

Fallacy of the Excluded Middle: Reassessing the Category of “Deponency” to Reclaim the Middle Voice in NT Greek

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It happens to every elementary Greek student. Just when he is getting used to verbs in his vocabulary memory lists ending in –ω, a whole new pattern of verbs emerges in his vocabulary assignments. Suddenly he is confronted with ἔρχομαι (I come), βούλομαι (I wish), δέχομαι (I welcome or receive), and other vocabulary forms mysteriously appearing with middle/passive endings. And yet the English glosses he is provided seem active enough—they appear neither passive nor reflexive. He dutifully memorizes the vocabulary for the day and comes to class, hoping for an explanation. The traditional answer to the befuddled student comes in the form of a lesson on a deponency.

When I first started teaching elementary NT Greek, Lesson Seven was familiar enough territory for me. After all, I’d been happily parsing deponents for years. As I would deftly explain, deponent verbs are middle or passive in *form*, but active in *meaning*. Typically, verbs so classified have no attested active form—certainly not in the NT. And for some reason not entirely known to us, I would explain, the middle/passive form essentially serves as the active form. Looking back on this explanation, I have only one thing to say in my defense: I wasn’t the only one using it.

In this paper, I argue that “deponency” (at least as often taught or caught in NT Greek classrooms) is a flawed category and that we should largely or entirely eliminate our dependence on this category in our pedagogy and replace it with a more robust understanding of the full semantic range of the Greek middle voice. Some challenges remain, so I sketch some of the difficulties inherent in a model of the Greek verb that excludes deponency, pointing to some potentially compelling answers to the main challenges that may be raised. Finally, I make some suggestions toward a better pedagogy of the Greek verb, particularly the middle voice. Partially due to the way we have taught deponency, I argue, the middle voice is largely neglected by the average student. Whether or not my readers agree with my perspective that we need to leave deponency behind, we need to find a way to adjust our pedagogy of the Greek verb so that the middle voice is better appreciated and less neglected by the average NT Greek student.

Middle Voice Defined

According to Stanley Porter, “voice is a form-based semantic category used to describe the role that the grammatical subject of a clause plays in relation to an action.”² Neva Miller explains that “the voice of a verb is construed to show how the participants in the action expressed in a verb related to that action.”³ The (excellent) curriculum from which I taught elementary NT Greek explains: “Voice indicates the relationship of the action of a verb to its

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² *Idioms of the Greek New Testament*, 2nd ed. (BLG, 2; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2nd edn, 1994), 62.

³ “A Theory of Deponent Verbs,” pp. 423-430, Appendix 2 in Barbara Friberg, Timothy Friberg, and Neva F. Miller (eds.), *Analytical Lexicon of the Greek New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000), 423.

subject.”⁴ Simply put, voice shows how the *action* indicated by a verb relates to the grammatical *subject* of that verb.

What relationships are possible? Traditionally, three voices (in terms of form *and* function) have been identified in Koine. The curriculum I used helpfully displayed these different voices in a chart indicating the nature of the relationship indicated between the action and the subject.⁵

Voice		
Voice indicates the relationship of the action of a verb to its subject.		
Voice	Explanation	Examples
Active	The subject performs the action of the verb.	Andy <i>hit</i> the ball. Christ <i>arose</i> .
Passive	The subject receives the action of the verb.	The ball <i>was hit</i> by Andy. Christ <i>was raised</i> .
Middle	The subject acts in his own interest or upon himself.	Andy <i>hit</i> the ball <i>for himself</i> . Christ <i>raised Himself</i> .

Middle voice was defined third (after the more familiar active and passive voices), and was defined in terms of self-interest or reflexive action. But this chart, appearing in Lesson Two, was clearly designed for beginners. Definitions from other Greek grammars help us fill out a picture of the Koine middle voice. Porter states that “the Greek middle voice expresses more direct participation, specific involvement, or even some form of benefit of the subject doing the action.”⁶ Neva Miller’s more involved explanation is helpful: “The middle voice shows that not only does the subject perform the action in the verb, but that the effect of the action comes back on him. He does the action with reference to himself. He is involved in the action in such a way that it reflects back on him. The action calls attention to him in some way. *For example, I washed myself.*”⁷ Wallace elaborates on the middle voice: “in the middle voice the subject *performs or experiences the action* expressed by the verb in such a way that *emphasizes the subject’s participation.*”⁸ According to Barber, “When a Greek author chooses the middle over the active voice for a particular verb, he is expressing what is usually described by Greek teachers as the ‘involvement’ of the subject in the action—the fact that the agentive subject is also affected in some way by the action.”⁹ Barber’s definition is helpful because it avoids giving the impression that the Greek middle is primarily a narrow reflexive or indicative merely of positive self-interest. Moving to a broader, more typological and cross-linguistic understanding of the middle voice, Lyons’ states: “The implications of the middle (when it is in opposition with the active) are that the ‘action’ or ‘state’ affects the subject of the verb or his interests.”¹⁰

⁴ *A Handbook for New Testament Greek*, 4th ed. (Greenville, SC: Bob Jones University Press, 2007), 8.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ *Idioms*, 67.

⁷ Miller, 424.

⁸ Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 414.

⁹ E. J. W. Barber, “Voice—Beyond the Passive,” pp. 16-24 in *Proceedings of the First Annual Meeting of the Berkeley Linguistics Society* (1975; <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/6339k77b>), 16.

¹⁰ John Lyons, *Introduction to Theoretical Linguistics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), 373.

In line with these definitions and with the actual usage of the middle voice in Koine, I view the middle voice as a morpho-syntactic coding of subject-affectedness.¹¹ These middle forms present the subject itself as in some way affected by the action of the verb. Of course, there are a number of different sub-categories of subject-affectedness and thus a number of different event-types for which the middle voice forms are appropriate, but the over-arching semantic idea in the middle voice can be viewed as an expression of subject-affectedness.¹²

Dealing with Deponency as a Greek Instructor, 2009-2013

I have already described a pedagogy that I have since repented of. When I first started teaching Greek and it came time to teach my elementary students about verbs that only occur in the middle or passive voice, I would explain that these verbs are middle or passive in *form*, but active in *meaning*. I viewed deponent verbs as an exception to the rule, as a sort of violation of an otherwise orderly voice system in NT Greek—and presented them as such. In doing this, I was not alone, and I had Greek grammars to back me up. For instance, the curriculum I was using states:

Deponent verbs are verbs that have the form of middle or passive verbs but the meaning of active verbs. The common deponent verbs must be memorized, and you can determine whether other verbs are deponent by checking their sources in a lexicon. A lexical form with a middle or passive ending is deponent. For example, ἀποκρίνομαι means “I answer,” not “I answer for myself” or “I am being answered.”¹³

Mounce, one of the most popular elementary texts, presents the deponent verb in this way:

This is a verb that is middle or passive in form but active in meaning. Its form is always middle or passive, but its meaning is always active....You can tell if a verb is deponent by its lexical form. Deponent verbs are always listed in the vocabulary sections with passive endings....If the lexical form ends in -ομαι, the verb is deponent.¹⁴

Dana and Mantey, an older but helpful grammar, states that “deponent verbs are those with middle or passive form, but active meaning.”¹⁵ Wallace’s volume, which have found very helpful in many respects, fell in line with traditional grammars in its definition: “A deponent middle is a middle voice verb that has no active *form* but is active in *meaning*.”

¹¹ See Rutgar Allen, “The Middle Voice in Ancient Greek: A Study in Polysemy” (PhD diss., University of Amsterdam, 2002), 185.

¹² It is helpful to keep Allen’s explanation in view: “In accordance with the usage-based model of grammar, it is conceivable that this abstract schema is less entrenched, and only of secondary importance in actual language use. In speaking and hearing, the language user is more likely to activate the more concrete middle usage types, than the rather abstract superschema of *subject-affectedness*. For example, it is plausible that, when a Greek heard the word ἵσταμαι in a context without a direct object or external agent, the low-level “node” of the *pseudo-reflexive*, that specified that the subject undergoes a self-initiated change of state, was activated first and foremost. The abstract schema, with the single implication that the subject is affected, may have been activated less strongly, or not at all.”

¹³ *A Handbook for New Testament Greek*, 29.

¹⁴ William Mounce, *Basics of Biblical Greek*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003) 150.

¹⁵ H. E. Dana and Julius R. Mantey, *A Manual Grammar of the Greek New Testament* (New York: McMillan, 1927), 163. Dana and Mantey distinguish between the terms *defective* and *deponent*. The former has reference to a verb that does not show up in all three voices. Often the concepts are combined and presented under the idea of deponency, as in the elementary textbooks I have already cited.

Perhaps, though, it was Wallace's work itself that during my years of teaching Greek as a PhD student first began to open my eyes to the fact that there is more complexity to the issue than I had first realized. Although the elementary curriculum I was teaching from told the student "you can determine whether other verbs are deponent by checking their sources in a lexicon,"¹⁶ Wallace indicates that the "ideal approach" goes a step or two further.

When an exegetical decision depends in part on the voice of the verb, a more rigorous approach is required. In such cases, you should investigate the form of the word in Koine (conveniently, via Moulton-Milligan) and classical Greek (Liddell-Scott-Jones) before you declare a verb deponent. **Even then, you should not be able to see a middle force to the verb** [emphasis mine].¹⁷

I had begun teaching deponents by telling my students that if the vocabulary form of a word had a middle/passive ending, then the word was deponent—that it was a verb that was middle or passive in *form* but active in *meaning*. But I was beginning to realize that the issue was not that simple. Wallace's presentation showed that some of the verbs I would have classified as "deponent" may, in fact, be middle in meaning as well as in form. In fact, Wallace goes on to supply a list of "some verbs that look deponent but most likely are not."¹⁸ The list includes some vocabulary forms that I had been giving to my students as "deponents" under the definition "middle or passive in form, active in meaning."

At some point it started to become clear to me that there actually were middle-only verbs that could be classified as true middles.¹⁹ After all, it would be extremely arbitrary to assume that just because a verb shows up only in the middle voice, *ergo* we should ignore middle voice morphology and assume the middle voice is standing in for the active. I began to realize that just because a Greek middle-only verb *sounds* active in my English ears—in *English translation*—does not mean that in Koine this middle verb carried the *meaning* of the active voice. Many Greek middles—including those that have active forms—can be translated in English in a way that doesn't *seem* or *sound* active to English ears; simply because we don't have a middle voice with which to compare it or translate it. And yet, upon closer scrutiny, it is apparent that for many of these supposedly deponent verbs, the action does in some way affect the subject.

At this point I faced a question that we all face when we make an adjustment in the way we think about our discipline: "How am I going to adjust my pedagogy?" The adjustment I decided to make at the time was to present a different definition for deponents, one that was slightly different than the one offered in the textbook I used. I defined a deponent verb as a verb that is "middle or passive in form, active in *translation*." This (seemingly tiny) shift allowed me to explain that some of these verbs whose lexical or vocab form is middle really are likely middles. The reason they occur in the middle voice, I would explain, is that the idea of the lexeme itself stands for an event that is inherently middle. Since English doesn't have a middle voice, often there's no explicit marker we use when translating/glossing these words. But the idea of, say, δέχομαι, is inherently middle. Here is a deponent verb, I would say, that really isn't active in *meaning* within the genius of the Greek language itself. But we can say it is active in

¹⁶ To be fair, this explanation may be stated in this way to simplify the issue for beginners.

¹⁷ Wallace, 429-430.

¹⁸ Wallace, 430.

¹⁹ My vague recollection is that at some point during these years I also ran across an article online by Jonathan Pennington that pushed me even further away from my original conception of deponency. See further below for more on Pennington's contributions.

translation. Essentially, I had redefined for my students the concept of deponency, reducing my working definition to a matter of *form*, rather than *meaning*.

I had taken my first few steps to the position I am articulating in this paper. I had recognized that some of what my textbook defined as “deponents” could be analyzed as true middles. And I had changed my pedagogy. Even if both adjustments seemed fairly minor at the time, I feel like it was a small but important step forward in understanding for me—and for my students. I was starting to give the middle voice back some of its territory. I had discovered (for myself) that some verbs are middle-only verbs simply because the idea communicated by the lexeme itself inherently lends itself to expression by the Greek middle.

Now, what was a new discovery *for me* was really nothing new. It was part of my growing up in my personal understanding of the language. But had I been reading more widely all along, perhaps I could have spared myself (and my students) my earliest notions of deponency. I have already mentioned that Wallace helped me realize that many of the middle-only verbs I had been analyzing as active in meaning were true middles. But even older works could have tipped me off to this. Davis’s 1923 *Beginner’s Grammar of the Greek New Testament*, in dealing with these verbs notes that “these verbs have been called ‘deponents’ (middle or passive) because it was difficult to see the distinctive force of the verb. Yet it is not hard to recognize the personal interest of the subject in the verbs in the middle voice.”²⁰ If in 2009, when I first started teaching, I had picked up the 2009 translation of Wackernagel’s *Lectures on Syntax* (originally given in German in the 1920’s), I could have profited (myself) by reading his helpful discussion of what he refers to as the “so-called deponents,” especially his summary of the issue: “In other words, deponents are simply middle verbs which have no active forms and our task becomes to discover the middle meaning in the deponents.”²¹

As a busy graduate student and a relatively inexperienced elementary Greek instructor, I had only made it so far—but I had seen enough to begin making adjustments. What I was not fully aware of at the time was that, as I was working through these issues in my own thinking, some of the brightest minds in the contemporary study of NT Greek were reaching a consensus that it was time to set the category of deponency aside.

A Growing Consensus in Scholarship²²

Tucked away in the back of Friberg’s analytical lexicon (2000) is a gem—Neva Miller’s appendix titled “A Theory of Deponent Verbs.” Miller’s essay demonstrates how it is possible to take verbs conventionally analyzed as deponents and place them in categories that make sense of them as true middles in light of middle semantics. Miller suggests that “largely through failure to understand what is being communicated, verbs that show no active voice forms have been relegated to a category called deponent.”²³ What is the student left to conclude regarding these verb forms? “The student can only conclude that...they appear to communicate in a rather

²⁰ William Hersey Davis (Harper & Brothers: New York and London, 1923), 70-71.

²¹ Jacob Wackernagel, *Lectures on Syntax: With Special Reference to Greek, Latin, and Germanic*, ed. by David Langslow (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 160. (If you, like I, missed this translational gem in 2009, never fear, you can hurry over to amazon.com and pick up a copy for yourself today for only \$324.45).

²² In this section overviewing key voices in the recent conversation on this issue I am indebted to Constantine Campbell, *Advances in the Study of Greek: New Insights for Reading the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2015). Campbell’s arguments and his summary of recent scholarship in Chapter 4, “Deponency and the Middle Voice” (91-104) drove me to key sources that have been extremely helpful in shaping my views.

²³ Miller, 424.

clumsy way concepts that appear clear enough in other languages as active verbs.”²⁴ Miller suggests “an alternate approach to deponency,” one in which we “examine each such verb for its own sake and allow it to speak for itself.” “Since the middle voice signals that the agent is in some way staying involved in the action,” Miller argues, “it is appropriate to ask, How is the agent involved?”²⁵ Miller proceeds to offer a representative display of NT Greek “deponents” broken down into seven major categories: reciprocity (positive interaction, negative interaction, positive and negative communication); reflexivity (including self-locomotion); self-involvement (intellectual activities, emotional states, volitional activities; self interest; receptivity (where the subject is “the receiver of sensory perception”); passivity (where “involuntary experiences” are in view); and state or condition (where “the subject is the center of gravity”). While there is room for disagreement on some of Miller’s specific classificational choices, Miller herself was not presenting her paper as the final word but as suggestive of a way forward. Through a more robust understanding of and appreciation of the range of meaning indicated by middle morphology, it is possible to achieve a better understanding of what the voice form of these verbs is there to communicate. And, as Miller concludes, “it would be worthwhile for exegetes, students, and translators to look for the enriched meaning being communicated by this category of verbs by letting each middle or passive ‘deponent’ verb speak with its own voice.”²⁶

Bernard Taylor’s 2001 SBL paper “Deponency and Greek Lexicography” finds deponency to be a concept imported from Latin grammar and foisted on the Koine middle voice and concludes that “for Greek, then, what needs to be laid aside is the notion of deponency.”²⁷

Carl Conrad in an unpublished paper “New Observations on Voice in the Ancient Greek Verb” (2002) argues that “technology and assumptions either implicit in the teaching or openly taught to students learning Greek seem to me to make understanding voice in the ancient Greek verb more difficult than it need be.”²⁸ Conrad continues: “In particular I believe that the meanings conveyed by the morphoparadigms for voice depend to a great extent upon understanding the distinctive force of the middle voice, that the passive sense is not inherent in the verb form but determined by usage in context, and the conception of deponency is fundamentally wrong-headed and detrimental to understanding the phenomenon of ‘voice’ in ancient Greek.”²⁹ Conrad believes that “the fundamental polarity in the Greek voice system is not *active-passive* but *active-middle*” and argues that “the middle voice needs to be understood in its own status and function as indicating that the *subject* of a verb is the focus of the verb’s action or state.”³⁰ Furthermore, in dealing with verbs typically analyzed as aorist passive forms with a deponent function, Conrad argues that “we need to grasp that the -θη- forms originated as intransitive aorists coordinated with ‘first’ -σα aorists, that they increasingly assumed a function identical with that of the aorist middle-passives in -μην/σο/το κτλ. and gradually supplanted the older forms.”³¹ Conrad essentially argues in his paper that the middle voice covered the passive

²⁴ Miller, 425.

²⁵ Miller, 426.

²⁶ Miller, 430.

²⁷ “Deponency and Greek Lexicography” in Bernard A. Taylor, John A. Lee, Peter R. Burton and Richard E. Whitaker (eds.), *Biblical Greek Language and Lexicography: Essays in Honor of Frederick W. Danker* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 167-176. Page 175.

²⁸ Conrad, 1. <https://pages.wustl.edu/files/pages/imce/cwconrad/newobsancgrkvc.pdf>.

²⁹ Conrad, 2.

³⁰ Conrad, 3.

³¹ Conrad, 5. Bolstering his argument is the historical reality that Proto-Indo-European and early Greek voice systems had only two voice paradigms, and there were no distinctly passive forms. See Conrad, 6. Also note, this is not merely an assertion Conrad is making. See, for example, Karl Brugmann, *A Comparative Grammar of the*

function and -θη- marker is to be seen as an alternate middle form that originated as an intransitive form (in certain tense-forms) within the middle voice. In fact, Conrad goes on to suggest that we consider “middle” and “passive” forms together as a single morphoparadigm, marked as “subject-focused” in opposition to a “simple” morphoparadigm that is unmarked with regard to subject-focus (what we know as “active” voice).³² Whether or not the reader is prepared to agree without reservation or nuance, Conrad’s contribution certainly furthers the conversation and puts on the table several well-argued ideas that deserve consideration. Perhaps most relevant to my argument is Conrad’s plea: “What I would urge is that we cease referring to the so-called ‘Deponent Verbs’ by that name and that we henceforth pay attention to their principal parts and the morphoparadigm(s) in which the verb is found, interpreting the verb’s meaning in terms intelligible from those morphoparadigms.”³³

Rutger Allen in his 2002 dissertation on the middle voice in Ancient Greek demonstrates that *media-tantum* (middle-only verbs or deponents) should be treated as semantic *middles*.³⁴ Critiquing conventional treatment that deals with *media-tantum* separately from oppositional middles (middles in verbs which have both an active and middle form), Allen notes that in conventional treatment while the latter “are distinguished purely on the basis of semantic criteria,” the former are “distinguished by a completely different criterion, namely the non-existence of an active form.”³⁵ Given the fact that middle-only verbs can be explained in terms of middle semantics, it makes little sense to separate them out as if the absence of an active form somehow implies that middle-only verbs do not express middle meaning. Allen provides a helpful listing of categories in the realm of middle semantics within which middle-only verbs tend to fall: beneficiary/recipient; body motion; emotion/cognition; volitional/mental activities; reciprocal; perception; and speech act.³⁶ Allen’s third chapter discusses aorist middle and passive forms. This is highly relevant to the current discussion, since one of the main challenges to an approach that would eliminate deponency as a valid category for explaining Greek verbs (and instead appeal to the semantics of the middle voice) is the issue of passive deponents, deponents that in the aorist tense-form appear with prototypical “passive” endings. Allen notes that “in the course of the history of the Greek language, a gradual expansion of the passive aorist form can be observed. This expansion take [sic] place mainly at the cost of the sigmatic middle aorist.”³⁷ Allen finds that the passive aorist form extended itself through “connected paths through the semantic network.”³⁸ Allen’s charts, supported by his more detailed analysis and discussion, illustrate the encroachment of the passive forms upon middle semantic territory in Homeric and Classical Greek and are reproduced below.³⁹

Indo-Germanic Languages, Vol. 4, Morphology Part III, trans. by R. Seymour Conway and W. H. D. Rouse (B. Westermann and Co.: New York, 1895.), 515. “For the Passive Voice there were originally no special and characteristic endings in the Indo-Germanic [Indo-European] languages. All so-called passive forms in the verb finite are either middle or active.”

³² Conrad, 7.

³³ Conrad, 9.

³⁴ Allen’s dissertation is a broader exploration of the middle in Ancient Greek but he makes points that are significant to the issue at hand.

³⁵ Allen, 35.

³⁶ Allen, 36.

³⁷ Allen, 111.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ Allen’s “Fig. 1” is taken from page 109 and “Fig. 2” from page 117.

Fig. 1: The Distribution of the Sigmatic Middle Aorist and the Aorist in -θη- in Homer

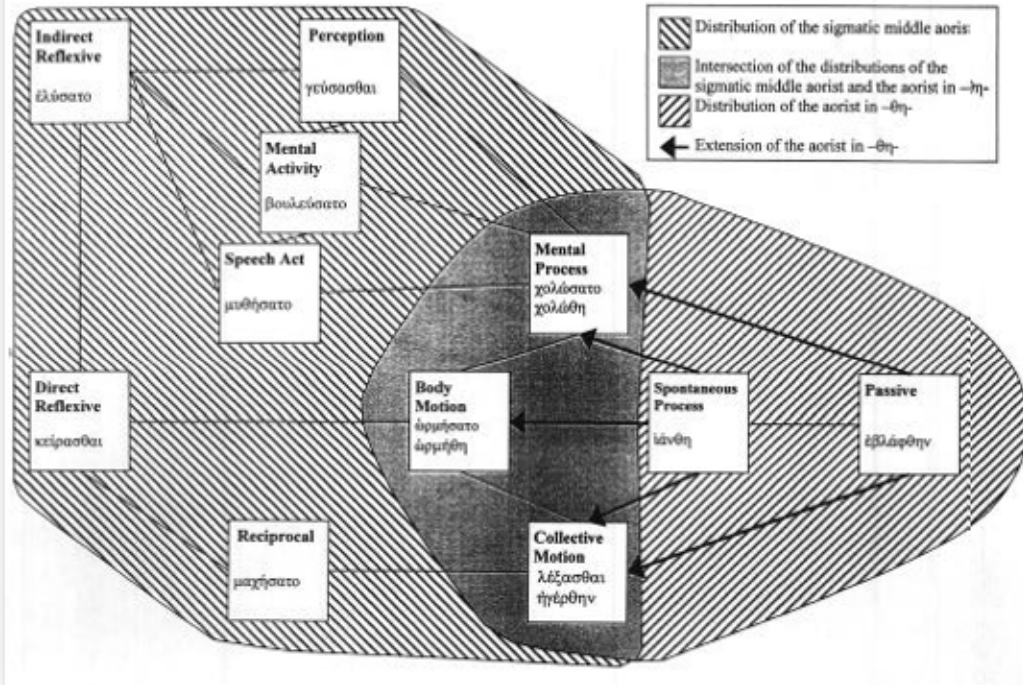
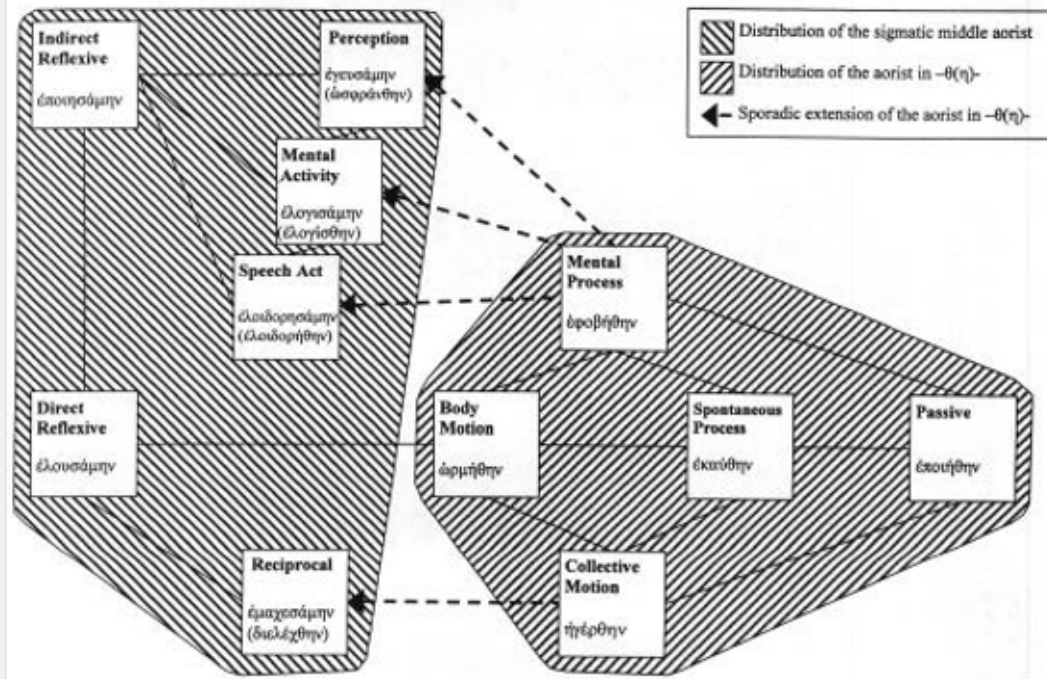


Fig. 2: The Distribution of the Sigmatic Middle Aorist and the Aorist in -θη- in Classical Greek



Allen's work, while not focused on Koine Greek, is a significant contribution that seriously grapples with the meaning of the Greek middle voice, and is a resource that will continue to be referenced in ongoing conversation regarding the Greek middle. It supports the contention that deponency is not a helpful category, offers help in understanding and classifying middle verbs (including middle-only verbs), and provides information that is helpful in dealing with the challenge of what to do with passive forms (in the aorist) of verbs lacking active forms—verbs that have traditionally been analyzed as deponents but that I suggest we ought to view as true semantic middles.

Jonathan Pennington wrote on the topic of deponency in 2003 and in 2009; he also presented during an SBL session in 2010 and again in 2012.⁴⁰ Here I will mainly focus on his 2009 contribution, since it is the latest full paper available to me from Pennington. Pennington sets out to show

that the grammatical category of deponency, despite its widespread use in Greek grammars, is erroneous. It has been misapplied to Greek because of the influence of Latin grammar as well as our general unfamiliarity with the meaning of the Greek middle voice. As a result we have failed to grasp the significance of the Greek middle. Indeed, most if not all verbs that are traditionally considered 'deponent' are truly middle in meaning. But because the Greek middle voice has no direct analogy in English (or Latin), this point has been missed....Additionally, a rediscovery of the genius of the Greek middle voice has ramifications for New Testament exegesis.⁴¹

As of 2009, Pennington lamented the fact that "the category of deponency is still used universally in our presentation of Greek grammar."⁴² After challenging the idea of deponency, he offers a positive explanation of what is going on with middle-only verbs, appealing to Miller's categories as well as to the work of Suzanne Kemmer.⁴³ He also includes a helpful section discussing the potential objections raised by verbs that are middle only in the future tense-form and by aorist passive deponents. He offers a perspective on the impact on the study of the New Testament, observing that "sensitivity to the nuances of the middle voice opens new possibilities when encountering middle forms in the New Testament texts" and that "both middle-only verbs and those which fluctuate between the two voices can be more fully appreciated in light of a fuller understanding of the Greek middle."⁴⁴ One final note regarding Pennington's views is in order: from what I can tell from the sparse handouts from his 2010 and 2012 SBL presentations, as well as from Campbell's testimony, Pennington seems to have fully adopted Carl Conrad's schema for viewing "aorist middle" forms and "aorist passive" forms as two versions (MP1 and MP2) of a "middle-passive" or "subject-focused" morphoparadigm.⁴⁵

⁴⁰ "Deponency in Koine Greek: The Grammatical Question and the Lexicographical Dilemma," *Trinity Journal* 24 (NS) (Spring, 2003), 55-76. "Setting Aside 'Deponency': Rediscovering the Greek Middle Voice in New Testament Studies," in *The Linguist as Pedagogue: Trends in the Teaching and Linguistic Analysis of the Greek New Testament* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2009), 181-203.

⁴¹ Pennington, "Setting Aside Deponency," 182.

⁴² Pennington, "Setting Aside Deponency," 187.

⁴³ Kemmer's cross-linguistic study is very helpful, particularly in her categorization of the types of events represented by middles. *The Middle Voice* (Typological Studies in Language 23; John Benjamins: Philadelphia, 1993).

⁴⁴ Pennington, "Setting Aside Deponency," 187.

⁴⁵ See <http://jonathanpennington.com/wp-content/uploads/2010/11/test-driving-the-theory-handout-pennington.pdf> and <http://jonathanpennington.com/wp-content/themes/jtp2011/AfterDeponencyPaperHandoutPenningtonSBL2012.pdf>. Also Campbell, 100, fn. 46.

Pennington was not the only presenter, obviously, at the 2010 and 2012 SBL sessions. In 2010, Con Campbell presented and along with the other presenters “argued that the category of deponency ought to be abandoned.”⁴⁶ At the same session, Bernard Taylor demonstrated that deponency was a concept imported from Latin. In a revision of this paper that was published in 2015, he concludes that “it is well past time to return deponency to Latin, and attune the ear to the nuances of the Greek middle voice.”⁴⁷ Porter presented on “Criteria for Determining the Concepts of Voice and Deponency in Ancient Greek,” and, while I do not have access to that paper and am not aware that it has yet been published, Campbell indicates that Porter came out against deponency.⁴⁸

An SBL session in 2012 was actually titled “We Killed Deponency: Where Next?”⁴⁹ So strong is the developing consensus that Campbell states, “While not all Greek professors are yet convinced that deponency should be abandoned, there is a consensus among most scholars working in the field that it should.”

Some Challenges

Perhaps the greatest challenges to my thesis are the aorist passives and the future middles. I have already addressed the aorist passive issue above, particularly in the section where I overviewed Carl Conrad’s contribution and Rutger Allen’s dissertation. It appears that the passive forms (if, indeed, we should even refer to them as passive forms at all) are during the Koine period well into their encroachment of middle semantic territory. The close relationship between the middle and the passive, the fact that the passive voice was developed after the middle voice was already clearly established, and the evident expansion of the usage of the -(θ)η-forms all combine to assure me that the issue of so called “passive deponents” is not a good reason to continue propping up the category of deponency. There is no reason to get the active voice involved or to appeal to an explanation like “middle or passive in form, active in meaning.” Even if one parts ways with Conrad and Pennington and views the forms as separate passive forms (rather than an alternative or secondary form within a single middle/passive morphoparadigm expressing subject-focus), any mismatch between form and function would be in the context of an intramural contest between the middle and passive forms. No recourse to the concept of deponency is needed; it is not helpful to identify what is going on as a passive form taking on *active* semantics. If anything, it would appear to be the case of a passive form taking on *middle* semantics.

The issue of “semi-deponents,” or verbs that use an active form in the present but are middle-only in the future, presents another challenge. First of all I think it might be helpful to realize that there may be a closer relationship between voice and other semantic and pragmatic features of the Greek verb such as aspect, tense, and *Aktionsart* than is sometimes realized. Egbert J. Bakker, discussing objective intransitive 1-participant events notes that for these events, in the future “the morphology is consistently middle” and offers an explanation:

⁴⁶ Campbell, 98. In email correspondence, Campbell indicated that the chapter “Deponency and the Middle Voice” in *Advances* is basically a revision of what he presented at SBL in 2010.

⁴⁷ “Greek Deponency: The Historical Perspective” in T. Evans and J. Aitken (eds.), *Biblical Greek in Context: Essays in Honour of John A. L. Lee* (Leuven: Peeters, 2015). 177-190. Page 190.

⁴⁸ Campbell, 98.

⁴⁹ I have not to this point had access to any of the papers presented at the 2012 SBL session other than the posted handout from Pennington; however, Stan Porter has indicated via email correspondence that he plans to publish his 2012 paper at some point in the future.

The affinity between future and middle, here and in other cases, has puzzled philologists, but is in fact easy to explain....On account of its connection with volitionality, future tense presents an event as a mental disposition, an intention, and this naturally explains the affinity between “middle” and “future”, since volitionality as the *sole* transitivity feature of an event (i.e. when agency and causation are absent) involves affectedness.⁵⁰

Pennington’s discussion of this issue is helpful. In addition to some other lines of discussion and argument, he also points out that “because the middle voice can only present an event as a mental disposition or intention, the middle voice serves well in many instances to communicate that sense.”⁵¹ Citing Klaiman’s cross-linguistic study, Pennington says that “there is a close semantic connection in many languages between the middle voice and the future tense.”⁵² There may be some lines of exploration here that would be helpful to explore, but in a framework that abandons the concept of deponency, the issue of future middles could use some more work.

Finally, I want to be clear that I am open to the possibility or the probability that some middle-only verbs are showing conventionalized forms. In fact I think it is quite likely that conventionalization is in play at times here, and I am not arguing that every Greek speaker was self-consciously and laboriously attempting to impart some special, intentional middle flair every time he used say, ἔρχομαι. I would assume that people said ἔρχομαι because that is how one was to say ἔρχομαι. But admitting that some middle forms may have become conventionalized is not the same as saying that there is a whole category of verbs in which middle forms code for an active meaning. Particularly in light of evidence that the middle voice was still understood in the Koine period, there is no need, in my view, to assume that the possibility conventionalization was happening negates the basically middle force to middle-only verbs.⁵³ If you do consider the forms fossilized, perhaps you would still agree that there is a reason the words fossilized as *middles*, after all.

Does This Really Make A Difference?

What difference does it make? First of all, I would argue that to perpetuate a lack of clarity on what is actually going on with so-called “deponents” only aggravates and reinforces these four all-too-common misperceptions among Greek students. 1) Active and passive are the main voice choices in Greek and the middle is a sideshow. 2) If it *sounds* active in *English*, the *meaning* must be active. 3) The “true” middle can/should always be translated as a reflexive or with a “for itself” clause. 4) Since active/passive voices are the main voices, and most middles are deponents, it’s not essential to learn much about middles other than the forms (in order to parse all those deponents).

Unfortunately, we may be setting our students up for these bad assumptions (and possibly some others) by the way we are teaching. However it comes about, students pay little meaningful

⁵⁰ “Voice, Aspect, and Aktionsart: Middle and Passive in Ancient Greek,” in Barbara Fox and Paul J. Hopper (eds.), *Voice: Form and Function* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 1994), 29.

⁵¹ 194. I am not sure I exactly agree with the way he puts this—nevertheless it seems like he may be on to something with his general line of argument here.

⁵² Pennington, “Setting Aside Deponency,” 194. See also M. H. Klaiman, *Grammatical Voice* (Cambridge Studies in Linguistics; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

⁵³ “On the whole the conclusion must be arrived at that the New Testament writers were perfectly capable of preserving the distinction between the active and the middle.” Friedrich W. Blass, trans. by H. St. J. Thackeray, *Grammar of New Testament Greek* (1898; repr., Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2010), 186.

attention to the middle voice in general—and my suspicion is that it is largely due to the way teachers pass along the concept of “deponency” to students.⁵⁴

The result? Even unquestioned semantic middles (middles that exist in lexemes with an active/middle opposition) are often entirely passed over. And for all practical purposes, for many NT Greek students (and, we might fear, some exegetes), the middle voice might as well not exist.⁵⁵

What are we missing? We are missing an opportunity to teach and model linguistic and historical sensitivity. We are missing an opportunity to better immerse ourselves, without filter, into the first-century world. We might even be missing exegetical precision (or even exegetical accuracy) in interpreting passages involving middle-only verbs.⁵⁶ And many students are almost entirely missing something that we ought to consider very important: one of (a maximum of) three voices in the language we have been tasked to teach them.

So I have a suggestion. Let us consider teaching middle-only verbs without appeal to deponency. We must teach the forms of course. But let me suggest we take a cue from someone very well known to the Bible Faculty Summit:

There are some verbs that always occur in the middle form; they use only the C personal ending, never the A set. These verbs do not have an active form. That is, you will never see them with active personal endings (set A). For these reason they are called middle-only verbs. This is a set of verbs that typically has an inherent middle meaning in the very lexis of the word itself. That is, the meaning of the word makes the subject focus of the middle form very natural. For example, think about the meanings of these words. Can you envision it being done to someone other than the subject?⁵⁷

Rod Decker’s grammar is a good example of how we can approach this category of verbs without giving the impression that these verbs do not make sense as middles. If more of us will consider adopting a similar approach, we may be able to recover the middle voice for our students—and maybe even for ourselves.

⁵⁴ See also Pennington, “Setting Aside Deponency,” 197.

⁵⁵ “Many New Testament scholars seldom consider the potential significance of a middle form....All of this is the unfortunate consequence of importing deponency into our understanding of the Greek verbal system.” Pennington, “Setting Aside Deponency,” 197.

⁵⁶ Even the most unwavering continuationist ought not to appeal to any concept of deponency in 1 Corinthians 13:8—even if he believes in deponency. The word *παύω* occurs in the active voice in Koine (see 1 Peter 3:10). And as Phil Gons points in his blog post “Is Παύσονται Deponent?” (<http://philgons.com/2006/11/is-παύσονται-deponent/>), this verb occurs in the *future* active in the LXX, in Philo, and in Josephus. Deponency seems to be something of an interloper in this conversation. And yet how many times has the concept of deponency been appealed to in argumentation regarding this passage? Changing your view on deponency probably shouldn’t change your view about tongues, whatever that view may be. But better sensitivity to the *range of meanings* that can be signaled by the Greek middle might remove from some of our discussions concepts that are foreign to the text and unhelpful to the discussion. And this sensitivity might help those on *both* sides of exegetical discussion like this be more informed and responsible in their arguments. If some of those in this discussion could stop dismissing the word as a deponent on the one hand, or on the other hand trying to enter the fray on the other side without a full-orbed understanding of the middle voice, perhaps there could be more meaningful discussion about the role of this verb’s middle voice in the theology of the passage. Whether or not the middle voice is found to be a significant factor in how the voice is interpreted, it would be nice at least to avoid wasted effort discussing deponency along the way.

⁵⁷ Rodney J. Decker, *Reading Koine Greek: An Introduction and Integrated Workbook* (Baker: Grand Rapids, 2014), section 15.9.