

# ABSTRACT WORD

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## ABSTRACT WORD

**Primary Disciplinary Field(s):** Psycholinguistics, Semantics, Cognitive Science

### 1. Core Definition

An abstract word is fundamentally defined as a lexeme or linguistic unit that lacks a direct, observable, physical referent in the material world. Unlike concrete nouns--such as 'table,' 'dog,' or 'tree'--which readily evoke specific mental imagery based on sensory experience, abstract words denote concepts, qualities, feelings, states of being, or relationships that exist primarily in the domain of thought and introspection. These terms represent intangible entities that cannot be perceived directly through the five senses of sight, smell, touch, taste, or hearing. The function of an **abstract word** is to codify complex cognitive structures, allowing speakers and writers to communicate nuanced philosophical, emotional, or institutional realities.

The distinction between abstract and concrete language is crucial in fields ranging from literary analysis to cognitive psychology. Concrete words are tied to the immediate physical environment, providing high imageability--the ease with which a word generates a mental picture. Conversely, abstract words, such as **instinct**, **anxiety**, **justice**, or **freedom**, possess low imageability. While speakers universally understand the meaning and implications of these terms, this understanding is derived through contextual knowledge, shared cultural frameworks, and deep conceptual learning, rather than a singular, universally displayable physical object. This requirement for indirect understanding highlights the complexity of semantic processing involved in using abstract language.

Psychologically, the utility of abstract words lies in their ability to describe internal or relational states. For instance, while a person cannot physically display **anxiety** in a descriptive sense (it is not a physical object), the term effectively communicates a complex emotional state characterized by worry, apprehension, and physiological arousal. The universality of understanding these non-physical concepts suggests that the human cognitive system is highly adept at creating robust conceptual structures that transcend direct sensory input, forming the bedrock of advanced philosophical, mathematical, and ethical communication.

### 2. Linguistic Classification and Contrast (Concrete vs. Abstract)

In formal linguistic classification, the concrete-abstract dichotomy represents one of the most fundamental distinctions used to categorize vocabulary. This division is not always sharp, as some words operate across the spectrum depending on context (e.g., 'system' can be abstract--a political system--or concrete--a plumbing system). However, the classification helps explain differences in how words are learned, retrieved, and processed by the brain. Concrete words are often learned

earlier in childhood, linked directly to sensorimotor experiences, and are generally easier to define and translate across languages due to their grounding in universal physical reality.

Abstract words, conversely, tend to be acquired later and require higher levels of cognitive maturity, often depending on prior mastery of related concrete terms and syntactic structures. For example, understanding the concept of **empathy** requires prior understanding of basic emotions and the ability to infer the mental states of others. This hierarchical learning suggests that abstract concepts are often metaphorically or structurally built upon more concrete foundations. Semantically, the meaning of an abstract word is often inherently polysemous, acquiring slightly different shades of meaning depending on the domain (e.g., 'power' in politics versus 'power' in physics).

Furthermore, the grammatical function of abstract terms frequently involves their use as nouns derived from adjectives or verbs (nominalization). For instance, 'happiness' derives from the adjective 'happy,' and 'destruction' from the verb 'destroy.' This process demonstrates how language transforms actions and qualities into conceptual entities capable of being treated as subjects or objects in discourse. This transformation is essential for higher-order reasoning, enabling complex argumentation and the systematic analysis of non-material phenomena.

### 3. Cognitive Processing and Imagery

The cognitive difference between abstract and concrete words is heavily investigated within psycholinguistics, particularly concerning mental representation and processing speed. The most notable metric differentiating these two types is **imageability**. When a concrete word is processed, it activates not only linguistic areas of the brain but also areas associated with sensory and motor representation (e.g., hearing 'bell' activates the auditory cortex). Abstract words, however, rely more heavily on purely linguistic and conceptual networks.

Dual-Coding Theory (DCT), proposed by Allan Paivio, suggests that concrete words benefit from two separate memory codes: a verbal code and an image-based code. This dual representation makes them easier to recall and process quickly. Abstract words, lacking a strong image-based code, primarily rely on the verbal system, meaning their representation is often more diffuse and interconnected with other related concepts. This necessity for robust inter-conceptual linkage explains why abstract concepts, though difficult to visualize, are highly integrated into semantic memory systems.

Recent neuroscientific studies using fMRI and EEG have supported the differential processing hypothesis. Processing abstract words tends to engage the left hemisphere's superior temporal sulcus and frontal areas associated with semantic integration and complex conceptual tasks. Conversely, concrete words show greater activation in parietal and occipital regions linked to spatial and visual processing. This physiological separation underscores that while both types of

words are essential for communication, they engage distinct--though overlapping--mechanisms in the brain for meaning retrieval.

#### 4. Historical Context in Philosophy and Semantics

The philosophical investigation into abstract concepts dates back to classical antiquity, particularly in the work of Plato, who posited the existence of Forms or Ideas--perfect, eternal, and non-material templates (e.g., Justice, Beauty) that concrete objects merely imitate. This early distinction established the ontological reality of entities that exist outside of physical perception, laying the groundwork for understanding **abstract words** as references to these non-physical forms.

During the Enlightenment, philosophers like John Locke further formalized the concept in epistemology. Locke defined abstract ideas as those derived by the mind through the process of generalization and abstraction from multiple particular sensory experiences. For instance, observing many individual white objects (snow, milk, paper) allows the mind to isolate the quality of 'whiteness,' which is then represented by the abstract word **whiteness**. This process moves the focus from metaphysical forms to psychological processes of concept formation.

In modern semantics, the study of abstraction has been crucial for developing theories of meaning. Traditional compositional semantics struggles to define abstract terms because they lack verifiable truth conditions tied to physical observation. This challenge led to the development of conceptual role semantics and frame semantics, which define abstract meanings based on their relationship to other concepts within a structured knowledge framework, recognizing that abstract words gain meaning through their systemic connections rather than their direct referential function.

#### 5. Key Characteristics

Abstract words possess several defining characteristics that distinguish them from their concrete counterparts, influencing their use, comprehension, and development within language systems.

**Low Imageability:** They do not readily elicit a specific, sensory-based mental image upon hearing or reading, requiring more effortful conceptual processing (e.g., **truth, courage**).

**Intangibility:** Their referents are non-physical, relating instead to states, ideas, qualities, or relations (e.g., **gravity, morality, time**).

**Context Dependence:** The precise meaning of many abstract terms is highly dependent on the linguistic, social, or philosophical context in which they are used, leading to potential ambiguities (e.g., the meaning of **art** varies widely across cultural and aesthetic contexts).

**Conceptual Density:** Abstract words often summarize vast and complex networks of related ideas and experiences, functioning as cognitive shortcuts for elaborate thought patterns (e.g., **democracy** summarizes a complex political system).

**Late Acquisition:** In language development, abstract vocabulary is generally acquired later than

concrete vocabulary, correlating with the development of formal operational thought and metaphorical reasoning abilities.

## 6. Acquisition and Developmental Psychology

The acquisition of abstract vocabulary marks a significant milestone in language and cognitive development. Early language learning relies heavily on ostensive definition--pointing to an object while naming it. This method works well for concrete nouns but fails for terms like **justice** or **faith**. Consequently, children learn abstract words through indirect means, primarily by exposure to complex discourse, inference from linguistic context, and social interaction.

Developmental psychologists note that the capacity to understand true abstract concepts correlates strongly with the transition from Piaget's concrete operational stage to the formal operational stage, typically around the age of eleven or twelve. At this point, adolescents gain the ability to reason hypothetically and manipulate concepts without recourse to immediate physical objects. This intellectual leap enables them to grasp concepts like algebraic variables, theoretical physics, or ethical dilemmas, which are wholly dependent on abstract language.

Educational strategies for teaching abstract vocabulary often involve the use of analogies, conceptual metaphors, and detailed explanations of definitional relationships, rather than simple rote memorization. Since abstract words are deeply embedded in conceptual systems, effective instruction focuses on building the semantic network around the term, connecting it to known emotions, experiences, and relational structures, thereby solidifying the concept in the learner's lexicon.

## 7. Debates on Conceptual Metaphor and Embodiment

A major contemporary debate challenging the traditional view of abstract words stems from the theories of embodied cognition and conceptual metaphor, championed by scholars like George Lakoff and Mark Johnson. These theories argue that even highly abstract concepts are not arbitrary but are fundamentally grounded in bodily experience, sensory modalities, and spatial relationships. The central thesis is that abstract thought is structured and understood via systematic mapping from concrete domains.

Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) posits that abstract concepts are understood through metaphors like "ARGUMENT IS WAR" (e.g., 'we defended our positions,' 'he attacked my claim') or "TIME IS MONEY" (e.g., 'spending time,' 'saving time'). While the abstract word **time** itself is non-physical, its comprehension relies on the concrete, spatial, and economic metaphors derived from bodily interaction with the world. This perspective suggests that the processing of abstract words might not be entirely devoid of sensory input but rather relies on simulating the concrete experiences they metaphorically reference.

The implication of embodiment theory is that the distinction between concrete and abstract words might be less absolute than previously assumed. Instead of existing solely in a non-sensory realm, abstract concepts are viewed as extensions of sensorimotor systems, allowing the brain to leverage existing neural pathways for complex, intangible ideas. This framework provides a robust explanation for why abstract concepts--such as **anxiety** or **instincts**--are widely understood: they map onto shared human physiological experiences even if they lack a singular external referent.

### Further Reading

[Abstract and concrete](#) (Wikipedia)

[Dual-coding theory](#) (Allan Paivio)

[Concepts](#) (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy)

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