The Slovenian Accusative Middle Construction
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Data and introduction. In this paper, I discuss the syntactic and semantic derivation of the
Slovenian equivalent of the generically interpreted middle construction (1).

(1) This book reads easily.

Cross-linguistic research (e.g., Ackema and Schoorlemmer 1995, Lekakou 2005, Lekakou and
Pitteroff 2018) has generally focused on the split between the so-called personal middles, which like
English (1) contain transitive predicates and are in Slavic languages like Slovenian reflexively marked
(2), and the impersonal middles, which are built out of intransitive predicates and in Germanic languages
contain an expletive pronoun in subject position (3).

(2) Taka knjiga se zlahka bere.
(3) Es sitzt sich angenehm auf diesem Stuhl.

In Slovenian, there is a third syntactic type of the middle construction, exemplified by the two
sentences in (4) and (5). This construction shares with the German sentence (3) the fact that it can contain
an intransitive predicate (4). However, unlike in German, it is also productively formed from transitive
predicates (5), in which case its interpretation is equivalent to that of the personal variant (2). Crucially,
unlike in (2), the logical object in the Slovenian impersonal middle (5) has accusative case.

(4) Na tem stolu se udobno sedi.
(5) Tako knjigo se zlahko bere.

Previous approaches. In the semantic literature (e.g., McConnell-Ginet 1994, Lekakou 2005), the
main feature of the middle construction is taken to be its dispositional property interpretation, which is
either associated with the logical object in transitive middles (i.e., the book has properties such that it
is easy to read) or with the event denoted by the VP in the intransitive impersonals (i.e., the event of
sitting in this chair is such that it is comfortable). To derive this interpretable feature at the syntax-
semantics interface, Lekakou (2005) and Lekakou and Pitteroff (2018) assume a modal operator labelled
DISP, which denotes a relation between the denotation of VP and an individual d to which the property
interpretation is ascribed. Crucially for this approach, the DP denoting the logical object can get such
an interpretation only if it surfaces as the grammatical subject, as what happens in sentences like (1) and
(2), given Lekakou’s assumption that possible-world accessibility is tied to the individual d, taken as an
argument by the operator – i.e., “a world w’ is accessible from a world w for an individual d [i.e., the
logical object], <w.d> R w’, iff <w’, d> ∈ P” (Brennan 1993), where P is a set of relevant properties.

In other words, such an approach predicts that the reemerger (or unergative base-generation, cf. Ackema
and Schoorlemmer 1995, a.o.) of the internal argument in the grammatical subject position (and the consequent
suppression of the external one) is a necessary condition of Middle Formation, enforced by the
dispositional operator. Similarly for (3), Lekakou and Pitteroff (2018) claim that the event denoted
by VP is ascribed the property reading on coindexation with the expletive es, which is merged in the
Spec position of the phrase headed by the modal operator DISP, thus serving as its semantic argument.

The problem. The Slovenian construction in (5) poses a problem for analyses like Lekakou (2005)
and Lekakou and Pitteroff (2018), since it – contra the requirement of the dispositional operator – retains
the “internal-argument-oriented” property interpretation even though the logical object stays put in its
VP-internal position, where it gets accusative case. Such a property interpretation tied to the logical
object is shown by (6), where the second PP in the brackets (modelled after Lekakou’s 2005 in-virtue-of
phrases) is odd as it says that the easy readability of crime stories is contingent on properties external
to them. In this respect, (6) mirrors the prototypical English construction, as seen from its translation.

(6) Kriminalke se zlahka bere (zaradi njihovega stila / #zaradi mojih bralnih sposobnosti).

Moreover, unlike the German intransitive impersonal construction (3) with the expletive pronoun
es, Slovenian accusative middles like (5) and (6) contain a null thematic external argument. As also
noted by e.g. Fehrman et al. (2010), the syntactic presence of such an argument is shown by the fact
that the construction admits a subject-oriented anaphor (7), in which respect it differs from the
nominative variant, which lacks the external argument in syntax (8).
(7) Svojo knjigo se zlahka bere.
self book.ACC refl easily read

(8) *Svoja knjiga se zlahka bere.
self book.NOM refl easily read

“A book of one’s own reads easily.”

“A book of one’s own reads easily.”

**Contribution.** The paper puts forth an analysis of the middle construction that divorces the modal generic operator from the syntactic derivation of the predicate’s argument structure, in contrast with McConnell-Ginet (1994) and Lekakou (2005)-style approaches where the interpretation of sentences (1)-(3) is conditioned by the (pre-syntactic) suppression of the external argument. This way, it is explained how Slovenian accusative middles (5) end up with the same middle interpretation as English (1) despite the divergent syntax.

**Analysis.** The paper analyses the VoiceP of sentence (5) as in (9):

(9) \[ \text{VoiceP}. \text{e} \exists \lambda_{\text{numb}}[\text{AGENT}(\lambda_{\text{numb}}, e) \land \text{READ}(e) \land \text{THEME}(\text{such a book}, e)] \]

\[ \text{pron} \quad \text{Voice'} \lambda x. \lambda e.[\text{AGENT}(x, e) \land \text{READ}(e) \land \text{THEME}(\text{such a book}, e)] \]

\[ \text{se} \quad \text{bene tavo knjigo} \text{ACC} \]

Following Rivero and Milojević Sheppard (2003) (but contra Grahek 2008), I claim that the external argument position in Spec, VoiceP is occupied by a null minimal pronoun (Kratzer 2006) that completely lacks \( \varphi \)-features (hence the “default” agreement in (6), which is third person singular on the main verb in the present tense, cf. Ackema and Neeleman 2013). Semantically, the pronoun contributes a [human] index to the open agent variable introduced by the active Voice head and closes it off with an existential operator, following the idea that “indefinites are inherently quantificational” (Rivero and Milojević Sheppard 2003: 123, based on Chierchia 1995). In order for structure (9) to obtain the generic middle interpretation (1), a generic operator \( GN \) is merged at TP which then binds the remaining event variable in (9). (In this sense, the analysis builds upon Rivero and Milojević Sheppard (2003: 124–128)’s account of conditional \( se \)-sentences with Q-adverbs, but does not assume additional semantic operators that change the force of conditional interpretations (1), cf. (9)) the analysis of passives in Bruening 2013, and because (ii) the generic operator binds the remaining event variable, parallel to what happens in the subsequent derivational stages of (9).

In contrast with the Lekakou (2005) and Lekakou and Pitteroff (2018) approach, the present analysis thus does not assume that the interpretation of the generic middle involves a dispositional property ascription hardcoded into the syntactic-semantic derivation. Rather, middles are interpretatively similar to generic habituals (e.g., John usually smokes after dinner), as originally proposed by Krifka et al. (1995). That this is so is corroborated by the fact that middles – both in Slovenian and e.g. English – seem interpretatively odd if denoting an event that cannot be repeated, as in (11), where one and the same balloon cannot be popped more than once. This is unexpected if middles only report a modal dispositional property of the logical object, as in Lekakou (2005) (cf. the fact that Anyone can pop this balloon, which has the dispositional reading due to the dynamic modal can, is not odd). Hence, on the present analysis, the property reading of the construction arises pragmatically, possibly due to the degree semantics inherent to the manner adverb (Stateva 2002).

(11) #Ta balon se zlahka poči.
this balloon.ACC refl easily pop

“#This balloon pops easily.”