

# A lexical approach to the derivation of the English Middle Construction\*

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The literature on the derivation of the English middle construction (EMC) (*This book reads well*) revolves around two competing analyses. On the one hand, the syntactic approach assumes a syntactic movement rule which operates in a way akin to what standard Government and Binding (GB) theory assumes for the passive transformation in English. The lexical approach, on the other hand, proposes lexical operations prior to lexical insertion in such a way that the middle subject appears as a subject already at D-structure. The arguments invoked in favour of one or the other approach are usually of a grammatical type. Here I put forward arguments of a semantic nature in order to justify a lexical approach. I begin by critically reviewing both approaches in the light of the semantic peculiarity of the construction and mapping principles like Baker's (1997) Uniformity of Theta Assignment Hypothesis (UTAH). I then propose a revised set of lexical rules that account both for the structural re-arrangement of arguments in a middle sentence and for the semantic changes that middle formation involves. I also consider how Goldberg's (1990) Construction Grammar approach to argument structure can give us a more encompassing insight into the meaning of middles. Finally, Bland's (1985) distinction between the Static and Dynamic Lexicon also provides some theoretical constructs within which the rule-based derivation of middles and the lexicalization process that they are undergoing can be accommodated.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

Middles are usually considered to be the intransitive variant of the middle alternation, exemplified in (1):

- (1) a. People read love stories easily.  
b. Love stories read easily.

Example (1b) is an example of a middle sentence, arguably derived from its transitive counterpart (1a). We observe that its subject, *love stories*, corresponds to the original Patient of the verb and that the original Agent is not superficially expressed although it is implied. Its verb does not show any morphological marking that distinguishes it from the verb in its active transitive counterpart. A further property of the English Middle Construction (EMC) is the lack of specific time reference or uneventiveness. Sentence (1b) is attributing some property to love stories that makes them easy to read, but no actual reading event is being referred to. As with most middles, it occurs with some modification, in this case the adverb *easily*. If not an adverb, some other element is typically present, such as negation or a modal element.

This paper deals with the derivation and the semantics of middles. Section 2 looks at the different levels of representation that are distinguished in grammatical analysis and at why middles pose a problem for a uniform mapping between grammatical functions and thematic

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