An Analysis of the Middle and Ergative Constructions in English

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Many verbs participate in different constructions, where the verbs need distinct argument structures. It is important to examine the argument structures of these verbs in order to consider the organization of lexicon. The representative cases are ergatives and middles, as shown in the following examples.

(1) a. The window broke.   (ergatives)

    b. John broke the window.

(2) a. The book reads easily.   (middles)

    b. John read the book.

The most obvious feature of middles and ergatives, as the above examples show, is that they are related in meaning and phonological form to transitives and that their subjects correspond to objects of the transitives.

Our goal is to propose a systematic account of the properties of middles and ergatives, based on two fundamental assumptions proposed in Nakau (1985, 1986), as follows:

(3) a. A threefold distiction of predicate-types:

       STATE, PROCESS, and ACTION

    b. The division between ACTOR and AGENT

The following lexical rules are proposed in order to capture the relation between intransitives(i.e. middles and ergatives) and the correspoding transitives.

(4) a. Delete an ACTOR argument.

    b. Externalize an internal argument.

The above lexical rules explain the following properties of middles and ergaitves.

(5) a. Non-ACTION verbs do not change into middles and

      ergatives.

    b. *By*-phrases do not occur in middles and ergatives.

    c. Purpose-clauses do not occur in middles and ergatives.

Previous studies (Roeper and Keyser (1984), Fagan (1988), Roberts

(1985), etc...) assume that middles have the same argument structure
as passives. Therefore, they have to stipulate (5b,c) since passives
occur with *by*-phrases and purpose-clauses. In our proposal middles
have the same derivation as ergatives, which means that they have the
same argument structure. Then, they share the identical syntactic
behavior.

The difference between them is due to the different predicate-
types they belong to. ACTION verbs have to become STATE verbs or
PROCESS ones through the application of the lexical rule (4b), since
the presence of ACOTR characterizes an ACTION verb. The following ex-
amples show that middles belong to STATE verbs, while ergatives are
PROCESS verbs, since ergatives are used in the progressive form, but
middels are not.

 (6) a. *Chickens are killing easily. (middles)

   b. The boat is sinking.   (ergatives)

The relation between lexical rule (4) and predicate-types is
important, because the rule changes a predicate-type into a different
one. This indicates that the argument structure have the close re-
lation to predicate-types, since lexical rules only affect the argu-
ment structures. This gives rise to an insight into the lexical organ-
ization, since middles and ergatives share the way of syntactic reali-
zation, but they must belong to the different predicate-types. That
is, the argument structure should consist of two pieces of information,
as follows;

 (7) a. the number of θ-roles and the distinction between exter-
    nal and internal θ-roles

   b. the content of θ-role, or semantic functions

The first information (7a) is conserned with the way of syntactic real-
ization of argument and (7b) is concerned with the predicate-types.
Middles and ergatives have the same information about (7a), but they
differ in (7b).