

Reconsidering the Semantic Properties of the Get-Passive Construction

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Abstract

We aim to re-examine the semantic properties of the get-passive construction in English, distinguishing it from the more commonly discussed be-passive. Through a detailed analysis of a variety of examples and linguistic contexts, we explore how the get-passive uniquely conveys dynamic, agentive meanings that often implicate the subject in the event's outcome. This construction is particularly prevalent in informal and colloquial speech, where it is frequently employed to depict both adversity and beneficial situations. Our study also reveals that the get-passive has been gaining traction in contemporary English, reflecting broader linguistic trends that favor more expressive and nuanced forms of communication. We argue that understanding these semantic nuances is essential for English learners, as it allows them to navigate the subtle differences between passive constructions more effectively. By mastering the use of the get-passive, learners can enhance their communicative competence, particularly in contexts where speaker stance and subject involvement are key.

Keywords: *Get-passive, Be-passive, Passive construction, Subject responsibility, Adversity and benefit*

1. INTRODUCTION

From a syntactic perspective, the English be-passive construction and the get-passive construction appear superficially similar, leading to the assumption that the choice of auxiliary verb between these two constructions is arbitrary [1, 2]. This syntactic similarity has often overshadowed deeper analyses, resulting in a perception of interchangeability that overlooks crucial distinctions. However, a closer examination reveals that these constructions are not merely variants of each other but carry distinct semantic implications and usages.

From a semantic viewpoint, the be-passive and get-passive constructions exhibit notable differences, and numerous studies have highlighted their functional disparities [3, 4]. The be-passive is generally associated with a more formal and neutral tone, often used in written and formal contexts. In contrast, the get-passive tends to convey a more dynamic and agentive meaning, often implying that the subject has a more active role or is experiencing an event, sometimes unexpectedly or undesirably. These functional and semantic differences underscore the need for a more nuanced understanding of each construction.

Recently, the get-passive construction has garnered significant attention as one of the rapidly spreading grammatical changes in English. Several studies have noted an increase in the use of the get-passive, which can be viewed as a colloquial variant of the be-passive construction, with its frequency steadily rising [5, 6, 7].

Manuscript received: May 27, 2024 / revised: July 1, 2024 / accepted: September 5, 2024

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This increased usage reflects broader shifts in language patterns, particularly in spoken English, where the get-passive is favored for its informal and conversational tone. The proliferation of the get-passive in contemporary English highlights its growing importance and necessitates a deeper exploration of its characteristics.

Furthermore, there is a growing body of theoretical research that discusses the stylistic and semantic constraints associated with the get-passive, particularly emphasizing its use in colloquial speech and negative contexts. Researchers have pointed out that the get-passive is often employed in contexts where the action is perceived as negative or undesirable, which contrasts with the more neutral or positive connotations of the be-passive. This stylistic and semantic specificity suggests that the get-passive is not merely a substitute for the be-passive but serves distinct communicative functions.

Building on this theoretical background, this study aims to discuss the general usage and semantic differences between the get-passive and be-passive constructions. Specifically, it seeks to reconsider the semantic properties of the get-passive through various examples. By doing so, we aim to enhance the understanding and acquisition of the get-passive construction among English learners. This deeper insight into the get-passive will facilitate a more nuanced comprehension and accurate usage of this grammatical form in English. Understanding these differences is crucial for learners to use both constructions appropriately and effectively, enriching their communicative competence in English.

2. PASSIVE CONSTRUCTIONS IN ENGLISH

In English, voice refers to the variation of verbs within a sentence according to the direction of the action they denote. When the subject performs a certain action directed towards an object, this is considered the active voice. However, when the direction of the action is from the object towards the subject, placing the subject in a passive role, this is considered the passive voice. This change in the direction of the action only occurs in sentences with an object. The active voice is primarily used to emphasize the actor, while the passive voice is used to emphasize the object of the action or to avoid directly specifying the actor. In English, there are generally two forms of the passive voice: the be-passive and the get-passive.

2.1 Actions and States

The be-passive and get-passive constructions appear syntactically similar at first glance. However, a key difference lies in their semantic focus: while the be-passive can denote both actions and states, the get-passive primarily emphasizes actions rather than states [8, 9].

- (1) a. The wall is painted every year.
b. The wall is painted white.
- (2) Randy got married in 2014.
- (3) Jen was/?got loved.

In examples (1a) and (1b), the be-passive construction can be interpreted as indicating both an action and a state, respectively. In contrast, the get-passive in example (2) exclusively denotes an action. Consequently, as shown in example (3), stative verbs that express emotions or cognitive states, which are not typically considered action verbs, are generally incompatible with the get-passive construction unless a specific context frames them as actions. This distinction underscores the semantic property that get-passive constructions are more action-oriented, whereas be-passive constructions are versatile in conveying both actions and states.

2.2 Formal and Informal Registers

One of the notable characteristics of the get-passive construction, in comparison to the be-passive, is its less frequent use in formal contexts [8, 9]. According to data from the Corpus of Contemporary American

English (COCA), the get-passive is more frequently employed in spoken language and fiction, while its occurrence in academic texts is minimal. Given that fiction tends to focus more on actions rather than descriptions, the get-passive is preferred for depicting situations involving actions and is more commonly used in spoken registers. Additionally, the get-passive appears significantly more often in spoken texts than in written texts. This higher frequency in spoken language indicates that the get-passive is associated with colloquial or informal registers. The contexts in which the get-passive is used seem to favor the expression of dynamic actions [10].

2.3 Adversity and Benefit

A distinguishing characteristic of the get-passive construction, as compared to the be-passive, is its unique usage in clauses that convey adversity or unfavorable circumstances. Additionally, the get-passive can also describe beneficial situations [8, 11].

- (4) a. John got mauled by a vicious dog.
b. My car got stolen.
- (5) a. My letter to the editor got published in the Sunday Times.
b. Janice got promoted last week.

In examples (4a) and (4b), the get-passive construction is used to depict adverse events, highlighting the negative experiences of the subjects. Conversely, in examples (5a) and (5b), the get-passive is employed to describe beneficial outcomes, emphasizing positive events or achievements experienced by the subjects. This dual capability of the get-passive construction to convey both adversity and benefit underscores its versatile semantic properties.

2.4 Subject Responsibility

A distinguishing feature of the get-passive construction, as compared to the be-passive, is that the subject in the get-passive construction often bears some responsibility for the event being discussed [4, 8, 12]. This characteristic is also related to the affectedness of the subject or the dynamic nature of the situation.

- (6) a. I was invited to IU's big New Year's Eve party.
b. I got invited to IU's big New Year's Eve party.

Unlike the be-passive in example (6a), the get-passive in (6b) implies that the subject (the speaker) performed some action to receive the invitation to the party. In other words, the get-passive construction suggests that the subject has some degree of responsibility for the resulting event. This implication highlights the nuanced semantic property of subject responsibility inherent in the get-passive construction.

3. SEMANTIC PROPERTIES OF GET-PASSIVE

From a syntactic perspective, the get-passive and be-passive constructions may appear formally similar, but their conversational implicatures are markedly different. This section will delve into some of the usages of the get-passive discussed in the preceding sections, based on semantic considerations [13, 14, 15, 16].

The property of the get-passive implies a transition to a resultant state. Alongside denoting an action, it also implies the existence of an operative or causal relationship that leads to the resultant state.

- (7) a. Smith got hurt on her way home.
b. Smith was hurt on her way home.

In the above sentences, (7a) conveys, through the get-passive, that someone or something caused Smith to

get hurt, while (7b), in the be-passive, does not imply such a causal relationship. This resultant constraint is considered absent in the get-passive construction. Furthermore, the emphasis on the action rather than the resultant state in the get-passive construction explains its preference in informal or spoken language.

In numerous grammatical studies, the get-passive is employed to convey events perceived by the subject as either fortunate or unfortunate outcomes. Additionally, unlike the be-passive, the get-passive is frequently used to reflect the speaker's perspective on the events described in the sentence, whether the speaker views such events positively or negatively, or if the speaker's attitude towards the event is more encompassing than the subject's fortune or misfortune. This distinction is evident when the subject is an entity rather than an animate being.

- (8) a. My cache of marijuana got found by Fido, the police dog.
b. My cache of marijuana was found by Fido, the police dog.

In (8a), the inanimate subject, "my cache," is not subject to fortune or misfortune, but it is evident that the speaker, who is directly related to the subject as its owner, is affected by the event and therefore feels unfortunate. (8b), on the other hand, is in the be-passive, where there is no indication of the speaker's involvement in the event, making it suitable for cases where objective facts, such as news reporting, are emphasized.

- (9) a. John got cheered up by a funny joke.
b. Susan got fired.

When the subject is a person, it pertains to the subject's direct involvement in the event, leading to the subject's fortune or misfortune. Such fortune or misfortune is expressed from the speaker's standpoint. While (9a) represents an event perceived as favorable to the subject, (9b) signifies an unfortunate event for the subject.

Interpreting whether the get-passive denotes luck or misfortune based on the speaker's emotional stance is not determined by the specific passive verb's meaning. In other words, it is not feasible to categorize the verbs appearing in the get-passive as either positive or negative. Rather, it is valid to consider the outcome of fortune or misfortune as contingent on the speaker's intention, determining which interpretation is appropriate within the context.

Let us now examine the semantic property of subject responsibility in the get-passive construction. Unfortunate events are often presented as partially attributable to the subject or as a consequence of the speaker's or listener's negligence in relation to the event.

- (10) a. Mike got arrested.
b. Mike was arrested.

In (10a), it can be inferred that the subject bears some responsibility for their misfortune, while in (10b), there appears to be no such implication of the subject's responsibility for the event. Get-passive constructions suggest that the subject is affected by the outcome of the event, which may result from the subject's intention or causal action, allowing the speaker to express their perspective on the outcome of such events.

4. DISCUSSION

This study has shed light on the distinct semantic properties of the get-passive construction, particularly in comparison to the be-passive. Through the examination of various linguistic contexts and examples, it became clear that the get-passive is more than just a syntactic variant; it functions as a powerful tool for conveying dynamic and agentive meanings, often with an implication of subject involvement in the event's outcome. The get-passive's tendency to appear in informal and colloquial speech, as well as in contexts depicting adversity or benefit, highlights its role in expressing the speaker's perspective and stance. The discussion also underscores the importance of understanding these nuances for English learners, as misinterpreting the subtle

differences between the get-passive and be-passive could lead to inaccuracies in communication. Furthermore, the growing prevalence of the get-passive in modern English reflects broader linguistic trends, suggesting a shift towards more expressive forms of language that prioritize the speaker's attitude and the subject's role in events.

5. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study has demonstrated the unique and evolving role of the get-passive construction in English. While the get-passive shares some superficial syntactic similarities with the be-passive, it stands apart due to its dynamic, agentive nature and its frequent usage in informal, spoken contexts. The get-passive not only conveys actions but also often implicates the subject in the event's outcome, suggesting responsibility or involvement. This construction is particularly versatile, capable of expressing both adverse and beneficial situations, which makes it a powerful tool for nuanced communication. As English continues to evolve, the increasing use of the get-passive reflects broader linguistic trends that emphasize expressiveness and speaker stance. For English learners, mastering the get-passive is crucial, as it allows for more precise and effective communication across different contexts. By understanding the semantic subtleties of the get-passive, learners can enhance their overall language proficiency and better navigate the complexities of modern English usage. This study thus provides valuable insights into the significance of the get-passive, reinforcing its importance in both linguistic theory and practical language learning.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This research was supported by Daegu University Research Grant, 2024.

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