

Stolen on the Outback Express

Ms Parrot: One of my easiest cases involved the famous singers Kareena Kapadia and Bobby Dylan. Both women liked jewellery, especially pearls. Although we had never met, we were all travelling on the same train, along with Professor Grahamarian and Harumi Kaga, the famous chef. I was drinking a cup of tea when I was summoned to solve a little mystery . . .

Bobby was in the lounge carriage being served a drink and left her pearl necklace on the table. She went out to have her nails manicured and closed the door. She was seen leaving by the famous chef Harumi Kaga.

The train's speed increased and the necklace fell off the table.

Another famous singer, Bollywood star Kareena Kapadia, was also travelling on the train. She proceeded to put her own pearl necklace on the table before leaving the lounge. Professor Grahamarian saw her go out.

(Bobby Dylan comes back into the lounge.)

Bobby Dylan: My necklace has vanished!

Ms Parrot: Kareena entered and looked for her necklace, as she wanted to get it cleaned. It too had vanished.

Kareena Kapadia: My necklace has been stolen!

Bobby Dylan: What are you doing at my table?

Kareena Kapadia: What are you doing at *my* table?

Bobby Dylan: It's *my* table and I'm looking for *my* necklace. It's been stolen. It was given to me by Prince Wolfgang.

Kareena Kapadia: *My* necklace has been stolen, and *my* necklace was given to me by Prince Wolfgang!

Bobby Dylan and Kareena Kapadia together: He gave it to me first!

Professor Grahamarian: What's the matter?

Bobby Dylan: My necklace has been stolen!

Kareena Kapadia: Someone's taken my necklace!

Professor Grahamarian: Are you sure? Who could have stolen them?

Bobby Dylan: / think it was someone employed by the railway!

Kareena Kapadia: Or maybe you have them both!

Professor Grahamarian: Dear dear. I think we should get Ms Parrot to come and help!

Ms Parrot: I was sitting in the dining car having a cup of tea with sugar and lemon as I was suffering from a terrible cold. The hot tea quickly dissolved the sugar, and I was enjoying a book which discussed different people's use of the English passive. But Professor Grahamarian interrupted me.

Professor Grahamarian: Ms Parrot. I'm so sorry to disturb you, but your presence is required!

Ms Parrot: What's happened?

Kareena Kapadia: Someone's taken my necklace!

Bobby Dylan: My necklace has been stolen!

Bobby Dylan and Kareena Kapadia together: And Prince Wolfgang gave it to me!

Bobby Dylan: *He's* stolen my necklace, I'm sure of it!

Railway Employee: I've been called many things in this job, but I've never been called a thief!

Bobby Dylan: You should be arrested!

Ms Parrot: Have you looked under that napkin?

Railway Employee: A napkin on the floor? It's my job to pick it up!

Ms Parrot: It looks as though nothing has been stolen. The necklaces must have dropped onto the floor and got covered by that napkin. As this story shows, facts need to be analysed very carefully before anyone assumes the worst!

Teaching component

Ms Parrot: Now, what have we learned about the passive? Do you remember Bobby Dylan's song at the beginning? Let's have a look at the words:

I used to be so passive,
Every door was closed to me.
I used to be so passive,
No door was opened to me.
Then the door opened,
It opened ergatively.
So I pushed it open,
I opened it actively.

There are two passive verbs there: 'Every door was closed' and 'No door was opened'. And there are two active verbs: 'I pushed it open' and 'I opened it actively.' And did you notice another verb? 'The door opened'. That verb is in the middle, between active and passive. It sounds as though the door opened by itself. That's sometimes called the middle voice, and those verbs are called ergative verbs. They can be active or passive, or somewhere in the middle. They're not the same as intransitive verbs, because intransitive verbs can't be made passive.

For example, I can say 'She cried' but not 'She was cried'. So 'cry' is not an ergative verb. Ergative verbs can work in all three ways: 'I opened the door', 'The door was opened' and 'The door opened'. There is a list of ergative verbs on my web site.

When would you use active, passive or middle? You use the active verb, 'I opened the door', to stress the action and who did that action. You can use a passive, 'The door was opened', when it's not important who did an action, or when you do not want to emphasise who did an action. And you use the middle, 'The door opened', when you want to avoid any mention of a person. We often use the active voice more when speaking and the passive more in scientific writing, but you can use ergative verbs any time.

The more involved you are with the action, the less likely you are to use a passive. For example, you wouldn't normally say 'That flower was picked by me.' You would only use the passive here if you were answering a question, such as 'Who was that flower picked by?' Even that question is unusual, and it is more likely that someone would ask 'Who picked that flower?' and you would answer 'I did' or 'I picked that flower'. But there are some verbs that are nearly always in the passive. For example, 'I was born in 1962' and 'He's called Professor Grahamarian'.

When we use a passive, we can choose to say who does the action or we can leave them out. For example, 'Bobby was given a necklace by Prince Wolfgang'. Or just 'Bobby was given a necklace'. It depends if

we need to know who did the action. The person who does something is called an 'agent'. Their name comes after the word 'by'.

Newsreader: Singers Bobby Dylan and Kareena Kapadia were rescued today by a man believed to be a secret agent.

Ms Parrot: We only need to include the agent if it is important to know that information. We could just say 'Singers Bobby Dylan and Kareena Kapadia were rescued today'. We would know that Bobby and Kareena were safe, but we wouldn't know who rescued them. To emphasise the agent's involvement, we have to put them into the sentence: 'Singers Bobby Dylan and Kareena Kapadia were rescued today by the secret agent Prince Wolfgang.'

In other cases we don't need to know who did the action. For example, 'Prince Wolfgang likes his iced coffee shaken, not stirred'. We don't need to know who is doing the shaking or stirring; it's the end result we are interested in.

If you are using a passive construction, you should use a past participle after the verb 'to be'. Some people wonder what the difference is between a past participle like 'bored' and a present participle like 'boring'. If you say 'I was bored by Professor Grahamarian', that means Professor Grahamarian bored *you*. You did not find him interesting. If you use a present participle, 'Professor Grahamarian is boring', that means that most people do not find him interesting. 'Boring' is a present participle used as an adjective. And here Harumi Kaga is interesting and Bobby and Kareena are interested.

It's a fascinating subject, and there are lots more explanations and exercises on the English for Uni website. Now if you'll excuse me, I think I'll finish my cup of tea.

(The tea is cold.)

Ms Parrot: I'll have to get another cup made. This is terrible!