

The crosslinguistic emergence of middle voice systems: sources and processes

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A unique feature of middle voice constructions, which sets them apart from other voice categories, is that middle markers have a peculiar distribution at the lexicon/grammar interface. In spite of the existing typological literature on the topic (Klaiman 1991; Kemmer 1993; Zúñiga & Kittilä 2019; Inglese 2021), little is still known about their history. The standard view is that middle markers predominantly originate in reflexive constructions, and that in their development, it is invariably the grammatical component that eventually expands to the lexical component. The available cross-linguistic evidence in support of this scenario is such that the reflexive > middle drift is believed to be universal (Kemmer 1993; Haspelmath 2003; Kaufmann 2007).

In this talk, I challenge these assumptions and offer a new diachronic typology of the middle voice based on the analysis a sample of 130 middle marking languages. As I will show, the sources and pathways whereby middle constructions come about are much more numerous and varied than what reported in the literature. More generally, I argue that a historical perspective may offer us unique insights in explaining the nature of middle voice systems and their distribution across languages.

References

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