A **stereotype** is a simplified and fixed mental picture or generalization about a particular group of people. It is a belief that all members of a group share certain characteristics, which may or may not be accurate in reality.

How Stereotypes Function in Language

In semantics, stereotypes are a form of **conceptual meaning** that helps us categorize and understand the world, similar to a **prototype**. However, unlike a prototype, which is a neutral cognitive model, a stereotype often carries social and cultural baggage, including biases and prejudices.

For example, the word **"librarian"** has a denotation of "a person who works in a library." The stereotype associated with the word might include characteristics like being quiet, wearing glasses, and being strict. While not all librarians fit this description, this set of associated traits is a cultural stereotype.

Stereotypes vs. Prototypes

While both stereotypes and prototypes are cognitive shortcuts that help us make sense of categories, they differ in their nature and function:

- **Prototype:** A neutral, cognitive ideal or "best example" of a category. It's about what is most typical. For example, a robin is a prototype of a bird.

- **Stereotype:** A socially and culturally constructed generalization that is often associated with a group. It can be positive or negative and is a form of social belief.

The stereotype of a "nerd" as socially awkward and intelligent is a belief about a group, whereas a prototype of a "nerd" might be an individual who best embodies those traits in a mental model.

Stereotypes are a powerful part of how we use language to describe and interact with social groups. They can be positive, negative, or neutral, but they always involve an oversimplification of a complex reality.