CHAPTER TWO

THE LANGUAGE OF DESIRE

uitam beatam concupiscere et desiderare sectari, omnium hominum esse arbitror

s. 150, 4

hoc tamen loquendi obtinuit consuetudo, ut, si cupiditas uel concupiscentia dicatur nec addatur cuius rei sit, non nisi in malo possit intellegi

ciu. 14, 7

In this Chapter, I shall discuss the three most common words for the negatively connotated desire in Augustine's works, namely the terms concupiscentia-concupisco, cupiditas and libido. A short survey in the lexical history of the words will be provided, and after that, questions pertaining to the degree of synonymy and varying contexts in which these words are used, shall be addressed. No comprehensive lexical analyses are pursued here, but only a rough outline of Augustine's terminology in the matter.

The standard treatises on lexical and semantic notions in the Augustinian concept of evil desire still remain those of Gerald Bonner.1 Bonner has

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1 Bonner 1962, 1986–1994, 1996–2002, 2002, 398–401. There are, of course, other positions to the semantics of the three words of desire. They are mostly of very general character, or noting a detail of the word uses in the Augustinian corpus. See the remarks of e.g. Brachtendorf 1997, 306 n. 52 (who notes the relative paucity of the word concupiscentia in ciu.), and Cipriani 2010, who treats the word in a “general sense” as synonymous to cupiditas and concupiscentia, but suggests then a “stricter sense,” by which libido refers to the desire for pleasure connected with the five bodily senses, and in “still stricter sense” may also denote a desire for sexual pleasure (Cipriani 2010, 981). The three words are handled as synonyms by e.g. Burnell 1999; Harrison C. 2000, 95. Schlabach (1998, 65–66, n. 26 and 30, 31) is ambiguous, positing on the one hand “subtle distinctions,” on the other hand he admits that the word choice depends mostly on metrical factors and on source texts. Lamberigts 2000 reconstructs different forms of concupiscentia (c. bona, c. naturalis and c. carnis), and refers to Bonner’s articles (2000, 189, 191); see also Lamberigts 1997, 155 n. 19 and 157–158, where he suggests for concupiscentia carnis a translation: “sinful longing.” For other references to Bonner, see Markus 1990b, 258; Schlabach 1998, 59. As Lawless (2000, 251) points out, concupiscentia remains hard to translate in English: “A recent translation of De nuptiis et concupiscentiis [sic!], for example, as Marriage and Desire, is misleading and frankly, inept. Like desiderium and cupido, concupiscentia is a word with a distinctively biblical and Augustinian coloration. The English ‘desire’ does not reflect its many resonances.” Markus (1990a, 60) prefers “lust
stressed the non-sexual facets of the concept more or less consistently. His basic assumptions concerning the semantics and the uses of the words in his 1962 article are the following:

1. *Libido* and *concupiscientia* are interchangeable when they are used to describe sexual desire.
2. If any other lust is meant, *libido* has the clear prevalence, sometimes supplemented by *cupiditas*. The importance of *libido dominandi* in *ciu.* is stressed, and its debt to Sallust is noted.
3. *Libido* is classical Latin. *Concupiscientia* is a Christian technical term, used exclusively by Christian writers, and mostly with a sexual connotation.

Bonner also makes short surveys of both words in the preceding Latin literature, and attempts to show that *libido* has a wider range of meaning than the exclusively Christian word of *concupiscientia*. Bonner provides examples of the various uses of *libido* from Lucretius, Sallust, Livy, Cicero, Tacitus and concludes that for Classical Latin authors, this word lacks "strongly sexual overtones" which it has for Augustine. In the *Augustinus-Lexikon* articles, the following modifications and additions are made:

4. Biblical Latin directed Augustine to use the word *concupiscientia* in both a positive and a negative sense, although the negative meaning prevails. Such ambivalence is due to the "African tradition" (i.e. Tertullian and Cyprian) that Augustine follows.
5. *Concupiscientia* as such is not limited to sexual desire: it also has "wider implications" in human sinful behaviour (correcting (3) above). Sexual desire is one, but not the only manifestation of *concupiscientia*.

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2 Bonner uses the form *libido carnalis*.
3 For a detailed criticism of this assertion, see Yates 2001, who investigates both Cyprian and Tertullian focusing on their use of *concupiscientia*. According to Yates, the two pre-Augustinian writers cannot be shown to have influenced Augustine in any profound way (p. 56). If any preference is to be given, it belongs to Tertullian.

Concerning the emergence of *concupiscientia* in Africa, see also Mohrmann 1965, 103–106. Mohrmann notes that in the old Latin translation of Clem. *Rom. ep. ad Corinth.* (28, 1; 30,1), the word *epithumia* is translated by *voluntas* instead of *concupiscientia*. This translation originates from the second century CE, and in all probability, from Rome. Mohrmann 1965, 103–106. However, in a few decades, it is *concupiscientia* that is found in the biblical quotations of Tertullian on the other side of the Mediterranean.