

ON THE ENGLISH MIDDLE CONSTRUCTION

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ABSTRACT

This paper is concerned with the English middle and the teaching of the construction at teacher training and translators' programmes. The paper offers a theoretical characterization of the construction and a tentative analysis couched within the framework of Distributed Morphology. It proposes a scientific approach to the study of Grammar at teacher training and translators' programmes and it discusses the advantages of implementing this approach. It also discusses the implications of teaching the middle construction and makes some suggestions for presenting the structure at teacher training and translators' programmes.

Keywords: Middles, dispositional, agentivity, aspect phrase, Distributed Morphology, roots, functional morphemes, thematic roles, genericity, Anti-causatives, Passives, teaching.

1. INTRODUCTION

This paper is about the teaching of the English middle construction at both teacher training and translators' programmes. The middle construction can be defined as a particular type of generic sentence that ascribes a property to the entity in the grammatical subject position (Lekakou, 2005a). Some typical examples of what is generally regarded as the English middle construction are given in (1), (2) and (3):

- (1) This bread cuts smoothly.
- (2) Crystal vases shatter easily.
- (3) Anti-age creams always sell well.

The basic proposal to be developed here is that students should be given a wider and more comprehensive insight into argument structure alternations and their different morphological realizations. The middle construction is one of these possible alternations and thus, needs to be discussed in Grammar courses in order to confront students with some of the possible options the language has to offer, namely the *active-passive*, *active-middle*, and *causative-anticausative* alternations, as shown in the examples below:

- | | |
|---|-------------------------|
| (5) a. John broke the porcelain vase. | (active) |
| b. The porcelain vase was broken (by John). | (passive) |
| (6) a. John broke the porcelain vase. | (active) |
| b. This porcelain vase breaks easily. | (middle) |
| (7) a. John broke the porcelain vase. | (causative) |
| b. The porcelain vase broke. | (anti-causative) |

During the last 25 years, there has been much heated debate about the analysis of middles due to the curious syntactic properties the construction exhibits across different languages. Middles have been the object of study in many research papers, but often in conflicting terms. In the literature two basic approaches are followed, middles are interpreted as resulting from a pre syntactic/lexical process (see Ackema & Schoorlemmer 1995, 2005; Fagan 1988, 1992; Condoradvi 1989; and Lekakou 2002,

2005, 2017, among others) or as resulting from a syntactic process (see Keyser & Roeper 1984, Hale & Keyser 2002, Klingvall 2007, Schäfer 2008, Alexiadou & Doron 2012, Alexiadou 2014, among others).

Though middles seem to share the same semantic properties across languages, there are great differences in their syntactic realization, and in the verbs which allow this construction cross linguistically (Reinhart & Siloni, 2005). Some linguists have claimed that middle formation takes place in the lexicon in all languages and others that it takes place in the syntax. However, there is a third option- those who hypothesize that it can take place in either of the two depending on the language considered (see Reinhart & Siloni (2005) for an explanation of this third option in terms of the *Lexicon vs. Syntax parameter*).

This paper will sit largely at the syntax-semantics interface so in it a syntactic view will be adopted. Its aim is to investigate the English middle, to provide a tentative analysis of the construction, and to make some suggestions for teaching the structure within the Minimalist framework of Distributed Morphology at teacher training and translators' programmes.

The middle construction is quite productive in the English language, "especially where bureaucratic language is involved" (Keyser & Roeper, 1984:383) and in advertising and scientific writing (Fellbaum, 1986:29; Hundt, 2007:39). Example (4) illustrates the use of the construction when a specific quality of a product is presented to an audience (from Parker, 2009¹).

(4) Haut-Canteloup: Pure and medium bodied with excellent fruit concentration and precision, *this wine drinks well* for 4-5 years.

Interestingly, in Romance languages, such as Spanish, the middle construction is extremely common and widely used in different contexts. Hence it is crucial for EFL teachers and translators whose native language is Spanish to understand and master the usage of such construction, as well as to develop a deeper awareness of some aspects of the English language.

¹ Parker, R. (2009). *Parker's Wine Bargains: The World's Best Wine Values Under \$25*. NYC: Simon & Schuster.

This paper will try to justify the importance of teaching the middle construction within the Generative Framework in Grammar courses at teacher training and translators' programmes. The teaching of such a construction within this framework will let students contrast in greater depth the differences between active and passive structures, and also explore syntactic structure in general and the interaction between roots and different types of functional heads in particular.

The paper is organized as follows: section 2 will be devoted to the theoretical background of the analyses that will be presented further on. It includes the basic ideas in Minimalism and accounts for syntactic derivation as argued in Chomsky 2001, 2004, 2007. This section will also present those aspects of Distributed Morphology which are relevant for the discussion of the middle construction, and some interpretation issues concerning thematic roles and genericity. Section 3 will provide a review of the most relevant literature on the topic. It also provides an overview of the English middle and it postulates a tentative analysis of the construction. This section is also concerned with the implications of teaching the middle construction at teacher training and translators' programmes. Finally, section 4 summarizes the main issues dealt with in the paper and postulates some questions for further research.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The research framework adopted in this paper is that of Chomskyan generative theory, the Minimalist Program, which takes a cognitive approach to the study of grammar. The Minimalist Program builds upon Chomsky's earlier work, the Principles and Parameters framework, but goes a step further since it aims to explain why language has the properties it has (Chomsky, 2004:105). There exist different branches within Minimalism, but this paper will adopt a non-lexicalist approach, namely the framework of Distributed Morphology.

2.1 A MINIMALIST FRAMEWORK FOR LANGUAGE

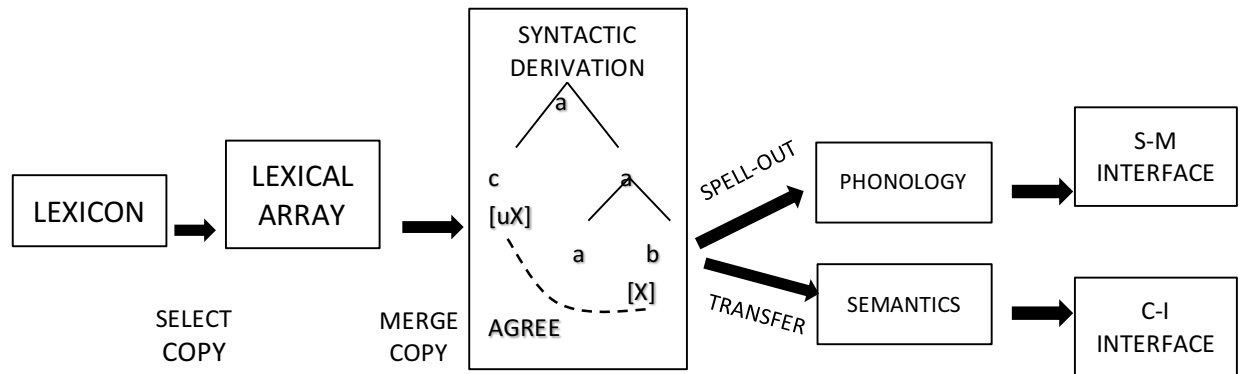
The Minimalist Program regards the grammar of a language as a model of the internalized grammatical competence that a native speaker of the language has. This is usually referred to in the literature as *I-Language*. In his essay *Approaching UG from Below*, Chomsky (2007) defines an I-Language as a computational system that generates infinitely many internal expressions, each of which can be regarded as an array of instructions to the two interface systems: the Sensorimotor (SM) interface and the Conceptual-intentional (C-I) interface.

2.1.1 SYNTACTIC DERIVATION AND FEATURE VALUATION

The basic building blocks of syntax are features. "A morphosyntactic feature is a property of words that the syntax is sensitive to and which may determine the particular shape that a word has" (Adger, 2003:24). Syntactic features trigger derivational operations since they carry information about how items should be combined with other objects. Features can be either *interpretable* or *uninterpretable* at the interfaces. Interpretable features contribute to the interpretation of the sentence, whereas uninterpretable features do not, and lack a value. Only interpretable features can be read at the interfaces, therefore all uninterpretable features must be deleted during the course of the derivation once their function has been performed, otherwise the derivation will crash at *Spell-Out*.

Syntactic derivation within this framework is argued to be driven by two things: (i) the operation MERGE, which takes elements from the Lexical Array (henceforth LA)

and puts them together; and (ii) AGREE, which is the operation by which features are valued. The components and processes at play when producing a derivation can be seen in (8) (based on Chomsky 1995, 2004, 2005 and Kuiper & Nockes, 2013):

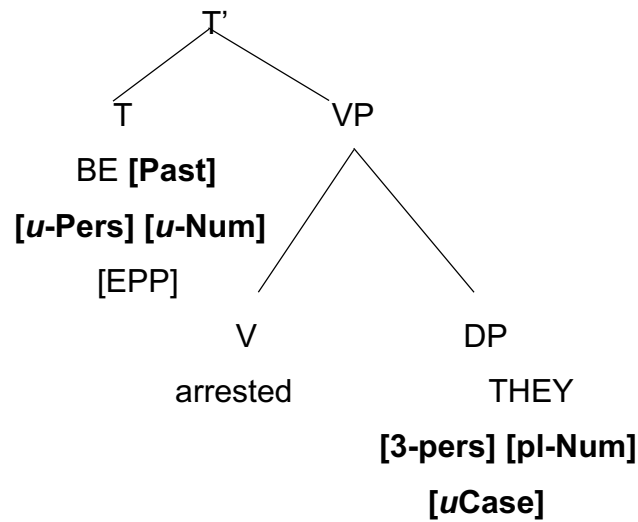


Merge is the operation by which two items previously selected from the lexicon into LA are combined into a new structure, and mapped into the syntactic tree. In Chomsky’s (2007: 5) words, “merge yields a discrete infinity of structured expressions”.

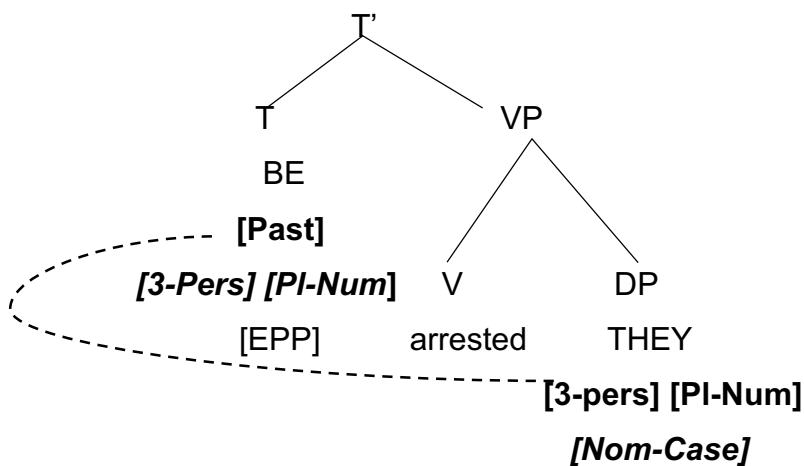
As stated above, features are valued by the operation Agree, where a *probe* looks for a matching *goal* in its c-command domain. Agree takes place to eliminate uninterpretable features. Probes are syntactic heads with uninterpretable features, and therefore they are active. Goals can be heads or phrases with both interpretable and uninterpretable features, and they are active as well (Chomsky, 2004: 113; Klingvall, 2007:13). A clear example is the one of Nominative Case assignment, as shown in sentence (9)² below, where the unvalued features of *BE* are probes that value Person and Number features with the goal features of *THEY*. Since *THEY* still has unvalued Case, the finite tense feature of the probe assigns nominative case to the goal (from Radford, 2004:285).

² To simplify the exposition some functional layers have been omitted in the tree diagrams. The only purpose here was to explain the agreement relation.

(9a) Before Feature Valuation



(9b) After Feature Valuation



One of the major minimalist concerns is the driving force for syntactic movement, which is supposed to happen for a formal reason. Movement is defined as a composite operation which involves Agree and Move (Chomsky, 2000:101). Some authors within the syntactic approaches have claimed that there is movement involved in the middle construction, since the internal argument moves to become the grammatical subject of the sentence. This type of movement is claimed to happen because the DP needs to check Case features and satisfy the EPP feature. This will be discussed in greater depth in the sections to come.

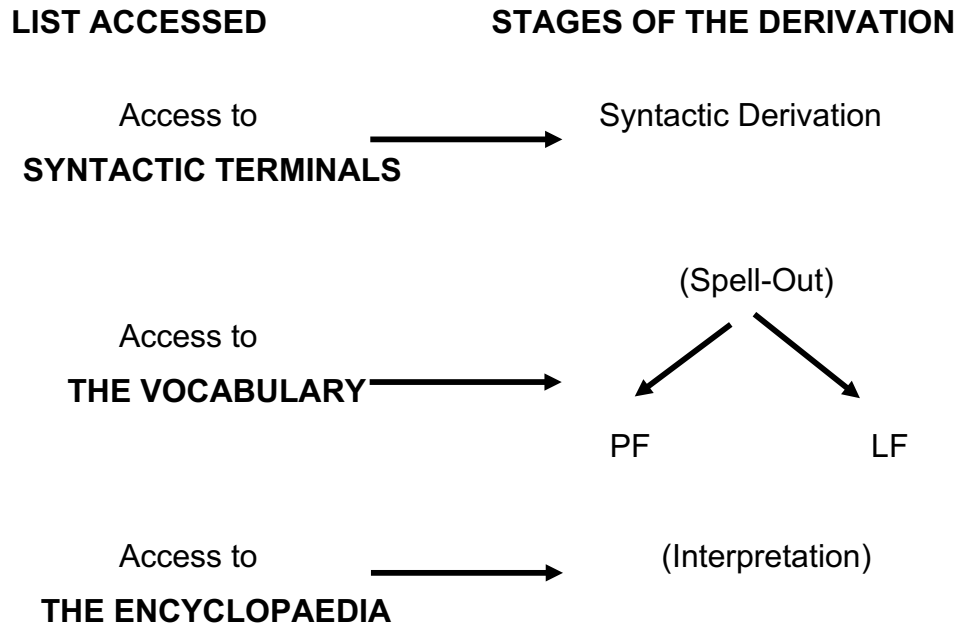
2.2 DISTRIBUTED MORPHOLOGY

Within the non-lexicalist view of language of Distributed Morphology (henceforth, DM), the elements that are initially selected to start the derivation are not words. The theory is non-lexicalist, in the sense that there is no pre-syntactic lexicon where words are derived or stored. Therefore, words do not have a privileged architectural status since the only generative component in the grammar is the syntax.

The DM approach is piece-based, and the pieces are the morphemes which are arranged in hierarchical structures. According to Embick (2015), the primitive elements of syntactic derivation are morphemes and the system which combines these objects into complex structures is the syntax. The syntax connects a particular type of phonological representation with a particular type of semantic representation (i.e. it relates sound and meaning) (Embick, 2015: 1).

Morphemes serve as the terminal nodes of syntactic derivations and they are stored in memory where they have an underlying representation in terms of features. Features can be of two types, namely *phonological* (e.g.: [+voice]) or *syntacticosemantic* (e.g.: [+past]). In turn, morphemes can be of two types according to how they relate to phonological or syntacticosemantic (henceforth, synsem) features: *Functional* or *Roots*.

The main idea in DM is that there are three distinct lists that are accessed at different stages of the derivation, and these are: the list of *Syntactic Terminals*, which is made up of functional morphemes and roots; the list of Vocabulary Items, called the *Vocabulary*, which provides phonological content into functional morphemes; and the Encyclopaedia, which is the list of special semantic information. The interplay between the grammar and the three lists is shown in (10) (from Embick, 2015):



Syntactic terminals will be of special importance when analysing the middle construction, thus I will mainly focus on that aspect of the proposal (for an overview of the framework see Hale & Marantz, 1993; Harley & Noyer, 1999; Embick, 2015).

As stated above, syntactic terminals can be roots or functional (abstract) morphemes. Roots are what are traditionally called lexical categories or open class vocabulary. Roots are grammatical objects which relate to a conceptual meaning and have an arbitrary connection between sound and meaning which must be memorized. Roots cannot be decomposed into syntem features. A working hypothesis of this proposal is the fact that roots possess a phonological representation as part of their primitive make-up. Most importantly, roots are category neutral, that is to say that elements in the initial lexical array are not categorized as verbs, nouns, adjectives, etc., but become one of these categories when combined with a category forming functional morpheme in the syntax. This is called the *Categorization Assumption* by Embick and Marantz (2008). For example, in the presence of little *v* a root is interpreted as a verb.

Some authors (see Alexiadou et al., 2006) have organized roots into four different classes based on their inherent meaning:

- (11) a. **Agentive:** √MURDER, √ASSASSINATE
 b. **Externally caused:** √DESTROY, √KILL

c. **Cause unspecified:** √BREAK, √OPEN

d. **Internally caused:** √BLOSSOM, √WILT

Klingvall (2007:17) claims that “depending on what they mean; roots appear more easily in certain syntactic environments than others”. Therefore, in verbal contexts, agentive roots will require an agent (see example (12)), and externally caused roots will allow for either an agent or an inanimate cause (as shown in (13)). On the other hand, cause unspecified roots can be interpreted with an agent, an external cause or without any of these, as illustrated in (14) below. Finally, internally caused roots do not allow for Agents or External causes as seen in (15) (examples from Klingvall, 2007:17).

- (12) a. John murdered the man
b. *The storm murdered the man.

- (13) a. Mary destroyed the building.
b. The storm destroyed the building.

- (14) a. John opened the window.
b. The storm opened the window.
c. The window opened.

- (15) a. The flower blossomed.
b. *Mary blossomed the flower.

Functional morphemes, as roots, also come in different variants. To be more precise, functional morphemes are bundles of binary synsem features (Embick, 2015:32). These features are required for semantic interpretation, thus they are interpretable in the sense of Chomsky (1995) and related work. Some examples of these universal synsem features are Tense, Aspect, Person, Number, etc. and different versions of these can be [±past] (for Tense) and [±plural] (for Number).

Following the “Borer-Chomsky conjecture” I will consider parameterization to be related to properties of functional heads (Alexiadou, 2014: 23). Alexiadou (2014) proposes a system where three different kinds of syntactic Voice heads (in the sense

of Kratzer, 1996³) are implicated in AS alternations. I will discuss this proposal in section 3. Alexiadou and Schäfer (2010) also propose the existence of an Aspect Phrase in their analysis of *-er* nominals. This Aspect head has a feature, which can be either episodic or dispositional, that binds the event variable in *v*. Since this aspectual distinction is crucial for the interpretation of middles as generic sentences, I will refer back to this in section 3.2.

2.3 THEMATIC ROLES

Barker (1996) and Hale & Keyser (2002) claim that the particular thematic role a given argument gets will be determined by the structural configuration in which it appears. Baker (1996:2) explains this in terms of *The Uniformity of Theta Assignment Hypothesis*:

(16) *UTAH*: Identical thematic relationships between items are represented by identical structural relationships between those items at the level of D-Structure⁴.

DM does not recognize a set of discrete thematic roles (Harley & Noyer, 1999), but following Marantz (1984) and Klingvall (2007) among others, I will take the difference between external and internal arguments to be of importance in their thematic interpretation.

Following the DM proposal roots do not enter syntactic derivation with a thematic grid (Marantz, 2001:20) and therefore, the same root can appear in a wide range of thematic structures. Nevertheless, the semantics of the root is important in the resulting argument structure. Because thematic role interpretation comes after the syntactic level, it can be considered a post-syntactic phenomenon.

³ The external argument is not introduced by the verb itself, but by a Voice P above *vP*.

⁴ Following Chomsky (1993) I will reject the idea of a D-structure and following Klingvall (2007) I will only take the idea that the same kind of role is assigned to the same position.

The number of theta roles has been a matter of debate in Linguistics, but I will consider the list in (17) below (from Klingvall, 2007: 22) to be of relevance for the syntactic analysis of middles.

(17) **Agent:** the intentional instigator of the action denoted by the predicate.

Causer: the entity causing the action denoted by the predicate.

Experiencer: the entity that experiences some (psychological) state expressed by the predicate.

Instrument: the means by which the action denoted by the predicate is performed.

Patient/Theme: the entity undergoing motion or being moved by the action denoted by the predicate.

2.4 GENERICITY

Genericity is an important issue in the interpretation of the middle construction because middles are a specific type of generic statement namely, disposition ascriptions. As Klingvall (2007: 109) explains “disposition ascriptions are generalizations that hold by virtue of some property of the entity that appears as the grammatical subject”. Dispositional sentences differ from habitual sentences because the latter are generic sentences involving quantification over events. Although they are both characterizing sentences, they provide different kinds of generalizations. This implies that the generic operator applies at different levels. In habituals, it applies at sentence level and in dispositionals, it does so at predicate level only. Lekakou (2005a) claims that generic operators at play in both habitual and dispositional sentences function as modal operators.

3. MIDDLES CROSS-LINGUISTICALLY – REVIEW OF PREVIOUS LITERATURE

The middle construction has always been a challenging topic in Linguistics, and it has lately become the topic of various articles and dissertations (see Lekakou 2002, 2005; Klingvall 2007, Schäfer 2008, Alexiadou 2014, among others). In this section, I will provide an overview of previous literature on the topic.

In the course of time, different analyses have been put forward in order to provide a plausible description and explanation of the Middle construction. Previous accounts of it tend to fall into those that adhere to the syntactic view (Keyser & Roeper 1984, Hale & Keyser 2002, Klingvall 2007, Schäfer 2008, and Alexiadou 2014) and those that follow a lexicalist or pre-syntactic approach (Fagan 1988, Condoradvi 1989, Ackema & Schoorlemmer 1995, Lekakou 2002, 2005, 2017).

Within the syntactic approaches the most important contributions have been done by Keyser and Roeper (1984; henceforth K&R) and by Hale and Keyser (2002; henceforth H&K), who claim that middles are generic statements and, accordingly, do not describe particular events in time. K&R consider middles to be generated by a syntactic rule of Move A, where the object/complement of the verb takes the specifier position (i.e. it becomes the syntactic subject of the construction) in order to get nominative case and avoid a violation of the Case Filter. Because H&K work with lexical syntax, they claim that middles verbs are transitive while in the lexicon but that they are derived in the syntax as intransitives. They argue that Middle formation is similar to Passive formation.

There is general consensus among linguists that there are similarities between the structure of anti-causatives and passives but middles are unique. As Klingvall (2007) argues, this construction has properties that seem to place it in between active and passive constructions. The middle construction resembles passive and anti-causative constructions because their internal argument, Theme/Patient, is A-moved from object (complement) to subject (specifier) position. The argument gets its theta-role in object position; therefore, it is never an Agent but usually a Theme or Patient, as is the case with anti-causatives. Although middles do not have Agent subjects, they evidently have an agentive flavour, which is distinct from the agentive interpretation of passives (Klingvall, 2007: 3).

Klingvall (2007) has described English middles as a construction with active verb morphology but passive argument structure. In other words, morphologically, middles are similar to active constructions, while semantically they are similar to passive constructions. The English middle construction is not morphologically marked. The same happens in Dutch, where the verb in the middle exhibits the same morphology as an ordinary intransitive. In contrast, German and Romance languages mark their middles with reflexive morphology (Schäfer, 2008: 212).

(18) This book reads easily. **(English)**

(19) Dit boek leest makkelijk. **(Dutch)**
 'the books read-3SG easily'

(20) Das Buch liest sich leicht. **(German)**
 The book read3SG REFL easily.

(21) Este libro se lee fácilmente. **(Spanish)**
 This book REFL read easily

Moreover, K&R interestingly claim that though English middles do not allow *by*-phrases to occur in the construction, they retain an implicit agent. The suppressed agent argument cannot be realized in the syntax, at least in English, in opposition to passive sentences, where the suppressed argument can be realized by means of a *by*-phrase, as illustrated in (22) and (23):

(22) *This book reads easily by John. **(middle)**

(23) This book was read by John. **(agentive passive)**

H&K point out that middles in English must occur with an adverb, a negation phrase or a PP, otherwise, they are unacceptable. Even though there are some examples in the literature in which these phrases can be omitted because it is the context (and/or the intonation) that makes the sentence grammatical. In other languages such as Italian or Greek, middles are grammatical without an Adverbial Phrase, a Negation Phrase or a Prepositional Phrase.

The adverbial adjuncts found in middle constructions are constrained to adverbs of manner that are not subject-oriented (i.e. they are not agentive adverbs), as shown in the grammaticality and ungrammaticality of (25) and (26) respectively.

(25) Clinique rinses away easily/completely/well.

(26) *Clinique rinses away carefully/professionally/patiently.

Alexiadou (2014) proposes an interesting analysis of middles where the different AS alternations (transitive, anticausative, middle, passive and reflexive) are related to the realization of the syntactic Voice Head. Alexiadou takes Kratzer's (1996) Voice head, which introduces the external argument and postulates that there are two distinct non-active Voice heads implicated in AS alternations, namely, Passive and Middle. Furthermore, she postulates that whereas languages such as Greek have a Middle Voice head, English does not. This is due to the fact that the Middle Voice head is considered to be non-active and middles in English are realized as active. Although she considers middles to be unergatives, in her analysis the DP internal argument of middles moves from the internal position to the specifier of Voice (Alexiadou, 2014:35).

Within lexicalist approaches the most insightful works are those proposed by Fagan (1988, 1992) and Ackema & Schoorlemmer (1995), who claim that middles are non eventive, and that even when they appear in the progressive, they do not describe events. Fagan (1988: 183) claims that middles in the progressive are used to "express change between successive states". She proposes that Middle formation is an instance of the process of genericization, where a generic interpretation is assigned to a theta-role (the agent) in the lexical entry of the verb that is afterwards left unrealized in the syntax, she follows the work of Rizzi (1986), who refers to this as saturation.

It has been argued by a number of authors (see Condoradvi 1989, Lekakou 2005, 2017) that precisely because middles exhibit such cross linguistic diversity in their syntactic realization (see examples (29), (30), (31) and (32) below) they should be defined as a semantic category rather than as a syntactic one.

(29) This book reads easily. **(English)**

(30) Afto to vivlio ðiavazete efkola. **(Greek)**
this the book read-NONACT.3SG easily.

(31) Ce livre se lit facilement. **(French)**
This book REFL read easily.

(32) Den här brödet är lättskuret. **(Swedish)**
this here paper-DEF is easy.read-PASTPART

Therefore, according to Lekakou (2002, 2017), the core properties of middles can be summarized as follows (from Lekakou, 2017):

- (33) a. The syntactic subject is the argument that would normally be realized internally (the understood/notional object).
b. An otherwise eventive verb becomes a derived stative, and more precisely receives a generic interpretation.
c. The Agent is syntactically suppressed and receives an arbitrary interpretation.

Following Lekakou (2005a:100), middles can be defined as a particular type of generic sentence, namely disposition ascriptions:

(34) Middles ascribe a disposition to the understood object.

Disposition ascriptions are generic sentences that ascribe a specific type of property to the entity in subject position, i.e. the Patient/Theme. The meaning that (35) expresses is that the clothes in question are such that the washing of them is easy.

(35) These clothes wash easily.

Middles do not make reference to an actual event having taken place but they are derived states (A&S, 2005). In this sense, example (35) can be true even if no one has ever washed those clothes. The agent is semantically available and it is interpreted as generic ONE (Alexiadou & Schäfer, 2010).

Lekakou claims that the cross linguistic variation in the realization of the middle semantics is mainly because of the heterogeneous way in which genericity is encoded across languages.

3.1 WHAT IS IN THE ENGLISH MIDDLE?

In order to discuss the teaching of the middle construction it is necessary to summarize and clarify the main characteristics of the structure that need to be taught. My main research questions regarding the middle construction were:

- What are the main syntactic and semantic characteristics of English middles? When can they occur and what are the restrictions on their occurrence?
 - Do middles resemble anti-causatives and passive constructions? How? And how do they differ?
 - What is the argument structure of middles? Where are its arguments generated? Do they undergo some kind of movement?
 - What is the role of adverbs, negation and PPs in middle constructions? Are they Adjuncts or Complements?
 - What types of verbs allow for the middle construction to occur in English?

The English middle has three syntactic relevant components: a subject, which is the underlying object, a verb and a modifying element, as seen in example (36):

(36) This shirt irons well.

However, many sentences include these three elements and still do not belong to the group of middles, and so further distinctions need to be made.

Semantically, middles ascribe a disposition to the understood object (Lekakou 2005:100). In other words, middles state a property of the entity in the grammatical subject position. This property is expressed by a verb and a modifier, which together constitute the predicate of the construction (Klingvall, 2007:30). Middles are considered to be stative predications (Alexiadou 2014:21).

Syntactically, middles have properties that seem to place them somewhere between active and passive constructions (Klingvall, 2007:2). They have a morphologically active verb but they are structurally like passives, in the sense that the Theme/Patient is the grammatical subject of the construction. The next four sections will deal with each of the components mentioned above.

3.1.1 THE SUBJECT

As stated above, a defining property of middles is that they have a grammatical subject that is an underlying object, thus a Theme/Patient argument. The subject of the middle is the entity over which a property, in other words a disposition, is predicated. The disposition that is ascribed to the grammatical subject in the middle is expressed by the predicate of the construction. Syntactically, this Theme/Patient was merged as complement and has moved to subject position to become the grammatical subject of the sentence.

3.1.2 THE VERB

The verb in the English middle is morphologically unmarked. Thus, it is in the active form, formally identical to the verb used in the non-middle active (causative) and different from passives, as exemplified in (37), (38) and (39):

- | | |
|--|--------------------|
| (37) This car <i>parks</i> easily. | (middle) |
| (38) John <i>parks</i> this car every day. | (causative) |
| (39) This car <i>was parked</i> by John. | (passive) |

The English middle typically has a verb in the present tense but it can also appear in the simple past or in the future, as long as it refers to a property (Klingvall, 2007:31):

- (40) Bureaucrats bribed easily during the cold war.
(41) This floor will always wash easily.

Fagan (1992) claims that the aspectual class of the verb is relevant in the middle construction. She resorts to Vendler's (1967) four aspectual distinctions: states, activities, accomplishments and achievements, and claims that the middle construction is only grammatical with verbs belonging to the class of accomplishments and activities, and only with a sub-class of achievement verbs. There is a restriction on verbs belonging to the class of states.

(42) This pipe smokes nicely.	(activities)
(43) This book reads easily.	(accomplishments)
(44) *The answer knows easily.	(states)
(45) *High summits don't reach easily.	(achievements)
(46) Glass breaks easily.	(achievements)
(47) High explosives detonate easily.	(achievements)

3.1.3 MODIFICATION

The issue of adverbial modification has always been controversial in middles. Some authors argue in favour of a semantic/pragmatic approach (see Condoradvi, 1989 for this approach). As an alternative, Lekakou (2005b) proposes a structural approach where adverbial modification in middles is a means of recovering the implicit agent which cannot be syntactically realized in English but which is semantically available.

English middles always require adverbial modification. Lekakou (2005b) claims that even in the examples where middles in English do not take an adverbial, the adverbial is implicit and present somehow. So, in an example as (48), she claims that there is a manner component in the sentence, “albeit not in the form of an adverb, but in the form of a manner component in the meaning of the verb” (Lekakou, 2005b: 139,143).

(48) This silk washes.

Moreover, sentences such as (49) are ungrammatical on the middle reading (examples from Lekakou, 2005b).

- (49a) *This book READS!
- (49b) *This rock CUTS!
- (49c) *Bureaucrats BRIBE!

However, as Lekakou (2005b) points out (49c) can be grammatical under the object-deletion reading where the animate subject can be interpreted as an agent. Due to the lack of an adverb, the interpretation of these sentences as middles is not possible. As Lekakou (2005b:141) claims “this is a first indication that the adverb in middles has something to do with the recoverability of the implicit Agent – in the

absence of the adverb, we ‘look’ at the syntactic subject for assignment of the Agent role-, and the availability of the middle interpretation itself”.

3.1.4 AGENTIVITY

Roots implying an agent or an external cause can surface as verbs in middles. Also roots with unspecified cause can form middles, but the latter have two different readings (i.e.) they are ambiguous. Following Fellbaum (1986), only the agentive interpretation will be considered as a middle. On their non-agentive interpretation, they will be anti-causatives.

Thus, a sentence such as (50) is considered to be ambiguous since it can be a middle or a generic anti-causative. This type of ambiguous sentence can only occur with a cause unspecified root, such as $\sqrt{\text{close}}$, $\sqrt{\text{break}}$, etc. (examples from Fellbaum, 1986):

- (50) The door closes easily.
- a) You just have to press down. **(middle)**
 - b) It only takes a gust of air. **(anti-causative)**

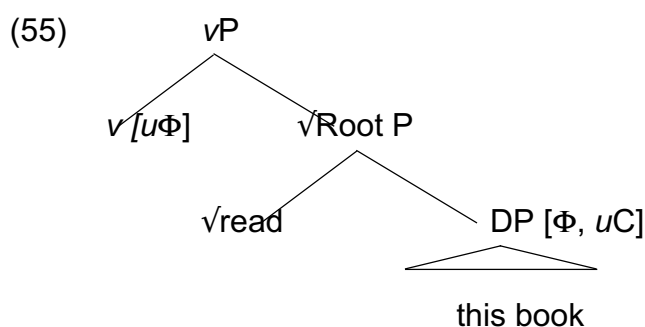
Some authors (see A&S, 2005 among others) only recognize middles as such when they have an agentive reading (i.e.: the door is such that it is easy (for anyone) to close). On its non-agentive reading (the one in 50b), on the other hand, the meaning expressed is that the door is such that it closes easily all by itself. Others (see Condoradvi, 1989; Klingvall, 2007) consider both readings to be middle, since both of them are disposition ascriptions to an understood object. In the proposal that follows, I will consider that middles always have an agentive flavour, as one of their main defining characteristics.

Middles don’t have the same agentive flavour as passives have. The passive allows phrases that make reference to an implied agent (Klingvall, 2007), whereas middles do not.

- (51) This bread was cut (by me).
- (52) This bread cuts easily (*by me).
- (53) This bread was cut to feed an army.
- (54) This bread cuts easily (*to feed an army).

3.2 TOWARDS A POSSIBLE ANALYSIS

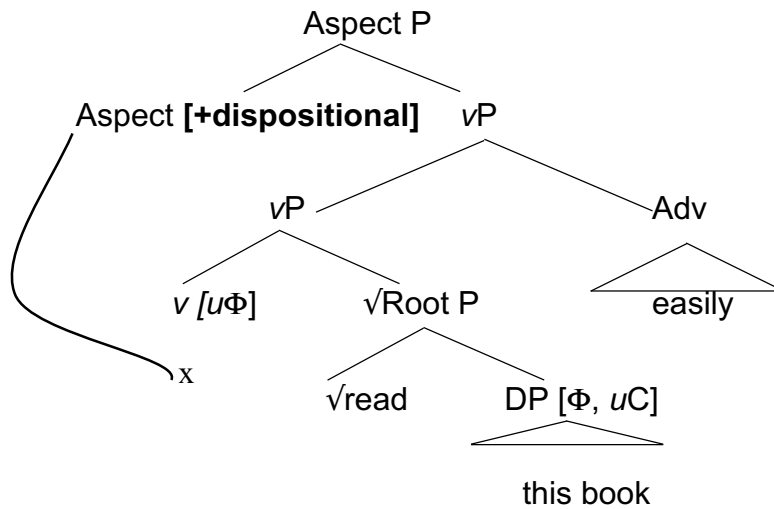
Following general ideas in Chomsky (2001, 2004) and adopting the framework of DM, I assume the derivation of a typical middle like *This book reads easily* to proceed in the following way. First, the category-neutral agentive root $\sqrt{\text{read}}$ merges with *this book* and to form a $\sqrt{\text{Root P}}$. Little v is merged above and categorizes it as a verb. As the complement of the verb, the DP (*this book*) is given the thematic role of Theme/Patient.



Contra Klingvall (2007), the categorization of the root as verbal occurs after the root has merged with its complement. This analysis has two advantages, it leaves the categorizing little v in a c-commanding position with respect to the DP complement, so that it can initially act as a probe. The other advantage is that it also allows us to say, following Marantz (2001), that the root will receive an interpretation in the domain of the first category assigning element. That interpretation remains without change throughout the derivation, because it behaves as a phase head (in the sense of Chomsky, 2001). This allows us to explain the fact that middles have an agentive flavour. This agentive flavour exists because it is part of the meaning of the root (following Alexiadou et al., 2006), and this cannot be changed in the course of the derivation even if the syntactic structure does not project an agent external argument.

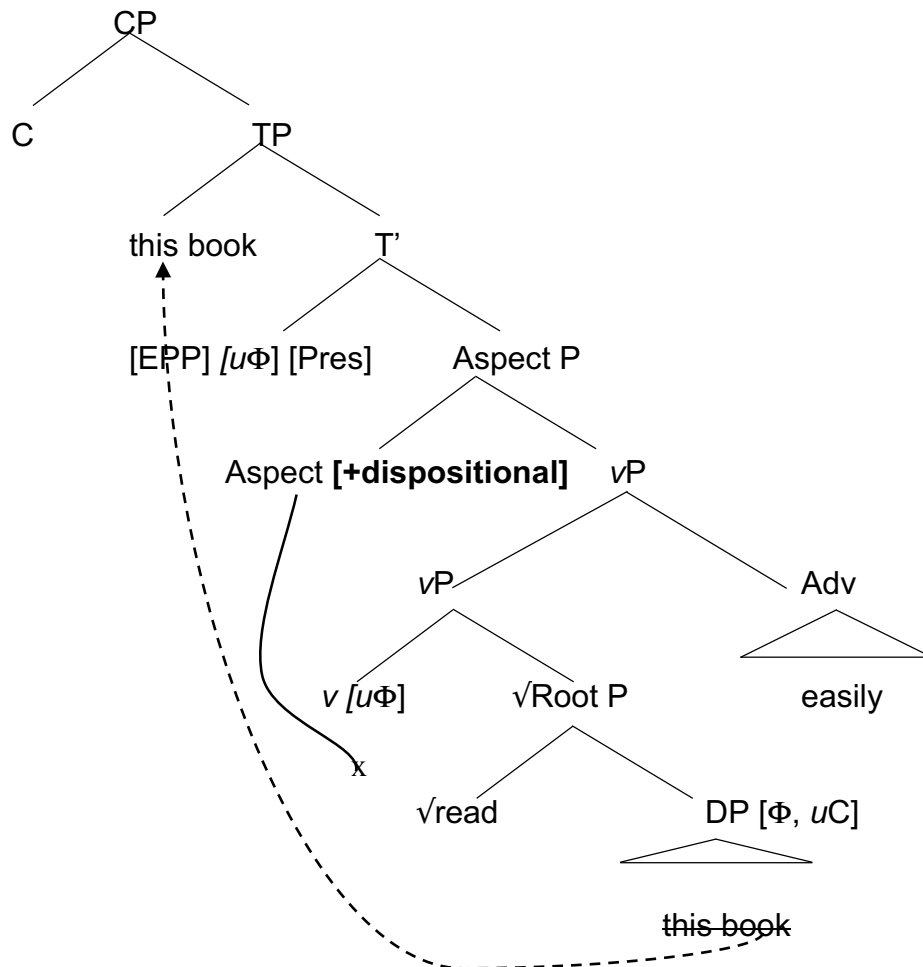
Taking into account case assignment in the Minimalist programme, little v is a defective head with unvalued phi-features and no EPP feature (following Chomsky, 2001 and Klingvall, 2007). Being defective, it can have its phi-features valued by the DP complement, but it cannot assign case to the DP, which leaves the DP still active to enter a relationship with Tense. The DP will eventually get Nominative Case from Tense, which acts as a probe.

Then, the modifying adverbial is adjoined to the *vP*. I will hypothesize, following Alexiadou and Schäfer (2010) that the tree for the middle includes an Aspectual Phrase, which carries the feature [+dispositional]. This feature implies that the construction is [-eventive]. The feature [+dispositional] contrasts with the feature [+episodic], which is the aspectual feature present in anti-causatives. The Aspect head binds the event variable in little *v* and transforms it into a derived state as seen in (56):



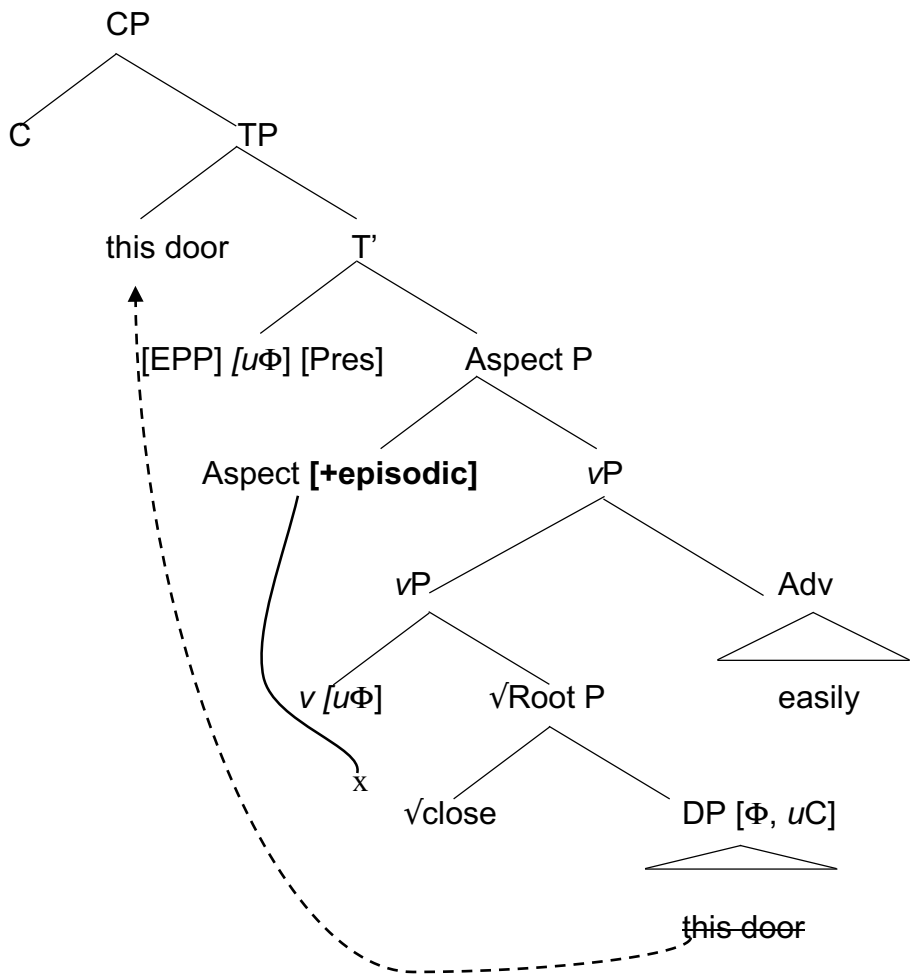
T is then merged above the Aspect Phrase carrying uninterpretable phi-features (*uPerson* and *uNumber*), and “therefore probes the structure to find a goal with matching features” (Klingvall, 2007:107). The DP can now value its Case feature with T, and get Nominative Case. The DP moves to Spec of T to satisfy the EPP feature on T. Finally, C is merged to mark the sentence as declarative.

(57)



I will claim that the tree for the middle construction is the same for middles which have agentive roots such as $\sqrt{\text{cut}}$, as well as for middles which have roots with unspecified cause such as $\sqrt{\text{break}}$ (contra Klingvall, 2007). The tree for the anticausative will be similar except for the feature of the Aspectual Phrase. The feature in this case will be [+episodic], because the sentence is eventive. A generic anticausative such as *The door closes easily* will have the structure represented by the tree diagram shown in (58):

(58)



3.3 TEACHING THE MIDDLE

Over the past 60 years, there has been a change in the way grammar is studied. Thanks to the work of Noam Chomsky and his followers, the study of grammar is now about the study of a specific kind of cognition, namely, human knowledge of language (Radford, 2016: 4) and no longer about prescriptive rules.

Since grammar has achieved the status of a science it has to be studied as such. As Larson (2010:14) interestingly claims “syntax offers an excellent instrument for introducing students from a wide variety of backgrounds to the principles of scientific theorizing and scientific thought (...) and it is an excellent medium through which to teach the skill of framing exact, explicit arguments for theories—the articulation of hypotheses, principles, data, and reasoning into a coherent, convincing whole”. Therefore, syntax at teacher training and translators’ programmes should be seen, not only as a way of improving students’ competence in the foreign language but also as practice for scientific theory construction.

As Banfi et al. (2016:3) claim this approach should be adopted for the teaching of grammar at teacher training and translators’ programmes, where students should develop skills and competencies required by the nature of the discipline. Students should no longer be conceived as mere receptors of prescriptive data about language, but as active agents in the construction of linguistic knowledge. Students should be expected to adopt active and reflective attitudes, which in turn should result in their having greater autonomy and self-confidence. The approach should lead to a greater awareness of language as an object of study.

DM offers us a good framework to develop the capacities mentioned above and to better understand the nature of the middle construction. In turn, the English middle construction is a good candidate for the study of Syntactic terminals (namely, Functional heads and Roots), argument structure, movement, and aspectual notions such as the notion of states and events. The intention of this paper is not to imply that all these notions should be taught in the first year of teacher training and translators’ programmes but that they should be introduced gradually as students progress in their courses of study.

The minimum requirement for first year in teacher training courses where Grammar I is a yearly subject⁵, is to introduce the structure and its main characteristics through the use of alternations (active-passive, causative-anticausative, active-middle) and through paraphrase. Comments should be made on the restrictions on its occurrence. The idea is to work with recognition and production through different activities (see appendix A for some more examples that can be used to discuss the construction with students). Students will need to master logical notions such as modality, aspectual notions such as the notion of event and state, the basic syntactically relevant thematic roles and voice morphology. Moreover, since this proposal is couched within the framework of Distributed Morphology, it implies introducing the notion that words do not exist as such, but that they are syntactically generated by merging roots with categorizing functional heads. It would also imply teaching the four different types of roots proposed by Alexiadou et al. 2006⁶. In first year, trees may be used as visual support to clarify the notions introduced, without expecting students to be able to draw them.

In second year and in Linguistics, all those topics should be taken up again to be dealt with in greater depth and at a more theoretical level. Tree diagrams may be used to show the different functional heads that play a role in middles. At these later stages, students may be asked to draw them. The types of adverbs that occur with middles and other elements that license the structure such as Prepositional Phrases, Focus and Negation Phrases should be discussed.

⁵ This proposal should be somehow adapted in the cases where the subject is a term subject.

⁶ See Theoretical Framework (p.12) for the mentioned distinction.

4. CONCLUSION

This paper had two aims: on the one hand, to investigate the middle construction in general and the English middle in particular, and on the other hand, to come up with a tentative analysis to teach the construction at teacher training and translators' programmes. The paper also argued that it might be advantageous to resort to argument structure alternations to explain the difference between sentences that superficially seem to be alike but which are not really so. I have proposed a syntactic analysis by means of tree diagrams couched within the framework of Distributed Morphology.

A word should be said about the issue of teaching grammar at teacher training and translators' programmes. The paper suggests the adoption of an approach where Grammar is considered a science and should, therefore, be studied as such. The idea that there exist different theoretical approaches to guess at the structure of linguistic expressions should be given its due importance because it contributes to the understanding that there are no definite answers to complex phenomena and that we can knowingly entertain inadequate or incomplete assumptions as temporary representations of better hypotheses to come (Sperber and Wilson, 1995: 230). From my point of view, this is one of the most enriching aspects of this approach to the teaching of Grammar.

When analysed cross-linguistically, middles make use of various syntactic structures in different languages. Thus, I side with Lekakou (2005a) and consider middles to be a particular type of generic sentence that ascribes a disposition to the entity in the grammatical subject position. This generalization is expressed by virtue of a property of the Theme/Patient which has taken subject position via A-movement, in contrast with other types of generic sentences, namely habituals, which only refer to the existence of previous events.

I have proposed a structure similar to anti-causatives for the analysis of English middles for various reasons. Firstly, because middles in English, the same as anti-causatives, cannot project an agent in the syntax. Secondly, because analyses which consider middles to be unergatives presuppose a pre-syntactic level where argument assignment takes place (Klingvall, 2007:164). Within DM, such a conjecture would be impossible to make since there is no such level. As stated in the theoretical framework,

before syntax starts combining elements, there only exist category neutral roots and functional morphemes. This implies that it is only when a root merges with a categorizing element (i.e. a functional morpheme), that it can become a verb, adjective, etc. in the derivation but not before. From this point of view, argument structure results from syntactic structure, and thematic role assignment results from the structural configuration of a given construction. Thus, the thematic role of the grammatical subject in middles is a Theme, and that kind of thematic role is only assigned in complement position.

Following Klingvall (2007) I have taken middles to have their agentive flavour in the semantics of the roots they employ. I have made use of Alexiadou et. al 's (2006) classification of roots but there are also other classifications available which remain an issue for further research. Finally, following Alexiadou and Schäfer (2010) I consider middles to have a dispositional component in the syntax, located in the head of the Aspect Phrase, which binds the event variable. This feature is responsible for middles being derived states.

Middles remain an open issue of debate in the literature, thus by no means do I imply that my tentative analysis solves the problems presented by the construction. The idea of the paper was to come up with a syntactic analysis that would help students see the features which are present in the construction.

One of the limitations of this paper is that I have not attempted a characterization of the middle construction in Spanish, where, interestingly, anti-causatives, middles and some specific types of passive constructions share the same marker 'se'. This topic, together with the role of adverbial modification, which poses different problems when analysed across languages, are issues for further research.

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APPENDIX A

- a) Ripe oranges peel well.
- b) She photographs well. (from Lekakou, 2005a: 175-176)
- c) Sport cars sell quickly.
- d) Leather shoes polish easily. (from Lekakou, 2005a: 175-176)
- e) Well-written papers proofread easily. (from Lekakou, 2005a: 175-176)
- f) Short poems memorize easily. (from Lekakou, 2005a: 175-176)
- g) Houses build more easily today than in the past. (from Lekakou, 2005: 175-176)
- h) This t-shirt dries easily.
- i) Your new hair dyer stores away neatly.
- j) This umbrella folds easily.
- k) This car handles well.
- l) I bruise easily.