



いっぴき?  
**ippiki?**

いっとう?  
**ittō?**



**Pera Pera Penguin's**  
5-minute Japanese Class by Hitomi Hirayama  
**Vol. 97**

When I visited my friend's house, his son asked me "How do you count butterflies?" I answered "**ippiki**," and the son said "No, it's **ittō**." Then he asked me "How about rabbits?" I answered "**ippiki**," but he said "No, it's **ichi-wa**." I had learned that when we count animals, we are supposed to use "**ippiki**" for small animals and "**ichi-wa**" for birds. Hirayama-san, what did I do wrong?

■■■ Japanese uses "counter words" when counting things. The child was right, but most of the time in our conversations we use the method Pole-san had learned. The counter for butterflies and rabbits are exceptional, though there are various types of counters. The exact number isn't known, but it is said that Japanese has more than 500 counter words, about 100 of which are used in daily life. You may be surprised that there are that many—but in fact, those counters are very useful because they can reflect the condition of what you are counting.

As to why we use "羽(**wa**) = wing" when we count rabbits, there are various explanations. One of them says that long ago, monks at temples were prohibited from eating fish or meat—but poultry was OK. One day a monk saw a rabbit hopping in the mountains and he thought that the rabbits' ears looked just like bird's wings. So, because he really wanted to eat the rabbit, he said "Oh, there's a bird." Other monks also said "Yes, that's surely a bird!" So they caught and ate it. People later began using "**wa**" as the counter for rabbits. As for butterflies, "head" was used to count them in English literature in the Meiji era and it was accordingly translated into Japanese as "頭" (**tō**), which means head.

■ An example which reflects a condition:

If we don't use counters in our conversation, the conversation won't work.

1) 165 (?) が参加する国際会議が開かれる。

**165 (?) ga sanka suru kokusaikaigi ga hirakareru**

There will be an international conference attended by 165 participants.

=> We don't know whether this means 165 countries (165 kakoku)

or 165 people.

2) バナナを 1 (?) 買って昼に 5本食べた。

**banana o 1 (?) katte 5 hon tabeta**

I bought (a bunch of bananas [banana hito-fusa], or a banana

[banana ippon]?) and ate 5 bananas for lunch.

=> We don't know how many bananas were bought.

3) 80 (?) の男性が海で泳いでいる。

**80 (?) no dansē ga umi de oyoideiru**

The (80-year-old man, or 80 men?) is/are swimming in the sea.

=> We don't know whether it's 80-year-old (80-sai no) man

or 80 (80 nin no) men.

● Below, the common counters are sorted into groups in order of pronunciation.

• Japanese system (**hitotsu, futatsu**) + a counter

Use the Japanese counting system for 1 (**hitotsu**) and 2 (**futatsu**).

For 3, use the Chinese / Japanese system, depending on your preference.

(e.g., 3 boxes → **mi-hako** or **san-hako**). From 4, use the Chinese system.

\_\_箱 **hako** (box), \_\_袋 **fukuro** (packet and bag), \_\_口 **kuchi** (mouthful),

\_\_切れ **kire** (slice), \_\_束 **taba** (bunch), \_\_さじ **saji** (spoonful),

\_\_試合 **shiai** (game), \_\_組 **kumi** (pair), \_\_山 **yama** (mountain),

\_\_皿 **sara** (plate), \_\_缶 **can** (can), \_\_鉢 **hachi** (potted plant),

\_\_コマ **koma** (scene), \_\_クラス **class** (class),

• Chinese system (**ichi, ni, san**.... + a counter)

\_\_羽 **wa** (bird) note: rabbit is an exception, \_\_枚 **mai** (sheet), \_\_台 **dai** (machine, car),

\_\_合 **gō** (unit for measuring rice and sake), \_\_膳 **zen** (a set of chopsticks, a bowl of rice),

\_\_段 **dan** (stair, rank), \_\_番 **ban** (order), \_\_列 **retsu** (line), \_\_株 **kabu** (stock),

\_\_部 **bu** (number of copies), \_\_畳 **jō** (number of tatami mats), \_\_錠 **jō** (tablet),

\_\_度 **do** (degree and number of times), \_\_世帯 **setai** (household),

\_\_人前 **ninmae** (serving), \_\_代 **dai** (generation), \_\_ポイント **point** (point),

\_\_チーム **team** (team), \_\_セット **set** (set), \_\_パック **pack** (pack), \_\_カップ **cup** (cup),

<Survival tips>: The two methods below are an easier to count inanimate objects. However, please be careful not to use them too much.

① The Japanese system has been used since the old days and it is often used when referring to a child's age, too. However, 10 (tō) isn't used much.

1 (**hitotsu**) 2 (**futatsu**) 3 (**mittsu**) 4 (**yottsu**) 5 (**itsutsu**) 6 (**muttsu**)  
7 (**nanatsu**) 8 (**yattsu**) 9 (**kokonotsu**)

e.g. **tsukue hitotsu** (a desk), **nimotsu futatsu** (two pieces of luggage),  
**yottsu** (4 years old)

② As a rule of thumb, use the Chinese number system + ko when counting small things.

1 (**ikko**) 2 (**ni-ko**) 3 (**san-ko**) 4 (**yon-ko**) 5 (**go-ko**) 6 (**rokko**) 7 (**nana-ko**)

8 (**hachi-ko/hakko**) 9 (**kyū-ko**) 10 (**jukko**) 11 (**jūikko**) ....

e.g. **tamago ikko** (an egg), **tokē niko** (two watches)

Remember, there are no definite rules for ① and ②. It is a matter of preference.

(e.g., one egg → **tamago ikko** or **tamago hitotsu**)

Why don't you ask the people around you how to count eggs!

★ Usage note: Japanese counters can even express the feelings of the person using them. Just as we use "**hiki/piki**" for small creatures (animals, fish and insects, etc.), we are supposed to use "tō" for large animals. However, in daily conversation, the sense of size depends on each individual. So even if it's a big dog, the owner may think that it's small, and he or she may use "**ippiki**" when referring to it. Also, there is another interesting example: There are some pet owners or veterinarians who think of a dog as a family member and they use "**hitori** (one person)" to refer to the animal. But, of course, these examples are not grammatically correct. So don't use them in your answers on a Japanese test!

Exercises : Put the proper word in each bracket.

1) 東京タワーの階段は 698 ( ) あります。

**Tokyo tower no kaidan wa 698 ( ) arimasu**

There are 698 steps to the top of Tokyo Tower.

2) あの選手は 1 ( ) ごとに強くなっている。

**ano senshu wa 1 ( ) goto ni tsuyoku natteiru**

That player gets stronger with each game.

3) 1 ( ) に並んでお待ち下さい。

**1 ( ) ni narande omachikudasai**

Please form a line.

4) この薬を食後に 6 ( ) 飲まなければなりません。

**kono kusuri o shokugo ni 6 ( ) nomanakereba narimasen**

I have to take 6 tablets after every meal.

5) パンフレットを 5 ( ) 送って下さい。

**pamphlet o 5 ( ) okuttekudasai**

Please send me 5 copies of the brochure (pamphlet).

6) ニュースによると去年は 3 ( ) に 1 ( ) が離婚したそうです。

**news ni yoruto kyonen wa 3 ( ) ni 1 ( ) ga rikon shita sōdesu**

According to the news, one in three couples divorced last year.

7) 1 ( ) に卵が 10 ( ) 入っています。

**1 ( ) ni tamago ga 10 ( ) haitteimasu**

There are 10 eggs in one pack.

8) 今年の夏の最高気温は 39.4 ( ) でした。

**kotoshi no natsu no saikō kion wa 39.4 ( ) deshita**

This summer's highest temperature was 39.4 degrees.

9) 私の部屋は 8 ( ) です。

**watashi no heya wa 8 ( ) desu**

My room size is 8 tatami mats.

10) 1 ( ) から 5 ( ) までの方お入り下さい。

**1 ( ) kara 5 ( ) made no kata ohairikudasai**

Numbers one through five, please enter now.

Answers: 1) (**roppyaku kyujū hachi-**) **dan** 2) (**hito-**) **shiai** 3) (**ichi-**) **retsu**  
4) (**roku-**) **jō** 5) (**go-**) **bu** 6) (**san-**) **kumi**, (**hito-**) **kumi**  
7) (**ichi-**) **pack**, (**juk-**) **ko** 8) (**sanjūkyū ten yon-**) **do**  
9) (**hachi-**) **jō** 10) (**ichi-**) **ban**, (**go-**) **ban**