

# [The multivoicedness of meaning](https://assignbuster.com/the-multivoicedness-of-meaning/)

In James Wertsch’s article “ The Multivoicedness of Meaning”, the author discusses several theoretical assumptions on how meaning is derived in language. His major premise is that accepted views on how meaning is derived are inadequate in a number of respects. He opposes the two views of meaning – one that suggests that no one determines meaning and the other that meaning is determined by the individual. Wertsch (1990) proceeds by presenting useful criticisms of the individualistic position of Western scholars.

He instead proposes ideas put forward by Bakhtin as well as several other theorists who in some way support Bakhtin’s position. Wertsch’s (1990) article follows three specific arguments. The first is that the individual is constituted by language and culture. This argument is opposed to the position held by Western scholars who have argued that, because the individual in society enjoys freedom then meaning in discourse is not influenced by society but by the individual. Bakhtin, Wertsch (1990) points out, views the social context as having an alarming influence on the determination of meaning.

Bakhtin does not, however, suggest that meaning is completely subordinate to outside authority but that both the individual and the society construct meaning. Wertsch’s (1990) second argument is that language functions both as a means of facilitating dialogue and of a unilateral transmission of information. Wertsch (1990) cites several theorists that have proposed the view of communication as the transmission of information. In transmission a message is translated into a signal, the signal is then transmitted to a sender and the sender then decodes the signal into the message.

Wertsch (1990) argues, however, that transmission is a one-way form of communication and does not fit all forms of communication. He supports the Bakhtin position that language is also dialogue. The sees communication as a cyclical process where meaning is constantly mean interchanged; there is no distinct classification of sender and receiver as sets of parties involved in communication alternate these positions. Wertsch (1990) does not discredit the view of communication as transmission. He argues that in some cases transmission is necessary.

In his third argument Wertsch (1990) establishes that a communication usually bares some amount of authority in meaning. He argues that unlike dialogue where meaning is flexible and constantly being interpreted, in some instances meaning is univocal. He suggests that particularly in religious, political and moral texts, the meaning attached to a text is fixed by the authority of the sender and therefore meaning is transmitted not represented. He points out however that in any discourse both situations can be functioning simultaneously.

Overall Wertsch’s (1990) article “ The Multivoicedness of Meaning”, follows good argument structure. He begins by presenting two opposing positions on the issue of meaning, the Bakhtinian position and the position held by most Western scholars. He then proceeds by putting forward arguments that support the position he agrees with, the Bakhtinian position, as well as a few criticisms on the limitations of each of his arguments. He uses the framework of his own position to counteract the opposing position.

Additionally, he utilizes a number of sources to support his position in each case. Furthermore Wertsch (1990) supports the superiority of the Bakhtinian position on how meaning is derived by using an illustration of the interaction between a mother and child where the mother is trying to help the child complete a puzzle. He ends by summarizing his main points at the conclusion of the article and concludes by reiterating that the concept of meaning as put forward by Bakhtin is the most useful.