

COGNITIVE INTERPRETATION OF ENGLISH MIDDLES IN THE USAGE-BASED APPROACH

Hu Mengying

School of Foreign Languages, Shaoyang University, Shaoyang, China

<https://doi.org/10.59009/ijlllc.2025.0153>

Received Date:14 April 2025/Published Date:27 October 2025

ABSTRACT

The previous studies have left explanations of middle constructions perplexing. The problems stem from the unclear definition or characterization of middles both in form and meaning. To serve as a remedy, a reconstructing of the English middles under the usage-based approach is proposed in this paper. The typical English middle construction is defined as “NP + Verb + Adverb (well, easily, etc.)”. Semantically, the subject can’t execute the action designated by the verb, yet it is construed to have a quality that exerts a positive influence on the potential event. This research casts doubts on distinguishing English middles by means of generic and non-generic events, much less the indefinite and definite subjects. In addition, the English middle differs from Chinese patient subject construction in that the former functions as a comment with the present tense whereas the latter describes an event with the past tense. Though the English middle construction is established as a unique pattern, it should be carefully handled pertaining to productivity.

Keywords: English middles, conceptual description, subjective construal, corpora.

1. INTRODUCTION

The analysis of English sentences has undergone from the syntactic and lexicalist approach to the cognitive-pragmatic approach. In the generative grammar framework, Perlmutter (1978) distinguished ergative verbs from the unergatives. In (1a), “smile” is an unergative verb with its external argument being the agent while “break” is ergative with its internal argument being the object in (1b). In English middles, some researchers (Keyser & Roeper, 1984) suggested that the object of the middle verb was moved to the subject of the sentence. As a result, the middle sentence resembles the ergative in the moving of the argument. However, this generative approach fails to provide the cognitive motivation for moving the internal argument to the grammatical subject. In cognitive grammar, Langacker (2008) proposed that the ergative sentence described an autonomous event with an absolute construal. Since the glass broke without any external force, the ergative and middle sentences are dissimilar because the grammatical subject of the middle sentence cannot execute the action by itself. In this paper, the middle construction will be analyzed by considering the cognitive and pragmatic factors. And most importantly, the middle construction should be carefully dealt with based on the usage-based approach.

- (1) a. He smiled. (unergative)
- b. The glass broke. (ergative)
- c. The book reads easily. (middle)

2. IDENTIFYING THE ENGLISH MIDDLE CONSTRUCTION

From the usage-based perspective, the specific sentences are instantiations of constructions which are abstracted from the specific examples. The usage-based approach has an advantage in that the prototypical construction can be extracted by considering the instantiations or examples in the actual data or corpora. There are four sources of English middle sentences: the dictionary, the grammar books, the related literature on English middles and the English corpora online. Since the English grammar books are supposed to explain linguistic phenomena well, their examples of English middle sentences are considered first.

- (2) a. The clothes wash easily.
b. Your book reads well.
c. The clock winds up at the back.
b. The table polishes up badly. (Quirk et al., 1972: 1016)
- (3) a. Her book translates well.
b. The sentence reads clearly.
c. The sheets washed easily.
d. My teapot pours without spilling.
e. My shirts have dried very quickly. (Quirk et al., 1985: 744)

In the grammar books by Quirk et al. (1972) and Quirk et al. (1985), the first two sentences (2a-b) and the first three sentences (3a-c) have the similar construction “NP + Verb + Adverb” except that the third sentence (3c) uses the past tense which is analyzed later. The other sentences (2c-d) and (3d) that use either the particles or the prepositional phrases are not involved in the study. In a strict sense, the last sentence (3e) should not be considered as a proper middle sentence. First, the fact that ‘dry’ can be used as intransitive and it is different from the transitive verbs like “read” and “wash” for the book can never read by itself and that the clothes or sheets can only be washed. Thus, the event that the shirts dried can be seen as a self-contained event without any apparent external forces. Second, the present participle strongly indicates that the event have taken place and it describes a real non-repetitive event which is in opposition to the meaning of the middle sentence. The middle sentence doesn’t describe a specific real event that have taken place. The sentence “The clothes wash easily” shows the good quality of the clothes which facilitates being washed easily. The washing event may not have occurred, yet it implies the event that the clothes can be washed easily can repeat and it entails in no way that the clothes can be washed easily for only once. Thus ‘My shirts have dried very quickly’ differs from a true middle sentence.

2.1 The prototypical middle and negative pattern

In another grammar book by Zhang (2021: 174), there are more examples of English middles, yet they can be divided roughly into two categories: the “NP + Verb + Adverb” pattern and the negative sentences which are listed below.

- (4) a. Browning’s plays won’t act.
b. This belt won’t buckle.
c. Damp wood will not fire.
d. The door won’t lock.
e. The window won’t shut.
f. This material won’t wear.

g. The drawer won't open.

Among the 36 examples in the grammar book, 7 are negative sentences and the modal verb “will” is typically used in the negation. This construction “NP + Verb (Negation)” might be grouped into another pattern different from the English middle construction. For one thing, a construction should have a relatively fixed form and a unique meaning. In form, the negative sentences differ from the prototypical middle sentence. The negative sentences allow the absence of adverbs, but the middle ones are unacceptable without adverbs. In meaning, the former conveys a negative meaning while the middle sentences on most occasions express affirmative and positive meanings. In effect, the negative sentences do involve a strong subjective tone. The sentence “The door won't lock” implies that even if all the means have been tried, the door can't be locked. Thus, the negative sentence describes a situation that won't happen despite all the possible external forces. The middle sentence, on the other hand, profiles the good property of the items and the external role of the agent is not considered properly in the situation. From the usage-based perspective, the negative patterns account for a small number of the examples and they are not treated as the middles in the grammar books by Quirk et al. (1972) and Quirk et al. (1985). Through careful examination of the examples, the “NP + Verb + Adverb” pattern is recognized as the prototypical middle construction in English.

2.2 The ‘unreal’ English middle sentences

Still, there are a vast array of examples in the English dictionary, papers and literature which are inconsistent with the typical middles. In order not to make things more complicated, only the examples with the present tense are discussed in this section.

In form, the sensory structures, the ergative and unergative constructions are intransitive patterns and they are easily confused with the English middle sentences.

- (5) a. The soup tastes delicious.
b. The cloth feels soft.
- (6) a. Young children learn quickly.
b. I panic easily.
- (7) a. Accidents happen easily.
b. Limestone crushes easily. (Liu, 2019: 125)

The sentences in (5a-b) involve the sensory verbs such as “sound, smell, feel” etc, which are followed by adjectives that designate the property of the subjects. In (5a), ‘delicious’ following the sensory verb designates the good taste of the soup. In (5b), ‘soft’ refers to the quality of the cloth. The sensory structure is obviously different from the English middle construction. In the English middle sentence, the word following the verb is adverb, not adjective. In contrast, the word following the verb is adjective, not adverb. It is grammatical in the sensory sentence if the sensory verb is replaced by ‘be’ verb. In addition, the sensory verb cannot be used in the passive voice, but the middle sentence can be transformed into a passive sentence. Thus, it is ungrammatical to put ‘The soup is tasted delicious’ yet grammatical to put ‘The clothes was washed well’ which designates a specific event.

The examples in (6) and (7) also look similar to the middle construction, but they are not. In (6), the subjects serve as the agent roles and they do have the ability to execute the action designated by the predicate verb. In (6a), the object of the verb ‘learn’ is implied in the

sentence, be it a song or whatever. In (6b), the verb ‘panic’ describes a mental activity that the subject feels scared. Here, both activities in (6) are executed by the subjects. In (7a-b), the sentences convey an absolute construal without external forces. In (7b), just like (1b) ‘The glass broke’, limestone crushed by itself. It is also grammatical to omit the adverbs in (6b) and (7b), in which cases the sentences “I panicked” and “Limestone crushed” described past events that occurred. In (8a), without the adverb ‘easily’, the sentence describes a generic statement that accidents happen from time to time. However, it is ungrammatical to omit the adverbs in the middle sentences as shown in (8b).

- (8) a. Accident happens. b. *The clothes washes.

Judging from the specific examples, the middle sentences differ from other sentences in the following aspects. First, the subject in the construction generally has no ability to execute the activity. While it is quite understandable that the patient or the location has no ability to execute the action, yet it is a little complicated when the instrument serves as the subject. For instance, in (9b), though the pen is an instrument, the pen cannot write by itself. But in (9c), it might be true that the car is an unmanned automobile and that it is so smart that it can control the vehicle by itself. In this case, this meaning of the sentence doesn’t comply with that of the middle construction. However, in (9d), the sentence can only mean that the car is easy to drive. Thus ‘The car drives easily’ is a proper middle expression.

- (9) a. The wall paints well.
 b. The pen writes smoothly.
 c. The car drives well.
 d. The car drives easily.

- (10). a. *The pen uses smoothly. b. The machine operates well.

Second, the verb in the English middles generally designates a specific activity and the vague activity such as “using” fails to work in the middle construction. ‘The pen uses well’ is unacceptable. In (10b), the verb ‘operate’ is more dynamic and designates the activity in a more visualized manner. Third, the adverb in the English middles more often than not entails positive evaluation of the activity. In the corpora, the adverb ‘well’ that indicates positive comment appears frequently following the verb. These are the basic requirements for typical middles. Yet there are more semantic constraints in producing proper middle expressions. And to clarify the essence of the middle construction, it is worthwhile to dig into the conceptual motivation behind the linguistic expressions.

3. THE CONCEPTUAL DESCRIPTION OF ENGLISH MIDDLES

So far, the negative sentence ‘The door won’t open’, the sensory pattern ‘The soup tastes delicious’, the ergative structure ‘The window breaks easily’, and the unergative example ‘I panic easily’ have been excluded from the proper middle construction. Semantically, the subject in the middle construction can’t execute the action by itself, yet it contributes to the realization of the possible event in a positive manner. That is, the property of the subject plays a positive role in influencing the action denoted by the verb.

For instance, In (11), her books possess a quality that is good for the selling event. In other words, the middle sentence profiles the good quality of the subject rather than the specific event.

- (11) Her books sell well.
(12) a. Her books sold out.
b. Her books were sold.

In this interpretation, the middle sentence describes a generic statement about the quality of her books which contributes to the possible selling event and the whole sentence with the present tense is more likely to convey a static event rather than the dynamic selling events in (12a-b). This conceptual description applies to other English middle examples. In (13), the interpretation of the sentence is that the pen has a certain good quality that contributes to the action of writing. In (14), the sentence conveys that the wall has a property that contributes to the painting activity. It is probable that the wall is smooth so that it paints smoothly.

- (13) The pen writes well.
(14) The wall paints well.

The conceptual interpretation concurs with Fagan (1988, 1992) in that the English middle sentence describes a non-event, a potential event or a possible event that may not be realized. The fundamental reason behind the linguistic phenomenon lies in the present tense which describes a state in (15a), or a generic statement in (15b).

- (15) a. He is a teacher.
b. He gets up early.

In this light, the sentence in (11) does have two interpretations. When the present tense implies a state or the quality of the book, the sentence can be paraphrased as 'Her books are quite popular or Her books are best-sellers'. When the present tense indicates a generic statement, it means a comment on the repetitive events that 'Her books have sold well'. In the former interpretation, the middle sentence describes a potential event. In the latter case, the middle sentence serves as a comment or a positive statement on regular incidents. Yet in either case, the dynamicity of the event is mitigated and that's why the present tense is preferred in the middle sentence.

3.1 Non-eventivity and activity

Iwata (1999) maintains that the middle sentences in the past tense and the progressive aspect designate specific events as opposed to the middle sentences with the present tense designating non-specific events or generic events. However, this argument seems to miss the points. The middle sentences with different tenses and aspects share the common property of non-eventivity. The only difference is that the past tense just implies a change of state and that the progressive aspect highlights the activity. To better illustrate the middle sentences in different tenses and aspects, the simple sentences in different tenses and aspects are dealt with first.

- (16) a. He works as a teacher.
b. He is working as a teacher.

To begin with, the two sentences in (16a-b) show non-eventivity because he is not really working at a specific time or a specific location in both of the situations. Instead, both sentences only show that his job is a teacher, which states a fact, not a dynamic or forceful event. Still, in

(16b), the progressive aspect of the verb stresses the activity of the action denoted by the verb. ‘V-ing’ may sometimes indicate the action is happening or recurring, or infer a strengthening of activity degree. For instance, in (17b), the sentence may show repetitive events that he is always getting up early. But the sentence doesn’t mean that he is getting up right now. In this circumstance, the sentence serves as a comment on the fact that he always gets up early. And in (18a-b), the sentences are also strengthening the dynamicity of the action, yet the whole sentences do not show forceful events. In (18a), it means that he is moving nearer and nearer and may catch up with me soon. There is no flow of energy transfer just like ‘He hit me’. Generally, the mental verbs such as “hate” is not be used in the progressive aspect. Yet (18b) may describe a situation that he harbors resentful feelings and that the degree of hate is increasing. If there is no strengthening of the activity degree, the sentence should be ‘He hates us’ and it is quite odd to add the progressive aspect since ‘hate’ typically designates a mental feeling or activity.

- (17) a. He was a teacher.
b. He is getting up early.

- (18) a. He is gaining on me.
b. He is hating us.

In the sentences with the past tense like ‘He was a teacher’ and ‘He worked as a teacher’, there are also no description of dynamic force. The sentences only indicate his job was a teacher in the past. Yet the past tense implies a change of state in that he used to be a teacher, but now he is not a teacher. On the whole, ‘be’ and ‘as a teacher’ demonstrate existence or a state. They are not so dynamic as the activity verbs such as ‘broke’.

- (19) a. The car handles well.
b. The car is handling well.
c. The car handled well.

The intended argument here is that the middle sentences in (19a-c) are all generic statements or comments just like the simple sentences ‘He works as a teacher’, ‘He is working as a teacher’ and ‘He worked as a teacher’. Hence, they describe situations more like states rather than dynamic and forceful events. The only difference lies in that the progressive aspect highlights activity whereas the past tense implies a change of state. This point contradicts Iwata’s claiming of generic and specific events to capture different middle sentences. It is not the case that the middle sentences in (19a-c) describe forceful events at all. Non-eventivity is a common feature of the middle sentences. Simply put, the examples in (19a-c) all share the good property of the car in common. The conception of genericity will be further elaborated in 3.2. and 3.3.

3.2 The grounding of nouns

According to Iwata (1999), the middle sentence in the present tense describes a generic event which is also compatible with the indefinite subjects. However, this is untenable and what matters here is the grounding of nouns. First, in (20a), ‘the car’ is definite and if ‘the’ is omitted, the middle sentence is rendered ungrammatical.

- (20) a. The car handles well. b. *Car handles well.

Taylor (2002: 344) states that grounding refers to a process whereby the designated instance is 'located' from the speech event. In the case of the noun in (20a), the speaker should have a specific car in his mind. If the 'car' is not grounded, the sentence is unacceptable. Langacker (2008: 272) also explains that grounding can be intrinsic, implied by the pronouns such as 'she'. In the eyes of the speaker, 'she' should be identifiable from other people. Therefore, (21a) is grammatical while (21b) is unacceptable for the subject 'people' cannot be located or grounded specifically. As for 'the car' in (20a), the grounding of the noun is realized by the demonstrative 'the'.

- (21) a. She photographs well. b. *People photographs well.

Second, following Iwata, Park (2009) insist that the middle sentence in the past tense or the progressive aspect entails specificity that influences the grammaticality. As depicted above, even the middle sentence in the present tense requires the grounding of the subject. The same is also true of the middle sentences in other tenses and aspects. In (22a), the sentence is acceptable as the driver of the car is a certain referent for the speaker. In (22b), Park (2009: 133) suggests that the middle sentence is wrong for 'I', interpreted as the driver of the car, could not drive the car while sleeping at the same time. As a matter of fact, all the examples in (22a-c) are grammatical to my respondents because the driver of the car can be perceived as another specific referent according to the speaker. That is, the referent is grounded in the examples (22a-c). However, the sentences in (23a-c) are unacceptable for the driver who might be denoted by 'I' leads to a conflict of the referent. This misunderstanding can be dismissed by replacing 'I' with 'the passengers' or adding information that "I was sleeping in the backseat".

- (22) a. The car handles smoothly while the passengers are sleeping.
b. The car is handling smoothly while I am sleeping in the backseat.
c. The car handled smoothly while I was sleeping in the backseat.

- (23) a. ? The car handles smoothly while I am sleeping.
b. ? The car handled smoothly while I was sleeping.
c. ? The car was handling smoothly while I was sleeping.

In brief, what matters in the examples is grounding, irrespective of the different tenses or the aspects. It should be proposed that the middle sentences in different tenses and aspects require the grounding of the referent. It is the confusing referent of the driver that makes the sentences in (23) unacceptable.

3.3 The English middles in different aspects and tenses

Iwata (1999: 531) infers that the reason why the middles with indefinite subjects resist progressive aspect is that middles in the progressive describe specific events. However, even the middle with the definite subjects may be incompatible with the progressive aspect.

For example, the preferred sentence in (24a) should be 'The clothes wash well' rather than 'The clothes is washing well'. At first glance, the fabric of the clothes comes to mind so that the present tense is enough to show a good quality of the clothes. This idea contradicts with the progressive aspect which shows the activity is taking place. But the middle with the progressive aspect is acceptable when certain conditions are met or the circumstances change.

- (24) a. *The clothes is washing well.

b. Fast cars are selling well when their price is cut down.

(25) a. Bureaucrats bribe easily.

b. Bureaucrats are bribing easily these days.

In (24b), the progressive aspect highlights the fact when fast cars get cheaper, they are prone to being sold well. Though the present tense is acceptable in ‘Fast cars sell well when their price is cut down’, the progressive aspect gives more emphasis to the activity of transaction. Similarly, while the present tense in (25a) gives emphasis to the inherent trait of the bureaucrats, the progressive aspect in (25b) implies the changing environment or circumstance makes the bureaucrats are more inclined to be bribed.

In both (24b) and (25b), though the subjects are indefinite nouns, yet they are grounded due to the inherent quality of the subjects. The fact that the indefinite subjects are compatible with the progressive aspect refutes the argument that the middles with the progressive aspect designate specific events. The sentences in (24b) and (25b) are still generic statements about fast cars and bureaucrats respectively. In (24a), the sentence can be also made acceptable by adding the time adverbial. Though the progressive aspect gives more emphasis to activity, ‘The clothes is washing easily at proper temperature’ is acceptable and grammatical as well as ‘The clothes washes easily at proper temperature’.

In short, the claim of the genericity and specificity of events as well as the definiteness and indefiniteness of the subjects has fallacy in distinguishing the middles in different aspects and tenses. What really matters is the essence of the middle sentences and how they are properly used in different circumstances. When Park (2009: 138) maintains that the pen means a pen of this kind not a particular pen in the sentence ‘The pen writes well’, such explanation of the middle sentence with the present tense is hardly convincing.

4. SUBJECTIVE CONSTRUAL IN ENGLISH AND CHINESE CONSTRUCTIONS

Although many researchers have tried to compare the English and Chinese middle sentences, this article would put aside the Chinese middle construction for it is quite complicated and doesn’t form a relatively fixed construction. In effect, the expressions in Chinese are so flexible that some experts (LaPolla, 2009; Dong, 2022) have argued that the Chinese is a topic-comment language. However, the Chinese patient-subject construction exhibits similarities and differences compared with the English middles.

One example of the Chinese patient-subject sentences is stated as below. In (26), the subject of the sentence is ‘yifu’ meaning clothes. ‘Xi’ is the predicate verb, meaning the activity of washing. ‘Ganjing’ is usually used as adjective in Chinese. Here it is a complement showing the state of the clothes. The whole sentence designates an event that the clothes became clean after being washed.

(26) Yifu xi ganjing le.

Clothes wash clean (past tense marker)

The English middle sentence shares the commonality with the Chinese patient subject sentence in that the non-agent role of the activity instead of the agent is profiled due to construal. In cognitive grammar, the subject is the most prominent position and it is naturally profiled. In (26), the agent is clearly somebody who does the activity of washing, but it is only implied just like the English middle sentence. Therefore, in the middle and patient subject sentence, it is the non-agent role that is profiled as the subject of the sentence. From this

perspective, neither of the English middle and Chinese patient subject sentence describes a situation that complies with the real event in life for the subject can never execute the action by itself. When the speaker's attention is focused on the non-agent role in the activity, then the non-agent is profiled as the trajectory, namely the grammatical subject of the sentence, as a result of subjective construal. But the middle sentence also differs greatly from the patient subject sentence in many aspects. A closer examination is made in the following.

4.1 Subjective construal in Chinese patient-subject construction

In the Chinese patient subject construction, the subject may be the patient, instrument or location. The complement following the verb indicates a change of state of the subject being influenced by the activity. And more often, the complement shows a meaning of perfective aspect.

For example, in (27a), the subject is instrument as 'bi' refers to the pen. This sentence profiles the change of the pen which can't be used or work properly due to the activity of writing. In (27b), the subject is the location 'qiang' (wall) and it is also affected in the process of painting. In (27c), 'wan' designates a perfective aspect, meaning the agent has finished reading the book. In Chinese, 'hao' and 'wan' is often used following the verb which shows the activity has finished.

- (27) a. Bi xie huai le.
Pen write broken
b. Qiang hua zang le.
Wall paint dirty
c. Shu du wan le.
Book read finished
d. Zuoye xie hao le.
Homework write finished

As illustrated above, the subjects in (27a-b) have undergone some changes in the activity. In (27a), the pen became broken as a result of the activity of writing. In (27b), the wall became dirty as a result of In (27c-d), though the truth is that somebody has finished reading and the homework, yet the sentences in (27c-d) emphasize the activity has finished from the perspective of the non-agent role. Hence, through the construal of the items what is profiled in (27a-d) is either the change of items during the process or the end of an activity. The cognitive motivation is attributed to the attention focus or the viewing perspective.

Since the patient subject sentence focuses on the change or the result of the activity, the past tense is preferred in the construction. This forms a sharp contrast to the English middle sentence which profiles a quality of the grammatical subject and thus prefers the present tense as a consequence.

4.2 Subjective construal in English middle construction

In English middle construction, the subjective construal also play its part since the subject is not seen as executing the action but considered to have a key property in contributing to the possible event in a positive manner. When a certain quality or property is profiled, the sentence doesn't designate a dynamic event, but a generic statement. On this occasion, the present tense is used in the sentence as shown in (28a). The sentence is regarded as a statement about what food the panda eats or it shows a typical characteristic of pandas in choosing food. In (28b),

however, since the sentence describes a specific dynamic event, the verb ‘eat’ is used in the past tense.

- (28) a. Panda eats bamboo.
b. She ate an apple.
- (29) a. The piano plays easily.
b. *The song sings easily.
c. The music dances well.

To produce grammatical middle sentences, it is important to construe a certain quality of the grammatical subject that helps to produce a positive effect on the activity. In (29a), the piano is considered to have a good quality and this quality is beneficial to the activity of playing. In consequence, the quality of the instrument is profiled in the subjective construal. For anyone who has a chance to play the piano, this instrument works quite well to produce beautiful note. In (29b), the agent outweighs the song because the singing ability of the agent plays a quite significant role in singing activity. Maybe the song is easy to sing. Yet singing a song requires some technique or skills. It depends on the subjective construal that the middle sentence is considered acceptable or unacceptable. In (29c), although it doesn’t mean that the music exerts a positive influence on the activity of dancing, it is often the case that we dance to the music. Thus the beating or rhythm in the music serves as a good accompany. It is the subjective construal of the music that is suitable for playing accompany when we dance that the sentence in (29c) is rendered grammatical.

- (30) a. *The bridge builds easily.
b. Qiao jian hao le.
Bridge build finished

In (30), a comparison is made between the English middle sentence and the Chinese patient-subject sentence. As depicted in (30a), the English middle sentence is ungrammatical for it is hard to attribute the building activity to the essential quality of the bridge itself. Normally, the construction of a bridge is a huge project which requires painstaking effort. The whole sentence implies an activity that requires great effort or depends on the agent to make a difference. Thus, it is hard to conceive that a property of the bridge is attributed to the easy accomplishment of the activity. In contrast, the Chinese resultative sentence profiles the change of the patient and there is no such constraint of the verb “jian” because it is in coordination with the whole constructional meaning. It doesn’t matter whether the real agent is implied or explicit as we can also put Qiao bei shigongdui jian hao le, meaning the bridge is constructed by the workers. And it is also grammatical to replace the verb with “xiu” meaning “repair”. In short, though the Chinese patient subject sentence shares one similarity with English middle sentence in profiling the patient, yet the former construction is much more flexible and exhibits fewer constraints in expression.

5. EXPLAINING THE ENGLISH MIDDLES IN CORPORA

The research conducted in the paper rejects the reductionism method or analyzing the sentence only by focusing on the parts. Rather, it is firmly practiced that the whole is bigger than the parts. In other words, the whole meaning of the sentence as well as the semantic meanings of the components is considered as to the grammaticality of the sentence. Most

importantly, the explanation of the sentence examples should be based on the real cases in the corpora.

Take a first glimpse of the examples in (31) before further elaboration.

- (31) a. ? Chickens kill easily.
b. Little children amuse easily.
c. Bureaucrats bribe easily.

In the sentences above, there is commonality that a typical property of the subjects is profiled, which is in accordance with the constructional meaning of the English middle sentence. If the plural subject is changed into a singular subject, the sentence will be hardly grammatical because this feature doesn't belong to one specific subject but is possessed by the subjects in general. Moreover, the grammaticality of the sentences relies on the encyclopedic knowledge and may be a matter of degree. For instance, Lemmens (1998: 59) and Yoshimura (2004: 297) consider "kill" is a strong volitional verb, which renders the sentence problematic. However, based on social conventions and understanding of the event, most researchers believe the sentence (31a) is grammatically acceptable. In the real practical corpus, more examples in contrast can be used to illustrate the complex grammatical issue.

- (32) a. * The house builds easily.
b. * English learns easily.
c. * She frustrates easily.

- (33) a. Teaching doesn't build systematically on what pupils have learned.
(<http://www.English-corpora.org/now>, April 8th, 2025)
b. English learns more easily than Chinese for Europeans.
(Liu Lihua & Deng Yunhua, 2014: 34)
c. Jane discourages easily. (Yoshimura & Taylor, 2004: 311)

To account for the ungrammaticality of the sentences "The house builds easily." and "English learns easily.", Han & Xue (2011: 1133) proposed that since "the house" is actually non-existent before the building event and "English" can only be acquired after the implementation of the depicted event, the creational verbs are incompatible with the English middle construction. However, the verb "build" and "learn" do occur in the sentences (33a) and (33b), which refutes the argument that the creating or learning event couldn't be employed in English middles.

Therefore, neither volition nor creation of verbs suffices to give convincing explanations. Practically no absolute criteria of the subject or the verb can be stipulated to ensure grammaticality. What really counts is the conventional usage of words and the whole semantic meaning. Any alternation or modification can have an effect on grammaticality and acceptability. In comparison to (32a-b), the sentences (33a-b) are acceptable with the addition of proper context. While it is hard to believe that learning a language is easy, yet compared with Chinese, English might be easier to learn. In (32c), the verb "frighten" generally can't be used to mean being frightened as opposed to the verb "panic". In (33c), however, the verb "discourage" is properly used to show Jane is vulnerable to setbacks. The typical examples show social conventions as well as the semantic meanings matter in expression. Adopting the usage-based perspective, a detailed account of the English middle examples from the corpora is made in the following sections.

5.1 The English middles with higher frequency

The previous studies on the practical cases of English middles show different perspectives and inconsistent findings. For instance, Yang (2006) examines the VIEW corpora and finds out the expression “sell easily” doesn’t appear frequently in middles. However, He and Wang (2009) insist that “well” and “easily” are good representatives of adverbs in English middles. And while Zhu and Chen (2013) suggest the verbs such as “keep” and “start” are middle verbs, such verbs may not be primarily considered as middle verbs in other researches. As a consequence, a comprehensive study of English middles in NOW (New on the Web) is necessary given that the cases are fresh and in pace with today’s usage. The following table shows the English middle examples with higher frequency in the corpora.

Table 1. English middle examples with higher frequency

Verbs	Adverbs in collocation	Examples
sell	well, easily	The product sells well.
drive	well, smoothly	The car drives smoothly.
cut	well, easily	The cake cuts easily.
handle	well, easily	The camera handles well.
clean	well, easily	The tool cleans well.
stain	easily	The material stains easily.
cook	well, easily	The food cooks well.
read	well, easily	The article reads well.
play	well, easily	The bass plays easily.
remove	easily	The lid removes easily.
wash	well, easily	The dress washes easily.
pack	well, easily	The item packs well.
write	well, smoothly	The pen writes smoothly.

The major verbs used in the English middles and their corresponding adverbs are listed in the table. At first glance, these verbs are action verbs but they can be used in different domains. For the verb “sell”, it describes a typical business behavior. For the verbs “drive, cut, handle and write”, they can be used together with the a tool to show its property. The verb “read” is also different from other verbs because it belongs to cognitive domain. Yet there is one point that the denoted events are quite common in daily life. Compared with other differentiated verbs such as “peel” and “paint”, these verbs have greater frequency of occurrence in middle sentences. In a broad sense, most of the examples show the good qualities of the items that can serve as commodity products. Such sentences are numerous as exemplified in (34a-d).

- (34) a. Fantastic cars sell easily.
 b. Food not only cooks quickly, it cooks well, deliciously, tenderly and with less effort than the traditional methods of cooking.
 c. It is easy to assemble. It packs well and it is easy to charge.
 d. It has a perfect size. Easy to operate and cleans well warm soap water.

The subjects as well as the adverbs in collocation with the verbs may also have inconsistent types. For example, the verb “drive” is generally collocated with the car and the subject in collocation with “read” typically refers to script such as passages or novels. While the adverb “well” for the most part is in coordination with the verbs, yet this doesn’t always apply to other adverbs such as “easily” and “smoothly”. It is peculiar to put “The food cooks smoothly.” or that “The clothes washes smoothly.” in (35a-b). Certainly, “smoothly” can be used to match the verb “drive”. Compared with “well”, “easily” is also limited in usage though it might be frequently collocated with the verbs such as “wash” and “cut”. Still, one special case is with the verb “stain”. In (35c), the positive evaluation of the adverb “well” is in conflict with the verb “stain”. Probably due to the derogatory meaning of the verb, the adverb “easily” instead of “well” should be used in (35c).

- (35) a. * The food cooks smoothly.
 b. * The clothes washes smoothly.
 c. * The material stains well.

Based on the investigation of the corpora, the adverb “well” has the highest frequency of occurrence in the English middle cases. In most English middle examples, the adverb “easily” can be replaced by “well”, especially when the sentence conveys a meaning of facilitation. However, “easily” and “well” can have different interpretations when they are used with the verb “read”. For instance, the sentences “The book reads easily” and “The book reads well” have different meanings in that the former indicates the book might use simple expressions while the latter implies that the books has marvelous depiction.

- (36) He has the right type of profile for the race and his form reads well.

And in the sentence (36), the adverb “well” can’t be replaced with “easily” since the example doesn’t mean the attribute of the subject facilitates the reading process. Thus, in this case, the adverb “easily” is not used here. Instead, the positive comment means that the form shows a good record of his performance in racing.

In brief, the verbs used in the most English middle cases are concerned with selling, driving, reading, cooking and other common behaviors. Except for a few cases, the English middles focus on the property of a product with a higher frequency.

5.2 The semantic constraints on English middles

The grammaticality of English middle sentences should be discussed by taking the semantic and pragmatic factors into account. Adopting the usage-based approach, the study based on the corpora sheds light on the semantic constraints of English middle sentences. By reexamining the cases in the corpora, it is found that the practical cases have a quite low frequency despite they often appear in the previous researches.

The sentences in (31a-c) are reanalyzed here. Take a glimpse of the sentence “Bureaucrats bribe easily.” in (37a) and the sentence “Chickens kill easily.” in (37c) again. Though some researchers suggest that the examples in the present tense are as grammatical as those in the present participle, yet both of these examples in different tenses and aspects seldom exist in the online corpora. That is to say, while it is true that these sentences are grammatical and acceptable, yet they just don’t have a higher frequency in the real usage.

- (37) a. Bureaucrats bribe easily.

- b. Little children amuse easily.
- c. Chickens kill easily.

Moreover, the examples in (37a-c) show more grammatical constraints in variation. For instance, if the plural subject is changed into a singular subject, the sentences such as “The bureaucrat bribes easily.” and “This chicken kills easily” might be less acceptable. One reason is that according to the social context, the pragmatic meanings of the middle sentences describe a property belonging to bureaucrats or chickens. It doesn’t refer to a specific bureaucrat or a particular chicken. Likewise, if the subject of the sentence is changed into a pronoun, like “She bribes easily.” or “It kills easily.”, the sentences would become less acceptable.

As for the case (37b), the key point lies in the property of little children. Still it is encyclopedic knowledge of the social conventions that makes the sentence acceptable. If “little children” is replaced by “adults”, the sentence will be less unacceptable. Our personal understanding is that since children are more innocent and they have a care-free life, they are more likely to be amused than the adults who have encountered lots of hardships and faced greater pressure.

The examples (37a-c) should be carefully handled pertaining to productivity. For one thing, in the English middles, the subject is often an inanimate product. Thus, the living creatures or human beings might be in conflict with the prototypical subjects in middles. For another, when the subject is animate, it can give rise to ambiguous meanings for the sentence may have an active meaning or a passive meaning. In (38), the verb “photograph” can be used as an intransitive verb. In this circumstance, the sentence means she is good at taking photos. But if analyzed as a middle sentence, the sentence means she looks good on camera. The motivation for a good sentence should be both economy and unambiguity. If the sentence is used in a proper context, it might be interpreted correctly. How the sentence is understood depends on how it is used in the context. In (39a-b), the two sentences are unambiguous since the subjects are the camera and the person respectively. But clearly in the sentence (39b), there is no passive meaning but active meaning. (39b) is by no means considered as a middle case.

(38) She photographs well. (It may be ambiguous.)

- (39) a. You need a camera that photographs easily in lower light.
- b. With a big telephoto lens, you can photograph easily spooked birds.

The sentences (37a-c) have been discussed in the published papers, but in the corpora they have lower frequency. It is also true of the following sentences (39a-c). Though the sentences might be understood in the passive meaning, yet they seldom appear in the corpora. In the same way, if it is put “The teachers bribe easily.” or that “The doctors bribe easily.”, such sentences only work in proper contexts.

- (39) a. ? She bribes easily.
- b. ? She amuses easily.
- c. ? She discourages easily.

In addition, the use of negative adverbs may also impact the productivity of the English middles. It should be noticed that the positive adverbs in the middles are used more frequently than the negative adverbs or phrases. In the corpora, the positive adverbs such as “well”, “easily”, “smoothly” and even “nicely” and “effortlessly” have a much higher frequency than

“poorly”, “slowly” and the phrase “with difficulty”. Language, in essence, lies in usage. How frequently the expression is used decides the grammaticality of the expression. In (40b), though the verb “solve” is transitive, yet it is seldom used in the middle sentence. Other verbs such as “learn” are also seldom used in English middle construction. In (40c), the verb “sleep” is intransitive. The sentence is seen as ungrammatical though it might mean the bed is suitable for sleeping. It will be grammatical only after being revised as “The bed is comfortable” or “You can sleep comfortably in the bed”.

- (40) a. The book sells poorly.
- b. ? The problem solves well.
- c. * The bed sleeps comfortably.

Through the analysis of the cases, the English middle sentence is a typical construction that should be handled carefully. Despite the typical middle is formed as “NP+ Verb + Adverb”, there are strict constraints of the components respectively. As for the noun phrase, it generally refers to a product. If the noun phrase is a person, it can cause ambiguity without additional information or context. In terms of the verbs, the common actions are selling, handling and reading. The frequently used adverbs are “well” and “easily”. By examining the corpora, the English middle cases focus on only a small number of verbs that have a certain level of productivity or frequency.

6. CONCLUDING REMARKS

The study shows a different outlook on the English middles from the previous researches. The five major points are summarized in the following perspectives. First, the preceding studies don't present a panorama of the English middles in corpora. The researchers rely too much on their intuitions and the analysis often covers part of the examples. In this study, the examples from the grammar books and the corpus are combined together to give a sound and convincing explanation. Second, the English middle sentences are in various patterns. The researchers often mix the unreal English middles with the true English middle construction. The unaccusative sentences such as “The limestone crushes easily” and the negative patterns such as “The car won't start” should not be confused with the English middle sentences. Third, genericity is a typical feature of the English middle construction. Some researchers separated the middles in the past tense and the present participle aspects from the middles in the present tense by means of non-genericity. However, this explanation is problematic because the noun phrases can be definite or indefinite in the present tense and indefinite nouns can also appear in the past tense as well as in the progressive aspect. What matters is the grounding of the nouns. That is, the referent of the nouns should be properly designated or understood in linguistic contexts. Fourth, subjective construal plays a part in the English middle sentence which profiles the positive role of a product in the designated event. Finally, based on an in-depth investigation of the corpora, the study finds out the English middle sentences have different frequencies of occurrence. Apart from the components that can influence grammaticality, the social and pragmatic contexts can also exert an impact on the acceptability of the middle expressions.

REFERENCES

- He Wenzhong & Wang Kefei. A corpus-based study of adverbial modifiers in English middle constructions. *Foreign Language Teaching and Research*, 2009, 41(4): 250-257.
- Iwata, S. On the status and of an implicit arguments in middles. *Journals of Linguistics*, 1999(35):527-553.
- K, Park. Explaining English middle sentences. *Pan-Pacific Association of Applied Linguistics*, 2009, 13(2): 125-140.
- Keyser, S.J. and Thomas Roeper. On the middle and ergative constructions in English. *Linguistic Inquiry*, MIT, 1984,15(3): 381-416.
- LaPolla, Randy J. Chinese as a Topic-Comment (Not Topic-Prominent and Not SVO) language. In *Studies of Chinese Linguistics: Functional Approaches*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press. 2009.
- Langacker, Ronald, *Cognitive Grammar: A Basic Introduction* (New York, 2008; online edn, Oxford Academic, 1 May 2008), <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780195331967.001.0001>, accessed 30 Mar. 2025.
- Liu Cunwei. On the Middle Construction in English from the Perspective of Cognitive Grammar. *Journal of Chongqing Jiaotong University (Social Sciences Edition)*, 2019, 19(2): 123-130.
- Liu Lihua & Deng Yunhua. A cognitive study of the syntactic and semantic restrictions in English and Chinese middle constructions. *Foreign Languages in China*, 2014, 11(5): 33-38.
- Perlmutter, David M. Impersonal passives and unaccusative hypothesis [A]. *Berkeley Linguistic Society* 4[C]. 1978: 157-189.
- Quirk, R. et al. *A Grammar of Contemporary English*. 1972. Longman. London.
- Quirk, R. et al. *A Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language*. 1985. Longman. London.
- Taylor, John R, *Cognitive Grammar* (Oxford, 2002; online edn, Oxford Academic, 31 Oct. 2023), <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198700333.001.0001>, accessed 25 Mar. 2025.
- Yang Xiaojun. A corpus investigation on the use of adverbs in the English middle construction. *Foreign Language Teaching and Research*, 2006, 38(4): 287-291.
- Yoshimura, K and John R. Taylor. What makes a good middle? The role of qualia in the interpretation and acceptability of middle expressions in English. *English Language and linguistics*, Cambridge University Press, 2004,8(2): 293-321.
- Zhang Zhenbang. *A New English Grammar Coursebook*. 2021. Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press.
- Zhu Xiaoli & Chen Guohua. A study of the middle construction in English with special reference to learners' dictionaries. *Chinese Journal of Applied Linguistics*, 2013, 36(4): 407-421.