Name:_____ Date: _____ Class Period:_____

Language Overview--Diction and Tone

Diction, or the author's word choice, is a powerful element of an author's style and helps to develop the tone of a text. Words that develop the author's attitude can have a **connotative** meaning, an implied or suggested meaning, or a **denotative** meaning, a literal dictionary definition meaning. Authors use this language purposefully to elicit certain responses from the reader.

As an example, the words *giggle* and *cackle* both literally describe a type of laughter, which is the dictionary definition, or denotative meaning. The word *giggle* has the connotation of being youthful and playful, while the word *cackle* has an evil or dark connotation.

Practice 1:
Identify if the following words have a negative, positive, or neutral connotation.

    A. spinster, old maid, bachelorette, unmarried woman, career woman

    B. saving, tight, miserly, frugal, economical, thrifty, penny-pinching, budget minded

    C. shrewd, calculating, clever, sly, knowing, cunning, skillful, smooth

Words That Describe Language

There are many words one could use to describe the language a writer uses, though the following adjectives are the most common:

    formal, informal, simple, complex, colloquial (like spoken language), scholarly, concrete, abstract, descriptive, technical (with jargon), emotional or neutral

Practice 2:
Which word(s) would you use to describe the language usage in the sentences below?

A. "The company's customer-centric business model provides a strong value proposition to consumers." From *PRDaily*

B. "I became aware of the old island here that flowered once for Dutch sailors' eyes — a fresh, green breast of the new world. Its vanished trees, the trees that had made way for Gatsby's house, had once pandered in whispers to the last and greatest of all human dreams..." From *The Great Gatsby*

C. "Riches is nothing in the face of the Lord, for He can see into the heart." From *As I Lay Dying*

(continued)

The language a writer uses helps to create the **tone** of a work. This tone is the author's attitude towards his or her subject matter. When reading for tone, consider not only language but also how the details, imagery, sentence structure and literary choices lend insight into the author's purpose and attitude. Being able to determine tone is an essential skill needed to fully comprehend a text.

Here are just some of the many words one can use to describe an author's tone:

lighthearted, hopeful, enthusiastic, complimentary, confident, optimistic, elated, sympathetic, compassionate, proud, angry, disgusted, urgent, outraged, accusing, indignant, threatening, sarcastic, cynical, critical, satiric, condescending, mock-serious, taunting, somber, sad, disturbed, mournful, solemn, serious, apprehensive, concerned, hopeless, formal, objective, nostalgic, restrained, clinical, sentimental, detached, urgent, instructive, matter-of-fact, informative and *authoritative*

Practice 3:
Answer the questions below based on a few lines of poetry with strong connotative diction from Dylan Thomas's poem "Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night":

> "Do not go gentle into that good night,
> Old age should burn and rave at close of day;
> Rage, rage against the dying of the light."

A. What do the words "good night" denote?

B. What do the words "good night" connote?

C. Pick another word from the poem with a strong connotation. What does the word suggest?

D. How would you describe Thomas's language overall?

E. What tone is created in Thomas's three lines of poetry (or what is his attitude towards living life)? How is it created?

Practice 4:
Alter the following sentence so that each conveys the attitude of the tone word listed below:

The boy looked out his window to the street below.

A. Elated

B. Detached

C. Select your own tone word to convey:

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