

Middle voice as generalized argument suppression: the case from Indonesian

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The term “middle voice” has been applied to a wide range of mostly intransitive verbal predicates that in some languages share a unique verbal marker known as a “middle marker”. These include most canonically inherently reflexive predicates such as grooming, inherently reciprocal verbs, and body posture verbs (Kemmer 1993), but also in some languages (non-)translational motion verbs (Talmy 2000), anticausatives (Chierchia 2004), and so-called facilitative middles or “middle constructions” (*This car sells easily*; Keyser and Roeper 1984, Ackema and Schoorlemmer 1994), among numerous others. Kemmer (1993) offers perhaps the most expansive unified semantic analysis of middle voice as indicating “low elaboration of events”, whereby the middle voice reflects that some aspect of the event described is not fully elaborated in some way, most canonically low distinguishability of the agent and patient, setting the core of middles as reflexive. However, not all instances of middle voice are easily amenable to an analysis based on reflexivization more narrowly or low elaboration of events more broadly, especially middle constructions. Furthermore, middle markers often have other functions beyond just middles (e.g. true reflexives, voice). Thus it is also common to assume middle voice is at best a notional category or a family of constructions (Condoravdi 1989, Reinhart 2002, Alexiadou and Doron 2012, Fábregas and Putnam 2014).

I present joint work with I Nyoman Udayana on the Indonesian middle marker *ber-* (Kemmer 1993, Kardana 2011), which shows a number of unique properties that suggest a unified analysis of middles is possible and attested, at least in one language. *Ber-* forms realize most of the middle types identified above such as grooming verbs (e.g. *ber-dandan* ‘MV-dress’ “dress (oneself)”), inherently reciprocal verbs (e.g. *ber-tengkar* ‘MV-fight’ “fight with each other”), and middle constructions (e.g. *ber-jual* ‘MV-sell’ “(s.t.) sells”), as well as additional less attested types including agent-subject change-of-state predicates where the patient is realized as an incorporated NP rather than an object DP (e.g. *ber-masak=sayur* ‘MV-cook=vegetables’ “cook vegetables”) and denominal verbal predicates with inherently relational nouns indicating possession of the base noun by the subject (e.g. *ber-topi* ‘MV-hat’ “have a hat on”). The latter two in particular clearly are not reflexive nor involve low elaboration of events. Yet simple *ber-* has few if any other functions beyond middle marking, suggesting it is not notionally reflecting a middle.

We suggest there is a single function of *ber-* that reflects the core basis of middles: *ber-* decreases the syntactic valency of the base predicate but leaves it as part of the predicate’s lexical semantic content (building on the analysis of anticausatives in Colloquial Sinhala of Beavers and Zubair 2013, 2016; see also Chierchia 2004, Kaufmann 2007). This turns a transitive verb into an intransitive verb and a relational noun into a sortal noun, each taking only a surface subject DP and thus by default leaving one underlying argument without a direct dependent to realize it. The various attested *ber-* forms arise from the interaction of this operation with two cross-cutting factors: (a) the choice of the argument to be removed (subject or object), which we suggest is conditioned by syntactic factors, and (b) the various possible ways for interpreting the implicit participant. These strategies include existential or generic binding (cp. external argument elimination; Jaeggli 1986), coidentification of the unrealized argument with the argument expressed as the subject (reflexivization; Chierchia 2004), interpretation by reciprocal quantification in relation to the subject (Dalrymple et al. 1998), incorporation of a non-Case marked NP dependent realizing the argument (e.g. Baker’s 1988 head-movement or Wescoat’s 2002 lexical sharing), or realization as the base nominal root of the verbal predicate (cp. conflation; Hale and Keyser 2002).

Thus middle voice in Indonesian indicates neither low elaboration of events nor a notional category, but rather a unified category of generalized syntactic argument suppression. This analysis furthermore provides a way to link middle voice to middle constructions and other non-canonical middle voices within a single analysis, something difficult to do under a low elaboration of events or reflexivization analysis. Finally, this analysis is extensible to other languages as well, albeit with cross-linguistic variation in which strategies a given language will have for expressing the otherwise unrealized argument, though it is also expected that some languages may show a more notional or family of constructions middle voice if the generalized argument suppression operation of the language is limited enough to not express all types of middles (as argued for Sinhala by Beavers and Zubair 2016).

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