Denotation vs Connotation

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Introduction

The terminological [ ] of antonyms "denotation" and "connotation" has been variously used in philosophy, linguistics, semiotics and stylistics to indicate a number of diverse distinctions in the realm of meaning, in particular dichotomic distinctions between what different students have seen as fundamentally different kinds (or aspects) of meaning. Before embarking on a review of the diverse technical uses of "denotation" and "connotation," it is perhaps useful to examine the semantic values suggested by their etymology and word formation. The deverbal noun *denotatio* attested in postclassical Latin, is derived from the compound verb *de-noto*, 'to mark out, point out, specify, indicate,' literally indicating the physical action of 'setting a mark (*nota*) on something'. The noun *nota* ('mark, sign, note') derives in turn from the verb *nosco* ('to come to know,' 'to become acquainted with' and also 'to recognize'). Thus the etymology of *denotation* generally suggests the idea of singling out an object by way of distinctive signs, or recognizing it because of its distinctive features. *Connotatio* and *connoto*, which are coined on the mold of *denotatio* and *denoto*, using the comitative prefix *con-* (the value conveyed is that of a secondary, accompanying or implied feature) are attested in Medieval Latin first in the theological literature, and then, in the 14th century, as technical terms in logic and grammar (Rosier, 1992).

It is customary to distinguish two broad uses of "denotation" and "connotation" as technical terms in semantics: a philosophical use and a semiotic-stylistic use.

Denotation, Connotation, Reference, and Sense

In the philosophical tradition, the pair denotation vs connotation is used to refer to a dichotomy analogous to those indicated by "reference" (or "denotation") vs "sense" (or "meaning"), or by "intension" (or to use a more traditional philosophical term "comprehension") vs "extension." Notably, we find this use in John Stuart Mill's *A system of logic* (1895): "The word 'white' denotes all white things, as snow, paper, the foam of the sea, and so forth, and, implies, or as it was termed by the schoolmen, connotes, the attribute whiteness." Of the two terms, "denotation" is the one which has wider currency in contemporary philosophical and linguistic semantics, while the corresponding use of "connotation" is nowadays rarer. The precise meaning of all the above terms is highly theory-dependent and varies in subtle but decisive ways also within the same broad tradition of logico-philosophical semantics. "Reference" and "denotation" both concern the relation between linguistic expressions and things in the world and are often used interchangeably. Some authors (cf. Lyons, 1995 and Allan, 2001), however, draw a distinction between the two along the following lines: "denotation" corresponds to the virtual relationship between a linguistic expression and a thing or set of things in the world (e.g. *dog* denotes the set of entities in the world which are correctly called *dog*), while "reference" indicates the relationship between an expression and what the speaker is talking about by using this expression in a given utterance (e.g., the reference of *dog* in a particular utterance of the sentence *the dog barks*). Referring is sometimes seen as a sort of speech act and contrasted with the act of predication (singling out a certain dog vs predicating the property of barking of this same dog). This opposition can be interpreted in terms of discourse semantics as the contrast between introducing new referents in the discourse representation or retrieving them on the one hand, and updating the conditions on these referents on the other. In classic formal semantics, such a distinction is not taken into account: simply the denotations of phrases (*the dog*) and sentences (*the dog barks*) are functions of the denotations of the component expressions (such as *dog*, *the*, *bark*, etc.).

Similarly, on the side of "sense," "intension" and "connotation" we find significantly different conceptions. In the philosophical tradition the "sense" or "intension" of a linguistic expression is often seen as the set of all properties, conceived as real world modes of being, that their denotatum must have, while in a large part of the linguistic semantic tradition, for both structuralist (cf. Hjelmslev and Jakobson) and generativist (from Katz to Jackendoff), the linguistic meaning or sense of an expression is seen as meta-linguistic paraphrase, usually cast in a (semi-) formalized language of semantic features. Finally, in the formal semantic tradition of Montague, the intension of an expression is reduced to a function from possible words to extensions in a particular world.

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Denotation vs Connotation: The Semiotic-Stylistic Distinction

The so-called semiotic-stylistic use is more difficult to tackle. More precisely, one should speak of a family

of loosely related uses the pair denotation vs connotation has acquired, a number of vaguely related uses in linguistic semantics, stylistics and semiotics. The two terms have often been called forth to set apart what are seen as objective, descriptive meaning of a linguistic sign from the subjective emotive meanings (sometimes seen as including ethic and aesthetic value judgments), or from the stylistic and poetic values associated with it.

p0030   In a different perspective, the opposition is seen as between the stable, codified meanings of a linguistic sign and the variable, unstable, weakly suggested values or even idiosyncratic associations it evokes in the mind of the language users. These associations may consist, in turn, of emotions evoked by the sign, socially shared beliefs about either the referent of the sign or about the use of the sign or the people who use it, or, again, poetic, or, more generally, aesthetic values associated with the sign. In this perspective, the range of connotative association is seen as including the fact that some words or grammatical structures can function as sociolinguistic indicators or markers, pointing to a particular sociolect or to a particular register.

p0035   In some of its formulation in semiotics and European structural linguistics, in particular in those derived from the influential account of this distinction offered by Louis Hjelmslev (1961) in his *Prolegomena to a theory of language*, the opposition between "denotation" and "connotation" is not connected specifically with emotion, value judgments and style. Rather it is construed more broadly as a fundamental distinction between different ways of making meaning rather than between types of concrete contents (e.g., objective vs subjective).

p0040   In some of these broad interpretations, the opposition denotation vs connotation tends to overlap with a series of distinctions that have occupied the center stage in the recent debates on the relationship between semantics and pragmatics in the linguistic and philosophical literature: distinctions such as propositional (or truth-conditional) meaning vs nonpropositional (non-truth-conditional) meaning, literal vs nonliteral meaning, coded vs inferred meaning.

s0020   Theories of Denotation and Connotation in Medieval Logic and Grammar

p0045   The introduction of the philosophical use of "denotation" and "connotation" is often credited to Mill, but, in fact, as his mention of Scholasticism (schoolmen) testifies, it can be traced back to the late Middle Ages, and in particular to the work of William of Ockham. It is worth considering how the medieval notion of connotation differed from the current conceptions of

sense or intension mentioned above. Ockham's notion of connotation emerges in the context of a long and very sophisticated debate on the semantics of the adjectives ad of the so-called denominative names (lat. *nomina denominativa*). Aristotle (*Categories*, n.1) calls denominatives (gr. *paronyma*) those beings whose name is derived from the name of something else, by way of a simple difference in morphological suffix: such as *grammarian* from *grammar* and *strong* from *strength*. While ancient grammarians considered denominatives as a morphological category, in the philosophical tradition of the Medieval commentators of Aristotle, the abstract name was always ontologically earlier irrespective of morphological considerations: for instance, when a man is called *strong* he takes his name from the quality that characterizes him, that is from strength. In his treatise *De grammatico* St. Anselm of Canterbury (12th century) proposed to analyze denominative terms such as "grammarian" as signifying directly the property (the *grammar*) and indirectly the substance (the *man*). Thus, in the meaning of a denominative such as "grammarian" one has to distinguish between their *significatio* (roughly 'meaning', the concept of *grammar*) from their *appellatio* (roughly 'reference', the *man* to whom the name refers) (see **Figure 1**).

p0050   This theory of denominatives was developed by later authors, which, like St. Anselm considered the conceptual meaning as being prior with respect to reference, which is signified indirectly and in a implicit way (*innuendo*).

p0055   In the 14th century, this analysis was reversed by Ockham's theory of connotation (cf. Pinborg, 1984 and Rosier, 1992 for a discussion of the reasons of this change of perspective). Ockham introduces a distinction between absolute and connotative terms: absolute terms correspond either to the names of substances (e.g., *homo* 'man') or to the names of qualities (e.g., *albedo* 'whiteness') and denote either an object or a class of objects. A connotative term, on
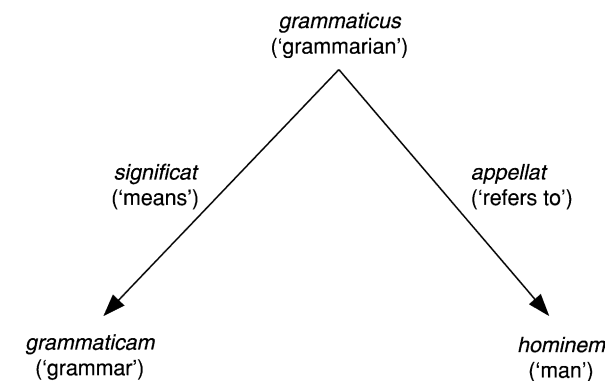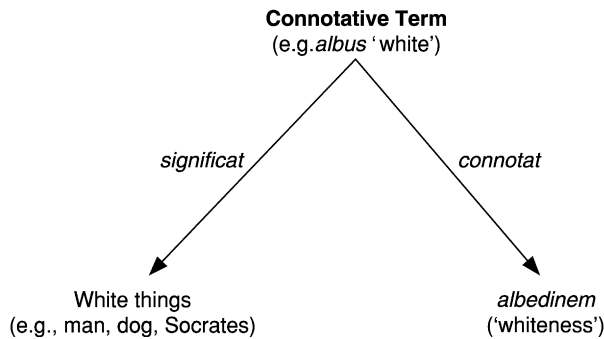

Figure 1   St. Anselm's theory of denominatives.   f0005

Connotative Term
(e.g. *albus* 'white')

significat   *connotat*

White things
(e.g., man, dog, Socrates)

albedinem
('whiteness')

f0010   **Figure 2**   Ockham's theory of connotative terms.

the other hand, such as the adjective *albus* ('white')
denotes first of all the white things to which it refers
(e.g., *homo* 'man', *canis* 'dog', *Socrates*), while, at the
same time, it connotes the quality *albedo* 'whiteness'
(see **Figure 2**).

p0060   St. Anselm's version of the theory of denomina-
tives, however, survived alongside Ockham's version,
in logic as well as in grammatical theorizing. In this
strand of theorizing, it was the reference to a sub-
stance, or object, which was called a connotation. We
find this use of in the treatment of the adjectives in an
important Renaissance grammarian such as Scaliger,
and later in the very influential *Grammar* and *Logic*
of Port-Royal, again in the chapters concerning the
adjective. But this use seems to be have disappeared
from contemporary philosophical and linguistic ter-
minology. Ockham's use, on the contrary, was to be
revived by J.S. Mill.

s0025   **On the Role of the Logic and the
Grammar of Port-Royal in the
Development of the Two Uses of
"Denotation" vs "Connotation"**

p0065   In Port-Royal we find three separate doctrines
concerned with the opposition between denotation
and connotation in its different uses. Two concern
what we have called the philosophical use of these
terms, while the third seems to be at the origin of the
so-called semiotic-stylistic notion of connotation.

p0070   The term "connotation" itself appears in the se-
mantic characterization of noun (substantive) and
adjective, both in the *Logic* (Part I, Chapter II; Part
II, Chapter I) and in the *Grammar* (Part II, Chapter
II). According to Port-Royalist doctrine, substantives
(or absolutes) signify directly either things (e.g., *earth,
sun, God*) or properties (e.g., *hardness*, *heat*, *justice*),
while the adjectives, which are also called connota-
tives, have a double relation of signification as they
indicate "primarily but confusedly" the thing and
"secondarily," albeit more "distinctively," the mode

of being or property. Contray to Ockham's (and
J. S. Mill's) use, in Port-Royal, the term "connota-
tion" refers to the primary and confuse signification
("confuse signification that we call connotation of a
thing"), while the term "denotation" is not used at all
in this context. Thus the theory presented appears to
blend aspects of Ockham's theory with the original
theory of denominatives. In Port-Royal's *Logic* we
also find a version of the philosophical-semantic dis-
tinction between *extension* and intension (here called
comprehension). Comprehension is seen as the set of
internal attributes of an idea (i.e., the ideas that make
up its definition), while extension is seen as the set of
ideas for which it can be asserted. The *Logic*, howev-
er, establishes only a remote connection between this
doctrine and the notion of connotation, as discussed
for the adjectives (see Part I, Chap. VIII).

p0075   In *Logic* Part I, Chap. XIV, Arnauld *et al.* (1972),   AU:2
discussing the problem of the definition of the mean-
ing of words, draw a distinction between what they
call the main signification of a word and the accessory
ideas (fr. *idées accessoires*) connected to it. In the
Logic accessory ideas are feelings, judgments or opi-
nions either connected to a word or to a particular
occurrence of a word in a certain utterance situation.
In the latter case the accessory ideas do not arise
from the word itself but the tone of voice, the facial
expression, and by other types of natural signs that
accompany its utterance. Discussing the accessory
idea stably connected to a word, the *Logic* considers
the case of words signifying the same thing but differ-
ing in the attitude associated to it. Two cases in par-
ticular are discussed: the different accessory ideas
connected with the effects of simple vs figurative
style, and the specific speaker's attitude connected to
obscene, taboo words, as opposed to acceptable ways
to refer to the very same things.

p0080   The range of phenomena mentioned in the *Logic's*
chapter on accessory ideas corresponds with remark-
able precision to the main phenomena that were to be
treated as connotations in 20th century linguistic and
stylistic literature. In fact, both the idea and the term
"accessory idea" were later to be found in discussions
of poetic language of the 18th and 19th centuries
and are likely to be the main source of the semiotic-
stylistic notion of connotation.

s0030   **Denotation, Connotation, and the
Problem of Additional Connotations
in J. S. Mill**

p0085   J. S. Mill in his *System of Logic* (1895) revises
Ockham's theory of connotation by limiting the
class of nonconnotative, or absolute terms, to proper
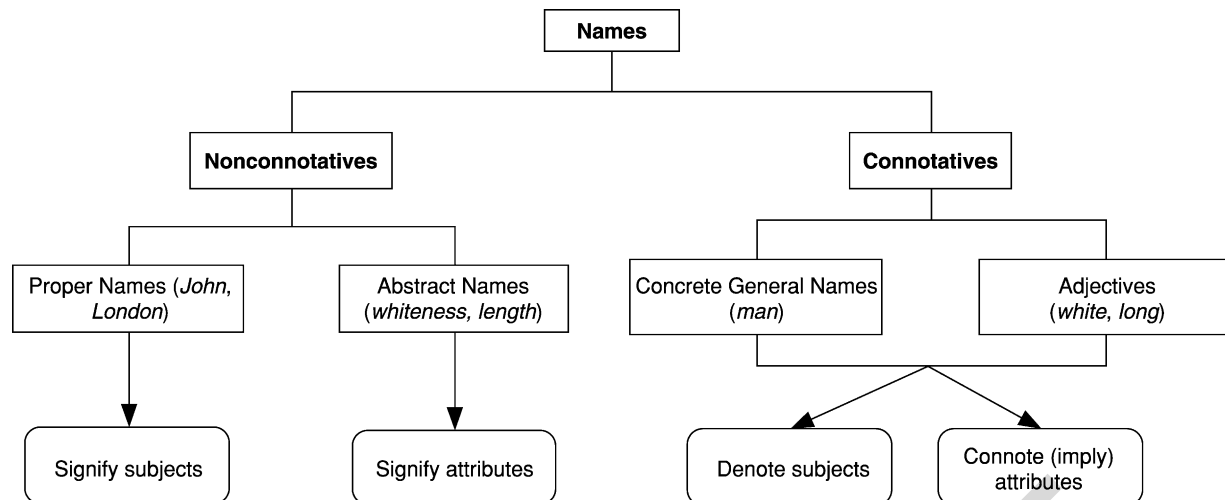names, which signify individual subjects (*John*,

Figure 3 Connotative names in J. S. Mill's *System of Logic*.

London) and to abstract names signifying properties: concrete general names such as *man* are considered connotative together with adjectives such as *white* (see **Figure 3**).

It is interesting to observe that while Mill's theory of connotative terms is rightly taken as the prime example of the philosophical use of the pair "denotation" vs "connotation," the *System of Logic* (Book IV, Chap. 4 and especially Chap. 5) also goes to some length to discuss a series of phenomena that are connected to the semiotic-stylistic use. In these chapters, J. S. Mill addresses the need of a language where general names have a meaning "steadily fixed and precisely determined" in order to carry out properly philosophical inquiry and argumentation, and analyzes the various obstacles natural languages set up to the fulfillment of this ideal requirement. One of these obstacles is the (diachronic) tendency of incorporating into the meaning of a term "circumstances accidentally connected with it at some time." Mill cites the examples of lat. *paganus* 'villager', which came to connote 'paganism' as country people were the last to abandon the old religion and of fr. *vilain* (from lat. *villa* 'farmhouse, village') – in the Middle Ages "a proper legal designation of the people who were subject to the less onerous forms of feudal bondage" – which became an insult, acquiring the connotations of 'crime' and 'guilt.' For J. S. Mill, the circumstances most likely to cling to a word by association and become "additional connotations" are those connected with pleasure and pain, emotion and moral judgment. The negative influence of such affective and moral acquired connotations can be felt, in particular, according to Mill, in the reasoning about morals and politics. Throughout this discussion, the term "connotation" retains its philosophical

use; however, what J. S. Mill calls additional or acquired connotations are close to some of the semiotic-stylistic uses of the term, and are likely to have been one of their sources.

The Emergence of the Semiotic-Stylistic Notions of Denotation and Connotation in 20th Century Linguistics

The main ideas and distinctions which are focal to the semiotic-stylistic use of the "denotation" and "connotation" were introduced, with a different terminology, at the very beginning of the 20th century by the German linguist Karl Otto Erdmann. In his study of lexical semantics (Erdmann 1900), he distinguished within the semantics of a word three dimensions: its main conceptual content (*Hauptbedeutung*), its secondary or associated representation or meaning (*Nebensinn*) and finally its emotional value (*Gefühlswert*). Erdmann showed how synonyms sharing the same conceptual content could be contrasted as concerns the associated representations or the emotional value attached to them. The latter two dimensions were later conflated in the notion of connotation.

The theme the emotional value of words was also prominent in Bally's theory of stylistics (Bally, 1909). The Swiss scholar conceives the stylistic study of the emotional aspects of linguistic expressions as involving the systematic establishment of series of synonyms sharing a core meaning but differing in the emotional values associated with them. He distinguishes two main types of emotional values associated with linguistic expressions: natural affective characters (which include attitudes and esthetic values directly associated with the expression) and effects based on the evocation of a milieu, which

include all the choices among different stylistic, dialectal and sociolectal variants of expression that are expected to excite emotion indirectly by evoking the speech community (milieu) connected with the variant selected. The effect is considered to be particularly strong when the expression is used outside its natural milieu and when there is a readily available nonmarked alternative in the standard language to refer to the object denoted.

The terms "denotation" and "connotation" are finally used in connection to this sort of phenomena in Leonard Bloomfield's *Language* (Bloomfield, 1933). The treatise presents a rich exemplification of connotation phenomena but only an extremely sketchy theoretical characterization of the distinction. At first, "connotation" is explained in terms of Bloomfield's behavioristic conception of meaning. Since in this conception the meaning of a linguistic form is identified with "the situation in which the speaker utters it and the hearer's response which it calls forth," connotation can be conceived as arising from partly deviant, individual, responses to "very unusual" circumstances of utterance. The distinction between denotation and connotation seems to be conceived as a distinction between stable meaning and the variable idiosyncratic effects an expression can have on an individual. The examples of connotation presented immediately thereafter by Bloomfield, however, do not concern at all instances of deviant interpretation and the individual psychology of the language user. Instead one finds a wealth of examples of connotations connected to the social standing of the speaker, local provenience, archaism, learned vs ordinary language, foreign and semi-foreign words, and slang. After this exemplification, Bloomfield somewhat revises his previous explanation by saying that there are connotations which are shared in a speech community as well as individual, deviant ones and that the former are not easily distinguished by "denotative meaning." In fact, there is no way, in Bloomfield's extremely behavioristic conception of meaning, to distinguish denotations and connotations once one admits that connotations can correspond to generalized responses. Other connotation phenomena discussed by Bloomfield in some detail include improper speech forms seen as contrasting with acceptable forms "with the same denotation" (*whore* vs *prostitute*), the avoidance of speech forms considered ominous in certain circumstances, the connotation associated with "symbolic forms" (both in the sense of phonosymbolism and onomatopoeia), which illustrate more immediately their meaning with respect to "ordinary" forms, nursery-forms (*papa* vs *father*) and hypocoristic forms (*Bob* vs *Robert*). Finally, discussing grammatical forms and syntax (Chap. X

and Chap. XII), Bloomfield remarks that differences in word order can have connotative values, referring, in particular, to the so-called free word order languages such as Latin.

The Notion of a Connotative Semiotics in the Tradition of Louis Hjelmslev

Louis Hjelmslev (1899–1965) provided, in his *Prolegomena to a theory of language* (1961), a theoretical treatment of the distinction between denotation and connotation underlying the range of connotation phenomena that are usually listed in the semantics and stylistics literature. Hjelmslev's model of denotation and connotation has been very influential in semiotics and is the main theoretical source from which prominent French semiotics students such as Algirdas Julien Greimas (1917–1992) and, in particular, Roland Barthes (1915–1980) draw for their work on connotative language.

Due to its highly general and abstract nature, Hjelmsev's model, ends up as expanding the range of phenomena that are ranged under the label of connotation. Reinterpretations (and sometimes also misreadings) by later scholars of semiotics adopting Hjelmslev's conception expand this area even further.
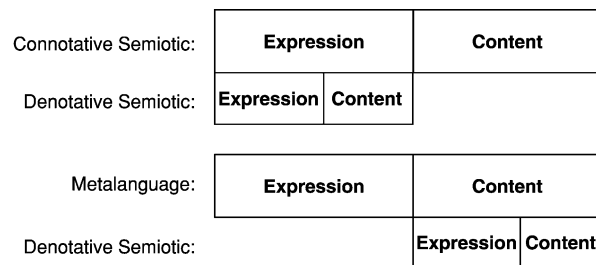
For Hjelmslev (1961) the opposition between denotation and connotation does not concern the typology of meanings. Rather it concerns the typology of languages (or more generally semiotic systems), and, more precisely, the way in which they realize the semiotic function. A connotational language (or connotative semiotic), for Hjelmslev, is a language whose expression plane is in itself a language, relating a plane of expression with a content plane. A denotational language (or denotative semiotic), on the other hand, is a semiotic system whose plane of expression cannot be further analyzed as a semiotic system. Denotation is a relation connecting the expression and the content of a sign, while connotation takes a sign as the expression of a further content. In Hjelmslev's system connotational language stands in an inverse relation with metalanguage, as a metalanguage, in fact, is a semiotic system whose content plane is constituted by another language (see **Figure 4**).

Hjelmslev (1961) lists just a few examples of contents that can be expressed by connotation, without entering into too much detail. These types of content include national languages, dialects, styles, genres, and voices. For instance, a person speaking a certain language, say Danish, connotes the content 'Danish language' all along her/his discourse, while he or she goes on denoting various contents. Systems of connotative signs are not necessarily isomorphic with the systems of denotative signs that make up their

| Connotative Semiotic: | Expression | | Content | |
| Denotative Semiotic: | Expression | Content | | |

| Metalanguage: | Expression | | Content | |
| Denotative Semiotic: | | | Expression | Content |

f0020   **Figure 4** The relationship between denotative semiotic and connotative semiotic an between denotative semiotics and metalanguage according to Hjelmslev's formulation.

expression plan. A unit of connotation, for example, can have as its expression plan several units of denotation, as it is the case, for example, with style. When connotation and denotation are isomorphic, the connotational language is said to derive from the form of the denotational one, while it is said to derive from its substance when the units of the two languages are articulated differently.

p0130   Despite the formal, geometric, and systematic appearance of Hjelmslev's formulation of the opposition between denotation and connotation, it is not easy to understand what was the intended scope and explanatory aim of the theory.

p0135   One interesting reconstruction of Hjelmslev's theory (Sonesson, 1989), based both on the definitions and on the few examples provided, sees connotation as residing in the meaningfulness of the choice of a particular expression to stand for a given content among a set of alternative, denotationally equivalent expressions, that is, connotation presupposes a set (or paradigm) of alternative expressions, which have the status of simple variant expressions for the same content at the denotational level but become relevant for the expression of a further level of meaning. Variants at the level of denotation become invariants at the level of connotation.

p0140   This paradigmatic dimension of choice between alternatives is implied by the very fact that Hjelmselv treated connotation as a secondary semiotic system for expressing meanings (dependent for its expression plane on another system) rather than just as secondary or accessory meanings. This reconstruction seems to fit well the case of stylistic choices, for example at the lexical level (e.g., choosing the word *steed* rather than *horse* to denote a certain animal in order to convey literariness), the use of euphemisms (e.g., *to pass away* rather than *to die*), the choice of a certain register, as well as the deliberate choice of a regional dialect or of a national language—both locally in code-switching and code-mixing phenomena, and more globally at the level of the entire communication event. The concept of choice, and the very notion

of a semiotic connotative system, becomes more problematic, however, when we deal with the simple fact of speaking a certain linguistic variety, irrespective of whether this is the result of a deliberate communicative choice of the speaker. Hjelmslev, for instance, maintains that a foreign (non-native) accent in speaking a certain language connotes the content "I am a foreigner." Certainly a non-native accent, inasmuch as it leads to infer a foreign origin, can be considered as a natural sign or symptom of foreign origin, an index in the sense of Peirce. It is far more controversial, however, if this inference is to be considered as encoded in a connotative semiotic system, and as the result of a choice within a paradigm of alternatives. Interestingly, the discussion of a borderline notion such as connotation raises the fundamental problem of the limits of a theory of semiotic codes.

p0145   In their readings of Hjelmslev, Barthes (1964) and Greimas (1970) assign to connotation phenomena, and consequently to semiotic codes, the widest interpretation. According to this line of thought, connotations exist as social facts independently of the communicative intentions of the speakers, and, consequently, the notion of choice evoked above cannot be taken literally as a choice of the speaker. Rather it is the simple actualization of one or another of the possibilities virtually present in the semiotic system. Barthes (1964), in particular, considers the scope semiotic codes coextensive with social realities and insists on the necessity of moving from a narrower semiotics of communication to a more encompassing semiotics of signification, which should not limit itself to the signs produced intentionally to communicate. For Barthes, Hjelmslev's notion of secondary, connotative, semiotic systems is one of the chief instruments for carrying out such a wider investigation of society *sub specie semioticae*. For Barthes (1964), connotative meanings can be identified with ideology, while connotative signifiers are identified with rhetoric. Rhetoric thus becomes the "signifying face of ideology."

p0150   In the practices of analysis of Barthes and other semioticians, the inventory of empirical phenomena ranged under the label "connotation" increases enormously with respect to the original – mainly sociolinguistic – list found in Hjelmslev, while from a theoretical viewpoint the definition of denotation and connotation remains, at least nominally, based on Hjelmslev's schema. Barthes, for instance, applies the label "connotation" to the semantic effects of figures of speech, but also, to all sorts of implicit meanings resulting from pragmatic inferences that take the explicit referential content as their starting point, as well as to the symbolic values (in the

psychoanalytic, Freudian sense of "symbol") of the people, things, events and situations referred to in the text.

p0155 The continuing relevance and explanatory power of Hjelmslev's schema for such a proliferation of diverse connotations have been, however, legitimately challenged. Kerbrat-Orecchioni (1977), for instance, observes that many inferences that Barthes treats as connotations, as well as the symbolic values, for instance, take the referents of the text as their starting point. Consequently, they do not depend, unlike sociolinguistic variants and figures of speech, on the choice of a particular expression to stand for a given content.

p0160 In a similar fashion, Umberto Eco (1976) refers to Hjelmslev's notions of a connotative semiotics, while applying the term "connotation" to what can be described as implications drawn from the denotatum of a sign on the basis of "a stable social convention, a scholarly training, a system of expectations deeply rooted in the patrimony of common opinions." Eco illustrates this notion with the following example: in the alarm system of a dam, a certain signal, say *AB*, denotes 'danger level;' at the same time, the engineer operating the dam knows that the danger level corresponds to the event of a flood and that, in this case, she must evacuate the water. Both these implications are treated by Eco as connotations of the signal based on a connotative semiotic code, which coincides with the knowledge of the engineer about the functioning of the dam.

p0165 It is worth noting that, in this perspective, the logical relation of entailment between 'danger level' and 'flood,' which is part of the engineer's knowledge, is reduced to a semiotic relation 'danger level' means (or connotes) 'flood' encoded in the connotative system, and the actual inference drawn by the engineer on the basis of this knowledge is reduced to the decoding of a token connotative sign. Such an interpretation, however, does not really fit Hjelmslev's model. Again, as Kerbrat-Orecchioni (1977) observes, it is only the denoted content ('danger level'), and not the whole denotative sign that makes up the expression of the connotative sign.

The Place of the Semiotic-Stylistic Distinction between Denotation and Connotation in a Semantic and Pragmatic Account of Meaning

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p0170 Apart from Hjelmslev's stratified model, there are only a few attempts at offering a definition of general import of the denotation vs connotation dichotomy capable of bringing together in a meaningful way either the whole range of connotation phenomena
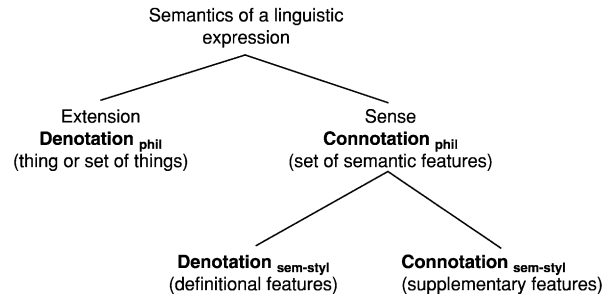
Figure 5 The relationship between the philosophical and the semiotic-stylistic notions of denotation and connotation. Adapted from Kerbrat-Orecchioni (1977: 12).

discussed in the literature or a significant portion of it. One such attempt is Kerbrat-Orecchioni (1977), which presents a general definition of the distinction between denotation and connotation alternative to Hjelmslev's model together with a typology of connotation phenomena. Kerbrat-Orecchioni's work has the merit of explicitly situating the semiotic-stylistic notions of denotation and connotation with respect to the philosophical distinction and represents at least an interesting starting point for the difficult task of understanding the role of such a distinction in the study of meaning in its semantic and pragmatic aspects.

p0175 While in its philosophical sense the distinction between denotation and connotation sets apart the extension of an expression (the thing or set of things itrefers to) from its intension, sense or meaning, in the semiotic-stylistic use denotation and connotation distinguish two aspects of sense (fr. *signification*). Following the linguistic tradition structural semantics, sense is identified by Kerbrat-Orecchioni with a set of meaning components, or semantic features. Within sense, denotation corresponds to those definitional features which are strictly necessary to the univocal identification of the referent, while connotation corresponds to supplementary features (cf. **Figure 5**).

p0180 The identification of linguistic sense, seen as including both definitional and supplementary features, with the philosophical notion of connotation is not, however, straightforward. Firstly, as Kerbrat-Orecchioni herself observes, philosophical connotation can be interpreted in a strict sense as consisting of the sole properties determining extension, and thus coinciding exactly with denotation in the semiotic-stylistic use. A second, more subtle, difference concerns the ontological status of the two notions: philosophical connotation, as conceived for instance by Stuart-Mill, is a property or set of properties, conceived metaphysically as real modes of being inherent in the denotatum, while sense, in the structural linguistics tradition, is a metalinguistic paraphrase,

and while we can conceive definitional semantic features as corresponding to actual properties of the referent, the ontological status of the supplementary features is much more uncertain.

This approach to the semiotic-stylistic notions of denotation and connotation rests crucially on the possibility of distinguishing between the semantic features that are relevant for the identification of the referent of a linguistic expression and those that are not. It is not obvious, however, in what sense a meaning component can be irrelevant referentially. Kerbrat-Orecchioni illustrates the distinction with the French lexical units *pomme de terre* and *patate*: both units denote the same vegetable ('potato'), and thus have the same denotative semantic features, to these features the lexeme *patate* adds the connotative feature 'informal, casual register' (fr. *langue familière*). This feature is referentially irrelevant in the sense that it does not say anything about the properties of the vegetable referred to, but instead says something about the properties of the speech situation in which the lexical unit is used.

According to Kerbrat-Orecchioni (1977), when the information provided by a certain meaning component does not concern the discourse referent, this is a sufficient condition to consider it as a connotation. Such connotative meaning components can appear both as additional meaning components of expressions that have a denotative meaning, as in the case of fr. *patate* discussed above, or as the sole meanings of particular means of expression that do not participate in the denotation. Such means of expression include phonetic features and prosody, but also specific grammatical constructions and specific derivational morphemes. For example, hypocoristic suffixes in languages such as Italian (Dressler and Merlini Barbaresi, 1994) often do not provide any information about the denotatum of the lexical unit, but rather concern the nature or the mood of the communicative situation, such as in the case of bay-talk:

> *No non toccare l'acqu-etta!*
> no not touch the water-DIM

or modulate the speech act performed, such as in mitigated requests:

> *Posso avere un caffe-uccio?*
> can-I have a coffee-DIM

Honorific forms, in languages such as Japanese, are another area of morphology with essentially connotative function according to Kerbrat-Orecchioni's criterion.

Although the notion of meanings that do not participate in the individuation of the referent and are not "about the discourse referent" suggested by Kerbrat-Orecchioni (1977) is suggestive and appears plausible with respect to the examples discussed above; this concept still remains very vague, and there is no obvious way to make it precise.

Certainly the nonreferential nature of connotation cannot be construed as the aberrant idea that these are meanings without referents, that connotational concepts do not intentionate anything, that their meanings are not about something. Obviously, they are about speaker attitudes, values, emotions, social facts, communicative situations, etc. A more plausible reconstruction would be to say that connoted meanings do not contribute to the act of reference when we are dealing with materials appearing in the context of referring expressions, and, more generally, that they are not part of the truth conditions of the proposition directly associated with the meaning of the sentence in which they appear, or in other words that they belong to nonpropositional meaning. This reconstruction highlights the fact that all phenomena habitually associated with connotation exhibit the basic properties shared by all nonpropositional semantic components (e.g., they are not part of the asserted content and cannot be negated). It is clear, at the same time, that this notion of nonreferentiality is too generic to single out connotation phenomena and to distinguish them from a variety of nonpropositional meaning phenomena including illocutionary meanings, nonpropositional epistemic and evaluative attitudes, presuppositions, information structure, conversational and conventional implicatures, etc.

The relationship between the phenomena ranged under the semiotic-stylistic use of connotation and the different theoretical categories that have been developed for the study of nonpropositional meaning in semantics and pragmatics remains a largely unexplored area.

See also: Barthes, Roland, theory of the sign (01395); Connotation (04331); Descriptions, Definite and Indefinite, Philosophical aspects (01160); Extensionality and Intensionality (01039); Greimas, Algirdas J., theory of the sign (01413); Hjelmslev, Louis, theory of the sign (01416); Meaning, Sense, and Reference (01425); Sense and Reference, Philosophical aspects (01226); Taboo euphemism and political correctness (01092).

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Abstract:

The article discusses both the philosophical use and the stylistic-semiotic uses of the pair ''denotation'' and ''connotation.'' A historical review reconstructs the development of the philosophical use from the medieval doctrine of denominatives to the work of J. S. Mill, while the origins of the stylistic-semiotic opposition are traced back to the *Logic* of Port-Royal and, again, to the work of J. S. Mill. Hjemslev's attempt at providing a general definition of the semiotic-stylistic use of ''denotation'' and ''connotation'' in terms of a relationship between semiotic codes is discussed in detail. In its final section, the article discusses the logical relationship between the two uses of the distinction and the place of semiotic-stylistic connotation in an account of the semantic and pragmatic aspects of meaning.

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