



Lexical content and context: The causative alternation in English revisited

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Abstract

This paper supports an analysis of the causative alternation in English in which all alternating verbs are lexically associated only with the internal argument(s). Lexical and contextual constraints on the distribution of the variants are distinguished. Semantic constraints on what kinds of causes appear with which verbs in various uses are argued not to be lexically specified. The account distinguishes clearly between the principled availability of the two variants of a causative alternation verb and the principles governing the (non)expression of the external cause. Many of the nonlexical constraints on the causative alternation are best understood as resulting from principles which determine which variant of the alternation is most appropriate in a given discourse context.

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1. Introduction

The causative alternation in English, illustrated in (1) below, is extremely productive. Levin (1993) lists well over 200 verbs that participate in the alternation, and new verbs that enter the language participate in the alternation as well.

- (1) a. John broke the vase.
b. The vase broke.
- (2) a. The butler opened the door.
b. The door opened.

Nonetheless, the alternation is also constrained. There are two broadly defined kinds of constraints. First, there are verbs which appear to be of the appropriate semantic type to alternate, but do not alternate. For example, given a characterization of the class of alternating verbs commonly offered and to be discussed in section 3, at least some verbs of killing and destruction should undergo the alternation. However, in English, all verbs of these classes systematically resist the alternation¹ (Levin, 1993; see also Alexiadou, 2010; Alexiadou et al., 2006; henceforth AAS):

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¹ The exact scope of the alternation is a matter of debate. For example, the question of whether the alternation which some verbs of emission show (*I rang the doorbell/The doorbell rang*) should be considered a manifestation of the causative alternation is not settled. See Levin and Rappaport Hovav (1995), Levin et al. (1997), Rappaport Hovav and Levin (2012) and Potashnik (2012) for differing views. In this paper, I restrict my attention to change of state verbs, which is the core class of alternating verbs cross-linguistically.

- (3) English verbs of destruction: *demolish, destroy, devastate, exterminate, obliterate, raze, ruin, wreck*...
- (4) English verbs of killing²: *kill, eliminate*, ...
- (5) a. *The city destroyed.
- b. *The building demolished.
- c. *The toys ruined in the rain.
- (6) a. *The rebels all eliminated.
- b. *All the chickens killed.

Second, as discussed in Levin and Rappaport Hovav (1995, henceforth L&RH 1995; see also AAS 2006) there are verbs which in principle alternate, but for certain choices of arguments appear not to alternate, as illustrated for the verb *clear* below. (7) indicates that the verb participates in the alternation, and (8) shows the apparent unavailability of the anticausative³ variant for one particular choice of theme argument.⁴

- (7) a. I cleared the screen.
- b. The screen cleared.
- (8) a. The waiters cleared the counter.
- b. *The counter cleared.

Much less discussed are cases of causative alternation verbs which for certain choices of theme argument, the *transitive* variant appears to be absent (Rappaport Hovav and Levin, 2012 (henceforth RH&L 2012); see also Folli, 2003 and Ramchand, 2008):

- (9) a. Her face narrows under the cheekbones.
- b. ???Her bone structure narrows her face under the cheekbones.
- (10) a. My watch broke after the warranty ran out.
- b. *I broke my watch after the warranty ran out (does not have the same interpretation as (a)).
- (11) a. As the days lengthened into weeks, their food and water was almost gone.⁵
- b. *As the wait lengthened the days into weeks...

The challenge is then to provide an analysis of the alternation which will account both for its productivity and for the constraints on its distribution. Most accounts to date have focused on the lexical properties of verbs which alternate: they address the question of the basic adicity of alternating verbs and the question of the appropriate semantic characterization of alternating verbs either in terms of the semantic roles of the arguments or in terms of a semantic classification of predicates. With respect to these questions, there are broadly speaking two kinds of accounts.

One class of accounts claims that the alternating verbs are lexically associated with two arguments and the alternation arises from the removal (or nonexpression) of the external argument. These accounts have generally assumed that the constraints on the alternation involve the lexically specified nature of the argument removed (or not expressed) in the derivation of the anticausative variant. The other class of accounts claims that alternating verbs are lexically associated with only one argument and the alternation arises from the addition of a cause argument. While these accounts imply that there are both lexical and nonlexical factors which determine the appearance of the cause argument, it is usually only lexical factors which are explored, and I know of no study which attempts to systematically formulate the nonlexical factors governing the alternation, let alone studies which distinguish explicitly between lexical and nonlexical factors.

³ I use the term 'anticausative' to refer to the intransitive form of a verb which participates in the causative alternation, and sometimes to a sentence using this verb form. In the literature, the term is sometimes reserved for the intransitive member of a causative alternation pair that is morphologically marked (e.g., Haspelmath, 1993). This use of the term is clearly not relevant for English which doesn't mark the alternation morphologically.

⁴ I say that the alternation is *apparently* unavailable for this choice of theme, since, as I will show below, the verb does in fact alternate with this choice of theme, but much depends on context.

² It is unclear to me whether any other verbs of killing are relevant here. Most other verbs of killing appear to require an animate external argument, which is not true for alternating verbs in general (see Levin, 1993:231). It may even be that the verb *kill* is the only relevant example here.

⁵ This sentence does not mean that the length of the day increased, but rather that the length of the units for marking the passage of time in the context under consideration increased from days to weeks. See Deo et al. (2013) for a semantic analysis of verbs of change of state which can possibly accommodate this sense of the verb *lengthen*.

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