

Don't Be Passive! Stay in the Middle!: Teaching Voice in Beginning Greek

This paper argues that students in Beginning Greek should learn only the active and middle voices in ancient Greek, to the exclusion, as far as is practical, of the term and concept “passive.”

It is all but universal in modern instruction in ancient Greek to introduce beginning students to three voices: the active, middle and passive. Unhelpfully, they learn that, except in the aorist tense, identical forms represent both the middle and passive voices. Both of these voices pose challenges for students whose native language is English, in that most struggle with English passive constructions and are routinely advised not to use them anyway. The only pure “passive” forms (in the aorist) use “active” endings. “Middle” as a category has no analogue and students face a series of possibilities rather than a coherent conception of the voice. Not only is most of this confusion unnecessary, it is positively misrepresents the language that they are learning.

In the time periods of the texts beginning students read, Greeks did not recognize, and rarely deployed, passive constructions (i.e. where the nominative subject receives the end of an action initiated by an external agent). It is established that there are absolutely no passive constructions in Homer, for example. Even by the time of the earliest formal grammar of Greek, there is no explicit category corresponding to the passive voice. What Dionysius Thrax in the second century BCE labels μέση and παθητική correspond not to “middle” and “passive” voices in modern terms but to deponent and semi-deponent verbs. The modern introduction of distinct middle and passive voices derives from students learning Greek subsequent to Latin and formal instruction in languages promoting the use of structures analogous to Latin, including the binary opposition between active and passive. For students with this sort of educational background, the

modern explanation of Greek voices starts with a point of familiarity and provides a conceptual space to explore unfamiliar uses of voice in Greek. For students without this background, however, who are the overwhelmingly vast majority today, the “three” voices of Greek are little but an obstacle.

Fortunately, English of the twenty-first century comes equipped with constructions that can elucidate middle verbs in Greek. Whereas students might or might not correctly analyze a sentence like “Socrates is hit by a rock,” they have little to no trouble understanding “Socrates gets hit with a rock,” which actually corresponds better to the Middle than the passive translation in English, anyway. In this model, a construction that does correspond to a true passive is but a particular instance within the semantic range of the middle (which does not intrinsically distinguish “Socrates is hit by Alcibiades” from “Socrates gets hit by Alcibiades”). In some cases, the “middle” voice is unmarked or conventional, both in English and Greek (e.g., English “Socrates stops” and the deponent futures in Greek). This phenomenon and deprecating the passive also make for a better starting point to comprehend the “aorist passive,” which was originally a stative and in many instances is incomprehensible as a passive (e.g., ἐγενήθη, ἐδυνάσθη).

There is a practical challenge in rethinking of the Greek voices this way, in that textbooks and resources have long labeled the forms “middle/passive” etc and it is naïve to think that this will change in the foreseeable future. Even so, the pedagogical benefits for new students in their comprehension and comfort far outweigh these logistical difficulties and go some way to demystifying this most rewarding and profound of languages.