Contextual Causee Interpretations: Lessons from Teochew *kə*-Causative

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1. Introduction

This study investigates *argument realization* under the framework of Minimalist Syntax & Distributed Morphology. Specifically, it examines the nature of *argument interpretations*: where are those thematic relations located in the current module of grammar featuring 'Late-Insertion', pre-syntactically as syntactic primitives, or post-syntactically as derivatives? The empirical focus is the interpretation of an animate causee in the *kə* 'give'-causative of Teochew (Southern Min, Sinitic), e.g., *Mimi* in (1), where both *Nangy* and *Mimi* are cat names. In (1), despite the agentive embedded predicate *tsao* 'run,' the animate causee is incompatible with agentive modifications, such as instrumental phrases and agent-oriented comitatives (2) (e.g., Bruening 2013, Alexiadou et al. 2015).

(1) *Nangy kə Mimi tsao.*
Nangy give Mimi run
'Nangy causes Mimi to run.' (Lit. 'Nangy gives the running event to Mimi.')

(2) **Nangy kə Mimi eng guʔbang / do Xingy gai puebang e tsao.*
Nangy give Mimi use skateboard / at Xingy POSS accompany under run
Intended: 'Nangy causes Mimi to use a skateboard to run.' or 'Nangy causes Mimi to run with the accompany of Xingy.'

Recent cross-linguistic studies highlight the nonagentive or reduced agentive status of animate causees in certain causatives (Luo 2024). However, explanations for this cross-linguistic puzzle remain scarce. This paper addresses this gap by examining the causee in Teochew *kə*-causatives. Two potential approaches to the 'nonagentive' causee puzzle in (2) are *the listing approach* and *the contextual approach*.[1] The *listing* approach posits that argument thematic interpretation is *listed as syntactic primitives*, either with individual verbs in their θ-grid (i.e., *lexical listing*) or with fixed syntactic positions (i.e., *syntactic listing*; e.g., implementing UTAH). The *contextual approach*, by contrast, derives argument interpretations as *contextualized post-syntactic derivatives* through event structure (e.g., Alexiadou et al. 2015, Wood 2015, Wood & Marantz 2017, Marantz 2022).

The *lexical listing* approach predicts that the causee, as an external argument of the embedded agentive predicate, should always be interpreted as AGENT, contrary to the data in (2). Similarly, the *syntactic listing* approach predicts that the causee should not be introduced by VoiceP typically associated with AGENT (Kratzer 1996), inconsistent with its incompatibility with agentive modifications (2). Yet, as to be shown in Section 2, the causee is indeed introduced by VoiceP, undermining the *listing* approach. By contrast, the *contextual* approach aligns with literature on external argument interpretations shaped by

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event structure. Since causees are a type of external argument, this approach logically accounts for the nonagentive interpretation, as to be argued in Section 3 and Section 4. Section 5 concludes.

2. Argument structure

First, this causative is bi-eventive, allowing independent manner adverbs to modify separate events (3). As in previous studies, I assume *v* introduces an eventuality variable, resulting in a recursive *v*P structure. Second, there is no embedded CP, as shown by the ungrammaticality of fronting the embedded object (4) and the absence of an overt embedded complementizer *da* (lit. 'say') (5). Third, this causative includes an AspP layer, evidenced by the preverbal progressive morpheme *lo* (6). Following Lin 2006 and Grano 2017, I assume Teochew, like Mandarin, lacks a TP. Finally, the ungrammaticality of the embedded pre-verbal neutral negative marker *bo* (7) indicates the absence of an embedded NegP.

(3) *Nangy meme kə Mimi manman tsao.*
Nangy quickly give Mimi slowly run
'Nangy quickly causes Mimi to slowly run.'

(4) **Nangy kə muegia Mimi tsia.*
Nangy give stuff Mimi eat.
Intended: 'Nangy causes, foodstuffs, Mimi to eat.'

(5) **Nangy kə da Mimi tsao.*
Nangy give COMP Mimi run
Intended: 'Nangy causes Mimi to run.'

(6) *Nangy kə Mimi lo tsao.*
Nangy give Mimi PROG run
'Nangy causes Mimi to be running now.'

(7) **Nangy kə Mimi bo tsao.*
Nangy give Mimi NEG run
Intended: 'Nangy causes Mimi not to run.'

The following examines the syntactic status of the causee, providing two pieces of evidence that the causee in Teochew *k*ə-causative is introduced as an argument, not an adjunct. First, Teochew's *...gai dai...* pseudo-cleft construction permits clefting only of arguments, not adjuncts (whether DP or PP). The causee in *k*ə-causatives can be clefted by this construction (8). Second, the argument-targeting *dui* (lit. towards')-construction in Teochew can raise an argument before the verb to convey a strong 'affectee' meaning; however, a DP/PP adjunct cannot be raised by this morpheme. The causee in Teochew *k*ə-causative can be raised to the left of the causative verb using this construction (9).

(8) *Nangy kə tsao gai dai Mimi.*
Nangy give run PTCP COP Mimi
'It is Mimi that Nangy causes to run.'

(9) *?Nangy dui Mimi kə tsao.*
Nangy towards Mimi give run
'Nany causes Mimi (affectee) to run.'

The next question is which syntactic projection introduces the causee as an argument. Since Kratzer 1996, it has been standardly assumed that AGENT is introduced by VoiceP. However, as shown in (2), the causee in the *k*ə-causative is incompatible with agentive modifications, seemingly suggesting it is not introduced by VoiceP. Nonetheless, the following evidence suggests otherwise.

First, verbs lacking an external argument cannot be embedded in the *kə*-causative. As shown in (10), embedding unaccusative or stative predicates, including psych verbs, is disallowed. Following Harley 1995 and Folli & Harley 2007, I assume stative predicates, like unaccusatives, lack an external argument. This indicates that the *kə*-causative requires its complement to have an external argument. Given the causee's incompatibility with agentive modifications, a common view is that it is introduced at ApplP (e.g., Legate 2014, Nash 2020, Akkuş 2021, 2022). However, in Teochew, a high applicative argument can only be a BENEFICIARY and must be introduced by the functional word *gaʔ*. In all examples, the causee in the *kə*-causative is not introduced by *gaʔ*. Moreover, the causee can co-occur with a high applicative argument that follows it in surface structure (11), suggesting the causee is not introduced by ApplP.

(10) **Nangy kə Mimi bualoku / u uangu / gia Xingy.*
Nangy give Mimi fall.over / own toys / fear Xingy
Intended: 'Nangy causes Mimi to fall over/own toys/fear Xingy.'

(11) *Nangy kə Mimi gaʔ Qiuzai soi sakou.*
Nangy give Mimi BEN Qiuzai wash clothes
'Nangy causes Mimi to wash clothes for Qiuzai.'

If we adopt the standard assumption that only VoiceP and ApplP introduce external arguments severed from verbs in the verbal domain (e.g., Kratzer 1996, Pylkkänen 2008), it follows that the causee in the *kə*-causative must be introduced by VoiceP. Following Alexiadou et al. 2015 and Nie 2020, among others, I assume the causer is introduced by VoiceP. Combining the above discussions, the syntactic structure for sentence (1) is shown in (12).

(12) $[_{VoiceP}$ *Nangy* $[_{Voice'}$ Voice $[_{vP}$ *kə* $[_{AspP}$ Asp $[_{VoiceP}$ *Mimi* $[_{Voice'}$ Voice $[_{vP}$ $\sqrt{\text{TSAO}}$ v]]]]]]]

However, the causee introduced by VoiceP is incompatible with agentive diagnostics (2). A similar pattern is observed in other languages such as Acehnese (Legate 2014), Turkish (Key 2013, Nie 2022), Georgian (Nash 2020), and Icelandic (Sigurdsson & Wood 2021), where the causee remains linked to VoiceP despite a reduction or absence of agency. This suggests that Teochew is not a special case. A key takeaway from this cross-linguistic pattern is that agentive modifications cannot be licensed solely by the presence of VoiceP. This also undermines the *syntactic listing* approach, which posits that argument interpretations are listed with specific syntactic positions. Therefore, a *contextual* approach to argument interpretation, featuring a syntactically-oriented event structure, should be more favorable. In the next section, I will explore the causal event structure interpretation of the *kə*-causative.

3. Event structure

In the following, I will argue that the *kə*-causative (13a), unlike the *mue*-causative (13b), does not entail the actuality of the caused event. Three diagnostics are used to illustrate this contrast: (i) negation of the caused event, and different scope readings of scope-ambiguous items (ii) *almost* and (iii) *again*.

(13) a. *Nangy kə Mimi tsao.* = (1)
Nangy give Mimi run
'Nangy causes Mimi to run.'

b. *Nangy mue Mimi tsao.*
Nangy make Mimi run
'Nangy makes Mimi run.'

First, negating the caused event in the *kə*-causative is felicitous, but infelicitous in the *mue* one (14).

(14) *Nangy kə / ♯mue Mimi tsao, dansi yi bo tsao.*
Nangy give / make Mimi run but 3.SG NEG run
'Nangy causes Mimi to run, but Mimi does not run.'

The second diagnostic follows the same logic as the *almost* modification in the context of accomplishment (e.g., McCawley 1971, Rapp & von Stechow 1999). While *gihu* 'almost' can modify both the causing and caused events in the *mue*-causative (15a), it can only modify the former in the *k*ə-causative without any context (15b).

(15) a. *Nangy gihu mue Mimi tsao.*
Nangy almost make Mimi run
'Nangy almost does the causing-Mimi-to-run thing.' OR 'Nangy does the causing-Mimi-to-run thing and Mimi almost runs.'

b. No context is provided:
Nangy gihu kə Mimi tsao.
Nangy almost give Mimi run
The only meaning: 'Nangy almost does the causing-Mimi-to-run thing.'

The modifier *iu* again' (e.g., McCawley 1968, Dowty 1979, von Stechow 1995, Pylkkänen 2008), following the same logic as *almost* in diagnosing sub-events in an event chain, serves as the third diagnostic. In the *mue*-causative, both 'repetitive' and 'restitutive' readings are available (16a). However, in the *k*ə-causative, without context, the only reading is that the causing event occurs again (16b).

(16) a. *Nangy iu mue Mimi tsao.*
Nangy again make Mimi run
'Again, Nangy causes Mimi to run and Mimi runs again.' OR 'Mimi run before and it was caused by someone other than Nangy. Nangy causes Mimi to run this time and Mimi runs again.'

b. No context is provided:
Nangy iu kə Mimi tsao.
Nangy again give Mimi run
The only meaning: 'Nangy does the causing-Mimi-to-run thing again.'

We can conclude that, unlike the *mue*-causative, the *k*ə-causative does not entail the actuality of the caused event. Building on the framework of Kratzer 1977, 1981, 1991, and in line with the Modal Component Hypothesis (Koenig & Davis 2001) and prior work on actuality entailment (Bhatt 1999, Davis et al. 2009, Rivero et al. 2010, Martin & Schäfer 2017), I propose that the causative verb *k*ə lexically encodes a universal volitional modality. This modality has a circumstantial modal base and a stereotypical ordering source representing the normal course of events in the picked-up possible worlds. Following Portner 2009, volitional modality relates to 'the ways circumstances affect the actions available to a volitional individual', which aligns with the requirement that the causee in the *k*ə-causative must be animate, as demonstrated in (17).

(17) **Mimi kə giu dingdang.*
Mimi give ball move
Intended: 'Mimi causes the ball to move.'

The lexical semantics of the causative verb is presented in (18). In this analysis, the counterfactual CAUSE operator (Dowty 1979) is replaced with a modality-linked causal relation. Here, the caused event is conceptualized as the final stage of the causing event's development along certain courses, aligning with the modal analysis of the progressive proposed by Portner 1998.

(18) $[\![k\text{ə}]\!] \rightsquigarrow \lambda P.\lambda e_2.\lambda w.[\forall w'.w' \in \text{VOL}(w,e_2) \rightarrow \exists e_1 : \forall x.[\text{AGENT}(e_1, x) \rightarrow \text{Animate}(x)].[P(e_1)(w')]]$

a. e_1 represents the caused event and e_2 represents the causing event

b. VOL(w,e_2) is defined as BEST(CIRC,ST,e_2), i.e., the set of worlds w' in $\bigcap$CIRC(e_2) such that there is no w'' in $\bigcap$CIRC(e_2) where $w'' <_{ST,e2} w'$.

According to (18), the caused event e_1 is only entailed in those possible worlds where certain conditions are met, such as the 'causee is animate' (a presupposition of e_1, omitted hereafter for simplicity), 'the causee is physically and mentally capable of performing the caused event', and 'the causer performs the causing event'. Thus, the caused event may fail to occur despite the presence of the causing event.

In contrast, for the causative verb *mue*, where the actuality of the caused event is always entailed, for consistency purposes, I propose that it sub-lexically encodes a universal metaphysical modality, with a modal base consisting of metaphysical alternatives and a circumstantial ordering source (Portner 2009). The lexical semantics of *mue* is provided in (19). Here, the connection between the causing event and the caused event hinges on what is metaphysically possible; in other words, whether the causing event evolves into or results in the caused event under metaphysically sensible conditions. Since metaphysically insensible conditions are exceedingly rare, the caused event is almost guaranteed to occur in this context.

(19) $[\![mue]\!] \rightsquigarrow \lambda P.\lambda e_2.\lambda w.[\forall w'.w' \in \text{META}(w,e_2) \rightarrow \exists e_1.[P(e_1)(w')]]$

a. e_1 represents the caused event and e_2 represents the causing event.

b. META(w,e_2) is defined as BEST(META,CIRC,e_2), i.e., the set of worlds w' in $\bigcap$META(e_2) such that there is no w'' in $\bigcap$META(e_2) where $w'' <_{CIRC,e2} w'$.

Having analyzed the argument structure (Section 2) and event structure (this Section) of the *k*ə-causative, we are now prepared to address the 'nonagentive' causee interpretation puzzle.

4. Contextual causee interpretation

The *k*ə causative exhibits a distinct event structure interpretation compared to the *mue* causative. If the contextual approach is correct, we expect the causee in the *mue*-causative to differ in its (in)compatibility with agentive modifications. This prediction holds: the causee in the *mue*-causative is compatible with all agentive modifications (20), unlike the *k*ə causative.

(20) *Nangy mue Mimi eng guʔbang / do Xingy gai puebang e tsao.*
Nangy make Mimi use skateboard / at Xingy POSS accompany under run
'Nangy makes Mimi use a skateboard to run.' or 'Nangy makes Mimi run with the accompany of Xingy.'

Since the event-structural differences between the two causatives stem from their causative verbs, it logically follows that the lexical semantics of the causative verb influences the interpretation of the causee. A related question is whether the embedded predicate, where the causee functions as the external argument, also affects the causee's interpretation. The answer is yes. In the *k*ə-causative, when context clearly indicates that the causee ultimately performs the caused event, the acceptability of instrumental phrases and agent-oriented commitatives improves (21).

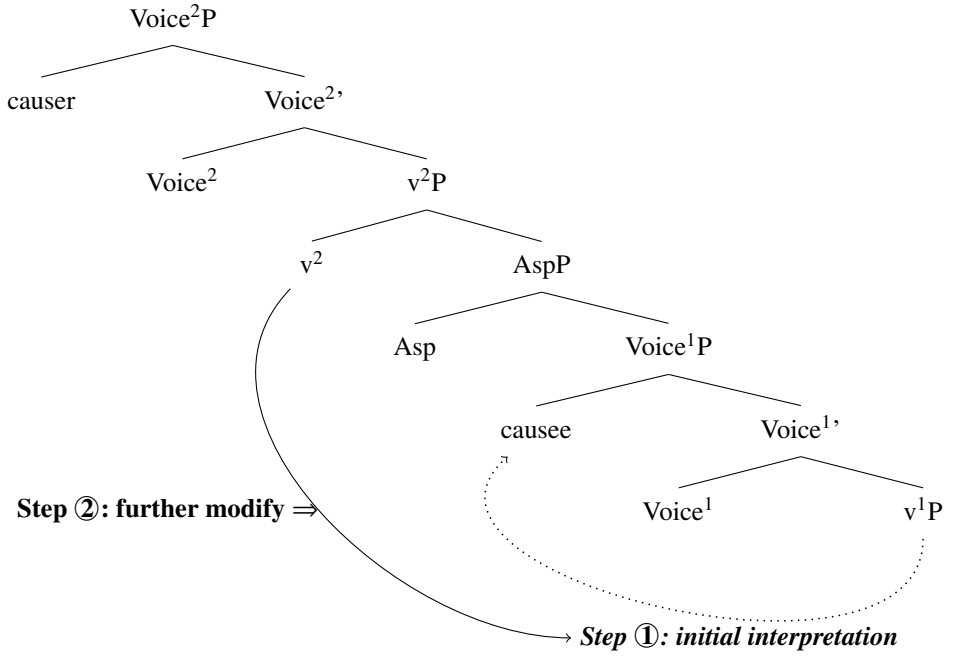
(21) Context: Mimi runs at the end.
??*Nangy kə Mimi eng guʔbang / do Xingy gai puebang e tsao.*
Nangy give Mimi use skateboard / at Xingy POSS accompany under run
Intended: 'Nangy causes Mimi to use a skateboard to run.' or 'Nangy causes Mimi to run with the accompany of Xingy.'

This suggests that the causee is more agentive in this context, which can only be explained if the embedded agentive predicate's eventuality also influences the causee's interpretation. Otherwise, the

causative verb would consistently trigger a 'nonagentive' causee interpretation, rendering the causee incompatible with agentive modifications.

I propose a two-step contextual mechanism for causee interpretation in (22). When the causee is introduced by the external argument-introducing head (here, Voice), it initially receives an argument interpretation (here, AGENT, following the Voice interpretation rules in Kratzer 1996, Wood & Marantz 2017, among others). This initial interpretation is subsequently modified by the lexical semantics of the causative verb; more specifically, it will fall within the scope of the sublexical modality encoded in the causative verb during semantic composition, as shown in (23) (the compositional derivation with the AspP is ignored here, since it is not the focus of this study). In contrast, the *complement-oriented* approach for interpreting other external arguments like AGENT and HOLDER (see Wood & Marantz 2017), i.e., step ①, is overly simplistic for the causee. As an intermediate external argument, the causee is influenced both by the syntactically higher causative verb and the syntactically lower embedded predicate.

(22)



(23) $[\![\text{Voice}^2\text{P}]\!] \rightsquigarrow$
$\lambda y.\lambda e_2.\lambda w.\text{AGENT}(e_2,\text{Nangy})(w) \wedge [\forall w'.w' \in \text{VOL}(w,e_2) \rightarrow \exists e_1.[\text{AGENT}(e_1,\text{Mimi})(w') \wedge \text{run}(e_1)(w')]]$

In this way, the widely adopted Voice interpretation rule is retained, providing the correct initial argument interpretation, a desirable outcome within the bottom-up compositional semantics framework of Heim & Kratzer 1998. The next question concerns how this causee, initially interpreted as an AGENT, is modified under sublexical modality, particularly given its general incompatibility with agentive modifications (2), yet occasional compatibility (21).

As shown, the (in)compatibility of the causee with instrumental phrases and agent-oriented comitatives depends on the actuality of the caused event. The empirical data in (24) showing that these agentive modifications align with AGENT in passives but not with THEME in unaccusatives prove them are reliable diagnostics for 'grammatically represented agentivity.'

(24) a. *Hi goi bang kə (ua) eng t'its'ui / do mest'aʔ gai puebang e*
that CL room PASS 1.SG use hammer / at burglar POSS accompany under
tiaku.
demolish
'That room was demolished (by me) with a hammer/with the accompany of a burglar.'

b. **Hi goi bang kə yi-gagi eng t'its'ui / do mest'aʔ gai puebang e*
that CL room by 3.SG-self use hammer / at burglar POSS accompany under
doloʔku.
fall.over
Intended: 'That room falls over by itself with a hammer/with the accompany of a burglar.'

This suggests a link between event actuality and grammatical agentive properties. Jacobs 2011, examining control phenomena in S̲kw̲x̲wu7mesh, argues that an agent's 'degree of control over an event' (Thompson 1979) is stronger when it governs the event's process and can bring it to culmination. In Section 3, I demonstrate that the Teochew *k*ə-causative lacks an actuality entailment for the caused event. It follows that the causee, as the caused event's controller, exhibits reduced agentivity.

The incompatibility between the causee and these two agentive modifications can be incorporated into the circumstantial modal base of the sublexical volitional modality, which restricts the circumstances under which the caused event occurs. This, in turn, complicates the causal event structure and contextualizes the causee interpretation as outlined in (22).

I argue that the causee, initially interpreted as an AGENT, is reanalyzed as a *Prospective DOER* (cf. Gropen et al. 1989, Lundin 2003, Beavers & Koontz-Garboden 2020, Sigurdsson & Wood 2021) with a reduced agency at the end of the compositional derivation. This explains the incompatibility of the causee with agentive modifications in (2). In this case, the causee is not a full AGENT, rendering it incompatible with instrumental phrases and agent-oriented comitatives, both of which require event actuality. This resolves the causee interpretation puzzle.

It is important to note that I do not propose a new thematic role or label, such as *Prospective DOER*, in this paper. Rather, following Dowty 1991 and others, I argue that argument interpretation is shaped by the syntactically oriented event structure, where the argument serves as an event participant, aligning with previous studies (e.g., Alexiadou et al. 2015, Wood & Marantz 2017, Biggs & Embick 2022).

5. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that in the Teochew *k*ə-causative, the intermediate external argument, the causee, is contextualized as a *Prospective DOER* through the syntactically oriented causal event structure, influenced by the sublexical modal properties of the higher causative verb. Regarding implications for argument thematic interpretations, I argue that these interpretations are not *listed* with individual verbs or tied to specific syntactic positions. Instead, they are derived post-syntactically from the event structure. Discrete and unanalyzed thematic roles like AGENT are insufficient to account for the nuanced contextual interpretation of arguments (e.g., Dowty 1991). Finally, compared to other external arguments, causees exhibit more complex contextualization conditions for thematic interpretation.

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