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Modistae



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Abstract

Modistae is the name of a group of Parisian grammarians and philosophers who lived in the period between 1270 and 1300, the most important being Martin of Dacia, Radulphus Brito, and Thomas of Erfurt. Their work on grammar and logic is characterized by the intention to situate these former liberal arts within the medieval system of sciences. In order to achieve this goal, they had to find universal objects for these new sciences. The result was the introduction of the concept of modes of signifying (*modi significandi*) in grammar, denoting the general meanings of words which constitute grammatical categories. In logic, they shared the opinion of other intentionalists of their time that the proper subject of logic is the second intention. In grammar as well as in logic they assumed a complete interdependence between the structure of reality and the operations of the mind. To warrant the foundation of our mental and linguistic operations in reality, they argued that every extra-mental object has various modes of being (*modi essendi*), which serve as the ontological counterpart of the modes of signifying and the second intentions.

The term *Modistae* is used to denote the, mostly Parisian, masters of the late thirteenth and early fourteenth century who wrote on grammar, logic, and metaphysics. They worked within a tradition that had its origin in ancient Latin grammar but had undergone considerable change under the influence of the work of scholars such as Robert Grosseteste, Peter Helias, Robert Kilwardby, and many anonymous commentators on Priscian (\pm 500), the author of the *Institutiones grammaticae*, the standard textbook for the study of Latin during the Middle Ages. The first representatives of the modist school were the Danish grammarians Boethius and Martin of Dacia (\pm 1270), but the most important author was Radulphus Brito (\pm 1290). The last significant member of the group was Thomas of Erfurt (\pm 1300), whose work *Grammatica speculativa* is considered the most complete modistic treatment of grammatical theory available (Bursill-Hall 1971; Thomas of Erfurt 1972; Pinborg 1982; Rosier 1983).

In the early Middle Ages, grammar was one of the seven liberal arts, the most important of which were the arts belonging to the so-called *trivium*: grammar, logic, and rhetoric. Grammar was the art of speaking well, vocal expressions being its object. After the recovery of Aristotle's *Posterior Analytics*, however, the ideas about grammar changed: grammarians now wanted to make grammar a science. This scientific approach to grammar was called "speculative grammar" (Bursill-Hall 1971). Taking seriously Aristotle's requirements for the construction of a scientific

theory, the *Modistae* were looking for universal and immutable objects that could function as the foundation of their science. Since speech differs from one language to another, vocal expressions could no longer constitute the immutable objects of a universal grammar. Thus, grammarians became philosophers, speculating about the universal features of language, in particular, the construction of linguistic expressions. The *Modistae* were interested in the meanings of words in so far as these meanings constitute grammatical categories, such as nouns, verbs, cases, or tenses, the so-called modes of signifying (*modi significandi*). The modes of signifying were the principles of grammar.

According to modistic analysis, words acquire their meaning by a deliberate act of imposition (*impositio*; Knudsen 1982). In a first imposition, a sound (*vox*) is connected with a referent. The relation between sound and referent is called the *ratio significandi*. The result of this coupling of expression and meaning is a so-called *dictio*, which is not yet a word or term in the logical sense, but rather a lexeme (Pinborg 1972). This lexeme can become a term and part of speech when it has received, as a result of a secondary imposition, a number of modes of signifying. The following example may help to make this clearer. The English word “drink” would be a manifestation of the lexeme “drink,” which includes all occurrences of the word “drink,” “drinker,” “drinking,” etc. For this lexeme to become a particular term or part of speech (*pars orationis*), as in “drinks are served at the bar,” several modes of signifying are necessary, in this case the modes of noun, plural, and nominative case. It is clear, then, that the object referred to by the lexeme is not a particular thing, but a more or less abstract content not yet determined in a category. Now the modes of signifying prepare the lexeme for various syntactical functions. Each lexeme has one essential mode of signifying and various other modes. The essential mode determines to which fundamental grammatical category it will belong, for example, noun or verb, whereas other modes provide it with less basic grammatical features, such as tense, case, or number.

As a result of their philosophical background, the *Modistae* believed that there is a structural parallel between language, thought, and reality, but unlike philosophers they were not interested in truth conditions of sentences, but in the construction of linguistic expressions (Rosier 1994). Such a construction is a union of two parts of speech (*partes orationis*), for example, a noun and a verb, or a noun and an adjective. Each part has its own modes of signifying. A construction is well formed if the modes of one part of speech are compatible with the modes of the other part, for example, a part of speech with the modes of signifying of noun, plural and accusative case, would in many cases be compatible with another part of speech with the modes of participle, and present tense, as in the expression “selling books.”

Although the aim of speculative grammar was to describe relationships between linguistic elements, the *Modistae* had to take the structure of reality into account. To ensure the scientific status of their doctrine, they needed an ontological foundation (*fundamentum in re*) of the modes of signifying. Being moderate realists, the *Modistae* assumed that the structure of reality is mirrored in language and thought. As the necessary ontological counterparts of the modes of signifying, they introduced the modes of being (*modi essendi*), which they considered to be accidental properties of the extra-mental objects, as distinct from their substantial form. Furthermore, since modes of being cannot be signified without being understood, a mental counterpart was needed: the modes of understanding (*modi intelligendi*), i.e., our concepts. The modes of signifying correspond with the modes of understanding, and through these they find their ontological foundation in the modes of being. This modistic “triangle of modes” is in accordance with the traditional interpretation of Aristotle’s *De interpretatione* chapter 1, according to which words signify concepts and concepts are natural likenesses of extra-mental objects. Later philosophers criticized the modists for confusing linguistic distinctions with real ones (Pinborg 1982), but this confusion was a consequence of their Aristotelian conception of science.

The grammatical theory of the modes of signifying also determined the modistic outlook on logic (Pinborg 1975a). The *Modistae* were interested in metalogical questions about the status of logical concepts. In their view, logic should be considered not as an art, as in the tradition of the liberal arts, but as a science, and what holds for grammar also holds for logic: if it is to be a science, its object must be immutable and eternal. In the case of logic, this object appeared to be the second intention. Second intentions are concepts of a certain kind, which are supposed to be universal and objective and to have a foundation in reality (*fundamentum in re*), for example, “genus,” “species,” “proposition,” and “syllogism.”

Thomas Aquinas and other intentionalists in the Middle Ages considered second intentions as second order concepts (concepts of concepts) and first intentions as concepts of extra-mental things. The *Modistae*, however, were of the opinion that second intentions are only secondary in the sense that they presuppose first intentions. Both first and second intentions are first order concepts, in their view. Moreover, an intention is a concept as well as the foundation of its content; it can be every extra-mental object as far as it is known, for example, a man as conceived (De Rijk 2005). This reflects the epistemological view that the human intellect grasps extra-mental objects through concepts that designate these things, including the ways in which they are conceived.

First and second intentions result from the operations of the intellect in the following way. The act of apprehension produces first intentions like “man” and “animal” and second intentions like “genus” and “species”; the act of judgment generates first intentions like “man is an animal” and second intentions like “conclusion” and “proposition”; and the act of reasoning brings about first intentions like “every man runs, Socrates is a man, therefore Socrates runs,” and second intentions like “syllogism” (Pinborg 1975b). The second intentions are the proper objects of logic, according to the *Modistae*, but the most interesting question is: how do they see the extra-mental foundation of these concepts? Here, the modes of being appear to be useful again.

Both first and second intentions are drawn from the modes of being (*modi essendi*) of extra-mental objects: first intentions from the proper modes of being and second intentions from the common modes of being. Second intentions conceive and signify extra-mental objects under a common mode of being. In this process, the intellect and the object cooperate, for example, the extra-mental object man has a proper mode of being from which the first intention “man” can be drawn and a common mode of being which is the foundation of the second intention “universal.” The accidental properties (of being) of the extra-mental object man are the foundation of the concepts “man” and “universal.” Logicians consider things according to their common modes of being. Therefore, second intentions are their primary object of study (De Rijk 2005).

The theory of second intentions sketched above is the version of this theory that can be found in the work of Radulphus Brito. In his view, all second intentions have a relation to the real world, although it is less clear how this works in the case of conclusions and syllogisms, which seem to be examples of mental constructions. Anyhow, the Modists’ views on grammar and logic are formed by the same intention: to make sciences out of these liberal arts. In both cases, their inspiration was Aristotle’s conception of science and its focus on the immutability of scientific objects. Their opinions were severely criticized by later philosophers (De Rijk 2005), but their foundation of logic and grammar in reality was an expression of the intellectual climate of the end of the thirteenth century.

Cross-References

- ▶ [Boethius of Dacia](#)
- ▶ [Primary and Secondary Intention](#)
- ▶ [Radulphus Brito](#)
- ▶ [Robert Kilwardby](#)
- ▶ [Thomas of Erfurt](#)

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