Denotation and Connotation

One of the most fundamental ways authors convey meaning is through the words they use. When you’re analyzing a text, remember that *each word is a choice*. That is, authors use the words they do for a reason.

For example, a *Time* magazine article once described the Quorum of the Twelve as “a group of dark-suited apostles” (65). What does the descriptive phrase “dark-suited” suggest about these apostles?

**Denotation**

Well, literally, a “dark-suited apostle” is simply one who wears a dark suit. That literal definition is what we call denotation. Often we say a word’s denotation is its dictionary definition.

However, many words have more than one definition. For example, abstract words such as *general* have several denotative definitions listed in the dictionary. According to Webster’s Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary, *general* is defined as:

1. involving, applicable to, or affecting the whole
2. involving, related to, or applicable to every member of a class, kind, or group.
3. a) applicable to or characteristic of the majority of individuals involved . . . b) concerned or dealing with universal rather than particular aspects (510).

Even some seemingly concrete words also can have several possible denotative meanings. For example, Webster’s Dictionary defines *nail* as:

1. a) a horny sheath protecting the upper end of each finger and toe of man and most other primates. b) a structure (as a claw) that terminates a digit and corresponds to a nail
2. a slender usu. pointed and headed fastener designed to be pounded in
3. an English unit of length equal to 1/16 yard (786).

Because most words have more than one meaning, readers and writers must figure out from the context which meaning(s) apply in the particular usage.

**Connotation**

It’s important to recognize that most words can also adopt extra meaning beyond their denotation(s) in certain situations. The connotations are “accompanying baggage” a word carries with it and the context thrusts upon it. Connotations always imply attitudes and are either positive or negative. The connotations of words help us determine how authors feel about what they’re describing.
What are the connotations, for example, of “dark-suited apostles”? In this instance, the author of the *Time* article probably isn’t expressing complete admiration for the LDS Church. “Dark suits” here implies perhaps secretiveness and authoritarianism. The word “dark” itself tends to have negative associations with night, danger and evil. In addition, dark suits may connote seriousness, formality, maturity, or Mafia connections.

Sometimes authors play denotations off of connotations for a humorous effect, as Jack Handey does in this “Deep Thought”:

“Dad always thought that laughter was the best medicine, which is I guess why several of us died from tuberculosis.”

In the proverb, medicine has a positive connotation as “an emotionally healing influence.” However, the dad only considered the denotation of medicine—“a physical cure”—and consequently his kids never got their shots or went to the doctor.

**Tone**

Because words have both denotations and connotations, the words that authors choose help create the tones of texts. Tone is short for “tone of voice” and reveals both the author’s intents and attitudes towards the subject, audience, and him or herself. Authors also frequently reveal their central arguments by means of their tones. In order to interpret tones accurately, you need to understand the words in their relation to everything else in the text. If taken out of context, you may misinterpret or misread the author’s tones.

For example, if I say, “Wow, that’s an interesting coat, Marie,” you may wonder if I’m using a sarcastic tone, since *interesting* sometimes carries a connotation of “I don’t like it, but I don’t want to hurt your feelings.”

However, *interesting* also has a positive connotation, as in, “What an interesting idea!” You need to know the context of the conversation and listen to the intonations of voice in order to determine whether the tone is sarcastic or sincere.

Some helpful hints for determining the tone of a text:

- **Trust the way you feel.** Those feelings have been caused in part by the author’s attitudes expressed in tones of voice. Once you have identified your feelings, go back and examine the author’s choices that promote the feelings you experienced.

- **Pay close attention to diction (word choice).** An author will use certain words because they create a certain tone. Pay attention to the denotations and connotations of those words.

- **Look for behaviors like exaggeration, understatement, reproachfulness, accusation, emphasis, heightening, lamenting, exclamation, mockery, consolation.** Sometimes these behaviors also create irony. These speech acts signal emotion.
Practice Examples

The following is a poem called “Fire and Ice” by Robert Frost. To whom does Frost refer in the first two lines? What are the connotations of fire and ice? How do these connotations enhance the comparison in Frost’s poem? What emotions do we typically associate with fire? With ice? Identify the speaker’s tones. How do the connotations of the words and the tones of voice contribute to the poem’s central argument?

Some say the world will end in fire,
Some say in ice.
From what I’ve tasted of desire
I hold with those who favor fire,
But if it had to perish twice,
I think I know enough of hate
To say that for destruction ice
Is also great
And would suffice. (Kennedy 658)

Another example is Timothy Steele’s poem “Epitaph.” What famous saying is he referring to in the first line? Consider the possible connotations of yellow and golden. What attitude does the substitution of yellow for golden reveal? What is this poem’s central argument?

Here lies Sir Tact, a diplomatic fellow
Whose silence was not golden, but just yellow. (Kennedy 656)

The following paragraph comes from BYU English professor Rick Duerden’s handout on letters of recommendation. Decide the letter writer’s attitude towards Willoughby, the hiring committee (audience), and himself. When is the writer using an ironic tone? Is he ever serious? Determine which words/phrases/behaviors, along with their connotations, help you understand the letter writer’s position. Also, pay attention to what the writer doesn’t say that makes his statements ambiguous.

For the past year J. Willoughby has been on the payroll of this organization. He has asked me to write a letter of recommendation for him, and I am very willing to help him find another job.

During the past year, Willoughby had been responsible for almost everything that has occurred in this organization. The quality of his work, his relations with his fellow workers, even his appearance have been beyond description.

I cannot praise him too highly. Indeed, you will be fortunate if you can get him to work for you.
Works Cited


Kevin Klein/Andrea Sabow/
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