

# Language, Sense and the Conceptual Inventory

Adam Pease <sup>\*1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Articulate Software

April 7, 2020

What does it mean to “cover” the conceptual space of a domain? Before we can attempt to answer that question we must define what is a “domain”, or “coverage” or a “concept”. We also must explain the difference between language and concepts.

For anyone who speaks more than one language, it should already be clear that words are labels for concepts. The labels can change for the purpose of communication about the same concept. I listened to a Korean mother and adult daughter talking recently where the mother spoke entirely in Korean and the daughter in English, both at normal speed of course with no difficulty understanding each other. They were clearly discussing the same topic but using labels that we also might describe as “verbal symbols” in different languages. They had all their concepts in common and were just using their respectively most convenient labels.

I find that people occasionally bring up the issue of the supposed “15 Eskimo words for snow” as a counter-example. This notion, now widely refuted, posited that indigenous northern peoples have words for snow that were not expressible in other languages, and that this “fact” supported the idea that language is central to the conceptual inventory. However, any skier will have many words for snow, such as “powder”, “corn snow” etc. Much is made of “untranslatable” words, but any concept is translatable from one language to another. The only issues are how many words are required in one language to translate what might be a single word in the source language and what amount of cultural explanation is needed to capture the context of the translated word. One can have concepts that require several words to express, such as one’s “heart rate” or an “inter-governmental communication”.

It’s also possible to have concepts that are “behind” a text. This is included broadly in the linguist’s notion of “pragmatics”. Pragmatic information is that which is not syntax - the structure of language, or semantics - the meaning of words or phrases, but that which is not directly referenced - information that is implied or understood but required to understand a text. “Don’t drop that plate! (because it will fall and break)” has world knowledge about gravity that

---

\*apease@articulatesoftware.com

is never mentioned. The concept of gravity and how it works is required to understand the utterance but not explicitly stated.

Knowing the difference between the linguistic expression of a concept and a concept itself is an important factor in understanding how to write an ontology or taxonomy.