Denotation and Connotation

Words have two main kinds of meaning, their denotation and their connotation. **Denotation** is the literal meaning or definition of a word--the explicit, particular, defined meaning, which usually can be pinned down with reasonable precision. Perhaps it could be called the overt, intellectual meaning of a word. Dictionary definitions are denotative meanings.

Connotation is the suggestive meaning of a word--all the values, judgments, and status implied by a word, the historical and associative accretion of "unspoken significance" behind the literal meaning. Many words have evaluative implications behind them, and convey a positive or negative attitude toward the things they name; this flavor of the word or its overtone of meaning--whether it makes you feel like smiling, sneering, kissing, conquering, or giving up--is the word's connotation. We might say it is the emotional meaning of the word. This meaning is seldom found in the dictionary. Here are just a few examples:

Word	Denotation	Connotation
new	recent origin	better, improved
snake	round reptile	horrible beast
adequate	good enough	not very good
excuse	explanation	weak reason

Let's look at the word "adequate" for a moment. Our society has become so drenched in exaggeration that a word like this is almost insulting in its connotative force, while its original denotative meaning was rather positive. Suppose you hear an interchange like this: "How do you like your car?" "Oh, it's adequate." What is your reaction? Or suppose you hear this: "How do you like your wife?" "Oh, she's adequate." This last speaker may love his wife deeply, but he does not convey that impression, even though he used a denotatively nice or positive word, because the connotations of a word are inescapable--they remain attached to it, whether we like it or not.

Sometimes two or more words will have the same or almost the same denotation (definition), but will have very different connotations. How does your response to each of these words differ from those it is paired with? Which seem positive, which seem negative, and which seem neutral? As you read each list, try to focus in your mind a single object or person, and see how changing the word changes your perception or image of the thing.

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house - - - home - - - living accommodation
childlike - - - childish - - - juvenile
girl - - - woman - - - lady - - - chick - - - broad - - - bird - - - female human
child - - - kid - - - youngster
single girl - - - unmarried woman - - - spinster
boyfriend - - - steady guy - - - male companion
cheap - - - inexpensive
rich - - - wealthy - - - loaded
slender - - - skinny
lawyer - - - attorney - - - legal representative or legal counsel
quiz - - - test - - - exam - - - examination - - - midterm
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Connotation is often a product of context. Depending on how it is used, a word might have a positive, neutral, or negative connotation to it. Note this variability in these paired examples:

- The pastor preached yesterday. (neutral connotation)
- Joe preached at me about book buying. (negative connotation.)
- This place is crawling with bugs! (negative connotation.)
- Fred is as cute as a bug. (positive connotation)

But generally we mean by connotation the common suggestive meaning or evaluative sense, shared and understood by all educated users of the language. Connotation is not the slang meaning of a word, though, of course, slang meanings can affect connotations. Denotation is also often a product of context. In fact, the particular verb "put on" has a variety of meanings, all depending on context:

Sally, please put on a Beethoven record. put on a Beethoven T-shirt. put on Junior's tennis shoes. put on your Emeraude perfume. put on a smile. put on fewer airs. put on the dinner plates. put on Harry. put on the television. put on the car wax.

And note the flexibility of a word like "love":

I love my girlfriend.

I love ice cream.

I love my parents.

I love sports cars.

I love my brother.

I love good literature.

Remember, then, that context is a part of meaning, and that there is a danger of misunderstanding words when they are taken out of their context. This context, by the way, includes not just the immediate sentence or paragraph where the word is found, but includes the whole composition, and to some extent the entire language from which it is drawn.

Euphemism

"Euphemism" comes from the Greek for "fair speech." A good definition borrowed from a literary handbook is "the substitution of a mild and pleasant expression for a harsh and blunt one." Euphemisms have traditionally been common in subject areas that people do not like talking about directly. The more uncomfortable we are with a subject, the more euphemisms we construct to get around talking about it in direct terms.

- lingerie, underwear, undergarment, undies, foundations, unmentionables, briefs
- restroom, powder room, men's room, ladies' room, water closet, toilet, necessarium
- dog doo, road apple, doggie dump, poo, horse biscuit, cow manure, fertilizer

Often a euphemism is used to make something bad sound better, and in this case, the disguise is usually deceptive or wrong.

Direct and blunt	Euphemism	
murder	terminate, neutralize, put a hit on	
lie	misstatement; misspeaking; plausible denial	
poor	economically disadvantaged	
crippled	handicapped; physically challenged, differently abled	

Even seemingly clear and precise euphemisms can be problematic because they channel our thinking along certain often incorrect lines. The term "homeless" for "people living on the street" is a good example. The implication of this euphemism is that what street people, formerly bums, need is a home, a place to live. This fact masks the fact that the homeless are really a varied and mixed population of mentally ill, alcoholics, drug addicts, beggars, and some people actually down on their luck and in need of a job and a home. Many street people refuse to go to shelters or homes, so simply thinking of them as homeless is deceptive. The old term for these people, bums, is similarly deceptive because it lumps them all together into the category of lazy, shiftless people, almost deserving society's neglect.

Most people catch on to the use of euphemisms pretty quickly and grow adept at translating them back into the "real" term. Thus, the euphemism itself takes on the bad connotations of the bad word it was intended to replace. When this happens, another euphemism must be found:

mad....crazy....insane....deranged....mentally ill
poor.....underdeveloped....developing....emergent
prison....penal institution....correctional facility....rehabilitation center
drunk....alcoholic....problem drinker
used car....pre-owned car....experienced automobile....resale

And compare some of these alternative ways of expressing and thinking about something:

dismissed... fired
rental consultant...apartment manager
real estate associate...real estate salesman
product representative...salesman
maintenance engineer...custodian...janitor
senior citizen...old person...prime timer
old age...golden years
automotive technician...auto mechanic
table attendant...server...waiter
financial aid...unemployment compensation...welfare
chauffeur...driver
chef...cook
has an open marriage...commits adultery
quiet...shy
perspire...sweat...glow...nervous wetness

strong willed...stubborn internal revenue service...tax collector takes drugs...experiments with recreational chemicals serviceman...repairman...service technician

Emotive Language

The fallacy of **emotive language** involves the use of words aimed at the feelings instead of at the reason. When certain words used in an argument have the purpose of stirring the emotions or getting the juices of feeling going to block an opponent's reasoning ability, then the fallacy of emotive language is committed. Many words have strong positive or negative connotations attached to them, and these words can make the hearer or reader tend to react to words instead of to the real issue behind them. The way around emotive language, of course, is to focus on the argument and not allow yourself to be distracted by words--however evocative or incendiary they may be.

It is important to note that not every use of emotionally loaded language is fallacious, for occasionally we feel strongly about an issue and want to show our joy or make our "righteous indignation" clear. The fallacy occurs when our intention is to persuade someone and when our language interferes with, colors, or substitutes for legitimate reasons. If the words get in the way of the argument, stirring the audience up to a point where thinking gives way to emotion, then the fallacy has been committed.

Occasionally emotive language will appear in conjunction with or as a part of oversimplification, *ad hominem*, *ad populum*, and the appeal to pity fallacies.

In its simplest form, *negative emotive language* is simply name calling. Consider such arguments as these:

- That plan is not only reactionary and extremist, but it's also simplistic.
- That's a communist plan if I ever heard one.
- I'll bet the Nazis believed that, too.
- It is time to discard that old fogey, outdated, anti-progressive view.
- These self-appointed little dictators are trying to force their grotesque opinions upon us.

In a more sophisticated form, careful word choice in adjectives, verbs, nouns, metaphors, and similes can be used to evoke negative feelings:

- This plan shows a naive and fanatical rigidity. Mine is much less cold and more comfortable to work with.
- We must question the promiscuous adoption of every supposed book that drops off the press and limps over here.
- Governor, do you plan to stuff the court with judges holding your own prejudices?
- This is not an argument of Smith versus Jones, but of the 20th Century versus the Middle Ages.
- There are a few resisters to . . . Keynes who do not go back to the frozen rigour of the neo-classical school. --Thomas Balogh

In addition to the use of *negative* emoters, many arguers are fond of using words which have a *positive emotive* force. Notice how easy it is to take a word standing for an ideal or concept we like and to attach it to some concept that the arguer wishes to recommend to us:

- We demand free parking on campus as one of every student's basic, inalienable rights.
- We are publishing these military defense secrets because the people have a right to know.
- Yes, we are tearing out this forest, but you aren't against progress are you?

• Hey, if I want to drink and drive, that's my freedom of choice.

Few people feel comfortable opposing anything described as involving freedom, liberation, rights, progress, justice, and so on. Many arguers successfully exploit these wonderful-sounding words to gather support for programs or candidates, even though the real issues are not made clear:

- We support an ordinance which merely reaffirms basic guarantees.
- Sign here if you support constitutional rights and human dignity.
- We are on a campaign to resist oppressive and unjust laws.
- I'm sure you will support our patriotic plan.
- Vote for me if you like the environment.
- This bill states that "truth, justice, and the American Way shall prevail forever." Don't you want to vote for it?

Among the biggest users of positive emotive language are the advertisers. We Americans are willing to spend billions of dollars to buy happiness, and the advertisers do their best to sell it to us. Brand names themselves are designed to make us feel happy, confident, modern, important, sexy, or some combination of these. Just look at what we can buy:

Cigarettes:	Detergents:
Now	Cold Power
True	Cheer
More	Joy
Lucky	Mr. Clean
Perfumes:	Toothpastes:
Tabu	Gleem
Seduction	Ultra Brite
My Sin	Close Up
Obsession	Aqua Fresh
Sex Appeal	

Advertisers also like to use ambiguous positive emoters to puff their products. Tires are a good example. The terms "heavy duty," "premium," and "four ply rating" have no standard or defined meaning, but they certainly make the product sound good, don't they?

And of course how often do you see these powerful words screaming at you from the label of some product?

NEW! FREE! MIRACLE! IMPROVED!

On its subtlest level emotive language can be used for emotional coloration in what might otherwise appear to be descriptive prose; the language can either convey the writer's attitudes--of approval or disapproval--or color by emotive terms certain objects or events. How a situation is characterized by a writer can have a significant effect upon our perceptions of and attitudes toward it.

- In the past these hot-rod hoodlums have terrorized the righteously outraged citizens of Poppy Street. -- Daily Bugle
- In the past these automobile enthusiasts have cheerfully visited the envious old cranks on Poppy Street. Daily Tribune
- That boring old meadow with the allergy-producing wildflowers was finally put to good use as a motorcycle racetrack.

On the Dangers of Emotive Language

Although words exist for the most part for the transmission of ideas, there are some which produce such violent disturbance in our feelings that the role they play in transmission of ideas is lost in the background.

--Albert Einstein

A good catchword can obscure analysis for fifty years.

--Wendell Wilkie

Exercise 1

Explain the different connotations, associations, and built-in judgments in each of the definitions below.

A woman is pregnant with a fetus an unborn baby fetal tissue a pre-born child

Abortion is the termination of a pregnancy. the killing of a fetus. the murder of a human being. a simple birth control procedure the removal of unwanted tissue

Exercise 2

Words are not neutral. In fact, almost every word has some connotative flavor to it, and as a result, almost every statement or question has some subjective slant to it. If you are not careful, someone else's diction (choice of words) will help you do your thinking for you.

In the following examples, what seems to be the attitude or view of the writer in each case? How does the choice of words attempt to sway you?

- A. After plummeting ten points during the course of the morning's trading, the stock market struggled back slowly during the first hour after lunch, for a net gain of sixteen points.
- B. The price of gold skyrocketed three dollars an ounce today. Yesterday it had declined three dollars.
- C. 1. The judge ordered explanation of GM's alternative engine usage.
- 2. The judge ordered disclosure of GM's alternative engine usage.
- 3. The judge ordered disclosure of GM's engine substitution practices.
- 4. The judge ordered the exposure of GM's engine switching practices.
- D. 1. A group of businessmen is funding the association.
- 2. A clique of business tycoons is bankrolling the interest group.
- E. 1. Court upholds smokers' rights.
- 2. Court favors smokers' privileges.
- 3. Court denies non-smokers' rights.
- 4. Court tramples on non-smokers' constitutional freedoms.
- F. 1. Hyperactive children to be given medication.
- 2. Hyperactive children to be drugged.
- 3. Chemical to be tested on hyperactive children.
- 4. Children to be guinea pigs in biological experiment.
- 5. Simple pill holds hope for hyperactive children.
- G. Senator Jones (announces, reveals, boasts, admits) he supports funding bill.
- H. These tires are made with (non-bouncing, sluggish, lazy, non-resilient, high-hysteresis) rubber.
- I. Shall we support the (demands, needs, requirements, requests, greediness) of the (patriots, guerrillas, terrorists, soldiers, anarchists)?
- J. Senator Smith (reports, says, claims, insists) that he knew nothing about the scandal.
- K. 1. Should students in the dorms be set adrift without the guidance of a curfew, or should they be encouraged toward responsible behavior??
- 2. Should students in the dorms be subjected to the restraints of arbitrary curfews, or should they be free to develop their own timetables?

Notice from this last example that question framing can easily be rigged to make one response psychologically much easier to give than the other. This first question asks if students should be "encouraged," and contains the positive connotations attached to "guidance" and "responsible behavior," as an alternative to their being "set adrift." Naturally the psychological force is toward encouraging them and so this question is loaded in favor of curfews. The second question is just the opposite. The words "subjected to," "arbitrary" and "restraints" all have negative connotations, while the word "free" is very positive. This question, then, pressures the hearer for a response opposing curfews. Many polls are more or less slanted (or even rigged) this way. Few people feel comfortable answering "no" to a question involving someone's "rights" or "freedoms." But notice that each of two opposite camps can be the ones with the rights or freedoms:

- My client has a right to compensation.
- And my client has a right not to pay unfair amounts.
- Don't you support our freedom to play music here?
- Don't you support *our* freedom to have peace and quiet?

So when you read the results of a poll, be sure you pay attention to the wording of the questions.

Exercise 3

Why would a campaign organization choose one title over another for its committee to defeat a ballot measure which would increase the alcohol tax?

- Californians for Common Sense
- Concerned Citizens Against Unfair Taxation

- The Whiskey Lobby
- Committee to Defeat Proposition 10
- Committee for Constitutional Rights
- Committee to Protect Corporate Beverage Profits
- Committee for Fair Liquor Prices
- Committee for Fair Beverage Prices

Review

Terms and Concepts

denotation
connotation
descriptive definition
stipulative definition
normative definition
persuasive definition
euphemism
fallacy of emotive language

Questions

- 1. Distinguish between the four kinds of definition.
- 2. Euphemisms can be either helpful or harmful. Discuss the circumstances that make a euphemism helpful or harmful.
- 3. Define emotive language and give examples of both positive and negative emotive words.

Test Yourself

For each argument, explain how the fallacy of emotive language is being committed:

- 1. This proposal has all the logic of a septic tank: it just sits there and stinks. The other proposal is better because it is a breath of fresh air. That's reason enough to vote for it.
- 2. And I hope that at the polls you will continue on that wise path you have begun here tonight. For you will be asked to vote soon, and I want you to know that in voting for me you are voting for truth, for dignity, for decency and love, for the goodness of the aspiring human spirit, moving forward into progress and greatness, meeting all obstacles as they come, conquering difficulties in the valiant struggle to establish the great American way of life we all hold so dear.
- 3. Ugh! you meat eaters! How can you stand to grind your teeth on a lump of decaying flesh hacked from the carcasses of dead animals? And you vegetarians! You sit there smugly chewing on the rotting sex organs of woody plants. That's what slugs do, too.