

# **A tightly-woven network of semantics and pragmatics in middle construction: with the grooming verbs**

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**Yu, Hye-Ryung. 2016. A tightly-woven network of semantics and pragmatics in middle construction: with the grooming verbs. *SNU Working Papers in English Linguistics and Language 14*, 143-152.** In English, there are a variety of grooming verbs describing the act of grooming such as undress, wash, brush, bathe, shave, comb etc. However, every grooming verb cannot make this structure. Only some grooming verbs normally used as transitive verbs use an understood reflexive pronoun object, which is a semantically required but syntactically implicit argument, forming a middle voice construction. It is generally assumed that it needs a complex mapping among some semantic features to make the middle construction. And most of the previous researches have focused on these semantic components. I'll explore how this middle voice construction, in particular which needs an implicitly understood reflexive object, can be a representation of the dynamic interaction between the semantic and pragmatic factors by categorizing 10 grooming verbs. (Seoul National University)

**Keywords:** grooming verbs, an understood reflexive object, implicit argument, affectedness, economicity, middle construction

## **1. Introduction**

Middle voice construction has caught many researchers' attention because it is hard to explain the structure with linguistic branches such as semantics, syntax, and pragmatics separated. That is, it is most likely impossible to investigate the middle construction phenomenon without considering the vigorous interaction among them. Groefsema (1995) argued that individual verbs allowing their arguments to be omitted cannot explain their behavior with respect to their arguments. Rather, pragmatic factors imposed on the understood arguments can account for the interpretation about those arguments thanks to the context the event occurs. Many other previous researches have mainly focused on the

syntactic, semantic properties of the middle construction and implicit argument separately, and they seem to put less attention on the interconnection between semantics, and pragmatics.

Therefore, here I focus on the interconnection between semantics and pragmatics. The purpose of this paper is to examine how the interconnection occurs. To do this, I'll firstly explore what semantic properties of 10 grooming verbs, which allow them to omit their reflexive object, are. And then, how pragmatics can contribute to the middle construction formation and interpretation of grooming verbs.

## 2. Theoretical and terminological background

Kaufmann (2007) said middle voice construction has an active verb form generally with a reduced argument structure, in most cases only one participant being engaged in the event the verb denotes.

It is argued that verbs which can construct the middle voice structure should have several semantic properties. One of them is “affectedness.” This is usually defined as a property of undergoing some state/location change. Beaver re-evaluated some of the semantic evidence dedicated to the Middle voice formation. (Beaver, 2011) One direct test for the affectedness of a predicate is Cruse’s (1973) ‘What happened to X is Y.’

- (1) a. The Romans destroyed the barbarian city.  
b. What happened to the barbarian city is that the Romans destroyed it.
- (2) a. They followed the star (out of Bethlehem).  
b. \*What happened to the star is they followed it (out of Bethlehem).

Beaver said the object of (1a) is affected and can pass the test. However, for (2a), the object (the star) is not affected and doesn’t pass the test.

Also, affectedness is concerned with a matter of degree. In other words, how strongly affected a patient or a theme of a verb is different based on contexts. Moreover, it is likely that degree of affectedness affects transitivity of verbs, that is, the higher degree of affectedness, the higher transitivity becomes. However, as Beaver (2011) pointed out, the degree of affectedness, whether it is high or low, is difficult to define with precision because it is somewhat intuitive. Despite this problem affectedness has, it plays a crucial role in argument realization, especially in determining direct objecthood (Fillmore, 1977). According to Seo (2005), the following sentences (3a, 3b, 3e, 3f) are grammatical, but (3c, 3d) are ungrammatical.

- (3) a. This bread slices easily.  
b. This wood splits easily.  
c. \*This poem understands easily.  
d. \*That towel sees easily from my window.  
e. The book reads easily.  
f. Jenny photographs well.

(3a, 3b) are well-formed middle constructions whereby they satisfy the affectedness condition. On the other hand, (3c, 3d) are ungrammatical. That is because the verbs- understand, see- don't affect the change of their patients' state. However, (3e, 3f) are grammatical though they also don't cause their patients' static change. It indicates that middle construction formation needs other semantic properties, one of which is 'aspect.' The middle construction generally states the generic proposition. According to Tenny (1987), the verbs that form middle voice construction should have a time limit on aspect in which there are a starting point and an end point, and the change of state must occur within the time period. In (3c, 3d), the events they denote do not occur within the limited time, so they are ungrammatical.

There are other properties that contribute to the middle voice

construction such as causitivity, and agentivity. However, they don't need to be necessarily saturated in middle construction (Rapoport, 1999). According to Rapoport, some middle constructions have a for-PP whose argument is identical to the agent of the middle voice, but others don't. The for-PP is an overtly realized agent argument.

- (4) a. French books read easily for educated people.  
 b. Latin texts do not translate easily for Bill.  
 c. \*These books don't sell for the average shopkeeper.

That (4c) is ungrammatical means that the agentivity property is not inherent in middle voice construction.

The middle construction is construed to have an implicit argument while satisfying these semantic constraints suggested above although they are not fully saturated in some cases. Furthermore, the middle construction needs not only a closely woven network among the semantic properties, but also should be considered pragmatically. Haiman (1983) suggested the concepts on INTROVERTED/EXTROVERTED verbs.

- (5) a. Max washed (himself).  
 b. Max kicked himself.  
 c. \*Max kicked.

In (5a), the direct object can be preferably omitted if the sentence is reflexively understood, though the verb 'wash' is a transitive verb. This is not the case for the verb 'kick' in (5b). He argued that it is rationale that verbs like 'wash' are characterized by semantic homogeneity. In other words, they can denote actions a person performs upon himself or herself in general situations. These belong to introverted verbs. On the other word, verbs describing actions the subject usually performs to or for others are called extroverted verbs. Also, the implicit reflexive object is interpreted pragmatically in that speakers express a linguistic form

with a reduced one when they accept it as familiar or predictable in a given context. That is to say, arguments can be left implicit if their interpretation is limited and constrained in a particular manner. The reason is that the constraints allow recovery of the interpretation from the context. (Groefsema, 1994) Because speakers generally want to make language use more efficient automatically, this is natural and universal in humans' cognitive process.

### **3. The present study**

#### **3.1 Grooming verbs**

What are the grooming verbs? They are verbs whose meaning is related to the act of grooming. However, though there are some semantically synonymous verbs, whether the meanings are completely identical or locally identical, all of them do not necessarily allow an understood reflexive object. Some verbs allow an implicit reflexive object, but others do not. How can we categorize these verbs?

#### **3.2 The previous researches limitation on grooming verbs**

As you saw the previous researches suggested, one important property for the Middle voice construction is affectedness. However, it is difficult to apply this semantic factor to these grooming verbs and sub-categorize them because how strongly affected the verbs are by the agent is a somewhat subjective matter. Since the transitivity and the causativity are closely related to the affectedness factor, these semantic properties also cannot sub-categorize the grooming verbs. So there is need to find out other aspects devoted to the middle voice construction of the grooming verbs.

#### **3.3 Semantic/ pragmatic interface in grooming verbs**

In order to examine what kinds of grooming verbs can have an understood reflexive object, I consulted the Oxford English Dictionary (OED).

Table 1. The grooming verbs' meaning from OED

Word	Meaning
undress	[no object] Take off one's clothes: e.g. 'She undressed and climbed into bed'
	[with object] Take the clothes off (someone else): e.g. 'He undressed his son slowly'
wash	[no object] Clean oneself with soap and water: e.g. 'He reached for the soap and began to wash'
	[with object] Clean with water and, typically, soap or detergent: e.g. 'Auntie Lou had washed all their clothes'
brush	[with object] [with adverbial] Remove (dust or dirt) by sweeping or scrubbing: e.g. 'We'll be able to brush the mud off easily'
	Use a brush or one's hand to remove dust or dirt from (something): e.g. 'She brushed down her best coat'
	Clean (one's teeth) with a brush
soap	[with object] Wash with soap: e.g. 'She <i>soaped</i> her face'
strip	[with object] Remove all coverings from: e.g. 'They stripped the bed'

	[with object and complement] Remove the clothes from (someone): e.g. 'The man had been stripped naked'
	[no object] Take off one's clothes: e.g. 'I was tempted to strip off for a swim'
towel	Wipe or dry with a towel: [with object and complement] e.g. 'She towelled her hair dry'
shampoo	[with object] Wash or clean (something, especially the hair) with shampoo: e.g. 'Dolly was sitting in the bath shampooing her hair'
shave	[no object] (of a man) cut the hair off the face with a razor: e.g. 'He washed, shaved, and had breakfast'
	[with object] Cut the hair off (a part of the body) with a razor: e.g. 'She shaved her legs'
	[with object] Cut the hair off the face or another part of the body of (someone) with a razor: e.g. 'His wife washed and shaved him'
lather	[no object] Form or cause to form a lather: e.g. 'Soap will not lather in hard water'
	[with object] Rub soap on to (the body) until a lather is produced: e.g. 'She was lathering herself languidly beneath the shower'

comb	[with object] Untangle or arrange (the hair) by drawing a comb through it: e.g. 'she combed her hair and put some lipstick on'
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Definitions about these verbs from the OED shed light on an understood reflexive object of the grooming verbs. As you can see, the verbs (e.g. undress, wash, strip, shave, lather) seem to have an object expressing the speaker's body as whole. It seems that these verbs put a more emphasis on the patients' static change in their whole body part, which is an event the verb denotes. Cognitively, the whole body part is considered the very entity who does the grooming act. So, in these cases, there is no specific and special context for people to draw the general interpretation.

On the other hand, the verbs (e.g. brush, soap, shampoo, comb) can have an object which is a specific body part. These verbs focus not on the patients' static change, but on the act of grooming a specific body part with an instrument such as brush, soap, shampoo, and comb. These verbs are derived from the noun referencing the specific instrument. So, their meanings become restricted to the body part, which should be explicitly expressed. When the meaning of the argument of verbs is constrained, they have no choice but to use the more special context to allow for more general interpretation.

To sum up, the grooming verbs in this present study can be sub-categorized into two groups. One group involves verbs that have a meaning interpretation like this: the grooming act by the verb is generally done for the whole body without a specific/special context. However, the other group contains verbs whose meaning is interpreted like this: the grooming act is done for a specific body part such as hair, and there is need of a special context for a speaker to have another meaning. As I suggested, these kinds of verbs should have their object argument explicitly expressed, so they cannot have an understood reflexive object. It is the dynamic interaction between the semantic factor they denote by

themselves and the pragmatic one that determines whether some grooming verbs allow their reflexive object to be omitted but others do not.

#### **4. Conclusion**

We have explored a very unique linguistic phenomenon called the Middle voice construction, especially the Middle where some verbs allow their reflexive object to be omitted. These object arguments are called implicit arguments, which are semantically explicit but syntactically implicit. To construct the Middle voice structure, there are several semantic factors needed. (I ruled out the syntactic features that the structure have.)

However, in some cases of grooming verbs, there is a vague boundary between apparently-synonymous words such as ‘soap/ lather’, where lather allows for an understood reflexive object but soap doesn’t. We need to figure out their different usage comes from.

Also, what we have to focus on is that though the implicit arguments are omitted, speakers and listeners can draw an appropriate interpretation about the meaning the verbs denote. They can do so, by retrieving the elliptical part from the context. To acquire economical efficiency in language use, the language users omit predictable part.

In this paper, I focused on the interconnection between semantics and pragmatics because pragmatic factors play a very crucial role in the Middle voice construction formation and in the general interpretation as much as the semantic features. By sub-categorization between verbs that can have an understood reflexive object and verbs that cannot, we could find out the dynamic interaction between semantics and pragmatics.

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