**Association for Academic
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Wittgenstein, Williams and the terminologies of higher education: A case study of the term 'critical'

Tim Moore

Office of Student Advancement, Swinburne University of Technology, Hawthorn, Victoria, 3122, Australia

Email: tjmoore@swin.edu.au

The idea of semantic indeterminacy, a key notion in linguistics, holds that in the case of many words, there is no simple one-to-one correspondence between the word and its referent. Another term used in the literature is 'polysemy'. This paper explores the idea of semantic indeterminacy as it is theorised by two key thinkers – Ludwig Wittgenstein and Raymond Williams. Their respective ideas in this field – Wittgenstein's notion of 'meaning as use'; and Williams' idea of 'keywords' – are thought to have much relevance to literacy work and practices in the academy. The paper considers the ideas of these thinkers in relation to a number of key terms in academic study, but with a particular focus on the concept of being 'critical' (or 'critical thinking'). In the latter part of the article I discuss some of the implications that a polysemic view of language might have for Academic Language and Learning (ALL) practice, considering approaches that are both implied and *not* implied by such a position.

Key Words: Ludwig Wittgenstein, Raymond Williams, semantic indeterminacy, polysemy language games, keywords, critical thinking, ALL practice.

1. Introduction

A key notion in linguistics is the idea of semantic indeterminacy (Medina, 2005). This idea holds that in the case of many words, there is no simple one-to-one correspondence between the word and its referent. Another term used in the literature is 'polysemy' – meaning multiple meanings. In the framework established by Saussure, polysemy can be explained in terms of a single signifier having associated with it a range of possible signifieds.

Sometimes this multiplicity of meanings is not a complex issue. On these matters, linguistics makes a broad distinction between words that are related homonymously (where two words are pronounced and spelled the same, but which have different meanings) and those where the relationship is a polysemous one (where the one word has multiple, but related meanings). In the case of homonyms, this disparateness of meanings is recognised by the word typically having separate entries in the dictionary; for example, the word *left* – meaning both the opposite of 'right' and the past form of 'leave'. Where there is relatedness of meanings (i.e. the relationship is polysemous), dictionaries will provide a range of definitions under the one entry. The OED, for example, offers seven different definitions for the word 'argument', referring, for example, to the idea of 'a quarrel' and to 'an act of reasoning'. But even with this studied comprehensiveness, a generalist dictionary will only get one so far, and there will be times when it is necessary to turn to a subject specific dictionary to get a fix on certain specialist usages. Even then, some more local (and sub-cultural) usages may not be adequately accounted for. Dictionaries, while being indispensable aids to learning, can at best provide only an

approximation of the sometimes extensive semantic field that a term can occupy. Commenting on such difficulties, James Gee suggests that words often evade the strictures of meaning that such accounts seek to impose. As he explains: words do not have "just dictionary-like meanings"; rather:

> they have different and specific meanings in different situations where they are used, and in different specialist domains that recruit them. (Gee, 2004, p. 41).

Words of their nature are difficult. In many of the processes of higher education, it seems however, that these difficulties are often overlooked, or not recognised. This is particularly evident in the way that students are typically instructed to perform the various tasks required of them in their learning. Students are enjoined to do many things: to be engaged in 'analysis', to 'argue', to 'discuss' things, to adopt a 'critical' approach to the things they need to consider. But these concepts, ones that are so fundamental to learning in higher education – 'analysis', 'argumentation', 'discussion', 'critical-ness' and so on – rarely appear to us as straightforward ones. We know this from our experiences as ALL practitioners, where many of our efforts working with students are devoted to helping them to understand what exactly is being asked of them in their studies, and how they might proceed. A significant part of these endeavours is assisting students to make sense of the types of terms referred to above. The task however, is made complicated by our knowledge that useful, all-purpose definitions of some terms always seem elusive. We also have an intuitive understanding that such terms (and the practices to which they refer) often mean different things in different contexts of learning. In our attempts to make such things clear, we can feel at times that rather than contribute to understanding, we only succeed in adding to our students' doubts and confusions.

In this paper, I wish to explore the idea of sematic indeterminacy, as it relates to language and learning work in the academy. I will do this by considering the ideas of two key thinkers: Ludwig Wittgenstein and Raymond Williams. While these two thinkers come from two very different traditions in 20th century thought – Wittgenstein from philosophy, and Williams from social and cultural theory – both, in their writings, have been concerned in a fundamental way with the "problem of words". Their respective ideas in this field – Wittgenstein's central notion of 'meaning as use'; and Williams idea of 'keywords' – have much relevance, I believe, to our work as academic literacy practitioners. The paper considers the ideas of these thinkers in relation to a number of key terms in academic study, but with a particular focus on the concept of being 'critical' (or 'critical thinking'), an idea which perhaps more than any goes to the heart of what a university education is fundamentally about, and which at times can be as baffling to we as academics as it is to our students. In the latter part of the article I discuss some of the implications that a polysemic view of language might have for ALL practice, considering approaches that are both implied and *not* implied by such a view.

2. Ludwig Wittgenstein and Raymond Williams

Ludwig Wittgenstein is often attributed with leading something of a revolution in 20th century thought – it is his name, for example, that is associated more than any other with what is known as the 'linguistic turn' in contemporary thought. Wittgenstein is also famous for being that rare type of thinker who radically changes his mind. In his early writings, sometimes referred to as Wittgenstein 1, he worked strongly within rationalist traditions to explore the logical relationship between propositions and the world. His broad conclusion – though one not necessarily affirmed by all readers – was to see language and thoughts as logical representations of reality, as "pictures of reality" (Wittgenstein, 1961). In the later Wittgenstein, especially in his seminal *Philosophical Investigations*, written during his days as a professor of philosophy at Cambridge, this 'realist' view of language is largely turned on its head. Rather than see language as having an essentially denotational function, as mirroring some pre-existent reality, its role is seen to be much more active, one that is constitutive of different social realities. "The speaking of language", he declared, "is [always] part of an activity, or a form of life" (Wittgenstein, 1958a, p. 23).

As part of Wittgenstein's broad position in *Philosophical Investigations*, he was much concerned with the problem of the meanings of words. It was his view that many of the mistakes made in traditional philosophy can be attributed to a belief that individual words (and the concepts to which they are attached) can be defined in some abstract way. Inevitably, out of such cogitations, Wittgenstein argues, many different and alternative meanings are generated, leading unavoidably to a "state of puzzlement" (Wittgenstein, 1958a). But for Wittgenstein it is folly to imagine that words have some independent, 'metaphysical' meaning. Instead, the only solid semantic basis they can be said to have is that which emerges from the way they are used in everyday discourse – hence Wittgenstein's famous dictum: "the meaning of a word is its use in the language" (Wittgenstein, 1958a, p. 20, sect. 43). For Wittgenstein, then, the solution to any difficulties concerning words and their meaning is not to "think" about them on some abstract plane, but rather to "recognise their workings" in the "rough ground" of human activity.

Fundamental to "recognizing these workings", according to Wittgenstein (1958a), is to see how different terms function in different contexts of use – or what he called "language games". Wittgenstein uses the example of the meaning of the word 'question' to illustrate this idea. If we do not think of the different contexts in which the term 'question' is used, he says, we will miss out on recognising its "multiplicity" of meanings – for example, 'questions' as requests for information, or as requests for assistance, or as descriptions of a state of uncertainty, or even in some contexts, paradoxically, declarations of a state of certainty – as in the rhetorical question (Wittgenstein, 1958a, p. 12, sect. 24). Thus, one must not rely on what one thinks the word 'question' means – but instead look to those situations in which it is being used. "Don't think, but look", was Wittgenstein's blunt instruction to his fellow philosophers.

If a word can mean many different things, does this suggest then there is a fundamental incoherence in the way that our language operates? Wittgenstein was sure that this is not the case, using the example of the word 'game' to illustrate how the different meanings of a term might relate to each other. As he explained: "the phenomena [we call games] have no one thing in common which make us use the same word for all, but they are related to one another in many different ways" (Wittgenstein, 1958a, p. 31, sect. 65). He goes on to outline the considerable variety of activities described by the term – "board-games, card-games, ball-games, Olympic games". Such instantiations, in all their variety – some played for amusement, some competitively, some involving physical prowess, some involving more feats of the mind – cannot be thought of as being united by some common, Platonic element, their intrinsic 'gameness'. Instead, as he suggests, they constitute a "complicated network of similarities", ones that sometimes overlap, sometimes criss-cross and other times drop out and disappear altogether. The expression Wittgenstein used famously to characterise such a network is "family resemblances".

This central part of Wittgenstein's philosophical position can be summarized in the following three propositions:

- There are no pre-determined meanings of words; rather their meanings derive from the way they are used in the language;
- The meaning of a term is liable to vary depending on the context of its use; that is to say, within the particular "language game" of which it is a part; and
- The variable meanings of a term are not arbitrary, but rather are related to each other in complex ways.

Among other things, these ideas were to anticipate developments in a number of fields in the latter part of the 20th century and beyond, including pragmatics in linguistics, and post-structuralism in philosophy.

At the time that Wittgenstein was developing these ideas at Cambridge in the 1930s and 40s, a young Raymond Williams, later to become a major figure in British social and cultural theory, was present at that institution as a student of literature. It is not clear whether Williams within his discipline was aware of the minor revolution in Philosophy being created by Wittgenstein at the time (Perloff, 1999). He was, however, like Wittgenstein, preoccupied in his days at Cambridge with words and their meanings. He begins his seminal work *Keywords* with

reflections on how the meaning of a particular keyword – 'culture' – appeared to be undergoing an interesting and, for Williams, a most significant semantic shift at the time of his undergraduate studies in the 1940s (Williams, 1976). The change was particularly noticeable to Williams as a result of an interruption to his studies during the war years. Upon returning to Cambridge in the mid-1940s he noted that not only was he hearing the word 'culture' much more often, but also that it seemed to have acquired new and different senses – ones, he says at the time, "he could not get clear" (Williams, 1976, p. 9). These observations of semantic variation and change formed the basis of his work *Keywords*, described by him as an attempt to make sense of that shared, but "imperfect" vocabulary that lies at the heart of "our discussions of the most central processes of our common life" (Williams, 1976, p. 12).

The bulk of *Keywords* consists of a series of "reflective essays" about a range of individual words, which for Williams were central to public discourses of the time, including such terms as 'culture', 'democracy', 'class', 'aesthetic', 'bourgeois'. In his sketch of each term, Williams provides a historical account of its variable meanings and uses, ones that he noted often allude to quite distinct outlooks and worldviews. Thus for the term 'culture', Williams identifies at least three contemporary, but somehow adversative, uses: 1) a more normative meaning, referring to "processes of intellectual and aesthetic development" (hence "being cultured", or "cultivated"); 2) a more anthropological sense denoting "the way of life of a whole people"; 3) another more neutral meaning referring to "works and practices of intellectual and especially artistic activity" (Williams, 1976, p. 90). It was the beginning of a shift from the first to the second and third meanings that was evident to Williams on his return to Cambridge. Indeed this semantic shift is associated with the major transformations that were to occur subsequently in the discipline of literary studies (and in the humanities more generally) during the 1970 and 80s; that is to say a move away from studies of the canon to an embrace of literary and cultural forms of all variety (Milner & Browitt, 2002, p. 26). Another term of interest in Williams' compendium is 'criticism'. Here Williams also notes a range of meanings, including the term's "predominant general sense of fault finding", "an underlying sense of judgement", and also what he calls a "very confusing specialised sense" the term has acquired in relation to art and literature. Williams (1976) speaks of the difficulties in understanding this term's various developments, with some meanings having only emerged in recent times, and others which appear to be "breaking down" (p. 74).

While there is a certain genius in Williams' sketches of each of his various terms in *Keywords*, the fundamental contribution of the work lies in his suggestions for how we should negotiate this semantic indeterminacy. Williams' purpose in compiling his inventory was not to try to get a fix on each term's meaning – to offer up some final consensual definition for each. Indeed, the purpose was something like the opposite. In terms rather similar to Wittgenstein, Williams suggests that any process which seeks to clarify the meanings of difficult words is unlikely to help resolve confusions:

> I do not share the optimism, or the theories which underlie it…which suppose that clarification of difficult words would help in the resolution of disputes conducted in their terms and [which are] often visibly confused by them. (Williams, 1976, p. 21)

Instead of seeking to "purify the dialect of the tribe", an expression borrowed from Eliot, Williams suggests we need to see these imprecisions and uncertainties as matters of "contemporary substance", and as "variations" to be insisted upon. Such a view is of a piece with Wittgenstein's rejection of what he called "the craving for generality" – that tendency, he suggested, to "look for something in common in all the entities we commonly subsume under a general term" (Wittgenstein, 1958b, p. 17).

On one level, Williams' work can be seen as a systematic effort to enact the type of project suggested by Wittgenstein; that is to "recognise the workings" of words – in this case, certain keywords – as they are used in the "rough ground of human activity". What is distinctive about Williams' approach is the locating of these meanings within specific, and often competing, epistemological and ideological formations, described by him as "ways not only of discussing, but at another level of seeing many of our central experiences" (Williams, 1976, p. 15).

Keywords, which was something of a bible for the intellectual left in the in the 70s and 80s, receded somewhat from view in the ensuing decades. One notes, however, a resurgence of interest in the work in recent times, attributed partly to new meanings that the term 'keyword' itself has acquired, especially under the influence of recent developments in textual analysis and corpus-based linguistics (Durant, 2006).

3. 'Critical thinking' as a keyword in higher education

The ideas of Wittgenstein and Williams, I have found relevant to work I have done exploring certain key terms in higher education, and especially what it means to be 'critical' in university study. This latter term, as we know, looms very large on the higher education landscape. Lecturers, for example, will often insist to their students that to be successful in their studies, more than anything else, they need to develop a suitably 'critical' approach to their work. Over the last 15 years, we have also seen the term inscribed increasingly in our institutions' accounts of the particular qualities and attributes it is intended that students will develop over the course of a degree. The concept has, in Williams' terms, become undoubtedly a 'keyword' in our institutions, being at the heart of "our most central processes of [university] life" (Williams, 1976, p. 12).

But, while everyone agrees about the manifest importance of critical thinking as an educational ideal, there would seem to be a good deal of uncertainty about what the term means. A number of commentators have spoken about this difficulty. Dwight Atkinson, for example, suggests that:

> …academics normally considered masters of precise definition seem almost unwilling or unable to define critical thinking. Rather they often appear to take the concept on faith, perhaps as a self-evident foundation of Western thought – such as freedom of speech. (Atkinson, 1997, p. 74)

For Fox (1994), the difficulties of critical thinking arise from academics typically learning these practices themselves in an intuitive way, and so as a part of their professional habitus (Bourdieu, 1977), the concept becomes a largely unspoken and ineffable one for them:

> ...because it is learned intuitively, critical thinking is easy [for academics] to recognize, like a face or a personality, but it is not so easily defined and it is not at all simple to explain. (Fox, 1994, p. 125)

In some research I conducted in the mid-2000s, I spent time exploring ideas about the meanings of critical thinking in university study. My interest was to try to find out how academics working within the disciplines actually understood the idea of 'criticality', and how they typically used the concept in their teaching. I did this mainly by conducting interviews with a group of colleagues (about 20), working in the Faculty of Arts of a large university, where I was based at the time. My informants were from a range of disciplines – History, Philosophy and Literary/Cultural Studies. I chose these discipline areas, partly because they were ones that I, as an academic, had some familiarity with, but also because collectively they constituted a set of subject areas that an undergraduate student in the Faculty might find themselves engaged in at the one time, and where any variations in the way these disciplines 'understood' the idea of critical thinking may have a bearing on students' experience of study. The central question asked of my informants was how they understood the term as it related to the types of qualities and attributes they were seeking to encourage in their students. I also got them to discuss some of the assignments they set on their courses, and asked how it was that they imagined a 'critical approach' might enter into the academic tasks they required of their students. In line with a polysemic view of such matters, I expected I would find a range of understandings; I was in fact surprised at the variety that was to emerge.

In my analysis of the materials collected – both informants' general talk about the idea of being critical and also what they said about the assignments they set – at least seven different understandings of the notion could be identified. It was interesting to note too that some of these understandings were, if not exactly contradictory, at least incompatible in some way. Some informants, for example, saw critical thinking fundamentally as a type of evaluative thinking –

to make judgements about the validity, value, usefulness, etc. of whatever one is being asked to consider. For others, by contrast, being critical was seen more in terms of a *withholding* of judgment – about employing a permanently sceptical attitude towards the ideas and knowledge one is exposed to. In another contrast of views, some thought the key was not to be sceptical about the possibilities of knowledge (described by one as "the easy part to being critical"), but rather to always be seeking to build upon knowledge, and to seek to make some "modest contribution" to it. Others spoke about critical thinking not so much as an attitude to knowledge but more as a method. Some, for example, saw it mainly as a form of rationality – about bringing principles of reason and logic to bear on one's analyses. For others, what was required was less a rational, logistic frame, and more an empathetic – or 'hermeneutic' – understanding of things ("Trying to get into the heads of those one seeks to understand", as one informant explained it). Some were sure that being critical necessarily had an ethical, even an activist quality about it – not just to analyse the world, but also to be engaged somehow in seeking to change it – echoes here of the Marxian notion of 'critical consciousness'. Finally, some spoke of critical thinking as a type of "reflexive thinking", where students – and indeed all of us – need to seek awareness of the 'perceptual and conceptual frames' that we bring to our apprehensions of the world. In short, what emerged was an interesting and complex network of understandings – in Wittgenstein's terms, a "family resemblance" of meanings.

In my informants' responses, there was a sense that disciplinary background had a significant bearing on the accounts given. In the case of the philosophers, for example, there was a greater emphasis placed on the underlying logical basis of critical thinking, with one suggesting that critical thinking needs be seen fundamentally as "a rational project". Among the historians, rationality seemed not so much to be the key; several suggested that what was needed more in their discipline was an empathic approach to material, especially in the way one handled the reading of documentary sources from different historical periods. Some of the historians also emphasised the idea of students needing to "build on knowledge", a requirement particularly evident when students were called on to offer their own particular interpretations and understandings of an historical episode, period, etc. The version of critical thinking that resonated particularly strongly among the cultural studies academics was the idea of "reflexivity", with some suggesting that students needed to be self-consciously aware of the particular theoretical resources and precepts they brought to their analyses of cultural phenomena or texts.

In the study, these sorts of articulated differences were often strongly evident in the different types of assignments that these academics set for their students. Indeed it was in the analyses of these tasks (and of my informants' discussions of them), that the disciplinary dimension of ideas about critical thinking became particularly apparent; that is to say, tasks in different disciplines seemed to require students to be critical in distinctly different ways. In what follows, I will illustrate this point by considering three tasks from each of the three disciplines investigated (Figures 1, 2 and 3). This is, of course, a very small sample to be considering, but the tasks selected exemplify well certain patterns identified in the larger corpus of assignment tasks collected for the research (Moore, 2011). The three samples are all notable for their explicit use of the term 'critical' in the wording used for the task. My interest in the discussion below is to consider how the word 'critical' is used in each case – and to see what light it might shed on the type of thinking required of students in these different contexts.

The first task is from a first year Philosophy unit (Figure 1). It will be noted that students here are required to select one of the five arguments (or 'proofs') for the existence of God advanced by Thomas Aquinas (his famous *Five Ways*), and then to provide what is termed a 'critical evaluation' of the text that has been chosen. A fair amount of detail is provided about how this critical evaluation should proceed: students are told they need to think about the text as an 'argument' and then to decide how 'successful' this argument is. This judgment is to be made on the basis of standard analytical procedures typically used in Philosophy. Thus, it is explained that if students are inclined to see the argument as an 'unsuccessful' one, they should support this position on the basis of identifying either: 1) a problem in the premises of the argument, or 2) a problem in the relationship between the argument's premises and its conclusion; that is, its

logical structure (Lines 8–10). If, on the other hand, students see the argument as a 'successful' one, they are advised to establish this 'success' by countering at least one possible 'objection' that might be mounted against it (L10–12).

Turning to the second task (Figure 2), from a History unit, students here are asked to prepare what is termed a 'critical analysis'. This task, as can be seen, requires students also to select a text – this time a 'primary source document' relevant to early twentieth century history (various tracts written by Woodrow Wilson, Lenin, etc.). As in the previous Philosophy task, students are also required to give some account of the author's 'argument' (L9). However, rather than explicitly evaluate this argument (i.e. assess its 'success' or otherwise), the task here for students is to locate the document within its place and time (its historical context), and drawing upon this, offer some interpretation for why the author might be advancing the views expressed in it – their 'motivation' (L10).

The third task is from a Cultural Studies unit (Figure 3). Like the two previous tasks, this task also requires students to select a text – although the term 'text' is used here more broadly to refer also to non-literary texts, such as films and television programs (e.g. *The Alien Trilogy*, *Apocalypse Now*, etc.). In the task, students are asked to write a 'critical analysis' of the cultural text they have selected. The critical element in the task here would seem to revolve around the student needing to draw on a specific theoretical 'concept (s)' such as 'intertextuality', 'syntagm and paradigm', etc. (L3–10) as the basis for developing their 'analysis' of the text.

Exercise: Argument analysis

Consider Aquinas' five arguments (or proofs) for the existence of God - his famous 'Five Ways'. Select one of these arguments and provide a) an analysis of the argument contained in the passage b) a ***critical evaluation*** of the argument.

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That is for a) identify the premises and the conclusion of the argument for b) say whether or not you think the argument is successful, then explain why by pointing out a flaw in one or more of the premises or in the structure of the argument. If you think the argument is successful, then consider an objection that someone might

10   make to it and provide a reply to that objection.

Analysing Arguments PHL 1030

Figure 1. Philosophy task.

Critical analysis

You are required to ***critically analyse*** one primary source document from Weeks 2 to 5 in your handbook (i.e. Condorcet, Wilson, Lenin, Himmler, Moseley, etc.).

5

In the ***critical analysis*** you should aim to:

−   place your document in its historical context (who wrote it and when, and how does it reflect those times?)

−   outline the author's argument (what are the author's main points?)

10 −   suggest the author's motivation for writing the document Why was he/she writing?

Contemporary Worlds HSY 1030

Figure 2. History task.

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        Textual analysis:

        Write a short explanation of your understanding of any four of the following key concepts:
              a)    intertextuality
              b)    paradigm and syntagm
    5         c)    denotation and connotation
              d)    sign and signification
              e)    narrative
              f)    the spectacle
              g)    transgression
    10        h)    commodity culture


        Select any two of the cultural texts* we have considered on the course so far this semester
        and provide a critical analysis of each. In each analysis, you should draw on one (or
    15  several) of the categories above that you find relevant to the material you are considering.

                                               Introduction to Cultural Studies CLS 1040

        *Texts include: Frankenstein (novel, film); Heart of Darkness, Apocalypse Now; Alien Trilogy, Cyberpunk
        magazines.
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Figure 3. Cultural Studies task.

The three tasks are similar in the way that each requires students to engage in some way with a text: Aquinas' writings in the first task; a primary source document in the second task; and a 'cultural' text in the third. Also in common, as we have seen, is the requirement that students somehow adopt a 'critical' approach to the text they are considering. But while the tasks are similar in these general respects, each would seem to require a distinctly different approach to their subject matter. I have attempted to characterise these differences in the simple sketches below (Figure 4). Thus, in the Philosophy task, the critical mode is one rooted in the idea of judgment, where students need to decide upon the 'success' of a text, by evaluating it according to certain given criteria. Significantly, the task requires students to engage with the text as an entity unto itself, as the "text on the page", as the approach is sometimes described (Belsey, 1980). In the History task, students are not so much concerned with the making of a judgement, as with the proffering of an interpretation – in this case, to consider what might have motivated the author to have written the text in the first place. Further, we see that the text here is not to be understood on its own terms, but rather in relation to the broader social context in which it was produced. The Cultural Studies task also requires recourse to material outside the text. Here though, it is not some putative social reality, but rather other textual entities; that is, the various theoretical precepts that might provide a particular entrée into the text's various cultural/literary qualities. Thus, all the tasks ask students to be critical in some general way, but what it is that students need to direct their critical thoughts towards (i.e. the types of texts to be considered), and the modes of analysis they need to bring to these texts, are arguably quite different in each case. In Wittgenstein's terms we can see that the term 'critical' here assumes quite different meanings within the different contexts (or "language games") in which it is used. In line with Williams' analysis, these different usages can be attributed to the different cultural formations of which they are a part – in this case, the distinct epistemologies and practices of different disciplines.

In this variety of meanings and uses of the term 'critical', there would appear to be the potential for a fair amount of confusion among students. It is worth noting too that it is not just this word that is potentially problematic here. Another term that appears in each sample task – and which is collocated in several instances with 'critical' – is 'analysis'. Thus, the History and Cultural Studies tasks both ask students to prepare a 'critical *analysis*', though, as we have seen, the nature of the 'analysis' required in each case appears to be of a different order. The Philosophy task also asks students to provide an 'analysis', though not prescribed in this instance as a 'critical analysis'. Here the 'analysis' is characterised as a process of breaking down an

argument into its constituent 'premises and conclusions', an activity which again would appear to be different from those prescribed in each of the other tasks, and one very much tied to the specific intellectual practices of that discipline.
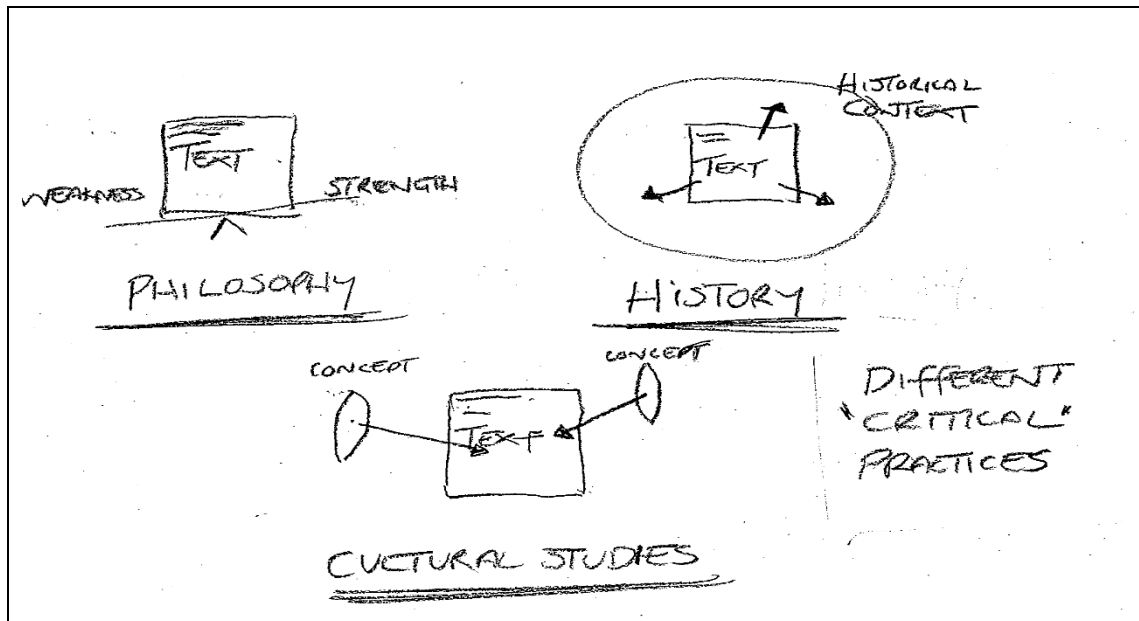

Figure 4. Representations of 'critical practices' associated with different tasks.

4. Implications for academic language and learning practice

The analysis of the tasks above has sought to show the types of semantic uncertainties that underlie the various academic processes that we wish our students to be engaged in. In Williams' terms, the terminologies of higher education, like those in society more broadly, would seem to constitute a most "imperfect vocabulary", one that we know from experience, has the potential ever to confound our students – even demoralise them at times – as they seek to find their way in their studies. In the remaining discussion, I wish to explain how in our teaching practices, we might deal with these sorts of indeterminacies. Before doing this, however, I shall mention several practices that would seem *not* to be implied by the observations that have been made**.**

The first concerns the oft-seen practice of providing students with 'laundry list'-type glossaries of terms, along with putative definitions of these. Such lists are often found in study skills manuals, and typically include items like those considered above (being 'critical', 'analysing', 'evaluating'), along with other terms also thought to be difficult for students (e.g. 'discussing', 'arguing', 'assessing', 'defining', etc.). It is believed that the laying out of such generic definitions will be of assistance to students in making sense of the academic work required of them. The variability, however, in the way such terms are used, as we have seen, suggests that such generic accounts are always going to be of limited value. The term 'critique', for example, is defined in one such text (Murray, 2012, p. 46) as "analysing and evaluating, demonstrating the strengths and weaknesses of an idea, position", a definition that takes up simultaneously variants of the terms considered in the earlier discussion (i.e. 'critical', 'analysis', 'evaluation'). In this example, one also notes a circularity that often enters into such definitional efforts, so that one term is often dependent for its meaning on other related terms, despite the apparent intention of these lists to clearly *distinguish* such terms.

By extension, another practice that is challenged by a polysemic understanding of terms is the push seen recently in higher education to develop stand-alone courses based on specific skills areas. Such courses are often conceived under the rubric of generic skills or graduate attributes, including 'problem-solving', 'communication skills' and the like. The most common of these arguably are dedicated 'critical thinking' courses, popular for a long time in the US, and

increasingly finding their way into discussions about curricula in Australian higher education (Davies, 2013; van Gelder, 2005). The underlying premise of such programs is that critical thinking as a practice is able to be characterised in some single, unitary way (e.g. Ennis, 1989; Facione, 1990), and also that its various constituent skills (e.g. identifying ambiguities; judging inferences; identifying fallacies and the like) can also be unproblematically specified. The belief too is that the skills learnt on such programs can be readily transferred to other contexts of learning. The evidence of a range of studies into critical thinking suggests however, that the quest for a single, overarching concept of 'being critical' is a forlorn one (see Carmichael et al., 1998; Chanock, 2000; Jones, 2007). It also appears from the examples we have seen above that the types of generic abilities taught on such programs are likely to be of limited relevance to the variety of ways students need to be critical in different contexts of study.

A final area of practice that sits uneasily with the ideas explored thus far is the use of skills taxonomies that seek to provide a generic account of learning processes in the academy. The most famous and well-used of these is Bloom's taxonomy – a schema that has shown surprising endurance in higher education pedagogy since its creation in the 1950s. Bloom is credited, among other things, with seeking to construct a common language about learning goals, one aimed at enabling communication across disciplines and levels of education levels (Anderson & Sosniak, 1994). The problem, however, with such an approach is that such schemes not only seek to specify the precise meaning of terms (e.g. 'comprehension', 'application', 'analysis', 'synthesis', 'evaluation'), but also hold that the relations between such terms are also able to be specified. Typically these relations are configured in terms of relative cognitive demand. Thus in Bloom (1956), the skills listed above ('comprehension', 'application', etc.) are presented as a hierarchy, with the ability to 'comprehend 'material seen as the most foundational skill, and 'evaluation' as the most developed. In the discussion of the tasks above, we saw the variable use of two of Bloom's terms ('analysis' and 'evaluation'). In these sample tasks, aside from the term, 'analysis' seemingly referring to a variety of academic modes, one would be loath to suggest that the 'evaluation' task in Philosophy might somehow constitute a more exacting form of academic engagement than that required in the 'analysis' tasks from Cultural Studies or History.

In all these practices described above (glossaries of terms, dedicated skills programs, learning taxonomies), there is an underlying attempt to make the indeterminate meanings of terms – and the academic processes to which they refer – somehow clear and distinct. While the aim of such processes is clarification, the suggestion from some is that the effect is often the reverse. Capossela (1993), for example, commenting on the seemingly endless efforts in the literature to get a fix on the term 'critical', suggests that this kind of definitional work has only served to make the concept more obscure:

> It seems reasonable to suppose that a concept so frequently invoked would long ago have acquired a clear-cut definition, but in fact the opposite is true: with each new appearance, critical thinking becomes less, rather than more, clearly defined. (p. 1)

Williams, as mentioned, has referred to such linguistic endeavours as an attempt to "purify the dialect of the tribe", where the hope – ever a fruitless one in Williams' eyes – is somehow to legislate for the meanings of words, and to try to erase from them their inherent imprecisions and uncertainties (Williams, 1976, p. 21). Wittgenstein, in a different kind of characterisation, sees the problem as one of seeking to construe language as a static, rather than a dynamic entity. "The confusions which occupy us", he declared, "arise when language is like an engine idling, not when it is doing work" (Wittgenstein, 1958a, p. 51).

How then might we proceed? How in our work with students can we help them to negotiate the types of challenges we have seen? And indeed, in such endeavours, how do we persuade them along the way that they are not somehow caught up in a Humpty Dumpty world where "words can mean whatever [one] chooses them to mean"? I would like to propose several ways that we might shape our pedagogies to deal with these kinds of uncertainties. One is concerned with the more immediate challenge of helping students to make sense of the vagrant terminologies they must invariably deal with in their studies; the other is concerned with how we might raise

students' awareness about the more general theoretical issues surrounding words and their meanings.

In the first area, a useful approach would seem to be one that avoids any generic explanation of terms, but always seeks exposition of these within the immediate contexts of students' study, and in particular, the specific academic tasks they are required to undertake. In line with his overall outlook, Wittgenstein (1958b) speaks of the need to understand an expression in relation to "the conversation of which it is a part" (p. 179). Academic tasks, like those considered earlier, constitute a very direct form of 'conversation' – one between teacher and student. Such situations deal with the universality of language, but as Taylor (2000) explains, here it is language that is "concretely universal". In line with Wittgenstein's analysis, the key line of enquiry with students in such contexts would not be: "What does term X mean?", but rather "How is it being used here?" and "To what specific practices might it refer?"

The overall approach being suggested here is characterised in Figure 5, where language acquisition processes are rooted very much in the exigencies of the tasks that students are engaged in ('context of situation'). Students' emergent understandings can then be related to the larger discipline they are studying in ('context of culture'), and then to the broader language system as a whole. Such a model stands in contrast to generic approaches where the envisaged processes of acquisition are effectively reversed. Here it is thought that students can be taught the meaning of a term in some general sense, and that these can then be readily applied to different disciplinary contexts and tasks. As we have seen, the variability of these meanings suggests that transfer of this kind is often going to be problematic.
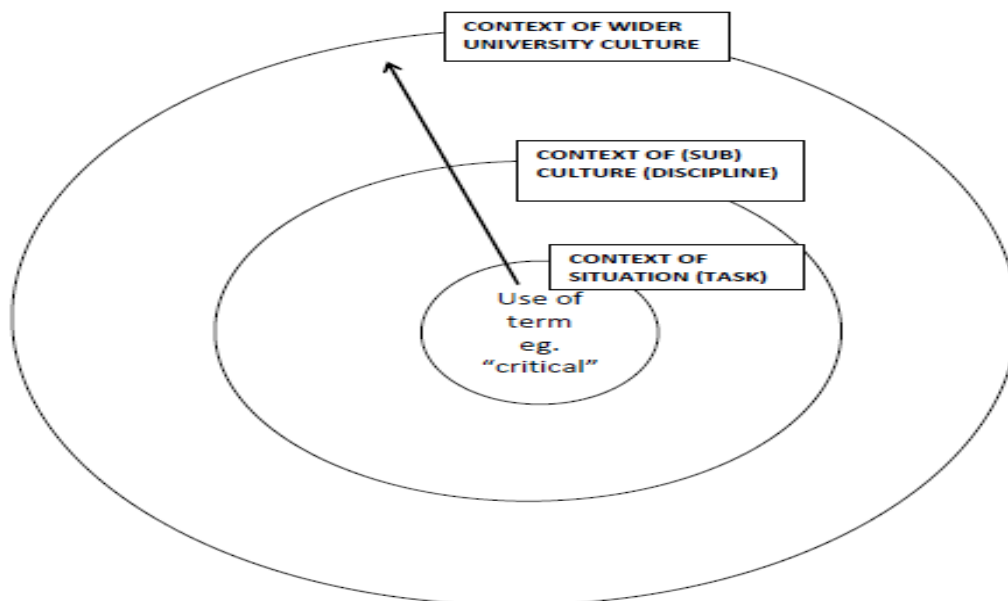

Figure 5. A model of language acquisition processes in university study

A second pedagogical response is concerned with raising awareness of the idea of polysemy; that is to say, to help students appreciate the inevitable variability of meaning that terms have, as well as the diversity of practices they often denote. In the critical thinking research described earlier, it was interesting to discover that such an approach was in fact employed in the teaching routines of several of the lecturers interviewed. These notably were from the discipline of Cultural Studies, where such ideas (including those of Raymond Williams) constitute key concepts in that discipline. One lecturer on a first year literature subject, for example, spoke about getting her students to investigate a variety of definitions of the term 'literature', so that, as she explained, "they could recognize the *relativity* of the term" and see that "[the idea of literature] is not some kind of *universal* given, in all times and all places" (my emphasis). Another lecturer mentioned how she sought to impress upon students that different terms used

in literary/cultural studies will take on quite distinct meanings depending on the particular paradigm of literary criticism they are being used in (e.g. variable meanings of the terms 'structure', text, 'narrative'). The lecturer stressed the need for students to develop an awareness of where particular usages derive – "knowing a term's biography", as she described it.

Such examples come from a specific context – and are concerned perhaps with issues particularly pertinent to that discipline area. The broad principle, however, would seem to be relevant to academic study in general, especially in relation to terms and concepts that have currency across the university. These would include those terms considered so far (i.e. those concerned with academic processes – 'criticalness', 'analysis', 'argumentation', etc.), but also others – for example, terms that refer to the products (or genres) of such processes (e.g. 'essay', 'report', 'review', etc.). Thus, opportunities need to be created that allow students to consider how the use of such terms might vary across the different contexts of their study. A useful example of this was observed by me recently in a Sociology class focused on assessment in the subject. In the session, the lecturer, in her discussions about an essay task she had set, led off by asking students how the 'essay' in Sociology might differ from that required in another subject students were studying at the time – Psychology. Part of the purpose of the exercise was to draw students' attention to the potential hazards of generic terms like 'essay', and to help students appreciate the variable usages they will invariably encounter in their studies. Similar processes might also be employed to interrogate the variability of other terms – for example, for students to reflect on their encounters with the term 'critical', and the different guises the term appears to them across their studies (Moore, 2013). Such an approach is, of course, contingent on academics having an appreciation of their own particular uses of such terms, and recognising that these can often be at odds with the way they are used in other parts of the university.

5. Conclusion

The writings of Wittgenstein and Williams make us aware of the complexity of words and their meanings. Importantly though, both writers were sure that these meanings are never arbitrary, but always highly coherent within the particular domains of their use. As Wittgenstein (1961) boldly declared:

> All the propositions of our everyday language, just as they stand, are in perfect logical order. (sect 5.5563)

For both theorists, the enemy of coherence then is not complexity; paradoxically, the dangers lie in those efforts to reduce and simplify – what Wittgenstein referred to as the "craving for generality". In philosophy, Wittgenstein saw such efforts arising from "metaphysical" urges, which can lead only to "a state of puzzlement"; within social and political realms, efforts to "purify the tribe's dialect", as Williams saw it, are likely to bring only confusion.

If one surveys the higher education landscape currently in Australia and beyond, it is easy to feel that our institutions have become prey to similar generalising urges – ones that seem somehow increasingly to threaten the coherence of many of our endeavours. As mentioned earlier, this is seen in the development of the generic skills idea, a movement which seems increasingly to overwhelm the idea of disciplinary knowledges, and to diminish their distinctive languages and worldviews. And perhaps even more ominous are those generic methods increasingly employed now to organise university life. I speak here of the spread of a bland managerialism – one imposed from the domains of business and the corporations – which has brought to our institutions a new, alien inventory of terms ('strategies', 'missions',' markets', 'performance', 'competition', etc.), and whose encroachments have served progressively to weaken the "life worlds" and idioms of our faculties and departments. This article has focused on the idea of critique, and the different forms this can take. In these current times – ones that seem to bring only feelings of trepidation to our universities – it is perhaps to critiques of these developments and 'cravings' that we most need to devote ourselves. In the considerable challenges academics face, both in our teaching work and in our professional lives generally, the writings of thinkers such as Wittgenstein and Williams offer guidance and consolation.

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