The causative alternation revisited: constraints and variation

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The causative alternation, illustrated in (1) with an English example, has been the focus of numerous studies across languages. In e.g. English, this alternation is extremely productive. As Levin (1993) and Rappaport Hovav (2012) observe, well over 200 verbs participate in the alternation, and new verbs that enter the language participate in the alternation as well.

(1) a. John broke the vase.
     b. The vase broke.

However, the alternation is constrained and subject to variation within a language and across languages. The constraints fall into two categories. On the one hand, there are verbs which are expected to alternate on the basis of their semantics, but they do not alternate across languages. For example, change of state verbs standardly participate in the alternation; however, verbs of destruction and verbs of killing, which are undeniably change of state verbs, do not participate in the alternation in English (2-3), while they do in e.g. Greek and Hebrew:

(2)   *The city destroyed.
(3)   *All the chickens killed.

Second, there are verbs which in fact alternate, but for certain choices of arguments do not, as illustrated for the verb *clear* below, taken from Rappaport Hovav (2012). (4) indicates that the verb does participate in the alternation, and (5) shows the unavailability of the anticausative variant for one particular choice of theme argument.

(4) a. I cleared the screen.
     b. The screen cleared.
(5) a. The waiters cleared the counter.
     b. *The counters cleared.

In contrast, there are also verbs that generally do not alternate, but for a specific choice of external arguments, they do, e.g. internally-caused change of state predicates such as *rust*. Such predicates have been reported to alternate, but they can only take causer (6), and not agent, subjects in their transitive variants (Wright 2002):

(6) a. Salt air rusted the metal pipes.
     b. Early summer heat wilted the petunias.

There exist three general types of approaches to the alternation: i) causativization approaches (which derive the causative from the anticausative variant, e.g. Dowty 1979, Pesetsky 1995), ii) decausativization approches (which derive the anticausative from the causative variant, e.g. Grimshaw 1990, Chierchia 1989/2005, Levin and Rappaport 1995, Reinhart 2000, Koontz-Garboden 2009, cf. Kalluli 2007), and iii) common-base approaches (which derive both variants separately from a common base, see Alexiadou, Anagnostopoulou & Schäfer 2006, Doron 2003, Embick 2004, Schäfer 2008, Piñon 2001, Pylkkänen 2008, and to a certain extent also Ramchand 2008). Both (i) and (ii) cannot explain the inner and cross-linguistic

variation found. Common-base approaches fare better. Such approaches assume that causatives and anticausatives involve derivation from a common base, which lexicalizes the core event involved. From this perspective, both the transitive and the intransitive variant are each derived from a common root (in the sense of Pesetsky 1995, and Marantz 1997), but neither variant is derived from the other by a lexical rule or syntactic transformation. Still, up to now common-base approaches had little to say about the factors that explain the presence of causer argument, but cf. Alexiadou (to appear).

In this talk, I will revisit common base approaches to the causative alternation in an attempt to offer an explanation of the complex set of factors which govern the causative alternation within a language and across languages.