

WHEN CAUSATION IS MANIPULATION: THE CASE OF CAUSATIVE GET

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ABSTRACT: *Throughout history, the norm of reciprocity has shaped human psychology, emphasizing the role of cues such as debt, favor, bargain and obligation in governing social relations. Manipulation premises are widely-accepted in analyzing agency theories and decoding mind-control techniques. Awareness of the effectiveness of these manipulative schemes is essential to counter verbal manipulation and isolate the necessary features that make up the manipulative scenario. Such curious use is prevalent in causal discourse, highlighting the intricacy between causation and manipulation. The case of the English verb GET is illustrative of the manipulative meaning which characterizes the causative use of this verb in the International Corpus of English.*

KEYWORDS: *Agency, Causation, Desirability, Force-dynamics, Manipulation.*

Introduction:

The notion of causation covers several disciplines and involves different fields of knowledge. From philosophy to psychology to linguistics, the term has embraced many definitions and received each time number of conceptualizations. A broad characterization models causation as a counterfactual relation between a causing event and a caused event (Shibatani, 1976; 2002). Similarly, Comrie (1981) describes causative events with reference to the role of the Causer and the Causee in defining the meaning and distribution of causative constructions. In the same vein, Dixon (2000: 62) identifies a set of scalar parameters along which causative constructions tend to vary. Besides intentionality and willingness, the list of parameters includes control and effort, among many others.

Interpersonal causation can be described by means of several different causative constructions, with different meanings and distinct uses. More importantly, labels such as ‘direct’, ‘indirect’, ‘strong’, ‘weak’, ‘distant’, or ‘contactive’ cannot account for these differences or clarify the type of causative action undertaken in each construction. Indeed, the use of the English periphrastic causative verb GET in interpersonal causative discourse attests to the emergence of a whole new range of salient concepts at the interplay between agentive causation and mental manipulation.

Desirability of human agency:

It is the proper of human beings to act and interact with the intention to fulfill a desired interest. This distinctive feature of human agency shapes also the description and functioning of interpersonal causative relations. Interpersonal causation may involve, however, conflicting interests, raising, therefore, the question of the use of manipulative techniques as means to an end, rather than ends in themselves.

Manipulability theory of causation:

Manipulability theory has been gaining grounds over other philosophical views on the nature of causal relations. Integrated within a more comprehensive theory of action, manipulability accounts for causal relations in terms of manipulative actions. Collingwood (1940), for instance, claims that the original and fundamental sense of ‘cause’ occurs in the action of human beings in relation to other human beings, which involves a voluntary agent bringing about an effect through voluntary actions. Accordingly, the notion of causation gives the impression of ‘compelling’ or ‘causing’ someone to do something either by argument, or command, or threat or the like. Following this view, Gasking (1996) advocates that the very idea of causation is “*essentially connected with the manipulative technique for producing results*” and “*a statement about the cause of something is very closely connected with ‘recipes’ for producing it or for preventing it*” (p. 110).

In accordance with this view, von Wright (1968) grounds the concept of manipulative causation in the concept of human agency. The relation of cause and effect is, therefore, mediated through the concept of ‘intentional interference’. To act, according to von Wright, is to bring about or to prevent a change in the world. More recently, Woodward (2003) offers an account of causation that relies fundamentally on the concept of ‘intervention’. Specifically, a variable (X) is a cause of a variable (Y) if there exists some intervention variable (Z) which can be used to ascertain that (X) made the change in (Y) happen.

Pursuing this analysis one step further, one may argue that manipulative acting underlines causal thinking. The conception of causative relations as manipulative processes intended to produce desired results would clearly distinguish accidental events from causal ones, as well as openly capture the intricate dependency between human agency and causal behavior. Achieving a targeted result seems to be the core incentive of every human action.

Defined as “*the human capability to exert influence over one’s functioning and the course of events by one’s actions*” (Bandura, 2009: 8), human agency can be exercised through three different modes: personal, proxy, and collective (*ibid*). Both personal and collective agency modes refer to cases in which the agent may exert direct influence over conditions that affect his/her life. Whereas, the exercise of agency through proxy relates to a chain-acting mode which helps the agent mold circumstances beyond his/her immediate control.

Regardless of the enacted mode, belief in the feasibility of the intended outcome is a core characteristic of human agency. To be an agent is to influence intentionally one’s sphere of functioning through action plans and strategies for realizing them (Bandura, 2008). But, “*unless people believe they can produce desired effects and forestall undesired ones by their actions, they have little incentive to act or to persevere in the face of difficulties*” (Bandura, 2009: 9). Clearly, actions are to be understood not by pointing at their remote or abstract causes, but by properly interpreting their intentions, that is by appealing to the agent’s reason for action and accessing his/her appropriate beliefs and desires which underlie the intention to perform the action. Purpose-related agency governs the functioning of interpersonal causation, which involves forming intentions and planning actions to reach desired outcomes.

The desirability parameter:

Human agency being goal-oriented, it is necessary that an action is characterized as desirable or undesirable in nature. Desirability stands out as a core parameter governing human agency. The agent's willingness to act seems to be intimately related to his/her interest in the outcome of the action. This feature of human agency shapes to a large extent the nature of interpersonal causation. Rather than obeying 'orders' or conforming to 'commands', human beings tend to take 'directions' or to follow 'instructions'.

Such distinctiveness of human relations may easily account for the shift in causal reasoning from directive ordering to manipulative guiding. Wierzbicka (2006) rightly observes that the idea of "getting someone to do something" suggests a setup that evokes a person plainly complying with the will of another, rather than bending blindly to an adversary will. The semantics of causative GET seems to evolve around a conceptual frame related to manipulative setup rather than coercive effect.

A main characteristic of manipulative discourse relates to the balance of power at place. Typically, manipulation displays a causative scenario wherein the Causer undergoes a shift in power in favor of the Causee. To counter this lack of control over the causative situation, the Causer should persuade the Causee of the desirability of the causative act in order to obtain his/her compliance. Often, such compliance is obtained through manipulative premises which disguise the causative act into a self-illusory scheme.

Definition of manipulation:

Manipulation is a subtly-used and somehow unconsciously-applied procedure. Few language users would, indeed, consider their own discourse 'manipulative', and even fewer would be able to discern manipulative functions in verbal communication. The claim that manipulation is an intrinsically goal-oriented phenomenon designed to satisfy the interest of the speaker has often been considered as one key feature of manipulation. Saussure and Schultz (2005), for instance, stress the fundamental correlation between the notion of speaker interest and the intention of manipulative effect:

[...] communication is manipulative when the speaker retains some relevant information, or provides the correct information in order for the hearer to conclude that he should behave in a way which favours the speaker's interests, without being aware of it. (2005: 119-120).

Broadly defined, an interest is the manifestation of an intention to accomplish a certain action or the expression of an inherent desire to fulfill a particular goal. Following Maillat and Oswald (2009), the notion of interest can be defined as "*a goal that an individual might reasonably be taken to be willing to attain*" (p. 353). Accordingly, manipulation refers to the intention to pursue a particular path in order to satisfy a personal interest.

In the same vein, van Dijk (2006) stresses the characterization of manipulative discourse as using power to persuade the audience to do or to believe things that are in the best interests of the manipulator, but against the best interests of the manipulee (p. 360). This description of manipulation in terms of conflicting interests is far from being accurate. Parents, for instance, often try to disguise the bitter taste of pills into some sweet food in order to get their children to take the medicine. Though it satisfies the manipulator's interest, the manipulative scheme

does not necessarily violate the interests of the manipulated person. Maillat & Oswald (2009) rightly argue that “*manipulation (...) does not require the satisfaction of the speaker’s interest at the expense of the hearer’s interest*” (p. 354, emphasis in original).

Still, manipulation, as a goal-oriented procedure, involves the use of power in order to exercise a form of mental control by means of verbal discourse. For van Dijk, manipulation entails domination, as it “*involves not only power, but specifically abuse of power, that is, domination*” (2006: 360). Typically, mind control could be exercised through persuasion and rewarding in case of compliance or dissuasion and punishment in case of noncompliance. Such manipulative forms entail a clear description of the balance of power at place, which requires, in turn, a distinction between overt and covert manipulation. In fact, the effectiveness of overt manipulation is directly proportional to the balance of power, as it increases in contexts where the balance of power shifts in favor of the manipulator. Inversely, the use of covert manipulative techniques seems to prevail in contexts in which the balance of power does not favour the manipulator.

Manipulative traces in causative discourse:

The verb GET is one of the most intriguing verbs in the English lexicon. Besides its high frequency and rich polysemy, causative uses of the verb GET seem to display many covert manipulative cues, such as the foot-in-the-door tactic, the pique technique or the door-in-the-face cue, to name just a few. Crucial to the use of these techniques is the existence of a biased balance of forces which clearly disadvantages the manipulator. To counter this difficulty, the manipulator disguises his/her intentional pursuit of self-interests into a seemingly natural course of events. The prevalence of such manipulative cues attests to the existence of an intimate relation between causal discourse and manipulative behavior, reflecting the intricate link between linguistic structures and instances of language use.

Lexico-Semantic features of causative GET:

Lexical findings relevant to the use of collocation seem to corroborate the emergence of a manipulative reading with causative GET. Conceived as a pointer to meaning rather than generator of meaning, the occurrence of two or more words within the same linguistic frame helps identify common lexico-semantic patterns whose regularity shapes to a large extent meaning construction. The analysis of the causative occurrences of the verb GET in the British component of the International Corpus of English (henceforth ICE-GB) clearly points to some general tendencies emerging from the corpus data with respect to collocation. The most striking feature relates to the idea of difficulty in achieving the desired outcome. Indeed, the verb ‘*try*’ occurs in no less than 8 times with causative GET in the ICE-GB corpus¹. Other indicators of difficulty and effort like ‘*manage*’, ‘*succeed*’ and ‘*attempt*’ occur twice throughout the corpus. The list of words or expressions from the same semantic field occurring in the corpus includes: ‘*desperate efforts*’, ‘*particularly hard*’, ‘*difficult*’, ‘*a lot of work*’, ‘*find the time*’, ‘*successful*’.

As a matter of fact, success cannot be taken for granted if the expected outcome is difficult to achieve, due to some resistance or refusal to comply. This difficulty involved with GET might account for the noticeable presence of words expressing uncertainty (e.g. ‘*think*’, ‘*normally*’, ‘*perhaps*’, ‘*probably*’ and ‘*seem*’), as well as downtoners such as: ‘*at least*’, ‘*or so*’, ‘*slightly*’,

¹ The overall frequency of GET in the ICE-GB does not exceed 86 examples.

'some' or 'somehow', and the absence of intensifiers like: 'indeed', 'deeply', or 'completely'. The mounting frequency of such features challenges any coercive description of the interaction scenario, as well as reveals a clear shift in causal reasoning from directive ordering to manipulative guiding.

Anna Wierzbicka, though speaking from another perspective, rightly observes that the idea of 'getting someone to do something' implies that "*the causees do something not because they want to do it but because somebody else wants them to do it*" (2006: 178). The causative scenario acknowledges, however, the possibility that the Causee may refuse to comply, together with the condition that the Causer cannot impose his/her will over the Causee to overcome his/her resistance or unwillingness to comply.

Given this uncertainty as to the outcome of the action, Wierzbicka fairly concludes to the emergence of a manipulative reading for causative GET: "*although the action is done willingly [...], the strategy used by the causer smacks a little of manipulation, for the causee's action is brought about by the causer's, rather than the causee's will*" (*Ibid.* p. 179). Nonetheless, the author refutes the assumption that causative GET may display 'a truly manipulative scenario' on the basis that (i) the Causer does not conceal his/her goal, and (ii) the Causee does not act against his/her will. This being said, the distinction between covert and overt manipulation, as well as the description of manipulation in terms of non-conflicting interests may account for the validity of a 'truly' manipulative analysis of causative GET.

Indeed, the essence of causative GET meaning seems to suggest a non-coercive interactional scenario, whereby a person complying with the will of another continues to believe that his/her will was free. To mirror this pseudo-freedom, the Causer should disguise the causative act into a manipulative self-illusory scheme. Nonetheless, the interactional scenario does consign the Causee in the role of a mere 'instrument' whose action is triggered by the Causer's will, rather than his/her own freewill.

Techniques of manipulation:

Social psychology refers to the way people see themselves and enter into relationship with each other. Typically, people tend to maintain a sense of personal freedom along which they socially behave and interact with others. Preserving one's ability to act willingly and freely seems to be the leitmotiv of human behavior and the basis of social relationships. This principle of psychological reactance explains why people usually pursue the opposite course of action when they perceive efforts to reduce their freedom to act, or endure pressures to make a certain choice rather than another (Brehm and Brehm, 1981).

The foot-in-the-door technique:

When constrained, a person may act against his/her moral values. Without strong coercion, however, few would betray their inner beliefs, unless submitted to efficient techniques of manipulation. The talent of the manipulator lies in his/her ability to maintain the subject under the illusion of freedom and self-control, either by persuading the subject of the benefits of a dubious action or by disguising an undesirable act into a desirable expression of freewill.

Curiously enough, a consented compliance to an external volition brings about an even stronger commitment than a coercive submission, because the illusion of freedom demands a rational

explanation or an emotional motivation of the supposedly voluntary choice, which results in an increasing of the commitment degree. In fact, the seemingly willful submission confines the agent in his/her decision and forces him/her to mold his/her behavior to comply with the required action.

This classic foot-in-the-door tactic is one of the mostly-recognized manipulative techniques. Introduced to social psychology five decades ago by Freedman and Fraser (1966), the foot-in-the-door trick reveals to be effective in increasing compliance with a request. Essentially, the technique consists of securing agreement to a small initial request in order to increase the likelihood of compliance with a second, larger request².

The intricacy of the effect has spawned a large amount of research concerned with the theoretical as well as the applied implications of the technique (Beaman, et al. 1983; Dillard, et al. 1984; Fern, et al. 1986). All these reviews have consistently concluded to the validity of the effect, which seems to operate more regularly than would be expected by mere chance or pure assumption.

Indeed, causal discourse is particularly tinted with manipulative effect. The occurrences of the verb GET in the ICE-GB corpus unveil the manipulative dimension of the semantics of this verb, confirming thus the intimate link between causation and manipulation. The following two sentences display a typical foot-in-the-door manipulative scheme.

1. Their first sort of phase is to get you to go through it as a delegate, to experience as a delegate
<S1A-060 #005:1:B>

2. I could put her in tomorrow at three, at one o'clock, and then try and get her to come next week as well
<S1A-083 #203:1:B>

The multi-phase process enacted in (1) is manipulative in nature. Rather than attributing a clearly-established mission, the manipulative scheme opts for a cautious step-by-step involvement strategy. The delegate position is not the targeted objective, but only a phase within a chain preparing for more important assignments requiring higher commitment.

Similarly, requesting a favor on a weekly-basis may arouse a strong resistance and increase the tendency of the manipulee to reject the demand. A more efficient strategy would apply sequentially, using the first small favor as a way to take the bait and engage the manipulee into this dynamic of approval. Indeed, one's tendency to comply with a large request would easily follow, once an affirmative response for an initial favor has been obtained. Both cases seem to concur with the foot-in-the-door requisites, as they display a slowly but surely manipulative approach.

The door-in-the-face procedure:

Another manipulative strategy often used in marketing and negotiations is known as the door-in-the-face technique. Conversely, the door-in-the-face procedure works by reciprocal concession effect, in that the requester precedes the target request by a larger request, before

² Like the prototypical door-to-door salesperson, the requester is said to get his or her "foot in the door" with the first request.

accepting to make a concession and lower the demand into the initially-targeted smaller request. This revised offer is often perceived as a favor to which the manipulee should positively respond in order to compensate for his/her initial refusal.

Researchers have suggested that the rationale behind this compliance-gaining procedure is that people tend to agree to a second request because rejecting the first request causes feelings of guilt, which could be alleviated by agreeing to the second request. Several experiments have demonstrated the effectiveness of the rejection-then-moderation procedure for inducing compliance with a request for a favor (Cialdini, et al. 1975). Traces of this technique can be found in everyday language, with a special reference to causal discourse. Throughout the ICE-GB corpus, the verb GET displays a number of manipulative cases involving the use of the door-in-the-face technique:

3. (...) you're very unlikely to get someone to commission you to write something unless you've already written and published quite a lot which I haven't <S1A-066 #117:1:B>

4. But I think you probably wouldn't be able to get people to work effectively for up to twelve hours <S1B-020 #159:1:A>

5. But I would have thought that with a reasonable bit of luck you should get at least one of them to go <S1B-025 #086:1:D>

What these examples have in common is the establishment of a manipulative scheme whereby the involvement of the manipulee is obtained through the use of the door-in-the-face technique. Indeed, commissioning someone to write something requires a solid publication record. For an unknown author to seek such a favor could only be interpreted as a cue to obtain a subsequent commission for a smaller demand, like reviewing or typing which require lower credentials. Similarly, asking a person to work for up to twelve hours when the average daily workload is limited to eight hours is a costly demand. Such an unusual request is unlikely to be satisfied unless lowered to a reasonable workload. Raising the expectation barrier serves, then, as a manipulative tool to obtain full-satisfaction of the initially-targeted demand. Likewise, example (4) shows a clear mismatch between the initial request (a group) and the final result (one person); ordering a whole group of people to go seems to be in opposition with the reasonable request of one person going. Consequently, the initial request serves as a door-in-the-face cue to guarantee the targeted request. The nominal '*luck*' and the adjective '*reasonable*' set the difference between what could be done and what is sought. Raising the barrier of demands is, therefore, a technique to secure the initially-targeted request.

The success of this manipulative process is either dubious or due to some sort of luck. The use of the conditional form in (3) or the modal form in (4) and (5), as well as the adverbials '*very unlikely*' (3) and '*probably*' (4), and the nominal '*luck*' (5) attest to the difficulty of the task and the uncertainty as to the outcome of the request, which are characteristics of the manipulative discourse.

The *pique* technique:

Manipulation may operate through another compliance procedure known as the *pique technique* (Santos, et al. 1994). The technique is designed to increase compliance in situations where

people typically pay little attention to the request or routinely reject it. Users of this tactic present individuals with an unexpected request, which takes them by surprise and disrupts their normative routine, such as requesting a strange favor or asking for an unusual amount of money. If successful, the procedure seems to lead to higher rates of compliance than a condition in which the request is presented in a predictable and uninteresting manner.

To demonstrate the effectiveness of the *pique* technique, Santos, et al. (1994) had students ask passersby for money, using either a traditional request ('a quarter' or 'any change') or an unusual request ('17 cents' or '37 cents'). A higher percentage of passersby gave money when presented with the unusual request than when approached with the traditional formula. Santos, et al. argued that the *pique* technique is effective because the unusual request disrupts the "*refusal script*" on which people typically rely in these situations. That is, most passersby have learned to not invest time and effort considering a panhandler's request. Rather, they respond to the situation with a cognitively efficient refusal or diversion of attention. This heuristic processing is disrupted when the panhandler presents an unusual request, which is said to 'pique' the passerby's attention (Burger, et al. 2007).

Findings from recent studies on compliance seem to corroborate with this description of the procedure. Researchers suggest that people typically rely on cognitive shortcuts, or *heuristics*, when responding to simple requests (Burger, et al. 2007; Cialdini & Goldstein, 2004). Rather than thoughtfully considering the merits of the request, most people rely on simple rules or scripts to guide their behavior, such as "I say 'No' to panhandlers". Similar observations on youth dating habits have also shown that French young women respond more positively to the request "*could you give me your 06³?*" than to the more typical formula: "*could you give me your cell phone number?*" Not only the nature of the request, but also the type of formulation may disrupt the attention of the addressee and influence his/her judgment, leading to higher rates of compliance than usual.

By confronting individuals with an unusual request or an uncommon form, the *pique* technique counts on the curiosity factor to counter the refusal script. Santos, et al. (1994) suggested that subsequent compliance is the result of "*arousing the target's curiosity and focusing attention onto the 'strange and unique' appeal*" (p. 763). The new focus of attention would lead to a decision that compliance is appropriate. Example (6) below is a particularly interesting illustration of this manipulative *pique* technique.

6. A disturbing example of the inaccuracy of psychiatric diagnosis was provided by Rosenhan (1973), when he and 7 colleagues were successful in getting themselves admitted to 12 mental hospitals for an average of 19 days. <W1A-007 #067:1>

Usually, people avoid mental institutions and even mental patients deny their need for medical treatment. The peculiarity of the situation lies in the contrast between the commonly-accepted belief that insanity is wicked and the curious self-demand to be declared insane. Faced with such a strange and unusual request, the manipulee undergoes a shift of focus which disrupts his/her cognitive heuristics and freezes the typical refusal script. Given this blurred state of mind, the manipulee opts for a more secure and less challenging approval script which satisfies the manipulator's interest. The success of the *pique* technique seems to depend on the element

³ French cell phone numbers all start with —06.

of surprise to lower the manipulee's defense mechanism, reducing, therefore, his/her likeliness to reject the request.

Less conclusive cases do exist as well, confirming the importance of the uncertainty factor which characterizes the use of causative GET. Example (7) below is particularly interesting, as the peculiarity of the response attests to the incongruity of the request.

7. Caroline is afraid of Nellie's attempts to get her to join in the nude dancing and runs off
<W2B-009 #103:1>

The essence of the *pique* technique is to divert the attention away from the request itself to focus on the oddness of the request. Joining a friend into a dance is a fair request if it wasn't for the nudity element. The absurdity of the request disrupts the manipulee's judgment capacity, leading to a state of panic which obstructs the refusal script; confused, the manipulee runs away to escape the manipulator's *pique*.

The *because* technique:

Another effective compliance enhancement technique is reliably obtained through rational explanation and logical justification. Studies have demonstrated that compliance could be increased when people are given a reason to elucidate the benefit of the action. Telling a person, for instance, that he needs to lower his blood pressure is not as effective as providing him with a supportive reason; Compliance is effectively increased if you say "*It is important for you to lower your blood pressure because it will reduce your chance of getting a heart attack*", than if you simply formulate the order "*You have to lower your blood pressure*" (Batson and Schwartz, 1999: 56).

People are indeed more compliant when a reasonable explanation is provided to induce certain behaviour or dissuade from particular deeds. This law of logic is prevailing in manipulative discourse where actions are mindfully-filtered prior to their accomplishment. Collocations involving causative conjunctions occur frequently with the verb GET, highlighting therefore its manipulative dimension. Example (8), below, clearly illustrates how the *because* technique operates.

8. Like the doctor in Bristol (...), she got me to touch fingers and noses, to hop on one leg and saw how I coordinated - or did not coordinate - arms and legs by performing simple tests
<W2B-001 #078:1>

The situation displays a request-and-compliance scenario. Far from being arbitrary, the *doctor's* commands follow a therapeutic procedure which flows necessarily from a sound medical knowledge. Introduced through the instrumental '*by*-clause', the movement coordination offers a reasonable explanation which would increase the manipulee's compliance. Providing the logical basis of an action reveals to be a powerful compliance-gaining technique, which triggers a manipulative reading of the verb GET.

CONCLUSION

Studies on the semantics of causative GET rarely acknowledge its manipulative dimension, viewing the question as part of the larger issue of causal reasoning. A finer analysis of the meaning of causative GET shows, however, that causal discourse is particularly tinted with manipulative effect. Typically, techniques of influence and forms of persuasion involve a clear

identification of the balance of power at place and a proper account of the desirability of the causative act.

The use of compliance-gaining techniques reveals to be a distinctive feature of causal discourse, which seems to prevail in the causative use of the verb GET throughout the ICE-GB corpus. Further research on the social, cognitive and discursive dimensions of manipulation helps identify the intricacy of the interplay between causal discourse and manipulative behavior, together with an illustration of the inherent relation between verbal communication and mental response.

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