

# A diachronic overview of color terms in the romance languages: the lexical stability of the latin color vocabulary

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## **1. Lexical Stability**

For the specialist in Romance historical linguistics, lexical stability can be defined as the rate of survival of inherited spoken Latin lexical items through oral transmission into the Romance languages. The Romanist who has devoted the most attention to this topic was the late Arnulf Stefenelli (see especially Stefenelli 1992, 1996, 2011). Stefenelli distinguishes between orally-transmitted Latin vocabulary that lives on in all Romance languages, in most Romance languages, or in only one or two Romance languages (in Stefenelli's German terminology, 'panromanisch' 'interromanisch', and 'teilromanisch' respectively). He based his survey on the one thousand most frequent Latin lexical items according to two frequency dictionaries (Gardner 1971, Delatte et al., 1981). I am unaware of previous studies on lexical stability in the Romance languages based on a systematic analysis of stability by semantic categories. Dworkin (2016) looks briefly at lexical stability in such fields as basic or lower numerals, kinship terminology, body parts, the calendar and the seasons, and domestic and wild animals. This paper seeks to describe and analyze the lexical stability of orally-transmitted Latin color terms or chromonyms in the Romance languages. In this context, lexical stability refers to the survival as a core

color term through oral transmission into the Romance languages of the Latin lexical item in question, and does not imply lack of further semantic or functional evolution which form part of the word's history in the individual Romance languages. Secondly, as appropriate, it will also make some observations as relevant on the lexical stability within the recorded history of the various Romance languages of selected Romance color terms and of the role of lexical borrowing and internal creations in the history of such lexical items.

This paper will limit its purview to the Romance labels for six -- white, black, red, green, yellow, blue -- of the eleven basic or core color categories identified in Berlin-Kay (1969). It will be concerned principally with the survival or non-survival of the Latin chromatic lexicon signifiers as core Romance color terms, and not with some of the difficult semantic interpretations of some of these terms in the documented medieval stages of the Romance languages. It will not deal with the many Latin color terms that survive only as secondary labels with restricted semantic scopes (the color of skin, hair, animal hides, etc.), nor will it deal with figurative meanings that many of these items developed over time, e.g., the use of labels for 'green' to designate 'unripe, immature, inexperienced'.

Written Latin had a rich color lexicon, with terms making distinctions between bright, dark, and neutral hues. In some instances it is difficult to determine for a given set of Latin chromonyms which one was the core term. The most detailed study of the Latin color lexicon remains André (1949). Only three Latin color terms seems to fall into Stefenelli's pan-Romance category, namely *NIGER* 'black', *VIRIDIS* 'green', and *ALBUS* 'white'. Whereas the Romance descendants of the first two adjectives have lived on until today in most of the Romance languages, reflexes of *ALBUS* have been supplanted as a core color term in many Romance-speaking regions by the introduction of a rival Germanic base.

## **2. Green**

There is little to say regarding the fate of *VIRIDIS* in the Romance languages. As can be seen from the following list of forms the Latin base has survived in all

Romance-speaking regions of the former Empire: Sardinian *birde*, Rumanian, Italian *verde*, Engadine *verd*, Friulian, French, Occitan, Catalan *vert*, Spanish, Portuguese *verde*, Dolomitic Ladin *vërt*, Vegliote *verda*. As Kristol (1978: 271) states: “Le vert est un champ d’une simplicité sans pareil en ce qui concerne la diachronie du vocabulaire ... du champ dans le latin classique et dans toutes les langues romanes”. The Latin adjective has had no serious competitors. The DELL states “La fortune de l’adjectif viridis dans les langues romanes provient de son emploi fréquent dans la langue rustique” (s.v. VIREO). The importance of the color green in early agricultural societies raises the question whether designations for ‘green’ show a high degree of lexical stability in other language families. The data found in Buck (1949) points to such stability in the Germanic and Slavic languages. Nevertheless, the Proto-Indo-European base that has been reconstructed for these items may well have referred to plant and vegetation growth, and, consequently, was not a basic color term (Biggam 2014: 6-9); cf. Lat. *virere* ‘to show green growth, to be green with vegetation’.

### 3. Black

Latin had two terms for ‘black’, NIGER ‘shining black’ and ATER ‘dark black’ (both often employed with metaphorical negative meanings). The latter seems to have survived only in Old Italian *atro* and northern Italian *adro* as a chromonym and, frequently, with secondary figurative meanings (LEI, s.v. ATER, TLIO). Varieties of Gallo-Romance (especially Occitan and Francoprovençal) offer a large number of substantivized orally-transmitted derivatives of ATER used to designate various dark-colored fruits and plants; cf. Fr. *airelle*, ‘huckleberry’, and the many other dialect reflexes recorded in FEW, 25, s.v. ATER. Rare Fr *atre* is a sixteenth-century Latinism, and has retained the pejorative connotations of its Latin source.

Orally-transmitted reflexes of NIGER are found from the time of the earliest texts as the basic term for ‘black’ in all the Romance languages: French *noir*, Spanish, Portuguese *negro*, Italian *nero*, Engadine *nair*, Friulian *neri*, Catalan, Occitan *negre*, Rumanian *negru*. One can also include here Sardinian *nieddu/nigeddu* < NIGELLUS ‘blackish’ (REW<sup>3</sup>, #5917). In Portuguese and Spanish, *negro* faced varying degrees of

competition from *preto* and *prieto*. The origin of these two forms is obscure. Although they differ with regard to the details, Malkiel (1953) and the DCECH derive them from the verb *apretar* ‘to squeeze’. Both these adjectives seem to be synonyms of *negro*. The medieval textual evidence offers more examples of *negro* than of *prieto/preto*; the small number of derivatives produced by these two adjectives (Old Spanish *pretura*, Old Portuguese *pretidão*) may bespeak the relative state of their vitality in medieval Luso- and Hispano-Romance. Whereas Spanish *prieto* was already considered obsolete by the beginning of the seventeenth century (to judge by the statement in Covarrubias, *Tesoro de la lengua castellana o española* [1611]), *preto* gradually came to be the basic designation for ‘black’ in both European and Brazilian Portuguese.

In some varieties of Dolomitic Ladin, *fosc[h]/fosk*, reflexes of lat. FUSCUS ‘dark, swarthy, brown’, are replacing or rivaling *nejger*, the local descendants of NIGER. Given the late date of the first Ladin texts, the analyst cannot determine whether this rivalry goes back to the level of regional spoken Latin or represents a later semantic evolution of the descendants of FUSCUS.

#### 4. White

Latin distinguished two terms for ‘white’, ALBUS, the basic term, and CANDIDUS, ‘brilliant, shining white’. The former left reflexes in (almost) all Romance territories. Although the family of ALBUS has left descendants in Gallo- and Italo-Romance, examples of Old French *albe/aube* and Old Italian *alvo* as an independent adjective are very rare. Schafer (1987: 36) calls into question the authenticity of the few instances of the Old French forms. The Latin adjective has survived in such compounds as *aubifoin*, *aubépine* ‘hawthorn’, and in such toponyms as *Auberive*, *Fiumalbo*. The LEI, (s.v. ALBUS) records medieval examples of *albo* used to describe the fruit of certain plants (*fico albo*), paper, clothing, and textiles. It also claims that the example of *albo* in the so-called *Indovinello Veronese* is probably a Latin form. Although far outnumbered in Spanish and Portuguese by *blanco* and *branco* respectively, *alvo* seems to have enjoyed a high degree of vitality as a color adjective

in medieval Spanish and Portuguese. before falling into disuse in the early modern period (for examples, see DEM, s.v. *albo*). ALBUS has also survived in relic areas: Rumanian *alb*, Vegliote *yualb*, Friulian *stradalbe* ‘Milky Way’, Grigione *alf/alva*, Lower Engadine *alp/alba*, Sardinian *albu, alvu*, archaic *arvu*.

In contrast, CANDIDUS did not fare well in the Romance languages. Some northern varieties of Italo-Romance contain such forms as *cando/canda, cand(e)*; see LEI (s.v. CANDIDUS). Does *candido*, well documented in medieval texts with reference to objects, cloths, textiles, reflect learned or oral transmission of the Latin base (cf. *tiepido* < TEPIDUS) ?; This Latin base also survived in some varieties of southern Gallo-Romance: Occitan *cande* ‘blanc; clair, proper; transparent (de l’eau); Cantal, Limousin. *cande* ‘très blanc’, Gascon *cande* ‘brillant, propre’ pur blanc clair; see FEW (Vol. 2: 281-282).

There is no evidence for the survival of CANDIDUS as an independent adjective in Spanish or Portuguese. The toponym *Rucandio* (province of Burgos) has been explained as a derivative of RIVUS CANDIDUS (García Sánchez 2007: 161, 261); oral transmission of CANDIDUS would have yielded *\*candio* in Hispano-Romance. Do the toponyms *Candemuela, Candepajares* (Menéndez Pidal 1950: par. 39:1), as well as Spanish, Portuguese. *trigo candial*, Old Catalan *forment candel*, Gasc *pan canesal*, referring to a type of wheat that produces a very white bread, bespeak the presence at some point in the spoken Latin of the Iberian Peninsula of the Latin family headed by CANDERE ‘to be shining white’?

In most Romance varieties the reflexes of ALBUS and CANDIDUS gave way before descendants of the Germanic root *\*BLANK* ‘bright, shining white’, which may have been employed at the outset with reference to horses, and only later came to be applied to animals, weapons, and the human face. Reflexes of this Germanic base are widespread in the Romance languages: French *blanc*, Spanish *blanco*, Portuguese *branco*, Italian *bianco*, Catalan *blanc*, Friulian *blanc*, Dolomitic Ladin *blanch*. Specialists have offered two different analyses for the introduction, incorporation, and diffusion of these chromonyms in the Romance languages. One school of thought holds that the Germanic base represents a very early borrowing into the Latin of the Empire in those regions of Latin-Germanic linguistic contact (hence its

absence from Rumanian). I am not aware of any vestiges of a Latinized *\*blankus/blancus* in post-Classical sources (cf. *blavus* ‘blue’, below). More recent thinking has proposed that the Germanic base first entered the spoken language of Gaul, from where it spread elsewhere (with the local phonetic adjustments of the /bl-/ cluster) with the Carolingian Empire (for a summary of the pertinent arguments and relevant bibliography see the entry [authored by M. Barbato] in LEI, *Germanismi*, fascicolo 6: cols. 1053-1057).

## 5. Red

Although RUBER (documented as early as Ennius and traceable to a proto-Indoeuropean base)) may have been the core designation for ‘red’ in written Latin, flanked by RUFUS (whose medial -F- points to its non-Latin Italic origin), the Romance evidence shows that it failed to strike root in the spoken language. Before falling into disuse RUBER acted on dialectal and rural ROBUS/ROBEUS, which originally designated the hides of animals, especially oxen. The result of this lexical blend was RUBEUS, the source of French *rouge*, Occitan *roge*, Catalan *roig*, Spanish *rubio*, Portuguese *ruivo*, Sardinian, *ryyu*, short-lived Old Italian *robbio*, and Rumanian *roib*. Although these Romance forms document the lexical stability of *rubeus* in the transition from Latin to Romance, their semantic ranges show a high degree of variation. Rumanian *roib* designated only the coat of a horse; Spanish *rubio* and Portuguese *ruivo* indicate a reddish or strawberry blonde, especially with regard to hair color, a meaning that is found in medieval sources. (Cunha 2014: 2255). Old Italian *robbio* is found mainly in notarial texts to describe the color of steers, cows, and calves. In a contiguous swath of territory comprising French, Occitan, and Catalan, the reflexes of RUBEUS listed above faced competition as the basic term for ‘red’ from the descendants of VERMICULUS (see below).

Though not frequent in written Latin, RUSS(E)US ‘brownish-red; red-haired’ enjoyed much vitality in the spoken language as illustrated by Old Spanish *roxo* (modern *rojo*), Portuguese *roxoxo*, French *roux*, Catalan *ros*, Italian *rosso*, Friulian *ros*, Vegliote *ruas/raus*. The French and Catalan terms here designate a hair color.

Though not unknown in earlier periods, Old Spanish *roxo* appears infrequently before the fifteenth century. Medieval Spanish preferred *vermejo/bermejo* as the designation for ‘red’, as does Portuguese today with *vermelho*. Portuguese *roxo* now designates a color leaning toward ‘purple’, and is scantily documented with the meaning ‘red’ in medieval sources (Swearingen 2014). Specialists in Rumanian etymology are divided as to whether *roșu* ‘red’ goes back to RUSSEUS or to ROSEUS. Phonetically both bases can account for *roșu*, but favors RUSSEUS on grounds of semantic identity seem to favor RUSSEUS.

As a color term, VERMICULUS, diminutive of VERMIS ‘worm’ originally referred to a bright red or scarlet dye produced by the larva of a certain small worm. It is first attested as a color adjective in the Vulgate (Exodus 35:25), where it designates a bright color, varyingly translated in English bibles as ‘crimson’ or ‘scarlet’. In Isidore of Seville, it seems to be equated with RUBER. In medieval varieties of Romance its descendants (Old French *vermeil*, Old Spanish *vermejo*) often served as the core term for ‘red’, a status that still applies to Portuguese *vermelho* and Catalan *vermell*. Typologically similar is the history of COCCINUS/COCCINEUS ‘scarlet colored’ < COCCUM ‘berry/insect that grows upon the scarlet oak’, attested already as color terms in Latin, whose reflexes have become the core labels for ‘red’ in Romantsch and in Dolomitic Ladin (*tgietschen*, *cotschens*, *cöc* and other formal variants; see Kramer, *EWDS*, Liver 2012: 88). Kramer cites regional Rumanian *coacin* ‘brebis au museau jaune ou rougeâtre’, megelenorumanian *coatsin* ‘red’ as additional reflexes of this base.

## 6. Yellow

No one Latin term that designated shades of ‘yellow’ came to dominate in the Romance languages. Latin labels for shades of the color in question are PALLIDUS, FALVUS, FULVUS, LURIDUS, MELLEUS, CROCEUS, GALBINUS. This last term, which meant ‘greenish-yellow’ is the source of Rumanian *galbàn* and Old French *jalne* (the forerunner of modern *jaune*). The Old French form was borrowed as

Italian *giallo* (> Sardinian *ǵallu/dzallu* [DES: 602]), Sicilian *gálinu*, Friulan *zâl*, Dolomitic Ladin *ghel*, and Old Spanish *jalde*.

Elsewhere, various Latin words became the basic label for ‘yellow’. Among the labels for ‘yellow’ in the Iberian Peninsula, Spanish *amarillo* and Portuguese *amarelo* have a unique history. Amply documented in the medieval language, both continue AMARELLUS, diminutive of AMARUS ‘bitter’ (Pérez González 2010: 40). The semantic history reflects the medieval belief that a yellowish skin color characterized a person suffering from an excess of bile. Catalan *groc* continues Latin CROCUS ‘saffron’, as did Old Occitan *groc* before it ceded to *jauna/jaune*, borrowings from northern Gallo-Romance. Wagner (DES: s.v. *grogó*) and Coromines (DECat, s.v. *groc*) consider Sardinian *grogó/grogu* to be Catalanisms. In Romontsch the basic term for ‘yellow’ is *mellen*, a reflex of Latin MELINUS ‘pertaining to quince’ (Liver 2012: 73). Wagner points out that in Sardinian, *melinu* refers specifically to a color of a horse’s hide. In some varieties of Occitan, *rosset/rossel*, a term referring to red color hair elsewhere, has become the basic word for ‘yellow’.

## 7. Blue

The various Latin adjectives for the different shades of ‘blue’ – CAERULUS ‘sky-blue’, LIVIDUS, GLAUCUS, CAESIUS (used only with reference to the eyes), and VENETUS ‘sea blue’ – did not fare well in the Romance languages. Of these terms, only VENETUS survived through oral transmission into Rumanian as *vînăt*. Nevertheless, the core term in Rumanian for ‘blue’ is *albastru*, a descendant of Latin ALABASTER ‘alabaster, type of whitish marble’, already documented in 1588 (Academia Română 2012:60). The original meaning of *albastru* may have been ‘gray, ash-colored’, as in Arumanian *oaie albastra* ‘gray sheep’ (Mihaescu 1993: 227).

Most Romance languages have turned to borrowings from other languages to designate ‘blue’. The oldest appears to be Germanic \*BLAO, the source of Old French *blo* (modern *bleu*). This base also lives on in Romontsch, Friulian, Dolomitic Ladin, varieties of northern Italian, and Vegliote. Italianists analyze *blu* as an early modern Gallicism. In Dolomitic Ladin one finds *brüm*, glossed in the EWD as ‘dunkelblau’,



but translated in Latin as ‘caerulus color’ in 1763 (Bartolomei). Its source is the Germanic base that gives Fr. *brun* ‘brown’. In Dolomitic Ladin *blé(f)*, used today only in some regions, can mean ‘light blue’ (EWD, 300, 362).

Spanish, Portuguese, and Italian have adapted an Arabic base LĀZAWARD as the core term for ‘blue’. Spanish *azul* is rarely documented prior to the mid thirteenth-century, when it is usually found as a noun meaning ‘lapis lazuli’. The Alfonsine corpus provides no examples of adjectival *azul* (Kasten and Nitti 2002). The basic Arabic term for ‘blue’ ZARQA is the source of Spanish, Portuguese *zarco*, with a specialized meaning ‘light blue’. Most of the nine thirteenth century examples of *zarco* found in CORDE are in texts such as *Poridat de las poridades*, *Judizio de las estrellas*, *Bocados de oro*, all based on Arabic originals. Since *azul* entered Spanish as part of a technical jargon, how did speakers of early medieval Hispano-Romance denote the color ‘blue’ (assuming that they had need to do so)? Might a descendant of the Germanic base discussed above have enjoyed some degree of vitality in the spoken Romance varieties of the Iberian Peninsula? A list under the heading “De coloribus versium” in the *Etimologiae* of Isidore of Seville (xix: 28:8) contains a Latinized *blavus* (Sofer 1930: 108-109). Lapesa (2003: 94) records one example of *blavo* in a late eleventh-century document from the eastern part of the Iberian Peninsula. Opinions are divided as to whether Catalan *blau* is a Gallicism or a local descendant of \*BLAO. Although *azzurro* is found in Old Italian texts, there is some question as to its vitality in the spoken language at earlier stages. It does not appear in Italian dialects, where one finds for blue terms cognate to standard *turchino*. Although *blu* is a modern Gallicism, Old Italian texts offer examples of *biada*, *biado*, *blavo*, *blava*, and the Gallicism *bioa*, *biodo*, *bioe*, *bioi*, *bioia*, *bioio*, *bloi*, *bloio*, *broi*, *broia*, *broio* < Old French *blou*.

## 8. A Brief Conclusion

In comparison to the other semantic fields examined in Dworkin 2016, Latin color terms show a relatively low degree of lexical stability in the transition to the Romance languages. It would be worthwhile studying the evolution of basic color

terms in other individual languages or across language families to see if this relative lack of diachronic lexical stability is widespread cross-linguistically. It seems that there is a great degree of variability and instability with regard to how humans physically and cognitively perceive and distinguish the various tones and shades of color. It seems reasonable to conclude that this perceptual and cognitive instability may be linguistically reflected in the historical evolution of the Latin chromatic vocabulary in the Romance languages.

## References

### Abbreviations

DECAT = Coromines 1980-2002

DCECH = Corominas and Pascual 1980-1991

DÉLL= Eronut-Meillet 1967

DEM = Müller 1987-

DES = Wagner 1960-64

EWD = Kramer 1988-1998

FEW = Wartburg 1922-2002

LEI = Pfister and Schweickard 1979-

TLIO = Beltrami 1998-

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