Secondary Agents in Get-Passives: Syntax or Pragmatics?

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Abstract. The following paper addresses the apparent "responsibility reading" that is often associated with the *get*-passive (e.g. interpreting Maria got caught' as Maria got (herself) caught'). This interpretation is first explored via an experimental study with Amazon's Mechanical Turk. Participants are significantly more likely ($p < 0.05$) to select a *get*-passive when the subject could be construed as contributing to the action of the lower predicate. The results of this pilot study are then analyzed in terms of the potential consequences, or implications, for the syntax. Overall, we will argue that the availability of this reading is only found given the right pragmatic conditions. As a result, we caution that the availability of particular readings does not necessitate building "responsibility" into the syntax of the adult grammar.

0. Introduction

English has both a *be*-passive (1a) and a *get*-passive (1b). While in both cases the matrix subject has been analyzed as the patient, it is often claimed that the subject of the *get*-passive (1b) has a more "active role" in the action described in the lower predicate (cf. Arce-Arenales et al. 1994; Butler & Tsoulas 2006; Reed 2011; among many others).

(1) a. Alex was caught (by the police).
b. Alex got caught (by the police).

That is, it is possible for some speakers to interpret the subject of a *get*-passive as another agent, such that (2a) would be equivalent to (2b), but without the reflexive- indicating that Alex did something to cause his own capture. I will refer to this interpretation throughout this remainder of this paper as the "responsibility reading", in which the matrix subject acts as a secondary agent (viz. Zubizarreta (1982) and Roeper (1987)).

(2) a. Alex got caught. =
b. Alex got **himself** caught.

While this apparent interpretable difference between these two passives is referenced often (see above) in previous literature, it is not clear just how robust this responsibility reading is, and/or on just how salient and accessible it is for speakers. The ability to interpret the matrix subject has consequences for the syntax; that is, there has been considerable debate as how to analyze the structure of the *get*-passive. This in turn relates to the much larger debate on how much should (and could) be accounted for by syntax, and how much could be accounted for by other, non-syntactic factors.

In this paper, I will first address the availability of secondary ("responsible") agents via an experimental study, in order to determine if the responsibility reading is both (i) well-attested and (ii) specific to the *get*-passive. I will then discuss the potential implications of the results.

1. Interpreting the Get-Passive

The *get*-passive is decidedly controversial in terms of its structure. The traditional analysis is perhaps that of Haegeman (1985), in which the *get*-passive is a variant of ECM 'get' (as in 3); the object first raises to the subject position of the Small Clause and then to the matrix subject position (3).[1]

(3) a. _____got [Mary caught ~~Mary~~].
b. Mary got [~~Mary~~ caught ~~Mary~~].

Another approach is a Control analysis (cf. Lasnik & Fiengo 1974; Butler & Tsoulas 2006; Reed 2011). Butler & Tsoulas (2006) adopt the structure as in (4), where the subject is base-generated and co-indexed with PRO in the Small Clause. More generally, the *get*-passive has been referred to as non-canonical in nature (see, for example, Alexiadou 2005 et seq.).

(4) $John_i$ [got [PRO_i caught ~~PRO~~].

The following discussion, however, will focus on if (purely) structural approaches to the *get*-passive- such as, but not limited to, those above- would primarily be able to account for the responsibility reading, or if this reading should rather be accounted for via pragmatics. Overall, I will argue that there is support for a pragmatic account; secondary agents are highly sensitive to context as well as real-world knowledge.

1.1 Responsibility and Affectedness

There has been a lot of discussion in previous literature concerning how the *get*-passive may be interpreted, and this has been centered on two oft reported characteristics of the construction: (i) the patient-subject seems to be able to function as a responsible agent, and (ii) the patient-subject seems to be highly "affected" by the action denoted by the verb in the lower clause; typically, it has been claimed, there is an adverse consequence to this subject, such that the *get*-passive is at times referred to as the "adversative passive" (cf. Alexiadou 2005). Here I will first address these semantic issues, before discussing the results of a pilot Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk) study to address if there is psycholinguistic support for these previous claims.

This notion of involvement on the part of the subject has been frequently cited as distinguishing the *get*-passive from the *be*-passive (see Arce-Arenales et al. 1994; Collins 1996; Givón & Yang 1994; among others). In fact, Givón & Yang (1994) provide the following pair in an attempt to illustrate this difference (see 5). They argue that (5b) is in fact infelicitous because the subject had some role in bringing about the event- which makes adding the epithet odd.

(5) a. Mary was shot on purpose, the bastards!
b. * Mary got shot on purpose, the bastards!

This would suggest that in the *be*-passive the subject is never interpreted as the agent. There is, rather, an external argument, whether it be overt and located in the by-phrase, or covert (cf. Manzini 1983; Jaeggli 1986; Baker, Johnson & Roberts 1989).

[1] Haegeman (1985) argues that *get*- and *be*-passives are not the same, and this seems rather uncontroversial (please see her article for her arguments). However, it could be that more recent raising analyses are amenable to both types, such as "smuggling" in Collins (2005).

(6) John was fired (by his boss).

Nevertheless, despite the reported judgments (including 7) that responsibility is associated with the *get*-passive alone, the ability for a displaced subject to function as a "secondary" agent has been noted in relation to the *be*-passive. Zubizarreta (1982) and Roeper (1987) argue that the subject of the *be*-passive may be interpreted as controlling into rationale clauses (as opposed to control by an implicit agent or "event control" viz. Williams 1985; see 7-8).

(7) **John** was arrested by the police to impress his mother. (Zubizarreta 1982)
(8) **King** was arrested to prove a point. (Roeper 1987)

As before, it is possible (for at least some speakers) to interpret the matrix subject *John* as the doing the impressing in (7), as opposed to the implicit agent, *the police*, despite the fact that *the police* are still functioning as the agent of the verb 'arrest'. Roeper (1987) points out that this reading is available regardless of the *by*-phrase; in (8) it is again possible to analyze the subject as the one proving a point.

Of course, while it is possible to interpret the subject as the agent in these examples, it need not be. In other words, nothing excludes the reading where the agent *the police* (in 7) are the agents controlling PRO, as is typically assumed. Based on previous literature, however, it would seem that while it may be possible to interpret subjects of passives as responsible to perhaps some extent- regardless of the verb- this "responsibility reading" on the whole is most salient and accessible with the *get*-passive. This is highlighted with the ability to contrast the two passives types, as in (9).

(9) Alex was caught, but Joe got caught (on purpose).[2]

In (9) the difference seems to be based on responsibility; Alex was caught through no fault of his own, whereas Joe did something to cause his capture. If no such difference existed, (9) would be infelicitous (as the conjunction should signal a contrast).

Another noteworthy property of the *get*-passive is affectedness, or adversity (cf. Arce-Arenales et al. (1994) and Alexiadou (2005), among others). The "kind" of affectedness may vary. The subject of a *get*-passive may be affected in a positive (beneficial), negative (adverse), or neutral fashion (cf. Downing 1996). There are certain predicates where the affectedness is more apparent than others; for example, some predicates denote a clear adverse (as in 10a) or beneficial (10b) consequence. Downing (1996) reports that most *get*-passives have either an adversative or beneficial reading in the corpus that she consulted (see also Chappell 1980).

(10) a. John got shot.
b. John got promoted.

Other predicates involve "neutral" affectedness, such as (11), where there is not a (necessarily) favorable or unfavorable consequence to the subject.

(11) John got called on (by the teacher).

[2] Intonation could be playing a role here- a contrast seems more noticeable if there is stress is added to the clause with the *get*-passive in this example.

Because the subject of a *get*-passive is always interpreted as affected is taken as the reason why certain verbs, which do not permit a reading in where the subject is taken to be affected (namely stative verbs), are incompatible with this construction (see 12) (Alexiadou 2005).[3]

(12) a. */? The story got remembered.
b. */? John got loved.

In sum, the *get*-passive is claimed to differ from the *be*-passive in regard to the properties associated with the matrix subject. In the following study, I will explore if this "responsibility reading" can be supported via psycholinguistic research with adult speakers of English, while controlling for verb choice/affectedness, which may influence the results.

If responsibility on the part of the matrix subject (patient-subject) distinguishes *get* from *be*, then we expect there to be a preference for *get*-passives when the context is such that the patient-subject is explicitly involved in bringing about the action in the lower predicate. When no such context exists (that is, the involvement of the patient-subject is either not clearly established or made explicit) it is expected that there should be no clear preference for either type of passive. In this next section I will discuss the study and the results, before offering a preliminary analysis regarding how to interpret the results.

1.2 Amazon Mechanical Turk Study

An online judgment task was administered via Amazon's Mechanical Turk (MTurk) in order to determine the effects of responsibility (and affectedness) in regard to *get*-passives. A total of 40 adult speakers of English were recruited directly through Amazon. A total of 10 participants had to be excluded of not passing enough experimental controls.

In this study, participants read a short scenario and had to choose which sentence (either a *get*-passive or a *be*-passive) most naturally continued, or corresponded to, that scenario. This was a forced choice task, so participants were required to pick one or the other. Each scenario had a non-responsibility (A) and responsibility (B) variant (see examples below) for a total of 24 items. However, each participant saw only the A or B version for each scenario (for 12 overall). In the responsibility variant of each scenario, context made it explicit that the subject contributed to the action of the lower clause in some respect, whereas in the non-responsibility variant no such connection was provided. In order to control for any influence on response choice due to affectedness, verb choice was manipulated; 4 out of 12 scenarios had a "negatively" affected subject, based on the verb (*shot*, *caught*), 4 had a "neutrally" affected subject (*chosen*, *noticed*), and 4 had a "positively" affected one (*promoted*, *awarded*).

(13) **Scenario 1A (Non-Responsibility)**
Mary and John were playing a game of tag. It was John's turn to be "it". Mary thought that she was fast enough to outrun him, but in the end...

1. Mary was caught.
2. Mary got caught.

[3] Not everyone finds these to be "bad" but they are often reported as such.

(14) **Scenario 1B (Responsibility)**
Mary tried to rob a bank; she handed the bank teller a note asking for the money, but then she had a pang of remorse and called the cops to come arrest her. As a result…

1. Mary was caught.
2. Mary got caught.

Each participant saw 12 scenarios total, along with 24 fillers in the same format. Participants were also asked three "catch" questions (with only one grammatical response, as in (15)) at the beginning of the experiment, to be sure that they were native speakers of English. In addition, a post-hoc survey was also included to verify that the participant was an English-speaker, which asked where in he/she was from/lived.

(15) **The owl is easy to see.**
Which of the following two options better paraphrases the sentence that you just read?

1. It is easy to see the owl.
2. The owl sees easily.

An additional four catch items were embedded in the experiment, which were modeled based on the target prompts, but only had one logical response (see 16), to ensure that participants were paying attention.

(16) **Jill won a really prestigious award and Jake was so happy for her! Unsurprisingly…**

1. Jill was congratulated by Jake.
2. Jake was congratulated by Jill.

Participants who did not get all three of the catch items at the beginning of the task, and at least three out of four catch items embedded within the task, were excluded (N= 10).

1.3 Experimental Results

The raw results comparing subject responsibility on response choice are summarized in Table 1. While participants chose the *be*-passive more often than the *get*-passive in general, they choose the *get*-passive most often in the Responsibility condition. The overall preference for the *be*-passive is perhaps not surprising as it is often considered more "correct" viz. prescriptivist notions (the *get*-passive seems to be considered more colloquial in nature).

Table 1. Responsibility

Participant Response:		GET	BE
Condition:	Resp. Scenarios	40% (72)	60% (108)
	Non-Resp. Scenarios	27% (49)	73% (131)

Results comparing affectedness are summarized in Table 2 below. As is consistent with previous claims, *get*-passives are favored more often when the subject is adversely affected; the opposite is true for *be*-passives.

Table 2. Affectedness

	Negative	Neutral	Positive
GET	40% (48)	32% (38)	29% (35)
BE	60% (72)	68% (82)	71% (85)

The results were analyzed with a mixed effects logistic regression model with Condition (Resp. or Non-Resp. Scenario) and Affectedness (Negative, Positive, or Neutral) as factors, and Subject as a random effect. The variable Item had been dropped from the random effects structure as it had no significant effect on the model. Responses were coded for participants' verb choice (*get* or *be*). The full model included the interaction Condition*Affectedness, but this was later dropped as a comparison of the model with and without it did not reveal any significant effect (χ^2= 3.5, $p > 0.05$). The model with only the main factors (no interactions) revealed a significant effect of Condition (Resp.) and Affectedness (see Table 3); participants were more likely to choose the *get*-passive when the subject was responsible ($p < 0.005$), and they were significantly more likely to choose the *be*-passive when the subject was positively affected ($p < 0.05$).

Table 3. Results from Logistic Mixed Effects Regression Model with 360 Observations, 30 Adult Subjects

Fixed Effects	**Estimate**	**SE**	**z value**	**p (>|z|)**
(Intercept)	-0.9017	0.3329	-2.709	0.007**
Condition-Responsibility	0.7320	0.2543	2.879	0.004**
Affectedness-Neutral	-0.4672	0.3042	-1.536	0.125
Affectedness-Positive	-0.6171	0.3081	-2.003	0.045*

1.4 Discussion

This study suggests is there is a significant effect of responsibility, insofar as given the choice between a *get*-passive and a *be*-passive, speakers are more inclined to prefer the former when the subject can be construed as somehow having a part in the outcome of the event. The results are consistent with previous claims that the *get*-passive differs from the *be*-passive in terms of how the subject is interpreted. The question, then, is what accounts for this difference- does it come

from the syntax or from the pragmatics? And is it accessible via implicature or association with the causative construction (viz. Huddleston & Pullum 2002)?

Firstly, the fact that the subject of a *get*-passive may be analyzed as "responsible" does not in any way exclude a contextual/pragmatic explanation. In fact, although results indicate that the *get*-passive is preferred in responsibility scenarios more so than in non-responsibility ones, it cannot be ignored that the *be*-passive is never ruled out in either scenario. If we account for responsibility in the syntax, this remains to be explained. On the other hand, if there is something concerning context causing speakers to associate responsibility with *get*-passives, this preference can be accounted for via non-structural means.

If the responsibility reading is explored further, it appears that this interpretation is *highly* sensitive to context. In the study, participants selected *get*-passives significantly more often only when the context made the involvement of the subject explicit; otherwise they strongly favored the *be*-passive. This seems to suggest that the potential to interpret the subject as responsible depends on contextual factors- in the experiment, this was of course deliberately manipulated. However, another example is the following, where pragmatics influences who is most likely to be interpreted as the agent: in (17a-b), real world knowledge (in this case about baseball) makes a particular reading more salient (or accessible) than others; the intended "responsible agent" is in bold.

(17) a. **Joe** got tagged out by the baseman (on purpose).

In (17a), it could be that Joe wanted to be tagged out. Let's assume that he slid hard into second base to break up a double play, so that whoever had been batting could run to first base safely. In other words, the responsibility reading is salient here, and could be even more so depending on the context, such as who is on base, the score of the game, etc.

b. Joe got struck out by **the pitcher** (on purpose).

In (17b) Joe does not want to be struck out- this serves no purpose. The pitcher always wants to record a strike out, however. The "responsibility reading" is not salient here- at least without any kind of additional, elaborated context.[4] This flexibility with which it may (or may not) be accessed, coupled with the fact that it is not always possible unless coerced, casts doubt on the analysis that responsibility is part of the syntax.

2 Syntax or Pragmatics?

In this next section I consider various syntactic diagnostics to determine the extent to which the matrix subject can serve as a secondary agent in the *get*-passive.

2.1 Animacy

If the *get*-passive required a secondary agent, or a thematic subject, we might expect there to be an animacy restriction. Inanimate subjects are compatible with raising verbs because the subject is not thematically related to the verb; selection of the subject depends on properties of the lower predicate alone (see Becker (2014) for a detailed discussion of the interaction between animacy and syntactic structure). However, inanimate subjects (as in 18) and animate ones are allowed.

[4] However, the very fact that you could conceive of a possible scenario where Joe would want to be struck out seems to be further support for the idea that it is context that is driving the interpretation.

(18) a. The window got broken.
b. The painting got damaged.

While there is a split in regard to animacy in terms of corpus data (see Arce-Arenales et al. (1994), Kim (2012)), these findings do not entail that the *get*-passive selects for a thematic subject, but only that animate subjects are preferred in spontaneous speech. It could be that this preference exists because of this association with responsibility and affectedness. If speakers prefer *get*-passives to express that a subject is somehow responsible (given the results), it would follow that they would choose the *get*-passive with animate subjects more often, as it is not clear how an inanimate object could be construed as responsible for the action (the window cannot be "responsible" for its breaking in (18a)).

2.2 Adverbials and Rationale Clauses

Another diagnostic for determining if the subject of the *get*-passive is agentive is to look for different kinds of constructions were it *must* be the matrix subject (and not an external agent) that is controlling the action in the lower predicate. For example, if 'get' allows for a thematic subject, there should be examples where only the subject may be interpreted as controlling PRO in a rationale clause, or as being modified by an agent-oriented adverbial.

There are certainly examples where it is possible (if not most natural) to interpret the external argument in the *by*-phrase as controlling PRO/being modified by the rationale clause (as in 19) and the adverbial (20), just as in *be*-passives.

(19) John got/was arrested (by the police) [PRO to keep a criminal off the streets].
(20) John got/was deliberately targeted (by the police).

In these examples, it is the agent in the *by*-phrase (here, the police) who cause the action. The subject may very well be affected, and perhaps John did something to facilitate the arrest, but the subject is not controlling PRO in (20); it is not clear how one could deliberately cause his own targeting (again without adding additional context).

Just as in the baseball example above, the *get*-passive allows (a subset of) speakers to interpret some agent-oriented adverbials as referring to either the subject or the agent in the *by*-phrase. The adverbial in (21) could be interpreted as referring to John or an implicit argument in the *by*-phrase. The example in (22), however, crucially does not seem to allow for a reading in which the adverbial corresponds to John (hence the "?"; this example is fine if the adverb refers to the implicit argument).

(21) John got caught on purpose.
(22) ? John got deliberately ignored.
(i.e. John got himself deliberately ignored.)

Interestingly, if the lower predicate is such that it must (logically) refer to the subject to be felicitous, the *get*-passive seems to become somewhat degraded. In (23), the only argument of the two (Ava, Ron) that could possibly be controlling PRO is Ava. If *get*-passives allowed for responsible, thematic subjects (23) should be acceptable, but it is degraded.

(23) ? Ava got deliberately abused by Ron [PRO to risk being with the girl she loved].

Moreover, although Reed (2011) points to a couple of counter-examples, (as in 24), where John can have complete control over the "hurting event" and the resulting action- another explanation is possible. It could be that we know and can imagine various scenarios where John would do something to collect on his insurance. The same cannot be said about (23); Ava is very likely not trying to deliberately abuse herself. Also notice that if the adverb 'deliberately' is left out of (24), there is at least some degree of ambiguity; we could assume that someone who would benefit from the insurance payout wanted John hurt on the job.

(24) John deliberately got hurt on the job [PRO/ec to collect Workingmen's Comp].

Moreover, notice that in passives with rationale clauses that have inanimate subjects, it cannot possibly be that the subject is controlling PRO (that is, the vase is not creating a distraction in 25). There is no optionality, as there was in the earlier examples (and those in the study). The implicit subject would need to be controlling PRO (see Jaeggli 1986), otherwise Event Control must be assumed (cf. Williams 1985).

(25) The vase got broken [PRO to create a distraction].

2.3 An Alternative Explanation

In sum, the ability to analyze the subject of a *get*-passive as a secondary agent and access the responsibility reading is constrained and/or influenced by several factors, namely: (i) context influences if, and how readily accessible, the responsibility reading is, (ii) animate subjects alone may be interpreted as functioning secondary agents, and (iii) secondary agents- while associated with the *get*-passive, are not a "core component" of their syntax and do not seem to be motivated by responsibility readings. There are times when a secondary agent is not found and a responsibility reading is not possible.

Nevertheless, if a responsibility reading is influenced by context alone, why are secondary agents found more often in *get*-passives (as in the study)? It is possible that speakers, including the participants in the MTurk experiment, rely on the parallel between passive and causative 'get'; there is a causative 'get' (26b) but not a causative 'be' (27b). This could be why 'get' and not 'be' is more likely to elicit a responsibility reading.

(26) a. John got caught.
b. John got Mary caught.

(27) a. John was caught.
b. * John was Mary caught.

As Huddleston & Pullum (2002) suggest, this parallel also highlights a possible implicature; if John got Mary caught, this implies that either John caught Mary (himself), or that he had her caught (whereas 27b is simply ungrammatical). This connection may make the matrix subject, which is an agent in the causative, much more likely to be interpreted as a secondary agent to begin with; pragmatics and real world knowledge may then strengthen that interpretation or block it, depending on the context.

3. Conclusions

The purpose of this paper was to (i) explore the "responsibility reading" that has been claimed to exist for the *get*-passive and (ii) address whether this reading should be captured in the syntax or in the pragmatics. In terms of the first point, it does seem to be the case that the *get*-passive is associated with responsibility, as determined via judgments from native speakers. That is, given the choice between a *get*-passive and a *be*-passive to describe a scenario, participants were more willing to pick the *get*-passive when the subject had been described as being responsible for the outcome of the event (in spite of a large preference for *be*-passives overall). Nevertheless, this interpretation does not necessarily extend to the syntax. It remains to be determined what exactly gives rise to a responsibility reading, or whether dialectal factors could be involved. At this point, however, the experimental data and examples indicate possible "interpretable interference" tied to context, and a possible pragmatic explanation for responsibility.

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