General information
- spoken by about 122,080,100; 121,000,000 in Japan (as of 1985) (ethnologue.com)
- possibly related to Korean (and possibly in the Altaic language family)

Location

(source: http://www.wordtravels.com/images/map/Japan_map.jpg)
Phonetics/Phonology

- 5 vowel system /i, e, a, o, u/
- CV is most common syllable type. Others are (ignoring geminates): V, VN, CVN
- Additionally, vowels are contrastive for length.
  - /oziːsa/ [odʒisən] ‘uncle’
  - /tuki/ [tsuki] ‘moon’
- Phonemically, Japanese has one nasal sound which has at least 5 phonetic realizations.
  1. It assimilates in place with following consonant.
     - /hōntoː/ → [hontoː] ‘truly’
     - /haspɑ/ → [hampa] ‘haphazard’
     - /kosɡaɾi/ → [kongaɾi] ‘crisply’
  2. It is realized as the uvular nasal /ɴ/ word-finally.
     - /hɔs/ → [hos]
  3. It is realized as nasalized copy of preceding vowel.
     - /hɔs/ → [hoʊ]
- Japanese also has geminate sounds.
  - /ɡakkoː/ ‘school’
  - /happoː/ ‘firing’
  - /jatto/ ‘at last’
  - /hossa/ ‘attack (of disease)’
- devoicing of high vowels occurs
  - general rule: between two voiceless consonants when unaccented
e.g. /kutsu/ → [kʊtsu]
- palatalization of dental obstruents occurs
  - /s/, /z/, /t/, /d/ → [ʃ], [ɹ], [tʃ], [dʒ] (respectively) in front of [i]
  - /siNbuN/ → [ʃimbuN] ‘newspaper’
  - /tomodatʃi/ → [tomodatʃi] ‘friend’
- affrication of dental obstruents (excluding /s/) occurs
  - /z/, /t/, /d/ → [dz], [ts], [dz] (respectively) in front of [u]
  - /tukue/ → [tsukue] ‘desk’
- Japanese makes use of a special kind of rhythmic unit called a mora
  - A Japanese syllable many contain one or two moras. An onset consonant (i.e. a consonant at the beginning of a syllable) does not count as a mora.
    - The structure (C)V will count as one mora
      - /hasi/ ‘chopstick’: ha-si
    - The structure (C)V: (with a long vowel) has two moras.
      - /ookii/ ‘big’: o-o-ki-i
    - The structure (C)VN has two moras.
      - /sinbun/ ‘newspaper’: si-n-bu-n
    - The structure (C)VQ has two moras.
      - /hakkiri/ ‘clearly’: ha-k-ki-ri

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1. Most information in this section is from Comrie (1990).
2. Instead of /u/, people sometimes use the symbol for the unrounded high back vowel /ɯ/. In Japanese, the vowel is neither rounded nor are the lips spread, but rather they are compressed. Neither /u/ nor /ɯ/ fully captures this.
3. C = consonant, V = vowel, N = nasal consonant
4. The circle is a diacritic indicating that a sound has been devoiced.
5. The term obstruent is an umbrella term for plosives, fricatives and affricates.
• functions as rhythmic unit in certain types of Japanese poetry (e.g. haiku)

Haiku have 17 moras, following the pattern 5-7-5.

江戸の雨何石呑んだ時鳥
*edo no ame nan goku nonda hototogisu*

how many gallons of Edo's rain did you drink?
cuckoo

Moraic breakdown:
e-do no a-me na-n go-ku no-n-da ho-to-to-gi-su

(Pitch change occurs not on syllable level but on mora level.

*káin ‘completion’*

• Accent, however, occurs on syllable level and not on mora level (i.e. if a syllable has two mora, the accent can only occur on the first mora of that syllable).

Transcription of recorded passage

árutokitaikaze to táijo: ga tikaɾakúɾaɾe o simásita. tabibito no gaito: o nugáseta hó: ga katsi to ju: koto ni kimete, mázu, kitakaze kaɾa haisimémasita. kitakaze wa, náni, hitomákuri ni site misejó, to, hágésiku hukitatemášita. sóruto tabibito wa, kitakaze ga hukéba hukúhodo gaito: o sikkárıto kaɾa da ni kuttukémasita. kóndo wa táijo: no bám ni nár̄imášita.

táijo: wa kúmo no aida kaɾa jasasi kao o dásite, atatákana hikaɾı o okúrimášita. tabibito wa dandân jói kokoɾomosí ni nátte, simai ni wa gaito: o nugar̄imášita. sokode kitakaze no make ni nár̄imášita.

Romanization (Hepburn system)

Arutokitaikaze to Taiyō ga chikara-kurabe o shimashita. Tabibito no gaitō o nugaseta hō ga kachi to yū koto ni kimete, mazu Kitakaze karā hajimemashita. Kitakaze wa, ‘Nani, hitomakuri ni shite miseyō’, to, hageshiku fukitaemashita. Suruto tabibito wa, Kitakaze ga fukeba fuhokudo gaitō o shikkarito karada ni kuttukemashita. Kondo wa Taiyō no ban ni narimashita. Taiyō wa kumo no aida karā yashii kao o dashite, atatakana hikari o okurimashita. Tabibito wa dandan yoi kokoromochī ni natte, shimai ni wa gaitō o nugimashita. Sokode Kitakaze no make ni narimashita.

Orthographic version

ある時、北風と太陽が力くらべをしました。旅人の外套を脱がせた方が勝ちということに決めて、まず北風から始めました。北風は、「なに、一まくりにして見せよう」と、激しく吹き立てました。すると旅人は、北風が吹けば吹くほど外套をしっかりと体にくつつけました。今度は太陽の番になりました。太陽は雲のあいだから美しい顔を出して暖かな光を送りました。旅人は段々よい心もちになって、しまいには外套を脱ぎました。そこで北風の負けになりました。

(source: IPA Handbook)
References

