

# Language Awareness for Key Stage 3

## 12: 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, the patient, is now the subject
      - The one killing, the agent, does not become the object
      - Instead, 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*
- 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
  - *Ōphthēsan* (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
  - *Iōánnēs nízei tēn trápezan* (active)  
'John washes the table'
  - *Iōánnēs nízetai* (middle — agent subject, like active)  
'John washes (washes himself)'
  - *Iōánnēs nízetai hupò toû 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
- 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 banagan<sup>y</sup>u*  
'He returned'
  - *Balan banagan<sup>y</sup>u*  
'She returned'
  - *Bangul buran balan*  
'He saw her'
  - *Bangun buran bayi*  
'She saw him'
- 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 absolute direct object
  - *Bayi buralḡanyu bagun*  
≈'He was looking at her'
    - The verb *buralḡanyu* is in the antipassive voice
    - It has an absolute 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