

COLOR TERMINOLOGY AND ITS NATIONAL CHARACTERISTICS

Mirzayeva Dilshoda Ikromjonovna

Fergana State University, PhD, docent

Marufova Sarvinoz Murotjon qizi

Fergana State University Master's degree student

Abstract

Color terminology reflects the way cultures conceptualize reality. Although humans share similar biological perception of color, the linguistic naming, symbolic meaning, and cultural interpretation of colors vary across nations. This article analyzes the linguistic nature of color terms and examines their national characteristics through the works of major scholars such as Berlin & Kay, Lakoff, Wierzbicka, and cultural linguists.

Key words: color terminology, ethnolinguistics, conceptualization, linguistic categorization, cultural semantics, linguistic relativity, linguistic diversity, cross-cultural comparison.

Color terms are essential elements of vocabulary that help speakers describe and classify the visible world. They function not only as labels for visual perception but also as cognitive categories through which people organize their experiences. As noted by **Anna Wierzbicka (1996)**, color words are shaped by the cultural environment in which speakers live [4. P. 86]. They develop through collective experience, everyday practices, religious beliefs, and aesthetic values. For this reason, color terminology cannot be treated as a purely biological or universal phenomenon. Instead, each color term reflects the worldview of a particular linguistic community.

For instance, while the human eye is biologically capable of perceiving the same spectrum of colors, languages differ significantly in how they divide, label, and symbolize this spectrum. Some cultures have only a few basic color terms, while others distinguish dozens of subtle shades. This diversity shows that color naming is tightly connected to a

society's ecological context, material culture, art, mythology, and social norms. In many cultures, colors carry symbolic meanings that influence language use—white may symbolize purity, red may denote power or luck, and green may reflect nature or spirituality. These associations are not universal; they vary according to cultural history.

The linguistic study of color terminology has evolved through several influential theoretical approaches. Each theory highlights a different aspect of how languages classify, name, and conceptualize colors. Together, these perspectives demonstrate that color terms are not merely lexical items but complex cognitive and cultural categories.

The pioneering study *Basic Color Terms: Their Universality and Evolution* (1969) by **Brent Berlin and Paul Kay** marked a significant shift in linguistic and anthropological research. Their work introduced the idea that color naming follows a universal evolutionary pattern [1. P. 46].

They proposed that:

- All languages begin with a limited set of basic color terms (e.g., “black,” “white”).
- Additional color terms emerge in a predictable order (e.g., first “red,” then “green/yellow,” and so on).
- Ultimately, languages may develop up to **11 basic color terms**, including “brown,” “pink,” “purple,” “orange,” and “gray.”

This theory had two major implications:

1. **Universality:** It suggests that human perception of color is biologically constrained, which creates universal tendencies in how languages develop color vocabularies.
2. **Language evolution:** The findings reveal that color terminology expands as cultures become more technologically and culturally complex.

Although later scholars criticized some methodological aspects of the study, Berlin and Kay's framework remains foundational. It provided the first systematic model for comparing color terms across unrelated languages and inspired decades of cross-linguistic research.

The cognitive linguistic viewpoint, represented by **George Lakoff (1987)**, emphasizes that color categories are part of human cognitive structures. Unlike Berlin and Kay, who focused on universals, Lakoff highlights the **role of experience, culture, and metaphor** in shaping color meanings [3. P. 126].

Lakoff's key idea is that:

- Colors are conceptual categories formed through experience.
- These categories extend metaphorically into abstract domains of thought.

For example:

- **“Feeling blue”** in English expresses sadness.
- **“Seeing red”** refers to anger.
- **“Green with envy”** indicates jealousy.

Such expressions show that colors are not only perceptual labels but also **metaphorical tools** that structure emotions and social concepts. These metaphors differ across cultures, meaning that color categorization is both cognitive and culturally constructed.

Lakoff's approach reveals that color terminology participates in larger conceptual systems. It shows how linguistic expressions reflect mental models, making color terms a crucial part of cognitive semantics.

Anna Wierzbicka's work in cultural semantics provides another important angle. In *Semantics, Culture, and Cognition* (1996), she argues that the meanings of color terms

cannot be separated from cultural context [4. P. 94]. Even if two languages have similar color terms, their symbolic meanings and emotional connotations may differ dramatically.

Key insights include:

- Color meanings are shaped by historical traditions, social rituals, ecology, and aesthetic preferences.
- The symbolic interpretation of a color (e.g., red as happiness in China or mourning in South Africa) reflects cultural values rather than biological perception.
- Color terms often appear in idioms, metaphors, and cultural scripts that encode collective attitudes.

Wierzbicka's approach shows that color terminology is deeply embedded in cultural semantics. It challenges the idea of universality by demonstrating that cultural experiences significantly shape how people understand and use color words.

Symbolic Meanings and Cultural Codes

Color terminology demonstrates strong cultural specificity, functioning not only as a descriptive system but as a symbolic code embedded in social and ideological structures. As emphasized by scholars such as **Victor Turner**, **Clifford Geertz**, and **Yuri Lotman**, colors act as cultural symbols that transmit shared meanings within a community. Analyzing these symbols reveals how deeply color values are rooted in collective memory and cultural logic. For example, the color **white** illustrates how symbolism varies cross-culturally: in Uzbek and Western traditions it denotes purity, innocence, and positive moral qualities, while in Chinese culture it is associated with death and mourning. This contrast shows that symbolic interpretation is not universal but shaped by ritual practices and cultural narratives [6. P. 45]. Likewise, the color **red** reflects different cultural codes. In European contexts it is linked to passion, vitality, and emotional intensity, whereas in East Asia it represents joy, celebration, and prosperity—demonstrating how a single color may carry opposite emotional valences depending on cultural ideology [7. P. 29]. The meaning of **green** also varies: while in Western societies it primarily symbolizes nature, fertility,

and life, in Islamic cultures it has sacred connotations due to its association with religious heritage, scriptural references, and historical symbolism [8. P. 164]. These differences highlight how colors operate as semiotic units shaped by cultural experience.

Traditions and rituals further reinforce these symbolic patterns, guiding how societies perceive, name, and value specific colors. Uzbek traditional architecture's prevalent use of **blue (ko'k)** tiles reflects a long-standing cultural connection between sky imagery, spirituality, and visual aesthetics [11. P. 173]. In African cultural frameworks, meanwhile, **black** is not associated with negativity or mourning but instead signifies maturity, prestige, and social authority [9. P. 53], illustrating how cultural environments shape the emotional and social meanings of color. The Japanese example, with its fine distinctions such as *mizu-iro*, *ao*, and *kon-iro*, shows how ritual aesthetics and artistic traditions can promote a more nuanced color lexicon [10. P. 18]. These cases demonstrate that color terminology expands or narrows depending on cultural relevance and aesthetic priorities.

Cross-Cultural Comparison

Cross-cultural comparison of color terminology reveals significant variation in how languages categorize, lexicalize, and symbolically interpret colors. Comparative linguistics shows that languages differ not only in the number of basic color terms they possess but also in the degree of lexicalization, that is, how many distinct color shades are encoded as independent words. Some languages have highly developed color lexicons with numerous specific terms, while others rely on broader, more general categories. Additionally, the metaphorical usage of color terms differs markedly across cultures, illustrating the role of color in expressing emotions, social attitudes, and cultural values.

As Wierzbicka observes, color metaphors vary so widely across languages that direct translation often fails to capture their cultural meaning [5. P. 32]. This is because each linguistic community attaches culturally specific connotations to colors based on its history, environment, religious worldview, and aesthetic traditions. For example, while English uses metaphors such as "*feeling blue*" to describe sadness, such expressions do

not have direct equivalents in Uzbek or Chinese, where blue carries different symbolic associations. Similarly, the metaphorical use of black and white varies across cultures: in English, *white* often signifies purity and goodness, whereas in Arabic cultural tradition *white* may also symbolize wisdom and maturity, reflecting different historical and religious influences.

Comparative studies of Uzbek, English, Chinese, and Arabic reveal how color symbolism is shaped by cultural and environmental factors. In Uzbek, colors frequently appear in idioms related to destiny, moral qualities, and emotional states, such as *oq baxt* (“pure happiness”) or *qora kunlar* (“hard times”), showing how color terms encode evaluative judgments. English tends to use colors metaphorically to describe emotions and character traits, such as *green with envy* or *red-handed*, reflecting its cognitive-metaphorical orientation. In Chinese, colors carry strong cultural and ritual meanings: red symbolizes happiness, celebration, and prosperity; white symbolizes mourning; and yellow has imperial connotations. In Arabic, the color system is shaped by desert environment, Islamic symbolism, and traditional poetic imagery; for example, green is associated with paradise and divine blessing, while black may denote strength, lineage, or tribal identity.

These cross-cultural differences demonstrate that color terminology is not simply a linguistic matter but a cultural phenomenon influenced by worldview, geography, and historical experience. By comparing how different languages name, classify, and interpret colors, researchers gain insight into how societies conceptualize the world and embed cultural meaning into everyday vocabulary.

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