



BOOK REVIEW

A Review of Voice and Mood: A Linguistic Approach

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Mathewson, David L. 2021. *Voice and Mood: A Linguistic Approach*. Essentials of Biblical Greek Grammar. Baker Academic. 191 pp.

The use of linguistics on the study of New Testament Greek is growing, but the discipline of linguistics is still in a good deal of flux, and that has limited its adoption and influence. This volume, *Voice and Mood: A Linguistic Approach*, seeks to provide a linguistically-informed approach to its subject and thankfully approaches its task with some of the modesty that is necessary for such a challenging task. David L. Mathewson teaches New Testament at Denver Seminary, and has coauthored (with Elodie Ballantine Emig) a Greek textbook, *Intermediate Greek Grammar: Syntax for Students of the New Testament* (Baker Academic, 2016). This present book continues that work's rather minimalist, form-equals-function approach to syntax, attempting—rather than multiplying syntactical categories—to get to the heart or central issue of its subject matter. It deals with the grammatical issues of voice and mood in Koine Greek verbs. As the book explains, finite Greek verbs are inflected for five features: aspect (some might add tense), voice, mood, person and number (p. 1), and this work deals with two of them. The book provides no explanation of its choice to study these two features of Greek verbs. Why not include all five features, or just study one? I suspect it is because there is so much already written on aspect (and tense), while voice and mood have received comparatively less attention, while person and number are relatively less complex. It may also be that this book, as the first in a series published by Baker Academic, needs to leave room for the publication of further volumes.

Each of the two main sections of the book follows a similar pattern, with an introduction, then a summary of recent scholarship in the field, followed by a discussion of how the book's chosen linguistic model systemic functional linguistics (SFL) contributes to understanding the topic. This approach is then applied to New Testament Greek in an extended analysis. This book reflects the influence of Michael Halliday, the British linguist and founder of SFL, and even more of Stanley Porter, the New Testament scholar and president of McMaster Divinity College. Porter has been influential in bringing the study of linguistics, particularly SFL, to the attention of the New Testament guild, through a large number of publications.

“Voice” normally refers to the relationship of the subject to the verb in a clause. Mathewson, drawing on Halliday’s notion of ergativity, holds that the choice of a speaker or writer to use a particular voice depends on the issues of causality and agency. Active verbs express “direct causality,” with the subject as “actor” or agent (p. 56). Passive verbs express indirect causality and external agency, while the subject is the “medium” (p. 56). The emphasis is on the effect on the subject, while agency is pushed to the background (p. 57). For middle verbs, the subject is “involved in producing the action but is not portrayed as the direct agent or cause.” Causality is internal, “attributed to elements within the process itself, in which the actor is involved” (p. 35), and the subject is the medium.

It is this last notion, that “the cause of the process is attributed to elements within the process itself” (p. 65), that is the most unclear in this book. Exactly what “elements within the process” are, or what “internal causality” means are not explained. There is contradiction, too. Mathewson cites Halliday (approvingly) to the effect that an action which is self-engendered, with no external cause, is *not* ergative (p. 29). Just two pages later he says that an action which is self-engendered *is* ergative (p. 31). Nevertheless, the idea of cause and agency as the meaning of grammatical voice is useful, though not comprehensive.

We can thank the author for abandoning the outworn notion of deponency. Middle voice verbs express degrees of subject-affectedness, and this can explain many of the choices of voice made by authors (though certain active intransitive and stative verbs can also express high degrees of subject-affectedness). The middle voice, as the least common of the three, might in certain circumstances be the most marked, except where lexical factors are involved, such as for middle-only verbs (p. 71). So-called passive deponents such as ἀπεκρίθη can be understood as emphasizing the subject’s response to external stimulus.

Some issues remain unaddressed. For example, why does Greek have separate middle and passive forms only in aorist and future verbs? Of course, the two tenses are related morphologically, and Mathewson notes that the advent of the distinct passive voice was a late development (pp. 45–47). Likewise the book does not explain why some verbs are active in one tense and middle in another, especially verbs which are active in the present tense but middle in the future tense.

The second half of the book (chapters 4–6) deals with verbal mood and offers a useful summary of current scholarship, though most of what is there may be found in modern intermediate grammars. The author starts with asserting a “fundamental distinction ... between indicative and nonindicative moods” with the indicative mood representing assertion, meaning “the author’s intention to portray the action as reality” (p. 95), while the nonindicative moods are nonassertive, expressing various “projections about reality” (p.

109). However, the “fundamental distinction” between indicative verbs and the others breaks down when we consider the overlaps between the use of future indicatives and both imperatives and subjunctives, and in light of the frequent use of the indicative mood to form questions. Mathewson does discuss questions at some length (pp. 101–104).

Mathewson places the indicative mood within the sphere of epistemic modality, “expressing the author’s judgment” or knowledge “about the certainty, likelihood or possibility of an event,” while the nonindicative moods largely express deontic modality, namely “the author’s judgment about obligation, permission or prohibition.” In this discussion Mathewson draws on F. R. Palmer’s *Mood and Modality* (2nd ed., Cambridge University Press, 1991), Stanley E. Porter’s “Systemic Functional Linguistics and the Greek Language” (pp. 9–47 in Stanley E. Porter et al. (eds.) *Modeling Biblical Language: Selected Papers from the McMaster Divinity College Linguistics Circle* [Brill, 2016]), and Vyvyan Evans’s *Cognitive Linguistics* (Edinburgh University Press, 2019). However, each of these works is clear that mood and modality are two different things, and none of them associates the indicative mood with epistemic modality. Mathewson does recognize that the mood system sometimes “cuts across the two types of modalities” (p. 91), but his treatment too easily conflates or confuses mood and modality. He is not correct, then, when he limits indicative verbs to the encoding of epistemic modality (p. 100).

He is on track, however, in declaring the indicative mood to be the unmarked (i.e. default) mood, “used when an author has no reason to use another” (p. 100). The insistence on the indicative mood as grammaticalizing *assertion* is generally helpful until questions are discussed, when, largely drawing on Porter, he classifies question-asking clauses as consisting of +assertive +interrogative (p. 101). Although Greek statements and questions can sometimes be identical in form, with only context deciding whether a verb is being asked, to call a question an assertion is I think somewhat confusing, especially to the intermediate Greek students who are the target of this book. Readers who need more help on questions might usefully consult Douglas Estes, *Questions and Rhetoric in the Greek New Testament* (Zondervan, 2017).

The difficulty, I suspect, lies with seeking to express the multiple effects of a single grammatical mood with one word. The search for such a term is probably just as helpful as finding the term itself, and some of this book’s summary terms are, I think, useful for readers. These include “expectation” for the future tense (pp. 131–33), “direction” for the imperative mood (pp. 122–27), “projection” for the subjunctive mood (pp. 109–11), and “projection + contingency” for the optative (pp. 116–21). This latter pair illustrates the difficulty with reducing the force of grammatical mood to a single expression. Even Mathewson, whose inclinations are to minimize the multiplication of categories, could not arrive at a single word which

summarizes the force of the least-common verbal mood in the New Testament. Earlier grammars often termed the optative the mood of *possibility*, so “projection + contingency” is actually more wordy. In the case of the subjunctive mood, “projection” is perhaps an advance over earlier grammars which labelled the subjunctive the mood of *probability*. In practice students will still need to learn the several different patterns in which subjunctives and optatives are used, and this book describes these briefly and well. The author recognizes the various contexts in which imperatives are used (request, prohibition, command), but insists that all these are still forms of “direction,” though he allows for “volition” to have its part as well (pp. 122–25, 127).

Chapter 6, covering both infinitive and participles makes some useful points. In temporal infinitive adverbial prepositional phrases, it is not the infinitive itself that grammaticalizes temporality, but the preposition (p. 148). Adverbial participles before the main verb tend to represent action preceding the action of the main verb, whereas if they come after the verb then the action they represent is likely subsequent to the action of the verb (p. 157). However, the attempt to summarize participles as showing that an author presupposes the reality of an action (p. 139) is only marginally helpful. To say that an infinitive “merely *refers to the action of the verb* and presupposes or states nothing about it” (p. 139, italics original) is more of a negative definition, emphasizing what the infinitive does not do, more than what it does.

Despite the few quibbles I have mentioned here, this book fills a need and helpfully summarizes a good deal of recent scholarship on Greek voice and mood. It is well-written overall, and easy to navigate, with useful indices. There are good examples taken from the New Testament (all with English translation added) and occasional discussions of the exegetical significance of grammatical features described. I have already started recommending this book to my students.

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