

Middle Voice as a Basic Syntactic System in
Indoeuropean and American Indigenous Languages

Ricardo Maldonado
Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México
and
Universidad Autónoma de Querétaro

Middle voice is defined as a system of constructions whose main property is to portray events remaining in the subject's dominion. The subject is, in most cases, an experiencer suffering the action expressed by the verb. Since the action remains in the subject, the similarity between middle and reflexive constructions is considerable and, in fact, contemporary typological analyses (Kemmer 1993, Lehmann 1995) have proposed that across the languages of the world middles derive from reflexives. Thus, middles are always seen as derived constructions.

In this paper I show that, based on Indoeuropean languages, this generalization not only fails to account for the whole spectrum of middle constructions in Indoeuropean languages, but also leaves unexplained the behavior of a wide variety of American Indigenous languages whose middle system appears to not depend upon the existence of the reflexive construction. To illustrate the basic nature of middles, this paper focuses first on the behavior of three Mesoamerican languages: Yucatec Maya, Tarascan and Otomi. The analysis is corroborated by data from Toba, a Guaycuru language from South America and extends the analysis to other unrelated languages such as Balinese and Amharic. I conclude by showing that Spanish also operates as a non-reflexive based language and I give evidence of the basic nature of the middle system from syntactic-semantic argumentation as well as from first and second language acquisition.

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