

DIALECTAL AND REGIONAL VARIANTS OF COLOR TERMS: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

Mirzayeva Dilshoda Ikromjonovna

Fergana State University, PhD, docent

Marufova Sarvinoz Murotjon qizi

Fergana State University Master's degree student

Abstract

Color terminology is among the most culturally embedded and linguistically variable domains of the lexicon. While the basic color categories across languages have been extensively studied since Berlin and Kay's landmark work, far less attention has been devoted to intra-language variation -the ways in which speakers of the same language use different color terms depending on their regional background, social group, or dialectal community. This article presents a comparative analysis of dialectal and regional variants of color terms within single languages, drawing on examples from English, Spanish, Arabic, and Russian.

Keywords: color terms, dialectal variation, regional lexicon, sociolinguistics, semantic fields, color categorization, lexical divergence, cross-dialectal analysis, language and perception

Introduction

The study of color terminology has long occupied a central position in the intersection of linguistics, cognitive science, and anthropology. Since the publication of Berlin and Kay's Basic Color Terms (1969), scholars have debated the extent to which color naming is universal or culturally determined. However, a dimension that has received comparatively less scholarly attention is intra-linguistic variation -the phenomenon

whereby speakers of the same language assign different names to the same color, depending on their regional, dialectal, or social background [1. P. 43].

Such variation is not trivial. Color terms are embedded in everyday communication, commercial labeling, artistic description, and cultural symbolism. When a speaker of British English calls a color "scarlet" and a speaker of American English calls the same hue "crimson," or when an Egyptian Arabic speaker uses a term unknown to a Moroccan speaker for a shade of blue, the gap between shared grammar and divergent vocabulary becomes socially and cognitively significant [5. P. 62].

This article undertakes a comparative analysis of how color terms vary across dialects and regions within individual languages. Rather than comparing across languages, the focus is deliberately narrowed to intra-linguistic diversity. The article surveys cases from English, Spanish, Arabic, and Russian, analyzing the factors -historical, geographical, and sociolinguistic -that give rise to such variation, and considers the implications for lexicography, language pedagogy, and color science.

1. Theoretical Background

The foundational assumption in much early color term research was that basic color categories are universal, with all languages converging on the same eleven basic terms if they possess a sufficiently large color vocabulary. Subsequent work, including the World Color Survey, refined these claims but generally preserved a universalist orientation. Such studies, however, typically treat a language as a monolithic system, ignoring internal variation [2. P. 142].

Dialectology and variationist sociolinguistics offer a corrective perspective. Labov's work on lexical and phonological variation demonstrated that language is inherently variable, with differences patterned by geography, social class, age, and ethnicity. These same forces operate in the color domain. A regional community may develop or preserve color terms that reflect local flora, fauna, crafts, or historical contact with other languages -producing a color lexicon that differs from the standard or prestige variety [3. P. 52].

Cognitive semantics adds another layer. Prototype theory suggests that color categories are organized around focal exemplars, but the boundaries of categories -and hence the applicability of color terms -are fuzzy and culturally negotiable. In a dialect where the local environment presents a particular range of natural hues, the boundaries of color terms may shift accordingly. For instance, communities with strong fishing or textile traditions may develop finer distinctions within blue-green or red-orange spectrums than the standard variety encodes [4. P. 92].

2. Dialectal Variation in Color Terms: Case Studies

2.1 English

English presents a rich field for examining color term variation. The most documented divide is between British and American English, but regional variation within each national variety is equally significant. In parts of Scotland and Northern England, the term "blae" (from Old Norse blár) is used for a dull blue-grey color, a term virtually unknown in Southern England or North America. Similarly, "dun" -referring to a dull greyish-brown -remains current in rural British and Irish dialects associated with livestock farming, while it has largely fallen out of urban usage.

American English shows its own regional patterning. In the American South, certain shades described as "teal" in the Northeast might be referred to as "peacock blue" or by locally preferred terms. The color term "puce" -French-derived and referring to a brownish-purple -is recognized but rarely used spontaneously in most American dialects, whereas in fashion-conscious urban communities or among older speakers with European heritage, it remains productive. African American Vernacular English (AAVE) has also developed distinctive color vocabulary in some communities, particularly for skin tones and clothing colors, reflecting both cultural identity and resistance to mainstream color naming conventions.

2.2 Spanish

Spanish, spoken across more than twenty countries, provides perhaps the clearest illustration of how political and geographical separation produces lexical divergence in the color domain. The term "güero" in Mexican Spanish refers to a light or blonde color, particularly applied to skin tone and hair, and is used affectionately or descriptively. This term is essentially absent from Peninsular Spanish, where "rubio" fulfills a related but not identical role. Conversely, the Rioplatense Spanish of Argentina and Uruguay employs "colorado" for red in informal speech more broadly than in other varieties, where it tends to be restricted to reddish complexions or political reference.

In the Caribbean, particularly Cuban and Puerto Rican Spanish, color terms for skin tones are markedly more numerous and nuanced than in the standard variety -a reflection of a complex racial history in which fine chromatic distinctions carried social weight. Terms such as "trigueño" (wheat-colored), "jabao" (very light-skinned with mixed ancestry), and "indio" (a reddish-brown tone) operate in ways that have no precise equivalent in Castilian Spanish.

2.3 Arabic

Arabic presents a particularly complex case because the gap between Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) and the numerous spoken dialects is itself considerable. In MSA, color terms are well-standardized; however, in colloquial use, dialects diverge substantially. Moroccan Darija makes extensive use of the Berber-derived term "azraq" for blue, but its precise hue boundaries differ from usage in Levantine Arabic, where the same form appears but with somewhat different focal referents. Gulf Arabic has preserved Semitic roots for color terms that have been displaced by loanwords in Maghrebi dialects.

Of particular note is the color green, which carries religious and ecological significance across the Arab world. In Egyptian Arabic, "akhdar" is the standard term, but its application to yellowy-greens versus blue-greens varies regionally. In parts of Sudan, distinctions are made between types of green that map onto agricultural contexts -the green

of young crops versus mature vegetation -distinctions that urban Egyptian Arabic tends not to encode lexically.

2.4 Russian

Russian is notable in color term research for its obligatory distinction between light blue ("goluboy") and dark blue ("siniy") -a distinction that English encodes only optionally. This categorical split, however, is not entirely uniform across Russian dialects. In some northern Russian dialects, influenced historically by Finno-Ugric contact, the boundaries between these two terms are drawn differently, and additional terms for blue-green shades occur that are absent from the Moscow standard. Southern Russian dialects, shaped by contact with Ukrainian, show some penetration of Ukrainian color terms, particularly for yellow and green shades associated with agricultural life.

3. Sociolinguistic Factors Driving Color Term Variation

The variation documented above is not random; it is systematically conditioned by identifiable sociolinguistic and historical factors. Geographic isolation is perhaps the most obvious: communities cut off from standard-variety contact preserve archaic forms or develop independent innovations. The "blae" of Scottish dialects and the "jabao" of Caribbean Spanish both survive in part because they fulfill local communicative needs not addressed by standard varieties.

Language contact is another major driver. Many regional color term variants are loanwords or calques from languages historically in contact with the regional variety. Moroccan Arabic's color vocabulary shows French influence far more strongly than Levantine Arabic does, reflecting the colonial history of the Maghreb. American English has absorbed color terms from Spanish ("adobe," "sienna"), Indigenous languages ("maize" for a yellow shade), and immigrant communities, producing regional pockets of color vocabulary enriched by contact [6. P. 73].

Occupational and environmental specialization also generates variation. Communities with strong textile, dyeing, fishing, or agricultural traditions develop

elaborated vocabularies for hues relevant to their practice. Yorkshire woollen mill workers historically possessed color terms for gradations of grey and brown wool that outsiders could not reliably distinguish. Such specialist vocabularies can persist in regional speech long after the original occupation has declined, becoming markers of local identity.

Finally, identity and prestige play a role. Some dialectal color terms are maintained or revived precisely because they signal membership in a regional or ethnic community. In contexts where the standard variety is associated with external authority, using local color vocabulary becomes an act of linguistic resistance and solidarity.

4. Implications

The findings of this comparative analysis carry several implications. For lexicographers, they underscore the inadequacy of monolithic, standard-variety dictionaries for capturing the full range of a language's color vocabulary. Regional and dialectal dictionaries, as well as community-based lexicographic projects, are needed to document this variation before it is lost to leveling pressures.

For language pedagogy, the data suggest that learners of Spanish, Arabic, Russian, or English who encounter regional speakers may find color communication more challenging than their textbooks anticipated. Pedagogical materials should at minimum sensitize learners to the existence of regional color term variation, even if exhaustive coverage is not feasible.

For cognitive science and color research, the findings reinforce the argument that color categorization cannot be studied adequately using only standard-variety data from educated urban informants. The full range of human color naming behavior within a language is only visible when dialectal variation is taken seriously.

Conclusion

Color terms occupy a unique position in the lexicon: they are simultaneously tied to universal perceptual realities and profoundly shaped by cultural, historical, and social

forces. Within single languages, dialectal and regional variation in color naming is pervasive, systematic, and meaningful. From the blue-grey "blae" of Scottish English to the skin-tone taxonomies of Caribbean Spanish, from the agricultural greens of Sudanese Arabic to the blue distinctions of northern Russian dialects, the color lexicon of any language is more variable and richer than any standard description acknowledges.

Future research should expand the empirical base through corpus studies, perceptual experiments with dialectal speakers, and collaborative documentation with communities whose color vocabularies remain understudied. Only through such work can linguistics develop an adequate account of color naming as a genuinely human, and genuinely diverse, phenomenon.

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