

## KY-style Japanese: Express yourself alphabetically

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Waiting at the railroad crossing, I couldn't help but overhear the animated conversation that the two students standing behind me were having.

Despite having studied Japanese for more than 10 years, I didn't have a clue what they were talking about. What on earth did *jeikei*, *aidaburyu*, *emuemu* and *shibi* mean? Were these guys even conversing in Japanese? It was only much later — long after the students had disappeared into the city's concrete jungle — that I realized they had been substituting alphabetical abbreviations for ordinary Japanese words: JK, IW, MM and CB. But it was not until much later that I discovered what these meant.

### KY cabinet

"KY-shiki Nihongo" ("KY-style Japanese"), a book published in February 2008 by Taishukan Shoten, contains popularly used abbreviations, including their meanings and usage. KY stands for *kuki yomenai* and refers to people who can't read "the air (*kuki*)," or intuitively understand a given situation and behave accordingly — a highly valued skill in Japanese society. The most infamous culprit of KY is former prime minister Shinzo Abe, whose cabinet is widely known as the "KY Cabinet."

"KY-shiki Nihongo" is edited by the linguist Yasuo Kitahara and was compiled after the publisher conducted an eight-month campaign to collect the most widely used KY expressions. The 439 entries that appear in the book were chosen from more than 44,000 submissions.

In it I found those abbreviations that first got me onto this topic. JK stands for *joshi kosei* (female high-school student); IW for *imi wakaranai* (don't understand a thing); MM for *maji mukatsuku* (be really fed up); and CB for *cho bimyo* (very hard to tell).

Some of the not-so-straightforward expressions include GMM for *guzen machideatta motokare* (bumping into an ex-boyfriend in town); ODD for *omae daigaku do suru* (What are you going to do about university?); and MK5 for *maji kireru gobyō mae* (five

seconds before I really lose it).

The use of English acronyms in Japan is of course anything but new. NHK (Nippon Hoso Kyokai) and JR (Japan Railways) have been around for quite a while, and recently imported terms like IT, PK or ATM have become Japanese. What's great about KY words is that they make some of these serious abbreviations lighter and more fun.

For instance, take IT. In KY terms, this has got nothing to do with Information Technology but refers to a matter that's closer to one's stomach: *aisu tabetai* or "I want to eat ice cream." Similarly, PK is not a penalty kick in soccer but a more delicate, if somewhat embarrassing, matter of having your underwear encroach into your bottom, or *pantsu kuikomu*. Young girls in the Kansai region (western Japan) may not be talking about a cash machine when they say ATM, but their fathers, who they are sick of (*aho na tochan mo irahen*).

Apart from being quite funny, the book's entries provide an interesting insight into the use of the English alphabet in Japan. One is that the KY system appears to be based on the Hepburn system of romanization of Japanese that is mostly preferred by foreigners — not the Kunrei system that is mainly taught in Japan. This is why *cho bimyō* mentioned above is abbreviated as CB and not TB (*tyo bimyō*).

Also noteworthy is that certain abbreviations are based on the original English spelling. Hence, *aisu tabetai* is I(ice)T, not A(aisu)T.

## Generational barriers

As with other aspects of language adopted by today's youth, a great deal of the attractiveness of KY Japanese lies in the fact that it gives speakers a sense of belonging to a certain clique, as well as excluding people in older age groups. The young guys that I met at the railroad crossing were successful in this respect.

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