

Porphyry's theory on linguistic simplicity and complexity in the frame of Neoplatonic teaching

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ABSTRACT

In this paper an attempt is made to contextualize the views of the Neoplatonic commentator Porphyry concerning language's progression from simplicity to complexity, into the curricula of the Alexandrian School of philosophy, in terms of proceeding from simple to complex philosophical reflection and reasoning. "Simple words" are considered by Porphyry and later Neoplatonic commentators as the subject-matter of the *Categories*, while the "more complex" level of human signification, i.e., the "second imposition of words", is considered as the subject-matter of the second logical work, i.e., *On Interpretation*. Given the established sequence of the treatises in the *Organon* within the Neoplatonic curricula, the importance of this linguistic step from simplicity to complexity can be related to the respective progress in thinking and reasoning.

KEYWORDS

Porphyry, simplicity, complexity, language, thinking, Neoplatonism

RÉSUMÉ

Cet article discute les vues du commentateur néoplatonicien Porphyre, concernant le passage de la simplicité à la complexité linguistique, dans le cadre du programme de l'école philosophique d'Alexandrie. Les « sons vocaux simples » sont considérés par Porphyre et plus tard par les commentateurs néoplatoniciens comme le sujet des *Catégories*, tandis que

le niveau « plus complexe » de la signification humaine, c'est-à-dire la « deuxième imposition des mots » est considérée comme le sujet du deuxième ouvrage logique, *Sur l'interprétation* ; étant donné la séquence établie des traités de l'*Organon* dans les programmes néoplatoniciens, l'importance du passage de la simplicité à la complexité dans le langage peut être liée aux progrès respectifs de la pensée et du raisonnement.

MOTS-CLÉS

Porphyre, simplicité, complexité, langage, pensée, néoplatonisme

1. Introduction: the Neoplatonic School of Alexandria

This paper attempts to contextualize the views of the Neoplatonic philosopher and commentator Porphyry as relating to the progress from linguistic simplicity to linguistic complexity, into the curricula of the School of Alexandria.

The Neoplatonic School of Alexandria is a particular case in the history of ancient philosophical schools, having affected reflection through Late Antiquity and Byzantium, as well as the Islamic East and Latinized West in an irreversible way¹, not only with its doctrines, but also with its influential representatives². Those scholars transmitted the study of philosophy in their own way, as framed by commenting on earlier great thinkers. Therefore, delving into the stages of such a curriculum can illustrate a significant aspect of the process of philosophical reflection during a transitional era.

In general, when approaching Neoplatonic commentators, it is necessary to take into account the particular character of their texts, as contextualized within the curricula of the Neoplatonic Schools of Athens³ and Alexandria⁴: Porphyry's *Introduction* to Aristotle was

1. As Sorabji (2005: 1) describes.

2. See Chriti 2022.

3. Plutarch of Athens was the founder of this School, which was closed at Justinian's order in 529 AD: see Beaucamp (2002) and Watts (2004); see also Sorabji (2005: 9).

4. Concerning the School of Ammonius, son of Hermeias, see Sorabji 1990; see also Westeringet *al.* (2003: x-xlii); Blumenthal (1993: 307-325). On Ammonius

the first text to be explained in these Schools. With few exceptions, Neoplatonic commentaries are structured as notes on courses from Porphyry onwards⁵, a turning point depicted by Sten Ebbesen⁶. After Porphyry's *Introduction*, Aristotle's treatises were taught as the *minor mysteries* (ἐλάσσονα μυστήρια) starting from the *Categories*, and the students would then proceed to the Platonic dialogues as the *major mysteries* (μείζονα μυστήρια) – Aristotle was “Plato's most faithful student” and he had to precede Plato, so as to contribute to the better understanding of his teacher's philosophy, as Plato was the Neoplatonists' main interest⁷.

Of high interest for this present study is the approach to the scale via which a philosopher-to-be was supposed to acquire the necessary qualifications, having the *Categories* at the very beginning of this specific syllabus. Aristotle's first logical treatise has caused serious debates from antiquity to contemporary scholarship⁸ regarding its subject-matter: What is the philosopher talking about in the *Categories*? The actual purpose of the *Categories* is beyond the scope of this paper, with the focus here being the manner in which Porphyry's theory concerning this specific purpose is integrated into the educational *milieu* of the Alexandrian School: that is in terms of proceeding from lower to higher levels of thinking and signifying. This represents an innovative approach to Porphyry's legacy to logic and semantics, and while the excellent contributions of Sten Ebbesen (1990) and Voula Kotzia (1992: 23 ff) primarily investigate

see Saffrey (1989: 168-169); Verrycken (1990); Blank (1996: 1 ff). The School of Athens mostly emphasized Plato, while the School of Alexandria emphasized Aristotle; in general, however, the two Schools did not have crucial differences as regards their method and orientation: see Golitsis (2008: 9, note 9).

5. On the issues of the Neoplatonic teaching in the respective Schools see Sorabji (2005: 1-28).

6. Ebbesen (1981: 133). Ebbesen's view is also adopted by Kotzia (1992: 21).

7. For a concise overview of the specific series of courses designed to prepare the Neoplatonic philosopher, see Golitsis (2008: 10-16), with further bibliography. On the two fundamental principles of approaching Aristotle and Plato in these schools see in general Karamanolis (2006); see also Sorabji (1990: 3) and Kotzia (2007: 194-201).

8. See Chriti (2019a: 419).

his *Introduction* and surviving commentary on the *Categories*, the former aspect has not been discussed.

Porphiry's lost and more extended commentary *To Gedaleius* can be reconstructed thanks to the evidence provided by Simplicius, a text not written according to any oral teaching but rather to be read (πρὸς ἀνάγνωσιν)⁹. Simplicius' teacher was Ammonius of Hermeias (5th-6th cent. AD), Head of the School, according to the teaching of whom a number of later commentaries on the *Categories* were written. Thus, John Philoponus' (6th cent. AD) commentary reflects Ammonius' teaching¹⁰. After Philoponus, we will examine what Olympiodorus (6th cent. AD) says in his respective commentary¹¹. Another commentary on the *Categories*, this time under David's name (CAG XIII), was believed to have been written by Elias, a Christian student of Olympiodorus¹²; the identity of Elias as the author of this text is followed here, and is examined last. The manner in which Porphyry's theory integrates into the syllabus of Alexandria's Neoplatonic School, as an aspect of how to approach the correlations between thinking and language for a philosopher-to-be of that era, will be illustrated in the Conclusions.

2. Porphyry on simple words in the first human linguistic act

The student, editor and biographer of Plotinus, argued that the subject of the *Categories* is “the first imposition of words”¹³ (“πρώτη θέσις

9. See Praechter (1922: 507-508); Westerink (1962: xxvii). Concerning the way Simplicius exploits his “rich philosophical bibliography”, see Chase (2003: 1).

10. See the analysis by Kotzia (1992: 139 ff).

11. The commentary on the *Categories* under Olympiodorus' name is based on his teaching (ἀπὸ φωνῆς Ὀλυμπιοδώρου) and contains linguistic views which certify linguistic expositions in other commentaries: see Kotzia (1992:183).

12. Hadot (1987: 5, note 7) supported the attribution to David. In any case, David and Elias were both Christian commentators (second half of the 6th cent. AD), having a similar philosophical orientation. The basic indication for Elias' studentship is the high number of parallel texts between his commentary and that of Olympiodorus.

13. Porph. *On Cat.* 58.5 & 58.32-33.

τῶν ὀνομάτων”)¹⁴, that is, the first words as established for things by mankind. As Porphyry describes, things pre-existed human beings, who were faced with the need to declare (κατονομάζειν) and signify (δηλοῦν) them “also with their voice” (καὶ διὰ τῆς φωνῆς; man is a δηλωτικὸν ὄν, he says, a “declarative being”)¹⁵. Porphyry’s stressing “also with his voice” is clarified when he uses the deictic phrase “τόδε τί”, so as to explain that people named certain things which were before their eyes and they could show¹⁶. In mankind’s first linguistic act, there is nothing divine or supernatural: rather they used their articulated vocal sounds and decided to call something a “dog”, something else a “pedestal”, something else a “man”, another thing “the sun”, one colour “white”, another colour “black”, something else as a “number”, another as a “size”, etc. (Porph., *On Cat.*, 57.23-29):

14. Ὄνομα here has the sense of ‘word’, as it is ‘said in two ways’ (διχῶς λεγόμενον) in ancient linguistic thinking, according to Aristotle: *a*) it is any meaningful utterance (φωνὴ σημαντική); *b*) in a *categorical statement*, a *name* designates the agent of a verb to the action of the verb, the *subject* (*On Interpretation*, 16b19-20).

15. Porph., *On Cat.*, 57.20-23. The outlines of Ebbesen (1990: 382) and Kotzia (1992: 21-31) are in general followed in this article to approach Porphyry’s text. What Ebbesen has marked out regarding the not strict use of linguistic terminology in philosophical texts of this period can be certified regarding the terms κατονομάζειν and δηλοῦν, which stand for human linguistic activity in Porphyry’s theory: the first term is only used by Porphyry in this text, obviously with the sense ‘to name’ (1990, p. 156-157), while the form δηλοῦν is used by him several times in his texts, in most of which it has the sense ‘to signify’ for words and linguistic expressions; see for example *On Cat.*, 62.8, 107.20; *On Tim.*, 1.21, 14.9; *Hom. Quest.*, 2.447.17, 8.1.46 etc. In the rest of the occurrences the term is used to designate ‘represent/signify’ for signs and actions, but in no case does Porphyry use δηλοῦν for simple sounds (ψόφοι), or even for inarticulate vocal sounds. If we also take into consideration that the term φωναί often means ‘words’ in his commentary on the *Categories* (see for example *On Cat.*, 56.35, 58.13, 58.30, 62.31, 71.20, 96.11, 102.8) we can conclude that in this text Porphyry is not dealing with the distinction between language and inarticulate vocal sounds or mere sounds (ψόφοι), but the distinction between non-vocal designation of things on the one hand, and vocal designation of things via articulated human sounds on the other..

16. Porphyry says that the word, e.g., *stone*, can be attributed to the very specific stone that we perceive by means of our senses: “τοῦδε τοῦ δεικνυμένου λίθου” (Porph., *On Cat.*, 56.7-13).

καὶ γέγονεν αὐτῷ ἡ πρώτη χρῆσις τῶν λέξεων εἰς τὸ παραστήσαι ἕκαστον τῶν πραγμάτων διὰ φωνῶν τινῶν καὶ λέξεων, καθ' ἣν δὴ σχέσις τῶν φωνῶν τὴν πρὸς τὰ πράγματα τότε μὲν τι πρᾶγμα βάθρον κέκληκεν, τότε δὲ ἄνθρωπον, τότε δὲ κύνα, ἥλιον δὲ τότε, καὶ πάλιν τότε μὲν τὸ χρῶμα λευκόν, τότε δὲ μέλαν, καὶ τότε μὲν ἀριθμόν, τότε δὲ μέγεθος, καὶ τότε μὲν δίπηχυ, ... καὶ οὕτως ἕκαστω πράγματι λέξεις καὶ ὀνόματα τέθεικεν σημαντικὰ αὐτῶν καὶ μηνυτικὰ διὰ τῶν τοιούτων τῆς φωνῆς ψόφων.

Thus his first use of words (ἡ πρώτη χρῆσις τῶν λέξεων)¹⁷ came to be to represent each thing by means of certain vocal sounds and words. In accordance with this relation between words and things, this thing here (τότε μὲν τι) is called a 'chair', that a 'man', this a 'dog', that 'the sun', and again, this colour is called 'white', that 'black', and this is called 'number', that 'size', this 'two cubits', and that 'three cubits'... In this way words and names have been assigned to each thing, serving to signify and communicate them by employing such sounds of the voice. (adapted transl. of S. K. Strange)

It can be said that Porphyry suggests that the most primitive level of declaration is the *deictic* one, during which no vocal sound is produced and human beings gesture to things that are in front of them. Be that as it may, the next level concerns words which represent experiential data. As this specific stage is cited immediately after the action of "pointing to", it can be deduced that the Neoplatonic philosopher refers, not only to the act of "talking about things which are present", but also to cases of people referring to things which are not present. This is demonstrated by his use of the term "συμβολικῶς"¹⁸, which is employed by Aristotle in his *Sophistical Refutations*¹⁹ to designate precisely this substitution of things and generally the conventional

17. The translation of S. K. Strange is not followed here; Porphyry probably uses "φωναί" and "λέξεις" alternatively to denote "words", although Strange translates "λέξις" as 'expression'; it wouldn't be unreasonable to suppose that it means 'word' in the Modern Greek sense (λέξη), since Porphyry seems to use the term in the specific sense as many times as with the sense 'linguistic expression' in his texts: see for example *On Cat.*, 55.12, 56.7, 58.8, 59.11, 61.27, 75.3, 86.21, 86.37, 91.8-19; *Hom. Quest.*, 4.2.6, 12.10.53, 19.221.7 etc.

18. He uses the term a little further down, in 57.30.

19. *Sophistical Refutations*, 165a6 ff.

character of words that represent things in *On Interpretation*²⁰. Therefore, the fact that human beings imposed words that could be used as *tokens* of the things not present, demonstrates a very significant step of the human mind, i.e., from reflexive to symbolic representation, something which is pre-supposed for the following level of declaration.

Before embarking on this final level, it should be highlighted that Porphyry notes that not all words are examined in the *Categories*, but only 'simple words which signify things', i.e., words "to the extent that" (καθό) they represent something. Simplicity is the essential feature of the first linguistic representation of things, as it is a non-complex act to represent an object. Words were imposed as tokens of things, in accordance to human conceptualization, which means that these words do not reflect the things' existence itself, but rather the way in which human mind conceives them²¹, since they exist independently of human perception: indeed, things are there, whether human beings can perceive them or not.

The most important parameter in this aspect is that mental activity is included in the first imposition of words, even if it is not openly stated by Porphyry, as Kotzia (1992: 47 ff) wisely argued. It is possible that Porphyry explicitly included mental entities in his lost commentary on the *Categories* when investigating the treatise's purpose, as well as in his lost commentary on Aristotle's *On Interpretation*²². Nevertheless, all three parameters, i.e., things, mental entities and words, are present in the formulations of later commentators to express the subject matter of the first logical treatise, possibly also under the influence of Aristotle's "semantic triangle" in *On Interpretation*²³. Symbolic signification and signification through a concept, are not in opposition with each other, as the existence of three parameters of signification (words, concepts, things) may

20. On this specific discussion see Chriti (2018).

21. For this particular distinction see Porph., *Intr.*, 1.10-11 & *On Cat.*, 75.27-28, as well as the analysis by Kotzia (1992: 45).

22. See Ebbesen (1981: 151-152).

23. Amm., *On Cat.*, 9.17-18; 9.22; 10.3; 10.8; 10.13; 12.1. Simpl., *On Cat.*, 12.1 ff; Philop., *On Cat.*, 10.6-8; Olymp., *On Cat.*, 69.15-17; Elias, *On Cat.*, 170.15-18 & 176.33-34. For this specific discussion see Chriti (2021: 44-45).

already be detected in Porphyry who uses the term συμβολικῶς. The existence of a notion/concept does not exclude the concept of ‘symbolic/ conventional representation’.

However disputable Porphyry’s approach to the subject of the *Categories* may be considered today, he discusses the primitive stages of mental elaboration and linguistic representation respectively, by describing what happened when human beings realized that they should stand among the data of reality and communicate them. The first human linguistic act results in words which are related to things, since human beings use their voice as a tool to symbolize objects of their perception and this is how human development in thinking and language begins.

3. Composition in the second human linguistic act

The conventional and communicative character of words in the “first imposition” provided human beings with another privilege in terms of linguistic use, elevating mankind to a superior level of representation. After the initial declaration of things, speakers reconsidered the function of words in speech and evolved into another mode of use as related to potential combination. Indeed, the “second imposition of words” (δευτέρα θέσις τῶν ὀνομάτων) is a categorization no longer related to the simple representation of things, but to discussion of language itself.

The revisiting of the same words — but this time in combination — is described as follows by Porphyry: words preceded by an “article” were called ὀνόματα (‘names’), while those which could be inflected in certain ways were called ῥήματα (‘verbs’). The secondary approach to words constituted mankind’s next act of declaration and this second “name-giving” resulted to the utterances by which mankind could now refer to other utterances and, to be more precise, to the concepts of other utterances; this was a “language about language” (‘metalanguage’; Porph., *On Cat.*, 57.29-58.4)²⁴:

24. See also Amm., *On Cat.*, 11.15-12.1: κατὰ δευτέραν δὲ ἐπιβολὴν ἐπεσκέψαντο ὅτι ταῖς μὲν τῶν φωνῶν δύναται συντάττεσθαι ἄρθρα, χρόνοι δὲ οὐχί, ἅπερ ἐκάλεσαν ὀνόματα, ταῖς δὲ χρόνοι μὲν συντάττονται, ἄρθρα δὲ οὐ, ἅπερ εἰσι

τεθεισῶν δὲ τοῖς πράγμασι συμβολικῶς τινων λέξεων προηγουμένως, πάλιν ὁ ἄνθρωπος κατὰ δευτέραν ἐπιβολὴν ἐπανελθὼν αὐτὰς τὰς τεθείσας λέξεις θεωρήσας τὰς μὲν τοιοῦτον φέρε τύπον ἔχούσας, ὥστε ἄρθροις συνάπτεσθαι τοιοῖσδε, ὀνόματα κέκληκε, τὰς δὲ τοιαύτας οἶον τὸ περιπατῶ, περιπατεῖς, περιπατεῖ, ῥήματα, δηλώματα τῶν ποιῶν τύπων παριστὰς τῶν φωνῶν διὰ τοῦ τὰς μὲν ὀνόματα καλέσαι τὰς δὲ ῥήματα. ὥστε τόδε μὲν τι τὸ πρᾶγμα καλέσαι χρυσὸν καὶ τὴν τοιαύτην ὕλην τὴν οὕτω διαλάμπουσαν προσαγορευῆσαι ἥλιον τῆς πρώτης ἢν θέσεως τῶν ὀνομάτων, τὸδὲ τὴν χρυσὸν λέξιν εἰπεῖν εἶναι ὄνομα τῆς δευτέρας θέσεως καὶ τοὺς τύπους τῆς ποιᾶς λέξεως σημαινούσης.

When certain words had been credited to things in the first place, man began to reflect upon the words that had been posited from another point of view, and saw that some were of such a form as to be attached to certain articles: these he called 'nouns'. Others, such as 'walk' and 'walks', he called 'verbs', indicating the qualitative differences between the two types of words by calling the one 'nouns' and the other 'verbs'. Thus, calling this sort of thing 'gold' and that material that shines so brightly 'the sun' belongs to the primary imposition of words, while saying that the expression 'gold' is a noun belongs to their secondary imposition, which signifies the qualitatively different types of expression. (adapted transl. of S. K. Strange)

Porphyry formulates a rather complete theory concerning a rank of certain levels of human thinking and declaration, the profundity of which is crucial for the conceptualization of the process from simplicity to complexity in mental and linguistic activity. The first level was deictic which preceded even the primary linguistic declaration of a thing. The next was naming things with simple words (the first linguistic act). The last level was the approach to the combination of words as the superior linguistic act, a procedure which is distanced from simplicity. This final level of declaration is to "use words to talk about words", a stage that concerns language by which an abstract discussion is possible and now mankind can discuss concepts and not simply sensible things:

ῥήματα. Philoponus notes that the action of *imposing a name* on each thing did not automatically lead to any kind of distinction between *names* and *verbs*, which was a further step (Philop., *On Cat.*, 11.34-12.3).

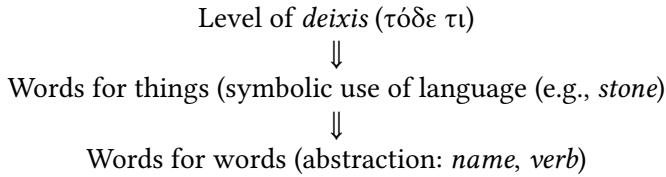


Fig. 1: Porphyry's "scale of declaration"

Porphyry started to evince his attitude towards human "declaration-levels" from implying the non-presence of language and ending with the potential for an abstract use of language. This is done via the description of a mental evolution, since human beings passed from showing objects to thinking and talking about objects without them being present and then to theorizing the use of those words in their own right, and classifying utterances as either *names* or *verbs*. Porphyry conceives of the ability to use words to refer to other linguistic units, or rather "to refer to concepts", as an inherent benefit to mankind. This is evident in his citing two examples that depict these powers²⁵: the Greek word χρυσός ('gold') as a *signifier* of something specific (τόδε τι), i.e., the metal, belongs to the "πρώτη θέσις"; the same word as a *name* belongs to the "δευτέρα θέσις". The same is true of the word ἥλιος signifying the 'sun' that shines as a word of the "first imposition". With these two examples, Porphyry delineates the importance of his theory concerning the evolution to linguistic abstraction: what he apparently means is that it is one thing to say "my ring is *gold*" ("first imposition") and another thing to say "*gold* is a name" ("second imposition")²⁶: in the second case we refer to a concept by talking theoretically and not in relation to a specific object. Again, the first mental and linguistic act is a simple one, while the second is complex because human beings are distanced from the world of senses and they can actually be engaged in a theoretical conversation.

As already said, according to Porphyry, the "first imposition of words", i.e., words that symbolize things, constitute the subject-

25. See the ancient text right above and especially Porph., *On Cat.*, 58.4-8.

26. Regarding the non grammatical character of the "second imposition of words" see right below.

matter of the *Categories*. The *Categories* deal with simple words “to the extent to which they *signify* things” and not from the perspective of any kind of function within human speech: “καθό σημαντικαί εἰσι τῶν πραγμάτων”. From the vantage point of Porphyry, in his *Categories* Aristotle refers to a primary categorization of experiential data with the help of language, which provides the philosopher with terms for each category²⁷. As for the “second imposition”, this is the subject matter of the second Aristotelian logical treatise, i.e., *On Interpretation* (Porph., *On Cat.*, 58.34-36):

In *On Interpretation* the discussion concerns the 2nd imposition, which does not regard words as representing things... (own translation)

In *On Interpretation* Aristotle deals with the basic parts of categorical speech (ἀποφαντικός λόγος), i.e., subject and predicate, affirmation, negation, opposition, contradiction and, in other words, what we would today call *syntax*, meaning that Porphyry considers this specific treatment as immediately following the declaration of things, treated in the *Categories*.

Obviously, *names* and *verbs* belong to Porphyry's *metalanguage* but it is important to emphasize here that this is not a “grammatical theory”: *names* can include both *nouns* and *adjectives* like *sun* and *gold* while *names* and *verbs* are classified together, based on the fact that they render human beings capable of referring to language²⁸. Porphyry and the other Neoplatonic commentators, who faithfully follow his theory, are well aware of the grammatical doctrines according to which *names* and *verbs* are treated in the respective grammatical categories. The Neoplatonists often refer to the Stoics and the Grammarians, and in a great many cases they discuss *names* and *verbs* as “parts of speech” in their commentaries²⁹. In Porphyry's consideration, *names* and *verbs* of the “second imposition” correspond to the *subject* and the *predicate* in *categorical speech*, as they are considered by Aristotle in *On Interpretation*, the work which

27. See the discussion in Lallot & Ildefonse (2002: 328-330).

28. The classification only of names and verbs in the “second imposition of words” is a long discussion which goes beyond the scope of this article. For such a discussion see in general Chriti 2019b.

29. See Chriti (2019b: 22-24).

examines a more complex process of the human mind, in comparison to the *Categories*. According to Porphyry's classification, the subject matter of the *Categories* is less complex than that of *On Interpretation* and, to be more precise, through his lens, the *Categories* is pre-supposed for *On Interpretation*.

4. Porphyry's theory as integrated in the Neoplatonic School of Alexandria

Porphyry's theory on the "first" and the "second imposition of names" is adopted by the Neoplatonic commentators as a hermeneutic tool to elucidate the "purpose" of both the first two logical treatises. Let us start with Ammonius of Hermeias, who was the Head of the School of Alexandria and teacher of later Neoplatonists. In his commentary on Aristotle's *Categories*, he justifies the sequence of the philosopher's logical treatises, insisting on the direct transmission from the first to the second treatise by stressing the exclusivity of this specific sequence, on the basis of Porphyry's theory (Amm., *On Cat.* 14.20-15.1)³⁰:

And those are opposed to the clarity and the order, since Aristotle taught that the first imposition of simple words has to precede the treatment of names and verbs; in the *Categories* he teaches us about the position of simple words, while in *On Interpretation* about names and verbs in a way that each treatise is intrinsically related with the other: because neither is it possible to study anything else before *On Interpretation* than the *Categories*, nor after the *Categories* any other text than *On Interpretation*. And the same reasonable order exists up to the *Analytics*, the treatise of argument. (own transl.)

Ammonius states that anyone who wants to investigate arguments has to proceed from simple words to the parts of a sentence and any scholar who wishes to delve into the latter will inevitably start from the simple words of the *Categories*. As a teacher, Ammonius' depiction of the progressive steps from simple to complex mental and linguistic activity is entrenched in the educational *milieu* of his

30. English translations without the ancient Greek texts are cited from now onwards, due to space limits.

School, with anyone instructed in logic having to reach the level of syllogisms, the subject matter of the *Analytics*.

Ammonius (as well as the other commentators) believes that, as a whole, the concept of the *Organon* is a complete instrument by which access to philosophical thinking is provided, a tool via which students could reach the utmost logical construction, namely the syllogism.

After Ammonius, and in his commentary on the same treatise, Simplicius attests that Porphyry also refers to Boethus³¹, stating that the *Categories* have a more simple subject matter than *On Interpretation* (Simpl., *On Cat.*, 11.23-29):

Porphyry also adds the remarks of Boethus, which are full of sharp-wittedness and tend in the same direction as what has been said. He too says that with regard to nouns and verbs, the division takes place as far as the elements of speech, but according to the categories the division takes place in so far as words are related to beings, since they are significant of the latter. (adapted transl. by M. Chase)

Therefore, Simplicius who has Porphyry's lost commentary in his hands provides us with the evidence that Porphyry may not have been the first to connect the two logical treatises via their subject matters, but that he may convey an earlier tradition from the direct circle of the Peripatos School. A little below this, Simplicius explains the reasons why Aristotle's logical treatises should be classified the way they are, for purposes of correctness, as regards the steps to logic (Simpl., *On Cat.*, 15.13-21):³²

So it is natural that we start from the *Categories*, because we are thus introduced to signifying speech and to things that are signified, from the more simple to the more complicated, since after simple words we learn what is a name and a verb, then what is affirmation and negation and which are their differences; these are what we are taught in *On Interpretation* and then we come to know what is a term, a premise and an argument and which are the kinds of argumentation and the forms

31. Boethus was a student of Andronicus of Rhodes and Head of the Peripatos School (1st cent. BC). On Boethus see Barnes, Bobzien, Flannery & Ierodiakonou (1991: 6).

32. Let us just point out here that the "elements of speech" should not be identified with the later grammatical "parts of speech": see Chriti (2019b: 22 ff).

of each one and the methods of instruction according to each form in the *Prior Analytics*. It is in this way that we are introduced to the treatise of proof, the one which Aristotle named as *Posterior Analytics*... (own transl.)

A question naturally arising from the first line of the text above is “who is *we*?”, as Simplicius is talking in first plural person. The most probable answer would be that he is collectively referring to philosophers like himself and, more generally, to those interested in approaching philosophy, given the educational environment of the School where he is active. Simplicius defends the order that a philosopher-to-be should follow in his studies just like Ammonius and we have the impression that he is referring to the way he was initiated to philosophy himself. He does not fail to acknowledge the importance of progressing from simplicity to complexity for anyone who wants to access logic, by reaching the treatment of arguments in Aristotle’s *Analytics*.

The same mentality is also expressed by John Philoponus in his commentary on the *Categories*, where he explicitly talks about the “instrument of logic” (Philop., *On Cat.*, 10.17-11.30):

The philosophers came in need of an instrument that would help them distinguish truth from falsity and good from bad; and what is this? The syllogism ... it is impossible to talk about it before explaining what argumentation is in general, for the discussion of which we need to know what is a premise ... but we cannot understand what is a premise, i.e., a sentence, without having previously explained names and verbs, from which every speech is composed. Therefore, he firstly discusses simple words in the *Categories*, then he treats names and verbs in *On Interpretation*, afterwards he deals with argumentation in general in his *Prior Analytics* and then he focuses on syllogism in the *Posterior Analytics*. (own transl.).

John Philoponus provides the same formulaic explanation for the subject matters of the logical treatises but also for the significance of starting from simple words and processing to complex combinations, in order to acquire the necessary knowledge of logic.

Continuing with Olympiodorus, it is evident that he follows the same line as his predecessors in his commentary on the same treatise (Olymp., *On Cat.*, 21.18-25):

Well, in order to distinguish these two, it should be added that in the *Categories* we refer to the 'first imposition', while in *On Interpretation* these words are approached to as belonging to the 'second imposition'. (own transl.)

Olympiodorus was succeeded by his student Elias who adopted Porphyry's terminology and conceptualization in terms of proceeding from simple to complex in relation to that a balanced access to logic can be achieved when studying philosophy (Elias, *On Cat.*, 131.18-132.21):

...and the purpose of the *Categories* concerns simple words signifying things via concepts. ... here Aristotle does not investigate names and verbs, but he does so in *On Interpretation*. In the *Categories* the purpose regards the first imposition of simple words which signify simple things through simple concepts ... i.e., the treatise deals with the first and not the second imposition of words, which includes names and verbs. ... And if the first imposition does not exist, there can be no second imposition, while without the second imposition there is no sentence, without which there is no argument. ... Consequently, the *Categories* should be before any other logical treatise, just like simple words pre-exist anything else. (own transl.)

Elias continues the tradition during late 6th cent. AD, a period in which the teaching of the Neoplatonic School of Alexandria still survived, in contrast with the decline and closure of the other Neoplatonic schools, owing to various historical (political, social, religious) circumstances in an era marked by the emergence of ever more complex cultural, religious, political, and philosophical networks. Porphyry's influence in terms of the smooth process from simplicity to complexity for anyone wishing to access logical thinking is still persist in the writings of the first Christian teacher of the School³³.

33. A detailed investigation of Elias' commentary regarding the survival of such doctrines would exceed the scope of this paper and could actually constitute the subject of an independent survey: it is hoped that such an appreciative study is still to come.

5. Concluding remarks

Let us summarize: Ammonius of Hermeias, Simplicius, John Philoponus, Olympiodorus and Elias, who represent the Neoplatonic School of Alexandria between the 5th-6th cent. AD, adopt Porphyry's theory in terms of the subject matters of the first two Aristotelian logical treatises. They likewise justify the sequence of the rest of the logical works, according to the methodology of starting from simplicity and progressively evolving to a complexity in thinking and language. Although Porphyry never directly refers to the necessity of such a process for a student, these other commentators explicitly formulate the integration of Porphyry's theory into the curriculum of their School. Not only is the title of the "Organon" fully adopted by those philosophers, but Porphyry's description of mankind's linguistic evolution is stated to be identified with the process itself from sensory perception to philosophical thinking. This prescriptive sequence reveals the intellectual preparation that was considered as being proper and necessary for the philosophers-to-be.

Therefore, the *Categories* has "simple words which signify things via concepts" as its subject matter, while *On Interpretation* focuses on *names, verbs* and *sentences* (speech = λόγος) which can be rendered as *true* or *false*. The "second imposition of words" is, according to Neoplatonic theory, the subject matter of Aristotle's *On Interpretation*, because the emphasis is on the potential combination and complexity of words. The commentators argue that this is why the given order of treatises in the *Organon* is correct the way it is, because the natural sequence for anyone who wishes to be introduced to logic is to first examine simple words and then those that construct more complicated units.

In his commentary on Aristotle's *Categories*, Porphyry formulates a theory on the way that the first words were attributed to things by human beings. Porphyry's "first imposition of words" regards simple utterances invented for things surrounding mankind, things that they could actually point to. However, after the "deictic" level of declaration, mankind reconsidered words in regard to their form and potential combination: the "second imposition of names" is a categorization of words according to this potential, which depends

on their form that renders them apt for combinations within speech. The revisiting of the same words was now based on lack of simplicity, as Porphyry explains. This second “name-giving” resulted to the language by which mankind could now refer both to concepts and language itself, explaining the process and progress from a “core language” to combinations and complexity that could lead the way to philosophy, the ultimate mental activity. Simple words can only be used to represent the data of experience, while linguistic complexity depicts the higher mental level which is demanded to reach philosophical thinking. Human progress in language is thus linked to a more sophisticated way of thinking, which goes beyond the simple deictic pointing of things.

Porphyry's theory fits perfectly with the Neoplatonic concept of the process through which a philosopher-to-be could reach Plato's theology, since the student should begin from Aristotle's *Organon* of logic with the *Categories* as the first step: simple utterances should then be followed by the parts of a sentence and then the young scholar should continue with syllogisms, which presuppose the expertise of sentences. In Plato's Academy, the itinerary would start from Mathematics and the goal concerned the Ideas; in the Neoplatonic School they should start from Plato's most emblematic student and his doctrines of logic, before embarking on the divine Platonic philosophy. To emphasize logic, what could be more normal than starting from simple utterances before delving into the formulation of syllogisms? The reasonable sequence of logical treatises is justified through the story of the invention and imposition of words, a story fully integrated in the educational environment of the School of Late Antiquity. The commentators take the classification of Aristotle's works by Andronicus of Rhodes for granted, with none of them questioning the “firstness” of the *Categories* in Aristotle's “Organon”. The appeal of Porphyry's theory is evident: Ammonius, Simplicius, Philoponus, Olympiodorus and Elias all directly or indirectly adopt Porphyry's theory that:

- Simplicity in language is identified with simplicity in thinking and the first step in accessing philosophy.
- The more complex linguistic declaration becomes, the closer the human mind is to abstraction and philosophical reflection.

- Linguistic development can represent nothing but intellectual evolution, as shown by the process and progress from naming things in front of us to deduction and demonstration.

Regardless of the fact that the sequence of Aristotle's treatises was not conceived of by the philosopher himself and no matter the correctness of the prescriptive purposes for which this sequence was applied, it is possible that we are dealing with the first explicit theorization of the intrinsic relation between linguistic and philosophical evolution from simplicity to complexity in the history of the philosophy of language.

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