

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 Introduction¹

Unlike English, the agent in Cantonese passives² is obligatory. Mapping in canonical passives involves the agent being expressed as a non-core GF OBL_θ, 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*.³ 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

¹ I am very grateful to the attendees and the audience of LFG18 for their attention and valuable comments, in particular to Prof. Mary Dalrymple, Prof. Miriam Butt, and Prof. Alex Alsina. I am also grateful to my supervisors Prof. Stephen Matthews and Dr. Olivia Lam for their contributive comments and support. Naturally all errors are my own.

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)).⁴

- (1) Gwo³ hoi² aa⁶, dei⁶ tit³ zeoi³ faai³
 過 海 呀, 地 鐵 最 快
 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?
 綠 色 生 活, 你 嚮 應 咗 未?
 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

⁴ Symbols and abbreviations used in this paper: * = Ungrammatical; 1st = First Person; 2nd = Second Person; 3rd = Third Person; Ag = Agent; Pt = Patient; CL. = Classifier; DEF = Definite Determiner; NEG = Negation Marker; OBJ = Object; Perf = Perfective Aspect; Pass = Passive marker; PRED = Predicate; SG = Singular; SUBJ = Subject; Th = Theme; Sfp=sentence final particle. The romanization scheme adopted in this paper is based on the one developed by The Linguistic Society of Hong Kong (2002). There are altogether six tones in this scheme: 1 = high level; 2 = high rising; 3 = mid level; 4 = low falling; 5 = low rising; 6 = low level. The tone is marked as superscript of each romanized character.

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 咩 呀?
 Ah Chan do what Sfp
 What happened to Chan?

(3-ii) keoi⁵ bei² jan⁴ caau² zo² jau⁴ jyu² aa³
 佢 畀 人 炒 咗 魷 魚 呀
 3rd sgPass 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-咩 呀?
 Ah Chan CL car what-happen Sfp
 What happened to Chan's car?

(4-ii) bei² jan⁴ zong⁶ zo² aa³
 畀 人 撞 咗 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*.⁵ The resultant grammatical function SUBJ carried by the patient via passive mapping rules makes it a topic by default.⁶

Mapping in canonical passives:

(5)

Can ⁴ saang ¹	gaa ³ ce ¹	bei ²	tung ⁴ si ⁶	zong ⁶ laan ⁶	zo ²
[陳 生	架 車]	[畀 同事	撞 爛	咗]	
Mr. Chan	CL car	Pass	colleague	crash-broken	Perf

Mr. Chan’s car was crashed by his colleague.

(6)

	tung ⁴ si ⁶	can ⁴ saang ¹	gaa ³ ce ¹
	同事	陳 生	-架 車
	(colleague)	(Mr.Chan’s car)	
zong ⁶ laan ⁶	< Ag	Pt	>
撞 爛 <small>passive</small>			
Crash-broken	OBL _θ	SUBJ (<i>default topic</i>)	

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

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).

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

(7)

Can ⁴ saang ¹	bei ² tung ⁴ si ⁶	zong ⁶ laan ⁶ zo ²	gaa ³ ce ¹
陳 生	[畀 同 事 撞 爛 咗]		架 車
Mr. Chan	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 bei²’ sentences, only 4 indirect sentences are found.⁷ 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 jan⁴ gam² joeng² lam² zyu⁶ wan² go³ san¹ sai³ gaa³ gam² joeng²

或 者 啲 藝 人 噉 樣 諗 住 搵 個 新 世 界 噉 樣 。

Or Det $\frac{\text{actors}}{\text{actresses}}$ that way think find CL new world Part Part

Or, the actors/actresses were thinking of living a new life

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 畀’. The other uses of ‘bei² 畀’ 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 benefactory role (23 %) (iv) as a particle meaning ‘if it were’ (1 %).

(S2)

Dim² zi² fat¹ jin⁴ gaan¹ jau⁶ m⁴ dak¹ laak³

點 知 忽然間 又 唔 得 嘞。

Unexpectedly suddenly Part NEG work Part

Unexpectedly, it turned out that it did not work.

(S3)

Zik¹hai⁶ teng¹ gong² gwo² di¹ jau⁶ waa⁶ ji¹ gaa³ bei² jan⁴ fong¹ uk¹ aa³...

即係聽講 嗰啲又話而家畀人封屋呀...

That is rumor those Part say now PASS people seal house Sfp

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

(8)-(S3) is an example of indirect passive: the subject of the VP ‘bei² jan⁴ fung¹ uk¹ 畀人封屋’ (having (their) houses sealed up) is expressed by the demonstrative pronoun ‘gwo² di¹’ (those) which refers to ‘di¹ ngai⁶ jan⁴ 啲藝人’ (the actors/actresses) in the previous discourse (S1). This is consistent with the assumption that topics must be referential and may or may not be overtly represented by noun phrases, while foci must be overtly expressed (Dalrymple and Nikolaeva 2011:50). The topichood of the DP ‘gwo² di¹’ (those) (= ‘di¹ ngai⁶ jan⁴ 啲藝人’ the actors/actresses) is further supported by the ‘what-about’ test for topichood (Dalrymple and Nikolaeva 2011).

(9)

(9-i) Gwo²di¹ ngai⁶ jan⁴ dim² aa³?

嗰啲藝人點呀

those $\frac{\text{actors}}{\text{actresses}}$ how Sfp

What about the actors/actresses?

(9-ii) Zik¹hai⁶ teng¹ gong² gwo²di¹ jau⁶ waa⁶ ji¹ gaa³ bei²jan⁴ fong¹ uk¹ aa³

即係聽講 嗰啲又話而家畀人封屋呀

That is rumor those Part say now Pass people seal house Sfp

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

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: *their houses being sealed up*

Building on the previous context, ‘di¹ ngai⁶ jan⁴ 啲藝人’ (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 jan⁴ge³uk¹ 藝人嘅屋’ as the subject (as in (10-ii)) would be odd.

(10)

(10-i) Gwo²di¹ ngai⁶ jan⁴ dim² aa³?

啲 啲 藝 人 點 呀
 Those $\frac{\textit{actors}}{\textit{actresses}}$ how Sfp
 How are the actors/actresses?

(10-ii)# di¹ ngai⁶ jan⁴ ge³ uk¹ ji⁴ gaa¹ bei² jan⁴ fong¹ zo² aa³

啲 藝 人 嘅 屋 而 家 畀 人 封 咗 呀...
 Det $\frac{\textit{actors}}{\textit{actresses}}$ 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 啲藝人’ (the actors/actresses)’ as the subject, i.e. *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
佢 幅 畫 畀 老師 貼 堂
3rd sg CL picture Pass teacher display

His/her picture was displayed by the teacher.

keoi⁵ hou² zung¹ ji³ bei² jan⁴ zaan³

(Matthews & Yip 1994, p.170)

- (12) keoi⁵ hou² zung¹ ji³ bei² jan⁴ zaan³
佢 好 鍾 意 畀 人 讚
3rd sg very like Pass people praise
S/he likes being praised so much.

(13)

(13-i) #keoi⁵ bei² lou⁵ si¹ tip³ tong⁴ fuk¹ waa² (positive event)

佢 畀 老師 貼 堂 幅 畫

3rd sg Pass teacher display CL picture

(The sentence can only be understood as a relative clause, meaning

“The painting that is/was displayed ...”)

(13-ii) keoi⁵ bei² lou⁵ si¹ pai¹ ping⁴ fuk¹ waa²

佢 畀 老師 批 評 幅 畫

3rd sg Pass teacher criticize CL picture

S/he had his/her picture being criticized by the teacher.

(14) *keoi⁵ zung¹ ji³ bei² jan⁴ zaan³ bun² syu¹

佢 鍾 意 畀 人 讚 本 書

3rd sg like Pass people praise CL book

(Intended meaning: He/She likes his/her book being praised.)

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 bei² and post-畀 bei²NP

The passivization rule states that the agent role is expressed as an adjunct or an OBL_θ and the patient NP is then expressed as the subject by LMT (Bresnan and Kanerva 1989). A possible relation between the topical pre-畀 bei² and post-畀 bei² NP (the highlighted NP in (15)) is that they are a discontinuous subject.

(15) (repeated in (8)-(S3))

Zik¹hai⁶ teng¹ gong² **gwo² di¹** jau⁶ waa⁶ ji¹ gaa³ bei² jan⁴ fong¹ **uk¹ aa³**...
即係聽講 嗰啲又話而家畀人封屋呀...

That is rumor those Part say now PASS people seal house Part
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) **taai⁴ zi²** ngo⁵ sik⁶ zo² **saam¹ lap¹** (discontinuous NP)

提子我食咗三粒

Grapes 1stsg eat Perf three CL

For grapes, I have eaten three.

(17) ngo⁵ sik⁶ zo² **saam¹lap¹taai⁴zi²** (restored construction)

我食咗三粒提子

1stsg eat Perf three CL grapes

I have eaten three grapes.

Going back to (15), the demonstrative pronoun ‘嗰啲 gwo² di¹’ (those) refers to the actors or actresses (‘di¹ ngai⁶ jan⁴ 啲藝人’) in the context. It is discovered that the possessor-possessee NP formed by the two NPs is not a grammatical one, see (18):

(18) *gwo² di¹ ngai⁶ jan⁴ uk¹ jau⁶ waa⁶ ji¹ gaa³ bei² jan⁴ fong¹
嗰啲 藝人屋 又話而家畀人封

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-畀 bei² and post-畀 bei² 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:

(19) Ken_i-wa tomodachi-ni zitsensya_i-o kowas-are-ta
 Ken-TOP friend-DAT bike-ACC break-PASS-PAST
 Ken had (his) bike broken by his friends.

(Ishizuka 2010)

(20) Ken_i-ga Naomi-ni kao_i-o tatak-are-ta
 Ken-NOM Naomi-DAT face-ACC hit-PASS-PAST
 Ken was hit in the face by Naomi.

(Ishizuka 2010)

(21) haksayng-i sensayngnim-eykey son-ul cap-hi-ess-ta
 student-nom teacher-dat hand-acc catch-pass-past-decl.
 The student had his hand caught by the teacher.

(The student was caught by the hand by the teacher.)

(Huang 1999, p.52)

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. zitsensya-*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	bei ² NP ₂	V	NP ₃
grammatical functions :	SUBJ	OBL _θ		OBJ
semantic roles :	malefactive	agent		patient

4.3 Structural Representation

As established in the previous section, the indirect passive subject which is usually the possessor of the post-*bei*² NP is associated with a malefactive and the post-*bei*² NP is an object. An important point about these features of indirect passives in Cantonese is that they are associated with this particular ‘NP₁-*bei*²-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.⁸ The theta-role assignment and f-structure of an indirect passive construction is proposed as below:

$$(23) < \frac{MALEFACTIVE \quad AGENT \quad PATIENT}{SUBJ \quad OBL_{\theta} \quad OBJ} >$$

(24)

$$(\uparrow \text{PRED}) = \text{verb} < \text{SUBJ} \quad \text{OBL}_{\theta} \quad \text{OBJ} >$$

$$(\uparrow \text{VOICE}) = \text{PASSIVE}$$

$$(\uparrow \text{FORM}) = \text{bei}^2$$

$$(\uparrow \text{TOP}) = \text{SUBJ}$$

Take (7) (repeated in (25)) in Section 1 as an example. The possessor ‘*can*⁴ *saang*¹ 陳生’ (Mr. Chan) of the patient ‘*can*⁴ *saang*¹ *gaa*¹ *ce*¹ 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):

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

陳 生 畀 同 事 撞 -爛 咗 架 車

Mr. Chan Pass colleague crash-broken Perf CL car

Mr. Chan had his car crashed by his colleague.

⁸ We thank an anonymous reviewer for this suggestion.

TOPIC	[PRED ‘陳生 can ⁴ saang ¹ ’]
PRED	‘撞爛 zong ⁶ laan ⁶ <(↑SUBJ) (↑OBL _θ) (↑OBJ)>’
ASP	PERF
VOICE	[PASSIVE FORM ‘BEI ² ’]
SUBJ	
OBJ	[PRED ‘架車 gaa ³ ce ¹ ’]
OBL _θ	[PRED ‘同事 tung ⁴ si ⁶ ’]

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.

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