

THE 100 MOST ESSENTIAL WORDS IN ANIME

by David Soler

Note: Since I want this to be readable in programs with no formatting ability, I'm employing a modified romanization system. Instead of putting a diacritical marking above an "o" to indicate a doubled length, I'll write out "ou." I'm assuming that readers will be familiar with the standard romanization system. If not, any pocket Japanese-English dictionary will provide a complete explanation of Japanese romanization.

Disclaimers: This glossary contains my choice of the 100 words which I deem to be most common and/or essential in anime. Obviously, my opinion is different from that of others. Students of Japanese should also be cautioned against using this vocabulary without regard to proper context. To choose an obvious example, don't attempt curses outside of your close circle of friends. My friend Akihiko Watanabe has graciously consented to proofread my work. Of course, any errors which remain are strictly my own.

1. abunai- dangerous. The term has a broader application in Japanese than a direct translation would suggest, being employed in situations where an English speaker would say "Duck!" or "Look out!" Another common usage is as a euphemism for "deviant," i.e. a "dangerous" relationship (abunai kankei).
2. ai- love. If a native speaker wanted to specify romantic love, he would use the character pronounced koi (or ren, depending on the context).
3. aite- opponent. Be careful, the word has many applications that are counter-intuitive. A more literal reading of the characters would be "the one whom I must face." As a result, the word can also refer to one's dancing partner or the person whom you are addressing in a two-person conversation.
4. akuma- Satan, Devil. As with its English counterparts, this word can be used figuratively.
5. arigatou- Thanks. The full formula is arigatou gozaimasu.
6. baka- an all-purpose insult denigrating the subject's intelligence. Depending on tone of voice and other factors, it can range in severity from "silly" to "retard." Other similar insults are aho and manuke, although manuke is more specifically "dolt, buffoon."
7. bakemono- monster.
8. be-da!- the sound made by Japanese when they perform akanbe, a gesture of contempt made by sticking out the tongue and bringing down one lower eyelid. The gesture is analogous to a Bronx cheer or "Nyah nyah nyah nyah nyah."
9. bijin- a beautiful woman. In terms of frequency and usage, it's best likened to "babe." However, it's still acceptable in formal speech registers, so is not inherently disrespectful.
10. chigau- a verb meaning "to deviate, be different." In standard Japanese, it's used to declare that someone is wrong. When shouted as an explanation, it's meaning is closer to "No way!" or "Don't be ridiculous!/You are SO off-base!"

11. chikara- strength, power.
12. chikusho- an exclamation of frustration, equivalent to "Damn!" or "Shit!" Comparable exclamations are kuso (literally "shit") and shimatta.
13. chotto- a little. Differs from its English counterpart in that it can only be used as an adverb. (The adjectival form is chiisai.) When exclaimed, it means "Hold it!" or "Cut it out!"
14. daijoubu- O.K. Most often encountered in anime when one character inquires as to another's health.
15. damaru- be still, silent. Most often found in its imperative form, Damare!, meaning "Shut up!/Silence!"
16. damasu- to deceive. Often encountered in its passive form, damasareru, "to be tricked."
17. dame- bad, no good; no can do. One very common usage is dame desu/dame da, uttered when refusing permission or indicating that something is a bad idea.
18. dare- who. Note that certain particles placed after the word will alter its meaning, i.e. dareka-someone, anyone daremo-no one daredemo-everyone.
19. doko- where.
20. fuzakeru- to play games, fool around. It can also be shaded by tone of voice to assume a harsher meaning, like "bullshitting" or "screw/fuck around."
21. gaki- young, immature person. Often translated as "brat" or "punk."
22. ganbaru- a literal reading of the characters would be "to adhere to something with tenacity." A very popular term used when encouraging someone is a difficult task. Some English translations are "Hang in there!," "Don't give up!," "Do your best!," and "Give it your all!" Note: the verb phrase shikkari suru has an overlapping meaning, but slightly different connotations. Apparently, the latter term implies use of innate abilities as opposed to a conscious act of willpower. The two are generally interchangeable, though. The command forms of "gambaru" are "gambatte" and "gambare."
23. hayai- quick, fast, early. The adverbial form hayaku means "Hurry up!" when exclaimed.
24. hen- strange, weird. In compound noun phrases, it assumes an older meaning of "change, transformation." One such compound that's especially popular in anime is henshin, meaning "physical transformation" a la Sailor Moon and Voltron.
25. hentai- although a hen compound, it merits a separate entry. Its classical meaning is "metamorphosis, transformation." It later came to mean "abnormality," and in modern colloquial Japanese is used almost exclusively to mean "pervert" or "perversion." When a woman insults a man in anime, she generally uses one of three terms: hentai, sukebe, and etchi. Sukebe implies "oversexed" rather than "deviant." Etchi can be quite mild in some contexts, comparable to "lewd" or "Fresh!" These three terms are often used interchangeably, especially when someone is stringing together insults. Though not as

frequent, the word (o-)kama refers specifically to transvestitism and other gender-bending actions associated with homosexuality.

26. hidoi- severe, harsh. As an exclamation, it means "How terrible!" or "That's harsh/cold!" A spoken variant is "Hide-e!"

27. hime- princess.

28. ii- good. An older variant, still current, is yoi. Yoku is the adverbial form. Yokatta is the familiar past tense. When used as an exclamation, it can mean "That's great!," but is usually better translated as "I'm so glad!"

29. iku- to go. Common conjugated forms are ikimashou, ikou, (Shall we go?/Let's go), ike and ikinasai (Go!/Begone!).

30. inochi- life. There are a couple of words in Japanese which can be translated as "life," but inochi is the proper term in the more dramatic situations common in anime, such as "to stake one's life," "to take a life" and "more important than life."

31. itai- hurt, pain; painful. A common explanation, it's equivalent to "Ouch!" A frequent spoken variant is Ite-e!

32. jigoku- Hell. Hades.

33. joshikousei- a female high school student. That's the literal meaning, anyway. In Japan, it invariably refers specifically to a cute high school girl in a sailor uniform. That Japanese has such a compact, productive phrase for this image implies that it's an important archetype in the Japanese psyche.

34. kamawanai- regardless of. When uttered as an exclamation, it means "I don't care!" Kamawan is a more brusque spoken variant.

35. kami- God, god. This term can also be applied to any supernatural being with a specific domain/charge/sphere.

36. kanarazu- an adverbial prefix indicating something will happen surely and/or inevitably. As an exclamation, it means "I swear it!" or "No matter the cost!"

37. kareshi- boyfriend. Kanojo is the equivalent word for "girlfriend." Koibito can be applied to both sexes, but it implies a more serious relationship.

38. kawaii- cute. More than a mere adjective, kawaii qualifies as an aesthetic and an obsession in Japan. A less common, secondary meaning is "cherished, beloved." Note: kawai sou means "How sad" or "How pitiful." Use caution before calling someone pitiful-looking, as Kawai is not etymologically related to Kawaii.

39. kedo- but, but still. More formal variants are keredo and keredomo. The latter form is generally restricted to writing Japanese nowadays.

40. kega- wound, injury. It's also possible to use this term to refer to a spiritual violation or defilement.

41. keisatsu- Police.

42. ki- this term is used in countless compounds and idioms. Although there are too many to describe in detail, "ki" is generally used in two senses. One is its literal meaning of "air." The other is its figurative meaning of "spiritual essence." Many English speakers know this concept through the Chinese loan word "chi." One common compound is kimochoi, the chi one bears, hence "mood."

43. kokoro- heart. Common extensions of this meaning are "sincerity" and "spirit/willpower."

44. korosu- to kill. Often occurring in the passive past tense (korosareta) and imperative tense (Korose).

45. kowai- to be frightful, afraid. The exclamation Kowaii! Can be translated as either "Scary thought!" or "I'm scared!," depending on the context.

46. kuru- to come. Its command form, Koi!, can mean either "Come here!" or "Come on!"

47. mahou- magic, magic spell.

48. makaseru- to place one's trust in someone or something, to count on.

49. makeru- to lose. The phrase Makeru mon ka! Means "I can't/won't give up!" or "I'll never give up!"

50. mamoru- to protect, guard. The inflected form most commonly found in anime is mamotte ageru, "I'll protect you."

51. masaka- Can it be?; It can't be!, No!

52. matsu- to wait. The shouted command "Wait" is "Matte (kudasai)!" or "Machinasai!" Mate! is an abbreviated form of Matte!

53. mochiron- of course, without a doubt.

54. mou- already. As an exclamation of frustration, it means "Enough!" or "Geez!"

55. musume- young woman. As an epithet, ko musume is stronger than a literal translation of "little girl" would suggest. When used in this sense, "girlie" or "bitch" come closer to capturing the meaning.

56. naka- a word referring to one's relations, both familial and platonic. Nakayoku suru means "to get along." "Nakama" means "close friend(s)" or "trusted ally(-ies)."

57. nani- what.

58. naruhodo- I see.; So.

59. nigeru- to flee. Often used in the imperative form, Nigete! or Nigero!, in which case it's best translated as "Run!" or "Get away!"

60. ningen- human; humanity. Refers to mankind as a species, especially when contrasted with alien races, demons, elves, etc.

61. ohayou- abbreviated form of ohayou gozaimasu, "good morning." Men have the option of using the reduced form ossu in casual speech.

62. okoru- to get angry.

63. onegai- truncated form of onegai shimasu, "I beg of you," "Please" or "Pretty please." Without the o- prefix, it means "wish."

64. oni- demon, ogre, or any other supernatural life form inimical to mankind.

65. Ryoukai!- message received and understood-"Roger!"

66. Saa- a noncommittal reply indicating that one has understood a statement and given it serious thought. Some possible translations are "So!," "Well!," and "Beats me!" (A good English equivalent might be the British "Innit?")

67. sasuga- a person is living up to his reputation or the speaker's personal expectations. "Yahari," on the other hand, refers to situations proceeding as expected or dreaded. (Yahari is often translated as "I knew it!" when used in exclamatory mode.) Yappari is a more casual variant of yahari. Other like terms are aikawarazu, "the same as always," and Sono touri, which means just so when employed as a response to a question.

68. sempai- anyone who is one's senior in a hierarchical organization. The term cuts across all classes and occupations, and must be translated according to context.

69. shikashi- however, but, nevertheless.

70. shikata ga nai- an expression meaning "No help for it," "No way to avoid it," "Nothing left but to deal with it." Shou ga nai is an abbreviated form.

71. shinjiru- to believe in. The inflected form most frequently encountered in anime is shinjirarenai, "I can't believe it!"

72. shinu- to die. The most common inflected forms are Shinda, "Dead.," Shinanaide!, "Don't die!," and Shi'ne!, "Die!"

73. shitsukoi- persistent, relentless, tenacious-at the very least a constant pain in the ass.

74. sugoi- one of three common superlatives that all happen to begin with su-. The other two are suteki and subarashii. The three are generally interchangeable. However, sugoi often expresses an admiration for someone else's power or talent, and may be mixed with a sense of dread. It can straddle the line between "awesome" and "awful." Suteki is most often applied to physical appearance. It's used most often by women, but it can be applied to both genders. Subarashii is more neutral and can be translated as "great." Although

lacking the su- beginning, kakkoi is a superlative used mostly in describing people-"Cool!"
Note: A spoken variant of sugoi is Suge-e!

75. suki- affection, liking. Also used to signify "love." If anything, the phrase "Suki da." is even more ambiguous than the English "I like you."

76. suru- to do. A frequently occurring phrase is "Dou shiyou?," meaning "(Oh,) What shall I do!"

77. taihen- when modifying an adjective, it means "extremely." When it describes a situation without any other adjectives, it means "terrible."

78. tasukeru- to aid. The exclamation "Tasukete kure!" = "Help me!/Save me!"

79. tatakau- to fight, do battle.

80. teki- enemy.

81. tomodachi- friend.

82. totemo- very, extremely. It can be pronounced totemo to indicate extra enthusiasm.

83. unmei- fate, destiny.

84. uragirimono- traitor.

85. ureshii- happy. As an exclamation, Ureshii! Can be translated as "I'm so happy!" or even "Whee!"

86. urusai- noisy. When used as an exclamation, it's best translated as "Be quiet!" and occasionally "Shut up!" Usse-e! is a spoken variant.

87. uso- a lie. As an exclamation, it can mean "You must be kidding!," "You lie!," or "No way!" Spoken variants are Usso! and Ussou. The word usotsuki means "liar."

88. uwasa- rumor.

89. wakaru- to understand. Common inflections are wakatta (understood) and wakaranai (don't understand). Note that the abbreviated forms of wakaranai are gender specific, with women favoring wakannai and men likely to say wakaran or wakanne-e.

90. wana- trap, snare.

91. yabai- miserable, wretched (situation). As an exclamation, this can be translated as "This is bad!" or an emphatic "Uh-oh."

92. yakusoku- promise, oath. Also used as "appointment."

93. yameru- to stop, quit, terminate. The exclamation Yamero! can be translated as "Stop (it)!" or "Enough!"

94. yaru- this verb has several meanings. It's a deferential form of the verb "to do." It's also a form of the verb "to give" reserved for gifts made to social inferiors (and plants and animals). Finally, it can mean "to try, attempt."

95. yasashii- although pronounced the same as the Japanese word for "easy," in anime it's more likely to refer to the character for "splendid, exceptional." For example, yasashii seikaku means "good-natured" and yasashii hito means "a great guy."

96. yatta- probably originated as the past tense of yaru, but has long since taken on an independent meaning. Used to proclaim victory or good fortune. Possible translations include "Hooray!," "Banzai!," "I did it!," and "Yay!"

97. yoshi- an exclamation used when readying oneself to take an important action. Possible translations include "Here I come!," "All right (,then)!" Spoken variants are yosshi and yo-oshi!

98. youkai- an occult monster. Sometimes used as a general term for occult phenomena.

99. yume- dream.

100. yurusu- to forgive, pardon. Forms of this verb commonly found in anime are O-yurushi kudasai or Yurushite kudasai, meaning "Forgive me!" Even more common is yurusanai/yurusenai. This phrase can be literally translated as "I won't/can't forgive you!," but an idiomatic translation generally requires that attention be paid to the specific circumstances in which the exclamation is shouted or growled. "I will grant no quarter!" might work in some historical periods, but "You're finished!" would work better in most contemporary settings. Other possibilities which work in certain circumstances are "Your day is done!," "It's curtains for you!," "You're through!"...you get the idea.

A Word on Pronouns:

I was going to avoid discussing larger questions of syntax and usage altogether. Unfortunately, the pronouns a character reveal so much about personality and background that I feel obligated to try and explain them.

This aspect of Japanese is easily lost in translation, since in English they can only be translated as "I" or "you." I'm including some personal conjectures in my explanations, so please forgive any errors that may occur.

When using the first person, the Japanese speaker can choose among the following words: watashi, watakushi, atashi, boku, ore, sessha, washi, and atai. This list is by no means complete, also. All of these terms are translated "I" even though each word has different connotations.

Watashi is polite without indicating deference or formality. Boku is used by young men (and young women actively emulating male behavior). Ore is even more overtly masculine, and implies either that a man is speaking among intimates (at the least that there are no women present) or that he is aggressively macho. Atashi is strictly feminine speech. Watakushi is an older form of watashi.

Today it's considered slightly more formal, and its use indicates that the speaker is paying conscious attention to decorum. Watakushi is favored by women, but might also be used by men, especially in the service industry. Sessha is an older form, and implies courtliness and modesty. Washi is used by older men in positions of authority. Atai is associated with the lower class.

Japanese second-person pronouns include omae, onore, kisama, anata, anta, kimi, onushi, and temee. In practice, second-person pronouns are usually avoided-something possible because the Japanese language doesn't demand that the subject be included in a sentence. There are signs that Japanese teenagers and young adults are starting to use omae as an all-purpose pronoun analogous to the English "you." This practice is not entrenched in the language yet, and older usages still survive, so use omae with caution. Omae is traditionally used in conversation with someone dear to the speaker, and to many Japanese it is this romantic connotation that is the truest sense of the word. Finally omae is used as a familiar form of address, signaling that the speaker is brash, casual, and doesn't respect convention.

This assumption of familiarity can be taken as insulting. Since omae has so many different (and sometimes clashing) connotations, use it with caution. Kisama is a masculine form of address which can be openly insulting. It seems that in anime the brash, defiant hero can use omae while his villainous counterpart will use kisama to indicate his distaste for the person he is addressing. Onore was once formal usage, but is now considered rude and offensive. Anata is generally used when speaking with social inferiors, and can be made insulting by tone of voice, BUT it also functions as an endearment when a woman uses it to speak with her husband. Anta is a variant of anata used by women, and is not necessarily rude. Kimi is male speech, used when speaking to people you have direct authority over, i.e. a vice-president speaking to the secretary, or a teacher addressing a student. Kimi is also how a boy refers to his girlfriend. Onushi is archaic polite usage, and sounds quaint when used in modern speech.

Third person is easier because Japanese speech favors using title and/or surname. Aitsu and yatsu are the two third-person pronouns that come to mind. Both are extremely casual, and generally slightly insulting. (It appears that yatsu may be preferred when referring to people outside of one's social class. An absolutely neutral way of referring to some one else is ano hito, "that person.")

Complicating things further is that Japanese speakers actually have a good deal of flexibility in choosing which pronouns they use. The extreme situations found in anime also lead to unorthodox usage. When Ranma changes into a woman, do his speech patterns change?

Let's take Pai from 3x3 Eyes as a specific example. In her normal personality, she refers to herself as "Pai" instead of using a first person pronoun. She may be mirroring the practice of her race's native language. However, using first-name instead of a first-person pronoun is common practice in Japan among children and child-like people. That's why Pai's speech seems natural and appropriate to a Japanese speaker. Conversely, in her "Sanjiyan" mode, Pai refers to herself as washi. That's because the Sanjiyan personality is inhumanly old and powerful. Some less fantastic examples of unorthodox speech include a male homosexual using feminine speech, and a female juvenile delinquent using masculine pronouns.

Pronouns are an especially complex and frustrating part of the Japanese language, but they can impart a lot of information in a rapid and subtle fashion. This versatility in responding to

different situations is one of the Japanese language's defining characteristic, adding much to the richness and character of its speech.

(End of article. I welcome people forwarding this to interested parties, asking only that the credits be unchanged. Anything else would be unfair to me and my native informant. Any comments can be addressed to david.soler@yale.edu and akihiko.watanabe@yale.edu)

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