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The Development of the Indirect Passive in English

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This paper concerns the historical development in English of so-called "indirect passive" sentences such as 'He was given the book' wherein the indirect object (IO) of a corresponding active sentence also containing a direct object (DO) (e.g. 'Someone gave the book to him') becomes the grammatical subject of the related passive sentence. The traditional explanation for the appearance of such passives is reanalysis under formal identity. That is, various non-accusative objects in Old English merged into the grammatical category of DO and therefore within the domain of the passive operation.

Of theoretical import are the claims of Lightfoot (1981), Lieber (1979) and Cole et al. (1980). Lightfoot's analysis is based on a theory of grammar in which (1) Nominative and Objective cases are assigned at surface structure, (2) Oblique case is base-assigned, and (3) the 'movement of a N to another N' position will take place only from a non-case-marked position (p.103). In conjunction with this theory he argues that the transformationally derived passive (Move N) has been present for all stages of English grammar and that base-assigned Oblique case was lost during the period of Middle English, making the indirect passive a 15th century innovation. Lieber argues that neither the IO nor DO is assigned Oblique in the base. Rather, the DO is assigned accusative at the surface level and the IO (in contrast to other Old English non-accusative objects) is not a lexically governed dative IO but a regular dative IO and receives its (dative) case assignment at surface structure as does the DO. Thus both the IO and DO of verbs like 'give' are converted to nominative subjects in corresponding personal passives. Lieber's analysis, then, predicts that direct and indirect passives existed in Old English. Both Lieber and Lightfoot assume, moreover, an isomorphic relationship between morphological and base-assigned cases and conceive of grammatical relations as discrete morpho-syntactic entities.

Others, however, have conceived of grammatical relations as sets of properties and have investigated diachronic change in terms of the redistribution of these properties across NPs.¹ The major work in this area is that of Cole et al. in which three stages are proposed for the acquisition of subject properties by a non-subject: (A) a period when a NP has none, (B) a subsequent period when the NP acquires subject behavior properties followed by (C) the period of acquiring subject coding properties. It is argued in Cole that stage C never precedes stage B. The data from early English do not fully support the Cole et al. hypothesis.

The view in this paper is that grammatical relations are not discrete morpho-syntactic entities but rather are constituted by the interaction and integration of semantic and discourse-pragmatic factors defined in terms of continua rather than roles.²
Constructions of the type in (1) are well-attested in Old English.

1. SU + Vt + IO + DO, where IO = NPdat; DO = NP or S

Sentence (2), taken from Visser (p.622) is but one illustration

2. he gedaelde seofon hlafas feower busendum

\[
\text{DO} \quad \text{IO}
\]

'He distributed seven loaves to four thousand.'

where we see the IO is a NP with the dative -um suffixed to the noun. When active sentences such as (2) appeared in the passive, their DOs converted to the passive subject (SU) and the verbs underwent the attendant changes. The normal word order for regular passives is seen in (3) (from Gaaf (1929:59)):

3. bis scheld is igiuen us agean all temptaciounes.

\[
\text{SU(DO)} \quad \text{aux} \quad \text{PP} \quad \text{IO}
\]

'This shield is given to us against all temptations.'

where 'this shield' is the grammatical subject of the passive sentence and corresponds to the DO in an active counterpart. It is singular and clearly controls verb agreement with the auxiliary. The plural IO us follows the passive verb. However, in many OE regular passive sentences an alternate word order prevailed. The IO appeared in sentence- or clause-initial position and the passive SU appeared after the verb or between the aux and past participle (PP). From Visser (p.2142-3) we see the SU between aux and PP:

4. Us ys cild acenned, and us ys sunu forgifen.

\[
\text{IO} \quad \text{aux} \quad \text{SU} \quad \text{PP} \quad \text{IO} \quad \text{aux} \quad \text{SU} \quad \text{PP}
\]

'A child is born to us and to us a son is given.'

Even though the IO is fronted in the above example and appears before the aux, it is not the SU of the passive sentence. As (4) clearly shows, the singular NPs cild and sunu, the SU in each clause, agrees with the singular form of the aux in each. Gaaf (p.60) provides several examples of passives with fronted IOs and post-verbal SUs as below:

5. us is alefed edhwyrf to þæm ecean life.

\[
\text{IO} \quad \text{aux} \quad \text{PP} \quad \text{SU}
\]

'To us is granted a change to the everlasting life.'

Examples (4) and (5) in OE and many others like them in Middle English (ME) illustrate an alternate word order to the normal passive construction. Such 'variants' have the advantage of topicalizing an inherently highly animate and definite NP, the IO, and thus correspond to the 'preferred direction of information' in a clause. This tendency to adhere to a flow of information from high to low animacy and definiteness can be seen in other ME data -- in relative clauses in which the passive SU is the relative pronoun (R-SU) as
So far, the data presented do not illustrate the indirect passive. Rather they have been adduced to show that for active ditransitive sentences there existed in OE and early ME regular passives that conformed not only to the morpho-syntactic requirements of canonical passive (i.e. the active DO is the passive nominative SU), but to the pragmatic prototype of information flow. Placing the IO in clause-initial position meets the pragmatic requirement while leaving undisturbed the grammatical properties of the passive clause. To further support the hypothesis that the position of the IO in passive clauses reflects a preference for fronting the highly animate/definite NP, an example from another construction type, relative clauses, was presented to show that pre-verbal position for IOs persisted at a time when SVO order was becoming the norm.

We now come to the point for presenting evidence that fronted IOs in regular passives became reanalyzed as the grammatical SUs of these passives such that the animate, definite NP intersects with the property of given information and grammatical SU properties. It will be argued that the motivation for reanalysis is not formal identity and that there is no evidence that the process began with full NPs and generalized to pronouns. Rather, it will be claimed the motivation for the development in English of the indirect passive is a universal tendency for clauses to adhere to the pragmatic prototype of information flow.

The examples below are the kind usually adduced to demonstrate that when the fronted IO in a passive sentence is a full NP, it is ambiguous for case and thus susceptible for reanalysis as SU. From Gaaf (p.61) we see:

(7) Thus was the tre bodun wronge For the braunch that of hym
aux IO/SU PP SU/DO

spronge.
'Thus was the tree proclaimed wrong because of the branch that jumped out at him.'

(8) The marchand was payd xxxti pownde fyne.
IO/SU aux PP SU/DO

'The merchant was paid a thirty pound fine.'

(9) no creature in erth is grauntyd more mercy i-wys.
IO/SU aux PP SU/DO

'No creature on earth is granted more mercy certainly.'

(10) Mynstrals were gyffen gyftis fre.
IO/SU aux PP DO/SU

'Minstrels were given gifts free.'
In (7) the NP 'the tree' appears between the aux and the PP. If we translate the sentence according to the pattern that places the IO before the SU it reads 'Thus to the tree was proclaimed a wrong because of the branch that sprang out at him.' Since the aux is singular and the NPs 'tree' and 'wrong' are also, we cannot rely on verb agreement to discriminate the above reading from 'Thus the tree was proclaimed wrong....' Example (8) is ambiguous in the same way having the two possible interpretations: 'A 30 pound fine was paid to the merchant' and 'The merchant was paid a 30 pound fine.' Sentence (9) may be read as 'No creature on earth is granted more mercy certainly' or 'More mercy is granted to no creature....' In (10) we have either 'Gifts were given to minstrels free' or 'Minstrels were given gifts free.' In each sentence verb agreement does not serve to specify the SU since both NPs have the same number. Therefore, other evidence must be found to indicate which NP is SU. Such evidence exists in the sentences below.

(11) c.1300 The Duke Mylon was geven hys lyff. And fleyg out of land with hys wyff.

The Duke Mylon was given his life and flew out of the land with his wife.'

(12) 1303 Swyche a man bat bus ys shryue, May be assoyled, and penance gyue.

'Such a man that thus is confessed may be absolved and given penance.'

(13) a.1349 I fand Thesus bowndene, scourgede, gyffene gall to drynke, Nayled to be Crosse. hyngand in be Crosse

'I found Jesus bound, scourged, given gall to drink, nailed to the cross, hanged on the cross and dying on the cross.'

(14) c.1380 Adam made was of be clay And gyuen gost & lif also.

'Adam was made of clay and given breath & life also.'

The first clause in (11) may be ambiguously read as 'To the Duke Mylon was given his life' with 'life' as SU and 'Mylon' as IO or as 'The Duke Mylon was given his life' with 'life' as DO of 'give' and 'Mylon' as SU. Since both NPs are singular, as is the aux, the criterion of verb agreement fails to determine the SU of the clause. However, the clause is conjoined to the non-passive finite verb 'flew,' the SU of which is 'Mylon' indicating that 'Mylon' in the first clause is SU. We can say then that the IO of 'give' has acquired in (11) the SU syntactic property of Conjunction Reduction (CR) which triggers the deletion of a co-referential SU in a conjoined clause. Therefore, (11) represents a clear case of an indirect passive at the beginning of the 14th century.
Similar analyses for (12)-(14) indicate that the IO of 'give' is the grammatical SU of each sentence. In (12) the passive SU 'man' of 'is shriven' triggers deletion of the SUs in the conjoined verb phrases 'be absolved' and 'is penance given' indicating that 'man' is SU and not IO of the verb phrase with 'give.' The DO 'Jesus' of the matrix verb in (14) is the derived SU of all participial phrases following it, 'bound,' 'scourged,' 'given gall,' etc., again indicating that the derived SU of 'give' is the IO 'Jesus' and not 'gall.' CR in (14) shows that the SU of 'give' is 'Adam' rather than 'breath and life.' Thus all of these 14th century sentences are unambiguous examples of the indirect passive.

In (11)-(14) it has been demonstrated that an ambiguously marked IO of a di-transitive verb was reanalyzed as a passive SU on the basis of its having acquired the syntactic SU property of CR. This observation suggests that reanalysis begins with the acquisition of SU syntactic properties by a non-pronominal NP for which the verb-agreement test fails to apply. Indeed this is the hypothesis of Cole et al. It is an intuitively attractive account: full NPs in ambiguous morphological environments are conjoined with another structure that forces assignment of a subject property of the ambiguous NP. Presumably, once speakers get used to the idea of a non-SU behaving like one in certain environments, it is a short step until coding properties are also assigned, eventually in all environments, thereby eliminating all prior traces of the non-SU function of the NP; thus the non-SU NP becomes fully reanalyzed as SU and has all SU properties in all environments.

The Cole hypothesis is based strictly on morpho-syntactic properties of SUs and excludes initial position on the basis that it is a topic, rather than SU, property. Leaving word order facts aside, then, we should look for historical evidence that confirms or rejects the hypothesis that non-SU NPs acquire syntactic properties prior to coding properties. In other words, if the hypothesis is incorrect, i.e. if coding properties are acquired before syntactic properties, we should expect to find in the language evidence like (11)-(14) above historically prior to sentences like 'He was given a book' and 'They were shown the treasure,' where prior IOs give evidence of possessing only SU coding properties but not SU syntactic properties. If the hypothesis is incorrect, i.e. if coding properties are acquired before syntactic properties, we should expect to find sentences like 'He was given a book' and 'They were shown the treasure' prior to sentences like (11)-(14) or sentences like 'They were given the soap and washed themselves before eating the meal,' in which the prior IO, now nominative, triggers CR and Reflexivization, both syntactic properties formerly restricted to SUs.

It has already been shown in (11)-(14) that stage B (when a NP acquires syntactic SU properties) is attested in English for the period of c.1300 to 1400. Given all the evidence available, we must determine whether indirect passives with nominative pronouns (which control verb agreement of course) existed prior to that time, i.e., if sentences like 'He was given a book' are attested prior to sentences like 'The king was given a book and read it.' A careful examination of the examples adduced in Visser
(pp.2144-5) supports the Cole hypothesis: in indirect object constructions, SU syntactic properties are acquired by ambiguously marked NPs at the beginning of the 14th century but nominative pronominal SUs do not appear in these constructions till the end of the 14th century.6 If, however, we include in the class of indirect passives represented by 'The king was given a book' D0s which are that-clauses or infinitives, OE examples can be aduced. e.g. from Visser (p.2144):

(15) he ne waes forlaeten peodum godcunde laere to bodienne.
    SU aux PP inf
    'He was not permitted to preach sacred teachings to the people.'

(16) he cuae ëaet he haten waes.
    that SU PP aux
    'He spoke that which he was commanded.'

(17) Ic eom forgifen from pam aelmihitgan gode ... eow to ge-
    SU aux PP inf
    gingenenne.
    'I am allowed by Almighty God to intercede for you.'

(18) Ic waes bede from paem biscope baet ic him rice alyf.
    SU aux PP that
    'I was ordered by the bishop that I hand over my kingdom to
    him.'

in which the pronominal IO of verbs such as 'permit,' 'command,' 'allow,' and 'order' appear as nominative SUs in passive sentences. We are led to ask why IOs in constructions of the type in (1) having clausal/infinitival D0s are passivized hundreds of years earlier than IOs appearing with nominal D0s. It is argued here that the IO with a clausal or infinitival D0 is semantically more like a prototypical D0 than is the that-clause or infinitive it appears with. That is, in OE active sentences corresponding to (15)-(18), the IO is the +affected entity in the transitive construction and thus eligible to be related to passive nominative subjects despite its dative morphology. On the other hand, in a Type 1 construction having a (pro)nominial D0, it is the +affected entity and the IO retains its recipient relation to the verb. If the D0 is non-clausal or non-infinitival in a Type 1 sentence, it, rather than the IO, is eligible for Passive in early English. Only after a period during which IOs are fronted to clause-initial position, as motivated by the pragmatic prototype of information flow, is the IO susceptible to reanalysis as SU. Evidence will now be examined that disconfirms the Cole hypothesis, i.e. instances that show that coding properties were acquired by some prior non-SUs at approximately the same time that syntactic properties were being acquired.7

Recall that the earliest examples of SU syntactic properties having been acquired by full NPs were dated from the beginning to the end of the 14th century. Gaaf (p.62) presents evidence that in the early part of the 14th century pronouns were appearing in indirect passives containing nominal D0s. In various texts of the Cursor Mundi we see:
(19) 1300  Ghiu sal forgiuin be giur sak. (E text)
       IO  PP  aux  SU
'To you shall forgiven be your sin.'

(20) 1300-50 You sal for-given be yur sak. (C text)
       IO  PP  aux  SU

(21) 1300-50 ye sal forgien be yur sake. (G text)
       SU  PP  aux  DO

(22) 1340-99 ye shulle for-veyyn by your sake. (F text)
       SU  PP  aux  DO

(23) 1400  ye shul forguyen be youre sake. (T text)
       SU  PP  aux  DO

In the earliest text (E) the IO is fronted but retains the dative form. The same holds for the C text. In the G, F, and T texts, however, the dative pronoun has been replaced by the nominative pronoun ye. Gaaf notes that a similar shift is evident among the texts for line 8396F of the Cursor Mundi where C text has:

(24)  For-giuen es be bar-of bi plight. (C text)
       PP  aux  IO  SU
'Forgiven is to you thereof thy guilt.'

A direct passive interpretation is 'Your guilt is forgiven to you'; an impersonal reading with 'guilt' as DO is 'It is forgiven to you thereof your guilt.' In either, the IO is non-SU. The G and T texts agree with (19) except that the plural dative you has been substituted for the singular dative be:

(25)  For-giuen es you bar-of bi plight. (G & T texts)
       PP  aux  IO  SU

However in the F text the line appears as:

(26)  ye are for-given of pat unrigt. (F text)
       SU  aux  PP

In the F text the nominative plural ye appears unambiguously as SU of the passive verb. By observing in these texts the variation of IO and SU pronouns in passive constructions, one is observing syntactic change in process in the mid-14th century. As Gaaf says, "Alterations of a syntactical character, introduced into a text by a scribe, always deserve notice, as they frequently reflect a change of idiom." A few other examples of reanalyzed IO pronouns appear in the 14th century which are not accounted for in Visser. Gaaf (ibid.) provides the following:

(27)  a.1330  To wrong pou art ylerd.
       SU  aux  PP
'Thou art taught to wrong.'

(28)  c.1350  bu sett him to fostering, Till he be lerid himself
       SU  aux  PP
      to lede. 'You set him to fostering till he is learned himself to lead.'
(29) c.1380 he pat wrogt hit asket was how long ... hit shuld
SU PP aux
endure.8 'He that wroght it was asked how long ... it should
endure.'

(30) c.1380 Al-so who-ser in dette wer for-giuen, thenne was he.
aux PP aux SU 'So, whosoever in debt were forgiven, then he was.'

(31) 1390-99 pou ssalt bi wille abide as ycham ytold her.
SU aux PP 'Thou shalt thy will abide as I am told here.'

In (27) the IO of 'learn'/'teach' appears as passive SU in the
form of the second person nominative 'thou.' In this instance
the DO is an infinitive. The indirect passive SU in (28) appears
anomalously to control reflexivization. However, the translation
of he be lerid himself to lede is 'he was taught (by someone)
such that he lead.' Although this does not constitute a case of
reflexivization per se, the SU of the DO infinitive appears in
reflexive form on the basis of coreferentiality with the passive
SU. In (29) the personal object of 'ask' appears as passive SU
in nominative form; the DO is clausal. In (30) the IO of 'give'
appears as nominative he in 'he was [forgiven his debts].' In
(31) the SU and aux are orthographically conjoined in ycham, 'I
am told here thou shalt thy will abide'; the DO in this case is
also clausal. In (21)-(23) and (26)-(31) adduced in Gaaf, the
prior IO has been reanalyzed as SU. In (21)-(23) the DOs are
nouns; in (27)-(31) the DOs are clausal or infinitival. Though
the evidence is slight, it is clear that indirect passives of the
type 'He was given a book' originate before 1450 (when Lightfoot
dates them) and make their first appearance in texts as early as
the beginning of the 14th century (and later than when Lieber
claims they exist). On the basis of all the evidence available
to date, we can summarize the development of the indirect passive
with respect to the sub-types of Type 1 constructions as in Table
1. After 1400 the indirect passive with nominal DOs increases
in frequency. The following 15th century example (one of many)
from Visser (p.2145) illustrates what has become a common idiom:

(32) c.1440 but if pou pay now, I shal holde the wif to wed
ytl tyme pat I be paied fully my salary.
SU aux PP DO 'Unless you pay now, I shall hold the wife to wed
until the time that I am fully paid my salary.'

As shown in Table 1 and in this paper, there is no evidence
that an indirect passive with nominal DO existed in OE. The
earliest attested example is at the beginning of the 14th century.
Thus the data do not support the claims of Lieber or Lightfoot.
Whether or not the hypothesis in Cole et al. can be supported is
moot. Their argument that stage B (wherein only syntactic prop-
erties are acquired) must precede stage C (when coding properties
Table 1

The Development of the Indirect Passive in OE/ME

**Type 1 Construction(s):**  SU + \(V_t\) + IO + DO

1. DO = (a) that-clause/infinitive
   (b) Noun

2. IO = (a) Pro (nom case)
   (b) NP (citation form)

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Indirect Passive Type</th>
<th>First Appearance</th>
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<tr>
<td>IO(2a) DO(1a)</td>
<td>'He was permitted to preach'</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>'The Duke was given his life and fled out of the land...'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IO(2b) DO(1b)</td>
<td>'You shall be forgiven your sin'</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

are acquired) is supported by the evidence in Visser which indicates that, indeed, SU syntactic properties were acquired in passives by prior IOs approximately 100 years before the acquisition of coding properties. The evidence in Gaaf, however, indicates that coding properties in these constructions were being acquired in English at the same time as syntactic properties, i.e. that stage B is not a prerequisite to stage C. As more early English evidence comes to light, it may be the case that sentences like (11)-(14) representing stage B vastly outnumber sentences like (21)-(23) and (26)-(31) representing stage C. In this eventuality we would conclude that reanalysis of grammatical relations very likely proceeds by means of an intermediate stage during which full NPs, being ambiguous for case and verb agreement, are dually analyzed as SU or IO. In the eventuality that the Cole et al. hypothesis is not supported by further evidence, we must conclude that stage B is not a prerequisite to stage C, i.e. that reanalysis does not necessarily begin with the ambiguity of full NPs and generalize to pronouns but rather that fronted pronouns in passive constructions may undergo reanalysis independently on the basis that they are clause-initial, that they possess the pragmatic properties of SU and that the constructions in which they appear correspond to the prototype of information flow.
1. The properties referred to are those of Keenan (1976).
2. An elaboration of this view of grammatical relations can be found in Thornburg (1984).
3. For a fuller discussion of this concept see Thornburg (1984).
4. One of several examples from Gaaf (pp.60-1); the date for the ms. cited in Gaaf is from Brandl & Zippel (1949).
5. These ambiguous sentences appear in texts from the middle ME period, the 14th and beginning of the 15th centuries.
6. See Thornburg (1984:194-5) for the analysis of these data.
7. Although these data disconfirm the Cole hypothesis, it is noted that they constitute weak counter-evidence. Stronger counter-evidence would be data that show coding properties were acquired before behavioral properties rather than approximately simultaneously with them.
8. Gaaf (fn.1) states for this example, "In Old English the personal object accompanying ascian was in the accusative. In Middle English aske(n) is sometimes followed by to, so that the personal object was no longer felt to be an accusative.

References

Gaaf, W. van der. 1929. The conversion of the indirect personal object into the subject of a passive construction. English studies. 11.1-11,58-67.