

**On the Topichood of Indefinite Subjects:
With Special Reference to *Cause-Causative Passives****

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1. Introduction

In the study of semantics and pragmatics, very little has been written on the passivisability of periphrastic causative sentences with the verb *cause*, i.e. “*cause-causatives*” (Osawa (2008a, b)). Mittwoch (1990) and Mair (1990) merely point out that *cause-causative passives* are not acceptable. The *cause-causative passive* is illustrated by sentences like the following:

- (1) a. * Prices were caused to rise (by the inflation).
 b. * Body temperature is caused to drop by aspirin.
(Mittwoch (1990:119))

Osawa (2008a, b), however, argues that although *cause-causative passives* cannot be acceptable at the sentence level or out of context, they can be in certain contexts. Basing the observation on the data where *cause-causative passives* are actually used, Osawa proposes the following hypothesis for *cause-causative passives*:

- (2) In order for a *cause-causative passive* to be acceptable, the subject must function as the topic of the sentence, and the cause of the event expressed by the sentence must be described in the context. (Osawa (2008b:71))

Takami (2009) also points out that *cause-causatives* can be passivised, but he provides counterexamples to Osawa’s analysis and objects that condition (2) is empirically inadequate.

The aim of this paper is to claim that the examples Takami (2009) provides are not real but apparent counterexamples and the examples are rather convincing evidence for Osawa (2008a, b) and to partly revise the condition to precisely account for facts. This paper is organised as follows. Section 2 surveys the analysis of Osawa (2008a, b) and the examples Takami (2009) provides. Section 3 defines the notion of the topic and argues that even an indefinite NP can be

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construed as the topic of the sentence. Section 4 reconsiders the latter part of condition (2) in terms of the “affectedness constraint” (Bolinger (1975)) and suggests a revision of the condition. Section 5 makes some concluding remarks.

2. A Licensing Condition and Counterexamples

This section surveys the licensing condition for *cause*-causative passives in Osawa (2008a, b) and the counterexamples against it which Takami (2009) provides. To begin with, let us take a brief look at Osawa’s analysis. It is alleged in previous studies (Mittwoch (1990) and Mair (1990)) that *cause*-causatives cannot be passivised, as shown in (3):

- (3) a. The inflation caused prices to rise. (Mittwoch (1990:119))
 b. * Prices were caused to rise (by the inflation). (= (1a))

Osawa (2008b:67), however, points out that there are certain contexts in which *cause*-causative passives can be used. The following fragment is found on a web site and the *cause*-causative passive in italics is used. Let us take a look at the example:

- (4) The Negro came to the United States of America in 1619. [...] Before the Mayflower, [...] *hundreds of Negroes [...] were caused to perish in the middle of the sea*, simply because the mean and cruel task master, the white man, would walk down the aisle and stumble over Negroes chained to the ship and say “We have too many on board. Dump them over into the sea.”

Osawa (2008a, b) observes the data found in the corpora and proposes condition (2). Osawa illustrates that it must be satisfied when *cause*-causative passives are acceptable by the following examples:

- (5) a. * Prices were caused to rise (by the inflation). (= (3b))
 b. The oil crisis caused a serious inflation in the 70’s in Japan. Inflation lead to a general increase in prices and a fall in the purchasing value of money. Needless to say, *prices were caused to rise* in this country. (Osawa (2008b:72))

Previous studies have claimed that sentence (5a) is infelicitous. The sentence, however, can be licensed under the context where its subject serves as the topic of

the sentence, and where the cause of the event expressed by the sentence is explicitly described.¹ In (5b), the subject of the *cause*-causative passive in italics is introduced in the preceding discourse, and the sentence in question describes what happened to the subject. The subject is thus construed as the topic of the sentence here. Furthermore, the context points to the influence of inflation as the cause of the event described by the sentence; thus the *cause*-causative passive is accepted in (5b). As seen in (5), *cause*-causative passives assumed to be unacceptable on their own can be licensed in the context which satisfies condition (2). Hence the validity of the condition.

Takami (2009), however, adduces the data as a counterexample against Osawa (2008a, b). First let us look at the following sentences:

(6) *A 37-year-old mother of twins was caused to lose a massive amount of blood* and died after hospital staff failed to diagnose and treat internal haemorrhaging in a timely fashion after a Caesarean section.

(Takami (2009:35))

(7) On one occasion, *an electrically-driven wheel chair was caused to move unintentionally* by the communication radio in a taxi.

(Takami (2009:35))

In (6) and (7), the subjects of the *cause*-causative passives are indefinite NPs, and the *cause*-causative passives occur in the discourse initial position. Hence, Takami claims that the subjects in question cannot be construed as the topics of the sentences here.

Next, the following examples show that the cause of the event expressed by *cause*-causative passives is described with a *by*-phrase.

(8) In a concert and sound installation, twenty mobile phones were suspended from a ceiling. These were caused to ring *by a live performer*, who dialled them up using another four phones below.

(Takami (2009:35))

(9) The requirements of §523 (a) (2) (B) are met if the existence of a written statement was caused to be prepared *by the defendant*.

(Takami (2009:35))

Osawa's condition in (2) prescribes that the cause of the event must be described in context, not with a *by*-phrase. Sentences (8) and (9) do not conform to this

¹ The notion of the topic is dealt with in detail in section 3.1.

condition: the *by*-phrases in the sentences express the cause of the event.

With these examples, Takami (2009) claims that Osawa's analysis is not empirically adequate. Apparently these examples show that condition (2) is inoperative, but it is not true. We shall argue that what Takami points out does not constitute a real counterexample in the following section.

3. Subject as Topic

3.1. *Topic in Our Theory*

This subsection clarifies what the topic is, because it is an important notion in the former part of condition (2). Osawa (2008a, b) and this paper basically follow Lambrecht (1994), and his definition of the topic is as follows:²

- (10) A referent is interpreted as the topic of a proposition if in a given situation the proposition is construed as being about this referent, i.e. as expressing information which is relevant to and which increases the addressee's knowledge of this referent. (Lambrecht (1994:131))

The following discourse illustrates the definition in (10) succinctly:

- (11) a. What did the children do next?
 b. The children went to school. (Lambrecht (1994:121))

The question in (11a) asks what the children did and the NP *the children* is introduced into the discourse. In the reply in (11b), the referent of the subject NP *the children* is what the sentence is about. The sentence is a proposition construed as being about this referent. Hence the NP represents the topic of the sentence. This is an obvious illustration of the definition in (10).

The definition covers the case of topicalisation where the NP referent does not appear explicitly in the previous discourse. Consider the following example:

- (12) A: You want to see every Woody Allen movie as soon as it comes out.
 B: No, *Stardust Memory* I saw yesterday. (Prince (1981:251))

In example (12), there are no explicit words in A's utterance that correspond to the subject NP of the topicalised sentence. *Stardust Memory* is not identical to *every*

² See Lambrecht (1994) for details.

Woody Allen movie, but *Stardust Memory* is a movie in which *Woody Allen* appears. The subject NP of the sentence in question is thus inferable from the word *Woody Allen* in the discourse, and the sentence describes what happened to its subject. Hence the acceptability of the topicalised sentence in (12).

Osawa (2008a, b) also explains the case of *cause-causative* passives by using the same logic:

- (13) The singer Janet Jackson, it was proved during the Super Bowl programme last weekend, is possessed of a right breast. And when an American breast is exposed on peak-time television, can litigation be far behind? “As a direct and proximate result of the broadcast,” a writ proclaims, *viewers “were caused to suffer outrage, anger, embarrassment and serious injury.”* (Osawa (2008b:69))

In (13), though the subject *viewers* does not appear in the preceding context, we can easily infer the existence of viewers from the words *television* and *broadcast*. This makes the subject *viewers* accessible from the context, and the sentence in question describes what happened to the viewers. Here the subject is interpreted as the topic of the sentence.

Furthermore the definition of the topic in (10) holds for the case where even no direct trigger word for inference appears in the previous discourse. Look at the following:

- (14) I graduated from high school as an average student. My initiative didn't carry me any further than average. *History* I found to be dry. *Math courses* I was never good at. I enjoyed sciences. (Prince (1981:253))

Note that the italicised NPs in (14), *history* and *math courses*, are not already introduced entities, and their equivalents also do not appear beforehand. However, the topicalised sentences with these NPs are used and accepted. The NPs *history* and *math courses* are inferable from a discourse theme (e.g. talking about school life) that is not mentioned obviously but that is inferable from the NP *high school*. Our knowledge of the world (“frame” in the sense of Prince (1981)) associates *history* and *math courses* with *high school*.³ So the topicalised sentences are impeccable in (14).

³ This kind of inference is also discussed by Clark and Haviland (1977) under the name of “bridging.” See Clark and Haviland (1977) for details.

Lambrecht (1994) does not fully mention the cases in (12) and (14), but we can assume that his definition of the topic includes all three cases: the cases where an equivalent of a referent is already introduced, where a referent is inferable from a trigger word in the previous discourse, and where a referent is inferable from the discourse theme.

It is the third case that seems to be applicable to the *cause-causative* passives Takami (2009) provides. We can predict that even an indefinite NP in *cause-causative* passives functions as the topic of the sentence. Let us consider whether or not it is really construed as the topic of the sentence in the following subsection.

3.2. *Inference from the Discourse*

Takami (2009) provides a part of the fragment where *cause-causative* passives are used, which is repeated below for ease of reference:

- (15) *A 37-year-old mother of twins was caused to lose a massive amount of blood* and died after hospital staff failed to diagnose and treat internal haemorrhaging in a timely fashion after a Caesarean section. (= (6))
- (16) On one occasion, *an electrically-driven wheel chair was caused to move unintentionally* by the communication radio in a taxi. (= (7))

These examples show that the subjects of the *cause-causative* passives are indefinite NPs and the sentences occur in the discourse initial position. It might appear that the subjects are not construed as the topics of the sentences. Our close investigation, however, reveals that the subjects in question evidently serve as the topics of the sentences.

The examples in (15) and (16) are extracted from the following paragraphs:

- (17) \$4,500,000.00 medical malpractice settlement – *37 year old mother of twins was caused to lose a massive amount of blood* and died after hospital staff failed to diagnose and treat internal haemorrhaging in a timely fashion after a Caesarean section.
(<http://www.napil.com/DisplayListing.aspx>)
- (18) Mobile phones can interfere with medical equipment.
[...] On one occasion, *an electrically-driven wheel chair was caused to move unintentionally* by the communication radio in a taxi [...].
(<http://www.cherryclough.com/Downloads/Compendium%20of%20Banana%20Skins,%205%20March%2007.pdf>)

Let us take account of the whole context where the *cause-causative* passive is embedded, especially the first line, i.e. the subheading of the article. The first phrase in (17) is a theme of this fragment. When we hear the NP *medical malpractice settlement*, we infer various sorts of information from it. For example, the NP implies the existence of perpetrators, victims, plaintiffs, and defendants. These participants are already evoked by the first phrase of this context. A 37-year-old mother of twins is one of them, a victim. It is reasonable to consider, therefore, that the referent of the subject NP is already introduced in the preceding context. The *cause-causative* passive describes what happened to its subject. Consequently, the subject is construed as the topic of the sentence in (17).

Likewise, in (18), the NP *medical equipment* is associated with a pacemaker, an infusion pump, and maybe an electrically-driven wheel chair. Thus, the subject of the *cause-causative* passive is as good as it is introduced beforehand, and the sentence is a proposition construed as being about its subject. Hence the indefinite subject represents the topic of the sentence.

Actually, the following test supports the supposition that the indefinite subject NPs in (17) and (18) function as the topics of the sentences:

- (19) a. What happened?
 b. ??A 37-year-old mother of twins was caused to lose a massive amount of blood (because of a medical malpractice).
- (20) a. What happened?
 b. ??An electrically-driven wheel chair was caused to move unintentionally by the communication radio in a taxi.

The question *What happened?* asks what event occurred. An answer to the question is necessarily a presentational sentence which explains what event took place, and thus the sentence as a whole represents totally new information and is topicless. As answers to the question, the *cause-causative* passives in (19b) and (20b) are not appropriate. This is because the subject of the *cause-causative* passive must be construed as the topic of the sentence, and the sentences in (19b) and (20b) cannot function as a presentational sentence.

That the indefinite subjects in (17) and (18) function as the topics of the sentences is independently supported by the case with topicalised sentences. Consider the following example:

- (21) I saw a film last night. A Fellini film it was. (Ward (1988:58))

According to Inage (1997), the NP *a Fellini film* in the topicalised sentence corresponds to *a film* in the first sentence: a Fellini film is a member of the class denoted by the NP *a film* which is introduced beforehand. Therefore, the NP in the second sentence carries some information related to the preceding discourse, and it does not express brand-new information. Even though an indefinite NP in topicalised sentences introduces a new referent in form, it is more informationally relevant to the preceding discourse in terms of information value (Inage (1997)).⁴

From the observation so far, it is probably safe to conclude that just because an indefinite NP is used does not mean the NP cannot be construed as the topic of the sentence. Takami (2009) states that the subject of the *cause*-causative passive cannot function as the topic of the sentence because it is an indefinite NP. We have revealed, however, that even an indefinite NP can be construed as the topic in relation to the preceding context.

We cannot determine by the surface syntactic information alone whether an NP is construed as a topic. Lambrecht (1994:120) has the following to say: in order to determine whether an entity is a topic in a sentence or not it is often necessary to take into account the discourse context in which the sentence is embedded. Why, then, is an indefinite subject used despite the fact that it is construed as the topic of the sentence? Generally speaking, a definite NP tends to be used in order to denote the topic. What function does an indefinite subject serve? The next subsection addresses this issue.

3.3. *Predicative Indefinite NPs*

Let us observe example (17), repeated here as (22):

- (22) \$4,500,000.00 medical malpractice settlement – *37 year old mother of twins was caused to lose a massive amount of blood* and died after hospital staff failed to diagnose and treat internal haemorrhaging in a timely fashion after a Caesarean section.

As mentioned above, though the NP *a victim* or its equivalent is not written clearly, the referent is implied by the first phrase and regarded as an already introduced entity. So, while an indefinite NP (*a 37-year-old mother of twins*) seems to introduce a new referent on the surface in the discourse, she and the victim are identical. Furthermore, *a 37-year-old mother of twins* is a more detailed description of the victim. It is used to introduce a new aspect to the topic entity, which is unknown to the hearer yet. Indefinite NPs of this type correspond to

⁴ For detailed discussion, see Inage (1997).

what Nishida (2002) calls “reflexive indefinites,” which function as a means to express a specific objective aspect to the topic person.⁵

Consequently, though the subject of the *cause-causative* passive is an indefinite NP, the referent introduced by the NP and the topic entity is coreferential, and the NP can be, though indirectly, identified as the topic of the sentence. This is illustrated by the following grammatical contrast:

- (23) \$4,500,000.00 medical malpractice settlement –
- a. The victim is a 37-year-old mother of twins who was caused to lose a massive amount of blood.
 - b. {*A woman / A 37-year-old mother of twins} was caused to lose a massive amount of blood.
 - c. * The 37-year-old mother of twins was caused to lose a massive amount of blood.

In (23a), the implied referent *the victim* is expressed and is the subject of this sentence; the original subject in question serves as the predicate of the subject. The sentence in (23a) is impeccable and shows that an indefinite NP denotes a new aspect to the subject. When *a woman* is compared with *a 37-year-old mother of twins*, as in (23b), the latter is more felicitous as the subject of the *cause-causative* passive here. This is because the latter describes more detailed information about a victim and can function as the predicate more sufficiently. Furthermore, as in (23c), if we change the definiteness of the NP in question, the sentence is infelicitous. This can be explained in terms of the nature of indefiniteness in English: an indefinite NP can express properties (e.g. *I am a student* / **I am the student*).

When an indefinite NP is used as a subject of a *cause-causative* passive, the subject looks as if it cannot be construed as the topic of the sentence, as Takami (2009) points out. The indefinite subject, however, can function as the topic of the sentence in relation to the preceding discourse. As seen in 3.2 and 3.3, if we take account of the contextual information surrounding *cause-causative* passives, we should find that Takami’s objection to the former part of the condition in Osawa (2008a, b) – the subject must function as the topic of the sentence – is not valid. The example he provides is a support to Osawa rather than a

⁵ Nishida states that by using a reflexive indefinite, the speaker can communicate to the hearer not only the unique identifiability of a topic person, but also a generalisation about the class which includes the topic person as a member. The latter function does not suit the case of an indefinite NP in the *cause-causative* passive, which may be ascribed to the nature of this construction. So we are not concerned with this function. On a reflexive indefinite, see Nishida (2002).

counterexample. In the following section, we shall turn to the latter part of the condition: the cause of the event expressed by the sentence must be described in the context.

4. Cause of *Cause-Causative Passives*

Osawa (2008a, b) argues that the cause of the event expressed by *cause-causative passives* must be described in the context, not in the sentence. This is illustrated by the examples in (24) and (25):

- (24) He was running a high fever this morning, and he went to a doctor.
 a. * So his body temperature was caused to drop by the doctor's treatment.
 b. So the doctor's treatment caused his body temperature to drop.
 (Osawa (2008b:71))
- (25) When a patient has a headache and fever, the doctor should prescribe aspirin for the headache. While aspirin relieves the patient's headache, *his body temperature is also caused to drop*. (Osawa (2008b:73))

In (24), the NP *a high fever*, which is an equivalent of the subject of the *cause-causative passives* in (24a), is introduced in the preceding discourse and the subject represents the topic of the sentence. Nevertheless, sentence (24a) is unacceptable since the cause of the event expressed by the *cause-causative passive* is not expressed in the context. Even though the cause is represented in the *by*-phrase, the *cause-causative passive* is infelicitous. In this case, a *cause-causative*, as in (24b) can be appropriately used.

In (25), the subject (*his*) *body temperature* is accessible from the related word *fever* in the preceding context, and the *cause-causative passive* describes what happened to the subject. It then serves as the topic of the sentence. It is also clear from the context that the cause of the event described is aspirin, which has the effect of lowering the fever. Hence the acceptability of the *cause-causative passive* in (25).

Takami (2009), however, adduces the examples which illustrate the fact that the *by*-phrase in *cause-causative passives* describes the cause of the event. Let us look at his examples in (8) and (9), repeated here as (26) and (27):

- (26) In a concert and sound installation, twenty mobile phones were suspended from a ceiling. These were caused to ring by a live performer, who dialled them up using another four phones below.

- (27) The requirements of §523 (a) (2) (B) are met if the existence of a written statement was caused to be prepared by the defendant.

Where does the difference in grammaticality between the examples in (24a) and (26)-(27) come from? Let us consider this difference in terms of the affectedness constraint. This constraint is proposed by Bolinger (1975) and is summarised as follows: a passive sentence needs a patient that is construed to be affected by the action of the verb. According to Osawa (2008a, b), the reason why *cause*-causatives cannot be passivised on their own is that they do not contain a patient that is directly affected by the action of the verb. In other words, the NP in the complement clause of *cause*-causatives cannot be identified as a patient from the lexical information of the verb. So, *cause*-causative passives cannot fulfill the affectedness constraint on their own.⁶

If passives must satisfy the affectedness constraint in order to be licensed, then *cause*-causative passives necessarily meet the constraint even by contextual information, not by their intrasentential information. Put another way, when a *cause*-causative passive is accepted in context, the subject of the sentence is regarded as a patient from contextual information. Let us confirm this point by the examples Osawa and Takami provide, which are repeated below for ease of reference:

- (28) He was running a high fever this morning, and he went to a doctor.
 * So his body temperature was caused to drop by the doctor's treatment.
 (= (24a))
- (29) When a patient has a headache and fever, the doctor should prescribe aspirin for the headache. While aspirin relieves the patient's headache, *his body temperature is also caused to drop.*
 (= (25))

Comparing (28) with (29), we notice that *the doctor's treatment* in the *by*-phrase is too simple to explain the reason why his body temperature dropped. My informant cannot infer the clear effect that the subject of the *cause*-causative passive underwent nor regard it as a patient from this phrase alone. On the other hand, he judges *cause*-causative passives as acceptable when the cause is described in the context, as in (29). Richer, or more specific, information tells him the effect which the subject undergoes. So, if we add more information on what happened to the subject, as in (30), the *cause*-causative passive becomes

⁶ We shall not spend time reviewing this analysis here. See Osawa (2008a, b) for details.

impeccable. This is because contextual information makes it possible to regard the subject as a patient. Look at the following example:

- (30) He was running a high fever this morning, and he went to a doctor.
 So his body temperature was caused to drop by the doctor's treatment.
 Then, the fever has left him, and he is quite cool.

In (30), *the doctor's treatment* in the *by*-phrase is the cause of the event expressed by the *cause-causative passive*. The cause is described only by the phrase. But when we explain how the fever changes, as shown in the last line, the *cause-causative passive* is acceptable. The fact shows that the cause of the event is not always expressed in the context. Takami's (2009) example also proves this point. Let us take (31) as an example:

- (31) In a concert and sound installation, twenty mobile phones were suspended from a ceiling. These were caused to ring by a live performer, who dialled them up using another four phones below.
 (= (26))

In (31), the cause of the mobile phone ringing is a live performer's action, which is described with the *by*-phrase, not in the context. In this fragment, the mobile phones are one of the tools of an art performance, and the way they are controlled is explained (i.e. *a live performer dialled them up using another four phones below*). Thus, the subject of the *cause-causative passive*, *these* (i.e. *twenty mobile phones*), can be construed as a patient. Actually, if we omit the relative clause, as in (32), the *cause-causative passive* is infelicitous:⁷

- (32) In a concert and sound installation, twenty mobile phones were suspended from a ceiling. **These were caused to ring by a live performer.*

The facts above show that it is how rich the contextual information is that makes *cause-causative passives* impeccable. Whether the cause is described in context or with the *by*-phrase is not relevant to the acceptability of the sentence.

⁷ Contrary to (32), example (27) is accepted despite the fact that the cause is described with the *by*-phrase which denotes only the agent and does not explain who he is or what he has done. In the original text, however, the context describes who the agent is and how the subject of the *cause-causative passives* is affected. Since the original text is too long to summarise, we do not treat it here. The example is cited from [<http://civics.com/COGIS/note-kaspar9.htm>].

Not only the cause, but the whole contextual information assigns the subject of the *cause*-causative passive a patient-like role and thus the affectedness constraint is satisfied, which in turn makes the *cause*-causative passive impeccable. In order to capture this fact precisely, we should revise Osawa's (2008a, b) condition and propose the following licensing condition:

(33) A revised licensing condition for *cause*-causative passives

A *cause*-causative passive requires a context where its subject can function as the topic of the sentence, and where the subject can be regarded as a patient.

When an entity is construed as the topic, the discourse develops in relation to the topic, which means that further information as to the topic is described in the discourse. The context tells us what happened to the topic and at the same time the patienthood of the topic entity. That the subject is construed as a patient means that the affectedness constraint is fulfilled. As a result, *cause*-causative passives are accepted in order to be used.

To sum up, the cause of the event expressed by *cause*-causative passives can be described either in context or with a *by*-phrase. Consequently, the discrepancy in this fact between Osawa (2008a, b) and Takami (2009) is not crucial and can be solved with the partial revision of the condition in (2).

5. Conclusion

We have discussed that just because an indefinite NP is used does not mean the NP cannot be construed as the topic of the sentence. Our investigation has shown that the examples Takami (2009) provides against Osawa (2008a, b) are not real but apparent counterexamples. Consequently, we can assume that in order for *cause*-causative passives to be licensed, the subject must be the topic of the sentence. The topicness of the subject can be determined by information in the discourse, not in the surface syntax of the sentence. Hence an indefinite NP can be interpreted as the topic of the sentence in relation to the preceding discourse.

We have also suggested a revision of Osawa's (2008a, b) condition in order to account for what Takami points out that the cause of the event expressed by *cause*-causative passives can be denoted with the *by*-phrase precisely. Osawa argues that the cause of the event must be described in context, and Takami points out that the cause can be denoted by the *by*-phrase, i.e., it can be described in a sentence. We have illustrated that both are compatible and it is the whole context that gives the subject of *cause*-causative passives a patient-like role.

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