

## The properties of German *sich lassen*-middles

1. German *sich lassen* (*sl*)-middles (1a) have received relatively little attention in the literature (but see Hoehle 1978, Fagan 1992, Kunze 1996) despite their similarities to the rather well-studied German dispositional middles ('canonical middles'; (1b)):

- (1) a. Dieses Auto lässt sich (gut) verkaufen.      b. Dieses Auto verkauft sich gut.  
       This car let-3.sg. REFL (well) sell.                This car sell-3.sg. REFL well.  
       'This car sells well.'                                        'This car sells well.'

We develop an analysis of *sl*-middles that accounts for their similarities to and differences from canonical middles and has important implications for the morphological marking of argument alternations, the characteristics of middle Voice, binding theory, and non-canonical passives. In particular, we argue that only *sl*-middles involve a sub-event which is realized by a passive complement. Syntactically, the matrix predicate *lassen* is a reflexively marked anticausative based on transitive permissive *lassen*. As such, it projects an expletive VoiceP with the detransitivizing reflexive pronoun *sich* in its specifier which is also present in canonical middle formation (Schäfer 2008, cf. Embick 1998, Alexiadou 2010 – both claim that special morphological marking is present in contexts where Voice does not project an external argument). This entails that due to the inherent semantics of permissive *lassen*, modality in *sl*-middles, unlike with canonical middles, is wired directly into the (embedding) predicate. Thus, as *sl*-middles are built on the basis of a marked anticausative embedding a passive, they fall in line with e.g. the French *se-faire* construction, for which a parallel analysis has been proposed (Labelle 2002). Hence, *sl*-middles instantiate a type of non-canonical passive that is cross-linguistically available.

2. While *sl*-middles are similar to canonical middles in their generic semantics (cf. Fagan 1992, Abraham 1995, Steinbach 2002, Schäfer 2008), unlike canonical middles they can be based on achievements (2a), and, crucially, allow *by*-phrases introducing the suppressed external argument of the lower predicate (2b):

- (2) a. Diese Krankheit lässt sich leicht erkennen/\*erkennt sich leicht  
       This disease lets REFL easily recognize/\*recognizes REFL easily  
       b. Das Buch lässt sich (von Kindern) leicht lesen  
       The book let-3.sg. REFL by children easily read-INF  
       'The book can be easily read by children.'

To account for this, we propose that *sl*-middles are bi-eventive and embed a passive complement (VoiceP) rather than a plain VP. Restrictions on the productivity of *sl*-middles provide further support: only verbs that form an eventive passive can appear as complements of *sich lassen*. (3/4) show this, using a verb that morphologically marks the causative alternation via stem allomorphy:

- (3) a. Das Schiff versinkt.                                        b. Hans versenkt das Schiff  
       The ship sinks<sub>INCHOATIVE</sub>                                        John sinks<sub>CAUSE</sub> the ship.  
       (4) a. Das Schiff wurde versenkt /\*versinkt.  
       The ship became sunk<sub>CAUSE</sub>/\*sunk<sub>INCHOATIVE</sub>  
       b. Das Schiff lässt sich versenken/\*versinken.  
       The ship let-3.sg REFL sink<sub>CAUSE</sub> /\*sink<sub>INCHOATIVE</sub>  
       c. \*Das Schiff lässt sich Hans versenken.  
       The ship let-3.sg. REFL John sink.

(4b) indicates that the complement of *lassen* in *sl*-middles has to be based on the transitive, not the inchoative variant of *senken* 'sink', which would be unexpected under a VP-analysis but follows directly from a passive-infinitive approach. (4c) shows that the complement of *sich lassen* has to be passive: even though it needs to be based on the transitive variant of the verb, a canonical realization of the external argument is not possible but has to be suppressed.

3. Due to the lack of passive morphology, the existence of a passive infinitive has been contested (cf. Gunkel 2003 challenging Reis' 1978 passive infinitive approach to causative passives). We claim that this argument against passive infinitives is not valid. The absence of passive morphology follows from the absence of Aspect (the locus of participial morphology, see e.g. Embick 2004) and Tense in the verbal complement, suggesting that passivization does not necessarily have an overt morphological reflex

(contra Haspelmath 1990). The reduced structure of the complement in *sl*-middles is evident in the context of extraposition. Only sentential complements (incoherent infinitives) can be extraposed (5; cf. Bech 1955/83). The infinitive of *sl*-middles, behaving like obligatory restructuring infinitives ((6), cf. Wurmbrand 2001) in this and other contexts, can *not* be moved (7).

- (5) ...weil Hans mich (das Buch zu kaufen) auffordert (das Buch zu kaufen).  
 ...because John me (the book to buy) ask-3.sg. (the book to buy)  
 ‘...because John asks me to buy the book.’
- (6) ...weil Hans (das Kind schreien) hört \*(das Kind schreien).  
 ...because John (the child scream) hear-3.sg. (the child scream)  
 ‘...because John hears the child scream.’
- (7) ...weil sich (das Buch lesen) lässt \*(das Buch lesen).  
 ...because REFL (the book read) let-3.sg. (the book read)  
 ‘...because the book can be read.’

4. The embedding predicate *sich lassen* (see Reis 1976, Hoehle 1978, Kunze 1996, Gunkel 2003 a.o. for the existence of a reflexive *lassen*) is a marked anticausative based on the permissive use of *lassen*. Its anticausative nature is supported by the observation that *sl*-middles, exactly as ordinary reflexive anticausatives (8), license *durch*-(from/through) phrases introducing a facilitator (9a) (cf. Alexiadou et al. 2006, Kallulli 2007, 2009). Unsurprisingly, the same facilitator can function as external argument of transitive permissive *lassen* (9b):

- (8) Durch die Schmiere öffnete sich die Tür nun von selbst.  
 Through the grease opened REFL the door now by itself.  
 ‘Due to the grease, the door opened all by itself.’
- (9) a. Durch die Schmiere lässt sich die Tür nun leichter öffnen.  
 Through the grease let-3.sg. REFL the door now easier open  
 ‘Due to the grease, the door can now be opened more easily.’
- b. Die Schmiere lässt einen die Tür nun leichter öffnen.  
 The grease let-3.sg. one the door now easier open  
 ‘The grease facilitates the door-opening process.’
- c. \*Durch die Schmiere wurde die Tür geöffnet.  
 Through the grease was the door opened

The lack of a corresponding passive (9c) shows that the *durch*-phrase is not licensed by the passive infinitive in (9a) but rather by the anticausative *sich lassen*.

5. The subject of *sl*-middles is base-generated as the theme complement of the embedded predicate. Since it cannot receive accusative case either in the lower passive VoiceP or from the embedding anticausative (which assigns accusative to the non-referential reflexive *sich* in SpecVoiceP; cf. Schäfer 2008), the embedded theme has to receive nominative via Agree with matrix T and optionally raises to matrix SpecCP (i.e. the V-2 *Vorfeldposition*). *Sich* in turn is bound via the valued  $\phi$ -features on T. (10; embedded predicate in bold):

- (10) [<sub>CP</sub> Das Buch<sub>i</sub> lässt<sub>j</sub> [<sub>TP</sub> t<sub>i</sub> t<sub>j</sub> [<sub>VoiceP</sub> sich t<sub>j</sub> [<sub>VP</sub> t<sub>j</sub> [<sub>VoiceP</sub> **Voice**<sub>{passive}</sub> [<sub>v</sub> **[lesen t<sub>i</sub>]]]]]]]]]**

#### Selected References:

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