

“Meaning as use” in medieval semantics—The case of Roger Bacon

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The nature of linguistic meaning is a greatly prized *casus belli* among philosophers. Whereas this is famously true for contemporary philosophy, the fact that comparable debates were going on in the Middle Ages has only been discovered and (properly) studied in recent years. In my talk, I'll present the opposition between two competing medieval conceptions of linguistic meaning which I shall call the “substantialist” and the “instrumentalist” views. Roughly, the former (i.e. substantialism) conceives meaning as a kind of substantial form acquired once and for all by a vocal sound (*vox*) in virtue of its “imposition” on a thing, while the latter (i.e. instrumentalism) sees meaning as consisting exclusively in the use (*usus*) of words. Against such a background, I'll focus on the semantics developed in what is perhaps the first treatise of semiotics in the West—Roger Bacon's *De signis* (1267)—and show how in spite of his insistence on the central role of the imposition of names on things, Bacon develops a highly sophisticated variant of instrumentalism.