

## Non-Generic Middles

### Claims

I will argue against approaches to the middle that take genericity to be an essential component of the middle semantics. Such proposals fail to account for the full range of grammatical middles, and they fail to account for the full range of interpretations associated with the middle. Instead, I argue that generic quantification may, but does not necessarily, occur in the middle. Advantages of this approach are: 1) a broader range of middles is accounted for; 2) the proposal extends to ambiguous (generic or nongeneric) active voice sentences; 3) the proposal extends to passive sentences with so-called “obligatory adjuncts.”

### Background

The prototypical English middle includes an adverbial expression (as in (1)), and many accounts of the middle seek to derive this “adverbial requirement.” But it is often noted that the “adverbial requirement” is not absolute (as in (2-5)). Most accounts of the English middle take it to involve genericity (Condoravdi, 1989; Zwart, 1997; Lekakou, 2005, among others). Condoravdi (1989) argues that in the middle generic quantification is over events, and that the “adverbial requirement” is derived in the following way: GEN produces a tripartite structure (operator, restrictive clause, nuclear scope). If the nuclear scope is contentless, the semantic representation will be ill-formed. Thus, a predicate must be provided for the event variable. The semantic representation for (1) would be as in (6). Condoravdi notes that a “negated middle” (as in (7)) is well-formed without an adverb. To explain this, she assumes that negation is capable of introducing material into the nuclear scope. Such a proposal addresses the semantics of many middles and derives the “adverbial requirement” for those middles, but it is too restrictive in that it cannot account for grammatical middles that have neither negation nor an adverb (like (2-5)), and in that it does not accommodate the complete range of middle interpretations.

### Proposal

Here a semantics is developed in which the middle may, but does not necessarily need to, include generic quantification. It is argued here that generic quantification entails existence. For example, the semantic representation in (6) is taken to entail the existence of at least one bread-cutting event. Adopting a semantics for the middle in which generic quantification does not necessarily occur predicts that middles without adverbs (2-5) are semantically well-formed. Although these are often taken not to be typical middles, they must nevertheless be accounted for. It is argued here that an appropriate context is needed to felicitously use these middles. For example, the middle in (2), possibly strange out of context, is not strange in a context in which someone is shopping for a bicycle and needs one that she can steer (perhaps the first few she tried were terribly rusted). A semantics like (8) is not possible for (2), as the nuclear scope is contentless, but a semantics like (9) is possible. There is nothing about the semantic representation in (9) that excludes a secondary predicate, and thus the middle in (10) (depending on the interpretation) could have a semantic representation as in (11) or (12). This is desirable, as the middle in (10) might be used to say something about bicycle riding events (11) or about a particular bicycle (12). The proposal developed here finds parallels in ambiguous active voice sentences such as (13). This sentence can be true in virtue of some (context-dependent) sufficient number of shoe sellings, and (14) is roughly associated with this interpretation. (13) can also be true in virtue of a property of Pearl, namely the shoe-selling property (if Pearl has a job in shoe sales). This property can hold even if she has never sold a single shoe. The representation in (15) is associated with this interpretation. The proposal developed here is relevant to other varieties of so-called “obligatory adjuncts” (Gross, 1979; Grimshaw & Vikner, 1993). Certain passivized predicates are argued by G&V to require a secondary predicate. For example, (16) gets a “\*” according to G&V, while (17) does not. These sentences are not in any obvious sense generics, and so appeal cannot be made to the requirement that the nuclear scope not be contentless. Extending the approach to non-generic middles pursued here, it is expected that (16) will be felicitous in a context in which the predicate *build* is adequately informative. One context is that in which some homes in a given region were built (by people) and others are naturally occurring (caves, hollow tree trunks).

## Examples

1. This bread cuts easily.
2. This bicycle steers.
3. Nobody thought that rap was going to sell. Darryl McDaniels (interviewed on NPR, 1997)
4. This dress buttons. Fagan, 1988
5. Newsprint binds. Fiengo, 1974
6. GEN [e: this bread(x), cut(e), patient(e,x)][easy (e)]
7. This rock does not cut. Condoravdi, 1989
8. \*GEN [e: this bicycle (x), steer(e), patient(e,x)][ (e)]
9. steer (this bicycle)
10. This bicycle steers easily.
11. GEN [e: this bicycle (x), steer(e), patient(e,x)][easy (e)]
12. steer easily (this bicycle)
13. Pearl sells shoes.
14. GEN [e: shoes (x), sell (e), patient(e,x)][Pearl (y), y e {z | agent (e,z)}]
15. sells shoes (Pearl)
16. The house on Victor Point Road was built.
17. The house on Victor Point Road was built in 1979/by my grandparents.

## References

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