Causative psych verbs in Sicilian:
morphosyntactic variation from the lexical perspective

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Verbs of psychological experience, or psych-verbs, are characterized by one of their arguments, henceforth *the experiencer*, being necessarily [+ANIMATE]. The other argument, *the stimulus*, is [±ANIMATE]. Consider English *amuse*: it describes an eventuality whereby a sentient being experiences a psychological state originating from a stimulus, which can be animate (e.g., *the entertainer amused the children*) or inanimate (e.g., *the programme amused the children)*. As discussed in Bossong (1998), the fact that the eventuality need not originate from an animate participant, whereas the participant experiencing it is necessarily animate, differentiates psych-verbs from other bivalent verbs with a [+ANIMATE] and a [±ANIMATE] argument, in that, in general, the [+ANIMATE] participant is encoded as the one from whom the eventuality originates (e.g., *Mary looks after her house/children*). The mentioned property of the semantics of psych-verbs has non-trivial consequences for their morphosyntax, where a distinction can be drawn between experiencer-subject and stimulus-subject verbs of affect (Talmy 2007[1985]), or, as they are more commonly called, subject-experiencer and object-experiencer psych-verbs. The Italian sentences in (1a) and, respectively, (1b) provide examples of the two types of verb or construction.

(1a) *Maria ama la musica classica.*   (Italian)
(1b) *La musica classica appassiona Maria.*

The variation in the morphosyntax of psych-verbs has long been known to have consequences in syntactic theory (Belletti & Rizzi 1988) and has figured prominently in the debate on the autonomy of the lexicon (Levin & Rappaport Hovav 2005). Put briefly, if both experiencer (cf. 1a) and stimulus (cf. 1b) can have subject realization, then it would seem that the thematic properties of the arguments are either irrelevant to their syntax or read off the syntactic sub-structures in which the verbs occur. However, in a lexicalist perspective, it has been claimed that the contrast between subject- and object-experiencer verbs depends on the respective thematic prominence of the co-arguments. Specifically, the assumption that the stimulus is a causer in (1b) (Grimshaw 1990: 22-30, etc.) explains why this argument outranks the experiencer in the syntax of (1b) but not (1a).

In this paper we uncover and analyse a pattern in the syntax of Sicilian causative psych verbs, which reveals them to constitute a composite class: the transitive of a subclass of such verbs tends to be realized periphrastically.

(2a) Sic. *Oi lu **facisti** veru **annirvari**.* [+Periphrastic; +Psych]   (Sicilian)
(2b) Sic. *Lu picciliddu chiancìa, ma la matri lu **calmau**.* [-Periphrastic; +Psych]
(2c) Sic. *Lu vasu lu rumpìu ddru picciriddru.* [-Periphrastic; -Psych]

TP,L.age,H.ed

Our findings were collected under the auspices of the *Atlante Linguistico della Sicilia* (http://atlantelinguisticosicilia.it/cms/). We conducted two rounds of questionnaire-assisted interviews with 105 and, respectively, 25 native-speaker informants, and we analysed the results quantitatively with Rbrul (Johnson 2019).[1] In the first stage, we sought to ascertain

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[1] Our samples of speakers were selected in such a way as to contribute to the variationist purposes of the ALS, taking into account first language (Italian or dialect), provenance, age and educational level. This aspect of the investigation, is, however, beyond the scope of the talk.

whether periphrastic syntax differentiated between psych and non-psych causatives and between different members of the former class. We found that the best model for the variation observed had the verb as the only factor which was significant vis-à-vis the application of the binary [±Periphrastic] dependent variable. Leaving this factor out of the regression, however, [±Psych] also turned out to be significant. We also found gradient variation in the factor weight of the verbs, i.e., the strength of their correlation with the dependent variable. The group whose factor weight indicated a negative correlation (less than 0.5) comprised both [+Psych] and [-Psych] verbs (*cunvinciri* 'convince', *provocari* 'provoke', *curpiri* 'hurt', *'mbrugghiari* 'cheat' and, respectively, *rapiri* 'open' and *rumpiri* 'break').[2]

In the second stage we sought to explore the semantic correlates of the variation uncovered, applying standard tests for agentivity, causation, and the detection of an effector (see Van Valin/Wilkins 1996 for the notion of effector, and Martin 2010, Cançado 1995, Centineo 1995 for the relevant tests). Since at the time of writing we do not yet have the complete set of results of this second phase of the analysis, we constrain the remainder of this abstract to our hypotheses and some theoretical consequences. With the sole exception of two or three of the psych verbs listed above, the other verbs under examination undergo anticausativization with Sicilian *si* and are rough translational equivalents of Italian causative psych verbs. We thus expect that they will pass the causation tests. Regardless of their individual relationship with the [±Periphrastic] dependent variable, they can *all* figure in the causative periphrasis with *fari*. If, as we expect, these verbs, or a subclass thereof, admit a causative reading with one causer and one causee both in the lexical and the periphrastic variants, this suggests that causation is encoded lexically. Our hypothesis is that the variation in the strength of the correlation with the [±Periphrastic] variable is sensitive to a distinction between two types of causation in the lexicon: some causative verbs lexicalize an unspecified cause, others a specific type of cause, namely an activity with an effector causer (Bentley 2021). In Sicilian the lexicalization of an unspecified cause determines a stronger association with the periphrasis with *fari* (cf. 2a), where the unspecified causer is encoded as the argument of *fari*. We advance the hypothesis that the periphrastic expression is a strategy to encode indirect causation (Cruse 1972, Wierzbicka 1975, etc.). Admittedly, the binary lexical distinction cannot be the only rationale of the gradient variation in the factor weight of the verbs. Our hypothesis is that some of the verbs which lexicalize an activity might be agentive or lend themselves to agentive inferences, and this also contributes to their looser association with periphrastic syntax.

References

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[2] The [+Psych] causatives outnumbered the [-Psych] ones in the questionnaire.