SEXTUS EMPIRICUS: AGAINST THE GRAMMARIANS. Translated with an
Introduction and Commentary by D. L. BLANK. Oxford: Oxford University

This book is the recent addition to the Clarendon Later Ancient Philosophers
series, and its greatest significance lies in its being the sole commentary on
Against the Grammarians. It also provides the only English alternative to Bury's
1949 translation in the Loeb edition. As such, it is a clear and readable
translation, although, of course, there is no Greek text provided (the norm
for this series).

Against the Grammarians is the first book of Sextus's six-book work Adversus
Mathematicos, which contains his general critique of liberal studies. Against the
Grammarians is brief, a mere 63 pages in this edition. Blank's book also
includes a 44-page introduction, bibliography, glossary of ancient and
medieval authors, and indices, and a whopping 283 pages of commentary.
Against the Grammarians begins with a critique of the arts in general, and
Sextus says he is here doing what Pyrrhonians always do: setting out the
opposing arguments that result in suspension of judgment. He then focuses
his attack on the dogmatic professors of language and literature. For example,
he discusses the parts of grammar, the syllable and its parts, the sentence and
its parts, orthography, and etymology. Sextus's primary goal is to "destroy" all
parts of the supposed grammatical science, in order to refute the grammarians's claim that a specialized knowledge of grammar is useful for life
and necessary for happiness (53).

I shall give one brief example of Sextus's reasoning ("About the Syllable,"
#121–42), and Blank's commentary, to illustrate this book's flavor. Sextus
explains all the ways in which a syllable may be called long or short by the
grammarians. In order for a short syllable to exist there must be a minimal
time in which it subsists. But all time is divided infinitely (this is assumed here;
defended at Adversus Mathematicos 6.61–67); therefore there can be no
minimum interval of time; therefore the short syllable cannot exist. The
grammarians say the long syllable is "dichronic," implying that two times
coeexist. But it is impossible for two times to coexist, because they are
distinguished as being two by the fact that one exists at present and the other
does not, and if they do not exist at the same time they cannot coexist.
Therefore the long syllable cannot exist. Since words are composed of
syllables, and it has been shown that syllables cannot exist, it follows that words
cannot exist. Sextus "destroys" the parts of sentences in similar fashion,
concluding that since "there is no such thing as a part of a sentence ... there
is no such thing as a sentence" (30). Now this is a peculiar train of thought,
and I do not find myself convinced that sentences do not exist. I am curious
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about what assumptions Sextus must be making that would make him so confident in this argument (not that he need endorse it, but it should be plausible enough to throw doubt on the grammarian's side of the debate). In his commentary on Sextus's destruction of the long and short syllable, Blank compares what Sextus says to numerous other sources on this topic. Regarding the destruction of the parts of sentences, Blank points out the similarity between Sextus's reasoning here and his reasoning in *Adversus Mathematicos* 8 and 9, and includes an outline of the latter book to illustrate the similarities. What is missing from Blank's commentary is an answer to, or even acknowledgement of, these philosophical questions about Sextus's reasoning.

There are glimpses of a more philosophical analysis in the introduction. For instance, the above-mentioned argument destroying the sentence certainly appears to be a case of negative dogmatism, and Against the Grammarians is full of similar examples. Blank spends several pages (I-IV) laying out various scholarly opinions on this issue. His own opinion is that it is not in fact negative dogmatism, but rather that Sextus is presenting the equipollent counterpoise to the dogmatic grammarian's arguments. Anyone hearing these two sides should as a consequence suspend judgment.

In his preface Blank says that Sextus's critiques of the liberal arts "are important for an understanding of Sextus' working methods and the relation of scepticism to everyday life" (v). This may be true of Against the Grammarians insofar as it provides a particular example of Sextus at work, using the skeptical approach to expose difficulties in his opponents' views. But considering how specialized the subject is, it is hardly worth reading for that reason. Rather, what sets Against the Grammarians apart is the information it yields concerning ancient theories of language and literature, and this is precisely Blank's area of expertise. His commentary is largely devoted to explicating the grammatical theories Sextus discusses, and providing the reader with a massive amount of historical context. He does an excellent job at this. What is disappointing about Blank's commentary is the paucity of philosophical analysis. This is a book for classicists, and for philosophers interested in the history of ancient grammatical theory. Blank's book is not going to have a very wide appeal, but it is very important for filling a specialized niche, and it does an excellent job at that.

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