AUGUSTINE'S LEGACY FOR THE HISTORY OF ZOOSEMIOTICS

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The present article focuses on St. Augustine's most significant contributions to the history of zoosemiotics. It attempts to propose a reading of St. Augustine's philosophical writings which sheds light on his understanding of animal communication and human non-verbal communication. The aim of the paper is to argue for a consideration of St. Augustine as a semiotician ante litteram not only for that which concerns the theory of the sign, but also for theoretical insights regarding modes of communications that transcend natural language, with particular regard to gestures and finger-pointing.

1. Introduction

The present work concerns the interface between medieval semiotics and zoosemiotics and its aim is to shed light on the theoretical connections between Aurelius Augustinus Hipponensis, known as Augustine or Saint Augustine (354−430 AD), and zoosemiotics. Many scholars have called attention to the importance of Augustine and his cutting-edge contributions to the philosophy of language and the general theory of semiotics (Jackson 1969; Todorov 1984 [1977]; Manetti 1993; Cosenza 1997; Calabrese 2001). Thus, this account is not to be considered a full, exhaustive attempt to reconstruct the relationship between Augustine and the history of semiotics, but a small, personal contribution to the revival of a semiotician *ante litteram*, considered to be the greatest one in classic antiquity and the founder of semiotics (Todorov 1984 [1977]). This paper starts from the presupposition that Augustine must be considered not only for his theory of the sign but also (and especially from a zoosemiotics vantage point) for his insights in animal communication and non-verbal communication among humans.

Augustinian semiotic theories are mainly collected in four texts: *Principia Dialecticae, De Trinitate, De Magistro* and *De Doctrina Christiana*. None the less, as Eco (1975) and Genosko (1995) have proved, *De mendacio* and *Contra mendacium* provided precious insights about the semiotic value of lies and the pointing fingers. The present account will mainly focus on *De Magistro* and *De Doctrina Christiana*. The paper is structured as follows: First, I shall consider the theory of language in Augustine's *De Magistro*, underlining the main functions of language. Then I will move to considering the theory of sign as outlined in *De Doctrina Christiana*. Further on, drawing on Genosko's article "Augustine gives us the finger" (1995), I will mainly

focus on nonverbal signs, with particular attention to gestures and finger pointing and their place in Augustine's typology of signs.

2. The functions of language

Before going further, a premise seems necessary. In our attempt to discuss the nature of language as conceived by Augustine we ought to bear in mind the author's theological background. As Clifford Ando pointed out:

> Augustine had theological reasons for denying any human capacity to know God. Yet these theological issues should not, and indeed cannot, be considered independently of his critique of human language. (Ando 1994: 49)

Augustine is not a semiotician, nor does he aim to build a general theory of semiotics. Although rich on useful semiotic insights, the main design of his writings rather has an apologetic, religious purpose. Augustine's main goal is to teach the Christian doctrine and to interpret the sacred scriptures. To put it with John Deely:

> [Augustine's] general notion of sign, then, was not proposed in order to begin the project we now have in mind, the development of a general theory of sign, but simply to serve as an instrument in the furthering of another project entirely, the project of promoting Christian doctrine. (Deely 2005: 11)

Nonetheless, many authors have stressed the semiotic valence of Augustine's writings (especially *De Doctrina Christiana*), so much so that he has been numbered among those who deserve the epithet of "protosemiotician" (Deely 2005:10), or "cryptosemiotician" to borrow a term used by Thomas A. Sebeok (1979). As Eco (1984) and Manetti (1993) pointed out, one of Augustine's main theoretical contributions to the theory of semiotics is to have bonded together, for the very first time, the theory of sign with the theory of language, in a process of definitive modern unification. Therefore what follows is to be interpreted as an interpretation of Augustine's writings (particularly *De Magistro and De Doctrina Christiana* which focus on the theory of the sign and nonverbal communication) which transcends the author's usage of them. In order to provide a chronological framework within the semiotic development we shall include Augustine in the second phase of John Deely's "four ages of understanding", namely the Latin age that goes from Augustine to John Poinsot (Deely 2001).

De Magistro (389), Augustine's early treatise about language, provides us with some striking insights that are helpful to decipher the theologian's theory of language. The dialogue starts with an investigation about the purpose or aim of language. Undeniably, Augustine presents a firm critique of language as a tool for teaching, and he emphasizes all its limits.

The treatise's incipit starts with the question Augustine asks to his son Adeodato about the function of language. Herein, Augustine singles out two main language functions: (1) to transmit knowledge, that is, to teach, and (2) to recall

information to one's memory or other people's memory.[1] Giovanni Manetti has noticed that:

> These functions are simultaneously *informative* and *communicative* as they centrally involve the presence of an addressee at the moment of providing information. (Manetti 1993: 161, italics added)

Hence, language is a means for communication. Thus, Augustine does not portray language as a closed system of signs *à la* de Saussure. Rather, language is conceived in its referential capacity to point at the outer world, as a possible means for knowledge (although a limited one), as a tool which conveys the intention of the speaker.

If language can be used to recall information to one's memory, thus serving for mnemonic purposes, we can draw a similarity between Augustine's second function of language and Juri M. Lotman's *autocommunication*. The eminent scholar of the Tartu-Moscow semiotic school pointed out the communicative situation in which the emitter and the receiver coincide (Lotman 1990: 20-22). Examples of this kind of autocommunication are personal diaries, in which language has the task of fixing and registering something for the future memory of the writer himself.

There seems to be an asymmetry between the first and the second part of Augustine's dialogue. In the first part, signs have the quality of giving information about things. This thesis is furthermore echoed in *De Doctrina Christiana*, wherein Augustine states that "all teaching is teaching of either things or signs, but things are learnt through signs" (I.4). This theoretical stance is in evident contradiction with what the author states somewhere else (*De Magistro X, 33)*, namely that nothing is taught through signs. Yet, in the second part of *De Magistro*'s dialogue, the argument is diametrically proposed in an upside-down dimension: "the reality which lies behind the signs, whether the object of sense-perception or intellection, is alone the proper subject of true knowledge" (Ando 1994: 46).

As stated above, one of the basic functions of language is teaching. This is a misleading concept. At a closer look we shall see that in Augustine's conception the capacity of teaching by means of signs is more apparent than real. Things cannot always be known via signs. In order to underpin this stance Augustine provides the example of the term *sarabara*. This word refers to its reference only given previous knowledge. Thus, if the addressee does not already know a given object (in Augustine's example the "headdress", "garments", "covering") the sign which refers to the object does not provide a helpful hint for recognizing the reference. This example aims to demonstrate that humankind does not learn about an object by means of its name (sign). Rather, we learn via seeing the object itself, by sight. As Genosko says: "One becomes acquainted, then, with the sign by means of the thing signified rather than by coming to know the thing from the sign" (Genosko 1995: 88). This is a crucial point insofar as it stresses the fundamental role of perception in all processes of semiosis and signification. Even in the case in which we know the meaning of a sign or name, we shall not learn anything from it, for we already knew what the name was referring to. To say it with Manetti: "Yet, even here, Augustine

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[1] *De Magistro 1,22:* "Sed sit u non arbitraries nos discere cum recordamur nec docere illum qui commemorate, non resisto tibi et duas iam loquendi causas constituo, au tut doceamus au tut commemoramus uel alios uel nos ipsos, quod etiam dum cantamus efficimus; an tibi non uidetur?"

claims, it is not really appropriate to speak of a true process of acquiring knowledge" (Manetti 1993: 161).

3. Augustine's theory of the sign

The first Augustinian definition of the sign is to be found in *Principia Dialectica*:

> A sign is anything which shows itself first to the sense and then indicates something beyond itself to the mind.[2] (Augustine 1975, V. 9-10)

Two additional definitions of the sign are to be found in *De Doctrina Christiana*, one in Liber Primus (Book One) and the other in Liber Secundus (Book Two). The first definition sounds quite basic. Says Augustine:

> Signs are things which are used to signify something.[3] (Augustine 1962, I, II, 2)

The second definition of the sign points out that:

> A sign is a thing which of itself makes some other thing come to mind, besides the impression that it presents to the senses.[4] (Augustine 1962, II, I, 1)

A few lines below Augustine singles out the main sign distinction. He distinguishes two classes of signs: *signa naturalia* (natural signs) and *signa data* (given signs). The criterion that differentiates them is the intentionality of the sign. The former, *signa naturalia*, are "those which without a wish or any urge to signify cause something else besides themselves to be know from them, like smoke, which signifies fire" (*De Doctrina Christiana*, II, I, 2). The latter, *signa data*, are "those which living things give to each other, in order to show, to the best of their ability, the emotions of their minds, or anything that they have felt or learnt" (*De Doctrina Christiana*, II, II, 3). Thus, under the general category of *signum* we have two different species of sign: linguistic and non-linguistic sign. Both belong to the same level. Both are jointed under the umbrella term of *signum*. This means that a sign can either belong to the sphere of culture or stem from the realm of nature. Sign (*signum*) as a general class that transcends the boundary of nature and culture is, for the very first time, thematized (Deely 2005: 23−24). This is the strategic move taken by Augustine, what Deely utters as "the semiotic revolution" (2005: 25), that which Todorov names "the Augustinian synthesis" (1984 [1977]: 46) and which Manetti terms "the fusion of the theory of language with the theory of the sign" (2010: 265). This is the very first fundamental contribution that Augustine provides to the history of zoosemiotics, and it deserves a more in-depth analysis. As we shall see in what follows, this stance implies and justifies locating animal communication in the general category of *signa*.

Before the unification made by Augustine there were two different lines of thought or models concerning the theory of sign:

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[2] *Signum est et quod se ipsum sensui, et praetor se aliquid animo ostendit.*
[3] Signa, res ... quae ad significandum aliquid adhibentur.
[4] Signum est enim res praeter speciem, quam ingerit sensi bus, aliud ex se faciens in cogitationem uenire.

- (1) signs as a particular class of natural events;
- (2) signs as verbal language signs (theory of verbal language).

The hiatus between the two conceptions originated in the context of Greek semiotics. According to the first perspective signs belong to the realm of nature. They are already existing phenomena which need to be deciphered and interpreted by men. This is the point where semiotics and medical investigation converge, interpreting symptoms as signs of illness, and making use of natural indices as signs for interpreting the surrounding environment. "If there is smoke, then there is fire". This first kind of understanding is based on inference (Manetti 1993: 2010).

The second model refers to signs as belonging to natural languages, that is to say, to the sphere of culture. The bond between signifier and signified is based on the principle of equivalence (Manetti 2010: 257). This is a crucial distinction because, as Eco and colleagues have demonstrated (1986), it explains the oddity of placing „animal language" differently within medieval typologies of signs. I shall return to this point below.

Now some words need to be applied in order to shed light on the processes of signification which occur within the animal kingdom. Augustine states:

> Animals also have signs which they use among themselves, by means of which they indicate their appetites. For a cock who finds food makes a sign with his voice to the hen so that she runs to him. And the dove calls his mate with a cry or is called by her in turn, and there are many similar examples which may be adduced. (Augustine 1962, II, I, 4)

Undoubtedly, this quotation is a clear hint for the zoosemiotician insofar as *signa data* include "those actions of signs that are labeled today „zoosemiotic", the realm of animal communication with no involvement of words, but with clear intention and aim of communicating (Deely 2005: 41). Although Augustine provides examples of intraspecific communication, he does not thoroughly provide arguments further explaining his view on animal communication. He simply states that he is excluding this matter as "not essential" (*De Doctrina Christiana*, II, I, 4). Augustine, therefore, raised the crucial question of whether animals which are not humans are endowed with the *voluntas significandi*, that is to say, the intention to signify. The question remained open, but the issue of intentionality within the animal kingdom is taken up by Umberto Eco and his colleagues in the article entitled *Latratus Canis*. The Italian semiotician noticed that the so-called *latratus canis*, namely the dog's barking, and other animal pseudo-languages such as "the horse's whinney, the pigeon's coo, the cow's moo, the pig's oink has had an ambiguous position among the medieval theories of language and consequently it is placed in a different position within medieval classifications of signs" (Eco et al. 1986: 63−73; Eco 1990: 111−122). For sure, Eco argues that among medieval commentators the *latratus canis* is seen as a linguistic phenomenon. Animals emit particular sounds which endow them with communicative skills. Two kinds of thought can be distinguished in the medieval semiotics: the theory of signs in general (stemming from the Stoics) and a theory of *voces* (Aristotelian and Hippocratic in origin). This distinction recalls the two models outlined above: (1) signs as a particular class of natural events (signs in general) and (2) signs as verbal language signs (*voces*). Eco demonstrated that the *latratus canis* has been placed in different positions inside the typology of signs, according to the

model adopted, either a theory of the sign in general or a theory of *voces*. Within the first line of thought, following the Stoic tradition and the Augustinian synthesis, the dog's barking appears as a given sign (*signa data*) whereas according to the second line of thought the *latratus canis* belongs to the realm of natural signs together with the wail of the infirm (*ibid.*). This ambiguity in classifying the sounds animals emit is indicative of the revolutionary shift Augustine inaugurated by linking together the theory of language with the theory of sign. Only this shift allows Augustine to consider the *latratus canis* as an intentional sign, eliminating its connotation as *vox animalia* which considered the dog's barking as a natural sign.

4. Semiotic pointers

Thomas A. Sebeok defined "zoosemiotics" as follows:

> Zoosemiotics [...] is that segment of the field which focuses on messages given off and received by animals, including important components of human nonverbal communication, but excluding man's language and his secondary, language derived semiotic systems, such as sign language or Morse code. (Sebeok 1990: 105)

It is my contention that those "important components of human nonverbal communication" to which Sebeok is referring in the passage quoted above have been left out or at least neglected within the field of zoosemiotics. They play only a minimal part compared to the study of communication in animals other than humans. Thus, the proposal of this paper is to consider Augustine as a „protosemiotician" not only concerning the theory of the sign but also his contributions to the study of nonverbal communication, defined as "those forms of bodily behaviour, supplementing or replacing speech, by which people convey their thoughts and feelings to each other" (Burrow 2002: 1).

As a matter of fact, Augustine was not only a semiotician *ante litteram* but also an attentive observer of human gestures. As Gary Genosko pointed out, Augustine was "a profound thinker about hands, especially fingers" (Genesko 1995: 81). Let us now briefly stroll into those Augustinian passages where forms of nonverbal communication are mentioned.

In *De Magistro* Augustine discusses the role played by nonverbal signs in human communication. When words fail to point at the meaning of a given thing, human beings can operate via gestures. He inquires (quoted in King 1996: 133):

> Have you ever noticed how men converse, as it were, with deaf people by gestures and how the deaf themselves in turn use gestures to ask and answer questions, to teach and to make known either all their wishes or, at least, a good many of them?[5] (Augustine 1962, III.28)

Gestures have a fundamental ostensive function. Men can reinforce a speech by gesture pointers or they can describe an action via gesticulation or body language. Human beings can further express their feelings by facial expressions. As Gary

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[5] Numquam ne uidisti, ut hominess cum surdis gestu quasi sermocinentur ipsique surdi non minus gestu uel quaerant uel respondeant, uel doceant uel indecent aut omnia, quae uolunt, aut certe plurima?

Genosko (1995) pointed out, nonverbal signs, especially gestures and pointers, play a significant role in Augustine's *De Magistro*.

The meaning of a nonverbal sign is given by the object it points at (or: to). In Augustine's own words (quoted in Genosko 1995: 88):

> For the pointing of the finger can signify nothing else but the reality to which it is pointed.

As the author explains, the pointing finger is equal to Peirce's index and/or symbol (*ibid.*). The indexicality of the pointing finger is given by the real connection between the sign and its object, or, in Jakobson's term, via a factual contiguity between the signifier and the signified. But the pointing finger still holds a certain degree of symbolicity, insofar as it is still governed by a general rule that a certain community must agree upon.[6]

Some inconsistency may be lurking between the lines when Augustine resolves his argument stating that "by means of this pointing finger, I learn neither the reality, which I already knew, nor the sign, towards which the finger was not pointed" (*ibid.*: 89). This claim could sound at odds with what Augustine maintained before, that is to say, the possibility of knowing through things rather than by means of signs. An objection to such theoretical discrepancy arises if we consider, as Genosko does, the value of the pointing finger irrespectively and independently of the object it refers to. In other words, the nonverbal sign can be seen, as it were, as a sign of itself, "a sign of what indicating is" (*ibid.*).

What is the implication of gestural signs within the general Augustinian theory of signs? How can we place the finger pointing in Augustine's typology of signs? In order to answer these questions I shall recall the various classifications of signs singled out by Augustine in *De Doctrina Christiana*. We have already seen the distinction between *signa naturalia* (natural signs) and *signa data* (given signs). In the light of this first classification, pointing fingers belong to the realm of *signa data*, inasmuch as they are intentional signs.

It is worth recalling now an additional typology of signs based on *De Doctrina Christiana*, perhaps the most complete one, formulated by Todorov (1984[1977]). This classification is articulated in five classes (Manetti 1993: 163):

> 1. According to the mode of transmission: visual/aural;
> 2. According to origin and use: natural signs/intentional signs;
> 3. According to social function: natural signs/conventional signs;
> 4. According to the nature of the symbolic relation: proper/transposed;
> 5. According to the nature of the designatum: sign/thing.

In order to place finger pointing in such a sign typology we shall consider the mode of transmission of the sign. Says Augustine in *De Doctrina Christiana*:

> Some of the signs by which people communicate their feelings to one another concern the eyes; most of them concern the ears, and a very small number concern the other senses. When we nod, we give a sign just to the eyes of the person whom we want, by means of that sign, to make aware of our wishes. Certain movements of the hands signify a great deal. (Augustine 1962, II, I, 2)

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[6] Indeed, the pointing finger has different meanings in different cultures.

Thus, gestural signs appeal to the *sense of sight*. To sum up, they are *intentional* and *visible*, that is, perceived by sight. To put it with Roman Jakobson, whose classification of signs is based on "the ways of their production" (organic/instrumental), "gestures are directly produced by bodily organs" (Jakobsen 1968 [1971]: 701).

Having identified intentionality and visibility as the main characteristics of gestural signs with particular focus on finger pointing, I would like now to express some observations regarding the first of these two features. If we conceive pointing a finger as an intentional sign, we place ourselves in the unbalanced position of considering only one side of the communicative situation. Namely, we focus on the addresser of the sign and the way of the sign production. What about the addressee? If a gesture is an intentional sign, how does the addressee know that the sign is intentionally being sent? Let us consider the case, following Clifford Geertz, of "two boys rapidly contracting the eyelids of their right eyes. In one, this is an involuntary twitch; in the other, a conspiratorial signal to a friend" (Geertz 1993: 5). The involuntary twitch belongs to *signa naturalia* whereas the wink, insofar as it is intentional, is a *signa data*. The latter thus performs a communicative function. As Geertz pointed out:

> The wink is communicating [...] in a quite precise and special way: (1) deliberately, (2) to someone in particular, (3) to impart a particular message, (4) according to a socially established code, and (5) without cognizance of the rest of the company. (Geertz, *ibid.*)

I would add to these five points a sixth one: the addressee's recognition of the wink as such through the *sense of sight*. Only by the identification of and agreement between both partners involved in the communicative process is it possible to talk of gestures as intentional signs.

Before outlining our conclusion I shall point at another issue. Gestures are seen by Augustine as "visible words". This means that in Augustine's view "verbal signs are the means by which all other varieties of semiosis may be expressed, but not vice versa" (Genosko 1995: 91). In other words, language is a primary modeling system, "a system into which any other semiotic system can be translated" (Manetti 1993:160).

5. Conclusion

What this paper has highlighted is Augustine's theoretical legacy for the history of zoosemiotics.

We have seen the role that language plays in Augustine's view and its connections to the theory of signs. We have stressed the revolutionary move taken by Augustine in combining two different ways of thought that were until then considered separately. Augustine jointed them together, giving to the sign a place between nature and culture. If zoosemiotics is to be considered as a discipline at the intersection between nature and culture, then a special place for Augustine among those scholars who significantly contributed to the semiotic development cannot be neglected although, as noticed in the introduction, he had a different aim in mind.

With Eco we have seen how differently the dog's barking has been considered among medieval commentators, and how much ambiguity medieval classifications of signs retained.

The other aspect this paper has considered concerns the place of nonverbal human communication within the field of zoosemiotics. If too narrow inspections of this topic have been proposed using the methodological lenses of zoosemiotics, this is indexical of a lacuna that should be filled. Stressing the importance of the nonverbal signs, this paper has attempted to link the theories of Augustine with the more extended semiotics of nonverbal communication. Augustine is not only a founder of semiotics, but also a bright investigator of gestural signs. Following Genosko, one of the very few scholars who have examined this issue thoroughly, we have demonstrated that finger pointing has a peculiar place in Augustine's writings. However, some important issues have been left out. I refer in particular to a possible *semiotics of silence* and a *theory of lies*. As Eco pointed out signs lie, and semiotics is the discipline which studies everything that can be used to lie (Eco 1975 [2002]: 17). It would definitely be fruitful to link a general theory of semiotics to the typology of lies as proposed by Augustine in his *De mendacio*. Furthermore, Augustine opens up a new semiotic vista with regard to the extent of a possible semiotics of silence. These are both interesting insights to be taken into consideration by further semiotic research.

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Augustinuse pärand zoosemiootika ajaloos

Käesolev artikkel keskendub Püha Augustinuse tööde tähtsusele zoosemiootika ajaloo jaoks. Kaastöö püüab pakkuda Püha Augustinuse filosoofiliste kirjutiste tõlgendust, millest nähtuks tema arusaamad loomade ja inimeste mittekeelelisest kommunikatsioonist. Artikli eesmärgiks on käsitleda Püha Augustinust kui semiootikut *ante litteram*. Seda mitte pelgalt Augustinuse märgiteooriale tuginedes, vaid lähtudes ka tema loomuliku keele piire ületavate kommunikatsiooniviiside teoreetilistest käsitlustest. Viimaste all vaadeldakse eriti osutamist ja *žeste*.

Märksõnad: zoosemiootika, Püha Augustinus, semiootika ajalugu, mitteverbaalne kommunikatsioon