

**BRIDGING THE HUMAN AND THE DIVINE  
THE GRAMMAR, ONTOLOGY AND MODE  
OF LANGUAGE IN AUGUSTINE'S  
CONVERSATION OF OSTIA (*CONF. 9.24*)**

**Introduction<sup>1</sup>**

The fracturing of language at Babel<sup>2</sup> is one of the defining events which, for Augustine, gives language its current *fallen* characteristics and limitations. But does the *fallen* state of language necessarily imply that language creates a chiasm rather than a bridge between the human and the divine? And if so, is language used in vain to invoke God? The role of language in Augustine's Ostia ascent narrative (*conf. 9.24*<sup>3</sup>) provides an

---

<sup>1</sup> This paper constitutes a substantially modified version of the proceedings from the pre-arranged panel organized for the North American Patristics Society (NAPS) held in Chicago on May 2017. The panel was entitled "Augustine on Language as a Bridge to the Divine: A Case Study in the *motus of conversio* in *Confessions IX.24*". The three papers delivered, which make up each of the three main parts of this article, were "*Per the Humanity of Your Word*": *The Language of Augustine's Theological Prepositions in the motus of the "Interior" conversio*" by Guinevere Rallens from Oxford University, "*Augustine on the Language of formae Christi (in Phil 2:6-7) and the visio Dei as the motus of the "Superior" conversio*" by Pablo Irizar from KU Leuven; and "*The School of the Heart*": *Humble Language and the motus of the "Exterior" conversio of Augustine*" by Charles Kim from the University of St. Louis. The substantially reworked form of this paper benefited from the audience's input during the discussion panel at NAPS. Special thanks go to Aäron Vanspauwen (KU Leuven) who kindly offered detailed feedback on the use of Latin. The article was originally written in English, but it was first published in the Spanish translation by Enrique A. Eguarte, as *Uniendo lo humano y lo divino. La gramática, ontología y la forma del lenguaje en la conversación de Agustín en Ostia (conf. 9, 24)*", in *Augustinus*, 2018-1 (63) 115-136.

<sup>2</sup> See, Gen 11:1-9.

<sup>3</sup> «Cumque ad eum finem sermo perduceretur, ut carnalium sensuum delectatio quanta libet in quanta libet luce corporea prae illius vitae iucunditate non comparatione, sed ne commemoratione quidem digna videretur, erigentes nos ardentiore affectu

interesting case-study to address these important questions. The passage reads as follows:

And so, since the *sermo* [conversation] was being drawn toward that point, where it seemed that the delight of the carnal senses –no matter how full, no matter how clearly grasped with corporeal light – did not seem worthy of comparison, nor even of remembrance compared to the joy of the saints' eternal life, Rousing ourselves by a more burning affection, into *id ipsum* we walked, step by step, through all bodily things and the sky itself, where sun and moon and stars shine over the earth. And still we ascended interiorly by pondering and speaking and marvelling at your works, and we came into our minds and also transcended them so that we might touch the region of unfailing fruitfulness, where you pasture Israel in eternity with truth for food. There, life is wisdom, through whom all these things are made, and all things which have been, and all which in the future will be – and this life, this wisdom is not becoming, but thus it *is*, as it was, and thus it will always be. More accurately, it is not really of this life/wisdom *to have been* and *to be in the future*, but rather only *to be*, since it is eternal: for to have been, and to be in the future is not eternal. And while we are speaking and gazing/listening/attending longingly to this, we lightly touch it with a whole striking out of our heart; and we sighed, and we left behind the first fruits of the spirit, bound there in that place, and we returned to the cacophony of our mouths, where verbs both begin and end. And what is like your word, our Lord, remaining in itself without age and yet restoring all things<sup>4</sup>.

Two general lines of interpretation on the function of language in the Ostia ascent can be identified. For some, «language snatches away the

---

in id ipsum perambulavimus gradatim cuncta corporalia et ipsum caelum, unde sol et luna et stellae lucent super terram. Et adhuc ascendebamus interiorius cogitando et loquendo et mirando opera tua et venimus in mentes nostras et transcendimus eas, ut attingeremus regionem ubertatis indeficientis, ubi pascis Israel in aeternum veritate pabulo, et ibi vita sapientia est, per quam fiunt omnia ista, et quae fuerunt et quae future sunt, et ipsa non fit, sed sic est, ut fuit, et sic erit semper. Quin potius fuisse et futurum esse non est in ea, sed esse solum, quoniam aeterna est; nam fuisse et futurum esse non est aeternum. Et dum loquimur et inhiamus illi, attingimus eam modice toto ictu cordis; et suspiravimus et reliquimus ibi religatas primitias spiritus et remeavimus ad strepitum oris nostri, ubi verbum et incipitur et finitur. Et quid simile Verbo tuo, Domino nostro, in se permanenti sine vetustate atque innovanti omnia?».

<sup>4</sup> Translated from the Latin by G. Rallens.

‘spiritual harvest’ of the vision [of God]»<sup>5</sup>. In a similar vein, the vision of God is contrasted by others with the «sinking back into language»<sup>6</sup>. In other words, according to this first line of interpretation language creates a chiasm rather than a bridge between the human and the divine. In contrast, scholars like Brian Stock compare the Ostia ascent to the *canticum graduum* of the Psalms, noting that «[t]he medium through which the pair’s ascent takes place is human language»<sup>7</sup>. According to this second line of interpretation, though fractured, language does not create a chiasm but rather a bridge between the human and the divine.

By identifying and intertextually analyzing three facets of the function of language in *conf.* 9.24, namely the grammatical, the ontological, and the modal, the present study aims at substantiating the second line of interpretation. Part one explores Augustine’s use of the expression *per uerbum* (Jn. 1:1-15) in order to analyze the relationship between human and divine *grammar* of language. Part two analyzes the *ontological* function of language as a mechanism of mediation by showing that the ascent in *conf.* 9.24 is similar to the structure of manifestation evident in the transition from *forma dei* to *forma serui* (Phil. 2:6-7) in Augustine’s *s.* 264. Finally, part three shows that Augustine conversion from the *schola superbiae* of rhetoric pride to the humility of the *schola pectoris* implicitly makes the *mode* of language a precondition for ascent in *conf.* 9.24. As such, the three facets of language, namely the ontological, grammatical and modal, function in *conf.* 9.24 to unite, mediate and transform the human experience of the divine.

## The Grammar of Language and Union

*Conf.* 9.24 is infused with Jn. 1:1-3’s language of Christ as the *uerbum* of God, *per quod omnia facta sunt*<sup>8</sup>. Augustine often uses this quote

<sup>5</sup> See, e.g. *civ.* 15.4-6 and *De Gen. c. Man.* 2, 4, 5-5, 6.

<sup>6</sup> J. B. RUSSELL, *A History of Heaven: The Singing Silence*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 1997, p. 10.

<sup>7</sup> B. STOCK, *Augustine the Reader: Meditation, Self-Knowledge, and Ethics of Interpretation*, The Belknap Press of Harvard University, Cambridge 1996, p. 118. See, *sermo* in *conf.* 9.14 and *dum loquimur* in *conf.* 9.27.

<sup>8</sup> The similarities between *conf.* 9.24 and, for instance, *Trin.* 4.1.3, where the reliance on John 1 is much more overt, also help confirm Johannine echoes in *conf.* 9.24:

to distinguish between the *uerbum hominis* and the *uerbum dei*<sup>9</sup>. As an adjectival clause modifying the *uerbum dei*, it differentiates the Word «by whom all things were created» from the human language, by which all things were subsequently confused<sup>10</sup>.

This section considers the presence and function of Jn. 1:1-3 in *conf.* 9.24. Since Augustine himself suggests that the preposition *per* is a scriptural clue to differentiating the *uerbum dei* and the *uerbum hominis*, the question arises: what is the role of *per* in relationship to *uerbum*<sup>11</sup>? The Johannine Word *per quod omnia facta sunt* in *conf.* 9.24 provokes a broader range of possible answers to the question which concludes the passage: *et quid simile uerbo tuo*<sup>12</sup>. Following Maria Boulding, who translates this as an exclamation<sup>13</sup> – how *different* from your Word, our Lord – *conf.* 9.24 is often read as simply another Augustinian acknowl-

---

«Quia igitur unum est uerbum dei per quod facta sunt omnia, quod est incommutabilis ueritas ubi principaliter atque incommutabiliter sunt omnia simul, non solum quae nunc sunt in hac uniuersa creatura, uerum etiam quae fuerunt et quae futura sunt; ibi autem nec fuerunt nec futura sunt sed tantummodo sunt; et omnia uita sunt et omnia unum sunt et magis unum est et una est uita. Sic enim omnia per ipsum facta sunt ut quidquid factum est in his, in illo uita sit; et facta non sit quia in principio non factum est uerbum, sed erat uerbum, et uerbum erat apud deum, et deus erat uerbum, et omnia per ipsum facta sunt; nec per ipsum omnia facta essent nisi ipsum esset ante omnia factumque non esset».

<sup>9</sup> Cf., *Io. ev. tr.* 1.8-9 (CCSL 36).

<sup>10</sup> The fracturing of language at Babel is one of the defining events which, for Augustine, gives language its current fallen and limited characteristics. See, e.g. *civ.* 15.4-6 and *De Gen. c. Man.* 2, 4, 5-5, 6.

<sup>11</sup> Cf., *Io. ev. tr.* 1.6 (CCSL 36).

<sup>12</sup> The question “what is similar” expressed as *quid simile*, followed by an ablative, and with an implied verb is not an abnormal phrase in good Latinitas (see, e.g. Cic. Div. II.65, Fam. 9.21, Orat. II.40). The phrase does not seem to normally suggest an exclamatory vs. interrogative (or even rhetorical question). Cf. *doct. chr.* 4.13.30: «O vere secures concidens petras! Huic enim rei simile esse uerbum suum, quod per sanctos Prophetas fecit, per hunc ipsum Prophetam Deus ipse dixit».

<sup>13</sup> From a purely grammatical standpoint an exclamatory vs. an interrogative sense could be a valid translation, but then would read: “How *similar* to your word, Oh Lord!”.

edgement of the ontological chasm separating the Word of God from human language<sup>14</sup>, which is noted just prior in the passage<sup>15</sup>.

As is customary in Augustine, *conf.* 9.24 does indeed note two genres of language: the finite *verbum* of man which ends and begins, and the eternal *verbum* of God<sup>16</sup>. But when does the *human* conversation between Augustine and Monica begin – and, most crucially – end in this passage? Where exactly do the boundaries lie between these human words and the *uerbum dei*? What if *quid simile uerbo tuo*? is meant to be read as a simple interrogative, as well as a rhetorical question (let alone an exclamation)?

Before turning to intertextual insights, we must acknowledge how difficult these questions are to answer in the original Latin of *conf.* 9.24<sup>17</sup>. First, it is usually assumed that Monica and Augustine fell silent before reaching the summit of the Ascent<sup>18</sup>. For one thing, *conf.* 9.24 is pervaded by the familiar perpetual sense of motion through and beyond

<sup>14</sup> See, e.g. E. DE MIJOLLA, *Autobiographical Quests: Augustine, Montaigne, Rousseau, and Wordsworth*, University Press of Virginia, Charlottesville 1994, p. 34-35: «Language snatches away the ‘spiritual harvest’ of the ‘vision’, but Augustine continues to struggle with it to explain what could only be ‘reached out’ to and ‘touched’ beyond his and his mother’s own souls [...]. Paradoxes abound: language that takes place in time takes Augustine and Monica beyond time; and talk that sounds aloud is the medium for their apprehension of silence in eternity (God’s voice mutes into vision); and eternity that endures is glimpsed only in an “instant of understanding,” “brief,” “fleeting.” But paradoxes are integral to the human condition [...]». J. B. RUSSEL, *A History of Heaven: The Singing Silence*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 1997, p. 10: «Augustine... [describes] his return from the vision as a sinking back into language and time, ‘with their beginnings and endings».

<sup>15</sup> Cf. *conf.* 9.24: «*strepitu moris nostris, ubi verbum et incipitur et finitur*».

<sup>16</sup> It is clear that both human language – *sermo, loqui, verba*, etc – and the word of the Lord power the ascent to the Vision of Ostia. This is already in contrast with the typical neoplatonic ascents, like those to which Chadwick directs us in his footnotes, where the Ascent happens alone (instead of in conversation) and silently. The point could be made that simply having language as part of the ascent at all makes it biblical.

<sup>17</sup> The ambiguities and obscurities of the original Latin are necessarily interpreted in translation, as we have seen in M. BOULDING.

<sup>18</sup> See, e.g. see J. P. KENNEY, *Mysticism and Contemplation in Augustine’s Confessions*, in *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Christian Mysticism*, J. A. Lamm ed., John Wiley & Sons, Chichester 2017, p. 198: «Augustine and Monica move beyond their own speech into silence, into the quietude of wisdom, because of that divine presence».

corporeal things (*perambulauimus... cuncta corporalia; ascendebamus interius; uenimus in mentes nostras et transcendimus eas*). The pair are said to «return to the cacophony of our mouths» only *after* having relinquished the Vision (*reliquimus ibi religatas primitias spiritus*); therefore, it would seem, they must have stopped speaking to each other at some prior point. Finally, this uncomplimentary depiction of their return to a cacophony (*strepitum*) of human words is punctuated, as we have seen by the question «what is similar to your word, Oh Lord?» which, Boulding's extreme translation aside, at the very least suggests a stark gulf between the *uerbum dei* and *uerbum hominis*<sup>19</sup>.

This reading indicates that the *uerbum* of John 1 reappears in *conf.* 9.24 to underscore the chasm between the divine word, or *sapientia*<sup>20</sup> (which is glimpsed in the Ascent) and the human word (which necessarily falls silent at some point before the summit of the Ascent).

However, the opposite case could be made from the text with equal strength, primarily because *dum loquimur* – particularly given the first-person plural – seems unlikely to refer to anything other than the *sermo* carried on between Monica and Augustine. The whole Ascent takes place *loquendo* (by means of, or through, or while speaking) and *dum loquimur* (while we are conversing). Even if *loquendo* happened to be some sort of silent, unspoken interior conversation<sup>21</sup>, *dum loquimur*,

---

<sup>19</sup> Regarding the 'sermo' which *ad eum finem perduceretur*: the imperfect subjunctive suggests that the scene takes place *as* the 'sermo' is being drawn to the 'finem,' but does not specify that it ceases. Even more importantly, 'finem' in this construction 'ad eum finem' is more suggestive of the conversation reaching a certain crucial or telic point rather than a conclusion.

<sup>20</sup> Especially in Christological contexts, for Augustine, *sapientia* and *verbum* are coextensive names for the Son. See P. H. BURTON, *Language in the Confessions of Augustine*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2007, p. 80-82; and D. W. JOHNSON, *Verbum in the Early Augustine (386-397)*, in *Recherches Augustiniennes et Patristiques*, 8 (1972) 36-42.

<sup>21</sup> In the phrase «*ascendebamus interius cogitando et loquendo et mirando opera tua*», a case could be made that *interius* modifies all three gerunds, and thus the conversation (*loquendo*) is some sort of interior, silent colloquy rather than a continuation of the conversation between mother and son. However, it is equally likely that *interius* either modifies only *ascendebamus* (which would be most grammatically appropriate, following Cicero and Quintillian, as an adverb), or only modifies *cogitando* (which would make sense, since *cogitatio* is something that takes place interiorly). There is no

which is underscored by a sudden switch to present/*praesens historicum* seems to insist that the conversation continues throughout the Ascent. The whole phrase *et dum loquimur et inhiamus illi, attingimus eam modice toto ictu cordis*, is carried by these three verbs in present/*praesens historicum*, and this continuous time is intensified by the *et ... et* construction, which helps to emphasize that «barely touching it [eam, the vision of the life which is wisdom] with a great leap of the heart» happens at the same time as the “speaking” and the “inhaling” of that vision (if vision is the best word for it)<sup>22</sup>.

In *conf.* 9.24, then, the Johannine *uerbum dei* and mother and son’s *strepitumoris nostri, ubi uerbum et incipitur et finitur* cannot be separated as neatly as Boulding (*et. al.*) suggests<sup>23</sup>. To better understand the relationship between these genres of *uerba* in *conf.* 9.24 it will now be helpful to revisit Augustine’s analysis of the types of *uerba* in Tractatus 1 (c. 406/407) and a few other key passages.

*quale uerbum est cogitandum: ‘per uerbum’, et tunc cognoscas quale sit uerbum ... quis explicat uerbis ornatum caeli? quis explicat uerbis fecunditatem terrae? ... uidetis quae taceam ... quale uerbum est per quod facta est: et non sola facta est ... per illud uerbum et angeli facti sunt; per illud uerbum et archangeli facti sunt; potestates, sedes, dominationes, principatus; per illud uerbum facta sunt omnia: hinc cogitate quale uerbum est*<sup>24</sup>.

Here and elsewhere in his exegesis of John 1, Augustine does seem to insist that *uerbum dei* and *uerbum hominis* function merely as homonyms: the shared name serves purely to exacerbate their disparity. Here

---

reason to think that *interius* qualifies either *mirando* (which is directed outward toward ‘God’s works’) nor that *loquendo* suddenly means something other than the *sermo* between Augustine and Monica, which is what *loqui* refers to throughout this passage.

<sup>22</sup> There is no way of getting around the fact that *dum loquimur* emphasizes that both *inhiamus* and *attingimus* happen “while we are speaking”, and there is no reason to assume this type of *loqui* is different from the speech (*sermo*) in which Monica and Augustine have been engaging up to this point.

<sup>23</sup> Neither, in the same vein, can the possibility that the entire ascent took place by means of their conversation (*loquendo*) and while they were speaking (*dum loquimur*) be ruled out.

<sup>24</sup> Cf. *Io. ev. tr.* 1.6 (CCSL 36).



Augustine uses grammatical forms to underscore the distinction between the two genres of words. The human *uerbis* are expressed with a bare ablative, while the *uerbum dei* is expressed in a prepositional *per* phrase. Augustine suggests that the particle *per* is a clue given by John to clarify how the *uerbum dei* differs from the *uerbum humanum*: «Quale uerbum est cogitandum: per uerbum, et tunc cognosces quale sit uerbum».

Augustine's choice to distinguish the actions/effects that happen because of *uerbis* (bare ablative) from the operations that take place *per uerbum* is partly grounded in the rules of good Latinitas, which insist that a human agent/instrument may not be expressed with the bare ablative<sup>25</sup>. In this passage, then, *per* highlights the personhood of the *uerbum*, the Son of God, and emphasizes the difference between this word, *per* which the entire cosmos was created, and the *uerbis* of men, which fail to even *describe* this cosmos. Augustine returns to this *per* clause from John 1 repeatedly throughout his corpus to describe how all things were made by or through the Word<sup>26</sup>.

However, though *per* in these variations of Jn 1.1-3 functions as a marker by which the *uerbum Dei* is distinguished from the bare ablative of the *uerbis hominis*, Augustine also regularly uses the *per uerbum* construction to specifically mark an agent/instrumental function of the *uerbum hominis*. Since *dial.* (c. 387) Augustine has employed variations of the *per uerbum* clause not only to specify the creative action of the Word of God, but just as frequently to designate the communicative process of human language<sup>27</sup>.

In these constructions, *per* is not strictly necessary: the bare ablative would indicate just as well that words are the instruments by which something is communicated. Indeed, Augustine uses the bare ablative

---

<sup>25</sup> It is permissible to say, e.g. *libro* [pure ablative] *canere didici* and *per illum librum canere didici*; it is only permissible to say *per magistrum canere didici*, because a 'book' is an object while a 'teacher' is a person. It is not acceptable to say *magistro* [pure ablative] *canere didici*.

<sup>26</sup> See, e.g. *trin.* 4.1.3, *doctr. chr.* 1.38, *En. Ps.* 103.4, s. 117.

<sup>27</sup> Cf. *per uerbum accepto signo animus* (*dial.* 7); *per litterationem discamus ... per grammaticam et syllabarum moras* (*ord.* 12.35-36); *per uerba quae dicta sunt* (*mag.* 0.35); *per locutionem aliquanta cogitatio loquentis apparet* (*mag.* 14); *res per signa discuntur* and *homines per homines discunt* (*doctr. chr. pr.* 6).



frequently to express precisely this, as we have already seen in *Io. ev. tr.* 1<sup>28</sup>. In the *Ars Breviata* attributed to Augustine<sup>29</sup>, it is noted that there is a sense of the pure ablative that is so identical to a *per* clause, yet so nuanced in its meaning, that it deserves to be a separate case altogether: «sunt qui alium casum velint adiungere quem septimum uocant. Ut cum dicimus uirtute beatus et naui uectus id est per uirtutem et per nauem et similia» (*Ars Breviata Grammatica* 7.5). Though both are equally valid grammatically and though they mean the same thing (*uerbis* = *per uerba* = through, by means of words), Augustine prefers the prepositional phrase to the bare ablative when he wishes to bring what linguists have identified as the “foundational sense”<sup>30</sup> of *per* to bear on language:

<sup>28</sup> See, e.g. *doctr. chr. pr.* 7.1.2, 1.14; *mag.* 1.5; *conf.* 1.8.13, 1.17.27-28, 9.11.27.

<sup>29</sup> Vivien Law has thoroughly and convincingly argued that the *Ars Breviata* is indeed likely Augustine's. See V. LAW, *St Augustine's De Grammatica: Lost or Found?*, in *Recherches Augustiniennes et Patristiques*, 19 (1984) 155–83.

<sup>30</sup> For an excellent treatment of the standard and variant usages of *per* together with an excellent survey on the extant literature on early, classical, and Late Antique usage of prepositions and *per* in particular see: L. BRUCALE and E. MOCCIAIO, *Continuity and Discontinuity in the Semantics of the Latin Preposition per: A Cognitive Hypothesis*, in *STUF - Language Typology and Universals*, 64.2 (2011) 148-169. The particle *per* is generally held to share with most other Indo-European languages the root \*per(i) meaning to go through or over, communicating movement that passes through some space or area (cf. BRUCALE-MOCCIAIO, *Continuity and Discontinuity*, p. 150; POKORNY, 1959; ERNOUT-MEILLETE, 1959). See also *per* in the *Oxford Latin Dictionary*. The corpus of early, classical, and Late Antique Latin reveals that *per* generally signifies one or more of these 5 semantic ranges: 1. movement of a duration of time (e.g. *per quinque dies*: something happens through five days); 2. instrumentality (e.g. *per vim mulierem retinet*, he holds back the woman by force); 3. agency/means/manner (e.g. *per epistulam aut per nuntium*, by means of a letter, or through a messenger or *si quid dictum est per iocum*, if what is said is said as a joke); 4. so-called ‘appeal’, invocation, or direct address (*per Iovem!* by Juppiter!); and 5. judgment of licitness (e.g. *liceatne per vos?* Might you permit this?) As BRUCALE-MOCCIAIO, *Continuity and Discontinuity*, show, all these semantic usages originate from the foundational sense of *per* as motion through some sort of space. «The preposition typically structures this bounded space as a passageway, a channel, or a tunnel, i.e. in a continuous and linear fashion, stretching from one side to the other» (BRUCALE-MOCCIAIO, *Continuity and Discontinuity*, p. 151). *Per* was used to distinguish a type of motion (e.g. *per urbem*, through the [whole] city) in contrast with the bare ablative, which communicated both motion through and instrumentality (e.g. *ambulat via* – I am walking in the street, as opposed to *per viam* – I passed through the street). As BRUCALE-MOCCIA-

to specify that language (words, teaching, conversations, books, grammatical, dialectic, or rhetorical devices) is a vehicle which carries knowledge across the great gulf that stretches between *res* and the humans who must teach and learn about these *res per uerba*.

Augustine intensifies this “foundational sense” connotations in *per* by overtly juxtaposing *per* with other prepositions to distinguish that which is received *per* – through, or by means of – other people but *from* or *in* God (*de/ex/in deo*)<sup>31</sup>. In specifically linguistic contexts, *per* suggests moving *through* and *past* the *uerba* to an apprehension of the *res* themselves, whereas the bare ablative seems to put less emphasis on the transitory nature of human words. Numerous variations of this *per*-phrase seem to be the standard way in Augustine for qualifying how something is learnt or taught by means of *human* words, speech, conversation, teaching, or other form of language. See, for instance, *doctr. chr. pr.* 5 where Augustine describes how even Peter and Paul, who both received rare and privileged visions, must receive the *uerbum suum* (word of God) *per* the “ministrations” of human words, teaching and language.

---

RO, *Continuity and Discontinuity*, show through their analysis of early Latin, *per* came to be used to also express the passing through of *time* as well as space and also acquired a *telic* quality where *per* was increasingly used to expressing passing through space (or some metaphorical space) in order to reach some *goal* or obtain some object (BRUCALE-MOCCIANO, *Continuity and Discontinuity*, p. 154-155) (e.g. *mulier ad me transeat ... per hortum*, “the woman crossed over to me through the garden” Plautus, *Per.* 446 or *me huc prolicit per tenebras* “he drew me away here through the shadows”, Cato, *Curc.* 97). *Per* is always, BRUCALE-MOCCIANO, *Continuity and Discontinuity*, argue, used to indicate motion through a 2 or 3 dimensional space, and frequently to “imply boundaries being crossed”, as when a deity descends “*per caelum* (through the clouds) to earth”, or as Plautus amusingly describes in *Miles gloriosus* 29-30 where «your arm would have passed straight *per* the leather, *per* the entrails, and *per* the mouth of the elephant», emphasizing human arm passing into the body of the elephant.

<sup>31</sup> E.g., *conf.* 1.7: «Quod *ex* eis non, sed *per* eas erat; *ex* te nam bonum erat eis bonum meum *ex* eis, quod *ex* eis non sed *per* eas erat. *ex* te quippe bona omnia, deus, et *ex* deo meo salus mihi universa. quod animadverti post modum, clamante te mihi *per* haec ipsa quae tribuis intus et foris». (*conf.* 1.7): «This ‘good was given to them [too], that good which I received from them, because not out of (*ex*) them but through/by means of (*per*) them I was given these things; from/out of (*ex*) You, certainly, God, from (*ex*) my God, my universal health and wellbeing (*salus*)». See also *conf.* 11.28.37, 12.6.6, 12.13.16; *Io.ev.tr.* 23.15.

*Per*, then is not only a marker of the *uerbum dei* which defines the word of God by its creative power, but also a modifier of the *uerbum hominis*, in which context it seems to suggest a motion *per* (through and beyond) *uerba* towards intellectual apprehension of the realities signified by the words.

But for Augustine, in coming to modify the *uerbum dei*, the “foundational sense” of *per* (demonstrated as we saw above in Brucalè-Mocciaro, *Continuity and Discontinuity*) as motion *through* and beyond something, is merged with the Johannine sense. In *doctr. chr.* 1.38<sup>32</sup>, the familiar *per* – phrase from John reappears – *uerbum per quod omnia facta sunt*, immediately followed by the reminder that this *uerbum caro factum est*. Here Augustine once again employs contrasting prepositions to make his point. Not only is the Word the “way” *per* which one ascends to the Truth and the Life; he also is the truth *ad* which we journey, and *in* which we rest and remain: *hoc est per me uenitur, ad me peruenitur, in me permanetur*. In short succession in this passage, Augustine uses *per* to modify the *uerbum*, through whom all things were made; then of the *rebus temporalibus per* which *potius curramus alacriter ut ad ipsum*; and finally of the *uia* which Christ has made himself, *per* which we pass in our journey toward being spiritually recreated *per* the same word by which all things were originally created. Here the Johannine *per* merges with the *per* of Latinitas, simultaneously uniting the *uerbum dei* with the transitory *uerbum hominis*. This is the function *per* also effects in the opening paragraph of *conf.*, where two *per* clauses link the humanity of the divine Word (*per* which, not only all things were initially made, but by whose incarnation they were recreated) with the words of the human preacher. “It is my faith that calls upon you Lord,” Augustine exclaims, «which you gave me, which you breathed into me *per humanitatem filii tui, per ministerium praedicatoris tui*».

<sup>32</sup> *doctr. chr.* 1.38: «uide quemadmodum cum ipsa ueritas et ‘*uerbum*’, *per quod factasunt omnia*, ‘caro factum’ esset, ut habitaret ‘in nobis’ ... adgrediendum et exord-  
iendum iter est omnibus qui *ad* ueritatem peruenire et *in* uita aeterna permanere de-  
siderant. sic enim ait: ‘ego sum uia et ueritas et uita,’ hoc est *per* me uenitur, *ad* me  
peruenitur, *in* me permanetur ... ne rebus temporalibus, quamuis ab illo pro salute nos-  
tra susceptis et gestis, haereamus infirmiter, sed *per* eas potius curramus alacriter, ut ad  
eum ipsum, qui nostram naturam a temporalibus liberauit et conlocauit ad dexteram  
patris, prouehi atque peruehi mereamur».

The «word of the Lord, itself remaining without age» and thus *innovanti omnia* (recreating all things, which in the beginning were made *per istud uerbum*), is the same Word that took on flesh to dwell among us, the same word that was spoken *per* prophetas, apostles, the authors of the Scriptures, and the same word that now proceed not only from the mouth of God but of human *praedicatores*, including the mouths of Augustine and Monica in the Vision of Ostia. James O'Donnell suggests that *conf.* 9.24, often titled the “Vision at Ostia”, would better be called an “audition”<sup>33</sup>. Perhaps “the Conversation of Ostia” would also be an apt name. Regardless, however, of at which point – or whether – the human conversation ended in *conf.* 9.24, analyzing the function of the grammatical construction of *per uerbum* suggests, at least, that the Johannine echo in *conf.* 9.24 might allow human language to be that thing «which is similar to your Word, O Lord». And if they are similar, they are in a sense, at least grammatically, united.

### The Ontology of Language and Mediation

For words to be united to the Word, language functions at an ontological level to mediate the human and the divine, specifically in Augustine's analysis of the relationship between Christ's *forma dei* and *forma servi* (Phil 2:6-7). Differently put, the ontology of language mediates grammatical unity. This section offers an intertextual analysis of the concept of *forma* as used in Augustine's exegesis of Phil 2:6-7 in *s.* 264.4 and it argues that despite their divergent dating, genre, audience and context, aspects of the mechanism whereby *forma* mediates the ascent to the *uisio dei* in *s.* 264.4 are also operative in *conf.* 9.24<sup>34</sup>.

When taken in isolation, how language mediates the *uisio dei* in *conf.* 9.24 remains as cryptic as the content of the *uisio* itself. The closest Augustine gets to describing the *uisio dei* is (presumably), *ut attingeremus regionem ubertatis indeficientis ubi pascis Israel in aeternum veritate pabulo, et ibi vita sapientia est*<sup>35</sup>. Not without difficulty have commenta-

<sup>33</sup> J. O'DONNELL, , *Augustine Confessions*, Oxford 1992, notes on 9.24.

<sup>34</sup> Augustine wrote *conf.* in 397-398 while *s.* 264 is dated 413 or 420 (K, B, Be), available in PL 38, 1212-1218.

<sup>35</sup> For a standard English commentary of *conf.* see O'DONNELL, *Augustine Confessions*.

tors tried to explain how the Biblical allusion to Israel is integrated within the metaphorical place (signified by *region* and *ubi*) of inexhaustible wealth, where the life of wisdom *is*. Language functions on various levels in this retrospective narrative which weds rhetorics and psalmody within a neo-platonic framework of ascent. The question arises: how does human speech (*loquendo*) lead to vision (*mirando*) of the divine? The passage in question conveys a sense of transition, from the sensual to the intellectual, from exterior to interior, from carnal sight to spiritual sight and ultimately from the world to God. Within these transitions language mediates the process (*gradatio*) from one state to the other<sup>36</sup>. If it is true that the meaning of a text is at least partly grasped by intertextual considerations, then it is useful to look outside of *conf.* 9.24 for insight into how *gradation* occurs<sup>37</sup>. An intertextual analysis of Augustine's use of *forma dei/forma serui* (Phil. 2:6-7) in *s.* 164.4 offers a linguistic paradigm to explain how language mediates the *uisio dei* in *conf.* 9.24: from human speech (*loquendo*) to vision of the divine (*mirando*).

Following the parallel structure of vv. 6-7 in Phil 2, Augustine usually juxtaposes *forma dei* (or divinity) with *forma serui* (or humanity)<sup>38</sup>. When considered with Jn. 1:1-15, Phil. 2:6-7 gives rise to the idea that the pre-existent *forma dei* is united with the *forma serui* in the incarnation<sup>39</sup>. In the context of Phil. 2:6-7, the use of *forma* can be isolated and the matically classified according to five models<sup>40</sup>: (1) *forma* = image, (2) *forma* = visible appearance, (3) *forma* = origin, (4) *forma* = condition, (5) *forma* = invisible nature<sup>41</sup>. This classification puts into relief the diverse uses of *forma* and opens the possibility of using the semantic

<sup>36</sup> B. STOCK, *Augustine the Reader: Meditation, Self-Knowledge, and Ethics of Interpretation*, London 1996, p. 118.

<sup>37</sup> For the origin of the word "intertextuality" see J. KRISTEVA, *Desire in Language*, New York 1980, p. 69.

<sup>38</sup> For a thorough treatment of contemporary Biblical scholarship on Phil. 2:6-7, see R. P. MARTIN, *Carmen Christi: Philippians ii. 6-7 in recent interpretation and in the setting of early Christian worship*, Cambridge 1967.

<sup>39</sup> On the problem of pre-existence and v. 6 of Phil. 2, see MARTIN, *Carmen Christi*, p. 99-133.

<sup>40</sup> These models are largely based on D. JOWERS, *The meaning of MORPHE in Philippians 2:6-7*, in *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, 49/4 (2006) 739-66.

<sup>41</sup> For the rationale behind these models, see P. IRIZAR, '*forma*' in Augustine: a synthetic approach, unpublished.

overlap of these various uses as the basis for understanding how *forma dei* and *forma serui* function together within the *uisio dei*.

Although Augustine employs Phil. 2:6-7 in *c.* 32 passages within the context of the *uisio dei*<sup>42</sup>, commentators generally fail to identify the manifestation of the *forma dei* as an instance of the *uisio dei*. This is partly because scholars usually stress the pro-Nicene exegesis of Phil. 2:6-7, thereby failing to appreciate how Phil. 2:6-7 bears on related themes like the *uisio dei*<sup>43</sup>. Augustine's exegesis of Phil. 2:6-7 is central to discuss *uisio dei* in a variety of genres (including *sermones*, *epistulae*, theoretical works, pedagogical works, primarily-exegetical works<sup>44</sup>, and primarily-polemical works<sup>45</sup>), as early as 396 (*s.* 196) and as late as 405/415 (*Gn. litt.* 8.50)<sup>46</sup>. Augustine brings together *uisio dei* and Phil. 2:6-7 most often in the *sermones*<sup>47</sup>.

Of the thousands of *sermons* which Augustine delivered from the time of his ordination onward, well over 500 remain extant<sup>48</sup>. Roughly 17 out of 123 *sermones* contain citations or references to Phil. 2:6-7<sup>49</sup>, where the *uisio dei* is discussed within various feasts of the liturgical sea-

---

<sup>42</sup> The estimate is based on an identification of thematic elements related to *uisio dei* through a CAG and CDS search of "*uisio dei*" and "*forma dei, forma serui*". No distinction was made between citations and references.

<sup>43</sup> In fact, Augustine employs Phil. 2:6-7 to discuss the *uisio dei* in polemical as much as he does in non-polemical contexts.

<sup>44</sup> Cf. *cons. ev.* (CSEL 43) and *Gn. litt.* (BA 48, 49).

<sup>45</sup> Cf. anti-Manichean, anti-Pelagian and anti-Arian.

<sup>46</sup> This period is estimated based on the most probable dating of the *sermones* in question.

<sup>47</sup> *sermones* which discuss *uisio dei* in terms of Phil. 2:6-7 include *s.* 186, *s.* 187, *s.* 192, *s.* 196, *s.* 207, *s.* 213, *s.* 214, *s.* 223F, *s.* 223H, *s.* 223I, *s.* 229, *s.* 244, *s.* 264, *s.* 265, *s.* 265A, *s.* 265F and *s.* 270.

<sup>48</sup> The number is a rough estimate based of the available *sermones*, including the *sermones ad populum*, the *sermones nuper reperti* (Dolbeau and Erfurt) and *Io. ep. tr.* (PL 35) and *Io. ev. tr.* (CCSL 36).

<sup>49</sup> No distinction has been made between citations and references. Searches were carried out using and comparing the results of a CAG and CDS search in *sermones* for the entries: *forma, forma serui, forma dei*, and Phil. 2:6-7.



sons<sup>50</sup> between 396 (s. 196) and 420 (s. 264)<sup>51</sup>: 4x on Christmas day (s. 186, s. 187, s. 192 and s. 196), 3x during Lent (s. 207, s. 213 and s. 214), 3x on the Easter Vigil (s. 223F, s. 223H, s. 223I), 2x during Easter (s. 229 and s. 244), 4x on Ascension (s. 264, s. 265, s. 265A and s. 265F) and 1x on Pentecost (s. 270). In each case, the combination of the liturgical feast, polemical occasion and *orchestration scriptuaire*<sup>52</sup> shape Augustine's treatment of Phil 2.6-7 as a case of the *uisio dei*.

The 12 extant *sermones* on Ascension have Jn. 14:28 as their leading text and are often shaped by anti-Arian concerns. Even when Phil. 2:6-7 is not employed, in the Ascension *sermones* Augustine stresses the *continuity* of the body of Christ throughout his death, resurrection and ascension, as the condition for faith (*fides*): the sight of the body of Christ is transformed into *fides*. When Phil. 2:6-7 is employed in the Ascension *sermones* (s. 264, s. 265, s. 265A and s. 265F), *forma* functions to articulate the transformation from faith (*fides*) to cognition (*cogitatio*), which is at times a kind of *uisio*.

In s. 264.4<sup>53</sup>, Augustine tracks three moments in the passage from corporeal vision to the *cogitatio dei*. First, Christ remains with the dis-

---

<sup>50</sup> The understanding of the liturgical seasons during the time when Augustine was preaching in North Africa is largely based on Augustine's *sermones*. For a study of the liturgical calendar and the Biblical pericopes of the various liturgical seasons based on Augustine's *sermones* see, M. MARGONI-KÖGLER, *Die Perikopen im Gottesdienst bei Augustinus: ein Beitrag zur Erforschung der liturgischen Schriftlesung in der frühen Kirche*, Wien 2005. For a recent study on the thematic content of the *sermones* across liturgical season see A. DUPONT, *Preacher of Grace: a Critical Reappraisal of Augustine's Doctrine of Grace in his sermones ad populum on liturgical feasts and during the Donatist controversy*, Leiden 2014.

<sup>51</sup> The tentative dating based on scholarly consensus gives an interesting overview of the interval.

<sup>52</sup> The expression *orchestration scriptuaire* refers to the ensemble of recurring pericopes which Augustine uses within a given thematic context throughout various periods and genre. The expression, used as a criterion for dating originally, was coined by A.-M. LA BONNARDIÈRE, *Le Cantique des Cantiques dans l'oeuvre de saint Augustin*, in *Biblia Augustiniana Ancient Testament*, fascicule 18, p. 225-237. Available online, Internet (01.09.2019):

[http://www.patristique.org/sites/patristique.org/IMG/pdf/55\\_i\\_3\\_02.pdf](http://www.patristique.org/sites/patristique.org/IMG/pdf/55_i_3_02.pdf).

<sup>53</sup> The leading scriptural text for the discussion is Jn. 14:28: «Si diligereis me, gauderetis, quia vado ad Patrem; quoniam Pater maior me est».



ciples in the flesh after the resurrection in order to reassure the disciples and to strengthen their faith. Had Christ not remained for some time before Ascending, the carnal affection the disciples had for Christ would have turned into fear<sup>54</sup>. Second, the physical presence of Christ is removed from the gaze of the apostles so as to dispatch their carnal desire for the *forma serui*<sup>55</sup>. Third, the *cogitatio* of the *forma dei* is located inside (*intus*), thereby constituting a shift from the exterior *forma serui* to the interior dwelling of Christ in the human heart<sup>56</sup>. These stages identify the *forma serui* as the object of corporeal sight and the *forma serui* as the apprehension of the *forma dei*.

The *forma dei* is achieved by the mediatory function of *forma*<sup>57</sup>. In phase one, *forma* functions as an external, material obstruction to the divine. In phase three, *forma* is the presence, as *cogitatio*, of the immaterial divinity of Christ in the interior. It is in phase two that *forma* mediates the dialectic between concealing (in phase one) and revealing (in phase two). Presence is mediated by absence in such a way that absence becomes an “interiorly filling” kind of presence. In phase two, Christ reveals his divinity through his absence.

A similar mechanism whereby *forma* mediates presence through absence is operative in *conf.* 9.24. The term *forma* appears 17x in *conf.* As a noun, *forma* is mainly used in the expression *forma corporis* to contrast goodness with sin (*conf.* 2.9, 10.54, 12.6, 12.15) whereas as a verb *formare* is used in the context of divine creation (*conf.* 3.12, 6.4, 13.48). While both of these usages are largely dictated by their classical prece-

---

<sup>54</sup> s. 264.4: «Nam si hic illam dimisisset, desperarent omnes de resurrectione carnis. Modo enim levavit eam in coelum, et sunt qui dubitent de carnis resurrectione».

<sup>55</sup> s. 264.4: «Tollite ergo de medio desideria carnalia. Tamquam hoc diceret Apostolis suis: Non vultis me dimittere (quomodo unusquisque non vult dimittere amicum suum, tamquam dicens: Esto nobiscum aliquantum, refrigeratur anima nostra quando te videmus); sed melius est ut istam carnem non videatis, et divinitatem cogitetis».

<sup>56</sup> s. 264.4: «Tollo me a vobis exterius, et me ipso impleo vos interius. Numquid enim secundum carnem et cum carne intrat in cor Christus? Secundum divinitatem possidet cor: secundum carnem per oculos loquitur ad cor, et admonet foras; habitans intus, ut interius nos convertamur, et vivificemur ex ipso, et formemur ex ipso; quia forma est omnium infabricata».

<sup>57</sup> As is the case with all Ascension *sermones*.

dents<sup>58</sup>, they are also shaped by Biblical language<sup>59</sup> in the Augustinian corpus. Augustine's use of the verb *formare*, when discussing Gen 1:26<sup>60</sup>, functions mainly as a synonym for *fare*<sup>61</sup> and *creare*, as is explicitly stated in *conf.* 6.4. With the term *informa* Augustine thematically joins the usage of *forma* as both a verb and a noun. The term *informa* occurs 7x in *conf.* 12, out of a total of 8x in *conf.* In *conf.* 12, when God *forms* (v.), unformed (*informa*) things receive a specific form, i.e., a *forma* (n.)<sup>62</sup>. Outside of *conf.* 12, *informa* is used 1x in *conf.* 7.7 as law, decree or doctrine. In *conf.* 12, the semantic range of *forma* as a noun, verb, and in the *informa* inflection, is primarily unified within the thematic umbrella of creation in Genesis, aimed to counter Manichean cosmology. This survey of *forma* in *conf.* reveals that there is no textual evidence to suggest that *forma*, as used in Phil. 2:6-7 is related to the semantic sense of *forma* as used in *conf.* 12<sup>63</sup>.

However, there are some thematic considerations that show Phil. 2:6-7 functions outside of *conf.* much as *informa* functions within *conf.* 12<sup>64</sup>. Outside of *conf.*, the main unifying element of the various senses of *forma* is not *informa* but rather the Christological parallel construction *forma dei/forma serui* in Phil. 2.6-7. When applied to Christ, the *forma dei* is at times described as unformed, beautiful and invisible, whereas the *forma serui* is formed (*ex utero maria*), ugly and invisible. As a noun, *forma* reconciles the inherent tension between apparent, exterior, and visible ugliness of the suffering servant in Is. 53:2 and the servant's con-

<sup>58</sup> On the classical sources of the doctrine of *forma* in Augustine, see J.-M. FONTANIER, *La beauté selon saint Augustin*, Presses Universitaires de Rennes, Rennes 1998.

<sup>59</sup> This is generally the case when the Latin Vulgate uses *forma*, ex. Ps. 139.13 and Gal. 4:19.

<sup>60</sup> Augustine exegetes the concept of *imago dei* in Gen. 1.26 together with Col. 1.15. FONTANIER, *La beauté selon saint Augustin*, has been able to provide the semantic basis for discussing *forma* and *imago dei* together.

<sup>61</sup> An exception is Augustine's treatment of Jn. 1.14, where *formare* is synonymous with *natus*, and appearing in the form of as *nato*, cf. *conf.* 7.14; the reason being, Augustine does not want to suggest Christ is created by God.

<sup>62</sup> Specifically, *conf.* 12.8, *conf.* 12.22, *conf.* 12.30, *conf.* 12.31 and *conf.* 12.40.

<sup>63</sup> An exception is *conf.* 7:14, where Augustine gives a standard reading of Phil. 2:6-7 which focusing on the humility of Christ.

<sup>64</sup> Although this may seem anachronistic, it is not. The focus here is on a question of intertextuality in the Augustinian corpus, cf. III.1.

trasting real, interior, and invisible beauty, based on Ps. 45:2<sup>65</sup>. Importantly, some of these thematic elements such as *uisio dei*, brought together in the Augustinian exegesis of Phil. 2:6-7 only later, are detectable in the *conf.*, as when comparing *s.* 264 with *conf.* 9.24.

Augustine employs similar language when discussing the *uisio dei* in *s.* 264.4 where he describes the ascent in *conf.* 9.24. In *s.* 264.4, the *uisio dei* is discussed against the backdrop of the complex relation between the humanity (*humanitas*) and divinity (*diuinitas*) of Christ against the Arians. In both *s.* 264.4 and *conf.* 9.24, the object of *cogitatio* is non-carnal (*carnalius*) and interior (*interius*). Augustine often uses the terms *uerbum dei* and *forma dei* interchangeably with *diuinitas*. In contrast, *corporis* and *forma serui* designate *humanitas*. By a process (*gradatio*) whereby carnal senses (*carnalium sensum*) are put aside, speech leads to ascent (*ascendebamus interius cogitando et loquendo et mirando*). In *conf.* 9.24, ascent culminates in the *uita sapientia* of the *uerbum*. However, an equivalent to the *humanitas* of Christ or *forma serui* is absent in the *conf.* account. While in both cases the *uisio dei* is mediated by language and sight, in *conf.* 9.24 the object of sight is the work of God (*opera tua*) made by means of Christ (*per quam fiunt omnia*) and language from the Psalms; whereas in *s.* 264.4 the object of sight is Christ in the *forma serui* (*humanitas*) and the language is Pauline (Phil. 2:6-7). Hence, the corporeal manifestation of Christ, in the *opus dei* (*conf.* 9.24) or in the *forma serui* (*s.* 264.4), functions to mediate the *uisio dei*.

The Biblical paradigm of mediation, explicitly present in *s.* 264.4 and implicitly operative in *conf.* 9.24, whereby absence signifies presence, can be synthetically articulated based on the five-fold classification of *forma* in the Augustinian *corpus*. The semantic range of *forma* in *forma serui* includes (1) *imago*, (2) visible appearance and (4) condition while that of *forma dei* covers (3) origins and (5) invisible nature. Accordingly, the following analytic formula expresses a synthesis of how absence of the *forma serui* ontologically mediates the presence of the *forma serui*: jointly, (1), (2) and (4) provide the necessary and sufficient conditions to mediate (3) and (5). In the context of the *uisio dei* in *s.* 264.4 and *conf.* 9.24, *forma* obtains a three-fold function: to conceal, to mediate and to reveal.

<sup>65</sup> See, FONTANIER, *La beauté selon saint Augustin*, p. 151-157.

A semantic and thematic analysis of the concept of *forma* in Phil 2:6-7, as employed in the context of the *uisio dei* in s. 264.4, provides a rich source of intertextuality to disclose the mechanism of mediation implicitly operative in the Ostia Conversation of *conf.* 9.24. The language of *forma serui* and *forma dei* bring into relief the thematic and linguistic characteristics of s. 264.4 which, when applied to *conf.* 9.24, suggest the *uisio dei* is mediated by absence of corporeal vision. The critical moment of ascent (*cogitatio*) in *conf.* 9.24, occurs by mediation: absence mediates presence. The ontological absence of the Word is mediated by words thereby uniting words with the Word.

### The Mode of Language and Transformation

The process of mediation, whereby words are united to and by the Word, is also modal because the prerequisite and outcome of the process is that the Word transforms words. The changing rhetorical function of Augustine's writings as evidenced in the mode of speech in the Ostia Conversation. *conf.* 9.24 highlights a hard-won life journey for Augustine from a prestigious rhetor to a humble servant of God. This is in part a rejection of Augustine's rhetorical past, but it is also a reflection of it. As R. A. Markus points out:

We are conscious of the triumph, a triumph all but complete, of that current in Christian tradition which led to the wholesale assimilation of classical learning by Christianity [...] in our foreshortened view of this conversion we sometimes fail to reckon with the hesitations and conflicts which attended it<sup>66</sup>.

In *conf.* 9.24 Augustine does not bring attention to himself, but to God. Humility transforms Augustine's rhetoric in *conf.* 9.24. In contrast with the Biblical, *schola pectoris* (the school of the heart), Augustine acquired the proud element of impersonation (προσωποποιία) in the rhetorical schools, the *schola superbiae*. The degree and quality of ornamentation have changed to meet a dif-

---

<sup>66</sup> R. A. MARKUS, *Paganism, Christianity and the Latin Classics of the Late 4th Century*, in *Latin Literature of the Fourth Century*, edited by J. W. BINNS, London 1974, p. 1-21.

ferent end, but Augustine has not given up his ability to compose a speech to produce a desired result.

Augustine often calls his former profession as a rhetorician a *schola superbiae* (school of pride)<sup>67</sup>. The transition from *schola superbiae* to the ascent in *conf.* 9.24 offers a critique of an education in rhetoric. One element of the *progymnasmata*, an essential feature of the rhetorical educational system, as outlined by Quintillian, was *προσωποποιία* (impersonation). Explaining the practice Quintillian writes, «Quin deducere deos in hoc genere dicendi et inferos excitare concessum est»<sup>68</sup>. Quintillian describes the power of the rhetor to speak for the gods and make them present to an audience. In *conf.* 1.27, Augustine alludes to Vergil's account of the Roman goddess Juno in *Aeneid* 1.37-49 in the practice of *προσωποποιία* to vindicate the fury of the pagan goddess. Years later Augustine embraces a changed attitude towards the rhetorical tool: *προσωποποιία* fills one with pride occasioned by speech, hindering an encounter with God. In *conf.* 1.27, the (mis) use of speech through *προσωποποιία* troubled Augustine not only by the presence of pagan gods or goddesses, but the by result of that speech in pride which prevents access to the divine.

What finally drives Augustine away from this pride is his learning of its inherent vanity. He describes years of education and learning to impersonate gods from the writings of Vergil, as *inania nugarum turpis*. These ugly vanities, not recognized as what they were, created in him a lust for more praise. In discussing the school of pride, one commentator notes, «Augustine finds the approval he receives to be far from harmless, because it ties his personal formation to a vast, largely unreflective imperial culture fired by the lust for domination and praise»<sup>69</sup>. Looking back he knows that they were empty, but that time he only sought ways to feed his ego through these vanities which redounded to the praise not to the true God, but to himself. Not through more formal education in

<sup>67</sup> *conf.* 9.4 (CCSL, 27).

<sup>68</sup> QUINTILLIAN, *Institutio Oratoria* 9.2. edited by D. A. RUSSELL, *The Orator's Education*, Cambridge 2001, p. 51.

<sup>69</sup> M. C. MCCARTHY, *Augustine's Mixed Feelings: Vergil's Aeneid and the Psalms of David in the Confessions*, in *The Harvard Theological Review*, 4 (2009) 465.

the best schools which Roman society had to offer did Augustine find rest and sweetness, but in the *schola pectoris*, like his mother.

There is a shift from prideful speech of the *schola superbiae* to humble speech of the *schola pectoris* in the ascent account of *conf.* 9.24. The shift of *schola* seems to suggest that Augustine thinks rhetorical use of speech has a modal element. Through an attitude of humility, rhetoric *should* direct attention away from oneself and fix it rather on God. Only then is the ascent possible. Ascent is hence a conversion from pagan pride to Christian humility. In 410, Augustine borrows the words of Cicero to describe to a student the difference between Christian rhetoric and pagan rhetoric:

Itaque, sicut rhetor ille nobilissimus cum interrogates esset, quid ei primum uideretur in eloquentiae praeceptis observari oportere, pronuntiationem dicitur respondisse, cum quaereretur, quid secundo, eandem pronuntiationem, quid tertio, nihil aliud quam pronuntiationem dixisse, si interrogares et quotiens interrogares de praeceptis christianae religionis, nihil me aliud respondere nisi humilitatem liberet etsi forte alia dicere necessitas cogeret<sup>70</sup>.

Augustine juxtaposes humility and delivery in his letter to the young Dioscorus in order to highlight the direction that pagan education leads, i.e. the focus on the individual. Augustine modifies the approach of Cicero by considering the function of rhetorical delivery, its audience and aims. A rhetor's eloquence aimed at obtaining praise from the audience, so delivery becomes a substitute for pride. By juxtaposing humility with the pride of delivery, Augustine aims at directing speech towards God, rather than towards oneself. Augustine turns the classical tradition on its head. Now humility becomes the defining characteristic of good Christian rhetorical teaching. Humility becomes the content and purpose of rhetoric in Christian teaching.

The prescribed transition, from prideful pagan delivery to humble Christian speech, reflects Augustine's own conversion. Augustine had made his way from student to master in the powerful rhetorical schools. His speeches had brought him a good job but ultimately proved empty for his soul. His mother, on the other hand, while learning the Scriptures

---

<sup>70</sup> *ep.* 118.4.23 (CSEL, 34,2), cf. CICERO, *De Oratore* III, 9.

through singing and praying them on her own, had learned to speak in such a way as to bring praise to God<sup>71</sup>. This sweetness which she found in these prayers, Augustine, after his conversion in the garden, had come seeking and finally found. He could not appreciate them before because in order to see the beauty of the Scriptures one had to turn language to its proper end in the humble Word of God. The point of speech was not to direct intention and meaning into the fame words could bring, but to bring one into the presence of the Word of God. A whole revolution in language was required for Augustine to begin to use speech in such a way as to direct his hearers to the Word of God, rather than himself. This process, which took place over a longer period of time than he lets on, required a great deal of humility that did not come naturally or easily. Once he learned to speak it, however, he found the sweetness that his mother had known all of her life, that he had missed due to his arrogance.

Returning to the *Confessions*, Augustine goes to Cassiacum where he immerses himself in the Psalms, which he read afresh without the previous prejudice of smug arrogance. In a particularly instructive passage, Augustine writes:

Quas tibi, deus meus, voces dedi, cum legerem psalmos David, cantica fidelia, sonos pietatis excludentes turgidum spiritum [...] quas tibi voces dabam in psalmis illis, et quomodo in te inflammabar ex eis et accendebar eos recitare, si possem, toto orbi terrarum adversus typhum generis humani!<sup>72</sup>

After his conversion, in speaking the Psalms, Augustine literally “gives voice”, in the humble diction of the Psalms. The words themselves are so powerful they are an antidote to the human condition of pride, *turgidum spiritum*. The longer he spoke those words, the greater his passion for God, which precluded his arrogant spirit. It is as if the words themselves did work to reduce the overinflated sense of purpose and importance.

The thread throughout all of this is precisely what rhetoric and language mean for Augustine. Immersing oneself in the language and speech of Vergil creates a vain, self-serving person. When one reads the

---

<sup>71</sup> *conf.* 9.7: «ibi mea mater, ancilla tua, sollicitudinis et vigilarum primas tenes, orationibus vivebat». Note: the *Vetus Latina* uses *ancilla* to speak of Mary in Lk 1:38.

<sup>72</sup> *conf.* 9.4.



Psalms, one speaks the words of Christ, as Augustine notes in the *en. Ps.* 103.4.1<sup>73</sup>. Not only does one speak the very words of Christ, but one encounters the Word, Christ. Who is Christ but the one who because of love for the world descended into our infirmity. He ignored his own greatness and took on the form of a servant, creating the pattern of humility for humanity's imitation, both in form and content of speech and action<sup>74</sup>. The contrast, as Augustine sees it, is between the pagan gods and Christ who are described in and through the texts. It is more than just the meaning behind what is said, but it is precisely the vocabulary and diction in which they are said. It is a medium appropriate to the message.

Like he did in the *certamen* of the rhetorical schools, Augustine, in *conf.* 9.24 does a kind of impersonation. The goal of the writing, however, is not to bring praise to the composer, Augustine. The aim is to produce for the reader a language appropriate to the content of the event. Augustine and his mother are brought into the presence of *Idipsum*<sup>75</sup>. Whereas before Augustine would have used elevated, ornate language to give voice to the pride of the pagan gods, Augustine now artfully crafts humble language to deflect praise from himself and highlight the unique moment of connection between God, Augustine, and his mother. The only language available reflects the new sensibility cultivated by the study of the Psalms in the *schola pectoris*. He writes, *conloquebamur valde dulciter*<sup>76</sup>. The language of sweetness is how Augustine defines the Psalms and a taste only possible in humility<sup>77</sup>. The bedrock for the experience between the two is their speaking, their conversation.

---

<sup>73</sup> *en. Ps.* 103.4.1 (CCSL 40): «Meminit Caritas Vestra, cum sit unus sermo Dei in Scripturis omnibus dilatatus, et per multa ora sanctorum unum Verbum sonet, quod cum sit in principio Deus apud Deum, ibi non habet syllabas, quia non habet tempora; nec mirandum nobis sit, quia propter infirmitatem nostrum descendit ad particulas sonorum nostrorum, cum descenderit ad suscipiendam infirmitatem corporis nostri».

<sup>74</sup> Again, for a full study on the import of Phil. 2:6-11 in the writings of Augustine see, A. VERWILGHEN, Paris 1985.

<sup>75</sup> This phrase is found in the *Uetus Latina* translation of Ps. 4:9.

<sup>76</sup> *conf.* 9.23

<sup>77</sup> Cf. Ps. 4:7, in *conf.* 9.10: «ibi mihi dulcescere coeperas et dederas laetitiam in corde meo».

The low style of the *sermo humilis* evidenced in *conf.* 9.24 characterizes much of Augustine's work, presumably typical after his conversion. Cicero, in his essay *De Oratore*, distinguished between three levels of content of speech and three levels of ornamentation to deliver the content specific to the level<sup>78</sup>. The lowest of which is the *sermo humilis*. Augustine rejects this distinction for the Christian preacher and speaker because all of Christian speech deals with sublime material insofar as it treated as revelation from God<sup>79</sup>. He also believes that one must imitate the Humble Word by a willingness to speak in humble speech, like the Scriptures. In *conf.* 9.24 Augustine quotes directly six biblical verses. Another possible ten biblical passages are echoed, six of which are Psalms. The ascent to God happens primarily through hearing, rather than seeing and the only quotations that Augustine uses are from Scripture.

The purposes of Augustine's speech in *conf.* 9 directly contradicts the admonitions of Quintillian, who thought that power of the high style is appropriate to sublime subjects. To speak this way the orator will «Hic deos ipsos in congressum prope suum sermonemque deducet [...]»<sup>80</sup> Augustine does the opposite here. He writes:

et loquatur ipse solus non per ea sed per se ipsum, ut audiamus verbum eius, non per linguam carnis neque per vocem angeli nec per sonitum nubis nec per aenigma similitudinis, sed ipsum quem in his amamus, ipsum sine his audiamus<sup>81</sup>.

It is not the human speaker that brings the gods down to earth. It is the Word made flesh who speaks in the Scriptures which through his speech brings humans up to him. If Augustine's language, by using the Psalms both in quotation and imitation, is effective, it is inviting its hearers into the Word to raise them up to meet the Word which needs no referent. The Word which speaks in Scripture. The focus of attention has dramatically shifted from the speaker to the God who is described in the

<sup>78</sup> CICERO, *De Oratore*, I, 101.

<sup>79</sup> E. AUERBACH, *Sermo Humilis*, in *Literary Language & Its Public in Late Latin Antiquity and in the Middle Ages*, New York 1965, p. 35.

<sup>80</sup> QUINTILLIAN, *De Institututa Oratoria* 12.10.62

<sup>81</sup> *conf.* 9.25.

speech. Augustine has upended the conventions of his day in order to bring his hearers into the presence of *Idipsum*.

## Conclusion

Three hitherto unidentified facets of language are operative in the Ostia Conversation (the term *conversation* is preferred to *ascent*) as narrated by Augustine in *conf.* 9.24. These are, the grammatical, the ontological and the modal. The first facet of language functions to *unite* words and the Word, the second functions to *mediate* words in the Word, and the last one *transforms* words in the Word. Though *fallen*, for Augustine language constitutes the precondition, means and end of the human attitude towards and experience of the divine. Indeed, precisely because language is *fallen* does the *canticum graduum* aptly begin with the humble yet confident petition for God's assistance in the face of human weakness:

*Deus, in adjutorium meum intende*  
*Domine, ad adjuvandum me festina*<sup>82</sup>.

Pablo IRIZAR  
Guinevere RALLENS  
Charles KIM \*

---

<sup>82</sup> See, Ps 69.2 (cf. Clementine Bible).

\* Pablo Irizar è Ricercatore della Research Foundation - Flanders presso la Faculty of Theology and Religious Studies della Katholieke Universiteit Leuven (pablo.irizar@kuleuven.be); Jenny (Guinevere) Rallens è Doctoral Research presso la Faculty of Divinity della Oxford University; Chad (Charles) Kim è Doctoral Research presso la Faculty of Theology and Religious Studies della St. Louis University (chad.kim@slu.edu).

