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**Papiere zum Spracherwerb und zur Grammatik**  
**ENGLISCH**  
**III**

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**The passive in English**

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## THE PASSIVE IN ENGLISH (PASSIVE VOICE)

### 1 CONCRETE EVENTS

In general we can say that any active sentence with an object can be changed into a passive sentence when it refers to *a definite event originating from a cause*.

- 1) Shakespeare wrote this play → This play *was written* by Shakespeare.
- 2) The Opposition has criticised the Government. → The Government *has been criticised* by the Opposition.
- 3) The manager is writing a report. → A report *is being written* by the manager.
- 4) The team can access the data. → The data can be accessed by the team.
- 5) The department will complete the project by the end of the year. → The project *will be completed* by the department by the end of the year.
- 6) John had written it. → It *had been written* by John.
- 7) Mary should have made the presentation. → The presentation should have been made by Mary.

We move the **object** to **subject** position in the passive construction, that is at the beginning of the sentence. We change the active verb phrase (e.g. “is writing”) into a passive verb phrase (“is being written”), using the auxiliary “to be” (this is in contrast to German, which uses the verb “werden”) and the **past participle** form of the verb (with regular verbs this is the *-ed* form, with irregular verbs it is the third form, e.g. *written*):

FIGURE 1

ACTIVE:	S <sub>CAUSE</sub>	-	V <sub>EVENT</sub>	-	OBJECT
	AGENT				PATIENT

  

PASSIVE:	S <sub>PATIENT</sub>	-	TO BE V <sub>EVENT</sub>	-	BY C <sub>AGENT</sub>
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S = subject; V = verb/verbal phrase; C = complementation

Another way of looking at it is in terms of meaning, in particular in terms of **semantic roles**: the subject in the active sentence is the **agent** (literally someone or something which does something), which is the **cause** of an **event** which happens to the **patient**, in other words the event is carried out on the patient. The structure in the passive is thus: **patient – event** (expressed by “to be” + past participle) – preposition “**by**” (in contrast to the German “von” or “durch”) + **agent**. In fact, that are two different passive constructions, **passive with agent** and **passive without agent**. We return to the latter in a later section.

There are also passive constructions with **modal verbs** such as “can” and “should”, as we can see from examples 4) and 7). In the first example, the modal verb “can” is followed by the passive infinitive construction “be accessed”. In the second example, the modal verb “should” is followed by the perfect infinitive construction “have been made”. This expresses something that should have happened, but didn’t happen, in other words a violation of a norm of behaviour.

The object may be a **noun phrase** (like “the report”) or a **pronoun**, e.g. “it”. It is clear that verbs that do not take an object cannot be put into the passive:

- 8) Prices *have risen* by five per cent.

Verbs like *to rise* that do not take an object are sometimes referred to as **intransitive**, while verbs that take an object are referred to as **transitive**. This explains the distinction between *to rise* and *to raise*: only the latter can take an object and thus be passivised:

- 9) The oil company *has raised* the price of petrol. → The price of petrol *has been raised* by the oil company.
- Some of the typical forms of the passive are as follows:

TABLE 1

TENSE	ACTIVE	PASSIVE
<b>PRESENT PROGRESSIVE</b>	John is writing a book	a book is being written
<b>PRESENT SIMPLE</b>	John writes a book	a book is written
<b>PAST PROGRESSIVE</b>	John was writing a book	a book was being written
<b>PAST SIMPLE</b>	John wrote a book	a book was written
<b>PRESENT PERFECT</b>	John has written a book	a book has been written
<b>PAST PERFECT</b>	John had written a book	a book had been written
<b>FUTURE</b>	John will write a book	a book will be written
<b>FUTURE IN THE PAST</b>	John will have written a book	a book will have been written
<b>CONDITIONAL</b>	John would write a book	a book would be written
<b>CONDITIONAL IN THE PAST</b>	John would have written a book	a book would have been written
<b>MODAL VERB</b>	John <i>may</i> write a book	a book <i>may</i> be written
<b>MODAL VERB/PAST</b>	John <i>may</i> have written a book	a book <i>may</i> have been written
<b>INFINITIVE</b>	to write	to be written
<b>PERFECT INFINITIVE</b>	to have written	to have been written
<b>PRESENT PARTICIPLE</b>	writing	being written

Note that the **progressive** form of the passive theoretically exists in all the tenses, but is typically used in the **present** and **past**. Sentences like the following are unusual, as they are felt by some speakers to be awkward:

- 10) The Council has been rebuilding the Town Hall. → ?The Town Hall *has been being rebuilt*....

Finally, remember that when transforming an active sentence into the passive that only the subject, verb and object are directly involved in the transformation, but not the adverbs of time and place, or any other parts of the sentence:

- 11) John (S) wrote (V) the report (O) in his office (A<sub>p</sub>) last week (A<sub>t</sub>) → The report was written by John in his office last week. (S = subject, V = verb, O = object, A<sub>p</sub> = adverb of place, A<sub>t</sub> = adverb of time)

The object is typically found in English immediately after the verb.

## 2 SPECIAL CASES

We said above that verbs taking an object can be passivised; with verbs that take an **indirect object** (in addition to a **direct object**), the indirect object can also become the **subject** of a passive construction, as in the following, where “Mary” is the indirect object:

- 12) John gave Mary a present./John gave a present to Mary.

- 13) *Mary* was given a present by John.

Also, the **direct object** can become the subject of the passive:

- 14) *A present* was given to Mary by John.

Note what happens to personal pronouns:

- 15) John gave *her* a present.

- 16) *She* was given a present by John.

- 17) *She* was given *it* by John.

- 18) *It* was given to her by John.

Personal pronouns like “she/her” take whatever form is appropriate as subject, in contrast to German: “*Ihr wurde ein Geschenk gegeben*...”

Passivisation also occurs with all those types of verb referred to generally as multi-word verbs – phrasal, prepositional and phrasal-prepositional verbs – provided that they take an object:

- 19) John *switched on* the television. → The television **was switched on** by John.

- 20) The MP *did not approve of* the Government's action. → The Government's action **was not approved of** by the MP.

21) The gang *robbed* her *of* her necklace. → She was **robbed of** her necklace by the gang.

22) The children *made a mess of* the house. → The house was **made a mess of** by the children.

23) The survivors *caught sight of* the lifeboat. → The lifeboat **was caught sight of** by the survivors.

But note that sentences like 23) normally have no other passive form:

24) \*Sight of the lifeboat was caught...

since 'sight' is an integral part of this idiomatic verb. But there are exceptions, where the noun used in an idiomatic verb is not fully integrated:

25) Coastguards *have lost hope of* finding the survivors of a shipwreck. → **Hope has been lost of** finding the survivors of a shipwreck.

Further examples of multi-word verbs in the passive are:

26) Their neighbours *looked down on* them. → They **were looked down on** by their neighbours.

27) The manager *put* England's success *down to* good team work. → England's success was **put down to** good team work by the manager./England's success was **put down** by the manager **to** good team work.

### EXERCISE I. PUT THE FOLLOWING VERBS INTO THE CORRECT PASSIVE FORM AND GIVE BOTH VERSIONS WHERE IT IS APPROPRIATE:

- (1) John is writing a report.
- (2) This company employs 100 people.
- (3) Ian McEwen wrote this novel.
- (4) John has switched on the light.
- (5) John sent her a mail.
- (6) The mechanic was fixing the car (when I arrived).
- (7) The council had repaired the bridge many years earlier.
- (8) The class will write a test next week.
- (9) The residents have to put up with the noise.
- (10) John will have finished the report by next week.

## 3 CONSTRAINTS

### 3.1 Agent constraints

From the above it follows that the passive cannot be used when *the subject in the active sentence is not the agent*:

28) The family have a small house. → \*A small house is had by the family.

29) This theory constitutes a breakthrough. → \*A breakthrough is constituted by this theory.

30) John resembles the Prime Minister. → \*The Prime Minister is resembled by John.

31) He lacks confidence. → \*Confidence is lacked by him.

32) These trousers don't fit me. → \*I am not fitted by these trousers.

Sentences of this type cannot be put into the passive, as the subject is not a real agent; in 32), the trousers do not cause anything to happen. These verbs – *to have*, *to lack*, *to fit* etc. – are sometimes known as **middle verbs**. However, when the verb – in this case used with a different but related meaning – is used with an agent, the passive is possible:

33) A tailor fits customers with clothes. → Customers are fitted with clothes by a tailor.

The verb *to fit* has different meanings; in 33) it is used with a real agent and expressing a concrete event, making the passive possible. One range of uses without an agent can be seen from the following examples:

34) John worked all night.

- 35) The meeting took three hours.
- 36) The suitcase weighs twenty kilos.
- 37) A kilo of tomatoes costs fifty pence.

These types of sentence involve *adverbs of time*, to *weights and measures*, and to *money*, that they typically do not involve an agent. However, if a verb of this kind is used in a related meaning to express a concrete event, then passive is possible again:

- 38) The airline clerk weighed the suitcase. → The suitcase was weighed by the airline clerk.

Here the verb *to weigh* is used with a different meaning, involving an agent.

Also, agent and patient must be *separate entities*. The following sentences cannot be passivised, because the patient is an *essential part of the whole*:

- 39) John nodded *his head*.
- 40) He washed *his hands*.

**Reflexive** verbs cannot be put into the passive for the same reason, i.e. the reflexive pronoun “myself” refers to the same person (“I”):

- 41) I blame *myself* for not paying attention.

Nor can verbs which take a **reciprocal** pronoun like “each other” or “one another”, since these reciprocal pronouns refer to the same people or things:

- 42) John and Mary love *each other*.

### 3.2 Meaning constraints

The passive is only possible when the verbs are used in their *literal* and *concrete* sense. The following sentences cannot be put into the passive:

- 43) This plant loves the light.

If we compare that with this example, where the verb “to love” is used in its basic literal meaning

- 44) John loves Mary.

we can see that the verb *to love* in 43) is used not literally, but metaphorically, meaning that this plant will thrive in conditions where it is exposed to a lot of light. For that reason the sentence cannot be put into the passive. The same applies to the following sentences:

- 45) She washes her dirty linen in public. (= to talk about private matters in public)
- 46) He has taken the plunge at last. (= to finally make a difficult decision)
- 47) His employers have given him the sack. (= to dismiss somebody)
- 48) She really blew a gasket. (= to react angrily or furiously)
- 49) Mr Jones kicked the bucket. (= to die)
- 50) That really takes the biscuit! (= to be the most unusual or annoying thing, to be the most extreme example of something)
- 51) Someone has sold you a pup. (= to sell someone something worthless)

All these cases of **idioms** involve *figurative* or *metaphorical* use of language; where the patient is used metaphorically, it cannot be passivised.

In cases where the passive is possible, it is only where the direct object is not part of the idiom, as in 51), which can be passivised as follows:

- 52) You have been sold a real pup.

The object which is part of the idiom – a real pup – cannot be passivised without it reverting to its original concrete meaning:

- 53) \*A real pup has been sold to you.

This means that a real, young dog has been sold to you; the metaphorical meaning of something being sold which is useless or worthless has vanished. The same also applies to examples like 47), which involve two objects, one of which is an indirect object – “him” – and is not part of the idiom. This example can be passivised as:

54) He has been given the sack by his employers.

It is, however, not possible to take the element of the idiomatic expression – “the sack” – which is used figuratively and make it the subject of a passive construction without changing the meaning completely, from figurative to literal and concrete (i.e. “the sack” is a real sack, e.g. of potatoes!):

55) \* The sack has been given to him...

### 3.3 Object constraints

We have seen that noun phrases and pronouns as objects can become the subject of a passive sentence, subject to the constraints mentioned above. Other parts of speech can be objects in a general sense, but cannot normally become the subject of a passive sentence, as mentioned above, as the object must be a noun phrase or a personal pronoun. Thus for example a clause with the **present participle/gerund** cannot be put into the passive:

56) Lots of people enjoy playing golf. → \*Playing golf is enjoyed by lots of people.

Clauses with **infinitives** cannot be used either:

57) John hoped to meet her. → \*To meet her was hoped by John.

Nor can a **that-clause**:

58) John said that she was attractive. → \*That she was attractive was said by John.

Note that these constraints only apply to the object; when the object is followed by another element such as a relative clause or that-clause, this has no effect on whether the patient can be put into the passive or not. The deciding factor is the **object** itself (underlined in the following):

59) The caller told me that my mother was ill. → I was told by the caller that...

60) The doctor advised her to take a long rest. → She was advised by the doctor to take a long rest.

61) The jury found the defendant guilty. → The defendant was found guilty by the jury.

62) The landlord keeps the beer cool. → The beer is kept cool by the landlord.

63) The caretaker saw the burglar leaving the building. → The burglar was seen leaving the building by the caretaker.

64) His father taught him how to drive. → He was taught how to drive by his father.

**EXERCISE II. PUT THE FOLLOWING VERBS INTO THE CORRECT PASSIVE FORM, AND GIVE BOTH VERSIONS WHERE IT IS APPROPRIATE:**

- (1) John brought me the mail.
- (2) The Government is building a new bypass.
- (3) A number of workers have challenged this view.
- (4) The child minder is taking care of the children.
- (5) The great crowd listened to him with enthusiasm.
- (6) His relatives took no notice of him but made much of his sister.
- (7) The Government will look into the problem.
- (8) John had sent Mary a letter.
- (9) Mary placed the lamp in the corner of the room.
- (10) An angry crowd shouted at the politician.
- (11) The second defendant had put the first defendant up to it.
- (12) Doctors were treating him for a stomach ulcer.
- (13) The Committee awarded her the Nobel Peace Prize.
- (14) John may have lost the book.

**EXERCISE III. DECIDE WHICH OF THE FOLLOWING SENTENCES CAN BE PUT INTO THE PASSIVE AND WHICH NOT. IF NOT, EXPLAIN WHY. GIVE THE PASSIVE FORMS OF THE OTHERS.**

- (1) I got up at six this morning.
- (2) The coat doesn't fit you.
- (3) The police want him for the bank robbery.
- (4) The Government has done away with this tax.
- (5) The two men painted the town red.
- (6) Peter thought that the play was interesting.
- (7) Experts have put forward opposing views to explain this phenomenon.
- (8) That dress doesn't suit her.
- (9) She couldn't move her foot.
- (10) We could hardly see each other in the fog.

### 3.4 Differences between English and German

There are some constructions in German which cannot be translated into English literally. Let us start with constructions where the patient is not mentioned:

65) Gestern wurde getanzt.

66) Jetzt wird gearbeitet.

These must always be translated into English using other constructions, as a) they do not have a subject ("Gestern" is an adverb of time here), and b) the verbs used are basically intransitive, i.e. they do not take an object. Here are some possible paraphrases:

67) There was dancing yesterday./People danced yesterday/We danced....

68) Let's get down to work./Let's work./It's time to work.

The same also applies in sentences where the head of the passive construction is an adverb of place:

69) Am Brandenburger Tor wurde gefeiert.

We would have to paraphrase this in English similarly to the examples above:

70) People celebrated at the Brandenburg Gate./There was a party at...

The same also applies to German constructions similar to 65), but using the so-called **expletive** "es":

71) Es wurde gestern getanzt.

There is no English equivalent to the German expletive "es", so we would have to paraphrase the sentence in English as above, sentence 67). In general, **passive constructions** in German with "es" (expletive "es") and a subject have to be translated into English using other constructions:

72) Es wurden vier Versuche durchgeführt.

73) Four experiments were carried out.

In these cases the "real" subject ("vier Versuche") is made the subject of the English passive sentence, since English does not allow the combination of an expletive and real subject. (Note that the "es" expression in German can in other cases be translated into English with "it", e.g. "es regnet" = "it is raining", or with "there", as in "es gibt" = "there is").

### 3.5 Further English constructions

#### 3.5.1 Reporting constructions

Note the following typical reporting constructions in English:

74) The media report that Smith is ill.

This can be transformed into a passive in two ways:

75) It is reported (by the media) that Smith is ill.

76) Smith is reported (by the media) to be ill.



These two passive constructions are roughly equivalent: note that in 76) Smith has been from the subject of the that-clause to become the **subject** of the passive construction and is followed by the **infinitive**. There are other similar constructions involving a range of verbs, including “to consider”, “to think”, “to say”, “to suppose”, “to allege”, “to know”, “to believe”, even “to expect”:

- 77) He is considered to be one of the best in his field.
- 78) He is thought to have committed a number of crimes.
- 79) The Queen is said to be very unhappy.
- 80) She is supposed to have refused to see him.
- 81) He is alleged to have transferred the money to a secret Swiss bank account.
- 82) This criminal is known to be violent.
- 83) Jones is expected to win the election.

Sentences 77) to 81) are typical of newspaper reporting and emphasise that these statements are only “reported”; they may be translated into German in some cases with “sollen” and “angeblich”. The verb “to allege” in 81) has a negative connotation, in the sense of an accusation. In many cases, the agent can be left out, as we can see from these examples. For example, in 81) we might have an agent in the form of “the police” for example, as in:

- 84) The police allege that he transferred the money...
- 85) It is alleged by the police that he transferred...
- 86) He is alleged by the police to have transferred...

If we look at example 78), we can see that there is a second construction involved, a **perfect infinitive**: “to have committed”. The perfect infinitive (in contrast to the straightforward infinitive) is used when the verb in the that-clause is in one of the past tenses: past simple, present perfect simple, past perfect simple. Also, as we will see below, examples like 85) involve *it*-extraposition, in that the “it” which is the subject of the passive construction actually refers to the that-clause: “that he transferred the money...”. We return to this topic below.

These reporting constructions where the subject of the that-clause becomes the subject of the reporting verb are limited to certain verbs, as we mentioned above. With most other verbs there is no second option, for example with the verb “to hope”:

- 87) It is hoped that Smith will become the next leader of the party.
- 88) \*Smith is hoped to...

### 3.5.2 *It*-extraposition

We encounter the phenomenon of ***it*-extraposition** with certain passive constructions. The pronoun “it” is the subject of the passive construction in the main clause but it actually anticipates the that-clause, which is the true subject:

- 89) *It* was agreed by the project team that the next meeting would take place in two weeks’ time.
- 90) *It* was rumoured that she had stepped down as minister.

In other words, in 89) the anticipatory pronoun “it” is nominally the subject of the main clause, but the real subject is the entire that-clause “...that the next meeting would...”. This example involves an agent (“the project team”), whereas 90) does not. These constructions with *it*-extraposition get round the problem we mentioned previously, that for an active sentence to be put into the passive, we need to have an object which is either a noun phrase or a pronoun, but not a that-clause or any other type of clause.

### 3.5.3 Use of *to get* in the passive

Normally we use the auxiliary *to be* in the passive, as we discussed previously, but there are certain cases – especially in informal English – where the auxiliary *to get* is used as well:

- 91) The cat **got** *run over* by a car.
- 92) She **got** *hired* by the company in 2013.
- 93) The house **was getting** *repainted* by the decorators.
- 94) The England football team **has got** *beaten* by Spain.
- 95) The window **is getting** *fixed*...

The use of “to get” in passive constructions seems to be that of a **concrete event (a process) plus goal or result (telic)**, so that where no goal or result is implied we cannot use *to get*:

- 96) \*Mary gets/got loved by John.

This use of *to get* seems to be connected with other uses of *to get*:

- ⇒ as a **resulting copula** together with an adjective, e.g. *my mother is getting old*
- ⇒ in **causative** constructions, e.g. *we are getting our house repainted* (similar to *to have*)

### 3.6 The use of other prepositions

We said earlier that the agent is indicated using the preposition *by*. There are some cases where there is no real agent:

- 97) The room was filled with antique furniture.
- 98) The square was crowded with people.
- 99) The hall was decorated with flowers.
- 100) His hand was covered with blood.
- 101) The house was surrounded with police.

All these examples deal with **location in space** in some sense, and imply that the space is completely **full**. In these borderline cases, the passive is followed by the preposition *with*.

Notice the difference between 101) and 102):

- 102) The house was surrounded by a high fence.

In the latter example we have a permanent situation (the fence is always there), while in 101) it is only temporary. 100) can also take the preposition *in*:

- 103) His hand was covered in blood.

The use of the prepositions *with* or *by means of/using* can also signal the **instrument** used to achieve something:

- 104) A circle was drawn in the dirt with a stick.
- 105) The values were measured by means of/using a measuring device.

### EXERCISE IV.

#### 1. TRANSLATE THE FOLLOWING FROM GERMAN INTO ENGLISH:

- (1) In Frankreich wurde in den letzten Monaten oft gestreikt.
- (2) Jetzt wird getanzt.
- (3) Unter Freunden wird oft gelacht.
- (4) Nach den Verbrechen wird immer noch gefahndet.
- (5) Das Auto wird morgen repariert.
- (6) In dieser Straße wird oft gesungen.
- (7) Es wurden keine Fehler gefunden.
- (8) Gestern wurde länger gearbeitet.

**2. GIVE THE VARIOUS POSSIBLE PARAPHRASES OF THE FOLLOWING SENTENCES:**

- (1) They say she is very bright.
- (2) They believe that the suspect has fled to South America.
- (3) They alleged that the football fans had caused a lot of damage.
- (4) We know that Smith is one of the ringleaders.
- (5) They hope that he will be caught soon.

**3. PUT THE FOLLOWING SENTENCES INTO THE PASSIVE.**

- (1) Dirt covered the walls of the flat.
- (2) People crammed the room.
- (3) Thousands of bouquets decorated the railings.
- (4) Smoke filled the building.
- (5) A deep green lawn surrounded the house.

## 4 PASSIVE WITHOUT AGENT

### 4.1 Specific and generic use

In English, as in German, it is possible to use the passive even when the agent is not mentioned:

94) The project has been approved.

FIGURE 2

ACTIVE:	S <sub>CAUSE</sub>	-	V <sub>EVENT</sub>	-	OBJECT
	AGENT				PATIENT
PASSIVE:	S <sub>PATIENT</sub>	-	TO BE V <sub>EVENT</sub>	-	Ø

This construction is used when you do not want to or cannot mention the agent, as in the following sentences:

106) The various UFO sightings have never been fully explained.

107) The Minister was forced to resign.

108) The Opposition had not been informed of the move.

109) The book will be published next month.

Let us have a look at some examples in more detail, to see the various reasons why the agent is omitted. Let us start with the following example:

110) The project has been approved.

In a situation where two colleagues at work are discussing a project, it can be assumed that here the agent is known: we could thus reconstruct the agent for example as “the head of the department”, as in:

111) The project has been approved by the head of the department.

However, it is omitted in the previous example, as both colleagues know who is responsible for approving projects and there is therefore no need to mention it. In the following examples too, the agent is either known or it is not important (i.e. not relevant in the context of the conversation):

1) I am paid monthly.

2) Our house is being repainted.

In the following example, the agent is unknown:

3) My bike has been stolen.

In the next example, taken from politics, the agent is omitted to avoid naming those who are responsible.

4) Mistakes were made...

By contrast, the following sentences are generic and anonymous:

5) This computer is manufactured in South Korea.

6) These shoes are made in Italy.

7) Indian curry is served with rice.

This typical use of a passive without an agent always involves the **present simple** (in other languages like Spanish, there is a special passive construction to express this meaning). These generic passive constructions without an agent are very common in scientific and engineering texts, as in the following:

8) Hot water or steam is brought from underground hydrothermal reservoirs to the surface and is used for electricity generation...

Note the use of the present simple tense: use of the **present progressive passive** would change the meaning completely. The following sentences have a completely different meaning:

9) Hot water or steam *is being brought*...

10) Indian curry *is being served* with rice.

Here we are talking about *specific events located in space and time* and in these cases incomplete at the moment of speaking, due to the use of the present progressive.

Equally, if we change the tense in 6), we have a change in meaning:

11) These shoes have been made in Italy.

While 6) is generic and refers to a type of shoe, seen for example in a shop window, 11) can only refer to a concrete pair of shoes, e.g. the ones worn by the speaker. On the other hand, a sentence like the following is ambiguous:

12) These shoes were made in Italy.

This sentence can be either specific or generic. So as we can see, specific and generic uses of the passive are linked with the tenses used.

Finally, there are a number of verbs which are used actively, but with passive meaning. One typical example is the verb *to sell*, which can also be used as an active verb with passive meaning called **mediopassive**, where the construction expresses generic (and **intrinsic**, see below) meaning:

13) Shoes made in Italy *sell* well in other countries.

These are other examples of mediopassive constructions in English with certain verbs like “to read”, “to wash”, “to peel”, “to steer”:

14) The book reads well.

15) These trousers wash easily.

16) Ripe oranges peel well.

17) The car steers poorly.

#### EXERCISE V. PUT THE VERBS IN BRACKETS INTO THE CORRECT PASSIVE FORM IN THE FOLLOWING EXPLANATION OF A GENERIC PROCESS WITHOUT AN AGENT:

There are many ways of shaping plastics. The most common way is by moulding. Blow-moulding \_\_\_\_\_ (to use) to make bottles. In this process, air \_\_\_\_\_ (to blow) into molten plastic that is inside a mould, so the plastic \_\_\_\_\_ (to force) against the sides of the mould. Many types of toy and bowl \_\_\_\_\_ (to make) using injection moulding. Thermoplastic chips \_\_\_\_\_ (to heat) until they melt and then they \_\_\_\_\_ (to force) into a mould under pressure.

##### 4.1.1 Special cases

**Past participles** can also be used with passive meaning and may be either specific or generic. Let us look at some examples, starting with an active sentence which we put into the passive:

18) The sales manager wrote the report. ACTIVE

19) The report was written by the sales manager. PASSIVE

We can now take this further and embed these sentences as relative clauses:

20) The report which the sales manager wrote was discussed at the last meeting. RELATIVE CLAUSE; ACTIVE

21) The report which was written by the sales manager was discussed at the last meeting. RELATIVE CLAUSE; PASSIVE

We can now take this passive construction in a relative clause and transform it as follows:

22) The report written by the sales manager was discussed at the last meeting.

The relative clause has now been replaced by the past participle “written”, followed by the agent. The past participle with passive meaning is always placed after the noun in English, in contrast to German, where it comes before the noun:

23) Der vom Verkaufsleiter *verfasste* Bericht wurde bei der letzten Sitzung besprochen.

In fact, the word order in the German version is quite different from the English version, with the article at the beginning, followed by the agent, then the past participle before the noun. This construction is also used without an agent:

24) Goods made in Germany are sold all over the world.

25) The services provided are excellent.

Finally in this section, a word about a construction which looks like a passive:

26) The house is sold.

This is referred to in some grammars as a “statal passive”, since it refers to a state, or “pseudopassive”, but it is better to say that it is not a passive at all, although it looks superficially similar to a passive, since there is no agent. It would be better to say that it is a participle used **predicatively**, in the same way that we say to express a particular property of the house:

27) The house is red/old/...

If it is constructed in the past tense, it may be ambiguous, in that it may refer to a state or be a true passive involving an event and an agent:

28) The house was sold. STATE

29) The house was sold (by its owner). PASSIVE

These would be translated into German in different ways using the verbs “sein” or “werden”, depending on the meaning:

30) Das Haus war verkauft. STATE

31) Das Haus wurde verkauft. PASSIVE

## 4.2 Some generic uses

A number of different constructions are used in English to express generic states of affairs. The pure passive (i.e. in the present simple, without a modal verb) is normally not used in the following cases:

32) You can clean these glasses easily.

33) These glasses can be cleaned easily.

34) \*These glasses are cleaned easily.

35) You can see Westminster Abbey from a distance.

36) Westminster Abbey can be seen from a distance.

37) \*Westminster Abbey is seen from a distance.

These examples express an **intrinsic**<sup>1</sup> property of something. In 32), for example, the sentence tells us that it is a property of this type of glasses that it is easy to clean them. Note that we can only use the passive construction with the modal verb “can” (which is the English equivalent of the German verb “lassen”) here; the present simple passive construction is not possible, as we can see from 34) and 37). These passive constructions have a further paraphrase, with the adjective form “easy” for example (in contrast to 33), where the adverb “easily” is used) followed by the infinitive:

38) These glasses are easy to clean.

39) Westminster Abbey is visible from a distance.

Let us look at these uses and contrast them with German:

TABLE 2: TYPICAL INTRINSIC PROPERTIES

<sup>1</sup> **Intrinsic** describes a characteristic or property of some thing or action which is essential and specific to that thing or action, and which is wholly independent of any other object, action or consequence. A characteristic which is not essential or inherent is **extrinsic**.

these glasses <b>can be cleaned</b> easily	diese Brille lässt sich leicht putzen
these glasses <b>are easy to clean</b>	diese Brille ist leicht zu putzen
*these glasses <b>are cleaned</b> easily	*diese Brille wird leicht geputzt

Note that the passive with present simple (without *can*) is excluded.

Typical **extrinsic** properties can be expressed as follows:

TABLE 3: TYPICAL EXTRINSIC PROPERTIES

stamps <b>are bought</b> at the post office	Briefmarken werden bei der Post gekauft
<b>you buy</b> stamps at the post office	Briefmarken kauft man bei der Post
≠ stamps <b>can be bought</b> at the post office	≠ Briefmarken können bei der Post gekauft werden

Thus we can see that the passive using the present simple and without a modal verb – “stamps are bought...” – can only express extrinsic properties.

## 5 TOPICALIZATION

We have seen that the passive can focus on the object or patient of the event. This is one important use of the passive in English, which has fixed word order – in contrast to German – and does not have many ways of putting a noun phrase in initial position in the sentence, as in the following:

40) The Irish drink whiskey.

41) Whiskey is drunk by the Irish.

In 40) we are talking about *the Irish* – this is the **theme** or the **topic** – and we are making a statement about them – the **rheme** or **comment**; in the other way around, and we are talking about *whiskey*: this is the theme or topic. The same applies to the following pair of sentences:

42) The dog bit the little girl.

43) The little girl was bitten by the dog.

In the first sentence, we are talking about “the dog” as theme or topic and what it did; in the second sentence, we are talking about “the little girl” and what happened to her. One of the differences between English and German is that English has a relatively fixed word order, in contrast to German, where it is possible for example to move the object to initial position in the sentence, making it the theme or topic:

44) Einen Verdächtigen hat die Polizei schon festgenommen.

This is not possible in English, which can use the passive instead to have the theme at the beginning of the sentence, to **topicalize** it, as in the following:

45) A suspect has already been arrested by the police.

The theme may be a **new** theme or it may be a **given** theme. Given and new relate to **information structure** – if the topic is given, the given topic or information (what you are talking about, what has already been mentioned) is placed at the beginning of the sentence and the new information comes later on in the sentence.

If the agent is mentioned, it is usually the **focus**, the most important information:

46) Fossil energies are being replaced by *renewable energies* (*focus*).

47) The Social Charter has not been adopted by the UK but by *the rest of the European Union* (*focus*).

The information provided by the agent is not only new but is also contrasted and emphasised.

### EXERCISE VI. TRANSLATE THE FOLLOWING SENTENCES INTO ENGLISH:

- (1) Dieser Computer wird in Taiwan hergestellt.
- (2) Dieses Hemd läßt sich leicht bügeln.
- (3) Man sieht den Berg von unserem Hotelzimmer.
- (4) Es wird zur Zeit viel über Fußball diskutiert.
- (5) Es wurde damals überall nach Spuren gesucht.
- (6) In diesen Räumen wird täglich unterrichtet.
- (7) Für die Feier letztes Jahr wurde stundenlang gekocht und gebacken.
- (8) Zwei Touristen sind am vergangenen Wochenende getötet worden.
- (9) Den Dieb hat die Polizei schon festgenommen.
- (10) Die Lohnfelder hatte man zu diesem Zeitpunkt noch nicht in die Umschläge gesteckt.
- (11) Die Wohnung war mit Möbeln vollgestopft.