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## **Semantics of Colour Terms: Black and White**

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## **A study of Semantics of colour terms: black and white**

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### **Abstract**

This review article synthesizes three distinct journal articles on semantics of color terms, specifically focusing on black and white. This thorough review is based on these studies, which were carried out separately in 2020, 2021, and 2022 by researchers from different nations. One of the pertinent concerns in linguistics is the desire to define culture-specific aspects of color naming in multisystem languages. Any country's mentality and culture are peculiarly reflected in the names given to various hues and their symbolic meanings. The most common basic colors in our lives are black and white, which are evident everywhere. These are the chromatography's two extremities. Different cultural perspectives on black and white may even be diametrically opposed. Therefore, the purpose of this essay is to ascertain how various languages and cultures interpret the terms "black" and "white." Many examples of color term expressions have been collected from dictionaries, other researchers' previous works and everyday speech. Then, the collected data is categorized and then analyzed based on 'black' and 'white' colors across various languages and cultures. The findings demonstrate that color words are multifunctional units with far more variance in their symbolic meanings than similarities. As a result, learning more about how they differ can help us understand other languages and encourage cross-cultural communication.

**Key words: Semantics, Color terms, Culture, Black, White.**

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## **Introduction**

The world in which we exist is a colorful one. The look of color affects everything that our eyes are capable of seeing, including the surroundings and environment we are in, the variety of natural and artificial items, and even humans. Human beings need a way to express things around them; color terms are one way to describe things and express the feelings and emotions of people. Each language and culture has its own. Colors express different cultural notions and characteristics of each culture and nation. Each color term has its own national or universal associations. Despite these associations, color terms have different interpretations and associations to other people and cultures. distinct national and cultural origins, including customs, habits, life experiences, aesthetics, etc., result in distinct color implications, according to the (2009:160). Kareem (2019) cites Pathak (2012), who further states that "the significance of color in various cultures is so profound that it defines that particular object or idea." Therefore, in many cultures and faiths, a hue can serve as a reliable sign of that notion, concept, thing, or occasion. The significance of color semantics as a cultural construct has a deep and intricate sacred system of meanings, which differ according on the nation and represent distinct cultural values. Thus, it is possible to conceptualize color namings as linguistic cultural phenomena. (Bayramova, 2004).

The study of color semantics, particularly concerning white and black, unveils a rich tapestry of interpretations that vary across different cultural contexts and linguistic traditions. Therefore, these colors are filled with their special significance both in an obvious visual sense and in a variety of connotations, associations, and manifestations in the form of perception and realization in society. These multifaceted meanings of "white" and "black" are especially important to consider to better understand intercultural values, thus making it easier to achieve mutual understanding. Thus, white and black art paint colors are not inherently meaningful; instead, they carry meanings that are situational and framed within particular cultural perspectives. Black finds its place in the African Continent as a sign of fertility, life, and the wisdom of the ancestors – a position of positivity and affirmation. White is traditionally used for memorial services and funeral ceremonies in Southeastern Asia, representing respect for the dead and continuation of ideological and even a spiritual connection with ancestors. These illustrations of cultural perception shall underline differences and complexity in color encoding and highlight the necessity of situational awareness in cross-cultural contexts. Certain research suggest that the connotative meanings of fundamental color terminology are shared across cultures by languages.

The existence of biologically grounded semantic universals regarding color concepts is presented by Kay and McDaniel (1978). According to Wierzbicka (1996) and Goddard (1998), objects in the visual and environmental domains ought to be used as standard reference points when discussing the meanings of colors. Use black and white as an illustration. The light vs. dark differentiation is the most noticeable difference across all colors. Given that "the cycle of day and night is a recurrent and universal (or nearly universal) human experience," day and night serve as the primary environmental prototypes for this distinction (Goddard, 1998).

The darkest shade conceivable is black, an achromatic color that absorbs all light. It is the hue of different animals, especially birds like the crow and raven, as well as soot, coal, pitch, and ink. It is also connected to night and depth as it moves into meanings that allude to darkness, primarily expressing a sense of foreboding and the unknown dark. It is applied to textiles, other natural phenomena (such smoke and clouds), and aspects of the human look (like hair and beard). Black is generally associated with death in western civilizations, but it also represents the dignity of the nobility and clergy as well as the somber and elegant social order. Even in the Middle Ages, it was widely used to communicate political and religious messages (Schneider 1978: 413). Black is an ambivalent connotation since it may represent both positive qualities and signals of strength, such as being in the black or black gold, but it can also imply something negative or unpleasant, terrifying and terrible, which is why it is frequently used as an epithet of the devil. White is an achromatic color; it has no particular hue because it reflects all light without being absorbed. The color white is the opposite of black and may be seen in many natural occurrences including snow, clouds, milk, and many types of flowers. It can also be found in manufactured goods like paper, refined sugar, and clean white linen. It is typically associated with good, innocence, purity, and cleanliness, giving it a positive connotation. When applied to hair, it connotes wisdom and age. The white peace dove represents transformation. As with white mourning garments in Japan, white attire for festivities like communion or marriage also symbolizes a fresh start (Hope/Walch 1990: 104). But the word "white" can also mean "aggressive," as in the cases of Moby Dick, white sharks, and the Ku Klux Klan. In linguistic studies, the analysis of color terms reveals fascinating insights into the cognitive processes underlying human perception and categorization. Across different languages, the categorization of colors varies significantly, reflecting cultural priorities, linguistic structures, and perceptual biases. For instance, English uses "white" and "black" as the most basic color terms, but other languages have various categorizations based on hue, saturation, or

brightness. The diversity of perception suggests that our sensory perception of color is so subjective and structurally ready that the language helps to find a conceptual repetition of the features of the material world .

### **Theoretical Background**

The study “Colour Categories in Different Linguistic Cultures” published in 2020 by Zhanar A. Kaskatayeva, Shara Mazhitayeva, Zhanar M. Omasheva, Nurgul Nygmetova, and Zhanbai Kadyrov explores cultural peculiarities of color naming in Kazakh as well as other languages including Russian and English. The purpose is to examine the usage of color naming categories as units of symbolic order in different languages, that is in English, Russian, and Kazakh. Thus, many of the most important components of the color spectrum for many civilizations received their meanings at the hands of the researchers who turned to a “list of color names:” black and white. It is formed that this “list” is built on a continuous sampling of definitions, phraseological dictionaries, and fiction works. Moreover, it is stated that the phenomenon of color naming is a widespread and meaningful phenomenon that reflects the traditions and customs of many peoples. According to the researchers, ideas such as "Linguistics of color," "Semantics of color," "Colorative linguistics," "Color linguistic world view," etc. have piqued academics' interest in the study of color terminology in modern science. The researchers also explain how the analysis of theoretical material related to the difficulties in examining color namings has built a comprehensive theoretical and methodological framework for color linguistics as a stand-alone scientific area. The study indicates that there has been a noticeable increase in the importance of research on color namings within the framework of the linguocultural paradigm. The potential for application in the study of language is evident by cultural linguistics interpretation, which allows researchers to restore fairly objectively semantic transformations that embody the naive world picture of people of a certain epoch, reconstruction of mental attitudes, and a worldview system as a whole. In addition, the researchers noticed that there is a huge network of relationship, various interpretations, meaning received color in different languages and cultures. For example, in Kazakh, Russian, and English cultures, the meanings of the color white are honesty, clarity, and humanism, respectively. In contrast, black is associated with strength, dishonor, and bad luck in the cultures of Kazakh, Russian, and English people. Consequently, the

color begins to genuinely exemplify numerous ethical and artistic attributes. Color semantics is important as a cultural component in every society because of historical, cultural, religious, and other aspects. Every one of them has a deep and unique sacred system of interpretations and meanings, and they all come to represent certain cultural values. The research also revealed some fascinating findings from G. K. Kortabayeva's 2007 study, which asserts that the usage of comparable color names in lexical and phraseological units of different languages results from the use of fundamental and important colors in the lives of individuals of an ethnic group: The prevalence of the same color names in the vocabulary and phraseology of different languages is associated with the relative importance of these colors in the lives of representatives of a specific ethnic group: "It is possible to consider that six main colors are enough to convey our feelings by the top names."

While, the main goal of a different study by (Wanchuan YU) titled "Cultural Implications in Basic Color Terms: Black and White in Chinese and English" conducted in (2021), was to look at the different aspects of color terms in intercultural communication of English and Chinese people and their perceptions of various color symbols. The researcher talks about how the two color terms, black and white, have symbolic implications in both Chinese and English cultures. The researcher claims that many color words are extensively used in both Chinese and English cultures, and they serve as cultural carriers with other words. The researcher emphasizes that color words have a variety of symbolic connotations in addition to their original meanings through some observations made by Li Guanyi in 2002. Words with color can express many ethnic mindsets and emotions. Man never has perfect eyes to view the world with. He perceives it as being filtered via a certain set of institutions, practices, and ideologies. According to the study, popular belief in the nineteenth century was that color words were linguistically relative and culturally specific, influenced by both linguistic relativity and cultural determinism. Later on, Leavers offered support for this theory by speculating on a possible slow evolution of the color word system. Rekindling interest in the intricacies of color semantics, color researchers in Anthropology throughout the next seven decades started studying how cultural factors impact and constrain the color word system. The researcher discussed how, despite people's shared perceptions of color, cultural differences cannot be concealed by a shared logic. Different cultural contexts assign distinct semantic interpretations to the color terms. He also clarified the many notable distinctions between those English-speaking nations and our own. Thus, there are differences between how different people

perceive color and how they communicate it. For instance, Chinese people frequently wear white to express their sorrow over a death, but attendees of funerals and other significant social events in English-speaking nations typically wear black. The explanation is because in those nations, black is a sign of gloom and horror. Specifically, there are differences in the symbolic significance of colors between Chinese and English cultures. The researcher clarified that the fact that different countries have varied descriptions of colors is not surprising. The differences in the symbolic meanings of color words between the two cultures arise from differences in their geographic environments, lifestyles, regimes, nationalities, religious beliefs, customs, cultural psychology, modes of thinking, aesthetic attitudes, literature, and arts, among other factors.

Another study, entitled “Colour Terms in Five Linguistic Images of the World: The Semantic Perspective” by (Paweł Golda, Agnieszka Jedziniak, Judyta Mężyk, Joanna Ryszka, and Teresa Uchman) conducted in (2022), Following a thorough investigation, the researchers produced a list of six fundamental color terms, including black and white, for each of the five linguistic representations of the worlds of English, French, Italian, Polish, and Japanese. The study investigates color terms' connotative and denotative meanings in relation to their collocations. In terms of the examined languages individually as well as well as an example of the cultural community of many ethnic languages, the researchers demonstrate that color terms are multifunctional components in the linguistic picture of the world. Further, Gage was cited as follows: “color perception and color-language turn out to be closely bound up with each other; since symbolizing is essentially a linguistic function, the available color-vocabulary must have a decisive role in the creation of any language of color-symbols”. This research most often provides comparative analysis of color terminology in English, French, Italian, Polish, Japanese, and other languages. These comparison studies focus on one or more particular hues, which we refer to as "basic," in keeping with the idea of "universals of human experiences." The foundation of semantics and the theory of cultural linguistics form the basis of the methodological framework. Lexical-semantic analysis is used to the data collected from monolingual, bilingual, collocation, and phraseological dictionaries. Furthermore, the researchers emphasized how color semantics emphasizes cultural variation and geographic location and how colors, as linguistic signals, can define and classify reality in terms of emotions, mental attitudes, or sensual reactions. Location, nature, and the human body are also mentioned in the terms under examination. For example, the color white in English signifies mental qualities like innocence and purity. Although it is written



in French, its meaning is connected to the visual component and can also be seen in descriptions of what is often referred to as "light." White is used in Polish to describe light-colored items and times of day (white wine). Conversely, in English, the word "black" connotes a lack of hope or misery (black despair, black day). However, the word "black" in French refers to something that is actually dark or black (black sky). It signifies night, gloom, and dirt in Polish. Understanding a human being, their nature, and the core of their inwardness completely and thoroughly is the main objective of the study of cultural linguistics. A linguist can provide light on the content, forms, and patterns found in language as well as the aspects of the value system and coded approaches to reality.

## **Methodology**

### **Sampling**

The next output was the list of color names, which the researchers compiled in a 2020 study. The latter was created on a peremptory sampling of definition, phraseological, bilingual (Kazakh, Russian, and English), and fiction book dictionaries. The meaning of the color spectrum's pivotal vital traits for different societies was established based on the materials in the Kazakh, Russian, and English languages. The researchers formulated the semantic content of the color, the function of color naming in a literary work, the matching and incoherencies using the techniques of semantic, contextual, and comparative analysis.

The results demonstrate how colors have meanings that are completely unrelated to color or have a distant semantic color matching in various languages because of their symbolisms.

On the other hand, the 2021 study covered the symbolic connotations of the two-color terms, black and white, in both Chinese and English cultures. By contrasting and comparing these two terms, one can see how the two cultures differ based on the symbolic meanings of "Black and White" in both Chinese and English, how those meanings have evolved, and how "Black and White" has been translated in intercultural communication in both Chinese and English. The findings showed that a deeper comprehension of the distinctions between Chinese and English cultures requires a solid command of color terms and their implications, associations, and cultural connotations.

Six fundamental color concepts, such as white and black, are shown in five alternative linguistic representations of the worlds of the following languages in the 2022 study by the researchers: English, French, Italian, Polish, and Japanese. The foundation of semantics and the theory of cultural linguistics form the basis of the methodological framework. The study investigates the connotative and denotative meanings of terms related to color and their collocations. Lexical-semantic analysis is used to the data collected from monolingual, bilingual, collocation, and phraseological dictionaries. The results also indicate characteristics of color meanings that are global and transcultural. The color semantics emphasizes the settings of geographic location as well as cultural diversity. As linguistic cues, colors can be used to define and classify reality in terms of emotions, attitudes, or sensual responses.

## **Research question**

Research questions are designed to narrow the objectives of the study to specific questions that the researcher tries to answer them during the investigation of the study. Given the present papers undergoing revision, it is anticipated that the questions will be comparable because the studies' goals with regard to Black and White in semantics of color terms are similar. Research that are currently being revision appear to be focused on the meanings of color words in terms of the languages that are being examined independently as well as an example of the cultural community of various ethnic languages, especially black and white, though with differing emphasis:

The 2020 study explores how various languages and cultures interpret color spectrums, particularly those of black and white, emphasizing the metaphorical and symbolic applications of color naming groups in Kazakh, Russian, and English. The 2021 study, on the other hand, attempts to determine the symbolic implications of the two-color terms, black and white, in Chinese and English cultures. In the meantime, the 2022 study focuses on multifunctional units of color words in the global linguistic representation, both in terms of the individual languages under analysis and as a representation of the diverse ethnic language community's culture.

Although investigating the semantics of color names is a common theme throughout these studies, their precise study goals and objectives differ. The 2020 study looks at the differences between multisystem languages based on a set of color designations. Additionally, the study from 2021 compares color names based on their development, translations, and symbolic implications in intercultural communication. Also, the study from 2022 investigates the connotative and denotative meanings of phrases related to color and their collocations.

## Results and Discussion

The findings of the 2020 study Color Categories in Different Linguistic Cultures demonstrated how color is surrounded by a complex network of relationships, meanings, and interpretations. As a result, the hue starts to truly embody many moral and aesthetic qualities. After conducting tests, the scientists discovered that:

White is regarded as a noble, honorable, pleasant, and warm color in Kazakh culture. It also denotes humanity, innocence, good intents, honesty, justice, truth, kindness, prosperity, holiness, a girl's beauty, respect, honor, and loss of strength. A study of the Kazakh phrase book revealed that the word "black" has the following meanings: "dark, not bright," "strong, biting" (about wind, frost: qara jel - chilling wind; qara suyq - biting frost); "large, big" (about cattle: qara mal); "honored, iconic"; "ter - excessive sweat; qara kush - strong; qara qurymdai - lots of."

The term "white" in Russian can signify various things, such "light" (white wine), "clear" (during daylight), "clean" (a white room), "unusual" (a white crow), "an extreme degree of anger" (on a tear), and "obvious" (transparent). While the word "black" may have a socially tinted connotation that is "honorless" in contrast to "white" - "honorable": "commoner" (compare: "of noble birth"), "black people," "treat as a slave."

Within the English language community, the color white is frequently linked to values such as virtuousness, kindness, joy, sanctity, divinity, ultimate wisdom, dream, and spent life. We also encountered the phrase "a white elephant," which has a bad connotation. The King of Siam was given a costly white elephant as a gift when he wanted to ruin all of his subjects. However, there are other meanings associated with the term "black." An example of a "black sheep" might be a family member who is not doing well in society.

As a reviewer of the study, I assert that the findings would have been altered had the researchers considered a longer list of colors and examining more books and dictionaries for finding differences and similarities between the two colors more broadly.

The results of the study conducted in 2021, the researchers discuss the findings of the study by comparing and contrasting the colors black and white differences in the two cultures depending on symbolic meanings of "Black and White" in both Chinese and English cultures, the development

of symbolic meanings, and the translations about “Black and White” in Intercultural Communication in both Chinese and English cultures. The results appeared as follows:

- A. The symbolic meanings of “white” In Chinese culture, is generally not a good hue. Consider those whose family members passed away recently. Chinese folks wear white clothes as part of a ritual and pay respects to the deceased by wearing white flowers. However, "black" frequently connotes negative connotations, such as catastrophe, calamity, and absurdity, like argot.
- B. The symbolic meanings of “white” in Chinese and English cultures are nearly diametrically opposed. It is a pure word that represents many lovely things. White is a symbol of hope in English funerals. Despite the fact that the color black is nearly invariably associated with crime, death, and disaster—such as the "Black Death"

As a reviewer of the study, I believe that the results would have been different if the researcher had considered to select more languages to be under scrutiny to investigate the data collected.

The study carried out in 2022 on the Color Terms in Five Linguistic Images of the World found that the color semantics emphasizes the circumstances of cultural variation and geographic location. It was also discovered that the words under examination also alluded to place, environment, and human anatomy. The connotative and denotative definitions of the word "white" in English are derived from its visual aspect and apply to objects that are either pale or almost white, such as white bread or wine. Additionally, Black makes allusions to visual elements or mental attitudes. In most contexts, black is not an antonym for white, despite what the general public believes. Only two meanings—"dirty" (to be black with soot) and "bad" (black sheep)—can be demonstrated to be in stark contrast to those of white. The first refers to something visually, whereas the second describes a mindset. On the other hand, the color that results from mixing all of the colors in the solar spectrum are typically referred to as white (blanc) in French. It is a light color, especially when compared to something dark, as it is the color of milk and snow, among other things. The word "black" in French refers to the deepest shade of gray and can be used to describe objects that are very dark or black (black sky). The core meaning of white in Japanese, along with the majority of its collocations, stem from color similarity and sensory response, namely pertaining to brightness and visual aspect. These could be references to white rice as food and white cats as animals. However, as one of its meanings (having a hue like ink) and other

collocations (black cuttlefish ink, black ink stone, black ink) demonstrate, black is frequently connected to ink. But if the researcher had considered to account of other languages. It would have shown other significant features of both colors contrasting other distant languages culturally and geographically.

## Conclusions

The material under analysis demonstrates the powerful impact of culture on the formation of color-based prejudices. It is a cultural phenomenon that is not exclusive to any one country, giving them a specific value and using color to profile different situations and states. Drawing conclusions from the data selected for the 2020 study, it can be said that Kazakh language culture's use of color semantics occasionally results in an inaccurate translation of the Russian language. The creation of color vocabulary in Kazakh and Russian follows distinct approaches. Individuals' long-term living conditions influence the differences between the primary and secondary components. The study from 2021 concludes that just as every culture has generalizations and specializations, so do languages. People in Chinese and English have distinct perspectives on the same color word due to differences in specific linguistic and cultural traits. It is clear from the explanation of black and white that Chinese and English cultures have different symbolic interpretations of the two-color terms. Both Chinese and English contain a large number of color words, and the symbolic meanings of these words vary greatly throughout cultures. In the meanwhile, the 2022 study finds that white and black are contrasting colors in several languages. It refers to light—not always white—things that can also be dark, such bread, wine, and chocolate. It is also the color of natural items like milk and snow in terms of the sensation of sight. Similar to white, black characterizes objects that are dark but not always black and that exist in both light and dark varieties, such as coffee, wine, and bread.

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