Agentive vs. non-agentive uses of causative predicates
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Previous work has shown that the degree of change in the theme's referent entailed by lexical causative predicates may vary with the thematic properties of the subject's referent. The generalization observed across languages is that with a subset of causative verbs (whose extension and properties partly vary from languages to languages), the theme's referent does not have to endure any change developing towards a result state of the type encoded by the predicate if the subject is associated with some agentive properties for the causative statement to be true. By contrast, at least part of a change developing towards such a result state has to take place when the subject is a (non-instrumental) inanimate entity. The goal of this paper is to provide an account for this generalization, elaborating on the analysis developed in Martin (2015).

I show that the way the subject is semantically combined with the VP is crucial for the inference of causal efficacy triggered by the resulting sentence. The output of this compositional step very much depends on the semantics of the functional head introducing the subject, which differs with the type of subjects introduced—agents or causers. The functional head introducing agent subjects—Voice-ag—does not introduce any further event, but only relates the external argument x it introduces to the event e introduced by the predicate it combines with, and specifies that x is the agent of e (Kratzer 1996). By contrast, the head introducing causer subjects—Voice-c— introduces a further event, as well as a relation R between this event e and the event e introduced by the predicate Voice-c attaches to (Pylkkänen 2008). I argue that in most cases, R is interpreted as CAUSE rather than the relation of identity.

Furthermore, I argue that although the causative predicate has the same meaning under both agentive and non-agentive uses, the event type it denotes is tokenized in a different way (i.e., is mapped with different event tokens in the model) depending on whether the subject is an agent or a causer. Event types denoted by causative VPs used agentively are tokenized by actions of the subject's referent and ensuing changes-of-state of the theme's referent. By contrast, event types denoted by causative VPs used non-agentively are tokenized by changes-of-state of the theme's referent (when R=cause). These differences in the semantics of Voice and the tokenization of the event type will account for why a change of state of the theme's referent can be denied with some causative predicates when they are used agentively, but typically not when they are used non-agentively.