

Concepts and Words: how do they relate to one another?

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Abstract:

It is not unusual to see the name for a concept written as a word in small caps. For example, the name for the concept for what we express using the word 'table' might be written 'TABLE'. This raises the question: just which features of a word are pertinent to the concept it names. Surely, a word's phonology is not pertinent. Nor presumably, in languages with non-notional gender, is non-notional gender. The fact that 'table' in French is feminine, a feature of the word, is not a feature of the concept of TABLE. In contrast, surely the concept expressed by the relational noun 'parent' is relational. Are concepts relational just in case the corresponding words are relational? If so, then to know which concepts are relational and which are not, we must know which words are relational and which are not; and if a word is relational, does it denote a binary, ternary or quaternary relation? And what do we say about words which appear sometimes to denote a binary relation and sometimes a simple property? The aim of the talk is first to explain the problem posed by words which seem to denote both a simple property and a relation or a binary relation and a ternary relation and second to propose a solution which applies to a broad range of cases found across a number of languages.