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Verbal Satiation and Changes in the Intensity of Meaning

In Collaboration with Leon A. Jakobovits

Several investigators have demonstrated that Ss experience a change or loss of meaning for words which have been continuously repeated or fixated for a certain period of time (Basette and Warne, 1919; Mason, 1941; Smith and Raygor, 1956; Wertheimer and Gillis, 1956). For instance, Basette and Warne (1919) reported that the meanings of familiar nouns which were repeated aloud "dissipated" for their Ss within 3 or 4 sec. More recently, it was found that if Ss fixated a word exposed on a screen for 20 sec., their first association to the word is uncommon as measured by the Kent-Rosanoff Word Association Test (Smith and Raygor, 1956). The lapse or radical change of the meaning of a word as a result of its continued repetition is known as verbal satiation. Before the full implication of this concept for theories of learning and meaning can be determined, it is necessary to develop a method for reliably measuring the extent of meaning change which can be attributed to the satiation experience. The purpose of the present study is to extend the significance of the concept of verbal satiation by introducing a more comprehensive method of measuring the phenomenon and thereby relating it to a contemporary theory of meaning.

Osgood, Suci, and Tannenbaum (1957) have proposed an objective and reliable instrument for the measurement of certain aspects of connotative meaning. This instrument, the "semantic differential," consists of a series of scales each representing a 7-point, bipolar dimension. The meaning of a word, such as "father," is given by its position on an evaluative factor (its degree of goodness or badness), on an activity factor, and on a potency factor. The theory underlying this method assumes that the meaning of a word has a place in a multidimensional semantic space. A word without