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CAUSING ONESELF TO DO SOMETHING: THE PSYCHODYNAMICS OF CAUSATIVE CONSTRUCTIONS

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Abstract

This paper deals with one particular type of causative construction, namely the periphrastic causative construction where the CAUSER is coreferential with the CAUSEE. This phenomenon is discussed within Talmy’s (1986, 2000) theory of force dynamics, and more precisely his concept of psychodynamics, according to which the human psyche is made up of two entities able to interact with one another. On the basis of corpus data, it will be shown that coreferential causative constructions represent a non-insignificant proportion in authentic English (especially with the verb get). It will also be argued that such constructions deserve a place in the frame of causation, although as less prototypical members than non-coreferential constructions.

Introduction

Causative constructions have been dealt with a lot in the literature and from many different theoretical perspectives (e.g. McCawley 1968 for generative semantics, Comrie 1976 and Wierzbicka 1998 for the universal-typological perspective, or Dik 1980 for functional grammar). Yet, there is at least one type of causative construction that has largely been neglected, namely the periphrastic causative construction where the CAUSER is coreferential with the CAUSEE, as in

(1) I made myself sit and really give him time. <BNC:S:KBF 952>¹

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¹ The code between angle brackets is the reference of the sentence in the British National Corpus (BNC).
After defining periphrastic causative constructions in general, and coreferential periphrastic causative constructions in particular, I will explain this phenomenon in terms of Talmy’s (1986, 2000) cognitive concept of psychodynamics. I will then present the results of a study carried out on naturally-occurring language data coming from the British National Corpus and seeking to determine the frequency and types of coreferential periphrastic causative constructions occurring in authentic English. I will end with some concluding remarks about the place of coreferential causative constructions within the frame of causation.

**Periphrastic causative constructions**

Periphrastic (or analytic) causative constructions are two-part configurations expressing causation and consisting of a verb, such as *make* or *have*, controlling a non-finite complement clause, e.g. *Mary had John come to the meeting* (see Baron 1974). In English, there are four main verbs which can be used in such configurations, namely (in decreasing order of frequency) *get*, *make*, *have* and *cause*. Each of them can be followed by certain types of non-finite complements. *Get*, for instance, can take a to-infinitive (*We’d better get you to fill in one of these forms*), a past participle (*As from tomorrow I can get my MOT done*) or a present participle (*Does that get your adrenalin going*?). All of these constructions belong to the frame of causation, which is made up of up to four frame elements (cf. Figure 1): the **CAUSER** is an entity, force or event that changes or influences the **CAUSEE**, which thereby produces an **EFFECT**. The latter may (but need not) affect a **PATIENT**.

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Usually, the various participants in a causative construction refer to distinct entities. Thus, in (2) the CAUSER (I) is different from the CAUSEE (Mike), which is different from the PATIENT (them).

(2) I **had** Mike ironing them [the curtains] while I was putting ’em up.

< BNC:S:KCG 2652 >

Sometimes, however, the CAUSER and the CAUSEE may be coreferential. This is the case in (3),³ where the CAUSER and the CAUSEE refer to the same person (she/herself). This is what I will call a coreferential causative construction.

(3) She **made herself** drink the rest of the coffee, though it was cold.

< ICE-GB:W2F-020 #75:1 >

To count as a coreferential causative construction, not all the participants need to be expressed. In (4), for example, the CAUSEE is not mentioned, but it is clearly coreferential with the CAUSER (cf. I’ll get myself to do my geography project).

(4) I’ll **get** my geography project done, I can’t do anything until I’ve got this bloody project out the way, can I? < BNC:S:KCE 6364 >

Finally, it is possible for a causative construction to express threefold coreferentiality, with the CAUSER being coreferential with the CAUSEE and the PATIENT. In (5), the speaker is at the same time the CAUSER, the CAUSEE and the PATIENT of the causative construction (cf. I’m getting myself to organize myself).

(5) I’m going to the street and getting an early lunch and getting myself organized for going out. < BNC:S:KB8 8793 >

**Coreferential causative constructions and “psychodynamics”**

Within the theoretical framework of cognitive linguistics, Talmý’s (1986, 2000) analysis of “force dynamics” is highly relevant for the phenomenon of causation. Force dynamics refers to “how entities interact with respect to force” (Talmy 2000: 409). More precisely, a distinction can be made between two forces, each exerting a force on the other, one the Agonist, the “focal force entity” (*ibid.* 413), which is

³ This sentence is taken from ICE-GB, the British component of the International Corpus of English.
singled out for attention, and the other the Antagonist, the force element that is considered for the effect it has on the Agonist. Each of them is said to have an intrinsic force tendency, either towards motion (or, more generally, action) or towards rest (or, more generally, inaction), as well as a relative strength (stronger or weaker). The stronger entity determines the resultant of the force interaction, which can be one either of motion (action) or of rest (inaction). As an illustration, Figure 2 shows how sentences (6a) and (6b) are represented by Talmy (ibid. 418).

(6)  

a. The ball’s hitting it made the lamp topple from the table.  
b. The water’s dripping on it made the fire die down.

Figure 2. Talmy’s (2000: 418) force dynamic representation of (6a/b)

In the first pattern (a), the Antagonist (the ball), represented by a concave figure, comes into position against an Agonist (the lamp), indicated by a circle, which has an intrinsic force tendency towards rest (•). Since the Antagonist is stronger (+), it causes the Agonist to change from a state of rest to one of motion ( > ), as shown by the slash on the resultant line beneath the Agonist ( / ), which separates the before and after states. The black arrow on the top of the diagram simply represents the Antagonist’s motion into impingement. In (b), the Agonist (the fire) has a tendency towards motion ( > ), which is overcome by the stronger (+) Antagonist (the water), so that the resultant of the force interaction is a state of rest (•). In both cases, the Agonist’s resultant state is the opposite of its intrinsic tendency, a property which is shared by all verbs of causing. In the other force-dynamic patterns, on the other hand, the Agonist’s intrinsic tendency and the
resultant state are the same, cf. the “letting” pattern illustrated by *The plug’s coming loose let the water flow from the tank*, where the Agonist (*the water*) has a tendency towards motion and is eventually able to manifest this tendency.

Interestingly, force dynamics need not concern a physical phenomenon, as the interaction can also be of a more symbolic nature. This idea has been explored by Talmy with the notions of “sociodynamics” (*ibid.* 438-440) and “psychodynamics” (*ibid.* 430-435). In the former case, the interaction involves social forces. In (7), “he” has a tendency towards rest, but “she” exerts pressure on him to force him towards motion – and is successful in doing so, since the resultant state is one of motion.

(7) She persuaded him to come to the meeting.

Here, the physical contact between two objects with a transmission of energy (cf. [6a/b]) is extended to “one sentient entity’s production of stimuli, including communication, that is perceived by another sentient entity and interpreted as reason for volitionally performing a particular action” (*ibid.* 438). In the case of psychodynamics, the participants are not two distinct entities, but two parts of a single psyche. Thus, in a sentence such as (8), the subject is presented as a divided self, with one part wanting to yawn and the other not wanting to.

(8) I refrained from yawning.

As in physical force interaction, there is pressure towards the realisation of a certain act, and resistance against performing it. One part of the self is characterised by a tendency towards motion (i.e. yawning), and the other part by a tendency towards rest (i.e. no yawning). Either of them can be stronger and determine the resultant state – in this case, a state of rest. Lee (2001: 110) refers to the two parts of the human mind as the Subject and the Self, and he describes this division as follows:

[O]ur conception of the human mind involves a distinction between two components – the Subject and the Self. The Subject is essentially the seat of our rational and moral judgments, whereas the Self is that part of our personality that interacts directly with the world. In the ideal situation, the Subject and the Self are in harmony (compare *She’s a very together person*), with the Self acting in accordance with the directions of the Subject. However, the Self can escape such control and perform acts under its own agency (compare *I couldn’t stop myself, I got carried away*).
This two-tier conception of the human mind explains why the **CAUSER** and the **CAUSEE** can be coreferential or, put differently, how it is possible to cause oneself to do something. Let us examine (3) again, repeated here as (9) for convenience’s sake.

(9) *She made herself* drink the rest of the coffee, though it was cold.  
<ICE-GB:W2F-020 #75:1>

*Herself* is the Self, the part that interacts directly with the world and can, say, drink coffee, go for a walk or talk with a friend. *She* is the Subject, which examines the situation, decides what should be done about it, etc. The Self is reluctant to drink the rest of the coffee because it is cold (in Talmy’s words, the Self has a tendency towards rest). But the Subject thinks that the coffee should be drunk (it has a tendency towards motion), for instance to be polite towards her host, and so forces the Self to drink it. In this case, it was clearly the Subject’s desire that the caused event took place. This is not always so. In (10) the Subject (*I*) did not intend to make the Self (*myself*) feel sick. Simply, the Self escaped the Subject’s control and performed the action of eating (too much) of his or her own free will. As a result of this, the Self felt sick. But it was not at the Subject’s instigation, since the Subject was not in control when the causing event took place.

(10) But *I* ate myself silly on them last night and *made myself* feel sick so *I’ll* never eat them again now. <BNC:S:KCA 1179>

**Coreferential causative constructions in English: a corpus analysis**

In order to investigate the behaviour of coreferential causative constructions in authentic English, I carried out a study on the basis of a 10-million-word subset of the British National Corpus, a collection of naturally-occurring texts and transcriptions of spoken interactions in British English (see Gilquin 2004). Before turning to the results, it should be noted that the corpus analysis revealed the existence of a number of ambiguous (past participle) constructions, such as (11) and (12).
They’ve had their house refurbished in the middle of Oxford. <BNC:S:KRL 2993>

I wanna get you expelled. <BNC:S:KBD 9002>

Theoretically, the CAUSEE in these sentences could be equal to or different from the CAUSER. This ambiguity is sometimes turned to good account by the speaker when s/he merely wants to emphasise the result of the causing event, without specifying the identity of the CAUSEE, as in (13).

I’ll have to see if I can get some banana skins put on the stairs [to bump him off]. <BNC:S:KB7 15681>

Table 1 shows the frequency of coreferential, ambiguous and non-coreferential causative constructions in the corpus data. While coreferential causative constructions are nonexistent with cause, they do occur with make, although with a very small proportion (less than 3%). Yet, such sentences do not seem to offend people’s ears, as 76% of my respondents judged the sentence I made myself sit in the armchair as okay or perfectly natural and normal. The proportion of coreferential causative constructions with have is slightly higher (9.6%), but it is with the verb get that such constructions are most frequent (39.1%). In fact, only 50% of the causative constructions with get in the corpus data clearly refer to distinct entities. The other half of the constructions are either coreferential or ambiguous.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>CAUSE</th>
<th>MAKE</th>
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<th>GET</th>
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<tr>
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<td>208</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>1,269</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table 1*. Relation between CAUSER and CAUSEE in the BNC (absolute frequencies and percentages)
The reason why *get* is particularly frequent in this type of construction has to do with the idea of effort or difficulty which is usually associated with causative constructions with *get*. Consider the following sentences:

(14) Attempts to *get* parents to reduce calorific intake, if the cause of the obesity is psychogenic, are doomed to *failure*; possibly this is why these families are often so *difficult* to treat. <BNC:W:CGT 1461>

(15) I don’t know how that man *managed* to *get* the two edges to meet but he did a wonderful job on it! <BNC:S:KC0 2118>

(16) We’re not picking on you we’re just *trying* to *get* a conversation going here, but it’s *very hard* when you just sit there and say nothing. <BNC:S:KCX 6634>

(17) So I take it Laura’s *got* her sinus *problem* *sorted out* did she? <BNC:S:KDM 10410>

In all these examples, there are linguistic clues (cf. underlined elements) indicating effort or difficulty in carrying out the caused event. Now, the split between Subject and Self, described in the preceding section, necessarily involves some sort of effort, since one part of the mind has to escape the control of the other part and perform acts under its own agency (cf. Lee’s quotation). This is clearly the case in the following coreferential causative constructions:

(18) It took me *six turns* to *get* it [the car] reversed in. Because there’s *no room* at all. <BNC:S:KC2 5566-7>

(19) And she was gonna, aye *trying* to do her ironing because she said if she didn’t *get* it done there’d be *all next week’s* as well to do. <BNC:S:KB9 2078>

(20) But she couldn’t *get* the car started this morning. (...) Yeah, she’d been to college but she couldn’t *get* her car started, she had to get her dad to drive her in and pick her up. <BNC:S:KBY 50/52>

**Coreferential causative constructions**

**within the frame of causation**

One might wonder whether the type of construction discussed here really belongs to the frame of causation and if so, how it can be integrated into the model. Like “regular” causative constructions, coreferential causative constructions express a process in which a CAUSER changes or influences a CAUSEE, which thereby produces an EFFECT. The only difference is that the CAUSER and the CAUSEE are not two different entities, but two parts of a single entity. This difference can be explained in terms of the cognitive concept of prototypicality,
according to which some members of a category are better examples than others (cf. the apple for the fruit category). \(^4\) According to Lakoff’s (1987: 54-5) definition of prototypical causation, a prototypical causative construction should contain “a single definite agent [CAUSER] and a single definite patient [CAUSEE]”, the implication being that the two entities should be distinct from one another. In a coreferential causative construction, this condition is not fulfilled, so that the construction can be regarded as a less central member of the frame of causation than a construction such as The teacher made Susan read the book, where the CAUSER is distinct from the CAUSEE. The analysis of such peripheral items, however, should not be neglected, as it can provide insights into the category as a whole.

References


