

## CONCEPTUAL METAPHOR IN RUSSIAN: COLOR AND EMOTION DOMAINS

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### Abstract

This article examines the intersection of color and emotion in Russian conceptual metaphor, drawing on lexical data from *Metaphors in Russian — Animals, Colors, Emotions, Sports* (Bobrova, Kisselev & Lantolf, 2018). Using Conceptual Metaphor Theory (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980) as its analytical framework, the study investigates how color terms in Russian encode abstract cultural values and how the four emotions catalogued in the dictionary — anger, happiness, love, and sadness — recruit multiple structurally distinct source domains. A central finding is that the two domains are not independent: red, white, black, and green each appear within emotion metaphors as markers of observable physiological states, creating a cross-domain color-emotion interface grounded in the visible bodily correlates of arousal. At the same time, culturally specific elaborations — particularly the density of black-color illegality metaphors and the Orthodox-inflected anger expressions — demonstrate that embodied universals are always shaped by historical and cultural experience. The article concludes with brief reflections on the implications for advanced Russian language pedagogy.

**Keywords:** *conceptual metaphor, Russian, color metaphor, emotion metaphor, cognitive linguistics, embodiment, cultural variation, Conceptual Metaphor Theory*

All Russian lexical examples cited in this article are drawn from Bobrova, Kisselev & Lantolf (2018). Each Russian term is presented in italics followed by a literal English translation in parentheses and, where relevant, its metaphorical meaning.

Metaphor functions not merely as a decorative element in literature but serves as a fundamental cognitive tool by which individuals comprehend abstract phenomena (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). Within the domain of second language acquisition, specifically for learners of Russian, metaphors pose significant difficulties due to their deep embedding in cultural practices, embodied experiences, and collective historical memory, which resist direct translation. The semantic fields of color and emotion within the Russian lexicon provide an illustrative example of this complexity, as these two domains are interrelated rather than separate. In Russian, color terms operate

simultaneously as independent cultural symbols and as physiologically based conduits into emotional significance, such that a single lexical item can simultaneously convey a cultural concept (e.g., чёрный рынок, “black market”) and a somatic emotional expression (e.g., почернеть от злости, “to turn black from anger”). This duality highlights an embodied rationale grounded in the tangible physiology of emotional experience, while also manifesting culturally specific nuances that transcend purely physiological explanations. This study examines lexical entries related to colors (specifically black, green, grey, pink, red, and yellow) and emotions (including anger, happiness, love, and sadness) as presented in Bobrova, Kisselev, and Lantolf (2018), utilizing the Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) framework for analysis. The principal discovery is a cross-domain interface between color and emotion wherein red, white, black, and green denote distinct physiological-emotional conditions, thereby constituting a coherent and embodied spectrum of emotional perception.

In the Russian lexicon, black serves as the most productive color metaphor, encompassing at least seven distinct conceptual domains. Negative emotions are expressed through phrases like “чёрная злоба” (black malice, meaning intense anger), “чёрный ужас” (black horror, denoting dread), and “чёрная зависть” (black envy, referring to raw envy). Illegality is conveyed by terms such as “чёрный рынок” (black market), “чёрная касса” (black accounts, hidden from taxation), and “чёрная экономика” (black economy). Moral corruption is signified by expressions like “чёрная душа” (black soul), “чёрная измена” (black betrayal), and “очернить кого-либо” (to blacken someone's reputation). Social inferiority is captured in words like “чернорабочий” (common laborer) and “чёрная работа” (menial toil). Uniquely, black also denotes incompleteness in terms such as “черновик” (draft, literally the black version) and “черновой вариант” (draft variant), a connection that lacks a direct English equivalent. Misfortune is represented by “чёрный день” (black day), while sadness appears in phrases like “чёрные мысли” (black thoughts) and “чёрная меланхолия” (black melancholy). The prominence of the illegality cluster likely reflects the significant role of informal economic activity in both Soviet and post-Soviet Russian history, layered upon a more universal metaphor linking darkness with concealment.

Red exhibits a rich polysemy, encompassing both prestige and emotional intensity. The prestige-related meanings — such as “красный ковёр” (red carpet, signifying VIP treatment), “красный день” (red day, meaning holiday), and “красноречивый” (eloquent, literally red-speaking) — Before the word “красный” narrowed to mean simply “red,” it carried the broader meaning of “beautiful” in earlier Russian. This semantic history left a trace in modern usage: “Красная площадь”, conventionally translated as “Red Square,” was originally named for its beauty, not its color. On the other hand, the emotional meanings link the visible physiological

response of flushing to feelings of anger and shame: expressions like “красный от гнева” (red from anger), “багровый от злости” (crimson from anger), and “краснеть от стыда” (to redden from shame) illustrate this connection. It is important to note that the darker shade “багровый” (crimson or dark red) is reserved exclusively for intense emotional states, whereas красный covers both the domain of prestige and milder forms of flushing.

In Russian, the color green conveys a range of emotions and states, including anger “зелёный от злости”, (green with anger), fear “зелёная от страха”, (green with fear), immaturity “зелёный”, (green/immature), permission “зелёный свет”, (green light), and boredom “тоска зелёная”, (green boredom). Grey consistently symbolizes mediocrity: “серый” describes a dull person or life, while “сереть” refers to declining talent. Pink, on the other hand, has a more specific meaning in Russian, associated with naive idealization, resulting in expressions like “розовые очки” (pink glasses, meaning seeing only the positive), “розовые надежды” (pink hopes, referring to unfounded optimism), and “розовая юность” (pink youth, implying naively idealized young age). Yellow represents immaturity “жёлторотый”, (yellow-mouthed, inexperienced), sensationalism “жёлтая пресса”, (yellow press, tabloids), and warning “жёлтая карточка”, (yellow card).

Anger is the most extensively developed emotion in the corpus, organized around twelve distinct source-domain metaphors. “Anger is hot liquid” captures the physiology of arousal: “злость кипит в груди” (anger boils in the chest), “злость клокочет” (anger seethes). “Anger is pressure” leads to bursting and explosion: “злость распирает” (anger bursts somebody), взрываться (to explode). “Anger is fire” generates “погасить злость” (extinguish anger), “испепеляющий гнев” (“incinerating anger”). “Anger is a plant” captures slow-nurtured resentment: “злость вкореняется” (anger takes root), “злость созревает” (anger ripens). “Anger is a reptile” encodes hidden malice: “злость отравляет ядом” (anger poisons with venom), “гадючья злость” (viper's anger). Two entries introduce a religious-cultural layer unique to Russian: “бесноваться” (act as if demonically possessed) and “сатанеть” (behave like Satan), drawing on Orthodox demonology. The culturally specific “доходить до белого каления” (to arrive at white heat) uses metallurgical imagery — white heat being the temperature at which metal becomes malleable — to express maximal anger, with no direct English equivalent.

The happiness domain employs metaphors such as containers, upward orientation, light, and intoxication. The container metaphor depicts happiness as a substance that fills and overflows a person, illustrated by expressions like “счастье переполняет” (happiness overflows somebody), “захлёбываться от счастья” (to choke from joy), and “море счастья затопливает душу” (the sea of happiness floods the soul). The upward-orientation cluster aligns with the cross-linguistic

metaphor “Happiness is up”, seen in phrases like “*на седьмом небе от счастья*” (on the seventh sky from happiness) and “*парить под потолком*” (float under the ceiling). Most notably, the incapacitation cluster equates extreme happiness with cognitive impairment, using expressions such as “*потерять голову от счастья*” (to lose one's head from happiness), “*с ума сходить от счастья*” (go crazy from happiness), and “*умирать от счастья*” (to die from happiness). This framing—portraying intense positive emotions as a form of temporary mental disarray—coexists alongside the more celebratory metaphors, reflecting varying levels of emotional intensity.

Love organizes around fire “*пылать любовью*”, (to be ablaze with love); “*сгорать от любви*”, (to burn from love), war “*завоевывать*”, (to conquer); “*ломать сопротивление*”, (to break resistance), worship “*боготворить*”, (to deify/idolize), and — most elaborately — sickness: *терять голову от любви* (“to lose one's head from love”). The richness of the “*love is sickness*” cluster reflects a Russian literary tradition — from Pushkin to Bulgakov — that valorizes passionate love as productive derangement. Sadness, by contrast, is more compactly organized around immersion and weight: “*погружаться в печаль*” (to immerse into sorrow), “*словно в воду опущенный*” (as if immersed in water, depressed), “*грусть стесняет сердце*” (sadness squeezes the heart). A single synesthetic entry — “*кислый*” (sour, mournful) — maps taste onto mood, echoing cross-linguistic expressions like English “*bitter sadness*”.

The most analytically insightful discovery from examining these two domains together is the consistent overlap at their boundary. The corpus reveals a physiological color spectrum anchored in visible bodily responses to emotional arousal. Red and crimson (*красный, багровый*) correspond to vasodilatory, warm emotions such as fury and shame, where blood rushes to the face. White (*белый*) represents vasoconstrictive, cold emotions like controlled rage and fear, where the face loses color: “*белый от гнева*” (white with anger) and “*побелеть от страха*” (to whiten from fear). Black is associated with the most extreme negative states through verb forms that describe the darkening of the complexion: “*почернеть от негодования*” (to turn black from indignation) and “*почернеть от печали*” (to turn black from sadness). Green indicates the pallid, nausea-like distress linked to intense fear and rage: “*зелёный от страха*”, “*зелёный от злости*”. This spectrum is far from arbitrary; it directly corresponds to known aspects of human physiology: red signifies sympathetic nervous system activation, white reflects vasoconstriction, and green signals extreme physiological distress. At the same time, it is culturally elaborated. For example, the abundance of black-related emotional expressions (*почернеть от злости, чёрная меланхолия, чёрные мысли*) goes beyond what physiology alone would suggest, highlighting black’s prominent cultural role as a symbol of negativity, corruption, and

moral darkness in Russian. This supports Kövecses's framework (2000, 2005), which posits that metaphorical systems are both universal—rooted in shared embodied experience—and culturally specific in their elaboration.

A combined analysis of the color and emotion domains in the Russian metaphorical lexicon reveals a more nuanced understanding than when examining each domain individually. Color terms serve not only as cultural symbols but also as emotion markers rooted in physiological responses, establishing a cross-domain connection where visible changes in bodily color help conceptualize internal emotional states. Among these, the anger domain is the most complex, structured around twelve source-domain metaphors. The happiness domain is remarkable for its association with an incapacitation cluster, while love is characterized by a rich array of sickness and worship metaphors. Sadness uniquely contributes expressions involving water immersion and synesthetic taste metaphors. Additionally, culturally specific elaborations—such as the Orthodox devil-anger metaphors, the metallurgical white-heat expression, the Soviet-era black cluster linked to illegality, and the literary tradition underlying the metaphor “love is sickness”—highlight that even a metaphorical system grounded in physiology is deeply influenced by history and culture. Thus, in Russian, the body communicates through colors, and these colors embody the weight of lived experience.

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