Chapter 9

Neologisms:
Semiotic Deconstruction of the New Words “Lizardy,” “Staycation,” and “Wannarexia” as Peircean Indexes of Culture

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ABSTRACT

While people use language to let others know how and what it is that we think, language is also the means by, and also the substrate within which, humans think. This chapter explores the use of language as the basis for cognition, based on both a chosen word’s denotative meaning and also its rhetorical (metaphorical) connotative meanings. The artificial dichotomy between language and speech is deconstructed. Peircean semiotics is used to argue that language is indexical in its primary referential functions, including sociolinguistic functions. Three new words, all of which were coined in the twenty-first century, are examined from a sociolinguistic and a semiotic point of view.

INTRODUCTION: DIFFERENCE AND MEANING

‘When I use a word,’ Humpty Dumpty said, in rather a scornful tone, ‘it means just what I choose it to mean — neither more nor less.’

‘The question is,’ said Alice, ‘whether you can make words mean so many different things.’ Lewis Carroll, Through the Looking Glass

The question of what a verbal message means on a connotative level is truly one of the most human preoccupations. How often have we asked friends, or have friends asked us, “I wonder what he or she meant by that?” It is not that we do not understand the denotative meaning of the words, the oral grunts, whistles and hisses or the written glyphs in which the language was encoded. Instead, by asking this question, we are trying to decode the connotative meaning of the other person’s statement. We want to
know the meaning of the message beyond its simple denotative meaning. Interestingly, other non-human animals do not seem to have this capacity to create connotative meaning. When a beaver slaps its tail against the water or a bird screams, when a dog barks or a cat meows, the other animals do not stop, reflect and ask, “I wonder what the animal meant by that particular signal?” There is just a denotative signal of some sort, such as a beaver tail slap on the water, followed by some sort of action, usually fight or flight. The point is, though, that there is a direct one-to-one correlation between an animal’s signal and what that signal actually means. If the animal is confused by a signal, the animal will often freeze and not continue until it believes that it has fully understood the situation. The animal does not think about the matter but just reacts by following its instincts. Even animals that we humans have taught to speak, like Koko the gorilla (Gorilla Foundation, 2017), do not seem to have the facility to reflect and to wonder about the meaning of the things. While these gorillas have been taught to speak sign language and while these gorillas even have the capacity to invent new words, their inventions refer only to concrete things or to emotions; things which they already know about (Gorilla Foundation, 2017). The point is that the gorillas can learn words and create new sign language words but all these new sign language words only have simple denotative meanings. Even gorillas do not seem to be capable to use words to connote things or to create metaphors for things that only exist in imagination. The gorillas do not, apparently, have the ability to abstract ideas from the world, to dream up new words, nor do they appear to have capacity to reflect on the words which they know. By “reflect,” the authors mean the ability to think about a thing in an abstract sense and to create new meanings based on these reflections which human beings have and which other animals apparently do not. Marcel Danesi discusses this capacity in a Semiotic sense (Danesi, 1993) which he links to the capacity to create metaphor and in fact, he links this to Giambattista Vico’s idea of verum factum, that human language is a creation based in metaphorical imagination and this capability is at the root of the origins of human language (Danesi, 1993). Such a discussion is, of course, beyond the scope of this work, but we are left with the idea that language is forged by the capacity for metaphor and its connectivity among conceptual domains.

This metaphorical use of language is exactly how humans express themselves. While gorillas use words to denote concrete ideas and concrete objects, human beings use words to connote ideas and things that may not exist concretely. Humans’ verbal ideas may exist solely in the imagination. Also, the new words we create are meaning rich, Peircean indexes, signs that indicate not only their very most basic denotative meanings but also that these words indicate meanings which, because they transcend simple denotation, also point to social, socioeconomic and other referential phenomena. Human words work beyond themselves to mean more than simple denotative referents. In Saussure’s linguistics we would call the word a “signifier” and its meaning the “signified” and this would be the word’s denotative meaning (Saussure, 1959). A re-signified sign, or the connotative meaning of a word, is what Roland Barthes calls a “mythology” (Barthes, 1957). While we will not be using Barthes model of meaning, it important to note that he and the other structuralists (those who follow Saussure’s dyadic ideas) are extremely useful in the world of criticism and anthropology, because they limit themselves to binary oppositions that are easy to detect and utilize for analytical purposes. These descriptions are useful but are limited to “one and zero,” “yes and no,” or “man and woman” descriptors instead of the plethora of other semantic nuances that exist. We will see that imagination transcends these binaries so that a strict one-to-one relationship of signifier and signified might be useful to create a simple deconstruction of meaning but that words are not bound by this binary relationship between a sign and its meaning (Danesi & Perron, 1999).

So instead of structuralist binaries, where words evoke meanings through opposition, studies have shown that words and their meanings are intertwined with themselves as if in a semantic network; it is