Chapter 10

A Look at Participial Constructions with *Get* in Hong Kong English*

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Abstract

English constructions consisting of the verb *get* plus a past participle (e.g. *The whole suburb got destroyed by the fire*) have been the subject of several studies, relating mostly to Present-day English (Chappell 1980; Carter and McCarthy 1999), but also to some ESL varieties, in some of which the construction is said to be particularly frequent (Collins 1996). Recent research (Coto-Villalibre 2014a, 2014b) shows that *get*-constructions form a fuzzy set and can be placed on a gradient depending on their degree of ‘passiveness’, that is, depending on the number of features they share with traditional *be*-passives.

In this chapter the author examines how this gradient is manifested in a specific ESL variety, namely Hong Kong English. The various characteristics of the *get*-constructions posited on the gradient will be discussed and then compared with the results obtained for British and Indian English in the author’s earlier studies. The analysis uncovers the existence of differences between the varieties as regards the information status of subjects, the type of lexical verb involved, and the semantic prosody of the *get*-constructions.

Keywords

central *get*-passives – *get* + *Ven* constructions – passive gradient – World Englishes – ICE corpora

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Introduction

As we know, passives in Present-day English can select two different verbs, \textit{be} and \textit{get}. But what is a \textit{get}-passive? The change from the active to the passive voice involves a structural rearrangement of the clause elements, where the active subject becomes the passive agent, the active object becomes the passive subject, and the agent, if mentioned at all, is introduced by the preposition \textit{by}. The change from active to passive is illustrated in the following example:

(1) a. The forest fire destroyed the whole suburb. (active)
    b. The whole suburb \textit{got destroyed} by the forest fire. (passive)

Though these features apply generally to both \textit{be}- and \textit{get}-passives, research on the latter suggests that \textit{get}-passives, as opposed to \textit{be}-passives, tend to be avoided in formal English while they are recurrent in conversation (Quirk et al. 1985, 161; Biber et al. 1999, 476; Huddleston and Pullum et al. 2002, 1442; McEnery et al. 2006, 112–113), occur only with dynamic verbs, that is, verbs which denote an action and not its outcome (e.g. \textit{cut, play, send, throw, type}) (Huddleston and Pullum et al. 2002, 1442; Alexiadou 2005, 17), and do not normally have an overt agent \textit{by}-phrase (Quirk et al. 1985, 161; Carter and McCarthy 1999, 52; McEnery et al. 2006, 113). Actually, the findings of McEnery et al.’s (2006, 113) study show that in F-LOB, of approximately one million words of British English recorded in the 1990s, the short or agentless form of the \textit{be}-passive is over eight times as frequent as its long or agentful form, while for the \textit{get}-passive the short form is over ten times as frequent as its long form. The contrast in the spoken part of the \textit{British National Corpus} (\textit{BNC}), of about ten million words (10% of the corpus), is even more marked, where the short forms of \textit{be}- and \textit{get}-passives are over 18 and 37 times as frequent as their long forms, respectively. Moreover, the animate subject of \textit{get}-passives has a higher degree of responsibility for the action described than the subject of \textit{be}-passives, and is also commonly attributed adversative consequences, hence its frequent occurrence with predicates such as \textit{arrest, blame, hit, kill, shoot}, and the like (Hatcher 1949, 436–437; Chappell 1980, 444–445; Arce-Arenaules et al. 1994, 14; Rühlemann 2007, 120; Toyota 2007, 148, 153).

The present chapter is part of a larger project (Coto-Villalibre 2014c) which involves a cross-varietal comparative analysis of ‘\textit{get} + past participle’ constructions in East and South East Asian Englishes. In this study, the focus is on \textit{get}-constructions in Present-day spoken Hong Kong English, on the basis of data extracted from the Hong Kong component of the \textit{International Corpus of English} (\textit{ICE-HK}). I first classify the different \textit{get}-constructions according