

# The Core Restriction on English Middle Formation

Hongxin Li

Zhengzhou Institute of Aeronautical Industry Management, Henan, China

Email: luckyhx@126.com

**Abstract**—We have accumulated many restrictions on English middle formation and are more likely to propose some more, but for a better understanding of English middles, it's all the more necessary to investigate what on earth is the core restriction on this formation. This paper tries to single out responsibility condition as the core one in that it has the final say over other conditions in licensing middle formation.

**Index Terms**—restriction, middle construction, formation

## I. INTRODUCTION

The restrictions on English middle formation have intrigued lots of linguists, and a number of proposals on this restriction have been made, which we will discuss in this paper. Not every verb can undergo middle formation, and verbs from the same subcategories do not necessarily form acceptable middles. In addition, the logical object as well as the logical subject is also subject to some restrictions. Accordingly, the proposed restrictions are targeted on three aspects: properties of the verb, properties of the grammatical subject and properties of the logical subject. Many of the restrictions manage to capture the properties for English middle formation to be possible, but surprisingly enough they overlap to a significant extent.

In the discussion that follows, we'd like to compare different restrictions and test its feasibility, and attempt to single out the core restriction on English middle formation. It is fair to say the jury is still out on this issue, but the discussion will help us better understand the restriction on English middle formation.

## II. RESTRICTIONS ON ENGLISH MIDDLE FORMATION

So far linguists have formulated many restrictions on English middle formation. In order to better understand how they work, this section examines in details the restrictions from three different perspectives.

### A. Properties of the Verb

Fagan (1992) proposes that aspectual properties of the verb are crucial in determining whether or not it can undergo middle formation. Fagan uses Vendler's (1967b) classification of verbs into four aspectual types:

- a. activities: express an ongoing action with no inherent end-point (examples are run, smoke, drive, play, etc.).
- b. accomplishments: express an event with an internal time structure and an end-point (examples are paint, read, make, build, assemble, etc).
- c. achievements: express instantaneous events (examples are recognize, break, reach, cross, acquire, see, notice, etc)
- d. states: do not express an event or activity (examples are have, love, know, believe, etc)

The four types of verbs exhibit different aspectual properties. As far as English is concerned, activity verbs and accomplishment verbs can be used in progressive, whereas achievement and state verbs usually can not. According to Fagan, the crucial restriction on middle formation in English is the following:

Aspectual condition: Only (transitive) activities and accomplishments undergo middle formation.

Consider how examples of each aspectual class fare with respect to middles formation. The contrast between the examples in (1a) and (1b) and those in (2a) and (2b) lends support to Fagan's generalization.

- (1) a. This pipe smokes nicely.  
b. Bob Ross-style pictures paint easily.
- (2) a. \*A red-winged blackbird recognizes easily.  
b. \*That answer knows easily.

However, in English, some achievement verbs, which run counter to aspectual condition, can also undergo middle formation (as shown in 3).

- (3) Glass breaks easily.

This sentence is accepted by many scholars as a genuine middle sentence, but the verb break, clearly an achievement verb and expressing an instantaneous breaking event, do not comply with aspectual condition.

Obviously, aspectual condition is too general to work for all instances of middles. Still sometimes aspectually eligible verb pair (verbs that pass aspectual condition), however, demonstrates great asymmetry in middle formation. A

famous contrast in middle formation is that between sell and buy. The former but not the latter can undergo middle formation, as in (4):

- (4) a. The new Saramago sells like water in a desert.  
b. \*The new Saramago buys with great difficulty, the distribution is bad.

(Ackema and Schoorlemmer 2002)

To account for this contrast, Fagan proposes an additional constraint. The condition is that the properties of the grammatical subject also hold responsibility in the process of middle formation, which will be discussed in more details in the next subsection.

### B. *Properties of the Grammatical Subject*

The classical restriction concerning the properties the grammatical subject/ logical object must have in order for a middle to be well-formed is the following:

Responsibility condition: The grammatical subject of a middle (if present) must have properties such that it can be understood to be responsible for the action expressed by the predicate.

See how this accounts for the sell-buy contrast in (4). A book can have properties which make it responsible for being sold easily: it can be well written, or have an attractive cover, or contain a lot of sex and violence, and so on. In contrast, although it can be difficult to buy a book because it is hard to find, or because you do not have enough money, those are not properties of the book itself. It is very hard to imagine a book having intrinsic properties which makes buying it easy or difficult, hence the unacceptability of (4b). This condition also holds of (3). The sentence in (3) can be explained by an appeal to responsibility condition: glass certainly has properties which make it easy to break it.

According to responsibility condition, in order for the properties of the grammatical subject to hold responsibility for the action expressed by the predicate, the grammatical subject must exist prior to the action rather than come into existence as a result of the action. In other words, from the existence of an entity comes the responsibility it bears on the action, but not the other way around.

This is where anti-effectedness condition comes in.

Anti-effectedness condition: The subject in a middle should not be an effected object of the verb.

This restriction has been proposed by Zwart (1998). The notion “effected” should not be confused with “affected.” An effected object is one that comes into existence by the action denoted by the verb.

Now let’s see how this condition works for middle formation.

- (5) a. ?This house builds easily.  
b. ?This picture paints easily.

Clearly, this house comes into existence as a result of the building. Similarly this picture is created by the painting, both of which run counter to anti-effectedness condition. Note that, looking at the verbs build and paint, they are a subset of Vendler’s classification of accomplishments, eligible for middle formation. That means the anti-effected condition seems to be in opposition to Fagan’s aspectual condition in.

Note, however, that examples in (5) are independently ruled out by another restriction on middle formation. This is the responsibility condition, which states that the subject of a middle “must have properties such that it can be understood to be responsible for the action expressed by the predicate”. The subjects in (5) cannot possibly comply with this restriction precisely because they only come into existence as a result of that action.

This interesting factor can be neutralized by using generic arguments as subjects (logical objects). A specific house that comes into being as a result of some building action cannot have any properties before it is finished which could make it responsible for building being difficult. However, a generic class of (a particular type of) houses certainly can have properties such that building a house of that type is difficult. As it turns out, examples like this are fine with generic subjects (see (6)).

- (6) a. The house of that type builds easily.  
b. Bob Ross-style pictures paint easily.

In summary, of the two conditions of the grammatical subject on middle formation, responsibility condition is the fundamental one, because the subject “must have properties such that it can be understood to be responsible for the action expressed by the predicate” entails a subject not being “an effected object”, which would otherwise fail to hold that kind of responsibility. In this respect, we can say that anti-effectedness condition is a corollary to responsibility condition. Therefore; responsibility condition takes precedence over anti-effectedness, since exceptions to the former will result in ill-formedness even when they are in compliance with the latter. In other words, the former is more operative than the latter in this respect.

The sentence in (4b) complies with anti-effected condition, but due to violation of responsibility condition, it is unacceptable to different extents.

### C. *Properties of the Logical Subject*

As far as the properties of the logical subject are concerned, there is also a condition on middle formation, namely agentivity condition (Abraham 1986; Pitz 1987; Roberts 1987).

Agentivity condition: The logical subject in a middle must be an agent.

This condition alone, without any appeal to other conditions, is capable of capturing the following contrast between the possible middles in (7) and the impossible ones in (8):

- (7) a. Bureaucrats bribe easily.  
 b. That book reads well.  
 c. Greek does not translate easily.  
 (8) a. \*The Eiffel Tower sees easily.  
 b. \*The answers knows easily.  
 c. \*Spies don't recognize easily.

(Ackema and Schoorlemmer 2002)

The distinction between (7) and (8) follows from the agentivity condition, because the subject argument of bribe, read and translate are agents, whereas the subject arguments of see, know, and recognize are not.

Of course the contrast can also be accounted for by applying aspectual condition, according to which, the verbs see, know, and recognize fall under either achievement verbs or stative verbs, neither eligible for middle formation. In this regard, we can say that agentivity condition and aspectual condition overlap, or rather, the former is a supplemental condition to the latter, for it will facilitate targeting the middable verbs, whose subcategories are sometimes difficult to determine according to Vendler's classification.

### III. THE CORE RESTRICTION ON ENGLISH MIDDLE FORMATION

Let us make a short summary where we stand at this point concerning the restrictions on middle formation. One question that naturally presents itself is which condition is the core condition and which conditions are peripherals. A useful test to tackle this issue is to try to find out which condition has the final say in licensing English middle formation when other conditions are not complied with. See how this work in the following examples:

- (9) a. \*The finish line reaches easily. (in violation of aspectual condition)  
 b. \*This wall hits easily. (in violation of agentivity condition)  
 c. ?That picture paints easily. (in violation of anti-effectedness condition)  
 d. \*The new Saramago buys with great difficulty, the distribution is bad. (in violation of responsibility condition)

In (9a), the verb reach is an achievement verb, thus ruled out by aspectual condition; (9b) do not seem to have implicit agent arguments in the relevant sense; in (9c) that picture does not come into existence before it is painted, bearing "an effected object of the verb"; (9d), as discussed before, runs counter to responsibility condition.

However, in addition to the last one, all the other three examples are ruled out just by the responsibility condition. Consider the example in (9a): a finish line cannot have any properties that make reaching it easy. (The distance between start and finish line can be such that reaching the finish line is easy-but that distance is not a property of the finish line). Now the second example (9b): it's hard to imagine a wall having properties that make hitting it easy. For (9c), a specific picture that comes into being as a result of some painting action cannot have any properties before it is finished (i.e., before it actually is that specific picture) which could make it responsible for painting being easy.

More importantly, responsibility condition not only has the final say in licensing middle formation, it is also that condition that helps save some ill-formed middles by assigning some properties (if possible) in order for the grammatical subject to be responsible. Examples in (9b.c) appear to improve considerably when a generic subject is used (see 10).

- (10) a. Quick opponents do not hit easily. (said by one boxer to another)  
 b. Bob Ross-style pictures paint easily.

At the present stage, it seems fair to conclude that responsibility condition is the core restriction working as a necessary condition to license middle formation. Aspectual condition, selecting for possible middable verb, anti-effected condition, a corollary to responsibility condition (as we claimed before) and agentivity condition, a supplemental condition to aspectual condition, they are all peripheral conditions in order for middles to be possible. Because they are peripherals, there are more conditions than we have discussed: affectedness condition, anti-double object condition, argument sensitivity condition, to name just a few. Just like a computer, CPU is the core configuration, while peripheral configurations may vary from a network card, bluetooth mouse to a webcam, a scanner or whatever. Peripheral configurations will most probably become even pluralistic in the future, but the core CPU is the most fundamental and can not be dispensed with. Even all the configurations, whether the core or peripherals are all available, the computer still may not work, for it may break down for other reasons.

### IV. CONCLUSION

In summary, the restrictions on English middle formation finally boil down to responsibility condition. All the well-formed middle constructions pass the responsibility condition, while those passing other conditions but running counter to responsibility condition, fail to undergo middle formation with no exception. In other words, responsibility condition is the core restriction in filtering out ill-formed middle constructions. The fact that responsibility condition is expressed in imperative language (by using "must") has misled many readers to regard it as prescriptive, while the truth is that responsibility condition is meant to describe what actually happens in middle constructions: the grammatical subject of

English middle construction bears the properties such that it holds responsibility for the action expressed by the predicate. In other words, English middle constructions are not used to report an action or events, because the grammatical subject must exist prior to the action rather than come into existence as a result of the action. That is also consistent with the universally accepted feature of English middle constructions--non-eventiveness.

#### REFERENCES

- [1] Abraham, W (1986). Unaccusatives in German. *Groninger Arbeiten zur Germanistischen Linguistik* 28:1-72.
- [2] Ackema, P. and Schoorlemmer, M. (1995). Middles and Nonmovement. *Linguistic Inquiry*. Vol. 26.2, 173-197.
- [3] Ackema, P. and Schoorlemmer, M. (2002). Middles. In Martin Everaert & Henk van Riemsdijk (eds.), *The Syntax Companion*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- [4] Chung, Taegoo. (1995a.). A Semantic Condition on English Middles: A Causative Approach. *Korean Journal of Linguistics* 20.4:271-288.
- [5] Chung, Taegoo. (1995b.). English Middle Constructions: Movement vs. Lexical Approach. *Phoenix* 33:297-312. Korean University, English Department.
- [6] Chung, Tagoo. (1996). On English Middle Formation. *Studies in Generative Grammar*. Vol.2, 281-317.
- [7] Fagan, S. (1988). The English Middle. *Linguistic Inquiry*.19, 181-203.
- [8] Fagan, S. (1992). The Syntax and Semantics of Middle Constructions: A Study with Special Reference to German. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- [9] Roberts, I. (1987). The representation of implicit and dethematized subjects. Dordrecht: Foris.
- [10] Stroik, T. (1992). Middles and Movement. *Linguistic Inquiry*. 23:127-137.
- [11] Stroik, T. (1995). On Middle Formation: A Reply to Zribi-Hertz. *Linguistic Inquiry*. 26.1: 165-171.
- [12] Stroik, T. (1999). Middles and Reflexivity. *Linguistic Inquiry*. 30.1:119-131.
- [13] Vendler, Z. (1967b). Verbs and Times. In: *Linguistics in Philosophy*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- [14] Vendler, Z. (1984). Adverbs of Action, CLS 20, Part 2, Papers from the Parasession on Lexical Semantics, 297-307.
- [15] Zwart, Jan-Wouter. (1998). Nonargument Middles in Dutch. *Groninger Arbeiten zur germanistischen Linguistik* 42, 109-128.

**Hongxin Li** was born in Xinye, China in 1975. He received his M.A. degree in linguistics from Zhengzhou University, China in 2008.

He is currently a lecturer in Foreign Languages Department, Zhengzhou Institute of Aeronautical Industry Management, Zhengzhou, China. His research interests include Formal Linguistics and Teaching Methodology.