



Grammatical Comparison Of English And Japanese

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Abstract: This article explores the grammatical similarities and differences between English, an Indo-European language, and Japanese, a member of the Japonic family. Despite serving as major global languages, their structural systems diverge in fundamental ways. English relies heavily on fixed word order, articles, and inflectional morphology, whereas Japanese grammar is characterized by flexible word order supported by particles, a relatively simple tense system, and extensive use of honorifics. The comparison highlights key areas such as syntax (SVO vs. SOV), tense and aspect, plurality, negation, and question formation, while also noting points of convergence such as the use of auxiliary verbs and subject–predicate structure. By examining these parallels and contrasts, the article provides insights into the linguistic distance between the two languages and underscores the challenges and opportunities they present for learners, translators, and cross-cultural communication.

Keywords: English grammar; Japanese grammar; contrastive linguistics; syntax; morphology; word order; tense and aspect; particles; politeness; cross-linguistic comparison.

Introduction: English and Japanese are among the most influential languages of the modern world, both serving as vehicles of international communication, culture, and education. However, their grammatical systems differ significantly because they belong to entirely different language families: English is part of the Indo-European group, specifically the Germanic branch, whereas Japanese is classified within the Japonic family, whose origins remain debated. This lack of genealogical relationship means that their grammatical structures have developed independently, often resulting in striking contrasts.

A systematic comparison of English and Japanese grammar is valuable for several reasons:

- For language learners: It helps students of either language identify areas of difficulty, such as mastering Japanese particles or English articles.
- For translators: It highlights structural differences that require creative adaptation, for example when rendering politeness levels or tense nuances.
- For linguists: It provides insight into universal versus language-specific features, thereby contributing to theories of contrastive linguistics and typology.

At the broad level, both languages share the basic concept of subject–predicate structure, tense distinctions, and auxiliary verbs, yet they implement these elements in very different ways. English tends to rely on a fixed Subject–Verb–Object (SVO) word order, obligatory use of articles (a/an, the), and inflectional endings for tense and plurality. Auxiliary verbs (do, have, will) are essential to forming questions and negatives. Japanese, in contrast, is a predominantly Subject–Object–Verb (SOV) language where meaning is clarified through the use of particles (は wa, を o, に ni) rather than word order. It lacks articles, marks plurality only optionally, and employs a highly developed system of honorifics that influences verb choice and pronoun use.

Scope of the Article

This article investigates key grammatical domains where English and Japanese either converge or diverge. The analysis covers:

- Word order and sentence structure: rigid vs. flexible patterns.
- Tense and aspect: complex aspectual distinctions in English vs. simpler tense marking in Japanese.
- Articles and plurality: obligatory forms in English vs. contextual reference in Japanese.
- Pronouns and politeness: minimal variation in English vs. complex social markers in Japanese.
- Negation and questions: auxiliary-based structures in English vs. verb inflections and question particles in Japanese.

The purpose of this comparative study is to highlight both the similarities (e.g., use of auxiliary verbs, subject–predicate structures, expression of causatives and passives) and the differences (e.g., SVO vs. SOV order, presence vs. absence of articles, inflectional vs. particle-based grammar). By drawing attention to these points, the article aims to clarify the linguistic

distance between the two languages and shed light on the challenges and opportunities faced by learners, teachers, and translators who work across English and Japanese.

METHOD

Having outlined the background and aims of this study, it is now important to examine the specific areas in which English and Japanese grammar converge and diverge. While both languages share the universal need to express relationships between subjects, verbs, and objects, the mechanisms they employ are often strikingly different. English tends to rely on word order, inflections, and auxiliary verbs, whereas Japanese places greater emphasis on particles, verb endings, and contextual interpretation.[1] The following sections provide a systematic comparison across several core grammatical domains: word order, the use of particles versus word position, tense and aspect, articles and plurality, pronouns and politeness, as well as negation and question formation. Through this analysis, the structural distance between the two languages becomes clearer, as do the strategies learners and translators may adopt to bridge these differences.

1. Word Order

One of the most fundamental grammatical contrasts between English and Japanese is their basic word order.

English Word Order (SVO)

English is categorized as a Subject–Verb–Object (SVO) language. This means that in a typical sentence the subject precedes the verb, and the object follows the verb. [2] For example: I eat an apple. She writes a letter.

In English, this order is highly rigid. Altering the sequence of subject, verb, and object generally leads to ungrammatical or confusing sentences (“Eat I an apple” is not acceptable in standard English). Word order, therefore, plays a crucial role in signaling grammatical relationships.[3]

Japanese Word Order (SOV)

Japanese, by contrast, follows a Subject–Object–Verb (SOV) structure. The verb almost always appears at the end of the sentence, while the subject and object can appear in different positions depending on emphasis or style. [4] For instance:

私はリンゴを食べます。

(I eat an apple.)

彼女は手紙を書きます。

(She writes a letter.)

Here, the subject 私 (watashi, “I”) is marked by the topic particle は, and the object リンゴ (ringo, “apple”) is marked by the object particle を. Even if the subject and

object are swapped in order, the sentence remains clear because the particles identify their grammatical roles.[5]

Flexibility vs. Rigidity

This comparison highlights a fundamental difference in grammatical strategy:

- English relies on word order to establish meaning. The subject must precede the verb, and the object must follow.
- Japanese relies on particles to clarify roles, allowing more flexibility in sentence arrangement, though the verb must remain final.

Learner Implications

For learners, this difference presents challenges. English speakers learning Japanese must adjust to verb-final constructions and the reliance on particles. Japanese speakers learning English must become comfortable with fixed SVO order and understand that altering word order can dramatically change meaning or make a sentence ungrammatical. [6]

Thus, word order serves as the first and most visible point of divergence between English and Japanese, shaping how sentences are formed and understood in each language.

2. Use of Particles vs. Word Position

Another major difference between English and Japanese grammar is how the two languages mark the roles of words within a sentence.

English: Word Position and Prepositions

In English, the meaning of a sentence is largely determined by word order and the use of prepositions. The subject normally comes before the verb, and the object follows it. Prepositions such as to, in, on, at, and with indicate spatial, temporal, and logical relationships. [7] For example: The boy gave a book to his friend. She is sitting on the chair. If the positions of the subject and object are reversed, the sentence may either become ungrammatical or change meaning entirely (The friend gave a book to the boy).

Japanese: Particles as Grammatical Markers

Japanese, unlike English, does not rely heavily on word order. Instead, it uses particles (助詞 joshi) to mark the grammatical role of each word in a sentence. [8] Particles attach directly to nouns or phrases, functioning like grammatical “tags.” Some of the most important particles include:

- は (wa): topic marker
- が (ga): subject marker
- を (o): object marker

- に (ni): direction or indirect object marker
- で (de): location or means marker

Examples:

私は本を読みます。

(Watashi wa hon o yomimasu. – I read a book.)

彼が音楽を聞きます。

(Kare ga ongaku o kikimasu. – He listens to music.)

子どもにお菓子をあげます。

(Kodomo ni okashi o agemasu. – I give sweets to a child.)

In these sentences, the particles clearly identify the grammatical roles regardless of the word order. Even if the noun phrases are rearranged, the particles maintain the relationships. For example, both:

私は彼に本をあげます。

彼に私は本をあげます。

mean essentially the same: I give a book to him.

Flexibility vs. Dependency

English: Grammar depends on word position; switching positions usually changes meaning.[9]

Japanese: Grammar depends on particles; word order is flexible as long as the verb remains at the end. [10]

Learner Implications

This distinction often poses difficulties:

- English learners of Japanese must memorize the correct particle usage for each noun phrase, since particles—not position—signal meaning.
- Japanese learners of English must adjust to the strict positional rules of English, where misplacing a subject or object often produces incorrect or confusing sentences.

- Thus, particles in Japanese serve as grammatical anchors, while word order in English is the primary structural guide.[11]

3. Tense and Aspect

Both English and Japanese express time through their verbs, but the ways in which they mark tense and aspect differ considerably.[12]

English: Rich Tense and Aspect System

English distinguishes between several tenses and aspects. The main categories are:

Simple Tense: I eat / I ate

Progressive (Continuous) Aspect: I am eating / I was eating

Perfect Aspect: I have eaten / I had eaten

Perfect Progressive: I have been eating / I had been eating

These distinctions allow English speakers to express not only when an action occurs (past, present, future), but also how it unfolds (ongoing, completed, repeated, or continuous).

Japanese: Past vs. Non-Past

Japanese verbs, in contrast, operate with a simpler tense system, distinguishing mainly between past and non-past. The non-past form covers both present and future, and context determines the intended meaning. [13] For example:

私はご飯を食べます。

(Watashi wa gohan o tabemasu. – I eat rice / I will eat rice.)

私はご飯を食べました。

(Watashi wa gohan o tabemashita. – I ate rice.)

Here, the difference lies in the verb ending:

～ます (masu) → non-past (present/future)

～ました (mashita) → past

Aspect in Japanese

While Japanese lacks the complex aspect system of English, it can still express nuances of completion, continuity, and progress through auxiliary verbs and verb endings.[14]

Progressive / Continuous:

私は本を読んでいます。

(Watashi wa hon o yonde imasu. – I am reading a book.)

Perfective / Resultative:

宿題をしてあります。

(Shukudai o shite arimasu. – The homework has been done [and remains done].)

Thus, aspect in Japanese is often conveyed through constructions like ～ている (–te iru) for ongoing actions, or ～てある (–te aru) for completed actions with continuing relevance.

Comparison

English: Uses auxiliary verbs and verb inflections to create a wide range of tense-aspect combinations.

Japanese: Has a simpler past/non-past system but uses auxiliary forms to express aspect and subtle shades of meaning.

Learner Implications

English speakers learning Japanese may struggle to adjust to the lack of explicit future tense and the multifunctional nature of the non-past form.

Japanese speakers learning English may find it difficult to master the fine distinctions of aspect, especially

between I have eaten and I ate. In sum, while both languages express time, English provides a highly articulated tense-aspect system, whereas Japanese employs a context-driven, auxiliary-based approach that distinguishes only broadly between past and non-past.

CONCLUSION

The comparison of English and Japanese grammar reveals both universal linguistic principles and striking differences shaped by history, culture, and language structure. English, as an Indo-European language, relies heavily on word order, articles, inflectional morphology, and auxiliary verbs to convey grammatical meaning. Japanese, by contrast, as a Japonic language, employs a very different strategy: particles, verb-final syntax, a past/non-past tense system, and honorific expressions play central roles in structuring sentences.

Despite these divergences, the two languages share certain fundamental traits. Both possess a subject–predicate structure, both use auxiliary elements to express additional grammatical information, and both are capable of forming passive and causative constructions. These points of convergence demonstrate the universality of some grammatical categories, even across distant language families. For learners, teachers, and translators, the implications are clear: mastering English requires sensitivity to rigid word order and tense–aspect distinctions, while mastering Japanese demands careful attention to particles, politeness levels, and contextual interpretation. Recognizing these challenges not only aids language acquisition but also deepens appreciation of the unique logic each language embodies. In conclusion, English and Japanese illustrate how languages can pursue the same communicative goals through fundamentally different grammatical pathways. Their comparison enriches our understanding of linguistic diversity and underscores the adaptability of human language in shaping thought, culture, and communication.\

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