

CAUSATIVE VERB

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1. Core Definition and Function

A **causative verb** is a specific verb form or construction that expresses a causal relationship between the grammatical subject and the object of a sentence, where the subject (the **causer**) initiates an action or brings about a change of state in another entity (the **causee**). This relationship is inherently transitive, meaning that the action does not merely originate from the subject but actively operates upon and affects the object, compelling it to perform an action or undergo a transformation. Fundamentally, causative constructions embed one event (the caused event, often represented by the causee's action) within another event (the causing event, initiated by the causer).

The core semantic function of a causative verb, therefore, is to merge two conceptually distinct events--the act of causing and the act or state that results--into a single linguistic unit. This structural merging allows for efficiency in communication, directly relaying the notion that an action word possesses the capacity to produce a specific result. For instance, the simple verb *kill* is a classical example of a lexical causative, semantically equivalent to 'cause to die.' Other common examples demonstrating this structure in English include *(to) persuade*, which implies causing someone to believe or act; *(to) empower*, which causes someone to gain authority or ability; and *(to) enliven*, which causes something to become lively or animated. The presence of a causative element dictates that the underlying argument structure of the verb must account for the causer, the caused entity, and the resulting state or action.

Linguistically, the study of causative verbs is central to understanding argument structure and valence theory. When a verb is causativized, its argument structure typically expands, adding the causer argument to the existing arguments of the base (non-causative) verb. This structural alteration highlights how languages encode complex causal reality into simple verbal forms. Causative verbs are not only vital for grammatical integrity but also reflect fundamental cognitive processes regarding event perception and responsibility attribution, which links them closely to psycholinguistics and the field of cognitive semantics.

2. Syntactic Realization and Typology

Causation is expressed across the world's languages using three primary formal strategies, known as the syntactic typology of causatives: lexical, morphological, and analytical (or periphrastic) causation. The choice of strategy often reflects the degree of integration between the causing event and the resulting event.

The **lexical causative** represents the highest level of integration. In this type, the causative meaning is fused directly into the root of a single verb form, such as in the English pair *die* (non-causative) and *kill* (causative). Other examples include *fall* versus *fell* ('cause to fall') and *rise* versus *raise* ('cause to rise'). The lack of a transparent morphological marker means that the causative relationship is semantically opaque and must be learned as part of the verb's inherent meaning. This high integration suggests a very direct and often immediate causal link with no intervening agent or mechanism between the causer and the causee. Lexical causatives often exhibit idiosyncratic behaviors and are frequently derived historically from earlier morphological forms.

The **morphological causative** involves affixing a dedicated morpheme (a prefix, suffix, or infix) to the base verb stem to indicate causation. This strategy is highly productive in languages like Turkish, Japanese, and Swahili. For example, in Japanese, the suffix *-sase-* is generally used to causativize a verb. This structure maintains a clear connection between the base action and the derived causative form, offering a mid-level integration. Because the marker is applied systematically, speakers can create new causative verbs readily. The use of the morphological strategy tends to imply a slightly less direct causal path or allows for greater flexibility in controlling the causee's participation, often necessitating complex case marking rules to distinguish the causer from the causee.

Finally, the **analytical** or **periphrastic causative** expresses causation using two separate verbs: a primary verb meaning 'to cause' (such as *make*, *have*, *let*, or *force* in English) and a secondary verb or infinitive describing the caused event. This represents the lowest level of integration and typically implies indirect causation, mediated causation, or a permissive/coercive relationship. For example, 'The teacher *made* the students write the essay.' Here, the causer (teacher) uses the main causative verb (*made*) to initiate the caused event (*write the essay*). Periphrastic constructions are highly productive in English and allow speakers to encode varying degrees of intentionality, control, and force exerted by the causer, which is often impossible with simple lexical forms.

3. Semantic Characteristics and Control

The semantics of causative verbs extend beyond simple grammatical structure, deeply influencing how listeners interpret responsibility and agency. A critical semantic distinction is drawn between **direct causation** and **indirect causation**. Direct causation, typical of lexical and some morphological forms, implies that the causer acts immediately upon the causee without any intermediate steps (e.g., 'The rock broke the window'). Indirect causation, frequently expressed by periphrastic forms, suggests an intermediary step or an action where the causer influences the causee, who then completes the action (e.g., 'The manager had the assistant prepare the report').

Furthermore, the dimension of **intentionality** plays a crucial role. Causative verbs can be agentive (implying intention and volition on the part of the subject, as in 'She persuaded him to leave') or non-agentive (where the causer is an inanimate force or circumstance, as in 'The storm broke the mast'). This distinction is fundamental to legal and philosophical interpretations of causality, as the choice of verb directly influences the attribution of responsibility. For instance, using *make* often implies coercion or lack of choice for the causee, whereas *let* implies permission and agency retained by the causee.

The interplay of control is also vital. In some causative constructions, particularly those involving 'less direct' verbs like *allow* or *permit*, the causee retains a significant degree of control over the execution of the caused event. In contrast, highly integrated lexical causatives like *drown* or *melt* imply that the causee is merely a patient or entity undergoing a physical change, with zero control over the resulting state. Therefore, causative verbs map a continuum of control, ranging from pure physical manipulation (high causer control, low causee control) to acts of social influence or authorization (lower causer control, higher causee control).

4. The Causative Chain and Argument Structure

The core concept of the causative chain defines the relationship between the two events involved: the causing event (E1) and the resulting event (E2). This chain determines how grammatical roles (such as Subject, Direct Object, and Indirect Object) are assigned to the semantic participants (Causer, Causee, and Theme).

When a verb is causativized, it typically undergoes a process known as **valency increase**. An intransitive verb (which takes only one argument, the subject, e.g., *The door opened*) becomes a transitive verb (which takes two arguments, a subject and an object, e.g., *John opened the door*). In this case, *John* is the causer, and *the door* is the theme/causee. If the base verb was already transitive (e.g., *The boy ate the apple*), the causativized form requires a mechanism to introduce the causer while maintaining the original subject (now the causee) and the original object (now the theme). This often results in the causee being marked as an oblique object (using a preposition) or an indirect object, especially in periphrastic constructions.

This complex interaction of arguments leads to the core challenge in analyzing causatives: the mapping problem. How do languages resolve the competition for the subject slot when both the causer and the causee are conceptually agents of an action? Generally, the Causer, being the initiator of the entire process, is promoted to the grammatical subject position. The Causee is demoted, often appearing as the direct object if the base verb was intransitive, or as an indirect/oblique object if the base verb was transitive. This hierarchical arrangement of arguments is one of the most studied phenomena in generative grammar, contributing significantly to theories regarding the structure of verbal predicates.

5. Psycholinguistic and Cognitive Implications

The prominence of causative structures in language is directly related to the human tendency to perceive and attribute causality in the world. Psycholinguistics suggests that causative structures reflect fundamental cognitive biases concerning event segmentation and agent identification. Research indicates that when people process sentences, they prioritize the identification of the intentional initiator (the causer), which aligns perfectly with the subject position reserved for the causer in most causative constructions.

The ease with which children acquire causative verbs (particularly lexical causatives) suggests that the concept of 'X causing Y to do Z' is a cognitive primitive. Moreover, the grammatical distinction between direct (physical) causation and indirect (social or psychological) causation mirrors how humans judge moral and legal responsibility. If a sentence uses a direct causative, the causal link is perceived as stronger and more deterministic; if it uses an indirect causative, the possibility of the causee resisting or mediating the action is increased in the listener's interpretation. The selection of a causative construction, therefore, is not merely a syntactic choice but a reflection of the speaker's assessment of the causal chain in the real world.

6. Related Verb Classes and Distinctions

Causative verbs are often studied in contrast to other related verbal classes, particularly **inchoative verbs** and the generalized concept of the actional verb mentioned in the source material. An inchoative verb describes the beginning or initiation of a change of state without specifying an external agent (e.g., *The ice melted*). The corresponding causative verb (*The sun melted the ice*) explicitly introduces the agent responsible for that change.

The concept of the actional verb generally encompasses any verb that describes an action rather than a state (e.g., running, writing, eating). Causative verbs are a subset of actional verbs that specifically introduce a causal component. The relevance of the causative verb within semantics is its power to create an action that results in a change, making it a highly dynamic and crucial category within the broader class of actional verbs. Distinguishing causatives from anticausatives (which lack an overt causer, like *The vase broke*) is essential for mapping the full spectrum of how agency is encoded in linguistic structure.

7. Further Reading

[Wikipedia: Causative verb](#)

[SIL Glossary: Lexical Causative](#)

[Wikipedia: Argument \(linguistics\)](#)

[Wikipedia: Actional verb](#)

Wikipedia: Periphrasis (Linguistics)

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