Language Learning Theory:
A Comparison between Wittgenstein and Augustine's *De Magistro*

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During the early part of the twentieth century, the enigmatic philosopher, Ludwig Wittgenstein, addressed language learning theory in his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, and in his later work, *Philosophical Investigations*.[1] In the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* Wittgenstein asserted that all philosophy is *Sprachkritik* (*TLP*, 4.0031). He defined the expression of thought through propositional signs; and these signs (spoken or written) constituted language (*TLP*, 3.12). Wittgenstein had utilized Bertrand Russell's idea of propositional logic to help create a conceptual framework of language. For Wittgenstein, language was a form of representation or *Bild*. Following this Aristotelian or atomic model of language, Wittgenstein then defined language as the totality of propositions (*TLP,* 4.001).[2] In addition, he infers a "language of thought," such that the propositions in this work assume the existence of ideal representations or signs (other than written and spoken language) which allow us to learn the meanings of ambiguous signs and natural expressions.[3]

However, in *Philosophical Investigations* Wittgenstein went beyond his propositional treatment of language and focused more on language use. He addressed the following questions: "Every sign *by itself* seems dead. *What* gives it life? — In use it is *alive*. Is life breathed into it there? — Or is the *use* its life (*PI*, 432)?" This passage truly encapsulates this work because it provides the thesis not directly addressed in his earlier book. Since he focused primarily on the conceptualization of signs in *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein himself believed that he had made a grave mistake (see the preface to the *PI*). There really was no mistake, because Wittgenstein had simply expanded the *Bild* notion of language to the use notion of language.[4] *Philosophical Investigations* does not exclude the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, but instead it enhances the propositions outlined therein. *Philosophical Investigations* simply gave context to *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. How do we use language? Wittgenstein referred to his mechanism of language use as "language-games." There are many games and many sets of rules, but all of this is determined by use. A common refrain throughout the *Philosophical Investigations* is "the meaning of a word is its use in language (*PI*, 43)." In one book, Wittgenstein would see the limits of language as equal to the limits of reality (*TLP*, 5.6); whereas in the other, he would see the limits of reality exceeding the limits of language (*PI*, 96-97).

Wittgenstein did not make it a habit of citing the work of his predecessors. In fact, in the preface of his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, he acknowledged the fact that his work "makes no claim of novelty." It is not surprising that Wittgenstein opened *Philosophical Investigations* with a quote from Augustine of Hippo (354-430). We know that Wittgenstein was versed in Augustinian philosophy. He even invoked Augustine in his lecture books.[5] Theodore Redpath descriptively recalls an

experience of discovering Wittgenstein's admiration of the saint: "On the mantleshelf, on which there was a small blackboard, I noticed a dark blue octavo book with the spine turned towards the audience. On the spine in gold letters were the words *Augustinus: Confessions*."[6] The opening quote of the *Philosophical Investigations* is probably from this very book. In addition, Norman Malcolm recalled:

> On the other hand, he (Wittgenstein) revered the writings of St. Augustine. He told me he decided to begin his Investigations with a quotation from the latter's Confessions, not because he could not find the conception expressed in that quotation stated as well by other philosophers, but because the conception must be important if so great a mind held it.[7]

Wittgenstein used Augustine to set in motion his discussion on language use. It was a very appropriate opening quote, because Augustine himself had devised his own language learning theory. Augustine's theory is referred to in his *Confessions*, but it is precisely outlined in one of his more obscure and earlier works called *De Magistro* or "On the Teacher."[8]

It is with the *De Magistro* that a true comparison can be made between Wittgenstein and Augustine. Scholars of Wittgenstein have seemingly ignored this Augustinian work completely. However, Miles F. Burnyeat, in an inaugural address to the Aristotelian Society, did make the connection between Wittgenstein and Augustine's *De Magistro*.[9] Building upon the work of Burnyeat, this paper has two basic goals. First, it will examine Wittgenstein's accolades and criticisms concerning Augustine's language theory *vis-a-vis* his *Confessions*. Second, it will collect the propositions of Augustine that describe his language learning theory and compare them to those put forth by Wittgenstein. Through these analyses, Wittgenstein's own *caveat* will be reaffirmed in that many of his assertions on language learning theory will be shown to have had their origins some fifteen hundred years earlier.

WITTGENSTEIN ON AUGUSTINE

Wittgenstein opened *Philosophical Investigations* with the following quote from Augustine's *Confessions* (1.8). Here, Augustine is explaining how he learned language as a child:

> When they (my elders) named some object, and accordingly moved towards something, I saw this and I grasped that the thing was called by the sound they uttered when they meant to point it out. Their intention was shewn by their bodily movements, as it were the natural language of all peoples: the expression of the face, the play of the eyes, the movement of other parts of the body, and the tone of the voice which expresses our state of mind in seeking, having, rejecting, or avoiding something. Thus, as I heard words repeatedly used in their proper places in various sentences, I gradually learnt to understand what objects they signified; and after I had trained my mouth to form these signs, I used them to express my own desires (*PI*, 1).

The above passage describes how verbal and nonverbal language is used in language learning; but, for Wittgenstein, this schema does not explain language use. Wittgenstein provides the following analysis of the passage:

> These words, it seems to me, give us a particular picture of the essence of human language. It is this: the individual words in language name objects — sentences are combinations of such names. — In this picture of language we find the roots of the following idea: Every word has a meaning. This meaning is correlated with the word. It is the object for which the word stands (*PI*, 1).

As a result, Wittgenstein classifies Augustine's description as merely an explanation for how words gain meaning. He interprets Augustine's language system to be a one-to-one correlation between words and meanings.

This opening passage is symbolic of Wittgenstein's own movement away from the solely representational notion of language. As a result, Wittgenstein spends a good deal of time criticizing Augustine's language learning theory: "Augustine, we might say, does describe a system of communication; only not everything that we call language is this system" (*PI*, 3). Wittgenstein does agree with Augustine, but he sees the system described in the *Confessions* to be a bit simplistic. He characterizes Augustine's language learning system by comparing it to a script:

> Imagine a script in which the letters were used to stand for sounds, and also as signs of emphasis and punctuation. (A script can be conceived as a language for describing sound patterns.) Now imagine someone interpreting that script as if there were simply a correspondence of letters to sounds and if the letters had not also completely different functions. Augustine's conception of language is like such an over-simple conception of the script (*PI*, 4).

Wittgenstein views Augustine's language system as being one-dimensional in that it does not deal with language use and the negotiation of meaning. He again describes Augustine's notion of language as a simple correspondence between word and meaning.

In this passage from *Confessions*, it should be reiterated that Augustine is really describing two communication systems (verbal and nonverbal) which work together in language learning. Regardless, for Wittgenstein, both systems are merely used to attach meaning to words with no real understanding of how meaning is negotiated through language. Wittgenstein described:

> And now, I think, we can say: Augustine describes the learning of human language as if a child came into a strange country and did not understand the language of the country; that is, as if it already had a language, only not this one. Or again: as if a child could already *think*, only not yet speak. And "think" would here mean something like "talk to itself" (*PI*, 32).

In this passage, Wittgenstein gives his strongest critique of Augustine's language learning theory. For Wittgenstein, Augustine's language learning theory assumes that there is some sort of built-in grammar that can be developed through instruction. In a way, this interpretation of Augustine would make him a distant precursor to the psycholinguistic schools of Noam Chomsky, his students, and many of his critics.

DE MAGISTRO AND WITTGENSTEIN

The *De Magistro* was written fairly early in Augustine's life. He wrote this work for his young prodigal son, Adeodatus, whose name means "Given by God." Augustine was in awe of his son's intelligence. Unfortunately, Adeodatus died at the age of sixteen. In Platonic style, the *De Magistro* is a dialogue between father and son concerning, of all things, language learning theory. It is a relatively short work that can be divided into sequential sections. By examining the purpose of language, the nature of signs, and the use of language, the second part of this essay will apply Augustinian doctrine to that of Wittgenstein.

Augustine opened his dialogue with a discussion on the purpose of language. It is here that Augustine identified two very important cognitive processes:

> Ah, but I think there is a certain kind of teaching by means of reminding, indeed a very important kind, which will be revealed in this dialogue of ours. But if you do not think that we learn when we remember things, and that man does not teach who reminds, I shall object. And now I posit two reasons for speaking: either that we may teach, or that we may remind either others or ourselves. (*DM*, 1).

We use language as a means to teach each others about ourselves and the things around us, and language uses memory to store those teachings for when we are reminded of them. These teachings and memories are communicated through external signs. Not unlike Plato before him,[10] Augustine goes on to explain the importance of reminding in spoken language:

> You understand that correctly. For I believe that you observe, at the same time, that even when one formulates a statement, although we utter no sound, yet because we think words we speak within the mind. And so in all speech we only remind, since memory, within which words inhere, by revolving them causes to come into the mind the very things of which the words are signs (*DM*, 2).

These two passages express the purpose of language in very cognitive terms. Teaching is the external mechanism for language acquisition, while reminding acts as the internal process.[11] For Wittgenstein, these basic processes are simply two forms of his language-games. Wittgenstein's language games are basically activities for negotiating meaning. However, in the Augustinian sense, teaching and reminding are also activities for negotiating meaning.

For Wittgenstein, the essence or purpose of his language-games, and of language, rests in the variability of word relationships:

> Instead of producing something common to all that we call language, I am saying that these phenomena have no one thing in common which makes us use the same word for all — but that they are related to one another in many different ways. And it is because of this relationship, or these relationships, that we call them all "language" (*PI,* 65).

These relationships or similarities create complicated networks, or families of meaning, which overlap and intersect one another. There is really no description of similar networks in Augustine's work, but the basic theme of *De Magistro* does allude to the formation of such networks. Augustine constructed his *De Magistro* to examine the various relationships between words, signs, and meaning; but he did not spell out these networks or explain their interrelationships.

The discussion concerning the nature of signs dates well into antiquity. Aristotle discussed the nature of signs in his *De Interpretatione* (16a3-8). For Aristotle, signs were affections of the soul. Interestingly enough, Thomas Aquinas cited the above passage of Aristotle (*Summa theologica*, 1.13.1), just as Wittgenstein cited a passage from Augustine's *Confessions*.[12] In the *De Magistro*, both Augustine and Adeodatus agree that words are signs, but not all signs are words (*DM*, 3-6). The meaning of words can be shown through verbal and nonverbal signs. From their discussions, Augustine and his learned offspring acknowledge the following basic divisions of signs:

> If certain signs are asked about, then these signs can be shown by means of signs. But when things which are not signs are asked about, they can be shown either by means of doing them after question, if they can be done, or by giving signs by means of which they can be called to attention (*DM*, 7).

Frederick J. Crosson has outlined the most logical divisions for how *De Magistro* deals with signs and showing.[13] He has identified two basic divisions which are represented in the above passage. Simply, words are signs and can be shown by signs (verbally). Some things are not signs, but they can be shown through actions, or by giving signs that direct attention toward them (nonverbally). However, the things being signified cannot be shown by signs, because signs only direct attention toward those things. The dialogue goes on to reveal a variety of subsets which fall under the first division, that words are signs and can be shown by signs. These subsets (see *DM,* 11-20) include reciprocal and nonreciprocal signs. Reciprocal signs are signs that are mutually signifying, and nonreciprocal signs are signs that cannot be represented by the signs they signify.

All of these categories attempt to organize the types of propositional signs that exist in language. Interestingly enough, Wittgenstein did differentiate between primitive and nonprimitive signs:

> Every defined sign signifies *via* those signs by which it is defined, and the definitions show the way. Two signs, one a primitive sign, and one defined by primitive signs, cannot signify in the same way. Names *cannot* be taken to pieces by definition (nor any sign which alone and independently has a meaning) (*TLP*, 3.261).

Primitive signs are the least common denominator for signs (that is, names); and nonprimitive signs are defined through a combination of primitive signs. There is a certain correlation between Wittgenstein's signs and those described in Augustine. The primitive signs of Wittgenstein equate to Augustine's notion that the things being signified cannot be shown by signs, because signs only direct attention toward those things. Also, Wittgenstein's nonprimitive signs seem to correspond to Augustine's reciprocal and nonreciprocal signs. In their own ways, Augustine and Wittgenstein have identified the basic relationship between signs and the things being signified — the former facilitates the understanding of the latter.

Wittgenstein was very critical of Augustine because he believed that his language learning system did not account for use. In the *De Magistro*, Augustine did attempt to explain what is necessary for communication to occur; and, in doing so, he put forth some basic propositions:

(1) signs direct the mind toward meaning (*DM*, 21-24);

(2) cognition of things is superior to their signs (*DM,* 25-28);

(3) things are not learned through words alone (*DM,* 29-35);

(4) words function only to remind (*DM,* 36-40); and

(5) words do not reveal the mind of the speaker (*DM,* 41-45).

All of these propositions assist in explaining the limits and uses of language. These notions exist in Augustine, but are not really credited to him by Wittgenstein.

In the first proposition, Augustine sets up an implicit notion of context to show how signs direct the mind toward meaning. He uses the following example to clarify his point:

> For if I ask what man is, you would perhaps answer he is an animal. But if I were to ask what part of speech *man* is, you could answer correctly only a noun. Accordingly, when *man* is found to be both a noun and an animal, the former is said in the sense in which it is a sign, the latter is said in the sense of the thing which is signified. And so when anyone asks whether man is a noun, I can only answer that it is, for the question thus put indicates clearly that the questioner wishes to be answered according to the sense in which *man* is a sign. But if he asks whether man is an animal, I may assent much more readily, since if he asked only what man is and indicated nothing in regard to *man* and to *animal*, my mind would fix itself according to the law of speaking towards that which is signified by the two syllables *homo* [man], and the answer would be "animal" only, or I might even give the full definition, namely a rational, mortal animal (*DM,* 24).

The key to understanding this passage is to intuit the intention of Augustine. He constructs a situation where meaning has to be negotiated in order for communication to occur between questioner and respondent. The context or "sense" of expression is what determines the correct answer. This negotiation separates the sign from what it signifies. It also separates grammar from use. As a result, signs direct the mind toward some sort of meaning. Negotiation of meaning is the most important step. Augustine does not really spell this out, because for him "teaching" exemplifies the negotiation process.

Augustine also makes some extremely Wittgensteinian statements with respect to his second proposition. He begins with this assertion: "For the cognition is considered superior to the sign of which we spoke for the sole reason that it proved conclusively that the sign exists because of cognition and not the cognition because of the sign" (*DM*, 26). This is pretty straightforward, in that human cognition creates signs to describe reality, but the signs themselves do not determine human cognition. Augustine exemplifies this point in the following passage:

> Similarly you as well as other men who judge matters suitably would reply to a garrulous word-lover who said: "I teach in order to talk," with "Man, why not rather speak in order to teach?" For if these things are true, as you know they are, you truly see how much less words are to be esteemed than that for the sake of which we use words, since the use of words is superior to the words. For words exist in order that they may be used, and in addition we use them in order to teach. As teaching is superior to talking, in like degree speech is better than words. So of course doctrine is far superior to words (*DM,* 26).

Due to its focus on language use, this passage could easily find its way into *Philosophical Investigations*. In fact, Wittgenstein described the cognition of words in much simpler terms: "One cannot guess how a word functions. One has to *look at* its use and learn from that (*PI*, 340)." Both Augustine and Wittgenstein would agree that meaning is determined by language use. Wittgenstein defined the meaning of a word as "its use in language (*PI*, 43)." Thus, the cognition of things is superior to the signs that describe them. For Augustine, understanding is an internal mechanism based on teaching and reminding, while Wittgenstein believes that understanding is not a mental process at all, but rather a result of particular circumstances (*PI,* 152-54). The last three propositions of Augustine's deal with the limitations of language — particularly words. Augustine asserts that things are not learned from words alone:

> And if I can, I shall try to prove to you above all that we learn nothing through those signs which are termed words. For it is more correct, as I have said, that we learn the meaning of the word, that is, the signification which is hidden in the sound when the thing itself which it signifies has been cognized, than that we perceive the thing through such signification (*DM,* 34).

This passage has a very Wittgensteinian flair to it, in that words themselves are merely one of many tools of expression. Augustine prefaced this statement by describing how pointing the finger can assist in the cognition of a sign. However, Augustine does not place too much emphasis on this nonverbal action, but rather, sees it to be a sign of the demonstration, not the thing that is being demonstrated. Similarly, Wittgenstein sees that pointing is merely one dimension of the multidimensional language-game (*PI,* 669). Both Augustine and Wittgenstein understand that language acquisition could not occur through words alone.

As a result, Augustine declares that words function only to remind: "To give them as much credit as possible, words possess only sufficient efficacy to remind us in order that we may seek things, but not to exhibit things so that we may know them (*DM*, 36)." This assertion refers to Augustine's dual purpose of language — teaching and reminding. Wittgenstein also addresses [this] internal process of remembering:

> And it is this inner process that one means by the word "remembering." — The impression that we wanted to deny something arises from our setting our faces against the picture of the "inner process." What we deny is that the picture of the inner process gives us the correct idea of the use of the word "to remember." We say that this picture with its ramifications stands in the way of our seeing the use of the word as it is (*PI*, 305).

Both Wittgenstein and Augustine make a distinction with respect to the process of reminding and remembering. Augustine limits this internal process by stating that words can only direct attention toward something, not actually show the things being represented. As a result, remembering a word is the first step toward understanding. Wittgenstein describes a similar (activity), but warns that (such a) process is not a one-to-one relationship between the word and the use of the word. This internal process must always be considered to be a bit tenuous with respect to assigning meaning, because it does not account for context or use.

Augustine's last proposition maintains that words do not reveal the mind of the speaker: "Now, therefore, not even this is left to words, namely, that at any rate they express the mind of the speaker, since a speaker may indeed not know the things about which he speaks" (*DM*, 42). Wittgenstein identifies this very problem by asking a couple of basic questions: "How am I to know what he means, when I see nothing but the signs he gives?…How is *he* to know what he means, when he has nothing but the signs either?" (*PI,* 504). It is this reality that requires people to participate in language-games. These words or signs are literally tools of expression.[14] Wittgenstein makes this very clear in his famous passage: "Think of the tools in a tool-box: there is a hammer, pliers, a saw, a screw-driver, a rule, a glue-pot, glue, nails and screws. — The functions of words are as diverse as the functions of these objects" (*PI,* 11). Augustine does explicitly state that words are merely tools of expression, but his focus on the limitations of words leads one to believe that this is his intention. Even his son, Adeodatus, at the end of the dialogue, reaffirms Augustine's basic thesis: "But I have learned through being reminded by your words that man is only prompted by words in order that he may learn, and it is apparent that only a very small measure of what a speaker thinks is expressed in his words" (*DM*, 46).

This is the reality of language learning for Augustine, and it becomes a central theme for Wittgenstein in his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* and *Philosophical Investigations.*

<div align="center">Conclusion</div>

From this relatively brief study, it is the hoped that scholars of Wittgenstein will become more interested in the unmistakable relationship fostered between two of the most influential philosophers since Plato and Aristotle. Alven Neiman is one of the few scholars who has utilized this relationship. His words have inspired this study: "In my own thinking, I have found very useful...the work of one of Wittgenstein's philosophical heroes, St. Augustine."[15] Obviously, Wittgenstein was well-versed in his Augustine, but was his education limited to the *Confessions*? Did Wittgenstein read the *De Magistro*? This essay has attempted to show that Wittgenstein and Augustine have much more in common with respect to language learning theory than was generally acknowledged by Wittgenstein and many of his students. Wittgenstein used Augustine as a starting point for his dialogue, but there is more to Augustine than is described in the *Confessions*. It would be futile to condemn Wittgenstein for stealing many of Augustine's ideas, because Wittgenstein himself admits to the crime. In fact, Wittgenstein should be praised for his relationship with Augustine because he was able to advance upon those ideas in such a way that he changed the study of philosophy forever. Similarly, Augustine emerges as a man who is centuries ahead of his time. In closing, scholars should continue to study the similarities between Augustine and Wittgenstein, because there are assuredly other scholarly bridges to be built between these two men. Even though Augustine and Wittgenstein had different agendas in their treatment of language learning, both men followed similar paths in their philosophical pursuits.

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1. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. C.K. Ogden (London: Routledge, 1990). This work will be cited as *TLP* with page numbers in the text for all subsequent references. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G.E.M. Anscombe (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1972). This work will be cited as *PI* with page numbers in the text for all subsequent references.

2. Ernst Konrad Specht, *The Foundations of Wittgenstein's Late Philosophy*, trans. D.E. Walford (New York: Manchester University Press, 1963), 27-38, provides an excellent comparison between Aristotle's atomic model of language and Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*.

3. Donna M. Summerfield, "Thought and Language in the Tractatus," in *Midwest Studies in Philosophy Volume XVII: The Wittgenstein Legacy*, ed. Peter A. French, Theodore E. Uehling, and Howard K. Wettstein (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1992). See Richard McDonough, "Wittgenstein's Reversal on the 'Language of Thought' Doctrine," *The Philosophical Quarterly* 44, 177 (1994): 482-94 for an alternative analysis.

4. Wittgenstein does state, "What does not get expressed in the sign is shown by its application. What the signs conceal, their application declares" (*TLP*, 3.262). See also (3.326).

5. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *The Blue and Brown Books* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell 1969), 27, 77.

6. Theodore Redpath, *Ludwig Wittgenstein: A Student's Memoir* (London: Duckworth, 1990), 17.

7. Norman Malcolm, *Ludwig Wittgenstein: A Memoir* (London: Oxford University Press, 1958), 71

8. *Confessions* was written in 401 and *De Magistro* was written in 389. St. Aurelius Augustine, *Concerning the Teacher and On the Immortality of the Soul*, trans. George G. Leckie (New York: D. Appleton-Century, 1938) will be the primary source of quotation for the *De Magistro*. This work will be cited as *DM* with page numbers in the text for all subsequent references.

9. M.F. Burnyeat, "The Inaugural Address: Wittgenstein and Augustine *De Magistro*," *The Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 61 (1987): 1-24, provides an analysis of *De Magistro* with respect to the passage Wittgenstein chose from *Confessions*. He does not really compare Augustine with Wittgenstein, but rather offers some explanation as to why Wittgenstein used Augustine in *Philosophical Investigations*.

10. Plato, *Meno*, 81.

11. Wittgenstein describes this activity in *PI*, 7.

12. John Haldane, "The Life of Signs," *Review of Metaphysics* 47 (March 1994): 451-70 examined Aristotle and Aquinas in relation to Wittgenstein.

13. Frederick J. Crosson, "The Structure of the *De Magistro*," *Revue des Études Augustiniennes* 35 (1989): 120-27.

14. See the study by J.F.M. Hunter, *Wittgenstein on Words as Instruments: Lessons in Philosophical Psychology* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1990).

15. Alven Neiman, "Wittgenstein, Liberal Education, Philosophy," *Studies in Philosophy and Education* 14, no. 3 (1995): 207. See also his insightful analysis of Augustine's philosophical perspective in Alven Neiman, "Augustine's Philosophizing Person," *New Scholasticism* 58, no. 2 (1984): 236-55.