

Essentials of Biblical Greek Grammar

# VOICE and MOOD

*A Linguistic Approach*

DAVID L. MATHEWSON

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# INTRODUCTION

## Voice, Mood, and the Greek Verb System

At the center of the Greek clause stands the verb, which expresses the verbal process. It is the verb that communicates the “doings” and “happenings” within the discourse, moving the discourse forward and affecting the participants in the sentence in some way.<sup>1</sup> That is, a clause is primarily about the events or states in which the actors in the clause are involved or by which they are affected. The Greek verb is also the most semantically weighty element of the clause, contributing the meaningful features of aspect, voice, mood, person, and number. Therefore, an informed understanding of the Greek verb is of utmost importance for any exegesis of the Greek New Testament.

As a fusional (or inflectional) language, Greek indicates all these major features of its verbs—aspect, voice, mood, person, and number—through its “tense” endings,<sup>2</sup> which is why first-year Greek students spend so much time memorizing endings when they get to verbs (a change in any of these five features requires a change in the formal ending). In other words, these semantic features related to the

1. “The heart of the Greek language is the verb” (Decker, *Reading Koine Greek*, 217).

2. By using the terminology of “tense endings” or “tense forms” I am not implying that the verbal endings in Greek indicated true tense or time. I am only following standard terminology to identify the *morphological endings* on verbs that indicate the different semantic features of aspect, voice, mood, person, and number.

various grammatical functions of the verb are communicated morphologically by the selection of a given verbal ending from a system of choices (e.g., singularity vs. plurality, first person vs. second person, or perfective vs. imperfective aspect). This suggests that an important linguistic principle for interpreting the Greek verbal system (or any part of the grammatical system) is that “meaning implies choice,” as the grammar can be seen as a series of meaningful choices within the language system.<sup>3</sup> This important linguistic notion will be developed further below. But as it applies to this volume the various semantic features of the verbal system must be considered in relationship to one another as choices from within a system (rather than examined in isolation, as most grammars do by treating the various features of verbs individualistically and discussing in isolation various functions). The purpose of this volume is to explore in some detail two of those features of the Greek verb system indicated by the verb endings that are important for interpreting the Greek New Testament: voice and mood.

## Voice

Though probably not as semantically and exegetically significant as verbal aspect, voice is an important feature of the New Testament Greek verb system. Voice is indicated by the selection of a formal ending, which grammaticalizes semantically the relationship of the grammatical subject (not necessarily the agent) to the action of the verb. Most Greek grammars understand the voice system in this manner: “Voice relates the action to the subject.”<sup>4</sup> However, a fruitful approach that is beginning to emerge among some discussion of verbal voice is to also interpret the Greek voice system more specifically as communicating the semantic feature of *causality*. That is, voice “is a semantic category by which a speaker/writer grammaticalizes a perspective on how a process is caused.”<sup>5</sup> Is the action caused by an external agent, or is it internally caused? Therefore, voice considers how the subject

3. Mathewson and Emig, *Intermediate Greek Grammar*, 114.

4. Robertson, *Grammar of the Greek New Testament*, 798.

5. O'Donnell, *Corpus Linguistics*, 371. See also Porter, “Did Paul Baptize Himself?”

relates to the verbal process in terms of causality. This way of looking at the voice system in Greek will be developed in more detail below. Though the question of the number of voices in Greek persists, as will be argued in the ensuing discussion, the Greek language exhibits three separate voices based on morphology, but more importantly semantically based on causality: active, passive, and middle. Though the voice system would seem to be relatively straightforward and does not perhaps carry the same exegetical weight as the semantic feature of verbal aspect, or even probably the feature of mood,<sup>6</sup> study of the voice system in Greek is complicated by a number of factors. A few of these include the precise meaning and definition of the voices, the question whether Greek is a two- or three-voice system, the relationship between the voices semantically and systemically, the interpretive and exegetical significance of the voices, and the validity of the concept of “deponency” as it applies to certain verbs. These and other issues related to Greek voice will be considered in the discussion below. Though overshadowed by attention given to verbal aspect, the voice system in Greek has recently attracted some scholarly attention that has moved the discussion forward.

## Mood

The semantic feature of mood is also important for understanding the Greek verb, and perhaps is second in importance to verbal aspect for interpreting Greek verbs. Unlike some languages, such as English, which indicate mood lexically through modal auxiliaries (e.g., “*would study*,” “*could study*,” “*might study*”), mood in the ancient Greek language is indicated, like aspect and voice, morphologically through the selection of a formal verb ending. Mood in Greek semantically indicates the author’s attitude toward the action, or his or her view of the action as it relates to reality. Thus, “*the mood forms are used to grammaticalize the language user’s perspective on the relationship of the verbal action to reality. . . .*” The mood forms

6. This is apparent from the space devoted to the discussion of voice in Greek grammars, compared to the space given to the discussion of verbal aspect and even mood.

indicate the speaker's 'attitude' toward the event."<sup>7</sup> Scholars are usually careful to distinguish mood as indicating the author's attitudinal perspective on the action from whether the action itself corresponds to reality; it is the *author's perspective* on or *attitude* toward the relationship of the action to reality that is important, not the factual status of the event.<sup>8</sup> There are four moods in the New Testament Greek verbal system: indicative, subjunctive, optative, and imperative. They can be distinguished according to assertive (indicative) and nonassertive (subjunctive, optative, imperative) semantics. Each of these moods will be considered separately and in more detail below. Once again, though not attracting nearly the attention that the Greek verb aspectual system does, as indicated by the little substantial work being done on mood outside of Greek grammars, there are a number of issues and factors that must be considered when discussing the Greek mood system. These include the semantics of the moods, the relationship of the moods systemically, linguistic approaches to mood, the relation of the moods to speech roles, and the interpretive significance of the moods. These and other issues related to mood will be addressed in this volume. It will also briefly treat the possible relationship between three other verbal forms and mood: the future, infinitives, and participles.

## Summary

The following chapters of this book will treat in some detail grammatical voice and mood in New Testament Greek. In each part recent research will be surveyed, the chosen linguistic model for our investigation will also be articulated, and numerous examples will be given to illustrate the value of the discussion for interpreting the New Testament. The first part of this work will consider the New Testament Greek voice system.

7. Porter, *Idioms*, 50. Italics his.

8. Mathewson and Emig, *Intermediate Greek Grammar*, 160; Wallace, *Greek Grammar*, 445.

PART 1

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# VOICE



# Recent Scholarship on Voice

## Introduction

Voice is a significant but frequently underdeveloped feature of the Greek verbal system. Yet it can be very important for interpreting the Greek New Testament. To illustrate voice, the following two English sentences are semantically similar in their content and what they describe as taking place; they differ, however, in their perspective on the way the action is portrayed as taking place and how the participants are involved in or affected by the action within the clause:

The student purchased the book.

The book was purchased by the student.

In simple terms, in the first sentence the subject, “the student,” is responsible for initiating the action of purchasing, with “book” being the object or recipient of the action. However, in the second sentence “the book” is now the grammatical subject, but it is still the recipient of the action of purchasing. In the second sentence the entity responsible for initiating the action of purchasing, the agent of the action (“student,” which is the subject in the first sentence), is now indicated by the prepositional phrase “by the student.” The

grammatical feature that deals with this phenomenon is *voice*, specifically how the subject relates to the action of the verb. The former sentence is an example of an English active voice construction, and the latter a passive voice construction. As already noted, Greek indicates voice through the use of a series of verb endings. In addition to the active and passive voices illustrated in the above examples, Greek also exhibits a third voice not represented in English: the middle.

The first chapter of this section will consider contemporary treatment of voice in the Greek of the New Testament. It will discuss voice as it is explained in recent Greek grammars and then consider three specialized studies of voice in ancient and New Testament Greek. The next chapter will lay out the linguistic model followed in this part of the book on voice. I will argue that Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) provides a workable model for understanding the Greek voice system, once the difference between the voice system in Greek and English is understood. The third and final chapter of this section will consider the meaning of voice in Greek, followed by a treatment of each of the individual voices as well as deponency and the interpretive significance of voice.

## Recent Treatments of Voice in New Testament Greek Grammars

Ancient Greeks referred to voice as *διάθεσις* (*diathesis*), referring to the disposition of the subject to the action of the verb.<sup>1</sup> Both ancient and modern grammars have theorized on the meaning and function of voice in the ancient Greek language. Here we will consider only some of the more recent attention given to the voice system in the Greek of the New Testament. The lack of attention to voice is beginning to be rectified with some important work on the Greek voice system (see below). In this first portion of this chapter we will consider the treatment of voice in intermediate-level and reference-type Greek grammars. Modern-day New Testament Greek grammars frequently treat voice in somewhat abbreviated fashion, often

1. Fletcher, "Voice in the Greek of the New Testament," 57; Lyons, *Theoretical Linguistics*, 372.

as part of a general introduction to the Greek verb or in connection with other elements of the Greek verb (e.g., person and number), and with little theoretical reflection on the voice system in Greek.<sup>2</sup> Usually grammars include a very brief definition and discussion of voice, followed by (with few exceptions) a fairly standard list of labels that ostensibly classify the variety of voice usages in context. To illustrate the typical treatment of voice in Greek grammatical discussion, we will consider and summarize only a selection of the most recent grammars.

Stanley E. Porter, in his *Idioms of the Greek New Testament*, defines voice as “a form-based semantic category used to describe the role that the grammatical subject of a clause plays in relation to an action.”<sup>3</sup> Despite his rather informed treatment of Greek voice covering eleven pages, Porter admits that there is much more work to be done on voice in New Testament Greek. In his treatment of the specific voices, Porter states that for the active voice “the agent . . . is the grammatical subject of the verb.”<sup>4</sup> In relationship to the other voices, it is the least semantically weighty. He discusses the active voice in relation to its use with verbs of perception, its use with verbs of motion, and its usage with the accusative case functioning adverbially. For the passive voice, the grammatical subject is the object or recipient of the verbal process, placing attention on the grammatical subject as the recipient of the action. Porter discusses the passive voice in relation to specified and unspecified agency, and the role of the accusative case objects. Finally, the middle voice, rather than carrying a reflexive meaning, expresses more direct participation, specific involvement, or some form of benefit of the grammatical subject.<sup>5</sup> The middle is the most semantically weighty of the three voices. Rather than relying on the typical labels used by other grammars (see below), Porter discusses translating the middle voice, important usages in the New Testament, and the issue of

2. Köstenberger, Merkle, and Plummer give it only just over six pages of treatment in a chapter overviewing Greek verbs (*Going Deeper with New Testament Greek*, 193–99). However, cf. Wallace, who gives voice thirty-five pages in a separate chapter (*Greek Grammar*, 407–41).

3. Porter, *Idioms*, 62.

4. Porter, *Idioms*, 63.

5. Porter, *Idioms*, 67.

deponency. On deponency, Porter is ambiguous about its value and concludes that the interpreter might be justified in finding middle meaning in all deponent verbs.<sup>6</sup>

Richard A. Young devotes three and a half pages to voice.<sup>7</sup> He defines voice as “a morphological feature that conveys the relation of the subject to the action of the verb.”<sup>8</sup> In general, the active voice means the subject performs the action, the middle voice indicates the subject participates in the results of the action, and the passive voice means the subject is the recipient of the action. He then proposes the following labels (a mixture of semantic and functional notions) for their various usages in context: active—simple, causative, reflexive; middle—direct (reflexive, which is rare), indirect, permissive, reciprocal, deponent; passive—thematizing the subject, omitting the agent, emphasizing the agent, passive with a middle sense, deponent passive. Deponent verbs, according to Young, have middle or passive forms but are active in meaning.<sup>9</sup>

In his important study on the Greek verb, Kenneth L. McKay devotes a separate chapter to voice, covering six pages.<sup>10</sup> His treatment of voice is from the perspective of the relationship of the grammatical subject to the action of the verb. McKay postulates three voices in Greek: active, passive, and middle. Basically, the active voice represents the subject as engaging in the action of the verb; the passive voice, the subject being acted upon; and the middle voice, the subject as acting on, for, or toward itself.<sup>11</sup> Because he sees it as differing little from its English counterpart, the active voice requires little explanation, though sometimes the active can be used when the agent has someone else act for him or her. For the middle voice, McKay says that it “is characterized by a reflexive idea”<sup>12</sup> and then reverts to some of the typical labels for describing its function in different contexts: reflexive, reciprocal, and causative. He also discusses its usage with transitive and intransitive verbs. The passive

6. Porter, *Idioms*, 72.

7. Young, *Intermediate New Testament Greek*, 133–36.

8. Young, *Intermediate New Testament Greek*, 133.

9. Young, *Intermediate New Testament Greek*, 135.

10. McKay, *New Syntax*, 21–26.

11. McKay, *New Syntax*, 21.

12. McKay, *New Syntax*, 21.

voice, according to McKay, apparently developed through the middle. McKay primarily discusses how agency with the passive voice is indicated. He also feels that passive forms do not always indicate passive meaning, and the form extends to more than the passive meaning. He ends his discussion of voice with a consideration of the issue of deponency, where he questions its necessity. Many verbs that are passive or middle deponent have a middle or passive element in their meaning or history.<sup>13</sup>

Daniel B. Wallace has the lengthiest and most detailed discussion of voice among Greek grammars, devoting an entire chapter of thirty-five pages to it.<sup>14</sup> His discussion is fairly typical of the way voice is usually treated. Unlike Porter, and as in most grammars, he describes the three voices not in relationship to each other but independently. He defines voice as the “property of the verb that indicates how the subject is related to the action (or state) expressed by the verb.”<sup>15</sup> He then simplistically describes the voices as follows: the active voice indicates the subject doing the action, the passive voice indicates the subject as receiving the action, and in the middle voice the subject is both doing and receiving the action, a combination of both active and passive.<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, the middle voice “emphasizes the subject’s participation” in the action.<sup>17</sup> That is, it appears that the only thing that distinguishes the active from the middle voice is more emphasis on the subject acting in the middle. Wallace also distinguishes voice from the category of transitivity (transitive vs. intransitive verbs). This is followed by a treatment of the three voices in terms of a full list of labels that capture their ostensible functions in various contexts: active voice—simple active, causative active, stative active, reflexive active; middle voice—direct (reflexive) middle (which Wallace thinks is rare), redundant middle, indirect middle, causative middle, permissive middle, reciprocal middle, deponent middle; passive voice—simple passive, causative/permissive passive, deponent passive. Wallace is cautious about the value of deponency

13. McKay, *New Syntax*, 25–26.

14. Wallace, *Greek Grammar*, 407–41.

15. Wallace, *Greek Grammar*, 408.

16. See Wallace’s “directional” illustration (*Greek Grammar*, 409).

17. Wallace, *Greek Grammar*, 414.

for understanding verbs that possess only middle or passive forms, but he still sees some verbs as true deponents.<sup>18</sup>

In his more popularized intermediate-level grammar, David Alan Black treats voice in just over two pages in a chapter that provides an overview of Greek verb inflection.<sup>19</sup> Black defines the three voices in a simple manner: the active voice is where the subject produces the action; the passive voice is where the subject receives the action of the verb; and the middle voice stands in between, where the emphasis is on the subject as the agent of the action of the verb. The reflexive meaning of the middle has all but disappeared. He then appeals to the common labels and categories of usage found in most grammars. For the active: simple active and causative active. For the passive: simple passive and permissive passive; this is followed by a discussion of different types of agency that can be expressed with the passive voice: primary (personal), secondary (intermediate), and instrumental (impersonal). For the middle voice: direct (reflexive), intensive, and reciprocal. He also finds a number of deponent verbs, which have middle or passive endings but are active in meaning.

In their intermediate grammar *Going Deeper with New Testament Greek*, Andreas Köstenberger, Benjamin Merkle, and Robert Plummer treat verbal voice in only six pages, and as part of a chapter on a general introduction to Greek verbs.<sup>20</sup> They offer a fairly standard definition of voice: “The voice of the verb indicates the way in which the subject relates to the action or state expressed by the verb.”<sup>21</sup> They likewise offer a brief description of each voice in terms of whether the subject performs the action (active), participates in the results of the action (middle), or receives the action (passive). This is followed by a list of repeated, common labels of usages for each voice: active—simple, causative, reflexive; middle—reflexive, special interest, permissive (causative), deponent; passive—simple, permissive, deponent.

18. See Wallace’s list in *Greek Grammar*, 430.

19. Black, *Still Greek to Me*, 93–96.

20. Köstenberger, Merkle, and Plummer, *Going Deeper with New Testament Greek*, 193–99.

21. Köstenberger, Merkle, and Plummer, *Going Deeper with New Testament Greek*, 193.

David L. Mathewson and Elodie Ballantine Emig cover voice in their intermediate grammar in a separate chapter covering eleven pages.<sup>22</sup> They define voice as the relationship of the grammatical subject to the process expressed in the verb.<sup>23</sup> “The grammatical subject, usually indicated by a nominal form in the nominative case, can be the agent of the action in the verb (i.e., the active voice), the recipient or patient of the action in the verb (i.e., the passive voice), or in some way directly involved in or participating in the action in the verb (i.e., the middle voice).”<sup>24</sup> The voices are to be distinguished from the issue of transitive versus intransitive verbs. There is then a general discussion of the meaning and function of each of the voices, but without the list of copious labels found in other grammars. However, due to some of the difficulties in interpreting and translating the middle voice, the authors do use the labels reflexive, intensive, and reciprocal to describe possible usages. Other topics considered in relation to voice are accusative with passives, expressions of agency with passives, topic continuity, and the effect of the middle on certain verbs (turning transitives into intransitives, changing the meaning of a verb). There is also a brief excursus on deponency, where following recent research the authors question its value and recommend dispensing with it.

Most recently, Heinrich von Siebenthal has produced a reference-type grammar containing much valuable material and treatment of grammatical and syntactical issues. He devotes almost ten pages to the voice system in New Testament Greek and uses slightly more up-to-date language to describe the voices.<sup>25</sup> He begins by defining voice as the subject’s relationship to the action expressed by the verb. Voice is to be distinguished from whether verbs are transitive or intransitive; either type of verb can occur with the active, passive, or middle voice. For the specific voices, the active voice presents an action as performed by the subject. In certain verbs it can be used with a force similar to a middle, overlap with the passive, or take a causative sense (determined by the context). The middle voice in Greek indicates greater subject-affectedness. Thus, the middle can be used to

22. Mathewson and Emig, *Intermediate Greek Grammar*, 142–52.

23. Mathewson and Emig, *Intermediate Greek Grammar*, 142.

24. Mathewson and Emig, *Intermediate Greek Grammar*, 142.

25. Von Siebenthal, *Ancient Greek Grammar*, 295–304.

indicate an indirect reflexive, the subject acting on its own body, the subject receiving something, or a direct reflexive middle, reciprocal, or causative. The passive voice is used when the subject is the patient of the action. Passive forms can be used without passive meaning in a causative sense or a “tolerative” (permissive) sense.

What shall we conclude about the previous manner of treating Greek voices in grammars? While voice has certainly received attention by grammarians, and there is some value in the discussion of voice in the above grammars, there are still a number of issues left unresolved by their treatment of voice. First, in much of this work there is little theoretical reflection, even at a basic level, on the semantics of the voice system beyond the general definition of how the subject relates to the action of the verb (perhaps because little specialized work or research has been done on this issue in comparison to verbal aspect; but see below), and there is little consideration of the relationship of the voices to each other in terms of why an author/speaker would select one voice over another and their specific semantics. Second, there is still a tendency to perpetuate a “directional” view of voice, which has to do with the direction of the process away from the subject toward an object (active), toward the subject through an agent (passive), or both away from and back toward the subject (middle).<sup>26</sup> While there is some value in this, much of the treatment of voice in grammars shows little if any development from previous grammatical discussion, and these grammars often appear content to perpetuate previous ways of defining and treating voice. Third, the above approaches follow the common but questionable method of multiplying labels to try to capture the different contexts of usages of the Greek voices and their interpretive and translational significance. Several of the proposed categories of usage seem to depend more on English translation than on the semantics of the voices themselves and lack justification for their usage or criteria for determining how they should be identified and utilized. This also raises the issue of the relationship between these various proposed functions for the voices, since they often do not capture the basic semantic force of the Greek voice (active, passive, or middle). This can be seen by the

26. See the visual graphic in Wallace, *Greek Grammar*, 409.



fact that some of the voices apparently have overlapping functions or meanings: reflexive active and reflexive (direct) middle; causative (permissive) active, passive, and middle; passive with middle meaning; deponent middle and passive. This raises the question of the semantics of the voice and the significance of the choice of one voice over another if they can apparently “mean” the same thing in certain contexts. In other words, what is the relationship of the formal endings to the semantics of the three voices?

Fourth, there is still much confusion over the middle voice, with a lack of clear understanding of its semantics beyond general agreement that a reflexive sense is not its primary meaning. It is often merely defined as a middle ground between the active and passive voices, combining the notion of agent and recipient of the action (i.e., a combination of the semantics of the active and passive, with little distinct semantic force of its own), or sometimes only as a sort of “emphatic” active voice. Fifth, the treatment of deponency is ambiguous, with some grammars still finding validity in the concept, while others question its value for interpreting Greek voice, and some fall in between. There is still some misunderstanding on what deponency is (“middle/passive in form but active in meaning”). Finally, with one or two exceptions, insights from modern linguistics have not yet made inroads into grammatical discussion of voice in standard grammars.

## Recent Specialized Work on Greek Voice

Outside of this expected and necessary treatment of voice as part of the Greek language in modern-day grammars, work on the Greek voice system has generally lagged behind research and interest in aspect in the Greek verbal system, so that much more work remains to be done on this significant verbal feature. However, recently the employment of the voice system in the New Testament and ancient Greek in general has begun to attract more attention, although the focus has been primarily on the middle voice and deponency, save for one or two exceptions.<sup>27</sup>

27. Harris, “Study of the Greek Language”; Campbell, *Advances in the Study of Greek*, 91–104; Porter, “Did Paul Baptize Himself?”; O’Donnell, “Some New Testament Words”; see more recently O’Donnell’s *Corpus Linguistics*, 370–85.

Here I will survey very briefly the most important and relevant work in order to bring the reader of this book up to date on some of the discussion on voice. Again, I will restrict my survey to three of the most recent contributions. The first work summarized below does not focus on New Testament Greek but focuses on ancient Greek more generally and has become somewhat of a standard. The latter two works focus particularly on voice in the Greek of the New Testament—one article length and the other dissertation length.

### Rutger Allan

Rutger Allan's work focuses on the meaning of the middle voice in ancient Greek and is one of the first recent comprehensive treatments of voice in Greek.<sup>28</sup> He begins by noting the “puzzling diversity of the different usage types of the middle and passive voice.”<sup>29</sup> As a way forward, Allan proposes examining the middle voice in light of prototypical transitive clauses: agent as subject, patient as object, and verb in the active voice. The middle can be seen as a marked departure from this. Allan proposes that what all instances of the middle have in common is the abstract notion of *subject-affectedness*. That is, in comparison with the prototypical transitive clause, the middle is marked coding (a departure from the prototypical transitive clause), where the subject undergoes the effect of the event. Furthermore, Allan understands the middle voice in Greek in terms of both *monosemy* and *polysemy*, as part of a complex network. From a monosemic perspective, the abstract meaning of the middle voice is *subject-affectedness*. However, from a polysemous perspective, the middle voice, while retaining this abstract meaning, takes on various but related meanings: for example, passive use, direct reflexive use, and indirect reflexive use. Thus, “the middle voice is seen as a polysemous network of interrelated meanings. The abstract schema, embodying the semantic commonality of all middle meanings, can be characterized as affectedness of the subject. The different middle meanings can, in turn, be viewed as elaborations of this abstract schema.”<sup>30</sup>

28. Allan, *Middle Voice*.

29. Allan, *Middle Voice*, 1.

30. Allan, *Middle Voice*, 57.

Following prototype theory, Allan sees some of these as closer to the prototypical middle meaning, while others are connected to it by extension. Allan then discusses the specific uses of the Greek middle voice under the following eleven categories: (1) passive middle, (2) spontaneous process middle, (3) mental process middle, (4) body motion middle, (5) collective motion middle, (6) reciprocal middle, (7) direct reflexive middle, (8) perception middle, (9) mental activity middle, (10) speech act middle, and (11) indirect reflexive middle.<sup>31</sup> From this listing, it is clear that Allan follows a two-voice system in Greek, seeing the passive (1) as a further function subsumed under the middle. Furthermore, Allan sees the mental process middle (3) as the prototypical middle usage. This also means that the *media tantum*, or middle-only verbs (so-called deponents), fall under the treatment of the middle voice, indicating subject-affectedness. Allan finds no evidence historically that anyone ever “laid aside” active forms (hence deponent), and he notes the diversity of usage of these middle-only verbs. Therefore, these verbs should be treated like other middle verbs that have an active voice opposition, so that categories such as “deponent” are unnecessary to explain verbs that occur only in the middle voice.

Allan also notes the intriguing morphology in the aorist tense with the  $-(\theta)\eta-$ , which originally covered passive and spontaneous processes but was extended to cover a number of usages of the middle referenced above (beyond just the passive voice) in Homer and in Classical Greek to include mental process, body motion, and collective motion. The semantic feature that underlies all usages of the aorist passive form is the notion of prototypical patient, whereas for the aorist middle forms the primary feature is the subject as agent. For the  $-(\theta)\eta-$  in the future, Allan finds that for many verbs, middle forms are imperfective, and  $-(\theta)\eta-$  (passive) forms are aoristic (perfective), so that the distinction between the endings is along the lines of aspect. Finally, he finds a number of examples of verbs where the active and middle overlap in meaning. In these cases, lexically the verb with the active voice semantically indicates subject-affectedness, with the middle voice semantically and redundantly making the subject-affectedness

31. See Allan, *Middle Voice*, chap. 2.

of the verb more salient. The active voice, then, can apparently give way to the subject-affected semantics of the context.

Allan has made an important contribution to the study of the middle voice in the Greek language, though his focus is on Classical Greek. He has effectively demonstrated how the semantic feature of subject-affectedness lies behind all the middle usages. Such an understanding of the middle voice further calls into question the need for such categories as “deponent” to explain verbs that occur only in the middle voice without an active opposition. His work also further supports the notion that Greek began as a two-voice system, with the opposition between active and middle, and with the passive later growing out of the middle. However, Allan’s work remains unclear regarding the role that verbal morphology plays in indicating voice. This can be seen in the fact that the middle endings and  $-(\theta)\eta$ - endings overlap in their main categories of usage (see above). Furthermore, Allan also appears to suggest that the active voice can be “laid aside” in contexts that indicate subject-affectedness, so that the meaning of the active voice is neutralized in some contexts and with some verbs.<sup>32</sup> This creates ambiguity as to what the voice endings would actually convey, if context can override them. Furthermore, though his focus is on the middle voice, there is little reflection on how the middle forms encode voice within the larger voice system of Greek.

### Rachel Aubrey

Rachel Aubrey has produced an important work that focuses mainly on the function of the  $-(\theta)\eta$ - ending as it relates to the middle and passive voices in Greek.<sup>33</sup> Much of her work depends on and develops the work of Allan (see above). A concern of grammarians has been what to do with aorist verbs with the “passive” ending  $-(\theta)\eta$ - that do not seem to communicate passive semantics in some contexts: the subject is the agent of the verb, as in an active voice. Grammars have resorted to labels such as “passive deponent” or “passive in form but active in meaning” to account for these “exceptions.” The concern of Aubrey is to demonstrate that these traditional ways of accounting

32. Fletcher, “Voice in the Greek of the New Testament,” 99.

33. Aubrey, “Motivated Categories.”

for the  $-(\theta)\eta$ - ending as exclusively passive, while explaining deviant examples where this ending does not seem to fit passive meaning as a mismatch in form and function, are unnecessary and misguided. Following the theory of cognitive linguistics, the burden of her article is: “Instead of an exclusively passive form with random deviants,  $-(\theta)\eta$ - 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.”<sup>34</sup> Aubrey resists the notion of limiting  $-(\theta)\eta$ - to one morphosyntactical function. Relying on cross-linguistic patterning and prototype theory, she argues that voice is more dynamic with gradual shifts in meaning, rather than distinct categories semantically. She plots event types on a spectrum from more agent-like (active) to more patient-like (passive). The Greek voices (active, middle, passive) are waypoints along this spectrum, not formally restricted and discrete entities. Rather than maintaining strict boundaries, they can blend into each other. She argues that the  $-(\theta)\eta$ - ending was originally employed in Greek with the aorist to designate spontaneous events involving a change of state without an external cause (the action is not done by someone or something; e.g., “He died”). However, this allowed it to extend its usage to other more patient-type events, such as the typical passives. According to Aubrey, “middle voice includes both middle and passive semantics within its scope.”<sup>35</sup> Like Allan above, she sees the middle voice as indicating subject-affectedness.

Greek sigmatic ( $-\sigma$ -) aorist middle forms, then, were used for more agent-type verbs, and the  $-(\theta)\eta$ - for more patient-type verbs, but the latter began to expand into the  $-\sigma$ - territory of more agent-type middle verbs. Therefore, the  $-(\theta)\eta$ - ending, which originally was used with patient-like spontaneous actions, extended in two different directions: (1) passive events and (2) middle event types usually expressed with the aorist  $-\sigma$ - endings.<sup>36</sup> According to Aubrey,  $-(\theta)\eta$ - aorist verbs are usually used in the New Testament with middle verbs of the patient-type events. In these cases, the  $-(\theta)\eta$ - ending “expresses an event in which a single focused participant [the grammatical subject]

34. Aubrey, “Motivated Categories,” 565.

35. Aubrey, “Motivated Categories,” 586.

36. Aubrey, “Motivated Categories,” 573.

undergoes a change of state with no external cause involved in the event.”<sup>37</sup> These include spontaneous processes, motion, collective motion, and passives. However, such verbs are also used with middle verbs of more agent-type events. In these cases, the subject of such verbs is both the source and endpoint of the action. Here the more agent-type middle events are direct reflexives/grooming verbs, reciprocal events, mental activity, speech act, and perception. The aorist ending  $-(\theta)\eta-$ , therefore, expands to be used of these event types, hence encroaching on the domain of aorist  $-\sigma-$  verbs.

Aubrey’s article has much helpful information and provides a model of how one linguistic method (cognitive linguistics) can shed light on the Greek voice system. However, her work still raises a number of important questions. What are the meanings of the Greek voices, and how are they distinguished? If the  $-(\theta)\eta-$  ending can cover such a broad spectrum of event types, and if even the active voice can be considered like the middle voice as subject-affected (where the subject experiences the effects of the action in some way) in intransitive verbs, there seems to be a frequent mismatch in form and meaning in her paradigm. Her work also raises the question of what role verb morphology plays in indicating voice. Aubrey appears to give more weight to event types and the semantics of the verb than to the morphology of the voice endings. She also raises the question again of whether Koine Greek is a two-voice or three-voice system.

### Bryan Fletcher

Bryan Fletcher has recently produced an important study of voice in the Greek of the New Testament and its significance for interpretation.<sup>38</sup> Written as a PhD dissertation for McMaster Divinity College (Hamilton, Ontario), his work is abreast of modern linguistic theory, as well as the history of voice in Proto-Indo European (PIE) languages. His work breaks some new ground on voice by examining the Greek voice system in light of M. A. K. Halliday’s Systemic Functional Linguistics. Unlike Allan and Aubrey, he focuses on the entire Greek voice system.

37. Aubrey, “Motivated Categories,” 595.

38. Fletcher, “Voice in the Greek of the New Testament.”

Fletcher defines voice as “the speaker/writer’s grammatical portrayal of the role of the subject according to an ergative alignment pattern that is predicated upon causality (startpoint) and affectedness (endpoint) in relation to the verbal process.”<sup>39</sup> Fletcher argues that the Greek voice system is an ergative alignment system, which is indicated not by marking nouns in the case endings (as some languages do) but through verbal morphology and the voice system. According to an ergative model, at the center of the clause is the verbal process and a participant that actualizes the process (what he calls the *medium*, following Halliday). In an ergative system, causality (the energy that initiates the process) can be internal or self-generating, or externally initiated by an agent. According to Fletcher, the *agent* is the external cause of the action in a clause, while the *medium* is “the ‘conduit’ through which the process comes into existence and arrives at actualization. It is the element of the clause that the process finds as its endpoint.”<sup>40</sup> Voice, then, concerns the role that the grammatical subject plays in relationship to the verbal process, whether the agent (active) or the medium (middle or passive). These roles are determined not by their case endings but by the verbal voice endings. On this basis, he argues that Greek is a two-voice system, depending primarily on the semantic role of the subject within the ergative aligned voice system. Therefore, the Greek of the New Testament exhibits an active-middle voice opposition. Under the umbrella of the middle voice, the middle can also function as a passive with the addition of the expression of external agency (if expressed with a circumstantial phrase consisting of a prepositional phrase). For Fletcher’s model, the primary defining feature of voice is the role of the grammatical subject, whether it functions as the agent (active) or medium (middle, passive) of the verbal process.

According to Fletcher, with the active voice “the subject acts as the original energy source and cause of the verbal process (including intransitive verbs). . . . Causality is the output of energy that resides in the Agent.”<sup>41</sup> In the Greek active voice the grammatical subject plays the semantic role of the *agent*. This can potentially affect

39. Fletcher, “Voice in the Greek of the New Testament,” 200–201.

40. Fletcher, “Voice in the Greek of the New Testament,” 144.

41. Fletcher, “Voice in the Greek of the New Testament,” 202.

other participants in the clause, such as a *goal* (grammatical direct object). Fletcher then considers how the active voice functions in certain types of clauses, with other participants, and in participle and infinitive constructions. In light of his definition of verbal voice as an ergative alignment system (see above), Fletcher concludes that “the middle-passive voice portrays the verbal process moving into the subject participant, entering the domain, and being realized in the subject participant as it acts in an endpoint role for the verbal process.” Thus, the subject is “the affected participant of the verb, creating a portrayal of the heightened involvement of the subject.”<sup>42</sup> That is, the subject is the medium, and thus host to the verbal process.

Throughout Fletcher’s discussion, causality is apparently secondary to the role of the subject, and an optional element, in defining the Greek voice system. As with his treatment of the active voice, Fletcher considers the function of the middle in different clause types, with other participants, and in participle and infinitive constructions. The passive voice shares the same subject role as the middle. The subject functions as the medium, the affected participant. However, what distinguishes the function of the passive is the way that causality is conceived. While in the middle voice causality is internal to the process, with the passive voice causality is external to the process; that is, it lies outside the medium + process nucleus. With passives, external causality can be (1) expressed by a circumstantial element (a prepositional phrase; e.g., ὑπό), (2) unspecified and external to the entire clause and inferred from surrounding clauses, or (3) located beyond the wider discourse.<sup>43</sup> Fletcher then examines usages of the passive voice under examples of specified and unspecified agency.

Fletcher, unlike Allan and Aubrey, interprets the  $-(\theta)\eta$ - ending as primarily marking passivity in the aorist and future tense forms. In the middle-passive voice, the subject plays the role of medium—that is, the affected participant—though Fletcher is not clear as to why he thinks the middle and passive voices have separate forms in the aorist and future but not in the present and perfect.

42. Fletcher, “Voice in the Greek of the New Testament,” 245.

43. Fletcher, “Voice in the Greek of the New Testament,” 292.



Fletcher's work provides the most comprehensive and sophisticated examination of the voice system in the Greek of the New Testament to date. He points the way forward to a more robust and linguistically plausible understanding of the voice system, and he further demonstrates the usefulness of SFL as a suitable and adaptable model for understanding features of ancient Greek grammar. He helpfully demonstrates how ergativity can be used in the service of describing the Greek voice system. One issue that his study raises is what role causality plays in the voice system. While it features in his overall definition, he is unclear whether it plays a role in defining the middle voice, though it does at times in his discussion seem to play a role, and a different one from the passive voice. His starting point, rather, is with the role of the subject, whether agent or medium. Furthermore, his study still raises the question of whether Greek is a two-voice or three-voice system.

## Conclusion

Some specialized research on the Greek voice system has enhanced our understanding of voice in New Testament Greek. A number of conclusions emerge from the previous survey of research. First, there is still the issue of whether Greek is a two- or three-voice system. Second, there is increasing recognition of the inadequacy of the category of deponency as applied to the middle voice. Third, the above studies raise the need for a clear and robust application of a linguistic model to the voice system of the Greek of the New Testament. Fourth, the emergence of the concept of causality shows promise in explaining the voice system. Finally, there is still a need to demonstrate the relationship of the semantics of the voice system to verbal morphology. These issues pave the way for further work to be done on the Greek voice system.