

■ Characteristics of Passive Sentences

What is expressed in the active sentence, *Inu ga kodomo o tasuketa* ‘The dog rescued the child’, and the passive sentence, *Kodomo ga inu ni tasukerareru* ‘The child was rescued by the dog’, is the same, but in the active sentence attention is drawn to the action of the dog, while in the passive sentence, the focus is on the treatment of the child. Passive sentences put the focus on the object which receives the action, and describe the situation, including the influence of benefit and damage.

The most prominent characteristic of the meaning that is expressed with passive sentences is adversity. The so-called adversative passive is generally represented in indirect passive sentences such as *Tonari ni biru o taterareta* ‘They built a building next to us (which has inconvenienced us)’, and *Kodomo ni nakareta* ‘The child cried (and I was not pleased),’ where the implication is that someone was not a direct victim of the action but that the action had a negative impact on the person. On the other hand, while direct passive sentences also sometimes have negative connotation, as in *Sensei ni shikarareta* ‘I was chastised by the teacher’, and *Hachi ni sasareta* ‘I was stung by a bee’, they may express positive impact as well, as in *Sensei ni homerareta* ‘I was praised by the teacher’ and *Minna ni aisarete iru* ‘She is loved by everyone.’ Whether the impact is annoying or beneficial depends on the meaning the verb itself possesses.

When the subject is insentient, there is no benefit or annoyance involved. This is called the insentient passive. In insentient passive sentences, as in *Sake wa kome kara tsukurareru* ‘Sake is made from rice’, *Kinō gikai ga hirakareta* ‘The congress was held yesterday’, and *Jishin ga okiru to iwareteiru* ‘It’s said an earthquakes will occur’, one does not have to specify the agent (i.e., the doer of the action of ‘make,’ ‘hold,’ and ‘say’). If there is a need to specify the agent, *ni yotte* is used, as in *Kono kyoku wa 15sai no shōjo ni yotte tsukurareta* ‘This song was composed by a 15 year old girl.’ If the agents are many and unspecified, *ni* is used, as in *Kono hon wa ōzei no hito ni yomarete iru* ‘This book is read by many people.’ Sentences such as *Jijitsu wa nazo ni tsutsumarete iru* ‘The truth is shrouded in mystery’ and *Ie ga ki ni kakomarete iru* ‘The house is surrounded by trees’ do not have a sentient agent. The active counterparts to these sentences (*Nazo ga jujitsu o tsutsunde iru*, *Ki ga ie o kakonde iru*) do not seem natural. They work only in the passive.

Passive clauses are convenient in complex sentences where the same subject is focused in both clauses. (1) *Ryōshin ga sodatete* (active) *ōkiku natta* ‘My parents nurtured me, and I grew’, sounds unnatural compared to (2) *Ryōshin ni sodaterarete* (passive) *ōkiku natta* ‘I grew, nurtured by my parents’, because in (1), the subject of *sodatete* in the first clause and that of *ōkikunatta* in the second clause are not the same. This is an example where a passive sentence (such as (2)) is required to make coherent statement about the same subject. Conversely, the passive sentence, *Mizu wa wakasarete kara nomu*, is not appropriate; it should be *Mizu o wakashite kara nomu* ‘One drinks water after one boils it (active)’, where the agent in both clauses is the same.

Sometimes causative verbs, such as *mataseru* ‘make someone wait’ and *tabesaseru* ‘feed someone’, are made into the passive. This construction is called the causative passive. Examples: *Tomodachi ni mataserareta* ‘I was made to wait by my friend’, *Kiraina mono o tabesaserareta* ‘I was forced to eat what I didn’t like’. Group I verbs (Five-row verbs) have the causative passive form (e.g., *mataserareru*) that is derived from the causative form with *-aseru* at the end (e.g.,

mataseru), as well as the causative form with *-asu* at the end (e.g. *matasu*→*matasareru*). Both forms are used commonly.

→受動文の種類 Types of Passive Sentences (2-E), 受動文の歴史 History of Passive Sentences (6-A)

- References

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