The passive in Singapore English

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ABSTRACT: Singapore English has two passive or passive-like constructions which exhibit substrate influence from Malay and Chinese. They are the *kena passive* and the *give passive*. Of the two constructions, the Malay-derived *kena passive* is more widely used among Singaporeans regardless of ethnic origin. By contrast, the Chinese-derived *give passive* is much rarer. In this paper, we present an analysis of the two passives, and show that while the substrate languages contribute to the grammar of Singapore English, the continued prestige of standard English exerts normative pressure and mitigates the effect of substrate influence - the winner of the competing substrate forms is closer in structure to what may be called the 'standard' or 'prestige' form.

1. INTRODUCTION

Singapore English is a variety of English spoken in Singapore which is a product of intense language contact between English and the local languages of Malay, Chinese, and, to a lesser extent, Tamil. Although the very notion of Singapore English is problematic, the effect of language contact on the grammatical structure of the Singaporean variety of English is so obvious even to the casual observer that the term Singapore English, with all its social and linguistic connotations, is clearly warranted. In this paper, we avoid the thorny issue of the boundary of Singapore English (henceforth, SgE), and concentrate instead on the syntax and semantics of three passive or passive-like constructions, which are exemplified in (1) and (2).

   (1) John (was) scolded by his boss
   (2) a. John *kena* scolded by his boss
      b. John give his boss scold

Of the three constructions, (1) is identical in structure to the passive in standard British or American English (henceforth, English), except for the optionality of the copula verb. The sentences in (2) are similar to (1) in that the semantic role of patient appears as the surface subject, and the role of agent appears in a non-subject position. It is these similarities that lead us to treat (2) as instances of the passive voice. For ease of reference, we call the construction exemplified by (2a) the *kena passive*, and the construction exemplified by (2b) the *give passive*. It is worth noting that syntactically, the *kena passive* is like the English passive shown in (1); semantically, however, it patterns with the *give passive*, as we will see shortly.

This paper has two objectives. First, we will show that the two passives in (2) are derived from the substrate languages of Malay and Chinese, respectively. The substrate influence on the structure of SgE is consistent with the findings of a growing body of literature on language genesis. Second, we observe that the *kena passive* is much more productive in SgE

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than the give passive. We argue that due to its continued prestige in Singaporean society, standard English exerts a normative pressure on the emerging grammar of SgE. When two structures compete, as is the case with the two passives, the one which is closer in structure to standard English emerges as the winner. Substrate structure and the normative pressure of the superstratum are important factors in the formation of new forms of language. Since the passive constructions under discussion are derived from the contact languages of Malay and Chinese, we claim that convergence with the grammatical norm of standard English, the socially dominant language in the community, serves to mitigate the effect of substrate influence on the grammar of the emerging language.

The rest of the paper is organized as follows. In section 2 we detail the syntactic and semantic properties of the kena passive in SgE and the kena construction in Malay, and show that they are similar. In section 3 we discuss the give passive in SgE and its substrate source, namely the passive construction in Chinese. Section 4 is the conclusion.

2. THE KENA PASSIVE

2.1 Kena in SgE

We already saw an example of the kena passive in (2a). More examples are given below.

(3) a. The thief kena caught by the police
   b. The durian kena eaten by him already

The agentive by-phrase can be omitted, as shown in the sentences in (4):

(4) a. The thief kena caught
   b. The durian kena eaten already

There are other properties of the kena passive that need to be mentioned. First, the lexical verb need not appear in the past participial form. It may appear in its base form.

(5) a. The thief kena catch by the police
   b. The durian kena eat by him already

However, the past participial form is clearly preferred, particularly for strong verbs, which exhibit irregular inflection.2 For this reason we will continue to cite the participial form of lexical verbs.

Second, among Malay-speaking Singaporeans, the Malay word oloh 'by' can be used in place of the English preposition by:

(6) John kena scold oloh his boss

This is not possible among non-Malay-speaking Singaporeans. Clearly, bilingualism is responsible for this state of affairs (cf. Thomason and Kaufman, 1988).

Third, the kena passive does not admit stative verbs:

(7) a. *That man kena known by everyone
   b. *The thief kena believed by the police

Fourth, the kena passive admits non-stative verbs which denote events affecting the surface subject, which bears the semantic role of patient. So, verbs such as burn, hit and hook can be passivized readily:

(8) a. The book kena burnt already
   b. The movie star kena hit (by the fans)
   c. The fish kena hooked (by my brother)

By contrast, verbs denoting actions which do not affect the subject cannot occur in the kena passive:

(9) a. *The book kena read (by John)
   b. *The movie star kena followed (by fans)
   c. *That fish kena bought (by my wife)

The notion of affectedness invoked here is a tricky one, which we will not address in detail. Suffice it to say that the subject is affected if it bears the semantic role of patient. For obvious reasons, stative verbs do not affect the subject (under passivization) in the same way that action verbs do.

Finally, there is a strong sense of adversity involved in the kena passive. Brown (1992: 73) notes that in SgE, kena 'is always used with negative overtones, with the meaning "be a victim"'. Therefore, while scold allows kena passivization, praise and like typically do not:

(10) a. *John kena praised by his boss
    b. *Mary kena liked by her tennis partner

Adversity is a strong semantic attribute of the kena passive. One may force an adverse interpretation on sentences which would otherwise be ungrammatical. Thus, the sentences in (10) are typically ungrammatical since to be praised (or liked) is not normally considered an adverse situation. In addition, (10b) is ungrammatical since like is stative. However, it is possible to force an adverse interpretation on the sentences in (10). Under such an interpretation, (10a) could mean that being praised by the boss has the effect of making John unpopular among his peers. Similarly, (10b) could imply that Mary is distrusted by the unwanted attention of her tennis partner, which, incidentally, gives like both an active and adverse interpretation. Under these circumstances, (10a and b) become acceptable. The marginal status of adverse stative verbs such as hate can be attributed to the same interpretative strategy. For some speakers, John kena hate is not entirely unacceptable.

Adversity is somewhat related to affectedness in the sense that adverse-action verbs typically assign the semantic role of patient. But they are conceptually distinct. The verbs build and destroy both involve affectedness, but the kena passive works only with destroy, not with build.

(11) a. The condominium kena destroyed by the typhoon yesterday
    b. *The condominium kena built by the developer last year

The contrast can be attributed to the adversity effect: only destroy carries the adversity meaning.

We summarize the syntax and semantics of the kena passive as follows:

(12) a. The lexical verb can be in the bare form or in the past participial form
       b. The agentive by-phrase is optional
       c. The subject must be adversely affected
       d. Stative verbs cannot be passivized with kena

We now proceed to examine the kena construction in Malay, from which SgE derives its kena passive.
2.2 Kena in Malay

As a lexical word, *kena*, which means 'to strike, to come into contact with', does not in itself carry any negative connotation. One can *kena* a disease (i.e. contract a disease), which is negative, just as well as one can *kena* a lottery (i.e. win a lottery). When it is used as a passive marker, however, *kena* not only loses its lexical meaning, but acquires the adversity connotation. This is evident in the examples below (adapted from Sulaiman 1990):

(13) a. Budak jahat itu kena pukul
    boy naughty the kena beat
    'The naughty boy was beaten'

b. Kambingnya kena langgar
    goat-his kena knock-down
    'His goat was knocked down'

c. Bandar itu kena bom dua kali
    city this kena bomb two time
    'The city was bombed twice'

d. Pengurus bank itu kena samun
    manager bank this kena rob
    'The bank manager was robbed'

e. Radio keretanya kena curi
    radio car-his kena steal
    'His car radio was stolen'

As the examples in (13) clearly indicate, *kena* is used to mark the passive: the semantic role of patient is in the surface subject position. The agent can be expressed with the help of the preposition *oleh* 'by':

(14) a. Budak jahat itu kena pukul oleh ibunya
    boy naughty the kena beat by mother-his
    'The naughty boy was beaten by his mother'

b. Ali kena tangkap oleh polis
    Ali kena catch by police
    'Ali was caught by the police'

Like the by-phrase in English, the agentive *oleh*-phrase in Malay is optional. Although Sulaiman (1990) does not state explicitly that the *kena* construction in Malay connotes adversity, all the examples in (13) involve an adversative interpretation. Native speakers' intuition unequivocally points to that conclusion as well.6

When an adversative interpretation is unavailable, the *kena* sentences become unacceptable:

(15) a. *Budak itu kena suap
    Boy the kena feed
    'The boy was fed'

b. *Kambingnya kena pegant
    Goat-his kena touch
    'His goat was touched'

Likewise, stative verbs cannot be passivized by *kena*:

(16) a. *Perkara itu kena tahu
    Affair the kena know
    'The affair became known'

b. *Buku itu kena punya
    Book the kena own
    'The book was owned'

So far, we have established that *kena* in Malay is used as a passive. Its properties are summarized in (17):

(17) a. The agentive *oleh*-phrase is optional

b. The subject must be adversely affected

c. Stative verbs cannot be passivized with *kena*

These properties are exactly the ones listed in (12b-d) for the *kena* passive in Singapore English. Malay verbs do not show any morphological marking, and SgE verbs are inflected, however inconsistently (cf. Platt and Weber, 1980). This is a trivial difference between Malay and SgE with respect to the *kena* passive. We conclude that the Malay *kena* construction is the substrate source of the *kena* passive in SgE.

3. THE GIVE PASSIVE

3.1 Give in SgE

The word *give* in SgE is used as a verb, as it is in English. At the bislectal level, however, this word may lose its lexical meanings, and function instead as a marker of the passive voice. In other words, the word *give* exhibits the effect of grammaticalization (Hopper and Traugott, 1993). Syntactically, the give passive has a fixed template, shown in (18):

(18) NP1 give NP2 Verb

where NP1, the surface subject, is the patient, and NP2 is the agent, and it is obligatory. Here are a few examples of the *give* passive:

(19) a. John give his boss scold

b. The dog give the boy kick

c. You always give him beat

Like the *kena* passive, the *give* passive requires an adversity reading. Verbs such as *like* and *stroke* cannot occur in the *give* passive:

(20) a. *John give his boss praise

b. *The dog give the boy stroke

A few properties of the *give* passive are worth noting. First, unlike the *kena* passive, the agent in the *give* passive, i.e. NP2 in (18), must be present, as shown below:

(21) a. *John give scold

b. *The dog give kick

c. *You always give beat

In addition, the surface subject of the *give* passive is typically understood to have contributed in some way to its own misfortune. Thus, the sentence in (19a) implies that John, either through his own meekness or inefficiency, allowed his boss to scold him.
Similarly, the sentence in (19b) may imply that if the dog had been more aggressive or known how to avoid the boy, it would not have gotten kicked. Because of this, the *give* passive tends to pragmatically signal a lack of sympathy on the part of the speaker.

The understanding that the surface subject has contributed to its own misfortune presupposes a degree of volition. Therefore, it is not surprising that the *give* passive requires its subject to be animate. The following sentences are unacceptable, despite the adversity interpretation, because the subjects are all inanimate:

(22) a. *The book give him burn
   b. *The car give him scratch
   c. *The house give the men destroy

Finally, we note that unlike the *kena* passive, where the lexical verb can either appear in the base form or in the past participle form, the lexical verb in the *give* passive can only appear in the base form:

(23) a. *John give his boss scolded
   b. *The dog give the boy kicked
   c. *You always give him beaten

To summarize, we have seen that the *give* passive differs from the *kena* passive in that it does not allow the agent to be omitted. In addition, the *give* passive carries the implication that the subject is in some way responsible for its own misfortune. Consequently, the subject of the *give* passive must be animate.

We now proceed to show that the *give* passive is derived from Chinese.

3.2 The passive in Chinese

The passive construction in Chinese, particularly in Mandarin, has been extensively analyzed; among the more readily accessible sources are Chao (1968) and Li and Thompson (1981). Here, we will follow the analysis of Wang (1982), which was first published in the 1940s. His account had decisive influence on subsequent work on the topic.

According to Wang (1982), the primary semantic property of the *bei* construction is adversity. This can be seen in the examples below (for the sake of clarity tones are not marked):

(24) a. women bei ren qifu le
   we BEI people bully Part
   ‘We were bullied by people’
   b. Lao taitai ye bei feng cui-bing le
      old lady also BEI wind blow-sick Part
      ‘The old lady was sick because of the wind’
   c. wo gege bei xian-li na-le qu
      I brother BEI county-inside take-Part go
      ‘My brother was arrested by the county’

Note that the sentences all express unpleasant or unwanted events, i.e. events with the adversity readings. Neutral or positive events cannot be expressed by the *bei* construction.

(25) a. *Zhangsan bei Lisi xihuan
   Zhangsan BEI Lisi like
   ‘Zhangsan is liked by Lisi’
   b. *she-ben shu bei wo du
      this-CL book BEI I read
      ‘This book was read by me’

Likewise, it is the presence or absence of adversity that explains the status of the following pairs of sentences:

(26) a. Zhangsan bei ren du shi le
   Zhangsan BEI people poison die Part
   ‘Zhangsan was poisoned to death by people’
   b. *Zhangsan bei ren yi-hao le
      Zhangsan BEI people cure Part
      ‘Zhangsan was cured by people’

Obviously, to poison produces undesirable effect on the poisoned, and to cure certainly does not have any adverse effect on the cured.

While Mandarin is now widely spoken in Singapore, historically most Chinese Singaporeans speak southern dialects of Chinese, such as Hokkien and Cantonese. Although the passive construction in these dialects varies in syntactic detail, the adversity interpretation is a shared semantic feature. In Hokkien, the word *hor* has exactly the two uses of *give* in SgE, as shown in (27).

(27) a. le hor wah lu, ay sai buay?
   you give me money can not
   ‘Can you give me money?’
   b. Ah Hock tapai hor lang me
      Ah Hock always give people scold
      ‘Ah Hock always gets scold by people’
   c. easy kow hor ce phi
      that dog give 3Sg beat
      ‘That dog got beaten by him/her’

In (27a), *hor* is used as a lexical verb; in (27b and c), it is used to mark the passive voice. In Cantonese, it is *bei* which performs the two functions (CL: classifier):

(28) a. Ngoh bei keeuh yip-hap pinggo
   I give him one-CL apple
   ‘I gave him one apple’
   b. Di chaang bei yahn maaih saai
      CL orange give people buy all
      ‘The oranges have all been bought’
   c. Leih bei yahn ngaak-jo la
      you give people cheat-Perf Part
      ‘You’ve been cheated’

(28b and c) are cited from Matthews and Yip (1994). According to them, the *bei* passive entails that the subject is affected by the action, typically in an adverse or unpleasant manner. This observation applies to the passive in all Chinese dialects.*
We summarize the syntactic template of the passive construction in Chinese as follows:\(^9\)

\((29)\) NP\(_1\) beibei\(\)hor NP\(_2\) Verb

where NP\(_1\), the surface subject, is the patient, and NP\(_2\), the agent. In Mandarin, NP\(_2\) is optional, but in Hokkien and Cantonese, it is obligatory (Yuan et al., 1989). Note that the syntactic template of the give passive shown in (18) is identical to (29). The substrate influence is unmistakable.

While the give passive in SgE is based on the Hokkien hor construction and/or Cantonese bei construction, we note one area in which the two differ. The give passive requires the surface subject to be animate. There is no such constraint in the case of the hor bei construction. The Hokkien examples are shown below:

\[(30)\]
\begin{align*}
\text{a.} & \quad \text{zhicai mingka hor lang gia} \\
& \quad \text{this-CL thing give people take} \\
& \quad \text{This thing was taken by someone'}
\end{align*}

\begin{align*}
\text{b.} & \quad \text{eazy zhiu hor lang lim} \\
& \quad \text{this-CL water give people drink} \\
& \quad \text{This water was drunk by someone'}
\end{align*}

We suggest that hor/bei and give may have undergone different degrees of grammaticalization. The lexical meaning of give or hor/bei requires an animate subject. In Hokkien or Cantonese, hor/bei is fully grammaticalized, losing the original meaning of animacy. In SgE, give is only partially grammaticalized. As such, it is less productive, and retains the animacy requirement.

4. CONCLUSION

In the preceding sections we have discussed at some length the substrate influence on the passive construction in SgE. SgE has three passives: one from English, the superstrate language, and one each from Malay and Chinese, the main substrate languages. We summarize the result in the table below:

\[(31)\]

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>(be) V-en</th>
<th>Kenal/give passives</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>English</td>
<td>Malay/Chinese</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Salient property</td>
<td>none</td>
<td>adversity</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

What emerges from our discussion has interesting implications for theories of language genesis. SgE develops out of intense contact between English, the prestige language, and various local languages. As the structures of the substrate-derived passives indicate, the substrate grammatical features are very much part of the grammar of SgE, the newly formed variety of English. This is consistent with the substratum views on language genesis, namely, substrate influence is structural, while superstrate influence is lexical (cf. Muysken and Smith, 1986; Mufwene, 1993, 1996; and Lefebvre, 1995).

Two observations are worth making about the passives in SgE. First, the adversity effect is a salient property of the substrate-derived passives, not the English-derived passive. Second, the kena passive is much more productive than the give passive.\(^{10}\) To account for these two observations, we need to examine the sociolinguistic factors in the contact situation. The first observation can be partially explained from the perspective of substrate influence. Adversity is a salient feature of the passive in the substratum of SgE, which is transferred to SgE together with the kena and give passives. The lack of the adversity effect in the English-derived passive cannot be accounted for in the same manner. Following Thomason and Kaufman (1988), we argue that the continued high prestige of standard English in Singaporean society insulates the English-derived passive from acquiring the adversity reading.

The same sociolinguistic factor may also be responsible for the second observation. We juxtapose the structural templates of the three passives below:

\[(32)\]
\begin{align*}
\text{a. English-derived passive:} & \quad \text{NP\(_1\) be V-en (by NP\(_2\))} \\
\text{b. The kena passive:} & \quad \text{NP\(_1\), kena V-en (byobject NP\(_2\))} \\
\text{c. The give passive:} & \quad \text{NP\(_1\) be NP\(_2\) V-en}
\end{align*}

Structurally, the kena passive is more similar to the English-derived passive, with kena replacing be.\(^{11}\) In both cases the by-phrase is optional. The give passive differs not only in the order of the relevant constituents, but also in the obligatory presence of the agentive NP\(_2\). When the kena and give passives compete, the dominance of standard English in the Singaporean speech community favors the kena passive over the give passive. This explains the robustness of the kena passive, and the low degree of acceptance of the give passive in SgE. We suggest that the passives in SgE lend support to a general condition on language contact. We state the generalization below:

\[(33)\] When two or more variants of a given grammatical construction compete in the emerging grammar of a contact language, the winner will be that variant which most closely resembles in structure the corresponding construction in the socially dominant language.

Our analysis of the passive construction in SgE highlights two interesting properties of language contact. First, it supports the substratist position that the grammar of emerging languages contains substrate structural features. In the case of SgE, the bulk of its vocabulary is derived from English, its grammar contains structural and semantic features which can be easily identified in the substrate languages. Second, in contact situations where the emergent dominant language still enjoys a high position in society, as in the case with English in Singapore, the grammatical norm of the dominant language will moderate the substrate effect on the grammar of the new, emerging language.

NOTES

1. We have benefited from discussions with our colleagues, among them Lisa Lim, Vincent Ooi, and Ismail Talib. We also benefited from comments from an anonymous reviewer. All errors of fact and interpretation are our own. An earlier version of the paper was presented at a seminar in the Department of English Language and Literature, National University of Singapore. The authors’ names appear in alphabetical order.

2. The status of the English language in Singapore is a controversial matter. There are roughly two camps in the controversy. One camp holds the view that English in Singapore is a speech continuum. At the basal level, the English language is a ‘creoloid,’ and at the acrolectal level it is indistinguishable, except for trivial phonetic features, from standard English in Britain or America. The speech continuum model is rejected by the opposing camp, which advocates the view that the English language situation in Singapore is diglossic (cf. Ferguson 1959). Two distinct varieties of English are postulated, which are labeled Singapore Standard English, the H form, and Singapore Colloquial English, the L form. We will not go into this controversy in this paper. The English under discussion, which we label Singapore English, would correspond to non-acrolectal varieties, or to the L form. For recent work on Singapore English, see Gupta (1991, 1994), Pakir (1992), Ho and Platt (1993), Bao (1995, 1997), Alsagoff and Ho (1998), Bao and Wei (1996), and Foley et al. (1998).

3. We will not attempt to justify our use of the term ‘passive’ here. For discussions on the general properties of the passive, see Shibatani (1985).

4. We use the term ‘substrate’ in a broad sense, to refer to languages in the contact situation other than the
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