The crosslinguistic realization of the middle semantics: imperfective aspect and reflexive paradigms

Across languages, middles do not have a uniform syntax. Ackema & Schoorlemmer (A & S) (1994, 1995, 2002) have extensively argued that the middle in English and Standard Dutch features a base-generated subject. This also holds of the subject of German middles. In this type of language, the implicit agent is syntactically inert, to the effect that by-phrases are illicit (cf. (1)). On the other hand, I show that in Greek and French, middles are syntactically indistinguishable from (reflexive) passives. The implicit agent is syntactically active, and can even take the guise of a by-phrase (cf. (2)).

(1) a. Afto to vivlio διjavazete efkola (apo opjonδipote).
this the-NOM book read-NONACT.IMPERF.3SG easily by anyone
b. Ce livre se lit facilement (par tout le monde).
this book REFL read-3SG easily by all the world

(2) a. This book reads easily (*by anyone).
b. Dit boek leest gemakkelijk (*door wie dan ook).
this book read-3SG easily (by anyone)
c. Dieses Buch liest sich leicht (*von irgendwem).
this book reads RP easily (by anyone)

In the spirit of Condoravdi (1989), I propose to treat ‘the middle’ as a particular interpretation that independently existing structures receive. The crosslinguistic variation in the choice of structure employed to convey this interpretation relates to more general morphosyntactic properties of the languages in question. One factor determining the syntax of middles is the (un)availability of imperfective aspect to encode genericity. A second factor at play within Germanic languages is the status of weak reflexives in the anaphoric system.

I propose the following specification for the middle interpretation (MI):

(3) MI=the ascription of a dispositional property to the Patient/Theme argument.

Dispositionals are generic sentences which differ from habituals in the following ways: the former, but not the latter, are subject-oriented and readily invite modal paraphrases. Disposition ascriptions are non-accidental generalizations that are true in virtue of some property of the subject referent; habituals are merely descriptive generalizations, i.e. non-accidental generalizations that state a pattern of regularly recurring events. This distinction underlies the contrast between (4), an adverbless nonepisodic passive which can only encode habituality (in Germanic), and (5), an adverbless middle, which is dispositional. As a result of the distinct meanings expressed, (6) is not a contradiction:

(4) Linguistics articles just don’t read!
(5) Linguistics articles just aren’t read!
(6) This book reads easily, but it isn’t easily read.

Based on Brennan’s (1993) proposal for subject-orientend modal verbs (dispositional will and ability can), I argue that the generic operator (Gen) of dispositionals is a VP-operator, which takes a property-denoting VP and returns a modalized VP. The resulting modalized property is ascribed to the syntactic subject. Gen receives the same semantic treatment as Brennan’s dispositional will. By characterizing MI as in (3), we derive (a) the genericity of the otherwise eventive verb, (b) the modal flavour of middles, and (c) the obligatorily generic interpretation of indefinite subjects of middles.
The characterization of MI as in (3) dictates the mapping to syntax. For the dispositional reading to be available, the Patient/Theme argument has to appear in subject position. Therefore, the otherwise most eligible candidate for that position, the Agent, is demoted. Its generic interpretation also follows from (3): disposition ascriptions do not favour specific agents. More in particular, I propose to treat the Agent in middles as a covert generic indefinite (ONE*), which like its overt counterpart (one) is only licit in the context of genericity (Gen). The crosslinguistic variation in the realization of MI is derived if we assume (7). Syntactic licensing is obligatory if Gen is present in the morphosyntax along the lines of (8):

(7) Syntactically active ONE* must be licensed in the syntax.

(8) Morphosyntactic Gen is available iff genericity ⇒ imperfectivity.

Greek and French encode Gen in morphological imperfective aspect; they thus have at their disposal the morphosyntactic means to license a syntactically active Agent. Generic passives, which independently feature the ‘understood object’ in subject position, are employed to convey MI. Germanic languages, on the other hand, do not encode Gen morphosyntactically, hence a syntactically active ONE* is illicit. Mapping principles, as discussed in Reinhart (2000), ensure that syntactic licensing of ONE* obtains in movement structures, whereas presyntactic ‘MF’ results in an unergative verbal entry. Within Reinhart’s system, middles cannot be parasitic on reduction but on saturation, parametrized to the level of its application according to the (un)availability of morphosyntactic Gen as in (8).

Within Germanic, the question is why sich is present in German, but not Dutch middles. German lacks the complex anaphor sichzelf, with the result that (a) sich can appear in argument reflexives, where Standard Dutch uses sichzelf and (b) sich takes on a narrower, more specialized meaning than its German (only apparent) counterpart. Zich is a marker of inherently, i.e. lexically reflexive predicates. It appears with some anticausatives, but does not generally mark the process that yields them, i.e. argument reduction. Sich is not restricted in this way: in addition to argument reflexives, it surfaces with nonargument reflexives, i.e. inherent reflexives and most anticausatives (argument reduction) as well as middles (argument saturation) (Steinbach 2002). Sich is a general marker of valency reduction. A similar situation to German obtains in Heerlen Dutch, a dialect which employs zich in middles and also most anticausatives. Heerlen Dutch too seems to lack a zichzelf anaphor. Across languages, it has been observed that the middle will employ a sich-type element only if the latter can also be used on a reciprocal reading of the predicate (A & S 2002). Sich also makes a reciprocal interpretation available. Although Standard Dutch can only employ elkaar for reciprocals, Heerlen Dutch lacks that element and employs zich.

It is unique to MF that it effects a change in the lexical aspect of the verb, from eventive to stative/generic, in addition to argument manipulation. The proposed account addresses these properties by relating its crosslinguistic output to the status of sich/zich within Germanic as a means of marking argument manipulation, and to the morphosyntactic encoding of Gen across languages.

Selected References