What causes causatives? A multifactorial study based on a parallel corpus

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This paper addresses variation of causative constructions in languages of the world. More specifically, it focuses on the following types of constructions:

- analytic (e.g. *make smb. believe smth., let smth. go*),

- morphological (e.g. *sharpen*)

- lexical causatives (e.g. *kill*, *break*).

These constructions represent a continuum of the formal integration of the causing and caused events, from the weakest degree in analytic causatives, where these events are represented by different predicates, to the strongest degree in lexical causatives, where these events are merged in one predicate. There have been many proposals in functionally oriented linguistics claiming that more compact causatives usually represent more integrated events (e.g. Givón 1980; Haiman 1983), although Dixon (2000) has proposed multiple dimensions of variation. This paper tests the predictions made by these theories on a sample of ten diverse languages (Finnish, French, Hebrew, Indonesian, Japanese, Mandarin Chinese, Russian, Thai, Turkish and Vietnamese).

The data come from the ParTy corpus, a parallel corpus for typologists that represents film subtitles and TED talks (www.natalialevshina.com/corpus.html). A sample of three hundred causative situations is drawn from the English subtitles. These causative situations serve as comparative concepts (Haspelmath 2010). Next, their translations in the ten other languages are analysed with regard to the above-mentioned three types of causative constructions. The causative situations are also coded for a set of semantic and formal variables known from previous literature (e.g. Dixon 2000), e.g. volitional vs. non-volitional Causee or making vs. letting. Advanced statistical methods, such as random forests, are employed in order to test whether the degree of formal integration can be predicted with the help of the semantic and formal parameters.

The results suggest that the degree of semantic integration of events is the most important factor, although the variation also involves other semantic dimensions, supporting Dixon's (2000) observations. I will also discuss alternative accounts to explaining variation in causative constructions, which that are based on the principle of economy and efficient form-meaning mapping, most importantly, Haspelmath's (2008) frequentist model and neo-Gricean pragmatic theory (e.g. Horn 1984). I will show that even though there is a correlation between formal cohesion and semantic integration of events, this correlation does not imply causation and the relationship between form and function is in fact better explained by frequency asymmetries in the use of the constructions across the languages.

References

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