



Language change and cultural change: The grammaticalization of the GET-passive in context

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ABSTRACT

Reciprocal and reflexive ('middle') readings of the GET-passive (as in GET INTRODUCED, GET MARRIED, GET DRESSED OR GET SHAVED) have been taken as indicative of the status of the GET-passive as a middle construction more generally. Historically, this interpretation is misleading, as these (marginal) GET-passives refer to cultural practices that have undergone massive change between the time of the inception of the GET-passive (before the 1760s) and today. What today are GET-middles used to be canonical passives with a two-participant structure. If we do not consider the historical cultural contexts and findings from historical cultural studies, we run the risk of imposing a hegemonic present-day view on previous stages of the language, falsifying our interpretation of instances of language change.

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1. Introduction

The English GET-passive serves as a prime example of what are sometimes called “non-canonical” passive constructions (Alexiadou, 2005, 2012; Alexiadou and Doron, 2012; Alexiadou and Schäfer, 2013a,b). The GET-passive is historically relatively recent (Fleisher, 2006; Hundt, 2001), and is comparatively marginal in use (Biber et al., 1999, 481). It is not only less frequent than the “canonical” passive with BE, it is also semantically specialized, highly register-sensitive (occurring in spoken rather than written, colloquial rather than formal genres) and has been frowned upon (probably for these reasons) and prescriptively corrected over the course of the twentieth century (cf. Ballard, 1939, 23–26; Mittins et al., 1970, 33–35). The GET-passive is an internally heterogeneous category that can be subdivided into several subcategories which can be ordered on a cline (cf. e.g. Collins, 1996), from more typically passive to less passive-like, and it has thus been discussed in terms of its passive-ness (or, indeed, non-canonicity more generally). In this article I will deal with just one of these subcategories, so-called *middle* constructions (e.g. GET ACQUAINTED, GET MARRIED, GET DRESSED) that seem to be particularly good examples of the non-canonical status of the GET-passive (judged by the number of times these constructions are quoted in the literature). It is interesting that these middle constructions also occur first in the grammaticalization process of the GET-passive (cf. Fleisher, 2006), and that they share specific semantics as either reciprocals or reflexives, which is taken to have wide-reaching ramifications for the present-day treatment of the GET-passive in general. In this article I will argue that while this semantic analysis may be a correct analysis for the middle GET-passives today, historically we have to include in our grammatical analysis quite detailed knowledge of cultural practices of the time. This inclusion will force us to revise the general analysis of these GET-passives as middles, and show that they originated as true passives. While this does not change the proposed grammaticalization path of the GET-passive, it does change the proposed non-canonicity of the GET-passive, at least in its historical stages. This means that

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the GET-middles must have acquired their non-canonical features later, and in particular that their participant-structure must have undergone significant changes since the days of their inception. Overall, this also means that (some instances of) the GET-passive have become *more* non-canonical over time, rather than less – a rather unusual path of development in grammaticalization.

2. Defining the GET-passive, previous research

On the face of it, it is relatively straightforward to define the GET-passive formally. Parallel to the BE-passive, we speak of the GET-passive when a (finite or non-finite) form of the verb GET is followed by a past participle. This apparently simple definition is however made complicated by the following factors:

1. As for BE, a following past participle does not necessarily have to be verbal. A clearly adjectival participle would force a reading of GET as inchoative, in the sense of 'become' (e.g. *they got drunk* 'they became drunk', not 'they were (being) drunk by someone/something', parallel to inchoative *they got ready*). Since it is often impossible to determine the dividing line, however, true GET-passives almost always shade into inchoative uses of GET plus an adjectival participle (or participial adjective) (Huddleston and Pullum, 2002, 1440–1443).
2. GET has semantically bleached to a passive marker, but does not formally conform to criteria of auxiliarihood – at least not by the standard NICE criteria (e.g. Quirk et al., 1985, 121–127). Although some authors have argued that by extending the criteria, GET can indeed be shown to be more auxiliary-like than lexeme-like (cf. Toyota, 2007), seeing auxiliarihood as gradual rather than categorical is by no means the majority opinion in linguistics (yet), and the syntactic status of GET therefore typically presents a problem in analyses. Thus, there is a dispute in how far GET is syntactically equivalent to a passive marker in formal accounts (cf. Reed, 2011; Haegeman, 1985).
3. Especially for a subgroup of GET-passives, it has been argued that their participant structure is very different from canonical passives, and that they should be analysed as middles instead (e.g. Mitkovska and Bužarovska, 2012). (However, it has to be said that the main criterion of their work seems to have been a comparison with their mother tongue Macedonian, and this linguistic "lens" may have coloured their analysis somewhat.) Nevertheless, a comparison with other languages may be sensible and can show that the function of a formally distinct "middle voice" (in those languages that have it, cf. Kemmer, 1993) is typically to express reflexive or reciprocal meaning, and from positing these meanings of the GET-passive as central for the category it is only a small step to claiming that the general meaning of the GET-passive in English is taking on the function of a "middle voice" (Alexiadou, 2012; Arce-Arenales et al., 1994; Mitkovska and Bužarovska, 2012). In fact, Arce-Arenales et al. (1994) claim that GET has a "detransitivizing effect", and Mitkovska and Bužarovska on the strength of their (Macedonian-coloured) analysis say explicitly that the GET-middles "should not be grouped together with GET-passives" (Mitkovska and Bužarovska, 2012, 201).

The last point cannot be overstressed. The participant structure and the participant roles are really one of the strongest arguments in favour of calling the GET-passive something different from the BE-passive. In fact, analyses centring on reciprocal and reflexive GET-passives have been influential in calling the GET-passive quite generally a kind of middle, also outside the generative camp. Thus, Arce-Arenales et al. (1994) assign to it active voice, but middle diathesis, Downing talks of "the middle construction" (Downing, 1996), and Hundt assigns to it "middle semantics" or a "middle interpretation" (Hundt, 2001) quite generally. For generativists, the GET-passive is quite a prototypical example of a "non-canonical passive"; thus Alexiadou explicitly says that "The English GET-passive is an alternative realization of middle Voice syntax" (Alexiadou, 2012).

This analysis of (all) GET-passives thus hinges on an analysis of GET ACQUAINTED, GET INTRODUCED, GET MARRIED OR GET DRESSED as typical GET-passives, whose semantics is then extended to all GET-passives. More specifically, the analysis of GET ACQUAINTED, GET INTRODUCED, GET MARRIED and GET DIVORCED as "middles" hinges on their analysis as reciprocals; the analysis of GET CHANGED, GET DRESSED, OR GET SHAVED hinges on an analysis as reflexive constructions. In both cases, this analysis entails that we are dealing with 1-participant constructions, because subject and object are construed as essentially the same: In the case of GET ACQUAINTED, GET INTRODUCED, GET MARRIED and GET DIVORCED, the subject is typically plural, and the meaning is "to each other" (or, in the case of GET DIVORCED, "from each other"); in the case of GET CHANGED, GET DRESSED, GET SHAVED, even in the case of plural subjects, we know from our present-day cultural practices that these actions are typically performed on one's own body, in the privacy of our bedrooms, bathrooms or walk-in closets (as personal circumstances may dictate), and so they are analysed as reflexives (GET DRESSED being roughly equivalent to "dressing oneself", GET SHAVED to "shaving oneself", etc.). Even with plural subjects, a reciprocal reading here is as good as impossible: *We got dressed* does not get the reading 'we dressed each other', but only ever 'each of us dressed herself/himself'. It is this (present-day) analysis of these two groups of GET-passives that I want to scrutinize in this article. I will argue that this present-day analysis cannot be extended backwards in time to the inception of the GET-passive, because the cultural practices referred to by these constructions have undergone massive change.

3. The grammaticalization of the GET-passive

In the historical studies of the grammaticalization of the GET-passive more generally, the earliest attestations come exactly from the group of reflexives and reciprocals. The earliest example in the OED is GET ACQUAINTED from 1568 (OED: get v. 29.b.(a)),

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