

On the Development of Middles in the History of English

Shuang Feng

1. Introduction

This paper attempts to account for the development of middles in the history of English in terms of the reanalysis of ergatives, where the development of modals played an important role.

Let us begin by pointing out some differences between middles and ergatives in Present-day English, which will serve as a diagnosis for distinguishing between the two in early English in what follows. First, it has been observed (Oosten (1986), Zwart (1998)) that middles attribute an inherent property to the grammatical subject which facilitates or hinders the event denoted by the verb. Therefore, the grammatical subject of middles must have some properties such that it can be understood to be responsible for the event denoted by the verb.

(1) a. This book reads easily.

b. The window broke.

The middle sentence in (1a) describes an inherent property of the grammatical subject *this book* which facilitates the reading event: *this book* is well-written and hence is easy to understand. On the other hand, the ergative sentence in (1b) does not describe an inherent property of the grammatical subject *the window*. It just indicates that the breaking event occurred spontaneously.

Second, middles are generic statements (e. g. Keyser and Roeper (1984),

Ackema and Schoorlemmer (1994), Condoravdi (1989) among many others): they do not denote a particular event in time, as shown in (2a). This does not apply to ergatives, which are acceptable as a statement of a particular event in time, as shown in (2b).

(2) a. ? At yesterday's house party, the kitchen wall painted easily.

b. At yesterday's house party, the kitchen door opened.

(Keyser and Roeper (1984: 384))

The genericity of middles is also manifested in their incompatibility with progressive aspect, in sharp contrast with ergatives, as shown in (3).

(3) a. *Bureaucrats are bribing easily.

b. The boat is sinking. (cf. *ibid.*)

Moreover, adverbial modification is often regarded as one of the defining characteristics of middles and the presence of adverbs is usually obligatory in a majority of cases. However, it is also reported in the literature that there are grammatical instances of middles without adverbial modification (Roberts (1987), Massam (1992)). Therefore, it is reasonable to classify middles into two types, as shown in (4) and (5).

(4) Type I: These novels read * (easily).

These novels read * (like mysteries).

(5) Type II: Dirt will rub off when it is dry.

This book could sell.

Type I middles involve a facility adverb like *easily*, or an event adverb like *like mysteries*, without which the sentences would become ungrammatical. In contrast, Type II middles are grammatical without an adverb, but must be accompanied by a modal like *will* or *could*. Notice that both types have a modal interpretation in that they denote the possibility/potentiality of the event denoted by the verb (Matsumoto (1996)). Thus, rather than adverbial modification, modality is the third property of middles which distinguishes them from ergatives; this will also be crucial in analyzing the historical development of English middles in section 4.

The organization of this paper is as follows. Section 2 briefly reviews

the historical data of middles in Visser (1963–1973). Section 3 shows the data on the development of English middles from OED on CD-ROM by utilizing its quotation search function, paying special attention to the earliest stage, where the relevant examples are ambiguous between ergatives and middles. Section 4 presents a syntactic analysis of the development of middles in the history of English in terms of the reanalysis of ergatives, combined with the development of modals as the triggering factor. Section 5 offers concluding remarks.

2. The Historical Data of Middles in Visser (1963–1973)

According to Visser (1963–1973), middles involve intransitive verbs used to represent a quasi-automatic or self-originated action, and are divided into the following three kinds.

Table 1. The Three Kinds of Middles in Visser (1963–1973)¹

I	Those in which the verb is accompanied by adverbs like <i>well, easily, smoothly, heavily</i> , etc. <i>e. g.</i> Persons of advanced age, of settled habits...do not 'transplant well'.
II	Those which contain the verb without further quantifications. <i>e. g.</i> The scandal... which I thought must certainly originates from Mr. Selby.
III	Those in which the verb functions as a kind of quasi-copula like <i>taste, feel, smell, touch, eat, drink, etc.</i> <i>e. g.</i> The milk tastes sour.

The first kind corresponds to Type I middles as defined above (see (4)). According to Visser, there were no instances of this kind in Old and Middle English and it was first attested in the 16th century. He lists 31 verbs used in this kind, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Verbs in Middles Accompanied by Adverbs

Period	Occurrence	Examples
16 th C	1	<i>tell</i>
17 th C	4	<i>peel, pull, steer, vend</i>
18 th C	6	<i>polish, read, spoil, tear, thresh, wear</i>
19 th C	16	<i>compose, fuse, let, load, make up, milk, paint, photograph, plough, sing, smoke, subscribe, translate, transplant, wrap, write</i>
20 th C	4	<i>open, scare, shock, tire</i>

(cf. Visser (1963: 168))

As for the second kind, it might appear to correspond to Type II middles as defined above (see (5)). According to Visser, instances of this kind were already found in Old English. However, a brief examination of the relevant instances cited will reveal that most of them are not middles, and all the alleged instances of middles before Modern English are in fact ergatives. Some examples from Old English are given in (6).

- (6) a. He þa leohtfatu onælde hy burnon.

He while lanterns lit they burn.

‘When he lit the lanterns, they burned.’

(Wærferth, Gregory’s dialogue)

- b. Buyrgenu openodon mid deadum banum

Graves opened together with dead bones.

‘Graves opened together with dead bones.’

(Ælfric Hom.)

- c. þone dæg and hiht scade.

The day and night separate.

‘Day and night separate.’

(Lchdm. ii, 116, 19)

(Visser (1963: 154–155))

The sentences in (6a, b) actually instantiate ergatives, because it is clear that they are eventive rather than generic, denoting a spontaneous event:

the lanterns burnt by themselves in (6a) and the graves opened by themselves in (6b). In addition, neither of them necessarily attributes an inherent property to the grammatical subject. The sentence in (6c) is not a middle, either: though it is generic, it does not attribute an inherent property to the grammatical subject *day and night*. The same is true of most of the examples from Middle and Modern English. The sentences in (7) and (8) do not attribute an inherent property to the grammatical subject and are eventive rather than generic, so they are not middles, either.

- (7) a. þat te blod wrang ut at tine finger.

That the blood wrang out at your finger.

(a1240 Wohunge, in O. E. Hom. 1, 281)

- b. Salt or any other manere vitail that dischargith by lighter, bote, or any other vessel.

‘Salt or any other manor food that discharge by lighter, boat or any other vessel.’

(1464 Letter-Bks. Archives Corpor. City London 46)

(Visser (1963: 155))

- (8) a. That part of the circulate which repeats is called the repetend.

(1796 Hutton, Math. Dict. I, 296/I)

- b. The snow preserveth all the whole sommer in hys accustomed nature and coldness without melting.

(1585 T. Washington, tr. Nich. Voy. III, I, 69b)

(Visser (1963: 155–157))

On the other hand, it should be noticed that there are some instances of the second kind from Modern English which are ambiguous between the ergative reading and the middle reading, as shown in (9).

- (9) ...Satten of Bruges wyll soyle (soil) anone. (1530 sgr. 724/2)

(Visser (1963: 158))

- a. ergative reading: Satten of bruges will soil by themselves at once.

- b. middle reading: Satten of bruges has a property which makes

the soiling event possible.

This sentence contains the adverb *anone* 'at once', which makes it more like an ergative. As shown in (9a), the ergative reading refers to a spontaneous soiling event, with the modal *will* merely as a futurity indicator. In contrast, in its middle reading shown in (9b), the sentence attributes an inherent property to the grammatical subject, where *will* has a modal interpretation of possibility/potentiality.

3. The Historical Data of Middles from OED

The previous section has shown the historical data of middles in Visser (1963–1973), pointing out that all the relevant instances in Old and Middle English involve ergatives and some instances like (9) in Modern English are ambiguous between the ergative reading and the middle reading. In order to clarify the whole path of the development of English middles, it is necessary to conduct a historical survey, paying attention to the distinction between ergatives and middles.

I have collected the data of English middles from OED on CD-ROM (Version 4.0) by utilizing its quotation search function. The data (338 tokens in total) cover the period from 1400 to 1950, and their distribution is shown in Table 3.

Table 3. The Distribution of Middles from 1400 to 1950

Century	15 th C	16 th C	17 th C	18 th C	19 th C	20 th C
Total (338)	0	6	51	53	166	62

Table 3 shows that middles emerged in the 16th century and increased from one century to the next thereafter. It is worthwhile to note that all the instances in the earliest stage (the 16th century) involve the modal *will* without adverbial modification, so that they belong to Type II middles, as

illustrated in (10).

- (10) a. your white Canuas doublet will sulley (sully).
(1596 Shakes. 1 Hen. IV, ii. iv. 84)
- b. My clayth will nocht stenzie (stain).
(1568 Sat. Poems Reform. xlviii. 15)
- c. ...that the purple dye will neuer staine.
(1579 Lyly Euphues (Arb.) 82)

As in the case of (9), the sentences in (10) are ambiguous between the ergative reading and the middle reading, and the two readings are associated with the futurity and possibility/potentiality interpretation of *will*, respectively.

In their later development, Type II middles came to occur with a modal other than *will*, as illustrated in (11).

- (11) a. The main yard could not lower. (1727 Philip Quarll (1816) 38)
- b. Spring-sown beans · · are short, thin, weak, and cannot corn well. (1884 Times 20 June 4)

In addition, middles with adverbial modification, namely Type I middles, began to emerge: those with a facility adverb in the 17th century and those with an event adverb in the 18th century, as shown in the earliest instances (12a, b) with each type of adverb, respectively.

- (12) a. Being washed three or four times, it Bites or eats not, but dries quickly. (1677 Moxon Mech. Exerc. (1703) 242)
- b. If they handle moist or clammy when you squeeze them they are fit to bag. (1727 Bradley Fam. Dict. s. v. Hop-garden)

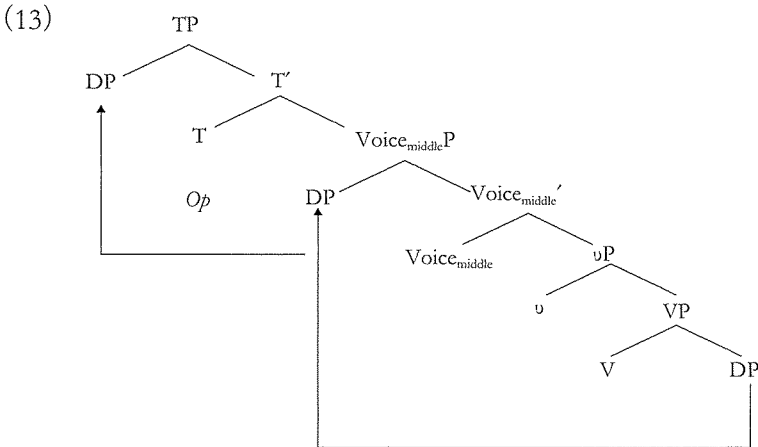
Unlike the instances of middles in the 16th century, the sentences in (11) and (12) are not ambiguous: they only have the middle reading in that they are generic and attribute an inherent property to the grammatical subject, which can be held to be responsible for the event denoted by the verb.

4. A Syntactic Analysis of the Development of English Middles

This section provides a syntactic analysis of the development of English middles revealed by the investigation in section 3, in terms of the reanalysis of ergatives as middles. It is argued that the development of modals played an important role in triggering the relevant reanalysis in the 16th century.

4.1 The Structure of Middles in Present-day English


This subsection proposes an analysis of middles in Present-day English, to provide a basis for analyzing their historical development in subsection 4.2. As we saw in section 1, the properties of middles which distinguish them from ergatives are (i) responsibility of the grammatical subject, (ii) genericity, and (iii) the modal interpretation of possibility/potentiality. This paper argues with Alexiadou (2012, 2013) that these properties are captured in syntactic terms, proposing the following structure of middles in Present-day English.²



According to Alexiadou, Voice_{middle}P is projected in Greek middles whose head hosts the non-active imperfective morpheme which is

responsible for genericity (see also Lekakou (2005)). Moreover, she argues that the Patient/Theme DP must appear in [Spec, VoiceP] for the subject-oriented interpretation of middles, which corresponds to the responsibility of the grammatical subject in the terminology of this paper. Following Alexiadou (2013), this paper assumes that Voice_{middle} is also present in English middles, because they are generic on a par with Greek middles. As for the responsibility of the grammatical subject, this paper adopts the mechanism of secondary theta-role assignment proposed by Osawa (2001) and applied to the *get*-passive by Honda (2012) with slight modifications,³ proposing that Voice_{middle} assigns a secondary theta-role (Agent) to the grammatical subject which moves to [Spec, VoiceP] on its way to [Spec, TP]. Then, apart from being assigned the primary theta-role (Patient/Theme) by V as its internal argument, the grammatical subject of middles is interpreted as a secondary agent that is responsible for the event denoted by the verb, thereby accounting for its responsibility.

Next, following Massam (1992), this paper assumes that English middles have a null modal operator in T, represented as *Op* in (13), to be specified either by a modal or an adverb, which yields the modal interpretation of possibility/potentiality in middles.⁴ According to her, the case of adverbial modification involves LF movement of an adverb to T, as shown in (14).

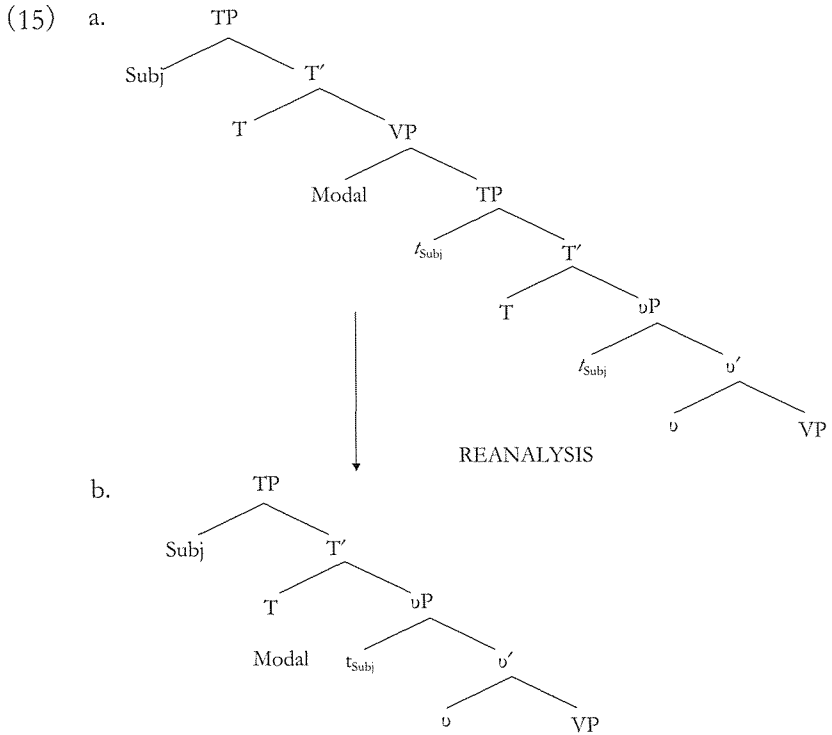
- (14) [_{TP} NP [_T *Op*] [[_{VP} ADV [_{VP} V.....]]]
- 

If this is correct, there will be two modes of specifying the modal operator: direct merger of a modal in T and covert movement of an adverb to T. As we will see in the next subsection, the development of English middles after their emergence can be best characterized as the change in the manner of specifying the modal operator from the direct merge of a modal to the covert movement of an adverb.

4.2. The Reanalysis of Ergatives as Middles and Its Triggering Factors

This subsection argues that there are two factors triggering the development of English middles, both related to the development of modals: the meaning change of *will* and, more importantly, the reanalysis of modals as T elements. First, as we saw in section 3, the earliest instances of middles involve the modal *will* which has the modal meaning of possibility/potentiality (see (10)). Therefore, one of the factors in the development of middles is the rise of the possibility/potentiality meaning of *will*: according to OED, the usage began to be attested in the 14th century (*will*, *v*¹ B. I. 9). Although this meaning change is necessary, it is not a sufficient condition on the development of middles; in fact, they first appeared in the 16th century, about two centuries later than the meaning change of *will*.

Given the assumption in the previous subsection that middles involve the modal operator in T to be specified either by a modal or an adverb, this paper proposes that the second, more important factor triggering the development of middles is the reanalysis of modals as T elements. Since the seminal work by Lightfoot (1979), there have been a number of studies on this topic and it is generally agreed that modals were reanalyzed from main verbs to auxiliaries in the 16th century. To take one of the recent studies, Biberauer and Roberts (2010) propose the following reanalysis of modals.



(Biberauer and Roberts (2010: 280))

In (15a), the modal is a main verb taking a sentential complement which is merged in V. This bi-clausal structure was reanalyzed in the 16th century as the mono-clausal one in (15b) where the modal is directly merged in T. This would have led to the emergence of middles, because modals can now specify the modal operator by being directly merged in T, in accordance with the assumption in the previous subsection.

With this in mind, let us consider the mechanism of the development of English middles. Recall from section 3 that the instances of middles in the earliest stage (the 16th century) involve the modal *will* and are ambiguous between the ergative reading and the middle reading. This is illustrated in (16), repeated here from (10a), where the two readings are

associated with the futurity and possibility/potentiality interpretation of *will*.

(16) Your white canuas doublet will sully.

a. Ergative reading:

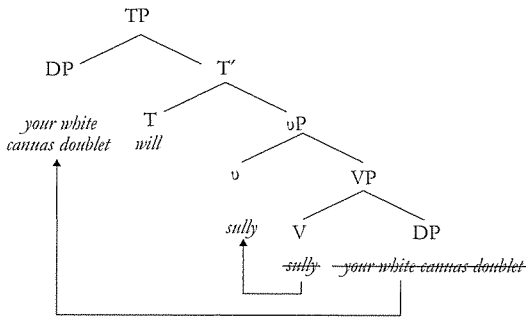
The sullyng event of your white canuas doublet will happen in the future.

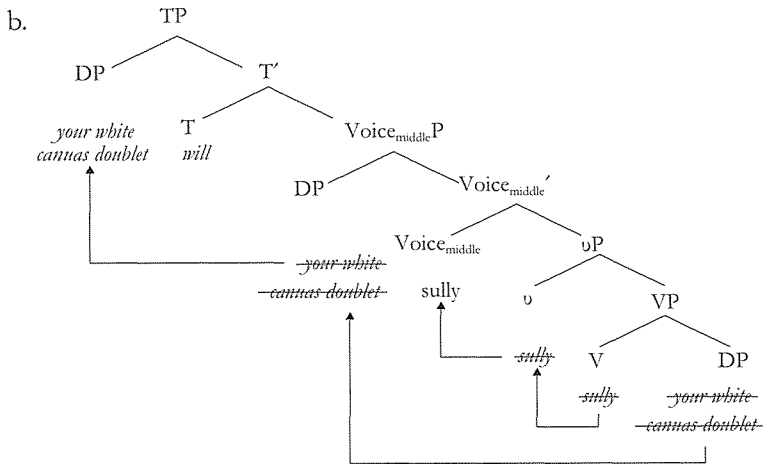
b. Middle reading:

The property of your white canuas doublet makes it possible to be sullied.

This paper proposes that such instances are the initial locus of reanalysis, because they are also structurally ambiguous, with (17a, b) corresponding to the ergative reading and the middle reading, respectively. The two factors, that is, the meaning change of *will* and the reanalysis of modals as T elements, set the stage for the development of middles: when the child was exposed to such ambiguous instances as (16), he/she could have postulated the structure in (17b), rather than that in (17a) based on the grammar of the adult generation, leading to the reanalysis of ergatives as middles in the 16th century.

(17) a.





Finally, the development of English middles after their emergence can be divided into three stages, characterized in terms of the change in the manner of specifying the modal operator in T: from the direct merger of a modal in T, to the covert movement of a facility adverb, then to the covert movement of an event adverb (see (12)).⁵ This developmental process is shown in (18).

(18) **Stage I (16 C)**

- a. Your white canuas doublet will sully. (Type II)

$[_{TP} \text{ your white canuas doublet } [_{T'} \text{ will } (Op) [_{voiceP} t_i [_{VP} \text{ sully } t_i]]]]$

↑
by direct merger



Stage II (17 C)

- b. It dries quickly. (Middles with a facility adverb (Type I))

$[_{TP} \text{ it } [_{T'} \text{ quickly } (Op) [_{voiceP} \text{ quickly } [_{voiceP} t_i [_{VP} \text{ dry } t_i]]]]]$

↑
covert movement



Stage III (18 C)

- c. They handle moist or clammy. (Middles with an event adverb (Type I))

$$\frac{[_{TP} \text{they}_i [_{T'} \text{moist or clammy}]_{(Op)} [_{voiceP} \text{t}_i [_{VP} \text{moist and clammy}]_{(Op)}]]_{(Op)} [_{VP} \text{handle t}_i]]]}{\text{covert movement}}$$

5. Concluding Remarks

This paper has discussed the origin and the development of middles in the history of English, based on the data from OED. It was proposed that English middles emerged via the reanalysis of ergatives, which was triggered by the meaning change of *will* and, more importantly, the development of modals in the history of English. Moreover, the development of English middles was characterized in terms of the change in the manner of specifying the modal operator in T: from the direct merge of a modal in T as a basic strategy, to the covert movement of an adverb which is a later development.

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Notes

¹ This paper does not discuss the third kind of middle, which involves a kind of quasi copula and hence is irrelevant for the present concern.

² Kratzer (1996) argues that the functions of the light verb in the standard analysis of clause structure (cf. Chomsky (1995)) are assigned to two functional categories, Voice and *v*: the former has the role of external theta-role assignment and the latter contributes to event interpretation (cf. Marantz (2005)). This paper follows Alexiadou (2013) in extending this proposal to middles, assuming that they also have a Voice head (though they do not take an external argument in [Spec, VoiceP]; but see below for the role of this head associated with the grammatical subject of middles).

³ Osawa (2001) proposes that the subject of the *be*-passive is assigned a secondary theta role (Agent) by *v* when it moves to satisfy the EPP feature of *v* on its way to [Spec, TP]. Honda (2012) applies her proposal to the *get*-passive that also has the property of the subject's responsibility. See also Kume (2009) for a similar analysis of the secondary agentivity in the double verb construction (e. g. *We go visit our parents every month.*).

⁴ As an anonymous *ILY* reviewer points out, independent evidence that T is crucially involved in English middles comes from the following example showing that they cannot appear in the complement of perception verbs. Assuming that perception verbs take a complement without T (Roberts (1987: 201)), it cannot host the modal operator, an obligatory element in middles, thereby accounting for the ungrammaticality of examples like '(i).

(i) * John saw the book sell/selling well.

⁵ This paper assumes that facility/manner adverbs and event adverbs are adjuncts of Voice_{middle}P and VP, respectively. See Alexiadou (1997: 135) and Cinque (1999: 101–103) for the licensing of facility/manner adverbs by Voice; see Matsumoto (1996) for arguments that event adverbs as VP adjuncts are related to the state/property of the Patient/Theme argument of the verb.

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Synopsis

On the Development of Middles in the History of English

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This paper analyzes the development of middles in the history of English in terms of the reanalysis of ergatives, combined with the development of modals as the triggering factor. In order to distinguish between middles and ergatives, three crucial properties of middles are shown as a diagnosis: (i) responsibility of the grammatical subject, (ii) genericity, and (iii) the modal interpretation of possibility.

To begin with, a brief examination of the historical data of middles in Visser (1963–1973) shows that all the relevant instances of middles before Modern English are in fact ergatives. Then based on the collection of the data of middles in OED, this paper suggests dividing the development of middles into three stages, by applying the analysis of Massam (1992) that they have a modal operator in T to be specified by a modal or an adverb. The development of English middles can be best characterized in terms of the change in the manner of specifying the modal operator in T: from the direct merge of a modal in T as a basic strategy, to the covert movement of a facility adverb, then to the covert movement of an event adverb.

It is worthwhile to note that all the examples of middles in Stage I (the 16th Century) are Type II middles with a modal verb *will*, which are ambiguous between ergatives and middles. This paper proposes that the meaning change of *will*, and, more importantly, the reanalysis of modal auxiliaries in the 16th century (see Biberauer and Roberts (2010)) trigger the reanalysis of ergatives as middles. Moreover, this paper follows Alexiadou (2012, 2013) in arguing that the properties of middles are captured in syntactic terms, proposing that Voice_{middle} in English is responsible for genericity on a par with Greek middles. Finally, this paper adopts the mechanism of secondary theta-role assignment (see Osawa (2001), Kume (2009) and Honda (2012)) and proposes that the Patient/Theme DP moves

to [Spec, VoiceP] on its way to [Spec, TP] and is assigned a secondary theta-role (Agent) by Voice_{middle}, thereby accounting for its responsibility.