

# The Linguistic Expression of Causation<sup>\*</sup>

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Causal relations are imposed by humans on the input from the world, and the linguist's task is to understand what it is about language that enables speakers to use it to describe their causal perception. (Reinhart 2000: 38, to appear)

## 1. Introduction

The main claim of this paper is that causation, as commonly understood in the philosophical and psychological literature, is not fully expressed in natural language predicates. The standard scheme for causation matches neither the syntactic structure projected by causative predicates nor their lexical semantics. What a predicate *can* do is emulate causation by other means, albeit imperfectly.

As a point of departure, we should provide a definition of causation. Any theory of causation (in the general sense, rather than the narrow linguistic sense) adopts the clauses in (1a) and (1b) below. In addition, a dependency must hold between the causing event and the caused event, in that the caused event takes place as a consequence of the causing event. Perhaps the best-known formulation of this dependency is due to Lewis's (1973) counterfactual theory of causation, which can be summarized as in (1c).

- (1) a. Causation is a relation between a two events: a causing event and a caused event.
- b. Causation has a temporal dimension: the causing event must precede the caused event.
- c. Causation is counterfactual: if the causing event had not occurred, the caused event would not have occurred either.<sup>1</sup>

There are numerous complications with the exact formulation of the dependency between caused event and causing event. We will mostly ignore these, as the clauses in (1a) and (1b) are sufficient to develop our argument.

It is important to realize that theories of causation are not theories about the world, but theories about human psychology and in particular about how humans understand the world. Consider a simple example. Suppose that a window breaks as a result of John swinging a hammer against it. Humans have the intuition that John's swinging the hammer caused the window to break, but that it is absurd to claim that John's mother meeting John's father caused the window to break. However, if John's mother had not met John's father, the window would not have broken either. In other words, the definition of causation in (1c) cannot make a distinction between the two claims under discussion, even though *we* clearly consider one true and the other false. This disconnect between the definition in (1c) and

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<sup>1</sup> A less intuitive but more adequate formulation of the counterfactual condition would read "If the caused event did not occur, then it must be the case that the causing event did not occur either".