

## Topic Role of Subject in Cantonese Indirect Passives

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One of the widely acknowledged but under-studied features of Cantonese passives<sup>1</sup> is a subtype of Cantonese passives generally known as *Indirect Passives*<sup>2</sup>. The subject in Cantonese indirect passives corresponds to part of the semantic argument, often the possessor of the object, rather than the active object<sup>3</sup>. One example of Cantonese active construction, its corresponding indirect passive construction<sup>4</sup> and the canonical passive are shown below. The predicate ‘zong6-laan6’ 撞-爛 (hit-broken) in (1)-(3) subcategorizes for two semantic arguments. In its indirect passive counterpart in (3), only the possessor of the object, rather than the whole argument, becomes the passive subject.

- (1) Active            *zong6-laan6* 撞-爛 ‘hit-broken’  
 Zoeng1 saang1    *zong6-laan6* zo2            **Can4 saang1 gaa3 ce1**  
 張    生            撞-爛            咗            陳    生    架    車  
 Mr. Cheung    hit-broken    perf.    Mr. Chan    CL    car  
 ‘Mr. Cheung has crashed Mr. Chan’s car.’
- (2) Canonical passive    *bei2+ zong6-laan6* 畀+撞-爛 ‘PASS+hit-broken’  
**Can4 saang1 gaa3 ce1** *bei2*    Zoeng1 saang1 *zong6-laan6*    zo2  
 陳    生    架    車    畀    張    生    撞-爛            咗  
 Mr. Chan    car            PASS Mr. Cheung    hit-broken    perf.  
 ‘Mr. Chan’s car has been crashed by Mr. Cheung.’
- (3) Indirect passive            *bei2+ zong6-laan6* 畀+撞-爛 ‘PASS+ hit-broken’  
 Can4 saang1 *bei2* Zoeng1 saang1 *zong6-laan6* zo2 gaa3 ce1  
 陳    生    畀    張            生    撞-爛            咗    架    車  
 Mr. Chan    PASS Mr. Cheung    hit-broken    perf.    CL    car  
 ‘Mr. Chan had his car crashed by Mr. Cheung.’

‘zong6-laan6’ 撞-爛 (active)	SUBJ	OBJ
	< Ag	Pt >
	Zoeng1 saang1 張    生 (Mr. Cheung)	Can4 saang1 gaa3 ce1 陳    生    架    車 (Mr. Chan’s car)
‘bei2+ zong6-laan6’ 撞-爛 (PASS + hit- broken)	OBL <sub>ϕ</sub>	SUBJ

The aim of this paper is two-fold. First, I am going to demonstrate with actual corpus data that the indirect passive subject bears a *topic* role in information structure and corresponds to the TOPIC function in an f-structure. Second, Adopting Dalrymple and Nikolaeva’s (2011) approach, I am going to show how a unified mapping of passives can be done by incorporating information structure role.

### Section 1 Informational topic role of SUBJ in Cantonese Indirect Passives

The indirect passive subject in (4) (HKCanCorp) shows behaviour consistent with the typical *topic* role. The indirect passive subject is expressed as a DP bound by the antecedent referent in the discourse. The subject of the VP ‘*bei2 jan4 fong1 uk1*’ (had (their) houses sealed up) is expressed by the DP ‘*gwo2 di1*’ (those), which refers to ‘*di1 ngai6 jan4*’ (the actors/actresses) in the previous discourse. This is consistent with the description of the *topic* role in that *topics* must be referential and may or may not be overtly represented by noun phrases, while *foci* must be overtly expressed

<sup>1</sup> The basic structure of Cantonese passives is SUBJ - *bei2* - agent - V - (OBJ). The agent NP in Cantonese passives is obligatory.

<sup>2</sup> 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.

<sup>3</sup> The subject of indirect passive can also correspond to POSS of OBL<sub>ϕ</sub> and POSS of POSS of active OBJ, but not POSS of active SUBJ or OBJ within COMP. See Appendix for examples.

<sup>4</sup> Huang (1999) categorizes passives into direct passives, inclusive passives and external/adversative passives. External/adversative passives involve intransitive verbs and often idiomatic expressions. External/ adversative passives are very rare. The formation of external/adversative passives indeed provides further support to my suggestion that the passive subject carries TOP function.

(Dalrymple and Nikolaeva 2011:50). Moreover, it is demonstrated with the ‘what-about’ test (see appendix for representation of information exchange) that phrasal structure reflects the locus of discussion and the choice between direct and indirect passive reflects the emphasis on the patient and the possessor respectively.

(4)	Waak6 ze2 <b>di1 ngai6 jan4</b> 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 <b>det actors/actresses</b> that way think find CL new world part. part. Or, the actors/actresses thought to live a new life ... [POSS] PASS Ag verb OBJ Zik1 hai6 teng1 gong2 [ <b>gwo2 di1</b> ] <sub>DP</sub> jau6 waa6 ji1 gaa3 bei2 <b>jan4 fong1 uk1 aa3</b> ... 即 係 聽 講 嗰 啲 又 話 而 家 畀 人 封 屋 啊... That is rumor those part. say now PASS jan4 seal house part Rumor has it that those people had their houses sealed up.
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‘**Di1 ngai6 jan4**’ (the actors/actresses), which is the antecedent of the demonstrative pronoun in the later context, is the most salient referent in the utterance. In other words, the indirect passive carries the informational role *topic*.

### Section 2 Mapping in Indirect Passives

As established, the possessor *Can4 saang1* 陳生 ‘Mr. Chan’ of the patient *Can4 saang1 gaa3 ce1* 陳生架車 ‘Mr. Chan’s car’ in (3) possesses a meaning constructor (abbreviated ‘*chan*’ as shown in (5)).

(5) *chan*:

HUMAN	+
STATUS	IDENTIFIABLE
ACTV	ACTIVE
<b>DF</b>	<b>TOPIC</b>

Referring to the correspondence between semantic feature decomposition and grammatical functions provided by Bresnan and Kanerva (1989), the other unrestricted grammatical function besides SUBJ is OBJ. The most optimal grammatical function for the ‘left behind’ possessee is OBJ. Accordingly, the resultant a-structure to f-structure mapping of indirect passives is (see appendix for proposed f-structure of (3)):

(6)	bei2 + zong6 laan6 PASS + 撞爛	< Ag	Pt- POSSESSOR	Pt- POSSESSEE>
	‘hit-broken’			
		OBL <sub>θ</sub>	SUBJ	OBJ

### Section 3 Conclusion

I establish that the indirect passive subject carries the information structure role *topic*. The semantic feature [DF TOPIC] plays a crucial role in the formation of indirect passives as it associates with the functional description in the lexical entry of the noun phrase, which results in the different mapping in direct and indirect passives.

Bresnan, J and Kanerva, J. M. (1989). Locative inversion in Chichewa: A case study of factorization in grammar. *Linguistic Inquiry* 20 (1),1-50.

Reprinted in Stowell et al. (1992).

Dalrymple, Mary and Nikolaeva, Irina (2011) *Objects and information structure*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Huang, C.-T. James. (1999). *Chinese passives in comparative perspective*. *Tsing Hua Journal of Chinese Studies* 29:423-509.

Luke, Kang-Kwong and May Lai-Yin Wong. 2015. The Hong Kong Cantonese Corpus: Design and uses. *Journal of Chinese Linguistics*.

## Appendix

### Subject NPs in indirect passives

(i) Subject NP = POSS of OBL<sub>θ</sub>

**can4 saang1** bei2 lou5 sai3 fong3 zo2 zoeng1 [hai2 toi2 min2]  
 陳 生 昇 老 細 放 咗 張 warning [喺 枱 面]<sub>OBL<sub>θ</sub></sub>  
**Mr. Chan** PASS boss put perf. CL on desk surface

Lit.: A warning letter was put on Mr. Chan's desk by his boss.

(ii) Subject NP = POSS of POSS of OBJ

**can4 saang1** bei2 Lei5 saang1 ling1 zo2 [[\_\_\_\_go3 haak3 ge3]<sub>POSS of POSS</sub> din6 waa2]  
 陳 生 昇 李 生 拎 咗 [[\_\_\_\_個 客 嘅] 電話]<sub>OBJ</sub>  
**Mr. Chan** PASS Mr. Lee take perf. CL client poss phone number

Lit.: Mr. Chan had his client's phone number taken by Mr. Lee.

### 'What-about' test based on (4)

(iii) A: Gwo2 **di1 ngai6 jan4** dim2 aa3?

嗰 啲 藝 人 點 呀  
 those **actors/actresses** how part.

How are the actors/actresses?

B-i: Zik1 hai6 teng1 gong2 **gwo2 di1** jau6 waa6 yi1 gaa3 bei2 jan4 fong1 uk1 aa3

即 係 聽 講 嗰 啲 又 話 而 家 昇 人 封 屋 啊

That is rumor **those** part. say now PASS jan4 seal house part

(=啲 藝人 'the actors/actresses')

Rumor has it that those actors/actresses had their houses sealed up.

B-ii: # **di1 ngai6 jan4 ge3 uk1** yi1 gaa3 bei2 jan4 fong1 zo2 aa3

啲 藝 人 嘅 屋 而 家 昇 人 封 咗 啊

**those actors/actresses poss house** now PASS jan4 seal perf part

Those actors'/actresses' houses have now been sealed up.

The information exchange can be represented as below:

a. pragmatic presupposition: the actors/actresses undergo X

b. pragmatic assertion: X = *their houses being sealed up*

c. focus: *their houses being sealed up*

(iv) F-structure for (3)

PRED	‘撞爛 hit-broken <(↑ SUBJ) (↑ OBL <sub>θ</sub> ) (OBJ <sub>θ</sub> )>’
ASP	PERF
PASSIVE	[ + ]
	[ FORM ‘BEI2’ ]
TOPIC	[ PRED ‘陳生 Mr. Chan’ ]
SUBJ	_____
OBL <sub>θ</sub>	[ PRED ‘同事 colleague’ ]
OBJ	[ PRED ‘架車 the car’ ]