

Commentary on Practice: Word Connotations

Acting on Words, 2nd ed., 6–7

Pages 6–7 introduce a practice activity in understanding word connotation. Here is our introduction to that exercise followed by the exercise words and our commentary on possible connotations raised by each word.

The problem of words meaning different things to different people can be best appreciated in the case of certain words that tend to be loaded with strong emotional connotations. *The Nelson Canadian Dictionary* defines connotation as “[a]n idea or meaning suggested by or associated with a word.” This association need not be the denotative meaning given by the dictionary (the formal, official, explicit definition). To test out this idea, do the following exercise. Draw a line across a piece of paper and mark the left end of the line as minus 5. Mark the right end of the line as plus 5. Place a zero at the middle point of the line. Your line now represents a spectrum, from -5 to +5. Now read the following list of eight words and rate each along the spectrum, according to how you feel about each word. If the word has extremely good connotations for you, give it plus 5. If it has extremely bad connotations for you, give it minus 5. If you are relatively neutral in your responses, rate the word around 0. Be as precise as you can in placing each word on the spectrum, but trust your initial emotional response to tell you where the word should be. Here are the exercise words:

Feminist
Politics
Marriage
Homosexual
Occult
Tradition

Peacekeepers
Rhetoric

Commentary

As an apprenticing writer, you should gain important insights from this exercise. First, it illustrates a general principle (discussed further in *Acting on Words*, Chapter 1, under “pathos,” 9-11): that emotions run faster and harder than thought. This may help explain why so many of us with higher degrees representing intellectual training and knowledge nevertheless (all too frequently) commit hasty, illogical and sometimes unethical actions. In a society that likes to elevate intellect or reason over emotion, we tend to suppress or marginalize emotion. This tendency, however, does not remove emotion from our human equation but may, in fact, grant it excessive power or influence. Left unattended, emotion may influence us in ways we choose not to acknowledge. One of our main goals as writers is to reach fair, well researched conclusions: conclusions that account for the full picture of human reactions and considerations. That means, among other things, increasing our consciousness of how words affect us and others.

If we are honest, we will probably admit to quite a number of minus 5 or plus 5 responses to words. If we do a little research, we will discover that the same words we rated at one end of the spectrum may be rated at the other end by other people. How do we deal with these differences? Conflict and hostility, as we know, represent one way. But one of the potential benefits of thoughtful writing is its power to understand, moderate, and resolve difference. By recognizing the connotations of words and choosing words carefully, we can guide ourselves and our readers to deepened understandings. We must remember that many words are emotional triggers. You will hear writing instructors advising you not to use “trigger” or “loaded” words or language, especially when writing persuasion, which requires that you appease and conciliate your possibly hostile reader. Words carrying strong emotional associations need to be treated with particular care (which is not the same as saying “don’t ever use them”).

Feminist

Songwriter Bob Dylan comments in the Martin Scorsese film *No Direction Home* that “words don’t mean the same thing today that they did yesterday.” In the 1970s, the word “feminist” indeed generated negative feelings, but it also generated many positive ones. Today, in the first decade of the twenty-first century, the word “feminist” appears to be more widely discounted than it was 30 or 40 years ago. While the denotative (formal, official, explicit) meaning still signifies someone who believes in and pursues the equality of the sexes, the idea that “feminist” refers to someone with a divisive, unreasonable bias toward favoring women seems common. At the least, the word appears much less likely to generate feelings of importance than it once did, while perhaps suggesting someone who is “out of date.” All of these changes—along with a wry suggestion that the need for feminism has not gone away-- are suggested by Nancy White’s tongue-in-cheek song “Daughters of Feminists.” This is not the place to debate the merits of the word “feminist.” But it is important to remind ourselves that words, tied to history, culture, and social change (not to mention personal factors), mean different things to different people. (For more on the complex history of the ever-changing language that so many of us speak in North America and elsewhere, see “A Brief Timeline of English” at this text enrichment site, Chapter 1, Rhetoric.)

Since meanings evolve and have different values in different times and places, we owe it to ourselves and our potential readers to do a little research into the history and cultural context of emotionally loaded words. Sometimes the alterations of meaning are such that the denotation of the word (its formal, official explicit dictionary definition) changes. For example, in Elizabethan times (1558-1603), the word “sometimes” was often used as an adjective to mean “former” or an adverb to mean “formerly.” The adjective “silly” meant “simple” or “rustic.” The adjective “eager” meant “sour” or “harsh.” (For more examples of words that have changed significantly in denotative meaning, see <http://www.elizabethan-era.org.uk/elizabethan-online-dictionary.htm>). Connotations sometimes foreshadow possible future changes of denotative meaning.

Politics

According to its dictionary denotation, “politics” means “the art or science of government or governing” (*Nelson Canadian Dictionary*). We know, however, that according to what many people think and feel, the word has an almost opposite connotation. In its informal, unofficial, implicit sense, the word suggests unscrupulous, heartless behaviour featuring back-stabbing, or phoniness, ethical apathy, or the like. While there is a strong sense today—particularly among the young—that yesterday’s political systems don’t work and aren’t worth the bother, the general meaning of politics is not the specific forms and agents of governance that we experience and perhaps discount. Some who say they are not political espouse a form of anarchy (which does not mean use of violence, by the way), but anarchy itself is a form of politics. Humans by nature are partly social; living in society always entails political systems, however differing those may be. The idea that any of us can be divorced from politics simply by renouncing or not participating in the conventional system is a logical fallacy (see *Acting on Words*, 2nd ed., Chapter 3). Thinking carefully about the denotative meaning of words, given by dictionaries, helps us to correct possibly misleading notions and harmful forgetfulness of the past.

Having determined an accurate dictionary meaning, however, we are still left with the enormous issue of reader awareness. Contrast what you know to be the correct meaning of a certain word to the connotative meanings that you understand your intended readers may have. This illustrates the difficulty of writing. You need to use words accurately and correctly, but you also need to consider your intended readers and their probable responses to connotations. There is no point in being “right” while at the same time alienating others (unless you deliberately choose alienation, as did dramatist Bertolt Brecht [1898 – 1956], for artistic purpose). This is a problem to return to in your contemplation of the writer’s challenge, and perhaps to solve in a number of different ways, according to the particulars of the writing occasion.

Marriage

To consider connotative triggers a little more, personal experience, of course, colours our interpretations of everything. Some have sweet associations with the word “marriage”

while others have bitter ones. Taking stock of our own emotional responses to key words in an assignment before we leap into our critical response (see *Acting on Words*, 2nd ed. Chapter 14, “Critical Analysis and Evaluation”) can avoid a heavily biased, uninformed effort on our part.

Homosexual

In the case of a word such as “homosexual,” we may react more from conventional training and bias than personal experience. In fact, we may have experienced little or nothing of the topic, but upbringing has taught us to reject any consideration of it. Students with such immediate reactions based on conventional training need to remember that the fundamental purpose of university is to question, discuss, and seek increased understanding. University ideals insist upon separating expressions of conventional morality (laws, social mores, etc.) from more deeply explored questions of ethics (see *Acting on Words*, 2nd ed. Chapter 14, “Critical Analysis and Evaluation”). Significant amounts of formal and informal research on homosexuality exist. Undertaking a paper on a certain topic and then expressing a view against it without sufficient research is a failure to allow yourself to consider a broader and deeper perspective.

Occult

People sometimes recoil from this word without knowing that it simply means “hidden.” It is popularly associated with wrong and even harmful beliefs and practices, but as we know, lack of knowledge breeds mistrust, misunderstanding, even fear. When certain traditions, for whatever reasons, are separated from common knowledge, one might anticipate misunderstanding of those traditions in mainstream society. Again, the goal of university study is to deepen and broaden knowledge. Researching the occult could easily take a lifetime, and it would likely uncover as many cases of wrongdoing and harm caused by those claiming to oppose the occult as by those identifying or being identified with it. Consider the persecutions of witches or so-called witches over the centuries for evidence of logical fallacies serving the very qualities that the accusers claimed to be

against. In any case, this word might be considered a “classic example” of the complex responses that can be triggered by a few marks on a page.

When you encounter emotionally laden words and topics, consider the advice in *Acting on Words*, Chapter 16 “Argumentation,” which is to enter into contrary viewpoints and do your best to understand those. This is not to say that you should be pressured by your instructor, *Acting on Words*, or other sources to adopt a certain viewpoint on a controversial issue—simply that you will be tasked with being fair to other views by properly considering them. Stretching your mind can begin by acknowledging responses to “trigger” words and allowing some time and further research to help you to understand and examine your reactions. This process, above all, helps you to understand how others may be affected by certain words, and the importance, therefore, of couching such words in sensitive discussion. If you do choose to use a “trigger” or “loaded” word as a flag, for rhetorical effect, do so with due awareness.

Tradition

An important point to consider in the connotative associations of words is how cultural background shapes the values we place on vocabulary. The word “tradition” has positive connotations for many Aboriginal people; it suggests preserving, recovering or reinventing ways that were destroyed, ways that provided a sound basis for well being. In the non-Native mainstream (based on a core belief in “progress”), this word may carry the negative connotation of outdated. Mind you, large segments of mainstream North America celebrate “traditional values,” by which is meant resistance to perceived social degradations (threats to the “nuclear” family, etc.). The word “tradition,” like so many words, can mean extremely different things to different groups, subgroups, and individuals.

Peacekeepers

Any preliminary rumination on the effects of words and terms should include mention of George Orwell's essay "Politics and the English Language" (*Acting on Words*, 471-81). While the term "peacekeepers" is not among the words he defines as euphemisms (his essay was written around the time of the Second World War), he might well have mentioned this term had he been writing his essay today. Not all would agree that "peacekeepers" reflects propagandistic language (see *Acting on Words*, Chapter 3, "Logical Fallacies 7 – 10," 40-42), but enough people would consider it to be propaganda that the issue needs at least to be considered. Whether certain words have been created or "spun" to sanitize certain realities is often an important question. Another essay that directly explores the same question—an essay well worth reading early in your course—is Howard Richler's "The Seven Deadly Sins Are In" (*Acting on Words*, 482-84).

Rhetoric

Our final exercise word above, "rhetoric," figures in the title of *Acting on Words: An Integrated Rhetoric, Reader, and Handbook*. Who knows how many readers it may have initially alienated. But this word is the "traditional" word to describe composition theory and practice; it is not necessarily a word to be rejected but rather, perhaps, one to be reclaimed. Its roots go back to the Golden Age of ancient Greece (see "A Brief Timeline of Classical Rhetoric" at the text enrichment site, *Rhetoric*, Chapter 1.)

For Further Practice

1. Look up the word "rhetoric" in your dictionary and search it on the Web. One site you might try is "The Forest of Rhetoric" by Gideon Burton at <http://rhetoric.byu.edu/> Discuss your findings and further thoughts with your course mates and instructor. We say more about the history of this word in *Acting on Words*, Chapter 16.

2. Discuss with classmates and your instructor different writing situations that might present a writer with readers who harbour strong connotative meanings of words that conflict with the denotative meanings. Discuss various strategies the writer might adopt to avoid distancing and possibly losing readers.