

## “Shakespeare sells well. – but is he also selling well?”

### A corpus-based analysis of the progressive constraint on middle-construction

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This study deals with the so-called middle-construction, as instantiated in (1)-(3):

- (1) ... orange eyes, which he makes with glass orbs that reflect the onlooker.  
They **sell** well. (2017, COCA)
- (2) Paintings do not **sell** well. (2015, COCA)
- (3) She did not **shock** easily (2007, COCA)

As these examples illustrate, the middle-construction refers to the clause where the theme or patient of a verb is structurally realized as the subject of a predicate in an active voice. Crucially, the verbs occurring in the verb slot of the middle-construction are used untypically in that prototypically transitive verbs like *sell* in (1) and (2) or *shock* as in (3) do not take a direct object, and moreover, the verbs are used semi-reflexively, with the subject of the clause being affected by the verbal action. In this respect, the middle-construction displays a valency-decreasing property (cf. Hilpert 2014: 39), an observation that challenges traditional accounts of syntax along the lines of dictionary-and-grammar models.

A common observation made in the literature at hand is that verbs used in middle constructions are modified by adverbs more or less obligatorily (see, e.g. Levin 1993, Ackema & Schoorlemmer 1994, Hundt 2014). Additionally, middle verbs seem to be constrained in that they are restricted to generic, universally valid contexts, which implies that they do not readily occur in the progressive, an assumption that is in further need of empirical validation.

Our research project seeks to find out if the progressive constraint on middle verbs holds across the board by zooming in on various middle verbs. Drawing on data from the COCA, we first of all identify adverbs which co-occur with selected middle verbs and then check to what extent these middle verb-adverb combinations are attested not only in generic contexts in the present simple but also in past contexts and progressive contexts.

## References

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