More on *Kena*-Passives in Singapore English and the Distribution of Passive Morphemes

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Abstract: In the so-called *kena*-passive construction in Singapore English (Bao and Wee 1999), the morphosyntactic realization of the passive feature of irregular verbs is optional (*John kena caught/?catch*) in contrast to the obligatory realization of the same feature within the English-derived *be*-passive (*John was caught/*catch*). We propose that this asymmetry follows from the hybrid syntactic structures of the *kena*-passive construction. Specifically, we argue that the verb *kena* allows not only the standard passive structure of the type discussed by Bao and Wee but also the active structure which embeds a sentential complement comprising of *pro* and the active verb. This analysis is supported by a variety of arguments regarding the *kena*-active complement structure independently available in Singapore English (Yap and Lim 2011) as well as the Chinese (Feng 1995; Huang 1999) and Baba Malay (Ansaldo and Matthews 1999), which have been hypothesized in the literature as the two major substrate languages of Singapore English.

1.   Introduction: A morphological asymmetry in *kena*-passives

In an article published in this journal, Bao and Wee (1999:2) observe a puzzling asymmetry in the distribution between regular and irregular passive morphemes in what is commonly known as the *kena*-passive construction in Singapore English. As they state that 'the past participial form is clearly preferred, particularly for strong verbs, which exhibit irregular inflection', native

speakers can omit *–ed* relatively freely, as in (1a), but they find it somewhat odd to do the same for *–en*, as in (1b,c).[1]

(1)   a.   John kena detained/detain.

'John was detained.'

b.   John kena caught/?catch.

'John was caught.'

c.   My cake kena eaten/?eat already

'My cake was eaten.'

((1b) adapted from Bao and Wee's (1999) example (5a))

In this article, we aim to locate the source of the puzzling asymmetry in (1). We argue that although *kena*-passive sentences like the ones in (1) appear to have the simple structure in (2a), in which *kena* selects a passive verb directly, it in fact has an additional active voice structure in (2b), in which *kena* selects a full clause containing *pro* followed by an active verb, and that this structural ambiguity results in the morphological asymmetry in (1).

(2)   a.   Subject kena [$_{VP}$ verb$_{[+passive]}$]

b.   Subject kena [$_S$ *pro* verb$_{[+active]}$]

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[1] We use the label *–en* as a cover symbol that refers to all irregular realizations of the abstract passive morpheme and the symbol ? to indicate that a ?-marked form is marginal compared to its alternative inflected form.

To argue for the structure in (2b), the major claim of this article, we present in section 3 Yap and Lim's (2011) recent finding that the Malay-derived passive marker *kena* can actually select an active clause (with an overt agent argument plus an active verb) as its complement, together with the fact that Singapore English is a *pro*-drop language. We propose that the conspiracy of these two independent syntactic properties creates the structure in (2b). [2] We further show that the emergence of the structure in (2b) in Singapore English is not accidental but has its substratal roots in Chinese languages, the major substrate languages throughout the history of Singapore English. In section 4, we turn to explain how the two structures in (2) are responsible for the morphological asymmetry in (1). Section 5 concludes the paper.

Before getting into the main discussion, however, we begin with morphological rules that govern the distribution of passive morphemes in Singapore English to show that they fail to account for the asymmetry in (1) and that something else must be said about it.

2. Morpho-phonological rules for Passive Morphemes in Singapore English

As a contact variety of English, Singapore English has *be*-passives as well as *kena*-passives in its repertoire of passive constructions. [3] *Be*-passives in Singapore English distinguish themselves from their English counterparts in one respect, i.e., in the way passive morphemes are realized; unlike English *be*-passives which require passive morphemes, regular or irregular, to be realized obligatorily, Singapore English *be*-passives only require irregular passive morphemes to be obligatorily realized, as the contrast in (3) and (4) shows.

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[2] Yap and Lim's finding has been made in collaboration with one of the authors of this article.

[3] The unmodified term 'English' refers to native versions of English such as British English and American English.

(3)   *English*

    a.   John was detained/*detain.

    b.   John was caught/*catch.

    c.   My cake was eaten/*eat already

(4)   *Singapore English*

    a.   John was detained/detain.

    b.   John was caught/*catch.

    c.   My cake was eaten/*eat already

To characterize this difference between English *be*-passives and Singapore English *be*-passives, one must posit different sets of morph-phonological rules for the two languages that govern the realization of passive features, which can roughly be written as follows:

(5)   *English*

    a.   [+passive]   →   *-ed* / $V_{regular}$ + ____

    b.   [+passive]   →   *-en* / $V_{irregular}$ + ____

(6)   *Singapore English*

    a.   [+passive]   →   *-ed* or $\varnothing$ / $V_{regular}$ + ____

    b.   [+passive]   →   *-en* / $V_{irregular}$ + ____

English has the morpho-phonological rules in (5) and thus it requires the passive feature [+passive] to be obligatorily realized, regardless of the type of verb the feature combines with. Singapore English, by contrast, has the un-English-like rule in (6a) that allows the passive feature to be realized either as *–ed* or as ∅ (a zero morpheme), together with the English-like rule in (6b) that requires the passive feature to be obligatorily realized when it combines with an irregular verb. Thus, only the irregular passive morpheme is required to be realized obligatorily in Singapore English.

Once we postulate the rules in (6) in Singapore English, they inevitably extend to *kena*-passives. However, one of the rules, which are necessary to account for the distribution of passive morphemes in *be*-passives, leads us to a wrong prediction concerning the realization of passive morphemes in *kena*-passives. While the rule in (6a) correctly enables us to predict the regular morpheme in (1a) to be optional, the rule in (6b) oddly forces us to predict the irregular morpheme in (1b,c) to be realized obligatorily. As already shown, however, the bare irregular verbs in (1b,c), repeated here in (7a, b) for convenience, are not as ungrammatical as the bare verbs in (4b,c). The bare irregular verbs in *kena*-passives may be marginal compared to their inflected ones, but they are acceptable, as Bao and Wee note, and by no means as ungrammatical as their counterparts in *be*-passives.

(7)   a.   John kena detained/detain.

                'John was detained.'

        b.   John kena caught/?catch.

                'John was caught.'

c.   My cake kena eaten/?eat already

        'My cake was eaten.'

The contrast between (4) and (7) shows two things. First, the morpho-pholonogical rules in (6) that govern the distribution of passive morphemes cannot be responsible for the (marginal) acceptability of the bare irregular verbs in the *kena*-passives in (7). If they were, the bare irregular verbs in (7b,c) should be ungrammatical on a par with their counterparts in (4b,c). Second, *kena* must possess some special property that allows the bare (irregular) verb following it to avoid being subject to the rule in (6b). We argue in the next section that *kena* is able to select not just a passive verb, as in (2a), but also a full clause containing an active verb, as in (2b), and that this latter structure is the source of the morphological asymmetry between regular and irregular verbs in *kena*-passives.

3.   A new *kena*-passive construction

Our proposal that a sentence which has the surface form in (8a) (*kena* directly followed by a verb) can have the structure containing an active verb in (8b) is supported on both theoretical and empirical grounds.

(8)   a.   Subject kena [verb].

        b.   Subject kena [$_S$ *pro* verb$_{[+active]}$].

Consider the sentence in (9), in which *kena* is followed by a bare irregular verb.

(9)   ?My cake kena eat.

There are, in principle, two possible ways to analyze the bare verb *eat* in (9). We can analyze it as a passive verb, *eat*$_{[+passive]}$, with the passive feature unrealized, or we can analyze it as an active verb, *eat*$_{[+active]}$, as shown in (10).

(10)   a.   My cake kena [$_{VP}$ eat$_{[+passive]}$]

        b.   My cake kena [$_S$ *pro* eat$_{[+active]}$]

Under the second analysis, no passive morpheme is postulated, because no passive feature is generated, and the agent of the active verb *eat*$_{[+active]}$ is assumed to be *pro*. Postulating *pro* is not an ad hoc stipulation required only for the present case, given the well-established fact that Singapore English displays robust *pro*-drop phenomena (Alsagoff and Ho 1998; Bao 2001; Gupta 1994; Platt and Weber 1980; L. Tan 2003, 2007, 2009; Sato 2011; Sato and Kim 2012, among others), as can be seen from the liberal omission of subjects, objects, and possessors in (11) (omitted pronouns are underlined.).

(11)   a.   After *pro* get some sickness, *pro* can't help it.   (subject omission)

                'After <u>one</u> falls ill, <u>one</u> can't help it.'

        b.   I never try *pro* before.   (direct object omission)

                'I have never tried <u>it</u> before.'

        c.   *pro* Head very pain.   (possessor omission)

                '<u>My</u> head is very painful.'   ((11a, b) from L. Tan (2003:1))

Now, notice that of the two possible structures in (10a, b), the first structure must be eliminated because it contradicts the rule in (6b) which forces the passive feature [+passive] to be realized when it combines with an irregular verb. Thus, the structure in (10b) is the only possible structure we can postulate for the *kena*-sentence in (9), and this constitutes a strong theoretical piece of evidence for our proposal that *kena* can select an active clause as its complement.

There are also independent reasons to think that *kena* can select an active clause. Bao and Wee's (1999) discussion of *kena*-passives is based on one type of construction, in which *kena* is directly followed by a verb. Recently, however, Yap and Lim (2011) report that there is in fact an additional type of *kena*-passive available in Singapore English, illustrated in (12).

(12)   a.   John kena police detain.

'John was detained by the police.'

b.   John kena police catch.

'John was caught by the police.'

c.   My cake kena dog eat.

'My cake was eaten by a dog.'

One notable fact about this newly found *kena*-passive construction is that argument agent NPs like *police* and *dog* in (12) are overtly realized between *kena* and the verb following it. This syntactic characteristic strongly resembles that of the Chinese *bei*-passive construction in (13), as can be seen from a comparison of (12) and (13).

(13)   ta   bei   jiejie   ma   le.[4]

       3sg   BEI   elder.sister   scold Perf

       'She/He was scolded by (his/her) older sister.'   (Li and Thompson1989: 492)

Given the identical surface structure between (12) and (13), and the well-established fact that Singapore English is a contact language born in contact with its local languages, mainly Chinese languages (Bao 2001, 2005; Gupta 1992, 1994; Ho and Platt 1993; Lim 2007, among others), we can arrive at the conclusion that the passive marker *kena* has extend its original Malay-derived grammatical function by absorbing the Chinese passive marker's property of selecting a full clause as a complement. The extended grammatical function of *kena* can now be represented as in (14), which says that *kena* can select either a verb phrase or a full clause as its complement.

(14)   Lexical entry of *kena* in Singapore English

       kena   [$_{VP}$…]

               [$_S$ ….]

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[4] Chinese languages that exerted the most significant impact on the formation of Singapore English are southern Chinese languages such as Hokkein, Cantonese, Techow, though Mandarin has arisen as another important player in recent Singapore English. In this article, we will use Mandarin, following the convention in the literature, to represent a substrate Chinese language that influenced Singapore English, partly because southern Chinese languages are syntactically more or less similar to Mandarin and partly because it is difficult to know which one of the southern languages is relevant to our discussion.

The conclusion that Singapore English *kena* has acquired the property of selecting a full clause from the Chinese passive marker *bei* or some of its equivalents in southern dialects such as Hokkien *hor* or Cantonese *bei*, is further supported by the way *kena* is used in Baba Malay. Baba Malay is a variety of Malay heavily loaded with Chinese characteristics as it has been a native tongue spoken by Chinese decedents in Malaysia and Singapore since the 15the century. Although it has lost most of its speakers now, Baba Malay played a vital role in the formation of Singapore English. As the first group of people to adopt and use English in Singapore, Baba Malay speakers brought many Chinese characteristics of their language into Singapore English; see Ansaldo, Lim, and Mufwene (2007), Shellabear (1913), Pakir (1986), Thurgood (1986) and C.-B. Tan (1988) for further discussions on the socio-history of the Peranakan community and on the linguistic significance of Baba Malay in the contact ecology of Singapore. Importantly, in this language which served as a medium to bring Chinese characteristics into Singapore English, *kena* is used in precisely the same way it is used in the Singapore English examples in (12). Compare Ansaldo and Matthews' example in (15) with Yap and Lim's examples in (12); they have exactly the same structure.

(15) Nkuh   gua   kena   orang   tipu.

      brother   1sg   PASS   people   cheat

      'My brother was cheated.'   (Ansaldo & Matthews 1999: 54)

The parallel that runs across the examples in (12), (13) and (15) clearly demonstrates that Singapore English *kena* has acquired the property of selecting a complement clause from

Chinese and that the *kena*-passive construction Yap and Lim report has long been present in Singapore English.

In the Chinese literature, the Chinese passive sentence in (13) is analyzed as an active sentence. Feng (1995) and Huang (1999), for instance, assign the structure in (16) to the Chinese passive sentence (irrelevant details omitted from the structure).

(16)　　Subject　　bei　　[$_S$　　subject　　verb$_{[+active]}$].

This means that if Feng and Huang's analysis is correct, Yap & Lim's *kena*-passive construction must have the same structure, for it originates from Chinese. For instance, the sentence in (12c) must have the structure in (17) in which the verb *eat* is analyzed as an active verb.

(17)　　My cake kena [$_S$ dog eat$_{[+active]}$].

In fact, there is a piece of evidence that support the analysis in (17). Yap and Lim report that passive morphemes are not tolerated in their construction, as shown in (18).

(18)　　a.　　*John kena police detained.

　　　　b.　　*John kena police caught.

　　　　c.　　*My cake kena dog eaten.

This non-occurrence of passive morphems is precisely what the analysis in (17) predicts. Since the final verbs in (18) are active verbs, they cannot host passive morphemes. If they were passive verbs with the feature [+passive], they should be able to host passive morphemes.

Now, if we replace the (embedded) subject in (17) with *pro*, an option liberated by the pro-drop nature of Singapore English, we get the structure in (19), which is identical to (10b).

(19)   My cake kena [$_S$ *pro* eat$_{[+active]}$].

Whether we follow a theoretical reasoning or a path that empirical facts provide, we arrive at the same conclusion – that is that *kena* can select a complement clause that contains a subject *pro* and an active verb.

Having established that *kena* can select a complement clause with an active verb, we can now turn to the morphological asymmetry observed in section 1.

4.   Locating the source of the morphological asymmetry in *kena*-passives

Let us first consider the case where *kena* is followed by an irregular verb, as in (1c) reproduced here as (20). Recall that the sentence in (20b) in which *kena* is followed by a bare irregular verb is relatively marginal.

(20)   a.   My cake kena eaten.

        b.   ?My cake kena eat.

Given that *kena* can select either a VP with a passive verb or an S with *pro* plus an active verb, two structures are available for *kena* followed by an irregular verb, as shown in (21).

(21)   a.   My cake kena [$_{VP}$ eat$_{[+passive]}$]

         b.   My cake kena [$_{S}$ *pro* eat$_{[+active]}$]

The structure in (21a) that contains the passive feature is realized as the sentence in (20a) due to the morpho-phological rule in (6b), which realizes [+passive] as *–en* when it combines with an irregular verb. Unlike the structure in (21a), the structure in (21b) has no passive feature. As such, the morpho-phonological rule in (6b) is irrelevant and the verb *eat* is realized as a bare verb, as in (20b). In other words, *kena* can be followed by a bare irregular verb because it can select a complement clause where the verb is in active form. In the case of *be*-passives, however, *be* only selects a VP with [+passive], not an S with *pro* plus verb$_{[+active]}$. Thus, an irregular verb following *be* is marked with *–en*, as shown in (22).

(22)   a.   My cake was eaten.

         b.   *My cake was eat.

We have just shown that the structure in (21b) explains why the sentence in (20b) is acceptable, but we have not shown yet whether it also serves as the source of the 'marginal' acceptability of the sentence. Yap and Lim (2011) make an observation pertinent to the second question in their discussion of *kena*-passives. They report that their *kena*-passive construction with a full active complement is less preferred to the typical *kena*-passive construction. That is,

the *kena*-passive construction in which *kena* is followed by a subject and a bare verb is less preferred than the *ken*a-passive construction in which *kena* is followed just by an inflected verb. Our informants report the same intuition. To employ the convention of marking a less preferred construction with ?, which we used at the beginning of this paper, all the examples of the Chinese-like *kena*-passive sentences in (12) need to be marked with ?, as in (23), as they are less preferred compared to the non-Chinese-like *kena*-passive sentences in (24).

(23) a. ?John kena police detain.

     'John was detained by the police.'

  b. ?John kena police catch.

     'John was caught by the police.'

  c. ?My cake kena dog eat.

     'My cake was eaten by a dog.'

(24) a. John kena detained.

  b. John kena caught.

  c. My cake kena eaten.

Now, given that the structure in (21b) is identical to, and derived from, the structure of the Chinese-like *kena*-passives in (23), the relatively marginal acceptability of the sentences in (23) entails the same marginal status of the structure in (21b), as shown in (25).

(25)   ?My cake kena [$_S$ *pro* eat$_{[+active]}$]

This in turn means that since (25 = (21b)) is the source of the sentence in (20b), the sentence itself is predicted to be marginally acceptable, and indeed the prediction is true. In short, the *kena*-passive sentence in (20b) in which *kena* is followed by a bare irregular verb is acceptable but relatively marginal because it originates from Chinese-like *kena*-passives which are acceptable but relatively marginal.

One may wonder at this point why Chinese-like *kena*-passives are relatively marginal, compared to their non-Chinese-like counterparts. One possible reason is that the former construction is less faithful to the prototypical concept of 'passive'. Passives are generally marked by demotion of an agent and some verbal morpheme that indicates passive voice (Keenan and Dryer 2007). The fact that the Chinese-like construction neither demotes an agent nor allows a verbal passive marking seems to make it less preferable than the non-Chinese-like construction, which is fully faithful to the concept of 'passive'.

Let us now turn to consider regular verbs following *kena* in (26).

(26)   a.   John kena detain.

        b.   John kena detained.

As Bao and Wee (1999) note, the presence or absence of *–ed* in the sentences has little impact on their acceptability. This is due to the morpho-phonological rule in (6a) that allows the passive feature to be realized either overtly or covertly. To see this clearly, consider the structures in (27) for *kena* followed by a regular verb.

(27)　　a.　　John kena [$_{VP}$ detain$_{[+passive]}$].

　　　　b.　　?John kena [$_S$ *pro* detain$_{[+active]}$].

The structure in (27a) is realized as either the sentence in (26a) or the sentence in (26b), due to the rule in (6a). Thus, both of the sentences in (26) are found to be acceptable. Although the structure in (27b), which is realized as the sentence in (26a), is marginally acceptable, it does not make the sentence equally marginal in acceptability, for the sentence already has the fully acceptable structure in (27a), where [+passive] is realized as ∅. In other words, a bare regular verb following *kena* is always ambiguous between the two structures in (27), whereas a bare irregular verb following *kena* unambiguously has the structure in (27). This difference results in their difference in acceptability.

5.　　Conclusion

Kena is a Malay word meaning 'to encounter, to come into physical contact with or to strike', functioning like a passive marker. This lexical origin of the word has led previous works (e.g., Bao and Wee 1999) to focus on Malay characteristics of *kena*-passives in Singapore English, obscuring the fact that *kena* has non-Malay characteristics as well. In this paper, we have shown that *kena* has the additional structure property of selecting a full complement clause containing an active verb, in addition to the well-known property of selecting a VP complement containing a passive verb. As the source of the non-Malay property, we have suggested the Chinese *bei*-passive construction. We have shown then how the hybrid syntactic structure permitted by *kena* can derive the morphological asymmetry between regular and irregular verbs in *kena*-passives.

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