Connotation and Denotation

Connotation and Denotation

> Connotation and Denotation are two principal methods of describing the meanings of words. Connotation refers to the wide array of positive and negative associations that most words naturally carry with them, whereas denotation is the precise, literal definition of a word that might be found in a dictionary.

Cars of the 1960's

Thunderbird, Falcon, Charger, Comet, Mustang, Barracuda.

Cars of the 1970's

Rabbit, Pinto, Colt, Civic, Starlet, Gremlin.

Introduce the idea of connotation, defining it as the associations that people make with a word. You can contrast connotation with the denotative value of a word, its more literal meaning, and give an example of a word (such as "chicken")

> **Connotation** is the emotional and imaginative association surrounding a word. **Denotation** is the strict dictionary meaning of a word.

Visiting Seema Srivastava's *Argumentative Writing* class recently, I witnessed a very useful exercise for teaching students the difference between **connotation** and **denotation**. Under the rubric of teaching students about Pathos, or appeal to emotion, in the Aristotelian Pathos/Ethos/Logos triangle, she briefly described **denotation** as the literal meaning and **connotation** as the emotional weight of a word, comparing *cheap* to *inexpensive* as an example. She noted that non-native speakers often have difficulty with **connotation**, while native speakers may use the words appropriately though unconsciously. She then presented students the following groups of words and asked them to rank the words in order from positive to negative.

Group 1

Thin, slim, lanky, skinny, gaunt, slender

Group 2

Aggressive, assertive, domineering, dynamic, pushy, forceful

Group 3

Shrewd, egghead, bright, clever, brilliant, cunning, smart, intelligent, brainy

Connotation and Denotation

Connotation and denotation are not two separate things/signs. They are two aspects/ elements of a sign, and the connotative meanings of a word exist together with the denotative meanings].
− Connotation represents the various social overtones, cultural implications, or emotional meanings associated with a sign.
− Denotation represents the explicit or referential meaning of a sign. Denotation refers to the literal meaning of a word, the 'dictionary definition.'
For example, the name 'Hollywood' *connotes* such things as glitz, glamour, tinsel, celebrity, and dreams of stardom. In the same time, the name 'Hollywood' *denotes* an area of Los Angeles, worldwide known as the center of the American movie industry.

Diction, an element of style, refers to the words writers use to express ideas. Words convey more than exact, literal meanings, in which case they "connote" or suggest additional meanings and values not expressed in general dictionary definitions. Words that "denote" a core meaning are those that are generally used and understood by the users and the audience to represent an object or class of objects, an act, a quality, or an idea. However, because of usage over time, words that denote approximately the same thing may acquire additional meanings, or connotations, that are either positive (meliorative) or negative (pejorative). Consider the changes undergone by these words in the 20th century: liberal, diversity, team player, right wing, follower, gay, minority, feminist, left wing, abuse, conservative, motherhood, extremist, rights, relationship, harassment, family, propaganda, peacekeeper, and comrade.

drug addict . . . druggie, drug fiend, substance abuser
handicapped . . . crippled, disabled, differently abled
horse . . . . . . steed, nag, plug
house . . . . . . home, abode, domicile, residence
thin . . . . . . thin, slender, slim, skinny, lean, beanpole
attractive . . . pretty, beautiful, handsome, fair
reporter . . . . journalist, broadcaster, newshound
unattractive . . plain, dull, ugly

http://grcpublishing.grc.nasa.gov/WizardArchive/wizard17/quirks.cfm

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- The media were swarming around the pileup on the innerbelt to capture every conceivable injury for the evening news.
- The journalists were on the scene at the innerbelt crash to document the incident for the evening news.

- Photographers stood patiently along the walkway, awaiting the arrival of the Oscar nominees.
- The paparazzi lined the walkway anxiously poised to snap the Oscar nominees.

- America's Midwest is often referred to as the heartland by Washington congressmen.
- America's Midwest is often referred to as flyover country by DC politicos.

http://grcpublishing.grc.nasa.gov/WizardArchive/wizard17/wizard.cfm

Words have both **denotations** (literal meanings) and **connotations** (suggestive meanings). *Fungus* is a scientific term denoting a certain kind of natural growth, but the word also has certain connotations of disease and ugliness.

Connotations can be both positive and negative; for example, *lady* carries a hint of both elegance and subservience. The influence of connotative meaning can also change the denotative meaning, one example being the thoroughly transformed word *gay*.

http://web.uvic.ca/wguide/Pages/UsConnotation.html

- **Denotation** refers to the literal meaning of a word, the "dictionary definition."¨ For example, if you look up the word *snake* in a dictionary, you will discover that one of its **denotative** meanings is "any of numerous scaly, legless, sometimes venomous reptiles having a long, tapering, cylindrical body and found in most tropical and temperate regions."
- **Connotation**, on the other hand, refers to the associations that are connected to a certain word or the emotional suggestions related to that word. The **connotative** meanings of a word exist together with the denotative meanings. The connotations for the word *snake* could include evil or danger.

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Denotation is when you mean what you say, literally. **Connotation** is created when you mean something else, something that might be initially hidden. The connotative meaning of a word is based on implication, or shared emotional association with a word. *Greasy* is a completely innocent word: Some things, like car engines, need to be greasy. But *greasy* contains negative associations for most people, whether they are talking about food or about people. Often there are many words that denote approximately the same thing, but their connotations are very different. *Innocent* and *genuine* both denote an absence of corruption, but the connotations of the two words are different: *innocent* is often associated with a lack of experience, whereas *genuine* is not. Connotations are important in poetry because poets use them to further develop or complicate a poem's meaning.

You may live in a *house*, but we live in a *home*.
If you were to look up the words house and home in a dictionary, you would find that both words have approximately the same meaning- "a dwelling place." However, the speaker in the sentence above suggests that home has an additional meaning. Aside from the strict dictionary definition, or **denotation**, many people associate such things as comfort, love, security, or privacy with a home but do not necessarily make the same associations with a house. What is the first thing that comes to your mind when you think of a home? of a house? Why do you think that real-estate advertisers use the word home more frequently than house? The various feelings, images, and memories that surround a word make up its **connotation**. Although both house and home have the same denotation, or dictionary meaning, home also has many **connotations**.

Read the following sentences. Type in all your answers (ten) for this page on the answer sheet, and then send it in to Mrs. Dowling!

- **Annette was surprised.**
- **Annette was amazed.**
- **Annette was astonished.**

1. What is the general meaning of each of the three sentences about Annette? Do the words surprised, amazed, and astonished have approximately the same denotation?
2. What additional meanings are suggested by astonish? Would one be more likely to be surprised or astonished at seeing a ghost?
3. Which word in each pair below has the more favorable connotation to you?
   - **thrifty-penny-pinching**
   - **pushy-aggressive**
   - **politician-statesman**
   - **chef-cook**
   - **slender-skinny**

   Since everyone reacts emotionally to certain words, writers often deliberately select words that they think will influence your reactions and appeal to your emotions. Read the dictionary definition below.

Definitions and Concepts in Critical Thinking

Understanding the difference between denotation and connotation is important to understanding definitions and how concepts are used. Unfortunately, that is complicated by the fact that these terms can be used in two different ways: grammatical and logical. Even worse, both uses are worth keeping in mind and both uses are relevant to project of logical, critical thinking.

In grammar, a word's denotation is whatever the word directly refers to, roughly equivalent to its lexical definition. Thus, the word "atheist" denotes a person who disbelieves in or denies the existence of gods. A word's connotation refers to any subtle nuances that might or might not be intended by its use. For example, one possible connotation for the word "atheist" might be someone who is immoral and wicked, depending upon who is doing the speaking or listening.

Separating grammatical denotation from connotation is important because while one might assume that a word's denotation is fully intended, whether a word's connotations are intended is much more difficult to determine. Connotations are often emotional in nature, and thus if they are intended, it may be for the purpose of swaying a person's emotional reactions rather than the logical evaluation of an argument.

If there are misunderstandings about how a person is using a word in a particular debate, a primary source of that misunderstanding might lie in the word's connotations: people might be seeing something not intended or the speaker may be intending something people don't see. In constructing your own arguments, it's a good idea not merely to look at what your words denote, but also what they connote.

The relationship between words and meanings is extremely complicated, and belongs to the field of **semantics**. For now, though, what you need to know is that words do not have single, simple meanings. Traditionally, grammarians have referred to the meanings of words in two parts:

denotation
> a literal meaning of the word

connotation
> an association (emotional or otherwise) which the word evokes

For example, both "woman" and "chick" have the denotation "adult female" in North American society, but "chick" has somewhat negative connotations, while "woman" is neutral.

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For another example of connotations, consider the following:

negative There are over 2,000 **vagrants** in the city.

neutral There are over 2,000 **people with no fixed address** in the city.

positive There are over 2,000 **homeless** in the city.

All three of these expressions refer to exactly the same people, but they will invoke different associations in the reader's mind: a "vagrant" is a public nuisance while a "homeless" person is a worthy object of pity and charity. Presumably, someone writing an editorial in support of a new shelter would use the positive form, while someone writing an editorial in support of anti-loitering laws would use the negative form.

In this case, the dry legal expression "with no fixed address" quite deliberately avoids most of the positive or negative associations of the other two terms -- a legal specialist will try to avoid connotative language altogether when writing legislation, often resorting to archaic Latin or French terms which are not a part of ordinary spoken English, and thus, relatively free of strong emotional associations.

Many of the most obvious changes in the English language over the past few decades have had to do with the connotations of words which refer to groups of people. Since the 1950's, words like "Negro" and "crippled" have acquired strong negative connotations, and have been replaced either by words with neutral connotations (ie "black," "handicapped") or by words with deliberately positive connotations (ie "African-Canadian," "differently-abled").

"I know what you said, but what did you mean?"

Language meaning is continually shifting, is always contextual, and is influenced by historical, cultural, and economic factors. For instance, terms that were used years ago such as *gangster* and *thug* **denoted** (that is, specifically referred to or explicitly meant) individuals involved in criminal activities, who were prone to violence, and who had general disregard for laws and social order. Also, particularly during the Depression era, gangsters and thugs were associated with male immigrants from Italy, Ireland, and other European countries. However, today's *gangsters* and *thugs* are associated with African-American males, and the terms are used to **connote** (that is, suggest or imply) that these individuals are concerned with accumulating material wealth, are hyper-sexual, and are threats to middle-class suburban folks. The terms also suggest a particular urban ethic and a particular cultural cachet that far transcend the original suggestion of criminal activity. Just think of the category of "gangster rap," a musical genre that

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practitioners have argued captures the "truth" of the black, urban male experience. The terms *thug* and *gangster* have also become prevalent all across youth culture, designating clothing styles, postures, attitudes, values, etc. and spawning a vast array of related terms. Much has changed since the 30s, and these changes are reflected in language as demonstrated by the above example.

House vs. home; kill vs murder; religion vs faith;

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The connotation of some words—or the attitudes we associate with them—can easily be seen when we examine pairs of words that are essentially similar in meaning, but different in the favorable or unfavorable attitudes they evoke in most people. Listed below are ten pairs of words that evoke negative or positive feelings. For each pair, place a plus sign after the word that conveys a more favorable attitude and a minus sign after the word that carries a less favorable attitude.

- refreshing – chilly
- plain – natural
- clever – sly
- cackle – giggle
- snob – cultured
- cop – officer
- skinny – slender
- statesman – politician
- smile – smirk
- domineering – assertive

Now, come up with some word pairs of your own:

Denotative language is factual; connotative carries emotional overtones

A recipe is denotative; an advertisement connotative

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Loaded Words: Using Denotation and Connotation

Directions: Read each list of words below. Each word has a different connotation, but has the same general denotation. Decide what the general denotation is for each group. Write your answer on the line provided. Then, number the words in each group from most positive connotation to most negative connotation.

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Example:

3. thin
4. bony
1. slim
5. anorexic
2. slender

_____thin_____ (general denotation)

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<td>

___ imprison
___ relocate
___ incarcerate
___ intern
___ evacuate
___ detain
___ lock-up
___ confine

_____ (general denotation)

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___ uprising
___ riot
___ demonstration
___ unlawful gathering
___ protest
___ disturbance

_____ (general denotation)

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<td>

___ prisoner
___ evacuee
___ internee
___ detainee
___ inmate

_____ (general denotation)

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___ guerilla
___ freedom fighter
___ mercenary
___ soldier
___ terrorist

_____ (general denotation)

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___ internment camps
___ detention camps
___ assembly centers
___ concentration camps
___ prison camps
___ relocation centers
___ temporary detention centers

_____ (general denotation)

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http://www.nps.gov/archive/manz/ed_loaded_words_deno_cono.htm