

Abstract: What does “natural” really mean? The term plasters advertising, food packaging, and even moral arguments, acting as a marketing incentive and as a desirable trait. Primarily, “natural” can be interpreted as either A.) all things untouched by human intent; non-artificial, but also as B.) existing within the world, a definition that excludes nothing but fictional characters and fantasy. The latter definition includes what would typically be deemed “natural” as well as the “artificial,” contradicting the primary, narrow meaning and imbuing “nature” with a semantic flexibility that lends itself to the exploitation of the term’s vagueness.

In a 1973 study by William Labov^{*}, people identified items that were very typical of categories, but also items that fell in between categories, challenging the concepts we use to understand and mentally organize our surroundings. Labov’s respondents identified items as “a cup” or “a bowl,” with the items often featuring characteristics of both. Labov thereby blurred the lines between the rigid categories of cups and bowls, and revealed that, beside width-to-depth ratio, the function of an item identified it as either a cup or a bowl. I wonder how and if similar results will arise in identifying a more conceptual, less easily illustrated word, such as “nature.”

In order to resolve the discrepancy between two conflicting senses of the word “nature,” I will survey 50 Georgia State students in the University Courtyard and ask them to rate a series of 50 items on a scale of 1 to 5 according to how natural they consider each item to be, with 1 being “not natural” and 5 being “natural.” The list includes everyday items like “a tree,” “glass,” and “a television.” Emergent trends will characterize the category of “natural,” reveal our beliefs about nature and naturalness, and delineate the boundaries of nature and artifice.

*Labov, William (1973). The boundaries of words and their meanings. In Charles-James Bailey and Roger W. Shuy (eds.), *New Ways of Analyzing Variation in English*. Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 340-371.