December 9, 2024

The Fox Center for Humanistic Inquiry,

Emory University

Atlanta, GA 30322

Dear Members of the Selection Committee,

As a scholar with research expertise in linguistics, philosophy, cultural studies, and ethnographic methodologies, I am particularly enthusiastic about submitting my application for this year’s postdoctoral research fellowship at the Fox Center for Humanistic Inquiry. I have recently completed my PhD in the Interdisciplinary Program for Hermeneutics and Cultural Studies at Bar-Ilan University. Above all, I insist on a holistic approach to scientific inquiry concerning human nature, viewing each (disciplinary) investigation as a means to uncover a fragment of the multifaceted complexities of life.

My dissertation, *Meaning in Life through Language: A Linguistic-Philosophical Investigation of Language Mechanisms in Constituting Subjective Meaning in Life in Ordinary Language*, speaks precisely to this year’s theme. It lays the foundations for understanding the role of language in constituting a personal sense of meaning. Central to this work is the premise that an individual’s sense of meaning is inextricably bound to their stories and self-construction through discourse and linguistic resources available at different developmental stages. In this regard, my research bridges a gap in our understanding of how language shapes not only how we communicate about life but also how we construct and experience it as we mature.

My research illuminates the intricate linguistic patterns—whether conscious or not —through which individuals of different ages articulate their understanding of life’s meaning. 10-year-old children frame their experiences through binary oppositions and orientational metaphors that involve spatial relationships (e.g., a *rollercoaster* and a *Ferris wheel*). Adults in their 40s-50s demonstrate a more complex linguistic repertoire, navigating between binary oppositions and demonstrating increased self-reflection and agency. Elderly individuals above 80 predominantly use narrative structures, abstract metaphors, and linguistic distancing strategies to create coherence and emphasize their active role in shaping their life’s meaning. Together, the comparative structure allows a deeper understanding of how meaning in life is expressed and reflected in language across the lifespan.

In collaboration with Prof. Thora Tenbrink, based in the UK, a linguist who developed a novel interdisciplinary method bridging Discourse Analysis and Cognitive Linguistics, we have authored an article entitled *Life is Like a Rollercoaster: A Cognitive Discourse Analysis of School Agers’ Understanding of Meaning in Life* (to be submitted to *Language and Cognition*).

Furthermore, I have already published two articles as part of this work. The first, *Reflections on Meaning in Language and Life*, centers on the relationships between meaning-making in life and meaning-making in the language (*Journal of Search for Meaning*, 2022). The second, *Bring Words Back from Their Metaphysical to Their Everyday Use: Meaning in Life through Ordinary Language Use*, engages with Wittgenstein’s theories on meaning, exploring their implications for researching life’s meaning. Following Wittgenstein’s “meaning is use” theory, the chapter conducts a conceptual investigation and outlines a qualitative-empirical approach (Routledge Press, book chapter, 2023). In previous research, I also published an article )based on my M.A. thesis( focusing on the interplay of language and thought as manifested in idiomatic constructions (*Natural Language & Linguistic Theory*, 2016).

As a postdoctoral fellow at the Fox Center, I intend to transform my research findings into two supplementary articles, which will serve as the foundation for a manuscript tentatively titled *The Language of Meaning in Life*. The interdisciplinary nature of this work would benefit substantially from collaboration with Fox Center scholars working at the intersection of life and story. This intellectual environment would provide invaluable opportunities to situate my empirical findings within broader theoretical frameworks of narrative identity and life meaning.

As a postdoctoral researcher, I would also be eager to teach an interdisciplinary undergraduate seminar, *Life in Words: Language and the Quest for Meaning*, that challenges conventional methodological and disciplinary boundaries and encourages students to ask: What insights might emerge when we deliberately think of meaning in life from multiple perspectives?

That The Fox Center’s intent to explore the intersections of Life/Story would offer an inspiring intellectual environment for my project goes almost without saying. Collaboration with other fellows and eminent scholars, such as John J. Stuhr, an expert on Pragmatism, and Arber Tasimi, a principal investigator of the Morality and Development Lab, would provide a priceless opportunity to refine and expand my work through dialogue, which similarly examines how narratives shape human experience.

Thank you for your time and consideration,

**Yael Mishani-Uval,**Post-Doctoral Fellow



The Program for Hermeneutics & Cultural Studies

Bar-Ilan University

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