

Linda Manney, Middle Voice in Modern Greek. Meaning and function of an inflectional category (Studies in Language Companion Series, Vol. 48). Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins. 2000. Pp. xiii + 262. \$94.00.

The so-called “middle voice” has been an enduring part of the Greek language for as long as Greek has had a separate recognizable linguistic identity (thus at least since Mycenaean Greek of the 15th century B.C.), and, to judge from comparative evidence, for several millennia before that as well. That is, this category is part of the grammatical stock that Greek inherited from Proto-Indo-European, the reconstructed ancestor language to Greek, English, Russian, French, Hindi, and numerous other familiar (and less familiar) languages of today and of the past. In fact, along with Albanian, Greek is the only branch of the Indo-European family to preserve into the modern era the Indo-European middle voice more or less in its original form and with at least some of its original functions intact.

As this characterization suggests, one could fruitfully look at the Greek middle voice – also referred to in the linguistic literature on Modern Greek as “mediopassive” (so, e.g., Joseph & Philippaki-Warbuton 1987), as “nonactive” (e.g. Rivero 1990), and as “passive” (e.g., Holton et al. 1997) – in terms of its historical development, in terms of its form, and/or in terms of its function. And indeed, form is relevant, for the middle voice is readily identifiable by special endings (e.g. –mai in the first person singular present indicative, –sou in the second person singular imperative, etc.) or special formatives (e.g., for the most part, –qhk- in the perfective past (aorist) tense). Nonetheless, not all such verb forms in Greek are used in similar ways or show the same nuances of meaning.

Thus, examining the function(s) of the Greek middle voice is an appropriate enterprise, and such is the focus of Manney’s interesting and well-documented study, a thoroughly revised version of her 1993 doctoral dissertation from the University of California, San Diego.

Manney’s primary concern is with the modern language, as she attempts to give a synchronic account of how the middle voice is used and what it means. Her interest is in finding a

common core meaning for middle voice forms. To give an idea of how challenging a task this is, consider some of the typical uses that she needs to take into account (using her descriptive labels):

1. “spontaneous state or change of state”, e.g.:
oi spovroi skorpivsthkan sthn aulhv ‘The seeds scattered in the yard’
2. “self-affecting or self-contained agentive events”, e.g.:
apomakruvnhke apov thn fwtiav ‘S/he moved away from the fire’
3. a “subject . . . acting for its own benefit . . . or [not] initiating an event”, e.g.:
arpavcqhke apov to swsivbio ‘He grabbed the lifesaver (for himself, intentionally)’
4. “strong affective involvement” in an action, e.g.:
[o F. Kavstro] uperaspivzetai perisovtero to kaqestovı tou parav kavpoiei ivdeeı
‘[F. Castro] is (passionately) defending more his regime than some ideals’.

Thus the one form (middle voice grammatical “apparatus”) can have several meanings; the “mapping” between form and meaning is thus not a one-to-one relationship. And, it goes the other way too, since there are some change of state verbs, for instance, that occur with the active voice grammatical trappings, not the middle voice, e.g.:

5. ta frouvta savpisan ‘The fruit got overripe’.

Moreover, in many instances, these verbs are what might be called ‘oppositional’ middles (not M’s terminology), where there is a distinction between active and middle forms and the opposition of these two shows what the middle voice can add to the meaning of a verb. Thus, besides (1) there is also (6), where the active form is transitive, taking a direct object (versus the object-less intransitive (1)):

6. o gewrgovı skovrpise touı spovrouı sthvn aulhv ‘The farmer scattered the seeds in the yard’
and besides (3), there is (7), where the intentionality and/or beneficiary in the active is different from what is seen in (3):
7. avrpaxe to swsivbio ‘He happened to grab the lifesaver (or grabbed it for someone else)’

Also, from a purely grammatical standpoint, as the above examples show, middle voice forms can be transitive or intransitive, and finally, there are verbs that have only middle voice forms (so-called

“deponent” verbs) whose meanings need not fall into any of the above categories, e.g. *skevptomai* ‘think’ (note the nearly synonymous active form *nomivzw*).

The analysis M pursues is in terms of the “cognitive grammar” framework for grammatical analysis developed by Ronald Langacker (see, e.g., Langacker 1987, 1991), in which “linguistic structure is [seen as] conceptual in nature [with] linguistic conceptualizations ... built up from the language user’s experience with contextualized linguistic data” (p. 53-54). M thus takes great care to illustrate her discussion with numerous examples presenting whole sentences often in their surrounding context. These are generally drawn from authentic texts or conversations and are not simply constructed by the investigator herself.

The best statement of what this book is about, and what M’s findings are, comes in Chapter 2 (p. 53):

While the general constructional template for middle structures has a variety of specific instantiations, these formal variants consistently invoke one or more of a cluster of related meanings which recur across numerous semantic classes of middle inflected verbs as they occur in particular middle structures. The goal of the present study is to identify and account for these common patterns of meaning which middle structures instantiate as members of a unified inflectional category.

The book is structured so as to highlight these different — but in M’s analysis unified — instantiations of the middle voice. After an introduction to the general problem and analytic framework, and a descriptive overview of the voice system found with the Greek verb, M devotes separate chapters to each of the major middle-voice construction types she examines: experiencer subject structures (Chapter 3), agent subject structures (Chapter 4), spontaneous change of state, stative, and passive structures (Chapter 5), and reflexive structures (Chapter 6). In each, she endeavors to show — and largely succeeds at this — just how they can be interpreted as different aspects of a “unified inflectional category”.

One important conclusion that M comes to regarding the purely grammatical side of the middle is that (p. 64) she takes active and middle to be two separate classes of verbs, each with its

own grammatical “integrity”, so to speak, and its own grammatical prerequisites in terms of meaning, participant relations, and such. Thus for her, middle voice is most definitely not derived from the active voice, contrary to a view that many have taken. This conclusion, however, accords with the results other linguists, e.g. Smirniotopoulos 1991, have reached based on purely analytic — as opposed to the more semantic and cognitive bases of M’s findings — considerations.

There is, to be sure, much here for linguists, both those who are Hellenically oriented and those who are simply interested in verbal voice, but at the same time, there is also much here for the nonlinguist Neo-Hellenist. In addition to the richness of M’s example sentences and her discussion of each one, and the detailed schematic figures representing the relationships holding among participants in an event and the perspective taken in the verbal voice (figures that are very helpful to those not well-acquainted with Langacker’s framework), the book contains two very useful Appendices. In these, M offers lists of the verbs considered (some 240 altogether), generally in active/middle pairs where both are available, together with their meanings; these lists allow the reader to see quite readily what the relationships are between active and middle verbs and to see the generalizations over various sets of middle verbs.

This work is generally well-written, though some tightening up of the prose would have been appreciated here and there, especially since some of the concepts lend themselves to a certain vagueness and imprecision of formulation. For instance, on page 46, in a discussion of active/middle verb pairs, the reader is told that “it is clear that voice inflection contributes to the meaning of the clause, since the designated event and the participants in the event are understood quite differently in the active and middle members of a given pair”; only after seeing several examples is it revealed what this difference is (subject’s greater “affective involvement” in the middle). Also, the body of the book ends somewhat abruptly, with Chapter 6 on reflexive structures being the last; one would normally look for a concluding chapter that sums things up.

Still, all in all, this is an interesting and valuable contribution to the literature in Greek linguistics and shows that new frameworks can show us old dogs new tricks about the analysis of the Greek verb.

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