Cantonese *jihgei*: Subject-object Asymmetry and Non-subject Antecedent Potential

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**Background**  Chinese long distance anaphors (LDA) are generally viewed to have subject orientation [1;2;3]. This property predicts that the Mandarin *ziji* in (1) and the Cantonese *jihgei* in (2) would select either the matrix subject or the embedded subject as antecedent. Cross-linguistically, LDAs also appear in other languages. In particular, Korean *caki* has been traditionally described to be subject-oriented. However, [4] demonstrates that by manipulating the predicate, such as in (3), the object has the potential of becoming the antecedent of *caki* when it is the source of information, as in (3b). The experimental findings of [4] capture the non-subject antecedent potential of *caki*.

The current study explores the non-subject antecedent potential of the Cantonese LDA, which has received far less attention than its Mandarin counterpart. Of particular interest is the asymmetry in antecedent selection between *jihgei* in the embedded subject position and *jihgei* in the embedded object position. In two experiments where the main predicate was manipulated to be *say*-verb or *hear*-verb, participants were asked to select an antecedent for an embedded *jihgei* from two forced choices. The findings revealed the possibility of non-subject antecedent for *jihgei* in both embedded subject and object positions in *hear*-sentences, with the subject *jihgei* showing a stronger preference for a non-subject antecedent than the object *jihgei*.

**The Experiments**  In each of the two experiments, 32 different native Cantonese speakers were asked to complete a forced-choice task which limited their responses to one of the two answer choices provided. The participants were presented with a *say*-sentence or a *hear*-sentence containing a *jihgei* or a third person pronoun in the embedded clause. They had to choose between the matrix subject and object as the antecedent. Each participant completed 16 test trials (four trials per condition) and 16 filler trials in a randomized order. In Experiment 1, *jihgei* or the third person pronoun was in the subject position. In Experiment 2, *jihgei* or the third person pronoun was in the object position. The four conditions in Experiments 1 and 2 are exemplified in (4) and (5) respectively.

**Findings**  In Experiment 1, participants predominantly selected the subject antecedent for the *say* condition (e.g. Yan in (4a)) but object antecedent for the *hear* condition (e.g. Jing in (4b)) regardless of anaphor type. The findings revealed that in embedded subject position, *jihgei* and third person pronoun display similar antecedent potential—they both exhibit strong preference for the source of information, i.e. the logophoric centre. In Experiment 2, again, participants had a stronger preference to select subject antecedent in the *say*-jihgei condition than in the *hear*-jihgei condition (p<.001). What is interesting is that the subject selection score in the latter condition was .48, meaning that the stimuli in the *hear*-jihgei condition were almost equally divided in having a subject or an object selected as antecedent (Figure 2). This finding is reminiscent of [4] in that there seems to be competition between the preference of having a subject antecedent and selecting an antecedent that is the source of information.

**Conclusion**  The present study found that there exists subject-object asymmetry in the antecedent resolution of embedded *jihgei*. It was found that in an embedded subject position, *jihgei* and the third person pronoun have similar antecedent potential, the source of information. However, in an embedded object position, *jihgei* has a strong preference to select only the subject as antecedent when the matrix subject and the source of information coincide. Should misalignment occur, i.e. the matrix object is the source of information, a competition between selecting the subject and selecting the object as antecedent was observed. Our findings, which echo [4]’s similar observation in Korean *caki*, suggest that the putative subject-orientation of *jihgei* is not categorical, but is modulated by other factors. The present study thus provides experimental basis for further theoretical work on Chinese LDAs, which are described as subject-oriented in the majority of current literature.
(1) Zhangsan zhidaol [Lisi, zai pian ziji]  
Zhangsan know Lisi ASP lie self  
‘Zhangsan knows that Lisi is lying to self.’

(2) A-Mahi wah [Mahn-jai mh sik hoigai jihgei]  
Grandma say Man not know cheer self  
‘Grandma says that Man doesn’t know how to cheer self up.’

(3) a. Yuli-nun Swuni-eykey [caki,-ka iki-lke-lako] malha-yess-ta  
Yuli-TOP Swuni-to self-NOM win-FUT-comp say-PAST-DECL  
‘Yuli said to Swuni that self would win the race.’  
Yuli-TOP Swuni-from self-NOM win-FUT-comp hear-PAST-DECL  
‘Yuli heard from Swuni that self would win the race.’

(4) a. A-Yan wa bei A-Jing teng jihgei keui jeui lek jyu hoisin say-jihgei/say-pronoun  
Yan say to Jing listen self/3sg most clever cook seafood  
‘Yan tells Jing that self/she is best at cooking seafood.’  
b. A-Yan teng A-Jing gong wa jihgei keui jeui lek jyu hoisin hear-jihgei/hear-pronoun  
Yan listen Jing talk say self/3sg most clever cook seafood  
‘Yan hears from Jing that self/she is best at cooking seafood.’

(5) a. Siu-Lahm wa bei A-Lihng teng Siu-Lei chai dou jihgei keui say-jihgei/say-pronoun  
Lum say to Ling listen Lei step PRT self/3sg  
‘Lum tells Ling that Lei stepped on self/her.’  
b. Siu-Lahm teng A-Lihng gong wa Siu-Lei chai dou jihgei keui hear-jihgei/hear-pronoun  
Lum listen Ling talk say Lei step PRT self/3sg  
‘Lum hears from Ling that Lei stepped on self/her.’

Selected References  