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Augustine as a Philosopher of Language

ABSTRACT: This paper offers an overview of Augustine's treatment of the issues of language, in particular his semantics and his theory of signification. His linguistic investigations are interspersed throughout different texts, chiefly *The Teacher* and *De doctrina Christiana*. A substantial part of his investigations in this field might be regarded as pioneering work, not only in semantics but also in early pragmatics. Furthermore, Augustine wrote one of the earliest texts dealing with the use of language, a thread picked up by Wittgenstein and other twentieth-century philosophers of language. Any systematic treatment of Augustine as a philosopher of language would need to consider both his major treatises and what he wrote about the use of language and his discussion of pragmatics.

KEYWORDS: Augustin • philosophy of language

For since we are unable to speak of words except by words
and since we do not speak unless we speak of some things,
the mind recognizes that words are signs of things,
without ceasing to be things.

Augustine, *De Dialectica*, V

1. Not only Wittgenstein

The opening paragraph of Wittgenstein's *Logical Investigations* is an extensive passage in Latin, a quote from Augustine's *Confessions*, where he describes how he learned a language as a child, observing people's communicative behavior: actions, gestures, gazes:

But how I learnt to talk I discovered only later. It was not that grown-up people instructed me by presenting me with words in a certain order by formal teaching, as later I was to learn the letters of the alphabet. I myself acquired this power of speech with the intelligence which you gave me, my God. By groans and various sounds and various movements of parts of my body I would endeavour to express the

intentions of my heart to persuade people to bow to my will. But I had not the power to express all that I wanted, nor could I make my wishes understood by everybody.¹

That is how Wittgenstein comments on this passage:

These words, it seems to me, give us a particular picture of the essence of human language. It is this: the individual words in language name objects—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.²

Thus, Wittgenstein, on the one hand, uses Augustine's conception of language as a springboard for his investigations and to develop his idea of meaning as associated rather with use than with reference. On the other, he is critical of this – as he sees it – narrow view of language as “an over-simple” conception of the script:

Imagine a script in which the letters were used to stand for sounds, and also as signs of emphasis and punctuation. (A script can be conceived as a language for describing sound-patterns.) Now imagine someone interpreting that script as if there were simply a correspondence of letters to sounds and as if the letters had not also completely different functions. Augustine's conception of language is like such an over-simple conception of the script.³

Wittgenstein's critique of thus formulated theory of signification is largely correct, provided that Augustine really put forward such a narrow and reductionist view of language. Did he?

First, in this passage Augustine gives an account of *how he learned* to use language. Second, his views on language, as well as on other issues for that matter, are scattered all over his works, which requires extensive research, a kind of Sisyphean task, given that he wrote some 100 major texts.

In this passage from *Confessions*, Augustine emphasizes the role of reference, an aspect that Wittgenstein himself never shuns. In other works, particularly in *The Teacher* and *De Doctrina Christiana*, Augustine's views are not inconsistent with those of Wittgenstein. Augustine seems

¹ Augustine, *Confessions*, I. 8. 6.

² L. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, I, 1. Trans. G. E. M. Anscombe, Oxford 1958.

³ L. Wittgenstein, *op.cit.*, I. 4.

to be acutely aware of the distinction between signification and the use of words.⁴

In *De dialectica*, Augustine formulates distinctions not unlike J. L. Austin's intuitions about different kinds of speech acts:

For either a statement is made in such a way that it is held to be subject to truth or falsity, such as 'every man is walking' or 'every man is not walking' and others of this kind. Or a statement is made in such a way that, although it fully expresses what one has in mind, it cannot be affirmed or denied, as when we command, wish, curse, and the like.⁵

Although he has never developed a full-blown account of this type of language use, his views are consistent with those of the major twentieth-century thinkers (Austin, Searle, Bach, Habermas).

2. Classical influences

On the one hand, Augustine admits that he had never mastered the Greek language and in later life he was inclined to protest too much his ignorance of Greek,⁶ and on the other, Augustine's philosophy of language in *The Teacher* (*De magistro*) reflects the entire Graeco-Roman discussion on these issues since *Cratylus*.⁷ He seems to be familiar with Aristotle's *Categories* (we have no way of knowing whether he had read it in Greek or in Latin), although we do know that Latin translations of *De Interpretatione* and *Categories* were available all over the Roman world.

There are clear signs of Augustine being influenced by the Stoics (and their debates with the Epicureans), telling us that he had a particular interest in logic, and that among logicians he had a special admiration for the Stoics.⁸ In their "most bitter quarrel" (as he describes it), he is particularly interested in their respective definitions of sign. For the Epicureans, the sign was perceptible, *aisthetón*, while the Stoics viewed it as intelligible, *noetón*. Augustine seems to combine these two approaches in his idea of the semantic triad (see below).

⁴ R. H. Ayers, *Language, Logic, and Reason in the Church Fathers*, Hildesheim and New York 1979, p. 73.

⁵ Augustine, *De dialectica*, II. Trans., introduction and notes by B. D. Jackson, Dordrecht – Boston, 1975.

⁶ H. Chadwick, *Augustine of Hippo. A Life*, Oxford 2009, p. 6; see also Augustine, *Confessions*, I. 14. 1.

⁷ U. Duchrow, *Sprachverständnis und biblisches Hören bei Augustin*, Tübingen 1965, p. 72.

⁸ See 83 *Questions* and *Contra Academicos*, III, 29; Cf. G. Watson, *St. Augustine's Theory of Language*, p. 10–11.

3. Augustine – a philosopher of language?

All instruction is either about things or about signs;
but things are learnt by means of signs.

Augustine, *De Doctrina Christiana*, II. 2

For all the wealth of texts written about his thought, Augustine is hardly ever mentioned as a philosopher of language, which is rather odd since he dealt with issues of language, signs, and words for a substantial part of his life, with teacher of rhetoric being his first profession for over ten years (376–386 AD), and perhaps his only learned profession, as he had had no formal training in philosophy.⁹ Augustine lived 76 years. A philosopher by nature turned Manichean ultimately converted to Christianity. A teacher of rhetoric turned theologian, preacher, and bishop.

Augustine never dealt with language as such, and most of his linguistic considerations (chiefly in semantics and occasionally in pragmatics) concern theological, rhetorical, and educational issues, with two major works on the questions of language: *The Teacher* (*De magistro*)¹⁰ and *On Christian Doctrine* (*De doctrina Christiana*). *The Teacher* is an early dialogue (written before Augustine's conversion), and arguably his most sustained discussion of language in the context of instruction.¹¹ The other major treatment of language-related issues is his work on biblical exegesis and Christian rhetoric *De doctrina Christiana*.

The Teacher illustrates how “Augustine's linguistics” is conceptualized and why he is interested in language in the first place. Namely, Augustine always treats language in order to discuss something else: teaching, learning, and understanding (*The Teacher*), or rhetoric and exegesis (*De doctrina Christiana*).

⁹ Cf. G. Watson, *St. Augustine's Theory of Language*, “The Maynooth Review / Revieú Mhá Nuad”, vol. 6, no. 2 (May 1982), p. 4–5.

¹⁰ Augustine, *The Teacher*, trans. R.P. Russell, O.S.A., Washington, D.C. 1968.

¹¹ Cf. T. Nawar, *Augustine on the Varieties of Understanding and Why There is No Learning from Words*, “Oxford Studies in Medieval Philosophy” 3 (1) (2015), p. 1–31.

3.1. *The Teacher*

Nothing, we are told, is learned or taught
simply by means of its sign,

Augustine, *The Teacher* X. 33

Augustine's key thesis as presented and discussed in *The Teacher* can be summarized as: there is no learning from words.¹² As Myles Burnyeat observed, Augustine uses the term "knowledge" (*scientia*) (i.e. the desired and expected result of any learning), and "understanding" (*intelligentia*) interchangeably. In other words, to know (*scire*) is to understand (*intelligere*),¹³ as both *scire* and *intelligere* refer to overlapping cognitive states. However, understanding is, first, synoptic in nature, and does not involve isolated claims (propositions), but sets of them; second, understanding requires awareness of the logical relationship between such propositions. Augustine's paradigmatic example of this kind of understanding is the ability to grasp mathematical concepts (which might strike a familiar note among readers of Wittgenstein). However, in this context "mathematical" refers to fairly simple arithmetical operations.¹⁴ Both knowledge and understanding rest on one fundamental condition, namely that knowing or understanding that *p* hinges on grasping the explanation of *p*. In other words, understanding requires the synoptic grasp of the whole field.

To know the meaning of propositions i.e. to understand them, requires language (i.e. an individual must be able to speak a language), and largely *rests on* language ("words", as Augustine generalizes this condition), but is not linguistic. It cannot exist without language but *does not come from* language; not because language is merely a necessary condition for understanding, but because, as Augustine seems to suggest, understanding is not exclusively linguistic. As Tamer Nawar puts it: "while one may attain (e.g.) justified true belief through accepting the testimony of another, one cannot attain explanatory understanding this way."

As we said, the key thesis of *The Teacher* is that there is no learning from words. Although not particularly concerned with the explanatory understanding in this work, Augustine does address several kinds of understanding (cognizance): conceptual understanding (understanding what *A* is, having a concept of *A*), and linguistic understanding (understanding what

¹² T. Nawar, *op.cit.*, *passim*.

¹³ M. Burnyeat, *Wittgenstein and Augustine* De Magistro, "Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society" 61 (1987), p. 1–24.

¹⁴ M. Burnyeat, *op.cit.*, p. 20–21.

‘*A*’ signifies).¹⁵ Neither is satisfactory in terms of certainty offered. Therefore, Augustine’s prime concern seems to be a third kind of *intelligere*: infallible knowledge, as defined in *Against the Academics* (*Contra Academicos*):

Here [Trygetius] said, “First of all, I don’t call it knowledge when the person who professes it is sometimes wrong. For knowledge consists not only of things that are comprehended but of things that are comprehended in such a way *that no one with this knowledge is in error*; and when he is pressured by contrary things, no matter what they are, he should not waver.”¹⁶

In *The Teacher* Augustine discusses the familiar controversy and the confusion resulting from the substantiation of the pronoun “nothing”. Whether it refers to “something”, in other words whether “nothing” is real seems to have plagued metaphysical and theological discussions for several centuries. Suffice it to cite Paul Tillich: “The very structure which makes negative judgments possible proves the ontological character of non-being.”¹⁷ In effect, this amounts to claiming that “nothing” exists essentially in no different a manner as “something”, a problem elegantly summarized by Lewis Carroll: “‘I see nobody on the road,’ said Alice. ‘I only wish *I* had such eyes,’ the King remarked in a fretful tone. ‘To be able to see Nobody! And at that distance, too!’”¹⁸ Augustine is well aware of this confusion and does not hesitate to call it “ridiculous”: “Instead of saying that *nihil* signifies something which is nothing, shall we say that this word 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?”¹⁹ Furthermore, Augustine adds,

¹⁵ Augustine, *The Teacher*, XI, 37, XII, 40. Cf. T. Nawar, *op.cit.*, *passim*.

¹⁶ Augustine, *Against the Academics*, VII, 19, translation, annotation, and commentary by M. P. Foley, New Haven & London 2019; emphasis added; see also: *ibidem*, II, 5, 11 and III, 9, 18. Augustine often uses two different Latin words when there is only one English word for them. In this case, “*scientia* usually refers to the highest kind of knowledge, that is, the grasp of eternal realities such as the truths disclosed in the liberal arts.” See *On the Immortality of the Soul*, I, 1: “All that the soul knows (*scit*), it has within itself; nor does knowledge (*scientia*) contain anything other than that which pertains to some discipline, for discipline is the knowledge (*scientia*) of anything whatsoever” (M. P. Foley, *Preface*, in: Augustine, *Against the Academics*, p. x; see also *Against the Academics*, I, 7, 19). Trygetius was one of two pupils of Augustine at Cassiciacum, and a principal participant of the Cassiciacum dialogues (*Against the Academics*, *On the Happy Life*, *On Order*, and *the Soliloquies*).

¹⁷ P. Edwards, *Professor Tillich’s Confusions*, “Mind”, vol. LXXXIV, April 1965, no. 294, p. 213.

¹⁸ L. Carroll, *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland and Through the Looking-Glass and What Alice Found There*, Oxford, 2009, p. 198–199.

¹⁹ Augustine, *The Teacher*, II, 3.

Now we must not heed the raving of individuals who think that “nothing” in this passage is to be taken as “something,” and who think they can compel assent to this sort of nonsense on the ground that “nothing” is put at the end of the sentence. “Therefore,” they say, “it [nothing] was made; and since it was made, nothing is itself something.”²⁰

Apparently, by “nothing”, Augustine means “not something”, a negation of a thing, thus dismissing the idea that “nothing” is a kind of something and not a mere negation.

3.2. *De doctrina Christiana*

In the last paragraph of *The Teacher*, the author makes a promise to continue his investigation: “We shall, God willing, resume our inquiry on another occasion into the whole question of the usefulness of words, which is one of no small importance if you look into it carefully.” Although he never resumed his work on this issue, he did write another major that deals with issues of language and how it relates to Christian education, *De doctrina Christiana*, which might be viewed as fulfillment of that promise.²¹ In the treatise, apparently intended as an introduction to Scripture interpretation, Augustine focuses on a single theme, the relation of thing (*res*) and sign (*signum*), reality, and representation. Famously, he says that “things are learnt through signs.”²² And in order to be able to understand texts (particularly the Scripture). Augustine makes a fundamental distinction between a “thing” (*res*) and a sign (*signum*); *res* is something that is not determined by the function of meaning, it is what it is, and does not belong in a system of representation.

Characteristically, in *De doctrina Christiana*, Augustine makes two basic claims regarding signification: (i) the doctrine of signs is a step towards a general theory of language; (ii) only God is not determined by anything else. He is the content of every sign and is beyond all meaning.²³ Rowan Williams stresses that Augustine does not inquire into a possible definition of the source of meaning in other religious doctrines (such as Judaism),²⁴ an obvious limitation in his account of signification. Nevertheless, even if we

²⁰ Augustine, *De natura boni*, trans. and comm. Fr. A. Moon, F.S.C. Washington, D.C., 1955, p. 25.

²¹ R. A. Markus, *St. Augustine on Signs*, in: *Augustine, A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. R. A. Markus, Garden City, N. Y. 1976, p. 73.

²² Augustine, *De doctrina Christiana*, I, 2.

²³ R. Williams, *Language, Reality and Desire in Augustine's "De Doctrina"*, “Journal of Literature & Theology”, vol. 3 no. 2 (July 1989), p. 139. Cf. Augustine, *De Doctrina Christiana*, I, 2.

²⁴ R. Williams, *op.cit.*, p. 147.

suspend his hypothesis of the Christian God as the source of all meaning and the context of all meaningful statements, for example by generalizing it, we would still have Augustine's claim that there must be some source that determines the meaning of signs.

4. Augustine's semantics

Words are signs.²⁵

Augustine, *The Teacher*, II

Augustine was probably the first to discuss signification at a greater length, and the one to have brought it into a theory of language.²⁶ The only hint of earlier discussion is a brief critical reference to Aristotle's *Categories* by Plotinus, which Augustine could have been familiar with. His account is a criticism of Aristotle's statement (*Categories* VI, 4b32–35): "The same may be said about speech, if by speech the spoken word is intended. Being measured in long and short syllables, speech is an evident quantity, whose parts possess no common boundary."²⁷

What are Augustine's views on meaning and signification? He finds the endeavor of "dealing with words by means of words"²⁸ 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."²⁹

To get the problem of the meaning of syncategorematic words and the fact that it is largely determined by the way they function in sentences ("use") out of the way, let us stress that Augustine differentiates between syncategorematic expressions (such as pronouns or prepositions) and "words charged with their own meaning":

Words are signs of things whenever they refer to them, even though those [words] by which we dispute about [words] are [signs] of words. For since we are unable to speak of words except by words and since we do not speak unless we speak of some things, the mind recognizes that words are signs of things, without ceasing to be things. When, therefore, a word is uttered for its own sake, that is, so that something

²⁵ Augustine, *The Teacher*, II.

²⁶ Augustine's theoretical discussion of language is primarily dealt with in two of his works, *Teacher* and *De doctrina Christiana*.

²⁷ Aristotle, *Categories*, VI. 4b32–35. Trans. H.P. Cook, Cambridge, Mass. 1962.

²⁸ Augustine, *The Teacher*, V.

²⁹ *Ibidem*.

is being asked or argued about the word itself, clearly it is the thing which is the subject of disputation and inquiry; but the thing in this case is called a *verbum*.³⁰

5. The semantic triad

What makes a word (Augustine's *verbum*) meaningful? Is it only mere reference, that a word spoken or written refers to a thing? Or is there something else involved? This issue engaged thinkers at least from Augustine to modern times. Charles Sanders Peirce was acutely aware of what is at play here: "The Sign can only represent the Object and tell about it. It cannot furnish acquaintance with or recognition of that Object; for that is what is meant in this volume by the Object of a Sign; namely, that with which it presupposes an *acquaintance* in order to convey some further information concerning it."³¹ The only reason we have for "signifying" is to bring forth what is going on in the mind of the speaker and to communicate it to another mind: "Given signs are those which living things give to each other, in order to show, to the best of their ability, the emotions of their minds, or anything that they have felt or learnt."³²

As he was a theologian and put his philosophical inquiries in the service of theological goals, Augustine's motivation, even in his linguistic investigations, is primarily theological,³³ and it is in this vein that he offers a solution to the problem of signification. Signs (and for him all words are signs) not only refer to things but by means of words teach (or more generally, communicate) about realities – as Christ did in the Gospels. In this manner, the teacher's words bring to mind the realities themselves, of which the words are signs.³⁴ As R. A. Markus wrote, "Thus speech puts before the mind what was previously either altogether absent from it, or at least not present to it in the sense of being actually thought about."³⁵

In *De doctrina Christiana* (I. 2; II. 1–4), Augustine divides the world into "things" and "signs", where things that, apart from being what they are, signify other things.

³⁰ Augustine, *De Dialectica*, V. See also W. and M. Kneale, *The Development of Logic*, Oxford 1962, p. 188; N. Kretzmann, "History of Semantics", in: *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, vol. VII, New York, 1967, p. 366.

³¹ Ch. S. Peirce, *Logic as Semiotic: The Theory of Signs*, in: *Philosophical Writings of Peirce*, ed. J. Bulcher, New York 1955, p. 98–101. Emphasis added.

³² Augustine, *De Doctrina Christiana*, II. 3. See also R. A. Markus, *op.cit.*, p. 67.

³³ Arguably, his texts can be read and interpreted as sermons, which seems to be their purpose in any case.

³⁴ Augustine, *The Teacher*, II.

³⁵ R. A. Markus, *op.cit.*, p. 75.

6. Signs – “natural” and “given”

Words do not refer to the things themselves,
but to the images impressed by them
upon the senses and stored away in the memory.

Augustine, *The Teacher*, XII³⁷

The heart of Augustine’s discussion of language is his treatment of signs, a recurrent theme in ancient philosophy, especially after Aristotle, particularly in light of *Analytically Prior*.³⁶ Despite considerable variations, the Aristotelian theory of signs as a means of inference sets the general framework for the Stoic and Epicurean discussion of the topic. Stoic logic was defined, among others, as the science “about signs and things signified”.³⁷ Sextus Empiricus viewed events as logically connected with other events, and the sign therefore analytically entailed the thing or event signified.³⁸ However, it is highly likely that Augustine had no first-hand knowledge of the Stoics-Epicureans debate on signification and reference.

Augustine’s first text on the meaning of signs is a discussion in *The Teacher* (*De magistro*, probably A.D. 389). The key question is why we use signs in the first place. Augustine’s answer: to teach or to learn. In *The Teacher* he deals with the problem that could be generalized as “communication” (“teaching”, as he terms it,³⁹ but we believe that it can be safely generalized). “Now if we examine the matter more carefully, perhaps you will discover that nothing is learned by means of its signs. For when I am shown a sign, it cannot teach me anything if it finds me ignorant of the reality for which the sign stands.”⁴⁰ Augustine insists that we understand the meaning of the word only if we recognize the reality it signifies.⁴¹ Therefore, on Augustine’s account, meaning is not reducible to reference, as it requires a third element – knowledge of the reality behind the word.

Augustine was interested in language as made up of signs, particularly in the language of the Scripture, and their meaning from the point of view

³⁶ Aristotle, *Analytically Prior* II. 27.

³⁷ Diogenes Laertios, VII. 62.

³⁸ Cf. Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, B 111–13.

³⁹ Augustine uses the term “teach” to include any form of personal communication for the purpose of instruction. Cf. Augustine, *The Teacher*, trans. R.P. Russell O.S.A., Washington 1968, p. 7, footnote 1.

⁴⁰ Augustine, *The Teacher*, X. 33.

⁴¹ *Ibidem*.

of the literal and the figurative sense of the Bible. Apparently, his theory of signs was meant to be a theory of signs and a theory of language.⁴²

In a later major text, *De doctrina Christiana* (I. 2; II. 1–4), Augustine divides the world into “things” and “signs” (i.e., things that, apart from being what they are, signify other things).

He viewed signs as an indispensable means of directing mind’s attention to things.⁴³ In *De doctrina Christiana*, he describes a sign as a thing that of itself makes some other things come to mind, besides the impression that it presents to the senses.⁴⁴ As regards the meaning of a sign, “what it ‘signifies’, can only be expounded and established by means of further signs, as it were by giving synonyms; by circumlocution; by pointing or gesture; or by pictorial representation.” This intuition reflects the idea that the nature of signification is rather systemic. It is both triadic (sign–object–reality) and signs refer not only to objects but also to other signs.⁴⁵

Augustine speaks of two types of signs: natural signs (*signa naturalia*) and given data (*signa data*). Natural signs are those which without a wish or any urge to signify cause something else besides themselves to be known from them, like smoke, which signifies fire. It does not signify fire because it wishes to do so; but because of our observation and attention to things that we have experienced it is realized that there is fire beneath it, even if nothing but smoke appears. Augustine is not interested in this type of signs and mentions it only to distinguish it from the second type.

The other type, given signs, are those which living things give to each other, in order to show, to the best of their ability, the emotions of their minds, or anything that they have felt or learned.⁴⁶ Given signs, from the point of view of a theory of language, are words, which are used for the sole purpose of signification.⁴⁷

Signs, Augustine claims, are essentially conventional. Therefore, meaning is founded on social agreement and acceptance of a given convention. “All these meanings, then, derive their effect on the mind from each individual’s agreement with a particular convention. As this agreement varies, so does their effect. People did not agree to use them because they were already meaningful; rather they became meaningful because people agreed to use them.”⁴⁸

⁴² R. A. Markus, *op.cit.*, p. 66–68.

⁴³ Augustine, *The Teacher*, III. 6; cf. *ibidem*. X. 29–31; R. A. Markus, *op.cit.*, p. 66–68.

⁴⁴ Augustine, *De Doctrina Christiana*, II. 2.

⁴⁵ R. A. Markus, *op.cit.*, p. 68, p. 74–75.

⁴⁶ Augustine, *De Doctrina Christiana*, II. 2.

⁴⁷ *Ibidem*, II. 2.

⁴⁸ Augustine, *De Doctrina Christiana*, II. 94.

Meaning indeed appears to depend on convention, but Augustine fails to discuss (perhaps even fails to see) how conventions are established in the first place, effectively blind to the role of language in the creation of communities, and that it is individual communities that establish (or create) conventions in the first place.

Words differ from signs in that a word is meaningful and presents to mind what it means, whereas a sign is meaningful only to an interpreter who is familiar with the *convention of its use*. As R.A. Markus elegantly put it, for any expression to be meaningful presupposes social solidarity between users of the same language, a kind of *societatis consensio* accepted and shared by both speaker and hearer.⁴⁹ In *De Trinitate*, Augustine's theory of the 'word' approaches language from the side of the speaker, unlike the sign-theories of the *De magistro* and the *De doctrina Christiana*.⁵⁰ In *The Teacher*, on the other hand, words are treated as signs, i.e. as things or phenomena endowed with meaning. On the other hand, the *verbum mentis* in *De Trinitate* is not a sign, because it is not a sensuous reality and is not perceived by sense.

7. Words and use of words

What would you say we are trying to do when
we speak?

Augustine, *The Teacher*, I. 1⁵¹

A word, spoken or heard, is the sign of the "word within", which precedes all the signs and stems from knowledge (*scientia*) and which remains in the mind when that knowledge is expressed. In modern terms, such knowledge would be called a mental state.

The notion that language expresses thought, mental states or emotions pervades modern philosophy. For example, in such a context John Rogers Searle speaks of intentionality, which he defines as a property of mental states: "Intentionality is that property of mental states and events by which they are directed at or about, or of object and states of affairs in the world."⁵² On his account, linguistic representation (Augustine's *vox*, utterance), is derived from mental representation (which we could also view as what Augustine calls "knowledge"). This is where Searle and Augustine seem to differ from

⁴⁹ R. A. Markus, *op.cit.*, p. 80–84. Emphasis added.


⁵⁰ Cf. R. A. Markus, *op.cit.*, p. 82–83.

⁵¹ This is the opening line of the dialog. Augustine seems to be acutely aware of the distinction between signification and the use of words.

⁵² J.R. Searle, *Intentionality: An Essay in philosophy of Language*, Cambridge 1983, p. 1.

Chomsky (and possibly Fodor), who claim that mental representation is essentially a natural phenomenon and whose nature is largely syntactic.⁵³ Augustine views representation as “putting the means furnished by the voice (*vox*) or by any other corporeal sign at the service of the word within.”⁵⁴

This necessarily brief preliminary overview of Augustine’s “things linguistic” serves as an introductory systematization of his interest in language and its uses. Aware that language is necessary for meaning, interpretation of any text, and for communication, including certain psychological intuitions that sound truly modern, Augustine reaches into these, now separate, disciplines of intellectual endeavor.

Unlike other philosophers of language, Augustine, who never dealt with language as such, or in isolation – so to speak – but always with a given purpose in mind, might be said, *toutes proportions gardées*, that is making all necessary allowances, primarily considering the passage of time, touched upon different issues of language and from different theoretical approaches. He was a rhetorician, a scholar of semantics, and one who approached the use and the purpose of language, as well as a theorist of communication (and education). 

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⁵³ R.K. Panda, *Searle on Representation: A Relation between Language and Consciousness*, in: *Language and World: Papers of the 32nd International Wittgenstein Symposium, August 9-15, 2009, Kirchberg am Wechsel*, ed. V.A. Munz, K. Puhl, J. Wang, Kirchberg am Wechsel 2009, p. 322–324.

⁵⁴ Augustine, *De Trinitate*, IX. 7.12. Wherever possible, we try to avoid diving into Augustine’s theology, which is propound and highly interesting in its own right.