōyō (most common) Kanji characters pronounced as
"kan" would reach the figure of 64, though their meanings are hardly related. Hence, the key to mastering Kanji characters is to aim for their core English meanings. When one contemplates an object in visual form, its pronunciation becomes secondary. When one sees David Beckham playing his game, whether it's to be called "football" or "soccer" becomes not so important. As a meaning-focused writing system—not pronunciation based—one major advantage is as follows: Though Chinese or Japanese people cannot necessarily converse in a common spoken medium, Kanji characters would enable the two vast cultures, nevertheless, to communicate.

Other Kanji books approach the teaching of Kanji the same way young children are taught Kanji in Japan: by means of the grade-level approach. The needs of children and adult language learners are much different, thus, this teaching method designed for children clearly cannot be the most effective way for adults to learn Kanji. While children learn languages with a symmetrical progression between simple ideas and simple linguistic skills, adult learners have to cope with an unbalanced equation between complex ideas and simple linguistic skills. For adults learning a second language, new linguistic skills must first catch up with his or her already complex thinking—a process that could be frustrating. The main theory behind this book is to simplify Kanji learning through the process of comparison. The study of Kanji through the grade-level approach would completely ignore a significant hindrance of learning Kanji: many Kanji characters look alike and are therefore difficult to differentiate.

In the Kanji Handbook, the easily-confused Kanji characters are grouped together so the learner can notice the subtle differences between the similar-looking characters. The learning process navigates through visually distinguishing one from the other, to identify their unique differences, in order to get the core meaning. This book is a humble attempt toward the mastery of Kanji characters within a meaning-focused framework. The core meanings should be of central importance. The conventional presentation of Kanji characters in contemporary Kanji books has the Kanji characters and English words sitting side by side, such as 水 = water, 火 = mountain, and 女 = woman. A better way to convey the meaning of each Kanji character, as in the case of universal symbols, needs to exist. Toward that objective, here is a ground-breaking alternative, whereby a Kanji character is combined with its English meaning to create one single and indivisible unit called KanjiHybrids. For example: 水 = mountain, and 女 = woman.

Next, to distinguish one Kanji character from another is a frustrating task, yet crucial. To that end, a second component, called Veemuenics, was created. The method is to identify similar looking Kanji characters, and put them together as KanjiHybrids in a catchy English sentence or phrase. The following Veemuenics are examples of how visually-similar Kanji characters can be set apart within a meaning-focused methodology:

a) [fraction] the idea is to contain elements of "Ave Maria.

b) At the temple's parade, a samurai holding a poem of special grade...

c) [standing] chorus trying over their lost status.

d) [fraudulent] vinegar produced by a beggar...

Finally, the theoretical approach runs along the following analogy: If one were to live in the same house with identical twin brothers, in two to three days, their overt dissimilarities would somehow come to notice. However, it would be difficult to tell them apart if they were to come to a sports club alternately. Dozens of Kanji characters are "identical twin brothers." How to know one from the other is the never-ending puzzle. By putting those "identical twins" side by side within the Veemuenics concept, the observer can clearly discern their differences. This manner of comparison is where the theoretical approach to learning Kanji diverges from the common grade-level approach. Within this innovative perspective, I hope to highlight the uniqueness of each Kanji character; to look at each tree, in order to clearly see the larger forest.

Zack Davisson concludes, "The Kanji Handbook" is another guide that proposes a method to get those little chicken scratches to stick inside your head better than just endless copying. The system is fairly simple, using linguistic association, where a word is written out with
everything but the first letter, which is then replaced by the target kanji. For example, the word boat would look like (kanji)boat. The kanji are then grouped together in a fairly nontraditional method using similarity of appearance. This way, you study them all as a group and can learn to detect the small changes that separate one from another. This method is both good and bad, because while it makes it easier to remember the groupings, some very complex Kanji are learned next to very simple Kanji, and there is no workbook to help master the strokes. There is still a healthy amount of copying, as the author recommends writing each kanji about 30 times, then he composes a sentence in English using the target kanji that is also written about 30 times. Some of the sentences are quite odd and forced to include all the kanji in the grouping, but they are usually helpful." Another reviewer (Belton) has this to say, "These are interesting little sentences using these KanjiHybrids to link characters in your memory mainly by shape. For instance, "distant garden, in fact a monkey's den." And the idea behind using hybrids I find quite interesting. Why 1 = distant and oddly a more useful connection. I also think the ambiguity at times helps by making me look closer or think harder. I first thought a monkey might be Donkey because of the potential rhyme, but in fact it's monkey and I think it might now be a permanent memory, or has the potential to be." Indeed if you take away the hybrids, the method is very much a traditional one. The twist is it's plus 16 years plus of English knowledge to give you a leg up. I think it might work and intend to give it a try. Nothing to lose really and it lends itself as an addition to how I already try to learn kanji." The governing concept behind KanjiHybrid is linguistic association. Here, the same reviewer writes, "The thing is, what KanjiHybrid relies on is your ability to fill in missing information while reading. Why you can understand mispelt words for instance. And I remember a test where as long as the length and the first and last letters of each word were correct you could still read a sentence that was on the face of it meaningless. By completely replacing English words with kanji in a rebus fashion you have nothing to help you understand the kanji. What Hybrids hopes to do is give you repeated exposure to a combination of the kanji and English key word. Enough exposure and you start to remember it." 

By explaining the concept and application of KanjiHybrids, it is fairly possible to form a whole text, which would still be recognizable given that the reader has sufficient background in both Kanji characters and the English language:

IN CONGRESS, JULY 4, 1776 The unanimous
Declaration of the thirteen United States of America

When in the course of human events it becomes
necessary for men to dissolve the political
bonds which have connected them with each other
and to assume among the powers of the earth

The separate and equal站stion to which the Laws
of nature and of Nature's God entitle them, a decent
respect for the opinions of mankind requires
that they should declare the causes which impel them
to the separation.

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all
men are created equal, that they are endowed by
their Creator with certain unalienable rights,
that among these are life, liberty and the
pursuit of happiness.

Conclusion

As a new learning tool, KanjiHybrids holds great
guarantee to both non-Japanese learning Kanji characters
and Japanese students learning the English language.
However, as a new method, standardization and
uniformity need to be established, thereby allowing
greater coherence and wider acceptance. The
requirement that KanjiHybrids need sufficient
knowledge of Kanji characters and a fair amount of
English vocabulary can be a limiting factor. Yet, when
one considers that Kanji character is the world's largest
writing system, wider acceptance is not totally
impossible. To be sure, KanjiHybrids will be subjected to
numerous tests, with possible revisions to the form here
and there, but the general concept will likely survive.
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新学習概念発明「漢字ハイブリッド」の概要

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要旨
この概念は、漢字とその意味を表す英単語を直接つないで表現するアプリケーションの総称であり、これを我々研究グループは「漢字ハイブリッド」と命名している。具体的にはillountain、teaven、stone、ountry、island、lower、acteria、edicine、usiness、theoryといったものである。この例からも分かるように、特定の言語に限定されず、ある外国語とある外国語のすべての言語の組み合わせに対応が可能な概念である。

キーワード：KanjiHybrids, Kanji characters, Linguistic Grouping, Ambiguity