Signs of Time in a Time of Signs: Re-reading Saint Augustine

Dumitru-Cornel VÎLCU

La conception augustinième concernant le rôle que les signes jouent (ou ne réussissent pas jouer) dans la transmission de contenus mentaux, d'information sur la réalité et, finalement, de vérités est re-examinée à la lumière d'idées appartenant à des linguistes modernes - en particulier, Wilhelm von Humboldt et Eugenio Coseriu. Aussi, la révolution apportée par Saint Augustin dans la pensée relative au temps est mise en relation avec des innovations conceptuelles post-kantiennes, en principal avec la conception de Martin Heidegger.

Mots clés: les signes, la réalité, Saint Augustin, la linguistique moderne, Martin Heidegger

"... quia magis per fidem quam per speciem ambulatur, cum in hac vita peregrinamur, quamvis conversationem habeamus in caelis" (*De Doctrina Christiana* VII, 11).

"... nihil esse aliud tempus quam distentionem: sed cuius rei, nescio, et mirum, si non ipsius animi" (*Confessiones* XI, XXVI, 33).

An explanation for the title

The heading of this paper might be considered by any of its readers rather rhetorical; and so it is. The wording of the title clearly belongs to a linguist and/or a semiotician, not to a theologist or a philosopher. What these words lack in depth, they try to compensate in formal spectacularity. As a result, they seem void, and the symmetry of their syntax - treacherous. "Existentially" speaking, nothing can be more desirable than a time in which signs (always few, always crucial) of something else (eternity? God?) appear and are interpreted; and nothing more odious than its reverse: superficial time, time invaded by a multitude of signs as (Baudrillard-ian) *simulacra*, as overall present means of generalised pretense.

The signs of time, even if, or especially when they do not regard time in general, but a certain epoch, are by definition a means to escape it - to somehow grab its essence, understand and thus be able to overcome it. In contrast, a (or the) time of signs is *seculum* - and nothing else. By definition, it has no transcendental opening, rends possible no the(le)ological vision. It is fully captured, encapsulated in the horizontal, "synchronic" game of multiple, inter-referential discourse(s).

BDD-A26425 © 2016 Editura Universităţii „Alexandru Ioan Cuza”
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.58 (2026-11-16 20:50:53 UTC)

Moreover, the gap between the two (signs of time; time of signs) only becomes deeper when we talk about, or start from, Saint Augustine's life and work. As it is well known, his conversion to Christianity also meant renouncing his position as a teacher of (mainly) Rhetoric.

Why, then, choose this intently provocative title? My main reasons were two. First, I truly believe that our time, while being (there's no doubt about it) dominated by the media, by the internet, by virtual gaming, etc., etc., has also brought about a level of scientific inquiry and knowledge "about" signs and their functioning never before acquired. I don't mean/ wish to state that modern, and even post-modern, semiotics is "better" than the one elaborated by Augustine more than sixteen centuries ago. By no means. "Our" semiotics is simply different, and "within" it we can find discoveries/ ideas, belonging to modern (Humboldt, Saussure, Peirce) or contemporary (Ricoeur, Coseriu) linguists and semiologists, that can change - in the sense of an enrichment - the way in which we understand Augustine's works.

And having written the words above, I got to my second, and more important, reason. Within simple, chronological history, the influence of an author upon another can only follow the irreversible line of past-upon-future. Thus, Augustine's ideas can determine the ones of Heidegger, not the reverse. But for cultural history, since there actually is no human knowledge other than the one contained in our individual minds (and, if I might add, souls), Augustine is not only readable, but actually read "through" Heidegger, once any of us has assimilated the German philosopher's ideas.

Our present time may be (regarded as) profoundly corrupt and/or secular, but it also benefits from a, let's call it "technical", knowledge of signs that can shed new light on the Augustinian doctrine, both concerning signs, on the one hand, and time, on the other.

Re-interpreting a "skeptical" position

"Hactenus verba valuerunt; quibus plurimum tribuam, admonent tantum, ut quaeramus res, non exhibent, ut norimus." (*De Magistro* XI, 36).

The quoted paragraph quintessentially expresses Augustine's well-known reluctance towards the signs' capacity of mediating communication. Of course, these words were written shortly (a few years) after the author's conversion - and implicitly talk about his newly acquired disbelief in Rhetoric. Also, we are dealing here with a somehow maximalist view on what communication should be - that is: the transmission of knowledge, which in its turn is understood as knowledge of the truth.

The verb *admonere*, used in the paragraph for characterising, in a positive manner, what words *can* do, has been widely discussed by translators. For instance, Eugen Munteanu, author of the Romanian version for *De Magistro*, comments:

> *To live in the world means living in a world of signs. But signs in themselves represent neither the cause, nor the goal of knowledge; they are simple*

BDD-A26425 © 2016 Editura Universităţii „Alexandru Ioan Cuza”
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.58 (2026-11-16 20:50:53 UTC)

> *instruments. Our sentient being (the part of us which is subject to corruption and change) uses them for warning (admonere) our ego on the fact that something, which needs to be searched for and understood, exists beyond what we perceive in this world - and also beyond ourselves as mortal, but rational beings (homo animal rationale mortale) (Munteanu 1995: 27).*

Still, for our current line of interpretation, Stephen Meier-Oser's terms (from an article dedicated, in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy***,** to medieval semiotics) are much more provocative:

> *In his dialogue De Magistro (On the Teacher), however, written shortly after De Dialectica, Augustine denies that words or signs have the power of "showing" anything in the sense of making something present to the understanding (Non … mihi rem, quam significat, ostendit verbum…) (Augustine, De mag. X, 32). For this reason, still influenced by the tenets of the skeptical tradition at that time, Augustine was limiting the capacity of the sign to its admonitory or commemorative function (Augustine, De Mag., XI, 36) (Meier-Oeser 2011).*

Indeed, in Augustine's view, what the signs in themselves *cannot* do, is to assure us of the actual *presence* of the things they refer to; to an even lesser extent could they represent the fundamental Truth upon which such a presence rests:

> *Is me autem aliquid docet, qui vel oculis vel ulli corporis sensui vel ipsi etiam menti praebet ea, quae cognoscere volo. Verbis igitur nisi verba non discimus, immo sonitum strepitumque verborum: nam si ea, quae signa non sunt, verba esse non possunt, quamvis iam auditum verbum nescio tamen verbum esse, donec quid significet sciam. Rebus ergo cognitis verborum quoque cognitio perficitur, verbis vero auditis nec verba discuntur. Non enim ea verba, quae novimus, discimus aut quae non novimus didicisse nos possumus confiteri, nisi eorum significatione percepta, quae non auditione vocum emissarum, sed rerum significatarum cognitione contingit. Verissima quippe ratio est et verissime dicitur, cum verba proferuntur, aut scire nos quid significent aut nescire: si scimus, commemorari potius quam discere, si autem nescimus, ne commemorari quidem, sed fortasse ad quaerendum admoneri (De Magistro XI, 36).*

One could write potentially endless scientific texts, just by commenting the numerous semiotic thesis present in the above-quoted fragment. Even without mentioning the (here implicit) presence of the *Magister Interior*, we should still insist on the following ideas:

1) knowing a word means, besides recognizing its phonetic expression, understanding its meaning (which is called here *significatione*, but, as we can easily see, it is fully equivalent to Augustine's much more famous *dicibile*);

2) but meaning can only be known via the reference to things themselves. As a consequence,

BDD-A26425 © 2016 Editura Universităţii „Alexandru Ioan Cuza”
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.58 (2026-11-16 20:50:53 UTC)

3) words simply cannot offer us a surplus in knowledge; at best they remind us what we already knew about things. Also,

4) whenever we deal with words the content of which we don't know, their presence within the message can at best draw our attention upon the newly-named things - so that we can examine these things in themselves.

Indeed, here skepticism seems to have reached its peak; it is obvious that for Augustine words (in spite of the fact that the only legitimate purpose of speech is *teaching*[1] the others) cannot insure any real transmission of knowledge.

Also, we are dealing with a very strict hierarchy: *letters*, as graphic signs of words, are less important then the *sounds* of speech. Verbal *sounds* are less important than word *meanings*. Purely conceptual *meaning* is, in its turn, less important than the actual referring to *real things*. And, finally, we can easily infer the overall position adopted by Augustine in this dialogue. It is obvious that, in his conception, all *real things* are to be considered insignificant compared to (the manifestation, in them[2], of) their *Creator* - none other than God Himself (seen inclusively as the Divine Word).

Moreover, the position adopted here seems to contradict theses emitted by the author in works both previous and ulterior to the one we just referred to. For instance, in his (most) semiotic treatise, written either prior, or in about the same period[3] as *De Magistro*, Augustine had stated:

> *Verbum est uniuscuiusque rei signum, quod ab audiente possit intelligi, a loquente prolatum. Res est quidquid intelligitur vel sentitur vel latet*[4] *(De Dialectica, V).*

Also, in 397, a while after he had accepted that one of the main tasks of his life would be explaining, interpreting, commenting the Holy Scripture, he was going to write:

> *Nec ulla causa est nobis significandi, id est signi dandi, nisi ad depromendum et traiciendum in alterius animum id quod animo gerit is qui signum dat (De Doctrina Christiana, II, 2.3.).*

Still, somewhat paradoxically, it is in *De Magistro* where we find ourselves precisely at the point in which, even without appealing to other thinkers or theories, that is, working strictly with what Augustine's semiotic doctrines have to offer, we can overturn his above-mentioned skepticism.

---

[1] „Vides ergo iam nihil nos locutione, nisi ut doceamus appetere" (*De Magistro* I, 1).

[2] Cf. Munteanu 1995: 41.

[3] *De Dialectica* seems to have been written în 384 or somewhere between 387 and 391 (Cf. Munteanu 2003: 13).

[4] As we can see, here the lack of communication ("vel latet") is considered to be possible, not to represent the rule.

BDD-A26425 © 2016 Editura Universităţii „Alexandru Ioan Cuza"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.58 (2026-11-16 20:50:53 UTC)

Indeed, on the one hand, our human master/ teacher can teach us nothing; he or she isn't even capable of transmitting his/ her thoughts to us; assuring us of their truth is even less possible[5].

But, on the other hand, each and every one of us, perceiving, so to say, *from the exterior* the verbal manifestation of his or her teacher/ interlocutor, will be thus *reminded* and/or *warned*[6] to reconstruct the whole process, existentially and cognitively speaking: in other words, we will have to (literally) *make sense* of what has been said, or rather shown to us. We will form our own opinion, make our own decision, think and then respond through our own behavior (verbal or not) as *individual presence* in the world.

Of course, Augustine states that, in order to do that, I or you have the most powerful ally one can imagine - Christ as our absolute, interior Master. But for the time being I will follow Coseriu's suggestion (in his *Geschichte der Sprachphilosophie*[7]) and say that this hypothesis is not indispensable, scientifically speaking.

Some clarifying (conceptual) distinctions

If we also accept leaving the strict zone of Augustinian texts and adopt a comparative "treatment" of the above-mentioned ideas, we discover at least two modern linguists capable of offering us the necessary "Occam's razor", in order to surpass the apparent Augustinian paradox - that one of the most famous ancient precursors of Semiotics preaches the total inefficiency of signs and/ or language.

For instance, in his famous philosophical *Introduction* to his treaty on the Kawi language of the Java islands, Wilhelm von Humboldt insists upon the fact that in any act of inter-human communication we deal with far more than the simple transmission of information:

> *Es kann in der Seele nichts, als durch eigne Tätigkeit vorhanden sein, und Verstehen und Sprechen sind nur verschiedenartige Wirkungen der nämlichen Sprachkraft. Die gemeinsame Rede ist nie mit der Übergeben eines Stoffes vergleichbar. In dem Verstehenden, wie im Sperchenden, muß derselbe aus der eignen, innren Kraft entwickelt werden; und was der erstere empfängt, ist nur die harmonisch stimmende Anregung. Es ist daher dem Menschen auch so natürlich, das eben Verstandene gleich wieder auszusprechen (Humboldt 1835/ 2008: 332).*

[5] The whole part between *De Magistro* XII, 39 and XIII, 44 is dedicated to Augustine's objections to the idea that we could be sure of the accuracy with which our speech partner "represented", through words, his or her thoughts. Moreover, in paragraph XIII, 45 we can read: „Sed ecce iam remitto et concedo, cum verba eius auditu cui nota sunt, accepta fuerint, posse illi esse notum de iis rebus quas significant, loquentem cogitavisse: num ideo etiam quod nunc quaeritur, utrum vera dixerit, discit?"

[6] Here, reference not to the present, but to past or future is inevitable.

[7] Cf. Coseriu 1969/2003: 145.

BDD-A26425 © 2016 Editura Universităţii „Alexandru Ioan Cuza"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.58 (2026-11-16 20:50:53 UTC)

The resemblance with Augustine's position is obvious: some material (that is: verbal) content (*Stoff*) obviously passes from speaker to hearer; but something much more profound than this empirical transmission of signs takes place. What we deal with is the incitement, for each of the participants in a dialogue, not only to reach, within the specificity of his or her own "interior energy" (*Kraft*) a (harmonic) concordance with the interlocutor, but to further re-iterate what he or she understood.

And if the above mentioned idea, as generous as it is, could be accused of being to vaguely (or even metaphorically) expressed, Eugeniu Coşeriu revives, one century and a half later, the same conception - resting on his much clearer conceptual distinction between three levels ("planes") of language, each with its own type of competence and its specific content:

plane of language	**Competence**	**specific content**
Universal	Elocutional	Designatum
Historical	Idiomatic	signified (*signifié*)
Individual	Expressive	Sense

(*Cf.* Coseriu 1988/1992: 106)

In Coseriu's view, each and every "language act" (*acto lingüístico*[8]) develops itself via two different semiotic articulations (*semiotische Verhaeltnis*[9]). The first one consists in the passage (one could also say "rising") from the (virtual) plane of a historical language (e.g. English, French, etc. as systems of words and grammatical rules) into the (real, effective) plane of universal speech. What the speaker actually does in accomplishing this first articulation is to use (the contents of) words in order to designate things (which may be empirically real or fictional) in the world. The second semiotic articulation uses the speech *designata*, as well as forms, contents and procedures of the idiomatic language in order to realize an individual *sense* (to state or imply the speaker's intention).

Within any act of "communication", the contents specific to the historical and universal plane (or to the first semiotic articulation), that is *significata* and *deisgnata*, are transmitted from the addresser to the addressee. (To be more accurate, we could say that both types of content should already be mutually known by the participants when the speech or dialogue act begins: significata usually pertain to an idiom that all the parts involved use or at least understand; also, the locutor/ interlocutor(s) should place themselves in the same frame(s) of "worldly" reference, share the same universe of designata if they want to understand each other's position and intention.)

[8] Cf. Coseriu 1951/1995: 26-31.
[9] Cf. Coseriu 1980: 49.

BDD-A26425 © 2016 Editura Universităţii „Alexandru Ioan Cuza”
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.58 (2026-11-16 20:50:53 UTC)

But the third, individual, type of content, which is also the result of personal mental activity in the second semiotic articulation - that is, *sense* - cannot itself be transmitted. *Sense*, the type of content that other linguists usually call the *meaning* of an utterance, is always an *ad-hoc* creation of the speaker/ an interpretation by the hearer, respectively (this being the main reason for which Coseriu often defines text linguistics as a hermeneutics of sense).

Thus, according to Coseriu's tri-partite linguistics, each time we speak (or just listen) we deal with:

1) contents which belong to the signs themselves - with two important specifications: a) that here we are talking about mental, linguistic signs and the relation, inside them, between the *signifiant* and the *signifié*; b) that this level of content is characterised by structural differences between idioms, not only in the realm of (phonologic, graphic, etc.) expression, but also in the one of content - Humboldt's *innere Sprachform*;

2) contents which are oriented ("referentially") towards objects in the world and should be understood similarly by all participants in a transmission or an exchange of information; but here also a remark is needed: these contents may be imaginary, as well as concrete. Language as such, and most notably its universal plane/ first semiotic articulation, allow(s) us to talk as readily about Jacob's wrestle with the Angel (which for a Christian like Augustine would represent a true story) or about Ulysse's encounter with the mermaids (which seen from the same point of view would be interpreted as a lie - beautiful as it may be);

3) "meanings" which only the individual, taken in isolation, can grasp, or rather form (as in "to make sense" of something), with the help, of course, of the other two types of content transmitted via signs, but by adding his or her personal knowledge, volition, intentions, etc.

And here we are dealing with a type of content which we can refer back to Augustine's not so much semiotic, but ethical and Christian doctrine.

Here is why: the first semiotic articulation usually functions mechanically (or, in Saussure's renowned words, "passively[10]") for all subjects knowing the language and familiarised with the world to which the speaker refers[11] - in other words, there's not much individual choice involved in the process.

But in the case of the second semiotic articulation, the situation is wholly different. This (ineludible) segment of our semiotic behaviour consists in an *interpretation* of both words and facts stated through them. For this part of the

[10] Cf. Saussure 1916/1997: 30.

[11] If I, the speaker (or, if it suits you better, the author of this text-discourse) choose to say/ write "An immense cubic lemon, purple in colour, weighing five hundred tons, is floating in the air exactly 1 kilometer above the Earth's North Pole", my listener or reader, as long as he/ she perceives my words and knows English, will have no other choice than to imagine a huge odd fruit at exactly the place where my description has placed it. Discovering that I lied, wondering why I did so and what should be done in order to stop linguists from such behavior... all of those actions, if accomplished with the help of words, belong to the second semiotic articulation and the development (by each individual engaged in this communication/ debate) of *sense*.

BDD-A26425 © 2016 Editura Universităţii „Alexandru Ioan Cuza”
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.58 (2026-11-16 20:50:53 UTC)

process, each and every individual needs - exactly as Augustine put it 16 centuries ago - to take a good (and personal) look *not at the signs, but at things themselves* (in relation to which all that signs can do is *admonere*).

In fact, we often do more than take "a look": we take action. We examine things, we assess their truth value and their pragmatic purport, we make up our minds and then we *do* something.

As a consequence, it is perfectly accurate to characterize Augustine's view as skeptical, maybe even pessimistic - as far as signs themselves (and just themselves) are the issue. But when we change our subject of inquiry, becoming interested in what people (as individuals, as communities, as - in this case - Christians) can do and actually do via the use and interpretation of signs... then skepticism is inevitably replaced by faith and acts of faith.

Augustine himself followed such a route - one that today we are inevitably tempted to call Hegelian: from the (purely technical and descriptive, as far as linguistic and semiotic devices are concerned) thesis of *De Dialectica*, via the skeptical antithesis in *De Magistro*, to the synthesis present in the whole realm of his works that followed. The scope of these later works is at the same time scientific and pastoral - and the Augustinian title under which we can, metonymically, gather them is, of course, *De Doctrina Christiana*.

The Augustinian Sense of Time

So what is the "added value", the supplement of meaning (Coseriu's *sense*) that Saint Augustine brings to the general, philosophical debate on time? And by saying "supplement" I mean, here, three things: 1) a historical - that is, chronologically situated - *change* in the way the very problem of time was posed; 2) the perpetual *origin* that Augustine's view offers for our thinking or re-thinking of the issue; 3) (like we said before) a set of ideas that are themselves *revisable*, in the light of concepts and/ or doctrines pertaining to later authors.

Undoubtedly, the most famous contribution brought by Augustine to the understanding of what time is consists in the pairing of, on the one hand, a declaration of stupefaction concerning the apparent simplicity vs. the actual difficulty of the concept:

> Quid est enim tempus? Quis hoc facile breviterque explicaverit? Quis hoc ad verbum de illo proferendum vel cogitatione comprehenderit? Quid autem familiarius et notius in loquendo commemoramus quam tempus? Et intellegimus utique, cum id loquimur, intellegimus etiam, cum alio loquente id audimus.
> Quid ergo tempus? Si nemo ex me querat, scio; si quaerenti explicare velim, nescio (*Confessiones*, XI, XIV, 17).

BDD-A26425 © 2016 Editura Universităţii „Alexandru Ioan Cuza”
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.58 (2026-11-16 20:50:53 UTC)

and, on the other hand, a statement, brief and apparently hesitant in form, but extremely surprising in content, which moves the very subject matter (time) from the category of physical or cosmological events into the mental/ spiritual[12] realm:

> ... mihi visum est nihil esse alliud tempus quam distentionem: sed cuius rei, nescio, et mirum, si non ipsius animi (*Confessiones*, XI, XXVI, 33).

Indeed, as long as we continue to consider time as physical, we will inevitably face the Aristotelian *aporia* of measuring something that either has no extension (the present) or simply is not here to be measured (the past and the future). It's true that no explicit reference to the philosopher of Stagira can be found in *Book XI* of the *Confessions*; but clearly an echo of "αριθμός κινήσεως κατά το πρότερον και το ύστερον" exists in Saint Augustine's work. The latter even seems to implicitly argue against one of Aristotle's most important tenets - when he appeals to the story of Jacob's fight with the Angel (cf. *Confessiones*, XI, XXIV, 31) in order to state that time is not (determined by) the movement of celestial bodies.

All in all, Augustine's most important discovery is that time can be conceived not as the sum of physical past, present and future, but as the coexistence of three dimensions or states of our mind/ soul:

> Quod autem nunc liquet et claret, nec futura sunt nec praeterita, nec proprie dicitur: tempora sunt tria, praeteritum, praesens et futurum, sed fortasse proprie diceretur: tempora sunt tria, praesens de preteritis, praesens de praesentibus, praesens de futuris. Sunt enim haec in anima tria quedam et alibi ea non video, praesens de praeteritis memoria, praesens de praesentibus contuitus, praesens de futuris expectatio. Si haec permittimur dicere, tria tempora video fateroque, tria sunt (Confessiones, XI, XX, 26).

Memory, contemplation (or perception) and expectation are, then, the Augustinian dimensions of time. The conceptual consequences of this radical change in vision are immense... so surprising, in fact, that even though an entire book (XI) of the *Confessions* (probably the most read of the author's books) is explicitly dedicated to the relation between time and eternity, this part of Augustine's thought was little discussed and left almost no trace in our continent's philosophical history.

Incredible as it may seem, Europe had to wait for more than one and a half millennia before the advent of other crucial works concerning the matter: Kant published his first edition of the *Kritik der reinen Vernunft* in 1781; Bergson's *Essai sur les données immediates de la conscience* appeared in 1889; Husserl's

[12] Paul Ricoeur calls Augustine's thesis on the nature of time "psychological", as opposed to the ones of Aristotle (who admitted the role played by a "soul" of some kind in the perception of movement, but in the end chose to base all his theory on the primal movement of the sphere of fixed stars) and Plotin (who referred to a soul of the world/ universe, not to the human, individual mind) - Cf. Ricoeur 1983/1984: 6.

BDD-A26425 © 2016 Editura Universităţii „Alexandru Ioan Cuza”
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.58 (2026-11-16 20:50:53 UTC)

lectures on the internal conscience of time, although given, at the University of Göttingen, during the first years of the 20th Century, were only printed[13] in 1928 - in an edition compiled by Heidegger, who, in his turn, had published, one year earlier, his famous *Sein und Zeit*.

Saint Augustine's influence on each of these thinkers is huge; one would need volumes to discuss it. What can be done here is mention only one, probably the most spectacular, of the developments made possible by the concept of time sketched in the *Confessions*. Within Heidegger's phenomenology, one of the main characteristics of the *Dasein* is transcendence[14] - which manifests itself primarily as temporality. It's only to those of us who live inauthentically that past, present and future appear as pre-given dimensions, exterior to the human subject and chronologically linked such that we (and the events that "happen" to us) pass from one of these realms to the next one: future becomes present and then past, or, in reverse, past influences present, which in its turn decides upon future. For the authentically existing *Dasein*, the three dimensions of time are in fact qualitative modes of our *ek-stasis*[15], of our being-outside-of-ourselves. This means that no "thing" (object or event) which is future can ever become present or past, in as much as being future means pertaining integrally, fundamentally, essentially to expectation, volition, care/ concern (Heidegger's famous *Sorge*).

Nowhere is the idea of time as a unilinear, pre-given dimension, external to (human) existence more criticised than within this type of phenomenology. Of course, there are important distinctions between Heidegger's and Augustine's views, a prominent difference consisting in the phenomenologist's refusal to discuss the concepts of time and temporality in relation to (the concept of) eternity.

From human signs to Holy Scripture and back

It's only at the end of the XIXth/ beginning of the XXth century that philosophers and scientists begin discussing the link between human signs and signification, on one side, and the human (concept of) time on the other side. Charles Sanders Peirce, the brilliant founder of Pragmatics and (modern) Semiotics, explicitly correlated[16] the use of symbols (as conventional, artificial signs) with the rational programming and development of future - the dimension of

[13] Edmund Husserl, *Vorlesungen zur Phänomenologie des inneren Zeitbewußtseins*, herausgegeben von Martin Heidegger, in "Jahrbuch für Philosophie und phänomenologische Forschung", Bd IX., 367-498 (in our bibliography: Husserl 1928/2000).

[14] Cf. Heidegger 1927/1996, # 69 (*The Temporality of Being-in-the-World and the Problem of the Transcendence of the World*).

[15] Cf. Heidegger 1927/1996, # 65 (*Temporality as the Ontological Meaning of Care*).

[16] Peirce's crucial "pragmatic maxim" states that a symbol's meaning (a concept's "intellectual purport" - cf. Peirce CP 5.438) does not consist of the objects and events already, empirically, existent that the sign "stands for", but is the totality of reasonable actions that the members of a given community accomplish because of the existence of the sign (or because they believe in the existence/ manifestation of the sign's object). In fact, it is impossible to reason otherwise than by using symbols ("omne symbolum de symbolo" - Peirce CP 2.302).

BDD-A26425 © 2016 Editura Universităţii „Alexandru Ioan Cuza”
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.58 (2026-11-16 20:50:53 UTC)

time which, in this scientist's view, is by far the most important. Edmund Husserl, in his pre-phenomenological lectures dedicated to the *innere Zeitbewußtsein*, saw signs as tools which we, humans, use in order to artificially extend our treatment of time (as past, present, future) far beyond our primary, authentic, intuitive grasp of it (which is actually "made of" retention, live presence [*lebendige Selbstgegenwart*[17]] and protention[18]). Also, as it is well known, a whole line of thinkers, mainly preoccupied with hermeneutics and/ or the philosophy of culture (Schleiermacher, Dilthey, Cassirer, Gadamer, Ricoeur, etc.) discussed the importance of the concept of *history* - including the distinction and relation between *Geschichte* and *Historie*.

Personally (I must confess, in the manner which we all learned from the author of *De Magistro*), having to teach, among other theories of signs, Augustine's semiotics, I have constantly searched his works in order to find there explicit and, if possible, systematic correlations between these two fields - the use of signs (especially words) and our understanding of time. But at least for now, my opinion is that, if we can indeed point to such correlations, this is rather the result of our reading-between-the-lines, in the light of more modern discoveries and theories - like the ones above-mentioned.

Paul Ricoeur, for instance, opens one of his most famous works, *Time and Narrative*, precisely with an analysis of the *Confessions*, *Book XI*. Fully familiarized with (and a promoter of) both phenomenology and hermeneutics, the French philosopher insists that in Saint Augustine's view, too, human experience re-enforced by signs (especially words) plays a fundamental role both in the part of the Book where the idea of a threefold present hasn't been yet announced and after the re-defining of time as memory, attention and expectation:

> It is remarkable that it is language usage that provisionally provides the resistance to the thesis of nonbeing. We speak of time and we speak meaningfully about it, and this shores up an assertion about the being of time (Ricoeur 1983/1984: 7).
>
> Augustine will at first appear to turn his back on this certainty that it is the past and the future that we measure. Later, by placing the past and the future within the present, by bringing in memory and expectation, he will be able to rescue this initial certainty from its apparent disaster by transferring onto expectation and onto memory the idea of a long future and a long past. But this certainty of language, of experience, and of action will only be recovered after it has been lost and profoundly transformed (Ricoeur 1983/1984: 8).
>
> What is it, then, that holds firm against the onslaughts of skepticism? As always, it is experience, articulated by language and enlightened by the intelligence (Ricoeur 1983/1984: 9).

[17] This concept remains central for Husserl's phenomenology, up to the #7 in his first *Cartesian Meditation* (*cf.* Husserl 1931/1994: 53).

[18] Cf. # 12 and # 24 in Husserl 1928/2000.

BDD-A26425 © 2016 Editura Universităţii „Alexandru Ioan Cuza”
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.58 (2026-11-16 20:50:53 UTC)

From my point of view, it is not important if these ideas were in Augustine's mind when he was writing his *Confessions*, or are just a result of our XXIst-century reading. To my eyes, due to my personal and cultural history, their presence in the text is undeniable.

Furthermore, I find Ricoeur's thesis metaphorically suitable for characterizing all of Augustine's work: indeed, signs and words cannot themselves induce a conversion, a shift in perspective or a revolution in thought. But once somebody has gone through the change, he or she can use signs in order to draw other people's attention (again: *admonere*) on the whole process, with all the things, events and, yes, ideas involved in it.

In Augustine's case, we know that the transformation was twofold - existential and cultural; and these facets of his personality took turns in influencing one another. For instance, he was very skeptical towards Christianity, during his manichean "phase" - but the influence of both his mother, Monica and of Ambrose, the Bishop of Milan helped him surpass this difficult (and quite long) period. Also, after the miraculous moment of his conversion, he seems to have been, at least for a while, totally disenchanted with the theory and practice of signs - especially with Rhetoric. But afterwards again, he was to discover a domain of texts - mainly, the Holy Scriptures - in which the very source of the signs was not merely human, but eminent, divine; so he started using his "old" knowledge of signs in order to debate and teach theological matters.

Conclusions

There are very few marks of an explicit connection, in Saint Augustine's thought, between the problem of signs and the one of time. Apparently, they simply represent two marginal developments - compared to the author's main, clerical-theological work; and the relation between them is aleatory. But later developments in semiotics and philosophy (especially in pragmatics, phenomenology and modern hermeneutics) create favorable circumstances for a re-examination of the matter itself.

In this re-thinking, from our present point of view, Saint Augustine's ideas - notably his revolutionary conception of time - will undoubtedly play a major role, continuing to bring a supplement of meaning even more productive now, than in the moment of their conception.

Bibliography:

Works by Saint Augustine:

De Dialectica (approx. 384 or 387-391) = Augustinus Hipponensis, *De Dialectica*, http://www.augustinus.it/latino/dialettica/index2.htm (July 01, 2016)

De Magistro (389) = Augustinus Hipponensis, *De Magistro liber unus*, http://www.augustinus.it/latino/maestro/index.htm (June 30, 2016)

Confessiones (397-400) = Augustinus Hipponensis, *Confessionum libri tredecim*, http://www.augustinus.it/latino/confessioni/index2.htm (July 01, 2016)

BDD-A26425 © 2016 Editura Universităţii „Alexandru Ioan Cuza”
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.58 (2026-11-16 20:50:53 UTC)

De Doctrina Christiana (396 Books I-III; 426 Book IV) = Augustinus Hipponensis, *De Doctrina Christiana libri quatuor*,
http://www.augustinus.it/latino/dottrina_cristiana/index2.htm (July 2, 2016)

Works by other authors:

Coseriu 1951/1995 = Eugenio Coseriu, *Introducere în lingvistică*, Editura Echinox, Cluj, 1995

Coseriu 1969/2003 = Eugenio Coseriu, *Geschichte der Sprachphilosophie. Von die Anfängen bis Rousseau*, A. Francke Verlag, Tübingen und Basel, 2003

Coseriu 1980 = Eugenio Coseriu, Jörn Albrecht, *Textlinguistik: eine Einführung*, Gunter Narr, Tübingen, 1980

Coseriu 1988/1992 = Eugenio Coseriu, *Competencia lingüística. Elementos de la teoría del hablar*, Editorial Gredos, Madrid, 1992

Humboldt 1835/2008 = Wilhelm von Humboldt, *Über die Verschiedenheiten des menschlichen Sprhachbaues und ihren Einfluß auf die geistige Entwicklung des Menschengeschlechts*, in *Schriften zur Sprache, Zweitausendeins, Frankfurt am Main*, 2008

Husserl 1928/2000 = Edmund Husserl, *Vorlesungen zur Phänomenologie des inneren Zeitbewußtseins*, Max Niemeyer Verlag, Tübingen, 2000

Husserl 1931/1944 = Edmund Husserl, *Meditaţii carteziene. O introducere în fenomenologie*, Editura Humanitas, Bucureşti, 1994

Heidegger 1927/1996 = Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, State University of New York, 1996

Meier-Oeser 2011 = Stephan Meier-Oeser, *Medieval Semiotics*, in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2011 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2011/entries/semiotics-medieval (June 20, 2016)

Munteanu 1995 = Eugen Munteanu, *Introducere*, in Sfîntul Augustin, *De Magistro/ Despre Învăţător*, Editura Institutului European, Iaşi, 1995, p. 5-48

Munteanu 2003 = Eugen Munteanu, *Introducere*, in Augustin, *De Dialectica*, Ediţia a II-a revizuită, Editura Humanitas, Bucureşti, p. 7-32

Peirce CP = Charles Sanders, *[The] Collected Papers* [of Charles Sanders Peirce], electronic edition, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press. [volume 2, Elements of Logic, 1932; volume 4, The Simplest Mathematics, 1933; volume 5, Pragmatism and Pragmaticism, 1934; volume 8, Reviews, Correspondence, and Bibliography, 1958]

Ricoeur 1983/1984 = Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, Volume 1, The University of Chicago Press, 1984

Saussure 1916/1997 = Ferdinand de Saussure, *Cours de linguistique générale*, Éditions Payot & Rivages, Paris, 1997

BDD-A26425 © 2016 Editura Universităţii „Alexandru Ioan Cuza”
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.58 (2026-11-16 20:50:53 UTC)