



The birth of a grammatical category: the case of the adjective class

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ABSTRACT

One of the main differences between Greek-Latin parts of speech theory and the parts of speech theory of so-called traditional linguistics lies in the presence of the adjective as an independent word class, but hitherto the literature on the topic has not discussed this question specifically. The paper therefore analyses the definitions of the noun, the verb and the epithet-adjective class from Dionysius Thrax to the Port Royal grammar with the aim of demonstrating that the birth of the adjective as an independent word class, as well as the stabilization of the labels *nomen substantivum* and *nomen adjectivum* with reference to the common noun and the adjective, depend on the reinterpretation of Aristotle's metaphysics in the light of Neo-platonic ontology in the Middle Ages.

KEYWORDS: history of linguistics, parts of speech, philosophy and grammar.

1. Introduction

In a famous work, Hockett (1954) divides the history of linguistics into two phases: 'traditional linguistics', from the Middle Ages to American Structuralism, and 'modern linguistics', from Sapir and Bloomfield onwards. Interestingly enough, Hockett starts traditional linguistics from the Middle Ages rather than from Greek-Latin grammar.

The reason for this choice can be imagined: although the traditional linguistics is by and large a continuation of the ideas sketched in Greek and Latin grammar, its parts of speech theory differs from the Greek-Latin one. While the traditional grammars show a tripartite division between the noun meaning substances, the verb meaning actions and the adjective meaning qualities (Arnauld and Lancelot, 1660: 59-60), the Greek-Latin parts of speech theory is based on a bipartition between two classes, the noun and the verb, plus a second-level division between nouns used as heads and nouns used as modifiers within the phrase, but it does not embrace an autonomous adjective class. The main difference between the Greek-Latin parts of speech

theory and the parts of speech theory of traditional linguistics thus lies in the presence of the adjective class, but the literature on the history of parts of speech has never discussed the topic specifically¹.

The present work aims to demonstrate that the birth of the adjective class depends on a problem of meta-semiotic translation. The problem concerns not only the literary translation of Gk. ὄνομα through Lat. *nomen* (*substantivum*), Gk. ῥῆμα through Lat. *verbum* and Gk. ἐπίθετον through Lat. *appositio* and *adiectivum*, ὑπαρκτικόν through Lat. *subiectum* and *substantivum*, it rather concerns the translation and the interpretation of the whole Greek-Latin parts of speech theory (two major linguistic non-ontological classes plus a second-layer division between nouns used as heads and as modifiers within the phrase) into a new theory which may appear similar to the former, but is effectively based on a different linguistic classification and different philosophical assumptions (three major classes established on a single plane which is both linguistic and ontological). For demonstrating our claim the definitions of the noun, the verb and the adjective-epithet class from Plato to Port Royal's grammar will be compared and contrasted with the goal of showing that the reinterpretation of Aristotle's metaphysics in the Middle Ages triggered a deep change in the definition of parts of speech. However, the grammarians, who failed to perceive the changes in the interpretation of Aristotle's theory, did not even see the change in the definitions of word classes and presumed to continue the same parts of speech theory found in Priscian when they used the traditional labels of *nomen substantivum* and *nomen adiectivum*.

2. *The definition of the major word-classes in Greek grammar*

Greek grammar derives from the interaction of two main research lines, Aristotle's philosophy of language and the Stoics' logic. However, while the Stoics were interested in the compilation of descriptive grammars, Aristo-

¹ For the history of the parts of speech between Antiquity and the Middle Ages, see ROBINS (1966), MATTHEWS (1967), JOLIVET (1981), monograph number 23, file 92 of *Langages* (1988), LALLOT (1988, 1992, 1999), AUROUX (1988, 2000), LUHTALA (2005: 129 ff.), ALFIERI (2006), SWIGGERS and WOUTER (2002, 2011). On adjective class specifically, see IOVINO (2012: 3-74). However, none of these papers or those quoted in notes 20 and 27 discusses the birth of the adjective class and scholars often translate Lat. *adiectivum* simply as "adjective", without considering that this term does not refer to the word class that we usually label as *adjective* until the late Middle Age.

tle's theory supplied most of the conceptual framework underlying the science of grammar, as the theory of parts of speech shows².

2.1. *The philosophical definition of parts of speech*

The theory of discourse and its parts (τὰ μέρη τοῦ λόγου) antedates the birth of grammar³. Plato (5th-4th BC) identifies the basic constituents of discourse (*Crat.* 425a1 and, especially, *Soph.* 262a1 ff.): the verb is “the indication that relates to the actions” (τὸ μὲν ἐπὶ ταῖς πράξεσιν ὄν δῆλομα ῥῆμά που λέγομεν); the noun is “the vocal sign applied to those who perform the actions” (τὸ δὲ γ’ ἐπ’ αὐτοῖς τοῖς ἐκείνας πράττουσι σημεῖον τῆς φωνῆς ἐπιτεθὲν ὄνομα). Although formerly ὄνομα meant “word, denomination, glory” and ῥῆμα “word, expression”, Plato uses both terms technically in the sense of “noun, subject” and “verb, predicate” (Lalot, 1992: 127, 1999: 59).

Aristotle (4th BC) adds the conjunction (σύνδεσμος) as the third part of speech (*Rhet.* 1407a21-26), the article (ἄρθρον) as the fourth (*Poet.* 1456a6-10) and substantially refines Plato's definition of the noun and the verb (*De int.* 16a19)⁴:

ὄνομα μὲν οὖν ἐστὶ φωνὴ σημαντικὴ κατὰ συνθήκην ἄνευ χρόνον, ἧς μὴδὲν μέρος ἐστὶ σημαντικὸν κεχωρισμένον (“the noun is a vocal form with conventional timeless meaning, no part of which is significant separately”).

ῥῆμα δὲ ἐστὶ τὸ προσσημαῖνον χρόνον, οὗ μέρος οὐδὲν σημαίνει χωρὶς· ἐστὶ δὲ τῶν καθ’ ἑτέρου λεγομένων σημεῖον. Λέγω δ’ ὅτι προσσημαίνει χρόνον, οἷον ‘ὑγίεια’ μὲν ὄνομα, τὸ ‘δ’ ὑγιάινει’ ῥῆμα· προσσημαίνει γὰρ τὸ νῦν ὑπάρχειν. Καὶ αἰεὶ τῶν ὑπαρχόντων σημεῖόν ἐστὶ, οἷον τῶν καθ’ ὑποκειμένου (“the verb is what consignifies

² For the polemics between the two traditions, see Ammonius' commentary on Aristotle (BUSSE, 1897: 43; SVF II, 99), PRISCIAN (*Inst. or.* II.15.5 = GL II, 54.5), Servius' comment on Donat (GL IV, 489.21), and, more recently, ARENS (1984: 52), BELARDI (1985, 1990), BLANK and ATHERTON (2003), LUHTALA (2005: 12, 20).

³ At the beginning of the Greek tradition, parts of speech could have different names (BRANDENBURG, 2005: 55). Aristotle calls them τὰ μέρη τοῦ λόγου in *De int.* 16b27, but τὰ μέρη τῆς λέξεως in *Poet.* 1456b20. Ammonius says that the latter collocation is that of philosophers, while the former is that of grammarians (BUSSE, 1897: 12, 16 ff.). On the difference between λέξις and λόγος, see also LO PIPARO (1999). Furthermore, the label τὰ μέρη may be substituted with that of τὰ στοιχεῖα “the elements”, especially in the Stoic tradition (ARENS, 1984: 68).

⁴ See *Poet.* 56b20 for a similar view. See ARENS (1984: 21 ff.) for the translation of both passages, BELARDI (1975) for Aristotle's theory of language, MONTANARI (1988) for the textual problems of Aristotle's *Poetica*, and GUSMANI (2004, 2005) for the translation of σημαίνω.

time, no part of it has separate meaning; it is always the sign of what is said of something else. By *consignifies* time I mean that, for instance, ὑγιεῖα ‘health’ is a noun, but ὑγιαίνει ‘is healthy’ is a verb, because it additionally signifies its being now in someone. And it is always the sign of something said concerning another, for instance, of a subject”).

Aristotle defines the ὄνομα and the ῥῆμα through a multifaceted definition. On the one hand, a purely linguistic clue is provided: the presence of tense reference (the verb *consignificat tempus*, as Boetius translated). On the other, a philosophical clue is used: the noun is what exists for itself, it is the substrate and the subject of the predication (ὑποκείμενον, which Boetius translated as *subiectum*); the verb is neither a substance nor a substrate, but an accident, because it predicates something of a different entity, the noun-subject⁵.

However, also the philosophical difference between the noun and the verb is justified from the linguistic point of view, since, in Aristotle’s theory, the verb is really the accidental part of the sentence (*Metaph.* 1017a28, *Anal. Pr.* 51b12). According to Aristotle, in fact, each finite verb, e.g. ὑγιαίνει “he is healthy”, is fully equivalent to a participle plus the verb “to be”, e.g. ὑγιαίνων ἐστί “he is being healthy”. Moreover, since the participle is a nominal form and nominal predicates without the copula are perfectly possible in Greek, the sole noun ὑγιαίνων can be used as a full predicate, e.g. Σωκράτης ὑγιαίνων “Socrates is (the one who is being) fine”. According to this theory, therefore, the noun really is the most substantial part of the discourse, since its absence precludes the existence of the whole λόγος, while the absence of verbs does not have the same effect, since each verb can be substituted by a noun-participle with or without a copula (ἐνδέχεται ἄνευ ῥημάτων εἶναι λόγον “a discourse is possible without verbs”, *Poet.* 1457a27).

In addition to the noun and the verb, Aristotle also mentioned the ἐπίθετον. However, he does not include the ἐπίθετον in the list of the traditional parts of speech provided in *Poet.* 1456b20 and employs this term only in the *Rhetoric*, when poetic style is analysed (1405a10; 1405b21-23;

⁵ Here and in the following, we use the Engl. *substance* and the corresponding adjective *substantial* to translate Lat. *substantia* and *substantialis*, which, in turn, are used to render the Aristotelian concepts of οὐσία, ὑπόστασις and, on occasions, ὑπαρξίς and ὑποκείμενον (see ALFIERI, 2006: 77 ff.). In the same way, Engl. *accident* and *accidental* are used as equivalents of Lat. *accidens* and *accidental*, which, in turn, translate Gk. συμβεβηχός, παρεπόμενος or ἐπιτρέχων.

1406a10-12, 19-24, 30; 1407b31; 1408b11). Therefore, in Aristotle the term ἐπίθετον does not have the grammatical meaning “epithet” that became usual later; it is rather conceived as any kind of ornamental “periphrasis” that can be added to another element of the λόγος, irrespective of its being a noun (ὁ πατρός ἀμύντωρ “the killer of the father”, 1405b21), an adjective (τὸν ὑγρὸν ἰδρωῶτα “wet sweat”, 1406a19), a compound (ῥοδοδάκτυλος “rose-fingered”, 1405b18) or a multi-word genitival expression (τῆ τῆς ψυχῆς ὄρμη “to the rush of the soul”, τοὺς τῶν πόλεων βασιλεῖς νόμους “the sovereign laws of the city”, 1406a19)⁶.

In sum, Plato found the most important parts of the λόγος, the noun-subject and the verb-predicate. Aristotle elaborated the difference between substance and accidents as part of a general theory of being, and adapted the substance-accident contrast as tool for language study (Belardi, 1975: 38 ff.): the noun-subject, which cannot be missing from discourse, is the substance-substrate of the λόγος; the verb-predicate, which is tense-marked, refers to a different entity and can be dropped without prejudicing the existence of the λόγος, is the accident. In the first, philosophical, theory of parts of speech, two major word classes are given, the noun and the verb. The noun is labeled as substantive (ὑποκείμενον), but it is labeled as such because it refers to the substantial part of the λόγος, not because it refers to individual single substances; the epithet (ἐπίθετον) is a stylistic ornament typical of the poetic style rather than a grammatical concept.

2.2. *The grammatical definition of parts of speech*

Aristotle’s influence progressively spread to the descriptive grammars of Stoic origin, as the common employment of the substance-accident contrast in the definition of the parts of speech confirms.

In Dionysius Thrax’s *Τέχνη γραμματική* (2nd-1st BC), the first grammar of the Western world, six classes are added to the two already identified by Aristotle and the traditional number of eight parts of speech is canonized: the noun (ὄνομα), the verb (ῥῆμα), the conjunction (σύνδεσμος), the participle (μετοχή), the article (ἄρθρον), the pronoun (ἀντωνυμία), the preposition (πρόθεσις) and the adverb (ἐπίρρημα). However, the defini-

⁶ Modern scholars confirm that in Aristotle’s *Rhetoric* the Greek term ἐπίθετον cannot be translated simply as “epithet”. See, for instance, FREESE’S English translation (1926: 476), DORATI’S Italian translation (2008: 383 fn. 27), LUHTALA’S comment (2005: 50) and IOVINO’S comment (2012: 12, 17).

tions of the noun and the verb differ from those found in Aristotle (*Tek^b*. 12, 13):

ὄνομά ἐστι μέρος τοῦ λόγου πτωτικόν, σῶμα ἢ πράγμα σημαῖνον, σῶμα μὲν οἶον ‘λίθος’, πρᾶγμα δὲ οἶον ‘παιδεῖα’ (“the noun is a part of speech with case, showing an abstract or a concrete thing, concrete such as λίθος ‘stone’ or abstract such as παιδεῖα ‘education’ ”)⁷.

ῥῆμά ἐστι λέξις ἄπτωτος, ἐπιδεικτικὴ χρόνον τε καὶ προσώπον καὶ ἀριθμῶν, ἐνέργειαν ἢ πάθος παριστᾶσα (“the verb is a word without case, displaying tense, person and number and presenting an activity or a state”).

Aristotle’s philosophy seems to have been put aside and the linguistic arguments gain importance. The noun and the verb are defined on inflectional clues and semantics provides the needed exemplification. The verb has tense, person and number but no case, and it means a state or an activity. The noun has case, gender and number but no tense, and it means a thing-like notion, such as “stone” or “education”. No reference to the Aristotelian theory is made⁸.

Although the noun and the verb are first defined on inflectional clues, philosophy is not totally disregarded. The noun falls into three subtypes (εἶδη): the proper noun (ὄνομα κύριον), which refers to the individual substance (τὸ τὴν ἰδίαν οὐσίαν σημαῖνον); the common noun (ὄνομα κοινόν), which refers to the common substance (τὸ τὴν κοινήν οὐσίαν σημαῖνον); and the epithet, which is third form of the noun. The epithet is so defined (*Tek^b*. 12):

ἐπίθετον δὲ ἐστι τὸ ἐπὶ κυρίων ἢ προσηγορικῶν ὁμωνύμως τιθέμενον καὶ δηλοῦν ἔπαινον ἢ ψόγον (“the epithet is what is equally added both to the proper or to the common noun meaning a praise or a blame”).

Dionysius does not identify the adjective class, but he comprises the epithet among the concepts needed by the grammarians. Moreover, he defined

⁷ Boetius translated πρᾶγμα with Lat. *res*, but *res incorporalis* seems more adequate. On the translation of πρᾶγμα “abstract thing, state of affairs, event”, see BELARDI (1990).

⁸ Contrarily to what is customarily claimed (LYONS, 1977: 423 ff.), semantics is not responsible for the parts of speech division in Greek and Latin grammar. In fact semantics exemplifies word classes defined inflectionally, but it does not determine the membership of a word in the noun or the verb class. Items such as Gk. ἐνέργεια “action” and Lat. *albedo* “whiteness”, for instance, are nouns, although their meanings are closer to the meaning of “action” and “state”, than to the meaning of “stone”.

the epithet saying that when the noun is the subject of the discourse, it is a true noun, and it can be further divided into proper and common; contrarily, when one noun is added to another to express a praise or a blame, an epithet is found. Although most of the epithets quoted by Dionysius are adjectives (σώφρων “wise”, ἀκόλαστος “excessive”, ταχύς “fast”, βραδύς “slow”), agreement and comparison are not mentioned and no difference separates the qualifying adjective (Σωκράτης ὁ ἀγαθός “the good Socrates”) and the qualifying noun (Σωκράτης ὁ γραμματικός “Socrates the grammarian”).

The influence of Aristotle’s theory is more prominent in Apollonius Dyscolus’ Περὶ συντάξεως (2nd AD). This work starts from a very short definition of parts of speech, resembling that of Dionysius (*De constr.* I.13.1). However, the *Scholia Londinensia* and Chaeroboscus (GG II.3, 38.20) attribute a more philosophical definition of the noun to Apollonius or to his son Herodianus (GG I.3, 524.8)⁹:

ὄνομά ἐστι μέρος λόγου πτωτικόν, ἐκάστῳ τῶν ὑποκειμένων σωμαίων ἢ πραγμάτων κοινὴν ἢ ἰδίαν ποιότητα ἀπονέμων (“the noun is a part of speech with case, which attributes an individual or common quality to any concrete or abstract substance”).

The reference to quality in the definition of the noun results from a merger of the Stoic tradition of grammar and Aristotle’s theory of language¹⁰. To Apollonius the noun means substance, just as Aristotle said, but the substance is not a pure substance, as Plato claimed, it rather is an ensemble (σύνολος) of substance and qualities: the noun ἄνθρωπος, in this view, means the substance “man” but it also means the qualities that are naturally ingrained within this substance, such as “being rational, having two feet and lacking plumage”¹¹. According to Apollonius, therefore, the

⁹ The attribution to Apollonius can be trusted, since in *De contrs.* II.22.1 he says that the noun attributes a quality to the subject-substrate of the discourse.

¹⁰ Usually, the reference to the quality in the definition of the noun is traced to the Stoic tradition of grammar (e.g. LUHTALA, 2005: 21), but Aristotelian influence cannot be completely ruled out, as shown below.

¹¹ This is the *predicatio de subiecto* termed by Boetius (ARENS, 1984: 180), when second substances are predicated on first substances. Logically, it is a complex form of tautology, since second substances are the definitional qualities interconnected with a substance, the qualities that cannot be missing once the existence of the substance is accepted. Priscian (*Inst. gram.* XVII.35.15) and Servius (GL IV, 489.21) commented on this theory, which is also explained by LUHTALA (2005: 85 ff.), who, however, attributes it to Priscian rather than to Apollonius.

noun attributes a quality (ποιότης) to the subject of the discourse, but it does not refer to the specific individual substance of the referent, while the relative pronoun, which has no semantic content on its own and shares the same syntactic function with the noun, refers to the substance of the noun (τὴν οὐσίαν τοῦ ὑποκειμένου) without addressing any of its qualities (*De constr.* I.101.1).

A confirmation of this philosophical framework comes from the definition of the verb “to be”. Apollonius merges the existential and the copular value of the verb “to be”, and terms as substantive constructions (ὑπαρκτικαὶ συντάξεις) all constructions made of the verb “to be” plus a noun (*De constr.* I.72.1; I.107.1; I.120.1; III.149.13). In this view, the phrases Σωκράτης ἀγαθός “Socrates is good” and Σωκράτης τύραννος “Socrates is a tyrant” are structurally equivalent, since both mean “Socrates exists as an entity, and this entity has the quality of being good or of being a tyrant”. To Apollonius, therefore, the verb “to be” predicates the existence of the noun subject of the discourse; the noun addresses the definitional quality of the subject of the discourse; the epithet refers to the accidental qualities of each noun; and the pronoun refers solely to the substance of the noun without naming any of its qualities.

The apparent rigour of this theory is broken up by an alternative definition of the noun, which on occasions can also be conceived as the sign of single substances, as Dionysius also said. This second, less frequent definition of the noun depends on a further application of the Aristotelian substance-accident pair to the science of grammar. Instead of analyzing the whole λόγος as a σύνολος of substance-plus-accidents, as Aristotle did when he defined the noun as ὑποκείμενον, and instead of analyzing the sole noun as a σύνολος of substance-plus-accidents, as Apollonius usually did, the noun phrase could also be analyzed as a σύνολος of substance-plus-accidents. Within the phrase, the noun is the sign of the specific substance of the referent, as Dionysius also said, while the epithet, which is added to the noun, refers to its accidental qualities (*De constr.* I.135.1). Therefore, epithets such as ἀγαθός “good”, δοῦλος “slave” and γράψας “writing, writer, who writes” are defined as ἐπιτρέχοντα πτωτικά “accidental nouns”, and the noun is said to refer to the substance of the subject (*De constr.* I.120.1: διὰ τῆς ὀνομαστικῆς συντάξεως τὴν οὐσίαν ἐπιζητοῦμεν τοῦ ὑποκειμένου “the substance of the subject is meant through the appellative construction”)¹².

¹² The term πτωτικόν means “noun”, since πτωσις means “case” (lit. the “falling”, from πίπτω

In sum, Aristotelian philosophy supplies the first definition of the noun and the verb. The definition starts from the idea that the λόγος is a σύνολος of substance and accidents, no differently from any other being. In this view, the noun is the substantial part of the σύνολος, its ontological substrate and its syntactic subject, therefore it is termed as ὑποκείμενον “substantive”. The verb is the accidental part of the λόγος, the part that can be dropped without prejudicing its meaningfulness. Thus, all verbs are accidental but the verb “to be” is substantive, since it predicates the existence of the noun heading the λόγος. The grammarians take up the philosophical division between noun-substance and verb-accident, add the epithet, which is a special use or a special type of the noun, and develop the traditional list of the eight parts of speech. Also in this case, the noun is the sign of the substrate-subject of the λόγος, although on occasions it may refer to the individual substance of the referent of the discourse, and the verb is the accident. The epithet is a special type or a special use of the noun which is defined on a merger of semantics (it means a praise or a blame), syntax (it is added to another noun) and philosophy (it does not refer to a substance), but it is not an independent part of speech (already Lallot, 1992: 35).

3. *The definition of the major word-classes in Latin grammar*

Latin grammarians imported the Greek theory of language with no major changes. The features of Greek grammar more overtly in contrast with the Latin data were subject to revision (e.g. the absence of the article, the lack of the aorist, the presence of the ablative etc.), but for the most part Latin grammarians were happy to make a summa of the Greek originals. As Robins said (1957: 62), they translated the Greek originals using a method similar to the *contaminatio* described by Terence in his prologues (*Andria* 8-21; *Heautontimoroumenos* 16-21). In other words, Latin scholars merged

“to fall”). The double definition of the noun complicates the hierarchical relation between the noun and the verb. Apollonius usually claims the predominance of the verb over the noun (LALLOT, 1997: II, fn. 61), but in *De constr.* I.16.1 and I.18.1, he takes the opposite view, saying that the noun comes before the verb, since it refers to the objects of the discourse (σώματα) and is the most important word. The contradiction can be avoided assuming, with ARENS (1984: 48), that the noun dominates the verb if the philosophical nature of the discourse is under scrutiny, but the verb dominates the noun if the syntactic structure of the clause is discussed. As a confirmation, Apollonius follows Aristotle when he says that no sentence is possible without nouns, but he does not push this view to its extreme consequence and, unlike Aristotle, adds that the sentence is also impossible without verbs (*De constr.* I.14.1).

original considerations with semi-literal translations of selected passages from other Latin or Greek texts on the same topic to obtain a work whose originality consisted in constant dialogue with tradition, not in the pretense of absolute novelty¹³.

Varro (1st BC) takes up Aristotle's definition of the noun and the verb and merges them with the definitions of the adverb given by Dionysius, but he does not use the label that later became usual for labelling the noun and does not discuss the epithet specifically (*De ling. lat.* 8, 11)¹⁴:

Quorum generum declinationes oriantur, partes orationis sunt duae, nisi item ut Dion in tris dividerimus partes res quae verbis significantur: unam quae adsignificat casus, alteram quae tempora, tertiam quae neutrum. De his Aristoteles orationis duas partes esse dicit: vocabula et verba, ut homo et equus, et legit et currit ("The parts of speech from which the declinations spring up are two, if we do not divide the ideas expressed by the words into three parts, as Dion: the one signifies the case in addition, the other the tense, the last neither of them. About them, Aristotle says that the parts of speech are two: the noun (*vocabula*) and the verb (*verba*), such as *homo* 'man' and *equus* 'horse', and *legit* 'he reads' and *currit* 'he runs'").

Quintilian (1st AD) introduced the Greek concept of epithet in Latin, calquing the Greek term ἐπίθετον through Lat. *appositum*, although some preferred to translate it as *sequens*, calquing the philosophical term ἐπιτερόχων. However, Quintilian does not mention the *appositum* in his *Ars grammatica* and considers it only as a stylistic ornament, as Aristotle did (*Inst. or.* VIII.6.40):

Cetera iam non significandi gratia sed ad ornandam et augendam orationem assumuntur. Ornat enim epitheton, quod recte dicimus appositum, a nonnullis sequens dicitur. ("The remaining [tropes] are employed solely to adorn and enhance our

¹³ Mommsen considered the Latin grammarians almost only as translators of the Greek originals. However, this view has recently been substituted by a more nuanced one, which does not rule out the originality of Latin grammar. See GIANNINI (1989), SCHWIGGERS and WOUTERS (1996) and LUHTALA (2005: 38 ff.) for a discussion.

¹⁴ On occasions, the participle is added to the noun, the verb and the adverb as the fourth part of speech. In *De ling. lat.* 8, 12, the parts of speech division is conceptualised as a bipartition between two main classes, termed as *vocabula priora* "primitive words" (such as the noun *homo* "man" and the verb *scribit* "he writes"), each of which shows a further sub-class of *vocabula posteriora* "derivative words" (such as the participle *doctus* "learned" and the adverb *docte* "wisely" respectively). In the same way, in *De ling. lat.* 8, 44, four parts of speech are distinguished on the use of case and tense: the noun has case, the verb has tense, the adverb neither and the participle both. In neither passage, however, is the adjective considered as a single part of speech.

style, without reference to the meaning. For the *epithet*, of which the correct translation is *appositum*, though some call it *sequens*, is clearly an ornament”).

In a first phase of Latin grammar, which antedates Apollonius’ work, the labels referring to the noun class and the epithet are not yet canonised, and the epithet is a purely stylistic ornament rather than a grammatical term. However, the traditional labels of *nomen*, *verbum* and *appositio*, as well as the definitions of the noun, the verb and the epithet that followed more closely those found in Greek grammar are given in Charisius’ *Ars grammatica* (4th AD). In this work, Dionysius’ definitions of the noun and the verb are repeated almost *verbatim* and the Aristotelian substance-accident contrast is used to define the epithet (GL I, 152.16, 193.12, 156.15, 163.24):

nomen est pars orationis cum casu sine tempore significans rem corporalem aut incorporalem (“The noun is the part of speech with case without tense reference meaning something concrete or abstract”).

verbum est pars orationis administrationem rei significans cum tempore et persona carens casu (“the verb is the part of speech meaning the organization of topic with tense and person reference without case”).

sunt etiam quae a Graecis ἐπιθετα dicuntur quae quibusque personis adiciuntur laudandi gratia vel vituperandi (“there are also nouns that are termed ἐπιθετα by the Greeks, which are added to other nouns in order to commend or to blame”).

nomina quae significationem sumunt a coniunctis, ut magnus, fortis, enim per se nullum habent intellectum et ideo a quibusdam adiectiones vocantur, ut magnus vir, fortis exercitus. His et comparatio accidit (“the nouns that take their meaning from the connected nouns, such as *magnus* ‘big’, *fortis* ‘strong’, do not refer to a concept in themselves, therefore they are termed *adiectiones* ‘additions’ by some, such as *magnus vir* ‘big man’, *fortis exercitus* ‘strong army’. These nouns can be compared”)15.

In Charisius the inflectional clues defining the parts of speech decidedly rule over the philosophical reasoning of Apollonius and, for the first time, comparison is used to define a specific semantic class of the noun: *nomina quae corpus significant comparari non possunt* “the nouns that mean an object

¹⁵ The passage is repeated in Diomedes’ *Ars grammaticae* (GL I, 323.5). The translation of *intellectum* as “concept” is confirmed by Pompeius (GL V, 36.18: *adjectivum non potest per se plenum habere sensum* “the adjective cannot have full meaning in itself”). Very similar definitions of the noun, the verb and the adjective are found in Donate (GL IV, 373.1, 381.12) and Pompeius (GL V, 489.21).

cannot be compared” (GL I, 163.26)¹⁶.

However, the enduring influence of Aristotelian philosophy is clearly visible in the *Institutiones grammaticae* of Priscian (5th-6th AD), Apollonius’ Roman pupil¹⁷. Priscian reports Dionysus’ definition of the verb, merges Dionysius’ and Apollonius’ definitions of nouns and translates Dionysius’ definition of the epithet (*Inst. gram.* VIII.1.1, II.5.22, II.5.28):

verbum est pars orationis cum temporibus et modis, sine casu, agendi vel patiendi significans (“the verb is the part of speech with tenses and moods, without case, meaning the acting or the suffering”).

nomen est pars orationis quae unicuique subjectorum corporum seu rerum communem vel propriam qualitatem distribuit [...]. Nomen est quasi notamen, quod hoc notamus uniusquisque substantiae qualitatem (“the noun is the part of speech that distributes a proper or a common quality of concrete (*corpus*) or abstract (*res*) subjects [...]. It is almost a sign, since we identify the quality of any individual substance through it”).

[nomen] adiectivum est quod adicitur propriis vel appellativis et significat laudem vel vituperationem vel medium vel accidens unicuique (“the epithet/adjective is what is added to proper or common nouns and means a praise or a blame or something in between or an accident of something”).

Apollonius’ philosophical background is kept almost in its entirety. Priscian employs the substance-accident contrast to build a large number of binary oppositions to be used on different layers of language structure¹⁸. Just as in Apollonius, the noun is the sign of a substance-plus-quality (*substantiae qualitatem*) and the relative pronoun refers to the substance of the noun deprived of any individual quality, therefore it can be termed as *substantivum*, not differently from the verb “to be”, which predicates the existence of the noun (*Inst. gram.* XIII.31.4 and VIII.51.15):

¹⁶ Note that from an Indo-European perspective, comparative morphology does not distinguish nouns and adjectives: see Skt. *pacatitaram* “it cooks better” (from *pacati* “he cooks” plus the comparative suffix *-tara-*); Skt. *ámbitamas* “best mother” (from *ambi-* “mother” plus the superlative suffix *-tama-*), Av. *gaotama-* “big cow” as well as Gk. βασιλεύτερος “a very great king” and βασιλεύτατος “the greatest king”; Skt. *uttama-* “upper” (from the preposition *ud*), Av. *ústama-*, Gk. ὕστερος “upper”, see ALFIERI (2009: 14 ff.; 2011).

¹⁷ On the relation among Priscian, Apollonius and Triphon, see IOVINO (2012: 19 ff.) with further literature.

¹⁸ On the merger of substance and quality in Priscian’s definition of the noun, see LUHTALA (2005: 81-97).

‘quis’ quoque quavis substantia sine aliqua certa qualitate demonstrat (“quis means a certain substance without any other given quality”)¹⁹.

sum verbum, quod ὑπαρκτικόν Graeci vocant, quod nos possumus substantivum nominare (“the verb ‘to be’, which the Greeks call ὑπαρκτικόν and we can term as substantive”)²⁰.

However, also in this case the substance-accident contrast is used to divide the noun class into two sub-categories, the *adpellativa* and the *adpositiva* or *adiectiva nomina* (*Inst. gram.* II.5.24):

haec enim quoque, quae a qualitate vel quantitate sumuntur speciali, id est adjectiva, naturaliter communia sunt multorum: adjectiva autem adeo vocantur, quod aliis appellationis, quae substantia significant, vel etiam propriis adici solent ad manifestandam eorum qualitate vel quantitatem, quae augeri aut minui sine substantiae consumptione possunt ut bonum animal, magnus homo, sapiens grammaticus (“those [nouns] that are taken from a specific quality or quantity, that is to say epithets/adjectives, are by nature common to many: for this reason, they are labelled as adjectives, since they are usually added to other common or proper nouns, which signify the substance, in order to show their quality or quantity, which can be augmented or diminished without change in the substance, such as *bonum animal* ‘good animal’, *magnus homo* ‘big man’, *sapiens grammaticus* ‘wise grammarian’”).

With respect to the Greek originals, the inflectional clues distinguishing the *adjectiva* and the *adpellativa nomina* are discussed more extensively (*Inst. gram.* II.28.1): *nomines adpellativi, quae comparari non possunt* (“appellative nouns that cannot be compared”). Moreover, the semantic types of the *nomina adjectiva* (i.e. *gentile, patrium, interrogativum, infinitum, relativum vel demonstrativum* etc.) are also discussed and gender inflection is identified as a common feature shared by *adjectiva* and *participia nomina* (*Inst. gramm.* II.5.27 and IX.2.13). However, agreement rules are not discussed specifically and semantics alone does not distinguish epithets and adjectives. Moreover, the gender inflection and the use of comparison are only typical, non-definitional features of the epithet/adjective to Priscian: in fact,

¹⁹ See also *Inst. gram.* II.5.25 and XVII.44.1: *in definitionibus quoque solet ad interrogationem omnium rerum, quae definiri possunt, neutrum substantivi preponi [...], ut ‘quid est animal?’* (“Also in definitions usually the neuter of the substantive [pronoun] is added for asking all that can be defined [...], e.g. *quid est animal?* ‘what is an animal?’”).

²⁰ See also *Inst. gram.* IX.4.9; IX.25.31; XVII.81.7 for a similar view. LEHMANN (2000: 732) attributes to Priscian the first use of the label of *nomen substantivum*, but the passages he quotes refer to the pronoun, not the noun.

when examples of the *nomina adiectiva* are discussed, true adjectives such as *iustus* “right”, *magnus* “big”, *niger* “black” are quoted side-by-side with standard nouns such as *filius* “son” and *grammaticus* “grammarian”, with nouns of alternating gender such as *grus* “crane”, with participles such as *sapiens* “wise”, non-gradable adjectives such as *medius*, *sinister* and *primus*, and with adjectives without overt gender inflection such as *capax* “able”²¹. If true adjectives, non-gradable adjectives, non-gender inflected adjectives, participles and nouns fall within a single word class and this class is labelled as *nomen*, comparison may define a specific sub-class within the noun class, but it does not define an independent part of speech, such as the modern adjective class.

In sum, the work of the Latin grammarians can be compared to a literary translation, a translation which can be improved by adapting the Greek originals to the specificity of the Latin language or précising the originals through a better definition of the parts of speech (e.g. the interjection is added; comparison is used for defining a sub-class of nouns). In Rome as in Greece, therefore, two major parts of speech are found, the noun (*nomen*) and the verb (*verbum*); the epithet (*appositio*, *adiectivum*) is a second-layer class defined on a merger of semantics, syntax and philosophy, but it is not an autonomous part of speech. In both grammatical traditions, three different definitions of the noun are possible: as a rule, the noun is conceived as the sign of a substance-plus-quality; often, it may be defined as the sign of the subject-substrate of the discourse; on occasions, it also is the sign of the individual substance of the referent of the discourse. The label of substantive (*substantivum*) refers to the pronoun or to the verb “to be”, but it does not refer to the noun.

4. *The word class system in the Middle Ages*

The grammatical schools of the Early Middle Ages followed the Greek-Latin tradition almost slavishly: glosses and comments on Priscian and Donate were compiled, and the theories of the Latin grammarians were repeated without substantial changes. The only requirement was the reading of the

²¹ These examples are discussed in *Inst. gram.* III.1.2, which closely resembles very similar passages in Charisius (GL I, 156.15 ff.), Donate (GL III, 373.11 ff.) and Servius (GL IV, 429.15 ff.). Moreover, also in the *Regulae Augustini* (GL V), where a long section on the gender of nouns is found, agreement rules are not discussed.

Holy Scriptures and for this purpose the work of Priscian was sufficient²².

Like the Latin grammarians, medieval commentators employed a method of translation plus comment, in which the source text, previous comments and the original ideas of the last comment are so deeply fused that the notion of *contaminatio* may again be useful²³. In fact, the presence of important innovations beneath the apparent respect for the doctrines of the predecessors is one of the hallmarks of medieval thought (what is known as the *principium auctoritatis*). Although the number of the parts of speech seemed to have been canonized once for all in Priscian, the definitions of these classes changed progressively. Even so, the reason for this change is not just in linguistic doctrines, but rather in the new philosophical framework underlying the theory of grammar.

4.1. *The reinterpretation of Aristotle's metaphysics*

The scant knowledge of the original Greek Aristotle fostered a reinterpretation of his theory in the light of Neo-platonic ontology. In Aristotle the categories of being differed from the categories of languages and both types of categories differed from the categories of thought (Belardi, 1975: 38 ff., 79 ff., 144 ff.). By contrast, the Middle Ages conceived a close isomorphism among the categories of language, the categories of thought and the categories of being. However, the new isomorphism was intended to continue Aristotle's theory, not to modify it. Passages such as the following triggered the misunderstanding (*De int.* 16a3 ff.)²⁴:

ἔστι μὲν οὖν τὰ ἐν τῇ φωνῇ τῶν ἐν τῇ ψυχῇ παθημάτων σύμβολα, καὶ τὰ γραφόμενα τῶν ἐν τῇ φωνῇ. Καὶ ὥσπερ οὐδὲ γράμματα πᾶσι τὰ αὐτά, οὐδὲ φωναὶ αἱ αὐταί. Ὡς μὲντοι ταῦτα σημεῖα πρῶτον, ταῦτα πᾶσι παθήματα τῆς ψυχῆς, καὶ ὧν ταῦτα ὁμοιώματα, πρᾶγμα ἦδε ταῦτά. ("the spoken forms are symbols of mental impressions and the written forms are symbols of the spoken forms. And as just as the letters are not the same everywhere, so are not the vocal forms. But what all these forms [sc. the written and spoken ones] are originally symbols of, mental impressions, are the same everywhere, and what the letters are likeness of, things, are also the same").

²² For a similar view, see BURSILL-HALL (1971: 114; 1976: 165 ff.) and LAW (1982: 53 ff.).

²³ For a similar view, see BURSILL-HALL (1971: 20 ff.) and ARENS (1984: 489 ff.).

²⁴ On the reinterpretation of Aristotle in the Middle Ages, see ISAAC (1956), BURSILL-HALL (1971: 133 ff.), DI CESARE (1980: 160 ff.), BRAAKHUIS and KNEEPKENS (2003), and ALFIERI (2006: 84 ff.).

The commentators of Aristotle take this and similar passages as if the Philosopher had said that the identity of things, notions and words is presupposed in the variability of their vocal forms, although Aristotle never made such a claim. Moreover, they interpreted the supposed identity of logic, ontology and language as the milestone of a new metaphysics, a metaphysics which was conceived as being Aristotelian, but which can only be defined as such in that it was developed in commentaries to Aristotle, not because it was close to the spirit of Aristotle's original text (Arens, 1984: 71 ff., 162 ff.).

In the 3rd AD, Plotinus says that any vocal discourse is a copy of another discourse, more trustworthy and enacted in the immortal soul of everyman (ὁ ἐν τῇ φωνῇ λόγος μίμημα τοῦ ἐν τῇ ψυχῇ, *En.* I.2.3)²⁵. Ammonius (5th AD), the first commentator of Aristotle and the best-known pupil of the Neo-platonic Proclus, scholar of Plotinus, adds that every vocal emission mirrors a mental utterance (ἐνδιάθετος λόγος), which is the emanation of a universal concept existing *in mente dei*. Since nouns and things are perfectly joined in the eternal mind of God, they should also be joined in the mental discourse enacted in the eternal soul of everyman. In this view, the presence of a noun in a language entails the existence of the corresponding substance on the metaphysical level: as Ammonius said, *nomina quidam existentiam significant rerum* (*Comm. in Ar. de int.* §2, see Busse, 1897: 57)²⁶.

Boethius (6th AD), who followed the lessons of Ammonius in Alexandria, précises his teacher's view: the meaning-setting power of words depends on the individual substances of the metaphysical world, which literally put their significations into words (Arens, 1984: 162 ff.). The noun, in this view, is indeed substantial, as Aristotle said, but it is substantial, since the individual substances of the metaphysical world put their substantial nature into the nouns' meaning, not because the noun is the substantial part of the discourse (Arens, 1984: 189). Simplicius, who followed Ammonius' lessons with Boethius, makes explicit the final consequence of this view. If the noun is the sign of the individual substances *in mente dei*, the verb really is the sign of accidents (Pattin, 1971: 66). However, in this new framework, the verb does not mean an accident since it can be substituted through a

²⁵ This is the doctrine of the *verbum cordis*, on which see ARENS (1980) and ALFIERI (2006: 85 fn. 16).

²⁶ The Latin translation of Ammonius is the one by William of Moerbeke (BUSSE, 1897). A view similar to that of Ammonius is found in Isidore of Seville (*Or.* I.7.1, 5th-6th AD: *nisi enim nomen scieris cognitio rerum perit* "if you do not know the name, the understanding of the notion vanishes") and in Boethius of Dacia (BURSILL-HALL, 1976: 176).

participle with or without a copula, as Aristotle already said, but since the verb is opposed to the noun, and the noun is the linguistic marker of the individual substances.

In sum, in the early Middle Ages the Aristotelian categories, which originally were only the categories of being, the predicables that could be attributed to any entity in the discourse, were gradually conflated with the categories of thought and language, as if language, logic and ontology were one and the same thing. Consistently with this view, the Aristotelian generic and abstract concept of substance had been progressively transformed into a specific and individual substance, which is not very different from a Platonic idea. The parts of speech theory, which is the main contribution of philosophy to the study of grammar, is also the part of grammar in which the reinterpretation of Aristotle's metaphysics produced the most relevant consequences. If language, logic and ontology coincide, as medieval commentators supposed, the same notions should find their expression in all languages and all languages should show the same grammatical categories, the noun, the verb and the adjective. These categories were identified with the classical parts of speech defined by Priscian, but their definitions changed with respect to those supplied by the Greek-Latin grammarians²⁷.

4.2. *Parts of speech in the early Middle Ages*

The most important consequences of the change in the philosophical framework underlying the theory of grammar consisted in the birth of a new part of speech, the adjective, in place of the epithet, which was only a subclass of the noun.

The birth of the adjective class was accomplished in two steps, the second of which can be further divided into two. The first step consists of a slight change in the definition of the noun. The noun could be defined as the sign of individual substances in Greek-Latin grammar, but this definition was uncommon. In the scholia of the Early Middle Ages, by contrast, the noun is customarily defined as such. See Chaeroboscus (6th AD) and the *Scholia Vaticana* to Dionisyus' grammar (13th AD), GG IV.1, 105.2; I, 24.26:

²⁷ The influence of medieval ontology on the contemporary parts of speech theory is discussed in FREDBORG (1980), DE RIJK (1981) and JOLIVET (1981), and is generally summed up through the label of "grammatical revolution". The revolution is usually dated to the 12th century (BURSILL-HALL, 1971: 31), but the commentators on Aristotle, the scholia and the glosses of the Early Middle Ages show the first signs of this view from the 3rd-4th AD (HUNT, 1980: 22-23, 29).

τὸ δὲ ὄνομα προτερεύει τοῦ ῥήματος, δὲ ἐπειδὴ τὸ μὲν ὄνομα οὐσίας ἐστὶ σημαντικόν, τὸ δὲ ῥῆμα συμβεβηκότος, αἱ δὲ οὐσῖαι προτερεύουσι τῶν συμβεβηκότων (“the noun predominates over the verb, since the noun signifies the substance, while the verb the accident, [and] substances predominate over accidents”).

τοῦ μὲν οὖν ὀνόματος ἴδιον τυγχάνει τὸ οὐσίαν σημαίνειν· ἔστι δὲ οὐσία ἀθύπαρκτόν τι καθ'ἑαυτό, μὴ δεόμενον ἑτέρου εἰς τὸ εἶναι [...]. Τοῦ δὲ ῥήματος ἴδιον τὸ σημαίνειν πρᾶγμα (“meaning a substance turns out to be proper to the noun; the substance is what exists for itself and needs nothing else for existing [...]. Meaning an event is proper to the verb”).

While Latin grammarians first defined the noun as the sign of the substance-plus-quality, then as the sign of the subject of the discourse and only occasionally as the sign of the single substances, the relative frequency of these definition is reversed in the Middle Ages: in the scholia, the noun is firstly the sign of the single substances; on occasions it is the subject of the discourse, but it no longer refers to qualities, as it was the case in Priscian and Apollonius.

The second step of the renewal of the Greek-Latin parts of speech theory consists in the transformation of the epithet into the modern adjective class. This step can be divided into two sub-steps. The first consists in the progressive shift in the use of the substance-accident pair from the definition of the noun as opposed to the verb, as seen in the *Scholia Vaticana* and in Chaeroboscus, to the definition of the noun as opposed to the adjective, as in the *Scholia Marciana* (15th century copy of a 6th-7th century original), see GGI, 386.27:

διαφέρει γοῦν προσηγορικῷ ἐπίθετον, ὅτι τὸ μὲν αὐτοτελές ἐστίν, οἷον ἄνθρωπος, τὸ δὲ τῆς τοῦ ἑτέρου δεόμενον ἐπαγωγῆς, οἷον ἄγαθός (“the epithet differs from the appellative noun, since the one is complete in itself, such as ἄνθρωπος ‘man’, the other needs another addition, such as ἄγαθός ‘good’”).

Since the adjective is not complete in itself and is added to another noun, it is the accidental part of the phrase, in the same way in which the verb is the accidental part of the sentence.

Once the substance-accident pair is used to distinguish the noun and the adjective, the redefinition of parts of speech passes through the second sub-step. Unlike the former, however, this change does not affect the philo-

sophical definition of the word classes, but rather the linguistic clues used to identify the epithet-adjective class. In an anonymous gloss to Donatus *Ars Maior* of the 9th AD, the *nomina substantialia* are separated from the *nomina accidentalia* or *adiectiva* (Thurot, 1868: 80). According to the gloss, the *nomina accidentalia* differ from the *substantialia* in that the formers do not refer to any substance but to the accidents that can be augmented or diminished without change in the substance. Following a reasoning typical of the Middle Ages, the linguistic clues that distinguish the *nomina accidentalia* and *substantialia* mirror their ontological difference: since the *nomina accidentalia* do not refer to single substances, they are not fixed in a single gender but vary from one gender to the other, depending on the gender of the specific noun-substance to which they refer (therefore they are termed as *nomina mobilia*).

The gloss shows a fundamental step in the birth of the adjective class. Concord and comparison are the linguistic features that define the modern adjective class and tell it apart from the epithet, since only the adjectives agree in gender and are graded, whereas non-adjectival nouns used as epithets do not (see *mulier pulchra* “beautiful girl” and *mulier pulcherrima* “very beautiful girl” vs. **mulier grammatica* “woman grammarian” and **homo grammaticissimus* “very grammarian man”). Indeed, Charisius and Priscian did not mention concord at all and used comparison as a typical non-definitional feature of a specific semantic sub-class of the noun (the nouns *quae corpus non significant*), since the nouns quoted as typical epithets, such as *grammaticus* and *rex*, cannot be graded nor agree. The gloss, therefore, does not represent the first appearance of the label *adjectivum*, which is traced at least to Charisius, but represents the first case in which the presence of concord ensures that the category described is the modern adjective class, not the time-honoured sub-class of the noun that the Greek grammarians termed as epithet.

We can be sure that the glosses above imply the new adjective class, and not the epithet, thanks to Abelard (11th-12th AD). Although Abelard usually says that the major parts of speech are two, the noun and the verb (Arens, 1984: 230), in the *Glosses ad Aristotelis Peri hermeneias*, he reports a polemic between grammarians and philosophers on the correct definition of the adjective and the substantive (Geyer, 1919: 384):

aliud est autem substantivum apud grammaticus et apud nos [sc. dialecticos], et aliud adiectivum quam accidentale. Illi enim substantiva vocant omnia fixa, etiam illa

quae sumpta sunt ab accidentibus dicimus; et illi adiectiva tantum dicunt ea quae aliis, id est substantiviis, per se adiunguntur, ut homo albus, animal rationale, nos vero rationale dicimus magis substantiale quam accidentale. Accidentalibus vero omnia sumpta ab accidentibus dicimus, etiam ea quae substantiva sunt, ut vir, mulier (“the substantive is defined differently by the grammarians and by us philosophers, and so it is also for the adjective. Grammarians call substantives any fixed noun [i.e. without agreement], including those nouns that are derived from the accidental properties; and they call adjectives those items that are adjoined to other nouns, i.e. substantives such as *homo albus* ‘white man’, *animal rationale* ‘rational animal’, but we would say that *rationalis* ‘rational’ is substantial rather than accidental. In fact, we define as *accidentalibus* ‘accidentals, adjectives’ all nouns taken from an accidental property, although they are substantives [grammatically], such as *vir* and *mulier*”).

The passage is noteworthy mainly for two reasons: on the one hand, it shows the first appearance of the label *substantivum* with reference to the noun; on the other, it is the first time in which the label *adjectivum* refers to the modern adjective class rather than to the epithet²⁸. Grammarians, says Abelard, do violence to the ontological nature of the words without even realizing it. They define parts of speech depending on their position in the sentence (*secundum positionem*) rather than their meaning, but this linguistic definition does not say anything about the substantial or accidental nature of the notions to which the adjectival and the substantive words refer (Geyer, 1919: 475). Ontologically, if the quality of “being rational” is predicated on the entity “man”, this predication is substantial, since the quality of being rational is entailed in the natural definition of man as “rational animal lacking plumage” (fn. 11). By contrast, if we say *rex* or *grammaticus*, we are not referring to a pure substance such as “royalty” or “being a grammarian”, rather we refer to the same substance “man” quoted above but further determine this substance through an accidental quality, that of being a king or a grammarian. Therefore, grammarians distinguish substantives and adjectives according to their different syntactic properties, but this distinction is misleading from the ontological point of view, because it does not coincide with the ontological difference between substances and accidents, as the grammarians usually believe²⁹.

²⁸ THUROT (1868: 161) is imprecise when he attributes to Abelard the invention of the label of *adjective*. In point of fact Abelard was the only medieval thinker who tried to oppose the isomorphism between language and ontology that gave birth to the adjective class, although he did not succeed. ROBINS (1997: 107) is also slightly wide of the mark when he considers Peter Helias as the inventor of the adjective class, since Peter was slightly younger than Abelard.

²⁹ The *Glosule super Priscianum maiorem* and Peter Helias (second half of the 12th AD) confirm the existence of a polemic between logicians, grammarians and school teachers on the correct defini-

In sum, if a polemic on the relative importance of the linguistic features of concord and comparison in defining the adjective appeared in the glosses on Donate (9th AD) and a polemic on the substantial and the accidental nature of the adjective was found in Abelard's glosses (11th-12th AD) one may reasonably infer that the Greek-Latin parts of speech theory changed between the 9th and the 12th. In the glosses, the nouns cited as typical instances of epithets by the Latin grammarians, such as *rex* and *grammaticus* are progressively substituted with true adjectives such as *bounus*, *albus* and *prudens*. At the same time, concord and comparison have begun to be used for distinguishing the adjective, which is the sign of accidental qualities, from the noun, which refers to substances. As a consequence, the label of *nomen substantivum*, which referred only to the relative pronoun in Latin grammars, has begun to be used with reference to the common noun while the category of the epithet has been transformed into the modern adjective class. This change went unnoticed by most contemporaries, since the labels identifying the adjective class remained the traditional ones (*nomen appositivum*, *mobile*, *adiectivum*, *accidentale*) and the noun was also defined as the sign of individual substances in Greek-Latin grammar. However, beneath the apparent identity of the labels, a fundamental change in the parts of speech theory was taking place.

4.3. *Speculative Grammar*

Despite Abelard's criticisms, the isomorphism between language and ontology was the dominant view of the Middle Ages. In *Speculative Grammar* (12th-14th AD), «the only method of research was to derive and justify rules of grammar from systems of logic and metaphysical theories on the nature of reality» (Robins, 1957: 75).

However, such isomorphism may be sustained from two perspectives. Sigier de Courtrai (late 13th AD) claims a perfect isomorphism, in which parts of speech are established directly on the basis of the properties of the things in the real world (*rerum proprietatum partes orationis invicem distinguuntur* "the parts of speech are distinguished on the properties of the thing", *Sum.*

tion of the adjective (HUNT, 1980: 55 ff., 101 ff., 21 fn. 5): *nota quod adiectiva proprie non possunt dici omnia mobilia, nisi comparationem sortiantur. Unde Graecus, Romanus non sunt adiectiva, nisi large accipiatur adiectivum, licet puerilis instructio hoc habeat* ("note that not all mobile nouns can be termed as adjectives, if they do not allow comparison. Therefore, *Graecus* "Greek" and *Romanus* "Roman" are not adjectives if the adjective is not meant broadly, as in infant instruction").

mod. sign., p. 93)³⁰. Contrarily, Peter Helias and Robert of Kilwardby think that isomorphism was direct and perfect only in the Garden of Eden, and it was corrupted after the expulsion. Out of the Eden, *non distinguuntur partes orationis secundum distinctione rerum, sed secundum modi significandi* “parts of speech are not distinguished by the difference between things, but by the modalities of signification” (Pinborg, 1967: 48). The *modi significandi* represent the mediation between the perfect and universal concepts *in mente dei* and their imperfect expressions in human languages. As Thomas of Erfurt says (*Gram. spec.* §24)³¹:

in rebus invenimus quasdam proprietates generalissimas, sive modos essendi comunissimos, scilicet modus entis et modus esse. [...] Duo sunt modi principaliter entium, modus entis et modus esse, a quibus sumpserunt grammatici duas partes orationis principales, scilicet nomen et verbum (“we find two absolutely general properties in things, or the most common modalities of being, the modality of the entity and the modality of being. [...] Two are the principal modalities of entities, the modality of the entity and the modality of being, from which the grammarians took the two major parts of speech, the noun and the verb”).

The nature of the things determines the nature of the universal concepts *in mente Dei* and the nature of the universal concepts *in mente Dei* determines the nature of the parts of speech in human languages. These classes are the same classes identified by Priscian, but they are defined as the two most general modalities of being, the modality of the entity and of being or becoming, not as the signs of the substantial and of the accidental part of the discourse, as Aristotle said.

Moreover, if substances are expressed through the modality of the entity, as nouns, and actions are coded through the modality of being, as verbs, qualities should also be encoded through a specific modality of signification and a specific word class, given the perfect isomorphism between language and ontology. As the verb referred to the modality of being, not of the accident, as in Aristotle, the substance-accident contrast could be freely used

³⁰ This theory was first pursued by Ammonius, and is taken up in the *Note Dunelmenses* (13th AD), as HUNT showed (1980: 19, fn. 4).

³¹ The same view is found in Petrus Helias (THUROT, 1868: 124) and in the *Glosule super Priscianum Maiorem* (HUNT, 1980: 26): the words *albedo* “whiteness”, *albus* “white” and *albet* “is white” refer to a single universal concept *in mente dei*, but they mean this single concept in different modalities (*modus*), the first as a substance, the second as an accident, and the third as an action.

to define the noun as opposed to the adjective. See Thomas Aquinas (*Sum. theol.* P.P. Q. 93, a. 3) and Thomas of Erfurt (*Gram. spec.* §31-32)³²:

nomina substantiva significant aliquid per modum substantiae, nomina vero adiectiva significant aliquid per modum accidentis quod inhaerent subjecto (“substantive nouns mean something through the modality of the substance, whereas adjectival nouns mean something through the modality of the accident inherent to the subject”).

modus significandi per modum per se stantis sumitur a proprietate rei, quae est proprietas essentiae determinatae [...] modum significandi per modum adiacentis sumitur a proprietate rei, quae est proprietas alteri adherentis secundum esse (“the modality of the signification that is the modality of what is in itself is derived from the property of the thing, which is the property of a determined essence [...] the modality of signification that is the modality of what is added is derived from the property of the thing, which is the property of what adheres to another entity according to its nature”).

The noun is characterized by the modality of the substance, the adjective by that of the accident. Syntax (called *diasynthetica* by the Modistae) mirrors the ontological difference between these two modalities of being. As Thomas Aquinas says (*Sum. theol.* P.P. Q. 5, a. 5)³³:

haec differentia inter nomina substantiva et adiectiva, quia nomina substantiva ferunt suum suppositum, adiectiva vero non, sed rem significatam ponunt circa substantivum (“this is the difference between substantives and adjectives: substantives bear their *suppositum*, while adjectives do not, but rather they adjoin the signified thing to the substantive”).

Lat. *suppositum* is a complex term, meaning either the logical and syntactic subject of the sentence, or its ontological substrate. It is the closest medieval continuation of the Aristotelian notion of ὑποκείμενον. In modern terms, it could be rendered through the notion of head, although this

³² A very similar definition of the noun is found in Michel de Marbais, Sigier de Brabant, Alexandre de Villedieu (THUROT, 1868: 170, 188, 346), in the manuscripts of the Oxford library (HUNT, 1980: 170), in William of Conches (MAIERÛ, 1972: 80 fn.) and in Sigier de Courtrai (*Sum. mod. sign.* p. 188, 97). Obviously, the classical definition of the noun as a substance-plus-quality could be juxtaposed with the new one, as is the case in the *Note Dunelmenses* (HUNT, 1980: 19 ff.).

³³ A similar definition of the difference between the noun and the adjective is found in Gosvin de Marbais (13th-15th AD, see THUROT, 1868: 351), and in many late medieval logicians (MAIERÛ, 1972: 191 fn., 207).

qualification holds on both the linguistic and the ontological level (Bursill-Hall, 1971: 57 ff.). According to Thomas, therefore, nouns are the subjects of the sentence, while the adjectives “copulate” the noun-*suppositum* with its accidental qualities, but they are not *supposita* in themselves³⁴.

If the noun refers to substances and the adjective to accidental qualities, the traditional Aristotelian definition of the verb “to be” as the “substantive verb” should be rephrased. Given the correspondence between language and ontology, in fact, if the noun means substances, the verb “to be” could not be the sign of substances, or it would mean the same as nouns. However, since countering Aristotle openly was not in the style of the Modistae, Thomas of Erfurt keeps the traditional label of substantive verb for the verb “to be”, but explains the substantial nature of the verb “to be” far differently what from Aristotle did (*Gram. spec.* § 118)³⁵:

verbum substantivum est non modo per se stantis, sed quia significat esse generale specificabile (“the verb [‘to be’] is substantive, but is so not for the modality of what is in itself, but because it means the general and specifiable being”).

According to Thomas, the verb “to be” is indeed substantial, as Aristotle also said, but it is so, not because it predicates the existence of its subject, but because the verb “to be”, as all others substances, could be further specified through its qualities.

In the same way, if the noun was the sign of the substance and the adjective was the sign of the accidents, the definition of the verb as the sign of the accidents should be rephrased, or the verb would mean the same as adjectives. However, since the *principium auctoritatis* keeps the Modistae from countering their predecessors explicitly, the verb is alternatively defined as the sign of being, of becoming, of actions and of passions but, since being, becoming, actions and passions are also accidents, the verb is also defined as the sign of accidents. See Sigier de Curtrai (*Sum. mod. sign.*, p. 108) and

³⁴ This definition of the noun-adjective contrast might seem identical to the noun-epithet contrast described by Priscian, but this is far from true. Nouns such as *rex* and *grammaticus* can be freely added to other nouns to mean their accidental qualities, but they are typically used as heads in syntax, therefore they bear their *suppositum*, as a rule. If they bear their *suppositum*, they are nouns, although they can be used as epithets given the right syntactic context. On the notion of *suppositum*, see also DUCROT (1976).

³⁵ For a similar view, see Petrus Helias (THUROT, 1868: 178) and the manuscripts published by HUNT (1980: 31 ff.).

Michel de Marbais (Thurot, 1868: 181)³⁶:

verbum est modus significandi per modum fluxus, fieri seu motus, seu esse. [...] Omne verbum significat rem suam per modum fieri, et ipsum fieri est dependens, ideo omne verbum significat rem suam per modum significandi dependentis. (“the verb is the modality of the signification through the modality of change, of becoming or of movement, or of being. [...] Each verb means its concept through the modality of becoming, and becoming itself is dependent, therefore each verbs means through the modality of what is dependent”).

verbum est parts orationis significans per modum fieri de altero dicibilis. Propter quod intelligendum est verbum significat actionem vel passionem protanto quod ipsum significat quicquid per modum fluxus vel fieri (“the verb is the part of speech that means through the modality of becoming and can be said of another entity. Therefore, it should be understood that the verb means an action or a passion in that it means something through the modality of change or of becoming”).

In sum, the difference between the Latin parts of speech theory and that of the Middle Ages is far deeper than is usually thought. To Priscian, as a rule the noun is the sign of a substance-plus-quality, the verb is the sign of accidents or of actions, and the epithet is the noun used as a modifier. To the Modistae, the noun is the sign of individual substances (for it is termed as *nomen substantivum*), the adjective is the sign of accidental qualities (for it is termed as *nomen adjectivum*) and the verb is the sign of actions and passions (which are also accidents). This change in the parts of speech theory was triggered by the reinterpretation of Aristotle’s philosophy into a new theory, a theory in which the categories of being, of thought and of language are totally isomorphic and coincide with the universal categories of noun-substance, adjective-quality and verb-action identified by the philosophers. In parallel to the change in the philosophical definitions of the parts of speech, the linguistic clues defining the epithet are subject to revision. Concord, comparison and the inability to head phrases constitute the definitional bundle of a new part of speech, the adjective. This new part of speech derives from the ancient epithet class, but unlike the epithet, the adjective is the sign of an independent modality of being, therefore of an independent word class, given the isomorphism between logic and ontology. The birth of the adjective as an individual part of speech is dated between the gloss to Donate’s *Ars* (9th AD)

³⁶ For a very similar view, see also the *Glosule super Priscianum maiorem*, Petrus Helias’ *Summa* and Petrus Hispanus’ glosses (HUNT, 1980: 25, 27, 110).

and Abelard (11th-12th AD), but this novelty was not included in a complete parts of speech theory until Speculative Grammar (13th-14th AD).

5. *The parts of speech theory of 'traditional linguistics'*

Grammatical studies were no exception to the general Humanist aim of restoring the lost classical past, in that they sought to go back beyond medieval conceptions to the grammar of Donatus and Priscian³⁷. However, beyond the apparent restoration of the past, the most important innovations of medieval grammar, the isomorphism between language and thought and the substantive-adjective contrast, were absorbed in study grammars with no realization of their innovative character.

As in the Middle Ages, the parts of speech are supposed to signify the objects of the world directly, as J.C. Scaliger (1540: 132) and Melanchthon (1558: 17) claims, or they can signify the objects of the real world through the mediation of the *modi significandi*, as Nebrija prefers (1492: 73). In both cases, the division of the parts of speech mirrors the ontological structure of the world. However, the contrast between the innovative ontology of the Middle Ages and Priscian's parts of speech theory generates a clash, in which empirically the tripartite parts of speech system of the Modistae is kept, but apparently the adjective is considered only a sub-class of the noun, not an autonomous word class.

To Scaliger the major parts of speech are two, the noun and the verb (1540: 220, 288). However, nouns are divided in two classes, the substantive, which means substances, and the adjective, which means accidents (1540: 187). Along with Priscian, Scaliger defines nouns such as *nepos* "nephew" and *filius* "son" as adjectives, since ontologically they presuppose the existence of other nouns (i.e. *avus* "uncle" and *pater* "father"), therefore they are not complete in themselves as the true substances that are coded as nouns. However, despite the confusion between language and ontology, the role of concord is accepted, since Ramus (1576: 88) defined substantives as nouns of a single gender and adjectives as nouns of three genders, and Sanctius conceived the adjective as a noun showing gender marking terminations (1587: app. f. i^o).

³⁷ See PADLEY (1976: 16-39). As a confirmation, more than six editions of Priscian were published between 1470 and 1530 (GL II.1, xxiii-xxiv).

The vernacular grammars confirm that the adjective is treated as a single part of speech empirically although it is defined as a subclass of the noun. In Melanchthon's Greek and Latin grammars, the major parts of speech are two, the noun and the verb (1533: 21, 1558: 6), but the noun is divided into two classes that differ both linguistically and ontologically: the substantive, which exists in itself and has a single gender, and the adjective, which inheres in a subject and shows terminations of three genders (1533: 25, 1558: 9)³⁸. If the major parts of speech are only two, the noun and the verb, but the adjective is defined through the linguistic clues of concord and comparison, which are not found with the noun and with the verb, the contradiction is patent.

Although a few, conservative works such as Accarigi's Italian grammar (1538) still refuse to accept the adjective class, the missionary grammars of the Renaissance ensure that by the 15th-16th century, parts of speech theory has changed definitively and the major parts of speech are three³⁹. It is well known that the missionary grammars hypostatize the Latin parts of speech system (Simone, 1990: 320). However, the parts of speech system that these grammars hypostatize is not that of Priscian, it is rather the new threefold parts of speech system produced by the Middle Ages. In the Zapotec grammar by Father Juan de Córdova (1578), for instance, the adjective is described in a specific section inside the chapter on the noun, as in contemporary vernacular grammars (Rojas Torres, 2009). However, Zapotec, like other Mayan languages but unlike Latin, shows no true lexical adjectives. Despite this difference, Father Juan claims that all languages show the same tripartite parts of speech system, although Zapotec adjectives are secondarily derived from verbs of quality meaning. However, if Father Juan projects the tripartite division between nouns, verbs and adjectives in Zapotec, he implicitly confirms that in his view Latin has a tripartite word class system.

The Lords of Port Royal add the last step to the canonization of the adjective class. Arnauld and Lancelot claim that Latin parts of speech are also

³⁸ The same view is found also in PEROTTUS and GUARINUS's Latin grammar (1490: A iiiii), in MANUTIUS' Latin grammar (1523: b iii), in CEPORINUS' Greek grammar (1522: viii r.), and in NEBRIJA's Spanish grammar (1492: iv). Especially interesting is the case of the Old High German grammars: in the oldest manuscripts, e.g. Ruodperts of St. Gall (11th AD) in an anonymous Latin-German Donate (late 13th AD), the adjective is not mentioned, but in the later works, such as in the anonymous *exercitium puerorum grammaticale* (1485) and in the *Handbuch grutlichs Berichts* by J. Meichsner (1538), the adjective is defined through comparison, concord and its inability to head phrases (MÜLLER, 1882: 2, 17, 41, 50, 163).

³⁹ SCARANO (1997) shows that Italian vernacular grammars are particularly conservative in this respect, since the adjective was unanimously accepted as an individual part of speech, not only as a subclass of the noun, only in the 19th century.

the logical categories of human thought, therefore they are universal (1660: i). Also in this case, however, the categories referred are word classes defined in the Middle Ages, not those defined by the Greek-Latin grammarians: the noun that refers to substances, the adjective that refers to qualities and the verb that refers to actions (1660: 56 ff.).

In sum, in the Renaissance the tripartite parts of speech system developed in the Middle Ages is canonized and becomes the standard view of all the grammars. However, this tripartite word class system is assumed to continue the Greek-Latin theory of grammar, not to modify Greek-Latin theory through the two most patent innovations of the Middle Ages: the birth of the adjective as an independent part of speech and the isomorphism between language and ontology.

6. The birth of the adjective class: summary and conclusion

The main difference between traditional linguistics and the Greek-Latin theory of grammar consists in the treatment of the adjective and, more generally, in the parts of speech theory to be accepted in the grammars. This difference depends on a complex meta-semiotic problem of translation, which can be summed up as follows.

Plato defines the noun-subject (*ὄνομα*) and the verb-predicate (*ῥῆμα*). Aristotle takes up his teacher's view, redefines these classes using a linguistic clue (the verb is tense-marked) and a philosophical feature: the noun is what exists in itself, is the subject-substrate of the discourse (*ὑποκείμενον*); the verb, which is predicated on another entity and does not exist in itself, is the accident. Moreover, he used the term epithet (*ἐπίθετον*), although the epithet was only a rhetoric concept, addressing any kind of adjunct to a noun such as an adjective, an epithet, a genitive modifier and so on.

Dionysius and Apollonius rephrase Aristotle's definitions of the noun and the verb and add the epithet to the concepts needed by grammarians. However, the epithet is not conceived as the third part of speech: it is a special use or a special form of the noun, which is verified when a noun is added to another. Moreover, the grammarians use the Aristotelian substance-accident contrast to build conceptual oppositions on different layers of the language structure: the verb "to be" is termed as a substantive verb (*ὑπαρκτικόν*), the pronoun is the sign of the substance of the noun deprived of its individual qualities, the noun is a bundle of substance-plus-quality, it

is the substantial part of the sentence and, on occasions, it may be the sign of the single substance of its referent.

The Roman grammarians imported the Greek parts of speech theory into the Latin world, keeping its Aristotelian background intact. They translated ὄνομα as *nomen*, ῥῆμα as *verbum*, ἐπίθετον as *appositio* or *adiectivum*, ὑπαρκτικόν as *subiectum* or *substantivum*. To Priscian, the noun can be the substantial part of the sentence, but normally it is the sign of a substance-plus-quality; on rare occasions, it may also refer to individual substances, but it is never called *substantivum*, which is the qualification of the verb “to be” and of the relative pronoun. Also in Latin grammar, therefore, the noun only rarely refers to individual substances, and the epithet is a special use of the noun, not a single part of speech.

The classical parts of speech theory changes between the Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages, and the change is triggered by the reinterpretation of Aristotle’s philosophy through Neo-platonic ontology. Although Aristotle never claimed isomorphism between language, logic and ontology, the commentators of Aristotle not only claim it, they project it onto Aristotle’s original text. The change in the philosophical framework underlying the science of grammar entailed a slight change in the labels identifying the parts of speech and a deep change in their definitions. To the Modistae, the noun is the sign of single substances, for it is usually called *nomen substantivum* or *substantiale*, the adjective is the sign of the accidental qualities, for it is called *nomen adiectivum* or *accidentale*, and the verb is the sign of actions. The birth of the adjective as an autonomous part of speech, which is the most patent hallmark of the new parts of speech theory, is dated between the glosses to Donate and Priscian (9th AD) and Abelard’s glosses on Aristotle (11th-12th AD), but the first coherent exposition of the new theory is found in Speculative Grammar (13th-14th AD).

The scholars of the Renaissance canonize the new parts of speech theory, but it is considered as a mere continuation of Priscian’s teaching. In the Humanist grammars, the adjective is apparently a sub-class of the noun, although really the parts of speech theory embraces three major classes by this time. Missionary grammars show that the scholars of the Early Modern Era thought that all languages displayed the same three parts of speech, even when the languages in question did not support this view on empirical grounds. Arnauld and Lancelot canonize the traditional tripartite parts of speech system, so that by the 17th AD, the universality of the major word classes, noun-substance, adjective-quality and verb-action, is not only

beyond doubt, it also seems to continue classical Greek-Latin theory.

If a conclusion is wanted, three very general remarks can be made. First, the difference between the Greek-Latin parts of speech theory and that of the so-called 'traditional linguistics' is deeper than is usually thought and crucially depends on a radical renewal of the theoretical foundation of Medieval linguistic doctrines. Second, this difference is often undermined even in the specialist literature, since many scholars often translate lat. *nomen adjectivum* and *nomen substantivum* simply as "adjective" and "substantive", without realising that neither term has exactly this meaning before the Modistae. Third, translating grammatical terms is a particularly complex task, since they are not opaque labels that refer to well-defined objects in the empirical world, they are so many fragments of larger theories, fragments that have no autonomous existence outside the theory of which they are part, so that each time a grammatical term is used, the whole theory that brought this label into being is activated at some level.

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