

Chapter 1. The sounds of Kawaiisu

Chapter 1 introduces the letters we use to write Kawaiisu sounds, and explains how the sounds are pronounced, especially the ones that are quite different English sounds.

Why write?

Before now, the Kawaiisu people never created a written language. Linguists wrote using their special symbols. Individual language students used the English alphabet writing the way the language sounded to them. One person might write something and not be able to read it later or would share it with another student who then pronounce the written language differently. So why do we need an alphabet? Kawaiisu is an endangered language now and writing can help us preserve a printed record of how the language sounds, especially if we all use the same writing system. Users of the Kawaiisu writing system can share materials like dictionaries, lesson plans and other materials for teaching the language, and notes from classes. To put the example sentences in this book, we first had to agree how to write them! Learning to read and write Kawaiisu can also let us do things like write letters and email, send text messages to each other, or write books.

There are three basic things we want from our alphabet.

- First, we want it to be easy to learn. We all know how to write English already, and we don't want the Kawaiisu alphabet to use English letters in too many unfamiliar ways.
- Second, our alphabet should be easy to read, write and type, so nobody has to learn how to use a special keyboard in order to write something in Kawaiisu or stumble over unfamiliar symbols when they read.
- Third, we want it to be consistent, so that letters represent more or less the same sounds wherever you find them, so when you look at written words you have a good chance of sounding them out correctly.

Sometimes it's hard to satisfy all three of these conditions at the same time. For example, in the next section you'll see that we use double letters for the "long vowels" in Kawaiisu. These sound like the short vowels, only you hold them longer. The idea is that the double letters will be easy to remember because each long vowel is just like more of the short vowels: ii is more i, aa is more a, and uu is more u. Long o and long e, which we write as oo and ee, may be harder to learn because people who already know how to read English will want to pronounce them like the vowels in words like **boot** and **feet** (in Kawaiisu we'd write these English words as **buut** and **fiit**). Basically, there isn't going to be a perfect alphabet, so the tricky part is designing one that has the smallest number of problems, and then making sure that people get lots of practice and help learning to use it.

Why not just use the English spelling system?

The problem is that the English spelling system is one of the hardest in the world to use. There are too many times when the same letter is used to write different sounds (think of the sound made by the letter “c” in “carry” versus “special”), or where the same sound is written with different letters (like “c” in “carry” and “k” in “king” – the first sound is pretty much the same in these two words!). This is because we still spell words in English the way they were pronounced a few hundred years ago, or the way they were spelled in some other language (like French or Latin) when they came into English. English also isn’t a great writing system for Kawaiisu because there are some sounds in Kawaiisu that we don’t really have in English, so we need some way to write them. Fortunately, in many cases we can use English letters the way they’re usually pronounced, and there are lots of letters that will be used to write more or less the same sound in both English and Kawaiisu. (“More or less” because there might be subtle differences between the way “p”, for example, is pronounced in Kawaiisu and how it’s pronounced in English. But these will typically be variations on the same basic sound, and when first starting out don’t worry too much about these differences.)

Consonants and vowel sounds

Here are the letters for writing Kawaiisu, with an example of a Kawaiisu word that holds each sound and its English translation, and some notes about how each letter sounds.

- a** **cha’a** ‘tea’
Usually sounds like the vowel in English father, but will sometimes be reduced to sound more like the vowel in English bus.
- aa** **Kaadüm.** ‘They are singing.’
Long [a]: Same as short [a] but held longer.
- b** **hivinübü** ‘cup’
Like the b in English baby.
- ch** **wihich** ‘knife’
Like the ch in English church.
- d** **Nükadüm(ü).** ‘They are dancing.’
Like the d in English deed.
- e** **lamesa** ‘table’
Like the vowel in English bet.
- ee** **eepizh** ‘boy’
Long [e]: Same as [e] but held longer, and sounds more like the vowel in English hey. (Be careful! In English the letters “ee” makes a different sound, as in the word see.)

- g** **havagüd(ü)** ‘shade’
Sometimes a hard g like in English goat, with the back of your tongue touching the ‘soft palate’ and blocking the airflow completely. Sometimes the tongue doesn’t touch the top of the mouth all the way; it might sound more like buzzing or gargling.
- gw** **Pidügweenaam.** ‘They arrived.’
As in the name Gwendolyn.
- h** **pahei** ‘three’
Like the h in English hop. This sound can come after a vowel in Kawaiisu, unlike in English.
- i** **münigi** ‘five’
Like the vowel in English sit or sometimes like the vowel in seat.
- ii** **Apiidüm.** ‘They are sleeping.’
Long [i]: Same as [i], but held longer and sounds more like the vowel in seat. (Be careful! In English we sometimes spell this sound with “ee”, as in see.)
- k** **ka’anübü** ‘fork’
Similar to the k in English kick.
- kw** **kwichiz** ‘plate, container’
Like qu in English quiet: Same as [k] but making your lips round at the same time.
- l** **lamesa** ‘table’
Like the l in laugh. Found only in words borrowed from Spanish and English.
- m** **mümüsuui** ‘ten’
Like the m in English mom.
- n** **nü’ü** ‘I, me’
Like n in English none.
- o** **po’o** ‘water’
Like o in English both, but a little shorter.
- oo** **ootsüz** ‘jar, bottle’
Long [o]: Same as [o], but held longer. (Be careful! In English double o is pronounced like the vowel we’re writing with short [u] or long [uu] in Kawaiisu.)
- p** **nopüv** ‘egg’
Similar to p in English pipe.

- r** **Cha'a tarugid(i).** 'The tea is hot.'
This is like a d sound, only your tongue just touches the top of the mouth really quickly. It's the same sound as you find in the middle of English bottom or ladder, called a "flap". Sometimes your tongue touches the top of the mouth a bunch of times in rapid succession. Rolling your r like this is called a "trill" and is like the sound in Spanish burrito.
- s** **saasiv(ü)** 'willow'
Like s in English sassy. Sometimes speakers will make this a little farther back in the mouth, so it sounds more like "sh".
- sh** **Hin shi'idü?** 'What's this?'
Like sh in English sharp or cash.
- t** **tiip** 'dirt'
Similar to t in English tater tot.
- ts** **ewuts** 'squirrel'
This is like the ts in English cats. In Kawaiisu this can come at the beginning of a word or syllable, unlike in English.
- u** **pugüz** 'dog'
Like oo in English boot.
- uu** **Uus(i)!** 'OK, finished!'
Long [u]: Like short [u] but held longer. This will usually sound like the oo in boot (not foot).
- ü** **hü'ühüü** 'yes'
A vowel we don't have in English. It's basically the same as [u] but you spread your lips wide instead of making them round.
- üü** **müüzi** 'moon'
Long [ü]: Like short [ü] but held longer. When speakers make this sound, you will see their lips spread wide apart, almost like they're smiling while they talk.
- v** **oov** 'salt'
Like the v in English van. Sometimes people will make this sound with their upper teeth touching their lower lip, just like in English. Sometimes it will be made using just the lips, like a [b] but with the lips not quite closing all the way.
- w** **wahai** 'two'
Like w in English wow.

- x** **aaxkid** ‘red’
A noisy ‘h’ sound, with the back of the tongue almost touching the soft palate. Similar to [g] but with no vibration of the vocal folds.
- y** **yühüür** ‘beans’
As in English yellow.
- z** **kwichiz** ‘plate, container’
As in English zoo.
- zh** **neezh** ‘girl’
Sounds like the s in English pleasure, or the zh in Dr. Zhivago.
- ’** **po’o** ‘water’
The catch in the throat when you say uh-oh or Hawai’i or at the end of the word when Homer Simpson says do’! You may hear people call this a “glottal stop.”
- (vowel)** **Hagare’enaam(e)!** ‘Greeting/How are you!’
At the end of a word sometimes you will hear a vowel pronounced but sometimes not. Indicate these types of vowels by putting parentheses around them.

Vowel combinations

Sometimes Kawaiisu has two vowels right next to each other. For example, we sometimes find [a] followed by [i], as in **Paikweevaad**. “He’ll go back.” The combination [ai] here sounds like the English word “eye”. Basically your tongue starts in the position for the vowel “a” (as in father) and ends up in the position for the vowel “i” (as in kilo). To be consistent with the way we write the vowels on their own, we write this as [ai]. We find this spelling in some English words, mostly ones that we’ve taken from other languages. Examples are **Thailand**, **mai-tai**, **Hawai’i**, **samurai**, and **Aileen**. In English “ai” is often pronounced as in “paid”, so this will take some getting used to.

Here are some other examples:

- a + i** (sounds like ai in ‘Thailand’) paikweed ‘go back’
aa + i kaaieez ‘wild celery’
o + i (sounds like oi in English “oil”) su’uois ‘then’
i + aa puiaaatü ‘blind’ (= without eyes)
ü + a üapügüda ‘used to be a garden’
u + i mumusui ‘ten’

Vowels at the end of a word

Short vowels at the end of words in Kawaiisu are often silent. What does “silent” mean? Sometimes it means the vowel is kind of whispered – you have to listen carefully to know it’s there. Other times it might drop out completely – kind of like what happens in English “cannot” versus “can’t”, where the vowel between “n” and “t” disappears. When this happens, how do you know the vowel is there? Well, it might show up if you add something else to the end of the word (because then it isn’t at the end anymore). In that case you need to know which vowel it’s supposed to be. It’s easier to leave out a silent vowel than it is to guess which one is supposed to be there! As a practical matter, new learners might want to just write what they hear: If you hear a vowel, write it, but if you don’t hear one don’t worry too much about what might be missing. But in this grammar we’ll probably list some words both ways, with and without the final “silent” vowel, since in many words the final vowel could be there in the right circumstances.

Stress

Most languages have sound units called “syllables.” A syllable is basically a vowel (in Kawaiisu, a, e, i, o, u, ü or long aa, ee, ii, oo, uu, üü), plus a consonant (one of the other letters) on the beginning or end. So ba, ta, di, küü, etc. are all examples of syllables. In English, we’re mainly interested in the vowels you actually say, so the name “Kate” only has one syllable (even though it has a silent “e” on the end).

Activity: How many syllables are in the following English words?

1. pot
2. captain
3. win
4. wine
5. Oklahoma

Activity: How many syllables are in the following Kawaiisu words?

1. hin ‘what’
2. puguz ‘ dog’
3. meeneen ‘he/she said’
4. chipikweeneen ‘he climbed up’
5. wüntiikweeneeken ‘he stood it up’

Syllables can be stressed or unstressed. Usually, stressed syllables are pronounced a little longer, louder, and at a higher pitch than unstressed syllables. This makes them stand out more, or have a special kind of importance. For example, think of the difference between the words spelled record in the following English sentences:

- a. He broke the record.
- b. We’re going to record a song.

In example (a), the first syllable is stressed: REcord. In example (b), the second syllable is stressed: reCORD. You can usually figure out where the stressed syllables are by humming a word: Stressed syllables will come out sounding louder. Words in English sometimes have more than one stressed syllable, in which case one syllable is more stressed than the others, sometimes called the main stress.

Why does any of this matter? First of all, many languages (including Kawaiisu) have fairly strict rules about where the stressed syllables of words go, and you need to make sure you stress the right one. In Kawaiisu, the stressed syllable is always towards the end of a word, in the last or next-to-last syllable.

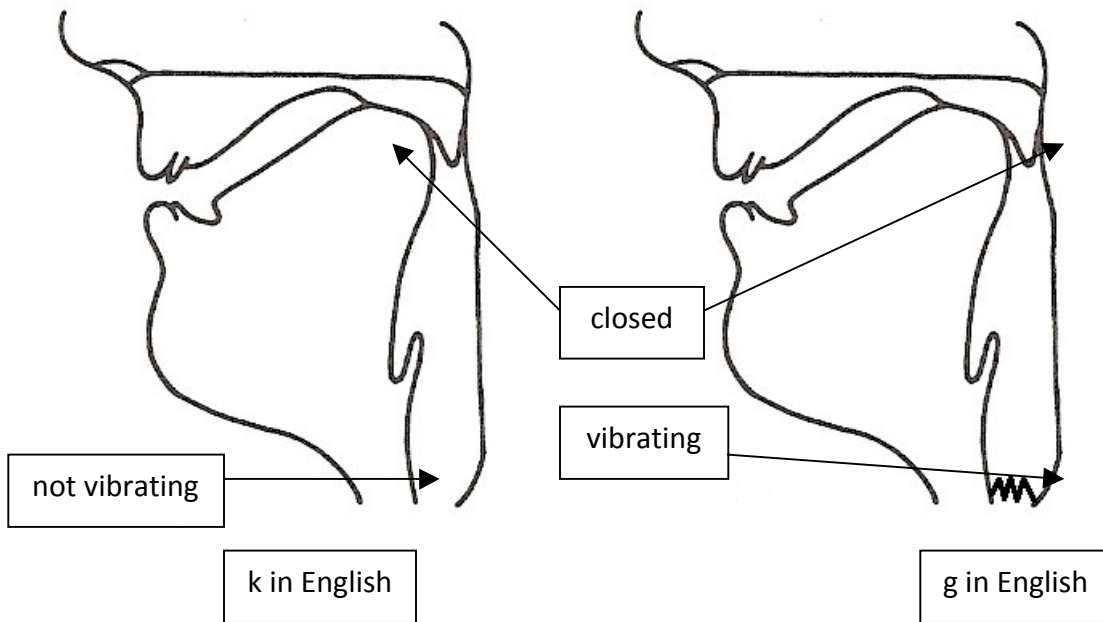
Pronunciation focus

Most of the sounds in Kawaiisu are close enough to sounds we're used to in English but some Kawaiisu sounds aren't found in English, or the letters we're using to write them might be less familiar, so here are some notes to help you remember how to pronounce them.

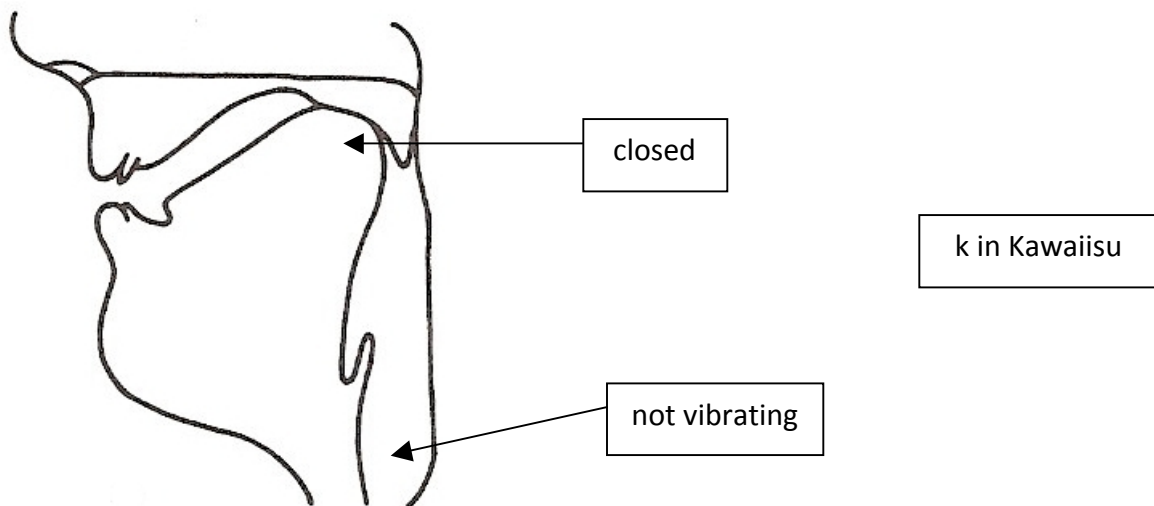
- ü** This is like making the “u” sound in English “put,” except your lips should be spread apart. To make this sound, start saying ‘u’, then smile!
- r** This Kawaiisu sound is not like “u” in English. It is more like “t” in “bottom” or “dd” in “ladder”. The tongue only touches the top of the mouth behind the teeth for a split second. This is called a “flap.” Kawaiisu “r” is also sometimes pronounced by rolling your tongue, sometimes called a trill, as in Spanish words like burrito.
- ts** This is a combination of “t” plus “s.” In English this combination can only come at the end of a word or syllable as in the word “cats,” but in Kawaiisu it can be at the beginning too. To say this sound, think about how some people say “What’s up” when they’re in a hurry or being casual: You might just hear them say “tsup?” You can practice by starting with “What’s up” and then cutting out the wh, then the a, until you’re starting with just the “ts” sound. Also think about the word pizza – try cutting out the first two letters and say the rest!

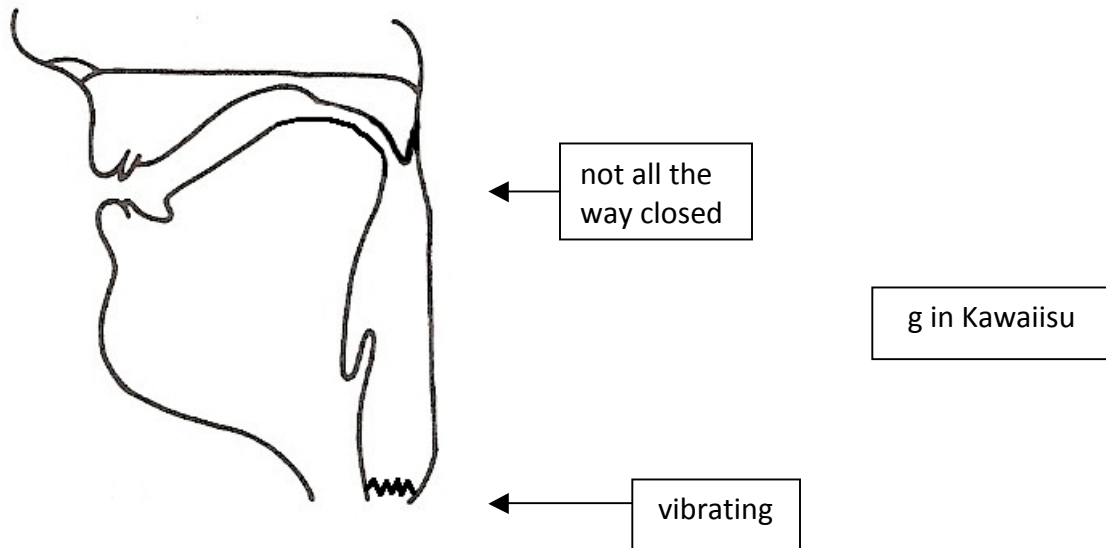
g vs. k vs. x

In English, “g” and “k” are both made with the back of the tongue touching the soft palate (velum) at the back of the mouth. They both close all the way, blocking the air completely. Linguists call these “stops” because they stop the airflow. The main difference between them in English is that g has the vocal cords vibrating, but k does not.



In Kawaiisu, you will sometimes hear people say words with a hard “g,” as in English. But people will also say this without closing off the airflow all the way. This will sometimes sound like buzzing, other times like swallowing or gargling, depending on how close the tongue gets to the roof of the mouth.





The sound we're writing with the letter "x," as in **axkid** 'red', is produced like "g" in Kawaiisu, with the back of the tongue not quite touching the roof of the mouth. It's different from "g," though, because it's pronounced without the vocal folds vibrating.

Reminders:

- Writing is a tool to help you learn to speak.
- If you have a hard time with writing at first, don't worry! It takes a lot of practice, and you'll have lots of chances to get it right as you go through all of the lessons.
- Watch out for places where double letters in Kawaiisu are different from what you're used to when you write English, especially ee and oo!