The English Passive and "Get": Expressing Attitude

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In recent conversation, an acquaintance of mine described being escorted out of a restaurant and expressed her shock and displeasure at the situation. She remarked: "I was thrown out!" Immediately after, she reiterated: "I *got* thrown out!" I realized after parting that she had switched between "be" and "get," the two basic passive voice sentence structures in English, and wondered whether there was a particular reason for her word selection. This was followed by speculation that this exchange might reflect a larger phenomenon in English—the "get" passive being used to impart meaning in communication.

The passive voice in English has widely been accepted by linguists as a grammatical tool used solely for shaping discourse. Out of convenience or personal preference, people will use the passive voice to control their speech or writing, but not to embed meaning (Quick 1985).

When we speak of the passive voice, however, we are usually referring to the "be" passive, leaving out the arguably peculiar position "get" holds in the language. Research on the "get" passive reveals that it has many unique linguistic features that set it apart from the "be" passive and restricts its use (Carter and McCarthy 1999). If there are key differences in grammatical linguistic properties, perhaps "get" differs in semantic significance as well.

This question has not gone unexplored by linguists. Carter and McCarthy performed a corpus search comparing "be" and "get," and Xiao did the same for the Mandarin Chinese particle "被" (bei) and both English passive structures. What these studies ignored, however, is that the "get" passive has been observed as being primarily a feature of casual English registers (Cornelis 1996).

I believe that a data-based approach to determining possible semantic significance in the "get" passive is not complete if it does not take register into account because register can determine context. One must discount the possibility that any positive or negative nuances are not the result of the passive structure itself but rather a more emotional register.

Consequently, in this paper I hope to answer whether the "get" passive use is semantics-driven and to fill potential holes in previous research by confining my own research to the casual registers.

1. "Get" Passive Use Is Semantics-Driven

The passive voice carrying semantic value is not unprecedented in world languages. East Asian languages like Japanese, Korean, and Chinese have been noted as using the passive voice chiefly to describe negative situations, and the same has been described of some southeast Asian languages. Chinese possesses some passive voice particles that are used exclusively in negative situations (Wang 2005). If one language possesses a certain linguistic feature, it does not necessarily follow that another language will possess the same, but it establishes precedence and calls for further investigation.

Certain innate properties unique to the "get" passive set it apart and suggest the possibility of some semantic component to its use. Xiao, McEnery, and Qian propose that the "get" passive possesses a certain dynamic element because "get" itself is still a fully lexical verb, requiring "do" support for negation and articulating the meaning "to become" or "to grow" in copular sentences ("pseudo-passive" sentences). Furthermore, "get" may not be used with stative verbs—one can "be hated," but one cannot "get hated." They argue, however, that "get" is so dynamic that speakers are willing to break this rule in order to add "something extra" to their statement (Xiao, McEnery and Qian 2006).

Carter and McCarthy also point out that there is an element of agency that seems to be embedded in the "get" passive (1999). A study exploring the possible relationship between passive-voice use and rape-myth acceptance explored this element of agency in its analysis. The researchers had university students watch a recording of a staged rape with no sound and a minimum of environmental cues that might offer context for the assault, particularly concerning which party instigated the encounter. The students were then asked to describe the activities in the recording and to speculate on what events led up to the rape itself. The study found a positive relationship between rape-myth

acceptance and use of the passive voice, especially the "get" passive. Bohner speculated that there is meaning embedded in the structure that implies that the victim is at fault, such that the phrase "she got raped" becomes "she got *herself* raped" (Bohner 2001).

2. "Get" Passive Use Is Not Semantics-Driven

Style guides for writing, English classrooms, and even document-proofing software refer to the passive voice as a "grammar point" important to shaping the flow of discourse, particularly in writing, but ultimately a style choice of the speaker or writer (Biber 2002). The same holds true for academic studies, when the consensus reached is often that the primary function of the passive voice in English—the "get" passive included—is to shape discourse.

The question of the passive voice used as a style choice ties it in with a more specific argument. The passive voice potentially allows the speaker or writer to omit the agent from discourse. In many cases, as in newspaper reports or academic texts, this is done because the agent is either assumed or irrelevant altogether; "the scientists performed the experiment" does not need to clutter up text when it can be assumed from context that it is scientists who will be performing a scientific experiment. Similarly, the passive voice is used to explain events when the agent is unknown, as in news reports for crimes or disasters. Perhaps more relevant to interpersonal speech, however, is that the passive voice may be used to evade responsibility. If an English speaker damages something valuable but does not wish to assume responsibility, he or she has the option of saying, "It was broken." This is arguably an instance of strategy in which the passive voice is being used solely to control what information is shared, rather than communicating something through the passive voice itself (Quick 1985).

In all of the above examples, the "be" passive is used to shape discourse. What would prompt a speaker to use "get" in one of these statements? Some have argued that register is the guiding hand in "get" passive use. "Get" has been noted as being strongly associated with the casual registers and the spoken word in particular (Cornelis 1996). "I got hurt" has an inarguably casual style to it that would not be used in an academic paper. Without a control, it is difficult to say that speakers use "get" to impart emotion or meaning if its use is confined to a register that may be more prone to exaggeration or emotional vocabulary.

3. Methodology

The purpose of this research project is to determine whether or not there is a significant semantic component to the "get" passive use. To accomplish this, I will compare the "get" passive and "be" passive within the casual registers. I will use "be" as a control because it has been observed as being discourse-driven, especially in academic texts, rather than semantics-driven.

Because I was interested in both exploring specific registers and working with larger data sets, I ran searches through Brigham Young University's Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA) to accumulate the data needed to reach a conclusion.

To determine whether there is any semantic component to a given instance of "get" or "be" in use, this study looks specifically at the verb that follows "get" or "be." This verb is compared to a sentiment lexicon and assigned a value of positive, negative, or neutral. If the verb is identified as positive or negative, then that instance of the passive voice is positive for semanticity; if it is identified as neutral, then that instance is negative for semanticity.

3.1 Formula

Quick offers a basic formula for the English passive voice sentence structure (Quick 1985): PATIENT be/get V-PAST PARTICIPLE (AGENT) To avoid bringing in results that do not qualify as instances of the passive voice, the formula above is translated into COCA's syntax:[get] [vvn] & [be] [vvn]

Here, brackets indicate that any permutation of the word or part of speech included within should appear in the results. A search for [vvn] in COCA returns any permutation of a past participle verb. Provisions are not made for the agent in the sentence because the agent is optional and will not appear in all sentences. Before searching, the filter option "LEMMAS" is selected so that if the same lexical verb is returned with multiple permutations of the same passive verb (for example, "killed" shows up twice as "got killed" and "get killed"), then those results will be combined under one value. The search covers the years from 1990 to the present.

3.2 Search Procedure

Longman Student Grammar of Spoken and Written English identifies the conversation and fiction registers as the most casual (Biber 2002). Searches are run for [get] [vvn] and [be] [vvn] in these registers, and frequencies (the number of instances that a certain passive verb–lexical verb combination appears in the corpus) are recorded for each verb's top 100 results. If any of these results are unsuitable (for example, stray copular phrases) they are omitted and return from outside the top 100 results, which are substituted instead.

3.3 Value Assignment

The lexical verbs in both lists of top 100 results are compared with Harvard University's *General Inquirer Dictionary*. If the dictionary provides multiple entries for the same verb, the sample sentences from COCA are consulted to determine which dictionary entry is most suitable.

The lexical verbs are then assigned a value of negative or positive based on the dictionary's entries; if there is no such indicator, then a neutral value is assigned. The result is six value categories: "be"-positive, "be"-negative, "be"-neutral, "get"-positive, "get"-negative, and "get"-neutral.

3.4 Calculations

The frequencies of all results in each of the above six categories are totaled, resulting in six numbers. These numbers are then each calculated as a percentage of the overall result frequencies for "be" or "get" usage.

3.5 Threshold of significance

The threshold of significance for this project is calculated in relation to the results of the "be" passive search because "be" is essentially the control group. To conclude that the "get" passive does indeed contain some semantic value, there needs to be a difference in the ratio between those results indicating semanticity (positive and negative) and those indicating a lack thereof (neutral). If the percentage of "get" results indicating semanticity exceeds the same for "be" by 20 percent or more, then I may conclude that "get" is, at least in part, semantically driven. If not, I will conclude that "get" passive use is equivalent to "be" passive use, and therefore not semantically driven.

4. Analysis

I analyzed all entries for the 100 returns from the "be" passive search and for the 100 "get" passive returns. I discarded three returns from my "get" passive search for being copular phrases and added three returns to replace them.

Of the 81,521 entries from the "be" passive search, 9,162 were evaluated as negative, 10,715 were evaluated as positive, and 61,444 were evaluated as neutral. Calculated as percentages of the total num-

ber of "be" entries, 11 percent of entries were negative, 13 percent were positive, and 76 percent were neutral.

Of the 20,526 finalized entries from the "get" passive search, 6,637 were evaluated as negative, 1,143 were evaluated as positive, and 12,746 were evaluated as neutral. Calculated as percentages of the total number of "get" entries, 32 percent of entries were negative, 6 percent were positive, and 62 percent were neutral (see Figure 1).
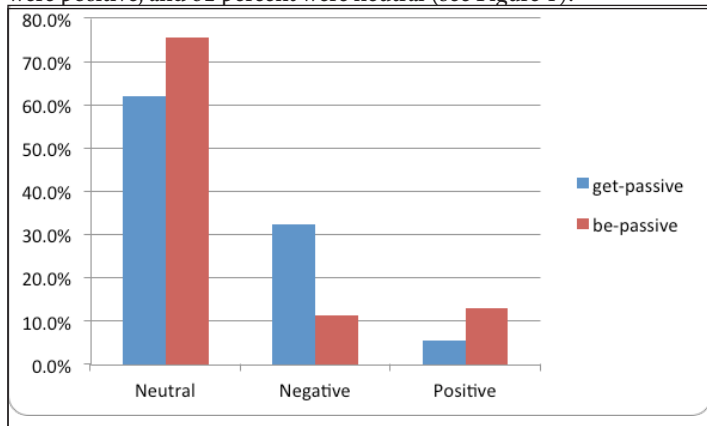

Figure 1. Neutral-positive-negative entries calculated as percentages of total entries.

Comparing the groups that indicate semanticity (positive and negative) with those that do not (neutral), I found that 24 percent of "be" passive entries indicate semanticity while 38 percent of "get" passive entries indicate semanticity. This is a difference of 14 percent.

5. Conclusion

Because my threshold of significance was 20 percent and there was only a 14 percent difference between "be" and "get," my research indicates that the use of the "get" passive is not semantically driven and that my hypothesis is invalid.

5.1 Practical and Theoretical Implications for Larger Issues in the Field

Because these findings strengthen an already widely accepted position, they are perhaps not as significant as they would be if my hypothesis proved correct. There are, however, some possible implications for Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) instruction. Native speakers of English acquire and use the "get" passive naturally in speech, but in school they are taught either through reading or explicit instruction that the "get" passive is not appropriate to use in writing. Because of this, there is currently no mechanism in place for grammar instruction as far as the "get" passive is concerned.

The inability to use the "get" passive is a potential issue for English language learners that sometimes need explicit instruction in areas where native speakers do not. Even though my research did not find any significant connection between semanticity and the "get" passive, it did produce two very different lists of associated lexical verbs. Many of these differences can be explained by grammar; for example, the stative verbs "hear" and "see" ("be heard" and "be seen"), while present on the list of "be" entries (Appendix A), are absent from the list of "get" entries (Appendix B). This is likely because "get" may not be used with stative verbs (Xiao, McEnery and Qian 2006). A TESOL instructor should be familiar with principles like these to help his or her students.

The verb lists also seem to indicate certain word collocations. Before analyzing the data, I discarded the entries for "get rid" and "get married" for reasons I will explain later. These were highly frequent in the "get" passive list, but do not show up on the "be" list. Collocations like these that are used to express everyday situations can make speech sound more natural, and students should be aware of these collocates.

Finally, there are some verbs that seem to have meanings that appear only in conjunction with "get." "Got laid," "got hammered," and a few other colloquial phrases seem to take advantage of the "get" passive's place in the casual register to create slang terms that may be

unfamiliar to English language learners. Even if students do not use these phrases themselves, if students wish to understand these phrases they will need to learn them as idioms; an add-sum approach to meaning will be insufficient for understanding.

Although my hypothesis was proven invalid, I argue that the significant content of the data returned still implies that explicit instruction on the "get" passive would be a worthwhile endeavor for TESOL instructors, even without a semantic component, and that further work with the "get" passive as an object of study should be pursued.

5.2 Limitations of the Study

There are multiple limiting factors in this project. The most obvious is that the threshold of significance was chosen on a largely arbitrary basis. Before beginning I examined thresholds used by other researchers in their own corpus searches and picked a number that seemed to fit adequately with my search; however, their topics were unrelated to my own, and this percentage may not have been appropriate for my topic.

When sorting through the corpus search results, I occasionally had to choose to omit specific entries because I deemed it more widely used as a copular phrase. "Get married" and "get rid" occasionally were presented in a true passive sentence, but the vast majority of results articulated the meaning of "to become married" or "to discard something." In other cases, there was not a corresponding entry in the Harvard *General Inquirer Dictionary*, or there were both negative and positive connotations for the same word, so I had to make a judgment call. This means that my own views were represented in the data based upon my judgments and may have skewed the results.

It is also possible that simply analyzing the adjoining verbs with a semantic lexicon is not an effective way of gauging semanticity. While assigning values, intuition may have been a better choice instead of the dictionary because the paired passive verb–lexical verb combination seemed to have a clear negative meaning in spite of the lexical verb's

neutral meaning in isolation. For example, I marked "get caught" as neutral because "catch" is neutral in the *General Inquirer Dictionary*, but I did not see many entries in which "get caught" was used in a positive or even neutral context.

Limiting my approach to positive, negative, and neutral may also have seriously impacted my research. Often there were verbs that did not have a positive or negative meaning but still seemed semantically significant. This would be fascinating to see addressed in future works.

6. Future Work

Given the limited scope of this project, there are plenty of opportunities to expand this topic into other works. In this paper I assigned semantic value on a very simple yes-no basis: positive or negative meaning for the adjacent verb indicated a "yes," and a lack thereof indicated a "no." The reality, however, is more complex. The *General Inquirer Dictionary* possesses dozens of sub-categories beyond positive and negative, including "weak," "hostile," "emotion," "role," "vice," and more. How could these be factored into a new experiment? Which would indicate "yes," and which would indicate "no"? I predict that the data would be rich and could very well yield results different from what I obtained in this study.

As a corpus study, this project also lacks data from actual speakers that would be able to offer more subjective information. It would be interesting to determine whether speakers felt that there were situations where one passive form felt more appropriate than another.

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Corpus of Contemporary American English: http://corpus.byu.edu/coca/