

# A note on non-canonical passives: the case of the *get*-passive

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## 1. Introduction<sup>1</sup>

In many languages, a passive-like meaning may be obtained through a non-canonical passive construction. The *get* passive (1b) in English, the *se faire* passive (2b) in French and the *kriegen* passive (3b) in German represent typical manifestations:<sup>2</sup>

- (1) a. John was killed in the war.  
b. John got killed in an accident. (Haegeman 1985:53)
- (2) a. Jean etait écrasé par une voiture.  
Jean was run-over by a car  
b. Jean s'est fait écraser (par une voiture).  
Jean refl aux made run-over (by a car)  
'Jean was run over by a car.' (Labelle 2002:1)

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<sup>1</sup> I am really happy that I can offer this squib to Henk with gratitude for his support and guidance over the years. Thanks are due to David Embick, Winfried Lechner and Florian Schäfer for comments and discussion.

<sup>2</sup> For English, see Siewierska (1984), Haegeman (1985), Arce-Arenales et al. (1994), Givón and Yang (1994), Fox and Grodzinsky (1998), Huang (1999), Taranto (2004), and McIntyre (2005) among others and references therein; for French, see Labelle (2002) and references therein; for German, there is a lengthy dispute as to whether or not this is a passive structure, see Haider (1984), (1986), (2001), Fanselow (1987), Reis (1985), Cook (2004) among others.

In addition to *kriegen*, *erhalten* and *bekommen* 'receive/get' may be used as passive auxiliaries in German. As Siewierska (1984) and references therein notes, the three auxiliaries are not interchangeable. Note that in German the *kriegen* construction promotes only a dative argument which, for some speakers, must co-occur together with an accusative argument, as in (3c).



The semi-lexical nature of *get* is manifested by a series of criteria that disambiguate pure functional heads, e.g. auxiliaries and lexical verbs. As demonstrated in examples of the type in (1b), *get* patterns more like a lexical verb than like an auxiliary, in that it shows an atypical behavior for auxiliaries in a number of contexts, including negation contraction and question formation (6):

- (6) a. Did he get killed?/Was he killed/\*Got he killed.  
 b. He didn't get killed/He wasn't killed/\*He gotn't killed.

In what follows, I briefly summarize the properties of the *get*-passive as these have been described in the literature.

## 2. The properties of the *get*-passive

Leaving aside the issue of the appropriate register (spoken vs. written language), a certain consensus seems to exist as far as the properties of the *get*-passive is concerned. First of all, unlike their *be* counterparts, the *get* passives lack an implicit external argument, since they are unable to control into purpose clauses and cannot license volitional adverbials (Huang 1999, Fox and Grodzinsky 1998, Taranto 2004 and others):

- (7) a. The ship was sunk [PRO to collect insurance money].  
 b. \*The ship got sunk [PRO to collect insurance money].  
 c. The ship got sunk [for John to collect insurance money].
- (8) a. The book was torn on purpose.  
 b. \*The book got torn on purpose. (Fox and Grodzinsky 1998:327)

As discussed in Fox and Grodzinsky (1998), these contrasts all lead to the same conclusion: in *get*-passives, unlike in *be* passives, the external argument of the VP has no implicit realization.

Second, as pointed out by Arce-Arenales et al. (1994), *get*-passives are compatible with reflexive action, while *be*-passives are not:

- (9) a. I got dressed (by my mother or by myself).  
 b. I was dressed (only by my mother).

This is reminiscent of Kratzer's discussion on German participles, where she shows that the following distinction holds:

- (10) a. Das Kind war gekämmt.  
The child was combed  
Stative: compatible with reflexive action (no agent)  
b. Das Kind wurde gekämmt.  
The child was combed  
Eventive: incompatible with reflexive action (necessarily an agent)

The above two properties seem to suggest that the participle involved is actually an adjectival passive. In fact, this is the conclusion drawn by both Fox and Grodzinsky and Taranto.

A further argument in favor of this view is provided by the thematic restrictions that have been observed for adjectival participles. As noted by Levin and Rappaport (1986) among others, adjectival passives of some (in fact the majority of) double object verbs do not allow goal externalization, while both arguments can be externalized in the case of the verbal passive:

- (11) a. The salesman sold the customer a car.  
b. The recently sold car  
c. \*The recently sold customer

- (12) a. The car was sold to the customer.  
b. The customer was sold a car.

If the *get*-passive is based on the adjectival participle, one might expect similar restrictions on what passives are possible there. (13) confirms this: goal externalization is not possible:

- (13) a. The car got sold to the customer. (Siewierska 1984: 132)  
b. ??The customer got sold a car.

The third property characterizing the *get*-passive is that, as opposed to the *be*-passive, it does not seem to be fully productive:<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Note, however, that verbs that do not normally have transitive counterparts can form the *get*-passive (see Arce-Arenales 1994: 15):

- (i) a. He got fogged in.  
b. \*The weather fogged him in.  
c. The cotton balls got decayed.  
d. \*The bad weather decayed the cotton balls.

- (14) a. \*The truth got known.  
 b. \*Mary got feared.  
 c. \*Mary got followed by a little lamb.  
 d. \*Mary got seen.  
 e. \*The electricity light got invented.

It has been noted that the *get*-passive is not permitted with stative verbs and verbs that do not allow for the subject of the construction to be interpreted as *affected*. Some researchers even classify the construction as an adversative passive. As Siewierska (1984: 161) notes, the *get*-passives describe events that are perceived to have a fortunate or unfortunate consequence on the subject.<sup>5</sup>

### 3. Towards an explanation

#### 3.1. What kind of adjectival participle?

The discussion in the previous section suggests that in the *get*-passive the status of the participle is unlike its *be*-counterpart, namely it involves an adjectival participle. The question I turn to here is what type of adjectival participle is actually present in the structure, in view of recent work by Kratzer (2001), Embick (2003) and others. These authors pointed out that adjectival participles fall into several (at least two) sub-types depending on whether or not they carry event implications.

One potential clue for distinguishing between the two types of adjectival participles comes from their form. While in most cases, English participles are homophonous, Embick (op.cit.) noted that there are also instances in which a pure stative meaning, i.e. a meaning void of event

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<sup>5</sup> This property brings the *get*-passive close to the restrictions that hold for middle formation as well as passive nominals in English.

- (i) a. the city's destruction/\*the book's knowledge  
 b. The wood splits easily/\*the cat chases easily

One line of understanding the notion of affectedness suggests that this has to do with properties of the event structure of the predicates. In particular, Doron and Rappaport-Hovav (1991) define *Affectedness* over event structure representations and claim that what characterizes it is the separation of the arguments of the verb into different sub-eventualities, with the external argument missing from one of the sub-eventualities. *Destroy* is such a predicate type, i.e. one can distinguish between two eventualities, *know* is not such a predicate type, as one cannot distinguish between sub-eventualities. Taranto's account builds on that.

implications is mapped on a distinct phonological realization. As shown in (15), the designated form is reserved for the stative participle:

(15)	<b>Root</b>	<b>Stative</b>	<b>Other Participles</b>
1.	√ROT	rott-en	rott-ed
	√SINK	sunk-en	sunk
2.	√EMPTY	empty	empti-ed
	√DRY	dry	dri-ed

It is possible to combined both forms with *get* and the constructions differ in interpretation as follows:

- (16) The mailbox got empty.  
 (17) The mailbox got emptied.

In (17) the subject of *get* is affected by the event described in the complement of *get* in the sense that someone is understood to have emptied the mailbox. This is not the interpretation associated with (16), where the reading is that the mailbox became empty. Taranto also observes that the *get* construction as a whole is eventive. Thus *get* selects both stative as well as eventive complements. The former are pure states, lack functional layers that bring about eventivity, the latter contain such a layer but lack a functional projection that introduces agentivity features, as shown in section 2.

Another test that can be used to provide evidence for the participial structure in the complement of *get* concerns the distribution of adverbs. As the data in (18) show, the participle under *get* can be modified by adverbials which modify the result state, but not by adverbs that bring about agentivity/intentional interpretation (cf. McIntyre 2005):<sup>6</sup>

- (18)a. John got sloppily dressed.  
 b. ??The manuscript got carefully destroyed.

The fact that only result oriented adverbs are fully grammatical within the *get*-constructions seems to suggest that the complement of *get* is a participle that carries eventivity features. The construction thus seems to

<sup>6</sup> Following Alexiadou and Anagnostopoulou (2005), I assume that there are two types of manner adverbials, namely manner adverbs that modify the visible result of an event such as ‘sloppily’(result-oriented) and manner adverbs that modify the initiator of the action such as ‘carefully’ (agent-oriented).

bear similarities to Kratzer's resultant state participles. In support of that note that it is incompatible with *for*-PPs (e.g. *The table was/\*got wiped for an hour*, noted by Fox and Grodzinsky 1998: 315).

However, there is an important difference between resultative participles and the *get*-construction: resultative participles do not license *by*-phrases, but *get*-passives do:

- (19) a. \*John is arrested by the police.  
 b. John got arrested by the police.

Data like the above suggest that the *by*-phrase is not licensed directly by the resultative participle but its licensing happens in a different fashion. Fox and Grodzinsky (1998) suggested that the licensing of the *by*-phrases in the *get*-passive follows the pattern of the licensing of *by*-phrases in nominalisations and is only restricted to the affector role. Arce-Arenales and al. (1994) label the *by*-phrases involved in the *get*-construction pseudo-agentive phrases. Alternatively, one could assume that the important difference between (19a) and (19b), and hence the locus of licensing of the *by*-phrase, is the presence of *get*.

### 3.2. The structure of the *get*-passive

Here I will merely sketch the structure I assume for the *get*-passive. Richards (2001) and Harley (2004) propose that in the transitive use of *get*, as in *Susan got a book*, this is decomposed into a BECOME and HAVE layer. Incorporation of HAVE into BECOME yields *get*.<sup>7</sup>

- (20) [<sub>VP</sub> BECOME [<sub>PP</sub> Susan [HAVE a book]]]

At this stage, it is not clear how this structure can be used for passive *get*, as it does not seem to be able to explain the properties of the construction.

Building on Haegeman (1985), I assume that *get* is actually a light verb that receives a resultative phrase (RP), i.e. the resultative participle, as its complement. The participle resembles the structure assumed for resultative stative participles in e.g. Alexiadou and Anagnostopoulou (2005) and

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<sup>7</sup> McIntyre (2005) assumes this decomposition analysis for the causative uses of *get* as in (i):

- (i) John got Mary blamed.

Embick (2003). The subject of the *get* construction raises to its surface position from inside the participial structure:<sup>8</sup>

(21) John got [<sub>RP</sub> t pushed].

Fox and Grodzinsky (1998) provided arguments in favor of such an analysis. These include cases where *get* can separate idioms chunks, suggesting that the subject must receive its thematic role in its base position:

(22) In the end, advantage always gets taken of John.

The analysis above implies that *get* is generated in a v/Voice type of head. As such, it has a semi-lexical nature, the result of which is the restrictions on its complement selection. Further research is necessary in order to determine the details of this structure as well as the difference between passive and causative *get* and its counterparts in the other languages.

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<sup>8</sup> Others, e.g. Taranto (2004), analyse the *get*-passive in terms of complex predicate formation where the argument structure of *get* and the argument structure of the participle 'fall together'. See also Haider (2001). The above proposal crucially differs from such views.

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