Intro

There are three different "alphabets" used in Japanese writing. The elaborate, intricate, squarish characters are Kanji, and represent a whole word per character. Katakana and Hiragana are phonetic alphabets, and, like the English alphabet, the characters represent sounds that are strung together to make words.

Hiragana are used (as you'd expect) to write Japanese words. Katakana, though, are usually used to "spell out" what the Japanese called "borrowed" words. Usually this borrowing is simply a Japanese-ized pronunciation of an English word. For instance, the Japanese word for "taxi" is "takushi" - not exactly identical, but easy enough to recognize.

Program instructions

The Katakana translator program is easy to run - find and click the katakana characters, and the program writes the "translation" for you. The result will be phonetically similar to an English word - sometimes you have to read it out loud a couple of times to "get it".

Some katakana characters are modified by two tiny dots or a little circle written at the top right corner of the character. When you see these marks, click the appropriate button BEFORE you click the katakana character. The two dots change some consonants into their "voiced" counterparts, for instance, KA with two dots is GA, TO becomes DO, etc.

You will occasionally encounter a katakana character that is slightly smaller than the charcters around it. Click the "Little" button BEFORE clicking the character. Little vowels and "y" vowels influence the preceding vowel, the little TSU doubles the following consonant.

Typography

Probably the hardest part of the program is searching the chart for the character you want in the first place. Familiarity is the only help there. It doesn't take long to be able to recognize the elaborate "Chinese character" kanji, but the difference between katakana and hiragana is more subtle. Translating hiragana, while as easy as translating katakana, yields Japanese words, which is of no use to English-only clods like me. Anyway, hiragana tend to be more "curly", while katakana are more angular. You'll start to know the difference with practice - it'll reduce the amount of time you spend futilely searching for a hiragana character on a katakana chart.

One of the trickiest parts (to English readers) in the katakana character set is the similarity between some of the characters. TSU looks like SHI and N looks like SO. On closer inspection, though, you will see that the direction of the brush stroke is the distinguishing factor between them. This is fairly apparent in the "hand written" font, but more difficult in the "machine printed" font. Note the height of the long stroke, though - the long strokes of the SHI and N characters don't come up as tall as the rest of the characters.

Pronunciation

The Japanese use clean vowel sounds similar to those used in romantic languages like Spanish. A is pronounced ah as in father, E is ay as in hay, I is ee as in see, O is oh as in focus, U is oo as in fool. (I've left the chart in traditional Japanese order, AIUEO, instead of changing it to English's AEIOU.)

The dash is used to "stretch" a vowel sound. When you click the dash in the program, it will double the previous vowel to simulate the stretched effect. This can sometimes be misleading, for instance if the vowel is O, the OO looks like U and not double Oh. (I just skip the dash if it's behind an O or E.) Usually it's a dashed A, which I've found implies a soft R, like in BA-- GA--, "burger".

All but one of the katakana describe a vowel or consonant-plus-vowel syllable. When transcribing an English word that uses a consonant without a vowel attached to it, ("truck" has two examples, the T and the K) the Japanese equivalent will usually use the consonant-plus-U form. The U sounds are "swallowed" to simulate the word better (TU-RA-KKU). Judicious use of the backspace key (or button) will clarify some words. Beware, though, some words really have a U in them!

The one consonant-only character corresponds to N or M. The program only uses N, but sometimes you'll have to substitute the M to figure out the word. "Computer" (KO-N-PYU-TA) is the most familiar example.

Bad jokes notwithstanding, the Japanese don't distinguish between the sounds we call L and R. The program uses R's, but you may need to substitute L at times to be able to decipher the word.