

## Explaining English Middle Sentences

**Kabyong Park**  
*Namseoul University*

**K. Park, 2009. Explaining English Middle Sentences. *Journal of Pan-Pacific Association of Applied Linguistics*, 13(2), 125-140.**

The current paper attempts to account for the formation of English middle sentences. Discussing a set of previous analyses on the construction under investigation we show, following the assumptions of Oosten(1986) and Iwata(1999), that English middle constructions should be divided into two types: generic middle constructions and non-generic middle ones. The distinction is shown to be closely related with the tense aspect of the verbs: the structural subject in the former is interpreted as generic with the present tense, while the latter can take past tense and progressive aspect with a non-generic subject. Other thematic roles than Agent can be realized as the structural subjects. In the generic interpretation, the intrinsic property of the plays the role of cause and is primary responsible for the event denoted by middle verb. In the non-generic interpretation, on the other hand, a specific event plays the part of cause and thus can take the past tense. Middle verbs are lexically derived from a set of activity or accomplishment verbs that carry [-state, +process] aspect features. After derivations, the verbs in the generic interpretation possess [+state, +process, +repetition] aspect feature, and those of the non-generic one, [-state, +process, -repetition]. Another contrast lies in the definiteness of the subjects: the generic interpretation involves an indefinite/generic subject and the non-generic one needs a definite/non-generic subject.

**Key Words:** middle construction, generic, non-generic, aspectual features, definiteness

### 1 Introduction

A middle construction refers to the clause where the theme or patient of a verb is structurally realized as the subject of a predicate in an active voice. For example, in the sentences below, the verbs *read* and *drive* occur with the active voice and the logical objects *the book* and *the car* appear in the structural subject position.

- (1) The book reads easily.
- (2) The car drives well.

## **Kabyong Park**

This construction has been widely discussed in many works including Keyser & Roeper (1984) and Fagan (1982). However, even native speakers have reported inconsistency about the grammaticality of the middle construction and a set of issues have not been resolved: the definition of the middle construction, the conditions on external arguments and implicit agent subjects, the semantic property of the middle verbs and the existence of adverbials.

The current paper distinguishes two types of the middle construction, following Oosten (1986) and Iwata (1999): the generic middle construction and the non-generic middle construction. In the former type, an intrinsic property of the subject takes the primary responsibility for the event expressed in a predicate. The non-generic construction does not show such a relationship.

This paper is organized as follows. Section 2 is devoted on the discussion of a few distinct approaches to the conditions on the formation of the middle construction: Hale & Key's (1987) and Fellbaum & Zribi-Hertz's (1987) Affectedness Condition, Vendler's (1967) Aspect Condition, Oosten (1984) and Fellbaum's (1986) Primary Responsibility Condition, and Chung's (1995) Causative Condition. We will show that each perspective falls short of providing an explanatory account. The next section attempts to resolve the limitations discussed in section 2 by discussing such issues as non-generic interpretation, aspect features of the middle verbs, subjects of the middle constructions and the impact of manner adverbials. We will also show that the middle construction can occur in the progressive and past tense and can be interpreted non-generically in certain contexts.

### **2 Conditions on the Formation of the Middle Construction**

The researches in the early generative grammar assume that the transitive verbs should occur in the underlying representation of the middle construction, since those verbs carry a passive meaning. This section discusses some previous analyses of the constraints on the construction under investigation and point out their limitations.

#### **2.1 Affectedness constraints**

According to the Affectedness Constrains, the middle construction can be possible only when the internal argument of a transitive verb is affected by the event or action<sup>1</sup>. Fellbaum & Zribi-Hertz (1989) assume that the intrinsic

---

<sup>1</sup> An argument A of a verb or predicate is AFFECTED by the action or process P referred to by the verb if the referent of A exists prior to P and if its inherent properties are modified by P (Fellbaum & Zribi-Hertz 1989:28).

## Explaining English Middle Sentences

property of the argument is affected. This hypothesis can account for the grammaticality of the following sentences<sup>2</sup>.

- (3) The bottle breaks easily.
- (4) \* The Eiffel Tower sees from my window.

It is argued that the patient *the bottle* is affected by the event of breaking easily; hence the grammaticality of (3). The logical object *Eiffel Tower* in (4), on the other hand, is simply seen to people but can not be affected by the action of seeing. Thus, the contrast in (3-4) can well be explained by the Affectedness Constraint. Moreover, the Constraint can explain why the verbs denoting creation can not occur in the middle construction. Consider the following examples.

- (5) a. \*This bridge builds easily.
- b. \*This poem writes easily.

We can perhaps simply say that the subjects *bridge* and *poem* in (5) are 'created' by the action of building and writing. Thus, we might not say that the process of creation results in the change of any intrinsic properties of these particular arguments. Then, the Affectedness Constraint can account for the ill-formedness of the examples in (5). Along the same line of thought, we can explain the contrast in (6), where the same verb occurs in the middle construction.

- (6) a. This piano plays easily.
- b. \*This sonata plays easily.

As the same verb *play* is used in both sentences, the choice of subjects is solely responsible for the contrast. In (6a), the subject *this piano* can be affected by the action of playing, though this sonata can not<sup>3</sup>. However, let us consider the following example in Fellbaum & Zribi-Hertz.

- (7) Mary photographs well.

The grammaticality of this particular sentence forces us to say that the subject *Mary* is affected by the action of photographing. This claim seems to

---

<sup>2</sup> Change of state is some property of the theme held before the time with respect to which the proposition containing the predicate is evaluated and fails to hold after that time, or vice versa (Roberts 1985:394).

<sup>3</sup> However, it is not easy to claim that the action of playing affects the piano in any way.

## Kabyong Park

be extremely hard to maintain in any sense. Felbaum & Zribi-Hertz simply stipulates that taking a picture transforms a person into an image and then the image can be affected by the event of photographing, which is very hard to be supported. It will not be easy to believe that any property or state of the subject can be affected by being photographed.

Moreover, the Affectedness Constraint can not provide a plausible account of the middle structure in the following sentences.

(8) This book reads easily.

(9) Greek translates easily.

In contrast to the prediction of the Affectedness Constraint, these sentences are judged grammatical although the subjects *this book* and *Greek* can not be considered being affected by the event of reading and translating. This Constraint also can not effectively explain the fact that the middle construction can also involve logical objects denoting other semantic roles than the patient. The following data show that the arguments denoting Instrument or Locative can be structurally realized as subjects.

(10) The knife cuts well.

(11) The aluminum pan bakes higher and browns evenly.

### 2.2 Aspectual features of verbs

According to Vendler (1967), verbs can be categorized into four different subclasses on the basis of their semantic properties: activity, accomplishment, achievement and state. These can be exemplified as in the following sentences. The first two can appear with a progressive tense, since they can denote a progress of an event taking time. These activity /accomplishment verbs differ in the presence/absence of a definite time period for the relevant event. An achievement verb, in turn, denotes an event that happens and ends at a particular time. The event or state expressed by a state verb, on the other hand, lasts for period of time. According to Fagan (1992) and Vendler (1967), the crucial factor for the formation of middles is whether the verb can occur in the present tense<sup>4</sup>. For instance, activity and accomplishment verbs can, whereas state and achievements can not, as illustrated in the following examples.

(12) The car drives easily. (activity)

---

<sup>4</sup> Roberts(1986)'s agentivity test also differentiates two groups of verbs: activity and accomplishments involve an external agent, whereas achievement and state verbs do not.

## Explaining English Middle Sentences

- (13) This book reads easily. (accomplishment)
- (14) \* This poem understands easily. (achievement)
- (15) \* The answer knows easily. (state)

The contrast in (12-15) leads Fagan to assume that only activity and accomplishment verbs are allowed in the middle construction and to claim that the aspectual features of a verb is responsible for the formation of the middle construction.

- (16) a. She is driving the car.  
b. She is reading this book.
- (17) a. \* She is understanding this poem.  
b. \* She is knowing this answer.

We can clearly see the similarities in grammaticality between the middle sentences in (12-15) and progressive sentences in (16-17). The verbs in (16) can appear in a progressive form, whereas the achievement and state verbs can not. However, the aspect feature constraints can not explain the ungrammaticality of the following examples.

- (18) a. \*Mary invites easily.  
b. They are inviting Mary.
- (19) a. \* That issue discusses easily.  
b. They are discussing that issue.

The verbs *invite* and *discuss* should belong to activity/accomplishment verbs, since they can appear in a progressive form as shown in (18). Thus, they are expected to appear in a middle sentence according to Fagan's aspect constraints. However, this prediction is not borne out as illustrated in (18a) and (19a). In other words, not all the activity/accomplishment verbs can always appear in a middle construction. Moreover, these aspect constraints can not account for the contrast found in (20-21) resulting from different types of patients and adverbials.

- (20) a. \* This sonata plays easily.  
b. This piano plays easily.
- (21) a. \* The soup eats rapidly.  
b. The soup eats like a meat.

We might conclude that the aspect feature constraints solely based on different types of verbs would not provide a satisfactory account of the formation of middle construction.

## Kabyong Park

### 2.3 Primary responsibility constraints

Van Oosten (1986) and Fellbaum (1986) claim that the subject of the middle construction takes the primary responsibility for the event expressed by a verb. In other words, only the patient taking the primary responsibility can be allowed as the subject of the middle construction. Consider the following examples.

- (22) a. The lawn mower handles easily.  
b. Sweatshirts wash in the machine.

According to Fellbaum(1986), the structural subject/the logical object *the lawn mower* has the property of being handled easily by anybody in (22a) and *sweatshirts* in (22b) has a certain characteristic that allows them to be washed in the machine. In other words, a certain property of the structural subject in the middle construction is primarily responsible for the action or event expressed by a verb<sup>5</sup>.

However, this primary responsibility constraint also has a limitation. First, it can not explain the role of adverbials in the formation of the middle construction.

- (23) a. \* The ball hits easily.  
b. The ball hits like a dream.

In this pair of sentences, patients are the same. Likewise, the primary responsibility should be the same for hitting or being hit. Thus, Oosten's primary responsibility constraint may not be able to explain the contrast in (23). Moreover, this model does not capture the fact that the primary responsibility could vary depending on the patients, though the same verb is employed, as illustrated below.

- (24) a. This piano plays easily.  
b. \* This sonata plays easily.

Note that in (24) the only difference between the two is the patient and still the acceptability is different. The contrast might show that the middle formation can not be due to the primary responsibility constraint only.

---

<sup>5</sup> The logical object is called 'quasi-agent' in van Oosten(1986: 460-461) and 'constructional agent role' in Hale and Keyser(1986).

## Explaining English Middle Sentences

### 2.4 Causative constraints

Chung (1995) observes that all the middles are allowed with a transitive verb but not all transitive verbs are allowed in the middle construction. He argues that a transitive verb can appear in the middle construction only when the internal argument carries the feature of causer.

#### (25) Causative Condition<sup>6</sup>

Unless there is a cause for an event, the caused event can not take place (Chung 1995: 276)

Based on the condition, he assumes that all the middles carry a causative property in terms of semantics. According to this causative condition, all the noun phrases carrying patient, theme, instrument or even place roles can appear as the structural subject of a middle sentence, as shown in (26).

- (26) a. The glasses break easily. (Patient)  
b. The books read easily. (Theme)  
c. The marks hit easily. (Goal)  
d. The piano plays easily. (Instrument)  
e. The dogs frighten easily. (Experiencer)

In (26a), a property of the glasses is the cause of the event of being broken. Along the same line, a certain property of the subjects plays the role of cause of the event in other examples; for example, a property of *the books* in (b) is the cause of the event. However, the causativity constraint does not overcome the limitations of the previous analyses. Moreover, it has its own problem. First, according to Chung (1995), state verbs can not form a middle construction. As a middle construction involves a cause-effect relationship, it follows that the verb involved should denote an event. But, if we follow Chung (1995), we can not explain why a middle construction expresses a certain non-event property or state feature at least at the surface.

Chung (1995) attributes the contrast in (27-28) between the achievement verb *break* and the activity verb *hit* to their lexical idiosyncrasies.

- (27) This bottle breaks easily.  
(28) \* This wall hits easily.

---

<sup>6</sup> Chung(1995)'s concept of the causer seems to be the same as Van Oosten(1986)'s responsibility of the subject.

## Kabyong Park

The cause of all the middle construction is a certain property of the subject, not the subject itself. The sentence (27) is grammatical, as the intrinsic property of the bottle causes the event of breaking easily. And (28) is ruled out, since it is hard to believe that the intrinsic property of the wall causes the event of hitting easily. If we follow Chung and assume that the grammaticality results from the lexical idiosyncrasies of the verbs, all the achievements should be allowed in the middles, while all the activity verbs should not. His causative constraint can not completely substitute the aspect feature constraints<sup>7</sup>.

To summarize, we have discussed four previous perspectives on the formation of middles and shown that all the four conditions have limitations and can not successfully account for the contrast under discussion. In the next section we make a new proposal that can deal with the problems mentioned above.

- (29) a. Affectedness Condition
- b. Aspect Features Condition
- c. Primary Responsibility Condition
- d. Causative Condition

### 3 A More Explanatory Approach

We follow Grimshaw (1990) and Chun (2003) regarding the argument structure of middle verbs in that the internal argument of a transitive verb can project in the structural subject position when it carries the role of a cause. According to Grimshaw (1990), the argument structure of a lexical item is arranged according to the thematic hierarchy and the aspectual hierarchy. The external argument is projected at the subject position and the internal arguments are placed inside the projection of a verb. However, some internal arguments of a certain verb can appear at the subject position; for example, psychological verbs. Grimshaw argues that the placement of an argument at the structural position depends on the aspectual hierarchy. Thus, the internal theme argument can appear at the subject position if it carries the cause role of the aspectual hierarchy. Therefore, it might mean that the subjects of the middle construction can appear at the surface position with any thematic role except Agent if they carry the cause role of the aspectual hierarchy.

We have seen that most of the examples of the middle construction involve a generic interpretation. Oosten (1986) and Iwata (1999), however, shows another type of the middle construction: non-generic middle sentences.

---

<sup>7</sup> Chung (1995:270) claim that the Goal role can not appear as the subject of a middle does not hold for the following sentence.

(i) The target hits easily.

## Explaining English Middle Sentences

Both types involve an implicit agent and the verb appears in the active voice with a passive meaning. The difference lies in the crucial observation that the non-generic middle can take a progressive tense and a past tense. And the subject is non-generic, as the name indicates, and is not primarily responsible for the event expressed by the predicate.

In this section we attempt to make a new proposal that can account for the middle formation. More specifically, we assume that there exist two types of middle construction: generic and non-generic middle construction. And we aim to show that a set of aspectual features of the middle verbs are responsible for the middle formation. We also argue that the definiteness of the subject of a middle sentence is closely related with the aspectual features of the verb.

### 3.1 Non-generic middle construction

According to Iwata (1999), the existence of an implicit agent subject is crucial for the definition of a middle sentence. However, some middle sentences lack genericity and modality of possibility which were assumed to typically characterize middle sentences. And the middle verb in those sentences can take both progressive and past tense, as shown below in (30 b-c). The implicit agent subject carries the feature of specificity.

- (30) a. This car handles smoothly.
- b. This car is handling smoothly.
- c. This car handled smoothly.

All the middle sentences in (30) are judged grammatical. The difference, however, lies in the genericity of the implicit agent: (a) involves a generic person, while (30b-c) a specific speaker. Thus, we can predict that the sentences (30b-c) should be ruled out if the event is independent of the speaker. And the prediction is borne out, as shown in (31-32).

- (31) \*This car was handling smoothly while I was sleeping in the backseat.
- (32) \*This car handled smoothly while I was sleeping in the backseat.

It is clear that the implicit agent is not a generic subject but the speaker. Thus, while the speaker is sleeping, this car can not be handled. When a middle sentence involves a specific event, the interpretation of the subject plays a key role.

Iwata (1999) raises a question about the judgment on the sentences in (33), which are judged ungrammatical in Keyser and Roeper (1984). If we

## Kabyong Park

assume that these are examples of the non-generic middle, these sentences can be given a legitimate interpretation.

- (33) a. ?\*Yesterday, the mayor bribed easily, according to the newspaper.  
b. ??At yesterday's house party, the kitchen wall painted well.  
c. Grandpa went out to kill a chicken for dinner, but the chicken he selected didn't kill easily.  
d. If it hadn't been for the wet weather, my kitchen floor would have waxed easily.  
e. The wall is painting easily.  
f. The floor is waxing easily.

As seen in (30), a typical generic middle sentence carries a different interpretation from a non-generic one in the progressive and past tense. In the generic middle construction a generic agent can be interpreted to carry out an action due to the intrinsic property of a middle subject, whereas in the non-generic middle a certain event is being or was performed by an implied specific agent regardless of the intrinsic feature of the subject.

If we posit the non-generic middle interpretation, all the conditions in (29) pose a problem. The conditions in (29a), (c) and (d) will be discussed in 3.2 and (29b) in Section 3.3.

The claim that the middle construction must involve a non-generic interpretation has a thread of connection with the argument that a middle verb can not be presented in the progressive and/or past tense. As pointed out in Iwata(1999), however, a middle sentence can appear in the progressive and past tense. Otherwise, the grammaticality of many middles can not be accounted for.

- (34) a. The boat sank all by itself.  
b. \* This book reads easily all by itself.

One thing worth mentioning here is that if the progressive or past tense appears with an intransitive verb, it might not be easy to tell whether the sentence is a middle structure or an ergative one. The apparent equivocalness can be cleared up with the addition of adverbial phrases like *all by itself*, as illustrated in (34).

According to Keyser and Roeper(1984:405), an ergative verb can co-occur with the adverbial *all by itself* that carries the meaning 'without any outside help'. This coexistence might be explained with the assumption that the ergative verb does not involve an agent. The ill-formedness of the middle sentence in (34b), in contrast, can be attributed to the existence of an implied agent, since the adverbial phrase literally negates it. The same contrast

## Explaining English Middle Sentences

between the middle and the ergative can be found in (35) and (36). The typical middle in (35) can not be saved unless with the addition of an adverbial<sup>8</sup>.

- (35) a. \*Bureaucrats bribe.  
b. \*The wall paints.  
(36) a. This branch broke.  
b. The cheese molded.

### 3.2 Aspectual features constraints

According to the aspectual constraint in (29b), both activity and accomplishment verbs can appear in the middle sentence. They both describe a process during a certain time and they differ in terms of time period.

Adopting J. Seo (1991)'s introduction of the features [stativity] and [process] for the classification of verbs, we might assume that activity and accomplishment verbs carry the features [-state] and [+process], achievement verbs [-state] and [-process] and state verbs [+state] and [+process]. Still, some accomplishment verbs are not always allowed in the middle structure. Consider the following examples.

- (37) a. \*This bridge builds easily.  
b. \*This poem writes easily.

The verbs *write* and *build* could be categorized as accomplishment verbs, since the event of building and writing takes a certain period of time until it is finished up. And once the event of creating a certain project is accomplished, the same event can not continuously or repeatedly happen. Thus these verbs may not appear in the middle. Now let us assume that a middle verb should carry the features [+state, +process]. Then the grammaticality of (38-9) can be easily accounted for.

- (38) This pen writes well.  
(39) Love letters write easily. (Chun 2003:145)

The action of writing in (38-9), in contrast to (37b), can be repeated for a certain period of time. It might be argued that the contrast in grammaticality between (37b) and (38-9) can be attributed to the aspectual

---

<sup>8</sup> Fellbaum(1986:6) points out that an ergative verb can be modified by an adverbial in certain contexts.

- (i) a. The door closes easily; you just have to press down. (middle)  
b. The door closes easily; it only takes a gust. (ergative)

## Kabyong Park

features; the middle verb *write* carries the features [+state, +process, +repetition].

Now let us turn our attention to the non-generic interpretation in (30b,c) and (33). The non-generic middle verb can take the progressive and past tense and hence is assumed to carry [-state, -repetition]. Thus, the assumption above that a middle verb should carry [+state, +process, +repetition] does not hold for the non-generic interpretation. A certain modification of the hypothesis is in order.

M. Lee (2001) claims that the middle construction can possibly be formed only if recursiveness based on regular repetition and definiteness inside the predicate is presented<sup>9</sup>. However, she does not investigate the non-generic interpretation. To account for the existence/contrast of both generic and non-generic middle sentences, we must hypothesize that a transitive verb with the features [-state, +process] can also appear in the non-generic middle with the features [+state, +process, +repetition] as well as in the generic middle with the features [-state, +process, -repetition]. It seems to be a theory-internal choice whether we posit a lexical device 'shifting' features in the lexicon or we assume more than one subentries for the same verb; a typical transitive, a generic middle and/or a non-generic middle.

Vendler (1967) also mentions that it is not easy to make a clear cut classification of verbs, which means that a verb might exhibit semantic and aspectual variety and that shifts of aspectual features should be allowed<sup>10</sup>. For example, such verbs as *think*, *know*, *understand*, *see*, *hear* can not easily belong to a specific subcategory. Consider the following examples.

- (40) a. Oh, I am quite tall, I saw him all the time he was in the courtroom. I was watching him.  
b. At that moment I saw him.

---

<sup>9</sup> (i) a. \* The suicide website terminates easily.

b. \* That natural disaster prevents easily.

She attributes the ungrammaticality of the examples above to the nonrecursiveness of the event. It does not happen repeatedly.

<sup>10</sup> Brinton(1988) also points out that the same verb can belong to all the four different categories. Some examples are found below.

(i) a. activity : The child is touching the breakable glassware.

b. accomplishment : Hannah touched all the buttons in the elevator to make them light up.

c. achievement : Just then he touched the buzzer.

d. state : The wainscoting touches the floorboard at a right angle all along the southern wall.

## Explaining English Middle Sentences

The same verb *see* carries the meaning of state in (40a) perhaps due to the adverbial *all the time* in (40a), whereas might be classified as an achievement verb in (b) where it refers to a specific time. Thus we might conclude that the subcategorization should depend on the contexts.

### 3.3 The subjects of middle sentences

The constraints discussed in section 2 show that the middle construction does not describe a specific event but expresses an intrinsic property or general state. For example, Fellbaum & Zribi-Hertz(1989) presents the following examples to support this generalization.

- (41) The clothes wash with no trouble because
- a. they're machine-washable.
  - b. \* I have lots of time.

A property of the subject *the clothes* in (a) can appear in the subordinate clause after the middle sentence, whereas any predication of the agent I is not permitted as shown in (b). The contrast might lead us to conclude that the middle sentence refers to an intrinsic property of the structural subject. Chung (1995: 276), on the other hand, claims in (25) that unless there is a cause for an event, the caused event can not take place. However, we can see here that the causative condition in (25) may not account for the contrast in (41). If we take the intrinsic property of the subject as the cause, it does not cause any new event to occur but simply maintains a general state of the subject. There is not really a cause-causee relationship in the middle sentences. Thus the condition in (29d) might be reformulated as in the following.

- (42) Constraint on the Middle Construction X contains a certain property or state due to its intrinsic nature.  
(X may carry all thematic roles except Agent)

Next let us discuss the definiteness of the middle subjects. The contrast in (43-4) is closely related to the definiteness of the middle subjects: the ones in (44) with the determiner are permitted.

- (43) a. ?\* Bureaucrats are bribing easily.  
b. \* Chickens are killing easily.
- (44) a. These bureaucrats are bribing easily.  
b. These chickens are killing easily.

We can clearly see from the above examples that the specificity of the non-generic middle verb with progressive and past tense is closely related

## Kabyong Park

with the definiteness of the subjects. In this case an intrinsic property of the subject is not really responsible for the specific event. Rather, a specific event is performed by a specific agent. Thus we might conclude that the primary responsibility constraint can not appeal to the interpretation of the non-generic middle sentences. Consider the following examples.

- (37) a. \* This bridge builds easily.  
      b. \* This poem writes easily.
- (38) This pen writes well.
- (39) Love letters write easily. (Chun 2003:145)

The same line of thought can apply to the repeated examples above. The sentences in (37) have definite subject, and thus can not exhibit a generic interpretation, whereas in (38-39) the indefinite subjects *this pen* (meaning a pen of this kind) and *love letters* can carry a generic interpretation. Again the definiteness of the subject is closely related with the generic/non-generic interpretation. In fact, many native speakers have reported that the following examples are acceptable in certain contexts.

- (37a') ? This bridge is building easily.
- (37b') ? The poem is writing easily.

### 3.4 Adverbials

Another question worth exploring is whether an adverbial is a necessary condition for the formation of a middle sentence. To paraphrase the question, must an adverbial occur to express an intrinsic property of the subject? Consider the following ungrammatical sentences.

- (45) a. \*That idea communicates.  
      b. \*That passage translates.  
      c. \*The home wrapping center stores.  
      d. \*The document photocopies. (Iwata, 1999:535)

It seems apparent that we can not dispense with an adverbial for the formation of a middle sentence. However, many examples are found to show that other elements including verbs themselves can perform adverbial effects, as shown below.

- (46) This dress buttons.
- (47) This umbrella folds up.
- (48) a. \* The meat cuts.  
      b. This meat doesn't cut. (Fellbaum, 1986:9)
- (49) a. ?? This car drives.

## Explaining English Middle Sentences

- b. I thought we were out of gas, but the car DRIVES!  
(Fellbaum, 1986:9)  
(50) These red sports models do sell, don't they?

### 4 Concluding Remarks

We have shown that none of the previous analyses are successful in accounting for the formation of the middle sentences in English. To summarize, the cause of the middle sentence is an intrinsic property of the subject, an incidental event or state. Thus, we assume two types of middle sentences: generic and non-generic. The subject in the former is primarily responsible for the event, whereas the subject in the latter is not. The structural subjects in the middle sentence do not carry their own will and other thematic roles than Agent are realized as the subject. Mainly activity and accomplishment verbs may be derived as middle verbs and all the middle verbs share the feature [+process]. These typical transitive verbs contain the features [-state, +process] and then the features are shifted in the middle construction after a certain lexical derivation to [ $\alpha$  state, +process,  $\alpha$  repetition]. If  $\alpha$  is assigned a positive value, it results in a generic interpretation and if negative a non-generic one. Thus, the generic interpretation must involve the feature [+state, +process, +repetition], while the non-generic one has [-state, +process, -repetition]. We also show that the definiteness of the subject of the middle is closely related with the interpretation: the generic one with [-definite] subject and the non-generic with [+definite] one, which enables the middle verb to take the progressive and past tense for a specific event.

### References

- Chun, B. (2003). Middle formation revisited. *The Linguistic Association of Korea Journal*, 11(1), 135-158.
- Chung, T. (1995). A Semantic condition on English middles: A causative approach. *Korean Journal of Linguistics*, 20(4), 271-288.
- Fagan, S. (1992). *The syntax and semantics of middle constructions: A study with special reference to German*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Fellbaum, C. (1986). *On the middle construction in English*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Linguistic Club.
- Fellbaum, C., & Zribi-Hertz, A. (1989). *The middle construction in French and English*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Linguistic Club.
- Grimshaw, J. (1990). *Argument structure*. *Linguistic Inquiry Monograph*, 18, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

## Kabyong Park

- Hale, K., & Keyser, S. (1987). *A view for the middle, lexicon project working papers, 10*, Cambridge, MA: Center for Cognitive Science, MIT.
- Lee, M. (2001). Recursiveness condition on English middles. *Eoneo*, 26(4), 735-753. (written in Korean)
- Keyser, S., & Roeper, T. (1984). On the middle and ergative constructions in English. *Linguistic Inquiry*, 15, 381-416.
- Iwata, S. (1999). On the status of an implicit arguments in middles. *Journals of Linguistics*, 35, 527-553.
- Massam, D. (1992). Null objects and non-thematic subjects. *Journal of Linguistics*, 28, 115-137.
- Roberts, I. (1987). *The representation of implicit and dethematized subjects*, Dordrecht: Foris Publications.
- Seo, J. (1991). *Research on Korean grammar*. Hanshin Publishers, Seoul, Korea. (written in Korean)
- Striok, T. (1992). Middles and movement. *Linguistic Inquiry*, 23, 127-137.
- Van Oosten, J. (1986). *The nature of subjects, topics, and agents: A cognitive explanation*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Linguistic Club.
- Vendler, Z. (1967). *Linguistic in philosophy*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Kabyong Park  
English Department  
Namseoul University  
21 Maeju-Ri, Seonhwan-Eup  
Chonan-shi, KOREA  
82-41-580-2162(Office)  
82041-580-2921(Fax)  
E-mail: kpark@nsu.ac.kr

Received: January 27, 2009  
Revised: May 22, 2009  
Accepted: June 5, 2009