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Investigating Denotation and Connotation in Ahmed Mutar's Poem “Donkeys’ Time”

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Abstract

It is known that when we speak literally, we mean the meanings our words carry, i.e., descriptive meaning and denotation. But when we speak non-literally we mean something different from what our words mean, i.e., expressive meaning and connotation.

Denotation is considered to be the primary meaning of a word, e.g., the denotation of the lexical item **fire** is 'a rapid chemical changes of the material that releases heat and light and is accompanied by flame'. On the other hand, connotation is the secondary meaning of a word, e.g., the connotations of **fire** are 'intensity of feeling, enthusiasm and brilliance'.

English words are interesting to be learned, but complicated to be studied semantically. This study attempts to investigate and analyse the denotative and connotative meanings of words, in Ahmed's Mutar poem "Donkeys' Time."

Keywords: connotation, denotation, semantics, meaning, Mutar, donkeys' time

Chapter One Introduction

1.1 The Problem

When we investigate the meaning of words in a language, we find two main kinds of meaning, one of these is the 'denotative' or 'conceptual' meaning and the other is 'peripheral', 'associative' or 'connotative' meaning. Denotative meaning is the literal, conceptual or the dictionary meaning of a word, while the connotative meaning is the emotional association accompanying a word.

Writers of literature often make use of these two types of meaning. Therefore, it is important to know connotation and denotation for our understanding of literature. Consequently, in order to discuss literary texts and understand them, we must concentrate on the language of these texts and the meanings of the words used.

It is so important to analyse meaning because through the exploration of the meaning of words the writer's message conveyed to his readers is understood. Therefore, this study deals with the problem of interpreting the meaning of words in order to get a better understanding of them. One's understanding of a word is incomplete if he knows only its denotative meaning without its connotative meaning. So, the main concern of the present study is to show how Ahmad Mutar uses words connotatively in his poem.

1.2 Aims of the Study

The present study aims at:

- 1-Explaining the significance of both kinds of meaning; 'denotative and connotative' and their value in Mutar's poems
- 2-Showing how to interpret the meaning of words denotatively and connotatively.
- 3-Studying how Mutar manipulates words connotatively to offer a better picture of his ideas.
- 4-Proving that Mutar uses connotation rather than denotation in his poems so as to give the intended meaning and to give each word its importance in the overall linguistic structure of the literary text.

1.3 The Hypotheses

It is hypothesized that:

- 1- Mutar frequently uses words connotatively rather than denotatively.
- 2-Connotative meaning is more difficult to deal with than denotative meaning.
- 3-Connotative meaning is more important in literary texts than denotative meaning.

1.4 Procedures

To carry out the study these procedures are followed:

- 1-Explaining the concepts of denotation and connotation.
- 2-Going through the poem to collect data by pinpointing the words used connotatively.
- 3-Analysing the words denotatively and connotatively.
- 4-Listing the semantic features of each word used denotatively and connotatively.

1.5 Limits of the Study

This study is limited to Ahmad Mutar's poem which is one of the most important and well-known poems written by this poet.

1.6 Value of the Study:

This study is hoped to be valuable for those interested in the semantic studies of words, as it surveys in detail the use of denotation and connotation in language, especially the language of literature.

Chapter Two

General Survey of Denotation and Connotation

2.1 Denotation

Words in any language generally convey at least two types of meaning; denotative and connotative. The distinction between them is commonly associated with the philosopher John Stuart Mill(1806-1873), though the distinction is in fact much older.

Concerning the first type; denotative meaning, which is also called central, conceptual or referential meaning, refers to the relationship

between words and the concrete objects and activities in the physical world(Wilkins, 1978:119).

Crystal (2003:129) states that denotation is a term used in semantics as part of a classification of types of meaning; opposed to connotation. Denotative meaning involves the relationship between a linguistic unit (especially a lexical item) and the non- linguistic entities to which it refers – it is, thus, equivalent to referential meaning. For example, the denotation of the lexical item **dog** is its dictionary definition of ‘canine quadruped’, etc.. Its connotations might include: **friend, helper, competition , faithful** and **lively pet**. Such a thing differs from culture to culture(ibid)

This type of meaning is known to be the central factor in linguistic communication. It is the most important element of every act of linguistic communication. Priority is given to denotation because this type of meaning has a complex and sophisticated organization of a kind that may be compared with and cross- related to similar organization of the syntactic and phonological levels of language(Leech,1974:9). It is shared by the speakers whoever and whatever they are. Also it is considered to be an important and a basic part of what language is; in order to define any language we have to be acquainted with the denotative meaning of its words (Leech,1974:11).

Matthews(1997:69,97) agrees with Leech saying that the usual implication is that denotations are primary and connotations are secondary, stating that denotative meaning involves the relation between a lexical unit and whatever objects in the world it refers to. For example, the denotative meaning of the lexical item, **bull** (in one account of its meaning) is a class of animals, while the connotative meaning is used variously to refer to differences in meaning that cannot be reduced to differences in denotation.

On the other hand, to Hartmann & Stork (1976:61), denotation is defined as “that aspect of meaning of a particular word or group of words which is based on a clear reference to give section of the observable ‘external world’ and on some kind of conventionalization; dictionary definition”. For instance, the word **girl** conveys something that is real and related to ‘living being’, ‘female sex’ , ‘age’, ‘behaviour’ ,etc...

According to Lyons(1981:152) who states that a lexeme is related to the outside world by means of denotation, denotation is basic in the sense that words are names or labels denoting classes of entities such as cows or

animals, which exist in the world, external to language and independent of it.

2.2 Connotation

Our understanding of the meaning of a word remains incomplete if we know only to what it may refer; its denotative meaning.

Connotation is defined by Hartmann and Stork (1976:49) as “that aspect of meaning of a particular word or group of words which is based on the feelings and ideas it arouses in the minds of speaker (or writer) and hearer (or reader)”. Thus the term **democracy** has different political contexts and its literal sense may have been extended to include different over-tones. Connotative meaning is also called ‘implication’ or ‘over-tones’. It is concerned with the emotional reactions of the language user to the use of the word and his attitudes towards the language he is using (Wilkins,1978:122). For example, the word **child** could be defined as a young human being but people may associate the following characteristics with it: affectionate, lovable, sweet, noisy, irritating and so on (Richards & Richard,2002:108).

Crystal in his dictionary (2003:97) states that the main application of the connotative meaning is with reference to the emotional associations (personal or communal) which are suggested by, or are part of the meaning of a linguistic unit, especially a lexical item. The lexical item **December** might have the following connotations:

- 1) Bad weather and dark evenings (for North Europeans, at least).
- 2) Christmas and parties for the others.

Yule(1986:92) uses the same expressions and illustrates this idea as follows:

The denotative meaning of the word will cover the conceptual or literal use of the word **needle** as a thin, sharp, steel instrument. The associations attached to the word that lead you to think of pain convey its connotative meaning. The connotation of a word changes while its literal meaning remains the same. For example the word **computer** in the 1960s had the connotations of dangerous super-intelligent machine threatening to escape human control and take over, while in the recent years its connotations have been changed positively but its denotation is still the same

Leech (1974:12) refers to the connotative meaning as the communicative value that an expression has by virtue of what it refers to, over and above its purely conceptual content. It can be interpreted according to the viewpoint adopted by an individual, a group of people or a whole society. Connotations may vary from age to age, from society to society and even from one individual to another within the same speech community. Connotative meaning is not an essential part of what language is but rather an incidental part and it varies from one person to another depending on his/her experience, culture and the historical period in which the individual lives. It is considered to be open-ended and changeable, just like our knowledge and beliefs about the universe are. It is also known to be the secondary meaning in addition to the primary meaning of the word (ibid)

Words may have different emotive meanings in different societies, e.g., the word **liberal** has a good impression in Britain, while in South Africa and in some political circles in the United States it has a bad impression and considered to be a bad word (Palmer, 1981:90).

Some connotations are quite personal gained from personal experiences. For example, the word **dog** may connote fierce and frightening animal to someone who had a bad experience of dogs in childhood, whereas the same word may connote friendship and loyalty to another person.

Atchison (1987:86) observes that if we depend on the denotative meaning of a word like **adolescent**, then it will mean someone who is between childhood and adulthood, while the connotative meaning implies that the person concerned is likely to be awkward, immature, obstinate and moody.

In fact, we all use connotations all the time through our use of language in everyday life communications. Connotation of a word can be thought of as the aroma, a kind of smell the word has, it needs to be attached to the word in an indirect way.

2.3 Distinctions between Denotation and Connotation

The terms denotation and connotation reflect at least four main conceptual distinctions, ignoring a few marginal ones, only the basic ones

will be handled .The four different distinctions are based on the views of De Saussure and Hjelmslev.

Chapter Three Ahmed Mutar as a poet

3.1 Preliminaries

Linguistic studies and literary studies are really connected in certain areas as intellectual disciplines. The effects on the literary domination of language studies are found clearly in the concentration of attention on language, especially the written form, and on the styles of the well-known authors. Almost in all works of literature, levels of language in addition to the semantic level are connected to be used aesthetically.

3.2 His Style

Ahmed Mattar style has a very distinctive style in choosing words and arranging parts of verse for aesthetic objectives. So his works motivate the reader in question as a result of their deviations, repulsion of their style, fragmentations of their readings and the intensity of their meaning therefore, his works require a well-versed reader in the field of linguistic riddles and good cultural background so as not be lost in the meanings of his verses. Moreover, his language is special in the general language. Besides, his statement is not ordinary among normal communicative ones.

3.3 Symbolism

Literary symbolism is rooted in and springs from linguistic symbolism. The former cannot be thought of apart from the latter, so to say “they are two sides of the same coin”. Literary symbolism arising out of the linguistic structure works as the most effective medium for expressing human emotional and intellectual experiences(Mukalel, 2003: 40).

3.3.2 Metaphor

A literary metaphor is a semantic oddity which requires that a linguistic form should be given something more than its normal, ordinary or literal interpretation; meaning (Leech cited in Freeman,1970:122) .Metaphorical meaning is the speaker’s utterance meaning ,i.e., what he means by uttering words, sentences and expressions .

Fromkin et al. (2003:204) reveal the importance of metaphor as an essential component of language creativity by saying that without metaphor, our ability to communicate effectively would be crippled. A metaphor is an expression that indicates one concept –its literal meaning – but is used to indicate another concept. Therefore by using metaphor we can give a different image from the basic one, i.e., give another meaning.

Chapter Four Analysis of the poem

4.1 Introduction

Few linguists refuse the idea that literature is language at full stretch and therefore it is more difficult to describe and explain than an ordinary conversation in the street. Yet some linguists agree that literature, whether written or oral, is composed of language and therefore it could be analyzed linguistically.

As a matter of fact, when a literary work is analyzed linguistically, there will be concentration on the meaning of words because the meaning of a word, as Chapman (1973:63) states, is neither infinite nor static in itself; it is changeable. It changes as the characters move in the narrative plot, just like the meaning of words change in different grammatical situations and in different contexts.

4.1

زمن الحمير

المعجزات كلها في بدني ،
حي أنا لكن جلدي كفني ،
أسير حيث أشتهي لكنني أسير ،
نصف دمي بلازما، ونصفه خبير ،
مع الشهيق دائما يدخلني، ويرسل التقرير في الزفير ،
وكل ذنبي أنني آمنت بالشعر، وما آمنت بالشعير ،
في زمن الحمير

4.2

Donkeys' Time

All the miracles are in my body,
I am a live but my skin is as my coffin,
I walk wherever I want but I am prisoner,
Half of my blood plasma, half expert,
Always enters me with the inhalation, and sends the report in exhalation,

And all my sins that I believed in poetry, not in barley
In Donkeys' time

Denotative meaning

The poet uses simple words like " donkey , skin , coffin , inhalation , exhalation, poetry , barley " These words have entries to the dictionary

- 1- Donkey means a domesticated hoofed mammal of the horse family with long ears and a braying call, used as a beast of burden; an ass.
- 2- Skin means the thin layer of tissue forming the natural outer covering of the body of a person or animal.
- 3- Coffin means a long, narrow box, typically of wood, in which a dead body is buried or cremated.
- 4- Plasma means the colorless fluid part of blood, lymph, or milk, in which corpuscles or fat globules are suspended.
- 5- Inhalation means the action of inhaling or breathing in.
- 6- Exhalation means the process or action of exhaling.
- 7- Poetry means literary work in which the expression of feelings and ideas is given intensity by the use of distinctive style and rhythm; poems collectively or as a genre of literature.
- 8- Barley means a hardy cereal with coarse bristles extending from the ears, cultivated especially for use in brewing and stock feed.

Connotative meaning

To begin with, most of the poets around the world use figurative, poetic, and symbolic language to deliver the ideas indirectly and to beautify their meanings

Here the poet uses symbolic language to convey his thoughts and to mock the political system by referring to them as donkeys. All the words which have been mentioned above are used connotatively and symbolically. The poet is chained cannot do anything because of the corrupted and illiterate politicians they berried him alive while he has all the power the develop his country and rise the nation but of course they are against their policies by using "all the miracles are in body" and "I am alive and my skin is my coffin ". He believed in in his capabilities and beliefs rather than their belief because he is right and they are not. In their eyes he is guilty because he follows his own desires and thoughts because he thinks

they are right but the corrupted politicians accused and imprisoned him for his rebel against their corrupted principles.

4.3 Conclusions

The study came out with the following results:

Ahmed Mutar frequently used connotative meaning rather than denotative meaning in his poem "Donkeys' Time".

Metaphor and symbolism are very important for him to achieve his goal which is "Mocking".

Mutar manipulated the words and offered a better picture to us by explaining his ideas.

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