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<th>Tsukuba English Studies</th>
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<td>Volume</td>
<td>12</td>
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<td>Page Range</td>
<td>275-276</td>
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<td>Year</td>
<td>1993-08-31</td>
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On Middle Constructions in English

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In this joint research, we attempt to identify the class of verbs which is compatible with middle constructions. First, we review Hale & Keyser (1987), whose study has wider coverage than most other previous analyses. They argue that verbs which undergo middle formation involve the following Lexical Conceptual Structure (LCS):

(1) \([x \text{ cause } [y \text{ "undergo change"}]\text{(by...)}]\)

We argue that this LCS approach is not descriptively adequate, because it involves at least two types of problems yet to be solved. One is concerned with the type of verbs which apparently do not have this LCS but is used in this construction, as in (2). The other problem is concerned with the class of verbs which involves that LCS but does not undergo middle formation, as in (3).

(2) This scientific paper reads like a novel.

   b. *This magazine buys well.

About the first type of problem, we argue, incorporating a suggestion by Minoru Nakau (p.c.), that verbs like read and perform, which do not seem to have an LCS like (1), involve a certain kind of change. Nakau refers to verbs of this type as instance-creating verbs, claiming that they express a change of situation in the sense that an instance of the action denoted by the verb comes into existence. Thus we claim that the acceptable class of verbs in middle constructions must semantically involve the notion of change of state.

We then turn to consideration of the second type of problem. The grammaticality contrast between (3a) and (4) suggests that some syntactic constraint is required, as observed in Endo (1986).

(4) The book shelves easily.
(3a) and (4) are considered to express the same situation and both satisfy the
semantic requirement mentioned above. They differ in that the former expresses
the end point of action by PP but the latter incorporates it into the verb.
Following Tenny (1987), we call expressions of end point of action as delimiters
and divide them into external and internal delimiters. Expressions like PPs,
CPs and small clauses delimit the action implied by the verb externally. In
contrast, resultative expressions and delimiters internalized in verbs
constitute internal delimiters. As a syntactic constraint an internal delimiter
is required in middle constructions.

Finally we explain the unacceptability of (3b). The semantic and syntactic
constraints discussed above do not block middle formation of verbs like buy.
Compare (3b) with (5), in which the verb expresses the same situation seen from
the opposite direction.

(5) This magazine sells well.

If we take into consideration the function of the middle construction, we can
explain this contrast naturally. As noted in previous studies, the function is
to describe the permanent property of the subject NP. Verbs which cannot
characterize the subject do not conform to middle formation. Thus sell can
characterize this magazine in (5), but buy is not responsible for its
characterization, rather the verb expresses the property of the agent of the
action. The characterization of the subject is a pragmatic factor in determining
the acceptability of middle constructions.

In this paper, it is made clear that there are semantic, syntactic and
pragmatic constraints on middle constructions.

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