

How alphabetic is Japanese rōmaji? Implications for the description and classification of writing systems

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The current Japanese writing system is characterised by its mixed and complementary use of four main scripts called *kanji*, *hiragana*, *katakana* and *rōmaji*. Regarding *rōmaji*, or ‘Roman script’, it is commonly described as ‘alphabetic’, ‘phonemic’ or ‘segmental’. All these descriptors imply that the script operates primarily on a systematic mapping between graphs and individual phonemic segments. However, while *rōmaji* actually implements monosegmental mappings in romanisation (e.g. <sushi>: <s> → /s/, <u> → /u/, <sh> → /ɕ/, <i> → /i/), it has many other uses that are often overlooked. This study distinguishes six categories (Coulmas 1996; López Rúa 2004; Irwin 2011):

1. Acronym: <Suica> *suika* ‘Super Urban Intelligent Card’ (prepaid travel card)
2. Alphabetism: <NHK> *enueichikē* ‘Nippon Hōsō Kyōkai’ (Japan Broadcasting Corporation)
3. Letter-name word: <L> in <L 字型> *erujigata* ‘L-shape’
4. Abbreviation: <GW> *gōrudenuwiku* ‘Golden Week holidays’
5. Xenography: <WC> *toire* ‘toilet’ (< Eng. *water closet*)
6. Loan orthography: <TikTok> *tikkutokku* ‘TikTok’

Of these, only Type 1 is monosegmental in the strict sense (e.g. <s> → /s/). Types 2 and 3 are polysegmental because all *rōmaji* letter names comprise multiple phonemes in Japanese (e.g. <N> → /enu/). Types 4 and 5 are morphographic because the graphs map to individual morphemes (e.g. <G> → {*gōrudenu*}). Type 6 is in a grey zone, where some mappings are monosegmental (e.g. <T> → /t/) but others are polysegmental due to phonotactic restrictions in Japanese (e.g. <k> → /ku/).

Unlike in writing systems based principally on the Roman script (e.g. English), polysegmental and morphographic mappings are not exceptional for *rōmaji* usage within the multi-script Japanese writing system. The present paper demonstrates this point based on a survey of the Balanced Corpus of Contemporary Written Japanese. It further discusses the significance of non-segmental adaptations of segmental scripts for the description and classification of writing systems.

Coulmas, Florian. 1996. *The Blackwell Encyclopedia of Writing Systems*. Oxford & Malden: Blackwell Publishers.

Irwin, Mark. 2011. *Loanwords in Japanese*. Amsterdam & Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company.

López Rúa, Paula. 2004. Acronyms & Co.: A typology of typologies. *Estudios Ingleses de la Universidad Complutense* 12. 109-129.