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## THE PASSIVE

- 1 Active – passive paraphrases with comments on potential difficulties or differences in meaning.
  - a. Very soon the Rabbit noticed Alice. → *Very soon Alice was noticed by the Rabbit.*
  - b. Alice was just going to leave the room. → *The room was just going to be left by Alice.*  
*The passive is awkward here, because the room does not seem to be a suitable subject; it is not affected by the action.*
  - c. She hastily put the bottle down. → *The bottle was hastily put down (by her).* The agent phrase seems superfluous when the agent is realized by a pronoun (i.e. it is given information).
  - d. The Rabbit ordered Alice about. → *Alice was ordered about by the Rabbit.*
  - e. After a few minutes she heard a voice outside. → *After a few minutes a voice was heard from the outside (by her).* Again the agent seems superfluous. In addition the passive would be more idiomatic with an added modal (*could be heard*), so as to imply that there was a voice that anyone could hear.
  - f. They heard the sound of broken glass. → *The sound of broken glass was / could be heard (by them).* The agent can be omitted, and a modal should be added to the verb phrase (see above).
  - g. They could not hear anything else. → *Nothing else could be heard (by them).* The agent can be omitted.

2 Passive – active paraphrases with comments on potential difficulties or differences in meaning.

- a. The Web site was created by the people behind Kodak Gallery. → *The people behind Kodak Gallery created the Web site.*
- b. Tuesday's power failure was caused by heavy rain, lightning and strong winds. → *Heavy rain, lightning and strong winds caused Tuesday's power failure.*
- c. Each offer was accompanied by whooping laughter. → *Whooping laughter accompanied each offer.* (The active sentence sounds a bit awkward because it seems to violate the information principle.)
- d. She was surrounded by her friends and family. → *Her friends and family surrounded her.*
- e. Teague was found hiding under a porch of a house. → *Somebody found Teague hiding under a porch of a house.* Since the passive is short, a subject needs to be added in the active version.
- f. The victim was taken to the hospital. → *Somebody / the ambulance drivers took the victim to the hospital.* Since the passive is short, a subject needs to be added in the active version. Note that in British English the definite article *the* would be omitted.
- g. His red hair could be seen from quite a distance. → *We/people could see his red hair from quite a distance.* Since the passive is short, a subject needs to be added in the active version.

3 Explain the difference in form and meaning between the members of each pair.

- a. 1 Michael was instantly taken with Anna.  
2 Michael was instantly taken by Anna.  
*The visible difference between the sentences is the choice of preposition. To be taken with something means to like something very much. This use of taken is best analysed as an adjective, which is postmodified by the prepositional phrase with Anna. The whole adjective functions as subject predicative. In sentence (a2), taken is the main verb in a passive verb phrase, and by Anna is the agent (adverbial). Sentence (a1) means "Michael immediately liked Anna very much", while (a2) means "Anna quickly took/caught/chose Michael".*
- b. 1 He was paid by the hour.  
2 He was paid by the company.  
*To be paid by the hour means that you get a certain sum of money per hour. By the hour is a manner adverbial, saying something about how he was paid. On the other hand, by the company is an agent adverbial, so (b2) means "The company paid him".*

c. 1 The film is not going to be appreciated by everybody.

2 Nobody is going to appreciate the film.

Sentence (c1) has the passive voice and (c2) has the active voice. Besides, the impersonal pronoun in (c1) is *everybody* (used in an agent phrase with *by*), while in (c2), *nobody* is used as subject. Sentence (c1) means that there will be some people who will not like the film and others who will. In sentence (c2), however, everybody is going to dislike it.

d. 1 Everybody in class speaks two languages.

2 Two languages are spoken by everybody in class.

Sentence (d1) has the active voice and *everybody in class* as subject and *two languages* as direct object. Sentence (d2) has the passive voice, with *two languages* as subject and *by everybody in class* as agent adverbial. Sentence (d1) says that all the students know two languages each, but they may not know the *same* two languages. In (d2), the subject position of *two languages* suggests that the same two languages are known by all the students.

e. 1 She couldn't trust John.

2 John couldn't be trusted.

Sentence (e1) has the active voice with *she* as subject and *John* as direct object. Sentence (e2) has the passive voice with *John* as subject and no agent phrase (= a short passive). Since no agent is specified in (e2), the implication is that nobody could trust John; he was not trustworthy. With (e1), however, it is possible that other people might trust John even if she could not.

4 Read the following text and answer the questions below:

An email asking people to reconsider their cancellation of home delivery from The New York Times accidentally *was sent* to some eight million people on Wednesday, but *was intended* to reach only a few hundred.

Robert Christie, a Times spokesman, initially tweeted that the emails appeared to be spam. But minutes later, that *was recanted* in a tweet from Amy Chozick, a corporate media reporter for the paper. Her tweet said the emails **were, in fact, sent by the newspaper**, but they were supposed to only reach about 300 people. Instead, they *were errantly delivered* to more than eight million.

The paper issued a statement: "An email *was sent* earlier today from The New York Times in error," it said. "This email *should have been sent* to a very small number of

subscribers, but instead was *sent* to a vast distribution list.” A screenshot of the email, **received by SC Magazine**, is below. (from [www.scmagazine.com](http://www.scmagazine.com), abbreviated)

- a. The short passives that occur in the first paragraph do not have an identified agent, so a long passive (or an active sentence) would have been hard to produce. The second sentence in the second paragraph could have had the active voice (*But minutes later, Amy Chozick, a corporate media reporter for the paper recanted that in a tweet*) or a long passive (*But minutes later, that was recanted by Amy Chozick, a corporate media reporter for the paper, in a tweet*). The active version gets a very long subject that violates the principle of end weight, while the long passive seems a bit awkward if the phrase “in a tweet” is to be retained in the sentence. However, an agent is easily found, in the postmodifier to *tweet*. For the passive *they were delivered* an agent is hard to find, as emails are hardly delivered by people. In the rest of the short passive, the speaker (= the *New York Times*) has probably avoided mentioning the agent, which is the paper itself, because of the embarrassment associated with the unintentional sending of emails.
  - b. The two long passives in the text are marked in **red and bold**. Their active counterparts might be, respectively, “In fact, the newspaper sent the emails” and “the email, which the SC Magazine received”. The passive versions are better suited to their context because the information in the agent phrases is new in both cases, while *email* is given information. In addition the text is structured in such a way that *email* occurs in subject position in many of the sentences.
- 5 Findings from the British National Corpus at <http://corpus.byu.edu/>.
- a. In the case of *was made* there are only two long passives among the first 15. *Was said* and *was sold* occur only with the short passive. *Was found* has one example of the long passive among the first 15. This suggests that the short passive is vastly more frequent than the long passive. It also suggests that the passive voice is often chosen when the speaker cannot or does not want to mention the agent of the action.
  - b. The top ten verbs to occur in the passive are: *used, made, seen, taken, found, done, given, born, considered, held*. Note that some of the lexical verbs occur several times on the list because they occur with different forms of the auxiliary *be*.
  - c. The passive is most frequent in the text type called “Academic” and least frequent in the spoken part of the corpus.