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Paradis, Carita

Published in:
Text & Talk: an interdisciplinary journal of language, discourse & communication studies

2009

Citation for published version (APA):
Paradis, C. (2009). This beauty should drink well for 10-12 years: A note on recommendations as semantic middles. Text & Talk: an interdisciplinary journal of language, discourse & communication studies, 29(1), 53-73.

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“This beauty should drink well for 10–12 years”: a note on recommendations as semantic middles*

CARITA PARADIS

Abstract

This paper capitalizes on the types of portrayal of the event in recommendations of prime drinking time using data from wine tasting notes. It argues that the weakly deontic nature of recommendation fosters semantic middles; not only the middle construction proper such as This beauty should drink well for 10–12 years, but recommendation as such is characterized by a mid-degree of transfer of action in the utterances. In spite of the fact that the event expressed in recommendations involves highly transitive structures, i.e., an ACTOR, an UNDERGOER, and a dynamic event, the actual staging of the recommendations at the time of use is similar to the staging of the middle construction. The various formal differences between the recommendations are examined in terms of the relative salience of the roles played by the semantic participants and the dynamicity of the event. The upshot of the study is that the middle quality is directly derived from the discourse function of recommendation.

Keywords: transitivity; wine language; middle voice; construction; semantic roles.

1. Introduction

Being a wine lover, I spend quite a lot of time reading tasting notes in wine magazines and books. While my main focus of attention is usually the part concerned with the assessment of the wine’s color, taste, smell, and mouthfeel, another component of the tasting note has recently attracted my interest as a linguist, namely the part where the wine critic issues a recommendation for prime consumption time. What aroused my interest in the recommendations to start with was that a sizeable number of them were expressed in the form of what is commonly known as the...
middle construction, as in Example (1), the italicized part. The use of the middle construction in recommendations in tasting notes raises the question of why such constructions should be efficient, and whether the discourse function of recommendations fosters “middle-voiced” expressions more generally.

(1) The medium ruby-colored 1997 Abadia Retuerta (a blend of 65% Tempranillo, 30% Cabernet Sauvignon, and 5% Merlot) exhibits an attractive spicy, cedary, tobacco, and berry fruit-scented nose. Herbaceousness makes an appearance in the mouth, but the wine is round, soft, and moderately concentrated, with fine cleanliness and accessibility. It should drink well for 5–6 years. (Emphasis added)

The recommendation issued in Example (1) takes scope over a conceptual event frame with a DRINK event and two participants, an ACTOR (the consumer) and an UNDERGOER (the wine). In spite of the fact that the DRINK event as such is transitive, the situation type profiled in the construction does not display a high degree of transfer of action. The “wine” participant, the UNDERGOER, figures prominently in the initial position, and the human ACTOR, the forceful source of energy transfer, is not encoded.

Broadly within the cognitive semantic tradition (Talmy 2000; Taylor 2003; Croft and Cruse 2004), this paper explores the conceptual and linguistic structure of recommendations. It is assumed that concepts form the ontological basis of linguistic meaning and various construals operate on the meanings at the time of use. Meanings in language are dynamic and sensitive to contextual demands rather than fixed and stable (Cruse 2002; Paradis 2005). The paper identifies the various types of linguistic expressions in terms of the presentation of the content of the recommendations, i.e., what sentence forms the recommendations are expressed through, what the event types (verb meaning types) are, what the participants are, and the relative foregrounding and backgrounding of their semantic roles. The paper offers an analysis using Hopper and Thompson’s (1980) transitivity parameters as a measurement of degree of transfer of action expressed in the constructions. In this article, transitivity is not defined syntactically as it is in traditional grammars, i.e., as a verb that can take one or more object. Transitivity is conceived of as a fundamental conceptual transmission of energy from an ACTOR to an UNDERGOER, causing some kind of change. In other words, transitivity is a construal of transfer of action from one participant to another. The meaning of the transitive construction has the status of a Gestalt (Taylor 2003: 231–241), and so do the meanings of the middle and the intransitive constructions as well.
The proposal is that in spite of the fact that recommendations may be formally different, they have one thing in common, i.e., they promote a “middle-voiced” type of linguistic structuring of the events and transfer of action. The setup of the event is pragmatically motivated in the sense that the weakly deontic function of recommending has repercussions on the portrayal of the event frame in terms of the staging of the participants of the event and the degree of energy that is transferred in the event expressed through the recommendation. The data are limited to the genre of tasting notes. Tasting notes offer a suitable source for a study of recommendations, since a large number of tasting notes issue recommendations, which means that they are both frequent and easy to identify. Recommendations appear to be a rare kind of data in the international literature. To the best of my knowledge there are no treatments of recommendations in the international linguistics literature.

The paper starts with a general description of the kind of information given in tasting notes, the rhetorical organization of tasting notes, and a more specific description of the data used. Section 4 gives an account of Hopper and Thompson’s transitivity parameters, and Section 5 reports on the staging of the recommendations in terms of the type of event and the roles of the participants in the event frame. Section 6 addresses the issue of the flexibility of the “wine” as undergoer and actor, and particular attention is paid to the middle construction in the tasting notes. The paper concludes with a summary of the findings.

2. Recommendation in tasting notes

Tasting notes are short texts ranging from 10 to 150 words published in books, wine magazines, both paper magazines and e-magazines, as well as on Web sites about wine. They are at the same time both descriptive and evaluative. Caballero (2007) refers to tasting notes as a descriptive-plus-evaluative genre in which the rhetorical organization of the tasting note typically mirrors the highly ritualized tasting event: (i) introduction to the wine (name, year, winery, grapes, etc.), (ii) assessment of the wine’s color, aroma and bouquet, flavors and mouthfeel, and (iii) a final evaluation of the wine and a prime time recommendation. Example (2) has all three parts.

(2) Another project of American Mark Shannan, this well-made 100% Primitivo cuvee from southern Italy is a noteworthy value. Aged five months in a combination of French, American, and Slovenian oak, it offers a deep ruby color as well as a sweet, candied nose of berry
fruit, earth, oak, and tar. There are loads of glycerin, sweet, succulent fruit on the attack and mid-palate, and a velvety-textured, seamless finish. Although not complex, it will provide delicious, uncomplicated drinking over the next 1–2 years.

The first part in Example (2) is the introduction to the wine, the wine-maker, and the grape, followed by the iconic assessment of the wine, i.e., “it offers a deep ruby color as well as a sweet, candied nose of berry fruit, earth, oak, and tar. There are loads of glycerin, sweet, succulent fruit on the attack and mid-palate, and a velvety-textured, seamless finish.” The last part is the recommendation, the evaluative prediction, and the time specification: “Although not complex, it will provide delicious, uncomplicated drinking over the next 1–2 years.”

Like other communicative-functional categories such as statements, questions, and orders, recommendations may be expressed in formally different ways. Their interpretation as recommendations is derived from their discoursal function. In contrast to orders, which we may characterize as “strongly deontic,” recommendations, like requests, could be said to be “weakly deontic.” In requests, the speaker kindly asks the addressee to do something, while in recommendations, the speaker suggests to the addressee what he/she should want to do or not want to do. Recommendations are supposed to be for the benefit of the addressee and also in that respect they differ from requests, which are for the benefit of the speaker. A lot has been written in the literature on the function of the broad communicative-functional categories and their sentence forms, both from a more philosophical point of view and as linguistic treatments (e.g., Searle 1969: 64–71; Levinson 1983: 226–278; Aijmer 1996: 124–195; Wichman 2004), but, again, to the best of my knowledge nothing has been written on recommendations in the international literature.

3. Description of data

The source of data used in this investigation is the American wine magazine, the Wine Advocate. The study is based on a subcorpus of 200 randomly collected tasting notes from 1995 to 2005 from a database of in total 80,000 tasting notes. The reasons for using data from the Wine Advocate are, firstly, that it is one of the most influential wine magazines in the world, if not the most influential. Secondly, the tasting notes and in particular the recommendations are longer and generally more discursively elaborate than the tasting notes in other wine magazines. The drawback of using the Wine Advocate is that the tasting notes were written by only three different critics (Robert Parker, Pierre Rovani, and
Daniel Thomases). For reasons of comparison, 100 tasting notes from another American wine magazine of good repute, the Wine Spectator (1998 and 2005), were examined. They are however not included in the analysis, since only two types of constructions were found in those tasting notes: Drink now through 20XX or Best before/after 20xx. Short recommendations of this kind are the most common type in tasting notes in general. Since the data were collected to identify types of expressions of recommendations and to analyze their semantics, the limitation to one wine magazine is of little importance for the present study. 3

In the Wine Advocate corpus, 7% of the recommendations are expressed as in Example (3) with the noun phrase Anticipated maturity and a time span specification, and 25% are imperatives as in Example (4). Most of the recommendations (68%) are in the declarative form, as in Examples (5)–(10). Among the declaratives, as many as 28% are expressed as middle constructions, as in Example (10), 32% in the passive, as in Example (9), and 40% in other types of simple declaratives. It is important to note that a distinction is being made in this article between the “middle construction,” which is a form-meaning mapping such as the one in Example (10), and the notion of the “semantic middle,” defined as middle degree of strength of transfer of action in an utterance (cf. Kemmer’s [1993] middle-voiced semantics). In order to facilitate the task of the reader, I have italicized the relevant portions of the examples.

(4) Drink it over the next 1–3 years.
(5) Made in a refreshing style meant for easy consumption, it should be enjoyed over the next six months.
(6) This wine will be delicious when released next year, and will last for 25–30 years.
(7) I would recommend another 1–2 years of cellaring (as hard as that may be), and consuming it over the following 10–12 years.
(8) It is an ideal wine for drinking with bistro-styled dishes over the next 4–5 years.
(9) It is medium-bodied, supple, and best drunk over the next 3–4 years.
(10) This sexy 2003 should drink well for 7–8 years.

In addition to the evaluation of the future quality of the wine and the specification of the time span, the majority of the declaratives, i.e.,
passives, middles, and “others,” involve some kind of explicit indication of their interpersonal function as recommendation. These cues are either modal auxiliaries such as the deontic should in Example (5), the predictive will expressing strong certainty in Example (6), and the less strongly predictive should in Example (10), or explicit recommendations such as I would recommend in Example (7), best drunk in Example (9), or descriptions such as ideal for drinking in Example (8).

After this brief description of the role of recommendations in tasting notes (Section 2) and their various forms (Section 3), I turn to the staging of the recommendations and the degree of transfer of action in the recommendations, but, first, I introduce Hopper and Thompson’s transitivity parameters through which the “middle-voiced” structuring of the events is operationalized.

4. The transitivity parameters

Following Hopper and Thompson (1980), this paper argues that participant roles and transitivity are not a matter of either/or but rather a continuum. Hopper and Thompson (1980: 252) argue that the defining properties of transitivity are discourse-determined, and they isolate a number of linguistic parameters of the transitivity notion that are typically encoded in languages. As shown in Table 1, each of the parameters suggests a scale according to which clauses can be ranked. The values of each of these parameters are set when a linguistic expression is put to use, and taken together they determine the degree of transitivity of the utterance.

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<thead>
<tr>
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As Table 1 shows, Hopper and Thompson’s take on transitivity is that it is gradient and can be broken down into ten parameters, each focusing on a different aspect of the transfer of an action from one participant to another. The more characteristics from the “high” column a sentence has, the closer it is to cardinal transitivity (Hopper and Thompson 1980: 253). The Transitivity Hypothesis predicts that whenever a pairing of two parameters in a language is obligatory in the morphosyntax or semantics, both parameters are always either in the “high” or in the “low” column. The Transitivity Hypothesis thus refers only to obligatory morphosyntactic markings or semantic readings. The claim is that co-variation takes place when two values are necessarily present. In other words, it does not predict when the values surface, but if they do, they will both be either on the high or the low value. This way of going about gradience suggests an either/or view of the individual parameters in that sentences either get a high value or a low value. Gradience in Hopper and Thompson is to be understood as a reflex of the totality of the encoding across all ten parameters. This is part of their scope which is limited to languages in which these parameters are linguistically encoded, i.e., the absence or presence of the linguistic expression of a certain parameter. The present paper is semantically oriented and explicit encoding is not a necessary requirement. Instead, in this paper it is not only the overall pattern of “highs” and “lows” that shapes the gradience, but also the scalar range of the individual parameters. In this investigation, the majority of the individual parameters are not discrete but scalar. In other words, the parameters may be neither high nor low. I return to this in Section 5.

Hopper and Thompson (1980: 252) show that each component of transitivity has a different value of intensity with which the action can be transferred from one participant to another. The ten different, but interrelated, aspects are defined as follows. In cases of cardinal transitivity, there are two PARTICIPANTS, an ACTOR and an UNDERGOER, since they are both crucial for the transfer of the action. This is related to KINESIS, i.e., the fact that actions (I hugged Sally), but not states (I like Sally), involve a transfer from one participant to another. A TELIC action (I ate it up) is viewed from its endpoint and is therefore more effectively transferred to an UNDERGOER than an atelic action (I am eating), which has no endpoint. Punctual actions (Sue kicked the ball) with no transitional phase between beginning and end have a more marked effect on the UNDERGOER than on-going events (Bill carried the basket). The impact on the UNDERGOER is more evident when the ACTOR is acting volitionally (I wrote your name) than not (I forgot your name). AFFIRMATIVE events are more effective and intense than negated (no examples are provided by Hopper and Thompson). The REALIS–IRREALIS distinction refers to whether the action
is presented as occurring in a real world or a nonreal (contingent) world. The latter is less effective than events that are asserted to correspond directly with a real event. Participants that are high in agency (George startled me) can transfer an action more effectively and with perceptible consequences than participants low in agency (The picture startled me). Finally, the last two parameters concern the undergoer. The intensity with which an action is transferred is a function of the extent to which the undergoer is affected. This is done more effectively in I drank up the milk than in I drank some of the milk, while the component of individuation refers both to the distinctness from the actor and the distinctness from its own background, i.e., the extent to which the undergoer is particularized. The applicability of these ten parameters to recommendation is discussed in Sections 5 and 6.

5. Staging the recommendations: actor, undergoer, and drink event

As has already been brought up, a drink event presupposes an actor (agent/experiencer) and an undergoer (theme). The actor and the undergoer are participants in the conceptual event frame and carriers of two radically different semantic roles. The drink event is by far the most common event type in the consumption recommendations, followed by state and transition events. In none of the recommendations but one, the actor/addressee is explicitly mentioned. The entity in focus in the tasting notes, the wine, is almost always explicitly mentioned in the sentences, except in the noun-phrase recommendations. The default role of the wine is undergoer. This role, however, is not always clear-cut and straightforward. On the contrary, the wine may also be depicted as animate by means of personification and thereby given a touch of dynamism through the middle construction. The different ways of portraying the drinking recommendations are discussed in this section.

Firstly, the recommendations that are in imperative form are short and the staging is identical across all of them. The drink event and the undergoer are explicitly mentioned, while the utterances themselves are aimed at the implied actor as in Examples (11), (12), and (13).

(11) Drink it over the next 5–6 years.

(12) Consume it during its first decade of life.

(13) Enjoy it over the next 5–7 years.

Drink, consume, and enjoy are the three verbs used for the drink event in the imperatives. Drink is by far the most commonly used verb in the

(157x629)
imperative constructions, thirty-eight occurrences, followed by four occurrences of enjoy and one occurrence of consume. Drink and consume presuppose an active agent, while enjoy presupposes a more passive experiencer. In all three examples, it refers to the undergoer, i.e., the wine for which maturity is anticipated. The recommendations in the imperative form have been examined according to Hopper and Thompson’s transitivity parameters. The results are shown in Table 2 with the relevant aspects of the scale in italics, i.e., the patterning for the imperative.

As Table 2 shows, the degree of transitivity of the imperatives resides in the middle between “high” and “low.” Out of the ten parameters, the imperatives have three on the “high” side, and seven on the “low” side of the scale. The actor is necessarily presupposed as part of the event frame, but only the undergoer is explicitly mentioned. On the linguistic surface there is only one participant, but the other participant figures on the stage as a necessary condition for the event. This discrepancy stretches the interpretation of the parameter of participant and makes the discreteness blurred. Drink and consume are actions while enjoy is more of a spontaneous experience caused by the undergoer. The events are atelic and non-punctual. There is no volitionality on the part of the actor, i.e., the consumer. It is the speaker that is the volitional participant. The sentences are affirmative, and they are irreals in being future events. The undergoer is totally affected in the cases of expressions with drink and consume, but not affected in the cases of enjoy. For all three, the undergoer is not individuated. The undergoer is definitely distinctly different from the actor but not necessarily from the background in the sense that only a portion of the vintage may be consumed during the specified time. It should be noted that the undergoer is not a bottle of wine but reference is made to the vintage. It is clear from Table 2 that

Table 2. The parameters of transitivity and their application to recommendations in the imperative; the applicable degree is in italics

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imperatives betray middle-voiced characteristics in between cardinal transitives and cardinal intransitives.

Furthermore, the characteristic of all the declaratives is that the wine is most often the subject of the sentence. In the passives and in the middle construction, the wine is *always* the subject, which ought to be a contributory reason for their relatively high frequency in tasting notes, where the wine is the main focus of attention all the time. Consider Examples (14) and (15).

(14) *It will need to be cellared for 2–5 years following its release, and drunk over the subsequent 15 or more.*

(15) *It will drink well for 3–4 years.*

In the passive, as in Example (14), the wine as undergoer is the subject of the expression and the actor is left implicit and thereby backgrounded. The actor is however present in the sense that the drink event always presupposes an actor. The same is true of Example (15), which is a middle construction with the undergoer as the salient participant and a backgrounded, implicit actor. The difference between the passive and the middle construction is that the latter construction suggests a dynamic participant through the active-voiced action verb *drink*, while the passive construction does not. Hopper and Thompson’s parameters are applied to passives and middles in Table 3. The relevant poles of the parameters for the passives and the middle constructions are in italics.

Table 3 shows that, when the passives and the middle constructions are applied to Hopper and Thompson’s parameters, the pattern looks the same for both of them as well as for the imperatives, as shown in Table

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2. What is not revealed by the parameters is the conflicting dynamic reading due to the active-voiced action verb and the stative generalized property interpretation of the UNDERGOER in the middle construction. We could therefore add to the list that the UNDERGOER comes across as relatively high in potency in middle constructions because of its conflicting actor-like role.5

Similar to the imperatives, there is a generic consumer in both the passive and the middle constructions, i.e., anybody who drinks this wine. The wine is also generic in the sense that the talked-about entity is the vintage and not a specific bottle of wine. Generalization over individuals and/or events is a point at issue in treatments of middle constructions. Some scholars claim that middle constructions generalize over individuals but not over events (e.g., Fagan 1992; Ackema and Schoorlemmer 1994; Hoekstra and Roberts 1993). While others (e.g., Rapoport 1999) make a distinction between “capacity middles,” which generalize over individuals, and “habitual middles,” which generalize over events and the truth of which relies on the existence of previous events. For instance, an utterance such as “This wine rarely/often drinks well” entails previous drinking events, i.e., “For few/many events that involve this kind of wine it drinks well.” Davidse and Heyvaert (2007) present an interesting analysis of the middle in which they argue for an interpersonal, modal analysis of middle-voiced constructions in English. On their view “[m]iddles construe a subjective assessment of the subject entity, presenting it as lending itself to the action designated by the predicator, and as having properties that are actively conducive to that action” (2007: 37). They say that the subject is strongly foregrounded in purely subjective speaker-assessment terms because of its construal as a conducive entity in relation to the “letting” modal. In other words, the English middle construction relies on an INTERPERSONAL schema associated with the specific modal relation between the subject and the finite along the lines of Talmy’s (2000: 409–470) force-dynamic letting relation. There is clearly a kindred likeness between their force-dynamic approach and the degree of transfer of action approach of this paper.

Clearly, the nature of the subject plays an important role in middle semantics. Klingvall (2008: 163), following Lekakou (2005), defines middles as generic sentences that ascribe a certain disposition to the subject. Generalizations are thus obligatorily subject oriented and true across events by virtue of the property of the subject, i.e., not by virtue of previous events. Similarly, Yoshimura and Taylor (2004) and Paradis (forthcoming) also claim that the ontological properties of the subject are central to the interpretation of middle constructions, more precisely through the qualia structure of the element in the subject position. The middle
constructions in the present study are all generic statements that abstract away from particular occasions and describe the wine as being of a sort that drinks well, i.e., “it is good.”

Drink is the only lexical item used in the middle construction. Neither consume (Example [17]) nor enjoy (Example [18]) are possible in middle constructions. The reason for this is not easily determinable, and at this stage, this behavior can only be assumed to be attributable to lexical binding of certain semantic types of verbs to a specific construction type. It may be the case that middle constructions are possible only for action verbs that may be used in both transitive and intransitive constructions, such as Bob drinks wine and Bob drinks, which can be compared to the naturalness of Bob consumes and Bob enjoys, both of which require particular contexts to be felicitously used, e.g., Sally works and Bob enjoys. Semantically, there is not much difference between consume and drink in the context of wine. The only difference is that consume is a more general notion than drink and it subsumes other consumption modes such as eating. Enjoy refers to the same activity but differs in not specifying the drinking/consumption. Enjoy differs from drink and consume in being an experiential verb where the actor is an EXPERIENCER, rather than a willful AGENT. An explanation for why enjoy is infelicitous in constructions such as Example (18) is that the event of enjoyment already semantically is a middle when wine is in the object position. Enjoy events are intermediate on the scale of transitivity with low ACTION, low VOLITIONALITY, and with an ACTOR low in potency. In the case of drink and consume, the ACTOR is more of an active participant than is the case with enjoy where the ACTOR role is more of an EXPERIENCER.6

(16) It will drink well for 3–4 years.
(17) *It will consume well for 3–4 years.
(18) *It will enjoy well for 3–4 years.

The remaining subcategory, “others,” as in Examples (19)–(22), shows more variation than imperatives, passives, and middle constructions. In most of them the wine is in the subject position, as in Examples (19), (20), and (22) and in Examples (19), (20), and (21) the wine has the role of UNDERGOER. In Example (19) the wine takes on a more dynamic and agentive role in combination with the verb require.

(19) Tight and unevolved, it should evolve gracefully for a decade.
(20) Tasty, dry, and hedonistic, it is a delicious, pure, inexpensive sparkler to enjoy over the next year.
(21) Readers should consider it a modern version of a French southern Rhone, and enjoy it over the next 3–4 years.

(22) Revealing more color and body as well as additional tropical fruit notes than the non-vintage bottling, it requires consumption before the end of 2005.

Example (19) is similar to the foregoing examples with the exception that there is no real action or transfer from one participant to another, but rather a spontaneous transition event or a process. Example (20) is similar to the imperatives, passives, and middle constructions in terms of transitivity. Example (21) is the only sentence in the corpus in which there is an explicit actor. There are two participants, but the rest of the parameters are similar, since the actor participant is an experiencer rather than an “actor high in potency.” Finally, Example (22) is clearly higher in transitivity since the wine is described as an animate, consciously acting participant. The wine is the actor. It acts volitionally and is thereby high in potency. This results in a type of recommendation that is relatively high in transitivity.

When the drink event is construed as a nominal or an adjectival, drink is still the most common lemma. Seven out of ten are represented by drink, plus one occurrence each for consume, enjoy, and last, as in Examples (23)–(26). All of the adjectives are represented by drinkable, as in Example (27).

(23) Although not complex, it will provide delicious, uncomplicated drinking over the next 1–2 years.

(24) Revealing more color and body as well as additional tropical fruit notes than the non-vintage bottling, it requires consumption before the end of 2005.

(25) Medium-bodied, with loads of fruit and a progressive, modern style, this delicious Italian red will provide enjoyment over the next 1–2 years.

(26) Thick, rich, and full-bodied, with admirable depth, this surprising effort from the Alto Adige is capable of lasting 7–8 years.

(27) Medium-bodied, fleshy, and drinkable over the next 1–3 years, it is an ideal restaurant Pinot Noir.

Finally, in the group of “others” no single verb is predominant. In the 22 sentences the verbs or verb constructions that are associated with the time specification for anticipated maturity are the following: enjoy (3), age (3), hit its stride and last (2), evolve (2), last (2), be at its finest (2), hit its peak
and last (1), consume (1), unfold slowly (1), drink (1), deliver untold levels of pleasure (1), be at its peak (1), keep (1), and be at its best (1). The ones that are state events do not express action at all in the kinesis parameter, that is, they are very low in transitivity. Like in passives and middle constructions, the wine is most often placed in sentence-initial position and has the role of undergoer, as in Example (28), but there are also a few occurrences of actor uses, as in Example (29).

(28) Full-bodied, with perfect harmony, extraordinary concentration, and a 60+ second finish, it should be at its peak between 2011–2030+

(29) Unlike Abreu’s biggest vintages, the 2000 is already delicious, and promises to evolve for 12–15 years.

In summary, it is the type of event as action, experience, transition, or state and the roles of the participants in the event frame actor or undergoer that drive the staging of the recommendations as semantic middles on Hopper and Thompson’s scale of transitivity. In the recommendations under investigation, the wine participant is the most prominent participant, captured by the fact that it is most often the subject of the clause and the sole participant mentioned in the recommendation irrespective of whether the event is construed as an imperative, a passive, a middle construction, or an “other.”

6. The wine as actor, undergoer, and actor-like undergoer

As was shown in the previous section, participant roles are not clear-cut cases of actors and undergoers in the construals of the event in the recommendations. At the time of use in text and discourse, the participant roles are portrayed in ways that serve the purpose of the speaker. This means that the staging of the events and the roles of the participants undergo contextual modifications in order to be optimally efficient in the communicative situation.

There are three ways in which wine critics might portray the “best-between” drinking dates for wine in the recommendations—either (i) the wine has the role of the undergoer of an action event as lexically expressed by items such as drink and consume, undergoer of an experience event (enjoy), undergoer of a transition event (evolve), or undergoer of a state (be at its peak); (ii) the wine may be portrayed as a personified actor of an action event (offer); or (iii) the wine may be an actor-like undergoer of the drink event, as in the middle constructions, which are
frequently employed as verbalizations of recommendations in these data. This state-of-affairs betrays an approach to event structure, semantic roles, and transitivity as gradient. In the majority of the cases in this material, only one of the participants is explicitly mentioned, i.e., the “wine,” while the actor, the consumer, is kept implicit. Moreover, the chief participant has a prominent position at the beginning of the clause and thereby the wine critics make use of a construal of the event to portray the wine in a position between dynamicity and stativeness.

The portrayal of the wine with the lowest degree of dynamicity is when it has the role of undergoer as the object in imperative sentences (Example [30]), the subject of passive sentences (Example [31]), and the subject of transitions (Example [32]), states (Example [33]), and experiential events (Example [34]) in “others.”

(30) Drink it over the next 1–3 years.

(31) It is designed to be drunk over the next 1–2 years.

(32) Tight and unevolved, it should evolve gracefully for a decade.

(33) It should be at its finest between 2008–2030.

(34) Tasty, dry, and hedonistic, it is a delicious, pure, inexpensive sparkler to enjoy over the next year.

The obvious way of presenting the wine as an active participant is to present it as a willful actor. One way of achieving this goal is through personification. The wine is promoted as subject of an action. Consider Examples (35) and (36).

(35) Soft, plush, and opulently-textured, it will offer gorgeous drinking young, yet will evolve effortlessly for 20 years.

(36) This is an extremely multi-dimensional, profoundly concentrated, awesome Cabernet Sauvignon that should deliver untold levels of pleasure, complexity, and most importantly, joy, for at least 25–30 years.

In Examples (35) and (36), the wine is not portrayed in its default role as undergoer of the event. Instead, the utterance presents a personified picture of the “wine” in order for the wine critic to infuse life into the description of the wine.

The middle construction offers an excellent way of providing the wine with an implicated semi-dynamic, agent-like potential as in Examples (37) and (38).

(37) It should drink well for 1–2 years.
Already drinking splendidly well, it possesses the necessary stuffing to last for 5–7 years. In the middle construction, the wine is depicted as an in-between entity. Due to the active-voiced verb drink, our interpretation of the role of the subject (“the wine”) becomes ambiguous and we flicker between an understanding of the wine as ACTOR-like and as UNDERGOER. In the literature, most studies of middles have sentence semantic focus. For instance, Kemmer (1993: 147) accounts for the middle construction as a phenomenon whereby the Initiator status of the Patient is derivable from the fact that the event is conceived of as proceeding from the Patient by virtue of an inherent characteristic of that entity. In other words, an inherent property of the Patient, the wine in the middle constructions in this study, enables the event to take place. On the one hand, there is something clearly dynamic about the wine, but, on the other hand, the interpretation of the construction is generic and stative in the sense that drink well comes across as a property of the wine much in the way adjectives do. These two ways of seeing the event are antagonistic in the sense that it is hard to conceive of both at the same time. Either the static generic interpretation is profiled, i.e., “This sort of wine is good,” or the interpretation of the wine as an ACTOR-like UNDERGOER conjuring up an interpretation of the whole wine-drinking frame with the wine and the consumer at center stage. One might even dare to argue that the middle construction is polysemous because, like polysemous words, we have to choose either the one or the other. We can flicker between the interpretations but not profile them simultaneously.7 There is a conflict between the bottom-up personification interpretation of Examples (37) and (38) and the top-down constructional template that promotes a generic proposition with a scalar property reading. The stative portrayal of the middle construction drink well as being a property of the wine is very close to our understanding of expressions that construe the drinking recommendations using the adjective drinkable, as in Example (27).

Finally, two important questions in this context should be raised. They concern what the ontological status of “wine” is and what the ontological requirements are for it to be construed as an ACTOR-like UNDERGOER. Following Yoshimura and Taylor (2004) and in accordance with lexical meanings as ontologies and construals (Paradis 2005), I argue that we use our knowledge of the world to produce and understand language. More specifically, we use our knowledge of the nature of wine to produce and understand middle constructions with wine as the talked about entity. Paradis (2005) shows that nominal meanings, and in particular concrete nominal meanings such as “wine,” are construed with the focus of atten-
Recommendations as semantic middles

This paper set out to investigate the nature of the communicative-functional category of recommendations and the commonalities across formally different recommendations using wine tasting notes as data for the investigation. The central issue concerned the portrayal of the event expressed in the recommendation. The relatively large number of middle constructions in the data suggested that the structuring of the event in terms of the staging of the scene, i.e., the presentation of the participants and the degree of action of the event, could be the same for all the recommendations irrespective of sentence form.

The study shows that, in spite of the fact that the event in recommendations mostly involves a verb meaning that presupposes a highly transitive situation frame including an actor, an undergoer, and a dynamic predicate, the recommendations reside in the middle range of the scale of transitivity. The presentation of the content of the recommendation as a semantic middle is mainly a function of the roles and the staging of the participants of the event. The motivations for the middle-voiced quality of the event are taken to be discoursal and interactive in nature. The interactive function of the recommendations is “weakly deontic” in that the speaker/wine critic wants the addressee to hit the right drinking time for the benefit of the addressees themselves. This fosters a middle degree of transfer of the actions on the parameters set up by Hopper and Thompson (1980). Special attention was given to the reading of the middle construction. The reading of the middle construction is predictable in terms of the very nature of “wine” and the conceptual structure that is evoked at the time of use and our ability to make certain aspects of “wine” salient in contexts when they are pragmatically motivated.

7. Conclusion

The readings of “wine” in Examples (35)–(38) are made possible through the activation of the function role of “wine,” and thereby the requirement of an actor as presupposed by the action event frame is satisfied (Paradis 2004, forthcoming).

Constitution involves taxonomic and meronymic aspects, and function involves telic and agentive aspects, i.e., focus on its use and focus on its origin. This kind of knowledge is highly encyclopedic in nature and at the same time of crucial importance for linguistic production and understanding.
In 25% of the cases, the recommendations are presented in the imperative form. The majority of the other 68% are declaratives, and a minor part, 7%, are in the form of the noun phrase, Anticipated maturity. Among the declaratives, as many as 28% are expressed by the middle construction, 32% by the passive, and 40% by other types of simple declaratives. In order to set up the talked-about event in the way the speaker wants the addressee to understand it, he/she foregrounds the part of the discourse that is important and crucial, and what is of little importance, or taken for granted, is not profiled. In this way, the autocratic speaker promotes the wine and demotes the potential consumer. The talked about event is typically the drink event with its two participants the actor (the consumer/addressee) and the undergoer (the wine). In spite of the fact that the drink event frame is highly transitive, it is not used in this way in the recommendations. The imperatives explicitly mention the drink event and the undergoer (the wine), but there is of course no explicitly mentioned actor. Instead, the fictive actor is conflated with the addressee. In the asymmetric speaker/addressee dyad at the speech event level, the speaker is willful and keeps the floor. The addressee is in the hands of the speaker in the speech event and underspecified at the event level by not being linguistically encoded.

Measured in terms of Hopper and Thompson’s (1980) transitivity parameters, most of the recommendations are middle-voiced and a small number are low in transitivity (the stative events). On the high side of the transitivity parameters, the event type in the recommendations is typically an action (drink) and the undergoer (the wine) is totally affected. On the low side of the transitivity parameters, the mode is irrealis in being predictions about future time. The events are non-punctual and aspectually atelic. The actor is non-volitional and low in potency, and the undergoer (the wine) is non-individuated. In particular, the rather large proportion of middles in the recommendations nicely reflects the seemingly contradictory nature of recommendations, i.e., the speaker tells the addressee what he or she should want to do in the future. On one reading, the wine may be understood as an active element. On another reading, prime time is to be understood as a generic statement about hypothetical events. The evaluative drink well is understood as a property of the wine. Middle constructions are suitable for expressing recommendations in tasting notes because they are iconic with the foregrounding of the undergoer and the backgrounding of the actor in the situation frame. They make generalized judgments about the quality of the promoted undergoer and the construction as such demands an explicit evaluative element, e.g., well, splendidly, beautifully, which adds the finishing touch to the recommendation.
Notes

* Thanks to Charlotte Hommerberg, Jean Hudson, and Eva Klingvall, the anonymous reviewers and the editor of Text & Talk for very valuable comments.

1. These roles should be understood to be macroroles that encompass a number of more specific roles such as agent and experiencer for actor, and theme, patient, and recipient for undergoer (cf. Van Valin 2005).

2. In this paper, “speaker” is used as the term for the sender/writer and “addressee” for the receiver/reader.

3. I am extremely grateful to Mr. Robert Parker for providing the data in a form that facilitated my work (http://www.erobertparker.com/members/home.asp). Like the tasting notes in the Wine Advocate, the tasting notes in the Wine Spectator are posted on the Web and are available to members (http://www.winespectator.com/Wine/Home/). There is yet another influential wine magazine, the Decanter. It was not used partly because it has no online service and their recommendations are minimalistic and therefore not interesting from the point of view of types.

4. “Others” is used for lack of a good term for non-passives and non-middles. The reason is that some of them are not active in the sense of having an agentive actor but only an undergoer, as is also the case for passives and middle constructions. Furthermore, they are like middles in having no passive morphology.

5. Explanations for how this reading is made possible and why we may perceive a conflicting actor role are proposed by Yoshimura and Taylor (2004) and Paradis (forthcoming). Both these treatments appeal to the qualia structure of the meaning of the element in the subject position. Ruiz de Mendoza and Mairal (2007: 46) take a more verb-oriented approach in their account. In their analysis, the middle relies on an underlying high-level metonymic shift of the kind process for action for result.

6. The middle construction is a relatively late development in the history of English. Fisher and Van der Wurff (2006: 170) give the example “This car drives like a dream” and say that such constructions are found in Modern English, but they only became frequent during the past two hundred years. They also say that the cause of its rise and development is not clear and point out that the number of individual verb forms that have both transitive and intransitive uses increased and the result of that was that the subject position in non-passive sentences in English came to be associated with other notional roles than the agentive role with which the subject was strongly associated in Old English (except for the variant in the well-defined impersonal system).

7. Goldberg (2006: 38) discusses the possibility of constructional homonymy. I remain agnostic about the distinction between constructional homonymy and constructional polysemy. My point here is only to highlight the ambiguity, irrespective of whether the ambiguity emanates from different sources historically speaking or, indeed, whether the ambiguity exists at the level of different senses or different readings.

References


Carita Paradis


Carita Paradis received her Ph.D. in English Linguistics from Lund University in Sweden and is currently Professor at Växjö University in Sweden. Her main research interests concern meaning in the broad sense. She specializes in lexical semantics and the modeling of
meaning within cognitive linguistics, combining corpus methods and experimental methods in her work. A presentation of her research interests and a list of selected publications are available at http://www.vxu.se/hum/utb/amnen/engelska/cpa/. Address for correspondence: School of Humanities, Växjö University, 351 95 Växjö, Sweden (carita.paradis@vxu.se).