

English Middles as Categorical Sentences*

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Kim, Sungwook. 2001. **English Middles as Categorical Sentences.** *Korean Journal of English Language and Linguistics* 1-4, 537-560. Stroik (1992, 1995, 1999) argues for the syntactic approach to English middles. His argumentation is heavily dependent upon the occurrence of a *for*-phrase in middles. However, many native speakers of English judge middles containing a *for*-phrase awkward or at best marginal. In addition, some other adverbials show a trait of a very similar nature. These two observational facts seem to justify the Genericity Constraint on Middles (= GCM). Yet a third observational fact that middles in the past tense can be sporadic nullifies GCM. In the present article, based upon several pieces of evidence, I show that the subject of the middle is a topic. In addition, it is argued that the Topical Subject Constraint on Middles can explain away the three observational facts.

1. Introduction

There have been two kinds of approach to English middles proposed: the syntactic approach and the lexical approach. As a proponent of the former, Stroik (1992, 1995, 1999) argues that above all else the occurrence of a *for*-phrase in English middles strongly supports the syntactic approach against the lexical one. Some of his examples are illustrated below:

- (1) a. No Latin text translates easily for Bill. (Stroik 1992:131)
b. Physics books always read slowly for Lou.
(Stroik 1999:120)

*I am grateful to two anonymous reviewers for insightful comments and suggestions. All remaining errors are my own.

- c. Bureaucrats bribe easily for Bill. (Stroik 1999:121)

According to Stroik, a *for*-phrase is the explicit manifestation of the middle verb's implied agent, which is syntactically demoted from the base structure. His claim is strikingly contrasted with that of Zribi-Hertz (1993:587-8), who asserts instead that "*for*-phrases do not bear an [a]gent θ -role assigned by the VP; they are 'point-of-view' adverbials, licensed by the evaluative content of the VP."

At this point, however, it should be noted that many native speakers of English find middles containing a *for*-phrase awkward or at best marginal. As a matter of fact, in replying to Ackema and Schoorlemmer (1995), Stroik (1999:122) himself concedes that the status of a *for*-phrase in English middles is not secure and speculates that some semantic or pragmatic constraint may work here. On the other hand, Rapoport (1999:148) argues that acceptability of *for*-phrases in middles can be simply related to, and explained by, whether the middle verb "does or does not contain an instrument (or means/manner) component." Rapoport's account cannot be correct, however, because it cannot explain why contrast in acceptability is observed in the following examples each pair of which are derived from an identical middle verb:

- (2) a. These books don't sell (*for the average shopkeeper).
 b. These kinds of books just don't sell for any shopkeeper.
- (3) a. (next to a line of poetry) Didn't/Doesn't translate into Polish (*for the average interpreter).
 b. (next to a line of poetry) Won't translate into Polish (for the average interpreter).
- (4) a. (on shoe chest) Stows on floor or shelf (*for tidy people).
 b. (on shoe chest) Stows on floor or shelf for anyone with half a brain. (all the data adapted from Stroik (1999))

In the present article I will show that the observational fact concerning *for*-phrases in middles is correlated with two other observational facts: (i) some other adverbials show quite the same restriction on their occurrence in middles; (ii) middles in the past tense show varied degrees of acceptability, depending upon their context. In addition, it will be argued that these apparently independent observational facts can be accounted for by the topical nature of the subject of the English middle.

2. Three Observational Facts

2.1. Deviance of a *for*-phrase

As Keyser and Roeper (1984) among others point out, canonical English middles show several characteristics including the following ones:¹ (i) the middle verb is usually expressed in the simple present tense; (ii) some adverbials denoting the doability of the event expressed by the middle verb must be appended to the postverbal position; (iii) an agent θ -role cannot be syntactically manifested and yet must be semantically implied.

Of the three characteristics the status of the agent θ -role is argued to be substantial in view of the following data:

- (5) a. Latin texts translate easily.
b. *Latin texts translate easily by anybody/people in general.
- (6) a. *The book reads well all by itself.
b. The ship sank all by itself.

As the example in (5b) shows, the addition of a *by* + NP phrase, the typical manifestation of the agent θ -role, makes a middle unacceptable, supporting the claim that middles cannot contain an explicit agent. Yet the complete exclusion of the agent θ -role from the middle cannot account for the difference between

¹For detailed discussion on general characteristics of middles, see Fagan (1992) and Iwata (1999).

middles and ergatives, as illustrated in the data in (6). That is, as the example in (6a) shows, the event denoted by the middle verb cannot occur without involvement of an implied agent.

Against this argument Stroik claims that the agent θ -role can be manifested by a *for*-phrase, as illustrated in the following examples, repeated here from (1) for ease of reference:

- (7) a. No Latin text translates easily for Bill. (Stroik 1992:131)
 b. Physics books always read slowly for Lou. (Stroik 1999:120)
 c. Bureaucrats bribe easily for Bill. (Stroik 1999:121)

Stroik's claim seems to be plausible, considering that the individual referred to by the NP contained in the *for*-phrase seems to perform the act designated by the middle verb. That is, the sentences in (7a) and (7b) imply, respectively, that Bill has tried to translate Latin texts and that Lou has tried to read physics books. Yet Stroik's argument is far from satisfactory in some respects.

First, we should ask Stroik why the implied agent cannot be expressed by a *by*-phrase, as noted by Fellbaum (1985:2), although it can be (marginally) by a *for*-phrase:

- (8) a. *The paint sprayed on evenly by the painter.
 b. *The car handles easily by any driver.

He might answer that *by*-phrases can cooccur only with an *-ed* participle. This is contrary to fact, however, as the following examples show:

- (9) a. I saw the destruction of the building by the aircraft.
 b. The road is runnable again (by the joggers). (Roeper and van Hout 2000:204)
 c. This is eatable by anyone. (ibid.:206)

Rather, the answer seems to lie in whether the theme subject is directly affected by the agent or not, leading us to infer that the theme subject of the middle is less affected by the (implied) agent than that of the passive. Note that the (implied) agent of the middle cannot control into the purpose clause unlike that of the passive, as illustrated below:²⁾

- (10) a. *The book reads easily for Bill in order to get some information.
 b. The book is read (by Bill) in order to get some information.

This casts doubt on Stroik's claim that *for*-phrases denote a true agent, resultantly weakening his thesis that a *for*-phrase is the explicit manifestation of the agent θ -role. Hence, hereafter let us take the implied agent as a 'pseudo-agent.'

Second, as was noted earlier, many native speakers of English consider middles containing a *for*-phrase awkward or at best marginal. Below are citations from the literature:

- (11) Stroik ... argues that the implicit argument of middles can be expressed in a *for*-phrase as in the following:

- (i) a. That book read quickly for Mary.
 b. No Latin text translates easily for Bill.

(Stroik 1992:131)

²Note also that the following data due to van Oosten (1977:460) show that the implied agent of the middle is not a true agent (see also Jespersen 1933, 1909-49; Lakoff 1977):

- (i) The clothes wash with no trouble because ...
 a. ... they're machine-washable.
 b. *... I have lots of time.
 (ii) It's no trouble to wash the clothes because ...
 a. ... they're machine-washable.
 b. ... I have a lots of time.

- (ii) a. This car should shift easily for me/one.
 b. Math books will never read easily for me/one.
 (Stroik 1995:167)

However, judgments are quite subtle. My informants reacted rather negatively to these sentences.

(Iwata 1999:545, fn. 16)

- (12) One anonymous reviewer in fact finds all middles with a *for*-phrase odd, and another reports judgments from several speakers who do not like them very much.
 (Ackema and Schoorlemmer 1995:180, fn. 8)

Considering the above comments, we can say that English middles with a *for*-phrase are unacceptable or at best marginal. Thus, Stroik's argument cannot be considered to be sound in that it is based upon a set of data with a dubitable status.

As a matter of fact, even Stroik himself concedes that a *for*-phrase is unacceptable with some middles, as noted by Akema and Schoorlemmer (1995:180):

- (13) a. These books don't sell (*for the average shopkeeper).
 b. (on shoe chest) Stows on floor or shelf (*for tidy people).

But he speculates that the unacceptability might be due to a semantic or pragmatic constraint rather than to some middle verbs' incapability of cooccurring with a *for*-phrase, noting that the addition of a modal element can improve the above sentences:

- (14) a. These books won't sell for the average shopkeeper.
 b. (on shoe chest) Should stow on floor or shelf for you.

According to him, the agent θ -role of the middle is explicitly expressed by a *for*-phrase, yet with some semantic or pragmatic restriction imposed on it, in view of the contrast in acceptability observed in data like those in (13)-(14). Regrettably, however, he could not explicate what the putative semantic or pragmatic restriction is.

Incidentally, Rapoport (1999:148) proposes that the (in)compatibility of English middles with a *for*-phrase depends on “whether the verb does or does not contain an instrument (or means/manner) component.” According to her, the middle verb *sell* in (13a) is incompatible with a *for*-phrase, because it does not contain an instrument component.

However, Rapoport’s analysis is also problematic in that it cannot differentiate the examples in (13) from those in (14): their relative acceptability is not determined by the type of middle verb, but by whether a modal element is included or not. Moreover, she cannot explain why the middle verb *read* can cooccur with a *for*-phrase for at least some native speakers like Stroik, even though it does not contain an instrument component.

To sum up the above discussion: (i) the addition of a *for*-phrase renders otherwise fully acceptable middles awkward or at best marginal; (ii) yet it does not induce the same degree of acceptability with all middles. Rather, middles with varied degrees of acceptability result with the addition of a *for*-phrase. In this connection what makes both analyses by Stroik and by Rapoport questionable is that they cannot provide a plausible explanation for why many native speakers judge middles containing a *for*-phrase less acceptable than those without one. Crucially, this observational fact does not seem to be an isolated one. A restriction of a similar nature seems to apply to some other adverbials in middles. Let us deal with this in the next subsection.

2.2. The Genericity Constraint

As Fellbaum (1985) observes, some adverbials other than *for*-phrases can also have influence on the acceptability of middles. Her observation is concerned with examples like the following:

- (15) a. The tent puts up in your/one's/anybody's backyard.
 b. *The tent puts up in my yard.

- (16) The tent puts up in John's backyard
 a. ... so it will put up in yours, too.
 b. *... and then he invited everyone over for beer.

(all the data adapted from Fellbaum (1985:22))

What is at issue here seems, as Fellbaum observes, to be whether middles imply a generic agent or a specific one. Specifically, the contrast in acceptability between the sentence in (15a) and that in (15b) cannot be attributed to whether the sentence in question *explicitly contains* a phrase denoting an agent. Instead, what is crucial seems to be whether the postverbal adverbial *implies* a generic agent or a specific one. This is evident from the fact that possessive pronouns in (15a) are interpreted generically while that in (15b) refers to the speaker. And the data in (16) show that even a possessive pronoun referring to a specific individual is allowed only if the reference of a generic agent can be inferred from it. The sentence in (16a) makes it clear that the tent can be put up anywhere, while in (16b) the feasibility of the tent being put up is attributed to a characteristic of John's backyard or John's technique.

In fact, it is widely accepted that middles sound most natural when they are interpreted generically. Thus, the middle verb is usually expressed in the simple present tense, since it is the most appropriate form for encoding generic statements. The sharp contrast in acceptability observed in the following data

bears out the generic nature of English middles:³⁾

- (17) a. The mayor bribes easily.
 b. ?*The mayor bribed easily yesterday, according to the newspaper.
- (18) a. The kitchen wall paints easily.
 b. ??At yesterday's house party, the kitchen wall painted easily.

Now based upon these data and observations as well as Fellbaum's, we may postulate the following constraint:

- (19) *The Genericity Constraint on Middles (= GCM for short)*⁴⁾
 The agent in middles, implied or explicitly manifested, and the tense of the verb must be generic.⁵⁾

³The data are originally due to Keyser and Roeper (1984). But their acceptability judgments about the (b) sentences are quite different from those reported in Iwata (1999). I adopted the latter, since they agree with my informants' judgments.

⁴The remarks below also seem to justify the necessity of GCM:

These [middle] sentences, sometimes called *generic sentences*, state propositions that are held to be generally true. They do not describe particular events in time.

(Keyser and Roeper (1984:384), italics original)

As generic statements, middles do not ascribe event, which are time-bound, but attribute properties to objects that hold regardless of time. (Fagan 1988:201-2)

⁵As a reviewer points out, the scope of generic reference as applied to the implied agent must be more specific in view of the fact that the following sentences due to the reviewer are generic statements although their subject NPs have less inclusive scope of reference than *shopkeepers* or *people in general*.

- (i) a. The average shopkeeper likes to read books.
 b. Tidy people are smarter than untidy ones.

GCM provides an immediate account for the contrast observed not only in the data in (17)-(18), but also in the data below, repeated here from (2) and (4):

- (20) a. These books don't sell (*for the average shopkeeper).
 b. These kinds of books just don't sell for any shopkeeper.
- (21) a. (on shoe chest) Stows on floor or shelf (*for tidy people).
 b. (on shoe chest) Stows on floor or shelf for anyone with
 half a brain.

The contrast in acceptability observed in the above data is correlated with the genericity of the reference set of each of the NPs contained in the *for*-phrases. While the NPs contained in the *for*-phrases in the (a) sentences refer to a specific group of people (i.e., the average or above-average shopkeepers or tidy people), those in the (b) sentences are likely to refer to shopkeepers in general or people in general.⁶ As a consequence

The concept of genericity in GCM is applied to VPs as well as NPs for the sake of a simpler statement of the constraint. Thus, in light of the preceding discussion, let us take the generic reference of the middle's implied agent to cover people in general or at least the whole group of people concerned with the act designated by the middle verb, e.g., readers in general, shopkeepers in general, etc.

⁶With reference to the sentences in (20b) and (21b) a reviewer comments that the NPs contained in the *for*-phrases cannot have generic reference, since *any* is an existential quantifier. (Note that generic reference is basically correlated with universal quantifiers.) However, the two *any*'s used in the examples are quite different from *any* in interrogative or conditional clauses. First, the *any* in (21b) is free choice *any*, which is argued to be a universal quantifier in Dayal (1998). Second, the *any* in (20b), combined with the negative particle *n't*, is also equivalent to the universal quantifier *all*. This is supported by the following examples from Jespersen (1933:182):

- (i) a. He did not like some of his wife's friends.
 (= He disliked some of them.)
 b. He did not like any of his wife's friends.
 (= He disliked all of them.) (paraphrases original)

the latter are judged to be more acceptable than the former.

Additionally, GCM arguably offers a possible account for why the addition of a *for*-phrase makes a middle sound awkward or at best marginal. In general, *for*-phrases are likely to denote a specific individual or a subset of the whole group of people concerned with the act expressed by the middle verb rather than people in general, violating GCM. For, generic NPs like *people in general* tend to be suppressed in S-structure, as evidenced by the following:

- (22) a. It is believed that Japan is a truly wealthy country.
 b. It is believed by {John/*people in general} that Japan is a truly wealthy country.

Nevertheless, GCM obviously cannot account for all the relative acceptability observed with middles containing a *for*-phrase. For instance, it cannot explain why the addition of a modal element improves the acceptability of middles like the following:⁷)

- (23) a. (next to a line of poetry) Didn't/Doesn't translate into Polish (*for the average interpreter).
 b. (next to a line of poetry) Won't translate into Polish (for the average interpreter).

Note that (23b) is more acceptable than (23a) with the addition of the modal *will* with the NP in the *for*-phrase intact. We are also faced with a conceptual problem: why is GCM required of

⁷Needless to say, GCM can cover the data in (23) if we can prove that a modal increases genericity. Interestingly, Brisard (2001:270) claims that some uses of *will* are generic, noting that they describe the subject's typical properties and express law-like regularities. The *won't* in (23b) could also be considered generic. Nevertheless, GCM is not invulnerable, because it cannot deal with the problem posed in 2.3.

the middle construction? Is it merely a stipulation or can it be derived from a more essential property of the middle? That GCM is not a necessary condition for generating middles is clear from the existence of middles containing the past tense, which is dealt with in the next subsection.

2.3. Episodic Middles⁸)

As noted repeatedly, middles sound most natural when the verb is in the simple present tense and the implied agent has generic reference, supporting the validity of GCM, but attested examples like the following due to Fellbaum (1986:4) cast doubt on the claim that genericity is an essential trait of the middle:

(24) The truck is handling smoothly.

(25) The tripod used to extend easily (now it jams).

These examples seem to meet the genericity constraint required of the implied agent but not that required of the verb, since the latter is not in the simple present tense, but is in the progressive aspect or is accompanied by *used to*. Possibly it could be argued that the progressive aspect or *used to* expresses 'limited genericity' and accordingly genericity is still considered to be essential to middle formation.

Yet, as Kim (1994) and Iwata (1999) argue, additional examples like the following render this argument implausible:

(26) The stakes you bought yesterday cut like butter.

(27) The paint we were persuaded to buy sprayed on evenly.

Unlike the progressive aspect or *used to* in (24)-(25), the past tense used in (26)-(27) can hardly be considered to denote any durative meaning (implicating 'limited genericity'). Rather, it

⁸The term 'episodic middles' is indebted to Dowty (1999).

expresses a single performance of the act designated by the verb, as noted by Fellbaum (1986:4). Additionally, the implied agent refers to a specific (group of) individual(s). Thus, these examples clearly show that neither the genericity of the verb nor that of the implied agent is required of middles, nullifying GCM.

What is more threatening to GCM is that it cannot differentiate the degrees of acceptability of examples like the following:

- (28) a. ?*Yesterday, the mayor bribed easily, according to the newspaper. (repeated from (17b))
 b. ??At yesterday's house party, the kitchen wall painted easily. (repeated from (18b))
 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.
- (29) The curry digested surprisingly easily last night.

The acceptability judgments above are made by Iwata's (1999:530) informants.⁹ Provided that these judgments are reliable, how can we account for them? To the best of my knowledge, this problem has not been tackled. In the next section I will provide a proposal based upon Lambrecht's (1994) information structure theory.

3. The Topical Subject Constraint on Middles

Lambrecht (1994:120-1) argues that even a structurally unambiguous sentence can be interpreted at least in three ways in accordance with its (discourse) context.¹⁰ His argumentation is

⁹Keyser and Roeper (1984) give question marks to the sentences in (28). The sentence in (29) is from Rosta (1995:137).

based upon examples like the following:

- (30) The children went to school.
 (31) a. (What did the children do next?)
 b. (Who went to school?)
 c. (What happened?)

The sentence in (30) can be used as an answer to any of the three questions in (31). As an answer to (31a), it is analyzed as having a topic + comment structure. Namely, *the children* is a topic and the rest a comment. Sentences interpreted like this are said to be categorical. As a response to (31b), the sentence receives a focus subject interpretation. Lastly, if used as a rejoinder to (31c), the sentence as a whole is interpreted as new information. Sentences interpreted in the last two ways are called *thetic statements*. To recapitulate, a single-structured sentence is usually at least three ways ambiguous, and disambiguated by its discourse context.

Incidentally, certain sentences are almost always interpreted in a specific way due to their semantic characteristics. Observe the following sentences:

- (32) a. John arrived.
 b. John's father died.
 c. Tigers are extinct in Korea.

(32a, b) are normally used to deliver the whole sentences as new information. Consequently, they are usually interpreted as event-reporting sentences. On the other hand, generic sentences like

¹⁰Lambrecht's theory is not completely original; it is rooted in functional grammar established by the Prague school. Also quite the same idea couched in slightly different terms can be found in Kuno (1972). See Newmeyer (2001) for an appraisal of the development of functional grammar in Europe and North America.

the one in (32c) state general characteristics of a specific entity, and they are almost always interpreted as categorical sentences. In other words, the subject is interpreted as a topic and the predicate as a comment.

Now what about middles? I claim that middles are always interpreted as categorical statements and accordingly their subject must be taken as a topic. Thus, we need a constraint on middle formation like the following:

(33) *The Topical Subject Constraint on Middles (= TSCM)*

The subject of a middle must be able to be interpreted as a topic.

TSCM says that middles should receive only an interpretation as categorical sentences. Now if we assume, following Givón (1984), that topicality is a matter of gradient, we predict that a middle's acceptability is proportionate to the topicality of its subject. In the ensuing discussion, I will show that this prediction is borne out.

Beforehand, however, the claim should be justified that the subject of the middle is a topic. Indeed, there are several pieces of evidence supporting the claim. First of all, middles cannot be changed into cleft sentences, as evidenced by the following:

- (34) a. This book reads well.
b. *It is this book that reads well.

This book is a topic, i.e., old information and accordingly it cannot be focused, accounting for the unacceptability of the cleft sentence in (34b).

A second piece of evidence is concerned with the specificity of an NP. In general, an indefinite NP can be understood specifically or nonspecifically, depending upon its context. For

instance, if it follows expressions like *look*, it is taken to be nonspecific. Now observe the following sentence:¹¹)

(35) Look! *A car drives well.

How can we explain the unacceptability of the sentence in (35)? It is well known that only NPs with a specific reference can be the topic of a sentence. Now if the subject of the middle must be a topic, as we claim here, the sentence in (35) violates TSCM, accounting for its unacceptability.

An additional piece of evidence supporting the claim that the subject of the middle is a topic comes from the generally accepted observation that postverbal adverbials in middles are comments describing the subject's characteristics. (Cf. Jespersen 1933; Fellbaum 1985) Thus, from the information structural point of view the subject has no choice but to play the role of a topic.

In a discussion of the *there*-construction, Rando and Napoli (1978) claim that the definiteness effect is due to the semantico-pragmatic constraint that the postverbal NP cannot be a topic, the role of which, as noted above, only NPs with a specific interpretation can assume. Now if the subject of the middle is really a topic, it is predicted that it cannot occur as the postverbal NP of the *there*-construction. This is indeed the case, as the following data show:

- (36) a. Chickens kill easily.
 b. *There are chickens killing easily.

¹¹Seven of nine native speakers that I asked their judgment about this sentence responded that it is fully unacceptable, and the rest gave a question mark to it. One of the latter changed the indefinite article to the demonstrative *this*, supporting that the problem is the specificity of the subject. My informants judged the sentence unacceptable when it is suggested as a discourse-initial sentence.

Our analysis by means of TSCM is also indirectly supported by Davison (1984). She convincingly argues that the more marked a syntactic construction is, the more topical its subject is. She invokes markedness “to refer to the more complex or less usual member of a paradigmatic opposition ... [and] to distinguish one element in the range of the equivalent or substitutable expressions defined by the rules of syntax, ...” (p. 807) She takes as an example the contrast between the passive and active and argues that the former is more marked than the latter. She remarks: “the passive surface structure does not directly convey the grammatical role relevant for correct semantic interpretation ... We would expect passive sentences to be more difficult to process ... and so to be more marked than corresponding active structure.” (p. 810)

We have at least two arguments for claiming that the middle is more marked than the passive. First, verbs allowing middle formation are all passivizable, but not vice versa. Thus, the lower productivity of the middle compared with the passive makes it more marked than the latter. Second, processing is more difficult with the middle than with the passive, which is in turn more difficult than its active counterpart. This is evident from the fact that middles involve the movement of an NP with a theme θ -role at the lexical level, but there is no verb morphology to indicate this, unlike the passive. The lack of verb morphology plus the noncanonical placement of a theme θ -role causes processing difficulty. Now if we assume Davison’s claim to be basically valid, we may safely assert that the subject of the middle is very likely to be a topic.¹²⁾

¹²A reviewer contends that the subject of the passive is not always a topic and my argumentation dependent on the passive construction is shaky. The reviewer’s comment may be true of true passives, but in the case of pseudo-passives, which are more marked than true passives, there is evidence showing that their subjects are topical. Observe the following data:

Up to now we have shown that the subject of the middle is a topic, justifying the necessity of the Topical Subject Constraint on Middles. Now let us examine how TSCM can solve the problems posed in earlier sections. First of all, it explains why middles are judged most natural when they receive a generic interpretation. As noted earlier with respect to the sentence in (32c), the subject of generic sentences is always interpreted as a topic. As a consequence, middles interpreted generically (due to their generic present tense and generic implied agent) always sound most natural, satisfying TSCM. The following examples are generic middles:

- (37) a. This paper reads like a science fiction.¹³
 b. The car handles smoothly.

Now, what about *for*-phrases and adverbials implicating a

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- (i) a. *The bridge was walked under by the dog.
 b. The bridge has been walked under by generations of lovers.
 (Bolinger 1977:9)
- (ii) a. *John was traveled with by Mary.
 b. Children under ten years old must be traveled with by their parents. (Takami 1992:114)

Unlike the (a) sentences where the semantic content of the predicate part is too awkward or insignificant to make the subject as a topic, the content of the predicate part of the (b) sentences is significant enough to characterize the subject, making the latter a topic. Now considering that the middle is more marked than the pseudo-passive, (since prepositional verbs never allow middle formation, as shown by Fagan (1988)) my argumentation based on Davison's markedness theory is not far-fetched.

¹³Professor Wilkinson (personal communication) informed me that middles like (37a), where the subject is modified by a demonstrative, is usually understood to implicate a contrast: 'This paper reads like ... but others read like' As Lambrecht (1994) convincingly argues, subject NPs interpreted contrastively are the typical examples of a topic. Thus, semantic interpretation of examples like (37a) supports our claim that the subject of the middle is a topic.

specific agent rather than a generic one, as in the following examples, repeated here with slight modification?

- (38) a. *These books don't sell for the average shopkeeper.
 b. *The tent puts up in my yard.

The middle's implied agent is always human, as shown in these examples and as implicated in Fellbaum's claim that the implied agent is canonically people in general. If a specific individual is explicitly mentioned as the agent in a *for*-phrase (as in (38a)) or strongly implied in some other adverbials (as in (38b)), it weakens the topical status of the subject, itself taking on a considerable degree of topicality. For, as widely accepted, humanness as well as agentivity tends to enhance the topicality of an NP.

However, as noted earlier, if *for*-phrases and adverbials refer to or implicate a generic agent as in the following examples,

- (39) a. These kinds of books just don't sell for any shopkeeper.
 b. The tent puts up in John's backyard. So it will put up in yours, too.

they tend to retrieve the topical status of the subject, improving the acceptability of the sentences. This is because generic NPs are unlikely to be a topic in view of the fact that they are usually not mentioned.

Now, why does the addition of a modal improve acceptability? As an illustration, compare the following set of sentences:

- (40) a. These books don't sell.
 b. *These books don't sell for the average shopkeeper.
 c. These books won't sell for the average shopkeeper.

Note that the modal *will* here is not interpreted as a future-tense marker, but as denoting the subject's inherent characteristic, as also exemplified by the following:

- (41) a. Oil will float on water.
 b. Boys will be boys.

In other words, *will* contributes to increasing the topicality of the subject by emphasizing the subject's characteristic. The same explanation applies to the following pair of sentences, repeated from (23):¹⁴

- (42) a. (next to a line of poetry) Didn't/Doesn't translate into Polish (*for the average interpreter).
 b. (next to a line of poetry) Won't translate into Polish (for the average interpreter).

Lastly, we are faced with this problem: how can some sporadic middles in the past tense be judged acceptable, apparently violating GCM? Consider the middles exemplified below (repeated from (28)):

- (43) a. ?*Yesterday, the mayor bribed easily, according to the newspaper.

¹⁴Then, what about middles containing the modal *should*, as exemplified below (adapted from (13)-(14)):

- (i) a. (on shoe chest) *Stows on floor or shelf for tidy people.
 b. (on shoe chest) Should stow on floor or shelf for you.

The contribution of the modal *should* to the improvement of acceptability in (ib) is not clear, since *for you* designates a generic agent. What seems to be certain is that the modal *should* here must be interpreted epistemically, not deontically. Incidentally, epistemic modality may concern the subject's characteristics while deontic modality concerns the speaker. Thus, only epistemic modality possibly enhances the topicality of the middle's subject, partly accounting for the acceptability of (ib).

- b. ??At yesterday's house party, the kitchen wall painted easily.
- 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.

As far as I know, no attempt has been made to account for the contrast in acceptability observed in examples like these. Under our analysis what is at issue is not the genericity of the middle, but the topical status of the subject. Now, let us examine each sentence in (43). In (43a) the subject can hardly be considered a topic, since the phrase *according to the newspaper* makes clear that the whole sentence describes new information. Thus the middle violates TSCM and hence its unacceptability. In a like manner, in the case of (43b), the topic of the sentence is likely to be *yesterday's house party*, not the subject *the kitchen wall*.

In striking contrast to these, *the chicken* is clearly a topic in (43c): not only has a chicken mentioned in the preceding sentence,¹⁵ but *the chicken* is modified by a relative clause, which enhances topicality of the NP containing it.¹⁶ Likewise, the context of (43d) leads us to interpret *my kitchen floor*, the subject in the main clause, as a topic: the *if*-clause describes weather as an element influencing on the floor's waxibility, enhancing the

¹⁵An earlier mention of an NP is sufficient to make it a topic, with the result that such an NP can be the subject of a sporadic middle, as illustrated in the following examples due to Dowty (1999):

- (i) I put my house up for sale last May, but it didn't sell until March.
- (ii) I put the beat-up old contrabassoon in the yard sale without much hope, but to my surprise, it sold.

¹⁶Note at this point that the subject is also modified by a relative clause in the case of the sentences in (26)-(27).

topicality of *my kitchen floor*.¹⁷⁾

4. Conclusion

Of several idiosyncratic properties of middles, we have discussed these three observational facts: (i) middles sound most natural when they are interpreted generically; (ii) middles become awkward or at best marginal if a *for*-phrase or some other adverbial is added to express/implicate a specific implied agent; (iii) sporadic middles in the past tense show varied degrees of acceptability. We have postulated the Genericity Constraint on Middles and tried to explain the problematic data. But the attempt failed because it cannot explain the observational fact in (iii). Instead we have argued that middles are categorical sentences and proposed the Topical Subject Constraint on Middle Formation, justifying the topical status of the middle's subject on various grounds. Also we have shown that our TSCM can explain all the three observational facts without difficulty.

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¹⁷Similar account applies to the sentence in (29). That is, the adverbial phrase *last night* hints that the curry in question has been the topic of the interlocutors.

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