

Critical Considerations on *Syncategorematica*¹ Enzo Melandri

Translated by Alexander Ferguson

In his latest book, where he exemplifies how statistical analysis may be applied to lexical surveys, Rosiello shows at a certain point that to increase the resolution of the analysis, it is necessary to divide the words in the chosen sample into two broad classes. In one, we place all those words that have an independent meaning, roughly speaking: nouns, adjectives, verbs and adverbs; in the other, we place those words that do not mean anything in themselves, and whose only purpose is to connect up the other words in the phrase: articles, prepositions, pronouns, conjunctions and interjections.² Using the terminology of the Brentano School, the terms of the first class are called ‘categorematic’ or ‘autosemantic’; the others are called ‘syncategorematic’ or ‘synsemantic’.³ This differentiation is very important, since approximately half of the terms we use in discourse are synsemantic; that is, they do not have an independent meaning. Regardless of all statistical considerations, when it comes to the lexical study of semantics, it is clear that only the autosemantic words matter; for syntax, it is instead the synsemantic particles.⁴

I believe there is little doubt as to the utility of this distinction, at least in its first approximation. Rosiello’s analysis already gives proof of this. Instead, it is at the level of epistemo-gnoseological theory that perplexity over the diairesis ‘semantic/synsemantic’ tends to grow, ultimately becoming prohibitive, if the latter is interpreted as a dichotomy. In reality, it may be interpreted in many ways. It probably makes no difference at the level of the statistical analysis of a certain lexical sample whether the distinction is understood in one way or another, as long as consistency is maintained: the procedure itself means that any resulting errors tend to balance each other out. Thus we do not dispute the distinction’s practical utility in the specific case for which it has been proposed: first of all, because it appears undeniable, but additionally, because it is not within our competence to do so. The

¹ Translator’s Note: The present text is an English translation of an essay published by Enzo Melandri in 1966: ‘Considerazioni critiche sui syncategorematica’, in *Lingua e Stile*, I, 1966, 2, pp. 107–15.

² L. Rosiello, *Struttura uso e funzioni della lingua*, Firenze, Vallecchi 1965, pp. 129–30.

³ F. Brentano, *Die Lehre von richtigen Urteil*, Nach den Vorlesungen über Logik mit Benützung anderer Manuskripte aus dem Nachlass, Herausg. V. Franziska Mayer-Hillebrand, Bern, 1956, § 16, pp. 35–38; also in *Psychologie vom empirischen Standpunkt*, II (‘Von der Klassifikation der psychischen Phänomene’), ed. O. Krause, Leipzig, 1925, and III (‘Von sinnlichen u. noetischen Bewusstsein’), idem., also *Versuch über die Erkenntnis*, ed. A. Kastil, Leipzig, 1925, passim.

⁴ L. Rosiello, *op. cit.*, p. 131.

disagreement relates to certain questions of principle. In this sense, it is philosophical.

As we know, the distinction is ancient,⁵ or rather, to use De Mauro's word, archaic.⁶ Brentano reclaims the diairesis *categorematica/syncategorematica* from the mediaeval terministae: William of Sherwood, William of Ockham, Jean Buridan, Albert of Saxony; from here one reaches back to Boethius, and from Boethius to the Stoics and to Aristotle. According to Hoffman, one ends up all the way back in prehistory: the difference between the unity of sense that belongs to the λόγος – the proposition as a synsemantic system – and the multiplicity of the ἔπεα – names as extra-linguistic referents – is present in Heraclitus just as much as it is in Parmenides.⁷ It is just that their ways of understanding it are mirror images of one another. Heraclitus founds semantics on the name; Parmenides finds it on the proposition. Thus for Heraclitus, the λόγος must also have the ability to unify things that are incompatible with one another, while in Parmenides the presupposition of the identity of the λόγος leads to the depreciation of empirical referents: the meaning of the ἔπεα becomes convention and mere opinion. If we disregard mere historical contingencies, the entire issue is clear from the beginning: the theme and the problem, with the two possible solutions: nominalism and realism. Another tradition derives from Port-Royal logic. In the meaning of a term, one may distinguish 'extension' and 'intension' (or 'comprehension'). The extension depends on the reference, the intension on the system of signs. J. S. Mill prefers to speak of 'denotation' and 'connotation'. At the limit, a (proper) name only has a denotation; the opposite holds in the case of conjunctions. Analogously, Frege distinguishes between *Bedeutung* (denotation, reference) and *Sinn* (connotation, configuration). Even in mathematical logic, the division of signs into 'descriptive' and 'logical' is fundamental. The meaning of logical signs is exclusively defined by logical calculus.⁸ The variables of the calculus become descriptive when they are treated as names by means of their interpretation (or application).⁹

It is clear that the distinction presupposes the theory of *langage-nomenclature* or *calque de la réalité*, to borrow the terms of linguists,¹⁰ or rather of *Abbildung der Wirklichkeit*, in the terms of philosophers of language.¹¹ The principal inconvenience of this approach is that it leads to the overvaluing of language's referential function. This temptation is so strong (perhaps because it is connected to the hegemony of our visual sense of perception) that it ends up overpowering all critical scruples. For example, one cannot understand how the

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 130.

⁶ T. De Mauro, *Introduzione alla semantica*, Bari, 1966, passim.

⁷ E. Hoffmann, *Die Sprache u. die archaische Logik*, Tübingen, 1925, I ('Logos und Epos'), pp. 1–14.

⁸ Cf. R. Carnap, *Introduction to Symbolic Logic and its Applications*, New York, 1958, part I.

⁹ *Ibid.*, part II.

¹⁰ A. Martinet, *Eléments de linguistique générale*, Paris, 1960

¹¹ L. Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, London, 1955 (1922), 2.1–3.23.

statistical analysis of lexical semantics, namely, the study of the referential function of language, can provide the basis for determining language's poetic function.¹² In theory, the two functions ought to be autonomous.¹³ If they are, neither of them may count as the foundation for the other. One may object that in linguistics autosemantic words do not just include names (in the logical sense of denotative signs), but everything in speech that may assume an emotive, connotative, emphatic or poetic (and not just referential) function; moreover, even one and the same name (in the linguistic sense of signifier) may assume different meanings according to the different functions for which it is employed. However, the first objection, if accepted, makes it impossible to distinguish the semantic parts of discourse from the synsemantic parts of discourse; and the second dismantles statistical lexical analysis. A question, for example, is the expression of a desire, an invitation to respond, a call to attention, or a Socratic exercise; it can even be an assertion, if it is 'rhetorical'. If each falls under semantics, then it is unclear which autosemantic words would provide for their expression. Secondly, statistical lexical analysis can only make sense of the *signifiers*. Semantics is left out.

Perhaps the distinction 'semantic/synsemantic' can be saved, if we understand it in a relative sense: not as a dichotomy with an excluded middle, but rather as a dipolarity between two extremes enclosing all intermediate cases. Plato seems to understand it in this way, when, between the descriptive species of ideas (so to speak) and the logical species ('all-pervasive', διὰ πάντων διεληλυθία),¹⁴ he inserts a third mediating one.¹⁵ Aristotle puts the matter more clearly. The autosemantic words are ὄνομα and ῥῆμα. Names are those words that can have a meaning even when they are taken by themselves, independently of the phrase in which they are embedded.¹⁶ Verbs are like names, but they also 'co-signify' (προσημαίνει) time and a certain connection (σύνθεσιν τινα).¹⁷ This property (like the declination of names, after all) has a synsemantic character. The non-signifying parts of speech are the σύνδεσμος and the εἶναι ἢ μὴ εἶναι. The conjunction is obviously φωνὴ ἄσημος.¹⁸ The copula expresses the pure synsemantics of the verb in an abstract way. In itself, it has no autonomous signification, οὐδὲ γὰρ τὸ εἶναι ἢ μὴ εἶναι σημειῖόν ἐστι τοῦ πράγματος, but it co-signifies a connection that cannot be comprehended without its terms, προσημαίνει δὲ σύνθεσιν τινα, ἣν ἄνευ τῶν συγκεimenῶν οὐκ ἔστι νοῆσαι.¹⁹ In the Middle Ages there were long debates over the question of the *transcendentalia* (substantial attributes, namely, those that necessarily belong to all

¹² L. Rosiello, *op. cit.*, iv.

¹³ *Ibid.*, iii.

¹⁴ *Soph.*, 255 e³⁻⁴

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 254 b⁷-c¹

¹⁶ *De int.*, ii, 16a¹⁹-b³; *Poet.*, xx, 1456b²⁰-1457a³⁰.

¹⁷ *De int.*, iii, 16b⁶⁻²⁵; *Poet.*, xx, 1457a¹⁴⁻¹⁸.

¹⁸ *Poet.*, xx, 1456b²⁸-1457a⁸.

¹⁹ *De int.*, iii, 16b²²⁻²³; 16b²⁴⁻²⁵.

entities, no matter what they are), which were understood in either a univocal, equivocal, or analogical sense. The question is originally connected to the semantics of the *nomina divina*, but gradually broke away from it to reveal a strictly logical nucleus.

Despite its ancient origins, nominalism has always managed to pass as the party of the *logica modernorum*. It undoubtedly has the advantage of great conceptual economy. On the one hand, there are names, whose meaning is given by their empirical referents: things according to the physicalist interpretation; sensations according to the phenomenalist interpretation. On the other hand, there is the connective system, whose sense is revealed by the analysis of language or mind. ‘If we take in our hand any volume’, says Hume, ‘let us ask, “Does it contain any abstract reasoning concerning quantity or number?” No. “Does it contain any experimental reasoning concerning matter of fact or existence?” No. Commit it then to the flames: for it can contain nothing but sophistry and illusion’.²⁰ In itself, the conclusion appears obvious. However, it depends on a premise that grants other, less acceptable consequences. In this regard, the most interesting is the one that Quine criticises as a ‘dogma’ of empiricism, namely, the theory that all propositions may be divided into two broad classes: analytic and synthetic. To verify the first, one only requires pen and paper, since their sense is purely logical; for the others, which concern truths of fact, one must resort to extra-linguistic reference. The ‘dogma’ consists in postulating a complete disjunction between the two classes, that is, in conceiving the distinction ‘analytic/synthetic’ as a dichotomy.²¹ The parallelism between this conception and the one with which we are occupied is clear. The first refers to the logic of propositions; the second refers to the logic of terms (predicates). It is interesting to note in this regard that in the 1920s Carnap, after having reclaimed from Russell and Frege the distinction between the two fundamental types of intra-propositional signs — *Eigennamen* (proper names) and *ungesättigte Zeichen* (incomplete symbols), namely predicates — warns that this distinction must be understood in a non-absolute, comparative sense.²² Thus, even modern logic confirms for us that the distinction ‘semantic/synsemantic’ ought not to be intended as a dichotomy.

Some important consequences derive from this. The first is that nominalism ends up being unsustainable. In fact, it requires the complete disjunction of analytic and synthetic propositions, as well as the disjunction of the correlative synsemantic and semantic terms. Modern logic authorises this conclusion. Indeed, closer inspection shows that it does not only exclude realism, but nominalism too. One

²⁰ D. Hume, *Enq.*, xii, end.

²¹ W. V. O. Quine, ‘Two Dogmas of Empiricism’ in *From a Logical Point of View* in *Nine Logico-Philosophical Essays*, Cambridge, Mass., 1961 (1953), pp. 20–46.

²² R. Carnap, *Der logische Aufbau der Welt*, Hamburg, 1961 (1928), § 27: ‘Es sei jedoch bemerkt, dass diese Unterscheidung im Grunde keine logisch scharfe Unterscheidung ist [...]. Vielleicht ist der hier gemachte Unterschied nu rein gradueller u. daher die Wahl der Grenzlinie im gewissem Grade Willkürlich’ (p. 35).

should keep Russell's criticism of Frege's Platonism in mind; but one should not forget that Frege is the founder of modern logic by means of the critique of that form of nominalism called 'psychologism'.

Another important consequence, strictly connected with the first, derives from the fact that nominalism (in the mediaeval sense) requires the theory of the 'univocity of being': namely (recalling Aristotle's analysis of the copula) the theory of the univocity of the synsemantic system, or, the thesis of the unity of language and the ideal language *[lingua]*. We refer to the common thread that runs from Lully to the early Wittgenstein. If one refutes nominalism, one must also refute the theory of the univocity of being. Moreover, if the conclusion is correct, the only thing to do is to turn to the other two theories. The theory of the 'equivocity of being' corresponds to Platonic realism. In reality, it was not proposed by Plato, but rather by Plotinus: he conceived the transcendentals as μέγιστα γένη in a descriptive sense.²³ This means that every synsemantic system constitutes a species of *haecceitas*, an individual incomparable with any other. What is normally called the 'reification' of universals has its origins in their entification as individuals. From here derives their infinite proliferation and the reciprocal incommunicability of different systems. There remains the doctrine of the *analogia entis*. It is easy to imagine the possible difficulties faced by this theory. In regards to our problem, it leads to a type of language in which, as the semantic reference varies, the synsemantic system also varies (although less so). In other terms, it is a matter of combining two presuppositions that appear irreconcilable in an all-or-nothing logic: the plurality of languages and their interaction and communicability.²⁴

Apart from this, there are more concrete considerations that recommend we relativise the distinction between the semantic and the synsemantic, and which relate to the logical schematism of language. In logic manuals, adjectives are treated as substances. 'Socrates is human' always signifies 'Socrates is a human' in the sense of an individual belonging to a class. But, 'having a property' is not the same thing as 'being the element of a class'. In fact, properties admit intensive degrees, which the alternative case does not grant. In other words, adjectives admit comparatives, nouns do not. In noun predication, every classification has a corresponding complement with which it forms a complete disjunction. For example, there is a contradiction between 'Argo is a dog' and 'Argo is not a dog' (that is, 'Argo is a non-dog'): one of the propositions must be true and the other false, regardless of what Argo is. One may do the same with adjectives. For example, 'a is white' and 'a is not white' (a is non-white). However, the formula is already slightly forced, since the pair are no longer perfectly symmetrical. The first member means 'a has whiteness'; the second means 'a is not a white thing'. This becomes clearer if we order the adjectives as pairs of contraries, rather than as contradictory pairs. In fact, every adjective admits a contrary; names do not, except for nouns formed from

²³ *Emm.*, VI, 1-3, specifically for the discussion dedicated to *Soph.* see VI, 2, viii³⁵⁻⁴⁸.

²⁴ This is not the place for an exhaustive discussion of the problem; therefore, I am limited to referring to a work on the theory of analogy (in the sense indicated) that I hope to publish soon.

adjectives. Thus we have ‘*a* is white’ and ‘*a* is black’. Here, the relationship is between contraries and not contradictory pairs: in fact, the two propositions may both be false. If, however, one of the two is true, then the other must be false. The opposition of contraries is not elicited by ἀπόφασις, but by στερήσις. In every pair of contraries, one term may be conceived as the privation of the other. But there is more to it: the concept of privation, in the Aristotelian sense, is subject to gradations, so it can account for comparatives. If we establish a linear ordering between two opposite extremes, for example, maxima of ‘hot’ and ‘cold’, then we get a logical model that is not only able to explain comparatives, but also adjectives of all degrees. To sum up, one may say that, in terms of their logical schematism, adjectives are distinguished from nouns by the fact that they admit at least two dimensions of symmetry: not only classificatory contradiction according to the excluded middle (‘white/not-white’), but also dipolar contrariety (‘white/black’) and comparative subcontrariety (‘more (or less) white/more (or less) black’) according to a principle of included middle.²⁵

In conclusion, are these characteristics semantic or synsemantic? Given that they lend themselves to logical representation, one might consider them synsemantic. But this is not a good argument. One must not forget, in our case, that if the logical schematism inherent in the use of nouns may be used to individuate ‘primary qualities’ (the objects of the *Anschauung*, according to Kant), the schematism of the adjective, in the sense expounded above, holds equally well with regard to ‘secondary qualities’ (the degrees of *Empfindungen*, also according to Kant).²⁶ Things either are or are not according to a principle of rigid bivalence; but the sensations that we have of them are or are not in varying transition. In perception, according to Kant, we combine two enantiomorphic schematisms: the discontinuity of intuition and the continuity of sensation.²⁷ This is also true, one might add, for abstract thought: mathematics combines the noun sense of cardinal numbers, whole and positive, with the adjectival sense of the ordered series of real numbers. Analogous considerations can be made regarding verbs and the link between their schematism and the dynamic or ‘tertiary qualities’: the sense of time, causality, and so on.²⁸ But the point already seems clear enough.

It is common to identify logic with metalanguage. But to talk about logic in linguistic terms is just as metaphorical, no more, no less, than talking about it in psychological terms as was done in the past. Logic is essentially the theory of inference. Problems of meaning are logically relevant only insofar as they may be reduced to problems of inference. Inference is nothing besides a particular case of calculus. To execute a calculus one may use various materials: fingers, pebbles, the imagination, the voice, signs on a wall or on paper, diagrams, tables, the keys of a

²⁵ This entire question is picked up with a certain degree of freedom by B. Snell, *Der Aufbau der Sprache*, Hamburg, 1952².

²⁶ *Kr. D. r. Vern.*, Table of Principles of the Pure Understanding: B 197 s.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, spec. B 207–218.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, Analogies of Experience: B 218–65.

computer, a slide rule, etc. The concept of calculus is extra-linguistic. I can also execute it using linguistic means: but then language is only the extrinsic vehicle of its realisation. The critique of nominalism demands a radical repression of the tendency to commit the fallacy of *suppositio materialis*, which inheres in every conception of logic as *scientia sermocinalis* [analysis of language], whether ancient or modern. ‘The word “man” contains four letters’ is a metalinguistic proposition, but it is not logical. And it is clear that the specific difference (if one objects that not all metalinguistic propositions are logical) demands for its definition an extra-linguistic criterion: namely, that of calculus. If this is valid, the concept of calculus cannot be identified with the concept of a synsemantic system. Rather, this represents the vehicle by which a calculus can receive a semantic application. To use an analogy that is perhaps not entirely amiss:²⁹ the concept of a calculus is *structural*, but to this extent (unlike linguistics), it is generic; that is, it is deprived of a paradigmatic specification of correlated units (of types of variables). This ought to explain the infinite metalinguistic regression encountered when one tries to define what a calculus is. The concept of application (or interpretation) is instead *systematic*, insofar as it realises the structure’s potentials in the various phenomena of syntagmatic combination. On the basis of this model, synsemantic terms would define the ‘system’ rather than the ‘structure’. In Aristotelian terms, what is here called ‘systematic’ would be related to every passage from the potential to the actual, to the extent that it is explicable in a functional manner. In this way, the referential (semantic) function would come to depend on the metalinguistic (synsemantic) function, and on all other functions, according to a much stricter interrelation than happens in the usual representational theories. If in fact the problems of meaning and sense, that is, semantic and synsemantic problems, are to be explained in a functional and not a structural manner, then for this reason alone the spectre of representationalism is exorcised. The latter presupposes the isomorphism between the structures of two different realities: language and reality, or language and thought. But if the correlation is between structure and functions, that is, between a potentiality and its actualities, then isomorphism is inconceivable in principle.

This thought lends itself to many apparently brash generalisations. Ethnology, sociology, the historical sciences, the theory of evolution, cybernetics, neurology, the theory of psycho-physical isomorphism, economics, and who knows what else are all in some way affected. Here we confine ourselves to pointing out that the rejection of both realism and nominalism by the science of language, which emerges from the preceding considerations, must necessarily result in a vigorous revival of what in other eras was called ‘conceptualism’, namely (to use the philosophical jargon), the theory of the *‘analogia entis’*. Characteristic of this theory is the distinction between two levels of language and correspondingly two levels of reality: that of the phenomenal or observable and that of the noumenal or model; furthermore, it recognises that the fit between the two levels is not mediated by

²⁹ For the terminology used here, cf. L. Rosiello, *op. cit.*, ii, esp. pp. 34–35.

logical reason, but only by analogical reason. Nor would it go amiss to observe that analogy, morphologically speaking, consists in ‘that resemblance of structures which depends upon similarity of function, as in the wings of insects and birds’.³⁰

³⁰ Ch. Darwin, *Orig. Of Spec.*, Glossary; analogy is opposed to homology, which is the resemblance of anatomical structure independently of function, ‘as in the case of the arm of a man, the foreleg of a quadruped, and the wings of a bird’. Cf. also Arist., *Hist. An.*, II, i, 497b^{32–34}.