Denotation and Connotation

A word’s denotation is its dictionary definition. A word can also make people feel or think a certain way. These feelings and ideas are the connotations of a word. Words with the same meaning can have different “shades of meaning”—that is, they can be understood differently.

Positive connotation: Being on the track team has made Alan slender and lean. (attractively thin)

Neutral connotation: Being on the track team has made Alan thin.

Negative connotation: Being on the track team has made Alan skinny and scrawny. (unattractively thin)

Be sure that the words you use have the right connotation as well as the right denotation.

A. Identifying Positive and Negative Connotations

Each pair of phrases includes synonyms with different connotations. Put a + sign next to the one with a positive connotation and a – sign next to the one with a negative connotation. Use a dictionary or thesaurus if needed.

1. a powerful stink ________ a powerful aroma ________ 6. answered with arrogance ________
   answered with confidence ________
2. a dynamic leader ________ a pushy leader ________ 7. sloppy clothes ________
3. squandered his money ________ spent his money ________
   8. an aggressive attitude ________
   9. an easygoing friend ________
   10. a thoughtful response ________
   a daring plan ________ a lazy friend ________
   energetic children ________ wild children ________
   a calculated response ________
B. Connotations in Action

In the first paragraph below, circle the words that have a positive connotation. In the second paragraph, circle the words that have a negative connotation. Use a dictionary or thesaurus if needed.

Positive connotation:

Ms. Baxter has been a(n) (valuable, costly) employee of this company for three years. In that time, she has expressed many (militant, strong) opinions. Her methods of solving problems are sometimes (unusual, bizarre). In short, she is a real (leader, show-off).

Negative connotation:

I was surprised to get a birthday gift from my Aunt Joanna. She is (an inquisitive person, a real snoop), so she had asked many of my relatives what I might like. I tore the (colorful, gaudy) paper off the package and found a shirt made of (flimsy, delicate) material. It was covered with (detailed, fussy) embroidery and (flashy, eye-catching) sequins. It certainly was a(n) (strange, exotic) present.

C. Vocabulary Challenge

Replace each word with a synonym that has positive connotations. Then write a sentence using the synonym correctly. Use a dictionary or thesaurus if needed.

1. nosy __________________
   ________________________________________________________________________

2. odd __________________
   ________________________________________________________________________

3. cheap __________________
   ________________________________________________________________________

4. overprotective ________________
   ________________________________________________________________________

5. glare ________________
   ________________________________________________________________________