Event structural properties of the English get-passive

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A substantial literature has explored several different analyses of the syntax and interpretation of English get-passives (e.g. Reed 2011), often with an eye towards contrasts with corresponding be-passives. Recent work suggest that event structural properties must play a crucial role in choosing among competing analyses (Brownlow 2011, Alexiadou 2012), but the absence of robust event-related diagnostics has hindered full development of this insight. This talk thus focuses on the event properties of get-passives to provide evidence concerning two controversial questions: (i) What is the nature of the get-passive participle (“verbal” or “adjectival”)? And (ii) (our primary focus) What is the syntactic status/semantic contribution of get in the get-passive (1a), relative to be in the be-passive (1b), and get in the get-causative in (1c)?

(1) a. John got [ arrested by the police ]
   b. John was [ arrested by the police ]
   c. Mary got [ John arrested by the police ]

Our syntactic answers are that (i) the participle is an eventive passive, so that (1a) and (1b) (and (1c)) have the same partipicical syntactic sub-structure (contra Fox & Grodzinsky 1996 and much work since); and (ii) get realizes a light v, with the get-passive structure an anticausative alternant of the get-causative (1c) (as in, essentially, Haegeman 1985). Our logic is that if get-passives have both an event associated with get, and (at a minimum) one associated with the passive participle, then get-passives have a more complex event structure than be-passives.

For v/get, we assume a theory of anticausatives in which transitives and intransitives differ in the specification of Voice (Alexiadou, Anagnostopoulou, & Schäfer 2015 and refs. there). VoiceP does not project a specifier in get-passives (Voice[-Ag]) (2), but introduces a DP in its specifier in get-causatives (Voice[+Ag]). In both the passive and causative a light verb v is realized as get, with a participial XP complement (cp. (1b-c)).

(2) The get-passive [-Ag] (1a) vs. get-causative [+Ag] (1c) structural alternation

The focus of this talk is the interpretation of the complex verbal syntax in (2). Our view is that get realizes a verbalizing v that is always eventive; be does not. Evidence includes differences with AP complements: Mary got sick (eventive) vs. Mary was sick (stative) (see Haegeman (1985) for syntactic differences in be vs. get). For the participle component, key under-discussed evidence for an eventive participle in typical get-passives includes the fact that ditransitive participles license both Theme and Recipient complements (2a-b), unlike adjectival participles (cf. Levin and Rappaport’s (1986) Sole Complement Generalization; pace Siewierska 1986, Alexiadou 2005).

(3) a. The customers got sold the cars./ The cars got sold to the customers.
   b. The carrots got fed to the babies. / The babies got fed the carrots.
   c. The recently sold cars/ *The recently sold customers.
   d. The recently fed babies/ *The recently fed carrots.

Building on the idea that both get and be passives have eventive passive participles, get realizes additional verbal structure relative to the be-passive that embeds the XP in (2). This syntax, we argue, produces a complex eventuality different from that in the be-passive. Previous work has failed to identify consistent interpretive differences between get and be clausal event semantics. The second part of the paper thus concentrates on showing that once various factors in diagnostics are controlled for, systematic event differences between get and be are clear, and can be accounted for by (2).
We demonstrate that careful manipulation a class of adjuncts we call “By-M(anner)M(eans)” (by-MM) in fact reveal clear differences between get and be passives. The point of interest is that in certain cases, by-MM is acceptable only in get-passive contexts:

(4) a. John got/*was arrested [by being too tall].
    b. The liver got/*was pounded along with the cutlets [by being left on the wrong board]
    c. The pencils got/*were broken [by being too long for the case].

By-MM supplies a Manner/Means by which an event unfolds (Fodor 1970, Dowty 1979, Sæbø 2007); importantly, we show, its distribution is sensitive to properties of events, not participants. In (4a) with get, the interpretation is that e.g. John is tall enough to have been detected by security cameras, with his arrest a consequence. That is, by-MM supplies the manner by which an event e₁ unfolds, an event distinct from the arresting event e₂. With be in (4a), the by-MM adjunct can only be interpreted as the MM of the arrest, as be is not an ‘event’ whose MM can be specified. The state [being too tall] happens to be nonsensical as an MM of an arrest. This is not a syntactic restriction, it concerns event semantics: e.g. John was arrested [by setting up a sting] is fine as the MM of arrest under be in (4a). We therefore get a be/get contrast. In (4b), it is implausible to construe by-MM with the event that the participle XP describes, i.e. being left on the wrong board is not a possible MM of pounding. However, being left on the wrong board can be understood as the MM of an event that brings about (i.e. IC in (5)) pounding, if by-MM in (4b) modifies e₁ in (5), an e₁ that is absent in the be structure. The same logic holds for (4c). We show in detail that properties of by-MM require careful control to reveal interpretive differences in complex verbal syntax, such as get. (Time permitting, we introduce further diagnostics showing get/be differences predicted by (2), including modification by almost.)

We argue that by-MM distinguishes get and be because get passives contain an extra (agentless) event/v to the participle, as in (2). Semantically, we propose get involves an event e₁ that has a State of Affairs (SOA) as its End; where get has a participle complement, the SOA and the eventive passive (‘e₂’, which may itself be complex) are related by Cause (5). The intuition encoded in (5) is that the event associated with get is interpreted as ‘causing’ the event of its complement only ‘indirectly’. This contrasts with previous work that argues get directly denotes Cause (a.o. Brownlow 2011 and refs there). We discuss a battery of standard diagnostics of causative syntax/semantics that show the get-causative does not have the semantics (or syntax) of varieties of ‘causation’ found in e.g. make, whit-en, or “lexical causatives” like melt (cp. Alexiadou 2012: 1098). As illustration, XPs expressing Facts can function as “causers” of get / the IC relation, but not other causatives in English: [The faulty seals on the bags] got/*made Mary arrested (by the police). We suggest these previously unobserved properties of get support a novel approach to complex verbal meaning, as in (5).

(5) [[ get XP ]] = END(e₁,SOA) & Cause(SOA,e₂)

Finally, we contrast our analysis with some particular claims in previous approaches to get. First, concerning the participle/e₂, much work has focussed on (apparent) be/get contrasts in participant-related (not event structure) tests (see Reed (2011) for overview of participant tests), notably the referent of Rationale Clause (RC) PRO (6).

(6) The ship was/*got sunk [PRO to collect the insurance money]. (Judgement from literature)

It is widely reported that the PRO of the RC in (6) is controlled by an implicit agent in the be-passive, but not in the get-passive (Fox and Grodzinsky 1996 et seq.). The claim has then been that be-passive participles involve an agentive eventive passive participle, while the get-passive participle must therefore be an ‘adjectival’ participle. But contemporary work on RCs demonstrates independently that RC PRO control is not a reliable indicator of be-passive implicit arguments; rather, RC PRO has a context sensitive ‘Responsible Party’ as its ‘antecedent’ (Landau 2010, 2017). Building on this idea, we show that manipulation of the matrix predicate to coerce a Responsible Party surface subject can produce a judgement the opposite of (6): John got/*was defeated [ PRO to help Mary win the tournament]. We show that differences in construal of Responsible Parties turn out not to be probative distinctions in participle syntactic structure, but, we argue, reveal how the lexical semantics of the embedded predicate contribute to the interpretation of the Cause relation in (5).