

Aristotle's Semantics

Mohammad Bagher Ghomi

mbqomi@gmail.com

1) *Determination of being in class-member relationship*

It seems that by 'having meaning' or 'significating' (σημαίνειν) Aristotle has something like kind of determination in mind: 'If 'man' has one meaning, let this be 'two-footed animal'; by having one meaning I understand this: If such and such is a man, then if anything is a man, that will be what being a man is (τοῦτ' ἔσται τὸ ἄνθρωπον εἶναι).' (Met.,¹ Γ, 1006a31-34) This also brings kind of whole-particular or class-member relationship to mind: if a word has one meaning, everything that is a particular case of that word, has that meaning. If this is true, we can say 'significating one thing' not only determines a word to a sense, it also determines a particular to the sense of the universal word. And this determination is a determination of being, that is, it determines 'being something' to a specific sense:² to say that A is the meaning of B, whatever will be³ a B, it will necessarily have A as its meaning. The mental process Aristotle hints as what happens in signification of something is also a determinative act: 'Thought stops and arrests the hearer' (ἴσθησι γὰρ ὁ λέγων τὴν διάνοιαν, καὶ ὁ ἀκούσας ἠρέμησεν). (OI., I, 3, 16b19-22)

That signification is kind of determination can be approved from Aristotle's emphasis that the meaning must be 'one' thing, or at least a limited number of things. This is evident both

¹ Abbreviations used in this paper:

Met.	<i>Metaphysics</i>
OI.	<i>On Interpretation</i>
PNC	Principle of Non-Contradiction

² Met., Γ, 1006b22-25 may be helpful in this case.

³ The use of future tense in Aristotle's sentence (ἔσται) might support this.

by Aristotle's accompanying 'one' with 'having meaning' in 'having one meaning' (σημαίνει ἐν ... ἐν σημαίνειν) and by his assertion of the necessity of limited determination just after the above mentioned text: 'And it makes no difference even if one were to say a word has several meanings, if only they are limited in number.'⁴ (Met., Γ, 1006a31-34)

Not having a limited number of senses, Aristotle argues, implies that there is no 'one' meaning for the word and this is not different from having no meaning at all: 'For not to have one meaning is to have no meaning' (Met., Γ, 1006b6-7) Aristotle takes this 'signification of one' as an argument for both reasoning and PNC. Not having 'one' thing as the meaning of a word annihilates reasoning: 'For it is impossible to think of anything if we do not think of one thing.' Therefore, Aristotle asks us not only to accept that a word has a meaning but that it has 'one' meaning: 'Let it be assumed then ... that the name is significant of something and signifies 'one' thing. (Met., Γ, 1006b8-13)

'Having one signification' has also another important result for Aristotle because it supports PNC: 'It is impossible, then, that being a man should mean precisely not being a man, if 'man' is not only a signification of one subject⁵ but also has one meaning (μὴ μόνον καθ' ἑνός ἀλλὰ καὶ ἐν).' (Met., Γ, 1006b13-15) Rejecting PNC and approving both being and not being of a thing is indeed destroying signification: 'He, then, who says this is and is not denies what he affirms, so that what the word signifies, he says it does not signify; and this is impossible. Therefore, if 'this is' signifies something, one cannot truly assert the contradictory.' (Met., K, 1062a16-20; cf. a20-23)

⁴ Having asserted at Met., K, 1062a13-16 that signification must be of 'only one thing and not many things,' he declares that 'if it signifies more than one thing, it must be made plain to which of these the word is being applied.'

⁵ As Aristotle immediately argues (Met., Γ, 1006b15-18), we must distinguish between 'having one meaning' (τὸ ἐν σημαίνειν) and 'being significant of one subject' (καθ' ἑνός) simply because the latter makes the meanings of all the things that are predicated of the same subject the same.

2) *Formula: what is signified*

That which is signified by a word is a formula, which becomes the definition of the word out of its signification: ‘Out of their necessarily meaning something definition is created; for the formula, of which the word is a signification, becomes definition.’ (Met., Γ, 1012a21-24)

Now if we consider the three above mentioned points, namely that i) signification is of being, ii) signification is having one meaning and iii) what is signified is indeed a formula, together, we can understand Aristotle better when he says ‘being one’ and ‘having one formula’ are the same: ‘For being one means this, as in the case of ‘raiment’ and ‘dress,’ that the formula is one.’ (Met., Γ, 1006b25-27)

3) *What has signification*

Besides words, sentences have signification and ‘sentence is a speech significant based on synthesis.’ (OI, I, 4, 16b26) Syllables and parts of simple words do not have meaning and are mere sounds. About parts of composite words, however, although they contribute to the meaning of the whole, they do not have meaning by themselves (καθ’ αὐτό). (OI, I, 4, 16b30-)

4) *Signification versus prosignification*

We must distinguish, it seems, signification from prosignification in Aristotle. The vital point of this distinction is copula-is because it does not signify and only prosignifies: ‘For neither ‘to be’ and ‘not to be’ are significant of any fact unless οὐδ’ ἐάν τὸ ὄν εἴπῃς αὐτο καθ’ ἑαυτὸ ψιλόν. For it is not by itself anything but prosignifies a synthesis, and without things coupled we cannot form a conception of it (οὐκ ἔστι νοῆσαι).’ (OI, I, 3, 16b22-25)

As this text indicates, while a copula prosignifies a synthesis, we cannot say it has signification because it does not signify a fact (πράγματος).

Aristotle also uses prosignification for a verb: besides the signification of a proper meaning, a verb prosignifies both the notion of time and the predication and these it does not by some of its parts: ‘A verb is that which, in addition to its proper meaning, prosignifies time; no part of it has separate meaning, and always is significant of something said of something.’ (OI, I, 3, 16b6-8; cf. b8-11) Although Aristotle uses the word ‘significant’ (σημεῖον) here for the signification of something being said of something, we know, at least based on the previous mentioned text, that it is not a real signification because like copula-is, it does not signify a fact. Therefore, every signification is necessarily signification of a thing (πράγματος). The fact that for Aristotle signification, distinguished from prosignification, must necessarily be a signification of a πράγματος should not be contradictory with his saying that what is signified is a formula: although a word signifies a πράγματος, what it signifies is a λόγος.

5) Convention as the basis of meaning

‘Every sentence (λόγος) has meaning, not as being the natural by which a physical faculty is realized, but ... by convention (κατὰ συνθήκην).’ (OI, I, 4, 17a1-2)