English causative alternation and hierarchically structured lexicon

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This study addresses the challenges in explaining English causative alternation, a phenomenon where certain verbs can appear in both transitive and intransitive constructions without morphological change (e.g., *John broke the window* vs. *The window broke*). Although traditionally it has been believed that the alternation is governed by the semantic content of a lexical entry, clarifying the exact scope of this belief has proven difficult. Existing approaches relying on semantic classifications or lexical rules (e.g., causativization or decausativization) often fail to account for exceptions and lexical idiosyncrasies.

To tackle these challenges, the study proposes an analysis based on Sign-Based Construction Grammar (SBCG) and the feature structure mechanisms of Head-Driven Phrase Structure Grammar (HPSG). Instead of treating one alternant as the base from which the other is derived, the analysis posits that terminal lexemes inherit constraints from both their supertype lexemes and separate lexical entries. In this model, lexical entries contain minimal but crucial information (such as basic semantic relations), and full lexemes are built through multiple inheritance, combining constructional constraints and lexical specifications.

A key innovation is the use of feature unification within a type hierarchy to determine the possibility of alternation. Proto-role features like ACT (actor) and UND (undergoer) help systematize the linking between syntactic arguments and semantic roles without overgeneralization. Additionally, the KEY feature in HPSG semantics determines the focal relation that controls argument linking, allowing a flexible but precise account of when verbs alternate.

This approach effectively explains why some change-of-state verbs (like *break*) alternate, while others (like *kill* and *die*) do not, without treating exceptions as ad hoc or derivationally problematic. Lexical idiosyncrasies are accommodated by specifying different KEY features and inheritance paths at the level of the lexical entry. Furthermore, the framework explains why internally caused change-of-state verbs (e.g., *blossom*, *tremble*) resist causativization: their semantic structure links ACT and UND roles in a way incompatible with causative constructions.

In sum, by defining alternation elements model-theoretically within a rich but formally constrained lexicon, the study achieves a reconciliation between the productivity of causative alternation and the persistence of lexical exceptions, offering a rigorous and flexible grammatical account without appealing to external inferential mechanisms or purely semantic operations.