English get-passives, middle voice and causative-passive ambiguities
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I argue that get-passives and French se faire-passives are reflexivised (middle voice) causatives, and derive the unexpected passive interpretation (and several other semantic nuances) from this. The hope is that this will contribute to our understanding of non-canonical passives, of causative-passive ambiguities and of middle voice, as well as testing the feasibility of deriving properties of constructions rather than stipulating them.

1 Parallels between get and French se faire

1.1 Optional surface subject responsibility

- Both get and se faire have a subject responsibility reading (surface subject portrayed as bringing event onto itself, be it by action or negligence) and a non-subject responsibility reading (complete absence of responsibility).

(1)  a. John is going to get killed.  
     b. Jean va se faire tuer.

Two interpretations for (a) and (b):

i) Responsibility: John is going to get himself killed.
ii) Non-responsibility: John is going to be killed.

- Non-responsibility reading with se faire (see also Koenig/Pedersen 1992, Labelle 2002):

(2) La crise se renforce: Vingt mille personnes se sont fait licencier."(K&P)
    The crisis worsens: Twenty thousand people were dismissed.
    "The crisis worsens: Twenty thousand people get (*themselves) dismissed."

(3) Elle s’est fait tuer par une balle perdue.                      (www)
    "She got (*herself) killed by a stray bullet."

- Symptoms of responsibility reading with get-passives (see also Lakoff 1971):

(4)  a. She decided to get/be arrested (by the police).
     b. The soldier got/was injured on purpose so he would be sent home.
     c. He got/was arrested by smoking weed.
     d. She almost got arrested.  
        [almost may scope over her decision/actions]

- The responsibility reading is found with other uses of get, e.g. get+AP (McIntyre 2010):

(5)  He decided to get/become drunk/fit.

1.2 Affectedness

- Surface subject of passives with get and se faire must be affected. (Claimed for se faire in K&P 153, Kupferman 1995:76; Claimed for get in Taranto 2004; cf. the common, though overrestrictive, claim that get-passive is adversative.)

(6)  Claudine s’est fait suivre par Jean.
     Claudine got followed by Jean. → chasing, tailing, stalking, detective work etc.

(7)  Claudine a été suivi par Jean.
     Claudine was followed by Jean. → no necessary interaction between them

(8)  a. IPA symbols can’t be/get read by this scanner.
     b. Your textbook won’t get read if you call it Linguistics for Retards.

(9)  a. The {band/#TV programme/#volcanic eruption} got watched by thousands.
1.3 Creation verbs

- Creation verbs are bad with *se faire* passive (Kupferman 1995:76):

  (10)  *L’église s’est fait construire en 1664.*
  The church got built in 1664.

- Dislike for creation verbs was also discussed w.r.t. the *get*-passive (e.g. Downing 1996:186f; Lakoff 1971:154), but effect less clear than in French, and speaker-specific:

  (11)  a. Now look over to the elegant house on the left. *(?) It got built in 1836.
  b. *(?) Do they know when the wheel got invented?

- Exception proving rule: Subject seen as virtually existent prior to creation:

  (12)  a. *He was planning a book on Proto-Nostratic textual deixis, but it never got written.*
  b. They designed a skyscraper but it never got built.

- An obvious idea: attribute problem with creation verbs to affectedness requirement, since not-yet-existing entities cannot be affected. Evidence: (13) and Naess (2007).

  (13)  *What I did to it was {make/create/build/design} it.

1.4 Responses

A. Treat both *se faire* and *get* passives as reflexivised causatives. This will involve presenting evidence for a silent English analogue of French *se* (section 2).

B. Show how the interpretations of *get/se faire* passives derive from their being reflexivised causatives (sections 3 and 4).

2 Preliminaries on middle voice (reflexivisation)


  (14)  a. lava-t-ur  b. plect-unt-ur [reflexive, reciprocal]
  washes-3s-MID  interweave-3pl-MID
  ‘s/he washes him/herself’ ‘they embrace’
  c. frang-it-ur [anticausative]
  break-3ps-MIDDLE ‘It breaks’
  d. del-et-ur [passive]
  destroy-3s-MIDDLE ‘It is being destroyed.’

  (15)  a. Ivan moet-sja [reflexive]
  Ivan washed-MID
  b. Dver’otkryla- s’ [anticausative]
  door opened ‘The door opened.’
  c. Dom stroi-l-sja (raboami) [passive]
  house.nom build-PAST-REFL (workers.INST)
  ‘The house was being built (by the workers).’

- French *se* shows the middle voice syncretism:

  (16)  a. Elle se lave.  b. Ils s’embrassent [reflexive, reciprocal]
  she MID washes  they MID. embrace
  “He washes.” “They embrace.”


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b. Le livre se lit facilement. \[potential passive, facilitative\]
   the book MID reads easily

c. Ce vin se boit en été
   this wine MID drinks in summer
   \text{‘This wine is drunk in summer.’}

d. La porte s’ouvre
   the door MID opens

• **English** has a middle voice syncretism, but no overt marker (cf. e.g. Kemmer, Steinbach):

  \[17\]
  a. I washed/dressed/shaved. \[reflexive\]
  b. They fought/married/embraced/met. \[reciprocal\]
  c. The book reads/translates/sells well. \[potential passive\]
  d. The door opened/broke. \[anticausative?\]

• \[17\]d) is only relevant on anticausative analysis of the structures (e.g. L&R 1995). \[18\]

  suggests clearer candidates for a middle voice analysis. Preference for progressive recalls the 18th century passival  \(\text{the house was building by Mr Smith and sons; Dennison 1993,}\)
  and a crosslinguistic link between middle voice passives and imperfectivity (see Kaufmann on Russian, Spanish). Moreover, \[18\]a-c) arguably favour a suppressed Agent analysis, since in English Agents cannot be omitted from linguistic interpretation if they are conceptualised: \{\text{shellac records/*world records} broke (L&R 1995).\]

(18)

a. The film is shooting/screening. \[*\text{the film shot}\]

b. People were hurting badly because of the sanctions. \[*\text{they hurt}\]

c. The package shipped out yesterday.

d. The e-mail is sending/downloading/printing.

• \[17\]a,b) also mirror overtly marked middle voice structures in that they are confined to \textit{commonly reflexive/reciprocal} events. (The distinction is often put in terms of \textit{strong vs. weak reflexives}. Weak refls. are phonologically lighter and are confined to commonly reflexive/reciprocal events (Russian \texttt{sebjá vs. -sja/-s’}, Icelandic \texttt{sig vs. –st}, Dutch \texttt{ziehzelf vs. zich}.) N.B. The strong-weak distinction is absent in some languages, e.g. French.

(19) They criticised/saw/psychoanalysed/imagined *(themselves/each other).

(20) a. Ivan uvidel \texttt{sebja/sja} \[Russian; Kaufmann 2004:192\]

   v zerkale
   \text{‘Ivan saw REF \textit{himself} in the mirror.’}

• **Claim:** \textbf{silent middle voice is implicated in get-passives}. Preliminary motivations:

  • Parallels with \texttt{se faire} passives, which (formally) involve a middle voice causative.

  • If \texttt{get} can occur with silent middle voice, we can explain the reflexive interpretations in responsibility passives and also e.g. with AP small clauses (McIntyre 2010):

(21) She deliberately got (herself) arrested.

(22) They decided to get (themselves) \{sober/high/fit/warm/ready/busy/clean/dry/naked\}.

• More support for this stance would emerge if it can derive the interpretation of passives with \texttt{get/se faire}. To this end, I will

  • show how middle voice gives surface subjects the affected interpretation (sect. 3).

  • explain how a causative verb can give us a passive interpretation (section 4)
3 The thematic side of get-passives: Causer becomes Affectee

- I assume the following structure for concreteness. The most important ideas below could be re-stated in an account treating middle voice as a lexical operation.

\[(23)\]

\[
\begin{array}{c}
\text{TP} \\
\text{DP} \\
\text{Mary}
\end{array} \quad \begin{array}{c}
\text{T'} \\
\text{Mary} \quad \text{VoiceP} \\
\text{Voice'} \\
\text{Voice}_{\text{[middle]}} \\
\text{CauseP} \\
\text{Cause} \\
\text{PrtP} \\
\{\text{Mary}\} \quad \text{arrested} \quad \{\text{Mary}\}
\end{array}
\]

- Separation of Voice and Cause (see Pylkkänen 2002, McIntyre 2010).

- get-passives involve raising: idioms can get-passivise even if the subject has no meaning outside the idiom. (A parameter: se faire may involve a different derivation where surface subject starts in spec,Voice and binds a gap in the infinitival clause; Labelle 2002, 2008).

\[(24)\]

a. Anybody’s hackles, would get raised \(t\) by this.
   \[\text{[raise } X \text{'s hackles 'make } X \text{ angry'; hackles not used elsewhere}\]

b. A lot of umbrage, got taken \(t\) at his behaviour.

- \(\text{Voice}_{\text{[middle]}}\): middle voice is treated here as a variant of the Voice head (which could translate into more complicated derivations involving silent reflexive clitics).

- Interpretation of middle voice: Two descriptive principles:

\[(25)\] Surface subject (i.e. DP raised through spec,Voice) is interpreted as a DP argument of the predicate selected by Voice.

\[(26)\] In the reflexive interpretation the DP additionally receives an Agent role. (Possibly a dual theta role assignment analysis extends to other middle voice uses; see appendix.)

- The reflexive interpretation in (26) manifests itself in the subject responsibility interpretation of get-passives: \(\text{Mary deliberately got arrested (by the police)}\).

3.1 How this explains the affectedness interpretation

- In middle voice causatives, (25) entails that the surface subject must be treated as an internal DP argument of get/faire and not just of the embedded \(V\).

- Internal DP argument of \(\text{CAUSE} = \text{Causee}\). The grammatical relevance of the affectedness of Causees is seen in contrasts like in (27) (e.g. Ackerman & Moore 1999, Guasti 2006, Lopez 2001). The faire à construction involves affecting a Causee while the faire par construction does not.

\[(27)\]

   “I got someone to clean the toilets.”

b. J’ai fait nettoyer les toilettes \(\text{par}\) quelqu’un.
   “I got the toilets cleaned by someone.”

\[(28)\]

a. What I did to him was get him to clean the toilets.

b. *What I did to him was get the toilets cleaned by him.
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• Thus, the affectedness requirement on subjects of get/se faire passives reduces to the fact that middle voice forces them to be interpreted as Causee arguments.

• Problem with the faire par/faire à distinction? Standardly the faire à construction with Causee is contrasted with the faire par construction without a Causee. The se faire construction is clearly a faire par construction (see (29)a) and Labelle 2002).

(29) a. Jean s’est fait tabasser par un voyou.
   “He got beaten up by a thug.”
   b. *Le gangster a fait tabasser Jean [à Pierre] [par un voyou].
      the gangster PERF CAUSE beat.up Jean [Pierre] [by a thug]
      “*The gangster had Pierre beat up Jean by a thug (Pierre = thug).”
   c. *Pierre beat up John by a thug.

• However my theory does not predict (29)b). This is excluded for the same reasons as (29)c): by/par-phrases require a passive Voice head, while (29)b,c) involve active Voice heads which introduce their own Agents, and are thus not passive.

• The Causee theory of affectedness is superior to any account which attributes affectedness to middle voice itself:

(30) a. The book reads easily.                     (not affected)
    b. Paris ne s’est pas fait en un jour.     (created object)
       Paris NEG REFL PERF made in a day
       “Rome wasn’t built in a day.”

3.2 Appendix: An account of middle voice

(31) Properties of Voice_{transitive} (in English):
   a. It assigns case to a DP.
   b. It introduces an Origin DP in its specifier. The interpretation of the Origin as an Agent, Causer, Experiencer (conceptualised as causing psych-situation), Stimulus (conceptualised as Causer) is specified by V’s semantics.

(32) Properties of Voice_{middle} (in English):
   a. It does not assign case to a DP.
   b. It does not introduce an Origin (e.g. Causer, Agent) DP in its specifier.
   c. It ensures that the DP moving through spec,VoiceP is interpreted as both the internal argument of the embedded predicate and as a non-canonical Origin.

(33) Examples of non-canonical Origins:
   a. Affected Agents: 
      He shaved.
      Il s’est rasé
   b. Facilitators/enablers: 
      The book reads easily. (Book has properties making reading easy)
      Le livre se lit facilement.
   c. Internal causers: 
      The door opened. (Perceived as acting autonomously; incompatible with human door opener on same side of door as speaker)
   d. Perceptual Origin (topic): Origin re-interpreted as participant first selected by the speaker as subject of comment; cf. Delancey’s notion of attention flow.
      The drums were beating, The film is screening.
4 What happens to causing events?
I claim that get-passives can be either verbal or adjectival, which will necessitate two different event-structural analyses.

- **Adjectival get-passives exist:** witness e.g. the uniquely adjectival modifier *very*:

  (34)  
  a. The tower **got very damaged** and was closed.
  b. I liked it when I first heard it, but it **got very over-played**.
  c. It got **very exaggerated**.

- **Verbal get-passives exist:** witness (well-attested) get-passives with double objects, and possibility of *by*-phrases with *get* even if the corresponding adj. participle disallows them:

  (35)  
  a. I got {sent/passed/handed} a book.
  b. *The data {seemed/remained} {given/accorded} the wrong treatment.

  (36)  
  a'. The present is opened (*by the wrong person). [* for stative interp.]
  b'. Egbert is arrested (*by the police). [* for stative interp.]

4.1 Event-structural properties of adjectival get-passives
- Adjectival participles express states, with or without prior event entailments (resultative vs. purely stative participles, e.g. Embick 2004).

  (37)  
  a. damaged houses [resultative]
  b. bent bars [purely stative: they might have been created bent]

- Embedding small clauses headed by either type of participle under *get* results in a structure expressing an event which immediately precedes the participial state.

  This can be formalised using an inchoative operator, some Dowty’s (1979) BECOME, or an empirical equivalent. Illustration using Beck’s (2005) event-based definition:

  (38)  
  a. [[BECOME]] [(P)(e) = 1 iff e is the smallest event such that P is not true of the prestate of e but P is true of the result state of e. (Beck 2005:7)]

  (39)  
  *The house got (very) damaged.*
  a. [SmallClause the house damaged] λst ∀e result_of(e)(st) & damage(the_house)(e)  
     “a property of a state which results from an event of damaging the house”
  b. [VP get [SmallClause the house damaged]] (in *The house got damaged*):
     ∀e λe’ BECOME [result_of(e)(st) & damage(the_house)(e)](e’)  
     “a property of an event which resulted in a state which is the result of an event of damaging the house” (N.B. e and e’ are reasoned to be the same event, since both immediately precede the damaged-state.)

- In most other uses, *get* can also be analysed as a BECOME-spellout, with or without other silent predications (McIntyre 2005; related ideas in Gronemeyer 1999). E.g.

  (40)  
  a. Gertrude got sick. λs BECOME [sick(gertrude)] (s)  
     “An event occurred which resulted in Sarah’s being sick.”
  b. Gertrude got a book. λs BECOME [HAVE(a_book)(gertrude)] (s)  
     “An event occurred which resulted in Sarah’s having a book.”

- The analysis accords with Fleischer’s (2006) finding that *get*-passives developed from inchoative *get*+AP structures like (40)a).

- This analysis makes it unsurprising that BECOME-verbs are also passive aux. in German, Swedish, Latvian, Polish, Finnish, Hindi, Nez Perce (Siewierska 1984:126; Pardeshi 2008). Caveat: in some languages my analysis is only valid for an earlier diachronic stage (modern German *werden*-passives seem involve verbal participles).
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- The BECOME=CAUSE hypothesis. Given the Pylkkänian idea that CAUSE need not entail a Causer, it is possible to reinterpret BECOME-predications as instances of direct causation (McIntyre 2010), since both involve an event immediately preceding a situation and making it possible. This allows us to capture alternations like (41) without assuming a CAUSE-BECOME semantics in (a), which seems to be problematic for several reasons (lack of scope possibilities; lack of spellouts in other languages; McIntyre 2010).

(41) a. She got them drunk
    b. They got drunk

- The BECOME=CAUSE hypothesis also demystifies the fact that a BECOME-semantics is possible with faire with AP predicates once we remove the Causer using se:

(42) a. Il se fait vieux.
    b. Le temps se fait beau.

He REF caus old
the weather REF caus nice
“He is getting old.”
“The weather is becoming nice.”

- The above analysis does not apply to se faire, as French passive infinitives are not stative.

4.1.1 Verbal get-passives

- Verbal participle formation does not generally have aspectual effects, and get does not seem to affect the temporal structure of the event in verbal get-passives.

- Proposal: relate verbal-passive-get to causative uses which express no causing event, and let embedded V determine the overall event structure (cf. scope of on Friday in (43)a)).

(43) a. The picture got Mary arrested by the police on Friday.
    b. Mary got arrested by the police on Friday.

(44) [VoiceP The picture [V [OICE P [vP get=CAUSE[-event] [Voice[pass]P Mary arrested]]]]]

(45) [VoiceP Mary [Voice[middle] [vP CAUSE[-event] [Voice[pass]P Mary arrested]]]]

- Still needed: (i) an explicit semantics; (ii) general theory of how eventive properties of embedded expressions get inherited by selecting V; (iii) study of diachronic widening of selection restrictions (A > adj. participle > verbal participle).

(46) a. At the moment Mary has her arm bandaged (*by a doctor). [resultative participle]
    b. At 6.15 Mary had her arm bandaged by a doctor. [verbal participle]

(47) a. Die Scheibe ist jetzt zerbrochen. [German]
    the windowpane is now broken
    b. Die Scheibe ist gestern zerbrochen.
    the windowpane is yesterday broken [be-perfect with unacc.]

(48) a. They {became/got (us)/made us/*were} angry.
    b. They {became/got (us)/made us/*were} angrier and angrier.

(49) I saw her given CPR by the nurses. [attested; verbal participle]

5 Unsolved problems (selection)

- I cannot yet explain the lack of se faire passives in other Romance languages (see K&P).

- Animacy-related constraint in (50) affects subject of se faire but not get. The animacy constraint would fit into my account if due to the crosslinguistic dispreference for inanimate Causees. Unclear how to evaluate the animacy constraint given its speaker-variability and its inconsistency between contexts. E.g. K&P say that (50)a) is worse than (b) because no-longer-existing entities can no longer affect animate entities. This seems unconvincing, so a correct modelling of the animacy constraint remains elusive.

(50) a. (*)Mon sandwich s’est fait manger.
    b. (?).Ma planche de surf s’est fait renverser.
    My sandwich got eaten.
    My surfboard got turned over.

- More work needed to understand other causative-passive ambiguities like (51), (52).
(51) I had a child run away.
   a. ‘I got a child to run away.’
   b. ‘A child ran away on me.’

(52) Taro-NOM son-ACC die-CAUSE-PAST
   a. ‘Taro caused his son to die.’  → ‘normal’ causative
   b. ‘Taro was adversely affected by his son’s death.’  → adversity causative

6 References


Ellison, G. 2005. Establishing the derivation of the English inchoative alternant. WWW?


