

Passive *get*, Causative *get*, and the Phasehood of Passive vP*

Nicholas Fleisher
University of California, Berkeley

Introduction

In this paper I examine the syntactic structure of English passive *get* and show that, contrary to the leading generative analysis of this structure (Haegeman 1985), it is not assimilable to the structure of causative *get*. The two constructions are exemplified in (1).

- (1) a. Passive *get*: They got arrested.
 b. Causative *get*: He got them arrested.

Passive *get* consists of a single vP, with *get* merged directly under v followed by a VP complement; causative *get* is biclausal, with the lexical V *get* followed by a passive vP small-clause complement. The structure of passive *get* supports Legate's (2003) claim that passive vP is a phase, contra Chomsky (2000, 2001). This paper serves both as an update to the generative literature on this often overlooked construction and as a contribution to the theoretical debate about the phasehood of passive vP.

Syntactic Basics of Passive *get*

Passive *get* appears at first simply to be an auxiliary verb, performing much the same role as the passive auxiliary *be*, as shown in (2).

- (2) a. Passive *get*: They got arrested.
 b. Passive *be*: They were arrested.

There is a large literature on the semantic and pragmatic non-equivalence of passive *get* and passive *be*. I do not address the issue here, but see Hatcher (1949), Lakoff (1971), Chappell (1980), Sussex (1982), and Collins (1996) for discussion.

Importantly, passive *get* and passive *be* differ not just in their semantics and pragmatics, but also in their basic syntactic properties. Unlike passive *be*, passive *get* fails to behave like a true syntactic auxiliary: it requires *do*-support under negation, fails to undergo subject-aux inversion, and cannot occur in tag questions, as shown in (3) (Haegeman 1985:55).

* Many thanks to the CLS audience for helpful feedback and to Line Mikkelsen and Andrew Garrett for valuable comments and discussion. The usual disclaimers apply.

- | | | |
|-----|--------------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| (3) | PASSIVE <i>BE</i> | PASSIVE <i>GET</i> |
| | a. They were not arrested. | *They got not arrested. |
| | b. Were they arrested? | *Got they arrested? |
| | c. They were arrested, weren't they? | *They got arrested, gotn't they? |

Thus, though one may say that passive *get* functions roughly as an auxiliary semantically, it is not an auxiliary in the syntactic sense, i.e., it does not raise to T.

Haegeman (1985): The Causative Connection

The leading generative treatment of passive *get* is that of Haegeman (1985), who proposes that passive *get* is the unaccusative alternant of causative *get*. On this view, the two are related by Burzio's generalization, with causative *get* assigning an external θ -role and accusative Case, and passive *get* assigning neither. The contrast is shown in (4).

- | | | |
|--------|---|-----------|
| (4) a. | He got [t_{he} [t_i arrested t_i]]. | CAUSATIVE |
| b. | They $_i$ got [t'_i [t_i arrested t_i]]. | PASSIVE |

In (4a), causative *got* assigns an external θ -role to the subject, *he*, and assigns accusative Case to *them* via ECM; *them* has moved from its base position, the complement of the passive V *arrested*, in search of Case. In (4b), passive *got* assigns neither θ -role nor Case, and so *them/they* must move on to the matrix subject position in order to get Case; this movement is licit, as no θ -role is assigned to the matrix subject position. On this analysis, the difference between the two structures is simply the difference between transitive *get* (causative) and its unaccusative alternant (passive); all other aspects of the structure remain the same. In particular, this means that the matrix subject of passive *get* must move successive-cyclically through a position between *get* and the passive participle, as shown by the intermediate trace in (4b); this is the position in which the object *them* appears in the causative in (4a).

There is reason to question whether this intermediate landing site is well motivated for the passive. Under a stranding analysis of quantifier float (Sportiche 1988), we would predict a stranded quantifier to be grammatical in the position of the intermediate trace in (4b); as (5) shows, this is ungrammatical for passive *get* (but grammatical for passive *be*, which moves higher than passive *get*).

- | | | |
|--------|-------------------------|--------------------|
| (5) a. | *They got all arrested. | PASSIVE <i>GET</i> |
| b. | They were all arrested. | PASSIVE <i>BE</i> |

If Haegeman's proposed structure for passive *get* is correct, then the ungrammaticality of (5a) is mysterious. It is unclear why the underlying object of the passive V should be able to move through an intermediate position without

being able to strand a quantifier in that position. Moreover, note that the intermediate position in (4b/5a) is not a θ -position for the underlying object; its θ -position is its base position, the complement of V. The well-known restriction against floating a quantifier in a θ -position therefore cannot be invoked to explain the ungrammaticality of (5a) (Bošković 2004).

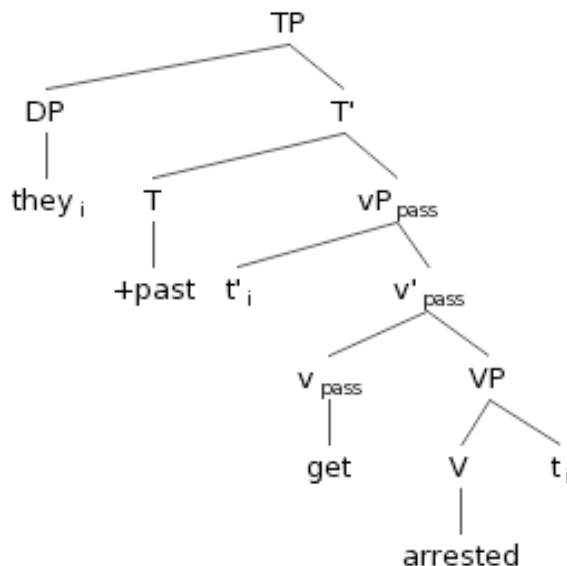
The unavailability of the intermediate position in (4b/5a) suggests a significant structural discrepancy between passive and causative *get*. While there is clearly a position available between *get* and the passive V in the causative—this is the position filled by the overt DP *them* in (4a)—the ungrammaticality of quantifier stranding in (5a) strongly suggests that this position does not exist in the passive. Haegeman’s analysis, which claims that passive and causative *get* are structurally identical, must therefore be revised.

A New Proposal

We can account for the mismatch noted above if we assume different structures for passive and causative *get*. I begin by presenting my proposals for the two structures, and go on to discuss additional evidence in support of each one.

In the passive, the lexical item *get* is merged not as a V but as a passive *v* head (v_{pass}) which takes a VP as its complement. The structure of the sentence *They got arrested* is shown in the tree in (6).

(6)



Since *get* is merged directly as the functional head v_{pass} , there is no position between *get* and the V *arrested* to which the object can move. This accounts for

the ungrammaticality of quantifier stranding in (5a): the quantifier is “stranded” in a position that does not exist. Note in addition that the v_{pass} *get* cannot raise to T, unlike its v_{pass} counterpart *be* (cf. the examples in (3)). At present I simply note this as an idiosyncrasy of the v_{pass} *get*; future research may offer an explanation for the discrepancy.

Also of note in (6) is the fact that the object, *they*, moves through Spec, vP_{pass} on its way to Spec,TP. This first step is crucial: if passive vP is a phase (as will be argued explicitly below), this movement must take place in order for the object to be available for further movement into its Case position (and thus for convergence).¹ The Phase Impenetrability Condition (Chomsky 2000, 2001) requires that the object DP move to the specifier of the phase projection (vP) if it is to undergo further movement out of the phase. Just as the unavailability of quantifier stranding between *get* and the participle argues against an intermediate landing site there, the grammaticality of quantifier stranding immediately to the left of *get* supports the structure proposed in (6), along with the notion that passive vP is a phase. The contrast is shown in (7).

- (7) a. *They DID [vP [get all arrested]].
 b. They DID [vP all [get arrested]].

Emphatic *do* is used to show that the quantifier in (7b) is stranded at the edge of vP , below TP, and does not move all the way up to Spec,TP with *they*. While the grammaticality of quantifier stranding in (7b) shows that the object moves

¹ I remain agnostic on the issue of whether all passive vPs must be contained within an agentive vP shell (to license *by*-phrases and agent-oriented adverbials). A potential problem for such a view is that the implicit agent with passive *get* is typically the undergoer, whereas with passive *be* it is the (suppressed) agent.

- (i) They got hit on purpose. = ‘they carried out their intention to get hit’
 (ii) They were hit on purpose. = ‘someone else carried out his intention to hit them’

This suggests that, in order to license the proper interpretation, the underlying object would move through the specifier of the agentive vP with passive *get* but not with passive *be*; however, it is difficult to construct a principled account of this movement disparity. See Lakoff (1971) for discussion of the agentivity of the subject of passive *get* and additional examples.

Importantly, if all passive vPs are contained within agentive vPs , then the question of whether passive vP is a phase (the main theoretical concern of this paper) is rendered largely vacuous, if we adopt the common assumption that agentive vP is a phase. It is difficult to say what empirical evidence could tease the two vPs apart. Note in addition that the passive vP complement of causative *get* could also be argued to have an agentive vP shell, though this would license only *by*-phrases (iii); agent-oriented adverbials always target matrix *get* in such cases (iv):

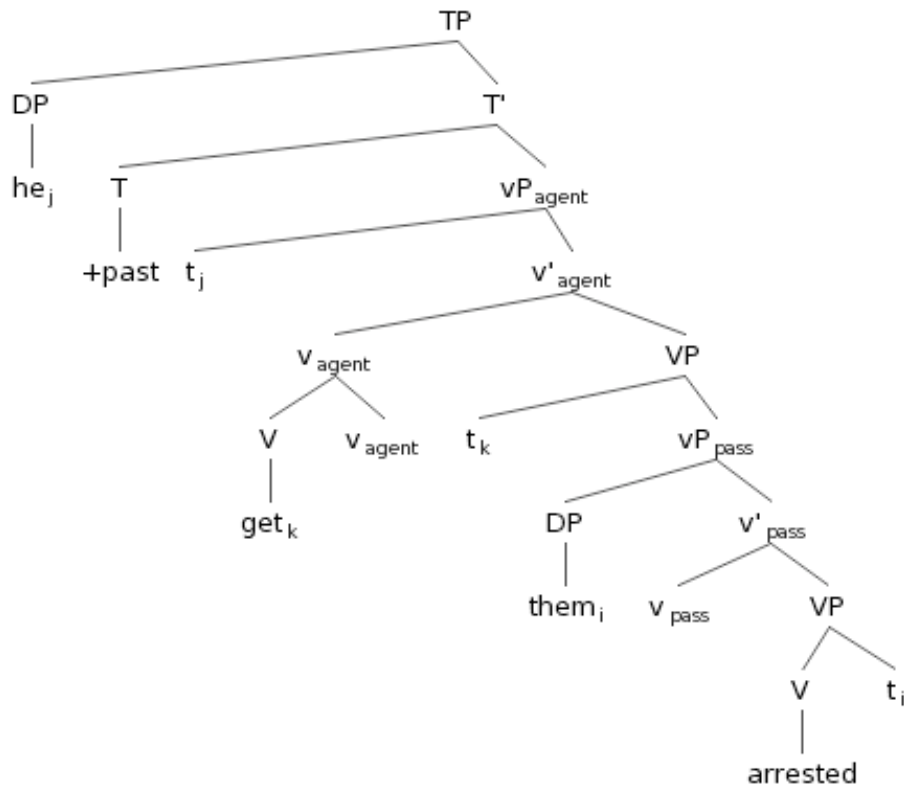
- (iii) He got them arrested by the police.
 (iv) He got them arrested by the police on purpose.
 = ‘he carried out his intention to have the police arrest them’
 ≠ ‘he carried out the police’s intention to have the police arrest them’

Throughout this paper, I will assume only a minimal passive vP structure, without an agentive vP above it.

through Spec,vP_{pass}, the movement itself shows that passive vP is a phase. In order for the object to be available to move to Spec,TP to check its Case, it must first move to phase edge, Spec,vP_{pass}. This first step is motivated only if passive vP is phase; otherwise, the object would move directly to Spec,TP. The stranded quantifier, a residue of the object DP's movement, provides evidence for the first step and thus for the phasehood of passive vP.

The structure of causative *get* is a bit different from that of passive *get*. As with the passive, the structure of the causative includes a passive vP, but *get* is a full lexical V that selects the passive vP as a small-clause complement. The structure of the causative sentence *He got them arrested* is shown in (8).

(8)



The V *get* raises to v_{agent} in the usual way, while the subject originates in the specifier of the agentive v and raises to Spec,TP to check Case. The complement of *get* is a passive vP much like the one shown in (6), with a null v_{pass} head instead of *get*.

Importantly, just as in the passive in (6), the object of *arrested* raises from the complement of V to Spec,vP_{pass} in the causative in (8). This is another instance of movement to the phase edge, though in this case the object DP *them* is able to

check its Case in that position, either via exceptional case marking by *get* (or perhaps by the agentive *v* dominating *get*) or via an equivalent raising-to-object mechanism. (Note once again that, in the case of raising-to-object, such additional raising is made possible by the fact that *them* has moved to the phase edge, Spec,vP_{pass}.)

Thus, while both passive and causative *get* involve a passive vP, they differ in both the category and the position of the word *get*. In the passive, *get* is the v_{pass} head itself, while in the causative it is a V that selects the passive vP as a small-clause complement. This passive vP complement conforms to Basilico's (2003) criteria for small clauses with thetic judgments (cf. Ladusaw 1994): (i) it requires stage-level predication and not individual-level predication, (ii) matrix passivization is impossible, and (iii) bare plurals tend to receive an existential interpretation, not a generic interpretation.² These three characteristics are exemplified in (9).

- (9) a. *Stage-level predication is acceptable; individual-level predication is not*
 i. He got them arrested.
 ii. * He got them red-headed.
 b. *Matrix passivization is impossible*
 iii. * They were gotten arrested.
 c. *Bare plurals receive an existential, not generic, interpretation*
 iv. He got things done.
 v. He got people killed.

The structure proposed for causative *get* in (8) therefore receives support from several independent syntactic and semantic tests. Moreover, the structure of the causative in (8) readily accounts for other possible small-clause complements of causative *get*. As shown in (10), causative *get* can take many different complement types.

- | | |
|----------------------------------|--------------------|
| (10) | COMPLEMENT TYPE |
| a. He got them to leave. | <i>infinitival</i> |
| b. He got them ready. | <i>AP</i> |
| c. He got them out of the house. | <i>PP</i> |

These additional causative examples simply involve the complement types listed in (10) in place of the passive vP shown in (8). The lexical V *get* of the causative

² Note, however, that in some situations the object can receive a generic interpretation:

(i) He got undergrads banned from the reading room.

James Isaacs (p.c.) points out that the availability of the generic interpretation can depend on other factors; e.g., generics are more readily available in the present tense. This third criterion may therefore be less reliable as a small-clause diagnostic than the other two.

is flexible in its complementation, and as a result we see the four different types of causative listed in (8) and (10). In all of these causative examples, *get* remains the lexical V shown in the structure in (8). Importantly, the structure for passive *get* shown in (6) explains just as readily why we do not see such flexibility in the complementation of passive *get*. In this case, *get* is the functional head v_{pass} , which selects only VP as its complement. It is difficult to explain this difference in complementation patterns on an analysis like that of Haegeman (1985), in which passive and causative *get* both involve the (GB equivalent of the) structure in (8). By contrast, in the analysis proposed here the difference falls out quite naturally, with the lexical item V selecting multiple complement types in the causative and the functional item v_{pass} selecting a unique complement type in the passive.³

Phasehood

As discussed above, the structures posited here for passive and causative *get* suggest that passive vP must be a phase. Any DP that fails to check its features within a phase must move to the phase edge—i.e., to its specifier—in order to be able to move higher in the tree later in the derivation. As noted earlier, there is strong empirical evidence for DP movement to Spec, vP_{pass} : with passive *get*, we have seen the grammaticality of quantifier stranding under emphasis in (7b), and with causative *get*, we have seen the presence of an overt DP between *get* and the passive participle in all examples. Recall that, in particular for passive *get*, movement to Spec, vP_{pass} is unmotivated and therefore illicit unless passive vP is a phase.⁴

³ David Pesetsky (p.c.) asks why causative *get*, as shown in (8), is unable to undergo the sort of unaccusative alternation seen with other *get* examples:

- (i) He got the book to her. *transitive*
- (ii) The book got to her. *unaccusative*

That is, even if the structure for passive *get* in (6) exists, why should the lexical V *get* in (8) be unable to become an unaccusative, with a passive sentence surfacing as a result? I do not have a straightforward answer, but I would point again to the ungrammaticality of quantifier stranding in (5a) as evidence that such structures do not occur. Furthermore, the transitive/unaccusative alternation is not always as semantically transparent as in (i) and (ii); e.g., the unaccusative alternant of the causative with an infinitival complement in (10a) expresses permission:

- (iii) He got them to leave. (=10a)
- (iv) They got to leave.

This is certainly unexpected, in light of the apparently close semantic relationship between (i) and (ii). The existence of an unaccusative alternation for *get* thus should not be taken for granted, despite the superficial evidence for it. Additional work is needed in order to determine the syntactic validity of the apparent alternation, a matter I do not pursue here. Moreover, it is possible that causative and passive *get*, in addition to being syntactically divergent, are semantically not as closely related as they first appear, a matter that may be related to their respective histories. More nuanced semantic work is needed in this area; see Gronemeyer (1999) and Fleisher (2004) on the historical non-relatedness of causative and passive *get*.

⁴ The facts for causative *get* do not require this conclusion, but they do not contradict it.

Alongside the evidence discussed above, we may also apply Legate's (2003) phasehood tests to passive *get* for further evidence that passive vP is a phase. Legate uses two tests to show that passive vP is a phase: a reconstruction test and an antecedent-contained deletion test. Though originally devised for sentences with passive *be*, the tests work equally well for passive *get*. The reconstruction test is shown in (11).

(11) LEGATE'S RECONSTRUCTION TEST:

[At which of the parties that he_i invited Mary_j to] did every man_i [_{vP} ✓
get introduced to her_j *]?

The logic of the reconstruction test is as follows. The wh-phrase must be interpretable at the check-marked position immediately to the left of *get*—i.e., in Spec,vP_{pass}—in order to allow the quantified expression *every man* to bind the variable *he* while at the same time preventing *Mary* from being illicitly bound by *her*. If the wh-phrase reconstructs to the lower position, it will produce a Principle C violation for *Mary*, as indicated by the star. The fact that the sentence in (11) is grammatical indicates that reconstruction to the check-marked position is possible. Of course, the wh-phrase may only move to this position if passive vP is a phase; otherwise, such movement would be unmotivated—i.e., it would not be in the service of checking a feature—and therefore illicit, and the wh-phrase would instead move directly to its surface position to check its wh-feature.

Note in addition that the position of reconstruction is fully compatible with the word *get* being inside the passive vP; this is in contrast to Legate's examples with passive *be*, in which *be* sits in the position of the auxiliary *did* in (11). In both cases, reconstruction takes place in Spec,vP_{pass}; the only difference is the identity of the v_{pass} head and its ability to raise to T.

Legate's second test is the antecedent-contained deletion test shown in (12).

(12) LEGATE'S ANTECEDENT-CONTAINED DELETION TEST

Mary didn't [_{vP1} get introduced to [_{DP} anyone you did [_{vP2} e]]].

The logic of this test is similar to that of the reconstruction test: the DP must raise in order to be interpreted, but it cannot raise any higher than the edge of vP₁, or else the negative polarity item *anyone* will not be licensed. Once again, in order for the DP to be able to move to the specifier of this vP—i.e., Spec,vP_{pass}—the vP must be a phase. The grammaticality of (12) provides yet more evidence that passive vP is a phase.

Conclusion

The goals of this paper have been twofold: the empirical goal has been to show that passive *get* is not simply an unaccusative variant of causative *get*, as

Haegeman (1985) proposed; the theoretical goal has been to offer additional evidence in support of Legate's (2003) position that passive vP is a phase, contra Chomsky (2000, 2001). The structures proposed for passive and causative *get* in (6) and (8) account for a number of previously overlooked empirical properties of the two constructions, and provide an update to the generative literature on passive *get*, the last major analysis of which is now twenty years old. These revised structures in turn support the conclusion that passive vP is a phase, an issue of significant concern in this developing area of generative theory.

References

- Basilico, David. 2003. The topic of small clauses. *Linguistic Inquiry* 34: 1–35.
- Bošković, Željko. 2004. Be careful where you float your quantifiers. *Natural Language & Linguistic Theory* 22: 681–742.
- Chappell, Hilary. 1980. Is the get-passive adversative? *Papers in Linguistics* 13: 411–452.
- Chomsky, Noam. 2000. Minimalist inquiries: the framework. In R. Martin, D. Michaels, and J. Uriagereka (eds.), *Step by Step: Essays of Minimalism in Honor of Howard Lasnik*, 89–155. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Chomsky, Noam. 2001. Derivation by phase. In M. Kenstowicz (ed.), *Ken Hale: A Life in Language*, 1–52. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Collins, Peter C. 1996. *Get*-passives in English. *World Englishes* 15: 43–56.
- Fleisher, Nicholas. 2004. The origin of passive *get*. Ms., University of California, Berkeley.
- Gronemeyer, Claire. 1999. On deriving complex polysemy: the grammaticalization of *get*. *English Language and Linguistics* 3: 1–39.
- Haegeman, Liliane. 1985. The *get*-passive and Burzio's generalization. *Lingua* 66: 53–77.
- Hatcher, Anna Granville. 1949. To *get*/be invited. *Modern Language Notes* 64: 433–446.
- Ladusaw, William. 1994. Thetic and categorial, stage and individual, weak and strong. In M. Harvey and L. Santelmann (eds.), *Proceedings of SALT 4*, 220–229. Ithaca: Cornell University, CLC Publications.
- Lakoff, Robin. 1971. Passive resistance. *Papers from the Seventh Regional Meeting of the Chicago Linguistic Society*, 149–162.
- Legate, Julie Anne. 2003. Some interface properties of the phase. *Linguistic Inquiry* 34: 506–516.
- Sportiche, Dominique. 1988. A theory of floating quantifiers and its consequences for constituent structure. *Linguistic Inquiry* 19: 425–450.
- Sussex, Roland. 1982. A note on the *get*-passive construction. *Australian Journal of Linguistics* 2: 83–92.