The Malefactive Topic Role in Cantonese Indirect Passives

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Abstract

In this paper, I aim to account for the formation of an under-studied subtype of Cantonese passives, namely the indirect passives. Having examined the indirect passive constructions in examples from a corpus, I establish that the indirect passive subject carries the information structure role topic and this particular syntactic structure is obligatorily associated with adversity. Instead of the patient argument as in canonical passives, a malefactive argument is borne by the sentence initial NP in indirect passives, leading to an extension of syntactic valency. In sum, the indirect passive with the topical part of the patient NP expressed as the subject and the non-topical part remaining as an object-in-situ is an outcome of interaction of information packaging and grammatical relations.

1 Introduction

Unlike English, the agent in Cantonese passives is obligatory. Mapping in canonical passives involves the agent being expressed as a non-core GF OBL, making the patient NP the most prominent semantic role bearing the SUBJ function. The subject in this case is the default topic, as default topic is associated with subject in Cantonese (Fung, 2007).

This paper investigates an under-studied subtype of Cantonese passives which has been analyzed in Mandarin (Huang 1999; Kit 1998; Her 2009; Peltomaa 1996, among others), generally known as *Indirect Passives*. In indirect passives, the subject corresponds to part of the patient argument, often the possessor of the object, rather than the active object/patient. I argue that a

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2 The basic structure of Cantonese passives is SUBJ - bei2 - agent - V - (OBJ). There are two main types of passives: canonical passives and indirect passives.

3 Indirect passives are also found in Japanese and Vietnamese. However, there are differences between Cantonese indirect passives and those in Japanese and Vietnamese in terms of selectional restrictions of verbs and syntactic relations.
crucial distinction between the subject in canonical and indirect passives involves information packaging. This article is structured as below: in Section 2, I give a brief description of the syntactic information packaging in Cantonese; in Section 3, evidence of topic-bearing subjects in indirect passives from corpus data is provided; discussion of the findings is carried out in Section 4, followed by the corresponding structural representations.

2 The Topic Role in Cantonese (Passives)

Cantonese, like other Chinese languages, possesses little verbal morphology. The grammatical relations in Cantonese are specified structurally (Berman 1999). Despite its scant morphology, Cantonese allows pro-drop and flexible word order, facilitated by topic particles such as ‘ne1 呢’ and ‘aa6 呀’ or prosodic signal, i.e. a pause (Matthews and Yip 2011) (see (1) and (2)).

(1) Gwo3 hoi2 aa6, dei6 tit3 zeoi3 faai3
Cross sea Sfp underground most fast
‘For crossing the harbor, the underground is fastest.’
(Matthews and Yip 2011:78)

(2) Luk6 sik1 sang1 wut6, nei5 hoeng2 jing3 zo2 mei6?
Green life-style 2nd respond Perf not-yet
‘Green living – have you responded yet?’
(Matthews and Yip 2011:77)

Information packaging in Cantonese follows a typical topic-focus arrangement. It is observed that the pre-verbal sentence-initial position, or [Spec S], is the
default position for topics, followed by focus (traditionally termed comment), see (3) and (4):  

(3)

(3-i)  Aa³ can² zou⁶ me¹ aa³  
阿 陳 做 咁 呀？  
Ah Chan  do  what Sfp  
What happened to Chan?

(3-ii)  keoi⁵ bei² jan⁴ caau² zo² jau⁴ jyu² aa³  
佢 界 人 炒 吃 魷 魷 魷 呀  
Pass people  fired Sfp

TOPIC  FOCUS/COMMENT
He/She was fired.

The information exchange of (1) can be represented as below:

a. pragmatic presupposition: Chan undergo X
b. pragmatic assertion: X = being fired
c. focus: being fired

(4)

(4-i)  Aa³ can² bou⁶ ce¹ gaau²-me¹ aa³  
阿 陳 部 車 搞 咁 呀？  
Ah Chan  CL car what-happen Sfp  
What happened to Chan’s car?

(4-ii)  bei² jan⁴ zong⁶ zo² aa³  
界 人 撞 吃 呀  
Pass person  crash Perf Sfp

FOCUS/COMMENT
(Chan’s car) was crashed by someone.

The information exchange of (2) can be represented as below:

a. pragmatic presupposition: Chan’s car undergo X
b. pragmatic assertion: X = being crashed by someone
c. focus: being crashed by someone
The topic ‘aa3 can2 bou6 ce1 阿陳部車’ (Chan’s car) in the response in (4-ii) is understood from previous context and is not expressed.

The passive sentences (3-ii) and (4-ii) are typical predicate-focus structures. The sentences express comments about the topic referents which are also the passive subjects, i.e. ‘aa3 can2 阿陳’ (Chan) in (3-ii) and ‘aa3 can2 bou6 ce1 阿陳部車’ (Chan’s car) in (4-ii).

In canonical passives, the sentence-initial subject carries the informational topic role. The resultant grammatical function SUBJ carried by the patient via passive mapping rules makes it a topic by default:

Mapping in canonical passives:

(5)

Can4 saang1 gaa3 ce1 bei2 tung4 si6 zong6 laan6 zo2  
[陳 生 架 車] [畀 同事 撞 爛 咗]  
Mr. Chan  
CL car  
Pass  colleague  crash-broken  Perf  
Mr. Chan’s car was crash-ed by his colleague.

(6)

tung4 si6 can1 saang1 gaa3 ce1  
(colleague)  (Mr.Chan’s car)  
zong6 laan6 < Ag  Pt >  
Crash-broken  OBL0  SUBJ (default topic)

In canonical passives, the rearrangement of grammatical function and semantic role mapping is triggered entirely by the coverb ‘畀 bei2’ and a straightforward mapping results according to the passive mapping rules. In the case of an indirect passive like (7), the mapping is more complicated. A motivation which targets only part of the constituent is needed. The claim of this paper is that

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\[5\] I adopt Butt and King’s (2000) definition of topic and focus: TOPIC is old or known information that is relevant in the current context. FOCUS is new and prominent information.

\[6\] Default information-structure roles are often associated with particular grammatical functions. In the majority of cases, the default topical GF is the subject. See detailed discussion in (Dalrymple and Nikolaeva (2011) Chapter 5).

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indirect passive is the outcome of interaction between the informational roles (i-structure) and functional relations (f-structure).

(7) Can¹ saang¹ bei² tung⁴ si⁶ zong⁶ laan⁶ zo² gaa³ ce¹ 陈生 [畀同事撞爛吃] 架車
Mr. Chun Pass colleague crash-broken Perf CL car
Possessor of patient Agent head of patient

In the following section, I demonstrate with corpus data that the indirect passive subject carries the discourse function of topic.

3 Corpus Data

Indirect passives cover a small proportion of passive sentences found in the corpus. Out of 61 passive ‘畀bei’ sentences, only 4 indirect sentences are found. The limited use of indirect passives is hypothesized to be related to its special pragmatic connotations. In (8), I provide an extract of a dialogue from HKCanCorp (Luke and Wong 2015). The passive sentences are underlined for easier reference.

(8) (S1)
Waak⁶ ze² di¹ ngai⁶ jan¹ gam² joeng² lam² zyu⁶ wan⁵ go⁳ sai¹ gaai³ gam² joeng² 或者啲藝人均樣諗住搵個新世界嘅樣。
Or Det actors actresses that way think find CL new world Part Part
Or, the actors/actresses were thinking of living a new life

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7 The Hong Kong Cantonese Corpus (HKCanCorp) (Luke and Wong 2015) consists of 93 recording and approx. 230,000 Chinese words. 471 sentences are found to involve the morpheme ‘bei2 當’. The other uses of ‘bei2 當’ discovered in the corpus and their corresponding proportion are listed as follows: (i) as the lexical verb ‘give’ (29 %); (ii) as the lexical verb ‘let’ (34 %); (iii) as a preposition marking benefactive role (23 %); (iv) as a particle meaning ‘if it were’ (1 %).
Unexpectedly, it turned out that it did not work.

Rumor has it that those people had their houses sealed up.

What about the actors/actresses?
Following Dalrymple and Nikolaeva (2011), the information exchange can be represented as below:

a. pragmatic presupposition: the actors/actresses undergo X
b. pragmatic assertion: $X = \textit{their houses being sealed up}$
c. focus: \textit{their houses being sealed up}

Building on the previous context, ‘di¹ ngai⁶ jan⁴ 咁藝人’ (the actors/actresses) which is the antecedent of the demonstrative pronoun in the later context is the most salient referent in the utterance. The theme of discussion continues with an indirect passive which has a possessor NP as the subject. A response using the canonical passive with the patient ‘ngai⁶ ge¹ uk¹ 藝人嘅屋’ as the subject (as in (10-ii)) would be odd.

(10)

(10-i) Gwo² di¹ ngai⁶ jan⁴ dim² aa³?

Those \textit{actors} \# how Sfp

How are the actors/actresses?

(10-ii)# di¹ ngai⁶ jan⁴ ge¹ uk¹ ji¹ gaa¹ bei² jan⁴ fong¹ zo² aa³

啲 藝人 嘅屋 而家 畀 人 封 咋 呀...

Det \textit{actors} Poss house now Pass people seal Perf Sfp

The actors/actresses’ houses have now been sealed up.

The discourse established in (10-i) calls for a response with ‘di¹ ngai⁶ jan⁴ 咁藝術人’ (the actors/actresses)’ as the subject, i.e. \textit{They had their houses sealed}.

A direct passive construction (10-ii) causes an inevitable mismatch between the theme of discussion in the context and the subject/topic in the sentence. In response to a ‘what-about’ question concerning the actors/actresses which are the TOPIC, an indirect passive with only the possessor but not the entire patient NP is preferred. In other words, the possessor NP in the indirect passive construction carries the discourse function TOPIC.
4 Discussion

4.1 The Semantic Restriction

Apart from the essential informational topic feature of the indirect subject, an additional malefactive restriction is imposed on the structure of indirect sentence. Such restriction is also shown in corpus example above. It has been observed in early studies of passives that adversative meaning is associated with indirect passives (Shibatani 1985, Lapolla 1988, Huang 1999 and among others). It is noted in Shibatani (1985:841) that,

*The affected nature of the passive subject, when strongly felt, may lead to the use of passive morphology/syntax in a situation where the subject is in directly affected by an event. Thus in Korean, Vietnamese, Chinese, and Japanese, the possessor of a body part or an article that is directly affected can stand in subject position in a passive...*

The semantic constraint of indirect passive is applied quite strictly in Cantonese. While canonical passives allow both adversative and non-adversative meanings such as (11) and (12), indirect passive is restricted to adversative events, see (13) and (14).

(11) keoi⁵ fuk¹ waa² bei² lou⁵ si¹ tip³ tong⁴

His/her picture was displayed by the teacher.

(12) keoi⁵ hou² zung¹ ji³ bei² jan⁴ zaan³

S/he likes being praised so much.

(13) keoi⁵ hou² zung¹ ji³ bei² jan⁴ zaan³

Matthews & Yip 1994, p.170

(14) keoi⁵ hou² zung¹ ji³ bei² jan⁴ zaan³
The emphasis on the affected possessor/sufferer suggests that the marked indirect passive construction is motivated by pragmatic reasons. To sum up, the subjects of indirect passives are believed to carry the discourse role *topic* and are necessarily associated with a malefactive semantic role.

Having established that a negatively affected *topical* subject is a crucial feature of indirect passives, a question that follows is: what are the syntactic relations of the constituents in indirect passives, and what are the consequences of such an analysis?

### 4.2 Syntactic relation of pre-畀 and post-畀NP

The passivization rule states that the agent role is expressed as an adjunct or an OBL and the patient NP is then expressed as the subject by LMT (Bresnan and Kanerva 1989). A possible relation between the topical pre-畀 and post-畀NP (the highlighted NP in (15)) is that they are a discontinuous subject.
Rumor has it that those people had their houses sealed up.

The hypothesis can be tested by restoring the ‘original’ structure, i.e. putting the two NPs together. Consider a construction with discontinuous NP in Cantonese:

(16) \[\text{taai}^4 \text{zi}^2 \quad \text{ngo}^5 \text{sik}^6 \text{zo}^2 \quad \text{saam}^1 \text{lap}^1 \] (discontinuous NP)

\[
\text{提子 我 食 吃 三 粒}
\]

Grapes 1sg eat Perf three CL
For grapes, I have eaten three.

(17) \[\text{ngo}^5 \text{sik}^6 \text{zo}^2 \quad \text{saam}^1 \text{lap}^1 \text{taai}^4 \text{zi}^2 \] (restored construction)

\[
\text{我 食 吃 三 粒 提子}
\]

1sg eat Perf three CL grapes
I have eaten three grapes.

Going back to (15), the demonstrative pronoun ‘啲嘅 gwo^2 di^1’ (those) refers to the actors or actresses (‘di^1 ngai^6 jan^4 嚮 艺人’) in the context. It is discovered that the possessor-possessee NP formed by the two NPs is not a grammatical one, see (18):

(18) \[* \text{gwo}^2 \text{di}^1 \text{ngai}^6 \text{jan}^4 \text{uk}^1 \quad \text{jau}^6 \text{waa}^6 \text{ji}^1 \text{gaa}^3 \quad \text{bei}^2 \quad \text{jan}^4 \quad \text{fong}^1 \]

\[\text{啲 嚮 艺人屋 又 話 而 家 艺人 封}
\]

those actors/actresses house Part say now PASS people seal
(Intended meaning: the actors’/actresses’ houses are said to be sealed.)

Failing to form a grammatical NP in the ‘restoration’ test suggests that the pre-

\[\text{界 bei}^2 \text{and post-界 bei}^2 \text{NP are not a discontinuous subject.}
\]

Diagnosis of grammatical status of constituents in Cantonese is rather difficult as Cantonese has very little morphological marking. Constructions of the same type in other languages serve as a good pointer for this kind of unclarity. Indirect passives in Japanese and Korean are two good pointers in this matter. Consider the indirect passives in Japanese and Korean below:
In the passive constructions in (19)-(20), the possessors are topicalized and marked by either the topic marker ‘wa’ as in (19), i.e. Ken-wa, or the nominative marker ‘ga’ as in (20), i.e. Ken-ga. The heads of the patients are marked by the accusative marker, i.e. zitensya-o (bike) in (19) and kao-o (face) in (20). The phenomenon is also found in Korean indirect passives. In (21), the possessor of the patient is marked by the nominative marker ‘i’, i.e. haksayng-i (the student) whereas the head is marked by the accusative marker ‘ul’, i.e. son-ul (hand). It is shown clearly by the case markers on the head of the patient NP in Japanese and Korean indirect passive constructions that the non-topical part of the patient retains its object status.

So far, we have established the grammatical relations and semantic roles of an indirect passive construction as below:

(22)  
NP_{1} \text{ bei}^{2} \text{ NP}_{2} \quad V \quad \text{ NP}_{3}
grammatical functions : \text{ SUBJ} \quad \text{ OBL}_{0} \quad \text{ OBJ}
semantic roles : \text{ malefactive} \quad \text{ agent} \quad \text{ patient}
4.3 Structural Representation

As established in the previous section, the indirect passive subject which is usually the possessor of the post-
bei² NP is associated with a malefactive and the post-
bei² NP is an object. An important point about these features of indirect passives in Cantonese is that they are associated with this particular ‘NP₁-
bei²-NP₂-V-NP₃’ structure. In other words, there is a change in syntactic valency associated with this structure. There is an extension of valency of the PRED from two to three because of the additional malefactive topic role. The theta-role assignment and f-structure of an indirect passive construction is proposed as below:

\[
(23) \quad \langle \frac{\text{MALEFACTIVE} \quad \text{AGENT}}{\text{SUBJ}} \quad \frac{\text{PATIENT}}{\text{OBL}_0} \quad \frac{\text{OBL}}{\text{OBJ}} \rangle
\]

\[
(24)
(\uparrow \text{PRED}) = \text{verb} \langle \text{SUBJ} \quad \text{OBL}_0 \quad \text{OBJ} \rangle
(\uparrow \text{VOICE}) = \text{PASSIVE}
(\uparrow \text{FORM}) = \text{bei}^2
(\uparrow \text{TOP}) = \text{SUBJ}
\]

Take (7) (repeated in (25)) in Section 1 as an example. The possessor ‘can⁴ saang¹ 陳生’ (Mr. Chan) of the patient ‘can⁴ saang⁴ gaa¹ ce¹ 陳生架車’ (Mr. Chan’s car) is associated with a topic role in the i-structure. The corresponding lexical entry specification of ‘Mr. Chan’ is represented as (26):

\[
(25) \quad \text{Can}^4 \text{ saang}^1 \text{ bei}^2 \text{ tung}^4 \text{ si}^6 \text{ zong}^6\text{-laan}^6 \text{ zo}^2 \text{ gaa}^3 \text{ ce}^1
\]

\[
\text{陳生畀同事撞-爛呢单車}
\]

\[
\text{Mr. Chan Pass colleague crash-broken Perf CL car}
\]

\[
\text{Mr. Chan had his car crashed by his colleague.}
\]

\[
^8 \text{ We thank an anonymous reviewer for this suggestion.}
\]
The functional specification in the lexical entry, i.e. \([\text{chan} \in (\uparrow \sigma \uparrow \sigma \text{DF})]\), requires the NP ‘can\(^4\) saang\(^1\) 陳生’ (Mr. Chan) to be a member of discourse functions, i.e. TOPIC in this case. The Extended Coherence Condition (Bresnan and Mchombo 1987) states that:

*FOCUS and TOPIC must be linked to the semantic predicate argument structure of the sentence in which they occur, either by functionally or by anaphorically binding an argument.*

‘Can\(^4\) saang\(^1\) 陳生’ (Mr. Chan) expressed as ‘\text{chan}’ in the i-structure, is the topic while the rest of the proposition (i.e. what happens to ‘\text{chan}’) is the focus. The topical NP ‘can\(^4\) saang\(^1\) 陳生’ (Mr. Chan) is linked to SUBJ in the f-structure. According to the Uniqueness Condition, each attribute in the f-structure must have a unique value only. With the subject position now being occupied by the possessor ‘can\(^4\) saang\(^1\) 陳生’ (Mr. Chan), the possessee NP ‘gaa\(^3\) ce\(^1\) 架車’ (the car) cannot be mapped to the SUBJ.

Combining the i-structure and the f-structure in (26), the resultant representation of the indirect passive sentence in (25) is shown in (27):

(27)  

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{TOPIC} & \{ \text{chan} \} \\
\text{FOCUS} & \{ \text{got crashed by colleague - car} \}
\end{align*}
\]
5 Conclusion

In sum, Cantonese indirect passives involve an extension of syntactic valency due to an additional topical malefactive argument. I argue that a crucial distinction between the subject in canonical passives and that in indirect passives lies in the ‘contributing factor’ of the topic role. In canonical passives, the resultant grammatical function SUBJ carried by the patient NP via passive mapping rules is a topic by default and is expressed in sentence initial position, as illustrated in (6). On the other hand, in indirect passives, a NP carrying the malefactive role (not the entire patient) is given a topic role through the context. This particular syntactic structure is the outcome of an interaction between information packaging and grammatical relations.

References


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