

## 06-12-2022, Mac Basics/Beginners SIG – fn Key (Part 1)

*Note: This discussion is based on macOS, 12.4 (Monterey). Some illustrations may differ when using other versions of macOS. Most illustrations are from screenshots on my iMac or MacBook Pro.  
Credit: See the credits at the end of this presentation.*

As many of you know, I like to use keyboard shortcuts. We're all familiar with the **Modifier keys** for use with shortcuts: **Command** (⌘), **Option** (⌥), **Control** (⌴), and **Shift** (⇧) found on Mac keyboards. In addition to these, at the top of the keyboard is a series of **Function** keys (F1, F2, F3, etc.). Then there are the **Cursor Movement** arrow keys. On extended keyboards are also found **Page Control** keys (page up, page down, home and end).

There's another key that isn't discussed much, the **fn** key:



**Standard Mac Keyboard (fn Key)**



**Extended Mac Keyboard (fn Key)**

As you can see, the **fn** key is located at different locations depending on the type of keyboard that you're using.

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On older Mac keyboards, the key is labeled with the two letters, **fn**. Newer Macs still have a key with an **fn** label and also a **Globe** symbol. (The **fn** key is now sometimes just called the **Globe** Key on newer Macs because of a globe symbol on the key. I'll just call it the **fn** key.)



Globe / fn Key

### The "Function" of the fn Key

So, what exactly does the **fn** key do? It can be used in several ways:

**1. Change How the F-Keys at the Top of Your Keyboard Work.** Remember those keys labeled **F1**, **F2**, **F3**, etc. at the top of the keyboard? These keys, known as Function Keys (F-keys), also have special symbols on them (**F1/F2: Brightness Higher/Lower**, **F3: Mission Control**, **F4: Launchpad**, ... **F7/F8/F9: Playback Control**, ... **F10/F11: Volume Mute/Down/Up**, etc.).



Function Keys (Standard Mac Keyboard)

Note: On an Extended Mac Keyboard, the F-keys are also located at the top of the keyboard, and in addition to F1 through F12, there are additional ones (F13 through F19).

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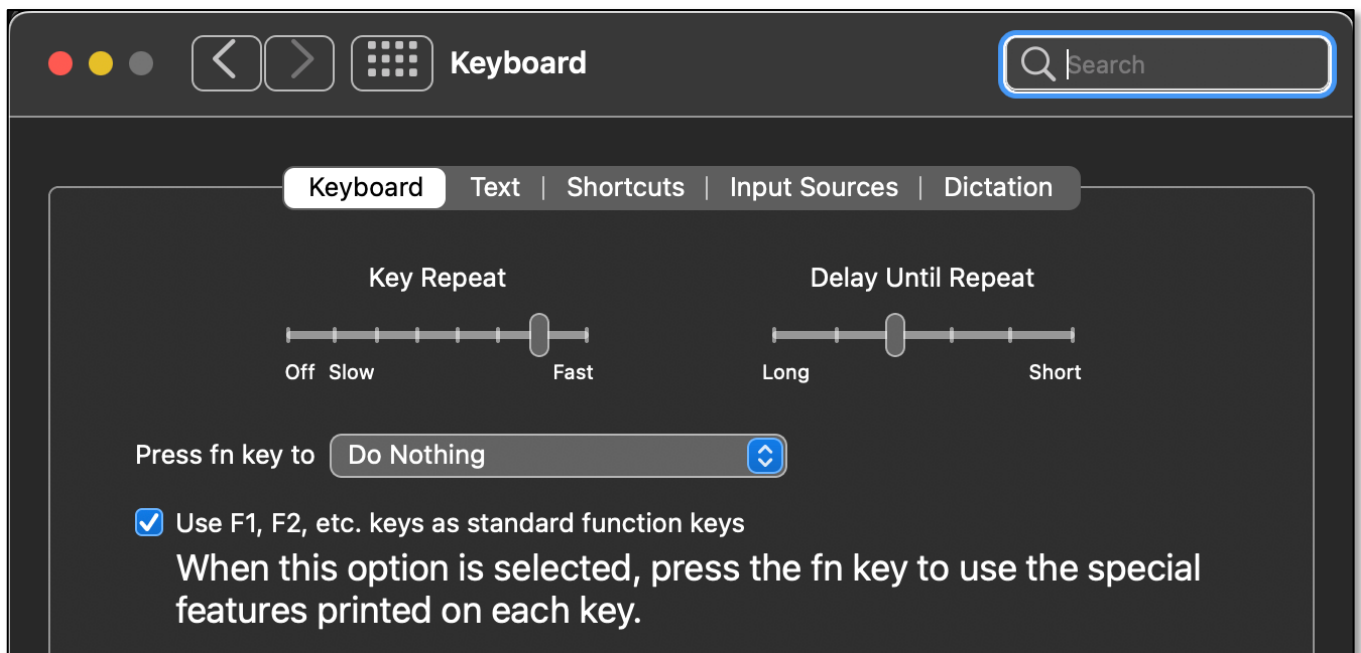
As you can see, F-keys each have two possible actions (functions). For example, when you press the **F1** key, two functions/actions are possible:

- [Trigger an action](#) that you have assigned to this key. (More on this in a moment.)
- [Turn down the Brightness](#) of your screen.



**F1 Key**

Which function is invoked depends on a checkbox setting in the [Keyboard System Preference](#):



**Keyboard System Preference (Partial View) – fn Key (Do Nothing)**

With the box checked (as shown in the image above), the F-keys are used as standard function keys, which is my preferred way to use them. For example, I use the Keyboard Maestro app and the F1 key to trigger a [Make Bigger](#) action by entering the **Command** (⌘) + **=** keystroke which works in most apps to increase the size of text.

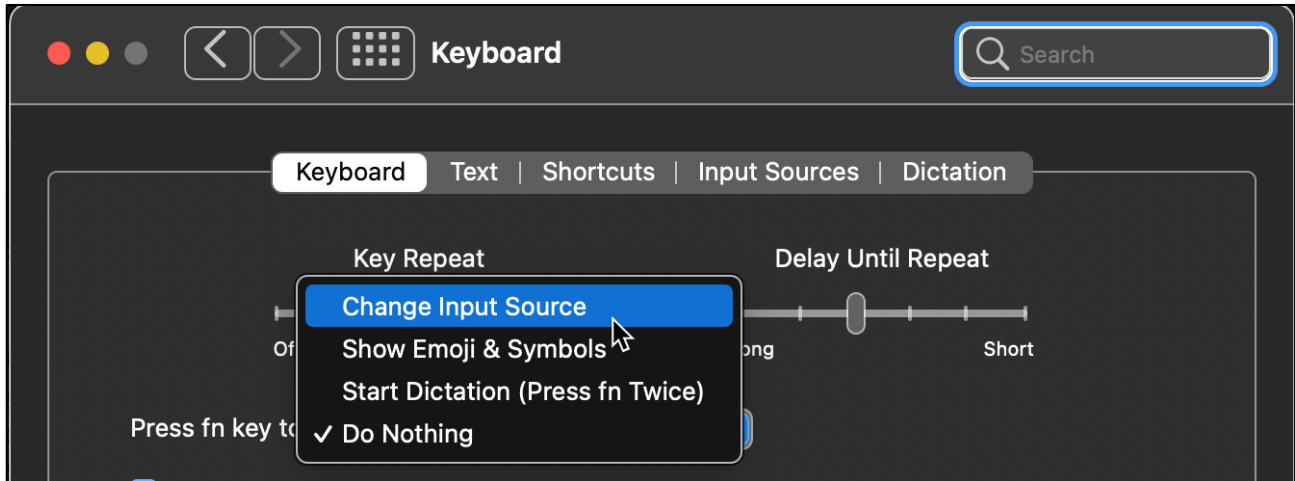
Alternatively, with this setting, if I were to hold down the **fn** key, pressing F1 would lower the brightness of my screen.

So, the choice is yours. To use the F-keys for special purposes, check the checkbox. If you prefer the default control settings (like controlling screen brightness or speaker volume), then don't check. Either way, you can access the functions that you want by either pressing or not pressing the **fn** key.

### fn Key Options (**Press fn key to**)

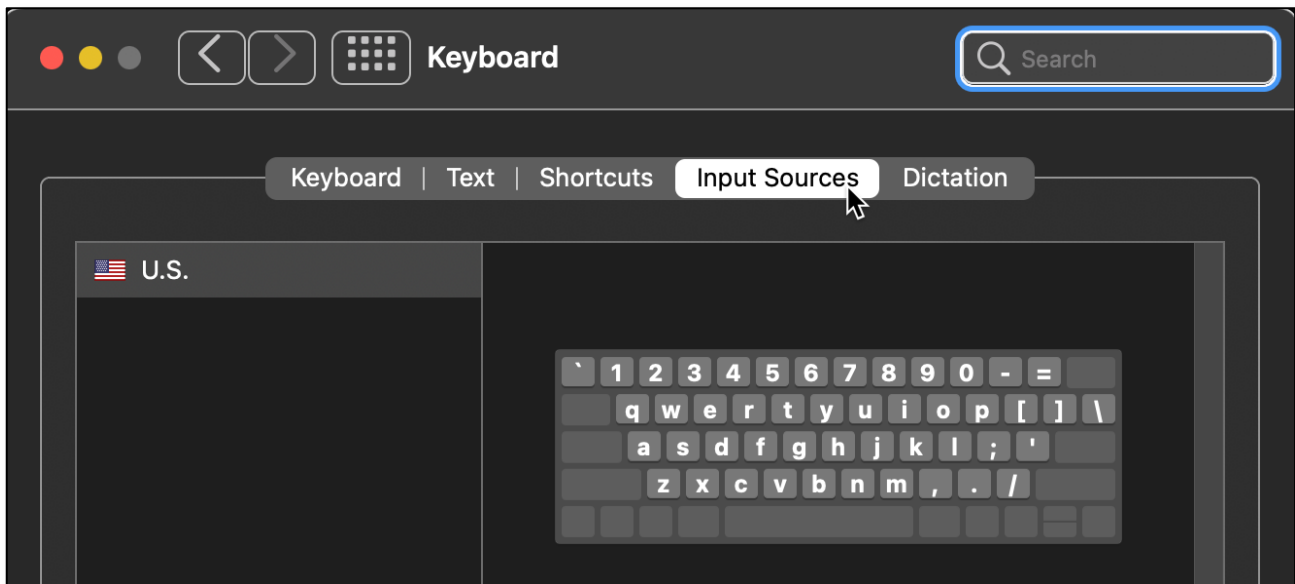
The **fn** key has several options other than "do nothing," and these provide other **fn** key functions described below. If you're using macOS Monterey (and many earlier versions of macOS), you can also use the **fn** key by itself to trigger an **Action**. This done by changing the setting in the **Press fn key to** pop-up menu to something else.

### 2. Change the Input Source. One **fn** key option is **Change Input Source**:



**Keyboard System Preference (Partial View) – Press fn Key (Change Input Source)**

Choosing the **Input Sources** tab gives you the option of adding a new keyboard:

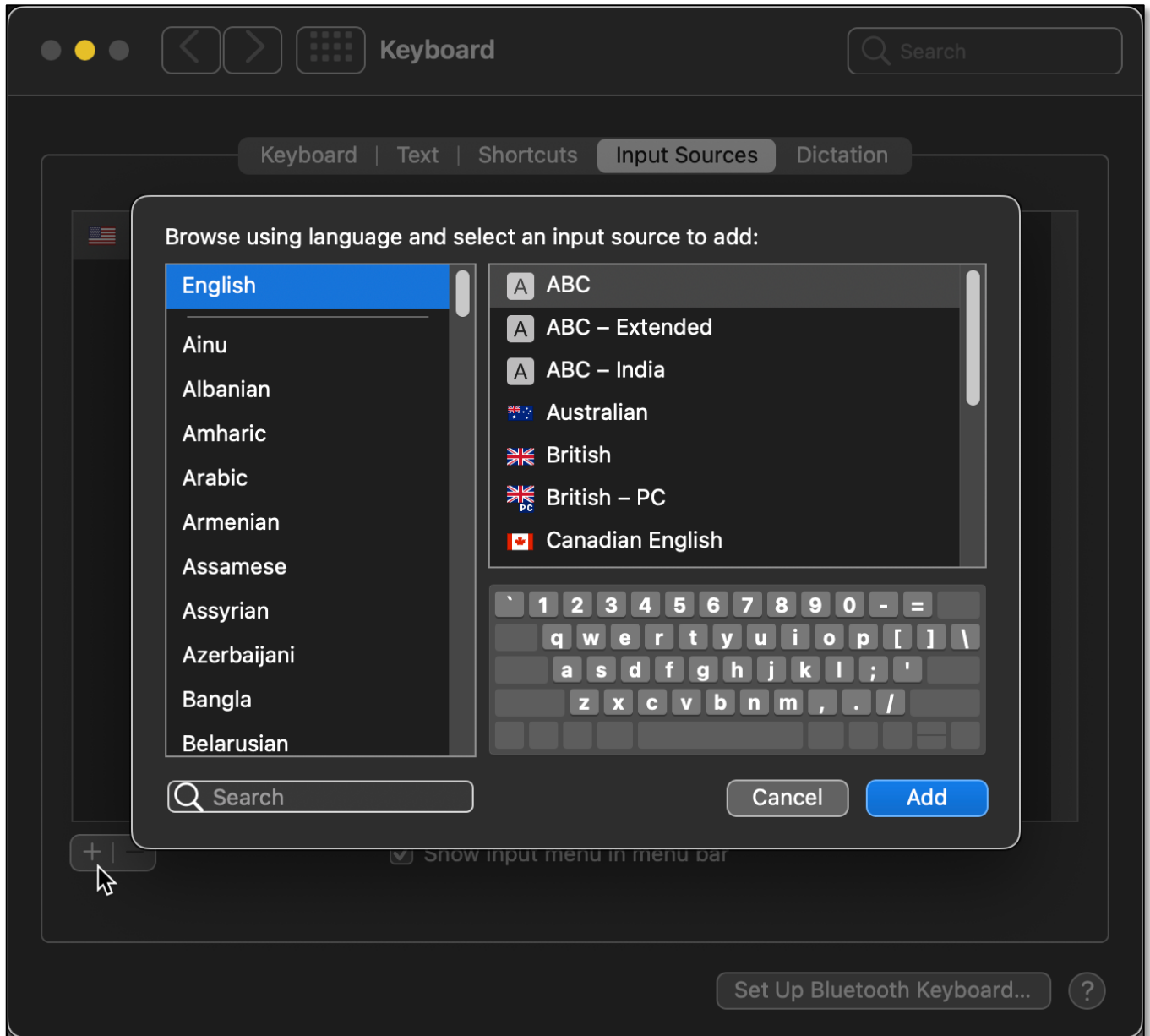


**Keyboard System Preference (Partial View) – Input Sources Tab**

Note: Using the term "Change Input Source" seems a bit strange since all the input sources are keyboards for various languages. Perhaps "Change Keyboard" or "Change Keyboard Language" would have been better. Still, this was Apple's labeling decision.

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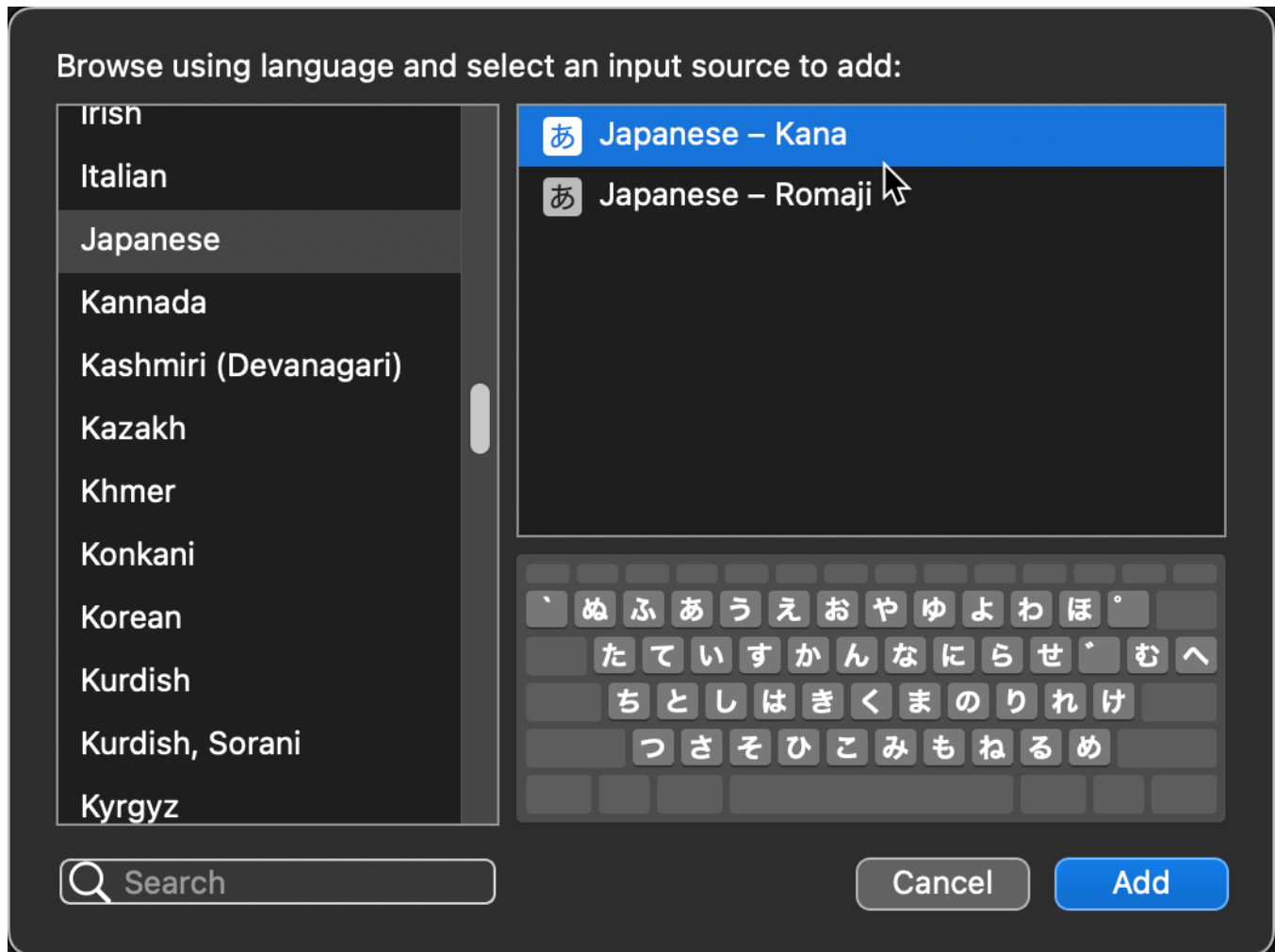
If there were additional languages that you wanted to access on your keyboard, you can add a new keyboard by clicking the **+** button at the bottom left of the [Input Sources](#) tab. This will bring up a list of alternative keyboards for numerous languages. See the image below:



**Keyboard System Preference – Input Sources, Choose Language & Keyboard**

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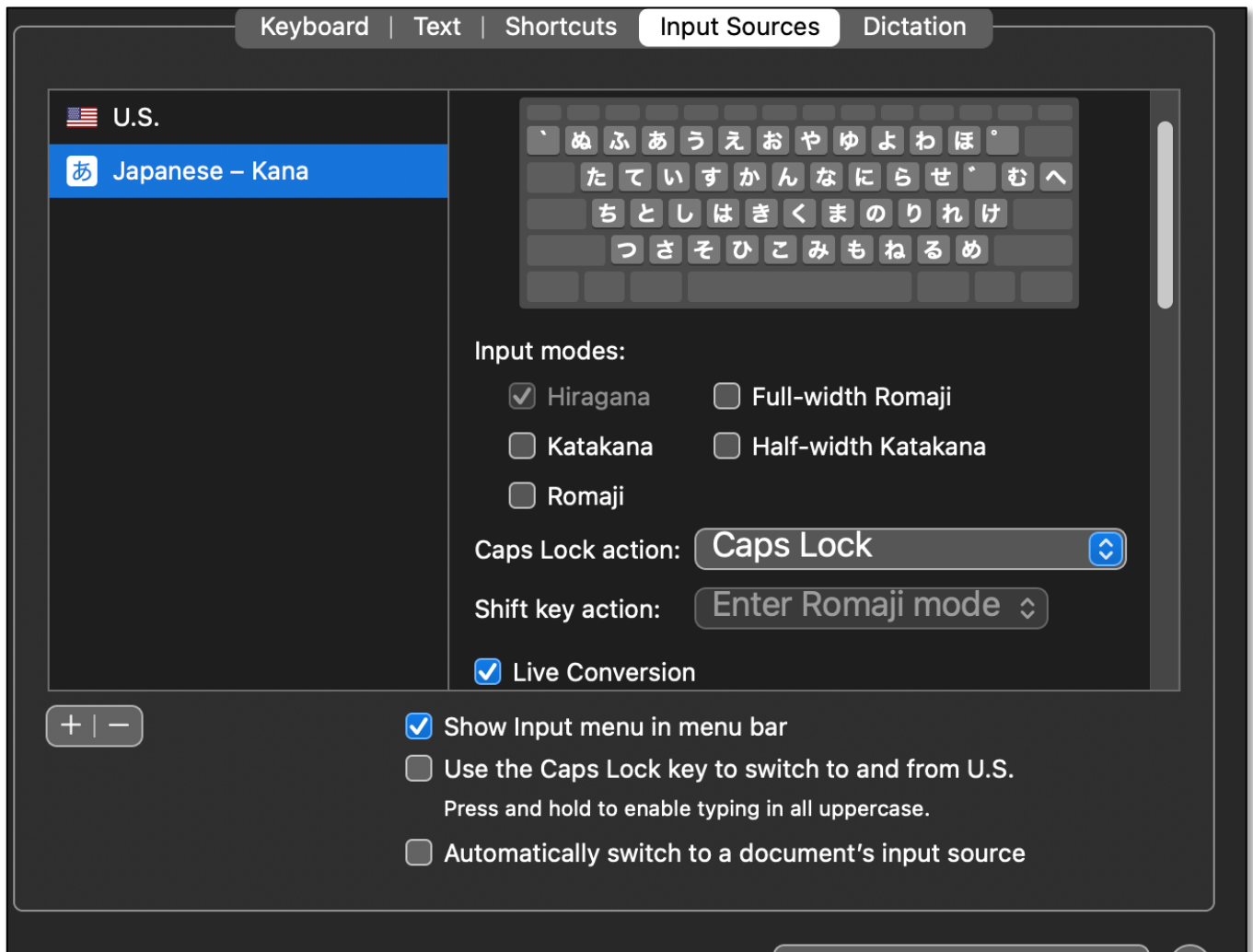
For illustration, let's choose one of the two Japanese language keyboards. I chose this one to show how the keyboard representation changes.



**Keyboard System Preference – Input Sources, Choose Japanese Keyboard**

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With some language keyboards, like this one for Japanese, additional options are available:



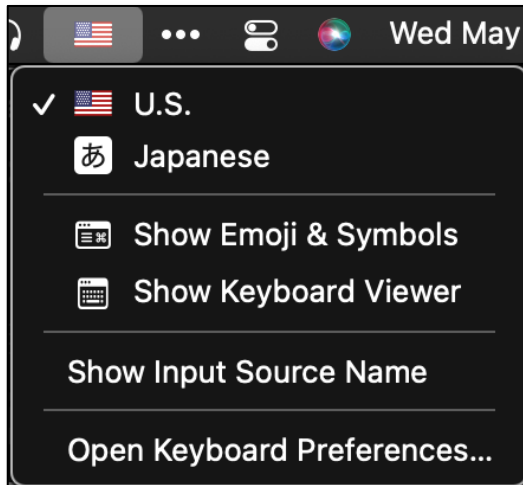
**Japanese Keyboard Options**



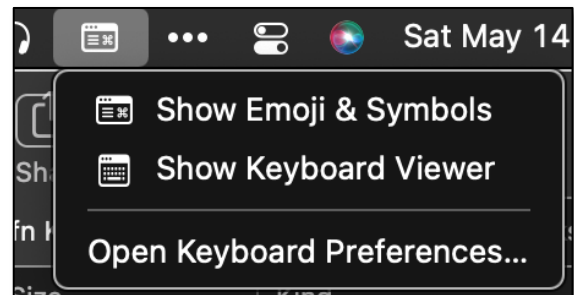
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In addition, if the box for **Show Input menu in the menu bar** is checked, a **Flag** icon for the Input Source is displayed in the menu bar if two or more input sources are being used. This allows you to choose among the different input sources that you've set up. (See the first image below.)

If only one Input Source (keyboard) has been selected (often the case), then no flag is displayed, and the **Character Viewer** icon is shown in the menu bar. (See the second image below.)



**Menu Bar – Input Menu (Two Keyboards)**



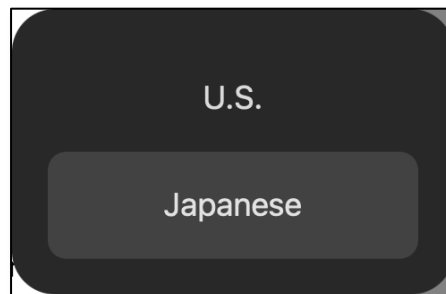
**Menu Bar – Input Menu (One Keyboard)**

After changing the input source to Japanese, the little menu bar flag changes indicating the change:



**Menu Bar – Input Menu (Japanese Keyboard)**

If instead, you tap the **fn** key to change the input source, there's a brief pop-up alert indicating that the input source (keyboard) has been switched:



**Input Source (fn on Keyboard) Switch – Pop-up Alert**

Note: You can add another Input Source keyboard to the menu bar without using the **fn** key **Change Input Source** setting. It just won't be triggered by the **fn** key.



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Note: If you're only using one input source, there's no real value in using the Input Source option since all that it will do is show you the input source that you're already using.

### Next Month: Part 2

Next month, we'll explore more functions for the fn key. Hint: As already noted, there are more options under the [Press fn key to](#) pop-up menu, and even more fn functions to discuss.

### Summary

The **fn** key might be the least known and understood on a Mac keyboard, but it has a lot of capability. Its simplest use is to change how the F-keys operate. However, you can also use it to change, add, and switch input source keyboards.

Part 2 will discuss even more **fn** key functions.

### Next Presentation

For the next presentation, we'll take a look another macOS feature.

Have a favorite Mac Tip or utility? Please feel free to pass it along, and I'll see if I can work it into a future presentation.

If you have any suggestions for presentation topics, including macOS utilities, please contact me at [slp4668@gmail.com](mailto:slp4668@gmail.com).

*–Steve Parker*

Credit: <https://macmost.com/how-to-use-the-fn-globe-key-on-your-mac-keyboard.html>  
(The Mac FN /Globe Key)