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The English *get*-passive in spoken discourse: description and implications for an interpersonal grammar[1]

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Using a 1.5-million-word sample from the CANCODE spoken English corpus, we present a description of the *get*-passive in informal spoken British English. Previous studies of the *get*-passive are reviewed, and their focus on contextual and interpersonal meanings is noted. A number of related structures are then considered and the possibility of a passive gradient is discussed. The corpus sample contains 139 *get*-passives of the type *X get + past participle* (by Y) (*e.g. He got killed*), of which 124 occur in contexts interpreted as adversative or problematic from the speaker's viewpoint. Very few examples contain an explicit agent or adverbials. Main verb frequency is also considered. Where contexts are positive rather than adversative, newsworthiness or focus of some kind on the subject and/or events is still apparent. The corpus evidence is used to evaluate the terms upon which an interpersonal grammar of English might be developed, and a contrast is drawn between deterministic grammars and probabilistic ones, with probabilistic grammars offering the best potential for the understanding of interpersonal features.

1 Introduction

In this paper we use corpus evidence for the occurrence of *get*-passives in informal spoken British English to present a description of the spoken use of the construction, and to raise questions about the nature of interpersonal grammar, and the terms in which such a grammar can be formulated. The *get*-passive has long been seen as a problematic construction in English (Chappell, 1980: 417, refers to 'tantalisingly unresolved questions' about it), and has been the subject of many investigations, both corpus-based and noncorpus-based (see below). The present paper is based on the evidence of the first 1.5 million words of everyday, informal, spoken British English in the CANCODE corpus. CANCODE stands for 'Cambridge and Nottingham Corpus of Discourse in English'; the corpus was established at the Department of English Studies, University of Nottingham, UK, and is funded by Cambridge University Press, with whom the sole copyright resides. The corpus is currently building to 5 million words. The corpus tape recordings were made in a variety of settings including private homes, shops, offices and other public places, and educational institutions (though in nonformal settings) across the UK, with a wide demographic spread. Unless otherwise stated, all examples are from the CANCODE corpus. For further details of the corpus and its construction, see McCarthy (1998).

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2 Previous studies of the *get*-passive

One early study of the *get*/*be* contrast in passive voice usage was Hatcher (1949), who noted that the co-occurrence of the *get*-passive with an explicitly stated human agent was quite unlikely, though impersonal or depersonalized agents might occur. Hatcher did not base her statements on a corpus, but did conclude that *get* would be used only for two types of events: 'those felt as having either fortunate or unfortunate consequences for the subject' (p. 441). The balance between the distribution of events felt to be 'fortunate' or 'unfortunate' was not something Hatcher was directly concerned with, but our corpus evidence suggests that the actual distribution is relevant to an interpretation of the interpersonal function of the form. Although her main emphasis was on the ability of the *get*-passive to focus on the grammatical subject (rather than the agent) and the involvement of the subject in the event, Hatcher seemed also to be considering the role played in expressing the speaker's/writer's attitude by the *get*-construction when she referred to events '*felt* as having either fortunate or unfortunate consequences' (p. 441) [our emphasis]. Svartvik (1966), in a seminal corpus-based study of voice in the English verb, does use his corpus to exemplify instances of *get*-passives (though these are not many) and also notes their lack of explicit agent (pp. x, 149). Svartvik also elaborates the concept of a 'passive scale' (pp. 132–8), along which constructions showing more or fewer of the qualities of canonical *be*-passives can be plotted. We return to the idea of a scale or gradient below.

The arguments concerning the role of fortunate and unfortunate events in the use of *get*-passives are taken up again by Lakoff (1971), who centres the discussion more firmly on how the *get*-passive 'is frequently used to reflect the attitude of the speaker toward the events described in the sentence: whether he feels they are good or bad, or reflect well or poorly on him or the superficial subject of the sentence (for whom he thus expresses implicit sympathy)' (p. 154). This latter reference to the dual potential of attitude towards the speaker and attitude towards the subject of the sentence is in reality a difficult distinction to maintain, and often clouds the issue, a point made also by Chappell (1980: 429) in her critique of Lakoff's paper. Lakoff's study was not corpus-based, and it additionally focuses on the relationship between the surface (grammatical) subject of the clause and the logical subject. For Lakoff, the *be*-passive is more concerned with the logical subject of the clause, and the *get*-passive with the surface subject, such that *He got killed* focuses on *he* rather than who killed him (tying in with the unlikelihood of the occurrence of an explicit agent). More importantly, as Chappell (1980) notes, both Lakoff and Hatcher talk about the active involvement of the surface subject in the event in *get*-passives, unlike in *be*-passives. Such a view is in no way in conflict with one that interprets the *get*-passive as an attitudinal marker, since the expression of attitude in *get*-passive utterances in our data is indeed normally directed towards the fate, condition or involvement of the patient (i.e. the grammatical subject) and towards the event itself rather than the doings of an agent. Stein (1979), using a corpus of novels and plays,

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also concurs that *get*-passives generally reflect the speaker's opinion on an event (p. 59), that the *get*-passive combines both the action/event and the resultant state (p. 48), and asserts that the speaker's attitude colours both. However, it is our view that degrees of focus on agency are evident in all passive clauses and there is no sharp cut-off between *get*-constructions and *be*-constructions. *He was killed by a terrorist bomb, He was killed* and *He got killed* represent three possible perspectives on the distribution of focus as between agent and patient.

Chappell (1980) draws parallels between English *get*-passives and the morphological marking of 'adversative' passives (in contrast to neutral passives) in some Asian languages (e.g.Vietnamese). She notes that *get*-passives encode change of state, echoing Jespersen's (1949: 109) earlier observation on the distinction between 'state' and 'transition' as between *be* and *get*, respectively. She also stresses the importance of the speaker's intention in context rather than any inherent quality of the events in themselves, which chimes in with our corpus findings as detailed below. However, many of the sentences Chappell labels as inappropriate for the *get*-passive (that is to say uncontextualizable – she stops short of calling them ill-formed) seem acceptable: for instance, Chappell deems inappropriate the sentence *Vietnamese women and children got massacred in the My Lai offensive*, on the grounds that *get* is unsuitable for circumstances where 'the speaker considers the subject an innocent victim of circumstance' (p. 425). To the present authors, the sentence, even though it may sound rather informal, can hardly be dismissed, and does not in fact tell us anything about the innocence or active involvement of the subject, any more than *John got killed in a road accident* in itself tells us anything about John's innocence or blameworthiness in respect of the accident. However, Chappell's paper simply reflects one of the persistent problems with all the noncorpus-based studies: invented examples and counterexamples usually leave the main issues unresolved, since everything depends on the plausibility of the invented sentences. One of Chappell's central arguments rests on the distinction between 'adversative' and 'beneficial' *get*-passives, where the role of the subject is seen as different: in the adversative type, there is an implication that the subject could have possibly avoided the misfortune encoded in the verb, whilst in the beneficial type the subject desires the outcome. Beneficial and adversative events are not inherent in the verbs themselves, and one cannot draw up two sets of verbs, one beneficial and one adversative: 'The speaker's intentions, aided by the context, determine which of the two interpretations is appropriate' (p. 444). Sussex (1982), however, takes Chappell to task for over-simplification of the 'fortunate'/'unfortunate' dichotomy and even more forcefully argues for the primacy of contingent, rather than inherent, properties of events in determining speaker attitude.

Granger (1983), using a portion of the Survey of English Usage corpus, finds statistical support for the lack of focus on agency: of nine *get*-passives, only one has an explicit (in this case indefinite, nonhuman) agent, a figure which tallies reasonably well with the number of such agents in our own, almost ten times larger, corpus. In the same year, Riddle and Sheintuch (1983), in a general study of pseudo-passives,

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argue that the crucial factor determining the choice of any noun phrase as a passive subject is that its referent plays the most prominent role in the eyes of the speaker within the situation. Haegeman (1985), working within a generative framework, examines a variety of related constructions and meanings with *get*, and distinguishes two basic meanings, a causative one (e.g. *George got himself very wet*) and an ergative meaning (e.g. *George got very wet*) (p. 61), with the *get*-passive falling into the ergative category, where agency is suppressed. Haegeman also provides convincing syntactic tests to demonstrate that *get*, unlike *be*, is a full lexical verb in the *get*-passive construction, and not an auxiliary: *get* does not allow the normal pattern of negation for auxiliaries (auxiliary followed by *not*), nor inversion in interrogatives, and requires full *do*-support (compare *He was killed, wasn't he?* and *He got killed, didn't he?*) (pp. 54–6). Hübler (1991) also notes that *get* enfocuses the subject as receiver of an action, and reiterates the syntactic difference between *get* and *be* in passive constructions in that *get* operates as a main verb rather than an auxiliary verb, with the predominant meaning of 'receiving' something. Assigning main verb status to *get* suggests an extra semantic feature over and above the marking of tense and voice that auxiliary *be* performs in the passive verb phrase, and Hübler's assignment of the semantic feature 'receiving' appropriately puts the emphasis on the relationship between the grammatical subject and the event, rather than on the agent.

Get- and *be*-passives may be syntactically very close to each other in terms of structural configuration, but there seems to be general agreement that there are important semantic and/or pragmatic differences, as Chappell (1980: 416) acknowledges in her critique of Hatcher's 1949 paper. The views outlined so far would suggest that agency is always secondary in passive utterances; in the *get*-passive case, where agency is usually implicit, there would seem to be a further downgrading of the agent and consequent highlighting of the patient and event. Hübler (1991) further illustrates this with examples taken from Hatcher's, Lakoff's and Stein's papers of sentences where adverbials predicating some quality on the agent would be inappropriate in *get*-passive constructions (e.g.**Radicals must get exterminated ruthlessly*); we shall present evidence below on adverbial distribution which supports this intuition. Gnutzmann (1991) likewise addresses the question of focus or otherwise on the agent, and notes passive cases where an agent cannot be omitted. He also repeats some of the arguments put forward by Haegeman on the relationship between passive and ergative meanings. Vanrespaille (1991) is a notable exception to those linguists who base their studies on concocted data or on written texts only (albeit written-to-be-spoken in Stein's case), in that her study of the *get*-passive is corpus-based and includes spoken data. But although her corpus does include spoken material from the Survey of English Usage, she does not indicate precisely what proportion of her approximately 700 instances of the *get*-passive are natural spoken. However, from her tables of results, it would seem that a large number of her examples come from a corpus of (written) drama texts, which are undoubtedly of great value, but which are nonetheless still less reliable as indicators

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of actual spoken usage than the kinds of corpora used in the present paper and in Collins (1996).

A useful recent contribution to the debate has come from Matthews (1993), who examines a number of restrictions on the use of the *get*-passive, including its incompatibility with an instrument 'under the full control of an agent used as a means to a particular end' (p. 14), such that **he got killed with a gun* would be considered ill-formed, a similar point to that made by Hübler (see above). This accords with the notion that the *get*-passive removes focus from the agent and places it on the patient/grammatical subject. Matthews also looks at a number of cases where acceptable *be*-passives with agents would be ill-formed with *get* (e.g. *The danger was realized by John*/**The danger got realized by John*) (p. 22). He concludes that semantic specifications alone cannot explain the choice of a *get*-passive, and that the choice may be conditioned by the speaker's 'affective intent' (p. 53), and that a pragmatic implicature to which he gives the formulation of 'not foreseen' (p.5 3) must be brought into play in addition to the semantic components of [+*punctual*] (with respect to the event), [-*control*] (with respect to the agent), and a potential [+*control*] (with respect to the passive subject). In the absence of these two last features, the implicature 'not foreseen' is activated (pp. 53–4). Although some of Matthews' concocted sentences may be challenged, his description is elegant and explains a large number of his example sentences. Also recently, the historical development of *get* has been examined. Haegeman (1985) looks at evidence from Early Modern English to support her thesis on the ergative meaning of *get*. The development of the *get*-passive in relation to other meanings of *get* has been investigated by Givón and Yang (1994), whose study presents evidence for long-standing close relationships among the kinds of meaning we examine in the range of pseudo-passive constructions involving *get* exemplified below from our data. Siewierska (1984), however, in a wide-ranging comparison of passives across many languages, cautions against comparing the passive-operator *get* with other meanings of main verb *get*.

Most recently, in a corpus-based study along the lines of the present paper, Collins (1996) has provided large-scale evidence of *get*-passives and their occurrence in a corpus of 5.25 million words. Although larger than the present corpus, Collins' corpus is a mixed spoken and written one, and the fact that he isolates 291 'central' *get*-passives (i.e. one per 1,800 words), compared with our 139 (i.e. one per 1,080 words) is probably a reflection of the lower probability of occurrence of *get*-passives in written texts. Within this limitation, Collins does provide in-depth discussion of some of the problems associated with the range of related forms and meanings which we exemplify in section 3 below. Following Quirk et al. (1985: 167–71), he prefers to think of a 'passive gradient' on which varying degrees of agentivity are manifested. Collins also discusses possible restrictions on the occurrence of *get*, in sentences such as **Paddy got known to be an IRA sympathizer*, and it is clear that some sentences, to say the least, sound highly unlikely with a *get*- passive instead of *be*, for example neutral factual information statements in technical contexts, such as

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**The steam engine was (?got) invented in the nineteenth century*, and truly stative passives such as *The house is/*gets surrounded by fields* (see Siewierska, 1984: 136 for further 'unlikely' examples of *get*). As well as examining the question of a gradient of passive meanings related to different forms, Collins' paper offers a useful description of the different distributions of the *get*-passive across different varieties of English. However, although Collins notes the importance of providing corpus evidence for the *get*-passive, his paper is purely descriptive, and he does not put his findings to the service of any wider implications for grammatical description, which we attempt to do in the present study.

We thus have, to date, a variety of studies, both noncorpus-based and corpus-based, which have homed in on various aspects of the *get*-passive, but all of which seem to be agreed that the form is closely related to *be*-passives, with a different focus on agent, event and patient, and with some marking of attitude, however achieved. The present paper hopes to make a further contribution to the long-running debate by offering evidence from a targeted corpus of informal everyday spoken English and by showing how that evidence points to wider issues in the formulation of an interpersonal grammar of English.

3 *Get*-passives and related forms

The phenomenon under consideration, normally conveniently referred to as the *get*-passive, is in fact difficult to pin down to any one structural configuration, and a range of forms occur with closely related meanings:

a) X *get* V-en (by Z) (where X is patient)
Example:

(1) S1 He got killed trying to save some other man. [SM0531][2]

b) X *get* reflexive pronoun V-en (where X is patient but with overtones of agency)
Example:

(2) S1 You see, if ever you get yourself locked out . . . I showed her how to get in. [90083001]

c) X get Y V-en (where X is patient and indirect agent)
Example:

(3) S1 Rian got his nipple pierced and it was so gross. [90064002]

d) X *get* Y V-inf (where X is indirect agent and beneficiary)
Example:

(4) S1 She got me to do a job for her, fencing. [90083001]

e) X *get* Y adjectival past participle (where X is agent, either direct or indirect)
Example:

[2] Codes in square brackets after examples refer to filenames in the CANCODE database.

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(5) S1 Right we've got to *get* you kitted out cos you can't go in like that. [80261001]

f) X *get* adjectival past participle (where X is patient)
Example:

(6) S1 The tape seems to have got stuck. [80261001]

We thus have a range of *get*-constructions with differing but related meanings connected in various ways with 'canonical' *be*-passives. Indeed, Gnutzmann (1991) goes even further and sees other constructions, such as *T-shirts wash easily*, as also belonging on the passive gradient (comparing them with their passive variants such as *T-shirts are easily washable*). Furthermore, Andersen (1991) prefers to see such phenomena as *be*- and *get*-passives as having greater affinity with transitivity than with voice, and there is no doubt that the borders between areas such as transitivity, ergativity, aspect, and voice are somewhat blurred with respect to the range of constructions we are considering. However, it is not the aim of the present paper to resolve such fuzziness (nor, probably, could it be resolved), but rather to present a case for focusing on the interpersonal meanings conveyed by passive-like constructions involving *get*.

Type (a) seems to be close to the unmarked passive with *be*, such that *He was killed trying to save another man* would have the same propositional meaning, but the corpus-verified *get*-version seems to carry something extra, which will be the principal matter of discussion in subsequent sections. Type (b) seems to carry the meaning of 'acting in a way that will make something happen to you' and definitely involves the subject very directly, with a sense of attached responsibility. Type (c) here seems to mean 'arranging for/ordering someone else to do something for you'. Type (d) is similar, except that the doer is specified. Type (e) is somewhat ambiguous as to the role played by the grammatical subject *we* (whether as direct or indirect agent). In many dialects *get* can be replaced by *have* (with or without the following infinitive *to* in type (e) sentences) without any marked change in meaning. Type (f) seems to involve simply a change of state rather than an agent-motivated event (a *by*-agent seems impossible here). That ambiguity is evident, and that in some cases (types (d) and (e)) agency seems almost to blur more into the active than passive, has been noted by Hübler (1991).

There is thus every reason to conclude that *get*- (and *have*-) 'pseudo-passive' constructions express meanings that may be plotted on a cline of passiveness, or the 'passive gradient' that Gnutzmann (1991) refers to, just like the 'passive scale' for English voice in general that Svartvik (1966) elaborated. Choices of construction clearly involve presence and/or absence of (potential) participants, degree of active involvement of those participants (or put another way, degree of 'passivity'), a differentiation between events and changes of state, and an as-yet-unspecified difference between *be* and *get*.

It is this last problem we shall focus upon in the rest of this paper, and our examples will be predominantly of type (a) constructions, which Collins (1996) also found to be of central importance and highest frequency in his corpus. However, we

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Table 1

Type	Example	Alternative(s)
a	(1) He got killed trying to save some other man.	(1′) He was killed trying to save some other man.
b	(2) You see, if ever you get yourself locked out	(2′) You see, if ever you are locked out
c	(3) Rian got his nipple pierced and it was so gross.	(3′) Rian had his nipple pierced and it was so gross. (3″) Rian's nipple was pierced and it was so gross.
d	(4) She got me to do a job for her, fencing.	(4′) She had me (to) do a job for her, fencing.
e	(5) Right we've got to get you kitted out	(5′) Right we've got to have you kitted out (5″) Right we've got to kit you out
f	(6) The tape seems to have got stuck.	(6′) The tape seems to have become stuck. (6″) The tape seems to be stuck.

shall return in our concluding remarks to a more general discussion of the relevance of the range of meanings we have exemplified to our preoccupation with interpersonal grammar. But before we turn to our more specific focus, it is worth considering how the various passive forms relate to one another as potential alternatives. Table 1 shows types (a)–(f) again, with 'passive' alternatives where these are possible, or, in the case of (5″) and (6″), with an active equivalent too.

(1′) neutralizes the focus on the patient in (1). (2′) removes the marking of agency/implied responsibility of the grammatical subject in (2). (3′) retains implicit agency and seems to differ from (3) only in degree of formality, while (3″) neutralizes agency and is ambiguous between description of a state and reporting of an event. (4′) is like (3′), apparently affecting degree of formality only. (5) is ambiguous between speaker as agent and some other party as agent; (5′) retains this ambiguity, (5″) removes it, with speaker clearly as agent. (6′) likewise affects formality, but (6″) removes the emphasis on change of state.

The complexity of passive and pseudo-passive forms in English is amply illustrated by the consideration of the various alternatives, and what is clear is that speakers may mark agency and involvement of participants in various ways, and that a range of syntactic choices is available. Why such a range of choice should exist can best be explained by seeing the grammar as offering the speaker different perspectives and positions from which to report events; such perspectives not only influence the information-structure of messages but also the interpersonal interpretation of speaker stance and attitude, and the degree of perceived formality. Type (a), however, is more specifically problematic, since the choice between *be* and *get* seems purely attitudinal. It is to this we now turn in greater detail.

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4 Type (a) constructions in the CANCODE corpus

4.1 Verbs and contexts

The CANCODE 1.5 million-word sample contains 139 type (a) *get*-passives, from which strong regularities emerge. 124 of the 139 examples refer in some way or another to what have been termed in the literature 'adversative' contexts (see Chappell, 1980), i.e. a state of affairs that is signalled contextually by the conversational participants as unfortunate, undesirable, or at least problematic. A number of these include verb phrases that would normally be considered adversative in their semantics, for example:

get arrested
get flung about in the car
get killed
get locked in/out
get lumbered [= landed with an unpleasant job]
get picked on
get sued
get burgled
get intimidated
get criticised
get beaten
get penalised
get stopped (by the police)
get nicked [= stolen]
get done [for fraud; done = charged]
get kicked off

Some typical contexts follow:

(7) S1 Was it the electricity that killed him?
S2 No no it was the pylon.
S1 The impact … I mean he'd have got flung about in the car, wouldn't he? Probably broke his neck. [90123001]

(8) [The halls are student halls of residence]
S1 Oh God that is a nightmare. Cos like loads of them aren't there, all, like they got like kicked off the halls.
S2 Mm I know. Trouble is they're all too interested in like drinking and socializing. [90026001]

(9) S1 Now after this they'd have to go back to the courts now, they haven't decided anything. No you've got to go right back to stage one. This poor bloke who got charged in nineteen eighty eight still is looking for justice now they haven't had the case yet. [90063003]

It is important to observe that semantic properties of the verb are not decisive in the choice of the *get*-passive, as Sussex (1982) notes in critiquing Chappell's (1981) semantic classification, and as (10) demonstrates with the verb *pay*, where any

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'adversativity' can only be seen to attach to the fact that *pay* is negated. Nor is it entirely obvious that the absence of payment is 'unfortunate' in this case:

(10) S1 She's got a book published.
S2 Really.
S1 And she's got a contract. She's, actually she didn't *get* paid for it, her her
S3 [Her payment is
shares in the company, book company. [90079001]

A small but interesting number of instances in our corpus are like this, referring to neither obviously fortunate, nor obviously unfortunate, events. Further examples follow:

(11) [A customer in a village shop has just realized that the shopkeeper has remembered a neighbour's fish order but forgotten her own order of fish for her cat. She addresses the neighbour humorously]
S1 So you got remembered and our cat got forgotten. [SMMI048]

(12) [Students talking about upcoming hectic social timetable]
S1 I've got invited to the school ball as well.
S2 Are you?
S1 Don't really fancy it. [90051001]

(13) S1 Do you know how much lawyers get paid for an hour the best ones?
S2 I don't I don't care.
S1 Six hundred pound an hour.
S2 I don't care. [90064002]

In (11), although *forgotten* refers to a clearly adverse event, *remembered* would seem to be the opposite. One possible interpretation is that this is an example of language play for the creation of humour, through a deliberate use of syntactic parallelism. In (12) and (13), the circumstances are not inherently negative, but they do seem to be problematic, topical, contentious or worthy of some sort of special focus for the speakers choosing the *get*-form, this being retrievable from the co-text and external context. Other (but even fewer) examples (accounting for less than 5 percent) are clearly seen as fortunate/good outcomes by the speaker, for example:

(14) S1 [The speakers are talking about S2's past successes as a tennis player]
S1 And were those like junior matches or tournaments or county matches?
S2 Er both county and er, well I played county championships and lost in the finals the first year and er I got picked for the county for that and then so I I played county matches pretty much the same time.
S1 Right, good. [900179001]

(15) S1 You know for what I do I get paid absolutely megabucks for doing nothing. I look busy all day long and I drink cups of tea every five, ten minutes and yeah I feel I'm quite happy what I'm doing, just sitting around.
S2 So what was it you do?
S1 I'm a production bench operator, we just look after computers. [80269001]

Get, therefore, coincides mostly, but not exclusively, with verbs referring to unfortunate events, or at least events perceived as unfortunate for the speaker. It is

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equally capable of marking any event simply as noteworthy or of some significance to the speaker, including the very small number of cases where that significance is one of a perception of good fortune. In other words, explaining the speaker's choice of a *get*-passive in preference to a *be*-passive involves us in questions of stance, defined as the overlay, on to the propositional core of the clause, of meanings connected with speaker attitude, judgement and affective posture. The speaker's stance is neither necessarily contained in the main verb nor in *get*, but is retrievable from the context. (13) above is a very clear instance of this, where the speaker's approval or disapproval of lawyers' high fees can only be gauged with access to the larger conversational context. *Get* overlays the potential alternative *be* with a stance-signalling function, and stance is a pragmatic rather than semantic feature of the discourse (see Chappell, 1980). This interpretation does not clash with an interpretation based on levels of formality: it is simply much more likely that affective and attitudinal values will be marked in informal and intimate contexts, which the CANCODE corpus mostly consists of.

4.2 Agents

130 of the 139 type (a) examples have no agent explicitly stated (i.e. 93 percent, which matches Collins' 1996 figure of 92 percent). Among the examples which do have agents stated are:

(16) *Most things got written up by scribes* [90027001]
(17) *The whole bus got stripped by the Italian police* [SMCRN02]
(18) *And got sued by the owners* [70001001]
(19) *You're going to get eaten by a crocodile* [90127005]
(20) *She's going to get eaten by the wolf* [90033001]
(21) S1 *You get intimidated by?*
S2 ⌊*The staff on the labour ward* [90193001]

All the stated agents in our examples are somewhat impersonal or, in the case of the crocodile and the wolf, nonhuman. In every case where explicit agents occur, the information is new rather than given, and is a key element in the discourse. This is especially noticeable in (21), where S1 is eliciting important information from S2. Similarly, (16) is from an informal university small-group tutorial on the history of English, where the role of scribes is important. (17) refers to a bus on its way to Yugoslavia, with the Italian police playing a perversely obstructive role in the bus's slow progress through Europe. In this case, making the agent explicit is necessary, since the storyteller jumps back to an earlier phase of the bus's journey; without explicit agency it would not be clear who precisely 'stripped the bus':

(17′) S1 It was nice sunny weather till we got to the border and and you, sort of two miles into Yugoslavia we went through a snowdrift you know, it was amazing, there must be some sort of climatic line [S2 Mm] [S3 Yeah] where the border is and then you got into Yugoslavia and they'd stop for these these motorway well not motorway, road service stations and people'd pay a fortune for a

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really grotty cup of coffee and I was outside brewing up tomato soup [S3 Yeah yeah] and all sorts of stuff, in the end I had a queue of people offering to buy stuff off me.
S3 Made a few bob did you?
S1 [Laughs] And er, oh we got, yes, sort of the whole bus got stripped by the Italian police looking for something they'd found something on the bus before they just took all the luggage apart, took about four hours to get to Trieste across the border this went on and on. [SMCRN02]

When *by*-agents occur, their explicit involvement is crucial from an informational point of view. The typical absence of an agent or the presence of an impersonal, nonspecific agent with the *get*-passive fits in with what linguists have previously noted (e.g. Granger, 1983: 194). Collins (1996) notes that in his corpus the very few cases of explicit agents are equally distributed between animate and inanimate agents (total, 17, with a ratio of 9:8 respectively). The usual lack of focus on agency reinforces focus on the event and on its effect on the patient. The present paper, therefore, confirms previous findings in respect of the distribution of agents, and offers the absence of explicit agents as evidence of the central characteristic of the *get*-passive as an expression of stance towards the patient and the events in which the patient is involved, and the backgrounding of agents except where they are indispensable to the coherence and information content of the message.

4.3 Main verbs and the case of pay

In the corpus sample of 139 type (a) *get*-passives, one verb occurs with a frequency strikingly greater than all others: *pay*. *Pay* occurs twenty times, while its nearest rivals, *tell* and *ask*, occur only five and four times, respectively, while *burgle*, *give*, *treat*, and *beat* occur three times, and *injure*, *intimidate*, *push*, *kill*, *tell off*, and *distract*, twice. All other verbs occur once only. Some typical contexts for *pay* follow:

(22) S1 Paperboys get paid £13 a week.
S2 Mm, that's good. [90064002]

(23) [S1 is complaining about people who have an easy time. MP = Member of the British parliament]
S1 MPs' holidays for one, they get paid for going on holiday for about six weeks you know.
S2 Mm, yeah, yeah.
S1 There's that many MPs, we don't really need them. [80273001]

(24) [S1 is telling a tale about a milk delivery man who was an alcoholic]
S1 He was rather fond of the booze, yeah, and of course as he got paid his money would go across the bar.
S2 Across the bar, yeah, yeah. [SMJDYM01]

Payment, or lack of it, and how much people earn is, in most societies, a matter of interest, debate, and, not infrequently, of controversy, criticism, wonder, pleasure, and annoyance. It should not surprise us, therefore, that attitude is often strongly

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marked in utterances to do with money and payment, and upon the recipients of payment. Whether marking approval or disapproval, stance is highlighted in the frequent co-occurrence of *pay* with *get*-passives. If *be*-passives are the unmarked form (i.e. the passive norm), and *get*- the marked form, then it is worth noting that, in the case of *pay*, the corpus sample offers twenty cases of *get*-passives, with only slightly more (twenty-four) cases of *be*-passives. In the next rank of frequency (*tell* and *ask*), it should not surprise us either that speakers' choices to report what they are told and asked should be marked as noteworthy in some way and reflective of the speaker's stance. The importance of these figures is that they suggest an element of institutionalization of certain types of phrase, with a strong probability of collocation between *get* and certain verbs. This is most noticeable in common insults in British English such as *Get stuffed!* and *Get knotted!*, which admit no variation in the verbal operator. Strong collocation is a reflection of constant recurrence of formal combinations, and within the usage of the *get*-passive, this seems to be the case with conversations concerning payment.

4.4 Adverbials

It was noted in section 2 above that the occurrence of adverbials with *get*-passives was problematic, since adverbial focus on the verb might serve to defocus the subject/patient. This is generally true, and the only adverbials that occur in our data sample, apart from negating particles and adverbials with verbs which must have adverbial complementation (e.g. *It got treated differently* [90220001]) are *actually, nearly,* and *really*, all of which have an intensifying or focusing role (as opposed to denoting manner, place, time, etc), and refer directly to the verb phrase rather than to the general circumstances of the clause. Examples of adverbials follow:

(25) S1 You can actually get done for it. (done = arrested/charged in court) [90114001]
(26) S1 I nearly got picked on, but I didn't say yes or no. [90052001]
(27) S1 Nothing ever really gets followed through. [90151001]

The general lack of adverbials and the presence of only these few reinforce the view that type (a) *get*-passives focus mainly on the subject, sometimes on the event, but rarely on the agent or the manner in which the action or event occurs. It may also be noted here that no adverbials occur in medial position between *get* and the main verb past participle, unlike in the case of *be*-passives, where this is not uncommon (examples from CANCODE include: *She was slightly coerced into it* [90193001]; *It was actually destroyed* [90114001]). This supports Matthews' (1993: 13) observations on the restrictions on certain types of adverbials in medial position in the *get*-passive. [3]

[3] We are, however, very grateful to one of our anonymous reviewers for drawing our attention to occurrences such as *I got severely yelled at yesterday* and *Most people everywhere actually get easily offended* in corpus material available to him/her. In noting that no such instances occurred in our data, we do not wish to exclude the possibility of their occurrence in other data.

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5 Discussion

The key to understanding the *get*-passive is that it highlights the stance of the speaker in context towards the event and the grammatical subject. It is a clear case where examining sentences and jettisoning the people who produce them and their contexts of production is inadequate. The *get*-passive might indeed be a linguistic puzzle, but it is considerably demystified the moment we look upon it as something the speaker overlays onto events to mark his/her stance towards those events and their subjects. Some linguists have recognized this, most notably Lakoff (1971), Stein (1979), and Hübler (1991), but the benefit of examining real spoken data is that intuitions on that score can be supported by figures showing actual usage. Our conclusion is that the *get*-passive coincides mostly with adverse or problematic circumstances, but these are adverse/problematic as judged by the speaker. *Get* also coincides overwhelmingly with the absence of an explicit agent, suggesting that emphasis is on the event/process and the person or thing experiencing the process encoded in the verb phrase, rather than its cause or agent. We have also made tentative statements, supported by (albeit limited) statistics, about the frequency of particular verbs, the collocational tendencies these suggest, and the relative absence of adverbials. But in all cases, such statements are no more than probabilities.

At this point we may usefully distinguish between deterministic grammar and probabilistic grammar. Deterministic grammar deals with matters of structural prescription (e.g. that *be*- and *get*-passives are always formed with the past participle of verbs, rather than the base-form or *ing*-form). Such determinism enables grammars of languages to be codified in a relatively straightforward way, and has served linguists well for centuries. Probabilistic grammar is concerned with statements of what forms are most likely to occur in particular contexts of use, and the probabilities may be stronger or weaker. Itkonen's (1980: 338) contrast between 'correct sentences' and 'factually uttered sentences' is apt here. Probabilistic grammars need real corpus data to substantiate their claims, but statistical data alone are insufficient; evaluation and interpretation are still necessary to gauge the form–function relationships in individual contexts, from which probabilistic statements can then be derived. Probabilistic grammar proposals are not new: Halliday (1961: 259) talked of the fundamental nature of language as probabilistic and not as 'always this and never that'. More recently, Halliday has returned to this theme with considerable quantitative evidence from the study of corpora. He is primarily concerned with how frequently the terms in binary grammatical systems (e.g. *present* versus *nonpresent*) actually occur in relation to each other, and argues that the statistical facts of occurrence are 'an essential property of the system – as essential as the terms of the opposition itself' (1991: 31). Halliday recognizes that a probabilistic statement such as 'agentless *get*-passives are nine times more frequent than *get*-passives with agents' has little predictive power, but argues that it is important for interpretation of the choice of form. Halliday (1992) stresses further that the different probabilities of occurrence in different registers is also important,

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since it is unlikely that terms in opposition will be equiprobable in a corpus reflecting any given register. This is true of a general language corpus as well, and the one must be measured against the other. Several of Halliday's followers within systemic-functional linguistics have also further pursued the matter of unequal probabilities of occurrence of particular forms: Nesbitt and Plum (1988) take a predominantly quantitative line in their study of the distribution of clause complexes in real data, and are interested in what is more likely and less likely to occur, rather than what is possible. Here, though, we go beyond the statistics of occurrence and are interested in the relationship between the probabilism of forms and their relationships to contexts. In the case of our type (a) *get*-passives, the probabilities are that *get* will occur in informal contexts when speakers are marking attitude. Most probably that attitude denotes concern, problematicness in some way, or, at the very least, noteworthiness of the event beyond its simple fact of occurring. Indeed, no deterministic statement about when speakers will choose *get* instead of *be* can be made; judgements about adversativeness, problematicness, noteworthiness, etc. are socioculturally founded and are emergent in the interaction rather than immanent in the semantics of verb choice, or of selection of voice or aspect. Over and above these concerns are the broader questions of probability of occurrence within particular generic types of spoken text: most of our *get*-passives occur in narrating and reporting contexts. It may be possible to show that probabilities of form-functional correlations are an integral characteristic of genres and one of the means whereby they can be adequately described by linguists. Genre derives from patterned social activity, and those patterns of activity emerge from the accumulated interactions of participants; their linguistic traces are the probabilities upon which grammars can be constructed. Since genres reflect complex activities, the plotting of probabilities should not be mono-dimensional but should investigate the likelihood of different features from different grammatical ranks and categories clustering in any specified context, rather in the way that Biber (1995) demonstrates.

Any grammar which attempts to explicate interpersonal meaning cannot but be probabilistic (i.e. interpretive rather than predictive, to utilize Halliday's terms), since interpersonal meanings are emergent in interaction. This brings us squarely back to our other types of pseudo-passives, (b)–(f) in table 1. The passive gradient itself cannot be prescribed deterministically or predicted absolutely. Possible choices of precise structural configuration as represented in table 1 depend on how the speaker cares to position the subject, event and (possible) agents and circumstances relative to judgements about perceived responsibility and involvement of the participants, the inclusion of essential information, and affective factors such as distaste, humour, amazement, etc. reflecting the speaker's reaction to the events. Within particular genres (e.g. gossip, anecdotes), such affective positioning may be more regularly socioculturally conditioned, and manifested in a greater frequency of occurrence of particular forms.

We can now return to some of our other types of structures and see how they occur in ways that highlight their interpersonal meanings just as we did in the case of

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the type (a) *get*-passives. (28) shows three different choices of perspective on the verb *frame*, concluding with a type (g) structure:

(28) [Speakers are discussing some photographs]
S1 I'm afraid I can't afford to frame them, but erm ...
S2 But do you want them framed?
S1 I'd love to have them framed.
S2 Well if that's the case then the next time we come [S1 Yeah] we'll take them with us [S1 Mm] and then we'll have them framed. [90113001]

In S1's first turn, the simple active is chosen, and agency is ambiguous, though likely to mean 'I cannot afford to pay someone else to frame them', which would be a challenge to S1's positive face (self-esteem) in Brown and Levinson's (1987) terms. S2's response equally avoids explicit mention of agency, thus preserving face (consider the possible alternatives: *Do you want to have them framed? Do you want them to be framed?*, both of which do or could carry greater implications of outside agency), and focuses on the subject and her needs. S1 then openly admits a desire to have an outside agency perform the task, and S2 agrees. Interpersonal equilibrium is maintained, face is preserved, by strategic choices of perspective upon patient and agent.

(29) includes structures of types (b) and (c):

(29) S1 Do you think school had an impact on you?
S2 Massive, massive, erm but I left it all to the last minute. I, you know, I kept telling myself well I'll work in the end, and in the end I did, but it was in the end, very much in the last two, in the last, like in the last couple of days, project work and whatnot. I'd stay up forty eight hours to **get it done** and stuff like that, which er ... and I realized, you know, then that, you know, if you put, if I put my mind to what I could do you know ... but I realized also that it's much easier if you work all the way through, and I had to **get myself organized** then. There was no point you know just leaving it. I had to do it you know. [90175001]

The speaker is centring himself as the topic, and his actions and their consequences for him. Simple active-voice choices on the two highlighted verb-phrases would have been possible, but would not carry the same affective focus on self-discipline, organization and achievement of the speaker's goals; *get*, with its focus on the subject-as-recipient, expresses these aspects of the speaker's narrative evaluation much more powerfully than simple, canonical active-voice alternatives could have done.

6 Conclusion

An interpersonal grammar, if such is needed (and we would argue that our corpus evidence shows that conventional types of description are inadequate to the task of explicating the difference between the various alternatives on the passive gradient), must necessarily be stated in probabilistic/interpretive terms. This does not weaken such a grammar; on the contrary, it lends strength to the enterprise of examining

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grammar in context, which many grammarians, especially those working within the field of discourse grammar, are currently engaged in, and offers the possibility of harnessing the power of computerized corpora in the service of qualitative research that reaches beyond the bare statistics of occurrence.

Get-passives and related structures are not the only grammatical features to display strong interpersonal meanings that are best explicated in probabilistic and interpretive terms. McCarthy and Carter (1997) account for right-dislocated elements in this way, using spoken corpus evidence, and McCarthy (1998) investigates a number of grammatical features including speech reporting, tense and aspect, and idiom selection from a similar perspective. We are encouraged in our claims for the *get*-passive by the fact that linguists who have previously investigated the phenomenon have instinctively homed in on features connected with the affective and interactive domains, finding it generally impossible to explain the choice of *get* solely by conventional semantic or syntactic criteria. The present paper has attempted to put the weight of corpus evidence behind other linguists' sound intuitions and to state more precisely the contextual conditions in which the *get*-passive and related forms are likely to occur. Our investigation has, we hope, sharpened the description of the structures and taken a step forward in the understanding of how an interpersonal grammar of English might be formulated.

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