

# Language Awareness for Key Stage 3

## 11: Voice and Alignment

Key Terms	Optional Terms
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Voice</li><li>• Active</li><li>• Passive</li><li>• Middle</li><li>• Auxiliary</li><li>• Agent</li><li>• Patient</li><li>• Transitive</li><li>• Intransitive</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Participle</li><li>• Alignment</li><li>• Ergative</li><li>• Absolutive</li><li>• Antipassive</li></ul>

- Introduction: Voice and Alignment
  - Today we will look at another property that verbs can have: voice
  - We will look at the active and passive voices, as well as the middle voice
  - We will see different ways of forming the voices, and the different auxiliaries that can be used
  - For those who want an extra challenge, there is an appendix about languages with ergative alignment and how voice works in them
- Voice
  - To understand how voice works, it may be useful to start by reviewing the categories of subject and object
    - **Jack** killed *the giant*
    - **Mary** built *a boat*
  - In these sentences, **Jack** and **Mary** are the subjects
    - The subject is the word that normally comes before the verb in English
  - *The giant* and *a boat* are the objects
    - The object is the word that normally comes after the verb in English
  - Another way of thinking about the same sentences is in terms of agents and patients
  - In these sentences, **Jack** and **Mary** are also the agents
    - The agent is the one doing something, like killing or building
  - *The giant* and *a boat* are the patients
    - The patient is the one having something done to it
  - Voice has to do with how participants such as agents and patients are assigned to the categories of subject and object
    - Jack killed the giant (active)
      - The one killing is the subject, and the one being killed is the object
      - The subject is the agent and the object is the patient
    - The giant was killed by Jack (passive)
      - The one being killed is now the subject
      - The one being killed does not become the object
      - The subject is the patient and the agent is introduced by a preposition
  - Voice gives you different ways of describing the same thing
  - One use for voice is to change the focus of the sentence
  - There is usually more focus on the subject than on the object
    - Jack killed the giant
      - This looks like a sentence about Jack

- The giant was killed by Jack
  - This looks like a sentence about the giant
- Another benefit of having different voices is for when you don't know or don't care who the agent is
- In that case, you can simply leave the agent out
  - The giant was killed

### Activity 1:

Take some time to think about the active and passive voices. Which do you think you use most often? When would you be most likely to use a passive sentence?

#### Notes

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- In English, passives are formed using the auxiliary *be* and a participle (e.g. *seen*)
- Many languages form passives the same way
  - Fueron vistos (Spanish)  
'(They) were seen'
- Some languages use other auxiliaries
  - Sie wurden gesehen (German)  
'They were seen' (literally, 'They became seen')
- In other languages, passive verbs are a single word
  - Ὄφθησαν (Greek)  
'(They) were seen'
- Sometimes languages have more than one auxiliary that they can use for the passive
- In English you can form passives with *get* as well as *be*
  - I was sent a letter
  - I got sent a letter
- German does something similar, using *bekommen* 'get'
  - Ich bekam ein Brief geschickt  
'I got sent a letter'
- So far, we have looked at the active and passive voices
  - In the active voice, the subject is the agent
  - In the passive voice, the subject is the patient
- However, active and passive aren't the only possible voices
- Some languages also have a middle voice
- The meaning of the middle voice is hard to describe, but it usually indicates that the subject is more than usually affected by an action
- It may be easiest to see how the middle voice works in a language like Greek, which has special middle forms
  - Ἰωάννης νίzei τὴν τράπεζαν (active)  
'John washes the table'
  - Ἰωάννης νίζetai (middle — agent subject, like active)  
'John washes (washes himself)'
  - Ἰωάννης νίζetai ὑπὸ τοῦ huetoû (middle — patient subject, like passive)  
'John is washed by the rain'

- You can see that the meaning of the middle overlaps with the active and passive
- Greek is not the only language that has a middle voice
- The term ‘middle’ is sometimes applied to English sentences where the verb has an active form without the usual active meaning
  - Mary photographs well  
(=‘When Mary is photographed, it turns out well’)
  - These tiles clean easily  
(=‘These tiles can be cleaned easily’)
- Note that the results in each case have more to do with Mary and the tiles than the photographer or the cleaner
- Pronominal verbs in Romance languages such as French are also very similar to the middle forms seen in Greek
  - Marie se lave  
‘Mary washes herself’
  - La table se lave  
‘The table gets washed’ (literally, ‘The table washes itself’)
- However, Greek is different from English and French in having special forms used just for the middle voice

### Activity 2:

In groups, take some time to think of any other languages that you might know. See which voices these languages have; you can start by trying to translate some of the sentences we’ve seen. How many of the languages use auxiliaries for voices? Can you find any voices we haven’t looked at yet?

Language	Voices	Auxiliary
<i>Greek</i>	<i>active, middle, passive</i>	<i>N/A</i>

- Passive verbs let you talk about events without mentioning the agent
- The passive voice is not the only way to do this
  - John broke the window
  - The window was broken
  - The window broke
    - Here the verb broke is in the active voice
    - However, it is intransitive
- Transitive verbs are verbs that have an *object*
  - John made *a mistake*
- Intransitive verbs are verbs with no object
  - Mary arrived
- Some verbs are always transitive or always intransitive
- Other verbs, such as *break*, can be either
- Only transitive verbs have a passive voice
  - ~~Mary got arrived~~

- When you use the passive voice of a transitive verb, the agent is still there, even when you don't express it
  - The window was broken on purpose
    - (Someone meant to break the window)
- However, when you use an intransitive verb, the agent isn't there at all
  - ~~The window broke on purpose~~
    - (The window meant to break)
- Summary
  - Today we have see how the same verb can occur in different voices
  - We have looked at the active, middle, and passive voices
  - We have seen that passives and middles can take many different forms
  - We have also seen the similarities and differences between passives and intransitive verbs
  - If you want an extra challenge, you can keep going to see some very different types of voice

- Alignment
  - In some languages, voice and case work very differently from what we've seen so far
  - To understand this, a useful beginning may be to review how case works in English
    - He returned
      - *Return* is an intransitive verb: it doesn't have an object
    - He saw her
      - *See* is a transitive verb: it does have an object
    - She was seen by him
      - Because *see* is transitive, it has a passive, where the object becomes a subject
  - *He* and *she* are in the nominative case
    - The nominative case is used for all subjects, of transitive and intransitive verbs
  - *Him* and *her* are in the accusative case
    - The accusative case is used for objects, as well as for the agents of passive verbs
  - You can see quite a different pattern in a language like Dyirbal (an Aboriginal language of Australia)
    - Bayi banaganyu  
'He returned'
    - Balan banaganyu  
'She returned'
    - Bangul buran balan  
'He saw her'
    - Bangun buran bayi  
'She saw him'

### Activity 3:

Take a minute to look at these examples. Can you describe what the rules are for which form to use?

Notes

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- Forms like *bayi* and *balan* are in the absolute case
- Forms like *bangul* and *bangun* are in the ergative case
- A language like Dyirbal, which has an ergative case, is said to have ergative alignment
- A language like English, which has an accusative case, is said to have accusative alignment
- This property is called alignment because it relates to how the cases line up with different verbs
- Other languages with ergative alignment:
  - Basque (spoken in parts of France and Spain)
  - Greenlandic (spoken in Greenland)
  - Yucatec (spoken in Mexico)
- Some languages even have a mix of ergative and accusative alignment
  - One split ergative language is Hindi

- Many languages with ergative alignment have an antipassive voice
  - Bangul buran balan  
‘He saw her’
    - The verb *buran* is in the active voice
    - It has an ergative subject and an absolutive direct object
  - Bayi buralḡanyu bagun  
≈‘He was looking at her’
    - The verb *buralḡanyu* is in the antipassive voice
    - It has an absolutive subject and a dative indirect object
    - Remember that the dative case is the one used for meanings like ‘to her’ or ‘at her’
- The exact sense of the antipassive can be difficult to translate into English
- Like the passive in English, it provides a different way of describing the same situation, letting people choose what to emphasise and how to structure what they say
- Conclusion
  - We have seen that alignment has to do with how a language treats the subjects of intransitive verbs
  - Languages with accusative alignment have nominative and accusative cases
  - Languages with ergative alignment have ergative and absolutive cases
  - Ergative languages can have a special antipassive voice