

THE MEANING PROFILE: ITS NATURE AND FUNCTIONS

Shulamith Kreitler

School of Psychological Sciences, Tel-Aviv University, Tel-Aviv (Israel)

Abstract

Meaning is a construct with a long history of applications in many disciplines, in each of which it was differently defined. Previous definitions of meaning in psychology focused on behavior, images and verbal responses or associations, which limit the scope of the possible uses of meaning and its assessment. The new proposed definition is based on the assumptions that meaning is communicable, includes an interpersonal and a personal part, and is a multi-dimensional developing construct. The definition is that meaning consists of units that include a referent to which meaning values are assigned. The six sets of meaning variables are described. They are used in meaning assignment and in coding meaning responses. Coding the responses of an individual to the meaning test that includes 11 stimulus words yields the individual's meaning profile. Meaning profiles can be constructed for groups of people, for personality traits, cognitive acts or processes, values, attitudes, constructs, concepts, people or emotions. The possible uses of meaning profiles in assessment, comparing traits, analyzing constructs, validation procedures and identifying traits are described. The procedure of training of meaning for its expansion or adaptation to particular goals is presented.

Keywords: *Meaning, cognition, meaning profile, personality traits, emotions.*

1. Introduction

Meaning is an old construct that has suffered many upheavals and has gained numerous definitions in the different disciplines that have used it, with the result that its nature has become increasingly blurred. However, it has survived the hardships due to its undeniable importance. The status of meaning in psychology has been similarly complicated. First it was admitted into the fold of psychology as a behavior which was replaced by kinesthetic responses. Then the admission regulation changed to images, which were followed by verbal responses or associations. Yet, all these changes did not provide an assessment method of meaning that would function for all individuals, all stimuli and all forms of expression.

2. Objectives

The major objective is to describe a new definition of meaning on the basis of the system of meaning (Kreitler, 2022a) that would bind theory, methodology and research together and to present its function in different domains of psychology.

2.1. What is meaning?

The definition of meaning is based on the following assumptions: (a) Meaning is communicable because most of the meanings we know and use have been learned from others; (b) Meaning includes a part that is interpersonally shared and another part which is more personal and private; (c) Meaning may be expressed both verbally and through non-verbal means, such as movements, drawings and images; (d) Meaning is a complex multi-dimensional or multi-layered construct, since both on the social and the individual levels, meaning develops slowly, absorbing components from different sources.

These assumptions led to the shaping of methods for collecting and coding data in regard to meaning that have led to a new definition of meaning and a new methodology for its assessment. The data consisted of responses of several thousands of subjects differing in age (2 to over 90 years), gender, education and cultural background who were requested to communicate the interpersonally-shared and personal meanings of a great variety of stimuli, using any means of expression they considered adequate. Analysis of the meaning communications revealed that they presented a rich variety of contents consisting of units, each of which included two components, one in need of meaning, the other providing the meaning (Kreitler & Urbanek, 2014).

Meaning was defined as a referent-centered pattern of meaning values. In this definition, referent is the input, the carrier of meaning, which can be anything, such as a word, an object, a situation, an event, or even a whole period, whereas meaning values are cognitive contents assigned to the referent for the purpose of expressing or communicating its meaning (Kreitler & Kreitler, 1990a).

3. Method

The major tools used in the assessment of meaning are the following six sets of meaning variables: (a) *Meaning Dimensions*, which characterize the contents of the meaning values from the viewpoint of the specific information communicated about the referent, such as the referent's Sensory Qualities (e.g., Sky – blue), Feelings and Emotions it experiences (e.g., Mother –loves her child) or evokes (e.g., Darkness– fear), Range of Inclusion (e.g., Body - the head, arms, and torso); (b) *Types of Relation*, which characterize the immediacy of the relation between the referent and the cognitive contents, for example, attributive (e.g., Winter - cool), comparative (e.g., Spring - warmer than winter), exemplifying instance (e.g., Country - the U.S.); (c) *Forms of Relation*, which characterize the formal regulation of the relation between the referent and the cognitive contents, in terms of its validity (positive or negative; e.g., Meditation - is not a religion), quantification (absolute, partial; Melon - sometimes yellow), and status (factual, desired or desirable; Regulations - should be obeyed, Wealth- I wish I had more); (d) *Referent Shifts*, which characterize the relation between the referent and the original input, or - in a chain of responses to some input - the relation between the referent and the previous one, for example, the referent may be identical to the input or the previous referent, it may be its opposite, or a part of it, or unrelated to it (e.g., when the presented stimulus was "U.S." and the response was "I love New York", the referent in the response was a part of the stimulus) ; (e) *Forms of Expression*, which characterize the forms of expression of the meaning units (e.g., verbal, denotation, graphic) and its directness (e.g., actual gesture or verbal description of gesture) (Kreitler & Kreitler, 1990a); (f) *Meta-Meaning* variables, which characterize the attitude toward the meaning communication that has been assumed by the respondent or is indicated for the recipients (e.g., it is incomplete, it is a quotation, it is a metaphor).

Together, the six sets of variables constitute the system of meaning. It includes also the components of other definitions proposed for meaning (Kreitler, 2022a).

3.1. The assessment of meaning

Any kind of meaning, regardless of the media of communication or language of its expression can be subjected to assessment. In assessing meaning the material is first reduced to meaning units, each of which consists of a referent and a meaning value. Then each unit is characterized in terms of the meaning variables defined in the meaning system, namely, it is coded on one meaning dimension, one type of relation, one form of relation, one referent shift and one form of expression. Summing the codings in each set of meaning variables across all meaning units in the given meaning statement yields a profile representing the frequencies with which each meaning variable has been applied in that meaning statement. The overall summary of frequencies of meaning variables in the given statement of meaning may be called the meaning profile of that statement, which may be a story, a letter, an email, a map, a painting or any other art product. Both the coding and the summary are made with a computer program.

3.2. Meaning test

In order to get information about the characteristic tendencies of an individual to use certain meaning variables it is necessary to assess the meaning responses of the individual to specific pretested stimuli. The 11 standard stimuli used for that purpose constitute the Meaning Test. There are three parallel sets of these stimuli for adults and three different sets for children (2-10 years of age). The standard instructions ask the subjects to communicate the interpersonally-shared and personal meanings of these stimuli to someone who does not know the meanings, using any means of expression they find adequate.

3.3. Meaning profile

Coding the meanings produced in this manner in terms of the meaning variables yields the subject's meaning profile which summarizes the frequency with which the subject used each of the meaning variables across all 11 stimulus words in the test. The subject's meaning profile includes meaning variables from the five sets described above.

Similar principles apply in regard to the meaning profiles of groups. The meaning profile of a group may be of interest either in order to characterize it as such or in order to compare it with the meaning profiles of other groups. In this context, a group is defined for example in terms of demographic characteristics, attitudes and beliefs, health states, behaviors, or responses to questionnaires. The meaning profile of a group represents the means of the frequencies of responses in the different meaning variables of members of the group who have responded to the Meaning Test.

The meaning profile of a personality trait is based on the results of the following procedure. The meaning test and a questionnaire are administered to a group of individuals. The meaning test is elaborated and produces the individuals' meaning profiles. The personality measure is coded separately and produces a score of the trait. The meaning profiles and the trait's scores for each individual are compared by t-test. The t-test provides information about the meaning variables that differentiate significantly between the high scorers and low scorers on the trait's measure. These are the meaning variables that define the traits' meaning profiles. The same result can be attained by correlating the meaning profiles and the trait's scores. This procedure shows the traits are in fact patterns of meaning assignment tendencies.

The same procedure can be applied in regard to cognitive processes, such as creativity, intuition, decision making; attitudes; emotions; people; management and leadership styles (Kreitler, 2022b).

4. Discussion

A meaning profile is a mine of information when it is subjected to interpretation or comparison with other meaning profiles. The individual's meaning profile provides information about the cognitive content and processes that are used by the subject naturally, without investing special effort, for perception, thinking, solving problems, communication, understanding situations and others, and expressing oneself.

Applying the meaning profile may shorten the process of assessing different constructs. The meaning profile can be used for comparisons with an endless number of different meaning profiles of traits, cognitive processes, emotions etc. without administering the meaning test repeatedly to the same subjects. The comparisons would yield the scores of the individual on all the traits and other constructs whose meaning profiles are available. These scores were found to be valid (Kreitler & Kreitler, 1990). The advantages of the described procedure of assessment are higher reliability of the results, increased amount of information, reduced costs and liberating the individuals from additional work involved in responding repeatedly to the Meaning Test. Thus, meaning profiles can be used for predicting the responses of an individual to stimuli or situations in regard to which the individual has not been assessed, for example, humor or adequacy for a particular job.

The meaning profiles can also provide insight into the dynamics of the examined tendency. For example, social desirability. The question is whether it assesses desire for love or evaluation. Comparison with other profile shows it is evaluation (Kreitler & Kreitler, 1990).

Further, the meaning profile of a trait provides guidelines for validation-by-meaning in the form of a complete and systematic list of the tendencies whose assessment defines the domains in which the trait has to be or can be validated. This procedure is broad-ranging, complete, and theoretically anchored.

Additionally, analyzing the formal characteristics of a large number of the meaning profiles of a specific kind, e.g., personality traits enable specifying the relative percentages of the different kinds of meaning variables in these profiles, (i.e., meaning dimensions, 54.75%, types of relation 25.75%). This enables identifying new candidates for personality traits or deciding whether different tendencies, such as humor, MMPI scores or being a left-winger have the characteristics of personality traits.

Moreover, the individual's adequacy for a particular profession can be evaluated by comparing the individual's meaning profile with those representing different professions.

Finally, analyzing the meaning profile of an individual in a state of despair can give the therapist suggestions about possible meaning variables that could be enhanced in order to overcome the sense of meaninglessness (Kreitler, 2016).

The above specifications are merely examples of many more functions and uses of the meaning profiles and the meaning system in psychology, including education, politics, or psychotherapy. In some of the above cases the training of meaning is appropriate.

Training is considered advisable for expanding an individual's meaning profile, for example, when it is limited (e.g., due to developmental retardation) or does not include a sufficient number of variables required for a specific occupation or for studying a given theme such as mathematics. The major principles of training are that each variable is trained separately, and the focus of training is only strengthening rather than weakening. The three basic levels of training are (a) expanding the number and range of meaning values, (b) elaborating the meaning of the trained meaning variable by using it as a referent, and (c) training the meaning variable by using it in exercises of different tasks.

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