

Why are 3rd conjugation deponent (passive) infinitives in =i, whereas the other conjugations have longer infinitives closer to the normal (active forms): =ari, -ēri, īri ?

In the Indo-European languages, infinitives are, at least in the origin, verbal nouns. Their endings are therefore originally noun endings. Usually a dative ending was used. You can still feel this, dimly, in some uses of the infinitive: I am able for running, i.e., able to run (*possum currere*); I owe to giving, i.e., I ought to give (*debeo dare*).

In Latin passive infinitives, the third conjugation form is actually the easiest to explain. We simply add -i, which is a dative ending elsewhere (as in the third declension) to the verb stem. In the other conjugations there has been contamination from the present active (normal) infinitives, which explains the presence of the -r-. That is, the Romans thought that their deponent/passive infinitives should sound more like their regular/active ones, and changed them—but the change never took in the 3rd conjugation.

The third conjugation is the most irregular in many respects, and often this means that it was resistant to change under the pressure languages experience to regularize forms. English past tenses are becoming more regular over time, for example. By one count, of 177 verbs that were irregular in Middle English (about 1200 years ago), just 98 remain irregular today. What's the past tense of "smite" ("smote" or "smitted")? Why is there an aisle at Schnuck's for "can" goods (rather than "canned" ones)? The more common a verb is, the less likely it is to be regularized in this way.

My data on English comes from:

<http://web.mit.edu/newsoffice/2007/language-1015.html>