

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.
such book.NOM refl easily read it sits refl comfortably on this chair
“Such a book reads easily.” “One sits comfortably in this chair.”

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 zlahka bere.
on this chair refl comfortably sit such book.ACC refl easily read
“One sits comfortably in this chair.” “Such a book reads easily.”

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 interpretative 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], $\langle w, d \rangle R w'$, iff $\langle w', d \rangle \in P$ ” (Brennan 1993), where *P* is a set of relevant properties. In other words, such an approach predicts that the remerger (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.

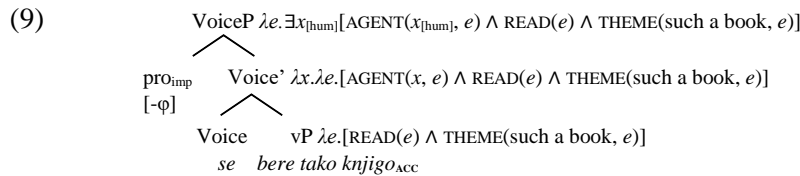
(6) Kriminalke se zlahka bere (zaradi njihovega stila / #zaradi mojih bralnih sposobnosti).
crime-stories.ACC se easily read.3SG due-to their style due-to my reading abilities
“Crime stories read easily (in virtue of their style / #in virtue of my reading skills).”

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



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 φ -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 the \exists -bound variable.) The resultant interpretation of (5) is given in (10), where the denotation of the adverb is mapped into the nuclear scope of the generic operator.

- (10) $GN_e \exists x_{[\text{hum}]} [[\text{AGENT}(x_{[\text{hum}]}, e) \wedge \text{READ}(e) \wedge \text{THEME}(\text{such a book}, e)] \rightarrow [\text{EASY}(e)]]$

The LF in (10) is roughly paraphrased as *Generally, when someone reads such a book, she does so easily*, which corresponds to the semantics of middles proposed by e.g. Condoravdi (1989) and Bruening (2013), where genericity is a property of sentences (Krifka et al. 1995). Concomitantly, the personal middle variant with nominative (2) receives the same interpretation as the impersonal in (5) because (i) it is a passive structure (cf. (8)), so its agent role is existentially bound by default in absence of a syntactically projected external argument (i.e., the Spec, VoiceP of (2) is unoccupied in contrast with (9), cf. 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 habituais (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 počī.
 this balloon.ACC refl easily pop
 “#This balloon pops easily.”

Selected references: Ackema P. and Schoorlemmer M. 1995. Middles and Nonmovement. *Linguistic Inquiry* 26(2).// Lekakou M. and Pitteroff M. 2018. This is Personal: Impersonal middles as disposition ascriptions. *Glossa: a journal of general linguistics* 3(1).