

“Meaning in life” through language

Yael Mishani-Uval¹

¹Bar-Ilan University, yael.mishani-uval@biu.ac.il

Keywords: Meaning in life, Contrast, Repetition, Vision

“Meaning in life” is one of the most abstract, complex and elusive moral concepts, the sources and causes of which are difficult to pinpoint and track. When it comes to the way one grasps the meaning of one’s own life, or the attitude one adopts towards life, there is also a great deal of subjective choice. This raises the question of how such a concept can be studied. The current paper explores speakers’ construal of subjective meaning in life and the role of bodily experience in it, through qualitative-empirical method of inquiry, which examines the way speakers talk about “meaning in life” in spoken discourse (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, 1999; Johnson, 1987, 1993, 2008, 2014; Gibbs, 1994; Jackendoff, 1994; Fauconnier & Turner, 2002).

30 Semi-structured in-depth interviews with native Hebrew-speakers in three age-groups: 10-year old children; 40-50 year old adults; and octogenarian Israelis, were conducted in Hebrew in order to reveal speakers’ understanding and construction of the concept in different life-stages and across the life-span (Erickson, 1959, 1963, 1968). The questions that comprise the interviews concern the ways that the interviewees grasp the meaning of their lives, as well as their attitudes toward events, people and other aspects of life they take to be meaningful. Interviews in spoken language provide spontaneous language-data that can reveal both conscious and unconscious cognitive processes (Halliday, 1987). Assuming that language-use involves conscious and unconscious linguistic choices, investigating these choices sheds light on speakers’ conceptualizations and modes of understanding (Halliday, 1976, 2010).

Results reveal three prominent linguistic mechanisms, used by speakers in order to construct a sense of meaning in life or stress the significance of different aspects, events and people in their lives. These mechanisms reveal shared aspects of people’s understanding of the concept, as well as bodily processes involved in its construction:

- (1) Contrast. Negation, repetition, or lexical contrasts serve as a cognitive strategy to emphasize the significance of the events interviewees choose to discuss, as well as to emphasize their roles within their experiences and life stories.
- (2) Analogy. Lexical, semantic or syntactic repetitions serve as a cognitive strategy to construct an experience as meaningful.
- (3) Vision. Vision metaphors and verbal constructions are frequently used by speakers to highlight understanding and meaningfulness, and also reveal the role of bodily experience in the construal of “meaning in life”.

Through a series of different empirical examples, the paper will demonstrate how these linguistic strategies serve both as cognitive mechanisms to make sense of the concept of “meaning in life” and as constitutive mechanism of coherence and a sense of meaning in life. The presentation will also discuss some differences between the age-groups. Concluding remarks will highlight the importance of further investigation of the interrelationships between meaning in life and meaning in language.

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