Metaphor and emotion in colour words

Erling Strudsholm (Københavns Universitet),
Carla Bazzanella & Irene Ronga (Università degli Studi di Torino)

1. Introduction

Within the rich and fruitful, research on colour words, starting from Berlin and Kay 1969 (more recently cf. Grossmann 1988; Lyons 2003; Biggam 2011 et al.; Rossi 2012, 2013, 2014; Anderson 2014 et al.), a significant and complex intertwinement of language/culture/context has been highlighted, together with psychological and cognitive processes, such as perception and categorization.

A general, still recurring question is the following: *When studying colour words, do we find universal pairings or cultural and linguistic specificities?* With regard to our issue, are the metaphorical[62] meaning and the emotional value of a colour word in a given language completely dependent on culture, context, and language? Or is there a convergent tendency among languages (possibly grounded in *embodiment and intersubjectivity,* cf. Gibbs 2005, Fusaroli et al. 2012), in associating metaphorical meanings and values to colour words?

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[62] The differences between metaphor and metonymy (see, e.g., Koch 2001; Niemeier 1998; Barcelona 2003, Sandford 2014a), will not be taken into account here. Both of them are considered as part of the *figurative language* that is a wider, powerful umbrella referring to non-literal meaning (see Gibbs 1994; Dobrovol'ski and Piirainen 2005; Bazzanella 2014).

The integrative answer provided by an increasing amount of recent, cross-linguistic studies consists in maintaining the significance of both cultural and universal facets of their use, by attenuating the strong, initial opposition between nurture and nature (cf., among others, Regier and Kay, 2009; Cruz and Plebe, 2013; Ronga, et al. 2014; Ronga and Bazzanella 2015; Strudsholm et al. submitted).

In this perspective, we will deal here with two particular, strictly entrenched, aspects of the use of colour words, that is: their metaphorical meanings and emotional values. More specifically, we will present some examples of metaphorical meanings, driven by a colour word/collocate in relation with their embodiment/conventionalization and their interlinguistic and intralinguistic variations, on the one hand (§ 2), and the emotional, often contrasting values, which are triggered by colour terms, on the other hand (§ 3).

We will mainly compare Danish and Italian, which share only a partially common linguistic belonging and European cultural heritage; but refer also to other languages that have been analysed in studies discussing colour words in applied perspectives (McCarthy and O' Dell 2002, Diadori 2012) and in relation with metaphors, proverbs, idioms, and emotions (Niemeier 1998, 2007; Kövecses 2010; Albertazzi 2009, 2010; Bazzanella et al. 2012; Dobreva 2014; Ronga et al. 2014; Sandford 2011, 2014a, 2014b).

2. Colour words and metaphorical meaning

2.1 Embodiment and conventionalization

Colour words are often used not as a simple reference to a perceptual portion of the colour spectrum, that is, not literally: they often assume a metaphoric meaning, which is grounded in the correspondence between perceptual and semantic processes (Albertazzi 2010) and varies according to its context and collocation, as in the following Danish example:

1)   Da. *Grøn koncert er hverken rød eller blå* (lit.[63] '*Green* concert is neither *red* nor *blue*'; met. '*Grøn koncert* is politically independent').

The three metaphorical values, here associated to *green, red*, and *blue*, need explication:

- Since 1983, the *Grøn koncert*, which has become an institution in Danish music and cultural life, refers to an open-air roc concert and takes place every year;
- The colour *green* is generally[64] associated to nature in general and to the ecological movement (Niemeier 1998: 131): see, e.g., the *green petrol*, the UK *Green Party* (formerly the *ecological* one), the corresponding *green* parties in Europe (such as in France *Les Verts*, in Germany *Die Grünen*, in Italy *I Verdi*), and The *European Green Party* founded in 2004. In fragment 1), the use of *green* is also related to the main sponsor, namely: the Danish brewery *Tuborg* (http://www.groenkoncert.dk/; stand November 2015);
- *Red* and *blue* are meant here to represent, symbolically, opposite political parties, that is, left- and right-wing ideologies in Denmark, respectively.

Colours associated to the political parties are mostly conventionally and arbitrarily established; e.g., the United States color symbolism is opposite to the Danish one: the more conservative Republican Party is symbolized by *red* and the Democratic Party is symbolized by *blue*, the color symbolism is the opposite to the Danish one. However, since 1854 *red* in political ideology "[...] is widely used to refer to left-wing politics (communism, Marxism, socialism.)" (Niemeier 1998: 129).

Also the colour of the road signs are highly conventional, so much so that a Vienna Conventions on Road Signs and Signals has been established for the European countries in 1968, but in a flexible way, given that the road markings

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[63] The metaphorical meaning follows the English literal translation that is marked by 'lit.' and 'met', respectively.

[64] See already in the Latin language: "The adjectives *uiridis* and *uirens* ('green') most commonly described the healthy crops and shrubs of Roman agriculture and horticulture, or the rich verdure of the Italian countryside" (Bradley 2009: 7).

partly vary among countries; e.g.: although yellow is commonly used to mark the forbidden parking, in Norway yellow markings separate the traffic directions.

Furthermore, there are colours, or coloured objects, which have been conventionally selected in many societies/languages as a symbol, such as *white* for truce/peace, or *yellow* in:

- the *yellow ribbon*, which is used in the United States, Denmark, Italy etc. (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yellow_ribbon; stand December 2015), for supporting the war prisoners and soldiers, and
- the *yellow t-shirt* used in Thailand as a sign of protest (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yellow_Shirts; stand December 2015).

In general, the metaphorical, conventional uses of colour words are more or less shared among English, Danish, and Italian, as in the following idioms:

2) En. *green fingers/thumb*, Da. *grønne fingre* (lit. 'green fingers'), It. *pollice verde* (lit. 'green thumb').

3) En. *out of the blue*, Da. *ud af det blå* (lit. 'out of the blue'); it does not exist in Italian.

4) En. *yellow-belly* does not exist neither in Danish nor in Italian.

According to Ronga et al. 2014, common tendencies in the metaphorical uses of colour are more frequently related to embodied experience and natural objects. Perceptual properties (Albertazzi 2009, 2010), experience, cognitive processes, and cultural motivation affect together the creation and conventionalization of colour metaphors. The variable interlacement between *embodied* (or *iconic*, such as in the *Grøn koncert* above), and the *conventional* (or *arbitrary*, such as in the *red* and *blue* above) associations pertains to metaphor in general (cf., among many others, Lakoff and Johnson 1980; Kittay 1987; Kövecses 2010; Lakoff 1987; Bazzanella 2009, 2014), and, by extension, to the metaphorical uses of colour words, especially in collocations, idiomatic expressions, or proverbs (Bazzanella et al. 2012, Ronga et al. 2014, Strudsholm et al. submitted).To quote an example, the meaning of the English idiom *out of the blue* is related to a blue and clear sky, from which nothing unusual is expected; but, nowadays, it is highly conventionalized.

Embodied metaphors, initially grounded in nature and experience, when conventionalized become "stored and retrieved whole from memory at the time of use" (Wray 2002: 9), by referring to a general exemplar of an object, as in the English phrase *white as a sheet:* the original colour of sheets metaphorically invokes the paleness of a visage, even today when sheets are, usually, variously coloured. Not surprisingly, Danish and Italian people resort to the same, literally and metaphorically corresponding idioms:

5) Da. hvid som et lagen,

6) It. bianco come un lenzuolo.

Interestingly, the English idiom *white noise* and the corresponding Italian and Spanish ones (that is, *rumor bianco, ruido blanco*), the colour *white* - that is, an 'achromatic' colour - matches the word *noise,* and metaphorically suggests a light, background noise (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=islibiZhbxc; stand December 2015).

The association appears arbitrary or partly motivated also in the Italian idiomatic expression *vedova nera*, which in other languages, like Danish, only refers to the very poisonous spider:

7) It. vedova nera, (lit. 'black widow'; met. 'a widow who killed her husband or made him been killed'; but also a category of serial killers (men included!), who mainly act within the family).

The Italian metaphorical meaning of:

8) It. *Principe azzurro* (lit. 'light blue prince'; met., *Prince Charming*, that is 'a man who fulfills a woman's romantic expectations'),

is shared by: *Principe azul* in Spanish, *Principe azul* in Portuguese, *Prinzep blau* in Catalan (lit. 'blue prince' for all three languages); but not in German, where *der blaue Prinz* would mean 'the drunk prince'.

2.2 Inter-/intralinguistic variations and multiple metaphorical meanings

With regard to the translation of colour terms, which isa delicate task, given their possible different connotations and values, Sutrop (2011: 44) pointed out: "If we look at colour terms only in one language, or especially the BCTs in that language, our observations remain static but, if we try to look at differences in one language or between languages, we run into problems of intra- and interlinguistic translation."

We will touch upon these two kinds of variation in the use of metaphorical colour words[65]:

- on the one hand, the *interlinguistic* variety consists either in the absence of correspondences in other languages of specific metaphorical uses (such as English *yellow-belly*, which is neither used in Danish nor in Italian), or in different associations, which the metaphorical use of the same colour word can trigger among languages (see 2.2.1),

- on the other hand, the *intralinguistic* variety, which is more surprising, consists in the different associations, which can be attributed by the metaphorical use of the same colour word within one single language (see 2.2.2).

2.2.1. The *interlinguistic* variety has been widely discussed in a contrastive perspective, and the contextual, cultural, historical, and social parameters (which play a crucial role in characterizing the selection, establishment and conventionalization of the metaphorical uses of colour words in a specific language and society, in comparison to other languages and societies) have been recently highlighted (see § 1).

To quote an example taken from our corpus[66]: Danish *ved det grønne bord* (lit. 'at the green table') denotes 'in the examination room', while Italian *al tavolo verde*

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[65] We will not deal here with 'creative' and 'polyphonic' uses, which are common in Danish newspaper titles, such as: *Københavns unge har stemt og maler hele byen i rødt* (lit. 'The youth of Copenhagen has voted and paints the whole town *red*', i.e. young people has preferentially voted for the left wing/red parties).

'(lit. 'at the green table'), means 'at the card table' (Strudsholm et al. submitted). Another example is the use of *blue-eyed*: interlinguistically, it has the same literal meaning, that is, 'with blue eyes'; but, while the English *a blue-eyed boy* has the figurative meaning of 'a darling' or 'a favoured person', the correspondences in Danish *blåøjet* and in German *blauäugig* mean 'naïve' or 'ingenuous'.

2.2.2. In general, metaphorical meaning is ambiguous[67]. Therefore, not surprisingly, when the metaphorical meaning is driven by an expression grounded on a colour word/collocate in a specific context, it may vary not only between two (or among more) languages, but also within a single language. In other words, the *intralinguistic* variation consists in different associations and values constrained by perception, culture, history, and linguistic context, which that can be metaphorically attributed to the same colour word within one single language: e.g., in Italian we use *bianco come la neve* ('white as snow'), which contrasts with *bianco come un morto* ('white as a dead man').

The English *green* can refer to freshness, vitality, but also to immaturity, such as in En. *green years* ('a person's developing years'), and *green ideas* ('unripe ideas'). Similarly in Danish and Italian, where the idioms *i min grønne ungdom* (lit. 'in my green youth') and *essere nel verde degli anni* (lit. 'to be in the green of the years'; met. to be in the early youth) are commonly used (Strudsholm et al. submitted). Recently, a new "serie verde" ('green series'), specifically addressed to A1 learners, started within a TV quiz program (see ALMA.tv; http://www.almaedizioni.it/it/ almatv/lingua-quiz/; stand December 2015).

With regard to English *red*, it assumes both a positive value, such as in examples 9) and 10), and a negative one, e.g., in *red-eye* (met. 'slave whisky') and *red tape* (met. 'bureaucratic delays').

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[66] See Ronga et al. 2014 for details on our corpus, grounded both in questionnaires and corpora.
[67] "Vagueness, ambiguity, and polysemy are typical features of the metaphorical language" (Radman 1995: 228).

9) red carpet, Da. rød løber, It. tappeto rosso.

10) *paint the town red*, Da. *male byen rød* ('to celebrate boisterously').

On the contrary, the *black* colour expresses only few positive – or neutral – associations (see examples 11-12). Negative associations prevail, by referring to unofficial, illegal uses (see examples 13-16), bad reputations (see examples 17-18), sadness or dysphoric feelings related to emotion, etc. (see § 3). These uses are more or less shared among English, Danish, and Italian:

11) *black tie*; Da. *den lille sorte* ('the little black'); It. *abito nero* ('black dress').

12) Da. *en lille sort* ('a little black', i.e. coffee laced with brandy; It. *caffè corretto*)[68].

13) black market, Da. sort marked/sort børs, It. mercato nero/borsa nera.

14) Da. *sort arbejde*, It. *lavoro nero* ('illegal work', moonlight??).

15) Da. *sorte penge* (*lit.* 'black money'), It. *denaro sporco* (lit. 'dirty money'); Da. *vaske sorte penge hvide* (lit. 'wash black money white'; met. 'launder black money').

16) black economy, It. economia near.

17) *to blacklist*, Da. *at sortliste*; Da. *at komme på den sorte liste (*lit. 'to come on the black list', i.e. 'to be blacklisted').

18) black sheep, Da. sort får, It. pecora.

In some cases, as in the following Danish example, positive or negative interpretations depend on the context:

19) *sort af mennesker* (lit. 'black with people', met. very crowded).

Let us briefly discuss here the 'mixed case' of *black Friday*, in their partially convergent and divergent uses, which encompass both a positive meaning related to shopping (which is commonly used by English and Danish; http://blackfriday-guide.dk; stand December 2015), and a negative one, related to several sad events (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Black_Friday; stand December 2015), which is also shared by Italian. Recently, also the shopping meaning is becoming common in the Italian advertisements, e.g. in EATALY's *Speciale Black Friday* (http://www.eataly.net/it_it/black-friday; stand December 2015). A recent Danish

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[68] In Triestine dialect *un nero* (lit. 'a black') is a cup of expresso coffee.

expression with reference to *Black Friday* (example 20) plays on the Danish word for *black* in the idiom *at gå i sort* (lit. 'to go in black', met. 'to go phut'):

20) *Byen går i sort til "Black Friday"* (lit. 'The town goes in black for Black Friday').

With regard to *blue*, considered by Romans as a *black* hue (Pastoureau, 2000, Garcea 2003), the Italian *blu* (which alternates also with *azzurro* 'azure-medium blue' and the less common *celeste* 'light blue'[69]) refers both to positive (example 21) and negative (example 22) meanings:

21) *Telefono Azzurro* (lit. 'the Blue Phone', that is, an institution set up to safeguard children's rights).

22) *Avere una fifa blu* (lit. 'having a blue fear'; met. experiencing an intense fear, thus causing a face so pale that is almost looks bluish, as if it is exposed to a great chill; see Biasi et al. 2013: 158).

The multiplicity of metaphorical meanings, which can be attributed to a colour word/expression in different languages and within the same language, increases when emotional features are involved, as we will see in the following section.

3. Emotional values *and double polarity* in the metaphorical uses of colour words

Recent studies have developed a wide conception of emotion, in its relationship not only with reason and mind, but also with history, culture, and language (see, e.g., Bodei 1991, Damasio 1994, Bazzanella and Kobau 2002, Weigand 2004).

Colour words can be used for referring to emotion on the basis of diverse forms of embodiment (see. 2.1). To quote an example related to the externally

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[69] Interestingly, also in other languages, such as Modern Greek, Maltese, Polish, Russian, and Turkish, the English BLUE category is often split into two or three colour words (see Ronga 2009, Sandford 2012b, Paramei and Menegaz 2013, Bimler and Uusküla 2014, Uusküla 2014, Ronga and Bazzanella 2015).

observable, facial reactions, *anger* is associated with *red* in several languages, such as English, Danish (*at blive rød i hovedet af raseri*, lit. 'to become red in the head with anger'), Italian (*rosso di rabbia*), Bulgarian (*Почервенявам от гняв* 'go red with anger'; Dobreva 2014: 196), Chinese (*mian-hong er-chi*; lit. face-red ears-red) 'become red in the face; flush with anger, shame or shyness'; Ning Yu 2002: 343), Czech, and Hungarian:

"the Czech *rudá* as well as the Hungarian *vörös* are connected with a state of being angry at someone (in Czech *být rudý vztekem* 'to be red with anger', *zroudnot jako krocan* 'to become red as turkey', meaning 'to become red with anger', in Hungarian *elvörösödik* 'to become red (with anger)'." (Uusküla 2008: 24).

Emotional associations and values attributed to colour words either can be shared by many languages or can vary, according to language, culture, and linguistic context, in a complex intertwinement of factors. Unavoidably, when one speaks about emotion, the complex balance between nature and nurture and the cross-linguistic variability come to foreground (see § 1). According to Soriano and Valenzuela (2009: 441), who applied Adams and Osgood (1973)'s semantic dimensions: "[...] colour Potency and Activity semantic ratings are likely to be more stable across languages because of their important relation to physical properties of colour, like brightness or saturation. Evaluation, on the other hand, is influenced by saturation, but seems nevertheless more sensitive to context, more dependent on external associations and a framework of reference, and therefore more prone to cross-linguistic variability."

As Da Pos and Green-Armytage (2007: 12) write: "There can be no single 'correct' colour for each emotion; emotions themselves are not one-dimensional." For example, in Italian we not only use *rosso di rabbia* ('red with anger'), but also *verde di rabbia* ('green with anger'), similarly to Bulgarian: *Позеленявам от яд* 'go green with anger' (Dobreva 2014: 196).

Within the same language, a colour word may be related with contrasting emotional values – let us label it *double polarity* - similarly to the metaphorical, multiple meanings of the colour words that we highlighted above (see § 2.2). In

Italian, the colour *green* expresses both positive (in: *verde speranza* lit. 'green hope'[70]), and negative, emotional values, such as anger (see above), and envy in *verde di invidia*, which corresponds to the following idioms English and Danish idioms: *green with envy, grøn af misundelse.*

In English, *to see red* is an expression of anger, but *red-letter day* is an expression of joy. In general, the *red* colour term is most commonly associated with joy (example 23), love (see the red rose as a symbol of love), and passion:

23) *red passion*, It. *passione rossa* (which is the name of the Ferrari Owners Club; http://www.ferrariclubtorino.it/new/images/Documenti/schedaeventochivasso.pdf; Stand December 2015).

On the negative side, *red* is related to anger (see above), urgency, warning, fear, and danger (example 24):

24) red allert, Da. rød allarm, It. allarme rosso.

By contrast, *black* generally represents negative emotions, such as fear, depression, bad luck, hopeless, and gloomy:

25) Da. *en sort dag*, It. *una giornata nera* (lit. 'a black day', met. off-day, bad day)
26) Da. *at se sort på tingene* (lit. 'to see black on the things', *met.* 'to look on the dark side of things'), It. *vedere tutto nero* (lit. to see everything black', *met.* 'to be a pessimist')
27) black humour, Da. sort humor, It. humor nero
28) black mood, da sort humør, It. nero
29) *black dog* – depression
30) *black and blue* – battered; Da. *gul og grøn* ('yellow and green')
31) Da. *den sorte bog* (lit. 'the black book', i.e. a (black) notebook where an authoritarian person (such as a teacher) registers his subordinates' (his pupils') errors)

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[70] The 'hope' value, which is attributed to the *green* colour in Italian, can be related to the Danish and Italian uses of Danish *ved det grønne bord* (lit. 'at the green table'; met.. 'in the examination room'; https://www.youtube.com/user/veddetgronnebord; stand December 2015), while Italian *al tavolo verde* '(lit. 'at the green table'; see § 2.2.1), respectively.

32) Da. *den sorte skole* (lit. 'the black school', i.e. an old-fashioned, reactionary teaching system building on rote learning and teachers' authority)

33) Da. *sort snak* (lit. 'black talk', i.e. nonsense)

34) Da. at snakke sort (lit. 'to talk black', met. 'to talk nonsense')

35) It. *cronaca nera* (lit. 'black news', i.e. crime news, crime pages)

With regard to *blue* (see note 10), the two Russian corresponding terms, namely *sinij* and *goluboj,* show distinct emotional connotations and interesting diachronic changes, as reported by Paramei (2005: 14):

In semantics of sinij, realization of extreme degrees of hue intensity (bright, saturated versus dim) is conceived to call for positive as well as negative emotional associations (Alimpieva, 1983). By comparison, *goluboj* conveys positive emotional expressive features and is commonly associated with tender, affectionate, soft (Alimpieva, 1980, 1982b, 1983). The nuance of cloudless and serene has adhered to *goluboj* under the influence of German and French 19th-century romanticism. It thence has transferred to its abstract (poetic) connotations implying cloudless insouciance, unrealistically sanguine (Wade, 1985), or at the beginning of the 20th century, the unearthly or innocent (Grebenšcikova, 2002).

4. Conclusion

As expected in an integrative perspective, on the one hand, metaphorical uses of colour terms share common tendencies (which are based on embodied features or conventionally established ones), and show significant variations, on the other hand.

Furthermore, colour terms in context assume a multiplicity of metaphoric meanings, by showing both inter- and intralinguistic variations, which characterize also the positive or negative values associated to the metaphorical use of a colour word.

The *cognitive* force, vagueness, and ambiguity of the metaphorical processes combine with the richness of the chromatic spectrum and its multifarious hues, to

represent the complexity and variety of emotion in their common and diverse forms.

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