

Re: uh?

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- *From:* The Wanderer <inverseparadox@xxxxxxxxxxxx>
 - *Date:* Fri, 04 Nov 2005 01:16:36 -0500
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Bart Mathias wrote:

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.)

I would be *very* interested, on at least an academic level, to learn more about that. (My inner etymologist sat up and took notice at the very mention of the idea that there might be variations on such a basic level.)

As to the definition of "sound", I think I can safely borrow one of the definitions I've derived from considering the tree-in-a-forest question: "something a person would recognize as being a sound", or in this case, "something a person would recognize as being a distinct sound". If the difference can be heard - not simply "detected" as with a 'sound spectrograph' (and I *know* there's a technical term for that) - then I'd probably classify the sounds as being different.

(Only "probably", mind, because then one gets into things like the differences between people's voices and the differences involved in inflection and/or intonation and even, perhaps, the differences in volume... and many or most of those would not be enough to constitute a difference in the sense at hand.)

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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.

...except perhaps for the elided 'u' in 'suki', I'm not sure I'd noticed any differences in the 'u's among those. I really have far too little practical experience with Japanese to go very deep into this sort of discussion...

But yes, I'd consider a dozen or so to be reasonable, given what little I've seen of the idea so far.

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The Wanderer

Warning: Simply because I argue an issue does not mean I agree with any side of it.

Secrecy is the beginning of tyranny.

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