

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 cause [y "undergo change"](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 does 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.
(3) a. *The book puts easily on the shelf.
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.

REFERENCES

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