

Entry title: **Syncategoremata**  
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Commissioned word length: **2000**  
Date of this draft: **October 3, 2004**

### **100-word abstract**

The intuitive distinction between syncategorematic and categorematic terms roughly corresponds to the logicians' distinction between logical connectives (such as, 'no', 'every', 'and', 'if') and other terms on the one hand, and to the grammarians' distinction between terms that can be subjects and predicates (such as nouns and verbs) and other parts of speech (such as adjectives, adverbs, conjunctions, prepositions, etc.) on the other. These two specifications of the distinction, however, are obviously not equivalent. This article surveys the different syntactic and semantic ways of drawing this distinction as they emerged in its history, especially in medieval logic, and the far-reaching philosophical implications of drawing the distinction in one way or another.

### **The history of the distinction**

The medieval distinction between syncategorematic terms (*syncategoremata*) and categorematic terms (*categoremata*) goes back to the 6<sup>th</sup>-century grammarian's, Priscian's *Institutiones Grammaticae*, where he, in turn, attributes the idea to certain "dialecticians". *Syncategoremata* were commonly recognized by Stoics and Neo-Platonics. [Pinborg, 1973, p. 60] But Peripatetic dialecticians could also take their cue from Aristotle's relevant remark on the copula (the verb 'is' or its equivalent, joining subject and predicate), when he says that it is in itself "nothing, but co-signifies some combination, which cannot be thought of without

the components”. [*On Interpretation*, 16b24-25] In any case, according to Priscian, the dialecticians he refers to characterized *syncategoremata* in a similar way: such terms merely co-signify, in contrast to verbs and nouns, which, when combined, make a complete expression. With the emergence of the distinctive logical and grammatical literature of the Middle Ages in the 12<sup>th</sup> century continuing through the late 15<sup>th</sup> and early 16<sup>th</sup> centuries, discussions of *syncategoremata* became part of the characteristic genres of this literature [Sweeney, 2002], in which our medieval colleagues developed ever more sophisticated characterizations of syncategorematic terms, their distinction from categorematic terms, their function, and their nature. According to Norman Kretzmann’s periodization, we can distinguish the following main stages in the medieval career of *syncategoremata*:

“[1] their emergence as the focal points of certain logical or semantic relationships or special problems of interpretation (in the twelfth century, especially the latter half);

[2] their identification as a distinguishable set of topics worthy of development in separate treatises called, typically, *Syncategoremata* (from the last quarter of the twelfth century to the last quarter of the thirteenth):

[3a] their assimilation into general treatises on logic, sometimes as a group, but sometimes dispersed in ways designed to associate particular *syncategoremata* with more general topics in logic to which they are appropriate; and

[3b] their absorption into the sophisma-literature [discussions of logical puzzles generated by problem-sentences, the so-called *sophismata*], where a particular syncategorema may serve as the germ of a paradox the interest of which is often associated with metaphysics or natural philosophy more than with logic or semantics proper (from the first quarter of the fourteenth century to the disintegration of scholastic logic).” [Kretzmann, 1982]

With the decline of scholastic logic, the logical treatises specifically devoted to *syncategoremata* or to *sophismata* focusing on the problems generated by *syncategoremata*

became gradually extinct along with the rest of the characteristic logical literature of the Middle Ages. Yet, the distinction between categorematic and syncategorematic terms has never become entirely forgotten, and keeps recurring in various guises also in modern philosophy. But the most sophisticated accounts of the distinction itself are still to be found in the medieval literature, which will be the focus of the rest of this article.

### **The syntactic and semantic criteria of drawing the distinction**

It is interesting to observe that already Priscian's remark involves two different and by no means equivalent criteria for distinguishing syncategorematic and categorematic terms. On what may be called the *syntactic* criterion, categorematic terms are those that can function as subjects or predicates of propositions, so that their combination yields a complete proposition, whereas syncategorematic terms cannot be subjects or predicates. On the *semantic* criterion, however, syncategorematic terms are those that merely co-signify, i.e., signify in combination with some other term, but which in themselves do not signify anything. Apparently, the syntactic criterion provides a good test for sorting various parts of speech into either of the two members of the division. However, even if the criterion works, it does not seem to provide a principled *reason* why certain parts of speech behave in one way or the other. The semantic criterion seems to provide such a reason, but, as it stands, it is rather vague.

Indeed, upon closer inspection even the syntactic criterion does not seem to fare much better. In the first place, in the appropriate context *any* part of speech can be a subject or a predicate. For example, the preposition 'of' or the negation 'not', which are certainly obvious candidates for being regarded as syncategorematic, can without further ado be used as subjects in the sentences "'Of' is a preposition" and "'Not' is a negation", where they are taken to stand for themselves (and other token phrases of the same type), or as medieval logicians would put it, in *material supposition*. Accordingly, later medieval authors sometimes refine the syntactic criterion by adding the requirement that syncategorematic

terms are those that cannot be subjects or predicates when used *significatively*, i.e., in their proper function, and *not* with the intent to take them for themselves. But this refinement clearly indicates that the distinction primarily applies not to words *per se*, but rather to their different *uses*. This point is further reinforced by the fact that parts of speech that on the simple syntactic criterion would be deemed syncategorematic in some of their uses *can* be subjects or predicates even when taken significatively. For instance, adjectives that cannot serve as subjects on their own, can be predicates (for example, contrast the grammatical ‘A man is brave’ with the ungrammatical ‘A brave is a man’) and they can have substantive uses (in Latin marked by the neuter gender), when they can even serve as subjects (as in the Latin sentence ‘Album est coloratum’, i.e., ‘[What is] white is colored’; but even in English we can say ‘Blue is a soothing color’). Furthermore, logicians, who were primarily interested in the *semantic* features of *syncategoremata*, would not regard adjectives and adverbs as syncategorematic without further ado.

So, to distinguish such terms from *syncategoremata* pure and simple, they introduced a further distinction. The two most influential authors of the 13<sup>th</sup> century, William of Sherwood and Peter of Spain, both distinguished *pure categoremata*, i.e., subjects and predicates, from their dispositions or determinations. [William of Sherwood, 1941, p. 48; Peter of Spain, 1992, pp. 38-41] But they also distinguished those dispositions of subjects and predicates that belong to them *insofar as* they are subjects and predicates (such as “signs of quantity”, i.e., quantifiers), the *pure syncategoremata*, and those dispositions that belong to the things that are signified by subjects and predicates *regardless of* the fact that they are subjects and predicates, which are *categorematic dispositions of pure categoremata*, such as adjectives and adverbs. Thus, adjectives and adverbs, even in their purely adjectival or adverbial uses, on this criterion are no longer regarded as pure *syncategoremata*, even if they cannot be self-standing subjects or predicates. Rather, they are regarded as *categorematic*

parts of complex subjects and predicates signifying the dispositions of the things signified by nouns and verbs, the principal parts of such complex subjects and predicates.

Further refinements of the distinction were provided by the nominalist philosophers of the 14<sup>th</sup> century [Cf. Nominalism], such as William Ockham, John Buridan and Albert of Saxony, with reference to their conception of a *mental language*, a natural system of representation constituted by mental concepts, the mental acts of a human mind to which spoken or written parts of speech are systematically subordinated, rendering these spoken or written signs meaningful. [cf. Mentalese] In this setting, any part of a spoken or written language is said to signify *immediately* the concept to which it is subordinated, and it is said to signify *ultimately* the *object* or *objects* conceived by means of the concept to which it is subordinated. [SD, pp. xxxiv-xli] But then, since some concepts have only the function of combining simple concepts into complex ones (say, a mental copula, or conjunction), or just to modify the representative function of other concepts (say, a mental term-negation), but in themselves do not have the function of representing any objects, such concepts themselves are syncategorematic in mental language. Thus, the purely syncategorematic terms of spoken or written languages will be those that are subordinated to such syncategorematic concepts.

For example, as Buridan remarks, “the copulas ‘is’ and ‘is not’ signify different ways of combining mental terms in order to form mental propositions, and *these different ways [of combining] are in their turn complexive concepts* [...] And so also the words ‘and’, ‘or’, ‘if’, ‘therefore’, and the like designate *complexive concepts* that combine several propositions or terms at once in the mind, but nothing further outside the mind. These words are called purely syncategorematic, because they signify nothing outside the mind, except along with others, in the sense that the whole complex consisting of categorematic and syncategorematic words does signify the things conceived outside the mind, but this is on account of the categorematic words.” [SD, p. 234]

Buridan's younger contemporary, Albert of Saxony provides further clarification of what we should understand by the significative function of syncategorematic terms when he observes: "if the terms 'every', 'no', etc. are taken materially, then they certainly can be subjects or predicates of propositions, as when we say 'Every is a universal sign', or 'Or is a [disjunctive] conjunction', or 'No is an adverb', or 'And is a copulative conjunction'. For in these propositions these words are not taken significatively, since *they do not exercise the function [non exercent officium] which they were imposed to exercise*. So, in the proposition "Every' is a universal sign', 'every' does not distribute anything, in "No' is an adverb', 'no' does not negate anything, and likewise, in "And' is a copulative conjunction', 'and' does not copulate anything; therefore, in these propositions these terms are taken not syncategorematically, but categorematically." [Albert of Saxony, *Perutilis Logica*, f. 2v]

So, syncategorematic terms, when they are taken significatively, are imposed to exercise the logical functions of modifying the semantic functions of categorematic terms with which they are construed on account of being subordinated to mental acts that exercise these functions on the mental level. Indeed, as Albert adds a little bit later, this is precisely the reason why in their significative function they cannot be subjects of predicates. [ibid. f. 3r] Thus, Albert presents the semantic distinction on the mental level as the ultimate reason for the syntactic criterion of the distinction on the spoken level. Indeed, later medieval treatises (in the late 14<sup>th</sup> and early 15<sup>th</sup> centuries) on concepts and mental language, such as those by Thomas of Cleves, Paul of Gelria or Peter of Ailly, draw the distinction as pertaining directly and primarily to acts of the mind. These authors describe *mental categoremata* as being *acts of conceiving of some objects*, as opposed to *mental syncategoremata*, which are rather *different modes or ways of conceiving* of the objects conceived by the former. [*Concepts*, pp. 14, 54-57, 96, 130; Peter of Ailly, 1980, pp. 18-19; see also the quote from Buridan above.] From this characterization, and from the common medieval doctrine that the semantic

functions of spoken and written terms are determined by the semantic functions of the concepts to which they are subordinated, we get as a simple corollary the usual semantic and syntactic features of (pure) *syncategoremata*, namely, that they are co-significative rather than significative on their own, and that taken significatively they cannot be referring terms of propositions.

Although the distinction drawn in these terms was not in vogue in early modern philosophy, it is significant that John Locke would characterize the parts of speech he calls *particles* (but which his medieval colleagues would recognize as *syncategoremata*), as being “marks of some action or intimation of the mind”, that is, some mental operation on ideas of the mind. [Locke, *Essay*, bk. IV, c. 7, n. 4.] Later on, Immanuel Kant would describe pure concepts of understanding as *logical functions*, directly preparing the way for Gottlob Frege to describe logical connectives as *second order concepts*, i.e., as concepts operating on concepts.

### **The philosophical significance of the distinction**

Syncategorematic terms present a particular problem for those philosophers who would take the primary function of elements of a language to be the signs or names of things. For in the case of syncategorematic terms we just don't seem to have obvious candidates among things in the world for these terms to name. Nevertheless, medieval realists, such as Peter of Spain or William of Sherwood, or the *modistic grammarians* of the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries, such as Thomas of Erfurt [cf. [Zupko, 2003](#) also for further references], who professed a close parallelism between *modi significandi* (modes of signifying), *modi intelligendi* (modes of understanding) and *modi essendi* (modes of being), assumed in their ontology certain *modes of being* or *dispositions of things* corresponding to the *modes of signifying* determined by *modes of understanding* conveyed by syncategorematic terms. So, in this framework,

syncategorematic terms do have counterparts in reality: the modes or dispositions of things that “prompt” us to conceive of and hence signify things in certain ways.

Although these philosophers, logicians and grammarians were careful to attach only a certain *diminished* degree of reality to these dispositions, nevertheless, it was precisely their “ontological liberalism” that prompted William Ockham and his nominalist followers discussed above to identify *syncategoremata* primarily with the mental acts modifying the representative function of categorematic concepts. For in this nominalist framework, as we could see, syncategorematic terms simply have no extra-mental counterparts: the complex expressions they form with categorematic terms signify only the things signified by the categorematic terms, but in *different ways*. So, for example, as Buridan explicitly concludes, the proposition ‘God is God’ and the proposition ‘God is not God’ signify extra-mentally exactly the same thing as the term ‘God’ does, yet, this does not render these expressions synonymous, for they signify the same thing *differently* because of the different *syncategoremata* signified by them in the mind. [SD, p. 234] This is how late-medieval nominalists are able to have a parsimonious ontology along with a sufficiently “fine-grained” semantics, by making the necessary semantic distinctions on the conceptual, and not on the ontological level. [Cf. Nominalism]

But besides these and similar ontological considerations, the re-interpretation of the medieval distinction had even more far-reaching consequences in early modern and modern philosophy with Kant’s re-classification of a number of traditional metaphysical concepts, such as substance and accident, cause and effect, existence, necessity and possibility, as *concepts of pure understanding*, that is, as *logical functions* or *syncategoremata*. For Kant’s considerations, especially those concerning existence, directly paved the way for Gottlob Frege’s analysis of the notion existence as a second-order concept, the existential quantifier, which in turn could immediately be exploited by the anti-metaphysical program of logical

positivists, such as Rudolf Carnap. [Carnap, 1959] Accordingly, without the recent re-evaluation of the concepts of existence, possibility, and ontological commitment in the framework of modern possible-worlds semantics, metaphysics probably still could not be regarded as the legitimate philosophical subject in analytic philosophy it has become in the past couple of decades. As even this example shows, our actual understanding of the medieval distinction still has fundamental significance in our considerations concerning the relationships between language, thought and reality.

### **Author's Biography**

Gyula Klima received his degrees in philosophy in Budapest, Hungary, where he started working at the Institute of Philosophy of the Hungarian Academy in 1982, doing research in medieval and modern logic and metaphysics. In 1991 he moved to the US, where he held teaching positions at Yale University (1991-1995), the University of Notre Dame (1995-1999) and Fordham University, where he is currently a professor of philosophy. He is the author of over 50 papers in collections such as *The Cambridge Companion to Ockham*, or Blackwell's *Companion to Philosophy in the Middle Ages*, and professional journals such as *Synthese*, *Medieval Philosophy and Theology* and *History and Philosophy of Logic*. His annotated translation of John Buridan's *Summulae de Dialectica* appeared in 2001 at Yale University Press.

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### **Keywords**

[nominalism, realism, conceptualism, universals, essentialism, ontological commitment]

### **Other relevant entries in the encyclopedia**

[Concepts; Mentalese; Semantic value; Objects, Properties and Functions; Nominalism]