The origin of diathesis

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As a linguistic term, diathesis (διάθεσις) first occurs in the definition of verb given in the treatise on grammar attributed to Dionysius Thrax. There its value intersects those of activeness (ἐνέργεια) and affectedness (πάθος) with the result that it designates both semantic and formal properties. Starting from the analysis of the author of this treatise on grammar, whoever he may have been, the paper investigates the origin of diathesis as a linguistic term. The data gathered suggest that the term was originally taken from Aristotle's thought. Of course, how the value of diathesis then developed can also be outlined. This relates to the Stoics' contribution to linguistic analysis, which was also adopted in subsequent philosophical thought.

According to Dionysius Thrax, verbs express either activity or affection; they do not however express mediacy. Mediacy therefore is not a semantic property of the verb, while activity and affection are. The fact is, however, that in the detailed definition of Dionysius Thrax activity and affection are primarily semantic properties, but end up corresponding to the verbal endings traditionally referred to as active and mediopassive, respectively. It is not necessary to mention here that ancient Greek had only these two sets of endings; there was no specific third set for what is indicated by μεσότης. In this way the chief formal property of diathesis became the difference between the active and mediopassive sets of endings. From here one could imagine that the semantic properties of activity and affection constituted particular values associated with the nominal element with which inflectional endings agreed. In other words, the idea arose that they could relate to what is now called the thematic relationship of the subject with predication. At this point, it is well known that the subject may have various thematic roles in relation to the verb; however, possessing only two distinct series of verbal endings, ancient Greek could distribute them in two different sets of forms that were distinct from the two different sets of endings.

Considering further the definition of Dionysius Thrax, activity and affection appear to have a different status from that of time, person and number: the verb is a word expressing – that is, formally inflected according to the morphological categories of – time, person and number, but also expresses semantic values of "activity" and "affection". It can thus be derived that the categories of time, person and number are invariant, that is, they can be described as properties always present in the finite verb regardless of the predicative structure, while the notions of "activity" and "affection" are variations, that is, they are properties of the verb dependent on the predicative structure of the sentence. Yet according to Dionysius Thrax, diathesis should be considered as an overt morphological category of the finite verb on a par with the other six listed by him. It is thus clear that diathesis, with the two alternatives of activity and affection, maintains an original ambivalence because in one sense it can designate semantic properties and in another formal properties. Of course, there were no problems when in the Greek language the relationship between form and meaning was direct: morphemes for activity and affection exhibited a specific form and expressed a particular meaning. The reason for separating form and meaning resided in the fact that, in most cases, a direct relationship between form and meaning was lacking. The middle thus did not represent a distinct morphological class, but was useful only to accounting for these cases of non-relation between form and meaning.

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