

On the Properties of German *sich-lassen* Middles

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1. Introduction

In the context of transitivity alternations, dispositional middles (1a) have been studied from a variety of perspectives (see Condoravdi 1989, Fagan 1992, Ackema & Schoorlemmer 2005, Steinbach 2002, Lekakou 2005 among others). In this paper, we are concerned with the syntactic and semantic properties of so-called German *sich-lassen* middles (*sl*-middles henceforth; (1b)), which, despite their superficial similarity to what we label here canonical middles in (1a), have received much less attention (but see Fagan 1992, Kunze 1996, and Ackema and Schoorlemmer 2005 for some insights).

- (1) a. Das Auto fährt sich angenehm. (canonical middle)
The car drive-3.sg. REFL comfortably
'The car drives comfortably.'
- b. Das Auto lässt sich (angenehm) fahren. (*sl*-middle)
The car let-3.sg. REFL comfortably drive-Inf
'The car drives comfortably.'

Despite certain similarities, *sl*-middles differ from canonical ones in a number of ways, most notably in terms of productivity and the syntactic presence of the implicit external argument. Based on these observations, we develop an analysis of *sl*-middles according to which these contain a reflexively marked anticausative (*sich lassen*) that embeds a morphologically unmarked passive (which we call *passive infinitive* due to the infinitival marking on the verb). The properties of *sl*-middles have an impact on various theoretically relevant topics: i) the syntactic theory of passivization, (since passive do not have to be morphologically marked, contra Haspelmath 1990), ii) the theory of the dispositional middle (which is shown to be a rather notional than grammatical category) as well as iii) the Binding Theory, which needs to account for cases where a non-thematic reflexive is bound by a structurally lower antecedent.

2. *sl*-middles vs. canonical middles

2.1. Similarities

The similarities between the two constructions essentially boil down to the following: canonical and *sl*-middles are non-episodic. They are generic statements about a property of the grammatical subject, which is what one usually associates with dispositional modality (see Condoravdi 1989, and Lekakou 2005 for an implementation of dispositionality in canonical middles; Holl 2010 for this type of modality in German modal infinitive constructions). Furthermore, in both constructions the internal argument (the understood or notional object) functions as the structural subject and both involve the presence of a non-thematic reflexive pronoun (see Haider 1985, Fagan 1992, Steinbach 2002, Schaefer

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2008 for the reflexive in canonical middles) which, in contrast to thematic reflexives, cannot be coordinated (2a), questioned (2b), modified (2c), or replaced by a full DP ((2d); see, Reis 1976 and Haider 1985 for such a classification of reflexive pronouns):

- (2) a. *Das Buch lässt sich und die Zeitschrift lesen.
The book lets REFL and the magazine read
 Intended: ‘The book and the magazine can be read.’
- b. *Wen lässt das Buch lesen?
Who lets the book read
 Intended: ‘For whom is it possible to read the book?’
- c. *Das Buch lässt nur sich lesen.
The book lets only REFL read
 Intended: ‘It is possible to read only this book.’
- d. *Das Buch lässt Hans lesen.
The book lets John read.

2.2. Differences¹

First, as indicated in (1b), the presence of manner adverbs is optional in *sl*-middles, whereas canonical ones (generally) require the presence of such a modifier (Fagan 1992: 215). Second, although impersonal variants of *sl*- as well as canonical middles are possible in German, they differ with respect to the optionality of the expletive pronoun *es* ‘it’. Impersonal middles require the presence of the expletive, but it is optional in *sl*-middles or even ungrammatical (Hoehle 1978: 63; Kunze 1996: 649). Third, *sl*-middles differ from canonical middles in terms of the lexical restrictions they impose on the predicate. Fagan (1992) notes that the latter can only be based on accomplishments and activities; achievements, however, are out (3a). By contrast, *sl*-middles lack such aspectual restrictions (3b).

- (3) a. *Diese Krankheit erkennt sich schnell.
This sickness recognizes REFL quickly
 ‘This sickness recognizes quickly.’
- b. Diese Krankheit lässt sich schnell erkennen.
This sickness lets REFL quickly recognize
 ‘This sickness can be detected quickly.’

Fourth, it is well-known that middles do not show signs of a syntactically active implicit argument. In particular, in contrast to verbal passives, middles cannot re-introduce the external argument as a complement in a *by*-phrase (4a). However, this is possible in *sl*-middles (4b) (Szatmári 2004: 37).

- (4) a. Verschlossene Türen öffnen sich (*von einem Handwerker) leicht.
locked doors open REFL by a craftsman easily.
- b. Verschlossene Türen lassen sich (von einem Handwerker) leicht öffnen.
locked doors let REFL by a craftsman easily open
 ‘Locked doors can be opened easily by a craftsman.’

Finally, an obvious difference relates to the fact that unlike canonical middles, *sl*-middles contain two (overt) verbal elements: the finite verb *lassen* ‘let’, and the infinitival complement. In the following section, we will determine the properties of the two verbal components of *sl*-middles which we consider crucial to understanding the particular behavior of *sl*-middles.

¹ All of the differences have been observed and discussed in Fagan (1992), and Kunze (1996); see also Hoehle (1978). Due to limitations on space, we will not provide examples for every one of the differences but refer the reader to the above mentioned literature.

3. The syntactic components of *sl*-middles

3.1. The status of 'lassen'

The higher verbal element *lassen* cannot be analyzed as an auxiliary, since it functions more like a semi-functional/lexical restructuring predicate (in the sense of Wurmbrand 2001) in being sensitive to event modification. Modifiers such as *wieder* 'again' can target the matrix event(uality) without enforcing modification of the embedded predicate. Imagine a context where John bought Mary a new book, which he accidentally drops into a muddy puddle on his way home. As a consequence, the book is unreadable. At home, he cleans the pages and the result is

- (5) ...dass das Buch sich wieder lesen lässt.
 ... that the book REFL again read lets
 '...that the book can be read again'

Note that (5) is compatible with the book never having been read before – 'again' clearly modifies the matrix predicate *lassen*, suggesting that it bears semantic (modal) content which distinguishes it from auxiliaries. Further, the reading in (5) cannot be considered the restitutive reading of *lesen* 'read': as (6) shows, the predicate only allows a repetitive reading.

- (6) ...weil Maria das Buch wieder liest.
 ...because Mary the book again reads
 '...because Mary reads the book again'

Further support for the claim that *lassen* cannot be considered an auxiliary comes from the fact that in *sl*-middles the reflexive pronoun belongs to *lassen* rather than to the embedded predicate (here we follow Reis (1976), Hoehle (1978), Kunze (1996) and Gunkel (2003); see Grewendorf (1983) and Suchsland (1987) for a different view). Having already determined the reflexive pronoun as a non-thematic one, the null hypothesis is that *sich lassen* is an instantiation of an independently existing construction that employs a non-thematic reflexive. There are three potential constructions in German: inherent reflexives, middles, or (marked) anticausatives.

3.1.1. 'sich lassen' as inherently reflexive

Kunze (1996), Gunkel (2003), and to some extent Haider (1985) assume that *sich lassen* in *sl*-middles is an inherent reflexive predicate. Yet, inherent reflexives lack a transitive counterpart², whereas *sich lassen* does have a transitive version in the canonical causative construction (7):

- (7) a. Der Ast lässt sich leicht zerbrechen.
 The branch lets REFL easily break
 'The branch can be broken easily.'
 b. Die Feuchtigkeit lässt selbst einen Schwächling den Ast zerbrechen.
 The humidity lets even a weakling the branch break
 'The humidity makes it possible that even a weakling breaks the branch.'

Furthermore, inherent reflexives passivize in German, thereby patterning with unergatives, rather than unaccusatives ((8a); see Schaefer 2008, to appear). *Sl*-middles, in contrast, do not form passives (8b), suggesting that *sich lassen* is not an inherent reflexive predicate.

- (8) a. ...und dann wurde sich geschämt.
 ...and then was REFL shamed
 b. *...und von dem Buch wurde sich lesen (ge-)lassen.
 ...and by the book was REFL read let-PART/INF

² We do not consider grooming verbs such as *sich waschen* 'wash oneself' to be inherently reflexive.

3.1.2. 'Sich lassen' as anticausative

German has two classes of anticausative verbs that differ, among other things, in their morphological makeup. The first class (labeled marked anticausatives by Schäfer (2008)) contains a non-thematic reflexive. The second one remains unmarked. In the preceding section, we saw that *sich lassen* has a causative counterpart: *lassen* 'let'. On the basis of this parallelism, we propose that *sich lassen* patterns with (marked) anticausatives. In other words, *sich lassen* is the marked anticausative variant of causative *lassen*. This assumption is supported by the fact that, parallel to other causative-anticausative pairs (see Alexiadou, Anagnostopoulou & Schäfer 2006, Kallulli 2009, and Schaefer 2008), a *durch* 'from'-PP in the *sl*-middle (9a) licenses the same argument that functions as the external argument of *lassen* in the causative construction (9b)³:

- (9) a. [Durch die großen Buchstaben] lässt sich das Buch von weitsichtigen Menschen gut lesen.
'Due to the large letters, the book can be read well by far-sighted people.'
- b. [Die großen Buchstaben] lassen weitsichtige Menschen das Buch leicht lesen.
'The large letters enable far-sighted people to read the book easily.'

It has been observed that causative constructions in a number of languages are ambiguous between a causative (factive/coercive causation) and a permissive interpretation (Nedjalkov 1976, Suchsland 1987, Gunkel 2003, Enzinger 2010 a.o.). We claim that permission in this case has to be understood as *x causes e to be possible*, thereby dissociating the concept from intentionality and accounting for the fact that (9b) is an instantiation of permission rather than coercion. As a consequence, the *sl*-middle in (9a) has to be based on the permissive reading of *lassen*. This makes immediate sense: if permission can be construed as *deontic possibility* as Auwera and Plungian (1998) suggest, it entails that *sich lassen* has the modal force *possibility* (see Kratzer 1991) hard-wired into its lexical semantics, thus triggering the dispositional interpretation typically involved in middle-constructions.

All of this entails that middles do not form a syntactic category but a semantic one, consisting of a number of different properties that independent syntactic constructions may possess or not (thereby directly supporting the view advanced by Condoravdi (1989) and Lekakou (2005), as well as indirectly the one in Schaefer (2008)). In other words, there is no *one* middle construction, but a middle interpretation for various syntactic structures (Vater 1988).

In the next section, we determine the syntax of the embedded predicate which we argue is a morphologically unmarked passive.

3.2.1. The lower part: a passive infinitive

Recall the differences between dispositional and *sl*-middles. Three of them are reminiscent of the properties of verbal passives. Note that if a verb can form a verbal passive, it can also occur in a *sl*-middle ((10); cf. the ungrammatical canonical middle in (3a)).

- (10) a. Diese Krankheit lässt sich schnell **erkennen**.
'This sickness can be recognized quickly.'

³ One could argue, however, that the *durch*-phrase is not licensed by *lassen*, but rather by the embedded passive, since passives can license both, a *durch*-phrase and a *von*-phrase:

- (i) Hektik und Stress werden von Patienten durch Atemübungen reduziert.
Hecticness and stress become by patients from/through deep-breathing exercises reduced
'Hecticness and stress are reduced by the patient through deep-breathing exercises.'

Yet, the passive counterpart of the following *sl*-middle is ungrammatical under these conditions:

- (ii) a. Durch den neuen Fahrbahnbelag lässt sich die Straße wieder befahren, ohne das Auto zu beschädigen.
'Due to the new road surface, the road can be driven on again, without damaging the car.'
- b. *Durch den neuen Fahrbahnbelag wird die Straße wieder befahren, ohne das Auto zu beschädigen.
'Due to the new road surface, the road is driven on again, without damaging the car.'

This shows that the *durch*-PP **has** to be associated with (*sich*) *lassen*.

- b. Diese Krankheit wurde schnell **erkannt**.
 ‘This sickness was recognized quickly.’

Furthermore, *sl*-middles, just as verbal passives, license a *by*-phrase introducing the suppressed external argument (Bhatt and Pancheva 2005); impersonal passives, similar to *sl*-middles, do not tolerate an expletive pronoun.

Thus, we propose that *let* in *sl*-middles embeds a verbal passive (a passive infinitive; see Reis (1976), Fanselow (1987) who propose something similar for the complement of *passive causatives*), thereby accounting for three of the four differences between *sl*-middles and canonical ones. The last difference, the optionality of the manner adverb in *sl*-middles, also follows from our approach: Roberts (1987) links the obligatoriness of the manner adverb in canonical middles to the need for *identification* of the (lexically suppressed) agent θ -role. Since passives have a syntactically active implicit agent, there is no need for such an *identification* and the adverb remains optional.

One straightforward objection to the postulation of an unmarked passive is the cross-linguistic tendency to mark such argument alternations morphologically (Haspelmath 1990, Gunkel 2003). Our answer is that passive syntax without a morphological reflex can occur if the relevant projections introducing the morphology are missing. In other words, we propose that the complement in *sl*-middles is too small for passive morphology to surface, but must be big enough to structurally encode a passive: *let* embeds a passive VoiceP.

3.2.2. The size of the complement

Bech (1955) distinguishes infinitives with from infinitives without sentential status (*incoherent* vs. *coherent* infinitives). One test to distinguish between the two is extraposition: only incoherent infinitives can be extraposed. (11a) shows this for the infinitival complement of a non-restructuring predicate *auffordern* ‘ask/request’. The complement of an obligatorily restructuring predicate, in contrast, cannot be extraposed (11b). This falls in line with the proposal that restructuring infinitives are bare VPs (Wurmbbrand 2001). Crucially, the infinitival complement in *sl*-middles behaves like a restructuring infinitive (11c) – it can only occur in internal position, suggesting that it lacks sentential projections (CP).

- (11) a. ...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.’
- b. ...weil Maria (ihn das Kind schlagen) sieht *(ihn das Kind schlagen)
 ...because Mary (him the child beat) see-3.sg. *(him the child beat)
 ‘...because Mary sees him beating the child.’
- c. ...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.’

Clause-union effects (such as the ECM-character of causative *lassen*) and the absence of a finite complement or an overt complementizer further support the lack of CP in complements of *lassen* (see Reis 1976, Grewendorf 1983, Suchsland 1987, Gunkel 2003, Enzinger 2010).

The absence of TP is indicated by the fact that the embedded event is temporally-dependent on the matrix event (12a). By contrast, (12b) shows that this does not hold for an incoherent infinitive, where the embedded event can be temporally modified independently.

- (12) a. *Gestern ließ sich das Buch morgen lesen.
 Yesterday let-3sg. REFL the book tomorrow read
- b. Gestern versprach Peter, morgen den Traktor zu reparieren.
 Yesterday promised Peter, tomorrow the tractor to repair
 ‘Yesterday, Peter promised to repair the tractor tomorrow.’

Additionally, as (*sich*) *lassen* obligatorily embeds a bare infinitive, perfect tense/aspect morphology can never surface (13).

- (13) a. Bis 8 Uhr hat Maria die Küche aufgeräumt.
By 8 a.m. has Mary the kitchen up-clean-PTC
 ‘Mary has cleaned up the kitchen by 8 a.m.’
- b. Bis 8 Uhr lässt sich die Küche aber nur von Hans aufräumen /*aufgeräumt haben.
*By 8 a.m. lets REFL the kitchen but only by John up-clean-INF /*up-clean-PTC have*
 ‘The kitchen can only be cleaned till 8 a.m. by John.’

We thus conclude that there is no evidence for the presence of an AspP in the complement of *lassen*. If, however, AspP is the locus of participial morphology (as proposed in Embick 2004), the absence of passive morphology in *sl*-middles is explained. The default/underspecified form used for German is thus the infinitival one.

3.2.3. A restructuring infinitive?

We argued that the complement of *lassen* lacks a number of projections (CP, TP, and, arguably, AspP). We also showed that *sl*-middles behave like restructuring constructions in a number of ways (extraposition and temporal dependency; additionally, *sl*-middles and (semi-)functional restructuring predicates have in common that they both trigger IPP-effects on the embedding predicate). Thus, the complement may just be a restructuring infinitive.

Two arguments show that the complement of *sich lassen* needs to involve more structure than just a bare VP. First, parallel to verbal passives (15a), *sl*-middles need to embed a transitive (or an unergative) predicate, but are incompatible with an unaccusative one (15b). Verbs that morphologically mark the anticausative alternation (14) clearly show this: only the causative variant is acceptable in *sl*-middles, the inchoative one leads to ungrammaticality:

- (14) a. Das Schiff versinkt. (inchoative)
 ‘The ship sinks.’
- b. Hans versenkt das Schiff (causative)
 ‘John sinks the ship’
- (15) a. Das Schiff wurde versenkt /*versunken.
*The ship became sunk-CAUS /*sunk-INCH*
 ‘The ship was sunk’
- b. Das Schiff lässt sich versenken /*versinken.
*The ship lets REFL sink-CAUS /*sink-INCH*
 ‘The ship can be sunk’

The above data is hard to explain under a bare VP-analysis. In particular, if *lassen* takes a VP-complement, why should unaccusatives not be possible? The contrast follows straightforwardly under the assumption that a further projection is present in the complement of *sich lassen*: the external argument introducing VoiceP (Kratzer 1996). Crucially, however, this VoiceP must not (overtly) realize its external argument:

- (16) *...weil sich Hans das Schiff versenken lässt.⁴
 Intended: ‘because John can sink the ship/the ship can be sunk by John.’

Thus, *sl*-middles pose the following restrictions on the infinitival complement: it needs to be a VoiceP in order to account for the intentionality and/or transitivity restriction (Holl 2010), but the external

⁴ (16) is acceptable under an interpretation which construes John as a causer/permissor and *sich* as a coindexed benefactor. In that case, however, (16) is a causative passive rather than an *sl*-middle.

argument that is canonically introduced in this projection needs to remain implicit. These requirements are fully satisfied by a passive VoiceP.

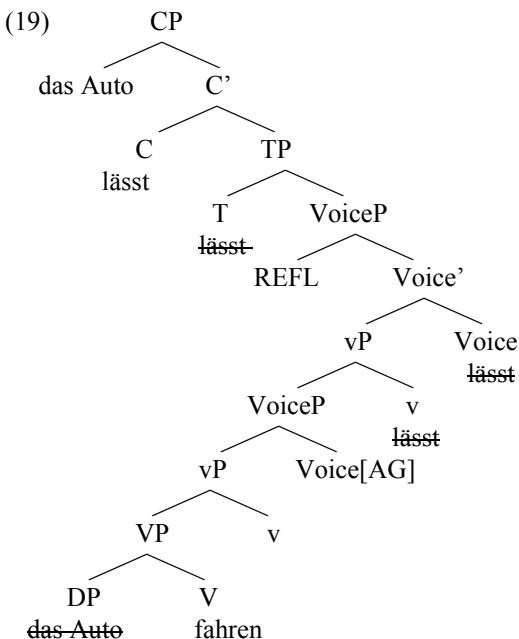
The second argument further supports the existence of such an unmarked passive in certain contexts. Verbs of perception and causative predicates have been claimed to be structurally similar (Wurmbrand 2001 groups them together as semi-functional restructuring predicates; canonically, they are both considered ECM verbs), but they differ fundamentally in terms of the type of infinitival complement they are able to take. Consider the following data:

- (17) a. Hans hört Maria einen Stock gegen den Fels schlagen.
John hears Mary-ACC a-ACC stick against the-ACC rock hit
 ‘John hears Mary hit a stick against the rock.’
- b. Hans lässt Maria einen Stock gegen den Fels schlagen.
John lets Mary-ACC a-ACC stick against the-ACC rock hit
 ‘John has Mary hit a stick against the rock.’
- (18) a. Hans hört einen Stock gegen den Fels schlagen.
John hears a-ACC stick against the-ACC rock hit
 ‘John hears a stick hitting the rock.’
- b. Hans lässt einen Stock gegen den Fels schlagen.
John lets a-ACC stick against the-ACC rock hit
 ‘John let a stick hit against the rock.’
 ‘John made someone hit a stick against the rock.’

(18b) shows that the complement of the causative verb *lassen* allows for an interpretation where some unexpressed agent hits the stick against the rock. The complement of the verb of perception, in contrast, is only compatible with the unaccusative reading of the embedded predicate. The additional, agentive reading of (18b), as well as its absence in (18a), can be explained under the assumption that *lassen* potentially embeds a passive VoiceP.

4. The derivation of *sl*-middles

In line with the presented arguments, we associate the *sl*-middle in (1b) with the structure in (19).



First, we build the passive infinitive by merging surface matrix subject as the internal argument of the embedded predicate *fahren* ‘drive’. We then add the category-identifying projection vP and the external argument-introducing VoiceP. Following Embick’s (1997, 2004) analysis of passives, the Voice head contains an [Ag]entivity feature, but does not project a specifier (presumably due to the lack of a [uD]-/EPP-feature) so that the external argument can only surface overtly as complement in a *by*-phrase that adjoins to VoiceP.

Since no more projections are present in the complement of *sich lassen*, we add the matrix predicate. *Lassen* behaves like a semi-functional restructuring predicate in a number of ways (co-occurrence with auxiliaries and modals, non-passivizability, IPP-effect, etc.), so we treat it as a light verb that is merged in v^0 (in line with Wurmbrand 2001) and combines with the passive VoiceP. On top of the matrix vP, we add an expletive VoiceP – essentially a projection that, in contrast to passive Voice, lacks an [Ag]-feature but projects a specifier (see Schaefer 2008 for details). The reflexive pronoun in the specifier of this expletive VoiceP is thus non-thematic, due to the lack of [Ag].

We then merge TP. Following Burzio (1991) in his claim that reflexives are featureless, the reflexive cannot value the uninterpretable ϕ -features on T^0 . Since uninterpretable features need to be deleted prior to LF, some other element has to do the job or the derivation will crash. The only (referential) element in the derivation that can do this is the embedded theme. By agreeing with T, the theme DP post-syntactically receives nominative Case (Marantz 1991), the reflexive consequently surfacing with dependent accusative. Furthermore, the embedded theme can value the uninterpretable ϕ -features of the reflexive pronoun via T^0 , thereby establishing the required binding relation. Note that this binding relation is a provocative one, since the antecedent is merged below the non-thematic reflexive, and potentially stays low (there is no movement for case in German, see footnote 10). Such binding configurations have already been proposed in Schaefer (2008) in order to derive anticausatives. Our analysis, however, provides another instance of such a binding configuration, where the antecedent is base-generated below the reflexive as an argument of a different (the embedded!) predicate.

Finally, the CP-layer is merged and the embedded theme moves to SpecCP to occupy the V2-prefield-position (movement of the embedded theme is not necessary prior to that. In German, nominative case can be assigned into the VP without triggering movement to SpecTP).

5. Conclusion

The properties of *sl*-middles provide important insights into the nature of passives, and the dispositional middle, and have impacts for the Binding Theory. We proposed that *sl*-middles syntactically involve a reflexively marked anticausative that embeds a morphologically unmarked passive complement. The latter fact is made possible by the reduced size of the complement, which lacks the projections that introduce passive morphology. Semantically, *sl*-middles nevertheless instantiate dispositionality since the embedding predicate *lassen* has the modal force *possibility* hard-wired into its lexical semantics, which supports claims that take the middle as a particular interpretation that certain constructions may receive. In our analysis, *sl*-middles instantiate a configuration in which an antecedent (the embedded theme) binds a c-commanding non-thematic reflexive pronoun (the one of the embedding marked anticausative), which is problematic for standard theories of binding.

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