

Aristotle on Verb

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For Aristotle, a verb (ῥῆμα) is that which a) besides a proper meaning¹ b) carry with it the notion of time; c) its parts do not significate separately and d) is a sign of something said of something else (OI², 2, 16b6-8). This comprehensive definition distinguishes verbs from both nouns (since they do not carry the notion of time with themselves) and sentences or co-positings of words (since they have parts with independent meanings). Based on this definition, a verb signifies three things: i) A main or proper meaning which is the meaning of the verb, e.g. running or sleeping; ii) time and iii) co-positing (or positing away).³ Although it is not asserted that one part is responsible for prosignification of time, its responsibility is given to co-positing-is. This might seem to be in contradiction with (c). However, it seems that (c) cannot include prosignifications of time and co-positing. What Aristotle means in (c) is just that parts of a verb cannot separately signify a meaning. Therefore, it is better to distinguish between signification, which is about meaning and prosignification, which is generally about anything but meaning. Hence, while the parts of the verb cannot have separate signification, they can have separate prosignification.

¹ Aristotle does not, however, assert this strictly, at least in the definition of the verb in *On Interpretation*. What makes us to say that he considers a proper meaning besides time for a verb is his expression ‘προσημαίνον χρόνον’ that means verbs significate time beside significating something else. This rejects the possibility of a mere signification of time. Thus, besides time verbs must significate a meaning.

² Abbreviations in this paper:

OI	<i>On Interpretation</i>
APr.	<i>Analytic Prior</i>
Phy.	<i>Physics</i>

³ Aristotle mentions two kinds of co-positing as his examples of this signification: ‘predication of’ and ‘being present in’ (OI, 2, 16b10-11).

Aristotle distinguishes between different kinds of verbs:

- 1) Definite⁴ verbs: those verbs that have definite nouns as their verb-name.
- 2) Indefinite verbs: those verbs that do not have definite nouns as their verb-name (OI., I, 3, 16b12-14; 10, 19b10-11). Aristotle's examples of an indefinite verb are 'is not-healthy' and 'is not-ill'.
- 3) Tenses of verbs: 'was healthy' and 'will be healthy' are tenses of the verb 'is healthy' because a verb indicates only the present time (OI., I, 3, 16b16-18).

For Aristotle, almost all verbs either are composed of or can be analyzed to parts. An example of the former is 'is healthy' and of the latter is 'runs,' which can be analyzed to two parts: 'is running.' (OI., I, 10, 20a3-5; II, 12, 21b5-8). Thus, for him a verb either includes or can be analyzed to two parts: a part that includes the meaning and is, or is shown, by a name we call 'verb-name' (a), and a part that includes the co-positing of that meaning with the subject of the verb, which is or is shown by 'is', which we call 'co-positing-is' (d). The verb 'runs', for example, can be analyzed to a verb-name, 'running' and a co-positing-is (Note: Aristotle distinguishes between the verb 'is' in the sense of 'exists' and the co-positing 'is'. Whereas in the former 'is' is a verb, having a signification of its own, which is 'existing', besides signifying time (OI., I, 10, 19b12-19), the 'is' in the latter is not a verb (Aristotle calls it 'incidental' is (OI., II, 11, 21a25-28) and is not sure whether to call it a verb or a noun (OI., I, 10, 19b22-24)) because it does not signify existing and, thus, need something else to be added. This something else is the meaning we are discussing. Therefore, it is only after the addition of the meaning to this 'is' that we have a verb. This is, I believe, the sense of the so much controversial text of OI, I, 3, 16b22-25: 'For being and not being signify the existence of a thing not τὸ ὄν εἴπῃς αὐτὸ καθ' ἑαυτὸ ψιλόν. For it does not indicate anything but prosignifies some co-positing (σύνθεσίην).'⁵

⁴ We coined the name based on Aristotle's name for indefinite verbs.

⁵ Marie De Rijk Lambartus (B502, 87-88) indicates that Aristotle never addresses 'is' as what makes a subject and a predicate connected and we never have a connecting label like σύνδεσμος or δεσμός (for which copula is a translation) for it. This very text, nonetheless, rejects her other claim that 'is' does not signify co-positing but is added to an already formed co-positing. Pointing

Aristotle's words at 16b24 about co-positing-is that it 'prosignifies some co-positing' (προσημαίνει δὲ σύνθεσίν τινα) is an explicit evidence that she cannot be right.) and is not a concept apart from the things co-positated (συγκειμένων).' This text, however, is so controversial. Originating from Ammonius⁶ and Boethius after him, who used the verb 'copular' for 'est' and Abelard, some commentators like Weidemann, Oehler, Francisco Ademollo⁷ take 'is' as having a copulative function.

Allen Bäck⁸ notes that Aristotle does not separate off 'is' from other verbs as a mere copula but takes it 'as the basic, paradigmatic form of the verb.' He believes that in his interpretation of Aristotle (in: *OI.*, 55, 19-24) Ammonius also took it as the paradigm for all verbs. Francisco Ademollo⁹ criticizes the standard view of taking 'is' as copula here and is inclined to take it as essential. David Ross¹⁰ thinks that although Aristotle is aware of the distinction between the existential and the copulative is, he has as yet no very clear idea of their relation.

Although Jonathan Barnes agrees that the copula is surely present in *de Interpretation*, he thinks that at 16b22-25 Aristotle ought to be talking of existential εἶναι.¹¹

to Aristotle's use of the passive verb προστιθέσθαι ('be added') and its equivalents (*OI.* 1, 16a15; 16a18; 4, 16b30; 5, 17a12; 10, 19b19-20 (προσκατηγορηθῆ); 19b25; 19b38; 20a5 (προσήπτετο); 29a9; 20a14-15; 20a36; 11, 21a21; 12, 21b6; 21b21; cp. 21b27-30; *APr.* I, 1, 24b17; *Phy.*, I, 2, 185b30 (προσάπτοντες), he says that 'the word 'is' is always said to be attached to the combination already formed by an *onoma* and a *rhema*, whereas there is never any suggestion that Aristotle takes it as itself performing the combination of an *onoma* and a *rhema*.'

⁶ CAG IV-5, p. 160¹³ff.

⁷ Ademollo, Francesco, *Names, Verbs and Sentences in Greek Philosophy*, in: Cameron, Margaret and Robert J. Stointon (eds), *Linguistic Content: New Essays on the History of Philosophy of Language*, Oxford, 2015

⁸ Back, Allen, *Aristotle's Theory of Predication*, 2000, Koninklijke Brill NV, p. 114

⁹ Ademollo, Francesco, *Names, Verbs and Sentences in Greek Philosophy*, in: Cameron, Margaret and Robert J. Stointon (eds), *Linguistic Content: New Essays on the History of Philosophy of Language*, Oxford, 2015, p. 51

¹⁰ Ross, David, *Aristotle*, 1923, Routledge, p. 28

¹¹ Barnes, Jonathan, *Logical Matters: Essays in Ancient philosophy II*, 2012, Oxford, pp. 160-161

Marie De Rijk Lambertus¹² believes that there is no copula in Aristotle's philosophical analysis of the elementary sentences and it is a mere *corpus alienum* in Aristotle's semantics.

Allan Bäck¹³ believes that the copulative theory is not Aristotle's and 'may have come to dominate as a result of the neoPlatonizing interpretations of Aristotle's works by Proclus, Ammonius and Boethius, which is the sign of the relation of running with a subject, e.g. Socrates in 'Socrates runs'. Nonetheless, none of these parts significate separately. This is supposed to mean that a verb is a single signification. However, it is evident that each of the parts *can* signify if we use them in a different context as both of 'running' and 'is' in 'runs' or both of 'is' and 'healthy' in 'is healthy' can do.

It might seem now that the first mentioned definition of verb might be contradictory. While Aristotle asserts that the parts of verb do not signify separately (d), he considers two other significations for a verb: the signification of time and relation. As it is obvious, both of these significations are done by one part of the verb, that is the co-positing-is. Therefore, in a verb e.g. 'is healthy' we have three significations: the significations of meaning, time and co-positing. Aristotle uses prosignification both for time (προσημαῖνον χρόνον, *OI.*, 2, 16b4) and co-positing (προσημαίνει δέ σύνθεσιν τινα, *OI.*, I, 3, 16b23-24). Since the copula part of a verb has no signification and does not form any conception, a verb is indeed its verb-name. Thus we see Aristotle saying that 'verbs are in and by themselves names and signify something' and like names, he adds, they arrest the hearer's mind and fix his attention (*OI.*, I, 3, 16b19-22). We can conclude then that verbs are names said of something else and carrying time. In other words, verbs are words that though have one single signification, as names have, they also have two other prosignifications: time and relation.

¹² Lambertus, Marie De Rijk, *Aristotle: Semantics and Ontology, Volume 1*, 2002, Koninklijke Brill NV, pp. 29-32

¹³ Back, Allen, *Aristotle's Theory of Predication*, 2000, Koninklijke Brill NV, p. 98