

On Psychological, Semantic and Structural Aspects of English Colour Terms

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Over centuries colours have come to mean many things to different cultures. They have always fascinated humankind. They provide us with the ability to differentiate many things. We think of colour as an independent concept with a part to play in every aspect of our lives, e.g. we have favourite colours for our clothes, our rooms, etc. The recognition and interpretation of colour are determined by many factors – cultural, religious, spiritual, biological, and psychological. The natural development of colour recognition is participatory, and the perception of the mind is unconsciously influenced by these factors. For example, ancient Greeks had no word for the colour *blue*, so they described the *sea* as *wine-dark* and the *sky* as *bronze*. To them, *blue* was not a colour in our sense, but the quality of *darkness*. The terms used to describe colour were psychological attributes such as *fresh*, *dark*, *moist*, or *alive*. The value of colour is extensive. It ranges from the use of language to artists and designing. The most important aspect of colour in daily life is probably the one that is least defined and most variable. It involves aesthetic and psychological responses to colour, and influences art, fashion, commerce and even physical and emotional sensations. One example of the link between colour and emotion is the common perception that red, orange, yellow, and brown hues are *warm*, while the blue, green and grey ones are *cold*: The *red*, *orange*, and *yellow* hues are said to induce excitement, cheerfulness, stimulation, and aggression; the *blues* and *greens* – security, calm and peace; and the *browns*, *greys*, and *blacks* – sadness, depression, and melancholy. *Green monster of jealousy*, *red with anger*, and *feeling blue* – these are emotions that are described in relation to colours. In these simple English phrases, colours are a symbol of feelings. Colours make these emotions more vivid and descriptive. It is one of the many steps to take language to a higher level of sophistication and beauty. Emotions will be much too simple if we were just to describe ourselves by a mere feeling. It does not provide enough exaggeration and amplification of the feeling. Being *red with anger* makes the feeling of fury more tragic and dramatic. The use of colour terms allows us to express ourselves better and appreciate words since we do not need to use pompous words to describe our feelings, thus economizing on words.

In addition to emotional associations, factors that affect colour perception include the observer's age, mood, and mental health. Many psychologists believe that analysing an individual's uses of and responses to colour can reveal information about the individual's physiological and psychological condition.

Colours are not universal. Some languages do not possess separate words for *green* and *blue* or for *yellow* and *orange*, while the Eskimos use 17 words for *white* as applied to different snow conditions (soft snow, frozen snow, melted snow, etc.). As for us, we, Armenians, do not yield to the limitation of colours; it can be said without scruple that

there exist 27 synonyms for white, not to mention their flexible combinability. Colour terms are widely used in languages; they are used in English as well. Like colour terminology, colour harmony, colour preferences, colour symbolism, and other psychological aspects of colour are culturally conditioned, and they vary considerably in terms of place and historical period. One cross-cultural study showed that American and Japanese concepts of warm and cold colours are essentially the same, but that in Japan *blue* and *green* hues are perceived to be *good* and the *red-purple* range as *bad*, while in the United States the *red- yellow- green* range is considered *good* and *oranges and red-purple*– *bad*. The colour of mourning is *black* in the West, yet other cultures use *white, purple, or gold* for this purpose. Besides many colours, there are a lot of shades of them e.g. the colour *red* has many shades: *scarlet, crimson, cherry, etc.* Sometimes if we want to show what shades of the colour we exactly mean, we can use them with other words, for instance *oil-brown* and *oil-green, lead-white* and *grey as lead, etc.* At the same time one particular colour may have many different first members like *chalk-, frost-, milk-, wall-, swan-, silver-white.*

Now we shall consider only the part of the field which covers the words *red, orange, yellow, green* and *blue*. Each of these terms is referentially imprecise, but their relative position in this lexical system is fixed (and as a set they cover the greater part of the visible spectrum); *orange* lies between *red* and *yellow, yellow* – between *orange* and *green* and so on. It is part of the sense of each of these terms that they belong to this particular lexical system in English. It might appear that the notion of sense is unnecessary here, and that an account of the reference of colour terms would be sufficient as a description of their meaning. Consider, however, the conditions under which one might come to learn or be said to know the reference of these words. The child learning English cannot first learn the reference of *blue* and then subsequently the reference of *green* or *yellow*, so that at a particular time he could be said to know the reference of one but not the other. (It is true that he might learn, that *green* referred to the colour of grass or the leaves of a particular tree, or one of his mother's dresses; but the reference of *green* is wider than any particular instance of its application and knowledge also of the boundaries of its reference). It must be supposed that over a certain period the child gradually learns the position of *green* with respect to *blue* and *orange*, and soon until he has learnt the position of each of the colour terms with respect to its neighbour in the lexical system.

It has often been shown that other languages impose a different form upon the substance by recognizing different members of areas within it and drawing the boundaries at different places. To refer to an example used above; the Russian words *синий* and *голубой* together cover roughly the same area as the English word *blue*, or *сиреневый* and *фиолетовый* cover the same area as the English word *violet*. In Armenian the same can be said about *գիգիրիզույն, նարնջիզույն* and *ծիրնիշույն* which are equivalent to the English *orange*. The words *синий* and *голубой* refer to distinct but contiguous colours co-ordinated in the system with the words *зеленый* and *желтый* (*green* and *yellow*). They're not to be regarded as terms which refer to different shades of one colour, in the way that *crimson* and *scarlet* with other terms subdivide the area covered by *red* in English.

Colour terms are often used in phraseological units. We can compare word-groups where colour terms are used to name an object exactly of that colour and word-groups where it is used in quite a different meaning.

Free word-groups make up variable contexts, whereas the essential feature of phraseological units is a non-variable or fixed context. So, depending on the context the names of colours can show not only the colour but also some other qualities of the word which they qualify (Amosova 1963).

While discussing phraseological units we must also pay attention to motivation, e.g. nominal groups like *red flower*, *blue dress*, *grey stone*, etc. are lexically motivated. The combined lexical meanings of these groups are deducible from the meanings of their components, whereas structurally identical word-group *red-tape* –*official bureaucratic methods* are lexically non-motivated. In these groups the constituents do not possess any individual lexical meaning of their own as the word-groups under discussion seem to represent single indivisible semantic entities.

The degree of motivation may be different. Between the extremes of complete motivation and lack of motivation there are innumerable intermediate cases, e.g. the degree of lexical motivation in the nominal group *black market* is higher than in *Black Death*, but lower than in *black dress*, though none of the groups can be considered as completely non-motivated.

The constituent *red* in the free word-group *red-flower* may, if necessary, be substituted for by any other adjective denoting colour (blue, white, etc.) without essentially changing the denotational meaning of the word-group under discussion (a flower of a certain colour).

In the phraseological unit *red tape* (*bureaucratic methods*) no such substitution is possible as a change of the adjective would involve a complete change in the meaning of the whole group. A *blue* (black, white, etc.) *tape* would mean a tape of a certain colour. It follows that the phraseological unit *red tape* is semantically non-motivated, i.e. whether the semantic relations between words are identical. So the word-group *red-flower* may be deleted and transformed into *flowers* without making the sentence nonsensical, e.g. I love red flowers, I love flowers, whereas *I hate red tape* cannot be transformed into *I hate tape* or *I hate red*. It's also argued that non-variability of the phraseological unit is not confined to its lexical components.

The grammatical structure of phraseological units is to a certain extent also stable. Thus, though the structural pattern of the word-groups *red-flower* and *red tape* is identical (A+N), the noun *flower* may be used in the plural (*red flowers*), whereas no such change is possible in the phraseological unit *red tape*; *red tapes* would then denote *tapes of red colour* but not *bureaucratic methods*.

This is also true of other types of phraseological units. Sometimes, however, the plural ending *-s* may change the meaning of the idiom completely but it will still remain as an idiom though quite another one, e.g. *white horse* means *cowardice* while *white horses* means *white-crested waves at sea* (барашки на море). So here we have two different idioms.

Sometimes extra-linguistic factors may account for the loss of motivation, *to show the*

white feather – to act as a coward, e.g. can be traced back to the days when cock-fighting was popular. A *white feather* in a gamecock's plumage denoted *bad breeding* and was regarded as a sign of cowardice. Now that cock-fighting is no longer a popular sport, the phrase is felt as non-motivated.

So, we see now that motivation is rather important for the phraseological units, in this case for idioms with colour names. Now we can refer to them from the point of view of context. So, the colours are polysemantic words. It will be recalled that in analyzing, e.g. the semantic structure of the polysemantic word *yellow* we can observe that some meanings are representative of the word in isolation, i.e. they invariably occur to us when we hear the word or see it written on paper. Other meanings come to the fore only when the word is used in certain contexts. So, the adjective *yellow* when used in isolation denotes a certain colour, whereas other meanings of this word, e.g. *envious*, *suspicious*, *sensational*, *corrupt* are perceived only in certain contexts, e.g. *a yellow look*, *the yellow press*, etc. We see here that the quality of colour isn't essential in these expressions at all; a look can't have a yellow colour, press isn't yellow either.

The same is true for other colours, e.g. *white frost* means the *frost with snow and rime*, which isn't exactly of white colour (and *black frost* means *frost without snow*), *white meat* means the *meat which is easily digested*, *white heat* means *extremely great heat*. Sometimes the colour is even less obvious, *white wine* is usually of yellow colour, *white herring* (and *red herring*) means just the fresh one, *white coffee* is brown, *brown bread* isn't exactly brown, etc. Here *white* denotes just the lightest in colour of that usually to be found. But it can also be used metaphorically, e.g. *white* can mean the one that is good, kind, again light but from another point of view. So *white day* – *happy day*, *white lie* – *a diplomatic untruth, told with good intentions*, *white witch* – *the kind one*.

Black is also used in phrases like *black coffee* or *black people* though they are not black in their colour. And it is used as a negative factor opposite to *white*. So *black humour* means a *morbid form of humour*, *black list* – *a list of persons or organizations to be disapproved or suspected of disloyalty, misconduct, etc.*, *black market* – *the selling of goods at illegal quantities*, *black sheep* – *a person considered disgraceful by his family*, etc.

But not only *black* can mean something that is bad as in *yellow look*, or *green with envy* – *very envious*, *very jealous*, *red flag* – *sign of danger*, *red-handed* – *in the act of committing a crime*, *in the red* – *losing money*, etc. The same is true for *brown* the archaic meaning of which was *dark*. So we can say *brown study* – *a mood of deep absorption or thoughtfulness*. Even *white* doesn't always mean something good, e.g. *white elephant* means *a possession that is no longer wanted by its owner, often because it is useless, expensive, or troublesome to maintain*.

To sum up, colour is a silent language. Without words and across differing cultures, colours can be used for communication among people. Colours are rich in hidden meanings and symbolisms. Colour symbolism serves an important role in art, religion, politics, and ceremonials, as well as in everyday life. Its strong emotional connotations can affect colour perception so that, for example, an apple or heart-shaped figure cut from orange paper may seem to have a redder hue than a geometric figure cut from the same paper

because of the specific psychological meaning that is associated with the shape. What is more, colours have a very interesting story to tell. They hold information and transmit messages. Intuitively and instinctively, human memory is stored within a colour-coded resonance.

References:

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Անգլերենի գունանուններով դարձվածքների հոգեբանական, իմաստային և կառուցվածքային առանձնահատկությունների շուրջ

Գունային սիմվոլիկան մեծ դեր ունի արվեստում, կրոնական ծեսերում և ամենօրյա կյանքում: Գունանունները հաճախ հանդիպում են դարձվածքներում, որոնց իմաստահոգեբանական հիմքում ընկած են տվյալ ազգին և մշակույթին բնորոշ պատկերացումներ: Դրանք արտացոլում են տվյալ լեզվին բնորոշ իմաստաբանական, քերականական, բառակազմական և հոգեբանական առանձնահատկությունները: Հոդվածը քննարկում է անգլերենի գունանուններով դարձվածքների հոգեբանական, իմաստային և կառուցվածքային որոշ հարցեր: