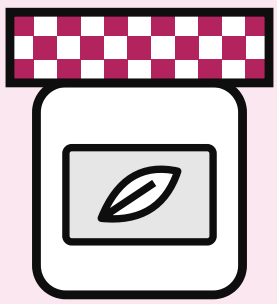
Concept

Denotation and connotation

Denotation is what a sign literally shows or names; connotation, the added meanings it suggests depending on the culture of whoever looks at it.



In Spanish
Denotación y connotación

Origin
Hjelmslev (1943); applied to images by Barthes (1957, 1964)

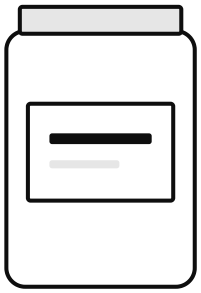
What problem it addresses

It explains why an image, a package, or a brand communicates more than it shows. Design works with these second meanings when choosing colors, photos, type, and materials.

An example

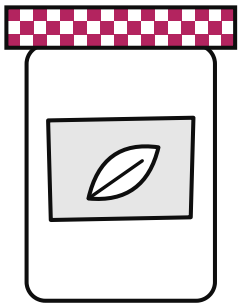
An illustrative example: two jars of the same tomato sauce.

Neutral label



Plain jar, white label, and the product name. **It says: tomato sauce.**

Label with connotation



The same jar, with a checked cloth lid, a paper label, and a drawn leaf. **It suggests: homemade, traditional.**

What is denoted is the same in both; what is connoted changes. Barthes analyzed a pasta ad this way: the vegetables and their colors suggested freshness and "Italianicity" (Barthes, 1964).

Why it happens

1 

First you read the literal, a jar of sauce;

2 

then you link it to what your culture associates with those shapes and colors;

3 

that second reading changes with who is looking.

Applications in design

Use it like this

Before choosing colors, photos, or materials, write down what you want them to suggest, not just what they must show.

Avoid

Using connotations that reduce a country or a group to a stereotype.

Don't fall for it

Ask your audience what the design suggests to them, without telling them first what you meant to convey.

0.88

What the research says

Average similarity between each country's color-emotion associations and the global pattern (1 would be identical), among 4,598 people in 30 countries (Jonauskaite et al., 2020).

●●● **Solid evidence.** Much is shared, such as red with love and anger, but there are differences: in China, white was also linked to sadness.

Connections

Used in

- Art direction
- Packaging design
- Brand identity design

Related to

- Text/image interaction
- Product semantics
- Signifier and signified

Authors and works

1943	**Louis Hjelmslev**	Proposed the distinction between denotation and connotation in his theory of language.
1957	**Roland Barthes**	In Mythologies, described myth as a second system of signs built on top of an earlier one.
1964	**Roland Barthes**	In "Rhetoric of the Image," separated what the photo in a pasta ad shows from what it suggests.

Sources

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