

# 20

## The Passive Voice (*la voz pasiva*) and Non-Finite Verb Forms (*las formas no finitas del verbo*)

### The True Passive Voice

Verbs can be in the active or passive voice. The active voice is used to indicate that the subject of the verb performs the action, whereas the passive voice, called **la voz pasiva** in Spanish, is used to indicate that the subject is the receiver of the action. It is sometimes called the "true passive."

*Active: Mario compra los libros. / Mario buys the books.*

*Passive: Los libros son comprados por Mario. / The books are bought by Mario.*

Passive sentences can be formed from corresponding active ones as follows:

1. Change the order of the subject and the object.

*Mario compra los libros. / Mario buys the books.*

~~Los libros (compra) Mario.~~

2. Change the verb into the passive form by introducing the verb **ser** / *to be* in the same tense. Next, change the verb into its past participle form (see Chapter 9). Recall that when you use the verb **ser** / *to be*, there is agreement (gender and number) of the adjective with the subject of the sentence (the past participle is the adjectival form of the verb).

Los libros son comprados.

3. Put **por** / *by* in front of the passive object.

**Los libros son comprados por Mario.** / *The books are bought by Mario.*

Here are a few additional examples of "passivization."

Active	Passive
La mujer <b>lee</b> la revista. / <i>The woman reads the magazine.</i>	La revista <b>es leída por</b> la mujer. / <i>The magazine is read by the woman.</i>
Él <b>vendió</b> el coche. / <i>He sold the car.</i>	El coche <b>fue vendido por</b> él. / <i>The car was sold by him.</i>

### EXERCISE Set 20-1

- A. Rewrite the following sentences. Change them to the "true passive" voice. Remember that the verb may be in any tense. Remember also that the past participle agrees in number and gender with the subject of a "true passive" voice.

1. **José construyó la casa.**

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2. **Los hombres abren las puertas.**

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3. **Ana leerá la novela.**

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4. **Los estudiantes cantaron la canción.**

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5. **Cervantes<sup>1</sup> escribió Don Quijote<sup>2</sup>.**

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<sup>1</sup>Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra, 1547–1616; <sup>2</sup>*Don Quijote*, novel in two parts, 1605, 1615.

B. How do you say the following sentences in Spanish? Remember that the past participle agrees in number and gender with the subject of a "true passive" voice.

1. The food was eaten by the children.

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2. The house was built by the workers.

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3. The window was broken by the men.

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4. The bill was paid by Carlos.

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5. The books were purchased by the students.

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## The Se Passive

There is another, more common way, of formulating the passive voice, when you don't want to express the original subject of the sentence. In this version of the passive voice, there are two possible verb forms: Third person singular and third person plural. These two verb forms are always preceded by the object pronoun *se*, as illustrated below. You will also note that the order of the words is as follows: *Se* + verb (singular/plural) + subject (singular/plural).

<i>se</i> +	verb in third person + (singular or plural)	subject (singular or plural)
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The following examples illustrate how the above formula works.

Singular	Plural
<i>Se canta la canción.</i> / <i>The song is sung.</i>	<i>Se cantan las canciones.</i> / <i>The songs are sung.</i>

It should be noted that the English translation of the *se* passive is not always equivalent to the traditional passive voice (*the man was seen by his son*). The following are some examples of other ways of translating the *se* passive forms into English and vice-versa. We provide the most common English glosses for this construction, namely, non-referential "you," non-referential "they," and impersonal "one."

¿Cómo se dice "book" en español? / How do you say book in Spanish?

*Se habla italiano en Suiza.* / *They speak Italian in Switzerland.*

*Se debe estudiar mucho.* / *One must study a lot.*

Remember that the *se* passive may be used in any tense or mood just as with the "true passive" voice.

**EXERCISE Set 20-2**

A. How do you say the following sentences in Spanish? Use the **se** passive construction.

1. Spanish is spoken here.

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2. They say that it is raining.

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3. They sell newspapers here.

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4. The bills are paid on Fridays.

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5. You must eat three meals every day.

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## Summary

The passive voice may be expressed in two ways, as illustrated below.

1. The "true passive" voice involves a step-by-step process:
  - a. Change the order of the subject and object.
  - b. Introduce the verb **ser**.
  - c. Make the verb **ser** the same tense as the original verb.
  - d. Change the original verb to the past participle.
  - e. Remember to make the past participle agree in number and gender with the new subject of the sentence.

The following example shows the process in a nutshell.

**Elena vende la casa.** / *Elena sells the house.*

**La casa es vendida por Elena.** / *The house is sold by Elena.*

2. The **se** passive also has a formula for its use that we reproduce here. Remember that you do not express the agent (the person by whom the action of the verb is performed) in this construction.
  - a. Use **se** and the third person (singular or plural) of the verb in any tense.
  - b. Place the noun after the verb. The verb will be singular or plural depending on whether the noun is singular or plural.

The following examples illustrate this process.

**Se vende tabaco aquí.** / *Tobacco is sold here.*

**Se venden casas aquí.** / *Houses are sold here (houses for sale).*