The properties of German *sich lassen*-middles

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German *sich lassen* (*sl*)-middles (1a) have received relatively little attention in the literature (but see Fagan 1992, Hoehle 1978, 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 the characterization of non-canonical passives. In particular, we argue that *sl*-middles are built on the basis of an anticausative embedding a passive. Thus, 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.

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

2. 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 *lassen*. (3/4) show this, using a verb that morphologically marks the causative alternation via stem allomorphy:

3. a. Das Schiff versinkt.
   The ship sinks\textsubscript{INCHOATIVE}
   b. Hans versenkt das Schiff
   John sinks\textsubscript{CAUSE} the ship.

4. a. Das Schiff wurde versenkt /*versinkt.
   The ship became sunk\textsubscript{CAUSE}/sunk\textsubscript{INCHOATIVE}
   b. Das Schiff lässt sich versenken/*versinken.
   The ship let-3.sg REFL sink\textsubscript{CAUSE}/*sink\textsubscript{INCHOATIVE}

(4b) indicates that the complement of *lassen* in *sl*-middles has to be based on the causative (transitive), not the inchoative variant of *sinken* ‘sink’, which is unexpected under a VP-analysis but follows directly from a passive-infinitive approach.

Passive complements of *sl*-middles lack passive morphology. We argue that this 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 is evident in the context of extraposition. Only sentential complements can be extraposed (5; cf. Bech 1955/83). The infinitive of *sl*-middles, like obligatory restructuring infinitives (cf. Wurmbrand 2001), can not be extraposed (6).
...weil        Hans  mich (das Buch zu kaufen) auffordert (das Buch zu kaufen).
‘...because John asks me to buy the book.’

...weil sich (das Buch lesen) lässt *(das Buch lesen).
‘...because the book can be read.’

The embedding predicate *sich lassen* is a marked anticausative, projecting an expletive VoiceP (cf. Embick 1998, Schäfer 2008, Alexiadou 2010). The anticausative nature of *sich lassen* is supported by the observation that *sl*-middles, exactly as ordinary reflexive anticausatives (7), license *durch-* (from) phrases introducing a causer/facilitator (8a):

(7)  Durch die Erschütterung öffnet sich die Tür.
From the tremor open-3.sg. REFL the door
‘The door opens from the tremor.’

(8) a. Durch die Erschütterung lässt sich die Tür von Hans öffnen.
From the tremor let-3.sg. REFL the door by John open
‘The tremor facilitates John’s door-opening process.’

b. *Durch die Erschütterung wurde die Tür von Hans geöffnet.
From the tremor was the door by John opened

The lack of a corresponding passive (8b) shows that the *durch*-phrase is not licensed by the passive infinitive in (8a) but rather by the anticausative *sich lassen*.

The subject of *sl*-middles is base-generated as the theme complement of the embedded predicate. Since it can neither receive accusative case in the lower passive VoiceP nor 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 φ-features on T. (9; embedded predicate in bold):

(9)          [CP Das Buch lässtj [TP tj [VoiceP sich tj [vP tj [VoiceP Voice(passive)]j, [lesen tj]]]]]]

**Selected References:**