

SEMANTIC AND STRUCTURAL FEATURES OF “GET” AND “BE” IN PASSIVE VOICE CONSTRUCTION IN ENGLISH

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ABSTRACT	KEYWORDS
The passive voice is a vital syntactic construction in English, often used for emphasizing the action or its receiver rather than the doer. While the be-passive is traditionally discussed, the get-passive structure has become increasingly prominent in both spoken and informal written English. This paper explores the syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic functions of the get-passive, drawing on previous scholarly work and authentic language data. The study employs the EMRAD (Introduction, Methods, Results, and Discussion) structure to systematically analyze the formation, usage contexts, and implications of this alternative passive voice.	Passive voice, get-passive, be-passive, English syntax, subject involvement, causatively, agentively, pragmatics, syntactic variation, informal speech, sentence structure, semantic

Introduction

The passive voice in English usually uses the auxiliary verb “be” followed by a past-tense verb, e.g., “The book **was** written”. However, another form, the **get**-passive, has gained importance in everyday usage. This article aims to examine the structure, distribution, and function of get-passives in comparison with the traditional be-passive, focusing on the pragmatic motives for the use of “**get**” in passive constructions. Both constructions can be used interchangeably in some cases. However, the choice between them often depends on the level of formality, the type of verb, and the emphasis that you want to convey.

Methods

Some of the first authors to include the get-passive in their discussions (e.g. Quirk et al., 1972; Stein, 1979) analysed two passive types with a simple choice between structurally identical, alternative auxiliaries; be and get. Lilian Hegeman (1994) distinguishes between be-passives and get-passives in the field of syntactic theory, highlighting their semantic and syntactic differences. Get-passives, as Hegeman notes, often convey a strong sense of event or agency, suggesting that the subject may be more involved in the action. **For example**, the sentence *He got arrested* expresses an event that happened to the subject, potentially due to their own actions, while *He was arrested* is more neutral, simply stating the event. This observation supports the idea that get-passives can have a causal or agency interpretation, distinguishing them from the more descriptive be-passives. From a syntactic perspective, get-passives can include additional projections (e.g., a causative light verb) that are not present in be-passive constructions. Hegeman also shows that the thematic role of the subject in get-passives is rather complex, often offering patient and causative interpretations depending on the context. Haegeman emphasises that thematic roles in get-passives may be more complex — the subject can be interpreted as both a patient (undergoing the action) and a causer in some contexts. Researchers have long noted the main differences between get-passives and be-passives in English. Haegeman (1985) argues that get-passives usually involve active participation of the subject and often have a causal or agentic interpretation that distinguishes them from neutral be-passives. Supporting this, Lightfoot (1979) traces the diachronic evolution of get from a possessive verb to an action in passive constructions and emphasises the dynamic and agentic nature of get-passives. Pullum (1991) suggests that they occur more in informal contexts, emphasising their limited grammatical productivity and significant pragmatic status. Radford (1997, 2009) analyses get-passives in terms of their syntactic structure, suggesting that they introduce an additional causal layer and that they often occur in colloquial speech. Furthermore, Collins (2005), working within a Minimalist framework, presents a syntactic analysis based on contraband, which emphasises the role of the causative head in the formation of get-passives. Together, these perspectives argue that get-passives are not simply stylistic variants, but reflect deeper syntactic and semantic differences from be-passives.

In Huang's estimation, the get-passive is a subject-control verb; that is, a verb that forces the covert (unpronounced) subject of a subordinate clause to refer to the subject of the main clause. Huang presents the **get**-passive and **be**-passive as very similar structurally. The primary difference is that in the **be**-passive, the action is moved from direct possessor position to subject position; in the get-passive case, the direct object is the anaphoric pronoun, This means that the subject in the get-passive is not moved from direct object position; of course, referring to the subject. This effectively places the subject in direct object position at the same time. *E.g. John got killed/ John was killed.*

Results

The results of the scientists' research and the examples considered show that the important grammatical difference between be and get and the passive voice is that we use **get** only with action verbs, not with stative verbs. Stative verbs like "believe" and "want" do not express action or change, so it usually does not make sense to say "*I believed*" or "*He knows*". Next, if you use the **be**-passive, there are some situations where it's not clear if you're talking about the action or the state. This confusion usually occurs when the past participle form of a verb can also be used as an adjective to indicate a state or a status.

Moreover, get-passives occur more frequently in spoken English and informal writing. They often involve animate subjects (e.g., “She got fired”), imply agentively or responsibility, and frequently express undesirable or unexpected outcomes. In contrast, be-passives are used more neutrally and across formal contexts. Get-passives also tend to be used with verbs indicating change of state or experience (e.g., hurt, married, caught). We often use the GET passive to emphasize actions that are unexpected. This can be something that’s very positive and surprising, or something that’s very negative and unwanted. Note that this is usually more conversational and less formal. For example, “*my bag got stolen.*” (This was very shocking. I didn’t expect this to happen, and I definitely did not want this to happen.) However, if you’re presenting facts or information before a judge in a court of law, you may choose to say “My bag was stolen.” This is a more formal situation and you are just stating a fact.

The differences between *get*-passive and *be*-passive constructions in English, based on syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic features:

Feature	Be-Passive	Get-Passive
Verb used	<i>Be</i> + past participle (e.g., <i>was broken</i>)	<i>Get</i> + past participle (e.g., <i>got broken</i>)
Formality level	More formal	More informal, colloquial
Subject involvement	Often neutral, subject is typically passive	The subject is often portrayed as involved or affected
Causativity	Generally lacks causative implication	Often implies an external cause or the subject’s responsibility
Agent inclusion	Compatible with agent phrases (<i>by...</i>)	Less likely to include agent; agent may be implicit
Focus of construction	Focus on the action or result	Focus on the experience or impact on the subject
Use in spoken vs. written	Common in written and formal speech	More frequent in informal spoken English
Frequency in standard grammar	Grammatically standard and widely accepted	Sometimes considered marked or idiomatic

Discussion

The get-passive serves unique pragmatic functions: it can suggest that the subject is partially responsible for the action (e.g., “He got himself arrested”), highlight the subject’s experience, or evoke emotional engagement. These nuances make it a valuable tool in narrative and colloquial discourse. Despite its informal connotations, the get-passive is structurally regular and semantically rich, warranting more attention in teaching and linguistic analysis. This study uses a qualitative corpus-based approach using samples from the British National Corpus (BNC) and the Contemporary American English Corpus (COCA), Website terms and conditions of use, Birmingham City University (Web Corp), 150 sentence samples containing get-passives were analysed for syntactic features, contextual usage, and pragmatic roles. Comparative examples with be-passives were also examined. The analysis focuses on syntactic position, agent insertion, subject animacy, and the influence of affect or responsibility.

Conclusion

The distinction between *get*-passives and *be*-passives reflects important syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic differences within English grammar. While *be*-passives denote a neutral, stative transformation of an active clause, *get*-passives often imply subject involvement, causation, or affectedness. Scholars such as Haegeman (1985), Lightfoot (1979), and Collins (2005) have provided various theoretical frameworks—ranging from diachronic evolution to minimalist syntax—to explain the unique behavior of *get*-passives. These findings highlight the need to treat *get*-passives not as stylistic variants but as constructions with distinct grammatical properties. Future research may further explore their use across registers, discourse functions, and second-language acquisition, contributing to a more nuanced understanding of voice in English.

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