

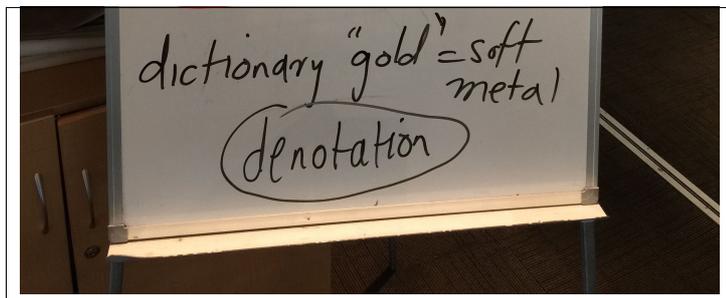
On Definition vs Denotation

Introduction

The lecturer in the ACU/Introduction to Literature course, made a statement that:

a dictionary contains denotations [of words]

As evidenced in part, by the whiteboard discussion:



I took issue with the subject statement, asserting that a dictionary contains *definitions* of words, not *denotations* of words. The lecturer requested a paragraph from me, laying out my argument. Unfortunately, it takes a bit more than that !

This is not a pedantic or merely academic issue, because:

- a. Learning about a subject requires precise understanding of terminology. Imprecise usage hinders that learning. As well, it severely hinders communication, which relies on definitions.
- b. A subject such as Literature, particularly the historical construction, is precise ¹. Muddling terms is not conducive to understanding or appreciating the body of pre-modern Literature. For creative writing, it is important to distinguish the layers of meanings, in order to use them effectively.

Submission

Given the dictionary definitions ²:

1. **Dictionary**

A book that lists the words of a language in alphabetical order and gives their meaning, or that gives the equivalent words in a different language.

2. **Definition**

A statement of the exact meaning of a word, especially in a dictionary.

Resolution

Clearly, a dictionary contains meanings of words, and these are definitions. That is not arguable. The issue is closed.

1 Save for the modern creative aspect, which appears unconstrained.

2 New American Dictionary, Apple Edition, 2005

Language Arts Discussion

However, it does not address the term *denotation*, that was used in the subject statement. Explaining that, is somewhat beyond resolving the accuracy of the subject statement. This is furnished as further explanation, that does not add to the resolution, which has already been made.

The terms *denotation* and *connotation* are reportedly used in the Language Arts. First, the dictionary definitions ²:

3. Denotation

- Literal or primary meaning of a word, in contrast to the feelings or ideas that the word suggests: *beyond their immediate denotation, the words have a connotative power.*
- the action or process of indicating or referring to something, by means of a word, symbol, etc.

4. Connotation

An idea or feeling that a word invokes, in addition to its literal or primary meaning: *the word discipline has unhappy connotations of punishment and repression.*

Therefore:

- *denotation* and *connotation* refer to the usage, and of the usage in a particular context, such as the Language Arts
- *denotation* merely means that the primary meaning of the word is used, and
- *connotation* merely means that the invocations are relied upon
- whereas the *definition* relates to the meaning of the word, without regard to context or usage.

The terms *denotation* and *connotation* have nothing to do with the *definition* of words, they are in addition to, or derived from, the *definition*. The pivotal point of the argument is the usage of a word versus its meaning. The meaning of a word is fundamental, the usage of a word is a consequence of its meaning, not a fundament.

Next, consider the definition given in the *Poetic Devices* handout, the *Meaning of Words* section:

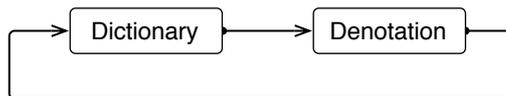
5. Denotation

The dictionary definition of a word ...

The expanded subject statement would then be:

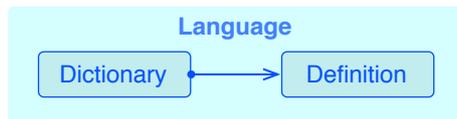
a dictionary contains denotations [of words] ... denotations are dictionary definitions

That forms a circular reference, and causes an infinite loop, without ever resolving the meaning of *denotation*, or providing a *definition* for the word.

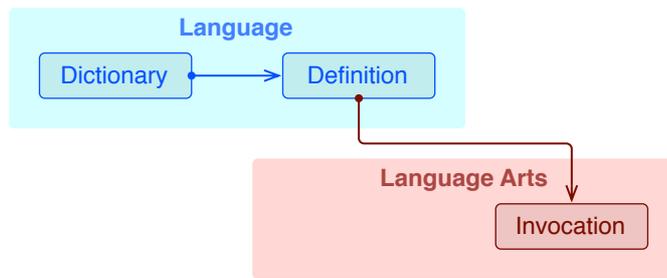


Besides the hilarity, it further proves the incorrect nature of the subject statement.

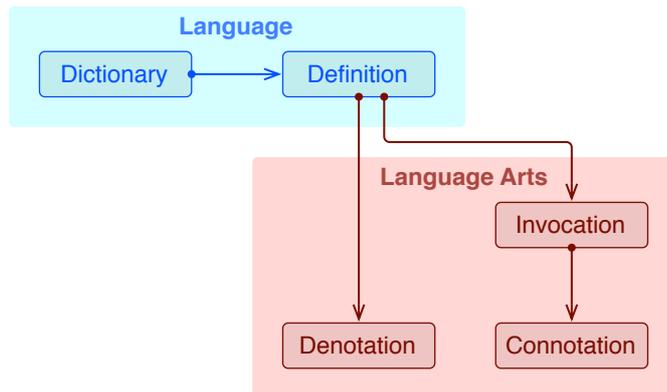
The confusion is an attack on Language, on reality. Once the confusion re fundament and consequence is removed, the truth is quite simple. First, we have authoritative *definitions*, these stand alone, they are true without regard to context or usage. Truth does not change with the seasons, it is not affected by emotions:



Next, we have the Language Arts, which owes its existence to Language, it is a derivative. Here we enter the realm of usage and context. *Invocations* are ever-changing, due to context: culture; emotions:



Next, we have more words which are used in the domain of the Language Arts, all of which are derived from the *definitions*. This shows the domains and layers concerning the issue, it illustrates the hierarchy that exists in reality. If this is understood (without confusion), resolution of each article is immediate and final:



Even the relationship between *denotation* and *connotation*, the fact that *connotation* is closely related to, and somewhat dependent upon *denotation*, is due to the fact that they, along with *invocation*, are all derived from a common ancestor, *definition*. There is no direct relationship between them. To draw such a direct relationship would be to make the same error as the subject statement: failure to keep discrete layers discrete.

It is unfortunately a common error in the arts, to reverse the roles of things, to propose that the dependent article (eg. *denotation*, or a child) is somehow equal to, or higher than, the article it is dependent upon (eg. *definition*, or a parent), the very article from which it is derived, to which it owes its existence.

Language Arts Resolution

I have established that:

- a. Although *denotation* may well be used as a substitute for *definition*, as reported, within the Language Arts alone, the terms have different meanings, they are not equivalent or interchangeable.
- b. The substitution cannot be used outside the Language Arts.

Further, I assert that:

- c. The corollary fails: *definition* cannot be substituted for *denotation*. Again, they are not equivalent or interchangeable.
- d. While a dictionary contains *definitions*, which happen to be *denotations* in a particular context, the dictionary does not contain *denotations*. Not even in the Language Arts (except if one is loose with definitions).

Therefore the subject statement:

a dictionary contains denotations [of words]

is false, and I reject it.

The correct statements are:

a dictionary contains definitions [of words]

the definition of a word, is its denotation.