

Japanese Culture Now

Keitai (Mobile Phone): Essential Item for Keeping in Touch



Photo: Hongō Jin

Mobile or cell telephones, known generically as “keitai” (now frequently written in the katakana letters ケータイ), first came into use as a means of emergency and other urgent communication, but have recently become indispensable to people in all walks of life. According to a survey on “Youth and Mobile Telephones” announced by the Management and Coordination Agency in December 2000, approximately 60 percent of second-year high school students own a mobile phone. *Keitai* are now an essential item for communication among high school students. Why are mobile phones so popular?

Probably the primary reason high school students prize mobile phones so much is they provide a personal and private means of communication. Using a *keitai*, as opposed to the family telephone, they can talk to their friends, girlfriends or boyfriends without parents listening in.

Inputting messages

Inputting messages for sending e-mail is done using the numeral keys. The 1 button brings up the あい-う-え-お list, 2 the か-き-く-け-こ list, and so on. Pressing 1 once shows あ, twice shows い, and three times う, four times え, and five times お. Input hiragana may be converted to kanji characters. Inputting takes longer than at a keyboard, but young people soon become expert at rapidly inputting messages with one hand.

Example: おはよう (Good morning)

- お 1 key five times
- は 6 key 1 time
- よ 8 key 3 times
- う 1 key 3 times.

着メロ Chakumero (ringer melodies)

Chakumero is short for *chakushin merodii* or “ringer melody.” Most owners of *keitai* soon learn how to substitute a phrase from a favorite musical composition for the impersonal and mechanical electronic ringing tone already installed. A wide range of selections is available to users from popular songs, classical music themes, anime film theme songs and so forth. Jingles can be downloaded from Internet websites or installed by hand referring to one of many *chakumero* guidebooks widely sold.

メル友 Meru-tomo (E-mail Friend)

Usually this refers to friends you make via e-mail, exchanging messages under “handles” or nicknames. The websites for *keitai* users have sites (*deai-kei saito* or “meeting sites”) set up for starting up e-mail friendships, and these sites are immensely popular. Some people are fortunate enough to make good friends or even fall in love starting from such e-mail friendships. Some people warn of the dangerous encounters such e-mail acquaintances can also bring.



Photo: Yamada Mariko



Photo: Hongō Jin

Current *keitai* make it possible to send brief e-mail messages back and forth, and have proved to be a medium of communication perfectly suited to young people’s preference for easy-going, informal exchange. Most of the e-mail messages they send are simple greetings (おはよう! [“Good morning!”]), and questions (いま、どこ? [“Where are you now?”]). They also send messages to help each other relax or buck up under stress; “勉強ばかりじゃばてちゃうよ! たまにはのんびりしよう!” [“If you do nothing but study, you’ll be exhausted. Hey! Let’s give ourselves a break!”]. Young people have used *keitai* skillfully to establish communication and close links with each other as never before.

The bad manners of some thoughtless *keitai* users, however, is now a much-talked-about issue. People who talk loudly on their phones without consideration of others around them can be a real nuisance on crowded trains.

Straps

Users like to search out unusual cell phone straps and select one that suits their particular tastes. Most straps cost between ¥500 and ¥800. Straps are available in all kinds of types, and many feature some kind of manga or comic character.

顔文字 Kaomoji (smileys)

Smileys created to communicate facial expressions using keyboard characters, () ^ - # * ; : + , and so on, are called *kaomoji* (lit., “face words”) in Japanese. Using these smileys, one can express various nuances of tone and attitude that are hard to express in words. High school students use some of these smileys frequently as a kind of diversion, but usually only among close friends. For example, a message might go as follows:
「あしたのバスケの試合、がんばってね (^o^)/」
Tomorrow’s your basketball game. I’m cheering for you!
* The smiley shows a face making a loud cheer with one hand raised high.

Can you guess the meaning of the following Japanese smileys?

1. m()m
2. (>_<)
3. (^_^)
4. (^_^;)
5. (T_T)
6. (^_^)
7. (^_^)/ ~ ~
8. (-_-)zzz

- | | |
|--------------|---|
| a. よろしくね | Wink |
| b. ニコニコ、うれしい | Smiling, happy face |
| c. うるうる | Tearful face (tears running down cheeks) |
| d. さようなら | Waving handkerchief goodbye |
| e. ごめんなさい! | Apologizing, hands on the floor, head bowed |
| f. ぐうぐう... | Sleeping |
| g. いや、おはずかしい | Embarrassed and flustered, caught in a spot |
| h. あー、つかれた! | Face squinched up with fatigue. |

Answers: 1-e, 2-h, 3-a, 4-g, 5-c, 6-b, 7-d, 8-f