

Lexical Semantics

Week 8: Semantic roles

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November 26, 2019

1 The middle construction

The middle construction (which can be used to test for patients) bears a superficial resemblance to the intransitive use of a causative alternation verb like *break*, but is NOT the same thing:

- (1) a. Crystal breaks easily.
b. Fresh-baked bread cuts well.
- (2) a. *Walls hit easily.
b. *Planets see easily on clear nights.
- the object of a transitive verb is the subject of its middle use: compare (35a) with (35b).
- for causative alternation verbs, the object of the transitive is the subject of the intransitive: compare (36a) with (36b).
- (3) a. The chef cut *the fresh-baked bread*. transitive verb
b. *Fresh-baked bread* cuts easily. middle use of transitive
- (4) a. The clumsy clerk broke *the crystal vase*. transitive use of *break*
b. *The crystal vase* broke. intransitive use

The two cases can be distinguished on semantic grounds:

- a middle construction describes a property of its subject and does not refer to a specific event.
 - (33a) describes a property of crystal and not any particular event of crystal-breaking
 - on the other hand, the intransitive use in (36b) describes a specific event in which a crystal vase changes state (breaks)
- Agency:

- an implicit agent is understood in the middle construction – e.g. *crystal breaks easily* when an agent attempts to break it/hits it accidentally, etc.
 - no implicit agent for (36b)
 - the adverbs that are characteristic of the middle construction often describe the agent’s involvement in the type of events described (e.g., *easily*) as easily does in the examples.
- generally: a wider range of verbs is found in the middle construction than in the causative alternation
 - *cut* has a middle, but does not have an intransitive variant (it is not a causative alternation verb)
- (5) a. Sally cut the fresh-baked bread.
 b. *The fresh-baked bread cut.

2 References

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