From intellectus verus falsus to the dictum propositionis:  
The Semantics of Peter Abelard and his Circle

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I

In his *Commentary on Aristotle’s “Peri hermeneias”*,1 Abelard distinguishes the form of an expression2 (oratio) from what it says, that is, its content. The content of an expression is its understanding (intellectus). This distinction is surely the most well-known and central idea in Abelard’s commentary. It provides him with the opportunity to distinguish statements (enuntiaciones) from other kinds of expressions without implying a difference in their content, since the ability of a statement to signify something true or false (verum vel falsum)3 cannot be found in its content. More precisely, Abelard distinguishes statements both from complete expressions (orationes perfectae) that are not statements but rather questions, requests, commands, etc., and from incomplete expressions, that is, mere word strings (orationes imperfectae), such as *homo albus*. These kinds of expressions, according to Abelard, do not differ in the understanding they present but in the way they present it.

1 The text of Abelard’s *Commentary on Aristotle’s “Peri hermeneias”* was published from the Milan manuscript in Geyer [1927]. Minio-Paluello [1958] 125-8 published some additions and corrections to Geyer’s edition based on the Berlin manuscript. We are preparing a new and complete edition of the full text for the *Corpus christianorum* series, to appear shortly; we give references to the page and line number of Geyer [1927], but we supply our own version of Abelard’s text, which differs in some cases from Geyer. Citations from Aristotle are given by Bekker number for the Greek text and the equivalent page and line number for Boethius’s Latin translation as given in *Aristoteles latinus* (abbreviated AL) in Minio-Paluello [1965].

2 We use “expression” to pick out strings of more than one word which are in grammatical agreement. A single word is not an oratio but a dictio—in our terminology, not an expression but merely a word.

3 That a statement is an expression signifying something true or false is implied by Aristotle, who said that “not every expression is a statement, but only those in which there is truth or falsity” (*Peri hermeneias* 17a2-3), and stated explicitly in Boethius, *De topicis differentiis* 1174B (oratio significans verum falsumae). See also 375.29-32.
The reasoning that leads Abelard to this thesis can be found in the prologue of his *Commentary on Aristotle’s “Peri hermeneias.”* Here Abelard describes the subject of the work he is going to comment on, namely *voce[s] significat[ione]s ad placitum per se* (307.12-3). Those conventionally meaningful utterances are single words (*dictiones*), like nouns or verbs, and expressions (*orationes*), that is to say strings of words that are not only juxtaposed but related to one another (307.9-10).

His main purpose in dealing with linguistic signs is to examine the simple (categorical) statement (*enuntiatio*). It consists minimally, according to Aristotle, of a noun and a verb; one noun and one verb are sufficient to compose one simple statement. Nouns and verbs are dealt with in order to examine statements (307.17-23).

Now according to Abelard, nouns and verbs signify in two different ways (307.26-30):

Nomina enim et verba duplicem significationem habent, unam quidem de rebus, alteram de intellectibus. Res enim significant constituendo intellectus ad eae pertinentes, hoc est naturam aliquam earum vel proprietatem attendentes.

This distinction and way in which the distinct parts are related to one another is plausible. Abelard’s use of it, however, is remarkable. He does not stress the difference between the singularity of each thing and the universal meaning of words, but rather puts the emphasis on another difference, which is complementary to the first one. Words never capture a thing as a whole in its complexity. Instead, they draw attention to some peculiarity or distinctive property of the signified thing.

Abelard links his semantical distinction between the signification of things and the signification of understandings (*significatio rerum/intellectuum*) to the following thesis: since nouns and verbs are considered in order to examine statements, because the latter consists of them, only the signification of understandings is relevant. The signification of things can be neglected or is at best of secondary interest (308.19-22):

Cum autem nomina et verba tam res quam intellectus significant, sicut diximus, recte hic de eis agitur non secundum significationem rerum, sed intellectuum, ubi videlicet de eis intenditur propter constitutionem propositionis.

To establish this claim, which is not at all self-evident, he offers the following three arguments:4

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4 Abelard also has reasons of symmetry for this claim. Just as Aristotle’s *Categories* is devoted to words insofar as they signify things, so his *Peri hermeneias* is devoted to words in their other capacity, namely signifying understandings (309.14-9; cfr. 111.8-11).