Abstract: I will review recent and ongoing computational work that addresses two related questions at the intersection of language, cognition, and culture: (1) Why do languages have the semantic categories they do, and (2) Do semantic categories shape non-linguistic cognition? Specific issues to be addressed include efficient communication, cultural communicative need, the evolution of semantic systems, and the existence or non-existence of a universal cognitive foundation for linguistic meaning. A general theme will be that approaching these contested questions in computational terms has the potential to resolve some of the tension that surrounds them.