

## COMPREHENDING DIRTY-WORD DESCRIPTIONS\*

TIMOTHY B. JAY  
*North Adams State College*

The study of dirty-word descriptions extends our knowledge of semantic, comprehension, and contextual language processes. Two studies were conducted to examine how we interpret and react to dirty-word descriptions. Subjects were asked to judge how much they would like a fictitious person described with dirty and non-dirty adjective pairs. Liking was significantly influenced by (a) semantic interpretation (connotation v. denotation), (b) the intrinsicalness of the adjective to the person described (prenominal adjective order), and (c) the contextual relation between the speaker and the listener (friend v. enemy).

## INTRODUCTION

Recent frequency counts (Cameron, 1969; Jay, 1980) indicate that dirty words are among the most frequently used words in English. It is easy to confirm this finding by being in the right place, like a bar or gymnasium, at the right time, such as during a dispute of some kind. You are likely to hear utterances that express emotions, for example,

(1) I feel shitty.

You might also hear descriptions of objects

(2) Your kid has a shitty diaper,

or events in the real world,

(3) She gave a shitty lecture.

How do native speakers comprehend these and other expressions containing descriptions using dirty words? If you try to find the answer, you will find that very little has been published to describe how we comprehend and produce dirty-word descriptions (see Jay, 1979). This is unfortunate, because dirty-word usage has great potential to provide us with interesting information about syntax, semantics, emotions, the social forces behind language, and other linguistic and psychological processes.

Below, I examine dirty-word usage and some of its consequences. More specifically, I focus on (a) how dirty words are used as adjectives to describe referents and (b) how we interpret or comprehend such descriptions. While focusing on these general concerns, I address the questions of meaning, adjective ordering, and contextual constraints on dirty-word usage.

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*Connotation versus denotation*

One of the interesting facets of dirty words is that they vary in semantic or denotative v. connotative meaning. A typical approach to the question of meaning in the study of language has been to look at this distinction between connotation and denotation. Because this distinction is so salient with dirty-word usage, understanding their usage will enhance our appreciation of semantic reference.

Denotative meaning is the information typically given in a dictionary, the mental representation of a set of objects, characteristics, or events that a word refers to. For example, when the adjective *shitty* is interpreted denotatively, as in (2), we understand that the baby needs to be changed. In contrast, connotative meaning is the affective or emotional representation commonly associated with the denotative meaning. Examples (1) and (3) both express negative feelings about emotions in one case and an event in the other. We can easily recognize the difference between connotative and denotative meaning; however, it is difficult to separate these two aspects of a word's meaning for study with most non-dirty words. When we hear or see most non-dirty words, the denotative meaning immediately comes to mind, and we can do little to inhibit the connotations associated with them.

Dirty words are unique because connotative meaning is dominant over denotative meaning, and these two aspects of meaning can be easily separated. Dirty-word expressions are typically interpreted connotatively (Jay and Danks, 1977). For example, when we call someone a bastard we are not questioning the legitimacy of his birth but expressing dislike for him. Connotation is generally linked to emotional expression, not to denoting a specific feature of the person in question.

An interesting question is how connotation and denotation affect our feelings about the objects or people so described. Dirty-word analysis is helpful here because it is easy to separate these aspects using the same word. If the meaning of a message containing a dirty word is interpreted connotatively, the message usually expresses negative emotion. Interpreted denotatively, the dirty-word message should not express such a strong negative emotion toward the referent. "Bill is shitty" would normally express the speaker's dislike for Bill. However, if Bill is a one-year-old with diarrhoea, then the description may be denotatively accurate (as well as expressing the parental frustration). In either event, our impression of Bill should be different, depending on the semantic interpretation of the adjective *shitty*. With connotation the impression should be less favorable than when denotation is used. An advantage to using dirty words is that the distinction between semantic usages can be made clearly with the same word.

*Adjective ordering and word meaning*

The study of prenominal adjective ordering has been another informative device for examining semantic meaning. Adjective ordering in natural speech is not random but reflects the underlying semantic properties of the adjectives modifying the noun. English, as well as other languages, has a preferred ordering of adjectives relative to the modified noun. For example, *the small red person* is preferred to *the red small person*. The basis for preferred adjective ordering lies in the meaning of each adjective relative to the others

in the prenominal string, such that adjectives that maintain much the same meaning regardless of the context tend to be preferred closer to the noun (Danks and Glucksberg, 1971; Martin, 1969). For example, *red* denotes much the same color regardless of the object, but to understand *small* the listener needs to know whether it is modifying a person or planet. Adjectives are ordered farther from the noun when their denotative meaning or definiteness is less well specified. Adjectives ordered closer to the noun are usually less discriminating and as a result are more intrinsic to or part of the noun (Danks and Schwenk, 1972, 1974; Olson, 1970).

Since dirty words can be used either to denote specific properties of referents or less definitely to indicate emotional overtones, it would be informative to examine the pragmatic effect of dirty-adjective ordering on our semantic interpretation. This examination would improve upon the knowledge that we have preferred orderings by showing how preferred order influences our impressions. We might anticipate that when dirty words appear closer to the noun (*the sincere shitty person*) and are thus more intrinsic to it, they would exert a negative influence on our interpretation relative to the case when dirty adjectives are ordered farther from the noun and are less intrinsic (*the shitty sincere person*). The first person description is interpreted as a "shitty" person and the latter more "sincere."

#### *Dirty words and communication context*

In most forms of communication, the interpretation and evaluation of a message is a result of the integration of several pieces of contextual information. Major contextual variables, according to sociolinguistic research, include: the relation between the speaker and listener, the social-physical setting, the topic of discussion, and the intended meaning of the message. Dirty-word usage is particularly sensitive to changes in context (Jay, 1977). We only swear under certain conditions and not others. For the purposes here, rather than deal with all of these factors simultaneously, I have chosen the speaker-listener relation to demonstrate the effect of context on interpretation.

The interpretation of any message depends in part on the qualities of the speaker. If your best friend calls you a bastard you feel more hurt than if your worst enemy calls you the same thing. Generally, research in communication and social psychology demonstrates that we place more value on the word of a well-liked, high status, or credible speaker, while the message from a less valuable speaker will be ignored, denied, or attenuated. The result for the present line of thinking is that when friends describe people with dirty words, e.g., *Tom is a bastard*, our impression of Tom will be more negative than if an enemy called Tom a bastard.

What predictions at this point can be made about dirty-word descriptions? First, the semantic interpretation of the description should influence understanding. Connotation should provide a more negative impression than denotation. Secondly, the ordering of adjectives should influence understanding. If the adjective closest to the referent is more intrinsic to it, as linguistic research suggests, then when dirty words are closest to the referent (*sincere shitty*) the impression should be less favorable than when the ordering is reversed (*shitty sincere*). Finally, as an indication of contextual effects, the

speaker of the message should influence our understanding. Friendly speakers should provide less favorable descriptions than enemies. The friend's message that would be unfavorable, when containing dirty words, would be more believable than a message with the same wording from an enemy.

Experiment I examines the influence of adjective meaning and adjective order on understanding. Experiment II examines the influence of speaker and adjective order on understanding.

## EXPERIMENT I

### *Method*

The first experiment assessed the impressions formed from dirty- and non-dirty-word descriptions when the order of the adjectives was varied along with their semantic interpretation. It was predicted that impressions would be less favorable when the description used the nondirty-dirty ordering (*sincere shitty*) and more favorable when the description used the dirty-non-dirty order (*shitty sincere*). It was assumed that since the adjective closest to the noun is most intrinsic to that noun, the type of adjective closest to the noun would dominate the interpretation of the description.

A semantic-interpretation prediction of connotation v. denotation was based on the finding that connotation is typically used to express disgust or dislike, while denotation is more factual and less emotional. Biasing the interpretation of the description toward connotation was assumed to result in a less favorable impression than a bias toward denotation.

*Subjects.* Subjects were 108 (54 male and 54 female) students in an introductory psychology course at Kent State University. All were native English speakers, and they were given course credit for participation.

*Materials.* Eight dirty and non-dirty adjectives were selected from previous research (Jay, 1974). The dirty adjectives were *bastardly*, *bitchy*, *cocksucking*, *cunty*, *pissy*, *shitty*, *slutty*, and *sucking*. Non-dirty words were personality-trait words selected on the basis of pilot data and Anderson's (1968) ratings. Four "positive" words were from the upper quartile of previous ratings (*cheerful*, *clever*, *reliable*, and *sincere*), and four "negative" words were from the lower quartile (*greedy*, *jealous*, *lazy* and *mean*).

Each dirty word was paired with each non-dirty word resulting in 64 pairs. Adjectives of the same type were not paired. The list was randomized, and only one ordering of a given pair (i.e., *sincere shitty* but not *shitty sincere*) appeared on a particular subject's list.

Materials were presented in booklet format. The adjectives were inserted in the sentence frame:

M.K. is a \_\_\_\_\_ person.

Following each sentence was the question, "How much would you like M.K.?" Beneath the sentence was a six-point scale with poles labeled "not like at all" and "like very much."

*Procedure.* Subjects were given the same general introductory instructions and one of three interpretational instructions, that is, denotation, connotation, or control instructions. The interpretational instructions for denotative and connotative groups included definitions of both connotation and denotation. The *denotative* group was given a short lecture on the history of dirty words. They were told that the experiment was an attempt to turn back the clock to the time when contemporary obscene words were used denotatively in everyday speech. They then read a list of dictionary definitions of all adjectives. The *connotative* group was provided with a list of all the adjectives and told to think of the words as they are used in everyday speech. The *control* group was given the list of words with no explicit instructions as to denotative or connotative interpretation.

*Design.* The variables of interest were Instruction and Adjective Order. The complete design of Experiment I was  $3 \times 2 \times 2 \times 9 \times 8 \times 2 \times 2$  (Instruction  $\times$  Sex  $\times$  Booklet  $\times$  Subject  $\times$  Dirty Words  $\times$  Non-dirty Words  $\times$  Adjective Order). Data were collapsed across Non-dirty words producing a two-level factor positive-negative adjectives, as Subjects is not completely crossed with Dirty, Non-dirty, and Adjective Order. An analysis of variance was conducted on the scale values ranging from 0 (not like at all) to 5 (like very much).

### *Results and discussion*

The mean likability ratings for the three instructional conditions were 1.97, 1.71, and 1.45 for the denotative, connotative, and control groups respectively  $F(2,96) = 6.31$ ,  $p < 0.003$ . As predicted, persons described using denotative descriptions were rated as more likable than persons described connotatively or with control descriptions, and persons described connotatively were rated more likable than those described with control instructions. A Newman-Keuls analysis supported this interpretation.

Adjective Order indicated that the persons described with dirty-non-dirty order were liked more than persons described with the non-dirty-dirty order,  $F(1,96) = 4.33$ ,  $p < 0.04$  with means of 1.73 and 1.69, respectively. The impressions appear to be a function of the intrinsicness of the adjective to the person being evaluated; in any event, the adjective closest to *person* dominated the overall evaluation.

Several interactions were obtained at the level of individual words. Table 1 contains the mean likability rating for individual words. The interactions do not vitiate the previous discussion and will not be discussed further.

The major predictions concerning semantic interpretation and adjective order were supported. Connotation, the typical usage of dirty words, when used to describe people, creates a less favorable impression than a denotative description using the same adjectives. In other words, when dirty words are used, people described affectively are liked less than those described denotatively. In addition, the listener focuses on the intrinsicness of the adjectives to the referent described. The adjective ordered closest to the referent influences the overall impression in this task. When the dirty word is closer to the noun *person*, the person is liked less than when the non-dirty word appears closest to *person*. These semantic fluctuations have pragmatic influence on our impressions when interpreting descriptions of others.

TABLE I  
 Mean Likability Ratings for Individual Words  
 Experiment I

Word	Instruction				Sex		Non-dirty			
	Mean	Den.	Ctrl.	Con.	Male	Fem.	Positive Order		Negative Order	
							d-n	n-d	d-n	n-d
bastardly	1.84	2.21	1.51	1.79	1.81	1.87	2.65	2.53	1.05	1.12
bitchy	1.70	1.98	1.46	1.65	1.75	1.66	2.40	2.45	1.09	0.92
cocksucking	1.48	1.73	1.12	1.58	1.48	1.48	2.15	1.98	0.86	0.91
cunty	1.86	2.08	1.63	1.86	1.87	1.90	2.50	2.46	1.30	1.17
pissy	1.82	2.15	1.53	1.75	1.75	1.88	2.47	2.44	1.09	1.24
shitty	1.71	2.08	1.38	1.66	1.71	1.71	2.38	2.40	1.04	1.01
slutty	1.60	1.58	1.56	1.66	1.68	1.53	2.34	2.09	1.03	0.95
sucking	1.72	1.97	1.45	1.71	1.59	1.84	2.39	2.29	1.01	1.17
Non-dirty										
Positive	2.37	2.77	2.01	2.36	2.25	2.49	-----	-----		
Negative	1.06	1.18	0.91	1.09	1.14	0.97	-----	-----		

Note: 0 = not like at all, 5 = like very much.

## EXPERIMENT II

The second experiment assessed the effect of dirty-word descriptions on the perception of a person described by either a friend or an enemy to determine how the speaker-listener relationship affects understanding. It was assumed that the listener will value the description from a friend more than the same description from an enemy. Since the overall impression of people described with dirty words is unfavorable (Experiment I), the friend's descriptions should be rated less favorably than the enemy's. If listeners judge people on the basis of adjective intrinsicness, as they did in the first experiment, it is reasonable to expect a replication of that effect here.

## Method

**Subjects.** Subjects were 144 college students (72 male and 72 female) in an introductory psychology course at Kent State University. They were native English speakers, and they were given course credit for participation.

**Materials.** With the exception of the speaker manipulation, materials were identical to those used in Experiment I. The sentence presentation was in the following manner, indicating the speaker of the description:

Your worst enemy says:

M.K. is a \_\_\_\_\_ person.

How much would you like M.K.?

In the neutral-speaker condition, subjects were told to think of "another person" saying the sentences, without reference to a specific relationship.

**Procedure.** Subjects were told that the experimenters were interested in the types of impressions that people form when they hear others use dirty words. Each subject was instructed to imagine only one of the following: (a) your worst enemy, (b) best friend, or (c) another speaker. They were to imagine the person saying a sentence like, "M.K. is a \_\_\_\_\_ person," and judge how much they would like the fictitious M.K.

**Design.** the variables of interest were Speaker and Adjective Order. The complete design for this experiment was a  $3 \times 2 \times 2 \times 12 \times 8 \times 2 \times 2$  (Speaker  $\times$  Sex  $\times$  Booklet  $\times$  Subjects  $\times$  Dirty Words  $\times$  Non-dirty Words  $\times$  Adjective Order). An analysis of variance was conducted on the ratings.

## Results and discussion

The mean likability ratings for the Speaker condition were 2.06, 1.51, and 1.51 for the enemy, friend, and neutral speakers, respectively,  $F(2,132) = 12.03$ ,  $p < 0.001$ . The means are in the predicted direction with the enemy's messages providing more favorable ratings than the friend's or neutral speaker's. A Newman-Keuls analysis supported this interpretation. Subjects disliked the friend's target more than the enemy's target and provided less likable ratings as a result. But there was not a complete reversal with the enemy speaker, i.e., they did not like his descriptions positively.

As in the previous experiment, the dirty-non-dirty order was responsible for more likable ratings than the non-dirty-dirty order with means of 1.73 and 1.66, respectively,  $F(1,132) = 18.13$ ,  $p < 0.001$ .

Several interactions were obtained at the level of individual words. Data for individual Dirty and Non-dirty words are presented in Table 2. These interactions do not vitiate the previous discussion and will not be discussed further.

Sex of subject had a significant effect on ratings: males provided more favorable ratings than females with means of 1.87 and 1.52, respectively,  $F(1,132) = 10.44$ ,  $p < 0.002$ . There was no main effect of Sex in Experiment I in comparison. One explanation for the differences in Sex effects may be provided at the level of individual words. In Experiment II there was no interaction of Sex with dirty words; males' ratings were

TABLE 2  
 Mean Likability Ratings for Individual Words  
 Experiment II

Word	Mean Lkblt.	Speaker			Subject		Non-dirty			
		Friend	Enemy	Ctrl.	Male	Fem.	Positive Order		Negative Order	
							d-n	n-d	d-n	n-d
bastard	1.83	1.61	2.23	1.59	1.95	1.67	2.48	2.25	1.23	1.30
bitchy	1.78	1.68	2.14	1.52	1.89	1.68	2.33	2.30	1.30	1.20
cocksucking	1.42	1.20	1.84	1.23	1.61	1.23	2.05	1.75	0.90	0.98
cunty	1.74	1.62	1.96	1.65	1.96	1.52	2.23	2.26	1.26	1.21
pissy	1.75	1.55	2.10	1.59	1.89	1.60	2.15	2.24	1.30	1.30
shitty	1.71	1.53	2.16	1.45	1.85	1.57	2.23	2.18	1.26	1.17
slutty	1.67	1.49	1.96	1.56	1.89	1.45	2.30	2.01	1.22	1.16
sucking	1.68	1.41	2.11	1.51	1.88	1.47	2.25	2.10	1.16	1.18
Non-dirty										
Positive	2.20	2.07	2.43	2.09	2.39	2.00				
Negative	1.20	0.96	1.69	0.94	1.34	1.05				

Note: 0 = not like at all, 5 = like very much.

consistently higher than females'. Interestingly, three of four words (*bitchy*, *cunty*, *shitty* and *slutty*) that created a large discrepancy between male and female ratings are clearly perjorative of females. In Experiment 1, however, the large discrepancy for these words did not appear; in fact, there is no apparent relationship between male and female ratings at the individual word level (an interaction of Sex and Dirty words did occur in Experiment 1,  $F(7,672) = 2.18$ ,  $p < 0.03$ ). Perhaps asking the subject to imagine a specific speaker in the second experiment contributed to the consistent ratings.

## CONCLUSION

What have dirty words showed us about understanding language? The present line of



research was conducted to examine the influence of the meaning of a message on the understanding of dirty-word descriptions. Results from the first experiment indicate that connotation and denotation provide different impressions about people who are described with dirty words. While the influence of words on impressions was known for non-dirty words, the effect had not been established with dirty words. Denotation has the effect of making impressions more favorable than connotative dirty-word usage, but neither type of dirty-word interpretation leads to ratings that are as favorable as positive non-dirty word ratings. We might think that all dirty words provide less favorable impressions than non-dirty words; however, this is not so. People described as *greedy* or *mean* are liked less than those described with some dirty words (*sucking* or *bastardly*). At the level of individual words, we should be sensitive to the distinction between dirty and non-dirty categories because some of the non-dirty descriptions are less favorable than those with dirty words. Dirty adjectives created not random but fairly consistent impressions in the two experiments. The correlation between ratings for them in these experiments was fairly high,  $r = 0.85$ . Not only does each dirty word create a different impression then, but the impressions are formed in a consistent manner.

The interpretation of the ordering of dirty and non-dirty adjectives can be derived from the semantic dimension of intrinsicness (Danks and Glucksberg, 1971). When the dirty word is closer to the noun (*the sincere shitty person*), the person is more of a shitty person than a sincere one, since the adjective closest to the person is most intrinsic. Shittiness would be more a part of the personality than sincerity, and when the person was evaluated, the meaning of *shitty* would dominate the impression. With the reverse ordering (*shitty sincere*), the person would be evaluated more positively as a sincere one. Subjects in these experiments appear to be operating under a process of the intrinsicness of the adjectives to the person described. Thus we can see the pragmatic effect of preferred adjective ordering. Such prenominal ordering influences both semantic interpretation and our reaction to the referent. Prenominal ordering not only performs a discriminative function but influences emotional reactions too.

Dirty-word usage is most effectively understood from a contextual or sociolinguistic point of view (Jay, 1977). The forces of speaker-listener relation, social and physical setting, topic of discussion, and intended meaning of the message are considered before we use dirty words. The speaker relation was chosen here to examine such influences. When another person is described with dirty words, the impression is generally negative or unfavorable. The degree of the unfavorableness depends on who is doing the describing. If an "enemy" describes another person, the target person is liked more than when a "friend" makes the same description. The enemy's word may be less valuable, credible or believable than the friend's. The listener may also want to disagree with the enemy, changing the enemy's negative opinion to a less negative one.

What remains for those interested in dirty words is to examine these laboratory data and at the same time compare dirty-word usage to its natural occurrence in the real world. It will probably be true that what is operating in the laboratory also operates in the real world, if the proper linguistic intuitions have been assessed here. Another avenue would be to examine the semantic properties of each word to unravel sex differences, adverbial intensification (*damned good show*) or idiosyncratic properties.

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