

## Rethinking the relationship between transitive and intransitive verbs

Students with whom I have studied grammar will remember my frustration at the idea that linking verbs can be intransitive. “Nonsense!” I rant, “the categories of transitive and intransitive verbs presuppose action. Since linking verbs do not convey action, they should be placed in some other category, not just lumped with intransitive verbs.”

You may also remember that mine is a minority opinion in the greater grammatical community. Most grammarians have no misgivings about describing *linking verbs*, or more properly *state of being verbs*, as intransitive.



Some early nineteenth-century grammarians provide support for the idea that state of being verbs act in a fundamentally divergent way, naming them *neuter* verbs and remarking that they do not express action. In our terms, they do not display active or passive voice, and thus are neither transitive or intransitive; they are something apart.

But many other grammarians, nineteenth through twenty-first-century, maintain that state of being verbs are well described as intransitive. Here’s how they do it.

### *Actors (agents, agency) & those acted upon (recipients, receivers)*

First, remember the potential for sentences to have an *actor* and/or something that is *acted upon*. Alternative terms used to refer to the idea of *actor* include *agent* and *agency*; alternative terms for that which is *acted upon* include *recipient* and *receiver*.

The meat enthusiast exploded the potato

The potato was exploded by the meat enthusiast

## *Transitive & Intransitive Verbs*

When defining the term *transitive*, I have suggested that the *actor* or *agent* acts, stressing that notion that transitive verbs transfer or pass action between the *agent* and the *recipient*. By this definition, the notion of transitive and intransitive is limited to action verbs (either in the active or passive voice).

But what if we shift the preliminary discussion of transitive and intransitive to the following:

The *agent* is a person or thing that produces an effect. The *recipient* is any person or thing that receives the effect produced by the agent.

I have dropped the absolute requirement for *action* and substituted *produces an effect* (we are talking in semantics here – to produce an effect, I think, is to act – but I want to soft-pedal the notion of *action*).

The definition of transitive remains unaffected by this adjustment to our theory. A transitive verb still has an *agent*. Whether the *agent* is the subject depends upon voice, and whether the *agent* is literally present or implied depends upon sentence structure.

Most importantly, however, transitive verbs require that a *recipient* exist within the sentence; something must be acted upon by the verb *or receive some effect from the verb*. It follows that transitive verbs will be verbs that allow agents and recipients to interact, and it also follows that sentences written in the active and passive voices must have transitive verbs.

### ***Intransitive verbs***

Intransitive verbs *do not* act or have any sort of effect upon a recipient – in short, the only entity they impact upon is the subject. This is why verbs in the passive voice are always transitive – you can't have passive voice without a recipient.

Intransitive verbs *always* have an agent. They may simply describe the action of the agent (the subject), but they may also express a statement, make an assertion, or affirm something about the *agent*.

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Consider the following intransitive verbs:

The man runs  
Planes fly  
Horses gallop

The girls weep  
You laugh  
We all rejoice

As written, there are no recipients for the action described by the verbs, only agents, so these are intransitive verbs. But consider the following examples:

The man stood quietly  
The cat sat with noble posture  
A mole peered blindly

We still have no recipients, but we don't have much action, either. Note the difference between the following uses:

The creature stood the stick on end.  
The creature stood.

The first example is transitive: "creature" is the agent (and subject) and "stick" is the recipient (and direct object). In the second example, *stood* makes an assertion or affirms something about the *agent*; still, there is little or no physical action. If you argue that in some philosophical sense action remains, you will admit a quantitative difference between the following examples:

The mice crept silently  
The man ate with gusto

The mice stayed silent  
The old paper sat on the desk

Now consider the following sentences:

Some were present  
She turned twenty-seven  
They are fabulous  
The cheese tasted bad.

Again, we have no recipients, and there is no action either: these are linking

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verbs. But if we follow the logic of intransitive verbs as verbs that express a statement, make an assertion, or affirm something about the *agent*, in this case the subject of the sentence – then linking verbs are intransitive.

State of being verbs make statements about the status or condition of *agents* (the subjects of the sentence), but those statements do not need to include an action: (*standing quietly, being present, tasting bad*). Viewed in this way, the fundamental requirement of an intransitive verb is that it not *act* upon or *effect* a *recipient*.

### ***Back to Transitive Verbs***

Grammarians note that transitive verbs have two forms for expressing precisely the same thought: one called the active voice and the other the passive voice. Stylistic differences arise – normally a matter of emphasis – depending upon the voice employed.



### ***Linking Verbs & Participles***

Samuel Kirkham and other early nineteenth-century grammarians argued that *participles* were a ninth part of speech, derived from a verb, and partaking of the nature of a verb, but also the nature of an adjective. This sort of thinking would simplify the parsing of sentences such as the following:

The rain is falling

If we follow Kirkham's thinking, *falling* is a participle that modifies the subject; it is a predicate adjective.

This is no longer the majority view of grammarians (if it ever was).

Remember that every verb can be conjugated into several forms, two of which are participial forms.

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To eat (infinitive form)  
eat (present tense form)  
ate (past tense form)  
eating (present participial form)  
eaten (past participial form)

In order for the present or past participial forms to function as main verbs, they need helpers, thus “is eating,” “was eating,” “has eaten,” or “will have eaten,” etc.

But as several of you (and Kirkham) have noted, some constructions look a lot like linking constructions. Are they? My best advice, in brief, is to see these constructions as main verbs with auxiliaries. Consider the following sentences.

Zoey’s manner *is engaging*.

After dinner, she *was tired*

The man *was running* for his life.

The entire verb is making a statement, assertion, or affirmation about the subject. We recognize all of these verbs as intransitive.

Nevertheless, the idea of a participle acting within a linking construction has not been entirely abandoned. Many grammarians insist that distinctions can and should be made.

In the sentences above, each can be described as employing a verb cluster comprised of an auxiliary verb attached to the participial form of a main verb. In the first two sentences, though, the participles may reasonably be seen to have modification power over the subjects. You can usefully describe them as predicate adjectives. In the third sentence, this is more difficult to argue because the participle “running” pretty forcefully describes an action in itself, not the subject of the sentence.

*Here is a simple guideline to make such distinctions.*

Any participle that follows a linking verb and that clearly describes the subject may be identified as a subject complement (or, alternatively, as a

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main verb following its auxiliary). A participle that follows a linking verb but denotes action should be described as the main verb following its auxiliary.

All of this is lovely – we can begin to discriminate between the quality of verb phrases that make use of participles. But the subject still remains murky and open to interpretation. How would you classify the verbs below?

Zoey's favorite activity is sleeping

Zoey is sleeping

I've seen the first described as a linking verb with participle; we wouldn't say that about the second would we?)



### **Tricky Moments in the Passive Voice**

Obvious examples of verbs in the passive voice have both *recipient* and *agent*:

“Reason to Believe” was sung by Bruce.

Of course, the agent does not need to be present within a sentence; it can be implied:

“Reason to Believe” was sung.

A few verbs, though, are a bit more tricky in the passive voice. They are reflexive in use and don't admit the insertion of the agent at all when used in the passive.

I am prepared for any emergency

They were inclined to take the opposite side

We are acquainted with them.

I am disposed to think favorably of his proposals.

Here are the same sentences with the implied agents spelled out:

I am prepared {by me} for any emergency

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They were inclined {by themselves} to take the opposite side  
We are acquainted {by us} with them  
I am disposed {by myself} to think favorably of his proposals

Try turning these sentences into the active voice:

I am prepared {by me} for any emergency  
I prepared for any emergency

They were inclined {by themselves} to take the opposite side  
They inclined to take the opposite side.

We are acquainted {by us} with them  
We acquainted with them

I am disposed {by myself} to think favorably of his proposals  
I disposed to think favorably.

The first sentence makes sense when the verb is placed in the active voice (but is there a direct object? – *myself?*), and the second sentence isn't unreadable, but the final two examples do not make sense. Some of these verbs can be turned easily into the active voice; some cannot.

This brings us to another intriguing area of sentence construction and grammar. There is a class of verbs that are frequently followed by prepositions that form a unified whole with the verb. The noun or pronoun that follows is the *recipient* (in other words, it is the direct object). Here is the verb first in the active voice, then the passive:

I prepared for any emergency  
An emergency was prepared for

They spoke to me  
I was spoken to

They laughed at us.  
We were laughed at

They listened to him  
He was listened to

They will call on you  
You will be called on

They looked at us  
We were looked at

When these verbs are changed into the passive voice, the preposition still occupies its position after the passive root (in the passive voice, it is perhaps best to think of them as adverbs).

### More Tricky Moments in the Passive Voice

Consider the following sentences, all written with the passive voice:

She was promised *jewels* by her mother

I was asked a *question* by the duffel bag

The piteous professor was offered a large *sum* by the rich entrepreneur

Notice the italicized words. In terms of rule-based grammar, they are difficult to parse. They are not traditional direct objects, for they are not recipients of the action of the verb as performed by the subject. If we drop the italicized words, the analysis seems simple enough.

She was promised by her mother

*The action is promising; the agent is mother; the recipient is She;*

Some stylists suggest that it would make better sense, and be more agreeable to the idiom of our language, to rewrite as follows. What do you think?

Jewels were promised to her by her mother

A question was put to me by the duffel bag

A large sum of money was offered to the piteous professor by the entrepreneur

Note what happens when these sentences are placed in the active voice. Suddenly we have a sentence with both indirect and direct object:

Her mother promised her jewels

The duffel bag asked me a question

The entrepreneur offered the professor a large sum of money

Now, take a look at one of the original examples again:

The professor was offered a *sum* by the entrepreneur

The entrepreneur offered the professor a *sum*

In both cases the word *sum* is the recipient of the action of the verb. In the first example *sum* is the direct object of a verb in the passive voice; *professor*

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is the indirect recipient. In the second example, *sum* is the direct object of the verb in the active voice; *professor* is still the indirect recipient, but here it is also recognizable as an indirect object.



### *Common Linking Verbs*

The most common linking verb is “to be” in any of its conjugated forms: *is*, *was*, *were*, *will be*, *have been*, etc. Here are some other linking verbs (by no means is the list complete):

appear	grow	smell
become	look	sound
continue	prove	stay
feel	remain	taste
get	seem	turn

In the list above only *become* and *seem* are always linking verbs. The rest may be linking verbs or action verbs depending on context.

To decide whether a verb is a linking verb substitute *is*, *are*, or *am* (forms of the verb *to be*) for the verb. If it fits – the substituted verb is a linking verb.

These remarks were developed after consulting a range of nineteenth-century grammar texts. The two that I have leaned most heavily upon are Samuel Kirkham’s *English Grammar in Familiar Lectures* (c. 1820 with many editions through 1850) and William C. Kenyon’s *Elements of English Grammar* (1849). Study of such texts shows just how many different ways grammar may be discussed, described, or theorized about.