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COLOURS USED IN IDIOMATIC EXPRESSIONS

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Abstract: This article aims at focusing on colour terms used in idiomatic expressions in English language. I chose the semantic field of colours because they are very frequently used especially to convey certain meanings.As a very significant human experience, colours attracted many scholars' attention. People always use colours to express their understandings and thoughts and their meaning changes across cultures.

Keywords: Colour, feelimgs, emotions, double meaning,collocation

Among figures of speech, idioms represent a set expression of two or more words that means something other than the literal meaning of its individual words.According to Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary, an idiom " is a phrase or sentence whose meaning is not clear from the meaning of its individual words and which must be learnt as a whole unit" (p.616). The meaning of the idioms can be sometimes understood by looking the words up in a dictionary and using some common sense and imagination and the context of the phrase. Taking into account all these aspects the article aims at focusing on colour terms used in the idiomatic expressions. So present are colours in our existence that alongside taxes and death they have been (humorously) labeled as the third inescapable element of our lives.Therefore, it comes as a natural phenomenon that they were incorporated in language and ascribed symbolic values. Colour symbolism is the use of colour to represent traditional, cultural or religious idea, concepts, feelings or to evoke physical relations. Colours are believed to create a physical reaction/red has been shown to raise blood pressure, they also follow trends- in certain periods different colours have been considered fashionable or the attribute of social political categories (as purple representing royalty or red representing communism).

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1. Colours and emotions

Anders Steinvall[1] explored the collocations of 50 colour terms and 135 emotions terms and researched "which colour categories are salient from the point of view of emotions and vice versa".

The most frequent collocation of black colour is related to sadness. White colour is associated with anger and fear and red is very vividly represented by collocations with anger. Both Yellow and orange convey joy. Green is associated with anger to be more precisely with envy and jealousy.

Here are some examples (according to Longman Dictionary):

-black day-*without hope*

-black look- *full of anger and hate*

-the black sheep of the family- *someone who is regarded by the other members of their family or a group as a failure or embarrassment*

-a **black** mark against somebody- *someone has a bad opinion of you because of what you have done*

-not as **black** as painted – *not to be as bad as people say you are*

-black list- 1. *ban from further employment in a particular field 2.a list of people, institutions, organizations, books, etc. that do not enjoy official support*

-to give somebody a **black** eye- *give somebody a bad reputation*

-in one's **black** list- *in one's list of datable pretty girls*

- paint somebody all **black-** *describe someone or something as all bad*

-the pot calling the kettle **black-** *criticizing another for faults or errors of which oneself is guilty (Rom. Râde ciob de oală spartă)*

-the pot shouldn't call the kettle **black-** don't criticize somebody else for you yourself can be criticised

On the other hand, white indicated something good, having the power to turn something bad into something good:

-white lie- *a lie that you tell someone in order to protect them or avoid hurting their feelings*

-white lightning- *moonshine*

[1] "Colours and Emotions in English" , Anthropology of Colour, Interdisciplinary Multilevel Modelling, p. 348

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-white magic- *magic used for good purposes*

-bleed **white-** *pay out so much money that one is left peniless*

-as **whit**e as sheet- *extremely pale*

-with **white** anger/fear-*very angry*

-white collar jobs – office jobs whereas **blue collar** is a term used to refer to manual workers.

Blue is very widely used colour for suggesting the sky, air, cold, emotional distance or spirituality. Further there are some expressions with blue:

-feeling **blue**- *be depressed*

-sing the **blues-** *be sad, melancholic*

-argue/talk till you're **blue** in the face- *to argue/to talk about something a lot, but without achieving what you want*

-between the devil and the deep **blue** sea- *to be in a very difficult position*

-blue with cold-*someone who looks extremely cold*

-burn with a low **blue** flame- *to be in the most extreme stage of intoxication*

-to make a **blue** fist of- (slang) – *make a dismal failure of*

Here are some expressions containing "red":

-to roll the **red** carpet- *to give a special treatment to a visitor*

-to be caught **red**-handed- *as he was doing something bad*

-red-faced- *be embarrassed or angry*

-to give somebody **the red** light- *not togive the permission to do something*

-go/turn **red**- *your face becomes a bright pink colour especially because you are embarrassed or angry*

-like **a red** rag to a bull- *very likely to make someone angry or upset*

-see **red**- *to become very angry*

-red cent- *every single money*

-red herring- *something designed to deceive, a false clue given to mislead pursuers.*

-red ink-*lose or indobtedness, as the total of loss is written in red ink, while the profit is written in black.*

-red-letter day- *any memorable or important occasion*

-red light district- *a district of brothels*

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-red neck- *American southerner known for his red neck presumbly working in the sun*

-like a red flag to a bull- it makes someone very angry, as you probably know, bulls get angry when you wave a red flag in front of them.

-red *tape – means bureaucratic delay in getting the things done*

-paint the town **red-** *celebrate, indulge in riotous fun through a visit to nightclubs, cabarets, etc.*

(Rom. A o face lată)

-red sky at night, sailors delight- *red sky in the morning sailors take warning*

Green can be associated envy with jealousy, lacking of experience, looking very pale:

-to be **green** around (or about) the gills- to look pale

-pretty **green**- *young and lacking experience*

look a bit **green**-*look pale and ill*

-green with envy- *wishing very much that you had something that someone else has*

-to get the **green** light-*get permission to do something*

-the grass is **greener** on the other side-people think they would be happier if things were different

-to have green **fingers**- *to be good at making plants grow.*

Brown colour appears in the following expressions:

-to do somebody **brown** (slang)- *to deceive somebody*

-to do something up **brown** (slang)- *do thorouhgly*

-browned off- *very annoyed by something*

-in a **brown** study- *absent minded*

-to get **browned** off- *annoyed*

-brownie points- *to make someone have a good opinion of you*

-brown nose- *to try to make someone in authority like you by being very nice to them*

-to be in a **brown** study- *completely absorbed in thoughouts*

Further I have found the following expressions with “purple”, “gold”, “crimson”, “grey”, “ruddy”, “silver”, “olive”:

-**purple** with rage- *colour of the face caused by anger*

-**purple** patch- *time when you are very successful*

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-heart of **gold**- *very kind*

-**golden** boy/girl- *someone who is very popular or successful*

-**gold** digger- *an attractive woman who uses her look to get money from rich people*

The pot of **gold** at the end of rainbow- fantasy, dream

-somebody is **golden**- *used to say that someone is in a very good situation and is likely to be successful*

-go/turn/flush/turn **crimson**- *your face becomes red because you are very angry or embarrassed*

-Don wearing the **gray**- *become a Confederate soldier*

-**grey** matter-*your intelligence/brain*

-**grey** face-*looking pale because you are tired, frightened or ill*

-**the grey**- *boring and unattractive*

-**grey** area- *used to talk about a situation in which something is not clearly a particular thing, so the people are not sure how to deal with it.*

-**ruddy** cheeks- *face that looks pink and healthy*

-**ruddy**- *bloody* (used to emphasize when you are annoyed with something or someone)

-**silver** bullet- *something that solves a difficult situation very quickly and easily*

- to be born with a **silver** spoon in your mouth-*born in a rich family*

-every cloud has a **silve**r lining- *there is something good even in a situation that seem very sad or difficult*

-**silver** surfer- *old person who uses the Internet*

-**silver**-tongued- *good at talking to people and making them like for, persuading them to do what you want*

-**silvery** voice- *very pleasant and musical voice*

-**olive** skin/complexion-skin *colour that is typical of people from countries such as Greece, Italy or Turkey*

- to extend offer/hold out an **olive** branch- *to do/to say something in order to show that you want to end an argument with someone.*

-in the **pink**- *in good health*

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Yellow dog contract- *an employer-employee illegal contract by which a person being hired is first made to agree that he will join no labour union while employed*

Yellow livered- cowardly

-fair-haired (or **blue**-eyed, **golden**-haired, **white** haired) – *boy/ man who is most favoured by those in power, one who is expected to be elevated to the top position*

-see life in **black or white**- *have a narrow, simplistic moralistic or social views*

-see something through **rose**-coloured glasses- *put everything in a good light, be always cheerful*

-shrinking **violet**-*very shy, withdrawn person*

-swear **black is white**- *be a chronic liar, falsify the truth*

2. Similes using colours

Wikberg[2] defined similes as "a figurative expression used to make an explicit comparison of two unlike things by means of the prepositions like, as….as, or the conjunctions as, as if, as though" . Here is a list of idiomatic phrases/expressions included similes as well:

-black as coal (completely black)

-black as ink (completely black)

-black as hell (completely black)

-black as devil (completely black)

-black as pitch (completely black)

- as black as a crow/ raven/a raven's wing

-as red as a lobster

-as red as a turkey-cock

-red as a beetroot (someone's face when embarrassed)

-red as a beet (someone's face when embarrassed)

-white as a snow

-white as a chalk

-as white as a sheet (when someone's face is white due to fear)

-green as grass

-as yellow as a crow's foot

[2] Wikberg, Kay "Phrasal Similes in NBC", p.156

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- as brown as a berry

- as green as goosebery

3. Conclusion

This paper stems from a desire to comprehend the symbolic connotation of colours as they are reflected in English language. Languages are living organisms and therefore new words and phrases are coming to life and this process is the most obvious in idiomatic expressions. This article is intended to be an attempt of representing a learning material which may facilitate the access to the English which is a language rich in idioms. Without them English would lose variety and humor, especially in speaking.

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