

Causative Verbs in English

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1. Introduction The four classical questions of philosophy concern the nature of time, causality, essence, and free will. All four have occupied linguists as well, and the study of the causative verbs of English -- primarily *make*, *have*, and *get* -- requires some thought about each, and perhaps casts some light on each. [fn. 1] In view of the amount of work that has been done on causative verbs more generally, it is surprising that so little work exists on the subject; I know only of Shibatani's dissertation (1973), the insightful remarks in McCawley (1975), and Givón (1975), the last work flawed by its concern with a non-standard dialect of English.

In speaking of causative verbs and causative constructions, I mean to restrict myself to cases such as those in 1, where there appears to be a NP and a full VP following the causative verb. This includes the example in 2a, but leaves out related constructions as in 2b-f, and the important question of the syntactic treatment of the pairs of transitive and intransitives as in 3. Ironically, there has been a good deal of inconclusive discussion of this last construction (often called the "medio-passive") in the literature; among the wealth of studies, the only insightful one that I am aware of is that of van Oosten (1977).

1. a. Gretchen made her husband clean the stovetop.
 b. Gretchen got her husband to clean the stovetop.
 c. Gretchen had her husband clean the stovetop.
2. a. John got the kids to be quiet.
 b. John got the kids quiet.
 c. John got the work done by 4 o'clock.
 d. The work got John hungry.
 e. John got hungry.
3. a. Without thinking, the child tore the tissue paper.
 b. Tissue paper tears easily, so be careful!

I shall refer to the subject of the causative verb as the "upper causer", and its object, the subject of the embedded verb, as the "lower causee". Let us begin

with several common examples of how each of the three causative verbs are used.

4. Have

- a. Mr. Malone had his secretary type up several extra copies of the letter.
- b. Joan had her brother pick up an extra bottle of milk on the way home.
- c. Mr. McCarthy had the worst-behaved students stand up and present their book reports from memory.

but not:

- d. #Sarah had the baby stop crying.
- e. #Lisa had the puppy stop barking.
- f. #I had the terrorist put down his gun.

5. Get

- a. Elizabeth got her mother to let her stay up late.
#made her mother let her stay up late.
#had her mother let her stay up late.
- b. #Mr. Malone got his secretary to retype the paper [What's she got on him, we wonder!]
- c. Dr. Gehirn got the patient to reveal his innermost secrets. [#had, made]

6. Make

- a. Mrs. Thrustle made the children stay after school and clean the erasers.

Shibatani (1973 [1975], 47) suggests that "the use of the verbs **make**, **get**, and **have** is ... correlated with the amount of resistance that the causer theme encounters. The **make**-causative expresses a situation where a greater resistance has been overcome, the **get**-causative a situation involving a slight resistance, and the **have**-causative a situation without any resistance involved." These remarks are extremely apt. It should be noted Shibatani here is restricting himself to the prototypical uses of causative verbs, involving situations where a sentient creature (typically a person) wants another person to do something; this leaves aside the less central cases where causation occurs without intent, as in the "His remarks made me realize how ignorant he was", or "The sound of a gun made Converse spin to his left", types to which we will have to return below. (It is because the English verb **cause** is limited to the latter class,

and is not used -- pace Givón and Shibatani -- in the prototypical causative case, that one would do well to ignore its use in an initial study of English causative verbs.)

2: **Have** But what does it really mean to say that no (or little) coercion is involved in the situation reported, Shibatani's proposal for the meaning of **have**? In example 4c above, there may in fact have been resistance in the actual classroom situation; the teacher might even describe a harrowing afternoon, "I had some of my students read their book reports this afternoon, but it sure wasn't easy -- they resisted every inch of the way," or some such. What is crucial is that the situation be one in which the will of the causer is taken in the social context to suffice to define the action of the causee, the person named by the subject of the lower clause -- N.B. the action of the lower subject, not the will. McCawley nearly puts his finger on this when he notes that the only cases "where **have** refers to a coercive act are those where previous context establishes that the **have** clause refers to part of a larger coercive act, e.g., 'The bandit took the passengers' money and then had them lie face down on the floor while his partner tied them up.'" (fn. 2, p.261)

There are cases where no coercion is, I think it fair to say, possible between one person and another, and yet the **have** causative is inappropriate; we have seen this already, in fact, in the examples in 5a. This represents a striking problem for the Shibatani analysis, if it is to be taken literally. If Elizabeth is seven years old, she is not in a position to coerce her mother into anything [dissenters, attend!]; nonetheless, the judgment is secure that we cannot say that 'the little girl had her mother let her stay up late'. Only where the social situation, for whatever reason, establishes that one person's wish is the other's command can **have** be used -- even when, as the rambunctious students have demonstrated, the principals in the case may try to flout the established relationships. Let us sketch this prototypical staging as in 7. We indicate there that the content of the causer's will (NP-1's will) is of the form "that NP-2 do X".

7 NP-1 has NP-2 do X

NP-1
Will: that NP-2 do X



NP-2
Action: NP-2 [i.e., ego] do X

Let us clearly note the crucial aspects of the situation sketched in 7. We are, as I have mentioned, restricting our attention to the case where both the causer and the causee are taken to be people. Both 'wills' and 'actions' can be ascribed to people, and though in other simple sentences, Person X's action is taken to flow directly out of Person X's corresponding will (as in simple agentive acts, like "John measured the width of the doorway"), the situation is otherwise here. The causer is described as having a will, and the causee is simply not presented as having a will, but rather is asserted to perform the action expressed in the causer's will.

This grammatical relationship is appropriate in a circumscribed set of social contexts, like those we have mentioned: employer-employee, parent-child (more generally, master-slave) -- or, fortunately, in the case of pure equals, where once again no coercion is involved, because it is presumed that one person's will for the other to do something suffices for that will to be carried out by the other person, as in the case of having your husband, or brother, bring an extra bottle of milk home, and so forth.

There is thus no particular "way" to have someone do something -- there are no choices of different ways in which to do it, and no possibility for the addition of manner adverbs, an apparently syntactic fact flowing directly out of the semantic analysis. This accounts for the oddity of sentences such as 8a, which contrast strikingly with those of 8b-c. [fn. 2]

- 8 a. #How did you have Jack mow the lawn?
 b. How did you get Jack to mow the lawn?
 (Answer: By offering him...)
 c. How did you make Jack mow the lawn? (I'm

asking because I thought he was impervious to threats...)

I believe that this crucial difference between **have** and the other causative verbs accounts for other differences McCawley notes (loc cit). McCawley does give an ungrammatical **have** sentence with a manner adverb (*John had Mary wash his socks by telling her that he needed clean socks) but suggests that this is the result of an aspectual characteristic of the causative **have**, a focusing on the result rather than the action. In support of what we might call the aspectual analysis, McCawley suggests that the causative **have** prefers not to appear in the progressive (9a), nor in a context focusing on the segment of time involved in an activity (9b).

- 9 a. ?*When I entered the room, John was having Mary kiss him.
- b. ?*It took John five minutes to have Mary kiss him.

I would suggest that the oddity of 9a is not much diminished in 10a, suggesting aspect is not the key, but rather the interaction of kissing, and its significance, with the kind of social relationship required by the **have** causative. Change the scene -- then we find syntactically parallel sentences that are, I believe, unexceptionable, as in 10b, or 10c (past and present progressives).

- 10 a. John had Mary kiss him.
- b. When I walked into the classroom, you can imagine my surprise to find that old Mrs. Thistlethwaite was having the first-graders draw swastikas all over the walls!
- c. Monsieur Durocher is having all his secretaries answer the phone in French.

McCawley is surely correct about the general oddity of sentences like 9b, but this is due, I think, not to the aspectual character of the causative verb **have** but rather due to other aspects of its meaning, involving a causation that must be instantaneous if it is to fit the prototypical model sketched for it.

3. **Make and Get** The difference between **make** and **get** is easily stated with the vocabulary implicit in schema 7. The lower subject is represented as possessing a will of its own in either case (unlike the case with **have**). When the lower subject, the causee, adopts the

will of the causer, we may say that the lower subject is **persuaded**; and in that case, we use **get**. When the lower subject, the causee, does not take on the will of the upper causer, then **make** is used. In both cases, the causee is viewed as possessed of a will of its own; in the case where the causee's will remains stubbornly independent of that of the upper causer, the lower causee's action will naturally less dependably turn out to be that of the will of the upper causer, and hence the upper causer must be more insistently and continuously involved in whatever effort is expressed in the causative situation.

Thus if I **get** you to do something, I have persuaded you to do it, and you ultimately do it -- an action -- with your will in gear. If I **make** you do it, your will remains disaffected. In light of this, we may disagree with Shibatani when he says that "the **make**-causative expresses a situation where a greater resistance has been overcome"; it rather expresses a situation where resistance has not been overcome, whether it is great or little (whether such things can be measured or not).

To illustrate this point, let us look at a minimal pair involving the contrast between **make** and **get**. An editor of a large publishing house might say, speaking of a yet unpublished and unknown writer, "I made him rewrite the whole thing. He was furious!" He would be unlikely to use **get** -- at least, the particular editor that I have in mind, proud of his prerogatives, would. But the same person, talking about one of the established stars in his stable, might report, "I got him to rewrite the whole thing. He never knew what hit him!" We can see in this example that it is not so much the amount of resistance that must be overcome that separates the uses of these two verbs as the way in which the caused action is brought about -- by inducing, or not inducing, persuasion.

4. Beyond the Prototypical situation We can move beyond the prototypical case most simply by dropping the restriction that each of the participants, the upper causer and the lower causee, be people or sentient, willful creatures. The simpler case to consider is that in which the upper causer is a person but the lower "causee" is not. In this case we still find all three causative verbs available, as in 11, with essentially the same contrast as the one we have already discussed.

11 a. The President made the boundary line go to

the east of the disputed territory. [even better: The President decided to make the boundary line go...]

b. The Congressman got the highway to go through his district. [cf. ...to be placed in...]

c. The Pope had the service start an hour earlier in honor of the occasion.

There are still wills and actions under the influence of the upper causer, but who they belong to is no longer grammatically specified. In each of the cases in 11, the President, Congressman, or Pope had to use his good office and influence on some unspecified persons, persuading or not, as the causative verb in each sentence defines. It is of some importance that this reference to a grammatically unspecified person is not a general characteristic of other causative constructions. When the object **does** fit the requirements of the prototypical situation, and is possessed of a will of its own, then it must indeed be its will that is bent (or not) to that of the upper causer. Thus "The President got the junior senator from Indiana to vote with him on the foreign aid bill" cannot be used, it seems to me, if the President achieved this end by political arm-twisting, log-rolling, or other means of persuasion in a meeting with the Senate Majority leader, who in turn may have passed on an imperious command to the Hoosier senator. In this respect the junior senator from Indiana differs from the boundary line in example 11a, in that the Senator's inherent personhood fits the prototypical requirements tightly enough to lock the other alignments of the prototypical situation in to the grammatically specified participants.

In other, structurally similar cases, there is no appeal possible to an unspecified person, as in cases such as 12.

12 a. I got the book to stay open by dripping glue on the pages that I'd finished reading.

b. We got the car to start by pouring rotgut down the carburetor.

But the set of objects that can serve as this kind of object of the causative **get** is limited, and easily specified: it is the set of objects perceived as being able to move (or effect their own kind of activity) through some internal energy-source. Electronic, diesel-powered, and spring-loaded objects (including

ill-behaved cookbooks) can be viewed as induced or persuaded to behave correctly, as in 12 or 13, though other objects cannot (cf. 14). (Notice the contrast between *?I got the door to open and OK I got the door open, unless it is an electronic door, in which case both are fine.) [fn. 3]

- 13 I got the computer (program) to generate all the primes up to 1,973.
14 a. #Zachary got the rock to move.
b. #Jerome figured out how to get the nail to leave his finger.

In other cases, where the source of the energy is taken to originate not in the lower causee -- here, the inanimate object -- but in the upper causer, a syntactically transitive construction must be used (e.g., John moved the chair, to use Shibatani's example). But in those cases where the lower causee is indeed viewed as imbued with a certain internal energy, causative constructions with both **get**, as in 12, and **make** (e.g., "How did you make the TV work so well?") are possible. Judgments become even more delicate in trying to understand the contrast between the use of these two verbs here; while there is a temptation to view the sentences with **get** in 12 as positing some minimal sort of inclination if not will on the part of the object, the point is hard to support in the absence of minimal pairs distinguishing the two verbs here. I will leave this matter in silence.

In sum, then, when the (lower) causee is unambiguously non-sentient, only **get** and **make** can be used. Why should this be, when these are the two causatives whose analysis, according to the account offered above, explicitly mentions the will of the lower causee? The one causative verb that did not mention the lower causee's will, **have**, is specifically excluded from use in the case where the lower causee has no will.

This potentially baffling tendency is maintained when we consider the other type of deviation from the prototypical causative situation, turning now to the case where the upper causer is not sentient, but the lower causee is. Again there are two subcases to consider. The first is found in examples like 15a, where the the action of the lower clause is a physical activity, and the lower causee is not engaged in much thought. In these cases, **get** is, I believe, not useable at all; the only causative verb available is **make**. In the other case, illustrated in 15b, the lower

However these conclusions are sliced, it does not appear to be possible to identify necessary and sufficient conditions for the use of each causative verb across these cases. If we characterize the use of the **have**-causative in the prototypical person-to-person causative situation, we see that it is used when coercion is specifically not involved; and yet when we turn to cases involving objects, where coercion could not, by the nature of things, be involved, we find that there **make** is used instead of **have**.

It appears to be the case that the choice of causative verb is made relative to, or on the basis of, the kind of entities involved in the situation, and our perception of the types of forces that can logically be at play between them. The chart above identifies a range of four types of entity-pairs that might be involved in a situation. In each case, the verb **make** can minimally be used, and is used, it seems, in the prototypical way, though this last point is harder to support.

The notion of prototype, in both the situation described and the construction used to report, seems thus to be of utility. The prototypical situation involves two people, but the situation actually described may deviate from that condition. The prototypical causative act involves imposition of the upper causer's will on the lower causee, in the case where there are two people involved, though it may involve less willful notions when the situation does not involve pairs of people. In each case, the prototypical type of causation is reported with the verb **make**, and less prototypical types of causation are reported with **get**, and then, under the restricted conditions described, **have** may be used. As expected, we find that when the conditions for the prototypical scene are met (i.e., when two people are involved), the greatest number of semantic distinctions in the nature of the causative relation are expressible.

6. **Further comments on the syntax.** As the time-worn adage would have it, time and space do preclude further study of the syntax of these constructions, about which I have said little to this point. The analysis presented up to this point, with its emphasis on the nature and character of the lower causee, might be taken to suggest that the lower causee must be in a syntactically identifiable position (i.e., object of

the causative verb), suggesting a **force-type** of syntax (V NP S), but this is by no means necessary. Other diagnostics are quite ambiguous. The possibility of passive in the lower clause, largely maintaining paraphrase, suggests that **have** and **get** involve embedded sentences, and not object plus complement constructions; judgments here are quite insecure, but I have found nothing parallel to 17 and 18 involving the causative **make**.

17. a. We decided to have a specialist examine the child.

b. We had decided to have the child be examined by a specialist.

18. a. He got the committee members to accept Stewart as the new chair.

b. He got Stewart to be accepted by the committee members as the new chair. (or, He managed to get Stewart to be accepted...)

Both **get** and **make** easily allow the weather "it" as their lower causee (Only God can make it rain, We tried to get it to snow one year by spreading moth balls on the ground, etc.), suggesting again that neither involves a direct object in the upper clause (that this is impossible with **have** follows from the semantics, of course). Neither dummy **there** nor the dummy **it** of extraposition is possible in this position, but this is due to the non-actional nature of clauses involving either of these two constructions (cf. 19, 20).

19. *They had it be illegal to drink alcohol of any sort on campus.

*They got it to be illegal to drink alcohol ...

*They made it be illegal to drink alcohol...

20. *? We got/made there (to) be a public outcry by planting photos in the paper.

One may ask as well whether the subject of the lower sentence can be passivized in the upper clause. These sentences are generally ungrammatical -- uniformly with **have** and **get** (21a,b), but with **make** certain sentences (21c) are good (the one given here I found recently in a novel).

21 a. *The secretary was had retype the letters.

b. *The movie star was gotten to give a public lecture.

c. She must be made to behave!

Notice that the passive in 21c with **make** triggers the insertion of a **to** following **make**, just as we find when we manage to passive the other bare infinitival complement, that following perception verbs, as in **Maheu was seen to leave the office each night around midnight** (cf. **We saw Maheu (*to) leave the office**).

7. Conclusions The categories that have traditionally interested philosophers, the categories of descriptive metaphysics, are categories that must also interest the linguist concerned with the fine structure of a language. There does not appear to be a sharp line between the study of syntactic constructions, lexical semantics, and the study of grammatical markers (as in, for example, the remarkably interesting Bella Coola control system described in Saunders and Davis (1982), whose analysis involves categories remarkably similar to those used in this paper). All involve the categories used by speakers to **understand** the world, categories such as cause and effect and agency; it is only natural that the language-learner should attempt to use the same categories to understand the complex system of language that it hears.

Footnotes

1. This paper has been, the reader will perceive, considerably influenced by a number of recent papers by Lakoff (1982, Lakoff and Johnson 1980) and by Langacker (1984), and Ruwet (1984), as well as the papers cited in the text by Shibatani and McCawley, and my own, perhaps idiosyncratic, reading of B.L. Whorf.

2. On the other hand, Givon suggests that there are speakers who accept sentences like "I had her lose her temper by sending John over to taunt her" (his 25c), or "I had her pick up her books by sending John over to tell her" (his 26c). I have been unable to replicate these judgments.

3. However, as Georgia Green and several other people pointed out to me after the presentation, many of these **get** causatives are fine in certain contexts. If you spend an hour removing old paint from around a window, you can then report that you finally got the window to open. Similarly, as Arlene Zide pointed out, many of the odd **get**-causatives become quite acceptable in the presence of a instrument, as in **I got the rock to move**

with a crowbar. What these examples without exception involve is a situation where it is not an action that is caused, but rather a change in the structure of the situation, where I use the term "structure" as developed in Goldsmith and Woisetschlaeger 1982. In each case, whether it reports the moving of the rock or the window, what is at stake is not that the object moved as a single event, but rather that the window or rock now moves, i.e., has or is involved in a different structure. The person who hears these sentences may justly infer that the next time we need to move the window or the rock, it will be easier because something has been pried loose. Thus we see that (as only adumbrated in the text above) *get* does involve shifting not the will of the lower causee in these inanimate cases, but rather the structure. Structure is thus to inanimate objects what will is to animates.

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