

# IS THE *GET*-PASSIVE REALLY THAT ADVERSATIVE?

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13

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## 1. Introduction

The phenomenon under investigation in this paper, the *get*-passive —also known as ‘true’ *get*-passive (Quirk et al. 1985), or ‘central’ *get*-passive (Collins 1996)—has been subject to numerous academic studies and prolific debates. In particular, its syntactic, semantic and pragmatic characteristics have been analyzed in detail by many authors, such as Chappell (1980: 444-445), Quirk et al. (1985: 161), Collins (1996: 52), Carter and McCarthy (1999: 51-52), Huddleston and Pullum et al. (2002: 1442), and McEnery et al. (2006: 112-113), among others. They all acknowledge that the presence of an agent phrase is exceptionally rare in central *get*-passives; that they occur only with dynamic lexical verbs, such as *cut*, *send* and *throw*; that the referent tends to be animate and human, and is usually responsible for the action described in the clause; and, finally, adversative consequences are commonly attributed to the subject-referent in these constructions, hence its frequent occurrence with predicates such as *arrest*, *hit*, *kill*, *shoot*, and the like.

In this paper I will examine the abovementioned definitory characteristics of central *get*-passives (for earlier related studies see Coto Villalibre 2012, 2014), turning the spotlight, however, on the semantic implication of these constructions. I will try to answer the following question: Is the *get*-passive predominantly adversative? That is, do the majority of *get*-passives actually convey a meaning

which is bad or to the disadvantage of the subject who undergoes the action, as in *get busted, mugged, nabbed* and *screwed*? Corpus-based data from the spoken British English component and of other ESL components of the *International Corpus of English* (ICE) point in a completely different direction.

## 2. Characteristics of Central Get-passives

### 2.1 Absence of an agent by-phrase

An overwhelming majority of central *get*-passives occur without an agent. Quantitative data from the literature confirms this expectation: *get* is usually “limited to constructions without an expressed animate agent” (Quirk et al. 1985: 161). In Collins’ study (1996), 92% of the *get*-passives are agentless and, in Carter and McCarthy’s (1999: 51), the corresponding figure is identical with 93% of agentless *get*-passives, as in example (1):

(1) Henry got beaten last night.

14

### 2.2 Dynamic lexical verb

Huddleston and Pullum et al. (2002: 1442) state that central *get*-passives are found only with dynamic verbs, that is, verbs which denote an action and not its outcome (*cut, send, throw*). In the same way, Alexiadou (2005: 17) argues that “the *get*-passive is not permitted with stative verbs and verbs that do not allow for the subject of the construction to be interpreted as *affected*”. *Be* cannot, then, be replaced by *get* in an example like (2) below from Huddleston and Pullum et al. (2002: 1442):

(2) It was /\**got believed* that the letter was a forgery.

Furthermore, the *get*-passive is likely to co-occur with verbs referring to daily activities, such as *get changed, cleaned, dressed, shaved* or *washed*, and with colloquial expressions, for instance, *get kicked (out), muddled (up), nicked, pissed* or *sacked*, which highlights the informal nature of the *get*-passive.

### 2.3 Responsibility of the subject

The subject in central *get*-passives is usually attributed some kind of responsibility for initiating the event described in the clause, which is determined both by the meaning of *get* and by features of the context. As Huddleston (1984: 445) has noted, “*get* lends itself more readily than *be* to the imputation to the subject-referent of some measure of initiative or responsibility”. An example like (3) below from Givón and Yang (1994: 120) shows that the subject of the *get*-passive is in

some way responsible for his own misfortune, while no such inference can be drawn about the subject of the *be*-passive:

(3) He got caught by the police.

He was caught by the police.

Further evidence for this implication, namely the attribution of responsibility to the subject, is provided by constructions which generally specify an agentive role for the subject-referent, as ‘*try + to/and + get Ven*’, ‘*go + and + get Ven*’ and ‘*manage + to + get Ven*’, as in examples (4) and (5) from Collins (1996: 51):

(4) Our advice is for both to *go and get involved* in the new technology and in shop-floor activities. (ACE-F19-3824)

(5) Though he knew no more about military science and tactics than any other desk officer, he *managed to get transferred* to the combat forces. (BROWN-F22-260)

#### 2.4 Animacy of the subject

Since it is animate human referents which can show volition and intentionality over their actions (Dahl and Fraurud 1996: 58), the concept of subject animacy and the notions of subject control and responsibility are closely interrelated. *Get*-passives are eventive in terms of their aspect and this fact presumably contributes to the animacy effect; since events are usually controlled by an actor, animates are more likely to be able to control those events. In fact, Toyota’s (2007: 153) findings on the animacy of the subject entity in central *get*-passives show that 85.7% of the subjects in his data are animate, of which 84.7% are human. Although the majority are animate subjects, the presence of *get*-passives with inanimate subjects (apparently incapable of having any responsibility) is not unknown. Givón (1993: 69) points out that the conditions under which inanimate subjects appear in *get*-passives suggest “a natural extension of the notion of responsibility towards other manners of human involvement”. In other words, the affected entity in these constructions is not the inanimate subject itself, but rather the person who owns or is responsible for it, such as in the case of Peter in example (6):

(6) *Peter’s video recorder got* fixed last week.

#### 2.5 Semantic implication

This implication was first noted by Hatcher (1949: 441), who claimed that central *get*-passives were only used for two types of events, “those felt as having either fortunate or unfortunate consequences for the subject”, or “non-neutral” consequences, according to Fleisher (2006: 249). The meaning of the lexical verb is the clearest indicator of an adversative or beneficial implication. This dichotomy

is illustrated in the following examples from Collins (1996: 52), from the Brown corpus; example (7) is an instance of an adversative connotation, in that getting fired is unfavorable to the subject affected by the event, while (8) is an example of a beneficial implication, since getting promoted is favorable:

(7) ‘We *got fired*,’ Jones said. (BROWN-N01-1650)

(8) Some of them were warts until they *got promoted*. (BROWN-M01-1440)

Several independent studies have shown that the majority of *get*-passives refer to adversative contexts, “a state of affairs that is signalled contextually by the conversational participants as unfortunate, undesirable, or at least problematic” (Carter and McCarthy 1999: 49), and they often indicate that “something unpleasant is happening” (Francis et al. 1996: 58-59). In other words, most verb phrases refer to unfortunate events, or at least, events perceived as unfavorable for the subject, for instance *get arrested, beaten, burgled, criticized, intimidated, killed, penalized, sued*, etc. (see also Hatcher 1949: 436-437; Chappell 1980: 444-445; and Budwig 1990: 1224). Good proof of this can be found in Carter and McCarthy’s (1999: 49-50) spoken corpus results, who obtained adversative meanings in nearly 90% of *get*-passives, and fewer than 5% beneficial meanings. In the same line, Collins’ findings (1996: 52) in a mixed spoken and written corpus portray 67% adversative and 23% beneficial. Leech et al. (2009: 156-157), using the Brown family of corpora, not only argue that most *get*-passives are adversative, but that the frequency of adversative *get*-passives has increased from 60.3% to 66.3% from the 1960s to the 1990s.

16

In corpus studies of the meanings of different passives (Collins 1996; Carter and McCarthy 1999), there is a consensus that central *get*-passives more often express emotive or interpersonal meanings, and either the speaker’s (approving or disapproving) attitude towards the events described, or a focus on the subject-referent’s situation; *be*-passives, on the other hand, are usually more neutral in meaning (Stubbs 2001: 212; Fryd 2008: 13-14). Thus *be*- and *get*-passives “carry different conversational implicatures” and cannot be regarded as pragmatically equivalent (Siewierska 1984: 134; see also Guerrero Medina 2009: 279).

Thus, it seems plausible to conclude, as Biber et al. (1999: 481) do, that the *get*-passive typically co-selects verbs that have “negative connotations, conveying that the action of the verb is difficult or to the disadvantage of the subject”, as *get pinched, run over, struck by lightning*, etc. (see also Budwig 1990: 1236). In Rühlemann’s words (2007: 120), it would appear that the central *get*-passive can by no means be said to allow an open-choice participle paradigm; rather “the typical *get*-passive is semantically restricted in that it prefers a restricted set of verbs sharing an ‘adversative’ core meaning”.

Furthermore, this adversative/beneficial distinction can also be applied to *get*-passives with non-human subjects. Chappell (1980: 440) argues that “the affected entity in this construction is not the inanimate subject, but rather the person who owns it, or else stands in a relationship to this object equivalent to that of ownership”, as in the two examples below from Collins (1996: 53). Example (9) is considered to be adversative because of the adverse effect of the theft upon Jane, while (10) is considered to be beneficial because of the beneficial effect of the repair on Jane:

(9) Jane’s bike *got stolen*.

(10) Jane’s bike *got fixed*.

Nevertheless, the attribution of either beneficial or adversative consequences to the subject-referent is not always present. In fact, there is a great number of cases where there are no adversative or beneficial effects upon the subject-related person or persons, as in example (11) from Collins (1996: 52):

(11) Remember I rang you up and asked you to come, like after you’d already decided that you didn’t want to go to the drive-in anyway ’cos remember I *got asked* if I wanted to go to the drive-in. (ICE-AUS-S1A-077)

Examples like (11) above, which express a neutral condition, neither adverse nor beneficial, have received little attention in the literature, with few exceptions such as Sussex (1982: 88) and Downing (1996: 194-197).

### 3. The Corpus

The empirical part of my research consists in the analysis of the semantic implication of central *get*-passives. As *get*-passives are commonly said to feature mostly in conversations and in informal communicative interactions (Quirk et al. 1985: 161; Biber et al. 1999: 476; Huddleston and Pullum et al. 2002: 1442), I focused on the spoken part of a series of corpora of the *International Corpus of English* (ICE), including British English, Indian English, Hong Kong English and Singapore English, which all consist of 300 2000-word samples of spoken Present-Day English. The spoken component is subdivided into dialogues and monologues: dialogues are further subdivided into public (i.e. classroom lessons, broadcast interviews, business transactions) and private spoken texts (face-to-face conversations, phone calls); monologues, in turn, are divided in scripted (i.e. news broadcasts, broadcast talks) and unscripted texts (i.e. spontaneous commentaries, demonstrations).

The search for central *get*-passives was carried out automatically with the AntConc 3.2 retrieval software, taking into account *get* in all its inflected forms, namely *get*

(present singular and plural), *gets* (present singular), *getting* (progressive), *got* and *gotten* (past singular and plural), followed by a past participle. Further examination to filter out those findings in which *get* functioned as a main verb meaning ‘obtain, receive’ or ‘reach, arrive (at a place)’, and thus not conforming to ‘true’ or ‘central’ *get*-passives, was mainly carried out manually.

#### 4. Corpus Findings

In order to study the semantic implication of the examples retrieved and classify them into either beneficial for the subject, adversative for the subject, or semantically neutral, I have followed Persson’s test for adversativity (1990: 52), which consists in answering the following statement: “Is it worse to be X than not to be X?”

If the answer to the question is “yes”, then the passive construction was labeled “adversative”, as in the following examples (examples from (12) to (17) are all from Nilsson 2014):

18

(12) He fell in love with the circus proprietor’s daughter, attempted to fake a tight-rope act, *got nibbled* by monkeys, ran away, helped the circus proprietor’s daughter to marry a competent tight-rope walker.

(13) But if you don’t mind *getting shot up* with poison and you don’t mind paralyzing parts of your face - well, you’ve got plenty of company.

If the answer to the question was “no, one of the alternatives isn’t clearly better or worse than the other”, then the construction was labeled “neutral”, or “other” (Persson 1990: 52), as in the examples below:

(14) So remembering that Gita is soundly harmonious, Eustace, who loves her, accepts, and waits for his image to *get photographed*.

(15) That info gets *cross-referenced* with census data plus records the parties keep: who worked or volunteered for them, who donated money.

If the answer to the question was “no, it is actually BETTER to be X than not to be X”, then the construction was labeled “beneficial”, or “benefactive” (Persson 1990: 52), as in the following:

(16) That was Tommy Gibbons’ last big fight, but he *got well paid* for it, and he had been well paid for many another fights.

(17) For many agents, an ideal client would be one who can open an action movie, *get recognized* by 99% of the world’s teenage boys and never complain.

The quantitative analysis of the spoken British English component of ICE yielded a total of 50 central *get*-passives. An examination of the semantics conveyed by these constructions shows the following results: 22 examples (44%) of adversative implications (e.g. (18)), 8 examples (16%) of beneficial connotations (e.g. (19)), and 20 examples (40%) of neutral value for the subject-referent (e.g. (20)):

- (18) I know my period started the year that Uncle Ahmed *got bitten* by the snake <,> but it doesn't help you to actually identify that particular year <,> (ICE-GB:S2A-047 #52:1:A)
- (19) A kickback or drawback means for every fifteen cents a competitor of Standard Oil <,> pushes along that same route Standard Oil *gets paid* fifteen per cent. (ICE-GB:S1B-005 #91:1:A)
- (20) Some days you want you know somebody who's Fred Bloggs you just type Fred <,> and that'll *get transcribed* into his full address <,> (ICE-GB:S2A-028 #116:2:A)

The 126 examples of *get*-passives retrieved from the Indian component have the following distribution: 33 examples (26.2%) are adversative (*get burnt, cracked, destructed, hurt, imprisoned, injured, killed, violated*), 12 examples (9.5%) are beneficial (*get benefitted, cured, elected, promoted, protected, refreshed, released, strengthened*), and 81 examples (64.3%) have neutral semantics (*get collected, displayed, downloaded, filled up, measured, recorded, stored, written*).

The spoken Hong Kong component contains only 35 tokens of central *get*-passives, classified as follows: 13 examples (37.1%) are adversative (*get caught, decapitated, disemboweled, held up, ripped off, sued, suspended, yelled down*), 9 examples (25.8%) are beneficial (*get awarded, looked after, paid, passed, reelected*), and 13 (37.1%) are neutral examples (*get circulated, drafted, modified, published, sent, spread around, translated*).

A total of 64 instances of *get*-passives were recorded in the Singaporean component, namely 26 examples (40.6%) of adversative (*get arrested, infected, knocked out, molested, penalized, raped, run over, stolen*), 16 examples (25%) of beneficial (*get elected, excused, paid, passed, promoted, selected*), and 22 examples (34.4%) of neutral semantics (*get assigned, committed, endorsed, normalized, posted, shelved*).

The results obtained from the corpus for the Outer Circle varieties of English might be influenced by the expression of the passive voice in the substrate languages. Passive voice in Hindi, the most widely used substrate language for Indian English, is fairly similar to the passive in standard English in that it is also expressed by means of a periphrasis, namely the passive auxiliary *ja* followed by an inflected past participle of the main verb (Sandahl 2000: 101; Kachru 2006: 93). In Cantonese and Mandarin, the most common substrate languages for Hong

Kong English and Singapore English respectively, passives are not expressed by means of a periphrasis but are, however, strongly associated with the expression of adversative meaning (Bao and Wee 1999; Matthews and Yip 1994: 150; McEnery et al. 2006: 124-141). With respect to substrate influence, therefore, we might expect Indian English to be characterized by a fairly frequent use of *get*-passives and both Hong Kong and Singapore English to show a low frequency of *get*-passives but a relatively high proportion, among them, of *get*-passives with adversative meaning.

By focusing only on the two implications conveyed by central *get*-passives as suggested in the relevant literature (see section 2.5 above), “those felt as having either fortunate or unfortunate consequences for the subject” (Hatcher 1949: 441) or on the “non-neutral” consequences of central *get*-passives (Fleisher 2006: 249), the corpus findings (see Fig. 1 below) seem to be in accordance with scholars such as Carter and McCarthy (1999: 49-50), Collins (1996: 52) and Leech et al. (2009: 156-157), who argue that the *get*-passive “is semantically restricted in that it prefers a restricted set of verbs sharing an ‘adversative’ core meaning” (Rühlemann 2007: 120).

20

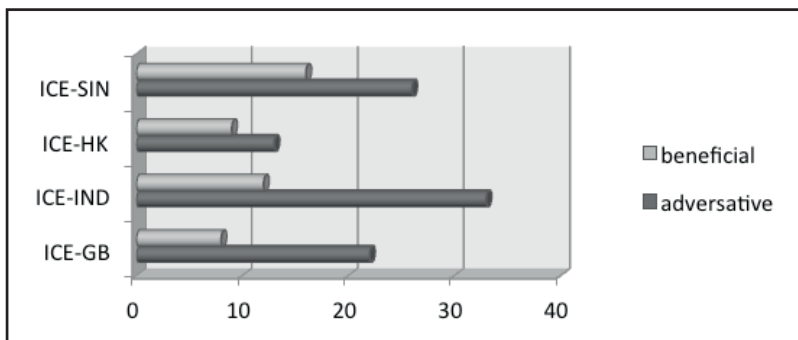


FIG. 1. *Get*-passives according to adversative and beneficial semantics.

Figure 1 above shows that central *get*-passives are far more common with adversative implications than with beneficial connotations for the subject, and this applies to all varieties of English under study. Both the figure and the conclusions represent, however, a partial and distorted picture of reality. It is certainly true that at first sight *get*-passives seem to be semantically restricted to negative meanings. But what about the examples in which the *get*-passive is semantically neutral? There are a number of instances in which the past participle has a neutral value for the subject-referent, that is, there are no beneficial or adversative effects upon the



## Is the *get*-passive really that adversative?

subject, or, at least, those effects are not clearly visible. Furthermore, neutral conditions tend to occur in contexts or areas which might be broadly classified as scientific, as many of the examples retrieved from the corpora suggest (*compressed, conflated, dissolved, measured, percolated, published, transcribed*). Based on their conclusions, none of the abovementioned authors (see section 2.5), except for Sussex (1982: 88) and Downing (1996: 194-197), seem to be paying much attention to those neutral cases, focusing the aim of their researches primarily on the dichotomy between adversative/negative meaning and beneficial/positive meaning.

The following figure represents the corpus data for central *get*-passives with adversative, beneficial and neutral semantic implications.

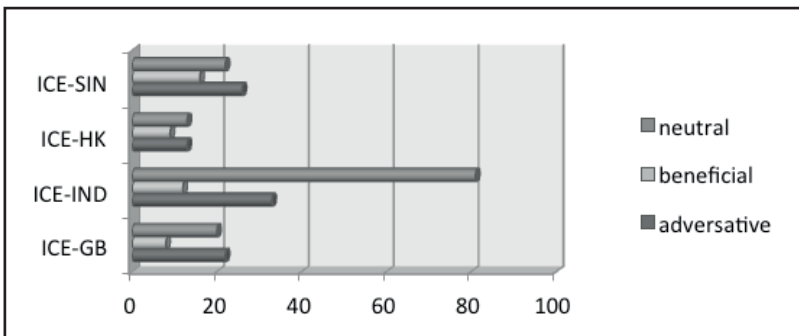


FIG. 2. *Get*-passives according to adversative, beneficial and neutral semantics.

Surprisingly, in three of the subcorpora, British, Hong Kong and Singaporean, the neutral implications are almost as common as the adversative connotations, namely 22 (44%) adversative vs. 20 (40%) neutral in ICE-GB, 26 (40.6%) adversative vs. 22 (34.4%) neutral in ICE-SIN, and 13 (37.1%) adversative vs. 13 (37.1%) neutral in ICE-HK. Unexpected is the overwhelming frequency of *get*-passives with neutral meaning in the Indian component, with 81 (64.3%) semantically neutral cases.

Furthermore, if we classify the *get*-passives as either “adversative” or “non-adversative”, the latter including both beneficial and neutral instances, as suggested by Gustafsson (2014), then the findings are even more striking, as shown in Figure 3 below. What is surprising, if the adversative interpretation is to be considered an essential and defining part of the *get*-passive, is that there should be so many instances which do not fall into this category.

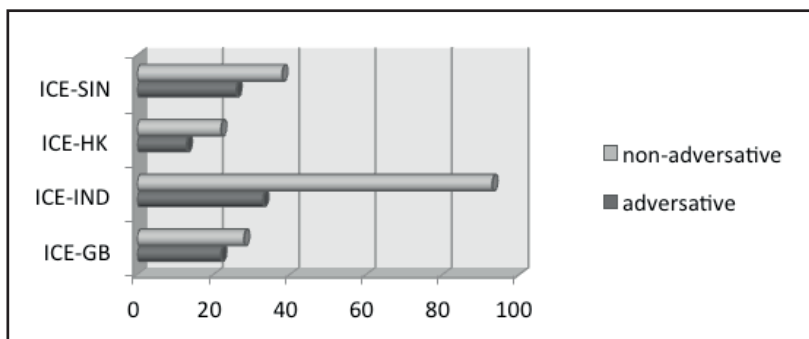


FIG. 3. *Get*-passives according to adversative and non-adversative semantics.

22

One of the main differences pointed out in the literature (Stubbs 2001: 212; Fryd 2008: 13-14) concerning the meanings of *get*-passives and *be*-passives is that the former usually express emotive or interpersonal meanings, usually speaker approval or disapproval of the event described, while *be*-passives tend to convey semantically neutral meanings. Is the *get*-passive then, according to the present findings, undergoing a change in meaning, shifting from primarily adversative semantics to more neutral contexts? This idea may be closely related to the hypothesis that subject animacy is starting to shift from animate to inanimate subjects. Although the predominant animacy of the subject in *get*-passives correlates with the feature [+ human], Toyota (2008: 161) suggests that a slight diachronic change can be observed, since inanimate subjects have increased in PDE over IModE by about 6% and likewise, human subjects have decreased by about 7%. As for twentieth century English, Hundt (2001: 74-75) suggests that the number of *get*-passives with inanimate subjects shows a drastic increase in American English (from 3 in Brown (1960s) to 20 in Frown (1990s)) and a slight increase in the British corpora (from 6 in LOB (1960s) to 8 in F-LOB (1990s)).

This loss of subject animacy also implies a loss of subject responsibility, as it is only animate human referents that can show volition and intentionality over their actions (Dahl and Fraurud 1996: 58). As we have seen, the notion of adversativity affects predominantly human and responsible subjects (see also Givón and Yang 1994: 139; Wanner 2009: 100). The increase in the number of inanimate and non-responsible subjects, which are unable to express any emotions or feelings towards the event described, may account for the proliferation of semantically neutral constructions, in which no negative consequences fall upon the subject, as in examples (21) to (24):

- (21) Note that an awful lot of heat *gets gathered* round the world and passed up in our uhm <sic> neck of the woods which keeps our climate mu <sic> much milder than it would otherwise be <,> (ICE-GB:S2A-043 #83:1:A)
- (22) So the dam gets *filled up* this time And they open the shutter <,> top shutter Yeah Then <w> it's </w> really beautiful to see. (ICE-IND:S1A-029 #107:1:B)
- (23) The thing is that these words *get translated* into machine code <,> (ICE-HK:S1A-047 #136:1:A)
- (24) This is the first time I tried it I don't know if it *gets recorded*. (ICE-SIN:S1A-086 #248:1:A)

On the other hand, the characteristics associated with central *get*-passives in the literature, as the degree of responsibility attributed to the subject or the adversative semantics conveyed by the past participle, might be overgeneralisations or oversimplifications, since, as has just been proved in this study, some do not hold. Authors such as Wanner (2009: 88) argue, for instance, that some of the features assigned to *get*-passives are not inherent to the construction, but have to “be seen in the context of the register in which the *get*-passive is used”. This is the case of adversative *get*-passives, whose high frequency is especially notable in colloquial expressions, such as *get kicked (out)*, *muddled (up)*, *nicked*, *pissed*, *sacked* and *whacked*; other informal examples recorded in the corpus include *get bobbed down*, *bumped off*, *busted*, *chased away*, *fired*, *knocked out*, *mixed up*, *pushed around*, *ripped off* and *yelled down*. On the contrary, *get*-passives in more formal contexts are often combined with verbs that have non-adversative associations, as in *get acclimatized*, *actualized*, *circulated*, *compressed*, *conflated*, *contracted*, *dissolved*, *elected*, *expanded*, *individualized*, *percolated*, *reinstated*, *restructured*, *subjected*, *transcribed*, *translated* and *weathered*. On the whole, *get*-passives seem to match their subjects and verbs stylistically: in (25) below, *ammonia*, a formal subject, is paired with *oxidised*, a semantically neutral formal-register verb. In an example like (26), whose context is indubitably informal (with hesitations and repetitions), the subject *ya [you]* is paired with the semantically adversative and informal verb *knocked out*.

- (25) When a hard platinum wire is inserted ammonia *gets oxidised* <,> to form nitric oxide <,> (ICE-IND:S1B-004 #139:1:A)
- (26) My friend she my friend had a liquor you know that that that <sic> kind which kind and it's it's <sic> a it's a what Earl Ladies and she was knocked out just after a single sip Had to stay had to sleep for about one hour at my friend's place Ya *get knocked out* I get so flushed I have to go and sleep immediately Then in the middle of the night I wake up scratching (ICE-SIN:S1A-004 #207:1:C)

## 5. Conclusions

Although it has been demonstrated that instances such as *get beaten* or *get killed*, which convey adversative consequences for the subject, are more frequent than examples like *get awarded* or *get promoted*, which signal beneficial implications, the findings do not comply with the literature in showing an overall preference for *get*-passives to occur with adversative meaning. In fact, most passive *get* constructions in the corpus carry semantically neutral and non-adversative implications for the subject, as in *get sent* or *get written*, and this extends to all varieties of English under consideration. The present study has shown that *get*-passives are not “non-neutral” (Fleisher 2006: 249) and that they convey more than just “fortunate or unfortunate consequences for the subject” (Hatcher 1949: 441). This suggests, on the one hand, that central *get*-passives are either losing their defining characteristics, moving closer to semantically neutral *be*-passives, or, on the other hand, that adversativity has never been prototypical of *get*-passives, but merely a contextual feature; in other words, it is not really built into the passive *get* construction. We have to see, thus, adversative meaning not as an integral part of *get*-passives, but as “merely a possible implicature” (Huddleston and Pullum et al. 2002: 1443). Taking into consideration the richness of colloquial expressions that English has for expressing actions and events with negative outcomes, it seems that it is the informal and colloquial nature of the *get*-passive, rather than the construction itself, which favors colloquial expressions of something being strongly affected negatively.

24

## Notes

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