

ぶんぽう Grammar

1 XはYです

“It is 12:30.” “I am a student.” “My major is the Japanese language.” These sentences will all be translated into Japanese using an appropriate noun and the word *desu*.

～です。 *It is . . .*

じゅうにじはんです。 *(It) is half past twelve.*
Juuniji han desu.

がくせいです。 *(I) am a student.*
Gakusee desu.

にほんごです。 *(My major) is the Japanese language.*
Nihongo desu.

Note that none of these sentences has a “subject,” like the “it,” “I,” and “my major” found in their English counterparts. Sentences without subjects are very common in Japanese; Japanese speakers actually tend to omit subjects whenever they think it is clear to the listener what or who they are referring to.

What are we to do, then, when it is not clear what is being talked about? To make explicit what we are talking about, we can say:

_____ は にほんごです。 _____ *is the Japanese language.*
wa nihongo desu.

Where _____ stands for the thing that is talked about, or the “topic,” which is later in the sentence identified as *nihongo*. For example,

せんもんは にほんごです。 *(My) major is the Japanese language.*
Senmon wa nihongo desu.

Similarly, one can use the pattern *X wa Y desu* to identify a person or a thing X as item Y.

XはYです。 *X is Y. As for X, it is Y.*

わたしは ^{すう} ^{きむ} スー・キムです。
Watashi wa Suu Kimu desu.

I am Sue Kim.

やましたさんは せんせいです。 *Mr. Yamashita is a teacher.*
 Yamashita san wa sensee desu.

メアリーさんは アメリカじんです。 *Mary is an American.*
 Mearii san wa amerikajin desu.

Wa is a member of the class of words called “particles.” So is the word *no*, which we will turn to later in this lesson. Particles attach themselves to phrases and indicate how the phrases relate to the rest of the sentence.

Note also that nouns like *gakusee* and *sensee* in the above examples stand alone, unlike their English translations “student” and “teacher,” which are preceded by “a.” In Japanese, there is no item that corresponds to “a,” nor is there any item that corresponds to the plural “-s” at the end of a noun. Without background situations, a sentence like *gakusee desu* is therefore ambiguous between the singular and the plural interpretations; it may mean “We are/you are/they are students,” as well as “I am/you are/she is a student.”

2 Question Sentences

It is very easy to form questions in Japanese. Basically, all you need to do is add *ka* at the end of a statement.

りゅうがくせい
 Ryuugakusee desu.
(I am) an international student.

りゅうがくせいですか。¹
 Ryuugakusee desu ka.
(Are you) an international student?

The above sentence, *Ryuugakusee desu ka*, is a “yes/no” question. Question sentences may also contain a “question word” like *nan*² (what). In this lesson, we learn how to ask, and answer, questions using the following question words: *nanji* (what time), *nansai* (how old), *nannensee* (what year in school). Note carefully that the order of words in a sentence may be quite different from what you find in your language.

せんもんは なんですか。
 Senmon wa nan desu ka.
What is your major?

(せんもんは) えいごです。
 (Senmon wa) eego desu.
(My major) is English.

¹It is not customary to write a question mark at the end of a question sentence in Japanese.

²The Japanese question word for “what” has two pronunciations: *nan* and *nani*. *Nan* is used immediately before *desu* or before a “counter” like *ji* (o’clock). The other form, *nani*, is used before a particle. *Nani* is also used in the combination *nanijin* (person of what nationality).

いま なんじですか。

Ima nanji desu ka.

What time is it now?

(いま) くじです。

(Ima) kuji desu.

It is nine o'clock.

メアリーさんは なんさいですか。

Mearii san wa nansai desu ka.

How old are you, Mary?

じゅうきゅうさいです。

Juukyusai desu.

I'm nineteen years old.

なんねんせいですか。

Nannensee desu ka.

What year are you in college?

にねんせいです。

Ninensee desu.

I'm a sophomore.

でんわばんごうは なんですか。

Denwa bangoo wa nan desu ka.

What is your telephone number?

186の7343です。

Ichi hachi roku no nana san yon san desu.

It is 186-7343.

3 noun₁の noun₂

No is a particle that connects two nouns. The phrase *Toozai daigaku no gakusee* means “(a) student at Tozai University.” The second noun *gakusee* provides the main idea³ (being a student) and the first one *Toozai daigaku* makes it more specific (not a high school, but a college student). *No* is very versatile. In the first example below, it acts like the possessive (“x’s”) in English, but that is not the only role *no* can play. See how it connects two nouns in the following examples.

たけしさんの でんわばんごう
Takeshi san no denwa bangoo

Takeshi's phone number

だいがくの せんせい
daigaku no sensee

a college professor

にほんごの がくせい
nihongo no gakusee

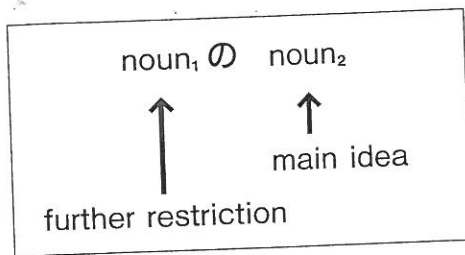
a student of the Japanese language

にほんの だいがく
nihon no daigaku

a college in Japan

Observe that in the first two examples, the English and Japanese words are arranged in the same order, while in the last two, they are in the opposite order. Japanese seems to be more consistent in arranging ideas here; the main idea always comes at the end, with any further description placed before it.

³Here is what we mean by the “main idea.” In the phrase *Takeshi san no denwa bangoo* (Takeshi's phone number), the noun *denwa bangoo* (phone number) is the main idea, in the sense that if something is Takeshi's phone number, it is a phone number. The other noun *Takeshi san* is not the main idea, because Takeshi's phone number is not Takeshi.



A phrase of the form “noun₁ no noun₂” acts more or less like one big noun. You can put it wherever you can put a noun, as in the following example:

たけしさんの	おかあさん	は	こうこうの	せんせい	です。
Takeshi san no	okaasan wa		kookoo no	sensee desu.	
<i>Takeshi's mother is a high school teacher.</i>					

表現ノート

ひょうげん

Expression Notes ②

あの ▶ *Ano* indicates that you have some reservations about saying what you are going to say next. You may be worried about interrupting something someone is currently doing, or sounding rude and impolite for asking personal questions, for example.

はい/ええ ▶ Both *hai* and *ee* mean “yes” in response to yes-no questions. Compared to *hai*, *ee* is more conversational and relaxed. In more informal situations, *un* is used.

Hai is also used to respond to a knock at the door or to the calling of one's name, meaning “Here,” as follows. (*Ee* cannot be replaced in this case.)

Teacher: <small>すみす</small> スミスさん?	Mr. Smith?
Student: はい。	Here.
Hai	

そうですか ▶ *Soo desu ka* acknowledges that you have understood what was just said. “Is that so?” or “I see.”

Pronunciation of は ▶ The particle は is pronounced “wa,” not “ha.” It should be written with は. All other instances of “wa” are written with わ.