

Denoted and connoted meanings (1)

Any message may carry both denoted and connoted meanings. The denoted meaning is the manifest meaning – the one that is most apparent on the surface.

Denoted meanings

The denoted message is the literal or explicit meaning.

Example 1

Denoted meaning

'Today! £100 reductions on all computers!'

The denoted message is: If you buy any computer at the place where the message appears, the price will be reduced by £100.

Example 2

Denoted meaning

You, too, could have a life in the sun.

The denoted message in Example 2 is: You could live where there is sunshine.

However, an argument may also contain latent messages in persuading us to a point of view. These tend to act on our unconscious as we are not necessarily aware that they are being used. Messages that act on the unconscious can be particularly powerful, so it is important to be aware of when an argument sounds convincing because of its connotations rather than its line of reasoning.

The connotations of a message can add to its effectiveness in persuading. If we can recognise connoted messages, we are in a better position to see how the argument is structured, and to decide whether we agree with its underlying point of view.

Connoted meanings

The connoted message carries additional unstated, or latent, meanings and implications. These may be obvious to the reader in some cases, but are often concealed and may need to be teased out.

Example 1a

Connoted meanings

The connotations of Example 1 are:

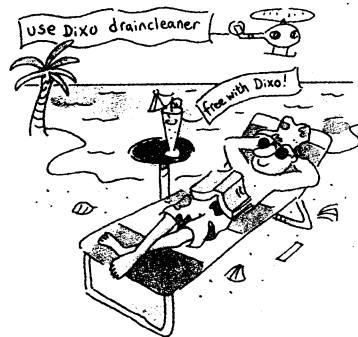
- These computers are bargains.
- If you don't buy the computer today, you are unlikely to get the £100 reduction so it is best to buy quickly.

Example 2a

Connoted meanings

The connotations of Example 2 are:

- A life in the sun is a desirable state that not everyone can achieve.
- If you do what we suggest, this opportunity will become available to you.



Arguing by association

One common way of creating connotations is by associating the item under discussion with another. This way, the author doesn't have to explicitly argue that an item is a certain way, but implies it through the second item.

Denoted and connoted meanings (2)

Example 3

That's a great car you got for your birthday. I got this CD for mine. This CD is like gold.

The denoted meaning in Example 3 is that the person received a CD as a birthday gift. The connotations of the messages are more complicated. By associating the CD with gold, the CD appears to be rare and therefore more valuable. This confers some importance to the gift and/or to the receiver of the gift. This may be because the CD really is rare. Alternatively, the author may be trying to create the illusion that the gift of a CD is just as good as the more obviously expensive gift of the car.

Products which have no connections with gold often contain the word 'gold' in the name. Alternatively, marketing materials locate a golden image such as a wedding ring prominently where it will catch the eye. The association with gold immediately suggests excellence, wealth, or scarcity. Terms such as 'golden age' suggest a better time. A golden wedding ring suggests a lasting relationship. This may encourage the audience to associate the product with the romance of weddings. The idea of a lasting relationship is useful when encouraging the idea of a long-term relationship between the audience as purchasers and the product being sold.

Latent messages

Latent messages may rely on connotations. In everyday life, we may be familiar with latent messages through the notion of 'reflected glory'. Most of us are familiar with people who don't argue explicitly: 'I am important', but imply it by mentioning all the important people they have met, or significant jobs held by friends and family. Latent messages are used a great deal in advertising and political campaigning. The product being sold, or the candidate for election, or a political argument, are linked with items and ideas that carry positive meanings. Rival political opponents and their campaign messages are associated with negative messages.

Latent messages often depend upon shared social, cultural and ideological values. As we saw above, if the audience is able to make the links for themselves, the intended message can be more powerful. One well-chosen key word or concept can evoke multiple associations, producing an effective latent message.

Latent messages may be conveyed through a number of means such as:

- Playing patriotic music in the background to a political broadcast, to suggest that a particular party is the most patriotic.
- Using an image of a bird flying in an open sky, to suggest freedom and unlimited choice as a consequence of acting in the way that the argument suggests.
- Baking bread when showing viewers around a house that is for sale, to suggest a feeling of home and well-being.

Stereotyping

When an idea or a set of people are continually linked to a small number of associations, such as adjectives, job roles or forms of behaviour, this is known as stereotyping. The more that the group is linked to that set of associations, the harder it is to conceptualise members of that group as individuals.

Example 4

On the left, we have the men's bathrooms, no doubt for the doctors, and over there are the ladies' bathrooms for the nurses.

For decades in Britain, there was a stereotype that doctors were men and nurses were women. Such stereotypes are now challenged. Stereotyping often accompanies the 'in-group' and 'out-group' behaviour described on p. 114.

Activities: Associations and stereotypes

Activity: Word associations

For the table below, identify which set of concepts is associated with each key word.

Key word	Associated concepts
1 mountain	A innocence, caring, love, tenderness, softness
2 child	B danger, bravery, speed, unstoppable
3 fruit extract	C romance, marriage, happiness, being special or chosen
4 wall of fire	D man being independent; a place women aren't meant to go
5 monkey	E healthiness, vitamins, well-being, flowing hair
6 ring	F natural freshness, refreshingly cool, outdoors, hardiness
7 shed or den	G humour, playfulness, tricks

Activity: Associations that sell

Look at several television advertisements. Identify which words or concepts are used the most to sell different types of product. What are the associations of the words used?

Key word or concept used in advert	Associations given to the word or concept

Activity: Stereotypes

Identify which stereotypes are being perpetuated in the following statements.

- 1 We'll decorate the room pink as they have two girls.
- 2 There are uniforms here for the pilots, and ladies, your stewards' costumes are over there.
- 3 We had better make sure there is roast beef on the menu so that the British tourists have something they are able to eat.
- 4 We should have expected that he couldn't control his temper, seeing he has red hair.
- 5 We'll play some Reggae for the visitors from the Caribbean and some flamenco music for those from Spain.
- 6 We should have expected trouble as there were so many football fans in the crowd.
- 7 There's no point providing washing machines in student halls of residence. It would be better to give them a big laundry bag so they can carry their laundry home to their parents to clean.
- 8 They won't be interested in fashion or computers: they are both retired now.

The answers are on p. 104. ▶

Activity: Denoted and connoted meanings

Activity

For each of the passages below, identify:

- the denoted meaning;
- the connoted meaning;
- the use of association to create a latent message.

Then read the commentary opposite.

Passage 6.30

Although my client has been a bit naughty in the past, her behaviour has now changed. Her children have been through difficult times in the last few months. Her son has been seriously ill and her daughter was very distressed by her grandfather's death. During the period of trial contact with her children, my client has been like a rock to them. They are now reliant on her support.

Passage 6.31

All the other parties change their policies as the wind blows. Only our party has a constant and clear direction. We have our leader to thank for this, as she is the only captain who can steer a clear course through the storms currently facing our country.

Passage 6.32

It shouldn't be difficult to persuade people to take the new scheme on board. We just need to persuade the community leaders to approve our suggestions and the rest of the community will follow like sheep.

Commentary

Passage 6.30

The denoted meaning is that the client's behaviour had been poor but has now improved. She has shown she can provide good support for her children.

The connotations. The word 'naughty' is one associated with children's behaviour and therefore carries the connotation that the woman's behaviour wasn't very serious in adult terms. The mother is associated with the concept of a 'rock' to create the impression of a supportive and dependable mother. 'Rock' carries connotations of firmness, stability, reliability, and providing good support.

Passage 6.31

The denoted meaning is that whereas other parties change their policies, the author's party is constant in its direction irrespective of events.

The connotations. Other political parties are associated with the wind, which is changeable and unreliable. The connotation is that the parties are also unreliable. This creates a greater sense of contrast with the author's party, which is presented as steady even in a storm, rather than in mere wind. The party leader is associated with a captain of a ship. This carries connotations of 'command over the elements', and of steering a steady path towards the shore. This is not an unusual comparison, so, for some people, this association will carry further connotations of previous leaders who were successfully compared to captains of ships in the past.

Passage 6.32

The denoted message is that it will not be difficult to persuade the community to accept the new scheme if the community leaders approve it.

The connotations. The passage associates the people in the community with sheep, an animal that is considered to have little mind of its own. The connotation is that communities have little mind of their own and do whatever community leaders tell them.

False analogies

An analogy is a comparison made to draw out similarities between two things.

Creative comparisons

Authors can attempt to persuade their audience through using comparisons. In creative writing such as poetry and fiction, it is legitimate to compare two items that seem at first to be dissimilar in order to produce a literary effect such as surprise, humour or an unexpected perspective. In creative writing, it may be permissible to say 'it was raining wellington boots', or 'the moon is a goddess riding her chariot of clouds'. Literary critics have to decide whether such comparisons work to create the desired effect on the audience.

Valid comparisons

For most types of critical thinking, comparisons must be valid, and add to our understanding of the situation. In scientific terms, for example, it doesn't help to think of the moon as a goddess or clouds as chariots. Comparisons draw attention to those aspects which are similar. As two things are never identical, it takes critical evaluation and judgement to decide whether a comparison is valid for the context. If the comparison helps to give a more accurate understanding, then it is likely to be valid.

Example

The heart works as a pump, moving blood through the body by opening and constricting.

For most purposes, the comparison with a pump helps us to understand the action of the heart, so this is valid.

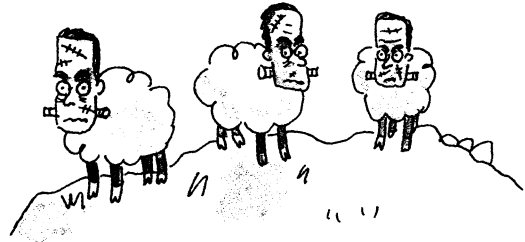
An analogy is not valid if:

- the two items being compared are not sufficiently similar, or . . .
- the comparison is misleading, or . . .
- the item used for comparison is described inaccurately.

Before reading on, check whether you can identify the weaknesses in the analogy in the example below.

Example

Cloning of human cells should never be allowed: it will create another Frankenstein's monster. We do not want such monsters.



The author's position on cloning is clear: that it is wrong and should be stopped. It may be that the idea of cloning is 'monstrous' to many people and the author is playing on that sentiment. However, the analogy used is not valid as it doesn't compare like with like. A clone is an exact copy of an original. Frankenstein's monster wasn't an exact reproduction or copy of anything, but was, rather, an assembly of pieces. Moreover, by using the term 'another Frankenstein's monster', the author is implying we should have learnt our lesson from the past. However, Frankenstein's monster was only a character in a book. The author wants us to think that a clone will be a 'monster', but if the original used for the clone was not a monster, an exact copy should not be a monster either.

If an author uses a false analogy well, the argument may seem convincing. This is especially true if one half of an analogy seems easy to prove (that Frankenstein's creation was a monster) and the other isn't (the outcomes of cloning). It is easy to assume that because one half of the analogy is true, the other half must be too.

Activity: False analogies

Activity

For each of the passages below, identify:

- What the analogy is: which two things are being compared?
- Whether the comparisons are valid.

Passage 7.10

The earth's atmosphere is like a blanket of gases around the earth. It is only a thin layer but it helps to maintain the temperature of the earth, keeping us warm. It also offers a layer of protection from the intensity of the sun.



Passage 7.11

It may not seem likely that the new political party will be successful in the next elections but we remain optimistic. It is true that the formal membership is small and the party does not have much money with which to campaign. However, what it lacks in these areas, it makes up for in other areas, such as the skill of its politicians and their commitment to success. The party is like a new David, taking on Goliath. It may be small, but it can take on those much bigger than itself.

Passage 7.12

As the basis of an argument, the premises are like the foundations of a building. If the premises are not well-founded, the argument is likely to collapse.

Passage 7.13

There was no way the defendant was able to help himself. He had been under excessive strain for some time and his emotions had been building up like steam under pressure. The witness had been goading the defendant, knowing he was likely to get angry. The defendant was like a pressure cooker, just waiting to explode. Eventually, he just reached boiling point and an explosion became inevitable.



Passage 7.14

Investors in certain businesses lost a great deal of money in recent years as their stocks and shares wavered in the financial markets. Investors may not have a right to compensation for the knocks and bruises they have suffered on the stockmarket but they should be reimbursed for major accidents and serious lapses in the health of the financial markets.

Answers: see pp. 122–3. ►