

Learn Korean Ep. 96: Passive Verbs

In order to learn about passive verbs, we first have to talk about two important topics – passive voice and active voice.

Passive Voice & Active Voice

First, if a sentence is in “passive voice” then it’s not in “active voice,” and if a sentence is in “active voice” then it’s not in “passive voice.”

Here is an example of a sentence that is in active voice.

The lion **ate** the rabbit.

And here is the same sentence written in passive voice.

The rabbit **was eaten** by the lion.

Active voice is much more commonly used than passive voice, but both are important to know.

Active Voice

When a sentence is in active voice, the **subject** of that sentence is the person (or thing) that is **doing** something. Or, the subject is what you are directly describing.

In the sentence “The lion ate the rabbit,” the **lion** is the *subject*. Here, the subject (the lion) is doing something. The lion **eats** the rabbit.

Passive Voice

When a sentence is in passive voice, the **subject** of that sentence is **not** the person (or thing) that is doing something. Instead, the subject is **being affected** by an action.

In the sentence “The rabbit was eaten by the lion,” the subject isn’t the lion. The subject is the **rabbit**. The rabbit is being affected by the action of being eaten.

In addition, in the passive version there is no need to say who or what does the action. In our example passive sentence, we don’t actually need to say “by the lion.” Just the sentence “The rabbit was eaten” already uses the passive voice. Because of this, the passive voice can sometimes sound vague (“Who or what ate that rabbit?”), or sound like someone is speaking backwards.

Most sentences in English and Korean will be in active voice. Active voice is the most common and clear way of speaking – and it’s the most direct.

How to Use the Passive Voice

To change an active sentence in Korean to the passive voice, you only need to change the active verb for a passive verb.

For example, instead of 먹다 (“to eat”), we can use the passive verb “to be eaten” (먹히다). Here is how that would look:

사자가 토끼를 **먹었어요**.

“The lion **ate** the rabbit.”

토끼가 (사자에게) **먹혔어요**.

“The rabbit **was eaten** (by the lion).”

To specify who the subject is being affected *by*, use the particle 에게 (or 에 for inanimate objects).

Although there are a lot of passive verbs in Korean, you can get a lot of mileage out of learning only a few of the most common ones. Here is one of *the most* commonly used passive verbs.

되다

“to become,” “to be okay,” “to function”

Since you're learning about passive verbs, you've most likely seen 되다 used before many times. This verb is the passive form of the regular active verb 하다 (“to do”).

If an action verb uses 하다 and the 하다 can be separated (for example, 공부(를) 하다 is *okay*, while 좋아하다 is *not* because 하다 can't be separated, and 피곤하다 is *not* because it's a descriptive verb), simply change the 하다 into 되다 to make it a passive verb. Here's an example:

준비(를) 하다 → “to prepare”

준비(가) 되다 → “to be prepared”

다 준비했어요.

“I prepared it all.”

다 준비됐어요.

“It was all prepared.”

시작(을) 하다 → “to start”

시작(이) 되다 → “to be started”

수업은 8 시에 시작했어요.

“Class started at 8 o'clock.”

수업은 8 시에 시작됐어요.

“Class was started at 8 o'clock.”

이해(를) 하다 → “to understand”

이해(가) 되다 → “to be understood”

숙제를 이해했어요?

"Did you understand the homework?"

숙제가 이해됐어요?

"Was the homework understood?"

주문(을) 하다 → "to order"

주문(이) 되다 → "to be ordered"

제가 주문한 음식이 도착했어요.

"The food that I ordered arrived."

주문된 음식이 도착했어요.

"The food that was ordered arrived."

Unique Passive Verbs

Not every action verb ends with 하다, but Korean has some unique passive verbs that can be used in place of regular action verbs.

먹히다 → "to be eaten." This comes from 먹다 ("to eat").

저는 치즈를 먹었어요.

"I ate the cheese."

저에게 치즈가 먹혔어요.

"The cheese was eaten by me."

쓰이다 → "to be written," "to be used." This comes from 쓰다 ("to write," "to use").

제가 자주 쓰는 책

"a book that I use often"

자주 쓰이는 책
"a book that is used often"

바뀌다 → "to be changed." This comes from 바꾸다 ("to change").

제 성격을 바꿨어요.
"I changed my personality."

제 성격이 바뀌었어요.
"My personality was changed."

보이다

보이다 means "to be seen." It comes from 보다 ("to see"). And 보이다 is used to mean that someone is **able** to see something. So a better translation is "to be visible." Here's an example.

철수의 얼굴이 안 보여요.
"Chul-soo's face is not **seen**."
"Chul-soo's face is not **visible**."
"I **can't see** Chul-soo's face."

An even more natural way to translate 보이다 is using active voice in English – "to be able to see." Here's another example:

저기에 보이는 집이에요.
"It's the house that is **seen** over there."
"It's the house that is **visible** over there."
"It's the house that you **can see** over there."

들리다

들리다 means “to be heard.” It comes from 듣다 (“to hear”). And 들리다 is used to mean that someone is **able** to hear something. So a better translation is “to be audible.” Here’s an example.

철수의 목소리가 안 들려요.
 “Chul-soo’s voice is not **heard**.”
 “Chul-soo’s voice is not **audible**.”
 “I **can’t hear** Chul-soo’s voice.”

An even more natural way to translate 들리다 is using active voice in English – “to be able to hear.” Here’s another example:

잘 들려요?
 “Is it **heard** well?”
 “Is it **audible** well?”
 “**Can you hear** it well?”

Notes on 보이다 and 들리다

Since 보이다 and 들리다 are used when talking about things that you can or can’t see and hear, you might wonder if it’s okay to instead just use these verbs:

볼 수 있다
 “can see...”

들을 수 있다
 “can hear...”

It’s okay to use these forms instead, but know that these are **active voice** and are not passive voice. Although 보이다 and 들리다 are passive verbs, they are both *more commonly* used than their active forms. Here’s an example of each form:

철수의 얼굴을 볼 수 없고 목소리도 들을 수 없어요.
철수의 얼굴이 안 보이고 목소리도 안 들려요.
"I **can't see** Chul-soo's face and I **can't hear** his voice."

받다

"to get," "to receive"

Some active verbs can become passive verbs using 받다 ("to get," "to receive").

사랑(을) 하다 → "to love"
사랑(을) 받다 → "to be loved"

존경(을) 하다 → "to respect"
존경(을) 받다 → "to be respected"

버리다 → "to throw away"
버림(을) 받다 → "to be thrown away"

감동(을) 시키다 → "to move (emotionally)," "to touch (emotionally)"
감동(을) 받다 → "to be moved (emotionally)," "to be touched (emotionally)"

Action Verb Stem + 아/어/etc. + 지다

For many other verbs, you can use this form to change active voice into passive voice.

Take a verb stem and conjugate it as if you were conjugating the ㅁ form. Instead of ㅁ, attach 지다. Then conjugate this however you'd like. Here are some examples:

주다 → "to give"
주어지다 → "to be given"

선물이 주어졌어요.
"A present was given."

만들다 → "to make"

만들어지다 → "to be made"

나무로 만들어진 책상을 샀어요.

"I bought a desk made of wood."

정하다 → "to decide (something)," "to set (something)"

정해지다 → "to be decided," "to be set"

정해진 날짜에 만났어요.

"We met on the decided date."

짓다 → "to build"

지어지다 → "to be built"

그 집이 빨리 지어졌어요.

"That house was built quickly."

깨다 → "to break (something)," "to smash (something)"

깨어지다 → "to be broken," "to be smashed." This is more commonly shortened to 깨지다.

컵이 떨어져서 깨졌어요.

"The cup fell and broke."

When to Use Passive Voice

What if you wanted to make the sentence, "I want to buy a book written in Korean," but didn't know passive voice? You might first try to make this sentence:

저는 한국말로 쓴 책을 사고 싶어요.

"I want to buy a book (that someone wrote) in Korean."

This sentence makes sense, but is not passive. In our English example, we didn't need to specify who wrote the sentence. Instead of using 쓴 ("someone wrote") we can use 쓰인 ("written") and avoid saying who wrote the book.

저는 한국말로 쓰인 책을 사고 싶어요.
"I want to buy a book written in Korean."

Whenever you are using an *action* verb (not a descriptive verb) to describe something, and you want that meaning to be passive, I recommend using a passive verb. This is the one situation where you will commonly hear passive verbs used in Korean.

Passive voice is perfect for saying that something happens to someone (or something) without having to say who (or what) caused it to happen.

Final Notes

Passive voice and passive verbs take time to master. Feel free to speak using only active voice until you feel more comfortable using passive voice. Koreans themselves don't use passive verbs too often, and you won't be corrected for speaking in active voice instead of passive voice. Active voice is still a correct way of speaking, and passive voice is simply another tool.

It's not necessary to learn every passive verb. Just learn a few of the most common ones right away, and the basic rules for how to use them. Through listening and speaking practice you'll be able to master them. In fact, you'll even start recognizing passive verbs that you've never heard before, simply by listening to how the verbs are being used.

Feel free to come back to review passive verbs again in the near future.

Advanced Notes

"By:" Noun + 에 의해(서)

In addition to 에게 (and 에 for inanimate objects), you can also specify "by" with this form. This is less common when speaking, but is used in writing.

원숭이가 사자에 의해 먹혔어요.
"The monkey was eaten **by** the lion."

More Passive Verbs

Here are just a few more commonly used passive verbs:

쌓이다 → "to be stacked," "to be piled (up)." This comes from 쌓다 ("to stack," "to pile (up)").

잠기다 → "to be locked." This comes from 잠그다 ("to lock").

없어지다 → "to disappear." This comes from 없다 ("to not exist").

켜지다 → "to be turned on." This comes from 켜다 ("to turn on").

꺼지다 → "to be turned off." This comes from 끄다 ("to turn off").

열리다 → "to be opened." This comes from 열다 ("to open").

닫히다 → "to be closed." This comes from 닫다 ("to close").

밀리다 → "to be pushed." This comes from 밀다 ("to push").

당겨지다 → "to be pulled." This comes from 당기다 ("to pull").

Conclusion

If you have any questions, feel free to send me a message through my web site or on YouTube. Good luck in your studies!

