

# Topic Role of Subject in Cantonese Indirect Passives

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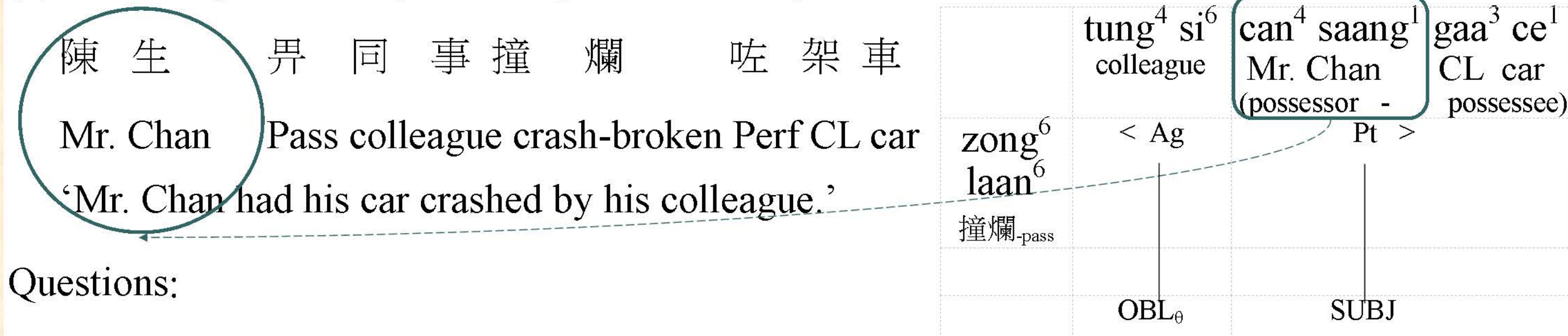
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## Introduction

The subject in Cantonese indirect passives corresponds to part of the semantic argument, often the possessor of the object, rather than the active object.

(1) can<sup>4</sup> saang<sup>1</sup> bei<sup>2</sup> tung<sup>4</sup> si<sup>6</sup> zong<sup>6</sup> laan<sup>6</sup> zo<sup>2</sup> gaa<sup>3</sup> ce<sup>1</sup>



Questions:

(a) How are indirect passives formed?

(b) What are the grammatical functions of the constituents?

## Evidence of Informational Topic Role of SUBJ in Cantonese Indirect Passives

Evidence (i): An indirect passive subject co-refers with its antecedent.

Consider an example of indirect passive from HKCanCorp (Luke and Wong, 2015):

(2) waak<sup>6</sup> ze<sup>2</sup> di<sup>1</sup> ngai<sup>6</sup> jan<sup>4</sup> gam<sup>2</sup> joeng<sup>2</sup> lam<sup>2</sup> zyu<sup>6</sup> wan<sup>2</sup> go<sup>3</sup> san<sup>1</sup> sai<sup>3</sup> gaai<sup>3</sup> gam<sup>2</sup> joeng<sup>2</sup>  
或者啲藝人噏樣諗住搵個新世界噏樣  
Or CL actor/actress that way think find CL new world like this  
“Or, the actors/actresses thought to live a new life...”

Zik<sup>1</sup> hai<sup>6</sup> teng<sup>1</sup> gong<sup>2</sup> [go<sup>2</sup> di<sup>1</sup>] DP jau<sup>6</sup> waa<sup>6</sup> ji<sup>1</sup> gaa<sup>3</sup> bei<sup>2</sup> jan<sup>4</sup> fong<sup>1</sup> uk<sup>1</sup> aa<sup>3</sup> ...  
即係聽講嗰啲又話而家畀人封屋啊...  
That is hear say Dem CL also say now Pass person seal house Sfp  
“Rumor has it that those people had their houses sealed up.”

Evidence (ii): The ‘what-about’ test

(3) A: Go<sup>2</sup> di<sup>1</sup> ngai<sup>6</sup> jan<sup>4</sup> dim<sup>2</sup> aa<sup>3</sup>?  
嗰啲藝人點呀  
Dem CL actor/actress how Sfp  
“How are the actors/actresses?”

B-i: Zik<sup>1</sup> hai<sup>6</sup> teng<sup>1</sup> gong<sup>2</sup> go<sup>2</sup> di<sup>1</sup> jau<sup>6</sup> waa<sup>6</sup> yi<sup>1</sup> gaa<sup>3</sup> bei<sup>2</sup> jan<sup>4</sup> fong<sup>1</sup> uk<sup>1</sup> aa<sup>3</sup>  
即係聽講嗰啲又話而家畀人封屋啊  
That is hear say Dem CL also say now Pass person seal house Sfp  
“Rumor has it that those actors/actresses had their houses sealed up.”  
(go<sup>2</sup> di<sup>1</sup> 嗰啲 = the actors/actresses)

B-ii: # di<sup>1</sup> ngai<sup>6</sup> jan<sup>4</sup> ge<sup>3</sup> uk<sup>1</sup> yi<sup>1</sup> gaa<sup>3</sup> bei<sup>2</sup> jan<sup>4</sup> fong<sup>1</sup> zo<sup>2</sup> aa<sup>3</sup>  
啲藝人嘅屋而家畀人封咗啊  
CL actor/actress Poss house now Pass person seal Perf Sfp  
“Those actors’/actresses’ houses have now been sealed up.”

**Observation:** The indirect passive subject shows behaviour consistent with the typical *topic* role.

## The So-Called ‘Retained Objects’

The constituent that remains in the canonical post-verbal position is **NOT** an object.

Evidence (i): The post-verbal DP/NP cannot be further passivized.

(4) \*gaa<sup>3</sup> ce<sup>1</sup> bei<sup>2</sup> can<sup>4</sup> saang<sup>1</sup> tung<sup>4</sup> si<sup>6</sup> zong<sup>6</sup>-laan<sup>6</sup> zo<sup>2</sup>  
架車畀[陳生]同事撞-爛咗  
CL car Pass Mr. Chan colleague crash-broken Perf  
(5) \*gaa<sup>3</sup> ce<sup>1</sup> can<sup>4</sup> saang<sup>1</sup> bei<sup>2</sup> tung<sup>4</sup> si<sup>6</sup> zong<sup>6</sup>-laan<sup>6</sup> zo<sup>2</sup>  
架車[陳生] [畀同事撞-爛咗]  
CL car Mr. Chan Pass colleague crash-broken Perf

Evidence (ii): The post-verbal position is the most natural position for a NP/DP that is in focus.

(6-i) can<sup>4</sup> saang<sup>1</sup> dim<sup>2</sup> aa<sup>3</sup>  
[陳生] [點呀]?  
[topic] [focus]  
“How was Mr. Chan?”  
(6-ii) can<sup>4</sup> saang<sup>1</sup> bei<sup>2</sup> tung<sup>4</sup> si<sup>6</sup> zong<sup>6</sup>-laan<sup>6</sup> zo<sup>2</sup> gaa<sup>3</sup> ce<sup>1</sup>  
[陳生] [畀同事撞-爛咗架車]  
[topic] [focus]  
“Mr. Chan had his car crashed by his colleague.”

**Proposal:** The indirect passive subject + ‘retained object’ = *Discontinuous subject*

Discontinuous grammatical functions are not unique to indirect passive constructions.

(7-i) Canonical structure  
ngo<sup>5</sup> sik<sup>6</sup> zo<sup>2</sup> saam<sup>1</sup> lap<sup>1</sup> taai<sup>4</sup> zi<sup>2</sup>  
我食咗[三粒提子]  
1<sup>st</sup>sg eat Perf [three CL grapes]  
“I have eaten three grapes.”

(7-ii) Discontinuous OBJ  
taai<sup>4</sup> zi<sup>2</sup> ngo<sup>5</sup> sik<sup>6</sup> zo<sup>2</sup> saam<sup>1</sup> lap<sup>1</sup>  
[提子] 我食咗[三粒]  
[grapes] 1<sup>st</sup>sg eat Perf [three CL]  
“For the grapes, I have eaten three.”

## Key Claims

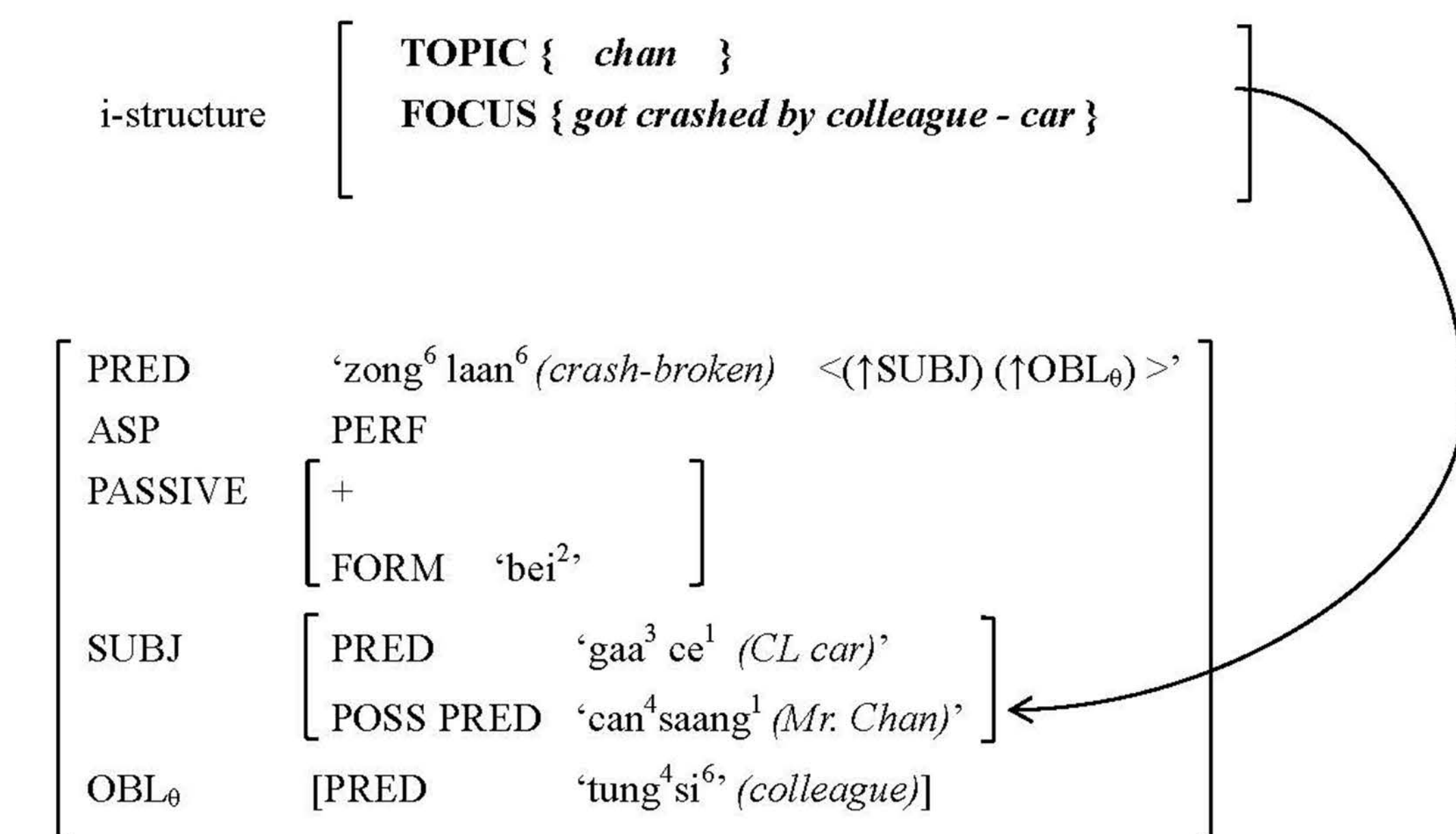
- Part of the patient NP bears the informational *topic* role.
- The topicalized NP ‘can<sup>4</sup> saang<sup>1</sup> 陳生’ (Mr. Chan) which bears a *topic* role in (1) is in the sentence -initial; and subject often corresponds to the topic position in Cantonese and Mandarin Chinese (Li and Thompson 1976).
- The rest of the original passive subject ‘gaa<sup>3</sup> ce<sup>1</sup> 架車’ (the car) falls within the focus domain of the sentence and remains in its post-verbal position.

can <sup>4</sup> saang <sup>1</sup>	bei <sup>2</sup> tung <sup>4</sup> si <sup>6</sup> zong <sup>6</sup> -laan <sup>6</sup> zo <sup>2</sup> gaa <sup>3</sup> ce <sup>1</sup>
[陳生]	[畀同事撞-爛咗架車]
Mr. Chan	had his car crashed by his colleague
TOPIC	FOCUS

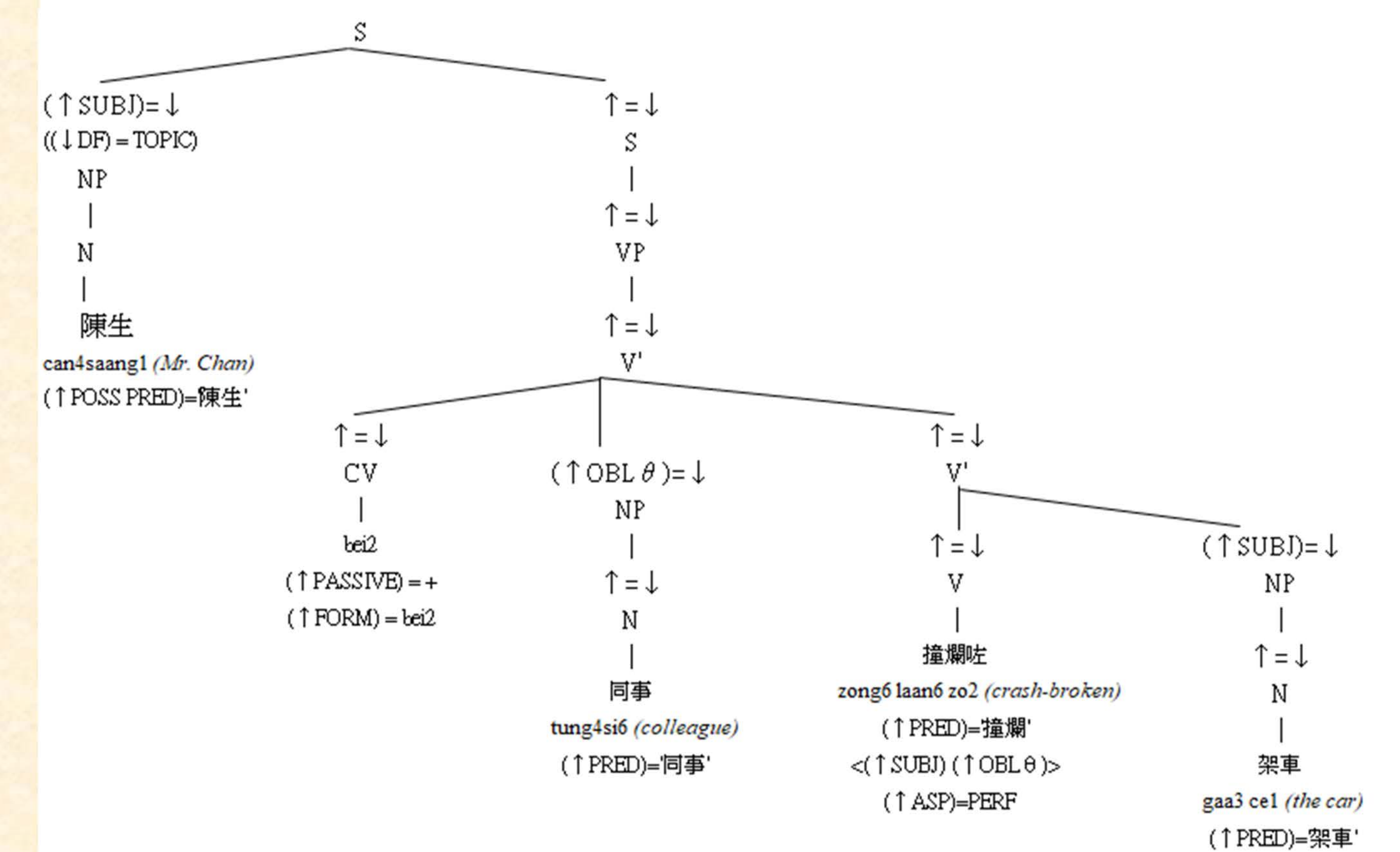
- (1) is a structure resulted from passivization and topicalization. The passive subject and the post-verbal DP form a discontinuous subject.

## Levels of Representation

(8) Association between i-structure and f-structure of (1), following Dalrymple and Nikolaeva (2011):



(9) The c-structure of (1):



## Conclusion

- The indirect passive, a.k.a. the retained object construction, is the outcome of passivization and topicalization.
- Part of the passive subject is pragmatically prominent and bears a discourse *topic* role.
- The so-called ‘retained object’ (Huang 1999), i.e. the post-verbal DP/NP, in indirect passives is not an object. Topicalization of part of the argument results in having a discontinuous grammatical function, more specifically, the passive SUBJ.

**Reference**  
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.  
Li, Charles N. and Sandra A. Thompson. 1976. Subject and Topic: A new typology of language. In Charles N. Li (ed). *Subject and Topic*. New York: Academic Press.  
Luke, Kang-Kwong and May Lai-Yin Wong. 2015. The Hong Kong Cantonese Corpus: Design and uses. *Journal of Chinese Linguistics*.