



## Meaning and the real life of language—Learning from “pathological” cases in science classrooms



Wolff-Michael Roth\*

University of Victoria, Canada

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### ABSTRACT

In this study, a contribution to the nature of language and its implication for linguistics in education, I take up Vygotskij's (1934) and Vološinov's (1930) discussion of an episode from the diary of Dostoevsky, in which six drunken workers have a (pathological?) “conversation” that exists only in the six-fold repetition of the same profane word. The analysis of these discussions leads to a critique of the notion of “meaning” (private or shared) associated with and denoted by words. I articulate a pragmatist approach to language, including the call for abandoning the concept altogether (Wittgenstein, Davidson, Rorty). Fragments from science classrooms are used to exemplify the need to go beyond the literal sense of words and the associated divorce of thought from the fullness of life. Implications for research and practice are sketched.

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### Introduction

The organizing center of every statement, of every expression, is *not internal*, but external: It is situated *in the social milieu* that surrounds the individual (Vološinov, 1930, p. 95, emphasis added).

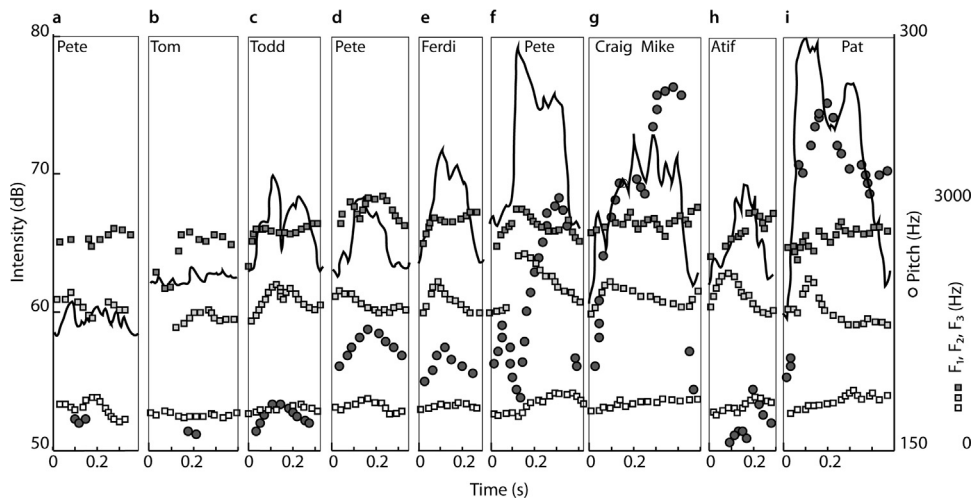
Meaning, in essence, means nothing. (Vološinov, 1973, p. 101)

Das Verstehen, die Bedeutung, fällt aus unserer Betrachtung heraus [Understanding, meaning, drops from our consideration]. (Wittgenstein, 2000, Ts-213,1r)

In the scholarly literature on language in educational settings, there is a considerable focus on (the construction of) “meaning”—so much so that we forget to really listen to and reflect upon how, when, and for what purpose language is used. We observe such a focus even when scholars of language take a decidedly social (semiotic) perspective (e.g. Lemke, 1990). This may astonish given that preeminent language philosophers often quoted in the (educational) literature on language-in-use have pronounced themselves against the usefulness of the term. Thus, as the first opening quotation shows, Vološinov suggests that the signification of a word, that is, its dictionary sense, says very little<sup>1</sup>: “Meaning, in essence, *means nothing*” (emphasis added). Two decades later, and apparently unaware of the Russian scholar, a philosopher of language states, as the third introductory quotation shows, that meaning (Ger. *Bedeutung*), as understanding, drops from a pragmatist consideration of the nature of language-in-use. We by-and-large can do without “meaning” as a theoretical and descriptive term. In fact, the notion of “meaning” that accompanies and is attached to words is consistent with a Platonic view of language, or, as

\* Correspondence to: Applied Cognitive Science, MacLaurin Building A567, University of Victoria, Victoria, BC, Canada V8P 5C2. Tel.: +1 250 721 7764.  
E-mail address: [mroth@uvic.ca](mailto:mroth@uvic.ca)

<sup>1</sup> The French version renders it more like ‘Signification says nothing in itself’ (Bakhtine [Volochinov], 1977, p. 145).



**Fig. 1.** Pitch, speech intensity, and first three formants (F1, F2, F3) for the 10 occurrences of “penis”.

Wittgenstein (1997) states, it is a term that “has a place in a primitive idea of the way language functions” or “is the idea of a language more primitive than ours” (p. 3 [§2]). One of the problems with the concept of “meaning”—e.g., as in statements such as “students construct meaning”—is that it freezes the word specifically and language generally into something stable when in fact these are living and therefore ever changing. Responding to his rhetorical question of what gives a sign life, Wittgenstein responds, “[i]n use it *lives*. Does it have its living breath in it?—Or is the *use* its breath?” (p. 128 [§432], my translation).<sup>2</sup> As Vološinov suggests in the first introductory quotation, the organizing center of a statement is situated in the social milieu, which, therefore, leads to an intermingling of language and life to the point that these become indistinguishable. Such an approach has serious consequences for the ways in which we describe, theorize, and analyze language in educational settings.

The purpose of the study is to make a case that linguistics in education can get by without the concept of “meaning” and that there is a lot of benefit in taking a radically pragmatic, Wittgensteinian perspective on language-in-use and drop the term altogether. I begin by analyzing one pathological case of language-in-use in preparation of offering a conceptualization of language that does not need recourse to the metaphysical concept “meaning.” In the context of this case, I discuss a similar case that two language philosophers (V.N. Vološinov, L.S. Vygotskij) discuss before providing a pragmatic reframing of language-in-use. I then present further classroom episodes that exhibit the rich intertwining of everyday language and concerns with the more sterile and serious language of a physics course. All episodes show that we may drop the notion of meaning from our analyses (as Wittgenstein suggests) because “meaning, in essence, means nothing” (as Vološinov states). The article has consequences for the on ongoing discussions of linguistic competence (e.g., Leung & Lewkowicz, 2013), which, in the present study, is theorized to be indistinguishable from the competence of getting around everyday life generally. In contrast to these authors, I pursue a radical pragmatist (concrete human psychological) agenda that does not seek recourse in metaphysical “meanings” and instead focuses on the linguistic tokens that have use and exchange value (e.g., Roth, 2006).

### The way language functions: a fragment from a real-life classroom

To situate the framing of the problem of “meaning,” consider the following fragment, which, as a related incident was for Dostoevsky (1994, p. 258), “is a fact that I witnessed myself” while recording the events in a science class.<sup>3</sup> The videotape shows the students working in small groups, nearing the end of a concept mapping task, which had asked them to hierarchically order the key terms from a chapter in their textbook and then transfer the resulting hierarchy to a large sheet of paper where they wrote verbs on lines connecting pairs of terms to produce statements. At one point, Pete, who has taken on the job of transcribing the concept map of his group asks Atif to return a pencil. Atif eventually tosses the pencil across the classroom, but misses Pete’s hands. Pat picks up the pencil from the floor and reaches it to Pete, who, shifting his gaze to face Pat, says with very low volume “penis” (turn 15). We then hear the same word articulated 9 more times (turns 18, 21, 24, 26, 28, 30, 31, 33, and 35) before Pete comments, “*there we go*” (turn 36) followed by Marc, who, naming the last speaker

<sup>2</sup> The English translation of §432 translates *Leben* (life) and *Atem* (breath) by the same term “life.” Saying that ‘the meaning’ of *Atem* in this passage is that of ‘life’ gets to the core of our problem, because it seeks recourse to a concept that Wittgenstein drops from his considerations.

<sup>3</sup> The lesson fragments used in this study derive from eleventh- and twelfth-grade physics courses recorded in a private high school. Almost all students attend college or university following graduation. Physics is a compulsory prerequisite for university science and engineering programs in that part of the country where the school is located. The learning that occurs in the concept mapping tasks from which the lesson fragments have been extracted, and the institutional context of the school, have been described elsewhere (e.g., Roth, 2009).

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