

ON ADJECTIVAL CONNOTATIONS

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ABSTRACT

Connotations are elusive semantic elements. Although they are often specific to individual speakers, many of them are sufficiently general to serve as general communicative elements. The paper suggests a device by means of which adjectival connotations, whether of the individual or the general type, can be pinpointed. The device is simply the sequence “ADJ¹ but not ADJ²”, where ADJ² is seen to enrich the connotational semantics of ADJ¹. Thus for example the use of a phrase like *desirable but not essential* may indicate that *desirable* normally contains an element of *essential*, though perhaps not in the situation where it is used. It is pointed out that ADJ² often represents an intensification of the semantic content of ADJ¹.

1. Introduction

In unreflected, untechnical language, words are often thought of as semantically monolithic. *Strong* “means” ‘powerful’, *slow* “means” ‘not fast’, *loud* “means” ‘noisy’, and similarly for the other word classes. Those are denotational meanings, describing the objective content of the word and in many ways the most important part of a word’s semantic constitution. But in order to gain a more precise idea of what the writer or speaker wishes to convey it is necessary that the reader or hearer have some conception of the connotations surrounding the words used. Briefly put, connotations are the often emotional and/or personal associations that are linked with certain words in the linguistic world of the language user. It is the aim of this paper to show how connotations can be made visible within one linguistic domain, the adjectives.

2. Definitions

The distinction between denotation and connotation, as the concepts are used now, goes ultimately back to John Stuart Mill, who distinguished “between the connotation, or understood meaning, of terms and the denotation, or real meaning”.¹ According to Lyons (1977: 176),

The reason why Mill chose the term ‘connote’ is clear enough. As he says himself, it is intended to suggest that what he calls the signification of the attributes of a subject is something additional to the signification, or denotation, of all the subjects which possess these attributes. Somewhat similar is the notion which underlies the non-philosophical use of the term ‘connotation’ according to which we might say, for example, that a particular word has a pleasant or desirable connotation. In this usage, the connotation of a word is thought of as a [sic] emotive or affective component additional to its central meaning.

Although the definitions of other scholars vary a little, their essence is more or less the same:

“The connotations of a word are those associations connected with a word-form that are emotional in character and which are not necessarily part of the definition of the word in question” (Warren 1988: 80),

“CONNOTATION[S...] are relevant [...] to social and stylistic aspects of meaning” (Allan 1992: 395),

“LEXICAL CONNOTATIONS are semantic components that, without being part of the definition of [the headword] L, are ascribed to L by the language in question. Thus *air* connotes ‘emptiness’, because of the expression ‘hot air’, as in *All this is hot air!*” (Mel’čuk 1992: 334),

“CONNOTATION. The personal and emotional associations which are suggested by words, and which thus form part of their meaning, for individual speakers” (Crystal 1992),

“CONNOTATION. The emotive or affective component of a linguistic expression (such as style, idiolect, dialect, and emotional charge), which is superimposed upon its basic meaning and which – in contrast to the static conceptual meaning – is difficult to describe generally and context-independently” (Bussmann 1996).

¹ *U*X*L encyclopedia of world biography 2003*

3. Aims

It is true that connotations are often personal and not shared with other speakers, but, “because people do have some common experiences, many lexemes in the language have connotations which would be shared by large groups of speakers” (Crystal 1995: 171). It is such connotations that are important, and sometimes even necessary, for the hearer to register if he or she is to take in the full import of what is being said. However, their identification can be problematic because of their subtle and elusive character. How could they be distinguished in a reasonably systematic fashion? In this paper I am going to suggest the use of a device that will elicit a number of such connotations. In doing so I will make use of language material from the 56-million-word *CobuildDirect Corpus* and the 100-million-word *British National Corpus (BNC)*.

The device in question will be referred to as “ADJ¹ but not ADJ²”. I hope to demonstrate its usefulness by means of a few simple examples, such as the following:²

- 1) Every effort is made to make you feel at home, with the service *attentive but not intrusive*: perfect for unwinding after a day of excitement.
(*Corpus*: ukmags/03. Text: N0000000764).

The writer is saying that the service is attentive, but not so much so that it becomes intrusive. Why does she say that? Clearly because there is a risk that prospective customers might suspect that attentive service would involve a certain measure of (unwanted) intrusiveness. In other words, the writer is suggesting, obliquely, that there is slight tinge, or connotation, of intrusiveness surrounding *attentive*.

- 2) Hart is ambitious *but not ruthless* in achieving personal aims.
(*BNC*: ECT 1291).

Ambition can be seen as bordering on ruthlessness, and the writer is concerned to show that the ruthless connotation of *ambitious* is not relevant here. At the same time he demonstrates by doing so the presence of that very connotation.

- 3) A shirt that’s *warm but not bulky* for your next trip to Alaska
(*Corpus*: usephem Text: E9000000114).

² Examples in this paper come from the 56-million-word *CobuildDirect Corpus* and from the 100-million-word *BNC*.

Here ADJ³ suggests that *warm* in connection with clothing calls forth the idea, connotation, of bulkiness.

4. Types of connotation

Backhouse (1992) distinguishes three types of connotation: those used with reference to expressive components of meaning, those reflecting social or situational circumstances of use, and those deriving from general cultural associations of what is denoted by the lexical unit. It is clear from the corpus material that the formula “ADJ¹ but not ADJ²” will primarily elicit connotations of the first type, but then not only those expressing value-judgements. (The third type, in particular, strikes one as being rare). The connotations tend to fall into two broad types, “factual” and “judgemental”. Factual are those where reference is, or can be, made to objective evidence, and judgemental are those representing the speaker/writer’s opinion. Here are some examples from the corpora:

Factual

- 4) Dandruff. It is *controllable but not curable*
- 5) it [the tradition] has become *attenuated but not extinct*
- 6) A more *autonomous but not fully independent* Algeria
- 7) stability that is *distinct but not separable* from the biological organization that maintains it tax which was *due but not paid* on or before the due date

Judgemental

- 8) Their relaxation is *active but not energetic*
- 9) The two ships offer *adequate but not exciting* service
- 10) Scholarly and *aloof but not infantile*
- 11) Hart is *ambitious but not ruthless*
- 12) Elsie was *amiable but not very bright*
- 13) The Manor is *attractive but not remarkable* as a building
- 14) *Disappointed but not surprised*

There are many more of the judgemental than of the factual type.

5. Intensification

It is characteristic of the formula “ADJ¹ but not ADJ²” that ADJ² represents an intensification of the meaning of ADJ¹. Intensification is here taken to mean the

³ “The plant should be in good, but not scorching hot, light”.

presence in ADJ² of more of the quality or quantity already present in ADJ¹. This of course presupposes that the two adjectives belong to the same semantic sphere. We may say *difficult but not impossible*, *slim but not skinny*, *exceptional but not unique*, but hardly **difficult but not skinny*, **slim but not illogical* or **exceptional but not intrusive*. Nor would we say **impossible but not difficult*, etc., where the intensification would go the wrong way. Most adjectives have several dimensions along which they can be intensified depending on the contexts in which they are being used, and the intensificational possibilities inherent in each adjective are very much part of its semantic setup. As a general description of the semantics of the structure being discussed one may say that the first adjective, ADJ¹, is close in meaning to the second adjective, ADJ², without in general (quite) attaining the level of intensification represented by it. The connotations of ADJ¹ are provided by ADJ². To take a few examples again:

- 15) Other people used mental images involving objects *similar but not identical* to the rbc's
(Corpus: usbooks/09. Text: B9000001453./09. Text: B9000000447).
- 16) Accommodation is *good, but not luxurious*.
(Corpus: sunnow/17. Text: N9119980510).

Even a high degree of similarity does not amount to total identity; even very good accommodation need not be luxurious, etc. Although the formula makes it explicit that ADJ¹ is not the same as ADJ², the fact that it needs to be stated shows that the two adjectives are in fact semantically quite close, and that there is a suggestion of ADJ² in ADJ¹.

There is one situation, however, where the “ADJ¹ but not ADJ²” formula does not suggest intensification, namely when two concepts are presented on an equal footing and the writer is referring to only one of them. As those cases do not provide the kind of connotational information that is being focused here, they are left out of account. Some examples are:

- 17) regional policies have moderated *the relative but not the absolute* differences in the unemployment rates
(BNC: FR4 1054).
- 18) the amplitude of the wave form over *the right but not the left* hemisphere
(BNC: FED 584).
- 19) President Habyarimana yesterday announced a partial ammnesty [sic] for *criminal, but not political* prisoners
(Corpus: bbc/06. Text: S1000900909).

Intensification can be brought about by ADJ¹ being duplicated and provided with a modifier. Some such examples are:

- 20) To sum it all up, it's *good but not that good*.
(BNC: C87 662).
- 21) all I want is a cup of tea, *weak but not too weak*.
(BNC: A7C 1457).
- 22) This probably means that the remedy was *close but not quite close enough* to give any sustained relief.
(BNC: B1R 563).
- 23) I thought the sex stuff was a bit *weird but not so weird* that I didn't want to get involved.
(BNC: A6E 895).

Here the expected duplicated adjective is sometimes left out:

- 24) It's all hysterically, and unintentionally, *funny, but not [funny] enough* to warrant an hour and 40 minutes of your time.
(Corpus: today/11. Text: N6000950602).
- 25) A bit *depressing but not entirely [depressing]*.
(BNC: B0H 1276).

However, the normal pattern with cases of modified ADJ² is, as before, that ADJ² is different from ADJ¹, of which it represents an intensified variant:

- 26) "It's very *fruity but not too sweet*", said one.
(Corpus: today/11. Text: N6000950909).
- 27) Simmer until the mixture is the right consistency – still *liquid but not too runny*.
(Corpus: ukephem/02. Text: E0000002072).
- 28) He was *courageous, but not too cunning*.
(Corpus: times/10. Text: N2000951118).

So *fruity* has connotations of sweetness, *liquid* of runniness, and *courageous*, apparently, of cunning.

The linguistic convention that ADJ² is an intensified version of ADJ¹ in the formula "ADJ¹ but not ADJ²" has interesting consequences. If the convention had not existed the following example would have been incomprehensible.

- 29) He was Lloyd, yet he wasn't the Lloyd she knew. He was more intense, voraciously attacking her body with his. *Rough, but not rough. Gentle but not gentle*. She pulled his face down until her lips were against his.
(*Corpus*: ukbooks/08. Text: B0000000115).

On the face of it, “rough but not rough” is gibberish. But the convention tells us that the second *rough* is now an intensified version of the first *rough*, perhaps meaning ‘very rough’ or ‘too rough’, and the second *gentle* an intensified version of the first *gentle*, perhaps ‘very gentle’ or ‘too gentle’. So Lloyd was rough, but not too rough, and also gentle, but not too gentle. Note the description of him: “He was more intense”, which is precisely what the formulas (rough but not rough, gentle but not gentle) convey.

It will have been seen that connotations, as understood in this paper, are not the same as synonyms. This point will be discussed towards the end of the paper.

6. Connotations as constitutive semantic elements

The structure “ADJ¹ but not ADJ²” is fairly common (there are more than 400 such cases in the *CobuildDirect Corpus* and more than 600 in the *BNC*); it may thus provide a picture of the dimensions in which different adjectives can be intensified and hence contribute to their semantic description. In many or most cases, the more intense word, ADJ², is more or less what the reader would expect: *cool but not cold, damp but not wet, good but not perfect*, but many others are surprising and therefore extra informative about the connotations of the adjectives. We shall see some examples of this below.

As the second adjective in our formula (ADJ²) hints at what can be suspected of being a part of the semantic constitution of the first (ADJ¹), ADJ² can often provide an interesting angle on the meaning of ADJ¹. For example:

- 30) The verdict is *harsh but not illogical*.
(*Corpus*: times/10. Text: N2000960217).
- 31) he has led a tough life and leaves us *uneasy but not despondent*.
(*Corpus*: oznews/01. Text: N5000951028).
- 32) He was *foreign but not French*. Dutch or German perhaps.
(*BNC*: HP0 2910).

In (30), harshness is seen as bordering on the illogical, and in (20) uneasiness is close to despondency. (32) reveals that *foreign* is more naturally associated with French than with other nationalities. The use of the structure thus uncovers sometimes unexpected strands in the semantic complex of the words.

One of the striking things about the “ADJ¹ but not ADJ²” formula is that fine semantic distinctions can be made, perhaps such distinctions as would not ordinarily have been noticed. In this way subtle nuances can be made visible. Examples (33)-(37) will demonstrate this.

- 33) Abrasive, *but not arrogant*, there is no edge to him
(*Corpus*: ukmags/03. Text: N0000000054).
- 34) I think the situation of our people is *desperate but not hopeless* says Lucky
(*Corpus*: ukmags/03. Text: N0000000869).
- 35) the AC Ace, a *gawky but not inelegant* spaceframe design by race car specialist John Tojeiro.
(*Corpus*: ukmags/03. Text: N0000000728).
- 36) I come across the house I have been seeking. It is *secluded but not shut off*.
(*BNC*: H9G 2827).
- 37) These accounts are *contradictory but not incompatible*:
(*BNC*: EFX 689).

In (33) “abrasive” seems to mean ‘unkind, unpleasant and rude in the way [someone talks] to other people’ (Sinclair 1995) but without the rudeness that comes with a feeling of superiority, arrogance, which would otherwise be associated with abrasiveness. To the writer of (34), despair, although suggestive of hopelessness, is not quite as bad as hopelessness itself, and to the writer of (35) *gawky* means ‘awkward’ and ‘clumsy’ and suggests lack of elegance though not in the present case. (36) shows that the writer regards seclusion as being related to but not quite as definite a form of isolation as being shut off. (37), finally, presents the thought-provoking case where contradiction though close enough in meaning to incompatibility is contrasted with it. Many nice distinctions are made:

- 38) complex variants which are *law-related but not necessarily legal*
(*BNC*: CHC 716).
- 39) I had a *neutral but not disinterested* role.
(*BNC*: CRS 1285).
- 40) problems when *new but not original* ideas are introduced.
(*BNC*: A26 287).

- 41) “The aim is to keep them *segregated, but not apart*”, one mod source said.
(*Corpus*: times/10. Text: N2000960415).
- 42) Creative, *but not necessarily productive*.
(*Corpus*: ukbooks/08. Text: B0000000622).
- 43) Both President Bush and Iraq’s leader Saddam Hussein knelt in prayer today, both in capitals *quiet but not calm*.
(*Corpus*: npr/07. Text: S2000910117).
- 44) *Last but not ultimate*; Concert
(*Corpus*: times/10. Text: N2000951204).

The meaning of ADJ¹ can thus be seen as enriched by ADJ².

Sometimes the two adjectives are so close in meaning that it is difficult to see how the first adjective differs from the second in intensity, but nevertheless the formula indicates that the speaker or writer sees more of the quality common to both adjectives in ADJ² than in ADJ¹:

- 45) material which is *indecent but not obscene*
(*BNC*: BNE 611).
- 46) They were all men. *Nude but not naked*.
(*BNC*: A0R 129).

Not surprisingly, then, indecency has connotations of obscenity, and nudity immediately suggests nakedness.

The connotations often give an interesting picture of the preconceptions, expectations and perhaps previous experience of the writers. Here are some examples:

- 47) She’s young *but not daft*
(*Corpus*: today/11. Text: N6000940101).
- 48) The Tories say they’re *philosophical but not angry*.
(*BNC*: KRM 441).
- 49) he was *proud but not stupid*
(*BNC*: A6J 832).
- 50) Mrs Bean was *fat but not fierce*, very placid in fact, and cheerful.
(*BNC*: AT4 638).

- 51) It was a *noisy but not a violent* affair
(*BNC*: EDA 170).
- 52) The audiences were *noisy but not, so far, violent*
(*BNC*: GVT 2619).
- 53) *Noisy but not brattish*
(*Corpus*: ukmags/03. Text: N0000000351).
- 54) *Angry, loud but not unrefined*, Ridgeway Bennett continue to make a solid contribution to cultural commentary on sexuality, sex and empowerment.
(*Corpus*: ukmags/03. Text: N0000000369).
- 55) LESBIAN 20, *cultured but not weird*, likes clubbing and has varied interests
(*Corpus*: ukmags/03. Text: N0000000934).
- 56) We can speak our minds then and there – being *honest but not destructive*.
(*BNC*: B21 260)

7. Contextual influence

The situational context in which the adjectives occur has a determining effect on their connotations. *Soft* occurs with the following connotations in the *BNC*: *coloured, mushy, disintegrated, brown, browned, sticky*, and with *brown, sticky, sickly, greasy* in *Cobuild*. The context, as could be guessed, is nearly always cooking recipes. And that *large* among its connotations has *bright* is explained by its reference to the celestial constellation Pegasus.

It was indicated above that the complexity of connotations surrounding individual adjectives could be demonstrated by means of the formula under discussion. It is obvious, however, that the demonstrable complexity of an adjective is dependent on its frequency and use in the formula: an adjective used only once in this way will show only one such connotation (if that). Adjectives with more general meaning (e.g. *good*) and capable of being used in a multitude of different contexts will be more frequent and have more connotations than those with more specific meaning (e.g. *futuristic*). In the corpora, a number of common adjectives are frequent enough in the structure to present a variety of connotations. Let us select from the whole repertoire of adjectives the reasonably frequent *good, interesting, possible, strong, unusual* and *useful* to see what their connotations are, as elicited by the “ADJ¹ but not ADJ²” formula.

Good is obviously as positive word, and in the *BNC* it is associated with *wonderful, sharp, dazzling* and *outstanding*. In *Cobuild* its associations go to *memo-*

rable, perfect, fantastic, great, suitable, scorching hot, luxurious, certain.⁴ The connotations are not unexpected and extend the semantic possibilities of *good* in different though related directions, adding to the basic meaning of simple *good*.

Interesting has a different flora of connotations: *consistent, untypical, demanding, romantic, surprising, easy, ideal* in the *BNC*, and *desperate* and *outrageous* in *Cobuild*. Here some of the connotations are unexpected and contribute to a multifaceted picture of the adjective.

Possible is even more diverse in its connotations: *commercial, usual, happening, necessary, inevitable, certain* in the *BNC*, and *cost-effective, probable, romantic* and *certain* in *Cobuild*. The contexts in which the formula is used clearly condition the choice of its connotations.

Some, but perhaps not all, of the connotations of *strong* may be more in line with one's expectations: *thick, invincible, direct, dominant, overpowering* in the *BNC*, and *dominant, universal, wild* in *Cobuild*.

Unusual is coupled with *impractical, unique* and *unknown* in the *BNC*, and with *unheard of* and *bizarre* in *Cobuild*.

Useful, finally, is associated with *reliable, personal, essential* and *consolidated* in the *BNC*, and with *essential, conclusive* and *necessary* in *Cobuild*.

In some cases (*good* and perhaps *strong*), the connotations are more or less to be expected. In other cases they are certainly unexpected and contribute to colouring the semantic *Gestalt* of the adjectives. Anyone who becomes familiar with them will then be prepared for them and see them as potential aids in his/her interpretation of the adjectives.

8. Sense-related words

Lists of connotations elicited by means of the "ADJ¹ but not ADJ²" formula, such as those just given for *good*, etc., are superficially not unlike those found for the same words in books of synonyms or in thesauri. However, closer scrutiny reveals that we are dealing with two different categories of concepts. Roget's *Thesaurus* (Kirkpatrick 1987) does not want to call itself a synonym dictionary (p. vii), but what it lists under each entry could fairly be described as sense-related words, thus a wider term than synonyms. If now we compare the connotations of *good, possible, strong, unusual* and *useful* with the sense-related words given for them in Roget (*interesting* is not given as a separate entry), we shall see that the two sets are different; there is not even a single case of overlap. To illustrate, let us compare the elicited connotations of *good* with Roget's sense-related words under *good*.

⁴ "The plant should be in good, but not scorching hot, light".

Connotations:	Roget's sense-related words:
wonderful	savoury
sharp	elegant
dazzling	good
outstanding	utility
memorable	useful
perfect	excellent
fantastic	skilful
great	prosperity
suitable	obedient
scorching hot	pleasurable
luxurious	amiable
certain	benevolent
	right
	honourable
	virtuous
	pure
	pious

Perhaps we could say that the emotional temperature is higher in the connotations than in the sense-related words. Nor would we expect connotations derived by means of the “ADJ¹ but not ADJ²” formula to be synonymous with the core adjective – the formula states that they are NOT the same. Nevertheless, even if connotations are not the same as synonyms, generally speaking, there is a shady area between the two, so that sense-related words occasionally turn up as connotations. For instance, the (fabricated) example,

57) His car was good but not elegant,

seems quite acceptable, where ADJ¹ (*good*) has the connotation ‘elegant’ (ADJ²), one of Roget’s sense-related words. This come as no surprise; it was pointed out above that the two adjectives concerned, ADJ¹ and ADJ², move in the same semantic sphere.

9. Collocations

Some of the connotations occur repeatedly or frequently, so that they become a kind of fixed expressions or collocations together with their source adjectives. Such collocations are e.g.:

58) desirable but not essential

59) difficult but not desperate

- 60) difficult but not impossible
- 61) last but not least⁵
- 62) necessary but not sufficient
- 63) similar but not identical.

10. Conclusions

Connotations are the elusive associations clustering round certain words. Their very elusiveness makes them difficult to elicit and pin down. This paper suggests that connotations of adjectives can be elicited by means of the frequent phrase “ADJ¹ but not ADJ²”, as in “good but not perfect”, where the second adjective indicates a possible connotation of the first. The connotations elicited in this way vary with the contexts in which the key word (ADJ¹) is used and contribute to giving it a more complete semantic shape.

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⁵ “And least but not last, the media” (Corpus N5000951103) is presumably a slip of the pen.

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CobuildDirect Corpus, an on-line service: <telnet://titan.collins.co.uk>

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