The Living Lexicon: How Semantics Maps Our Mental World

Meaning and Conceptual Structure

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What does it mean to know the meaning of a word? Semantics is the linguistic study of meaning, seeking to understand how we map sounds and symbols onto concepts, objects, and relationships in the world and in our minds. A central concern is the architecture of word meanings. Words are not isolated but exist in networks of relations: synonymy (similar meaning), antonymy (opposite meaning), hyponymy (a "poodle" is a type of "dog," which is a type of "animal"). This structure creates our mental thesaurus. Furthermore, word meanings often have internal components called semantic features. The word "bachelor" might be broken down into [+human], [+adult], [+male], [-married]. This explains why "The bachelor gave birth" feels semantically anomalous—it violates a feature.Moving beyond single words, semantics examines how meaning compounds in phrases and sentences. This involves compositionality: the principle that the meaning of a complex expression is determined

by the meanings of its parts and the rules used to combine them. However, this is not always straightforward, as seen in idioms ("kick the bucket") or metaphor ("a wall of silence"), where meaning becomes non-compositional and culturally embedded. Crucially, semantics intersects with human cognition. The way languages lexicalize color, spatial relations, or time reveals how we carve up reality. While the human visual system perceives a color spectrum universally, different languages draw boundaries in different places. Russian has separate words for light blue (goluboy) and dark blue (siniy). This suggests that while our cognitive apparatus may be universal, semantics shows how language provides a specific, culturally-influenced lens for conceptualizing our experience.