



Common Core Language Standards: “My Love is a Rose” ≠ “You Really Love Flowers”

Focus: Figurative Language

Overview

This lesson introduces students to basic figurative language concepts such as metaphor, simile, oxymoron, et cetera, and progresses into an understanding of denotation, connotation, euphemism, and the problems with translating idiomatic expressions.

Standards

- 9-10.L.5. Demonstrate understanding of figurative language, word relationships, and nuances in word meanings.
 - a. Interpret figures of speech (e.g., euphemism, oxymoron) in context and analyze their role in the text.
 - b. Analyze nuances in the meaning of words with similar denotations.

Objectives

- To understand figurative language
- To interpret figures of speech, specifically euphemisms and idioms
- To understand the usage of oxymoron
- To correctly interpret author’s intent in using figurative devices

Materials

- List of [literary terms](#) for use in class
- A variety of examples, currently in use and older ones
- A good dictionary (or access to one on-line)
- Access to the Internet
- Optional text: *Figuratively Speaking*, by Delana Heidrich
ISBN-13: 978-0-88160-317-0
This is a helpful text for introducing figurative language, poetic technique, and literary devices. It may be too elementary for some students, but it introduces the basics very effectively.
- Optional text: *Voice Lessons*, by Nancy Dean
ISBN-13: 978-0-929895-35-2
Nancy Dean’s books are marvelous. They compel close reading by requiring students to look at well-chosen short selections to explore how an author uses a specific technique (e.g. detail) to achieve a particular effect on a reader.



Activity 1

Lecture

Define a number of key literary terms for students using the [literary terms](#) list. Some of the absolutely key terms that come up repeatedly are the following:

Term	Definition	Example
Simile	<p>*A comparison of two unlike things</p> <p>*Uses the words “like” or “as” to compare them.</p>	<p>My love is like a red, red rose.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Robert Burns <p>Enter into the front of your skin like a splinter.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Eminem
Metaphor	<p>*A comparison of two unlike things</p> <p>*DOES NOT use the word “like” or “as” to compare them</p> <p>*May attribute to object X the qualities normally associated with object Y</p>	<p>She is a rose without a thorn.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ King Henry VIII, about his wife Catherine Howard, whom he later executed for infidelity <p>I’m interesting, the best thing since wrestling, infesting in your kids’ ears and nesting.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Eminem
Personification	<p>Imparting to an object the qualities and “personality” of a human being</p>	<p>The rain set early in tonight, The sullen wind was soon awake, It tore the roof-tops down for spite And did its worst to vex the lake.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Robert Browning <p>Basically, every single Disney film with talking candlesticks and the like.</p>
Imagery	<p>Verbal representation of a sense experience; that is, the use of words to create a “virtual reality” appealing to the senses</p>	<p>[He] went on...eating melons, and throwing the rind about, because he could not pick it up, till he trod on what he thought was a log of wood at the very edge of the great grey-green, greasy Limpopo River, all set about with fever-trees.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Rudyard Kipling
Paradox	<p>A statement in which two seemingly contradictory ideas are nonetheless true.</p>	<p>Yet from those flames no light, But rather <i>darkness visible</i>.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Milton <p>Much <i>Madness is divinest Sense</i>.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Emily Dickinson
Oxymoron	<p>An oxymoron is a paradox at the level of the word.</p>	<p>I’m on a <i>working vacation</i>. I’m giving him a <i>definite maybe</i>.</p>

**Reinforcement**

Using the following site (http://knowgramming.com/metaphor_checker.htm), lead students through the “Is it a Metaphor?” test to determine whether particular sentences such as *Love is a feeling* or *Life is a box of chocolates* are examples of metaphor, idiom, simile, or are just plain speech.

Small-Group Work

- Group students into small groups and give each student in the group 2-3 separate figures of speech each (along with the terms *metaphor*, *personification*, and *paradox*, which every group will have in common).
- Each student will come up with original sentences demonstrating understanding of their individual figures of speech and share them with the group.
- After individual sentences are done, the entire group can come up together with a sentence illustrating the three common terms.

Whole-Class Discussion

Share each other’s sentences with the entire group and discuss the approaches that were particularly innovative or effective. Focus on the figures of speech each group had in common to demonstrate the diversity of approaches these figures of speech can allow individual writers.

Activity 2: Connotation vs. Denotation**Lecture**

Students will need to know the difference between a word’s *connotation* and its *denotation* – a concept crucial for close reading of text. (This is a good time to bring in the definition of *euphemism* as well.)

Definitions

- **Denotation** – Denotation is the literal “dictionary definition” of a word.
- **Connotation** – Connotation is how a word “feels,” or the emotional impact of the word. In contrast to denotation, connotation is all about whether the word is offensive or bland, proper or improper, or whether it is associated with a particular emotional context.
- **Euphemism** – Euphemism is a pleasant-sounding word or term for an unpleasant event, object, situation, or issue.



Note: One nice trick to remember the meaning of “denotation” and distinguish it from “connotation” is this one below, which you can write on the board essentially like this:

<p>Denotation is a word’s</p> <p>Dictionary</p> <p>Definition</p>

If students are having a hard time trying to understand why connotation is important, explain to them that essentially every fight that occurs because one person called another person or group a name is actually a fight over the *connotation* of the word. (Except among rabid lexicographers, fights over *denotations* are rare.)

Small-Group Work – Denotation vs. Connotation

Present to students the following list of terms. Please ask them to fill in the blanks. The first two rows have been completed for the students to use as examples. Please ask students to come up with classroom-appropriate examples only for the blanks!

Word	Denotation	Connotation – How it “Feels”
Woman	A person of the female sex	Neutral, unbiased
Chick	A young person of the female sex	Slightly demeaning if used in an unflattering way. Not for older women or in a business context.
Man		
Bro		
	Having insufficient body weight for one’s height	Neutral, unbiased
	Having excess body weight for one’s height	Complimentary, praising, flattering
	A vehicle in poor condition	Insulting or disparaging of the vehicle’s condition
Teacher		
	Gemstones or valuable metals made into personal adornments such as necklaces and bracelets	



Bling		
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Whole-Class Discussion

Discuss the importance of *context* as an issue with connotation. One would (probably) not refer to one’s grandmother as a *chick*, for example, or refer to her jewelry as *bling*. In a different context, however, those two terms would not necessarily be offensive or disrespectful (or at least incongruous).

As a humorous aside, here is one example of the difference between connotation and denotation taken from Slangcity.com, a site that “translates” common slang and current American idiom into mainstream, Standard English.

This example is a “translation” of some lyrics from “Boom, Boom, Pow,” by the Blackeyed Peas

Original Lyric	Translation
<p>Will.i.am Yo, I got that hit that beat the block You can get that bass overload I got that rock and roll That future flow.</p>	<p>Will.i.am Listen, I have got that song that makes the whole block vibrate, The bass part is very loud. I have got rock and roll music. The rap from the future.</p>

NOTE: Due to the nature of slang and popular music, the material on this site is not appropriate for general classroom viewing. Please do not use it as a general resource for students.

Lecture

At this point, it is also useful to discuss euphemism if it has not already come up naturally in discussion. The class can brainstorm some common euphemisms for these harsher words or terms. The first one has been done as an example:

Blunt Term	Euphemisms
Dead	Passed, passed away, gone
Old	
Fired	
Ugly	
Boring	



Focus on the idea that euphemisms are often used to spare the feelings of others, but they are also sometimes used to obfuscate, deceive, or mislead—again, as with connotation, context is crucial.

Extension

It would be helpful (and probably humorous) to ask your foreign language teachers for a few idioms with word-for-word translations. (Or let the students use a translation device on the Internet to see that literal translations do not work.) What do these phrases really mean? What if you were trying to interpret these idioms/euphemisms for a second-language friend?

Note: As an example of translations gone awry, the example of the Chevy Nova is a good one. The automobile executives who marketed the Chevy Nova were perplexed when sales in Latin American countries were very poor – only to discover that the word “nova,” which means “new,” strongly resembles the Spanish phrase *no va*: “It doesn’t go.”

Another (possibly apocryphal) example was the famous “Come Alive with the Pepsi Generation” campaign for Pepsi. In Chinese, unfortunately, the phrase was translated to mean, “Pepsi Brings Your Ancestors Back from the Grave” – a claim that is beyond the reach of most soft drinks.

Helpful Resources

1. **Translation Gone Wrong**

<http://pbtranslations.wordpress.com/2008/01/11/a-wicked-deception/>

This video is a must see—it shows how literal translations go horribly wrong.

NOTE: Some of the language may be not be appropriate for the classroom.

2. **Idiom Site**

<http://www.idiomsite.com/>

This is a good list of common idioms in a fun format—plus translations!

3. **Euphemisms**

<http://gmat.learnhub.com/lesson/5080-euphemisms>

This site has some clean examples (many sites do not!) and a fun quiz.

4. **Holder, R. W. *How Not To Say What You Mean*.**

Oxford Paperback Reference.

This is a cheap, funny book that has a lot of clean phrases appropriate for class use.



5. Denotation vs. Connotation

http://www.education.com/reference/article/denotation-connotation_answer/

Some fairly easy connotation/denotation exercises; multiple choice format.

6. Connotation vs. Denotation

http://www.csun.edu/~bashforth/098_PDF/06Sep15Connotation_Denotation.pdf

This is a pdf file lesson plan. It's a bit more sophisticated and very complete.

7. Figurative Terms List

http://highered.mcgraw-hill.com/sites/0072405228/student_view0/poetic_glossary.html

This is DiYanni's list of poetic (figurative) terms with examples.