

# Getting a sense of *krijgen*\*

## A diachronic study of its polysemy and grammaticalization

Frank Landsbergen  
Leiden University

### 1. Introduction

Present Day Dutch (PDD) *krijgen* can be used in different ways, as shown in examples (1–4):

- (1) Andrew had dorst gekregen van al het rennen.  
'Andrew had gotten thirsty from all the running.'
- (2) Myrthe krijgt een nieuwe iPod van haar vrienden.  
'Myrthe gets a new iPod from her friends.'
- (3) Ik krijg dit artikel niet geschreven.  
'I can't get this article written.'
- (4) Ik denk dat Willem Holleeder een schikking aangeboden zal krijgen.  
'I think Willem Holleeder will get offered a settlement.'

The prototypical use of *krijgen* is given in (1–2), in which the verb is transitive and has a non-agentive subject. Whether the verb gets an inchoative (or 'change-of-state') meaning as in (1) or the meaning 'to receive' as in (2) mainly depends on the kind of direct object *krijgen* is used with. Examples (3–4) show the less frequent use of *krijgen* as an auxiliary. (3) differs from (4) in that it has a pseudo-agentive subject, as opposed to the recipient role of the subject in (4). Van der Horst (2002) refers to the use in (3) as 'the new *krijgen*'. The use in (4) is commonly known as the semi- or dative passive.

The relationship between these uses has been studied previously in Hoekstra (1984) and Broekhuis & Cornips (1994) from a synchronic perspective. In this paper, I will take a diachronic perspective. By looking at its history, a clear picture emerges of the way the present-day uses of *krijgen* are related. First, the

transitive use of *krijgen* has changed from an agentive verb in Middle Dutch to a non-agentive verb in PDD. I will argue that this change can be explained by the changing character of the direct objects combined with *krijgen*. Second, the pseudo-agentive use of the ‘new *krijgen*’ in PDD still reflects the original meaning of *krijgen* in Middle Dutch, as suggested in the *Woordenboek der Nederlandse Taal* (or WNT, De Vries et. al. 1864–1998, s.v. *krijgen*), and is much older than Van der Horst (2002) proposes. Third, I will argue that the semi-passive has developed out of the ‘new *krijgen*’. It lost the pseudo-agentive use of the construction it originated from when it became increasingly similar to the non-agentive transitive use of *krijgen*.

## 2. Methods

For this study, I used two corpora to collect instances of *krijgen* in the period 1300–1979: The CD-ROM *Middelnederlands* (1300–1500) and the electronic version of the WNT (1500–1979). All instances of the lexemes *krijgen* and *gekrijgen* (see below) were collected, and from the total I made a random selection of around 200 sentences per century. When referring to the ‘corpus’, I am referring to this collection of sentences.

For the study of *krijgen* as an auxiliary, I have also used relevant sentences from other sources to get a more accurate picture of the precise course and time of its development.

## 3. The development of transitive *krijgen*

Around 1300, two forms of *krijgen* can be identified: the intransitive *crigen* ‘to fight, to strive for, to proceed to’ which is derived from a noun *crijch* ‘effort’, and the transitive *gecrigen* ‘to obtain by effort’, which is formed by addition of the perfective prefix *ge-*. This prefix is present in 80% of the transitive uses, but this percentage decreases over time.

The intransitive *crigen* has disappeared gradually. In 1300, its use still makes up 10% of the sentences in the corpus, but from 1400 onwards it appears only sporadically. In standard PDD, its use has become archaic. This development has quite likely played a major role in the gradual shift in the transitive use from *gecrigen* to *crigen* in Middle Dutch. In the fourteenth century, *gecrigen* is still used in 75% of the transitive cases, but by 1700 it has been completely replaced by *crigen* (then spelled *krygen*).

Transitive *krijgen* in the fourteenth century is a verb with an agentive subject and a meaning which varies between ‘to obtain’ and ‘to conquer,’ depending on the direct object. Example (5) is a prototypical use in this period.

- (5) Ende [ic] pensede hoet mi mochte gescien, dat ic *der rosen ene* gecege,  
die ic roke alle wege.  
‘And I thought how it could occur, that I would get into my possession  
*one of the roses* that I smelled everywhere.’ (1300 — Rose)<sup>1</sup>

The majority of the direct objects used in combination with *(ge)crigen* are concrete objects such as *sieraad* ‘piece of jewelry,’ *schaakspel* ‘chess board,’ and *kroon* ‘crown,’ or less tangible, yet concrete objects such as *kasteel* ‘castle’ and *stad* ‘city’. The subject becomes the possessor of these objects by his or her own effort. In terms of agentivity, this is still close to the original intransitive meaning which at that time was still in use. This also explains the character of the objects, which have to be concrete and manipulable in order to be controlled and taken into possession by an agentive subject.

In the period 1300–present, a change takes place in the kinds of direct objects that are used with *krijgen*. This change is not an absolute one, but rather one of degree, in which the relative frequency of certain kinds of objects increases over time. It can best be described as an extension of the set of objects, since most, yet not all, of the original objects remain in use. I will describe the change in qualitative terms below, while Figures 1–2 show the exact numbers.

Between 1300 and 1500, apart from the kinds of concrete objects mentioned above, less concrete objects become increasingly frequent. Unlike the concrete physical objects that were originally used, they describe more abstract objects or a state or condition of the subject. Examples of these new objects are *wraak* ‘revenge,’ *vriendschap* ‘friendship’ and *zuiverheid van hart* ‘purity of the heart’. However, these objects are still controlled by the (agentive) subject, as examples (6–7) show.

- (6) Si zwoeren zi wouden dat wreken nu. “Blevet ongewroken, [...] wy en kregen des nembermeer *ere*.”  
‘They swore to avenge this now. “If it would remain unavenged, we would never obtain *honor* from it anymore.”’ (1415 — Merlijn)
- (7) Als David inden sonden vel, hy bekende sijn misdade, hy riep an God, hi bat ghenade soe langhe dat hi creech *perdoen*.  
‘When David fell into sin, he confessed his crimes, he called to God, he prayed for mercy for so long, that he got *absolution*.’  
(1470 — Gedichten Hildegaersberch)

This extension of the set of possible objects used with *(ge)crigen* can be considered the main force of the semantic change the verb has undergone. The original objects allow for a strict agentive reading of the subject; because of their concrete nature, the transfer in possession can only occur with an agent, in this case the subject, causing this transfer to happen. For the less concrete objects, this necessity is absent. In the early examples, objects denoting feelings (e.g. *geluk* 'luck', *zuiverheid van hart* 'purity of the heart') are obtained by an agentive subject, but more and more the active role of the subject is less clear. The transfer of these objects, in contrast with concrete objects, does not necessarily have to be caused but can also occur without intention. To give an example, *geluk krijgen* 'to get luck' indicates a transition from not having luck to having luck. In the original interpretation, an agentive agent causes this transition, and the meaning can be described as 'to obtain luck'. However, an agentive reading for 'luck' is less likely than a reading in which the subject obtains 'luck' without any effort, because of the nature of these kinds of objects that describe a state of the subject. Therefore, the interpretation 'to get luck (e.g. by chance)' becomes more frequent.

Around 1500, the majority of the sentences with objects denoting a state of the subject no longer have an agentive subject, which means that in most cases the subject is no longer actively and intentionally obtaining the object. Consequently, more and more sentences appear with unwanted objects such as diseases or negative feelings (example 8). A similar change also takes place in the domain of less concrete objects such as *tijding* 'news', *een goede naam* 'a good name' and weather-related words slightly later (example 9).

- (8) Ende als sij haer lichaem aldus strengelijc gequelt hadde, soe began sij  
*een groote siechte* te crighen.  
 'And when she had chastised her body so gravely, she started to get  
 seriously ill (litt. 'she started to get *a serious illness*.')'  
 (1500 — Leven van Sinte Clara)
- (9) Doen cregen wy *een moye coelte uyten zuyden*, also dat men onse riemen  
 in leyde, ende maeckten seyl.  
 'Then we got *a nice breeze from the south*, so that we shipped the oars and  
 prepared the sails.'  
 (1598 — O.-I. e. W.-I. Voyag. 1, 72 c)

A consequence of the increase of uses with non-agentive subjects is an increase in inanimate subjects (Figure 1) and sentences in which another entity is (implicitly or explicitly) the agent (examples 10–11). In the latter case, the meaning of *krijgen* can be paraphrased as 'to receive'.

- (10) Kregen van een ambassadeur van Bantam *tijdingh, wel op onse hoede te wesen*.  
 ‘We received *news* from the ambassador of Bantam *to be very careful*.’  
 (1629 — Daghreg. Bat. 1, 396)
- (11) De Graaf van Lodron kreeg *onthiet om een regiment ... in Tirol op te rechten*.  
 ‘The count of Lodron got *an order to set up a regiment in Tirol*.’  
 (1642 — Hooft, N. H. 150)

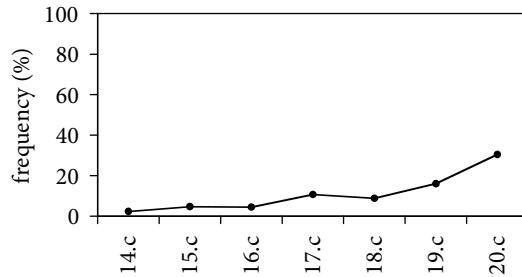


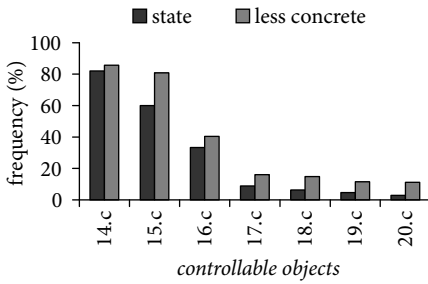
Figure 1. Relative frequency of sentences with inanimate subjects per century.

Note that this change at first only takes place in the subset of less controllable objects such as states mentioned above. In the sixteenth century, almost all concrete objects are still used with an agentive subject (example 12). However, the relative number of sentences with concrete objects and non-agentive subjects (as in example 13) is gradually increasing.

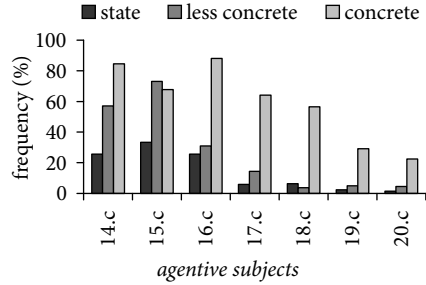
- (12) ...Dat sy een groote hoop van hen volck uyt sonden om [...] *eetwaren* te krijghen.  
 ‘...That they send out a large part of their people in order to collect *food*.’  
 (1603 — V. Zuylen, Plut. 254 a)
- (13) Ick crech 2 *bryeven* van mijn huysvrouw, 2 *bryeven* van mijn sone ut Seelant en 2 *bryeven* van monseur Jan Duym.  
 ‘I received *two letters* from my wife, *two letters* from my son from Zeeland and *two letters* from sir Jan Duym.’  
 (1659 — De Ruyter, Journ. 195)

This process continues in the following centuries. By the mid-twentieth century, *krijgen* has become a verb with a non-agentive subject in almost all cases. Traces of the original meaning of the verb can still be found in more or less specific constructions such as *ik krijg je nog wel* ‘I will get you sooner or later’, in which the subject might be called pseudo-agentive.

Summarizing, the data seems to indicate that the semantic change of *krijgen* started in a subset of direct objects, states. Because of the nature of



**Figure 2.** Relative frequency of sentences with a controllable direct object per subset, per century. The subset of concrete objects is not shown; they are always 100% controllable.<sup>2</sup>



**Figure 3.** Relative frequency of sentences with an agentive subject per subset, per century.

these objects, the agentivity of the subject became less evident. In turn, this led to more uncontrollable objects. The increase in non-agentive use in this subset of objects then had its effect on the general meaning of *krijgen* and spread to the other objects as well. Figure 2 shows the changing nature of objects denoting states and less concrete objects. Figure 3 shows how this affected the agentive meaning of *krijgen*, starting with states and finally spreading to concrete objects as well.

#### 4. The development of *krijgen* as an auxiliary

As shown in examples 1–4 in the introduction, PDD *krijgen* can be used both as a transitive verb and as an auxiliary, and the auxiliary use can be divided into the ‘new *krijgen*’ and the semi-passive. The former has a pseudo-agentive subject, the latter has not. In this section, I will argue that the ‘new *krijgen*’ has its origin in the causative use of *krijgen*, which is already found in the fourteenth century, and that the semi-passive developed from the ‘new *krijgen*’ in the beginning of the twentieth century.

##### 4.1 Development of the ‘new *krijgen*’

Fourteenth century *krijgen* can be used as an intransitive, transitive and a causative verb. In the latter case, it is combined with an object and a complement.<sup>3</sup> These complements are full prepositional phrases (PPs) denoting locations. As examples (14–15) show, these locations often indicate abstract goals.

- (14) Op dat ic Gelloene mach enechsijns *te campe* gecrigen.  
 ‘So that in some way I can get Gelloene to fight me (litt. ‘get Gelloene *at a fight*’).’  
 (1340 — Roman der Lorreinen)
- (15) Mocht sine *in haren arm* ghecrighen, hine souts haer niet swighen.  
 ‘Should she get him *in her arms*, he would not conceal anything from her.’  
 (1350 — Borchgravinne van Vergi)

The meaning of these causatives can be described as ‘to make object X move to location or state Y’, in which the objects can be both persons and things. This use clearly shows the agentive subject that is prototypical for *krijgen* in this period.

Over time, the number of more abstract locations (such as in example 15) in the PP-complements increases. The metaphorical extension to adjectival complements describing states is therefore not surprising. Its first occurrence in the corpus dates from 1569:

- (16) Ende so daer de eene Sluetel niet op en paste, sy mochte eene andere versoecken [...] dat sy het Slot *op* crege.  
 ‘And because the key did not fit, she tried another one, so that she got the lock *open*.’  
 (1569 — Marnix, Byenc)

Soon after the first adjectives start to appear in the complements, a specific type of adjective, the adjectival participle, appears as well. Since adjectival participles are adjectives derived from verbs, their occurrence marks a crucial step in the development of *krijgen* as an auxiliary:

- (17) Desen dach waren eenige ruyteren uyt Heusden naer des viants leger gereden ... ende rencontreerden eenige voeragiers, daer af sij eenigen *gevangen* cregen.  
 ‘On this day, some horsemen had ridden from Heusden towards the enemy’s army, and encountered some freebooters, of which they took some prisoner (litt. ‘of which they got some *caught*’).’  
 (1600 — Duyck, Journ)

The WNT (s.v. *krijgen*) also gives the following example:

- (18) Sij ... konden haar drank niet als met een gemeen Herbergs vuur *ontdoid* krijgen.  
 ‘They could not get their drink *defrosted* like with an ordinary fire at the inn.’  
 (1684 — Selds. Walvisv. 52.)

These examples are ambiguous; their meaning can be described both as ‘to get a person/object in a V-ed state’ and ‘to V a person/object’. In the latter

interpretation, the main activity described in the examples is reduced to that of the complement, which is a first indication of a reanalysis of *krijgen* from main verb to auxiliary. The examples show that the early 1990s as a starting point of this construction, as proposed by Van der Horst (2002:176), cannot be maintained, and that this date has to be set some three centuries earlier.

Apart from the 'new *krijgen*', the original causative construction still exists in PDD, both with locations (*ik krijg die spijker niet uit de muur* 'I can't get that nail out of the wall') and states (*het kind krijgt zijn bord niet leeg* 'the child can't get his plate empty') as complements. In their syntactic and semantic properties this construction behaves very much like the 'new *krijgen*'. For instance, it seems to be used mostly in negative contexts, and is often combined with the modal verb *kunnen* 'can', although both elements are by no means obligatory. Semantically, the question is whether both the causative construction and the 'new *krijgen*' really still have a strict causative meaning with an agentive subject. Use in the imperative sounds rather odd in most cases (*??Krijg de soep opgegeten!* 'Get the soup eaten!'; *??Krijg je bord leeg!* 'Get your plate empty!'), as is the case when used as a complement of verbs such as *beloven* 'to promise' (*??Ik beloof je de soep opgegeten te krijgen* 'I promise you to get the soup eaten'; *??Ik beloof je mijn bord leeg te krijgen* 'I promise you to get my plate empty'). Such tests suggest that the subject in the causative use and the 'new *krijgen*' might better be called 'pseudo-agentive'. Also, 'causative' might be too strong a term for the use of the original causative construction in PDD.

The question therefore is whether the original causative construction actually had an agentive subject, or that these subjects were pseudo-agentive from the start. To me, the former option seems more logical, because *krijgen* was originally an strongly agentive verb in all its uses. However, by the time the 'new *krijgen*' developed, the agentivity of the causative construction could have been less strong already, under the influence of the semantic changes in the transitive use of *krijgen*. It is evident that more research (and more data) is needed to get a clearer picture of the exact thematic roles in these constructions through time.

#### 4.2 Development of the semi-passive

The two constructions with the auxiliary *krijgen* in PDD (examples 1–4) are formally similar, but differ semantically. In the 'new *krijgen*', the subject has the role of pseudo-agent, while it lacks this agentivity in the semi-passive. This makes *krijgen* in the semi-passive semantically very similar to its PDD transitive use.

The Dutch semi-passive (example 19c) differs from the regular passive construction (example 19b) in the choice of the grammatical subject:



- (19) a. *active*  
*De rector reikt de diploma's uit aan de scholieren*  
'The principal hands out the diplomas to the students.'
- b. *regular passive*  
*De diploma's worden door de rector aan de scholieren uitgereikt.*  
'The diplomas are handed out to the students by the principal.'
- c. *semi-passive*  
*De scholieren krijgen de diploma's uitgereikt door/van de rector.*<sup>4</sup>  
'The students get the diplomas handed out by the principal.'

Typical verbs used in the semi-passive are *aanbieden* 'to offer', *uitreiken* 'to hand out', *overhandigen* 'to hand over', and *voorschotelen* 'dish up'. They can be characterized as ditransitive verbs describing a specific kind of transfer. This is not surprising, since the semi-passive needs a three-argument verb, and these kinds of verbs are typically verbs describing transfer of a direct object participant to an indirect object participant.

The semi-passive is a relatively new construction in Dutch. Royen (1952) mentions a first occurrence in 1907<sup>5</sup> and it is first found in the corpus in the 1920s:

- (20) Ze moest nog lessen betaald krijgen, Godfried ook.  
'She still had to get paid classes, and Godfried as well.'  
(1907 — Duykers, Rosa 189 (ex. from Royen 1952: 259))
- (21) 's Avonds kreeg zij, keurig in enveloppe, f 50 thuisgestuurd.  
'At night, she got sent home fifty guilders, nicely in an envelope.'  
(1920 — Naeff, Veulen)

In order to understand how and why this construction came into existence at this time, let us look again at some examples of the 'new *krijgen*':

- (22) Ook kreeg zij [...] haar borden nog gewasschen en haar pannen  
geschuurd.  
'Also she got her plates washed and her pans scrubbed.'  
(1909 — Schart.-Ant., Sprotje 2, 44)
- (23) Mijnheer Pardoes zat als verwezen en durfde waarlijk niet zeggen dat zijn  
éénige bijdrage 't half geld was waarvoor hij de advertentie had geplaatst  
gekregen.  
'Mr Pardoes was dismayed and did not dare to say that his only  
contribution was that he got the advertisement placed for half price.'  
(1859 — Ned. Volksalm.)

- (24) Het ophouden te arbeiden, ten einde zekere eischen doorgevoerd te krijgen, of zekere eischen der werkgevers te weerstaan.  
 ‘Stopping their work, in order to get certain demands carried out, or to withstand certain demands by the employers.’

(1908 — Levit.-Polak, Diam.)

All three examples describe actions carried out by the grammatical subject of the sentence in order to produce the result indicated by the participle. However, there is an important difference between (22) on the one hand and (23–24) on the other. In (22), the grammatical subject is also the subject of the participles *gewassen en geschuurd* ‘washed and scrubbed’, but the same does not apply to the subject in (23–24). In other words, the subject of (22) washes and scrubs the plates herself, while in (23–24), the subject has *someone else* carrying out the respective actions of placing the advertisement and carrying out the demands. In the corpus, the latter construction appears later than the former, which makes it probable to consider the latter an extension of the ‘new *krijgen*’: one in which the grammatical subject is still the agent, but in which it is no longer the subject of the participle. Although this step does not immediately change the agentive role of the subject, it does open the door for possible ambiguity. Note that in this light, it is not clear whether example (20) is really a semi-passive or an ambiguous case of the ‘new *krijgen*’, without more knowledge of the context.

This reanalysis is made possible by the split between the subject of *krijgen* and the subject of the main verb. This creates an extra argument role, and the agentive role shifts from the subject of *krijgen* (in example 25i) to this new argument (in examples 25ii), the subject of the main verb. Example (25iii) represents the state in which the grammatical subject ‘he’ is no longer given an agentive interpretation.

- (25) Hij kreeg de advertentie geplaatst.  
 ‘He got the advertisement placed.’
- i. He succeeded in the placing of the advertisement.
  - ii. He succeeded in (someone else) placing the advertisement.
  - iii. (He succeeded in that) someone else placed the advertisement.

This last step is not a coincidence, but a consequence of the semantic change that the verb *krijgen* has undergone by the beginning of the twentieth century. The subject of *krijgen* has lost its agentivity in almost all transitive uses. Agentive subjects are at this time restricted to the ‘new *krijgen*’, which makes up only around 15% of the corpus data. When the agentive role shifts to the subject of the main verb, the subject of *krijgen* gets the role it also has in the transitive use, that of recipient. This process can be considered a case of ‘combined analogical pressure’, a term coined by Givón & Yang (1994:130) for the in many respects

similar case of the development of the *get*-passive. The main point of using this term is to stress that the development of the new form, in this case the semi-passive with *krijgen*, cannot be attributed to one 'parent' construction, but rather to two. The formal similarities between the transitive use and the auxiliary use most probably will have reinforced this process.

## 5. Discussion and conclusion

The diachrony of *krijgen* gives a clear example of polysemy and grammaticalization developing in different constructions or linguistic contexts of the same word (cf. Hopper & Traugott 1993). The semantic change from 'to get by effort' to 'to get without effort', with a loss of agentivity of the subject, takes place in the transitive use of *krijgen* but in a much weaker way in the causative construction. This explains the pseudo-agentivity of the subject in the 'new *krijgen*', that developed out of the causative construction in the seventeenth century. The grammaticalization of *krijgen* from main verb to auxiliary is the result of a change that took place within this causative construction.

However, the case of *krijgen* also shows that the semantics of the verb in different constructions are not completely isolated. It seems likely that the causative use of *krijgen* lost some of its agentivity under the influence of the changes in the transitive use. A similar point can be made for the development of the semi-passive. The 'new *krijgen*' changed in such a way that the subject of the main verb no longer had to be the subject of the auxiliary *krijgen*. In these cases, it became structurally very similar to the transitive use, which had a recipient subject. The much higher frequency of the transitive use will undoubtedly have affected and therefore directed the new use into an interpretation that was similar to its own, thus leading to the semi-passive.

This hypothesis runs counter to that of Van der Horst (2002), who claims the opposite: the 'new *krijgen*' would have evolved from the semi-passive via the ambiguous cases in which the subjects of *krijgen* and the main verb are different. However, the data shows that the 'new *krijgen*' occurs before the semi-passive and not vice versa, which makes this scenario unlikely.

Besides the fact that the hypothesis I presented in this paper deals better with the diachronic data, it is also preferable for another reason. The change from semi-passive to the 'new *krijgen*' would mean that an almost non-existent agentive subject use would develop from a highly frequent non-agentive subject use. Although this is not impossible, it is much more unlikely than the opposite development, in which an aspect of the original meaning is lost that survived in a specific construction only.

## Notes

\* I would like to thank Arie Verhagen, Bernd Heine, Maarten van Leeuwen and an anonymous reviewer for discussion, comments and yet more useful examples of the verb that Grimm (for German) refers to as ‘one of the most curious words in our language’. This research was supported by a grant (051-12-047) from the Dutch National Science Foundation (NWO).

1. The source reference given here is similar to that found in the electronic corpora from which the examples are taken. As for the translations, I have tried to keep them as literal yet acceptable as possible.
2. Objects that are ‘controllable’ are those objects that can *in principle* be controlled by the subject. Examples are all concrete things, states such as ‘luck’, ‘happiness’ and ‘comfort’ and less concrete objects such as ‘consent’, ‘victory’ and ‘profession’. Examples of uncontrollable objects are states such as ‘sadness’, ‘fever’ and less concrete objects such as ‘answer’, ‘storm’ and ‘beating’. In Figure 3, only those sentences with unambiguous agentivity of the subject are included. This was determined by looking at the context.
3. A similar construction for *get* in Middle English is called the ‘transitive-locative’ by Givón & Yang (1994), who claim it to be the source for the *get*-passive in Present Day English. They argue that the transitive-locative construction has developed via the following path: ‘to obtain/take X’ > ‘to obtain/take X for oneself’ (reflexive) > ‘to obtain/take X for another person’ (benefactive) > ‘to take X toward another person’. A similar path for Dutch seems unlikely. In my data I have not found any benefactive uses dated prior to the first transitive-locative uses and reflexive uses do not appear at all. Also, the benefactive use of *krijgen* is very rare. Before 1800, only two instances appear in the corpus, against 85 instances of the causative.
4. Note the possibility of both *van* and *door* in the adjunct. *Van* is the standard preposition for adjuncts in the transitive use, *door* for those in the regular passive use. Because of lack of space, I will not discuss this phenomenon in more detail in this paper.
5. Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for pointing out this example to me.

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