

What is a semantic domain?

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A semantic domain is an area of meaning and the words used to talk about it. A domain is often given a name consisting of a common word in the domain. For instance English has a domain 'Rain', which includes words such as *rain*, *drizzle*, *downpour*, *raindrop*, *puddle*. We use these words to talk about the rain.

The words within a domain are related to each other by *lexical relations*. Linguists use the term *lexical relations* to refer to various kinds of relationships that exist between words. There are two basic types of lexical relations. The first type are known as *collocates*—words that are frequently used together in a sentence. For instance we often use the words *bird* and *fly* in the same sentence. *Bird* and *fly* are related by the lexical relation *agent:typical action*. The second type are known as *paradigm forms* and include relations such as *synonyms*, *antonyms*, and the *generic-specific* relation. The words *big* and *large* are close synonyms. *Kind* and *unkind* are antonyms. *Bird* is a generic term that includes the more specific term *chicken*.

As a child learns to speak, he forms lexical relations in his mind. We need these lexical relations in order to speak correctly. Each of us has a mental dictionary which is organized into a giant network of lexical relations. Within the network are important clusters, like cities and towns linked by roads. So a semantic domain is a cluster of words in the mental network. The words within the domain are linked by lexical relations and the domains themselves are linked by lexical relations.

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