Unit 2
Denotation and Connotation

Denotative and Connotative Meanings

Although some words may be considered to have similar meanings, they cannot be substituted for one another without changing the message. Words with similar meanings have similar denotations . Often, however, words with a similar denotation do not have the same connotations. *"Denote* implies all that strictly belongs to the definition of the word, *connote* all of the ideas that are suggested by the term; thus, 'home' *denotes* the place where one lives with one's family, but it usually connotes comfort, intimacy, and privacy. The same implications distinguish denotation and *connotation* ."* The denotation of a word is its dictionary definition, which is what the word "stands for." A word's connotation is what the word suggests, or what we associate the word with, that goes beyond its formal definitions. The word *house* and *home* both refer to a building or structure in which people live; these words have, then, the same denotation. But the word *home* , for most people, suggests or is associated with concepts and feelings of family and security. Thus, the word home has a strong, and generally positive, connotation. The word house though, has little, if any, connotative significance. *House* brings to mind a picture of a physical structure but little else because *house* does not carry any "emotional baggage." *House* is likely to suggest only a residential structure or building, *home* to add connotations of the warmth of family life over a long period. The difference in meaning between these two words can be seen from the following lines:

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* From *Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary,* copyright, 1949,195 1, 1953, by G & C. Merriam Co.

A *house* is made of brick and stone,

But a *home* is made of love alone.

We learn the connotative significance of most words the same way we learn their denotative meanings. Most people who live in the same culture share the same connotative associations of words. Most of us respond to the positive associations that *home* has with family and security. The notion that *home* usually connotes the warm intimate comfort of family life and *house* does not may not apply to the reaction of a person who has grown up in the cheerless impersonality of an orphans' home. Those who are unfortunate to have experienced an unpleasant home environment may personally respond with negative feelings when hearing the word, but they will know, from observing the responses of others, that the *culturally* shared response is positive, not negative.

The difference between denotation and connotation is often illustrated by the fact that of two words which roughly "mean" the same, one has a complimentary, the other an unflattering, connotation. At times the *context* in which a word is used will determine the word's connotation. For example, the word *sister* usually has positive associations. It may bring to mind the picture of a kid sister or college sorority sister or a nun in a convent. But when an unfriendly person who thinks a woman may have pushed in front of him to get on the bus first says "You'd better watch it, *sister* ," the word has a negative connotation. Particular social, physical, and language contexts will, at times, control the connotative significance of words. Studying the context in which a writer uses emotionally charged words is the only way to be sure that we understand the writer's attitude.

Nothing is more essential to intelligent, profitable reading than sensitivity to connotation. Only when we possess such sensitivity can we understand both what the author means, which may be quite plain, and

what he wants to suggest, which may actually be far more important than the superficial meaning. A constant awareness of the connotative power of words is just as vital to the writer. His task is to select the word which will convey, not approximately, but exactly, what he wants to say. He must remember that two words may be "synonymous" in respect to denotation, that is, they mean the same thing. But to the practiced writer, as to the practiced reader, few if any words are exactly synonymous in connotation; in a given context one particular word will convey the precise implication the writer desires to communicate to his reader. Although by definition synonyms are words that have the same meaning or denotation, it is often said that no two synonyms are interchangeable. The *denotation* of a word is its limited, explicit meaning; the *connotation* of a word is the additional suggestion that it carries with it.

Personal and General Connotations

There are two types of connotations: personal and general. Personal connotations are the result of the experience of the individual man and woman. The way we react to ideas and objects, and thus to the words that stand for those "referents" is determined by the precise nature of our earlier experience with the referents. The connotations that surround most of the words in our vocabulary are a complex and intimate record of our life to date. Our present reaction to a word may be the cumulative   result of all our experiences with the word and its referents. In the case of another word, our reaction may have been determined once and for all by an early or a particularly memorable experience with it. For example, a student's reaction to the word *teacher* may be determined by the mingled memories of all his experiences with different teachers he has known during the course of time. Or, on the other hand, when the student

thinks of *teacher* he may think of a particular teacher who for one reason or another has made a especially deep impression upon him--the English teacher in high school, for instance, who encouraged him, by example and advice, to make English his life work.

We have to keep in mind that there is no clear-cut boundary between personal and general connotations. General connotations result when the reaction of the majority of the people to a specific word is substantially the same. The differences in general connotation derive from at least two major sources. For one thing, the exact shade of meaning a word possesses in the English language is due to how it was used by a writer who had especially great influence over the language because he was, and is, so widely read. For instance, many words used in books which are widely read and studied such as the King James' version of the Bible, Mallory's *Morte d'Arthur*, or Shakespeare's plays, have influenced the vocabularies of following generations. But general connotation is not always a matter of literary development. It can result from the experience that men as a social group have had with the ideas which words represent. Events have conditioned us to react in a particular way to certain words.

All general connotations thus have their origin in private connotations--in personal, individual, but generally shared reactions to words and the ideas for which they stand. But later, after general connotations have been established, the process works the other way: the individual, who may have had no personal experience with the idea represented by a given word, may acquire a personal attitude toward it by observing how society in general reacts to the word.

Every writer must be aware of the differentiation between general connotations and personal ones. It is the general ones--those which he can be reasonably sure his readers share with him--which he must rely on to convey the accuracy of his message. If he uses words which have additional

connotations to him alone, he runs the risks of not being understood by his readers. Since there is no clear dividing line between general and personal connotations, it would be unrealistic to require that a writer absolutely confines himself to the former. Moreover, some of the richness of poetry, and to some degree that of imaginative prose, is derived from the author's use of words in private senses. But in most forms of practical communications, it would be better for an author to use only words whose connotations are approximately the same to his readers as they are to him.

Not all words possess connotative powers. Articles, conjunctions, prepositions, and many common adverbs lack connotative qualities because they are words used to connect idea and to show relationships between them; these parts of speech do not themselves stand for ideas. But most words which stand-for idea have connotations, even though they are often scarcely perceptible. That is because ideas themselves have connotations; they produce some sort of intellectual or emotional reaction inside us.

Exercise 1

After each of the following pairs of words write two sentences using the words to show how they differ in what they suggest to you.

1. corpulent/obese_____

_____

_____

2.rustic/rural_____

_____

3. immense/monstrous

4. injure/impair

5. savage/barbaric

6. void/vacuum

7. include/involve

8. fragrant/odorous

9. journey/voyage

10. invasion/raid

Exercise 2

Explain why the italicized words in the following sentences reflect the writer's insensitivity to connotation, and in each case supply a more appropriate word.

1. Although she was really twenty-one, there was a certain *childishness* in her voice and manner which set her apart from the other girls and delighted everyone who met her. _____

2, Handle the Ming vase with *care.* It's *very brittle.* _____

3.What especially interests newcomers is the absolute *smoothness* of the countryside._____

4. When she got out of the hospital she was pretty lean , but a good wholesome diet of home cooking soon remedied that._____.

5. Attractive though it was in terms of pay and prospects for advancement, Tom decided finally to *spurn* the offer and look for some other job._____

6. I've been taking aspirins by the carload, but they haven't *healed* my headache.____. ____

7. I knew she had studied the lesson thoroughly, so after asking my question I waited a little. Finally the *retort* came, in her usual quiet, almost hesitant manner ._____ ____

8. One of the best things the Scouts did for him was to develop genuinely *mannish* qualities. He's a fine, upstanding youth._____

9. I was glad to see by his agile gait as he strode down the street that he was fully recovered.-----__

10. What I *pined* for above all was a thick, juicy hamburger, with plenty of relish and a side dish of French fries and onions ._____

Exercise 3

In the blank following each phrase write the number of the word nearest in meaning to the italicized word.

1. an *adamant* attitude: ___1. benevolent 2. hostile

   3. hesitant 4. unyielding

2. a *defunct* company: ___1. prosperous 2. no longer existent

   3. famous 4. reorganized

3. a *prolific* novelist: ___1. very productive 2. superior

   3. thoughtful 4. popular

4. early *secular* music: ___1. popular 2. orchestral

   3. non religious 4. courtly

5. ephemeral joys: ___1. short-lived 2. fervent

   3. ill-guided 4. widespread

6. a *robust* young man: ___1. pale and sickly

   2. careless and wasteful

   3. ambitious

   4. sturdy and vigorous

7. a *taciturn* person: ___1. changeable and unreliable

   2. habitually silent

   3. timid and reserved

   4. romantic and colorful

8. *exotic* products: ___1. dangerous and forbidden

   2. romantically foreign

   3. dull and commonplace

   4. useless and trivial

9. *vacillating* attitude: ___1. determined 2. obstinate

   3. hesitant 4. discreet

10. *heinous* offenses: 1. atrocious   2. forgivable

                                    3. repeated   4. secret

Exercise 4

Explain the differences in connotation among the members of each of the following groups of words. Choose *two* words from each group to write sentences that show the differences in the connotations of the words.

1. dash, hurry, race, gallop, speed, run

_____

_____

2. plumb, obese, heavy-set, fleshy, fat, paunchy, overweight

_____

_____

3. mansion, dwelling, domicile, residence, house, home

_____

_____

4. racket, uproar, clatter, noise, commotion

_____

_____

5. giggle, chuckle, guffaw, laugh, roar

_____

_____

6. dress, costume, outfit, gown, ensemble, apparel, clothes

_____

_____

7. dilapidated, ruined, neglected, deteriorated, ramshackle

_____

8. shrewd, cunning, calculating, sly, adroit, knowing, clever

_____

_____

9. cheat, phony, quack, crook, impostor, charlatan

_____

_____

10. admire, love, relish, like, approve, idolize, respect, revere, esteem

_____

_____

11. arrogant, conceited, cocky, egotistical, proud, high-and-mighty, overbearing

_____

_____

12. common, ordinary, vulgar, run-of-the-mill, average, everyday

_____

_____

13. frighten, alarm, terrify, scare, intimidate, startle

_____

_____

14. impertinent, impudent, saucy, cheeky, insolent, fresh

_____

_____

15. confess, acknowledge, concede, grant, admit, come clean

_____

_____

Exercise 5

In the blank space before each word in the following pairs of words, write P if you think the word has a positive connotation and N if you think it has a negative connotation.

_____ a middle-of-the-roader/_____ a fence-sitter

_____ enthusiastic/_____ fanatical

_____ cautious/_____ cowardly

_____ touchy/_____ sensitive

_____ fluent/_____ gabby

_____ coy/_____ modest

_____ trusting/_____ gullible

_____ original/_____ screwball

_____ stolid/_____ even-tempered

_____ thrifty/_____ penny-pinching

_____ practical/_____ unimaginative

_____ hypocritical/_____ tactful