3 Components of *be*-passive and their Historical Change

3.1 Introduction

In this chapter, each component of the verb phrase ‘be + past participle’ is analysed. The results in Table 2.2 indicate the aspectual change, but, as hinted at in the discussion of Table 2.7, we need to look at auxiliary and past participle separately in order to understand the change better. For auxiliary, we look at the status of *be* as auxiliary and some particular syntactic constructions with the passive. As for the past participle, we look at various characteristics such as the suffix *-ed*, the prefix *ge-*, verbs with two different forms, stative verbs and prepositional verb phrases. These various features will clarify the grammaticalisation of the *be*-passive.

3.2 Auxiliaryhood

The category auxiliary has been a puzzle for linguists over several decades: ‘In fact, in the recent history of linguistics, auxiliaries have provided one of the most popular battlegrounds for disputes on linguistic theory’ (Heine 1993: 26). Indeed, it seems hard to describe satisfactorily what an auxiliary is. Generally speaking, auxiliary verbs possess morphosyntactic characteristics of verbs, i.e. the position in a clause, inflectional information (agreement, tense–aspect–mood, etc.), but differ in their lack of ability to create the major conceptual relation of the clause (i.e. state or activity expressed in the clause). In addition, they are often considered semantically empty, except for a subcategory of auxiliary commonly known as modal auxiliary, which can express modality. Even where a single language, say English for convenience, is concerned, there has been a debate over whether the category auxiliary
in grammar exists or not. For example, this category is rigidly distinguished in GB approaches, while some scholars claim that there is no such category, and what are known as auxiliaries should be considered as types of lexical verbs. Linguists who consider the auxiliary as a special category include Jackendoff (1972), Akmajian et al. (1979), Plank (1981), Steele et al. (1981), Palmer (2001); studies treating it as a lexical verb include McCawley (1975), Huddleston (1976), Pullum and Wilson (1977), Pullum (1981), Schachter (1983), Huddleston and Pullum (2002).

Whether the category ‘auxiliary’ exists or not represents the tip of the iceberg. A number of works differ over various syntactic or semantic characteristics. Apart from the lexical verb/auxiliary distinction, Schmerling (1983) considers that the auxiliary is a subject modifier, while for Janssen (1983), it is a verb modifier. As for dependency, Matthews (1981) treats auxiliaries as dependents of main verbs, while Schachter (1983) considers that auxiliaries are the head and the main verbs are the dependents. In distinguishing the head in a clause, Hudson (1987) identifies the auxiliary as the head, while Zwicky (1985) believes that there is no coherent way of defining a head once an auxiliary is involved, and therefore the auxiliary cannot be the head. We return to the issue of head and dependent in Section 3.4. In the face of these various approaches, there are some linguists who claim that the distinction depends greatly on one’s perspective on grammar. For example, Gleason (1961: 104):

There is doubtful value in this analysis [classification of can, will, etc. as fully lexical verbs, J.T.], but in any case the class is quite distinct from verbs in many other respects and quite uniform within itself in usage, and so must be recognized as a clearly marked class in English structure. Whether it is treated as a highly specialized subclass of verb (auxiliary verbs) or as a separate class closely associated with verbs (verbal auxiliaries) does not matter greatly.

In similar vein, Palmer (1979: 3) considers the matter a highly complex one that cannot be treated in a black-and-white manner.

Some typological accounts suggest that there are certain patterns with regard to the category auxiliary. For example, Greenberg (1966: 85; universal 16) reveals the relationship between the word order and the position of the auxiliary: ‘in languages with dominant order VSO, an inflected auxiliary always precedes the main verb. In languages with dominant order SOV, an inflected auxiliary always follows the main verb’. Additionally, Steele (1978: 42) notes that no language with an SVO or VSO basic word order, or with free word order, has its auxiliaries