

# Making things move through space (and talking about it): the acquisition of the causative in early child French

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## Introduction

As children acquire the cognitive wherewithal to act on objects, they also acquire the linguistic means necessary to describe the manner of motion of objects. Grasping the conceptual/linguistic distinction between caused and uncaused motion is a key step toward understanding the way in which space is represented in language. The acquisition of the mechanisms encoding causativity in language has been studied for a number of languages, especially English, but is still not well understood. No data on the acquisition of causative-forming mechanisms have hitherto been available for French. This paper presents the results of a longitudinal study of the acquisition of the *faire faire* causative in Canadian French. The *faire faire* construction is similar to English syntactic causative constructions on the pattern of “Make it go”, but presents some interesting quasi-morphological features. It was hypothesized that young children acquiring this construction would go through a series of acquisitional stages. A likely stage might involve using noncausative constructions with causative, transitive meaning. Such a stage was reported for English by Bowerman (1974) and by Lord (1979) in utterances such as “Don’t fall me down!”. Because of the difficulty of eliciting specific syntactic structures from children younger than four, published studies of causative acquisition fall into two categories. Most have relied on longitudinal, serendipitously obtained, rather sketchy data from very young children (younger than four). A few studies have relied on elicited data from children older than four, but the results are often ambivalent. Across languages, children over four tend to display adult-like mastery of causative-forming mechanisms.

For the study presented here, a “guided-play” protocol was devised for eliciting production of *faire faire* from children aged between two and four. The data-gathering period occurred between the second and fourth birthdays and was timed to coincide with each child’s most intensive period of causative acquisition. Transcription of the children’s increasingly adult-like attempts at forming the French causative made it possible to roughly delineate three stages of acquisition. Ability consistently to supply *faire* is one characteristic that varies across stages, as predicted. Other morphosyntactic features of the stages, such as the supplying and positioning of direct objects and other verb arguments, will be discussed. It was also possible to contrast the acquisition of simpler infinitive constructions with fewer arguments, such as *je veux jouer* (“I wanna play”). Ongoing, more fine-grained analysis is currently revealing the existence of sub-stages within larger stages. These show interesting morphophonemic features and may help us understand how the *faire* causative-forming element (and by implication other such argument-structure-altering elements) emerges in early language development.

## What are causatives?

Comrie (1985, 1976) defines a causative construction as one in which an event *s* is caused to happen by a causing agent; the addition of this causing agent to the original sentence describing *s* increases the valence (number of arguments) of the sentence by one argument. Thus, with the addition of a causing agent, the original agent will have to be demoted to another argument position; depending on whether or not the original verb was transitive, this may be either the direct object position or an oblique object position (whichever position is most “accessible”). In Comrie’s framework, the valence increase

in a causative construction can be seen as one among a number of ways of increasing valence (and forming new verbs from previously existing verbs). The phenomenon of causativity is thus closely linked to the phenomenon of *transitivity*. Making a non-causative verb causative will almost always result in making it transitive (if it was originally intransitive— “it goes” to “I make it go/I drive it”) or ditransitive (if it was originally monotransitive— “you see the book” to “I make you see/I show you the book”, with both a direct and an indirect object).

Comrie points out that across languages, there are three possibilities for forming causatives: analytical, morphological and lexical. “I made the child stand on the table” is an example of an analytical (also called periphrastic or syntactic) causative construction. “I stood the child on the table” is a lexical causative, in which the verb itself contains all the causative properties required. We have no morphological causatives in English; a relic of a prehistoric morphological causative reflex in Germanic lingers on in our *fall/fell*, *sit/set*, *lie/lay*, in which the second member of each pair is the causative version of the first, and was formed by internal vowel change. Lexical causatives tend to imply more direct causation and analytical causatives less direct causation.

In French, causatives are formed by adding *faire* to the verb phrase. The original verb then reverts to the infinitive form. The position of the object varies, depending on the mood of the VP and on whether the object is nominal or prenominal. A nominal object must follow the infinitive in all cases, as must a non-cliticized prenominal object. A cliticized prenominal object follows *faire* and precedes the infinitive in the case of a sentence in the imperative only; otherwise it must precede *faire* (and in this respect the French causative is atypical of the language). The verb *faire* becomes the main verb, syntactically, and must of course be fully conjugated.

### The problem of acquisition

From the child learner’s point of view, mastering the French causative presents certain complexities. Some of these are analogous to the difficulties inherent in any verb-combining operation, in that the auxiliary verb becomes the tense- and mood-bearing element of the sentence (as in verb phrases like *Je vais aller au marché*, “I’m gonna go to the market”, *Je peux le faire*, “I can do it”, *Je veux avoir celle-là*, “I wanna have that one”). Others, however, are unique and quite unlike the preceding examples: when a noncausative sentence is made causative, an additional argument (the “causing agent”) is introduced as grammatical subject of the verb *faire*, and the former “original” subject, now the “causee agent”, becomes the *object* of *faire* but the *subject* (in the agentive rather than the syntactic sense) of the following infinitive. The introduction of an additional argument “makes it happen”.

Clark, in her comprehensive review of the state of our knowledge about the acquisition of Romance, and particularly French (1985), points out that research into early verb use is badly needed, especially with regard to valence-changing phenomena such as causativization. She summarizes the available data on the acquisition of causative forms (in English: Bowerman 1974, Lord 1979; in Portuguese: Figueira 1984; other work not mentioned by Clark includes Ammon & Slobin 1978, for Turkish, and Berman 1982, for Hebrew; the latter two languages both have morphologically regular and early-acquired causative-formation options). Although from some points of view causative constructions might appear formidably complex, a close examination of causative phenomena may give us a near-ideal window into the child’s mind.

### The problem of elicitation

It has been widely recognized in the child language literature that, when working with children younger than three, it is extremely difficult to elicit examples of specific syntactic structures (see, for example, the discussion in Thornton 1996). Naturalistic data-gathering involving unstructured play is

unproblematic, but if the purpose is to assess a child's syntactic competence with respect to a specific feature of language that may not have a high frequency of occurrence (such as the causative), elicitation becomes a challenge to the researcher. Studies of two-year-olds to date have therefore concentrated on linguistic features that can be counted upon to appear without unusual measures being taken, such as word order, the development of negation and question form, null subjects, verb inflections, and so forth (Bloom 1991, Brown 1973, for example).

In the present study, the research question was: How does the French *faire+INF* causative develop in monolingual French-speaking children? It was determined from a preliminary scan of the (fairly scanty) literature on the subject that French-speaking four-year-olds seem to have an adult-like grasp of the construction; and it is obvious to even the most casual observer that most one-year-olds are very far from being able to combine verbs at the requisite level of complexity, since forming the French causative (as with causatives in all languages) involves changing the valence of the verb phrase, moving the noncausative subject to an oblique position, and, given the properties of verbs and verb combining in French, also involves knowing how to conjugate the verb *faire* and where to place the object(s). The placement of clitics is particularly tricky and has been much studied in the adult language (Authier & Reed 1991). It seemed likely that careful investigation would reveal that sometime between the second and the fourth birthdays, French-speaking children learn how to form causative constructions.

#### Method: the pragmatics of elicitation

A large number of two-year-olds at various levels of development, from families where only French was spoken in the home, constituted the "pool" of participants from which data were gathered over the course of the study. Around 115 sessions were recorded (in both audio and video) with over a dozen participants. It was thought at first that a fairly rigid elicitation protocol might be usable, even with these younger children. However, initial piloting quickly made it clear that for children under 3, a more flexible approach would have to be used.

The study was conducted longitudinally. Eight children (three girls and five boys) participated in semi-structured play periods that took place in the children's homes over a total of 20 months. In all cases, French was the only language used in the children's homes. The parents of the children were French-Canadian, with one exception. The families were two-parent, again with one exception. Informed consent was obtained from all parents in accordance with institutionally mandated ethical review procedures. The reader is referred to Sarkar, 2002, for further information on the data-gathering sessions.

Play sessions either 30 minutes long or 45 minutes long were recorded in both audio and video over a period of at least eight months. The decision to tape at two-, three- or four-week intervals was made from session to session, depending on how fast the children's syntactic development was progressing. A period of intense and rapid causative-building activity was the signal for taping sessions to be conducted every two weeks. After each recording session brief field notes were taken.

An elicitation procedure for causatives was devised especially for the present study. Special toys and play scenarios were used to encourage participants to use causative constructions. A great deal of flexibility was built in in consideration of the younger children's ages. Another aspect of the data collection procedure that was somewhat open-ended concerned the number of participants present at sessions with the children. Recording the children in interaction with their siblings or playmates increased the difficulty of analysis, but this was offset by the interest of the causative utterances produced by younger children after hearing various developmental forms modelled by older children. If the child did not spontaneously produce a causative, the researcher would model it for the child.

The first step in data analysis for a given session was to watch the video recording all the way through, “scanning” for occurrences of the causative in what the child said. Every time the child produced an utterance that in the adult language would require a *faire faire* form of expression, it was noted. Notes were also taken on the extralinguistic play context. The second step was to listen to the audio recording and fill in gaps in the video record as necessary. The third step was to watch the video recording again, to get more information on the extralinguistic context surrounding any new utterances gleaned from the audio recording.

### Analysis

Six categories emerged for placement of the causee agent in the data, listed here in what the data suggest to be order of increasing developmental difficulty:

1. Causee agent is omitted.
2. Causee agent is a full noun phrase or the neutral pronoun *ça* and is generally correctly placed after the *faire*+infinitive.
3. Causee agent is a tonic rather than clitic pronoun, grammatically inappropriate (*moi, toi, lui, elle*) and is generally placed after the *faire*+infinitive, though infrequently occurs in clitic pronoun position.
4. Causee agent is a clitic pronoun in a non-imperative causative and is incorrectly placed after the *faire* and before the infinitive, using the syntax of an imperative causative.
5. Causee agent is a clitic pronoun and is correctly placed (whether in an imperative or in a non-imperative causative). Errors may persist with respect to the placement of adverbs modifying the causative construction.
6. Causee agent occurs in a ditransitive causative (either correctly or incorrectly placed).

There were four possibilities with respect to the presence or absence of obligatory subjects for both single-agent and causative infinitival complement constructions. Categories 1 through 4 are listed here in the order of difficulty suggested by the data. Causative imperatives do not provide an obligatory context for the expression of grammatical subject and are not included.

1. Obligatory subject omitted altogether
2. Obligatory subject present as tonic pronoun (incorrect)
3. Obligatory subject present and adult-like as clitic pronoun
4. Obligatory subject present and adult-like as full noun phrase

### Results

The complete French L1 results comprise 678 instances of single-agent infinitival complement constructions and 387 instances of causative expression, taken from approximately 48 hours of video-recorded data.

Of a total of 98 data-gathering sessions conducted with the 8 L1 children whose data were analyzed, 61 yielded continuous developmental data that were used in the quantitative analyses which led to the sketch of the stages of causative acquisition in French monolingual children. These included most sessions with the four children Benoit, Denis, Zéphirin and Réjeanne. The qualitative data from four other children, Claudia, Simon, Léo and Iseult, provided additional support for the conclusions reached through quantitative analysis.

Suppliance or omission of *faire*. A very common developmental feature during the first stages of emergence of the causative was the omission of *faire*. There is a steady trend towards supplying *faire* more and more consistently.

Some examples of typical contexts for *faire*-omission are shown in Table 1. *Faire*-omission occurred in declarative, interrogative and imperative utterances, and in utterances both with and without

a modal auxiliary (*aller, vouloir*) before the causatively-used verb. One child (Benoit) started producing utterances with causative meaning, omitting *faire*, before his second birthday. Another (Réjeanne) did not reach this point in her syntactic development until closer to her third birthday.

Table 1: Typical contexts for *faire*-omission

Pseudo-nym and session	Age	Causative utterance	Situational context
Benoit	1;10.21	§ il va tomber le château?, 'he's gonna fall down the castle?'	referring to his brother who is trying to knock the castle over
Denis	2;3.11	§ veux marcher ça, 'wanna go that'	he is trying to make a little car go
Zéphirin	2;4.18	§ saute ça, 'jump this' § tombe pas elle, 'don't fall it down'	instructing researcher what to do or not to do with the toys
Réjeanne	2;10.26	§ je danse le p'tit chat, 'I'm dancing the little cat'	telling researcher what she is about to try to do

The children's data show that between the stage of omitting *faire* altogether and the stage of supplying it consistently there is an intermediate period during which *faire* is supplied in some but not all obligatory contexts. The “non-discreteness of stages” has been amply attested to in the L1 literature on other aspects of the acquisition of syntax. It was nevertheless quite clear that at any given time children were either “mostly omitting” or “mostly supplying”.

Status of causee agent. For the children, the simplest solution to the problem of where to place the causee agent is to leave it out altogether; the next simplest, to put it at the end of the utterance as a full noun phrase or a pronoun (either tonic, or generic *ça*, 'it'). These strategies account for by far the greater proportion of the causee agents overall in the data from the four children whose data were quantified. Both strategies constitute avoidance of pronominalization of the causee agent. Causee agents are simply omitted in one-quarter to one-third of the causative utterances produced by the children throughout the data collection period. Causee agents are expressed as full NPs or *ça* in declining proportion as the children begin to use object clitic pronouns more and more. By the final data-collecting sessions, use of object clitic pronouns has risen to nearly 30% of the total across the four children, although one-fifth of these are misplaced.

Correct use and positioning of object clitic pronouns (causee agents) in causative constructions is one of the later steps to be mastered in the children's emerging syntactic competence. Benoit, Denis and Réjeanne (but not Zéphirin) all misplaced the occasional object clitic. In BEN 08 (2;1.18), the session in which Benoit seemed to be the most actively engaged in working out the details of causative formation, there were four instances of misplaced clitics, as well as two instances of correctly placed ones. Misplaced clitics shared several features: they occurred in very few sessions per child and very few times per session; they occurred in sessions in which there are also correctly placed clitics; and they were all misplaced in the same way, i.e., the causative utterances are *not* imperative, but clitic placement conformed to imperative requirements—that is, the clitic pronoun follows *faire*, which was supplied in all the examples in Table 2.

Table 2: Placement of causee agent clitic object in causatives

Pseudo-nym	Age	Well-formed and *ill-formed utterances (in which clitic object is produced between <i>faire</i> and the infinitive even though the utterance is declarative)
Benoit	2;1.18	§ * <i>je fais les sauter</i> , 'I'm making them jump' / § <i>fais la marcher</i> , 'make it go'
Benoit	2;2.25	§ * <i>j'ai fait les marcher</i> , 'I made it go' / § <i>je le fais arrêter</i> , 'I'm making it stop'
Denis	2;7.17	§ * <i>on fait la marcher à terre comme ça</i> , 'you make it go on the ground like this' / § <i>puis on la fait lever</i> , 'then you make it go up'
Réjeanne	3;2.20	§ * <i>c'est moi vas faire l'avancer</i> , 'it's me gonna make it go forward' / § <i>veux pas le faire parler, moi, le oiseau</i> , 'don't wanna make it talk, the bird'

Presence of obligatory subject. Throughout the data-collection sessions, Benoit, Denis, Zéphirin and Réjeanne sometimes omitted obligatory subjects and sometimes used tonic pronouns in subject position, both typical developmental errors in L1 French acquisition. These strategies have not previously been examined in the context of the development of causative as compared to non-causative single-agent infinitival constructions. Clear patterns emerge. Most importantly for the present analysis, there seems to be little difference between the way subject pronoun use develops in single-agent infinitival complement constructions and causative complement constructions in the data for the four French monolingual children whose data were quantifiable. If anything, the children seem to have a slightly easier time learning how to produce grammatically correct obligatory subjects in causative constructions.

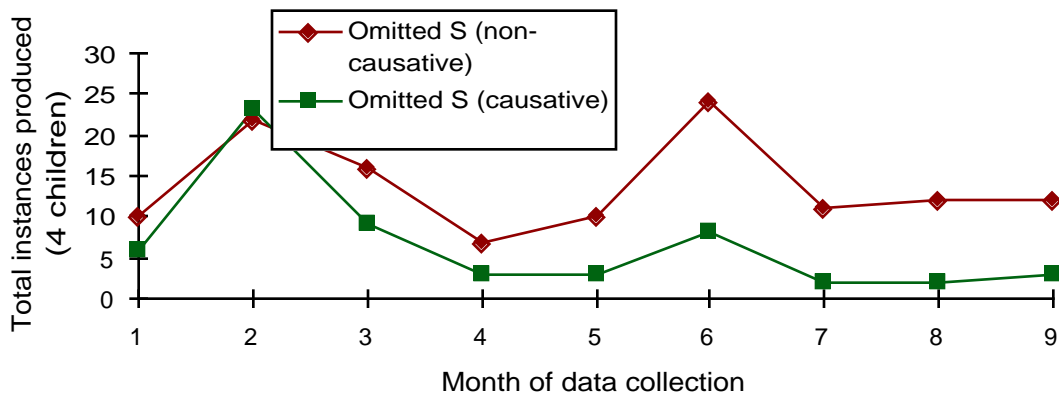


Figure 1. Presence of obligatory grammatical subjects in non-causative and causative infinitival constructions.

The rates at which the children supplied or failed to supply obligatory subjects in both causative and non-causative infinitival constructions is compared in Figure 1. A similar pattern was found across the two types of construction with respect to the production of tonic pronoun subjects and of adult-like pronominal or full-NP subjects.

Modals and protomodals in infinitival constructions. The “ambiguous” syllables supplied where one would expect a *faire* in a causative construction were occasionally paralleled in the children’s single-agent infinitival complement constructions by similarly ambiguous place-holding syllables in modal position. Following terminology used by Simonsen (1999), these are referred to here as “protomodalic” filler syllables. They were impossible to transcribe reliably even after repeated listenings. Table 3 shows some examples.

Table 3: Modals and protomodals in infinitival constructions

Pseudo-nym	Age	Non-valence-changing infinitival constructions	Causative constructions
Zéphirin	2;3.21	§ veux mettre xxx à ça, ‘wanna put xxx on it’ § veux voir les bébés, ‘wanna see the babies’ § va laver, ‘gonna wash’ § puis elle pour laver , ‘then her for washing’	§ moi vas tourner, ‘me gonna turn’ § é tourne elle, ‘é turn it’ § à tourne elle, ‘à turn it’ § é marche ça, ‘é [make] it go’ § é fa tourner comme ça , ‘é make turn like that’
Denis	2;3.24	§ veux jouer encore, ‘wanna play some more’ § rrr rrr cacher la barbe, ‘rrr rrr hide the beard’ § xxx pas mordre l’ours, ‘xxx not bite the bear’ § veux enlever la selle, ‘wanna take the saddle off’	§ da de de da manger bébé , ‘da de de da [make] baby eat’ § é ou à manger, ‘é or to [make]eat’ § oh à manger, ‘oh à [make] eat, ‘ <i>he is feeding baby with spoon</i> ’ § é boire, ‘é [make] drink’ <i>in response to “qu’est-ce que tu fais avec la tasse?”</i> , ‘ <i>what are you doing with the cup?</i> ’
Zéphirin	2;4.18	§ vas les garder, ‘gonna keep them’ § pas ça, va casser!, ‘not that, gonna break!’ § moi vas casser à tigre, ‘me gonna break uh tiger’	§ là fa tourner vite, ‘now gonna [?]/make [?] turn fast’ <i>unclear: VA or FA?</i> § fais tourner pas à bonhomme!, ‘don’t turn uh little man!’ § fais casser ça, ‘make this break’

In Table 3, utterances in either category in which there was no filler syllable are also included if the subject produced any during the same session. We see that at any given point during the course of development recorded here, these children may in fact have been able to produce *va(i)(s)*<sup>1</sup>, *veux* or *fais* in preinfinitival position, but they did not always do so in an unambiguous way.

The filler syllables in these utterances fall into three different categories:

1. one or more vocalic sounds before an infinitive

<sup>1</sup>In colloquial Quebec French, the first person singular present form of the verb *aller* is usually pronounced *je vas* or *j’vas*. These are the forms young children would normally be exposed to. If a child does not distinguish between the forms of *aller* that follow *je* and *tu*, and pronounces them both *vas*, this should not be considered an error or evidence of confusion.

2. sounds beginning with a voiced or unvoiced labial fricative that appear to be intended as one of *va(i)(s)*, *veux*, *fais* before an infinitive (but that cannot be definitively identified, given the leeway afforded by the context)
3. “other”; sounds of a teasing and playful nature before an infinitive, all produced by Denis.  
It is an intriguing coincidence that in French, of the possible lexical items allowable in pre-infinitival position over the range of infinitival complement constructions, several begin with labial fricatives (*va(s)*, *veux*, *fais*) and one with a phonologically somewhat similar labial stop (*peux*). The data presented in this study show that all four of these possible options for pre-infinitival position were acquired by these French-L1 children during their third year. It would not be surprising if the accidental phonological similarity between the four possibilities listed led to some initial confusion as children prepare to make on-line decisions about which one they want to express.

For all three children, protomodal filler syllables were more likely to occur in *causative* constructions during the first few data-collecting sessions, and in *non-causative* constructions during the last few. The number of instances is admittedly very small, but the qualitative findings are nonetheless suggestive. It is possible that further analysis of these and other French corpora would show that the qualitative trend that emerges from these data could be backed up by more rigorous and more quantitative support. In a *faire faire* causative construction only *faire* is admissible in pre-infinitival position by definition, so the choice is highly constrained. In single-agent infinitival complements, there are several possibilities, with near-homonymy between two of them (*va(s)* and *veux*). This might account for the fact that filler syllables drop out of the children’s data earlier for causative utterances. The subtle distinctions in type and amount of intentionality and futurity conveyed by the choice of one modal or another in single-agent infinitival complement constructions may take longer to acquire, and the phonological resemblance between *veux* and *va(s)* may add to the possible confusion.

What is less easy to account for is the fact that the children who produced filler syllables nearly always showed, in the same session, that they were able to produce *unambiguous* instances of the words the filler syllables seemed to be standing in for. A further analysis of these data might reveal aspects of the interactional context that would explain the children’s seeming certainty about what they intended to say at one time and their apparent refusal to commit themselves a few moments before or after. Perhaps the emerging modal auxiliaries, at this point in the children’s development, were more likely to be clearly expressed when other demands on the children’s attention were not present in the extralinguistic context.

The evidence presented here shows that there is a close relationship between causative and single-agent non-causative infinitival complement constructions. The children approach them at the same point in their cognitive and linguistic development, and treat them as if they are of the same syntactic difficulty level overall. This is an interesting finding, considering that the argument structure of causatives is more complex than that of non-valence-changing, non-causative, single-agent infinitival complement constructions. The added level of syntactic/semantic complexity in the verb phrase in causative constructions does not seem to stop the children from tackling these constructions, even though they may still be at a stage of syntactic development characterized by frequent omission of many sentence elements, such as subjects and objects.

### Discussion

Based on preliminary quantification of the data (ongoing) it proved possible to sketch a tentative sequence of three developmental stages for the emergence of the *faire faire* causative in monolingual French-speaking children aged between two and four, summarized in Table 4. *Faire*-omission was typical of the first stage. In this stage, causee agent objects were rarely supplied, and, when supplied,



were never in clitic-pronominal form. In the second stage, *faire* was supplied, but erratically, and clitic-pronominal causee agent objects made their appearance, sometimes in word orders that would not be used in the adult language. The third stage was characterized by the consistent and accurate production of *faire* in causatives and correct clitic object placement. However, even at the third stage, ditransitive causatives involving the causativization of a transitive utterance with dativization of the causee agent were only rarely elicited from the children. A further fourth stage during which ditransitive causatives emerge is postulated, although it was not attested by the data collected for this study.

Table 4: Stages of causative acquisition in French

	<i>Stage One</i>	<i>Stage Two</i>	<i>Stage Three</i>
Presence of <i>faire</i> in causatives	<i>Faire</i> is often omitted in clear contexts*	<i>Faire</i> is still omitted occasionally	<i>Faire</i> is reliably supplied in causatives
Causee agent (object of <i>faire</i> )	Causee agent often omitted; when supplied, is usually nominal or tonic pronominal	Causee agent usually supplied; clitic-pronominal causee agents appear, occasionally misplaced	Correctly placed clitics, but ditransitive constructions rarely attempted & cause difficulty
Obligatory subject in causatives/non-causatives	Subject often omitted; when supplied, is usually clitic pronoun (full nominals also occur)	Tonic pronominal subjects appear	Tonic pronominal subjects fade out
Protomodal “filler” syllables in pre-infinitival position	Filler syllables in pre-infinitival position occur in both causative and non-causatives	More filler syllables in non-causatives than causatives	Auxiliaries all clear and reliably supplied in pre-infinitival position
Examples from data	§ saute ça, ‘jump this’ § vas boire mon bébé, ‘gonna drink my baby’ § je danse le p’tit chat, ‘I’m dancing the little cat’	§ é marche ça, ‘eh go this’ § je fais les sauter, ‘I’m making jump them’ § moi veux faire manger le petit bébé, ‘me wanna make the little baby eat’	§ je l’ai fait tomber!, ‘I made it fall!’ § je le fais boire du jus d’orange, ‘I’m making him drink orange juice’ § pas capable de faire lui bouger les pieds, ‘can’t make him move his feet’

Two features stand out in this progress through stages: (a) there is an early period of omission and then one of irregular production of causative *faire*, (b) the positioning of clitic-pronominal causee agent objects seems to constitute a problem space for the children at some point fairly late in the acquisition process. The more general linguistic features that have been discussed (presence or absence of obligatory subject, use of tonic-pronominal subjects or objects, and presence of protomodal filler syllables) are not peculiar to causativization. Where these features are concerned, an examination of the

children's spontaneous speech does, however, reveal that the syntax of causative constructions is treated as being no more and no less complicated than the syntax of single-agent infinitival constructions, despite the more complex argument structure of causative constructions.

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