COLOR NAMES. FROM DENOMINATION TO SYMBOL

Cristina Radu-Golea

Assist. Prof., PhD, University of Craiova

Abstract: Color names and definitions have been the topic of many scientific papers (and not only), starting with those of the British scientist Isaac Newton. The notion of "color" refers to two different phenomena: the subjective sensation of color and the possibility of an object to appear coloured. The differences between colors and nuances and their classification depend, to a large extent, on the culture of the onlookers. All over the world, beyond their concrete properties, colors are involved in a multitude of symbolic significations, very different form one culture to another, and, consequently, far from being universal; therefore, colors are used according to cultural conventions and cultures.

Keywords: color, nuance, lexicon, signification, culture

Scientists have always been interested in the chromatic spectrum, but a general theory on colors has not been elaborated yet. In his study *How Culture Conditions the Colours We Use*, Umberto Eco draws attention on an undeniable fact: "Colour is not an easy matter!". Therefore, for physicists, color is a particular wavelength; for chemists, it is linked to pigments; biologists are interested in colors as they exist in the living world, mineralogists study the variety of nuances in the inorganic world. Unlike all the above mentioned, philosophers, starting with Aristotle, have been interested in the "color spectacle". In their turn, physicians and psychologists[1] have made experiments in order to solve the mysteries of the mechanism of perceptive response to the chromatic effect.

[1] *Cf. Mihai Golu, Aurel Dicu, Culoare şi comportament/ Color and Behavior, Craiova, 1974; George Lakoff, Women, Fire and Dangerous Things; What Categories Reveal about Mind, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 1978; Tony Belpaeme, Factors Influencing the Origins of Color Categories, Artificial Intelligence Laboratory, Brussel, 2002; Barbara Saunders, Revisiting Basic Color Terms, in "Journal of Experimental Psychology", 1993, p. 10-20.*

Arhipelag XXI Press, Tîrgu Mureş, ISBN: 978-606-8624-03-7

BDD-V3960 © 2016 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 22:56:48 UTC)

Linguists, anthropologists[2] and historians have also joined the effort of answering the question: *What is color*?

In socio-human sciences color is a topic of confrontation and debate among different orientations. Colors separate the areas of discontinuity in the surrounding world, so that chromatic differences provide an important instrument of classifying and ordering (in all the languages of the world, the vocabulary of colors has a special importance). A question arises: what is the role played by nature and culture in categorizing and naming colors? According to their answer, psychologists, linguists and anthropologists make up two distinct categories: the evolutionist-universal category and the culturalist-evolutionist category. According to the evolutionist opinions, color names and even their perception have evolved throughout the history of the mankind. Color language and color perception are one and the same thing, and language differences reflect perception differences. Some of these theories originate in the conclusions of the classicist William Gladstone on Homer's scarcity and vagueness of color terms; for instance, the term *glaukos* means "grey", "green", "blue", "yellow" and "brown"[3]. That led to the conclusion that Greeks could not distinguish these colors. It was said that the individuals belonging to premodern societies, primitive or antique, were not endowed with certain cognitive abilities, or, even more, they had a different structure of the ocular apparatus and, consequently, they could not distinguish colors as "evolved", "civilized" contemporary people do.

In 1969, two American researchers – the linguist Paul Kay and the anthropologist Brent Berlin – relaunched the debate on the universality and evolution of the manner of naming colors. Their book, *Basic Color Terms*: *Their Universality and Evolution*, is based on the lexicographic data gathered from the speakers of twenty languages and also on the data about another seventy-eight languages mentioned in literature. The authors claim that color terminology evolves from a simple set, based only on two categories: light and dark (as in Dani, spoken in New Guinea); then, new words are added in a fixed order, till the set is complete, comprising eleven basic colors: *white*, *black*, *red*, *green*, *yellow*, *blue*,

[2] *"Some anthropologists argue that languages with a large color lexicon should be found in places with considerable socio-economic stratification and occupational specialization. Other social scientists have offered a biological explanation. They note that humans with dark eyes and dark skin are less able to make certain color distinctions than those with lighter pigmentation. Therefore, languages spoken by dark-eyed, dark-skinned peoples are likely to have small color lexicons. Because such people tend to live near the Equator, there should be a relationship between the latitude and the number of basic color terms. Melvin Ember examined these competing hypotheses cross-culturally (...). He concluded that the cross-cultural evidence supported both the explanations." (Saunders, 1993, p. 13)*

[3] *Cf.* Gladstone, William Ewart, Studies on Homer and the Homeric Age (3 vol.), Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1858.

Arhipelag XXI Press, Tîrgu Mureş, ISBN: 978-606-8624-03-7

BDD-V3960 © 2016 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 22:56:48 UTC)

brown,orange, *pink*, *violet*, *grey*. For instance, in those languages where there are three terms, besides *white* and *black*, there is obligatorily one designating the color *red*,then, in those languages which have a more evolved color vocabulary, other terms are added progressively and cumulatively, always in the same order. Hence, all languages would submit to the same universal law, and as they evolve, they acquire new terms. The process is doubled by technological evolutionism: the more "advanced" the speakers of a language, the more they need to to distinguish colors and, consequently, more words appear to designate them. But there is always a universal biological constraint in passing from a stage to another.

Ever since 1900, the universalist point of view has been criticized by the representatives of culturalism, a theory appeared in American cultural anthropology. According to the famous Sapir – Whorf hypothesis, the perception of colors is oriented by language. The color vocabulary influences the perception of colors. It means that one can identify only the colors for which there are designating terms. For instance, a man could distinguish only *white*, *black* and *red*, not because only these three colors existed in reality, but because in that culture there are only terms for these colors.

Culturalists insist on the fact that there are no "natural" divisions of the chromatic spectrum and that the separation of the continuum represented by chromatic experience is made by each culture.

The research in linguistic anthropology has insisted on the fact that chromatic terminology is extremely rich in some languages, while in others is minimal. In Africa, Oceania and Asia the chromatic spectrum consists of three basic units: *white*, *black* and *red*[4]. Some languages multiply the nuances to be distinguished, others reduce their number. The Ndembu population in Zambia uses the same word to designate the colors *blue* and *black*, and also *yellow – orange – red*, respectively, but this does not mean the color vocabulary is scarce, because the chromatic stimulus is often designated differently, by means of an emotion or the object or person having the chromatic property referred to. Therefore, in evaluating the chromatic vocabulary one should not be misled by the

[4] *"This very old chromatic system based on the three poles had a strong impact on medieval literature (mainly epic poems, but also chivalric romances), in toponymy and anthroponymy, in fairy tales, fables and folklore, in general. The story of Little Red Riding Hood (...) is centered on three colors – red, white, black: a girl dressed in red is carrying a pot with white butter for her grandmother dressed in black (or for a black wolf). The same chromatic circulation is to be found in Snow-White ..." (Pastoureau, 2006, p. 70) Cf. Byrne, Hilbert, 1997, p. 402-404.*

Arhipelag XXI Press, Tîrgu Mureş, ISBN: 978-606-8624-03-7

BDD-V3960 © 2016 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 22:56:48 UTC)

criterion represented by the number of words that denote a color explicitly. The expressive ways of designating nuances are to be considered, too.

For instance, in the language of the Maori in New Zealand there are about three hundred terms designating nuances; other parametres characterising colors are introduced: saturation, hue, brightness, contrast, texture. For instance, the vocabulary and perception of the color *red* depends on the exact context of its manifestation, that involving the oppositions warm – cold, dry – moist, soft – hard. Thus, a room can be decorated in matching colors, i.e. in nuances of red: walls, the carpets, the curtains, all will be assimilated to the category "red", irrespective of the fabric/material the objects are made of.

Moreover, in some African cultures, chromatic vocabulary is differently expressed, depending on sex and age. To Japonese, what matters is brightness: they can distinguish lexically more nuances of white, from a matt nuance to bright white, nuances which are often imperceptible to the European eye. It is also known the richness of the Eschimo vocabulary referring to snow.

Chromatic sensitivity differs from one culture to another – colors are never neutral, they have a symbolic "load", conveying social codes and ideological values. The historian Michel Pastoureau[5] viewed the histoy of colors as a surprising one. To the French researcher, "to see" a color is not only a biological and physiological perception, but a much more complex phenomenon, acquiring cultural-historical valences. At present, man is living in a different sensory universe, his visual perception registers more chromatic stimuli, compared to the people in premodern societies. Contemporary ways of classifying and defining colors don't coincide with those pertaining to the near or remote past.

People's relating to colors is in a continuous reorganization. For instance, the significance of the blue and red dots on bathroom taps would not have been understood in the past. Moreover, *green* would not be associated to the idea of nature. Until the 18th century, nature had been defined by the four basic elements, i.e. water, air, fire and earth, and definitely not by the color *green* as today. The association *green* – nature is due to Romanticism.

[5] See Michel Pastoureau, *Albastru*: *istoria unei culori/Blue: the history of a color*, Chişinău, Cartier Publishing House, 2006; Michel Pastoureau, *Dictionnaire des couleurs de notre temps*: *symbolique et société*, C. Bonneton éd., 1999.

Arhipelag XXI Press, Tîrgu Mureş, ISBN: 978-606-8624-03-7

BDD-V3960 © 2016 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 22:56:48 UTC)

For a long time, till the discovery of synthetic pigments, green natural pigments were extremely volatile in natural fabrics, whereas inorganic ones (for instance, the copper oxide) were poisonous (for instance, Paris green). The whole symbolism of *green* has been constantly centered on this unstable character.

Symbolically, *green* has been associated to games, money and hazard, it has been the color of buffoons, clowns and hunters. In the 16th century Venice casinos, game tables were always green. It was not by hazard that the color of the first printed dollar bills in 1792 was green. As far as *red* is concerned, brides' dresses were red till the 19th century. It was a way of symbolizing feminity and of emphasizing the exceptional character of the moment, because, generally, the intense-red pigment was very expensive, and, consequently, accessible only to the rich.

Black was also an expensive color and difficult to obtain chemically, that is why it was the privilege of princely elegance and of authority (magistrates, priests). The boom of industrial pigments production, begun around 1850, has led to the "democratization" of colors, the diversification of the chromatic range and the appearance of nuances impossible to obtain in the past.

White and *black* haven't always been associated so insistently as it happens at present. Till the 16-th century, chess pieces were *white* and *red*,like in India, the place of origin of the game. The identity of the binom *white-black* was better outlined by the bichromy of the printed page (black letters on a white page), and then by the invention of photography. Nowadays, *white* and *black* are considered non-colors or achromatic colors; in the past, in various cultural spaces, especially in Europe, they were basic colors. In Japan, when color television was introduced, the term designating it was not a literal translation, the syntagm used being *natural television*.

In conclusion, the notion of *color* can have a multitude of senses. From magic to painting, from crafts to medicine, fashion and architecture, colors are an inseparable part of the profound dimension of the human being.

BIBLOGRAPHY:

Belpaeme, Tony, *Factors Influencing the Origins of Color Categories*, Artificial Intelligence Laboratory, Brussel, 2002.

Botiş, Ioan, *O istorie antropologică a culorilor*, Muzeul Judeţean de Artă, „Centrul Artistic Baia Mare", Baia Mare, 2008.

Arhipelag XXI Press, Tîrgu Mureş, ISBN: 978-606-8624-03-7

BDD-V3960 © 2016 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 22:56:48 UTC)

Byrne, Alex, Hilbert, David R., *Readings on Color*: *The Science of Color*, MIT Press, 1997.

Gladstone, William Ewart, *Studies on Homer and the Homeric Age* (3 vol.), Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1858.

Golu, Mihai, Dicu, Aurel, *Culoare şi comportament*, Craiova, 1974.

Lakoff, George, *Women, Fire and Dangerous Things*; *What Categories Reveal about Mind*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 1978.

Pastoureau, Michel, *Albastru*: *istoria unei culori*, Chişinău, Editura Cartier, 2006.

Pastoureau, Michel, *Dictionnaire des couleurs de notre temps*: *symbolique et société*, C. Bonneton éd., 1999.

Saunders, Barbara, *Revisiting Basic Color Terms*, in "Journal of Experimental Psychology", 1993, p. 10-20.

*** *The Wordsworth Dictionary of phrase and Fable*, Wordsworth Editions Ltd., Hertfordshire, 1993.

Arhipelag XXI Press, Tîrgu Mureş, ISBN: 978-606-8624-03-7

BDD-V3960 © 2016 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 22:56:48 UTC)