

NB: A fuller and more refined version of this argument can be found in the forthcoming essay, “Setting Aside ‘Deponency’ and Rediscovering the Middle Voice for New Testament Studies,” in Stanley Porter and Matthew Brook O’Donnell (eds.), *Studying the Greek New Testament: Papers from the SBL Greek Language and Linguistics Section* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press).

“Is Deponency a Valid Category for Koine Greek?”

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SBL 2003 (Atlanta, GA)

Genesis of an Idea

Two or three years ago I was doing a lot of Greek lexicographical work for Zondervan – both for my own publications and some editing work.¹ As I laboriously examined every word that occurs in the GNT ten times or more, I began to notice some inconsistencies in how different lexicons and grammars listed the lexical form for so-called “deponent” verbs. As you know, a deponent verb is traditionally defined as a verb that occurs in the middle-passive form but with an active meaning. This is pounded into our heads from the earliest days of Greek study to make sense of such words as ἔρχομαι and δέχομαι, and others.

Thus, these inconsistencies in how lexicons listed such words stood out to me. For example, take the word φοβέω / φοβέομαι (“I fear”): some list this in the simple active indicative form (–εω) while others, the middle/passive φοβέομαι (thereby communicating deponency). The same is true for σέβω / σέβομαι (“I worship”) and others.

I began to wonder how we decided which words were deponent and which were not. Was it purely a matter of extant morphological forms? If so, what corpus of literature did we use to determine if only middle-passive forms existed? Or was there some other factor that went into establishing deponency.

At the same time as I was working on this, at SBL in Denver, Bernard Taylor read a paper entitled, “Deponency and Greek Lexicography.” Dr Taylor raised some of the same issues and further stimulated my thoughts.

As I began to dig deeper into the subject of deponency, I found comments such as these:

Stanley Porter: “There is room for much more work in areas related to Greek voice. One of those areas is deponent verbs.”²

Dan Wallace: “The criteria for determining deponency still await a definitive treatment.”³

And as I went back to earlier grammarians, I was surprised to find very *disparaging* remarks about the whole category of deponency. Moulton calls the idea of Greek deponency “unsatisfactory.”⁴ Even more strongly, A. T. Robertson, who always puts “deponency” in scare-quotes (“”) writes: “The truth is that [the term] should not be used at all.”⁵

¹ Jonathan T. Pennington, *New Testament Greek Vocabulary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001).

² Stanley Porter, *Idioms of the Greek New Testament* (2d ed.; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), 63.

³ Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 430 n. 65.

⁴ James H. Moulton, *Prolegomena* (vol. 1 of *A Grammar of New Testament Greek*; 3d ed.; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1908), 153.

⁵ A. T. Robertson, *A Grammar of the Greek New Testament in the Light of Historical Research* (Nashville: Broadman, 1934), 332. See also pages 811 ff.

Well, you can imagine this only served to pique my interest even more. How could it be that something so standard as deponency was so profoundly questioned by the leading grammarians?

Well, as I continued to work on this topic I came to agree wholeheartedly with Robertson that deponency is a less than helpful category for understanding Koine Greek, despite its widespread use.

The issues here can be quite complex and I obviously have limited time today. So, this afternoon I will simply layout a rather straightforward thesis against the grammatical concept of deponency. My presentation today can necessarily only be the barebones structure of my fuller argument.⁶ I will conclude by offering some practical ramifications of this for us as teachers of Greek and exegetes.

The Thesis

My thesis is this: *Deponency is a grammatical category that has been misapplied to Greek because of the influence of Latin grammar and our unfamiliarity with the meaning of the Greek middle voice. Most if not all verbs that are traditionally considered “deponent” are truly middle in meaning. Therefore, the use of the category of deponency – “verbs that are middle-passive in form but active in meaning” – needs to be minimized at least, and possibly rejected all together.*

Let’s unpack this.

Influence of Latin Grammar

It will be of no surprise to this group to argue that Latin grammar has unduly influenced parts of our understanding of Greek. I think deponency is another such example. In his paper “Deponency and Greek Lexicography” Bernard Taylor tells of his own linguistic journey through Latin to Greek. He explains the source of the ‘deponent’ idea (from the Latin verb, *deponere*, “to lay aside”) as the term used “to describe the phenomenon of Latin verbs passive in form but active in meaning.”⁷ He points out that

At least by the Renaissance, Latin grammar and terminology had become the norm and were used to describe and delimit other languages.... In the interface between Greek and Latin, at least one Latin notion was transferred to Greek that had not existed in that language before: the notion of deponency.

Western European students of Greek, many of whom had first learned Latin, began to use this term to explain the Greek middle forms which appeared to have an active meaning. The handiness of the label in Latin became the perceived reality of what deponent Greek verbs were. But the problem is that in Latin there is no formal distinction between middle and passive.⁸ Therefore, Latin grammar does not stand in a good position to categorize the Greek middle voice. Taylor observes that

the Greeks themselves never found recourse to the concept [of deponency] despite their close attention to the form and function of their language... what is needed is to

⁶ A fuller argument of this thesis can be found in my article, “Deponency in Koine Greek: The Grammatical Question and the Lexicographical Dilemma,” *Trinity Journal* 24 (NS) (Spring, 2003), 55-76. The current paper builds upon that work and includes further developments in my thoughts as well as practical examples.

⁷ Taylor, “Deponency and Greek Lexicography,” 4.

⁸ Robertson, *Grammar*, 332-333.

go back to the point prior to the Late Latin grammarians... and work from there to understand the function of the three different voices, especially the middle.⁹

Modern scholars, even if their own training did not begin with Latin, have adopted the category of ‘deponency’ as if it were part of the Greek linguistic structure. But is there any evidence that a Greek person would have ever conceived of a verb as being deponent? I think not. Taylor points out how conspicuous it is that A. T. Robertson, who provided *Greek* terms for all of his grammatical terminology, fails to do so for deponency.¹⁰ This seems a clear case where we have taken a Latin grammatical category and applied it backwards and sideways to Greek.

Unfamiliarity with the Middle Voice

The reason this has happened is because we are so unfamiliar with the meaning of the Greek middle voice. Typically the middle voice is perceived as an insignificant element in Greek, a rare oddity that lies somewhere between the key voices – the active and the passive. Nearly every middle verb is written off as “deponent” – i.e., having a truly *active* meaning.¹¹ Deponent verbs, therefore, are treated a bit like an embarrassing member of the family who is “defective” in some way.

In fact, however, the middle voice was very important in ancient Greek. Greek was fundamentally a language of the active and middle voices, while the passive voice as a separate morphoparadigm¹² was a late-comer which eventually encroached on the middle in form and meaning.¹³ This should alert us to the fact that the middle plays a larger role in Greek than we typically allow it.

But what does the middle voice communicate? Quite simply, “the middle voice represents the subject as acting on, for or towards itself” (McKay).¹⁴ In the past, many thought of the middle voice as being reflexive, but most grammarians today realize that this is a very rare function of the middle voice.¹⁵ In Greek, like English, the reflexive is typically communicated by the active voice plus a reflexive pronoun.¹⁶

Instead, the Greek middle voice typically functions to express the subject’s direct involvement with or special interest in the action of the verb. The middle, then, serves as the counterpart to the active voice, which simply represents the subject as performing the action of the verb. Carl Conrad, in an unpublished paper, argues convincingly that the reason that distinct passive forms arose later¹⁷ was that because the Greek speaker did not make a great

⁹ Taylor, “Deponency and Greek Lexicography,” 9.

¹⁰ Taylor, “Deponency and Greek Lexicography,” 5.

¹¹ Bill Mounce, following others, calculates the deponency rate of middle-passive verbs as 75%.

¹² This term is adopted from Carl W. Conrad in his thorough essay, “New Observations on Voice in the Ancient Greek Verb” (unpublished).

¹³ One of the many evidences of this can be found in certain forms which in the NT period were still in the process of evolution. For example, it is only in the aorist that separate passive forms have become fully established and to a lesser extent the future passive. In modern Greek the middle forms have completely vanished.

¹⁴ Kenneth L. McKay, *A New Syntax of the Verb in New Testament Greek: An Aspectual Approach* (New York: Peter Lang, 1994), 21.

¹⁵ This has traditionally been called the “Direct Middle.” Even in the case of the “classic example” of a direct middle in Matthew 27:5 (the only one Moulton allows), where Judas went out and hanged himself (ἀπήγγατο, from ἀπάγγω), one could possibly see an indirect middle sense rather than reflexive; he hanged himself out of his own (despairing) interests.

¹⁶ Cf., among others, Richard Young, *Intermediate New Testament Greek: A Linguistic and Exegetical Approach* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1994), 133.

¹⁷ Note again, that in the present tense, middle and passive forms are indistinguishable. Separate passive morphoparadigms are still in the process of evolution in the time of the NT.

distinction between the middle and the passive voices. Instead, the fundamental voice distinction was between the subject simply acting (active) and the subject acting in a subject-focused way (middle).¹⁸

Our problem, which I would argue is why deponency has become so predominant, is that *in English*, of course, we do not have a morphological form to communicate “the subject acting on, for or towards itself.” We do this with other syntactical means, if at all. Our unfamiliarity with the middle voice, which was quite common and important in ancient Greek, causes us to land upon a categorization that does not allow the middle to perform its intended function. As a result, we speak of “deponent” as verbs which are middle-passive in form but active in meaning. But active in meaning by whose definition? By how the gloss appears *in English*? But as we have no middle form in English, of course the glosses are going to look like active forms.

For example, take the verb δέχομαι (“I take, receive”). This is classified as deponent because it appears to be “active in meaning but middle-passive in form.” But Dan Wallace and others have observed that it is not difficult to see a truly middle meaning in a lexeme such as δέχομαι. The subject of this verb naturally “takes” or “receives” with his or her own interest in mind. But because the gloss “I take, receive” is apparently active in English, we assume there is some incongruity in the Greek word. But this need not be the case. As Steven Baugh points out, to say δέχω would be as strange to a Greek as saying “I caught” would to an English-speaker (besides my children). The seeming “problem” of δέχομαι occurring always in the middle/passive forms is a self-inflicted one based on the limits of *English* at this point.

Examples of Truly Middle Verbs

In fact, Wallace, Robertson and others have compiled assorted lists of verbs that are typically considered “deponent” and have shown that in many instances, the meaning of the verb has an inherent middle sense. Therefore, at least for these verbs, the category of “deponent” is inaccurate. Wallace and Robertson’s lists include classically deponent verbs such as ἀσπάζομαι, ἀποκρίνομαι, λογίζομαι, and προσκαλέομαι. As there is a middle sense in words such as these, at least in these cases, the category of deponency should be rejected.

But beyond these, my contention, as stated earlier, is that most if not all such verbs can be understood as true middles and not deponent if we allow the *Greek* concept of middle voice to set the agenda. Neva Miller provided some of the greatest help along these lines in her essay, “A Theory of Deponent Verbs.”¹⁹ Her brief essay (buried at the back of Friberg and Friberg’s analytical lexicon) questions the traditional definition of deponency and gives an extensive list of verbs, usually considered deponent, that are in fact true middles. She points out that inherent in many of these words the subject remains centered in the action, even though in English the form appears active. This applies to verbs like answer, try, doubt, fear, touch, and fight. She writes:

If we accept the theory that so-called deponent verbs express personal interest, self-involvement, or interaction of the subject with himself or with others in some way, we will be better able to accept that the non-active form of the verb is valid for

¹⁸ This insight highlights the inadequacy of the nomenclature of the voices, as “middle” communicates some halfway point between active and passive, but only the Direct Middle fits this bill. Thus, as Wallace writes, “the term is hardly descriptive of the voice as a whole” (*Greek Grammar*, 415). Or as Robertson puts it, “There is very little point in the term middle since it does not come between the active and the passive” (*Grammar*, 331).

¹⁹ Appendix 2, pp. 423-430, of Barbara Friberg, Timothy Friberg, and Neva F. Miller (eds.), *Analytical Lexicon of the Greek New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000).

communicating a meaning on its own, and we will be challenged to look for that meaning.²⁰

Miller concludes her essay with a long list of NT deponent verbs in a schema designed to show the various ways in which the middle sense is used. This listing covers some eighty-five verbs which are traditionally classified as “deponent.”

The linguist Suzanne Kemmer has also produced a similar classification of categories of verbs that typically appear in middle-passive form.²¹ Both Miller’s and Kemmer’s classifications point out that some semantic concepts are candidates, by virtue of their lexical idea, for the middle form. This includes mental and emotional states,²² stative, reciprocal and spontaneous events, and others.

Miller concludes her survey by concurring with the same thesis argued above: “If the verbs in the above classes are understood as true middles... then it may be that categorizing such verbs as deponent is no longer relevant.” This concurs with Porter’s concluding thoughts, “On the basis of this evidence... one might be justified in seeing some middle sense with virtually all verbs with middle-voice form, regardless of whether they can be analyzed as deponent.”²³

Return to the Thesis and Potential Objections

Having laid out this argument, I can now restate the thesis: *Deponency is a grammatical category that has been misapplied to Greek because of the influence of Latin grammar and our unfamiliarity with the meaning of the Greek middle voice. Most if not all verbs that are traditionally considered “deponent” are truly middle in meaning. Therefore, the use of the category of deponency – “verbs that are middle-passive in form but active in meaning” – needs to be minimized at least, and possibly rejected all together.*

As you might imagine, I think we should completely do away with deponency as an unhelpful and misleading category. But I say that at least it should be minimized in usage because I realize that the issues are very complex, and there are some potential difficulties that remain.

For example, “semi-deponent” verbs still remain somewhat anomalous. These are verbs which are active in one tense and middle/passive in another. Many of these have stem changes in the aorist and/or are suppletive verbs, where one root has filled in the paradigm for a defective verb. Many are also in categories that would be considered middles, such as mental or emotional states. Therefore, the reason for the active forms in a particular tense is unclear.

Another similar difficulty that could be raised for my proposal is the case when we find active and middle forms of the same word (in the same tense) which have no apparent difference in meaning. Some would see these at least as evidence of deponency in that the middle forms do not seem to be communicating a middle meaning but an active one instead.

Let us take one such example: the common word, αἰτέω (“I ask, ask for”). This word occurs in both the active forms and the middle throughout Classical Greek, the LXX and the NT.²⁴ BDF points out that there appears to have been a distinction in meaning between the

²⁰ Miller, “A Theory of Deponent Verbs,” 426.

²¹ Suzanne Kemmer, *The Middle Voice* (Amsterdam: J. Benjamins, 1993).

²² This observation may explain the phenomenon of the handful of verbs whose morphology is active in the present tense forms and middle in the future.

²³ Porter, *Idioms*, 72.

²⁴ It appears from a comparison of the LXX and NT that the active forms were on the increase relative to the middle, though both occur with great frequency. According to my calculations, we find around 93 occurrences in the LXX with 55 in the middle, 37 active, and 1 passive. In the NT there are 70 occurrences with 32 in the

two voices: the active is used for a request in general and the middle, often in the sense of asking for a loan or asking in a situation of commerce.²⁵

My own examination of the NT use of this word affords mixed results. In several cases, this distinction does seem to hold up. In others, however, it is more difficult to discern. What is particularly interesting with this word is that there are several texts in the NT where the active and middle forms actually alternate within a particular passage. These passages include: Matt 20:20-22 // Mk 10:35-38; Mk 6:22-25; John 16:23-26; James 4:2-3; and 1 John 5:14-16. These instances, then, provide a particularly convenient way to examine a potential difference in meaning between the voices.

In the case of John 16 and 1 John 5, it is difficult to detect an intended difference between the middle and active forms of αἰτέω. The unexpected alternation in James 4:2-3 has carried much debate.²⁶ There may be a distinction at work, but it is impossible to be completely confident.²⁷ In the cases of Mark and Matthew, however, the active and middle voices may indeed communicate a difference: a difference between a general asking (active) and a contractual request (middle). This is especially true in Matt 20 (and parallel in Mark 10). In fact, the 13 occurrences of αἰτέω in Matthew seem to break nicely along these lines, with 20:20-22 showing the distinction at play.

But the objection remains: What about αἰτέομαι in John 16 and 1 John 5 (and elsewhere)? If there is no difference between the active and middle voices, does this not bring us back to the category of deponency once again?

I think not for several reasons. The subtle distinctions in meaning that occurred between the active and middle voices may have indeed been lost by the time of the NT, but we should not assume all such voice-meaning distinctions are absent. They may be lost only upon authors whose Greek was not so subtly nuanced, while in others the distinctions remain. As a result, such a “deponency” that is based only a particular author’s usage would have very limited usefulness as a general grammatical category. In this case, would it not be much better to simply comment on such a usage as a function of the idiolect of the author?

Moreover, if we do fail to discern a difference in meaning, we should at least retain the possibility that *we* are the ones missing the intended nuance. James 4:2-3 is a passage that comes to mind in this category.

But more fundamentally than these responses, I suggest that even if we do find that a lexeme in the NT does not have a noticeable difference in meaning between the active and middle forms, this may simply reflect the evolutionary dying out of the middle voice form, not deponency. In this scenario, then, we have just the opposite of deponency: not a middle form that has an active meaning, but an active form that has a middle meaning. In other words, where the middle would have been used in a nuanced way, a less-skilled author may employ the more familiar active in that same sense, or even alternate between the two forms though the middle sense is still meant. In the case of αἰτέω, it does appear that the active forms are on the increase relative to the middle.

Practical Ramifications

I will conclude with a couple of practical ramifications from my thesis.

middle and 38 in the active. Of course, such statistics must be qualified by a closer examination of particular authors/translators to see if idiolectic or other factors are at play.

²⁵ BDF §316, 2. They go on to say that, in general, in the NT the middle is used of requests in commerce and the active for requests addressed to God.

²⁶ For a summary of the various views see Ralph Martin, *James* (WBC), 146-147, and Peter Davids, *The Epistle of James* (NIGTC), 160.

²⁷ If there is a distinction, such as Mayor’s between praying with the heart (middle) and praying with the lips (active), it is different than the general asking (active) and contractual request (middle) found elsewhere.

(1) For Teaching Greek

Quite simply, I contend that we should do away with using the category of deponency when teaching first- and second-year Greek. I realize this is quite a revolutionary call to arms! However, if my thesis is right, I see no other solution. One might argue that “deponent” is a helpful category for first-year students to understand common words such as ἔρχομαι. However, I would respond in this way: Is it not much better in the long run to take a little bit of extra time and explain in simple terms what the middle voice is in Greek? This lets Greek grammar and semantics set the agenda for our study and expands our minds to how a language structure other than our own works. As I always tell my students, one of the great advantages of learning a foreign language is that it is humbling and enlarging at the same time to see how other peoples think about things differently than we do. Different turns of phrase and ways of speaking provide wonderful enlightening moments.

What does my radical suggestion look like? Rather than presenting deponent verbs as a separate category, we should simply teach the middle voice. We should explain the middle voice is used to express the subject’s involvement with the action (and is not typically reflexive). If any here are unconvinced by my radical call, then you could still use “deponent” as one *use* of the middle rather than a separate category. But rather than accounting for 75% or more of middle forms as is typically argued, I hope I have shown that far fewer verbs, if any, could be classified as deponent. Therefore, it is at best a subset of the middle.

When I taught the middle voice about two weeks ago, I simply explained that we have nothing comparable in English and gave them a simple explanation of the meaning. I then told them that they will meet two kinds of verbs that are in the middle form: (1) verbs that are always or nearly always in the middle form because of their lexical idea (typically called “deponent”); and (2) verbs that are sometimes active and sometimes middle.

(2) For Exegesis

Simply, let the middle voice have a voice. As a principle, we should assume a middle form is truly middle unless there is contrary evidence. When we teach and exegete Greek with the assumption that 75% or more of middle-passive forms are “deponent,” we are like a mechanic going to work with only a partial toolbox.

When it comes to translating middle forms in the NT, it will often be difficult to bring out the middle sense of the subject’s involvement without making the translation laborious and overdone in English. For example, when the ones on the rocky soil “receive the word with joy” (μετὰ χαρᾶς δέχονται τὸν λόγον), it is probably too stilted to translate this as “received for themselves the word with joy.” This is simply an example of translation being treason in that English does not have an efficient way of communicating what is inherent in the Greek middle voice.

Nevertheless, in our exegesis and explanation of texts we should keep our middle voice antennae alert. For example, in Ephesians 1:4 we read that God chose us (ἐξελέξατο ἡμᾶς). Dan Wallace, I think rightly, makes the comment that we can understand this as “he chose us for himself.”²⁸ By all accounts, ἐκλέγομαι would be considered “deponent” because it is extant only in middle and passive forms and the English gloss “choose” is active. However, a true middle sense is likely meant here.²⁹

²⁸ Wallace, *Greek Grammar*, 421.

²⁹ As an interesting side note, when we find middle-passive forms followed by the phrase ἐν αὐτῷ (such as in 1:4 and 1:10), there is a smattering of manuscripts which fall for the bait, as it were, and change the ἐν αὐτῷ to the reflexive ἐαυτῷ.

Conclusion

In sum, I hope I have at least raised reasonable doubts about the righteousness of the category of deponency. I appreciate your time and interest today and look forward to your feedback.