

The *passive voice*

23.1 The passive construction

In a passive construction, the subject of the sentence undergoes the action of the verb. Dutch expresses this relationship by the use of the verb **worden**, the independent meaning of which is “to become,” plus the past participle of the verb. The agent is indicated by **door** “by”:

<i>Active</i>			
Paul	eet	de appel.	
subject	verb	direct object	
	present		
1	2	3	
↓			
<i>Passive</i>			
De appel	wordt	door Paul	gegeten.
subject	present of	agent	past participle,
	worden		action verb
3	2a	1	2b

The subject of the active sentence becomes agent in the passive sentence (1).

The direct object of the active sentence becomes subject in the passive sentence (3).

The conjugated verb of the active sentence (2), the action verb, is replaced by a form of **worden** (2a) in the same tense and the active verb turns into a past participle (2b) at the end of the passive sentence:

Active: The subject (**Paul**) commits the action (**eten**) on the direct object (**de appel**).

Passive: The subject (**de appel**) undergoes the action (**gegeten worden**) done by the agent (**door Paul**).

23.2 Tenses in the passive

23.2.1 Simple present

English:

She washes the car. → The car is washed by her.

Dutch:

Zij wast de auto. → **De auto wordt door haar gewassen.**

23.2.2 Simple past

English:

We bought the house in 2004. → The house was bought by us in 2004.

Dutch:

Wij kochten het huis in 2004. → **Het huis werd door ons in 2004 gekocht.**

23.2.3 Future tense

English:

The grandparents will raise the three children. → The three children will be raised by the grandparents.

Dutch:

De grootouders zullen de drie kinderen grootbrengen. → **De drie kinderen zullen door de grootouders grootgebracht worden.**

23.2.4 Present and past perfect

English:

She has already warned me. → I have already been warned by her.

She had already warned me. → I had already been warned by her.

Dutch:

Zij heeft mij al gewaarschuwd. → **Ik ben al door haar gewaarschuwd.**

Zij had mij al gewaarschuwd → **Ik was al door haar gewaarschuwd.**

English:

On Saturday we booked the trip. → On Saturday the trip was booked (by us).

Dutch:

Wij hebben zaterdag de reis → **De reis is zaterdag (door ons) geboekt.**

Although the perfect tense of **worden** in the meaning “to become” is **geworden**, the past participle of **worden** does not appear in the perfect tenses of a passive construction (except stylistically in a very formal context).

23.3 Passive and non-passive

Dutch makes no distinction between the perfect tense of a passive action and a predicate adjective following a form of **zijn**:

Het eten is klaar.

The food is ready.

Het eten is opgediend.

The food is served.

Het eten wordt opgediend.

The food is (being) served.

Het eten was klaar.

The food was ready.

Het eten was opgediend.

The food had been served.

Het eten werd opgediend.

The food was (being) served.

↓

to be + adjective

↓

to be + past participle

↓

worden + past participle

Let us consider the Dutch passive constructions for a moment from the standpoint of English. The phrase “the food is served” can mean two things, each of which is expressed in a different way in Dutch. First, it can express the observation that someone is at the moment in the process of serving the food. In this case, the passive is required in Dutch:

Het eten wordt opgediend. The food is (being) served.

But it can also indicate simply that at the moment the food is in a state of being served, which is not passive:

Het eten is opgediend. The food is served.

However, since in Dutch “the food is served” (state of being) amounts to the same as saying “the food has been served,” this completed action is expressed in Dutch in the same way:

Het eten is opgediend. } The food has been served.
} The food is served.

23.4 Modal verbs

English:

You have to do your homework. → Your homework must be done by you.

You can eat up the pizza. → The pizza can be eaten up (by you).

Now you can do this exercise. → Now this exercise can be done (by you)

Dutch:

Jij moet je huiswerk maken. → **Je huiswerk moet door jou gemaakt worden.**

Jij mag de pizza opeten. → **De pizza mag (door jou) opgegeten worden.**

Jij kunt nu deze oefening maken. → **De oefening kan nu (door jou) gemaakt worden.**

English:

You had to do your homework. → Your homework had to be done by you.

Dutch:

Je moest je huiswerk maken. → **Je huiswerk moest door jou gemaakt worden.**

English:

You will have to fill in the form. → The form will have to be filled in (by you).

Dutch:

Je zult het formulier moeten → invullen.

Het formulier zal (door jou) ingevuld moeten worden.

English:

You have to take the medicine before the meal. →

The medicine has to be taken before the meal.

Dutch:

Je moet de medicijnen voor de maaltijd innemen. →

De medicijnen moeten voor de maaltijd ingenomen worden.

23.4.1 Let's try it

Turn the following sentences into the passive voice:

- 1 De chirurg opereert haar neus.
- 2 De arts genas zijn wonde.
- 3 Hebben jullie de ambulance opgebeld?
- 4 Ik moet mijn tanden poetsen.
- 5 Wanneer maakte jij een afspraak met de dokter?
- 6 Hoe lang geleden heeft de tandarts je tanden schoongemaakt?
- 7 De arts bezoekt de patiënten elke dag.
- 8 Hoeveel pillen heeft hij voorgeschreven?

23.5 Impersonal passive

Dutch has different ways in which it can conceal the agent.

23.5.1 *er* and the passive sentence

Passive sentences may be introduced by *er*, thereby given a generalized, non-specific meaning difficult to translate (compare the generalizing function of *er* discussed in Chapter 21):

Er werden veel bloemen geplukt.

Many flowers were picked. (i.e. there were many flowers that got picked, there was a lot of flower picking)

Veel bloemen werden geplukt.

Many flowers were picked. (i.e. many of the flowers got picked)

The passive voice introduced by *er* is also used without any grammatical subject; such a construction must be rendered in English by a paraphrase:

Er wordt veel gelachen.

There is a lot of laughing.

Er werd geroddeld.

There was gossiping being done.

Er wordt (aan de deur) geklopt.

There is a knock (at the door).

Er is hier veel gerookt.

There's been a lot of smoking here.

Er zal hier veel gerookt worden.

There will be a lot of smoking around here.

23.5.2 Active construction with men, je or ze

Just as English uses “one” or an impersonal “you” instead of a passive construction, Dutch uses the words *men*, *je* or *ze* and an active construction. *Men* is the formal, written form, while *je* or *ze* is the everyday spoken form:

Roken doet men hier niet.

One doesn't smoke here/smoking isn't done here.

Men zegt dat hij gearresteerd is.

It is being said that he has been arrested.

Vers fruit kan je daar niet krijgen.

You can't get fresh fruit there/fresh fruit isn't to be had there.

Ze bouwen hier een moskee.

They're building a mosque here./A mosque is being built here.

23.5.3 te + infinitive

Dutch uses an infinitive preceded by *te* and a form of the verb *zijn* in a construction that must usually be rendered by a passive in English:

Grote auto's zijn vaak niet te krijgen.

Big cars are often not to be had.

Dat bier was niet te drinken.

That beer was not to be drunk. (i.e. not drinkable)

Er is niemand te zien.

There is nobody to be seen.

Zoiets is te verwachten.

Something like that is to be expected.

It is important to note that Dutch uses the passive voice somewhat less than English does, as suggested by both 23.6.2 and 23.6.3. Overuse of the passive voice in Dutch can make what is being said or written too impersonal and possibly difficult to follow.

23.6 When is the passive voice used?

When it is not important who the active person is. Even if you know who it is, it is the action being done that is important rather than who actually does it:

De test wordt vandaag (door de secretaresse) gecopieerd.

The test will be/is being copied today (by the secretary).

Mijn auto is gisteren (door mijn dochter) gewassen.

My car was washed yesterday (by my daughter).

When it is not known who is actually doing the action:

De koningin wordt vandaag in het medisch centrum geopereerd.

The queen is being operated on today in the medical center.

Er wordt hier een nieuw winkelcentrum gebouwd.

A new shopping center is being built here.

Er wordt aangebeld.

Somebody is ringing the doorbell.

When the statement is a general one:

In Amerika wordt veel gebarbecued.

In the U.S.A. a lot of barbecuing is done.

In Nederland wordt eens in de vier jaar een nieuwe regering gekozen.

In the Netherlands a new government is elected every four years.

Er mag in openbare gebouwen niet meer gerookt worden.

Smoking is no longer permitted in public buildings.

When the implied subject is not a person but an organization or some other formal institution. In this case, the passive makes the text very formal:

U wordt vriendelijk verzocht het bedrag zo snel mogelijk over te maken.

You are kindly requested to transfer the amount as soon as possible.

De reizigers wordt geadviseerd via Amersfoort om te rijden.

Passengers are advised to travel via Amersfoort.

23.6.1 *Let's try it*

Turn the following sentences into the passive voice and consider the better option, the active or the passive sentence:

- 1 Je mag in de bioscoop niet roken.
- 2 Men at vroeger veel meer spek dan nu.
- 3 De politie heeft de inbreker op heterdaad betrapt.
- 4 Mijn moeder opereert vandaag de minister-president.
- 5 In Frankrijk eten ze veel kaas.
- 6 Vorig weekend heb ik een pan erwtensoep gemaakt.