

Connotation and Denotation

Connotation is the emotional and imaginative association surrounding a word

Denotation is the strict dictionary definition of a word.

You may live in a house, but we live in a home.

If you were to look up the words *house* and *home* in a dictionary, you would find that both words have approximately the same meaning: "a dwelling place." However, the speaker in the sentence above suggests that home has an additional meaning. Aside from the strict dictionary definition, or **denotation**, many people associate such things as comfort, love, security, or privacy with a home but do not necessarily make the same associations with a house. What is the first thing that comes to your mind when you think of a home? A house? Why do you think that real-estate advertisers use the word home more frequently than house? The various feelings, images, and memories that surround a word make up its **connotation**. Although both *house* and *home* have the same denotation, or dictionary meaning, home also has many **connotations**.

Which word in each pair below has the more favorable connotation to you?

- **thrifty OR penny-pinching**
- **pushy OR aggressive**
- **politician OR statesman**
- **chef OR cook**
- **slender OR skinny**

WORD CHOICE: Since everyone reacts emotionally to certain words, writers often deliberately select words that they think will influence your reactions and appeal to your emotions. Read the dictionary definition below.

cockroach (kok' roch'), n. any of an order of nocturnal insects, usually brown with flattened oval bodies, some species of which are household pests inhabiting kitchens, areas around water pipes, etc. [Spanish *cucaracha*]

What does the word *cockroach* mean to you? Is it merely an insect, or is it a disgusting creature?

Read the poems on the other side of this handout.

1. Which denotative (dictionary definition) characteristics of the cockroach do both poets include?
2. Which characteristics does Wild give his roaches that are not in the dictionary definition?
3. What additional characteristics does Morley give to roaches?
4. Which poet succeeds in giving favorable characteristics to cockroaches?
5. Describe the VOICE in each poem. How does WORD CHOICE influence VOICE?

Roaches

Last night when I got up
to let the dog out I spied
a cockroach in the bathroom
crouched flat on the cool

porcelain,
delicate

antennae probing the toothpaste cap
and feasting himself on a gob
of it in the bowl:

I killed him with one unprofessional
blow,
scattering arms and legs
and half his body in the sink...

I would have no truck with roaches,
crouched like lions in the ledges of sewers
their black eyes in the darkness
alert for tasty slime,
breeding quickly and without design,
laboring up drainpipes through filth
to the light;

I read once they are among
the most antediluvian of creatures,
surviving everything, and in more primitive
times
thrived to the size of your hand...

yet when sinking asleep
or craning at the stars,
I can feel their light feet
probing in my veins,
their whiskers nibbling
the insides of my toes;
and neck arched,
feel their patient scrambling
up the dark tubes of my throat.

--Peter Wild



from *Nursery Rhymes for the Tender-hearted*

Scuttle, scuttle, little roach-
How you run when I approach:
Up above the pantry shelf
Hastening to secrete yourself.

Most adventurous of vermin,
How I wish I could determine
How you spend your hours of ease,
Perhaps reclining on the cheese.

Cook has gone, and all is dark-
Then the kitchen is your park;
In the garbage heap that she leaves
Do you browse among the tea leaves?

How delightful to suspect
All the places you have trekked:
Does your long antenna whisk its
Gentle tip across the biscuits?

Do you linger, little soul,
Drowsing in our sugar bowl?
Or, abandonment most utter,
Shake a shimmy on the butter?

Do you chant your simple tunes
Swimming in the baby's prunes?
Then, when dawn comes, do you slink
Homeward to the kitchen sink?

Timid roach, why be so shy?
We are brothers, thou and I,
In the midnight, like yourself,
I explore the pantry shelf!

--Christopher Morely

