

Spicing up your vocabulary

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This may come as a surprise, but each of the following expressions could be translated as “I’ll buy it.”

- (1) *Kau.*
- (2) *Katte miru.*
- (3) *Katte miseru.*
- (4) *Katte oku.*
- (5) *Katte kuru.*
- (6) *Katte iku.*
- (7) *Katte shimau.*
- (8) *Katte yaru.*
- (9) *Katte ageru.*
- (10) *Katte sashiageru.*

But just as different spices can create new flavors with the same meat, auxiliary verbs provide nuance to an expression.

Each of the 10 expressions listed above appear to be single expressions—especially for native Japanese speakers. But in actuality, all but No. 1 are made up of two verbs, i.e. *kau* + another verb. For instance, in No. 2, the verbs mean “to buy and see.”

In the English expression “buy it and see,” the second verb, “see,” is used as an auxiliary, giving the expression the nuance of trying something. You can use “see” this way with many other verbs, such as: wait and see; go and see; read it and see; eat it and see; etc. In the same manner “*miru*” (see) is used in Japanese as well. It can be used with any other verbs as long as the combination makes sense. Examples can include *yatte miru* (do it and see), *yonde miru* (read it and see), *mitemiru* (look at it and see), and so on.

While in English “see” is one of the few normal verbs that can be used for an auxiliary purpose, Japanese has a number of normal verbs that have auxiliary uses, adding a certain nuance to the main verb. All of the above are such examples. Let’s examine each of them.

In (3) *katte miseru*, *miseru* is a verb meaning “to show.” You would use *miseru* as an auxiliary for a main verb when you dare to show off that you can do something in a situation where other people doubt your ability to do so. So, *katte miseru* implies something like, “You guys might think that I won’t buy it, but I’ll show you; just you wait.”

Katte oku in (4) above contains the verb, *oku*, which means “to put something in place.” When you put something in place, it will stay there and be available for you for later use. So, *katte oku* is used when you want to say something such as “I’ll buy it

in preparation for its eventual use.”

In (5) *katte kuru*, *kuru* is a verb meaning “to come.” So, the expression literally translates as “I’ll buy it and come (back).” I’m sure many of you know that Japanese commonly say “*itte kimasu*” when they leave home or work. Literally it translates “I’ll go and come (back),” although few Japanese are aware that this is what they’re saying. Nevertheless, this fact seems to reiterate their subconscious respect of where they belong.

While (5) *katte kuru* means “buy and come,” *katte iku* (6) means “buy and go.” This therefore is used when you buy something on your way to your final destination.

So far, the expressions are relatively easy as you can imagine their combined meaning by their literal translation. While the pattern is the same, the remaining four require more in-depth explanation.

In (7) *katte shimau*, *shimau* is a verb meaning “to put something away,” so the expression literally means “to buy it and store away.” As it is, the meaning is a bit opaque. When you store something away, it disappears from sight. The original meaning of this combination implies something has been done to the point of exhaustion. *Tabete shimau*, for instance, means to eat and leave nothing behind. So, *katte shimau* could mean to buy it completely.

As a derivative, however, this combination is commonly used when something is done inadvertently or against one’s will. *Katte shimau*, therefore, may translate as “I will end up buying something I don’t really want to.”

The expressions in (8), (9) and (10) are all combinations meaning “buy and give,” with *yaru*, *ageru* and *sashiageru* all essentially meaning “give.” The difference lies in how you position your counterpart, i.e. junior to you, equal with you, or senior to you. You would use *yaru* when you feed your dog or water your plants, for instance, while you would use *ageru* when you give something to your peers. If you wish to pay respect to your elders or superiors, you would replace *ageru* with *sashiageru*. This is how you use these verbs when actually presenting the item.

When they are used in auxiliary verbs such as *katte yaru*, *katte ageru* or *katte sashiageru*, what you are giving is not an item but a favor. Therefore, they would literally translate “I’ll buy it and give you a favor,” but a more natural English translation would be something like, “I’ll buy it for you.”

Because of the difference of how you position yourself vis-a-vis your counterpart, the nuances could be differentiated as below: