

Positive Neutral Negative evaluation in connotation

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Abstract

The article focuses on evaluation-type connotation, expressed by a theoretically triple opposition (positive neutral negative, as in *plump*⁺, *stout*^{neut}, *obese*⁻) which is more often represented by only two members (as in *dismiss*^{neut} *fire*⁻), though even cases with no opposition can be spoken about (e.g., *bald*⁻). Though to speak about connotative opposition we basically need denotative synonyms (like *high-flown*^{??} “*pompous*”), words like “*warm*”⁺ and “*cold*” (especially in metaphoric meanings) may be viewed as both denotative and connotative antonyms. As evaluation depends on taste, it is subjective (depending on historic period, personality of the speaker, situational and linguistic context) and therefore difficult to study or teach. This situation, anyway, should not prevent researchers and language teachers from its careful treatment as ignorance of connotation on the language users' part may cause serious problems in communication.

Two essential aspects of word meaning are studied by lexicology: denotative (factual, intellectual) and connotative (emotional, evaluative). There are at least three types of connotation mentioned in linguistic literature (Cruse, 1997): evaluative, power-solidarity and associative (metaphor). In this article we will deal with evaluative connotation.

Positive or pleasant connotations are also called **honorific**, while negative ones are called **pejorative**. Pejorative connotations, besides dealing with negative evaluation of the phenomenon as a whole (e.g., negative *burden* vs. neutral *load*), may also refer to a “polite” word versus an “impolite” word (“not tall” vs. “short”), though both mean a fairly negative phenomenon (Gowers, 1987).

One of the basic principles of linguistics is that to be able to speak about a category we need at least a **double opposition** (dichotomy) of both meaning and form. In the evaluative type of connotation there is a **triple opposition**, though examples of connotatively different synonyms with all three members of opposition are difficult to find, such as in “*plump* (+) *stout/overweight* (neutr.) *fat/obese* (-)” or “*aroma/fragrance* *smell/odour* *stink/stench*”. Generally we deal with pairs with positive-negative (partner - accomplice), positive-neutral (friend - acquaintance; talent - ability) and neutral-negative (single - spinster/old maid; alone - lonely; *dismiss* - *fire*) relations. If mishandling of a positive/neutral pair may make you sound pompous (“high-flown” is a neutral/positive equivalent!), erroneous usage of the other two types may have a more dramatic effect.

Sometimes we have a feeling that a single word (and not a double or triple opposition) can have both a negative or a positive connotation, e.g., “*authority*.” This may deal with zero (but theoretically possible) connotative opposition (*bald* / ?? = having hair, “*hairy*” would be the wrong word here since its connotation is also negative. Besides the denotation of “*hairy*” is also different: having much hair *on*

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the face / body) or be connected with association / metaphor type of connotation where the images that the word brings to our mind are generally subject to positive or negative evaluation (e.g., “bill” or “beetle”). In the case of zero opposition for words with positive connotation lack of the quality denoted by the word is often the theoretically possible opposition (such as *ambition, common sense, conscience* +).

Most cases of positive-neutral-negative connotation deal with denotative **synonyms**, but it is not necessarily so, for example, “suburbs” (+) “centre” (-) meaning a living place where the words in connotation opposition are **denotative antonyms** as well. Generally, among denotative antonyms a large group has denotatively positive / negative relationships: good-bad, kind-evil, beautiful-ugly, etc. The example of suburbs / centre is not of this kind, as positive and negative evaluation does not constitute part of their denotative meaning. For some antonyms positive / negative denotation and connotation more or less coincide: warm (weather, character) (+) - cold (weather, voice) (-). Warm temperature is objectively good for people, thus the positive evaluation in the trite metaphor “warm relationships” may be accepted as basically denotative. For some pairs of antonyms it is difficult to judge whether we deal with positive / negative denotation, connotation or both, as the denotative basis is too subjective, such as in “hard” (more often negative) - “soft” (more often positive): a “hard chair” (-), “hard life” (-), “work hard” (?); “a soft bed” (+), a “soft voice” (+), a “soft character” (?).

Some words in connotative opposition are in fact used synonymously, though no thesaurus give them as synonyms, e. g., savage (-) - aboriginal, native, indigene (neut.) “Savage” (adj.) taking into consideration its strongly negative connotation, is given as a synonym to “wild,” “untamed,” “barbarous,” etc.

Moreover, words that denotatively are not even roughly synonymous can be used as connotative synonyms. We often say that something is “unusual,” “original” or “strange” meaning it is just “bad” or “tasteless”. Politicians sometimes choose the word “order” to deceive the electorate frightened of “dictatorship” but who would vote for “strong authority.”

Some words have two types of evaluative oppositions:

- between denotative antonyms: **mean** (-) generous (+);
- within denotative synonymy: economical (basically +) **mean**, greedy (-); or generous (+) - prodigal, spendthrift, extravagant, wasteful (-).

Racial, nationalistic or sexist language is in fact “negative,” at least from the perspective of minorities. The example with “savages”- “natives” illustrates the first two. Also remember the wonderful episode in the “Pocahontas” cartoon where the Native Americans and the Settlers (we are trying to use neutral language!) are calling each other “savages”! The same offensive or infuriating effect may have a text using “businessmen” instead of “business people” ignoring contemporary emancipated ladies.

It is a bit doubtful whether to view words with evaluative sub-meaning as cases of connotation if they have no connotatively different denotative synonyms at all. For example, the word “imagination” is generally used positively probably when the person's imagination is too rich and causes problems for the environment and for the person herself / himself it is used ironically or negatively, as a soft

substitute for “madness”. Anyway, if from a linguistic point of view it is doubtful, we deeply believe that for language teaching purposes these cases need to be treated as connotation.

It is obvious that **evaluation** depends on **taste** and thus is very **subjective**. Subjectiveness of word (and phenomena) evaluation can be illustrated by the word (and the phenomena) “enthusiasm,” for example, which is viewed sometimes positively and sometimes negatively. This word, by the way, has a connotatively different pair “fanatism” evaluation of which is always negative (except, probably the derivative “fan” which is basically neutral / positive). Different denotative meanings of a **polysemantic** word may also have different connotations: e.g., “understanding” most often is used as just “comprehension” (neutral), but also as an amicable relation (a sympathy, community, or agreement positive connotation) between persons. The word “mistress” may mean “owner” (feminine equivalent of “master”), in which case the word is neutral, but it also can mean “lover” which tends to have a negative connotation (depending on the culture and individual speaker).

It is interesting that the connotation of a word may depend on **collocation**. For instance, while “honour” is positive practically in any context, “reputation” used with no attribute (she's got a reputation in business) is normally positive (= fame or a good name), However a negative attribute collocates fits with it, changing the word's meaning to “being known as.” And, vice versa, collocation usually depends on connotation: e.g., encourage (+) to start a business, but trigger (-) anger; do (+/-) a favour or a foolish thing, but commit (-) a murder.

In some connotation oppositions one word has a stable connotation and the other a changeable one: “mad” (always negative) - “crazy” (generally negative, sometimes highly positive).

One and the same word may have positive or negative connotations according to the speaker / listener (sociolinguistic factors of age, gender, education level, social class, nationality, religion, political and general views have to be taken into consideration) and situational context. .Gairns and .Redman (1991), for example, illustrate this thesis with examples of usage of the word “liberal”:

1. It's probably the most liberal regime in the area rife with dictatorships.
2. I find Thatcher's government policy on immigration far too liberal.
3. He's a typical liberal says he supports the pay claim, but he won't come out on strike with us.

The first example deals with positive connotation (our explanation is that “liberal” is in opposition with obviously negative “dictatorships” here) The words “far too” and refusal to take part in practical actions in the other two examples demonstrate the negative attitude of the speakers towards liberals (here “liberal” is probably in opposition with “democratic”).

Unfortunately, too often the connotation meant by the speaker and the one perceived by the listener differ even in cases of communication between two native speakers. Here, besides the above-mentioned sociolinguistic factors, the linguistic factor (ironic or friendly intonation) and such extralinguistic factors as glances, facial expression, gestures and relations between the interlocutors are essential. It is impossible to teach these subtleties in a language course, but luckily

they are more or less international.

Basic subjectiveness has most likely stifled linguistic research on connotation and its pedagogical applications until recently. Another reason is the instability of connotation through time and cultures. Phenomena and words (e.g. “sex”) are periodically banned but then come into fashion again, relationship towards them varies (“aggressive” and “ambitious”). Who if not us non-native English teachers know that difference in values between cultures may cause not just trivial lexical interference but a real culture shock. There is no denying the fact that teaching connotation deals with a lot of disadvantages. But the counter-arguments are very strong: ignorance of connotation causes misunderstandings which can be funny or dramatic in result and eventually - cause failure in communication.

References:

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