

Concepts and lexical knowledge: What's special about thinking through words

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That words express a conceptual content is uncontroversial. This does not entail that their content should break down neatly into a grammatical part, relevant for language and to be analyzed in linguistic terms, and a conceptual part, relevant for cognition and to be analyzed in psychological terms. Various types of empirical evidence are reviewed, showing that the conceptual content of words cannot be isolated from their linguistic properties, because it is affected and shaped by them. The view of words as labels or containers for a non-linguistic conceptual content stems from a naive disregard of the complex and structured nature of lexical knowledge. On the contrary, knowledge of language is shown not just to organize and categorize conceptual content in a way not reducible to non-linguistic cognition, but also to affect its scope, as the range of verbalized concepts is both limited by abstract templates and expanded by productive word formation. This suggests that lexical knowledge is a distinctively linguistic dimension of conceptualization, and that words do not so much label or package concepts, as provide an inner form for conceptual knowledge.