

English passive constructions: Many variations on an elusive schema

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There have been various usage-based and conceptually oriented investigations into English passive constructions, which are commonly conceived of as tests for transitivity (e.g. Hopper & Thompson 1980, Rice 1987). The present paper combines a cognitive linguistic approach with an empirical corpus investigation using recent statistical methods developed to explore the contextual associations and determinants of constructional alternations involving polytomous (more than two) alternatives traditionally believed to be semantically equivalent (cf. Arppe 2008; Gries & Stefanowitsch 2004; Gries 2003 on dichotomous alternations).

At the heart of this corpus-based study is a random sample of data obtained from Mark Davies' Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA) containing different English passive constructions involving three different auxiliaries (*be*, *get*, and *become*) and participles which occurred with at least two of the three auxiliaries. The corpus search returned 3,000 concordance lines of 500 instances by auxiliary (*be/get/become*) and modality (spoken/written), which were then coded for about 80 morpho-syntactic (clause type, instantiations and types of contextual elements) and conceptual variables (coarse-grained semantic role and more fine-grained sub-frame participant role and other ontological descriptions). The coded data were then subjected to univariate and multivariate statistical analysis – most notably polytomous logistic regression for fixed and mixed effects (Arppe 2012), which allows us to investigate the conspiracy of various variables for particular constructional outcomes.

In quantitatively comparing the behaviors of the distinct passives, we not only find extremely low proportions of *canonical* passive constructions in general, but the different *be*, *get* and *become* auxiliaries emerge as aspectual devices, whose semantics seem to naturally form distinct affinities for different kinds of participles, and consequently very different types of PATIENTS: While only the *be*-passive seems to have a significant attraction for true PATIENTS (inanimate entities that are physically affected by some animate AGENT), and beyond that for RESULTS and EFFECTED entities, the *get*-passive has a repulsion for those, and typically profiles EXPERIENCER patients, or no overtly expressed patients at all. The *become*-passive on the other hand, has an affinity for EXPERIENCER patients, but also a significant preference for STIMULUS patients.

These distinct collocational and collostructional preferences have in turn repercussions for further ecological niches of language use, such as genres and modalities, conceptual domains, clausal structure, and other behavioral characteristics. Moreover, various sub-clusters indicating the presence of frozen sub-constructions can be found, too, such as *become known as* or *get acquainted with*. What is most notable, though, is the large proportion of cases of low transitivity. This suggests that the prototypical passive may be considered a schema at best, which finds most of its application in quite extended uses and across domains well beyond the physical.

Key words: English Passive constructions, syntactic alternation, passive auxiliaries *be*, *get* and *become*, transitivity, polytomous logistic regression.

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