

Causative VP-omission in English*

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1. Introduction

In English, the causation verbs *make*, *let*, and *have* take [DP + uninflected VP] complements (Mittwoch 1990; Ritter and Rosen 1993, 1997). As parenthesised in (1), *make* (a) and *let* (b) allow the VP to be omitted; *have* (c) does not:¹

- (1) a. First I made Chris eat dinner, then I made Sam (eat dinner).
b. First I let Chris play outside, then I let Sam (play outside).
c. First I had Chris do my bidding, then I had Sam *(do my bidding).

We make three contributions regarding ‘causative VP-omission’. First, VP-omission (VPO) involves Null Complement Anaphora rather than Predicate Ellipsis (section 2). Second, the thematic role of the causee is more restricted with VPO than when the VP is present, in that it must be an agent (section 3). Third, while causative-*have* does not license VPO, for some speakers experiencer-*have* does (section 4). Section 5 concludes.

2. VP-omission is Null Complement Anaphora

This section argues that VPO is an instance of Null Complement Anaphora (NCA) involving a null VP pro-form ‘ \emptyset_{VP} ’, as indicated in (2):

- (2) a. I chopped the wood, because Sally made me \emptyset_{VP} . \emptyset = chop the wood
b. We’ll present in person if the travel rules let us \emptyset_{VP} . \emptyset = present in person

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¹Examples (1a,b) et seq. counterexemplify previous claims that such VP-omission is unacceptable in English (Craenenbroeck 2017: ex. 59h, Lobeck 1995:48).

We thus identify VPO as ‘deep’ rather than ‘surface’ anaphora (Hankamer and Sag 1976). In particular, VPO is not an instance of Predicate Ellipsis (PE, a.k.a. VP ellipsis) involving silenced syntactic structure. Example (3) contrasts PE (a) with NCA (b):

- (3) I asked Mary to give her toys away, but ...
 a. she refused to ~~give them~~ away.
 b. she refused \emptyset . \emptyset = to give them away

We make this argument by showing that VPO patterns with NCA and not PE on two key diagnostics: A'-movement and categorial restrictions.

A'-movement is possible out of PE (Haik 1987, Merchant 2013) but not NCA (Depiante 2000, 2018). As illustrated in (4), the internal structure of PE (a) allows the base position of A'-movement to be represented, where the atomic pro-form of NCA (b) does not:

- (4) I remember what Mary was willing to give away *t*, but I don't remember ...
 a. what she refused to ~~give away~~ *t*.
 b. *what she refused \emptyset .

VPO patterns with NCA. In (5) and (6), A'-movement is impossible out of the omitted VP:

- (5) I remember what Mary was willing to give away *t*, but I don't remember ...
 ... *what Bill made her \emptyset .
 (6) Whose dessert did Mary make John eat *t*?
 *And whose did she make Bill \emptyset ?

Covert A'-movement points to the same conclusion. In (7), an inverse scope reading can be derived via Quantifier Raising out of PE (a) but not NCA (b) (Depiante 2000, 2018). VPO (c) again patterns with NCA:

- (7) *Inverse scope context:*
 Each patient needed to be seen by some doctor or other, and by some other medic.
 So fortunately, some doctor volunteered to visit every patient, and some nurse...
 a. ... did ~~volunteer to visit~~ [every patient]_{QR}, too. (PE)
 b. *... volunteered \emptyset , too. (*NCA)
 c. *... made the radiographer \emptyset , too. (*VPO)

Turning to the second diagnostic, note first that the target of PE is not restricted by category. As (8) shows, not only VP but also AdjP, DP and PP predicates can be elided:

- (8) Mary is [~~VP crying~~] / [~~AdjP teary~~] / [~~DP a star~~] / [~~PP in DC~~], and
 John is [~~VP crying~~] / [~~AdjP teary~~] / [~~DP a star~~] / [~~PP in DC~~], too.

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NCA, however, generally is restricted by category (Haynie 2010). In (9), *try* permits NCA of complements of category TP, but not complements of category DP; likewise for *agree* and CP complements vs. PP complements in (10):

- (9) a. John wasn't good enough [_{TP} to win], but at least he tried \emptyset_{TP} .
b. *John wasn't a fan of [_{DP} the soup], but at least he tried \emptyset_{DP} .
- (10) a. It was suggested [_{CP} that we should leave], and I agreed \emptyset_{CP} .
b. *There was much disagreement [_{PP} with the decision], but I agreed \emptyset_{PP} .

VPO, like NCA, is restricted by category. *Make* combines with predicates of many categories, shown in the first halves of (11); but as shown in the second halves, only VP complements can be omitted:

- (11) a. Mary made John [_{VP} audition], and his agent made him \emptyset_{VP} , too.
b. *Up* made John [_{AdjP} teary], *then *Toy Story* made him \emptyset_{AdjP} , too.
c. Mary made John [_{DP} a star], *and his agent made him \emptyset_{DP} , too.
d. Mary made John [_{PP} into a star], *and his agent made him \emptyset_{PP} , too.

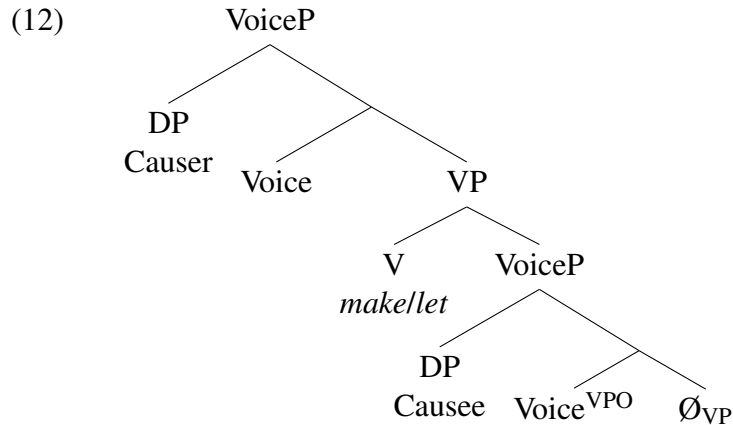
Thus VPO is best analysed as a kind of NCA, not PE.² Adapting the pro-form analysis of NCA (Hankamer and Sag 1976, Depiante 2000, Haynie 2010) to VPO yields (12). In the complement of *make/let*, a null VP pro-form ' \emptyset_{VP} ' can be selected by a dedicated Voice head 'Voice^{VPO}':

²It is of course possible for the causation verb to be elided as part of PE, licensed by T (cf. Lobeck 1995, Aelbrecht 2010), as diagnosed by A'-movement in (i):

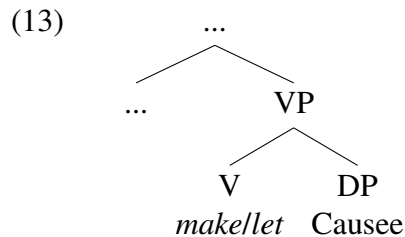
- (i) I remember what Mary made me eat *t*, and what JOHN did ~~make me eat~~ *t*, too.

PE can also be induced below *make* (ii), since constituent negation (a) and auxiliaries (b) independently license PE (Williams 1994, Potsdam 1997):

- (ii) a. I remember what Mary made me eat *t*, and what she made me **NOT** eat-*t*.
b. In my screenplay, I remember which monster I let Ed be eaten by *t*.
?I just can't remember which monster I let Mary **be** eaten-by-*t*.



Before moving on, we argue against an alternative analysis of VPO—one based in turn on an alternative analysis of NCA. NCA has been analysed as plain intransitivity (Shopen 1972, Grimshaw 1979, Napoli 1983). On this view, anaphora is mediated semantico-pragmatically without null pro-forms in the syntax. For VPO, a parallel analysis would take the causative verb to be a ‘plain transitive’ with no further complement, as sketched in (13):



However, a plain transitive analysis of VPO faces two fatal problems. First, *make* and *let*, when combined with VPO, have different meanings from their bare transitive counterparts. Transitive *make* is not a bieventive causative: “*I made a band*” (in an out-of-the-blue context) means only that you created one, not that you made it do something. Meanwhile the simple transitive counterpart of *let* means ‘lease’ (at least in British English); e.g. “*They let grotty flats.*”

A second problem for a plain transitive analysis of VPO is that *make+VPO* is structurally like *make+VP* and not like bare transitive *make*. *Make+VP* resists passivisation (Sheehan and Cyrino 2022), and continues to do so with VPO (14):

(14) *I didn’t want to eat the haggis, but I was made (eat the haggis) (by my hosts).

By contrast, bare transitive *make* happily passivizes:

(15) A cake was made for the occasion.

With a plain transitive analysis of VPO facing these insurmountable problems, we maintain the pro-form analysis in (12). Still, a plain transitive analysis seems accurate in

nearby circumstances. Perception verbs take [DP + uninflected VP] complements (16), but do not license VPO. If they did, (17) and (18) would not have contradictory interpretations:

- (16) I saw/heard/watched/smelt/felt/witnessed [Mary eat the last sandwich].
- (17) A: Did the suspect leave the house?
B: #I didn't **see** him \emptyset , even though I was watching him all day.
- (18) A: Did Mary hear John go to the loo at 3am?
B: #She didn't **hear** him \emptyset , although she was listening to him snore all night.

Instead, (17) and (18) can only involve plain transitive uses of *see* and *hear*.

A plain transitive analysis seems equally accurate for *help*. In (19), (b) cannot be interpreted as '*...helped Labour lose*', indicating the absence of any silent verbal material:³

- (19) A poor Brexit strategy helped Labour lose the election.
a. An unpopular leader helped it lose, as well.
b. #An unpopular leader helped it, as well.

These differences between *make/let* on the one hand and *see/hear/help* on the other justify the tight selectional relationship in our analysis in (12). As a lexical matter, *make/let* can select Voice^{VPO}, but *see/hear/help* cannot. The next section discusses VPO's requirement for an agentive causee.

3. VP-omission requires an agentive causee

In all our good examples of VPO so far (1a,b, 2, 11a), the causee was an agent. In (20), non-agentive embedded predicates guarantee that the causee is not an agent. Instead, the causee is an underlyingly internal argument of an unaccusative (a), dispositional middle (b), 'sporadic advancement' (c) (Perlmutter and Postal 1984, Bruening 2013), or passive (d). Absent an agentive causee, VPO is bad throughout:

- (20) a. We made [the glass crack from the pressure].
But we couldn't make the granite ??(crack from the pressure).
- b. If we can make [our new line of shirts wash more easily],
then we can certainly make our line of trousers ??(wash more easily).

³This contrasts with *help* by itself, which does appear to license NCA in (i):

- (i) A poor Brexit strategy helped Labour lose the election.
An unpopular leader helped \emptyset , as well. \emptyset = Labour lose the election

- c. By altering the design, we can make [the new hall seat an extra 200 people].
After an upgrade, we can also make the old hall ??(seat an extra 200 people).
- d. John wanted to make [the law be overturned].
Mary just wanted to make the ruling ??(be overturned).

What (20) shows with *make*, (21) shows with *let*. Again, VPO is bad when the causee is not an agent:

- (21) a. I'm happy to let [the ice melt from the heat of the sun].
But we shouldn't let the butter ??(melt).
- b. If the author lets [her French translation read as badly as this], then I wouldn't be surprised if she lets her German translation *(read as badly as this) too.
- c. By altering the design, we can let [the new hall seat an extra 200 people].
After an upgrade, we can let the old hall ??(seat an extra 200 people) too.
- d. The attorney was happy to let [that one specific ruling be overturned].
But she didn't want to let the whole legal framework *(be overturned).

Our analysis explains why internal argument causees are incompatible with VPO.⁴ Internal arguments are generated within VP; but the null VP pro-form of VPO is atomic. Thus the syntactic structure where internal arguments would be generated does not exist.⁵

However, our analysis fails to explain why VPO remains impossible with non-agentive external arguments. As shown in (22), VPO fails with an embedded unergative emission verb (a) or an experiencer-subject psych verb (b):

- (22) a. I'll make [the brass shine]. You make the silver ??(shine).
- b. The PM successfully made the cabinet worry about climate change.
But he still had to make the backbenchers ??(worry about it).

⁴Mittwoch (1990: 113) makes a related but different claim. She states that with VPO, the causer must be an agent. The examples in (i) do not seem overly degraded to us, however; further work is required:

- (i) a. ?Self-belief made Carol practice every day. A strong work ethic made Emily.
- b. ?Perfectionism makes Tom resubmit his work. But only a bad grade will make David.

⁵Raised agents are incompatible with VPO for the same reason— \emptyset_{VP} does not provide structure to raise out of, so VPO is bad in (i):

- (i) At that stage, we really wanted to make [our preferred candidate seem *t* to be winning].
But unfortunately, we could only make one of the backups ??(seem to be winning).

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In order to capture VPO's requirement that the causee must be agentive, we stipulate that Voice^{VPO} is agentive; there are no other 'flavours' of Voice^{VPO}.

Can this stipulation be derived from something more principled? Possibly—it could be that the agent restriction is a fact about NCA in general, and not just a quirk of VPO. We start with the observation that a great many NCA-licensing predicates require agent subjects. With *volunteer* or *try* (23), this is perhaps an 'unremarkable' property of these particular lexical items:

(23) Chris couldn't move the boulder, so Sam volunteered/tried \emptyset .

The requirement for agent subjects is more striking with aspectual predicates, like *start*. These predicates can license NCA (24) and, separately, they allow non-agent subjects (25):

(24) Abby finished writing her essay before Beth had even started \emptyset .

(25) a. There started to appear essays that discussed previously-taboo topics.
b. The shit started to hit the fan.

But crucially, aspectual predicates cannot both license NCA and have a non-agent subject at the same time. In (26), the range of embedded predicates familiar from (20) guarantees that the subject is non-agentive. NCA after aspectual verbs with these non-agent subjects is degraded to an extent that contrasts starkly with PE (parenthesised):

(26) a. The glass will stop cracking from the heat about when the pyrex starts ??(to).
b. My book was selling well in China long before yours started *(to).
c. This run-down hotel was sleeping 100 guests per night long before the grand hotel ever began *(to).
d. The fugitive ceased being spotted around town about when the sheriff's goons started *(to be).

Thus the agent restriction is in evidence with NCA in (26), just as it was with VPO in (20) and (22). While we continue to stipulate that Voice^{VPO} is necessarily agentive, the pervasiveness of the agent restriction across VPO and NCA suggests that there could be a licensing relation between \emptyset and agency more generally. The next section turns to *have*.

4. *Have*

Like *make/let*, *have* can take a [DP + uninflected VP] complement (27), in which case *have*'s subject can be interpreted as either a causer (a) or experiencer (b):

(27) a. I had a constable interrogate the suspects. causative-*have*
b. I had a constable quit on me. experiencer-*have*

Unlike *make/let*, *have* is far less compatible with VPO (28, cf. 1c). No speakers allow VPO with causative-*have* (a), while only some allow it with experiencer-*have* (b):⁶

- (28) a. *First I had a constable interrogate the suspects, then I had a detective Ø.
 b. %First I had a constable quit on me, then I had a sergeant Ø.

For speakers who reject both examples in (28), an analysis is clear; for them, *have* cannot select Voice^{VPO}. For speakers who accept (b), however, it must be that *have* is able to select Voice^{VPO}.⁷ Why then the contrast with (a)?

The contrast in (28) can be derived from an independent property of *have*-clauses; namely, *have*-clauses are monoeventive. Unlike *make*, the complement of causative-*have* is not a separate modifiable event, as shown in (29) (Bjorkman and Cowper 2013: 2):

- (29) They made/*had the team throw the game on Monday by threatening them on Sunday night.

We propose that the monoeventivity of *have*-clauses follows from there being at most one Voice_{Agent} head introducing an event. The distinct position of the lone Voice_{Agent} head yields the different semantics of causative- vs. experiencer-*have*, and modulates the potential for VPO.

With causative-*have* (30), agentivity is associated with the subject of *have*. Accordingly, Voice_{Agent} is merged above *have*, while the causee is merged in embedded Spec-VP:

- (30) [VoiceP DP_{Agent} **Voice_{Agent}** [VP *have* [VP DP_{Causee} V (DP_{object})]]]

⁶The silence after experiencer-*have* is VPO rather than PE, as shown using the A'-movement diagnostic in (i):

- (i) Which documentary did the unsuspecting audience have Mary show them *t*?
 *And which film did they have Jane Ø?

⁷VPO with experiencer-*have* is rather fragile, however. As in (i), contrasting embedded agents are necessary for VPO (a); contrasting experiencers are woefully insufficient (b):

- (i) a. %First Mary had John play a trick on her, then she had Bill.
 b. *First Mary had John play a trick on her, then Sally had him(, too).

Strangely, this is the opposite of the tendency of VPO in general to disprefer contrasting embedded subjects. In *COCA* (Davies 2008-), contrasting causees seem unattested with *make*; i.e., there are zero examples of *made NAME* before punctuation, with a VPO reading. Non-contrasting agent causees, by contrast, are relatively common. There are many hits for *made me*, *made you*, *made him*, *made her*, *made us* before punctuation, with a VPO reading. Two examples from *COCA* are given in (ii):

- (ii) a. She didn't want to come in today, but I made her. (*The Night Shift*, 2016)
 b. I had to do it! I didn't want to do it. She made me. (*Kindergarten Cop*, 1990)

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With experiencer-*have* (31), on the other hand, agentivity (if present at all) is associated with the subject of the embedded predicate, not the subject of *have*. Voice_{Agent} is accordingly merged below *have*, granting agentivity to the causee. Meanwhile the experiencer is merged as the specifier of a higher non-agent Voice head (Kim 2012, Bjorkman and Cowper 2013, Myler 2016):

(31) [VoiceP DP_{Exp'er} Voice_{Exp'er} [VP *have* [VoiceP DP_{Agent} Voice_{Agent} VP]]]

Causative-*have* (30) does not yield the correct configuration for VPO. The complement of *have* is not a VoiceP headed by Voice_{Agent} (we have it as a VP here). By contrast, experiencer-*have* (31) yields a configuration with the potential to allow for VPO, in that the complement of *have* can be an agentive VoiceP.⁸ For speakers who allow *have* to select Voice^{VPO}, VPO will then be possible with experiencer-*have*.

5. Conclusion

This paper made three contributions regarding causative VP-omission in English. First, VPO is an instance of Null Complement Anaphora. In our analysis, *make* and *let* select Voice^{VPO}, which in turn selects \emptyset_{VP} . Second, VPO requires an agentive causee. Our analysis stipulates that Voice^{VPO} introduces agentive semantics, though we suspect this may be derivable from an overarching requirement on NCA. Finally, unlike *make* and *let*, causative-*have* does not license VPO. By the monoeventivity of *have*-clauses, if *have* selects Voice^{VPO}, an experiencer interpretation will result.

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⁸In experiencer-*have* clauses, Voice^{VPO} still necessarily introduces agentive semantics. Hence VPO is degraded when non-agentive events are embedded under experiencer-*have*, as in (i):

- (i) *Mary had her tent shake under her, while Sally had her yurt \emptyset .

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