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Colour Words**

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## **Semantic Structure of Colour Words**

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### **Abstract**

The research claims and provides linguistic evidence that the English terms of colour are used for the same five purposes and reveal regularity and systematic features in their semantic structures. This commonality is evident in the existence of similar meanings and in common types of meanings. The polysemantic colour adjectives in the English language exhibit a common model represented by five groups, such as to describe color (*white paper*), to describe light or darkness (*grey morning*), to describe object types (*black bread*), to “label” objects (*yellow press*), and to reflect emotions (*blue mood*).

The author comes to the conclusion that the system could be found on the “inner” level of a semantic structure of polysemantic words and suggests that the results should be reflected in the lexicographical definitions of color adjectives and bilingual dictionaries.

**Keywords:** Adjectives of Colour, Polysemy, Semantic Structure, Meaning.

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## Introduction

Many studies in the field of semantics investigate systematic features in the organization of the vocabulary into lexical, semantic, thematic, and synonymous groups, including the words of colour (Berlin and Kay, 1969; Averill, 1980; Voss 1996, Sakuta, 2006). Only a few researchers dwell on the systematic connection between the meanings of polysemantic words and similarity in the derivational links between various meanings or so called lexical-semantic variants (Kascheeva, Ustinova, 1985).

The prediction of my research is that the system could be found on the “inner” level of a semantic structure of polysemantic words. It is especially true for the words that are combined into a certain group on the basis of common features that exist in extra-linguistic reality. Thus, the names of animals, taste, temperature or color words should reveal similar features on the level of semantics.

The thorough and detailed analysis of vocabulary entries from six dictionaries: Webster’s, Chamber’s, Concise Oxford, Funk and Wagnalls, Longman, and Random House, as well as fiction data, composed of 9,400 samples, allows me to develop a hypothesis about certain regularity in semantic structure of colour adjectives and project the existence of a typical colour adjectives’ model in English and some other European languages.

The data for my research include eight adjectives of the English language such as white, black, grey, blue, brown, red, green, and yellow. These adjectives were not randomly selected. They represent a visual sense perception that is very important for a person’s worldview. Also, these adjectives are among the most frequent polysemantic words that maintain both direct and figurative meanings and exhibit rich associations and potential for developing new meanings. These colour words in English have well-developed semantic structures and possess multiple meanings: white is composed of 21, black of 17, green of 14, grey of 12, red of 11, blue of 10, yellow of 10, brown of 8 meanings or lexical-semantic variants (LSV).

## Common Model for Adjectives of Colour

### *The First Group of Meanings: Characterizing a Specific Colour*

The nuclear dominant meanings (LSV1) for this group represent semantic centers and a basis for derivational meanings. They are “the colour of coal (for black), ruby (for red), grass (for green), snow (for white), etc.” as in *white dress, black car, blue eyes, red lips, green sea*, etc. These are the most frequent meanings; according to my data from the American and British fiction, above 60% of all samples illustrate them.

*Black as coal*, and the both their families *white as snow* and blond blond (MacDonald, *Fall on Your Knees*).

It was this *red hunting hat*, with one of those very, very long peaks (Salinger, *The Catcher in the Rye*).

Nonetheless she has nice *brown eyes* and a good disposition blond (MacDonald, *Fall on Your Knees*).

What also makes these meanings special is the fact that each adjective reflects a wide spectrum of colour shades and that is why a particular object of nature, whose colour serves as an etalon or a standard is usually picked for dictionary definitions: “*black as coal, brown as mud, white as clouds*” “However, there is no rigid norm and the standards allow some variability : E.g. *red* can be as *blood, or rubies, or sunset, or human lips*. *Green* can be as *grass, leaves, field, sea-water, emerald, olive*. And when the *fields* are fresh and *green*, I’ll take you to your home again (MacDonald, *Fall on Your Knees*).

She tried to think of Daddy and light things-fresh air, and *green grass*- she worried that daddy would know (MacDonald, *Fall on Your Knees*).

All this he seemed to see in the large eyes of his mother and his sister, looking up at him through the *green water*, hundreds of fathoms down and still sinking (Orwell, 1984).

*Black* can be as *tar, coal, or ace of spades*.

She may be peaches and cream but you should see her mother...*black as the ace of spades*, my dear (MacDonald, *Fall on Your Knees*).

Occasionally, one object can serve as an etalon to two different colours, such as *sea-water* for *blue* and *green*; *lead* for *blue* and *grey*, *coal* for *grey* and *black*; *gold* for *red* and *yellow*. That serves as an evidence of smooth transition of one colour into another in the colour spectrum.

He read and the *coals* cooled to *gray* in the hearth (MacDonald, *Fall on Your Knees*).

*Coal-black curls* escaping from two long braids (MacDonald, *Fall on Your Knees*).

Down below is the jagged water.... Father out it’s mauve like a pair of cold lips, closer in it’s copper *green*, gun *gray*, seducing *seaweed* to dance the seven veils despite the chill (MacDonald, *Fall on Your Knees*).

Rarely it happens, but the standard will not work out well; thus, though *white* implies *snow* and *green* implies *grass* or *leaves*, it is possible to come across such combinations as *blue snow*, *red leaves*, *brown grass*.

A light *orange snow* began to fall (MacDonald, *Fall on Your Knees*).

Another common meaning (LSV 2) of this group is “wearing clothes of this colour” as in *black monk*, *blue soldier*, *green girl*. Those meanings are based on the contraction: *black monk*---- *black habit monk* (N1----{N2}----N3). Similar type of production is found in the third meaning (LSV3), such as “having hair of this colour”, as in *gray woman*, *he was white now; he was black and curly*, etc.

...a dark little round woman with a *gray bun* slips into the back of the hall with a tall young *black woman* (MacDonald, *Fall on Your Knees*).

I turned sideways and showed her my *grey hair* (Salinger, *The Catcher in the Rye*).

#### *The Second Group of Meanings: Characterizing Light and Darkness*

*Black* and *brown* characterize darkness: *black night*, *brown evening*; *white* describe *light* as in *white air*, *grey* and *blue* indicate *dim light* or *dusk* as in *blue grains of dawn*, *grey day*. These meanings (LSV 4) also serve as a basis for emotional meanings.

Usually I like riding on trains, especially at *night*, with the lights on and the *windows so black* (Salinger, *The Catcher in the Rye*).

She did not sing, she talked and talked in her mother tongue to the stones, till she grew dizzy and the *day* grew *gray* and she lost track of where she was  
(MacDonald, *Fall on Your Knees*).

#### *The Third Group of Meanings: Characterizing Special Role of Colour in Naming Objects*

Colours are important in naming of the objects or phenomena, but not the only characteristics of them. Typical meanings (LSV 5) will be: “having a natural pigmentation of the skin close to a specific colour, such as white, black, brown and red. “

As *she was white* as the orchard blossoms or the *sunburnt skin* seemed more richly *brown* (MacDonald, *Fall on Your Knees*).

His *red face* split in a grin, he wheezed out his laugh like a busted accordion (MacDonald, *Fall on Your Knees*).

Kathleen thrived. Silky red-gold hair, green eyes and *white white skin* (MacDonald, *Fall on Your Knees*).

The meanings (LSV 6) “having changed the skin colour under of influence of some reasons” are composed of two semas ; a sema of colour and another sema that denotes emotional or physical state of a person. Reasons why skin changes colour can be similar and a person can be *white or black or brown or yellow or red* with *rage, anger, hate* or *white, red, blue* with *cold*.

Two monstrous women with *brick-red forearms* folded across their aprons were talking outside a doorway (Orwell, 1984).

Suddenly he became aware of Julia’s *face* a few centimeters from his own, *deathly white, as white as chalk* (Orwell, 1984).

How come you gave her a *blue mouth*? She stayed in water too long and her *lips turned blue* (MacDonald, *Fall on Your Knees*).

Meanings (LSV 7) signify “belonging to a certain ethnic group or race” in combinations with nouns denoting humans as in a *black girl* (African-American), *white people* (Caucasian), *yellow baby* (Mongolian) races. The meanings can also be realized in combination with inanimate objects, such as *white school, brown power, red God*.

If a *white girl* was singing it, she’d make it sound cute as hell, but old Estelle Fletcher knew what the hell she was doing, and it was one of the best records I ever heard (Salinger, *The Catcher in the Rye*). In the extended context, the author calls Estelle Fletcher, a singer who had a Cuban mother, a *coloured girl*.

James could not place the man’s accent and never realized her was *black, from Barbados....* (MacDonald, *Fall on Your Knees*).

In the trucks little *yellow men* ...were squatting. Their sad, *Mongolian faces* gazed out over the sides of their trucks (Orwell, 1984).

Often the meanings indicating race can have derogatory and offensive connotation:

The old stand by about the strangeness of *white people* doesn’t really apply here because, although you’d take your life in your hands if you said it, the *Mahmouds aren’t really white*, are they? (MacDonald, *Fall on Your Knees*).

*The Forth Group of Meanings: Symbolized By Colour*

These meanings are motivated by colour and were named on the basis of colour, though colour is not the most prominent feature and often plays a symbolic function. Thus, the meanings (LSV8) “having colour as one of the differentiating signs” are typical for binary or multiple juxtapositions where the colour just implies the type, variety, species of a class, brand or breed as in *white/black/red currant*, *black/brown/red/yellow soil*, *blue/red spruce*.

The sample below illustrates the different breeds of bears, *white* or polar (in Latin, *Ursus maritimus*) versus *brown* or grizzly bear (in Latin, *Ursus arctos*).

Only one of the bears was out, the *polar bear*. The other one, the *brown one*, was in his goddam cave and wouldn't come out (Salinger, *The Catcher in the Rye*).

Often the link between colour and meaning is arbitrary and symbolic; it can only be explained by the extra-linguistic factors. Thus, *black flag* implies the *pirates' flag*, *red flag- revolutionary flag*, *white flag- capitulation or surrender flag*. Among those symbolic meanings, a special type of meanings (LSV 9) that reflect societal, social, cultural, and ideological realities is identified, such as in *white terror*, *orange revolution or yellow press*.

They marched in good order, jaunty for all their rags, their torn *red battle flags* flying in the rain (Mitchell, *Gone with the Wind*).

The timeline of *Gone with the Wind* novel is the Civil war in America and the red flag is the flag of the Confederate Army.

In many European cultures, traditionally a *white* in a wedding dress is a symbol of purity and *black* in mourning outfit is a symbol of grief.

... her *housedress* actually is *black* since she was in *mourning* for Kathleen at the time (MacDonald, *Fall on Your Knees*).

They buried her in *white*, it should have been her *wedding dress* (MacDonald, *Fall on Your Knees*).

*The Fifth Group of Meanings: Associated With Colour*

These are emotional meanings (LSV 10), associated with darkness and light or subjective and cultural interpretation of colour. Some meanings (LSV 10) are “characterizing objects’ or people’s qualities or moods, “such as in *black mood* (sad, desperate, fearful), *white hope* (optimistic, inspiring, pure), *brown atmosphere* (gloomy, sad), *to be young and green* (naïve, young, immature), *to be green* (jealous), *to be blue and weepy* (pessimistic, melancholy, sad), *yellow press or person* (lacking courage, cowardly).



I was sorry anyway. Goddam money. It always ends up making *you blue as hell* (Salinger, *The Catcher in the Rye*).

I am one of these very *yellow guys*. I try not to show it, but I am. For instance, if I ‘d found out at Pencey who’d stoled my gloves, I probably would’ve gone down to the crook’s room and said,” Okay. How ‘bout handing over those gloves?” .... It’s not fun *to be yellow*. ... What *you* should be is not *yellow* at all (Salinger, *The Catcher in the Rye*).

Plenty of time to think and the more I thought, the *blacker every thing* got (Hemingway, *A Farewell to Arms*).

Meanings (LSV11) “intensive, vivid, exaggerated” emerge when desemantization of the emotional meanings occurs and the quality of the noun combined with the adjective of colour becomes just stronger, as in *white ecstasy* or *black horror*.

He locked his fingers with *white violence* as if he would break his knuckles, staring, staring into darkness (Fowles, *The French Lieutenant’s Woman*).

Aunt Cissie’s *green hellish flares of hate* would go up again all young things, sometimes (Lawrence, *Twilight in Italy*).

## Conclusion

This model of semantic structure is examined and built for eight adjectives of colour; however, it can be extrapolated on other polysemantic words, such as *purple*, *silver*, *scarlet*, *crimson*, etc. The illustrations from the texts support this prediction and reveal multiple regular meanings in such combinations as *purple sunset*, *scarlet woman*, *rosy boy*, *he was crimson with shame*, *silver-blue fox*, *golden opportunity*, *ruddy Communist*.

People with black curly hair, full features and smooth *olive faces* (MacDonald, *Fall on Your Knees*).

Materia stroked the *fire-gold hair* and passed a warm brown hand across the staring green eyes (MacDonald, *Fall on Your Knees*).

It is discovered in the research that terms of colour are used for the same five purposes and reveal regularity and systematic features in their semantic structures. The semantic structure of colour adjectives are built according to a similar pattern. This commonality is evident in existence of similar meaning and in common types of meanings.

The linguistic evidence of a common model exists for polysemantic colour adjectives in the English language and is represented by five groups.

1. To describe color (*white paper*)
2. To describe light or darkness (*grey morning*)
3. To describe object types (*black bread*)
4. To “label” objects (*yellow press*)
5. To reflect emotions (*blue mood*)

The results should be reflected in the lexicographical definitions of color adjectives and bilingual dictionaries. Potential uses of discovery included automated translational systems, which is gaining more prominence today with the advent of the Internet. Significance of novelty also lies in its potential use: second and foreign language teaching is tremendously facilitated by direct correlation between the students’ native languages and the language of their studies.

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