




# Semantics and Society

Chapter 4 of *Semantics: A Study of Meaning* by Geoffrey Leech

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# Overview



- Functions of Language
    - The various uses to which language is put in a social context.
  - Conceptual and Affective Meaning
    - The distinction between literal and intended meanings.
  - Associative Engineering
  - Conceptual Engineering
  - Position
  - The Phatic Function
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- The subtle effects of semantics in society
- Language as a Substitute for Action



# The Functions of Language

What We Use Language For

Informational

Expressive

Directive

Aesthetic

Phatic

# Functions of Language

## 1 | Informational

- The main – but often thought to be the only – function of language.
- Heavy in conceptual meaning.

## 2 | Expressive

- Convey the speaker's feelings.
- Do not always have “information”.
- Predominantly affective meaning.

## 3 | Directive

- Intended to influence others' behaviour or thoughts.
- Mainly affective and connotative meanings.

# Functions of Language (contd.)

4

Aesthetic

- Language for its own sake.
- Principally conceptual and affective meanings.

5

Phatic

- For the purpose of maintaining social bonds.
- Not about the content, but the existence of the message.



# Functions of Language

- This breakdown of the functions is not unique; but it is convenient in that it associates one function with each of the essential features of a “communicative situation” (Jakobson, 1960):
  - The subject matter
  - The originator
  - The receiver
  - The channel
  - The message
- In the social roles of language, the expressive, directive and phatic functions of communication are most involved.



# Conceptual and Affective Meaning

What Words Mean – and How We  
Mean Them

The Dangers of  
Associative Meaning

Snarl and Purr Words

# Conceptual and Affective Meaning



- There is very frequently an overlap between conceptual and affective meaning – especially in emotional or evaluative speech.
- Conveying feelings through associative meanings, however, is fraught with danger:
  - Associative meanings vary from person to person; this leads to misunderstandings.
  - The connotation of the message could hide its denotation; the reader is “taken in”.
- As denotative meaning is the “overt” value of a message, so is connotative meaning its “covert” value – and therefore, potentially, the more dangerous of the two.
- Hiding meaning in associations makes it harder to discover and thereby harder to refute.

“

We feel the need to respond but don't know how to argue.

”



# Conceptual and Affective Meaning



- The words most infamously differing in associative meaning are those that refer to social groups:
  - nationalities
  - religions
  - political ideologies
- There are even words whose dictionary sense is almost forgotten, like “democracy”.
- An illustrative example of the miscommunications arising from associative meanings is given by Hayakawa in *Language in Thought and Action*.

# Conceptual and Affective Meaning



- In the same work, Hayakawa defines “snarl words” as
  - “ Words whose conceptual meaning becomes irrelevant because the user is capitalising on connotations to express their own hostility. ”
- Words that are most prone to this are those referring to extreme or uncompromising political ideologies.
- Predictably, “purr words” are the exact opposite. Words similar to “democracy” (as mentioned before) commonly turn into these.

# Conceptual vs Associative Meaning



- The nurse was putting on lipstick, when the nurse's mother walked into the room, she was surprised!

But why?

You have associated the word “nurse” with lady, but the conceptual meaning of nurse never had anything associated with gender



# Associative Engineering

Playing with what we mean

Euphemism

Image-building

# Associative Engineering: Euphemism and Image Building



- Euphemisms(Greek: wellspeaking) are words which are used to avoid directly addressing subjects that might be deemed negative or embarrassing, e.g. death, sex, excretory bodily functions.
- e.g : He passed away (died) last night.
- Economically less favoured parts of the world are called developing, emergent, third world countries etc instead of backward/undeveloped.
- Concentration camp was also a euphemism (it meant: a place where non combatants of a district are accommodated)
- But a euphemism is not a cure, but simply a palliative .
- 1, 2.

## Associative Engineering: Euphemism and Image Building

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# Associative Engineering: Euphemism and Image Building

*The Middle French word 'toile' ("cloth") had a diminutive form: 'toilette', or "small piece of cloth." This word became 'toilet' in English, and referred to a cloth put over the shoulders while dressing the hair or shaving.*



- Toilet, privy, water closet, cloak room, wash room, rest room, comfort station, loo etc.

# Associative Engineering: Euphemism and Image Building



- The labels (water, emergent) are picked with a strategic tact, which is where the engineering part comes in. It's not just painting over the bad things, but introducing pleasant acquisitions.

From the most distinguished  
tobacco house in the world  
(from an advertisement for Dunhills)

Cigarettes by John Player, England

- firm/manufactures -> gentlemanly business
- Few other examples would be fair-and-handsome, axe etc.





# Conceptual Engineering

Playing with the dictionary

Engineering

Another perspective

# Conceptual Engineering



- John was arrested while stealing arms from a factory, when questioned whether he was a 'militant', he replied "I don't know what that exactly means, but if it means using violence, i would prefer the word force instead".
- Conceptual engineering: violence = extreme degree of force
- Associative engineering: force as a more pleasant synonym for violence, like passed away/died
- Rebuke (criticising someone) vs reprimand (formal disapproval)

**In 1943, when General Dwight Eisenhower rebuked General George S. Patton for striking an enlisted man, an Army official in Algiers denied that General Patton had 'at any time been reprimanded by General Eisenhower'.**

- He managed to both tell the truth, and not giving any info

# Another perspective of conceptual engineering



- Thunger
- Herman Cappelen: **fixing language** – find out which concepts or words are deficient and propose replacements for them
- Nurse, mass

*she began to realize the extent of the problem was later termed “sexual harassment”. As the women in the class described their experiences in the workplace she noticed a pattern: every woman there had either quit or been fired from a job because they had been made so uncomfortable by the behavior of men. She discovered that this phenomenon of male harassment and intimidation of female workers had not been described in the literature and was not publicly recognized as a problem, although she continued to hear it described by women from all walks of life.*



# **Presupposition, Position, And Phatic Function**

Implicature  
Affective meaning  
Social Intimacy

# (Presup)position




*“Do you regret killing him?”*

The above sentence has an implicit assumption, that the person who is being asked the question, has killed someone. If they answer “Yes” or “No”, they cannot effectively deny the assumption. They must explicitly deny the statement by saying *“I did not kill him”*.

The implicitness of presuppositions makes it an effective – and in some sense dangerous – vehicle of meaning. The re-election campaign speech

*“Who held power justly and fairly for the last five years?”*

presupposes the fact that the incumbent government did in fact rule justly and fairly, which may not be the case.



*“How are we reacting to the realities of our world? What do we think of the steady gain of Communism - of the millions killed, tortured and enslaved by this criminal conspiracy? Do we still laugh at Khrushchev’s claim that our children will live under Communism? Do we shrug off Cuba? Will we shrug off Mexico? Are we concerned about the certain, documented, real influence Communism exercise in Washington? Do we watch with curiosity? Do we pull down the curtain on these disturbing thoughts? Do we are draw down the warm covers of apathy around our necks?”*

- (1) Communism is gaining steadily.**
- (2) Communism is a criminal conspiracy.**
- (3) Millions have been killed by Communism.**
- (4) Millions have been tortured by Communism.**
- (5) Millions have been enslaved by Communism.**
- (6) Khrushchev has claimed that our children will live under Communism.**
- (7) Communism exercises certain influence in Washington.**
- (8) Communism exercises documented influence in Washington.**
- (9) Communism exercises real influence in Washington.**

# Phatic Function



- Role played by language in maintaining social contact
- Characterized by not having much information (of importance or urgency)
- Eric Berne says it is akin to a social intimacy, calls it 'stroking'
- Argues it is a substitute for physical intimacy and affection received by one as a child

A: "Hey, how's it going?"

B: "Oh I'm fine, thanks for asking? How about you?"

A: "I'm doing well too. Weather's wonderful today, don't you think?"

B: "Oh yes, it's beautiful out today."

A: "Well see ya later, bye!"

B: "Bye bye!"

A: "Hey"

B: (no response)

# Phatic Function



Mr Chief Justice, President Eisenhower, Vice President Nixon, President Truman, reverend clergy, fellow citizens, we observe today not a victory of party, but a celebration of freedom – symbolizing an end, as well as a beginning – signifying renewal, as well as change. For I have sworn before you and Almighty God the same solemn oath our forebears prescribed nearly a century and three quarters ago.

The world is very different now. For man holds in his mortal hands the power to abolish all forms of human poverty and all forms of human life. And yet the same revolutionary beliefs for which our forebears fought are still at issue around the globe – the belief that the rights of man come not from the generosity of the state, but from the hand of God.

We dare not forget today that we are the heirs of that first revolution. Let the word go forth from this time and place, to friend and foe alike, that the torch has been passed to a new generation of Americans – born in this century, tempered by war, disciplined by a hard and bitter peace, proud of our ancient heritage – and unwilling to witness or permit the slow undoing of those human rights to which this Nation has always been committed, and to which we are committed today at home and around the world.



# Language as Substitute for action



- Semanticists like Hayakawa have put forward the idea that when “the use of language” leads to conflict among people, there is something “linguistically wrong with the speaker, the listener, or both” as an assumption in his book *Language in Thought and Action*.
- Leech argues that this is not a fair assumption to make.
- The misuse or misinterpretation of language is better viewed as a ‘symptom’, rather than a cause of human conflict.
- Even in a world where people understood each others’ statements perfectly there would still be conflict.
- Language also is able to act as “a verbal attempt to change behaviour as an alternative to brute coercion”

A: “Please listen to what I have to say, there is good reason I can’t allow you to do that”

B: “OK”

*as opposed to*

A: \*smacks B across the face\*

B: “AAARGHH!!”