Transitive vs intransitive verbs

There are two types of verbs in Indonesian.

1. Siti berdiri. Siti stands/ Siti stood.

Siti simply does the action, “berdiri”. She doesn’t do it to anyone. The only character involved is the Actor (Siti). These ‘Actor-only’ verbs, like “berdiri”, are called intransitive verbs.


Siti does the action “memukul” to Ali. So there are two characters involved, an Actor and an Undergoer. These ‘Actor + Undergoer’ verbs are called transitive verbs.

It is very useful to know which verbs are transitive. Transitive verbs may be used flexibly: to make either active or passive sentences (see later units).

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Which verbs are intransitive?</th>
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<tr>
<td>* All “ber” verbs. Examples: Siti berdiri, or Dia bermain.</td>
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<tr>
<td>* All ‘bare’ verbs. Examples: Siti tidur, or Dia duduk.</td>
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<tr>
<td>* A few ‘me-’ verbs. Examples: Siti menangis, or Dia meninggal.</td>
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<td>* The great majority of ‘me-’ verbs. Examples: Siti memukul Ari, or Dia membeli buku.</td>
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<td>* Four verbs with an invisible ‘me-’, i.e. a ‘me-’ that is usually left off. These are:</td>
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<td>Siti (me)makan roti, Dia (me)minum teh, Dia (me)minta uang, Dia (me)mohon bantuan.</td>
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With nearly all verbs, it is easy to tell whether they are transitive or intransitive. There are only a few which might give you trouble at first. These are ones that look as if they are transitive when they are not. Prime examples are:

Siti bermain tenis. Siti plays tennis.
Siti belajar matematika. Siti studies mathematics.
Siti berbicara bahasa Cina. Siti speaks Chinese.
Siti naik bis. Siti took the bus.

It looks as if Siti does the action to ‘tenis’, and to ‘matematika’, and to ‘bahasa Cina’, and so on. Therefore these verbs “bermain”, “belajar” “berbicara” etc look transitive. But actually they are all intransitive. They do not have an Undergoer, properly speaking.

And so they cannot be used to make Passive sentences.

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Exercise 1: Underline the verb. Say whether it is intransitive [I] or transitive [T].

1. Saya **melihat** anjing. 
   9. Mereka menangis keras.
2. Erna **berbicara** bahasa Inggris.
3. Mereka **bekerja** di kantor.
   11. Riko **berganti** pakaian.
4. Bu Ida **menulis** surat.
   12. Dia **naik** bus.
5. Saya **bermain** bola basket.
   13. Pak Nur **mengajar** murid.
6. Sri **membantu** Dewi.
   14. Saya **berjalan** ke sekolah.
7. Anwar **memasak** mie goreng.
   15. Kami **makan** daging.
8. Maria **belajar** ilmu bumi.
   16. Dia **meninggal** kemarin.

Exercise 2. Say if each verb is intransitive [I] or transitive [T]

1. melihat **T**  
   8. duduk ___  
   15. mengajar ___
2. belajar ___  
   9. berbicara ___  
   16. membaca ___
3. menjual ___  
   10. bermain ___  
   17. mandi ___
4. membeli ___  
   11. minum ___  
   18 beristirahat ___
5. tidur ___  
   12. mencuci ___  
   19. menulis ___
6. makan ___  
   13. menangis ___  
   20. berganti ___
7. naik ___  
   14. berjalan ___  
   21. meninggal ___

Answer Key

Exercise 1. 2) berbicara [I] 3) bekerja [I] 4) menulis [T] 5) bermain [I]  
16) meninggal [T]


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