

Another idiomatic construction in Hindi-Urdu: Using the passive against the intransitive to reassign responsibility

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Coming between grammars and dictionaries a “constructionary” may be of interest to linguists and provide assistance to advanced learners and to those concerned with authoring language-learning texts. Such a collection of constructions, numbering maybe a few dozen, would consist of **templates** into which medium to large sets of lexical items or fixed idioms can happily fit. Constructions of this kind may be thought of as constituting an intermediate “abstraction layer” interposed between lexical units or fixed idioms that are listed in dictionaries [such as *tūl pakar-* ‘catch length’ > ‘escalate; take a violent turn’ in (1)] and fully productive constructions: such as active vs. passive voice, infinitive vs. finite clause, etc. that are normally treated in grammars.

A construction not found either in Hindi-Urdu dictionaries or in grammars is instantiated in (1)¹

- (1) *māmle-ne kuchh-yū tūl-pakarā ki netā-ke sambhāl-e nahī sambhalā*
matter-ERG some-such length-caught that leader-GEN handle-INF2 NEG was.handed
'The matter escalated to such an extent that the leader could not handle it.'
[amazon.com/-/es/santosh-pathak-ebook/dp/B07ZXK WY93]

A structural frame or template for (1) can be formulated as in (2):

- (2) [NP.NOM/ERG (NP.GEN) V^{tran} -INF2² NEG V^{intr} -INFL {where V^{tran} & V^{intr} constitute a morphological pair}]

The frame in (2) may be thought of as a discontinuous formula into which an indefinitely large number of relevant subject or topic NPs and co-ordinated V^{tran} - V^{intr} lexical pairs may be plugged.

Most such templates like the one in (2) are specific to individual languages. This squib examines one of them, one that juxtaposes a passive against a morphologically corresponding anti-transitive or unaccusative predicate in order to reassign responsibility for an event from a subject to a silent (unnamed) causee:

- (3) *ye enkāuntar yogī sarkār-ko bacā-ne ke lie ki-yā.gayā hai, gārī palī nahī, palī-ā-ī.ga-ī.hai*
this encounter Yogi gov't-ACC save-INF for done-PASS is car flipped NEG flip-TRAN-PASS-PRESPRF
'This "encounter" was staged in order to save the Yogi gov't. The car didn't flip, it was flipped.'
[zeenews.india.com/hindi/india/ ... /709385]
- (4) *bhagdad huī nahī, kar-ā-ī.ga-ī!* *čašm.dīdō-ke bayān sunie*
stampede happened NEG do-CAUS-PASS-PST eyewitnesses-GEN accounts listen.IMPER
'The stampede didn't happen on its own, it was *made* to happen. Listen to eyewitness accounts.'
[www.instagram.com/thesanatanhindunews/reel/DFo9_D3BKfB/]
- (5) *yah āg lag-ī nahī, lag-ā-ī.ga-ī.hai* *ab is-ke.khilāph log āndolan kar-ne ko taiyār*
this fire start-PST NEG set-TRAN-PASS-PRESPRF now this-against people agitation do-INF to ready
'This fire did not start all by itself, it was set. Now people are ready to agitate against it.'
[bhilwarahalchal.com/bhilwara/--552947]

The rendering in (6) (let's call it an “internal translation”) brings out the semantics of (5) in overt form:

- (6) *logō.kā kah-nā hai ki āg khud lag-ī nahī balki kisī-ne jān.būjh.kar lagā-ī.hai*
people's say-INF is that fire itself start-PST NEG rather someone-ERG purposely set-PRESPRF
'Local residents claim that the fire did not start by itself, rather somebody started it on purpose.'
[etvbharat.com/hindi/delhi/city/delhi ... /dl20220122182536054:]

¹ The construction templated in (2) is described in detail in Hook 2024. Its identification *qua* construction was first made by Liperovskij 1984, p. 218. Other examples of it are in Hook 2001-2002.

² INF2 refers to short infinitives that occur in complements of postpositions like *binā*: *ruk.e binā* ‘without stopping’.

The transitivity grade of predicates in this construction ascends usually from an intransitive base to the passive of a transitive (5) but ascension from a transitive to the passive of a causative is also possible (7):

- (7a) *unhō-ne binā kisī pārṭī.kā nām lie kahā ki ye āg lagā-ī nahī, lag-vā-ī.ga-ī.hai*
 he-ERG without any party's name take.INF2 said that this fire set.PST NEG set-CAUS-PASS-PRESPRF
 'Without naming any particular party he stated that this fire was not set, it was caused to be set.'
 [mpbreakingnews.in/madhya-pradesh/gwalior/pradyumn-bayan]

The frame or template for the responsibility reassignment construction (RRC) can be formulated as in (8):

- (8) $[NP_j V^{atr} NEG^3 (NP_i-ACC) V^{a+1tr} -PASS + INFL \{where V^{atr} - V^{a+1tr} \text{ constitute a morphological pair}\}]^5$

Instances in which the negated base is a transitive [(7) and (9)] present a problem. They lack an overt agent:

- (9a) *pathrāv ki-yā nahī kar-ā-yā.ga-yā.hai. sab-kučh su-niyojit hai*
 stone.pelting do-PST NEG do-CAUS-PASS-PRESPRF every.thing well-planned is
 'The stone-throwing was not spontaneous. Everything was well planned in advance.'
 [x.com/skdvd/status/1860576242573148257]

This problem can be resolved if the passive in the second clause of (9a) (*kar-ā-yā.ga-yā.hai*) is interpreted as having scope over both the base predicate *ki-yā*- 'did' and the ascended (or “upgraded”) predicate *kar-ā*- 'have someone do'. Scope is shown in (9b) with parentheses around the target and the “arrow” in blue:⁶

- (9b) *pathrāv (ki-yā nahī kar-ā-yā) ga-yā.hai.* NB: The form *ki-yā* is not the PST but the passive participle.

Allowing scope of the passive and /or tenses like the present perfect or the past over conjoined phrases will also account for the absence of PSTPRF *thā* in the negated predicate *niklā nahī* of (10):⁷

- (10) *nayā sṭudent pičhle skūl-se (niklā nahī nikāl-ā.gayā) thā yahā bhī ṭīčarz-ke.sāth jhagre ho.ne lage*
 new student last school-from left NEG leave.TRAN-PASS PST here too teachers-with fights be-INF began
 'The new student hadn't left his last school, he had been expelled. Here too he began fighting teachers.'
 [www.instagram.com/nirjacartoons/] [(10) has been edited for length.]

- (7b) *āg (lag.ā-ī nahī, lag-vā-ī) ga-ī.hai*
 fire set-PASSPART NEG set-CAUS-PASSPART PASS-PRESPRF
 ['...fire was not set, it was caused to be set.' ["set-PASSPART" overrides the analysis of *lag.ā-ī* in (7a).]

Not just passive voice and tense but a whole predicate may have scope over conjoined infinitives (11-12):

- (11) *kānūn-kā pālan (kar-nā nahī, kar-ā-nā hī) pulis-kā dharm hotā.jā.rahā hai*
 law-GEN obedience do-INF NEG do-CAUS-INF only police-GEN duty becoming is
 'It is becoming the duty of the police not to obey the law themselves but only to make others obey it.'
 [www.patrika.com/surat-news/ ... 2766018]

- (12) *yād.rahe mukadme.ke čakkar-mē nahī par-nā hai mukadmā (lagā-nā nahī lag-vā-nā) hai apne-ūpar*
 remember suit's wheel-in NEG fall-INF is suit bring-INF NEG bring-CAUS-INF is self-on
 'Keep it in mind not to fall into the pit of suing. To sue (us) is to bring a countersuit against yourself.'
 [x.com/i/flow/login?redirect_after_login=%2Fnareshk74345965]

It would seem that a defining feature of the RRC (Responsibility Reassignment Construction) is the non-appearance of the patient and of the agential causee in the second part. The covert patient in the second part is understood to be co-referential with the first part's subject. The presumptive agential causee in the second part's passive remains silent, unnamed, although often identifiable from context (13):

³ Rarely the negative element *NEG* may occur to the left of V^{atr} rather than to its immediate right.

⁴ A few pairs exist that are not related morphologically, only semantically. See *khonā* vs *miṭānā* in footnote (7).

⁵ The symbol V^{a+1tr} indicates that the transitivity of the predicate in the passive must be higher by one grade than the transitivity of the predicate that precedes the negative marker. That predicate can be intransitive (3-5) or transitive (9).

⁶ One might think of this as a kind of reverse *anuvṛtti*, one which extends the scope of later formants to earlier forms.

⁷ The phenomenon in Serbian is discussed under the label ‘suspended affixation’ (Despić 2017). Thanks to Rajesh Bhatt for citing formal terminology and suggesting references such as Depiante (2000) and Spencer and Luis (2012).

- (13) *kaṭ.ī nahī, kāṭ-ī.ga-ī.thī śahar.kī pāvar saplāī ! nijīkaran-ke.virodh-mē haṭtāl kar.ne.vāle ...*
 cut^{intr} NEG cut^{tran}-PASS-PSTPRF city's power supply privatization-against-in strike makers ...
 'The city power supply did not cut off on its own. It was (deliberately) cut. The strikers fighting privatization ...'
 [www.jagran.com/punjab/ ... -22513047.html]

In many if not most idiomatic constructions aberrant features of syntax or constituency may indicate idiomaticity of the construction. In the normal H-U order the inflected verb comes at the end of its clause:

- (14a) *čaudharī āj.kal bahut čāplūsī kar-ne lage*
 Chaudhari nowadays much flattery do-INF began
 'These days Chaudhari has begun to engage in a lot of flattery.' [youtube.com/watch?v=sIfutaVorGg]

To signal mocking intent the finite verb may occur on the extreme left, out of its normal rightmost position:

- (14b) *lag.e aurō-kī.tarah tum bhī čāplūsī kar-ne*
 began others-like you too flattery do-INF
 'There you go, just like the others, trying to flatter me.' [Premchand's *godān*, 51.38, cited in Hook 2011]

The idiomaticity of the RRC may be signaled not by a difference in word order from the order normally found in Hindi-Urdu but by a difference in constituency and in intonation. The negative element between the two verb forms applies to the predicate to its left (not to the one to its right): The two verbal predicates together with the negative between them merge into a single phrase with just one intonation peak. We may view this as an example of phonological "uniphrasation".

In most instances the RRC expresses blame or accusation on the part of the speaker or writer of bad faith or bad behavior on the part of an unnamed actor:

- (15) *dar-asal hamāre javān (mār-e nahī mar-vā-e-) jā rahe.hāī*
 in-truth our troops kill-PASSPART NEG kill-CAUS-PASSPART PASS PRES
 'The truth is that our *javāns* are not being killed but are being caused to be killed.'
 [hi.quora.com/भारतीय-वामपंथी]

More neutral instances of its use may be found:

- (16) *koī āp-se (mil.tā nahī, mil-vā-yā jā.tā-) hai*
 someone you-with meets NEG meet-CAUS-PASSPART PASSHAB PRES
 'No-one meets you by chance. They are made to meet you.' (by fate?)
 [www.youtube.com/watch?v=7RRkGQfhYJ4]

These more neutral, non-accusatory instances may express conscious effort on the part of an agent⁸:

- (17) *bīt.ī nā bit.āī rainā birhā-kī jāī rainā*
 spent^{intr} NEG spent^{tran} night separation-GEN went night
 'The night did not pass on its own. I passed the night somehow, the night of separation.'
 [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MjVRG2VV1kA]

In the present habitual tense the RRC may convey the need for deliberate effort on an agent's part:

- (18) *garībī (miṭ.tī nahī, miṭ-ā-ī jā.tī-) hai*
 poverty disappears NEG disappear-TRAN-PASSPART PASSHAB PRES
 'Poverty doesn't just disappear on its own, but must be *made* to disappear by conscious effort.'
 [www.youtube.com/watch?v=pf-7CGXPqNE]

⁸ The similarity of this lyric to the RRC was suggested to me by my colleague Prashant Pardeshi. It differs, as he points out, in the use of the active transitive *bitāī* 'spent' found in (17), not the passive *bitāī gaī* in this verse by Soni: *umr bīt nahī, bitāī gaī, šauq khoye; nahī, miṭāe gae* [Shweta Soni in sahityapedia.com/post/291860/]

'My life didn't just pass on its own, I spent it purposefully. I didn't lose my passions inadvertently, I shut them down.' This verse could also be interpreted as an accusation: 'My life did not flow (the way I might have hoped). No, I was made to live a life I didn't want. My passions did not disappear on their own; I was forced to let them go unfulfilled.' Notice that the pair *khoye* vs. *miṭāe* depends on an abstract semantic component <disappear> that is common to both.

Appendix: The RRC in other languages

Although fewer examples of it are found, the RRC occurs in some other Indo-Aryan languages. A few examples from Gujarati (19) and Marathi (20-22). For Marathi's competing passives see Pardeshi (2016).

- (19) *koṭhi-kačeri-mā āg lāgi nathi, lagāḍ-vā-mā.āv-i*
land-office-in fire started PST.NEG set-INF-PASS-PST
'The fire in the land office did not start by itself, it was set.'
[www.loksattanews.co.in/news/who-is-interested-in-setting-fire-to-land-acquisition-office- ...]
- (20) *šet.mālā-tse bhāv paḍ.le nāhi pāḍ-nyā-t.ā-le* yā-muḷe pratyek šetkarī kuṭumbā-tsa - nuksān dzhāla.āhe
crops-GEN prices fell NEG fall-INF-PASS-PST consequently every farming family-GEN harm occurred
'Crop price didn't just fall; they were pushed down. As a result every farm family has been harmed.'
[facebook.com/groups/234181884020216/posts/1745038489601207/] (edited for length)
- (21) *pepar phuṭ-lā nāhī phoḍ.nyā-t.ā-lā* āmhā sarva.sādhāraṇ lōkān-nā šiku-ts de-u.naye hi bhumikā āhe
exam leak-PST NEG leak-INF-PASS-PST us ordinary people-DAT learn-EMPH let-NEG this policy is
'The exam didn't just get out. It was leaked. The idea is to deny us ordinary folks the chance to learn.'
[facebook.com/story.php?story_fbid=932895019006125&id=100068569061228&_rdr]
- (22) *nav-vadhu-tsa āyūṣy čhāṭ-un ṭāk-la, sāsar-čyā lālse-na ti meli nāhi, mār-li.geli*
new-bride-GEN life cut-GER THREW father.in.law-GEN greed-INST she died NEG kill-PASSPST
'The new bride's life was cut sort. Because of her father-in-law's greed she didn't die but was killed.'
[www.instagram.com/reel/DKBOLB0ofja/]

Abbreviations

α = arbitrary ACC = accusative CAUS = causative EMPH = emphatic ERG = ergative GEN = genitive GER = gerundial HAB = habitual IMPER = imperative INF = infinitive INF2 = short infinitive INFL = inflection INST = instrumental INTR = intransitive NEG = negative NOM = nominative NP = noun phrase PART = participle PASS = passive PRED = predicate PRES = present PRF = perfect PROG = progressive PST = past TR = transitivity grade TRAN = transitive VOC = vocative

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