

A tale of two deponents: Deponency, sound change, paradigm split, canonicity

It is almost inevitable to make use of Dickens' title for a study on passive, medio-passive and similar categories. In this case, the two deponents belong to two different languages, Latin and Old Irish, and the point is to observe how the same category, the ancient medio-passive that both languages have inherited from Proto-Indo-European, have reacted to the effect of an important and pervasive sound change such as the syncope of medial vowels.

A number of the questions raised in the call for papers are thereby more or less directly addressed in this study: since deponency is a lexically determined morphological feature, the main point of this paper is the 'diachronic behavior of lexicon-like morphology', but it also deals with the 'differential stability of subparts of morphology' when it looks at the diverging development of the same category in two different languages, among other questions which could be adduced in this regard.

What this paper does not consider is language contact: the Latin syncopa occurred in the 6th and 5th centuries BC, whereas the Irish one happened a millenium later, at a moment in which Latin was known by an educated elite at most, and the deponent verbs had (almost) disappeared from the Romance languages. No Romance language was spoken in Ireland at that time, and the assumable contacts between these and the Irish speakers could not be strong enough in order to decide the development of grammatical categories. This is therefore a tale of the parallel and independent developments of two twins, which runs as follows.

The Proto-Indo-European language had a category labeled as 'medio-passive', where one and the same set of endings was used to express both passive and medium. Both meanings potentially contrast with an active form, but even in languages such as Old Indic and Greek, there are verbs which only display medio-passive endings, the so-called *media tantum*. In Italic and Celtic, these are the deponent verbs, initially characterized by the fact that they have active meaning, but make (exclusive) use of the endings which other active verbs use to express passive meaning. In both Latin and Old Irish, this feature is completely lexicalized, and the latter even has a fully productive denominative verbal suffix *-(a)igithir*, which bears the so-called deponent (actually, 'ex-deponent') inflection.

In the recent prehistory of Latin and Old Irish, a strong syncopa took place: e.g. Latin *monstrum*, *sestertius* < **monestrom*, **semistertios*, but never in passive and deponent forms in which it should have happened, i.e. the passive *dicitur* 'is said' or the deponent *fungitur* 'performs' should have given > **dictur* and > **functur* respectively, but they preserve their medial vowel due to morphological and phonotactic reasons. By contrast, in Old Irish the syncopa of every second vowel can be observed in passive and deponent forms, but not in whichever manner. Consider the following examples, which include passive forms of both inherited and borrowed verbs: *-bendachthar* 'is blessed' < **-ben^í(e)đax(a)θor* < **-b^íen^íeđaxaθor* (← Lat. *benedica-tur*); *-léicthar* 'is left' < **-lég^í(i)θor* < **-légī-tor* < **-linkī-tor*; *-pridchider* 'which is preached' < **prid^í(i)xaθor* < **prid^íixaθor* (← Lat. *pr(a)edica-tur*).

Old Irish has therefore passive forms of verbs other than the *-(a)igithir* deponents either with (*-pridchi-der*) or without (*-bendach-thar*) pre-desinential vowel. But this is not admitted for the *-(a)igithir* deponents, which systematically oppose the passive without vowel (e.g. *suidig-thir* 'is put') to the deponent with vowel (*suidigi-thir* 'puts'), which is why they can be dubbed as 'ex-deponent'. A paradigm split must be considered in this specific lexical class.

Whereas Latin has avoided the morphological effects of the syncopa on the deponent and passive verbs, among other categories, Old Irish has taken advantage of the variation resulting from the syncopa, which can be observed in the non-*-(a)igithir* verbs, where passive forms without pre-desinential vowel are the majority. This tendency is the basis for the rule for the productive 'ex-deponent' (and thereby more canonical) *-(a)igidir* verbs.