

Re: uh?

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The Wanderer wrote:

[...]

Since I'd have said, before tonight, that anyone who claimed that there were more than (to be generous) about eight Japanese vowel sounds in total didn't know what they were talking about, I don't know if I can claim much snootiness over that one.

It depends how you define "sound." If you mean it as what distinguishes one word from another, then "standard" Japanese has exactly five vowels. (Some dialects might have fewer; at least one I know has more.)

If you define it as something that a sound spectrograph might distinguish from all other sounds, then the number approaches infinity as you improve the sensitivity of the machine, virtually all matters of free variation.

If you mean allophones, it's somewhere between, but I think I generally made it about a dozen or so (distinguishing the four-way distinction of /u/ in /kuki/, /muki/, /suki/ and /sumu/, for example) in presentations to students, only five of which are really necessary to distinguish unless you want to pass as Japanese for the CIA or something.

Bart

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