

# On the Generic Character of Middle Constructions.

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November 1, 1997.

## 1. Introduction

Middle constructions are generally characterized as generic sentences (Condoravdi 1989, Fagan 1992). I will take generic sentences to be sentences expressing a predication which is held to be generally true. In this squib, I will argue that middle constructions involve two predications (a matrix predication and an embedded predication), and that the generic character of middle constructions is determined by the embedded predication only.

## 2. Middle Constructions

In this squib, I take middle constructions to be defined by the characteristics in (1):

(1) *Middle Constructions*

- (i) The external argument of the verb is not expressed
- (ii) The verb has active morphology
- (iii) The action denoted by the verb is predicated over by an adverb
- (iv) The verb is of the activity-class, and the sentence as a whole is non-eventive

Examples are given in (2):

- (2) a. This book reads quickly  
b. This pen writes easily  
c. Bureacrats bribe easily

The absence of the external argument in middle constructions is illustrated by the impossibility of (3):

- (3) This book reads easily (\*by anyone)

The obligatory active morphology of the verb in middle constructions is illustrated in (4):

- (4) \* This book is read quickly

The function of the adverb as predicating over the activity denoted by the verb only (instead of predicating over the entire accomplishment denoted by the verb phrase) is suggested by the impossibility of placing the adverb in the verb phrase modifying position before the verb:

- (5) \* This book quickly reads

More compelling evidence for the status of the adverb in middle constructions is offered by comparable sentences in Dutch, where certain adverbial elements can appear in middle constructions but not as verb phrase adverbials in nonmiddles:

- (6) a. Dit boek leest {snel/als een trein}  
 this book reads fast/like a train [i.e. very fast]  
 b. Men kan dit boek {snel/\*als een trein} lezen  
 one can this book fast/like a train read

I conclude elsewhere that these facts show that *als een trein* (and, by consequence, other middle adverbials) modify the activity **lezen/read** only, yielding a paraphrase of (2a)/(6a) as in (7) (Zwart 1997a):

- (7) This book makes the reading quick/like a train

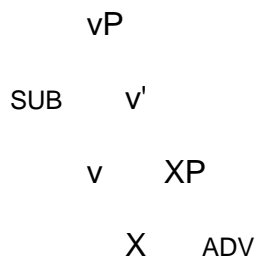
The aspectual restrictions on middle constructions in (1iv) is only relevant for comparison with other languages, and will not be further discussed here (see Zwart 1997b).

### 3. The double predication in middle constructions

The paraphrase in (7) of the middle constructions in (2a)/(6a) implies that two subject-predicate relations exist in middle constructions. First, the adverbial element predicates over the activity denoted by the verb (represented by *the reading* in (7)). Second, the predicate *makes the reading quick* predicates over the sentence subject *this book*.

In Zwart (1997a), I propose the following syntactic structure for middle constructions:

- (8) *Structure of middle constructions*



In (8), the 'little V' *v* is associated with permissive causativity, giving rise to the element *make* in the paraphrase in (7) (cf. Chomsky 1995:350 and Kratzer 1996 for similar ideas about the structure of unergative verbs, involving a light verb associated with agentivity and/or causativity). *X* represents a categorially neutral lexical root, represented (somewhat incorrectly) by the nominalization *the reading* in (7). The lexical root incorporates into the light verb (as with all unergative verbs, see Hale & Keyser 1993), yielding the notionally complex middle verb.

In (8), the adverb predicates directly over its sister, the lexical root. Likewise, the combination *v'* of the light verb *v* and the phrase *XP* predicates directly over the subject.

The ensuing discussion of the generic character of middle constructions supports the distinction between these two predication relations within the middle construction.

The distinction accounts for the intuition that what is said to be generally true is not the agency of the subject bringing about a certain attribution of properties to the activity by the adverb (the 'higher' predication), but the attribution of properties to the activity (the 'lower' predication) itself. Thus, when one utters (2a), one does not express that the book generally makes the reading fast, but that the book has certain properties which make the reading generally fast. (In other words, the sentence subject is not within the scope of the generic operator.)

#### 4. Generic sentences

Generic sentences can be of two general types, referred to as *kind-generics* and *characterizing sentences* (see Krifka et al 1995).

Kind-generics involve a nonspecific noun phrase referring to a kind rather than to a specific entity, as in (9a) vs. (9b):

- (9) a. The human male snores  
b. John snores/snored yesterday

The genericity in (9a) is the result of the subject referring to many instances of the kind **human male**, a large percentage (say, the majority) of which has the property of snoring.

Characterizing sentences may involve either a kind-noun phrase or a specific noun phrase. They involve a nonspecific predicate, as opposed to particular sentences, as in (10a) vs. (10b):

- (10) a. John snores  
b. John snored yesterday

The genericity of (10a) is the result of the property of snoring to be generally attributable to John. This can be understood if we think of John as being 'temporally sliced', i.e. as existing in successive slices of time, in a large percentage of which (say, the majority) the property of snoring applies to John. (10b) lacks that genericity because of the restriction of the predication to a single time slice, namely yesterday.

Characterizing sentences can be distinguished from particular sentences by adding explicit designators of genericity, such as the adverb *usually*. With characterizing sentences, addition of these should give rise to only a slight change of meaning. With particular sentences, addition of words like *usually* should give rise to a rather drastic change of meaning. Thus, in the middle construction (11), *usually* does not add much in comparison with (10a):

- (11) John usually snores

But in the particular sentence (10b), addition of *usually* introduces the notion that John slept at various times during the period indicated by *yesterday*:

- (12) John usually snored yesterday

## 5. Middle constructions as generic sentences

In middle constructions, adding explicit designators of genericity does not lead to a radical change in interpretation:

- (13) a. This book usually reads quickly  
b. This pen usually writes easily  
c. Bureaucrats usually bribe easily

I take this to imply that the sentences in (13) are all generic sentences of the characterizing type.

Note that the subjects in (13a) and (13b) can have both a kind-reading and a specific reading. Especially in the specific reading, the genericity of the statements may be questioned. Thus, (14) can be uttered about the new type of bread after only one act of cutting it:

- (14) This bread cuts smoothly

Since (14) in this case is a specific comment on a single action of cutting a specific bread, it is questionable whether one may infer (15) from (14) without the rather drastic change of meaning that betrays particular sentences:

- (15) This bread usually cuts smoothly

I believe that (15) cannot be inferred from (14) because (15) as presented is a statement held to be valid over a series of known acts of cutting. This is pragmatically inappropriate when only one act of cutting has taken place. Choice of a different tense and modality, in combination with an appropriate explicit designator of genericity, makes for a less questionable inference:

- (16) This bread will probably always cut smoothly

I will therefore continue to assume that (14) is a generic sentence of the characterizing type, and I will assume the same for (13a) and (13b) where the subject receives a specific interpretation.

## 6. Generic interpretation at two levels

In section 3, I argued that middle constructions involve two levels of predication, one involving the sentence subject, and a 'lower' one involving as its subject the element *X* in (8) referring to the activity denoted by the verb.

There is no doubt that the higher level of predication, involving the sentence subject, can be the locus of genericity in middle constructions. This is necessarily the case whenever the middle construction involves a kind-subject, as in (13c) and in the kind-reading of (13a,b). The genericity in these constructions is a function of the subject denoting various instances of a certain kind, the predication holding of the majority of those instances.

More questionable is the existence of the second level of predication, and, in connection with this, the attribution of genericity to this 'lower' predication relation.

In what follows, I argue that in middles with specific subjects, the genericity cannot involve the sentence subject, and, therefore, cannot be attributed to the 'higher' subject-predicate relation.

## 7. Individual Level and Stage Level Properties

The argumentation that follows relies crucially on the distinction between Individual Level properties and Stage Level properties (cf. Carlson 1977, Kratzer 1995).

Individual Level properties of  $x$  are properties of  $x$  holding at all times. Taking  $x$  to be 'temporally sliced' again, we can say that individual level properties are properties holding of  $x$  at all 'time slices' of  $x$ . An example is given in (17):

(17) John is intelligent

In (17), *intelligent* is a property of John at any slice of time in which John appears. It is therefore an individual level property of John.

Properties that do not hold at all time slices of  $x$  are stage level properties of  $x$ . An example is given in (18):

(18) John is ill

In (18), *ill* denotes a property of John at a subset of the slices of time in which John appears.

## 8. Stage level properties in characterizing sentences

Characterizing sentences with specific subjects crucially play into stage level properties of the subject. Take the example (10a), repeated here as (19):

(19) John snores

This sentence expresses that in a majority of the 'time slices' of John, John has the property of snoring.

I submit that the question to ask at this point is: what properties of John allow for the attribution of the property of snoring to John to be correct (in the relevant cases)?

If we look at the properties of John at each of the relevant time slices, it appears that the properties responsible for the attribution of the property of snoring to John (in the relevant time slice) are all stage level properties. Thus, John can be snoring (in the various time slices) because he is overweight, or because he has been drinking, or because he is lying on his back. It appears that all the properties that could be imagined as being responsible for his snoring are stage level properties.

It is clear why this should be the case. If John's snoring would be caused by individual properties of John, these properties would apply at all John's time slices, and the property that they cause (John's snoring) would also apply at all John's time slices. But generic sentences are about a (relatively large) *subset* of a subject's time slices, not about the *total* of a subject's time slices. This makes genericity incompatible with

individual level predication. As expected, (20), repeated from (17) cannot be interpreted as a generic sentence:

(20) John is intelligent

This is because John's intelligence is a function of certain properties of John holding at all John's time slices (i.e., individual level properties of John).

In other words, a property of a subject *x* caused by individual level properties of *x* can never be the predicate of *x* in a generic (characterizing) sentence (where *x* is a specific subject).

## 9. Properties of the specific subject in middle constructions

Consider now a middle construction with a specific subject, such as (21):

(21) This book reads easily

Upon closer inspection, it strikes one that the properties of the subject responsible for the attribution of the predicate *reads easily* to *this book* are all individual level properties. Thus, we may say that the book's property of reading easily is caused by its binding, the choice of its font, or its clever composition. All these are individual properties of the book, holding at all time slices in which the book appears.

More generally, if we would like to construe a situation where stage level properties could in principle be held responsible for the matrix predication in a middle construction, we find that even in these cases, the stage level properties are irrelevant. Thus, in (22), we may say that the predicate *treats easily* is attributed to *John* because he has the individual level properties of being equanimous and of easy character, but not because he has the stage level property of being ill:

(22) John treats easily

The conclusion seems clear: at the level of predication where *reads easily* is attributed to *the book*, (21) is a particular sentence and not a generic (characterizing) sentence. Therefore, if (21) (and all other middle constructions involving specific subjects) are nevertheless generic sentences, the genericity must apply to a more embedded level of predication, such as made available in the structure in (8).

This analysis supports the semantic analysis of middles in Condoravdi (1989), where middle constructions are defined as involving generic quantification over events, contra the analysis in Fagan (1992), where middle constructions are argued to involve generic quantification over entities (subjects).

## Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Ileana Paul for bringing the problems of genericity in middle constructions to my attention. The relevance of (5) was pointed out to me by Mark Baker. The problem of middle constructions based on a single event was pointed out

to me by Brendan Gillon. The research reported on here is supported by a grant from NWO, nr. 300-75-002, which is gratefully acknowledged.

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