

Béla Korponay & Ildikó Nagy

Internal and external causation

Abstract

The paper discusses and extends the notions of internal and external causation, mainly on the basis of Levin and Hovav (1995). New subclasses are added to the group of internally caused verbs, with a detailed semantic analysis of the semantic properties of the arguments that such verbs (e.g. verbs expressing the emission of sound or light) can take. The paper also discusses the agentive – causative – factitive alternation on the basis of Hungarian, where the factitive pattern is expressed in a fully regular way by morphological means.

Keywords: agentivity, internal and external causation, factitive, transitivity, Hungarian.

In their book *Unaccusativity* (1995) Levin and Hovav make the illuminative distinction between internal and external causation. In their analysis verbs like *break* and *open* describe eventualities that are under the control of some external cause that brings such an eventuality about. Such intransitive verbs have transitive uses in which the external cause is expressed as subject. On the other hand, verbs like *laugh*, *play*, and *speak* do not have this property. The eventuality each describes “cannot be externally controlled” but “can be controlled only by the person engaging in it” (Smith 1970: 107). Smith takes the lack of a causative transitive use for these and other verbs to be the reflection of the presence of “internal control”:

Mary shuddered.

*The green monster shuddered Mary.

The green monster made Mary shudder.

Levin and Hovav distinguish between internally and externally caused eventualities. In their analysis, with the intransitive verbs describing an internally caused eventuality, some property inherent to the argument of the verb is “responsible” for bringing about the eventuality. For agentive verbs such as *play* and *speak*, this property is the will or volition of the agent who performs the activity. However, internally caused verbs need not be agentive. For example, the verbs *blush* and *tremble*, which take animate arguments, can be considered to describe internally caused eventualities, because the eventualities arise from internal properties of the arguments, typically an emotional reaction. These verbs exemplify that neither trembling nor blushing is generally under the person’s own control.

The notion of internal causation can be extended to a class of non-agentive single argument verbs that can be referred to as verbs of emission. These verbs can be divided into four subclasses:

- a. Sound: burble, buzz, clang, crackle, hoot, hum, jingle, moan, ring, roar, whir, whistle,...
- b. Light: flash, flicker, gleam, glitter, shimmer, shine, sparkle, twinkle,...
- c. Smell: reek, smell, stink
- d. Substance: bubble, gush, ooze, puff, spew, spout, squirt,...

The eventualities described by such verbs come about as a result of internal physical characteristics of their argument. Consequently, only a limited set of things qualify as arguments of any specific verb of emission. Only embers, lights, and certain substances glow since only they have the necessary properties, and the same holds of other verbs of emission. Unlike internally caused verbs, externally caused verbs, by their very nature, imply the existence of an external cause: one agent, an instrument, a natural force, or a circumstance. Thus, consider the verb *break*. Something breaks because of the existence of an external cause.

Some externally caused verbs such as *break* can be used intransitively without the expression of an external cause, but, even when no cause is specified, our knowledge of the world tells us that the eventuality these verbs describe could not have happened without an external cause.

The core class of causative alternation verbs encompasses the verbs of change of state, which typically describe changes in the physical shape or appearance of some entity. Jespersen (1927: Part 3) suggests that the class of verbs that are found in the causative alternation can be characterized as the “move and change” class, because it includes a variety of verbs of change of state and verbs of motion. The list of alternating verbs can easily be divided into two subclasses along these lines:

- a. bake, blacken, break, close, cook, cool, dry, freeze, melt, open, shatter, thaw, thicken, whiten, widen,...
- b. bounce, move, roll, rotate, spin,...

Relatively few verbs of motion participate in the causative alternation. The difference between internally and externally caused verbs is also reflected in the general pattern of selectional restrictions on the cause argument of the two kinds of verbs. As we have seen, only a limited set of things will qualify as arguments for a verb of emission (e.g. only embers, lights, and certain substances can *glow*), and similar restrictions hold for other verbs of emission as well. Unlike most internally caused verbs, most externally caused verbs do not impose restrictions on their external cause argument, taking agents, natural forces, and instruments as external cause.

It is in the nature of internally caused verbs that they are inherently monadic predicates. On the other hand, externally caused verbs are dyadic taking as arguments both the external cause and the passive participant in the eventuality. The proposed analysis of externally caused verbs predicts that there should be no externally caused verbs without a transitive variant. That is, all externally caused verbs have a causative, but not all of them have an intransitive use in which the external cause is unspecified (for example, *The baker cut the bread* — **The bread cut.*)

In English (as in other languages) adjectives are used to describe states, and not surprisingly, many alternating verbs of change of state are deadjectival, as shown by the examples, taken from Levin 1993: 28. These deadjectival verbs can be divided into two groups, one (a) in which the verbs are zero-related to adjectives and a second (b) in which the verbs are formed from adjectives through the use of the suffix *-en*:

- a. brown, clean, clear, cool, crisp, dim, dirty, dry, dull, empty, even, firm, level, loose, mellow, muddy, narrow, open, pale, quiet, round, shut, slack, smooth, sober, sour, steady, tame, tense, thin, warm, yellow, ...

- b. awaken, blacken, brighten, broaden, cheapen, coarsen, dampen, darken, deepen, fatten, flatten, freshen, gladden, harden, hasten, heighten, lengthen, lessen, lighten, loosen, moisten, neaten, quicken, quieten, redden, ripen, roughen, sharpen, shorten, sicken, slacken, smarten, soften, steepen, stiffen, straighten, strengthen, sweeten, tauten, thicken, tighten, toughen, waken, weaken, whiten, widen, worsen,...

What is relevant for us is that the adjectives that form the base for alternating verbs of change of state support the proposal that such verbs are externally caused. In Carlson's analysis (1977) these verbs are related to stage-level and not individual-level predicates: stage-level predicates describe temporary properties or transitory activities. They contrast with individual-level predicates, which describe permanent properties.

A language could choose to have two verbs whose meanings are the same in every respect except that one describes the eventuality as internally caused and the other as externally caused. The verbs *shudder* and *shake* at first glance appear to be synonymous, but only *shake*, and not *shudder*, shows a transitive causative use. Given the differing behaviour of these verbs with respect to the causative alternation, *shake* should be externally caused and *shudder* internally caused. Things that shudder are usually thought of as having a "self-controlled" body: they include people, animals, and, by forced extension, the earth, engines, machinery, and vehicles. In contrast leaves, teacups, and furniture, none of which can be said to have a "self-controlled" body, can only shake.

There are certain agentive verbs that appear in causative pairs:

- The soldiers marched (to the tents).
 The general marched the soldiers to the tents.
 The horse jumped (over the fence).
 The rider jumped the horse over the fence.
 The mouse ran (through the maze).
 We ran the mouse through the maze.

These verbs describe the manner in which motion takes place, contrasting with verbs of inherently directed motions like *come* and *go*, which describe the direction – but not the manner of motion.

At this point we mention a Hungarian peculiarity which may help in solving some problems. In Hungarian factitive meaning is generally expressed by morphological means, the regular factitive suffixes being *-at -et, -tat -tet*. These verbs, as a rule, take two agent participants (somebody is made to do something):

János meneteltette a katonákat. "John marched the soldiers."

The reader, I hope, will find the following list of oppositions persuasive:

alszik (asleep): *altat* (make sb. sleep), *bizik* (have confidence in): *biztat* (encourage), *bukik* (fail): *buktat* (fail sb.), *éheznek* (starve): *éheztet* (starve sb.), *emlékezik* (remember): *emlékeztet* (remind sb. of sth.), *fekszik* (lie in bed): *fektet* (put to bed), *foglalkozik* (deal with sth.): *foglalkoztat* (employ), *fürdik* (bathe): *fürdet* (bathe sb.), *hibázik* (make a mistake): *hibáztat* (blame sb. for sth.), *iszik* (drink): *itat* (make sb. drink), *késlekedik* (tarry) : *késleltet* (detain, delay), *költözik* (move): *költöztet* (move sb. somewhere), *nyugszik* (rest): *nyugtat* (calm sb.), *öltözik*

(dress): *öltöztet* (dress sb.), *szopik* (suck): *szoptat* (suck a child), *várakozik* (wait): *várakoztat* (keep sb. waiting), *vetkőzik* (undress): *vetkőztet* (undress sb.).

In the pairs active agentive verbs are in opposition with factitive ones.

In English there is also a small class of verbs which may be used with agentive (animate) objects: e.g., *John marched the soldiers*. The clause contains a verb of action *march*, an actor *the soldiers*, and an initiator *John*. The above structure, however, is only used with a limited number of actions such as *run, work, gallop, jump*, etc. This is the reason why the sentence *We can seat twenty people in this house* sounds strange, but I think, a native speaker would understand it. Factitive meaning is usually expressed by the auxiliaries *have, make, and get*. Examples for the use of *have*:

I had my shoes cleaned.
 I had the house painted.
 I have my paper (all) written.
 I had the piano tuned (yesterday).
 I have my shoes mended.
 I'm having my car washed.

The above factitive construction can be replaced by performative ones:

I asked someone to clean my shoes.
 I ordered/asked someone to wash my car.
 I asked a man to tune the piano.

In the function of *have* the auxiliary *get* can also be used:

I got my shoes cleaned.
 I got the piano tuned.
 I got my shoes mended.
 I got my car washed.

In Hungarian the factitive pattern is quite regular, so much so that, for example, in *épített* a factitive suffix is added to the causative one.

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