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978-0-521-10955-0 - Syntactic Theory in the High Middle Ages: Modistic Models of Sentence Structure

Michael A. Covington

Excerpt

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# 1 Introduction

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The speculative grammarians of the High Middle Ages are remembered today for two major achievements; they formulated the theory of *modi significandi*, which comprises an elaborate attempt to explain linguistic structure in terms of the structure of cognition and of reality, and they developed an elaborate theory of syntax from which some concepts, such as government and dependency, have survived to the present day. The former has been studied extensively in modern times, while the latter has been neglected.

This book deals with the origins and development of the theories of syntactic structure used by a group of grammarians and logicians who flourished at Paris between about 1270 and 1310 and who were later called ‘Modistae’ because of their emphasis on *modi significandi*. I am focusing on roughly the period from Martin of Dacia (c. 1270), who was, as far as we know, the first to construct a fully modistic theory of syntax, to Radulphus Brito (c. 1300), the last major contributor to modistic theory before the rise of nominalism diverted grammarians’ attention to methodological matters.

The primary goal of my study is exegesis. I am concerned more with explicating the conceptual content of the medieval theory than with presenting its complete history. In so doing, I am consciously writing for two audiences – linguists who may know little about medieval philosophy, and medievalists who may know little about linguistics – and I hope readers in each group will forgive me for having done certain things purely for the benefit of the other. Linguists wanting to know more about medieval thought should look at books such as Lindberg (1978) and Lewis (1964) (which is of much more general relevance than its title suggests); medievalists may want to consult Matthews (1981) on points of linguistics. Moreover, two important reference works – Bursill-Hall’s *Census of Medieval Latin Grammatical Manuscripts* (1981) and the *Cambridge History of Later Medieval Philosophy* (1982) – have been published since

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

## 2 Introduction

most of this book was written; they are now indispensable for any further work in the field.

Many of my sources are available in printed editions, though I have consulted manuscripts where appropriate. I have standardized the orthography in all Latin quotations; to do otherwise would have added nothing and would have made proofreading nearly impossible. Also, I have made occasional changes in punctuation, though not such as to alter the clause structure. I have indicated emendations to printed texts by means of square brackets (for interpolated comments) or angle brackets (for short insertions).

I have given all important Latin quotations in parallel columns of text and translation, both to increase the usefulness of this work to non-Latinists and as a way of presenting my interpretations of difficult passages. Medieval scientific Latin has many words and phrases, such as *item* and *dicendum est*, which mark the exact position of the sentence in the highly structured discourse from which it is taken; I have generally left these in place on the Latin side but have not attempted to render them into English, since there is no way to do so concisely.

Moreover, most theoretical terms in medieval grammar have no counterparts in modern languages. Many of them I have simply calqued (*modus significandi*: ‘mode of signifying’, *constructibile*: ‘constructible’) or left in Latin (*regimen*, *primum*, *secundum*). Translating into modern terminology (e.g., rendering *causa inventionis* as ‘functional explanation’ and *partes orationis* as ‘components of the sentence’) can be useful in restricted contexts but, if followed as a general practice, would tend to exaggerate the similarities between medieval and modern theories – or, worse, make it impossible to separate the medieval doctrines from my tentative interpretations of them.

Although comparison of medieval and modern theories is not among my main goals, I have not hesitated to introduce insights from modern grammatical theories where appropriate (particularly in Chapter 5). In this connection one must avoid two opposite errors. On the one hand, to study past linguistic theories ‘in and of themselves,’ as is sometimes advocated, would be to ignore the fact that linguistics, unlike art or literature, is the scientific investigation of a natural phenomenon – language – and hence that many of the properties of linguistic theories, past and present, result from the properties of the thing being studied, not just the creativity of the theorizers. No one would study medieval astronomy without looking at modern analyses of planetary motion; it would make equally little sense to

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Michael A. Covington

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction* 3

study medieval grammar without looking at the best grammatical analyses available today.

On the other hand, it would be just as much a mistake to assume that the Modistae are interesting only because, and insofar as, they anticipated modern developments. No one who is familiar with both can doubt that some of the issues faced by medieval and modern syntacticians are similar – for instance, the constituency-dependency question discussed in sections 5.1 and 5.2 – but the medieval philosophical environment and (even more so) the overall medieval frame of mind are very different from those of the present day; indeed, it is the difference as much as the similarity that makes the Modistae interesting. (The discovery of Pāṇini by the West was, after all, far more exciting than the discovery of a precursor of Locke or Turgot would have been.) In the final analysis, the history of linguistics, like any field of knowledge that is speculative in the Aristotelian sense, needs no external justification; like Mount Everest, it is of interest simply ‘because it’s there.’

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

## 2 *Before the Modistae*

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Modistic syntactic theory represents in large part the continued development of earlier ideas. Its background begins with the late Roman grammarians who wrote down descriptions of the classical Latin language for posterity – writers such as Donatus, Charisius, Diomedes, and Servius in the fourth century, Phocas and Pompeius in the fifth, and Priscian in the early sixth. The grammarians of the Carolingian Renaissance, such as Alcuin of York (fl. 781–96), Sedulius Scottus (fl. 848–58), and Remigius of Auxerre (c. 900), made use of the writings of many of their Roman predecessors and kept essentially the same descriptive framework.

By the eleventh or twelfth century, however, the range of Roman grammarians whose works were used in the schools of northern Europe had narrowed to two: Donatus and Priscian. The *Ars grammatica* of Donatus – the first part of which, the *Ars minor*, is phrased in a catechism-like question-and-answer format – says nothing significant about syntax. The only substantial Roman source for medieval syntactic theory is therefore Priscian, whose eighteen-book *Institutiones grammaticae* constitute the most voluminous, most thorough, and most disorganized of the surviving Roman grammars. The first sixteen books, referred to in the Middle Ages as *Priscianus maior*, discuss the individual parts of speech, and the last two (*Priscianus minor*) are explicitly devoted to syntax, though syntactic information is scattered through the other books as well.

Priscian's stated goal (*Institutiones* I.1) is to pass along to the Romans the insights of various Greek grammarians, especially Apollonius Dyscolus, and his treatment of syntax is heavily dependent on Apollonius' *Περὶ Συντάξεως* (*On Syntax*); but since Priscian's Greek antecedents were not known to the medieval Latin grammarians with whom I am concerned, I shall not try to trace them exhaustively. On the whole, Priscian is far less theory-oriented than the Modistae; his brief discussions of general principles tend (even more than those of Apollonius) to be followed by long enumerations of examples from classical literature, cited either because

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

they illustrate important points or, more commonly, because they present minor problems and therefore need explaining.

## 2.1 Priscian on syntax

For Priscian, the number of parts of speech (*partes orationis*, more literally ‘parts of the sentence’ or ‘sentence components’) is a fundamental theoretical issue. He argues that there are eight: noun, verb, participle, pronoun, preposition, adverb, conjunction, and interjection (II.15–21). For him, ‘noun’ comprises both substantives and adjectives; interrogatives and relatives like *quis*, ‘who?’ and *qui*, ‘who, which’ are nouns, not pronouns; and ‘preposition’ includes both separate words and prefixes. His criteria for identifying the parts of speech involve a haphazard mix of semantic, syntactic, and morphological criteria. For example:

Proprium est nominis substantiam et qualitatem significare. (II.18)	The distinguishing characteristic of the noun is that it signifies substance and quality.
Proprium est verbi actionem sive passionem sive utrumque cum modis et formis et temporibus sine casu significare. (II.20)	The distinguishing characteristic of the verb is that it signifies action, or the undergoing of action, or either of the two indifferently, with moods and inflections [for person] and tenses, without case.
Proprium est adverbii cum verbo poni nec sine eo perfectam significationem posse habere. (II.20)	The distinguishing characteristic of the adverb is that it is put with the verb and can have no complete meaning without it.
Proprium est coniunctionis diversa nomina vel quascumque dictiones casuales vel diversa verba vel adverbia coniungere. (II.21)	The distinguishing characteristic of the conjunction is that it joins different nouns, or any kind of words inflected for case, or verbs, or adverbs.

Priscian holds that, like the letters of the alphabet, the parts of speech form not merely a closed set but an ordered set – in fact, the same is true of

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Michael A. Covington

Excerpt

[More information](#)6 *Before the Modistae*

the sets of cases, genders, tenses, and so forth (XVII.12).<sup>1</sup> He argues that the *ordo naturalis* of the parts of speech is:

NOUN > VERB > PARTICIPLE > PRONOUN >  
PREPOSITION > ADVERB > CONJUNCTION > INTERJECTION

(By '>' here I mean 'precedes' or 'is prior to'.)

The rationale for this ordering is as follows. The noun and verb come at the beginning because they alone have to be present (at least implicitly) in every sentence (XVII.12–13). The noun is prior to the verb because substance (signified by nouns) is ontologically prior to action (signified by verbs) (XVII.14). The participle is obviously next in line because of its close relationship with, and dependence on, the verb (XVII.18–19). Then comes the pronoun, which would have been next to the noun if its position had not been preempted by the verb and the participle. Those are the inflected parts of speech; they are, as a class, prior to the uninflected parts of speech (*indeclinabilia*). Of the latter, the preposition comes first (Priscian does not really say why); then the adverb (because it modifies, and thus corresponds to, the verb, which is second in the order as a whole); then the conjunction, because it can join words from any of the categories that precede it and is therefore dependent on all of them; and, last of all, the interjection (XVII.20).<sup>2</sup>

At first sight it might seem that Priscian's *ordo naturalis* has to do with word order, but this is not so; the relation of *ordo naturalis* holding between one part of speech and another can be the opposite of the normal word order. For instance, in the sentence the preposition (whether functioning as a separate word or as a prefix) always precedes the inflected part of speech to which it is attached; but it comes after the inflected parts of speech in the *ordo naturalis*. 'Ergo natura quidem posterior est, constructione vero principalis' (XVII.20) – the preposition is subsequent by nature but initial in the construction.

Priscian's theory of syntactic structure, insofar as he has one, is elegantly simple. Phonological segments (*litterae*, or more properly *elementa*) go together to form syllables (*syllabae*); syllables make up words (*dictiones*); and words are put together to form sentences (*orationes*). Each of these four primitive units is independently definable: the segment is the shortest unit into which speech can be divided (I.3), the syllable is what is pronounced with one accent<sup>3</sup> and one breath (II.1), the word is the shortest unit that has meaning out of context (II.14), and the sentence is 'a gram-

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Michael A. Covington

Excerpt

[More information](#)

matical sequence of words, manifesting a complete thought' ('ordinatio dictionum congrua, sententiam perfectam demonstrans,' II.53).

The four primitive units, segment, syllable, word, and sentence, are related by three levels of distributional constraints, which Priscian considers to be parallel in nature. To take some of his examples, the segment *h* occurs only at the beginning of the syllable; the syllable *prae* occurs only at the beginning of the word;<sup>4</sup> and a particular class of words, the prepositions, always come before the words to which they are joined (XVII.7). (Priscian's exposition becomes unclear at this point; another, better example, which he hints at but does not state clearly, is the fact that relative pronouns and subordinating conjunctions always come at the beginning of the clause.) The *partes orationis* (literally 'sentence components', not 'parts of speech') are to the sentence what vowels and consonants are to the syllable: classes of constituents (XVII.10).

All of this leaves out morphology, which Priscian handles with what Hockett (1954) and Robins (1959) classify as a 'word-and-paradigm' model: inflection is a kind of variation that whole words undergo, rather than a matter of selecting and attaching appropriate affixes. For Priscian, *puella* is the nominative of 'girl' and *puellae* is the genitive of the same word; he would never say that *puell-* is 'girl' and *-ae* is genitive. An analogue to this in modern theory is the representation of inflectional categories as features attached to lexical items, rather than as separate elements in the string of morphemes.

Priscian does not go very far toward his goal of treating sentence syntax and phonology in parallel fashion because his method of stating distributional constraints in terms of linear order, which works so well for describing the behavior of segments and syllables, is rather poorly suited to handling sentence structure. Latin has highly variable word order and indicates grammatical relations mainly by means of case endings, not linear position; yet Priscian's distributionalism keeps him from saying anything more about grammatical relations than that one word 'is put in construction with' (*construitur cum*) or 'requires' (*exigit*) another. He makes no attempt to define grammatical relations precisely; even the concepts of subject and object (as distinct from the cases that mark them) are absent. It is hardly surprising that Priscian's idea of parallel syntax and phonology was completely rejected by the Modistae.

On a more *ad hoc* level, however, Priscian formulated (or passed on from Apollonius) a number of syntactic concepts that were to be influential in

Cambridge University Press

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Michael A. Covington

Excerpt

[More information](#)8 *Before the Modistae*

the Middle Ages. Percival (to appear) notes that Priscian has at least the germ of a concept of morphological government – the notion that one word is responsible for the case or mood of another – though he has no technical term for it. Further, Priscian often appeals, in an informal way, to the idea that certain parts of the sentence are understood (*subaudiuntur*, (*sub*)*intelliguntur*) or left out (*per figuram ἐλλείψεως*); for example, when the infinitive *gaudere* is used as an imperative, *iubeo*, ‘I bid you to . . .’ is understood with it (XVIII.48), and in *non bonus homo* ‘not a good man’, the adverb *non* only seems to modify a noun; in reality it modifies an understood verb *est* (II.20). In one place (XVIII.10) he proposes a rule for interpreting possessives by paraphrasing them; in his example, *Hector filius Priami*, ‘Hector son of Priam’, is converted to *Hectorem filium Priamus possidet*, ‘Priam possesses a son, Hector’.

Moreover, Priscian promotes the concept of *transitio personarum* – the transfer of the action from one person or referent to another.<sup>5</sup> In a transitive sentence, such as *Aristophanes Aristarchum docuit*, ‘Aristophanes taught Aristarchus’, the action (in this case teaching) proceeds from Aristophanes to Aristarchus (XIII.23). If there is no transfer of action, as in *percurrit homo excelsus*, ‘an eminent man finishes the course’,<sup>6</sup> then the sentence or construction is said to be intransitive (XIV.14), and if the action is transferred back to the person from which it came, as in *Ajax se interfecit*, ‘Ajax killed himself’, the construction is described as reciprocal (XIII.23). A retransitive construction is one in which the action goes from one person to another and then back to the first, as in *orare iussit . . . ut ad se venias*, ‘He<sub>1</sub> commanded (me<sub>2</sub>) to ask (you<sub>3</sub>) to come to him<sub>1</sub>’ (XIV.14, indicating the various referents with subscript numbers for clarity). Percival (to appear) observes that ‘it would not appear that Priscian regarded this classification as exhaustive,’ but much was made of it during the Middle Ages.

**2.2 The reunion of grammar and logic**

Beginning late in the tenth century, the study of logic, which had been languishing for about four centuries, underwent an important revival. The last great logician of antiquity had been Boethius (roughly contemporary with Priscian), whose works, including translations of Aristotle’s *Categories* and *De interpretatione* and Porphyry’s *Isagoge*, remained available (though neglected) during the succeeding centuries. After Boethius, one elementary treatise on logic was written (c. 778) by Alcuin of



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Michael A. Covington

Excerpt

[More information](#)*The reunion of grammar and logic* 9

York, but logic did not become the object of intensive scholarly research until the time of Gerbert of Aurillac (938?–1003), ‘the first man in Europe, so far as we know, to lecture systematically on the whole range of Boethius’ logical treatises’ (Southern 1953: 175). There is doubtless no way to tell to what extent Gerbert himself was responsible, but there certainly ensued a sharp rise in scholars’ interest in logic, continuing through the halting first steps of Garlandus Compotista (fl. c. 1040) and Anselm of Canterbury (1033–1109) up to Peter Abelard (1079–1142), the first great medieval logician – by which time the remaining works of Aristotle were being rediscovered and the rise of scholasticism was well under way.

With the revival of logic came a restoration of the link between logic and grammar that had existed in Stoic times but had been broken long before the time of Priscian. Heretofore, Latin writers had confined themselves either to grammar or to logic, and even those who wrote about both, such as Alcuin, made no attempt to relate the two fields (de Rijk 1967a: 98–9). The re-establishment of the connection resulted in a period of rapid progress in both fields, about which little is known (see, however, Hunt 1943); for grammar this culminated in the Priscian commentaries of William of Conches (first edition c. 1125, second c. 1150) and his pupil Petrus Helias (c. 1140). William of Conches was forgotten all too soon, but Petrus Helias’ work was well known throughout the Middle Ages and was used extensively by the Modistae.

The nature of twelfth-century philosophical grammar is manifest in William of Conches’s famous plaint, at the end of his *De philosophia mundi*:<sup>7</sup>

Priscianus . . . obscuras dat  
definitiones nec exponit, causas  
vero inventionis diversarum  
partium et diversorum acciden-  
tium in unaquaque praetermittit.

Priscian gives obscure definitions  
without exposition and in fact  
leaves out the functional expla-  
nations of the various parts of  
speech and their respective  
attributes.

The call for clearer definitions is just what one would expect, since Priscian’s definitions of his terms are not very rigorous, and additional confusion had resulted from eleventh-century mixing of logical and grammatical terminology (for examples see Kneale & Kneale 1962: 199–200 and Hunt 1943: 216). The explicit quest for *causae inventionis* was, however, a new development first attested in eleventh-century sources (Hunt

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Michael A. Covington

Excerpt

[More information](#)10 *Before the Modistae*

1943:18–19). The idea behind it was that language had been invented in prehistoric times by human beings acting consciously as they assigned (*imposuerunt*) words to signify particular concepts and as they invented (*invenerunt*) linguistic structure. Everything in language was put there to serve a specific function, and the *causa inventionis* of a word or part of speech or grammatical category therefore amounts to an explanation of the communicative function it serves. To give some examples:

Illud quoque sciendum est, quod communis causa inventionis omnium dictionum est ut haberet homo quo modo propriam voluntatem alteri manifestaret. (Petrus Helias, cited by Fredborg 1973:13)

Causa inventionis haec est: in omni perfecta oratione dicitur aliquid et de aliquo. Fuit igitur repertum nomen ad discernendum de quo fieret sermo, verbum vero ad discernendum quid dicitur de eo. (Ibid.)

Hic tractat [Priscianus] de cognomine ostendendo quid sit, sed non propriam causam inventionis nec significationem nec nominationem illius dicit. Nos tamen causam inventionis dicamus quae talis est. Cum diversi ab una honesta persona principium generationis haberent ut se de eius familia notarent, nomen illius nomini suo adiungebant et dicebatur cognomen. (William of Conches, comm. on Priscian II.24, first edition [c. 1125], quoted by Fredborg 1973:14)

Note also that the functional explanation common to all the parts of speech is this: that a man might have a way to make his will known to another.

The functional explanation [of the noun and the verb] is this: in every complete sentence something is said, and it is said about something. The noun was therefore introduced to show what the statement was about, and the verb, to indicate what was said about it.

Here Priscian treats the surname, showing what it is, but he does not say why it was invented, nor what it means, nor what it refers to. But we shall say why it was invented, which is as follows: when various people were descended from one well-known person with the result that they identified themselves as being from his family, they added his name to theirs and it was called a surname.