Bulletin of the *Transilvania* University of Braşov
Series IV: Philology and Cultural Studies • Vol. 6 (55) No.1 - 2013

A CORPUS STUDY OF THE UKRAINIAN COLOUR NAME *HOLUBYI*

Vasyl STARKO[1]

Abstract: *In cognitive linguistics, the categorization of colour is studied through the reconstruction of colour concepts. Specifically, the goal is to discover the points of reference used by a linguistic community as prototypes of different colours. The colour system of Ukrainian is special in that it has as many as three "basic" words that together cover the range of the English* blue*. This paper presents the results of a corpus study of one of them,* holubyi *'sky-blue'. On this basis, the referential model of this colour name is reconstructed as consisting of the dominant reference point (a clear sky) and secondary ones.*

Key words: *colour, categorization, prototype, corpus.*

1. Introduction

A seminal work (Berlin & Kay) published in 1969 triggered an avalanche of research in the domain of colour names. Since then, researchers have generally divided into two large camps: objectivists, who believe that the meaning of colour names is ultimately the segments of the visible spectrum that they pick out, and relativists, or more exactly conceptualists, who are convinced that the semantics of colour resides in the corresponding concepts employed in language and cognition. The study of these concepts involves discovering points of reference (or exemplars, or prototypes) that determine the use of colour names and their connotations. They function as principles of colour categorization in that they define the range of colour categories. Anna Wierzbicka, a prominent representative of the latter approach, made a convincing case for using this kind of conceptual analysis of colour names in her works (Wierzbicka 1996; Wierzbicka 2006). To her, the main objective is to reveal the reference points on which speakers explicitly or implicitly rely in their use of colour names. A search for such reference points of Ukrainian colour names has been undertaken in a number of studies (Javorska 1999; Javorska 2000; Martinek 2004; Martinek 2005; Martinek 2006; Starko 2013a; Starko 2013b). Some of their results are discussed below.

Candidates for the status of reference points are primarily culturally salient natural objects or artifacts which have a specific colour as a permanent characteristic. In linguistic studies, a key to finding them is an analysis of lexical collocation patterns (Javorska 1999; Javorska 2000; Starko 2013b). Linguists also make use of free association experiments (Martinek 2004; Martinek 2005; Martinek 2006; Starko 2013a) and rely on trained introspection (Wierzbicka 1996; Wierzbicka 2006).

[1] Applied Linguistics Department, Lesia Ukrainka Eastern European National University, Lutsk, Ukraine.

BDD-A20112 © 2013 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.239 (2026-11-05 04:28:50 UTC)

Wierzbicka (Wierzbicka 1996, 309-314) analyzes a series of words in different languages that roughly correspond to the English *light blue* and argues that they are all related to the concept of sunlit sky but in different ways. In particular, the Polish *błękitny* (a cognate of the Ukrainian *blakytnyi*) has a more exclusive semantic association with the colour of the sky than *niebieski*, which is, ironically, derived from *niebo* 'sky'. Wierzbicka assigns an additional reference point to *blue*: naturally occurring bodies of water (seas, lakes, etc.) especially if looked at from afar. The Russian *goluboj*, which is a cognate of the Ukrainian *holubyi*, is, she argues, directly likened to the sky in broad daylight and contrasted with *sinij* as the colour of the sky in the absence of full daylight, while *blue* is not specified in this respect and can cover both lighter and darker shades. Wierzbicka's observations, based on trained introspection and informal questioning of informants, appear to be valid. They would be even more convincing if ample linguistic evidence were presented to support them.

Galina Javorska (Javorska 2000) has studied Ukrainian colour names and has come to the conclusion, on the basis of textual evidence, that the Ukrainian *syniy* has a dominant reference point (the sky) and a secondary one (sea), while *holubyi* has the prototypical reference to natural bodies of water and secondary to the sky and *blakytnyi* is associated with the colour of the sky on a sunny day. Javorska observes that *holubyi* readily combines with designations of bodies of water but not with *nebo* 'sky' (unlike the other two colour names). She believes (but does not provide any textual evidence) that *blakytnyi* and *syniy* refer to bodies of water as viewed from an elevated distant vantage point when they appear to be reflecting the sky. In contrast, *holubyi* can refer to water viewed from up close and may involve a shade of grey, which enables its application to distant, misted-over objects. *Holubyi* also tends to co-occur with artifacts, while *blakytnyi* with natural objects. The typical connotations of *holubyi* are sorrow, grief, nostalgia and cold, which, Javorska argues, can be neatly explained by its prototypical reference to water.

2. Objectives

The most remarkable feature of the Ukrainian colour system is that it has as many as three "basic" colour names that together cover the range of the English *blue*, viz. *holubyi*, *blakytnyi* and *syniy*. The first two are very similar and roughly correspond to light blue or sky-blue, while the third one designates dark blue. It is the first one, *holubyi*, that is the object of consideration here. Our study is motivated by the need to furnish more substantial and detailed evidence to either corroborate or disprove earlier conclusions regarding the colour name in question. We also need to reconsider what kind of referential model of colour needs to be reconstructed. We believe that the study of colour concepts should, among other things, focus on reconstructing an entire referential model which may involve multiple reference point with different ranks of importance. It may also include specific vantage points or circumstances under which a particular object is viewed. The internal and external connections also need to be shown. This type of model can better account for variability and dynamics in colour designations.

3. Material and Methods

The corpus consists of four subcorpora (fiction, poetry, informative prose and folklore) of which the first two have provided the bulk of data for our research.

BDD-A20112 © 2013 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.239 (2026-11-05 04:28:50 UTC)

After retrieving all occurrences of *holubyi*, collocation and quantitative analysis was performed. Collocation analysis was aimed at establishing the typical collocates of *holubyi*, i.e., words designating objects it most frequently applies to, with an eye to establishing prototypical references. A reference point, e.g. natural bodies of water, can be expressed by a variety of lexemes, for example *river*, *lake*, *brook*, etc., which means that all contexts containing such references had to be grouped together. Such groups are the textual expression of reference points. Several such classes were thus established, while a number of contexts could not be classified. After this kind of conceptual grouping was completed, we performed quantitative analysis by calculating the proportion of contexts grouped under each reference point relative to the number of hits for *holubyi* in each subcorpus. For example, contexts grouped under 'natural bodies of water' account for 6% of all uses of *holubyi* in the subcorpus of fiction. This figure was interpreted as the contribution of this reference point to the entire reference model of *holubyi*. The underlying idea is that the more salient a reference point is the greater its contribution. We based our final estimates on the data drawn from subcorpus of fiction, because it is by far the biggest of the four, with the subcorpus of poetry playing an auxiliary part. Textual analysis was also carried out to identify connotations conveyed by *holubyi* and conceptual links between its reference points and other groups of objects. *Holubyi* occurs a total of 478 times in the corpus: 281 in fiction, 175 in poetry and 22 in informative prose.

4. Results and Discussion

In the subcorpus of informative prose, which consists, according to our observations, predominantly of newspaper texts, two uses of *holubyi* stand out: associations with the colours of political forces and their supporters (1) and homosexual men (2):

(1) *v tradyciyno "holubykh" rehionakh* 'in traditionally "blue" regions', i.e., in regions that support the Party of Regions which has blue and white as its party colours;

(2) *holubi khloptsi*, lit. 'blue boys', i.e., homosexual men (a common designation of obscure origin).

Other collocates occur only once: *nebo* 'sky', *more* 'sea', *mriya* 'dream', *palyvo* 'fuel' (i.e., natural gas) and *vkraplennia* 'inclusion'. Curiously, expressions like *holubi tumany* 'blue mists' immediately betray inserts of the belles-lettres style in informative texts.

In the subcorpus of poetry, *holubyi* dominates as the colour of the sky (11% of all occurrences in the subcorpus):

(3) *holubi pozhezhi holubykh nebes* 'the light blue fires of the blue skies';

(4) *a nebo v vikni – nache bil holube* 'and the sky in the window is light blue as pain';

(5) *na holubykh po-tsarsky nebesakh* 'in the royal blue skies'.

A mass of air illuminated by the sun and filling the space between the earth and the sky is also distinctly conceptualized as *holubyi* (8%) and expressed through a variety of lexemes, such as *prostir* 'expanse', *dal* 'distance', *padil* 'a small valley', *ranok* 'morning', *nadvechiria* 'twilight', *krai* 'land', obriy 'horizon' and *den* 'day':

(6) *v prypoli nadvechiria holubim* 'at the light blue edge of twilight';

(7) *dali neosiazhno holubi* 'the limitless light blue expanses';

(8) *i syn'-rika i holuba dolyna* 'both the blue river and the light blue valley'.

In one instance (9), eyes are likened to "a light blue day" by virtue of colour. Such

BDD-A20112 © 2013 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.239 (2026-11-05 04:28:50 UTC)

similes point to the ability of proficient speakers to make explicit the conceptual links between the reference points of colour names and other objects of the same colour:

(9) *v holubykh, yak den, moyikh ochakh* 'in my eyes that are light blue as the day'.

A group of contexts in which objects that reflect or issue cold bluish light accounts for 7% of the total count for the subcorpus of poetry, for example:

(10) *plomin holubyi* 'a light blue ray';

(11) *zori holubi* 'light blue stars';

(12) *iskrinnia snihopadu holuboho* 'the sparkling of light blue falling snow'.

This group is a source of metaphorical uses some of which express the idea of coldness:

(13) *I chuttia rozpashili moi, mov zapaleni ochi, Studyt Vasha dusha – fioletovym i holubym*, 'And my glowing feelings, like inflamed eyes, Are cooled down by your soul – with purple and light blue'.

In the subcorpus of poetry, *holubyi* refers much less frequently to eyes (3%), bodies of water (3%), mist, haze or smoke (3%). Apart from nostalgia (example 14) and peace (18), other connotations of *holubyi* in poetic usage are negative, such as pain (4), sorrow (15), bitterness (16) and anxiety (17):

(14) *I ya zaplakav nad lymanom, De holubym smiyavsia ptakh!* 'And I wept over the estuary Where a light blue bird laughed';

(15) *stoit holuboiu zhurboiu osin morska holuba* 'a light blue seaside autumn is standing as light blue sorrow';

(16) *holubyi povniavyi zhal* 'a light blue bubble of sorrow';

(17) *v yikhnyi holubiy tryvozi* 'in their light blue anxiety';

(18) *upokorenyi spokoievi holubomu* 'resigned to light blue peace'.

In imaginative prose, the most salient point of reference for *holubyi* is a clear sky (10%):

(19) *nebo holube i chyste* 'a light blue clear sky';

(20) *rozislalysia neba holubi dali* 'the light blue expanse of the sky have spread out';

(21) *v holubu bezodniu neba* 'into the light blue abyss of the sky';

(22) *v holubomu zeniti* 'in the light blue zenith'.

Naturally occurring bodies of water make up the next most significant point of reference (6%). Contexts often refer to sunlit, limpid water:

(23) *voda holuba, prosvitchasta* 'light blue, transparent water';

(24) *v holubykh, yak dniprova voda, kashketakh* 'in caps that were light blue as the waters of the Dnieper';

(25) *v holubomu siayvi okeaniv* 'in the light blue shimmer of the oceans';

(26) *nad holuboiu krynychkoiu* 'over a light blue well';

(27) *Toi Dunai ... – chystyi, holubyi vid neba* 'That Danube River … pure, light blue from the sky'.

Only three contexts containing *holube more* 'light blue sea' appear in the subcorpus. Next by the order of frequency is a heterogeneous group of objects reflecting or issuing cold light (5%), for example:

(28) *u holubykh snihakh* 'in light blue snow';

(29) *kriz nich holubu* 'through the light blue night';

(30) *kriz zir prominnia holube* 'through the light blue rays of the stars';

(31) *koly vse nebo vuryie v holubykh spalakhakh* 'when the entire sky is swirling with light blue flashes'.

Such collocations as *holuba nich* are about the visual effect of moonlight, sometimes light reflected by snow:

(32) *shchozymy, shuhaiuchy v snihakh z zapalenoiu zvizdoiu vhori, nesly my kriz nich holubu ... svoiu koliadnytsku radist* 'every winter, as we dashed in the snow with a lit star up above, we carried our joy of carolling through the light blue night'.

BDD-A20112 © 2013 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.239 (2026-11-05 04:28:50 UTC)

The group of expressions designating a light blue shade of fog, haze, smoke, etc. accounts for 4% of occurrences, for example:

(33) *v holubomu marevi* 'in the light blue haze';

(34) *holubyi serpanok prozorosti* 'the light blue haze of transparency';

(35) *v holubomu tumani* 'in the light blue fog'.

Somewhat less numerous are contexts referring to a mass of air that produces the visual effect of light blue (3%):

(36) *holubi khvyli chystoho povitria spadaly iz zelenykh skhyliv* 'light blue waves of clear air rolled down the green slopes';

(37) *holube pivkolo hir* 'a light blue semicircle of mountains';

(38) *ushchelyny, napovneni, yak tse buvaie v horakh, holubymy tiniamy* 'ravines filled, as it happens in the mountains, with light blue shadows'.

Holubyi is more often used to refer to homosexual men (3%) than *blakytnyi*. Although this adjective quite often describes the colour of clothes, we have not observed a marked tendency for *holubyi* to be applied to artifacts and *blakytnyi* to natural objects. This is contrary to the conclusion which Javorska (2000) drew on what evidently was a much smaller sample of contexts.

Unlike *blakytnyi*, which is strongly suggestive of heaven, divinity and related things (Starko 2013b), *holubyi* barely shows an association of this kind.

Connotations of *holubyi* in fiction include peace (39), pensiveness (40) and nostalgia (41):

(39) *holubyi spokiy neba* 'the light blue peace of the sky';

(40) *peredosinnie nebo povyte bulo v holubu zadumu* 'the pre-autumnal sky was engrossed in light blue thoughtulfness';

(41) *yak v oti davni holubi litni nochi* 'as in those distant light blue summer nights'.

5. Conclusions

Contrary to Javorska (2000), who suggested that natural bodies of water are the primary reference point for *holubyi*, while the sky is a secondary prototype, our corpus study has revealed that their roles are reversed. The contribution of the sky is 10%, while bodies of water figure in 6% of contexts in fiction. Moreover, there are additional minor reference points: a mass of air filling the expanse between the sky and the earth (3%) and air saturated with moisture or having diminished transparency (4%). Objects with a cold shine or light are mentioned in 5% of contexts, but they make up a highly heterogeneous collection of objects which hardly qualifies for membership in the reference model. The data drawn from subcorpus of poetry is, in general, consistent with the findings based on imaginative prose.

The connotations of tranquility and peacefulness are due to the association with the sky. The negative connotations of pain, sorrow, anxiety, etc. do not have a clear connection with any reference point of *holubyi*. *Holubyi* also reveals a distinct connotation of nostalgia, but it is not, pace Javorska (2000), linked to water. Rather, the connection is with a speaker gazing into distance, which corresponds to the reference point of a vast expanse of air between the sky and the earth.

A number of similes and comparisons between objects on the basis of colour (for example, day–eyes, smoke–eyes, sky–distance, sky–expanse, sky–abyss and river–sky) are evidence of internal and external connections between the reference points of *holubyi* and other objects.

In the future, it will be interesting to expand and refine these findings about the referential model of *holubyi* using linguistic data collected by other methods. Overall, combining corpus

BDD-A20112 © 2013 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.239 (2026-11-05 04:28:50 UTC)

studies with other types of analysis in line with the principle of converging evidence may yield the most accurate results.

References

1. *A Corpus of the Ukrainian Language*. Available at: http://www.mova.info/corpus.aspx. Accessed: 03-04-2013.
2. Berlin, B., Kay, P.: *Basic Color Terms: Their Universality and Evolution*. Berkeley. University of California Press, 1969.
3. Javorska, G.: *Movni kontsepty kolioru* (do problemy katehoryzatsiyi). In: Movoznavstvo 2-3 (1999): 43-50.
4. Javorska, G.: *O podstawowych nazwach barw w jezyku ukrainskim*. In: *Studia z semantyki porownawczej*, Gregorczykowa Renata and Krystyna Waszakowa (Eds.). Warszawa. Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Warszawkiego, 2000, p. 29-38.
5. Martinek, S.: *Kontseptualizatsiya zelenoho kolioru* (za rezultatamy asotsiatyvnoho eksperymentu). In: *Movni i kontseptualni kartyny svitu*, Vol. 10. Bielova Alla et al. (Eds.) Kyiv. Kyivskyi Natsionalnyi Universytet, 2004, 404-412.
6. Martinek, S.: *Pomarancze i rewolucja czyli zmiany w kategoryzacji barw podstawowych.* In: Etnoligwistyka 18 (2006): 295-310.
7. Martinek, S.: *ZHOVTYI: prototypna referentsiya.* In: Uchenyie zapiski Tavricheskogo nats. un-ta im. V.I. Vernadskogo. Seriya "Filologiya*"* 18**.**2 (2005): 75-81.
8. Starko, V.: *Koloratyvy "blakytnyi, holubyi i syniy" u movniy svidomosti ukraintsiv"*. In: Naukovi zapysky Nizhynskoho derzhavnoho universytetu im. M. Hoholia. Filolohichni nauky, 2013a (in print).
9. Starko, V.: *Korpusne doslidzhennia kolioronazvy blakytnyi*. In: Naukovyi visnyk Skhidnoyevropeiskoho natsinalnoho universytetu imeni Lesi Ukrainky. Seriya *Filolohichni nauky. Movoznavstvo*, 2013b (in print).
10. Wierzbicka, A.: *Semantic Primes and Universals*. Oxford. Oxford University Press, 1996.
11. Wierzbicka, A.: *The semantics of colour: A new paradigm*. In: *Progress in Colour Studies*, Biggam Carole P. and Christian J. Kay (Eds.). Amsterdam. John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2006, p. 1-24.

BDD-A20112 © 2013 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.239 (2026-11-05 04:28:50 UTC)