



A Semantic Analysis of Denotative and Connotative Meaning in User-Generated Content Across Instagram

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Abstract. This study aimed to analyze the denotative and connotative meanings in Instagram captions as a form of user-generated content. The problem addressed in this study was how literal and implied meanings are used in digital communication. This research used a descriptive qualitative method with a semantic analysis approach. The data were taken from five Instagram captions posted by public figures. The findings show that connotative meaning is more dominant than denotative meaning. Short captions can convey complex meanings through metaphor, symbolism, and ambiguity. It is concluded that meaning in social media, especially Instagram, is flexible and highly influenced by context and user interpretation.

Keywords: semantics, denotation, connotation, Instagram, caption

Abstrak. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis makna denotatif dan konotatif dalam keterangan foto Instagram sebagai bentuk konten yang dibuat pengguna. Masalah yang dibahas dalam penelitian ini adalah bagaimana makna literal dan tersirat digunakan dalam komunikasi digital. Penelitian ini menggunakan metode kualitatif deskriptif dengan pendekatan analisis semantik. Data diambil dari lima keterangan foto Instagram yang diposting oleh tokoh publik. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa makna konotatif lebih dominan daripada makna denotatif. Keterangan foto yang singkat dapat menyampaikan makna yang kompleks melalui metafora, simbolisme, dan ambiguitas. Disimpulkan bahwa makna di media sosial, khususnya Instagram, bersifat fleksibel dan sangat dipengaruhi oleh konteks serta interpretasi pengguna.

Kata kunci: semantik, denotasi, konotasi, Instagram, keterangan foto

INTRODUCTION

Language plays an important role in human communication because it is used to express ideas, feelings, opinions, and information. In everyday life, people use language not only in direct communication but also in digital communication through social media platforms. Along with the rapid development of technology, social media has become one of the most widely used means of interaction, especially among young people and students. One of the most popular social media platforms is Instagram, which allows users to share photos, videos, captions, comments, and hashtags as forms of communication.

Instagram is not only used for sharing daily activities but also as a medium for self-expression. Through captions, comments, and hashtags, users often express their thoughts and emotions in various ways. The language used in Instagram content is unique because it frequently contains meanings beyond the literal sense of words. In many cases, the words or expressions used by users may carry both direct and implied meanings depending on the context.

In semantics, meaning is generally divided into several categories, among which denotative and connotative meaning are the most common. Denotative meaning refers to the literal or dictionary meaning of a word, while connotative meaning refers to the additional or implied meaning associated with emotions, attitudes, and cultural understanding. These two types of meaning are essential in understanding how language functions in communication, especially in digital spaces.

The use of denotative and connotative meaning can be clearly observed in user-generated content across Instagram. For example, expressions such as “*living my best life*”, “*queen*”, or “*glow up*” often carry meanings that go beyond their literal definitions. Such expressions are commonly used to convey personal identity, emotional states, social relationships, and symbolic messages. Therefore, semantic analysis becomes important in interpreting the intended meaning behind these expressions.

Nowadays, social media language has become more dynamic and contextual. Users tend to use figurative expressions, slang, abbreviations, and emotionally expressive language to attract attention and increase engagement. This phenomenon makes semantic analysis highly relevant in understanding how meaning is constructed in online communication.

Based on this background, this study aims to analyze the denotative and connotative meanings found in user-generated content across Instagram. This study is expected to provide a better understanding of how language meaning is used and interpreted in digital communication, particularly in social media contexts.

Research Significance

1. Theoretical Significance

This research contributes to the field of semantics by examining how denotative and connotative meanings are not always fixed, but can shift depending on context, particularly in user-generated content on Instagram. It aims to show that literal meaning (denotative) and implied meaning (connotative) interact in a dynamic way, especially when combined with visual elements such as images, captions, and hashtags. In this sense, the study expands our understanding of how meaning is constructed and interpreted within increasingly complex digital communication.

2. Practical Significance

Practically, this study is expected to provide useful insights for Instagram users,

especially content creators, students, and communication practitioners, to become more aware of how they express and interpret meaning. A clearer understanding of the relationship between denotative and connotative meanings can help minimize misinterpretation in online communication. In addition, this research encourages more thoughtful, precise, and responsible language use on social media.

3. Social and Cultural Significance

From a social and cultural perspective, this research highlights that Instagram is not merely a platform for sharing content, but also a space that actively shapes how language is understood. Connotative meanings, influenced by trends, popular culture, and user interactions, can affect how people perceive certain words or expressions. This shows that language continues to evolve alongside social dynamics, with social media playing a significant role in that process.

PREVIOUS WORKS

1. Semantics, Denotation, and Connotation

Semantics is concerned with how meaning is constructed and understood in language, covering not only words but also phrases and larger units of expression. A central distinction in this field lies between denotative and connotative meaning. Denotative meaning refers to the literal and most direct interpretation of a word, typically aligned with dictionary definitions (Lyons, 1995). However, meaning in real communication rarely stops at the denotative level. Connotative meaning introduces layers of emotional, cultural, and contextual associations that shape how a word is actually perceived. As Leech (1981) argues, while denotation tends to be relatively stable, connotation is inherently flexible and context-dependent. In contemporary communication, especially in digital spaces, this distinction becomes increasingly blurred. The same lexical item can carry multiple interpretations depending on how, where, and by whom it is used.

2. Language Use in Instagram as a Social Media Platform

Among various social media platforms, Instagram presents a particularly interesting space for semantic analysis due to its strong emphasis on visual communication. Unlike purely text-based platforms, Instagram combines images, captions, hashtags, emojis, and user interactions into a single communicative unit. This multimodal

nature significantly affects how meaning is constructed and interpreted. Scholars such as Crystal (2011) and Tagg (2015) highlight that online communication tends to be informal, creative, and highly adaptive. On Instagram, users often manipulate language to fit aesthetic, social, or expressive purposes, which can result in shifts in meaning. For instance, captions may appear straightforward at a denotative level, but when paired with specific images or trends, they can convey irony, satire, or implicit messages. This suggests that meaning on Instagram is not fixed, but negotiated through the interaction between text and visual context.

3. The Influence of User-Generated Content on Meaning Construction

User-generated content plays a central role in shaping how meaning evolves on Instagram. Unlike traditional media, where meaning is often controlled by a limited number of producers, Instagram allows users to actively participate in meaning-making. This participatory nature leads to the rapid circulation and transformation of both denotative and connotative meanings. Recent studies indicate that meanings on social media are highly dynamic, often influenced by trends, virality, and community practices. Words and expressions can quickly acquire new connotations that may differ significantly from their original literal meanings. In some cases, even denotative meanings can appear to “shift” due to repeated contextual reinterpretation. This phenomenon highlights that meaning is not only a linguistic property but also a social process. On Instagram, interpretation is shaped by shared knowledge, cultural references, and visual framing, making it a rich site for examining how denotation and connotation interact in contemporary digital communication.

RESEARCH METHOD

Research Design

This study employs a qualitative descriptive method to analyze the denotative and connotative meanings found in Instagram captions. A qualitative approach is used because the study focuses on interpreting meaning rather than measuring numerical data. The descriptive method allows the researcher to explain and interpret the meanings embedded in user-generated content.

1. Data Source

The data of this study were taken from captions posted on Instagram by several public

figures, including Selena Gomez, Justin Bieber, One Direction, EXO, and Naura Ayu. The researcher selected captions that contain potential denotative and connotative meanings. A total of five captions were used as the data for analysis.

2. Data Collection Techniques

The data are collected through the following methods:

- a) Browsing Instagram accounts of selected public figures
- b) Identifying captions that contain figurative or meaningful expressions
- c) Selecting captions that show both denotative and connotative meanings
- d) Recording and compiling the selected captions into a data table

The researcher focused on captions that are short but meaningful, especially those containing metaphor, ambiguity, or emotional expressions.

3. Data Analysis Techniques

The data were analyzed using semantic analysis by distinguishing between denotative and connotative meanings. The steps of analysis are as follows:

- a) Identifying the caption
Each caption was identified and categorized as a unit of analysis.
- b) Analyzing denotative meaning
The literal or dictionary meaning of each caption was explained.
- c) Analyzing connotative meaning
The implied or associated meaning was interpreted based on context, emotion, and cultural understanding.
- d) Interpreting context
The researcher considered the background, situation, and possible intention behind each caption.
- e) Drawing conclusions
The results were summarized to identify patterns of meaning in Instagram captions.

4. Research Instruments

The main instrument of this research is the researcher herself, as the study involves interpretation and analysis of language. Supporting instruments include:

- a) Data table.
- b) Notes and documentation of captions.

Research subject

The subject of this research is Instagram caption content, focusing on how language especially words and phrases with both denotative and connotative meanings—is used by users in expressing ideas, emotions, and experiences. This study also considers how captions, although often short, can carry deeper meanings depending on context and interpretation.

The selected subjects include:

a) Content Creators

The subjects of this study are Instagram users, particularly public figures such as Selena Gomez, Justin Bieber, One Direction, EXO, and Naura Ayu. These users were chosen because their captions often contain expressive and meaningful language that can be analyzed semantically.

b) Instagram Captions

The main data of this research are captions taken from Instagram posts. The captions selected are those that contain potential denotative and connotative meanings, such as metaphorical expressions, emotional statements, and ambiguous phrases. These captions are analyzed to understand how meaning is constructed beyond the literal level.

c) Context of the Posts

This study also considers the context in which the captions appear, including the situation, theme, or message of the post. Even though the research focuses on captions, understanding the context helps in interpreting the intended meaning more accurately, especially for connotative meanings.

Research Object

The object of this research is the use of language in Instagram captions, with a specific focus on how denotative and connotative meanings are expressed and interpreted in written social media communication. This study examines how short captions can carry both literal and implied meanings depending on context and language use. This includes examining:

- a) Words or phrases with denotative (literal) meanings that appear in Instagram captions. These meanings are identified based on their basic or dictionary definitions.

- b) The connotative meanings of those words or phrases, which may reflect emotions, personal experiences, or symbolic expressions beyond their literal sense.
- c) The influence of contextual elements, such as the theme of the post, the situation being expressed, and the use of emojis or hashtags, which help shape the intended meaning of the caption.

By focusing on these elements, this research aims to explore how meaning in Instagram captions is not only conveyed through literal language but also through implied and contextual interpretation. As a result, the study highlights how social media users creatively use language to express deeper meanings in a simple and concise form.

DATA ANALYSIS

Denotative

This section presents the analysis of denotative meanings found in selected Instagram captions. The researcher selected five captions from different public figures on Instagram and identified words or phrases with clear literal meanings.

The captions were taken from accounts such as Selena Gomez, Justin Bieber, One Direction, EXO, and Naura Ayu.

Each caption was analyzed to identify its literal meaning before interpreting the deeper meaning.

Example:

In the caption “We’re not getting any younger” by Selena Gomez, the phrase literally refers to the natural process of aging over time. The denotative meaning shows that humans continue to grow older and cannot return to a younger state.

Another example can be seen in the caption “Where it all began #10YearsOf1D” by One Direction. Denotatively, this refers to the starting point of something, indicating the beginning of their career journey.

The analysis followed these steps:

- Identifying the caption content
- Determining the literal (denotative) meaning
- Referring to general or dictionary meanings
- Analyzing how the words are used in context

Connotative

This section presents the analysis of connotative meanings found in the selected Instagram captions. Unlike denotative meaning, connotative meaning refers to the implied, emotional, or symbolic meaning behind the words. These meanings are often influenced by context, personal experience, and cultural understanding.

The data show that most Instagram captions do not only convey literal meanings but also express deeper messages through figurative language, emotion, and symbolism.

Example:

- I. The first caption by Selena Gomez, *“We’re not getting any younger,”* denotes the natural process of aging. Connotatively, it expresses an awareness of life’s limited time, implying the importance of taking action and making meaningful choices. The statement carries a reflective tone that invites introspection and emphasizes the value of time.
- II. The second caption from One Direction, *“Where it all began #10YearsOf1D,”* denotes the starting point of a journey. From Geoffrey Leech’s perspective, its connotative meaning reflects nostalgia and shared memories, symbolizing the group’s long journey, achievements, and enduring connection with fans. The hashtag further reinforces its function as a marker of collective identity and digital commemoration.
- III. The third caption by Justin Bieber, *“we could take it all the way,”* demonstrates semantic ambiguity. Denotatively, it refers to completing something fully, while connotatively it may imply ambition, emotional commitment, or a serious relationship, depending on context. This supports Geoffrey Leech’s view that meaning is shaped by contextual interpretation, making the expression flexible and open to multiple readings.
- IV. The fourth caption from EXO, *“It’s the king of the town,”* illustrates the use of figurative language. Denotatively, it refers to a ruler of a town; however, connotatively it symbolizes dominance, popularity, or strong influence within a particular social context. This supports Roland Barthes’s view that connotation operates through cultural symbols and metaphorical associations.
- V. Finally, the caption by Naura Ayu, *“each star belongs to a secret wish,”* reflects poetic expression. Denotatively, it associates stars with wishes, while connotatively it symbolizes hope, dreams, and personal aspirations. This figurative language

suggests that individuals hold hidden desires, demonstrating how connotation enhances the emotional and aesthetic quality of language.

No	Source	Caption	Denotative Meaning	Connotative Meaning	Notes
1	Selena Gomez	"We're not getting any younger"	People are aging over time	Life is short; urgency to act or make decisions	Reflective, life-awareness
2	One Direction	"Where it all began #10YearsOf1D"	Refers to the beginning of something	Nostalgia, journey, long-term achievement	Hashtag & memory
3	Justin Bieber	"we could take it all the way"	Completing something fully	Commitment, ambition, or romantic implication	Ambiguous meaning
4	EXO	"It's the king of the town"	A king rules a town	Someone dominant/popular/influential	Metaphor
5	Naura Ayu	"each star belongs to a secret wish"	Stars linked to wishes	Dreams, hope, personal desires	Poetic metaphor

Table 1. Data of Instagram Captions and Their Denotative and Connotative Meanings

FINDINGS

From the analysis of five Instagram captions taken from Instagram, several findings emerged regarding the use of denotative and connotative meanings in user-generated content.

1. Connotative meaning is more dominant than denotative meaning

Although all captions contain literal meanings, most of them convey deeper messages through implied meanings. Users tend to express emotions, ideas, and experiences indirectly rather than relying only on dictionary definitions.

2. Simple captions can carry complex meanings

Even short captions such as "We're not getting any younger" (Selena Gomez) and "we could take it all the way" (Justin Bieber) contain layered meanings. This shows that meaning in social media does not depend on sentence length, but on how language is used.

3. Figurative language is commonly used in Instagram captions

Many captions use metaphor and symbolic expressions, such as "king of the town" (EXO) and "each star belongs to a secret wish" (Naura Ayu). These expressions

do not reflect literal meanings but represent abstract ideas like power, dreams, and personal aspirations.

4. Meaning is highly influenced by context

The interpretation of captions depends on context, including the situation of the post and the background of the user. For example, “Where it all began #10YearsOf1D” (One Direction) can only be fully understood when connected to the group’s history and anniversary.

5. Ambiguity allows multiple interpretations

Some captions are open to different interpretations, such as “we could take it all the way.” This ambiguity allows readers to interpret meaning based on their own perspective, making communication in social media more flexible but also less fixed.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study show that denotative meaning in Instagram captions is not always used as the main source of meaning. Although denotation represents the literal meaning of words, most captions analyzed in this research rely more on connotative meaning to deliver messages. This indicates that meaning in social media communication is often indirect and context-dependent. The use of simple and short captions does not limit the depth of meaning. As seen in captions by Selena Gomez and Justin Bieber, even brief expressions can carry emotional, motivational, or ambiguous meanings. This supports the idea that language in social media is highly expressive despite its simplicity.

In addition, the frequent use of figurative language, such as metaphor and symbolism, plays an important role in shaping meaning. Captions like those from EXO and Naura Ayu show that users often replace literal expressions with symbolic ones to represent abstract ideas such as power, dreams, and personal feelings. This aligns with semantic theory, which states that connotative meaning allows words to go beyond their dictionary definitions. Furthermore, context becomes a key factor in interpreting meaning. The caption from One Direction demonstrates that without contextual knowledge, the intended meaning may not be fully understood. This shows that meaning in Instagram captions is constructed not only from the text itself but also from background knowledge and situational context.

Unlike platforms that rely on audiovisual elements, Instagram captions depend mainly on written language. However, elements such as emojis, hashtags, and stylistic choices still function as semantic supports that influence interpretation. These elements help strengthen connotative meaning and guide the audience's understanding. Therefore, Instagram can be seen not only as a platform for sharing content but also as a space where meaning is creatively constructed. The relationship between denotative and connotative meaning is dynamic, and users actively shape meaning through language, context, and personal expression.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study reveal that the use of social media, particularly Instagram, significantly influences the understanding and interpretation of denotative and connotative meaning from a semantic perspective. Although denotative meaning refers to the literal or dictionary meaning of a word, the communication environment provided by Instagram—through short captions, emojis, hashtags, and contextual expression—often extends the meaning beyond its literal sense. In various examples analyzed in this study, it was found that captions that appear simple and literal are often interpreted in deeper ways due to emotional tone, figurative language, and contextual background. This indicates that meaning, even at its most basic level, is not entirely fixed in digital communication, where users tend to express ideas indirectly through connotative meaning. Furthermore, the findings show that Instagram captions frequently use metaphor, symbolism, and ambiguity, allowing users to convey personal experiences, feelings, and abstract ideas in a concise form. As a result, the boundary between denotative and connotative meaning becomes less rigid and more flexible. Instagram, therefore, does not only function as a platform for sharing content, but also as a semantic space where meaning is continuously constructed and interpreted by users. This study contributes to the field of semantics by demonstrating that in modern digital communication, meaning is dynamic and highly influenced by context, interpretation, and user expression.

SUGGESTION

Based on the findings, several suggestions can be proposed. First, future researchers are encouraged to explore semantic studies more deeply on Instagram by using a larger amount of data to gain more comprehensive results.

Second, educators can use Instagram captions as real-life examples to help students understand denotative and connotative meanings in a more practical way.

Third, social media users should be more aware that simple captions may carry multiple meanings, especially when using figurative language or ambiguity.

Finally, future studies may combine semantic analysis with other approaches, such as pragmatics or discourse analysis, to gain deeper insights into meaning in digital communication.

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