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Author(s): M. H. Klaiman

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Toward a Universal Semantics of Indirect Subject Constructions

M.H. Klaimage
University of Chicago

In natural languages the indirect subject construction is widely observed but poorly understood. Formally (and, as we will see, semantically), indirect subject constructions may be contrasted with more typical direct or nominative subject constructions, in which sentential subjects take the unmarked or nominative case and trigger verbal agreement. By contrast, under indirect subject formation (or Inversion, as some relational grammarians refer to it), the ostensible subject is marked with an indirect case. It is typical but not universal for this indirect case to be that of the indirect object, or dative case. (Exceptions, however, include Bengali—w. 1a below.) It is also typical though not universal for the indirect subject to fail to trigger verbal agreement.

This paper is concerned with a universal semantics for indirect subject constructions. First, let us consider some examples of these constructions from a variety of natural languages. These are seen in 1-13.

1. Bengali a. (ind) tomaake aamaar khub pachondo hay you-O my-G very liking becomes 'I like you lots'
b. (dir) aami tomaake khub pachondo kori 'do' I-N you-O very liking do-pl

2. Old English Anoher drem dremede me yet. (N. McCawley 1976a:199)
3. Georgian m-civa mama-s u-qvar-s švil-i me it-is-cold father-D/A 3p-love-pres 3p sg child-N 'I am cold' 'The father loves the child'
   (Holisky 1978:140) (N. McCawley 1976a:201)
4. German a. ich friere an den Füssen b. mir frieren die Füsse I chill-pl at the feet-D me-D chill-pl the feet-N 'I feel cold in the feet'
5. Hindi a. (dir) jain merii ko pasand kartaa hai 'John John-N Mary O liking do-es likes Mary'.
b. (ind) jain ko merii ('ko) acchii lagti hai 'do'
   John O Mary-N 0 good seem-fem-s
6. Italian a. (dir) i bambini non mancano di energia the children neg lack-pl of energy 'The children don't lack energy'
b. (ind) ai bambini non manca energia 'do'
   to-the children neg lacks energy (Perlmutter 1979:278-79)
7. Japanese Kimura-san ni (wa) sono mondai ga wakaru Kimura-title D top that problem N understands 'Mr. Kimura understands that problem' (ibid. 310)
8. Latin piget me tui mihi dolet (Golaš 1975:7,4) disgusts me-A you-N me-D hurts 'I am disgusted with you' 'I suffer'
While indirect subjects may lack the morphological (coding) properties of direct subjects, they may share the syntactic (behavioral) properties of direct subjects. Thus indirect subjects may trigger reflexivization in languages wherein reflexives are governed by a subject antecedence condition; examples from Bengali and Japanese are seen respectively in 14a,b. A similar phenomenon is control of Equi, illustrated in 15a,b for Latin and Bengali respectively. 3

Some linguists have treated indirect subject constructions in the wider context of impersonal constructions, a few examples of which are seen in 16:

As 16 suggests, impersonal constructions typically express activities whose agency can be attributed to no personal entity. The question is how such constructions can be semantically linked with indirect subject constructions, which tend to express highly personal activities or experiences (such as hunger, anger, desire, etc.). In view of their apparent semantic dissimilarity it is paradoxical that impersonal and indirect subject constructions bear such a close formal resemblance.

Writers interested in the semantics of indirect subject constructions have observed that they tend to express certain kinds of activities to the exclusion of others; N.A. McCawley 1976a,b suggests that these activities fall into the six categories listed in 17:

16 Latin vesperascit Japanese ima rokuzi da
'It grows dusky' now 6 o'clock is
(Golaæ 1975:4) 'It is 6 o'clock now' (Makino 1975-76:102)
A few theories concerning indirect subject constructions and universal semantics have been proposed. It has, for instance, been suggested that indirect subjects are semantically recipients (W.A. McCawley 1976a, Lindholm 1975); this viewpoint may be called the Recipient Hypothesis. A second theory is that indirect subject constructions express subjective activities, i.e., activities that occur exclusively within the body or mind of the experiencer (Masica 1976:160). This viewpoint may be called the Subjective Hypothesis.

Both hypotheses have limitations. The Recipient Hypothesis fails to account for the minority of languages (e.g., Bengali) in which indirect subjects and indirect objects take different case markings. The Subjective Hypothesis is falsified by the occurrence in various languages of indirect subject predicates which do not express subjective activities (activities which occur within the body or mind of the experiencer); these predicates include geynan 'profit', misqowan 'go wrong' and geyfelian 'injure, become ill' in Old and Middle English (N. McCawley 1976a) as well as naak daak- 'snore', laabh ha- 'profit', asukh ha- 'become unwell' and prasob ha- 'give birth' in Bengali (Klainan 1980a). Moreover neither the Recipient Hypothesis nor the Subjective Hypothesis can account for the peculiar formal similarity between impersonal and indirect subject constructions, above noted.

Another hypothesis has been proposed for a number of languages, including Japanese (Makino 1975-76:102), Serbo-Croatian (Golab 1975:26-27), Old and Middle English (N. McCawley 1976a:197), Russian (Scholz 1973:168) and Bengali (Klainan 1980b), though it has not to my knowledge been very aggressively supported as a semantic universal for indirect subject constructions. This viewpoint—the Volitionality Hypothesis—holds that indirect subject constructions universally tend to express activities viewed or spoken of as nonvolitional. This hypothesis has immediate advantages; not only does it account for the formal similarity between indirect subject and impersonal constructions, but it is also consistent with the semantic range of indirect subject predicates (v. 17). However, the strongest evidence for the hypothesis involves the relative distribution of direct and indirect subject constructions, particularly in languages in which direct and indirect subject predicates occur as formally related alternatives or counterparts.

The evidence below for the Volitionality Hypothesis is taken from four languages: Bengali, Georgian, Japanese, and Russian. The evidence involves the contrastive behavior of indirect and direct counterparts with respect to adverbs of volitionality, dissipations, verbs of aural and visual experience, commands, and passives. While no one type of evidence is conclusive in and of itself, all the evidence taken together contributes to what I believe is a highly convincing case for the Volitionality Hypothesis.
Exhibit A. In the context of an adverb of volitionality (e.g., 'deliberately'), indirect subject constructions tend to be excluded. This holds in Bengali (18), Russian (19), and Georgian (20):

18 a. (ind)*baabaar aapotti satteo aamaar tomake iiccha kore father-G objection despite my-G you-O deliberately pacondo hoyche 'I deliberately liked you despite my father's objections' (cf. 1a)
   b. (dir) baabaar aapotti satteo aami tomake iiccha kore father-G objection despite I-N you-O deliberately pacondo koreschi 'do' (cf. 1b)
   liking have-done-Lp

19 a. (ind)*emu nastojatel'no xotelos' kurit' nesmotrja him-D insistently wanted-ref neut to-smoke in-spite-na vozraženija otca 'He insistently wanted to smoke of objections-A father-G despite his father's objections' (cf. 1a)
   b. (dir) on nastojatel'no xotel kurit' nesmotrja he-N insistently wanted-masc to-smoke in-spite-na vozraženija otca 'do' (cf. 12a)
   of objections-A father-G

20 a. (ind)*segnebulad m-cioda 'I was deliberately cold'
deliberately me-chilled (Holisky 1978:150)
   b. (dir) cerili segnebulad ds=vcere 'I deliberately wrote letter deliberately I-wrote this letter' (ibid.)

It may be particularly noted of Russian and Bengali—in which languages predicates may have formally related direct and indirect counterparts—that adverbs of volitionality are compatible with direct but not with indirect subject predicates. This suggests that the direct/indirect counterparts are differentiated by the semantic opposition volitional/nonvolitional.

Exhibit B. In disculpations—contexts in which the subject is to be represented as the unwilling prisoner of his emotions, as a victim of circumstances, or as a justified sinner—the indirect subject construction tends to be selected in preference to its direct counterpart.

Thus in Japanese a hostess and guest may exchange the following dialog (v. 21) at a dinner party.

21 Hostess: dooshite motto meshi agara nai no desuka why more eat hon neg nominalizer is-it
   'Why is it that you are not eating more?'
Guest: daietto-chuu nanode, 'As I am on a diet, diet amidst as/because
   a. (ind) boku ni wa moo kore ijoo tabeare masen? I-masc D top more any-longer eat-e- neg
      I can't eat any more at all'
   b. (dir)*boku wa moo kore ijoo tabe masen I-masc-N top more any-longer eat neg
      I'm eating no more at all'

While an indirect subject construction (21a) is an acceptable reply to the hostess, a direct subject reply (21b) is distinctly
bizarre. The implication of such a reply ('Since I'm on a diet, I refuse to eat any more at all') is at best rude, if not ungrammatical. Similar possibilities exist in Bengali. Consider the dialog in 22:

22 A: deri kore esecho kaeno 'Why have you come late?'
B: ki korbob, rcastaay a. (ind) asmaar deri holo what will-do-lproad-L my-G delay became
b. (dir)*sami deri korlaam I-N delay did-lp

'What could I do, I was delayed on the road'

In 22, (a) is acceptable and (b) is peculiar because a speaker would hardly like to portray himself as a volitional participant in this particular situation. Here the indirect subject construction (a) allows him to confess tardiness with a face-saving nuance of helplessness. The direct counterpart (b), however, is at best rude; it implies 'I'm late, what of it?' in Bengali as in Japanese, indirect subject constructions are preferred over direct counterparts in discalculations. This suggests that volitionality is the criterion by which speakers of various languages select between indirect and direct subject alternatives.

Exhibit C. Let us now consider predicates of hearing and seeing in Japanese and Bengali. The former has, as we have seen, a productive process for forming indirect subject predicates from their direct counterparts by the addition of the stem formant -e-. Thus the direct subject predicate taberu 'eat' in 21b is related to its indirect counterpart taberaru in 21a. Similarly the direct subject predicate kiku 'hear, listen' yields the indirect counterpart kikoeru 'be audible', while the direct predicate miru 'see, look at' yields the indirect predicate mieryu 'be visible'.

In some contexts either the direct or indirect counterparts of 'hear' and 'see' are acceptable, as in 23 and 24. But they are not interchangeable. Only the direct counterpart is possible in a context of volitional hearing or seeing, while the indirect counterpart is excluded. This is seen in 25 and 26.

23 a. (dir) Hamlet wa sono toki sono henna oto o kiita
Hamlet-N top that time that strange sound O hear-past
'At that moment, Hamlet heard/listened to that strange sound'

b. (ind) Hamlet ni wa sono toki sono henna oto ga kikoeta
Hamlet D top that time that strange sound N hear-e-past
'At that moment, Hamlet heard that strange sound/that strange sound was audible to Hamlet'

24 a. (dir) Mimi wa sono henna otoko o mita
Mimi-N top that strange man O see-past
'Mimi saw/looked at that strange man'

b. (ind) Mimi ni wa sono henna otoko ga mieta
Mimi D top that strange man N see-e-past
'Mimi saw that strange man/that strange man was visible to Mimi'
25 a. (dir) Hamlet wa sono toki sono henna oto o chuui
Hamlet-N top that time that strange sound O attention
site kiita ‘At that moment Hamlet listened atten-
do-ptocl hear-past tively to that strange sound'
b. (ind)*Hamlet ni wa sono toki sono henna oto ga chuui
Hamlet D top that time that strange sound N attention
site kikoeta ‘At that moment that strange sound was
do-ptocl hear-e-past attentively audible to Hamlet'

26 a. (dir) Mimi wa sono henna otoko o chuui site
Mimi-N top that strange man O attention do-ptocl
mita ‘Mimi gazed attentively at that strange man'
see-past
b. (ind)*Mimi ni wa sono henna otoko ga chuui site
Mimi D top that strange man N attention do-ptocl
mieta ‘That strange man attentively appeared to
see-e-past Mimi'

The same thing happens in Bengali. Consider the direct
subject predicate daekh- ‘see' and its indirect counterpart cockhe
par- ‘see, spot' (literally, ‘fall into the eye'). Also con-
sider the direct predicate son- ‘hear' and its indirect
counterpart kaane aa- ‘hear' (literally, ‘come into the ear'). These are respectively illustrated in (27a,b) and (28a,b). In
such neutral contexts either the direct or indirect counter-
part is possible. That they are not interchangeable, however,
becomes clear in other contexts, as seen in (29) and (30):

27 a. (dir) se ekti sundor meyeke dekhlO ‘He saw a pretty girl'
he a pretty girl-O saw
b. (ind) ekti sundor meye (ke) taar cockhe porlo ‘He spotted a
a pretty girl O his eye-L fell pretty girl'

28 a. (dir) aami tomar biruddhe naaanaa katha kuni
I your against various matter hear-lp
l ‘I hear various things against you'
I hear various things against you
b. (ind) tomar biruddhe naaanaa katha samaar kaane aase 'do'
your against various matter my eye-L comes

29 a. (dir) se ekti sundor meyeke taakiye dekhlO ‘He stared at
he a pretty girl-O stare-CP saw a pretty girl'
b. (ind)*taakiye ekti sundor meye (ke) taar cockhe porlo ‘do'
stare-CP a pretty girl O his eye-L fell

30 a. (dir) se kaan khaaraa kore protibesider jhagrea sunchilo
he ear erect do-CP neighbors-G quarrel was-hearing
‘He was listening to his neighbors' quarrel with his
ears pricked up'
b. (ind)*kaan khaaraa kore protibesider jhagrea taar kaane
ear erect do-CP neighbors-G quarrel his ear-L
aaschilo ‘do'
wass-coming

That is, in a context of expressly volitional seeing (e.g.,
staring) or expressly volitional hearing (e.g., listening with
one's ears pricked up), the indirect subject alternatives cease
to exist. This suggests that they refer to nonvolitional acts
of seeing and hearing respectively.
Exhibit D. Indirect subject constructions are by and large excluded in commands; their direct counterparts are not excluded. Evidence for this is seen in (31)-(32) for Russian, 33 for Georgian, (34)-(35) for Japanese, and 36 for Bengali:

31 a. (ind) mne veritsja s trudom me-D believe-ref 3p sg with difficulty-I sg 'I have trouble believing that'

b. (dir) ja verju s trudom 'do' I-N believe-1p sg with difficulty-I sg

32 a. (ind) 'pust' vam veritsja mne 'Believe let/may you-D polite believe-ref 3p sg me-D me!' 

b. (dir) povert'e mne 'do'
believe-perf impv polite me-D

33 a. (ind) *gakvetili icodi 'Know the lesson!' (Holisky 1978:152) lesson know

b. (dir) gakvetili isgavle 'Study the lesson!' (ibid.) lesson study

34 a. (ind) *kikoenasai 'Hear!' (cf. 23b) b. (dir) kikinassai 'do' hear-e-impv hvar-impv (cf. 23)

35 a. (ind) *minasai 'See!' (cf. 24b) b. (dir) minasai 'do' (cf. 24a)

36 a. (ind) tomaar onosoonaa hok! 'Repent!' your-G repentence become-impv 3p

b. (dir) (tumi) onosoonaa karo! 'do'
you-N repentence do-impv 2p

To be sure, an indirect subject predicate can occur in the so called imperative form (simple or periphrastic) as an hortative; v. 37 (Russian) and 38 (Bengali):

37 a. ne grustite (dir) b. pust' vam ne neg be-sad-impv polite 'Don't be sad!' let/may you-D polite neg

38 aami caai, tomaar onosoonaa hok (cf. 36a) 'I want you I want your-G repentence become-impv 3p to repent'

But such sentences as (37b) and 38 are not commands; they are wishes.

Commanding by its very nature presupposes the addressee's ability to choose to act or not to act on the speaker's request. This is why commands are normally addressed only to humans and to the more intelligent species of animals and not, say, to inanimate objects. In other words, a command presupposes the addressee's faculty of volition. The fact that an indirect subject cannot occur in the context of a command suggests that indirect subjects are semantically nonvolitional.

Exhibit E. Bengali offers some particularly impressive evidence that indirect subject constructions express nonvolitional activities. This evidence relates to passives. Bengali has two passives: one whose characteristic is the finite verb jaa- 'go'; the other whose characteristic is the
finite verb ha- 'become'. Both passives entail that the affected clause undergoes sentence nominalization. This is followed by assignment of one of the matrix verbs just mentioned. Both passives are of the 'impersonal' type described by Comrie 1977; hence the underlying subject either deletes altogether, or—if it surfaces (under conditions which need not be explained here)—it takes the Genitive case. Both passives apply indifferently to transitives and intransitives. Examples of the Bengali jaa- and ha- passives are seen in 39.8

39 a. aektaa khabar praayi khaborer kaaroje daekhaa jaacche
one news very-often news-G paper-L seeing is-going
"One piece of news is very frequently seen in the newspaper"
(Jugantor newspaper, Calcutta, 10 April, 1979)
b. amerikaay iareji balaa hayn in America, English speaking becomes is spoken

In the following examples 40 through 43, the even numbered examples illustrate the jaa- passive and the odd numbered examples, the ha- passive. Passive applied to direct subject constructions is seen in the (a) examples, while passive applied (infelicitously) to indirect subject constructions is illustrated in the (b) examples.

40 a. alpo kheete anek laabh karaa jaabe
   less labor-CP many profit doing will-go
   'A lot of profit can be made without working hard'
b. alpo kheete anek laabh haasoja jaabe 'do'
   becoming will-go

41 a. alpo kheete tomaar anek laabh karaa habe
   less labor-CP your many profit doing will-become
   'You'll make a lot of profit without working hard'
b. alpo kheete tomaar anek laabh haasoja habe 'do'
   becoming will-become

42 a. bhaarotborse alpo taakaay anek din caalaano jaaay
   India-L less money-L many day causing-to-run goes
   'In India it is possible to manage a long time on little money'
b. bhaarotborse alpo taakaay anek din caala jaaay 'do'
   running goes

43 a. taader alpo taakaay anek din caalaano hoyeche
   their less money-L many day causing-to-run has-become
   'They've managed on little money for a long time'
b. taader alpo taakaay anek din caala hoyeche 'do'
   running has-become

In general, passives in Bengali apply to direct but not to indirect subject constructions. One could try to account for this on formal grounds, for example, by writing an appropriate structural description (SD) into the rule for passive. However, such a solution would fail to account for other types of sentences the passives of which block in Bengali.

For instance, passives block for sentences whose subjects have nonhuman referents. Examples 44 and 45 illustrate.
The (b) examples in 44 and 45 illustrate the unacceptability of passives whose underlying subjects have inanimate referents. It may be mentioned at this point that volitionality cannot be an attribute of inanimate entities. In this connection it is interesting to note that a passive block in Bengali—even if the subject is human—when the predicate expresses a nonvolitional activity. Examples (46)-(48) illustrate.

It is interesting to contrast 48, which expresses an ordinary act of dying, with 49, which expresses a volitional act of dying (i.e., suicide):

While passive blocks in 48, it does not block in 49. The contrast between these two examples provides especially clear evidence that passive in Bengali applies only to sentences in which volitional activity is expressed. Turning back to examples (40)-(43), it would now appear that the failure of Bengali indirect subject constructions to passivize supports the position argued throughout this paper that indirect and direct subject constructions in natural languages tend to express nonvolitional
and volitional activities, respectively.

To conclude, evidence has been presented in this paper for the hypothesis that indirect constructions in natural languages tend to express nonvolitional activities. While direct subject constructions may express either volitional or nonvolitional activities, languages may display a formal alternation between indirect and direct subject counterparts such that the former tend to express activities viewed or spoken of as nonvolitional; the latter tend to express basically the same activities viewed or spoken of as volitional.

While I have limited the data in this paper to four languages—Bengali, Georgian, Japanese, and Russian—it is my prediction that similar evidence occurs in other languages. Moreover, it has been pointed out that in addition to contrastive evidence of the type presented in Exhibits A through E, other evidence for the volitionality hypothesis arises from two facts: (a) that indirect subject predicates tend to conform cross-linguistically to a particular semantic range (v. 17); and (b) that indirect subject constructions and impersonal constructions, which tend to be similar formally, both express activities which are nonvolitional, i.e., which lack the willful or agential participation of some personal entity.

The question remains why languages tend to select the same or roughly the same formal means of expression—the indirect and impersonal subject constructions—for a particular semantic notion, that of nonvolitionality. This problem is left for future research.

Footnotes

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1This behavior may be observed generally throughout the language, as in Bengali and Latin, or may be conditioned by grammatical factors like tense and aspect, as in Georgian and Hindi.

2Nepali (ex. 10) is a language in which indirect subjects can control verbal agreement. In other languages, the agreement trigger may default to the unmarked direct object—as it does in Hindi (v. 5b)—or to no NP at all—as in Bengali (v. 1) in the instance of most if not all of the language's indirect
subject predicates.

3 The behavioral properties which indirect subjects share with direct subjects may be highly specific to individual languages. This holds of Subject Honorification in Japanese, described by Shibatani 1977. Shibatani shows that this grammatical process does not distinguish between direct and indirect subjects.

4 The Recipient Hypothesis is based on an assumption that substantives which are treated alike formally (e.g., in terms of case marking) must have something in common semantically. It provides a seemingly natural way of accounting for the sameness of case marking, in many languages, of indirect subjects and indirect objects; it claims that both belong to a common semantic category of recipients. This in turn explains the fact that indirect subjects are widely referred to as 'dative subjects', dative being the case of the indirect object.

5 The hypothesis does not entail that direct subject constructions in natural language never express nonvolitional activities. The hypothesis is only that indirect subject constructions in natural languages tend to be restricted to the expression of activities viewed or spoken of as nonvolitional.

V. footnote 6.

6 In some languages speakers have a choice of expressing a given activity or experience by using a direct subject construction or by using a formally related indirect subject construction. Such alternative predicates may be referred to as direct and indirect subject counterparts. The productivity of such alternation varies from language to language. In Italian I am aware of only three such pairs of counterparts: manca-/mancare 'lack' (v. 6); riusci-/riuscire 'manage, succeed'; and avere bisogna/abbisognare 'need'. (The first two are discussed in Pfeiffer 1979; the third was offered me by Dr. Paolo Cherchi, personal communication.) In Bengali, on the other hand, according to Kleinman 1980a,b, approximately two-thirds of the indirect subject predicates have direct counterparts.

7 Note that the Japanese nominative marker ga deletes before the topic marker wa (v. 21b, etc.). (On the status of ga as a nominative or direct case marker rather than a subject marker, v. Shibatani 1977.) Also note that the stem formant -e- may be separated from vowels in preceding and following morphemes by a variety of phonetic/phonological devices; hence tabe+e+taberare and kik+e+inf=kikoeru. The form taberare in (21a) looks superficially passive, though not all Japanese indirect subject predicates are formally identical to passives (v. e.g. the forms kikoeru and mieru in Exhibit C). However, N. Akatsuka (personal communication) informs me that (21a) cannot possibly be taken as a passive. The reasons are complex, but apparently have to do with the fact that Japanese passives express the idea of a victim to which something is done. Thus, as in English it is strange to say 'What was done to the cake was to be eaten', so (i) below is strange to a Japanese (and hence 21a as well). The only way a Japanese passive of 'eat' makes sense, according to
Akatsuka, is in a context like (ii) below, where the underlying direct object is unmistakably a victim to which something is done:

   i. *okashi wa otoku ni taberareta 'The cake was eaten
cake-N top man by eat-passive-past by the man'

   ii. senkyooshi wa hitokui ni taberareta
missionary-N top man-eating-race by eat-passive-past
'The missionary was eaten by the cannibals'

For a more detailed treatment of Bengali passives, v. Klaiman 1980a,b. Examples of Bengali passives in the present work are from Klaiman 1980b.

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