

Denotation, Connotation, and Tone

Poetry 1

-Ni Wayan Swardhani W.-

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The Meaning of Words

- Poetry uses words in a brand new way
- The word is uniquely used that a reader or listener may not understand what it means
- Factors affecting language understanding:
 - knowledge on the meaning of individual words
 - context recognition

The first step of understanding poetry →
understanding the meaning of individual words.



Poetry is the form of writing that welcomes the
eccentricities of word.

No word in poetry can be moved or replaced without
changing and perhaps harming the whole work.

Let's try to replace some of the words. Do you see any difference?

Success is counted sweetest
By those who ne'er succeed.
To comprehend a nectar
Requires sorest need.

Can you translate the work
properly?

Kami mati muda. Yang tinggal tulang diliputi debu

Kenang, kenanglah kami

Denotation

- A word conveys the same idea to both the speaker and the listener
- Definitions in nearly any good dictionary
- The exact and literal meaning
- Denotative meaning is closely related to the history, association and the environment where the word is used → may change over time

Connotation

- Meaning determined by the ideas associated with or suggested by the word.
- Enrich the meaning and delight of a poem.
- May change over time, just like denotation.

The example

- “flower”
 - Denotation: a part of plant
 - Connotation: girl, beauty and delicacy

A slumber did my spirit seal;
I had no human fears--
She seemed a thing that could not feel
The touch of earthly years.

No motion has she now, no force;
She neither hears nor sees;
Roll'd round in earth's diurnal course
With rocks, and stones, and trees.

A Slumber Did My Spirit Seal by William Wordsworth

Tone

- The attitude that we feel in it.
- The writer's attitude and feeling toward the subject in the poem.
- Neglecting the existence of tone in poetry can mislead our understanding of the poem.

- A poet can put forward his/her underlying sentiments through the rhythm, images and word choices.
- Poets refine their language, but they usually wish to achieve the spontaneity of sincere expression.
(Bergman and Epstein, 1987)
- Several kinds of tone:
 - a poem of praise → tone of approval
 - irony, playful, humorous, regretful, angry, neutral and convincing.

A poem with subtle/neutral tone

At ten A.M. the young housewife
moves about in negligee behind
The wooden walls of her husband's house.
I pass solitary and in my car.

Then again she comes to the curb
To call the ice-man, fish-man, and stands
Shy, uncorseted, tucking in
Stray ends of hair, and I compare her
To a fallen leaf.

The noiseless wheels of my car
Rush with a crackling sound over
Dried leaves as I bow and pass smiling

- The speaker tells about a woman that he finds attractive.
- Instead of saying, "What a beautiful housewife!", he seems to be cool in describing the woman.
- He does not exaggerate her charm.
- He only compares her to a fallen leaf.
- We can feel a restraint of expression → it sounds neutral.

A poem with didactic tone

Success is counted sweetest
By those who ne'er succeed.
To comprehend a nectar
Requires sorest need.

Not one of all the purple host
Who took the flag to-day
Can tell the definition,
So clear, of victory,

As he, defeated, dying,
On whose forbidden ear
The distant strains of triumph
Break, agonized and clear

- Didactic poem usually aims to teach.
- Because of its purpose, the tone is distinctive and convincing.
- In the first quatrain of the poem → it teaches the readers about struggle that one needs to gain/feel success.
- By presenting it like a lesson, a proportion (the first quatrain) is followed by illustrations (2nd and 3rd quatrains).

A poem with comic tone

There was a King and he had three daughters,

And they all lived in a basin of water;

The basin bended,

My story's ended.

If the basin had been stronger,

My story would have been longer.

- comic/amusing tone → a comic attitude of the poet toward the subject.
- The comic tone is usually an effect of feminine rhyme.
- A comic poet's repertoire has two popular tricks:
 - *pun* → a play on words with similar sounds or on a single word with different meanings
 - *Spoonerism* → a slip of the tongue that exchanges the parts of two words

For example → " Let's sit by the fire and spin"

becomes Let's spit the fire and sin".

Let's do the exercises starting on page 20

Which word in each group has the most “romantic” connotation?

a. horse, steed, donkey

b. king, ruler, tyrant

c. rose, flower, plant

Which word in each group is the most emotionally connotative?

a. female, mother, dame

b. offspring, children, progeny

c. brother, sibling

Arrange the words in each group
from most positive to most
negative in connotation:

a. skinny, thin, gaunt, slender

b. prosperous, loaded, moneyed

c. brainy, intelligent, eggheaded, smart

In the following examples the denotation for the word *white* remains the same, but the connotations differ. Explain.

- a) The young princess had blue eyes, golden hair, and a breast as white as snow.
- b) Confronted with the evidence, the young princess turned as white as a sheet.

Please identify and explain the connotative meaning of the lines below.

a) Remember me when I am gone away,
Gone far away into the silent land; (Christina
Rossetti)

b) The soul selects her own society,
Then shut the door; (Emily Dickinson)

c) Forgive us, mother
as we have taken your gold
and ignored your beauty

6) Read the short poem below and answer the following questions.

***The Adversary* by Phyllis McGinley**

A mother's hardest to forgive.
Life is the fruit she longs to hand you,
Ripe on a plate. And while you live,
Relentlessly she understands you.

a) What word in the poem is nearest to the title in its connotation?

b) What is the tone of the poem?
