

TOK Exhibition: Subtext and Connotation

The TOK prompt I have selected is: **“What challenges are raised by the dissemination and/or communication of knowledge?”**. This exhibition explores this prompt by reflecting on knowledge and language, and more specifically on whether subtext and connotation always create confusion rather than help us to communicate knowledge. The language we use in our everyday lives can often be interpreted many different ways by different people, depending on their cultural background, beliefs, ideologies, affiliations, personal experiences etc. In particular it seems that subtext and connotation can be particularly challenging as they are often only recognised by people that share some particular knowledge or experiences, and it seems that they can easily be interpreted very differently by different people which can cause confusion and hinder communication of knowledge.

Object 1. Starbucks holiday cup

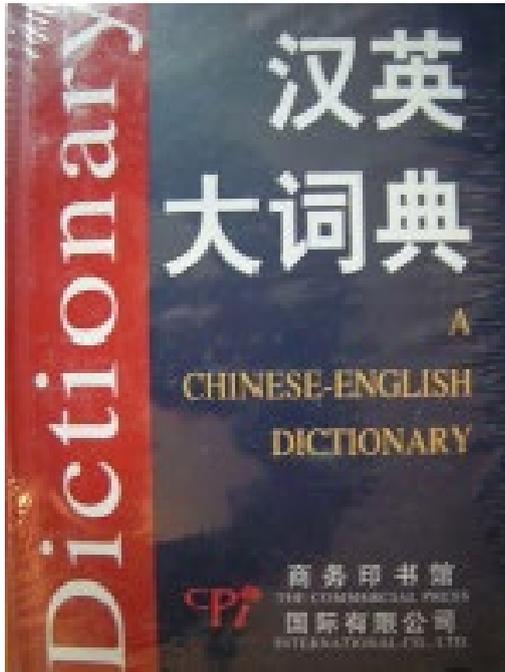


This cup was used by Starbucks in 2017 and was controversial because some people viewed the symbol of the two hands holding hands on the cup as a sign that Starbucks was promoting a homosexual agenda, because they saw the cups as having an LGBT subtext. However, many other people just saw the cup as spreading joy and love during the holiday season and did not think that there was any particular subtext at all.

This cup is particularly interesting for this exhibition because a Starbucks spokesman said that they had intentionally designed the cup so that customers could interpret it in their own way, which suggests that they were deliberately trying to communicate in an open or vague way rather than seeing the disagreement this might cause as being negative/ a challenge. In this way, the cup highlights how confusion arising from the use of subtext can be useful or can actually even be used by people intentionally to provoke discussion. The cup generated a lot of media attention for the company while still allowing them to say that how the cup was to be interpreted was up to their individual customers to decide.

This cup also enriches this exhibition because both some members of the LGBT community and also some members of the right-wing media and public saw the cups as promoting same sex relationships. While both of these different groups interpreted the cup this way, their reaction was very different, with one seeing this as very positive and one being very upset about it. Yet other people didn't see this subtext at all. So in this particular case it wasn't only that the subtext itself was only seen or understood by some groups and not others, but also that the reaction to that subtext also differed very dramatically.

Object 2. My Chinese-English Translation Dictionary



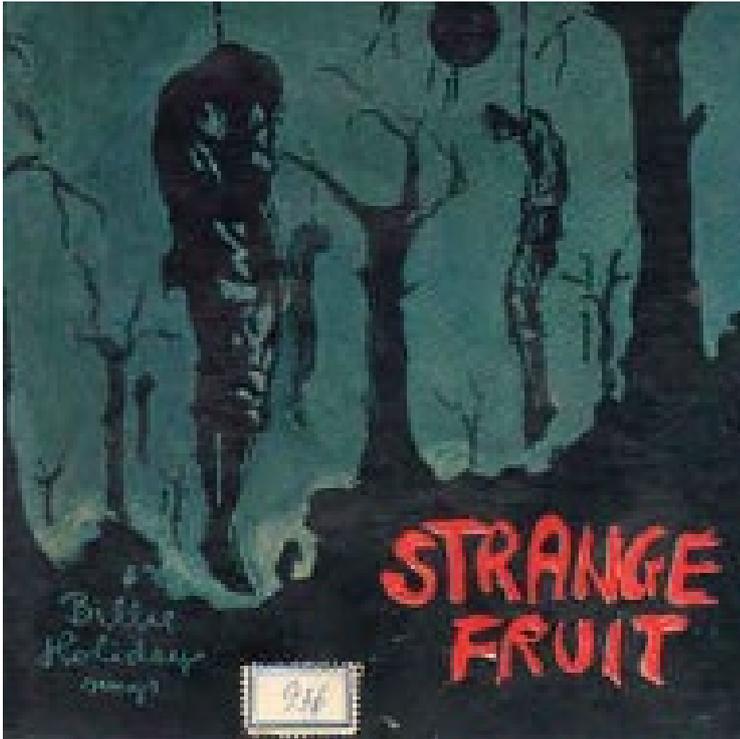
This object is a dictionary I use to help me translate between Chinese and English. When we think about how language is translated so that it can be communicated between people who speak different languages we can see that this poses many challenges to communication of knowledge, particularly because of the way that language uses connotations, euphemisms, proverbs and idioms that go beyond the literal meaning of a word.

The meaning and true essence behind many words and phrases is often unique to a specific language and the cultural/historical understanding that comes with an intimate knowledge only a native speaker can acquire, particularly things like connotation where language can have not only its literal translation but also can have secondary meanings.

This dictionary is therefore included in this exhibition as an example of where language and culture can really impact on communication of knowledge and on whether we see connotation or subtext at all as those nuances might be lost in translation. I have also included this dictionary in this exhibition because of how it represents me and the challenges around language and communication that I have personally experienced in my life and as a DP student – for example

I have personally experienced how some words and ideas do not translate easily from Chinese into English.

Object 3. Billie Holiday's song *Strange Fruit*



The song *Strange Fruit* was sung by Billie Holiday in 1939. It is often seen to use vivid imagery to protest against the treatment of black people in America and to have a subtext about promoting civil rights. This can be seen to be heavily insinuated throughout the song, especially with the use of “strange fruit” as a gruesome metaphor for the lynching of black people.

This song makes us think about whether there are things that only some people see or understand because of their culture, personal experiences, etc. I do think that subtext and connotation are sometimes interpreted very differently by different groups and the group that a person belongs to impacts on the meaning and on what is being communicated. For example, *Strange Fruit* was sung by Billie Holiday, a black artist. The fact that this subtext was being expressed by a black artist means that the singer was themselves part of a group of people had been marginalised for so long, which makes the song lyrics even more powerful and emotional.

The use of metaphor, connotation and subtext in this song helps the song communicate complex emotions and themes about racism and civil rights. In this way, this song is a helpful addition to this exhibition because it provides a good contrast to the dictionary. The dictionary highlighted that subtext and connotation can sometimes cause confusion because they add a layer of interpretation to the literal meaning of language. But this song shows that sometimes

subtext and connotation can actually help communicate complex ideas and emotions rather than always being a challenge to the communication of knowledge. Thinking about this song, I have realised that connotations and subtext don't always have to be challenging or misleading. If the person is trying to evoke a powerful meaning or emotion, often words that have many layered meanings deliver a more powerful impact.

References

Sugar, R. 2018. 'How Starbucks's annual holiday cup became a battleground for the heart and soul of America', *Vox*, accessed online at <https://www.vox.com/the-goods/2018/11/2/18052550/starbucks-holiday-cup-explained-2018-controversies>

Lynskey, D. 2011. 'Strange Fruit: the first great protest song', *The Guardian*, accessed online at <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2011/feb/16/protest-songs-billie-holiday-strange-fruit>