An Alternative Analysis of the English Get-Past Participle Constructions: Is Get All That Passive?

Liljana Mitkovska¹ and Eleni Bužarovska²

Abstract

The article reexamines the status of the so called get-passives in English. The term “get-passive” is often used to refer to constructions with the verb get and the past participle. The authors claim that this construction involves more heterogeneous types with different semantic and structural properties and that the term passive is misleading, especially when the distinction is blurred. Authors of university grammars, such as Huddleston and Pullum, Quirk et al., and Huddleston, distinguish between verbal and adjectival get-passives comparing them to be-passives. The authors of this article argue that such classification is oversimplified because it lumps together two distinctive types of diathesis, middle and passive voice. Namely, they claim that get+past participle (get+pp) constructions are best described as a diathesis continuum from active to passive poles, covering a range of events in which the active role of the subject is gradually diminished. A comparative analysis with Macedonian and Greek is included to show that the equivalents of get+pp constructions are not all passive and copular constructions. They also include active get+pp constructions, where the verb get is an inchoative or decausative marker. The article focuses on these “nonpassive” get+pp constructions and attempts to establish a semantic link among the different types as well as between them and the passive get-constructions.

Keywords

get-passive, middle voice, inchoative diathesis, decausative marker, semantic gradience

¹FON University, Skopje, Macedonia
²University Ss Cyril & Methodius, Skopje, Macedonia

Corresponding Author:
Eleni Bužarovska, University Ss Cyril & Methodius, Krste Misirkov bb, MK-1000 Skopje, Macedonia
Email: elenibuzarovska@t-home.mk
Introduction

In this article, we look at get+past participle constructions that express different types of meanings from the regular passive functions. The get-passive constructions, illustrated in (1), semantically present a process or event as undergone by the syntactic subject, in a similar way as the ordinary be-passive.\(^1\) The existence of an explicit or implicit agent (Huddleston & Pullum 2002:1441) and the existence of an active counterpart (Collins 1996:45; Fleisher 2006:226) are often considered as the main criteria for passivehood.

(1) My car got broken into this weekend and they stole $1500 of stuff;\(^2\)

However, a number of get+past participle (get+pp) constructions, such as get acquainted and get dressed (2), do not have passive properties and differ crucially from the passive ones with respect to the number and role of the participants involved. They are still labeled as passives, be it “pseudo-passives” (Quirk et al. 1985) or “adjectival passives” (Huddleston & Pullum 2002:1441).\(^3\)

(2) He got up and made his way to the bathroom, where he showered, shaved, and got dressed.

In some surveys of the get+pp constructions in the reference grammars, the difference between unambiguously passive constructions and nonpassive constructions is duly recognized, but it is not further elaborated. Below we present the accounts of several authors relevant for this study. Quirk et al. (1985:161) state that pseudo-passives such as get dressed and get mixed up superficially look like passives but in fact are “copular constructions” consisting of the dynamic “resulting” copula get and a past participle. The construction has a statal reading due to an adjectival value of the participle, while get-passives have a dynamic reading because of the verbal character of the participle.

Huddleston (1984:445) also acknowledges the ambiguous status of the get+pp construction between verbal and adjectival, claiming that “like be, get figures in both verbal and adjectival passive constructions. But there is nothing like the same overlap as we find with be.” He notes that the combinations with the copula get and past participle are subject to more restrictions and that the verb get neutralizes the semantic difference between the verbal and adjectival passive (otherwise clear with be), because it “involves change of state.” However, the fact that some get+pp constructions with participles such as washed and dressed are ambiguous between verbal and adjectival passive has led Huddleston to conclude that the meaning of the construction cannot be predicted on the basis of the verbal or adjectival character of the past participle.

Following Huddleston (1984), Huddleston and Pullum (2002:1441) also draw a distinction between verbal and adjectival get-passives concluding that “get accepts adjectival passives as complements less readily than be.” They distinguish several types of these constructions, some more typical than others, on a structural basis, that
whether the participle is gradable or nongradable. Most importantly, they capture the semantic gradience, pointing out that some get-constructions are closer to the prototypical passive than others. Constructions with “gradable adjectives” (psychological verbs participles) such as carried away, depressed, distressed, interested, and worried and “nongradable” adjectives such as lost (The children got lost in the woods) are considered the clearest cases of adjectival passives, while those with married, dressed, changed, and shaved as well as started and finished (Let’s get started/finished) have more specific features related to the distinction between the subject and the agent.

Huddleston and Pullum (2002:1441) suggest that “the difference in these last examples is that with the verbal passives there is some explicit or implicit agent . . . distinct from the subject-referent, whereas in the adjectival case there is not.” This is exactly what we consider to be the main reason why the term passive is not appropriate for what is called “adjectival get-passives.”

In some grammars, however, the so-called “pseudo-passive” or “adjectival passive” get+pp constructions are not even distinguished from straightforward get-passives. For instance, Biber et al. (1999:481) state that get-passives “describe the process of getting into the state with a resultant meaning similar to become,” illustrating this with examples such as get married, get involved, and get stuck, which clearly do not belong to passive voice.

This article reexamines the status of nonpassive get+pp constructions in relation to passive get+pp constructions and claims that they need to be considered a category of their own, related to but distinct from the passive. To achieve this goal, the article elaborates what many authors have observed: that a group of get+pp constructions do not have passive voice characteristics, despite their formal and semantic similarity. The analysis of these nonpassive get+pp constructions presented in this article then attempts to define their place in the voice system and explain how their various semantic types relate to one another. More specifically, the article extends Quirk et al.’s idea about the existence of a “passive gradient” by incorporating an analysis of these get+pp constructions as a link between the active and passive pole. For this reason, we believe that any term that makes reference to passive is misleading because, unlike passives, the so-called “adjectival” or “pseudo-passive” get+pp constructions designate situations involving one participant that retains agentive features. In some cases they are quite strongly pronounced as in (2). We argue that the source of the confusion with get-passives lies not only in their formal likeness but also in their conceptual affinity as they both code situations in which the subject referent is affected in some way.

The article is organized as follows: the next section gives an outline of the theoretical approach that we adopt in the analysis of nonpassive get+pp constructions. We then present a short overview of previous scholarship that we find useful for our analysis. The central section of the article is devoted to semantic typology of these constructions based on analysis of collected examples, after which we provide a summative conclusion to the investigation.
Theoretical Background

The term voice refers to a grammatical category that expresses diathesis, that is, canonical and noncanonical representation of events. Geniušiene (1987:52-53) explains the differentiation of the terms diathesis and voice as follows: diathesis is defined as “a pattern of correspondences between units at the syntactic level and units at the semantic level,” whereas voice is defined as a regular marking in the verb coding the correspondences between units at the syntactic and units at the semantic level. We use the term voice to refer to both morphologically and syntactically marked constructions. Passive voice is usually marked both in the verb and in the syntax, while middle voice may be only syntactically marked (The door opened).

The concept of diathesis as understood by Geniušiene (1987) closely corresponds to the conception of events based on an idealized model, which involves transfer of energy along the action chain. A prototypical event consists of three phases: cause → become → state (Croft 1994:93). It is expressed by an active simple clause whose subject position is occupied by the agent (causal instigator) and the direct object position by the affected participant. However, according to Croft (1994:92), “verbs represent self-contained events, that is, events which are conceptualized as isolated from the causal network and individuated for various purposes,” so they can code the whole sequence or part of the sequence, presenting it as isolated from the cause. Croft uses the term diathesis to denote the way the speaker presents the event (“event view”): as causative, by encompassing all three phases; as inchoative, by focusing on the last two; and as resultative, by highlighting the last phase. The diathesis of the verbs changes according to which phase of the event is coded, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Event Representations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Event view</th>
<th>Form</th>
<th>Diathesis</th>
<th>Basic voice</th>
<th>Derived voice</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cause/become/state</td>
<td>Transitive</td>
<td>Causative</td>
<td>Active</td>
<td>Process passive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Become/state</td>
<td>Intransitive</td>
<td>Inchoative</td>
<td>Middle</td>
<td>Antipassive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>State</td>
<td>Adjective</td>
<td>Resultative</td>
<td>(Passive)</td>
<td>Stative passive</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Adapted from Croft (1994:113).

Transitive verb forms designate causative diathesis that can be coded in active and passive voice, whereas the two final phases are expressed by intransitive verbs of inchoative diathesis, whose basic voice is middle. We accept Croft’s distinction into basic (active and middle) and derived voice (passive) because active and middle voices express types of events while process passive voice codes only a marked view on causative events. Consequently, the distinction between situations coded by active, middle, and passive voices is based on two parameters: the number of participants in an event and the semantic role of the participant in the subject position. Table 2, based on Geniušiene (1987:53-55), presents the correspondences on three levels.
Both the active and passive voice imply the existence of two participants with agent/patient semantic roles, whereas middle voice involves only one participant whose semantic role contains characteristics of both initiator and undergoer. Thus, the passive voice codes the whole action chain, but the semantic roles are not equally distributed along the syntactic positions, that is, the passive voice “indicates marked correlation between causal sequence and topicality” (Croft 1990:255). Accordingly, it represents a derived voice that is generally marked in the verb phrase. On the other hand, “middle constructions are yet another non-prototypical causal type” (Croft 1990:255) and represent a basic diathesis type that does not have to be marked in the verb. Nevertheless, middle and passive share the feature of affectedness of the referent in the subject position and have been shown to be both conceptually and historically related in many languages (Geniušiene 1987; Kemmer 1988, 1993; Haspelmath 1990, 1993; Kazenin 2001b). The common principle on which middle voice constructions are delimited from active voice constructions is that the agent is not perceived as an actual participant because it is either fused with the patient or removed from the scene (Kazenin 2001a:906).

With this in mind, we postulate that get+pp constructions in English can code two types of voice: passive and middle, which explains the varied behavior among these constructions. To prove this, we examined selected examples from the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA). Using the parameter of the number of participants in an event, we separated passive from one-participant get+pp constructions and refer to the latter as middle voice get+pp constructions. Then we classified these middle get+pp constructions according to semantic criteria to show the unitary character of this class and its internal structure as well as the relationship of the middle constructions to the passive get+pp constructions. It should be noted that the number of verbs that can form middle get+pp constructions is relatively small, hardly exceeding sixty, but some verbs are very frequently used in this construction, especially in colloquial language (e.g., get lost, get confused); in addition, the same construction may have several contextual meanings.

Before continuing the exposition of our argument we give a short overview of a number of studies that have treated get+pp constructions from various points of view.
Previous Studies of the get+pp Constructions

An extensive body of literature has been dedicated to the study of various aspects of get-passives, many of them focusing on their comparison to the be-passive (Chappell 1980; Carter & McCarthy 1999). We will mention only those that have direct bearing on our research: Collins (1996), Arce-Arenales, Axelrod, and Fox (1994), Givón and Yang (1994), and Fleisher (2006).

Collins (1996), adopting a corpus-based approach to the study of all get+pp constructions in standard English, distinguishes “central get-passives” (He got hit in the face with the tip of a surfboard [ICE-AUS-S1A-0751]; Collins 1996:45) from a number of other get+pp constructions related to the central get-passives on the basis of certain semantic and structural criteria; namely, psychological (At first, I got frustrated by delays in getting things done, . . . [ACE-F03-4821]), reciprocal/reflexive (That is a reason to want go get married [ICE-GB-S 1A-050-172] /Let’s get dressed up. . . . [BROWN-P16-1300]), adjectival (The conversation is about the need to get involved in as many diversions as possible. [ACE F3 9-7-7661]), and formulaic get-passives (After a certain stage you just have to get stuck into public life. [ICE-GB-S1 B-047-81]). The get+pp constructions with psychological verbs are taken to be closest to central get-passives as they have active counterparts and can be expanded by a by-phrase. However, Collins observes that the participle in these constructions has more adjectival properties, and the agentive phrase does not express a typical agent but “various phenomena which initiate psychological processes” (Collins 1996:46): the agentive phrase also can sometimes be expressed by different prepositions (e.g., about, over, with). This observation about the choice of the preposition indirectly supports our view that these constructions should not be treated as passive.

Reciprocal/reflexive get-passives are more remote from central get-passives. Their affinity with the passive category is justified, relying on Quirk et al. (1985:161), by the fact that both put “the emphasis on the subject rather than the agent and on what happens to the subject as a result of the event.” Structurally, unlike the psychological past participles, the participles of these verbs are nongradable and never co-occur with a by-phrase due to “the sense of initiative and responsibility for the action that is vested in the subject-referent” (Collins 1996:48). We believe that this is exactly the reason why they should not be grouped together with get-passives. Although they share the feature “emphasis on the subject,” the two constructions code different “event views,” that is, diathesis (She got washed and left vs. The child got washed by her mom).

The periphery of the class consists of constructions that Collins considers only superficially related to the passives and appropriately names “adjectival get-passives” because their central members are adjectives and they have no proper active counterparts. He distinguishes several degrees, depending on the adjectival properties exhibited by the participle: capacity to be used attributively, to be modified by degree adverbs, and to be coordinated with prototypical adjectives. Some of these constructions are more reflexive (get entangled, get involved), while others are adjectival and thus more remote
from the verbal pole (get fossilized, get drunk, get tired). Even further from the central get-passives are situated the so-called idiomatic constructions (get accustomed, get hold of, get fed up).

In spite of the fact that Collins identifies the differences between the functionally varied get+pp constructions and acknowledges the nonprototypical nature of some of them, he still treats the latter as part of the passive domain. In his attempt to give a unified treatment of these constructions, Collins imposes a passive analysis on all get+pp constructions regardless of their semantics.

An alternative analysis is offered by Arce-Arenales, Axelrod, and Fox (1994), where get+pp constructions are compared to isofunctional constructions in two unrelated languages—Spanish (se-constructions) and Koyukon (d-effect)—with a claim that all three belong to the middle diathesis. Following Klaiman (1988), they understand middle diathesis as an alternative conceptualization of an event when the sentential subject is not a “controller” but an “affected entity” (Arce-Arenales, Axelrod & Fox 1994:2). Nominative-accusative languages (as the ones they analyze) mark a particular kind of active clauses in which the subject is affected by the action. However, these middle voice constructions have often been traditionally analyzed as passive due to the same marking that is usually performed by verbal morphology. Arce-Arenales, Axelrod, and Fox (1994:11-15) argue that get+pp constructions, which otherwise closely correspond to the Spanish se-constructions, are not passive but a type of active clauses because (a) they sometimes allow a reflexive interpretation and (b) they have no active counterparts. They hypothesize that get is a marker of middle diathesis with strong aspectual functions as it imposes an inchoative and/or punctual interpretation in contrast to the stative reading of the be-passives. We agree that some get+pp constructions belong to the middle domain, but we believe that treating all these constructions as middle is another case of overgeneralization.

Givón and Yang (1994) investigate the rise of get+pp constructions in English. They found the earliest usages of causative get with verbal complement (the participle of go), as in “get thee gone,” in Shakespeare’s and Marlowe’s works (1564–93). This construction served “as a spearhead for the analogical extension” (Givón & Yang 1994:129-131). This pattern was further extended to other passive participial and adjectival complements (got thou to be released), eventually evolving into get-passive and inchoative middle through reflexivization (he had got himself so gallantly arrayed) and subsequent loss of the reflexive (Till thou has gotten to be entertained; Givón & Yang 1994:144).9

An opposing view on the evolution of get-passives is provided by Fleisher (2006), who disagrees with the causative-to-passive change and proposes that get-passives evolved from inchoative get+pp constructions. He argues that the inchoative get (he got sick) and passive get (he got arrested) are similar because of their resultative semantics (Fleisher 2006:229). In addition, syntactic ambiguity is characteristic for get+pp due to verbal or adjectival interpretation of the participle. Aspect played a crucial role in this disambiguation because the perfective aspect of the participle

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contributed to the eventive interpretation of this construction, thereby facilitating the semantic reanalysis of the inchoative into passive (Fleisher 2006:237).

Although our article does not address the evolution of this construction, we draw on two relevant points from the previous discussion in our analysis of middle get+pp constructions: (a) the observation that causative and inchoative source semantics played a crucial role in the rise of passive get+pp constructions (Givón & Yang 1994; Fleisher 2006) and (b) the suggestion that the more active agentive sense of get-passives in contrast to be-passives “can be ascribed to the active-inchoative sense of get” (Givón & Yang 1994:121; Arce-Arenales, Axelrod & Fox 1994:15). We suggest that a potential overlap between inchoative and causative constructions may have prompted the evolution of get-passives and therefore accept Givón and Yang’s (1994:145) position that the evolution of get-passives did not proceed in a linear sequence but involved a multivariant, layered model of change.

**Classification of Middle get+pp Constructions**

We believe that the class of middle constructions is united on a semantic basis: they represent various degrees of departure from the canonical transitive clause, which is reflected in the status of the subject. Following Klaiman (1988, 1992) and Croft (1994), we assume that middle verbs are distinguished from both active and passive in that their subject has a complex role: it is the “locus of affectedness” and the “controller” at the same time. In fact, it collapses the two macro roles, actor and undergoer, in one participant, which results in “relative distinguishability of participants in an event” (Kemmer 1994:206), leading to their syntactic intransitivity. Thus the central middle domain, covering situations in which the subject has a high degree of control, can be placed at the active pole, between transitive and intransitive situations. A decrease in control by loss of intentionality and volitionality results in constructions that depart from the active pole and move toward the passive one, with the subject referent losing gradually its potent nature. To sum up, the main parameter for distinction between the central and peripheral middle domain is the potency of the subject referent.

The middle semantic domain is shown in Figure 1. The central middle situations are distributed on the active pole between the transitive and intransitive situations, while the peripheral ones depart from the active and take positions toward the passive pole.

Following Kemmer’s (1988) slightly adjusted classification of the middle diathesis situations, we attempt to show how get+pp constructions fit in it according to their semantics. In addition, these constructions are compared to their Macedonian and Greek counterparts: both languages mark the middle diathesis morphologically and thus offer a useful point of comparison because of the way they treat similar meanings. The fact that these cross-linguistic equivalents are largely constructions of middle voice nature (reflexive and mediopassive, respectively) strengthens our argument.
Central Middle Domain

Central middle situations comprise intentional activities of a human subject referent that affect the same referent, either physically or mentally. Two main subtypes are distinguished: autocausative and actional. These intransitive constructions differ only in semantics, that is, the type of activities expressed. Autocausatives mainly code activities that involve body movements (e.g., wash, turn, bend), while actionals express human behavior activities, both physical and mental (e.g., prepare, agree, marry, acquaint, complain, brag).

Autocausative situations represent autocausal intransitive events with an affected single participant. The volitional agent performs an activity whose effect she or he undergoes, so she or he is the agent and the patient at the same time. The activities are usually related to the body of the agent; thus, they comprise body care actions, changes of body posture, and translational and nontranslational motion. Such activities are often coded by middle strategies, such as reflexive verbs in many European languages (e.g., in Slavic languages) or by the mediopassive, as, for instance, in Greek. English uses mainly intransitive verb constructions, including verbs with or without a transitive pair for these types of activities (e.g., wash, sit down, turn around, stretch, climb up, walk). However, a few verbs, such as dress, change, wash, are commonly encountered in get+pp constructions (get dressed, get changed, get washed). It seems that there is no significant difference in meaning between the intransitive and the get+pp construction, as captured in examples (3)–(5).
(3) Get washed. Your father will be home soon, and we’ll be eating dinner.

(4) He got up and made his way to the bathroom, where he showered, shaved, and got dressed.

(5) It’d be nice for us if we could somehow either hold all the media people out until everybody gets showered and gets changed.

Actional middle situations represent human behavior in various types of social situations. The active role of the volitional participant is more pronounced, but she or he is also presented as the locus of the effects resulting from the activity. Kemmer (1988:171-194) calls these situations “cognition middles,” distinguishing between emotive “speech actions” (complain, blame) and other “speech actions” that have emotional overtones (confess, boast, threaten). However, this class can be extended to situations that involve not only verbal but also other aspects of human behavior. Commonly expressed as middle in languages with grammatical middle voice markers are situations such as prepare, register, make sacrifice, and pretend (Kemmer 1988; Geniušiene 1987), as well as emotionally colored speech acts such as complain, pray, and make an excuse, which are marked by specialized middle forms in Macedonian and Greek: se podgotvua/etimazome ‘prepare,’ se prijavi/egrafome ‘register,’ se žrtvuva/thisiazome ‘make sacrifice,’ se preprava/prospiume ‘pretend,’ se žali/paraponieme ‘complain,’ se moli/prosefxome ‘pray,’ and so on. This class also includes some reciprocal situations representing an integral event where the two participants are in symmetric relation (e.g., se zapoznava/gnorizome ‘get to know one another’).

The distinguishability of the participant roles in these situations varies. Those in which the two roles of the subject referent are more conspicuous may be closer to the transitive pole, but those with a low degree of distinguishability prevail, leaning toward the intransitive pole. In some Slavic languages this semantic distinction is reflected in the syntax: higher distinguishability corresponds with the use of the reflexive pronoun, and lower distinguishability is matched with the clitic. In Macedonian, for instance, the long pronoun sebe(si) can easily be added in constructions expressing reflexive situations, where the roles of the participant are perceived as distinct, but not in the constructions where the two roles are fused. Thus, se mie sebesi ‘wash oneself’ is acceptable in contrastive contexts that emphasize the subject, while *se preprava sebesi ‘pretend oneself’ and *se mesha sebesi ‘interfere oneself’ are not.14

In English, a small number of these situations are expressed with reflexive constructions (excuse oneself, devote oneself to, behave oneself, address oneself), but the bulk of the verbs corresponding to middle constructions in other languages are primarily intransitive verbs (prepare, wonder, surrender). Yet a number of frequent situations of this type are often expressed in get+pp construction (get accustomed, get involved, get organized, get settled) where the active involvement of the subject referent is clearly indicated, as in examples (6) and (7).

(6) It’s the perfect chance to get acquainted with some of the best work by the best African American writers being published today.
We only get involved if the problem gets out of control.

Reciprocal situations, where the participants have symmetric roles projecting one integral event, are also often expressed with middle constructions. In English, the following verbs are frequently encountered in a get+pp construction: get married, get engaged, get acquainted, and get divorced. Examples (8)-(10) are typical.

(8) People got divorced because of politics, . . .
(9) We got engaged on May 14, 2005 at Stonewall Restaurant in the Village of NYC.
(10) In November of that same year, Jackson got married again to Debbie Rowe.

The constructions get started, get finished, and get done, illustrated in examples (11)–(13), also exhibit actional properties as they express one-participant situations with an agentive subject.

(11) How I got started in programming. Finale on how he got started making music.
(12) By the time Flossy and I got finished with it, the tree looked pretty nice.
(13) Excuse me, but when you get done with your hole, can you help me do something?

However, they are different from the other constructions in this class by not expressing any obvious affectedness of the subject referent. In fact, it seems that the only function of get here is to detransitivize the verb and distance the thematic argument by placing it in a prepositional phrase (e.g., in, with). As a result, the difference between the active verb and its use in the get+pp construction is minimal (Huddleston & Pullum 2002:1441). Collins (1996:48) includes the constructions get started/finished in the reflexive subclass claiming that this intransitive active construction has derived from the complex reflexive ‘get oneself started on something.’

The agentivity of the subject is weaker in constructions where the participant may not have full control, as in examples (14) and (15).

(14) I’m just getting warmed up on this book, I’m not terribly far into it.
(15) She eventually told people that she got separated from my father in the storm.

If the causer is explicitly expressed, the constructions become closer to peripheral middle situations discussed below. Example (15) illustrates a transitional type between actional and peripheral.
Peripheral Middle Domain

The constructions covering the peripheral middle domain have a less agentive subject referent and move toward the passive end of the continuum. They can be divided into three subtypes: resultative, psychological, and decausative. In each subsequent type the agent gradually loses its agentive properties—first intentionality in the resultative constructions, and then responsibility in the decausative.

Resultative situations represent events in which the acting human or animate participant does not act consciously or intentionally and hence the agentivity of the subject is diminished. The construction presents the activity as autonomous, irrespective of how the activity was caused: externally or internally. Although the construction highlights what is happening to the patient, the subject has enough control over the activity to remain an active agent. A nonpotent subject weakens the agentivity and renders the construction decausative (see examples 27-30 below), thus many verbs can be used in both constructions depending on the subject referent.

English employs three constructions to lexicalize such situations: along with intransitive verbs (wake up, sober up, warm up) and some reflexives (find oneself, convince oneself), a considerable number of middle get+pp constructions are commonly used for coding these types of situations. Verbs often occurring in such constructions are get lost, get drunk, get bogged down, get stuck, get trapped, get tangled up, get mixed up, get focused, get addicted, get used, get hooked, get doused, and get hurt, five of which are illustrated in examples (16)–(20). Some of these constructions are very frequent and have idiomatic status (get used to, get accustomed to), which motivated Collins (1996:49) to classify them as formulaic get-passives (together with the idioms get fed up and get hold) and to place them at the periphery of what he calls “get-passives.”

(16) Many people get hooked on prescription drugs merely because . . .
(17) I don’t want to get bogged down in theory or bore you with all the evidence.
(18) Well, your mama’s so clumsy she got tangled up in the cordless phone!
(19) It’s easy to get lost in the Colorado mountains, Nancy.
(20) We have no idea how this bird got trapped inside the bathroom in the building.

Such situations are regularly coded with middle markers in languages with grammatical middle voice markers, illustrated in the following Macedonian and Greek examples: se zaglavi/englovizome ‘get bogged down,’ se zapletka/berdhevome ‘get tangled,’ se izgubi/xanome ‘get lost.’

Emotional reactions may be expressed by “psychological” get+pp constructions. They express situations in which the only participant experiences a certain psychological or mental effect. Some external cause that is usually inferable from the context provokes the experiencer’s reaction. As a result, the nonintentional human subject with decreased agentivity cannot control the psychological change she or he undergoes. This type of situation often belongs to middle voice in languages with morphological middle markers—compare, for example, Macedonian se-constructions such as
se iznenadi ‘be surprised,’ se voz nemiri ‘get annoyed,’ se luti ‘be angry,’ and se raduva ‘be glad,’ and the Greek mediopassive counterparts: ekplisome, stenaxorieme, eknervrizome, xerome. In English, we find fewer intransitive constructions than their passive-like (be+pp/adjective) equivalents (be surprised, be annoyed, be angry, be glad). However, to express the onset of the reaction, get+pp constructions are commonly used. The following verbs are attested in these constructions: get attached, get distracted, get worried, get carried away, get confused, get offended, get settled, get turned on, get excited, get worked up, get sucked in, get discouraged, get swept up, get surprised, get disappointed, get scared, get annoyed, get frightened. This is illustrated in examples (21)–(23) from the corpus.

(21) He doesn’t have any other symptoms except a headache and stiff neck, so I got worried about meningitis.

(22) But inevitably, emerging-market oligarchs get carried away; they waste money and build massive business empires on a mountain of debt.

(23) I try not to get excited any more over things because it just seems to be a let down . . .

The resulting psychological state of the experiencer is expressed by a past participle that exhibits more adjectival properties than those in the central middle domain (Collins 1996:46): it can be premodified by intensifiers (e.g., very) and coordinated with an adjective.16 There is always a causer in these situations, projected as the stimulus, but the constructions focus on what is happening to the experiencer and code the stimulus as part of the stage.17 However, the explicit expression of a particular causer, as in examples (24)–(26), makes the construction assume a somewhat passive-like character, thus highlighting the existing affinity between middle and passive get+pp constructions.

(24) And if that happens she’ll never get carried away by passion.

(25) Don’t get discouraged with these. It takes practice.

(26) I mean, I personally get offended by it when I keep hearing it.

Decausative situations represent spontaneous processes in which the only participant is inanimate, thus even further remote from the prototypical agent. They may happen due to some internal or external force, but the causative phase is completely isolated from the verb construction. As a result, the situation is viewed as autonomous. These are primarily physical processes that involve the subject referent’s change of state, place, or form: for example, the door opened, the soup cooled down, the glass broke into pieces.

Middle markers, such as reflexive constructions in Macedonian and mediopassive in Greek, are often extended to this type of situation. The most common strategy for expressing such situations in English is the morphologically unmarked strategy employed also in the central middle domain: intransitive constructions, predominantly
with ergative (also called “unaccusative”) verbs, and occasionally with unergative ones. While reflexive verbs are rare (the figures repeated themselves, this generalization suggested itself, the problem lends itself to easy solution), it seems that inchoative get+pp constructions are often employed for this function, as demonstrated in examples (27)–(30).

(27) Instead, a propeller got tangled up, ran backwards . . .
(28) I just sort of stuttered in the middle; my muscles stuttered. My limbs got tangled up, and I almost ran into the person next to me.
(29) I had this idea that at night your eyes get accustomed to the darkness.
(30) All crops need water to get established, but some need more . . .

A considerable number of verbs encountered in decausative constructions are characterized by belonging to both peripheral resultatives (get lost, get stuck, get tangled up) and also central middle classes: autocausative (get warmed up) and actional (get mixed, get accustomed). The affiliation to these classes is conditioned by the nature of the subject referent: with a human subject they are interpreted as resultative, autocausative, or actional, while with an inanimate subject they belong to the decausatives. The following examples illustrate this: in (31) both events occur spontaneously, but in (31a) the human subject acts with its energy and the construction is closer to the active pole, while in (31b) ‘the hook’ cannot be attributed any responsibility and the event is perceived as autonomous (i.e., decausative). In (32a) the subject referent acts intentionally, thus we have a central middle interpretation, but the same verb with an inanimate subject expresses a decausative (autonomous) event in (32b).

(31) a. As it turned out, I got stuck in traffic and was going to be later than expected.
   b. I had hooked my 4-year-old son in the cheek. That is, the hook had entered his mouth and got stuck on the inside.
(32) a. Services: about us and how we got established in the business.
   b. . . . eventually my practice got established, mostly by word-of-mouth.

Decausatives present the event as autonomous. The notion of “autonomy” should not be taken literally, though, but rather as a way of conceptualization of the event. Thus, apart from truly spontaneous processes, middle constructions of this type can also code events that in reality do not occur as such, but the construction imposes on them an autonomous construal and the cause is abstracted. This image can be stretched to the border of this class when a human initiator may enter the scene and cause change in the construction type. Various semantic and discourse-pragmatic factors influence the implication of the agent. In many cases we are faced with ambiguity, as in example (33) where the warming up of the political theater can be understood as happening by itself or as a result of the activity of some agent, who can be realized explicitly (as in “by the journalists”).
But the political theater was just getting warmed up, on both sides.

Such ambiguity may explain the link between the middle and passive get+pp constructions. A considerable number of constructions, such as get jammed, get wrapped, get reflected, get changed, get swept away, and get hurt, may acquire both decausative and passive interpretation depending on the presence of a causer in the semantic structure of the construction and the possibility of its explicit coding in a by-phrase. In examples (34)–(37) the passive gradient is noticeable in all four sentences: the least passive-like is the first decausative example, and the last example is clearly passive.

One of her fellow students waits in the wings with a sheet of fire-retardant fabric in the event one of the rigs gets wrapped around a leg or arm and ignites clothing or hair.

Usually the talent is there but they don’t always know the business, and it gets jammed up so people don’t go as high as they should go, he said.

Issues that need to be discussed and not get swept under the carpet because the person doesn’t want to bring up something that might upset the loved one.

Ryan Smyth got hurt bad by Jack Johnson.

It has been shown that cross-linguistically middle markers often extend to mark passive diathesis as well (Kemmer 1988:275; Geniušiene 1987:261-271; Haspelmath 1990; Fleisher 2006). This fact could support Fleisher’s (2006) proposal for the inchoative to passive historical development of get+pp constructions. Furthermore, it may explain the general observation that get-passives co-occur with an agentive by-phrase far less commonly than be-passives (Givón & Yang 1994:141; Collins 1996:50; Carter & McCarthy 1999:51). It runs counter, however, to the evidence that the get-passive occurs more often with a human subject, who retains some responsibility for the event and predominantly codes adverasive situations (Chappell 1980:417; Givón & Yang 1994:139), which may be viewed as a consequence of the get-passive developing from reflexive causative get+pp construction (he got himself promoted), as Givón and Yang (1994) argue. Therefore we assume that the development of get+pp constructions along the continuum from middle (inchoative) to passive was complex and multilayered.

Conclusion

In this article we suggest that the distinction between the verbal and adjectival interpretation of get+pp constructions drawn by Huddleston (1984:445) and Huddleston and Pullum (2002:1441) derives from different construals of the same event structure. The beginning of the result state is emphasized in the “adjectival passive” constructions, which code middle diathesis. Unlike passives, middle get+pp constructions highlight the change itself; in other words, get, due to its inchoative semantics, codes the change that brings about the result state. Nonpassive get+pp constructions have
often been labeled “inchoative” without much explanation of the term. We use the term *inchoativity* in relation to event structure of the verb. According to Haspelmath (1993:90), “inchoative verb meaning excludes a causing agent and presents the situation as occurring spontaneously.” In English, it is *get* that denotes the beginning of such a spontaneous situation that results in the affectedness of the participant (Arce-Arenales, Axelrod, & Fox 1994:15). Therefore, *get* serves as a detransitivizing device that weakens the transitivity of the verb. This is evident in central middle *get*+pp constructions where *get* ascribes affectedness to the subject referent without diminishing its agentivity (e.g., *get* dressed).

If central middle constructions are characterized by the preservation of the agentivity of the subject referent, in the peripheral middle domain the agentivity gradually disappears. In situations with decreased agentivity of the subject, especially in the decausative *get*+pp constructions with inanimate subjects, *get* marks the beginning of a spontaneous event, presenting it as autonomous. Here, the inchoative *get* marks a nonagentive initiation of an event with an affected subject participant. This property of *get* to deagentivize and thereby induce affectedness on the subject has contributed to its spread into the passive voice domain. In fact, the semantics of affectedness of the subject referent in the peripheral middles creates a possibility of an implicature of an external cause, in spite of the noncausative nature of the “middle” situations. We believe that this “causal” implicature is strengthened in certain contexts as the construction spreads from autonomous to nonautonomous situations that cannot be conceptualized without a causer. This is what provides a semantic link between noncausative *get*-middles and causative *get*-passives. Nevertheless, the difference between *get*-passive and middle *get*+pp constructions is significant and can be attributed to the inchoativity of *get* which, in the absence of a causer, highlights the onset of a resultative situation.

Our research has shown that *get*+past participle constructions can be analyzed as a diathesis continuum from active to passive poles and thus demonstrates the link between the middle and passive *get*+pp constructions. Most importantly, we have explained why some of the so-called *get*-passives should be treated as middle voice constructions. They express the same type of situations that are rendered by middle voice grammatical constructions in other languages. English uses several strategies to code middle diathesis, intransitive and unaccusative being the most frequent. However, it also uses *get*+pp constructions, especially in the peripheral middle domain. Recognizing the status of these *get*+pp constructions and highlighting their properties within the middle domain, as well as their relation to the *get*-passive, would help scholars to better understand the much debated nature of *get*-passives.

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Notes

1. The differences between the be-passive and get-passive are beyond the scope of this article.
2. This and all other numbered examples in the article are taken from the Corpus of Contemporary American English (http://www.americancorpus.org/). Italics have been added.
3. In Huddleston & Pullum (2002:1440) and Huddleston (1984:444) these constructions are discussed under the heading “get-passives.” Collins (1996) distinguishes central from other types of get-passives, such as psychological get-passives, reciprocal/reflexive get-passives, and so on.
4. Langacker (1991:283) calls it the billiard ball model. The simplest action chain is the one where the head (causer) and the tail (affected entity) interact directly.
5. Geniušiene (1987) refines Xolodovič’s definition of diathesis by adding to his syntactic and semantic correspondences the analysis on the referential level, which enables her to capture the full array of fine distinctions between the various meanings of the reflexive constructions in Lithuanian and cross-linguistically.
6. This view is also characteristic of classical definitions of diathesis and voice (Benvinist 1975).
7. A distinction should be made between middle voice and what is called “middle constructions” in English. The latter term is usually used for potential generic constructions such as “The books sell well,” which have derived from transitive verbs. Middle voice, in contrast, is used in the literature (e.g., Kemmer 1988, 1993, among others) to refer to a type of diathesis that comprises a set of different intransitive constructions such as reflexive, reciprocal, decausative, potential, and so on.
8. It has to be pointed out that all get+pp constructions, including get-passives, are relatively rare in English (Collins 1996; Carter & McCarthy 1999:49), except for a few constructions frequent in colloquial use, usually regarded as idiomatic expressions. As the purpose of this research was identification of the possible meanings expressed by nonpassive get+pp constructions, statistical analysis of the occurrence of various types was not carried out. The general impression is that passive usage is more frequent than the nonpassive, but there are also many indeterminate cases.
9. Givón and Yang (1994:144-145) suggest that the detransitivization process proceeded in two steps: (a) from the causative get-construction to the causative reflexive via reflexivization (She got him to be admitted → She got herself to be admitted) and (b) from the causative reflexive to the intransitive middle. The intransitive middle, in turn, gave rise to both get-passive and inchoative middle get-constructions via dereflexivization and morphological simplification (She got herself to be admitted → She got to be admitted → She got admitted).
10. Potents are “referents capable of performing actions or causing changes as they possess a force of their own” (Geniušiene 1987:45).

11. According to Kemmer (1988, 1993), middle voice comprises situation types involving one participant with a dual role, both agent and undergoer, coalesced with a lower degree of distinguishability than in the reflexive situations. The central middle domain is situated on the active pole between the prototypically transitive and intransitive situations. It comprises events such as (a) body actions: grooming (wash, dress, shave, bathe), change in body posture (sit down, lie down, kneel down), nontranslational motion (stretch out, turn around) and translational motion (fly, go away from, move, climb); (b) cognitive events: emotive speech (complain, pray, blame), other speech actions (confess, boast), emotion (be frightened, be angry, take pleasure), and complex cognitive events (believe, forget, remember, suspect). The same middle markers are often used for situations in which the active role of the participant diminishes (peripheral middle domain). Such situations depart from the active pole inclining toward the passive one. They comprise (a) spontaneous events (die, sink, develop, become light, change, dissolve, grow, burst, spread out, melt, split), (b) facilitative (can be eaten/washed), and (c) impersonal (generic agent constructions: one says/doesn’t do that, one talks a lot here). Related to the middle situations are the reciprocal ones (meet, fight, greet, wrestle, embrace, gather, merge) and the indirect middle (buy/build a house for oneself, choose/acquire for oneself).


13. According to Kemmer (1994:197), translational motion involves change of place of an animate entity, whereas nontranslational motion refers to a change of body position.

14. Compare the use of the reflexive pronoun versus clitic in Russian: rugatj sebya ‘scold oneself’ versus rugatjysya ‘argue.’

15. Autonomous situations are understood as “processes or states that occur by themselves and require no external causation, and therefore do not constitute part of a causative (macrosituation)” (Geniušiene 1987:99-100).

16. This is also characteristic of some other peripheral middles such as get drunk.


18. Ergative (or unaccusative) verbs have an internal but no external argument, while unergative verbs have an external but no internal argument (Levin & Rappaport Hovav 1995:3).

19. These reflexive constructions are often treated as idiomatic expressions.

References


**Bios**

**Liljana Mitkovska** is professor of linguistics in the Department of Modern Languages at FON University (Skopje, Macedonia). Her research interests include investigation in both theoretical and applied linguistics. She has published several textbooks on foreign language teaching and a series of articles on voice phenomena and possession in Macedonian, Bulgarian, and English.

**Eleni Bužarovska** is professor of linguistics in the English department at the University of Cyril & Methodius (Skopje, Macedonia). Her research reflects her special interests in syntax, semantics, and pragmatics of English and Balkan languages. Apart from coauthoring two textbooks, she has edited a book in the field of areal linguistics and published a number of articles on grammaticalization and language change.