

Giving & Receiving 1

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Japanese has three different verbs for “to give”. Your choice depends on who is giving what to who.

The first factor you need to consider is whether the gift is going from your **in-group** to your **out-group**, or from your **out-group** to your **in-group**. Who is in which group is not absolute, but depends on context.



For example, if your **dad** gave something to **you**, that act of giving would move **inward**. But if **you** gave something to your **dad**, that would move **outward**. You are always your closest in-group. In contrast though, if **your boss** gave something to **your dad**, that would move **inward**. **Your father** is closer to you than **your boss**. However, if **someone outside your company** gave something to **your boss**, that would also be **inward**, as **your company** your in-group compared to another. **Your dad** giving a gift to **your boss**, or **your boss** giving it to **another company** are then both obviously **outward**.

くれる・くれます

The verb **くれる** is used for “to give” when the object moves **inward**. The person something is given to is marked by **に**.

ちちがわたしにほんを**くれました**。
My father **gave (inwards)** a book to me.

A社はいつぶちょうにレポートを**くれる**? ←
When will Company A **give our** HoD the report?

パパになにを**くれた**?
What did you, **a person who is outside our family, give** my dad?

You would never use **くれる** here if you or a co-worker was giving the report to your HoD, as that's **outwards**.

Giving & Receiving 2

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Japanese has three different verbs for “to give”. Your choice depends on who is giving what to who.

あげる・あげます

The verb **あげる** is used for “to give” when the object moves **outward**. The person something is given to is marked by に.

わたしは ちちに ほんを あげました。
I **gave (outwards)** a book to my dad.

みきさんが のぶさんに あげた よ。
Miki, **who is our friend**, gave it to Nobu, **who isn't, or is equally close**.

だれかが だれかに なにかを あげる。
Someone will **give** something to someone else.

あげる is also used when the people are of equal distance, the distance is unclear, or you are talking about giving in the abstract (i.e., as an act).

やる・やります

The verb **やる** is used for “to give” when the object moves **outward** and you dislike the receiver, they aren't human, or you want to sound tough/rough. It's not rude for pets, but some people prefer **あげる**.

わたしは ちちのはなに みずを やった。
I **gave (outwards)** water to my dad's flowers.

おまえに いちえんも やらないぞ。
I'm not **giving** you even one yen.

にゃんせんせい「えさを やる」なんて いわない。わたしの かわいい こに「えさを **あげる**」よ。
I never say “**yaru/give**” food to Dr. Meow. I always “**ageru/give**” food to my little cutie.

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All three verbs can be attached to a verb in its てる form to show that the action is directed **inwards/outwards**. This can indicate thanks, or stress that an action is done as a favor. However, it also just occurs to show direction of action. Given that Japanese often drops subjects/objects, the verb helps understand what happened.

ちちにつくって **くれた**。
Someone outside our family made it **for** my dad.

せつめいして **くれる**?
Will you **explain** it to me/us (as a favor)?

せんせいがおしえて **くれた**。
The teacher **taught** me (as a favor).

みきちゃんにかって **くれた**?
You bought this **for** Miki (who I'm close to cf. you)?

ちちにつくって **あげた**。
I (or my and my siblings) made it **for** my dad.

せつめいして **あげた**。
I/we explained it to you/them.

This could also just mean "I bought it for Miki", as she would always be outside of the "ME" group.

みきちゃんにかって **あげました**。
We bought this **for** Miki (who is an outsider or an equal).

Be careful using **あげる** to talk about your own actions to the recipient, as it can sound pretentious or haughty (e.g., I did this for YOU)

ちちにつくって **やった**。
I made it **for** dad, but I dislike him or want to sound tough.

せつめいして **やる**ぞ。
Fine, I'll explain it to you, who I'm looking down upon.

おまえにおしえて **やる**。
I'm going to teach you a lesson (you scum).

のらねこにえさをかって **やった**。
I bought the stray cat food (and they aren't family or human).

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Finally, the verb もらう is used to mean “get” or “receive”. The person who “gets” the thing is marked by は・が.

もらう・もらいます

The verb もらう is used for “to receive”. It does not care about direction. The person an item/action is received **from** is marked by に or から.

ちち から ほん を もらった。

Someone (probably me) **got** a book from my dad.

あけて もらいました。

(Someone) opened it **for me**.

パパ に なに を くれた?

What did you, **a person who is outside our family**, give my dad?

てもらう can sound threatening when directed at the verb’s “doer”.
E.g., せつめいしてもらおうよ is like “You’ll be explaining this to me (and you have no choice)”

Let’s finish by comparing a sentence using each verb. I have over-translated them to illustrate the grammar. Note how the people marked by は and に change depending on the verb.

たなかさん は わたし に ほん を くれました。

Tanaka gave (inwards) me a book.

わたし は たなかさん に ほん を あげました。

I gave (outwards) a book to Tanaka.

わたし は たなかさん に ほん を もらいました。

I received a book from Tanaka.

わたし は たなかさん に ほん を やりました。

I (disrespectfully) gave a book to Tanaka.