

Letting structure speak with authority: Constraining agents' choices with French *laisser*

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Agent's actions and intentions can be prompted or hindered in multiple ways. Across languages, verbs that lexicalize the causative primitives of CAUSE, ENABLE or PREVENT (Wolff & Song 2003) can help us understand the nature of agency, precisely because they involve multiple participants which are sometimes seen as being in a position of influencing each other via different types of force relations. In this talk, we focus on the role of **authority**, intended as an influence that affects the choices available to a free agent with respect to the actions in service of their goal. We show that, while many causative verbs seem to imply the type of force relation between the participants in their lexical meaning, the French causative verb *laisser* is underspecified: the type of influence exerted by the two participants in a *laisser* relation is determined by the syntactic structure of the causative construction.

(i) Authority and choice restriction. What does it mean to have authority over an agent? To be an authority means to be able to influence the action of a free agent. In the semantic representation of syntactic causative constructions such as (1) and (2), we model authority as the ability to constrain the set of alternative actions available to the lower agent denoted by the non-finite predicate.

- (1) John prevented Mark from watching TV. (2) Lucy allowed Peter to go out tonight.
ALT_{MARK} {watch TV, not watch TV} ALT_{PETER} {go out, not go out}
John sets value of ALT_{MARK} := {not watch TV} Lucy sets value of ALT_{PETER} := {go out, not go out}

The subject of the lower clause in (1) has an alternative choice, which is determined by the denotation of the predicate (Mark can either watch TV *or* not watch TV); this alternative is restricted by the intention of the matrix subject John, and as a result the only available action is “not watch TV”. John's intention is therefore restricting Mark's freedom of action. Conversely, in ENABLE situations, the first participant's intention does not affect the second participant's choice between alternative actions. In (2), the set of alternative actions ALT available to Peter includes the options of going out and not going out, and Lucy's intentions do not restrict the set. Crucially, however, in both the configurations expressed by *prevent* and *allow*, the agentive subject of the matrix causative verb is understood as having the ability to restrict the set of choices available to the other participant(s): if Lucy is in a position to *allow*, she has enough authority to *prevent* too.

(ii) Structural constraints on authority relations. The French causative verb *laisser* (‘let’) is generally described as realizing an ENABLE relation. The syntactic causative can be realized in either of two ways: the embedded subject can appear before the non-finite predicate (a pre-V construction (3a)) or after it (a post-V construction (3b)).

- (3) a. Jean a laissé Pierre manger. b. Jean a laissé manger Pierre.
John let.PF Pierre eat.INF Jean let.PF eat.INF Pierre
‘Jean let Pierre eat.’

Kayne (1975:222) points out that the two structures correlate with two interpretations: (4a) can be interpreted as a situation where the guard acted with “complicity” or “deliberate neglect” with respect to the prisoner's attempt to escape, while there is no such inference in (4b). In other words, we could say that (4a) carries an *intentional flavor*: it seems to be the guard's intention to give to the prisoner the choice to escape. No such inference arises in the post-V construction (4b).

- (4) a. Le gardien a laissé le prisonnier s'échapper.
b. Le gardien a laissé s'échapper le prisonnier. (Kayne 1975:222)
‘The guard let the prisoner escape.’

But where does this *intentional flavor* come from? We argue that i) (4a) necessarily makes reference to the authority relation between the two participants, and ii) an authority relation necessarily involves the intention of the authority. Conversely, (4b) does not make any reference to an authority relation and thus does not trigger the interpretation of an intentional agent.

To see this, consider the following contrast:

- (5) a. La juge a laissé l'accusé parler.
'The judge let the defendant speak.'
- b. La juge a laissé parler l'accusé.
'The judge let the defendant speak.'
- (6) a. #L'accusé a laissé la juge parler.
'The defendant let the judge speak.'
- b. L'accusé a laissé parler la juge.
'The defendant let the judge speak.'

In (5), we have kept the same (natural) authority relation as in (4): the subject of *laisser* has authority over the *lower agent*: both sentences are felicitous. However, in (6), we reversed the authority levels: it is infelicitous for the defendant to have authority over the judge, and this accounts for the infelicity of the pre-V construction. We submit that in the case of *laisser* the role of authority is determined by the possibility of constructing a syntactic structure where the lower subject is realized as the agent of the embedded verb. In other words, in pre-V constructions, *laisser* embeds a clause whose subject is interpreted as an Agent (possibly by a VoiceP, Alexiadou 2014). In this first case, the Agent introduces the ALT set, which the matrix subject must be able to restrict. Post-V constructions, on the other hand, feature a vP complement: the interpretation is that of a no-choice: an action that has already started.

- (5') La juge a laissé l'accusé parler. (5'') L'accusé a laissé parler la juge.
 a. LAISSER [_{VoiceP}] a. LAISSER [_{vP}]
 b. Judge [ALT_{defendant} {speak, NOT speak}] b. Defendant [judge speak]

Assuming that alternatives are propositional and therefore can take negation, whereas event descriptions cannot, the structure can account for the contrast in the use of negation in the complement of *laisser* – indeed, lower negation can be inserted in pre-V (7a) but not in post-V (7b):

- (7) a. Marc laisse ses enfants ne pas travailler. b. *Marc laisse ne pas travailler ses enfants.
 Marc let.PRS his children NEG work.INF. Marc let.PRS NEG work.INF his children
 'Marc let his children not work.'

Additionally, the presence of available alternatives can be signaled through Free Choice Items (FCIs) like *n'importe-quoi* 'any' (Staraki 2018). In (8a), the passenger has authority over the driver (of a taxi) and chooses not to restrict the choice of the driver to take any exit he pleases. (8b) on the other hand sounds odd: there is a clash between the absence of alternatives in the structure (post-V) and the presence of an FCI.

- (8) a. Le passager a laissé le conducteur prendre n'importe quelle sortie.
 The passenger let.PF the driver take.INF FCI exit
 b. ?Le passager a laissé prendre n'importe quelle sortie au conducteur.
 The passenger let.PF take.INF FCI exit PREP the driver
 'The passenger let the driver take any exit.'

N'importe-lequel forces alternatives, which forces a lower free agent, which forces authority, which forces a pre-V structure, and disallows the post-V structure.

To conclude, in this paper we probed the relation between authority and intentional causation. We defined authority as the influence that an agent has over the action of another free agent, modeled as the restriction on a set of alternative propositions. We have shown that authority relation can be represented structurally – when there are two Agents involved, causative verbs like *laisser* can yield two interpretations based on the structure they embed.

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