Solution to Question 1: As easy as 2-3-5

(a) disuku sammai three disks
(b) endomame goko five peas
(c) haŋkachi nimai two handkerchiefs
(d) kaba gotō five rhinos
(e) kyūri sambon three cucumbers
(f) morumotto nihiki two guinea pigs
(g) nezumi sambiki three mice
(h) rin go goko five apples
(i) tsuna nihon two ropes
(j) zō santō three elephants

Comments

The counting word came after rather than before the noun, and that it consisted of the words ni (2), sam/san/saŋ (3) and go (5). What of the other part of the word? If you rearrange the list so words with the same second part are together, a pattern should emerge:

- **hon/bon**: legs, bananas, pencils
- **ko**: balls, stones
- **mai**: sheets of paper, plates
- **hiki**: cats, squirrels
- **tō**: horses, cows

The second part of the counter word depends on the type of object being counted: long thin things, round things, flat things, small animals, big animals.

There are two other little tricky things going on: the variation in the word for 3 is because the ‘n’ of san matches (‘is assimilated’) to the following consonant: n+m/b becomes ‘m’, n+k/g becomes ‘ŋ’. And with the word for ‘long thin things’ hon, ‘h’ becomes ‘b’ with san (sam), so that explains why san+hiki becomes sambiki.

The basic principle of semantic grouping for the counter words should have been rather easy: it is typical of many East Asian languages, where these words are called ‘classifiers’.

Actually, English also has classifiers, though not as systematically used as in Japanese: we say three slices of bread, rather than three breads, 200 head of cattle, etc. (And by the way, the counter tō for big animals also means ‘head’, so Japanese is just like English!)

The extra difficulty with the assimilation of the letters made the problem a little bit harder, or should we say, interesting.