

Chapter three

Denotation and Connotation

A primary distinction between the practical use of language and the literary use is that in literature, especially in poetry, a *fuller* use is made of individual words. To understand this, we need to examine the composition of a word.

The average word has three component parts: sound, denotation, and connotation. It begins as a combination of tones and noises, uttered by the lips, tongue, and throat, for which the written word is a notation. But it differs from a musical tone or a noise in that it has a meaning attached to it. The basic part of this meaning is its **denotation** or denotations: that is, the dictionary meaning or meanings of the word. Beyond its denotations, a word may also have connotations. The **connotations** are what it suggests beyond what it expresses: its overtones of meaning. It acquires these connotations by its past history and associations, by the way and the circumstances in which it has been used. The word *home*, for instance, by denotation means only a place where one lives, but by connotation it suggests security, love, comfort, and family. The words *childlike* and *childish* both mean "characteristic of a child," but *childlike* suggests meekness, innocence, and wide-eyed wonder, while *childish* suggests pettiness, willfulness, and temper tantrums. If we name over a series of coins: *nickel*, *peso*, *lira*, *shilling*, *sen*, *doubloon*, the word *doubloon*, to four out of five readers, will immediately suggest pirates, though a dictionary definition includes nothing about pirates. Pirates are part of its connotation.

Connotation is very important in poetry, for it is one of the means by which the poet can concentrate or enrich meaning—say more in fewer words. Consider, for instance, the following short poem:

19. THERE IS NO FRIGATE LIKE A BOOK

There is no frigate like a book
To take us lands away,
Nor any coursers like a page
Of prancing poetry:
This traverse may the poorest take
Without oppress of toll;
How frugal is the chariot
That bears the human soul!

Being Thiefs

Emily Dickinson (1830–1886)

In this poem Emily Dickinson is considering the power of a book or of poetry to carry us away, to let us escape from our immediate surroundings into a world of the imagination. To do this she has compared literature to various means of transportation: a boat, a team of horses, a wheeled land vehicle. But she has been careful to choose kinds of transportation and names for them that have romantic connotations. “Frigate” suggests exploration and adventure; “coursers,” beauty, spirit, and speed; “chariot,” speed and the ability to go through the air as well as on land. (Compare “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot” and the myth of Phaëthon, who tried to drive the chariot of Apollo, and the famous painting of Aurora with her horses, once hung in almost every school.) How much of the meaning of the poem comes from this selection of vehicles and words is apparent if we try to substitute for them, say, *steamship*, *horses*, and *streetcar*.

QUESTIONS

1. What is lost if *miles* is substituted for “lands” (2) or *cheap* for “frugal” (7)?
2. How is “prancing” (4) peculiarly appropriate to poetry as well as to coursers? Could the poet have without loss compared a book to coursers and poetry to a frigate?
3. Is this account appropriate to all kinds of poetry or just to certain kinds? That is, was the poet thinking of poems like Wilfred Owen’s “Dulce et Decorum Est” (No. 3) or of poems like Coleridge’s “Kubla Khan” (No. 199) and Keats’s “La Belle Dame sans Merci” (No. 217)?

QUESTIONS

1. How old is the speaker in the poem? How old is his beloved? What is the nature of their relationship?
2. How is the contradiction in line 2 to be resolved? How is the one in lines 5–6 to be resolved? Who is lying to whom?
3. How do “simply” (7) and “simple” (8) differ in meaning? The words “vainly” (5), “habit” (11), “told” (12), and “lie” (13) all have double denotative meanings. What are they?
4. What is the tone of the poem—that is, the attitude of the speaker toward his situation? Should line 11 be taken as an expression of (a) wisdom, (b) conscious rationalization, or (c) self-deception? In answering these questions, consider both the situation and the connotations of all the important words beginning with “swears” (1) and ending with “flattered” (14).

A frequent misconception of poetic language is that poets seek always the most beautiful or noble-sounding words. What they really seek are the most *meaningful* words, and these vary from one context to another. Language has many levels and varieties, and poets may choose from them all. Their words may be grandiose or humble, fanciful or matter-of-fact, romantic or realistic, archaic or modern, technical or everyday, monosyllabic or polysyllabic. Usually a poem will be pitched pretty much in one key: the words in Emily Dickinson’s “There is no frigate like a book” and those in Thomas Hardy’s “The Man He Killed” (No. 9) are chosen from quite different areas of language, but both poets have chosen the words most meaningful for their own poetic context. Sometimes a poet may import a word from one level or area of language into a poem composed mostly of words from a different level or area. If this is done clumsily, the result will be incongruous and sloppy; if it is done skillfully, the result will be a shock of surprise and an increment of meaning for the reader. In fact, the many varieties of language open to poets provide their richest resource. Their task is one of constant exploration and discovery. They search always for the secret affinities of words that allow them to be brought together with soft explosions of meaning.

21. THE NAKED AND THE NUDE

For me, the naked and the nude
(By lexicographers construed
→ As synonyms that should express
The same deficiency of dress
Or shelter) stand as wide apart
As love from lies, or truth from art.

5

Lovers without reproach will gaze
On bodies naked and ablaze;
The Hippocratic eye will see
In nakedness, anatomy; 10
And naked shines the Goddess when
She mounts her lion among men.

The nude are bold, the nude are sly
To hold each treasonable eye. 15
While draping by a showman's trick
Their dishabille in rhetoric,
They grin a mock-religious grin
Of scorn at those of naked skin.

The naked, therefore, who compete
Against the nude may know defeat; 20
Yet when they both together tread
The briary pastures of the dead,
By Gorgons with long whips pursued,
How naked go the sometime nude!

Robert Graves (1895–1985)

QUESTIONS

1. Vocabulary: *lexicographers* (2), *construed* (2), *art* (6), *Hippocratic* (9), *dishabille* (16), *Gorgons* (23), *sometime* (24).
2. What kind of language is used in lines 2–5? Why? (For example, why is “deficiency” used in preference to *lack*? Purely because of meter?)
3. What is meant by “rhetoric” (16)? Why is the word “dishabille” used in this line instead of some less fancy word?
4. Explain why the poet chose his wording instead of the following alternatives: *brave* for “bold” (13), *clever* for “sly” (13), *clothing* for “draping” (15), *smile* for “grin” (17).
5. What, for the poet, is the difference in connotation between “naked” and “nude”? Try to explain reasons for the difference. If your own sense of the two words differs from that of Graves, state the difference and give reasons to support your sense of them.
6. Explain the reversal in the last line.

The person using language to convey information is largely indifferent to the sound of the words and is hampered by their connotations and multiple denotations. He tries to confine each word to a single exact meaning. He uses, one might say, a fraction of the word and throws the rest away. The poet, on the other hand, uses as much of the word as possible. He is interested in connotation and uses it to enrich and convey meaning. And he may use more than one denotation.

The purest form of practical language is scientific language. Scientists need a precise language to convey information precisely. The existence of multiple denotations and various overtones of meaning hinders them in accomplishing their purpose. Their ideal language would be a language with a one-to-one correspondence between word and meaning; that is, every word would have one meaning only, and for every meaning there would be only one word. Since ordinary language does not fulfill these conditions, scientists have invented languages that do. A statement in one of these languages may look like this:



In such a statement the symbols are entirely unambiguous; they have been stripped of all connotation and of all denotations but one. The word *sulfurous*, if it occurred in poetry, might have all kinds of connotations: fire, smoke, brimstone, hell, damnation. But H_2SO_3 means one thing and one thing only: sulfurous acid.

The ambiguity and multiplicity of meanings possessed by words are an obstacle to the scientist but a resource to the poet. Where the scientist wants singleness of meaning, the poet wants richness of meaning. Where the scientist requires and has invented a strictly one-dimensional language in which every word is confined to one denotation, the poet needs a multidimensional language, and creates it partly by using a multidimensional vocabulary, in which the dimensions of connotation and sound are added to the dimension of denotation.

The poet, we may say, plays on a many-stringed instrument, and sounds more than one note at a time.

The first problem in reading poetry, therefore, or in reading any kind of literature, is to develop a sense of language, a feeling for words. One needs to become acquainted with their shape, their color, and their flavor. There are two ways of doing this: extensive use of the dictionary and extensive reading.

EXERCISES

1. Which word in each group has the most "romantic" connotations? (a) horse, steed, nag; (b) king, ruler, tyrant, autocrat; (c) Chicago, Pittsburgh, Samarkand, Birmingham.
2. Which word in each group is the most emotionally connotative? (a) female parent, mother, dam; (b) offspring, children, progeny; (c) brother, sibling.
3. Which word in each group has the most favorable connotation? (a) skinny, thin, slender; (b) prosperous, wealthy, moneyed, opulent; (c) brainy, intelligent, smart.

4. Which of the following should you be less offended at being accused of? (a) having acted foolishly, (b) having acted like a fool.
5. In any competent piece of writing, the possibly multiple denotations and connotations of the words used are controlled by context. The context screens out irrelevant meanings while allowing the relevant meanings to pass through. What denotation has the word *fast* in the following contexts? (a) a fast runner, (b) a fast color.
6. In the following examples the denotation of the word *white* remains the same, but the connotations differ. Explain. (a) The young princess had blue eyes, golden hair, and a breast as white as snow. (b) Confronted with the evidence, the false princess turned as white as a sheet.

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22. RICHARD CORY

Whenever Richard Cory went down town,
 We people on the pavement looked at him:
 He was a gentleman from sole to crown,
 Clean favored, and imperially slim.

And he was always quietly arrayed, 5
 And he was always human when he talked;
 But still he fluttered pulses when he said,
 "Good-morning," and he glittered when he walked.

And he was rich—yes, richer than a king— 10
 And admirably schooled in every grace:
 In fine, we thought that he was everything
 To make us wish that we were in his place.

So on we worked, and waited for the light,
 And went without the meat, and cursed the bread;
 And Richard Cory, one calm summer night, 15
 Went home and put a bullet through his head.

Edwin Arlington Robinson (1869–1935)

QUESTIONS

1. In how many senses is Richard Cory a gentleman?
2. The word "crown" (3), meaning the top of the head, is familiar to you from "Jack and Jill," but why does Robinson use the unusual phrase "from sole to crown" instead of the common *from head to foot* or *from top to toe*?
3. List the words that express or suggest the idea of aristocracy or royalty.
4. Try to explain why the poet chose his wording rather than the following alternatives: *sidewalk* for "pavement" (2), *good-looking* for "Clean favored"

- (4), *thin* for "slim" (4), *dressed* for "arrayed" (5), *courteous* for "human" (6), *wonderfully* for "admirably" (10), *trained* for "schooled" (10), *manners* for "every grace" (10), *in short* for "in fine" (11). What other examples of effective diction do you find in the poem?
5. Why is "Richard Cory" a good name for the character in this poem?
 6. This poem is a good example of how ironic contrast (see Chapter 7) generates meaning. The poem makes no direct statement about life; it simply relates an incident. What larger meanings about life does it suggest?
 7. A leading American critic has said of this poem: "In 'Richard Cory' . . . we have a superficially neat portrait of the elegant man of mystery; the poem builds up deliberately to a very cheap surprise ending; but all surprise endings are cheap in poetry, if not indeed, elsewhere, for poetry is written to be read not once but many times."* Do you agree with this evaluation? Discuss.

23. NAMING OF PARTS

To-day we have naming of parts. Yesterday,
 We had daily cleaning. And to-morrow morning,
 We shall have what to do after firing. But to-day,
 To-day we have naming of parts. Japonica
 Glistens like coral in all of the neighboring gardens, 5
 And to-day we have naming of parts.

This is the lower sling swivel. And this
 Is the upper sling swivel, whose use you will see,
 When you are given your slings. And this is the piling swivel,
 Which in your case you have not got. The branches 10
 Hold in the gardens their silent, eloquent gestures,
 Which in our case we have not got.

This is the safety-catch, which is always released
 With an easy flick of the thumb. And please do not let me
 See anyone using his finger. You can do it quite easy 15
 If you have any strength in your thumb. The blossoms
 Are fragile and motionless, never letting anyone see
 Any of them using their finger.

And this you can see is the bolt. The purpose of this
 Is to open the breech, as you see. We can slide it 20
 Rapidly backwards and forwards: we call this
 Easing the spring. And rapidly backwards and forwards
 The early bees are assaulting and fumbling the flowers:
 They call it easing the Spring.

*Yvor Winters, *Edwin Arlington Robinson* (Norfolk, Conn.: New Directions, 1946), p. 52.

They call it easing the Spring: it is perfectly easy 25
 If you have any strength in your thumb: like the bolt,
 And the breech, and the cocking-piece, and the point of balance,
 Which in our case we have not got; and the almond-blossom
 Silent in all of the gardens and the bees going backwards and forwards,
 For to-day we have naming of parts. 30

Henry Reed (b. 1914)

QUESTIONS

1. Who is the speaker (or who are the speakers) in the poem, and what is the situation?
2. What basic contrasts are represented by the trainees and by the gardens?
3. What is it that the trainees "have not got" (28)? How many meanings have the phrases "easing the Spring" (22) and "point of balance" (27)?
4. What differences in language and rhythm do you find between the lines concerning "naming of parts" and those describing the gardens?
5. Does the repetition of certain phrases throughout the poem have any special function or is it done only to create a kind of refrain?
6. What statement does the poem make about war as it affects men and their lives?

24. PORTRAIT D'UNE FEMME

Your mind and you are our Sargasso Sea,
 London has swept about you this score years
 And bright ships left you this or that in fee:
 Ideas, old gossip, oddments of all things,
 Strange spars of knowledge and dimmed wares of price. 5
 Great minds have sought you—lacking someone else.
 You have been second always. Tragical?
 No. You preferred it to the usual thing:
 One dull man, dulling and uxorious,
 One average mind—with one thought less, each year. 10
 Oh, you are patient, I have seen you sit
 Hours, where something might have floated up.
 And now you pay one. Yes, you richly pay.
 You are a person of some interest, one comes to you
 And takes strange gain away: 15
 Trophies fished up; some curious suggestion;
 Fact that leads nowhere; and a tale for two,
 Pregnant with mandrakes, or with something else
 That might prove useful and yet never proves,

That never fits a corner or shows use, 20
 Or finds its hour upon the loom of days:
 The tarnished, gaudy, wonderful old work;
 Idols and ambergris and rare inlays.
 These are your riches, your great store; and yet
 For all this sea-ward of deciduous things, 25
 Strange woods half sodden, and new brighter stuff:
 In the slow float of differing light and deep,
 No! there is nothing! In the whole and all,
 Nothing that's quite your own.
 Yet this is you. 30

Ezra Pound (1885-1972)

QUESTIONS

1. Vocabulary: *in fee* (3), *uxorious* (9), *mandrakes* (18), *ambergris* (23), *deciduous* (25).
2. The Sargasso Sea, an area of still water in the North Atlantic, is legendarily a place where ships have become entangled in seaweed and where the ocean floor is littered with sunken vessels and their scattered cargoes. What kind of woman is Pound describing? In what ways is her mind like the Sargasso Sea?
3. Pound seeks to create an impression of the rich and strange, as opposed to the dull and average. How does he do it?
4. Comment on the phrases "in fee" (3), "of price" (5), "richly pay" (13), "of some interest" (14), "strange gain" (15), "your riches" (24), "your great store" (24), "this sea-ward" (25). What do they have in common? What is their effect?
5. Comment on the phrase "pregnant with mandrakes" (18). Why do these two words go well together?
6. Pound might have called his poem "Portrait of a Woman" or "Portrait of a Lady." Which would have been more accurate? What advantages does the French title have over either?

25. CROSS

My old man's a white old man
 And my old mother's black.
 If ever I cursed my white old man
 I take my curses back.

If ever I cursed my black old mother
 And wished she were in hell,
 I'm sorry for that evil wish
 And now I wish her well. 5

My old man died in a fine big house.
My ma died in a shack.
I wonder where I'm gonna die,
Being neither white nor black?

10

Langston Hughes (1902–1967)

QUESTIONS

1. What different denotations does the title have? Explain.
2. The language in this poem, such as “old man” (1, 3, 9), “ma” (10), and “gonna” (11), is plain, and even colloquial. Is it appropriate to the subject? Why?

26. THE WORLD IS TOO MUCH WITH US

The world is too much with us; late and soon,
Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers:
Little we see in nature that is ours;
We have given our hearts away, a sordid boon!
This sea that bares her bosom to the moon,
The winds that will be howling at all hours,
And are up-gathered now like sleeping flowers,
For this, for everything, we are out of tune;
It moves us not.—Great God! I'd rather be
A pagan suckled in a creed outworn;
So might I, standing on this pleasant lea,
Have glimpses that would make me less forlorn;
Have sight of Proteus rising from the sea;
Or hear old Triton blow his wreathèd horn.

5

10

William Wordsworth (1770–1850)

QUESTIONS

1. Vocabulary: *boon* (4), *Proteus* (13), *Triton* (14). What two relevant denotations has “wreathèd” (14)?
2. Try to explain why the poet chose his wording rather than the following alternatives: *earth* for “world” (1), *selling and buying* for “getting and spending” (2), *exposes* for “bares” (5), *stomach* for “bosom” (5), *dozing* for “sleeping” (7), *posies* for “flowers” (7), *nourished* for “suckled” (10), *visions* for “glimpses” (12), *sound* for “blow” (14).
3. Should “Great God!” (9) be considered as a vocative (term of address) or an expletive (exclamation)? Or something of both?
4. State the theme (central idea) of the poem in a sentence.

27. A HYMN TO GOD THE FATHER

Wilt thou forgive that sin where I begun,
Which is my sin though it were done before? ran
Wilt thou forgive those sins through which I run,^o
And do them still, though still I do deplore? 5
When thou hast done, thou hast not done,
For I have more.

Wilt thou forgive that sin by which I won
Others to sin, and made my sin their door?
Wilt thou forgive that sin which I did shun 10
A year or two, but wallowed in a score?
When thou hast done, thou hast not done,
For I have more.

I have a sin of fear, that when I have spun
My last thread, I shall perish on the shore;
Swear by thyself that at my death thy Sun 15
Shall shine as it shines now, and heretofore;
And having done that, thou hast done.
I have no more.

John Donne (1572–1631)

QUESTIONS

1. In 1601, John Donne at 29 secretly married Anne More, aged 17, infuriating her upper-class father, who had him imprisoned for three days. Because of the marriage, Donne lost his job as private secretary to an important official at court, and probably ruined his chances for the career at court that he wanted. It was, however, a true love match. In 1615 Donne entered the church. In 1617 his wife, then 33, died after bearing him twelve children. In 1621 he was appointed Dean of St. Paul's Cathedral in London and quickly won a large reputation for his eloquent sermons. His religious poems differ markedly in tone from the often cynical, sometimes erotic poems of his youth. The foregoing poem was written during a severe illness in 1623. Is this information of any value to a reader of the poem?
2. What sin is referred to in lines 1–2? What is meant by “when I have spun / My last thread” (13–14)? By “I shall perish on the shore” (14)?
3. What three puns give structure and meaning to the poem? Explain the relevance of each.

28. BASE DETAILS

If I were fierce, and bald, and short of breath,
I'd live with scarlet Majors at the Base,
And speed glum heroes up the line to death.
You'd see me with my puffy petulant face,
Guzzling and gulping in the best hotel, 5
Reading the Roll of Honor. "Poor young chap,"
I'd say—"I used to know his father well;
Yes, we've lost heavily in this last scrap."
And when the war is done and youth stone dead,
I'd toddle safely home and die—in bed. 10

Siegfried Sassoon (1886–1967)

QUESTIONS

1. Vocabulary: *petulant* (4).
2. In what two ways may the title be interpreted? (Both words have two pertinent denotative meanings.) What applications has "scarlet" (2)? What is the force of "fierce" (1)? Try to explain why the poet chose his wording rather than the following alternatives: *fleshy* for "puffy" (4), *eating and drinking* for "guzzling and gulping" (5), *battle* for "scrap" (8), *totter* for "toddle" (10).
3. Who evidently is the speaker? (The poet, a British captain in World War I, was decorated for bravery on the battlefield.) Does he mean what he says? What is the purpose of the poem?

EXERCISES

1. Robert Frost has said that "Poetry is what evaporates from all translations." Why might this be true? How much of a word can be translated?
2. Ezra Pound has defined great literature as being "simply language charged with meaning to the utmost possible degree." Would this be a good definition of poetry? The word "charged" is roughly equivalent to *filled*. Why is "charged" a better word in Pound's definition?