

## 15. The passive

### 1 Definition

The various tenses that have been mentioned above have all been shown in their **active** form, that is, where the subject of the verb is carrying out the action of the verb.

Le chien **a poursuivi** le chat

*The dog chased the cat*

There is a form, however, where the subject is not carrying out the action of the verb, but is on the receiving end. This form is called the **passive**:

Le chat **a été poursuivi** par le chien

*The cat was chased by the dog*

### 2 Formation

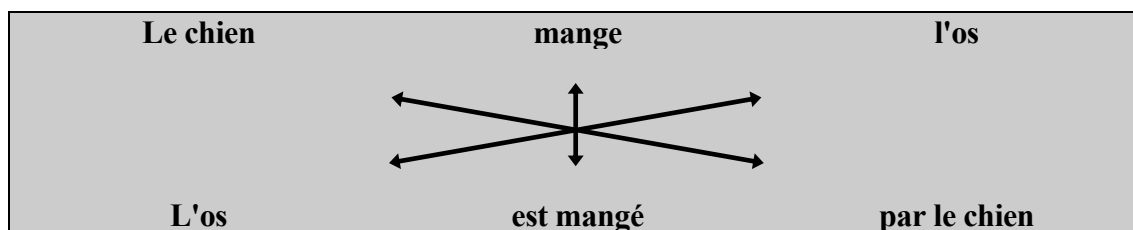
The French passive is formed in a similar way to the English passive. Take, for example, the following active sentence:

Le chien mange l'os

*The dog eats the bone*

A passive sentence is created as follows:

- The passive verb is formed by replacing the active verb with *être* plus the past participle of the active verb: **mange** ⇒ **est mangé**
- The object of the sentence becomes the subject: ... **mange l'os** ⇒ **L'os est mangé**...
- The subject of the sentence is placed after the verb and is used with *par*:  
**Le chien mange...** ⇒ ...**est mangé par le chien**



It is important to note that in French an indirect object can never be made the subject of a passive sentence. For example the sentence *Paul was given a book* cannot be translated by *\*Paul a été donné un livre* because it is the *book* and not *Paul* that is being given. Generally an *on* construction is used instead (*On a donné un livre à Paul* - see section 4.1 below).

### 3 Agreement

In a passive construction, the past participle must always agree with its subject:

Elle n'a pas été **informée** du crime  
*She wasn't informed of the crime*

Sa lettre a été **publiée** dans le journal  
*Her letter has been published in the newspaper*

### 4 Alternatives to the passive

The passive is much rarer in French than in English. Instead French often uses other constructions:

#### 4.1 An *on* construction

Lorsqu'**on** a annoncé la nouvelle, il y a eu de vives acclamations  
*When the news was announced, there were great cheers*  
**On** ne sait pas quand le temps s'améliorera  
*It isn't known when the weather will get better*

As mentioned in section 2 above, this is especially the case with constructions such as *donner qch à qn*, *demandeur qch à qn* and *conseiller qch à qn* which are rarely used in the passive because the "*quelqu'un*" is an indirect object. This is **unlike** English:

I was advised to take a few days off work  
*On m'a conseillé [and not \*J'étais conseillé] de prendre quelques jours de repos*

#### 4.2 Pronominal verbs

Pronominal verbs (sometimes called "reflexive" verbs) are often used in French where English would use a passive.

Leurs produits **se vendent** partout dans le monde  
*Their products are sold through the world*  
Ce médicament ne **s'achète** pas sans ordonnance  
*This medicine cannot be bought without a prescription*  
Ce vin **se boit** frais  
*This wine is drunk chilled*  
Le français **se parle** dans plusieurs pays dans le monde  
*French is spoken in several countries in the world*

#### 4.3 (Se) *faire* + infinitive

*Faire* or *se faire* + infinitive can also be used to express the passive:

Nous **avons fait nettoyer** la moquette  
*We had the carpet cleaned*