C.S. PEIRCE'S SEMIOTIC AND MODISTAE'S GRAMMATICA SPECULATIVA

A SEMIÓTICA DE C.S. PEIRCE E A GRAMÁTICA ESPECULATIVA DE MODISTAE

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Abstract: The relationships between Peirce's Semiotic and the Grammatica Speculativa of Thomas of Erfurt, who belongs to Modistae's medieval school, have still been little explored. Peirce shows a continuous interest in this text, and his study must have gone much further than a simple reading of the work. Peirce may have felt close to Modistae's theory because of his inquiry into the reality of generals, and his related interest in dealing with the distinction between abstract and concrete terms, like whiteness and white. This feature, in a realist context, provides Peirce with the framework he is looking for in his account of the Hypostatical Abstraction. Moreover, I believe Thomas of Erfurt's work has retained Peirce's attention for the indexical question of the pronoun, conceived by the Modistae as a part of speech independent of noun, unlike among contemporary grammarians, who consider the pronoun as a mere substitute for the noun. As well known, Modistae aimed to set up Grammar as an universal and autonomous science: Logic depends upon and presupposes Grammar, as in Peirce's theory. Peirce in fact brought the subjects of the Medieval Trivium into his own Semiotic Trivium, giving to Speculative Grammar the first and most important place of the three Semiotic sciences.

Keywords: Speculative Grammar. Grammatica speculativa. Semiotic Trivium. Scholastic realism.

Resumo: As relações entre a Semiotica de Peirce e a Grammatica Speculativa de Thomas de Erfurt, que pertence à escola medieval de Modistae, ainda são pouco exploradas. Peirce demonstra um interesse continuo nesse texto, e deve ter ido muito além de um simples estudo do início do trabalho. Peirce pode ter se sentido próximo à teoria de Modistae devido à sua investigação da realidade dos gerais, e do seu interesse afim no trato da distinção entre termos abstratos e concretos, como brancura e branco. Esta característica, dentro de um contexto realista, dá a Peirce o arcabouço que ele busca em sua explanação da Abstração Hipostática. Além do mais, acredito que a obra de Thomas de Erfurt manteve a atenção de Peirce pela questão indexical do pronome, concebido por Modistae como parte do discurso independente do nome, contrariamente a gramáticos contemporâneos que consideram o pronome como um mero substituto do nome. Como é do conhecimento geral, Modistae desejava estabelecer a Gramática como uma ciência universal e autônoma: A Lógica depende da Gramática e a pressupõe, como na teoria de Peirce. Peirce, na realidade, trouxe os temas do Trivium Medieval para seu próprio Trivium Semiótico, colocando a Gramática Especulativa no primeiro e mais importante lugar das três ciências Semióticas.

Palavras-chave: Gramática especulativa. Semiótica. Trivium. Realismo escolástico.

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The relationships between Peirce's Semiotic and the *Grammatica Speculativa* of Thomas of Erfurt, who belongs to Modistae's medieval school, have still been little explored. Peirce reads this work at a time when it is yet wrongly ascribed to Duns Scotus; but he even takes the liberty to have reservations about the attribution to any other author, likely with the aim to give an historical and theoretical foundation to his own realist and scotistic theory of Speculative Grammar. Peirce shows a continuous interest in this text, during all his life, and he even reads the whole *Proemium* of the work to the audience of his first cycle of academical lessons, the "Lectures on British Logicians" of 1869.

Since this early lesson, Peirce contrasts the theoretical content of the modistic *Grammatica Speculativa* with the terministic logical approach, as this latter is described in

William of Ockham's *Summa Logicae*. All this seems to lead to the paradigmatic dispute, often shown and discussed by Peirce, between realists and nominalists, here called nearly synonymously as formalistae and terministae. Nevertheless, in my opinion, the importance of Thomas of Erfurt cannot be restricted to that of the Subtle Doctor, or to the school of medieval realism in general; on the contrary, his work has been able to give a valuable and original contribution to the theory of signification and to the project of Speculative Grammar, as later conceived by Peirce. Therefore, Peirce's reading must have gone much further than a simple study of the beginning of the work. In what follows, I would like to make some suggestions about the reasons why the Modistae should have retained Peirce's attention.

First of all, Peirce may have felt close to Modistae's theory because of his inquiry into the reality of generals, and his related interest in dealing with the distinction between abstract and concrete terms, like "whiteness" and "white", or in the latin form, "albedo" and "albus". The two terms have the same reference; but if we mantain that "white" and "whiteness" have the same meaning, we will face some problems: in fact the first one refers to the quality as it inheres in a subject, while the second one refers to the quality-in-itself. This distinction underlines the importance of the conceptualization of the *modi significandi*, that for the Modistae concerns only the way we signify something, and not what we signify; and so it belongs to the grammatical field, and not to the logical one. According to the Modistae, we can signify by the abstract name an accidental reality as if it would not inhere in any subject, but still conceive it in the *modus significandi* of the substance, typical of the common noun in general. This question represents, in my opinion, one of the reasons that led Peirce to believe the work of the *Grammatica Speculativa* as an original of Duns Scotus. In fact Scotus, in his early works of the block called *Parva Logicalia*, seems to adopt the modistic approach to this question; as Ebbesen has noted,[1] on this point there is a theoretical and hystorical link between the school of Modistae and Scotus. More in particular, Peirce reads and quotes in his writings a few times[2] a passage taken from the *Quaestiones in librum praedicamentorum*[3] in which the Doctor Subtilis copes with the distinction between concrete and abstracts, using explicitly the modistic terminology, and agreeing with their solution to the problem. This modistic feature, in a realist context, provides Peirce with the framework he is looking for in his account of the Hypostatical Abstraction, with whom we are able to turn some accidental reality, like an iconic quality or firstness, into a logical subject, or, in the language of Scotus, to transform a metaphisical general into a logic/predicative one. This kind of abstraction, the most important that Peirce recognizes, allows for the possibility of the Semiotic Process, the ability with which we manage to turn predicates from being signs into being subjects thought of. In other words, we can first hypostatize the concrete term in the proposition "The building is large", into the abstract term in the proposition "The building has largeness", and then, following Peirce's example, continue this process affirming that "The largeness of the building is impressive".[4]

I believe Thomas of Erfurt's work has retained Peirce's attention also for the question of the pronoun, conceived by the Modistae as a part of speech independent of noun, unlike among traditional and contemporary grammarians, who consider the pronoun as a mere substitute for the noun. For Peirce, instead, the first is an index, and the second is an icon. Peirce wrote that the only definition of pronoun ever correctly given is Duns Scotus's one, although we strongly suggest that here Peirce is following Thomas of Erfurt's *Grammatica*

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1   EBBESEN, Sten (1988) p. 120-121
2   CP 6.627; W2: 335
3   Duns Scotus, *Quaestiones in librum praedicamentorum*, Quaestio 8.
4   CP 4.332

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Speculativa. But Peirce's theory of pronoun is more complex, and unwittingly he mixes Modistae's grammar to the metaphisics of Scotus: the reference of the pronoun is the scotistic *haecceitas,* admitted by Peirce in the new characterization of the index which took place during the Eighties. As in Modistae's Grammar many *pars orationis* can take the same function and signify the same object, each one with their peculiar *modus significandi,* so in Peirce the indexical function is undertaken by a lot of word classes, following different modalities. The modistic notion of *congruitas* of the speech regulates the construction of the proposition, this latter conceived as if it were an originally unitary structure from which we can optionally extract the parts of the speech; on the contrary the terministic approach of William of Ockam starts from the minimum elements in building the proposition. This suggests strong analogies with the propositional theory of Peirce, as in the case of the rhematic element, whose bond of chemical valence regulates the number of the members of the proposition; in fact the rhema, like the iconic element or any other, is something which has to be extracted from the well-formed proposition.

As well known, Modistae aimed to set up Grammar as an universal and autonomous science: a theory which tried to free itself from the framework of the traditional grammar still tied to the various species of the languages and their linguistic accidents, and to a theory of signification that was conceived in psychologistic terms. Logic depends upon and presupposes Grammar, as in Peirce's theory. Grammar does not concern the direct reference to the thing: on the contrary it is the dimension of truth, belonging to the logic, that presupposes the notion of congruity of grammar. Thomas of Erfurt maintains that the grammarian cannot discriminate between two objects like a *"cappa nigra"* and a *"cappa categorica"*:[5] the existence or non-existence of an object like a "categoric cloak" is something that concerns only the work of the logician. Peirce was strongly influenced by this conception of science; in fact he brought the subjects of the Medieval Trivium into his own Semiotic Trivium, giving to Speculative Grammar the first and most important place of the three Semiotic sciences. The *ground* of the science of Speculative Grammar precedes the relationship to the object, and prescinds from the truth of the assertion, and also from the reference to an interpretant. This science is not aimed in studying the meaning, but is intended to analyze the conditions that must be satisfied so that the process of signification could be produced.

But the specific advantage of the Modistic approach is to guarantee a real foundation of the process of signification, and to maintain also a certain freedom in the process of signification. As Peirce argued in his Lesson of 1869:

> *ou cannot divide things into those that are signified by nouns and those that are signified by verbs, yet the distinction between noun and verb arises from the needs of signifying. [...] Thus it appears that there is a distinction greater than a distinction merely in mentalibus and yet less than a distinction between different things or a distinctio realis. In other words there is such a distinction as the Scotistic distinctio formalis.*[6]

Put differently, if we are able to signify something as an individual object, or if the same element can be considered as a part of a generality, or else, if it can be expressed by a verb or by a noun, according to the way of becoming or to the way of permanence: all these features should not be founded in the mental constitution, with the risk of psychologism like in the occamistic theory of the *sermo mentalis*, but we should rather guarantee to the *modi*

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5   Thomas of Erfurt; *Grammatica Speculativa.* London, Longman, 1972, p. 309
6   W2: 330

significandi a real foundation on the *modi essendi*, following the approach of the Modistae. Even when Peirce, referring to the *Grammatica Speculativa*, writes that *"its greatest merit is the idea of the sciences embodied in the title"*[7], we cannot think that this precludes a serious knowledge of the work, especially if we consider the peircean concept of the Ethics of Terminology, and the fact that Peirce uses the same name for his own project. On the contrary, the idea of a rational and universal grammar, already deducible from the title of the modistic work, is coherently developed by Thomas of Erfurt, and we can give proof of the fact that Peirce was an attentive and critical reader of this masterpiece.

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7   Ms R 595

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