

Some Additions to the Heisig Method for Remembering the Kanji

In these notes I want to share my own experiences learning kanji by applying the Heisig method and a variety of similar approaches. Using these methods helped me a lot and gave me a good head start for my formal Japanese language studies. Of course, I am not a professional language teacher and my knowledge about Japanese and language learning in general is limited to what I have acquired myself by my own experiences and the sources that I have studied. I am also aware that there are various types of language learners, and that these methods might be not suitable for everyone, but still I hope that these notes may be found useful by learners and teachers of the Japanese language alike.

I. The scope of the Heisig method

In his three-volume book series “Remembering the Kanji” the American scholar James W. Heisig describes a way to efficiently and long-lastingly anchor thousands of kanji in the learner’s memory without going the traditional path of rote and brute force. The foundation of Heisig’s method is that every of the about 3000 kanji treated in his book is associated with a unique key word. This keyword represents a common meaning of the kanji and is used to make the kanji identifiable to the learner. It does not claim to cover all the different meanings and usages of the kanji, but serves as a first foothold to get familiar with the kanji. The outcome of applying the Heisig method is that the learner will eventually be able, by just hearing the keyword, to recall and write down the associated kanji.

As efficient as this method is, it comes with its limitations: For one thing, no connections to actual Japanese vocabulary are made, and also no readings are taught during the first book – they are only added in the second and third book. Both of these issues I will discuss later and will give some suggestions for how to fix them. Moreover, Heisig focuses on the leaning and reviewing direction “keyword to kanji” only. This means, the ability to recognize a given kanji and to say its keyword (“kanji to keyword”) is not explicitly covered. However, in Heisig’s and also in my personal opinion, the direction “kanji to keyword” is the “easier” of the two, and the ability of recognizing a given kanji is an automatic outcome of the Heisig method (“keyword to kanji”). It is even reinforced by muscle memory and the mental process of taking the kanji apart and writing down its parts in a particular order.

In my personal approach, I used Heisig’s original method as a basis, and added other methods to make connections to vocabulary and pronunciation. I will to present these additional methods which I drew from other sources and which are not covered in Heisig’s books.

II. How the Heisig method works

Here I will give just a brief summary of the method. For more details refer to the Introduction in “Remembering the Kanji 1”. The first step of the method is breaking down a given kanji into smaller parts that are also frequently used in other kanji. Heisig calls those parts “primitives”. He gives every primitive a one or several meanings which do not have to be related to a possible historic meaning. Often, they are connected with the shape of the primitive or a certain theme that is common in kanji that use this primitive. The focus here is rather on building up a set of well-distinguishable components. The online dictionary jisho.org uses Heisig’s keywords for the first entry in the list of meanings they give for a single kanji (see for example the [kanji 肌](#) with the keyword “texture”).

Example: As just mentioned, Heisig starts his discussion of the kanji 肌 by giving it the keyword “texture” (he reserves the keyword “skin” for 膚). Now the kanji 肌 is broken down into the primitives 月 and 几. The meanings of the primitive 月 are derived from the kanji 月 (keyword “moon”), as well as its frequent usage in kanji that are related to body parts (e.g. 胴, 腕, 腹). Thus, the primitive 月 is given the meanings “moon”, “flesh”, and “part of the body”. The primitive 几 is not taught as a kanji itself by Heisig. He just treats it as a component of other kanji and gives it the primitive meaning “wind” (derived from 風).

The second step of the method is to create a story for each kanji which enables the learner to make a connection from its keyword to the primitives used in the kanji. The story can also contain hints about the writing order of these primitives if necessary. The learner is then able to put the kanji together in his mind and write it down. Of course, he still must learn certain stroke order rules and how to write the primitives themselves. But this is less work than learning each kanji on its own. The stories are the strong point of the Heisig method because the human mind is much more capable of remembering stories than just random unsorted facts or stroke sequences. The reason for this is that stories are always connected to emotions and personal memory and usually have a logical progression. That means if you use stories to memorize kanji, you utilize resources that are already present and well-connected in your memory. Therefore, the more emotions and personal experiences a story contains and the more vividly it is imagined, the better it can be recalled.

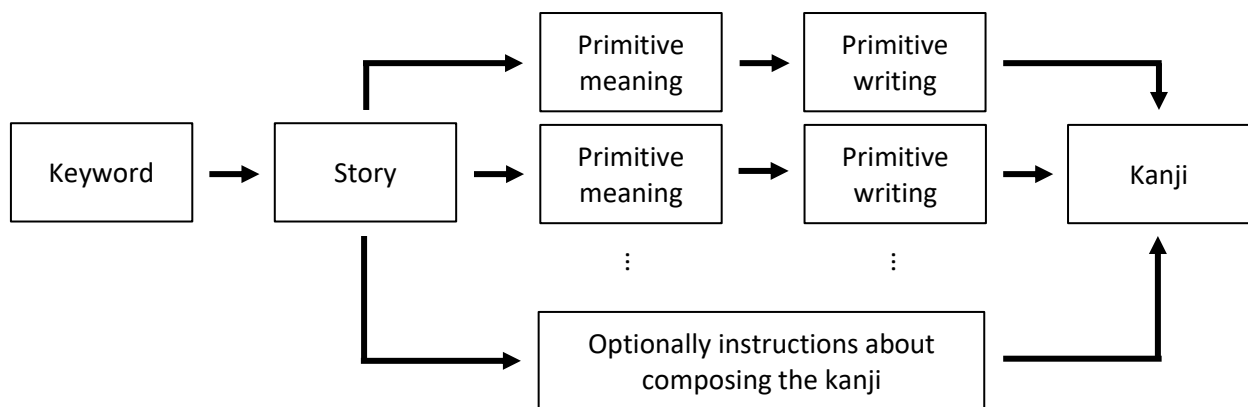
Example: The primitives 月 and 几 of the kanji 肌 are combined to the following story:

66	texture
肌	<p>Ever notice how the texture of your face and hands is affected by the <i>wind</i>? A day's skiing or sailing makes them rough and dry, and in need of a good soft cream to soothe the burn. So whenever a <i>part of the body</i> gets exposed to the <i>wind</i>, its texture is affected. (If it is any help, the Latin word hiding inside <i>texture</i> connotes how something is “to the touch.”) [6]</p> <p style="text-align: center;">丿 月 月 月 月 肌</p>

It is very useful to connect this story with the memory of a sailing trip or going skiing, the feeling of wind on your hands and face and the roughness of dry skin. If this story is triggered when hearing the word texture, it is not a big step to write down the kanji.

In the above example there were no instructions about composing the kanji in the story itself. The learner is expected to know by experience that in a “phono-semantic kanji” (keisei moji) like 肌 the primitive 几 is rarely on the left side, and since the meaning of the kanji has something to do with a body part, 月 is most probably a “left-side radical” (hen). In Heisig’s story for 冒 (keyword “risk”), however, the story contains a hint for the position of the primitives: “It is a risk to look with your eye directly **up** into the sun”. This helps to remember that the “sun” primitive has to be **over** the “eye” primitive.

The following graph gives a visualization of the thought process of remembering a kanji:



The third step is the right way of reviewing. Heisig suggests to prepare flashcards with the keyword on one side and the kanji on the other, and to review them regularly by actually writing the kanji down on a piece of paper to acquire a muscle memory. I personally use the smartphone application Anki (apps.ankiweb.net) together with a notebook. Anki provides customizable flashcards and a spaced-repetition-system which lets you study your flashcards in increasingly long time-intervals and helps you to build up a long-term memory of the kanji stories.

The power of the Heisig method is that it enables the learner to come up with his own stories which can be even better suited for memorization and connected to memories than the stories presented in the book. I personally, however, stick mostly to the stories in the book as they have sunken quite deeply into my memory by the effect of the first encounter (this means seeing a connection for the first time makes a much stronger impression than any attempt to change it afterwards) for I have started to use the Heisig method before I started Japanese classes. Therefore, it is important to come up with good story right away when starting to study a certain kanji and not leaving it to a later time. In his book, Heisig encourages the learner to create individual stories by gradually going from full stories to story fragments (after about 500 kanji) to just listing the keywords and primitive meanings.

III. Additions to the Heisig method

In order to go beyond the scope of the Heisig method, strategies to incorporate reading and vocabulary must be found.

Addition 1: Methods for learning the reading

One way to include the reading is achieved by the online platform WaniKani (www.wanikani.com) created by the group Tofugu which is a learning platform based on the Heisig method. It supplements a kanji's story by an additional story part that leads to a key pronunciation of the kanji (often the most common on-yomi). The Japanese reading is treated as a kind of "sound primitive" which is connected to an English word that sounds similarly (of course, you can also use words from other languages).

Example: The kanji 記 with the keyword "scribe" is broken down into the primitives 言 and 己 to which Heisig assigned the meanings "say" and "snake" respectively. Heisig does not provide a story for this kanji. So, I created my own story including WaniKani's sound primitive for the on-yomi 己 (like in 記事) which is "key".

For the story, I used my own memory of the character Sir Hiss in Disney movie “Robin Hood”. Sir Hiss is a snake and the personal assistant and scribe of Prince John. So, my story goes like this:

Prince John announces his new regulations for taxing the people. His **scribe** Sir Hiss, the *snake*, writes every word down that the prince *says*. After the document is finished, he puts it on a shelf in the treasury next to the other tax decrees and locks the treasury with a *key*.



Other example for sound primitives would be “hoe” for ホウ, “hog” for ホ, “socks” for ソク, “sheep” for シ and “he shoots you” for シュツ. It is important to keep your primitives for kanji components and sounds apart to avoid confusion.

A remark on WaniKani: I have used the WaniKani system for many years and enjoyed it. It also goes a step further and combines the learned kanji to vocabulary. But it comes with some trade-offs. First, it is not free. But this is ok since it is constantly improved and extended, for example with example sentences and sound files. But with this comes the second trade-off: The stories and even the primitive meanings have been changes over the course of time. This is understandable for several of the stories and meanings have not been optimal in the beginning, and now the system is more robust and consistent. For me though, this has made it harder to return and continue with the WaniKani system. Third, the review direction is only “kanji to keyword” or “kanji to reading” which is ok when you look for a quicker way of doing the reviews but it does not provide the advantages of producing the kanji yourself in your memory and writing it down. Forth, the primitives are sometimes used in a very flexible way. For example, in the case of 陽, WaniKani uses the primitive 易 instead of 昶 which has one stroke less. This might be ok if you only want to recognize the kanji, but it is a hindrance to remembering the correct stroke count and the exact way of writing it down.

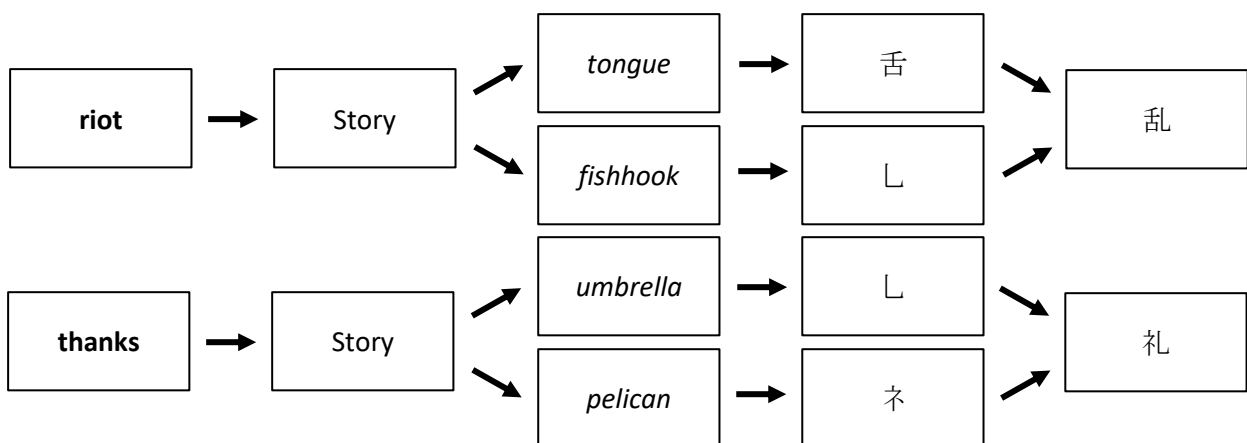
An additional way to learn reading is following the system that Heisig introduces in his second book by grouping kanji with the same or similar on-yomi that share a common primitive like 官, 管, 館 and 棺. In this case it is enough to learn the reading of 官 (カン) with a sound primitive and to memorize that the other three kanji obtain their reading from the fact that they are “phono-semantic kanji” (keisei moji) using 官 as their phonetic component.

I personally use a mix of both. For example, it was for me not much of a stretch to memorize that 申 is also pronounced シン like 神 whose reading I already knew, or that 様 and 洋 are pronounced ヨウ like 羊. On the other hand, the sound primitive method has the advantage that the reading is directly connected with the story and thus easier to memorize than the abstract association with other kanji with the same reading. Moreover, already in Old Chinese when the system of keisei moji was originally introduced, the phonetic component only provided an approximation of the actual reading of the kanji even before various sound shifts occurred over the centuries. This explains how kanji like 茶 (チャ, サ), 途 (ト), 除 (ジヨ, ジ) and 余 (ヨ) can have such different readings even though they belong to the same phonetic series.

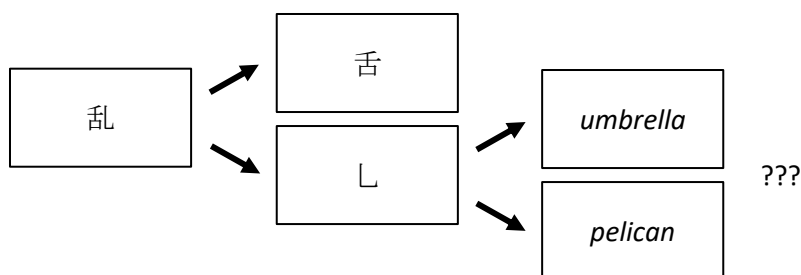
Addition 2: Giving primitives more than one meaning

Adding stories from WaniKani (the search function can be accessed via www.wanikani.com/kanji) or other online platforms (as for example kanji.koohii.com) confronts the learner with the issue that he

ends up with stories that used the same primitive but have different meanings assigned to it. But this is actually no problem for recalling a kanji from memory since for retrieving the correct primitive from a memorized story it does not matter which meaning is assigned to that primitive as long as there is a unique primitive for each meaning. The following example makes this clear: In Heisig’s book, the primitive 乚 has been given the meaning “fishhook” which I use in the story for 乱 (keyword “riot”), while WaniKani assigns to it the meaning “umbrella” which I use in the story for 礼 (keyword “thanks”). Now, Heisig’s story for “riot” involves a *fishhook* and a *tongue* which let me think of the primitives 乚 and 舌 respectively. From these I can assemble the kanji 乱. Likewise, the WaniKani story for “thanks” involves a *pelican* and an *umbrella* which let me think of the primitives 丩 and 乚 respectively, and I can assemble 礼.



It is actually quite helpful to have more than one meaning per primitive as it improves the chances to come up with original and individual stories. Actually, Heisig already uses multiple primitive meanings (see the aforementioned “moon”, “flesh”, and “part of the body” for 月). Note that the other direction, i.e. recognizing the kanji, is not uniquely defined anymore:



But in this case usually the other primitives and the overall visual appearance of the kanji work together to point one to the correct story. Often going by the story is not even necessary for recognizing a kanji. A least I never had any problem recognizing a kanji which originated in conflicting primitive meanings.

Here is a list of additional primitive meanings that I found particularly helpful:

- Add “loiter” for 彳. Heisig calls it just “going” which is problematic since many stories involve someone going, and it does not stick out enough so that the learner could recognize it as a primitive meaning.
- Add “leader” for 亻. Heisig calls it “person” but this is as problematic as “going” for 彳. Even though 亻 historically is derived from 人 and indeed means “person”, I found it extremely helpful to give it the meaning “leader” for making more memorable stories.

- Add “ribs” for 刂. Heisig calls it “saber” which is ok when you imagine it as a real big curved sword wielded by a pirate or so, and have no problem confusing it with a regular sword (刀). “Ribs” has the advantage that it automatically serves as hint for the reading 利 of the kanji 利, and with some stretch of the imagination the reading レイ and レツ of 例, 列 and 裂.
- Add “fish stick”, “soul” or “spear” for 亅. Heisig calls it “state of mind” which is quite hard to imagine in a story, especially since there are many kanji that use this primitive.
- Add “cellphone” for 隹. Heisig calls it “turkey” which is very useful, but there is a big number of kanji which are using this primitive. So having a second option for the primitive meaning can be handy.
- Add “wolverine” for 彡. Heisig calls it “broom”. One problem with this primitive meaning is that there are already many primitives that resemble long tools (like “rake” and “mop”) which can become interchangeable in stories. Another issue is that the primitive 帚 appears in a handful of kanji (婦, 婦, 掃) and it would be a pain to break it down every time anew into its three parts. Therefore, it is more practical to give 帚 the meaning “broom” instead as it is also closer to the original kanji for broom (帚 or 箒).

Here I want to remark that even though 彳, 亅, 刂, and 亅 are only abbreviated forms of 行, 人, 刀, and 心 respectively and historically had the same meaning, Heisig decided to give them different meanings. This is because we are not interested in etymological accuracy when writing a kanji, but in remembering the exact form of a primitive.

Addition 3: Including vocabulary

The use of keywords in the Heisig method is a good start to get familiar with kanji meanings. As time progresses and more and more kanji are learned, the number of keywords that are similar in meaning increases. Even though Heisig tries to choose a different word each time, especially for me as a non-native English speaker it was sometimes hard to understand the difference in nuance (for example in the keywords “cavity” for 孔, “hole” for 穴, and “den” for 洞). Thus, it was hard to come up with stories for each one of them that could distinguish between the differences in nuance. A second issue is that keywords don’t cover the full array of meaning of a certain kanji and all its possible usages in the Japanese orthography.

One strategy to avoid confusion is to embrace that fact that there are kanji with almost equal meaning (like 川 and 河) and learn them together, for example by using only one flashcard for them. But ultimately, it might be helpful for the learner to change to real Japanese words at a certain point (maybe after the first 500 kanji learned).

In order to connect a kanji with a real Japanese word instead of an English keyword, the learner can change the make-up of his flashcards as follows. For a given kanji he has to find a Japanese word that uses this kanji. It is important that the learner is already well familiar with the word (i.e. its meaning, usage and pronunciation) and all other kanji that are used in the word, so that he can focus alone on how to write the new kanji. In the beginning, he can start with Japanese words that are already known in the West like 桜 (sakura) 津波 (tsunami) or 将軍 (shougun), or with simple beginner words like 見る, 名前 or 古い.

Then, instead of the keyword, he writes the Japanese word in hiragana on the front side of his flash card. If the hiragana alone is too ambiguous or if the memory of the word is not yet firm enough, he

can write an example sentence which uses that word to give some context. On the back side of the flashcard, he writes the word in kanji, optionally the translation of the word, the kanji which he wants to study with this card, and its keyword.

Example: My flashcard for the kanji 軍 looks like this:

front	back
しょうぐん	将軍 軍 ARMY

For the kanji 将 I have a different card which uses the word 将来.

A possible flashcard for the kanji 趣 that uses an example sentence can look like this. しゅみ is underlined to indicate that this is the word the learner has to write down.

front	back
写真を撮るのが私の <u>しゅみ</u> です。	趣味 hobby (A hobby is not considered as a serious encounter with a subject. You only get the *gist of its *flavor.) 趣 GIST (You *run through the streets of your city. You come by a group of street theater performers. Without stopping you *take in all the impressions you can get. So, you understand a least the gist of the performance.)

Here I wrote my own story for the kanji 趣 on the card in order to not forget it, and a short explanation what the word “hobby” has to do with the keywords “gist” and “flavor”. In both stories I marked the occurring components and primitives with an asterisk.

The advantages of this addition are that not only the memory of the used vocabulary is deepened, but also that the reading of the kanji is part of the thought process and gets better associated with the kanji. If it is reviewed by writing down the whole word, also the other kanji is reviewed at the same time and a muscle memory for the whole word is developed.

Moving from keywords to actual Japanese words also solves the aforementioned problem of similar and easily confusable keywords. Instead of only the abstract concept, also a concrete Japanese word is connected to a kanji. In the above example the meaning “gist” is now connected to both the image of a street performance and the concept of pursuing a hobby. This sets it further apart from kanji with a similar meaning like 意 (keyword “idea”), 想 (keyword “concept”), or 概 (keyword “outline”).

Moving on to Japanese vocabulary is also backed by Heisig's observation that the learner eventually comes to a point when the story is not necessary anymore to make the connection from keyword to kanji. At this point that learner's brain has strengthened the direct association between keyword, primitives, kanji. By using actual Japanese words in his flashcards, the learner will in the same way reinforce the direct association between vocabulary and kanji so that eventually even the keyword becomes obsolete.

IV. Some final remarks

Every kanji should be looked up in a dictionary (like jisho.org) as the keyword given by Heisig can have multiple meanings, e.g. "company" for 社. In this case, in order to reduce ambiguity, the learner can add a hint ("company (economy)"), switch to another language ("Firma"), or come up with a completely new keyword as long as it is not used with another kanji (for example "sharpen a pencil" for 削 instead of "plain"). It is essential that a definite picture comes up in the learner's mind when reading the keyword which then leads to the associated story. Sometimes the concept behind a kanji cannot be fully expressed by just a single keyword. For example, both the kanji 触 and 接 have to do with "touching". But 触 means actively touching, gripping and feeling an object, and 接 means two objects making contact. Therefore, it is helpful to first research how a kanji is used, and then create a story based on that.