63. Connotation (in Linguistic Semantics)

1. The Term Connotation
2. Lexical Connotation
3. Linguistic Manifestations of Lexical Connotations
4. Distinguishing a Connotation from a Component of a Lexicographic Definition
5. Lexical Connotation in the Dictionary
6. Literature (selected)

Abstract

The article deals with the semantic term “connotation”. It is claimed that the common linguistic understanding of connotation is extremely broad and vague: it covers variegated phonetic, stylistic, enunciative, and semantic properties of linguistic units (Kerbrat-Orecchioni 1977; Sansome 1986). In this research the connotation is defined in a more constrained way, namely, it is restricted to semantic connotations of lexical units (LUs). A line is drawn between the lexical connotations and the metaphorical associations implied by a lexical unit. The wide-spread idea that lexical connotations are “non-cognitive semantic components” in the meaning of a lexical unit — emotive/expressive and modal/evaluative components in particular — is rejected. Following Apresjan 1974, 1995, it is further claimed, that the lexical connotation is not a component of the meaning of a word. It is rather a characteristic of a lexical unit L which is both language-specific and definitely not part of the lexicographic definition of L.

1. The term connotation

The term connotation, which often appears in linguistic studies, especially in semantics, is used by various authors in different senses. (On the history of the term, which originated with William of Ockham (1295–1349), and its various uses and interpretations, see Garza-Cuarón 1991.) The known senses of the term connotation fall in two groups (Lyons 1977, 176): connotation as a logical-philosophical notion and connotation as a linguistic notion. The logical-philosophical connotation is opposed to denotation: the former is the intension (in Carnap’s sense) of the name N of a class of objects, i. e., the content of the corresponding concept, while the latter is the extension of N, i. e., the set of all objects named by N. As for the common linguistic understanding of connotation, it is extremely broad and vague: it covers variegated phonetic, stylistic, enunciative, and semantic properties of all sorts of linguistic units (e. g., Kerbrat-Orecchioni 1977 and Sansome 1986). Contrary to this trend, the linguistic connotation will be defined here in a more constrained way. First, the term connotation will be restricted to semantic connotations of lexical units [= LUs] only, that is, to lexical semantic connotations for short, lexical connotations (this excludes synaesthetic characteristics as well as dialectal and stylistic features). Second, a line is drawn between, on the one hand, lexical connotations and, on the other hand, cultural and metaphorical associations...
implied by an lexical unit (such information as ‘love is like war’, ‘love is like a game’, ‘anger is like a dangerous animal’, etc. – see Lakoff 1987, 381 ff.). Third, the widespread idea that lexical connotations are “non-cognitive semantic components” in the meaning of a lexical unit, in particular emotive/expressive and modal/evaluative components, is rejected. For us, lexical connotation is not a component of a word meaning at all. We believe (following Apresjan 1974, 67 f.; 1995, 159) that lexical connotation is a characteristic of a lexical unit L that, first, is language-specific, and second, is not part of the lexicographic definition of L.

2. Lexical connotation

Let us consider the two above mentioned properties of lexical connotations.

i) The extent to which lexical connotations are language-specific is well shown by Isačenko (1972), who presents different connotations associated with the names of the same animal in Russian, German, and Czech. Thus, the Russian noun koza ‘she-goat’ and its diminutive form kozońka connote ‘extraordinary mobility and grace [in a young female]’ something pleasant. The German noun Ziege, also ‘she-goat’, has a set of very different – unpleasant – connotations: ‘excessive curiosity’, ‘choosiness’ and ‘stupidity’ [in a woman]. In Russian, vol ‘ox’ connotes ‘ability to patiently do hard work without balking’, but the Czech noun vůl ‘ox’ connotes ‘extreme stupidity’. In German, the noun Frösch ‘frog’ (often with the adjectives süßer ‘sweet’ or lieber ‘dear’) is a standard term of endearment for a baby; in Czech, the corresponding nouns žába ‘frog’, žáb ‘small male frog’, žabka ‘small female frog’ are used as familiar terms for little girls, adolescent girls, and young women. In Russian, however, it would be impossible to call a young girl ljuaguška ‘frog’, or even ljuagušečka ‘dear little frog’, without insulting her, because the connotation of this Russian noun is completely different ‘slippery and cold’: skol’zkij/xolodnyj, kak ljuaguška ‘slippery/cold like a frog’. (For interesting data about different connotations of animal names in Russian and French, see Gutman/Ceremisina 1972, dies. 1975.)

Purely linguistic nature of lexical connotations can be observed within one language as well. Russian nouns osël ‘donkey’ and išak ‘donkey’ denote exactly the same animal and have roughly the same meaning (although išak includes an additional component: ‘in Central Asia or Caucasus’). However, these nouns have quite different connotations: osël OSĚL (Ib) ‘male donkey’ connotes ‘(stub-born) stupidity’ (OSĚL (Ia)) ‘donkey’ refers to the species), and IŠAK (Ia) – ‘accepting exploitation without balking’. These connotations manifest themselves, among other things, in the figurative senses of these nouns: OSĚL (II) means ‘(stubbornly) stupid male individual’ and IŠAK (II) is ‘person who accepts exploitation without balking’.

ii) As was pointed out, a connotation of a lexical unit L is not part of L’s lexicographic definition. The components of a lexicographic definition must ensure correct lexical selection and correct lexical cooccurrence, and connotations do nothing of the kind. If the connotations of OSĚL (Ib) and IŠAK Ia were included into the meanings ‘osël Ib’ and ‘išak Ia’, they would bar some correct phrases – such as umnyj osël ‘an intelligent he-donkey’ and lenivyj išak ‘a lazy donkey’ (when speaking of animals). Which is more,
different connotations of the same lexical unit can be almost contradictory: russ. sobaka ‘dog’ connotes both ‘devotion’ (which manifests itself in the derived adjective SOBAČIJ (II) ‘embodying or expressing high devotion’: cf. sobačja predannosť ‘dog’s devotion’ or sobačij vzgljaj ‘doggishly devoted look’) and ‘despicability’ (SOBAKA (II) ‘despicable person’ ≈ ‘scoundrel’). A lexicographic definition cannot of course contain two (quasi-)contradictory components.

A rigorous definition of lexical connotation (Iordanskaja/Melčuk 1980, dies. 1984) follows:

A lexical connotation ‘C’ of an lexical unit L of language L is a meaning such that 1) it is associated with the referent of L by language L, but 2) is not part of L’s lexicographic definition. These two properties of lexical connotation are discussed in Sections 3 and 4.

3. Linguistic manifestations of lexical connotations

As we have said, lexical connotations of an lexical unit L are associated with the referent of L by language L, that is, they have explicit manifestations in L. More precisely:

The meaning ‘C’ associated with the referent of an lexical unit L by language L has a linguistic manifestation in L if and only if L has an lexical unit L’ such that 1) L and L’ have a common stem and 2) the lexicographic definition of L’ includes ‘C’.

Such a situation obtains in the following three cases (illustrated with the Russian noun svin’ja I ‘pig’, having the connotation ‘dirtiness’):

i. L and L’ stand in a relation of polysemy: svin’ja (I) ~ svin’ja (II) ‘dirty person’.
   (For more on the role of connotations for polysemy, see Percova 1985.)

ii. L and L’ stand in a relation of derivation: svin’ja I ~ svinjačit’ ‘[to] cause much dirt [somewhere]’ ≈ ‘[to] make a mess’.

iii. L is part of a phraseme L’ whose meaning includes ‘c’: svin’ja I ~ [žit’] kak svin’ja ‘[live] dirtyly’.

Here are four more Russian examples.

veter ‘wind’

Connotations

a) ‘Freedom’: the phraseme vol’nyj, kak veter lit. ‘free as the wind’.

b) ‘Fast motion’: the phrasemes mčats’ju, kak veter lit. ‘[to] rush as the wind’; [Ego] kak vetrom sdulo lit. ‘[He] disappeared as if blown away by the wind’.

c) ‘Excessive changeability’: the phrasemes deržat’ nos po vetru lit. ‘[to] keep one’s nose in the wind’ ≈ ‘being unscrupulously changeable, [to] try to perceive the changes in the situation so as to better adapt oneself to it’; znat’, kuda/otkuda veter duet lit. ‘[to] know which way the wind is blowing’ ≈ ‘being unscrupulously changeable, [to] be able to perceive quickly the changes in the situation so as to better adapt oneself to it’.

d) ‘Being not serious’: the noun veternik lit. ‘windy person’ ≈ ‘flighty person’ ≈ ‘person who is not serious in amorous relationships’ and the phraseme [U nego] veter v golove lit. ‘[He has] wind in his head’ ≈ ‘[He is] not serious in whatever he does’.
e) ‘Blowing away’: brosat’ slova na veter lit. ‘[to] throw one’s words to the winds’ ≈ ‘[to] speak so that words are wasted’; pustit’ Y po vetru ≈ ‘[to] throw Y to the winds’ ≈ ‘[to] waste fortune Y’.

**voda** ‘water’

**Connotation**

‘Insufficient content’: manifested in a figurative sense of *voda* — ‘text with insufficient information content’ [in predicative construction only], as in Vsja pervaja glava knigi — (čistaja) voda lit. ‘The whole first chapter of the book is nothing but (pure) water’.

**pilit’** (I) ‘[to] saw’ (from Aprejan 1974, 67)

**Connotation**

‘Tedious cyclicity’: manifested in a figurative sense of *pilit’* (II) ‘[to] nag, [to] pester’, as in Žena večno pilit ego ‘His wife nags him all the time’.

**rozovyj** (I) ‘pink, rosy’

**Connotation**

‘Idealizing the world’: manifested in a figurative sense of *rozovyj* (II) ‘pleasant, but unreal’, as in rozovye melyty ‘rosy dreams’; and in the phrasemes v rozovom svete ‘idealizing’, as in videť N v rozovom svete lit. ‘[to] see N in a rosy light’, and (smotreť) skvoz rozovye očki lit. ‘([to] look) through rosy glasses’.

Linguistic manifestations oppose lexical connotations of lexical units to encyclopedic connotations of the referents of lexical units. Encyclopedic connotations of an entity R referred to by the lexical unit L are determined by either real properties of R or culturally-determined received ideas about R; they have no particular linguistic manifestation in L. Encyclopedic connotations based on real, inherent properties of R are universal, as they come from the knowledge of the referents. Such are, for instance, the nutritiousness of meat or the care-requiring helplessness of a baby. Note that a drawing of a baby conjures up the same encyclopedic connotations as the word for ‘baby’ in any language (Leech 1975, 15). Encyclopedic connotations based on cultural associations are of course not universal (cf. cultural connotations of women that change with geography and history: Leech 1975, 14). Thus, for Russians, brown rye bread, called černyj xleb, connotes poverty; however, the collocation černyj xleb does not have the lexical connotation ‘poverty’ — such a lexical connotation would have no linguistic manifestations. (On the other hand, the collocation černaja ikra, lit. ‘black caviar’, connotes ‘luxury’ — and this is a lexical connotation, because Russian has a phraseme est’ černuju ikru ložkami ‘[to] eat caviar with spoons’ = ‘[to] have a luxurious life’.) Encyclopedic connotations may serve as a basis for comparisons not codified by the language (codified comparisons are phrasemes, so that properties of objects mentioned in them may constitute lexical connotations), for opposition and pseudo-tautological constructions, etc. Such expressions as russ. Malčiki est malčiki ‘Boys will be boys’, On nastojaščij malčik ‘He is a real boy’ or Perestan’ plakat’, ty že malčik! ‘Stop crying, you are a boy!’ are produced based on culturally-determined information: a typical boy is strong, courageous, unruly, etc. These encyclopedic connotations of boys have
no linguistic manifestations in Russian. Therefore, the noun malčik has no lexical connotations.

However, any encyclopedic connotation may in principle become lexical in a particular language. Thus, culturally-induced encyclopedic connotations of men — strong, courageous, self-possessed, firm — are linguistically manifested in Russian: cf. the derivatives mužskoj ‘manly’/po- mužski ‘in a manly way’ and the phrasemes kak mužčina lit. ‘as a man’ ≈ ‘courageously/in a reliable way’ and bud’ mužčinoj/ lit. ‘Be a man!’ ≈ ‘Behave courageously!’ Interestingly, the noun ženčina ‘woman’, which has lexical connotations ‘grace’ and ‘care-fulness’, seen in the derivatives ženskij ‘womanly’, po-ženski ‘in a womanly way’, ženstvennyj ‘feminine, woman-like’, does not form phrasemes *kak ženčina or *bud´ ženčinoj!

4. Distinguishing a connotation from a component of a lexicographic definition

Meanings linked to an lexical unit L are of two types: some are part of [= are included in] the meaning of L, while some others are not.

Meanings of the first type are components in the lexicographic definition of L; they appear in the semantic representation of the utterance which contains L and participate in transition from meaning to text. Namely, a linguistic meaning ‘s’ is a component in the lexicographic definition of L if ‘s’ is necessary for the description of one of the two major linguistic operations:

Lexical selection: ‘s’ is necessary to choose L correctly when starting from a representation of initial meaning of an utterance.

Lexical combination: ‘s’ is necessary to ensure the correct cooccurrence of L with other lexical units.

Meanings of the second type are lexical connotations of L; they do not appear in the semantic representation and are not involved in ‘Meaning − Text’ processes. Such meanings reflect the paradigmatic correlations between lexical units: the lexical connotation ‘s’ of L is necessary to represent explicitly the semantic links between L and formally related lexical units L’.

Each full lexical unit has a lexicographic definition, but not all full lexical unit have lexical connotations.

Theoretically, the distinction between definition components and lexical connotations is clear and can be easily drawn in many cases. Consider, for instance, the staple example: the adjectives famous vs. notorious, which are commonly said to have the same (denotative) meaning — ‘widely known’, but different connotation — ‘approved’ vs. ‘disapproved’. However, meanings ‘approved’ vs. ‘disapproved’ are necessary for the correct selection of the adjective (famous philanthropist vs. notorious robber) and, therefore, they are components in the corresponding definitions.

Practically, however, this distinction is not always easy to establish so that some special tests may be helpful. For the time being, two such tests can be proposed. Let there be an lexical unit L with a hypothetical connotation ‘C’.

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A. *Antonymy test.*

If the addition to $L$ of a modifier with a meaning antonymous to ‘$C$’ produces logical contradiction, then ‘$C$’ is not a connotation of $L$ but a part of $L$’s definition; otherwise, ‘$C$’ is a connotation of $L$.

For example, the Russian lexeme *osël* (II) [person] ‘ass’ implies ‘stupidity’. Since the sentence $^2$Ivan = umnyj osël ‘Ivan is an intelligent ass’ is contradictory, ‘stupidity’ must be a component in the definition of the lexeme in question: *osël* (II) ‘(stubbornly) stupid male individual’. Any Russian speaker feels that *osël* (I) is related to *osël* (Ib) [animal] ‘he-donkey’ and in this way ‘stupidity’ becomes associated with *osël* (Ib). Since the expression umnyj *osël* ‘intelligent he-donkey’ applied to an animal is not contradictory, ‘stupidity’ cannot be a part of the definition of *osël* (Ib); consequently, it is its connotation.

B. *Function test.*

This test applies in case when ‘$C$’ refers to an essential function of the object denoted by $L$. If the fact that this object is out of order entails that it cannot normally perform the function ‘$C$’, then ‘$C$’ is a component of $L$’s definition; otherwise, it is a connotation of $L$.

For example, compare the description of Russian *golova* [body part] ‘head’ and *serdce* [internal organ] heart’. A Russian speaker associates with *golova* the meaning ‘seat of reason’ and with *serdce* the meaning ‘seat of emotions’ — in quite a parallel fashion. However, *U menja bolit golova, i po ē tomu ona ploxo rabotaet*, lit. ‘My head aches and therefore it works poorly’ ≈ ‘[…] and therefore I cannot reason’ is a normal sentence, while *U menja bol’noe serdce, i po ē tomu ono ne sposobno čuvstvovat’, lit. ‘My heart is sick and therefore it is unable to feel’ is pragmatically deficient. As a result, the meaning ‘seat of reason’ is a component in the definition of *golova*; but the meaning ‘seat of emotions’ cannot be part of the definition of *serdce* — it is a connotation of this lexical unit.

These tests are of course not applicable in all cases (the first does not work if ‘$C$’ has no antonym; the second is limited to nouns denoting ‘functioning’ objects). As a result, sometimes it is difficult to say whether ‘$C$’ linked to $L$ is $L$’s connotation or a component in $L$’s definition. However, the existence of intermediate situations without a unique solution is quite typical of natural language and linguistics.

5. *Lexical connotation in the dictionary*

Lexical connotation is thus a way of representing in the dictionary the semantic link perceived by speakers between lexical units $L$ and $L’$ that have the common stem but whose definitions have no non-trivial part in common (no semantic bridge). More precisely, the definition of $L’$ contains a semantic component ‘$C$’ which, according to our criteria, cannot be a semantic component in the definition of $L$, but can be $L$’s lexical connotation. In such a case, a semantic bridge between $L$ and $L’$ is ensured by the connotation ‘$C$’. For instance:

*Osël* (Ia) ‘domestic animal used to carry loads smaller than a horse, gray, with long hanging ears, […]’.
Osël (Ib) ‘male osël (Ia)’
Connotation: ‘(stubbornly) stupid’

Osël Ia ‘(stubbornly) stupid male person’

Formally, then, the two last lexical units show a semantic bridge and thus can be united in one vocable, which corresponds to speakers’ intuition: osël (Ib) and osël (II) obviously represent polysemy rather than homonymy. Nevertheless, such a description does not fully reflect the linguistic intuition: namely, the speaker knows that he deals here with a metaphor, i.e., a comparison. Thus, any Russian knows that if someone is called osël (II), this is because he is somehow like osël (Ib). This intuition must be reflected in the lexicographic definition of osël (II), but in such a way as to show that the role of this comparison component is different from that of other definition components. It can be done along the following lines:

Osël (II) ‘(stubbornly) stupid male individual [as though he were an osël (Ib)]’.

The component ‘[as though it were]’ has a special status in the definition of a lexical unit (which is shown by the brackets around it). Unlike the other components, it is not part of informative meaning. It only presents the ‘internal form’ of the meaning, its metaphoric structure (comparison) – one might say, its semantic etymology. A full-fledged semantic theory must take this aspect of meaning into account (in order to model the creative use of language – word play, puns, etc. – or to account better for language psychological processing).

The component ‘[as though it were L]’ can appear in a lexicographic definition of L’ not only in the case of lexical connotations, but whenever it seems appropriate to explicitly show the metaphoric structure of the meaning of L’ in terms of the meaning of L. For example, if one wishes to indicate the metaphoric relation between russ. Serdce (I.2) ‘central part of a space’ and serdce (I.1) ‘main organ of the circulatory system of a person X found in the central part of the body’ (which are linked by a semantic bridge ‘central part’), one has to add to the definition of serdce (II.2) the component ‘[as though it were serdce (I.1)]’.

Lexical connotations of L are represented in the semantic zone of the lexical entry of L – but of course separately from L’s definition. As for the encyclopedic connotations of the referent of L, the culturally-determined ones may be also presented in the lexical entry of L, although not in the semantic, but in a special encyclopedic zone.

6. Literature (selected)


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