Middle Voice and Deponent Verbs: Reordering the Topics

A critically important factor in teaching Greek is the order of topics in the elementary sequence. To avoid overwhelming students, teachers generally want each topic to be reasonably discrete and digestible, such as the aorist tense or second-declension nouns. As for the order of presentation, some areas of Greek would be baffling without certain prior formal and grammatical points, and so, each subject area takes its place after the topics on which it depends. Noun declensions, for example, provide the necessary endings for participles and must consequently be introduced before participles.

But beyond obvious and logically necessary arrangements of subject matter, order of presentation receives little attention. The result is that in our classes and built into our textbooks we often find a sequence of topics that actually makes learning more difficult. At times, the order of subjects tends to concentrate difficulties rather than distribute them. Beside piling up difficulties, typical chapter arrangements in Greek textbooks tend to create wrong impressions that must later be relearned.

The key example, and particular focus of this paper, is the introduction of the middle voice and deponent verbs. Many textbooks introduce middle/passive voice well before discussing deponent verbs, which has several unfortunate consequences. The arrangement delays such high frequency deponents as γίγνομαι and ἔρχομαι, piles up the difficulties of new forms and the grammatical challenges of the middle/passive voice, and leaves the strong impression that such endings as "-ομαι, -ει, -εται..." are somehow inherently passive. Students, therefore, learn "passive endings" but are soon confronted with deponent verbs, whose meanings are active even though they take the very same endings as passive verbs. The problem is that students learn the new endings, which are not inherently passive, in the context of the passive

voice so they will naturally think of any verb ending in "-ομαι" as passive and will find themselves correcting the misimpression with each new deponent verb.

What textbooks seem to miss is that skill in distinguishing active deponent verbs from middle/passive-voice verbs is as much about ingrained habits and reactions as explanations. Students may know the definition of "deponent" but still instinctively assume "passive" when they see endings like -αντο or -ομεθα. Or they may simply not know how to proceed once deponents are in the mix. To address the problem, I have used a radical reordering of the topics connected with middle/passives, deponents, and verbs generally. First, MI verbs and omega verbs are introduced together as two distinct but regular verb families from the beginning of first-term Greek. Deponent verbs are introduced along with them as a third verb family. (I explain to my students that treating deponents as their own family is a practical tool for learning not a linguistic account of their origin.) All tenses of MI, omega, and deponent verbs are introduced before the concept of voice is systematically discussed. Consequently, when passive and middle verbs are introduced, students have already seen, in the context of deponent verbs, all the endings they will need to create or recognize the two new voices (this also decouples formal and grammatical difficulties). Delaying the formal presentation of voice also allows students to ingrain the notion that each verb family only takes its own pattern of endings. Consequently, when passive and middle forms appear, they seem like shocking mismatches: normal omega- or MI-verb stems suddenly have attached to them deponent verb endings. This strong "feeling" of mismatch announces that there is something strange and abnormal about these verbs, namely, that they are passive or middle. Verbs, however, that have no mismatch (omega stems/omega endings, MI-verb stems/MI-verb endings, deponent stems/deponent endings) constitute the normal and expected active voice. Thus, when students encounter a form that could be deponent

or passive, they will recognize the deponent ending but then ask whether they have a deponent/deponent match or a normal/deponent mismatch. Consequently, they will avoid knee-jerk wrong guesses and instead have an ingrained and systematic approach to deponents and passives.