UNIT 5: TRANSITIVITY & PASSIVE VOICE

The **transitive** vs. **intransitive** distinction in **verbs** is an important one in both English and Chinese. The grammatical 'rule' itself is simple enough:

A **transitive verb** <u>needs</u> an **object** (e.g. 'The teacher <u>praised </u>the student' vs. * 'The teacher <u>praised</u>')
An **intransitive verb** <u>cannot</u> take an **object** (e.g. 'The teacher <u>smiled</u>' vs. * 'The teacher <u>smiled</u> the student')

But it is not easy to explain the idea behind this rule. Why should transitive and intransitive verbs behave this way?

The following explanation may be of some help to you. But remember that, just as in the case of the other 'explanations' (for count/mass nouns, finite/non-finite verb forms, etc.), it is just an attempt to help you make sense of something that would otherwise seem pretty arbitrary or mechanical.   A lot of things in grammar make sense, but not in an absolutely clear-cut way.

INTRANSITIVE VERBS

Think of the activities or events that happen in real life. Some of them involve only **one (essential) participant**. If you 'run' (meaning to use your legs to propel yourself), you do the running all by yourself. You don't run somebody else, nor does somebody else run you – you just move your own legs and run. (Of course, you may run <u>with</u> someone else, but that's a different matter.) The same with jogging, swimming, crawling, smiling, laughing, crying, sneezing, snoring, sleeping, standing, sitting, living, dying, etc. All these activities, which involve just one essential participant, are typically represented by **intransitive verbs**, which involve only a **subject** but no **object** (which would represent a second participant in the event).

TRANSITIVE VERBS

More often than not, however, an activity may involve **two** (or more) **essential participants**. Think of the activity of 'hitting'. It always involves two participants: (i) a 'hitter', and (ii) somebody or something which is 'hit'. Furthermore, the activity can be said to be started by one participant (in this case the 'agent' of the hitting, i.e. the hitter), and is directed at the other participant (the 'target' or 'object' of the hitting). You'll find the same thing with other activities like touching, striking, killing, wounding, kissing, loving, hating, scolding, praising, criticising, attacking, buying, selling, building, eating, drinking, destroying, protecting, betraying, etc. etc. They all involve at least two essential participants (NOTE: a 'participant' need not be a living thing – e.g. a typhoon and a house can be the two participants of 'destroy', in 'The typhoon destroyed the house'). In terms of grammar, this sort of activity is typically represented by a **transitive verb**. A transitive verb involves both a **subject** and an **object**, which correspond to the 'agent' and the 'target' respectively.

Just two further notes. Some actions may involve <u>three</u> participants. For example, the action of 'giving' involves (i) a 'giver', (ii) some object which is 'given', and (iii) a 'recipient' who receives the object. We call (iii) an 'indirect object'. Secondly, sometimes an object can be

left out if it is commonly understood. When we say 'He's eating', we understand that he's eating some food.

SUGGESTED ANSWERS

QUESTION 1:
'Group A' verbs *slept, smiled* and *died* do not carry objects. However, 'Group B' verbs *built, damaged* and *scolded* carry objects.

QUESTION 2:
When verbs like *sleep, smile* and *die* take objects, as in sentences 7, 9 and 11, the results are ungrammatical. This means that these verbs <u>cannot</u> take objects. On the other hand, when verbs like *build, damage* and *scold* are used without objects, the results too are ungrammatical. This means that such verbs <u>need</u> objects.

QUESTION 3:
There are many possibilities here. Please refer to the explanations on intransitive and transitive verbs above.

QUESTION 4:
You'll find that the same verbs in Chinese take objects or do not take objects. E.g. 睡覺 (sleep) can't take an object. '他睡覺' is fine but *'他睡覺他的朋友' (*He slept his friend) is not. On the other hand, '建' needs an object: e.g. '他建房子' is fine but not *'他建'.

QUESTION 5:
The underlined phrases in sentences 2, 4, 6 and 8 are objects; those in sentences 1, 3, 5, and 7 are not. One important difference is that objects are normally **noun phrases**, like *the floor*, and not prepositional phrases, like *on the floor*.

QUESTION 6:
The underlined phrases in sentences 1, 3 and 5 are objects; the others are not. One important difference is that the sentences with real objects can be turned into passive sentences, e.g. (5) '<u>An English teacher</u> was hired by him', but not those without objects, e.g. (6) * 'An English teacher was become by her'.

QUESTION 7:
Only sentences 1, 3 and 5 can be turned into the passive voice because they have objects:
3. His suitcase was packed (by him) the night before the trip.
5. An English teacher was hired by him.

QUESTION 8:
1. * 'The figure <u>raises</u>.' *Raise* is a transitive verb, and requires an object, but here there's no object. What we need is an intransitive verb here, such as *rises*.
2. * 'The financial crisis <u>deteriorated</u> the economy of Hong Kong'. *Deteriorate* is an intransitive verb and cannot take an object (and here it wrongly has an object 'the economy of Hong Kong'). We'll have to say 'The economy of Hong Kong <u>deteriorated</u> because of the financial crisis', which has no object.

3. * 'The employees want the boss to <u>rise</u> their salaries.'   *Rise* is an intransitive verb and cannot take an object (such as 'their salaries'). What we need is a transitive verb here, such as *raise*.

When in doubt about whether a verb used in a certain sense is transitive or intransitive, look it up in a dictionary. It will tell you where the verb is [T] (transitive) or [I] (intransitive) for a given meaning.

QUESTION 9:
1. He <u>flew</u> from Hong Kong to San Francisco, then drove to Yosemite. INTRANSITIVE *flew*, = 'to travel by air'.
2. He <u>flew</u> an old plane and nearly had a crash. TRANSITIVE *flew*, = 'to operate', object: *an old plane*.
3. She <u>walked</u> to school yesterday as the weather was fine. INTRANSITIVE *walk*, = 'to travel on foot'
4. She <u>walks</u> her dog every morning before going to school. TRANSITIVE *walk,* = 'to take for a walk', object: *her dog*.
5. He <u>drinks</u> tea but not coffee. TRANSITIVE *drink,* = 'to consume', object: *tea.*
6. He <u>drinks</u> with his friends every weekend. INTRANSITIVE *drink,* = 'to consume alcohol'
7. Tom <u>painted</u> the fence all by himself. TRANSITIVE *paint*, = 'to put paint on', object: *the fence*.
8. Do you know that Tom can <u>paint</u>? INTRANSITIVE *paint,* = 'to paint pictures'.
9. You don't have to <u>run</u> every time your boss calls. INTRANSITIVE *run,* = 'to rush'.
10. The boss <u>runs</u> his company like a military establishment. TRANSITIVE *run,* = 'to organise and operate', object: *his company.*

QUESTION 10:
You will probably find that whether we decide to include the 'agent' or 'doer' of the action ('by so-and-so') depends not only on whether we know the identity of that person, but also (if we know the identity) on whether it is informative or relevant to mention it.
1. President Kennedy was assassinated by Lee Harvey Oswald in 1963.
2. Paper was invented in China thousands of years ago. (There's no point mentioning 'by somebody' since it doesn't tell us anything really.)
3. All living things can be divided into two main types. (There's no point mentioning 'by us' since it is a general 'us' and doesn't refer to any group of people in particular.)
4. The Bank of China building in Hong Kong was designed by I.M. Pei. (Very important to mention 'by I.M. Pei', for otherwise the sentence would tell us next to nothing.)
5. My friend was kidnapped by extraterrestrial aliens and taken up into their spaceship last night. (Important to mention 'by extraterrestrial aliens', as it is a very noteworthy piece of information.)
6. The kidnappers have finally been arrested (by the police). ('by the police' can be left out if you wish, as 'arrested' already implies the police.)

QUESTION 11:
1. * This vitamin can find in carrots. (The writer failed to use the passive 'This vitamin can be found in carrots'. He probably thought in terms of a topic 'this vitamin', followed by a comment '(we) can find (it) in carrots', but that is not acceptable in English.)

2. * It cannot produce by the body. (Similar comments as (1). 'It cannot be produced by the body.')
3. * These results can classify three types. (Similar comments as (1). 'These results can be classified into three types.')
4. * Some giant plants were decay. (Use 'decayed' or 'were decayed'. The writer seems aware of the passive, but used the wrong form of the verb *decay*.)

QUESTION 13:
1. After working for 10 years as a clerk, John hopes **to be promoted**.
2. Students who are more than 15 minutes late for class **are treated** as absent.
3. When he arrived home, he noticed that all the lights **were switched on**.
4. It is very humiliating to **be made** fun of by your classmates.
5. At the time the lawyer arrived at the police station, his client **was being interrogated**.
6. In my opinion, all computer hackers **should be locked up**.
7. These diseases **are spread** by physical contact, not through the air.
8. Do you know which films **will be nominated** for next year's Academy Awards?
9. At the Asian Games, two of Hong Kong's table tennis players **were sent** home.
10. We are not sure how he died. He **may have been poisoned** (poison), or he **may have been shot**.

QUESTION 14:
1. The <u>hunting</u> party rested after a long day. ('party' is the logical **subject** of 'hunt' – i.e. the party hunted somebody or something)
2. The <u>hunted</u> animals had no rest. ('animals' is the logical **object** of 'hunt' – i.e. the animals were hunted by somebody)
3. The <u>winning</u> team celebrated their victory. ('team' is subject of 'win')
4. The <u>defeated</u> team broke down in tears. ('team' is object of 'defeat')
5. The <u>crying</u> baby kept me awake all night. ('baby' is subject of 'cry')
6. There's no use crying over <u>spilled</u> milk ('milk' is object of 'spill')
7. The <u>disappointing</u> Vanessa Mae concert left a bad impression. ('concert' is subject of 'disappoint')
8. Her <u>disappointed</u> fans demanded their money back. ('fans' is object of 'disappoint')
9. The <u>exhausting</u> match lasted for five hours. ('match' is subject of 'exhaust')
10. The <u>exhausted</u> players collapsed as soon as it ended. ('players' is object of 'exhaust')

GENERALISATION: When the **present participle** form of a verb (e.g. 'hunting') is used as an adjective before a noun, then the **noun** is normally the logical **subject** of the **verb** (e.g. the 'party' of people were the ones who did the hunting). When the **past participle** form of a verb (e.g. 'hunted') is used this way, then the noun is normally the logical **object** of the verb (e.g. the 'animals' were the ones who were hunted by the hunting party).

QUESTION 15:
(The mistakes are marked with *)
1. * It was useful to study the <u>remained</u> parts of the plants. – <u>the remaining parts</u> (i.e. the parts that remain)
2. * A survey <u>conducting</u> among 100 chief executives has been published. – <u>a survey conducted…</u> (i.e. a survey which was conducted by somebody)
3. * A million years ago, there were many giant plants <u>grown</u> on the Earth. – <u>many giant plants growing</u> (i.e. the plants were growing on the Earth)

4. * Their performance is really <u>fascinated</u>. I have seen it three times. – <u>fascinating</u> (the performance fascinates people)
5. * I was so <u>boring</u> with the math lesson that I went to sleep. – <u>bored</u> (I was bored by the math lesson)
6. These confusing rules are impossible to understand. – **Correct** (the rules confuse people, so these rules are 'confusing')
7. * The children seem <u>delighting</u> by the cartoon. – <u>delighted</u> (the children are delighted by something)
8. * The little girl was <u>frightening</u> by the fierce barking dog. – <u>frightened</u> (the dog frightened the girl)
9. The manager apologised to the annoyed customers. – **Correct** (the customers were annoyed by something)
10. The moving vehicle smashed into his rear. – **Correct**.

ADDITIONAL EXERCISES:

Text 1:
The disruption of the Google search engine this month appears to have been only one symptom of a significant change in the way China censors the Internet. Observers say the main focus of the so-called Great Firewall has switched from preventing access to a long list of **banned** Web sites to screening Internet traffic, including e-mail, by searching out keywords and blocking the data they **are associated** with.

A far greater amount of online information **is denied** to mainland residents than was previously the case.

The changes, which began to **be noticed** around September 13, are also proving highly unpopular with many of the country's 46 million Internet users.

News sites, including the South China Morning Post's scmp.com, particularly **are affected**. Mainland users can still reach the scmp.com homepage, but if they try to read stories on topics Beijing considers politically sensitive, they **will be blocked**. Even sites that offer seemingly benign information **are tampered** with.

After being off-line for two weeks this month, Google now works when users put in most words. But looking for information on a banned topic can cause searches to **be blocked** (block) until the browser **is restarted**.

Text 2:
Police are considering laying charges after a Chinese flag **was set** on fire during a National Day protest yesterday.

It would be the first time that a flag-burning prosecution **has been brought** - although there have been five convictions for desecrating the national or SAR flags, the charge which could apply to the new case. In the previous cases, flags **were defaced** or **altered** by protesters.

Yesterday's flag-burning **happened** when 10 members of the April 5th Action Group marched from the Southorn Centre in Wan Chai about 7am. A dozen police officers **escorted** the group but stopped it near Central Plaza and asked to check what was inside the coffin. They **demanded** that the protesters move to a demonstration area set up by the police.

A minor scuffle broke out as the activists defied police demands and **insisted** on heading for the waterfront. During the confusion, a national flag **was set** alight. Officers **used** a fire extinguisher to put out the blaze.

Ng Po-keung, the assistant Wan Chai division commander, said the protesters might have breached the National Flag Ordinance by burning the flag. "We will investigate the incident of burning the national flag and seek legal advice from the Justice Department as to what follow up action should **be taken**," he said.

"Long Hair" Leung Kwok-hung, a core member of the April 5th Action Group, said he was not **involved** in burning the flag.

Leung, who is on trial over unlawful assembly charges, **was fined** $6,000 for desecrating the Hong Kong flag with his colleague Koo Sze-yiu during an anti-police rally in May last year.

Text 3:

Legislators and tourism industry leaders last night demanded an inquiry after thousands of Hong Kong residents and tourists **were stranded** at the Lowu border crossing because of a mainland computer breakdown.

Long queues formed on the mainland side when the crash happened at noon. It **took** 45 minutes to fix the glitch, but some people said they **were delayed** by up to two hours because of the knock-on effects.

It was an embarrassment for Shenzhen border authorities who, in response to complaints about border delays, **had claimed** just five weeks ago that their efficiency was "even better" than that of their Hong Kong counterparts.

About 2,000 people travelling to Shenzhen were stranded on the Lowu bridge at the peak of the hold-up. Many more had to wait on the other side of the bridge to get into Hong Kong.

Many transit passengers were angry. "I have a plane to catch. What **am I supposed** to do?" shouted Cheung Wai-kuen, who said he **had been trapped** for 30 minutes and had less than an hour to reach Shenzhen's airport.

Tony Law Yau-tong, the border commander of the Immigration Department, said some travel agents should **be held** responsible for the border congestion. He said only 173 mainland tour groups **had told** Shenzhen border authorities of visits in advance but 250 groups turned up at Lowu yesterday.

"Most of the mainland tourists are only on a short trip to Hong Kong. It must be very frustrating if most of their time **is spent** on queueing up for border-crossing. With the bad experience, they may not want to visit Hong Kong again," Mr Li said.

Text 4:

Canto-pop star Nicholas Tse Ting-fung will be spending two weeks in jail while awaiting sentence after **being convicted** of perverting the course of justice on Wednesday afternoon.

The Western Court ruled that the teen idol and 28-year-old police constable Lau Chi-wai were both guilty of allowing Tse's former chauffeur, Shing Kwok-ting, to stand in as the driver of Tse's black Ferrari when it crashed at Cotton Tree Drive on March 23.

No sentence **was handed** down but Tse and Lau **have been remanded** in custody, without bail, until October 16.

Last month Shing - who **was sentenced** to four months' imprisonment after admitting to falsely representing himself as the driver - testified in court, under immunity for prosecution, that he **had asked** Tse to leave the scene of the accident.

After saying he would deal with the matter, Shing asked Constable Lau if he could stand in as driver of the vehicle. Lau allegedly agreed to the request, the court **was told**.