

# The Double Object Constraint in French is not a Constraint on Thematic Roles

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In many languages the causee may or must be realized as a direct object in the causative of an intransitive verb but must be realized as an indirect object in the causative of a transitive verb. This Double Object Constraint is often taken to reflect a requirement that only one direct object occur in a single clause. Williams (1981) suggests that this constraint be stated instead as a constraint on thematic structure, namely that a single predicate argument structure may contain no more than one theme. I propose to show that this formulation of the constraint is not viable in French.

The basic facts of French causatives are illustrated in (1-4). In (1) the causee is a direct object. As (2) shows, dative marking of the causee in the causative of an intransitive verb is impossible. Sentence (3) shows that the causee may not be a direct object if the basic verb is transitive. Instead, it must be dative, as in (4).

- (1) J'ai fait partir Jean.  
I-have made leave Jean  
I made Jean leave
- (2) \*J'ai fait partir à Jean.  
I-have made leave to Jean.  
I made Jean leave
- (3) \*J'ai fait manger le gâteau Jean.  
I-have made eat the cake Jean  
I made Jean eat the cake.
- (4) J'ai fait manger le gâteau à Jean.  
I-have made eat the cake to Jean  
I made Jean eat the cake.

Consider now the predictions made by Williams' hypothesis with regard to VP idioms. If the idiom is truly semantically opaque, no accessible thematic role can be borne by the NP or PP following the verb; in particular, it cannot be a theme. Thus, Williams' proposal predicts that the Double Object Constraint will not hold for VP idioms; VP idioms should behave like intransitive verbs. Sentences (5-8) show that this prediction is false.

- (5)\*Marie a fait rompre les chiens Pierre dans les affaires de Vincent.  
Marie had Pierre stick his nose into Vincent's business.

(6) Marie a fait rompre les chiens à Pierre dans les affaires de Vincent.

(7)\*Jean a fait casser la pipe Marie.

Jean caused Marie to die.

(8) Jean a fait casser la pipe à Marie.

Sentences (5) and (6) contain the idiom *rompre les chiens*, literally “break the dogs”, whose actual meaning is “butt into a discussion, particularly of a delicate or difficult subject”. Sentences (7) and (8) contain the idiom *casser la pipe*, literally “break the pipe”, whose actual meaning is “to die”. Both idioms are completely opaque (i.e. comparable to English *kick the bucket*, as opposed to quasi-idiomatic expressions such as *take advantage of*). In both cases the Double Object Constraint holds, contrary to the prediction of Williams’ theory.

It is easy to show that this is due not to some special property of idioms but to their syntactic structure. Idioms consisting of an intransitive verb followed by a PP behave just like their non-idiomatic counterparts. Sentence (1) shows that the causee is realized as a direct object when the verb is intransitive. This remains true when a prepositional complement is added, as in (9).

(9) J’ai fait partir Jean de sa maison.

I made Jean leave his house.

The behaviour of idioms is exactly parallel, as illustrated in (10-13).

(10) On a fait passer Jean à l’as.

Jean was made to disappear without a trace.

(11) On a fait Jean passer à l’as.

(12)\*On a fait passer à l’as à Jean.

(13)\*On a fait à Jean passer à l’as.

These sentences contain the idiom *passer à l’as*, literally “go to the ace”, whose actual meaning is “to disappear without a trace”. This idiom consists of the verb *passer* together with the PP *à l’as*. The causee must in this case be a direct object.

Williams’ proposal predicts that all idioms will behave like non-idiomatic intransitive verbs. Instead, we find that transitive idioms behave like transitive non-idioms, and intransitive idioms behave like intransitive non-idioms. These facts falsify the hypothesis that the Double Object Constraint is a constraint on thematic roles, and suggest that it must be stated in terms of grammatical relations or case.

## References

Williams, Edwin (1981) “Argument Structure and Morphology,” *The Linguistic Review* 1,81–114.