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Avant – Propos

Avec la parution du premier numéro de la Revue « Buhūṭ Jāmiʿiyya » (Recherches Universitaires) se concrétise pour la Faculté des Lettres et des Sciences Humaines de Sfax la possibilité de réunir les conditions qui feront d'elle une institution universitaire digne de ce nom, et ce, d'autant plus que le coup d'envoi a été donné, cette année même, pour un troisième cycle en lettres et civilisation arabes.

Mais s'il nous est permis d'insister sur la portée de telles réalisations, ce sera en raison de la conscience que nous avons de l'importance que revêtent les espaces mis à la disposition des études et des recherches, celles qui sont à même d'enraciner chez les enseignants et les chercheurs les rigueurs de l'esprit scientifique ainsi que les règles de l'académisme universel.

Ainsi, osons-nous croire qu'avec l'enthousiasme de nos collègues et l'aide de notre université, nous pourrions jeter les fondements d'une saine concurrence intellectuelle et donc d'un véritable débat d'idées dont l'éclosion et l'entretien sont, non seulement notre dû, mais surtout notre lot le plus sacré.

Dr. M'hamed Ali Halouani
Le Doyen de la Faculté des
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Voice shift of causative verbs in a corpus of texts

Akila SELLAMI-BAKLOUTI*

Abstract

The same event in the physical world can be represented differently on the linguistic level. Language offers to its speakers many possible constructions to express the same event or relation. This paper deals with the case of the causal relation for which English as any other language offers a wide variety of linguistic means of expression (verbs, prepositions, conjunctions...). Dealing with all these linguistic means needs a wider space than the scope of this paper. So, we are going to focus our attention on the study of the causative verb, especially the different forms it may take i.e. active vs. passive voice. What determines the choice of the speaker between the active and the passive form of causative verbs. The two forms are semantically equivalent, so we are going to try to answer the question from a pragmatic point of view. Our conclusions will be based on statistical tests carried on a corpus of texts.

INTRODUCTION

The importance of the relation of causality is undeniable and language offers various possibilities to express this relation. First we will remind of the definition of causality [1.1] and the main linguistic means of its expression that are used on the level of the sentence, emphasising the pragmatic differences between constructions which are semantically equivalent [1.2]. Then, we will try to investigate the possible motivations of speakers/writers when choosing a specific way rather than another one for the expression of the same physical

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fact. It will appear that it is indeed a very complex issue which cannot possibly be answered fully in the scope of such a short contribution. We will be content with providing some clues to the answer by examining some cases of voice shift affecting causative verbs as they are found in a corpus of texts in various styles [2.1]. Statistical tests will be applied to this corpus of texts, to check on the degree of correlation - if any - between the selection of voice and the nature of the cause [2.2]. Some excerpts and examples will be examined for their semantic and pragmatic value [2.3] and a tentative interpretation will be provided, giving valuable hints about the motivation of active/passive voice shift [3].

1. THE CAUSAL RELATION AND ITS EXPRESSION

1.1. THE IMPORTANCE OF THE CAUSAL RELATION

This paper dealing with the expression of causation should start with a definition of the relation of causality, a notion that is largely studied in philosophy and in logic given its close link with the notion of origins. What does it mean that two events are linked by a causal relation, i.e. *C* is the cause of *E*. Such a definition is not easy to formulate. Without going into details, we can adopt the formulation of the causal relation in terms of conditional propositions. This results in a counterfactual analysis formulated by logicians such as David Lewis, Robert Stankler and Richmond Thomason which can be summed up in the following points:

*"in case of particular events C and E which have occurred (that is, they are actual events), E depends causally on C just in case E would not have occurred if C had not occurred."*¹

This definition introduces the cause as a sufficient and necessary

¹ Quoted in MORREAU, M: "Causation and Interference. A Working Draft"¹, in *Semantics of Time, Space, Movement and Spatio-Temporal Reasoning*. Working Papers of the 4th International Workshop. Château de Bonas, 1992, p.p. 375-384

condition of the result. An example of this analysis could be the one given by John Stuart Mill:

*"If a person eats of a particular dish, and dies in consequence. that is, would not have died if he had not eaten of it, people would be able to say that eating of that dish was the cause of his death"*²

The importance of the causal relation in our life is undeniable for two reasons:

- 1) The first is that we understand phenomena better when they are linked to their origins. This gives causality an important role in the process of argumentation.
- 2) The second is that causality is strongly linked to the notion of responsibility: to be the cause of an event means to be responsible for it, and this explains the importance of the causal relation in the legal domain while determining responsibilities.

What interests us in all this is the linguistic representation of the causal relation. In this respect, the first important remark to make is the one made by Leonard Talmy that causality in the physical world should be distinguished from causality in linguistic representation. In fact, in the former *"the totality of phenomena constitutes a causal continuum"* in other words, every event b is caused by another event a and is in turn a cause of another event c; for example the event of water pouring from a tank is understood as caused by the gravitational attraction between the water and the earth and as causing pressure on the object that water falls upon. However, in the linguistic representation :

(1) *Water poured from the tank*
intr. verb

² MILL, J. S : *A System of Logic*, University of Toronto Press, Toronto 1973.

The event is felt as autonomous, taking place by itself without causal relations inside or outside the event.

The purpose of this remark is to show that linguistic representation does not always reflect genuine reality and the linguistic presentation of this relation depends to a large extent on the speaker's intentions and choice. We will try to provide evidence of this by the end of the present paper. Let us examine first the possibilities offered to the speaker for the expression of causality.

1.2. LINGUISTIC MEANS FOR THE EXPRESSION OF CAUSALITY

Language provides speakers with a large variety of linguistic categories to express causality.

- 1) The causative verb: is a transitive verb containing in its semantic decomposition the atomic predicate CAUSE. A famous example extensively discussed by generative linguists is the verb *to kill* which can be represented as follows :

Kill (X, Y) = CAUSE (X (BECOME NOT ALIVE (Y)))

Any verb expressing a relation of causation between a subject and an object - the subject being the cause of a change of state undergone by the object - is a causative verb. Other examples of causative verbs in English are *to remove*, *to modify*, *to destroy*...

- 2) The cause can also be introduced by a preposition: it assumes then the form of a prepositional complement e.g. *The tree is frozen because of the cold*. Various English prepositions can express cause, such as *out of*, *thanks to*, *for*...
- 3) Some conjunctions and connectives can also express the relation of causality between two clauses. Examples of English causal conjunctions are *because*, *for*, *since*.

The latter linguistic category will not be taken into account here as it expresses causality on the level of discourse, even though we have ample evidence that the argumentative values of the causal connectives and the option of the speaker for the one or the other can be valuable objects of research.

We will focus here on the expression of causation on the level of the simple sentence, i.e. when the cause is introduced by a causative verb or a causal preposition and especially by the verbs. When causation is expressed by the verb, it is a function of the subject expressing cause. E.g. in

(2) *The damp rotted the potatoes*

The damp (function = subject) is the cause of the change undergone by the potatoes. Given the importance of the cause in this respect, linguists have talked at length about its semantic features. Without going into details, we can sum up these features in the following classification:

- The cause is either inanimate, e.g. *The key opened the door* (instrumental causation)
- Or it can be animate; in this case, we make a distinction between
 - 1) an animate non-human cause, e.g. *The dog bit the child*, and
 - 2) an animate human cause, in which case linguists refer to agentivity which, in turn, implies intentionality or non-intentionality as a cause of the action. In this respect, Talmy makes a distinction between

(3) *I broke the vase in rolling a ball into it.*

which expresses an unintentional causative action and

(4) *I broke the vase by rolling a ball into it.*

which expresses an intentional causation.

The same relation can be expressed by:

(5) *The potatoes rotted because of the damp.*

Here, *rot* is an intransitive verb expressing a change of state and the cause is introduced by the prepositional complement.

In a comparison made between English and French in their expression of causality on the level of the simple sentence (Baklouti, 1995), it was found that, out of 20 typical causative situations, the two constructions are possible in English in 16 cases, e.g:

(6) a. *The candle went out because of an air current.*

b. *The air current put out the candle.*

(7) a. *The colour fades in the sun.*

b. *The sun has faded the colour.*

The two constructions seem to be semantically equivalent. In both examples 7a and 7b:

cause = the sun

patient = the colour

relation = a change from state S1 (the colour is bright) to state S2 (the colour has faded).

However, from a pragmatic point of view, the two statements are not equivalent. It appears clearly that the function of the subject in the sentence has a more important illocutionary force than that of the prepositional complement. This difference may be accounted for by the fact that i) the subject is in the first position, so that it receives more attention on the part of the listener and ii) it is an obligatory constituent in the sentence, which is not the case with the prepositional complement, as the latter assumes the function of an optional adverbial and can therefore be omitted at a lesser expense. Consequently, when the cause is introduced by the subject, the speaker is more willing to emphasise "its" responsibility than when (s)he introduces it by means of an optional adverbial and assigns the function of the subject to the patient. In this case, with an intransitive verb, the stress is laid on the change/result rather than on the cause of change.

Another interesting situation in which the patient is introduced by the function of the subject and the cause by an optional adverbial - even though the verb is transitive and causative - occurs when the causative verb is passivised. Thus, instead of saying:

(8) a. *The explosion destroyed his house*

we have:

(8) b. *His house was destroyed by the explosion.*

In this case too, the two sentences are semantically, but not pragmatically equivalent. In the semantic analysis, both sentences convey the following elements:

causer = explosion

patient/causee = house

change: State of the world S1 = the house exists → S2 = no house.

In terms of enunciation, things are different. The primary focus in 8b is attributed to the patient (taking on the function of the subject) and the resulting state; the cause is relegated to the position of an optional adverbial. The adjective 'optional' has central value here: we will see below - by means of statistics - that it is left out in most of the cases. Even if the cause is mentioned, it is given less importance because the logical order cause + result is disrupted. The presentation of events linked to their origin(s)/cause(s) is a very efficient persuasion strategy; it becomes more efficient when things follow the natural order, i.e. they are presented in a temporal and logical sequence.

These pragmatic considerations can be very important in persuasion strategies and the decision of the speaker in favour of the active or passive form in the expression of a causative relation cannot be separated from his/her intentions to convey a certain message.

This assumption has been a starting point for the examination of voice shift with causative verbs in a corpus.

In which cases do we have a selection of the active or rather passive voice ? And how can this shift be used as a persuasion strategy ? The investigation on this issue will be based on the examination of occurrences in a textual corpus.

2. APPLICATION TO A CORPUS

2.1 THE CORPUS AND INVESTIGATING TOOLS

The corpus analysed is an extract from Compton's Interactive Encyclopaedia, published by Compton's Home Library Editions, New York, 1998. In this document, recent events are presented in chronological order. As a sample, we

took some of the major events that occurred in January 1997. The corpus has 8,900 words , corresponding to ca. 10 A4 pages.

The software used for the examination is "Le Concordeur", for Mackintosh version 2.0, 1994. The program makes it possible to create a list in alphabetical order for all the words in the document, with corresponding lexical frequencies. After the lists had been created, we could extract all causative verbs with the immediate context. Forms extracted were both in active and passive forms.

2.2.RESULTS AND GENERAL INTERPRETATION

The following results were obtained:

Total number of causative verbs: 121

- 59 active forms
- 62 passive forms including 5 cases where the cause is introduced by a by phrase vs. 57 cases where explicit cause has been omitted.

We can immediately observe that passive forms are numerous. This is surprising for two reasons:

- 1) The active form is supposed to be the basic one in terms of syntax (the passive form is a transformation), so it should be more productive; however active causative verbs are inferior.
- 2) The documents relate events. We can therefore expect active verbs to be more frequent than passive ones.

It appears here that the passive construction was given preference over the active one. The reason seems that the passive construction offers the speaker/writer the possibility of omitting the cause. The writers seem to have taken advantage of this : out of 62 passive sentences, in only 5 cases - i.e. 8 % - has the cause been mentioned.

So, the question now is why does this omission occur? What determines this choice? To answer this question we put forward the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis : The choice of the active or passive voice can be determined by

the nature of the cause from the point of view of the human agent/non-human feature for cause. Cause and responsibility are obviously strongly linked when the cause is of a human nature considering that human causality is the only cause endowed with intentionality. That is to say, human acts are determined by final causes: purposes and goals.

Test : In order to test the above hypothesis, the occurrences of causation have been classified according to voice and the nature of the cause³ ; the following results were obtained :

	Human	Non-human
Active voice	36	23
Passive voice	57	5

Apparently, there is a strong preference for the passive form when the cause is of a human nature. This correlation can be tested by Yule's coefficient:

$$Q = \frac{A - B}{A + B} = \frac{(36 \times 5) - (23 \times 57)}{(36 \times 5) + (23 \times 57)} = \frac{180 - 1311}{180 + 1311} = \frac{-1131}{1491} = -0.75$$

The correlation is estimated to be doubtful when the value of the coefficient is in the - 0.30 /0.30 range; in the present case, Q = - 0.75; we can therefore claim that there is a strong correlation between the nature of the cause and the choice of the voice.

³ Of course, in the case of passives where the cause has not been mentioned, this concerns what is most likely to be the cause for e.g. in :

Biko, who gained a nationwide following in South Africa for his eloquent and passionate calls for black political and cultural autonomy in South Africa, was arrested in Port Elizabeth.

The cause can only be human.

Result: The statistical test demonstrated that the selection of the passive construction is not random, moreover, when the cause is of a human nature, the author intentionally prefers the passive construction, probably in order not to mention a cause. The pragmatic function of "agent defocusing", as introduced by Shibatani 1985 and discussed by Mâalej 1998, is used here to its full extent, i.e. the agent is totally deleted.

We may make various assumptions as to the motivation. Does the speaker/writer intend to minimise the responsibility of agents in such documents? Is this "agent defocusing" procedure applicable to all types of agents ? Investigating voice shift in some specific cases might provide hints.

2.3. ANALYSING SOME EXAMPLES

2.3.1. Active -passive shifts

A. Israeli Soldier Attacks Palestinians in Hebron

1. *An Israeli soldier armed with an assault rifle **opened** fire in a Hebron marketplace, **wounding***
2. *Six Palestinian onlookers. Noam Friedman, a private in the Israeli army who reportedly **had***
3. ***been hospitalised** for mental illness prior to his service in the army, **was charged** with*
4. *crime*
5. *...*
6. *On the day after the shooting, Friedman **was brought** to court for arraignment.*
7. *...*
8. *Friedman also informed the court that he **attacked** the Palestinians **in order** to avenge*
9. *the death of Corp. Nahshon Waxman, a friend of Friedman who **had been killed by the***
10. ***Palestinian group Hamas***
11. *...*
12. *According to Israeli news sources, Friedman **had been hospitalised** for mental illness*
13. *prior to*
14. *being recruited by the army. Army psychologists who examined Friedman were aware*
15. *of this*
16. *past medical problems. Friedman's psychological problems also led to his expulsion*
17. *from the*
18. *Mercaz harav yeshiva in Jerusalem.*

Comments:

Lines 1 + 2: There are 2 transitive verbs in this complex sentence: *to open (fire)* and *to wound* (6 Palestinian onlookers). Both verbs are causative, but the second one, from the point of view of pragmatics, has a greater impact than the first. It can be observed that *to open (fire)* is used in the main clause, whereas *to wound* appears in the subordinate clause. The result of Friedman's actions has been defocused by setting it in the latter clause. Friedman's action would definitely have appeared more "brutal" if the sentence had been formulated as '*An Israeli soldier armed with an assault rifle **wounded** six Palestinian onlookers by **opening** fire in a Hebron marketplace.*'

Let us note also:

- The passive voice is predominant (*had been hospitalized x 2, was charged, was brought to court*) when the patient is Friedman. We may infer from this selection of the passive form that the reporter to some extent has sympathy for the criminal, in spite of the fact that he wounded 6 people.
- Line 8: we may see here some justification for Friedman's action (*in order to*) as the causative verb *attack* is used in the active voice.
- Line 9: Despite the use of the passive voice, we can observe here the agent is named explicitly when it comes to denouncing an action by the Hamas group.

B. Letter Bomb Explodes in London

1. A letter bomb **addressed** to the editorial staff of *Al-Hayat*, an Arabic-language newspaper.
2. exploded in the mail room of the paper's headquarters in London, England, wounding two
3. mail-room clerks. Three other mail bombs **were also discovered** in the mail room, though
4. **non had been detonated**. Across the Atlantic Ocean, two mail bombs, apparently **mailed**
5. **from the same location** as the London bomb, **were discovered** in the mail room of the United
6. Nation. Both bombs were disarmed.
7. The spate of mail-bomb discoveries was the second in less than two weeks. On Jan. 2, 1997,
8. members of the United States Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) announced that they had
9. intercepted eight letter bombs, all originating in Egypt, that **had been mailed** to various
10. addresses in the United States. Four of the letter bombs **were mailed** to the United states
11. office of *Al-Hayat*. The remaining bombs **had been mailed** to the federal prison in
12. Leavenworth, Kan.
13. ...
14. Postmarks from all of the letter-bomb packages revealed that they **had been mailed**
15. **Alexandria, Egypt**. Egyptian officials vehemently denied that the bombs had been mailed
16. from their country. Nevertheless, Egyptian authorities vowed to support future FBI inquiries.

Comments

- The use of the passive voice is extensive. In standard situations, this can be an indication that the agent(s) of the action is/are unknown. But this does not apply here as the phrase *from the same location* in line 5 shows that the author has the proper information but does not disclose it. This can be explained by the stereotypical nature of the agents in this passage. The writer presupposes that the reader knows the author of the action and so refers to him implicitly through hints rather than denouncing him explicitly. It is only towards the end of the passage, after the long list of the various addressees of the letter bombs, that the origin is disclosed (line 14-15).

C. Wave of Violence in Algeria

1. Political violence **continued to grip** the country of Algeria, as a massacre of 36 Algerians at
2. the hands of Islamic militants was followed by the detonation of a series of **car bombs** that
3. **killed** as many as 38 people and **wounded** more than 70. The massacre occurred roughly 45
4. miles (72 kilometers) south of the capital city of Algiers, in the town of Beni-slimane.
5. **The assailants** reportedly **mutilated** and **decapitated** the bodies of many of the massacred victims.
6. It was the second such massacre in a week. In the earlier attack, 14 members of another
7. village near the capital **had been brutally murdered by extremists**
8. ...
9. The following day, two bombs exploded ; **one killed** 18 people, the second killed two
10. and injured ten more.
11. ...
12. One hundred fifty-seven people **had** reportedly **been killed** and nearly 170 wounded since the
13. Ramadan holiday began on Jan. 10.
14. ...
15. More than 60.000 people **had been killed** during the four years of fighting.

Comments

- In this passage, the reader has an impression that the author is willing, not only to mention explicitly the identity of the agent, but also to emphasize his/her responsibility. The passage begins in the active voice. The cause is introduced by the function of the subject with, in some cases, two causative verbs (L3 *killed* and *wounded* and L5: *mutilated* and *decapitated*). The purpose of providing details about the circumstances might be to draw attention to the agent's guilt. This is enhanced by the fact that, even when the shift has been made to the passive voice (L6-7), the agent is introduced under a different label *the extremists*. However, we feel that this was not really necessary as it was understood from the very beginning; moreover, there is ample confirmation of the impression in a sentence like:

*It was the second such massacre in a week. In the earlier attack, 14 members of another village near the capital **had been brutally murdered.***

The reader will perfectly understand who is the agent of the action. By the end of the passage, it is as if sufficient attention and focus have been granted to the agent and the writer can therefore shift back to the passive voice without mentioning the agent (L 12, 15). Focusing is then shifted to results.

2.3.2. Active-only cases

The corpus also offers several passages where the active/passive shift seems to be irrelevant. In a few cases, only the active voice is used. This may be accounted for by the nature of events: this observation concerns sports events, which is an area where the presentation of facts tends to be objective and there is reduced risk of having some attempt at influencing.

1. *J. Hingis, Sampras, win at Australian Open*

Martina Hingis and Pete Sampras won the women 's and men 's singles championships at the 1997 Australian Open tennis tournament. Hingis, a 16-year-old phenomenon from Switzerland, defeated American born Mary Pierce 6-2, 6-2 to claim her first career Grand Slam victory. On the following day Pete Sampras of the United States won his ninth career Grand Slam title by beating 20-year-old Carlos Moya of Spain. Playing in 100°F (38°C) heat, Sampras won by the score of 6-2 6-3, 6-3.

Hingis also won the Australian Open women 's doubles championship. Hingis, teamed with Natasha Zvereva of Belarus, defeated Lindsay Davenport and Lisa Raymond of the United States, 6-2, 6-2. In the men's doubles competition, Mark Woodforde and Todd Woodbridge of Australia defeated Sebastian Lareau of Canada and Alex O'Brien of the United States, 4-6, 7-5, 7-5, 6-3, to win the title.

2. *Packers Win Super Bowl*

The heavily favored Green Bay Packers defeated the New England Patriots by the score of 35-21 to claim the National Football League championship. Desmond Howard, a kick returner for the Green Bay Packers, was named the game 's most valuable player. Howard, who in 1991 won the Heisman Trophy award as the outstanding college football player in the United States, became the first kick returner or special teams player to win the award and he did it by accumulating 244 yards on 10 punts and kickoff returns, including a 99-yard kickoff return for a touchdown. Green Bay also received outstanding performances from quarterback Bret Favre, who completed 14 of 27 passes for 246 yards and 2 touchdowns, and defensive lineman Reggie White, who recorded three quarterback sacks against New England.

3. Conclusions and Implications

The most evident conclusion we can reach in the end of this paper is that the speaker can not separate (even if he/she tries to) his/her beliefs, ideology and intentions from the speech he/she produces and the relations he/she expresses. The texts analysed have shown that, more or less subconsciously, the writers of reports for media might betray their political inclinations by their use of the active, the passive voice and the shift between

the two. In this paper, we have tried to shed a new light on this through the close examination of the shift between the two voices. The application of statistical tests on the corpus was meant to legitimise our conclusions.

The expression of causation was chosen on purpose. In fact, we are convinced of the importance of this relation in inter-human relations given its very close link to the notion of responsibility. The speaker/writer has the choice to stress the agent's responsibility or to hide it and one way of doing this is by the choice of the voice which is a strong tool in influencing the hearer/reader's reactions to the events. What makes this tool stronger is the type of the texts in which the manipulation in the presentation of the causal relation is used. It goes without saying that causality is a very important argumentation strategy and we can convince people when presenting causes. So, when reading an argumentative text, the reader expects the use of such conviction strategies so, he/she develops his/her own defensive strategies. However, the texts analysed are not argumentative, they are media texts from which the reader expects a simple exposition of facts. So, when reading them, the reader develops no defensive strategies and this makes persuasion stronger and more dangerous.

CONCLUSION

So far, we have tried to demonstrate through the study of the voice shift of causative verbs how language can be used as a tool of persuasion. We have started with a brief presentation⁴ of the linguistic means offered by language to the speaker to express the relation of causality. On the level of the simple sentence, we tried to show the semantic equivalence but the pragmatic difference between verbal causation and prepositional causation. It was interesting to apply this to a corpus of texts and see through statistical evidence to what extent the shift between the active and the passive voice is strongly determined by the speaker/writer's intentions and ideologies. It may be

⁴ For more details on the linguistic means for the expression of the causal relation, see Baklouti 1998,

'L'expression de la relation causale: étude comparée appliquée à un corpus trilingue (Anglais, Arabe, Français)'

interesting to note that even in the case of voice shift in favour of non-committal passive forms, there are more or less subtle information of whom is actually accused. The question to be asked is the following: "Is the choice of the passive voice always a tool of agent defocusing or can it turn to be, on the contrary, a tool of agent 'valorising'"? In other words: "What is stronger in terms of persuasion: mentioning an agent in the active voice, omitting it by the choice of the passive construction and creating a whole network of information about that agent through hints?" The answer to this question is another evidence for the deficiency of a purely syntactic analysis of speech and the need to extend the analysis of language to the level of discourse.

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