

In the Event of a Disposition

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Synopsis We propose an analysis of impersonal middles (IM), illustrated for Dutch and German in (1) and (2), on the basis of Lekakou's (2005) treatment of personal middles (PM) as disposition ascriptions to the Patient/Theme. We argue that IM involve a disposition ascription too, albeit to an eventuality. Applying the dispositional analysis to IM captures their semantic and syntactic properties, as well as the fact that IM pattern with PM in a number of ways, as shown in Ackema & Schoorlemmer (2005), Broekhuis & Corver (2015).

- (1) Het danst hier goed. (Dutch) (2) Es tanzt sich hier gut. (German)
it dances here good it dances REFL here good
'One dances well here.'

Disposition Ascriptions According to Lekakou (2005), middles are disposition ascriptions to the Patient/Theme. Disposition ascriptions are generic sentences whose truth depends on properties inherent in the subject referent. In particular, Lekakou (op.cit.) argues that disposition ascriptions are subject-oriented generic sentences involving a VP-level generic operator, the semantics of which is modeled on Brennan's (1993) analysis of dispositional *will*. The conversational background restricting the operator consists of properties of the syntactic subject (instead of propositions, as in the Kratzerian analysis of modals), which can be overtly realized via an *in virtue of* phrase, as in (4) and (5).

- (3) a. Mary handles the mail from Antarctica. (active dispositional)
b. This machine crushes oranges. (active dispositional)
(4) The car drives well, in virtue of its new suspension/*my driving skills. (middle)
(5) Cotton washes easily, in virtue of its consistency/* my washing machine. (middle)

Agent demotion is then required for the disposition to be ascribed to the Patient/Theme.

Impersonal middles If IM as in (1) and (2) are to be treated as disposition ascriptions, the question arises what the disposition is ascribed to. For Hoekstra & Roberts (1993), Broekhuis & Corver 2015 (see also Fagan 1992, Lekakou 2005, Pitteroff 2014), the semantic subject of IM is the nominal inside the PP modifier; an association process links an adjunct (the PP) to an argument position (the subject pronoun), much like what has been argued for extraposition (comp. Bennis 1986) or certain copula clauses (*It is nice in Leiden*; Bennis & Wehrmann 1987). This approach is flawed for several reasons. (i) It is not only locational PPs that appear as modifiers in IM. On a dispositional approach, sentence (6) would attribute to blankets the unusual dispositional property of enabling one to sleep well in their absence. A more likely candidate for the dispositional subject in (6) would be the entire PP. (ii) Other categories of modifiers are acceptable, such as AdjPs (7), which can hardly be conceived of as the subject of the dispositional predicate. (iii) In (8), there is no adjunct present that could be linked to the subject position, yet *het/es* is obligatory. Here the pronoun would take the dative argument as its associate; this would involve a process that is quite different from the one involved in (6) and (7). Other cases with sentential complements make the same point; extraction across *het/es* is possible in IM. Thus, no uniform analysis of IM seems possible: (6)-(8) involve a disposition ascription to arguments or adjuncts, and to different event participants or states (e.g. the state of being without blanket/being drunk).

- (6) Ohne Decke schläft *(es) sich gut. (German)
without blanket sleeps it REFL well
'Without a blanket, one can sleep well.'
(7) Betrunken tanzt *(es) sich besonders gut.
drunk dances it REFL particularly well
'One can dance particularly well when drunk.'

- (8) Kleinen Kindern hilft *(es) sich leicht.
 small.dat children.dat help it REFL easily
 ‘It is easy to help small children.’

Proposal We propose a unified approach to IM: IM ascribe a disposition not to an event participant, but to the event itself. (6) is thus a generalization over events (cf. Condoravdi 1989), and conveys that sleeping events without a blanket are disposed to be good sleeping events. Given Lekakou’s treatment of disposition ascriptions as subject-oriented generics, *het/es* is the syntactic *and* semantic subject in IM. This is in line with the fact that the subject pronoun in IM is of the (quasi-)argumental type (cf. Haider 1985, Bennis 1986, Vikner 1995); as such, *het/es* cannot be omitted in IM (cf. the expletive in impersonal passives). Building on Ramchand (1996) and Felser & Rupp (2001), who treat *there*-type expletives as realizations of Kratzer’s (1995) spatio-temporal argument (see also Piñón 2005 for a similar treatment of English *it*), we propose that the pronoun in IM realizes the event argument. Related to this, the associate of the pronoun in IM is, on our approach, the entire vP.

Syntax Following Schäfer’s (2008) analysis of (German) middles, *sich* is located in the specifier of expletive Voice. As in Lekakou (2005), VP-level GEN turns its complement into a modal (=dispositional) predicate. GEN combines with an expletive VoiceP and projects a Spec position for the subject of the dispositional predicate. Being the subject of the dispositional predicate, *het/es* is located in SpecGenP. (9) provides the proposed structure for the IM in (6) (glossing over irrelevant projections and leaving aside factors relevant to linearization (though see below). Dutch IM have the same base structure, but Dutch realizes expletive Voice differently, as PM independently show (see Schäfer op.cit).

- (9) [_{GenP} **es**ⁱ Gen [_{VoiceP} **sich** Voice_{expletive} [_{vP} [_{AdvP} **gut**] [_{vP}ⁱ [_{PP} **ohne Decke**] [_{vP} [_{VP} **schläft**]]]]]]]]

The additional modifier Since on our approach the modifier in IM does not function as the dispositional subject, its near-obligatory presence needs to be otherwise explained. The modifier in IM is, we contend, topical, and topics are obligatory (Cohen 2007 and references), albeit not for syntactic reasons. As a topic, the modifier maps onto the restrictor of the generic operator, i.e. it restricts the generalization expressed by IM; in e.g. (6) the restriction is to sleeping events that take place without a blanket. Since for us the dispositional subject is the event, we predict that only modifiers that target the event will be acceptable. This is borne out: only verb-related or participant-oriented modifiers in Maienborn & Schäfer’s (2011) terminology are acceptable, while sentence-level ones are not, cf. (10). Furthermore, if the restriction is contributed contextually, no modifier is required, cf. (11). The need for the additional modifier in IM is thus pragmatic (cf. Goldberg & Ackerman 2001).

- (10) a. Leise streitet es sich schlecht. (verb-related; manner)
 quietly fights it REFL badly
 ‘One cannot fight well quiet.’
 b. *Überraschenderweise streitet es sich schlecht. (sentence-level; evaluative)
 surprisingly fights it REFL badly
 ‘Surprisingly, one can fight badly.’
- (11) Context: John just started leading the live of a nudist. After one day, his friend Peter asks him how it is to be nude all the time. John answers:
 Es schläft sich gut... aber die Blicke der Menschen nerven schon.
 it sleeps REFL well...but the gazes of.the people annoy really
 ‘One can sleep well...but the people’s gazes are really annoying.’

An alternative is that the pronoun in IM associates with the eventuality contributed by the modifier (see e.g. Maienborn’s (2001) analysis of event-related modifiers as contributing their own event variable). However, such an analysis cannot account for (8), or (11).

Conclusion If our approach is on the right track, there are, in fact, no impersonal middles: middles always require a subject that the disposition is ascribed to. This view is supported by

adjunct middles in Dutch, which Ackema & Schoorlemmer (1994) argue are derived in a way very similar to personal middles. We demonstrate that our analysis extends to languages such as Polish or Ukrainian, where, for independent reasons, IM lack an overtly realized pronoun.