PRE-Pre-Cartesian Linguistics

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Criticism of Cartesian Linguistics (Chomsky 1966) began soon after its publication; this criticism was spearheaded by Robin Lakoff and Keith Percival. Lakoff's paper at the 1966 LSA meeting in New York and her long review of the Port Royal Grammar attack Chomsky's views on both factual and theoretical grounds. Percival's paper at the Fourth CLS meeting dealt with Vaugelas, an important precursor of the work of Lancelot and Arnauld.

By now the notion of Cartesian linguistics as presented by Chomsky in 1966 and repeated in Language and Mind (1968) has been destroyed. And though I am not interested in criticizing Chomsky at this time, let me cite a few sentences from Language and Mind which may be relevant.

> This rationalist philosophy of language [the Cartesian] merged with various other independent developments in the seventeenth century, leading to the first really significant general theory of linguistic structure, namely the general point of view that came to be known as "philosophical" or "universal" grammar. (12)
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> ... it is interesting that although the Port Royal Grammar is apparently the first to rely in a fairly systematic way on analysis into surface structure, it also recognized the inadequacy of such analysis. (14)
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> I think there have been two really productive traditions of research that have unquestionable relevance to anyone concerned with the study of language today. One is the tradition of philosophical grammar that florished from the seventeenth century through romanticism; the second is the tradition [called] "structuralist" ... (19)

What I would like to do is talk about the views of language of some trué pre-Cartesians; pre-Cartesians by some four centuries. None of the authors I will mention is usually thought of as a grammarian, yet I believe I can demonstrate just how important their work is to us working today. I propose to mention St. Anselm (mid-eleventh century), Peter Helias (twelfth century), Pope John XXI (end of the thirteenth century), and to devote some time to Siger de Courtrai (beginning of the fourteenth century).

Anselm's de Grammatico points unshakingly toward Aristotle, and specifically to On the Categories and On Interpretation. The important Aristotelian statements in

the first of these may be represented by "Whatever is expressed in an incomplex fashion signifies a substance or a quality"; the second contains Aristotle's famed divisionof words into those which predicate things and those which have things predicated upon them: into what we might call nominal and verbal elements. What Anselm is interested in here is making sure that none of his readers (hearers?) confuse the notions of circumstances and qualities. Anselm -- unlike many of his classical and mediaeval fellows -- recognizes that words and things are not the same; as a result he nowhere falls into what we might call the Isidorian fallacy of etymologizing words on the basis of the physical items denoted by them. To a certain extent Anselm anticipates de Saussure in that he differentiates between the signifier (the word) and the signified (the thing) to the extent of responding to a question concerning literate with the point that the item could be either a quality or a circumstance:

> if your question concerns the word, then it is a word signifying quality;
> if, however, your question is about the circumstance, then it is a quality.

What we can assert then is that Aristotle and Varro, and their (valid) statements that objects and the words denoting them have no integral relationship, are resurrected by Anselm, who actually goes on to become the first grammarian/philosopher to use proto-Saussurian terminology: signifier and signified.

Peter Helias is seen by most historians of linguistics as the prime mover where speculative grammar is concerned (cf. Robins 1951:76). Though no one has bothered to write much about him in the past decade, there are a number of older works concerning his oeuvre. Peter's great work is a commentary on Priscian in which he attempts philosophical explanations for Priscian's grammatical rules. Peter remarked that there are as many grammatical systems as there are languages, but his two most important followers -- Roger Bacon and Siger de Courtrai -- proclaimed that there was one universal grammar underlying all human language and that this universal grammar was dependent upon the structure of reality and on human reason. For the authors of the grammaticae speculativae the philosopher not the grammarian was the author of grammatical rules. Bacon states this most succinctly: "non ergo grammaticus sed philosophus ... grammaticam invenit" (MS Bibl. Nat. Paris lat. 16297 fol. 131). I do not wish to linger with Peter Helias much longer at this time, but it may be worthwhile to give another, longer, Baconian quotation, so that it can be seen just how close some of the mediaeval modistae come to our contemporary concerns.

> He that understands grammar in one language understands it in another, as far as are concerned the essential properties of grammar. The fact that he cannot speak or comprehend another language is due to the diversity of words and their different

forms, but these are the accidental properties of grammar.

Robins (1951:79) is very hard on this attitude, going so far as to state that "expressed in such terms, a grammatical method and theory would not survive today." However, it must be admitted that as early as 1928, Hjelmslev argued that we must postulate a universal grammar which is manifested in various ways throughout the languages of the world (1928: chapter V, especially 268).

Petrus Hispanus, later Pope John XXI, is primarily concerned with the difference between the _significatio_ (the meaning of the word) and the _suppositio_ (the "acceptance of a term ... as denoting something"). Again, this may be one of the antecedants of the Saussurian dichotomy, but more importantly it is the ancestor of the conversation between Alice and the White Knight. Pope John differentiates between "man" as a lexical item and "man" in "Man runs," where "man" "is taken to denote Sortes, Plato and the rest of men. ... Of suppositions, one type is general, the other is discrete." Similarly, the White Knight differentiates the song, the name of the song, what the song is called, and what the name of the song is called -- and the tune is his own invention ["But the tune isn't his own invention...," as Alice remarks to herself.]. _John_, as we all know, is not the same in _John is a man_ and in _John is a name_.

In his _Logische Untersuchungen_, Husserl writes that modern grammar believes it necessary to base itself upon psychology and the empirical sciences. Opposed to this Husserl sees the older notions of aprioristic grammar. Grabmann (1926:105) points out that the study of speculative grammar, semantics and logical syntax can be traced to long before the Port Royal _Grammar_ and _Logic_ (pace Chomsky). Grabmann traces this development from Plato's _Cratylus_ to Papias in the mid-eleventh century to Huguccio in the twelfth century to the _Doctrinale_ of Alexander of Villedoux [Villedieux] at the end of that century and the _Graecismus_ of Eberhard of Bethune at the outset of the thirteenth century. But the real push came within the thirteenth century, for it is at this time that we begin finding works called _de Modis Significandi_, from which title we derive the name of a school: the _Modistae_. The oldest of these tracts is by Roger Bacon, the best known is that of Duns Scotus, the most interesting for the modern reader is that of Siger de Courtrai. If one reads Wallerand's edition (1913), Siger's ideas are easily accessible: he believes it necessary to set up the inner relationships between speculative grammar, logical syntax and semantics on the one hand and the _sophismata_ on the other.

There are questions as to just how things will work out that arise immediately; in unique terms Siger answers the logical questions. He is the only one of

the Modistae who tells us just how words can be determined by things outside of themselves. The relationship between the various levels of human life -- the modi essendi (levels of being), modi intelligendi activi/passivi (levels of understanding) and modi significandi activi/passivi (levels of language) are made clear. That, for example, which exists between the modus significandi and actual expression is a denominatio: just as we are able to name things because of the general concepts extant in the intellect (the general concept providing a specific label), so the modus significandi names the expression, that is, it gives the expression the possibility of describing something in a specific fashion. The modus significandi activus is thus the modus intelligendi activus furnished with an accidental relation to the utterance.

It was this very portion of Siger's work which was criticized by other Modistae. They claimed (validly) that Siger's scheme made the modi significandi dependant upon the intellectus practicus. Another problem arose over whether the modi significandi were themselves signs or not. Simon Dacus, Swebelinus and Johannes Avicula maintained that the modi significandi were active tokens of the modus intelligendi and the modus essendi; most of the Modistae protested against this Boethian formulation, which I will abandon here as I do not wish to be drawn further into a thirteenth century philosophical argument.

From the preceding it must be obvious just how interdependant Siger considered language structure, the natural order of things, and the operations of the human mind. Language, to Siger and the other Modistae, was much more than a mere "jumble of noises" (Robins 1951:83). According to Chomsky (1968:16) it was the Port Royal grammarians who fielded the notion of linking what we would call linguistics and psychology; a glance at the modistic treatises shows this claim to be vacuous. Let us look next at more of Siger's theory of language.

To Siger, the traditional parts of speech were only distinguishable in terms of their modi significandi activi; nouns are defined in terms of their "essential" mode of signifying substances; the verb is the part of speech which signifies modes of change, becoming, movement or existence; pronouns signify substance without reference to quality.

It must be admitted that Siger's classificatory framework is uncritically taken over from Priscian, but the justification and explanation of grammatical phenomena is a development of the metaphysical theory I discussed above. Interestingly, Siger's treatise is not formal in the technical sense; despite its modern outlook, it is a mediaeval philosophical treatise. The de Modis Significandi of Thomas of Erfurt, on the other hand, is full of what we might term formal grammatical descriptions: descriptions which are founded in actual syntactic data and phrased in terms of strict philosophical definitions.

Finally, let us turn to another of the Modistae, Albertus Magnus, and his de Modis Significandi of 1250. Albert puts forward four interesting questions:

> Is grammar a science?
> Are the modes of signification, of understanding, and of being the same?
> Do the modes of signification arise from the properties of things?
> Are the parts of speech distinguished by reference to what they mean or by the way they have their meaning?

These are formidable questions, but they become even more formidable when we realize that they bear a very close resemblance to certain questions posed in last Autumn's Camelot report. I am sure that neither Georgia Green, nor Jerry Morgan, nor Robert Binnick had heard of either Siger or Albertus Magnus last year, yet the ideas are there. We can thus no longer stop at the beginning of the seventeenth century or the end of the fifteenth when we search out the philosophic ancestors of Lakoff, McCawley, Postal, and Ross. At the end of her brilliant review of the Port Royal Grammar, Robin Lakoff remarks that

> the history of the field is too significant to be ignored as it has been, or brushed aside with a few words: scholars should devote themselves to an examination of the origins of modern linguistic theory: where did Sanctius get his ideas from? Where does transformational grammar really begin?

I must admit that I do not know the answers to these questions. But it must be obvious that the roots of universal grammar lie hidden somewhere in the twelfth or thirteenth centuries and that the progenitors of modern semantics are entombed in a somewhat earlier historical stratum.

APPENDIX

Three Interesting Quotes from Siger

Quoniam grammatica est sermocinalis scientia, sermonem et passiones eius in communi ad exprimendum principaliter mentis, conceptus per sermonem coniugatum considerans, conceptis autem mentis est.

Modus significandi activus est ratio quedam, ab intellectu voci concessa, secundum quod vox modum essendi significat. Modus significandi passivus est modus essendi per vocem significatus.

Non tamen modi significandi activi sunt in voce sicut in subiecto, quia modi significandi activi sunt quidam conceptus ipsius intellectus.

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