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What's in a word?: Connotation in teaching English to speakers of other languages

Marie Linnea Bozzetti-Engstrom

WHAT'S IN A WORD?

CONNOTATION IN TEACHING ENGLISH

TO SPEAKERS OF OTHER LANGUAGES

A Thesis

Presented to the

Faculty of

California State University,

San Bernardino

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

in

English Composition

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ABSTRACT

When I began teaching English as a second language (ESL) courses, I found that connotative meaning was routinely ignored or difficult to locate in the available ESL textbooks and dictionaries. This perceived absence led to the following study: a review of ESL textbooks, a review of standard monolingual English and learner dictionaries, and a survey of ESL instructors.

The thesis begins by locating connotative meaning within a semantic theory framework, drawing on Leech (1974) and Lyons (1995), in particular, to support the contention not only that connotative meaning is a fact of language use but also that it is crucial. Furthermore, research in second language learning demonstrates why connotative meaning needs to be taught and made accessible to second language students. This is followed by a review of ESL textbooks to determine if connotative meaning is covered and how it is covered. Also, standard monolingual English and learner dictionaries were reviewed to discover if connotative meaning is present in entries and how this type of information is presented. The results from the reviews and survey suggest the need

to improve the treatment of connotative meaning in textbooks and dictionaries. Also, ways that instructors could incorporate this type of meaning into the ESL curriculum are suggested.

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To Stefan and Anja,

Mom, Dad, and Lisa

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Statement of the Problem

When my father visited Beijing, a young Chinese woman who led his tour group repeatedly told him that he was fat. At first he felt annoyed, wondering why, despite an engaging nature, she continued to insult him about his weight. After attempting to communicate his discomfort, it gradually dawned on him that she was unaware of the adjective's full range of meaning in English. The tour guide's connotative meaning of the word did not match up with my father's; that *fat* not only refers to size but also conveys a negative evaluative comment about the individual. Somehow this tour guide, who was highly proficient in English, had not learned the connotative meaning of a seemingly ordinary adjective. She was only aware of the denotative meaning of the word that most English dictionaries simply address with a definition noting the size of an individual. Denotative meaning represents the conceptual, or fundamental, meaning of a word whereas, connotative reflects the values, beliefs, customs, and culture of a language, that is, the so-

called "real world" experiences associated with a word when used.

For this thesis the acronym ESL will refer not only to students and teachers in the United States or an English-speaking country teaching English but also to students and teachers in foreign countries learning and teaching English. Additionally, students who might be classified as English as a foreign language such as second language students studying at an American University, will also be classified as ESL students.

When I was an English as a second language instructor at California State University, San Bernardino the lack of attention paid to the teaching of connotation in commonly available resources such as assigned textbooks and dictionaries was an ongoing source of frustration. For example, I was frustrated with not being able to find connotative meanings when I taught vocabulary classes. The assigned text often paid marginal attention to word meaning, requiring students to memorize lists of words with little opportunity for discussion of word meaning, such as the subtle differences between synonyms in connotative meaning. I would look up words in the dictionary, and often find entries that were not

useful in addressing these differences in connotative meaning. Fellow instructors did not seem to share my concern regarding connotative word meaning, often remarking "I don't have time to cover connotative meaning since there are so many other issues." Granted, there is a finite amount of time in the ESL classroom with an often overwhelming amount of information to cover during any given class. However, that does not preclude addressing connotative meaning, nor does it justify ignoring it all together. Additionally, connotative meaning has not been extensively studied in semantics, nor are there many articles within second language learning that focus on this type of meaning.

As a response to this need to locate the treatment of connotative meaning, the following reviews of ESL textbooks (used at the university level), dictionaries (standard English monolingual and English learner dictionaries—those specifically written for L2 students), and a survey of ESL instructors to assess their treatment of connotative meaning were designed.

A description of the thesis chapters follows. Chapter 2 provides an overview of semantic theory, illustrating the analytical splitting of word meaning

into two primary levels: denotative and connotative. Next, the semantic importance of connotative meaning is illustrated, drawing on examples from semantic theory, second language learning research, and language use in general. The works cited form the body of evidence supporting the claim that connotative meaning is crucial to language learners, especially in an ESL context. Chapter 3 presents the methodology of the reviews forming the research for this study: a textbook review, an instructor survey, and a dictionary review. This chapter details how each review was organized, sampled, and analyzed. In Chapter 4, the results of each review are presented along with a discussion of the findings.

Finally, Chapter 5 briefly summarizes semantic theory and second language learning issues pertaining to connotative meaning introduced in earlier chapters. In closing, some of the limitations of the reviews are addressed, along with suggestions to teach connotative meaning in the classroom that incorporate examples from the textbooks and dictionaries reviewed as well as the instructors surveyed.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

Semantic Theory

> The word "meaning" and its corresponding verb "to mean" are among the most eminently discussable terms in the English language, and semanticists have often seemed to spend an immoderate amount of time puzzling out the "meanings of meaning" as a supposedly necessary preliminary to the study of their subject. (Leech, 1974, p. 1)

As Leech's statement above suggests although, there is much disagreement regarding the parameters of the concept of meaning among semantic theoreticians (Asher, 1994-a, pp. 707-710; Garza-Cuarón, 1991; Hatch & Brown, 1995; Singleton, 1999), most theorists agree that there are two basic types of word meaning: denotative and connotative. However, on account of its less central, unstable, and ultimately unscientific properties, connotative meaning is often left outside the realm of linguistic study (Garza-Cuarón, 1991; Ullmann, 1967).

In light of this, Leech(1974) proposes a broader range of investigation extending semantics beyond the cognitive or denotative part of meaning to include connotative or associative meaning. (p. xi) For this thesis, the scope of semantic theory presented focuses on Lyons (1995) and Leech, (1974); both linguists not only believe that words have two layers of meaning—denotative and connotative—but also that connotative meaning merits discussion.

Denotative meaning represents the conceptual or fundamental meaning of a word (Asher, 1994-b, pp. 2153-2155). It tends to be more stable. As Lyons (1995) states, "The denotation of an expression is… part of the meaning, which the expression has in the language-system, independently of its use on particular occasions of utterance" (p. 79). Denotative meaning also has a complex and sophisticated organization (Leech, 1974) and assumes a more crucial role in the linguistic study of word meaning:

> Conceptual meaning (sometimes called "denotative" or "cognitive") is widely assumed to be the central factor in linguistic communication, and… integral to the essential

> functioning of language in a way that other types of meaning are not (which is to not to say that conceptual meaning is always the most important element of an act of linguistic communication). (Leech, 1974, pp. 10-11)

In contrast, connotative meaning is constantly in flux and not easily measured. Leech (1974) characterizes connotative meaning as

> the communicative value an expression has by virtue of what it refers to, over and above its purely conceptual content… the "real-world" experience one associates with an expression when one uses or hears it…Connotations are relatively unstable: vary considerably according to culture, historical period and experience of the individual…Connotative meaning is open-ended in the same way as our knowledge and beliefs about the universe are open-ended: any characteristic of the referent identified subjectively or objectively may contribute to the connotative meaning of the expression which denotes it. (pp. 14-15)

Lyons (1995) seconds the less central and heterogeneous nature of connotative meaning, offering a variety of "alternative more or less equivalent terms ('affective', 'attiudinal', 'emotive')" (p. 45). Connotative meaning, unlike denotative, is not internal to the structure of language or words. This feature of being essentially incidental to the language system lends connotative meaning a messier, harder-to-define characterization, whereas denotative meaning often represents the "purer" meaning of a word. For example, Leech (1974) illustrates how the word *women* denotes salient characteristics such as *female, adult,* and *human,* whereas its connotative associations may include *frail, irrational,* and *emotional,* according to the speaker's viewpoint (p. 14).

The Analytical Division of Meaning

> 'When I use a word', said Humpty Dumpty, 'it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less.' (Ullmann, 1967, p. 48)

The division of two separate and distinct types of meaning, denotative and connotative is only an analytical tool as such a distinction is not always clear-cut (Asher, 1994-a, pp. 707-710; Chandler, 1994). In semantic

theory, denotative meaning is often presented separately without reference to connotative meaning. However, Leech (1974) points out that denotation and connotation are not "entirely separable—they coexist." Lyons (1995) seconds this: "These meanings are interconnected and shade into one another in various ways" (p. 5; see also Asher, 1994-b, pp. 2153-2155). For instance, the word *hearth* refers to the area in front of a fireplace as well as to the warm associations of the family home. When using this word, it is difficult to refer only to the denotative meaning without invoking its connotative meaning, or vice versa. Given that the division of meaning is an artificial one, it seems important not to dispense with connotation altogether.

Viewing denotative meaning devoid of the other level of meaning is rather alarming since

> knowing the expressive (connotative) meaning of a lexeme is just as much part of one's competence in a language as knowing its descriptive (denotative) meaning. (Lyons, 1995, p. 65)

To be communicatively competent language users need access to all components of word meaning, especially

connotative. This point gains further significance in a second language context (Tomlinson, 1998), which will be discussed below.

Second Language and Connotation

One of the numerous challenges for L2 learners is that English has many nouns, verbs, and adjectives that contain connotative meaning in addition to the core denotative meaning (Lyons, 1995). As discussed earlier, my father's Chinese tour guide was unaware of the offensive connotative meaning of the descriptive adjective *fat*. Additionally, my father's negative reaction to her use of this word to describe him as well as her failure to understand that this offended him illustrates how second language users and native language users may have quite different associations for certain terms(Szalay & D'Andrade, 1972; Yamamoto & Swan, 1989).

The perception of a mismatch between L2 associations for a word and the native language (L1) associations for the same word has been characterized by Baetens-Beardsmore (1982) as "connotative interference" (p. 51). This may occur when one selects a word that does not evoke the type of connotative meaning desired, for

example, when my husband whose native language is Swedish, wrote a caption in English for our daughter's website (she is pictured on my husband's back in her backpack). It is a warm day and he is sweating, whereas our daughter appears to be quite comfortable. The caption originally read "Pappa's straining but I think it's a breeze." This was changed to "Pappa's huffing and puffing but I think it's a breeze." Although my husband has near-native fluency in English, he was unaware of the bathroom connotations of the word *strain*. An informal poll of friends from Argentina who have lived in the United States for thirty years confirmed the undesired connotations of this word.

Often, connotative meanings are culturally specific (Hatch & Brown, 1995; Larson, 1998). In the Chinese tour guide's case, the descriptive adjective *fat* had neutral or even positive associations in Chinese, whereas in English it has acquired negative ones. Thus, the failure of L2 learners' to acquire an adequate range of connotative word meaning may result in misunderstandings and miscommunication.

Word Choice Issues

In certain instances, connotative meaning may override the denotative meaning, further complicating matters for the L2 user. Leech (1974) gives examples of terms referring to political ideas or movements, such as *anarchism*, *communism*, *racist*, and *liberal*, which often have such strong connotative meanings as to nearly erase the dictionary sense of the word (p. 51). If second language users are unaware of these connotations, they could have problems with, for example, to correctly infer a writer's opinion. Other examples included words with taboo meanings, for example, *intercourse*, and *erection*, that conjure up such strong sexual associations as to cancel out their more "innocent" senses (p. 19). In contrast, *bitch* and *swine*, when used to describe people, clearly are predominantly connotative in meaning rather than denotative (Lyons, 1995, p. 65). This last category of words could spell disaster for the second language learner, such as when one of my professors (whose native language is not English) unwittingly learned, while teaching a class, the taboo meaning of the word *come*, much to his chagrin.

An additional word choice issue pertains to gender-specific terms. L1 users of English might take for granted the neutral choice of *Ms.* as a title of respect to address women, or the gender neutral *flight attendant* or *police officer,* versus *stewardess* and *policeman;* however, second language users might not be aware of the present status of these words as they have evolved over time. When the term *Ms.* was introduced it carried negative connotations, yet over time it has attained neutral connotative meaning (Crawford, Stark, & Hackett Renner, 1998).

Another word choice issue that poses problems for L2 learners is synonymy, in particular the connotative differences between synonyms. There is indirect evidence that L2 learners have trouble learning synonyms. They often lack the ability to perceive the connotative difference between synonym pairs, such as *skinny* and *slim* (Singleton, 1999, pp. 144-145). Sets of synonyms may contain a variety of differences readily apparent to L1 users, ranging from positive, negative and neutral values (e.g., *plump, overweight, fat)* to expressions that imply approval or disapproval (e.g., *stink* and *stench* or *gigantic* and *very big)* (Larson, 1998, p. 144; Lyons,

1995, p. 65; Ullmann, 1967, p. 132). However, in the L2 classroom, presenting synonyms and the differences between them seems to be a forgotten activity (Hatch & Brown, 1995, p. 321). It may also be useful to examine antonym pairs when considering the nuanced meanings of synonyms. Some of these pairs (e.g., *beautiful/ugly* or *stupid/smart)* are basically evaluative (Leech, 1974, pp. 109-110).

Connotative meaning is not only a fact of language; it is crucial to language. It forms part of a language users' so-called "feel" for the language. Furthermore, conflicting connotations between languages need to be taught (Hatch & Brown, 1995, p. 135). Bearing this in mind—the need for connotation to be taught in a second language context—the following chapter presents the methodology of the reviews.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

In order to determine whether connotative meaning is addressed and how it is addressed, reviews of textbooks, dictionaries, and instructors were devised to closely examine the treatment of word meaning in each context. The design of each review is presented below.

Review of Textbooks

All course books for this review came from the private libraries of the director of the ESL program at Nashville State Technical Community College, the English Center's in-house library at Vanderbilt University, and the American Culture and Language Program's (ACLP) in-house instructor library at CSUSB. All textbooks reviewed were written for ESL students at the university level. The ESL textbooks represent a wide range of authors, publishers, language skills, and content areas such as Conversation, Reading, Writing, Culture, Speaking and Listening, and Business English. Levels of textbooks range from the most basic to the most advanced to give a representative sampling. Additionally, recently published textbooks, along with some published as long ago as 1989,

were selected to reflect trends in teaching word meaning in the ESL field. By reviewing a variety of textbooks, I hoped to gain a more complete picture of what textbooks cover regarding connotative meaning (see Appendix A for a complete list of textbooks reviewed).

Since connotative meaning tends to be the less focal type of meaning discussed, if it is addressed at all, it probably will not occur often in a text. Therefore, each textbook was reviewed in its entirety—all chapters or units and reading selections—for types of word meaning addressed. Specifically, I examined language learning tasks, for example, exercises to learn new levels of word meaning and discussion points and culture notes, for the types of meaning covered. For each review, all instances of connotative meaning, including the context in which it occurred was noted. Also, I recorded places in the text where connotative meaning would have been appropriate to address but was not.

As I examined the textbooks, the treatment of connotative meaning emerged in three categories, namely, full, marginal and absent. (1) Full treatment refers to when connotative meaning was addressed explicitly in the text and was defined or included discussions addressing

word choice issues, such as sexist terminology or racial category terms. (2) Marginal treatment occurred most often when the positive and negative meaning of words were presented in an exercise. This category raises questions whether this truly entails connotative meaning because it borders on neither fully addressing connotation nor being completely devoid of it either. Finally, (3) Absent treatment refers to when connotative meaning (full or marginal) was not mentioned at all.

Dictionary Review

The following review was constructed to discover if dictionaries address connotative meaning. In my experience as an ESL instructor, using standard monolingual English dictionaries (e.g. Webster's or English learner dictionaries such as the Newbury House Dictionary) to find connotative meaning often proved frustrating and futile.

For this review, I compiled a list of words and looked up the definitions for each word (described below) in a variety of dictionaries, comparing the types of meaning presented. Furthermore, I compared usage guides, synonyms listed, and other information pertaining to

meaning for each word selected. For each word, I noted if connotative meaning was mentioned in the definition, usage guides, or synonym paragraphs. A synonym paragraph resembles an extended usage guide, providing detailed information about a set of synonyms for a particular word. Also, if a synonym was linked to a particular word (e.g., if the entry for *fat* instructs "see overweight"), this linked word would be looked up to determine if connotative meaning was present in the definition of the cross-referenced word. This exercise illustrates how the entries for words differ between dictionaries.

Standard English dictionaries and English learner dictionaries were selected for the review, whereas bilingual dictionaries were not (see Appendix B for the list of dictionaries reviewed). Additionally, the most current editions of dictionaries available at Vanderbilt University Jean and Alexander Heard library were chosen, due to the tendency of dictionaries to slowly reflect changes in the language (Yamamoto & Swan, 1989). As Aitchison (1993) points out; "Book dictionaries are inescapably outdated because language is constantly changing and vocabulary fastest of all (p. 11).

The word list compiled for the dictionary review represents several categories: descriptive adjectives, words reflecting American values, and words undergoing change in meaning, including sexual preference terms, gender-specific terms and terms categorizing race.

All of the descriptive adjectives those selected are fairly common words. They are used often, and most students, even at the lowest levels will be acquainted with them. Six of the descriptive adjectives: *fat*, skinny, *old*, *young*, *ugly*, and *beautiful* primarily focus on physical attributes. *Fat* and *skinny* also relate directly to the values of being thin in this culture: to say that a person is *fat* is insulting. *Skinny* was also selected to see if dictionaries distinguish between synonym sets. It has (to my way of thinking) a sickly, unhealthy nuance, in contrast to *thin* or *slender,* which have healthier associations. Additionally, these synonym sets were suggested by Larson (1998) and Singleton (1999) as having particularly strong connotative differences in meaning. *Old* was suggested by my father, who finds being described as such demeaning, whereas *young* and its associations of youth and vigor are highly prized in American culture. This is also presented as an antonymic

pair by Leech (1974). *Ugly* has obvious negative evaluative value, whereas *beautiful* has positive attributes (also an antonymic pair with evaluative associations) (Leech, 1974).

Two other descriptive adjectives, *poor* and *cheap* relate to the material worth of people and things. Generally, when a person (in this case, a student) states "I'm so poor," there is often a negative interpretation of this. I wondered if this negative component would be present in dictionary citations. In the same vein, buying *cheap* things does not make a good impression. *Stupid* and *smart* pertain to a person's mental acuity. I wanted to know if the offensive nature of *stupid,* as in "I'm so stupid!" or worse yet, "Why are you so stupid?" (all heard in the classroom) would be addressed in definitions of these words. In contrast, *smart* represents a person's mental prowess, which is highly valued. Rounding out the descriptive adjective category, *healthy* relates to the current preoccupation in our American culture with being fit.

For American cultural value terms, I selected words that have strong positive associations in English, whereas other languages might have quite different

perceptions of them. The words *hearth* and *home* were chosen because they were given as examples of connotative meaning in Webster's Encyclopedic Unabridged Dictionary of the English Language. I thought it would be interesting to see if the dictionaries reviewed would include this level of meaning for both words. *Privacy* and *independent* were suggested by one of the textbooks reviewed as words with positive American cultural values versus other languages' more negative perceptions of them.

One aspect of connotative meaning that makes it rather difficult to incorporate into dictionary definitons is its unstable nature, namely, that it changes over time depending on the culture or historical period (Leech, 1974). Many words in the English language are currently experiencing change in connotative meaning, in particular terms categorizing sexual preference, gender, and race. For this category words—undergoing change—terms were selected that could pose problems for ESL students.

Forming part of the words undergoing change category, the sexual preference term *queer* is a word that is currently undergoing a change in use in the homosexual

community. I also selected *gay* to see what sort of information dictionaries include regarding the now dominant denotative meaning—homosexual. Representing gender-specific terms and changes in the English language are the words *Ms.* and *stewardess*. In particular, I hoped to discover if dictionaries address the now preferred term of respect *Ms.* and how it has attained neutral status, as mentioned earlier in a study by Crawford, Stark, and Hackett Renner 1998. Also it would be informative to know if dictionaries offer an explanation of the gender neutral term *flight attendant* when defining the word *stewardess*.

Finally, terms to categorize race in the English language—*Black, Oriental,* and *Indian*—were chosen. My aim was to discover if shifts in current cultural perceptions of each racial group would be explained in the dictionary definitions of the words. For *Black,* I hoped to gain insight into whether this word is currently acceptable, since a number of textbooks reviewed favored *African American*. Likewise, *Indian* was often discussed in the textbooks reviewed as being offensive suggesting *Native American* as the appropriate term. Finally, I chose *Oriental* because when I was doing a preliminary

dictionary review it was alarming to find entries devoid of the potentially offensive nature of the word. I also wondered if *Asian* would be suggested as the more appropriate term. By selecting words representing a variety of categories, I hoped to uncover the type of word meaning that dictionaries contain beyond the obvious—denotative.

Survey of Instructors

A survey was designed (see Appendix C) to investigate how ESL instructors perceive connotative meaning and if they address it in their classes and how. L2 studies tend to focus on the learner and not the instructor, however, ESL instructors are equally important in terms of the application and interpretation of textbook material. Additionally, since most teachers develop homemade materials to cover aspects of language learning that are either insufficiently covered or not covered at all in textbooks, it seemed relevant to survey them. The survey has two focal points: assessing, first, instructors' beliefs regarding connotative meaning and, second, how useful they find resources (e.g., textbooks and dictionaries) to teach word meaning. This

questionnaire consists of three parts. (1) Background information: I asked each instructor he or she currently teaches English and if English is that person's native language. (2) Instructors' beliefs about connotative meaning: Here I hoped to discover whether instructors deemed connotation important, if they addressed this meaning in class, and in which classes they covered it. (3) Word meaning resources: This section asked instructors how useful different resources are to cover connotative meaning, including dictionaries. Throughout the questionnaire, instructors were invited to comment further, at appropriate intervals (see Appendix C for a copy of the questionnaire).

In order to determine if connotative meaning is relevant to instructors teaching English worldwide, I designed this survey to see what other instructors believe regarding connotative meaning and what they do to teach it. At first, I polled fellow instructors at ACLP at CSUSB and Yasuda University in Hiroshima, Japan, but the responses were too few. Because this survey was posted on a website, the ACLP and Hiroshima instructors were sent e-mail requests to fill out the survey, with a link to the survey website. When too few responses came

back, 10 in all, I broadened the sample by posting the survey a few times in a couple of on-line forums for ESL instructors including, Dave's ESL Café. As a result, the bulk of the responses—more than 50—came from on-line postings. Later, when evaluating surveys, incomplete surveys were eliminated; often, instructors did not fill out the entire questionnaire. Only surveys with all questions answered were included in the results. The results of the textbook and dictionary review as well as the instructor surveys are discussed in the next chapter.

CHAPTER FOUR

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Textbook Review Results

Table 1 presents the textbooks' treatment of connotative meaning. Of the textbooks reviewed, 42% cover some aspect of connotative meaning, whereas 58% do not. That 17 textbooks address connotation, and of that number only 9 give it full treatment, confirmed what I had already suspected: this type of meaning is not well represented in textbooks.

Table 1. Treatment of Connotative Meaning: Numbers of Texts and Percentages

Treatment of connotative meaning	Number of textbooks	Percentage
Full	9	22%
Marginal	8	20%
Absent	23	58%
Total	40	100%

Full Treatment

Textbooks addressing connotative meaning directly did so in two different ways: explicitly as connotative meaning or through word choice issues that were explained and illustrated. When addressed explicitly, the textbook introduced and defined the terms connotation and

denotation. Three textbooks referred to connotative meaning in this way (all were high level): Tapestry Listening and Speaking 4 (Fragiadakis, 2000), Tapestry Reading 4 (Sokolik, 2000), and Reading Strategies for University Students (Romstedt & McGory, 1988). All three textbooks introduced connotative meaning in reading passages that covered various aspects of connotation followed by comprehension questions inviting students to apply their new knowledge of word meaning. In Tapestry Reading 4 (Sokolik, 2000), how writers and speakers use connotative meaning to affect the reader's or listener's inferences is illustrated by several contrasting examples of word choice. One such example demonstrates how an instructor lecturing about paintings may chose to convey either negative or positive connotations: "The apparently random choice of reds and oranges is a departure from the more serene blues and greens that Monet used in earlier paintings" (p. 54). In this case, the text explains that *random* conveys a more negative connotation because a master painter should have a plan for a painting, whereas *serene* implies a more positive meaning. Overall, these words help the listener to infer that the instructor finds Monet's earlier paintings more impressive than his

later ones (Sokolik, 2000). The reading selection concludes by offering a few more examples of how words are able to convey more than their denotative meanings. This is followed by comprehension questions. For the remainder of Tapestry Reading 4 (Sokolik, 2000), connotative meaning does not receive any further treatment; it was introduced only once, in the exercise described above. This was a recurring pattern for the other textbooks that presented full treatment of connotative meaning. Here too, the task or exercise introducing connotative meaning occurs once, never to be readdressed in subsequent chapters.

Another way to present the full treatment of connotative meaning materialized when the results were compiled. Some texts clearly address word choice matters, for example, non-sexist language and the preferred terms for racial groups such as Native Americans or Blacks. For this category, only textbooks that directly address issues such as sexist terminology or preferred terms are included: If a text simply employs gender-neutral terminology or refers to Native Americans without discussion, it is not included. A particularly well-written example of this occurs in NorthStar: Focus on

Reading and Writing (Betta & Sardinas, 1998). The topic of gender-neutral language is introduced in a reading passage in which a person who is interviewed discusses how English has several feminine words that are sometimes used to refer to women, such as *poetess*, *songstress*, or more commonly *actress*. These words, *actress* in particular, might make one think of a "silly, beautiful female who's more worried about her makeup than she is about Shakespeare," whereas the word *actor* is more serious and devoid of the connotations already mentioned. This passage continues addressing the choice women currently have regarding the title of respect *Ms.* versus *Miss* and *Mrs.* It concludes noting that gender-neutral word choice pertains to a number of occupations, including *police officer* and *fire fighter* (Betta & Sardinas, 1998, pp. 98-99). Questions immediately follow the text, assessing students' comprehension of the material presented.

Among the textbooks reviewed, Tapestry: Listening & Speaking 1 (Benz & Dworak, 2000) clearly addressed issues relating to register, preferred racial terms, and sexist terminology, along with culture notes to further explain

them. This demonstrates that a low-level textbook can be an appropriate place to cover connotative meaning.

Marginal Treatment

This category consists mainly of tasks identifying the positive, negative or neutral meanings of words. Some of the words presented have rather obvious associations, for example, *terrible, awful, horrible, brilliant, thrilling,* and so on (Jones, 1996, p. 59). In this particular exercise, students are first instructed to chart the positive and negative words listed and then to describe an event they liked and one that they did not like, using these words. In this type of exercise, the reason that these words are identified appears to be rather arbitrary. No real significance seems to be gained from the charting of the words and the subsequent description because the treatment remains superficial.

Another example of this, Passages (Richards & Sandy, 2000), was the only textbook that repeated more than once (three times) exercises addressing connotative meaning. In the other textbooks reviewed, if an exercise addressing connotative meaning was presented, it occurred only once, never to reappear. However, here too the selected descriptive adjectives are of the obvious kind

such as *absurd* and *embarrassing* (p. 8), *sinister* and *sympathetic* (p. 16), and so on. This is an unfortunate tendency to select words without much significance pertaining to connotation when there are plenty that can pose real problems for ESL students.

Fortunately, other textbooks presented words with more nuanced connotative meaning such as the values listed in Tapestry: Listening and Speaking 3 (Carlisi & Christie, 2000, p. 51), which included *honesty*, *generosity*, *tolerance*, and *compassion*. A culture note points out that values between cultures and persons differ. Students are asked to reflect on their own values. Beyond Language: Cross-Cultural Communication (Levine & Adelman, 1993) offers another useful example of marginal treatment in a reading selection. Here, *friendship* and *privacy* are explored from a variety of cross-cultural perspectives, illustrating how words often do not mean the same across languages. Also, I found several exercises aimed at identifying the positive, negative, and neutral values of descriptive adjectives. In one such exercise, students are provided with a list of descriptive adjectives, such as *shy*, *outgoing*, *thin*, *fat*, *poor*, *rich*, *dirty*, *clean*, and so on (Datesman,

Crandall, & Kierney, 1997, p. 12). Students are then instructed to compare their country's evaluation of these words (i.e., if the descriptive adjectives listed have positive or negative meanings in their native language) to their perception of the positive and negative values of the words in English as related to Americans. The intent of this exercise is to help students gain an awareness of stereotypes that they might have about Americans.

Absent Treatment

Of the textbooks reviewed 23 do not address connotative meaning at all. This represents 58% of those reviewed, indicating that connotative meaning is not well represented. At the very least, some of the textbooks surveyed included vocabulary exercises such as fill in the blanks and matching target vocabulary with the appropriate synonym. These tasks cannot address complicated issues of word meaning such as connotative meaning or the nuances of synonyms. Also, I discovered that the highest level of textbook reviewed (sometimes called the Bridge level) aimed at advanced university students, paid very little attention to word choice issues. Often, textbooks advised students to avoid using

language characterized as loaded or judgmental but provided no tasks or exercises to illustrate or explain this. Additionally, I noticed a trend in these textbooks to omit the treatment of word meaning. That word meaning was ignored in general seems an alarming trend in light of how second language research demonstrates the importance of providing access to L1 word knowledge including but not limited to connotative meaning.

Dictionary Survey Results

For this review, standard English dictionaries as well as learner dictionaries were selected. Table 2 presents the results for each category of words noting when connotative meaning was present in the definitions for each word listed. While compiling the results, I noticed that connotative meaning was either present in a definition (represented by "yes" in Table 2); marginally present ("marginal"), for definitions that are not clearly connotative or those that are cross-referenced, or not addressed at all ("no").

Table 2. Dictionary Review Results for Eight Dictionaries

Category of Words	Connotation present? Yes	Marginal	No
Descriptive adjectives (n=10x8=80 dictionary entries)			
Fat	1	1	6
Skinny	2	1	5
Young	2	1	5
Ugly	3	1	4
Beautiful	4	0	4
Poor	1	0	7
Cheap	3	1	4
Stupid	0	0	8
Smart	0	0	8
Healthy	4	0	4
Σ	20 (25%)	5 (6%)	55 (69%)
American cultural values (n=4x8=32 entries)			
Hearth	6	0	2
Home	4	0	4
Privacy	0	0	8
Independent	0	0	8
Σ	10 (31%)	0 (0%)	22 (69%)
Words undergoing change (n=7x8-2=54 entries)			
Gay	2	0	6
Queer *	7	0	0
Stewardess*	0	2	5
Ms.	1	4	3
Black	4	2	2
Indian	2	1	5
Oriental	3	0	5
Σ	19 (35%)	9 (17%)	26 (48%)

Note: Survey of definitions of 22 words in 8 dictionaries. Some dictionaries did not include all words selected (occurrences indicated with an asterisk).

At the start of the dictionary review, I anticipated finding very little connotative meaning in definitions. The results, however, reveal that connotative meaning is present, although not as strongly as denotative. However, many dictionaries do address this level of meaning. For the descriptive adjectives and the American culture value terms, the results were quite similar: 25% and 31%, respectively, of the dictionaries surveyed addressed connotative meaning, whereas there was no coverage in 69% for both. Marginal meaning was a mere 6% for descriptive adjectives, with none for American cultural values. The category of words undergoing change showed a more even split of 35% of dictionaries addressing connotative meaning, with 45% that do not, and 17% receiving marginal treatment.

These results came as a welcome contrast to my earlier attempts as an instructor to locate connotative meaning. This proves that dictionaries can and do address connotative meaning—the key is knowing where to find it. If one is willing to spend time following linked words and reading lengthy passages detailing differences between synonyms, then connotative meaning can be found in quite a few dictionaries.

Connotative Meaning

When connotative meaning was clearly defined in dictionary entries for descriptive adjectives, it occurred most often in synonym paragraphs; however, some dictionaries had different names for the usage guides that explain synonym usage. For example, for the word *fat in* the American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language (2000), a synonym paragraph lists a variety of synonyms including *obese, corpulent, portly, stout, pudgy, rotund, plump,* and *chubby*. It notes that these adjective have the denotative meaning of having too much flesh. Then this synonym paragraph provides a detailed explanation of the different nuances of meaning depending on the synonym used. For example, "Fat implies excessive weight and generally has negative connotations" (p. 63). The passage continues by specifying the differences between the synonyms listed above—all connotative in nature. Sometimes the connotative meaning for a word differed between dictionaries. An example of this occurred for the word *old*. In the Newbury House Dictionary of American English (2000), the entry suggests that it is more polite to use the word *elderly* (p. 55),

whereas the American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language (2000) recommends avoiding this adjective in formal or polite speech. Here, the word *older* is suggested as a more neutral choice. This is when connotative meaning in a dictionary definition can be either misleading or insightful. My father suggested the word *old* because it offends him. What then if an unwitting ESL student looked up *old* and takes the advice, calling someone like my father elderly, believing it to be the more polite term, when in fact the word *elderly* may imply frailty in addition to commenting about one's age? This misleading information in a learner dictionary definition could pose problems for ESL students, especially when they do not have access to other dictionaries.

The descriptive adjectives that define physical attributes—*fat*, *skinny*, *old*, *young*, *ugly*, *beautiful*, and *healthy*—were much more likely to contain connotative meaning in their definitions whereas those describing one's mental acuity (*stupid* and *smart*) or material wealth (*cheap* and *poor*) rarely addressed connotative meaning. Most often, when a definition for the word *cheap* clearly contained connotative meaning, it was used to describe a

person. For example, the entry for *cheap* in the Cambridge Dictionary of American English (2000) includes the following example: "(disapprovingly) The boss is cheap" (p. 137).

Among the terms representing American cultural values, *hearth* and *home* often contained the connotative value of the words as part of the definition, for example, "family life, home" (Webster's New Word: Compact Desk Dictionary and Style Guide, 2002, p. 225). For the sexual preference terms, *gay* was most often presented with usage notes detailing the word's change over time. Webster's Encyclopedic Dictionary of the English Language (2001) notes how the word has evolved over time, placing it in a historical context, noting additionally that the word is no longer considered slang (p. 792). For *queer*, all 7 dictionaries (one did not list the word) addressed its offensive nature with usage labels such as "pejorative" or "offensive." One usage guide explains its evolution and status as a reclaimed word by members of the homosexual community (American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, 2000, p. 1435).

I found one clear instance of gender-specific terms in a usage guide that not only explained the title of

respect *Ms.* and its evolution over time but pointed out its preferred status as well.

For racial category terms, *Black* merited frequent usage notes, often with mention of it being offensive, as did the term *Indian*. If connotative meaning was mentioned, it occurred in the usage notes. One example explained how *American Indian* is a familiar term in the Native American community (American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, 2000). Overall, I did not find much acknowledgement of *Native American* as a preferred term in the definitions. Finally, for the term *Oriental*, both the usage label "highly offensive" and a usage note characterizing the noun as a taboo term were noted. However, I discovered little reference to *Asian* as the preferred term.

Marginal Connotative Meaning

This section presents definitions for the words selected that neither fully addressed connotative meaning nor ignored it altogether. This category contains all cross-referenced words that, upon following the linked word, addressed connotative meaning. I placed these words here because many of my ESL students would not bother to follow linked words, thus making connotative meaning

inaccessible. In order to discover connotative meaning, it will become apparent from the results discussed below that students need to follow the links that dictionaries provide. I also placed in this category definitions that seemed ambiguous regarding the type of meaning covered (denotative or connotative).

In the descriptive adjectives category, *fat* and *skinny* were most often linked to a synonym with further explanation including connotative meaning. In the Newbury House Dictionary Of American English (2000), *fat* is cross-referenced with *overweight*. At *overweight*, the usage note states, "In the USA, it is considered impolite to say that someone is fat or obese. It is more polite to say that someone is overweight" (p. 614). Additionally, many entries for descriptive adjectives provide lists of synonyms as a definition. These words often have quite strong connotative value, such as for *young*: *fresh, vigorous*, or *ugly*: *bad, disgusting*.

For American cultural value terms, the synonyms listed to define the words have a fair degree of connotative value. However, this might depend on the user of the dictionary; for example, *independent: free, taking care of oneself*, and *privacy*: *freedom from interference*

(Newbury House Dictionary of American English, 2000, p. 442).

Regarding gender-specific terms, for *Ms.*, usage guides often explained the word's evolution over time; however, no indication of the term's preferred status or how it is perceived by English users is included.

Stewardess was routinely cross-referenced with *-ess*. At *-ess*, I found quite clear usage guides delineating sexist connotations (American Heritage Dictionary of the English Dictionary, 2000, p. 609). Regarding the racial category terms *Black* and *Indian*, usage guides either detail how the terms may or may not be preferred or no other information is included.

No Connotative Meaning

Sometimes connotative meaning was entirely absent from the definition of a word. Descriptive adjectives were often defined with no further discussion. Also, usage notes or synonym use for this category tended to focus on denotative differences between the words listed or on how to use synonyms in particular contexts.

The American cultural value terms were often not defined beyond the denotative. This too occurred for *gay* when the word was defined simply as homosexual with no

further comment. Also, *Ms.* was often defined solely as a term of respect. For the racial category terms, *Black*, *Indian*, and *Oriental* were often listed with no comment at all. There was one instance when *Oriental* did not refer to people, only food and art. It was rather disturbing to find no mention of the potentially offensive nature of the terms *Indian* and *Oriental*. I also found it surprising to discover that the three learner dictionaries in this review failed to note that *stewardess* has sexist connotations. The American Heritage English as a Second Language Dictionary (1998) simply notes that it is "an old-fashioned word for flight attendant" (p. 829), whereas the Newbury House Dictionary of American English (2000) instructs one to see the word *flight attendant*, and finally the Cambridge Dictionary of American English (2000) omits the sexist connotation altogether.

Overall, there were quite a few pleasant revelations in the dictionary results. That a number of dictionaries address connotative meaning and do so in a clear and understandable fashion came as a welcome discovery.

Connotation Survey Results

More than 50 questionnaires were received, but not all were usable. Only the questionnaires that instructors answered in full were selected for this survey.

Forty-four questionnaires were deemed usable, of these, 21 originated in the United States, 8 were from Japan, and 2 were sent from the United Kingdom. The remaining 12 were single contributions from the following countries: Australia, Canada, Ecuador, Germany, Portugal, Puerto Rico, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Spain, Sweden, Tanzania, and Ukraine. One respondent did not answer the question of where she or he was currently teaching. Thirty-five (80%) classified themselves as native speakers of English.

Beliefs About Connotation

Figure 1 shows the percentage of 44 instructors responding to the question "I believe the following about the connotative meaning of words": 27 (61%) said that connotation is a crucial component of word meaning, compared with 3 (7%) who thought it an extraneous component. A clear majority, 36 (82%), responded that connotation should be included in vocabulary instruction, whereas no one thought that it should not be included,

and 5 (11%) who thought that connotation should only be addressed as part of usage concerns in general. Thus, it seems that the respondents largely view connotative meaning as important to understanding and teaching vocabulary.

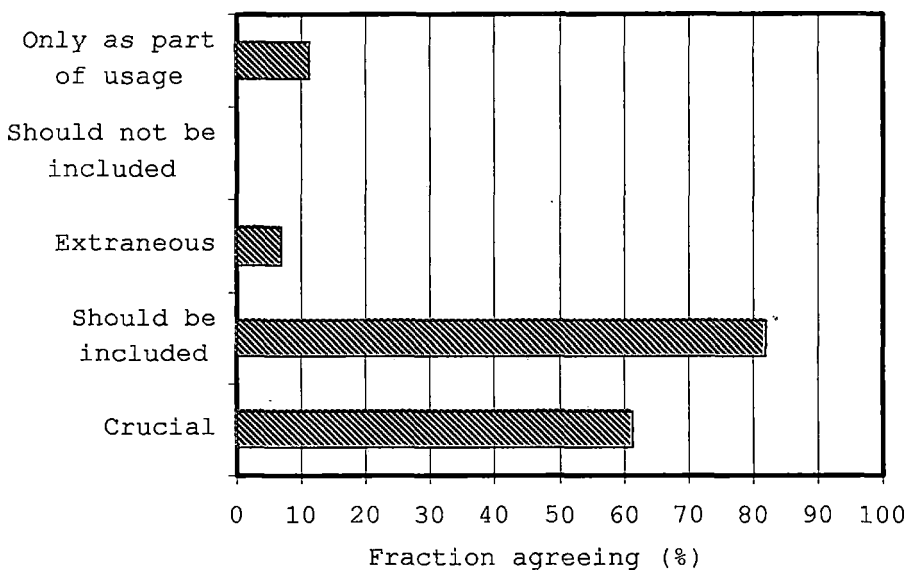

Figure 1. Beliefs About Connotation

When asked what type of classes would be best served by the inclusion of connotation (see Figure 2), 39 (89%) thought that it belonged in language skills classes, but that figure dropped to roughly half when asked about content, for example, history and culture, classes (25, or 57%) and test-preparation classes (26, or 59%). The classes in which connotation is thought to be a useful

element in language skills are reading, writing, and conversation.

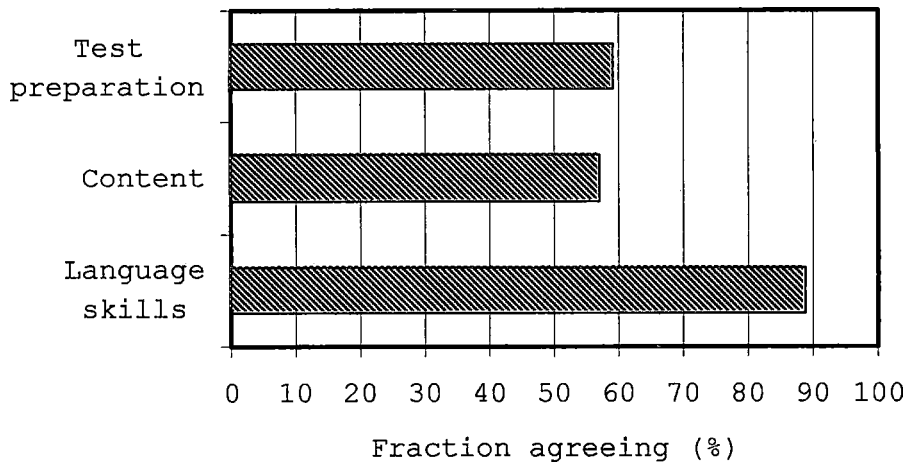

Figure 2. Connotation Helpful When Teaching

I also surveyed the instructors regarding whether connotation should be used depending on the level of the students, and whether instructors include connotation when teaching. There was an approximate 50/50 split on whether proficiency determines if connotative meaning should be covered in class: 22 (50%) said yes, 17 (39%) said no, and the remainder had no opinion. Most replied yes (40, 91%) when asked if they include connotative meaning when teaching vocabulary (see Figure 3). When this survey began, I wondered whether my routine incorporation of connotative meaning when teaching

vocabulary was an anomaly. With 91% of the respondents indicating that they too incorporate it into their instruction (see Figure 3) this practice appears to be the rule rather than the exception—good news indeed.

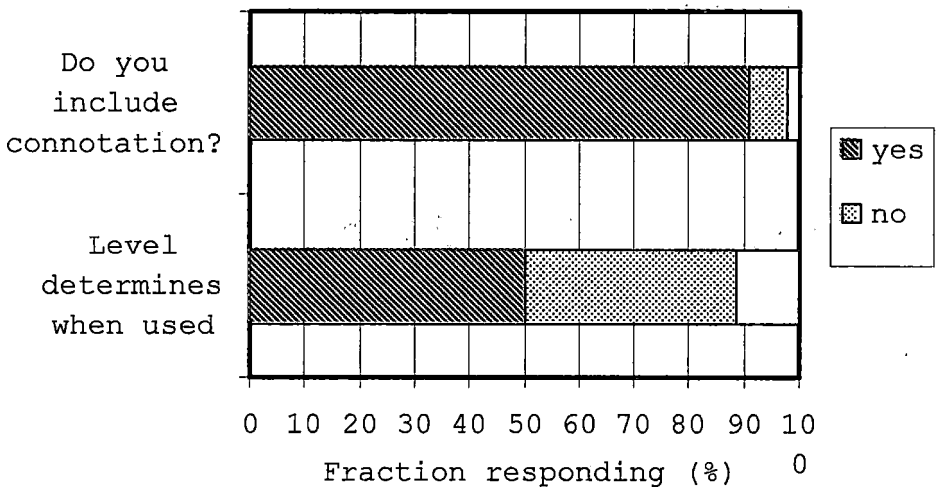

Figure 3. Connotation in Teaching English as a Second Language

Three techniques were considered equally effective when revising and refining vocabulary: word association (27, 62%), semantic mapping (21, 48%), and antonyms and synonyms (25, 57%). Semantic feature analysis was considered less effective (10, 23%). I received comments from instructors remarking that if they knew how to use semantic feature analysis to refine vocabulary, they would use it. It appears to be a problem of the

instructors not knowing how to use this technique properly.

Instructors also seemed to believe that focusing on connotative meaning is especially important for certain categories of words. There was majority support for the notion that connotative meaning is helpful in clarifying the finer points in words from the following categories: taboo words (29, 66%), sexist language (34, 77%), register (36, 82%), and synonyms (27, 62%). These word categories pose specific challenges for ESL learners, as evidenced by second language research. Taboo, sexist language, and register are especially difficult due to their more nebulous associations and constant shifts in connotative meaning.

I was curious to discover how ESL instructors would handle a scenario involving connotative meaning in the classroom. The instructors were asked how they might respond to the following situation:

> During a class discussion, a student asks you to explain why her American friend became upset when she commented that he was fat. How would you handle this situation?

A clear majority favored exploring cross-cultural differences of the connotative meaning of the word *fat* (37, 84%), whereas a smaller number of instructors checked off "give a rule" (12, 27%), "discuss concrete and abstract attributes of adjectives" (9, 20%), and perform a semantic feature analysis (8, 18%). One respondent checked off the option to ignore the problem and tell the student to "forget it." That the majority of the respondents chose the cross-cultural response reveals not only their awareness that connotative meaning often differs between languages but their willingness to address it as well. Fortunately, the option to ignore the issue was not a popular one, garnering only one response.

Resources to Teach Word Meaning

When I taught ESL classes, I was often unable to find resources that were helpful to teach connotative meaning. The following section of the questionnaire surveys instructors' opinions by asking them to assess how useful resources are to teach word meaning.

The instructors surveyed found the following resources most useful when teaching vocabulary (see Figure 4): dictionaries (26, 59%), course text (22, 50%), and other ESL textbooks (17, 39%). There were less

favorable responses for reference books for ESL instructors (13, 39%), professional journals (11, 25%), and linguistic textbooks (5, 11%). The same trend was observed when this questions was cast in the context of teaching connotative dictionaries meaning: dictionaries (18, 41%), course texts (13, 30%), other ESL textbooks (11, 25%), reference books for ESL teachers (10, 23%), professional journals (10, 23%), and linguistic textbooks (4, 9%).

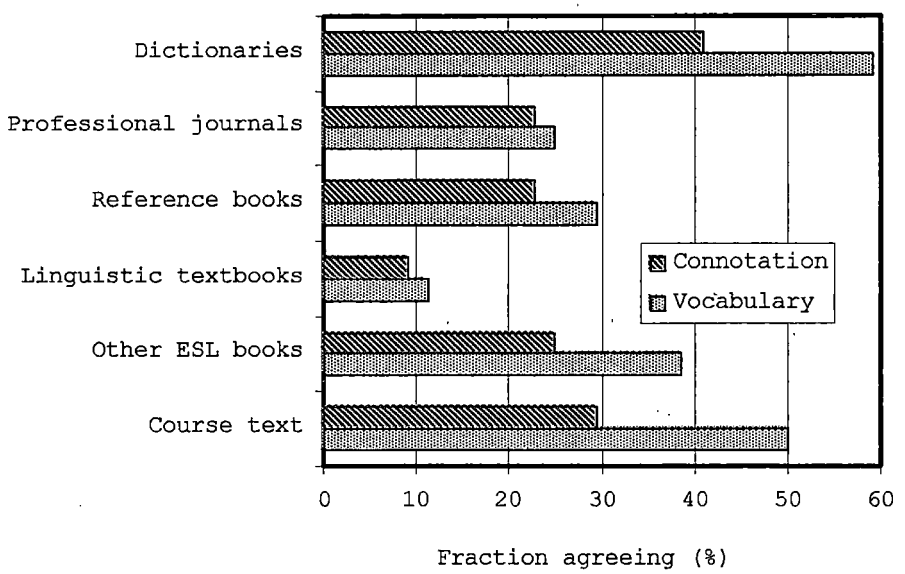

Figure 4. Useful Resources When Teaching Connotation

When teaching vocabulary in general, 59% of the respondents found the dictionary to be the most useful resource, and 49%, when addressing connotative meaning.

Often, when I taught, the dictionary was the only available resource that addressed connotative meaning—at least some of the time. The assigned course books were deemed (25% of the responses) marginally helpful by the instructors. This could be due to the thin treatment of connotative meaning and, at times, meaning in general found in most textbooks reviewed.

Additionally, linguistic textbooks such as those addressing semantic theory were considered least useful for teaching vocabulary and connotative meaning: 11% and 9%, respectively. Often, they do not cover connotative meaning, and when denotative meaning is discussed its presentation is often confusing. For a busy instructor struggling to grade tests and compositions for a full roster of classes, often without any assistance, taking time to read complex linguistic textbooks is not appealing or feasible. The fact that instructors judged other resources equally lacking in usefulness to teach word meaning in general and connotative meaning specifically points to a void, in that there appears to be very little available to aid instructors to better address word meaning.

When asked if they encourage students to use standard English and/or learner dictionaries in class, 30 (68%) responded yes, whereas 13 (33%) said no. One person failed to answer this last question. That 33% of the instructors surveyed do not use dictionaries in the classroom could be due to a variety of factors, among them lack of resources. As mentioned by several respondents teaching abroad, they would gladly use dictionaries if they had access to them. There could also be hesitation on the instructors' part to use dictionaries if they do not know how to use them appropriately in an ESL classroom. As an instructor, I often found dictionaries, learner dictionaries especially, difficult to use efficiently since my students were often unaccustomed to using monolingual English dictionaries. Most of the students relied on bilingual pocket-sized dictionaries.

The results of the reviews presented above provide evidence that connotative meaning is difficult to find. The textbook review revealed that connotative meaning is often not well represented and is given thin treatment. However, the dictionary review demonstrated that connotative meaning is present but that it is not easily

accessible. Finally, the instructors surveyed offer resounding proof that connotative meaning matters, with the majority of them not only addressing this type of meaning in class but also believing that it is an important component of meaning. Their assessment of the usefulness of resources to teach word meaning supports my findings for both the textbook and dictionary reviews that connotative meaning is difficult to locate, forcing ESL instructors to look elsewhere, often to themselves, relying on their native English knowledge to teach this form of meaning. In the next chapter, I offer suggestions to remedy this situation with fuller treatment of connotative meaning in textbook exercises and by locating connotative meaning in dictionaries. Finally, I conclude with ideas to teach connotation beyond assigned textbooks in the classroom.

CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSION

As an instructor, I noticed that connotative meaning was not addressed in ESL resources. The original purpose of this thesis was to discover if connotative meaning is covered in ESL resources, specifically textbooks and dictionaries, as well as to see if instructors addressed this type of meaning. As demonstrated earlier, words have two layers of meaning: connotative and denotative. The denotative is generally believed to be more central and more important, whereas connotative meaning is constantly changing over time and much more difficult to study and therefore more peripheral. However, this division of word meaning is an analytical tool, and it does not occur when words are in use. Therefore, the connotative meaning of a word coexists with the denotative meaning. Furthermore, connotative meaning forms part of a language user's competence.

To be communicatively competent, especially in a second language, access to connotative meaning is crucial. Not only are connotations often culturally specific, but in some instances, such as with taboo

terms, they might even cancel out the denotative meaning. There is also evidence that L2 synonyms pose problems for second language learners and that these students have trouble perceiving the nuances in synonym sets. Furthermore, evidence in second language learning supports the pedagogical belief that connotative meaning needs to be taught in the ESL classroom.

Teaching Connotation in Textbooks

At first, it may seem that connotative meaning was well represented in textbooks as 42% of the textbooks surveyed either covered it in full or gave it thin treatment. However, upon closer inspection, it became apparent that if the tasks introducing connotative meaning were not well designed this superficial treatment of connotative meaning serves little purpose. An example of this is when an exercise addresses some aspects of connotative meaning but not others, or when the exercise is introduced in one chapter only, never to be used again. Yet another example is when an exercise presented a task with little significance such as identifying the positive and negative meaning of obviously evaluative words. One drawback of tasks presented in textbooks

addressing connotative meaning is that they are rarely repeated. As a case in point, Tapestry Listening and Speaking 4 (Fragiadakis, 2000) devotes a reading passage to connotative meaning, emphasizing its importance only to drop the issue altogether for the rest of the textbook. As Tomlinson (1998) points out, "In order to facilitate the gradual process of acquisition it is important for materials to recycle instruction and to provide frequent and ample exposure to the instructed language features in communicative use" (p. 17). To aid students' acquisition of connotative meaning, the concept could be introduced earlier in the textbook and then reintroduced in subsequent chapters where appropriate.

Contributing to the superficial treatment of connotative meaning was the tendency for textbooks to focus on the positive or negative values of words. The words chosen were often descriptive adjectives with strong evaluative meaning. One textbook, Passages (Richards & Sandy, 2000), focused on the positive and negative values of descriptive words in three different exercises, but the words are so obviously evaluative—for example, *terrible*, *awful*, and *brilliant*—that they do not seem meaningful to explore. It would be far more useful

to introduce other types of words, for instance, words with differing cultural values such as *privacy* or *independence*, or descriptive adjectives that truly could cause miscommunication dilemmas, such as *fat* and *stupid*.

Dictionary use was often overlooked in the textbooks; therefore, it would be helpful to inform both the instructor and the student about synonym paragraphs and usage guides and the wealth of connotative meaning they often contain. Also, it is crucial to point out to instructors and students alike the importance of following linked words and of spending time with a dictionary exploring entries to form a more complete picture of what various synonyms or linked words mean. If textbooks do not provide assistance regarding dictionary use and neither does the teachers (33% of instructors surveyed do not use a dictionary in class), then the student must face the challenges alone of navigating the often tangled web of word meanings. Part of the instructor's job is to enable students to better use resources, to help them unlock closed doors to communicative competency in the English language. Thus, it is important that instructors help students to more efficiently utilize the dictionary.

In many textbooks, the advice given to students to avoid judgmental or loaded language was offered without much explanation often in a short paragraph preceding a writing assignment. A brief introduction of connotative meaning illustrated with clear examples would enhance this type of directive. For example, the passage cited earlier in Tapestry Reading 4 (Sokolik, 2000) illustrates how word choice creates inferences with connotative meaning. In this example, an instructor discusses Monet's paintings, choosing words such as *random* and *serene* to describe them. To practice using objective language, in this reading passage students could change the words revealing the instructor's positive or negative evaluation of Monet's painting to more neutral ones.

Furthermore, in writing textbooks especially, there is a tendency to provide charts for revision with very little explanation of word meaning choice. An issue such as word choice, as part of a chart for revision, would be much more accessible if examples were provided. For example, to avoid gender-specific language, students could be advised to avoid words ending in *-ess* such as *actress* or *stewardess*. Alternately, when choosing between synonym sets—for example, *thin* or *slender* for the word

skinny—a discussion of the nuances of connotative meaning between synonyms would help students choose the appropriate word. Perhaps for each type of writing exercise, word choice issues ranging from selecting descriptive adjectives to racial category terms could be explored as a pre-writing strategy and as a strategy for the revision process.

During the textbook review, I noted many exercises that could be improved by addressing word choice issues. In the following exercise (from Tapestry Listening and Speaking 1, Benz & Dworak, 2000, pp. 132-133), students are instructed to study photos in the textbook of an elderly white woman, a middle-aged African American woman, a young Asian child, two African American boys, and a white male in his twenties. A list of words is provided for students to describe hair, eyes, and features. The words listed for hair and *long, short, brown, blonde, red, black*, and so on; for eyes, *brown, blue*, and *hazel*, and so on; and for features, *freckles, mustache, beard, mole*, and so on. Students are first asked to describe the photos and then their classmates.

I felt that this exercise would be improved by incorporating terms relating to skin color, race,

physical dimension (weight and height), and age because they are not mentioned in the text. Much later in this textbook, racial terms are addressed. The first step for improvement would be to incorporate the racial terms section earlier, integrating them with this exercise. Instructors could begin discussing the terms to categorize race represented in the photographs. At this juncture, it would be appropriate to incorporate dictionary use. Students could look up the terms such as *African American, Asian* and *white*, even extending the discussion to encompass other terms such as *Latino* and *Native American*. Students could then read usage guides from different dictionaries and compare definitions. This exercise would illustrate how these words have evolved over time and how then continue to change meaning. It would also address relevant issues such as preferred terms. Additionally, one could address the reasons why all terms to categorize race, except *white*, are capitalized.

Regarding skin color, I would encourage instructors to ask students to describe themselves. When I taught Japanese students, they often described themselves as yellow and had trouble giving a description of their

African American or Latino host families. An exercise such as this one could cover many crucial issues, enabling students to tread difficult semantic ground.

As the dictionary review demonstrated, words categorizing race, physical qualities, and age contain a host of connotative meaning that could be explored. For example, for the word *old* there is a wonderful synonym passage in the American Heritage Dictionary of English (2000) that clearly presents the connotative meaning of this word and its synonyms. Also, entries listed for words selected in the dictionary review often conflicted. For example, Black was both characterized as highly offensive in some dictionaries and in others as positive. Thus, an exercise such as the one above could gain far more significance by including discussion of word choice issues raised by the photos and offering the terminology to discuss them.

Another neglected area in most textbooks reviewed was the selection of synonyms. Synonyms, as noted earlier, pose a host of problems for the L2 learner. As Fox (1998) points out, "When you read the work of even quite advanced students or listen to them speak their language is often stilted, too formal and too high-level"

(p. 27). In order to effectively select synonyms, students need direct access to their nuances of meaning. As part of the process to revise drafts of writing, synonym sets could be explored adding the dictionary as a resource. For example, during the dictionary review, entries for the word *beautiful* listed a variety of synonyms, often explained in detail in a synonym paragraph. To practice selecting the appropriate synonym, one could write sentences such as, She is a *handsome* child and Clint Eastwood is a *pretty* man. Using the differences in connotative meaning noted in the synonym paragraph, students could explain what changes they might make to the sentences.

Teaching connotative meaning does not need to be textbook-based, nor does it necessitate using a dictionary. It may be addressed in a variety of classes. One appropriate venue for a discussion of connotative meaning would be a conversation class or in conversation groups such as those organized by CSUSB's Writing Center. Here, the teacher or leader could introduce topics pertaining to connotative meaning, for example, asking students to describe their interpretation of the words *independent* and *privacy*. The instructor could facilitate

discussion of the American connotative associations of these words, making this form of meaning available to students.

Many ESL students are actually EFL students in an ESL context, such as students from Asian countries completing MBA degrees at American Universities. A conversation group could be an appropriate forum to discuss a variety of sensitive word-meaning issues. For instance, a student is puzzled as to why she offended her host mother by saying, "Don't sit too close to me. You're too fat!" (this happened when I taught). This would be an ideal to opportunity to address the cross-cultural differences of the descriptive adjective *fat*, opening the discussion up to solicit other students' opinions. If one teaches a multicultural class, it could be instructive to ask them what *fat* connotes in their languages.

Additionally, students could be encouraged to raise questions about connotative meaning that baffles them, keeping track of incidences of "connotative interference" in a notebook. Many writing and reading classes encourage ESL students to keep a vocabulary notebook to log new word meanings. A notebook could be the place to record not only words that pose problems for students but also

newly learned connotative meanings of words. They could take turns introducing words for discussion in the classroom taken from their notebooks.

One way ESL students might gain access to connotative meaning would be to discuss certain words with native English speakers. When I taught culture classes, we often used interviews as part of the curriculum. Perhaps students could choose the words for discussion and with their instructor's help design an interview. To address the above example of offending a student's host mother by labeling her fat, interview questions such as, "For the words *fat*, *overweight*, *obese*, and *plump*, which ones do you think are polite or rude?", could be formulated by the student. Also, questions such as, "Which of these words would you use to describe a person? Could you please explain why?", could be posed by the student. The answers to these questions might help clarify the connotative meaning of *fat* and its synonyms.

This review of textbooks, dictionaries, and instructors offers a limited picture of what ESL instructors have available to them. One of the drawbacks of the textbook review is that the dimension of textbook use—how students and instructors use them in the

classroom—is not included. It would be informative to evaluate how useful exercises provided in the textbooks to teach connotative meaning are for both the instructor and the student.

Furthermore, the dictionary review could more fully explore words by following not only the cross-referenced word but by looking up all synonyms listed for a particular word. This would give a more complete picture of how connotative meaning is presented in entries.

A limitation of the instructor survey was that the questions posed focused on what instructors believe about connotative meaning and what they teach. To gain a more complete picture of connotative meaning in an ESL context, one could formulate questions assessing whether instructors sense a gap or less-than-satisfactory presence of connotative meaning in teaching resources. Also, for the dictionary survey, one could poll teachers and students on words that pose difficulties. A more comprehensive and representative list could then be generated for a dictionary review.

As an ESL teacher, when the assigned textbooks and available dictionaries rarely addressed connotative meaning, I felt quite alone in my conviction that

teaching connotative meaning matters. As this project began, I was curious to discover what others thought of this level of meaning: semantic theorists, second language researchers, materials developers, textbook writers, dictionary editors, and fellow instructors. My review of the semantic theory and second language research literature suggests that others believe not only that connotative meaning is a fact of language use but that it is important, especially in a second language context. However, the results of the textbook review confirmed my suspicion that connotative meaning is not well represented in the treatment of word meaning. Dictionaries, on the other hand, address connotative meaning if one knows where to find it. Finally, the results of the instructor survey suggest also that instructors believe that connotative meaning is important and should be taught. This then is the challenge: To incorporate connotative meaning in systematic and helpful ways, thus facilitating students' and instructors' access to this form of meaning. Finally, for those who write and teach for an ESL audience, I propose making connotative meaning an integral component when teaching word meaning,

treating it fully in textbooks, dictionaries, and the classroom.

APPENDIX A

TEXTBOOKS REVIEWED

1. Adams, C. R., & Toyama, S. J. (1997). Journeys: Listening & speaking 1. Singapore: Prentice Hall, Asia ELT.

2. Anderson, David P. (2000). Journeys: Listening and speaking 3. Singapore: Pearson Education, Asia Private Limited.

3. Anderson, D. P. (2000). Teacher's edition journey's: Listening and speaking 3. Hong Kong: Pearson Education, North Asia Limited.

4. Barnard, R., & Cady, J. (2000): Business venture 2: Student book. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

5. Benz, C., & Dworak, K. (2000). Tapestry: Listening and speaking 1. Boston: Heinle & Heinle.

6. Betta, L., & Sardinas, D. (1998). NorthStar: Focus on reading and writing, intermediate. White Plains, NY: Addison Wesley Longman.

7. Bungmeier, A., Eldred, G., & Zimmerman, C. B. (1991). Lexus: Academic vocabulary study. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall Regents.

8. Carlisi, K., & Christie, S. (2000). Tapestry: Listening and speaking 3. Boston: Heinle & Heinle.

9. Datesman, M. K., Crandall, J., & Kierney, E. N. (1997). The American ways: An introduction to

American culture. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall Regents.

10. Dennis, J., & Griffin, S. (1994). Reflections (2nd. ed.). Boston: Heinle & Heinle.

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12. Fellag, L. R. (2000). Tapestry reading 3. Boston: Heinle & Heinle.

13. Folse, K. S. (1993). Intermediate reading practices (rev. ed.) Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

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15. Fragiadakis, H. K. (2000). Tapestry: Listening and speaking 4. Boston: Heinle & Heinle.

16. Giannotti, J., & Szwarcewicz, S. M. (1996). Talking about the U.S.A.: An active introduction to American culture. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall Regents.

17. Gill, M. (2000). Tapestry: Listening and speaking 2. Boston: Heinle & Heinle.

18. Hagen, S. A. (2000). Journeys: Listening & speaking 2. Singapore: Prentice Hall ELT.

19. Hartman, P. (1989). Clues to culture: A cross-cultural reading/writing book. New York: McGraw-Hill.

20. Hartmann, P., & Mentel, J. (1997). Interactions access: A reading/writing book (2nd ed.). Boston: McGraw-Hill.

21. Haughnes, N., & Maher, B. (1998). NorthStar: Focus on reading and writing. White Plains, NY: Addison Wesley Longman.

22. Jones, L. (1996). Let's talk: Speaking and listening activities for intermediate students. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

23. Keen, D. (1994). Developing vocabulary skills (2nd ed.). Boston: Heinle & Heinle.

24. Kelly, C., & Gargagliano, A. (2001). Writing from within. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

25. Levine, R., & Adelman, M. B. (1993). Beyond language: Cross-cultural communication (2nd ed.) Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall Regents.

26. Loughheed, L. (1993). Words more words and ways to use them. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley.

27. McNamara, M. (1994). Work in progress. Boston: Heinle & Heinle.

28. Molinsky, S. J., & Bliss, B. (1994). Day by day: English for employment communication. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall Regents.

29. Reich, N. (1996). Now and then: Reading and writing about the American immigrant experience. New York: St. Martin's.

30. Richards, J. C., & Sandy, C. (2000). Passages: An upper-level multi-skills course: Student's book 2. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

31. Romstedt, K., & McGory, J. T. (1988). Reading strategies for university students. Boston: Heinle & Heinle.

32. Sökmen, A., & Mackey, D. (1999). Kaleidoscope 3: Reading and writing. Boston: Heinle & Heinle.

33. Sökmen, A., & Mackey, D. (1999). Kaleidoscope 4: Reading and writing. Boston: Heinle & Heinle.

34. Sokolik, M. E. (1999). Rethinking America 1: An intermediate cultural reader. Boston: Heinle & Heinle.

35. Sokolik, M. E. (2000). Tapestry reading 4. Boston: Heinle & Heinle.

36. Sokolik. M. E. (1996). Tapestry: The Newbury House guide to writing. Boston: Heinle & Heinle.

37. Vai, M. (1998). The heart of the matter: High-intermediate listening, speaking, and critical thinking. Boston: Heinle & Heinle.

38. Vetrano, J., Whalley, E., & Blass, L. (1995). Tapestry: Let's talk business. Boston: Heinle & Heinle.

39. Wholey, M. (2000). Reading matters 1: An interactive approach to reading. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.

40. Wong, M. S. (1998). You said it! Listening and speaking strategies and activities. New York: St. Martin's.

APPENDIX B

DICTIONARIES REVIEWED

1. American Heritage dictionary of the English language (4th ed.). (2000). Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
2. American Heritage English as a second language dictionary (1998). Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
3. Cambridge dictionary of American English. (2000). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
4. Encarta concise dictionary. (2001). London: Bloombury Publishing.
5. Merriam-Webster online: The Language Center collegiate dictionary. (2002). Available at http://www.m-w.com/netdict.html. [September 20, 20002]
6. Newbury House dictionary of American English. (2000). Boston: Heinle & Heinle.
7. Webster's encyclopedic unabridged dictionary of the English language. (2001). Thunder Bay Press.
8. Webster's New World: Compact desk dictionary and style guide (2002). (2nd. ed.). New York: Hungry Minds.

APPENDIX C

QUESTIONNAIRE ON CONNOTATIVE MEANING

The online version of this questionnaire can be viewed at:

http://members.aol.com/mbengstrom/connotation.html.

Dear Instructor,
I am currently writing my master's thesis at California State University, San Bernardino. I would appreciate it very much if you respond to this questionnaire on connotative word meaning. When you finish, please click on the send button. If you should experience any problems, please contact me at the following e-mail address: MBEngstrom@aol.com

Thank you for your help.
Sincerely,

Marie Bozzetti-Engström

In this questionnaire, connotative meaning refers to the so-called "real world experiences" (i.e. values, beliefs, and customs of a language) associated with a word versus the denotative, or more literal, dictionary level of word meaning. In the sentence "Billy is fat," the word "fat" denotes that Billy is overweight or heavy, whereas the connotative meaning conveys a negative, evaluative comment about him.

For each multiple choice question, please check all items that apply.

Background Information

1. Please indicate the country where you currently teach:
A. U.S.A.
B. Japan
C. Other (specify):

2. English is my native language:
A. Yes
B. No

3. List the classes that you currently teach. Please include class level and class size (e.g. Advanced reading [20], Beginning conversation [40]:

Connotative Meaning

4. I believe the following about the connotative meaning of words:
A. The connotative meaning of words forms a crucial component of word meaning.
B. The connotative meaning of words forms an extraneous component of word meaning.
C. The connotative meaning of words should be included in vocabulary instruction.
D. The connotative meaning of words should not be included in vocabulary instruction.
E. The connotative meaning of words should only be addressed as part of usage concerns in general.
F. Other (please specify):

5. I think it would be helpful to address connotative meaning in the following classes:
A. Language Skills (e.g. Reading, Writing, Conversation)
B. Content (e.g. American History, American Literature)
C. TOEFL, TOEIC or other Test Preparation Classes
D. Other (specify):

6. Do you think the students' level of English proficiency determines if connotative meaning should be covered in class?
A. Yes
B. No
C. No opinion

7. Do you address connotative meaning when presenting, studying, revising or discussing vocabulary?
A. Yes
B. No

8. I find the following techniques most effective when revising and refining target vocabulary:

A. Word Association
B. Semantic Feature Analysis
C. Semantic Mapping (clustering, word mapping, or brain storming)
D. Antonyms and Synonyms of Target Vocabulary (looking closely at fine distinctions between the words)
E. Other (please specify):

9. I think examining connotative meaning would help clarify some of the finer distinctions made between words in the following categories of vocabulary choice:
A. Taboo words
B. Sexist language
C. Register (formal -> informal)
D. Synonyms
E. Other, please specify:

10. During a class discussion, a student asks you to explain why her American friend became upset when she commented that he was fat. How would you handle this situation?
A. Give the following rule: Never tell an American that s/he is fat because it is considered rude.
B. Explore cross-cultural differences in the connotative meaning of "fat" in the context given by the student.
C. Perform a semantic feature analysis or clustering of a group of adjectives semantically related to the adjective "fat".
D. Discuss concrete and abstract attributes of adjectives.
E. Tell her to forget about it.
F. Other, please specify:
Optional: If you teach connotative meaning, briefly describe the most successful approach(es).

Word Meaning Resources

11. When teaching vocabulary in the classroom, I find the following resources most useful:
A. Assigned course text
B. Other TESOL (ESL, EFL, ELT) textbooks
C. Linguistic textbooks
D. Reference books for TESOL instructors
E. Professional journals

F. Dictionaries
G. Other, please specify:

12. If you teach connotative meaning, which resources do you find most helpful for this specific purpose?
A. Assigned course text
B. Other TESOL (ESL, EFL, ELT) textbooks
C. Linguistic textbooks
D. Reference books for TESOL instructors
E. Professional journals
F. Dictionaries
G. Other, please specify:

13. Do you encourage the use of learner or monolingual English dictionaries in class?
A. Yes
B. No
If yes, please specify the dictionary(ies), as well as, the type of class (Reading, Composition):

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