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Between Causative and Passive: Agentivity in the Affective Construction

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Abstract: This brief discussion paper is concerned with the sequence [*have* NP V_{pp}] and its distinction into a causative and a passive construction, which hinges on the (non-)agentivity of the subject participant, so that the sequence can be seen as ambiguous in that respect. Instead of analyzing these uses as two different constructions, I propose a unified analysis as instances of the affective construction. This construction has the functional potential of putting primary focus on secondary participants, so-called afficiary participants. The potential ambiguity with regard to the agentivity of these participants is not an issue in usage, as it is only evoked as part of the conceptual content in the background.

Keywords: semantic roles, causation, voice, construal

1 Introduction

It has often been claimed that sequences consisting of the verb *have*, a noun phrase, and a past participle are ambiguous in several respects, which can be illustrated by the constructed examples in (1). First, the sequence can have a dynamic (1b–1d) or stative interpretation (1e). Second, the sequence is ambiguous with regard to the agentivity of the subject participant: It can be the agent of the expressed action (1d), it can be the maleficiary or a similar type of participant (1c), and it can be an indirect causer (1b) (e.g. de Acosta 2013; Chomsky 1965; Johannsen 2021; Palmer 1988; Poldauf 1967).

- (1)
- a. I had my bags packed.
 - b. I had my bags packed by the housekeeper to have time for breakfast.
 - c. I had my bags packed by my ex-boyfriend and thrown on the street.
 - d. I had my bags packed in five minutes.
 - e. I had my bags packed all the time.

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In the following brief discussion, I will focus on the ambiguity with regard to the agentivity of the subject participant, especially on the difference between the interpretation in (1b), which is usually categorized as a causative construction, and the interpretation in (1c), which has been labeled as a kind of passive in the literature. I will argue that the two are best described as one single construction, which has the functional potential of putting primary focus on an afficiary argument (the subject), and in which the agentivity of this subject participant is ambiguous, or rather vague or underspecified. From a usage-based perspective, there is no need for speakers of English to avoid this ambiguity, for two reasons. First, the construction has a functional range that is clearly delimited from causative constructions, in that any notion of causation is always in the background, and second, specific instances of the construction are rarely ambiguous in their usage context.

2 Causative Versus Passive

In contrast to the existing literature, I claim that examples (1b) and (1c) are not instances of two different constructions, but instances of one construction, which I call the affactive construction (Johannsen 2021, To appear). This analysis results, first, from the unreliability of proposed tests to distinguish causative from passive uses, and, second, from the observation that all uses of the affactive construction have in common that their subject participant is an afficiary, i.e. a secondary, peripheral participant such as recipient, beneficiary, maleficiary, or possessor.¹ In addition to being an afficiary, the subject participant can have a role of indirect agent or causer, but this role is always in the background.

Let us first consider a diagnostic to distinguish causative from passive interpretations. Inoue (1995: 75–76) argues that the subject of a *have*-NP- V_{pp} -sequence with causative interpretation can occur in the cleft construction *What NP did was ...*, as in (2a), while the subject of a sequence with passive interpretation can appear in the cleft construction *What happened to NP was ...*, as in (2b).

- (2) a. John had the car washed.
 What John did was have the car washed.
 *What happened to John was that he had the car washed.
- b. John had his savings wiped out.
 *What John did was have his savings wiped out.
 What happened to John was that he had his savings wiped out.

¹ Zúñiga (2011: 329) defines afficiaries as “typically animate participants [...] whose state or condition changes due to some state of affairs [...] without these participants being that state of affairs’ patient”.

This test is not reliable for *have*-NP- V_{pp} -sequences, however. There are many cases for which neither of the cleft constructions appropriately reflects the meaning of the original construction, as in the examples in (3).²

- (3) a. She's had a kidney removed.
 ?What she did was have a kidney removed.
 ?What happened to her was that she had a kidney removed.
- b. All babies have stuff knitted for them.
 ?What all babies do is have stuff knitted for them.
 ?What happens to all babies is that they have stukkitted for them
- c. They're having a new bathroom put in.
 ?What they're doing is they're having a new bathroom put in.
 ?What's happening to them is that they're having a new bathroom put in.

Another problem with this test is that it is based on the intuition of the analyst. In observational data, the combination of either cleft construction with a *have*-NP- V_{pp} -sequence seems to be rare – there are no occurrences in the COCA (Davies 2008) nor in the Spoken BNC2014 (Love et al. 2017). This indicates that these cleft constructions are not well-suited as paraphrases of the active construction.

What the two pseudo-clefts express is agentivity ('someone does something') versus non-agentivity/patienthood ('something happens to someone') of the subject participant, similar to the agent-focused question *What did [agent] do?* and patient-focused question *What happened to [patient]?* used in experiments by Brooks and Tomasello (1999) to elicit the active transitive construction and the passive construction. The affective does not go well together with the patient-focused cleft *What happened to [patient] was ...* since the subject participant in uses of the affective is never a patient, but always an afficiary, i.e. a recipient, beneficiary, possessor etc. Uses of the affective construction also do not usually match the agent-focused cleft *What [agent] did was ...* because the subject participant in affective uses never is the immediate agent of the expressed event.

But why do the examples in (2) seem to function in the cleft constructions? This can be explained by seeing the roles of agent and patient as proto-roles, which are higher-order generalizations across different verbs and their arguments in the form of prototypically organized cluster concepts, as proposed by Dowty (1991).³ The

² The examples are based on actually occurring uses in the Spoken BNC2014.

³ Dowty (1991: 572) proposes a preliminary list of properties for proto-agent (1. volitional involvement in the event or state, 2. sentience (and/or perception), 3. causing an event or change of state in another participant, 4. movement (relative to the position of another participant), 5. exists independently of the event named by) and proto-patient (1. undergoes change of state,

patient-focused cleft seems to work in cases in which the subject participant is adversely affected, for example in (4a). Apparently, the subject participant is non-agentive enough (by being non-volitionally involved and clearly not causing the event) and patient-like enough (by clearly being causally affected) to be used in the patient-focused cleft. The agent-focused cleft, on the other hand, seems possible when the subject participant, in addition to its affciary role, is an indirect agent that volitionally initiates a service, as in (4b), which apparently makes it agentive enough.

- (4) a. I had a brick thrown through my classroom window.
 *What I did was have a brick thrown through my classroom window.
 What happened to me was that I had a brick thrown through my classroom window.
- b. I had my hair cut.
 What I did was have my hair cut.
 *What happened to me was that I had my hair cut.

Most subject participants in uses of the affactive construction, however, are exactly in between being agentive and non-agentive. This is, for example, the case in the context of medical treatments, in which the affactive construction is frequently used.⁴ In these uses, the subject participant can be classified as the possessor of the body part to which something is done (5a), the source from which something is extracted (5b) or the goal into which something is put in (5c), all of which can be categorized under the affciary role. Additionally, in the typical medical treatment situation, the subject participants have some degree of agentivity, in that they indirectly cause the event by seeking medical advice and are volitionally involved by consenting to the treatment. At the same time, they show some similarity to patients, in that they are causally affected and indirectly undergo a change of state.

- (5) a. he'd just had his ankle operated [Spoken BNC2014: SN33]
 b. she's just had her gallstones removed or something [Spoken BNC2014: SDJ9]
 c. I've got a coil now [...] it was quite painful having it inserted [Spoken BNC2014: SFLB]

An even lower degree of agentivity appears with uses such as in Extract 1. Here, the subject participants are not causing or initiating the event in any way, but they are consenting to it. Thus, the only aspect of agentivity that is left in these

2. incremental theme, 3. causally affected by another participant, 4. stationary relative to movement of another participant, 5. does not exist independently of the event, or not at all).

4 22.43% of the 816 uses of the affactive construction in the Spoken BNC2014.

cases is some degree of volition. In any case, the subject participant is an afficiary argument. The frame that is evoked here is the CREATE PHYSICAL ARTWORK frame, which includes the frame element REPRESENTED, i.e. the thing or person that is photographed, which is a type of afficiary argument. In order to assign primary focal prominence to this frame element, the affactive construction is used, while the afficiary argument has low prominence in the active construction, where it is expressed by an oblique.⁵

Extract 1: Library [Spoken BNC2014: SC3M]

S0440: both (.) and it's funny cos **we're having photos taken** now it's for the reading bits for our erm for the reading for the library gonna have pictures of staff reading in the library

S0439: oh god why?

S0440: cos they just want it done like that anyway **he had his photo taken** the other day and erm the librarian said I actually put it in black and white for you she says because erm you were a bit red on the day cos it was that really hot day she said you looked a bit hot and he looked and he went I would have preferred the word smouldering

I argue that all uses of the affactive construction share this function of putting primary focus⁶ on an afficiary argument, despite varying degrees of agentivity of this subject participant. Interestingly, the subject participants in the two examples in (4) can also be construed with the opposite degrees of agentivity, given the appropriate context. In the constructed example (6a), the afficiary becomes agentive, as they volitionally initiate the throwing of the brick. In (6b), on the other hand, the afficiary becomes non-agentive.

- (6) a. I had a brick thrown through my classroom window in order to intimidate my students.
 b. I had my hair cut by my friends after I had fallen asleep at the party.

It can thus be argued that the affactive construction is ambiguous with regard to the agentivity of the afficiary subject participant. Why is this ambiguity tolerated in the English language? I will briefly answer this question in the following section.

⁵ About half of the active uses of *take (a) photos(s)* in the Spoken BNC2014 (47.95%) include the frame element *Represented* as an oblique, e.g. *can you take a photo of us here?* [Love et al. 2017: S96L] or *a lot of people would've taken photos of the food they're eating* [Love et al. 2017: SFG3].

⁶ As described by Langacker (2008: 70–73).

3 Agentivity in the Background

For speakers in situated usage, there is no need to avoid this ambiguity, since any agentive role of the afficiary is usually in the background in uses of the affective construction. In a dataset of 816 instances of the affective construction in informal conversations from the Spoken BNC2014, there are no indications of misunderstandings, so that none of the interlocutors asks, for example, “Did you want it to happen?” or “Did you ask for it to be done to you?” etc., which would indicate that the use of the affective construction is ambiguous to them. I suggest that the agentivity of the afficiary is either clear from the context⁷ or irrelevant.

In order to illustrate that the agentive role of the afficiary is in the background, let us focus on the central use of the affective construction, which is in the context of service situations.⁸ In the Spoken BNC2014 dataset, 562 out of 816 instances (69%) evoke the service frame, which includes subtypes such as hairdressing, beauty or medical care, technical maintenance, or house maintenance. The recipient of the service is a salient participant in these contexts and receives primary focus in the affective construction; their (potential) role as an indirect causer can be regarded as part of the conceptual content in the background, but it is not in the foreground. One kind of evidence for this construal is the use of the affective construction in the progressive, as in the examples in (7).

- (7)
- a. so anyway we were going this Sunday but now **they’re having a new bathroom put in** and new windows in their house so they’ve just moved in to –ANONnameM’s parents for about a week [Spoken BNC2014: S7FK]
 - b. while **I was having my windows replaced** I had a f- fine view of the street outside [Spoken BNC2014: SRWD]
 - c. yeah no I to be honest if **I’m having something done** I’d rather have it done properly [...] if I have a massage I I like to really feel it [Spoken BNC2014: SGAN]

The process that is imperfectivized by the progressive (Langacker 2008: 160) and then zoomed in on is the reception of the service, not the commissioning of the service. If we were to paraphrase the affective in (7a), ‘they’re receiving the service of replacing their bathroom and windows’ rather than ‘they’re commissioning the service of replacing their bathroom and windows’ captures the meaning of the

⁷ Context in my understanding includes the linguistic co-text, but also the situational context and general knowledge, e.g. about service situations such as hairdressing.

⁸ Stefanowitsch (2001) and Gilquin (2010) have pointed out that the *have*-causative typically evokes a service frame.

construct. The progressive can never be used to profile the preceding phase of causation, i.e. commission of the service. In Cognitive Grammar terminology, this preceding commissioning of the service can be described as part of the maximal scope that is evoked by the affective when used in the context of service situations. The different aspects of the construal imposed by the affective construction in (7a) can be described as follows:⁹

Maximal scope:	they commissioned builders to put in a new bathroom and new windows in their house
Immediate scope:	the builders are putting in a new bathroom and new windows in their house
Profile:	they, their house, new bathroom and new windows being put in
Primary focus:	they
Secondary focus:	new bathroom and new windows

In order to bring an agentive role of the afficiary to the foreground, other constructions will be used instead of the affective, e.g. *ask so. to do sth.* (8a), or in addition to the affective, e.g. *arrange to have sth. done* (8b).

- (8) a. **Ask your hairdresser to cut your hair** when it's dry so you see exactly how your locks react to the layers. [COCA: MAG 2003]
I think she'd **arranged to have that nicked** [Spoken BNC2014: S6MQ]

4 Concluding Remarks

The above discussion has omitted some issues, for example the distinction between ambiguity and vagueness (or underspecification). Instead of describing it as a case of ambiguity, one could argue that the abstract affective construction is underspecified for the agentivity of the afficiary participant. Further, I have not addressed uses such as *have so. arrested/assassinated/disqualified/kidnapped*, which differ from the affective construction in that the indirect causation of the event is not in the background. This does not undermine, however, the general point made above: that the causative and passive *have-NP-V_{pp}*-constructions are best analyzed as one construction – the affective construction –, whose central function is to assign primary focus to a peripheral participant, with varying degrees of agentivity in the background.

⁹ This sketchy description could also be visualized in a diagram, as is typically done by Langacker in Cognitive Grammar analyses.

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