

Connotations



REPORT LANGUAGE, as we have seen, is *instrumental* in character—that is, instrumental in getting work done. But language is also used for the direct *expression* of a speaker's feelings. Considering language from the point of view of the *hearer*, we can say that report language *informs* us, but that expressive uses of language such as judgments and presymbolic functions *affect* us—that is, affect our feelings. Affective language has the character of a kind of force.

A spoken insult, for example, may provoke a return insult, just as a blow may provoke a return blow; a loud and peremptory command compels, just as a push compels; talking and shouting are as much a display of energy as pounding the chest. The first of the affective elements in speech is the *tone of voice*—its loudness or softness, its pleasantness or unpleasantness, its variations in volume and intonation during the course of the utterance.

Another affective element in language is *rhythm*. Rhythm is the name we give to the effect produced by the repetition of auditory (or kinesthetic) stimuli at fairly regular intervals. From the boom-boom of a drum to the nuances of cultivated poetry and music there is a continuous development and refinement of man's responsiveness to rhythm. To produce rhythm is to arouse attention and interest; so affective is rhythm, indeed, that it catches our attention even when we do not want our attention distracted. *Rhyme* and *alliteration* are, of course, ways of emphasizing rhythm in language, through repetition of similar sounds at regular intervals. Political-slogan writers and advertisers therefore have a special fondness for rhyme and alliteration: "Tippecanoe and Tyler Too," "Fifty-four-forty or Fight," "Keep Cool with Coolidge," "Better Buy Buick," "I Like Ike," "All the Way with L.B.J.," "McD.L.T." These are rather absurd expressions so far as information is concerned, but by their sound they set up small rhythmic echoes in one's head that make them annoyingly difficult to forget.

In addition to tone of voice and rhythm, another extremely important affective element in language is the aura of feelings, pleasant or unpleasant, that surrounds practically all words. It will be recalled that, in Chapter 4, a distinction was made between denotations (or extensional meaning), pointing to things, and connotations (or intensional meaning), consisting of "ideas," "notions," "concepts," and feelings suggested in the mind. These connotations can be divided into two kinds, the *informative* and the *affective*.

Informative Connotations

The informative connotations of a word are its socially agreed-upon, "im-personal" meanings, insofar as meanings can be given at all by additional words. For example, if we talk about a "pig," we cannot give the exten-

sional meaning of the word unless there happens to be an actual pig for us to point to. But we can give its informative connotations: "pig" for English-speaking people means "domesticated mammalian quadruped of the kind generally raised by farmers to be made into pork, bacon, ham, lard . . ."

Informative connotations may include both the *definition* of a term ("pig" as a "domesticated mammalian . . .") and its *denotation* (pig₁, pig₂, pig₃ . . .). But some terms have a definition, yet lack denotation: for example, a "mermaid" exists by definition only ("a creature half woman and half fish"). The term has no denotation because an extensional mermaid is not to be found. Terms in mathematics which have "logical existence" but no extensional reference can also be said to have informative connotations, but no denotation.

Denotations would seem to offer few problems of interpretation, since we are dealing here with words apart from the personal feelings that they may arouse. But such is not the case, because the same word may denote different things to people in different occupations or in different parts of the world. An English "robin" is an entirely different species from the American bird of that name. Many different and unrelated kinds of fish are denoted by the word "bream" (pronounced "brim" in the South). Belgian hares, we are told, are "really rabbits," while the American jackrabbit is "really a hare." The term "crocus," as popularly used, refers in different parts of the country to different flowers. The English sparrow is not a sparrow at all, but a weaver finch. House finches are often called linnets. The linnet is a European bird not found in North America.

Such differences in popular and regional terminology are among the reasons for establishing scientific names for plants and animals—names that are accepted and used by the entire international scientific community.

Affective Connotations

The affective connotations of a word, on the other hand, are the aura of personal feelings it arouses, as, for example, "pig": "Ugh! Dirty, evil-smelling creatures, wallowing in filthy sties," and so on. While there is no necessary agreement about these feelings—some people like pigs and others don't—it is the existence of these feelings that enables us to use words, under certain circumstances, for their affective connotations alone, without regard to their informative connotations. That is to say, when we are strongly moved, we express our feelings by uttering words with the affective connotations appropriate to our feelings, without paying any attention to the informative connotations. We angrily call people "pigs," "rats," "wolves," "skunks," or lovingly call them "honey," "sugar," "duck," and

"sweetie pie." Indeed, almost all verbal expressions of feeling make use, to some extent, of the affective connotations of words.

All words have, according to the uses to which they are put, some affective character. There are many words that exist more for their affective value than for their informative value; for example, we can refer to that man as "that gentleman," "that individual," "that person," "that gent," "that guy," "that hombre," "that fellow," or "that nerd"—and while the person referred to may be the same in all these cases, each of these terms reveals a difference in our feelings toward him. Dealers in knickknacks may write "Gyfte Shoppe" over the door, hoping that such a spelling carries, even if their merchandise does not, the flavor of antiquity. Affective connotations suggestive of England and Scotland are often sought in the choice of brand names for men's clothing—"Regent Park," "Bond Street," "London Fog"—and for real-estate developments—"Coventry West," "Hyde Park." Sellers of perfume choose names for their products that suggest France—"Mon Désir," "Indiscret," "Evening in Paris"—and expensive brands come in "flacons," never bottles. Consider, too, the differences among the following forms of address:

I have the honor to inform Your Excellency . . .
 This is to advise you . . .
 I should like to tell you, sir . . .
 I'm telling you, Mister . . .
 Cheez, boss, git a load of dis . . .
 Listen, punk . . .

The parallel columns below also illustrate how affective connotations can be changed while extensional meanings remain the same:

Finest quality filet mignon.
 Cubs trounce Giants 5-3.
 McCormick Bill steamrolled through
 Senate.
 Japanese divisions advance five miles.
 French armies in rapid retreat!

First-class piece of dead cow.
 Score: Cubs 5, Giants 3.
 Senate passes McCormick Bill over
 strong opposition.
 Japs stopped after five-mile advance.
 The retirement of the French forces to
 previously prepared positions in
 the rear was accomplished
 briskly and efficiently.

The governor appeared to be gravely
 concerned and said a statement
 would be issued in a few days
 after careful examination of the
 facts.

The governor was on the spot.

During the Boer War, the Boers were described in the British press as "sneaking and skulking behind rocks and bushes." The British forces, when they finally learned from the Boers how to employ tactics suitable to warfare on the South African veldt, were described as "cleverly taking advantage of cover." During the Vietnam War, retreat by U.S. forces was sometimes termed "strategic withdrawal."



A Note on Verbal Taboo

In every language, there seem to be certain "unmentionables"—words of such strong affective connotations that they cannot be used in polite discourse. In English, the first of these to come to mind are, of course, words dealing with excretion and sex. We ask waiters and salesclerks where the "lounge" or "rest room" is, although we usually have no intention of lounging or resting. "Powder room" is another euphemism for the same facility, also known as "toilet," which itself is an earlier euphemism. Indeed, it is impossible in polite society to state, without having to resort to baby talk or a medical vocabulary, what a "rest room" is for. (It is "where you wash your hands.")

Words referring to anatomy and sex—and words even vaguely suggesting anatomical and sexual matters—have even stronger affective connotations, especially in American and British culture. Polite ladies and gentlemen of the nineteenth century could not bring themselves to say "breast," "leg," or "thigh"—not even of chicken—so the terms "white meat" and "dark meat" were substituted. It was thought inelegant to speak of "going to bed," so "to retire" was used instead. When D. H. Lawrence's first novel, *The White Peacock* (1911) was published, the author was widely criticized for having used the word "stallion," even though its context was innocuous. Taboos and the euphemisms we use as substitutes do change, of course: a novel by Henry James or Edith Wharton uses the phrase "making love" in a way different from the way we use the term now. To Americans at the turn of the century, "making love" meant "wooing" or "courting"—these, in turn, are both words not in current use. Currently, we use "making love" as a more acceptable, romantic alternative to clinical or vulgar expressions for sexual union.

Amusing as these verbal taboos sometimes are, they may also produce serious problems, since they may prevent frank discussion of sexual or physical matters. Finding the nontechnical vocabulary of sex too coarse and shocking, and being unfamiliar with the medical or technical vocabulary, many people are simply unable to seek or use information about such "sensitive" issues.

When scientists first learned about AIDS, for example, the vague, hesitant vocabulary used to explain how the disease was transmitted confused many people. Gradually, the vocabulary became more specific as newspa-

pers, magazines, and other publications began using a less technical, common vocabulary to convey the critical facts needed by specific groups and audiences at risk for the disease. Nevertheless, some people have objected to, or have been shocked by, the appearance in print of explicit sexual terms designed to ensure that people of all ages know enough about AIDS to help prevent its spread.

Money is another subject about which communication is inhibited. It is acceptable to mention *sums* of money, such as \$10,000 or \$2.50. But it is considered in bad taste to inquire directly into other people's financial affairs, unless such an inquiry is really necessary in the course of business. When creditors send bills, they almost never mention money, although that is what they are writing about. There are many circumlocutions: "We beg to call your attention to what may be an oversight on your part." "We would appreciate your early attention to this matter." "May we look forward to an early remittance?"

The fear of death carries over, quite understandably in view of the widespread confusion of symbols with things symbolized, into fear of the *words* having to do with death. Many people, therefore, instead of saying someone has "died," substitute such expressions as "passed away," "gone to his reward," "departed," "bought the farm," or "gone west." In Japanese, the word for death, *shi*, happens to have the same pronunciation as the word for the number four. This coincidence results in many linguistically awkward situations, since people avoid "*shi*" in the discussion of numbers and prices, and use "*yon*," a word of different origin, instead.

The stronger verbal taboos have, however, a genuine social value. When we are extremely angry and we feel the need of expressing our anger in violence, the uttering of these forbidden words may provide a relatively harmless verbal substitute for going berserk and smashing furniture; they may act as a kind of safety valve in our moments of crisis.

It is difficult to explain why some words should have such powerful affective connotations while others with the same informative connotations do not. Some of our verbal reticences, especially the religious ones, have the authority of the Bible: "Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain; for the Lord will not hold him guiltless that taketh his name in vain" (Exodus 21:7). "Gee," "gosh almighty," and "gosh darn" are ways to avoid saying "Jesus," "God Almighty," and "God damn." Carrying the biblical injunction one step further, we also avoid taking the name of the devil in vain by means of such expressions as "the deuce," "the dickens," and "Old Nick." It appears that among all the people of the world, among the civilized as well as the primitive, there is a feeling that the names of the gods are too holy, and the names of evil spirits too terrifying, to be invoked lightly.

The primitive confusion of word with thing, of symbol with thing symbolized, manifests itself in some parts of the world in a belief that the name

of a person is *part of* that person. To know someone's name, therefore, is to have power over him. Because of this belief, it is customary among some peoples for children to be given at birth a "real name" known only to the parents and never used, as well as a nickname or public name to be called by in society. In this way a child is protected from being put in anyone's power. The story of Rumpelstiltskin is a European illustration of this belief in the power of names.

Thomas Mann, in *Joseph and His Brethren*, gives the following dramatic account of the power of names, according to ancient Jewish belief:

[Joseph, speaking of a lion.] "But if he had come, with lashing tail, and roared after his prey, like the voice of the chanting seraphim, yet thy child would have been little affrighted or not at all before his rage. . . . For knoweth not my father that the beasts fear and avoid man, for that God gave him the spirit of understanding and taught him the orders into which single things fall; doth he not know how Shemmael shrieked when the man of earth knew how to name the creation as though he were its master and framer. . . ? And the beasts too they are ashamed and put the tail between their legs because we know them and have power over naming him. If now he had come, with long slinking tread, with his hateful nose, mewing and spitting, terror would not have robbed me of my senses, nor made me pale before his riddle. 'Is thy name Blood-Thirst?' I would have asked of him making merry at his expense. 'Or Springing Murder?' But there I would have sat upright and cried out: 'Lion! Lo, Lion art thou, by nature and species, and thy riddle lieth bare before me, so that I speak it out and with a laugh it is plain.' And he would have blinked before the name and gone meekly away before the word, powerless to answer unto me. For he is quite unlearned and knows nought of writing tools."

Words with Built-in Judgments

The fact that some words simultaneously arouse both informative and affective connotations gives a special complexity to discussions involving religious, racial, national, and political groups. To many people, the word "communist" has both the informative connotation of "one who believes in communism" and the affective connotation of "one whose ideals and purposes are altogether repellent." Words applying to occupations of which one disapproves ("pickpocket," "racketeer," "prostitute") and those applying to believers in philosophies of which one disapproves ("atheist," "radical," "heretic," "materialist," "fundamentalist") likewise often communicate *simultaneously* a fact and a judgment on that fact. Such words may be called "loaded"—that is, their affective connotations may strongly shape people's thoughts.

In some parts of the United States, there is a strong prejudice against certain ethnic groups, such as Mexican-Americans, whether immigrant or

names given to names & claims to reclaim status

American-born. The strength of this prejudice is revealed by the fact that polite people and the press have stopped using the word "Mexican," using the term "Hispanic" instead to avoid any negative connotations. There are also terms such as "Chicano" and "Latino" that Mexican-American and Spanish-speaking groups have chosen to describe themselves.

Names that are "loaded" tend to influence behavior toward those to whom they are applied. Currently, the shop doorways and freeway underpasses of American cities are sheltering tens of thousands of people who have no work and no homes. These people used to be referred to as "bums"—a word that suggests not only a lack of employment but a lack of desire to work, people who are lazy, satisfied with little, and who have no desire to enter the mainstream of the American middle class or subscribe to its values. Thus, to think of these people as "bums" is to think that they are only getting what they deserve. With the search for new names for such people—"street people," "homeless," "displaced persons"—we may find new ways of thinking about their situation that may in turn suggest new ways of helping deal with it. Similarly, "problem drinker" has replaced "drunkard" and "substance abuser" has replaced "junkie." "Developmentally disabled" has replaced "retarded," which in turn replaced "idiot."

The negative connotations of words sometimes change because of deliberate changes in the way they are used. Michael Harrington, the American socialist, has said that "socialist" became a political dirty word in the 1930s and 1940s in the United States when opposing politicians and editorialists repeatedly linked "socialism" and "communism," obscuring what adherents to the two philosophies saw as distinctions between them. In the 1964 presidential campaign, it was said by his opponents that Senator Barry Goldwater was "too conservative" to be made president. The negative connotations of "conservative" had receded by 1988; in that presidential campaign, then Vice President George Bush repeatedly amplified the negative connotations of the word "liberal" and then accused his opponent, Michael Dukakis, of being one.

The meaning of words also changes from speaker to speaker, from hearer to hearer, and from decade to decade. An elderly Japanese woman of my acquaintance used to squirm at the mention of the word "Jap." "Whenever I hear that word," she used to say, "I feel dirty all over." She was reacting to the negative connotations as it was used during the Second World War and earlier. More recently, "JAP" is an acronym for "Jewish-American princess," heard as an insult by an entirely different ethnic group.

A black friend of mine recalls hitchhiking as a young man in the 1930s through an area of the country where very few blacks lived. He was given a ride by a white couple, who fed him and gave him a place to sleep in their home. However, they kept referring to him as "little nigger," which

upset him profoundly. He finally asked them not to call him by that "insulting term," a request they had difficulty understanding, as they had not meant to offend him. One way my friend might have explained his point further would have been to say, "Excuse me, but in the part of the country I come from, white people who wish to show contempt for my race call us 'niggers.' I assume this is not your intention."

In recent times, the negative connotations of the word "nigger" are more widely understood. This is partly the result of efforts by black Americans and others to educate the public. Early in 1942, when I was living in Chicago and teaching at the Illinois Institute of Technology, I was invited to become a columnist for the *Chicago Defender*—at that time the most militant of Negro newspapers. I say "Negro" rather than "black" because this was 1942 and it was the mission of that newspaper to make people proud of being "Negro." The word "Negro" at that time was used with dignity and pride. In its editorial policy, the *Defender* saw to it that the word was used in that way. It was always capitalized. Later, during the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s, a wider effort was made to make just this point in the mind of the American public as a whole, first substituting "Negro" for "colored," "nigger," "nigrah," and, later, substituting "black" for "Negro." "Black" is now the word most frequently chosen by people of African origin in the United States to describe themselves, and the word "Negro" is considered by many to be old-fashioned and condescending. Most recently, it has been proposed that "African-American" be substituted for "black." *Those who believe that the meaning of a word is innately part of the word risk offending or being offended because of having ignored differences in context or current usage.*

The conflicts that erupt over words are invariably an index to social concerns over the reality that the words refer to. Much debate has arisen over the issue of sexual discrimination in language. Is it fair, many people ask, that the word "man" should stand for all human beings, male and female? Should we say, "Everyone should cast his vote," when half the voters are women? Are there biases that are unfair to women—and to men—built into the English language? If so, what can or should be done about it?

The problem can be better understood if we look at the disputed words in the contexts in which they appear. In some contexts, the extensional meaning of "man" as a synonym for the species *Homo sapiens* covers both sexes, without any discrimination implied: men, women and children; Englishmen, Chinese, Eskimos, Aborigines, next-door neighbors, and so forth. In other contexts, "man" refers only to the male: "There is a man at the door." The problems with connotation occur in a context such as: "The work team is short ten men." In such a case the employer may be inclined to look for ten more males to hire, even when the work can be done equally well by women.

The Chinese ideograph [人], also used in Japanese, stands for "man" in the generic sense: "person," "human being." A different ideograph [男] is used for "man" in the sense of "male human being." Since women traditionally have been assigned subordinate roles in both Chinese and Japanese cultures, discrimination against women cannot be said to be due solely to the peculiarities of language.

For those who have no difficulty with the different meanings of "man," or who like the maleness they find in the generic term, the language needs no modification. But what about those who are dissatisfied with the masculine connotations of "man"? What about the woman on the softball team who insists on being called "first baseperson" or the committee leader who styles herself "chairperson"? What about the woman named "Cooperman" who wanted to change her name to "Cooperperson" and petitioned a court to legalize the change? (Her petition was denied.) Can the language accommodate them?

Fortunately, the language is flexible enough for people to make personal adjustments to meet their own standards. "Human beings" or "humans" or "people" are acceptable substitutes for the generic "man," though rhetorically they may not always sound as good. Instead of saying "Man is a tool-using animal," we can say, "Human beings are tool-using animals."

Once it becomes apparent that we can construct any sentence we please without incurring possible sexual stereotypes, a further question remains: Should we demand that all writers adopt a "nonsexist" vocabulary and always use it—for example, the neutral plural? On this point history offers some guidance.

Most of the attempts made to force living language into a doctrinaire program have failed resoundingly. Jonathan Swift once spoke out acidly against the use of the word "mob" as a corrupt shortening of the Latin term *mobile vulgus*. Dr. Samuel Johnson resisted, to no avail, the admission of the word "civilization" into his dictionary because it seemed to him a barbarism, despite its respectable Latin root. In this century, Mussolini tried to eliminate the informal *tu* in Italian (the second person singular pronoun, whose English counterpart, "thou," has disappeared in ordinary English usage). He covered Italy with posters commanding Italians to use the *voi* form instead. His campaign failed. The social forces that created the words in the first place could not be changed by logic, fiat, or program. Language has usually proven stronger than the individual.

It must not be forgotten that language, created over centuries and inherited with our culture, does not exert its tyranny uniformly over all who use it. In the novel *Kingsblood Royal* by Sinclair Lewis, actually a tract against racial prejudice, the central character is a vicious racial bigot—but he is careful never to use the word "nigger."

Similarly, an individual who uses "sexist" terms uncritically may have all kinds of discriminatory attitudes towards women, or he—or she—may

trans
identities
"they"

thing

be entirely free of them. The presence or absence of such terms has no necessary connection with the presence or absence of the corresponding attitudes.

This does not mean that writers who are sensitive to sexual bias in language should resign themselves to what they consider a sorry state of affairs. They can carry out their own programs within their own speech and writing. These efforts are not without risk of accidentally engendering new, unintended meanings. For example, in revising the words of hymns, the Episcopal Church changed "Christian Men, Rejoice!" to "Christian Friends, Rejoice!" However, as Sara Mosle pointed out in *The New Republic*, the theological implications of extending joy only to friends—what about Christian enemies, or even strangers?—were entirely inappropriate to the message of the hymn. "How long would it be before Christmas cards read 'Peace on Earth, good will towards friends?' A different proposition altogether from the brotherly (or sisterly) benediction to all mankind."¹

The calling of attention to sex discrimination contained within language, a campaign conducted in a similar way to that by which "Negro" and then "black" were successfully substituted for "colored," has served to raise society's awareness of the problem of built-in bias in language, even though it has not yet transformed the language. Even if such efforts fail to dislodge all forms of gender bias in the language, the effort to correct the problem is, in itself, worthwhile. As the poet John Ciardi has observed:

In the long run the usage of those who do not think about the language will prevail. Usages I resist will become acceptable. It will not do to resist uncompromisingly. Yet those who care have a duty to resist. Changes that occur against such resistance are tested changes. The language is better for them—and for the resistance.

One other curious fact needs to be recorded about the words we apply to such hotly debated issues as race, religion, political heresy, and economic dissent. Every reader is acquainted with people who, according to their own flattering descriptions of themselves, "believe in being frank" and like to "tell it like it is." By "telling it like it is," such people usually mean calling anything or anyone by the term which has the strongest and most disagreeable affective connotations. Why people should pin medals on themselves for "candor" for performing this nasty feat has often puzzled me. Sometimes it is necessary to violate verbal taboos as an aid to clearer thinking, but, more often, to insist upon "telling it like it is" is to provide our minds with a greased runway down which we may slide back into unexamined and reactive patterns of evaluation and behavior.

¹"Washington Diarist," *The New Republic*, Nov. 21, 1988