

Re-conceiving the middle voice for Greek and Latin students

Seumas Macdonald

The following began as a series of blog posts attempting to summarise and explain the middle voice across Greek and Latin, aimed at teachers and students of the language. It came about as a result of continually needing to explain various points and my own need to systematically read through and think through these issues.

Almost entirely, the view expressed in this write-up is that of Suzanne Kemmer, in her key work *The Middle Voice*, along with R.J. Allen's 2002 dissertation, "The Middle Voice in Ancient Greek. A study in Polysemy" (since published, but I only have the dissertation version).

So, we begin with Suzanne Kemmer, *The Middle Voice*, which "approaches the middle voice from the perspective of typology and language universals research" (1), and move on to semantic categories, Latin, and deponency.

The problem with Greek voice

All my problems started, or continue to start with Greek students, and Greek grammars, especially pesky NT Greek ones. NT Greek courses do a particularly bad job at the nuances of Greek, I find. So, students are very often taught, or at least end up with, a view of Greek that is:

Active: I hit Mike.

Passive: Mike is hit by me.

Middle: "something vaguely in the middle where I am benefited by hitting Mike"

This is usually a very English (vel sim) -driven view, in that the middle is an awkward third-voice squished between the Active and Passive.

Two things, in my own long growth in Greek knowledge, helped get over this. Learning that (a) Greek has an active-middle voice system, and that "passive" is a semantic, not a morphological realisation. e.g. there are no forms that actually mark "passive" in Greek, there are just two sets of middle-voice in the Aorist and Future. (b) that middleness is basically some form of "subject affectedness" (the core of Lyons' definition, see Kemmer, 1-4).

So, with Greek we are dealing with active v. middle. But even before we get to Greek, let alone Latin, Kemmer helps lay out a broader semantic understanding of events and their participants which provides a lot of the basis for understanding how the "middle" works across various languages.

This document available and reusable under a [Creative Commons BY-SA 4.0 Licence](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/).

Written by Dr. Seumas Macdonald
thepatrologist@gmail.com

Kemmer uses a cross-language approach to map out the kinds of semantics associated generally with the middle voice. That is, what kind of meanings tend to be expressed with middle-type structures. She also lays out a bit of a map of *how* languages mark the middle.

One thing that I found exceedingly helpful was how Kemmer laid out a spectrum of events (at least their conceptualisation).

1. One-participant
2. Middle
3. Reflexive
4. Two-participant.

If we take the last category first, this is the classic situation where X does something to Y. Let's use a made-up verb for a little while, *grazhonks*.

A *reflexive* event occurs when X *grazhonks* X. Here *grazhonks* is the event, and its Initiator and Endpoint are the same. So a language will mark this reflexively, if possible.

At the other end of the scale is the one-participant event. Either there is no Y, or Y is deleted. So, "X *grazhonks*" or "X *bedtweeps*", where no external endpoint is, or can be, in view.

The middle then, as a constellation of subject-affected actions, lies between the reflexive and one-participant, in that an event occurs in which X acts on or with regard to X, but X is conceptualised as *one participant*, not "two" like in the reflexive.

What ends up in 'the middle voice' depends in part upon how a language marks different voice options. Is there a reflexive form, is there a middle form *separate* or *related* to a reflexive form? Greek, for the most part, has both an expansive middle system that is separate from reflexive, and which encompasses the passive. Latin, I would say, has an active-passive opposition, but the -r forms also mark some middle uses, *especially* among historic deponents.

Here's a nice English example that illustrates some of those 4 categories.

- α) *I hide*
- β) *I hide the book*
- γ) *I hide the book first, then I hide myself*
- δ) *I was hidden by the rebel alliance.*

α is an intransitive active, being used to express a middle-type meaning – an event in which initiator and endpoint are conceived as a single entity. But *hide* also works as a transitive verb, as in β. We also use it reflexively, as in γ, but primarily when we want to provide contrast (this matches with Kemmer's observations about how languages with both reflexive and middle markings tend to use them in relation to each other). Lastly, to express the passive in English, we must switch to a passive construction, the intransitive-active-as-middle won't cut it.

Semantic categories in the ‘Middle’ space

Direct Reflexive

Kemmer starts with the **Direct Reflexive**. This is an event where one participant *does* the action to themselves.

e.g. *Mike stabbed himself*.

In English, we need to mark this with a reflexive form – *Mike stabs* implies that he stabs someone else (as a habit, probably).

In Greek (and Latin), actions that are normally performed on someone else (er, ‘stabbing’) take a reflexive marker. Allen gives this example:

ρίπτει αὐτὸν εἰς τὴν θάλατταν (*Dem 32.6*)¹ *He throws himself into the sea.*

But there are actions that are normally carried out *on oneself* that appear in the middle. These are “body action middles” including several sub-categories.

The first category are ‘grooming’ actions. Actions like dressing, bathing, shaving, decorating, etc.. Here we see typical middle-marking.

ornor to adorn (oneself)

perluor to bathe

κοσμοῦμαι to adorn

λοῦμαι to bathe

In all these, the participant is both acting *upon* themselves, but acting upon themselves *using* themselves. The sense in which you can distinguish ‘agent’ and ‘patient’ is low. For this reason, too, these verbs often lack an active. When you do find an active voice form, its usage is often contrastive – of course I might usually bathe myself, but I *can* bathe someone else. *λοῦω* v *λοῦμαι* shows that kind of contrast.

A second category involves **various types of bodily movement**. Between Kemmer and Allen you can see three sub-categories of this: **change in body posture, non-translational motion, and translational motion**.

1. Changes in body posture involve actions like sitting up, standing, reclining. Again, here the agent is acting upon themselves, but in such a close unity that the difference between ‘agent’ and ‘patient’ is minimal, the event is unitary.
2. Non-translational motion involves movement of the body but not along any ‘path’. Things like turning, twisting, bending, bowing, nodding, etc..
3. Translational motion involves moving the body through space along a path.

¹ R.J. Allan, “The Middle Voice in Ancient Greek. A study in Polysemy”, PhD Thesis. 2002. 65.

κλίνομαι	lie down (CiBP)
στρέφομαι	turn around (nTrans-motion)
πορεύομαι	to go (translational-motion)

Where there is an active form it often has a causative meaning:

ἵσταμαι	to stand up/still	> ἵστημι	to cause to stand
στρέφομαι		> στρέφω	to turn (something else)
πορεύομαι		> πορεύω	to cause to go

What's common about all these verbs is that encoded in the verb is the sense that the Initiator and Endpoint are the same, with low distinguishability, and generally these actions do not involve an external endpoint.

There are less examples of these in Latin, though I think some appear to fall into this category. For instance, the *-gredior* compounds, e.g. *progredior*, as well as *proficiscor. orior* (to rise) seems to me a borderline instance, though it may also fall into the “spontaneous process” category.

This is a good place to stop and talk about deponency for a minute. Is πορεύομαι ‘deponent’? Not by traditional definitions because an active form exists. But the middle form is so prevalent that it may as well be learnt as the primary form. It hasn't ‘assumed’ an active meaning that has been left vacant by a defective paradigm. Within the ‘logic’ of the Greek language, it's a typically middle form.

Whether any particular verb is middle *only* or not depends, in part, just on attestation. If we had no instances of πορεύω, we'd conclude it was deponent. But that's not really true, is it? ἔρχομαι seems deponent because we don't have active instances of it. Except for grammarians saying things like:

οὐδεὶς γὰρ λέγει ἔρχω ἢ εὔχω ἢ πέτω ἢ δέχω ἢ ὀρχῶ καὶ τὰ λοιπά, ἐπειδὴ τὸ σημαϊνόμενον κωλύει.

For no one says “I ‘go’, or I ‘pray’, or I ‘fly’, or I ‘receive’, or I ‘depart’ and the rest, since the meaning prohibits it. (Georgius Choeroboscus, Prolegomena et scholia in Theodosii Alexandrini canones isagogicos de flexione verborum.²

The meaning of ἔρχομαι prohibits an active meaning. That's why there's no active, not because an active form has disappeared and the middle has picked up the meaning, but because the meaning of the verb is itself *middle* in its meaning, and an active does not make sense. One supposes that speakers *could have* coined an active version of this verb with a causative sense, but they didn't. That's why this, and similar verbs, are better termed *media tantum*, ‘middle-only’, rather than deponent. They lack a *morphologically realised* active form.

² A. Hilgard, *Grammatici Graeci*, vol. 4.2, Leipzig: Teubner, 1894 (repr. Hildesheim: Olms, 1965): 19: 27-28.

So, what does this mean for deponency and terminology? It seems best to lay to rest the term ‘deponent’ if we mean “a verb that has no active morphology but uses a middle or passive form with active meaning”. That’s not accurate to these verbs, *especially* if conceived of as verbs that actually ‘set aside’ their active forms. It’s far better to conceive of these verbs as *media tantum*, i.e. verbs that only have middle forms, never active. And then, you have verbs that are primarily used in the middle, where the active is less common precisely because what the active is expressing is less usual. Some verbs *prohibit* an active form, others *disprefer* an active form.

Thirdly, it means, cautioning students that ‘active in meaning’ is not the same as ‘active in English translation’. Because English does not exhibit a ‘middle-voice’ system, in translation the best options will often be an English intransitive active, or an English reflexive. That’s about the best way to render something in English, not about what the Greek means.

Indirect Reflexives

A prototypical transitive event involves A (Agent) acting on B (Patient). While a direct reflexive occurs when B is also A.

Similarly, a prototypical indirect event involves A (Agent) acting on B (Patient), where C is a recipient or beneficiary. This becomes an indirect *reflexive* where C is, in fact, A. Kemmer treats this in pages 74-81. It becomes an indirect *middle* where the action involves is normally, usually, or typically undertaken with A as the beneficiary or recipient. E.g., just as direct reflexives tend to be marked with a reflexive marker (‘oneself’) unless customary/habitual/usual, so too indirect reflexives. She writes, “the indirect middle situation type comprises actions that one *normally* or *necessarily* performs for one’s own benefit”.

Greek:

αἰρεῖσθαι	to choose
κτάσθαι	to acquire for oneself
εὔχεσθαι	to pray

Latin:

liceor	to acquire by bidding
apiscor	to get, acquire
potior	to get possession of

Allan has a fuller list of Greek verbs, which importantly includes δέχομαι, ἐργάζομαι, ἰάομαι, and ῥύομαι (at least in Homer). The ‘healing/preserving’ verbs may originally, he suggests, have had a sense of self-benefit built into the action.

In all these cases, the middle (and it’s very often a *middle-only* verb in view), indicates without any particular emphasis, that the subject stands as beneficiary and/or recipient.

Naturally reciprocal events

These are events which, by the very nature of the action itself, involve reciprocity. That is, whatever A is doing to B, B is doing to A. This draws on Lichtenberk (1985), and then expanded by Kemmer (p96-9101) to cover collective and chaining type events as well (see below).

Personally, I find the ‘fighting’ verbs a great example of this. In Greek, verbs like μάχομαι, ἐρίζομαι; but the category is not limited to fighting, as evidenced by the inclusion of διαλέγομαι and similar in this category.

Kemmer also considers actions such as meeting, joining, touching, kissing, etc., and the way that a difference in meaning may appear between expressing these with middle marking, versus explicit reciprocal marking. E.g. “They lovers kissed” vs. “The lovers kissed each other” (see page 111-4 for an in-depth discussion of the distinguishability of kisses)

Into this category fall Latin verbs such as:

<i>osculator</i>	to kiss
<i>conflictor</i>	to fight
<i>amplector</i>	to embrace
<i>luctor</i>	to wrestle
<i>altercor</i>	to wrangle
<i>copulor</i>	to be joined

Collective

A collective event differs in that where a naturally reciprocal event involves $A > B$, $B > A$, in the collective event, the action as a whole “is carried jointly by the participants involved”, and yet not *individually* (that is, not a distributed action), but as a group (i.e. the participants have low distinguishability from each other). Allan focuses in on particularly collective motion (2.1.5), primarily *gathering* and *dispersing*. λύομαι, interestingly, falls into this category, as do similar verbs of dissolution, as does (συλ)λέγομαι .

For Latin, examples such as *misceror*, *congregor*, *colligor* may be adduced.

This is an appropriate place to stop and discuss the troublesome Latin verb *loquor*. There’s no straightforward category for *loquor* to fall into. It doesn’t appear to be an emotive speech act (a category coming up...), nor is it easy to categorise as a speech act in which the Agent is normally the indirect beneficiary. It may be derived from a naturally reciprocal verb.

Thus Latin loquo-r, instead of containing an arbitrary instance of *-r*, can be explained as descended from an old verb of the naturally reciprocal type, possible meaning ‘converse (with each other)’. [Seumas: *colloquor*?] If this semantic reconstruction is correct (it must be noted there is no direct historical evidence for it) then the Latin verb at some point lost the sense of mutuality and began to occur with singular subjects with the meaning ‘speak’. A similar hypothesis could be invoked for the Latin deponent *fo-r* ‘speak’. (Kemmer, 108)

Of course, a reconstruction without any evidence is speculative, but it does account for a rather odd middle-only form in Latin.

Chaining

I find this a fascinating subcategory. Instead of a relationship of where A stands to B as B stands to A, or a collective in which individual participants acts as a whole, this is the situation where A stands to B, as B stands to C, as C stands to D. There are not that many verbs (or situation-events!) that typically encode this idea. But one that consistently does so across Indo-European languages is ‘follow’. Perhaps unsurprisingly, this is *sequor* in Latin, and ἔπομαι in Greek, both *media tantum* forms. Even Old Irish maintains this as a middle form. Sihler, we may as well note, thinks its PIE root meant “keeps in sight” and is related to hunting (*New comparative grammar of Greek and Latin*, 449). Kemmer sees a different hunting connection, in that *venor* may have a similar ‘chain’ type semantics.

The cognitive middle

We now come to a rather broad category, which appears to depart from the kinds of ‘middle domain’ situations that can be easily related to the direct and indirect reflexives. What is it about these that tends to create middle-dominant or middle-only verb usage?

Kemmer begins with simple events, and the type of event going on. We have an Experiencer (i.e. the animate being having the mental experience), and a Stimulus (which brings about the mental event). The Stimulus may not be expressed, encoded, or it may be internal to the Experiencer. In any event, the entity involved as Experiencer is decisively the Endpoint for the event, and to a greater or lesser degree, they are (often) the Initiator. That is, it very often tends to be an event that the Experiencer *initiates* (hence middle), or else passively experiences (a kind of mental passive event, which Greek would encode as morphologically middle anyway).

This meta-category includes emotion events (*conolor, delector, misereor, vereor*), emotive speech-acts (*queror, testor, ὀλοφύρομαι, μέμφομαι, αἰτιάομαι, ἀρνέομαι*).

We might note here that Allan splits emotive speech acts from the cognition middle, and treats speech acts as their own category altogether, very often with the Subject as beneficiary or recipient, hence a form of indirect middle. Under that umbrella, he includes verbs of promising, commanding, asking, answering, and begging (e.g. εὐχομαι, ὑπισχνέομαι, ἐντέλλομαι, ἀποκρίνομαι, πυνθάνομαι, δέομαι). But neither are these absent from Latin, e.g. *frustror*.

Simple acts of cognition fall here too (*meditor, interpreter, comminiscor, ἡγέομαι, βουλευόμαι, σταθμάομαι*, and many more Greek verbs in Allan (p47)).

So too do perception verbs, especially (per Allan) where the subject is *volitional* in perceiving. ἀκουάζομαι, γεύομαι, θεάομαι, σκέπτομαι, though not necessarily, αἰσθάνομαι, ὀσφραίνομαι. Cf. also *conspicior, odoror*.

Complex mental events are those where there is a *dependent* event, normally expressed as a proposition encoded in a dependent clause (Kemmer, 137). e.g. English, “I forgot that I put my keys in my pocket”. There are two events here “I put me keys in my pocket” – the dependent event, and “I forgot X” – the primary mental event. Cognition type events (rather than emotion or perception, Kemmer p138) are most likely to be middle here.

Kemmer’s analysis differs from Allan’s in carving up the terrain of these various types of events. For example, what Allan takes as speech acts of promising, Kemmer treats as ‘commissive’ events in which the mental source initiates a dependent event. e.g. “I promise to learn how to use the middle voice properly” has a dependent event, “learn to use the middle voice properly” which I, as Mental Source, undertake to put into place. Hence, *polliceor* in Latin, ὑπισχνέομαι in Greek.

What’s key, in all these cognition middles, I’d say – and by way of concluding today’s rather expansive post – is that the Subject stands as Experiencer and so is “subject affected”. That, and the corresponding commonality that the Subject is very often the Source or Initiator of the event, is why these events are typically marked as ‘middle’. And that’s what this series is mostly about – unravelling the ‘logic’ of what types of events fall in a broad conception of ‘the middle domain’, so that you have a better grasp of that domain’s “realm” and all that falls in it.

Spontaneous Process events and the Passive-Middle

Kemmer moves on in her monograph to cover a range of ‘other’ categories that “impinge” on the middle (142), the categories of the “spontaneous events” and the “passive middle”.

A spontaneous event is one in which “the entity undergoing the change [of state] is the chief nominal participant” and “in which no Agent entity receives coding.” That is, there’s a subject, who undergoes a change of state, and no agent is mentioned. There may or may not be a ‘conceivable’ agent.

Allan notes that a spontaneous process thus differs from the passive-middle, because the latter implies an unspecified agent, the SP tends to exclude one. SP often have active counterpart verbs in Greek that are causative.

This includes various possible subcategories. E.g. biological processes: dying, growing, aging; physiochemical: melting, freezing, rusting; changes in properties: ‘greening’, ‘squaring’ (okay, I made that one up, but presumably there exists a language where you can regularly form a verb from the adjective ‘square’ and express the change of state that results in a square).

Examples:

ἀπόλλυμαι	die
αὐξάνομαι	grow
γίγνομαι	come into being
τρέφομαι	grow up
φύομαι	grow

καίομαι	burn
τήκομαι	melt
λευκαίνομαι	become/grow white
θέρομαι	become warm
φαίνομαι	appear (Allan includes verbs of appearing & disappearing)

Allan also outlines reasons to adopt the “Spontaneous Process” label in preference to *anticausative* or similar (44) in that the middle form here is not secondary and derivative to a causal version or an active.

For Latin, we find

morior – to die

scindor – to tear, split

nascor – be born

orior – arise (possible, certainly in its existential sense rather than posture)

Kemmer explores why these are middle in terms of the choice between portraying such an event as having an external Initiator (not always possible), or otherwise selecting the Patient as the chief participant and thus the event as ‘autonomous’. (145) In the case that there is an external Initiator, that participant is *deemphasised*. So “I die” might be an autonomous spontaneous process, or I might be killed by an angry proponent of grammar-translation, but even in the latter case, I have deemphasised the agent of the action.

Some types of non-volitional movement (e.g. shaking, cf. *tremblor*) may also be treated under this category; as well as generic ‘happen’ type verbs (γίγνομαι).

Kemmer goes *on* to consider passive-middles, in which an agent is understood to exist, but is deemphasised, whereas Allan treats that category *prior* to the SM. Allan also helpfully notes that several verbs in the SP category can be considered to occur with or without an external agent, and so categorisation is difficult in absolute terms. Nonetheless, in both cases, the Patient, and the change-of-state event, are the highlighted or dominant features of the presentation.

That basically concludes all the semantic categories treated in Kemmer, and mostly in Allan. And, I hope by now, you have some sense of how most Greek middle verbs readily fall into these categories.

The η/θη “passives” in diachronic and semantic focus

I want to turn now to highlight the work of Allan, and Rachel Aubrey, in considering the η / θη aorist and future “passive” forms.

Allan

Allan’s work is broader, considering various morphological realisations of η vs θη as well as sigmatic aorists vs ‘passives’. In particular, he does several interesting things: (1) considers the semantic distribution of alternatives, i.e. which categories of middle usage are found with which

markers, (2) the morphological distribution, i.e. which stem-formations take which endings, (3) the diachronic development, i.e. how these forms shift over time from Homer onwards.

In Homer, he finds that SP favours η , passive or body motion favours $\theta\eta$. In classical, the distribution of all formation types shifts heavily from η to $\theta\eta$.

Over time, the collection of ‘middle-type’ categories, including the ‘passive-middle’, which are represented by the $\eta/\theta\eta$ types, expands across the middle domain. Notably, Allan finds that the sigmatic aorist middle does not occur for Spontaneous Process or Passive-Middles in Homer, (111) but rather for *animate* subjects with *volitional* actions (111). There is overlap for mental process, collective motion, and body motion (112). By the classical period, the sigmatic is being used primarily for (indirect and direct reflexive, perception, mental activity, speech act, and reciprocal action), the $\theta\eta$ type for (passive, spontaneous process, mental process, body motion, and collective motion) (117).

Why does this matter? Well, (1) the $\theta\eta$ types are not a morphologically encoded *passive* as opposed to the sigmatic *middle*. Rather, the passive is a semantic subcategory. (2) that means there are simply **two** middle morphological forms in Greek, with the $\theta\eta$ forms emerging from a “spontaneous process + passive-middle” core, but over time expanding to include other middle-type categories. (3) diachronically, the $\theta\eta$ forms come to devour the sigmatic middles altogether; (4) in some verbs, contrastive sigmatic-middle vs. $\theta\eta$ middle has semantic contrast, between different types of middle usage.

Aubrey

Rachel Aubrey, as I understand it, has been at work on a Masters’ thesis on the middle voice in Koine for some time, and I’m looking forward to it. She gives some anticipation of it in her article ‘Motivated Categories, Middle Voice, and Passive Morphology’^[1]. She begins by highlighting the ways in which $(\theta)\eta$ forms break their expectations in not expressing passive syntax (566) and the fundamental problem with called $(\theta)\eta$ forms ‘deponents’ in expressing an ‘active’ meaning and ignoring the middle (567). On Aubrey’s construction $(\theta)\eta$ entered the language as expressing change of state, then extended to prototypical passives, and onward from there (571-2). Aubrey expresses it well in considering a semantic continuum, and that the sigmatic middles tended to express more agent-like or agent-active events, the $(\theta)\eta$ types as more patient-like. (573)

The $-(\theta)\eta$ - form is better understood as sharing a division of labor in the middle domain with the sigmatic middle forms than as an exclusively passive marker with defective, deponent exceptions. It marks the same set of middle event types subsumed within the semantic middle domain with respect to the other middle-passive morphology in the present and perfect paradigms.^[2]

She also reaches further back, to PIE, in seeing the origin of $(\theta)\eta$ in the state-predicate marker **eh₁-* which grammaticalizes into an aspect-voice inflectional marker (578-9).

Both Allan and Aubrey suggest that the (θ)η emerged in the aorist (and future) but not present because (θ)η is associated with telicity (i.e. the event has a conceptual ‘end-point’ which is reached), which the *imperfective* aspect forms (e.g. the present tense), do not.

Aubrey’s article goes on to give a robust prototypical explanation of semantic categories, participant roles, and the like, focused on the (θ)η forms. It concludes robustly with a reconsideration of the (θ)η forms along the same lines as Kemmer and Allan point us to.

Changing our categorization of -(θ)η- from the analogous English counterpart (passive) to a typologically attested middle form alters our view of Greek voice. Instead of seeing it as a passive marker with defective active outliers in an active-passive system, -(θ)η- is rightly treated as marking the less-transitive middle events—including passives—within a larger transitivity continuum in an active-middle system. The middle share of the space divides the labor across two morphological forms in the aorist and future compared to one in the present and perfect.^[3]

So, about Latin then

Does Latin really have deponent verbs? The answer is, it’s complicated.

It’s complicated by two factors: firstly, how we define ‘deponency’, and secondly how we understand the Latin middle-only verbs. However, by the traditional description of “passive verb with active meaning”, and “verbs that ‘set aside’ (*deponere*) their active forms”, no. That’s not true.

But if we mean simply ‘defective paradigms’ or ‘form-function mismatch’, that does appear to be *sometimes* the case in Latin, because Latin is not Greek. Latin *does* have an active vs. passive morphosyntactic opposition, not an active vs. middle. So the passive only verbs in Latin are more anomalous. For the most part, they appear to be verbs that were historically middle in an earlier stage of Latin’s development from PIE, and so one can usually see that categorisation at work, though for some verbs it remains elusive (see earlier discussions on *loquor* for instance). However, Latin deponents often take *active* morphology for participle and gerundive forms.

Late Latin, however, may be a different situation. There you see verbs *switching* from active to ‘deponent’ (at least, true deponency!) or vice versa moving from passive-only to active morphology. Generally however the trend is for deponents to become active-morphology verbs. This might be linked to the loss of synthetic passives in place of novel analytic forms.

Semi-deponents

“Semi-deponents” are the label often used for verbs that appear to have regular active morphology in one tense-form, but switch to a middle (or passive, in Latin) form in another tense system.

Much as I dislike the term ‘deponent’, I am going to keep using ‘semi-deponent’ at least for this post. There are two categories of semi-deponents, as I see it. The first are words where the paradigm is in fact *suppletive*. That is, the stem used in one tense is altogether different from the stem used in another. The second, then, are words that do not involve suppletive formations.

Suppletives: ἔρχομαι and ἦλθον

Probably the most well-known Greek example of suppletion is ἔρχομαι. This verb, as most students encounter it anyway, means ‘to come’ (though, a read through LSJ will make you a bit wiser on that score), and its aorist is supplied by ἦλθον, its future in Attic is supplied by present-forms of εἶμι. I’m only going to talk about the present v. aorist alternation here.

Now, the fact that ἔρχομαι is middle-only we referenced back in our second post. It’s a type of translational-body-motion middle, and ἔρχω is found only as a barbarism or as a point of discussion by grammarians. One may translate it regularly as an intransitive active in English, but that’s beside the point, its Greek semantics are middle.

Why then is ἦλθον morphologically active? I would suggest the reason is this: the semantics of that stem encode different features.

Now, let’s do some analogising to see how this works and how you might explain it, to yourself or to students.

Firstly, just because many verbs of translational bodily motion *are* middle, doesn’t mean that they have to be middle. βαίνω and βαδίζω involve the same idea, but they are active in morphology.

Secondly, in English we have but a few words that involve suppletion. *go/went* is a nice example. We teach people that this is ‘irregular’, but really ‘go’ and ‘went’ are formed from two separate stems and the past tense of ‘go’ was replaced, with *went*, in about the 15th century as I understand it.

Thirdly, in English we also have words that occupy *roughly* the same semantic space. I’m going to use *devour* and *eat* as my example. In normal usage, *eat* can take an object, but it can be omitted (some would call this ‘ambitransitive’. So *James eats the apple* and *James eats* are both fine. *devour* is necessarily transitive. *James devours the apple* is fine, but **James devours* is not normally acceptable (yes, I realise that there are some meanings of *devours* for which this seems okay, don’t write to me about it).

Now... (imagination caps on): imagine that in the 15th century we’d stopped using the present of *devour* and we’d also stopped using the past of *eat*. So we started to supply *devoured* as the past of *eats*.

James eats the apple

James devoured apple

James eats

**James devoured* (better>) *James devoured the meal*

So that we considered it incorrect English to express the past *without supplying the object*.

Do you see how this is a case where two roots can be used together with suppletion, but different syntactical entailments? I know it's a little bit of a stretch, but I hope you got there.

This, I think, is the best way to conceptualise ἔρχομαι/ἦλθον. The present derives from PIE *h₁erg^h-, the aorist from *h₁lud^hét, and the two roots encode different voice.

Non-Suppletives: the Greek 'middle futures'

While the prior explanation of why some verbs are middle in some tense/aspect systems but not others works with suppletive verbs, it does not explain why some verbs are active in one system, but middle-only in another. In particular, a reasonably large number of Greek verbs become middle in the future. I confess, I found this puzzling, and while I have come across some answers, they are not entirely satisfying.

I first turned to R.J. Allan's thesis on the middle voice. Again, I don't have published book version, perhaps he had more to say in that than in the thesis. Nevertheless, at the start of chapter 4 on the future, he has this footnote:

Another interesting issue is the occurrence of middle future forms of – mostly intransitive – active presents (εἰμί – ἔσομαι). From a synchronic point of view, the middle inflection of these futures can be explained by their semantics. All verbs in question involve a physical or mental affectedness of the subject,

e.g.. *perception* ἀκούσομαι, *motion* βήσομαι, *receiving* λήψομαι, *change of state* θανοῦμαι.

Ἔσομαι appears to be the only exception. Historically, these middle futures may be explained as former desideratives. The middle voice, then, expressed the mental involvement of the subject. For further details, I refer to Rijksbaron (2002: 156).

Now, for the most part that makes some sense. (a) It's common to say that the future system (and the subjunctive) developed out of a desiderative (< desire, for those who don't love jargon) form at an earlier stage of the language (aka PIE), and (b) you can see that all (really, all?) the verbs involved in this form of semi-deponency fit into the semantic categories already established: subject affectedness, especially mental involvement, which is heightened in the desiderative, enough perhaps to 'tip' an active into a middle only.

Rijksbaron does treat this, on pages 156-57 of his *The Syntax and Semantics of the Greek Verb* (an excellent read, by the way). For his part, he classifies them as verbs "denoting essential functions of body and mind", in categories related to sound, various types of excretion or extrusion, physical-and-mental grasping-and-taking, movement, and bodily affection. You can see how most of these are close to the 'middle' domain already.

He then says, "This phenomenon" that is, the middle only/dominance in the future) "is not easy to explain". Following C.J. Ruijgh, he attributes it to the σε/σο suffix for these having an originally desiderative value, and thus also have a preference for middle endings. Thus, the diachronic development hypothesised is that the σε/σο suffix *preferred middle endings first*, and *then* was applied to corresponding active forms, but only when the active form would have a meaningful opposition to the existing middle form.

That, I have to say, is quite interesting, if only because of the way the middle form is *prior* and *primary* in the diachronic development. Is it true? Hard for me to say. Does it have some explanatory power for middle-only futures? Yes, it seems to.

Although, at the end of the day (and this post), it's worth remembering that in trying to understand the middle (or any apparently unusual feature of a language), we're trying to describe what *is*, and it's not up to a language to give us some neat system that justifies its logic to us. Yes, often there is a logical explanation for why linguistic phenomenon X is X, but *there doesn't have to be* some kind of "this is the way the language thinks about this thing." Sometimes you just have to say, "well, it's just like that".

Non-Suppletives: the Latin perfects

There's a third set of semi-deponents which I confess have resisted my attempts to find a good accounting of. These are the Latin perfects. They are few, being primarily *audeō*, *fidō*, *gaudeō*, *soleō*, and their compounds, which switch to a periphrastic passive in the perfect system: *ausus*, *fsus*, *gāvīsus*, *solitus* + *sum*.

I don't have any answer for these. I've tried a few avenues of exploration, but have so far come up empty-handed. I'm very open to hearing from someone a historical-linguistic explanation for these!

Latin middle-only verbs categorised

abitror	to think	Cognitive, Mental Process
cōnor	to try, attempt	indirect reflexive (cf. ἐργάζομαι – e.g. self-exertion for benefit)
hortor	to encourage, urge	Emotive Speech
moror	to delay	Body motion?
mīror	to wonder at	Perception, or cognitive
testor	to witness	Emotive speech
polliceor	to promise	Emotive Speech
videor	to seem	Sp-Pr, or Passive-Middle
vereor	to fear	Mental Process, Emotion
mereor	to deserve, earn	Indirect
loquor	to speak	<< derived from <i>colloquor</i> ??
colloquor	to converse	Reciprocal
patior	to suffer	Passive-Middle
queror	to complain	Emotive speech
proficīscor	to set out, depart	Translational body motion
aggredior	to approach, attach	Translational body motion
congedior	to meet, come together	Collect. Motion M.
ēgredior	to go out, disembark	Translational body motion

prōgredior	to advance	Translational body motion
sequor	to follow	< PIE chaining-middle ?
ūtor	to use, make use of	Indirect Reflexive
morior	to die	Sp-Pr
nāscor	to be born, be found	Sp-Pr
revertor	to go back, return	translation body motion? or
orior	to rise, arise	Sp-Pr (but also, change of body posture?)
potior	to get possession of	Indirect Middle
opperior	to await, wait for	?
ordior	to begin	? cf. ἄρχομαι
osculator	to kiss	naturally reciprocal
conflictor	to fight	naturally reciprocal
amplector	to embrace	naturally reciprocal
luctor	to wrestle	naturally reciprocal
altercor	to wrangle	naturally reciprocal
copulor	to join, be linked	naturally reciprocal; stative
misceor	to assemble, unite	naturally collective
congregor	to gather, assemble	naturally collective
colligor	to gather	naturally collective
venor	to chase	< PIE chaining middle.
consolor	to take consolation	Mental Event: Emotion
delector	to delight in	Mental Event: Emotion
misereor	to pity	Mental Event: Emotion
illacrimor	to weep over	Emotive Vocalisation
fateor	to confess	Speech Act
meditor	to ponder, meditate	Simple Cognitive
interpreter	to interpret	Simple Cognitive
comminiscor	to think up, devise	Simple Cognitive
conspicior	to perceive, descry	Perception
odōror	to smell	Perception
obliviscor	to forget	Complex cognitive
polliceor	to promise	commissive/intentive (complex mental)
scindor	to split (intr)	spontaneous event
tremblor	to tremble	spontaneous event, non-volitional movement

Wrapping up

Well, I hope by this point, I've done a few things:

1. Convinced you that Greek has an active v. middle voice system, in which the middle domain covers a range of different categories, all generally united by ‘subject affectedness’
2. Convinced you that ‘deponency’ is not a useful concept for explaining verbs that do not appear with active morphology.
3. Given you a reasonable account of most of those semantic categories, thereby giving an explicit account of why their ‘middleness’ makes sense.
4. Shown that Latin deponents, by and large, represent historic middles from a PIE origin, and can be accounted for mostly under the same types of categories.
5. Show that the ‘passive’ forms in Greek are also a category of middle-morphology.

But what does this mean for teaching and learning? I wrote these posts partly to force myself to work through some of the research, partly to make it clearer in my own mind, but also to try and bridge some of the gap between linguistics and general classical-language education. In my experience, a lot of this simply never makes it down to teachers, let alone students, of these languages.

For the grammar-translation context

If you teach in a relatively ‘traditional’ mode of grammar presentation, and translation as exercise, I think there are certain things you can do.

Firstly, change your terminology. Start referring to Greek as having an active vs. middle (or mediopassive) voice system. Explain that ‘middle’ means a range of categories that represent some form of ‘subject affectedness’, and that as your students encounter various types of middle verbs, you’ll point out what those categories are. Don’t try to present them as I have here! Rather, on a case by case approach, simply say, “here’s a new verb ἔρχομαι. It’s middle in its forms, because verbs indicating translational body motion are often middle.”

Greek students need to be met with the idea early that Greek voice is quite different to the Active-Passive system in English, and isn’t best understood with reference to English, but learning to accept it on its own terms. My mantra here, as elsewhere, is *meaning comes first, then translation*.

I think it’s worth adopting the language of *media tantum* (‘middle only’) for verbs that lack active counterparts. But I also think it’s worth adopting the language of *middle-preferred* or *middle-primary* for verbs that mostly and ‘by default’ appear in the middle, treating their active counterparts as the secondary/subsidiary form (e.g. causatives).

As students meet more middle-only and middle-preferred verbs, you can begin to systematise some of the semantic categories, and give more general explanations for why these verbs *tend* to show middle morphology as an expression of middle semantics.

It's still worth preparing them/inoculating them, against the 'deponent' explanation, by giving a short historical rationale for why this language *was* used, and why you don't. I often say, "middle in meaning *active in translation*", to highlight that active translations in English reflect English voice and semantics, not Greek.

For Latin, I think a similar approach can be taken, except that there really is an active vs. passive voice system, and so when historic-middle verbs begin to appear in your classes, it's worth stopping and giving a short historical explanation, "These are verbs that indicate subject affectedness and often changes-of-state, they have passive morphology because they were originally middle. etc.."

Communicative Language Teaching

In some ways, it's actually far *easier* to teach these in a CLT approach. You simply introduce them without comment. You don't need to explain why *orior* is an -r formation, or ἔρχομαι has a middle ending, any more than you need to stop and explain verb endings. You just introduce them in ways that are comprehensible, and it's only if students begin asking questions that you need to pause and give, e.g. some pop-up grammar.

That could be as simple as, "oh, some verbs use these endings instead, because of what they mean." The ongoing exposure to their usage in regular conversation, and readings, will make clear enough how they are used.

For students that persist, the same approach as any grammar-curious student – a short explanation on the spot, then follow up with a more detailed explanation outside the communicative context, or a written-up version (perhaps not quite the version I've done, though you can try!)

My own take-aways

For myself, reading through Kemmer, Allan, Aubrey, and bits and pieces elsewhere has helped crystallise my understanding of voice systems in both Latin and Greek. I have a much clearer understanding of Latin deponency, and a stronger articulation of Greek's middle system, including how the 'middle' forms and the η/θη forms carve up the middle domain. From here on I'll be using terminology such as *mediopassive voice*, *middle-only*, *middle-primary*, and explaining the selection of voice based on the semantics of the lexical items in question. And, in CLT contexts, I'll be worrying less about "used-to-be-called-deponents" as being oddities, and treating them more as a normal and regular feature of the language.