Improving Vocabulary
Word Connotation and Denotation
Today's Objective

Students will differentiate between word connotation and denotation.
Even though synonyms are said to be words with the same meaning, very few words have exactly the same meaning. **Usage and connotation** give words special meanings.
All words convey a literal meaning, the specific meaning found in a dictionary.
This is called denotation.
Many words, however, stir up emotions or suggest associations. This is called connotation.
Take the word shark, a marine carnivorous fish with large teeth. What do we associate with the word shark? **DANGER!**

Can you think of a single person who doesn’t feel some fear at the very mention of this word?
Writers have always been sensitive to the emotional power of words. Writers who wish to create a more emotional response in their readers will choose words with a stronger connotation.
The choice of words often reveals a writer’s attitude toward a subject.

**Example:**
The boy seemed very youthful.

The boy seemed very immature.
**The Power of Words**

**Immature** suggests that the boy is childish and juvenile. Using that word makes it clear that the writer’s attitude is negative.

**Youthful** just suggests he is young.
Let’s take a look at the words: trip and vacation.

Both words have similar denotations, but vacation has an extra level of meaning.

It makes us feel a sense of freedom, relaxation, and fun.
Understanding connotations is important because some words have similar denotations but opposite connotations.
The city was bustling with people during the holiday.
The city was *mobbed* with people during the holiday.

http://www.urban75.org/photos/newyork/ny203.html
**Connotation**

In these examples, the words *bustling* and *mobbed* both mean “filled.”

However, **bustling** suggests a positive feeling of energy and excitement, while **mobbed** suggests a feeling of overcrowding and restricted movement.
Which words have a more positive connotation?

Every October the old maple *(paints, litters)* the lawn with its falling leaves.

The girl ran *(courageously, recklessly)* into the flaming barn to save her colt.

We walked at a *(leisurely, sluggish)* pace.
Every October the old maple **paints** the lawn with its falling leaves.

The girl ran **courageously** into the flaming barn to save her colt.

We walked at a **leisurely** pace.
The man and woman were retired and living on a fixed income, which forced them to be very -

A. generous.
B. cheap.
C. careless.
D. thrifty.

How did you do?
**Connotation**

*Cheap* and *thrifty* have close to the same dictionary meaning. However, the connotation of the word *cheap* is so different.

It’s almost like a criticism, while *thrifty* seems more like a natural description of a way someone is forced to live and implies a wise or careful use of what’s available.
Word Denotation & Connotation

Let’s say you want to describe someone.
The first word that comes to your mind is loud.
Now, you have to decide if loud is the best word to use in this situation.

Perhaps a synonym fits better:

Loud can describe many things, from sounds to people to colors.
From Roget’s II, The New Thesaurus

**loud**  
*adjective*

1. marked by extremely high volume:  
   earsplitting, deafening, roaring

2. tastelessly showy:  
   chintzy, flashy, gaudy, tacky, garish

3. offensive in manner:  
   unpleasant, aggressive, distasteful
Word Connotation

**Negative**
There are over 3,000 vagrants in this city.

**Neutral**
There are over 3,000 people with no fixed address in this city.

**Positive**
There are over 3,000 homeless in this city.
All three expressions refer to the same people, but they trigger different associations in a reader's mind:

A **vagrant** is often seen as a public nuisance, while a **homeless** may have fallen into hard times.
Someone writing an editorial in support of a new shelter might use the **positive** form.

Yet someone writing an editorial in support of anti-loitering laws would use the **negative** form.
The connotation of some words - or the attitudes we associate with them - can be seen in these pairs of words that are similar in meaning, but different in the **positive or negative attitudes** they evoke in most people.

- refreshing – chilly
- plain – natural
- clever – sly
- snob – cultured
- cop – officer
- skinny – slender

**Can you tell which words evoke positive feelings?**
Positive Connotation:
The child held tightly to his mother.

Negative Connotation:
The kid hung onto his mother.
The words **child** and **held tightly** sound more sensitive and compassionate than **kid** and **hung onto**.
Positive Connotation:
The doctor gave the child an injection.

Negative Connotation:
The doctor gave the child a shot.
Choose the word below that suggests a more positive connotation.

The portions at the restaurant were -

A. sufficient

B. adequate

How did you do?
Both of these words mean enough.

However – **Sufficient** suggests exactly what is needed.

While the word **adequate** implies barely enough.

*Can you see the difference?*
If you look up the words **house** and **home** in a dictionary, you’d find that both words have almost the same meaning - "a dwelling place."

However, the expression above suggests that home has an additional meaning.
“A house is not always a home.”

The feelings, images, and memories that surround a word make up its **connotation**.

Why do you think that real estate advertisers use the word **home** more frequently than **house**?
The glass has **shattered**.
The glass has **cracked**.

Both words mean “broken,” but have different connotations. Cracked is less severe than shattered. Shattered implies being broken violently into many pieces and beyond repair. Cracked implies it’s not completely destroyed.
Hector was a ______________ teenager whose arms and legs seemed to get in his own way.

Which of the following words has a less flattering or more negative connotation?
A. tall

B. gangling
Practice Question

The word **gangling** implies that someone is very tall and usually awkward.

**Tall** just implies having greater than ordinary height.

*How did you do?*
There is nothing wrong with the old hotels in Las Vegas. However, many hotels are antiquated and should be replaced.

Which of the following words has a more positive connotation?

A. old

B. antiquated
Practice Question

The word **antiquated** suggests the hotels are old-fashioned and out of date.

**Old** merely suggests they’ve been around for a long time.

**How did you do?**
The audience ____________ when the master of ceremonies introduced the singer by the wrong name.

Which of the following words has a less flattering or more negative connotation?

A. snickered
B. chuckled
Practice Question

The word **snicker** suggests laughing *at* someone in a smirking, unkind way.

**Chuckle** suggests a more good natured type of laughter *with* someone.

*How did you do?*
My neighbor is always __________ dressed when she goes out.

Which of the following words has a more flattering connotation?

A. nicely  
B. impeccably

How did you do?
The word impeccable suggests flawless, elegant, and close to perfect.

While the word nice is also a compliment, it suggests neat, presentable, and suitable and is not quite as strong.
Connotation is the emotional association surrounding a word.

Denotation is the strict dictionary meaning of a word.
Copyright Notice

Permission is granted to copy (unmodified) all or part of this PowerPoint for educational, personal, non-commercial use off-line as long as the copyright message (Copyright © 2006 by Jill Leone) is maintained on the title page. This material may not be sold, duplicated on other websites, incorporated in commercial documents or products, or used for promotional purposes.

Copyright © 2006 by Jill M. Leone