

CONNOTATION AND DENOTATION

Words work on many levels. On one level, a word has an actual meaning or what we call a *denotation* (specific meaning found in a dictionary entry). On another level, a word has a meaning which is different (something more culturally configured). Rather than strictly adhering to a dictionary meaning, the word's meaning may be implied or compared to another context; the word may be a metaphor or stem from some aspect of the thing with which it is paired. We call this a *connotation*.

EX: (Denotation)

Jerry is very stubborn.

You indicate that Jerry is unwilling to do something (as the dictionary might suggest).

EX: (Connotation)

Jerry is pig-headed.

Then, you rely on an idiom to define Jerry as stubborn. Moreover, you use a metaphor to aid in the meaning (comparing Jerry to a Pig, a animal which lays in its own excrement and is renowned for its stubbornness).

As noted above, a word may have two meanings. For example, the word, Leech, has two meanings. The denotation of the word refers to a blood-sucking, hermaphroditic annelid (a type of unisex invertebrate). In another sense, the connotation refers us to a person who often "uses other people for amusement or personal gain."

Thus, you could say:

EX:

I caught the Leech in a glass jar. (Using the denotation)

-or-

Mary is a lying, cheating leech. (Using the connotation)

MEMONIC

In order to remember the difference between denotation and connotation, consider how the D in denotation is similar to the D in the word, dictionary. And, remember the C in connotation is similar to the C in the word, culture.

STRATEGY

Using metaphorical language and idioms (culturally-specific words or phrases) are not always good elements in academic and professional writing. One of the aims of good writing is to have it be a cross-cultural representation of an idea.