

## **Signs, language and knowledge in augustine's *de magistro***

### **Sinais, linguagem e conhecimento no De Magistro de Agostinho**



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**Abstract:** In his dialogue *De Magistro*, Saint Augustine debates whether one human being can teach another something using language. For this purpose, he develops his semantics and a general semiotic theory. The first and minor objective of the paper is to show that Wittgenstein's (1953) *Augustinian conception of language* applies to Augustine's semantics. The second and major objective is to show that his skeptical conclusion is epistemic and derives from his strong requirements for justification. For Augustine knowledge requires acquaintance with the epistemic objects. In the case of sensible knowledge, justification consists of first-hand acquaintance;

in the case of intellectual knowledge, it consists of understanding thanks to divine illumination.

**Keywords:** Saint Augustine, Augustinian conception of language, Teaching, *Significabilia*.

**Resumo:** Em seu diálogo *De Magistro*, Santo Agostinho debate se um ser humano pode ensinar algo a outro por meio da linguagem. Para tanto, ele desenvolve sua semântica e uma teoria semiótica geral. O primeiro e menor objetivo do artigo é mostrar que a *concepção agostiniana de linguagem* de Wittgenstein (1953) se aplica à semântica de Agostinho. O segundo e principal objetivo é mostrar que a sua conclusão céptica é epistêmica e deriva das suas fortes exigências de justificação. Para Agostinho, o conhecimento requer familiaridade com os objetos epistêmicos. No caso do conhecimento sensível, a justificação consiste na percepção direta; no caso do conhecimento intelectual, ela consiste na compreensão graças à iluminação divina.

**Palavra-chave:** Santo Agostinho, Concepção agostiniana da linguagem, Ensinar, *Significabilia*.

## Introduction

The dialogue *De Magistro (Teacher)* between Augustine and his son Adeodatus was written in Thagaste (today, Souk Ahras in Algeria) around 389. It was conceived in 386 during the period of philosophical leisure in Cassiciacum after his conversion to ascetic Christianity. Augustine was baptized by Ambrose at Easter 387 and returned to Africa, accompanied by his son Adeodatus, who died shortly after (Tornau, 2020).

Augustine's real concern in this work is the problem of the conditions of the possibility and communicability of knowledge itself (Graminga, 2019, p. 51).

Concerning the paper's objective, we can adopt Madec's (1975) dialogue structure as follows: (1) Purposes of speech

(I–II), (2) Nothing can be taught without recourse to signs (III–XXX), (3) Nothing can be taught through signs<sup>1</sup> (XXXI–XXXVII), (4) Christ, the only teacher of truth (XXXVIII–XLVI). Augustine formulates the basic thesis explicitly (implicitly already in Chapter 2,6): “Then it has been established that nothing can be taught without signs...” (“*Cofectum est igitur et nihil sine signis doceri...*” (Augustine, 2017, 10,31, p. 44; 1855, p. 1212). He provides what should be a counterexample against this thesis, claiming that we can learn bird catching without using signs just by observation. (Augustine, 2017, 10,32, p. 45). Then, he radicalizes his doubt concerning the possibility of transmitting knowledge by signs, affirming the contrary thesis that nothing can be taught with signs (*nihil...quod per sua signa discatur.*) (Augustine, 2017, 10,33, p. 46; 1855, p. 1214).<sup>2</sup>

In the interpretation, we will seldom distinguish between the passages from Augustine and his son Adeodatus, as both deal with Augustine's thoughts, and the two make up a team in the dialogue.

For better elucidation, I will compare and criticize his position with some ideas and theories from analytic philosophy.

To be a teacher is to be someone who teaches. The essential function of teachers is to teach. However, Augustine comes to the pessimistic conclusion that no human can teach another human anything. That nothing can be taught by

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<sup>1</sup> Madec (1975) translates “signum” e “verbum” into the same French word “signe”. I preserve his choice in English. In later passages, it will become clear that for Augustin, words (*verba*) are a subcategory of signs (*signa*).

<sup>2</sup> In Aristotelian logic, the thesis that everything is taught by signs and the thesis that nothing is taught by signs are contrary, which means that they cannot both be true but can both be false.

language. The only teacher (*solus magister*) is Christ. Professors and teachers cannot teach anything. Should they start looking for another job?

## 1 Teaching through signs

### 1.1 Opening question: What is the purpose of speech?

In the first two chapters, Augustine determines the purpose of speech: to teach or to recall (*aut docendi aut commemorandi*) in the double sense of recalling to oneself (to remember) and recalling to others (reminding someone of something). (Augustinus, 2017, 1,1 p.7-8; 1855, p.1195). He dismisses the apparent counterexamples of praying and singing. Singing is not speaking. Prayer serves to recall God (Augustinus, 2017, 1,2, p. 8-9). The difference between teaching and recalling lies in the novelty of the information. Recall means to get information already kept in memory; to teach is to bring someone to learn new information. Teaching is, in this sense, more relevant. As we will see, for instance, in recollection and divine illumination theory, recalling is an important aspect of learning for Augustine. He says that “memory brings to mind the realities themselves, which have words for their signs” (*memoria ...facit venire in mentem res ipsas quorum signum sunt verba*). (Augustinus, 2017, 1,2, p. 7-8; 1855, p. 1195).

Since the speech acts theory, we know we can do more things with language than describe, teach, or recall, as Augustine claims. We can, for example, promise, marry, order, or even create social institutions through speech. However, till the 20th century, it was common to focus on the descriptive function of language. Nonetheless, teaching in the broad sense of conveying information remains a basic task of language use. The entire dialogue's subject is whether language is a suitable

instrument for this purpose and, if not, what the alternatives might be.

Let us start with some conceptual analysis. What does *docere* (“to teach”) mean, and what does Augustine mean by it? At the beginning of the dialogue, Augustine understands “teaching” broadly as conveying true information from a speaker to a listener. Teaching is imparting knowledge (Burnyeat, 1987, p. 5). It means to inform or transmit information to someone, generally to the students. In ordinary language, there is no great difference between information communication and teaching (aside from any institutional association sometimes added by teaching) (Burnyeat, 1987, p. 8). The product of teaching is knowledge in the learner’s mind. In ordinary language, we sometimes teach something false, for example, “He taught me that Rio de Janeiro is the capital of Brazil”. This sense is excluded for Augustine, who subscribes to knowledge as true justified belief. Teaching is a relationship in which the teacher teaches and the student learns. Augustine uses the Latin word “*discere*” for “to learn”. (Augustinus, 1845, 7,19, p.1 205).

## 1.2 Indication of word meanings

Augustine asserts that words are signs, and all signs signify something (significant). There was a dispute in antiquity between the Stoic view that all words signify something and the rival Peripatetic view that some words do not signify (there are means of combining and embellishing). (Burnyeat, 1987, p. 10-11). We can generously interpret Augustine’s view as all words (syncategorematic or categorematic) contribute to the sentence’s meaning.

Taking in the good Roman tradition, a famous verse from the Aeneid (2,659) (describing the scene when Aeneas finds his family in Troy destroyed by the Greeks) as an

example: *Si nihil tanta superis placet urbe relinqui* (“If it pleases the gods that nothing remains of so great a city.”) (Augustinus, 1845, 2,3, p. 1196), he gives Adeodatus the task is to provide the meaning of each of the eight words in the sentence and to find out what kind of entity their meanings are. The first strategy is to find synonyms; for example, “of” (“of”) means “de” (“from”). As “de” and “ex” are equally familiar, we gain nothing by paraphrasing.

The second strategy is to describe or explain the meaning; for example, “se” (“if”) means doubt, “ex” means separation (Augustinus, 2017, 2,3-4, p. 10-12). Adeodatus proposes states of mind as meaning or explanation of words like “if” or “nothing”. However, mental states are not considered the realities signified by the words later in the dialogue. It seems to be a *faute de mieux* intermediary solution.

Looking for the meaning of “*nihil*” (“nothing”), Augustine touches on the riddle of not-being. He proposes that “nothing” signifies “a certain state of mind when, failing to perceive a reality, the mind nevertheless finds, or thinks it finds, that such a reality does not exist?” (Augustinus, 2017, 2,3, p.11) or “...a state of mind, whenever something it was looking for does not exist” (Augustinus, 2017, 7,19, p. 30). In philosophical terms, it is conceived as an intentional mind state.

Augustine jokes with the use-mention distinction, exploring its ambiguity.: “Nothing is a sign unless it signifies something “; ergo, nothing is not a sign. (Augustine, 2017, 2,3, p. 10). However, we know that the word “nothing” is a sign. Famous is the passage from *Odyssey* in which Odysseus

explores the use-mention difference in the word “nobody” to deceive the Cyclopes Polyphemus.<sup>3</sup>

Augustine is known for proposing the conception of evil as the absence of good (*privatio boni*) in *Confessiones* (liber 7, 12,18). Similarly, “nothing” could be interpreted as the absence of being. Nevertheless, there is no trace of this idea in *De Magistro*. In first-order logic, “nothing” is formalized as a negation of the existential quantifier, saying that the predicate, in this case, “Remains of such of a great city,” is empty because it has no instances. Thus, we formalize the sentence in first-order logic as  $\neg \exists x \text{ RemainsOf}(x,t)$ , read as “there is no  $x$  such that it remains of such a great city.” Expressed more simply: “There is not anything that remains of Troy”. Augustine’s treatment of the meaning of “nothing” is very superficial.

The objection is evident in this way of explaining the meaning of words with other words, one gets stuck in the language, even though one wants to get at the signified realities themselves, whatever they may be (Augustinus, 2017, 2,4, pp. 10-12). Later, he describes this effort in a very pictorial way:

Now dealing with words using words is just as bewildering as intertwining and scratching one's fingers, where it is almost impossible to tell, except for the person doing it, which fingers are itching and which are relieving the itch.” (Augustine 2017, 5,14, p. 23)

### 1.3 Meaning by Ostension

Augustine describes the attempt to indicate meanings by ostension. Through demonstration with a finger, one can

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<sup>3</sup> Uliisses tells the Cyclopes Polyphemus his name is “nobody”. Thus, Polypheme tells the other Cyclopes that nobody has blinded him. In this way, Uliisses explores the use-mention confusion to deceive the simpleminded Cyclopes.

show physical objects (such as wall *paries*) visible qualities, for example, a color (Augustinus, 2017, 3,5, p.12). Through gestures, it is also possible to show sounds and flavors when they are present to the senses. In general, a gesture can indicate sensible entities. However, the gestures themselves are also signs, according to Augustine. (Augustinus, 2017, 3,5, p. 13). We can call them deictic signs.

There remains a possibility of doing the act, for example, walking, drinking, or eating after being asked about it, if the meaning is an activity that human beings can perform. Augustine accepts this solution temporarily (Augustinus, 2017, 4,7, p.15)

The dissatisfaction comes from that, after being asked what the meaning of a certain word is, the listener could perform an activity, but the act would be imprecise (how the speaker would be able to differentiate, for example, between walking quickly and hurrying) and the context ambiguous, how would the caller know that the listener is demonstrating the meaning and not just doing these things without wanting to respond? Later, Augustine radicalizes his doubt, saying that only speaking can be shown this way. (Augustinus, 2017, 10,29, p 42.) However, speaking is making signs; we show speaking through speaking. It does not help.

In modern philosophy the problem of ambiguity of ostension gained much attention. Wittgenstein (1953, 254, p. 129), to show somebody the color sepia, he needs to know that I am showing the color and not another aspect of reality like the form, for example. Wittgenstein (1953, 30, p. 14) says:

So one might say: the ostensive definition explains the use—the meaning—of the word when the overall role of the word in language is clear. Thus if I know that someone means to explain a colour-word to me the ostensive definition "That is called 'sepia' "will help me to understand the word...



In his radical translation, Quine (1960) asserts that there are many different translations for “gavagai” when a rabbit is shown through ostension. They can contradict each other but are consistent with the speakers' observations and linguistic behavior.<sup>4</sup>

Returning to *De Magistro*, the situation is not so simple, as ambiguity interferes there again. The questioner would have to abstract the speech act and ignore that the listener might want to talk about some other subject, especially communicating the meaning of the words. After verifying that it is impossible to find something that can be learned without signs, Augustine's first strong thesis is that everything learned is learned through signs.

#### 1.4 Semiotics

I will briefly discuss Augustine's influential semiotics because it structures much of the dialogue. Augustine categorizes signs according to the object of signification: signs or things, and the means of signification: signs or things/activity. Some signs manifest signs. Some signs manifest things that are not signs. Finally, there are things manifested without signs we can do after being questioned about them. (Augustinus, 2017, 7,20, p.31). He temporarily accepts the last category of things shown by activities (not signs) like walking and eating, which we can perform after a question (Augustinus 2017, 4,7, p.15). Then, there are things

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<sup>4</sup> In acquiring a foreign language without the aid of interpreters and dictionaries. linguist always listens to “gavagai” in the presence of rabbits. Different translations are possible, for example, rabbits' segments, non-separate parts, and the property of being a rabbit. The translation indeterminacy thesis states that it will always be possible to construct translation manuals that are logically incompatible and empirically equivalent.

that are not signs but are shown by signs. Augustine calls these things *significabilia*. These two categories are the only ones that point to reality and have the task of crossing the metaphysical abyss between signs and reality. Signs shown using signs (*signa signorum*) are subdivided into signs of the same sign and signs of other signs.

Words are subordinated to signs (everything that means something) because there are signs in the proper sense that are not verbal, such as military flags, military insignia, symbols, and flags (Augustinus, 2017, 4,9, p. 19). Augustine conceives of speaking as making signs (*signa facere*) (Augustinus 2017, 4,7, p. 15; 1845, p. 1198). Some words signify signs, others signify words, and some signify things.

Augustine claims that written words are signs of words articulated by voice (Augustinus 2017, 4,8, p.16). Although in our culture, the written language seems more important after the invention of printing, the genetic order, the etymology itself, and the linguistics give Augustine reason.

Augustine introduces the neologism *significabilia* signifiabiles: *Placetne appelemus significabilia, ea quae signi significari possunt et signa non sunt...* (Augustinus, 1845, 4,8, p.1119) (“Would you agree if we call things that can be signified by signs but are not signs “signifiabiles””. (Augustinus, 2017, 4,8, p.17).

The realities that are not signs but are signified by signs Augustine calls “signifiable” because they can be signified. Examples of signifiabiles are *Romulus* (Romulus), *Roma* (Rome), *fluvius* (river), and *virtus* (virtue). Written words are visible signs of audible signs (of oral language); these, in turn, are signs of signifiabiles that can be audible like a cry or maybe Rome, visible like Rome, river, or intelligible like virtue depending on the epistemological relationship between these things and the subject. The signifiabiles are the ones that

signify things that are not signs. “Stone” signifies stones. (Augustinus, 2017, 4,8, p. 17-18). Thus, “word” (“*verbum*”) signifies “noun” (“*nomen*”), “noun” signifies “river” (“*fluvius*”), and “river” (“*fluvvius*”) signifies river (*fluvius*). (Augustinus 2017, 4,9, p.18).

There are signs which are self-referential, like “*verbum*” (“word”), and which signify other signs like “*conjunction*” (“conjunction”) (Augustinus, 2017, 4,10, p. 20-21). Now, among the class of signs that indicate signs, one can distinguish between signs that also signify themselves, as in the case of “sign” or “word” because the word “word” is a word, whereas, for example, the word "man" is not a man, but a word. (Augustinus, 2017, 4,10, p. 20-21.)

Augustine perceives the semantic peculiarity of the self-reference of some words. This characteristic can lead to paradoxes; however, Augustine does not explore this subject. Languages that have it are called “semantically closed” by Tarski. Natural languages are semantically closed.

As we saw before, some signs can signify themselves, and some signs can signify other signs; for example, “conjunction” means the conjunctions: *si* (if), *vel* (or), *nam* (for) *namque* (yet), *nisi* (unless) ergo (since). They are words. However, none of these conjunctions signify the word “conjunction” (Augustinus 2017, 5,11, p. 20-21)

Now, we find signs that signify each other reciprocally (*signa mutua*), like “*verbum*” (“word”) and “*nomen*” (“noun”). This case of reciprocally signifying each other is very particular because the sign "word" signifies “noun” and vice-versa.

However, does “noun” signify the same as “verb”? Augustine distinguishes nouns in the strict sense as a grammatical category (alongside other conjunctions, prepositions, interjections, verbs, pronouns, adverbs, and

numerals) and nouns in the broad sense encompassing all parts of the sentence. (Augustinus, 2017, 5,11-15, p. 20-26) He presents an unsound argument. He claims that in the sentences “*placet si*” (“if” pleases”) and in “*displaced quia*” (“because’ displeases”) *si* and *quia* are names (Augustinus, 1845, 5,16, p. 1204). Nevertheless, he neglects that *quia* and *si* are mentioned and not used in the sentences. It is different from standard use of the nouns in “*equus currit*” (“the horse runs”), “*homo sedet*” (“the man sits”) (Augustinus, 2017, 5,16, p. 26). Every word can be the subject of a sentence when it is mentioned. He has, however, not shown that every word is a noun. The erroneous linguistic argument is the following:

*Minus enim tibi videtur idonea, remotis auctoribus, ipsa ratio, qua demonstratur omnibus partibus orationis significari aliquid, et ex eo appellari; si autem appellari, et nominari; si nominari, nomine utique nominari...* (Augustinus, 1845,5,15, p. 1203)

So you think that without authorities, reason itself is incapable of proving that all the parts of speech signify something and thereby give it a designation; if it has a designation, it has a name; if it has a name, it certainly gets its name from a noun.... (Augustinus, 2017,6,15, p. 25).

He says that provided that all words signify something, then they name something. If they name something, then they are nouns. He considers all words to be nouns; it is a blunder. It is false that every word occurrence is a noun. Every word as a type can be turned into a noun by mentioning it and making it the subject of the sentence; like “because” in the sentence “Because’ is metaphysical”, for example. It can occur as a noun when mentioned. That is what he does. We can also nominalize words and phrases that are not nouns to turn them into nouns. Sometimes, the subject is concealed, implicit in the conjugated verb in Latin and other languages (*errat*: he makes a mistake). Augustine is even invoking the Gospel and, in a wrong way, the authority of Cicero (Augustinus, 2017, 5.11-16, p. 23-27) to support his thesis. The blunder originates in his neglect of the context.

He uses this pair of words to apply the notion of extension. "Noun" in the broad sense is all that can be referred to through the anaphoric use of a pronoun, and "word" means each other. Furthermore, "noun" in the broad sense and "word" have the same value (*valent idem*); that is, they mean the same things, which is not the case with "sign" and "word", since "sign" means beyond words, "sign" has a greater value than "word". (Augustinus, 2017, 7,20, p .31). "*Idem valent*" ("have the same value") means "are coextensive".

Here, we can say that Augustine disposes of the notion of extension in terms of mutual subordination of sets as in the passage: *omne coloratum visibile esse, at omne visibile coloratum, quamvis haec duo verbadistictè differenterque significant.* (Augustinus, 1854, 5, 12, p.1204)

"...everything colored is visible and everything visible is colored, though these two words have separate and different meanings (Augustinus, 1845, 5,12, p.21).

In the last passage, saying that they have separate and different meanings, Augustine indicates another dimension of meaning, which is more fine-grained than extension. He does it as well in the following passage:

*Quid, si horum duorum ex uno appellata sunt verba, ex altero nomina: verba scilicet a verberando, nomina vero a noscendo, ut illud primum at auribus, secundum ab animo vocari meruerit?* (Augustinus 2017, 5,12, p. 1202)

What if words derive their name from one of the two things and nouns from the other? Suppose that is, that words [*verba*] come from "striking" [*verberando*] and nouns [*nomina*] from "knowing" [*noscendo*] so that the former has earned its name because of the ear, the latter, because of the mind. (Augustinus 2017, 5,12, p .22)

The truth of the etymology is disputed in the case of "*nomen*", but speculative etymology is in the case of "*verbum*." He thinks there is a distinction in meaning between "*nomen*"

because it has an etymological connotation with the mind and “*verbum*” with the ears.

There is no difference in meaning between “*nomen*” (“name”) and “*vocabulum*” (“term”) whatever (Augustinus, 2017, 6,17, p. 28). As there are no between pairs of words from different languages, for example, “*nomen*” and “*ὄνομα*”. They are only distinguished in Augustine's opinion concerning their sound, but they mean the same; there is only a phonetic difference (Augustinus, 2017, 7.20, p.32). He sees no problem in translation because the translation (no *traduttore*, *traditore* problem) word for word seems unproblematic. Once again, because of the neglect of context.

Resuming, he says, “There are signs which signify themselves; signs that signify each other mutually; signs that have the same extension; signs that differ only in sound.” (Augustinus, 2017, 6,18, p. 29)

## 1.5 Use and Mention

Augustine discusses *in extenso* the errors that come from the confusion between use and mention, for example, the difference between man and “man” (even if in his time there were still no quotation marks to indicate the difference graphically). The problem is that meanings are external things. Augustine ridicules the effects of confusion by asking if Adeodatus can spit a lion, that is, pronounce a lion. For, of course, we only pronounce words and not things. In this context, he recognizes the difference between mention and use. Augustine observes that usage prevails over mention that signs normally indicate their meanings and that knowledge of things is more valuable than of meanings. The mind automatically resorts to meaning. Signs are only the means of gaining knowledge. (Augustinus, 2017, 8, 22-24, p.34-38.). This is one of the few passages where he gives context and its

appropriate importance. Medieval supposition theory, which Augustine influenced (Meier-Oester, 2011), explained the relevance of context for the word meaning.

"*Supponit*" is very close to the technical notion known as "reference" in English. At its most basic level, supposition theory tells us how words used in sentences refer to things. There are three types of *suppositones* - *materialis*, *personalis*, and *simplicis* - Material assumption occurs when a term is mentioned rather than used. Personal supposition occurs when a term represents an object in the world, just like the term "wall" in the sentence "Adeodatus sees the wall", and simple supposition occurs when a term represents a concept, just like "cat" in the sentence, "Cat is a species."

## 1.6 Augustinian Semantics

In Chapter Three, Augustine discusses the possibility of teaching the meanings of words like "walk", "eat, and "speak" by ostension. Several years later, about 396-400, he refines his conception of (learning by) ostension in *Confessiones* (I.8). This passage has become famous for being used as the inauguration passage of Wittgenstein's (1953, 1, p.2) *Philosophische Untersuchungen*:

1. *Augustinus*, in den Confessionen I/8: cum ipsi (maiores homines) appellabant rem aliquam, et cum secundum eam vocem corpus ad aliquid movebant, videbam, et tenebam hoc ab eis vocari rem illam, quod sonabant, cum eam vellent ostendere. Hoc autem eos velle ex motu corporis aperiebatur: tamquam verbis naturalibus omnium gentium, quae fiunt vultu et nutu oculorum, ceterorumque membrorum actu, et sonitu vocis indicante affectionem animi in petendis, habendis, rejiciendis, fugiendis verebus. Ita verba in variis sententiis locis suis posita, et crebro audita, quarum

rerum signa essent, paulatim colligebam, measque jam voluntates, edomito in eis signis ore, per haec enuntiabam.<sup>5</sup>

Wittgenstein says that in Augustine's conception, language is a nomenclature; learning language is essentially associating words and things through ostensive definitions ("this is called N "). Words name objects in the world. He writes:

These words, it seems, give us a particular picture of the essence of human language. It is this: the words in language name objects and sentences are combinations of such names. — In this picture of language we find the roots of the following idea: Every word has a meaning. This meaning is correlated with the word. It is the object for which the word stands. Augustine does not mention any difference between kinds of word. Someone who describes the learning of language in this way is, I believe, thinking primarily of nouns like "table", "chair", "bread", and of people's names, and only secondarily of the names of certain actions and properties; and of the remaining kinds of word as something that will take care of itself. (Wittgenstein, 1953, 1, p.2).

Wittgenstein characterizes this so-called Augustinian conception of meaning as primitive. According to it, all words name things. Each word has a meaning, the thing represented by it. Chapter Two of *De Magistro*, Augustine ascribes to the thesis that every word names something, for all signs, name something, and all words are signs. Moreover, Augustine

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<sup>5</sup> When grown-ups named some object and at the same time turned towards it, I perceived this, and I grasped that the thing was signified by the sound they uttered, since they meant to point it out. This, however, I gathered from their gestures, the natural language of all peoples, the language that by means of facial expression and the play of eyes, of the movements of the limbs and the tone of voice, indicates the affections of the soul when it desires, or clings to, or rejects, or recoils from, something. In this way, little by little, I learnt to understand what things the words, which I heard uttered in their respective places in various sentences, signified. And once I got my tongue around these signs, I used them to express my wishes.



defends the thesis that all words are nouns (because they name something), showing that he primarily thinks of nouns. The two main levels of his conception are *verba* (words) and *res* (things). Meanings are entities in the external world that are perceptible by the senses or reason. He calls them *significabilia*. Augustine gives examples: Romulus, stones, walls, colors, rivers, virtue, walking, and talking. Secondly, some words can signify words, for example, “word” and “conjunction”. Words can be mentioned as well. According to Augustine, the basic function of words is to signify *significabilia*, reminding us of them. Augustine maintains the importance of ostensions in learning words; we can learn if we hear the word and perceive its *significabile*: Hearing the word and simultaneously perceiving the thing referred by it, one associates the word with the thing. (Augustinus, 2017 10.34-35, p. 47-49.)

One of Wittgenstein’s (1953) main objectives is to criticize the reification of meaning in the broader sense. Wittgenstein criticizes the traditional theories of meaning. For Wittgenstein, the meaning of a word is not an object, a set of objects, a mental image, or a platonic entity. Nevertheless, it is the use of the word in a given context. It transfers, so to speak, meaning to the floor of linguistic practice. Words only have meaning within the game of language (within the socio-practical context).

Augustine possesses the notion of extension in terms of mutual subordination of sets as in the passage: “...everything colored is visible and everything visible is colored, though these two words have separate and different meanings (Augustinus, 1845, 5,12, p.21). He uses “*valent idem*” (“are worth the same”) to express that two words are coextensive and “*plus valet*” (“is worth more”) to express that one word has a greater extension than the other. For example, he says

that “sign” has a greater value (*plus valent*) than “word” (Augustinus, 2017, 7,20, p.31).

Some passages in *De Magistro* indicate a semantic conception beyond extension, like sense, meaning, or intension. These, however, are not developed systematically. In the first passage, he says that “colored” and “visible” have the same extension but different meanings.

Another case that implies a third dimension is the difference he draws between “name” and “word”. (Augustinus 2017, 5,12, p .22) He thinks there is a distinction in meaning because of the words’ etymologies.

Considering Augustine's Platonic background, this may surprise a bit; it turns out that the meanings are individuals or instances of universals, but not the universals themselves. He does not even discuss this option. A Platonist would certainly not confuse the idea of walking with the copy of the idea instantiated in the world. However, he discusses abstract entities as *significabile*, such as virtue or separation.

If Adeodatus cannot find any *significabile*, he proposes mental states as meanings of words; for example: “if” signifies doubt, and “nothing” a state of mind, whenever something it was looking for does not exist” “(Augustinus, 2017, 7,19, p. 30). This solution seems an intermediary and is not pursued further in the dialogue.

Words refer directly to things in the external world. This semantics does not accept the Aristotelian semantic triangle that words refer to things through concepts. The Augustinian model is two-dimensional; there is no conceptual mediation by mental concepts or linguistic meanings in the sense of rules of use or Fregean senses. The human mind can directly and immediately relate to the things themselves. Language is secondary.

Burnyeat (1987, p. 1) states that Wittgenstein (1953, 1) omits Augustine's previous passage in which he says he taught himself (Confessiones I,8,3). Teaching implies understanding on the student's part, an activity of the mind, and direct contact with the objects. Burnyeat (1987, p.23) claims that Augustine defends the general thesis that nobody ever teaches another person something for similar reasons to Wittgenstein's.

That Augustine shares with Wittgenstein a strong sense that nothing other people may do or say, and no fact about the world around me, can determine me to respond in the right way. No-one can achieve my understanding for me, not for the trivial reason that it is mine, but because to internalize the requisite connections is to go beyond what is presented on any occasion of so-called teaching. Augustine does not have Wittgenstein's subtle arguments to bring out the multiplicity of ways in which I might seem (to myself and others) to understand and later turn out to have missed the point, which in turn demonstrates the multiplicity of connections involved in understanding itself.

I argue that Burnyeat (1987) is wrong, for the two conceptions of language are extremely different. Especially the conceptions of understanding are very different. Wittgenstein claims that understanding has to do with socially regulated observable behavior, with rule-following, for Augustine's direct epistemic connection to the *significabilia* is relevant. Augustine neglects the role of context. Wittgenstein emphasizes it in his conception of language games. Understanding and correctly applying a rule is the manifestation of following it; it is an expression of a public practice. We learn the meaning of words by learning to use them. Furthermore, certainly not by hearing the word and perceiving what they refer to. Understanding has nothing to do with the inner man and the divine light, a rather private, intimate relationship. Augustine's skeptical conclusion that we cannot teach anything using language is epistemic.

Wittgenstein is right in describing the Augustinian conception in basic lines. However, Wittgenstein does not mention some aspects of Augustine's view, which are not worked out systematically.

## 2. Epistemic Skepticism

### 2.1 Augustine's background assumptions

The concept of teaching has a social, pedagogical, and epistemic dimension. Even if Augustine discusses several topics about the philosophy of language, his basic skeptical thesis is epistemological. As it will turn obvious at the end of the dialogue, the most relevant pedagogical aspect is the contact of the human mind (which he calls the inner man) with God. What matters is to connect to God.

Augustine's strong, surprisingly skeptical position can only be understood through his background assumptions, which stem from Plato's philosophy and Christianity.

Plato's epistemology deeply influences Augustine's philosophy. There is no doubt that Augustine is a Platonist. In the context of the dialogue, some fundamental platonic ideas play a key role. First, the epistemic objects determine an epistemic hierarchy; Augustine believes in epistemic categories (Barnes, 1980, pp. 193-206).

The highest being the platonic ideas. The epistemic subject-object relation is a direct, immediate one. It means that knowledge is objectual knowledge. Augustine seems to defend two types of knowledge: one acquired by reason, the other by perception. The two types admit knowledge as justified truth belief. The difference lies in the mode of justification, by sense perception versus reason. Reasoning adds understanding (*intellegere*) (Burnyeat, 1987, p.6).

This thesis neglects propositional (factual) and processual knowledge. It implies the independence of thought from language. It claims that we can know things directly without the symbolic intermediation of language; thought is independent of language. Augustine philosophizes according to the ontological paradigm in which reality is first, thought second, and language last.

Furthermore, Augustine adopts some aspects of Plato's philosophical style as the maieutic method, irony, and Plato's paradox. There is a Christian ingredient, especially after his *tolle-lege*-episode. He sees God as a *summum bonum*. God as the highest Good is the sole purpose; everything must be subordinate to it. What matters is the relation of the human soul with God. Adopting Christianity leads to substituting anamnesis theory for the divine illumination theory. Let me explain these theses in some detail.

(I) As does Plato in some dialogues like *Theaetetus*, Augustine subscribes to knowledge as justified true belief. There is an epistemic hierarchy. The epistemic mode depends on its objects. The epistemic source determines the objects. The νόησις is more important and reliable than the αἴσθησις. For everything we perceive, we perceive either by the bodily sense or by -the mind. We call the former sense objects the latter intelligible objects. ..." (Augustinus, 2017, 12,39, p. 52)

Even if Plato, in some texts, accepts sensible knowledge (αἴσθησις), he requires first-hand justification, not counting testimony as a legitimate source of knowledge. It is inferior to presence as a mode of justification (Augustinus 2017, 11,38, p. 11). In *Theaetetus*, knowledge of what happened at the crime scene from the eyewitness is impossible; first-hand appreciation is necessary. Knowledge of the road to Larissa is acquired by traveling, not by testimony of travelers (Burnyeat, 1987, p.19). As we will see, Augustine follows this line.

Intellectual Knowledge for Augustine requires rational understanding and connection between the items. It has a systematic character; it consists in grasping a complex field and its explanation (Burnyeat, 1987, pp. 21-22). Augustine writes, "...which makes it impossible for him to consult that light regarding the matter in its entirety. He is led on to consider it part by part when questioned about those very same parts comprising the whole, which he was unable to perceive in its entirety (Augustinus, 1987, 12,40 p.54). Understanding typically seems harder to acquire and more of an epistemic accomplishment than knowledge. For another, the objects of understanding seem more structured and interconnected. Thus, the subject matters we try to understand are often highly complex (Grimm, 2021). Understanding the information requires the listener's student's work, effort, and task. (Burnyeat, 1987, p.8)

(II). Nowadays, epistemology distinguishes, according to linguistic data, between three types of knowledge: objectual, propositional, and processual knowledge. Certainly, Augustine takes objectual knowledge to be fundamental. It seems he considers knowledge of bird-catching (obviously a processual one) as objectual knowledge. The other types are neglected; we cannot be sure if he sees them as derivable or irrelevant or even accepts the distinction. All knowledge requires its object to be present to the mind *in person* and not by *proxy*; a theory of illumination presents the objects of the mind to the person directly. (Silverman, 2022)

Russell (1905) takes a similar approach, distinguishing between knowledge by description and acquaintance. Knowledge by acquaintance is objectual, a direct relation between the subject and the object. Differently de Russell (1905), Augustine does not admit descriptive knowledge.

Because of the focus on objectual knowledge, he neglects propositional and processual knowledge. He also

neglects the importance of context for the meaning of a word except for recognizing some instances of the use and mentioning distinction, as we have discussed in Chapter One. In some way a common issue in ancient theories. The epistemic subject-object relation is direct and immediate, so we do not need language for knowledge. Language is secondary to thought. We do not need language to think about complicated issues. There is no mention of any mentales, for we can grasp the intellectual realities themselves thanks to divine illumination.

(III) Some of Plato's dialogues influence *De Magistro*, making its content more skeptical and less constructive. We can see the influence of Plato's paradox, i.e., some dissatisfaction with his position and results. Plato reminds us that philosophy is thinking on our own and that it is fun (Kraut, 2022). Augustine employs Socrates' *maieutics*, in which the teacher is just the *doula* (birth companion) at the birth of knowledge (Chappell, 2023); he elicits knowledge in a person's mind by interrogation and insistence on close and logical reasoning. However, as many readers of the platonic dialogues observe, the questioner insinuates, proposes, and conveys the relevant pieces of knowledge; he is the dominant interlocutor, as it happens in *De Magistro*.

(IV). After his conversion to an ascetic life form, he starts to see God as the only goal in life. Everything must be measured according to this goal. Later in *De Civitate Dei*, he develops the distinction between *frui* and *uti*, the enjoyment (*frui*) of God, and the means we use (*uti*) to arrive at that goal.

In Menon, Plato characterizes the knowledge of ideas as [ἀνάμνησις](#), recollection of the soul from her preexistence in the platonic realm. Under Christian influence, Augustine develops the divine illumination theory. It is God who enlightens the soul for her to understand. (Augustinus, 2017,

12,40, p. 54). He enlightens and illuminates. (Augustinus, 2017, 11,38, p.51)

*Summa summarum*, Augustine defends an epistemic hierarchy with intellectual knowledge on the top. All knowledge directly relates to the epistemic object. Sensible knowledge requires first-hand acquaintance and intellectual knowledge understanding through divine illumination. Language is not required for thinking. He employs the methods of Socratic philosophy. Finally, God is *summum bonum*. Everything important has to do with Him.

## 2.2 Teaching without signs

In Chapter Ten, Augustine withdraws his objections about the possibility of learning by observing activities that other people do, therefore ignoring and forgetting doubts about ambiguity and imprecision. This turning of the table is an example of Plato's dialogue style. If one has sufficient intelligence, one can obtain knowledge by observing other people, for example, a bird catcher. In this way, he believes to refute the thesis that nothing can be taught without signs. He admits that nature directly shows us the sun, light, and other natural things. (Augustinus, 2017, 10, 32, p. 45-46).

Nevertheless, is the bird catcher teaching in any sense? Burnyeat (1987, p.15) denies that:

In that sense, I could teach everybody about flowers simply by putting some on view in a vase. However, most of us would agree that this is not really teaching or even showing. It is merely providing an occasion for the spectator to learn.

He continues arguing that the ordinary usage of "teach" requires the teacher's intention. However, there is an extended usage that permits inanimate things to teach, like in: "She taught/showed me what courage could be", "The mountain taught me the value of life", and Augustine's



example of the wall showing itself (Burneay, 1987, footnote 16, p.15).

For us, bird catching is a know-how, a practical capacity that can be learned by doing it. Augustine seems to accept only objectual knowledge and interprets bird catching as such.

Augustine confident that he has refuted the initial thesis by demonstrating the contradictory thesis that something is taught without signs. (Augustinus, 2017, 10.33, p. 46) Radicalizes his critic defending the contrary thesis to the initial one. He starts to argue in favor of the thesis that nothing can be taught by signs, analyzing the obscure term “*saraballa*” in Daniel 3,94: *Et saraballae eorum non sunt immutatae* (“And their saraballae were not spoiled”) (Augustinus, 1845, 10,33 p.1214; Augustinus, 2017, p. 47). He argues that when the listener hears the word “*saraballae*”, he either already knows the meaning of it, that is, coifs, and consequently, he does not learn anything, or he does not know it yet. In the second case, the word cannot give him its meaning. For that to happen, the thing itself, the coif in this case, would have to be shown to him *ad occuculos*. This is the way to learn the meaning of a word. Hearing the sound and simultaneously perceiving the thing denoted by it, one associates the word with the sound. (Augustinus, 2017 10.34-35, p. 47-49.)

What Augustine presents is a semantic version of Meno’s paradox. (Augustinus, 2017, 11.36, p.49). The natural solution to Meno’s paradox is to characterize the inquirer as only partially ignorant. He knows enough to recognize a correct answer but not enough to answer independently (Sorenson, 2022).

The argument has a very important implication. The word shows me the thing it signifies. No word, taken in isolation, tells me what it signifies or anything about what it

signifies. Someone may tell me that a *saraballa* is a certain covering for the head, but that is no help unless I already know what a covering is and what a head is. Nevertheless, assuming I know what a head and covering are, I still do not know what a *saraballa* is. I need to know what peculiar thing “*saraballa*” signifies, but a particular kind of first-hand justification which, now that *saraballae* are extinct, none of us can ever have (Burnyeat, 1987, p16). I need acquaintance; if not, I will not know; just believe. Word shows me the thing it signifies. Because of that, he cannot solve Meno’s paradox, admitting partial ignorance.

The utmost value I can attribute to words is this. They bid us to look for things but do not show them to us so we may know them. (Augustinus, 2017,36, p.49). They remind us of the *signifiabiles*.

Even if Augustine concentrated more on whole sentences, his skeptical result would remain because first-hand justification is needed.

### 2.3 Ignorance of the Past

As we do not have direct knowledge of people from the past, he concludes that we cannot know the meaning of proper names: “However, Ananias, Azarias, and Misael are as unknown to me as those *saraballae*, and their names did not help me know them, nor could they help. (Augustinus, 2017, 11, 37, p .50) Furthermore, we must rely on the reports of people from whom we hear the story about the bearers of the names.

Without wishing to exaggerate the similarity of Augustine's conception, it has much in common with the causal theory of proper names. As developed 1500 years later by Kripke (1980). Since the bearers of proper names are their

only semantic value, in learning the name, the speaker must intend to refer to the same individual from whom he learns the name and, therefore, must trust him, as Augustine claims (Augustinus, 2017, 11, 36, p. 50-51.) Moreover, the causal theory requires a causal chain that leads from the producers<sup>6</sup> (people who have knowledge of the bearer of the name and use the name) to the current users of the proper name. Augustine's rejection of testimony as a legitimate source of knowledge, nevertheless, impedes any constructive solution in this sense.

Augustine denies the possibility of knowledge by description. The subject must have acquaintance with things for him to know of them. Words unconnected with perceived external things or abstract entities grasped by the mind are nothing more than noise.

In Chapter (Augustinus, 2017, 11,39, p. 53), he continues to assert that there is no real knowledge of past events as in the case of proper names of past persons. Augustine reflects on how we can talk about things we perceived in the past, as the referents (*significabilia*) are no longer in front of us. In that case, we only have the images of things in our memory. How, then, can propositions about the past be true? (Augustinus, 2017, 12, 39, p. 53), For Augustine, there is no historical knowledge: knowledge transmitted by another person's word. It must come from first-hand learning, by the intellect, or by my sense-perception. We do not know about past events; we have beliefs.

## 2.4 Ignorance of the Truth and Witchcraft of Language

Augustine admits that some may judge it absurd that words can teach nothing. (Augustinus, 2017, 12, 40, p. 55)

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<sup>6</sup> “Producers” in this sense has been as introduced by Evans (1980).

For Augustine, there are two types of knowledge: through the senses, *sensibilia* are perceived, and through reason, *intelligibilia*. The words themselves do not guarantee their truth. One who does not know can use the same words as one who knows. When someone describes where and how he is at the new moon, the words alone do not determine the truth value of an utterance. One needs to consult reason and the senses by which we obtain knowledge of things, the moon, and its qualities. "*Nam verba eadm sonant videnti, quae non videnti etiam sonoerunt*" (Augustinus, 1854, 12,39, p.1216) ("Words, then, have the same sound for those who see as they did for those who do not.") To know sensible things, the subject has to learn them through the senses and intelligible things through contemplation itself. The contemplation is successful if God enlightens the mind. Words play no role in this; at most, they motivate us to find things. Augustine contrasts two propositions, one obviously considered true: "... that wise men are better than fools" and one obviously false, "... that I saw a man flying". The sentences have the same certainty. Noticing these two sentences, one learns nothing without inner examination. Words need an inner justification. (Augustinus, 2017, 12,40 p. 53-54)

So, he reinforces his argumentation. In no case of teacher-student learning does the student "learn". Either he hears what you say and does not know whether it is true – he either believes it, knows it is false or true – he bears witness to the truth.

Anyone who lacks the capacity for discernment that is, understanding, will not learn anything.

The hearer must grasp the realities (Augustinus 2017, 12,40, p.55). It is a question of justification. Authority will not do. Another problem is that the speaker cannot even express his thoughts; sometimes, lying, he does not even try. The words do not even manifest the thought of the speaker. The statements do not mirror the thought. This lack of

correspondence between utterances and thoughts has several reasons. Liars abuse language to hide their thoughts. According to the saying: *A parole is donné a été donné à l'homme pour déguiser sa pensée*. These failures have their reasons in *lapsus linguae*, inability to find the right word in a situation, ambiguity of meaning, imprecision. We cannot know the speaker's thinking through language. Even the speaker cannot express his knowledge through language. (Augustinus, 2017, 13, 41-45, p. 56-59). In short, a lack of definitions and mishearing often lead to misperceptions of what has been said. (Augustinus, 2017, 13, 42-44, p.59)

In the end, students must decide for themselves whether their teachers speak the truth. They can only do this by looking upon the inner Truth, according to their abilities. This is the point at which they learn.

## 2.5 Skeptical Thesis and Divine Illumination

The truth that helps us evaluate things we are told through signs is the Truth that presides within the mind itself, the Inner Teacher. Augustine admits that “we may have been led to consulting it because of the words Now He who is consulted and who is said to “dwell in the inner man, “5 He it is who teaches us, namely, Christ, that is to say, “the unchangeable Power of God and everlasting wisdom.” This is the Wisdom which every rational soul does indeed consult”. (Augustinus, 2017, 11,38, p.51) God is the solution. What really matters is God and our relationship, especially our love (*caritas*) for Him.

The remaining role of language in knowledge is the same as in prayer; that is, to admonish us, words only fulfill the epistemological function of encouraging us to seek the truth within us. A view that he famously expresses later *Noli foras ire. In interiore homine habitat veritas (De Trinitate (XIV,*

7,10). The inner man (*homo interior*) is the mind, as shown already in *De Magistro*. (Augustinus, 2017,11,38, p. 51)

Not even outside of language does a man need to go out to find the truth, for a language would not help.

The thesis that no human can teach anything to another is paradoxical. Adeodatus learned it himself. The proper plot of the dialogue illustrates this thesis. (Burnyeat 1987, p. 5) He stimulates his son to learn something. This is part of Augustine's Socratic dialogue style. After his conversion, however, Augustine can liberate himself from his epistemological skepticism thanks to God.

Augustine believes you do not need words to learn true knowledge; this happens through perception and contemplation. Language seems epistemologically superfluous. This, however, does not mean that language does not play an important role in human knowledge. Augustine argues that only God can teach us. Other people can tell us things and communicate ideas to us. We can believe what others tell us. However, all of this stays at the level of mere belief. In *Retractiones* (Augustinus, 2010, I,14,6), Augustine became more inclusive and accepted a broader concept of knowledge that includes what we believe in the authority of trustworthy witnesses while understanding the distance between knowledge in the narrow sense and in the broad sense.

In *De Magistro*, knowledge is impossible unless we grasp the truth of what we are hearing (Pasnau, 2020). "Therefore, even when I say what is true, and he sees what is true, it is not I who teach him. For he is being taught, not by my words, but by the realities themselves made manifest to him by the enlightening action of God from within." (Augustinus, 2017, 12.40, p.54).

Adeodatus (Augustinus, 2017, 14,46, pp. 60-61) resumes the relevant points: stimulation by words, disconnect between words and thoughts, and divine illumination, in the following passage:

I myself have come to learn through the suggestive power of your words that words merely stimulate a man to learn, and that the words of the speaker seldom reveal his thoughts to any great extent. But as to the truth of what is said, I have also learned that He alone teaches those who use external words to remind us that He dwells within us. With His help, I shall now love Him all the more ardently as I advance in learning.

### **Final considerations**

Augustine's semantics is correctly described by Wittgenstein (1953), even if he omits some fragmentarily developed ideas. Augustine affirms that words name things. He concentrates on nouns and admits that we can learn the meanings of words by ostension. Augustine neglects the context. He discusses the challenges of language, including its potential for ambiguity and the difficulty of accurately conveying one's thoughts and intentions. The only teacher is Christ. According to his epistemological skepticism, language cannot guarantee knowledge communication. No knowledge can be communicated through signs. Knowledge is deduced directly from things. The only things we can know are sensible things when they are presented in front of us (which can be directly perceived) or intellectual things we can grasp with our mind thanks to divine illumination. We need personal inner understanding and direct experience. He requires direct personal justification for a true belief to be knowledge and firmly rejects the epistemic testimony source. He can only believe the teacher and our words but not know if they are justified. The student learns directly by perceiving the *significabile* and, in the case of intellectual things, when God illuminates his mind.

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