

Causative Structures in French: Word Order Following *faire*, *laisser*, and *forcer*

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**CAUSATIVE STRUCTURES IN FRENCH: WORD ORDER FOLLOWING *FAIRE*,  
*LAISSER*, AND *FORCER***

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**0. The problem.**

This paper is concerned with word order in causative constructions in French. These constructions are presented in (1)-(3).

- (1) a. *Marie fait pleurer Jean*  
 b. \**Marie fait Jean pleurer*  
 'Mary makes John cry'
- (2) a. *Marie laisse pleurer Jean*  
 b. *Marie laisse Jean pleurer*  
 'Mary lets John cry'
- (3) a. \**Marie force à partir Jean*  
 b. *Marie force Jean à partir*  
 'Mary forces John to leave'

Notice that with *faire* in (1a), the infinitive immediately follows the causative verb. The logical subject of the infinitive follows the infinitive. Crucially, it cannot precede the infinitive as shown in (1b). This type of construction is traditionally referred to as having a post-verbal subject (Kayne 1975). It will be called the VV construction here. With *forcer* in (3), the logical subject of the infinitive must follow the causative verb and precede the infinitive as in (3b). These structures present cases of pre-verbal subjects, which is the usual case for French. I shall refer to these structures as VOV constructions. Both these structures may occur after *laisser*. VV is illustrated in (2a), VOV in (2b).<sup>1</sup>

The problem posed by these causative structures is twofold. It is necessary first to account for the post verbal position of the logical subject of the infinitive in the *faire* cases, and secondly, to explain the presence of the two constructions following *laisser*. This paper is especially concerned with the variation in the *laisser* cases.

**1. Previous accounts.**

Most of the research dealing with causative constructions has been concerned with accounting for the existence of the VV construction syntactically. Following Kayne (1975), the traditional generative syntax account of causative structures has been based on the idea of Predicate Raising. For example, the D-structure of (1a) is given in (4), and its S-structure is given in (5):

- (4) Marie fait [<sub>S</sub> Jean <sub>VP</sub> pleurer]  
(5) Marie fait [<sub>VP</sub><sub>i</sub> pleurer Jean t<sub>i</sub>]

Predicate Raising is triggered by the causative verb. It is obligatory with *faire*, blocked with *forcer*, and optional with *laisser* and the perception verbs.

In a Relational Grammar account, the VV construction is produced by the rule of Clause Union, which, according to Aissen and Perlmutter (1983: 379) 'makes all dependents of the embedded verbs into dependents of the matrix verb'. The RG solution posits a reorganization of the clause where the initial subject of the complement structure becomes a term of the matrix clause. Clause Union is a product of specific properties of certain verbs, called Union Triggers. *Faire* is an obligatory Union trigger, *laisser* and the perception verbs are optional Union triggers, and *forcer* is not a trigger verb.

The Predicate Raising and the Clause Union solutions successfully account for the surface post-verbal position of the logical subject of the infinitive in the VV construction. However, both analyses encounter one major difficulty. Since they treat the choice between the VV or the VOV constructions following *laisser* and the perception verbs as a mere structural option, they can offer little insight into the possible motivations for that choice.<sup>2</sup> However, as it will be shown in this paper, the distribution of the two structures is not unconstrained, but motivated by semantic factors.

The main claim developed in this paper is that the syntactic behavior of causative structures is motivated by their semantics, and the only way to capture and express that motivation is to treat VV and VOV as two separate meaningful constructions. The investigation of the meaning of VV and VOV will be conducted using the concepts developed by the theory of Cognitive Grammar (Langacker 1987, 1991). The recognition of the semantic import of each construction will enable us to examine several issues which so far have received very little attention within the literature.<sup>3</sup> In particular, the parameters which determine the selection of the VV and VOV constructions following *laisser* will be brought to light and investigated.<sup>4</sup>

## 2. Meaning of VOV and VV: different construals on a causative base.

The first step in the analysis is to investigate the semantic import of the VV and VOV construction. I will show that the difference in meaning between them is due to the different construals they impose on a particular base in the sense of Langacker (1987).

### 2.1 One event or two.

With a causative main verb, the sentence profiles the subject's role with respect to some event or process in the world. This represents the base relative to which the constructions' meaning is established. The choice by the speaker to

describe the scene using the VV or VOV construction reflects a particular way of structuring that base, i.e. imposing a specific image on it. Investigating the meaning of each construction therefore amounts to defining the specific type of construal it imposes on the event designated by the complement. We can do this in several ways. First, speakers have intuitions about the meaning of the constructions. A possible paraphrase of VOV in (2) could be: 'Mary lets John do something, and that something is crying'. A possible paraphrase of VV could be: 'Mary lets something happen, and that something is John crying'. Secondly, valuable information about the meaning of the constructions can be gained through close observation of their structure.

The Relational Grammar account briefly presented earlier offers interesting insight into the structural description of the two constructions. Recall that the VV construction is monoclausal, since Clause Union has applied, while the VOV construction remains biclausal (contains two verbs and their arguments).<sup>5</sup> This structural information is crucial in determining the meaning of the two constructions. If we take the schematic value of a clause as presenting a single event, with the verb (single or complex) profiling that event, the VV construction instantiates that schema, whereas the VOV construction does not. We can therefore say that the VV construction presents the scene construed as a single event, whereas the VOV construction construes it as two events. The structure of each construction is given in figures 1 and 2:

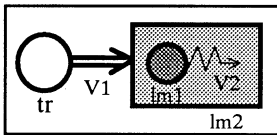


Figure 1. VOV

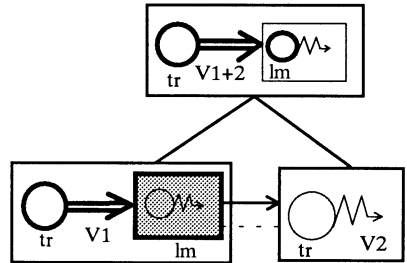


Figure 2. VV

VOV in figure 1 has the semantic structure described in Langacker (1991: 410). Its trajector is the energy source, its primary landmark is the trajector of the subordinate V2 process and that process, taken as a whole, functions as a secondary landmark. The trajector and the primary landmark function as e-sites for nominals which are respectively identified as subject and direct object. The secondary landmark is likewise an e-site, elaborated by an infinitival complement. Taking (2b) as an illustration, the main clause subject *Marie* elaborates the trajector of the causative verb. The logical subject of the infinitive *Jean* elaborates the primary landmark of that verb. The result process *pleurer* functions as a secondary landmark of the causative verb.

The VV construction in figure 2 takes a process as complement but does not give particular focal status to any participant in that process. The landmark of the causative verb is the result process, the participant in that process is not profiled at that level of organization. At the composite level, the logical subject of the infinitive is the landmark of the complex verb, and thus identified as the direct object of that verb. Taking (1a) as an example, the infinitive *pleurer* elaborates the landmark of the causative verb. At the composite level, the logical subject of the infinitive, *Jean*, elaborates the landmark of the complex process and is therefore identified as its direct object.

The analysis presented here relies heavily on the idea that a specific scene can be construed as one event, with a complex verb, or as two separate events, each with their separate process. It still leaves open, however, the question of identifying the conditions which facilitate the construal of a particular scene as one or two events. I will show that two related parameters are of crucial importance here: i) the role of the logical subject (the causee) with respect to the infinitival process, and ii) the nature of that process.

## **2.2 Role of the causee: notion of energy source.**

Looking at figure 1, we notice that in the VOV construction, the causee has a dual status. It is profiled as the primary landmark of the causative verb, and is also simultaneously the trajector of the infinitival process. Since the notions of trajector and landmark are associated with the functions of subject and object respectively, we can say that in a VOV construction, the causee is at the same time subject-like and object-like. This dual status implies a certain amount of semantic tension between the two thematic roles of agent and patient which respectively go along with its status as subject and object. In contrast, the causee in a VV construction does not have dual status. It is only profiled at the composite level, where it is the landmark of the complex verb. Its status is thus simply object-like. The semantic tension which exists between the two roles potentially played by the causee is crucial to the selection of a particular construction. The more agent-like the causee is with respect to the infinitival process, the more difficult it will be to construe it as strictly patient-like with respect to the main structure. It will be shown that with *laisser*, the causees which appear in the VOV construction are precisely those which are more agentive with respect to the infinitival process.

An agent can be defined as the energy source of a verbal process. When a causative scene is represented by the VOV construction, it is conceived as having two separate energy sources generating two separate activities. What the VOV construction encodes is the control exerted by the primary source of energy over the secondary source. Inherent to the VOV construction is a certain amount of direct interaction between the two energy sources which remain clearly separate. In the VV structure, the subject of the complex verb is the highly dominant energy source. The VV construction profiles only one activity which includes

both the causal and result processes in a single complex form. What the VV construction encodes is the control exerted by the main subject over the event as a whole, not over the source of energy itself. The distribution of the VV and VOV structures therefore depends in part on the causee's being considered a valid energy source for the infinitival process.

### 3. The VOV/VV alternation following *laisser*.

In light of the previous observations, I propose the following hypothesis. The VOV construction is felicitous following *laisser* only if the causee is construed as a valid energy source which generates (or at least sustains) the infinitival process. If not, the VV construction is selected.

#### 3.1 Inanimate causees.

The hypothesis proposed above suggests a natural starting point. Since inanimate subjects are not prototypically agentive, we would expect that they will tend to be used in the VV construction. The data in (6)-(8) confirm this prediction.

- (6) a. *J'ai laissé tomber mon stylo*  
 b. ??*J'ai laissé mon stylo tomber*  
 'I dropped my pen'
- (7) a. *Le cuisinier a laissé brûler la viande*  
 b. ??*Le cuisinier a laissé la viande brûler*  
 'The cook let the meat burn'
- (8) a. *J'ai laissé glisser mes skis*  
 b. ??*J'ai laissé mes skis glisser*  
 'I let my skis glide'

None of the causees in (6)-(8) can be considered an energy source which generates the infinitival process. In sentences (6) and (7), the causees are patients, at the receiving end of an energy chain, the origin of which is not expressed in the sentence. Their status as patients is not compatible with a VOV construction which would treat them as energy sources. The case in (8) is slightly different. The causee is not a patient but an instrument, designed to perform specific functions. Gliding is one of these functions, but the skis can hardly be viewed as generating the gliding.

The impossibility of considering the causees in (6)-(8) as energy sources generating the infinitival process accounts for their use in the VV construction. Inanimates can, however, occur in the VOV construction as the data in (9)-(11) indicate:

- (9) a. *J'ai laissé brûler le gratin*  
 b. *??J'ai laissé le gratin brûler*  
 'I let the casserole burn'
- (10) a. *J'ai laissé brûler le feu jusqu'à l'aube*  
 b. *J'ai laissé le feu brûler jusqu'à l'aube*  
 'I let the fire burn until dawn'
- (11) a. *Mon voisin a encore laissé sonner son réveil pendant une heure*  
 b. *Mon voisin a encore laissé son réveil sonner pendant une heure*  
 'My neighbor let his alarm clock ring for one hour again'

Note the difference between (9) and (10). *Le gratin* in (9) is a patient. *Le feu* in (10) is also inanimate, but it is not a patient. It has greater potential for generating (or at least sustaining) the process in the complement. Fires are not self-generated. They require outside energy sources: wood, oxygen, etc. However, in front of a healthy bonfire, we tend to forget the energy provided by outside elements. The momentum gathered by the fire gives it a life of its own, as if it were indeed self-generating. It is not the patient in the burning process, but rather is conceived as a full fledged energy source. It is therefore not surprising that it can appear in the VOV construction in (10).

When an entity is involved in a process over a long period of time, it becomes possible to consider it responsible for that process, even it merely performs a function it has been programmed for. In (11), the alarm clock only does what it has been set to do; however, after it has been ringing for some time, the clock can be considered responsible for the ringing. One of the cognitive capacities that we have is to give instruments designed to perform a certain process the ability to generate that process. We use that ability to convey communicative nuances. For instance, sentence (12) would be appropriate to describe the surrealists' technique of automatic writing, where the pen has a will of its own:

- (12) *Ils laissaient leur plume courir sur le papier à sa guise*  
 'They let their pen run on the paper on its own'

The initial hypothesis is confirmed by the inanimate subject data. Apart from the special type of construal expressed in (10)-(12), they are more felicitous in a VV position, due to their lack of agentive qualities.

### 3.2 Animate causees.

Animate causees can very easily be part of either construction. In fact, outside a particular context, it is very difficult to prefer one over the other, as indicated in (13) and (14):

- (13) a. *Le professeur a laissé les étudiants bavarder*  
 b. *Le professeur a laissé bavarder les étudiants*  
 'The teacher let the students chat'
- (14) a. *Sa mère laisse Paul jouer dans le jardin*  
 b. *Sa mère laisse jouer Paul dans le jardin*  
 'His mother lets Paul play in the garden'

However, if the degree of agentivity of the causee can be evaluated, the differences between the two constructions can be teased apart. Consider the data in (15)-(18):

- (15) *Jean laisse partir Marie quand il veut*  
 'John lets Mary leave whenever he wants'
- (16) ??*Jean laisse Marie partir quand il veut*  
 'John lets Mary leave whenever he wants'
- (17) *Jean laisse Marie partir quand elle veut*  
 'John lets Mary leave whenever she wants'
- (18) ?*Jean laisse partir Marie quand elle veut*  
 'John lets Mary leave whenever she wants'

In (15)-(18), the adverbial modifiers *quand il veut* 'whenever he wants' and *quand elle veut* 'whenever she wants' increase the degree of agentivity of *Jean* and *Marie* respectively by attributing them a greater will of their own, and therefore an added capacity to initiate the subordinate process for *Marie* (or at least to choose the time of that process) or the causative process for *Jean*.

Permission represents a highly asymmetrical type of relationship. The increased control over the subordinate process given to *Jean* by the adverbial *quand il veut* decreases *Marie's* role in the accomplishment of that process. As a result, we expect that when the agentivity of the subject of the causative verb is increased, the causee will be construed as more object-like, and appear as part of the VV construction. This prediction is borne out, as illustrated in (15). Conversely, *Jean's* limitless power is incompatible with an image of *Marie* as the energy source responsible for the generation of the infinitival process, and hence incompatible with the VOV construction as illustrated in (16). With *quand elle veut*, which gives her greater validity as the energy source generating the infinitival process, the causee *Marie* very easily appears in the VOV construction, which stresses her subject-like role in relation to that process (17). Conversely, her active part in the generation of the infinitival process is not fully compatible with the object-like role she is confined to by the semantics of the VV construction. Although (18) cannot be said to be ungrammatical, it makes people uncomfortable. When they do accept it, they wonder who *elle* in *quand elle veut* is, as if they were reluctant to accept *Marie* and *elle* as coreferential because their

respective semantic roles are different. Note that this problem does not arise in (17).

The situation with animate causees once again goes in the direction predicted by our hypothesis. In the contexts where the causee is construed as an energy source with respect to the infinitival process, the VOV construction tends to be preferred.

### 3.3 Nature of the infinitival process.

It was said earlier that the nature of the infinitival process is relevant to the selection of VV or VOV. Consider the data in (19)-(20), where the question marks indicate a rather unexpected usage, although not strictly ungrammatical.

- (19) a. *La voiture laisse passer les piétons*  
b. ??*La voiture laisse les piétons passer*  
'The car lets the pedestrians pass'
- (20) a. *Les grévistes ont laissé passer les coureurs du tour de France*  
b. ??*Les grévistes ont laissé les coureurs du tour de France passer*  
'The strikers let the tour de France racers pass'

The data from (19)-(20) seem to go against the analysis given so far. Even though the causees are all humans, they seem to be more felicitously used in a VV construction. This result however is not so surprising if we consider the nature of the infinitival processes. Processes such as *tomber* 'fall' and *passer* 'pass' are very basic translations through space, for which the energy source is constant: gravity for *tomber*, the momentum gathered by the entity in motion for *passer*. Crucially, these verbs do not profile the initial generation of the process (unlike verbs such as *marcher* 'walk' for instance), but only view the action in progress, once momentum has been gathered. It is therefore difficult to construe the entity involved in them as the energy source responsible for their generation, and hence use them in the VOV construction. Compare (21) and (22):

- (21) a. *Jean a laissé tomber Marie (du mur) sans essayer de la retenir*  
b. ??*Jean a laissé Marie tomber (du mur) sans essayer de la retenir*  
'John let Mary fall (from the wall) without trying to stop her'
- (22) *Jean a laissé Marie sauter (du mur) sans essayer de la retenir*  
'John let Mary jump (from the wall) without trying to stop her'

The subject of *sauter* is more volitional (capable of initiative) than that of *tomber* which is simply a patient. It is therefore easier to construe the causee in (22) as the legitimate energy source of that process.

To briefly recapitulate, this section has demonstrated that the distribution of causative structures following *laisser* is semantically motivated. The most important factor in the selection of VV or VOV has been shown to be the

thematic role of the causee relative to the infinitival process. The more the causee can be considered an energy source with respect to the infinitival process, the more felicitous the use of the VOV construction will be. With certain processes, the difficulty of construing their causee as the energy source explains why they are more likely to occur with the VV construction.

#### 4. *Faire* and *laisser* with transitive clauses.

When the VV construction is used with a transitive clause, the logical subject of the infinitive is marked either as a *par* 'by' complement or a *à* 'to' complement. For our purposes here, I will roughly characterize the meanings of *à* and *par* complements as benefactive and instrumental respectively (for a detailed semantic analysis of these complements, see for example Cannings and Moody (1978)). The difference in meaning is clearly visible in (23) and (24) (from Cannings and Moody 1978: 342):

- (23) *Elle a fait obtenir le tableau à Jean-Jacques*  
'She made Jean-Jacques get the picture'  
(24) *Elle a fait obtenir le tableau par Jean-Jacques*  
'She made Jean-Jacques get the picture'

In (23), the picture necessarily ends up in *Jean-Jacques*' possession (benefactive). In (24), *Jean-Jacques* might have bought the picture for someone else (instrumental).

Any account which treats the alternation between the VV and VOV constructions following *laisser* as a structural option, i.e. without considering its semantic motivation, predicts that both constructions will be equally felicitous with *à* and *par* complements. It will be shown here that this is not the case, and that the type of analysis proposed earlier provides a viable explanation to the behavior of transitive clauses following *laisser*. Consider the data in (25)-(30):

- (25) *Il a laissé Jacques lire la lettre*  
'He let Jack read the letter'  
(26) a. *Il a laissé lire la lettre à Jacques*  
b. *??Il a laissé lire la lettre par Jacques*  
'He let read the letter to \*by Jack'  
(27) *Il a laissé les enfants manger le gâteau*  
'He let the children eat the cake'  
(28) a. *Il a laissé manger le gâteau aux enfants*  
b. *??Il a laissé manger le gâteau par les enfants*  
'He let eat the cake to \*by the children'  
(29) *Le général a laissé ses soldats tuer des civils*  
'The general let his soldiers kill civilians'

- (30) a. *Le général a laissé tuer des civils à ses soldats*  
 b. *??Le général a laissé tuer des civils par ses soldats*  
 'The general let kill civilians to \*by his soldiers'

The crucial point here is the difference in the role of the causee in the VOV and VV constructions. In the VOV construction, as illustrated in (25), (27) and (29), it is realized as a direct object. In the VV construction, as illustrated in (26), (28) and (30), it is realized as an oblique (instrumental or benefactive). As we have seen previously, the direct object in a VOV construction designates an entity that has a certain level of agentivity, and hence is capable of initiating the infinitival process. When a transitive clause follows *laisser*, the VOV construction is always felicitous because the subject of a transitive process is agentive by definition, and therefore matches up very well with a construction which recognizes its agentive value. In order to account for the data in (25)-(30), we now need to explain i) why *par* complements are infelicitous, and ii) why *à* complements are felicitous following *laisser*.

Unlike an agent, an instrumental cannot be construed as initiating a process. Rather, it is simply the means by which the process gets carried out. Note that *par* complements are perfectly felicitous following *faire*, as shown in (31):<sup>6</sup>

- (31) *Le général a fait tuer des civils par ses soldats*  
 'The general made his soldiers kill civilians'

Since it establishes the responsibility of its subject for the accomplishment of the infinitival process, *faire* is not incompatible with the use of instruments to achieve that goal. The soldiers in (31) are instruments in the hands of the general, used to carry out a process conceived and designed by him alone. Their use is conceptually similar to John's use of the hammer in the sentence *John broke the window with a hammer*.

The instrumental interpretation of the causee in a transitive clause following *laisser* is infelicitous because the subject is only a potential agent, who merely reacts to an on-going situation. The causee cannot be considered a mere instrument because there is no true energy source to put that instrument to use. This explains the oddity of (30). The sentence presents the soldiers as instruments. However, the absence of a true source of energy in the sentence poses them as the generators of the killing. They are therefore much more felicitous in a VOV construction which accommodates their initiative (agentivity). The specific force dynamic orientation of *laisser* makes it difficult for a transitive clause to be used in a VV instrumental (*par*) construction. The VOV construction is highly favored because it treats the causee as a valid energy source for the infinitival process.

The same type of analysis also shows why the benefactive (*à*) complements are semantically compatible with *laisser* and the VV construction.

A possible meaning for a benefactive construction is that the person who inherits something shows some inclination for receiving that thing. In the context of *laisser* and the VV construction, it is very easy to construe the causee as willing to initiate the infinitival process. This is fully consistent with the status of the subject of *laisser* as a potential agent. Its non-interference in the desire expressed by the causee is perceived as some sort of reward for the latter. The use of a VOV or VV construction profiles different aspects of the causee. In the VOV construction, its status as the initiator of the infinitival process is emphasized. In the VV construction, its status as a recipient of a favor is profiled. This is illustrated by the difference between (27) and (28a). In (27), the children do not necessarily have permission to eat the cake. The main subject simply does not interfere with their involvement in the infinitival process. In (28a), we can easily imagine that the cake was saved (or reserved) for the children. Even though in both sentences the children end up performing the eating, only in (27) are they construed as the initiators of the infinitival process.

## 5. Conclusion

This paper has demonstrated that the observed variation following *laisser* is semantically motivated. The VOV construction is preferred if the causee can be considered a valid energy source with respect to the infinitival process. If not, the VV construction is preferred. With certain processes, the difficulty of construing their causee as the energy source explains why they most felicitously occur in the VV construction. Finally, consideration of the meanings of the two causative constructions, as well as their compatibility with different main verbs, has enabled us to explain the different reactions of *faire* and *laisser* to the presence of *par* complements. This constitutes strong evidence that the choice of VV or VOV following *laisser* is determined by semantic factors

## NOTES

\* I would like to thank Kathleen Carey, Rich Epstein, and Kimberly Kellogg for their help. All errors and shortcomings remain of course my own.

1. The verbs of perception such as *voir* 'see', *regarder* 'watch', *écouter* 'listen', *entendre* 'hear', *sentir* 'smell' can also be followed by both constructions. The specific problems posed by these verbs are considered in Achard (in progress).

2. This is also true of more recent accounts of causatives in the Government Binding framework. See for instance Reed (1991) where *faire* only subcategorizes for a CP complement, whereas *laisser* and the perception verbs also subcategorize for a VP small clause.

3. A notable exception is Hyman and Zimmer (1976) who consider some of the data presented here from a discourse perspective. I see no fundamental incompatibility between the two types of approaches
4. The type of methodology developed in this paper can also account for the distribution of causative structures with *faire* and *forcer* by invoking the respective semantic incompatibility of the VOV construction with *faire*, and the VV construction with *forcer*. This issue is considered in more detail in Achard (in progress).
5. The tests for the monoclausality of the VV construction and the biclausality of VOV are not presented here, for the sake of brevity. They include clitic climbing, negation in the downstairs clause, and adverb placement. For additional information about these tests, see Aissen and Perlmutter (1983).
6. *Faire par* is usually considered to be a separate construction. In generative analyses, it is analyzed as involving a passive in the complement clause (Kayne 1975). This does not, however, explain why this structure is felicitous with *faire* and infelicitous with *laisser*.

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