

Transitivity and the *get*-passive: oddities in the English grammar*

Junichi Toyota

Introduction

The *get*-passive has been a subject of research for more than several decades, but there are many characteristics that have gone unnoticed. In this paper, this construction is analysed in relation to transitivity. Transitivity is one of the crucial characteristics that defines the grammar of Present-Day English (Toyota 2012) and a closer look at the relationship between transitivity and the *get*-passive will yield something unexpected in the English grammar. It is argued that the *get*-passive behaves oddly in the Present-Day English grammar, which makes it difficult to analyse this construction.

Transitivity

Transitivity can be divided into two types, i.e. syntactic and semantic (cf. Toyota 2008; 2009). Syntactic transitivity is unique to English, where the presence or absence of a direct object decides transitivity. In other words, whether the energy transfer from actor to underdoer exists or not is clearly distinguishable. Semantic transitivity, on the other hand, varies according to various grammatical features in a clause, as demonstrated in works such as Hopper and Thompson (1980) and Taylor (2003). In this type, the energy transfer is gradable and there are cases where the transitive-intransitive division is hard to discern, and there are various grammatical tactics to express subtle differences. For instance, altering the case marking on the direct object is a common tactic among the Indo-European languages. The genitive case in (1b) from Serbian denotes a partitive reading, and thus, the transfer is only partially achieved. The accusative marking in (1a), on the other hand, express that the transfer is complete, i.e. higher transitivity. Historically, languages develop semantic transitivity first, and some have then developed syntactic transitivity. It is argued here that the *get*-passive is sensitive to semantic transitivity, but not syntactic transitivity. This is the only construction in English with obvious semantic transitivity, making it a very unique construction in English.

Serbian

- (1) a. *Moram da pitim vodu*
need.PRS.1SG that drink.PRS.1SG water.ACC
'I need to drink water.'
- b. *Moram da pitim vode*
need.PRS.1SG that drink.PRS.1SG water.GEN
'I need to drink water.'

Passive and Transitivity

Transitivity is a key grammatical feature in understanding the passive voice (Kittilä 2002: 23), and the interaction between them may vary according to the language in question. Anglocentric analyses may make it less obvious in English, but transitivity can be sometimes crucial in other languages such as German (e.g. Arnett 2004). Generally, the passive clause is associated with high transitivity, but some languages employ syntactic transitivity, and others semantic transitivity. This difference results in different grammatical behaviours in the passive construction. Thus, the Germanic languages except English, for instance, generally allow passivisation of monovalent verbs as long as they are semantically transitive, as in (1) from Dutch. In English, on the other hand, it is possible to turn perception verbs, which are semantically intransitive but syntactically transitive, into the passive, as demonstrated in (2).

Dutch

- (1) *Er wordt gefloten*
it become.PRS whistle.PST.PRT
'There is whistling.'
- (2) a. *Many people in this town like this film.*
b. *This film is liked by many people in this town.*

Characteristics of *get*-passive

As for the *get*-passive, it does not behave like the *be*-passive as in (2b). Therefore, (3b) is not fully grammatical. This is partly because of the *by*-phrase, which hardly ever occurs with the *get*-passive, but what is more crucial is the type of transitivity employed, i.e. the *get*-passive operates on archaic semantic transitivity, although the passivisation of monovalent verbs is, like its *be*-passive counterpart, not possible, contra (1).

- (3) a. *This film is liked by many people in this town.*
b. **This film gets liked by many people in this town.*

This grammatical oddity is accountable once the source of this construction is taken into consideration. Out of two sources proposed so far, as Toyota (2008) argues, the middle/reflexive voice origin is more plausible due to various semantic peculiarities associated with the *get*-passive. The middle/reflexive voice is normally semantically intransitive due to one of its core meanings, i.e. spontaneity. When events spontaneously take place, energy transfer is reduced to the bare minimum without a volitional actor. In addition, the subject control and the facilitative reading (i.e. the subject's generic characteristics, cf. Kemmer 1993), features often associated with the middle voice, are also found in the *get*-passive, but is not detectable in the *be*-passive. The subject animacy in the *get*-passive makes a sharp contrast with that in the *be*-passive, and the subject in the *get*-passive is predominantly human animate. Thus, the subject entity in (4a) is a passive recipient of shooting, but in (4b) it is possible to detect an additional sense, namely that the subject is responsible for being shot, i.e. *He got himself shot*. Finer distinctions in energy transfer, such as the facilitative reading, are not normally in languages with syntactic transitivity.

- (4) a. *He was shot.*
b. *He got shot.*

Summary

Semantic transitivity in the *get*-passive is a residue of an earlier grammatical structure, highlighting at the same time the lack of the middle voice in English. Since syntactic transitivity dominates the English grammar, the fact that semantic transitivity can be detected in the *get*-passive makes this construction very odd in the Present-Day English grammar. Although transitivity has not been given its deserved attention in analysis of the *get*-passive, it is possible to state that semantic transitivity is what makes an analysis of the *get*-passive difficult.

Notes

* Abbreviations used here are as follows: ACC = accusative; GEN = genitive; PRS = present; PRT = participle; PST = past; SG = singular.

References

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