

THE DERIVATION OF THE *GET*-PASSIVE IN ENGLISH

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1. Introduction

This paper is concerned with the derivation of the English *get*-passive such as (1b) below.

- (1) a. John *was* killed in a war.
b. John *got* killed in an accident. (Haegeman 1985: 53)

There has been extensive discussion on the syntax and semantics of English *get*-passives in both traditional and generative grammars. In traditional grammar, *get*-passives are treated simply as variants of canonical *be*-passives (Jespersen 1933, Quirk et al. 1972, Stein 1979). On the other hand, in generative grammar, Haegeman (1985) casts doubt on this traditional assumption and demonstrates that the passive *get* and the passive *be* differ in their syntactic properties: the passive *get* fails all the formal syntactic tests standardly used to determine auxiliary status of verbal elements. In the framework of minimalist syntax, Fleisher (2008) develops Haegeman's (1985) approach and argues that the passive *get* belongs to the functional head v_{pass} based on observations about quantifier stranding, discriminating the structure of the passive *get* and that of the causative *get*. Haegeman (1985) and Fleisher (2008) are classified as raising approaches. In this paper, however, following Thompson and Scheepers (2013), I argue that the *get*-passive involves control and analyze it in terms of Form Copy (Chomsky 2021, Saito 2022).

This paper is structured as follows. Section 2 takes Haegeman (1985) as a starting point for discussion, and then looks at Fleisher

(2008). Section 3, following Thompson and Scheepers (2013), argues that the English *get*-passive involves control (Lasnik and Fiengo 1974, Huang 1999, Butler and Tsoulas 2006, Reed 2011, Thompson and Scheepers 2013) and analyzes it in terms of Form Copy (Chomsky 2021, Saito 2022). Section 4 concludes the paper.

2. Raising Approaches

2.1 Haegeman (1985)

Haegeman (1985) enumerates various uses of *get* in English as follows.

- (2) a. John *got* killed in an accident.
- b. He *got* his girlfriend invited to all important meetings.
- c. Bill *got* very impatient with his girlfriend.
- d. Bill *got* Susan a book on economics.
- e. Susan *got* a book on economics. (Haegeman 1985: 53-54)

(2a) has attracted particular attention as the *get*-passive in the literature. Early authors such as Jespersen (1933), Quirk et al. (1972), and Stein (1979) treat the *get*-passive as simply a variant of the canonical *be*-passive, categorizing *get* as a passive auxiliary. Translated into the current syntactic framework, the traditional observations imply that *get* in its passive use is generated under I/T. Haegeman (1985), however, demonstrates that *get* is not of the category AUXILIARY, but rather is a full lexical verb. She shows that in contrast to the passive *be* and the perfective *have*, both of which belong to the category AUXILIARY, *get* is incompatible with Negative Contraction (3c), Subject-Aux Inversion (4c), and VP-Deletion (5c).

- (3) a. He hasn't left the house.
- b. He wasn't killed.
- c. *He gotn't killed.

- (4) a. Has he left the house?
 b. Was he killed?
 c. *Got he killed?
- (5) a. John has left the house and Mary has too.
 b. John was killed in an accident and Bill was too.
 c. *John got killed in an accident and Bill got too.
 (Haegeman 1985: 54-55)

These data indicate that *get* in its passive use fails all the formal syntactic tests for determining auxiliary status of verbal elements. *Get*, like all lexical verbs, requires *do*-support, as illustrated in (6a-c) below.

- (6) a. He didn't get killed.
 b. Did he get killed?
 c. John got killed in an accident and Bill did too.
 (Haegeman 1985: 55)

These data demonstrate that *get* is not an auxiliary verb, but rather is a full lexical verb (cf. Huddleston 1984). Thus, *get*-passives cannot be regarded as simple variants of canonical *be*-passives.

Having shown that *get* is a full lexical verb, Haegeman (1985) argues that it is an ergative verb that takes a passive small-clause (SC) complement, as illustrated in (7b).

- (7) a. His girlfriend got invited (to all the parties).
 b. His girlfriend_i got [SC t_i [invited t_i]].
 (adapted from Haegeman 1985: 69)

Invited is a passive participle. Hence, it does not assign accusative Case to its object (Chomsky 1981). The DP *his girlfriend* must therefore undergo movement in search of Case. According to Haegeman (1985), it must move through the subject position of the SC. This is because the lowest trace, being an anaphor, must be bound in its Governing Category, namely the SC (Chomsky 1981). Since *get* is an

ergative verb, it assigns neither accusative Case nor an Agent theta-role. Thus, *his girlfriend* moves from the intermediate position to the matrix subject position to receive nominative Case. Note that this movement is licit because no theta-role is assigned to the subject position of *get*.

Haegeman (1985) concludes that while the *get*-passive is partly indeed a passive, through the presence of the passive morphology, it is an ergative construction with *get* an ergative verb.

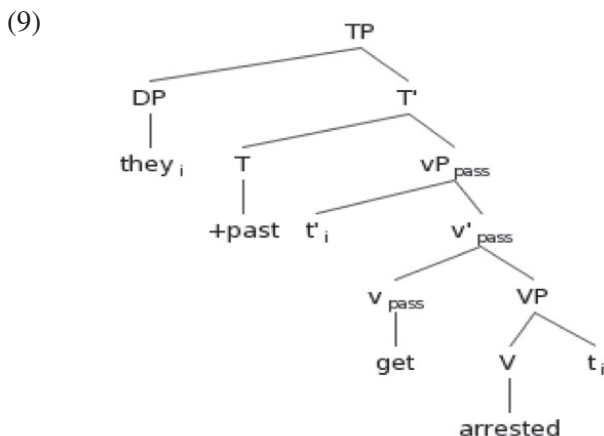
2.2 Fleisher (2008)

Fleisher (2008) argues that there is reason to question whether the intermediate trace in (7b) is well-motivated for the *get*-passive because a stranded quantifier cannot occur in the relevant position, as shown below (cf. Downing 1996).

(8) *They got all arrested. (Fleisher 2008: 60)

Under the stranding analysis of quantifier float (Sportiche 1988), *all* would be expected to appear in the intermediate trace position in (7b). However, (8) is ungrammatical, a mystery under the Haegeman-style derivation. Fleisher (2008) also notes that the well-known restriction against floating a quantifier in a θ -position cannot be invoked here because the intermediate position in (7b) is not a θ -position.

In order to explain the ungrammaticality of (8), Fleisher (2008) assumes that *get* is merged not as a V but as a passive *v* head (v_{pass}) which takes a VP as its complement (cf. Alexiadou 2005). The syntactic structure he proposes is the following.



(Fleisher 2008: 61)

In (9), *get* is directly merged under the functional head v_{pass} . Therefore, there is no syntactic position between *get* and the V *arrested* to which the DP *they* can move. This, Fleisher (2008) argues, straightforwardly accounts for the ungrammaticality of quantifier stranding in (8).

What is noteworthy in (9) is that the DP *they* moves through $\text{Spec}vP_{\text{pass}}$ on its way to $\text{Spec}TP$. This is motivated by the fact that the quantifier *all* can be stranded between T and *get*, as shown in (10b).

- (10) a. *They DID [vP [get all arrested]].
 b. They DID [vP all [get arrested]]. (Fleisher 2008: 62)

The grammaticality of (10b) clearly argues for an intermediate landing site between T and *get* and also for the phasehood of a passive vP . That is, in order for the DP *they* to move to the matrix subject position, it must first move to the edge of the phase, as required by the Phase Impenetrability Condition (Chomsky 2000, 2001).

Applying Legate's (2003) phasehood tests to the passive *get*, Fleisher (2008) presents empirical evidence showing that a DP complement of the passive participle moves through the edge of v_{pass} . Consider

the following two examples.

(11) LEGATE'S RECONSTRUCTION TEST:

[At which of the parties that he_i invited $Mary_j$ to] did every man_i [vP ✓ get introduced to her_j *] ?

(12) LEGATE'S ANTECEDENT-CONTAINED DELETION TEST:

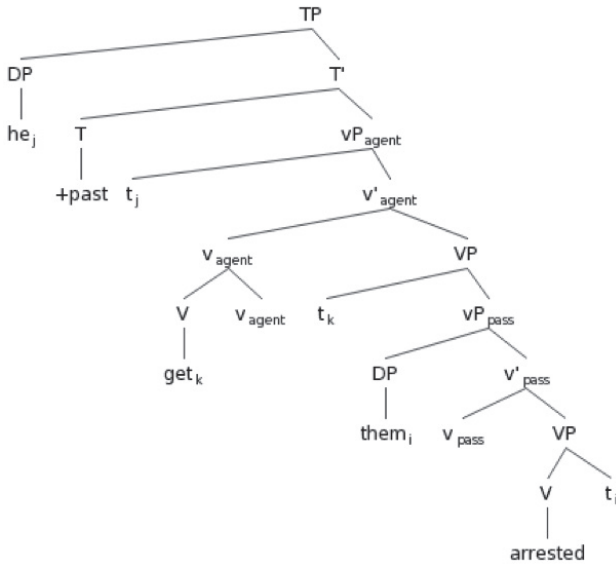
Mary didn't [$vP1$ get introduced to [DP anyone you did [$vP2$ e]]].
(Fleisher 2008: 66)

In (11), the *wh*-phrase must be reconstructed to the check-marked position in order to allow the quantified expression *every man* to bind the variable *he* while at the same time preventing *Mary* from being illicitly bound by *her*. In (12), the DP must raise in order to be properly interpreted. It must undergo quantifier raising (QR) to a position no higher than negation, thus to the edge of $vP1$. Otherwise, the negative polarity item *anyone* would not be licensed. These data thus provide more evidence that vP_{pass} constitutes a phase.

Fleisher (2008) also argues that the structure of the so-called causative *get* like (13a) is a bit different from that of the passive *get*, as illustrated in (13b).

(13) a. He got them arrested. (Fleisher 2008: 59)

b.



(Fleisher 2008: 63)

In the causative *get*, v_{pass} is left unoccupied. In this structure, *get* is a full lexical verb and selects the passive vP_{pass} as its complement. The object of the passive participle *arrested* undergoes movement from the complement of V into $\text{Spec}vP_{\text{pass}}$. According to Fleisher (2008), the object DP *them* is able to check its Case in that position, either via exceptional Case marking (ECM) by *get* (or perhaps by the agentive v) or via an equivalent raising-to-object mechanism.

To recapitulate, the primary motivation for treating *get* in its passive use as a functional element v_{pass} comes from the unacceptability of quantifier stranding in (8). For Fleisher (2008), the fact that (8) is judged to be unacceptable indicates the absence of a trace position in which to merge the quantifier *all*, leading to the conclusion that the passive *get* and the causative *get* should be structurally discriminated.

Although Fleisher's (2008) approach readily accounts for the unacceptability of quantifier stranding in (10a), it introduces a new assumption regarding the status of the passive *get*. That is, the passive

get behaves not as a full lexical verb but as a functional element v_{pass} . However, it would be more desirable if we were able to treat *get* (in its all uses) as a full lexical verb generated under V.

3. The Derivation of the *Get*-Passive

3.1 *Get*-Passives as Control: Thompson and Scheepers (2013)

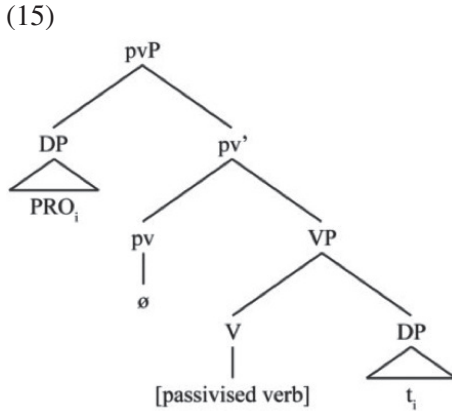
Haegeman (1985) and Fleisher (2008) are classified as raising approaches. Both assume that the complement DP of the passive participle undergoes movement into the matrix subject position. On the other hand, there have been proponents of a control approach to the *get*-passive (Lasnik and Fiengo 1974, Huang 1999, Butler and Tsoulas 2006, Reed 2011, Thompson and Scheepers 2013). It has been well observed that the subject in the *get*-passive can be attributed some kind of responsibility for initiating the action described by the verb (for semantic and/or pragmatic properties of the *get*-passive, see Hatcher 1949, Lakoff 1971, Palmer 1974, Chappell 1980, Sussex 1982, Cameron 1990, Givón and Yang 1994, Collins 1996, Downing 1996, Sasaki 1999, Marín Arrese 1999, Carter and McCarthy 1999, among others). Comparing the canonical *be*-passive and the *get*-passive, Huddleston (1984) states that *get* lends itself more readily than *be* to the imputation to the subject-referent of some measure of initiative or responsibility.

- (14) a. Ed got arrested.
 b. Ed was arrested. (Huddleston 1984: 445)

Huddleston (1984) observes that if the subject *Ed* deliberately sought arrest or was careless in allowing it to happen, *get* is more likely to be used. The subject responsibility interpretation of the *get*-passive can be properly explained by a control structure, where *get* assigns its external theta-role to the base-generated subject, which controls PRO in the embedded clause.

In this line of research, Thompson and Scheepers (2013) propose

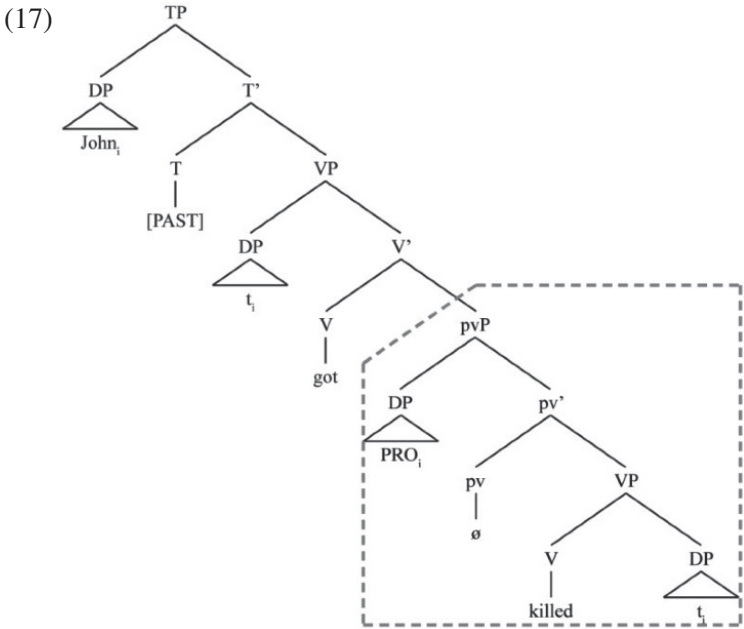
a control structure for the English *get*-passive. They assume that “the passive” is a self-contained unit, a specific phrase that can be merged as a verbal complement, as shown below.



(Thompson and Scheepers 2013: 86)

The head of this phrase is pv^0 , which Thompson and Scheepers (2013) call the *passive light-verb*. The head pv^0 is phonetically null, forming a complex predicate with a verb phrase (VP) headed by the passivized verb. The complement of the passivized verb is the phonetically null anaphor PRO, which, under Thompson and Scheepers’s (2013) analysis, undergoes movement into the specifier position of the pvP (for EPP reasons). In the following *get*-passive (16), for instance, *get* selects a subject DP and a pvP complement. The syntactic structure of (16) is shown in (17).

(16) John got killed.



(Thompson and Scheepers 2013: 88)

Under this analysis, *get* is a full lexical verb, unlike Fleisher’s (2008) approach. That is, it is the same lexeme that occurs in other *get*-constructions. The subject DP *John* is generated in the specifier of VP and then undergoes movement into the specifier of TP to receive nominative Case. According to Thompson and Scheepers (2013), the “passiveness” of the sentence comes from *get* selecting a *pvP* complement. Note that this approach correctly predicts the unacceptability of (8), repeated here as (18).

(18) *They got all arrested. (Fleisher 2008: 60)

Given the stranding analysis of quantifier float (Sportiche 1988), quantifiers can only appear grammatically in the location of a trace. As can be seen in the derivation (17), the only trace left by the subject DP *John* lies above *get*. That is why the quantifier *all* cannot appear below

get (i.e., between *get* and the passive participle).

Although Thompson and Scheepers's (2013) approach nicely accounts for the unacceptability of quantifier stranding (8) and the control nature of the *get*-passive, there is one problem with this approach. They assume that the complement of the passivized verb is the phonetically null anaphor PRO, which undergoes Internal Merge (IM) into the edge of the *pVP*. This is an operation with no visible phonological consequences. However, such an operation is banned by the following hypothesis (for empirical and theoretical discussion on OSH, see Tonoike 2008 and Takahashi 2016).

(19) *Overt Syntax Hypothesis (OSH)*:

Internal Merge carries the morphological coding of the internal element to be merged. (Tonoike 2008: 19)

OSH states that IM moves an element with a phonetic shape. Given OSH, movement of PRO is clearly at odds with it since PRO has no phonetic shape. In order to resolve this problem, I will slightly revise Thompson and Scheepers's (2013) analysis by incorporating the notion of Form Copy (Chomsky 2021). Before proceeding to show the derivation of the *get*-passive, let us briefly outline the mechanism of Form Copy.

3.2 Form Copy

Chomsky (2021) assumes that syntax is memoryless and pursues a strictly-Markovian derivation. When two identical syntactic objects show up in a syntactic derivation, we must determine whether they are copies or repetitions. It is standardly assumed that when two syntactic items are drawn from the lexicon separately, they are repetitions. In contrast, when a syntactic object is displaced from one position into another, the two identical items are copies. Under the memory-less syntax, however, the derivational history cannot be retrieved. Chomsky (2021) thus assumes that there is an operation Form Copy, which assigns the copy relation to two identical syntactic objects. In this framework, Merge is dissociated from a copy relation. Thus, IM is no

longer responsible for a copy relation. Form Copy can assign a copy relation to two identical syntactic objects created by External Merge (EM). By way of illustration, consider (20).

(20) Mary is likely [~~Mary~~ to win the prize] (Saito 2022: 160)

In (20), *Mary* undergoes IM from the embedded clause into the matrix clause. However, under the strictly-Markovian derivation, the derivational history cannot be retrieved. Thus, what is found in (20) is simply two instances of *Mary*. The operation Form Copy assigns the relation *Copy* to the two *Marys* and the lower copy deletes.

As stated above, Form Copy can also apply to two identical syntactic items that are independently introduced into the derivation via EM. Consider for example the following derivation.

(21) Mary tried [~~Mary~~ to win the prize] (ibid.)

In (21), the two *Marys* are independently introduced into the derivation via EM because movement into θ -positions is not allowed in Chomsky (2021). But Form Copy can assign the relation *Copy* to two instances of *Mary* and lower copy deletes. This is an instance of what has been called control. In the next subsection, I will put forward an analysis of the derivation of the *get*-passive based on the operation Form Copy.

3.3 The Derivation

Given the discussion so far, let us consider how we can derive the following *get*-passive.

(22) John got killed.

I follow Thompson and Scheepers (2013) in assuming that the *pvP*, a self-contained passive core, underlies the *get*-passive, but depart from them in assuming that an overt DP is merged at the complement position of the passive participle. The overt DP then undergoes IM into

the edge of the *pvP*.

(23) [_{pvP} John *pv* [_{VP} killed ~~John~~]]

Note that this does not violate OSH because the DP *John* has a phonetic shape. Form Copy identifies the two instances of *John* as copies and the lower *John* deletes. Then, *get* is introduced into the structure. What is important here is that unlike Fleisher (2008), *get* is a full lexical verb generated under V. The light verb *v* is then merged into the structure because the passive *get* constitutes a phase (Fleisher 2008). *John* is then merged into the edge of *v* via EM and receives an external θ -role. The resulting structure is then merged with T and *John* undergoes IM into the edge of T.

(24) [_{TP} John T [_{vP} ~~John~~ *v* [_{VP} get [_{pvP} ~~John~~ *pv* [_{VP} killed ~~John~~]]]]]]

Form Copy makes *John* at the edge of *pvP* and *John* at the edge of *vP* copies, and the former deletes. It then makes *John* at the edge of *vP* and *John* at the edge of T copies, and the former deletes. (22) is thus generated.

As Thompson and Scheepers (2013) point out, the derivation involving the *pvP* core can straightforwardly account for the ill-formedness of data like (24).

(25) *They got all arrested. (Fleisher 2008: 60)

Given the derivation shown in (24), there is no trace position in which to merge the quantifier *all* between *get* and the passive participle, hence the ill-formedness of (25). Furthermore, the analysis makes it possible to attain a uniform characterization of *get* its all uses as a full lexical verb generated under V, contra Fleisher (2008). There is no need to give a special syntactic status to *get*.

4. Conclusion

In this paper, I have examined the derivation of the English *get*-passive within the recent framework of generative syntax. Following Thompson and Scheepers (2013), I have assumed that the English *get*-passive involves control and analyzed it in terms of Form Copy (Chomsky 2021, Saito 2022). Under the proposed analysis, *get* is nothing other than a full lexical verb generated under V, contra Fleisher (2008). Furthermore, the proposed analysis is compatible with OSH. Although there remain some loose ends, I hope that this short paper stimulates more research on *get*-passives and Form Copy.

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