Name: _____ Date: _____

LESSON 7

Connotation and Denotation

Understand the Concept

A **denotation** of a word is its dictionary definition. A word's **connotations** are all the associations it has in addition to its literal meaning. Connotations may be positive, negative, or neutral. For example, the words *vintage* and *old* both mean something that has been around for a long time. *Old* is rather neutral. An old car could be worn and beat-up, or it could be a shined-up classic. *Obsolete* is negative. It connotes something that is no longer useful or acceptable. *Vintage,* a word that comes from wine-making, connotes something that, like a fine wine, has become more valuable with age.

> NEGATIVE   That computer is <u>obsolete;</u> you should get a newer model.
>
> NEUTRAL   There was an <u>old</u> car parked outside the house.
>
> POSITIVE   That boutique sells <u>vintage</u> clothes.

It is important to be aware of a word's connotations as well as its denotations. Your word choice may imply a certain meaning that you did not intend to convey, so it is important to choose your words wisely.

Try It Yourself

Circle the word or words that would best describe each of the following people, objects, or situations. Explain your answers. You may use a dictionary to help you.

1. A child who innocently asks a lot of questions might be described as which of the following?

   curious   inquisitive   nosy   snoopy

2. A politician who has accepted a bribe might be described as which of the following?

   crooked   villainous   corrupt   devious

3. Which word would you use to respectfully describe people in a nursing home?

   elderly   vintage   aged   old

erratic (i ra> tik) *adj.,* having no fixed purpose

His actions have become more and more <u>erratic</u> and now I don't know what to do.

The word *erratic* has a fairly neutral connotation, while some of its synonyms, such as *bizarre*, *oddball*, and *weird*, have negative ones. Other synonyms with more positive connotations include *eccentric*, *singular*, and *changeable*.

Look through a dictionary or thesaurus until you find a group of synonyms that have different connotations. Put these words in order from positive to negative, with more neutral words in the middle. You might start with a word like *silly, fake,* or *flighty.*

EXAMPLE
vintage, antique, timeworn, old, antiquated, obsolete, worn-out

Some words start out as neutral or positive, but gain negative connotations over time. For example, the word *gossip* once meant a godparent (from *God-sibb,* meaning related through God). Over time, it gained the meaning of one who spreads stories about people, perhaps because godparents were often distant relatives who were only seen once in a great while. During their infrequent visits, they would likely spend a long time chit-chatting and sharing the latest news about family members. Similarly, the word *hussy* once was a neutral word meaning "housewife" before it took on the negative connotations it has today.

A connotation is an emotional association or implication attached to a word or expression.

Writers and speakers should be aware of the connotations as well as the denotations of the words they use.

4. You think your dad is far too tight with his money. Which word would you use to describe him?

thrifty   frugal   miserly   conservative

5. Which word would you use to describe a friend whom you admire for having a different style?

strange   different   unique   quirky

6. Which word could you use to describe a young child who doesn't tell the truth?

liar   perjurer   fibber   fabricator

7. Which word best describes a delicious meal in a fancy restaurant?

exquisite   fine   delicate   admirable

8. Which word best describes an honest businessperson?

merchant   dealer   trader   trafficker

9. You read in the newspaper of someone who has committed a terrible crime. Which word would probably be used to describe this person?

mean   nasty   contemptible   obnoxious

10. Someone has taken your lunch money. You laid it on the desk in front of you and turned to reach for your backpack, and it was gone. Which word would best describe what happened to the money?

smuggled   pilfered   filched   embezzled

The dictionary will often explain the differences in connotations between words with a similar meaning. For example, if you look up the word *shrewd,* you may find a description of the differences between *shrewd, sagacious, perspicacious,* and *astute.* All of these words mean "having good judgment." However, they have more subtle shades of meaning, or connotations. *Shrewd* suggests one who has a sharp eye and is clever and wily, while *sagacious* suggests one who has a far-seeing wisdom. *Perspicacious* and *astute* have different shades of meaning as well.