

ALINA JACKIEWICZ  
University of Silesia Katowice

## MIDDLES, NOTIONAL PASSIVE OR CHANGE-OF-STATE VERBS IN ENGLISH AND POLISH

The article deals with the phenomenon of the middle voice, which traditionally was an intermediate form between the active voice and the passive voice. Middle constructions, which can be illustrated by the sentence *The book reads well* are defined here as constructions whose form is active but the meaning is passive. The article presents syntactic properties of middles as well as their semantic characteristics in both English and Polish. The author attempts at emphasizing the properties of middles which are shared by the two languages. It is also stressed that it would be worthwhile to investigate the area of the Polish middles, since they are not recognized as a separate class of constructions by the Polish linguists.

### 0. Introduction

The group of constructions that we will venture to classify here as middles, notional passive or change-of-state verbs could be illustrated by the following sentences:

- (1) Honda Civic drives smoothly.
- (2) Ford Focus świetnie sprzedaje się na naszym rynku.  
Ford Focus sells excellently on our market.

The terminological multiplicity that is perceptible for the reader will have to be accounted for first. „Middles” are associated with the the middle voice, the term that goes back to the Greek distinction between three voices «active», «passive» and «middle». Lyons (1971) states:

“As the term suggests, the middle was thought of as intermediate between the primary opposition of active and passive (signifying either an “action”, like the active, or a “state”, like the passive, according to the circumstances or the inherent meaning of the verb in question)”. Lyons (1971:373)

In the present understanding of the term, middle constructions are constructions whose form is active but the meaning is passive, which is exemplified by sentences (1, 2).

Quirk (1985) discussing the constructions at issue, labels them either as „notional passive” (Quirk 1985:811) or locates them in the array of verbal conversion. Sentences like (i-iii):

- (i) The clock winds up at the back. („can be wound up”)
- (ii) Your book reads well.
- (iii) The table polishes up badly.

are instances of transitive → intransitive conversion and belong to the subgroup which could be paraphrased by *Can be V-ed*<sub>2</sub> (Quirk 1985:1016). Quirk adds that these verbs are often followed by an intensifying adverb such as *well* or *badly*.

Syntactic and semantic descriptions of the constructions under discussion can be found under any of these names. Some linguists restrict the scope of the phenomenon on which they debate, which should not lead to any terminological discrepancies. In this paper we shall confine ourselves to applying the term *middles*; other terms mentioned above to be used only while quoting other linguists' views.

Since many properties of middles are universal and, what is crucial for our deliberation here, are shared by the Polish and English middle constructions, we shall discuss them in unison.

## 1. Syntactic properties of *middles*

Polish traditional linguistics distinguishes three voices: active, passive and reflexive. Reflexive voice in Polish is marked by the presence of the clitic *się*<sup>1</sup> occurring together with a finite or non-finite verb in any tense. Since a vast majority of Polish sentences that would be perceived as middles are constructions with *się*, Polish grammarians classify them as reflexives emphasizing their unique character and properties.

Benni, Łoś, Nitsch, Rozwadowski (1923) in their grammar recognize reflexive constructions as one of two major ways of expressing passiveness in Polish; the other way being the construction consisting of *być* “to be”, *bywać* “to happen to be” and *zostać* “to become” and the past participle form of a lexical verb. The passive character of the middle reflexives is confirmed by Gaertner (1933) and Szober (1953), who presenting the sentence (i)

- (i) Stoczyła się bitwa.  
'The battle has been fought'

maintain that the reflexive form is preferred when the performer of the action is not known. The alternative “proper” passive sentence in which the agent is not specified either, i.e.:

- (ii) Bitwa została stoczona.  
'The battle has been fought'

---

<sup>1</sup> In phonology **clitics** are phonologically deficient elements which are unable to bear primary stress and therefore adjoin to their phonological hosts. The term **clitic** describing *się* in any of its numerous functions is widely used by Kardela (1985).

is supposed to be used when it is the results of the action, not the action itself, that we intend to stress.

Grzegorzczukowa, Laskowski and Wróbel (1984) in their comprehensive analysis of the Polish grammar while elaborating on the question of voice present a list of the functional types of the constructions with *się*. Making concessions for the general character of the list, they enumerate six kinds of constructions with *się*. Starting with reflexiva tantum, they go through the classification which does not seem to recognize constructions which are understood here as middles. Middles might be “fitted” somewhere between function three, which says “constructions denoting an involuntary state”, as in (i):

- (i) *Dobrze mu się pracuje*  
 well him refl. works  
 «He enjoys working here».

and function four, which encompasses “impersonal constructions of two types”, as in (ii, iii):

- (ii) *We wsi buduje się nową szkołę.*  
 In the village builds refl. a new school.  
 «A new school is being built in the village»
- (iii) *Ta szkoła już się buduje osiem lat.*  
 This school already self builds eight years.  
 «This school has been built for eight years»

The above mentioned observation appears to clarify the fact that linguists preoccupied with the Polish language data do not seem to give much attention to the phenomenon which we label as middles.

The absence of the performer of the action (quoted above) is a universal property of middles observed by the linguists dealing with this phenomenon. (Kardela 1985 and 1996; Kański 1986; Napoli 1976; Keyser and Roeper 1984; Roberts 1985; Magnusson and Persson 1986; Wołczyńska-Sudół 1976). Other universal properties of the constructions under discussion comprise: aspectual limitations, verbal choice according to detailed subcategorization, obligatory presence of adverbs (with certain exceptions) and thematic constraints on the predicate and its arguments (especially the Patient). Let us have a look at sentences (3-16)<sup>2</sup>:

3. \*Honda Civic drives smoothly by an experienced driver.
4. \*Ford Focus świetnie się sprzedaje na naszym rynku przez dealerów.
- 4'. \*Ford Focus sells excellently on our market by the dealers.
5. \*Honda Civic is driving smoothly.
6. \*Honda Civic has driven smoothly.
7. Honda Civic drove smoothly.
8. \*Honda Civic drove smoothly yesterday.
9. Ford Focus sprzedawał się świetnie na naszym rynku.

<sup>2</sup> Polish examples (4, 9, 10, 13, 15, 16) are followed by English equivalents (4', 9', 10', 13', 15', 16') respectively. We did not think that providing glosses would be necessary, therefore.

- 9'. Ford Focus sold excellently on our market.  
 10. \*Ford Focus sprzedawał się świetnie na naszym rynku wczoraj.  
 10'. \*Ford Focus sold excellently on our market yesterday.  
 11. \*Flowers give easily.  
 12. Flowers grow easily.  
 13. \*Te obrazy pokazują się dobrze.  
 13'. \*These paintings show well.  
 14. \*It runs easily.  
 15. Ta koszula pierze się szybko.  
 15'. The shirt washes quickly.  
 16. ?\*Turysta myje się szybko.  
 16'. ?\*The tourist washes quickly.

Sentences (3, 4) are incorrect because middles do not allow co-occurrence with the performer of the action, which means that no agentive adjunct "by-phrases" are acceptable. The existence of some indefinite agent is presupposed, however. Sentences (5, 6) are considered to be unacceptable due to the aspectual limitations imposed on them. It would be problematical to find the justification for the restrictions in the realm of syntax<sup>3</sup> but if we glance at them from the semantic perspective, we might undertake to discover some logic in them. Middles could be compared to generic statements (Rizzi 1986; Fagan 1988; Keyser and Roeper 1984) and as such should not be expected to describe particular events, as would be the case with sentence (5), which exhibits progressive aspect. Sentence (6) exemplifies perfect aspect whose application signifies a resulting state, not a property of some object, thing or entity, which is conjectured to be the message conveyed by middles. Sentences (7-10) cannot be interpreted in a similarly elementary way. Their acceptability is rather dubious. Roberts (1985), following Keyser and Roeper (1984), observes that verbs in the preterite with punctual interpretations do not form middles. The sentences quoted by them are (i, ii):

- „(i) \*Yesterday, the mayor bribed easily.  
 (ii) \*Last week, the chickens killed nicely.” Roberts (1985:369)

and they correspond to our sentences (8, 10), which would be perceived as hardly acceptable. Sentences (7, 9) do not sound erroneous and we could effortlessly supply them with a logical context. The phrase *before they modified the suspension* could constitute an adverbial clause of time completing sentence (7). It is generally agreed that the most natural tense for middles to adopt is Present without any aspectual bias. The use of other tenses is partially restricted but it is the perfect and progressive aspect that are totally incompatible with the middle construction.

The oddity of sentences (11, 13, 13', 14) is caused by the syntactic status of the verbs functioning as predicates in them. *Give* and *show* are subcategorized as ditransitive and "ditransitive verbs cannot be made into middles" (Roberts 1985:359). Sentence (14) is quoted after Roberts (1985:368), who maintains that "middles cannot be formed from intransitives" although "there is nothing semantically anomalous about (14); it means "run-

<sup>3</sup> Verbs *drive* and *sell* are dynamic and there is no reason why they should not accept progressive forms, for instance.

*ning is easy*". Middles, if classified on purely syntactic grounds, are subcategorized as intransitives. Nevertheless, they are not formed from intrinsically intransitive verbs. They are constructed from inherently transitive verbs which have undergone transitive → intransitive conversion.

The difference between (15, 15') and (16, 16'), which induces the dubiousness of the latter, consists in the existence of restrictions imposed on the subject. The point is that only inanimate nouns can act as subjects-Patients of the middles. *Koszula* "shirt" in sentences (15, 15') is an inanimate noun and forms a structure that would be conceived as a middle construction. Sentences (16, 16'), although grammatical and acceptable, are never understood in the "middle" way and this will be ascribed to the status of the subject, which is indubitably animate.

## 2. An attempt at the semantic interpretation of *middles*

Linguists (Rizzi 1986, Fagan 1988, 1992, Keyser and Roeper 1984, Langacker 1991, Stalmaszczyk 1992, Kardela 1995, 1996) would commonly acknowledge the generic character of the middles. Langacker (1991), following Rizzi (1986) and Fagan (1988, 1992), puts forward a proposal that middles should be derived in the process of genericization, i.e. a generic quantification of an implied argument, which will be interpreted as "people in general" (Fagan 1988). Langacker (1991), being supported by Kemmer (1993), risks a thesis that middles are characterized by a "low degree of elaboration<sup>4</sup> of events", which further on might lead to an opinion that a participant can remain unprofiled or unspecified. Langacker (1991) understands it as the main reason why middle and reflexive marking is often used to cover various kinds of impersonal and passive constructions, whose basic feature is the unspecificity of the action-chain-head (Langacker 1991:371).

There are, definitely, numerous restrictions blocking the occurrence of certain verbs in the middle constructions. The constraints we have in mind here do not comprise the ones we discussed in the section devoted to syntactic properties of the middles. Roberts (1985) observes that psychological-activity verbs in English do not form middles as in (17) nor do the perception verbs as in (18).

(17) \*This mathematical principle acquires fast.

(18) \*The rainbow sees beautifully after rain.

This constraint applies to Polish as well (19, 20)

(19) \*Ten krótki wiersz uczy się szybko.

(19') \*'This short poem learns fast'

(20) \*Muzyka słyszy się dobrze w tej sali koncertowej.

(20') \*'Music hears well in this concert hall'

However, there exists a perfectly grammatical Polish sentence:

---

<sup>4</sup> The term „elaboration” is used within the framework of cognitive grammar to denote a more specific use of a given schema (i.e. the use characterized by a greater amount of detail). „Profiling” is used in the sense of highlighting an element (eg. an object or a relation) so that it receives a higher degree of prominence and salience (Langacker 1991, Langacker 1995).

- (19") Tego krótkiego wiersza uczy się szybko.  
 This short poem-Acc. learns refl. fast  
 'One learns fast this short poem'.

Despite the apparent similarity, the sentence is not, in our opinion, an instance of a middle construction, although some linguists would place an equation sign between (21, 22)

- (21) Książka drukuje się.  
 The book-Nom. prints itself-refl.  
 (22) Książkę drukuje się.  
 The book-Acc. prints itself.  
 'One prints the book.' (Szlifersztejnowa 1968)

The latter sentence, in our opinion, is an impersonal *się* construction.

It is believed that middles require adverbs modifying them. There are, however, certain exceptions to this rule and certain limitation imposed on the adverbs co-occurring with the middles. Roberts (1985) maintains that the presence of an adverb is not indispensable when the verb group contains a modal verb.

- (21) This book could sell.

It is also Roberts (1985), who specifies which adverbs are required in middles. Making use of Jackendoff's (1972) classifications of adverbs, Roberts (1985) makes it clear that Class IV Adverbs are the ones in question. The erroneous examples quoted after Roberts (1985:423) are:

- (i) \*Easily, bureaucrats bribe.  
 (ii) \*Chickens rapidly will kill.  
 (iii) \*The floor will nicely have painted.

show that Class IV Adverbs can neither appear in the initial position nor can precede an auxiliary and finally they cannot appear within a verb group.

Concluding, middles must be modified by adverbs (acknowledging constraints) or by a modal verb or by contrastive stress.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, middles do not allow purpose clauses modifying them, as in the example:

- (iv) \*Apples eat to get slim.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>5</sup> It could be accounted for in terms of focus-topic contrast. Horvath (1981) claims that it is the realization of a focus operator.

<sup>6</sup> In Roberts (1985) book the contrast with Romance languages is performed. Following Jaeggli it is emphasized that the property of the English middles concerning purpose clauses and „psychological activity” is not shared by the Romance languages and sentences such as:

- (i) Las manzanas se comen para adelgazar.  
 \* 'Apples eat to get slim' or  
 (ii) Les lenguas romances se adquieren facilmente.  
 \* 'Romance languages acquire easily' are acceptable. Polish seems to follow the English pattern.

Magnusson and Persson (1986) concentrate on a specific semantic group of verbs and consider them from the point of view of their adaptability as middle verbs. Verbs like *break* (unlike *drop*) are supposed to have two readings (they have two deep structures) when used intransitively. The difference lies in the presence or absence of the adverb.

(22) The cookies broke.

(23) The cookies broke crisply.

Sentence (23) is paraphrased in the following way "the breaking occurred in the cookies" (Magnusson and Persson 1986:171) and the interpretation of it is intransitive. Sentence (24), however, due to the presence of the adverb is interpreted transitively and the proposed paraphrase is "It was possible for anyone to break these cookies easily". The breaking was inflicted on the cookies by an external agent." (Magnusson and Persson 1986:171). There is a presupposition of an Agent which results from the presence of the adverbial. The subject of the sentence is a Patient and it has a certain property which facilitates the performing of the action in a specific way that is expressed by the adverbial at the end of the sentence.

Pondering over verbs which are primarily transitive but do occur in middle contexts, Magnusson and Persson (1986) observe that there is a substantial variety in this class of verbs, which could be shown through the patterns, which are additionally supplied with verbs that follow them.

- |                                |  |
|--------------------------------|--|
| “(i) I V-ed the X.             | stretch, cut, split, break, fold, heal, improve, wear, clean |
| (ii) The X V-ed.               | stretch, split, fold, heal, improve                          |
| (iii) These X-es V well/easily | stretch, cut, split, break, fold, heal wear, clean.”         |
- (Magnusson and Persson, 1986:172)

One can deduce from the list above that verbs such as *cut*, *wear*, *clean* do not form constructions of the second (ii) kind, which could be supported by the following examples:

(24) This fabric stretches.

(25) \*This fabric cuts.

(26) This fabric cuts easily.

(27) \*The skirt washed.

(28) \*The skirt ironed.

The explanation of the phenomenon that is demonstrated here is a semantic one. It is advocated that actions that require the Agent's use of a tool or some other instrument should presuppose this specific kind of physical impact so strongly that the minimal intransitive construction deprived of all associations with agentivity or instrumentality is made impossible. Since verbs such as *cut* require an instrument to perform the action (scissors) and verbs such as *stretch* do not, only the latter ones form the minimal intransitive construction.

### 3. Concluding remarks

Middles have aroused the interest of scholars working within models of grammar that have developed in the Anglo-Saxon tradition. For Polish linguists investigating the Polish

syntax, middles are not even a residual problem; they do not exist as such. The analysis that we have presented shows that there are many properties that the two languages share and it would be worthwhile to investigate the area of the Polish middles.

## References

- Benni T., Nitsch I., Rozwadowski K., Ułaszyn H. (1923). *Gramatyka języka polskiego*. Kraków: Polska Akademia Umiejętności.
- Fagan S. (1988). The English Middle. *Linguistic Inquiry* 19, 181-203.
- Gaertner H. (1933). *Gramatyka współczesnego języka polskiego*. Warszawa: Książnica – Atlas.
- Grzegorzczkowska R., Laskowski R., Wróbel H. (1984). *Gramatyka współczesnego języka polskiego. Morfologia*. Warszawa: PWN.
- Jackendoff R. (1972). *Semantic interpretation in generative grammar*. Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press.
- Kański Z. (1986). *Arbitrary reference and reflexivity. A generative study of the Polish pronoun się and its English equivalents*. Katowice: Uniwersytet Śląski.
- Kardela H. (1985). *A grammar of English and Polish reflexives*. Lublin: UMCS.
- Kardela H. (1996). The *Passive Scale* revisited: From passives to middle voice constructions. Evidence from English and Polish. In: H. Kardela, B. Szymanek (eds.), *A festschrift for Edmund Gussman* (pp. 135-153). Lublin: The University Press of the Catholic University of Lublin.
- Keyser S., Roeper T. (1984). On the middle and ergative constructions in English. *Linguistic Inquiry* 15, 381-416.
- Lyons J. (1971). *Introduction to theoretical linguistics*. Cambridge: CUP.
- Magnusson U., Persson G. (1986). *Facets, phrases and foci: Studies in lexical relations in English*. Umea: Acta Universitatis Umensis.
- Napoli D.J. (1976). *The two si's of Italian*. Bloomington: University of Indiana Linguistics Club.
- Quirk R., Greenbaum G., Leech G., Svartvik J. (1985). *A grammar of contemporary English*. Longman.
- Rizzi L. (1986). Null objects in Italian and the theory of *pro*. *Linguistic Inquiry* 17, 501-557.
- Roberts I.G. (1985). *The representation of implicit and dethematized subjects*. Unpublished Dissertation. University of Southern California.
- Szliferszteinowa S. (1968). *Bierne czasowniki zaimkowe (reflexiva) w języku polskim*. Wrocław: Ossolineum.
- Szober S. (1953). *Gramatyka języka polskiego*. Warszawa: Nasza Księgarnia.
- Szydłowski M. (1984). *Pracownia fizyczna*. Warszawa: PWN.
- Wołczyńska-Sudół A. (1976). Notional passive in English and in Polish. In: *PSICL* 5, 153-164.