

Subject Prominence in English Middles

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Surface subjects (henceforth S-subjects) of middle and ergative constructions exhibit different levels of prominence in their roles as subjects. While the S-subject in each construction is generally accepted as an internal argument of its verb, the degree of agentivity varies when this internal argument raises to subject position. Given the following

- (1) a. Bureaucrats bribe easily.
- b. Ships sink.

the middle S-subject bureaucrat in (1a) does not function as an agent in the act of bribing while the ergative S-subject ship in (1b) does.

Following Burzio (1986), we might refer to (1a,b) as BV members of AVB/BV alternations, where the internal θ -role of the AVB construction has been externalized à la Williams (1981a) to produce BV. Assuming this derivation, it is interesting to note that a difference in S-subject prominence is also obvious in the AVB forms of (1a,b) where an explicit agent is present, as shown by the paraphrasing of the AVB sentences in (2a,b) as (3a,b).

- (2) a. X bribed the bureaucrat.
 - b. X sank the ship.
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- (3) a. * X caused the bureaucrat to bribe easily.
 - b. X caused the ship to sink.

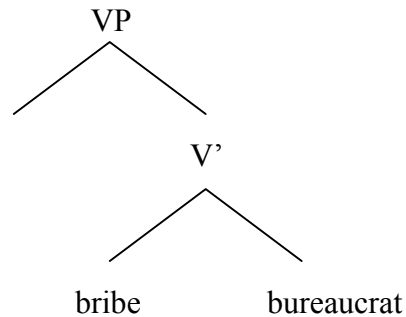
The direct objects in (2a,b) are different in that the object of (2a) is prohibited from being the subject of an embedded causative complement clause in (3a) while the object of (2b) is not and paraphrases as the grammatical (3b). To account for this difference, I propose that the objects of (2a,b) are different types of internal arguments and are base-generated in different positions relative to their respective verbs. If this is true, and the AVB forms in (2a,b) are fundamentally different in terms of the internal argument position of their verbal complements, the noted difference in subject prominence of middle and ergative S-subjects may be explained in a simple way.

Among the arguments presented to explain the difference between middle and ergative behavior are lexical transitivity differences (Keyser & Roeper 1984; henceforth K&R); stative/eventive contrasts (Fagan 1988); and unergativity/unaccusativity contrasts (Akema & Schoorlemmer 1995; henceforth A&S). These arguments do not take into account the difference in subject prominence presented above and as a result do not consider a difference in internal argument status. While both K&R and Fagan acknowledge the middle and ergative S-subject as an internal argument of the verb, they explain differences by location of movement in different domains (K&R) or stative/eventive semantic contrasts (Fagan), but crucially not by differentiating between

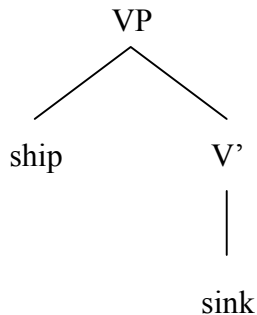
the relationship of the verb and its internal argument. A&S, while recognizing a significant difference in the relationships between the two S-subjects and their respective verbs, make the claim that the middle S-subject is a logical subject and the ergative S-subject a logical object. This is essentially the opposite of the claim that I make here, which is that the D-structure of middles and ergatives reflects the stronger subject status of the ergative S-subject.

In this paper I will examine only the difference in S-subject prominence of middles and ergatives and attempt to explain it by locating each construction's S-subject in a different VP-internal position in the basic AVB forms. I will argue that S-subject behavior of middles and ergatives can be explained by one parsimonious assumption: whether the domain of derivation is lexical or syntactic, middle S-subjects are derived from a VP-internal object position, while ergative S-subjects are derived from a VP-internal subject position. The assumed base-generated structures are similar to those presented in Larson (1988), Hale & Keyser (1993) and Basilico (1998), where the verb's internal argument may be either a VP-internal object, as in (4a) or a VP-internal subject, as in (4b).

(4) a. Middles



b. Ergatives



There are two phenomena, affectedness and predication, which taken together will motivate the structures in (4a,b). We may first locate the NP arguments inside the VP via affectedness and subsequently distinguish them via differences in predication types.

Affectedness, noted by Hopper (1985) as a fundamental test for transitivity, and therefore internal argument status, seems a strong justification for establishing the NPs in (4a,b) in their VP-internal positions. Taken alone, however, the semantic notion of

affectedness or change-of-state does not suffice to generate different structures within VP. Note that *ship* in each of the following cases is an affected argument of its verb,

- (5) a. X sank the ship / The ship sank / The ship sank easily
- b. X destroyed the ship / *The ship destroyed / The ship destroyed easily
- c. X painted the ship / *The ship painted / The ship painted easily

but the ergatives in (5b,c) are ungrammatical while the middles are fine. Clearly, affectedness cannot be the sole basis for differentiating between middle and ergative S-subjects, as we run into a problem categorizing internal arguments by measuring the degree to which they are affected. It is worth noting that Fagan's semantic analysis of middles as generic and ergatives as eventive also fails to point out any difference between the two constructions' internal arguments, and breaks down further given the fact that stative ergatives behave differently than stative middles on the repetitive *away* and *out-*prefixation tests introduced by K&R, as in (6a,b) and (7a,b).

- (6) a. Ships sink away (when hit by cannonballs).
- b. * Bureaucrats bribe away (when presented with lavish gifts).
- (7) a. Ships outsink sailboats.
- b. * Bureaucrats outbribe managers.

Something more than semantics is required to distinguish types of internal arguments and predict the grammaticality of ergative alternations. (I should note here that there are syntactic tests for internal argument status, notably auxiliary selection and object cliticization in languages where these occur (Burzio 1986). I must point out that such tests are more along the lines of *a posteriori* diagnostics for internal arguments, but crucially not motivating factors for the location of arguments inside VP.)

The second step in motivating the representations in (4a,b) is based on Basilico's (1998) claim that different predication forms correspond to different positions of objects within VPs. Basilico supports his claim via syntactic scope differences between alternations in creation/transformation, locative and double-object constructions, but we can extend the association of predication forms and object position to middle and ergative S-subjects and use it in support of the structures in (4a,b). In fact, Roeper and van Hout (1999) notice a similar scope difference in middles and ergatives, explicated by the structures in (8a,b).

- (8) a. These suitcases open up easily.
- b. These suitcases easily open up.

Roeper and van Hout's claim is that only the adverbial in post-verbal position (8a) results in a middle reading, while the adverbial in pre-verbal position (8b) results in an ergative (unaccusative per Roeper and van Hout). If this is correct, we have syntactic evidence to extend Basilico's argument to the domain of middles and ergatives.

Basilico contrasts between two forms of VP-internal predication, *thetic* and *categorical*, where only the latter singles out a VP-internal argument:

When an object occupies an internal position, this corresponds to a ‘thetic predication’ within the inner predication in which an assertion is being made as to the existence of an object or of an event involving the object. When an object occupies an external position, this corresponds to a ‘categorical predication’ within the inner predication, in which a property is being ascribed to the object.

There is a sense in which the categorical predication’s “individuation” (Basilico’s term) of an argument corresponds to the argument’s ability to function in a subject role. It is clear that of the objects in (5a,b,c), only the *ship* in (5a) is uniquely related to the verb *sink* in the sense that it is not only a part of the action of sinking, but also a performer of such action. The *ship* is, regardless of the presence or absence of an agent, doing, or experiencing, the *sinking*. This participation of the object in the action of its verb is the basis for locating the NP of the AVB structure in (4b) outside of V’ and for the subsequent BV/ergative alternation of (1b). The failure of the verbs *destroy* and *paint* in (5b,c) to ergativize might simply be due to the type-of-predication subcategorization of these verbs: *destroy* and *paint* call for a thetic predication with their objects.

We might consider, on the basis of such affectedness and predication arguments, ergatives as constructions with a VP-internal subject. This would seem to indicate a third class of verbs, in addition to accusatives and unergatives, in which an NP enjoys both a subject and object role. Once again, complement-clause paraphrases like those in (3a,b) may be used to demonstrate the differences among these classes.

- (9) a. X bribed Y.
b. * X caused Y to bribe.
- (10) a. * X laughed Y.
b. X caused Y to laugh.
- (11) a. X sank Y.
b. X caused Y to sink.

Note that the grammaticality of (9a,b) and (10a,b), the accusatives and unergatives, respectively, is in complementary distribution – (9b) is ruled out because Y is an object and only an object; (10a) fails because Y is a subject and only a subject. Both constructions in (11), however, would be allowed if Y functions as both a subject and object of its verb. I will note here that A&S’s argument for middle S-subjects as logical subjects would predict that (9) and (10) exhibit the same patterns of grammaticality. They do not.

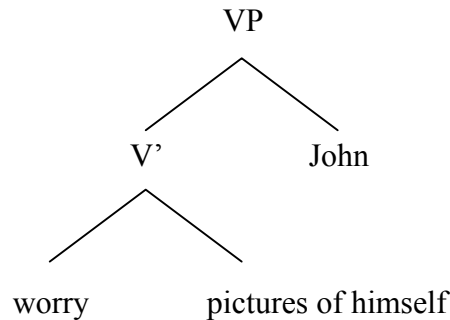
The creation of a third category of verbs is not as ad-hoc as it seems, as ergative S-subject behavior resembles that of psych-verb Experiencer objects. Belletti & Rizzi’s (1988) (henceforth B&R) representation of psych-verbs is that of verbs with two internal

objects, where the Experiencer *John* has more thematic prominence than the Theme *pictures of himself* in (12).

- (12) Pictures of himself worry John.

B&R hypothesize the structure in (13), where asymmetrical c-command, use of arbitrary *pro*, and embedded causatives follow from the location of the psych-verb Experiencer in a VP-internal subject position.

- (13)



This structure is essentially similar to that of (4b) if we consider only the location of the VP-internal subjects (*ship* in (4b) and *John* in (13)) in relation to their verbs. It would follow that ergatives pattern in some respects with psych-verbs, which in fact they seem to do.

Psych-verbs of the *worry* class exhibit the alternations in (14a,b).

- (14) a. X worries Y.
b. Y worries.

This AVB/BV pattern is exactly the same as that found in ergatives. There are additional similarities between the *worry* psych-verbs and ergatives which are not apparent in middles, specifically, the ability to embed psych-verbs and ergatives in a causative construction (15); the possibility of a passive agent (16); and *si*-clitic use in Italian (17).

- (15) a. Psych-verb: X worries Y. (X causes Y to worry)
b. Ergative: X sinks Y (X causes Y to sink)
c. Middle: X bribes Y (*X causes Y to bribe)

- (16) a. Psych-verb: Flaws in his character worry John
b. Ergative: Holes in their hulls sink ships.
c. Middle: *Financial greed bribes bureaucrats.

- (17) a. Psych-verb: Y *si* preoccupa. (Y worries.)
b. Ergative: Y (si) affonda. (Y sinks.)
c. Middle: Y SI legge facilmente. (Y reads easily.)

Regarding (17a,b,c), Burzio (1986) claims that psych-verbs and ergatives (Burzio's term for the BV alternations of AVB/BV pairs) both select for the non-thematic ergative *si* (sometimes optional in the case of ergatives). Italian "middles", however, select for thematic subject *SI*, which is never optional, and often require an adverbial in object-preposing cases such as that of (17c). In combination with the English evidence in (15) and (16), the *si/SI* alternations substantiate the claim that ergative S-subjects relate to their verbs differently than middle S-subjects.

It seems the difference in middle and ergative subject prominence may be explained by a crucial distinction between the two constructions' internal arguments: middle S-subjects originate as VP-internal objects; ergative S-subjects are, in a sense, subjects all along. Evidence in support of such a distinction comes from form-of-predication arguments and comparisons with certain psych-verbs, and seems to indicate a fundamental difference in the subcategorizations of verbs that can ergativize and verbs that cannot. In fact, the hypothesis presented in this paper suggests that middle and ergative S-subjects are different even when the ergative contains the canonical middle adjunct *easily*, as in (18a,b), where despite the adjunct in (18b) no agent is implied.

- (18) a. Bureaucrats bribe easily.
b. Ships sink easily.

It is possible that such an analysis of internal argument structure may explain further variations in middle and ergative syntactic behavior. If this is the case, we could avoid lexical movement analyses that utilize syntax-like derivations in the lexicon to generate new D-structures and simply rely on different basic VP structures for different classes of verbs.

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