

Chapter Eight

Present Tense Verbs: Middle Voice

This chapter deals with a feature of Greek that is likely to strike you as redundant. In fact, it is not so much redundant as subtle, but for the moment it may be best for you to regard it as merely redundant. For now I will tell you that all the personal endings that you learned in *Chapter Six* (which are said to be in the *active voice*) have counterparts in the *middle voice*. These middle voice forms (so far as an English speaker is likely to notice) mean exactly the same thing as their active voice counterparts. You already know, for example, the verb **λού/ω** (present tense, *active voice*, indicative mode, 1st-person singular), and you know that it means **I bathe**. In this chapter you will learn the form **λού/ομαι** (present tense, *middle voice*, indicative mode, 1st-person singular), and you will learn that it, too, means **I bathe**.

Middle voice: concept

Begin by thinking of the middle voice as analogous to capital letters. Someone learning to write English might become confused by the fact that there are two parallel alphabets: one capital, and one minuscule. He might worry far too much about when to use one or the other to spell a word. In fact, of course, there are reasons for the two parallel alphabets, and there are some rules of proper usage, but aside from nuances and convention, there is no difference in meaning between *John Jones* and *john jones*. If you use the latter, it is probably because you are five years old and are still struggling to write any letters at all. People will be appropriately pleased that you are spelling things more or less correctly whether or not you understand proper nouns and their need for capital letters.

Similarly, in Greek if you were to use active forms when a middle was needed, an ancient Greek would quickly spot you as an ignorant foreigner, but he would also know what you meant. So, the middle forms are virtually indistinguishable in translation from the forms that you have already learned. I should add, of course, that the reason young scholars such as you take the trouble to learn Greek is that they want to sharpen their intellects so that they will be able to perceive just the sort of subtleties that the middle communicates. So, don't think that I am encouraging you to neglect these subtleties. I'm not. Rather, I am encouraging you not to get too hung up on detail at this stage of your study. We want to prepare you to read real Greek sometime before Christmas. When you start reading real Greek, your instructor will point out the subtleties in the text.

The radical (= root) sense of the middle voice

I think that all the nuances of the middle voice may be said to arise from a single radical sense: *to experience* <what the verb says> rather than to do <what the verb says>, which is communicated by the active voice.

Middle voice: Principles

The 4 nuances of the middle voice

When you encounter a verb with a middle ending, begin by translating it just as though it were an active, but once you have translated it, remain alert for one of the following nuances commonly conveyed by the Greek middle.

1) The verb is **intransitive**. That is, it *does not have a direct object*. The subject is not doing the action *to someone*; she is just doing or *experiencing* it.

Active: The mother is bathing (λούει) the children.

Middle: The mother is bathing [taking a bath] (λούεται).

In Greek the second sentence uses a middle verb because the mother is not bathing *something*. She is just bathing (herself). Or, as I have come to think of it, she is not so much doing the business of bathing as *experiencing* the business of bathing.

2) The verb is to some degree **reflexive**. Even though the verb has a direct object, the subject is doing the action to himself or in his own interest.

Active: The mother washes (λούει) the children's hair.

Middle: The mother washes her (own) hair (λούεται).

Once again, I suspect that the Greek ear heard the middle more as "The mother is *experiencing* the washing of her hair."

3) The verb is **causative**. The subject is not doing the action himself, but is arranging for someone else to do it.

Active: I educate (παιδεύω) my son. (I.e., I am his teacher.)

Middle: I educate (παιδεύομαι) my son. (I.e., I send him off to school where someone else will educate him.)

Or, yet again: "I am going through the *experience* of educating my son (rather than actually "performing the act of education on my son.")

4) A few specific verbs take on **a rather different meaning** (or so it may seem to English speakers) when they occur in the middle.

For example, the verb ἄρχω.

Active: You are *leading* (ἄρχεις) the soldiers.

Middle: You are *beginning* (ἄρχεαι) to speak.

In fact, of course, though the middle and active meanings may at first seem unrelated because English doesn't have a single word that applies to both notions, a bit of contemplation will usually reveal that there is a single semantic notion from which the two meanings arise. Here, **ἀρχ** communicates a notion similar to our "start." In the *active* it means *to start* <somebody else> (*transitive*), i.e., *to lead*. In the *middle* it means *to experience starting*, i.e., *to begin*.

Present middle forms

Present Indicative Middle

<i>Present indicative middle: Athematic verbs</i>		
	Singular	Plural
1 st person	ἵσταμαι (ἵστα / <u>μαι</u>)	ἵστάμεθα (ἵστα / <u>μεθα</u>)
2 nd person	ἵστασαι (ἵστα / <u>σαι</u>)	ἵστασθε (ἵστα / <u>σθε</u>)
3 rd person	ἵσταται (ἵστα / <u>ται</u>)	ἵστανται (ἵστα / <u>νται</u>)

<i>Present indicative middle: Thematic verbs</i>		
	Singular	Plural
1 st person	λούομαι (λου / <u>ομαι</u>)	λούόμεθα (λου / <u>ομεθα</u>)
2 nd person	λούεαι (λου / <u>εσαι</u>)*	λούεσθε (λου / <u>εσθε</u>)
3 rd person	λούεται (λου / <u>εται</u>)	λούονται (λου / <u>ονται</u>)

*In the 2nd singular, intervocalic sigma is lost.

Present Imperative Middle

<i>Present imperative middle: Athematic verbs</i>		
	Singular	Plural
1 st person	[None]	[None]
2 nd person	ἵτασο (ἵστα / <u>σο</u>)*	ἵτασθε (ἵστα / <u>σθε</u>)
3 rd person	ἱτάσθω (ἵστα / <u>σθω</u>)	ἱτάσθων (ἵστα / <u>σθων</u>) or ἱτάσθωσαν (ἵστα / <u>σθωσαν</u>)

*In the 2nd singular intervocalic sigma is retained.

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<i>Present imperative middle: Thematic verbs</i>		
	Singular	Plural
1 st person	[None]	[None]
2 nd person	λούου (λου/ε <u>σ</u> ο)*	λούετε (λου/ε <u>σ</u> θε)
3 rd person	λούέσθω (λου/ε <u>σ</u> θω)	λούντων (λου/ε <u>σ</u> θων) or λούετσαν (λου/ε <u>σ</u> θωσαν)

*In the 2nd singular, intervocalic sigma is lost.

There are *no middle forms* (indicative or imperative) of the *irregular verbs* for *to be* (ἐσ/) and *to go* (ἵ/).

Deponent verbs

A considerable number of Greek verbs are *never used with active endings and always occur in the middle*. Such verbs are called **deponent verbs**. They can also be described as *defective in the active voice* (that is, they don't have active voice forms). You needn't spend much time wondering what nuance Classical authors were trying to communicate by putting deponent verbs in the middle. The authors didn't *choose* to use the middle to convey some nuanced difference of meaning. They didn't have any choice: Educated people in their communities simply grew up using these verbs with middle endings—always.

A few *athematic* verbs (such as δύναμαι [δύνα/μαι], *I am able*) and a good many *thematic* verbs (such as μάχομαι [μάχ/ομαι], *I fight, I engage in battle*) are deponent. They are conjugated in all their forms just like any other middle verb.

How the lexicon lists deponent and non-deponent verbs.

Verbs that have active forms are listed by the present active 1st singular. The meanings of active forms are listed first. Then (if the verb uses middle forms) the meanings unique to the middle forms of the verb are listed, prefaced by *Mid:* (middle) or *Med:* (*medialis*, Latin for “middle.”) For example,

λούω to bathe <somebody>. *Med:* to bathe <oneself>, take a bath.

You can easily recognize *deponent verbs* in vocabulary lists and lexica because their entry has a middle ending: e.g., μάχομαι (since there is no form μάχω).

What now?

Review the *active* personal endings from *Chapter Six*. Make sure you have them memorized. (If you are having difficulty memorizing them, put them into some sort of chant with a beat.

Greek Before Christmas

It may sound silly, but it will tattoo them into your mind.) Then commit these *middle* endings to memory. When you start reading (in about a week), you will quickly find that your first priority in reading a sentence will be to identify the verb, and you'll need to know the personal endings to do that.