Middles across languages: the parameter of imperfective aspect

I argue for an approach to the cross-linguistically diverse syntax of middles that relates the discrepancy to a parameter of aspect. I maintain that the distinction between the attested two ‘types’ of middle construction reduces to the distinction between languages that have and languages that lack aspectual morphology that encodes genericity.

Middles in English, Dutch and German are syntactically unergative and lack a syntactically active implicit Agent, to the effect that by-phrases are illicit (cf. (1)) (Ackema and Schoorlemmer, 1994, 1995, 2002; Cabredo-Hofherr, 1997). On the other hand, in Greek and French, middles are syntactically indistinguishable from (reflexive) passives (Tsimpili, 1989; Lekakou, 2002, 2003; Dobrovie-Sorin, 2002, 2004; Zribi-Hertz, 2003). The implicit Agent is syntactically active, and can even license a by-phrase (cf. (2)). Additional differences, which I argue follow from the distinct derivation of the English- and of the Greek-type middle, relate to the obligatoriness of adverbial modification, and the restrictions on the input to middle formation. Germanic languages are more stringent with respect to both these properties.

(1) a. This book reads easily (*by anyone).
   b. Dit boek leest gemakkelijk (*door wie dan ook).
   c. Dieses Buch liest sich leicht (*von irgendetwem).

(2) a. Afto to vivlio δjavazete efkola (apo opjonδipote).
   b. Ce livre se lit facilement (par tout le monde).

In the spirit of Condoravdi (1989), I propose to treat ‘the middle’ as a particular interpretation that independently existing structures receive. The proposed typological generalization for the syntax of middles appears in (3). Availability of morphosyntactic encoding of genericity is defined in (4). My proposal for the middle interpretation (MI) is given in (5).

(3) A language will employ a passive/unaccusative structure for the middle interpretation iff genericity is encoded in imperfective morphology.

(4) A language encodes genericity in imperfective morphology iff in at least one tense it has two distinct verb forms for generic and nongenerics uses, i.e. iff genericity → imperfectivity.

(5) MI=the ascription of a dispositional property to the Patient/Theme argument.

Dispositionals are generic sentences which differ from habituals in the following ways: the former, but not the latter, are subject-oriented and readily invite modal paraphrases. Disposition ascriptions are non-accidental generalizations that are true in virtue of some property of the subject referent (see Greenberg (2002, 2003) for the notion of ‘in virtue of’ genericity applied to NP-genericity). Habituals are merely descriptive generalizations, i.e.
non-accidental generalizations that state a pattern of regularly recurring events. Contrary to habituals, dispositionals can be true in the absence of any prior event of the type denoted by the verb. This distinction underlies the contrast between (6), an adverbless nonepisodic passive which can only encode habituality (in Germanic), and (7), an adverbless middle, which is dispositional. As a result, (8) is not a contradiction:

(6) This poem doesn’t translate.

(7) This poem isn’t translated.

(8) This book reads easily, but it isn’t easily read.

I apply the proposal made by Brennan (1993) for subject-orientend modal verbs (dispositional will and ability can) to the dispositional generic operator (Gen). The latter is a subject-oriented VP-operator, which takes a property-denoting VP and returns a modalized VP. The resulting modalized property is ascribed to the syntactic subject. By characterizing MI as in (5) and by analyzing dispositionality as subject-oriented genericity (Lekakou, 2004, 2005a), we derive the genericity of the otherwise eventive verb and the obligatorily generic interpretation of indefinite subjects of middles.

Most crucially, the particular analysis derives the realization of arguments in middles: for the disposition ascription to target the Patient/Theme argument, this has to appear in subject position, either by being base-generated there—Germanic—or by being moved there—Greek/French (for impersonal and adjunct middles see Lekakou (2005a)). Concomitantly, the otherwise most eligible candidate for subject position, the Agent, has to be demoted. Its generic interpretation also follows from (5): disposition ascriptions are incompatible with specific agents. More in particular, I propose that the Agent in middles is interpreted as an inherently generic indefinite, which I dub ONE*. ONE*, like the lexical item one, needs to be licensed by a modal operator, such as genericity (Gen). The generalization in (3) is derived on the assumption that ONE* imposes a requirement of immediate licensing as in (9):

(9) ONE* needs to be licensed at the level at which it is expressed.

Greek and French encode Gen in morphological imperfective aspect. They thus have at their disposal the morphosyntactic means to license a syntactically active Agent. Generic passives, which independently feature the understood object in subject position, are employed to convey MI. Germanic languages, on the other hand, do not encode Gen morphosyntactically, hence a syntactically active ONE* is impossible. ONE* is introduced presyntactically, at the level of conceptual structure, where it is licensed by a presyntactically available Gen (cf. Chierchia (1995)). I demonstrate that the adverb, obligatory in Germanic middles, plays a crucial role in the recoverability of the implicit Agent at LF.

By employing the parameter of aspect to explain the pattern of variation in middles, I propose a straightforwardly falsifiable analysis, whose empirical coverage may well extend to the rest of Romance and to Slavic languages. The proposed account is conceptually superior to something like Reinhart’s ‘Lexicon–Syntax’ parameter (Reinhart, 2000), since it capitalizes on an independent morphosyntactic property of languages. It also fares better empirically: mainly because of the presence of sich (Lekakou, 2005b), in Reinhart (2003) and Marelj (2004) German middles are predicted to pattern with Greek, contrary to fact.
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References


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