Guide to Japanese Verb Tenses

11-1-19

Ru Verbs and U Verbs

Ru verbs end in iru or eru. You don’t double their t’s when making their te or ta forms. For example, taberu = ‘to eat’, tabete = ‘eating’, tabeta = ‘ate’.

U verbs are not as easy to define. Most u verbs don’t end in ru, but a number of them do. For example, the following verbs are all u verbs: ganbaru (‘to do one’s best’), suwaru (‘to sit’), noru (‘to board a vehicle’), toru (‘to take’), hairu (‘to enter’), hashiru (‘to run’), iru (‘to need’), kiru (‘to cut’), shiru (‘to know’) and kaeru (‘to return’). What these verbs have in common is that you double their t’s when making their te or ta forms. For example, the verb shiru = ‘to know.’ Its te form is shitte (‘knowing’). Its ta form is shitta (‘knew’). The double t’s tell us that a verb that ends in ru is actually a u verb.

The root of a verb is its pre-u or pre-ru form. For example, kawasen (‘to buy on’), kawaseru (‘to make buy’) and kawasen (‘to be made to buy uncomfortably’). However, the root does not add a ‘w’ when making the ‘let’s’ or ‘I shall’ form, e.g., kou (‘let’s buy’), iou (‘let’s say’), omoou (‘let’s think’); when making the eba form, e.g., kaeba (‘if I buy’), ieba (‘if I say’) and omoeba (‘if I think’); or when making the potential form, e.g., kaeru (‘to be able to buy’), ieru (‘to be able to say’), and omoeru (‘to be able to think’).

For verbs ending in tsu, the root is the pre-su form. For example, the root of tatsu (‘to stand’) is tat. Tatana = ‘won’t stand.’ Tatou = ‘let’s stand.’ Tateba = ‘if I stand.’

The stem of a verb is the pre-masu form. For an ru verb, the root and the stem are the same. For example, taberu = tabemasu = ‘to eat.’ Its root is its pre-ru form, or tabe. Its stem is its pre-masu form, which is also tabe. Now consider a u verb for comparison: nomu = nomimasu = ‘to drink.’ Its root is its pre-u form, or nom. Its stem is its pre-masu form, or nomi.

The e rule says that, looking at transitive/intransitive verb pairs, transitive verbs tend to end in eru. For example, akeru (‘to open’) is transitive, and aku (‘to open’) is intransitive; shimeru (‘to close’) is transitive, and shimaru (‘to close’) is intransitive. But su usually trumps eru in determining which verb is transitive. For example, kesu (‘to turn off’) is transitive and kieru (‘to go off’) is intransitive; dasu (‘to put out’) is transitive and dera (‘to go out’) is intransitive; nekasu (‘to put to sleep’) is transitive and neru (‘to go to sleep’) is intransitive; kowasu (‘to break’) is transitive and kowareru (‘to break’) is intransitive.

Exceptions to the e rule include kiru (‘to cut’) which is transitive and kieru (‘to be cut’) which is intransitive; uru (‘to sell’) is transitive and ureru (‘to be sold’) is intransitive; nuru (‘to paint’) is transitive and nureru (‘to get wet’) is intransitive. These intransitive exceptions are all potential forms (see the potential tense on the next page) of their related transitive verbs, which are all u verbs ending in ru. As an example, kieru, one of the exceptions just mentioned, which = ‘to be cut,’ also = ‘to be able to cut.’ In the same way, ureru also = ‘to be able to sell,’ and nureru also = ‘to be able to paint.’

The te form of intransitive verbs is always followed by imasu, whether describing an ongoing action or a fixed condition. For example, mado ga aite imasu can mean either ‘the window is opening’ or ‘the window is open.’ Since aku (‘to open’) is an intransitive verb, you can never say mado ga aite arimasu.

Similarly, the te form of transitive verbs is also followed by imasu, if you are describing an
ongoing action, e.g. *mado wo akete imasu* = 'I am opening the window.'

However, if you are describing a fixed condition, the transitive aru rule says that the te form of transitive verbs is usually followed by aru, or arimasu. For example, *mado wo akete arimasu* = 'the window is open' (by someone). (To make things a little more complicated, *mado ga akete arimasu* is also OK, since you may use either wo or ga after the direct object of a transitive verb when describing a fixed condition.)

However, some verbs are exceptions to the transitive aru rule, when they are used to describe a fixed condition. For example, *hajimete imasu* = 'it is started' (by someone). *Nakashite imasu* = 'it is lost' (by someone). Another exception occurs when you want to imply that the speaker performed the action. In that case, you can use imasu with a transitive verb, even though you are dealing with a fixed condition, e.g., *mado wo akete imasu* = 'the window is open' (by me).

Saying 'if' or 'when'

To express the idea 'if, then,' for u verbs, add *eba* to the root. For ru verbs: add *reba* to the root. For example, *nomu* = 'I drink.' *Nombeta* = 'if I drink, then ...' *Akeru* = 'I open.' *Akeretara* = 'if I open, then ...'

To express the ideas 'if' or 'when,' add *ra* to the plain speech past form of a verb or adjective. This is called the tara form. For example, the plain past form of taberu ('to eat') is tabeta ('ate'). Adding *ra*, we get tabetara = 'if I eat' or 'when I eat.' The plain past form of *nomu* ('to drink') is nondara ('drank'). Adding *ra*, we get nondara = 'if I drink' or 'when I drink.' *Samui* = 'cold.' The plain past form is samukatta = 'it was cold.' Adding *ra*, we get samukattara = 'if it's cold' or 'when it's cold.'

Another way to express the ideas 'if' or 'when' is to add *to* to a plain non-past verb. For example, *nomu to* = 'if I drink' or 'when I drink.' *Akeru to* = 'if I open' or 'when I open.' Don't use *to* or *eba* before a request, suggestion, wish etc. For example, you cannot say oosaka ni iketara, okashi wo katte kudasai = 'if you go to Osaka, please buy sweets.' Nor can you say oosaka ni iketara, okashi wo katte kudasai. Instead you may say oosaka ni ittara, okashi wo katte kudasai.

Use *tara* to sound more personal. For example, *tabako wo sutta karada ni yokunai desu* = 'if you smoke, it's not good for the body.' Use *to* to sound more impersonal. For example, *tabako wo suu to karada ni yokunai desu* = 'if one smokes, it's not good for the body.' Use *to* to give directions or talk about natural laws. For example, *fuyu ni naru to, samuku narimasu* = 'when it becomes winter, it becomes cold.'

To say 'in case it is,' add *nara* to a noun, adjective or verb. For example, *eki mae ni aru ginkou nara, dokodemo ii desu yo* = 'in the case of exist-in-front-of-the-station banks, anywhere is good for sure.'

Another way to say 'in case it is' is to add *dattara* to a noun, adjective or verb. For example, *sono heya ga kirei dattara karimasu* = 'in case that room is clean, I'll rent it.'

The Potential Tense

To show that something is possible for u verbs, add *eru* to the root. Think the excited rooster can (drink). For example, *nomu* = 'to drink.' *Nomeru* = *nomemasu* = 'I can drink."

To show that something is possible for ru verbs, add *rareru* to the root. Think rapid red roosters can (eat). For example, *taberu* = 'to eat.' *Tabarareru* = *taberaremasu* = 'I can eat.' Rareru can be shortened to *reru*, meaning that you can remove the 'ar.' Think red roosters can (eat).

The three irregular verbs are: can go (long form) = *ikareru* = *ikaramasu*. Think at the eastern camp, red roosters can go. Can go (short form) = *ikeru* = *ikemasu*. Think eastern
Kenyan roosters can go. Can come (long form) = korareru = koremasu. Think called red roosters can come. Can come (short form) = koreru = koremasu. Think red roosters can come. Can do = dekiru = dekimasu. Think the deaf king’s rooster can do it.

When using potential verbs, you may follow object nouns with either ga or wo; e.g., tegami wo kakeru = tegami ga kakeru = ‘I can write a letter.’

Tari

One way to express the idea of ‘etcetera’ is to add tari to the past stems of plain speech verbs and adjectives. Follow the last listed item (if you are listing more than one) with suru or desu. For example, kaimono wo shitari souji wo shitari shimasu = ‘he’s doing shopping, doing laundry, etc.’ Tabetari nondari desu = ‘she’s eating, sleeping, etc.’

Tari can also be used to mean ‘sometimes it is; sometimes it isn’t.’ For example, isogashikattari hima dattari desu = ‘sometimes it’s busy; sometimes it’s free time.’

Saying ‘shall’ or ‘let’s’

To say a plain speech ‘I shall’ or ‘let’s,’ for a u verb, add ou to the root. For example, nomou = ‘I shall drink’ or ‘let’s drink.’ For an ru verb, add you to the root. For example, tabeyou = ‘I shall eat’ or ‘let’s eat.’ For the three irregular verbs, say ikou (‘I shall go’ or ‘let’s go’), koyou (‘I shall come’ or ‘let’s come’), and shiyou (‘I shall do’ or ‘let’s do’).

To say ‘I shall’ or ‘let’s’ using the more polite masu verb forms, remove the final su and add shou. Using the same verbs mentioned in the previous paragraph, we get nomimashou, tabemashou, ikimashou, kimashou and shimashou.

Saying ‘to try to do’

To express the idea ‘to try to do,’ use the plain ‘let’s’ form of the verb followed by to suru. For example, oyoide kawa wo watarou to shimasu = ‘swimming, I will try to cross the river.’

Tokoro and Bakari

Tokoro means ‘place’ or ‘part.’ For example, ii tokoro desu = ‘it’s a nice place.’ In addition, there are some other ways to use this word: hashiru tokoro desu = ‘he’s on the verge of running.’ Hashitte iru tokoro desu = ‘he’s in the process of running.’ Hashitta tokoro desu = ‘he just finished running.’ In contrast, hashitta bakari desu = ‘he finished running a while ago.’

The Exclamatory Tense

To report what you see as an exclamation, use the past plain speech tense of a verb. For example, kita kita = ‘it’s coming, it’s coming!’

Imperative Verbs

To form an imperative verb, for a u verb, add e to the root. For example, nome = ‘drink!’ For an ru verb, add ro to the root. For example, tabero = ‘eat!’ The three irregular verbs are ike (‘go!’), koi (‘come!’) and shiro (‘do!’). Think there’s a shiro koi in the ike, since shiro also= ‘white,’ koi also = ‘carp,’ and ike also = ‘pond.’

The Causative Tense

Causative verbs are used when someone causes or allows someone else to do something. Mark the person causing the action with wa or ga and the victim (which can be an object rather than a person) with ni or wo. The decision as to whether to use ni or wo is somewhat complicated. If you are using wo in a sentence as a direct object marker, then use ni to mark the victim (in other words, avoid using wo twice in
the same sentence). If the sentence implies that permission rather than force is used to get someone to do something, you are more likely to use ni to mark the victim.

For a u verb, add aseru to the root. Think they make assertive roosters (drink). For example, haha’oya ga imouto ni gyuunyuu wo nomaseru = my mother to my younger sister makes drink milk.’ In colloquial speech, aseru can be shortened to asu. Think I assume they make roosters (drink). For example, haha’oya ga imouto ni gyuunyuu wo nomaseta = ‘as for me, it was drunk on me by younger brother.’

To make the passive form of a u verb, add areru to the root, i.e., the pre-u form. Think they (drink) on the African red rooster. For example, boku no koora wa otouto ni nomaseta = ‘as for my cola, it was drunk on me by younger brother.’

To make the passive form of an ru verb, add rareru to the root, i.e., the pre-ru form. Think they (eat) on the rapid red rooster. For example, okashi wa imouto ni taberareta = ‘as for the sweets, they were eaten on me by younger sister.’

To make the causative tense with an ru verb, add saseru to the root. Think they make the sad sensitive roosters (eat). For example, chichiyaa ga otouto ni yasai wo tabesasemaru = ‘my father to my younger brother makes eat vegetables.’ In colloquial speech, saseru can be shortened to sasu. Think they make sad supervisors (eat).

The three irregular verbs are: Ikaseru = ‘to make go.’ Think at the eastern camp, they make the sensitive rooster go. Kosaseru = ‘to make come.’ Think they make the Korean sad sensitive rooster come. Saseru = ‘to make do.’ Think they make the sad sensitive rooster do it.

In Japanese, when using a passive verb, mark the person causing the action (if one is stated) with ni and the victim (which could be an object rather than a person) with wa or ga.

In Japanese, both transitive and intransitive verbs have passive forms. The passive form of intransitive verbs may imply something unfortunate. For example, juutai ni makikomareta = ‘to a (traffic) jam they got involved.’ The passive form of either a transitive or an intransitive verb may also be used to show politeness. For example, keikosan ga koraremasita = ‘Keiko honorably came.’ In this case, the person causing the action is marked with wa or ga, and there is no victim. To use the passive form in this way is similar to using irassharu (‘to honorably come, go or exist’), ossharu (‘to honorably say or tell’) and other honorific verbs,
but the passive form is not as polite as the honorific form.

**Causative Passive verbs**

The final tense we will cover is the causative passive tense. There is nothing quite like this verb form in English. This tense is usually used to show that a victim is being forced to do something unwanted and thus suffers discomfort.

When using this form, mark the person causing the action (if one is stated) with ni and the victim (which occasionally can be an object rather than a person) with wa or ga.

To form the causative passive tense of a u verb, add asararēru to the root of the verb. Think asthmatic erratic red roosters are made to (drink). This may be shortened to asareru. Think assaulted red roosters are made to (drink). For example, imouto wa haha’oya ni gyuunyuu wo nomaserarēru = ‘as for my younger sister, by my mother she is made to drink milk.’ As mentioned above, nomaserarēru may be shortened to nomaserēru in this sentence. (Note: the short form cannot be used with verbs that end with su, like hanasu, and there are other exceptions as well. Use the long form when you aren’t sure.)

To form the causative passive tense for an ru verb, add sasareru to the root. Think the sassy erratic red rooster is made to (eat). For example, otouto wa chichi ni yasai wo tabesaserēru = ‘as for my younger brother, by my father, he is made to eat vegetables.’

If we re-write the previous sentence using the causative tense, it becomes: chichi wa otouto ni yasai wo tabesaseru = ‘as for my father, to my younger brother he makes eat vegetables.’ Note that there is almost no difference in meaning between the causative passive tense and the causative tense, but the point of view is different. In the causative passive sentence the younger brother is the topic (the sentence is written from his point of view), whereas in the causative sentence the father is the topic (the sentence is written from his point of view). In addition, with the causative passive sentence we get a strong sense that the younger brother is uncomfortable with what he is being made to do.

The causative passive forms of the three irregular verbs are as follows: ikaserarēru = to made to go. Think at the eastern camp, sensitive rapid red roosters are made to go. This can be shortened to ikasēru = ‘to be made to go.’

Think at the eastern camp, sad red roosters are made to go. Kosaserarēru = ‘to be made to come.’ Think the Korean sassy erratic red rooster is made to come. Sasēru = ‘to be made to do.’ Think the sassy erratic red rooster is made to do it. For example, kodomo wa okaasan ni kaimono ni ikasēru = ‘as for the child, by the mother, for the purpose of shopping, he is made to go.’ Imouto wa sensei ni gakkou ni kosaserarēru = ‘little sister, by the teacher, is made to come to school.’ Yoko san wa iroiro na tetsudai wo sasēru = ‘as for Yoko, various helps, she is made to do.’

The use of the causative passive verb form does not always imply that the effect of an action is negative. For example, sono ie no mawari wa kakine ga megurasarete iru = ‘that house’s circumference is being surrounded by a fence.’ This sentence does not have any negative implications.

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Please see the last two pages of this document for a quiz that we hope will help you to memorize the conjugations of the Potential, Causative, Passive and Causative Passive verb forms.
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A Quiz: How to Conjugate Four Challenging Japanese Verb Tenses

Instructions

The four columns on the left side of the page below list the different verb forms that are associated with these four verb tenses. The columns on the right contain mnemonics to help us remember each form.

Part 1. Try to recite the verbs for each tense in the order shown: u verbs, ru verbs, “to go,” “to come,” and “to do.” When reciting u verbs and ru verbs, add the appropriate suffixes (preceded by “-”) in the lists below to their roots. (A verb root is its pre-u or pre-ru form.) Use “nomu” to represent u verbs and “taberu” to represent ru verbs. The first three responses should be “nomeru,” “taberareru” and “tabereru.”

Part 2. When you are able to recite all of the verb forms, try to make complete sentences with them, using kare, watashi, miruku, pan and soudan as nouns. Say the English sentences first, and then translate them. The first two responses should be 1) “he can drink milk: kare wa miruku ga nomeru” and 2) “he can eat bread: kare wa pan ga taberareru, or kare wa pan ga tabereru.” Please include sentences that illustrate the use of the passive tense to show politeness. See the next page for a complete list of suggested answers.

Potential Tense (mark the actor with wa or ga)

Among potential verb forms, there are three redundancies (duplicate ways of expressing the same meaning). For example, both tabereru and taberareru = “can eat.” Among the eight verb forms listed for this tense, redundancies like this affect ru verbs, the verb “can go” and the verb “can come.”

If a verb is affected by a redundancy, we use plural nouns like “roosters” in the mnemonic to the right of it. Plural nouns tell us that there is more than one way to express the idea that the verb represents.

-eru (u verbs) The excited rooster can (drink).
-rareru1 (ru verbs) Rapid red roosters can (eat).
-eru (ru verbs) Red roosters can (eat).

ikareru2 At the eastern camp, red roosters can go.
ikeru Eastern Kenyan roosters can go.
korareru3 Corralled red roosters can come.
koreru Korean red roosters can come.
dekiru The deaf king’s rooster can do it.

Causative Tense (mark the actor with wa or ga; mark the victim with ni or wo)

There are two redundancies, affecting u verbs and ru verbs.

-aseru (u verbs) They make assertive roosters (drink).
-asu (u verbs) I assume they make roosters (drink). (“-asu” is only used with some verbs; don’t use it with verbs that end in su, like hanasu)

-saseru3 (ru verbs) They make sad sensitive roosters (eat).
-sasu (ru verbs) They make sad supervisors (eat). (“-sasu” is only used with some verbs; use the longer form “saseru” when you aren’t sure)

ikaseru At the eastern camp, they make the sensitive rooster go.
kosaseru They make the Korean sad sensitive rooster come.

saseru4 They make the sad sensitive rooster do it.

Passive Tense (mark the victim with wa or ga; mark the actor with ni; if the passive tense is used merely to show politeness, there is no victim, and the actor is marked with wa or ga)

-areru (u verbs) They (drink) on the African red rooster.
-rareru1 (ru verbs) They (eat) on the rapid red rooster.

ikareru2 At the eastern camp, they go on the red rooster.
korareru3 They come on the corralled red rooster.
sareru They do it on the sad red rooster.

Causative Passive Tense (mark the victim with wa or ga; mark the actor with ni)

There are two redundancies, affecting u verbs and the verb “to be made to go.”

-asasereru (u verbs) Asthmatic erratic red roosters are made to (drink).
asaseru (u verbs) Assaulted red roosters are made to (drink).
sasereru5 (ru verbs) The sassy erratic red rooster is made to (eat).

ikasereru At the eastern camp, sensitive rapid red roosters are made to go.
ikasereru At the eastern camp, sad red roosters are made to go.
kosasereru The Korean sassy erratic red rooster is made to come.
sasereru5 The sassy erratic red rooster is made to do it.

Notes: 1. The suffix “-rareru” is used twice. 2. The word “ikareru” is used twice.
3. The word “korareru” is used twice. 4. The suffix “-saseru” is identical to the word “saseru.”
5. The suffix “-sasereru” is identical to the word “sasereru.”
Suggested Responses for the Quiz on the Previous Page

Part 1.
Potential Tense: nomeru, taberareru, tabereru, ikereru, korareru, koreru, dekiru
Causative Tense: nomaseru, nomasu, tabesaseru, tabesasu, ikaseru, kosaseru, saseru
Passive Tense: nomareru, taberareru, ikereru, korareru, sareru
Causative Passive Tense: nomaserareru, nomasareru, tabesaserareru, ikaserareru, ikasareru, kosaserareru, saserareru

Part 2.
Potential Tense
He can drink milk: kare wa miruku ga nomeru.
He can eat bread: kare wa pan ga taberareru, or kare wa pan ga tabereru.
He can go: kare wa ikereru, or kare wa ikeru.
He can come: kare wa korareru, or kare wa koreru.
He can do consultation: kare wa soudan (ga) dekiru.

Causative Tense
He makes me drink milk: kare wa watashi ni miruku wo nomaseru, or kare wa watashi ni miruku wo nomasu.
He makes me eat bread: kare wa watashi ni pan wo tabesaseru, or kare wa watashi ni pan wo tabesasu.
He makes me go: kare wa watashi ni ikaseru.
He makes me come: kare wa watashi ni kosaseru.
He makes me do consultation: kare wa watashi ni soudan (wo) saseru.

Passive Tense
I have milk drunk on me by him: watashi wa kare ni miruku wo nomareru (suggesting he drinks my milk).
I have bread eaten on me by him: watashi wa kare ni pan wo taberareru (suggesting he eats my bread).
I have him go on me: watashi wa kare ni ikereru (suggesting that his going causes me discomfort).
I have him come on me: watashi wa kare ni korareru (suggesting that his coming causes me discomfort).
I have him do consultation on me: watashi wa kare ni soudan (wo) saseru (i.e., he consults me).

Passive Tense Used to Show Politeness
He drinks milk honorably: kare wa miruku wo nomareru.
He eats bread honorably: kare wa pan wo taberareru.
He goes honorably: kare wa ikereru.
He comes honorably: kare wa korareru.
He does consultation honorably: kare wa soudan (wo) sareru.

Causative Passive Tense
I am made to drink milk by him: watashi wa kare ni miruku wo nomaserareru (6), or watashi wa kare ni miruku wo nomasareru (5).
I am made to eat bread by him: watashi wa kare ni pan wo tabesaserareru (7).
I am made to go by him: watashi wa kare ni ikaserareru (6), or watashi wa kare ni ikasareru (5).
I am made to come by him: watashi wa kare ni kosaserareru (6).
I am made to do consultation by him: watashi wa kare ni soudan (wo) saserareru (5).

1. Words shown in parentheses are optional.
2. In the Causative Passive section only, numbers are shown in parentheses to indicate the number of syllables in the previous verb. Knowing the number of syllables may help you to learn those conjugations.