SOLVING MIDDLE SYNTAX WITH TAGALOG MORPHOLOGY

In past tense, the English middle construction is ambiguous between two readings (1). One interpretation entails actualization and describes a specific event and subject (1a). The second describes a property of the subject that held in the past, allows a specific or generic subject, and does not carry any actualization entailment (1b). Since the middle literature has defined middles as generic statements, non-generic examples (“non-core middles”, as termed by Fagan 1992) have been largely overlooked in existing analyses (Ackema& Schoorlemmer 1994; Fagan 1992; Hoekstra & Roberts 1993; Keyser & Roeper 1984; Massam 1988, others). However, understanding the discrepancy between the two interpretations in (1) is essential to solving the underlying syntactic structure of middles. In this paper, I will apply Bhatt’s (1999) analysis of be able to to middles and arrive at a hypothesis for this unseen structure which is then verified and elaborated by examining the morphology of parallel Tagalog constructions. I will argue that middles are formed by embedding a non-volitional eventive predicate under a stative predicate. This complex predicate attributes a property to a Theme as its external argument.

Similar to the middles described above, Bhatt (1999) observes that the English ability modal, was able to, is ambiguous between ‘managed to’ and ‘had the ability to’ readings (2). Bhatt analyzes was able to as basically actuality-asserting (as in 2a), while the ‘ability’ interpretation, (2b), results from the addition of a generic operator to the ABLE predicate (3). This predicts that was able to on its actuality reading does not entail that the subject possesses the property described by the ability reading, as borne out in (4). Example (5) shows that middles behave similarly, ie given the situation in (5), (5a) has only the actualization interpretation.

Although genericity is not morphologically encoded in English, many languages distinguish generic statements from others by imperfective aspect (Bhatt 1999, Lekakou 2004). The Tagalog sentences in (6) support Bhatt’s claim that the same structure yields a ‘managed to’ interpretation with perfective aspect (6b), yet an ‘ability’ one with imperfective (6c). The Tagalog morpheme ‘maka-’ corresponds to the ABLE predicate of Bhatt in terms of the meaning it contributes (ie. (6a) vs. (6b,c)). However, the Tagalog morpheme is decomposable into smaller atoms of meaning: ‘-ka’ encodes completed action, and ‘-a’ is a stativizing morpheme (Phillips 1996, Travis 2000a). This morphology suggests that the ABLE predicate is in fact stative, contrary to Bhatt’s claim of its eventiveness (Bhatt 1999:184). Travis’ (2000b) analysis of certain Malagasy and Tagalog phenomena involving ‘maka-’ shows that the Agents of these constructions are projected in SPEC AspectP, where they are interpreted as non-volitional Agents. I argue in this paper that since the Agent is necessarily not in control of the event, another argument is able to be linked syntactically and semantically as causer/controller. Coming back to middles, the logical Themes of ‘maka-’ verbs can be promoted to subject, yielding (7), which now bears the same characteristics and interpretations as English middles. In both languages, the middle construction attributes the responsibility for the event to the logical Theme. In other words, in (1b), something about my Ikea bookshelf allows the assembling of it to be quick, in the generic case. Similarly in (7b), it is a property of mosquitoes that they can be eaten.

Making the assumption that the shared interpretations and behaviours of English and Tagalog middles are indicative of shared syntax, we have arrived at a new analysis of middle syntax. From Bhatt and Tagalog ‘maka-’ we confirm earlier analyses that middles involve a generic operator scoping over events, but make the added claim that without this operator the base actualization interpretation is understood. Tagalog morphology suggests that part of the meaning contributed by ABLE and ‘maka-’ is stativizing, forming a state from the (syntactically) lower event predicate. Tagalog morphology also shows that middle Agents are necessarily non-volitional, barring them from projection in SPEC vP and allowing the Theme to be interpreted as causer/responsible for the event. Independently motivated distinctions between the syntax of English and Tagalog explain why these can be syntactically realized only in Tagalog. Most surprisingly, the parallel behaviour of ABLE constructions and middles suggest a close connection between the two phenomena which has yet to be explored in any depth, but which is strongly supported by the Tagalog data in (6) and (7).
(1) My Ikea bookshelf assembled quickly (a. ...yesterday OR b. ... for years until it broke).
a. There was an ‘assembling’ event of my bookshelf, carried out in a quick manner, and that
cumulated prior to the time of utterance.
b. There was a property of my bookshelf such that in an ‘assembling’ event of it, this would
be carried out in a quick manner, and this property held prior to the time of utterance.
(2) John was able to eat five apples in an hour.
a. Yesterday, John was able to eat five apples in an hour. (episodic)
b. In those days, John was able to eat five apples in an hour. (generic) (Bhatt 1999:173)
(3) a. Past (Perf(ABLE) [VP]) = managed-to
b. Past (GEN (Impf(ABLE) [VP]) = had-ability-to (Bhatt 1999:177,185)
(4) Yesterday, Brown hit three bulls-eyes in a row. Before he hit three bulls-eyes, he fired 600
rounds, without coming close to the bulls-eye; and his subsequent tries were equally wild.
a. Brown was able to hit three bulls-eyes in a row.
b. #Brown had the ability to hit three bulls-eyes in a row. (Bhatt 1999:180)
(5) Last Bloom’s Day, 50 enthusiasts participated in a read-off of a selection from Ulysses. 49
of the participants struggled through at a snail’s pace, but one speed-reader, Judy, finished
the entire section in no time.
a. Ulysses read quickly (for Judy). b. #Ulysses had the property of being read quickly.
(note also, present tense: #Ulysses reads quickly)
(6) a. kumain ako ng lamok “I ate a mosquito.”
eat.AT.PERF 1S CASE mosquito
b. nakakain ako ng lamok “I managed to/accidentally ate the mosquito.”
MAKA.eat.PERF 1S CASE mosquito
c. nakakakain ako ng lamok “I am able to eat the mosquito.”
MAKA.eat.IMP 1S CASE mosquito
(7) a. nakain ang lamok “Someone managed to eat/accidentally ate this mosquito”
MAKA.eat.PERF NOM mosquito
b. nakakain ang lamok “Anyone is able to eat this mosquito/Mosquitoes are edible”
MAKA.eat.IMP NOM mosquito

REFERENCES:
Lingua 93, 59-90.
Press.
Heokstra, T. & I. Roberts. 1993. “Middle constructions in Dutch and English.” In Knowledge and
language. vol. 2: Lexical and conceptual structure. eds. Eric Reuland and Werner Abraham,
vol. 15, 381-416.
Bedeutung.
Massam, D. 1988. “Middles, tough and recipe context constructions in English” In J. Blevins and Julie
Carter, eds. NELS 18: UMass at Amherst. 315-332.
167-193.