On the Property Reading of Middles

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Abstract

The English middle construction (*This book reads well*) is usually approached from the point of view of the derivational operations that account for the transitivity alternation. However, hardly any attention has been devoted to its semantics. This paper offers a semantic and pragmatic account of English middles. It focuses on the un-agentive, property-predicational nature of the construction, which is made to follow from the stativisation process involved in middle formation. This is linked to its pragmatic function, which is discussed from a relevance-theoretic perspective.

1. Introduction

On the surface, ergatives (*The cup broke*), middles (*This book reads easily*) and passives (*The man has been shot*), are all intransitive one-argument structures. Structurally, however, they hide important differences which have been well documented in the literature. These revolve, on one hand, around the original Agent argument, which is deleted in the case of ergatives, not present though implied in middles, and optionally realized in passives, and, on the other, around the stativity of middles and the eventiveness of ergatives and passives (Keyser and Roeper, 1984; Roberts, 1987; Ackema and Schoorlemmer, 1994). Comparatively, little attention has been devoted to the semantic and pragmatic changes that the transitivity alternations impose on the resulting structures. Whilst in the case of ergatives and passives these changes do not go beyond what we would expect from the grammatical rearrangement of their arguments, they are much more idiosyncratic in middles and yield a highly marked constructional meaning which I refer to as the *middle interpretation*. This paper explores the nature and the

makeup of this semantic (section 2) *and* pragmatic (section 3) peculiarity.

2. The property reading

The semantic idiosyncrasy of middles has not passed unnoticed in the literature. Dixon (1991: 327) notes that the construction "is only used when the nature of the referent of a non-subject NP is the major factor in the success of some instance of an activity". In a similar vein, Erades (1975: 36) claims that "the construction in question is only found when the subject is represented as having certain inherent qualities which promote, hamper or prevent the realisation of the idea expressed by the predicate". A middle sentence like *Children's books read easily*, for example, means that there is some characteristic of children's books, such as the simplicity of the style that can be held responsible for the fact that they are easy to read. I refer to this feature as the *property reading* of the middle subject, and take it to be a crucial and defining feature of English middles.

Van Oosten (1977: 461) also emphasises the semantic relevance of the subject of middles. She claims that, in patient-subject constructions, as she calls middles, "the subject, or a property of it, is understood to be responsible for the action of the verb". She goes on to add that "the patient-subject construction […] is used when we want to say that the patient of the action is to some extent acting as agent".

However, if we turn to standard notions of agentivity according to which the Agent is the volitional doer, performer or instigator of an action (Gruber, 1967: 943; Jackendoff, 1972: 32), as the NP *John* in *John kicked the ball*, then the subject of a middle sentence will be seen to exhibit, if anything, *anti*-Agent-like features. Note that, as the *kick* example shows, agentivity often goes hand in hand with other semantic features like kinesis or action, punctuality, and affectedness of the object, which are some of the components that Hopper and Thompson (1980: 252) list as making up a prototypical transitive clause. Transitivity is here used in the Latin sense of *transire* "to pass" or of "expressing an action which passes over to an object" (*OED* s.v. *transitive* a. (n.) 2), and is thus seen more as a semantic notion than a purely structural one. In middles, there is no action to be carried out. Middles are essentially *in*transitive sentences, not only structurally, but

also semantically. They are stative, unagentive and uneventive constructions, located at the intransitive end of Hopper and Thompson's transitivity continuum and diametrically opposed to highly transitive sentences like *John kicked the ball*. We could express essentially the same insight by drawing on Halliday's (1967: 38 and ff.) notion of transitivity, which he characterises in cognitive terms, according to the type of process expressed in the clause. Middles will be seen to be *attributive* clauses, involving primarily a process of *ascription* of an *attribute* ("a property of […] one of the participants in the clause" p. 62) to an *attribuant* (the participant to whom the property is ascribed). Halliday's (1967: 47) example of an attributive clause is *She looked happy*, where an attribute (happiness) is being ascribed to an attribuant (*she*). The subject of a middle sentence, like *This book reads easily*, could equally be seen as having the role of an *attribuant* to which the property of being easy to read is being ascribed.

Middles, then, do not refer to events, but are rather descriptive statements which attribute some property to the subject. This is noted by Roberts (1987) and by Keyser and Roeper (1984: 381), who claim that middles are generic statements and that, as such, they state propositions that are generally true and do not describe particular events in time. Levin (1993: 26) offers the same insight when she asserts that middles "lack specific time reference". In effect, example (1), a typical middle, is attributing some property to mystery books that makes them easy to sell, but is not referring to an event in which any book was actually sold.

(1)   Mystery books sell easily.

Thus, unlike their transitive counterparts, which are eventive and describe happenings or occurrences, middles describe circumstances or states in which something obtains or holds true. In fact, middles pattern with statives with respect to all the usual tests employed to distinguish between statives and non-statives (see Dowty, 1979: 55-59).

However, the following examples seem to suggest that eventive middles do exist:

(2)   I thought that this book was going to be really difficult to translate, but it wasn't. It translated really easily.
(3)   The president bribed easily. A few hundred pounds was enough.

In (2) it is clear that there exists a specific event in the past in which the book was translated. Similarly, (3) does not merely bring up some property of the president that is held to be true irrespective of time. A bribing event is indeed implied. And yet, any eventive interpretation that these sentences may have is overridden by the property reading and the lack of agentivity that characterises middles, which accounts for the fact that these sentences still qualify as statives according to Dowty's tests. While a translation event is indeed implied, the primary function of sentence (2), for example, is not to report that the translation took place, but rather to imply that there were properties of the book that rendered the translation easy, in line with the semantics of English middles. Thus, though middles can refer to events, they can still be said to be essentially uneventive constructions, in the sense that they do not *primarily* assert events.

3. The pragmatics of middles

Both Fellbaum (1985: 23) and Rosta (1995: 132) point out that, in order for middles to be acceptable, they have to provide "newsworthy information". This idea goes hand in hand with the property reading. Consider the following examples:

(4)   ?? A book translates well
(5)   This book translates well

Example (4) is only marginally acceptable. Under normal circumstances, and assuming no context, it is an inherent property of books that they can be translated, and stating it does not convey any newsworthy information. However, once we specify that it is this particular book that translates well, as in example (5), it is possible to infer that there is some property that this particular book has, but which others may lack, that makes this book easy to translate. This

requirement for middles to provide newsworthy information can be seen as a requirement for them to be *pragmatically relevant*. In the context of Sperber and Wilson's (1995) Relevance Theory, the notion of relevance is characterised in terms of contextual effects. An utterance is said to be relevant in a context "if and only if it has some contextual effect in that context" (Sperber and Wilson, 1995: 122). Given the right contextual assumptions, then, example (4) could be perfectly acceptable. Middles are thus very much context-dependant. They are used when we want to bring to the foreground a property of the subject. If it is impossible to infer from the context what that property could be, then the middle is not acceptable.

This brings us to the issue of the types of modification that middles usually appear with, and their contribution to the semantics and pragmatics of the construction. In the light of our discussion so far, the presence of modification in middles can be seen as a means of producing the desired contextual effects and thus helping to convey the middle interpretation, which will in turn make middles more acceptable. We saw above that this was the case with definite subjects. But there are other linguistic devices that serve the same purpose. The introduction of an explicit element of comparison is one of them. Consider the sentences in (6)-(8):

(6)   * This book reads.
(7)   ? This book reads but that one doesn't.
(8)   This book reads better than that one.

Example (6) is unacceptable. As the sentence stands, it is difficult to imagine what properties of the book could make it responsible for the fact that it can be read. It is therefore odd for *This book* to appear in the subject position of a construction whose function is to bring to the foreground some property of the subject that can be held responsible for the successful occurrence of the action denoted by the verb. But the situation improves as soon as an element of contrast or comparison is introduced, as in (7) and (8).

Contrastive stress, modal auxiliaries, negation or emphatic *do* are other common types of modification to appear with middles, as Roberts (1987: 195) and Rosta (1995) note, and as the following examples show:

(9)   *This book* reads.
(10)   The car will steer, after all. (from Rosta, 1995: 132)
(11)   This book won't translate.
(12)   This book does read.

Fagan (1992: 57) proposes some examples of middles which can occur without any of the elements mentioned above:

(13)   Glass recycles.
(14)   This dress buttons.

Here it is the lexical content of the verbs themselves, in combination with their subjects, that makes it possible to create contextual effects. There would not be much relevance in stating, for example, *Rubbish recycles*, since, after all, it is well-known that recycling consists precisely in turning rubbish into reusable material. On the other hand, stating that glass (as opposed to plastic or cardboard, for example) recycles, conveys relevant information, since not all types of materials can be recycled. It has to be borne in mind, however, that even though middles *can* appear without modification, examples (13) and (14) are far less relevant than any of the middles in (8)-(12), in the sense that much greater processing effort has to be put in to derive contextual effects in the former than in the latter.

4. Conclusion

The very marked and idiosyncratic changes of meaning that the middle transformation imposes on its arguments are both semantic and pragmatic in nature. Only when both are considered together can a better understanding be reached of what a middle sentence can or cannot be. More precisely, we have seen that middles like *This book reads* are unacceptable because it is impossible to infer from the context what the property could be that is being ascribed to the subject, which is the very reason why one would choose to use a middle in the first place.

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