The Meaning Deficit: Semantic Fidelity and the Structural Breakdown of Coherence

Cognitive Drift Series – CD 2.4

A. Jacobs — Reality Drift Framework (2023–2026)

Core Claim

Meaning comes from how experience is compressed and kept aligned with reality. When that alignment breaks down, coherence collapses and Cognitive Drift emerges.

Mechanism

- The mind compresses high-dimensional input into usable models
- Meaning emerges from stable, recursive compression
- Fidelity constrains compression to preserve structure
- Information volume and velocity exceed compression capacity
- Models lose coherence and require increasing effort to maintain
- Chemistry adapts to degraded structure rather than repairing it

Key Concepts

- **Meaning**: Compression of experience into stable, usable structure
- **Semantic Fidelity**: Preservation of structure between model and reality
- **Drift Principle**: When information exceeds integration capacity, fidelity decays
- **Compression Failure**: Breakdown of models due to overload or distortion
- **Replacement Behavior**: Substituting coherence with stimulation or reward
- **Filter Fatigue**: The cognitive cost of continuously filtering and stabilizing meaning under high information load

How Drift Emerges

Cognition begins with raw input being compressed into representations that form meaning, which in turn stabilizes into coherent models of the world.

When semantic fidelity is maintained, these models remain stable and aligned, supporting predictive coherence and orientation. As fidelity degrades under increasing informational load, however, models become unstable, and drift emerges as coherence breaks down.

In response, the system compensates by shifting toward stimulation or reward, producing temporary relief without restoring underlying structure, which further reinforces drift over time.

Observable Effects

- Interpretation becomes effortful and unstable
- Identity feels provisional and fragmented
- Stimulation increases while satisfaction decreases
- Anxiety becomes ambient rather than situational
- Addiction emerges as a substitute for missing structure

These arise when compressed models lose fidelity and can no longer stabilize cognition.

Reality Drift Framework Connection

This describes the internal cognitive layer of Reality Drift, where cognitive drift emerges as meaning itself begins to degrade under conditions of sustained compression and declining semantic fidelity.

As informational load exceeds the system's capacity to maintain alignment, models lose coherence and require increasing effort to stabilize, even as outputs remain superficially functional.

In this state, cognition continues to operate but no longer produces grounded meaning, and compensatory behaviors emerge in place of structural stability.

Meaning is not lost all at once, but gradually replaced by effortful interpretation and short-term substitutes, making drift feel like a persistent condition rather than a discrete failure.

This reflects a broader constraint on scaled cognition, where increasing informational load and compression capacity do not preserve semantic fidelity, making the degradation of meaning an expected outcome rather than an anomaly.

Keywords: *semantic fidelity, meaning, compression, cognitive drift, coherence, information overload, neurochemistry*

Related Concepts: *cognitive drift, filter fatigue, recursive compression, synthetic realness, optimization trap*

Source: *Integrated into the Reality Drift Framework, this work draws from the Cognitive Drift Archive (2024–2025).*