

What's in a (Japanese) Name?

By Alex Bellos

1. N If you know that Nihon is the word for “Japan” in Japanese, that’s a good place to start. The literal meaning is “origin of the sun.” Since we know that all of the Japanese words consist of two elements, we can deduce that the two elements here are probably “ni” and “hon,” though we don’t know which is “origin” and which is “sun” yet.

2. I The English translations contain “original rice-field,” but none contain the word “sun.”

3. B “Ni” does not appear in any of the names, and “hon” appears in just one. Thus, it is fair to assume that “hon” means “origin” and Honda means “original rice-field.”

4. M So “da” means “rice-field,” and that appears in two of the translations. Though “da” does not appear in any of the Japanese words, we know that “t” and “d” might be interchangeable. Lo and behold, the element “ta” appears twice: Ōta and Tanaka. It’s likely that these are “middle of the rice-field” and “big rice-field,” but we don’t know which is which yet. Hold that thought.

5. E Another starting point is Fujisan, which is presumably Mount Fuji, since Fuji is a Japanese word. So “san” means “mount.” One of the other words is “fire mount,” or a volcano. Once again, there is no other “san”—only a “zan,” in Kazan. We know letters that sound similar might get swapped, so we can guess that Kazan is the “fire mount.”

6. P That makes “ka” mean “fire,” which leads us to Kagawa translating to “fire river,” and “gawa” meaning “river.”

The translations include “tree river” and “upper river,” which must be Kigawa and Kawakami (like some other letters, the similar sounds of “g” and “k” can be swapped). We don’t yet know how “ki” and “kami” correspond to “upper” and “tree,” but there are “upper village” and “cherry tree” among the translations.

7. H None of the Japanese words have a “ki,” but there is a “gi”: Sakuragi. And there is a “kami” in Murakami. We can deduce that Sakuragi is “cherry tree,” since neither “sakura” nor “cherry” appear anywhere else in either list, while “mura” does, in Nomura, and there is another translation with “village”: “field village.” Thus Murakami means “upper village” and Nomura means “field village.” So “no” means “field,” and Ono must be “little field.”

8. O The remaining words are: Ōsaka, Nakayama, Yamazaka, and Yamamichi, which must mean “big slope,” “slope of the mountain,” “middle mountain,” and “mountain road” in some configuration. We also still have to tease apart Ōta and Tanaka, which we know mean “middle of the rice-field” or “big rice-field.”

9. D “Yama” appears in three words, so that must mean “mountain.” That leaves Ōsaka as the “big slope.” From that we deduce that Yamazaka is “slope of the mountain,” Ōta is “big rice-field,” and Tanaka is “middle of the rice-field. So “naka” means “middle,” which gives us the final two translations: Nakayama is “middle mountain” and Yamamichi is “mountain road.”