

CISPELS III
Università della Calabria, 9–11 ottobre 2025
Call for Papers
(HI)STORIES OF MEANING:
The “Semantic Century” and Its Roots

“Meaning” is one of the most debated terms in linguistics, particularly in its historical dimension. On the one hand, the focus on meaning—and its public or objective nature—constituted a defining feature of twentieth-century linguistic thought, encompassing the so-called *linguistic turn*, and the rise of language as a central theme in the humanities (from Frege to Wittgenstein, from Bréal to Saussure, from Peirce to Morris). Yet, this momentum seems to have waned in the current century. On the other hand, meaning as a domain, theme, and problem has long been in existence (even prior to Bréal’s coining of the term *science of meaning*) and continues to occupy the background, even though the words “semantics” and “meaning” have fallen out of fashion in contemporary discourse.

It should be acknowledged that the Saussurean term *signifié* poses *significant* conceptual challenges in linguistic contexts. It functions only in contrast to *signifiant* and implies a passive role (“that which is meant” as opposed to “that which means”). Furthermore, it inherently refers to signs, whereas not all theories of language are semiotic. In the Anglophone tradition (largely non-semiotic), the term *meaning* functions akin a present participle, referring to intention rather than signification, and alludes not to the sign but to thought and potentially extralinguistic reality. Meanwhile, Frege introduced the German-speaking world to the distinction between *Sinn* and *Bedeutung*, which would exert a profound influence on subsequent linguistic and semiotic considerations.

The elusive nature of meaning, however, precludes its outright dismissal, as both the term and the concept are firmly grounded in common sense as well as in epilinguistic and metalinguistic knowledge (for instance, “the meaning of music” or “the meaning of images”). Within this context, historical studies play a crucial role in recovering the problems that brought meaning to prominence in 20th-century theoretical studies, which often paid insufficient attention to the history of ideas.

One productive way to engage with the themes of the “semantic century” is to trace its deep historical roots through the canonical articulations of intellectual history (which serve as necessary conventions and points of reference for constructing a general framework). What aspects of earlier linguistic thought foreshadow the themes of 20th-century semantics? In this perspective, discussing “meaning in Antiquity” may involve referencing the grammatical tradition and specific works such as the *Cratylus*, *Peri Hermeneias*, or the *Ashtadhyayi*. Turning to the Middle Ages, the ideas of the *Modistae*, Peter of Spain, Roger Bacon, or the debate on universals might be relevant, alongside texts such as Augustine’s *De Magistro* or Jerome’s Letter 57. A similar approach extends to the early modern period (marked by a proliferation of grammars and dictionaries, facilitated by the invention of printing), the rationalism of the 17th and 18th centuries (where language, thought, and knowledge were tightly interconnected, forming a framework revisited in the “semantic century”), and the 19th century, dominated by historical-comparative grammar (to the extent that the very term *semantics* originated to denote a historical discipline), though cannot be reduced to this paradigm alone.

A second way to explore the history of meaning involves examining the various disciplines dealing with languages and language, along with their interrelations. Here, grammar (normative, often encompassing lexicon) plays a central role, but many other fields are implicated: rhetoric, philosophy, philology, lexicography (including synonymy and etymology, in their historical variations), as well as the history and pedagogy of languages. While the role or function of meaning differs across these disciplines, none of them operates independently or in isolation when defining what meaning is (e.g., philosophers have drawn on etymology, philologists on rhetoric, grammarians on logic, and those studying history or pedagogy cannot ignore these interconnected dimensions).

When meaning became an undisputed object of study in the 20th century, the challenges (and thus the history to be written) shifted. The first issue was integrating semantics into a framework of linguistic subfields (phonology, morphology, syntax) that were far more formalized. Linguistics, after all, had

treated meaning as a kind of *black box*: it need not be defined, yet it could not be ignored, as it provided the backdrop for other dimensions to emerge (the commutation test being the most evident case). More recently, the challenge has been defining the boundaries of semantics relative to forms of “external linguistics”—chiefly pragmatics, which, pervasive and invasive, seems to have “devoured” semantics in the 21st century. When stepping outside linguistics *stricto sensu* into semiotics and philosophy, the entanglement of theoretical questions, terminological constructions, and fields of application becomes even denser and harder to untangle. If “the same words” do not mean “the same things,” it is because the problems, approaches, and experiences privileged by those engaging with meaning differ—and many no longer even call it that. Structural semiotics (in its Greimassian/textualist form) focuses on sense, while interpretive semiotics (derived from Peirce through Eco) speaks of interpretation/semiosis. In both cases, the need for formalization (internal or external) demanded by the notion of meaning is avoided, with the emphasis instead placed on the experience and process of signification. Similarly, in the philosophy of language, the shift represented by the “later Wittgenstein” and ordinary language philosophy replaced the categories of *use* and *form of life* with the concept of meaning (in its Fregean or Saussurean sense). Even the relationship between meaning and ontology (historically manifested in various forms, from Plato to Ockham, from Leibniz to Frege) seems to recede after the pivotal contributions of *Kant e l'ornitorinco (Kant and the Platypus)* by Eco. Today, meaning no longer occupies center stage, and we now have “talking machines” that purportedly have no use for meaning (or so we are told). The “semantic century” seems a distant memory. Yet perhaps it is precisely history—viewing the “semantic century” through the lens of *longue durée*—that may offer us a meaningful perspective on the future of meaning.

Call for Papers

We invite proposals for individual presentations or panels that engage with any aspect, tradition, period, or author pertinent to the history of linguistic and semiotic ideas. Abstracts should not exceed 300 words and must be accompanied by a bibliography of up to seven titles.

Please submit your proposals by **31 May 2025** to: emanuele.fadda@unical.it; giuseppe.cosenza@unical.it and paola.cotticelli@univr.it.

Submissions will be evaluated by the Scientific Committee, composed of the organizers and the CISPELS Board.

Suggested Topics:

- The Historical Roots of the Semantic Century
 - Antiquity (Greek, Latin, Sanskrit Indian traditions, etc.)
 - Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages
 - Renaissance and Modern Era (from Humanism to Hume)
 - Rationalism (from Descartes and Port-Royal to Kant)
 - The 19th century (notably historical-comparative grammar)

- The Role of Meaning in Various Language-Related Disciplines
 - Grammar
 - Rhetoric
 - Etymology and *histoire des mots*
 - Philosophy
 - Philology
 - Lexicography, etymology, and synonymy
 - History of languages
 - Language pedagogy

- Semantics and Other Linguistic Dimensions
 - Morphology

- Lexicon
 - Syntax
 - Pragmatics
 - Text linguistics
-
- Semantic Terminology Through Time (semasiological and onomasiological perspectives)
 - Beyond Meaning: Reference, Interpretation, Inference
 - The Articulation of Meaning: From core meanings to connotations and nuances
 - Meaning and Ontology: Semantic articulation as world description
 - The Axiological Dimension of Meaning: Meaning and meaningfulness

Important Dates:

- Proposal submission deadline: May 31, 2025
- Panel submission deadline: April 30, 2025
- Notification of proposal acceptance: July 31, 2025
- Notification of panel acceptance: June 2025

Comitati

Organizing Committee: Emanuele Fadda, Giuseppe Cosenza, Paola Cotticelli

Scientific Committee: Direttivo CISPELS: <https://cispels.altervista.org/direttivo>.