

## Original Paper

# Connotative Interpretations of the “Sex” Word in a Sample of Iranian Students: A Pilot Study

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### Abstract

**Objective:** Sex is a ubiquitous word which is widely used in other languages with a meaning somewhat different from the English one. This study plan to examine the attributes assigned by a group of Iranian Farsi speakers to “sex” constructs.

**Method:** the total of 33 women and 31 men (45 single and 19 married mean, age= 28.26), of medical students of Tehran University participated in this study which was done at 2020. Our measurement scale has been borrowed from Osgood; fifteen bipolar items in seven-point Likert that arranged in odd and even order is offered to participants. Some of poles are: “Cold-Warm”, “Weak-Strong”, “Secure-Unsecure”, “Hidden-Obvious”, “Up-Down”, “Funky-Fragrant”.

**Results:** this sample evaluated “sex” as warm, strong, up, fragrant, beautiful, sweet, white, good taste, good and active. Interestingly, there are more agreement than disagreement in comparison of two genders. However, there is a significant difference between male and female in the item of “unsecure-secure”. Also, regarding the marital status no significant difference was found between single and married students. The only marginal was Hidden-Obvious and Bad Taste-Good Taste.

**Conclusion:** When communication involves the use of sexuality-related words, semantics may play a particularly important role. Therefore, exploring the meaning of sex assigned by users seems necessary.

### Keywords

“sex” word, Iranian students, osgood scale, bipolar items

## 1. Introduction

The study of the relationship between a word and its representations in the mind (i.e., meanings) is known as semantics (Noland et al., 2004). According to the psychological understanding of semantics,

the words have two main kinds of meaning, denotation and connotation. Denotation is the meaning of a word, which primarily refers to the real word, the “dictionary definition”. Connotation, on the other hand, deals with some aspects of meaning which go beyond the explicit meaning. This aspect of meaning is mostly personal, subjective, and emotional (Ghassemzadeh et al., 2017). Representational interpretations of specific words can be influenced by people’s previous experience and sets of beliefs, and, thus, two people may assign entirely different connotative meanings to the same word (Osgood, 1952).

*Sex* is a ubiquitous word in modern English. It is also one which is spreading widely into other languages as a loan word, usually with a meaning somewhat different from the one it has in English (Wierzbicka, 2012). In fact, sexually explicit words can elicit certain specific reactions in people (Stewart, 1998). Along with explorations about the concept of meaning and different aspects of it, the investigators started to develop and propose some tests and techniques to measure the meaning of words as they occur in relation to other words or ideas in individuals (Ghassemzadeh et al., 2017). Semantic Differential Scales (SDS), is a scaling tool which has been used frequently for measuring subjects’ attitudes towards nearly everything, pioneered by Charles Osgood (Osgood, 1952). There are two main components of a semantic differential scale: (1) the adjectives; and (2) the layout of the scale itself. In designing a scale which can be used easily by subjects as well as providing meaningful results for the researcher, the researcher must make a number of decisions regarding both of these components (Al-Hindawe, 1996). Semantic differential scales use a standardized set of bipolar adjectives on which research participants rate an issue or object. This simple procedure confers a variety of benefits, both for researchers and study participants. Through a series of statistical analyses, Osgood identified three recurring, stable dimensions on which people can judge nearly anything: a) *evaluative*, focused on the value of the object (e.g., good/bad); b) *potency* or power of an object (e.g., strong/weak); and c) *activity* or movement of an object (e.g., slow/fast). To use a semantic differential scale, research participants respond to several bipolar adjectives designed to measure each dimension of a specific object or issue by placing a mark on one of seven blanks between the two adjectives (Frey, 2018).

Although the meaning of sex seems simple, but psycho-socio-cultural factors as well as gender play an important role in attitudes about sexual interactions. This research is the first to study the meaning of “sex” in Iran and has two purposes: first, to examine the attributes assigned by medical students to “sex” constructs; second, to compare how meanings assigned to this construct may differ in regard to gender and marital status.

## 2. Methods

### 2.1 Participants

Sixty-four Iranian Farsi speakers took part in this study which was done at 2020. Participants were an available sample of medical students and residents from Tehran University of medical sciences, Tehran,

Iran.

## 2.2 Ethical Issues

Informed consent (written) was obtained before participating in the study. It was emphasized that all participants were allowed to withdraw the informed consent and stop taking part in the study. This was important for authors because the sexual issues might be a taboo word for participants and they should feel free for cooperation. However, nobody withdrew the consents.

## 2.3 Scale and Procedure

Borrowing our main approach for measurement from Osgood, we designed a somewhat similar scale for the assessment of the word “sex”. At beginning there was a short description about the scale and a neutral example. Fifteen bipolar items were selected via an expert group discussion (2 psychiatrists and 3 psychologists). All items were seven-point Likert. Participants were supposed to select one of the seven boxes between two polar meaning that better associate with word “sex”. The poles included: “Cold-Warm”, “Weak-Strong”, “Secure-Unsecure”, “Hidden-Obvious”, “Up-Down”, “Funky-Fragrant”, “Beautiful-Ugly”, “Bitter-Sweet”, “White-Black”, “Filthy-Clean”, “Soft-Stiff”, “Good Taste-Bad Taste”, “Round-Tipped”, “Bad-Good” and “Active-Passive”. Items were arranged in odd and even order, so that in the odd items, the pole, which is generally speaking considered positive, is on the right and the pole considered being negative on the left and in the even items vice versa. No time limit was set. Authors tried to prepare a comfortable situation to reduce distraction. Before starting to fill the scale, participants could ask question about the process if there was any question.

## 2.4 Analysis

In the scale, no box has been numbered avoiding the making bias and as said above, we altered the poles in odds and evens rows. However, in analysis, we considered the poles “Warm”, “Strong”, “Safe”, “Obvious”, “Up”, “Fragrant”, “Beautiful”, “Sweet”, “White”, “Clean”, “Soft”, “Good Taste”, “Round”, “Good”, “Active” as generally speaking positive. We assigned the maximum number 7, to nearest boxes to them and numbered other boxes respectively in order that the nearest boxes to the opposite poles assign the minimum number, the one. We used SPSS software edition21 for descriptive statistics and nonparametric test for comparing the result according to male-female and single-married duality.

## 3. Results

Sixty-four volunteers participated in this study: 31male, 33 female, 45 single and 19 married). Age ranged 23 to 50, overall mean age was 28.26(SD=6.66). Details shows in Table 1.

**Table 1. Demographic Data**

Number of participants		Marriage status		Age		Mean (SD)	Median
		Married	Single	Minimum	Maximum		
Female	33	10	23	23	47	27.63(5.13)	26
Male	31	9	22	23	50	28.93(8.02)	26
Total	64	19	45				

Since the distribution was not normal, data were analyzed using non-parametric Mann-Whitney test. There was no statistically significant difference between males and females in the items, except Unsecure-Secure. Regarding the marital status no significant difference was found between single and married students. The only marginals were Hidden-Obvious and Bad Taste-Good Taste (Table 2).

**Table 2. Means and SD's in the Total Group and Differences in Semantic Differential Scale Related to "Sex" by Gender and Marriage (n = 64)**

	Total	Gender		Z	P	Marital status		Z	P
	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)				Mean (SD)			
		Female	Male			Single	Married		
Cold-Warm	5.96(1.25)	5.87(1.42)	6.03(1.07)	-.258	0.796	5.86(1.31)	6.21(1.13)	-1.121	0.262
Weak-Strong	5.56(1.23)	5.50(1.36)	5.67(1.07)	-.480	0.631	5.46(1.26)	5.78(1.13)	-.890	0.373
Unsecure-Secure	4.89(1.79)	5.34(1.49)	4.35(1.94)	-2.179	0.029	4.80(1.61)	5.10(2.15)	-1.117	0.264
Hidden-Obvious	2.23(1.26)	2.12(1.12)	2.38(1.40)	-.763	0.446	2.31(1.03)	2.05(1.71)	-1.814	0.070
Down-Up	5.35(1.53)	5.56(1.34)	5.09(1.70)	-1.072	0.284	5.37(1.49)	5.31(1.66)	-.038	0.970
Funky-Fragrant	5.28(1.66)	5.37(1.60)	5.12(0.28)	-.962	0.336	5.26(1.50)	5.31(1.91)	-.598	0.550
Ugly-Beautiful	5.73(1.33)	5.87(1.52)	5.54(0.27)	-1.034	0.301	5.84(1.31)	5.47(1.67)	-.777	0.437
Bitter-Sweet	5.64(1.51)	5.65(1.62)	5.58(0.29)	-.322	0.747	5.60(1.57)	5.73(1.55)	-.360	0.719
Black-White	5.42(1.45)	5.50(1.67)	5.29(0.30)	-.511	0.609	5.42(1.49)	5.42(1.74)	-.242	0.809
Filthy-Clean	5.26(1.57)	5.34(1.56)	5.12(0.28)	-.636	0.525	5.24(1.43)	5.31(1.85)	-.552	0.581
Stiff-Soft	5.00(1.76)	4.71(1.89)	5.22(0.32)	-1.124	0.261	5.88(1.75)	5.26(1.91)	-1.005	0.315
Bad Taste-Good Taste	5.51(1.39)	5.25(1.43)	5.74(0.22)	-1.328	0.184	5.31(1.28)	5.89(1.37)	-1.848	0.065
Tipped- Round	4.42(1.72)	4.15(2.06)	4.61(0.37)	-1.001	0.317	4.38(1.81)	4.36(2.11)	-.037	0.970
Bad-Good	5.79(1.31)	5.75(1.01)	5.80(0.18)	-.364	0.716	5.81(1.18)	5.68(1.15)	-.613	0.540
Passive-Active	5.55(1.63)	5.31(1.40)	5.80(0.25)	-1.197	0.231	5.36(1.58)	6.00(1.33)	-1.629	0.103

#### 4. Discussion

It seems whenever we are dealing with some “abstract” concepts which it is difficult to put them in a well-defined category, what is important is not necessarily the object itself but the combination of some salient features of it on the one hand and the mental set that is activated in the individual, on the other (Ghassemzadeh et al., 2017). This study examined the assigned attributes to sex by 64 medical students. Regarding to medians, students evaluated “sex” as warm, strong, up, fragrant, beautiful, sweet, white, good taste, good and active.

According to three type’s classification of Osgood including “overall evaluation, assessment of potency and degree of activity” (Osgood, Suci, & Tannenbaum, 1957) , the most associations in these three fields which accompany with sex are positive, potent and active. This finding is consistent with metaphysical sexual optimists who suppose that sexuality is a natural bonding mechanism that happily joins people together both sexually and non-sexually. Sexual activity involves pleasing the self and the other at the same time, and these exchanges of pleasure generate both gratitude and affection, which in turn deepen human relationships and make them more satisfying and emotionally substantial (Soble, 2002).

Although most of the attributes which were selected by the participants were positive; “hidden” and “bad taste” were selected as a basically different attributes in single subjects. Each society, however, interprets sexuality and sexual activity in different ways. Even in the Western world, countries differ in their emphasis on the value of virginity before marriage (Widmer, Treas, & Newcomb, 1998). Sexual intimacy and premarital sex is legally prohibited and culturally forbidden in Iran society (Motamedi et al., 2016). Therefore, for preserving social norms and family values, single subjects sometimes participate in hidden sexual activity which seems to affect their attitude to sex. It could be due to being sex as a taboo. Taboo and euphemism affect us all (Gao, 2013). Also, language as the most important tool and/or mechanism of relationship and communication is very sensitive to any “violation” or “anomalies” considered as taboos. This sensitivity is notably salient in the case of sex and sex related words (Ghassemzadeh, 2018).

It is interesting that when we compared differences in semantic differential scale related to “sex” by gender, we find more agreement than disagreement; which might be attributable to the homogeneity of persons (students) who attended in this study. However, there is a significant difference between male and female in the Item “unsecure-secure”. Actually, females select unsecure attributes significantly more than males, it could be consistent with the findings of an unpublished preliminary study in Iran (Ghassemzadeh et al., 2018). Its main purpose was to find the associated words to the word “sex” by the participants (67 female and 36 male volunteer medical students) when they were asked to write down the words that came to their minds after gave them the word sex. In total, 112 words were collected. Some of the frequent associated words in both genders were pleasure (27 %), love (24 %), sexual relation (17 %), and peace of mind (15 %); which could be show having a positive view towards

sex.

Some of the words that were absent (zero frequency) from the women associations were: genital organs, masturbation, fetish, bosom, feet, lip, sucking, porn films, vaginal sex, anal sex and sex position, as well as power, aggression, mastery and energy. On the other hand, the following words were absent from the men associations; pain, shame, dirty, money, sin, inferiority, commitment, infidelity and rape. Although it is not possible to generalize the findings, it shows a kind of inhibitory mechanism in the women, which can be interpreted as the effect of taboos in their mind and as a representation of a more conservative and relatively negative attitude toward sex.

Moreover, these findings could be explained by the double standards. It refers to just that two different standards of sexual behavior, one for women and one for men. It is based on the questionable assumption that males have a greater desire and need for sexual activity than females do. Believers in the double standard do not hold a man responsible for pushing an unwilling woman to engage in sexual activity; rather, they maintain it is the woman's responsibility to set limits (Lips, 2017).

## 5. Limitation

This study has some notable limitations. Our sample size is very small, and all of the participants were medical students and were not selected randomly from different populations

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