Causation: from concept(s) to grammar

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This workshop aims at investigating the ties between the cognitive representation of causation and its linguistic realisations, in order to define how the primitives of causation interact with grammar at different levels of representation.

A growing body of formal and cognitive studies on causation in natural language has been recently showing that causative predicates encode a complex inventory of relations (Wolff (2007)), and cannot be adequately represented with a single, abstract CAUSE operator (as in e.g. Dowty 1979). Among the formal models focusing on the different types of causal dependencies, force dynamic theories (Talmy 2000, Wolff & Thorstad 2016) decompose causation into a set of primitives (HELP, PREVENT, CAUSE) that reflect the interactions of causers' forces and tendencies. Thus, the English causative verb *make* (1) is described as encoding a relation where the Causer's (John) and Causee's (the children) tendencies have diverging directions (Wolff & Song 2003), whereas *let* describes a relation where their tendencies correspond (2).

(1)   John made the children eat the soup.

(2)   John let the children eat the soup.

While we have made progress in understanding the fine-grained structure of causation at the conceptual level, the lexical and grammatical realisations of conceptual primitives need further investigation. Looking both at cross-linguistical data and within languages, there is no one-to-one mapping between a causal primitive and a causative predicate, and some causative predicates can yield interpretations that are not (yet) entirely covered by the primitive relations theorised by force dynamics. Pitteroff (2014) argues that German *lassen* falls under both *causing* and *letting* (Lauer & Nadathur 2018), and recognises an additional, *non-interference* reading. While *causing* and *letting*-lassen don't display morphosyntactic differences, only *non-interference*-lassen can be passivised (3a vs. 3b, Pitteroff 2014: 58). Similarly, French *laisser* 'let' enters two syntactic configurations (4a-b) (Kayne 1975) associated with the two subtly distinct interpretations of *non-interference* and *autorisation* (Enghels 2009).

(3)   a. *Die Kinder wurden (von der Mutter) ein Eis essen lassen / gelassen.
           the children became by the mother an ice eat let.INF / let.PRT
        'The children were allowed to eat an ice cream by the mother.'

        b. Das Bild wurde (von dem Maler) hangen *lassen/ gelassen.
           the picture became by the painter hang let.INF / let.PRT
        'The picture was left hanging by the painter.'

(4)   a. Jean laisse jouer les enfants.
           John LET play the children

b. Jean laisse les enfants jouer.
John LET the children play
'John let the children play'

In a model where syntax and semantics inform each other, one may thus ask to what extent the selectional properties of the causative head depend on the causal relation it encodes and how much of this information is seen by grammar. The division of labour between lexical and functional heads is debated in the case of lexical causatives (Alexiadou et al. 2006, Copley & Harley, 2020; Beavers & Koontz-Garboden 2020), and this issue is all the more relevant in the case of causative predicates that, like *make* (1), may enter configurations of growing complexity.

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