Deponents and feature mismatch

Laura Grestenberger
Lgresten@fas.harvard.edu

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1 Introduction

Deponents, broad definition: Verbs that take only non-active (middle or passive) morphology, but are semantically and syntactically active (Lat. dē-pōnere ‘lay aside’, sc. the verb’s passive meaning), in languages which morphologically distinguish between an active and a synthetic non-active voice.

Often used synonymously with the term Medio tantum.

Examples:

- Classical Greek: active vs. middle, e.g., act. λου-ô ‘wash’ — mid. λου-ô-mai ‘wash myself’

(1) Greek deponent: Homer, Iliad, 3.278-9:

καὶ ἠνέτηκαν ταμιὼν τιμόθων
and who.NOM.PL beneath passed.on.PTCP.ACC.PL men.ACC

timōthon
punish.2DU.PRES.MID.

“and (you) who in the underworld punish the men who have passed on”

- Vedic Sanskrit: active vs. middle morphology, e.g., act. vārdha-ti ‘grows sth.’ — mid. vārdha-te ‘grows’ (itr.)

(2) Vedic deponent: RV 2.23.4:

trāya-se jānāṁ yāṁ tūbhyaṁ dāsāṁ
protect-2SG.PRES.MID man.ACC who.NOM you.DAT worship.3SG.SBJ.ACT

“You protect the man who worships you’

- Latin: act. vs. passive endings, e.g., am-o ‘love’ — am-or ‘am loved’
Latin deponent: Plautus, *Mercator*, 4.2.4-6:

sed *coquos* ... ita *horta-ba-tur*
but *cooks.acc.pl* so *urge-3sg.pass*

"But ... so he urged on the cooks"

The goals of this talk:

- Show that a stricter definition of deponency is needed
- Deponency = feature mismatch, verbs that do not instantiate any of the canonical uses of non-active morphology
- Argue that deponents are agentive (i.e., not experiencer verbs, self-benefactives, etc.)
- Deponency occurs in the context of an imperfective aspectual head

1.1 Deponents ≠ Media tantum

Some examples of deponents in the broad use of the term\(^1\) (e.g., Lavidas and Papangeli 2007, Xu et al. 2007, Zambolou and Alexiadou 2013, and much of the historical linguistics literature, e.g., Floer 1975):


- The broad use encompasses too many different verb classes to be insightful

→ Determine which uses of non-active morphology are canonical. The rest = deponents

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\(^1\)Citation forms: Vedic Sanskrit, Hittite: 3sg.pres.; Latin, Classical & Modern Greek: 1sg.pres. I am grateful to Artemis Alexiadou and Katerina Zambolou for sharing their corpus of Modern Greek deponents with me. Most of the Modern Greek data cited here are from this corpus or from Zambolou and Alexiadou 2013.
1.2 Canonical uses of non-active morphology

Middle/non-active morphology tends to have the same set of functions cross-linguistically in languages that have an active–non-active voice opposition (Klaiman 1991, Kemmer 1993, 1994, Embick 1998, Kaufmann 2007, Alexiadou 2012, etc.):

(5) a. Anticausatives/inchoatives
   b. (Naturally) reflexive verbs, (naturally) reciprocal verbs, (self-benefactives)
   c. Dispositional/generic middles
   d. Medio-passives, (passives)

Descriptively “oppositional” middles: the middle is opposed to a corresponding active construction, e.g.:

(6) Modern Greek:
   a. Anticausative: act. keo ‘burn’ (tr.) — nonact. kegome ‘burn’ (itr.)
   b. Reflexives: act. pleno ‘wash’ — nonact. plenome ‘wash oneself’
   c. (Medio)passive: act. skotono ‘kill’ — nonact. skotonome ‘be killed’

Non-oppositional/non-alternating canonical uses of the middle (Kemmer (1993), Zambolou and Alexiadou (2013)):

(7) Modern Greek:
   a. States: ime ‘am’, kime ‘lie’
   b. Motion (translational/non-translational): erhome ‘come’, afiknume ‘arrive’
   c. Psych verbs/experiencer verbs/verbs of cognition: fovame ‘fear’, gevome ‘taste’, esthanome ‘feel’
   d. Denominal/deadjectival verbs: ironevome ‘am ironic’ (ironikos ‘ironic’), selinazome ‘am affected by the moon’ (selin ‘moon’)

1.3 Summary: “Feature mismatch”

If being a deponent means “laying aside” the canonical function associated with middle (or, in general, non-active) morphology, then the term should only be used for verbs with non-canonical syntax and meaning.

Table 1: Uses of middle morphology

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Oppositional middles</th>
<th>Canonical</th>
<th>Non-oppositional middles (Media tamen)</th>
<th>Non-canonical</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Anticausative</td>
<td></td>
<td>Psych/experiencer/cognition verbs</td>
<td>Deponents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reflexive/reciprocal</td>
<td></td>
<td>Verbs of motion</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dispositional</td>
<td></td>
<td>Denominal/deadjectival</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medio-passive</td>
<td></td>
<td>States</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
(8) Definition of deponency (general)
   “In an active—non-active voice system, all finite forms of a deponent verb are
   morphologically non-active, but syntactically active and do not instantiate any of the
   canonical uses of non-active voice.”

   “Canonical uses” established above based on comparative/typological work.

   **Voice mismatch verb:** A verb that fulfils the definition of deponency in (8).

   Cp. the papers in Baerman et al. (2007) on feature mismatches.

2 The syntax of mismatch verbs

Deponents (as defined in (8)) are transitive and agentive (Embick 1997, 1998, contra Zombolou and Alexiadou 2013):

2.1 Agent nouns

(9) Vedic deponent agent nouns
   a. trā-tār- ‘protector’ (trā ‘protect’)
   b. īḍi-tār- ‘praiser, worshipper’ (īḍ ‘praise’)
   c. kṣat-tār- ‘server’ (kṣad ‘serve, prepare’)

(10) Greek deponent agent nouns
   a. rū-tēr ‘protector’ (érūmai, rūomai ‘protect, guard’)
   b. lēis-tēr ‘robber’ (lēizomai ‘rob, plunder’)
   c. lōbē-tēr ‘slanderer’ (lōbomai ‘slander, mistreat’)

(11) Latin deponent agent nouns
   a. hortā-tor ‘inciter’ (hortor ‘urge, incite’)
   b. vēnā-tor ‘hunter’ (vēnor ‘hunt’)
   c. tū-tor ‘watcher, protector’ (tueor ‘watch, protect, guard’)

   Cp. Experiencer/psych verbs

(12) English:
   a. *fearer
   b. *smeller
   c. *feeler
   d. *forgetter

2.2 Passivization

Passivization of deponents is possible iff passive morphology that is distinct from middle morphology is available.
Vedic: distinct passivizing morpheme -yá- available in the imperfective (“present”) stem, deponents passivize (pace Gonda 1979):

(13) Vedic deponent passives

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Root</th>
<th>Deponent</th>
<th>Passive</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>īḍ</td>
<td>īṭ-te ‘praises’</td>
<td>īḍ-yá-te ‘is being praised’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ḍh</td>
<td>ind-dhé ‘kindles’</td>
<td>idh-yá-te ‘is being kindled’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ḍh</td>
<td>kindle-3SG.NONPAST.MID</td>
<td>kindle-PASS-3SG.NONPAST.MID</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ṛḥ</td>
<td>ráḥa-te ‘seizes’</td>
<td>ṛḥ-ya-te ‘is being seized’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ṛḥ</td>
<td>seize-3SG.NONPAST.MID</td>
<td>seize-PASS-3SG.NONPAST.MID</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Not possible in strictly bivalent voice systems (Latin, Modern Greek, Hittite), creating the impression that passivization of deponents is generally impossible.

2.3 Modern Greek

All examples from Embick (1997).

2.3.1 Clitic doubling

With certain psychological predicates, the agentive reading with an animate subject does not require clitic doubling of the object ((14) a.), but the psychological reading is ungrammatical without the doubled clitic ((14) b.).

(14) a. I Maria enohli ton Petro
    The Maria.NOM bothers the Petros.ACC
    “Maria bothers Petros”

b. Ta epipla *? (ton) enohlon ton Petro
    The furniture.NOM CL.ACC bothers the Petros.ACC
    “The furniture bothers Petros”

Transitive agentive deponents: no clitic doubling → their external argument is an agent rather than a cause/theme.

(15) I Maria hriazete ton Petro
    The Maria needs.NACT the Petros.ACC
    “Maria needs Petros”

2.3.2 Clitic left dislocation

Fronting of the object of a non-psych verb results in a marked clitic left dislocation (CLLD) structure. Transitive deponents trigger this CLLD construction, experiencer verbs do not (fronting of their object does not trigger CLLD):
(16)  *hriazome* ‘need’ (deponent)

a. O Petros *hriazete to vivlio*  
The Petros.*NOM* needs the book  
“Petros needs the book”

b. To *vivlio to hriazete* o Petros  
The book cl. needs the Petros  
“The book, Petros needs”

2.4 Conclusion

Deponents (narrow use) are transitive and agentive.

3 Deponency and aspect

- Different approaches to deriving non-active voice morphology, most assume a syntactic operation that “absorbs” an argument (cp. the passive)

Embick (1998): Non-active morphology is assigned post-syntactically according to the following rule:

(17)  $V \rightarrow V-VOC[NonAct]/_/_$  No external DP  
“Non-active voice is assigned when $v$ does not introduce an external argument”

- Assume that external argument means agent

- Kratzer (1996): The external argument is merged in the specifier of $vP$

- This rule covers all of the canonical uses of non-active voice morphology (anti-causative, reflexive (?), dispositional/generic, mediopassive) including the non-oppositional/*media tantum* uses (verbs of motion, statives, experiencer/psych verbs, (certain) denominal/deadjectival verbs)

- ... but it does not cover “mismatch” cases because these do have agents

Embick: Assume that deponents have an inherent, lexical [NONACT] feature.

Alternative: Transitive deponents are predicted by (17), but their external argument is merged by a functional projection above $vP$:

(18)  

\[
\begin{array}{c}
\text{XP} \\
\text{DP} \\
\text{AGENT} \\
\emptyset \\
\text{vP} \\
\text{v} \\
\text{VP} \\
[\text{NONACT}] \\
\text{DP}
\end{array}
\]
3.1 XP = imperfective aspect

Vedic Sanskrit: Alternating verbs make a present and an aorist stem, deponents usually only make a present (= imperfective) stem.  

Table 2: Vedic deponents and aspect

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>pres.act.</th>
<th>pres.mid.</th>
<th>aor.act.</th>
<th>aor.mid.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a. Alternating</td>
<td>✔️</td>
<td>✔️</td>
<td>✔️</td>
<td>✔️</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. Deponent 1</td>
<td>✗</td>
<td>✔️</td>
<td>✗</td>
<td>✗</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. Deponent 2 (rare)</td>
<td>✗</td>
<td>✔️</td>
<td>✗</td>
<td>✔️</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d. * Deponent 3</td>
<td>✗</td>
<td>✗</td>
<td>❌</td>
<td>✔️</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sample derivation:

(19) Vedic deponent 3sg.ipf. rabh-a-ta “was seizing”

TP + AgrP

T

[\text{PAST}]

-ta  \text{DP}_{AGENT}

\text{AspP}

\text{Asp}

\text{vP/Voice}

\text{v/Past}

\text{v/Voice}

\text{v/Voice}

\text{VP}

\text{V}

\text{RP}

\text{R}

\text{DP}

\text{rahh-}

1. Root node merges with a “verbalizing” category VP (cp. Harley 2009)

2. vP/VoiceP is merged and receives a [\text{NON-ACT}] feature because there is no external argument in its specifier


4. Asp[IPFV] is merged, introducing an external argument. This step is responsible for the active, agentive syntax of the verb, but cannot affect the [\text{NON-ACT}] feature on Voice, since this has already been sent to Spell-Out.

a. $T \leftrightarrow /-O/$

b. $\text{AGR} \leftrightarrow /-t-/ $

c. $\text{VOICE[nonact]} \leftrightarrow /-a-/ $  

$\rightarrow 3\text{sg.past.mid. /-ta/}$

4  Conclusion

- Separating deponents from the canonical uses of non-active voice morphology allows for clearer picture of the expected distribution of active vs. non-active morphology.
- Deponents display a mismatch between their syntactic behavior (active, transitive, agentive) and morphological exponence (non-active). Their external arguments are agents.
- Assuming that the external argument of deponents is introduced by an imperfective aspectual projection above $vP$ derives the non-canonical cases from the same principle as the canonical ones.

References


