

# VARIANCE IN THEMATIC ROLES PROJECTED BY MIDDLES: A CASE FOR FORMAL ROLE SUBCATEGORIZATION GRIDS

Carol Brouha

## INTRODUCTION

The Projection Principle of Chomsky's Universal Grammar requires that thematic roles (i.e. specific semantic roles in the relations among a verb's arguments) be projected onto the syntax. Thematic roles are a significant point of contrast between middle verbs and passive verbs. Levin and Jones (1996) point out that one way Russian middle verbs and passives differ is that middles do not allow "an attendant adjunct NP in Instrumental case." Likewise in English, the absence of a *by* prepositional phrase and the elimination of the external NP are characteristics that distinguish passives from middle verbs:

- (1) a. The clay was molded by the sculptor.  
b. The clay molds well.

In (1)a the verb's lexical entry is:

*mold*, V, [\_\_\_\_ NP], <(1),2>

In (1)b, a typical middle-verb sentence, the lexical entry is:

*mold*, V, [\_\_\_\_], <2>

However, there appears to be an exceptional case in English in which a middle verb has two theta roles:

- (2) Left alone, the bread machine starts by itself on the hour.

*start*, V, [\_\_\_\_] <(1), 2>

Notice that in (2), the sentence does not contain a redundancy by containing both "left alone" and "by itself." Semantically *by itself* does not mean "alone." This prepositional phrase means "under its own power," or "by itself as agent." Here we have a case of a middle verb with a suppressed, but not eliminated, subject.

What is it about inclusion of *itself* or its derivative, an affixed *-self*, in a middle-verb sentence that can break the middle-verb rule of not having an adjunct NP and can also make possible a varied projection of theta roles? Consider the following subcategorization:

*self-clean*, V, [\_\_\_\_] <1,(2)>

- (4) a. The oven self-cleans quickly.

The internal argument, somewhat absorbed by the morphology of the verb but still overt, takes the thematic role of patient and yet in its hyphenated form allows <1> to be a theme and not an agent. Because the thematic role grids projected onto the syntax by the middle verbs *start* and *self-clean* differ, middle verb subcategorizations are best expressed in argument grids without thematic consideration. As suggested by Levin and Jones (1996), an approach in which arguments are expressed as formal roles in the subcategorization grid rather than as specific thematic roles is a step towards further minimizing Universal Grammar.

## REFERENCES

- Levin, James S. and Charles Jones. 1996. Agent, purpose and Russian middles. *Journal of Slavic Linguistics*, 4: 50-75.