

Change and Continuity in the English Passive: from Weorþan to Get¹

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1. Introduction

The passive in Present-Day English is prototypically expressed by means of *be* followed by a past participle. This construction is known to be rather equivocal. A sentence such as (1), for instance:

(1) The vase was broken.

may indeed carry two distinct interpretations depending on whether one refers to the action suffered by the vase (Sense I), or to the state of the object observable at a given moment (Sense II).

Irked by this ambivalence, the great early twentieth century Germanic philologist G.O.Curme felt justified in deploring that:

English is peculiarly poor in passiv² constructions. The passiv is one of the very few things in the English language that look shabby. (...) Compare *The door was shut at six but I don't know when it was shut* with *Die Tür war um sechs geschlossen, aber ich weiß nicht, wann sie geschlossen wurde*. The weakness of literary English at this point is apparent. It is not capable of expressing that accurately. (Curme, 1913: 186).

Curme's irritation here is probably fuelled by his intimate familiarity with a former stage of the English language in which a cognate form, Old English *weorðan* similarly allowed the specific expression of sense I, in contradistinction to *beon/wesan*, which (allegedly, but see below) specialised in the expression of Sense II. Yet, Curme sees reason to be fortified by ongoing change in the English language:

As bad as our case looks, there is much hope for the future of the English passiv, for in our colloquial speech we have a much completer system than is

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¹ For easier referencing purposes the Old English verb *weorðan* appears in the title with the conventional transliteration 'th' in lieu of the Old English character 'eth'.

² *Sic*. As can be verified throughout this quotation, Curme was also a staunch advocate of spelling reform...

found even in German: Actional Passiv: *the house often gets painted, the house at last got painted*, etc.; Progressiv Passiv: *the house is getting painted, was getting painted*, etc. As literary English also has a progressiv passiv, we have two progressiv forms: *the house is getting* or *is being painted*. These forms may in time become differentiated under the influence of the different meaning of their auxiliaries. The form with *being* might call attention to a slow or a gradual development, while *getting* might indicate a shorter and quicker movement (...).(*ibid.*)

Following on Curme's remarks, this article proposes to take a closer look at the expression of the passive in the history of the English language, and more particularly, at the successful development of newcomer *get* as a replacement for some of the meanings formerly expressed with *weorðan*.

2. 'Weorðan': diachronic overview

The Old English verb *weorðan* derives from a PIE root **wer-*,³ (e.g. Lat. *vertere*), whose core meaning of 'rotation' is clearly evidenced in the various senses of *weorðan*: 'turn, come about, befall'.

In terms of grammatical function, the verb was fairly versatile,⁴ with either non-copular or copular usage:

2.1 Non-copular 'weorðan'

- Intransitive construction (meaning: 'happen')

(2) *Sona wearð micel eorðbyfung*

Soon happened great earthquake

'Immediately a great earthquake occurred'

(c1075. Chrodegang, *Regula canonicorum*, 1: 14.21)

- Dative object construction (meaning: 'happen to')

(3) *Hu mihte æfre englum mara gefea & geofu & blis geweorþan,*
How might ever DAT-angels more joy and gift and bliss befall,

opþe mannum mara weorðmynd þonne him on þyssum dæge
gewearþ?

or DAT-men more respect than DAT-him on this day happened?

'How could ever befall the angels more joy and liberality and merriment, or more glory to men, than to him on this day happened?'

(c1000. HomS 46 [Blickling Homilies 11]: 123.127)

³ See Pokorny (1959), and Watkins (1969).

⁴ Exx 2–8 are borrowed from Petré & Cuyckens (2008).

2.2 Copular 'weorðan'

- + prepositional phrase (meaning: (a) change of location or (b) property)
 - (4) (a) Hit wyrð on berne þæt to ðam belimpað.
It goes into barn (the-one)that to them belongs
'It goes into the barn, that which belongs to them.'
(c1100. LawGer: 3.1)
 - (b) Gif þu sie Godessunu, cweþ þæt þa stanasto hlafum
geweorþan.
If you be God's son, say that the stones into loaves turn
'If you are God's son, say that the stones turn into loaves.'
(c1000. HomS 10 [*Blickling Homilies* 3]: 27.4)
- + adjectival phrase (predication of new property)
 - (5) For þinum wundrum forhte weorðað.
For thine miracles afraid PLUR-become
'For your miracles they get afraid.'
(c970. Paris Psalter 64: 20)
- + noun phrase (predication of new property)
 - (6) Ond binnan III gearum heo wearð þæs minstres abbud.
And within three years she became that minster's abbot
'And within three years she became abbess of that nunnery.'
(c1025. Mart 1 [Herzfeld-Kotzor]: De25, C.15)
- + participle of intrans. verb (predication of resulting state affecting subject)
 - (7) Se hreofla, þe hym ær lange on wæs, wearð þa sona nyðer afeallen
The leprosy that on-him before long was, became then soon down fallen
'(The) leprosy, which formerly had long affected him, then immediately disappeared'
(c1075. VSal 1 [Cross]: 33.7)
- + participle of transitive verb (predication of resulting state affecting subject)
 - (8) Þa feoll an of his handum, þæt hit wearð tobrocen & tostrægd on
unarimedlice styccu.
Then fell one [glass lantern] from his hands, so-that it became broken and scattered in innumerable pieces
'Then one fell from his hands, so that it got broken and scattered in innumerable pieces.'
(c1075. GregD 1 [C]: 7.49.20-1)

- (9) Þær wurdon gehæled æt ðære halgan
 There became healed at the holy
- byrgene eahta untrume men
 tomb eight infirm men
- (Ælfric, *Lives of Saints* I 21.132)⁵

2.3 Semantic specifications of 'beon/wesan' vs 'weorðan' + past participle with passive meaning

Instances of passival *weorðan* such as (8) and (9) show transition into a new state affecting the patient. For Kilpiö (1989: 67) such transitions are typically sudden, and may even carry, notably when *weorðan* is in the present tense, “a stylistic overtone indicating the negative effect of the action on the subject.”

Barring one isolated case of synthetic passive surviving in Old English⁶ in the verb *hātan* ('to name, call, promise, command'), the expression of the passive implied therefore a choice between either *beon/wesan* or *weorðan* before a past participle. The reasons governing the selection of one over the other are the object of some controversy. The view most generally held has long been that there existed a functional contrast between a 'stative' meaning expressed via *beon/wesan* and a 'dynamic'⁷ meaning, expressed via *weorðan*. These respective meanings can be verified in (10, 9):

- stative meaning:

- (10) seo Asia on ælca healfe heo is befangen mid sealtum
 wætere
 this Asia on each side she is surrounded with salt
 water
- buton on easthealfe
 except on (the) east side

(Ælfred, *Orosius*, 1,1)

⁵ Examples 9-11 borrowed from Denison (1993: 418-9).

⁶ The verb's only surviving form in Middle English is *hight*. Re synthetic passives, one may note that Gothic did have a fully functional form in the present tense (indicative and subjunctive; e.g. *daupjada* '(he) is being baptized'), but, in the past tense, the passive was always periphrastic, e.g. *daupips was* '(he) was baptized'). Note too that *wairþan* could also be used as an alternative to *wisan*.

⁷ The terms 'statal' vs 'actional' are also used.

- dynamic meaning:

(9) Þær wurdon gehæled æt ðære halgan
There became healed at the holy

byrgene eahta untrume men
tomb eight infirm men

(Ælfric, *Lives of Saints I* 21.132)

Other Old English scholars, however, and most notably Mitchell (1985), challenge the view that there ever existed such a marked separation and provide evidence that *beon/wesan* and *weorðan* were actually polyfunctional and each capable of expressing *both* stative *and* dynamic passive meanings:

- dynamic passive *wesan*:

(11) þonne wæron ealle þa dura betyneda
then were all the doors closed

(Orosius, 59.10)

(12) Þær wæron gehælede þurh ða halgan
There were healed through the blessed

femnan fela adlige men
woman many sick men

(Ælfric, *Lives of Saints I* 20.113)

- stative passive *weorðan*:

(13) an hi wurdon ða utan ymbsette mid
and they were then from-outside besieged with/by

Romaniscum here swa lange þæt...
Roman army so long that...

(Ælfric, *Homilies I* 28.402.3)⁸

According to statistics compiled by Hoffman (1934: 12) based on the *Orosius* and *Chronicles A & B* for the Old English verb *ofslean* ('to slay', *ofslægen* PP), the number of occurrences of passive constructions with the past tense forms *wæs/wæron* (79 tokens) or *weorð/wurdon* (107 tokens) comes out as so marginally biased in favour of *weorðan* as to warrant the hypothesis that the forms had perhaps, to a large extent, become interchangeable, thus paving the way for the subsequent loss of Middle English *wurthe* beyond the 14th century. By contrast, the preservation of functional differences in Dutch and German would explain why their respective cognates *worden* and *werden* prospered unimpeded to the present day.

⁸ Example given in Mitchell (1985: 331).

2.4 The demise of 'wurthen' in Middle English and the development of alternative verbs

Quite remarkably, the demise of Middle English *wurthen* seems to have been massive rather than gradual, with a sharp drop in recorded occurrences between the 11th and 12th centuries, and a progressive phasing out until its final dropping out by the end of the 15th century, with only fossilised expressions remaining even up to this day, notably in archaic (literary, rural) usage, e.g.:

- (14) Woe worth the day!
woe betide the day (= cursed be the day!)

Wurthen's fate, once again, was wholesale and concerned not only its use in the expression of the passive, but encompassed all other functions, and notably that as an ingressive copula indicating the entering into a new state:

- (15) ME *wurthen wip childe = become pregnant*

Little is known of what may have prompted this fatal issue. Mustanoja (1960: 616ff) invokes, among other factors, the levelling of inflectional participial endings, the fact that *beon* had always been compatible with the expression of transition, and the competition of *wurthen* with other ingressive copulas (e.g. *become, come, grow, fall, turn, wax, fall*, etc.),⁹ but lays primary stress, however, on the accessory nature of the copula, in comparison with the semantically crucial role of the participial element. He also conjectures that *be* may have won out, ultimately, because it was phonetically lighter.¹⁰

If *be* was indeed compatible with the expression of transitional meaning, this was essentially the case as an auxiliary of the Passive (with transitive verbs) and the Perfect (with intransitive mutative verbs), but contrary to *weorðan*, this capacity did not encompass the predication either of a *change* of location or of a *new* property (see above exx. 4–6.) Concurrent with the demise of Middle English *wurthen*, a gap was therefore left open for the latter function, which was aptly filled by ingressive copulas such as *become, wax, fall*, etc. These, however, did not successfully evolve to also take on the role of passive auxiliaries. After a period of undisputed¹¹ reign of *be +pp* over the expression of the passive, a challenger –in the form of *get*– appeared on the Middle English scene, which was to take on some of the predicative functions formerly assumed by *weorðan* and progressively extend its scope so as to encroach on *be's* own territory for the expression of the passive. The expansion and grammaticalisation of this verb will be discussed in the following paragraphs.

⁹ See Petré & Cuykens (2008) for a detailed analysis of *wurthen's* successors in Middle English.

¹⁰ Note here that *be* itself was under pressure from a wealth of competing stative copulas: *lie, hang, stand, sit*, etc. A fair number of both groups of verbs (ingressive and stative copulas) are still productive in PDE, if only marginally so (see Visser (1973: 2027ff)).

¹¹ No doubt comforted by the fact that *have +pp* now served for the expression of the perfect with both transitive and intransitive verbs, and thus allowed *be +pp* to function unchallenged as the requisite operator of the passive.

2. The verb 'get' in Middle English and Early Modern English

Although the verb *get* existed in Old English as a pseudomorpheme in various compounds such as *begietan* ('to beget'), *forgietan* ('to forget'), *undergietan* ('to understand'), the autonomous Middle English verb *geten* is in fact a 13th century Scandinavian borrowing. The origin of the verb can be found in a Proto-Indo-European base **ghe(n)d-* 'seize'.¹²

Interestingly, this root is also attested in Latin exclusively as a pseudo-morpheme (e.g. **hend-*, in *prehendere* 'to seize'). Within the Germanic language tree, the Scandinavian sub-branch actually stands alone in having lexicalised –in a wide variety of senses¹³ beyond the core transitive acquisitional sense– an uncompounded form (Old Norse *geta* 'to get, obtain').

2.1 'get': a transitive verb

Get initially gained a foothold in Middle English as a transitive verb, and appeared first in texts penned in regions under strong Norse influence. Thus in the *Ormulum*, written in an East Midlands dialect:

- (16) Forr wha se itt iss þatt gredi3 iss. [For whoever is greedy]
& 3iferr affterr ahhte; [And desirous for property,]
A33 alls he mare. & mare gett; [As he ever gets more and more,]
A33 lisse himm affterr mare. [He ever yearns for more.]
& nohht ne ma33 he wurrþenn full. [And he cannot be satisfied]
(?c1200 Orm.(Jun 1) 10219, *Middle English Dictionary*)

French & Hale (1930) reckon the dialect in *Havelock* to be North Midlands with strong Norse influence, which might explain the presence of this novel lexical element:

- (17) And gaten mani children samen
And (they) got many children together [= they had many children]
(c1300 *Havelok the Dane*, l.2934)

- (18) Wel is set þe mete þu etes And þe hire þat þu getes
well is set¹⁴ the food you eat and the wages that you get
(*ibid*, ll.907-908)

2.2 From Acquisition to Possession

In the Middle English period, the semantic paradigm of *get* broadened somewhat with the development of a new meaning where the initial notion of agency

¹² See Pokorny (1959: 437), Watkins ([1969] 2000: 29), and Livingston (2004: 47-56), the latter especially for a discussion of the nasal element in the PIE root.

¹³ See Cleasby & Vigfusson (1874 : sv 'geta').

¹⁴ 'invested'.

present in the ‘grasping’ / ‘capture’ Proto-Indo-European root was bleached to such an extent that the semantic prime /HAVE/, inherent in the actualisation of the action took precedence.

If one analyses the semantic properties of acquisitional *get* as /CAUSE TO HAVE/, where the subject is both agent and beneficiary, loss of the /+volition/ component must have translated into a new /COME TO HAVE/ pattern, with a subject whose only role is that of beneficiary:

- (19) þarfore drink of me gettes þou nane
therefore drink from me get you none
‘therefore you get nothing to drink from me’

(*New Testament: St John, c1388*)

Indeed, the meaning of *get* here is *receive*, a marked evolution from the initial agentive connotation. In the course of this evolution, *get* also became compatible with objects expressing abstract reference:

- (20) And jn no wyse I kwd not getyn no grawnth of here to sesyn tyl ge
com hom
and in no way could I get permission from her to cease until you come home
(*Paston Letters, Letter to Husband, 1448*)

It appears to be a regular feature of Indo-European languages that verbs of possession ultimately derive from earlier dynamic forms denoting an act of acquisition. Thus, the Germanic cognates of ‘have’ (O.E. *habban*, O.N. *hafa*, O.S. *hebbjan*, O.Fris. *habba*, Ger. *haben*, Goth. *haban*), all proceed from a Proto-Germanic root **khaf-*, itself derived from PIE **kap-* ‘to grasp.’¹⁵ Most informed scholars¹⁶ refute as ungrounded any inclination to link Lat. *capere* (from PIE **kap-*) –and consequently all Germanic cognates of ‘have’– with Lat. *habere* (from PIE **ghabh-*, ‘to give, to receive.’ Be that as it may, the fact remains that verbs of possession rather systematically derive from earlier dynamic roots, with occasional cases of both dynamic and stative acceptions synchronically preserved. Witness, for instance, G. ‘geben’, or F. ‘avoir’:

- (21) Jonas gab Peter ein Buch. [*Jonas gave Peter a book*]
(22) Es gab ein Buch auf dem Tisch. [*There was a book on the table*]
(23) J’ai eu un livre pour mon anniversaire. [*I got a book for my birthday*]
(24) Il y avait un livre sur la table. [*There was a book on the table*]

A similar pattern of evolution applies to the change in meaning resulting from loss of agency in verbs of holding:

¹⁵ See Pokorny (1959: 527).

¹⁶ E.g. Walshe (1952), Barnhart (1988: 469), Klein (1966: 708). Partridge ([1958] 1966: 281), however, is reluctant to see here a case of mere “fortuitousness”, and suggests that “conservatism” may be at play, which would have taken precedence over sound laws.

- (25) [Sp. 'tener'] Tengo dos hermanos. [*I have two brothers*]
(26) [F. 'tenir'] Il tient une bonne cuite. [*He has a severe hangover*]
(27) [E. 'hold'] This jug can hold about a pint.

Interestingly, the Old Norse verb *geta* had already proceeded quite far ahead along this road:

- (28) eigi getr vitrara mann
[not is got wiser man]
no wiser man is to be got= there is no wiser man
(Cleasby & Vigfusson, 1874: 198)

Yet a further stage of evolution may be found in Early Modern English with *have got*, where the periphrasis loses some of its aspectual force (i.e. resultative connotation) to express purely stative¹⁷ (i.e. non-resultative) possession:

- (29) What the Devil, have they got no Ears in this House?
(1697, Vanbrugh, *The Relapse*)

Some 'advanced' varieties of non-standard English, it must be noted, display a grammatically bleached form *got* which is no longer perceived as *have got*, and is reanalysed as a base form meaning /HAVE/, thus giving rise to a whole new paradigm¹⁸ involving both lexical (a, b) and quasi-modal (c) meanings:

- (30) (a) {I,you,we,they} got; {He,She,It} gots
(b) What do you/Watcha got? Do you (etc.) got? I (etc.) don't got
(c) I (etc.) gotta go/ Do I gotta go?/ I don't/ain't gotta go

In this respect, the English-based Creole spoken in Guyana¹⁹ grammaticalises a semantic discrimination based on the root vowel of *get* where /get/ is a change of state copula (31), while /gat/ is a copula of existence/location/possession (32):

- (31) shi get sik [She became ill]
(32) de gat a shap a di kaarna [a. There is a shop at the corner/b. They own the shop at the corner]

¹⁷ Interestingly, the pluperfect form 'had got' retains dynamic perfective meaning in the affirmative, but licenses, in the negative, both stative and perfective interpretations.

¹⁸ Initially circumscribed to varieties of AAVE (African-American Vernacular English), the paradigm is steadily gaining ground in spoken informal Am.E., with the exception of Pr3Sg which still remains clearly marked as AAVE. Full morphological reanalysis still appears to be some way off as no records of **gotting* have yet come to light...

¹⁹ See Gibson (1986: 573, 581).

- (39) Oh mother, dear mother, come sit you down by me,
Come sit you down by me and pity my case;
For my poor head is aching, my poor heart is breaking,
And I'm in low spirits and surely must die.

(Excerpt from *Young Girl Cut Down in Her Prime*,
song collected from an unnamed singer in East Meon,
Hampshire, in 1909)²⁰

The verb *get*, in its use as a verb of motion, seems to have especially favoured the pleonastic reflexive construction:

- (40) Then saith Jesus unto him, Get thee hence, Satan: for it is written,
Thou shalt worship the Lord thy God, and him only shalt thou
serve.

(KJV, *Matthew* 4:10)

- (41) Get thee to a nunn'ry, why would'st thou be a breeder of sinners?

(Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, III, i)

This type no longer appears to be productive in Present-Day English, in contradistinction, in this respect, to the ditransitive type exemplified in (42), where the optional reflexive pronoun is a dative object:

- (42) Get {yourself / \emptyset } a new coat.

In the core acquisitional sense of *get*, the verb's object apprehended via an abstract operation of localisation relative to the subject.²¹ To some extent, a similar property may be said to hold of *get* when it expresses a change of location, the only difference with acquisitional *get* being that what is obtained is a new location (43) or state (42)²² of the object or of the subject (45).²³

- (43) He may all evill forgeat, our soules out of hell to get.

(1607(?a1425) *Chester Pl.*(Hr1 2124) 97/303, *Middle English Dictionary*, 'get')

- (44) He . . . knitting all his force, got one hand free

(1590, *Oxford English Dictionary*, 'get')

- (45) Harrow! devill! how swa gat he away?

(a1500(a1460) *Towneley Pl.*, *Middle English Dictionary*, 'get')

²⁰ See <http://www.informatik.uni-hamburg.de/~zierke/shirley.collins/songs/younggirlcutdowninherprime.html>

²¹ This is in keeping with Emile Benveniste's semantic analysis: « Avoir n'est rien d'autre qu'un être-à inversé », ([1960]1966: 197). The same formal property holds of *get* as 'receive', with the distinction that the acquisitional sense is /+volitional/, when the 'reception' sense is /-volitional/.

²² Change of location and change of state are intimately linked in (42).

²³ As in the case of (43) with deletion of co-referential reflexive object, which is the rule in PDE.

2.4 The *get* + past participle construction: from resultative to passival meaning

The *get* + past participle construction is an early Modern English innovation. Instances such as (46–47) are initially quite rare, and the type ‘get rid’ accounts in itself for a large proportion of the early corpus:

- (46) The chief use ... is to devise wayes to get ridd of the Later [‘latter’]
(1665, Boyle, *Occas. Refl. Ded.Let.*, *Oxford English Dictionary*, *rid*, v.3d
[in Denison 1993: 433])
- (47) But then again, they begin so abominable early, a Man must rise by
Candle-light to get dress'd by²⁴ the Psalm
(1697, Vanbrugh, *The Relapse* [in Gronemeyer *ibid*: 28])

These are formally similar to (44) in that both also imply a change of state consecutive to the accomplishment of the event.

In (44) the efforts exerted by the subject result in his hand becoming free of its bounds, while in (46) plans are devised to eliminate²⁵ what is referred to by ‘Later’, (i.e. reach a situation where that referent has undergone a change of state), and in (47), likewise, what is envisaged is a resultative situation where the subject is fully clothed.

In Early Modern English, the *get* + *PP* collocation clearly replicates the pattern of ingressive copula *weorðan* (see *supra* exx. (7-9) and falls in with other Late Middle / Early Mod.English concurrent forms:

- (48) ... a grete part of his company bicame cristened
(1500, *Three Kings' Sons*, EETS, 187; in Visser, 1973: 2030)
- (49) ... how came this mab slain?
(1594, Rob. Greene, *A Looking Glass for London*, I ii 110; in Visser, 1973: 2031)
- (50) This Master Benedicke fell inamoured of this maiden.
(1578, Roper, *Life of More*, 47; in Visser, 1973: 2031)

Undisputably passive meaning for the *get* + *PP* construction is not recorded before the mid or late 17th century. The *Oxford English Dictionary* gives (51) as the first available occurrence:

- (51) A certain Spanish pretending Alchymist ... got acquainted with
foure rich Spanish merchants...
(1652, Gaule, *Magastrom*, 361, *Oxford English Dictionary*, ‘get’ v. 34b)

But Strang (1970: 150–1) disputes the notion of passive meaning in (51) and describes *acquainted* as a ‘predicative which could be taken as a participle’.

²⁴ ‘at the time of.’

²⁵ ‘rid’: Old English *āryddan* ‘to strip’, *hryding* ‘a clearing; Old Norse *rythja*, ‘to clear land, etc.

Jespersen (52) and Gronemeyer (53) give the following examples as the next serious early candidates for passive meaning:

- (52) ... so you may not only save your life, but get rewarded for your roguery.
 (1731, Fielding, *Letter Writers*, II ix, 20; in Jespersen, 1909–49iv: 108–9)
- (53) I am resolv'd to get introduced to Mrs Annabella.
 (1693, Powell, *A very good wife*, II i. p.10 (ARCHER corpus);
 in Gronemeyer, 1999: 29)

The extreme scarcity of this type, however, leads Strang (1970: 151) to postpone to the late 18th century the emergence of unmistakably passive structures, and conjectures that the novel collocation must have been initially restricted to spoken English.

Svartvik (1966) and Granger (1983) only find a few token *get*-passives in a mass of *be*-passives in their respective corpora. As Svartvik (1966: 149) puts it: “there is no indication in our material that the *get*-passive is common in colloquial English.”

Granger (1983), compounding her own spoken English corpus with that of Stein (1979), composed of novels and plays, draws the following rather telling chart (54):

(54)

Corpus	Nr of words	<i>be Ved</i>	<i>get Ved</i>
Spoken	160,000	1,157	53
Written	160,000	1,293	47

Granger (*ibid*: 234)

Granger is quick to point out, however, that the three corpora on which Svartvik, Stein and herself based their respective studies show a distinct bias in favour of educated British English speakers and written sources. She further hints that an investigation of American English might provide a different picture. And, indeed, Weiner & Labov (1977), in their study of American adults and teenagers, do note that:

- (55) Adults show a preponderant use of *be*, as do female teenagers to a lesser extent; male teenagers are significantly different from all other groups in their heavier use of *get*, and this tendency is stronger among blacks than whites. (...) A shift to the *get* passive appears to be one of the most active grammatical changes taking place in English; and at least in the North, it seems to be also a stigmatized sociolinguistic variant which is used more by males than females.

(Weiner & Labov, *ibid*: 24)

Herold (1986), building on Weiner & Labov's (1977) findings, introduces a strikingly relevant sociolinguistic variable, summarised in the following table (56):

(56)

	Social Class				Total
	Working		Upper		
	Number	%	Number	%	
<i>get</i> passive	89	49%	30	17%	119
<i>be</i> passive	91	51%	147	83%	238
Total	180	100%	177	100%	357

Herold (1986)²⁶

Another statistical study conducted more recently by McEnery & Xiao (2005) on the Freiburg-LOB and the larger BNC corpora, however, confirms the ‘underdog’ status of *get*-passive *vs* the dominant *be*-passive:

(57)

Corpus	<i>Be</i> passive		<i>Get</i> passive	
	Frequency	Per 100K words	Frequency	Per 100K words
FLOB	9908	854	59	5
BNCdemo	5001	101	1300	26
Total	14909	955	1374	31

Frequencies of *be* and *get* passives in FLOB and BNCdemo [in McEnery & Xiao, 2005]

2.5 *Get*-passives: a fully grammaticalised paradigm

Successful grammaticalisation of the *get*-passive construction is attested by a complete paradigm, including modal (58-59) or progressive (60) constructions:

(58) Or else they wou’d Get most confoundedly bamboo’d
(1816, *Oxford English Dictionary*, *bamboo* (= cane),
Quiz, *Grand Master*, viii 213; in Denison 1993: 434)

(59) I shall get plentifully bespattered with abuse
(1819, *Oxford English Dictionary*, ‘bespatter’, Southey, *Letters* [*ibid*])

(60) My stomach is now getting confirmed, and I have great hopes the
bout is over
(1819, Scott, Let. in Lockhart (1837) IV viii 253, *Oxford English Dictionary*,
‘set to’ 2b, [*ibid*: 436])

As is to be expected in the early stages of a grammaticalisation process, a certain amount of confusion may have favoured tentative linguistic experimentation as, indeed, next to the expected perfect form of (61):

²⁶ Herold (1986) is discussed in Givón & Yang (1994: 138).

(61) (...) it hasn't got mentioned very much.

(Denison, 2000: 20)

one also comes across occasional instances of double perfect, after the type of (62):

(62) An expedient ... has been propounded; and has been got adopted.

(1837, Carlyle, *Fr. Rev.*, I, III, ii, 69.9; in Denison, *ibid*)

This type is certainly marginal and non-standard in contemporary English, although a parallel may be drawn with non-standard Southern US 'done +PP'²⁷:

(63) They have done killed Dr. King.

in which *done* is grammaticalised as a marker of completion with epistemic connotations of certainty. The type displayed in (62) does not seem to have survived even in dialectal usage.

If *get*-passives exhibit a full grammatical paradigm, the syntactic status of *get* itself remains the object of some controversy. Quirk *et al.* (1972: 802) present both *be* and *get* as passive auxiliaries, and their (1985) massively revised and expanded edition retains this surprising presentation.

Contra Quirk *et al.*, Haegeman (1985:54–5) argues that *get* can hardly be termed an auxiliary insofar as it fails the NICE properties tests, (cf. (64)), that is to say all the usual syntactic tests for auxiliaries: subject inversion in questions, direct NEG affixation, question tag compatibility:

(64) *Got he killed? / *He gotn't killed. / *He got killed, gotn't he?

and one can readily admit with Gronemeyer (1999: 2) that even though *get* does indeed show some level of copulative function and is as such 'much more syntactically versatile than most lexical verbs', it can only be said to be 'semi-grammaticalized' (*ibid*) because of the limitations shown in (64).

2.6. *The genesis of get-passives: causative or inchoative?*

Two distinct schools of thought emerge from the literature on the genesis of *get*-passives. One considers causative meaning to be at the root of passive meaning, while the other sees it as deriving from an inchoative value of *get*.

Givón & Yang (1994: 144–145) offer an elaborate plea in favour of the causative origin theory. Their view is that the *get* passive meaning can be explained as deriving from a three-step 'detransitivisation' process. They postulate a sequence along the following lines:

²⁷ Mostly present in lower class Southern US varieties, and especially widespread in African American Vernacular English.

(65)

- a) *From causative with be-passive complement to causative-reflexive with be-passive*
She got him to be admitted \Rightarrow She got herself to be admitted
- b) *From causative-reflexive to intransitive-inchoative*
She got herself to be admitted \Rightarrow She got to be admitted
- c) *Morphological simplification*
She got to be admitted \Rightarrow She got admitted

The authors' suggestion that reflexive pronouns may alternate between overt and null without any significant consequence²⁸ is indeed easily evidenced:

(66)

- (a) He washed himself. / (a') He washed.
- (b) He shaved himself. / (b') He shaved.

Thematically, the subject in (66a–b) is an agent, and the reflexive object a patient. Insertion of a secondary predicate expressing change of state (cf. (67a–b)) does not affect Agent/Patient roles:

(67)

- (a) He washed himself clean. / (a') *He washed clean.
- (b) He shaved himself bald. / (b') *He shaved bald.

(67*a'–*b'), however, demonstrate the impossibility of reflexive object deletion because change of state affects the patient argument,²⁹ which is perforce required. This impossibility, by way of consequence, also delivers a serious blow to Givón & Yang's causative hypothesis, since if reflexive object deletion cannot alter the subject's thematic status, it cannot either adopt thematic *patient* status, as is required in the passive.

The inchoative³⁰ origin hypothesis is defended by Gronemeyer (1999: 29) who proposes “that the *get*-passive evolved out of the inchoative construction when the matrix subject [was] reanalyzed as controlling the implicit internal argument of the participle, rather than the implicit external one as in the inchoative.”

3. Discussion

In its first acception as a transitive verb expressing acquisition, the verb *get* subsumed a teleological import comprised of two distinct phases: a first phase during which an agent puts his initial project into operation, and a second phase in which the targeted state obtains:

(68) Project \rightarrow [--Action \rightarrow] \rightarrow Result

²⁸ See Safir (2004: 123), and Levin & Rappaport Hovav (1995: 39).

²⁹ See Levin & Rappaport Hovav (1995: 39).

³⁰ Gronemeyer actually uses the term 'ingressive.'

The agent of, say, 'get a book' is, thus, at once the *causer* of the action, and its *beneficiary*, insofar as, upon completion, the object 'book' may then be said to be 'with him'. As has been hinted above, the transitive acquisitional pattern appears to have served as the matrix for a new development where, via some metaphorical reanalysis of the process of acquisition, the causer *obtains* the targeted state:

- (69) The doorman got the troublemaker out of the bar.
(70) John got out of the bar.

Now, in contexts such as (70), the presence of a pleonastic reflexive pronoun³¹ lays emphasis on the agentive status of the subject, as is confirmed by the oddity of (74):

- (71) He got wet.
(72) He got himself wet.
(73) The book got wet.
(74) ??The book got itself wet.

In (72), the pleonastic pronoun stresses deliberate agency on the part of the subject, while its absence in (71) yields a non-agentive interpretation (that is to say a situation where the subject becomes *unintentionally* wet).

A functional split is therefore introduced between the two uses of *get* shown in (71–72), according as whether the verb carries /+ / or /- / Agency features. Such a split is also known to obtain with labile verbs (see Haspelmath, 1993: 92), e.g. 'the captain sank the boat,' 'The boat sank.' Levin & Rappaport Hovav (1995: 79–133) describe such alternating pairs in terms of 'causative alternation':

- (75) Pat broke the window.
(76) The window broke.

and call the one 'causative' (75), and the other 'inchoative' (76). The latter term is perhaps rather loosely applied by the authors, to account for a spectrum of values which may encompass initial inception *stricto sensu*, but are probably better apprehended within the scope of telic aspect. More than just intransitive, 'break' in (76) is unaccusative, in the sense that the predicate addresses a result affecting the *internal* argument in a predicative pattern where the Agent slot is unsaturated [(\emptyset) BREAK window] and the affected internal argument is moved into subject position [window BREAK (\emptyset)], which explains the verb's inability to assign accusative case. In this respect, unaccusative intransitives can be distinguished from unergative intransitives where subject position is held by an original external argument (i.e. not a *raised* argument), e.g. [John LAUGH (\emptyset)], which may then assign accusative case to a cognate object, e.g.

- (77) John laughed a silly laugh.

³¹ Not to be confused with the dative pronoun in, say, *I got myself a drink*.

This ability explains, no doubt, why unergatives, but not unaccusatives, control objects (lexical or ‘fake’ reflexives) in resultative constructions:

(78) John laughed {his heart out / himself sick}.

Haegeman (1985) places the verb *get* in the category of causative/ergative (i.e. ‘unaccusative’) alternating pairs:

(79) John got his feet wet.

(80) His feet got wet.

“In [(79)] *get* assigns two theta-roles: one externally (Agent), one internally (result). In [(80)] *get* assigns only one (internal) theta-role: result. The surface subject NP *his feet* is not thematically related to *get*, but rather to the lower predicate *wet*.” (*ibid*: 68)

The postulate that unaccusative subjects really are raised deep objects, and thus nonagents devoid of volition, is well evidenced by a comparison with agentless passives where agent demotion leaves a trace which licenses a purpose clause, contrary to unaccusatives:³²

(81) The ship was sunk in order [PRO]³³ to collect the insurance.

(82) *The ship sank in order to collect the insurance.

Indeed, as Härtle (*ibid*: 885) neatly puts it: “Nonagentive entities cannot control PRO in purpose clauses,” as is confirmed by a comparison between (83) and (84):

(83) *John knew the right answer in order to rescue Mary.

(84) John gave the right answer in order to rescue Mary.

The operational concept of agentivity here at play distinguishes between sheer causation (85), and *volitional* causation (87), which alone fully warrants the label of agentivity, as is confirmed by the contrasting degrees of acceptability of (86, 88):

(85) The wind overturned the dustbin.

(86) *The wind overturned the dustbin in order to make it more stable.

(87) John overturned the dustbin.

(88) John overturned the dustbin in order to make it more stable.³⁴

Though the wind is indeed in (85) a *causa efficiens* (an ‘efficient cause’), (87) shows that it lacks the volitional component required to allow purpose clauses (e.g. (88)).³⁵

³² See Härtle (2003: 884).

³³ As pointed out by Härtle (*ibid*), this covert trace need not be directly co-referential with the agent of ‘sink’: *The ship was sunk by the pirates in order {a. for them / b. for John} to collect the insurance.*

³⁴ Examples adapted from Cruse (1973: 11).

³⁵ The category of agentivity is obviously very much dependent on the animate nature of the verb’s subject, e.g.: *John broke the vase <=> John did something; The vase broke <≠> *The vase did*

Because animate subjects in unaccusative predicates are nonagents, they can be perceived as helpless participants in events which befall them, *volens nolens*. And the perception of this lack of control³⁶ on one's fate may well explain why, admittedly with semantically appropriate predicates, the *get*-passive predication especially favours detrimental³⁷ connotations. Downing (1996: 194–195) confirms this in an exploration of the British COBUILD corpus, where “adverse” consequences are found to account for 70.92% of the overall number of *get*-passives, with an overwhelming 81.32% of them concerning animate subjects. Unlike several languages spoken in East and South East Asia,³⁸ English does not morphologically encode any such connotations, and there is nothing to distinguish adversative passives from their beneficial or neutral counterparts, other than the explicitly negative connotation carried over by the lexicon.³⁹

Some scholars have seen fit to conflate the agentive sense of *get* and the adverse implications which are often implied, into a notion of “responsibility,”⁴⁰ if not active involvement. Thus, for Hatcher (1949: 437), a *get*-passive along the lines of ‘get left behind/ locked out/ stepped on, etc.’ “is apt to be the result, to some degree, of [the subject's] carelessness (if not actual misbehaviour); and we tend to feel that such accidents might have been avoided, with greater foresight or virtue on the part of the subject. (...) if we attempt to imagine the exceptional cases in which the subject is meant to be entirely absolved, *get* will not be used: surely it would be impossible to say ‘he got run over in cold blood’ –or ‘he got fired unjustly’, ‘he got arrested on false charges’.” Hatcher further adds, in a footnote, that for a “more pointed suggestion of responsibility, one may find the reflexive construction with *get*: ‘So you got yourself kicked out!’”⁴¹

However severe Hatcher's acceptability judgement may seem to a contemporary observer, the fact remains that *get* is far less intuitively natural, in the examples under scrutiny, than the perfectly standard *be*-passive alternative. But her suggestion of subject responsibility along a scale of two degrees, where the reflexive suggests higher involvement, is theoretically shaky, as it leaves out the unaccusative structure –in which the subject is a nonagent– in favour of a single causative structure, with either covert or overt reflexives.

An alternative explanation to the relative oddity of Hatcher's *get*-passives could stem from the hiatus generated by the combination of a nonagent grammatical subject and some unattributed judgement (e.g. ‘in cold blood’, ‘unjustly’, ‘on false charges’). But if that were the case, similar restrictions should also apply to the *be*-passive construction... The explanation must therefore reside elsewhere.

something, (cf. Anderson, 1971: 42), though some degree of non-volitional animacy may be conferred upon natural elements, for instance: *Look at what the wind did to my house*.

³⁶ For Shibatani (1985: 830), the main function of the passive is ‘agent defocusing.’ Shibatani (*ibid*) also refers to Meillet (1948:196): « Le vrai rôle du passif est d'exprimer le procès là où l'agent n'est pas considéré ».

³⁷ On the ‘adversative passive’ in English, see Chappell (1980), Sussex (1982), Downing (1996), Sawasaki (2000), Toyota (2007, 2008); for a prototypical perspective, see Shibatani (1985: 840sq) and his notion of “affected” subject.

³⁸ See Toyota (2008: 164–167).

³⁹ E.g. ‘get abducted, abused, accused, ambushed, etc.’ See Downing (1996: 195).

⁴⁰ Hatcher (1949 : 437), Lakoff (1971: 151), and Chappell (1980).

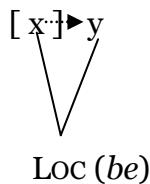
⁴¹ (*ibid*).

The one prerequisite which drastically conditions acceptability for the *get*-passive is the construction of a resulting state. In this respect, the *get*-passive is markedly telic (which explains the infelicity of (89b, 90b)), whereas the *be*-passive is at home with both states (89a, 90a) and telic events (91):

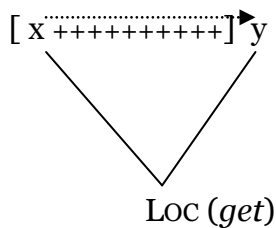
- (89) Explosions have {(a) been / (b) *got} heard in the sky above Israel.⁴²
(90) John {(a) was / (b) *got} considered a fool/genius.⁴³
(91) The government {(a) was / (b) got} toppled in a bloodless military coup.

A further important feature of the *get*-passive is its characteristic transitional implication, inherited from *get*'s original acquisitional meaning: the change of state introduced by *get* does not just 'happen', it *comes* into existence. By contrast, the *be*-passive displays no interest in the interval leading up to the end-state: the shift from anterior state to end-state is either instantaneous or irrelevant. With *get*, on the other hand, the same interval is *dilated*, to make room for the metaphoric acquisition of the new state of affairs. This is tentatively represented below in the figures for (92) and (93), where 'x' stands for the eventive 'burning' phase, and 'y' for the consecutive, resultant 'burnt' state, while 'Loc' refers to the predication of existence performed by copulas *be* and *get*:

- (92) The book was burnt by accident.



- (93) The book got burnt by accident.



⁴² Exx. (91–92) borrowed from Downing (1996: 180). Note that 'hear' may be rendered more compatible with the *get*-passive with a situation-specific NP subject amenable to some form of result. Thus, for instance, in *Our message got heard loud and clear*, the addressee now understands our purpose. The result is not exactly in the form of a transformation, but clearly, some new state obtains, which is what *get* requires.

⁴³ Exx. from Chappell (1980: 421).

The very transitional nature of *get* makes it an ideal candidate for the expression of a protracted and difficult process:

- (94) Our books got sold, our books got read; we didn't see the money but the books found a readership!
(*Poetry Quarterly*, Introduction to the Spring 2004 Issue (Volume 5, Number 2))

Chappell (1980) rejects (95b) below on the grounds that it would carry inappropriate connotations of intentionality:

- (95) Einstein {(a) was / (b) 'got} awarded the Nobel Prize.

The *get*-passive, says Chappell (*ibid*: 436) “is often conducive to a hint of subterfuge or scheming on the part of the subject,” which would explain its infelicity in a context such as (95b). But why, then, should such a reading fail to impose itself in a sister example like (96)?

- (96) A little girl named Sue got awarded first prize in the tap dancing competition.

The oddity of (95b) owes in fact nothing to Einstein’s putative thirst for honours, and both examples may rightly be considered *bona fide* unaccusatives and, as such, devoid of intentionality. Rather, it is the very idea that the road to the award may have been lengthy and bumpy, rather than deservedly short and smooth, which strikes one as preposterous.

Hatcher’s contention⁴⁴ that the notion of responsibility in the *get*-passive finds itself enhanced by the presence of a reflexive is fully endorsed by Chappell (1980), who proposes that the intuition that comes to mind about (97):

- (97) John got himself elected president.

is that “he rigged the voting system.”⁴⁵ Indeed, personal involvement is consubstantial to causative *get*, and the rigging interpretation makes sense in the context of an election, whose outcome is by definition unknown, therefore the interpretation of John perceived as having bypassed the electoral process and given fate a push in the right direction.

Next to this perfectly standard *get*-passive *causer—causee* construction, a novel, formally cognate construction seems however to be gaining in popularity, where *get* is unaccusative:

⁴⁴ (*ibid*: 437).

⁴⁵ (*ibid*: 438).

(98) Vignette CMS just got itself upgraded!
(Web advert for a new “content management” software)

(99) But we have travelled the celeritous cycle and once again it is recognised that the pedestrian has rights pre-dating the time when the first motor-car got itself run down by a horse-and-cart.
(*The New Zealand Railways Magazine*, Volume 12, Issue 7 (October 1, 1937.))

Indeed, the inanimate nature of the subject in (98) forces an *anticausative* meaning, while, in (99), some might, perhaps, be tempted to yield to the temptation of fantasy and lend the motorcar some level of responsibility in the event... Barring the latter interpretation, however, the pattern under consideration is one where the reflexive brings focus on the beneficiary, in a formally dative structure (*dativus (in)commodi*). In the case of animate subjects a structure clash is therefore possible with potentially conflicting causative *or* unaccusative interpretations:

(100) It looks like Japan was not the only lucky ones today as the US also got itself a Bayonetta patch.
(Web info on electronic games –*Bayonetta* is a video game)

(101) TV and radio were knocked out for a couple of hours in Switzerland on Sunday after a squirrel got itself electrocuted.
(Web news: *Bootnotes*, 25th August 2008 08:06 GMT)

Is it because the subject of (100) is a collective? Or, more likely, because the context of ‘luck’ disfavors an agentive reading? The fact is that, in this case, the causative interpretation is not a tenable alternative to an evidently unaccusative structure. But (101) is a tougher nut... Is our squirrel responsible in some way for its unfortunate end? No doubt it is. But is it, for all that, endowed with the foresight required to form the wish to bring an end to its squirrely life? Well, no. Perhaps so in a world of fantasy, but certainly not in real life Zürich, where the unhappy squirrel actually met its maker. There appears to be solid ground, consequently, for treating the non-human agent of (101) as no different from the inanimate NP subjects of (98–99).

Another instance of fluctuation in meaning where the causative occasionally gives way to a non-agentive interpretation, is the “go and get” verbal binomial expression. Typically, the collocation implies a spatial change of location whose motivation is the accomplishment of the second member of the verbal pair:

(102) She went and got her hair cut and highlighted.

Sometimes, however, the second event is not necessarily subsumed under the same causative umbrella as the initial event, with a resulting *causative + unaccusative* sequence:

(103) Somebody said let’s go out and fight for liberty and so they went and got killed without ever once thinking about liberty.
(Dalton Trumbo, *Johnny got his gun*, 1939.)

A further evolution of the expression apparently also takes place, where the non-agentive characteristics of the second event are transferred upon the first event, which is then decausativised. This is probably the case in (104), and almost certainly so in (105):

(104) Then I went and got busted
(Lyrics from 'Busted,' song by Bonzo Dog Band)

(105) Well, good ol' Dave went and got promoted to Lieutenant in the CHP,⁴⁶ looking to be a Captain. I guess you could say that he turned coat and became an officer (...).
(*The Boom Signal*, March 1998, p.59, <http://www.theboomsignal.org>)

True, (107) may still be interpreted as reflecting Dave's rampant aspiration for promotion, by which account he would be credited with the secret wish of being one day promoted to officer rank, and of having accordingly initiated the procedure. But this is probably not the most likely interpretation. Firm evidence that the collocation may ultimately be reanalysed as one complex non-agentive unit is, however, indubitably provided by (106):

(106) I found Mr Brown on that occasion in the act of getting on his overcoat to catch a train to Philadelphia and our whole interview took place in the elevator on the way down from the tenth story; but from it I gleaned the fact of his connection with Burton Holmes and on the strength of it went home and wrote him a letter, giving all the explorational circumstances of the film. Then Mr Brown went and got sick like everybody else in this miserable pest-ridden city, and I have not seen or heard from him since.
(R.J. Christopher, *Robert and Frances Flaherty: A Documentary Life*, 2005, p.278)

In examples (104–105), the verb 'go', the initial member of the collocation is, to a large extent, semantically bleached into an expression of departure from an original state of affairs, while *get* retains its meaning of transition into a new state. Thus the 'gangsta' hero portrayed in the lyrics of (104) is probably living peacefully when his life unexpectedly takes a wrong turn ([→ GO] and he ends up in jail (→] GET). Likewise, in (105) Dave's career takes a turn for the better and he finally gets the well-deserved promotion.

⁴⁶ California Highway Patrol.

4. Conclusion

The table below summarises the different patterns discussed in the preceding paragraphs.

107.

/+Agentive/	/-Agentive/
/CAUSE TO BE WITH/	/COME TO BE WITH/
' <i>get a book from the shelf</i> '	' <i>get a book for one's birthday</i> '
/CAUSE TO BE/	/COME TO BE/
' <i>get x wet</i> ' ' <i>get {x/ø} up</i> '	' <i>get wet, get lost</i> '
Passive	Passive
/CAUSE TO BE/	/COME TO BE/
' <i>get s.o./oneself promoted</i> '	' <i>get promoted</i> '

If transitive *get* is indeed the matrix from which the other senses of the verb are derived,⁴⁷ the evolution can be subsumed under a two-pronged movement:

- a) decausativisation, with attendant valency reduction and focus on beneficiary;
- b) metaphorisation of the acquisitional movement into one of transition, with *get* adopting the role of an aspectual copula of change.

Following on the demise of *weorðan* and the poor success of alternative ingressive copular verbs (e.g. *become, grow, wax...*), the emergence of *get* as a candidate for the expression of the dynamic passive was a protracted, if ultimately felicitous, affair. The verb certainly has functional limitations and is no less likely to oust *be* from the expression of the passive than *weorðan* in its time, but its growing frequency, albeit in less formal registers, bears witness to its popularity. It has been suggested that the particular fondness noted of younger children for the *get*-passive⁴⁸ was apt to decrease significantly when placed under the normative influence of the schooling system. However, several studies⁴⁹ conducted with randomly selected American children aged 4.6 to 8.5 have shown that, after three years of formal education, children aged 8.5 still "used *get* passives as their predominant response strategy."⁵⁰ Other studies carried out at Rutgers University⁵¹ in which subjects (mean age of 23) were asked to pair sentences and screen images, show markedly faster mean response time for the *get*-passive than for the *be*-passive: *The bear got slapped* (0.37 sec.) vs *The bear was slapped* (0.6 sec.). Predictably,⁵² the difference in response time decreases significantly when an agent is expressed

⁴⁷ Miller (1985: 188) believes change of location to be the core meaning of *get*, with an evolution from 'concrete' to 'abstract' movement.

⁴⁸ See Turner & Rommetveit (1967a, b).

⁴⁹ See Harris (1982).

⁵⁰ (Ibid: 309).

⁵¹ See Manna (2004 : 7–8).

⁵² The agentive complement removes any semantic ambiguity in the *be* phrase and confirms its status as a dynamic passive.

(e.g. *by the dog*), with *get* scoring at 0.25 sec against 0.3 sec for *be*. Faster cognitive processing time is no doubt facilitated by the unambiguously dynamic nature of *get*, which holds here a distinct advantage over polysemous (stative *or* dynamic) *be*.

It remains to be seen whether the stativisation of *get* illustrated in *I('ve) got* will ultimately be a source of conflict with dynamic *get*, and thus force the dice of language to roll again in search of yet another copula of change...

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