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## A NOTE ON ARISTOTLE'S *DE INTERPRETATIONE* 20b-21a

HERBERT E. BREKLE

This contribution is intended to be a discussion of a few passages of Aristotle's *de interpretatione* (20b-21a) where the Philosopher deals with the notion of 'simplicity of a proposition' and with certain relations holding between several types of predicates contained in a proposition.

It is the aim of these remarks to clarify — as far as possible — Aristotle's view of the problems just mentioned *and*, secondly, to venture an explanation of one of the questions raised in terms of modern linguistics.

The following quotations from Aristotle's text will be given in the English translation by Harold P. Cook (1938), however, for the sake of notional clarity, reference will be made to the relevant Greek terms.

A proposition is not one but several that predicates one thing of many or many of one and the same in a positive or negative manner, unless what the many denote, in reality, is only one thing.

Man is animal, biped, domesticated: these coalesce into one, whereas 'white', 'man' and 'walking' do not. Should we predicate these of one subject or affirm a single predicate of them, the resulting proposition would be single in no sense except the linguistic. (*de interpretatione* 20b12ff.)

This passage does not require much comment: Aristotle considers a proposition as one even if several predicates are affirmed of a subject; in this case he posits the following criterion: these predicates must coalesce into one, i.e. these predicates must, in some given language, fall together into one commonly accepted concept, which is not necessarily represented by a single morpheme. His example is: 'animal, biped, domesticated'. These concepts coalesce into one, namely that of 'man'. When affirmed of 'man', according to Aristotle, ONE proposition arises. Nowadays we would qualify such a proposition as 'analytic'. If other predicates, e.g. 'white', 'walking' are affirmed of ~~abj~~ subject, then these predicates do not fall together into a single concept even if, in a given language, a single morpheme were to exist. Thus, such a proposition is not simple except in a purely

morphological sense (Aristotle uses the term *φωνή* as the decisive criterion). We would, however, misunderstand the preceding quotation were we to infer from it that only complex analytical propositions should fall under the criterion given by Aristotle. His requirement is rather that the concepts forming the predicate-part of a proposition must coalesce into one, the analyticity of the whole proposition is not necessarily required. An example would be: 'someone is a parent of somebody and male'; it is agreed that the product of being a parent of somebody and being male equals to the notion commonly expressed by the word *father*; however, the given example is not an element of the class of analytical propositions.

In the following passage Aristotle views the phenomenon of the combination of predicates within a single proposition from a different angle. Whereas in the preceding section he discussed the coalescing of predicates into one (the relevant Greek term is *ἐν τι γίνεσθαι*), it is in the following paragraph that he deals with the combination proper of predicates (Greek term used: *κατηγορεῖται συντιθέμενα*). The following quotation — together with its explanation — will reveal that Aristotle's notion of 'coalescing predicates into one' is based on purely semantic or notional criteria, whereas the notion of 'combination of predicates' is subject to weaker conditions pertaining to the domain of syntax.

In certain combinations of predicates we find that the separate predicates fuse themselves into one predicate; in others, again, they do not. How, we ask, does this difference arise?

We can either use two propositions and state, first, that man is an animal; secondly, that man is a biped, or, combining the two into one, state that man is a two-footed animal. So we may use 'man' and 'white'. (20b31 ff.)

The idea hinted at before, that the combination of predicates into one complex predicate may include the process of coalescing predicates into one — this is clearly the stronger condition — AND the combination of predicates into a syntactic group, is evident in Aristotle's own examples (for both cases the overriding criterion is the equisignificance of propositions containing simple predicates with the one containing a complex predicate):

*man is an animal and man is a biped →*  
*man is a two-footed animal*

*A man is a man and a man is white →*  
*a man is a white man* (This is Aristotle's own example).

Next the philosopher takes up a case where the combinability of predicates is possible on purely syntactical grounds but where the resulting complex proposition is NOT equisignificant with the respective simple propositions.

This [i.e. combinability of predicates with resulting equisignificance] is not so with 'cobbler' and 'good'. Though a man is a cobbler and good, yet we cannot combine them together and pronounce him also 'a good cobbler'.

For if we can say that, whenever both predicates, separately taken, are truly affirmed of one subject, both also, when taken together, are truly affirmed of that subject, then many absurdities follow.

(20b35ff.)

In this passage Aristotle maintains that not all predicates that "separately taken, are truly affirmed of a subject" may be combined into a single syntactic group with resulting equisignificance of the propositions concerned. So this latter sort of transformation does not always lead to a proposition that can be said to be equisignificant with the respective basic simple propositions. Aristotle does not explain this special phenomenon; a few lines further down we only find the repeated statement that "to maintain ... that predicates can always be combined without any exception leads clearly to many absurdities".

It is in the concluding section of this contribution where an attempt shall be made to clarify this problem a little further.

Summing up what has been said so far we can say that in the three passages quoted from *de interpretatione* Aristotle distinguishes between three kinds of compounded predicates in a proposition:

Firstly, such predicates that in a given culture coalesce into one. Propositions containing predicates of this sort are said to be semantically simple propositions; Aristotle's example is:

*man is an animal and man is a biped* →  
*man is a two-footed animal*

our own example was:

*someone is a parent of somebody and someone is male* →  
*someone is somebody's father*

It is evident that predicates of this first sort always admit of combination; the criterion of coalescing into one implies combinability of predicates.

Secondly, some predicates, though not coalescing into one, do admit of being taken together to form a complex predicate of a proposition.

In the first and in the second case equisignificance of the propositions connected in the combinatorial process is preserved.

An example for this second case would be:

*something<sub>1</sub> is a square and something<sub>1</sub> is red →  
something<sub>1</sub> is a red square.*

Compared with the first kind of predicates — the 'coalescing ones' — this second sort of predicates is subject to weaker conditions: only the equisignificance of the basic propositions with the resultant complex proposition must be guaranteed.

Thirdly, other predicates, when combined to form the complex predicate of a proposition, do not satisfy the required condition of equisignificance of the basic propositions with the resultant complex proposition. Yet, on the syntactic surface some such predicates seem to form a syntactic group morphologically similar to constructions arising in type one (e.g. *two-footed animal*). Aristotle's example for this kind of predicates is:

*someone<sub>1</sub> is a cobbler and someone<sub>1</sub> is good*

Superficially these propositions may be transformed to:

*someone<sub>1</sub> is a good cobbler.*

There is no equisignificance between the first two simple propositions and the one with the complex predicate *good cobbler*. It was already said that Aristotle himself just stated this fact but did not give an adequate explanation.

In an explanation of the case of the 'good cobbler' in terms of contemporary linguistics it should be pointed out that a full investigation of this and related problems can only be carried out within the framework of syntax AND semantics of simple and transformed sentences. Recently, problems of this sort have been dealt with by Hans Marchand (*Anglia* 84), by Jerrold Katz in *The Philosophy of Language* (1966), and by myself in a contribution to the *Marchand-Festschrift* (1968).

Here, however, we shall be only concerned with Aristotle's case of the 'good cobbler'. Stated in other terms, the question amounts to this: By which linguistic criteria can we explain the nonequivalence of the sentences *a man is a cobbler and good* and *a man is a good cobbler*?

The inspection of any occurrence of the word *good* — or for that case *bad*, *faithful* and a few more — reveals that it always qualifies some function inherent in the content of the word to which *good* is attributed. So a thing or a person cannot just be good in an absolute sense. (Aristotle's own

explanation of the concept 'aretē' in his *Nicomachean Ethics* is compatible with our assumption.) When we speak of a *good man*, a *good neighbour*, a *good father* etc. it is not the person as such who is seen to be endowed with the quality of 'goodness'; what is really meant is that a man is good insofar as he fulfills his civil and moral duties well; a neighbour is good insofar as he is good in his function as a neighbour; a father is good insofar as he fulfills his paternal duties well. In applying these findings to Aristotle's case of the good cobbler it is relatively easy to find an explanation for the non-equivalence of the propositions *a man is a cobbler and good* and *a man is a good cobbler*. In the first sentence it is said of a man that he fulfills his moral duties well and that the same man is a cobbler; in the second sentence nothing is stated about the moral qualities of a man but it is said that this man is good in mending shoes. Thus, in the second proposition the adjective *good* does not refer at all to some moral quality of a man but refers only as a transposed adverb to his abilities in mending shoes; in other words, the second sentence — *a man is a good cobbler* — does not derive from a copula sentence, where goodness is predicated of some subject, but it goes back to a sentence where *good* in the morphologic shape of a manner adverb, i.e. *well*, refers to some action or function, namely that of 'mending shoes'. Thus the syntactic group *good cobbler* really is a nominalization of a sentence like *someone mends shoes well*. It is exactly this difference in the functions to which the word *good* refers in the before-mentioned sentences that accounts for the lacking equisignificance between the two sentences *a man is a cobbler and good* and *a man is a good cobbler*.

The just-discussed peculiarity of the word *good*, i.e. that it qualifies only functions, processes or actions and not just things or substances, which is normal for other adjectives, can be reworded in terms of symbolic logic.

In the predicate calculus, as, e.g., developed by Carnap and others, predicates or concepts are — among other aspects — differentiated according to levels. If we are to represent the proposition that, e.g., 'some table is red', by means of the notational system of symbolic logic, we might use the following symbols (quantifiers are omitted here, as not being relevant for our topic):

(1)  $T(x) \cdot R(x)$

This means: something —  $x$  — is a table and  $x$  is also red. Predicates like  $T$  = 'table' and  $R$  = 'red' are said to be predicates of the first level because they may take as their arguments thing-variables. If, however,

we are to represent a proposition like 'someone mends shoes well', it would seem to be impossible to ascribe the predicate 'well' to any thing-variable like 'someone' or 'something'. Traditional grammar and our own linguistic competence tells us that the predicate 'well' can qualify only some process, function or action. The same result is obtained in predicate logic by requiring that predicates like 'well', 'badly', 'heavy' in the noun phrase *heavy smoker* etc., are predicates of the second level taking as their arguments predicates of the first level. This does not mean that all predicates of the first level may become arguments for second-level predicates.

Our example 'someone mends shoes well' can be represented in symbolic notation roughly as:

$$(2) \quad x_1 . S(y). M(x, y) \quad . \quad \varphi(M_{x,y})$$

$M$  stands for 'mend', being a two-place predicate of the first level;  $x_1$  stands for 'someone';  $S$  stands for 'shoe';  $\varphi$  stands for 'well', being a one-place predicate of the second level and, consequently, taking  $M$ , a first-level predicate, as its argument.

The fact that the notational system of symbolic logic is used here to exemplify a certain parallelism between the ways and means of grammatical analysis prevalent in traditional as well as in certain 'modern' quarters of linguistics and the conceptual framework of symbolic logic does not imply that the theories and calculi so far developed in symbolic logic can be taken over *in toto* into linguistics without any revisions. Yet, if certain modifications of the conceptual and notational apparatus of the hitherto accepted canonical form of symbolic logic are carried out to suit the needs of linguistic descriptions, the potential fruitfulness of integrating its theoretical foundations into linguistics could prove to be a real one.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. for a tentative elaboration of predicate logic for linguistic purposes, especially in the domain of sentence semantics my 'Habilitationsschrift' *Generative Satzsemantik und transformationelle Syntax im System der englischen Nominalkomposition*.



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# SOCIETAS LINGUISTICA EUROPAEA

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