Swedish pupils' use of the *get*-passive in written language

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Abstract

The purpose of this essay is to analyse and discuss Swedish pupils' use of the *get*-passive in written language and to find out whether they use the *get*-passive according to rules or simply randomly. The purpose is also to look at possible reasons for the pupils' use of the *get*-passive and the potential consequences of it. The analysis and discussion are based on translations of ten different sentences containing passive constructions made by 23 pupils in year nine at a secondary school in the outskirts of Gothenburg. The *get*-passive had not been introduced to the class by the teacher. What can be seen in the pupils' answers is that the *get*-passive is used more frequently in some sentences than in others. Although nothing can be said with certainty, one likely reason for this is that the pupils incorporate what they have heard on TV or in music and media into their written language.

Keywords: the passive construction, *get*-passive, *be*-passive, written language

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1. Introduction

1.1 Background

The English language is constantly subject to change and it is not a given that teachers are the first to know about the changes that often make their way into pupils´ language. This study deals with a linguistic phenomenon that came to my attention through a conversation with an English teacher at a compulsory school (years 6-9), in the outskirts of Gothenburg, earlier this year. The subject of the conversation was a discovery made by the teacher at a grammar test in year nine. Several pupils had used the auxiliary *get* + past participle instead of the auxiliary *be* + past participle when asked to translate a number of sentences from Swedish into English. Since no mention of the *get* –passive had been made by the teacher, the most likely conclusion therefore was that the pupils must have picked it up from outside the classroom. It should be mentioned that the test was taken several weeks after the teacher had presented this particular grammar point and the test was made up of several other grammar points in addition to the passive construction. The dilemma facing this particular teacher is one that is relevant to all teachers, should the *get*-passive be corrected or simply accepted as an alternative to the *be*-construction. Although there is a difference in degree of formality between the two constructions, the latter is not always more correct than the former.

Even though very little is said about what should be accomplished by the pupils regarding grammar or the ability to use grammar in the Swedish syllabus in English for Compulsory school, one important point is made. Under the headline *Goals to aim for* it is mentioned that pupils should "develop their ability to analyse, work with and improve their language in the direction of greater variation and accuracy" (Skolverket). Since the guidelines are so vague, it is up to the teacher to interpret them in detail. However, it may be argued that the issue with the *get*-passive versus the *be*-passive in pupils´ written production is a matter of variation and accuracy since the *get*-passive is mainly to be used in spoken language (Huddleston et al. 2002:1442). This leads to the conclusion that when pupils use the *get*-passive in written production they are using it the wrong way.

1.2. Aim and scope

The aim of this study is to examine, to what extent pupils use the *get* –passive in formal written language and to find out if they use it according to rules or simply randomly. There

has also been an attempt to find out potential reasons for pupils' use of the *get*-passive and to look into the consequences of this particular phenomenon. Is it perhaps a consequence of pupils constantly being surrounded by informal English in the form of media, computer games etc.? What will also be discussed is how the use of the *get*-passive should be looked upon and handled. It might be viewed as an example of pupils not having studied for a test. Yet another option is to perceive it as an excellent illustration of pupils' creativeness and ability to find new ways to overcome a problem by incorporating knowledge they have attained from outside the classroom. The following three questions summarize the aim and scope of this essay:

1. To what degree do EFL-pupils use the *get*-passive in passive constructions when asked to translate sentences from Swedish to English?
2. How should teachers view the use of the passive construction with *get* instead of *be* in pupils' written language?
3. What possible reasons are there for pupils' preference to use the passive constructions with *get*?

The analysis of the sentences only concerns the choice of the *get*- or the *be*-passive. Hence, spelling mistakes and other grammar errors such as use of the wrong tense and concord mistakes are not dealt with in this study.

Preferably, a comparison between the answers from the Swedish EFL-learners and answers from pupils of the same age-group of native speakers of English could have been made. This would have been a help in trying to find out whether the use of the *get*-passive and the *be*-passive in written would occur amongst native speakers of English or if it is a solely "Swedish" phenomenon. However, there was no time to conduct an additional survey in connection to this study.

In order to find out the reasons for pupils' choice to use the *get*-passive in some of the cases, additional interviews about pupils' studying habits and sources of language input might have been carried out. However, this has been left for someone else to examine further.

1.3. Material and method

In order to find out whether the pupils use the *get*-passive in written language and if they do, to what extent, a material consisting of ten different translation sentences was developed. Each of the sentences contained a passive construction. The sentences were then handed out

to and translated by pupils in a class of year nine at a compulsory school in a well-to-do suburb of Gothenburg in 2008. As has been mentioned, the purpose of the study was to see whether the pupils would sometimes use the *get*-passive in favour of the *be*-passive. It was also to see if their possible use of the *get*-passive followed any rules or if it was purely random. The sentences were constructed according to different aspects such as verbs commonly used with the *get*-passive.

All in all, 23 pupils participated in the study. Both female and male pupils translated the ten sentences from Swedish into English. No consideration has been taken to gender in the analysis of the translation sentences.

The pupils were not given any additional information about the passive construction when the translation sentences were handed out. They were simply asked to translate the sentences into English as well as they could. At an earlier occasion, the teacher had introduced the passive construction using the auxiliary verb *be* to the class. Neither at that occasion nor at any other time had the teacher mentioned the alternative to use the *get*-passive to the pupils.

The pupils participating in the study were explicitly told that the results of the translation sentences would in no way have an impact on their grades. They were assured that the sentences would only be used in a study and that they would remain anonymous. To write the name or not was optional but the samples with names on would possibly be discussed with the English teacher. Out of the 23 pupils present at the time of the study, all 23 participated.

1.4 Plan of study

Chapter one is a presentation of the topic of the essay. The first part, named *Background* contains information about how the topic came about and what triggered the interest in it. After the background, information about the *aim and scope* is offered. The main material for the essay is introduced in the last part of chapter one; *Material and method.*

In chapter two; *Previous research,* references are made to research that has been conducted in relation to the topic of the essay. Although no research has been carried out within the exact same field as this essay, several studies have been conducted in areas contiguous to the topic and have some relevance for it.

Chapter three is the part of the essay where the passive voice in general and the *get*-passive in particular are discussed.

In chapter four, the *analysis and result* of the study are examined. The translation sentences of the study are individually discussed with references to what is presented in chapter three.

Chapter five is a *discussion* of the *analysis and result* in relation to previous research and pedagogical aspects of the issue.

The last chapter is a *conclusion and summary* in which the most important points of the discussion and the findings and suggestions of the author of the essay are presented in a condensed manner. At the end of the essay, a list of references is found. Appendices containing the pupils' answers presented in a diagram and the translation sentences are also found at the back of this essay.

2. Previous research

To my knowledge, no research has been carried out on Swedish pupils' use of the *get*-passive in formal written English. However, in 1999 a study on English speakers' use of the *get*-passive in informal spoken language was published by Ronald Carter and Michael McCarthy. By studying a 1.5 million-word sample from the CANCODE corpus, (Cambridge and Nottingham corpus of Discourse in English) Carter and McCarthy wanted to find evidence for the occurrence of *get*-passives in informal spoken British English in order 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. Tape recordings were made across the UK, in a variety of settings such as private homes, shops, offices and educational institutions in order to provide information for the corpus (Carter et al. 1999:41).

Although Carter and McCarthy's research concerns the use of *get*-passives in informal spoken language, there are some conclusions that are helpful in understanding the pupils' use of the *get*-passive in formal written language in this study. Carter and McCarthy found that *get*-passives coincide mostly with adverse or problematic circumstances implied by the speaker. *Get* also coincides with the absence of an explicit agent, which emphasises the event/process and the person/thing experiencing the process in the verb phrase. Hence, it does not emphasise the cause or the agent. Carter and McCarthy (1999:54) argue that particular

verbs occur more frequently with the *get*-passive than others but that there is too little research within this area to state anything with certainty. Conclusions based on statistics about the frequency of a certain verb in a particular context belong to the field of ´probabilistic grammar´ based on corpus data. Its counterpart, ´probabilistic grammar´ deals with matters of structural prescription such as the fact that *be-* and *get*-passives are always used with the past participle of verbs (Carter et al. 1999:54). In *get*-passives of the kind X *get* V-en (by Z) (where X is the effected/experiencer) such as: "He got killed trying to save another man" *get* will occur more frequently in informal contexts when speakers are marking attitude, especially an attitude that denotes concern, problematicness or noteworthiness of the event beyond its simple fact of occurring. In fact, 124 of the 139 examples of the type shown above refer in some way or another to adversative contexts i.e. "a state of affairs that is signalled contextually by the conversational participants as unfortunate, undesirable, or at least problematic" (Carter et al. 1999:49) Several of these include verb phrases that would usually be considered adversative in their semantics. Some of these are:

get arrested, get killed, get sued, get burgled, get beaten, get stopped (by the police), get done
(Carter et al. 1999:49)

Although Carter and McCarthy argue that 'adversativity' is one of the factors that determine the use of the *get*-passive, it is far from true that all *get*-passives are preferred for this reason. One example of the opposite is the verb *pay* that was the most common verb appearing with *get*-passives in the corpus. There is no 'adversativity' attached to *pay* unless it is used as a negation (Carter et al. 1999:49-50). 130 of the 139 examples from the corpus have no agent explicitly stated and where there is an agent it is somewhat impersonal and the information is new rather than given (Carter et al. 1999:51). Nevertheless, it is not possible to make any definitive statements about when speakers will choose *get* instead of *be* (Carter et al. 1999:55)*.

In 2003, a study of the frequency in use of the *get*-passive by Dr. Kertsin Meints was published. Her study presents new evidence of the use and acquisition of the *get*-passive by children. It also presents adults' judgments of *get*-and *be*-passives. Although the study concerns 2-4-year-old British children, there are some interesting points to be discussed here. According to the results of the study, the semantics and pragmatics of the *get*-passive differ from those of the *be*-passive. *Get*-passives are often used about highly 'actional', dynamic events, which focus more on the effected/ experiencer and his or her attitudes and feelings than the *be*-passives. It is also stated that the *get*-passives are more common in American than in British English and that the *get*-passive is more common in informal and colloquial style

and less in written than in spoken English. According to the study, the *get*-passive is used differently depending on differences in social background (Meints 2003:45).

Lena Börjesson, Assistant researcher at the University of Gothenburg, commissioned by the National Agency for Education to construct and develop the national test material in English, has studied hundreds of samples of the national tests in English throughout the years. Together with her colleagues, she has found an inability to distinguish between formal and informal language among Swedish EFL-learners. Furthermore, she has not been able to see any real progress in this area in the last ten years. According to Börjesson, CAE -assessors (Certificate in Advanced English) have shown evidence that Swedish students are poorer in this area compared to pupils of a number of other nationalities. This is probably due to the fact that the influx of English in Sweden is very rich and that English, to a high degree, is learnt outside of school (anecdotal reference, spring 2008).

The National Assessment of the Elementary School (NU-03), is a report produced by the Swedish National Agency for Education, where pupils' skills and knowledge are assessed. Its main objective is to give an all-in-all picture of the level of fulfilment of the goals in the curricula and syllabuses at the Swedish Elementary School. The assessors of the English National Tests are of the same opinion as Börjesson and her colleagues, namely that pupils' inability to distinguish between spoken and written language is a big problem. Like Börjesson, they relate this problem to the fact that pupils consciously or sub-consciously use language and expressions that they have picked up from TV and music in written language. They conclude that pupils of today "write as they speak" (Skolverket).

3. The Passive Voice

The passive voice occurs in written as well as in spoken language. Some of the areas where the use of the passive voice is most frequent are academic prose and news. Most passive constructions are used with the auxiliary verb *be* followed by an *ed*-participle (Biber et al. 2000:476). The passive construction can be used with the verb *get* instead of *be*. There are also passives that contain neither of the two verbs. Passive constructions of that type are called ´bare passives´ (Huddleston et al. 2002:1430). The following are examples of the *be*-passive, the *get*-passive and the ´bare passive´.

(1) My mother was attacked by our dog.   [*be*- passive]

(2) My mother got attacked by our dog.   [*get* -passive]

(3) The woman attacked by our dog is my mother.   [*bare* passive]

Both *be* and *get* are catenative verbs, i.e. verbs taking non-finite complements. Apart from the normal verbal passives that we have seen examples of above, there are also adjectival passives called complex- intransitive constructions. In some cases there is ambiguity, i.e. the sentence or the clause can be interpreted either as a verbal passive or as an adjectival complex-intransitive (Huddleston et al. 2002:1430-1436). The following sentences are examples of a verbal passive, an adjectival complex- intransitive and an ambiguous sentence.

(4) The porcelain cat was broken by Henry.   [verbal: *be*-passive]

(5) He was very sorry for this.   [adjectival: complex-intransitive]

(6) They were married.   [ambiguous]

Broken in (4) is a verb, *sorry* in (5) is an adjective, but *married* in (6) can be either. In the verbal interpretation of (6) *married* is dynamic, describing an event, i.e. the actual wedding ceremony. In the adjectival interpretation it is static, describing the state of being married. However, the verbal and adjectival passives cannot be distinguished simply by looking at whether they are stative or dynamic. Verbal passives can in fact also have a stative meaning, as in the sentence, "She is loved by everyone" (Huddleston et al. 2002:1438).

When a *by*-phrase, including an agent, is used in a passive construction, it is called ´a long passive´. If there is no *by*-phrase with an agent, it is a ´short passive´ (Biber et al. 2000:475). *Get* is most frequently used without an expressed animate agent but can also appear with an animate agent (Quirk et al.1985:161). The short passive can be used when the speaker does not know who carried out the act described in the passive construction or when the speaker does not want to reveal the identity of that person. Moreover, the short passive can be used when dealing with human knowledge in general (Huddleston et al. 2002:1446).

The *get*-passive is a rather new phenomenon (Biber et al. 2000:477). It is used less often as a passive auxiliary than the verb *be.* In Longman Grammar of Spoken and Written English (2000:476) the *get*-passive is even argued to be extremely rare and only occurring in conversation, except for a few examples in colloquial fiction. However, five different verbs frequently appearing in the *get*- passive are presented. These are: *get + married, get + hit, get + involved, get + left* and *get + struck.* It is stated that these verbs have a different emphasis when used with the *get*-passive than with the *be*-passive. Used with *be* they express a state as

in the state of 'being married' or 'being involved'. Used with *get* they rather express the process of getting into that state. This said, we can conclude that the *get*-passive is typical only in conversation whereas *become* is often used in written language instead of *get* (Biber et al. 2002:172)

Like *be*, the verb *get* can be the head of a complex-intransitive clause, as in *He got very angry. Get* can also be used in sentences that would be ambiguous with the verb *be*. However, ambiguities will arise much less often when *get* is used. This is shown in the examples below.

(7) The fence was painted red.   [ambiguous: verbal or adjectival]

(8) The fence got painted red   [unambiguous: verbal only]

As we can see, (7) can either describe the event of painting the fence red or it can refer to the red fence. In (8) on the other hand, we can clearly distinguish that it is the event of painting the fence that is referred to. This shows us that *get*-passives are less readily to accept adjectival passives as complements than *be*-passives. The main differences between the two types of passive constructions are:

1. *Get*-passives are seldom used in formal style.
2. *Get*-passives are used only with dynamic verbs.
3. *Get*-passives tend to be preferred when the subject has an agentive role in the situation or event.
4. *Get*-passives are mainly used in clauses showing adversity or benefit.

The first point speaks for itself, but the second point might benefit from some explanation. In a passive construction where there is stative-dynamic ambiguity with *be*, *get* can be used in order to reveal the dynamic meaning. The sentence *The castle was surrounded by soldiers* has two possible interpretations. Either it means that soldiers are positioned around the castle, protecting it, or it means that soldiers are surrounding the castle in order to attack it. The sentence *The castle got surrounded by soldiers* excludes the stative interpretation and leaves us with the dynamic one (Huddleston et al. 2002:1442).The third point implies that when the subject has some responsibility for the development of a situation the *get*-passive is preferred. This matter will be commented on further in the analysis and results of this study. The last point signifies that when the subject, or someone associated with it, is affected in a good or in a bad way, *get* is often used. In sentences of a more neutral character the *get*-passive is not

very common (Huddleston et al. 2002:1442). Most of the verbs commonly used with *get* have negative connotations, i.e. the action of the verb is difficult or to the disadvantage of the subject (Biber et al, 2000:475).

4. Analysis and results

The ten Swedish original sentences (appendix1) each contain passive constructions which are of a fairly simple character. In order to prevent unnecessary difficulties for the pupils, words that might appear difficult to them have been translated and put in brackets. The 23 pupils in year nine have translated the sentences according to their level of proficiency without any help from dictionaries, grammar books or textbooks. The pupils were informed that their achievements on the translation sentences would not have any impact on their grades and that the translations were purely to be contributions to this study.

4.1 Tables presenting the pupils' answers

The three tables below show the pupils' translation sentences. Table 1 illustrates how many of the pupils chose the *be*-passive, the *get*-passive or another alternative in each of the sentences. Table 2 shows how many times the *get*-passive occurred among the pupils and Table 3 is a complete demonstration of the pupils' translations.

Table 1. Number of pupils using the *get*-passive, the *be*-passive or another alternative

Sentence	Number of pupils using the *be*-passive	Number of pupils using the *get-passive*	Number of pupils using another alternative
1. Huset byggdes av min mamma.	23	0	0
2. Hon blev påkörd av misstag.	15	7	1
3. Glödlampan uppfanns 1879 av Thomas Alva Edison.	21	0	2
4. Arbetarna fick inte betalt förra månaden.	1	21	1
5. Kyrkan brändes ner för tre år sedan.	16	1	6
6. Huset omges av en skog.	23	0	0
7. Mannen arresterades av polisen när han försökte råna en äldre dam.	18	4	1
8. Polen attackerades av Tyskland under andra världskriget.	21	2	0
9. John dödades av trädet som föll ner.	20	2	1
10. Victoria och David Beckham gifte sig 1999.	7	15	1
Total:	165	52	13

Looking at the results of the translation sentences, we can clearly see that the *get*-passive was used to a much greater extent in some cases than in others. In sentence ten, 15 out of the 23 pupils used the *get*-passive whereas none of the pupils used it in sentence one and three. The largest number of *get*-passives is found in sentence four where all but one of the pupils used it. It should be added that sentence four is somewhat different in structure from the other sentences, since it contains a negated form of the passive construction.

Apart from the examples at the end of the scale, there are several sentences where *get* was used by some but not all of the pupils. Seven pupils chose the *get*-passive in sentence two and the corresponding result of sentence seven is four. All pupils used the *be*-passive in sentence six which, to some extent, is ambiguous when translated into English with the be-passive. Although the most likely interpretation is that the house was situated among the trees (stative), the sentence could also be interpreted as that the trees were actually moving closer to the house (dynamic). Had any of the pupils used the get-passive in sentence six it would have changed the meaning of the Swedish sentence and clearly indicated that the trees were

moving closer to the house. However, none of the pupils did use the *get*-passive in sentence six, which shows that they are aware of the difference in meaning that the *get*-passive would create.

Only two pupils used the *get*-passive in sentence eight and the same goes for sentence nine. In some cases the pupils have chosen a third alternative, such as using the active voice or leaving out the auxiliary verb, in favour of the *get*-passive or the *be*-passive. However the translations containing another alternative will not be much further explained, since the focus of this study is placed upon the difference between the *get*-passive and the *be-passive*.

While the number of pupils who have chosen another alternative than the *get* –or the *be*-passive in sentence five is so high, a short presentation of the pupils' translations will follow. In order to avoid the *get* –or the *be*- passive, some of the pupils transformed the sentence into one in which the church burnt down rather than was burnt down, i.e. there was no intention behind. Although no explicit agent is present in sentence five, it is clear in the Swedish sentence that someone made the church burn down.

Table 2. Frequency in use of the *get*- passive

Number of *get*-passives	Number of pupils
0/10	1
1/10	7
2/10	8
3/10	2
4/10	2
5/10	3

As we can see from Table 2, none of the pupils used the *get*-passive in more than 50 percent of the cases and only one pupil used the *be*-passive in all sentences. The *get*-passive occurs in one or two sentences for the majority of the pupils. As can be seen in Table 1 the sentences in which the *get*-passive appears most frequently are sentences two, four and ten. Since only three pupils used the *get*-passive in as many as 50 percent of the sentences the conclusion that can be drawn by looking at table two is that there is some kind of a compromise in the pupils' choice between the *get*- and the *be*-passive. Only one pupil shows complete consistency by using the *be*-passive in all of her translations. All of the other pupils alternated between the two alternatives and even used a third alternative in some cases. Even if nothing can be said with certainty, the results shown in Table1 and 2 suggest that the pupils have used whatever expression they found most suitable. It is possible that the pupils thought that what would be tested was their ability to use the correct alternative of the *get*-passive and the *be*-passive in each of the sentences since they were clearly aware of the existence of the *get*-passive in

addition to the *be*-passive. Although some consistency is shown in the sentences, e.g. that all the pupils used the *be*-passive in sentences 1 and six, there is also great variation in the pupils' answers. The potential conclusions of the results are discussed in the next chapter.

In order to be able to see what might have caused the pupils' preference to use the *get*-passive in some sentences but not in others, the sentences will be dealt with individually. Although some conclusions might be drawn from this, it is important to bear in mind what Carter and McCarthy stated. What we are dealing with here is probabilistic grammar and no real deterministic statements can be made about when and why *get* is preferred (Carter et al. 1999:55).

4.2 Analysis of the translation sentences

All ten translation sentences are analysed individually in the following section. Although they all contain passive constructions, they are different in semantics as well as in structure. All sentences are translated into English for the benefit of the reader.

1. Huset byggdes av min mamma. (The house was/got built by my mother)

Sentence one is a long passive (Biber et al. 2000:475), in which an animate agent is present; ´min mamma´ (´my mother´). As has been mentioned, g*et* is not commonly used with an animate agent (Quirk et al. 1985:161). The fact that 22 of the pupils used the *be*-passive in this sentence might be due to this fact. On the other hand it might be argued that the *get*-passive should be used since a process is being presented.

2. Hon blev påkörd av misstag. (She was/got hit accidentally)

Although no mention is made about the passive construction *get hit* by Carter and McCarthy (1997), a number of verbs similar in their semantics occur in their research. Verbs like *get arrested, get killed, get sued, get burgled, get beaten, get stopped (by the police), get done* are all considered adversative and the same applies to the verb *get hit* (Carter et al.1997:49). Moreover, g*et*-passives are often used of 'actional', dynamic events, which sentence two is an example of (Meints 2003:45).

3. Glödlampan uppfanns 1879 av Thomas Alva Edison. (The light bulb was/got invented in 1879 by Thomas Alva Edison)

Twenty-one of the pupils used the *be-* passive and two of the translations were changed into the active voice (*Thomas Alva Edison invented the light bulb in 1879).* The fact that not one single pupil made use of the *get*-passive is supported by the claim that *get-* passives seldom occur in neutral statements in which the subject is unaffected by the event described (Huddleston et al. 2002:1442).

4. Arbetarna fick inte betalt förra månaden. (The workers were not paid/did not get paid last month)

Sentence four is perhaps the most interesting one in this study since the result of the pupils' translations differs significantly from all other sentences, possibly with the exception of sentence ten. Twenty-one of the translations contained *get*-passives and only one held a *be-*passive. In order to create a negated clause using the *get*-passive, the pupils had to use a *do-*construction which changes the structure of the sentence in a more radical way than the *be-*passive does. Despite this fact, virtually all pupils used the *get*-passive.

Although nothing can be said with certainty, one of the reasons for the extensive use of the *get*-passive here might be that the verb *pay* is often used with the *get*-passive in spoken discourse (Carter et al. 1999:49-50). Moreover, the event described in the passive construction has negative effects for the subject, in this case *the workers,* which might also have influenced the choice between the *get-*and the *be*-passive (Huddleston et al. 2002:1442).

5. Kyrkan brändes ner för tre år sedan. (The house was/got burnt down three years ago)

The number of alternative translations is higher in sentence five than in any of the other sentences. In most of the alternative translations the pupils have replaced the passive construction using *get* or *be* with a bare passive construction. This replacement changes the meaning of the sentence in one important way. The sentence *The church got/was burnt down* implies that there is an agent, although it is not mentioned who it is, i.e. someone made the church burn down, probably through a deliberate act. When the sentence is changed into *The house burnt down* the connotation is changed in a drastic way since there is no implication that there is an agent responsible for the event. Although not much reliable information is

found about the difference between the expressions *was/got burnt down* and *burnt down,* a discussion about the topic can be seen at the website www.everything2.com (2008-05-16). The website is a place where different topics are discussed, sometimes by professionals and sometimes by amateurs. What is put forward in the matter of the sentence *The church burnt down* is that there is a third type of voice in English that is neither active nor passive. It is called the English middle and according to the discussion it is often used in situations where there is no agent, as opposed to an unknown agent, which may be indicated by the passive.

(9) Peter burnt down the church three years ago   [active]
(10) The church was/got burnt down three years ago (by Peter)   [passive]
(11) The church burnt down   [middle]

Since there is no specific form for the this type of expressions in English, as opposed to Icelandic and Ancient Greek, the sense conveyed be the middle voice tends to be expressed using the active voice. The topic is further discussed at a similar website, www.useenglish.com (2008-05-16), where it is stated that the English middle is used when the patient is the subject of an intransitive but active verb which is the case with (11).

6. Huset omges av en skog. (The house is surrounded by a forest)

None of the pupils used the *get*-passive in sentence six. Although there have been examples of moving trees in literature, the most probable interpretation is that the trees are remaining in their positions and that the sentence is merely a description of where the house is situated. Had the sentence illustrated a dynamic event, in which the trees had actually been moving closer to the house, the frequency of the *get*-passive might have been higher. To use the *get*-passive is actually a way to distinguish between stative or dynamic meaning (Huddleston et al. 2002:1442). However, none of the pupils used the *get*-passive which indicates that they were able to see that it would have changed the meaning completely.

7. Mannen arresterades av polisen när han försökte råna en äldre dam. (The man was/got arrested when he tried to rob an old lady)

According to Carter and McCarthy, a*rrested* is a verb that often appears with the *get*-passive in spoken language (Carter et al. 1999: 49), which may be one explanation to the great

number of *get*-passives used by the pupils in sentence seven. A further explanation might be that the *get*-passive occurs most frequently in narrating and reporting contexts and with adverse or problematic circumstances (Carter et al. 1999: 55). Sentence seven is a type of narrating or reporting context and the pupils might have used the *get*-passive for this reason.

8. Polen attackerades av Tyskland under andra världskriget. (Poland was attacked by Germany during the Second World War)

The *get*-passive is seldom used for neutral statements, such as sentence eight where it is merely stated that *Poland was attacked by Germany.* Since *attack* is a dynamic verb that clearly describes an action, *get* is not needed to emphasise that it is a verbal passive. Again, the probability of the pupils being aware of this distinction is rather small and their preferences to use *get* or *be* are probably based on their gut feeling rather than on their knowledge of the difference between dynamic and stative verbs in relation to the use of *get* or *be*. The possibility that some pupils are aware of the phenomenon can of course not be excluded. Although the use of the *get*-passive was not very frequent among the pupils it occurs in two of the translations. The reason for this might be that the subject, in this case Poland, is negatively affected by the event taking place, i.e. the attack by Germany.

9. John dödades av trädet som föll ner. (John was killed by the tree that fell down)

Although sentence nine is an example of a subject that is negatively affected by the event described in the passive construction, only two pupils used the *get*-passive. The number of pupils using the *get*-passive in this sentence is not higher than in sentence eight, which is a more neutral statement. The pupils do not seem to be aware of the difference between neutral statements and statements in which the subject is negatively or positively affected by the event.

10. David och Victoria Beckham gifte sig 1999. (David and Victoria Beckham were/got married in 1999)

Sentence ten is clearly to be interpreted as a verbal passive since the time for the actual ceremony is given. Had it been left out, it would have been ambiguous with two possible interpretations, verbal and adjectival complex-intransitive. It might be argued that '*get'* is

actually preferable in this case since it is the process of getting into the state of being married that is referred to. Although the year when the wedding took place is mentioned, which assures us that it is the actual wedding that is being referred to, the translation: 'Victoria and David Beckham *were* married in 1999' does carry the connotation of them already being married. 'Victoria and David Beckham *got* married in 1999' on the other hand clearly refers to the wedding.

The use of a *get*-passive conveys the dynamic sense of the sentence, which would not have been the case with *be*. However, it is emphasised that *get* should only be used in spoken informal language. In the written registers, *become* is an appropriate substitute (Biber et al. 2000:481). As we can see from table one, 14 of the 23 pupils used the *get*-passive in the translation of sentence number ten. Although the ambiguity of the sentence is not as obvious as it would have been without a mention of the year of the wedding, it is still possible to interpret the sentence *Victoria and David Beckham were married in 1999* in two different ways. Either as *The year for their wedding was 1999* or as *They were already married in 1999*. The ambiguity is a possible explanation to why more than half of the pupils made use of the *get*-passive in the sentence. It is of course possible that none of the pupils even considered the potential ambiguity of a translation using *be*. Since *get* commonly occurs with *married* in the spoken discourse (Biber et al. 2004:171), the pupils might automatically have come to the conclusion that *get* was the correct verb to use.

The fact that the pupils were told that their translations would not be used for any other purpose other than the study might have had an impact on what words or grammatical structures they chose to use. The fact that none of the pupils used the *get*-passive in more that fifty percent of the sentences shows that almost all the pupils in the study switch between the *get*-passive and the *be*-passive when they find it appropriate. Since they have not been introduced to the *get*-passive at school, according to their teacher, they seem to be implementing what they have learned from outside school when translating the sentences. Perhaps the outcome of the study would have been different, had it been carried out in connection to the introduction of the passive structure. The pupils' preference to use the *get*-passive, particularly in some cases (e.g. sentence four and ten) has probably something to do with the fact that there were no real explanations or clues to how they should manage the task they were given. All they could do was to use the knowledge they had gained from earlier teaching and from sources of knowledge from outside of school.

5. Discussion

As was mentioned at the beginning of this essay, the syllabus for English at the Swedish compulsory school gives us very little information about what grammar skills that should be expected of the pupils. The same goes for instructions on how it should be taught. However, grammar is constantly used and taught at schools all over the country. Some teachers choose to teach it deductively (Hedge 2000:147) i.e. by letting the pupils apply rules they already know to working out how to say or write what they want to. Others use an inductive approach, which means that the pupils are given a material that contains a certain grammar point, but they are not given any rules to apply to it. The inductive approach helps the pupils raise their awareness of how language works and can be very useful in contexts where the learner is already familiar with the language (Hedge 2000:160). The inductive approach could be used in order to help the pupils understand the difference in use of the *get*-passive and the *be*-passive since they are already familiar with the two expressions. All that is needed is knowledge about how to use it correctly.

The view on grammar has shifted throughout the years. Before the 1970s, when Lgy 70 was published, the prevailing opinion was that grammar teaching and learning should be focused on the formal aspect of grammar and that grammar should be practised through formal exercises. One of the reasons for this might have been that it was easier for the teacher to determine whether the pupils used the correct expression in a formal exercise than in activities of a freer character. Another reason might have been the belief that the number of language errors in real life would be fewer if the grammar point had been practised in formal exercises. However, it was stated in Lgy 70 that the role of grammar in the education should be functional and that no self-worth should be ascribed to it. Theoretical analysis should only be used if it meant a shortcut to practical language skills, i.e. the practical purpose was superior to the theoretical. Today, we have moved on to a more holistic perspective of grammar teaching and learning. Language as a means of communication is still more important than language itself. However, it is not enough that pupils are comfortable with their cognitive ability and are able to get their message across. Linguistic rules and grammatical structure are also areas that need to be taught and learnt (Malmberg 2001:18).

One of the prevailing pedagogical approaches used at schools all over the country is the communicative language approach. According to the advocators of this approach, language teaching should mainly be focused on language as a means of communicating with people in

a variety of settings and situations. It can be seen as a move away from narrow focus on language as a formal system and includes social and cultural knowledge needed in order to understand and use linguistic forms (Hedge 2000:45). However, Tricia Hedge states that linguistic competence is one of the key elements of communicative competence. Linguistic competence involves knowledge of spelling, pronunciation, vocabulary, word formation, grammatical structure, sentence structure and linguistic semantics (Hedge 2000:47). Hedge continues by claiming that there is a common misconception about communicative language teaching that it does not aim for a high standard of formal correctness in the use of rules. However, in addition to the aim for a high standard of formal correctness, the communicative competence approach should involve a high level of tolerance for risk-taking and error-making in the classroom (Hedge 2000:47).

It is important to bring up the issue with pupils' inability to distinguish between formal and informal language. Although it might be argued that the consequences of pupils' use of the *get*-passive in written language are not that serious, we have to consider the fact that researchers see pupils' inability to adjust their language to a given situation as one of the biggest difficulties for Swedish EFL-learners.

The *get*-passive is indeed used by native speakers of English but with some restrictions. The most important restriction is the one between spoken and written language. The task of learning how to distinguish between formal written and informal spoken language is not an easy one. However, it is an important one if the pupils are to be able to adapt their language to a given situation and thereby more resemble a native speaker. The fact that the pupils who translated the passive sentences did not have the ability to distinguish between the use of the formal *be*-passive and the informal *get*-passive in the translation sentences does of course not mean that they are incapable of adapting their language to the situation in other cases. The intention of this study is to analyse and discuss the pupils' use of the *get*-passive in written language. However, it is important to point to the fact that researchers claim that there is in fact an inability among Swedish pupils to distinguish between formal and informal language in general.

The fact that language researchers have not been able to see any real improvement within this area is reason enough to encourage more research on the topic. It would certainly be of utmost interest to find out what reasons there are for pupils' increasing use of informal spoken language in formal written language. As was suggested by researchers in the National Assessment of the Elementary School (NU-03), one probable explanation of the phenomenon is that Swedish pupils are constantly surrounded by informal English in TV, media, music etc.

and that they do not have the ability to filter what they hear and see of informal English before they use it in formal written language. Although no interviews have been made with the pupils who translated the sentences, one can suppose that the surrounding flow of English has been a contributing factor to the relatively high number of *get*-passives. It would be of great importance to investigate what possible consequences that can be expected if the development continues since there is nothing that points in the direction of less informal influence on pupils' language in the future and teachers will most probably have to find new ways of dealing with the phenomenon.

What must be remembered is that the fact that pupils incorporate what they have picked up from TV, music and media in their own use of language should be seen as an asset and not as a problem. Indeed, the process of learning should always be encouraged, no matter if it takes place at school ground or in other places. Moreover, the pupils will be exposed to different types of English for the rest of their lives. For this reason it is even more important to make sure that the pupils are aware of the different ways that language can be used in. As non-native speakers of English, they will constantly have to evaluate what they hear and read if they have the desire to master the language the way a native speaker does.

It would be interesting to find out to what degree native speakers of English from the same age group as the pupils in the study use the *get*-passive in written language. While it is stated that the *get*-passive is mainly used in spoken language in some of the most prominent grammar books, the fact that it can be used in written language is proposed on a number of sources of a more informal character on the internet. One example is a web page for practice for non-native speakers of English where the *get*-passive is used as the correct alternative in some examples of a grammar-quiz (http://www.grammar-quizzes.com/passive2.html). Although this web page is no proof of the correctness of using the *get*-passive in written language, it is still a proof of its existence.

The fact that the pupils did incorporate language that they had picked up from other sources than those provided at school shows that most of the pupils have a lot of confidence in their own knowledge. Moreover, most of the pupils alternated between the *be*-passive and the *get*-passive. The fact that they did alternate between the two expressions and that they did so according to a pattern, e.g. that 21 pupils chose the *get*-passive in sentence 4, demonstrates that the pupils have a lot of confidence in their own ability to know when to use what expression. It also shows that they are familiar with the use of the *get*-passive in different kinds of sentences where it is often used in informal spoken language. As can be seen in the research of Carter and McCarthy the *get*-passive occurs more often with certain verbs that are

adversative in their semantics in informal spoken language, such as *arrested* and *hit* (Carter et al. 1999:49). Judging by the translations made by the pupils, they seem to have some knowledge of this phenomenon or at least their intuition tells them when to use the *get*-passive and when not to use it.

When the phenomenon with the *get*-passive in pupils' written language came up, the teacher was faced with the decision whether to correct the *get*-passives in written language or to encourage the pupils' ability to incorporate knowledge gained from elsewhere than school. Perhaps a middle ground can be found where the pupils' ability to make use of what they have learnt outside of school is encouraged at the same time as the difference between the two ways of expressing the passive voice are presented. The ability to communicate is no doubt the most important one when it comes to pupils´ skills and knowledge. In learning how to use language in different situations television, computer games, media and music can be of great importance. The fact that this type of learning takes place outside of school gives it a more playful character and provides the pupils with a kind of motivation that they sometimes lack when being forced to learn grammar or vocabulary at school. However, if the pupils are to obtain a proficient level of English they have to be aware of some of the most important differences between informal spoken language and formal written language. It is up to the teacher to decide what the most important things for the pupils to learn are and when to introduce them to the pupils. However, sometimes the pupils have already been introduced to the subject. Teachers are really not always the first to know.

6. Summary and conclusions

It appears that Swedish pupils use the informal *get*-passive in formal written language. The translations of the sentences containing passive constructions seem to support this statement. Table 1 shows that there is a higher frequency of *get*-passives in some of the sentences than in others which indicates that the pupils are aware of the fact that *get*-passives and *be*-passives are used differently. However, they do not seem to be aware of the difference in use of the *get*-passive and the *be*-passive concerning formal and informal language.

Although nothing can be said with certainty, it looks as if the pupils use the *get*-passive when they find it appropriate in relation to context or structure of the sentence. It might also be the case that certain verbs, such as *arrested, married* and *paid* that are commonly used

with the *get*-passive in informal spoken language, create associations to the *get*-passive in written language.

Perhaps the most important issue discussed in the essay is the one about pupils' tendency to use informal spoken language in formal written language. Although the pupils' extensive use of the *get*-passive does not obstruct language communication it is a proof of this fact. Since the main objective of the essay is to investigate to what degree pupils use the *get*-passive in written language, not much is said about other aspects of the incorporation of informal language into formal language. It is therefore suggested that further research on the topic is carried out.

There have only been speculations about what reasons there might be for the use of informal spoken language in formal written language and much is still to be done on the subject. However, researchers who have studied the results of the national test in English claim that it is obvious that Swedish pupils have difficulties in distinguishing between informal spoken language and formal written language. One reason for this might be that they are constantly surrounded by informal spoken English that they incorporate in their formal written language.

Since the syllabus for English does not provide the teacher with any concrete directions on how to deal with the phenomenon, it is up to the teacher to decide when to introduce a topic, how much time that should be spent on it and how it should be done.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Translation sentences

Please, translate the following sentences into English.

1. Huset byggdes av min mamma.

2. Hon blev påkörd av misstag (accidentally).

3. Glödlampan (the light bulb) uppfanns 1879 av Thomas Alva Edison.

4. Arbetarna fick inte betalt förra månaden.

5. Kyrkan brändes ner för tre år sedan.

6. Huset omges (omge=surround) av en skog.

7. Mannen arresterades av polisen när han försökte råna en äldre (old) dam.

8. Polen attackerades av Tyskland under andra världskriget.

9. John dödades av trädet som föll ner.

10. David och Victoria Beckham gifte sig.

Appendix 2: Table 3

Table 3. Presentation of the pupils´ individual use of *get/be-* passive in each of the ten translation sentences. **S** stands for ´sentence´ and **P** stands for ´pupil´.

Pupil	S1	S2	S3	S4	S5	S6	S7	S8	S9	S10
P1	be	be	be	get	be	be	be	be	be	be
P2	be	get	be	get	be	be	get	be	be	get
P3	be	be	be	get	get	be	get	get	be	get
P4	be	be	be	get	other	be	be	be	be	get
P5	be	be	other	get	be	be	be	be	other	be
P6	be	get	be	get	be	be	be	be	be	get
P7	be	be	be	get	be	be	be	be	be	be
P8	be	get	be	get	be	be	get	be	get	get
P9	be	be	be	get	other	be	be	be	be	be
P10	be	be	be	get	be	be	be	be	be	get
P11	be	be	be	get	be	be	other	be	be	get
P12	be	get	be	get	other	be	be	be	be	get
P13	be	be	be	be	be	be	be	be	be	get
P14	be	get	be	get	other	be	get	be	get	get
P15	be	be	be	get	be	be	be	be	be	get
P16	be	get	be	get	be	be	be	be	be	be
P17	be	be	be	get	other	be	be	be	be	get
P18	be	be	be	get	be	be	be	be	be	get
P19	be	be	be	get	be	be	be	be	be	get
P20	be	other	be	get	be	be	be	be	be	be
P21	be	be	other	other	other	be	be	be	be	other
P22	be	be	be	get	be	be	be	be	be	be
P23	be	get	be	get	be	be	be	get	be	get