Connotation & Denotation

Words are one of the basic units of communication in English, but words are far from simple. Words have multiple meanings which change over time. New words are incorporated into the language every day. Words change part of speech over time.

Denotation is a term that the literal or dictionary meaning of a word; there are no emotions, values, or images associated with denotative meaning. Scientific and mathematical language carries few, if any emotional or connotative meanings.

Connotation is a term that describes the emotions, values, or images associated with a word. The intensity of emotions or the power of the values and images associated with a word varies.

Let’s look at a very simple word: mother. Below is the Merriam Webster Dictionary entry for mother.

Pronunciation: ‘mə thər
Etymology: Middle English moderate; Old English modor; akin to Old High German muoter, Latin mater, Greek mētēr, Sanskrit mātr
1a: female parent
2 (a) a woman in authority specifically the superior of a religious community of women
(b) an old or elderly woman

Yet the word mother has a great deal of emotion meaning beyond the dictionary meaning.

Use this space to brainstorm at least three meanings for the word mother beyond the denotation. You will share your ideas with the class. During this discussion, write down your classmates’ ideas.
Home, House, Residence, Dwelling

**Denotation:** These words all mean a place in which someone lives.

**Connotation:**

- **Home:**
  cozy, loving, comfortable, security, images or feelings of people you associate with it

  It could also opposite --depending upon a person’s experiences. (Traditionally, the connotation is “cozy, loving,” etc., and a reader should be aware of this and other connotations in a reading passage.)

- **House:**
  the actual building or structure

- **Residence:**
  Cold, no feeling

- **Dwelling:**
  primitive or basic (picture a cave, etc.)

2. Vagrants, people with no address, homeless

- **Vagrants:**
  nuisance

- **People with no address:**
  official, neutral, businesslike

- **Homeless:**
  object of pity/charity, not as negative as vagrant

3. Overweight vs. fat
4. Job vs. career
5. Student vs. scholar
6. Doctor vs. physician
7. Rich vs. wealthy
8. Immigrant vs. alien
9. Alien vs. illegal
PRACTICE

Read the following sentences.

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? Circle your answer.

   - Thrifty - penny-pinching
   - Pushy - aggressive
   - Politician - statesman
   - Chef - cook
   - Slender - skinny

4. The closer a word is to describing what an individual believes about him/herself, the more positive the euphemism becomes. Thus:

   - I am a genius / You are a nerd / He is a show-off
   - I am a brilliant conversationalist / You “talk a lot” / She “never shuts up”
Which connotation is more positive? Write the answer (the word) in the ________

1. Our trip to the amusement park was _____.
   a) fine
   b) wonderful

2. _______ people rode on the roller coaster.
   a) Brave
   b) Foolhardy

3. We saw _____ animals in the animal house.
   a) fascinating
   b) weird

4. Some of the monkeys made _____ faces.
   a) hilarious
   b) amusing

5. Everyone had a _____ on his or her face on the way home.
   a) smile
   b) smirk

Which connotation is more negative?

6. We bought _____ souvenirs at the amusement park.
   a) cheap
   b) inexpensive

7. I ate a _____ sandwich.
   a) soggy
   b) moist

8. Mike _____ us to go to the funny house.
   a) nagged
   b) reminded

9. I didn't like the _____ on the jester's face.
   a) smirk
   b) grin

10. It made me feel _____.
    a) uneasy
    b) frightened

Which is the best answer?
11. Which is worth more?
a) something old
b) something antique

12. Which is better?
a) to be skinny
b) to be slender

13. Which would you rather be called?
a) thrifty
b) cheap

14. Which would a vain person be more likely to do?
a) stroll
b) parade

15. Which is more serious?
a) problem
b) disaster

16. Which is more polite?
a) sip a drink
b) gulp it

17. Which would you be if you hadn't eaten for several days?
a) hungry
b) starving

18. Which would you be after a walk in the mud?
a) filthy
b) dirty
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 (DENOTATION) below.

**cockroach (kok' roch'), n.** any of an order of nocturnal insects, usually brown with flattened oval bodies, some species of which are household pests inhabiting kitchens, areas around water pipes, etc. [Spanish cucaracha]

1. What does the word cockroach mean to you?

2. Is a cockroach merely an insect or is it also a household nuisance and a disgusting creature?

**See what meanings poets Wild and Morley find in roaches in the following poems.

_Roaches_

Last night when I got up
   to let the dog out I spied
a cockroach in the bathroom
   crouched flat on the cool
   porcelain,
   delicate
   antennae probing the toothpaste cap
   and feasting himself on a gob
   of it in the bowl:
   I killed him with one unprofessional
   blow,
   scattering arms and legs
   and half his body in the sink...

I would have no truck with roaches,
crouched like lions in the ledges of sewers
   their black eyes in the darkness
   alert for tasty slime,
breeding quickly and without design,
laboring up drainpipes through filth
to the light;

I read once they are among
   the most antediluvian of creatures,
surviving everything, and in more primitive times
   thrived to the size of your hand...
yet when sinking asleep
or craning at the stars,
I can feel their light feet
probing in my veins,
their whiskers nibbling
the insides of my toes;
and neck arched,
feel their patient scrambling
up the dark tubes of my throat.

--Peter Wild

from *Nursery Rhymes for the Tender-hearted*

Scuttle, scuttle, little roach-
How you run when I approach:
Up above the pantry shelf
Hastening to secrete yourself.

Most adventurous of vermin,
How I wish I could determine
How you spend your hours of ease,
Perhaps reclining on the cheese.

Cook has gone, and all is dark-
Then the kitchen is your park;
In the garbage heap that she leaves
Do you browse among the tea leaves?

How delightful to suspect
All the places you have trekked:
Does your long antenna whisk its
Gentle tip across the biscuits?

Do you linger, little soul,
Drowsing in our sugar bowl?
Or, abandonment most utter,
Shake a shimmy on the butter?

Do you chant your simple tunes
Swimming in the baby's prunes?
Then, when dawn comes, do you slink
Homeward to the kitchen sink?

Timid roach, why be so shy?
We are brothers, thou and I,
In the midnight, like yourself,
I explore the pantry shelf!

--Christopher Morley

Reread the dictionary definition.

3. Which of the denotative characteristics of a cockroach both poets include in their poems?

4. What characteristics does Wild give his roaches that are not in the dictionary definition?

5. What additional characteristics does Morley give to roaches?

   In each poem, the insect acquires meaning beyond its dictionary definition. Both poets lead us away from a literal view of roaches to a non-literal one.

6. Which poet succeeds in giving roaches favorable connotations?

7. Which poet comes closer to expressing your own feelings about roaches?