

## A PRELIMINARY ANALYSIS OF THE WORD 'GET'

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get, v., got; got or gotten; getting; n. --vt. 1. to obtain, or acquire by any means: to get favor by service, get a good price. 2. to obtain by labor; earn: to get one's living, get coal. 3. to acquire a mental grasp or command of; learn: get a lesson. 4. to cause to be or do: to get a friend appointed, get one's hair cut, get the fire to burn. 5. to capture; seize upon. 6. Colloq. to be under an obligation to; be obliged to: you have got to go. 7. prevail on: get him to speak. 8. to prepare; get ready: to get dinner. 9. to beget (now usually of animals). 10. Slang. to hit: the bullet got him in the leg. 11. Colloq. to kill. 12. Colloq. to puzzle; irritate: that gets me. 13. Chiefly U.S. Colloq. to understand: I get you. --vi. 14. to come to or arrive: to get home. 15. to become; grow: to get tired. 16. to succeed in coming or going (fol. by away, in, into, out, over, through, etc.). 17. to earn money; gain. 18. to bribe; influence by surreptitious means (fol. by at). 19. Some special verb phrases are:  
get across, to make understood.  
get along, 1. to go; go off. 2. See get on.  
get even with, to square accounts with.  
get off, 1. to escape; evade consequence. 2. to start a journey; leave. 3. to dismount from (a horse or train). 4. to say or express (a joke).  
get on or along, 1. to make progress; proceed; advance. 2. to succeed; manage well. 3. to agree with.  
get over, 1. to overcome (a difficulty, etc.). 2. to recover from: to get over a shock or illness.  
get round, 1. to outwit. 2. to cajole.  
get up, 1. to arise; sit up or stand. 2. rise from bed. 3. to ascend or mount. 4. (to a horse) go! go ahead! go faster! 5. to prepare, arrange, or organize. 6. to acquire a knowledge of: to get up a subject. 7. to do up: to get up the linen. 8. to pro-

uce in a specified style, as a book. 9. to work up (a feeling, etc.).

--n. 20. (in tennis, etc.) a return of a stroke which would normally be a point for the opponent.

[ME geten, t. Scand.; cf. Icel. geta, c. OE gietan (G-gessen in vergessen forget): akin to L -hendere in prehendere seize, take; and to GK. chandanein hold, contain]

--get ta·ble, get a·ble, adj. --get ter, n.

--Syn. 1-3. Get, Obtain, Acquire, Procure, Secure.

imply gaining possession of something. Get may apply to coming into possession in any manner, and either voluntarily or not. Obtain suggests putting forth effort to gain possession, and Acquire stresses the possessing after an (often prolonged) effort. Procure suggests the method of obtaining as that of search or choice. Secure, considered in bad taste as a would be substitute for Get, is, however, when used with discrimination, a perfectly proper word. It suggests making possession sure and safe, after obtaining something by competition or the like.

got, v. pt. and pp. of get.

(The American College Dictionary, 1969.)

Too many times in today's society we tend to overlook the everyday, commonplace occurrences around us because they seem unimportant. We seek excitement; something a little unusual.

This phenomenon sometimes occurs in the study of linguistics, too. How often, for example, have linguists analyzed pseudo-clefts in the past few years? (I have read quite a few articles on the subject.)

Of course, linguists do analyze obvious phenomena. The English auxiliary system (after the Chomsky model) has been frequently discussed ([MODAL - HAVE (en) - BE (ing)] V), but very few other verbs, such as the verb "get", have been fully analyzed.

Get is commonplace enough. The American College Dictionary (1969) lists 20 definitions. But is this analysis complete? Is the verb "get" so widely used and accepted that it needs no further analysis? Get is a "no-meaning verb", after all. It is used in so many contexts that native speakers can obtain little or no meaning from the word;--or can they? Let's examine some sentences and find out:

- (1) I get to go.
- (2) I got to go.
- (3) You've got to go to Mexico.
- (4) You've gotten to go to Mexico.

Sentence (2) is not merely the past tense of sentence (1). Sentence (1) means: "I am allowed to go," while sentence (2) means either: "I must go" or "I was allowed to go." Similarly, sentences (3) and (4) are not identical. Sentence (3) means: "You must go to Mexico," and sentence (4) means: "You've been allowed to go to Mexico." We can even note here that apart from tense, sentences (1) and (4) have similar meanings because of the inclusion in sentence (4) of the auxiliary verb "have". In these sentences get to go means "am allowed to go", and have gotten to go means "have been allowed to go."

Native speakers can obtain meaning from the verb "get". Get has very definite meanings in sentences (1) through (4) as is clearly demonstrated above. But got is not merely the past tense of the verb "get", and the past participle "got" is not always substitutable for the past participle "gotten" as the dictionary indicates. Clearly, there is a great deal of divergence between the uses of the verbs "get" and "got" and the dictionary definitions give, but to what extent are the two verbs divergent?

Even though the dictionary lists twenty meanings for the word "get", it does not list all the possible meanings that can be associated with the word. The dictionary claims that "[g]et may apply to coming into possession in any manner, and either voluntarily or not," (The American College Dictionary, 1969) but get doesn't always imply a gaining of possession. It can be used metaphorically:

- (5) If the U.N. hadn't called for and gotten a cease-fire, Israel might have captured Cairo, Ammon, and Damascus before anyone could have reacted.

In sentence (8) one cannot "possess" a cease-fire. What does the word "gotten" mean in this sentence? It is similar to the word "receive" (a meaning not given in the dictionary), but the word "receive" still isn't an adequate definition because one cannot receive a cease-fire in a literal sense--a cease-fire isn't a physical entity that can be given. The word "receive" also implies possession after receipt of an object. In this sentence, what was called for was an agreement, a signed treaty in which both contending parties agreed upon an end to fighting--if only temporarily.

One can find other instances of the use of "get" and "got" which diverge from the commonly recognized definitions. The word "get" in sentence (6) means receive:

- (6) We get a lot of work that must be completed in one day or a few days.

In this sentence, though the work is handed to "us", or sent to "us", it doesn't really belong to "us". It's "our" responsibility to do the work, but work is something which, once again, cannot be possessed.

The meaning of "get" in sentence (7) more closely fits a dictionary definition. Definition number 11 defines get colloquially as "to kill".

- (7) There are so many hunters that if every hunter were to get one pheasant, it would wipe out the entire pheasant population.

Here get does mean "kill", but it also implies the manner in which the pheasants are killed because of the nouns which accompany the verb (hunter and pheasant), and it implies that the hunter actively seeks to do the killing. From our knowledge of pheasant hunting, we can conclude that the hunters intentionally shot the pheasants.

The use of get also implies that the hunter will take possession of the pheasant(s) once it/they have been killed.

Baseball players often announce:

(8) a. I've got it!

when they want to signal that they are attempting to catch the ball and want to warn other players on the team to stay out of their way, or when they have actually caught a difficult ball and wish to emphasize their action. Sentence (11) a. is similar in meaning to the following examples provided by Dwight Bolinger:

(8) b. I have it!  
 c. It's mine!  
 d. I'm taking it!

"I have it" varies from "I've got it" in that the verb "have" implies a lack of effort in gaining or retaining possession of the object, while get, on the other hand, implies that an active effort has been made by the topic "I" in order for him/her to obtain "it".

"It's mine" shows that the speaker is claiming possession of the right to catch the ball, and is warning the other players to stay out of his/her way. If, after a player has announced "It's mine", another player attempts to catch the ball, the other players--especially the one who uttered statement (8) c.--will feel that the second player is infringing on the rights of the first, and the first player will often feel resentment.

"I'm taking it" implies that the speaker feels that s/he does not have a right or permission to receive or possess the ball, but that s/he is taking that right.

(9) I'm getting a headache.

In sentence (9) getting most closely fits definitions 1: "to obtain, gain, or acquire by any means . . .", or 15: "to become; grow". However, neither of these definitions is quite adequate. We don't obtain, gain, or acquire headaches because, again, a headache isn't a possession but a physical ailment. One also doesn't "become" or "grow" a headache. One suffers from a headache. So sentence number (9) really means:

(9) a. I'm beginning to suffer from a headache.

Dwight Bolinger has commented that sentence (9) contains a metaphor wherein the verb phrase am getting implies a figurative



Both viciously and thoroughly function as adverbs of manner, and adverbs of manner occur in English sentences in medial and final positions. Manner adverbs in medial position occur after the first auxiliary verb or immediately before the main verb if the sentence contains no auxiliary, and manner adverbs in final position occur immediately after the main verb plus its direct object. Therefore, if "get" is analyzed as a main verb rather than as an auxiliary, one would expect (13) a. and (14) a. to be of acceptable rather than of questionable grammaticality because the adverb would naturally be positioned immediately before the main verb since no auxiliary verb would then exist. Instead, (13) b. and (14) b., in which the adverbs are positioned between the verbs "get" and their respective past participles, are the acceptable variations. Sentences (13) c. and (14) c. are also grammatical when the adverbs are placed in final position in relation to the verb.

Though adverbs of manner can occur immediately following a past participle verb, they cannot occur immediately following an adjective:

(15) a. \*She looked pretty extremely.

They occur instead in the position immediately to the left of the adjective they modify and are attached to the adjective node rather than the verb phrase node of a tree diagram.

(15) b. She looked extremely pretty.

While the positioning of (15) b., (13) b. and (14) b. appear on the surface to be identical; (15) a., which contains an adverb in final position in relation to an adjective, is ungrammatical while both (13) c. and (14) c., in which the adverbs appear in final position in relation to the verb, are not ungrammatical as they should have been had the past participles functioned as adjectives. Therefore, I analyze the verb "get" in sentences such as (11) through (15) to function as an auxiliary verb rather than as a main verb. Sentences (11) and (12) do not result from sentences containing deleted reflexives; they can instead be analyzed as truncated passives ("They got married (by someone)"; "They will get divorced (by someone)").

The word "get" can function as an auxiliary verb, either in combination with the particle "to" or by itself. On the surface, get to + V or got to + V appear to be verbs plus infinitive phrases, and (17) merely the past tense of (16):

(16) I get to go.

(17) I got to go.

However, these sentences do not differ simply in the fact that one contains present tense and the other past tense. If one paraphrases sentences (16) and (17) one obtains the following:

- (16) a. I may go.  
 (17) a. I was allowed to go.

The paraphrase replaces get to with may, and because of this substitution of get plus to with a modal one can conclude that get to has come to be used as a modal. But got was not replaced with a modal. The auxiliary "have" must be added to got in order to obtain a modal meaning "must":

- (17) b. I have got to go. (Meaning: "I must go.")

Another interesting phenomenon has occurred that supports the idea that get to and have got to function as modals. In spoken English the words get to and got to are often uttered as one word, either as getta or gotta.

- (18) I getta go. (Meaning: "I may go.")  
 (19) I gotta go. (Meaning: "I must go.")

The process of word formation clearly shows the association between the verb "get" and the particle "to". In sentence (19) we can observe that a deletion transformation has occurred which optionally deletes the auxiliary "have" once flapping has occurred:

- (20) a. I got to go to Mexico last summer.  
 b. I have got to go to Mexico this summer. (have insertion)  
 c. I've got to go to Mexico this summer. (contraction)  
 d. I've gotta go to Mexico this summer. (flapping)  
 e. I gotta go to Mexico this summer! (have deletion)
- (21) a. You got to go to Mexico last summer.  
 b. You have got to go to Mexico this summer.  
 c. You've got to go to Mexico this summer.  
 d. You've gotta go to Mexico this summer.  
 e. You gotta go to Mexico this summer!
- (22) a. He/She/It got to go to Mexico last summer.  
 b. She has got to go to Mexico this summer.  
 c. She's got to go to Mexico this summer.  
 d. She's gotta go to Mexico this summer.  
 e. \*She gotta go to Mexico this summer!
- (23) a. We got to go to Mexico last summer.  
 b. We have got to go to Mexico this summer.  
 c. We've got to go to Mexico this summer.  
 d. We've gotta go to Mexico this summer.  
 e. We gotta go to Mexico this summer!
- (24) a. They got to go to Mexico last summer.  
 b. They have got to go to Mexico this summer.  
 c. They've got to go to Mexico this summer.  
 d. They've gotta go to Mexico this summer.  
 e. They gotta go to Mexico this summer.



The have-deletion transformation can occur with all pronouns except with third person singular (with the exception of black dialect which has regularized this deletion as it has subject/verb agreement of third person singular verbs). [I should also note here that there are a few instances, such as in certain types of questions in which the third person singular topic is contrasted to a non-third person singular topic, which will allow the have-deletion with third person singular pronouns. In these questions the third person singular topic is always highly stressed: "She gotta go?"]

Even though the flapping transformation does not change the essential meaning of sentences such as (20) c. and (20) d., the effect of such sentences are often quite different:

- (25) You've got to do it. (command force)
- (26) You've gotta do it. (a plea for action)
- (27) You get to do it. (permission granting)
- (28) You getta do it. (a confirmation of who is being allowed to do the action)

While getta and gotta can be paraphrased as modals, their positioning in conjunction with other auxiliary verbs is not the same as that of modals. Modals have been analyzed as being the first auxiliary verb, and two modals cannot exist in the same verb phrase (except in a relatively few dialects which include such constructions as might could meaning "may be"). Modals can be optionally followed by a have auxiliary and/or an active be auxiliary plus the main verb: [MODAL - HAVE (en) - BE (ing)] V. Where do getta and gotta fit into this model?

- (29) I getta go home.
- (30) I gotta go home.
- (31) I will getta go home.
- (32) \*I will gotta go home.
- (33) \*I will have gotta go home.
- (34) I will have gotten to go home.
- (35) \*I have gotta go home.
- (36) I've gotta go home.
- (37) \*I've getta go home.
- (38) I've gotta be going home.
- (39) \*I've be gotta go home.
- (40) \*I getta be going home.

Getta occurs after modals, but gotta cannot. Gotta occurs after have auxiliaries, but getta cannot. This occurs because get is the infinitive form of the verb and got is the past participle form; and even though the meaning of the flapped forms varies from that of the simple verb "get", the "traditional" grammatical rules that govern the verb "get" remain: an infinitive form follows a modal, and a past participle form follows a have auxiliary verb.

It is interesting to note that gotta cannot follow both a modal and a have auxiliary verb; especially since gotta would follow the have auxiliary and not the modal auxiliary. This is probably due to the fact that gotta must follow the contracted form of the auxiliary "have", and have cannot be contracted to a modal. Gotta must also precede the active be auxiliary, but getta cannot precede this auxiliary.

Thus, getta and gotta must be included in the English auxiliary system as follows:

$$[ \left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{(MODAL)} \\ \text{'VE (en)} \end{array} \right\} \text{ (getta) } \left\{ \left\{ \begin{array}{l} \emptyset \\ \text{(BE (ing))} \end{array} \right\} \right\} ] V$$

The auxiliaries "getta" and "gotta" function in some ways as do modals, but the auxiliaries "get" and "got" do not. Nor can they be included into the English auxiliary system in the same fashion as getta and gotta. The auxiliary "get" functions as an active auxiliary, while got can function as either an active or a passive auxiliary. Get and got function as active auxiliaries in the following sentences:

- (41) Get lost!
- (42) I got lost.
- (43) I will get lost.
- (44) I will have gotten lost.
- (45) I will be getting lost.
- (46) I will have been getting lost.
- (47) I have gotten lost.
- (48) I am getting lost.
- (49) I have been getting lost.
- (50) It really helped me get started on my paper.
- (51) They are getting acquainted.
- (52) \*I get will lost.
- (53) \*I will get had lost.
- (54) \*I will have gotten been lost.

As one can observe from sentences (42) through (54), the get auxiliary must follow a modal, a have auxiliary, and/or an active be auxiliary. As is proven by sentences (50) and (51), the get auxiliary determines that the verb which follows must appear in past participle form. Get can be added to Chomsky's auxiliary model as follows:

$$[(\text{MODAL}) - (\text{HAVE (en)}) - (\text{BE (ing)}) - (\text{GET (en)}) ] V$$

In each of the sentences, (41) through (54), the agent is the topic, and get implies that the action has occurred due to the volition of the agent.

While got can appear as an active auxiliary, it does so only because it follows a have auxiliary which determines the past participle form. The form "got" is also used as a passive auxiliary similar in form to, but not equivalent in meaning to, the passive be auxiliary:

(55) She got raped.

Obviously, "she" did not rape "herself"--some man raped "her". Thus sentence (55) is actually the truncated passive of:

(55) a. She got raped (by some man).

But because of the agent deletion and because the active get auxiliary implies volition of the topic (as opposed to the volition of the agent), we often assume that the action described has been performed due to the volition of the topic; a faulty assumption at best. Rutherford (1975: 315) explained our assumptions well: "With many verbs 'get' passives indicate involvement of the grammatical subject" [or the topic], "'be' passives of the logical subject [or the agent]:"

- (56) a. He was invited to the party. (Someone invited him.)  
 b. He got invited to the party. (He managed to be invited.)"

But did the woman in sentence (55) really want to be raped? Our use of the passive auxiliary "got" tends to imply that she did, while the use of the auxiliary "was" does not imply any such thing.

Get is a commonplace verb; however, it has been unjustly overlooked in the past. Our dictionaries do not adequately define the word as it is used as a main verb, many linguists have incorrectly analyzed the auxiliary "get" as a main verb plus a past participle adjective and have thus dismissed an important aspect of the word, and they have also overlooked the import of got as a passive auxiliary.

Get and got. Is the usage of these verbs really as simple as we have been led to believe?

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