Raising or Control? Children's Early get-Passives

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Abstract. This research study examines children's comprehension of the *get*-passive, to determine (i) what age the *get*-passive is acquired, (ii) how children perform with 'get' relative to 'be', and (iii) what structure(s) children assign to the *get*-passive. We argue that the results of two experiments (with children around 3-4 years to 6 years) indicate that young children may initially assume a causative/control analysis of the *get*-passive, allowing them to comprehend those that have animate subjects alone. By around age 4, children comprehend both actional *get*- and *be*-passives, and interpret the *by*-phrase as containing the agent of the action.

Keywords. first language acquisition; syntax; get-passives; A-movement

1. Introduction. It is well-known that children have difficulties with the *be*-passive (1a-b), and that these difficulties may persist for quite some time, even after age 6, for non-actional verbs (1b) (see Maratsos et al. 1985, Borer & Wexler 1987, Orfitelli 2012, among many others).

(1)   a. Alex was caught by Joe.
        b. Alex was remembered by Joe.

However, the *get*-passive (2) has been largely ignored in the acquisition literature.

(2)   Ava got kissed by Kate.

While there have been few studies that have looked at production (see Marchman et al. 1991) or comprehension (Harris & Flora 1982, Fox & Grodzinsky 1998), there is nevertheless a persistent claim that the *get*-passive is acquired earlier and is "easier" (relative to *be*) for children based on the results of these studies alone. The research in this article is to expand on the previous literature to address (i) how early children acquire the *get*-passive, (ii) how they perform with *get*-passives relative to *be*-passives, and (iii) what type of analysis children may be assuming for the former if these passives are truly earlier in development.

In this paper I will first briefly provide some background on the passive in terms of the adult syntax in Section 2, and then in Section 3 provide background on what has been done on children's passives. In Section 4, I describe two experimental studies and their results, before offering some preliminary conclusions and directions for future research in Section 5.

2. Syntax of the Passive in the Adult Grammar. Most modern, movement-based approaches to the *be*-passive assume that the subject has been derived via its base position as the object of the verb (see, for example, Collins 2005). While the precise nature of the *be*-passive may still be a matter of debate (e.g. it has been argued if there is always an implicit *by*-phrase, for instance, cf. Bhatt & Pancheva 2006), it is assumed that this construction is verbal in nature.

The *get*-passive, however, is decidedly more controversial, as a variety of differing analyses have been proposed. While early approaches equated the two passive types (see Stein 1979),

Haegeman (1985) argues that these are not the same; namely, 'get' does not function as an auxiliary verb (while 'be' does). She adopts a raising analysis of the *get*-passive, where 'get' behaves as a lexical verb that takes a small clause (SC) complement. The object of the SC raising to the subject position, and then again to the matrix subject position (see 3).

(3)   Ava got [~~Ava~~ kissed ~~Ava~~].

However, both passives are arguably amenable to a Collins (2005)-style analysis, in which the object is "smuggled" into VoiceP. Regardless of the exact analysis assumed, there is support for a raising analysis of 'get' from idiomatic expressions (4a), expletive subjects (4b), and the ability to select for both animate and inanimate subjects (4c-d).[1]

(4)   a. Advantage got taken of Jill.
        b. There got to be enough participants for this research.
        c. Julia got promoted (by her boss).
        d. The vase got broken (by the child).

Other analyses of the *get*-passive include (but are not limited to) an adjectival analysis (cf. Fox & Grodzinsky 1998) and a control analysis (see Lasnik & Fiengo 1974, Butler & Tsoulas 2006, Reed 2011). In regard to the first analysis (as in 5), this is based on claims that this passive fails certain diagnostics for having an agent.

(5)   [Ava got [$_{AdjP}$ ~~Ava~~ kissed]].

For example, the well-known example in (6) is argued to be ungrammatical, as the subject is claimed to not be able to control PRO in the rationale clause. However, Reed (2011) points out particular flaws with these diagnostics; for example, there are *get*-passives that are in fact compatible with agent-oriented adverbials (AOMAs), as in (7, from Reed).

(6)   *The ship got sunk [PRO to collect the insurance money].

(7)   The book got accidentally torn in the move.

The control analysis, on the other hand, assumes that the matrix subject is not derived, and that the object is a null anaphor/PRO (as in 8). This approach has been motivated by certain readings of the *get*-passive; it is possible for some speakers to analyze the matrix subject as being "responsible" for the outcome of the event in the lower predicate (that is, an example such as (9a) could be interpreted as (9b) without the overt reflexive). However, this reading seems to be highly susceptible to contextual factors and real-world knowledge, specifically what we expect from the subject in a given situation (see Gotowski in progress).

(8)   Alex$_i$ got [PRO$_i$ caught].

(9)   a. Alex got caught.
        b. Alex got **himself** caught.

For these aforementioned reasons, I will assume a raising analysis for the adult grammar, and I will rely on this framework when discussing and analyzing the acquisition experiments. Nevertheless, it is possible that young children have a non-raising analysis of *get*-passives. This would

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[1] This is not to say that *get*-passives and *be*-passives are equivalent, especially in regard to the semantics. For example, the subject of a *get*-passive is claimed to be highly affected by the action, and is often associated with positive or negative affectedness (see, for example, Downing 1999, among others).

in fact be predicted if children have difficulties with A-chains (as suggested by Borer & Wexler 1987), or with smuggling the object across an intervening argument in the *by*-phrase (cf. Snyder & Hyams 2015).

3. Children's Acquisition of the Passive. In this section I will provide a brief overview of the work that has been done on both *be*- and *get*-passives, before moving on to the experiments.

3.1. THE ACQUISITION OF THE BE-PASSIVE. As previously mentioned, the *be*-passive has been the focus of much research for many years (see references in Section 1). At this point, there is still much to be determined as to why children are delayed in development, but there is some consensus on a number of issues. First, although it was originally suggested by Borer & Wexler (1987) that children's passives are adjectival because they often produce short/truncated passives, more recent research has not found a split in children's comprehension of passives with or without the *by*-phrase (see Gordon & Chafetz 1990, Hirsch & Wexler 2006b, among others). However, most current studies include long passives to avoid a possible confound. Second, it has been well-established that children perform better with actional passives than non-actional passives; they acquire the former around age 4, but the latter around age 6 (cf. Orfitelli 2012). However, *get*-passives are only compatible with actional verbs, and thus any comparison to *be*-passives can only address actional verbs.[2] The items in the experiments discussed here include only long passives with actional verbs for a viable analysis. For a more detailed discussion on children's performance with *be*-passives in particular, please see Kirby (2009).

3.2. THE ACQUISITION OF THE GET-PASSIVE. The majority of studies on children's acquisition of passives have ignored the *get*-passive, or have not attempted to directly compare the two. The exception to this pattern, in terms of comprehension studies, is Harris & Flora (1982) and Fox & Grodzinsky (1998). Harris & Flora report that children (N= 58) performed better with 'get' at all ages (mean ages 4;06, 6;01, and 8;05). They interpret this finding as an advantage to *get*-passives in development. Similarly, Fox & Grodzinsky (1998) conducted a Truth-Value Judgement Task and report that children (N= 13), ages 3;06-5;05, performed at ceiling with *get*-passives, but not with (all types of) *be*-passives. This, again, would suggest that there is some ease with 'get'.

While these studies are informative, important questions remain. First, the analysis provided in Fox & Grodzinsky (F&G) (1998) is primarily focused on the effect of the length of the passive, and it has not since been replicated. Second, the fact that so few studies have addressed children's comprehension of the *get*-passive at all makes assessing children's understanding of this construction difficult, regardless of the individual results. To this end, the overall goal of this research is to contribute to the previous literature. Another purpose of the following experiments is to examine what structure children may be assuming for *get*-passives, particularly if they are acquired earlier; in other words, what makes *get*-passives special? If children perform better with these passives, and at an earlier age, it could be because they assume a non-adult-like analysis.

4. Experiment 1: Picture-Matching Task. In order to assess at what age children demonstrate comprehension of the *get*-passive, if the *get*-passive has an advantage in development, and what kind of structure children might be assuming, I conducted the following task. If children assume a non-raising analysis (resulting in any kind of apparent "advantage" or ease), this might be because they are assuming a control/causative analysis, in line with Butler & Tsoulas (2006). It is

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[2] It is possible to use a non-actional verbs with get-passives, but these tend to have a coerced actional meaning. For example, "John got seen (by the doctor)" is fine, but this means that the doctor examined John.

well-known that children are sensitive to animacy restrictions, and make distinctions based on animacy (see Becker 2014 and references within). While raising verbs do not place selectional restrictions on the subject (that is, both animate and inanimate subjects are felicitous), control verbs generally only select for animate subjects. This causes the contrast between (10a-b). It stands to reason that animacy may thus be revealing in terms of children's syntactic representations of the *get*-passive; if children require an animate subject, they may be assigning a non-raising structure to this passive. If children have a raising analysis, there should be no noticeable effect of animacy.

(10)   a.   The rock seems to be purple.
       b.   #The rock wants to be purple.

There has been little research on the effect of animacy in early syntactic development regarding passives. All of the prompts in Fox & Grodzinsky (1998) contained animate DPs, and while Harris & Flora (1982) included prompts with both animate and inanimate DPs, they do not provide a statistical analysis on the effect (if any) of animacy. This experiment crucially differs from these previous ones in taking into account not only verb, but also animacy.

4.2. PARTICIPANTS. There were 44 monolingual English-speaking children who participated in this experiment, between the ages of 3 and 6 (see Table 1). All participants were recruited in Los Angeles and in the Greater Philadelphia area. An additional 15 children participated, but had to be excluded because they did not pass enough experimental controls; another, additional child had to be excluded for not wanting to complete the task, along with one other due to parental interference. There were 10 adults, for comparison.

Group	Age Range	N
3-year olds	3;00-3;11	11
4-year olds	4;01-4;10	11
5-year olds	5;01-5;10	11
6-year olds	6;00-6;09	11
Adults	23-29	10

Table 1. Participants in the Picture-Matching Task

4.3. METHOD. Children were tested on long, reversible, actional passives, with both 'get' and 'be' and with animate (11) and inanimate (12) subjects. The child was asked to select either the image on the left or the right, after being told a short story that closed with a prompt in the passive. There was a total of 24 prompts, 12 with each verb (6 with animate subjects, 6 with inanimate); however, the prompts were split into two different sets (A and B), so that each participant received only 12 target prompts.

(11)   Elmo and the Count were playing tag, and they each took turns being "it." Can you show me the picture where **Elmo got/was chased by the Count**?

(12)   It looks like there is a flower and a rock, with one on top of the other! Can you show me the picture where **the flower got/was covered by the rock**?

In order to familiarize children with the task beforehand, there were three "pre-test" items that were not scored. The experiment was in a block design, such that there were 6 active control items (as in 13, the active variant of 11) given first, in the same format as the test items. The child had to respond to 5/6 of these to be included in the experiment. There were also 6 fillers (also active, but intransitive) interspersed in with the test items; the purpose of these was to en-sure that the child was paying attention. Children did not have difficulties with the fillers.

(13)   Elmo and the Count were playing tag, and they each took turns being "it." Can you show me the picture where **the Count chased Elmo**?

4.3. RESULTS. As might be expected, children's performance increases with age, as can be seen in the raw results found in Table 2. However, only the 4-6 year-olds performed significantly above chance in each of the conditions ($p < 0.5$), as determined via a mixed effects logistic re-gression model. The 3-year-olds were above chance with *get*-passives with animate subjects alone. This suggests that 3-year-olds do not yet have complete mastery over this construction, and that it is not until the age of 4 that children fully comprehend *get*-passives.

	Get-Passives		Be-Passives	
Age	Animate	Inanimate	Animate	Inanimate
3	26/33	20/33	22/33	18/33
	79%	61%	67%	55%
4	28/33	25/33	25/33	26/32*
	85%	76%	76%	81%
5	28/33	23/33	25/33	24/33
	85%	70%	76%	73%
6	30/33	29/33	27/33	28/33
	91%	88%	82%	85%
Adults	30/30	28/30	29/30	29/30
	100%	93%	97%	97%

*one response missing

Table 2. Picture-Matching Results

In terms of the children's performance on *get*-passives relative to *be*-passives, there were no significant main effects of either variable, Verb or Animacy, but there was a significant effect of Age. Children in each of the groups performed rather uniformly, allowing the random inter-cept for Child to be dropped, as it had no significant effect on the model (χ^2 (1) = 0.991, p = 0.32). The random effect for Item, however, was retained. As there were no significant two- or three-way interactions, these were accordingly dropped from the final model. This model is in

Table 3, where the baseline (i.e. the Intercept) represents 3-year-olds' performance with *get*-passives with *animate* subjects, the only condition in which they perform well.[3]

Fixed Effects	Estimate	SE	z value	p (> |z|)
(Intercept)	1.063	0.439	2.421	0.015*
Verb (Be)	-0.371	0.225	-1.420	0.155
Animacy (Inanimate)	-0.320	0.551	-0.674	0.500
Age (4)	0.835	0.304	2.746	0.006**
Age (5)	0.600	0.294	2.043	0.041*
Age (6)	1.408	0.335	4.198	0.000***

. $p < 0.1$, * $p < 0.05$, *** p= 0

Table 3. Results from Logistic Mixed Effects Regression Model
with 527 Observations, 44 Child Subjects

The results, taken together, suggest two important findings (i) there does not seem to be an advantage to 'get' per age as found in Harris & Flora (1982), and (ii) 3-year-olds are crucially behaving differently than the older children. This raises the question: what kind of analysis are 3-year-olds assuming, if not a raising one? An adjectival analysis would not predict that these children would only perform well with *get*-passives with animate subjects, as both subject types are compatible with adjectives (it would also not explain why children would not be using an adjectival strategy across the board). A raising analysis would also not predict that 3-year-olds would show a split in regards to animacy as, again, raising verbs/constructions do not have a selectional restriction for an animate subject. However, if children assume a control (causative) approach to get-passives, this would explain the results; that is, for young children *get*-passives may require a thematic, agentive subject. This could suggest that when they encounter an example like (14a), they interpret it as (14b).

(14)   a. Elmo got chased by the Count.
       b. Elmo got himself chased by the Count.

This analysis would allow children to select the correct image with animates (here around 80% of the time), and essentially provide them with a strategy such that it may *appear* as if they have acquired the *get*-passive early. The results here therefore suggest that these early "passives" may not be passives at all, but rather active control or causative constructions as in (15, based on Huang 1999, Butler & Tsoulas 2006). From the viewpoint of Universal Grammar, this possibility is supported from other languages, such as French. The construction that has been argued to be equivalent to the *get*-passive in French is *se faire*, and this construction only allows for thematic subjects (cf. Gaatone 1998, Reed 2011). That is, while in English (16a) is grammatical, the French translation in (16b) is infelicitous. English-speaking children may start off assuming a control structure for *get*-passives, before assuming an adult-like raising structure.

(15)   Elmo$_i$ got [PRO$_i$ caught].

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[3] Changing the baseline confirms that 3-year olds are not significantly above chance in the other conditions.

(16) a. The apple got eaten.
   b. *La   pomme se   fait   mangée.
      the.DET.SG apple SELF make.S3SG.PRES eaten
      'The apple gets itself eaten.'

Nevertheless, there is something that happens in the grammar around the age of 4 that allows English-speaking children to do well with all actional passives, regardless of verb of subject type. This might be related to the Universal Freezing Hypothesis proposed by Hyams & Snyder (2015), which claims that the mechanism that is needed to "smuggle" the object matures around age 4 with actional verbs. The results from this experiment are consistent with this hypothesis.

5. Experiment 2: Act-Out Task. Although the results from the above Picture-Matching experiment suggest 4-6-year-olds have an adult-like comprehension of actional *get-* and *be-*passives, it has been argued that children have a non-adult-like analysis of the *by*-phrase. Hirsch & Wexler (2006a) claim that children may be analyzing passives as resultatives, and could be interpreting the 'by' as being semantically contentful in nature (e.g. as locative-*by*). The following experiment was an attempt to follow up on this possibility.

5.1. PARTICIPANTS. There were 18 children between the ages of 4;02 and 6;10 who participated in this experiment (see Table 4 below).[4] As before, there were additional children (9) who had to be excluded for not passing enough experimental controls, as well as (4) for not being monolingual English speakers, (2) for not wanting to complete this task, and (4) due to an experimenter error. The children that were excluded are not a part of Table 4. There were 5 adults who participated as controls, for comparison.

Group	Age Range	N
Children	4;02-6;10	18
Adults	23-24	5

Table 4. Participants in the Act-Out Task

5.1. METHOD. For this task, children were given Sesame Street figurines and other props to act out various stories, which the experimenter read to them. Each of the stories concluded with a prompt in the passive voice (which had either 'get' or 'be', as before). The verbs in the prompts made "good" resultatives (see Embick 2004 for a discussion of resultatives). Crucially, all of the stories included three salient characters (as in 17). This was designed in this way so as not to bias children to have a passive or agentive *by*-phrase interpretation and, relatedly, to ensure that a locative strategy was an option. If there were only two (salient) characters, it is likely that participants would assume an agent-patient interpretation by default.

(17) This is a story about Oscar, Elmo, and Grover. All three of them were playing in the water. After they came out of the water, Oscar dried Grover, and Elmo got/was dried by Oscar. **Can you show me, "Elmo got/was dried by Oscar"?**

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[4] Originally I attempted to include children younger than age 4 for comparison, but this task proved too demanding for most of them (N =7); because only 2 completed the task without trouble, I excluded the 3-year-old group. Based on the results of Experiment 1 (and the limited data gathered) it seems that most of them assume an active strategy, which is perhaps expected given any "responsibility" or agentive properties of the subject may be difficult to act out.

I was interested in how children interpreted the *by*-phrase; there are two possible interpretations for the *by*-phrase in these stories, even in the adult grammar (see 18a-b). If children are not interpreting the *by*-phrase in passives as agentive, it is expected that they would rely on a resultative strategy (see Hirsh & Wexler 2006a) such that they would provide locative responses.

(18)   a. Oscar dried Elmo.
       b. Grover dried Emo near Oscar.

There were a total of 16 test (passive) prompts divided into two sets, so that each participant was given 8 (and 4 with each verb). The experimental controls for this study were items with the preposition 'near' such as (19). There were 4, half with 'get' and half with 'be'. Unlike the target items like (17), there was only one possible, adult-like interpretation. Children had to respond to 3/4 of these controls correctly to be included.

(19)   This is a story about Ernie, Bert, and Elmo. Bert tried to lift Ernie up and hold him, and Ernie was held near Elmo.
Can you show me, "Ernie was held near Elmo"?

The reason to include these controls was to ensure that children had a locative 'by' to begin with; otherwise there would be no reason to suspect that children could use this strategy.

5.2. RESULTS. The results are found in Table 5 below. All of the participants' results were categorized as either a passive with an agentive *by*-phrase (e.g. 18a), a passive with a locative *by*-phrase (e.g. 18b), an active (interpreting the subject as an agent), or as simply "other." The responses in this last category include, for example, children acting out their own stories or giving an ambiguous response that could not be coded.

Ages	N	Interpretations for Test Items*				Controls (% Correct)
		Passive-Agentive By	Passive-Locative By	Active	Other	
4;02-6;10	18	118/141 84%	3/141 2%	8/141 6%	12/141 8%	63/72 88%
Adults	5	38/40 95%	2/40 5%	0/40 0%	0/40 0%	19/20 95%

*three responses missing from the children

Table 5. Act-Out Results

    First, the children perform well with the controls with the preposition 'near'. This suggests (i) that they are able to make a distinction between the prepositions and (ii) that they have a locative available in their grammar. This also suggests that children did not have difficulties with the experiment. Overall, the general finding is that children prefer to interpret the *by*-phrase as agentive, just as adults. They gave appropriate, passive responses with the DP of 'by' as the agent 84% of the time, and had a rate of 86% passive responses overall. Both children and adults dispreferred the locative reading (only 3 tokens came from the children, and 2 from the adult). There was no noticeable pattern based on verb (that is, about an equal number of responses of each type featured 'get' and 'be'). As might be expected, children did provide more "other" responses- but these are not equivalent to their active responses, which are clearly non-adult-like in nature. If a child acts out a different story, this does not necessarily indicate that they do not understand the experiment, but rather that they may be prone to distraction by the toys. In fact, it

was not uncommon for children to ask me to act out more stories for them afterward or for them to act out their own additional stories. This tendency for "other" responses does decrease with age, as children older than 5 years gave only a single "other" response.

The results are consistent with those from Experiment 1. Children ages 4 and older are able to comprehend and provide passive responses. While Experiment 1 included *by*-phrases, which is consistent with a verbal/raising analysis of passives, the Act-Out Task confirmed that children in this age range are in fact analyzing the *by*-phrase.

6. Discussion. The purpose of this research had been to examine children's comprehension of the *get*-passive, in order to investigate (i) how early children comprehend the *get*-passive, (ii) how they perform with *get*-passives relative to *be*-passives, and (iii) what structure children may be assuming. In regard to (i), it seems that children do not have an adult-like understanding of the *get*-passive until age 4, as they performed well with *get*-passives with animate subjects alone. As earlier studies did not provide a statistical analysis of the effect of animacy (and all of the prompts in Fox & Grodzinsky (1998) were animate), it could be that not controlling for this variable caused a confound. In regard to (ii), the only advantage to 'get' exists at age 3; by age 4, children performed well with all conditions. There was also no main effect of Verb, suggesting that the *get*-passive may not really be any easier. Lastly, in regard to (iii), the results of Experiment 1 indicate that 3-year-old children may initially assume a control or causative analysis of the passive, allowing them to do well with a particular subset of them. Around the age of 4, however, children do well with long, reversible, actional passives in every condition. This would suggest a raising analysis, and this is seemingly confirmed in Experiment 2, in which 4-6 year-olds were not only providing passive responses, but were analyzing the DP in the *by*-phrase as the agent of the action.

I am currently conducting follow-up research on the experimental studies presented here, in order to further probe the kind of analysis that children assume for *get*-passives and other, related structures with displaced predicates. The overall objective is to continue to contribute to the literature to advance our understanding of all passives in language development.

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