ENG423A:
Current Issues in Linguistics

KNOWING LANGUAGE II

Symbolic Function

HOW THE FUNCTION WORKS.

LANGUAGE IS A PROMPT TO A RICH SYSTEM OF CONCEPTUALIZATIONS.

MEANING-MAKING INVOLVES LANGUAGE AND MORE.

Symbolic function of language

One crucial function of language is to express thoughts and ideas: language encodes our thoughts.

The way language does this is by using **symbols.**

The symbols are ***forms,*** which may be spoken or signed, and **meanings** with which the forms are conventionally paired.

Because a symbol can be complex, it may be referred to as a **symbolic assembly.**

It consists of two parts that are conventionally associated - the **form-meaning pairing.**

Symbolic function of language

What are symbols?

Symbols are ‘bits of language’.

A symbol is that which refers to something other than itself.

Symbols might be:

- meaningful subparts of words (for example, *un- as in unhealthy)*
- whole words (for example, *cat, read, black, beautiful, tomorrow)*
- ‘strings’ of words (for example*, I couldn’t get up in the morning forget attending the class*.)

A form can be a sound as in [kæ:t].

A form can be the orthographic representation that we see on the computer screen: *cat.*

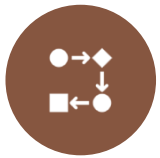
It can also be a *signed* entity in a sign language.

A meaning is the **conventional ideational content** associated with the symbol.

Form and meaning

How the symbolic function of language works

The meaning associated with a linguistic symbol is linked to a mental representation, which is termed as a **concept.**



Concepts, in turn, derive from **percepts.**

Consider a piece of chalk.

Our sensorimotor systems perceive its shape, colour, texture, taste, smell and so on.

This diverse range of perceptual information derives from the world 'out there'.

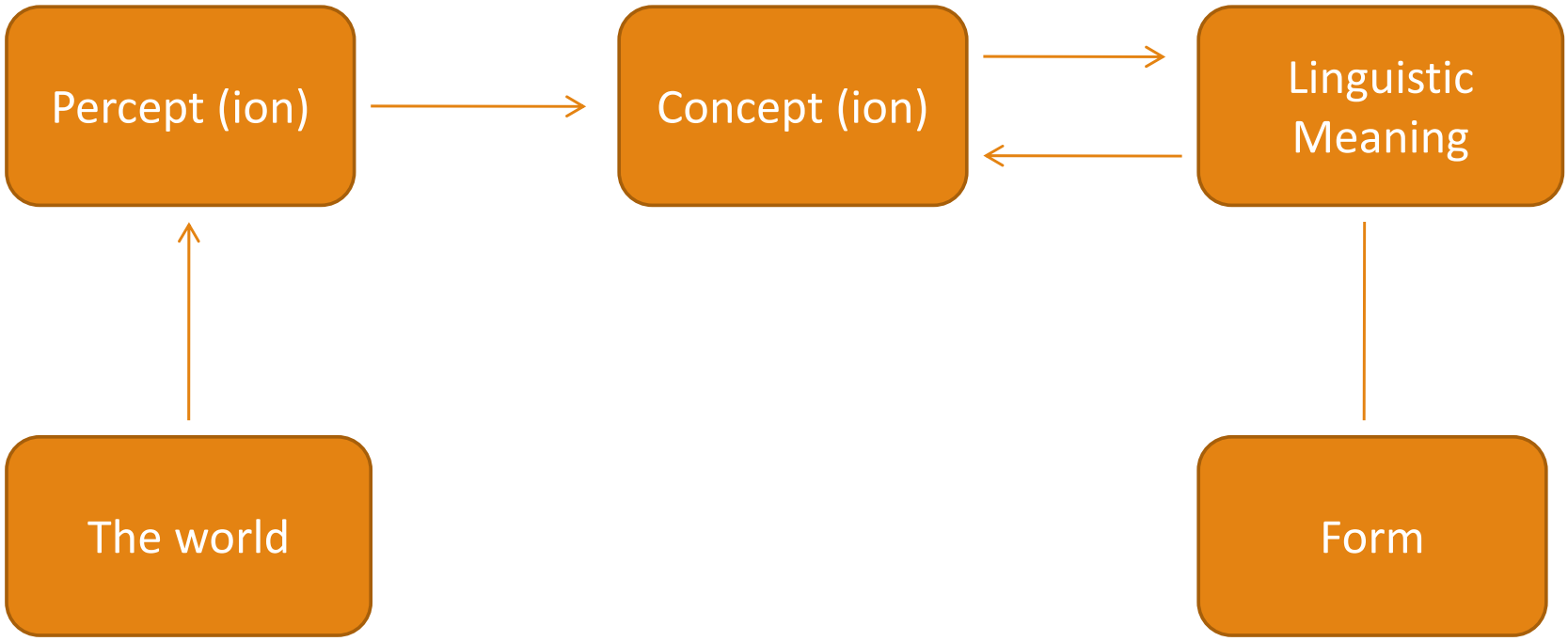
It is integrated into a single **mental image** (a representation available to the mind), which gives rise to the concept of CHALK.

How the symbolic function of language works

What happens when we utter the form *chalk*?

When we use language and utter the form *chalk,* this symbol corresponds to a conventional meaning, and 'connects' to a concept rather than to the physical object in the external world.

How the symbolic function of language works



Projected reality

Our cognitive abilities work on the raw perceptual information and integrate it into a coherent and well-defined concept.

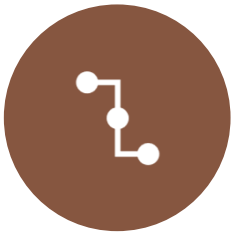
The meanings encoded by linguistic symbols thus refer not to the reality but to our **projected reality.**

What is the projected reality?

Projected reality is a mental representation of reality, as construed by the human mind, mediated by our unique perceptual and conceptual systems.

Does language fall short?

We are all familiar with the frustration of not being able to say what we wish to say or to ‘put an idea into words’.



There is a finite number of words, with a delimited set of conventional meanings.

Language represents a limited system for the expression of thought.

Our conceptualizations, on the other hand, are unlimited in scope.

Does language fall short?

Can we say that language merely provides ***prompts*** for conceptualization.

Conceptualizations are far richer and more elaborate than the meanings provided by language.

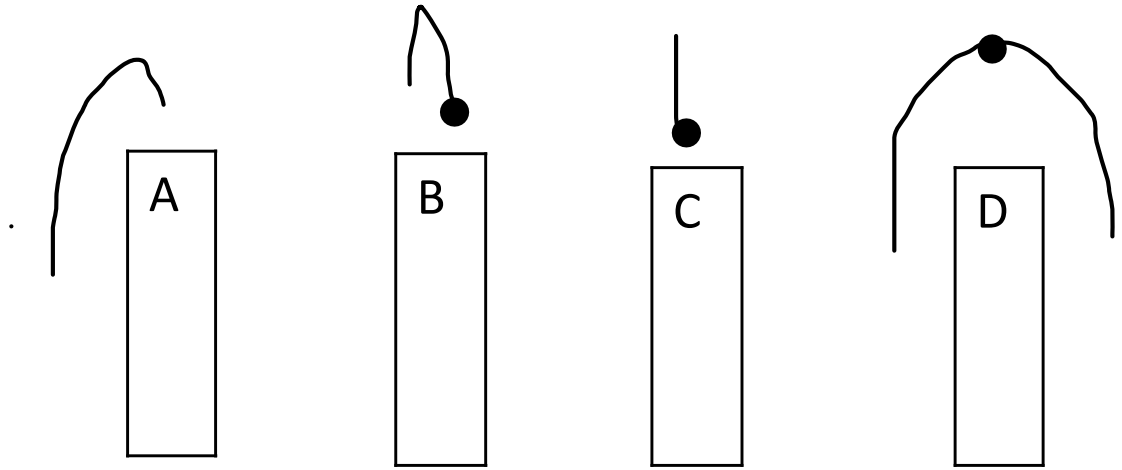
In other words, what language encodes is not thought in its entirety, but only rudimentary ***instructions*** to the conceptual system to access or create conceptualizations.

An example

The cat jumped over the wall.

The example is from Evans and Green (2006) - Cognitive Linguistics: An Introduction.

The cat jumped over the wall:
*The p*ossible motion paths or trajectories



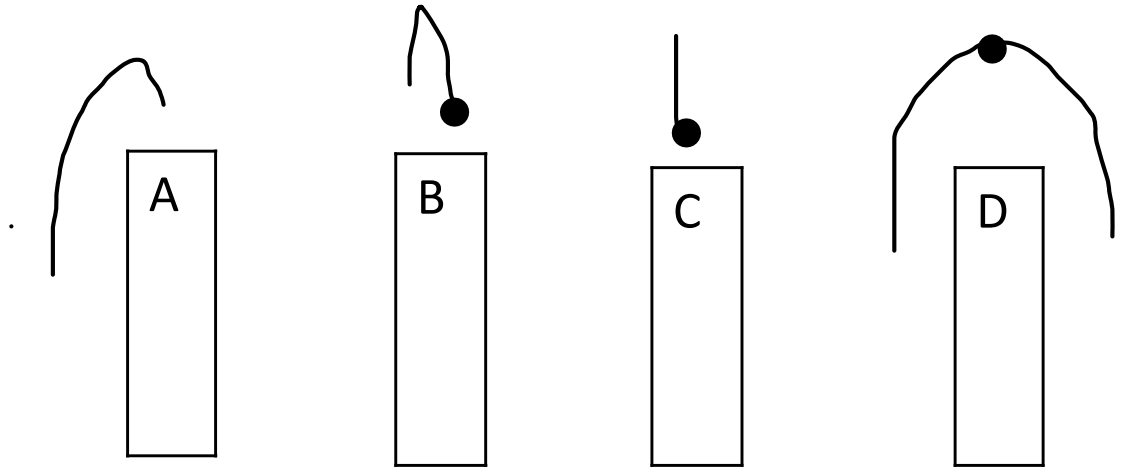
What did you select?

Chances are that you selected (D).

The exercise seems straightforward.

However, even a simple sentence like this raises some interesting issues.

The cat jumped over the wall: Possible motion paths or trajectories



Two questions

How do we know that the trajectory of the jump of the cat is as represented in (D)?

What information is there in the expression, *The cat jumped over the wall,* that provides this interpretation and excludes the trajectories A, B, and C?

The sentence contains words that have a **range of interpretations.**

Range of interpretations: *jump*

The word *jump* can involve a variety of trajectories.

- jumping from the ground to the top of a surface as in (A)
- jumping on a trampoline as represented in (B)
- bungee jumping as represented in (C), in which the jumper stops just as the surface is reached.
- jumping over a hurdle, wall etc. which involves an arc-like trajectory as in (D).
- **Why did we choose (D)?**

Range of interpretations: *over*

Since *jump* does not narrow down our choice to (D), then perhaps the preposition *over* is responsible.

But *over* can also have a range of possible interpretations.

It might mean ‘across’ when *I walk over a bridge.*

It might mean ‘above’ when an entity like *a butterfly is over a flower.*

Again, *over* could mean ‘above’ when *a plane flies over a* city.

These are just a few of the many possibilities.

Where does the information come from?

So the preposition *over* can also be used with a number of different trajectories or paths of motion in different kinds of spatial configurations.

Thus no linguistic element in the sentence explicitly provides us with the information that the trajectory of the cat is (D).

What does the example tell us?

The example tells us several things. But the most important of these is the following:

Even in a simple sentence, the words themselves, while providing meanings, are only partially responsible for the conceptualization that these meanings give rise to.

In other words, thought relies on encyclopedic knowledge.

Encyclopedic knowledge

The jumping of the cats is not like bungee jumping: it involves crossing obstacles.

If a cat begins a jump at a point on one side of an obstacle, then gravity ensures that it stops on the other side of the obstacle.

Walls are impenetrable barriers to forward motion.

Cats know this, and therefore, attempt to circumnavigate the obstacle by going over the wall.

Language is a prompt.

We use a rich array of encyclopedic knowledge in constructing the conceptualizations associated with linguistic expressions.

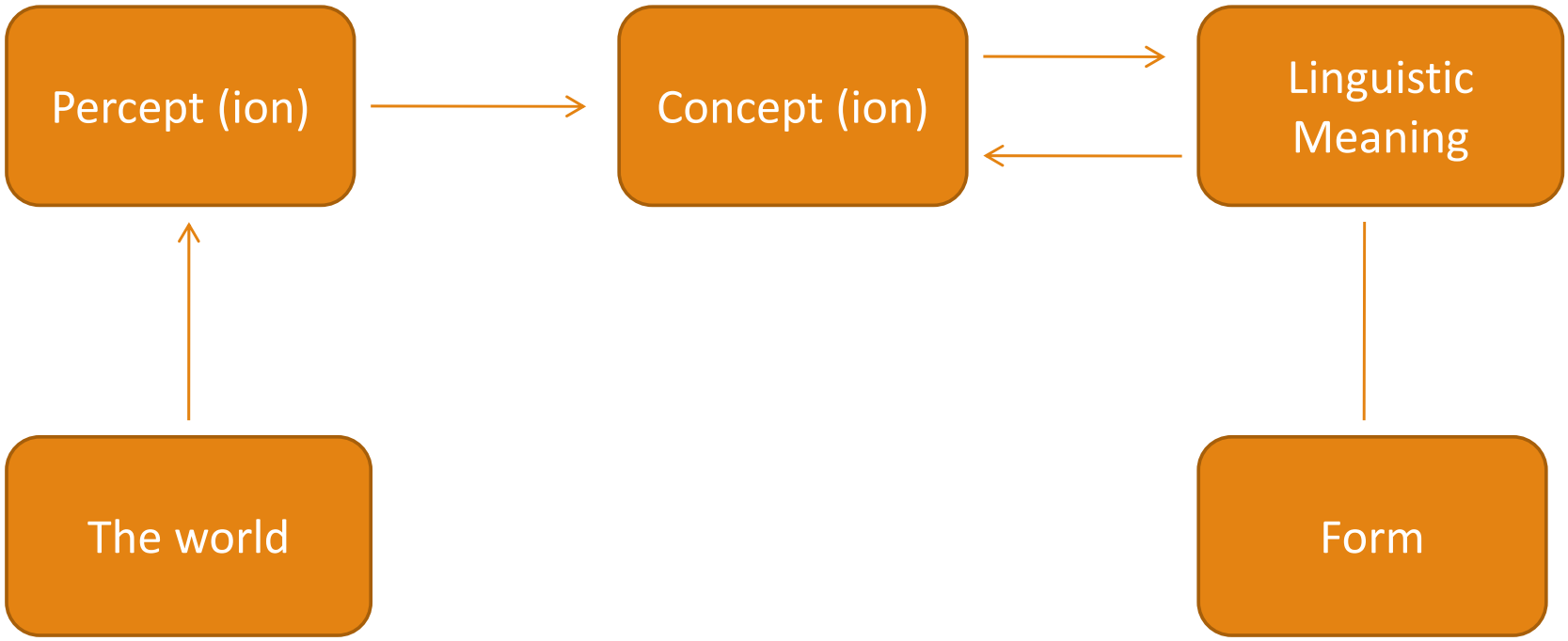
What is the motion path in this expression?

The cow jumped over the moon.

What is the encyclopedic knowledge you use to process this sentence?

A vast range limited only by imagination??

How the symbolic function of language works



So far…

One of the functions of language is to represent or *symbolize* concepts.

Linguistic symbols or *symbolic assemblies* enable this by serving as *prompts* for invoking much richer conceptualizations.