

## LINGUOCULTURAL FEATURES OF COLORS IN ADVERTISING AND MARKETING DISCOURSE

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### **Abstract**

This article examines the linguocultural dimensions of color symbolism in advertising and marketing discourse, investigating how colors function not merely as visual stimuli but as culturally encoded semiotic units that carry distinct connotations across linguistic and cultural communities. The article concludes that effective intercultural marketing discourse requires a thorough understanding of color semantics within their respective linguocultural contexts.

**Keywords:** linguoculturology, color symbolism, advertising discourse, marketing communication, cross-cultural semiotics, color psychology, cultural connotations, brand identity, intercultural communication, visual rhetoric, consumer perception, color pragmatics

### **Introduction**

In contemporary advertising and marketing, visual language plays a role no less significant than verbal text. Among the visual elements deployed by advertisers, color stands out as one of the most immediate, emotionally potent, and culturally charged. A single hue can evoke trust or danger, mourning or celebration, purity or passion -yet these associations are rarely universal. They are, instead, deeply rooted in the cultural and linguistic histories of specific communities.

The field of linguoculturology -developed prominently in Russian and European linguistic scholarship -provides a productive framework for analyzing this phenomenon. Linguoculturology investigates the ways in which language and culture are mutually

constitutive, examining how culturally specific meanings become encoded in linguistic and semiotic units. Color terms and color symbols, as culturally saturated signs, occupy a central place in this inquiry [4. P. 92].

In the domain of advertising, color operates on multiple levels simultaneously: it attracts attention, triggers emotional responses, communicates brand values, and situates a product within a particular cultural imaginary. Yet when advertising crosses cultural and linguistic borders -as it increasingly does in the era of globalization -the culturally specific resonances of color become sites of potential misunderstanding, as well as opportunities for sophisticated intercultural communication [3. P. 152].

### **Theoretical Framework: Linguoculturology and Semiotics of Color**

Linguoculturology emerged as a distinct discipline in the late twentieth century, particularly through the foundational work of Russian linguists such as V.N. Teliya and V.V. Vorobyev, who argued that language is not a neutral medium of communication but a culturally laden system in which the historical experiences, values, and worldviews of a community are inscribed. Central to this approach is the concept of the "cultural connotation" -the secondary, culturally derived meaning that attaches to a linguistic or semiotic sign beyond its primary denotative content [5. P. 42].

Color terms represent a particularly rich domain for linguocultural analysis. The word "white," for instance, denotes a specific region of the visible light spectrum; but its cultural connotations -purity in Western wedding traditions, mourning in many East Asian cultures, spiritual power in several indigenous African traditions -vary dramatically across communities and cannot be derived from the denotative meaning alone. These connotations are embedded in proverbs, idioms, ritual practices, and visual traditions, and they exert a powerful influence on how consumers interpret color in advertising contexts [2. P. 63].

From a semiotic perspective, color functions as a sign in the Peircean sense: it stands for something beyond itself, and its interpretive value depends on the cultural codes shared between sender and receiver. In advertising, color is rarely arbitrary; it is selected precisely because of the associations it is expected to trigger in the target audience. The semiotics of

advertising color thus involves a process of cultural encoding by the advertiser and cultural decoding by the consumer -a process that can succeed or fail depending on the degree of shared cultural knowledge.

Roland Barthes's distinction between denotation and connotation, applied to the realm of visual culture, is particularly illuminating here. At the denotative level, a red background in an advertisement simply means that the background is red. At the connotative level, however, that same red may signify passion (in a French perfume advertisement), good fortune (in a Chinese New Year campaign), or danger (in a public safety notice). The connotative level is where cultural meaning resides, and it is at this level that linguocultural analysis must focus [1. P. 71].

## **Color Symbolism Across Cultures: A Comparative Analysis**

### **Red**

Red is perhaps the most culturally variable of all colors in marketing discourse. In Western advertising traditions, red is associated with energy, urgency, passion, and appetite-associations exploited by brands such as Coca-Cola, McDonald's, and KFC, which have made red a cornerstone of their visual identities worldwide. Psychologically, red has been shown to stimulate appetite and increase heart rate, making it a logical choice for the food and beverage industry.

In China and much of East and Southeast Asia, however, red carries additional layers of meaning: it is the color of prosperity, celebration, good luck, and marital happiness. Chinese New Year decorations, lucky envelopes (*hóngbāo*), and traditional bridal attire are all red. Global companies entering the Chinese market have actively adapted their color strategies to capitalize on these associations -notably, Starbucks and Apple have released special red-edition products for Chinese festive seasons. This adaptation reflects a sophisticated understanding of color as a linguocultural marker rather than a purely aesthetic element.

### **White**

White provides one of the clearest illustrations of cross-cultural divergence in color symbolism. In the dominant Western European and North American cultural tradition,

white is strongly associated with purity, cleanliness, innocence, and new beginnings. Wedding dresses are white, hospital environments are white, and luxury products frequently use white packaging to suggest refinement and simplicity. Brands like Apple have built their entire aesthetic identity around whitespace and white packaging, signaling minimalism and premium quality to Western consumers.

In Japan, China, Korea, and much of South and Southeast Asia, white is traditionally the color of death and mourning. White flowers are brought to funerals; white clothing is worn by the bereaved. A marketing campaign that presents a product in white packaging with imagery of white flowers may, in these cultural contexts, trigger connotations directly antithetical to the advertiser's intentions. Importantly, this cultural coding is not merely anecdotal but is embedded in the linguistic fabric of these cultures: in Chinese, the term *bái shì* (白事, literally "white matter") refers to funerary affairs, in direct contrast to *hóng shì* (红事, "red matter"), which denotes weddings and celebrations.

### **Green**

Green occupies a complex and shifting position in global advertising discourse. In Western marketing, green has become the emblematic color of environmentalism, sustainability, and health -a development driven by the rise of ecological consciousness in the late twentieth century. Brands that wish to signal their environmental credentials routinely adopt green color schemes, a practice so widespread that it has generated the critical concept of "greenwashing" -the use of green visual elements to create an impression of environmental responsibility not substantiated by actual practice.

### **Yellow and Gold**

Yellow presents another case of striking cross-cultural variation. In Western advertising, yellow is associated with optimism, warmth, and energy -McDonald's "Golden Arches" being perhaps the most globally recognizable deployment of this association. However, in some European and South American cultural traditions, yellow is associated with jealousy, cowardice, or even illness, and in France, yellow doors were historically painted on the houses of traitors.

### **Blue**

Blue is often cited as the most globally "safe" color in international marketing, frequently described as the world's most universally liked color. It is associated with trust, reliability, and professionalism across many cultural contexts, which explains its prevalence in the branding of financial institutions, technology companies, and healthcare providers worldwide -from Samsung and IBM to Facebook and Pfizer.

### **Linguistic Encoding of Color in Advertising Discourse**

The verbal language of advertising reflects and reinforces the cultural meanings of color. Advertising slogans, product names, and descriptive copy frequently invoke color terms not merely as descriptors but as cultural signifiers. The phrase "going green" in environmental advertising discourse, for example, is not simply a statement about color but a culturally loaded expression of ecological commitment. Similarly, "in the red" and "in the black" -financial idioms derived from bookkeeping practices -carry powerful connotations of failure and success respectively, and are deployed in financial services advertising to invoke these associations without making them explicit.

Color metaphors and idioms vary significantly across languages and cultures, and these variations have direct implications for advertising translation and localization. The English expression "green with envy," for instance, does not translate directly into many other languages, where envy may be associated with an entirely different color. Russian, for example, uses the expression "siniy ot zazdrosti" (blue with envy) in some regional dialects, reflecting a different cultural mapping of emotion onto color.

The naming of colors in marketing discourse is itself a sophisticated linguocultural practice. Rather than using generic color terms, brands frequently develop proprietary color names that carry specific connotative weight: "Millennial Pink," "Tiffany Blue," "Hermès Orange." These names function as cultural markers that locate the brand within a specific aesthetic and social tradition. "Tiffany Blue," for instance, is not simply a descriptor of a particular shade of robin's egg blue; it is a semiotic shorthand for luxury, romance, and American elegance, and its meaning is inseparable from the cultural history of the Tiffany & Co. brand.

This practice of proprietary color naming reflects an understanding that color, in advertising discourse, is always more than a visual property: it is a culturally saturated sign that carries accumulated meaning through repeated association.

## **Case Studies in Intercultural Color Communication**

### **Pepsi in Southeast Asia**

One of the most frequently cited cases of intercultural color failure involves Pepsi-Cola's operations in Southeast Asia in the 1960s. At the time, Pepsi changed the color of its vending machines and coolers from dark blue to light blue -a shade associated in several Southeast Asian markets with death and mourning. The result was a significant negative consumer response, illustrating how a seemingly minor chromatic adjustment can trigger culturally specific connotations with serious commercial consequences.

### **McDonald's Global Color Strategy**

McDonald's provides a contrasting case study of successful cross-cultural color adaptation. While the brand's iconic red and yellow color scheme is maintained globally to ensure brand recognition, the company has shown flexibility in culturally specific contexts. In several European markets, McDonald's has adopted green as a complementary color to signal its commitment to environmental sustainability -replacing the traditional red background with forest green in its signage. This shift reflects an acute awareness of the culturally specific meaning of green in the European environmental discourse.

### **Luxury Brands and the Language of Gold**

Luxury goods advertising across cultures makes extensive use of gold -in typography, packaging, and visual design -to signal prestige and exclusivity. This represents one of the more culturally consistent uses of color in global advertising: while the specific shade and deployment of gold varies, its association with wealth and status transcends many cultural boundaries. Brands such as Rolex, Moët & Chandon, and Burberry have built gold into their visual identities in ways that communicate luxury across diverse markets.

## **Conclusion**

Colors in advertising and marketing discourse are not mere aesthetic choices: they are culturally encoded signs whose meanings are shaped by the historical, religious, social,

and linguistic traditions of specific communities. The field of linguoculturology provides a productive theoretical framework for analyzing these meanings, situating color symbolism within the broader relationship between language, culture, and cognition.

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