Active, Middle, and Passive: Understanding Ancient Greek Voice

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1. Active Voice:

1.a. Active Voice, Transitive and Intransitive Verbs in English:

The *standard* form for verbs in English, whether intransitive or transitive, portrays the grammatical subject of the verb as performing the act, as for example:

 a. "The boy *is* at home."
 b. "The boy *runs*."
 c. "The boy *eats* meat."

This standard form is generally cal led "active" although the categorization as "active" is not really relevant unless the verb is transitive, which is to say, unless that verb takes an object as "The boy eats meat." In this sentence, we call the verb "eats" *transitive*. In "The boy is at home" and "The boy runs" the verbs "is" and "runs" are *intransitive*.

 (It is true that a transitive verb may be used "intransitively" or "absolutely," as in "The boy eats" (but we might say there's an implicit object of the verb "eats" but we are not expressing it and we aren't interested in the boy's habitual diet. It is also true that an intransitive verb may occasionally be used transitively, as in "The boy runs a good race." Here "race" is the direct object of "runs." Nevertheless, these are exceptions; generally a verb is *transitive* if it takes a direct object.)

1.b. Active Voice, Transitive and Intransitive Verbs in Ancient Greek:

As in English, so also in Greek the standard form of the verb, whether intransitive or transitive, portrays the grammatical subject of the verb as performing the act. We can illustrate this with the precise equivalents of the sentences used previously for English:

 οἴκοι ἐστὶν ὁ παῖς.
 τρέχει ὁ παῖς.
 τὸ κρέας ἐσθίει ὁ παῖς.

As in the English sentences above, so here too in Greek the form of these verbs is commonly called "active," although the categorization as "active" is not relevant unless the verb is transitive. In sentences (a) and (b) above the verbs **ἐστὶν** and **τρέχει** are intransitive but employ the *standard* form for Greek verbs which is called "active." Of the three sentences, however, only the third has a *transitive* verb, ἐσθίει. Here the term "active" is more appropriate because the grammatical subject is performing the action and the verb has a direct object, **τὸ κρέας**.

2. Passive Voice:

2.a. Passive Voice in English:

When a transitive verb has a direct object, as in the sentence "The boy *eats* meat," the clause can be converted into a "passive" form wherein the *direct object* of the original clause becomes the *subject* of the new clause and the *verb* of the original clause is reformulated, normally with a form of the auxiliary verb "be" and a past participle of the verb. When thus converted, the sentence "The boy *eats meat*" becomes "*Meat is eaten* by the boy." It isn't even really necessary that the prepositional phrase expressing the *agent* (in this instance, "the boy") is explicit. The sentence "Meat is eaten" or "Meat is being eaten" shifts the focus away from the person performing the act onto the person or thing undergoing the action. That is to say, in a *passive-voice* clause, the grammatical subject is the *recipient* or *experient* of the action or process indicated by the verb.

2.b. Passive Voice in Greek:

In the English sentence, "The boy eats meat," we have noted that we could convert the direct object of the verb "eats" into the subject of a new sentence with a *passive* form of the verb and also, if we wish, indicate the one performing the action with an agent phrase; we can do the same in Greek: in this instance **τὸ κρέας ἐσθίει ὁ παῖς** becomes **τὸ κρέας ἐσθίεται (ὑπὸ τοῦ παιδός)**. In this instance the verb-form employed has a distinct "morphoparadigm" (i.e. a pattern of verb conjugation involving stems and endings) that indicates the "passive" meaning. This morphoparadigm is traditionally termed "middle-passive" for reasons that will be explained later.

3. Expressions neither active nor passive:

3.a. English expressions neither active nor passive:

English grammar doesn't have any other categories of grammatical voice than these two, "active" and "passive." Nevertheless English does have ways of expressing other relationships between the grammatical subject and the action or state/condition indicated by the verb. Such expressions may use an auxiliary verb such as "have" or "get" as in:

      a. "The boy is having his hair cut" or "The boy has his hair cut"
      b. "The boy gets up every morning at 7 a.m."
      c. "The boy will undergo baptism tomorrow."

How should these sentences be analyzed in terms of the voices of English grammar? The predicate in sentence (a) above may be understood such that "his hair" is the direct object of "is having … cut" or "has … cut." That is to say, the verb "have" is transitive and active, and "cut" is a participial predicate adjective construed with the direct object, "his hair." The predicate in

sentence (b) is "gets up" (for surely "up" is an essential part of the verb in this instance in the sense of "awaken and/or arise"); in this instance we should probably call "gets up" an intransitive verb. The predicate of sentence (c) above, "will undergo baptism" is intelligible but requires a more careful analysis: we may say that "will undergo" is here a transitive verb and "baptism" is its direct object, but upon reflection we can see that what is meant is that the boy is going to be baptized by some person credentialed to perform the ritual; that is to say, the expression seems implicitly to be passive, although it is formulated in such a way as to indicate the boy's willing participation in the upcoming baptism.

3.b. Greek expressions neither active nor altogether passive:

Each of the three sentences set forth as examples in §3.a. above can be formulated in Greek as follows:

   a. **κείρεται ὁ παῖς.**
   b. **ἐγείρεται ὁ παῖς καθ᾽ ἡμέραν πρωὶ τῇ ὥρᾳ τῇ πρώτῃ**
   c. **βαπτισθήσεται αὔριον ὁ παῖς.**

In each of these three sentences the Greek verb is formulated in a voice-form that is neither distinctly active nor distinctly passive. The verbs in sentence a. (**κείρεται**) and in sentence b. (**ἐγείρεται**) are traditionally said to be in the "middle-passive" voice, while the verb in sentence c. (**βαπτισθήσεται**) is traditionally said to be in the "passive" voice.

In fact, however, each of these verbs belongs to a morphoparadigm—a conjugated verb pattern—that has flexibility of verbal meaning and can fluctuate between intransitive notions of entering into a state or condition or activity and transitive notions indicative of actions being performed upon the grammatical subject. That is to say: verbs in sentences such as c. above may be understood as passive and may be translated as passive in English: "The boy will be baptized tomorrow." But such verbs may just as well indicate that the boy will with clear and resolute intention submit himself to baptism, in which case we might translate the verb **βαπτισθήσεται** as "The boy will have himself baptized tomorrow." But this means that the verb, although we might want to call it *transitive*, is not really *passive* any more than it is *active*. It is what Greek traditionally calls "middle voice"—a grammatical category that often seems difficult for English speakers to understand rightly.

The verb in sentence b. above (**ἐγείρεται**) is also in the Greek "middle" voice. This verb-form in this instance could be understood as transitive and passive in meaning if the context should indicate that it means "The boy is awakened (e.g. by noises outside his bedroom or by rays of sunlight streaming through his window), but it may just as well be intransitive and indicate the natural process of awakening at the impulse of a boy's internal alarm clock: "The boy wakes up." How can we tell whether the verb-form in question should be understood as "middle" or "passive"? Only the context can provide us with clues; the important thing for one learning Greek here is that the morphoparadigms itself is flexible—not *either* "passive" *or*

"middle" but "middle-passive" and indicative of the fact that the grammatical subject is entering into a state or condition or action either on his own initiative or in response to some external stimulus or cause or even spontaneously. In the case of this particular verb it is perhaps worth noting that New Testament texts describing the resurrection of Jesus often use this verb in the aorist form ἠγέρθη which may be understood to mean either "he arose" or "he was raised." Whether or not the verb should be understood as intransitive ("he arose") or as passive ("he was raised") depends wholly upon contextual factors and in some instances may be impossible to determine with any certainty.

The same flexibility is in evidence in sentence a. above. The verb may mean, "cuts his own hair" or "has he hair cut (by a barber or by a friend)" or "is shorn of his hair," this last alternative chosen if one understands the verb in its context as *passive* in meaning.

The principle to be understood here is that **middle-passive** morphoparadigms do not, in and of themselves, indicate necessarily either a transitive or intransitive nor middle nor passive meaning. They are ambivalent and flexible and must be interpreted each in accordance with the character of the verb in question and the contextual indicators of the instance under examination. The usage of the middle-passive morphoparadigms is unquestionably one of the most difficult features of ancient Greek for a learner to appreciate; while one may develop some facility with reading Greek middle-passive forms and understanding their meaning, it will be much more difficult to formulate the proper Greek verb-forms corresponding to one's native English verbs. If ever there was a feature of ancient Greek hindering word-to-word equivalent expressions, this is certainly one such feature.

4. The Morphoparadigms for Voice in Ancient Greek

I use the word *morphoparadigms* (so far as I know, this is my own coinage) to refer to a conjugational paradigm of a verbal system consistently used to convey a distinct category or combination of categories of verbal information. With respect to Voice in ancient Greek it is customary to speak of three voices: Active, Middle, and Passive but to speak of three morphoparadigms of voice: "active," "middle-passive" and "passive." Traditional grammars of ancient Greek have also described a category of conjugation called "deponent," but there is really no need for such a category of conjugation and the conception of "deponency" must be seen as a deterrent to understanding the authentic nature of "middle-passive" verbs.

4.1.   Only Two Original "Voices": Active and Middle-Passive

Linguists refer to the parent language from which Greek derives as "Proto-Indo-European." They tell us that Proto-Indo-European had only two morphoparadigms for voice, those conjugational patterns that in Greek have traditionally been called "Active" and "Middle-Passive." There was no distinct morphological indication in verbs that expressed the notion of the "passive" only; rather, the "Middle-Passive" sufficed to convey both intransitive notions of entering into a state or condition or activity and transitive notions indicative of actions being

performed upon the grammatical subject. To be more precise, the Proto-Indo-European and the Greek language in its earliest form had no distinct morphoparadigms to express the concept of the Passive voice. I would contend that, contrary to what traditional grammarians have taught, ancient Greek never did have a morphoparadigms that expressed exclusively the concept of the Passive Voice.

4.2. "Active" Voice: a "standard" form, usually conveying an active but often an intransitive, occasionally a passive meaning

As noted above in §§1.a and 1.b, the *standard* morphoparadigms in Greek as well as in English is conventionally called "active." Greek verb-forms are more likely to display the "active" morphoparadigm than any other; in fact of the 28,133 verb-forms in the Greek New Testament 20,696 (73.5%) are "active." In tables of ancient Greek verb paradigms, the "active" morphoparadigms display:

"Primary" endings (used in the present and future indicative and in all subjunctives) **-ω, -εις, -ει, -ομεν, -ετε, -ουσι(ν)** in the so-called "Thematic" or "Omega" verbs or **-μι, -σι, -τι, -μεν, -τε, -ντ** (or their historical derivative forms) in the so-called "Athematic" or "Mi" verbs;

"Secondary" endings (used in the imperfect and aorist indicative and in all optatives) **-ον, -ες, -ε(ν), -ομεν, -ετε, -ον** in the so-called "Thematic" or "Omega" verbs or **-ν, -ς, -τ, -μεν, -τε, -ντ** (or their historical derivative forms) in the so-called "Athematic" or "Mi" verbs, including the so-called "Athematic" aorists in **-ων** and **-ην**);

Alpha active endings (used in the Sigmatic or Alpha aorist and in the Perfect active indicative) **-α, -ας, -ε(ν), -αμεν, -ατε, -αν** (**-ᾶσι(ν)** in the perfect tense).

One should also include the infinitive endings: **-ειν, -ναι, -αι, -εναι**, the participial markers **-ντ-** (present) and **-(κ)ως** (perfect) and the imperative endings: **-ε//-ς, -έτω, -ετε//τε, -οντων//ντων** (Hellenistic **-τωσαν**).

It needs to be understood that the designation of these verb forms as "active" is descriptive in a meaningful sense only when a verb is transitive and takes an object. Perhaps we could say that these verbs are all "active" in the sense that the grammatical subject is a "participant" in the verbal action, but that is too vague and it also opens the door to the misleading conception of "deponency" since in reality it is just as true that the grammatical subject of "middle-passive" verbs is a "participant" in the verbal action. Therefore, although we call this verb-form "active" in accordance with traditional terminology, we should view it as the "default" form of conjugation for a Greek verb. The "active" voice-forms quite commonly *are used* to indicate transitivity and in that case *do* take an object, explicitly or implicitly. But it is also true that quite a few verbs in this "active" verb-form are *intransitive*—verbs such as **εἰμί** ("I am") and **τρέχω** ("I run"), and there are a few verbs that are commonly used in Greek with meanings that might normally be considered "passive."

4.3 "Middle-Passive" Voice: ambivalent and flexible, conveying sense ranging from

involuntary to intentional entering into a state or condition or action by the grammatical subject to undergoing of action initiated externally

As noted above in §3.b, verbs in these morphoparadigms are ambivalent and flexible; while they are much less frequent in ancient Greek than "active" forms, they are nevertheless the only forms in which some of the most important verbs in the language appear. When many of the verbs in these morphoparadigms are converted into English, the English equivalents may have "active" forms, and for that reason the term "deponent" has been used to categorize such verbs (see §5 below); it would be preferable to learn these verbs simply as "middle-passive."

While traditional grammarians have referred to the voice-forms of the "middle-passive" in the present, imperfect, future, perfect, and pluperfect tenses as ambivalent and flexible, open to bearing distinct "middle" or "passive" or *intransitive* meaning, they have almost universally designated the **-θη-** forms of the aorist and future tenses as distinctly "passive." In fact, however, although many and perhaps even *most* of the **-θη-** forms may in their context bear a "passive" sense, yet many others are intransitive or "middle" in meaning. For this reason, I believe that we should designate both these morphoparadigms as "middle-passive." My own preference would be to refer the more common morphoparadigms of the present, imperfect, future, perfect, and pluperfect tenses as **"MP1"** forms and of the **-θη-** forms of the aorist and future tenses as **"MP2"** forms. I believe that adoption of these designations in textbooks and reference works of ancient Greek hereafter would obviate much of the confusion and misunderstanding associated with identification and description of these verb-forms as "middle deponents" or "passive deponents" or "passives with intransitive meaning."

4.3.a. μαι//σαι//ται-μην//σο//το (traditionally termed "middle-passive") endings ("MP1" morphoparadigms)

> "Primary" endings (used in the present, future, and perfect indicative and in all subjunctives) **-μαι, -σαι** (or **η**), **-ται, -μεθα, -σθε, -νται** with the characteristic **ο//ε** linking or "thematic" vowel in the so-called "Thematic" or "Omega" verbs;
> "Secondary" endings (used in the imperfect, aorist, and pluperfect indicative (when the pluperfect is not periphrastic, at least) and in all optatives) **-μην, -σο** (or **ου//ω**), **-το, -μεθα, -σθε, -ντο** with the characteristic **ο//ε** linking or "thematic" vowel in the so-called "Thematic" or "Omega" verbs and with the appropriate Alpha linking vowel in the Sigmatic aorist;
> One should also include the infinitive ending: **-σθαι,** the participial marker **-μεν-** and the imperative endings: **-ου//-σο, -σθω, -σθε, -σθων** (Hellenistic **-σθωσαν**).

4.3.b. The -θη- (traditionally termed "passive") endings ("MP2" morphoparadigms)

> While the or **-ν, -ς, -τ, -μεν, -τε, -ντ** of the aorist and future tenses are traditionally understood as bearing fundamentally *passive* meaning, they appear to have originated as alternative forms of an non-thematic form of the "standard" aorist "active" in **-ην//ης//η//**

ημεν//τηε//ησαν. In fact one can discern this in the so-called "second passive" of the verb **φαίνομαι**. Although the standard aorist "passive" form of this verb is **ἐφάνθην**, the older common form is **ἐφάνην**. This is actually intransitive and **ἐφάνη** may mean either "it became manifest" or "it was made manifest." That is to say, the verb-form can bear either an intransitive middle sense or a transitive active sense, depending on the context. The aorist forms of the **-θη-** morphoparadigm, it should be noted, are conjugated with "active" endings (**-ν, -ς, -τ, -μεν, -τε, -σαν**). The truth is that these verb-forms from their very inception in the Greek language were bearers of the same kinds of meaning as those morphoparadigms described above in §4.3.a. On the basis of analogy with the vowel-stem future middles a the **-θη-** future tense was constructed with the forms **-θήσομαι, -θήσῃ, -θήσεται, -θησόμεθα, -θήσεσθε, -θήσονται**. Like the aorists these futures are also bearers of the same kinds of meaning as futures of the sort described in §4.3.a. above.

5. So-called "Deponent" verbs

Traditional grammarians have referred to verbs that have no "active" voice-forms but regularly have present-tense forms in **-μαι** as "deponent" verbs. The term "deponent" has been variously explained, most commonly with an implication that they are somehow defective, perhaps that they once had an "active" morphoparadigm but lack one in the historical period of the language. Also some verbs that have active forms in the present tense but whose future is middle (e.g. **βαίνω//βήσομαι, μανθάνω//μαθήσομαι**) are by the same reasoning termed "future deponents." And again, a distinction is drawn between "middle deponents" (verbs that have a present-tense form in **-μαι** and future in **-σομαι**) and "passive deponents" (verbs that have a present-tense form in **–μαι** and future in **-θήσομαι**).

In fact, however, the term and concept of "deponency" is confusing and misleading. Verbs such as **ἔρχομαι** and **ἀποκρίνομαι** and **δύναμαι** ought not to be considered in any way irregular or wanting because they have no "active-voice" forms. The Greek-speaker understands these verbs as involved in a kind of relationship to the grammatical subject that properly finds expression in the "middle-passive" morphoparadigm. It may be difficult for non-Greek-speakers to grasp the distinctive notion implicit in these "middle-passive" forms, but one should make the effort to discern their flexibility for expression of notions of entering into a state or condition or action, whether involuntarily or voluntarily, and for notions of undergoing a process or action or being subjected to an action. One ought *not* to suppose that these verbs, because they may be translated into English by "active-voice" verb-forms, are in any way irregular or accidentally given forms that are not appropriate to them.

6. Learning the Greek verbs

Know the verb, not just the morphology: Whether your focus is classical Attic, Homeric, or Koine (especially Biblical) Greek, you must learn the principal parts of the 50+ *irregular* verbs, i.e. of verbs whose tense-stems are not predictable from the present first-person singular form (*lexical form* or *lemma*). In traditional terms these are (1) Present indicative first singular, (2) Future indicative first singular, (3) Aorist indicative first singular,

(4) Perfect active first singular, (5) Perfect MP first singular, (6) Aorist **-θη-** first singular. If a student is ever to learn to read Greek with any fluency, he or she must gain the ability to recognize at sight any form of a verb confronted in the text. In addition to the principal parts one needs to learn the idiosyncrasies of the important verbs—and you can be sure that the irregular verbs are particularly important: the reason that they have retained their idiosyncratic forms is precisely that they continued to be used repeatedly in everyday speech and writing and therefore their forms were not subject to the leveling and standardization of less-frequently used verbs. When you learn a verb like **ἁλίσκομαι, ἁλώσομαι, ἑάλων, ἑάλωκα**, you need to learn that *all the morphoparadigms of this verb*, regardless whether "standard" (or "active") as are ἑάλων, and ἑάλωκα or "middle-passive" as are ἁλίσκομαι and ἁλώσομαι, bear *passive* semantic value, i.e. they mean "be caught/convicted." When you learn a verb like ἀποκρίνομαι, ἀποκριθήσομαι, ἀπεκρίθην (which has only these three principal parts), you must grasp that this verb bears a "middle" semantic value and that the -θη- forms of its aorist- and future tense regularly bear the "middle" sense proper to this verb; there is nothing irregular about the voice morphoparadigms of this verb. When you learn the verb γίνομαι, γενήσομαι, ἐγενόμην//ἐγενήθην, γέγονα//γεγένημαι, you must grasp that this verb too is essentially "middle" in sense although in some contexts it may bear a *passive* sense, and you must realize that the two aorist forms ἐγενόμην and ἐγενήθην bear the same sense and that, like sigmatic (**ἔλυσα**) and thematic (**ἔλαβον**) types of aorist, they are not different in meaning just because the morphoparadigm differs; you must grasp too that the perfect forms γέγονα ("basic" or "active" morphoparadigm) and γεγένημαι (MP morphoparadigm) both bear the same "middle" sense. I would recommend further that, when the student learns these principal parts of the irregular verbs, he or she should spend some time and effort in careful study of the lexical entries in Liddell & Scott or in BDAG for each of them, noting carefully the idiosyncrasies of form and usage of each verb. Ultimately one must know the idiosyncrasies of these verbs as one comes to know the psyche of temperamental or "difficult" persons with whom one has frequent dealings and whom one must understand well.

7.   Evidence underlying the principles here expounded

A fuller exposition of the principles underlying the introduction to ancient Greek voice set forth above may be found in a longer PDF document by the author entitled, "New Observations on Ancient Greek Voice" accessible at

http://www.ioa.com/~cwconrad/Docs/NewObsAncGrkVc.pdf

or at

http://www.artsci.wustl.edu/~cwconrad/docs/NewObsAncGrkVc.pdf

Extracts from historical linguists Pierre Chantraine and Andrew Sihler demonstrating what has been argued in this paper and in that referred to above regarding the **-θη-** verb-forms may be found in a PDF document entitled "Aorist Passive in –H-, -QH- at

http://www.ioa.com/~cwconrad/Docs/AorPass-H-QH..pdf

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http://www.artsci.wustl.edu/~cwconrad/docs/AorPass-H-QH.pdf

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