

Online Learning

English Short Clip

'BE BROKE' versus 'BE BROKEN'

Hi everyone!

In this video, we are going to answer a question emailed to us. The question is as follows:

Dear all,

As I had the lesson about the passive voice in an Experiential English class, I think I really understood it well. But I read somewhere and feel confused about the sentence "***This person is broke.***" Why isn't this sentence written "***This person is broken.***"?? Please tell me more.

Thank you.

You know, this is sometimes confusing, but actually, it concerns an 'expression', not the case of a 'passive voice.' The expression 'to be broke' does not have the same meaning as 'to be broken.' The sentence, "This person is broke," is an informal expression meaning, "This person has no money." This sentence is not related to the passive form of the verb 'to break'. In the case of the passive form of the verb, the sentence "This person is broken." sounds a little strange. If we change the position of the word 'broken' to be an adjective modifying the noun 'person', the new sentence will be: "This broken person is..." which means the person who has lost all hope and enthusiasm because of a bad experience".

However, the original sentence order does make sense if we interpret the sentence with this second meaning, e.g. 'He was broken by the war' (i.e. his spirit was defeated, he felt hopeless) In this case, the verb is passive; however, we can still use the adjective 'broken' with this word order e.g. "He is a broken man" with the same meaning as the passive sentence i.e. he is hopeless (*adapted from Macmillan English Dictionary, 2007*).

'Broke' looks like a verb and it *is* the past tense of the verb 'to break'. But, it is also an adjective and a bit special in that it is usually used after the verb 'to be' and the noun

it describes.

- In this case, it is an adjective meaning 'having no money,' so the two sentences below have the same structure and neither is passive.
"Tom is big." and "Tom is broke."
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