Meaning Across Languages: A Contrastive Study of Causative Structures in English and Indonesian

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Abstract: This study examines how causative structures encode meaning in English and Indonesian through a qualitative contrastive analysis. It focuses on differences in agentivity, affectedness, and event structure using authentic written texts from both languages. The findings show that English tends to express causation through explicit and segmented constructions that foreground responsibility, while Indonesian often relies on integrated morphological forms that compress cause and effect. These differences lead to shifts in interpretation and challenges for Indonesian learners of English, particularly in academic writing. The study highlights the importance of meaning based contrastive analysis for understanding cross linguistic variation and improving EFL instruction.

Keywords: Causative structures, qualitative contrastive analysis, English–Indonesian, agentivity and affectedness, EFL academic writing

INTRODUCTION

Language encodes meaning through structure. One crucial structure is causation. Speakers use causative forms to show how an action happens, who initiates it, and who receives its effects. These choices are not neutral. They reflect how a language organizes experience and assigns responsibility (Levshina et al., 2013). For this reason, causative structures offer a productive site for contrastive analysis. English and Indonesian represent causation in markedly different ways. English often expresses causation through lexical verbs such as make, cause, or allow. It also uses syntactic alternations, including transitive and intransitive pairs (Cuervo, 2015). Indonesian, by contrast, relies heavily on morphological causatives, especially through affixation. It also uses serial verb constructions and analytic patterns that do not map neatly onto English forms. These structural differences shape meaning in subtle but systematic ways.

Most learners notice causatives only at the surface level. They see forms. They memorize patterns. They rarely examine how meaning shifts across languages. As a result, Indonesian learners of English often produce grammatically acceptable sentences that sound unnatural or convey unintended meanings. The problem does not lie in grammar alone. It lies in how causation is conceptualized and encoded. Research on causative constructions exists in both English and Indonesian linguistics. Many studies describe form and classification. Others focus on acquisition or error patterns. However, these studies often treat each language in isolation. They rarely place English and Indonesian side by side to examine how similar meanings emerge from different structural choices. This gap limits our understanding of cross-linguistic meaning construction.

Contrastive analysis provides a systematic way to address this issue. It allows researchers to compare languages at multiple levels (Gast, 2012). These include syntax, morphology, and semantics. More importantly, contrastive analysis highlights where meaning aligns and where it diverges. In the case of causatives, this approach reveals how languages differ in expressing agency, control, and affectedness (Park, 2022). Causative structures do more than show cause and effect. They encode degrees of responsibility. They signal whether an agent acts directly or indirectly. They also show whether an event happens intentionally or accidentally (Goldman, 2014). English often makes these distinctions through verb choice and syntactic configuration. Indonesian frequently encodes them through affixes and verb sequencing. These strategies lead to different interpretive outcomes, even when the surface meaning appears similar.

For example, English allows speakers to choose between lexical causatives and periphrastic constructions. Each option carries a distinct semantic weight. Indonesian speakers, however, may express the

same situation using morphological causatives that compress meaning into a single verb form. When learners transfer patterns from Indonesian into English, mismatches occur. These mismatches affect clarity and pragmatics (Roza et al., 2024). This study focuses on causative structures as carriers of meaning. It does not treat causatives as isolated grammatical forms. Instead, it examines how structure and meaning interact across languages. The study asks how English and Indonesian encode causation differently and what these differences reveal about cross-linguistic meaning representation.

The analysis centers on three semantic dimensions. The first is agentivity. This refers to who initiates the action and how explicitly the language marks that role. The second is affectedness. This concerns how the caused participant experiences the action. The third is event structure. This includes whether causation appears as a single event or as a sequence of actions. These dimensions provide a clear framework for comparison.

This research uses authentic written data to ground the analysis in real language use. Authentic data reduces reliance on intuition alone. It also reflects how causatives function in natural contexts (Pietsch, 2016). By examining real examples, the study avoids oversimplification and captures meaningful variation. The relevance of this study extends beyond theoretical linguistics. It has direct implications for English language teaching. Indonesian learners often struggle with causative constructions because instruction focuses on form rather than meaning. Teachers explain patterns but rarely explain why certain forms sound more appropriate in specific contexts. A contrastive perspective can address this gap.

Understanding cross-linguistic differences in causation also supports clearer academic writing (Le Guen et al., 2015). Many Indonesian students write in English for research purposes. Inaccurate causative choices can weaken arguments or obscure responsibility in academic texts. By clarifying how meaning shifts across languages, this study supports more precise and effective writing. This study contributes to contrastive linguistics in three ways. First, it provides a focused comparison of English and Indonesian causative structures at the semantic level. Second, it links grammatical form to meaning rather than treating them separately. Third, it offers insights that bridge theory and pedagogy. Causation lies at the heart of how humans explain events. Languages encode it differently. By examining these differences closely, this study seeks to show how meaning travels across languages and where it changes along the way.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative contrastive research design to explore how causative structures encode meaning in English and Indonesian. A qualitative approach is appropriate because the study aims to examine meaning, interpretation, and functional use rather than frequency or distribution. The analysis prioritizes depth over breadth and focuses on how linguistic form interacts with semantic roles. Contrastive analysis functions as the central framework, allowing systematic comparison between two language systems. Each language is analyzed independently before cross linguistic comparison takes place (Gast, 2012). This procedure avoids premature alignment and preserves language specific patterns.

The study focuses on written language because written texts provide stable and context rich data. Written causatives tend to reflect deliberate grammatical choices and clearer semantic distinctions. The research limits its scope to declarative clauses that express direct or indirect causation. Non finite and elliptical constructions were excluded to maintain analytical clarity. This restriction ensures that comparisons remain consistent across both languages. The emphasis lies on how meaning is encoded rather than how it is inferred.

Data collection draws on authentic texts from academic and formal expository genres. English texts were produced by native or near native speakers to represent standard usage. Indonesian texts were written by educated native speakers to ensure comparable linguistic competence. Genre similarity was prioritized to reduce contextual variation. Texts were selected through purposive sampling based on the presence of explicit causative constructions. This method supports focused analysis of relevant data rather than broad corpus coverage.

All data were collected from publicly available sources such as essays, articles, and academic style writing. The study avoids learner data to prevent interference from proficiency related errors. Each causative construction was identified manually to maintain semantic accuracy. Surrounding sentences were retained to preserve pragmatic and discourse context. This step is essential because causation often relies on implicit roles and shared assumptions. The final dataset reflects a balance between analytical depth and manageable scope.

Data analysis followed an interpretive and iterative process. The first stage involved identifying causative constructions within each language. These constructions were classified into lexical, morphological, and analytic types. This classification provided a structural basis for further analysis. The second stage focused on semantic interpretation. Each construction was examined for how it encodes

agentivity, control, and affectedness. The analysis considered whether the causer appears explicit or implicit and whether the caused event suggests direct or indirect involvement.

The third stage examined event structure. The analysis explored whether causation is presented as a single unified event or as a sequence of actions. Particular attention was given to how each language compresses or expands meaning through grammatical choices. After completing the within language analysis, cross linguistic comparison was conducted. Functionally similar constructions were paired to identify semantic shifts and mismatches. These contrasts were interpreted in relation to meaning transfer and potential challenges for Indonesian users of English. The analysis remains descriptive and explanatory, aiming to reveal how causative meaning operates across languages rather than to evaluate correctness

Findings

The analysis reveals clear and systematic differences in how English and Indonesian encode causative meaning. In English texts, causation most frequently appears through lexical and periphrastic constructions (Wijaya & Winstin, 2023). Verbs such as make, cause, allow, and force explicitly signal the presence of a causer and clearly assign responsibility. These verbs foreground agency and control, often leaving little ambiguity about who initiates the action. English writers tend to separate the causing event from the resulting action, which creates a layered event structure. This separation allows writers to manipulate emphasis, for example by highlighting intention, obligation, or permission. As a result, causation in English often appears analytically transparent and semantically segmented.

Indonesian causative structures show a different pattern. The data indicate a strong reliance on morphological causatives, particularly through verbal affixation. These forms compress causation into a single predicate, merging cause and effect into one grammatical unit. This strategy often reduces explicit reference to the causer, especially when the agent is recoverable from context. Indonesian texts therefore tend to present causation as an integrated event rather than a sequence. The caused participant often appears as the grammatical object, but the degree of control or intention remains less overt (Duffley, 2014). Meaning relies more heavily on shared context and pragmatic inference. This structural compactness leads to efficient expression but also increases interpretive flexibility.

Differences in agentivity emerge as a central finding. English causatives typically require an explicit causer, even when agency is indirect. The language pushes writers to specify who initiates the event. This pattern reflects a preference for overt role assignment. Indonesian, by contrast, allows agentivity to remain backgrounded. In many cases, the causer is grammatically present but semantically weak. In others, it is omitted altogether without causing ambiguity for native readers. This difference affects how responsibility is perceived. English causatives often imply accountability, while Indonesian causatives may present events as procedural or situational rather than agent driven.

Affectedness also differs across the two languages. English causative constructions frequently highlight the impact on the caused participant. The structure often implies effort, resistance, or change of state (Tran, 2024). Indonesian causatives, especially morphological ones, tend to neutralize this dimension. The caused participant appears affected, but the degree of impact is less explicitly encoded. Instead, affectedness is inferred through context or world knowledge (Nugraha, 2024). This contrast shows that English distributes meaning across multiple grammatical elements, while Indonesian concentrates meaning within the verb. These strategies lead to different interpretive priorities.

The contrastive comparison also reveals potential areas of meaning transfer in EFL contexts. When Indonesian patterns are mapped onto English, learners may underuse periphrastic causatives or avoid explicit causers (Wijaya & Winstin, 2023). This results in sentences that appear vague or pragmatically weak in English. Conversely, overexplicit causation may sound unnatural when English patterns are transferred into Indonesian. These findings suggest that many learner difficulties stem from semantic misalignment rather than grammatical ignorance. Learners know the forms but struggle with their interpretive force.

Overall, the findings show that causative structures in English and Indonesian differ not only in form but also in how they organize meaning. English favors explicitness, segmentation, and role clarity. Indonesian favors integration, efficiency, and contextual interpretation. These differences shape how causation is understood, written, and taught. A contrastive perspective makes these patterns visible and explains why direct equivalence between causative forms often fails.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION
Causation and the Encoding of Responsibility

The findings show that English and Indonesian differ sharply in how they assign responsibility through causative structures. English causatives tend to foreground the causer. Writers explicitly mark who initiates the action and how that action unfolds. This pattern reflects a semantic preference for accountability. Even indirect causation usually requires an overt agent. As a result, English causatives often imply intention,

pressure, or obligation. These meanings do not remain optional. The structure itself pushes them to the surface.

Indonesian causatives operate under a different logic. Morphological causatives often compress responsibility into the verb. The causer may appear, but the structure does not force emphasis on agency (Hasisah et al., 2021). In many cases, the event itself becomes more salient than the initiator. This pattern reflects a meaning orientation that prioritizes outcome over origin. Responsibility becomes diffuse rather than explicit. Native readers rely on context to interpret agency. The grammar allows this flexibility without loss of clarity.

This contrast has important implications for cross linguistic interpretation. When Indonesian speakers write in English, they may produce causative sentences that lack perceived force or clarity. The message remains understandable, but the implied responsibility weakens. English readers may interpret such sentences as vague or evasive. The issue does not stem from grammatical error. It stems from mismatched expectations about how responsibility should appear in language. Contrastive analysis helps explain why such interpretations occur.

These findings also challenge the assumption that causatives function similarly across languages. Even when two languages encode the same causal relationship, they may assign responsibility differently. English externalizes responsibility through syntax. Indonesian internalizes it through morphology and context. This difference affects how actions, decisions, and outcomes are framed in discourse. It also explains why literal translation of causatives often fails to preserve meaning.

Event Structure and Meaning Compression

Another key issue concerns how languages structure events. English causatives frequently present causation as a multi stage process. The causing action and the resulting action remain conceptually separate. This separation allows writers to manipulate temporal sequence and logical relations. Writers can stress delay, resistance, or effort. The grammar supports fine grained meaning distinctions. This structure aligns with English preferences for analytic expression. Indonesian causatives often compress events into a single verbal unit. Morphological causatives merge cause and effect. The language treats causation as an integrated process rather than a sequence. This compression increases efficiency. It also reduces the need for additional syntactic material. However, it places greater interpretive responsibility on the reader. Meaning emerges through shared knowledge rather than explicit structure.

This difference affects how meaning travels across languages. When English learners rely on Indonesian event compression, they may omit elements that English readers expect. The sentence remains grammatical but feels incomplete. Conversely, English style expansion may sound heavy or redundant in Indonesian. These contrasts show that event structure shapes discourse style, not just grammar. The findings suggest that event structure plays a central role in meaning construction. It determines how readers perceive causation. It also shapes expectations about explanation and justification. English encourages elaboration. Indonesian allows economy. Neither approach is superior. Each reflects a stable linguistic system. Problems arise only when speakers assume equivalence where none exists.

This insight supports a semantic rather than formal view of contrastive analysis. Comparing surface patterns alone misses deeper differences. Event structure reveals how languages package experience. Causatives offer a clear example because they sit at the intersection of syntax and meaning. They show how languages choose between expansion and compression as communicative strategies.

Implications for EFL Writing and Pedagogy

The discussion carries strong implications for English language teaching. Many teaching materials present causatives as fixed patterns. Learners memorize structures such as make someone do something or cause something to happen. This approach treats causatives as mechanical forms. It rarely addresses meaning choice. As a result, learners struggle to select appropriate structures in real writing.

The findings suggest that instruction should focus on semantic contrast. Teachers should explain how English causatives encode responsibility and control. They should contrast this with Indonesian patterns explicitly. Such comparison helps learners understand why certain English sentences feel weak or overly strong. Awareness of meaning differences supports better decision making in writing. Academic writing deserves special attention. Causatives often appear in explanations of results, processes, and decisions. Inaccurate causative choices can blur agency. This weakens arguments. Indonesian students writing in English may unintentionally obscure responsibility. This issue affects clarity and credibility. Contrastive awareness can reduce this problem.

Pedagogy should also address event structure. Teachers can show how English prefers explicit causal chains. Exercises can focus on expanding compressed meanings into clearer sequences. This practice helps learners adapt to English discourse norms without abandoning their linguistic identity. The goal is not

replacement. The goal is strategic control. At a broader level, the discussion reinforces the value of contrastive analysis in applied linguistics. Contrastive studies often face criticism for being outdated or predictive. This study shows their continued relevance when grounded in meaning. By focusing on semantics and interpretation, contrastive analysis explains persistent learner issues that form based approaches cannot resolve.

In sum, the discussion highlights three key insights. First, causative structures encode responsibility differently across languages. Second, event structure shapes how meaning is packaged and interpreted. Third, these differences matter for writing and teaching. Understanding them requires moving beyond form to meaning. Contrastive analysis provides the tools to do so.

CONCLUSION

This study set out to examine how causative structures encode meaning in English and Indonesian through a qualitative contrastive approach. The analysis shows that differences between the two languages extend beyond grammatical form. They reflect distinct ways of organizing agency, responsibility, and event structure. English tends to express causation through explicit lexical and periphrastic constructions that foreground the causer and separate cause from effect. Indonesian often relies on morphological and integrated structures that compress causation into a single event and allow greater reliance on context.

These differences have important semantic consequences. English causatives usually assign clear responsibility and emphasize control or intention. Indonesian causatives often highlight outcomes rather than initiators. This contrast affects how actions are interpreted and evaluated in discourse. When speakers move across languages, these meaning patterns do not always transfer smoothly. As a result, learners may produce sentences that are grammatically correct but pragmatically weak or ambiguous.

The findings confirm the value of contrastive analysis that focuses on meaning rather than surface similarity. By examining agentivity, affectedness, and event structure, the study reveals why direct equivalence between causative forms often fails. The analysis also shows that many learner difficulties stem from semantic mismatch rather than lack of grammatical knowledge. Learners understand the forms but struggle with their interpretive force.

From a pedagogical perspective, the study suggests that causative instruction should emphasize meaning choice. Teaching should explain how different structures encode responsibility and causal relations. Explicit comparison between English and Indonesian can help learners develop greater control over their writing. This approach supports clearer academic communication and more accurate expression of ideas.

In conclusion, causative structures offer a powerful lens for understanding cross linguistic meaning. By comparing English and Indonesian, this study highlights how languages shape interpretation through structure. These insights contribute to contrastive linguistics and provide practical guidance for EFL writing and instruction.

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