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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 \bar{N} to another \bar{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 \bar{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

in (6):⁴

(6) c.1200 ic wende wel þat þe saege soð weoren þat me wes to niht
R-SU IO aux

itald.
PP

'I believed fully that the sayings were true that to me was recounted tonight.'

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 branche 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 peyd xxx^{ti} 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.'

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 correct, 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

- (19) 1300 Giu sal forgiun 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 forgiven be yur sake. (G text)
 SU PP aux DO
- (22) 1340-99 ye shulle for-yeyyn by your sake. (F text)
 SU PP aux DO
- (23) 1400 ye shul forgyuen 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 pe par-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 pe:

- (25) For-giuen es you par-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 þat 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 bou art ylerd.
 SU aux PP
 'Thou art taught to wrong.'
- (28) c.1350 þu 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 þat wrogt hit asket was how long ... hit shuld
 SU PP aux
 endure.⁸
 'He that wrought 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 þou ssalt þi wille abide as yham 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_i was taught (by someone) such that he_i 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 yham, '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 þou pay now, I shal holde the wif to wed
 tyl tyme þat 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 properties 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)

<u>Indirect Passive Type</u>	<u>First Appearance</u>
<u>IO(2a) DO(1a)</u>	
'He was permitted to preach'	OE: 900-1150
<u>IO(2b) DO(1b)</u>	
'The Duke was given his life and fled out of the land...'	MME: 1300-1399
<u>IO(2a) DO(1b)</u>	
'You shall be forgiven your sin'	MME: 1300-1399

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.

Notes

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 (1984:194-6) 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.

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