Middle Voice Marking in Tibeto-Burman

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1.0 Introduction

Middle voice marking is very rarely recognized as such in the grammars written on Tibeto-Burman languages. It is often simply treated as a normal direct reflexive or as an intransitivizer. In order to draw the attention of scholars to the existence and function of middle voice marking in Tibeto-Burman languages, the present paper discusses the form and function of middle marking in several of these languages. We will first discuss key facts about middle marking in general, then discuss the individual Tibeto-Burman examples.

The middle situation is semantically like the direct reflexive situation in that the referent performing the action and one affected by the action are the same referent, that is, both involve self-directed action, but the middle voice situation differs from the prototypical direct reflexive situation in that the nature of that referent as initiator of the action and the nature of that referent as end point of the action are not as distinct as in the direct reflexive situation. There is what Kemmer (1993) refers to as a 'low elaboration of participants in an event' (Ch. 3), or, on a more general level, a 'low elaboration of events' (Ch. 6), as the subparts of the complex action involved in a middle situation are not as distinguishable as in a reflexive situation. This can be seen in comparing the Russian examples in (1) (from Kemmer 1994:203, citing Haiman 1983:796):

(1) a. On utomil sebja he exhausted RM
   'He exhausted himself'

b. On utomil-sja he exhausted-MM
   'He grew weary'

In (1a) the use of the reflexive marker sebja marks it as a reflexive event, emphasizing the conceptual distinction between the actor as initiator of the action and as endpoint of the action. Use of the middle marker, as in (1b), marks it as a spontaneous event, and involves no such clear distinction as in (1a).

Just as the reflexive can be seen as an intermediate semantic type between the two poles transitive and intransitive (Hopper & Thompson 1980:277), the middle can be seen as intermediate semantically between the reflexive and intransitive situations on the total transitive-reflexive-intransitive cline represented in Figure 1 (Kemmer 1993:73):

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1Abbreviations used in the examples: AGT agentive marker, ASP aspect marker, DAT dative marker, INST instrumental marker, MM unique middle marker, PP past participle, RECIP reciprocal marker, RM unique reflexive marker, R/M reflexive-middle marker. Arabic numbers refer to person, with sg, dl, pl being singular, dual, and plural, respectively.
Two-participant event  Reflexive  Middle  One-participant event

+ < _________________________________________ --> -

Figure 1: Degree of distinguishability of participants/events

Even when the verb used to code a reflexive or middle situation is syntactically transitive, as the reflexive and middle situations are not prototypical transitive situations, the marking of the whole clause can sometimes reflect the lower degree of transitivity. For example, many languages do not allow agentive marking of actors in such clauses, though such marking might be obligatory in normal transitive clauses.

There is no consistency in the marking of this category cross-linguistically. Only a minority of languages in the world have distinct marking for middle situations (e.g. Russian, Old Norse, Hungarian, Turkish). In other languages the marking of middle situations patterns with either prototypical reflexive situations, as in, for example, French, German, and Quechua, or with prototypical transitive and intransitive situations, as in English and Chinese (see examples below). In languages of both the French type and those of the English type (i.e. the two types of language that do not have distinct middle marking) there are three types of marking for the categories on this cline: transitive, intransitive, and reflexive. What is different between the two types of language is what semantic categories are covered by each type of marking. In languages of the French type, the form of the reflexive prototype is used to mark middle situations, as in the French example in (2), while in languages of the English type it is the form of the intransitive prototype or the transitive prototype, and not the reflexive prototype that is used to mark middle situations, as in the examples in (3):²

(2) Elle se lave les mains.
   3sg-fem R/M wash the-pl hands
   ‘She washes her hands.’

(3) a. I rose from the chair.
   b. I washed my face.

In languages with unique marking for the reflexive (i.e. those with middle forms distinct from reflexive forms, such as Russian, and those without middle marking, such as English), it is usually possible to use a reflexive form, or a pronoun or noun interpreted as having reflexive meaning (such as shēn ‘body’ in example [4b] below), to a sentence which marks middle semantics in order to emphasize the dual semantic nature of the participant of the action. We saw the Russian example of this above (ex. [1a]); below are examples from English (ex. [4a]) and Chinese (ex. [4b]):

(4) a. I got myself up (and walked out the door).

   b. tián gūnǐáng zhàn qǐ shēn lái fǔzhé ménkuàng
      Tian miss stand up body come holding doorframe

²In English it is also possible to use the ‘get passive’ or a reflexive pronoun to express some middle semantic situations, e.g. *get dressed, enjoy oneself* (Kemmer 1993:184). See also ex. (4a).
chuanxi yihui fang zou.
panting a while only then go
'Miss Tian stood herself up and, holding on to the doorframe, rested a while before leaving.'

In many of those languages where we know middle marking developed out of reflexive marking, as in French, this extended emphatic use of the reflexive simply became more consistent, lost its emphatic sense, and eventually became obligatory. In some cases, this loss of uniquely reflexive meaning led to the development of a unique middle form being created through repartition or reinforcement of the reflexive form, as in Dutch, where the original reflexive marker zich came to be used for middle situations, and now must be reinforced by -zelf (i.e. zich-zelf) to express reflexive situations (Kemmer 1993:184ff.). That is, as the originally emphatic use of the reflexive to mark middle situations became obligatory, a new reinforced form for reflexives began to be used, and these forms then developed into a system with distinct reflexive and middle marking.3

Semantic situation types often marked by middle marking in languages that have it include grooming actions, changes in body posture, emotions, cognitive actions, perception, spontaneous events, indirect middles (e.g. Classical Greek ktai-sthai ‘acquire [for oneself]’, Latin apīscor ‘get [for oneself]’), and naturally reciprocal events.4 Very often these situations types will be obligatorily marked with middle marking, so that verbs coding these situations will be listed in dictionaries with the middle marker. These verbs are often known as ‘deponents’ following the use of this term for Latin verbs of this type.

Commonly in languages with middle marking, we find that that marking can also be used for reciprocals and collectives. Below are examples of the reciprocal use of the reflexive/middle marker in French:

\[(5)\] a. Les deux hommes se regardent. b. Ils s’écrivent.
the-pl two men R/M look-3pl 3pl R/M-write-3pl
'The two men are looking at each other.' 'They write to each other.'

In looking for middle marking in Tibeto-Burman languages, we will be looking for a type of reflexive-like marking that is used for situations that in English and other non-middle marking languages would be marked with plain transitives or intransitives, but with middle marking in languages with unique middle marking. We will also be looking to see to what extent this marking also covers reciprocal and collective situations, or has a detransitivizing effect.

2.0 Dulong

The first example from a Tibeto-Burman language is that of Dulong/Rawang, a language spoken in southeast China and northeast Myanmar (Burma). The

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3 In many languages with unique reflexive and middle markers, there is an etymological relationship between the two forms, as in Russian, though this is not always the case. For example the Latin mediopassive (middle) marker -r and the reflexive se have no etymological relationship.

4 See Kemmer 1993, Appendix A, for a full listing of the categories of semantic middles.
examples given here are from the Sanxiang (三鄉) Dulong dialect spoken in Gongshan county of Yunnan Province in China (see LaPolla 1995a). We will here only cite examples from this one dialect, though the phenomenon we will be talking about is general to dialects in both China and Myanmar.\(^5\)

The Dulong middle voice is marked by the verbal suffix \(-cu^{31}\). Consider the following examples:\(^6\)

(6) a. \(\text{əŋ}^{53}\ ən^{53-\text{cu}^{31}}\)
   3sg hit-R/M
   'He is hitting himself.'

b. \(\text{əŋ}^{53}\ \text{mu}^{55}\text{gu}^{53-\text{mi}^{53}}\ ən^{55-\text{cu}^{31}}\)
   3sg raincoat-INST cover-R/M
   'He is covering himself with the raincoat.'

c. \(\text{əŋ}^{53}\ \text{tu}^{31}\text{n}^{53-\text{cu}^{31}}\)
   3sg curse-R/M
   'He is cursing himself.'

d. \(\text{əŋ}^{53}\ \text{a}^{31-\text{lup}^{55-\text{cu}^{31}}\}
   3sg happy-R/M
   'He is happy.'

e. \(\text{əŋ}^{53}\ \text{e}^{55}\text{wa}^{53}\ \text{mi}^{55-\text{cu}^{31}}\)
   3sg this.way think-R/M
   'He is thinking this way.'

f. \(\text{əŋ}^{53}\ \text{e}^{55-\text{cu}^{31}}\)
   3sg laugh-R/M
   'He is laughing.'

If we look at the examples in (6) in terms of the semantic situation types coded by this suffix, we can see that they are all self-directed: the referent involved is both the source of the action and the end point of the action. In (6a,b,c) we have clear examples of prototypical direct reflexive situations, while in (6d,e,f) we have examples of situations that show the same marking, but are not prototypical direct reflexive situations; they are the type of situations that are marked with middle voice marking in languages that have distinctive middle voice marking, such as grooming actions, changes in body posture, emotions, cognitive actions, perception, spontaneous events, indirect middles, and some collective events.

The use of the reflexive/middle marker in Dulong is very similar to that of the reflexive pronouns in French, which also mark both reflexive and middle situations. From Table 1, below, we can see that Dulong and French have deponent middle marked verbs in some of the same semantic categories.\(^7\)

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\(^5\) The data used for this section are from my own fieldwork in China and Myanmar, and first appeared in LaPolla 1995a. I would like to thank Yang Jiangling, of Kongmu Village, Gongshan County, Yunnan Province, China, and James Khong Sar Ong, of Putao, Kachin State, Myanmar, for their help with the data.

\(^6\) The actual form that the suffix in question takes in the sentence can be affected by the person and number of the actor, though as the differences in person do not affect the function of the suffix in question, third-person singular forms will be used for all the examples in this paper.

\(^7\) Even in languages where the reflexive and middle markers have the same form, as in French and Dulong, there is a difference in the use of the two: middle marking is obligatory to achieve a particular meaning with certain verbs (e.g. Dulong \(\text{et}^{55}\ "\text{to laugh at (someone)}\); \(\text{et}^{55-\text{cu}^{31}}\ "\text{to laugh, smile}"\); \(\text{ta}^{55}\ "\text{to throw}, \text{ta}^{55-\text{cu}^{31}}\ "\text{to run}\), whereas reflexive marking does not change the meaning of the verb, only the relationship between the participants. Cross-linguistically there is variation as to which particular verbs will take middle marking, though there is great consistency as to which semantic categories of verbs will be marked with middle marking (Kemmer 1993).