

# LINGUISTIC SIGNIFICATION

A CLASSICAL AND SEMIOTIC COURSE  
IN GRAMMAR & COMPOSITION

BRIAN KEMPLE

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This book is dedicated to the members of the Lyceum Institute, past, present,  
and future, for their enduring pursuit of the true and the good.

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# INTRODUCTION: GRAMMAR AND LANGUAGE

This book intends to serve one principal end: instructing students, of sufficiently mature mind, how to compose thoughtful and insightful essays in the English language. Accomplishing this rather specific end, however, requires a broad range of study: a study much broader than that comprised by a simple question of “how to write”. That is, we cannot write well unless we understand the instruments whereby writing is accomplished; or, to employ one of those instruments—the metaphor—the fruits of composition are nourished best through growing deep the roots of grammar. As we will see, this linguistic growth requires some knowledge also of logic and rhetoric: for although this book intends an introduction into the first study of the **liberal arts**, all three arts of the Trivium are nevertheless inseparably convergent in the flourishing of our natural human ability for linguistic signification.

As stated, we aim in this book at the specific composition of **essays**: compositions, that is, of a length between 2,000 and 4,000 words. At such an approximate length, we will combine some use of *all* the Trivium, however abecedarian<sup>1</sup> our talents in these arts may still be, by the time we reach the final chapter. While we will draw upon logic and rhetoric, however, the focal study of grammar, as pursued in this book, forms not only the foundational but rather the central part of this non-trivial pursuit of the Trivium.

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<sup>1</sup> Consider this the first of many vocabulary lessons in the book: *abecedarian* is a deceptively simple word. Despite containing many syllables, its meaning is as basic as could be: *a-be-ce-darian*—relating to the study of one’s *abc*’s. To be abecedarian is to be at an elementary level. While we would not like, perhaps, to admit being so, doubtless we are all more rudimentary in our knowledge than we probably suppose.

Ideally, progressing through the course of this book will help students to acquire the basic acuity needed in all writing-oriented educational institutions, occupations, and tasks, including the skills for writing compositions of far greater length. Moreover, this intellectual improvement not only makes us more capable in our professional and academic institutions and occupations but helps us seek the good through which we are perfected as human beings: for all things can be signified to and by our minds—because our minds are *human minds*—through linguistic signification, whether that language appears explicitly or implicitly in the things that we do. Language, in other words, appears *literally everywhere* in human experience. We think of the neurochemically-regulated indications of the body, for instance (blushing, jittering, avoiding eye-contact), as though itself a kind of language (what we call “body language”). Likewise, we understand the interactions of animals as though they are “talking” to one another, even though they have no language, properly speaking, of their own. We hear about the “language” of music, or mathematics. We think of the order of the cosmos in terms of poetry. We conceive of creation itself as being through the Λόγος (*Logos*), the Word.

This is not to say that all signs are linguistic signs, or that only what is signified linguistically truly counts as a sign; but rather, that however imperfectly, linguistic signs alone possess the capacity to stand-in for the signification of all other kinds. Whenever we *think* of an object, in the fullest sense of what we mean by “thinking”, we do so linguistically. Certainly, to describe the beautiful is not the same as to experience it with one’s own eyes or ears, but we may nevertheless *know* something of it from the words which relate another’s experience of beauty, and often under a light which we did not recognize from our own experiences. Likewise, the quorum signaling of bacterial cells, by which they learn to form larger units than they are individually, is not a linguistic communication of one cell to another, but we understand it nonetheless by linguistic description. Once having passed the threshold of language, we may never fully depart from it again, without losing who and what we are. We grasp the universe both as a whole and in all its parts through language.

To *know* language, therefore, we require a profound grammatical knowledge: to know *what* it is, *how* it is, and to be able to *use* it *within* language, and thereby lead others and ourselves to further knowledge.

All too often—not only in our own day, but throughout history—grammar has been reduced to mere *textbook* education: that is, a rote instruction in rules and “correctness” which amounts to little more than learning to follow a series of

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arbitrary decisions made by would-be linguistic bureaucrats. Conversely, the extreme opposite error forgoes grammatical instruction altogether and trusts in the human individual's ability to pick up the rules "intuitively" or "without instruction"—or, worse yet, to discard belief in need for rules entirely and to subordinate all usage to *feeling*.

In contrast to both extremes, the approach taken here, while it does include instruction in rules for grammatical *order*, is rather aimed at learning to produce *intelligent and therefore **significant** linguistic constructions*, to which end the grammatical instruction serves subordinately. In other words, we want to apply the lessons of grammar to an improved understanding of language itself, which in turn improves the ability to communicate well: to constructing sentences, paragraphs, and essays which excel at meaningful signification and improve the understanding of an audience.

Thus, rather than simply positing rules unexplained, this book drives at unveiling and explaining the **principles** behind the rules.<sup>2</sup> Through understanding the principles underlying and ordering the grammatical rules of *any* language, a mind becomes better both at structuring its own thought in a *particular* language and understanding the thoughts others attempt to convey. We will therefore improve in our command over the *how* of **conveying meaning**: how we are able to make things known both to ourselves and to others, and, indeed, as to how our thoughts are structured in relation to the structures of the universe itself. Accordingly, students will learn the functions of the parts of speech and their relations to one another through definitions, examples, and extensive practice in diagramming. Moreover, students are encouraged to **think** about the parts of speech, their functions, and how they relate one to another; mere correctness is not the goal, but rather we will, we must, strive for **understanding**. We have become thoroughly accustomed to approaching language as a matter of re-arranging the parts according to rules determined by convention, rather than thinking about the complex relationships between what the parts of language signify. While that unreflective approach may facilitate communication within the lowest common denominator of thinking, making one a suitable drone for a robotic engagement in a society geared towards the

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<sup>2</sup> This is, in other words, a *speculative* approach to grammar; inspired in part by the short-lived and somewhat inefficacious but nevertheless interesting movement of speculative grammarians in the 13<sup>th</sup> century and the late 19<sup>th</sup>/early 20<sup>th</sup> century revival of the term found in the work of Charles Sanders Peirce (1839—1914).

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least sophisticated thinking possible, it does nothing to improve the understanding itself, nothing to nourish the mind—just the opposite.