

Language and the Grammar of Death in Augustine's *City of God*

In Book XIII of Augustine's *City of God*, he tries to put death into words. As he soon finds out, it is far from easy to express the experience of dying in everyday language. This is not some vague sense Augustine has. Rather, he provides detailed examples of how our language falters when speaking of death. Specifically, it is linguistic tense that struggles most when trying to account for the temporality of death.

According to Augustine, the apparently punctual nature of the moment of death is what we have trouble putting into words. We can speak quite easily of those who are “before death” (*ante mortem*) or “after death” (*post mortem*), but not of those who are “in death” (*in morte*) or “dying” (*moriens*).¹ Is there, indeed, any moment in time during which someone is “dying?” Or can we only speak of a prior and posterior state—living and dead, with no proper word for what comes in between?

Already in Book XI of the *Confessions*, Augustine had critiqued the tense structure of language. To be sure, both English- and Latin-speakers do break their verb tenses down into past, present, and future. But how can we be sure that such a tripartite distinction actually maps onto the nature of time itself? Augustine is scarcely convinced that the map fits the territory. In the *City of God*, then, he returns to this awkward intersection of time and language. Yet now we have moved from the potentially abstract problem of time proper to the visceral aporia of the time of death. If it bothers us that language is inadequate for describing pure temporality, it bothers Augustine even more that our words fall short at the instant of our own deaths.

In addition to his general critique of linguistic tense, Augustine adds here a series of specific remarks about the verb *mori* (to die). A deponent, *mori* is already laden with grammatical peculiarities. Augustine latches on to these in order to speculate on how the

grammar of the verb for dying may help us think about the confusing grammar of death itself. Pointing out that the past passive participle of *mori* is irregular (because it redoubles the ‘u,’ giving us *mortuus* rather than simply *mortus*), Augustine argues that the verb itself suggests something is awry with the time of death. *Mortuus*, he argues, is not in fact a past passive participle at all, but rather simply an adjective. Because of that, it admits of declension, not conjugation. Grammatically speaking, it—perhaps like the elusive instant of death—is *sine tempore*: without time.

In order to make sense of all this, it is incumbent upon us to talk about how Augustine uses something like a speculative grammar to reveal the inadequacy of everyday language in the face of death. In the wake of that failure, he concludes, we can perhaps turn only to a mode of language that takes us far beyond the quotidian. To speak of death, in other words, we may have to arrogate the voice of Scripture.

ⁱ Augustine, *City of God*, XIII.9-11.