

The traditional categorization of verbs and verb-endings arose from the desire to codify the various forms of verb endings (not that anyone was particularly confused about it for most verbs, or that the categorization would solve the problem for the exceptional verbs). Still, however, the traditional categories remain embedded in most dictionaries and textbooks, so it is good to know the basics of the traditional system.

Traditional categories of verbs (1a, 1b, 5, k, s):

上一段活用動詞 (かみいちだんかつようどうし) : 見る、着る、起きる、閉じる、過ぎる、etc.

下一段活用動詞 (しもいちだん) : 出る、消える、教える、掛ける、止める、etc.

五段 (ごだん) : 書く、分かる、死ぬ、読む、なさる(irr)、ある(irr)、行く(irr)、問う(irr)、etc.

カ変 (かへん) : 来る(irregular enough to merit its own category)

サ変 (さへん) : する、感ずる、etc. (also irregular enough to merit its own category)

Traditional categories of verb endings:

未然形 (みぜんけい) : the 'imperfect' (= action incomplete) form: used with negatives

連用形 (れんようけい) : the 'stem' form: used with ~ます、~て etc.

Note the absurdity of the claim that this 'works' for the ~て form.

終止形 (しゅうしけい) : the 'final' form: used at the end of a sentence.

連体形 (れんたいけい) : the 'modification' form: used to modify the noun it precedes.

Note that in modern standard spoken language (口語: こうご) the 終止形 and 連体形 are identical.

仮定形 (かていけい) : the 'provisional' (hypothetical) form: used with 'ば' (another form of 'は').

命令形 (めいれいけい) : the 'imperative' (command) form: i.e., 'you must xxx.'

Some Examples:

→ endings:	未然形	連用形	終止形/連体形	仮定形	命令形
↓ verb categ's					
五段活用:					
書く	書かない 書こ-う	書き-ます 書い-て	書く-ベン かく-よ。	書け-ば~	かけ!
話す	話さない 話そ-う	話し-ます 話し-て	話す-人 話す-よ。	話せ-ば~	話せ!
分かる	分から-ない	分かり-ます 分かっ-て	分かる-人	分かれば~	分かれ (???)
(irr) なさる	なさら-ない	なさい-ます なざっ-て	なさる-...	なされ-ば~	なさい!
(irr) 問う	問わ-ない	問い-ます 問う-て	問う-...	問え-ば~	問え (???)
上一段活用:					
見る	見-ない 見-られない 見-よう。	見-ます 見-て	見る-番組 見る-よ。	見れば	見ろ! or 見よ!
下一段活用:					
出る	出-ない 出-られない 出-よう	出-ます 出-て	出る-人 出る-ぞ。	出れば	出ろ! or 出よ!
カ変活用:					
来る	こ-ない	き-ます	くる-	くれば	こい!
サ変活用:					
する	し-ない し-よう	し-ます	する-	すれば	しろ! or せよ!
感ずる =感じる	かんじ-ない	かんじ-ます	かんずる or かんじる	かんずれば or かんじれば	かんじろ! maybe かんぜよ!

Note that ‘五段’ (‘five-step’) actually derives from the fact that the go-dan verbs have forms that include all five vowels: ik-A-nai, ik-I-masu, ik-U, ik-E-ru, ik-O-u. Also there is ‘i-T-te’, so it really should be six -- but that would be confusing, and 行く is a little bit irregular anyhow, so why mess with a good thing? Also, note that the forms of 見る always end in ‘i’, and the forms of 教える always end in ‘e’, therefore they are called ‘single-step’ verbs, and since ‘i’ occurs prior to ‘e’ in all the charts, the names are therefore designated ‘upper one-step’ and ‘lower one-step.’

Also note that the ‘verb-ending’ categories are based on ‘meaning’ rather than ‘form’ -- in fact, the system was created as a way of conflating form with meaning (even though it doesn’t always work very well: remember that ‘nouns’ don’t always have ‘noun-like’ meanings, etc.). This incurs major inconsistencies when the same verb ‘meaning’ can have two different ‘forms.’ For example, forms like 行きます and 見よう are said to take the 未然形. But 行こう, which should be the same, seems to be something else, since it doesn’t begin with the standard mizenkei form 行か～. Ha! The reason is that in classical language (文語: ぶんご) it used to be written 行かう -- but in late classical language, even though it was written 行かう it was pronounced 行こう. Go figure.

Present-day linguists often make reference to the old forms only because of the notion that ‘everyone else does it,’ but some basic language texts now use a much less complex system that easily allows for the same irregularities:

Verb Formation Categories:

-ru verbs: 見る、できる、教える、出る, etc.

-u verbs: note that the ‘-te’ forms are still unpredictable:

買う → 買って
聞く → 聞いて
泳ぐ → 泳いで
死ぬ → 死んで
呼ぶ → 呼んで
読む → 読んで
売る → 売って

honorific-ru (なさる、おっしゃる、いらっしゃる、くださる、ござる)

note irregular forms: なさいます、なさって、～なさい (imperative)

miscellaneous irregular: 来る、する、問う, etc. (as shown above)

Verb-ending categories:

‘Dictionary’ or ‘informal’ form: 見る、行く、etc.

‘Stem’ form (= ‘-masu’ form minus ‘-masu’): 見-, etc.

Miscellaneous: the other forms are easier to manage by referring to the entire form. For example:
negative: 見ない、教えない、行かない、いらっしゃらない、etc.

imperative: 見ろ、しろ、せよ、帰れ、etc.

tentative: 見よう、買おう、帰ろう、etc.

potential: 見られる、買える、帰れる、etc. (Note 分かる、できる、etc. lack potential forms)

conditional: 見たら、行ったら、etc.

hypothetical: 見れば、教えれば、待てば、行けば、etc.

Note also that the categories of “verb formation” and “verb endings” are different from categories that pertain to case arrays such as “transitive,” “intransitive,” “ergative/affective,” etc.