

Given the sack, yet promoted: passivizable V-IO-DO constructions in Cantonese

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In Cantonese, there is a ditransitive construction in which the indirect object (IO) appears between the verb (V) and the direct object (DO), as shown in (1a). There are also some idiomatic V-DO ‘compounds’, e.g. *caau-jaujyu* = fry-squid ‘give the sack’, *sai-nou* = wash-brain ‘brainwash’, that can be intervened by an IO (Matthews & Yip 2011), as in (1b). In both cases, IO expresses an affectee role (cf. Kim 2012, Tsai 2018). They can also be passivized by reducing the external argument (EA) to a *bei* phrase and promoting IO, but not DO, to subject position (2, 3)—an instance of an asymmetric passive. This is sometimes known as an indirect passive (Matthews & Yip 2011).

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| (1) | a. | <i>Keoi-dei coeng ngo-dei cin.</i>
3-PL rob I-PL money
‘They robbed us of money.’ | b. | <i>Ngo caau zo aa-Ming jaujyu.</i>
I fry PFV ah-Ming squid
‘I gave Ming the sack.’ |
| (2) | a. | <i>Ngo-dei bei keoi-dei coeng cin.</i>
I-PL by 3-PL rob money
‘We were robbed of money by them.’ | b. | <i>Aa-Ming bei ngo caau zo jaujyu.</i>
ah-Ming by I fry PFV squid
‘Ming was given the sack by me.’ |
| (3) | a. | * <i>Cin bei keoi-dei coeng ngo-dei.</i>
money by 3-PL rob I-PL
Int.: ‘Money was robbed us by them.’ | b. | * <i>Jaujyu bei ngo caau zo aa-Ming.</i>
squid by I fry PFV ah-Ming
Int.: ‘The sack was given Ming by me.’ |

This study examines the licensing of IO and DO in these constructions. In particular, it attempts to account for two questions: *How are the nominal arguments licensed in V-IO-DO constructions? What gives rise to the asymmetry between IO and DO under passivization?*

V-IO-DO constructions have previously been analyzed as having a possessor-possessee relationship between the IO and the DO (Matthews & Yip 2011, Li 1997). Under this analysis, the possessor raises up to subject position in the passive (Li 1997). However, this view is problematic for the constructions illustrated above: (a) they are incompatible with the usual possessive constructions in Cantonese, where the particle *ge* or a classifier may appear between IO and DO; (b) IO and DO do not form a constituent together, contrary to expectation if they were in a possessive relation; (c) DO can be modified by a possessor distinct from IO (cf. Kim 2012, Tsai 2018); and (d) IO is not always interpretable as the semantic possessor of DO.

I propose instead that the IO merges as specifier of an Appl(icative) head between *v* and V (Pylkkänen 2000, Tsai 2018; i.a.). This allows V and DO to form a constituent, which is important given the idiomatic interpretation of V-DO compounds. Adopting phase determination by sisterhood with VP (McGinnis 2001) and phases as domains of dependent case assignment (DCA) (Baker 2014), I propose that IO and DO are licensed through DCA applied at every phase, and that the case assigned through DCA interacts with the Activity Condition (Chomsky 2001).

To account for the asymmetry in passivization, I argue that the passive is derived by movement. EA merges with *bei* before merging into Spec,*v*P, disabling EA from satisfying the [EPP] feature on T and participating in DCA as a ‘case competitor’ (Branan 2022). DO cannot be raised since it is made inaccessible for movement by DCA with IO as a case competitor in the ApplP phase (Appl being sister to VP). As the only DP available to satisfy the T probe, IO is promoted from Spec,ApplP to Spec,TP.

This paper proposes a unified argument structure of V-IO-DO constructions and indirect passives in Cantonese. It applies theories of case assignment to account for constraints on movement. By extending analyses based on overt exponents of case to a language that does not mark case overtly, this study supports the idea that case assignment is relevant to narrow syntactic operations (e.g. Baker & Vinokurova 2010) and furthers our understanding of the licensing of nominal arguments.

Selected references

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