

# To Be or To Get? Diachronic and Synchronic Considerations on *Get-* and *Be-* passives

Junghee Byun  
(Seoul National University)

**Byun, Junghee.** 2013. *To Be or to Get? Diachronic and Synchronic Considerations on Get-and Be-passives*. *SNU Working Papers in English Linguistics and Language 11*, 1-19. This paper aims at expounding on historical development of grammaticalization of the *get* passive to compare with the *be* passive and pursuing reflections upon the contemporary usage of the two passives. Established as a prototype of passive voice from OE, the *be*-passive has long gained the most general use in English grammar. On the contrary, the *get*-passive which emerged from ME out of the need to distinguish dynamic meaning with static one, mixed in the OE passive forms, has reached its maturation by the 17th century. Givón's hypothesis on the steps of grammaticalization process (1994) is drawn to elaborate discussion of grammaticalization of *get* passive in comparison with the relative frequency of other *get* constructions. Lastly, the implications of diachronic considerations into the contemporary usage of *be* and *get* passives will be highlighted in terms of the style, their lexical meanings, the responsibility of the subject in passive sentence and middle interpretation of *get*-passive. (Seoul National University)

**Keywords:** grammaticalization, *get*-passive, *be*-passive, middle voice, corpus study, multifunctionality of *get*

## 1. Introduction

It appears that one of the most interesting phenomenon in terms of diachronic changes is grammaticalization, which deals with the process that a content word gradually assumes the grammatical characteristics of a function word. Examples are some auxiliaries in English, which used to be a lexical category in OE and have taken on grammatical functions that we know as they developed in ME and EMdE. In the PDE, there are some in the progress of grammaticalization; *be going to* and *have to* (Kim, 2005).

This study aims to track down on the historical development of *get* in passive construction by citing various corpus data and explore its implications in different usage of two English passives - be and *get* + past participle. Section 2 takes a diachronic approach to the two passive forms, bringing the grammaticalization of the *get* + past participle into focus. Section 3 addresses synchronic considerations on how the two passives are differently used in contemporary English grammar. Section 4 discusses the interface between historical considerations in Section 2 and contemporary use of the two passives in Section 3. As for wrap-up, the final section reviews major discussions and make implications for follow-up study.

## 2. Diachronic considerations

### 2.1 Old and Middle English

About the origin of the English passive construction, Parker (1976) and Lightfoot (1979) trace back to Indo-European middle voice. The middle form has dual functions of active (reflective) and passive as ‘-tai’ in *louetai* translated as ‘to wash’ and ‘to be washed’. The following Greek sentence, ‘tu astu amunetai’ also has three readings, translated as ‘He defends the city. The city defends itself. The city is defended.’ And there were many with both intransitive and transitive meanings: for example, *histemi* – *histamai* (set – stand) and *óllumi* – *óllumai* (kill- die). Parker mentioned the passive function of Sanskrit and Greek. The middle *dharisyate* [Sanskrit] means either ‘He will bear for himself or will be borne’... the middle *haireitai* [Greek] means either ‘choose’ or ‘is chosen’. The ambiguity derived from such different meanings had created a therapeutic attempt that the complex middle voice was lost and its passive meaning only remained (Kang, 2006). But, OE had ‘beon (the old form of *exist, be here/there*) + past participle’ form interchangeable with the middle form. Emergence of

this form may have been brought about as English, a synthetic language shifted into analytic language (Kang, 2006). In OE, passive auxiliaries, *beon/ wesan* and *weorðan* (the old form of *become*), were used as static and dynamic auxiliaries respectively. Later, *weorðan* took *beon* or *wesan* form which was lost at the end of 14C.

- (1) Her wæs Crist gefulluhtud... (gefulluthan)  
‘In this year Christ was baptized...’
- (2) Ð æt hie wolden weorðan forlorene & oferwunnene  
‘That they would be destroyed and vanquished’ (Kang, 2006)

On the other hand, the lexical roots of *get* are found in ME. Etymologically, *get* comes from the Old Norse ‘*geta*’, Old English ‘*gieten*’ (Gronemeyer, 1999). It was possible that the verb *get* with mutative value, turned into intransitive with dynamic meaning and was used similar to *weorðan* of OE (Kang, 2006). The OE passive auxiliary *weorðan* changed into *wurthe* in ME 11C, then it was lost.

The early ME began to use *wurthe(n)* in meaning of *become*. As *wurthe* was diminished in 15C, the dynamic passive using the verbs ‘*get*’ and ‘*become*’ came into use at the end of the century. It could have been affected by the incomplete grammaticalization of the verb *be* in early ME. Surely, *get* as a passive auxiliary was preceded by *be* and the *be* + past participle is approved to be the prototype of various passive constructions in modern grammar.

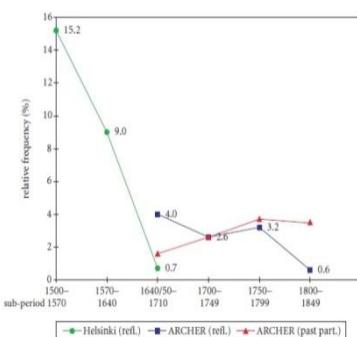
## 2.2 Early Modern and Modern English: Grammaticalization of Get

There came many kinds of passives into being from 15 to 16C. Get passive first appeared in the record of early 17C. Visser (1912) argued that get passive construction was first developed by the necessity to eliminate the ambiguity in meanings of dynamic and stative passives

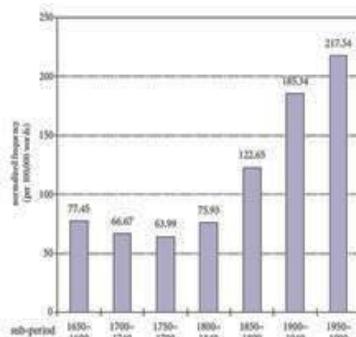
in ME and distinguish the two. Visser further stated that get passive construction put more emphasis on the meaning of dynamic passive. (Yoo, 1986) The verbal phrases with get passive appeared including *get rewarded*, *get engaged*, and *get married*. (Kang, 2006)

- (3) A certain Spanish pretending Alchymist got acquainted with four rich Spanish merchants<sup>1</sup>.
- (4) So, now I have furnish'd myself with Wit and Money, I am resolv'd to *get introduced* to Mrs. Annabella<sup>2</sup>. (lowe.d1,1693, ARCHER<sup>3</sup>)

These examples are also interesting because they have features that are close to a middle interpretation: the same verb *-introduced* - is used with a reflexive and the responsibility of the conscious patient-subject can be inferred from the immediate context (i.e. the active preparation and the determination on the part of the subject *to get introduced*).



[Figure 1. *get + reflexive / past participle*]<sup>4</sup>



[Figure 2. Overall frequency of Get passive]

Figure 1 illustrates Hundt's study (2001) on the comparison of

<sup>1</sup>cited in Kang(2006) p. 118

<sup>2</sup>Givón/Yang (1994: 131) cited in Hundt, 2001, p.73

<sup>3</sup>abbreviation of 'A Representative Corpus of Historical English Registers'

<sup>4</sup>Helsinki and ARCHER indicate the names of corpus used in Hundt's study (2001)

get+ reflexive and get + past participle. Reflexive pronouns after *get* are more frequent between 1650~1750, but they decrease sharply between 1750 and 1800, remaining at a low level afterwards. *Get* followed by a past participle is less frequent than get + reflexive at first, but between 1700 and 1750, the development of the two constructions is parallel. Unlike get + reflexive, however, the frequency of *get* + past participle remains stable through the rest of periods. ARCHER corpus in Figure 2 illustrates the sharp rise in frequency of Get-passive constructions since the late 19C.

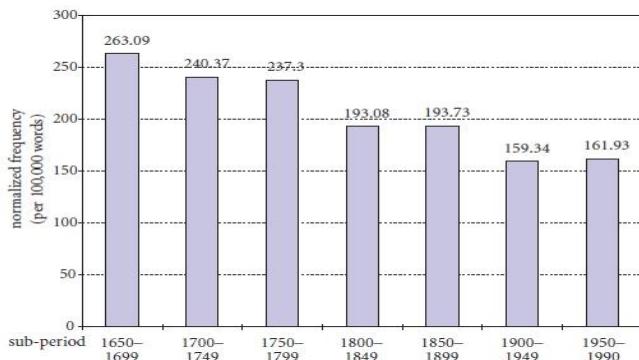
### **2.3 Givón's hypothesis on the grammaticalization chain of Get**

Hundt (2001) introduced Givón (1993:65f) hypothesis on the steps to develop the passive meaning of get-constructions, which is called ‘the grammaticalisation process. This process begins with **1)** the original meaning of the verb, to obtain, the mono-transitive lexical tense (*He got a horse.*), moving on to **2)** bitransitive and locative usage. (*He got her to the barn.*) Afterwards, it extends to **3)** an active complement that gives a causative construction, followed by a verbal complement (*He got her to play.*). It continues to extend to **4)** a causative construction with be+passive complement (*He got her to be admitted.*), again developing into **5)** a reflexive version (*He got himself to be admitted.*) and lastly arrives at **6)** the de-transitivization and reanalysis of the reflexive as an intransitive clause (*He got admitted*).

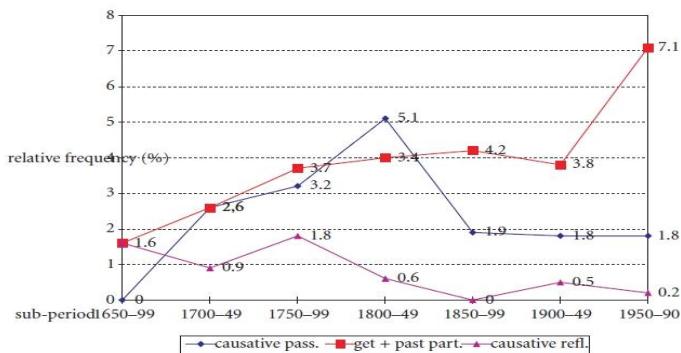
### **2.4 Hundt's corpus study**

As shown in Figure 1, ARCHER corpus data, however, illustrates the rise of get + past participle structure did not always correspond with the demise of get + reflexive. In other words, Hundt's corpora-based research made a surprising discovery that the grammaticalisation

of get-passive does not go hand in hand with a significant decrease in the former lexical function. This can be evidenced by the comparison between get+ past participle and get+ reflexives. In fact, the growing frequency of get+past participle cannot solely explain the decrease in get + reflexive because according to the corpora, the decrease of get + reflexive construction coincided with the general decrease in reflexive use in English as illustrated in Figure 3.



[Figure3.Self-reflexives in ARCHER]

[Figure 4.Causative passives, causative reflexive, *get*-past participle in ARCHER]

Secondly, the comparison study of the causative passive and get + past participle reveals that the causative construction was playing a

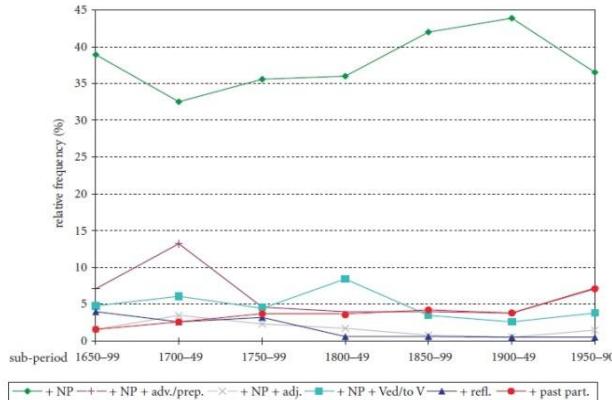
less important role for the foundation of get + past participle. Hundt argues that the relative frequency of reflexive causative use of *get* was so low that the role in the development of the passive function of *get* might have been overrated. Thirdly, the combination of the get + reflexive and *be*-passive, an intermediate step of Givón's grammaticalization chain of *get* (1994), are not frequent except the following two instances found from the EMdE part of the Helsinki corpus and ARCHER. There are none in the late period.

- (5) [...] he intended to *get himself to be made* a dean. (cehist3a)
- (6) I *got my books*, for greater speed, *to be bound* at London [...].  
(1664more.x1)

This suggests the get construction with *be*-passive did not play an important step in the grammaticalization process of *get*, and a majority of instances in the causative passive in Figure 4 contain the causative *get* passive without *be* seems to have given support to the rise of *get* + past participle until the sharp decrease from 1800. It is noteworthy that the causative reflexive, despite its relative low frequency, could have contributed to the establishment of *get* + past participle construction after 1900.

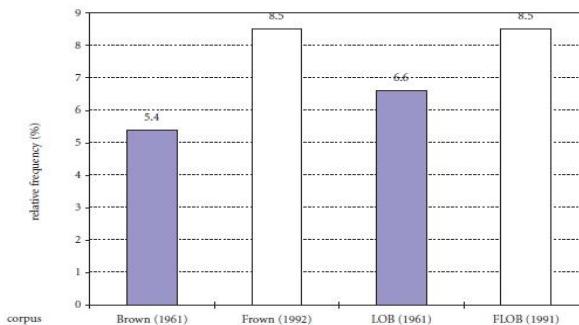
This view is also supported by what Givón and Yang (1994) said, 'the *get*-passive arose from—or by analogy with—the transitive reflexive-causative use of *get*'. In the discussion of the grammaticalization process of *get*, however, Figure 5 (Hundt, 2001) shows that on the whole, the lexical use of *get* has still remained far more dominant than any other *get*-constructions throughout the whole periods except the significant two periods. One is the period between 1650 and 1699 when the first drop of the lexical use of *get* coincides with the increasing use of *get* + NP + adv/prep, that is, what Givón (1993) proposes as the second step of grammaticalization chain of *get*.

The other period is the 20<sup>th</sup> century when a decrease of the lexical use of get occurs as the use



[Figure 5.Functions of Get-constructions in ARCHER]

of the grammaticalized pattern, get + past participle is on the rise. Figure 6 shows the get + past participle construction with a clear passive function has spread in the late 20th century.



[Figure 6.Get + past participle corpus in four corpora of English]

### 3. Synchronic considerations

#### 3.1 General descriptions in modern English grammar

*The fundamentals of English grammar* (Azar, 1992) and *Cambridge grammar of English* (Carter & McCarthy, 2006) mention that the get-passive is used to make distinction between a dynamic event and a state. This form is only used to describe a dynamic event with a dynamic verb, not a state or a situation, for which the be-passive is used. In the sentence ‘The door was shut at 6’, it is not sure whether the action of shutting door occurred at 6 or the door was in the state of being close at the time. To make a distinction, the got-passive is used only for a dynamic event.

- (7) The fence *got* damaged.
- (8) The fence *was* damaged.

The *get*-passive describes a dynamic event whereas the *be*-passive in the second sentence is not clear if it is a state or a dynamic event. In the following sentences, one cannot substitute *get* for *be* in the second sentence as it is a non-dynamic verb.

- (9) A headmaster *got* stabbed a few weeks ago. What is the world coming to?
- (10) The standard unit of mass used by all scientists *is* kept at the International Bureau of Weights and Measures at Severs, near Paris, France.

The *get*-passive includes an unintentional and unexpected action whereas the *be*-passive describes intentional or unintentional action. The simplest example is “I was born in Korea.” because birth can be expected. However, *get* cannot be substituted for *be* here because *get*-passive denotes something unintentional. Similarly, the sentence, “The

traffic camera got recorded.” was incorrect because the recording of the camera was intended, not accidental. For the correct use of the passive form, the sentence should go “The traffic camera was recorded.” In addition, get-passive is more informal, more common in spoken English. Quite often, to *get*, as a copular verb, is followed by adjectives to describe the idea of changing, becoming, and beginning to *be*. Just as in the sentences “Eric got nervous before the job interview.” or “My business has got better.” the writer chose the verb *get* to tell a state change.

### 3.2 Linguistic comparisons on two passive constructions

In English, the *be*-passive is the prototypical and unmarked one, but the *get*-passive displays several syntactic, semantic and pragmatic properties distinctive from the *be*-passive. Despite its significant resemblance to the *be*-passive, the *get*-passive are not interchangeable in some contexts and the difference seems to be involved with more than stylistic factors in terms of the choice of passive form - grammatical factors.

#### **Be-passive**

- Includes an optional by-phrase mentioning the agent of the action when it adds important information.
- (un)intentional action
- an ambiguous participle-verb/adjective

#### **Get-passive<sup>5</sup>**

- rarely includes a by-phrase unless it adds to the unexpected or (un)fortunate nature of the action.
- unintentional
- may include an ambiguous participle- verb/adjective.

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<sup>5</sup>cited in [www.grammar-quizzes.com / passive2.html](http://www.grammar-quizzes.com/passive2.html).

- states what happened (neutral)
- comments on a planned, intentional course of action
- indicates a situation with an adverse or beneficial effect on the subject.
- may indicate a causal relationship between the subject and completed action.
- used when we talk about personal routine tasks.
- used to say that we have a service done or arranged to have something completed.

[Table 1. usages of get- and be-passive forms]

### 3.2.1 Syntactic differences

Further contrastive analysis was made possible that the verb status of *be* and *get* are different; the former is a typical auxiliary while the verb *get* is not, which can be supported by the NICE properties test (Kim, 2012) judging the auxiliaryhood with Negation, Inversion, Contraction and Ellipsis.

- (11) a. He was not fired by the company.  
b.\*He got not fired by the company.
- (12) a. Was he fired by the company?  
b.\*Got he fired by the company?
- (13) a. He wasn't fired by the company.  
b.\*He gotn't fired by the company.
- (14) a. He was fired by the company and Bill was \_\_ too.  
b.\*He got fired by the company and Bill got \_\_ too.

### 3.2.2 Semantic differences

In addition to syntactic differences illustrated above, there are semantic and pragmatic differences too. Kim (2012) mentioned the properties of the subject and the main verb, and the volitionality of the event.

- (15) They would be/\*get known as silencers or perhaps repressors.  
(COCA, NPR Talk nation)

(16) I am making the assumption that he helped \*be/get rid of the  
body, is the allegation. (COCA, FoxSusteran)

According to Barber (1975: 22) *get*-passives often suggest responsibility on the part of the subject: the medium of the *get*-passive, unlike the medium of the *be*-passive, is somehow bringing the action onto itself (Hundt, 2001). This notion illuminates that a responsible patient-subject of *get*-passives is fairly in contrast with the affected patient-subject of typical *be*-passives.

### **3.2.2.1 Middle interpretation of get passive**

Hundt (2001) introduced the so-called ‘middle voice’ proposed by functional-typological grammarians, Svartvik (1966) and Stein (1979). It is an additional notion to active and passive voices that can be found in the following sentences; ‘*the book reads well*’, or ‘*the fax wouldn’t send*’. It is not a morphosyntactic category but a semantic category that the subject is both an initiator and the endpoint in causal chain, similar to the get-passive in sentences, ‘we have to *get organized*’ or ‘he *got dressed*’. Thus, two constructions show semantic similarities while they are syntactically different - the agent in the get-passive can either be overt or implicit but that of the middle voice is always implicit. To put it simply, get-passives can be positioned in between be-passive

voice to middle voice. In the sentence ‘The dishes don’t get done’, it is doubtful whether it is a prototypical passive as the *get* construction here is used to avoid blaming someone. Clearly, the sentence intends to scale down the degree of responsibility.

Questioning Givón/Yang’s study (1994:139) that an increase in non-human/inanimate subjects have played a crucial role in the neutralization of the former adversative meaning of *get*-passives, Hundt (2001) said that the number of instances of *get*-passives with inanimate subjects is small in corpora, giving examples of non-adversative use of *get*-past participle that tends towards the passive rather than the middle interpretation as in the following sentence, *Calamari gets grilled and served with beans and garlic*.

Also, there are some instances that illustrate a middle, which means the subject is to some extent responsible for the event, despite human/animate subjects: *If you are good, you should get paid* and *Ann spent ten years trying to get elected for a seat*. This corpora study suggests that the *get+past* participle still has a tendency to keep middle semantics while the corpus holds a significant number of instances on the *get* passives which are more interpreted as passive rather than neutral.

### 3.2.2.2 Subject properties

Taranto (2005) said that the subject of *get*-passive is affected by the action in question (Kim, 2012). In other words, the pre-existence of the subject is a necessary condition to the *get*-passive. This affected condition explains why the following sentence is unnatural; *the letter was/\*got written by you and no one else* because the letter came into existence after the action of writing, so it was in a sense not affected. (Kim, 2012) However, the affectedness does not only depend on physical but also psychological and conceptual conditions in case of inanimate subjects which are hardly affected physically. Moreover, in

the *get*-passive, the subject-referent has some responsibility for the event in question. The subject's responsibility can be observed in the following examples. (Kim, 2012)

- (17) She decided to get /\*be arrested (by the police).
- (18) The soldier got /\*was injured on purpose so he would be sent home.

### **3.2.2.3 Causative and resultant relation**

Get-passive bears the causative relation that brings about a resultant state. When we say 'John got hurt on his way home', it implies someone or something caused John to be hurt. Meanwhile, when we say 'John was hurt on his way home', there may be no such cause relation. Since the get passive needs a resulting state, the so-called endpoint, it is unnatural with the durative preposition, *for*. Thus, the get-passive can be observed in the following;

- (19) John got caught in one hour/\*for one hour.
- (20) John got promoted in two years/\*for two years. (Kim, 2012)

### **3.2.2.4 Adversary and beneficiary meaning**

The *get*-passive is characteristically used in clauses involving adversity, but it is also possible to describe a beneficial situation (Collins 1996).

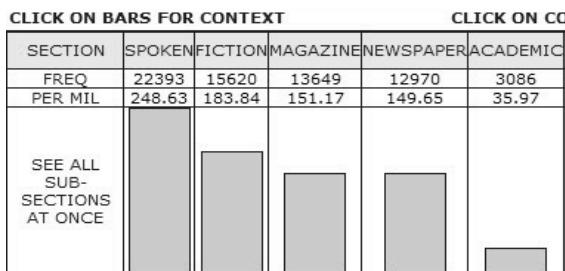
- (21) He got promoted multiple times.
- (22) The story got published and won some recognition.

The *get*-passive usually conveys the speaker's personal involvement or reflects the speaker's opinion as to whether the event described is

perceived as having favorable or unfavorable consequences.

### 3.2.3 Pragmatic differences

The use of get-passive and be-passive normally differ stylistically – the former is more colloquial as illustrated in Table 2, and avoided informal style but in fact, even in informal English, it is far less frequent than the be-passive. The get-passive is commonly used in an informal spoken context whereas the be-passive is used in a formal written context. For example, in talking about a heavily drunken man



[Table 2. Frequency of the get-passive in the COCA] (Kim, 2012)

who fought with a customer last night, one can say “He *got* thrown out of a restaurant in town.” On the other hand, on the label of a health supplementary bottle, one can find the notice “Vitamin tablets should *be* taken daily.” It is inappropriate to substitute *get* for *be*.

## 4. Interface between chronic and synchronic considerations

It is out of question that the *be on / wes an* + past participle in OE has developed into the be-passive of PDE, being acknowledged as a prototype of passive constructions. Unlike *weorðan*, which carried dynamic meaning of passive in OE and went into extinction in 14C,

the passive auxiliary *be* has survived until today. Such endurance of the *be+passive* is still reflected in its contemporary usage that allows for neutral meaning to go with both static and dynamic verbs. At the same time, its time-tested popularity may be due to the fact that it can be put into wide use for various contexts, whether they are formal or informal and whether spoken or written.

Meanwhile, as Visser (1912) claimed, get-passive construction was first developed by the necessity to eliminate the ambiguity in meanings of dynamic and stative passives in ME and distinguish the two. Although full-fledged get-passive appeared toward the end of the 18th century from a speech-based genre, it is not accidental that all examples of the get-passive taken from OED (Old English Dictionary) actually originated from fiction and drama texts (Hundt, 2001). This traditional usage still remains in one of well-known get-passive usages saying it is usually used in spoken English, which plays a major role in the choice of passive form.

Related to this, the usage of get-passive to denote adversity or favorable consequences in contrast with *be-passive* that carries neutral tone is actually connected to its involvement of speaker and reflection of speaker's opinion and it might have been more effectively emphasized by spontaneous spoken context rather than written context by tradition.

Among other synchronic usages regarding get-passive lie its middle interpretation associated with the so-called middle voice in Section 3. This notion in other words refers to the involvement of the subject, the responsibility or volitionalty of the subject. The responsible patient-subject of get-passives as opposed to the affected-subject in typical *be-passive* might originate from the transitive reflexive-causative use of *get*. The causative-reflexive *get* was initially proposed as the prior step to *get + passive* by Givón and Yang (1994) and Hundt (2001) acknowledges the role of *get + reflexive* construction in the spread of *get + passive* construction in the 20th century as illustrated in Figure 4

of Section 2. And now I speculate that the subject responsibility of get + passive is inherited from the causative-reflexive use of get.

For example, the expressions, *get introduced to*, *get involved in (with)* or *get acquainted with*, which first appeared in the late 17th century, might have a possibility to evolve from the transitive-causative meaning of get; '*get oneself to be introduced to*, *get oneself to be involved in (with)*, and *get oneself to be acquainted with*' in the grammaticalization process of get. Until today, the use of reflexive counterparts of these expressions is quite viable as in *introduce oneself to*, *involve oneself in (with)*, or *acquaint oneself with*, which suggest they commonly get along well with reflexives.

In addition, it seems that from the early time, the context offers an important cue to grasp such semantically unique property of middle interpretation in get + passive. Here is the sentence with get + passive in the late 17 century.

- (23) So, now I have furnish'd myself with Wit and Money, I am resolv'd to *get introduced* to Mrs. Annabella<sup>6</sup>.

(lowe.d1,1693, ARCHER)

The use of the verb 'resolve to' with get + passive is apparently enhancing the volition of the subject to introduce oneself to the lady, which suggests the subject brings the action. Likewise, the following sentence is well quoted to explain the same usage in the contemporary grammar on get-passive.

- (24) She spent 10 years trying to get selected as a chairman of the committee.

The use of the verb 'try to' strengthen the effect of subject

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<sup>6</sup>Givón/Yang (1994: 131) cited in Hundt, 2001, p.73.

responsibility that is the subject brings about the action.

## 5. Conclusion

Some connections are recognized between the present usages of the two passives and their historical developments. They seem to have made quite independent route of development. Unlike the time-tested prototypical be-passive construction, the get-passive, quite recently established and still evolving, is characterized as multifunctionality in both transitive and intransitive ways, which creates its mutative values - possession, movement, causation, obligation and change of state. And as acknowledged in Figure 5, the lexical function of the verb get takes up its prominent part until today and it is premature to state the get-passive has a mature passive auxiliary. It can be concluded that although get-passive cannot replace be-passive or be a serious rival yet, the get-passive should deserve our attention because get-passive has specialized linguistic properties that can better represent diversity and complexity of human mind. Further effort will need to be made in comparing the subcategories of get passive constructions.

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Junghee Byun  
donne99@snu.ac.kr