

## Unit 5

# TRANSITIVITY & PASSIVE VOICE

## I. INTRODUCTION

In this unit, we'll look at another important property of verbs, which seems to show some similarities between English and Chinese -- and yet they are very different in some other ways.

### QUESTION 1:

Here are some common verbs in English, each used in a sentence in a typical way. Based on how they are used here, can you divide them into two groups (let's call them Groups 'A' and 'B')? Can you give a reason for your choice?

1. He slept.
2. He built this house.
3. He smiled.
4. He damaged the vase.
5. He died.
6. He scolded the policeman.

'Group A' verbs:

'Group B' verbs:

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It is almost certain that all of you will have divided the above sentences this way: 'Group A' verbs: 1, 3, 5; 'Group B': 2, 4, 6. What about the reason? You may have put it differently, but most of you will probably have said something like this: Group A verbs have **no objects**, and Group B verbs have **objects**.

### QUESTION 2:

Here are some more sentences involving the same verbs as in 1-6 above. The way they are used this time, all the sentences are ungrammatical (as indicated by \*). What do these additional data tell you about these verbs?

7. \* He slept the floor.
8. \* He built.
9. \* He smiled the pretty girl.
10. \* He damaged.
11. \* He died his friend.
12. \* He scolded.

ANSWER:

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You will probably have arrived at the following conclusion: The first group of verbs (*sleep, smile, die*) cannot have objects, while the second group (*build, damage, scold*) need to have objects. That's why sentences 7-12 are ungrammatical.

**QUESTION 3:**

Think of three more verbs which are like Group A verbs (like *sleep* etc.), and another three verbs which are like Group B verbs (like *scold* etc.) Make a sentence with each of these new verbs.

More Group A verbs:

More Group B verbs:

Unlike tense or number, the property that you've noticed about the verbs in this unit is not limited to English. Let's look at Chinese.

#### QUESTION 4:

Give the Chinese equivalents of sentences 1-6 above. What similarities do you find between the Chinese and English verbs?

ANSWER:

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You'll have discovered something quite interesting. And that is, in Chinese as well as in English, the same kinds of verbs (e.g. those in sentences 1, 3, 5) do not have objects, and the same kinds of verbs (e.g. those in 2, 4, 6) do.

## II. TRANSITIVITY

From Section I, you will have got the idea that there are two types of verbs, in both English and Chinese, i.e.:

Verbs that cannot take an **object** (e.g. *sleep, smile, die*) – we call them **intransitive verbs**.

Verbs that need an **object** (e.g. *build, damage, scold*) – we call them **transitive verbs**.

What is an 'object'? A mere definition is not going to do you much good. The following questions will help you understand this concept better.

#### QUESTION 5:

In the following sentences, the verb (in bold print) is followed by an underlined phrase. Some of these underlined phrases are objects and some are not. Using what you may know about 'objects', can you identify those that are objects, and explain how you managed to distinguish them from non-objects?

1. He **sat** on the floor.
2. He **swept** the floor.
3. The teacher **shouted** at the student.
4. The teacher **praised** the student.
5. The baby **cried** for milk.
6. The baby **finished** the milk.
7. The boss **travelled** by plane.
8. The pilot **tested** the plane.

ANSWER:

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One of the crucial points that you may have found from the above question is that an object is normally a **noun phrase** (like ‘the floor’), rather than a **prepositional phrase** (i.e. a **preposition** followed by a noun phrase, like ‘on the floor’). That is an important first step.

You can also discover another important property of the object by this simple test. Try to insert a word or phrase – such as ‘patiently’, ‘loudly’, ‘for a long time’, etc. – between the verb and the underlined phrase. What is the result?

1. He **sat** patiently on the floor.
2. \* He **swept** patiently the floor.

Go through the rest of the examples and you will discover the same thing: you cannot normally insert other words between a **verb** and its **object**.

Does this mean that any time we see a noun phrase immediately following a verb (and cannot be separated from it), it must be the object?

#### QUESTION 6:

In the following sentences, the verb (highlighted) is followed by a noun phrase (underlined). Are all these noun phrases objects? If not, which ones are not, and can you explain why?

1. The typhoon **flooded** many areas and **destroyed** many buildings.
2. The typhoon **lasted** one whole week.
3. The night before the trip he **packed** his suitcase.
4. His suitcase **weighed** thirty kilograms.
5. He **hired** an English teacher.
6. She **became** an English teacher.

The following are not objects:

You'll probably have found that the underlined noun phrases in sentences 2, 4 and 6 are not objects. It isn't that easy to explain why they are not, and you may have your own way of explaining it. There is one grammatical 'test' that you can do, to find out whether the noun or noun phrase after a verb is an object.

**QUESTION 7:**

Try turning the sentences in Question 6 into the **passive voice** -- if you can. Sentence 1 is done for you:

1. Many areas **were flooded** and many buildings **were destroyed** by the typhoon.

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|----|
| 2. |
| 3. |
| 4. |
| 5. |
| 6. |

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What did you find? Not all of these sentences can be 'passivised' (turned into the passive voice). And it is those sentences which do not have objects – i.e. sentences 2, 4, 6 – that cannot be passivised.

And now, to summarise what we've found so far:

There are two types of verbs: **transitive** and **intransitive**.

A **transitive** verb needs an **object**, while an **intransitive** verb cannot take an **object**.

An **object** is normally a **noun phrase** which immediately follows the **verb**, and which can be **passivised**.

Mistakes are sometimes made by students who confuse transitive with intransitive verbs.

**QUESTION 8:**

Explain the mistakes in the following sentences, and correct them:

1. The figure raises.

|         |
|---------|
| ANSWER: |
|---------|

2. The financial crisis deteriorated the economy of Hong Kong.

ANSWER:

3. The employees want the boss to rise their salaries.

ANSWER:

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### III. SOME COMPLICATIONS

Just as there are nouns which can be used both as mass nouns and count nouns (e.g. *cake*, *paper* (as in ‘Paper was invented in China’ vs. ‘Many papers were presented at the conference’), so there are verbs which can be used both as **transitive** and **intransitive** verbs, usually with some differences in meaning. Take for example the verb *grow*. As an **intransitive** verb, it has several meanings, including ‘to develop or increase over time’, as in:

1. Papaya trees grow well in this soil.
2. The economy is growing at a fantastic rate.

As a **transitive** verb, it means ‘to make plants grow’, as in:

3. We tried to grow vegetables in our garden, but failed.

Let’s look at some more verbs.

#### QUESTION 9:

In the following sentences, you will find the underlined verbs used in two different ways – one transitive and one intransitive. Identify each of these uses, and explain any differences in meaning between the two uses.

1. He flew from Hong Kong to San Francisco, then drove to Yosemite.
2. He flew an old plane and nearly had a crash.
3. She walked to school yesterday as the weather was fine.
4. She walks her dog every morning before going to school.
5. He drinks tea but not coffee.
6. He drinks with his friends every weekend.
7. Tom paints the fence all by himself.
8. Do you know that Tom can paint?
9. You don’t have to run every time your boss calls.

10. The boss runs his company like a military establishment.

1-2:  
3-4:  
5-6:  
7-8:  
9-10:

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It is a good habit to look up a dictionary when you are in doubt about transitivity – transitive uses are identified by [T] and intransitive uses by [I]. In fact, it is a good habit to look up a lot of other things in a dictionary – how a word is used, what word class (noun, verb, adjective, etc.) it belongs to (words often belong to more than one class), whether a noun is countable or uncountable, etc. A dictionary tells you much more than just the meaning – it tells you a lot about the **grammar** of words.

#### IV. THE PASSIVE VOICE

We mentioned the **passive voice** earlier in this Unit. As you know, we can change an **active** into a **passive** sentence by

- (i) moving the **object** of the active sentence into the **subject** position in the passive sentence, and
- (ii) changing the main verb into the **past participle** form, preceded by the auxiliary *be*.

A third step is optional, and may be left out if you wish, and that is to take the original subject of the active sentence and moving it to a position after the verb, preceded by the preposition *by*. The following example illustrates both possibilities:

1. ACTIVE: The earthquake destroyed the whole village.
2. PASSIVE: The whole village was destroyed.
3. PASSIVE: The whole village was destroyed by the earthquake.

Whether you choose (2) or (3) depends on how much information you want to give, or how much you know about the ‘doer’ or ‘agent’ that did it. Sometimes it’s not known who did it, e.g. ‘My wallet was stolen’. Sometimes it is unnecessary or irrelevant, but sometimes it is extremely important. Let’s think about these options by looking at the questions below.

#### QUESTION 10:

Give the passive forms of the following sentences. Decide whether or not to include information on the ‘doer’, but whichever way you decide, try to explain why.

1. Lee Harvey Oswald assassinated President Kennedy in 1963.

ANSWER:

2. Somebody invented paper in China thousands of years ago.

ANSWER:

3. We can divide all living things into two main types.

ANSWER:

4. I.M. Pei designed the Bank of China building in Hong Kong.

ANSWER:

5. Extraterrestrial aliens kidnapped my friend and took him up into their spaceship last night.

ANSWER:

6. The police have finally arrested the kidnappers.

ANSWER:

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Turning sentences into the passive voice may seem like a mechanical procedure to some of you. The procedure itself may be simple, and yet students do make lots of mistakes.



### QUESTION 11:

Given below are some mistakes made by students in the use of the passive voice. Correct these mistakes. At the end of this question, can you think of a reason why students keep on making such mistakes?

1. This vitamin can find in carrots.

ANSWER:

2. It cannot produce by the body.

ANSWER:

3. These results can classify three types.

ANSWER:

4. Some giant plants were decay.

ANSWER:

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## V. AN EXPLANATION

You may have arrived at your own explanation of why students make relatively frequent mistakes like the above with the passive voice. But here is another explanation that may interest you.

If you think about it, Chinese does not really have a ‘passive voice’. This is shown by the following examples from Chinese:

1. *fan zhu hao le*. (飯煮好了 = ‘rice cook already’)
2. *xin xie hao le*. (信寫好了 = ‘letter write already’)
3. *shu mai wan le*. (書賣完了 = ‘book sell finish already’)
4. *mai wan le*. (賣完了 = ‘sell finish already’)

On the surface, these Chinese sentences look just like ‘active’ sentences, because the verbs are in exactly the same form. But there are two major differences between English and Chinese that you should notice by comparing the above sentences with their English equivalents:

- 1a. The rice is cooked.
- 2a. The letter has been written.
- 3a. The book is sold out.
- 4a. The book (or CD or magazine etc.) is sold out.

### QUESTION 12:

Compare sentences (1-4) in Chinese, and (1a-4a) in English, as given above. Describe at least two differences between the grammar of Chinese and English as revealed by these sentences (you may ignore differences in tense and aspect for the purposes of this question).

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Comparing the Chinese and English sentences (1-4) and (1a-4a), we find the following differences:

- 1) Chinese does not have a special verb form like the past participle (*written, sold, etc.*) which is associated with the passive voice in English. The form of the verb never changes in Chinese, whether in an ‘active’ or ‘passive’ sense.
- 2) A Chinese sentence does not need a **subject** (as in sentence 4).

You may recall from Unit 1 that a Chinese sentence has a **topic** rather than a subject. In English, the passive construction is needed precisely because the **object** of the **active** sentence has become the **subject** of the **passive** sentence. But imagine a language, like Chinese, where subjects are not obligatory. All we would need then is a topic (‘this is what I’m talking about’), and a comment (‘this is what I’m going to say about it’). So in sentence (1) above, ‘rice’ is my topic, and what I want to say about it is that the cooking of it is done, or someone has cooked it – hence ‘cook already’.

From this point of view, the idea of ‘passive’ would seem quite unnecessary in Chinese. We can now understand why the students wrote sentences (1-3) of Question 11 this way, e.g. ‘This vitamin can find in carrots’, etc. It’s like saying, ‘As for this vitamin, we can find it in carrots’, but leaving out all the ‘unnecessary’ words!

The important thing is that English grammar does not work this way. Remember that:

**The subject of the passive sentence corresponds to the object of the active sentence, and so the verb should take the passive (i.e. past participle) form.**

## VI. PASSIVE VOICE & TENSE/ASPECT

The passive voice can freely combine with the use of any tense, e.g.:

- (1) Simple **present tense**: *Nowadays, lectures are held in posh, air-conditioned theatres.*
- (2) Simple **past tense**: *Decades ago, they were held in crude, makeshift buildings.*

The passive voice can also be used in any other tense/aspect/modality combination, or even be non-finite, as in the following examples:

- (3) **Present progressive**: *Lectures are being held in the gym this week.*
- (4) **Present perfect**: *Lectures have been held in the gym before.*
- (5) **Past progressive**: *Lectures were being held on the podium while the renovations were going on.*
- (6) **Past perfect**: *Lectures had been held in all kinds of places before the theatre was built.*
- (7) With **modal auxiliaries**: *Lectures will be held in the gym if it rains. Or they may be cancelled.*
- (8) **Non-finite**: *Being called a fool is bad enough, but being called a traitor is much worse. Do you want to be called both?*

### QUESTION 13:

Fill in the blanks below with the appropriate forms of the verbs in brackets (please use them as **verbs** and don't change them into nouns or other things). Be careful with the tense or aspect or modal auxiliaries that may be needed.

1. After working for 10 years as a clerk, John hopes \_\_\_\_\_ (promote).
2. Students who are more than 15 minutes late for class \_\_\_\_\_ (treat) as absent.
3. When he arrived home, he noticed that all the lights \_\_\_\_\_ (switch on).
4. It is very humiliating to \_\_\_\_\_ (make) fun of by your classmates.
5. At the time the lawyer arrived at the police station, his client \_\_\_\_\_ (interrogate).
6. In my opinion, all computer hackers \_\_\_\_\_ (lock up).
7. These diseases \_\_\_\_\_ (spread) by physical contact, not through the air.

8. Do you know which films \_\_\_\_\_(nominate) for next year's Academy Awards?
9. At the Asian Games, two of Hong Kong's table tennis players \_\_\_\_\_ (send) home.
10. We are not sure how he died. He \_\_\_\_\_ (poison), or he \_\_\_\_\_(shoot).

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## VII. PRESENT AND PAST PARTICIPLES AS ADJECTIVES

Recall that a verb has a **present participle** form (e.g. *breaking*) and **past participle** form (e.g. *broken*). You have seen that the present participle is used in the **progressive** aspect (e.g. 'He is breaking all the records'), and the past participle in the **perfect** aspect ('He has broken all the records') and the **passive** voice ('All the records have been broken').

There is another important use for these verb forms, and that is, as **adjectives**. For example:

1. The breaking glass made a loud noise.
2. The broken glass cut my feet.

In the above examples, *breaking* and *broken* function as adjectives telling us something about the noun 'glass'.

The important question to ask is: What is the connection between the **verb** in **present participle** (like *breaking*) or **past participle** form (like *broken*), and the **noun** that it modifies (like *glass*)? Perhaps you can figure this out for yourself from the following exercise.

### QUESTION 14:

Analyse the sentences below, and state the relationship between the underlined verb (functioning here as an adjective) and the noun which follows. [Clue: Is the noun the 'logical' subject, object, or something else, of the verb?] What generalisations can you make after analysing all these examples?

1. The hunting party rested after a long day.
2. The hunted animals had no rest.
3. The winning team celebrated their victory.
4. The defeated team broke down in tears.
5. The crying baby kept me awake all night.
6. There's no use crying over spilled milk.
7. The disappointing Vanessa Mae concert left a bad impression.
8. Her disappointed fans demanded their money back.

9. The exhausting match lasted for five hours.
10. The exhausted players collapsed as soon as it ended.

Relationship between:  
present participle (eg *hunting*) and the noun (eg *party*):

past participle (eg *hunted*) and the noun (eg *animals*):

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If you have analysed the examples in Question 14 carefully, you will have found an interesting and systematic relationship between the present/past participle verb acting as adjective and the noun. The noun is usually the logical **subject** of the **present participle**. E.g. in ‘the winning team’, the ‘team’ is the logical subject of the verb ‘win’ – the team won. In contrast, the noun is usually the logical **object** of the **past participle**. E.g., in ‘the defeated team’, the ‘team’ is the logical object of the verb ‘defeat’ – somebody defeated the team, and the team was defeated.

#### **QUESTION 15:**

Some of the following sentences contain mistakes of the kind that we discussed above. Identify and correct these mistakes.

1. It was useful to study the remained parts of the plants.
2. A survey conducting among 100 chief executives has been published.
3. A million years ago, there were many giant plants grown on the Earth.
4. Their performance is really fascinated. I have seen it three times.
5. I was so boring with the math lesson that I went to sleep.
6. These confusing rules are impossible to understand.
7. The children seem delighting by the cartoon.
8. The little girl was frightening by the fierce barking dog.
9. The manager apologised to the annoyed customers.
10. The moving vehicle smashed into his rear.

ANSWER:

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Now that you have a better understanding of transitivity and the passive, and the use of present and past participles as adjectives, let’s do a few more exercises to make sure you’ve got it right.

## **ADDITIONAL EXERCISES**

Fill in the blanks with the appropriate forms of the verbs in brackets:

### **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 \_\_\_\_\_ (ban) Web sites to screening Internet traffic, including e-mail, by searching out keywords and blocking the data they \_\_\_\_\_ (associate) with.

A far greater amount of online information \_\_\_\_\_ (deny) to mainland residents than was previously the case.

The changes, which began to \_\_\_\_\_ (notice) 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 \_\_\_\_\_ (affect). Mainland users can still reach the scmp.com homepage, but if they try to read stories on topics Beijing considers politically sensitive, they \_\_\_\_\_ (block). Even sites that offer seemingly benign information \_\_\_\_\_ (tamper) 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 \_\_\_\_\_ (block) until the browser \_\_\_\_\_ (restart).

### **Text 2:**

Police are considering laying charges after a Chinese flag \_\_\_\_\_ (set) on fire during a National Day protest yesterday.

It would be the first time that a flag-burning prosecution \_\_\_\_\_ (bring) -- 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 \_\_\_\_\_ (deface) or \_\_\_\_\_ (alter) by protesters.

Yesterday's flag-burning \_\_\_\_\_ (happen) when 10 members of the April 5th Action Group marched from the Southorn Centre in Wan Chai about 7am. A dozen police officers \_\_\_\_\_ (escort) the group but stopped it near Central Plaza and asked to check what was inside the coffin. They \_\_\_\_\_ (demand) 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 \_\_\_\_\_ (insist) on heading for the waterfront. During the confusion, a national flag \_\_\_\_\_ (set) alight. Officers \_\_\_\_\_ (use) 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 \_\_\_\_\_ (take)," he said.

"Long Hair" Leung Kwok-hung, a core member of the April 5th Action Group, said he not \_\_\_\_\_ (involve) in burning the flag.

Leung, who is on trial over unlawful assembly charges, \_\_\_\_\_ (fine) \$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 \_\_\_\_\_ (strand) 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 \_\_\_\_\_ (take) 45 minutes to fix the glitch, but some people said they \_\_\_\_\_ (delay) 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, \_\_\_\_\_ (claim) just five weeks ago that their efficiency was "even better" than that of their Hong Kong counterparts.

Many transit passengers were angry. "I have a plane to catch. What I \_\_\_\_\_(suppose) to do?" shouted Cheung Wai-kuen, who said he \_\_\_\_\_(trap) 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 \_\_\_\_\_(hold) responsible for the border congestion. He said only 173 mainland tour groups \_\_\_\_\_ (tell) 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 \_\_\_\_\_(spend) on queueing up for border-crossing." Mr Li said.

#### **Text 4:**

Canto-pop star Nicholas Tse Ting-fung will be spending two weeks in jail while awaiting sentence after \_\_\_\_\_ (convict) 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 \_\_\_\_\_ (hand) down but Tse and Lau \_\_\_\_\_(remand) in custody, without bail, until October 16.

Last month Shing - who \_\_\_\_\_(sentence) to four months' imprisonment after admitting to falsely representing himself as the driver - testified in court, under immunity for prosecution, that he \_\_\_\_\_ (ask) 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 \_\_\_\_\_(tell).