7. *Language and Gender* by Angela Goddard and Lindsey Meân Patterson (2000)

In school, we are taught that adjectives describe items and nouns name or label them. As usual, such apparent simplicities disguise quite a lot of complexity. For a start, adjectives operate at a number of different levels. For example, the dictionary definition of a word ― its **denotation** ― is hardly ever the end of the story. A very potent aspect of meaning is the level of connotation a word can call up―all the associated ideas we connect with a term. Connotation is a fluid aspect of meaning, as it will depend, not only on the experiences that individuals and groups bring to interactions, but also on who is using the terms and how they are being deployed.

As an illustration of the potential differences between denotation and connotation, consider the word 'bald'. The dictionary definition of this term is 'having the scalp wholly or partly hairless'. Is that the total meaning of this word?

Brainstorm all the connotations of the adjective 'bald'. For example, are there different connotations of this term according to the type of person you picture? Does the term mean the same when applied to, say, a young man who has shaved his head, compared with an older man who is losing his hair and combs his remaining hair across the top of his head?

As well as one adjective having connotations that are very different from its denotative meaning, there are also pairs of adjectives that have the same denotation but very different connotations. For example, 'someone without children' could be the denotation of both the terms 'childless' and 'childfree', but these terms have nothing in common at the connotative level of meaning.

Just as adjectives can operate at different levels of description, so can nouns. Nouns are traditionally not thought of as descriptors; they are seen as labelling words, with the implication that things exist prior to their needing a name. At the simplest level, it is true that one of the functions of language is to name and itemise the world around us: tables, chairs and computers need to be called something. But when you get away from concrete objects, naming isn't quite so cut and dried. For example, here are two common nouns that refer to people:

bachelor spinster

At the level of denotation, these terms mean 'unmarried adult male' and 'unmarried adult female', respectively. However, the connotations of these two nouns go much further: while a bachelor is traditionally seen as a man who has *chosen* not to marry and who is 'playing the field', a spinster is seen as a woman who has *failed* *to* find a husband and who has been 'left on the shelf'. Our everyday expressions, such as those in quotation marks in the previous sentence, also reveal a lot about our hidden thinking. Men are associated with sport; women, not just with shopping, but with being saleable commodities that are, in this case, past their sell-by date.

The point being made above is that even nouns, looking for all the world like simple, clear-cut labels, are categories which often mask a whole range of implicit descriptions which are very revealing of cultural values. Implicit meanings are very powerful precisely because they are unremarkable and therefore can become part of our automatic thinking.

Implicitness in itself is not necessarily a bad thing, however: as an aspect of language use, we employ it on a daily basis to make our communication more economic than it would otherwise be. For example, we can imply a great deal about people's characteristics, qualities, moods and physical states just by selecting a particular verb + adverb combination. If a friend tells you that they are *swotting frantically* for an exam, this might conjure up a picture of someone in a state of nervous exhaustion, feeling that they are running out of time, panicking, burning the midnight oil, drinking cups of black coffee to stay awake. Similarly, the choice of one particular verb over another to describe an action constructs a picture of the person being described. For example, even without the adverb 'frantically', if your friend said they were *revising* instead of swotting, or *reviewing* their work, your picture would be likely to be one of considerably more calm control.

Such language choices enable us to be economic because a lot can be left unsaid: the speaker or writer knows that the listener/reader can fill in the gaps as a result of the thinking that is shared by members of cultural groups who speak the same language.