Active, Passive and Ergative Exercise

Here is the text from the “Stolen on the Ghan” video story. Can you identify which highlighted verbs are in the active voice and which are in the passive voice? Are there any ergative verbs?

Can you put the active verbs into the passive voice, and the passive verbs into the active voice? Is it always possible? What different effects are achieved by using active, passive or ergative verbs?

Stolen on the Ghan

One of Ms Parrot’s easiest cases involved the famous singer Bobby Dylan. Bobby liked jewellery, especially pearls. Although Bobby and Ms Parrot had never met, they were both travelling on the same train, known as the Ghan. Bobby had heard of Ms Parrot, whose fame as a detective had spread after she had won a million dollars and saved English grammar. Bobby was in carriage K, room 14. She went into her cabin and left her pearl necklace on the table. She went out to have her nails manicured and closed the door, but forgot to lock it. No one saw her go out. The train increased speed, and the necklace fell off the table. Another famous singer, Dizzy Delite, was travelling in carriage L, room 14. Thinking she was entering her own cabin, she opened the door and went in. She proceeded to put her own pearl necklace on the table before leaving the cabin. She was seen in the corridor by several other travellers. The train accelerated again, and Dizzy’s necklace dropped to the floor. Both necklaces got covered by a handkerchief. The door reopened again and Bobby returned. Her necklace was not there. ‘My necklace has vanished!’ cried Bobby. She thought it had been stolen and ran to get help. Dizzy entered and looked for her necklace, as she wanted to get it cleaned. It had vanished. Dizzy was upset. She too thought her necklace had been stolen. The door reopened and Bobby returned. She approached Dizzy. ‘What are you doing in my cabin?’ she asked. ‘What are you doing in my cabin?’ Dizzy responded. ‘My necklace has been stolen,’ said Bobby. ‘It was given to me by Prince Wolfgang of Hutt River Province.’ ‘My necklace has been stolen too,’ said Dizzy, ‘and my necklace was given to me by Prince Wolfgang!’ Ms Parrot was quickly summoned to solve the mystery.
She **knocked**, and the door **opened**.

It **was** not a difficult case.

Dizzy **was advised** to look on the floor.

She **did** so, and **found** the two necklaces.

Dizzy and Bobby **had misinterpreted** the situation.

Nothing **had been stolen** at all.

As this story **shows**, events **need to be analysed** carefully before conclusions are **reached**!

**Active/passive/ergative key:** yellow – active; green – passive; aqua – ergative

One of Ms Parrot’s easiest cases **involved** the famous singer Bobby Dylan.

Bobby **liked** jewellery, especially pearls.

Although Bobby and Ms Parrot **had never met**, they **were both travelling** on the same train, **known** as the Ghan.

Bobby **had heard** of Ms Parrot, whose fame as a detective **had spread** after she **had won** a million dollars and **saved** English grammar.

Bobby **was** in carriage K, room 14.

She **went** into her cabin and **left** her pearl necklace on the table.

She **went out** to **have her nails manicured** and **closed** the door, but **forgot** to lock it.

No one **saw** her go out.

The train **increased** speed, and the necklace **fell** off the table.

Another famous singer, Dizzy Delite, **was travelling** in carriage L, room 14.

Thinking she **was entering** her own cabin, she **opened** the door and **went** in.

She **proceeded** to put her own pearl necklace on the table before leaving the cabin.

She **was seen** in the corridor by several other travellers.

The train **accelerated** again, and Dizzy’s necklace **dropped** to the floor.

Both necklaces **got covered** by a handkerchief.

The door **opened** again and Bobby **returned**.

Her necklace **was not there**.

‘My necklace **has vanished**!’ **cried** Bobby. She **thought** it **had been stolen** and **ran** to get help.

Dizzy **entered** and **looked** for her necklace, as she **wanted** to **get it cleaned**.

It **had vanished**.

Dizzy **was upset**. She too **thought** her necklace **had been stolen**.

The door **reopened** and Bobby **returned**. She **approached** Dizzy.

‘What **are you doing** in my cabin?’ she **asked**.

‘What **are you doing in my cabin**?’ Dizzy **responded**.

‘My necklace **has been stolen**,’ **said** Bobby. ‘It **was given** to me by Prince Wolfgang of Hutt River Province.’
‘My necklace has been stolen too,’ said Dizzy, ‘and my necklace was given to me by Prince Wolfgang!’

Ms Parrot was quickly summoned to solve the mystery. She knocked, and the door opened.

It was not a difficult case. Dizzy was advised to look on the floor. She did so, and found the two necklaces. Dizzy and Bobby had misinterpreted the situation. Nothing had been stolen at all.

As this story shows, events need to be analysed carefully before conclusions are reached!

**Answers**

One of Ms Parrot’s easiest cases involved the famous singer Bobby Dylan (active)

> The active sentence emphasises one of Ms Parrot’s cases.

→ (passive) The famous singer Bobby Dylan was involved in one of Ms Parrot’s easiest cases.

Bobby liked jewellery (active)

> The active sentence emphasises Bobby as someone who likes jewellery.

→ (passive) Jewellery was liked by Bobby.

This is technically possible, but it sounds strange in English. That is because ‘like’ is a stative verb, and we generally prefer indefinite agents when we make stative verbs passive. e.g. ‘Jewellery is liked by everyone’ is better than ‘Jewellery was liked by Bobby’.

Bobby and Ms Parrot had never met (active)

→ *This is intransitive here, so it cannot be made passive.*

they were both travelling (active)

→ *This is intransitive, so it cannot be made passive.*

[which was] known as the Ghan (passive)

> The passive emphasises the name of the train, not the anonymous people who know the train.

→ (active) which people knew as the Ghan

Bobby had heard of Ms Parrot (active)

> The active sentence emphasises Bobby rather than Ms Parrot.

→ (passive) Ms Parrot had been heard of by Bobby

[Ms Parrot’s] fame as a detective had spread (ergative)

> The ergative emphasises the noun ‘fame’ rather than the verb ‘spread’ or the action of anonymous people.
(active) people had spread Ms Parrot’s fame as a detective
(passive) [Ms Parrot’s] fame as a detective had been spread

she had won a million dollars (active)
The active sentence emphasises the fact that Ms Parrot was the person who won a million dollars.
(passive) a million dollars had been won by her

[she had] saved English grammar (active)
The active sentence emphasises the fact that Ms Parrot was the person who saved English grammar.
(passive) English grammar had been saved by her

Bobby was in carriage K (active)
This is intransitive, so it cannot be made passive.

She went into her cabin (active)
This is intransitive, so it cannot be made passive.

[Bobby] left her pearl necklace on the table (active)
The active sentence emphasises the fact that Bobby left her necklace on the table – the focus is on Bobby and the necklace.
(passive) her pearl necklace was left on the table

She went out (active)
This is intransitive, so it cannot be made passive.

to have her nails manicured (causative verb like a passive)
The emphasis is on the action, rather than on the anonymous person who will manicure Bobby’s nails.
(active) for somebody to manicure her nails

[she] closed the door (active)
The active sentence emphasises the fact that Bobby closed the door; no one else closed it, and it did not close by itself.
(passive) the door was closed (by her)
(ergative) the door closed

[she] forgot to lock it (active)
This is intransitive, so it cannot be made passive.

No one saw her go out (active)
The active sentence emphasises the fact that not a single person saw her.
(passive) She was not seen go(ing)/to go out by anyone

The train increased speed (active)
The active sentence here emphasises the train and its action.
(passive) The train’s speed was increased
(ergative) The train’s speed increased

the necklace fell off the table (active)
This is intransitive, so it cannot be made passive.

Another famous singer, Dizzy Delite, was travelling (active)
This is intransitive, so it cannot be made passive.

she was entering her own cabin (active)
The active sentence emphasises the fact that Dizzy performed the action.
(passive) her own cabin was being entered

she opened the door (active)
The active sentence here emphasises the fact that Dizzy opened the door, rather than concentrating on the result of the door being opened.
(passive) the door was opened (by her)
(ergative) the door opened

[she] went in (active) This is intransitive, so it cannot be made passive.

She proceeded (active) This is intransitive, so it cannot be made passive.

She was seen in the corridor by several other travellers (passive)
The passive emphasises the action of being seen, rather than the anonymous travellers who saw Dizzy.
(active) Several other travellers saw her in the corridor.

The train accelerated (ergative)
The ergative makes it seem as though the train accelerated by itself, without any outside help from the driver. The emphasis is on the train, not the unknown driver.
(active) The driver accelerated the train
(passive) The train was accelerated

Dizzy’s necklace dropped to the floor (ergative)
The ergative puts Dizzy’s necklace in the subject position and makes it seem as though it dropped by itself, without any outside influence or help.
(active) The active is not possible in this case, because Dizzy is not present. In other circumstances, we could say ‘Dizzy dropped her necklace’.
(passive) The passive is not possible in this case, because Dizzy is not present. In other circumstances, we could say ‘her necklace was dropped by Dizzy’.

Both necklaces got covered by a handkerchief (get used like a passive, followed by a past participle)
The emphasis is on the necklaces and what happened to them, rather than what covered the necklaces.
→ (active) A handkerchief covered both necklaces

The door opened again (ergative)
The ergative makes it seem as though the door opened by itself, without any help. We do not know who opened the door.
→ (active) Bobby opened the door again
→ (passive) the door was opened again

Bobby returned (active)
→ This is intransitive, so it cannot be made passive

Her necklace was not there (active)
→ This is intransitive, so it cannot be made passive

My necklace has vanished (active)
→ This is intransitive, so it cannot be made passive

cried Bobby (active)
→ This is intransitive, so it cannot be made passive

she thought (active)
→ This is intransitive, so it cannot be made passive

it had been stolen (passive)
The passive emphasises the action, rather than the anonymous person Bobby thinks has stolen the necklace.
→ (active) someone had stolen it

[she] ran to get help (active)
→ This is intransitive, so it cannot be made passive

Dizzy entered (active)
→ This is intransitive, so it cannot be made passive

[Dizzy] looked for her necklace (active)
The active sentence emphasises Dizzy and her action, rather than the necklace.
→ (passive) her necklace was looked for by Dizzy

she wanted (active)
→ ‘want’ is a stative verb, and does not work in the passive here. Many stative verbs (e.g. ‘weigh’) are not used in the passive, because the subject of the passive usually needs to be affected by the action of the verb. Stative verbs with indefinite agents in the passive are usually more acceptable than those with specific agents. e.g. ‘She is loved by everybody’, rather than ‘She is
loved by Jim’.

to get it cleaned (causative verb like a passive)
   The emphasis is on what Dizzy wanted to happen to her necklace, rather than
   the anonymous person who might clean it.
   → (active) someone to clean it

It had vanished (active)
   → This is intransitive, so it cannot be made passive

Dizzy was upset (active)
   → This is intransitive, so it cannot be made passive

she too thought (active)
   The active sentence emphasises Dizzy and her action, rather than what she
   thought.
   → (passive) it was thought by Dizzy

her necklace had been stolen (passive)
   The passive emphasises the event, rather than the anonymous person Dizzy
   thinks has stolen the necklace.
   → (active) someone had stolen her necklace

The door reopened (ergative)
   The ergative makes it seem as though the door opened by itself, without any
   help. Thus we do not know at the beginning who may go into the room.
   → (active) Bobby reopened the door
   → (passive) The door was reopened by Bobby

Bobby returned (active)
   → This is intransitive, so it cannot be made passive.

she approached Dizzy (active)
   The active voice emphasises Bobby and her action.
   → (passive) Dizzy was approached by her

What are you doing in my cabin? (active)
   This is a way of saying, ‘Why are you here?’ The emphasis here is on ‘you’.
   The question form changes the word order. Bobby is not so much interested
   in what Dizzy is doing, as in the fact that Dizzy is in Bobby’s cabin.
   → (passive) What is being done by you in my cabin?

she asked (active)
   The active emphasises Bobby as the person who is asking, rather than
   emphasising the question itself.
   → (passive) was asked by her
What are you doing in my cabin? (active)
The spoken emphasis here is on ‘my’. The question form changes the word order. This is a way of saying, ‘Why are you here in my cabin?’ Dizzy is not so much interested in what Bobby is doing, as in the fact that Dizzy thinks Bobby is in Dizzy’s cabin.
→ (passive) What is being done by you in my cabin?

Dizzy responded (active)
→ This is intransitive, so it cannot be made passive.

My necklace has been stolen (passive)
The passive emphasises the necklace and the theft, rather than the anonymous person Dizzy thinks has stolen the necklace.
→ (active) someone has stolen my necklace

said Bobby (active)
The active emphasises the action.
→ (passive) was said by Bobby

It was given to me by Prince Wolfgang of Hutt River Province (passive)
The passive emphasises the giving of the necklace, rather than the person who gave it.
→ (active) Prince Wolfgang of Hutt River Province gave it to me

My necklace has been stolen too (passive)
The passive emphasises the event, rather than the anonymous person Bobby thinks has stolen the necklace.
→ (active) someone has stolen my necklace too

said Dizzy (active)
The active emphasises the action.
→ (passive) was said by Dizzy

My necklace was given to me by Prince Wolfgang (passive)
The passive emphasises the giving of the necklace, rather than the person who gave it.
→ (active) Prince Wolfgang gave my necklace to me

Ms Parrot was quickly summoned (passive)
The passive emphasises who is summoned (Ms Parrot) rather than the people who sent for her.
→ (active) they summoned Ms Parrot quickly

She knocked (active)
→ This is intransitive, so it cannot be made passive.

The door opened (ergative)
The ergative makes it seem as though the door opened by itself, without any help. Thus the emphasis is not on Bobby or Dizzy.
→ (active) Bobby and Dizzy opened the door
→ (passive) the door was opened by Bobby and Dizzy

It was not a difficult case (active)
→ This is intransitive, so it cannot be made passive

Dizzy was advised [by Ms Parrot] (passive)
The emphasis is on Dizzy and what she was advised to do, rather than on who advised her to do it.
→ (active) Ms Parrot advised Dizzy

She did so (active)
The active sentence emphasises the subject and the action, rather than what was done.
→ (passive) This was done by her

[She] found the two necklaces (active)
The active sentence emphasises the subject and her action.
→ (passive) the two necklaces were found by her

Dizzy and Bobby had misinterpreted the situation (active)
The active sentence emphasises the fact that these two people, whose names we know, made a mistake.
→ (passive) The situation had been misinterpreted by Dizzy and Bobby

Nothing had been stolen at all (passive)
The passive emphasises the action, rather than the anonymous person who was believed to have stolen the necklaces.
→ (active) No one had stolen anything at all

As this story shows (active)
The active emphasises what this story does.
→ (passive) as is shown by this story; or as shown by this story

Events need to be analysed carefully (passive)
The passive emphasises events and their analysis, rather than the anonymous people who should analyse them.
→ (active) people/everyone needs to analyse events carefully

Conclusions are reached (passive)
The passive emphasises conclusions, rather than the people who may reach them.
→ (active) they/people reach conclusions