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**The Mysterious Middle: A Look at the Treatment and
Teaching of Koine Greek's Middle Voice**

By
McKenzie Dunn-Morris

A Project Submitted to
the Faculty of Covenant Theological Seminary
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts in Biblical & Theological Studies.

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Abstract

Koine Greek presents a few difficulties for English translation and interpretation. One of those is the middle voice, which exhibits a challenge in terms of both morphology and semantics. This is not only because of its absence from English, but because of its rarity in other languages. Within the context of the New Testament, the middle voice is also complicated by the intrusion of the passive, which was not present in pre-classical iterations of Greek. As regards the meaning of the middle voice, no universal definition exists, but the cornerstone concept behind it is *subject-affectedness*. In other words, the subject is in some way affected, involved, or emphasized in the action of the verb. Though middle voice verbs represent a relatively small portion of the New Testament, this study maintains that they play a critical role in biblical interpretation. A few Scripture examples are provided to help display this role. The intention of this work is to explore the characterization of the middle voice and to consider how it is taught in the Greek classroom.

A survey of key Greek grammars alongside a few other works in biblical and linguistic studies displays the current landscape of Koine Greek's middle voice. Also represented in this survey are "hot spots" of the middle voice. One of those hot spots deserving of mention here is the issue of deponency, which has recently experienced major upheaval.

Following this is a consideration of how the middle voice is taught to Greek students. The acquisition of ancient languages is unique from that of modern languages. This is primarily because the goal of ancient language acquisition is typically literacy, not

oral fluency. So pedagogical methods for teaching Koine Greek are largely deductive in nature.

Following a review of how the middle voice is usually introduced in the modern grammars surveyed, a few ideas are presented for the teaching of the middle voice.

Ideas range in scope and are dependent on one's stance on specific components of Koine Greek's middle voice. First is a two-voice continuum, where the active and passive voice make up the two ends of the continuum and the middle floats along it. Second is less reliance on the category of deponency, which is not only potentially necessary but could help students work harder to understand the meaning of true middles. Third is the application of the linguistic methods Discourse Analysis and Construction Grammar, which encourage a context-based approach. Fourth is the inclusion of visuals with explanation to promote middle voice comprehension. Finally, a few small ideas are presented such as the call for a uniform definition, sentence diagramming, and an emphasis on application.

These ideas may benefit the Greek student, but it should also be noted that critical to middle voice comprehension is an attempt to understand its Greek context (instead of via the English context). More linguistic work is needed to thoroughly flesh out the meaning and function of the middle voice. While some progress has been made, further research will greatly enhance understanding of the middle voice, ultimately improving the biblical interpretation that involves it. In the meantime, continued engagement and effort with the middle voice in the New Testament is essential.

To Chris, my ever-present sounding board, motivator, and encourager.

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All Greek text is from the Kurt Aland et al., *Novum Testamentum Graece*, 28th ed. (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2012).

Abbreviations

NA28	Nestle-Aland Greek New Testament, 28 th ed.
NT	New Testament
SBL	Society of Biblical Literature

Chapter 1

Introduction: The Middle Voice and Why It Matters

As students embark on their journey into Koine Greek, one of their first milestones is an introduction to verbs and the voice system. The active voice is clear and familiar, the passive voice recalls vague memories from English grammar lessons, and then comes the middle voice. Initially it seems straightforward and perhaps somewhat insignificant. Then they encounter it in the Greek text. It often is not clear whether it is middle or passive--or how its translation seems indistinguishable from the active voice--, and a curiosity about the middle voice resurfaces. They may explore it more, but with so many other critical concepts of Koine Greek to master, the middle voice falls to the wayside and remains murky. Many engaged students share this experience. Despite valiant efforts at grasping the middle voice, it is a difficult portion of Greek study for both students and scholars.

For centuries scholars have wrestled with the original language of the NT. Yet somehow these years of effort have not threshed out the meaning or function of its middle voice. The middle voice frequently remains enigmatic and obscure. So, for those who wish to delve the depths of the language in pursuit of faithful interpretation of the Holy Scriptures, it is essential that the middle voice receive more attention in terms of comprehension and, subsequently, instruction.

Even beyond biblical studies, the middle voice has been a somewhat “under-studied” concept.¹ Several factors contribute to this reality. First, the middle voice is rare, present in only a handful of languages² (though not non-existent).³ Second, though older Greek existed with only the active and middle voice, Modern Greek does not employ the middle voice at all. This is because the passive voice intruded upon use of the middle voice such that the middle voice eventually disappeared. Koine Greek sits somewhere in the transition, with the middle voice still at play, but not as centrally as previous iterations of the language.⁴ Third, the middle voice (barring perhaps the direct/reflexive middle) “knows no approximate parallel” in English.⁵ Because language plays such a significant role in how people grasp the very concept of communication, English-only speakers (or speakers of any language lacking a middle voice) are at a major disadvantage for comprehending—and translating—occurrences of the middle voice. Lastly, though certainly not least, a debate exists concerning the middle voice and

¹ Suzanne Kemmer, *The Middle Voice: Typological Studies in Language* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 1993), 1, eBook Collection EBSCOhost.

² J. H. Moulton, *A Grammar of New Testament Greek*, 2nd ed. (Edinburgh, Scotland: T&T Clark, 1906), 1:152, <https://archive.org/details/grammarofnewtest01mouluoft>.

³ Suzanne Kemmer and Rutger Allan both discuss the presence of the middle voice or “reflexive systems” in other languages such as Old Norse, Sanskrit, and Germanic and Dravidian languages; Suzanne Kemmer, *The Middle Voice: Typological Studies in Language* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 1993), 16-20; Rutger J. Allan, *The Middle Voice in Ancient Greek: A Study in Polysemy*, Amsterdam Studies in Classical Philology 11 (Amsterdam: J. C. Gieben, 2003), 4, https://www.google.com/books/edition/The_Middle_Voice_in_Ancient_Greek/FPb7EAAAQBAJ?hl=en&gbpv=0.

⁴ Jonathan T. Pennington, “Deponency in Koine Greek: The Grammatical Question and the Lexicographical Dilemma,” *Trinity Journal* 24, no. 1 (Spr 2003): 56, Atla Religion Database with AtlaSerials PLUS.

⁵ A. T. Robertson, *A Grammar of the Greek New Testament in the Light of Historical Research* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1934), 804, <https://archive.org/details/grammarofgreekne0000robe>.

deponency.⁶ For many years deponency was a widely accepted explanation of Greek verbs that do not appear in active form but have an active meaning. Recently the tides have turned on this issue; the catalyst usually attributed to the work of Bernard Taylor, Jonathan Pennington, Stanley Porter, and Constantine Campbell. This new wave of scholarship claims that most deponent-appearing middle verbs are actually *true* middle verbs, so the concept of the deponent middle should be abandoned. This is a significant claim as, according to Mounce's 2009 grammar, approximately 75% of middle form verbs in the New Testament are deponent.⁷ One is initially hesitant to join this new wave, considering the long-held acceptance of the deponent middle. However, an interesting occurrence has transpired alongside this development. Although some scholars still hold to it, one is hard-pressed to find new published works whole-heartedly accepting deponency. So it is difficult not to be swept away with the tide abandoning deponency.

Regardless of the stance one holds on deponency, both sides largely agree that more work should be done to understand Koine Greek's middle voice. 13.5% of all verbs in the NT appear in the middle form.⁸ While this may not be an enormous amount, it is still a noticeable portion of the very Word of God, deserving of dedicated consideration.

⁶ This debate is particularly prevalent within NT biblical studies.

⁷ William D. Mounce, *Basics of Biblical Greek*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009), 153.

⁸ Statistical data obtained from BibleWorks 10 NT morphological data base (BNM) for NA28. Found in Susan E. Kmetko, "The Function and Significance of Middle Voice Verbs in the Greek New Testament," (PhD diss., Australian Catholic University, 2018), 3, <https://acuresearchbank.acu.edu.au/item/86x71/the-function-and-significance-of-middle-voice-verbs-in-the-greek-new-testament>.

What is the Middle Voice

A universal definition for the middle voice does not currently exist. This is in part because of the rarity of the middle voice, a lack in cross-linguistic work involving the middle voice, and the many nuances and forms which can characterize the middle voice.⁹ In an effort to maintain the focus of this work, perhaps the best approach is to consider *what is the middle voice in Koine Greek*. With the Greek student in mind, Benjamin Merkle and Robert Plummer's definition of the middle voice provides a straightforward foundation from which to begin, "[for the middle voice] the subject of a verb both performs and is affected by the action."¹⁰ In other words, the subject of a middle voice verb is involved in the action of the verb in a way that is unique from that of the active voice. This is rather difficult to grasp for English speakers, particularly "in the wild" (when encountering the middle voice in the Greek text). As regards morphology, it is typically understood to be a middle marker; however, it should be noted that a strong relationship exists between the middle and passive voice (such that even -θη- morphology is not necessarily solely passive¹¹). And, for those who hold to deponency, verbs with middle morphology can also be active in meaning.

After this initial description, the topic gets complicated quickly. From deponency to mediopassives to the middle voice's various functions, Koine Greek's middle voice is a nuanced and obscure concept. This is not to say it is incomprehensible, but certainly

⁹ Kemmer, *The Middle Voice*, 1.

¹⁰ Benjamin L. Merkle and Robert L. Plummer, *Beginning with New Testament Greek* (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2020), 38, eBook Academic Collection EBSCOhost.

¹¹ For more on this, see the section discussing Rachel Aubrey's work under "Helpful Additions from Surrounding Research" in Chapter 2.

that scholars and students alike would benefit from a deepening of the collective understanding of it. This paper is a small attempt at contributing to the effort.

History and Background

From here, a look at an older handling of the middle voice is warranted. A good place to begin is the work of Dionysius Thrax, written around the same time as the New Testament, and oft cited as one of the oldest (if not the oldest) Greek grammar.¹² It is rather exciting to have an account of the middle voice from such an early time. The expectation being that Dionysius' work might provide great clarity on a rather uncertain topic. Unfortunately, the ambiguity surrounding the Greek middle voice is present even here. Dionysius' treatment of voice is as *διόθεσις*, disposition, and defines the middle voice simply as that "which sometimes signifies activity and sometimes affectedness."¹³ Another key grammatical figure is Apollonias Dyscolus, in a more extensive grammatical work, Apollonius refers to the middle voice as "between the active and passive but not complying with either."¹⁴ These two early accounts of the function of the middle voice are helpful in acknowledging that a middle voice does exist and has its own unique role, and somewhat unhelpful in clarifying just what the role is. Albert Rijksbaron and his fellow authors point out that such early accounts of the middle voice are "unsatisfactory"

¹² Ca. 100 BCE; Kmetko, "The Function and Significance," 6.

¹³ Dionysius Thrax, quoted in Albert Rijksbaron et al., *Form and Function in Greek Grammar: Linguistic Contributions to the Study of Greek Literature*, Amsterdam Studies in Classical Philology, (Leiden: Brill, 2019), 357, eBook Collection EBSOhost.

¹⁴ Kmetko, "The Function and Significance," 7.

due to ambiguity of definition and lack of uniformity for what circumstances fit under the banner of the middle voice.¹⁵

As previously mentioned, Ancient Greek (pre-Classical) literature reveals that originally the primary voices were active and middle.¹⁶ As the passive voice was introduced, it slowly overtook the middle such that Modern Greek only applies the active and passive voices.¹⁷ The passive voice was well-established by the time of the NT, and the middle voice was also still in use. This places Koine Greek somewhere along the transition from active and middle only to active and passive only. As such, paying attention to the interchange between middle and passive may serve to greatly benefit the Greek student.

Finally, although the deponent middle was a widely accepted (though not necessarily loved) category for many years, it is now falling out of favor. So the categorization and understanding of these deponent/true middle verbs in the NT is in flux, and a defined consensus on them has not yet emerged. As a live issue, this will affect any discussion on Koine Greek's middle voice. It is worthwhile to turn now to a few (*particularly*) interpretively significant instances of the middle voice in the NT.

The Middle Voice in the New Testament

Upon surveying middle voice verbs in the NT, one will encounter scenarios that are affected by the interpretation of those verbs. Contemporary scholarship has begun to

¹⁵ Rijksbaron et al., *Form and Function*, 365.

¹⁶ Moulton, *Prolegomena*, 152.

¹⁷ Pennington, "Deponency in Koine Greek." 56.

recognize a gap in Koine Greek studies, particularly that of the middle voice. Though some may claim this is a relatively unimportant issue, the truth is that one's understanding of the middle voice plays a role in biblical interpretation. If one's understanding of the middle voice is lacking, biblical interpretation will, likewise, be lacking. So it is beneficial to observe a few NT occurrences of middle voice verbs.

1 Corinthians 13:8 Ἡ ἀγάπη οὐδέποτε πίπτει· εἴτε δὲ προφητεῖαι, καταργηθήσονται· εἴτε γλῶσσαι, παύσονται· εἴτε γνῶσις, καταργηθήσεται

The middle verb in question in 1 Corinthians 13:8 is παύσονται, from the verb παύω, meaning “stop, cause to stop, quiet, relieve; *middle*: stop (oneself), cease.”¹⁸ Much might be explored in terms of interpreting this passage, but for the purposes of brevity and focus here, the primary consideration is what Paul means by the *ceasing/stopping* of tongues. Unique to this situation is that παύσονται stands bracketed by the future passive of καταργέω, on either side in reference to prophecy and knowledge. Then in verse 10 καταργέω is repeated (in future passive form) in reference to prophesy and knowledge. Tongues (note that the meaning of *tongues* here could also be discussed) is apparently different from prophesy and knowledge within the context of 1 Corinthians 13:8-10. And because παύσονται is a middle verb, the assumption is that tongues will cease “*because of something intrinsic to their very nature.*”¹⁹ And the argument is further drawn out that τὸ τέλειον in verse 10 is referring to the completion of the canon, so the gift of tongues

¹⁸ William Arndt, et. al., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 790.

¹⁹ D.A. Carson, *Exegetical Fallacies* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 1996), 76; Examples of such stances include John MacArthur, *Charismatic Chaos* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1992), 230-231 (see esp. footnote 20), <https://archive.org/details/charismaticchaos0000maca>; Robert G. Gromacki, *The Modern Tongues Movement* (Philadelphia, PA: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1967), 128, <https://archive.org/details/the-modern-tongues-movement/mode/2up>.

ceased before this and is no longer in use today. A closer look at *παύσονται* helps to clarify this.

παύσονται could be acting as a direct middle, indicating that tongues will stop themselves. This is unlikely as it would require significant agency on the part of *γλῶσσαι*. It could be an indirect middle, meaning that they will stop of their own accord. This is possible but does not seem to fit well into this passage and is rejected by most scholars.²⁰ It could be acting deponently, making the *ceasing/stopping* purely active in meaning. Deponency, however, is not an option here because *παύω* (the active form of the verb) does occur in the NT and because the surrounding verbs are passive, not active.²¹ Instead, scholars like Wallace, Carson, Schreiner, and Perrin, find the force of the middle verb *-παύσονται-* to be intransitive (making it equivalent to the active “cease”), and this to be a stylistic choice.²² So the ceasing of tongues will occur, but this passage gives no clear indication *when* this will happen, and to use it as a proof that the gift of tongues has already ceased is very likely faulty. The fact that this interpretation is debated is an excellent example of the confusion surrounding middle voice meaning even among some of the most prominent NT scholars and commentators.

²⁰ Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar: Beyond the Basics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1996), 422.

²¹ Wallace, *Greek Grammar*, 422-423.

²² Carson and Wallace also cite Luke 8:24 and Acts 21:32 as evidence that this verb does not indicate an assumed ceasing because of an inherent characteristic; Wallace, *Greek Grammar*, 423; Carson, *Exegetical Fallacies*, 77; Thomas R. Schreiner and Nicholas Perrin, *1 Corinthians: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2018), 147, eBook Collection EBSCOhost.

Acts 22:16 καὶ νῦν τί μέλλεις; ἀναστὰς βάπτισαι καὶ ἀπόλουσαι τὰς ἁμαρτίας σου ἐπικαλεσάμενος τὸ ὄνομα αὐτοῦ.

An intriguing middle voice occurrence, βάπτισαι, appears in Acts 22:16 alongside another middle voice verb, ἀπόλουσαι. Here Luke is writing of Paul's account of his Damascus Road experience before the Jews in Jerusalem. In verse 16 Paul is telling of Ananias's command for Paul to get up, baptize (himself?), and wash away his sin. The interpretive question is if βάπτισαι indicates that Paul baptized himself. Stanley Porter explains that commentaries have largely ignored this issue, but where it is addressed, they have identified βάπτισαι as functioning in one of three ways: reflexively, passively, or causatively.²³ Porter finds the arguments for these three options unconvincing and feels the confusion here is largely due to a greater lack in understanding Koine Greek's middle voice.²⁴ After then exploring some of the broader middle voice usage categories presented by Greek grammars, Porter concludes that this instance of βάπτισαι in Acts 22:16 can be rendered "experience baptism."²⁵ It is not a perfect conclusion. However, taking the parallel passage of Paul's baptism from Acts 9 into account (where the verb is the passive ἐβαπτίσθη) alongside the general subject-involvement of the middle voice makes a rendering like Porter's sufficient.²⁶ Though Porter has taken the time to consider βάπτισαι in Acts 22:16, it is curious that many commentators have overlooked it

²³ Stanley Porter, "Did Paul Baptize Himself? A Problem of the Greek Voice System," *Dimensions of Baptism: Biblical and Theological Studies*, eds. Stanley E. Porter and Anthony R. Cross (London: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002), 93-109, eBook Collection EBSCOhost.

²⁴ Porter, "Did Paul Baptize Himself?" 100.

²⁵ Porter, "Did Paul Baptize Himself?" 109.

²⁶ The hope of Porter and many others cited in this paper is that more scholarship on the middle voice, both cross-linguistically and for Koine Greek, would be done in the near future. Such work would help fill in the gaps and bolster the general understanding of Koine Greek's middle voice in exegetically significant ways.

somewhat. Without further attention and scholarship, issues like this remain unresolved and the subtleties of Koine Greek's middle voice remain obscure.

Ephesians 1:4 καθὼς ἐξελέξατο ἡμᾶς ἐν αὐτῷ πρὸ καταβολῆς κόσμου, εἶναι ἡμᾶς ἁγίους καὶ ἀμόμους κατενώπιον αὐτοῦ ἐν ἀγάπῃ,

For a more nuanced example, the middle verb ἐξελέξατο in Ephesians 1:4 could be misconstrued as a deponent verb.²⁷ This is, in part, because the headword in BDAG is ἐκλέγομαι. As a deponent, the meaning of ἐξελέξατο would very simply be "...he (God) chose us..." However, Wallace points out that this makes better sense as an indirect middle, i.e. God choosing us "...for himself, by himself, or for his own interests" (this, in part, because it does appear in active form outside the NT).²⁸ And the point is perpetuated by the datival phrase following the ἐξελέξατο ἡμᾶς construction, ἐν αὐτῷ. This is one of the many examples of middle verbs that simply will not convey the middle force in English without perhaps excessive or confusing additions. However, interpretive value exists for passages like this one. God established it within himself to choose His people; it was not because of anything humanity did or did not do but his gracious and generous nature. For students of the original Greek, an awareness of and engagement with such a middle voice nuance is significant. As Pennington quite helpfully states, "...the fact that

²⁷ Kmetko, "The Function and Significance," 43-44; Wallace, *Greek Grammar*, 421.

²⁸ Wallace, *Greek Grammar*, 421 and 428; See also H.G. Lidell and Robert Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, revised by Sir Henry Stuart Jones, et al. (Irvine, CA: Thesaurus Linguae Graecae, 2011), 511, <https://stephanus.tlg.uci.edu/lsg/#eid=1>.

our English translations don't distinguish between Active and Middle does not mean that Greek does not distinguish them either."²⁹

Critical Questions

1. What is the current landscape of the middle voice in the studies of Biblical Greek, particularly Biblical Greek Grammars?
2. What are the current theories and curricula for teaching the middle voice?
3. How might this data alongside sources outside New Testament Studies coalesce to benefit the study and teaching of the middle voice as it appears in Koine Greek?

Basic Approach and Assumptions

Embarking on this project involves addressing two primary concerns: 1) understanding why the middle voice appears to be such a challenging topic, and 2) exploring ways to clarify lessons on the middle voice for Greek students. The study of the middle voice reveals that it is not only problematic in Koine Greek but also presents difficulties within the greater world of linguistics. There is a general lack of understanding, coupled with a lack of uniformity and cross-linguistic work on the topic. While this issue is unlikely to be resolved within biblical studies, efforts can be made to engage with and build upon the existing and emerging linguistic research on the middle

²⁹ Jonathan T. Pennington and Robert B. Jamieson, "After Deponency: Connecting the Middle Voice to Other Elements of Greek Grammar and Teaching it to Students," SBL Biblical Greek Language and Linguistics Section (2012), 11, https://www.academia.edu/30926196/After_Deponency_Connecting_the_Middle_Voice_to_Other_Elements_of_Greek_Grammar_and_Teaching_it_to_Students.

voice. This responsibility largely falls on grammarians, who serve as the primary interface between the grammatical and linguistic worlds for Greek students. This study draws on relevant sources to analyze the current landscape of the middle voice, identify potential gaps in understanding, and consider pedagogical approaches for teaching this topic.

First, this thesis will survey the issue, exploring the current landscape of scholarship surrounding the middle voice—both within and without biblical studies—, also addressing the deponency debate. Then it will explore some ideas for better pedagogy, acknowledging the significant need for further research that is primarily linguistic in nature. These ideas are intended to contribute to the conversation in helpful, though not necessarily new, ways. This thesis will not directly defend or argue against deponency, though it will be influenced by the perspective of the author. And any application of linguistic theory will only be at a rudimentary level; thus, the thesis is not intended to provide technical explanation of the middle voice. It is also not an attempt to entirely transform the current understanding or teaching of Koine Greek’s middle voice, but to encourage still further engagement with the topic as well as present some ideas for teaching the middle voice.

Definition of Terms

In the context of this study, these terms are defined as follows:

Middle/Middle Voice – “the subject[/agent] of a verb both performs and is affected by the action[/patient].”³⁰ *Please note this term is used to refer both to middle morphology and to middle semantics. Where a distinction between the two is needed, it is provided in context.

Deponency/Deponent Middle – a verb that has no active form (typically appearing in middle form) but is active in meaning.³¹

³⁰ Benjamin L. Merkle and Robert L. Plummer, *Beginning with New Testament Greek* (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2020), 38.

³¹ Wallace, *Greek Grammar*, 428.

Chapter 2

Literature Review/Landscape of the Middle Voice in Koine Greek

In order to obtain a picture of the landscape of Koine Greek's middle voice, this chapter looks both within and without biblical studies. It first surveys a selection of key Greek grammars. Older grammars serve to illuminate the pathway from which the more contemporary grammars have traveled. Contemporary grammars then display the current understanding of the middle voice. Next is a look at a few biblical studies sources other than grammars which display relevant "hot spots" of the middle voice. The final section of the chapter reviews sources outside biblical studies that discuss the middle voice in general or, specifically, in Greek.

Within Biblical Studies

Survey of Grammars

What follows is a survey of a selection of grammars presented in chronological order. These grammars were chosen either for their influence in the study of Koine Greek or because their contents helps to display a sample of the variety of treatments on the middle voice. Some of the grammars are beginning grammars and some are intermediate or advanced grammars. Understandably, intermediate and advanced grammars generally spend more time and provide more information on the middle voice than beginning grammars. However, the inclusion of beginning grammars is essential in answering both what is or has been the approach to teaching the middle voice and how this approach might be amended going forward.

G.B. Winer

In his *Treatise on the Grammar of New Testament Greek*, Winer describes the middle voice as referring the action to the agent either (1) simply, as the direct object (reflexively) or (2) mediately, as the action being performed on or in some way for the subject. He also notes that, “Sometimes the physical and the metaphysical significations of a verb are divided between the active and the middle ... In other instances a new meaning arises out of the middle voice...”³² Finally, he observes times when the middle voice implies command or permission given from the subject, and times when two subjects interact with each other (reciprocal middles).

More than some others, Winer discusses the interchange between middles and passives, pointing out that these two are often “mixed up,”³³ and that attention should be paid to these instances in terms of interpretation. This is much appreciated since, as mentioned, many grammarians hardly mention the middle-passive interchange. He then walks through some examples of *both* the active voice appearing where a middle would be expected *and* the middle voice appearing where the active would be expected. And lastly, he differentiates deponent verbs from the former instances, giving several different possibilities in which deponents (active meaning deponents and passive meaning deponents) can appear (aorist middle, aorist passive, perfect middle, perfect passive, future passive, etc.). Winer ends this section by recounting that many verbs considered

³² Georg Benedikt Winer, *A Treatise on the Grammar of New Testament Greek: Regarded as a Sure Basis for New Testament Exegesis*, 3rd ed., translated by William Fiddian Moulton (United Kingdom: T&T Clark, 1882), 317, https://www.google.com/books/edition/A_Treatise_on_the_Grammar_of_New_Testame/i7kC8UOe-4cC?hl=en&gbpv=0.

³³ Winer, *New Testament Greek*, 319.

deponents should actually be considered middle verbs. As the oldest grammar presented in this survey, the mention that “many” deponents are actually middles is a poignant example of the complications wrapped up in deponency and the middle voice.

James Hope Moulton

Moulton’s *Prolegomena* boasts a thorough section on the middle voice. Upon beginning his conversation of verbal voice, he explains that the passive voice was absent from earlier forms of Greek, and the middle was in equal standing with the active. As he explores the meaning of the middle, he suggests a focus on the *emphasis*, active emphasizing the action and middle emphasizing the agent. While this description alone is perhaps incomplete, it is a helpful addition to one’s arsenal in grasping middle meaning. Moulton later mentions the Indian grammarians’ word for middle, *atmane-pada*, “a word for oneself” to help illustrate the nuance of the middle.

As regards deponency, he is not satisfied with the term, but provides a few examples and regards these examples as instances where the middle meaning is too far obscured such that “the distinction is so fine, it is easily seen that many cases must arise in which we can no longer detect it...”³⁴ Moulton lists several uses of the middle, including: reciprocal, dynamic, and mental action. He cites Friedrich Blass in asserting that, regardless of the changes in the Greek language regarding voice, the NT writers were able to distinguish active voice and middle voice. However, in consideration of the differences between middle and passive, Moulton states (after providing an analysis with

³⁴ Moulton, *Prolegomena*, 153.

specific verbs), “We have seen how the bulk of the forms were indifferently middle or passive, and how even those which were appropriated to one voice...are perpetually crossing the frontier.”³⁵ As with Winer, this explanation of the interaction between middle and passive is appreciated.

A. T. Robertson

In his grammar, Robertson begins his discussion on voice by addressing transitivity and intransitivity, asserting that transitivity/intransitivity can belong to any voice. It is, instead, the verb that determines transitivity. After dealing with this in some detail, he states his displeasure with the names of the voices, particularly the middle. Here, alongside Moulton, he notes the Hindu title for middle meaning, “a word for one’s self.” And finally, Robertson gives his understanding of the middle, simply that it “stresses the interest of the agent.”³⁶ He later introduces deponent verbs as, “The So-Called ‘Deponent’ Verbs,” revealing a glimpse into his opinion on the morphological category of deponency up front. He states that the title “deponent” should not be used, and that occurrences of some verbs in middle or active, etc. is simply a function of the language. He calls these verbs “defective rather than deponent” (*defective* because they are missing one form or another).³⁷ Before he turns to other matters, Robertson discusses in detail the process of the passive encroaching upon the middle and the rarity of the middle. In another of Robertson’s works (written “for students familiar with the elements

³⁵ Moulton, *Prolegomena*, 162.

³⁶ A. T. Robertson, *Grammar*, 331.

³⁷ Referencing figures like Brugmann and Moulton; Robertson, *Grammar*, 333.

of Greek”), he elaborates his definition of the middle somewhat, stating that it “calls special attention to the subject while the active merely represents the subject as acting.”³⁸ He also breaks down the uses of the middle somewhat, mentioning the direct and indirect middle. Poignantly, he notes that (with some verbs in particular) the middle is difficult to differentiate from the active in English, and that, “It is better to confess ignorance than to profess knowledge that is really absent.”³⁹ Robertson is clearly perturbed by some of the assertions present regarding the middle voice, and he endeavors to set some of these straight.

H.W. Dana and Julius Mantey

Dana and Mantey make one of the most severe declarations regarding English interpretation of the middle voice. This is how they begin their section on the middle voice:⁴⁰

“Here we approach one of the most distinctive and peculiar phenomena of the Greek language. It is impossible to describe it, adequately or accurately, in terms of English idiom, for English knows no approximate parallel. It is imperative that the student abandon, as far as possible, the English point of view and comprehend that of the Greek. We can never hope to express exactly the Greek middle voice

³⁸ A. T. Robertson, William Hersey Davis, and W. Hersey Davis, *A New Short Grammar of the Greek Testament: For Students Familiar with the Elements of Greek* (New York, NY: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1933) 289, https://archive.org/details/newshortgrammaro0000atro_m4x6.

³⁹ Robertson, *A New Short Grammar*, 290.

⁴⁰ H. E. Dana and Julius R. Mantey, *A Manual Grammar of the Greek New Testament* (New York, NY: Macmillan, 1957), 156-157, <https://archive.org/details/manualgrammarofg00dana>.

by an English translation, but must seek to acclimate ourselves to its mental atmosphere, and feel its force, though we cannot express it precisely.”

They then define the middle voice in terms of the subject participating in the action, more specifically, the results of the action. Along with others, they consider the emphasis of the middle to be on the agent of the action.

Dana and Mantey list three middle voice usages: the direct middle, indirect middle, and permissive middle. Interestingly, they introduce the direct middle as the “typical use of the middle voice.” By “typical” they do not appear to mean “common” (as they later note this use is rare); but it is not particularly clear what they do mean by “typical.” For the next category, the indirect middle, Dana and Mantey provide a long description. In short, they explain that it is the most extensive use of the middle, indicating that the action has a close relationship with the subject, the reason for which must be determined from context. Their final usage category is the permissive middle, where the agent “voluntarily yield[s] himself to the results of the action, or seek[s] to secure the results of the action in his own interest.”⁴¹

Friedrich Blass and Albert Debrunner

In their grammar, Blass and Debrunner’s discussion of voice claims that the system of voices remained the same in Hellenistic and NT Greek as in Classical. As such, they consider any “modifications” to be a result of the merging of the middle and passive voices. A few examples are provided. They then discuss the middle, stating that NT

⁴¹ Dana and Mantey, *A Manual Grammar*, 160.

authors preserve the middle voice alongside the passive. Their first major discussion for middles is middle forms where an active is expected. They also present a middle meaning, “to let oneself be,”⁴² similar to what others call the “permissive middle.” BDF reads more like a reference grammar (with little elaboration) than a teaching grammar.

Maximillian Zerwick

Zerwick’s work, *Biblical Greek*, states simply that the middle voice represents a subject acting with respect to oneself. Along with a few others, Zerwick includes a helpful explanation regarding the transition from solely active and middle voices, to active, middle, and passive, and then to solely active and passive. He defends the nature of the middle as distinct from the active and in use widely throughout the NT, but particularly in Luke and Acts. He believes examples of the middle voice in Luke’s writings indicate that he “found it natural to distinguish the voices,”⁴³ further proving his assertion that the middle voice is in use in NT Greek. However, he also considers the evolution from all three voices to solely active and passive to be visible in NT Greek. For example, he points to verbs displaying middle forms in the future, but active endings. He also notes evidence of deponent verbs appearing more commonly with passive endings than middle endings. Zerwick’s detailed discussion of the transition in voices gives helpful insight into the potential ambiguity of verbs occurring in both middle and passive

⁴² Friedrich Wilhelm Blass and Albert Debrunner, *A Greek Grammar of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, trans. Robert Walter Funk (Chicago, IL: Univ of Chicago Press, 1961), 166 §316, <https://archive.org/details/greekgrammarofne0000blas>.

⁴³ Maximilian Zerwick, *Biblical Greek: Illustrated by Examples*, English ed. / adapted from the 4th Latin edition by Joseph Smith (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1963) 73, <https://archive.org/details/biblicalgreek0000unse>.

forms. Finally, for those occurrences of the middle voice that remain in the NT, Zerwick lists the direct (reflexive) use of the middle and the indirect (subject acting *of* itself) use of the middle.

Heinrich von Siebenthal

Siebenthal presents a depiction of the middle voice slightly unique from that of others. He writes in his grammar that the function of the middle is twofold: one, it presents an action as primarily caused by a subject; two, it displays subject-affectedness. He states that “subject-affectedness is difficult to explain in terms of English usage,”⁴⁴ and presents six usage examples. First, he lists the indirect reflexive middle, which indicates a verb being performed in the interest of the subject. Under this section he notes the occurrence of deponent verbs (which he says do not have an active counterpart). His next category is when an action is performed on a subject’s own body. After this he calls to attention those verbs that do have both middle and active forms, and where the active indicates the subject *giving*, the middle indicates the subject *receiving*. Then he lists the direct reflexive middle, where the “the subject entity, the agent, is also its patient.”⁴⁵ His next usage category is the reciprocal relationship (with the same meaning as others state). Finally, he lists a metaphorical sense of the middle form, giving Luke 19:8 and Acts 5:8 as examples.

⁴⁴ Heinrich von Siebenthal, *Ancient Greek Grammar for the Study of the New Testament* (Oxford, UK: Peter Lang Ltd., 2019), 300.

⁴⁵ Siebenthal, *Ancient Greek Grammar*, 301.

After this set of examples Siebenthal points out that sometimes the distinction between middle and active voice is not so obvious. He names three ways this occurs in the NT. One is when the middle form appears when an active form would be expected. Another is a few NT verbs where there seems to be no distinction between middle and active voice (he provides the examples αἰτέω, αἰτέομαι). With this example he does note that “a clear distinction between the active and the (indirect reflexive) middle voice is probably presupposed at least in Mk. 6:23f, Jas 4:2f and 1Jn 5:15f.”⁴⁶ The third is times when the difference between middle and active is not discernible. Siebenthal’s list of middle voice usages comprises the majority of his discussion on the middle voice.

James Voelz

In his *Fundamentals of Greek Grammar*, Voelz attempts to apply the use of discourse analysis to a beginning grammar, an admirable endeavor, particularly for those looking to better exegete middle voice verbs. Voelz defines the middle voice as the subject being the “agent of the activity,” but also acting “in some way in relation to himself, e.g. in his own interest, for his own benefit, or, rarely, even on himself (reflexively)...”⁴⁷ In comparison with active and passive voice, he explains the middle as acting for oneself. Later, he introduces deponent verbs as verbs that have laid aside active forms (using middle forms but having active meanings). And when discussing how to distinguish present and imperfect passives from middle voice, he says that “many middle

⁴⁶ Siebenthal, *Ancient Greek Grammar*, 301.

⁴⁷ James W. Voelz, *Fundamental Greek Grammar*, 2nd ed. (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 1993), 26.

forms are from deponent verbs.”⁴⁸ The rest of Voelz’ mention of middle form and voice has more to do with morphology and less to do with semantics.

Daniel Wallace

Wallace’s intermediate *Greek Grammar* deals with the middle voice in detail. He begins his presentation of the middle by acknowledging the challenge of defining a rather nuanced concept. With this in mind, he describes the middle voice as such: “the subject *performs or experiences the action* expressed by the verb in such a way that *emphasizes the subject’s participation*.”⁴⁹ Later in his description he also suggests that, while the active voice emphasizes the action itself, the middle voice emphasizes the actor of the verb.

Wallace then provides seven different categories to organize the uses of the middle voice. First, he introduces the direct middle, or reflexive middle, which, as other grammarians also note, is rare in the NT. Second is the redundant middle, which is the reflexive use presented with a reflexive pronoun, hence the redundancy. Third is the indirect middle, which is common in the NT. In this instance, a subject is acting *for* or *by* oneself, or *in* one’s own interest. Wallace inserts an expanded discussion with this category, noting that one’s perspective on the nature of NT Greek likewise colors one’s perspective of the indirect use of the middle voice. That is, more specifically, one’s perspective on how much of the rules of Classical Greek remain intact within NT Greek. Fourth is the causative middle, which involves a subject having something done for or to

⁴⁸ Voelz, *Fundamental Greek*, 84.

⁴⁹ Wallace, *Greek Grammar*, 414.

oneself. Fifth is the permissive middle, in this case a subject allows something to be done for or to oneself. Sixth is the reciprocal middle, which involves plural subjects interacting among themselves. Wallace notes that the causative, permissive, and reciprocal middles are all rare in the NT. The seventh and final category is the deponent middle, the verb which has no active form, but remains active in meaning. Wallace states that this is the most common use in the NT. At this point he breaks down the criteria for determining deponency and provides two methods for doing so.⁵⁰ Wallace provides a thorough and helpful discussion on the middle, though he may be overestimating the frequency of deponent middle verbs.

William Mounce

Mounce's *Basics of Biblical Greek* gives a more robust discussion of the middle voice than some beginning grammars. However, in so doing, he fails somewhat to portray the complexity of the middle voice, particularly in relation to English (though he does note the difficulty in defining the true use of the middle).

Before beginning his full discussion of the middle, Mounce has already introduced middle form verbs known as deponents. These he introduces in his initial chapter on the present middle and passive indicative with this definition for deponency: "...a verb that is middle or passive in form but active in meaning. Its form is always

⁵⁰ These methods include the "Rough and Ready Rule" and "The Ideal Approach;" Wallace, *Greek Grammar*, 429-430.

middle or passive, but its meaning is always active.”⁵¹ After introducing deponent verbs, he briefly discusses the middle voice, explaining that the true use of the middle is difficult to define. Mounce delves deeper into the middle voice later on. Like many, he begins the conversation by comparing the middle voice with the active and passive voices. He considers the active to be the subject doing the action of the verb, the passive to be the subject receiving the action of the verb, and the middle to be the subject in some way being affected by the action of the verb. However, he caveats this as the “self-interest” nuance, which he will speak more on later.

He then provides three major categories for the middle voice: the indirect middle, the reflexive (direct) middle, and the deponent middle. With the indirect middle, he states that the subject performs an action on a direct object, “but the participation of the subject is emphasized.”⁵² Here there can be a *self-interest nuance*, but Mounce is sure to point out that this is not always the case. In a small note to the side of this description, he states that the force of the middle in Koine, “is not normally reflexive, or...is so subtle that it is scarcely discernible.”⁵³ He also takes the time to note that some verbs learned as deponents are actually indirect middles. Next is the reflexive (direct) middle, which Mounce explains as the subject both doing and receiving the action of the verb. The final category is the deponent middle. Here Mounce reiterates that most middle verbs have an

⁵¹ Mounce, *Basics of Biblical Greek*, 152; However, it is worth noting that Mounce begins moving away from deponency in the fourth edition of this grammar, published in 2019; Biblical Mastery Academy, “Deponent Verbs: Why We Should Stop Talking About Them in Koine Greek,” October 21, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y3RNtMf6ERE>.

⁵² Mounce, *Basics of Biblical Greek*, 228.

⁵³ Mounce, *Basics of Biblical Greek*, 228.

active meaning either because they are deponent or the “middle meaning is active to the English mind.”⁵⁴

Upon explaining the meaning of the middle voice, he offers some suggestions for the student who is parsing middle voice verbs. Although parsing itself is not critical. This is a critical point in his discussion as one’s method for parsing also influences one’s perspective of the verb in consideration. And, more relevant for the discussion here, parsing certainly plays a role in how the middle voice (or any voice, tense, etc.) is taught to the student. Mounce suggests the student parse middle voice verbs as *deponent* or *middle deponent* if they have been learned as deponent; as *middle* if they are future or aorist; and, if it is unclear, to assume they are passive or deponent (keeping context in mind).

S.M. Baugh

In another beginning grammar, Baugh’s overall approach is different from Mounce’s, but his introduction of middle/deponent verbs is similar. Baugh first introduces the student to deponent verbs, explaining that this is “an alternate ending for the present active meaning.”⁵⁵ This is quite problematic because *deponency* becomes a category all its own (a category that later largely dissolves when Baugh gives his fuller dealing with the middle). Speaking from experience, this can leave the beginning student left feeling a little tricked. Baugh does caveat his initial introduction of deponency by explaining it is a simplification. But in the same short paragraph he downplays somewhat

⁵⁴ Mounce, *Basics of Biblical Greek*, 229.

⁵⁵ S.M. Baugh, *A New Testament Greek Primer*, 3rd ed. (Philipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2012), 18.

the substance of deponent/middle verbs by stating that, “one can exegete the Greek NT quite successfully without mastering the mysteries of deponent [middle] verbs...”⁵⁶

While most would probably agree that the beginning Greek student need not master the nuance of the middle voice, those who have argued for the meaning of the middle (and against deponency/deponency as a parsing category) would likely disagree with Baugh’s statement here.

Baugh explores the use of the middle voice further in a later chapter on middle and passive verbs. Here he states that the middle voice is called such because it expresses ideas from both the active and the passive. He mentions the reflexive use, intransitive verbs, and again mentions deponency. As regards the meaning and function of the middle voice, this is the extent of Baugh’s discussion on it. It is, unfortunately, quite minimalistic.

However, it should be noted that in Baugh’s second edition, he more thoroughly discusses the middle voice, explicitly stating that no English equivalent exists, then describing four main uses of the middle: reflexive, or the subject acting on itself; special interest, the subject acts with some special interest in the action; intransitive, the use of the middle voice turns a transitive verb into an intransitive meaning; and lexical, the verb takes on a different meaning in the middle from its active voice meaning. This earlier edition is significantly more helpful than his third edition.

⁵⁶ Baugh, *A New Testament Greek Primer*, 18.

David Mathewson and Elodie Ballantine Emig

Mathewson and Emig's *Intermediate Greek Grammar* presents the middle voice similarly to other grammars, first explaining that the middle voice indicates a participation or involvement of the subject in the action of the verb. They note the difficulty of translation in English and point out that the reflexive use is not the most common use in the NT. In describing its place in the NT, they claim, "The middle is the most semantically significant of the three voices."⁵⁷ More than any of the other contemporary grammars reviewed, Mathewson and Emig emphasize the idea that one should be aware that English translation will likely not display the force of the middle voice. They then break down several use categories, including the reflexive; the intensive, which highlights the subject's interest in the action; and the reciprocal, for involvement of plural subjects. From here they note, as do others, that sometimes the use of the middle turns a transitive verb into an intransitive one or can change the meaning of a verb altogether. Finally, they discuss deponency. They give a thorough explanation of the considerations surrounding deponency and note key research in this area. They suggest a departure from deponency, preferring to consider "deponent" middle verbs "middle-only" verbs. Mathewson and Emig's grammar marks the first of the modern grammars found in this survey to begin a new trend of dealing with deponency in this way.

⁵⁷ David L. Mathewson and Elodie Ballantine Emig, *Intermediate Greek Grammar: Syntax for Students of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2016), 94, eBook Collection EBSCOhost.

Dana Harris

Harris takes a significantly different approach to her beginning grammar. Generally speaking, she presents more information and more depth than the other modern, beginning grammars surveyed thus far. This likewise applies to her treatment of the middle voice. She first introduces the middle briefly, defining it such: “the subject *performs or experiences* the action expressed by the verb in such a way that *emphasizes the subject’s participation*.”⁵⁸ Here she also mentions reflexivity, the lack of English equivalent, and the importance of context.

As regards the meaning of the middle voice, Harris presents the indirect middle, direct middle, permissive middle, and reciprocal middle. She explains the indirect middle as the most common use, expressing the subject’s action as “in one’s own interest or for one’s own benefit.”⁵⁹ The direct middle, Harris explains, is reflexive in meaning and is rare in the NT. Later she introduces the permissive middle, where subjects allow an action to be done to themselves, and the reciprocal middle, where an exchange occurs among a plural subject. Harris also addresses deponent verbs. She makes a compelling statement in this vein, commenting that, “because the essential force of the middle voice is *always* active, it is not entirely clear what has been ‘laid aside’ in these verbs.”⁶⁰ Because of this, among other complications (e.g. passive deponents and deponency in one tense, but not another), Harris chooses not to employ the concept of deponency.

⁵⁸ Italics original to author. Dana Harris, *An Introduction to Biblical Greek Grammar* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing, 2020), 49.

⁵⁹ Harris, *Introduction to Biblical Greek*, 69.

⁶⁰ Harris, *Introduction to Biblical Greek*, 70.

Benjamin Merkle and Robert Plummer

Similarly to Baugh's, Merkle and Plummer's grammar, *Beginning with New Testament Greek*, first introduces nouns and, soon after, verbs. In their initial introduction, they define the middle voice, alongside the active and passive, with this description: "The subject both performs and is affected by the action."⁶¹ As regards the function of the middle voice, they name four categories cited from Neva Miller's work: reciprocity, or the involvement of two parties in the verb; movement, where the subject is often "acting and immediately affected by the action"; self-involvement, the verb is an action of thinking, feeling, or deciding (often middle-only); and passivity, the verb affects the subject in a way that is seemingly un-chosen by the subject.⁶² Note the term *middle-only* mentioned above. This is a description given in place of deponency as Merkle and Plummer suggest that, along with the majority of recent Greek scholarship, deponency is an attempt to apply English or Latin categorization that is ultimately unhelpful. So, they define middle-only verbs as verbs that have no active voice form "because, to ancient Greeks, the activity these verbs describe was inherently 'subject affected' in a way that demanded they be marked by middle voice endings."⁶³

⁶¹ Merkle and Plummer, *Beginning with NT Greek*, 38.

⁶² Both the categories and quoted material come from Neva F. Miller, "Appendix 2: A Theory of Deponent Verbs," in *Analytical Lexicon of the Greek New Testament*, ed. Timothy Friberg, Barbara Friberg, and Neva F. Miller (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2000), 427–29, <https://archive.org/details/analyticallexico0000frib>.

⁶³ Merkle and Plummer, *Beginning with NT Greek*, 39.

Andreas Köstenberger, Benjamin Merkle, and Robert Plummer

In their intermediate grammar, *Going Deeper with New Testament Greek*, Köstenberger, Merkle, and Plummer provide a balanced presentation, discussing the grammatical topics in a practical way with many useful reference points. Their treatment of the middle voice does likewise by presenting a small description and four different usage categories. In their description they first note the difficulty per lack of English equivalent. They then lean on Robertson's definition, stating that, "[the middle] convey[s] the idea that the subject directly participates or is involved in the results of the action."⁶⁴

The first of their usage categories is the reflexive middle. Next is the special interest middle. This terminology is also employed by Baugh and is simply another name for the indirect middle. Köstenberger, Merkle, and Plummer note that this is the most common use of the middle voice. Next, unlike Wallace, they consider the permissive and causative middle to be one category. The final category they present is the deponent middle. Here, however, they discuss the fact that recent scholarship questions (and in some cases denies) the necessity or helpfulness of the category of the deponent middle. They explain that they have included the deponent middle to provide a "balanced summary, recognizing the wide use of the category of 'deponency,'" but also endeavor to present a "better understanding" of these verbs as true middles.⁶⁵

⁶⁴ Andreas J. Köstenberger, Benjamin L. Merkle, and Robert L. Plummer, *Going Deeper with New Testament Greek* (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2020), 196.

⁶⁵ Köstenberger, Merkle, and Plummer, *Going Deeper*, 198.

Helpful Additions from Surrounding Research

These sources were chosen as they also help to display the current landscape of the middle voice, particularly some “hot spots” like deponency and middle/passive morphology.

Jonathan Pennington

Pennington presents a scathing argument against the application of deponency to instances where middle-form verbs appear to function actively. His argument rests on the premise that such verbs are actually true middles and that deponency was inaccurately adopted from Latin grammar, disregarding the once-prominent position of the middle voice in Greek. Pennington acknowledges that his theory is not without difficulties (he notes future middle forms and “passive deponents”), but he maintains his stance even regarding these instances. In the end he suggests that deponency, if it is maintained at all, should play a much smaller role in the categorization of the Greek middle. Pennington’s work is frequently cited amidst discussions of deponency and the current trends in middle voice scholarship. Among others, his work acted as somewhat of a catalyst for revisiting (and largely departing from) deponency.⁶⁶ Pennington talks more about the middle voice

⁶⁶ Jonathan T. Pennington, “Deponency in Koine Greek: The Grammatical Question and the Lexicographical Dilemma,” *Trinity Journal* 24, no. 1 (Spr 2003): 55–76, Atla Religion Database with AtlaSerials PLUS.

in other works, dealing with such issues as transitivity and markedness, and highlighting the ideas of others, such as Rutger Allan.⁶⁷

Rachel Aubrey

Understanding the shifting prominence of the middle voice in Koine Greek (slowly overtaken by the passive voice) and setting the concept of deponency aside makes way for a deeper look into complications such as the $-(\theta)\eta$ - morphology. In her chapter in *The Greek Verb Revisited*, Aubrey points out that morphological markers like $-(\theta)\eta$ - are usually perceived to be consistent middle or passive voice markers. However, she asserts that “... $-(\theta)\eta$ - is better understood as a diachronically and synchronically motivated form with multiple functions, all of which fit within the semantic scope of the middle domain.”⁶⁸ In her analysis she suggests voice categories might better be understood less as distinct categories and more as points on a continuum. This view requires one to discern voice based on “a complex interplay of competing motivations [that] underlie the categorization of an event” rather than morphology alone.⁶⁹ Aubrey’s discussion plunges much deeper, but the basic idea that voice is complex and dynamic, influenced by competing motivations, is valuable in attempts to further grasp Koine Greek’s middle voice.

⁶⁷ Jonathan T. Pennington, “The Greek Middle Voice,” in *Linguistics and New Testament Greek*, ed. David Alan Black and Benjamin L. Merkle (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2020); Jonathan T. Pennington, “Test-Driving the Theory – Middle Voice Forms in Matthew,” SBL Biblical Greek Language and Linguistics Section (2010), https://www.academia.edu/30926194/_Test_Driving_the_Theory_Middle_Voice_Forms_in_Matthew_.

⁶⁸ Rachel Aubrey, “Motivated Categories, Middle Voice, and Passive Morphology,” in *The Greek Verb Revisited*, ed. Steven E Runge and Christopher J. Fresch (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2016), 565.

⁶⁹ Aubrey, “Motivated Categories,” 570.

Neva Miller

In an appendix of the *Analytical Lexicon of the Greek New Testament*,⁷⁰ Miller discusses middle voice and deponency. She identifies the middle voice as a subject performing an action and that action coming back upon the subject. As she addresses deponency, she points out that two assumptions underly the concept: one, all Greek verbs had active forms at some point; two, at some point they lost those forms and became “defective.” Miller then suggests that, “As a class, so-called deponent verbs probably never had an active form at all and so never laid it aside.”⁷¹ Instead of making these assumptions about “so-called deponent verbs,” she proposes careful attention to each instance of a middle verb, seeking to see how the agent might be involved in the action of the verb. She then lists verbs commonly considered deponent with “an alternate way of thinking about them” (i.e. unique English glosses).⁷² The list is organized into seven classes: reciprocity, reflexivity, self-involvement, self-interest, receptivity, passivity, and state/condition.

Without Biblical Studies

Valuable in consideration of Koine Greek’s middle voice is the inclusion of linguistic scholarship outside NT studies. These sources consider Ancient/Classical and Byzantine Greek as well as Koine, alongside a variety of other languages displaying a presence of the middle voice. Michael Aubrey helpfully points out that, “The field of

⁷⁰ Timothy Friberg, Barbara Friberg, and Neva F. Miller, *Analytical Lexicon of the Greek New Testament*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2000), 423-430, <https://archive.org/details/analyticallexico0000frib>.

⁷¹ Miller, “Theory of Deponent Verbs,” 425.

⁷² Miller, “Theory of Deponent Verbs,” 426-427.

linguistics provides us a greater level of precision in making grammatical decisions with a higher degree of explanatory power.”⁷³ Linguistics is a critical element in exegetical work and facilitates the handling of challenging elements of scripture, like the middle voice.

Suzanne Kemmer

Kemmer’s work, *The Middle Voice: Typological Studies in Language*, is a cross-linguistic study on the middle voice, a critical and necessary contribution to this topic. She explains that the middle voice is widely applied in linguistic literature and that there is not currently a universal definition or characterization. However, she does highlight John Lyons’ definition for the semantic middle voice, that it “is an indication that the action or state of the verb affects its subject or the subject’s interests.”⁷⁴ Kemmer’s work is thorough and much more in depth than can be assessed here, but one of her primary conclusions is helpful in this exploration of the middle voice:⁷⁵

“The middle is a semantic area comprising events in which (a) the Initiator [beginning of an action] is also an Endpoint [conclusion of an action], or affected entity and (b) the event is characterized by a low degree of elaboration [adding details to a sentence or idea to make it clearer]... The first property is a subspect of the second.”

⁷³ Michael Aubrey, “The Value of Linguistically Informed Exegesis,” in *Linguistics and Biblical Exegesis*, ed. Douglas Magnum and Josh Westbury (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2017), 191.

⁷⁴ Suzanne Kemmer, *The Middle Voice*, 1.

⁷⁵ Kemmer, *The Middle Voice*, 243.

She also asserts that the category of voice is intertwined with transitivity: “The scale of transitivity ... forms the conceptual underpinning for voice systems in general, and for reflexive and middle marking systems in particular.”⁷⁶ These are valuable contributions to attempts at grasping the middle voice in Koine Greek.

Rutger Allan

Allan presents a comprehensive look into the Greek middle voice in his book, *The Middle Voice in Ancient Greek*. Only a small sampling of the book is touched on here. Note that Allan’s work is focused on the middle voice in Classical Greek. A significant contribution from Allan is the denial of any evidence for middle-only verbs ever laying aside active forms and an “abstract” categorization of “subject-affectedness” to describe the function of the middle.⁷⁷ Here he converses about the agent, patient relationship of a “proto-typical transitive clause” (typically with an active voice verb) where “an agent-subject volitionally initiates physical activity resulting in a transfer of energy to a patient-object that absorbs the energy and thereby undergoes an internal change of state.”⁷⁸ The middle voice verb diverges from this in that the agent-subject is affected by the change of state.

An important component of NT study is the understanding that the Greek of the NT is a snapshot in the transition from primarily active and middle voice to primarily

⁷⁶ Kemmer, *The Middle Voice*, 247.

⁷⁷ He presents this in part from John Lyons’ definition, “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,” and Elizabeth Barber’s additional work, where she identifies the *affectedness* of the subject per middle usage; Allan, *The Middle Voice*, 16-19.

⁷⁸ Allan, *The Middle Voice*, 19.

active and passive voice. Along these lines, Allan treats the passive as a middle usage type. He introduces eleven different aorist middle voice usage types, which are helpfully presented in this diagram presented by Susan Kmetko:⁷⁹

Fig. 2.3 The distribution of aorist forms among Allan’s middle voice categories

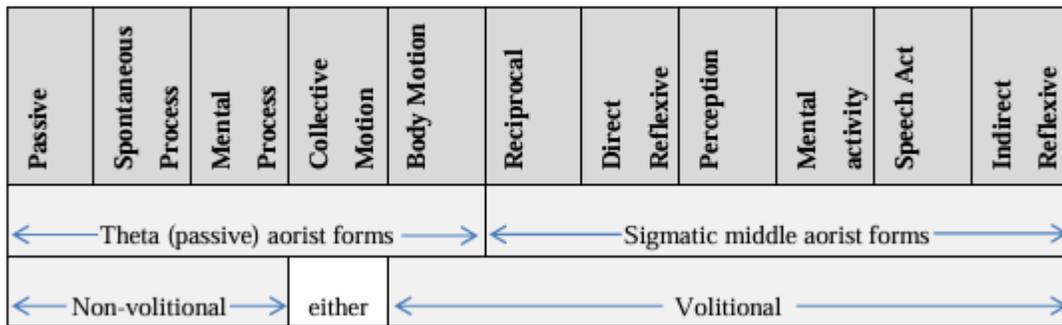


Figure 1 Allan's Middle Voice Categories

Fernando Zuniga and Seppo Kittilä

A good introduction to the middle voice⁸⁰ might be Zuniga and Kittilä’s frequently quoted statement from their book, *Grammatical Voice*, “...middles are so heterogeneous that they represent a major terminological problem area...”⁸¹ As Zuniga and Kittilä get into their discussion, they explain that the term “middle” originated in connection with its counterparts (active and passive). Like the active voice, the middle voice verb’s subject performs an action, but like the passive voice, the middle voice verb’s subject is also affected by the action. This description could prove quite helpful for a beginning Greek student just being introduced to the middle voice. For the meaning of

⁷⁹ Note that “passive” is presented as simply a use of the middle voice; Kmetko, “The Function and Significance,” 39.

⁸⁰ Please note Zuniga and Kittilä do not approve of using the term “middle voice” and instead suggest “middle inflection”; Fernando Zuniga and Seppo Kittilä, *Grammatical Voice* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2019), 151-152.

⁸¹ Zuniga and Kittilä, *Grammatical Voice*, 151.

the middle, they list passive, anticausative, reciprocity, reflexivity, direct reflexive (expressed actively), contrasting with an existing active (“...active *politeúō* ‘I am a citizen’ and middle *politeuomai* ‘I act as a citizen, perform my civic duties...’”⁸²), and deponent/*media tantum*. Following this part of the discussion, Zuniga and Kittilä dive further into the linguistic discussion on the middle voice, including “The Middle as a Network of Meanings” (here citing Kemmer’s work, among others)⁸³ and inflection, voice, and cluster.

Albert Rijksbaron

In *Form and Function in Greek Grammar* Rijksbaron, reviews “the ancient grammarians” handling of the Greek middle voice. He includes Dionysius Thrax (and his scholiasts), Apollonius Dyscolus, Choeroboscus, Macrobius, and Charisius and Priscianus. One would hope that such a study would provide quite the enlightenment on middle voice usage; however, Rijksbaron finds the ancient grammarians’ discussions somewhat unhelpful as the middle seems to become a catch-all for verb forms that do not fit into the expected form-meaning category. Still, Rijksbaron notes some middle or middle-related categories discussed by these grammarians, such as self-affectedness, direct-reflexivity, anti-passives, and intransitive verbs. And although he points to Simplicius’ commentary on Aristotle’s *Categories*, mentioning the agency, patiency dynamic, he concludes by saying he feels the ancient grammarians had “a somewhat mechanical view of active, passive, and especially, middle, and whose main concern, as

⁸² Zuniga and Kittilä, *Grammatical Voice*, 170.

⁸³ Zuniga and Kittilä, *Grammatical Voice*, 171.

regards the middle voice, was to dispose of a number of anomalies of the Greek verbal system...”⁸⁴

Guglielmo Inglese

For a little more background on the middle voice, Inglese explains in an article that ancient grammarians introduced *voice* to explain a “morphological peculiarity of the verbal system of Ancient Greek.”⁸⁵ As such, voice indicates person and number, but also the relationship of the verb to its subject. He also states that the middle was primarily understood by ancient grammarians as a morphological category and that, today, its function is largely understood in conjunction with the active and passive. In the same work, Inglese deals with middle typology, pointing to the cross-linguistic work of Kemmer and M.H. Klaiman, which has helped the middle voice be seen as a cross-linguistic category and has provided a better cognitive and functional explanation for middle uses. But a lack still exists in consistency regarding the term “middle.” As such, Inglese asserts that, “...the case of the middle is but yet another manifestation of a more general ‘comparability problem’ (e.g. Evans 2020), which has taken centre stage in the debate on the methodological foundations of the discipline of typology...”⁸⁶ This statement reveals that scholars outside biblical studies are likewise naming the need for more work to be done in this area.

⁸⁴ Rijksbaron et al., *Form and Function*, 367.

⁸⁵ Guglielmo Inglese, “The Journey of the Middle Voice: From Antiquity to Linguistic Typology,” *Language & History* 66, no. 2 (August 2023): 202, https://www.academia.edu/105147234/The_journey_of_the_middle_voice_from_antiquity_to_linguistic_typology.

⁸⁶ Inglese, “Middle Voice,” 214.

Summary of Literature Review

Grammars

Each author surveyed here presents a slightly different handling of the middle voice, but one thing remains consistent throughout:⁸⁷ a discontent with or call for a clearer picture of the function and meaning of the middle voice. One concept worthy of particular notice is the deponency discussion. Early grammarians like Winer, Moulton, and Robertson express dissatisfaction with the concept. Oddly, this dissatisfaction seems to disappear in later grammars. Zerwick, Siebenthal, Baugh, and Wallace, for example, treat deponent middles as an assumed and accepted category.⁸⁸ Another shift then occurs when Bernard Taylor, Jonathan Pennington, and others begin challenging deponency more aggressively around 2001-2010.⁸⁹ After this, grammarians like Harris, Mathewson, Emig, Merkle, and Plummer decide not to utilize deponency and, instead, to consider these verbs true middles.

In consideration of the meaning and function of the middle voice, definitions vary from author to author. However, most authors mention some sort of subject involvement (e.g. Winer, Zerwick, Voelz) or subject emphasis (e.g. Moulton, Wallace, Harris). Most also introduce a few middle usage categories. Usually included in those is the direct middle, indirect middle, and a few others (e.g. reciprocity, permissive, etc.). Depending

⁸⁷ Excluding only perhaps S.M. Baugh's *A NT Greek Primer*, 3rd ed.

⁸⁸ Note that this is the case with their works that are dealt with here. Newer editions of Wallace and Baugh may present something different.

⁸⁹ Bernard Taylor's paper on deponency being the first major direct challenge at the 2001 SBL Conference; Jonathan Pennington, Taylor, Constantine Campbell, and Stanley Porter further challenging deponency at the 2010 SBL Conference. Others mentioned in the literature review (e.g. Neva Miller and Rutger Allan) likewise fueled this new move away from deponency).

on one's pedagogical approach and stance on deponency, the grammars surveyed here which may prove most helpful to the beginning Greek student are Dana, Mantey, Wallace, Mathewson, Emig, Harris, Merkle, and Plummer.⁹⁰ The reason for this being that these grammars do not shy away from a thorough treatment of the middle voice, acknowledging its difficulty, but still giving clear descriptors that do not rely on reflexivity.

Other Biblical Scholarship

Other scholars have dealt with key issues or “hot spots” surrounding the middle voice category. Pennington's work challenging deponency has already been mentioned. Miller likewise questions the necessity of deponency as a category. Aubrey further contributes by addressing morphological ambiguities, such as the $-(\theta)\eta-$ forms and how this impacts middle/passive categorization and interpretation.

Other, Non-Biblical Scholarship

Outside biblical studies, scholars such as Kemmer (via a major cross-linguistic work) and Allan demonstrate that the middle voice is best understood in terms of subject-affectedness rather than rigid morphological classifications. Kemmer's research presents the middle voice as a continuum, with transitivity playing a key role in its function. And Allan discusses deponency, particularly considering the unique way the subject/agent is involved/affected with the action of middle voice verbs.

⁹⁰ Note that Mathewson, Emig, and Wallace are not beginning grammars.

Additionally, Zuniga, Kittilä, Rijksbaron, and Inglese, reinforce the idea that Ancient Greek voice systems were more fluid than traditionally presented. Their work underscores the complexity of middle voice usage, encouraging a more nuanced approach to interpretation.

Exploring scholarship within and without biblical studies displays a better picture of the current understanding of the middle voice. While early grammars laid the groundwork, contemporary scholarship increasingly recognizes the inadequacy of deponency and the necessity of considering cross-linguistic evidence. As such, the middle voice remains a rich area of study, requiring careful attention to its nuance, grammatical structure, and broader linguistic evidence.

Chapter 3

Teaching the Middle Voice

After gathering together an image of the current landscape of Koine Greek's middle voice, it is now time to consider the methods used when teaching Greek learners about the middle voice. First, a preview of some theories for teaching ancient languages orients the discussion. Then a look at some of the current pedagogical methods regarding the middle voice provides insight into what is more or less effective. Finally, with this information in mind, a few ideas are presented to potentially benefit students in their middle voice acquisition.

Considerations for Teaching Ancient Language

It has generally been understood that ancient language acquisition differs from second language acquisition because a different kind of comprehension is needed for each.⁹¹ When learning a second (modern) language, one is expected to acquire literacy and oral fluency. Contrastingly, when learning an ancient language, one is typically expected to acquire literacy only. Indeed, in some cases, oral fluency of an ancient language is impossible to achieve because certain aspects of the language (e.g. pronunciation, accent, and stress) are unknown. This thinking about ancient language acquisition has shaped the study of ancient languages such that it is usually deductive in method. In other words, the focus is on learning *about* the language (how it functions and how to read and understand it) rather than on how to *use* it.

⁹¹ Paul Overland, "Can Communicative Methods Enhance Ancient Language Acquisition?" *Teaching Theology & Religion* 7, no. 1 (January 2004): 51, Atla Religion Database with AtlaSerials PLUS.

Some teachers of ancient languages are challenging this thinking and attempting to employ more inductive (conversational, comprehensive, etc.) methods.⁹² It is unclear whether this will shift the greater corpus of ancient language learning or whether a deductive approach will remain the standard. One poignant realization, however, of attempting to apply inductive methods to the teaching Koine Greek's middle voice is the remaining lack in understanding it. If interpreting occurrences of the middle voice in Koine Greek literature is difficult, it would be that much more difficult to attempt to actively use the middle voice in properly applicable ways. And forget not that Modern Greek has only maintained the active and passive voice. So while engaging with Modern Greek may provide good opportunities for grasping other aspects of Koine Greek, it can provide nothing in the way of grasping the middle voice.

Regardless, it is worth acknowledging that many are looking towards inductive methods, feeling that these methods provide another level of learning that encourages fluency and retention. This being the case, it presents even more need for good scholarship to flesh out the middle voice. Otherwise, with the introduction of inductive methods, the confusion already present surrounding the middle voice is likely to increase all the more.

⁹² Paul Overland at Ashland Theological Seminary applied communicative methods to his teaching of Biblical Hebrew and found (in a small sample of about 13 students) that these methods improved language competency and retention; Overland, "Can Communicative Methods Enhance ALA?" 51-57; Brandon Westengard suggests, "With a greater attention to methods of input given in creative ways, a sense of trust that the brain will eventually put the linguistic puzzle together, and the removal of all grammar-based assessment, educators in any theological setting will better set up their students for higher and more proficient levels of acquisition;" Brandon L. Westengard, "Language Acquisition in the Theological Classroom: A Case Study in Comprehensible Input," *Teaching Theology & Religion* 26, no. 4 (December 2023): 142, <https://doi.org/10.1111/teth.12649>; Wes Olmstead at Briercrest College and Seminary uses inductive methods, including writing, speaking, and listening to ancient Greek in Koine Greek classes, even taking students to a Greek-speaking country for a language intensive; David Chapman, email message to author, February 7, 2025.

Current Methods for the Middle Voice in Koine Greek

The Status of Deponency

To begin this conversation, it is important to recognize the status of that pesky middle voice issue, deponency. Almost all modern scholarship is moving away from deponency. Indeed, this study has failed to find any recent defense of deponency except that of Stratton Ladewig.⁹³ This is not to say that everyone is denying the role of deponency completely. Some professors and students will hold to it, and some will partially hold to it, believing it to play a diminished role.

Grammars published after 2012 tend to mention deponency and explain its background but choose not to employ it. This is evident even in newer editions of published grammars, like that of Mounce. In his third edition (2009) of *Basics of Biblical Greek* he employs deponency without any question; in his fourth edition (2019) he begins moving away from it.⁹⁴ This trend sets a precedent for how the middle voice will be taught and understood. If those verbs previously categorized as deponent now become true middles, no longer can a student think of them simply as active. Another layer of nuance is present, and they must be understood as something unique. The question is whether these modern grammars have done a sufficient job of describing the function and meaning of the middle voice, and whether professors (who likely learned deponency) will be able to convey the message to their students effectively.

⁹³ Alongside the fact that there is a lack in other scholarship attempting to defend deponency, Constantine Campbell and others find Ladewig's dissertation unconvincing; Constantine R. Campbell, *Advances in the Study of Greek: New Insights for Reading the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2015), 97.

⁹⁴ Biblical Mastery Academy, "Deponent Verbs," YouTube.

From Modern Grammars

From the survey above, those considered “modern grammars” are Siebenthal, Voelz, Wallace, Mounce, Baugh, Mathewson, Emig, Harris, Merkle, Plummer, and Köstenberger. However, the editions of Voelz, Wallace, Mounce, and Baugh dealt with here maintain the use of the deponent middle, while the other grammars listed do not. So, these four present a significantly different approach to the middle voice. Though they still give a description of the indirect middle, the main thrust of their effort is spent on explaining that most middle verbs are deponent. The beginning grammars in this list introduce the middle voice alongside the active and passive. This is probably a good approach as it orients the student to the voice system and gives them something familiar to grasp onto (that is, if they are already familiar with active and passive voice). The definitions of the middle voice these modern grammars give will not be repeated as it was already recounted in detail above; however, it is worth noting that all but Baugh include in their definition something about subject emphasis, involvement, or affect. Baugh, instead, states that the middle expresses ideas from both the active and passive. Both these approaches contain good and helpful information for the student. The greater difficulty for the beginning student comes with the identification, parsing, and translation of middle verbs.

Those grammars which hold to deponency clearly state that deponency is the most frequent usage category for middle voice verbs in the NT. Depending on how this is taught in the classroom, it can mean students fall into a habit of assuming middle form verbs are deponent. This is an understandable tendency, but it stunts students’ learning of the meaning of the middle voice by giving them an “out” from doing the harder mental

work of engaging with the middle from the Greek perspective. As already discussed, Baugh goes so far as to make deponency a category all its own⁹⁵ (Mounce also seems to suggest this practice⁹⁶). This is a creative idea but is largely ineffective and confusing for the student.

Those grammars which depart from deponency suggest rendering a middle/passive verb such as λυόμεθα as something like “we release for ourselves” or “we are being released.” And for middle only verbs they suggest becoming familiar with those that are frequently occurring, so as to recall their unique glosses. The inclusion of “for ourselves” when rendering verbs that display middle morphology is an attempt at communicating the force of the middle. This is helpful in moving the student toward understanding the meaning of the middle. However, it could also be confused as a reflexive meaning more than subject-involvement. Mathewson and Emig state that, “The student should maintain a fair amount of flexibility when translating the middle voice. ...involvement or participation of the subject in the action of the verb is present irrespective of how we translate it.”⁹⁷ This is a helpful reminder for both the teacher and student and should likely be repeated often when the student is attempting to translate middle voice verbs.

Most of these grammars acknowledge the difficulty of the middle voice, particularly translating the middle voice into English. It seems almost any approach is going to be initially difficult for the beginning student. However, with continued

⁹⁵ Baugh, *A New Testament Greek Primer*, 19.

⁹⁶ Mounce, *Basics of Biblical Greek*, 152.

⁹⁷ Mathewson and Emig, *Intermediate Greek Grammar*, 94.

engagement and in-text encounters, a reasonable grasp of the middle voice is possible to achieve.

Some Ideas for Teaching Koine Greek's Middle Voice

For various reasons already explored, the middle voice presents an interesting challenge to the instruction and acquisition of Koine Greek. Most current methods for dealing with the middle voice seem to range from *very poor* to *sufficient*. While it is likely that those methods cannot be optimized fully until better scholarship on the middle voice arises, some adjustments could be made. Those adjustments may differ in severity from simple to extreme depending on pedagogical perspectives. The following section provides some ideas on possible adjustments for the way the middle voice is presented and handled in the Greek classroom.

Problem Spots

Before diving into adjustment ideas for teaching the middle voice, it is valuable to note a few common problem spots for students. First, although most grammars explicitly state the rarity of the direct (reflexive) middle, many students still tend to think of the middle primarily as reflexive in meaning. This might be called the “reflexive sinkhole.” Two factors likely contribute to this phenomenon. One, many grammars use “reflexive-like” vocabulary when attempting to portray subject-involvement in middle voice verbs. Though they differentiate this from the direct middle, a student who is just trying not to drown in the ocean of Greek grammar may easily miss this distinction. Two, the reflexive use of the middle is perhaps the only use that is easy for the English mind (or likely any mind unfamiliar with middle inflection) to grasp. So, the reflexive use becomes the only

clear idea of how the middle voice functions. In response to this, professors might consider giving extra and repeated emphasis to the fact that the direct reflexive use of the middle is rare. They might also encourage students not to begin with the reflexive sense when translating middle voice verbs from the NT, repeating again that very few direct middles exist in the NT. Additionally, the better grasp students have on the whole meaning of the middle voice, the less likely they are to fall into the “reflexive sinkhole.”

Second, though students may grasp the middle voice at one time in their study, that grasp is often not retained. Retention of a new language is a typical problem, so retention of a difficult element of a new language is not unexpected. In this instance, that retention is best countered by repeated “real-world” (in-text) encounters with the middle voice (where special attention is drawn to its occurrence).⁹⁸

Finally, a problem spot closely connected with the first, but broader in nature, is the need for students to step outside the “English mind” to comprehend the middle voice. Recall Dana and Mantey’s infamous quote, “[the Greek middle voice] is impossible to describe...adequately or accurately, in terms of English idiom.”⁹⁹ This is something quite difficult, if not impossible, at the beginning. And it may not be a helpful realization for the Greek student immediately, but not far down their learning road, this realization could be critical in a better understanding of the middle voice. Note also that inductive methods could be quite helpful in this vein (though this idea is presented with considerable caution per the concerns addressed above).

⁹⁸ Cary Smith notes this problem and solution; Cary Smith, Zoom Video Call Communication, January 27, 2025.

⁹⁹ Dana and Mantey, *A Manual Grammar*, 156-157.

Two-Voice Continuum

Most grammars maintain three voice categories for Koine Greek: active, middle, and passive. Some contemporary scholars such as Rutger Allan, Rachel Aubrey, and Carl Conrad have countered this concept, suggesting that “the middle voice and the active voice comprise a binary, opposite pair.”¹⁰⁰ Indeed, this group (especially Allan) considers the passive to simply be a use of the middle voice. This is an interesting contribution from linguistic studies that largely differs from the biblical Greek grammars, where the passive voice plays a prominent role over and above the middle. Conrad suggests the two categories: basic (traditionally “active”) and subject-focused (traditionally “middle/passive”).¹⁰¹ This is because the “basic” category is unmarked for subject-affectedness while the “subject-focused” category is marked for subject-affectedness.¹⁰²

This idea is more on the extreme end of adjustments as it would be a major methodological shift. One can imagine the pros and cons of such an adjustment, particularly for the beginning student. A more helpful conception of the same idea may be the presentation of the three voice categories on a two-voice continuum (“active” and “passive” forming the two poles with “middle” floating along the continuum).¹⁰³ The great benefit of this adjustment is that it encourages viewing the voices with more fluidity and less rigidity while also helping to depict the role of subject-affectedness. As sources

¹⁰⁰ Pennington and Jamieson, “After Deponency,” 2.

¹⁰¹ With subcategories of strong middle passive and weak middle passive (or MP1 and MP2); Carl W. Conrad, “New Observations on Ancient Greek Voice,” 12, <https://sites.wustl.edu/cwconrad/ancient-greek-voice/>.

¹⁰² Pennington and Jamieson cite Rutger Allan in explaining that this does not mean the basic/active category cannot include subject-affectedness, simply that it is “neutral” to it; Pennington and Jamieson, “After Deponency,” 2.

¹⁰³ See Fig. 3 for a depiction and further discussion of this.

like Zuniga, Kittilä, Rijksbaron, and Inglese have revealed, the Greek voice system is relatively fluid and a rigid morphological or semantic distinction among the voices is not linguistically realistic. This is not to say consistency and categorization do not exist, but that a perspective less reliant on such distinct, consistent categorization would benefit the student of Koine Greek.

Deponency, Again

A note about deponency is necessary here once more. It may be that, as many new grammars are doing, demoting the category of deponency might bolster students' opportunity and ability to better grasp the middle voice. Instead of expecting most middle verbs to be deponent, this would require students to engage more frequently and thoughtfully with potential middle voice meanings. The simple practice of wrestling with the middle voice more could yield incredible results in comprehension. It must be noted, of course, that this idea is only viable for those who agree with the argument against deponency.

Discourse Analysis and Construction Grammar

Once students have moved from learning the very basics of Koine Greek and are beginning to dabble in translation and exegesis, the real work of application and comprehension can begin. This is true of the language as a whole, and it is true of specific concepts like the middle voice. Although the introduction of and beginning familiarity with the middle voice is important, it is at this slightly more advanced stage that a deeper grasp can begin to take hold. It is also at this stage that more use of Discourse Analysis and Construction Grammar may prove quite beneficial in middle

voice comprehension.¹⁰⁴ Both these methods tend towards examining specifics in light of the bigger picture. Discourse Analysis does this by analyzing context to determine meaning. In exegetical work this means studying the cultural and historical context;¹⁰⁵ it also means looking for things like repetition, bracketing (i.e. how passages are split up), cohesion, and coherence. These features can play a significant role in determining the meaning of words. And they are arguably especially important in the case of Scripture, where the author cannot confirm or deny whether an interpretation is true to his intention.

Construction Grammar looks for patterns in language usage via pairings of form (syntax) and meaning (semantics).¹⁰⁶ This can happen in words, morphemes, idioms, and syntactic patterns. The construction of *form* plus *meaning* can cause coercion, or a change in expected meaning. As one can imagine, the relationship between constructions becomes valuable for interpretation. Aubrey believes a Construction Grammar approach to provide more precision because, “Focusing on how verbs license their noun phrases, prepositional phrases, and subordinate clauses constrains the interpretation from the start.”¹⁰⁷

For middle voice comprehension, Discourse Analysis gives the student the opportunity to dive deeper into the NT context and, hopefully, better understand how the

¹⁰⁴ This idea, alongside language typology, was presented by Michael Aubrey in his chapter in *Linguistics and Biblical Exegesis*. In this work he discusses the application of linguistics to all biblical exegesis. He provides an orientation to the topic and some specific examples of application; Michael Aubrey, “Linguistically Informed Exegesis,” 192-198.

¹⁰⁵ Ideally, it would also include the redemptive-historical context.

¹⁰⁶ Mirjam Fried, “Construction Grammar,” oxfordbibliographies.com, March 20, 2024, <https://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/display/document/obo-9780199772810/obo-9780199772810-0061.xml>.

¹⁰⁷ Aubrey, “The Value of Linguistically Informed Exegesis,” 195.

author is applying middle voice verbs. Construction Grammar could illuminate the communicative function of the middle voice by observing the form-meaning bond. For maximum effectiveness, it could be beneficial to introduce these methods as soon as the student's first exegetical notebook. And it may also be beneficial to encourage applying them *before* or *during*, say, the work of an annotated translation. Though it could be introduced later, perhaps an initial introduction to a context-oriented approach helps to set the student in that mental habit from the start.

Including Visuals with Explanation

Visual representations of the middle voice accompanied by explanations could prove exceedingly helpful in conveying middle voice meaning. Speaking from experience, many depictions of the middle voice can perpetuate the “reflexive sinkhole” discussed earlier, making the inclusion of an explanation essential. Take this wonderful example from E.J.W. Barber:¹⁰⁸

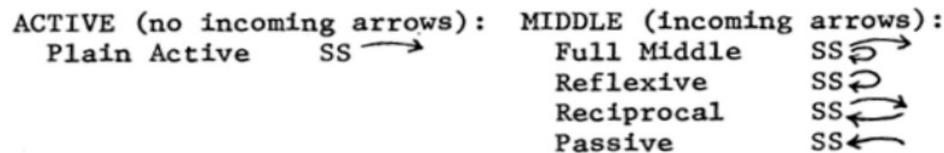


Figure 2 Barber's Middle

Though some elements of this visualization may be debated; overall, it is an excellent depiction of the Greek voice system. It includes the necessary elements (and no more than that), differentiating each one as its own unique function. However, --once again

¹⁰⁸ Note, “SS” stands for “surface subject,” or grammatical subject; E. J. W. Barber, “Voice -- Beyond the Passive,” *Proceedings of the Annual Meeting of the Berkeley Linguistics Society*, vol. 1 (1975), 21, OAlster.

speaking from experience as a beginning student-- the “Full Middle,” “Reflexive,” and “Reciprocal” could appear relatively uniform. A fairly simple explanation can clear this up by explaining how each arrow functions. The full middle, or indirect middle, indicates the subject acting on someone or something, but with one’s own interest or involvement somehow also at play. The reflexive, or direct middle, indicates a subject acting completely for, by, or to oneself. The reciprocal, or reciprocal middle, involves plural subjects both acting on or with one another. With this explanation, the figure might appear simple; however, it is not necessarily intuitive. Also, a helpful inclusion to the figure could be the representation of a direct object (DO) where necessary.

Two-Voice Continuum

In conjunction with the two-voice continuum mentioned above is this depiction of the Greek voice system. It is presented with the active voice on one end and the passive voice on the other, while the middle voice floats along the continuum.

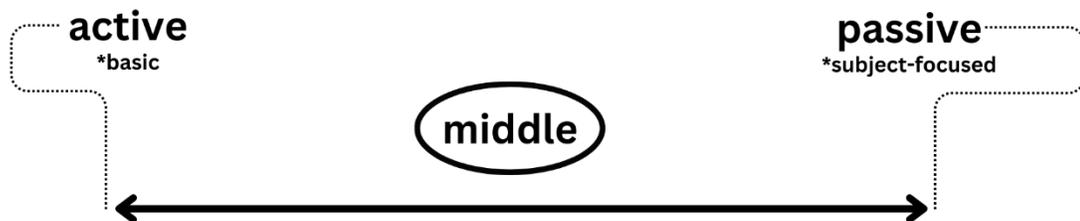


Figure 3 Two-Voice Continuum

This depiction is intentionally simple for two reasons. One, it provides a good starting place for the beginning student. Two, it allows for functional use. Included beneath the “active” and “passive” labels are the additional labels presented by Carl Conrad, “basic” and “subject-focused.” These are included so that the student can also be introduced to the concept of subject-affectedness/involvement (which is an important element of the

middle voice). The middle voice is presented as floating along the continuum to indicate its varied nature as both active in meaning, but marked for subject-affectedness/involvement.

Active verbs would land somewhere on the lefthand side of the continuum. Passive verbs would land somewhere on the righthand side. And middle verbs could land either on the lefthand or righthand side. Specific placement would vary per verb, per context, depending on semantic force. The benefit of a continuum image is primarily to help instill the idea of fluidity over and above rigid voice and voice usage categories. This particular image is not perfect, but it is a simple representation for beginning students meant to communicate the potential interchange and nuance surrounding the Greek voice system. Rachel Aubrey presents a similar, but more linguistically accurate (and thus more complex) continuum that could be helpful for more advanced students.¹⁰⁹

Visualizations like these, included with explanation, could bolster students' grasp on both the function and meaning of the middle voice. Best practice might be including multiple such visualizations so as to strike different chords for different people.

Usage Chart

A middle voice usage chart could be helpful for students determining the meaning of a middle voice verb. This chart was compiled primarily from Wallace's *Greek Grammar*, only excluding the example scripture under the "deponent" category from Mounce's *Basics of Biblical Greek*:¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁹ Aubrey, "Motivated Categories," 573.

¹¹⁰ Excluding his category of "redundant middle;" Wallace, *Greek Grammar*, 415-430; Mounce, *Biblical Greek*, 152.

USAGE TYPE	indirect	direct	reciprocal	causative	permissive	deponent
MEANING	<i>true middle</i> (subject-affectedness)	reflexive, the subject acts on itself	plural subjects interacting among themselves	the subject <i>has</i> an act done to itself	the subject <i>allows</i> something to be done to itself	active, the subject <i>performs</i> or <i>experiences</i> the action
EXAMPLE (from Wallace <i>Greek Grammar</i>)	Luke 11:38	Matthew 27:5	Matthew 26:4	Luke 11:38	Luke 2:5	Matthew 24:42 (from Mounce's <i>Basics</i>)

Figure 4 Middle Voice Usage Chart

A caution must be supplied with this chart reminding the student not to forget that rigid categorization does not always provide the whole picture of how a middle verb is functioning. A tendency to organize everything into neat categories could push against the mental work of engaging with the Greek on its own accord (as opposed to through the English lens). It should also be noted that such a chart is only one idea of how the middle voice is used. Recall the numerous uses presented by Rutger Allan (see chart in Chapter 2). This is one tool that can be quite beneficial, but cannot act as the end-all, be-all.

A Few More Small Ideas

A Uniform Definition

Unfortunately, a uniform definition of the middle voice does not currently exist. The array of slightly varied presentations of the middle voice acts as a perfect depiction of the greater lack in uniformity of understanding the meaning and function of the middle voice. In an ideal world a uniform definition would exist. This is easier said than done, otherwise it would be done by now. The best-case scenario would probably mean such a definition comes from the wider world of linguistics, but perhaps biblical studies scholars could at least agree upon the basic tenets of the middle voice. The goal in this endeavor being a clear and consistent presentation for beginning Greek students. Such an

agreement could contribute to some healthy uniformity not only in definition, but, consequently, in interpretation. Admittedly, an agreement on a uniform definition is a challenging prospective at this juncture.

Diagramming

In a similar vein with middle voice visualizations is the possibility of diagramming Greek sentences (hopefully with an added element that indicates where the action of the verb is directed [e.g. arrows]). The effort required for diagramming a sentence with a middle voice verb could help establish a student's *initial understanding* of the middle voice. Initial understanding is emphasized here because this practice is not a long-term solution and does not necessarily promote a context-oriented practice. Diagramming is time-consuming and something that most students would probably dislike. Thus, diagramming is probably better placed as an extra tool for the student who would find it helpful rather than an inclusion in classroom lessons.

Additionally, instead of diagramming whole sentences, students could just utilize the arrows mentioned above. One could simply add arrows projecting from the middle voice verb, pointing towards wherever the action of the verb is directed. Done in a classroom setting, this could provide the opportunity to see differing viewpoints and determine together how the middle voice is functioning.

Emphasis on Application

As mentioned with the problem of retention, getting “into the wild” is one of the best learning mechanisms for Greek students. Everything is theoretical until the student confronts and wrestles with concepts like the middle voice in the Greek text. Exegetical

work helps to cement these concepts and can inspire a yielding to the “Greek mind” over the “English mind.” An excellent example of this is from Colossians 3:9, with the middle participle ἀπεκδυσάμενοι.¹¹¹ From the middle-only verb, ἀπεκδύομαι, ἀπεκδυσάμενοι in this case indicates the taking, stripping, or putting off of the old self.¹¹² This is a helpful instance for grasping middle meaning because it exemplifies the subject acting on something (the old self) which inherently affects the subject (taking something off innately alters the subject). Encountering middle voice occurrences like this one is an essential practice for beginning and advanced students of Koine Greek.

¹¹¹ This example brought to attention via Cary Smith; Cary Smith, Zoom Video Call Communication, January 27, 2025.

¹¹² BDAG ἀπεκδύομαι 1.

Chapter 4

Conclusion

Among the difficult aspects of Koine Greek, the middle voice presents a unique challenge for the beginning Greek student. This is not merely because it is a difficult concept to grasp, but because it is somewhat lacking in greater scholarship. Biblical studies scholars and linguists alike note this lack. Some have turned their attention towards it, but more work still needs to be done in the area of the middle voice. Nevertheless, those engaged with the learning and teaching of Koine Greek can work towards a better comprehension of the middle voice with the scholarship that is currently available.

As the survey of grammarians and other scholars presented above reveals, the primary common thread in their treatment of the middle voice is the involvement—great or small—of the subject in the action of the verb. Other aspects of middle voice function and meaning vary somewhat from source to source. And instead of a reliance on rigid depictions of middle voice usage, linguists (especially) point to a more fluid view of middle voice usage.

Teaching the Middle Voice

With these things in mind, it is possible to consider the way the middle voice is taught to the beginning Greek student. Koine Greek has classically been taught deductively. Some instructors are beginning to employ inductive methods, but it is not clear whether this is effective or if it is a lasting trend. Critical for the introduction of the middle voice to primarily English-speaking students is an appreciation for its lack of

English equivalent. The tendency to attempt to comprehend a Greek concept within the framework of English is incredibly strong. In the case of the middle voice, this most often manifests in the form of equating the middle voice to reflexivity. This urge should be challenged firmly and frequently with the encouragement that the middle voice is difficult.

Another foundational concept of the middle voice is subject-affectedness. Once students can grasp the involvement, affect, or emphasis of the subject in the action of the verb, they are making great strides. This will most likely be an incremental revelation, becoming more and more clear with continued middle voice engagement.

Some ideas for this stage of learning include employing the two-voice continuum, diminishing the role of deponency, and including visual depiction of the middle voice with explanation. The first two of these ideas are not just pedagogical methods and would thus only be applicable if the curriculum and/or instructor agree with the premises. As students advance in their study, utilizing discourse analysis, construction grammar, and, generally, plenty of application work becomes more relevant and useful. As an added benefit, it is likely that the more students engage with the middle voice in the Greek text, the better they will retain it.

Though Koine Greek's middle voice is, in some senses, a work-in-progress, it remains a valuable portion of Scripture that is worthy of attention and care. For those engaged in biblical interpretation--be they beginning, advanced, or expert students--, the middle voice must not be ignored.

Appendix

Quick Reference: Grammarians' Definitions of Middle¹¹³

Winer – action refers to the agent either (1) simply, as the direct object (reflexively) or (2) mediately, as the action being performed on or in some way for the subject.

Moulton - the middle emphasizes the agent.

Robertson – the middle voice stresses the interest of the agent.

Dana and Mantey - the subject participates in the action, more specifically, the results of the action.

BDF – don't directly define. Mention deponent middles, middle meaning “let oneself be,” and permissive middles.

Zerwick - the middle voice represents a subject acting with respect to oneself.

Sieenthal - the function is twofold: one, it presents an action as primarily caused by a subject; two, it displays subject-affectedness.

Voelz – the subject is the agent of the activity, but also acts in some way in relation to himself, e.g. in his own interest, for his own benefit, or, rarely, even on himself.

Wallace – the subject performs or experiences the action expressed by the verb in such a way that emphasizes the subject's participation.

Mounce - the subject is in some way affected by the action of the verb.

Baugh - the middle voice expresses ideas from both the active and passive.

Mathewson – the middle voice indicates a participation or involvement of the subject in the action of the verb.

¹¹³ Definitions presented here represent my encapsulation of each author's description/definition of the middle voice. For fuller analysis and reference information, see section from each author in Chapter 2.

Harris - the subject performs or experiences the action expressed by the verb in such a way that emphasizes the subject's participation.

Merkle and Plummer - the subject both performs and is affected by the action.

Köstenberger, Merkle, Plummer - the subject directly participates or is involved in the results of the action.

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