

On the Differences between American and British English Bible Versions with Reference to *get* Passive

Sungkyun Shin

(Kangwon National University)

Shin, Sungkyun. (2024). On the differences between American and British English with reference to *get* passive. *The Linguistic Association of Korea Journal*, 32(3), 105-119. In the case of the diachronic change of the *get* passive, the history of the English language shows functional cyclicity of the language. The functional roles of Old English passives are divided into the two auxiliary verbs *weorðan* and *beon/wesan*, these being dynamic (unintentional and informal), and stative (intentional and formal), respectively. In Middle English, the usage of *be* with a past participle encompasses both formal (stative, intentional) and informal (dynamic, unintentional) functions. This stems from the loss of the auxiliary verb *weorðan* and the merging of the functional roles of *beon/wesan* and *weorðan* into *be(on)*. In Early Modern English and Present-day English, the Bible versions representing British English, including the Revised English Bible (1989, 2010), show fewer examples of *get* constructions and *get* passives than the Bible versions representing American English, such as GNT (1976), NIV (2011) and NASB (1971, 1977, 1995, 2020). It might be concluded that the trend evident in *get* constructions and *get* passives spread from American English, characterized by informality and colloquiality, to British English, characterized by being formal and conservative.

Key Words: functional, cyclicity, diachronic study, *get* passive

1. Introduction

Denison (1993: 419) points out that the Oxford English Dictionary (OED) states that the first English passive with *get* was recorded in the mid-seventeenth-century:

- (1) “1652 Gaule, Magastrom. 361 (OED s.v. get v.34b)
 A certain Spanish pretending Alchymist ... got
 acquainted with foure rich Spanish merchants.
 Denison (1993: 419, His [20])”

Jespersen (1909-49: IV 108-9) also provides the following instances in chronological order:

- (2) a. “1731 Fielding, Letter Writers II.ix.20
 so you may not only save your life, but get
 rewarded for your roguery” (Denison 1993: 419, His [21])
 b. “1759 Sterne, Tristram Shandy III.ii.126.19
 he should by no means have suffered his right
 hand to have got engaged” (Denison 1993: 419, His [22])
 c. “1766 Goldsmith, Vicar xvii.90.16
 where they give good advice to young nymphs
 and swains to get married as fast as they can”
 (Denison 1993: 419, His [23])

However, despite the continuous increase in frequency of the usage of the get passive since its appearance in the mid-seventeenth century, Granger (1983: 234-5) concludes that *get* passives remain “extremely rare . . . and are restricted to colloquial style,” with a sample of spoken material dated 1961-75 from the educated, adult, British English (BrE) of the Survey of English Usage. Additionally, she mentions that “younger speakers tend to use it much more frequently, especially in more casual styles, and especially in *American English*” (italics are mine).

In this paper I describe and explain the synchronic usage of *get* passive in Present-day English (PE) and the diachronic functional cyclical change of the English *get* passive from Old English (OE) *beon/wesan* and *weorðan* (corresponding to PE *get*) passive. I suggest how and why the *get* passive has undergone diachronic cyclical changes, and point out that division of labor concerning *get* and *be* passive in PE is similar to that in OE. Finally, I describe and explain the differences between American English (AE) and British English (BE) with reference to *get* and *be* passive.

2. Synchronic Usage of the English *get* and *be* Passive

According to my paper, Shin (2017: 246), *get* passive is characterized by [+informal, +dynamic, +unintentional], whereas *be* passive is distinguished by [±informal, ±dynamic, ±intentional] features. Thus, the *get* passive is not identical to or replaceable by the *be* passive, as shown in the following examples:

- (3) a. I got demoted yesterday, due to my tardiness in arriving at work over the past five weeks.
- b. I was demoted yesterday at my company, due to my inability to produce enough results.

In (3b), *I got demoted ...* instead of *I was demoted* would be somewhat uncomfortable due to the dynamic use of *get*.

Further, according to Shin (2017: 241), in casual writing the *get* passive is commonly employed as an alternative to the *be* passive:

- (4) Their minivan got stolen in front of their church last Sunday.

Furthermore, *get* passives are only associated with dynamic (action) verbs; solely due to this limitation to dynamic (action) verbs, *be* is not interchangeable with *get* and the verb *get* is not employed with state verbs like *believe*, *like*, or *say* as shown in the following examples:

- (5) a.*That tree was blown over in the enemy's attack last week.
- b. That tree got blown over in the enemy's attack last week.
- (6) a. Nothing is known about the background.
- b. *Nothing gets known about the background.
- (7) a. It was believed that the painting was a fake.
- b. *It got believed that the painting was a fake.

Furthermore, Grammar-Quizzes.com states that the *get* passive is utilized to convey unintentional actions when emphasizing the subject as the "victim." Various emotional reactions stemming from unintended actions can be observed:

- (8) a. I got cut off while making a turn.
- b. I got bumped (shot, chased, followed).
- c. I got blamed.
- d. My shirt got torn (lost, damaged, dirty).

The passive construction known as the "get passive" is not employed for communicating deliberate actions, as demonstrated in the following examples:

- (9) a. *The traffic accident got documented.
- b. *The other taxi driver got issued a citation.

With the unintentional usage of the *get* passive Swan's (2005: 223) observed difference can be explained. The *get* passive is not often used to discuss longer, more deliberate planned actions:

- (10) a. ?Our building got built in 1885.
- b. ?Parliament got opened on Thursday.

The *be* passives, compared with the *get* passives, are used to state an observation or to report an event. A *by*-phrase is optionally included. The event may be unintentional:

- (11) a. I was hit by a driver.
- b. I was scolded for the accident.
- c. My bike was damaged by her car.

Alternatively, the event might be deliberate:

- (12) The accident was recorded by a traffic camera.

Similarly, the *be* passive can be employed to articulate deliberate actions that demand careful consideration or contemplation. In essence, a committee deliberated the result, a procedure dictated the result, and laws (whether civil or social) established the result. These statements can conveniently be expressed in passive form using the *be* passive.

- (13) a. By the board she was selected/chosen/picked for the award.
 b. He was asked/invited to make a speech.
 c. He was taken/sent to Busan Movie Festival.
 d. He was accepted into the Authors Guild! (received by selection process)
- (14) a. He was let go/left out/sacked.
 b. He was caught/cited/stopped/ticketed/
 (intentional, done with intention)
 c. He was expelled/fired/imprisoned/jailed.
 (received due process/legal right)

Moreover, by considering the distinct usage of the unintentional *get* and the (un)intentional *be*, we can elucidate the discrepancy in grammaticality observed in certain sentences in PE, such as those illustrated below:

- (15) a. Adrielle was born in 2017.
 b. *Adrielle got born in 2017.
 c. Esther was pregnant.
 d. Esther got pregnant.
 e. Adrielle was spanked by the doctor to open her airway.
 f. *Adrielle got spanked by the doctor to open her airway.
 g. *Adrielle’s umbilical cord was wrapped around her neck.
 h. Adrielle’s umbilical cord got wrapped around her neck.
 i. Our church was founded in 2000.
 j. *Our church got founded in 2000.

A birth is planned and anticipated, regardless of the accidental nature of the pregnancy, hence (15b) is ill- formed and (15a, c, d) are well-formed. (15e) and (15f) were intentional and expected, and therefore (15f) is ill-formed. (15g) is ill-formed and (15h) is well-formed because they were unintentional, accidental, and unfortunate acts. (15i) and (15j) were a deliberate and intentional act, and therefore (15j) is ungrammatical.

Based on these data, Shin 2017: 246 characterizes PE (synchronic) *get* and *be* passives as follows:

Table 1. Characteristics of PE Get and Be Passives
Get Passive: [+informal, +dynamic, +unintentional]
Be Passive: [±informal, ±dynamic, ±intentional]

3. Diachronic Cyclical Changes of the English *be* and *get* Passives

Concerning the contrast between the PE *be* and *get* going back to OE *weorðan* (corresponding to PE *get*), Denison (1993: 421) underscores that the utilization of *get* is linked with a dynamic interpretation, akin to OE *weorðan*. Traugott (1972) additionally observes that all three OE auxiliaries - *beon*, *wesan*, and *weorðan* - are employed in OE passive structures: *beon* for predicting or intermittent generality, *wesan* for expressing permanent generality or ongoing action, and *weorðan* for emphasizing the activity and event. In particular instances, the notion of "becoming" remains so prominent in *weorðan* + past participle that it appears to resemble our contemporary usage of *get* as in *It got built* versus *It was built*.

Shin (2017: 247, adapted from Mitchell and Robinson 1992: §202, 203) proposes that the forms using *beon/wesan* sometimes appear to highlight the resultant state stemming from the action, while those using *weorðan* emphasize the action itself, with regard to the difference between the forms with *beon/wesan* and those with *weorðan*, as illustrated below:

- (16) a. he eall wæs beset mid heora scotungum
 ‘he was completely covered with their missiles’
 b. ne bið ðær nænig ealo gebrowen
 ‘nor is any ale brewed there’ (showing the continuing state by the use of *bið*)
 c. Ðær wearð se cyning Bagsecg ofslægen
 ‘there King B. was killed’ (lit. ‘became slain’)

Hence, in OE, the contrast in collocational patterns between *weorðan* and *becuman* reflects a distinction in meaning: abrupt transformation beyond the subject’s influence (*weorðan*) versus gradual alteration, potentially under the subject’s control (*becuman*). Hence, Shin 2017: 249 assume that in OE, the functional roles of passives are divided into the two verbs *weorðan* and *beon/wesan* as follows:

Table 2. OE Division of functional roles

Weorðan	[+informal, +dynamic, +unintentional]
Beon	[-informal, ±dynamic, -unintentional]

Shin 2017: 249) also argues that, in ME, due to the disappearance of the word *weorðan* from English, there was a merging of the functional roles of *beon(wesan)* and *weorðan* into *be(on)*. In ME *be* + past participle takes the functions of formal (stative and intentional) and informal (dynamic and unintentional). In ME, passive constructions with *be* can convey both dynamic and stative meanings, as illustrated below:

- (17) Alsso it is seyde Ðat þe Erle off Penbroke is
 taken into Brettayn (Paston Letters Ed. Davis 1971)
 ‘It is also said that the Earl of Pembroke is
 being taken/has been taken into Brittany’

In (17), the *be* passive can be interpreted as either *is being taken* (dynamic) or *has been taken* (stative).

Yet, during the Early Modern English (ENE) period, a re-emergence of functional distinctions (a revival of labor division) possibly occurred, resembling the earlier state of OE. This resurgence might have been due to the persistent use of the copula *be* with predicates, which diminished the dynamic potency of *be* with prepositional phrases. Thus, similar to OE, the requirement for dynamic passive construction arises, leading to the introduction of the *get* passive, which serves a function akin to OE *weorðan* (‘become’). This kind of process is the so-called linguistic cycle.

The linguistic cycle¹⁾ is “a designation used to describe language change taking place in a systematic manner and direction.” (van Gelderen 2024: 3). According to van Gelderen (2022, 2024), cycles are composed of micro cycles, which consist of determiner and verbal cycles, and macro cycles, consisting of analytic and synthetic cycles, agreement or head marking cycles, case cycles or dependent marking cycles, and interaction involving macro cycles. It is assumed that the linguistic cycles are motivated by comfort and clarity.²⁾ The

1) An example of linguistic cycle is the Negative Cycle in the history of English (van Gelderen 2024: 2):

Old English Middle English later Middle English Modern English
ne > *n(e)-...* *na wíht/not* > *not* > *-n’t*

2) A typical and representative cycle, according to van Gelderen (2024: 3), comprises of grammaticalization followed by renewal, which is in turn followed by grammaticalization. This definition is based on the commonly-cited characterization by von der Gabelentz as follows: The history of language moves in the diagonal of two forces: the impulse toward comfort, which leads to the wearing down of sounds, and that toward clarity, which disallows this erosion and the destruction of the language. The affixes grind themselves down, disappear without a trace; their

most frequently cited description and explanation of cyclical change is as a balance between comfort and clarity. To explain the cyclical change of passives, OE shows the characteristic of clarity in that OE distinguishes *weorðan* [+informal, +dynamic, +unintentional] and *beon* [-informal, ±dynamic, -unintentional]. ME is characterized by comfort in that in ME *be* + past participle takes the functions of formal (stative and intentional) and informal (dynamic and unintentional). Hence, during the ME period, *be* passives could be understood dynamically or statically. However, in ENE, a reestablishment or return to the original state of OE likely took place, as the functional roles were once again distinguished. This could be attributed to the sustained use of the copula (linking verb) *be* + predicate, leading to a weakening of the dynamic aspect of *be* + past participle. Consequently, akin to OE, there arises a necessity for a dynamic passive form, thus prompting the introduction of the *get* passive, which functions similarly to OE *weorðan* ('become'). In ME, passive constructions with *be* can be understood both dynamically and statically. Generative grammarians³) including van Gelderen (2024) discuss just micro and macro cyclical changes, but not functional cyclical changes such as that of the *get* passive, which I have discussed so far and seems to need greater attention from linguists.

Investigation of the English Bible versions shows this diachronic and functional cyclical change of the *get* passive. No instance of the *get* passive is found in the Tyndale translation (1526, adapted from Bosworth 1907) or the King James Version (1611). This suggests that the English *get* passive did not emerge until the end of the seventeenth century. Analysis of the Darby Bible Version (1890) uncovered only a single instance of *get* (*got*) baptized, which is presented below:

(18) Acts 22:16 DBY

And now why lingerest thou? Arise and get baptised,
and have thy sins washed away, calling on his name.

functions or similar ones, however, require new expression. They acquire this expression, by the method of isolating languages, through word order or clarifying words. The latter, in the course of time, undergo agglutination, erosion, and in the mean time renewal is prepared: periphrastic expressions are preferred ... always the same: the development curves back towards isolation, not in the old way, but in a parallel fashion. That's why I compare them to spirals. (von der Gabelentz 1901: 256)

3) See Chomsky (2012, 2013, 2015, 2019, 2020, 2021, 2022, 2023), and Chomsky, Belletti, et al. (2002), Chomsky, Gallego, et al. (2019), and Chomsky, Seely, et al. (2023) for reference.

Thus, although the English *get* passive was used in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, it was not popular, particularly in Bible language, because the language of the Bible is rather formal and conservative.

The Revised Standard Version (1952) (RSV) does not include any instance of the *get* passive, except for the following two occurrences of *get drunk*:

(19) a. Ephesians 5:18 RSV

And do not get drunk with wine, for that is
debauchery; but be filled with the Spirit,

b. 1 Thessalonians 5:7 RSV

For those who sleep, sleep at night, and those who get
drunk are drunk at night

RSV (1952) exhibits the traits of formal and conservative language usage.

The Good News Translation Version (1976) (GNT), published as a full Bible by the American Bible Society and intended to be a “common language” Bible, contains 29 examples of the *get* passives and 13 examples of *get + drunk, tired, and started*, which can be regarded adjectivally. This version is notably informal and conversational, featuring numerous instances of *get* passives employed to convey dynamic actions when contrasted with *be* passives. PE marks the beginning of a distinction in functional roles for passives, delineating between an informal/dynamic/unintentional *get* passive and a formal/stative/intentional *be* passive, akin to OE, as outlined below:

(20) a. Genesis 35:2 GNT

So Jacob said to his family and to all who were with him,
“Get rid of the foreign gods that you have; purify yourselves and
put on clean clothes.

b. Exodus 14:25 GNT

He made the wheels of their chariots get stuck,
so that they moved with great difficulty. The Egyptians said,
“The Lord is fighting for the Israelites against us. Let’s get out of here!”

c. Matthew 18:12 GNT

“What do you think a man does who has one hundred sheep and
one of them gets lost? He will leave the other ninety-nine grazing
on the hillside and go and look for the lost sheep.

The 1976 edition of GNT is characterized by its informal and conversational tone, often referred to as “common language,” and features numerous instances of *get* passives.

The Revised English Bible (1989, 2010) (REB), which is a good example of a British English Bible, includes 142 instances of *get* with 15 *get* passives. The New International Version (1978, 1984, 2011) (NIV) and New American Standard Bible (1971, 1977, 1995, 2020) (NASB), which are American English Bibles, show 305 instances of *get* with 20 *get* passives and 179 cases of *get* with 18 *get* passives, respectively.

Among the Bible versions examined, those produced using British English show fewer examples of *get* constructions and *get* passives than the Bible versions in American English, such as GNT (1976), NIV (1978, 1984, 2011) and NASB (1971, 1977, 1995, 2020). It might be concluded that the trend evident in *get* constructions and *get* passives spread from American English, characterized by informality and colloquiality, to British English, characterized by being formal and conservative.

This observation aligns with the trend noted by Mair and Leech (2006: 318-342) regarding the colloquialization of written English. They suggest that as written English has adopted a more conversational tone, the frequency of the canonical *be* passive has experienced a decline, as evidenced by four written corpora. The passive construction exhibits a decrease of 12.4% for British English and 20.1% for American English. As noted by Mair and Leech (2006: 318-342), in the past two decades, there has been a shift in the prescriptive guidelines regarding passive usage, with many style manuals now discouraging the use of passive constructions in academic writing, particularly in the United States. Nevertheless, there has been a significant rise in the utilization of the *get* passive, as observed in both British and American English. They argue that the decline in *be* passives and the surge in *get* passives represent a discourse shift, indicating that written English has progressively aligned with the conventions of spoken language over the past century.

According to Mair and Leech (2006: 318-342), the *be* passive is relatively uncommon in spoken language and is closely linked to written communication, especially in academic contexts. Present-day expectations for writing to be easily understood and engaging influence of writing conventions across various domains, ranging from journalism and academia to the creation of official documents, consequently lead to a reduction in the prevalence of the *be* passive. Accordingly, when modern writers opt for a passive construction, there is less reluctance to adopt the *get* passive, which has thus become more generally acceptable in documents as well as in spoken language. This represents a

measure of harmonization of the two forms of language, supposedly to promote a high level of public comprehensibility or readability of documents

Aside from the mentioned *get* passives, the GNT (1976) includes nine instances of *get drunk*, one of *get started*, and three of *get tired*, where *get* is paired with adjectives, which nevertheless have the orthographic form of past participles:

(21) a. Proverbs 25:17 GNT

Don't visit your neighbors too often; they may get tired of you and come to hate you.

b. 1 Thessalonians 5:7 GNT

It is at night when people sleep; it is at night when they get drunk.

In the informal and conversational GNT (1976), *get* passives are employed to convey dynamic actions, contrasting with *be* passives, as shown in the table below:

Table 3. ENE and PE Division of Functional Roles

Get: [+informal, +dynamic, +unintentional]
Be: [-informal, ±dynamic, ±intentional]

The utilization of the *get* passive in GNT (1976) resembles the common usage of the *get* passive in PE, demonstrated in the following examples:

(22) a. He and his girlfriend are going to get engaged this spring.

b. When did that old school get built?

c. I got picked up by my brother at the bus stop.

d. The dog gets fed every morning.

e. He got fired by the company in 2024.

f. My food got cooked.

Here, *get* is used in the passive voice instead of the verb *be*, encroaching on the previous territory of the *be* passive.

4. Conclusion

Over the course of English language history, shifts between the *get* and *be* passive constructions demonstrate the cyclical nature of the language. In OE, passive functions are fulfilled by the two auxiliaries *beon/wesan* and *weorðan*, formal/stative/intentional and informal/dynamic/unintentional, respectively. During the ME period, due to the disappearance of the term *weorðan* from the English lexicon, the functional roles of *beon/wesan* and *weorðan* merged into *be(on)*. In ME, *be(on)* + past participle assumed both informal/dynamic/unintentional and formal/stative/intentional functions. In ENE there was a resurgence of functional division (the division of labor) or a return to OE pattern, probably because the copula *be* + predicate persisted in usage, the dynamic effect of *be* + past participle was diminished. Hence, similar to OE, there arose a requirement for a dynamic passive construction, leading to the introduction of the *get* passive, which functions similarly to the OE *weorðan* ('become') passive.

The analysis of various English Bible versions underscores the chronological cyclical change of the *get* passive. Neither the Tyndale (1526) nor the King James Version (1611) includes any instance of the *get* passive, indicating its absence until the late seventeenth century. In the Darby Bible Version (1890), only one occurrence of *get* (*got*) *baptized* is found. Hence, while the *get* passive was occasionally used in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, it was not prevalent, particularly within the Bible, given the latter's formal and conservative language. Notably, RSV (1952) lacks examples of the *get* passive, aside from just two instances of *get drunk*.

The GNT (1976), published as a full Bible by the American Bible Society to be a "common language" Bible, presents 29 instances of the *get* passive and 13 examples of *get* followed by adjectives such as *drunk*, *tired*, and *started*. This version, characterized by informality and colloquialism, features numerous *get* passives, employed to convey dynamic actions in contrast to *be* passives. This reflects a shift in the functional roles of passives, with informal/dynamic/unintentional *get* passives emerging alongside formal/stative/intentional *be* passives, akin to OE. The REB (1989, 2010), which is a British English Bible, provides 142 instances of *get* with 15 *get* passives. NIV (1978, 1984, 2011) and NASB (1971, 1977, 1995, 2020), which represent American English Bibles, show 305 instances of *get* with 20 *get* passives and 179 cases of *get* with 18 *get* passives, respectively.

Among the Bible versions examined, those representing British English show fewer

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Sungkyun Shin

Professor emeritus

Department of English Language and Literature

Kangwon National University

1Kangwondaehgil, Chuncheon-si, Gangwon State 24341 Republic of Korea

Email: skshin@kangwon.ac.kr

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