

The *Get*-Passive and Its Uses

Kenji SONODA¹

Abstract Not all the *get*+ed participle forms are true passives. Many of them are not in the passive voice. For instance, *get hurt*, *get dressed*, *get lost*, etc. are not in the passive voice. However, of the *get*+ed participle forms there are some that look morphologically like passives but in fact they are not, and vice versa. For example, is *get born* a true passive? What about *get involved* (*in*)? It is these seemingly confusing *get*+ed participle forms that I am here concerned with. I take up 10 of these *get*+ed participle forms here. As for *get born*, it seems not to be a passive structure. In regard to *get involved*, and *get involved in*, either they are passive or they are not passive, depending on passivity.

The *get*-passive is used in a number of ways. For instance, it can be used without a *by*-phrase more frequently than the *be*-passive. Yet sometimes it can be followed by a *by*-phrase. When is it followed by a *by*-phrase? The *get*-passive, it seems to me, is followed by a *by*-phrase chiefly when the speaker is afraid that without the *by*-phrase the hearer or the reader might fail to comprehend fully what he is going to say. And it must be added further that besides the use of a *by*-phrase, some other uses of the *get*-passive are referred to here.

Bull. Sch. Allied Med. Sci., Nagasaki Univ. 10: 1-7, 1996

Key Words : The *get*-passive, Its uses, Colloquialism

1. Introduction

First I make an attempt to distinguish the true *get*-passives from other *get*+ed participle forms that are not in the passive voice, for of the *get*+ed participle constructions, there are not a few that seem not so clear as to whether or not they can be considered as passive. Among these are numbered *get born*, *get carried away*, *get involved* (*in*), etc. Ten of these *get*+ed participle forms are discussed here.

With regard to the uses of the *get*-passive, many grammars give an explanation of them. However, most of them tend to be sketchy and cursory. Accordingly I give a more detailed description of them as possibly as I can, giving citations as often as possible.

2. *Get born*, *Get carried away*, *Get embroiled in* (*with*), *Get involved*, *Get involved in* (*with*), *Get married*, *Get started*, *Get wrapped up in*

2.1. *Get born*

Get born is always used in this *get*+past

participle form. It has no active equivalent, and it is not followed by a *by*-phrase¹⁾

- (1) a. *My mother bore me.
- b. *I got born by my mother.

Get born is in actual use like the following:

- (2) a. ... so this man could get home and see his niece get born and have this wonderful sense of achievement.
(Ina Yalof, *Life and Death*)
- b. The normal hero gets born only in vol. iv and breeched in vol. vi.
(Visser (1984: 2033))

Although many grammars consider *get born* as passive, this is doubtful. It has no passive meaning. *Born* in *get born* has a weak verbal power and it has an adjectival meaning, and *get* in *get born* is almost a copular verb similar in meaning to "become". *The OED2* says something to the same effect with reference to *be born*:

1 The Department of General Education, the School of Allied Medical Sciences, Nagasaki University

- (3) ... it has rather a neuter signification = "come into existence, sprung" without explicit reference to maternal action; hence it is the form used adjectively, and figuratively. (OED2, s.v. bear 4)

LDOCE3 goes one step further and says that *born* in *be born* is an adjective (s.v. born). It would thus be appropriate to say that *get born* is not a passive form.

2.2. *Get carried away*

Get carried away is used in two ways like (4a) and (4b):

- (4) a. The bridge got carried away by the flood.
b. We got carried away by the beauty of the music. (LDOCE3, s.v. carry)

The original meaning of *get carried away* is suggested in (4a). (4b) is its figurative use. (4a) has an active counterpart like (5a), yet normally an active construction is not possible with (4b) (cf. OALD5, s.v. carry):

- (5) a. The flood carried away the bridge.
b. *The beauty of the music carried us away.

(4a) and (4b) are passive sentences, as will be seen by the existence of the *by*-phrases. Then what about (6) that has no *by*-phrase?

- (6) He tends to get carried away when watching wrestling on TV.
(OALD5, s.v. carry)

(6) is ambiguous because either it is interpreted as a passive sentence or it is not. In (6), if passivity is to be felt on the part of the subject, then this is a passive sentence. If passivity is not to be felt on the part of the subject, then this is not a passive sentence. In the latter case, *get* is a copula and *carried* is an adjective.²⁾

2.3. *Get embroiled in (with)*

Get embroiled in is followed by a thing:

- (7) I don't want to get embroiled in their

quarrels.

Get embroiled in is either a passive form or it is not. For instance, in (7), if passivity is to be felt on the part of the subject, it is a passive. If passivity is not to be felt on the part of the subject, it is not a passive, and in this case *embroiled* is an adjective and *get* is a copula that can be replaced by "become" like (8):

- (8) I don't want to become/get embroiled in their quarrels. (OALD5, s.v. embroil)

Get embroiled with can be followed by a person like (9a) or a thing like (9b). In either case, it is not a passive. No passivity is to be felt on the part of the subject in either case; *get* is a copula that can be replaced by "become", and *embroiled* is an adjective. Moreover, (9a) and (9b) have no precise active counterparts; (10a) and (10b) tend to unacceptability:

- (9) a. I often become (get) embroiled with my superiors.
(The Kenkyusha Dict. of English Collocations)
b. He gets often embroiled with the law as a result of his violent temper.
(10) a. ?*My superiors often embroil me.
b. *The law often embroils him as a result of his violent temper.

2.4. *Get involved, get involved in (with)*

When passivity is to be felt on the part of the subject, *get involved* and *get involved in* are passive forms. When passivity is not to be felt on the part of the subject, they are not passive forms: in this case, *get* is a copula similar in meaning to "become", and *involved* is an adjective. Sometimes the same sentence can be interpreted either passively or non-passively:

- (11) a. He got politically involved.
b. He got involved in the war (quarrels).

In (11a) and (11b), when passivity is not to be felt on the part of the subject, this sentence is not a passive sentence. When passivity is to be felt on the part of the subject, this is a passive sentence.

Get involved with is followed by a person or a

thing:

- (12) a. It is hard for me not to get emotionally involved with our patients.
(Ina Yalof, *Life and Death*)
b. After what he had been through — major contracts with the Teamsters, and getting involved with milk strikes in New York — he thought this job was a joke. (ibid.)

Get involved with seems not to be used in the passive whether it is followed by a person or a thing, because *get involved with* in (12a) and (12b) has no passive meaning; passivity is not to be felt on the part of the subject in this structure. *Get* in *get involved with* is thus a copular verb and *involved* in this structure is an adjective.³⁾

2.5. *Get married*

Get married has no passive meaning at all. It is not a passive expression. *Married* in *get married* is an adjective. *OALD5* deals with *married* in *get married* as an adjective (married 1a) and gives the following instance:

- (13) Rachel and David are getting married on Saturday.

LDOCE3 also treats the word *married* in *get married* as an adjective (s.v. married 1) and gives the following instance:

- (14) We're getting married next month.

The word *get* in *get married* is a copular verb similar in meaning to "become" (cf. *LDOCE3*, s.v. get 14).

2.6. *Get started*

The subject of *get started* is either a person (15a) or a thing (15b):

- (15) a. I could hardly wait to get started.
b. I'm not sure how it all got started.
(Ina Yalof, *Life and Death*)

LDOCE3 treats *get started* as an idiom (s.v. start 1, 2). It defines *get started* as follows: when the subject is a person, *get started* means "start

doing something, especially when you have not been able to do anything yet, or have been lazy" (s.v. start 1), and gives the following instance:

- (16) We better get started if we want to finish this job by midday.

When the subject is a thing, it means "start happening, especially after a delay" (*LDOCE3*, s.v. start 2). "Finally" in (17) implies that it was after a delay that the match started:

- (17) The match finally got started at 2:30 p.m.
(*LDOCE3*, s.v. start 2)

In this way, *get started* is not a passive form whether its subject is a person or a thing.

2.7. *Get wrapped up in*

Get wrapped up in is used like the following:

- (18) While I was in medical school, I'm sure I was very selfish at times ... and if I got wrapped up in myself, she seemed to understand. (Ina Yalof, *Life and Death*)

Get wrapped up in is not in the passive voice. *Wrapped up* is an adjective: *COBUILD2* treats *wrapped up* as a separate headword and as an adjective. Because it is an adjective, it can be modified with "very":

- (19) New mothers can get very wrapped up in their baby without realising it.
(*COBUILD2*, s.v. wrapped up)

3. Some Uses of the *Get*-Passive

3.1. Colloquialism

Because the *get*-passive is mainly used in a conversation, normally the sentence with a *get*-passive is rather short.

- (20) a. But sometimes I'm glad I got arrested.
(*Harper's*)
b. But we still get hijacked when we are off guard. (*TIME*)

However, lengthy sentences are found occasionally:

- (21) a. But little gets said about how we might persuade Americans who make more than \$50,000 a year to take more notice of the desperate situation of their fellow citizens who make less than \$20,000. (*Harper's*)
 b. Yet rogue campaigns get called what they are only when the perpetrators are caught red-handed. (*ibid.*)

(21a) and (21b) seem awkward because the *get*-passive, which is chiefly used in a conversation, is used here in written formal style.

3.2. Short, sudden actions

The *get*-passive is mainly used in short, sudden, unplanned actions that happen only once:

- (22) a. Then all of a sudden you get notified of an expiration and it's him.
 (*Ina Yalof, Life and Death*)
 b. The gunshots, stabbings, somebody falls out of a window ... somebody's eye gets knocked out. (*ibid.*)

Yet it should also be noted that, though fewer in number, the *get*-passive is also used when we talk about repeated, longer, planned, deliberate actions:

- (23) a. John Rife, 54, of Waimanalo, Hawaii, was getting clobbered by everything from virulent pneumonia to malignant lymphoma. (*TIME*)
 b. Through the years, my crew got gradually whittled down to three men. It seems the first one to go is always the gardener.
 (*Ina Yalof, Life and Death*)
 c. Besides, Klein said, he would consider himself lucky if it even got reviewed. (*Newsweek*)
 d. Nobody gets put under anesthesia to have a baby anymore.
 (*Ina Yalof, Life and Death*)

The *get*-passive in (23a) shows that John Rife was suffering from one disease after another. The *get*-passive in (23b) denotes a longer, deliberate action as shown in part by "gradually," and the *get*-passives in (23c) and (23d) connote intentional,

complicated actions.

3.3. A *by*-phrase

Normally, the *get*-passive is not followed by *by* +agent because this passive is often used in contexts where the meanings are obvious without the *by*-phrases, or where the *by*-phrases are unnecessary, or unknown, or unimportant. In the *get*-passive, it is the subject, and not a *by*-phrase, that is of importance:

- (24) a. I became so absorbed in journalism that I applied to Columbia and I got accepted....
 (*Ina Yalof, Life and Death*)
 b. But I put nine thousand applications and never, never got hired. (*ibid.*)

Yet there are instances where a *by*-phrase comes after the *get*-passive. *By*-phrases seem to be used mostly in cases where the subject suspects that without the *by*-phrases the hearer or the reader may find it difficult to understand fully what he is going to say:

- (25) a. And I go canoeing in the wilderness...to get away from all this craziness. I love it. I sleep on the ground. Get bitten by bugs. Catch fish.
 (*Ina Yalof, Life and Death*)
 b. And Grandpa was one of the few men I had ever seen cry. He wept when Bruce, our collie, got bit by a snake and almost died,... (*Reader's Digest*)
 (26) Now I'm back in the old ways; I just come in and I go home. Every once in a while, though, I'll get invited to a party by people I met during the strike.
 (*Ina Yalof, Life and Death*)
 (27) Along the way, he got sidetracked by the story of the Donner Party, and interrupted his research to shoot a documentary on the subject. (*The New Yorker*)
 (28) It's a testament to the sullen, wary pride of Michael Jai White's performance that when Tyson gets floored by Buster Douglas in Japan, and sprawled on the canvas, fumbles for his mouth guard, you feel a true pang of sympathy. (*ibid.*)

In (25a) and (25b), the meanings of *get bitten* (*bit*) could become blurry without *by bugs* or *by a snake*, for without these *by*-phrases it would not be clear by what each of the subjects is bitten. This is also the case in (26)(27)(28), where without the *by*-phrases what is meant by the *get*-passives would be likely to be ambiguous.

3.4. An unfavorable meaning

The *get*-passive is normally used to talk about things unfavorable to the subject:

- (29) a. I asked him, "What happened? How did you get shot?"

(Ina Yalof, *Life and Death*)

- b. He thought, "What's all this you hear about getting stabbed not hurting?"

(*Reader's Digest*)

Numerous instances with bad implication can be found with the *get*-passive: *get arrested*, *get bitten* (*bit*), *get busted*, *get caught*, *get cut up*, *get delayed*, *get fired*, *get fooled*, *get hanged*, *get held up*, *get hijacked*, *get knocked out*, *get overheard*, *get rained out*, *get run over*, *get spanked*, *get sucked*, *get trashed*, etc.

The *get*-passive is also used to talk about things favorable to the subject like (30a) and (30b). And it is also used neutrally, that is, without any connotation of good or bad to the subject like (31a) and (31b):

- (30) a. I became so absorbed in journalism that I applied to Columbia. I got accepted and even got a scholarship

(Ina Yalof, *Life and Death*)

- b. If one of us recruits another RN, we get paid three hundred bucks. (ibid.)

- (31) a. That signal gets passed on to neuron No.30, and on and on.

(*Reader's Digest*)

- b. We have two categories of baked goods; some get sold in the cafeteria and others go to the patients.

(Ina Yalof, *Life and Death*)

3.5. The problem of responsibility

It is generally agreed that, in the *get*-passive, it is the subject, not the agent, that has the responsibility for an action.

Numerous examples attest to this:

- (32) a. Once I got turned in for watering the flowers! (ibid.)

- b. But usually people make their own bad luck by regularly getting trapped in self-defeating attitudes and behavior.

(*Reader's Digest*)

But again there is an exception to this. (33) implies that it is not the responsibility of the coal miners that they are not paid. It suggests that it is capitalism that is to blame:

- (33) The harshness of the transition has produced fury. In the coal-mining regions of northern Russia, men in the pits went months without getting paid earlier this year. Many pension payments have also been late. If capitalism doesn't stand for a decent day's pay for a decent day's work ... "then what does it stand for?" asks a bitter Lyudmila Sakharova, a retired Muscovite who'll vote for Zyuganov.

(*Newsweek*)

4. Conclusion

Get born is not a passive form. *Get carried away* is a passive if it is followed by a *by*-phrase. If it is not followed by a *by*-phrase, either it is a passive or it is not, depending on passivity. *Get embroiled in* is either a passive form, or it is not. *Get embroiled with* is not a passive form. *Get involved (in)* is either a passive form or it is not, depending on passivity. *Get involved with* is not in the passive voice. *Get married*, *get started*, *get wrapped up in* are not passive forms.

With regard to the uses of the *get*-passive, although there are other uses of the *get*-passive other than those mentioned here, I paid special attention to five uses, which I thought are main characteristics of the *get*-passive. I also made reference to exceptions to these normal uses.

The *get*-passive, which first appeared in the middle of the 17th century, has come to be used to signify a dynamic meaning because the *be*-passive has been ambiguous since the *be*-passive signifies either a dynamic meaning or a stative meaning. However, the *get*-passive has limitations as shown in part here because its uses are highly restricted to

an informal everyday conversation or to conversational colloquial style and it is seldom used in written formal style. As a result, the *be*-passive is still used in written formal style and even in an informal conversation to denote a dynamic meaning as well as a stative meaning. The *get*-passive does have thus limitations, yet when it is used, it adds a sprightly, crisp touch to a sentence.

Notes

1. The reason why *get born* is never followed by a *by*-phrase would be that it is all too evident without it.
2. When *get carried away* has a passive meaning, the Japanese equivalent would be "... *ni-miserareru*" or "... *ni-kokoro-o-ubawareru*". When it does not have a passive meaning, the Japanese equivalent would be "... *ni-muchu-ni-naru*" or "... *ni-uttori-suru*".
3. When *get involved*, *get involved in* have a passive meaning, the Japanese equivalent would be "... *ni-makikomareru*". When they do not have a passive meaning, the Japanese equivalent would be "... *to-(ni-)kakawaru*".

References

- Ando, Sadao, and Yamada Masayoshi. 1995. *The Kenkyusha Dictionary of Contemporary English Usage*. Tokyo: Kenkyusha.
- Bolinger, D. 1980. *Language — The Loaded Weapon*. London: Longman.
- Declerck, R. 1991. *A Comprehensive Descriptive Grammar of English*. Tokyo: Kaitakusha.
- Egawa, Taiichiro. 1991. *A New Guide to English Grammar*. 2nd ed. Tokyo: Kaneko-shobo.
- Greenbaum, Sidney, and Randolph Quirk. 1990. *A Student's Grammar of the English Language*. London: Longman.
- Palmer, F. R. 1988. *The English Verb*. 2nd ed. London: Longman.
- Quirk et al. 1985. *A Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language*. London: Longman.
- Swan, Michael. 1995. *Practical English Usage*. 2nd ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Visser, F. Th. 1984. *An Historical Syntax of the English Language*. Vol. 3. Leiden: E. J. Brill.
- Yasui, Minoru. 1982. *A Better Guide to English Grammar*. Tokyo: Kaitakusha.

Dictionaries:

- COBUILD2 = *Collins Cobuild English Dictionary*. 2nd ed.
- The OED2 = *The Oxford English Dictionary*. 2nd ed.
- OALD5 = *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary*. 5th ed.
- LDOCE3 = *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English*. 3rd ed.

Get 受動態とその用法

園 田 健 二¹

1 長崎大学医療技術短期大学部一般教育等

要 旨 本稿では get 受動態のうち受動態であるかどうかの判別がやや難かしいと思われる get born, get carried away, get involved (in) など10の get+p.p. 形についてこれらが受動態に属するか属しないかを論じ、あわせて、get 受動態のいくつかの用法を多くの引用を交えながら論じた。

長崎大医療技短大紀 10: 1-7, 1996