

# Middle Transitive Alternations in English: A Generative Lexicon Approach

Christian Bassac and Pierrette Bouillon

*Université Michel de Montaigne Bordeaux 3 and Université de Genève*

## 1. Introduction: Current approaches

Over the last fifteen years, following Perlmutter and Postal's (1983) work, there has been constant interest in the problem raised by transitivity alternations. Perlmutter and Postal argued that the single argument of intransitive verbs may either be generated as an object of the verb (unaccusative verbs) or as a subject (unergative verbs) (cf. Bassac 1997). A sub-class of unaccusative verbs show both transitive and intransitive use, as in (1) and (2):

- (1) The artillery sank two ships.
- (2) Two ships sank.

This transitive/ergative (or causative/inchoative) alternation must be distinguished from another alternation, the transitive/middle alternation exemplified in (3) and (4):

- (3) I read this book.
- (4) This book reads well.

Prima facie middle constructions such as (4) appear as more constrained forms of (2): syntactically they need an adverbial, and semantically their time reference cannot be specific. More specifically, the middle variant of the alternation exhibits the following two basic characteristics: the agent theta-role is not projected in the syntax, and semantically a middle construction is a generic statement. The syntactic characteristic that the agent theta-role is not projected in syntax is shared by passive constructions (with no agentive *by* phrase) and by ergative constructions such as (2). However, unlike in passive constructions no

morphological change affects the verb of the middle construction, and similarly to what happens in ergative constructions such as (2) the unprojected agent theta-role is not accessible for control:

- (5) a. \*This book sells to shock.  
 b. \*This book reads well by everybody.

Semantically, a middle construction is a generic statement, whatever the genericity of the surface structure subject may be – either generic as in (6a), or specific as in (6b):

- (6) a. Minced food does not freeze well.<sup>1</sup>  
 b. Your new hair dryer stores away neatly.

Consequently the genericity of statements such as that in (6) cannot come from the genericity of the surface subject.

To account for these characteristics crucially involving the interplay between the lexicon and syntax (cf. Levin and Rappaport Hovav 1995), two basic approaches are possible, depending on whether the surface form of middles is interpreted as resulting from a syntactic or a presyntactic (i.e., lexical) process. The former type of analysis, which is very similar to that proposed for the derivations of passives or unaccusatives (cf. Burzio 1986, for instance), is developed in Stroik 1992 or in Keyser and Roeper 1984. Obviously, this kind of analysis is far from unexpected, given the similarities between the three constructions. The latter type of analysis is developed in Ackema and Schoorlemmer 1995 or in Fagan 1988, and there it is argued that the unprojected argument is not overtly expressed as the result of some lexical (or presyntactic) principle. In what can be called syntactic analyses, it is suggested (cf. Stroik 1992) that the unprojected argument, which bears the implicit agent theta role, is PRO adjoined to VP. The s-structure of (4) would then be:

- (7) [<sub>IP</sub> This book<sub>i</sub> [<sub>I</sub> I [<sub>VP</sub> [<sub>VP</sub> [<sub>V'</sub> reads t<sub>i</sub> well]]] PRO ]]

For Keyser and Roeper, the surface subject is generated as a deep object and then moves to its subject position to receive its case. The motivation for this movement is that if the deep object did not move, this would result in a violation of the Case Filter as it would not be assigned case in its d-structure position.

In what can be called lexical analyses, Fagan (1988) offers counter arguments to Keyser and Roeper's proposal and contends that a syntactic

---

1. This example is attested, as are most examples from this point on. This is important insofar as some middle constructions may be unexpected (e.g., (34)) and yet must be accounted for.

derivation of middles is untenable. Ackema and Schoorlammer (1995) offer counter-arguments to Stroik's analysis: one of their most compelling arguments is that of auxiliary selection. According to Perlmutter's analysis, unergative verbs select cognates of *have* and unaccusatives select cognates of *be*. If middles are syntactically derived by movement of the internal NP, this means that by definition middles are unaccusatives, and therefore should select cognates of *be*. Contrary to this expectation, in Dutch they take *hebben* 'have' thereby behaving like unergatives; consequently the subject NP of middles is not moved but is generated as an external argument. This leads them to the conclusion that only "presyntactic analyses of middles are on the right track."

The analysis we want to develop here is definitely of the latter type. We claim that the syntactic mapping of middles follows from the lexical representation provided and from operations on the elements of this representation. We also claim that these representations offer an explanatory account for some phenomena poorly explained in the analyses previously outlined, such as the lexical distribution of verbs exhibiting middle/transitive alternations, and for other empirical data that have been more or less extensively described or have passed unnoticed.

## 2. Phenomenology

### 2.1. *The constraints on middle constructions*

Among other long-established facts about middle constructions, the best known is certainly that these constructions are syntactically constrained. One constraint is that the agent theta role is not projected. This is exemplified in (8):

(8) \*This book reads easily by John.

Yet Stroik (1992) argues that in some cases the agent can be syntactically expressed in the guise of a *for* phrase, as in (9):

- (9) a. That book reads quickly for Mary.  
b. No Latin text translates easily for Bill.

Obviously this kind of evidence supports Stroik's syntactic derivation of middle constructions, since here the agent argument seems to be overtly expressed. However, this argumentation does not seem conclusive. First, as Ackema and Schoorlemmer (1995) shows, the construction with the *for* phrase is not productive as indicated by (10) (taken from Fagan 1988).

(10) These books don't sell (??for the average shopkeeper).

**The complete article appears in *Many Morphologies*, edited by Paul Boucher, published in 2002 by Cascadilla Press. To purchase *Many Morphologies* or to find out more about the book, please visit our web site at <http://www.cascadilla.com/manym.html> or contact us:**

**Cascadilla Press  
P.O. Box 440355  
Somerville, MA 02144  
USA**

**phone: 1-617-776-2370  
fax: 1-617-776-2271  
e-mail: [sales@cascadilla.com](mailto:sales@cascadilla.com)  
<http://www.cascadilla.com>**