

Middles and Other Related Constructions

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When we talk about the easiness or facility of an event's actualization and want to state that the property to facilitate the denoted action lies in the object of a verb, in English, we can use at least the following three types of expressions:

- (1) a. This book sells easily.
- b. This book sells ITSELF.
- c. The book is easy to sell.

We will refer to (1a,b,c) as the Middle, the *Reflexive* Middle, and the *Tough* Constructions, respectively (hereafter MC, RMC, and TC). (In contrast to an ordinary reflexive pronoun, the reflexive in the RMC receives sentence stress, so indicated by capitalization.) They all imply an human entity as an actor, and thus cannot be formed from the predicates which do not select for the human subject when used transitively. The verb *rot*, for example, selects for only the inanimate external argument, as in *All that sugar/*His mother rotted John's teeth*, and therefore it cannot appear in all of the three constructions:

- (2) *John's teeth {rot easily/THEMSELVES/are easy to rot}.

The MC and RMC, however, behave differently from the TC with respect to the requirement of volitionality: the verbs eligible for the former must select for the *volitional* human subject when used transitively, while the latter is not subject to such a constraint. The verb *know*, for example, does not select for the volitional human subject, as in *??John volitionally knew the truth*, thus excluded from the MC and RMC:

- (3) The truth {*knows easily/*ITSELF/is easy to know}.

At first sight, it seems to be mysterious that the so called "periphrastic causatives" never occur in the constructions except for the TC, since they can occur with adverbs like *volitionally*, as in *John volitionally made the floor clean*:

- (4) This floor {*makes clean easily/*ITSELF/is easy to make clean}.

To solve the problem, let us emphasize the fact that the implied entity in the MC and RMC must be perceived as the actor of the described event. The periphrastic causative, by nature, does not express a specific activity, so its subject is not perceived as an actor, but rather as a causer who provokes the event. Thus, we claim that the verbs eligible for the MC and RMC must be able to describe a volitionally performable activity, while the verbs eligible for the TC have only to select for the human entity as an external argument (in some loose sense). The MC and RMC in (4) are unacceptable because they violate this constrain. This is verified in the fact that the resultative counterpart can enter into the MC and RMC as well as the TC. Consider the following:

(5) This floor {wipes clean easily/ITSELF/is easy to wipe clean}.

Unlike the periphrastic causative, the resultative predicate *wipe the floor clean*, no doubt, expresses a specific action (wiping) which causes a change of state in the patient, and the described action has the property of volitionally performability, as in *John intentionally wiped the floor clean*, thus it is perfectly compatible with the MC and RMC.

As we have noted, the MC and RMC behave identically in the 'volitionally-performability' constraint, yet they show a difference with respect to the notion of pre-existence. I assume that the subjects of active sentences must be perceived as pre-existent before the action described by the *main* verb. It is thus expected that the three constructions all satisfy this constraint, since these are considered to be a kind of active sentences. It seems, however, that the RMC and TC are free from such a requirement, though the MC behaves as we have expected. Let us consider the following examples:

- (6) a. *This solution suggests easily.
 b. This solution suggests ITSELF.
 c. This solution is easy to suggest.

In the event described by *suggest*, what is suggested (here *this solution*) cannot be identified in the situation prior to that action; we perceive it to appear after the action has finished, (though it must be pre-existent in his or her conceptual domain; otherwise he or she cannot suggest anything). On my assumption, then, such an entity should be expected not to occupy the subject position of the main verb *suggest*. The results of (6b,c), however, appear to upset our expectation. As for (6c), we can easily solve the problem by claiming that the main verb in the TC is not *suggest*, but *be*, so the subject here needs not to be perceived as pre-existent before the action of suggesting. The problem lies in the acceptability of the RMC in (6b), since the main verb here is *suggest*.

A close inspection reveals, however, that this fact also does not conflict with my claim; rather it gives us an important insight into the difference between the MC and the RMC. Stating our conclusion first, the presence of the reflexive pronoun warrants the pre-existence of the subject in the RMC. In the case of (6b), the presence of the reflexive *ITSELF* forces us to interpret the subject referent (*this solution*) as a proposer (who virtually proposes itself). So it is understood to exist, as a proposer, in our conceptual domain, prior to the action of suggesting; otherwise it cannot start that action. In short, the subject of RMC is strongly viewed as a virtual agent, due to the presence of the reflexive pronoun, while that of the MC is still understood to be the patient, though perceived as responsible for facilitating the event's actualization. It is for this reason that the MC and RMC behave differently in the eligibility of *suggest*. Given this, we may safely say that the result of (6) demonstrates the validity of my assumption.