

Every Word is a Name: Autonymy and Quotation in Augustine

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Augustine famously claims every word is a name. Some readers take Augustine to thereby maintain a purely referentialist semantic account according to which every word is a referential expression whose meaning is its extension. Other readers think that Augustine is no referentialist and is merely claiming that every word has some meaning. In this paper, I clarify Augustine's arguments to the effect that every word is a name and argue that 'every word is a name' amounts to the claim that for any word, there exist tokens of that word which are autonymous nouns. Augustine takes this to be the result of universal lexical ambiguity or equivocity (that is, the fact that every word has more than one literal meaning) and I clarify how Augustine's account of metalinguistic discourse, which is one of the most detailed to have survived from antiquity, differs from some ancient and modern theories.

When I was initiated into the mysteries of logic and semantics, quotation was usually introduced as a somewhat shady device, and the introduction was accompanied by a stern sermon on the sin of confusing the use and mention of expressions. (Davidson 1979, p. 27)

1. Introduction

Augustine's importance for and influence upon the history of philosophical thought concerning language is difficult to overestimate, but there is significant disagreement over precisely what Augustine's views are. This divergence is especially apparent concerning Augustine's *De Magistro*, which examines how we learn things through language and offers one of the most extensive ancient treatments of how, to use Davidson's phrase, language 'turns on itself' (1979, p. 27).¹ Augustine's remarks in *De Magistro*, notably his saying 'every word is a name' (*Mag.* 5.11–6.18), have inspired a number of readers to think that Augustine maintains a thoroughly referentialist or extensional

¹ Cf. Sluiter (1997, p. 218).

semantics according to which every word has some extension which is its meaning. Against such readings, Myles Burnyeat (1987) has influentially argued that Augustine does *not* equate a linguistic expression's meaning with its extension and that in saying 'every word is a name' Augustine merely means that all words have some meaning.

In this paper, I clarify Augustine's principal arguments to the conclusion that every word is a name and his views about autonomy. While I think that Burnyeat is right to resist referentialist interpretations, I argue that in saying 'every word is a name' Augustine is not merely claiming that all words have some meaning, but that for any word, there exist tokens of that word which are autonomous nouns and that this is what the claim 'every word is a name' amounts to. I go on to explain how Augustine accounts for autonomy by appealing to universal lexical ambiguity or equivocity (the view that every word has more than one literal meaning) and clarify how this differs from some ancient and modern theories of quotation and metalinguistic discourse.

2. Augustinian pictures of language

Augustine's *De Magistro* begins as an inquiry into why we speak. Early on, it is assumed that words are signs (*signa*) and the conversation between Augustine and his son Adeodatus turns to what these signs signify. In considering a verse from Vergil, '*Si nihil ex tanta superis placet urbe relinqui*' ('If it pleases the gods that nothing be left of so great a city', *Aeneid* 2.659), the interlocutors assume that each word is a sign and that for any word, there is something (*aliquid*, *Mag.* 2.3) it signifies. Later on in the dialogue, Augustine suggests that 'word' and 'name' are signified by each other (*Mag.* 5.11) and when Adeodatus proposes that certain words (for example, '*si*' ['if'], '*ex*' ['from']) are words but not names (*Mag.* 4.9, 5.11), Augustine proceeds to offer several arguments towards the conclusion that 'just as every name is a word, so too every word is a name' (*ut omne nomen verbum est, ita omne verbum nomen [est]*, *Mag.* 5.12; cf. *Mag.* 5.13, 6.17–18).²

There have been two principal ways of understanding what Augustine might mean by saying 'every word is a name'. According

² 'We can correctly call all words "names"' (*recte possumus omnia verba nomina dicere*, *Mag.* 5.13); 'all words are names' (*omnia verba nomina*, *Mag.* 6.17); 'all parts of speech can be called names' (*omnes partes orationis, et nomina posse dici*, *Mag.* 6.18). Note that '*nomen*' can be translated as 'name' or 'noun'.

to one widespread view, Augustine endorses a referentialist semantics according to which every word (not just proper names — as per Millian views — but *every word*) is a referential expression whose extension is its meaning or signification. Such an interpretation of Augustine is famously articulated by Wittgenstein in the opening of his *Philosophical Investigations* (though he was there thinking of Augustine's *Confessions*),³ and has also been endorsed in several philosophical studies of Augustine's views. Thus, for instance, in a detailed study of Augustine's thought concerning language, Christopher Kirwan takes Augustine to maintain and perhaps even inaugurate a strongly referentialist account of meaning akin to the kind of "Fido"-Fido' accounts of language famously derided by Ryle (Kirwan 1989, pp. 37, 43, 47–9). Equally, in his translation of *De Magistro*, Peter King also adverts to Ryle's remarks and suggests that, for Augustine, 'a proper name (sign) names (signifies) its bearer (significate), so that meaning is taken to be a kind of labelling of things' (King 1995, p. xviii).

According to such readings,⁴ Augustine is thought to maintain a purely referentialist account of meaning or signification according to which:

- (i) every word is a name or referential expression;
- (ii) every word has some extension; and
- (iii) the meaning or signification of a word is its extension.

Philosophers who are thought to closely follow Augustine, such as Anselm, are often ascribed similar referentialist views and an 'Augustinian semantics' has been attributed to them on that basis (for example, King 2004).⁵

According to another view, championed by Myles Burnyeat (1987), Augustine's remarks concerning all words being names is not an espousal of referentialism and should instead be understood against the

³ Wittgenstein *Philosophical Investigations* §1; cf. *Philosophical Grammar* 56–7; *Brown Book* 1; Glock (1995, p. 41).

⁴ For example, SurrIDGE (1976); Lyons (1977, pp. 216, 224); Bearsley (1983); Kirwan (1989); Rist (1994, pp. 27, 314–316); King (1995, but cf. King 1995, pp. xviiiin24, 120n50; 2014, pp. 295, 308n4).

⁵ One can find later medieval figures, such as Buridan, describing such views before repudiating them (for example, Buridan *Quaestiones longe super Librum Perihermeneias* 1.2).

background of ancient disputes over whether only nouns and verbs possess independent meaning or signification (a view associated with various Platonists and Peripatetics),⁶ or whether all parts of speech have some independent signification (a view Burnyeat associates with the Stoics) so that every word expresses some meaning (λεκτόν, cf. *dicibile*, *Dial.* 5) and thereby makes a contribution to the truth-conditions of sentences in which it occurs which goes beyond merely ‘combining and embellishing’ (Burnyeat 1987, pp. 10–11).⁷ In saying ‘every word is a name’, Burnyeat’s Augustine takes the side of the Stoics and Augustine’s principal claim should thus be understood as follows:

The substantive claim — but it is not very radical — is that even connectives make a distinct, hence nameable, contribution to speech. The reason Augustine insists on this, I think, is that his topic is teaching. He wants to say that every word contributes to the information content of the sentences in which it occurs, to what is taught by them. That is the burden of the thesis that all words are names. (Burnyeat 1987, p. 11)

On Burnyeat’s view, Augustine is claiming that every word has some independent meaning and Burnyeat goes on to suggest that Augustine does ‘distinguish between what a word signifies and the way in which it signifies’ (Burnyeat 1987, p. 12) in such a way that he should not be construed as a referentialist.

I take Burnyeat to be correct in resisting referentialist readings of Augustine. Within *De Magistro*, Augustine discusses co-extensive linguistic expressions which differ in signification. Thus, for instance, Augustine points out that the term ‘coloured’ has as its extension the

⁶ Platonists seem to have variously maintained that terms which are not nouns or verbs (as they characterised nouns and verbs) either: do not signify at all (for example, Plutarch *Quaest. Plat.* 1009d8–e1); do not signify substances or accidents or activities (for example, Ammonius *In De Int.* 11.8–16); or do not express propositional constituents and have a purely syntactic as opposed to semantic function (for example, Plut. *Quaest. Plat.* 1011a6ff; Apuleius *In De Int.* 4). We find similar views ascribed to Theophrastus and other Peripatetics (for example, Simplicius *In Cat.* 10.23–11.1; cf. Schol. D. Thrax, *GG* 1.3, 516.10–27).

⁷ The Stoics distinguished five parts of speech: (α) proper name (ὄνομα); (β) common noun or appellative (προσηγορία); (γ) verb (ῥῆμα); (δ) conjunction (σύνδεσμος); and (ε) article (ἄρθρον) (D.L. 7.57–8; *GG* 1.3, 517.33–4). There is evidence for Burnyeat’s claim (for example, D.L. 7.58; Apollonius Dyscolus *De Pronomine* 67.5–7; cf. *De Coniunctione* 214.4–20), but it seems that at least some Stoics may have denied that every conjunction or any article expressed a λεκτόν (cf. Apollonius Dyscolus *De Coniunctione* 248.1ff; *De Pronomine* 5.13; Frede 1978, pp. 66–7; 1987, p. 356).

set of things which are coloured $\{x: x \text{ is coloured}\}$ and the term 'visible' has as its extension the set of things which are visible $\{x: x \text{ is visible}\}$. Now, 'coloured' and 'visible' have the same extension, that is, $\{x: x \text{ is coloured}\} = \{x: x \text{ is visible}\}$, but they do *not* have the same signification (for example, *Mag.* 5.12–13, 6.17, 7.20; cf. *Dial.* 7). Augustine thereby denies (iii) (at least of certain linguistic expressions). Moreover, his remarks elsewhere suggest that he thinks a sign's signification is or offers some mode(s) of presentation of the relevant extension (for example, 'penis' and a word like 'mentula' make the relevant item *seem different* [*aliter videtur*, *Dial.* 7]),⁸ and that significations may be highly fine-grained (perhaps more so, for instance, than Fregean *Sinne*).⁹

However, there are at least two reasons to be hesitant about Burnyeat's account. First, relatively little direct evidence has been provided for interpreting Augustine's remarks about every word being a name in the manner Burnyeat proposes and one might worry that if one is not a referentialist, then saying 'every word is a name' seems like an infelicitous way of expressing the thesis that every word has some meaning.¹⁰ Secondly, and more importantly, Burnyeat offers little discussion of the arguments by which Augustine aims to establish that every word is a name (at *Mag.* 5.13–16) and it is not clear whether they do aim to show what Burnyeat suggests.

In what follows, I offer an analysis of Augustine's arguments and defend a different reading of what Augustine means when he says 'every word is a name'. On my view, Augustine is saying that for any word, there exist tokens of that word which are autonomous nouns and thereby names of themselves. *Something like* the autonymy reading or metalinguistic reading I defend seems to find partial

⁸ Augustine thinks a spoken utterance's meaning lies hidden in the sound (*latet in sono*, *Mag.* 10.34) and is an incorporeal entity (akin to the soul of a word) intersubjectively grasped by competent speakers when they hear the relevant utterance (for example, *Quant. An.* 32.65–6; cf. *Dial.* 5).

⁹ Frege thinks 'but' and 'and' differ in *Färbung* and conventional implicature but not in *Sinne* (cf. Frege 1956, pp. 295–6). Augustine would seemingly take such expressions to differ in signification.

¹⁰ The strongest evidence thus far adduced in favour of construing 'every word is a name' in the way Burnyeat suggests is offered by Bermon (2007, p. 309), who points to a passage in Simplicius where three senses of 'name' (ὄνομα) are noted. The relevant sense applies the term 'name' to x when x is co-ordinated (κατατεταγμένον) with something signified (σημανωμένον) (*Simpl. In Cat.* 27.16–21).

precedent in some brief remarks made by Burnyeat himself,¹¹ but has not been adequately defended or explained and is not favoured by those who have offered more detailed discussions of Augustine's arguments in the relevant part of *De Magistro* (for example, [Sriridge 1976](#); [Bermon 2007](#), pp. 295ff).¹² There is some evidence that something like the reading I defend may have been a live option in Augustine's time in that Porphyry, who influenced Augustine on other matters, claims that every part of speech falls under the extension of 'name' (ὄνομα) because (in Greek) one can attach the definite article to a word in order to talk about the relevant word or quote it (Porph. *In Cat.* 62.1–6).¹³ However, Augustine betrays no direct awareness of this argument, which requires definite articles or comparable items which Latin ordinarily lacks, and the principal evidence for my reading comes from Augustine's arguments, which seem to be very much his own. It is to these I now turn.

3. Every word is a name

In *De Magistro*, Augustine offers a number of arguments for the claim that all words are names (*Mag.* 5.13–16). The arguments have received relatively little in the way of detailed discussion (the notable exceptions being [Sriridge 1976](#) and [Bermon 2007](#), who closely follows [Sriridge](#)), but they repay careful reading. In the first argument, which we might call 'the Pronoun Argument', Augustine assumes a

¹¹ Alongside the claims offered above, Burnyeat also claims that words 'can be used to name (stand for, refer to) their own meanings or themselves' ([Burnyeat 1987](#), p. 11). However, this is compatible with several very different readings (cf. [Baratin and Desbordes 1982](#), pp. 83–4; [Kirwan 1989](#), p. 52).

¹² For example, 'Augustine is thus arguing not that every expression of the object language is a name-word on the grounds that it can be used as a metalinguistic name of itself. . . He did not mean to show that every word of the object language has name-meaning on the grounds that every expression has a self-naming use' ([Sriridge 1976](#), pp. 191–2).

¹³ 'Because "name" is not applied only to those words which have a peculiarly name-like character, to which articles are attached, but to all parts of speech (Ὅτι τὸ ὄνομα οὐ μόνον ἐπὶ τῶν ἰδίως ὀνομαστικῶν ἔχόντων χαρακτήρα τάττεται, ὃν προτίθεται τὰ ἄρθρα, ἀλλὰ ἐπὶ παντὸς μέρους λόγου) because when asking whether they are homonyms, they are also attached to articles and behave like indeclinable words (χαρακτήρα τάττεται, ὃν προτίθεται τὰ ἄρθρα, ἀλλὰ ἐπὶ παντὸς μέρους λόγου διὰ τὸ καὶ ταῦτα, ὅταν ἐξετάζωνται εἰ ἔστιν ὁμόνυμα, μετὰ ἄρθρου προτεθέντος αὐτῶν λέγεσθαι καὶ κλίνεσθαι γε ὡς τὰ μονόπτωτα). For we say that *andrapodizesthai* ["to enslave" or "to have been enslaved"] is a homonym and so on. So it is said that "noun" applies commonly to all parts of speech' (φραμὲν γάρ ὅτι τῷ ἀνδραποδίζεσθαι ὁμονύμῳ ὄντι καὶ τὰ ἐξῆς. εἰληπται οὖν ὄνομα τὸ κοινῶς ἐπὶ παντὸς μέρους λόγου ταττόμενον, Porph. *In Cat.* 62.1–6, trans. Strange adapted).

traditional definition of pronouns, according to which pronouns are things which stand in the place of names (*Mag.* 5.13).¹⁴ Augustine then gets Adeodatus to cite some conjunctions (for example, ‘*et*’ [‘and’], ‘*at*’ [‘but’]), and he himself proceeds to refer back to these conjunctions by saying: ‘all these’ (*haec omnia*) (*Mag.* 5.13). A pronoun (‘*haec*’, [‘these’]) has stood in the place of something and pronouns — the thought goes — stand in the place of names; therefore, the things which they stood in place of (that is, ‘*et*’, ‘*que*’, ‘*at*’, ‘*atque*’) were names. However, Adeodatus resists the argument, proposing that the utterance ‘all these’ (*haec omnia*) was elliptical for something like ‘all these words’ (*haec verba omnia*) (*Mag.* 5.13).

In order to convince Adeodatus that every word is a name, Augustine proceeds to offer three further arguments to the same conclusion (*Mag.* 5.14–16). One argument (*Mag.* 5.14), call this ‘the Scripture Argument’, invokes a verse of scripture (*Non erat in Christo Est et Non, sed Est in illo erat* [2 Cor. 1:19], ‘For there was not in Christ “yes” or “no”, but “yes” was always in Him’). The argument is brief, but Augustine appeals to the fact that even though ‘*est*’ is typically considered a verb (for example, on the basis of morphological and syntactic criteria), there are tokens of ‘*est*’ (as in 2 Cor. 1:19) which syntactically are nouns and could only be substituted by other nouns or noun phrases while preserving a grammatical sentence. Thus ‘*est*’ is, Augustine claims, both a verb and a noun and the same holds, Augustine suggests, of other words (*Mag.* 5.14).

The next argument (*Mag.* 5.15), call this ‘the Translation Argument’, is directed against those who might be inclined to think that the Scripture Argument is defective because the Apostle did not put forward a grammatical sentence. The Translation Argument is also brief and consists of Augustine imagining someone asking what terms the Greeks use for several Latin words and proceeding to provide an answer by translating the relevant words. For instance, ‘*volo*’ (‘I wish’) is translated as ‘*θέλω*’, ‘*bene*’ (‘well’, that is, the adverb) as ‘*καλῶς*’, ‘*ab*’ (‘by’ or ‘from’) as ‘*ἀπό*’, and so on (*Mag.* 5.15). The thought seems to be that if a linguistic expression D_1 in language L_1 can be translated as D_2 in a distinct language L_2 , then: (a) there exists some signification or meaning which is shared by D_1 and D_2 ; and (b) D_1 and D_2 can be regarded as names.

¹⁴ Cf. Dositheus *GL* 7.401.9ff; Donatus *GL* 4.357.1ff, 379.23ff.

While the rationale for (a) is clear enough in cases of accurate translation, matters are less immediately clear when it comes to (b). Sirridge proposes that Augustine views D_1 and D_2 as *names of the meaning they share* (1976, p. 189) and thinks that the relevant expressions *refer to their meanings* (Sirridge 1976, pp. 184, 186–7, 191–2; cf. Bermon 2007, pp. 297–9, 309, 319). However, this is not particularly attractive (especially if, as we have seen above, Augustine does *not* hold a purely referentialist semantics) and has undesirable results. For instance, Sirridge is forced to regard “‘from’ is a one-syllable word’ and similar claims as being false (because she takes ‘from’ to refer to the meaning of the relevant word, which, on her own view, is not composed of any syllables, cf. Sirridge 1976, pp. 184–6, 189–91) whereas such claims are in fact obvious truths (of the kind Augustine frequently affirms, for example, *Mag.* 3.5–6, 4.9–5.11).¹⁵

We can better appreciate why Augustine affirms (b) by noting that the force of Augustine’s argument depends especially upon the following remarks: ‘In all these parts of speech I enumerated, it can’t be that he who asks what they are in this way would speak correctly unless they were names’ (*in his omnibus partibus orationis, quas nunc enumeravi, recte loqui eum, qui sic interroget quod, nisi nomina essent, fieri non posset. Mag.* 5.15). These remarks indicate that the Translation Argument does not essentially depend upon the answers Augustine imagines providing to the relevant translation questions or upon accurate translatability (which may be just as well because it is not entirely clear whether the wisdom of Augustine’s time thought that every word whatsoever could be accurately translated by another word).¹⁶ Instead, the argument turns upon syntactical considerations and the grammatical correctness of certain wh-questions.

Thus, for instance, in ‘*quid Graeci nominent quod nos nominamus bene?*’ (‘What do the Greeks name what we name “well”?’), ‘*bene*’ (‘well’) — which we would say is being *mentioned* or *quoted* — is *not* syntactically functioning as an adverb but as a noun or noun phrase. Equally, in ‘*quid Graeci nominent quod nos nominamus volo?*’ (‘What do the Greeks name what we name “I wish”?’), ‘*volo*’ (‘I wish’) is *not* functioning as a verb or verb phrase but as a noun or noun phrase; and the same applies to the other examples Augustine

¹⁵ Equally, even if this issue were addressed, Sirridge’s reading requires that “‘*ab*’ is a Latin word’ has the same truth value as “‘*ἄπό*’ is a Latin word’ (cf. Sirridge 1976, p. 190).

¹⁶ Cf. *Doc. Chr.* 2.11.16; *En. Ps.* 123.8; *S. Dom. Mon.* 1.9.23; *Jerome Adv. Iovinian.* 1.13; *Ad Philemonem* 20.

provides (*Mag.* 5.15). Whether or not an accurate translation exists for a given term D_1 , questions of the form: ‘What is D_1 called?’, ‘What do you call D_1 ?’, ‘What do the Greeks call D_1 ?’ and so on are grammatically correct and attending to the syntax of such questions reveals that the relevant token of D_1 is a noun or name. In other words, Augustine thinks that the fact that one can ask whether a linguistic expression D_1 in language L_1 can be translated indicates that D_1 is a name and this holds whether or not some accurate translation exists for D_1 . Insofar as this point can be generalised and one can ask such questions concerning any word or expression, then for any relevant word or expression there are tokens of that expression which are names.¹⁷

The final argument Augustine offers in *De Magistro* (*Mag.* 5.16) may be called ‘the Complete Sentence Argument’. It receives the longest discussion and aims to render more explicit the reasoning of the Scripture Argument and the Translation Argument. It proceeds as follows. After briefly explaining the view that a complete simple sentence (*plena sententia*) which expresses a proposition (*pronuntiatum*, cf. Cic. *Tusc.* 1.7.14; *Fat.* 11.26) is constituted by a noun and a verb — a view he notes is associated with the ancient dialecticians — Augustine offers some examples of such sentences constituted by a noun and a verb, for example, ‘*homo sedet*’ and ‘*equus currit*’. The expression ‘*sedet*’ (translation: ‘he/she/it sits’) does not by itself, that is, shorn of context or an associated demonstration, constitute a complete sentence or express a proposition capable of being affirmed or denied (*Mag.* 5.16; cf. *Dial.* 1) and Augustine goes on to say:

Attend to what follows and imagine that we see something far away and are uncertain whether it is an animal or a stone or something else, and I say to you ‘because it is a man, it is an animal’ (*Quia homo est, animal est*). Wouldn’t I be speaking rashly? (*Mag.* 5.16)

Augustine proceeds to argue that the relevant sentence (‘*Quia homo est, animal est*’, ‘because it is a man, it is an animal’) is false or inappropriate in a particular context where it is not clear that the relevant object is a man because ‘*quia*’ (‘because’) is inapt and renders the claim false or inappropriate. Augustine adds that if one were to wish to offer a true or appropriate assertion instead of a false or inappropriate one, then the word ‘*si*’ (‘if’) should be used in the relevant sentence so that the new sentence would read ‘if it is a man, it is an

¹⁷ I am grateful to an anonymous referee for his or her comments concerning this argument.

animal'. In what follows, Augustine asks us to consider two utterances. To clarify Augustine's account, I frequently depart from modern conventions regarding quotation:

- A. *placet si* ('if is acceptable', that is, "'if' is acceptable')
- B. *displicet quia* ('because is unacceptable', that is, "'because" is unacceptable')

Augustine gets Adeodatus to agree that each of these utterances is a complete sentence and expresses a proposition. Thus, since A. is a complete sentence and — according to the ancient dialecticians — a complete sentence is constituted by at least a noun and a verb (and the proposition expressed by such sentences is constituted by a subject and a predicate),¹⁸ and '*placet*' ('is acceptable') is the verb or expresses the predicate and has the role of what we regard as the verbal phrase, it follows that '*si*' ('if') is the noun:

[_S [_{VP}[_V*placet*]]] [_{NP}[_N[*si*]]]

In the relevant sentence, '*si*' thus has the grammatical function of what we would regard as the noun or noun phrase and seems to be a name for the word '*si*' or tokens of that word. A similar argument is offered regarding B., where '*quia*' ('because') is taken to function as a noun or name:

[_S [_{VP}[_V*displicet*]]] [_{NP}[_N[*quia*]]]

Thus, just as there are tokens of '*si*' which are autonymous nouns and can be combined with a token verb to constitute a complete sentence, so too there are tokens of '*quia*' which are autonymous nouns and can be combined with a token verb to constitute a complete sentence and serve as the grammatical subject of such a sentence. The same holds of *every word* (*Mag.* 5.16) and this seems to be an entirely general point which turns upon the grammaticality of the relevant sentences. Accordingly, every word is a name in that, for any word, there are tokens of that word which are autonymous nouns and thereby names.

We can thus see how Augustine's Complete Sentence Argument complements and renders more explicit the reasoning of the Translation Argument and the Scripture Argument. In each case, what Augustine's arguments show is not that every word is a name of its meaning or refers to its meaning (as per Sirmidge), or that every

¹⁸ Cf. Ammonius *In Cat.* 11.1–3; *In De Int.* 11.1–5.

word has some meaning or other (as Burnyeat seems to suggest). Instead, Augustine's claim that all words are names is a metalinguistic thesis concerning autonymy and the burden of Augustine's remarks in *De Magistro* — and what the arguments show — is that for any word, there are tokens of that word which are autonymous nouns and thereby names.

4. Autonymy and quotation

In *De Magistro*, Augustine aims to explain the fact that all words are names (that is, that for any word, there are tokens of that word which are autonymous nouns) by appealing to universal lexical ambiguity or equivocity (that is, the fact that every word has multiple literal meanings).¹⁹ Thus, after the arguments just examined, Adeodatus provides a summary of the preceding discussion (*Mag.* 7.19–8.21) and Augustine then turns to consider the utterance 'Is man man' (*Mag.* 8.22).²⁰ It is pointed out that the relevant sentence might be a mere list (that is, "is", "man", "man") or it might be a question of the form 'Is man man?' or 'Is "man" "man"?' (*Mag.* 8.22, 24) and this, the thought goes, is because each word in the utterance is semantically ambiguous (*ambigua*) and has multiple literal meanings (*Mag.* 8.22). As Augustine puts it: 'man is found to be both an animal and a noun' (*homo et nomen et animal esse inveniatur*, *Mag.* 10.24), that is, 'man' can have the same meaning as 'mortal rational animal' and it can also have the same meaning as 'the word "man"'.

To better understand Augustine's views on how lexical ambiguity or equivocity explains autonymy, one must examine what Augustine says elsewhere, most notably in his *De Dialectica* (which, though brief, provides one of the more detailed extant Hellenistic or post-Hellenistic discussions of lexical ambiguity or equivocity). There, after briefly discussing several other issues (for example, connectives, truth-conditions and non-indicative sentences such as wishes, *Dial.*

¹⁹ The term 'ambiguous', much like the term 'equivocal', can indicate: (α) indeterminacy of meaning; and (β) a multiplicity of (determinate) meanings. 'Ambiguous' is thus itself ambiguous, as per sense (β). In what follows, what is at issue is (β).

²⁰ Here, and in what follows, I again frequently depart from modern conventions concerning quotation marks.

1–4), Augustine asks us to consider the following two utterances (*Dial.* 5):

- (I) *arma quae pars orationis est?* (Translation: what part of speech is wars [*arma*]?)
- (II) *arma virumque cano* (Translation: I sing of wars and a man)

It seems natural to suppose that the word ‘*arma*’ has a different extension in (I) from that which it has in (II). Nowadays we would typically attempt to explain this by claiming that in (I) the word ‘*arma*’ is being *quoted* or *mentioned* (and denotes the word ‘*arma*’) while in (II) ‘*arma*’ is not being mentioned but *used* (and denotes wars or weapons). However, there are various ways in which one might understand why ‘*arma*’ seems to have a different extension in (I) from that which it has in (II) and it is worth considering some of these before examining Augustine’s own views and what is distinctive about them.

According to one traditional modern account of quotation, often known as ‘the proper name theory of quotation’, quotation or the application of quote-functors serves to ‘transform a sign into a name of that sign’ (Reichenbach 1947, p. 335; cf. Quine 1940, pp. 23–6; Tarski 1956, pp. 159–60). On this kind of view, quotations are proper names and the instances of ‘*arma*’ in (I) and (II) are taken to have different significates because, in (I), quotation has transformed the quoted expression ‘*arma*’ into a new expression whose meaning is more or less the same as that of ‘the expression “*arma*”’. Thus, in quoting a word, one in effect creates a new word (with a new meaning) by introducing a name for the quoted expression.

One might be inclined to think that although Augustine does not appeal to punctuation with a semantic function (as modern proper name theories of quotation typically do),²¹ he nonetheless conceives of what is going on with ‘*arma*’ in (I) along similar lines and thus the

²¹ It is often noted that there were no quotation marks in Augustine’s time (for example, Burnyeat 1987, pp.10–11; Kirwan 1989, p. 50; Rist 1994, p. 315) and there is significant truth to this. There was increasing use of diacritics and punctuation marks in late antiquity (for example, accentuation marks, Augustine *Ep.* 149.1.4), $\pi\alpha\rho\acute{\alpha}\gamma\rho\alpha\phi\omicron\varsigma$ marks were used by scribes for various purposes, including indicating (verse) quotations (for example, in the Derveni Papyrus, cf. Betegh 2004, pp. 94–7), and Augustine’s contemporary, Rufinus of Aquileia, may have used the dipole to indicate direct quotations of reported speech (Houston 2013, pp. 194–5; on other late antique uses, see Dexippus *In Cat.* 32.20–23; Wildberg 1993 *ad* Simplicius *In Phys.* 1327.26–9). However, such practises were rare and not consistently applied even by single scribes.

instance of ‘*arma*’ in (I) is missing quotation marks (or some other device used to indicate quotation) in which it should be enclosed. Insofar as these issues have been discussed, several readers seem inclined to take something like this line.²² Thus construed, Augustine would seem to be striving towards something like the account of quotation described above, albeit imperfectly because of the absence of quotation marks (or, perhaps, for other reasons).

On this kind of view, mention or quotation allows for metalinguistic discourse by introducing a new name for the mentioned or quoted expression and insofar as any word can be mentioned or quoted any word can be named. Accordingly, one might wish to understand Augustine’s remarks concerning all words being names as the claim that any word is *potentially* a name in that any word *can be named* because, for any word, one can introduce a new expression to name it.²³ If Augustine were to be understood in this way, then his views would resemble those of a figure like Apollonius Dyscolus, who discusses how one can quote or mention a word by attaching a definite article to it (for example, *De Constructione* 34.3–35.4) and *seems* to see the resulting quotation as a new expression which is the name of the original uttered expression (for example, τὸ ὄνομα τῆς φωνῆς, *De Constructione* 34.6–7, 11–13).²⁴

However, as becomes especially evident in the latter part of *De Dialectica*, Augustine seems to conceive of things rather differently. In attempting to explain cases such as the difference of the extension of ‘*arma*’ between (I) and (II), Augustine appeals to universal lexical (that is, semantic) ambiguity or equivocity (*Dial.* 8–10). Simply put, Augustine credits the ancient dialecticians (that is, the Stoics) with rightly perceiving that there is universal lexical ambiguity (*itaque rectissime a dialecticis dictum est ambiguum esse omne verbum*, *Dial.*

²² Markus (1957, p. 67), Baratin and Desbordes (1982, pp. 83–4), and Kirwan (1989, pp. 49–52; 2001, p. 198) seem to assume something like the view just described. Cf. Sirridge (1976, p. 186).

²³ For similar talk of *potential* and *actual* in this kind of context, see Edlow (1977, pp. 40–8).

²⁴ Cf. Dyscolus *De Constructione* 154.10–155.5. Porphyry (Porph. *In Cat.* 62.1–6, cited above), who accounts for quotation by a so-called ‘secondary imposition’ (δευτέρω θέσει) of a name (*In Cat.* 57.32–58.3; cf. Dexippus *In Cat.* 15.16ff; Ebbesen 1981, pp. 133ff), may have held something like Dyscolus’ view. Attaching the neuter definite article to a word in order to quote it had long precedent, but was not consistently done (hence, for instance, the difficulties concerning whether Aristotle’s *Categories* is about words or things, cf. Kneale and Kneale 1962, pp. 26–7).

9) and thinks that every word, considered on its own, is ambiguous (*quod enim dictum est omne verbum esse ambiguum de verbis singulis dictum est*, *Dial.* 9).²⁵ That is to say, every word has multiple distinct, determinate literal meanings (which are articulated by distinct definitions, *Dial.* 9) (cf. D.L. 7.62; Atherton 1993, pp. 135–74) and is thereby akin to a crossroads (*multivium*) with many paths (*Dial.* 8).²⁶ Among these literal meanings or significations of every word, there is a meaning according to which the word denotes itself and closely associated items.

As an initial illustrative example, Augustine asks us to consider ‘*magnus*’ (‘great’) on its own. That same word, Augustine remarks, may be the name of Pompey the Great (wherein it is akin to a surname or nickname and refers to Pompey the Great, cf. *Plut. Vit. Pomp.* 13.4–5; *Livy* 30.45), but it may also have the same meaning as ‘the word “*magnus*”’ (and thus may denote the word ‘*magnus*’) (*Dial.* 8).²⁷ Equally, just as ‘man’ is (as Augustine puts it) both an animal and a noun (*Mag.* 10.24, see above), so too ‘Tullius’ is both at once a proper name which denotes Marcus Tullius Cicero and an autonomous noun which denotes the word ‘Tullius’ (*Dial.* 10). The

²⁵ Cf. Aulus Gellius *Noctes Atticae* 11.12.1; Quint. *Inst.* 7.9.1; Cic. *Inv. Rhet.* 2.40.117. Several elements of Augustine’s account of dialectic are clearly Stoic, but he is also critical of some Stoic views (cf. *Dial.* 6) and the state of the evidence makes Augustine’s precise debt to the Stoics difficult to evaluate. For different views of the Stoic account of ambiguity, see Ebbesen (1981; 1988); Atherton (1993); and Sluiter (1990; 1997).

²⁶ Augustine gives sustained attention to discussing the extent of lexical ambiguity or equivocity in *De Dialectica* 8–10 while distinguishing between various kinds of ambiguity (*ambiguitas*) and equivocals (*aequivoca*). Augustine applies the term ‘*aequivoca*’ to: (α) the diverse items signified by ambiguous words; and (β) the lexical items which have multiple significations (*Dial.* 9). His taxonomy of ambiguity and equivocals is somewhat complex. The highest category is divided into two subcategories: (i) lexical ambiguity or equivocity (one word having multiple significations); and (ii) what might be regarded as morphological ambiguity, wherein a token expression or graphical sequence is a form of several distinct words (as per Augustine’s example, ‘*leporem*’ is the accusative singular of the noun ‘*lepor*’ (‘charm’) and of the noun ‘*lepus*’ (‘hare’), *Dial.* 9). Lexical ambiguity is again divided into various subtypes and these into further subtypes again (cf. Ebbesen 1981, pp. 38–9). The subtype of lexical ambiguity with which I am primarily concerned, and which accounts for autonymy, is said to arise from the study of language (*ab arte*, *Dial.* 10).

²⁷ Cf. ‘For example, suppose someone said “*magnus*” [“great”] and then was silent. Notice the uncertainties that result from hearing the name. For what if he were going to say, “What part of speech is it?” What if he were going to ask about its meter, “What sort of foot is it?” What if he were going to raise a historical question, for example, “Great Pompey, how many wars did he wage?” [...] For this one “*magnus*” that is said is a name and a trochee and Pompey [...] and innumerable other things, even though not mentioned here, can also be understood as a result of this utterance of a word’ (*Dial.* 8).

same holds of ‘adverb’ (*adverbium*) (which, according to one sense (*notio*), is an autonymous noun, that is, a name of the word ‘*adverbium*’, *Dial.* 10). Every word, the thought goes, has at least two literal meanings, one of which denotes the word itself. (Call this the word’s ‘autonymous signification’.) Moreover, Augustine emphasises the polysemy of words, so that ‘Tullius’ may denote not only Marcus Tullius Cicero but several other things closely associated with him, such as his corpse or his statue (*Dial.* 10).²⁸ Equally, when it comes to autonymous signification, (for example) ‘*magnus*’ can denote not only the word ‘*magnus*’, but also the disyllabic pronunciation /‘mag.nus/, the spelling ‘m’-‘a’-‘g’-‘n’-‘u’-‘s’, the meaning of ‘*magnus*’, and various associated items (*Dial.* 8, see above).

Accordingly, in order to explain the difference in extension between ‘*arma*’ in (I) and (II) Augustine does not think there is a need for a semantic device or a special use of language which *changes* the literal meaning of the relevant quoted expression or creates a new expression and neither is there a need for a speaker to appeal to some form of speaker meaning to communicate something beyond the relevant literal meaning(s). That is to say, Augustine does not think that every word is *merely potentially a name* in that for any word, one can create a new expression to name it (perhaps by adding something to it, as per the kinds of theories discussed above). Equally, Augustine is not claiming that for any word *x* there is (or can be) a distinct word *y* which is an orthographic and phonological doppelganger of *x* and acts as a name of *x* (a view which might prove attractive to those inclined to think that a word’s identity is determined purely by its meaning, as Socrates arguably thinks in Plato’s *Cratylus*),²⁹ or that for any word, the speaker can — simply in virtue of speaker meaning — use that

²⁸ In discussing lexical ambiguity *from use* (*ab usu*, *Dial.* 10) (which seems to be more practically oriented than ambiguity *ab arte*), Augustine illustrates the polysemy of ‘Tullius’ with sentences like ‘Tullius freed the fatherland from ruin’, ‘Tullius is buried in this place’, and ‘You must read all of Tullius’ (*Dial.* 10). In each case there is a different signification and different referent of ‘Tullus’. ‘Tullius’ is thus equivocal, but its meanings are closely related and have something important in common (*Dial.* 10).

²⁹ In the *Cratylus*, a word’s identity is seemingly determined by its δῶναμς (its sense or meaning, cf. *Cratylus* 394b3ff; Ademollo 2011, pp. 171–80). On this kind of view, it also turns out that no word is ambiguous (which may explain the condescending attitude of Plato’s Socrates towards those preoccupied with ambiguity, cf. Sedley 2003, pp. 153–4). Thus, ‘*arma*’ in (I) and ‘*arma*’ in (II) would turn out to be homonyms and homographs (and are instances of words spelled ‘a’-‘r’-‘m’-‘a’). However, they are not tokens of the same word but of two distinct words precisely because they have different meanings.

word as a name (a view which may have been held by Diodorus Cronus).³⁰

Instead, Augustine's view seems to be that every word is *actually a name* in that the multiple meanings are *already present* in the semantically ambiguous word and all words have at least one autonomous meaning whereby they denote themselves (and items associated with themselves). Whether a particular speaker uses a particular word autonomously or not depends upon the speaker's intention at the time of utterance. When a speaker utters a word with the intention of bringing the word itself to the mind of the hearer, the word is said 'on account of itself' (*propter se*). When a word is used 'normally', that is, non-autonomously, to denote something other than itself (or items closely associated with itself), it is said 'on account of signifying something else' (*propter aliud aliquid significandum*, *Dial.* 5). However, on Augustine's view, what allows for a speaker to signify *x* (and associated items) by using *x* is the fact that, among *x*'s literal meanings, there is an autonomous meaning. Autonomous meaning figures among the various literal meanings of the semantically ambiguous word and the lexicon of the relevant language is such that the entry for every word has multiple literal meanings, often in different syntactic categories, and one of these meanings has the word functioning as an autonomous noun.

When it comes to interpretation and how a listener or reader can tell whether a particular token expression is being used autonomously or not, one might think that the non-autonomous signification of an expression should be taken as its customary or primary sense. In *De Magistro*, Adeodatus is himself attracted to this 'rule' (*regula*) of interpretation (*Mag.* 8.22–3) and Augustine allows that this is natural enough (*Mag.* 8.24). However, Augustine thinks that, just as is the case in interpreting ordinary (that is, non-autonomous) lexical ambiguity and polysemy, one should always attend to context, the plausibility of the relevant utterances, and the speaker's likely intention (*Mag.* 8.24) (otherwise one will be susceptible to what we would regard as use-mention errors and fallacies which turn upon them, cf. *Mag.* 8.23–4;

³⁰ Diodorus Cronus is credited with naming one of his slaves 'however' (Ἀλλὰ μὲν) (and others similarly). On the patchy evidence available, he seems akin to a prefiguration of Humpty Dumpty who thinks that if a speaker intends his words to mean such and such then they do mean such and such (cf. Ammonius *In De Int.* 38.17–22; Simpl. *In Cat.* 27.18–21). If Diodorus Cronus thought there is nothing over and above speaker meaning, then we can see why he is meant to have claimed that no word is ambiguous (Aulus Gellius *Noctes Atticae* 11.12.1–3; cf. Sedley 1977).

Quant. An. 32.65). Certain assumptions about the speaker (for example, that the speaker is not guilty of significantly absurd error) thus play an important disambiguating role in interpretation. By attending to considerations about plausibility and the speaker's likely intentions, someone who hears a speaker utter 'my bat was flying around last night' can tell that, in uttering 'bat', the speaker probably intends to denote a flying mammal rather than an implement for striking balls or the word 'bat'. Equally, someone who hears a speaker utter '*caput disyllabum est*' can tell that the speaker is probably using '*caput*' ('head') to denote a linguistic expression because even though taking '*caput*' to signify non-autonymously (for example, to denote a head) yields a grammatical sentence, '*disyllabum est*' ('is composed of two syllables') can obviously only be satisfied by linguistic expressions. However, other utterances may be more difficult to decipher.

In certain respects, Augustine's account of metalinguistic discourse bears resemblance to some later medieval theories of material supposition (and at least one modern theory of quotation, namely that of [Saka 1998](#)),³¹ but it differs significantly from many modern accounts of quotation which would typically: *not* regard (for example) 'because is unacceptable' (cf. *Mag.* 5.16, above) as a true sentence (or even a grammatical sentence); *not* maintain that the quoted expression refers to *itself* or items associated with itself; *not* treat every quoted expression as a name (even if, like proper name theories of quotation or demonstrative theories of quotation, they might treat every *quotation* as a name or a singular term); and *not* regard the quoted expression as semantically part of the sentence which quotes it (as is especially evidently the case in demonstrative theories of quotation of the kind championed by [Davidson 1979](#)).

³¹ In some particular sentence, a token term α was thought to materially supposit when it denoted itself or something similar to itself. As there were several different accounts of material supposition it is difficult to concisely state how Augustine's account relates to them, but while philosophers like William of Ockham took material supposition to occur non-significantly (for example, *Summa Logicae* 1.64, 67), several philosophers after Ockham posited second concepts to explain material supposition significantly and were seemingly led to accept something akin to universal lexical ambiguity (cf. [Read 1999](#), pp. 15–20). Note that the account of Saka (who distinguishes between quotation and mention in a manner that other modern theorists typically do not and posits an account of mention which resembles Augustine's account of using expressions *on account of themselves*) turns primarily upon pragmatics, but (in a manner akin to Augustine and some later medieval accounts of material supposition) he thinks a set of quotation marks 'maps its [quoted expression] X into some linguistic item saliently associated with X other than the extension of X' ([Saka 1998](#), p. 127).

Thus, many moderns would regard the use of ‘bat’ to denote ‘bat’ (as in ‘bat is a one-syllable word’, that is, the *mention* of the word ‘bat’) as ‘fundamentally different’ (for example, [Washington 1992](#), p. 582) from its use to denote (for example) an implement for striking balls, to such an extent that they would think that a special semantic device is required to explain the latter case and would regard ‘bat is a one-syllable word’ as incorrect. However, on Augustine’s view, using the word (for example) ‘bat’ autonymously to denote the word ‘bat’ is not fundamentally different from using the term ‘bat’ to denote members of the Mammalian order Cheiroptera or using the term ‘bat’ to denote an implement for striking balls (and the same applies to (I) and (II) and whether ‘*arma*’ denotes ‘*arma*’, wars, or weapons, *Dial.* 5).

Augustine’s account of autonymy explains why he and his contemporaries regularly and unapologetically discuss linguistic expressions without any quotation-like devices. (Thus, for instance, devices such as ‘*li*’, as used in later medieval Latin, are very rarely present and never necessary.)³² One might worry that Augustine’s account multiplies literal meanings beyond necessity (cf. [Grice 1989](#), p. 47) and requires significant extra-linguistic knowledge and considerable interpretative work (that is, what many would deem *additional* and *creative* work) on the part of the hearer if customary signification(s) and autonymous signification (or ordinary discourse and metalinguistic discourse) are to be told apart. However, it is important to keep in mind that Augustine himself emphasises that ‘discussing words with words is as entangled as interlocking one’s fingers and rubbing them together, where hardly anyone but the person doing it can distinguish the fingers that itch from the fingers scratching the itch’ (*Mag.* 5.14, trans. King) and that he is attempting to account for the existing linguistic and metalinguistic practices of his time (rather than, for instance, stipulating how one should engage in metalinguistic discourse). Augustine would happily accept that listening requires considerable work and one of his broader aims in *De Magistro* is to show that words do not typically simply transfer

³² The use of Greek definite articles has been discussed above. It is only in later medieval works that one finds ‘*li*’ or ‘*ly*’ (sometimes described as a ‘sign of materiality’ (*signum materialitatis*)) used to indicate material supposition. There are differing views over the extent to which this should be taken to resemble a quote-functor (cf. [Trentman 1977](#), p. 86; [King 1985](#), p. 331; [Perreiah 2002](#), p. 250–1; [Dutilh Novaes 2007](#), pp. 28, 33, 47ff), but Paul of Venice notes that certain thinkers thought a term *only* signifies materially when a sign of materiality (such as ‘*li*’) governs it (*Logica Magna* 1.7ff).

information from speakers to listeners without the decisive and often creative cognitive agency of the hearer or something within the hearer (*Mag.* 10.34ff; *Retr.* 1.12).³³

5. Conclusion

In this paper I have sought to clarify what Augustine means by saying ‘every word is a name’, his arguments on behalf of that claim, and his views concerning certain kinds of metalinguistic discourse. I have argued that, in saying ‘every word is a name’, Augustine is not proposing a referentialist thesis according to which a word’s referent is its meaning and neither is Augustine merely claiming that every word has some meaning. Instead, Augustine is claiming that for any word, there exist tokens of that word which are autonomous nouns (so that every word is a name of itself and several associated items). This, Augustine thinks, is the result of universal lexical ambiguity or equivocity (that is, the fact that every word has more than one literal meaning) and I have sought to explain how Augustine thinks lexical ambiguity accounts for autonymy while clarifying how Augustine’s views differ from some ancient and modern theories of quotation and metalinguistic discourse. This has, I hope, furthered our understanding of one of the most detailed extant accounts of how language ‘turns on itself’ to have survived from antiquity and the ways in which one might hope to account for metalinguistic discourse without appealing to quotation as we moderns typically understand it.³⁴

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³³ This theme was aptly explored by Burnyeat (1987). While Augustine is especially concerned with arguing that testimony concerning *x* typically fails to produce adequate cognition, knowledge, or understanding of *x*, he also picks out ambiguity as one of the reasons why we should not be said to learn from words (*Mag.* 13.43). Cf. Nawar (2015; 2019).

³⁴ I am grateful to: Emar Maier for discussion at an early stage; Matthew Duncombe, Marion Durand (who led me to Hegel), and David Ebrey for comments on an earlier version; and especially to the anonymous referees for helpful comments and criticisms.

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