

The Semantic Role of the Middle Subject

Casilda Garcia de la Maza, University of the Basque Country

On the surface, ergatives (*The cup broke*), middles (*This book reads easily*) and passives (*The man has been shot*), are all intransitive one-argument structures. Structurally, however, they hide important differences which have been well documented in the literature. These revolve, on one hand, around the original Agent argument, which is deleted in the case of ergatives, not present though implied in middles, and optionally realized in passives, and, on the other, around the stativity of middles and the eventiveness of ergatives and passives. Comparatively little attention has been devoted to the semantic changes that the transitivity alternations impose on the resulting structures. Whilst in the case of ergatives and passives these changes do not go beyond what we would expect from the grammatical rearrangement of their arguments, they are much more idiosyncratic in middles and yield a highly marked constructional meaning which we refer to as ‘the middle interpretation’.

This paper explores the nature and the makeup of that semantic peculiarity. In order to do so, the role of both the middle subject and of the implied agent argument need to be examined. The semantic status of the former, which has been described as exhibiting agent-like properties and as being the primarily responsible participant (Erades 1975, Lakoff 1977, Van Oosten 1977, Dixon 1991, Fagan 1992, Rosta 1995) is analysed. These notions are refined in the light of different interpretations of the notion of agentivity (Fillmore 1968, Jackendoff 1972, Dowty 1981), and of Hopper and Thompson’s (1980) semantic concept of transitivity, which includes a number of components such as agentivity, punctuality, kinesis etc. The subject of a middle is thus seen as an *attribuant* (Halliday 1967), the argument about which a property is being predicated and the subject of a semantically *intransitive* structure. It is further argued that this argument engages in a clash of forces with the implied agent argument. This clash is described within Talmy’s (1985) theory of force dynamics, where the implied agent acts as the *agonist*, the force-exerting entity, and the subject as an *antagonist*, the force element that opposes it. For example, the middle *This book translates easily* implies that properties of this particular book are such that, contrary to expectations, it lends itself to an easy translation. The subject is the *antagonist*, the element that opposes (or neutralises) the force, or the effort, that the implied Agent would have needed to accomplish in order to carry out a successful translation.

Once we have gained an understanding of the middle interpretation and of the clash of forces it instantiates, we are in a better position to account for the requirement for middles to have some type of modification, which, if an adverb, will typically be a ‘facility’ (Vendler 1984) or a ‘middle’ (Fellbaum 1989) adverb, like *easily*, *well*, *nicely* etc. The suitability, or indeed the requirement for these adverbs to appear in middles – and the impossibility for manner adverbs (like *carefully*) to do so – is analysed in terms of their (im)compatibility with the semantics of the middle arguments and of the extent to which they help instantiate the clash of forces that characterises the construction.