

DENOTATION / CONNOTATION

Denotation: The *specific, exact and concrete* meaning of a word. This is the meaning you would find in a dictionary.

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| Mother | definition: female parent |
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Connotation: The attitudes, feelings and emotions aroused by a word.

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| Mother | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> attitude: positive feelings: love and respect emotions: security and warmth |
| "Mommy" | <p>all of the above, <i>plus</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> extra connotations of familiarity and childhood (children call their mothers "mommy" but adults do not) |

A word can have positive or negative connotations. Sometimes words have different connotations to different people because of their experiences.

Scientists and philosophers focus on the *denotations* of words in order to communicate exact meaning. Writers of literature rely more heavily on *connotation* in order to evoke an emotional response in the reader.

Same Denotation, Different Connotation?

Two words can have the same definition while carrying different emotional content. One word may be cruel or insulting while another word might be neutral or positive.

Example: Aunt Myrna is proud of her nephew George. Aunt Willa, by contrast, disapproves of everything George does. Let's see how their different views of George determine the language they use.

The fact is: George likes to save money when shopping.
Aunt Myrna says: "He's thrifty."
Aunt Willa says: "He's stingy."

Both of these words refer to saving money, but they have different connotations. "Thrifty" suggests that George is smart and knows how to find bargains. "Stingy" depicts George as greedy and lacking generosity.

The fact is: George works hard.
Aunt Myrna says: "He's very focused on his job."
Aunt Willa says: "He's obsessed with his job."

Both of these words refer to paying close attention to something; however, "focused" implies that someone is interested in what they're doing, while "obsessed" suggests that they are addicted to it.

The fact is: George has a son and two daughters.
Aunt Myrna says: "George has three children."
Aunt Willa says: "George has three brats."

"Brat" is a slang word for a noisy, annoying child. Willa is implying that George's children misbehave all the time.

Some words seem more loaded with meaning than others.

friendship, love, vacation, freedom usually arouse pleasant feelings
slum, drunkard, torture, criminal usually arouse unpleasant feelings

Politicians and advertisers try to choose words with positive connotations in order to make their message more appealing. On the other hand, if you are angry at someone, you may choose a word with negative connotations to describe them!

Things to remember:

- Words can have context-specific connotations that are not always obvious from their dictionary meaning. For example, the word *elderly* means “old” but it can only be applied to a person; no matter how old a house is, it would not be called “elderly.” Similarly, *blonde* means “yellow” but it refers only to hair and to some kinds of wood; it is never used to describe other yellow objects. It is important to be aware of this in order to avoid misusing words.
- Sometimes writers choose *euphemisms*, which are nice ways to describe things that are upsetting. For example, English has many euphemisms for death: instead of saying that someone “died,” we might say they “passed away” or “departed.” This is a way to avoid the negative associations with certain ideas.

Exercise 1

For most people, 10 of the following words have favourable connotations, and 10 have unfavourable ones. Mark the words with favourable connotations with an asterisk (*), and underline those that are unfavourable.

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| 1. dessert | 11. Monday |
| 2. flu | 12. weekend |
| 3. monster | 13. T.V. |
| 4. music | 14. murder |
| 5. worm | 15. war |
| 6. progress | 16. daughter |
| 7. jewels | 17. debt |
| 8. success | 18. traffic |
| 9. gang | 19. springtime |
| 10. circus | 20. liar |

Exercise 2

Categorize the following words as positive, neutral, or negative. If you are not sure, look the word up in a dictionary. The first one is done for you as an example.

| | | Positive | Neutral | Negative |
|----|--------------------------|-------------|--------------|-------------|
| 1. | house, dump, home | <i>home</i> | <i>house</i> | <i>dump</i> |
| 2. | exotic, foreign, strange | | | |
| 3. | babble, talk, chat | | | |
| 4. | dinner, feast, slop | | | |
| 5. | fragrance, stench, smell | | | |
| 6. | venerable, old, decrepit | | | |
| 7. | sound, tune, noise | | | |
| 8. | beast, animal, pet | | | |

Exercise 3

Read each of the following sentences. Decide from the context whether the speaker is showing approval or disapproval of the topic. Then circle the best word to put into the sentence.

1. “The sooner we move out of this (home, dump),” said Jack, “the happier I’ll be.”
2. This cell phone is (expensive, overpriced), but I don’t mind paying extra because it has so many useful features.
3. You’re lucky to have Wilma on your committee. She has lots of (original, crazy) ideas.
4. Boss Reed and his (cronies, employees) have controlled the politics in this city for more than twenty years. I certainly hope the other party wins this year!
5. It was a beautiful spring day, and the (stench, scent) of apple blossoms filled the whole yard.
6. I hope I don’t have to share an office with Janice. Sandra told me how (curious, nosy) she can be.
7. “I think Fay is an excellent president,” said the principal. “She really knows how to (manage, meddle).”
8. Will you please turn your stereo off? I can’t concentrate with all that (music, noise).