

Re: Passive Form

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- *From:* Ben Finney <bignose+hates-spam@xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx>
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kirito@xxxxxxxx writes:

I'm having trouble understanding the passive translation of this sentence:

HOWAITO-san wa SUMISU-san ni KOOHII wo nomaremashita.

Does that mean Mr. White was made to drink coffee by Mr. Smith? But that would be the causative... Help?

You've correctly identified White-san as the subject of the passive verb; he was identified as the topic of the whole statement. But since it's the passive form of the verb, White-san is the **receiver** of someone else's action.

White-san didn't "nomu", that was done by the other party; Smith-san is identified as that other party with "Smisu-san ni". (If this was a statement using "nomu", it might simply be "Smisu-san ga koohii wo nomimashita".)

So, this is a statement **about** White-san ("Howaito-san ha"), regarding what happened when Smith-san drank the coffee: the verb is "nomareru", the **receiving** or **suffering** of a drinking action done by another party.

A possible translation is:

Mr. White had (his) coffee drunk by Mr. Smith.

.... which correctly has Mr. White as the subject of the verb "to have (object) drunk (by someone)", but omits the sense from the original that this was to Mr. White's detriment, in contrast to another use of the same verb form, such as "to have (one's hair) cut (by a barber)". This is because English has no such verb form as "-rareru", and we have to make do with the ambiguity.

I'll take this as an opportunity to once again praise Jay Rubin's

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little volume "Making Sense of Japanese", a collection of essays on troublesome topics for NSoE learners of Japanese. He illustrates the lack in English of a clear equivalent for this precise Japanese verb form, the "suffering passive":

... a form that can be used with both transitive and intransitive verbs, and thus one that is very different from the English passive. The subject is the one who gets *rareru*'ed whether the passive Japanese verb is transitive or intransitive. ... The subject remains *you* (or whoever else the context has established as the subject), so you get *rareru*'ed by somebody, but you don't get stolen.

"Pardon me, officer, but I've just been *rareru*'ed" you say to the policeman.

"Oh, sorry to hear that, sir, but what were you *rareru*'ed?"

"I was *rareru*'ed somebody's having stolen my suitcase."

"How's that again?"

"I was stolen my suitcase!"

"What an odd way to put it!"

"Of course it's odd. I'm Japanese, and that's how we phrase these things when our English is a little shaky!"

As the officer says, your expression may be odd, but it's perfectly clear. From it, he knows that you are the victim, that someone did the stealing, and that the someone stole your suitcase. *Kaban wo nusumareta*, then, is a clear statement involving you, the robber, and the suitcase, though only the suitcase is mentioned.

I really do recommend this book, published by Kodansha (also published earlier under the title "Gone Fishin'"), for anyone who has grasped the basics of Japanese grammar but finds there are some points that seem intractable.

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\"The best mind-altering drug is truth.\" — Jane Wagner, via |
`Lily Tomlin |
o) |
Ben Finney