

Lexical-Constructional analysis of Spanish and French middle structures

Isabel Negro
Universidad Complutense

Abstract

The syntactic, semantic and pragmatic features of middle structures have been extensively discussed in several works (e.g. Fellbaum 1985; Kemmer 1993; Maldonado 1999; 2008). In Construction Grammar approaches middles are regarded as instances of an argument structure construction (Goldberg 1995). The present contribution outlines an alternative approach to middle structures in Spanish and French within the framework of the Lexical Constructional Model (Ruiz de Mendoza and Mairal 2008; Mairal and Ruiz de Mendoza 2008), a comprehensive model of language that accounts for constructions at all levels (i.e. argument structure, implicature, illocution and discourse). At the argument structure level, the LCM postulates internal and external factors which license or block out the incorporation of lexical structure into constructional configurations. The paper addresses three issues: a) the semantic and syntactic properties of middles; b) the Spanish and French realization patterns of the middle construction; c) the internal (semantic) and external (cognitive) factors which make many Spanish and French verbs compatible with this construction.

This paper is intended to contribute to the literature on the topic by considering the semantic and cognitive principles regulating middle formation and by comparing Spanish and French middles, an issue which, to the best of our knowledge, has not been investigated.

Key words: construction, verbal predicate, internal constraint, external constraint.

1. Introduction

The Lexical Constructional Model (LCM; Ruiz de Mendoza and Mairal 2007b; 2008, 2011; Mairal and Ruiz de Mendoza 2008; Ruiz de Mendoza 2008; cf. Butler 2009 for a critical assessment) is a comprehensive model of language that accounts for meaning construction at the levels of argument structure (level 1), implicature (level 2), illocution (level 3) and discourse (level 4). At the level of argument structure, which is the focus of the present contribution, the LCM

examines the participation of lexical predicates in argument structure constructions. In this connection, a high proportion of Spanish and French verbal predicates partake in argument structure constructions of the kind proposed by Levin¹ (1993) and Goldberg² (1995, 2006). In the LCM verbal predicates are represented in the form of lexical templates, i.e. low-level semantic representations that link world-knowledge aspects of meaning to the event-structure representation of lexical items, thus preparing semantic structure for syntactic expression.

Unlike other constructionist approaches (e.g. Goldberg 1995, 2006), the LCM provides a full account of meaning construction where lexico-constructional integration, whereby the conceptual structure of a predicate is incorporated, together with its argument structure, into a construction, is constrained by internal (i.e. semantic) and external (i.e. cognitive) factors. Among the former, Peña (2009: 746) mentions the following: *full matching* (which specifies that there must be full identification of variables, subevents, and operators between lexical and constructional templates); *lexical blocking*, which stipulates that one of the components of a given lexical template can rule out the fusion with a given construction because such a component is a suppletive form; *predicate argument conditioning*, according to which the lexical template can impose some restrictions on the kind of instantiation of a constructional argument; and *internal variable* conditioning, whereby the internal predicate variables constrain the nature of the predicate and the constructional arguments. Among the latter, high-level metaphor and high-level metonymy³ and metaphorical and metonymic complexes stand out.

The present contribution explores the middle construction in Spanish and French within the framework of the LCM. There has been a considerable amount of research into middles (Fellbaum 1985, Fagan 1992, Kemmer 1993, Maldonado 1999, 2008; Rapoport 1999; Manney 2000; Dowty 2001; Ruiz de Mendoza 2008). The term *middle* has received two readings:

a) Maldonado understands Spanish middles as a system of constructions which depict events in the subject's dominion, including grooming actions (e.g. *Me*

¹ Levin's (1993) syntactic alternations are distributed in four groups: transitivity alternations, alternations involving arguments within the VP, oblique subject alternations, and reflexive diathesis.

² Goldberg (1995: 3-4) discusses five types of constructions: ditransitive, caused motion, resultative, intransitive motion, and conative.

³ Following Ruiz de Mendoza and Mairal (2011: 66), high-level metaphor and high-level metonymy make use of generic-level conceptual structure and are operational at the grammatical level. Two examples are GENERIC FOR SPECIFIC (e.g. *I'll do the dishes*) and ACTIONS ARE TRANSFERS (e.g. *They gave the thug a big beating*).

corté las uñas), self-beneficial events (e.g. *Se compró un bolso*), emotional changes (e.g. *Se divertieron en la fiesta*) and changes of location (e.g. *Me subí a la escalera*).

b) Ruiz de Mendoza (2008) refers to the *evaluative middle construction* in English and the *evaluative reflex passives* in Spanish, thus highlighting the evaluative ingredient of middle structures (cf. below).

The LCM provides a more fined-grained description of the middle construction. This construction has two variants (Ruiz de Mendoza and Mairal 2007; Ruiz de Mendoza and Peña 2008):

a) a process-oriented variant, as in *The door didn't close easily*.

b) a result-oriented variant, as in *Clothes don't wash well*.

The structure of the paper is as follows. Section 2 deals with the semantic and syntactic properties of the middle construction. This is followed by discussion of the Spanish and French realization patterns of the middle construction. Then I focus on the internal (semantic) and external (cognitive) factors constraining the integration of predicates in middles. The last section presents some concluding remarks.

2. Semantic and syntactic properties of the middle construction

Middle structures are characterized by the following semantic and syntactic features:

a) From a semantic perspective, the action designated by the verb is construed as a process.

b) Most middles involve a notion of modality (ability/possibility) and can be paraphrased with a passive clause that contains *poder/pouvoir*:

(1) *Los diferentes tonos del cuadro se distinguen fácilmente.*

Los diferentes tonos del cuadro pueden distinguirse fácilmente.

(2) *La tour de l'église se remarque facilement.*

La tour de l'église peut être facilement remarquée.

b) Syntactically, the middle construction is a transitivity alternation (Levin 1993) with an implicit agent and a modal element with an evaluative function. Middles are formed from transitive predicates. A middle is an intransitive variant of a transitive pattern where the object of the transitive clause becomes the subject of the intransitive use.

Middles require the presence of an adverbial. A restricted number of adverbials occur in middles. They are typically manner adverbs (*fácilmente/con facilidad/facilement/aisément* 'easily', *bien* 'well'), although time and place adverbs can also be found (*a menudo/souvent* 'often', *aquí/ici* 'here'), as illustrated in (3-7):

- (3) *Este papel se rasga con facilidad.*
 (4) *Cette peinture se craquelle facilement.*
 (5) *Estos teléfonos móviles se venden muy bien.*
 (6) *Les habits tâchés ne se lavent pas bien.*
 (7) *La ropa se arruga a menudo en la lavadora / Les habits se froissent souvent dans la machine à laver.*

Middles take a third person subject which usually denotes an inanimate entity. The actual agent remains implicit. Middle structures do not allow agents to be specified: **El pan se corta bien por el cocinero* / **Le pain se coupe bien par le cuisinier* ‘*Bread cuts well by the cook’.

Middles code a causal state of affairs where the identity of the causer is irrelevant. The agentivity load of the subject of the middle construction is a controversial issue. Middles invoke the agent but leave it unprofiled. Ruiz de Mendoza and Mairal (2011: 75) highlight the *agentivity load* of middles as compared to the agentivity component of passives. The agentivity of middles is refuted by other scholars like Rapaport (1999: 147-155) and Stalmaszczyk (1993: 134). I believe that the notion of agentivity is not just linked to the construction type but to the predicate’s lexical class and to the sentence pattern. Thus, in sentences like *La goma se dobla fácilmente* ‘Rubber bends easily’, the modal component implies the agent’s efforts. Yet in cases like *Ce vin se boit comme de l’eau* ‘This wine drinks like water’, there is not an affected argument, the object being more agent-like.

Middles have a non-eventive generic interpretation. They do not describe events that occur at a particular time but highlight properties of the subject that hold independently of time. This explains why they occur in the present tense.

The function of the middle construction is to assess some aspect of that state of affairs, a function derived from the presence of the evaluative element (Ruiz de Mendoza and Mairal 2011: 74).

3. Realization patterns of middles in Spanish and French

Middle structures are built on the pattern S V Adverbial (realized by a modal adverb) in both Spanish and French. They often appear with the reflexive pronoun *se* which is a clitic (i.e. non-referential), in such a way that Spanish middles are referred to as *se passives* / *se reflex passives*.

Consider the following examples:

- (8) *La harina y el azúcar se mezclan bien / La farine et le sucre se mélangent bien.*
 (9) *Los glaciares se derriten rápidamente / Les glaciers fondent vite.*

(10) *Algunos tejidos encogen al primer lavado / Certains tissus retrécissent au premier lavage.*

(11) *Les lèvres se gercent au grand froid.*

(12) *J'ai tendance à avoir les lèvres qui gercent très vite.*

The examples above show that the clitic is sometimes optional in French (11-12).

4. Internal and external constraints on Spanish and French middles

4.1. Internal constraints

A. Constraints on the subject argument

Although the middle pattern does not impose any selection restrictions on the subject argument, an inanimate entity usually fills this slot.

B. Constraints on the predicate

The middle construction covers a wide array of constructions:

(13) *Esta pastilla se disuelve rápidamente* 'This tablet dissolves quickly'.

(14) *La fenêtre ne ferme pas* 'The window won't close' .

(15) *Esta novela se vende bien / Ce roman se vend bien* 'This novel sells well'.

(16) *Este coche se conduce con facilidad / Cette voiture se pilote aisément* 'This car handles easily'.

(17) *Los cromos se están vendiendo como churros* 'The stickers are selling like hot cakes'.

As shown in the examples, we may distinguish various types of middles (Kemmer 1993): (i) sentences denoting the ease or difficulty of occurrence of an event (13-14); (ii) sentences expressing a quality judgment (15-16); (iii) sentences making an explicit comparison of quality (17).

Sentences (15-17) illustrate a particular case of the middle construction, where the action is the result of some property of the patient (van Oosten 1986;⁴ Radden and Dirven 2007). Such internal quality is seen as the *enabling cause* which influences the realization of a process (Radden and Dirven 2007).⁵ In this light, Fagan (1992) claims that the middle construction foregrounds the properties of the object.

⁴ Van Oosten refers to the middle as the *patient-subject* construction.

⁵ Radden and Dirven (2007) include in the middle construction sentences designating other types of enabling situations, e.g. *The plane blew a tire, A leak sank the ship, Our new stadium seats 100, 000 and These caves are dipping water.*

Lexical class membership is to be regarded as an internal principle regulating the ascription of verbal predicates to the middle construction. Unlike English, where middle formation is more restricted, we find examples of Spanish and French middles with several verb lexical classes:

a) Change of state verbs (the most prototypical category)

– Verbs that specify the kind of change involved, whether a change in physical state, colour, shape, size, quality or amount.

(18) *Sus dientes se blanquearán rápidamente.*

(19) *La fréquence cardiaque durant l'exercice augmente rapidement.*

(20) *Les sels de cadmium se dissolvent aisément dans l'eau.*

– Verbs that specify the way in which the change comes about (i.e. through combination, separation, disruption of the material integrity of something, motion or contact):

(21) *El chicle se despega mal.*

(22) *Les tâches de mûre s'enlèvent difficilement.*

(23) *Esta tela se rasga con facilidad*

(24) *La pâte à pizza se déchire facilement au moment du roulage.*

(25) *Las latas de conservas se abren fácilmente.*

(26) *Ces biscottes se trempent facilement dans un bol de thé ou de café.*

(27) *Le plexiglas se fissure facilement.*

(28) *El poliestireno se perfora fácilmente con calor.*

b) Perception verbs

(29) *La torre de la iglesia se ve bien.*

(30) *Les grains de beauté se reconnaissent facilement.*

c) Cognition verbs:

(31) *Este texto se entiende bien / Ce texte se comprend bien.*

d) Feeling verbs:

(32) *Julia se entusiasma rápidamente con los proyectos nuevos.*

(33) *Je déprime facilement.*

C. Constraints on the adverbial

The adverbial must be relevant to the properties of the object. Thus agent-oriented adverbials are unacceptable (Fellbaum 1985): * *Esta ventana se cierra con cuidado / Le texte se lit attentivement.*

4.2. External constraints

Ruiz de Mendoza and Mairal (2011) postulate external constraints (i.e. cognitive operations) to account for certain syntactic features of the middle constructions. Thus, the impossibility of using an agentive complement in these constructions (**The burgers grilled by John*) is accounted for in terms of the high-

level metonymy PROCESS FOR ACTION (Ruiz de Mendoza and Pérez 2001). In addition, high metonymy applies in the interpretation of middle structures and determines their evaluative function (Ruiz de Mendoza and Mairal 2007).

Spanish and French middles are grounded in identical metonymies. The double metonymy (UNREAL) REFLEXIVE ACTION FOR (UNREAL) PROCESS FOR (ACTUAL) NON-REFLEXIVE ACTION underlies the process-oriented variant of the middle construction. There is a double metonymic shift from unreal reflexive action to unreal process to actual non-reflexive action:

(34) *Estas copas se rompen fácilmente / Ces coupes se cassent facilement.*
'The glasses break themselves' → 'The glasses get broken' → 'Someone breaks the glasses'

A multiple metonymic chain underlies the result-oriented variant: (UNREAL) REFLEXIVE ACTION FOR (UNREAL PROCESS) FOR (ACTUAL) NON-REFLEXIVE ACTION FOR RESULT. Here there is a triple metonymic shift from unreal reflexive action to unreal process to actual non-reflexive action to the result of the action:

(35) *Este jersey se lava bien / Ce tricot se lave bien*
'The pullover washes itself' → 'The pullover gets washed' →
'Someone washes the pullover' → 'The pullover is well washed'

5. Conclusion

In this paper I have examined the middle construction in Spanish and French in the light of the LCM, as developed by Ruiz de Mendoza and Mairal (2008) and Mairal and Ruiz de Mendoza (2009). My analysis shows that subsumption in middle structures in both languages is mediated by internal and external factors. On the one hand, participation in the middle construction is constrained by internal factors associated with the predicate and the predicate arguments (the subject and the adverbial), the verb's lexical class being the most relevant one. On the other hand, the facets of the middle construction also follow from high-level metaphor and metonymy. In this light, Spanish and French middles are instantiations of the same metonymies: (i) (UNREAL) REFLEXIVE ACTION FOR (UNREAL) PROCESS FOR (ACTUAL) NON-REFLEXIVE ACTION; (ii) (UNREAL) REFLEXIVE ACTION FOR (UNREAL PROCESS) FOR (ACTUAL) NON-REFLEXIVE ACTION FOR RESULT.

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