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

1. Introduction

The French verb *laisser* 'let' is well-known for being peculiar among causative verbs in Romance, as it licenses two different embedded clauses. The sentence in (1) exemplifies the so-called infinitive construction, where *laisser* embeds an infinitive clause with a preverbal subject; in (2), the verb enters a complex predicate construction, which has received different analyses in the literature (Alsina 1992, Guasti 1996, Folli & Harley 2007). In this construction, the understood subject of the infinitive verb is realised postverbally, or, in the case of transitive verbs, as the complement of a preposition.¹

(1) Jean a laissé les enfants manger.
 John laisser.PF the children eat.INF
 'John let the children eat.'

(2) Jean a laissé manger les enfants.
 John laisser.PF eat.INF the children
 'John let the children eat.'

The first question that arises with regards to (1) and (2) concerns the relation between form and meaning. It has been observed very early on (Borel 1972, Kayne 1975) that the two structures in (1) and (2) are correlated with two slightly different interpretations, but this intuition has been developed quite informally, and judgements are therefore not consistent in the literature, where the interpretive difference has been described as, at best, pragmatic effect (Abeillé et al. 1997). We believe however that the relation between form and meaning deserves a more careful investigation, since differences in meaning can reflect differences in structure particularly in the case of causative constructions, where distinct interpretations correspond to different causative relations that are conceptualised in different ways. The link between syntax and conceptual structure is given by grammar, to the extent that grammar determines the way in which the participants in a causal relation are realised as the arguments of a causative predicate. As it has been extensively discussed in the literature (see e.g. Shibatani 1976) the grammars of different languages deal with conceptual structure in different ways, and there may be alternative ways of realising causal chains even within one particular language. One of the most famous examples is probably the distinction between direct and indirect causation as expressed by lexical (3a) vs. analytical constructions (3b) in English (Fodor 1970). It is generally assumed that the lexical causative verb *kill* in English expresses a relation of direct causation, i.e. in (3a) John did something that directly led to the death of Bill. Causative constructions like *cause to die* in (3b), on the other hand, may also express a more indirect relation: John might have done something which started a

¹ For the purpose of this paper, we only will discuss examples where the embedded verb is intransitive. The reader is addressed to the aforementioned literature for more detailed analyses of the syntax of complex predicate constructions in French and in Romance languages.

longer causative chain leading, at the end, to the death of Bill (but see Neeleman & van de Koot 2012 for arguments against this generalisation).

- (3) a. John killed Bill.
- b. John caused Bill to die.

It is thus fairly reasonable to assume that the grammatical constructions in (1) and (2) may each realise a distinct causative relation.

In the specific case of (1) and (2), however, probing the issue of form and meaning leads to a related question, which is the main focus of this paper. Following the intuitions of native speakers, also reported in previous literature, the two interpretations can be paraphrased as such: while (1) can only convey that Jean had the intention to let the children eat, (2) seems to be also compatible with a scenario in which Jean is less directly responsible for their action, and merely failed to prevent them from eating. Looking at the interpretations, then, one may wonder: how are concepts such as intentions and causal responsibility expressed in language, or, more specifically, to what extent does grammar "see" intentions and map them into syntactic structures? The question is vast and goes far beyond grammatical analysis; we shall be satisfied if we manage to take a few steps towards an answer.

In this paper, we show that the analysis of *laisser* may help us do so. To start with, we show that the distinct interpretations of the *laisser* constructions in (1) and (2) can be probed by looking at the particular type of influence that the subject of *laisser* (the Causer) exerts on the subject of the infinitive (the Causee). More specifically, in (1), but not in (2), this influence must be that of authority: sentence (1) represents a state of affairs that is compatible with a situation where John allows the children to eat by virtue of his position of authority – in other words, John authorises them to eat. This is not necessarily the case in (2), which is compatible with a situation where the children started to eat without being granted permission, and John merely did not intervene. The link between form and structure is intuitively the following: since authority can arguably be exerted only by intentional agents on intentional agents, and agentive thematic positions are constrained by grammar across languages, one can predict that authority-related interpretations may also be restricted to specific syntactic structures, i.e. the ones where the two participants are both mapped onto agentive positions. We claim that this is what determines the structural difference in the two French sentences. Evidence from French may in this sense support the hypothesis that the link between form and meaning in causative constructions is expressed at the interface of syntax with the semantic component of grammar. The exact implementation of the syntactic module goes beyond the scope of this paper, and we must leave it to further research.

The paper is organised as follows. In section 2, we expound the theoretical assumptions that form the background of our analysis of the interpretation of causal relations as conceptual configurations. We draw these assumptions from recent approaches to the use of force-dynamic representations for meaning, as first proposed by Talmy (1983, 1988, 2000), developed by Wolff (2003, 2007), and further elaborated at the interface with linguistics by Copley & Harley (2015). In section 3, we discuss more specifically the formal representations of agency and authority in such configurations, and we come back to the case of *laisser* in section 4, where we show that looking at authority and intentions provides a solution to the interpretation issue raised above. Section 5 concludes.

2. Theoretical background

2.1 Causal configurations in force theory

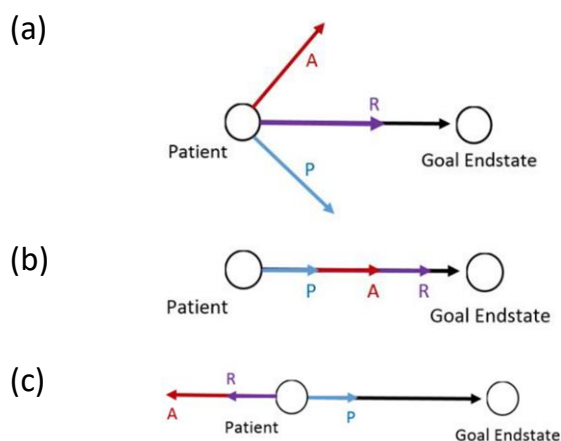
Cognitive linguist Leonard Talmy first brought linguistic attention to the usefulness of force-dynamic representations for natural language semantics (Talmy 1988, 2000, e.g.; see also Copley 2019 for an overview). The idea we are interested in here is the grounding of the concept of causation in people's cognitive representations, focussing in particular on the representation of forces and their interactions in space (Wolff & Thorstad 2016). We follow Wolff and Song 2003, Wolff 2007 in specifying how the concept of CAUSE, a primitive operator in lexical and syntactic decompositional approaches (see, a.o., Dowty 1979, Hale & Keyser 1993, Ramchand 2008), may be deconstructed into finer elements, and how these elements can be represented in a formal system interacting with grammar. In this section, we will start by reviewing the basic configurations predicted by Wolff and Song's theory, and give a quick review of the configurations that possibly underlie the meaning of different causative verbs. With this in mind, we will then be able to show how *laisser*, as a particular type of causative operator, may help us refine the set of primitives needed in structural representations of causation.

A causal configuration, for Wolff and Song, implies the interaction of an Agent and a Patient, represented as vector forces of given magnitude directed towards a goal. This type of conceptual representation gives origin, at the level of individual configurations of forces, to three main causal concepts: CAUSE, ENABLE (which includes ALLOW and HELP) and PREVENT. The three concepts can be differentiated via three parameters, as detailed in Table 1: (i) the tendency of the Patient towards the goal – that is, whether the Patient's force is directed towards the endstate prior to the intervention of the Agent; (ii) the relationship between the tendencies of Agent or Patient – whether the two participants in the causal relation are both directed towards the goal or not; and (iii) the direction of the configuration – whether the goal is indeed targeted as the result of the interaction of the Agent's and Patient's forces. The dynamics of CAUSE, ENABLE and PREVENT can be represented as configuration of forces as in, respectively, Figures 1a, 1b and 1c, where the vector A represents the force associated with the Agent, P the force associated with the Patient, and R represents the position of the Patient as a result of their interaction.

Table 1: Representation of causal concepts (adapted from Wolff & Song 2003:284)

	Tendency of the patient for the result	Opposition of Agent and Patient	Occurrence of the result
CAUSE	no	yes	yes
ENABLE	yes	no	yes
PREVENT	yes	yes	no

Figure 1: the dynamics of (a) CAUSE, (b) ENABLE and (c) PREVENT



One of the consequences of representing causal relations in vector space as in Figure 1 is that the goal does not need to be reached in order for a causal interaction to occur – the occurrence of the goal endstate depends on the magnitude and direction of the resultant vector. Therefore, according to the theory, one may predict that only CAUSE and ENABLE configurations are compatible with the actual occurrence of the goal endstate (since in the PREVENT configuration the R vector is not directed towards the goal), but the occurrence of one of these two causal configurations does not guarantee by itself that the goal occurs. As we will see, this prediction is borne out in the case of *laisser*, which realises a particular case of the ENABLE configuration.

2.2 Types of influences

The framework of this force-dynamic theory, in defining at least three possible causal configurations, also makes room for the hypothesis that the type of force interaction between Causer and Causee may correlate with the choice of different causative verbs lexicalising the relation. In the following, we would like to submit that lexicalisation may depend not only, more broadly, on the type of configuration (thus differentiating, in English, between the CAUSE, ENABLE and PREVENT configurations and the homonymous verbal predicates), but it can also be sensitive, more specifically, to some of the parameters that determine such configurations. One of these parameters, which we wish to discuss in detail, has to do with the type of influence that the Causer exerts on the Causee.

Throughout this paper, we use the term "influence" as a *porte-manteau* for different types of forces, starting from Talmy's observation that Causers can indeed exert pressure of various kinds: besides physical forces, intentions and social or psychological pressures can also influence the progression of an event towards an endstate (cf. Wolff 2007).

In the case of LET verbs such as *laisser*, the type of influence is necessarily an intention.² This is what seems to discriminate between *laisser* and other causative verbs realising ENABLE

² In fact, *laisser* permits a few inanimate subjects with very particular complements, as in (i):

(i) Les rideaux laissent entrer la lumière du soleil.
 The curtains laisser.PR enter the light of-the sun
 The curtains let the sunlight come in.

configurations in French, such as *permettre* 'allow'. The subject of *permettre* can exert either a psychological or a physical influence on the Causee. Accordingly, the sentence in (4a) may be interpreted in both ways: (4a) could mean that Marie authorised Julie to go out with her friends, or that, for example, she helped her climb out of a hole by joining her physical strength to hers. Authority cannot be at stake in (4b), where the wind enables the windmills to turn by exerting a purely physical force against their blades.

- (4) a. Marie a permis à Julie de sortir.
 Marie allow.PF to Julie to go-out
 'Marie allowed Julie to go out/ Marie helped Julie go out.'
- b. Le vent a permis aux éoliennes de tourner.
 the wind allow.PF to-the windmills to turn
 'The wind allowed the windmills to turn.'

Laisser could be compared to *permettre* in its interpretation of authorisation in sentence (5a); however, (5a) lacks the second possible interpretation of (4a), where Marie would help Julie out of a hole. The fact that in the case of *laisser* the influence can only be an intention is also confirmed by the infelicity of (5b).

- (5) a. Marie a laissé Julie sortir.
 Marie allow.PF Julie go-out
 'Marie let Julie go out.'
- b. #Le vent a laissé les éoliennes tourner.
 the wind laisser.PF the windmills turn

We will see that intention must characterise both Causer and Causee when it takes the form of an authorisation from the Causer, as in (5a). This leaves us with the issue of characterising the role of the Causee as an intentional Agent. We discuss this point in the next section, where we provide the first sketch of a formal representation of agency in causative structures.

3. Characterising authority as a constraint on choice

We have seen that Marie in (5a) exerts a particular influence through an intentional act (an act that Marie performs because of her intention). Our aim in this section is to define more precisely the conceptual status of influences based on intention, and more specifically of the influence exerted by authority, and its effect within a causal chain. In accordance with our

The existence of a few idiosyncratic inanimate exceptions here meets Copley's (2018) criterion for "dispositional causation", where intentions are understood as a species of disposition. The felicitous cases such as (i) might then be seen as involving a disposition of the subject that causes an event of the kind described by the complement, whereas those that do not admit *laisser* should be seen as describing impossible courses of events, where there is no such disposition of the subject that can cause an event of the kind described by the complement. See also Donazzan & Tovena (2016), who make a similar case for dispositions licensing a causative entailment in light-verb constructions.

assumption that there exists a link between conceptual representations and language realisations, we will try to represent it in the grammatical structure by making use of tools provided by a formal framework.

3.1 Agency as choice

Given that, as we have seen in the preceding section, authority is an influence exerted by agents, we start by providing a more general definition of agency. Along with standard philosophical literature (Anscombe 1957), we assume that agents have intentions when their action is directed towards a goal. We may then represent an intentional action as an influence that is directed towards the occurrence of a particular state of affairs, which we represent formally as a proposition. What is important for our present concern is the observation that, when their will is unimpeded, agents have the choice of pursuing different goals. Following our initial assumption, then, these different goals will be represented as a set of alternative propositions. The signature of free agents is then that they have a choice over an ALT set of alternative propositions.

Let's consider some examples. A sentence like (6) below is understood as depicting a situation where John's actions or will are directed towards realising a state of affairs in which he plays the piano.

- (6) a. John intends to play the piano.
b. John intend [John play the piano]
c. $ALT_{JOHN} := \{play\ the\ piano, \neg\ play\ the\ piano\}$

Accordingly, let's assume that the goal of John may be represented by the proposition embedded under the predicate of intention. Alternative propositions are denoted, in linguistic expressions, by (non-tensed) clauses (Rooth 1992). Once the co-reference of the subject under the control configuration has been resolved, we may assume that the embedded clause in (6) denotes the proposition $p = John\ play\ the\ piano$.

Since John is the holder of an intention and therefore an intentional agent, in principle he has the choice whether to pursue this goal or not: his choice includes a set of propositions alternative to p . In the absence of prominent focus on one of the elements in the embedded clause,³ we take this set of alternatives to be the verum focus set of alternatives, namely p and $\neg p$. We represent alternative propositions as belonging to the set ALT, which minimally includes the proposition p expressed by the infinitive predicate (the prevalent) and a proposition $\neg p$, which is intended as a negation of the prevalent p (*John play the piano*).

The set of alternative states of affairs available to John may thus include other states of affairs, but the main predicate of the sentence states that John himself has restricted his choice to one possible alternative, that of playing the piano. In this sense, the matrix predicate, in complex constructions, determines how the ALT set is dealt with. As shown by

³ Narrow focus on a constituent in the embedded clause seems to create other alternative sets in the usual manner: e.g., *Mary let John give a book to JILL* evokes a different alternative set from *Mary let John give A BOOK to Jill*. In the former, Mary constrains who John can give a book to, removing e.g. *John give a book to Bill* and *John give a book to Sue* from the John's alternative set $\{John\ give\ a\ book\ to\ x\}$, while in the latter, Mary constrains what John can give to Jill, removing, e.g., *John give a newspaper to Jill*, *John give a sandwich to Jill* from John's alternative set $\{John\ give\ x\ to\ Jill\}$.

the second conjunct in (7b), when the main predicate is not a causative verb or a modal operator, John, as a free agent, can choose to follow any other alternative goal which may be available to him.

- (7) a. We asked John [to play the piano]
 $ALT_{JOHN} := \{p, \neg p\}$
 b. We asked John to play the piano, but he watched TV instead.

Within a causal configuration, then, an influence affects the available choices of a free agent with respect to the actions in service of their goal(s). What happens when an influence is exerted by a free agent on another free agent, as in complex causative structures? More specifically, to what extent does the influence lexicalised by a specific causative predicate constrain the choices available to an agentive Causee?

3.2 Constraining agency in complex causatives

The result of an influence can be conceived as the Causer's *preference* for one choice – that is, one course of action - among alternative options (Staraki 2017). Let's consider, for instance, sentence (8). In (8), contrary to (7) above, John's alternatives are reduced, and this follows from the influence exerted by Peter – John may want to play the piano or not, but Peter leaves him with no choice by setting the value of the ALT set to one possible state of affairs, represented by p . Therefore, adding the second conjunct in (8b) yields an infelicitous sentence.

- (8) a. Peter forced John to play the piano.
 $ALT_{JOHN} := \{p, \neg p\}$
 Peter sets value of $ALT_{JOHN} := \{p\}$
 b. #Peter forced John to play the piano, but John didn't (play the piano).

In the semantic representation of causative constructions, we therefore model the influence required by the causative verb as the ability to constrain in different ways the set of alternative actions available to the lower agent (the Causee). Sentences (9) and (10) below represent causative configuration of the ENABLE and PREVENT type, respectively.

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

The representation in (9) captures the intuition that the Causer in ENABLE configurations exerts an influence that is in accordance with the tendency of the Causee (see also Table 1);

therefore, all possible choices are granted. In (10), the influence of the Causer is directed against the Causee's tendency, and therefore the value of ALT is set to $\{-p\}$.

So much for the different configurations. However, we have seen that influences can be of different types, and that we may assume, following a lexicalisation hypothesis, that certain causative predicates impose constraints on the nature of the relevant influence. For example, the English verb *forbid* in (11) is a predicate that, as a causative predicate of the PREVENT type, requires the Causer to exert an influence on the Causee. Contrary to *prevent*, however, *forbid* requires two agentive arguments, and imposes additional constraints on the type of influence exerted by the Causer. More specifically, the proposition realised by (11) is felicitous only in a situation where God may exert a type of authority over Adam: Adam may want to eat the apple or not, but God, who has authority over him, sets the value of Adam's alternative set to $\{-p\}$. Crucially, however, as is well-known given the actual outcome, it is still acceptable for the Causee in (11) to overcome the Causer's influence and exercise his free will.

(11) God forbade Adam to eat the apple (but Adam did eat the apple).

Authority is then a type of coercive intention that acts as a force constraining an intentional agent's choice of action. Contrary to physical force, however, authority is not strictly implicative (the free agent may still have a choice) and is legitimate only if the two agents are in a social or contextual relation that justifies the influence itself.⁴ In case of mismatch in the presupposed authority relation, verbs of influence such as *forbid* are infelicitous, cf. (12a) vs. (12b).

- (12) a. The judge forbade the defendant to speak.
 b. #The defendant forbade the judge to speak.

4. When syntax matters: structural constraints on authority relations

The French causative verb *laisser* 'let' is generally described as realizing an ENABLE relation (as defined in Wolff & Song 2003, cf. Table 1). As we have seen in section 1, contrary to other ENABLE verbs such as English *let*, *laisser* can embed its complement clause in two ways. Unlike their English translation, then, the two structures, exemplified here by (13a) and (13b), are said to correlate with two interpretations (Borel 1972, Kayne 1975).

- (13) a. Le gardien a laissé le prisonnier s'échapper. Pre-V Causee
 the guard laisser.PF the prisoner CL-escape
 'The guard let the prisoner escape.'
- b. Le gardien a laissé s'échapper le prisonnier. Post-V Causee
 the guard laisser.PF CL-escape the prisoner
 'The guard let the prisoner escape.'

⁴ The authority relation is presupposed, but of course, as in (11) above, it may turn out that the Causer did not have the ability to decide what happens after all; see Copley (2008) for discussion of this idea.

Discussing specifically the examples in (13), Kayne (1975: 222) remarks that the structure (13a), where the Causee is realised preverbally, 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 (13b). In other words, we may say that (13a) carries an intentional flavour: it seems to be the guard's intention to give the prisoner the choice to escape.

Following our analysis, then, only (13a) implies an influence that can be characterised as an intention. But how does this conceptual interpretation correlate with the structural difference between the two sentences? And what is the influence exerted by the guard in (13b)?

In the following, we will address this question by looking at the constraints on interpretation imposed on both the pre-V and the post-V constructions. For the sake of clarity, we will set up a context where the two participants are quite uncontroversially in an authority relation. We take as a prototypical case, among other possibilities, the relation of a judge and a defendant in court, assuming that the authority of the judge is recognised and enforced by the law. Also, in order to highlight the desired interpretations, we will make use of specific contextual conditions: if the Causer authorises the Causee to act, we may expect that the Causee's action will necessarily start after the authorisation is granted. Conversely, if the Causer merely does not interfere with the Causee's action, it may be possible that their action is already going on, and the Causer just refrains from intervening.

4.1 Authority and preverbal Causee

As we have seen in the preceding section, we may characterise authority relations as implying the presence of two intentional agents, one of which, the Causer, performs an intentional act that constrains the choice of action available to the Causee.

With this in mind, let's consider sentence (14).

- (14) La salle d'audience était silencieuse. Finalement...
The courtroom was silent. Eventually...
La juge a laissé l'accusé
the judge laisser.PF the-defendant
'The judge let the defendant speak.'

The context for sentence (14) enhances the authority reading – the judge has authority on the defendant, and the defendant's action, as evidenced by the preceding sentence, is due to start only after the authorisation has been granted. More importantly, we predict that the sentence should only be compatible with a situation where the Causer is in a position of authority with respect to the Causee: similarly to the *forbid* case discussed with respect to example (12), we expect such structures to be infelicitous if the higher Agent has no authority over the lower one. This prediction is borne out: sentence (15), which, if we are

correct, displays a mismatch in the authority relation, is considered unnatural or degraded in a prototypical courtroom context by most of the native speakers we have consulted.⁵

- (15) La salle d’audience était silencieuse. Finalement...
 The courtroom was silent. Eventually...
 ??l’accusé a laissé la juge
 the-defendant laisser.PF the judge

How is this interpretation related to the syntactic structure of the sentence? According to the representation that we have adopted so far, the verb *laisser* embeds a proposition realised by the non-tensed predicate *parler* 'speak'. The Causee is understood as the agentive subject of the embedded verb, i.e. the lower Agent of the causal relation.

The lower Agent, being an intentional subject, introduces in the formal representation an ALT set (16b) whose members are the prevalent p (*speak*) and its negation $\neg p$. The meaning of *laisser*, as a causative verb, is that the higher Agent must be able to restrict the ALT set with authority. Recall however that, if we are right in considering *laisser* an ENABLE verb, the Causer is acting in accordance with the Causee's tendency, and therefore both alternatives in ALT are made available to the Causee (16c).

- (16) a. $\text{laisser}_{[\text{VoiceP the defendant} [\text{VP speak}]]}$
 b. $\text{ALT}_{\text{defendant}} := \{\textit{ speak, not speak}\}$
 c. Judge sets the value of $\text{ALT}_{\text{defendant}} := \{\textit{ speak, not speak}\}$

This prediction is borne out: *laisser* is not an implicative verb, the fact that the Causee's tendency is directed towards the goal does not imply that the goal is eventually reached. We may qualify the projection of the outcome as an implicature, as the continuation in (17) seems to confirm.

- (17) La juge a laissé l’accusé parler, mais
 the judge laisser.PF the-defendant speak.INF but
 est resté muet.
 remain.PF silent
 ‘The judge let the defendant speak, but he kept silent.’

⁵ Note however that the constraint here is structural, and not lexically enforced as in the case of predicates such as *forbid* (or *authorise*), which express authority as part of their meaning. This may be the reason for the difference in acceptability between (12b) and (15) among native speakers, for whom the feeling of infelicity for sentence (15) is weaker than that for sentence (12b), and a context is needed in order to make the contrast more salient.

4.2 Causation by omission: postverbal Causee

Let's consider now the interpretation of the postverbal construction, exemplified here by (18).

- (18) La juge a laissé parler l'accusé.
the judge laisser.PF speak.INF the-defendant
'The judge let the defendant speak.'

We claim that post-V constructions like (18) do not necessarily make reference to an authority relation and thus do not trigger the interpretation of the Causer as an influencer. Since the relation is not one of authority, we predict that no mismatch in authority can ever arise; indeed, native speakers' judgements confirm this prediction, as (19) is judged more acceptable in a normal courtroom situation than (15) above.

- (19) L'accusé a laissé parler la juge.
the-defendant laisser.PF speak.INF the judge
'The defendant let the judge speak.'

In postverbal constructions, the lower subject is not interpreted as an external argument of the embedded verb, it is not realised as an agentive subject, and therefore no ALT set is introduced.

In some sense, the sentence may be interpreted as a case of enabling by omission: i.e. as describing a situation where the higher agent does not exert any influence in order to restrict the lower subject's action.

Although the exact characterisation of the syntactic structure of pre-V and post-V constructions is beyond the scope of this paper, the pre- or post-V position of the embedded subject may be correlated to distinct realisations of the argument structure of the embedded predicate. Following standard assumptions in the literature (Kratzer 1996, Harley 2013, Alexiadou et al. 2015, a.o.), we may suppose that the agentive subject of the infinitive is introduced as the specifier of a dedicated functional projection, such as VoiceP (20a), of which, following our analysis, we would give the tentative denotation in (20a). The post-V complement, on the other hand, would be a vP without external argument position (20b).

- (20) a. Preverbal case complement : $[[\text{VoiceP}]] = \lambda s.\text{chooser}(x, s, \text{ALT}([[vP]]))$
& $\text{agent}(x, e) \ \& \ [[vP]](e)$
b. Postverbal case complement : $[[vP]] = \lambda e. [[VP]](e)$

What ultimately happens to these denotations in the syntactic derivation may be more complex and is beyond the scope of this paper. In the following section, we will discuss some additional empirical data that may confirm our semantic hypothesis.

4.3 Additional evidence for the analysis

We have shown that the two available readings for *laisser* are enhanced from structural constraints. The authorise interpretation is constrained by the possibility of constructing a sentence where the lower agent is interpreted also structurally as the agent of the embedded verb: in pre-V constructions, *laisser* embeds a clause whose subject is interpreted as an external argument, i.e. an agent (possibly by a VoiceP) – the embedded clause denotes then a proposition in the set of the agent’s alternatives.

In Post-V constructions, on the other hand, *laisser* embeds a reduced vP, with no external argument. The interpretation is that of an event description, and not of a propositional complement qualifying as an alternative choice.

But to what extent does grammar see conceptual objects such as alternative propositions? In this section, we present a few empirical observations pointing to the conclusion that alternatives indeed enter the semantic component which is processed by grammar.

More specifically, following our analysis we expect at least two types of structural correlates, related to: (i) the complement of *laisser*: whether it is a propositional or a non-propositional complement; (ii) the presence vs. absence of available alternatives for the lower agent. In this section we mention two phenomena that seem to depend on a sensitivity to these two parameters.

4.3.1 Negation

The first observed empirical difference between preverbal and postverbal constructions has to do with the possibility of embedding a negative operator in the former case. Assuming that alternatives are propositional in preverbal constructions, we expect that a negative operator can apply to the complement of *laisser* in this construction. Indeed, under an authorise reading the causative verb can embed a clausal negation. Sentence (21a) is to be understood in a context where the judge authorises the defendant to answer a question; in the same courtroom situation, (21b) is perfectly acceptable if the defendant expresses the intention not to answer the question, and the judge authorises him to do so.

- (21) a. La juge a laissé l'accusé répondre.
the judge laisser.PF the-defendant answer
'The judge let the defendant answer.'
- b. La juge a laissé l'accusé ne pas répondre.
the judge laisser.PF the-defendant NEG answer
'The judge let the defendant not answer.'

Conversely, we assume that event descriptions are not propositional, and therefore we expect that the complement of *laisser* cannot host a negative operator in postverbal constructions. Thus, while (22a) is compatible with a context where the judge does not impede the defendant from answering, (22b) is ill-formed.

- (22) a. La juge a laissé répondre l'accusé.
 the judge laisser.PF answer the-defendant
 'The judge let the defendant answer.'
- b. *La juge a laissé ne pas répondre l'accusé.
 the judge laisser.PF NEG answer the-defendant

The ill-formedness of (22b) can be explained both on structural and semantic grounds: the syntactic constraint would say that the clausal negation *ne pas* cannot be expressed in a reduced vP structure, but one can also argue that there is no sense in which the judge could interrupt the occurrence of a non-event.

4.3.2 Agency as choice: defeasability of causative entailments and free choice

Recall that the main difference between preverbal and postverbal constructions concerns the possibility for the lower agent to have a choice over a set of alternatives in the former case: in preverbal constructions, the agentive subject of *laisser* allows the lower agent to keep all the alternatives in their choice set available (23).

- (23) a. La juge a laissé l'accusé parler.
 the judge laisser.PF the-defendant speak
 b. Judge sets the value of $ALT_{\text{defendant}} := \{speak, not\ speak\}$

In this framework, an influence such as that exerted by the subject of the matrix verb can be conceived as guiding the *preference* for one choice among the alternative options within the set (see also section 3.2 above). The lack of constraints observed in the complement of *laisser* in (23) can then be formalised in terms of an *indifference* relation among the propositions in the ALT set (see e.g. Staraki 2017 for a formal implementation of indifference in a possible-world semantics). In plain words, indifference means that the two propositions p and $not-p$ are not ranked in terms of preference with respect to one another, because the subject of *laisser*, who exerts the influence, chooses not to posit any ordering on them.

If we are right, we therefore expect that an indifference relation among alternatives in the complement of *laisser* may be observed only when the subject of *laisser* is an intentional agent, who can choose not to rank the alternatives; also, a preference choice over the alternatives is expected to depend on the ability of the lower subject, as an intentional agent, to make a choice. Next, we may also expect that the presence of an alternative set may trigger the use of lexical or functional items sensitive to semantic environments that denote choice over possible alternative worlds or propositions. In the following, we will provide two sets of empirical observations that confirm our expectations.

The first observation concerns the (non-)implicative interpretation of causal relations. We have seen in section 2.1 that Wolff & Song's (2003) taxonomy of causal categories predicts that the causative meaning of *laisser* as an ENABLE verb is non-implicative: the endstate represents a tendency, and it is envisaged once the direction of the resultant vector is defined. It "does not require that the result event occur before it can be said that causation

has occurred” (Wolff & Thorstad 2016: 150, and also Table 1), and implicative readings, by which the endstate is asserted to occur, would rely on an independent dimension, which is given in this framework by the length of the endstate vector.

This conceptual representation agrees with the observation that authorise readings of *laisser* are non-implicative, in the sense that the endstate need not be reached for the *laisser*-sentence to be felicitous. Thus, the continuation in (24b) is not considered a contradictory statement, but it may be analysed as the cancellation of an implicature arising from the expectation that Causees follow their tendency in acting.

- (24) a. La juge a laissé l'accusé parler...
 the judge laisser.PF the-defendant speak...
 b. ...mais finalement il est resté silencieux.
 but eventually he stay.PF silent
 ‘The judge let the defendant speak, but eventually he kept silent.’

In the framework adopted in this paper, the non-implicativity of ENABLE verbs can be translated by saying that the matrix subject of *laisser* does indeed exert an influence (therefore, causation occurs), but lower agents, despite having a tendency towards the endstate denoted by the prevalent *p*, still keep all the alternatives *p* and *not-p* in their choice set available. The defeasibility of the causative entailment for ENABLE-verbs is thus compatible with the configuration given in Force Theory. We take a step further in this paper and claim that there is also a grammatical dimension to this cognitive representation.

On the semantic side, the defeasibility of the entailment that the endstate has been reached is observed only when the causative relation involves two agentive participants. Thus, in sentences (25) and (26), where either one of the Causer and Causee is non-agentive, asserting that the endstate has not been reached yields a contradiction.

- (25) Sa réponse m’a laissé comprendre un certain nombre de
 his answer CL-laisser.PF understand a certain number of
 choses #mais finalement je ne les ais pas comprises.
 things but eventually I NEG CL understand.PF
 ‘His answer let me understand quite a few things, #but eventually I did not understand them.’

- (26) Jean a laissé couler l’eau dans la baignoire
 John laisser.PF flow the-water in the tub
 #mais finalement l’eau n’a pas coulé.
 but eventually the-water NEG flow.PF
 ‘His answer let me understand quite a few things, #but eventually I did not understand them.’

The relation between the defeasibility of causative entailments and the (agentive) properties of the subject has been already observed in the literature, where this phenomenon has received different analyses under various labels (see a.o. Martin 2015, Martin & Schäfer 2012, 2014 analysis of *non-culminating entailments* and *defeasible causative verbs*, and

Copley & Harley's (2014) *defeasible causation*). Here we use the label “defeasible entailment” in a descriptive way, without strong commitment to a specific analysis; note however that the correlation between agentivity and defeasibility is expected in our framework, since only agentive subjects can choose not to impose an ordering between the alternatives. What is more interesting for our present concern is that defeasibility is also subject to a *structural* condition with *laisser*: the causative entailment appears to be non-defeasible when *laisser* embeds a vP complement in the postverbal construction, and this happens independently of the agentive potential of the lower agent. In (27), the judge can be considered, categorically speaking, an animate entity who is potentially volitional; nevertheless, contrary to (23b), the continuation in (27b) is considered degraded by most speakers.

- (27) a. L'accusé a laissé parler la juge...
 the-defendant laisser.PF speak the judge
 b. ??mais finalement elle est restée silencieuse.
 but eventually she stay.PF silent
 ('The defendant let the judge speak, but eventually she kept silent.')

Once again, to our mind, the reason why the entailment is not defeasible in (27) has to do with the type of complement that *laisser* embeds in this construction. In (27), the defendant does not give the judge the choice to speak, but merely does not prevent an event from occurring. Additionally, there is flavour that the action has already started: sentence (27a) is considered odd by native speakers in a context where an inceptive interpretation is forced on the embedded event, as in (28).

- (28) La salle d'audience était silencieuse.
 The courtroom was silent.
 #Finalement, l'accusé a laissé parler la juge
 eventually the-defendant laisser.PF speak the judge

Next, let's mention a further empirical fact that follows from the assumption that *laisser* involves quantification over an alternative set: only in these constructions are certain free-choice items licensed in the embedded clause. Recall that the subject of *laisser*, in virtue of her position of authority, offers a choice to the lower agent by choosing not to order the alternatives in the ALT set in terms of preference with respect to one another (an *indifference* relation).

The presence of non-ranked available alternatives seems to be relevant for licensing Free Choice Items (FCIs) like the French determiner *n'importe qu-* '(just) any', which has been described as conveying a meaning of indiscriminacy (Jayez & Tovena 2005, Vlachou 2006, 2007).

- (29) Le passager a laissé le conducteur prendre
 the passenger laisser.PF the driver take
 n'importe quel itinéraire pourvu que ce soit rapide.
 n'importe quel route provided that it be.SBJ fast
 'The passenger let the driver take any route, provided it would be a fast one.'

According to Vlachou (2007:52) “indiscriminacy implies that an agent makes a choice in such a way that, before choosing, any alternative is equally probable to be chosen”, and results in a “random selection by an agent of an entity out of a set of alternatives” (2007:131). In complex causatives, indiscriminacy would be the result of the Causer’s choice to keep all alternatives equally ranked in terms of accessibility for the lower agent in the embedded clause. The fact that the lower agent does not seem to randomly choose an option would then be imputable to the meaning of *laisser*, which, as an ENABLE verb, conveys the meaning that there is a tendency of the Causee towards the prevalent *p*.

FCIs such as *n'importe qu-* are more generally not available in configurations where the lower agent’s choice is already constrained from the causative meaning of the matrix verb, as in the case of *forcer* ‘force’ in (30).

- (30) #Le passager a forcé le conducteur à prendre
 the passenger force.PF the driver to take
 n'importe quel itinéraire pourvu que ce soit rapide.
 n'importe quel route provided that it be.SBJ fast
 'The passenger forced the driver to take any route, provided it would be a fast one.'

Although the issue of the licensing of FCI is a complex one, and its detailed discussion goes far beyond the scope of this paper, we believe that the contrast observed between (29) and (30) can in principle be explained assuming that lexical causative verbs constrain the set of alternatives denoted by their complement in different ways.

5. Conclusions

An agent's actions and intentions can be furthered or hindered in multiple ways. Across languages, verbs that lexicalize causative primitives can help us understand the nature of agency and intention, precisely because they involve multiple participants which may be in a position of influencing each other via different types of force relations.

In causal relations, free choice can be restricted (or highlighted) through authority: we define authority as an agent’s intrinsic ability to influence another agent’s choice of action.

The goal here was to probe the relation between authority and intentional causation by looking at a construction where the causative verb expresses an ENABLE relation (Wolff and Song 2003, Wolff 2007) between agentive participants.

We have shown that authority relations are visible in grammar: authority is possible only when both participants are mapped as agents in the structure, reversing authority relations

with *laisser* is not felicitous in the cases where authority is relevant, as we have seen in the authorise scenarios with the pre-V structure for *laisser*.

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