THE RISE OF THE MIDDLE PASSIVE IN MODERN ENGLISH

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Abstract: *The paper discusses the increasing number of originally transitive verbs used as middles in Modern English (The shirt irons well), and attempts to categorize them and suggest reasons for their recent spread. Observations will also be made on their equivalents in other languages, e.g. Spanish, which may use the reflexive passive (or other constructions) to convey the nuances of English middles.*

Keywords: *English grammar, ergatives, middle voice, passivization, reflexivization.*

1. Introduction

One of the most important properties of English verbs which renders the verbal category highly flexible is the ability to have both a transitive and an intransitive valency without any change in the morphology. Thus *to break* can be used transitively in the sentence *The boy broke the vase* and intransitively in *The vase broke.* Similarly, the verb *to change* can be used transitively and intransitively in the following two sentences:

The girl changed her appearance.
Her appearance changed.

Many other verbs apart from *to break* and *to change* operate in the same way and are often referred to in grammar books as "ergative". The verbs *bend*, *bounce*, *drop*, *explode*, *freeze*, *grow*, *improve*, *melt*, *move*, *shut*, *split*, *tear*, *turn* represent just a small sample, though the adaptability of the verb to the pattern will be determined by the kind of subject or object involved, i.e. semantic restrictions will play a role in determining syntactic patterning. Many verbs lack the intransitive use so, whereas both of the following sentences are acceptable

Sweat burned my eyes.
My eyes burned,

only the transitive use is usual with the verb *to gut*, to mention just one example:

The fire gutted the building. *The building gutted (intr).

If we make *The building* the subject of this sentence, we are obliged to use either the passive voice or a different verb (possibly a phrasal verb) that admits a passive meaning:

The building was gutted.
The building burned right through.

Compare also the case of *to destroy*, which lacks an intransitive use, but whose meaning can be expressed by the neologism *to self-destruct* in Modern English in intransitive constructions:

THIS MESSAGE WILL self-destruct in five minutes. Thus began Mission Impossible … (Collins Cobuild, 2006).
It seems as though they have a subconscious desire to self-destruct — perhaps to relieve the pressure of office (Collins Cobuild, 2006).

Just as certain verbs, like *to gut* and *to destroy*, lack an intransitive use, there are others, like *to die* and *to fall*, that lack a transitive application. The transitive meaning of these verbs has to be conveyed through different lexemes, which may be simplex, like *to kill* and *to fell*, or phrasal, like *to cause the death of* or *to knock/bring down*:

The blast killed two people. (The blast caused the death of two people.)
*The blast died two people.
Heracles, the hero as ever, fells him with a single arrow… (CCCS)
(Heracles, the hero as ever, brings him down with a single arrow.)
*Heracles, the hero as ever, falls him with a single arrow…

Although, as we have already seen, intransitive verbs are abundant in English and are common in the range of syntactic patterns of the language, intransitive use of verbal lexemes that are primarily transitive is a phenomenon that has become noticeably more popular only in recent times. The occurrence is not entirely unknown to previous periods of the history of

English: witness the Shakespearian example *were* 'wear', i.e. 'are worn' quoted by Denison [1993: 392], and the following example from a much more modern piece of literature, *Animal Farm*:

> There were times when it seemed to the animals that they worked longer hours and *fed* no better than they had done in Jones's day (Orwell, 2000 [1945]: 61).

But it is only more recently that the number of verbs adapting to the new model appears to be rising appreciably. Note just one example from a contemporary novel:

> School will be letting out soon (McGovern, 2007:206).
> (i.e. 'They will soon be letting the children out of school.')

To take a another example that has been around for some time in American English (AmE), observe how the verb *to hurt* has been extended to intransitive constructions with animate subjects, as illustrated by the last two examples below, in which the meaning of 'hurting' is something like 'feeling upset, unhappy, offended':

> I hurt my leg coming down the mountain.
> My leg hurts / is hurting.
> I've never consciously tried to hurt anyone.
> Everyone was hurting so much. The atmosphere was thick with anger (CCCS).
> Martha's going through a divorce and really hurting right now (LDOCE).

As we have seen, middles adopt an active-voice syntactic pattern, but the subject-verb relationship is notionally passive. As Rosta says (1995:123), "The traditional view of them is that they are 'active in form but passive in sense'".

The special properties of prototypical English middles are that no agent is mentioned. As the agent is demoted or ignored, they tend to emphasize an inherent property of the subject: *This car drives well* suggests that it is the outstanding mechanical performance of the car that allows it to be driven so effortlessly, over and above the skill of the driver. Similarly, *You photograph well* suggests that there is something about you personally that contributes to your having a pleasing appearance in photographs; in a word, you are photogenic. However, it must be added that, just how much the subject contributes to the action fulfilled in the verb depends on each individual context and the possible degree of interaction between subject and

verb. Middle constructions often include an adverb of manner (*well*, *easily*, *fast*) and/or a modal verb (*can*, *will*), and the clause in which they occur is sometimes negative, as in the second of the following examples:

> The crowds are the biggest the bookshop has seen and the book is selling faster than any the publisher has known. (BNC)
> This car won't steer properly.

The verb *to rage* (< Latin RABIES 'madness') may have originally been pressed into service as an intransitive verb through the influence of phonetically similar *to rave*, with which it appears to overlap in Modern English. But be that as it may, it provides interesting confirmation of the blurring of the concept of transitivity in present-day English, since it is sometimes found in sentences like the following, in which it is followed by a noun clause object:

> Re. Julie Nicholson, who lost her daughter in the July 2005 bombing: I rage that a human being could choose to take another human's life (*Time Magazine*, 20/3/06).

2. Categorization and reasons for the proliferation of middles in English

In Rosta's view (1995:124), "The membership of the mediopassive category is open: a verb of any lexeme can be a mediopassive providing that it has the appropriate syntactic structure. This is in contrast to, say, the category of modals; a verb's membership of the modal category must be stated explicitly in the grammar". However, "Actual usage of mediopassives is further constrained by their semantics."

Consider the following two examples:

> *This cat strokes well.
> This text photocopies well.

The first example is not possible, because there is nothing about some cats that makes them intrinsecally more strokeable than others. On the other hand, the second example strikes us as acceptable owing to the fact that some texts will be easier to photocopy than others because the original is clearer or inscribed on a type of paper that can be photocopied without difficulty. As an extension of this last example, note that it is possible to con-

vey the idea of complete exoneration of the agent by laying blame on the grammatical subject in middle constructions:

> The page photocopied too low. (Blame laid on page or photocopying machine)
> The rifle fired. (Implying that it was not the user's fault)

Since middles are not a formal category in English — i.e. they have no inflection that marks them, it is not possible to identify a specific number of them by their morphology. For this reason, it is difficult to search for instances in corpora (even using programmes like CLAWS, which is a part-of-speech tagger and allows you to search, for example, for cases of typical adverbs, like *well* and *beautifully*, that are known to often modify middles), since specific verb forms do not tend to be tagged as middles. Accordingly, for Keyser and Roeper (1984: 414), middles are a syntactic category, not a lexical one. In order to adduce observations on their incidence, therefore, it seems more promising to look at the actual styles of language, the genres, in which they tend to occur.

They crop up frequently in colloquial language, where their brevity is an obvious motivation, like text messaging on mobile phones: *I don't hit very easily* (said by somebody who had been in a war zone) is syntactically more direct than *It is not easy to hit me* as it is less morphemically complex, and directs interest towards the speaker and his claim to invulnerability in a very concise and compact way. Examples are commonly found, too, in slang expressions, like *I completely spaced out during the lecture*.

Middles are also found in scientific language, e.g. in Phonetics, where conciseness is a definite stylistic preference, too:

> The glide triggers assibilation of [t] and then deletes.
> [t] lenites when it is internuclear.

Other sources include the social sciences, like Psychology, or texts that contain psychological terminology:

> People who self-harm do have a choice.
> She stopped drinking but started obsessing about her weight. (Collins, 2006)

Further examples from the field of science are:

> The target tracks well. (Looking at a radar screen)

Clearly the word “privatisation” does not translate easily into Romanian. (CCCS)

Keyser and Roeper (1984: 390) comment on the readiness with which verbs ending in -ize and which are used in scientific or technical language become middles, quoting examples like ergativize and demagnetize (The recording head demagnetized), but they also point out that semantic restrictions block the use as middles of some others like authorize and capitalize. Instructions and descriptions of products tend to use middle constructions for their grammatical simplicity and directness: stows on floor, loads from top. Consider also:

Mosquito netting: both inner doors are fully protected by netting which zips up independently from the door flap. (BNC)
The car drives beautifully, in fact the throttle response from the 1870cc engine is almost petrol sharp. (BNC)
The text scrolls horizontally instead of vertically.
The paint applies evenly.
Press “Repeat” once and the current track plays/will play repeatedly.
The machine switches off automatically.

Journalese also exploits middles. The first example below is a typical announcement that sensationalizes a piece of news and tries to give the impression of energy and dynamism behind the start of an operation; the other examples have a similar kind of impact:

The campaign will launch in October with support from a Lilly education grant. (Balance [magazine for diabetics], July/August 2007)
In 2001, the medical-relief organization Médecins sans Frontières began sending staff to Lampedusa to treat the near-dead immigrants who wash up on its shores. (Time Magazine, 22/12/03)
... 71% of the class branched into combat units and could deploy to Iraq or Afghanistan as little as a year from now. (Time Magazine, 30/5/05)
Mr White, a farmer who has lived almost all his life on Wallasea Island on the Essex coast near Southend, was nearly killed that night when the sea wall protecting the island breached. (Guardian Weekly, July 2006)

Another common source of middles is advertizing. The following comments on the web concerning satisfaction over smoke emissions from car

engines and plane engines (examples 1 and 2, respectively) show an intransitive use of to smoke that also crops up in advertisements for cigarettes or tobacco-related products (example 3):

GTA 4 tire smoke better than Forza's.
I've found four-strokes smoke better than a comparably sized two-stroke.
Estate pipes smoke better than new pipes.

Many further examples of middles can be found in bureaucratic language or officialese, such as is typical of announcements

Flight BA0486 to Barcelona is now boarding at Gate 15.
The wine retails at £6.95 a bottle. (LDOCE)

Naturally, in the creation of new middles there is overgeneralization of an existing pattern. Analogy is a powerful force in language processes and the more verbs that adopt the middle pattern, the more verbs that are likely to follow suit. It must also be remembered that English is characterized by a rigid word order as compared to some other languages (see, for example, the case of the Slavonic languages, mentioned below). If movement of subjects and objects is restricted, then thematic roles may be shifted in compensation: in middles, the grammatical subject takes on the thematic role of patient. It is also the sentence topic and, as such, has wider scope over the whole sentence.

3. Equivalents in some other languages

It seems appropriate in a paper of a general nature of this kind to proffer some data on middles or expression of "middle" concepts in languages other than English and to see whether there are any particular linguistic conditions or circumstances that favour their use in particular languages. It is a well-known fact that Ancient Greek marked the middle voice in the aorist and future tenses of verbs and thus distinguished these forms from passives. There also appears to have been a middle passive of some form in Gothic: "Greek passive constructions may be translated with the Gothic medio-passive in the present…" (Lehmann, 1994:36).

The language most familiar to me after English is Spanish, which has a reflexive passive (No se asusta fácilmente 'He doesn't scare easily'), and a number of intransitive passives (Se está bien aquí 'it's good here'; cf.

Portuguese Gosta-se da praia ‘People like the beach’), which would be the translation equivalents of English middles (see Mott, 2006). Interestingly, Spanish occasionally has passive syntax with active meaning: (Estoy) bien comido y bien dormido, lit. ‘I am well eaten and well slept’, i.e. ‘I have eaten and slept well’ (cf. English He is well read).

There are plenty of examples of dynamic intransitive verbs in Spanish, just like the ones quoted at the beginning of this paper for English (melt, split, bend, bounce, and so on): acabar, empezar, amanecer, oscurecer, cambiar, explotar, crecer, nacer, casar [regional and formal], and many more, and the subject tends to follow the verb when they express motion, location or change of state, as it fulfils the role of patient, thus having the same role as the object of a transitive verb. However, middles with no morphological marking like the English prototypes seem to be much rarer. I have seen the following: Esto no vende ‘This doesn’t sell’; Windows está cerrando ‘Windows is closing’; Bueno, ya van pintando poco a poco ‘Well, they (= the tomatoes) are gradually ripening’ (Espinàs, 2006:78).

As in English, in scientific texts, like those on Phonetics, and perhaps, sometimes, through the influence of original texts in English, there are cases of middles: *no palataliza* ‘it doesn’t palatalize’, *no asoma a final de palabra* ‘it does not appear in word-final position’, etc. In Brazilian Portuguese, impersonal constructions can lose the pronoun “se”, thus approximating in form to the prototypical English middle: *aqui (se) come bem = aqui comem bem* ‘people eat well here’ (Parkinson, 1988: 161).

There are ample relics of the middle posited for Indo-European in Latin deponent verbs like LOQUITUR ‘he speaks’, for which no morphological active form exists (The ending -ITUR otherwise formed an impersonal passive: e.g. CURRITUR, literally ‘it is run’, i.e. ‘people run’).

According to Baldi (1987: 45), “Germanic has no traces of the middle” (perhaps referring to a morphologically marked middle voice?), Nevertheless, Danish has the verbal ending -*s*, from reduction of the reflexive pronoun *sig* ‘himself/herself/itself’, which forms a synthetic passive (*Dette aeg kan ikke spises* ‘This egg cannot be eaten’), and apparently this same ending may confer a “middle” reading on certain verbs, which, in this case, undergo further phonetic reduction.: “Some verbs have a middle which is often spelled like the synthetic passive but is pronounced with a shortened vowel or loss of [ə]” (Haberland, 1994: 335). For example, *slås*

with a long vowel is the passive of *slå* 'to kill', but with a short vowel it is a middle.

As far as the Slavonic languages are concerned, the passive form of the verb is less common because of the flexibility of word order, so the change of perspective in the transformation *Peter killed Paul > Paul was killed by Peter* can be expressed in Czech and Slovak, for example, by reversing the syntacic order, which does not produce ambiguity because the object is case-marked:Petr zabil Pavla > Pavla zabil Petr (Short, 1987: 120).

Similarly, in Russian, *MAXIM defends Victor* can be expressed unambiguously as:

Viktora zaščiščaet Maksim

since *Viktora* has the accusative case-ending *-a* and the syntactic relations are therefore explicit in the morphology (Van Valin, 2001: 329).

What we have said about Czech, Slovak and Russian may not be the whole story, since in a later publication Short (1993:485) adds: "Voice is a two-member verbal category, active and passive, though some types have led to periodic discussion of a possible middle voice in Czech". Czech certainly has impersonal passives like *Celý večer se tancovalo*, literally 'All evening it was danced', as does German, in which they may be non-reflexive, and may or may not include a formal subject (Eisberg, 1994: 379): *(es) wird getanzt* (lit. '[it] will be danced'). Browne (1993: 333) provides interesting information on Serbo-Croat impersonal passives: "Some Western dialects and recent Croatian codifications can keep the underlying object in the accusative": *knigu se piše* (instead of *kniga*, nominative) 'The book is being written'.

4. Conclusions

The question of why middle constructions should have increased in English in modern times is not hard to answer in view of the obvious appeal of syntactic simplification. What remains more difficult to specify is exactly which verbs are candidates for middle voice use. Semantics and text genre appear to play a role. I would also venture the opinion that middles in English are more likely to be common words in the vocabulary than uncommon items, though they may not necessarily be core words or superordinates. For example, *This bread slices well* sounds as correct as *This bread*

cuts well, even though *slice* is a hyponym of *cut*, but *This wood saws well* does not sound so likely. Similarly, *The chicken fried quickly* sounds acceptable, but *The chicken broiled quickly* sounds more dubious.

Perhaps it is significant that this synthetic, as opposed to analytical, kind of syntax has been favoured in the history of English. In early Modern English, we find expressions like *The meal was eating* and *The house was (a-)building* with passive meaning; it is not until the late eighteenth century that the more analytical combinations of passive and progressive like *The meal was being eaten* and *The house was being built* arise (Barber, 1997: 188; Denison, 1993: 393; Fennel, 2001: 145). We should also mention the use of the gerund instead of the passive infinitive in Modern English in the construction *The house needs/wants cleaning*. Thus, there are precedents in English syntax for the present-day proliferation of middles.

It is also noteworthy that analytical and synthetic syntax often rotate in the history of individual languages. For example, the Classical Latin synthetic future derived from earlier analytical forms. In the development from Latin to Spanish, there was first reversion to an analytical structure (*amar* + *he*, lit. 'to love' + 'I have'), but this in turn later became synthetic (*amaré*, lit. 'I have to love', i.e. 'I shall love'). Since the seventeenth century, it would appear that the analytical future constructed with *ir a* 'to be going to' has slowly gained ground and taken over from some instances of the synthetic future (Sáez Godoy, 1968: 1879-1880, 1889). In English, in the case of the *will*-future, there seems to be a move towards fusion, as *will* has lost much of its modality and now expresses mostly temporality, often reducing to the clitic form *'ll* (see Mott and Estapà, 1989). In view of this evidence, it does not seem unlikely that the present trend towards synthesis in English, manifest in the cliticization of *will* and the proliferation of middles, may at some later date reverse and give way once again to a tendency towards more analytical modes of expression.

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