**The Problem of Meaning in Life: Usage and Generativity in the Spoken Language of Israelis in Different Life Stages**

Keywords: meaning in life; spoken language; usage; choice; narrative; depth grammar; surface grammar

The proposed project will examine the problem of meaning in life from a theoretical and empirical-developmental perspective of the study of language. The purpose of the research is to examine how speakers at different life stages understand and construct meaning in life. The study proposes a novel examination of this through the analysis of rich transcripts of semi-structured interviews using an interdisciplinary methodology combining language and discourse analysis. The common ground (Arvidson 2014) is that spontaneous speech in everyday spoken language is a portal through which feelings, attitudes, and subjective perceptions are reflected in an authentic and unmediated way. In this speech, it is possible to distinguish between conscious speech.

The project will be comprised of two sections—theoretical and empirical. The theoretical section will include an interdisciplinary discussion that links perceptions of meaning in language to perceptions of meaning in life. The discussion will focus on the tensions between conceptions of meaning based on social agreements and shared social values, and conceptions of meaning that center on establishing individual and universal meaning and which are not dependent on a specific society. The theoretical discussion will also establish the methodology for the qualitative research.

The empirical study will be based on semi-structured in-depth interviews with native Hebrew speakers in four different age groups: 10-year-old children, adults aged 20-30, adults aged 40-50, and adults aged 70 and over. Each group will contain 20 participants with an equal gender distribution. Analysis of the interviews will focus on the various ways that speakers choose, consciously or unconsciously, to formulate their responses to questions about how they perceive different aspects of meaning in their lives and their value.

Through analysis of the interviews, which will use tools from linguistic, discourse, and conversational analysis, the study will attempt to answer the following questions: what are the grammatical surface-structure characteristics of the various answers to questions about meaning in life, and how do they compare the characteristics of the grammatical deep-structures of the same answers? What circumstances result in individuals contending with questions of meaning in life? What types of narratives are formed following these and other circumstances? What expressions of creative generativity compared to expressions of regulatory function arose in the interviews? Does age or gender have an effect on how meaning in life is articulated? How were expressions of direct meaning formulated, and how were expressions of indirect meaning formulated? What recursive uses and what expressions of “private language” characterized the descriptions of meaning?

The concluding discussion of the empirical research findings in light of the preliminary theoretical discussion will address the tense interplay between social norms and individual expressions of meaning in life. Through this comparison, a distinction can be made between expressions of meaning that are indicative of individual choice, and expressions of meaning that reflect agreements and judgments based on a form of life. More generally, the concluding discussion will indicate the role of language and its various mechanisms in establishing a sense of meaning in life at different ages, and on a more general level, the relationship between establishing meaning in language and establishing meaning as a mental process.

**Detailed Description of the Research Program**

**1. Scientific Background**

**1.1 The Study of Meaning in Life**

The search for meaning in life and the will to meaning is the “primary motivational force” in human life (Frankl 1959: 121). This search is inherent in both the contents and the method of Plato’s dialogues, which are founded on conceptual analysis with the object being the discovery of the meaning of life and its purpose (Plato 1997; Scolnikov 2008). Although “meaning in life” did not appear in Plato’s writings as a concept *per se* parallel concepts such as purpose and destiny were discussed at length (Peperzak 2003, 41). The Platonic method of dialogue and the idea that one must “give birth” to the contents of life’s meaning in life from the words of an interlocutor was also adopted as a therapeutic method by Viktor Frankl, who situated the search for purpose and meaning in life as a fact at the heart of psychotherapy (Frankl 1959, 122).

Western philosophy’s discussion of the question of meaning in life can be said to begin with Descartes, the father of modern philosophy, who argued that this meaning is based on virtue, including happiness (Descartes 1988 I, 125). However, the phrase “meaning of life” as a concept first came into use in the eighteenth century (Landau 1997, 263). It received more attention in the nineteenth century, amid the decline of religion and the rise of humanist-existentialist thought. The term “meaning of life” was used interchangeably both in a general sense of the meaning of the world, and in an individual-subjective sense as the meaning of the value and importance of individual lives. In the nineteenth century, the concept began to be addressed in a variety of fields. Two prominent thinkers who addressed it, and who are the subject of much scholarly work, are Soren Kierkegaard (Kierkegaard 1944) and Leo Tolstoy (Tolstoy [1879] 1987).

Kierkegaard, who is considered the father of modern existentialism, explored the meaning of life in the context of ethics, aesthetics, and religion (Golomb et al. 1995). Kierkegaard argued that forming a discussion is the first stage in clarifying an individual’s destiny in the world. Later, the individual must continue his investigation on the ethical plane, and finally on the religious plane (Krishek 2022). Kierkegaard’s book *Stages on Life’s Way* articulates the necessity of an individual’s gradual development in finding meaning in life (Kierkegaard 1998). Further, Kierkegaard pointed out how literary creativity is key to subjective reflection, arguing that only through subjective choice can we confer meaning on reality (Sagi 2000). Kierkegaard’s statement that “subjectivity is truth; subjectivity is actuality” (1944: 343) is an inspiration for this project, which focuses on “meaning in life,” in the subjective-individual sense of the construct. Although subjectivity can be understood in several ways (Landau 2020), the idea is to extricate a perception of the meaning that a particular speaker articulates within his life experience (Metz 2013). Tolstoy followed a path similar to that of Kierkegaard. His literary work preceded his philosophical work but unlike Kierkegaard, Tolstoy did not view his work as being a stage on the way to finding the meaning of life, but instead considered his religious faith to be the primary source of meaning in his life (Hosseini 2023; Jareño-Alarcón 2023).

In the wake of the Second World War, it became apparent that meaning in life is distinct from such constructs as wellbeing or happiness. Life in the Nazi extermination camps, as Frankl (1959 [1946]) demonstrated, may have been meaningful—but it was certainly neither happy nor a life of wellbeing (Landau 2022: 2). Analytical philosophers, whose work is of particular relevance to this study due to their focus on language, did not concern themselves overmuch with questions of meaning in life (Landau 2022: 1). Further, the few studies that have examined the question of meaning in life from the perspective of analytical philosophy do not take into account the contribution that linguistic theories and concepts have made to this debate (Landau 2022; Metz 2013). Since the mid-twentieth century, the topic has developed in different directions, but its complexity remains unchanged (Landau 1997).

Beyond the philosophical difficulty inherent in the construct of meaning in life and the considerable complexity inherent in describing it from a scientific perspective, it also presents linguistic difficulties. Meaning in life is among the vaguest of abstract constructs and involves complex and subjective processes that are not necessarily causal. Further, like other abstract constructs (such as happiness, morality, and love) meaning in life is ambiguous, and it is not possible to identify any clear referents for it. Similar to other abstract constructs, meaning in life is influenced by individual life experiences, the particular context in which it is used, and the specific culture within which it arises (Barsalou 1987).

Paul Thagard (2019) has proposed an interesting and important methodological approach for analyzing consciousness, insights from which will be integrated into the qualitative research questions of this study. Thagard’s proposal involves three categories: exemplars (like Tolstoy), typical features (such as purpose, value, and reflection), and explanations (such as mental, neural, and social). In another study, Thagard describes two approaches to the problem of meaning in life and accordingly divides scholars into two groups—those who focus on the individual aspect (such as Hill (2018)) and those who focus on the normative aspect (such as Wolf (2020) and Landau (2017)). Thagard proposed unifying these two approaches by “identifying objective sources of meaning for all” (Thagard 2022: 134). Here, it is important to note Thagard’s argument (2022: 134) that findings regarding meaning in life should be seen as lacking essentialness, in the spirit of Wittgenstein’s methodological concept of *Familienähnlichkeit* (family resemblance) (Wittgenstein 2019: 66-67). The concept of family resemblance will also be used in this study as a tool to analyze the content of the interviews. While Thagard (2022) proposed dealing with the problem of meaning in life by recognizing the relevance of neuroscience, this study proposes doing so through language analysis, using methodological tools that allow us to reveal both individual choices and the normative use of existing content related to meaning in life.

**1.1.1 Meaning in Life from a Developmental Perspective**

Questions regarding meaning in life, including whether it exists or not, or whether one has a sense of it or not, are relevant to any human being at any age and life stage. The choice to examine the developmental aspects of the conceptualization and experience of meaning in life, as expressed through language, stems from the assumption that humans experience a sense of meaning in life in different ways and to varying degrees and that they can report on those feelings and experiences in language (King & Hicks 2021: 563). The search for meaning in life begins in a person’s early years, with the development of language (Vygotsky 1986). This coincides with the development of central cognitive skills, such as self-reflection and the acquisition of self-esteem (Erikson 1950: 1968), and the ability for abstract and moral thinking (Piaget 1932: 1936). Psychological studies indicate that six-year-old children have a sense of meaning in life (Devogler & Ebersole 1983; Shoshani & Russo-Netzer 2017; Taylor & Ebersole 1993). With age, there is an increase in the level of meaning in life (Meier & Edwards 1974; Reker 2005; Reker et al. 1987; Van Ranst & Marcoen 1997). Due to this, most empirical studies on meaning in life have been among older adults (see, for example: Battersby & Phillips 2016; Boyle et al. 2009; Ryff et al. 2016).

**1.2 The Study of Meaning in Language**

The study of meaning in language is one of the main research streams in modern linguistics and occurs in two parallel branches: semantics and pragmatics. Semantics, which is concerned with the meanings of words, bound conjunctions, and arguments, uses tools from logic and mathematics, such as truth conditions and first-order predicate calculus, and strives to reveal the abstract set of rules that underpin natural language. Pragmatics, meanwhile, is concerned with aspects of meaning derived from context, linguistic or extra-linguistic, via processes of interpretation and inference. Since the beginning of the twentieth century, philosophers and linguists have pointed to the importance of language analysis in understanding human nature, the cognitive limitations on our ability to learn, and the sources of our abstract values, including moral values. The philosophical linguistic turn, as Richard Rorty (1965) termed the common ground of scholars who focus on language, situates the study of everyday language at the center of all investigations.

The focus on the study of the action of linguistic mechanisms is attributed to philosophers of the linguistic turn, chiefly Wittgenstein (1922; 1953), who is considered the first philosopher to assert that everyday language, in particular spoken language, contains the meaning that linguists seek to study and understand: “The meaning of a word is its use in the language. […] What is true or false is what human beings say; and it is in their language that human beings agree. […] Essence is expressed in grammar” (Wittgenstein 1953, §43, §241, §371; emphasis in the original).

The methodology of everyday language research will be at the center of this study, from both a theoretical/philosophical and an empirical perspective. The study will incorporate an interdisciplinary methodological toolbox based on concepts from several thinkers. The interdisciplinary common ground for these thinkers is their positioning of everyday language use at the center of the investigation and drawing of retrospective conclusions regarding how people understand and construct meaning in life, the contents of the construct, and linguistic mechanisms. The basic assumption shared by all the thinkers and scholars whose ideas are discussed below is that language is a tool of thought and everything that humans mean is embodied in it, including perceptions of meaning in life (Austin 1962; Chomsky 2015; Wittgenstein 2019). The construct of meaning in life will be examined comparatively, using Wittgenstein’s concept of family resemblance, through which he demonstrated that it is not possible to define anything, tangible or abstract, but only to describe the resemblances and differences between the characteristics of various phenomena (Wittgenstein 2019: §§66-67). Further, as Roman Jakobson has argued (1960), the study of the functions of language calls for an interdisciplinary research infrastructure, since language is the basis for every field in the social sciences and humanities. Therefore, the concise review below focuses on ideas common to the various thinkers, highlighting the unique contribution of each to the proposed methodology of this study.

**1.2.1 Usage and Context**

Language use is a central methodological concept in Wittgenstein’s later perception of meaning. Wittgenstein’s argument that, in most cases, “The meaning of a word is its use in the language” (Wittgenstein, 2019: §43), has inspired many interdisciplinary studies, including in literature, sociology, and psychoanalysis (e.g., see Bloor 1997; Gibson & Huemer 2004; Lemberger 2016). Wittgenstein contended that meaning is always produced within a specific social context, within a language game that is part of a particular form of life, and is the data from which every investigation begins (Wittgenstein 2009: §23).

The concept of form of life has been the subject of various studies thanks to its importance in understanding the context in which humans use language (Bloor 1997; Kishik 2012). Wittgenstein used form of life to denote a set of specific cultural conditions of which we must be aware in order to understand what is being said in the language of that culture:

It is what human beings say that is true and false; and they agree in the language they use. That is not agreement in opinions but **in form of life**. If language is to be a means of communication there must be agreement not only in definitions but also […] in judgments (Wittgenstein, 2019: §§241-242).

Agreement in form of life does not simplify the possibility of creating agreement in opinions.

Wittgenstein also used form of life to examine complex and abstract concepts such as hope, imagination, and longing: “Can only those hope who can talk? Only those who have mastered the use of a language. That is to say, the phenomena of hope are modes of this complicated form of life.” (Wittgenstein 2019: §366 & 1). In all these cases, Wittgenstein emphasized that our understanding of a particular concept depends on our investigation of its ways of use, where agreements are expressed in judgment. An individual may use a concept in a way that is contrary to the agreement regarding it, but such use is also understood on the basis of, and in comparison to, the form of life—as a given.

At the same time, Wittgenstein pointed to “countless different kinds of use” and language games, in other words, to infinite creativity in language (Wittgenstein 2019: §23). The dynamism of the language system allows us to adapt to a changing reality, as well as to changing “mythology” (Wittgenstein 1969, §97) and “hinges” of certainty. Wittgenstein described the objects on which humans rely to perform actions as akin to the hinges of a door. The hinges enable the door to be opened (that is, the action to be performed)—but they can be replaced, with the action then based on other hinges. This type of change can occur as a result of constraints or intentionally, and can also be a source of poetic, dialogical, and mystical creativity (Lemberger 2016). Further, Wittgenstein argued that we tend to place at the center of our investigations concepts that are the expression of our interest, and direct our investigations accordingly (Wittgenstein 2019: &). This study will examine the construct of meaning in life through concrete linguistic performance analysis. Accordingly, these three components—the centrality of the use of a particular form of life, the dynamism of language, and the possibility of language creativity—will be key concepts.

Like Wittgenstein, Chomsky also believed that linguistic performance should serve as the starting point for research. From this, certain problems and questions arise such as: what are the relationships between language and knowledge and between language capacity and human capacities such as freedom and choice (e.g., see Chomsky 1971; 1987; 2015). For Chomsky, the central concept is that of generativity. While grammar is universal and subject to limitations, within the rules of grammar—which are only partially known to us—a native speaker can generate an infinite number of new combinations (e.g., see Chomsky 1966; 1975; 1987). The most basic feature of language, according to Chomsky, is the production of an infinite array of hierarchically structured expressions that are mapped to the conceptual-intentional interface. In this sense, language is a capacity with infinite potential. Linguistic creativity is expressed in the ability of humans to understand and produce new expressions (and sentences) to which they have not had any prior exposure and to use language for varying purposes.

The investigation of linguistic performance as a portal to human consciousness is also shared by Wittgenstein, as is the argument of the possibility of linguistic creativity (although Chomsky focused on the creativity of speakers, and Wittgenstein on the dynamic potential of language). While Wittgenstein and Chomsky developed different methodologies, scholars have made a number of comparisons between the two thinkers, in the main with respect to their focus on investigating actual linguistic performance and their opposition to abstract theories (Rorty 1993; Werry et al. 2006). Another argument that is important for this study, and which is shared by Wittgenstein, Chomsky, and Davidson, is that metaphor is an integral part of everyday language, and that there is no need to distinguish between words that denote abstract concepts and those that denote concrete concepts (Wittgenstein 2019: §97).

**1.2.2 Surface Grammar, Depth Grammar, and Choice**

Wittgenstein (and also Chomsky (1971) in his work on transformational grammar) distinguished between two dimensions of linguistic performance—surface and depth. The surface dimension is embodied in an act (an expression) and the dimension of depth is embodied in the speaker’s distinct intention regarding the meaning of his words (Wittgenstein 2019: §594, §664). According to Wittgenstein, grammar can reveal whether a speaker says his words and means them, or whether he does not “mean the meaning” of his words but rather utters them in a casual, offhand way.

Here, Wittgenstein offers an answer to the possible fallacies that Austin noted in his discussion of speech acts. Austin specified three inner states of mind that are difficult to express through speech: feelings, intentions, and thoughts (Austin1962: 40). The speech act is based on specific thoughts or feelings, and if these cannot be accurately expressed, their words may be infelicitous. Austin listed three types of infelicities: insincerities, infractions, and breaches (ibid.: 39). Austin explicitly said that speakers may be aware of the inconsistency between their thoughts or feelings and what they say. The difficulty in ascertaining the reasons for this inconsistency stems from the inherent gap between the speaker’s feelings and those of the listener. The difficulty in knowing with certainty whether a speaker is really saying what he thinks or feels is similar to Austin’s description of the difficulty in understanding what is in other people’s minds (Austin 1961: 44-84).

Lemberger (2003; 2023) has shown how an investigation of depth grammar and surface grammar can allow us to examine beliefs and opinions through a literary, psychoanalytical, and cogitative lens.

Following Wittgenstein, Baker (2003) emphasizes that we should clarify the circumstances in which a particular sentence is created, rather than the grammatical principles upon which it is structured. It is the investigator’s task to examine whether a word has a meaning that plays a role in human activity—and, in light of the results, to examine the various ways in which the same word integrates into that activity. Such an investigation can be carried out by studying the picture created by or accompanying a certain word, and depth grammar can then be used to interrogate the word’s use in its various forms.

This concept also led to the field of systemic functional linguistics (SFL), which perceives the linguistic system as a paradigmatic axis involving a set of choices. This approach focuses in particular on the purposes of language use. Within it, language use is seen as a semiotic process in which meaning is established through choice. According to Michael Halliday, language is a semiotic process for establishing meaning, in which speakers choose a particular meaning over another (Halliday 2010: 16). The concept of choice increases the importance of the paradigmatic axis of the linguistic system (as compared to the syntagmatic axis that is the focus of generative linguistics), and serves as a key for understanding the relationship between the linguistic system (or linguistic code) and linguistic performance in the field (that is, the text) (Freddi 2013: 56).

**1.2.3 The Study of Meaning in Spoken Language.**

The father of modern linguistics, Ferdinand de Saussure, called for the study of everyday speech to be prioritized over that of written language, on the basis that speech is the central and most basic means of communication for humans, and the main arena in which language develops (Saussure 1916). The development of SFL, according to which language is a social semiotic system used by speakers as a resource or source of meaning-making, has increased the importance of studying everyday spoken language. SFL points to the potential of spoken language to reveal learning processes and the construction of meaning (Halliday 1976 [1969]; 1985; Halliday & Matthiessen 2014). Spoken language is produced in real-time and a speaker’s choice of words and phrases is usually not preplanned. In spoken language, a speaker is more involved in the content that is being delivered, and there is less detachment between the content and the audience (Chafe 1982). Conversational spoken language is also rich in phenomena that do not exist in written language, such as hesitations, corrections, repetitions, and imperfect expressions. These “failings” can be regarded as keys to understanding the creative processes of a spoken text (Yatziv 2003: 153).

To our justification of investigating everyday spoken language, we can add various insights from cognitive linguistics and conceptual semantics. Here, the assumption is that most of our use of language is automatic and unconscious (Jackendoff 2011), and so investigating the use of polysemic words, metaphors, and metonymies can reveal valuable insights into human conceptual structures (frames) (Fillmore 1982).

Further, discourse analysis, which concerns itself with phenomena of free exchange between people in everyday contexts, sees spoken language as a resource for the design and construction of identities, social roles, and social relationships (Drew & Curl 2008). In this light, this study will use discourse analysis as a methodology for collecting research data and forming the research corpus, and also as an investigative tool.

Meanwhile, the basic premise shared by scholars of narrative research is that the creation of narratives is a universal human activity, and one of the main (cognitive) tools humans use to establish meaning, understand and interpret experience, create self-identity, and enable a holistic understanding of the “self” (Shakdi 2003; 2014; Alasuutari 1997; Bruner 1986; 1987; Polkinghorne 1988; Freeman 1993; McAdams 1993; Riessman 1993). Narratives of self (that is, autobiographies) are used as a way to create a narrative identity that is stable and continuous in the face of a lived experience of multiplicity and constant change (Ricœur1994). Narratives of self allow individuals to understand themselves and the path along which their lives are directed (Gudmundsdottir 1991).

As a means to translate lived experience into a story, narrative provides a resource for the presentation of the individual self. At the same time, it also exposes differing aspects (including some that had been hidden) of a narrator’s self-identity and sociocultural identity (Schiffrin 1996). The pioneers of the study of narrative in spoken language, William Labov and Joshua Waletzky, found that phenomena previously considered unique to scholarship on literature and poetics are also prevalent in everyday speech, and that oral narratives demonstrate a high level of order and organization (Labov & Waletzky 1967; Labov 1975). Their empirical analysis of stories revealed that oral narratives are constructed around a “narrative skeleton” of event clauses, whose order of presentation in the text coincides with the order in which they occurred in the world they represent. Information that is not presented in the order in which it occurred in the world is thus not considered part of the central axis of the “narrative skeleton.” Labov and Waletzky also showed that the “narrative skeleton” constitutes only a small element of a text and that the majority of a story consists of “free clauses” that do not belong to the plot skeleton, but indicate “deviations” from it. Descriptions of character and place, as well as expressions that belong to Jakobson’s notion of poetic function (1970) such as repetitions, equivalences, parallelisms, and metaphors, may be termed “means of evaluation” or “value-emphasis” (Labov & Waletzky 1967; Labov 1975; Reinhart 1999; Polanyi 1999).

**2. Research Objectives and Expected Significance**

The study of meaning in life has gained considerable attention from scholars in recent decades, albeit mainly within the context of positive psychology. The construct has yet to be examined from a linguistic perspective, either theoretically or empirically. Moreover, there remains a perception that leading scholars of language, including Wittgenstein and Chomsky, are opposed to investigating meaning in life through the lens of language analysis (Landau 2017: 20). This study proposes to distinguish between theoretical opposition to an empirical study of meaning in life, and the potential meaningful contribution to such a study of methodological concepts from the corpus of these scholars, to whom we can also add Austin and Jakobson.

Further, the study of meaning in life through language analysis will likely point to a relationship between the processes by which meaning is established in language and in life, thus providing a significant contribution to the study of meaning in both. The use of methodological tools from both discourse and language analysis could offer a rare opportunity to deepen our understanding of the sources of meaning in life, at different life stages, via the examination of its expression in everyday language. In this way, the study of meaning in life as a philosophical construct and a cognitive process would benefit from research that takes a new perspective, that is, through the lens of language analysis.

**3. Detailed Description of the Proposed Research**

**3.1 Research Question**

The main question that this study attempts to answer concerns how native speakers of Hebrew of different ages in Israel understand and construct meaning in their lives. The study proposes to address this question via an examination of the various ways in which such individuals talk about meaning in life in everyday spoken language.

To this end, the study will attempt to answer the following questions:

1. Is there evidence of “family resemblance” in the answers to the question of meaning in life among interviewees from the same age group, and interviewees from different age groups?

2. Which language resources do interviewees use to conceptualize meaning in their lives and to establish meaning and value for various aspects of their lives? This question is based on insights from cognitive linguistics regarding the central role of language mechanisms in human cognitive processes (Jackendoff 1994; 2002).

3. Which linguistic mechanisms do the interviewees use to reestablish meaning after a crisis? Are these mechanisms different?

4. How do the interviewees position themselves in relation to the events and characters they perceive as significant in their lives? This question attempts to explore whether the interviewees situate themselves within certain roles in terms of establishing meaning in their lives and whether they perceive themselves as active or passive within these roles.

These questions will shed new light on a number of theoretical questions within the extant scholarship on meaning in life, primarily:

1. Is meaning in life based on worthwhile activities that enable personal growth?

2. Is there a relationship between ethical stance or ethical action and meaning in life?

3. Is there a relationship between success according to social criteria and meaning in life?

4. Is there a relationship between belief in the existence of God or atheism and meaning in life?

**3.2 Working Hypotheses**

The study will be based on the following assumptions:

1. The answers a person gives to questions regarding meaning *in* life do not necessarily depend on the answers the same person gives regarding questions concerning the meaning *of* life. The study is based on the assumption that an individual can feel that their life has meaning without having an answer to the question of the meaning of human existence as a whole.

2. The choice to examine the construct of meaning in life through the use of language is based, first and foremost, on Wittgenstein’s idea that “the meaning of a word is its use in the language” (1995 [1953]: §43). It is also based on Wittgenstein’s explicit call for philosophical questions to be investigated through grammar (ibid.: §371, §373). According to Wittgenstein, even if concepts do not have clear boundaries, they may still be investigated based on their use (2006 [1958]: §52). Thus, Wittgenstein calls for us to “return words to their everyday use,” that is, to investigate them according to their actual use in language (ibid.: §116). Within this assumption, the characteristics of the construct of meaning in life and its various contents and aspects may be exposed by describing their modes of use within language. Of course, the study will also evaluate these characteristics using Wittgenstein’s methodological concept of family resemblance (Wittgenstein 2009: §66). This concept has already been employed in language studies (e.g., see Lakoff & Johnson 1999), and in the study of meaning in other areas of scholarship, including literature (e.g., see Lemberger 2016; Baumeister 2022).

3. **Spontaneous language formations in spoken language are a porthole through which we can observe the (frequently concealed or unconscious) deep layers that lie at the basis of the various ways in which speakers understand and construct meaning in their lives, or through which they perceive events, characters, and other aspects of their lives as being significant.** The assumption here is that a speaker’s choice of words is never entirely arbitrary. With the exception of metalinguistic utterances, it is not possible to determine whether a speaker has consciously chosen her mode of language use, or whether we can infer from it that she is aware of the modes of thought and perception expressed in her choice of words. However, language use always involves a choice (conscious or unconscious) from a wide linguistic repertoire (Halliday 1976 [1969]; 1985; 2010). Since a speaker always has more than one choice of words, it is extremely significant to investigate why a certain word was chosen over another.

**3.3 Research Design and Methods**

Meaning in life has been studied within a variety of fields, including philosophy, positive psychology, and literature. However, it has yet to be explored from a language perspective. Meaning in life arguably belongs directly to a number of fields. However, Baumeister’s argument regarding methods of philosophical inquiry in general can also be applied here regarding language analysis, i.e., that its validity in this context is to help provide a rich conceptual basis for psychological approaches to meaning in life, in particular for collecting and interpreting data, something that is acutely needed in psychology’s studies of meaning (Baumeister 2022: 427).

The construct of meaning in life ostensibly belongs to philosophy. However, as noted above, this proposed investigation of its relevance to other disciplines requires us to declare an interdisciplinary common ground and a methodological toolbox with which to analyze the interviews, on the assumption that these will incorporate aspects from other fields, in particular psychology, literature, and philosophy/linguistics, which is the main focus of this study.

Regarding the psychological aspect, the will to meaning (Frankl 1959) will be explored as a source of motivation embodied in language expression. Further, although Frankl was critical of Freud’s focus on drives and defense mechanisms (ibid.), Freud himself argued in various contexts that several kinds of morals exist in the human psyche, including religion, morality, and social feeling, as well as remorse and conscience (while the latter two are sometimes unconscious, they are directly embodied in the problems that arise during therapy) (Freud 1923; 1930). This study integrates the possibilities offered by Freud within its toolbox of possible sources for meaning in life rather than taking them as a comprehensive and binding investigative starting point (Lemberger 2023a). Further, the psychoanalytic concept of “psychic deadness” (Eigen 2004) may help to decipher the terrifying experiences that have damaged a person’s ability to create meaning in life.

From a literary perspective, concepts such as narrative, poetic function, and flat and round characters may help enrich our understanding of how life stories are used in various capacities. Lemberger (2023a; 2023b) has demonstrated how various concepts and processes can be shared by language analysis, literature, and psychoanalysis.

The empirical part of the study will develop a thematic linguistic corpus, that is, linguistic data (expressions) from everyday spoken language. These expressions will be collected proactively via a series of semi-structured, in-depth interviews. Each of the four study groups will include ten male and ten female interviewees (i.e., there will be equal gender distribution). The study participants (interviewees) will be recruited via an advertisement on social networks. The advertisement will include a very general explanation of the aim of the study, to avoid influencing what interviewees say in the interviews and, as far as possible, to create the conditions for spontaneous conversation. To ensure diversity, the interviewees will be recruited from different regions of Israel and different socioeconomic backgrounds and will include both religiously observant and non-religious (secular) people.

All interviews will be conducted in a pleasant and quiet environment, either in person in the interviewee’s home or online via Zoom. Before conducting the interviews, we will ask each interviewee to sign an informed consent form, or, if the interviewee is a child (under the age of 18), we will ask a parent or guardian to sign a consent form (for the children’s group, there will also be an option for parents or guardians to be present in the interview).

At the start of the study, we will explain its purpose in general and ask the interviewees for permission to record and transcribe the interviews and to use this material (anonymously) for the purposes of the study.

Example interview questions:

The first interview question will be formulated as a general descriptive request: “Tell me about yourself.” Making this request at the start of the interview should create a pleasant and open atmosphere, where interviewees are free to disclose anything they consider relevant and significant for the purposes of the interview.

Some of the following questions will be put to all age groups, while others will be formulated specifically for each age group. Examples of questions that will be put to interviewees in all age groups are:

(a) What is significant (important) to you in life?

(b) Please tell me about a significant event in your life.

(c) Please tell me about someone significant for you (not necessarily someone with whom you have a personal acquaintance).

(d) What do you consider to be a source of meaning for yourself?

Examples of specific questions for each age group:

Children: What is your dream? What would you like to do in the future?

Age 20-30: How would you like to live your life?

Age 40-50: Is there anything you would like to change in your life?

Age 80 and over: Looking back, how would you sum up your life? What would you like to pass on? What message would you like to leave for posterity?

Since the study is focused on language use, the interviews will be transcribed according to the norms of discourse analysis to reflect everything that was said in the interviews, including hesitations, repetitions, errors, corrections, partial words, the expression of sounds such as “ah,” “beh,” “veh,” and pauses (and the duration of the pause). Further, the interview transcripts will include information, recorded in double brackets, of any sounds such as speaking, laughter, sighing, and tutting, and will include notes on any hand gestures or prominent facial expressions.

An interdisciplinary methodology may be effective for studying meaning in life for two reasons directly related to this topic. First, meaning in life may arise from different aspects of a person or from different events. In analyzing these diverse aspects, it may be useful to propose a diverse methodology. The second reason concerns the ambiguity and complexity of the construct of meaning in life. The interdisciplinary approach in general, and the context of exploring meaning in life in particular, is intended to create a more comprehensive understanding of the problem at hand (Arvidson 2016) while also allowing new intellectual configurations of knowledge to be created (Moran 2010). An interdisciplinary approach presupposes that there are various forms of understanding, multiple solutions to a problem, and diverse subjective explanations. By combining different approaches to language analysis, the aim is to offer a solution to a problem that cannot be answered by any one particular method (Repko, Szostak & Buchberger 2016). Moran, for example, noted that “interdisciplinarity has produced some of the most interesting intellectual developments over the past few decades” (2010: 180). Enriching understanding through an interdisciplinary approach allows us “to advance […] understanding of a complex problem with the goal of applying the understanding to a real-world problem” (ibid.: ADD PAGINATION). Further, the interdisciplinary method will also integrate an interdisciplinary consciousness study (Arvidson 2006: 188), interpreting the conscious use of meaning in life in terms of attention.

**3.4 Preliminary Results**

Previous work by the principal investigator submitting this proposal (Lemberger 2016; 2023) has focused on establishing meaning in poetry and prose using a language analysis approach. This proposed study is next-step research and places everyday speech at the center of the investigation. In her prior work, Lemberger examined expressions of creativity against a background of literary and social conventions in poetry and prose, using methodological concepts from language analysis (including from Wittgenstein and Austin and the fathers of American pragmatism, Pierce, Dewey, and James). Some of these methodological concepts will be included in the toolbox for this proposed study. In her Ph.D. dissertation, the doctoral candidate involved in this research (Yael Mishani-Uval) examined the relationships between various linguistic mechanisms in everyday speech, including figures of speech and linguistic performance, which serve to establish meaning during a person’s life. Mishani-Uval’s doctoral work also included a qualitative study comparing individuals from different age groups and found statistically significant differences between the groups.

**4. Resources Available to the Researcher Conducting the Research**

There are no issues regarding the accessibility and availability of material. Prior to conducting the interviews, an application to the Ethics Committee of the Interdisciplinary Studies Unit will be required. This will include parent/guardian consent forms for interviewees aged under 18 and consent forms for interviewees aged over 18. Both the principal investigator and the research assistant are fluent in Hebrew, the language in which the research will be conducted, the source language of the literary corpus, and the language spoken by the interviewees.

**5. Expected Results**

This is a book-length project. The first year will be devoted to writing the theoretical part of the study, conducting the qualitative interviews, and creating a database for the empirical stage of the study, which will begin after completing a full verbatim transcript of the interviews. This work will require a research assistant to help with conducting the interviews, and a transcriber to undertake the verbatim transcriptions. The second year will be devoted to analyzing the interviews and drawing conclusions from the empirical research. In the third year, we intend to present our theoretical and empirical findings in conference papers and to write a minimum of two articles for submission to philosophy, language analysis, linguistics, and interdisciplinary studies journals. We also intend to write a separate article setting out our development of an interdisciplinary methodology, which will incorporate a language analysis methodology for investigating philosophical and psychological concepts. Drawing on feedback to these papers and articles, during the fourth year of the study we intend to write a book for publication in both Hebrew and English.

**6. Pitfalls**

The main difficulty with this study is the abstract nature of the construct of meaning in life. In view of this, analysis of the interviews will require a great deal of careful work to extract the meanings and narratives that will enrich language analysis in the context of meaning in life. Further, meaning in life may derive from various states of mind such as emotions, feelings, or ethical or aesthetic decisions, and may also involve various types of justification, and thus difficulties may sometimes arise when it comes to associating a particular meaning to an appropriate cognitive category. This, in turn, may make it harder to organize the research findings. To help mitigate this, Yael Mishani-Uval, the doctoral student involved in the research, has experience in conducting interviews and analyzing spoken language.