

Get-Passives*
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1. Introduction

It is well known that when *get* is followed by a past participle, the form conveys a passive meaning (hereafter, “the *get*-passive”) and is quite similar to the *be*-passive in the meaning. Although this kind of description is frequently found in standard dictionaries and grammar books, the meaning of the *get*-passive is actually not the same as, though similar in some respects to, that of the *be*-passive.

Unlike the *be*-passive, the *get*-passive, as has been noted in the previous literature, can be accompanied by emotional values, i.e. emotional attitudes of a speaker toward a described situation (cf. Hatcher (1949), Lakoff (1971), Barber (1975), Chappell (1980), Givón (1993), and Iwasawa (1993, 2001), among others). Compare:

- (1) a. Oh no! I got locked out.
b. #Oh no! I was locked out.

In (1a), an emotion of the speaker, such as disappointment or depression, is expressed via the *get*-passive. On the other hand, the *be*-passive in (1b) does not convey such an emotion and hence is not compatible with “Oh no!” expressing the speaker’s disappointment.

It is easy, therefore, to predict that the *get*-passive is not considered appropriate for formal occasions. In a news program, the following utterance is not appropriate when the *get*-passive is used:

- (2) A man who had been playing football at the sport club {was / #got} shot by a man wearing a mask.

This is because the *get*-passive tends to convey emotional values and is considered to be subjective, while only the objective truth is supposed to be reported in a news program.

The main purpose of this article is to clarify from a semantic perspective the question of why the *get*-passive has a tendency to convey emotional values, to which little attention has been given in the previous literature.¹ One of the few

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¹ We are not concerned with the following types of examples:

- (i) a. John got dressed in new jeans and a blue prison shirt.
b. Mary got excited at the news.

researches includes Iwasawa (1993), which focuses mainly on the emotional values of the *get*-passive and suggests that the semantics of the *get*-passive motivates the emotional values. This article also assumes that the emotional values of the *get*-passive come from its semantic properties, and claims that inchoativity of the *get*-passive has a significant role in conveying emotional values.

Section 2 shows types of the emotional values that can be implied in the *get*-passive. Section 3 compares the *get*-passive with inchoative *get* and argues the relation between them. Section 4 explores the semantic function of the *get*-passive. Section 5 clarifies how the *get*-passive implies emotional values. Section 6 offers concluding remarks.

2. Types of Emotional Values

Speakers express various types of feelings with the *get*-passive. Observe the following:

- (3) a. Our grant got cancelled (darn it!). (Iwasawa (2001:258))
 b. How did this window get opened? (Lakoff (1971:155))
 c. Why did I get involved? There's no money in it, there's no items, no rewards. I shouldn't have gotten involved.
 d. My friend, Joe, got arrested every time he went to Panama.
 (Chappell (1980:436))

In (3a), through the *get*-passive, the speaker is blaming or complaining about the cancellation of the grant. In (3b), the speaker asks the hearer not about the way of the window being opened but about the reason why he/she opened the window. A proper answer to the question is not 'I used an old fork, and it worked' but 'I'm terribly sorry.'² The speaker in (3c) undoubtedly regrets his/her own act performed in the past. In (3d), the speaker shows sympathy for Joe, who has been arrested every time he went to Panama, via the *get*-passive.

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- c. Why don't we get rid of her?

(Arrese (1999:108))

Although all of these examples share the form with the *get*-passive, they have no passive meanings. Downing (1996) gives three criteria for the *get*-passive: The *get*-passive should (i) be paraphrased into the *be*-passive, (ii) have an active counterpart, and (iii) have an oblique agent whether expressed or not. On the basis of these criteria, (ia) cannot be paraphrased into the *be*-passive and has no implied oblique agent. (ib), which is called a psychological *get*-passive by Collins (1996), also has no unexpressed oblique agent. (ic) includes an idiomatic expression and it does not meet all of the criteria. For the reasons mentioned above, I limit the discussion to sentences that meet the three criteria.

² In contrast, the speaker asks the hearer the way of opening the window when using the *be*-passive.

Emotional values accompanying the *get*-passive are not limited to negative ones:

- (4) a. Mary got admitted to Harvard! (Isn't she lucky!)
 b. Jane got examined by a Macquarie St specialist! (What a good news!)
 (Chappell (1980:437))

Both of the examples convey emotional values such as astonishment or delight. For example, in (4b), the speaker must not have expected Jane to be examined and was totally surprised (or delighted) at it, and therefore the (b)-sentence is perfectly compatible with the parenthesized expression.

In this way, the *get*-passive can be accompanied by various types of emotional values, which are determined depending on context. In contrast, the *be*-passive hardly has such emotional values. In the following section, we will argue the origin of the *get*-passive.

3. The *Get*-Passive and Inchoative *Get*

As a first step in our analysis, let us consider the syntax of the *get*-passive. While some authors regard *get* in the *get*-passive as an auxiliary (Quirk et al. (1985: 802)), Haegeman (1985) presents some formal tests confirming that it is not an auxiliary but a main verb. Observe the following:

- (5) a. Did he get killed?
 b. *Got he killed?
 (6) a. He didn't killed.
 b. *He gotn't killed.

(Haegeman (1985:54-55))

In the examination of interrogative and negative forms of the *get*-passive, the subject is not inverted with *get* as in (5b), and *get* is not directly negated as in (6b). Further, *get* cannot be stranded in sentences involving VP deletion as in (7a) (and hence *do*-support is required as in (7b)):

- (7) a. *John got killed in an accident and Bill got too.
 b. John got killed in an accident and Bill did too.

(Haegeman (1985:55))

These results conflict with the fact that auxiliaries do not fail these formal tests and confirm *get* as a main verb.

The above observation leads us to the assumption that the *get*-passive shares semantic properties with *get* as a main verb. Our next task is to examine what use of *get* the *get*-passive shares semantic properties with, i.e., to argue the origin of the *get*-passive. There are different views in the previous literature with regard to the

relation between the *get*-passive and the other use of *get*. For example, analyzing the various uses of *get* within a generative framework, Haegeman proposes that the *get*-passive is an unaccusative variant of causative *get*. Givón (1993) and Givón and Yang (1994) also indicate that the *get*-passive results from causative *get*. However, as we will see in the following section, the *get*-passive shares similar semantic properties with inchoative *get*, rather than causative *get*. Regarding the *get*-passive as an extension of inchoative *get* is not an out-of-the-way view (cf. Lakoff (1971) and Kimball (1973), among others). Gronemeyer (1999:6), for example, states that “the *get*-passive is conceptually distinct from the inchoative construction, but the boundary between the two uses is subtle.”

This article takes the same position as Lakoff (1971), Kimball (1973) and Gronemeyer (1999) and assumes that the *get*-passive shares semantic properties with inchoative *get*.³ According to Kimball (1973:206), *get* followed by a nominal phrase or an adjectival phrase can be paraphrased into ‘*come to have NP/be AP*.’ Let us consider the following examples:

- (8) a. John got a chocolate.
b. Mary got angry.

As is represented by *come to*, the verb *get* denotes change of state from a presupposed state to a resultant state (cf. Kobukata (2005)): (8a), which can be paraphrased into *John came to have a chocolate*, describes John’s change from a state of not having a chocolate to a state of having it. In the same way, (8b) describes Mary’s psychological change and is paraphrased into *Mary came to be angry*.

If our claim is on the right track, we can paraphrase the *get*-passive as follows:

- (9) *get V-en* = ‘*come to be V-en*’

Based on this representation, we can give an account of semantic properties of *get*-passive shown in the following section. As will be shown, the *get*-passive is specialized to describe a change of state. In the following section, we will analyze the semantics of the *get*-passive originally coming from its inchoativity.

4. Semantic Properties of the *Get*-Passive

It has been pointed out that there are some differences in the semantics between the *get*-passive and the *be*-passive. One of the most obvious differences is that, while the *be*-passive can be used as either an actional or a statal passive form,

³ Gronemeyer (1999) calls inchoative *get* ‘ingressive *get*.’

the *get*-passive is always used as an actional passive form.

Before we examine the *get*-passive, let me draw attention to the difference between the actional passive and the statal passive. Compare the following:

- (10) a. The house is painted every year.
 b. The door was shut at six when I went by, but I don't know when it was shut.

(Curme (1931:445))

In (10a), the adverbial phrase *every year* forces us to interpret the *be*-passive as the actional passive: It describes an event of the house being painted. In contrast, the *be*-passive in (10b) describes not an act but a state of the door being shut, and hence it is compatible with the content of the subordinate clause beginning with *but*. Thus, the *be*-passive in (10b) is interpreted as a statal passive.

On the other hand, the *get*-passive, as mentioned above, always expresses an act (i.e. the actional passive). Take the following for example:

- (11) a. The heroine got surrounded by zombies.
 b. The heroine was surrounded by zombies.

The *get*-passive in (11a) is interpreted only as describing an event of the heroine being surrounded, while the *be*-passive does not have such a limitation on the interpretation. The following are examples to support the fact that the *get*-passive describes only the actional situation:

- (12) a. * Charlie Chaplin got loved by millions.
 b. * He got known as the father of linguistics.

Notice that in (12a, b) the verbs following *got* are what is called 'stative verbs,' which describe states or conditions lasting over a period of time. Naturally, this type of verb can appear only in the statal passive. As shown in (12), the stative verbs, *love* and *know*, cannot appear in the *get*-passive. This clearly suggests that the *get*-passive is not a statal passive but an actional passive.⁴

In addition to the difference between the actional passive and the statal passive, the *get*-passive also differs from the *be*-passive in another respect. According to Taranto (2004), the subject of the *get*-passive has to undergo some change of state, whereas that of the *be*-passive does not. Let us compare the following pairs of examples:

⁴ Stative verbs such as *love* and *know* can appear in the *be*-passive as follows:

- (i) a. Charlie Chaplin was loved by millions.
 b. He was known as the father of linguistics.

This is because the *be*-passive, unlike the *get*-passive, can denote not only the actional passive but also the statal passive.

- (13) a. *Mary got followed by a little lamb.
 b. Mary was followed by a little lamb.
- (14) a. *Harry got seen at Sherry's barbecue.
 b. Harry was seen at Sherry's barbecue.

It is hard to think that Mary underwent any change of state by the act of being followed by a little lamb in (13). In (14), the subject, *Harry*, is not regarded as being affected. In these cases, only the *be*-passive, which does not require the subject to undergo some change of state, is accepted.

However, there is a possibility for the *get*-passive to be accepted. Compare the following with (13a) and (14a):

- (15) a. Mary got followed by a knife-wielding homicidal maniac.
 (Taranto (2004:10))
 b. Harry got witnessed at the Sherry's barbecue.

In (15a), unlike (13a), the agent indicated by the *by*-phrase is no longer harmless to the subject, *Mary*. We can easily guess that Mary was affected more or less by the maniac and underwent some change of state, at least, in her mind. Therefore, the *get*-passive is accepted. The same goes for (15b). In (15b), we must note that the subject, *Harry*, was not seen but witnessed at the barbecue. Someone witnessing Harry at the barbecue might place him at a disadvantage in such a case where Harry was absent from work or school without permission. When the verb *witness* is used, we can interpret the subject as being affected or undergoing some change of state.

The claim that the *get*-passive requires the subject to undergo some change of state is also supported by the following examples:

- (16) a. ?A house got built on the vacant lot.
 b. *The "Segway" got invented in the USA.
- (17) a. *Advantage got taken of Bill by Harry.
 b. *Tabs got kept on those radicals.

As shown in (16), verbs of creation cannot appear in the *get*-passive. That is, subjects of verbs of creation refer to entities that come into existence as a consequence of an act of creating, and cannot undergo any change of state by the act. For example, *a house* in (16a) resulted from building. In the same way, in (17), elements in idioms cannot appear in the subject position in the *get*-passive. This is because idioms do not have a literal reading and their elements are not entities that undergo some change of state.⁵

⁵ Note that elements in idioms can appear in the subject position of the *be*-passive:

From the discussion above, it is concluded that the subject of the *get*-passive has to undergo some change of state. In fact, the *get*-passive is apt to be used in contexts or with expressions that focus on a change of state (cf. Vanrespaille (1991) and Tobin (1993), among others). Let us consider the following examples (italics are mine):

- (18) a. This is *finally* going to get cleared up.
 b. *At the last moment*, the criminal got fired in the head.
 c. They would have got transferred to Tunis *eventually*.
(Downing (1996:185))
 d. Yesterday I got arrested for accidentally hitting a kid with a paintball so the police said that I was charged with a class 2 misdemeanor. Can this affect my chance of getting a job when I am 16 or getting a college?

Examining corpus data, we can easily find *get*-passives such as the above. All of the *get*-passives in these examples, except for (18d), appear with the italic expressions focusing on a change of state. In (18a), we can see from the expression *finally* that the speaker is very conscious of the forthcoming change. Also in (18b) and (18c), the changes of state seem to be focused. In (18d), we can see that the speaker regrets having been arrested and worries about disadvantages that result from the change of state. It is clear here that the speaker focuses on a change of state of his/her own.

A change of state expressed in the *get*-passive seems not to be gradual. This allows us to predict that the *get*-passive is hardly compatible with durative adverbials:

- (19) a. ?The hall got gradually cleared.
 b. ?The water got added {little by little / by degrees} into the tank.

In addition, the *get*-passive shows a strong tendency to be accompanied by time adverbials referring to an extremely short period of time:

- (20) a. My computer got instantly locked.
 b. His hand got cured in a blink.
 c. They'll get caught in a moment.

These facts suggest that the *get*-passive expresses a change of state as an instant or non-gradual one. It seems that this semantic property originally comes from inchoative *get*, which, as is well known, is perfectly compatible with adjectives such

(i) a. Advantage was taken of Bill and Harry.
 b. Tabs were kept on those radicals.

as *angry*, but not with adjectives such as *tall*:

- (21) a. He got angry.
b. ?He got tall.

(Konishi (1996:9))

Inchoative *get* cannot describe gradual changes. Becoming angry is not a gradual but instant change and does not need a long period of time. On the other hand, becoming tall is a gradual change and obviously needs a long period of time. Hence (21b) is not acceptable.

From what has been discussed above, we can represent one of the functions in the *get*-passive as follows:

- (22) The speaker of the *get*-passive is strongly conscious of the fact that some change has occurred in the subject's state and it has occurred in a short period of time.

This seems to hold true for virtually every instance of the *get*-passive. It is this semantic function that offers a key to solving the question of why the *get*-passive can imply emotional values.

5. Emotional Values

Here, let us return to the question posed in the beginning of this article: Why does the *get*-passive have a tendency to convey emotional values? The key to answer this question lies in the function shown in (22). As is shown in (22), the speaker of the *get*-passive focuses on the change occurring in the subject's state. In general, when a certain state has changed and it is directly related to us (or affects us), we might have in our minds some feelings toward the change. It is not easy to hold back our feelings, for example, when we get a big promotion, or when our researches and ideas are undervalued. Thus, we naturally tend to focus especially on some change of state and have some feelings, whether it is good or bad for us. Therefore, it is natural that the *get*-passive, which is specialized to focus on a change of state, can carry emotional values.

In addition, as is also shown in (22), the speaker of the *get*-passive regards the change of state as occurring in a short period of time. This also leads to the possibility of implying emotional values. The speaker of the *get*-passive does not capture the change simultaneously along with a gradual change, but captures it as a whole away from the flow of time, and hence the speaker tends to be objective about the occurrence of the change even if the change is directly related to him/her (or affects him/her). Therefore, we use the *get*-passive especially when the change has occurred against our will or expectation, which leads to the implication of

emotional values such as disappointment, regret and astonishment.

I would like to emphasize that the emotional values in the *get*-passive are not always available. In fact, the following sentences do not usually carry emotional values:

- (23) a. Asparagus got boiled.
b. The roof got blown off in the middle of the storm.

We do not usually feel anything just because asparagus is boiled up in preparation for supper. The speaker of (23a) does not express any feelings toward the change, though s/he focuses on the change of state by using the *get*-passive. In (23b), the speaker might express his/her feelings such as disappointment toward the change of state, i.e. the roof being blown off, or he/she might have not expressed them at all. It is, in fact, possible for us to say, "*The roof got blown off in the middle of the storm, but I don't feel anything about it.*" This clearly shows that emotional values are pragmatically implied in the *get*-passive, depending on contexts.

We assume here two types of context, based on which emotional values are implied. Let us first consider the context in which the occurrence of the change (described in the *get*-passive) is unfavorable to the speaker (of the *get*-passive). Consider:

- (24) a. Yesterday I got arrested for accidentally hitting a kid with a paintball so the police said that I was charged with a class 2 misdemeanor. Can this affect my chance of getting a job when I am 16 or getting a college? (=18d)
b. I'm really disappointed that I got disqualified in the 500 meters.
c. The Trades' Union President got selected as the Labour Party candidate for a blue ribbon seat in Victoria, of course.

(Chappell (1980:437))

For example, in (24a), we can see that the change of state, i.e. his/her being involved, is clearly unfavorable to the speaker. In this context, the *get*-passive is easy to carry the negative emotional value such as regret, disappointment and criticism.

Let us move to the other type of context in which the occurrence of the change (described in the *get*-passive) is favorable to the speaker:

- (25) a. Mary got admitted to Harvard! (Isn't she lucky!)
b. Jane got examined by a Macquarie St specialist! (What a good news!) (=4)

In (25b), for example, the speaker is favorable to Jane's examination by a Macquarie St specialist and the *get*-passive is perfectly compatible with the expression *What a good news!* because it carries positive emotional values such as

delight or astonishment. In this context the *get*-passive tends to carry positive emotional values such as astonishment and delight.

We proposed in this section an answer to the question of why the *get*-passive tends to carry emotional values and assumed two types of context leading to the implication of emotional values. Our classification of context might not be enough and we need detailed classification in order to reveal the relation between emotional values and context. This calls for further research and will be an issue in the future.

6. Concluding Remarks

In this article, we have been concerned with the *get*-passive, which tends to be accompanied by emotional values. Through a detailed examination, I have shown that the emotional values result from the interaction between the semantics of the *get*-passive and pragmatic contexts.

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