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PER VERBUM AD VERBUM:

AUGUSTINE'S METONYMIC THEORY OF LANGUAGE

Thesis submitted to the Department of Historical Studies,
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Signature

Ecce sic peragitur et sermo noster per signa sonantia.
Non enim erit totus sermo, si unum verbum non decedat
cum sonuerit partes suas, ut succedat aliud.

— Augustinus, Confessiones IV.10

Abstract

This thesis examines Augustine's philosophy of language through a metonymic-anagogical framework of signification: one that challenges metaphor-based readings by emphasizing indication, contiguity, and moral orientation. For Augustine, the word is *signum par excellence*: a sign whose being lies in pointing beyond itself. Language, fractured by the Fall, is neither transparent nor self-sufficient; its value rests in its capacity to guide the soul toward what exceeds it. Through close readings of *De Dialectica*, *De Magistro*, and *De Doctrina Christiana*, the thesis traces how Augustine's semiotics departs from classical models of resemblance and representation and is reconfigured around ethical direction and theological ascent. Signs function not by analogy but by proximity, and serve not to depict, but to direct. Insofar as language belongs to the realm of *res ad utendum*, it attains its purpose only in leading the soul to the only *res fruenda*, God. By recovering the metonymic structure underlying Augustine's theory of signs, this study offers a rearticulation of language as a theological act, situated not within the logic of representation, but within the movement of return.

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List of Abbreviations

CCSL	*Corpus Christianorum, Series Latina (Turnhout, 1954-)*
Conf.	*Confessiones*
CSEL	*Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum (Vienna, 1866-)*
De Civ. Dei	*De Civitate Dei*
De Dial.	*De Dialectica*
De Doctr. Chr.	*De Doctrina Christiana*
De Gen. c. Man.	*De Genesi Contra Manichaeos*
De Mag.	*De Magistro*
De Ord.	*De Ordine*
De Trin.	*De Trinitate*
Ench.	*Enchiridion de Fide, Spe et Caritate*
Ep.	*Epistula*
PL	*Patrologia Cursus Completus, Series Latina, ed. J.-P. Migne, 221 vols. (Paris 1844-1864)*
Serm.	*Sermo*
Sol.	*Soliloquiorum Libri Duo*

Framework Chapter

Introduction

The present study takes a close look at Saint Augustine's philosophy of language with the aim of presenting his theory of language as a vertical framework: that is, an understanding of language as oriented toward the divine, rather than confined to the human realm. In his earlier thought, language serves primarily as a tool for engaging with the earthly world: it functions horizontally, within the human sphere of expressing intentions and transmitting knowledge, from the rudimentary use of signs to the refined art of rhetoric. Over time, what begins as a functional view of language undergoes a metamorphosis in Augustine's thought. No longer merely instrumental in human learning or confined to the educational and rhetorical sphere, language becomes, for him, a means of approaching divine truth, grounded in revelation, scriptural interpretation, and the mysteries of Trinitarian theology. In other words, Augustine turns from linguistic epistemology (i.e., language as a medium of human learning) to what may be called linguistic theology (i.e., language as a vehicle of divine disclosure). This development, I argue, is best understood when articulated in rhetorical terms – as a metonymic-anagogical conception of linguistic signification.

As a point of departure, this study poses a question concerning the relationship between the word as *res significans* (i.e., the reference) and its meaning, the *res significata* (i.e., the referent). One of the central concerns of this investigation, therefore, is the concept of the word, the smallest linguistic unit, understood fundamentally as a *signum*. Positing the word as a sign gives the foundation for grounding Augustine's philosophy of language in his semiotic theory. I argue that Augustine's semiotic theory already bears a metonymic character, and since words are the *signa par excellence*, this theory of signs becomes the underlying framework for his

broader understanding of language. For Augustine, language possesses a twofold nature: it is both earthly and divine. On the one hand, it is material, taking on a sense-perceivable form; on the other, it is immaterial, grounded in the *dicibile* – the inner word, or divine *Logos*. While its earthly function is communication, its divine purpose is to facilitate the understanding of ultimate, ineffable truths. This twofold nature is already present in Augustine's semiotic theory: within the human realm, a sign signifies something tangible, yet its ultimate role is to point beyond itself – toward what cannot be directly signified. For Augustine, the designative function of the sign is secondary. Its true value lies in its ethical implication: rather than emphasizing the relationship between sign and referent (as classical traditions often did[1]), Augustine redirects focus toward the connection between signs and moral transformation. His theory of signs thus becomes the foundation for his philosophy of language, which in turn supports and informs his ethical and theological thought. While the existing scholarship often emphasizes metaphorical or allegorical aspects of Augustine's shift from a secular to a theological understanding of language, [2] this study proposes a metonymic-anagogical framework instead to capture more clearly how language remains rooted in its earthly function while ultimately oriented toward divine purpose and meaning.

Methodology and Sources

Having outlined the conceptual focus of this study, the next step is to clarify its methodological approach. Central to this inquiry is the analysis of Augustine's treatment of signs, which is primarily developed across three main works: *De Dialectica*, *De Magistro*, and *De Doctrina*

[1] The famous *fusei*/*thesei* debate in classical world concerns the relationship between the things and their name; Plato's Cratylus investigates correspondence between a name and the thing named. Similarly, Aristotle has affections of the soul as medium between things and words, but since they are similar to the realities, of which they are image of, at least an indirect relationship is implied between the two.
[2] *vide infra*, in chapter 1 of the present thesis.

Christiana.[3] These key treatises are where Augustine gradually articulates his semiotic theory. Therefore, they are important not only for understanding his theory of signs but also for putting the word itself within it and examining it as a paradigmatic sign.

The earliest of these, *De Dialectica* is an unfinished work on dialectic, written around 384–385 CE in Milan. It centers on dialectics, the art of logical reasoning and argumentation, which was a cornerstone of classical education. This treatise sets the stage for Augustine's semiotic theory by examining the relationship between words (*voces*) and the things they signify (*res*) and analyzing how words function as signs that point beyond themselves. The traces of Stoic logic and Ciceronian rhetoric in the text show that Augustine's ideas on language have roots in classical thought, which, (within the framework of this thesis), can be understood as belonging to the human realm, as it belongs to pagan, not yet "baptized," philosophy. Juxtaposing this with his later works allows us to follow how language takes roots in the earthly world and gradually rises toward the divine.

Following it, *De Magistro*, written around 389 CE, takes the form of a dialogue between Augustine and his son Adeodatus. It primarily focuses on epistemology and the process of acquiring knowledge. However, since language is its main *modus operandi*, it necessarily involves extensive analysis of language itself. The rationale behind this approach is simple: acquiring knowledge involves learning, which in turn requires teaching, and teaching involves either telling or showing something to someone. For Augustine, the most straightforward form of teaching seems to be verbal communication. Thus, a logical starting point for understanding how knowledge is acquired would be an examination of language and how it carries information between people.

[3] Citations of Augustine's works follow the *Patrologia Latina* (PL) for its accessibility and consistent referencing, with critical texts cited in parallel from the *Corpus Christianorum Series Latina* (CCSL). When a work is not available in CCSL, the *Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum* (CSEL) is used instead.

Augustine's fullest treatment of signs, however, appears in *De Doctrina Christiana* (397–427 CE), a guide to interpreting and teaching Scripture. The work is divided into four books: Books I-III focus on hermeneutics, distinguishing between "things" (*res*) and "signs" (*signa*), and providing rules for understanding literal and figurative language, with love (*caritas*) as the ultimate interpretive goal. Book 4 addresses preaching and the use of rhetoric to communicate Scripture.

Through the close analysis of these texts, I proceed along four main steps: first, I establish that Augustine conceives of words as signs, therefore, the word falls within his semiotic system; second, I analyze his semiotic theory through the categories of *res* and *signum*; third, I show that signs, particularly verbal ones, are of an indicative and referential nature; and fourth, I show that their ultimate reference is to God.

Supplementing this primary analysis, I also refer to *De Trinitate*, especially where Augustine articulates his theory of the *verbum interius*, or "inner word." At first glance, the *verbum interius* seems, in ontological terms, to fall within Augustine's semiotic system, as if it were inherently part of language itself and thus could be treated like external words within that same framework. This issue is taken up in detail in the relevant section. What comes to the fore here, however, is that bringing the *verbum interius* to the forefront is precisely what gives language its twofold nature in Augustine's thought. The *verbum interius* is the divine element within language: Augustine presents it as a kind of mental echo of Christ, mapping the divine Logos onto the structure of human cognition. Just as spoken words express thoughts, those "words imprinted on the mind,"[4] Christ incarnate reveals the eternal Word of God. The *verbum interius*, as an analogy to Christ, carries the divine presence inherent in language and reveals the horizon of its vertical dimension.

[4] *de trin.* 9.10.15, PL 42:969; CCSL 50:206.

Not only Augustine's semiotic theory, but also his foundational move of positing the word as a sign, provides the skeletal structure of his wider philosophy of language. From this basis, I demonstrate how his understanding of language evolves: I observe Augustine's shifting viewpoints on language, from a rational, conventional tool of communication to a *mirror,*[5] theological medium borne of the Fall and redemption. This movement of thought can be traced across his works and allows us to follow the metamorphosis of his understanding of language *vis-à-vis* his theological concerns. A good example is his biblical exegesis: I refer to Augustine's interpretation of Genesis to show how he links language to humanity's fallen state and the loss of direct divine communication. Moreover, I refer to the classical philosophical tradition, not merely to put Augustine's thought in the context of the prevailing intellectual milieu, but to demonstrate how his classical education set the stage for his initial understanding of language. I show how Cicero shapes Augustine's earlier views on language, particularly the role of reason and sociability in language formation, through Roman linguistic and rhetorical traditions. While the Stoics provide him with vocabulary to elaborate his semiotic theory, Aristotle's *Categories* and *De Interpretatione* give him a paradigm for understanding words as conventional symbols of thought, (though I highlight how Augustine departs from strict Aristotelian semiotics). This demonstrates how Augustine bridges classical grammatical discourse with theological concerns and how his theory of language, arising from a classical grammatical foundation, gradually evolves toward a more explicitly theological. Yet, this must be approached with caution. A range of academic literature interprets Augustine's philosophy of language and the theory of signs against the Classical background: through the Aristotelian,

[5] Marcia L. Colish, *The Mirror of Language: A Study of the Medieval Theory of Knowledge*, Revised edition (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1983), 35: "For Augustine, redeemed speech becomes a mirror, through which men may know God in this life by faith."

Stoic[6], Platonic[7] and Neoplatonist[8] traditions. I think that interpreting Augustine's thought through Classical philosophy is tempting, as it suggests a correspondence between Augustine's semiotic theory and the Greek theory of signs. The influence of the classical tradition was undoubtedly significant, since it served as a basic structure of thought: The *trivium's* rules of speech and thought, with their epistemological implications, were inseparable from medieval education and Christian faith, unlike classical ethical or metaphysical ideas, which could be more freely accepted or rejected.[9] It is the form that is common, not the content. While Augustine borrowed terms and concepts from ancient thinkers, for him the designative function of a sign is of secondary importance, unlike for the classical tradition, for which it is a primary issue.

To pull this thread of thought more, since *trivium* was a "mental equipment" for Augustine, it is no surprise that he would express his thought in the mode of rhetoric, as Marcia Colish puts it. She argues that for Augustine, verbal signs represent reality.[10] So argues also Guido Jacobs.[11] In this vein, the Augustinian *signa translata* is often translated as *metaphorical* signs, not *figurative*. In this thesis, however, I place particular emphasis on the metonymic dimension of Augustine's conception of the word as a sign.

Moreover, Colish focuses solely on epistemology, while this study aims to move beyond a purely epistemological reading. Indeed, I argue that Augustine's philosophy of language

[6] R.A. Markus, "St. Augustine on Signs," *Phronesis* 2, no. 1 (1957): 60–83; Darrell B. Jackson, "The Theory of Signs in St. Augustine's De Doctrina Christiana", in *Revue Des Études Augustiniennes* 15, 1969, pp. 9-49.
[7] Colish, *The Mirror of Language.*
[8] John M. Rist, *Augustine: Ancient thought baptized,* Cambridge University Press, 1994.
[9] Colish, *The Mirror of Language,* xii: "Specifically, the rules of speech and thought which comprise the trivium, along with their epistemological implications, cannot be treated in exactly the same way as classical ethical or metaphysical ideas. Medieval men were not as free to accept or reject the trivium as they were to accept or reject other aspects of the classical tradition. Their education saw to it that the trivium was as much a part of their mental equipment as their Christian faith."
[10] Ibid., 79: "For Augustine, verbal signs, whether literal or figurative, represent truly, if partially, really existing things."
[11] Guido Jacobs, *Metaphor, History and the Ineffability of God: Augustine's Approach to Reading the Old Testament* (PhD diss., Tilburg University, 2018), https://doi.org/10.26116/4s2w-gc74, 33.

culminates in his ethical-theological vision. Ando[12], Ayers[13] and Morgan[14] have already drawn attention to this theological orientation, showing how language is situated within Augustine's soteriological and moral framework. I align with this interpretive strand and argue that, by framing language as a mark of humanity's separation from God and a means of returning to Him, Augustine aligns linguistic inquiry with the pursuit of divine wisdom. And this is where Augustine's linguistic inquiry becomes an integral element of his ethical philosophy: For him, moral philosophy seeks the *Summum Bonum* – the supreme good pursued for its own sake, which, he insists, is God alone, the only *res fruendum*. This intellectual imperative – pursuing God as the ultimate good – extends beyond the soul's interior life to encompass every *res ad utendum*, every created thing. The world itself becomes a metonymy of God, not in a sensual but in a purely intelligible sense: it signifies Him not through resemblance, but through a causal and referential connection grounded in divine creation. This is crucial, because metaphor, rooted in similarity, fails to capture the ontological distance between God and His creation. God, being utterly transcendent, admits no genuine likeness with what is made, not even with humanity. This vision of pursuing the good is reverberated in Augustine's theory of signs, where the true value of signs lies not in themselves but in what they imply: a transcendent pointing toward God. In the same way, Augustine's philosophy of language, especially in his later works, transforms words and, thus, language, into more than mere tools of communication. Language becomes a vehicle, guiding the soul through the material world toward the ineffable divine.

In short, while the theological dimensions of Augustine's linguistic thought have been explored before, this study offers a unified account that follows the metamorphosis of his conception of

[12] Clifford Ando, "Augustine on Language", *Revue d' Etudes Augustiniennes Et Patristiques* 40 (1), 1994, 45-78.
[13] Robert H. Ayers, "Language Theory and Analysis in Augustine," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 29, no. 1 (February 1976): 1–12.
[14] Edward Morgan, *The Incarnation of the Word: The Theology of Language of Augustine of Hippo*, T&T Clark Theology (London: T&T Clark International, 2011), 15.

language: from a horizontal tool of human interaction to a vertical conduit pointing toward the divine. At the heart of this framework is the metonymic logic of language; this emphasis on metonymy offers a new perspective on Augustine's understanding of how knowledge of God is mediated and pursued through language, placing linguistic inquiry closely within his wider ethical and theological thought.

Metonymy

This vertical orientation of language and its role in guiding the soul toward the divine requires a closer examination of the mode by which linguistic signs operate in Augustine's thought. Here, the concept of metonymy becomes central. This thesis leads to a discussion of metonymy not only as a figure of speech but as a fundamental mode of signification – a way in which language, by means of *contiguity* rather than *resemblance*, points beyond itself. Metonymy is commonly defined as the substitution of one term for another, based on a material, a conceptual, or a causal relation. Unlike metaphor, which represents by similarity, metonymy indicates by association, proximity and effect. I argue that this metonymic logic underlies Augustine's philosophy of language: signs function not by mirroring divine realities, but by being bound to them in a referential and ethical structure.

To explore this claim, the corresponding chapter begins by outlining key modern theoretical definitions of metonymy, followed by a historical account of the trope's development from classical antiquity through late antiquity – with particular attention to how it was often overshadowed by metaphor in rhetorical and philosophical traditions. Then, I turn to Augustine's engagement with figural language, to show that his conception of signs aligns more closely with a metonymic than a metaphorical model. For Augustine, language is not a transparent medium for representing divine truth; rather, it is a system of signs that orients the soul toward realities that exceed representation. This dynamic, I argue, is fundamentally

metonymic: it operates through the proximity and relational logic of signs that point to the divine, not by likeness but by referential association. Ultimately, the chapter frames metonymy as a mode of signification at the heart of Augustine's theological semiotics: one that enables language to gesture toward God through the logic of contiguity rather than analogy. This consideration naturally leads to the opening chapter, where metonymy is examined in detail as the fundamental mode of signification that serves as the framework for Augustine's theological semiotics and his compelling conception of language.

Chapter I: Metonymia

In this chapter I examine the rhetorical trope of metonymy, first by outlining its modern theoretical definitions, then, by tracing its historical development, and finally, by turning to its relevance in the St. Augustine's philosophy of language. While metonymy is traditionally classified among the tropes of substitution, I approach it here not merely as a figure of speech, but also as a mode of signification: a way in which language, through indication rather than resemblance, points the mind beyond itself. This mode, I argue, aligns with Augustine's understanding of language as inherently incapable of representing the divine through likeness or simile. For Augustine, language performs its highest function not by depicting God directly, but by leading the soul upwards through signs. Therefore, it is metonymy, rather than metaphor, that more precisely captures the structure and limits of signification in Augustine's thought. In discussing metonymy as a mode of signification, I will be primarily following the account developed in *Textual Metonymy* by Abdul Gabbar Mohammed Al-Sharafi, which combines a historical treatment of the trope with a semiotic approach.

i. Modern Definition

In terms of rhetorical or poetic language, as defined in *The Princeton Encyclopaedia of Poetry and Poetics,*[15] metonymy is defined as a figure of speech, in which one word is substituted for another based on material, conceptual, or causal relationship. This substitution involves shifting meaning from causes to effects, subjects to adjuncts and vice versa. In contrast to metaphor or allegory, metonymy is not only representative *(vide infra),* but moreover indicative

[15] Roland Greene et al., eds., *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, 4th ed (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), s.v. "Metaphor," 863–70; s.v. "Metonymy," 876–78.

in nature: while metaphor represents one thing by the name of another based on their similarities, metonymy alludes to one thing by the name of something else, based on their material, conceptual, or causal relationship.

Moreover, metonymy is defined as an "archaicizing device" that aims "to convey some incorporeal or intangible state in terms of the corporeal or tangible,"[16] much similar to anagoge – a sense that "leads the thought of the exegete 'upwards,'" directing the mind from visible things to those invisible or "from things below to the things above," i.e., to things divine.[17] It involves an understanding that elevates the mind through visible things to the invisible, guiding the contemplation of "the highest heavenly affairs" and ultimately leading to the contemplation of God. Anagoge introduces the believer into the mystical life and advances the insight into the rewards to be hoped for. It is a continual journey, always seeking the "Face of God," with the quest growing ever more fervent as love and understanding increase.[18]

Having first established and defined metonymy in its modern theoretical understanding, I now turn to the historical development of metonymy as a rhetorical trope, its specific use and significance in Augustine's thought, and finally, its broader conceptualization not merely as a figure of speech but as a fundamental mode of signification within a semiotic system. In these discussions, I will closely follow the comprehensive framework developed by Al-Sharafi in *Textual Metonymy*. His work provides both a detailed historical account of metonymy from

[16] Kenneth Burke, *A Grammar of Motives*, Reprint 2020 (Berkeley, University of California Press, 2020), 506: "The basic 'strategy' in metonymy is this: to convey some incorporeal or intangible state in terms of the corporeal or tangible. E.g., to speak of 'the heart' rather than 'the emotions.' If you trail language back far enough of course, you will find that all our terms for 'spiritual' states were, metonymic in origin. We think of 'the motions,' for instance, as applying solely to the realm of consciousness, yet obviously the word is rooted in the most 'materialistic' term of all, 'motion' (a key strategy in Western materialism has been the reduction of 'consciousness' to 'motion'). In his P*rinciples of Literary Criticism*, Richards is being quite 'metonymic' in proposing that we speak not of the 'emotions' aroused in the reader by the work of art, but the 'commotions.'"

[17] Henri de Lubac, *Medieval Exegesis Vol. 2: The Four Senses of Scripture*, Chapter 10: "Anagogy and Eschatology, 1. A Twofold Anagogy," and "2. Exegesis and Contemplation," in *Ressourcement: Retrieval and Renewal in Catholic Thought* (Chicago: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co, 2000), 180-197.

[18] Ibid.

classical antiquity through late antiquity and an elaborated semiotic approach to the process of signification. Al-Sharafi presents metonymy not simply as a rhetorical figure but as a fundamental mechanism whereby linguistic signs gain meaning beyond their immediate reference. Central to this theory is the notion of proximity, both cognitive and contextual, and such understanding of metonymy (as a dynamic process of meaning creation and retrieval) in my mind offers a solid foundation for understanding Augustine's conception of language and rhetoric: The historical context helps to underline how Augustine's use of language reflects a metonymical process – one that points towards, but does not directly represent, the divine. Unlike simile-based representation, which relies on similarity, metonymy in Augustine's view acts as an index, that directs the mind towards a greater, often ineffable truth. I think an example for the metaphorical conception of name as a sign could be the Platonic view of language: for Plato, words can *represent* realities.[19] As Marcia Colish puts it, "just as time, for Plato, is a moving shadow of eternity, so language is a moving shadow of reality. And, if the reality which a word happens to signify is itself transient and sensory, the word is the shadow of a shadow." [20] In Plato's *Cratylus* things have an inherent relationship to their names as signs, that is based on imitation (*mimesis*). [21] In contrast, I argue that Augustine's conception of sign is of

[19] Plato, *Cratylus*, 433b-434a, in *Cratylus, Parmenides, Greater Hippias, Lesser Hippias*, trans. Harold North Fowler, Loeb Classical Library 167 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1926), 166-169:
433b: **δήλωμα** συλλαβαῖς καὶ γράμμασι πράγματος ὄνομα εἶναι, "a name is the **representation** of a thing in syllables and letters."
433d: τὸ εἶναι τὸ ὄνομα **δήλωμα** τοῦ πράγματος; "Are you not satisfied that the name is [433d] the **representation** of a thing?"
434a: ὅλῳ καὶ παντὶ διαφέρει, ὦ Σώκρατες, **τὸ ὁμοιώματι δηλοῦν ὅτι ἄν τις δηλοῖ ἀλλὰ μὴ τῷ ἐπιτυχόντι.** "…**representing by likeness the thing represented is absolutely and entirely superior to representation by chance signs**."
[20] Colish, *The Mirror of Language*, 10.
[21] Plato, *Cratylus*, 423b, 427c, 428e, 434b, Fowler, 132-33, 146-147, 150-151, 168-169. e.g., 423b: ὄνομ᾽ ἄρ᾽ ἐστίν, ὡς ἔοικε, *μίμημα* φωνῆ ἐκείνου ὃ μιμεῖται, καὶ ὀνομάζει ὁ μιμούμενος τῇ φωνῇ ὃ ἂν μιμῆται. "A name, then, it appears, is a vocal **imitation** of that which is imitated, and he who imitates with his voice names that which he imitates." For a non-ironic reading of how names relate to the nature of thing in *Cratylus* see David Sedley, *Plato's Cratylus*, (Cambridge University Press, 2003).

metonymic nature, since he is interested in the sign as pointing to the object of reference *(semeion*), not as representing it *(mimema)*.[22]

The semiotic theory of metonymy proposed in Al-Sharafi's book provides a model through which one can better understand how Augustine's language, rather than offering direct analogies to the divine, signifies God indirectly. This aligns with Augustine's belief that language can only point to the divine, never fully exhausting it – for Augustine, all signs ultimately point toward God: one cannot fully speak about God but only refer to Him.[23] Therefore, Augustine's conception of language can be seen as inherently metonymical, as it involves a process of indirect representation that gestures towards a higher truth rather than offering a complete or analogous depiction. More precisely, in Saint Augustine's thought, even words possess a metonymic (or even anagogic) nature: they function as signs that do not represent God directly but rather point toward the ineffable, guiding the soul toward divine truths.

ii. Historical Development: The Western Tradition

As Al-Sharafi observes, the fact of overlooking metonymy in the rhetorical and philosophical traditions arises largely from privileging metaphor. Historically, metaphor was favored for its symbolic complexity and capacity for dual-layered semantic transfer that made it particularly attractive to rhetoricians and philosophers concerned with poetic and imaginative language. Metonymy, by contrast, was often dismissed for its lack of symbolic or analogical structure, as it was operating through associative contiguity within a single semantic domain instead. This

[22] Christopher Kirwan, "Augustine's Philosophy of Language," in *The Cambridge Companion to Augustine*, ed. Eleonore Stump and Norman Kretzmann, 1st ed. (Cambridge University Press, 2001), 192 and *Augustine, The Arguments of the Philosophers* (London: Routledge, 1991), 37-39.
[23] *de doctr. chr.*, 1.6.6, PL 34:21; CCSL 32:9.

structural simplicity led to its relative neglect in classical discussions of figurative language, where it received fragmented and narrow treatment.[24]

ii.1. The Greek Tradition

In the context of ancient Greek philosophy, however, metonymy was not without theoretical significance. Metonymy functioned not merely as a rhetorical device but as a theory of linguistic signification and a mechanism of meaning-making. Unlike metaphor, which involves semantic transfer across domains, metonymy operates within a single semantic field: an aspect that aligned it more closely with the concerns of philosophers interested in semantics rather than with rhetoricians focused on poetic expression. Aristotle's *Poetics* presents four types of metaphor, three of which, according to modern classification, correspond to synecdoche and metonymy, rather than to metaphor in the strict sense.[25] As Lodge observes, Aristotle's influential taxonomy subsumed metonymy under the broader category of metaphor, a move that shaped Western rhetorical tradition for centuries and was persisting until Roman Jakobson's mid-20th century distinction between metaphor and metonymy as structurally and cognitively separate operations.[26] Though figures like Demetrius and Longinus do not treat metonymy explicitly, the term "metaphor" historically functioned as a catch-all for rhetorical tropes, what Eco describes as a genus including all other figures:

> the term *metaphor* for many authors – and this is true for Aristotle and Emanuele Tesauro – has served to indicate every rhetorical figure in general; the metaphor, as the Venerable Bede put it, is 'a genus of which all the other tropes are species.' To speak of metaphor, therefore, means to speak of rhetorical activity in all its complexity. [27]

[24] Abdul Gabbar Mohammed Al-Sharafi, "Metonymy in Western Rhetoric," in *Textual Metonymy* (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2004), 11.
[25] Aristotle, *Poetics*, 1457b, in *Aristotle in 23 Volumes*, vol. 23, trans. W.H. Fyfe (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press; London: William Heinemann Ltd., 1932): "Metaphor is the application of a strange term either transferred from the genus and applied to the species or from the species to the genus, or from one species to another or else by analogy." Al-Sharafi, ibid., 13.
[26] David Lodge, *The Modes of Modern Writing* (London: Arnold, 1977), 75-6 as found in Al-Sharafi, ibid.
[27] Umberto Eco, *Semiotics and the Philosophy of Language* (London: Macmillan, 1984) as quoted in Al-Sharafi, ibid., 14.

ii.2. The Latin Tradition

In the Latin rhetorical tradition, the *Rhetorica ad Herennium* offers one of the earliest and most precise definitions of metonymy. Here it is defined as a figure in which an expression is used to refer to an object not by its own name but by something closely associated with it.[28] Al-Sharafi emphasizes that this definition enfolds two essential features of metonymy. First is the notion of "drawing," which can be understood as a cognitive act akin to abstraction: not limited to physical objects, but applicable to abstract entities as well. Second is the central idea of "closeness" or "association," which implies a neighboring relationship, both physically and cognitively. This relational proximity is the defining structural feature of metonymy and sets it apart from metaphor, which relies on similarity, analogy, or resemblance rather than contiguity.[29]

By contrast, Cicero's account represents an early shift away from this conceptual richness toward a more limited rhetorical function. He presents metonymy as a valuable stylistic ornament, yet his treatment of the trope reveals an ultimately reductive understanding of it. He begins by acknowledging its value as a stylistic ornament, associating it with the embellishment of oration and likening its effect to that of riddles – not through isolated words, but through the general style or syntactic structure. However, this broader view quickly narrows. As his discussion progresses, metonymy is increasingly framed as a lexical phenomenon, reduced to the substitution of one proper name for another for the sake of ornamentation.[30] This move

[28] Cicero, *Rhetorica ad Herennium*, trans. Harry Caplan, Loeb Classical Library 403 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1954) IV.43, 334–35: *Denominatio est quae ab rebus* ***propinquis*** *et* ***finitimis*** *trahit orationem qua possit intellegi res quae non suo vocabulo sit appellata.* "Metonymy is the figure which draws from an object **closely akin** or **associated** an expression suggesting the object meant, but not called by its own name."
[29] Al-Sharafi, "Metonymy in Western Rhetoric," 15-16.
[30] Cicero, *On the Orator: Books 1–2*, trans. E. W. Sutton and H. Rackham, Loeb Classical Library 348 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1942), III.167, 130-31: "This [metonymy] is a valuable stylistic ornament; but care must be taken to avoid obscurity – and in fact it is usually the way in which what are called riddles are constructed; but this mode does not turn on a single word but consists in the general style, that is, in a series of words," as quoted in Al-Sharafi, ibid., 16.

detaches the trope from its earlier theoretical grounding in the principle of semantic or conceptual contiguity. The absence of the notion of "closeness" from Cicero's definition marks a departure from earlier rhetorical accounts, which still preserved metonymy's semiotic and cognitive function. What remains is a trope stripped of its explanatory power: a vague stylistic device whose boundaries with metaphor become increasingly difficult to discern.[31]

ii.3. Late Antiquity

In Late Antiquity, Sacerdos offers a notable development in the theorization of metonymy by shifting the focus from lexical substitution to a more semiotic framework. His definition, "speech descending from a proper signification to a proper [one] through an interpretation of proximity"[32] is a sign of a significant departure from earlier formulations by avoiding terms like "word" or "name" and foregrounding "signification" instead. This emphasis on *proximity* points both to a continuity with classical rhetorical theory and a more mature cognitive understanding of metonymy. His account points out two key components of metonymic processing: the semantic shift (signification) and the underlying cognitive contiguity (proximity). This dual focus affirms the semiotic nature of metonymy, wherein a linguistic sign refers to something other than itself but does so through an adjacent or associated concept that remains cognitively accessible:

> In essence metonymic processes are semiotic because there is a use of a linguistic sign which has a meaning other than itself. The notion of proximity is also important because this is what makes this signification resolvable and makes it cognitively accessible and easily retrievable. [33]

[31] As Al-Sharafi observes, once the notion of "closeness" is removed, metonymy is reduced to mere substitution, making it hardly distinguishable from metaphor, which can likewise be reduced to a similar mechanism. Al-Sharafi, ibid., 16-17.
[32] Sacerdos, *Artis Grammaticae* in Heinrich Keil, ed., *Grammatici Latini: Volume 6: Scriptores Artis Metricae*, Cambridge Library Collection. Linguistics (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1874), 467, lines 6-7: *metonymia est oratio ab aliqua propria significatione ad propriam* ***proximitatis*** *interpretatione descendens,* translation by A.M. Rosiene, *Classical and Medieval Latin Metonymy in Relation to Contemporary Figurative Theory*, Unpublished PhD thesis, Northwestern University, 210, as found in Al-Sharafi, ibid., 18.
[33] Al-Sharafi, ibid.

In Late Antiquity, the rhetorical tradition reveals a growing uncertainty not only about the theoretical structure of metonymy but also about its very designation. Following Sacerdos, attention increasingly shifted from articulating the inner mechanics of the trope to negotiating its nomenclature: rather than clarifying its semiotic function, rhetorical treatises became preoccupied with terminological alignment – wavering between Greek inheritances such as *metonymia* and *hypallage*, and Latin formulations like *denominatio*, *transnominatio*, or *transmutatio*. This diffusion of names, none of which fully captures the cognitive and relational nature of metonymy, reflects the failure to maintain a stable conceptual identity for the trope. As the emphasis on proximity and cognitive contiguity weakened, metonymy was gradually reduced to nominal substitution and its theoretical richness faded into ambiguity.[34]

iii. Augustinian Thought

Having outlined the historical context, I now turn to Saint Augustine, not to offer an exhaustive account of his treatment of the subject, but to highlight two aspects that are particularly relevant to the central argument of this thesis. The preceding historical discussion is not merely descriptive; rather, it serves to support and contextualize my interpretation of Saint Augustine's thought: it (i) sketches the conceptual terrain in which Augustine was both intellectually immersed and rhetorically fluent and (ii) gives a glimpse of the frameworks through which metonymy was understood in late antiquity and, by extension, how Augustine may have received and reconfigured the trope.

In the historical treatment of the metonymy above there are two characteristics in particular I would like to take away and emphasize on. First, despite its distinct mechanism, metonymy was frequently absorbed into the broader and more dominant category of metaphor: a

[34] Ibid.

terminological overlap that reflects the common tendency to treat metaphor as the dominant or primary trope. Second, the defining feature of metonymy is its logic of proximity: it operates not through resemblance or analogy but through contiguity, through the neighboring relation of signs within a shared semantic field.

I begin with the first of these, the conceptual overlap between metaphor and metonymy. *In De Doctrina Christiana* Augustine defines two types of signs: literal or *proprium* and figurative or *translatum.*[35] As mentioned before, some scholars translate the latter as *metaphorical signs*, since *translatum* is close to the Latin name of this trope – *translatio.*[36] Moreover, in *De Trinitate*, Augustine uses the term *translate* when discussing how one speaks of God *(Situs vero, et habitus, et loca, et tempora, non proprie, **sed translate ac per similitudines** dicuntur in Deo),*[37] which is mainly translated in English as *metaphorical.*[38]

Translating *translatum* as 'metaphorical' encourages to present Augustine's view on the relationship between the word (as a reference) to its referent as simile-based, where the reference represents the referent, *res*. In short, through this framework, words (and thus language) correspond to reality, which I do not think is the case with Augustine. The key is in translating the term.

Wanda Zemler-Cizewski notes that Augustine's key terms, translated into English as "literal" and "figurative," though somewhat misleadingly, are Cicero's *proprium* and *translatum*, drawn from his definition of metaphor. Augustine defines *propria* signs as those which designate "those things on account of which they were instituted," which reflects Cicero's account of

[35] *de doctr. chr.*, 2.10.15, PL 34:42; CCSL 32:41; Robertson, 43.
[36] E.g., Jacobs, *Metaphor, History and the Ineffability of God,* 33.
[37] *de trin.*, 5.8.9: PL 42:917; CCSL 50:215-26.
[38] E.g., Augustine. *The Trinity*. Translated by Stephen McKenna. Fathers of the Church: A New Translation, vol. 45. Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2002, 186; Augustine, *On the Holy Trinity*, trans. Arthur West Haddan, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers: First Series*, vol. 3, ed. Philip Schaff (New York: Cosimo Classics, 2007), 92;

proper (*propria*) designations as those "which were almost born at the same time as the things themselves."[39] The *translatum* sense corresponds to Cicero's understanding of metaphor both as a necessary substitution and as a stylistic device that pleases through ornate or indirect expression. However, whereas Cicero emphasizes the brevity and concentrated impact of metaphor, its power to delight through a single, unexpected word, Augustine seems to be expanding the scope of *transferre* to include a wider range of extended similitudes and figural expressions in Scripture. [40]

Following the thread of Zemler-Cizewski's thought, I think one can say with confidence that Augustine uses *translatio*, a conventional Latin name for the trope of metaphor, as an umbrella term which is broadly defined as words shifting between realms of meaning. I am convinced that by *translatio* he means not only metaphor (drawing a similarity between two things), but also metonymy (drawing contiguity between two things). An earlier example of such usage can be most clearly observed in his *De Dialectica,* X, where he defines *translatio,* but gives the examples of metonymy:

> I call it transference (*translatio*) (1) when by similarity one name is used of many things, as both the man, renowned for his great eloquence, and his statue can be called 'Tullius.' Or (2) **when the part is named from the whole**, as when his corpse can be said to be Tullius; or (3) **the whole from the part**, as when we call whole houses 'roofs.' Or (4) **the species from the genus**, for 'verba' is used chiefly of all the words by which we speak, although the words which we decline by mood and tense are named 'verba' in a special sense. Or (5) the genus from the species, as 'scholars' were originally and properly those who were still in school, though now all who pursue a literary career use this name. Or (6) **the effect from the cause**, as 'Cicero' is a book of Cicero's. Or (7) **the cause from the effect**, as something is a terror which causes terror. Or (8) **what is contained from the container**, as those who are in a house are called a household. Or (9) vice versa, as a tree is called 'chestnut.' Or if any other manner is discovered in which something is named by a transfer, as it were, from the same source.[41]

[39] Wanda Zemler-Cizewski, "From Metaphor to Theology: *Proprium* and *Translatum* in Cicero, Augustine, Eriugena, and Abelard," *Florilegium* 13, no. 1 (January 1994): 40-42.
[40] Ibid.
[41] All the translations of *De dialectica* are directly from Jackson, *De Dialectica*, 1975.
de dial., 10*: Translationem voco, cum vel similitudine unum nomen fit multis rebus, ut Tullius, et ille in quo magna eloquentia fuit, et statua ejus dicitur. Vel ex toto, cum pars cognominatur, ut cum cadaver illius Tullius dici potest: vel ex parte totum, ut cum tecta dicimus totas domus. Aut a genere species: verba enim principaliter*

As seen, most of the examples given for *translatio* are ones for metonymy, rather than metaphor. Therefore, translating it as *figurative* rather than *metaphorical* seems more appropriate. The latter has a very specific meaning today, while the former mirrors Augustine's use of *translatio* as a broader term. Moreover, I think this understanding of both *signa translata* and the speaking about God *translate*, that is, *figurative* signs and speaking about God *figuratively*, aligns more closely with Augustine's overall thought. As will be shown later in the chapter, in Augustine's thought no sign directly represents the divine, in the sense of being grounded in resemblance or likeness, as metaphor typically implies. Rather, this proposed reading better gives a space for observing the metonymic character of theory of signs and his conception of language as a whole – a direction I am taking with this thesis.

iv. Metonymy as representation

As we saw above, metonymy and metaphor often overlap in practice, and one reason for this is that both operate as modes of representation. As Al-Sharafi points out, metonymy, in this sense, is a process of signification in which the signifier represents a signified that is associated with it in some way, but not by similarity or resemblance, as in the case of simile. Unlike metaphor, which depends on analogy or similarity, metonymy relies on contiguity and causality to establish connections between the signifier and the signified. This distinction is important in understanding metonymy as a representational trope.[42]

Following Al-Sharafi, a representational theory of metonymy extends the notion of the trope from its traditional lexical confines into a framework suitable for textual analysis. The

dicunt Romani, quibus loquimur; sed tamen verba proprie nominata sunt, quae per modos et tempora declinamus: aut ab specie genus; nam cum scholastici non solum proprie, sed et primitus dicantur ii qui adhuc in schola sunt; omnes tamen qui in litteris vivunt, nomen hoc usurpant. Aut ab efficiente effectus, ut Cicero est liber Ciceronis: aut ab effectu efficiens, ut terror, quia terrorem fecit. Aut a continente quae continentur, ut domus etiam qui in domo sunt dicuntur: aut a conversa vice, ut castanea arbor dicitur quae et fructus: vel si quod aliud inveniri potest, quod ex eadem origine quasi transferendo cognominetur, PL 32:1418, Jackson, 116-117.

[42] Al-Sharafi, "A relational model of metonymic signification" in *Textual Metonymy*, 104-106.

representational nature of metonymy is realized through two primary relational principles: the *contiguity principle* and the *causality principle*. The contiguity principle encompasses relations such as part-for-whole and whole-for-part, which are central to the development of a textual model of metonymy. These part–whole relations are crucial in understanding how elements in a text are linked by proximity.[43]

In connection with the previous section, if the reference item points to another item, this constitutes a form of signification. This signification can be symbolic, iconic, or indexical. However, in the case of metonymy, the reference is always indexical because there is a direct act of "pointing" each time reference is made. The indexicality of metonymy distinguishes it from symbolic signification, as it involves a more direct and often more context-dependent relationship between the signifier and the signified.[44]

Conclusion

This chapter defined metonymy not simply as a rhetorical ornament, but as a fundamental mode of signification. The key takeaway from this analysis of the trope should be that metonymy functions through indication: the signifier "points" to its signified through relationships of contiguity or causality, as opposed to metaphor, that relies on similarity. This is an important aspect of the trope, since the present thesis aims to articulate Augustine's conception of linguistic signification as metonymic in nature, based precisely on its indexicality. Moreover, since the core argument of the thesis depends on the treatises where Augustine uses the term *translatio,* precise translation of the term plays an important role. Translating it as *metaphorical* gives the impression that Augustine develops a system of signs based on similarity, leaving no

[43] Ibid.
[44] Al-Sharafi, "Metonymy as an index" in *Textual Metonymy,* 102-104.

room to examine the metonymic nature of his thought – an inquiry that lies at the heart of this thesis.

Chapter II: Words as Signs

The following chapter investigates the relationship between the word as *res significans* and its referent, the *res significata*, within the writings of Saint Augustine, addressed primarily in *De Dialectica*, *De Magistro*, and *De Doctrina Christiana*. The aim of this chapter is twofold: first, to demonstrate that in Augustine's thought words are *signa par excellence*: signs whose entire existence is bound to their function of signifying; second, to examine the nature of the semiotic system that these words belong to. This inquiry reveals that Augustine's semiotic system is fundamentally indexical, that is, metonymic in character. Because this semiotic system operates through contiguity and relational proximity rather than resemblance, and since the word, the smallest linguistic unit, functions within this system, language itself can be understood as metonymic in nature.

i. Verbum

This conceptual foundation finds its first articulation in *De Dialectica*, where Augustine begins to define and delineate the nature of the word as a sign. While the first chapter subtly alludes to the significative nature of the word by predicating '*verba'* with '*significare'*[45], it is in the fifth chapter that the treatise explicitly defines words as signs:

> A word is a sign of any sort of thing. It is spoken by a speaker and can be understood by a hearer.[46]

[45] e.g., *de dial.,* 1.1: *Simplicia [verba] sunt quae unum quiddam significant…* "Words which signify some one thing are simple…," PL 32:1409; Jackson, 82-83. An alternative translation of my own could be: "Simple words are those that signify one certain thing," that is, not something complex, such as a sentence, or a composite word. On the usage of words related to signification when speaking of *verba* in *de dial.* see: Phillip Cary, "How Words Became Signs: The Development of Augustine's Expressionist Semiotics," in *Outward Signs,* 1st ed. (Oxford University PressNew York, 2008), 70.

[46] Ibids., 5.1: *Verbum est uniuscuiusque rei signum, quod ab audiente possit intellegi, a loquente prolatum,* PL 32:1410; Jackson, 87.

In a later treatise, the *De Doctrina Christiana*, Augustine says that words fall under the category of conventional signs, which, in contrast to natural signs, are given intentionally:

> Conventional signs are those which living creatures show to one another for the purpose of conveying, in so far as they are able, the motion of their spirits or something which they have sensed or understood.[47]

> Among the signs by means of which men express their meanings to one another, some pertain to the sense of sight, more to the sense of hearing, and very few to the other senses… More signs, as I have said, pertain to the ears, and most of these consist of words… For words have come to be predominant among men for signifying whatever the mind conceives if they wish to communicate it to anyone.[48]

And since the entire existence of words depends on their significative nature, for Augustine words are *signa par excellence*:[49]

> There are other signs whose whole use is in signifying, like words. For no one uses words except for the purpose of signifying something.[50]

It is for this reason, why the nature of the word as a *res significans* should be examined in the light of Augustine's semiotic theory.

ii. Signum

Sign is first defined in *De Dialectica* as sensible itself, which indicates to the mind something beyond itself:

[47] All the translations of *de doctr. chr.* are from *On Christian Doctrine*, trans. D.W. Robertson, Jr. (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill/Library of Liberal Arts, 1958).
de doctr. chr., 2.2.3: *Data vero signa sunt, quae sibi quaeque viventia invicem dant ad demonstrandos, quantum possunt, motus animi sui, vel sensa, aut intellecta quaelibet*, PL34:37; CCSL 32:33; Robertson, 34-35.
Within the same section, Augustine states that conventional signs are a primary interest of his treatise and removes from discussion signs, that are given without intention.

[48] Ibid., 2.3.4: *Signorum igitur quibus inter se homines sua sensa communicant, quaedam pertinent ad oculorum sensum, pleraque ad aurium, paucissima ad caeteros sensus... Ad aures autem quae pertinent, ut dixi, plura sunt, in verbis maxime… Verba enim prorsus inter homines obtinuerunt principatum significandi quaecumque animo concipiuntur, si ea quisque prodere velit*, PL 34:37; CCSL 32:34-34; Robertson 35-36.

[49] Expression borrowed from Markus, "St Augustine on Signs," 65.

[50] *de doctr. chr*., 1.2.2: *Sunt autem alia signa quorum omnis usus in significando est, sicuti sunt verba. Nemo enim utitur verbis nisi aliquid significandi gratia*, PL 34:20; CCSL 32:7; Robertson, 8.

> A sign is something which is itself sensed and which indicates to the mind something beyond the sign itself.[51]

In *De Magistro* we are given a broader description, that a sign can only be a sign if it signifies something:

> *Aug.* Then we agree that words are signs?
>
> *Ad.* We do agree.
>
> *Aug.* Well, can the sign be a sign unless it signifies something?
>
> *Ad.* No.[52]

These definitions seem to be focusing solely on the significative aspect of a sign and thus giving a vague picture of the nature of *signum*. I think that this restriction might be due to the content and generally the character of these two treatises: both *De Dialectica* and *De Magistro* are interested in the notion of sign inasmuch as they are primarily concerned with speech or the language as the medium through which we communicate (one text looks into the process of arguing and other – into that of teaching). Ultimately, the discussion comes down to the smallest linguistic unit – the word, the *signum par excellence,* through which minds can exchange thoughts. Augustine is interested in the significative nature of signs exactly because *words* are signs. Thus, they *signify something* and precisely on their significative nature rests the whole process of communication. This is the reason why the emphasis in these treatises is solely on signification. The definitions given in Augustine's theological work, *De Doctrina Christiana,* are still general but more elaborate and the whole treatise gives a more precise

[51] *de dial.,* 5.1: *Signum est quod et seipsum sensui et praeter se aliquid animo ostendit*, PL 32:1410; Jackson, 87. Alternatively, my translation: "Sign is that, which shows itself to the sense and, beyond itself, something to the mind."

[52] All the translations of *de.mag.* are from Robert P. Russell, ed., *The Teacher; The Free Choice of the Will; Grace and Free Will, The Fathers of the Church: A New Translation*, vol. 59 (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2004).
de mag., 2.3: *Aug. Constat ergo inter nos verba signa esse. Ad. Constat. Aug. Quid?* ***signum, nisi aliquid significet, potest esse signum****? Ad. Non potest*, PL 32:1196; CCSL 29:159-160; Russell, 10.

picture of the notion of sign, as two of the four books, namely II (*doctrina signorum*) and III (*de signis*) are primarily concerned with signs.

Signs are defined twice in *de doctr. chr:*

1. They [signs] are things used to signify something.[53]
2. A sign is a thing which causes us to think of something beyond the impression the thing itself makes upon the senses.[54]

Although presented in slightly different manner, both definitions fundamentally address two essential elements of a sign: (i) the thing itself (*res*), and (ii) its relation to something else — namely, its capacity to signify or bring something beyond itself to the mind.

To discuss sign *qua res*, *res* has to be discussed first.

iii. Res

In *De dialectica res* refers to whatever *(quidquid)* that can be directly perceived through the senses *(sentitur)*, or through the mind *(intelligitur)* or, if it lies hidden from direct perception *(latet),*[55] can be inferred from what is perceived:

> Thing is whatever is sensed, or is understood or is hidden.[56]

[53] *de doctr. chr.,* 1.2.2: *signa res… quae ad significandum aliquid adhibentur*, PL 34:20; CCSL 32:7; Robertson, 8.
[54] Ibid., 2.1.1: *signum est enim res praeter speciem, quam ingerit sensibus aliud aliquid ex se faciens in cogitationem venire*, PL 34:35; CCSL 32:32; Robertson, 34.
[55] To shed a little light on what might Augustine mean behind *'latet'* see Jackson, *De Dialectica*, fn.2, 125: "At this point the Augustine editions include the following sentences: *Sciuntur enim corporalia, intelliguntur spiritalia, **latet vero ipse deus et informis materia**. Deus est quod neque corpus est neque animal est neque sensus est neque intellectus est neque aliquid quod excogitari potest. Informis materia est mutabilitas mutabilium rerum, capax omnium formarum.* ('For corporeal things are sensed and spiritual things are understood; **but God himself and formless matter are truly hidden**. God is neither body, nor animal, nor sense, nor understanding, nor anything which can be thought. Formless matter is the changeableness of changeable things, the capacity for all forms.')".
[56] *de dial.,* 5.1: *Res est quidquid vel sentitur vel intelligitur vel latet,* PL 32:1410; Jackson, 87.

In the first book of *De Doctrina Christiana* Augustine refers to the things *(res)* that are not used to signify something else, i.e., things *qua res*, as proper:

> I have here called a "thing" that which is not used to signify something else.[57]

It would be in an improper sense to refer to res qua being:[58] "Second, it refers improperly to anything whatsoever that is (I infer this from '*quod enim nulla res est, omnino nihil est*'). Anything not a *res* in the improper sense is nothing at all. In this latter sense, 'res' may be applied to such things as words and the stone that Jacob slept on, which, in addition to being something, also signifies something."[59]

Therefore, a thing, inasmuch that it is a thing and not *nothing*, can always be referred to as *res* in an improper sense, for the sake of its existence solely. It is *qua res* in proper sense, if it is not used to signify something else, and if it is [used to signify something else], then it is also to be referred to *qua signum*. Hence this is why words are signs *par excellence* for Augustine: they can be referred as *res* only in improper sense, since their whole *being* depends on their significative nature.

As seen above, *de dial.* words were defined as signs of *things* (V, 1: *rei signum).* However, it is not clear whether all signs refer to things (in the proper sense) or is it exclusive for words. According to *de doct. chr.*, things are learned through signs[60] but the two definitions from the treatise do not tell anything else about the relationship between the sign and its referent or the nature of the referent itself. They seem to be very general, as signs are said to signify *aliquid*

[57] *de doctr. chr.,* 1.2.2: *Proprie autem nunc res appellavi, quae non ad significandum aliquid adhibentur,* PL 34:1; CCSL 32:7; Robertson, 8.
[58] Apparently, here Augustine understands by "thing in the proper sense" Aristotle's "first substance" (*πρώτη οὐσία*) being itself in itself (*in se*).
[59] Jackson, "The Theory of Signs" 11.
[60] *de doctr. chr.*, 1.2.2., PL 34:19; CCSL 32:7; Robertson, 8.

or *aliud aliquid*. Similarly, in *De Magistro* ("can there be a sign unless it signifies something?")[61].

From this, one can infer that signs may refer to: (i) things in the proper sense (*res* that are not themselves signs); (ii) things in the improper sense (i.e., any being, insofar as it exists and can be the object of thought); and (iii) other signs, in the case of linguistic metalanguage. But this typology still leaves out the mechanism by which the mind passes from the perception of a sign to an understanding of its referent. It is precisely here that Augustine's doctrine of the *verbum interius*, developed especially in *De Trinitate*, proves decisive.

iv. Verbum Interius

The idea of the inner word had already been quietly present in Augustine's earlier thought, albeit in a nascent form. It is first articulated in *de Dialectica* as *dicibile* – stripped of sensible, i.e., material elements:

> Now that which the mind not the ears perceive from the word and which is held within the mind itself is called a *dicibile*.[62]
>
> *'Dicibile'* is a word; however, it does not signify a word but what is understood in the word and contained in the mind.[63]

In *De Magistro,* Augustine insists that the soul is not taught by external signs, but by the inner truth, that is the inner Teacher, Christ:

> But as for all those things which we "understand," it is not the outward sound of the speaker's words that we consult, but the truth which presides over the mind itself from within, though we may have been led to consult it because of the words. Now He who is consulted and who is said to "dwell in the inner man," He it is who teaches us,

[61] *de mag.*, 2.3. PL 32:1196; CCSL 29:159; Russell, 10.
[62] *de dial*., 1.5: *Quidquid autem ex verbo non aures sed animus sentit et ipso animo tenetur inclusum, dicibile vocatur*, PL 32:1411; Jackson, 88-89.
[63] Ibid.: *Quod dixi dicibile, verbum est, nec tamen verbum, sed quod in verbo intellegitur et animo continetur, significant*, PL 32:1411; Jacskon, 90-91.

> namely, Christ, that is to say, "the unchangeable Power of God and everlasting wisdom." [64]

The idea of inner words is a witness to Augustine's reflections on intelligible things, as opposed to sensible things. Even though in the passage from *de Magistro* quoted above we already see Augustine's gaze turning towards the divine, in the same treatise he is still bound to look at this incorporeal aspect of the language through the sensible word:

> But when questions are asked, not about things we perceive while they are present to us, but about those which our senses perceived on former occasions, then our words do not refer to the things themselves, but to the images impressed by them upon the senses and stored away in the memory.[65]

This leads to an idea that the referent of a sign, the *res* it intends, need not be a thing "out there" at all, but may instead be an intelligible reality present within the soul. In *De Trinitate* Augustine further clarifies that the inner word is not formed in any spoken language, but is a direct, mental expression of what the soul knows:

> For the thought that is formed by the thing which we know, is the word which we speak in the heart: which word is neither Greek nor Latin, nor of any other tongue. But when it is needful to convey this to the knowledge of those to whom we speak, then some sign is assumed whereby to signify it.[66]

Philip Cary emphasizes that this "word" is not a word in the ordinary linguistic sense, but something more inward and elevated. Since, in Augustine's semiotics, all words are signs and all signs are external, the *verbum interius,* as it is internal, cannot properly be called a sign or

[64] *de mag.*, 11.38: *De universis autem quae intelligimus non loquentem qui personat foris, sed intus ipsi menti praesidentem consulimus veritatem, verbis fortasse ut consulamus admoniti*, PL 32:1216; CCSL 29:195-196; Russell, 51. An alternative translation of my own: "About all those things that we understand, we are not consulting the speaker who is manifested (*personat*, from *persona*, mask, face, manifestation) outside but the truth that is presiding inside the mind itself, while perhaps it is by words that we are reminded to consult it."

[65] Ibid., 11.39: *Cum vero non de iis quae coram sentimus, sed de his quae aliquando sensimus quaeritur; non jam res ipsas, sed imagines ab iis impressas memoriaeque mandatas loquimur*, PL32:1216; CCSL 29:197; Russell, 53.

[66] *de trin.*, 15.10.19, *Formata quippe cogitatio ab ea re quam scimus, verbum est quod in corde dicimus: quod nec graecum est, nec latinum, nec linguae alicujus alterius; sed cum id opus est in eorum quibus loquimur perferre notitiam, aliquod signum quo significetur assumitur*, PL 42:1071; CCSL 50A:486; trans. Arthur West Haddan, in *On the Holy Trinity*, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers: First Series*, vol. 3, ed. Philip Schaff (New York: Cosimo Classics, 2007), 209.

a literal word. Cary notes that Augustine is explicit in distancing the inner word not only from any human language, but also from the silent mental rehearsal of linguistic forms, which would reduce it to a mere act of imagination. Instead, he interprets *the verbum interius* as preceding both speech and the image of speech and therefore belonging to a different order altogether. Cary suggests that this inner word may be best understood not as a *signum* or even a *res*, but as a *significatio* the intelligible meaning itself, that arises within the soul as the completion of the signifying process.[67]

This strand of thought leads Augustine to draw an analogy of the incarnation: [68]

> How did He come except that "the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us"?! It is as when we speak. In order that what we are thinking may reach the mind of the listener through the fleshly ears, that which we have in mind is expressed in words and is called speech. But our thought is not transformed into sounds; it remains entire in itself and assumes the form of words by means of which it may reach the ears without suffering any deterioration in itself. In the same way the Word of God was made flesh without change that He might dwell among us.[69]

All of this implies that Augustine's *verbum interius* does not belong to language at all. It is not a sign, nor shaped by linguistic form, but the soul's direct grasp of what it knows, prior to and beyond speech. It grounds language without participating in it. What is noteworthy here though, is that with bringing *verbum interius* into the discussion about language, Augustine

[67] Cary, *Outward signs*, 144-145.

[68] This idea is fully developed in *de trin.*, 15.11.20, PL 42:1071-1073; CCSL 50A:286-490; and is a recurring theme in Augustine's writings, e.g., *Sermo* 119.7: *Sicut ergo verbum meum prolatum est sensui tuo, nec recessit a corde meo: sic illud Verbum prolatum est sensui nostro, nec recessit a Patre suo. Verbum meum erat apud me, et processit in vocem: Verbum Dei erat apud Patrem, et processit in carnem,* "So just as my word was presented to your perception, and didn't depart from my mind, so that Word was presented to our perception, and didn't depart from his Father. My word was with me, and went out into the sound of my voice; the Word of God was with the Father, and went out into the flesh.," PL 38:675, Edmund Hill, O.P., in *Sermons (94A–147A)*, ed. John E. Rotelle, O.S.A., *The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century*, vol. 3/4 (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 1992), 229-230, and *Sermo* 288.4, PL 38:1306.

[69] *de doctr. Chr.*, 1.1.13: *Quomodo uenit, nisi quod 'Verbum caro factum est et habitauit in nobis'? Sicuti cum loquimur, ut id, quod animo gerimus, in audientis animum per aures cameas inlabatur, 'fit sonus' uerbum quod corde gestamus, et locutio uocatur, nec tamen in eundem sonum cogitatio nostra conuertitur, sed apud se manens integra, formam uocis qua se insinuet auribus, sine aliqua labe suae mutationis adsumit: ita uerbum dei non commutatum caro tamen factum est, ut habitaret in nobis,* PL 34:42; CCSL 32:13; Robertson, 14.

brings forth its incorporeal aspect, which contrasts the earthly nature of the language with the divine: Born as an incorporeal and spiritual echo of the *verbum exterius*, the *verbum interius* gradually finds its most fullest expression in Christian theology, where it becomes a reflection of the Word made flesh, Christ himself. This line of thought ultimately leads Augustine, in *De Trinitate*, to draw an analogy between the inner workings of the human mind and the mystery of the Trinity.[70] Language, then, as a system of signs, does not aim to signify the *verbum interius* directly, for the latter remains ontologically apart from language, but rather to direct the mind towards it,[71] much like all signs strain toward the incorporeal absolute: God. With this in view, we now turn to the *signa* themselves end examine as tools, *res ad utenda*, that point to God.

v. Signs as Res ad Utendum.

In *De doctr. chr.* Augustine differentiates between *res ad fruendum* and *res ad utendum:*

> Some things are to be enjoyed, others are to be used, and there are others which are to be enjoyed and used. Those things which are to be enjoyed make us blessed. Those things which are to be used help and, as it were, sustain us as we move toward blessedness in order that we may gain and cling to those things which make us blessed.... [72]

[70] In *de Trin.* 9-10, Augustine draws a psychological analogy to the Trinity, beginning with the mind, its self-knowledge, and its love: three distinct but inseparable operations that reflect divine unity. He later refines this in Books 14–15 through the triad of memory, understanding, and will, presenting these as the image of God in the rational soul (14.12.15), most fully realized when directed toward God in love (15.7.13); Mary T. Clark, "De Trinitate," in *The Cambridge Companion to Augustine*, ed. Eleonore Stump and Norman Kretzmann (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 91–102.

[71] *de mag.* 1.2: s*ic quoque locutione nihil aliud agere quam commonere, cum memoria cui verba inhaerent, ea revolvendo facit venire in mentem res ipsas quarum signa sunt verba*, "So, too, by speaking, we merely call something to mind since, in turning over the words stored therein, memory brings to mind the realities themselves which have words for their signs.," PL 32:1196; CCSL 29:159; Russell, 9.

[72] *de doctr. chr.,* 1.2.3: *Res ergo aliae sunt quibus fruendum est, aliae quibus utendum, aliae quae fruuntur et utuntur. Illae quibus* ***fruendum*** *est,* ***nos beatos faciunt****. Istis quibus* ***utendum*** *est, tendentes ad beatitudinem adiuuamur et quasi adminiculamur, ut ad illas, quae nos beatos faciunt,* ***peruenire atque his inhaerere possimus****…,* PL 34:20; CCSL 32:8; Robertson, 9.

> To enjoy something is to cling to it with love for its own sake. To use something, however, is to employ it in obtaining that which you love, provided that it is worthy of love.[73]

Some things are be enjoyed *(quibus fruendum est)* that make us blessed *(nos beatos faciunt)* and things that are to be used *(quibus utendum)* so we may be able to gain and cling *(peruenire atque inhaerere possimus)*, those that make us blessed *(quae nos beatos faciunt)*. To enjoy something is to cling to it with love *(animo inhaerere)* for its own sake *(propter se ipsam).* To use something is to employ it *(in usum venerit)* in obtaining that which you love *(ad id quod amas obtinendum referre).*

Now the question is what is to be enjoyed and what is to be used. According to Augustine, only what has been described as being eternal and immutable is to be enjoyed, the rest is *ad utendum*:

> Therefore, among all these things only those are to be enjoyed which we have described as being eternal and immutable; others are to be used so that we may be able to enjoy those.[74]

In other words, what is to be enjoyed is God:

> The things which are to be enjoyed are the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, a single Trinity, a certain supreme thing common to all who enjoy it, if, indeed, it is a thing and not rather the cause of all things, or both a thing and a cause....Thus, there are the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, and each is God, and at the same time all are one God; and each of them is a full substance, and at the same time all are one substance.[75]

To be more precise, the things to be enjoyed are eternal and immutable, that is a unified Trinity: The Father, The Son, and The Holy Spirit. It is difficult to find a term fitting such excellence,

[73] Ibid.1.4.4: *Frui est enim amore inhaerere alicui rei propter se ipsam; uti autem, quod in usum venerit ad id quod amas obtinendum referre, si tamen amandum est,* Pl 34:20; CCSL 32:8; Robertson, 9.
[74] *de doctr. chr.*, 1.22.20: *In his igitur omnibus rebus illae tantum sunt, quibus fruendum est, quas aeternas atque incommutabiles commemorauimus; ceteris autem utendum est, ut ad illarum perfructionem peruenire possimus,* PL 34:20; CCSL 32:16; Robertson, 18.
[75] Ibid., 1.5.5: *Res igitur, quibus fruendum est, pater et filius et spiritus sanctus eademque trinitas, una quaedam summa res communisque omnibus fruentibus ea, si tamen res et non rerum omnium causa, si tamen et causa… Ita pater et filius et spiritus sanctus et singulus quisque horum deus et simul omnes unus deus, et singulus quisque horum plena substantia et simul omnes una substantia,* PL 34:21; CCSL 32:9; Robertson, 10.

but perhaps it is best to say this Trinity is one God. What is to be enjoyed is God. The rest are *res ad utendum* and signs, as seen above, fall under this category too.

Moreover, Augustine implies that there is no sign that can signify God:

> Have we spoken or announced anything worthy of God? Rather I feel that I have done nothing but wish to speak: if I have spoken, I have not said what I wished to say. Whence do I know this, except because God is ineffable? If what I said were ineffable, it would not be said. And for this reason God should not be said to be ineffable, for when this is said something is said.[76]

Signs fail to signify God as they are sensible, i.e., temporal entities that could not convey the eternal.[77] Moreover, as Ando points out,[78] Augustine stresses that not only signs are bound do the earth, but they also are inferior to what they signify:

> *Aug.* What about words we find written? Are they words, or are they more properly thought of as signs of words? To be a word, something must be uttered with articulated sound and have some meaning, and sound can be perceived by no other sense than hearing. Consequently, when a word is written, the eyes are given a sign by which something pertaining to hearing is brought to mind.[79]
>
> *Aug.* Although it may be false, in our opinion, that all realities should be valued above their signs, it still remains true that everything that exists for the sake of something else is of less value than that for which it exists.[80]

Even if there were signs that could signify the divine or could signify God *more* than the other signs, they would still fall under the things that should be used as means to God; they cannot signify things that are to be enjoyed in themselves, which can only be God and which, as seen

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[76] *de doctr. chr.,* 1.6.6: *Diximusne aliquid et sonuimus aliquid dignum deo? Immo vero nihil me aliud quam dicere voluisse sentio; si autem dixi, non hoc est quod dicere volui. Hoc unde scio, nisi quia deus ineffabilis est? quod autem a me dictum est, si ineffabile esset, dictum non esset. Ac per hoc ne ineffabilis quidem dicendus est deus, quia et hoc cum dicitur, aliquid dicitur.* Pl 34:21; CCSL 32:9; Robertson, 10-11.

[77] Cf., Plato, *Timaeus*, 29b-c.

[78] Ando, *Augustine on Language*, 55.

[79] *de mag.,* 4.8: *Aug. Quid, cum verba scripta invenimus? num verba non sunt, an signa verborum verius intelliguntur? ut verbum sit quod cum aliquo significatu articulata voce profertur; vox autem nullo alio sensu quam auditu percipi potest: ita fit ut cum scribitur verbum, signum fiat oculis, quo illud quod ad aures pertinet, veniat in mentem*, PL32:1199; CCSL 29:165; Russell, 16

[80] *de mag.,* 9.26: *Aug. In illa igitur sententia nostra, quanquam sit falsum, res omnes signis suis praeponi oportere; non tamen falsum est, omne quod propter aliud est, vilius esse quam id propter quod est*, PL 32:1210; CCSL 29:185; Russell, 39.

above cannot be signified. In sum, "for Augustine, created things of all kinds, various signs and symbols, are 'spoken' media through which men may know God in this life."[81]

The system of signs discussed above is fundamentally metonymic in nature. It does not rely on resemblance or direct representation to signify the divine; rather, it functions by pointing beyond itself as it is guiding the mind toward what cannot be seen, touched, or fully spoken. As *res ad utendum*, signs serve as instruments that lead the soul toward God. Their value lies not in what they are, but in what they direct us toward: the incorporeal and ineffable reality of the divine. In this way, Augustine's semiotics remains grounded in the sensible while insisting on its insufficiency. Language, for which the semiotic system serves as a scaffold, shares this same metonymic nature, referring only indirectly to the incorporeal.

Conclusion

To conclude, in this chapter I took a close look at Augustine's semiotic theory to show that the capacity of signs to signify is not grounded in direct representation, but in a more fundamental metonymic structure: one in which signs refer to, point toward, or lead the mind to something beyond themselves. This metonymic nature is not incidental but essential: it arises, at least in part, from the fact that a sign is always ontologically inferior to what it signifies. A sign cannot contain what it refers to, and in Augustine's framework, its value lies precisely in its referential function, its ability to draw the soul's attention beyond the sensible toward the intelligible. Signs, then, are *res ad utendum*, things to be used in service of reaching what is to be enjoyed – *res fruenda*, i.e., God. Their *telos* lies not in what they are, but in where they lead. This metonymic structure becomes the very scaffold of language, which, being a system of signs, shares in the same logic. And since the smallest unit of language, the word, is itself a *signum*

[81] Colish, *The Mirror of Language*, 49.

par excellence, language as a whole becomes a system oriented not toward immanent clarity but toward transcendence. It mediates rather than mirrors, gestures rather than depicts, and through its structure points the soul beyond itself. Yet it is precisely at this point where language begins to strain against the limits of its own signifying capacity, that the *verbum interius* comes into view. As the incorporeal articulation of what the soul knows directly, the *verbum interius* is not properly a sign, nor is it shaped by linguistic form; it is the intelligible meaning itself, that arises at the horizon where language fails, and divine communication begins. Born as a spiritual echo of the *verbum exterius*, it finds its fullest articulation in the figure of Christ, the Word made flesh and thus becomes the point at which Augustine aligns the divine *Logos* onto the human capacity for thought. The following chapter examines how language, so conceived, takes on a vertical orientation within the wider thought of Augustine.

Chapter III: Beyond Signs

If the metonymic structure of language grounds Augustine's mature vision of signification as a path toward divine truth, then his earlier reflections trace a complementary path – one that begins not in transcendence, but in the world. This chapter opens by turning to the horizontal axis of language: the realm in which words emerge from human reason, shape social bonds, and mediate learning, thought, and memory. In his early philosophical writings, Augustine presents language as the principal tool through which the mind comes to know itself and others: a rational instrument born of need, convention, and communion. Here, language is the fruit of reason, gradually and rationally developed for souls to communicate with each other. Augustine's journey through the *trivium,* from grammar through dialectic to rhetoric, becomes an allegory of intellectual formation and ethical judgement. Language is the scaffolding of thought, the structure through which the self is articulated and shaped. What begins as a human project of naming and ordering, gradually reveals the cracks of its insufficiency, gesturing toward another mode of meaning: one that exceeds its original function. If language arises from the soul's outward movement, it may also prepare the way for its return inward and upward. What follows is an account of this formative trajectory: how Augustine first conceived language as a rational and social enterprise, and how even this horizontal vision carries within it the seeds of a higher calling.

This inquiry begins with Philip Cary's reading of Augustine's self-examination of Reason in *De Ordine*, where the progression of language unfolds through the three arts of the *trivium* (grammar, dialectic, and rhetoric):

> In the beginning, Reason invents words as a means of expression, to bind soul to soul in society. Then it proceeds to establish the three arts of language: grammar, dialectic,

> and rhetoric (the medieval *trivium*). First comes grammar, the basic art of literacy, which includes both the study of language *per se* and also the interpretation of literature. Then comes dialectic, the art of argumentation that we now call logic, whose task is "to define, distinguish, and draw conclusions." Finally, there is rhetoric, about which Augustine, the recently retired teacher of rhetoric, has scarcely a good word to say.[82]

One might observe that Reason's progression through the *trivium* mirrors Augustine's own introspective pilgrimage: a journey from infancy to rhetorical mastery. This analogical reading shows that for Augustine the fundamental *modus cogitandi* is *trivium*, with language being the *instrumentum principale* – the principal tool through which the mind both discovers itself and reaches outward to others.[83]

This is not merely a theoretical construct. Augustine grounds this vision in his own life. He famously reflects on his own development from an *in-fans*, a "non-speaker," to a child who begins to wield words as signs of will and desire:

> Yet it was no longer there. I was not an infant incapable of speech, but now I was already a boy, able to talk. This I do remember; and later on I realized from what sources I had learned the art of speech. It was not that older people were teaching me, giving me words in a logical framework of instruction, such as happened soon after with the alphabet. Rather, I intended to give expression to the feelings of my heart by all kinds of groaning, and crying, and moving my limbs in different ways, to make people obey my will.[84]

As he grows, he becomes not merely a speaker but a student: first immersed in grammar, learning subtleties of language, then ascending to dialectic, the art of critical thought and logical distinction.[85] Eventually, he becomes a master of rhetoric, not just as a craft but as a career[86] – though he would come to regard it as futile and morally hollow:

[82] Phillip Cary, *Augustine's Invention of the Inner Self: The Legacy of a Christian Platonist* (Oxford University Press, 2000), 91.
[83] Cf. Marcia L. Colish, *The Mirror of Language,* xii.
[84] All translations of Augustine's *Confessions* are from Carolyn J.-B. Hammond, trans., *Confessions, Volume I: Books 1–8*, Loeb Classical Library 26 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014), *Conf.*, 1.8.13: *non enim eram infans qui non farer, sed iam puer loquens eram. et memini hoc, et unde loqui didiceram post adverti. non enim docebant me maiores homines, praebentes mihi verba certo aliquo ordine doctrinae sicut paulo post litteras, sed ego ipse mente quam dedisti mihi, deus meus, cum gemitibus et vocibus variis et variis membrorum motibus edere vellem sensa cordis mei*, PL 32:666; CCSL 27:7; LCL 26:23.
[85] *Conf.*, 2-3, PL 32:675-92; CCSL 27:18-39; LCL 26:60-131.
[86] *Conf.*, 4, PL 32:693-704; CCSL 27:40-56; LCL 26:132-183.

> Say a man earnestly desires a reputation for skill in speaking: before a judge, who is also a human being, and with a crowd of men around him, he launches an attack, full of vitriolic hatred, upon his enemy. He takes the most scrupulous care not to make a slip of the tongue by saying "among they people" – but he takes no trouble at all to prevent his furious temper causing another human being to be cast out of the land of the living.[87]

The following remark from Catherine Conybeare gives a concise and insightful reading of this passage:

> The determined lack of euphony in this passage, punctuated by the stolid repetition of *homo* in its different cases (the word *homo* being generally an unnecessary expansion in classicizing Latin), underscores Augustine's point: words are just playthings to the rhetor, empty signs to be elegantly rearranged. The rhetor does not pause to think of their referents, and hence, their moral significance… in the *Confessions,* Augustine uses the figure of the rhetor to call attention to the moral failings of rhetoric: it fills the empty 'vessels' of words with the 'wine of error'[88] to engage and sway the affections of imperfect humans."[89]

Her analysis not only draws attention to the deliberate awkwardness of Augustine's Latin but also situates that stylistic choice within the wider moral argument: she shows how Augustine's linguistic choices (his jarring repetition, his refusal of classical polish) serve to expose the moral emptiness of rhetorical display when severed from ethical reflection.

This critique of rhetorical artifice, however, should not be mistaken for a wholesale rejection of language's human dimension. Indeed, even after his conversion to Christianity, Augustine continued to explore language as a worldly, pedagogical, and cognitive instrument (concerns that align closely with classical philosophical traditions). Some of his early post-conversion works, such as *De Ordine* mentioned above, remain within this framework, focusing on

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[87] *Conf.,* 1.18.29: *Cum homo eloquentiae famam quaerit, astans ante hominem judicem, circumstante hominum multitudine, inimicum suum odio immanissimo insectans, vigilantissime cavet ne per linguae errorem dicat, Inter hominibus; et ne per mentis furorem hominem auferat ex hominibus, non cavet,* PL 32:674; CCSL 27:16; LCL 26:53.

[88] *Conf.,* 1.16.26*: non accuso verba quasi vasa electa atque pretiosa, sed vinum erroris quod in eis nobis propinabatur ab ebriis doctoribus, et nisi biberemus caedebamur, nec appellare aliquem judicem sobrium licebat.* "I am not blaming the words themselves, for they are select and precious vessels. Nonetheless, drunken teachers prepared the wine of error in them for us to drink, and if we did not drink it they used to beat us. here was no right of appeal to some sober judge." PL 32:672; CCSL 27:14-15; LCL 26:47.

[89] Catherine Conybeare, "Augustine's Rhetoric in Theory and Practice," in *The Oxford Handbook of Rhetorical Studies*, ed. Michael J. MacDonald (Oxford University Press, 2017), 302.

language's role in human learning, communication, and the rational ordering of thought. The fact that these works were composed after his "intellectual conversions" tells that Augustine's transformation was not abrupt but gradual; themes rooted in his earlier education continued to shape his thought even as it turned to theological reflection. What follows from here, then, is not a strictly chronological account of his writings, but a thematic examination of how Augustine conceives language in its horizontal function, as a vehicle for human expression and intellectual formation, before turning to its vertical dimension, where words reach beyond themselves toward divine meaning.

This horizontal, human-centered view of language is especially prominent in Augustine's early philosophical works, where the influence of classical Latin thinkers remains strong.[90] Here, Augustine views language development as driven by human reason and sociability: he sees language as emerging through a gradual and rational process of naming within society. This process is initially arbitrary but becomes permanent through social convention. Augustine describes words as "meaningful sounds" (*significantes sonos*) and emphasizes their role as a means of joint reference that binds people together in communication:[91]

> Our rational power, i.e. our using reason in doing or understanding reasonable things, saw the necessity of giving things names. This was necessary because reason, common to all in a human society, forms the most natural bond between humans. But no firm bonding can take place at all without communication, by which thoughts are mutually exchanged.[92]

[90] e.g., Cicero, *De republica* 3.2.3: And when [reason] found men with stammering voices uttering unformed and confused sounds (*inconditis uocibus inchoatum quiddam et confusum sonantes*), she separated these sounds into distinct classes (*incidit has et distinxit in partis*), assigning words to things as a kind of distinguishing mark (*ut signa quaedam sic uerba rebus impressit*). Thus with the most pleasant tie of speech (*iucundissimo inter se sermonis uinclo*) she bound together (*colligauit*) previously solitary men (*homines … antea dissociatos*), as quoted in Tim Denecker, "The Origin of Linguistic Diversity," in *Ideas on Language in Early Latin Christianity: From Tertullian to Isidore of Seville* (BRILL, 2017), 34.

[91] Ibid., 33-35.

[92] *de ord.*, 2.12.35: *Namque illud quod in nobis est rationale, id est, quod ratione utitur, et rationabilia vel facit vel sequitur, quia naturali quodam vinculo in eorum societate astringebatur, cum quibus illi erat ratio ipsa communis, nec homini homo firmissime sociari posset, nisi colloquerentur, atque ita sibi mentes suas cogitationesque quasi refunderent, vidit esse imponenda rebus vocabula, id est significantes quosdam sonos; ut, quoniam sentire animos suos non poterant, ad eos sibi copulandos sensu quasi interprete uterentur*, PL 32:1011-

> Men can, by agreement among themselves, arrange as to the sounds of language by which they may communicate their thoughts to one another.[93]

In a sense, Augustine echoes Aristotle, since he views man as a naturally political (or social) animal, endowed with speech.[94] Furthermore, traces of Aristotle's philosophy appear throughout Augustine's thought. Although debated,[95] it is highly likely that Augustine was familiar with Marius Victorinus' translations of Aristotelian works, particularly the *Categories* and *De Interpretatione*, the influence of which is evident in his theory of meaning.

In the beginning of the *de Interpretatione* Aristotle states that the words are conventional symbols of affections in the soul, that is, thoughts, and are the *likeness* of things.[96] Similarly, Augustine argues that words are conventional, meaning they are agreed upon by humans,[97] and they signify the speaker's state of mind:[98]

> Nor is there any other reason for signifying, or for giving signs, except for bringing forth and transferring to another mind the action of the mind in the person who makes the sign.[99]

12; CCSL 29:127; trans. Silvano Borruso, *On Order (De Ordine)* (South Bend, IN: St. Augustine's Press, 2007), 98–99.

[93] Ep. 102, Letter to Deogratias: *quod linguae sonos, quibus inter se sua sensa communicant, etiam homines pacto quodam societatis instituere sibi possunt*, PL 33:374; CSEL 34.2:553; trans. J. G. Cunningham, in *The Confessions and Letters of St. Augustine*, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers: First Series*, vol. 1, ed. Philip Schaff (New York: Cosimo Classics, 2007), 416.

[94] Aristotle**,** *Politics*, 1253a.

[95] Jackson, "The Theory of Signs," 43, fn. 132 and 13.

[96] Aristotle, *de Interpretatione,* 16a3. The above ranslation is corresponding to J. L. Ackrill's edition of *Categories and De Interpretatione* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1963).

[97] Cf. *de doctr. chr.* 2.24.37: *sicut ergo hae omnes significationes pro suae cujusque societatis consensione animos movent, et quia diversa consensio est, diverse movent; nec ideo consenserunt in eas homines, quia jam valebant ad significationem, sed ideo valent, quia consenserunt in eas,* "Therefore just as all of these significations move men's minds in accordance with the consent of their societies, and because this consent varies, they move them differently, nor do men agree upon them because of an innate value, but they have a value because they are agreed upon.," PL 34:54; CCSL 32:60; Robertson, 60.

[98] Cf. *de doctr. chr*. 2.3.4: *Verba enim prorsus inter homines obtinuerunt principatum significandi* ***quaecumque animo concipiuntur****, si ea* ***quisque prodere velit***, "For words have come to be predominant among men for signifying **whatever the mind conceives** if they **wish to communicate** it to anyone.," PL 34:37; CCSL 32:34, Robertson; 35-36; *de mag.* 1.2*: Qui enim loquitur,* ***suae voluntatis signum foras dat*** *per articulatum sonum,* "When a person speaks, he **gives an outward sign of what he wants** by means of an articulated sound.," PL 32:1195; CCSL 29:158; Russell, 8.

[99] *de doctr. chr.* 2.2.3: *Nec ulla causa est nobis significandi, id est signi dandi, nisi ad depromendum et trajiciendum in alterius animum id quod animo gerit is qui signum dat*, PL 34:37; CCSL 32:33; Robertson, 35.

> Now clearly, language, in its proper function, was developed not as a means whereby men could deceive one another, but as a medium through which a man could communicate his thought to others.[100]

Despite similarities, following Jackson's argument, Augustine (i) does not claim that words are signs of the soul's movements but sees them as *expressing* such movements, and he (ii) does not posit a likeness between the mind and the things but notes that people seek likeness between signs and things. Since he denies a likeness between *res* and the mind, he rejects the idea that signs designate *res* through the mind's natural mediation. He sees *animae passio* as understanding, holding that the spoken word signifies both the understanding of the thing and the thing itself. [101] Moreover, Augustine did not engage with an age-old debate whether names exist by nature or convention, though he does address it.[102] His scope of interest lies in the limitations of speech, (especially when conveying abstract and divine concepts), and thus focuses on how mental ideas in the mind are translated into speech, how that language functions as a system of signs and how that speech is perceived and understood by others.[103] The internal understanding of language as meaningful sounds or marks is introduced by the Stoic concept of *lekton*, or the inner word, with which Augustine 'interrupts' the secular grammatical discourse.[104] In his later writings, Augustine ascribes to the souls the need to communicate with

[100]*Enchiridion de Fide et Spe et Caritate*, 8.22: *Et utique uerba propterea sunt instituta non per quae inuicem se homines fallant sed per 75 quae in alterius quisque notitiam cogitationes sua perferat*, CCSL 46:62; trans. J. F. Shaw, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, First Series, vol. 3, ed. Philip Schaff (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1887), https://www.tertullian.org/fathers/augustine_enchiridion_02_trans.htm.
[101] Jackson, "The Theory of Signs", 44.
[102] C. Ando, "Augustine on language," *Revue d'Etudes Augustiniennes et Patristiques* 40, no. 1 (January 1994): 46fn6: "See *de doctrina Christiana* 2.24.37, 2.25.38-39, 2.40.60, 3.14.22, *Conf.* 1.8.13, *de trin.* 13.1.4."
[103] Ando, "Augustine on language," 46.
[104]Mark Amsler, ed., "Technical and Exegetical Grammar Before Isidore," in *Etymology and Grammatical Discourse in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages*, Amsterdam Studies in the Theory and History of Linguistic Science. Series III, Studies in the History of the Language Sciences 0304-0720, v. 44 (Amsterdam Philadelphia: J. Benjamins Pub. Co, 2010), 103. He further argues that for Augustine, language does not directly mirror reality but forms a network of different ways to access and understand the world, always considered separate from the things it refers to. The meaning of language (*dicibile*) depends on the speaker's beliefs, rhetorical strategies, and the context of communication. According to Amsler, Augustine critiques the idea that language directly reflects reality and instead connects it to conceptual or intramental states. The function of language varies based on the speaker's intent, discursive conflicts, and how meaning is negotiated within discourse, and grounds authentic knowledge in a nonverbal sign system ultimately connected to God.

each other through signs, (i.e., language) as a consequence of sin, which fractured the direct, unmediated connection between human beings and the divine:

> But such is the state of sin that souls are allowed to act upon souls moving them by signifying by one or the other body, or by natural signs as look or nod, or by conventional signs as words.[105]

Augustine sees language as a sign of humanity's fallen state: it is because of human disobedience in the Garden of Eden, curiosity, and pride, that human communication through signs became necessary, as a direct communication between the souls, and most importantly, between God and the soul is no longer possible.

Given Augustine's view that language arose from humanity's fallen state, it is unsurprising that his interpretation of Genesis reflects this conviction.[106] In *De Genesi Contra Manichaeos,* when commenting on Gen. 2.5,[107] Augustine interprets field (*ager*) as the world[108] and the green of the field (*viride agri*) *as* an invisible creature, i.e., the soul. Before the Fall

> "God watered [the invisible creature] by an interior spring, speaking to its intellect, so that it did not receive words from the outside, as rain from the aforementioned clouds. Rather it was satisfied from its own spring, that is, by the truth flowing from its interior."[109]

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[105] *De Musica*, 6.13.41: *Peccatorum tamen conditione fit, ut permittantur animae de animis aliquid agere, significando eas moventes per alterutra corpora, vel naturalibus signis, sicut est vultus vel nutus, vel placitis, sicut sunt verba*, PL 32:1185; CSEL 102:223; trans. Robert Catesby Taliaferro, in *The Fathers of the Church: A New Translation*, vol. 4 (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1947), 365.

[106] Furthermore, see György Heidl, *The Influence of Origen on the Young Augustine: A Chapter of the History of Origenism*, Gorgias Eastern Christian Studies (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2009), which posits Origen as the source of this narrative in *De Gen. c. Man.*

[107] *De Gen. c. Man.* 2.3.4: *Factus est ergo dies, quo die fecit Deus coelum et terram, et omne viride agri, antequam essent super terram, et omne pabulum agri,* PL 32:197, CSEL 91, translation corresponding to Roland J. Teske, *On Genesis: Two Books on Genesis against the Manichees: And, On the Literal Interpretation of Genesis, an Unfinished Book*, The Fathers of the Church, v. 84 (Washington, D.C: Catholic University of America Press, 1991), 96.

[108] Matt. 13:38 (New Revised Standard Version): "The field is the world, and the good seed are the children of the kingdom; the weeds are the children of the evil one."

[109] *De Gen. c. Man.* 2.4: *Ante peccatum vero, cum viride agri et pabulum fecisset Deus, quo nomine invisibilem creaturam significari diximus, irrigabat eam fonte interiore, loquens in intellectum eius*, PL 34:198-199; CSEL 91:123-124; trans. Roland J. Teske, in *On Genesis: Two Books on Genesis Against the Manichees and On the Literal Interpretation of Genesis: An Unfinished Book*, *The Fathers of the Church*, vol. 84 (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2001), 99.

That is to say, in the prelapsarian state God spoke to the soul interiorly, without the need of "the clouds", i.e., without the words. The soul ceased to be watered by the inner spring as man's pride began with turning away from God and growing outward into worldly matters.[110] Yet God brings forth the green of the field again, but now by raining upon the earth, through His word, that is by the *Logos* – Christ, and the writings of the prophets and apostles.[111]

> And, therefore, having begun to labor on the earth man had the need of rain from the clouds, that is, of instruction from human words, so that he might in this way grow green again from that dryness and again become the green of the field.[112]

Simply put, God speaks to the souls through figural language, which by itself is obscure and unclear (like the clouds and the fog), fractured and indirect, as it functions through signs and gestures.[113] Precisely this indirectness is what causes language to be valued not for the truths it carries, but for its capacity to point beyond itself. Augustine draws a Christological analogy between the Incarnation and human language: just as God took on flesh to restore humanity's likeness to Him, He also embraced language, the very symbol of human division, to guide

[110] Ibid., 2.5.6: *initium enim superbiae hominis apostatare a Deo. Et quoniam in exteriora per superbiam tumescens coepit non irrigari fonte intimo,* "For 'the beginning of man's pride is to turn away from God.' And as it swelled out into external things through pride, the soul ceased to be watered by the inner spring.," PL 34:199; CSEL 91:124; Teske, 99.

[111] Ibid., 2.4: *Quia et nunc viride agri Deus facit, sed pluendo super terram, id est, facit animas revirescere per verbum suum; sed de nubibus eas irrigat, id est de Scripturis Prophetarum et Apostolorum,* "Now God also makes the green of the field, but by raining upon the earth; that is, he makes souls become green again by his word. But he waters them from the clouds, that is, from the writings of the prophets and apostles.," PL 34:198; CSEL 91:123; Teske, 98.

[112] Ibid., 5.6: *Et ideo laborans jam in terra necessariam habet pluviam de nubibus, id est doctrinam de humanis verbis, ut etiam hoc modo possit ab illa ariditate revirescere, et iterum fieri viride agri,* PL34:199; CSEL 91:124; Teske, 100.

[113] Andrew Louth, "AUGUSTINE ON LANGUAGE," *Literature and Theology* 3, no. 2 (1989), 154.

humanity back to unity.[114] Thus, the language is both a sign of the separation from God and a way to redemption.[115]

This brief interlude turns the gaze to the analogies Augustine employs to probe the workings of the human mind. As seen above, in his earlier writings, he pictures reason progressing through the structure of classical education. Here, the mind matures by way of grammar, dialectic, and rhetoric, being constrained to the human realm. In his later works, however, Augustine turns to a theological analogy: one is drawn not by education but by the divinity itself. The mind is now read through the Trinity, not the trivium. I see this as a shift in orientation: Augustine, examining the inner workings of his own soul, reframes reason within a vertical axis and directs its movements toward the divine. And since the mind's primary *modus operandi* is language, since one cannot think, reflect, or know oneself apart from it, language too becomes caught up in this theological ascent. Once a horizontal instrument of social communion, language now acquires a vertical dimension: it becomes the means by which the soul, having gone outward, returns inward and, from there, reaches upward. In lack of such a return, language remains chained to a world of surfaces, never touching what lies beneath.

The interlude above not only articulates Augustine's shifting framework but also returns us to the redemptive vision of language: what was once a sign of division becomes a means of return. For Augustine, this realization begins with a turn from the function of language toward its

[114] As discussed in section x.x of this thesis. Cf., Colish, *Mirror of Language*, 34*: "*In the face of the ineffable mystery of God, human language labors under crushing limitations. The possibility of intellectual contact with God through words would seem inadmissible. Yet, the role which God assigns to speech in the economy of His redemption demands a real and dynamic relationship between language and objective truth. This problem springs from the disparity between Divine and human nature. God overcomes it by uniting Divinity and humanity in the Word made flesh. In Christ, says Augustine, God speaks to man as man, "proclaiming aloud by words," through the sensible, temporal media of His life, deeds, death, descent, and ascension. The Incarnation conveys the knowledge of God to the world by communicating God Himself. It also enables man to respond to God in human terms, by restoring man's words to God in Christ."

[115] Edward Morgan, *The Incarnation of the Word: The Theology of Language of Augustine of Hippo*, T&T Clark Theology (London: T&T Clark International, 2011), 15.

theological purpose. Where he was once absorbed in language's role as a vehicle of consciousness, bound to the material and distracted by the temporal,[116] he now sees language as an instrument not merely to denote but to guide. Its value lies not in what it names, but in where it leads: toward the ethical, the intelligible, and ultimately, toward God.

This shift in his picture of language mirrors his conversion experience: the true conversion began when he learned from Bishop Ambrose, himself an accomplished rhetor and an illustrious preacher how to read the scriptures not literally, but spiritually. He reflects on hearing him preaching in his *Confessions*:

> I put no effort into learning what he was saying but only into hearing how he was saying it, for that hollow interest was all I had left, despairing as I was of a way ever opening up for humanity to reach you. Even so, while the words which I loved kept coming into my mind, some actual facts, to which I usually paid no attention, came with them, for I could not keep them separate. Thus while I was opening my heart to absorb how eloquently he was speaking, at the same time the true subject matter of which he spoke was entering too, though only gradually.[117]

As he recounts, Augustin was initially drawn only to Ambrose's eloquence, not his message. Yet even as he lingered on rhetorical beauty, the substance of the Scriptures, previously obscure to him, began to reveal itself. What he discovered was a new way of reading: not literal but

[116] Cf. *Conf.,* 4.15.24 for Augustine's struggle to grasp spiritual realities through material categories*: et ibat animus per formas corporeas et pulchrum, quod per se ipsum, aptum autem, quod ad aliquid adcommodatum deceret, definiebam et distinguebam et exemplis corporeis adstruebam. et converti me ad animi naturam, et non me sinebat falsa opinio quam de spiritalibus habebam verum cernere. et inruebat in oculos ipsa vis veri, et avertebam palpitantem mentem ab incorporea re ad liniamenta et colores et tumentes magnitudines et, quia non poteram ea videre in animo, putabam me non posse videre animum,* "My mind was considering physical forms in turn, and I defined as 'beautiful' those that are so in themselves; but as 'fitting' those that are adapted to something else: I also classified and categorized them with concrete examples. Then I turned to the nature of the mind, and the spurious beliefs I held about spiritual entities did not let me perceive the truth. Still the power of truth itself assaulted my vision, and I turned my trembling mind away from things which are incorporeal and toward shape and color and definite bulk. Because I could not see these in my mind I thought I was unable to see the mind itself.," PL 32:703; CCSL 27:52; LCL 26:170-73. and *de. trin.,* 8.2.3: *Ecce vide, si potes, o anima praegravata corpore quod corrumpitur, et onusta terrenis cogitationibus multis et variis; ecce vide, si potes: Deus Veritas est,* "Behold and see, if thou canst, O soul pressed down by the corruptible body, and **weighed down by earthly thoughts**, many and various; behold and see, if thou canst, that God is truth.", PL 43:949; CCSL 50:271-272; Haddan, 116.

[117] *Conf.,* V.14.24 *Cum enim non satagerem discere quae dicebat, sed tantum quemadmodum dicebat audire (ea mihi quippe iam desperanti ad te viam patere homini inanis cura remanserat), veniebant in animum meum simul cum verbis quae diligebam res etiam quas neglegebam, neque enim ea dirimere poteram. et dum cor aperirem ad excipiendum quam diserte diceret, pariter intrabat et quam vere diceret, gradatim quidem*, PL 32:717-18, CCSL 27:71, LCL 26:227-29.

spiritual, attuned to the deeper voice behind the words. In this "double language" of Scripture, Augustine found a new orientation: not secular but sacred, [118] not horizontal but vertical. Through this, language, once an earthly convention, became a path for the soul's return. In other words, it reflects a wider metamorphosis in his conception of language itself: where he had once used language horizontally, operating within the material realm, from the babble of infancy to the polished eloquence of a master rhetorician, his turn to Christian thought introduced a new, vertical orientation. Language was no longer just a tool for navigating through or dominating over the world; it became a medium for ascent, a channel through which the soul might reach toward the divine. In this reimagined view, language remains marked by its fallen origins, yet it is also capable of bearing the weight of grace, and in this way, it becomes both a sign of human limitation and a means of spiritual elevation.

In short, Augustine came to understand that, while language served an immediate earthly function, i.e., mediating communication between the souls, it was ultimately ordained for a higher, divine purpose: to guide the soul toward God. He perceived not only that the *character* of language was anagogical, leading the mind upward, but also that its very *structure* bore the imprint of this transcendental orientation. This duality is mirrored in his semiotic theory, since language itself is a system of signs: On one level, a sign denotes something corporeal and sensible; on another, it leads the mind toward what is incorporeal and intelligible.

Thus, this view of language as oriented toward the ultimate good forms the foundation of Augustine's ethical philosophy. In his thought, philosophy aims at a happy life,[119] and it is moral philosophy or ethics that inquiries into the *Summum Bonum*: the supreme good, which

[118] Amsler, "Technical and Exegetical Grammar Before Isidore," 102.
[119] *de civ. dei*, 8.8: *quoniam philosophia ad beatam vitam tendit, fruens Deo sit beatus qui Deum amauerit*, PL 41:233; CCSL 47:225; trans. and ed. George E. McCracken, Loeb Classical Library 411 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1957), 43.

"we strive for its own sake; and if we attain it, we need seek no further source of happiness."[120] These words echo the classical Western tradition of the eudaimonistic virtue ethics, et for Augustine, true happiness lies in the *fruitio Dei,* the enjoyment of God. for God alone is to be enjoyed for His own sake.[121] "To enjoy something is to cling to it with love for its own sake."[122] This ethical orientation raises a theological and epistemological concern: the desire to understand both God and the soul.[123] Yet this pursuit is fraught with tension, for while language is the necessary vehicle for articulating such knowledge, it is ultimately insufficient. God exceeds the limits of both comprehension and expression: "For if thou comprehend, that is not God."[124] As B. Matthews observes, Augustine often depicts God as a blinding light –the source of all illumination and yet imperceptible in itself. Just as this light enables vision but cannot be directly seen, so too does God make understanding possible, even as He eludes full perception.[125] The soul, trembling in its weakness, is unable to look directly at the source, yet it is only in this light that anything is truly seen. In this way, Augustine's philosophy of language is inseparable from his theology: language gestures toward God, but it is ultimately love and grace that must carry the soul the rest of the way.[126]

Although he consistently emphasizes the limitations of human language in describing God, Augustine recognizes the necessity of using words: While he maintains that anything said about God is inadequate, as God is ineffable, in *De doctrina Christiana* he confronts the paradox of calling God ineffable since even this statement attributes something to Him. But whatever is

[120] Ibid.: *Reliqua est pars moralis, quam Graeco vocabulo dicunt ethicam, ubi quaeritur de summo bono, quo referentes omnia quae agimus, et quod non propter aliud, sed propter se ipsum adpetentes idque adipiscentes nihil quo beati simus ulterius requiramus*, PL 41:232; CCSL 47:224; LCL 411:39.
[121] *de doctr. chr.,* 1.22.20, PL 34:20, CCSL 32:16, Robertson, 18
[122] *de doctr. chr.,* 1.4.4: *Frui est enim amore inhaerere alicui rei propter se ipsam*, "To enjoy something is to cling to it with love for its own sake.," PL 34:20; CCSL 32:8; Robertson, 9.
[123] *Sol.,* 1.2.7: *Deum et animam scire cupio*, PL32:872; CSEL 89:11.
[124] *Sermo 117*: *Si comprehendis, non deus est*, PL 38:661-71.
[125] Cf., Plato *Republic,* VI, 507b ff.
[126] Gareth B. Matthews, "Knowledge and illumination," in *The Cambridge Companion to Augustine*, ed. Eleonore Stump and Norman Kretzmann, 1st ed. (Cambridge University Press, 2001), 183.

said about God is not said properly but *translate* and through similitudes.[127] We speak of God "relationally," that is through reasoning by analogy and signs,[128] which became the human *modus operandi* after the Fall. Thus, human discourse remains bound to temporal principles that serve eternal ones: when we speak of the ineffable God, we do so within a temporal rather than an eternal frame of reference.

Conclusion

To conclude, this chapter followed Augustine's reorientation of language within a theological framework.: from a rational and social instrument to a vehicle of ascent. In the beginning, language is born and first articulated within the realm of classical philosophy, where its function lies in the social domain: to express thought, to mediate human interaction, and to cultivate reason through grammar, dialectic, and rhetoric. This is the horizontal trajectory of language, where its worth is measured by its utility in worldly affairs and its refinement in rhetorical mastery. But with Augustine's conversion, language itself undergoes a kind of baptism. What once bore an earthly function, now opens toward a divine purpose. No longer just a means of outward expression, language is reimagined as a path of inward return: a vehicle by which the soul might ascend.

This reorientation finds its fulfillment in Augustine's ethical philosophy, where the *telos* of language aligns with the soul's highest aim: the pursuit of the *Summum Bonum*, the ultimate good, which is God Himself.

[127] *de trin.* 5.8.9: *In Patris enim nomine, ipse per se Pater pronuntiatur: in Dei vero, et ipse et Filius et Spiritus sanctus, quia Trinitas unus Deus. Situs vero, et habitus, et loca, et tempora, non proprie,* ***sed translate ac per similitudines dicuntur*** *in Deo,* PL 42:917; CCSL 50:215-26. The importance and issue with translation of *translate* is discussed in chapter "Metonymy".

[128] Brian Stock, *Augustine the Reader: Meditation, Self-Knowledge, and the Ethics of Interpretation* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), 248.

Conclusion

This thesis took a close reading of Augustine's philosophy of language with the aim of rearticulating his semiotic theory as fundamentally metonymic in character. It began with a conceptual distinction between metaphor and metonymy, positioning the latter as a more fitting framework for Augustine's understanding of signification: an understanding in which the sign, rather than mirroring its referent through analogy or likeness, points beyond itself through causal and relational contiguity. From this basis, I proposed a metonymic-anagogical model for interpreting Augustine's linguistic thought, wherein language, rooted in its earthly function, nonetheless acquires a vertical orientation, one that guides the soul toward the divine.

The thesis proceeded by establishing that, for Augustine, the word is *signum par excellence*: it exists solely in its capacity to signify, and it does so not arbitrarily, but within a semiotic system that is indexical in nature. This indexicality, as shown, corresponds to a metonymic mode of signification: one that resists symbolic closure and remains referential or indexical. In closely examining Augustine's conception of the sign across *De Dialectica*, *De Magistro*, and *De Doctrina Christiana*, it became clear that the semiotic function of language is never exhausted in representation; rather, its value lies in its ability to direct the mind beyond the sensory and toward the intelligible, and ultimately, toward God.

This trajectory finds its fulfillment in Augustine's theological writings, where the philosophy of language becomes inseparable from his soteriological vision. Here, signs are not merely tools for communication (*res ad utendum*) but are reframed as ethical and spiritual instruments: their *telos* lies in their capacity to lead the soul toward what is to be enjoyed (*res fruendae*). Within this framework, the entire created order becomes a system of metonymic signs: a semiotic structure in which each element, however mundane, is bound to the divine by virtue of its origin and final cause. Language, fractured though it may be by the Fall, is capable of

bearing this weight. Precisely in its limitation, i.e., its inability to represent God directly, language assumes its higher function: to guide the soul through visible things to the invisible, through temporal utterance to eternal truth.

By recovering metonymy as a central feature of Augustine's semiotic thought, this study has also aimed to shift the terms of scholarly debate. Whereas much of the existing literature has focused on metaphor or allegory as the primary *modus operandi* of figural language in Augustine, I have argued that such frameworks do not fully account for the ontological distance Augustine insists upon between God and creation. Metaphor, rooted in similarity, collapses where distance must be preserved. Metonymy, by contrast, preserves the hiatus: it marks rather than bridges the gap. It is precisely this restraint that enables Augustine's signs to remain theologically viable: they do not presume to disclose the divine, but rather, to orient the soul toward it.

The more general implication of this study lies in its reconfiguration of Augustine's philosophy of language as a theological ethics of signification. Language is not neutral; it is embedded in the narrative of fall and redemption. As such, its function is not epistemological alone, but moral and spiritual. To speak, for Augustine, is always already to point, to turn the mind outward, and then upward. In this sense, the word becomes not only a bearer of meaning but a mode of moral direction. The sign does not merely form, it informs; to elevate, not merely describe.

This study has focused primarily on a selection of Augustine's major texts and offered a thematic analysis rooted in metonymy, by developing a semiotic framework that can place adequate emphasis on the hitherto neglected dimensions of Augustine's philosophy of language. However, given the constraints of a Master's thesis, this study has of course been limited to one element of Augustine's thought. Other aspects of his thought, particularly his

engagements with scriptural hermeneutics and Trinitarian theology, remain open for further investigation within the proposed framework, outlined in the present thesis. Further research might consider how this metonymic logic is fleshed out in Augustine's sermons or scriptural commentaries, or how it informs his ecclesiology and sacramental theology.

Nevertheless, by foregrounding metonymy as the structural logic of Augustine's philosophy of language, this thesis has sought to clarify the deep interrelation between linguistic form, theological meaning, and ethical purpose in his thought. Language, for Augustine, is never an end in itself, it is always a path. And the path, though fragmented and obscure, does not lead nowhere. It leads those who follow it toward the ineffable – God.

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