Introduction to the Media Unit
Media Analysis: Connotations and Denotations

The everyday reader of the newspapers, pressed for time, may not necessarily pay attention to the type of language used in the news articles. That is, she may not particularly heed the choice of words (diction) or the tone in which a story was reported. This seems reasonable if the reader is in a hurry to just get the gist of things, or a quick information update. After all, language is merely a tool, a medium if you like, with which ideas and knowledge are communicated.

Or is it?

In this exercise, you'll decide.

Each pair of words below has similar denotations (*neutral* meanings) but rather different connotations (*coloured* meanings). In the first blank column, write down one definition which could objectively apply to both words. In the second column, write down the different associations that each word possesses.

	WORD	COMMON DENOTATION	DIFFERENT CONNOTATIONS
1	**kill** **massacre**		
2	**house** **home**		
3	**emotional** **passionate**		
4	**sweat** **perspire**		
5	**die** **pass away**		
6	**pale** **fair**		
7	**naive** **innocent**		
8	**nosy** **inquisitive**		
9	**animal** **beast**		
10	**liberal** **permissive**		
11	**thin** **skinny**		
12	**puny** **delicate**		
13	**single** **spinster**		
14	**mislead** **deceive**		
15	**lie** **misstatement**		
16	**data**		

	information		
17	**portly** **fat**		

Emotive Conjugations

Another way to think about the values imposed upon us by language is to think in terms of 'emotive conjugations.' This is a term many today associate with philosopher Bertrand Russell (1872-1970). A conjugation is a verb that has been inflected (or changed in form) to fit the context. An emotive conjugation refers to the practice of changing words (or choosing them), either consciously or unconsciously, so that we pitch a sentence in a way that benefits us, or in a way that will have the readers view us in a favorable light. In other words, when we conjugate words emotively, we find words whose factual content (denotation) is the same as its synonyms but whose connotations are entirely different.

The following examples will clarify:

What is being described (neutral)	**Word choice when applied to 'Us' (objective meaning)**	**Word choice when applied to 'Them' (subjective meaning)**
Arriving at a new decision	I have reconsidered	You have changed your mind
		They have gone back on their word.
Holding one's position	We are firm	You are obstinate
		They are pig-headed
Intelligence activities	We are conducting research / surveillance	They are spying

Let us consider the examples: "We are firm", "You are obstinate", and "He is pig-headed". "Firm" here is an instance of what linguists regard as ameliorative (positive) connotation, "obstinate" and "pig-headed" as pejorative (negative) in increasing degree. Yet these three sentences could refer to the identical situation. What this suggests, in the end, is that language has great emotive power. Depending on our word choice (diction), we can choose to evoke positive or negative emotions to varying degrees, and in so doing, shape people's response to what we are saying. Language is thus not a transparent carrier of content, but is itself laden with messages which we intentionally or unintentionally send out to our audience. These messages will in turn shape what they know.

The article below provides a first-hand example of the linguistic determinism as proposed by Sapir and Whorf. In this case, we see how the Japanese language can influence and determine thought.

Reading: The Interplay of Language, Culture, and Thought

by Eileen Dombrowski.

Inscrutable, evasive, insincere. Saying 'yes' when they really mean 'no', and smiling politely all the while. The image of the Japanese in the west is often of an incomprehensible culture, whose smooth and polished surface cannot be penetrated. It is perhaps through examining the Japanese language, though, that English speakers might gain a glimpse into the culture, as the language and culture are so reciprocally interconnected. The Japanese language shows some of the substance behind the polished surface, as it reveals a culture of politeness, of respectful treatment of others, and of highly tuned social awareness.

In Japanese, one can scarcely speak to another person, and certainly not correctly, without a highly developed sensitivity to relative social position, based on a fusion of factors such as age, gender, or importance in a company. The language provides different levels of politeness, so that the speaker must recognize whether to speak 'up' to a superior, 'level' to an equal - though never 'down' to an inferior! "We can't say exactly what form for what occasion," writes Miss Tanaka, "but we have to use our sensitivity."

This sense of relative position permeates the forms of the language. 'If I want to say something very polite: comments Junko Sagara, 'I have three ways. One is to put the verb or sentence in the polite form. The second is to use the verb which is used only for a respected person for the action of the person I am talking to. The third is to put the verb which shows my own action into the modest form.'

To complicate matters, modesty and humility are so much part of speech that one would refer indirectly to one's own group one's family, for example - using a humble form which pushes them downward, and to the group of the person to whom one is speaking in an honorific form, raising them upward in comparison, in order to be respectful toward the other person.

The words for 'I' and 'you' likewise vary according to the relationship between people, to the point that Japanese students in an English-speaking college describe responding quite differently toward bilingual teachers depending on whether they are speaking with them in English or Japanese. Izumi Sasaki describes her feeling that English gives her different possibilities from Japanese in forming relationships with families where she was a guest:

I would like to give an example from my experience here. When I was in Japan, I went to stay at my friend's house for the weekend. Of course, I was talking to my friend using the informal form of 'you', and I was using polite forms (for which the exact translation in English does not exist, as far as I know) for her parents and her grandparents. Although I had known all those people for quite a long time, I never got to talk to her parents and her grandparents about their private life as I do to her, because those polite forms that I was using would not go together with those questions that I wanted to ask them about their private life. I would never ask those questions in those polite forms unless I was their lawyer or something like that. If I actually did ask them, I might have been considered as being such a nagging teenage girl. Therefore, I never got to know how her parents met each other, or even about their childhood or adolescence at all. No matter how close the friend might have been to me, the relationship with her family was always like this.

But when I stayed at my host's family's place for the first time in Canada, the condition was totally different. First of all the feeling that I had when I was asking them on the phone if I could stay or not, was the one that I had never experienced when I was talking to someone who I had met (or talked to) for the first time. Although we were talking to each other without even knowing the other person's face, we were talking to each other in such a way that people who overheard our conversation might have thought that I was talking to my friend. Actually, I myself couldn't believe that I was talking to my host family rather than my friend. It seems to me that this was because we were both using the same word 'you'.

Male and female speech also varies, with 'I' and 'you' in different forms and particular endings added to other words. The possibility for subtlety and innuendo, though, is not eliminated
by such structure. Saeko Hagihara comments, 'If I, as a woman, use "ore", the word for guys, that means I'm wild or I don't feel feminine.'

Japanese politeness, however, is not confined to this sense of relative social position. It also affects the openness or frankness of speech. Makiko Oyama describes the way in which indirectness can soften potential conflict in order to preserve a social harmony:

When talking in English, usually one can get the other's opinion as soon as that person starts talking, whereas in Japanese, one may have to wait for a longer time to hear the other's opinion since the verb which states the final conclusion is at the end. Therefore, in Japanese, since it is difficult when one has to respond negatively, one can start speaking a little bit in an affirmative way by stating one's reasons politely and, through explaining, one can reach the negative conclusion at the end. The Japanese are used to this Kind of situation. However, it could cause a problem when English speakers have to deal with this, since it is thought to be polite to answer straightforwardly for them.

This indirectness - a sidestepping of the confrontational or the too naked assertion - also characterizes the content of what is appropriate to say. Akiko Koyama tells a story in one of her essays of a romance which floundered on language:

Once my Dad told me a funny story about his 'miai'. An arranged marriage starts not with love between the young man and woman but with an introduction, a 'miai', set up by a go-between who thinks they would make a good couple. If they finally

find that they hit it off, the go-between sees them through to marriage. Anyway, he had a 'miai' with a lady who had been in USA for a long time, before he got married to my mom.

This is what he said to me. The lady to whom he was introduced seemed graceful and nice. This is a part of their conversation at the 'miai' which is a very common and typical question at any 'miai':

> ***Dad:*** *Do you have any pastimes?*
> ***Lady:*** *Oh, yes! I have lots. Especially I am really good at playing the piano. All my friends love me playing it. I'm sure you'll love it, too. He was quite shocked by her words, and he found that there was no way to marry her, because he thought that she lacked modesty, which means for Japanese that she had no common sense. I wonder if non-Japanese can see what is wrong with this part of conversation. Probably not. But if the lady had been a typical Japanese, what would the conversation be like?*
> ***Dad:*** *Do you have any pastimes?*
> ***Lady:*** *Yes I play the piano only a little bit. But I am too shy to play it in front of you.*
> *These words were expected to be said even if she was an amazing pianist. At the same time people would know for sure that she is a good pianist If she says that she plays it 'only a little bit'.*

Clearly, Japanese, both in the content of what is spoken and in the linguistic forms of the language, reflects and reinforces a culture in which group harmony is more important than individual self-expression, and in which politeness is a supreme value. Sylvia Cousineau emphasizes that the politeness is much more than a veneer or a false mask, and that the linguistic forms are an integral part of the Japanese way of thinking:

*I was a grown individual, aged*21, *when I learned Japanese, but even acquiring the language at that point of relative maturity, as an outsider, I found that it mediated my thinking. Perhaps it has not changed the filters through which I see reality, but it has modified them.*

In Japan one is never determined by the self as an individual, but always as a member of a group, and the language is shaped by that. In learning Japanese, I had to come to a new understanding of myself and of hierarchy and group, and the language forced me to internalize this new understanding, partly intellectually, partly organically.

I had previously assumed that sincerity was something that one saw on someone's face. Not anymore. In Japan, the language is such that personal expression makes one feel quirky. It is rough, confrontational. In Japanese society, feelings are not displayed but intimated; it is not a culture of representation of the self but of representation by consent. In Japan, one generally deals with people completely in their social roles, where everything is codified, and smooth, with the support of the expected: one always knows what to do or to say.

The Japanese are thought of as hypocritical, but they are less hypocritical than people in the west, because no one is fooling anyone else. I find this more honest. The mask is a lie - but it is a socially true lie. In the west we also wear masks, but we pretend that it is our real self In fact, we have a 'representational neurosis' - enhanced by television, with its emphasis on faces- whereby people are acting their own lives. 'I feel joy. I feel anger. Can't you see it on my face?'

She comments, too, on the way that Japanese manners penetrated her own Canadian conduct. 'When I returned from Japan, I found that at first I was very formal with everyone – and when I talked on the telephone, I found that as I spoke I kept bowing to the phone!'

Language, culture, and thought can scarcely be disentangled. Perhaps it is easier to recognize the union in a language which is not our own, as our own ways are so often invisible to us, simply assumed as the way things are and therefore must be. For English speakers, then, a consideration of Japanese might illuminate these interconnections and help us to raise some questions about our own invisible norms.

Source: *Theory of Knowledge*, by Nicholas Alchin, pp. 187-190.