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Edited by
Ayo Osisanwo
&
Kazeem Adebiyi-Adelabu

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ACTIVE AND PASSIVE VOICES/DIRECT AND INDIRECT SPEECH FORMS

C.T. Akinsete

Introduction

Active and passive voices as well as direct and indirect speech forms are important aspects of the Use of English Language. For students to be able to utilise the English language effectively, it is imperative that they learn how to correctly employ the active and passive voices along with direct and indirect (reported) speech, in both written and spoken forms. Therefore, this unit focuses on the description of the voices and speech forms in English. It also explores the rules and regulations that students need in recognising the voices and the two different speech forms in English Language. This exercise would also help students change one voice to the other and also one speech form to another. At the end of this unit, it is expected that students would be well equipped with syntactic rules that govern the voices and speech forms, with a view to utilising them correctly.

Objectives

After reading through this unit, students should be able to:

- (i) identify the voice types of English sentences and the forms of reported speech in English;
- (ii) recognise the structure of each voice type and reported speech form;
- (iii) effectively change from one voice to another as well as one reported speech form to another.

Contents

Active and Passive Constructions

Active and passive voices are the two recognised voices in the English language. The structure of the sentence determines which

voice such a sentence represents. A sentence may contain three important components. These are:

Subject: This is the *doer* or *performer* of the action in a sentence.

Object: This is the *receiver* of the action in a sentence.

Verb: This is the expression of the *action* in a sentence.

Eastwood (1994) clearly states that when the person (subject) is performing the action, the active voice is used. But when the subject is transposed from its original position to become part of the predicate, the construction is in the passive form. Therefore, if the sentence is in the active voice, the subject is placed before the verb, i.e. the subject comes before the verb. e.g.

- (1) *John* bought the car.
- (2) *The women* are preparing the food.
- (3) *I* told Ibitayo.

However, if the sentence is in the passive voice, the object is placed before the subject, i.e. the subject comes after the verb. In some instances, the subject may not even appear in the sentence, as expressed in example three (3) below.

- (1) The car was bought by *John*.
- (2) The food is being prepared by *the women*.
- (3) Ibitayo was told by *me*.

The point is that in the active voice, preference is given to the subject as the doer of the action. It usually appears first before the verb. However, the reverse is the case in the passive construction. The object, which is the receiver of the action, appears before the verb. Here, preference is not quite given to the subject. That is why the subject can easily be concealed e.g.

- (1) The car was bought.
- (2) The food is being prepared.
- (3) Ibitayo was told.

Change from active and passive constructions: Basic rules

Now that we can easily distinguish active sentences from passive ones, the next step is to be able to change an active sentence to a passive sentence. To achieve this, three important rules must be strictly followed.

- (1) Subject/Object Reversal
- (2) Addition of just one auxiliary verb
- (3) Addition of the preposition 'by'

Rule 1: Subject/Object Reversal

This rule states that the subject and the object in an active construction should be reversed to create an active construction. The subject moves to the position of the object (after the verb), while the object now takes the position of the subject (before the verb).

Example 1: *John* likes *James*. (active)
James is liked by *John*. (passive)

Example 2: *The tall bald man* has bought *a hat*. (active)
A hat has been bought by *the tall bald man*. (passive)

Rule 2: Addition of ONE Be-verb

This is an important rule. To change from an active to a passive structure, only one Be-verb is to be added to the main verb in the passive construction. This means that if the question on an active sentence comes with a single verb, the answer in the passive must have two verbs. Only Be-verbs are relevant in this sense. The question is, what Be-verb are we to choose from? The answer lies in the question given. If the question contains a single lexical verb, then we choose from the options from the 'to be' family: 'is', 'was', 'are', 'were', 'am', 'be', 'being', 'been'. e.g. I am being praised. He can be punished. Note that these two sentences are passive constructions.

Exercise 1 (Question): The police arrested the thief. (active voice)

The sentence above is in the active voice. The exercise here is to change it to its passive form. Please note that there is only one lexical verb in the sentence. The main verb- 'arrested'- has two

important qualities that would determine the appropriate choice – **tense** (present or past) and **number** (singular or plural). Note that the tense for the verb ‘arrested’ is past, while the new word in the subject slot (thief) is singular. Hence, the most appropriate choice which is also *past tense* and *singular* is ‘was’. Therefore, the passive construction would read thus;

Exercise 1 (Answer): The thief was arrested by the police.
(passive voice)

Please note that the verb ‘arrested’ is in the past participle form.

Exercise 2 (Question): Bad citizens give bribes. (active voice)

The verb in this expression is ‘give’. To choose rightly, the tense of the main verb in the active sentence determines the tense of the Be-verb and the number of the Be-verb is determined by the number of the noun moved to the subject position. In the active form of the sentence above (Bribes are given by bad citizens), the tense is present, while the new subject is plural. (Please note that the new subject is ‘bribes’). Hence, the most appropriate choice, which is also the *present tense* and the *singular form* of the four options, will be ‘are’.

Exercise 2 (Answer): Bribes are given by bad citizens. (passive voice)

Note that the verb ‘give’ changes to its past participle form, which is ‘given’. The point is that the lexical verb must change to its participle form when the active voice is converted to the passive voice.

Rule 3: Addition of the preposition “by”

After executing Rule 1, Subject/Object Transposition, it is important to add the preposition “by” before the subject, which is now in the object position.

Supplementary rules for different sentence structures

(a) *In Instances where the verb phrase is in an Active Construction.* In instances where the two verbal elements (verb phrase) are in the progressive/continuous tense (e.g. am, is, was, are, were + a main verb ending with -ing), “being” is chosen as the correct be-verb to be added to the passive form. This is because “being” is the corresponding progressive form of “be”. This explains why it ends with “-ing”.

Example 1: The chef is cooking our meal. (active)
Our meal is **being** cooked by the chef. (passive)

Example 2: The vice-chancellor is addressing the students. (active)
The students are **being** addressed by the vice-chancellor. (passive)

Also, where the verb phrase in an active construction is in the present perfective tense (e.g. has, have + a main verb in the past continuous tense), “been” is the additional be-verb that is added when the passive form is being constructed.

Example 1: The chef has cooked our meal. (active)
Our meal has **been** cooked by the chef. (passive)

Example 2: The vice-chancellor has addressed the students. (active)
The students have **been** addressed by the vice-chancellor. (passive)

(b) *Modals attract verb “be”.* Modals are special auxiliary verbs that deal with mood. They are ‘can’, ‘will’, ‘may’, ‘shall’, ‘could’, ‘would’, ‘might’ and ‘should’. This rule states that when modals are presented as part of the lexical verb in an active construction, the verb to be added is ‘be’.

Example 1: Peter may play soccer tomorrow. (active)
Soccer may **be** played by Peter tomorrow. (passive)

Example 2: Due to his skills, John will attract more customers. (active)
Due to his skills, more customers will **be** attracted by John. (passive)

(c) *Changes in Personal Pronouns.* When the subject is a personal pronoun, it changes into the objective case when a sentence is changed from active to the passive form.

- Example 1: *I* drove the sheep out of the house. (active)
 The sheep was driven out of the house by *me*. (passive)
- Example 2: *We* are learning English in school. (active)
 English is being learnt in school by *us*. (passive)

(d) *Present Perfect Continuous Tense.* This is a bit complex structure. However, strict obedience to the rule will save the day. Remember the instruction in Rule 2, which is addition of just one auxiliary verb. And to know the right auxiliary verb to choose, references must be made to the first rule under supplementary rules.

- Example 1: He has been telling the truth. (active)
 The truth has been being told by him. (passive)
- Example 2: Women have been enduring emotional pains. (active)
 Emotional pains have been being endured by women. (passive)

Change from passive form to active form

This is a very important aspect. Please note that you are also expected to know how to change passive sentence constructions to active ones too. In this case, there is a slight difference in Rule 2. This means that the word, 'addition,' will be replaced by 'subtraction' in the main rules.

- (a) Subject/Object Reversal
- (b) Subtraction of just one auxiliary verb
- (c) Subtraction of the preposition 'by'

- Example 1: Some oranges *are* bought by Peter. (passive)
 Peter bought some oranges. (active)
- Example 2: The floor is *being* swept by the girl. (passive)
 The girl is sweeping the floor. (active)

Please note that the auxiliary verbs are deleted because the change is from passive to active voice. Also note the changes that affected the lexical verbs, which also changed from participle to past and progressive tenses, respectively, in the two examples above.

(e) *Missing Subjects in Passive Constructions.* Sometimes, the subject in the objective case may be missing in a given question. In this case, the student must replace the subject with an appropriate indefinite pronoun.

- | | | |
|------------|--|-----------|
| Example 1: | The floor is swept. | (passive) |
| | (Someone) sweeps the floor. | (active) |
| | Our gardens are being watered daily. | (passive) |
| | (Someone) is watering our gardens daily. | (active) |

Exercise 1: Identify the voices in these sentences

e.g. I like rice (active)

- We watched the match. _____
- The letter was posted. _____
- Her requirements have been met by us. _____
- My father spends a lot of time in Ondo State. _
- Don't beat the boy. _____

Exercise 2: Change these sentences from active to passive form and vice versa.

- The Minister of Finance has announced the annual budget.
- Three men were being questioned by the detectives.
- Our guest broke the beautiful vase.
- My friends locked the door and they drove the man away.
- People use electricity for all kinds of purposes.

Direct and Indirect Speech Forms

'Direct and Indirect Speech' is a topic in English that illustrates two patterns of communication. The pattern of the direct speech requires the use of quotation marks. This indicates that the exact expression of the main speaker is repeated and it is usually

separated from the rest of the expression. Listed below are examples of direct speech;

“This old woman is strong and healthy,” said the doctor. - Direct Speech

“Do not preach to me,” warned the poet. - Direct Speech

“Put on your shoes always,” mum ordered. - Direct Speech

The man inquired, “Are you going to town tonight?” - Direct Speech

The indirect speech is however reported in a different way. Rather than repeat the exact words of the main speaker, the speech is paraphrased in such a way that certain linguistic elements must undergo change. In indirect speech, there is no use of the quotation marks.

The doctor said that that old woman was strong and healthy. - Indirect Speech

The poet warned that (we) should not preach to him. - Indirect Speech

Mum ordered that (I) should put on (my) shoes always. - Indirect Speech

The man inquired if we were going to town that night. - Indirect Speech

We use direct speech when we report someone’s words by repeating them. But when we use indirect speech, we simply use our words to give meaning to someone else’s expression (Eastwood 1994).

Change from direct and indirect constructions: Basic rules

From the above illustrations, it is obvious that there is a difference between a direct speech and an indirect one. Syntactic changes take place when indirect speech is constructed from the direct one. However, these changes are not arbitrary; there are rules to be followed for direct speech to be successfully changed to an indirect expression. Three rules are sacrosanct. They are:

- (1) Change of Tense
- (2) Change of Persons
- (3) Change of Adverbials

Rule 1: Change of Tense:

This rule simply states that to change from the direct to the indirect speech form, there must first be a backshift in tense (table 10.1). It means that since the event cannot be recaptured in the present anymore, a relative past tense or past participle form of the verb must apply when changing from direct to indirect speech.

Table 10.1: Backshift in Tense

DIRECT	INDIRECT
Present Tense (e.g. is, are, has)	Past Tense (e.g. was, were, had)
Past Tense (e.g. was, were)	Past perfect (e.g. had been)
Present perfect (e.g. has been)	Past perfect (e.g. had been)
Past perfect (had been)	Past Perfect (had been)
Present Progressive (is thinking)	Past Progressive (was thinking)
Past Progressive (was thinking)	Past Progressive (was thinking)

For example,

“John *buys* rice,” said the farmer - Direct

The farmer said that John *bought* rice. - Indirect

“Oluwatise *has* driven the car,” said Tanito - Direct

Tanito said that Oluwatise *had* driven the car - Indirect

Please notice that there is a change in the verbal elements. This is an example of the backshift in tense. The different levels of backshift in tense are shown in table 10.1. The examples listed for direct speech forms tally respectively with the backshift tense in the indirect speech forms e.g. ‘is’ corresponds to ‘was’; ‘are’ corresponds to ‘were’; ‘has’ corresponds to ‘had’ and so on.

Sometimes, however, the backshift in tense does not apply when changing from direct to indirect speech forms. There are five exceptions to Rule 1.

- (1) *Habitual Statements* – When a statement expresses habits or common practices, tense backshift does not apply. e.g.

“John takes his bath every evening,” - Direct
Beatrice affirmed.

Beatrice affirmed that John takes his - Indirect
bath every evening.

- (2) *Timeless Truth* – This refers to expressions that relate to enduring realities or eternal notions. e.g.

“God is merciful and benevolent,” cried - Direct
my soul.

My soul cried that God is merciful and - Indirect
benevolent.

- (3) *Proverbial Expressions* – Proverbial expressions do not accept the backshift in tense. e.g.

“Action speaks louder than voice,” the - Direct
lecturer advised.

The lecturer advised that action speaks - Indirect
louder than voice.

- (4) *Scientific Truth* – Statements that express scientifically encoded truths do not respond to the backshift rule. e.g.

“The earth rotates on its axis,” said the - Direct
geography teacher.

The geography teacher said the earth - Indirect
rotates on its axis.

- (5) *Authorship of a book* – When a statement indicates that someone is the author of a book, the tense backshift rule does not apply. e.g.

“The author of *The Famished Road* is Ben Okri,”
Romanus said.

Romanus said that the author of *The Famished
Road* is Ben Okri.

Rule 2: Change of Person:

This rule applies on occasions where personal pronouns or possessive pronouns feature in active or passive constructions. The change of person requires that the persons in these pronouns change when an active construction is changed to the passive and vice versa (table 10.2).

Table 10.2: Change of Persons

DIRECT	INDIRECT
I	he or she
We	they
My	his or her
our/ours	their/theirs
You	me, we, they, etc.

For instance,

“**I** love eating oranges,” said Francis. - Direct

Francis said that **he** loved eating oranges. - Indirect

“**We** are going to pass **our** exams,” said the students

The students said that **they** were going to pass **their** exams.

“**You** (singular) love **me** right?” asked John

John asked **me** if I loved **him**.

“**You** (plural) forsook **us** in times of need,” Kike complained.

Kike complained that **we** had forsaken **them** in times of need.

Rule 3: Change of Adverbials:

In changing direct speech forms to indirect speech forms, it is important to take cognizance of the time and place when the speech is made. The point here is that changes also must take place with reference to the choice of adverbs of time or place used in the direct speech. Here are some examples.

Table 10.3: Change of Adverbials from Direct to Indirect Form

DIRECT	INDIRECT
Now	then, that moment (in the case of commands), immediately
Here	there
Today	that day
Yesterday	The day before, the previous day
Tomorrow	the next day, the following day
(an hour) ago	(an hour) before
this week	that week
two weeks	a fortnight
next month	the following month
last year	the previous year

Direct to indirect: Grammatical rules on modals

The modal auxiliaries also experience tense changes. A present tense modal would automatically be converted to its past tense form, when changing from direct to indirect speech (table 10.4).

Table 10.4: Modals

DIRECT	INDIRECT
Can	could
Will	would
Shall	should
May	might

Examples:

“I can swim,” claimed Ronke.

Ronke claimed that she could swim.

“We will begin preparations next month,” assured the coach.

The coach assured that they would begin preparations the following month.

Missing subjects in direct speech

In some cases, the speaker in the direct speech could be missing. The speaker therefore must be replaced with any appropriate nominal, whether a noun or a pronoun. For example;

- | | |
|--|------------|
| “Close that door!” | - Direct |
| (The man) ordered me to close the door | - Indirect |
| “God has been faithful.” | - Direct |
| (He) said that God has been faithful | - Indirect |

Changing questions and command statements from direct to indirect speech

When a question is asked in a direct speech, the use of ‘if’ and ‘whether’ becomes pertinent when changing the structure to indirect speech. For example,

- | | |
|--|------------|
| “Will you marry me next month?” asked the rich man. | - Direct |
| The rich man asked if I would marry him the following month. | - Indirect |
| “Can Oyeyemi do her assignment here?” the father enquired. | - Direct |
| The father enquired whether Oyeyemi could do her assignment there. | - Indirect |

Conclusion

The active and passive voices as well as direct and indirect speech forms have been discussed as important aspects of the use of English. Students must have a clear understanding of the usage of these grammatical concepts. This would facilitate a better expression of the English language in both oral and written forms. Below are some questions that are meant to test students’ knowledge of the topic in this unit. This would validate their understanding of the topic discussed so far.

Summary

In this unit, we have been able to explore the concepts of active and passive voice along with direct and indirect speech forms as

part of the usage of the English language. The focus at the beginning of this unit is that students must be able to identify active and passive constructions as well as direct and indirect speech forms. In addition, we also discussed the syntactic rules that are applied to both voice and speech forms. Lastly, with a clear mastery of the rules, students are expected to be able to effectively change one voice to another as well as one speech form to another.

Exercises

Change these expressions to indirect speech direct speech.

- (a) "Our employers pay us whenever they want," said the teacher.
- (b) "It is getting late," said Mary.
- (c) "Chinua Achebe is the author of *Things Fall Apart*."
- (d) "We have to go there now."
- (e) "Honesty is the best policy," said the politician.

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