

Colour Terms in Languages

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Abstract

Colour terms are found to exist in all languages and they contribute vitally in stressing ideas or conveying meanings in a subtle but significant manner. Colour terms, apart from their indication to the concrete visual characteristic, have certain connotative meanings. The connotative meanings of colour terms apparently correlate with the culture of the respective language. This paper attempts to briefly compare English and Tamil in terms of their colour terms. In this way, the writer also intends to identify the cultural similarities and dissimilarities between these two languages.

Key Words: Connotative meaning, Symbolic expression Cultural niches, Cultural similarities

Introduction

Colour Terminology

Colour seems to be a subject that has drawn the attention since the olden days. The origins of colour symbolism go so far back in time that it is impossible to ascertain where they came from. As an object of study in the field of optics, colour has been studied extensively. Its applications in experimental and clinical psychology are still modern. Medicine too has found a use for colour, though in a somewhat unconventional way. With the exception of optics, whose main objective is to understand the physical realization of colour as a visual phenomenon, the other areas mentioned above are all concerned with what colour means, either in apparently absolute terms or in a subjective, idiosyncratic sense, despite the fact that, objectively speaking, colour has no meaning as such as it is simply an optical manifestation. For this reason, Peirce (1965) placed it in the grouping which he calls **qualisigns**: the group reserved for phenomena such as colour and musical tones whose nature is qualitative and devoid of inherent meaning. Yet one can find the existence of a very strong perception refuting any suggestion that colours are

semantically empty. This assumption is created in terms of the fact that colours are an extraordinarily rich source of symbolism. They are full of connotative and affective meanings which are institutionalized by the fusion of academic knowledge and mainstream culture.

Colour Meaning and Terminology

Colour “meaning” is mostly interpreted with citations from language, in the form of recognized phrases such as ‘red with anger’, ‘green with envy’. Such phrases are evidences of their authority and appropriateness as examples of figurative or symbolic meanings. There is a strong connection between the figurative and symbolic meanings ascribed to colours, and the use of colour words in the language. In fact, the use of colour words adds to a great extent, to the effectiveness of the notions expressed by language.

Colour terminology is a source that can be used to gather knowledge about the relationship between different languages in terms of the cultures of the speech communities that use those languages. It is obvious that all languages make use of basic colour terms. A basic colour term is a single word i.e. green or violet, not combination of words such as light green or dark blue. It can’t be the subdivision of some colour, like crimson or scarlet which are of red. A basic colour term has quite general use; it must not refer only to a confined class of objects. For example, in English blond is applied exclusively in the colour of hair and wood. Further, the term must not be highly restricted, in the sense that it is used by only a certain section of speakers.

Patterns

A detailed study carried on colour terms found in a wide variety of languages provides information about certain interesting patterns. In case, only two terms are available in a language, they are for equivalents to black and white or dark and light. If there is a third, it is red. The fourth and the fifth terms will be yellow and green, but the order can be reversed. Blue and brown occur as the sixth and seventh terms. Terms such as pink, gray, orange and purple as in English are found, but not in any particular order. We also come across combinations like greenish-yellow, variations like pink, modification like fire-engine-red and various designations assigned by paint and cosmetic manufacturers. (Wardhaugh, R. 1986)

The extent of colour terminology in specific languages can be related with the cultural and technical aspects of the societies whose members speak these languages. It appears to be reasonable to assume that communities that experience little technological advancement have the fewest colour terms in usage; e.g., the Jale of New Guinea has words corresponding to dark and light only. Whereas societies that are technically advanced have terms corresponding to all the above mentioned colour terms. Societies at intermediate level in technological development have intermediate number of colour terms; for example, the Tiv of Nigeria has three terms; the Garo of Assam and the Hanunoo of the Philippines have four; and the Burmese have seven (Wardhaugh,R.,1986).

Colour Lexemes

Colour lexemes are found to vary from language to language. English has eleven basic colour lexemes: white, black, red, green, yellow, blue, brown, purple, pink, orange and gray. In contrast, the following features are observed in other languages. Navaho has a single lexeme for both brown and gray, but it has two terms for black: the black of darkness and the black of such objects as goal. Two kinds of blue are found in Russian and Hungarian has two terms for red. There is a single term for green, blue or pale, depending on context (e.g. vegetables, sea, clouds) in Japanese. Only four basic colour terms, black, white, red and green are available in Hanunoo (Christal, D., 1997).

Language and Culture

The notion that a strong relationship always exists between language and culture has been very popular and under study for long. That is, there should be some relationship between the phonetic structural elements and the sounds of the language and the ways in which speakers of the language realize the world and behave in it. The ways in which language and culture are related vary. In this context, some comments on what is meant by culture may be appropriate. Goodenough (1957, p.167) defined culture thus: ‘A society’s culture consists of whatever it is one has to know and or believe in order to operate in a manner acceptable to its members and to do so in any role that accept for any one of themselves.’ The knowledge pertaining to culture is socially acquired. The members of a particular society learn the necessary behaviours and they do not inherit them from others.

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According to Edward Sapir (1929), language and culture are closely associated and one cannot be understood or appreciated without knowledge of the other.

Language is a social institution both shaping and shaped by society at large or in particular the ‘cultural niches’ in which it plays an important role. If we assume that language is or should be understood as cultural practice, then we ought to admit the notion of culture in relation to language. Language is not an autonomous construct but a social mechanism both creating and created by the structures and forces of the social institutions within which we live and function. It is apparent that language cannot exist in a vacuum and one can be firm in one’s assertion that there is a kind of transfusion that operates between language and culture (Fairclough, 1989).

Among those who have illustrated the affinity between language and culture, it is Duranti who has impressively expressed how these two have been interwoven.

“... to be part of a culture means to share the propositional knowledge and the rules of inference necessary to understand whether certain propositions are true(given certain premises). To the propositional knowledge, one might add the procedural knowledge to carry out tasks such as cooking, weaving, farming, fishing, giving a formal speech, answering the phone, asking a favour, writing a letter for a job application” (Duranti, 1997: 28-29).

It’s quite obvious that language used for everyday interaction is a mixture of cultural bits and pieces. In the course of our speech, we assume social and cultural roles, which are so deeply enriched in our thought processes as to go unnoticed. “Culture defines not only what its members should think or learn but also what they should ignore or treat as irrelevant.” (Eleanor Armour & Sharon-Ann Gopaul – Mc Nicol, 1998:56)

“Language does not exist apart from culture, that is,from the socially inherited assemblage of practices and beliefs that determines the texture of our lives.” (Sapir, 1970:207)

Goodenough (1981:62) summarises the contents of culture quoted below.

- The ways in which people have organized their experience of their phenomenal world so as to give it structure as a system of cause and effective relationships, that is, the propositions and beliefs by which they explain events and accomplish their purposes.
- The ways in which people have organized their experience of the real world so as to give it structure as a phenomenal world of forms, their percepts, and concepts.
- The ways in which people have organized their experiences so as to structure their world in hierarchies of preferences, namely their value or sentimental systems.
- The ways in which people have organized their experience of their past efforts to accomplish recurring purposes into operational procedures for accomplishing these purposes in the future, that is, a set of grammatical principles of action and a series of recipes for accomplishing particular ends.

In fact, culture prescribes standards for deciding what is, standards for deciding what can be, standards for deciding how one feels about it, standards for deciding what to do about it and standards for deciding how to go about doing it. It is quite clear, culture is a ubiquitous force, forging out identities and our relationships with other things and individuals. Were it not for culture, we would be little more than----- gibbering, incomprehensible idiots, less capable of mere survival than a member of the very earliest tribe of prehistoric people the social legacy the individual acquires from his group leads to the belief that to be human ineluctably means to be cultured (Thanasoulas, 2001).

The Place of Colour Terms in Culture

It is quite interesting to note the feature of the association of colour terms with language expressions that reflect the culture of the society. Some cultural aspects which are common for all nations irrespective of ethnic, linguistic or religious divisions are represented by expressions linked with colour terms. For instance, white stands for purity, peace, etc., in almost all cultures throughout the world.

Colour is one of the most significant physical features of concrete objects. It partially contributes to the distinctiveness and identity of a visible object. Colour also adds to the external

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appearance. Human race has manipulated the language in several ways in conceptualizing ideas and it has done so through the use of colour terms as well to highlight or bring out the abstract qualities. The use of colour terms to represent the abstract qualities in different languages remains the same in some instances and varies in other instances. For example, in both English and Tamil, black represents melancholy, grief, etc., and while ‘black lie’ and ‘white lie’ in English denote very harmful lie and harmless lie respectively. The phrase ‘pachchai poi’, the literal meaning of which is *green lie* in Tamil refers to the astringency of the lie.

Most languages seem to have the treasure of typical expressions including idioms associated with colour terms. These expressions have connotations which create strong effect as intended by speakers. In English, white coffee and black coffee are not white and black. White and black appear to indicate polarity and they are not supposed to offer an accurate indication of colour. Likewise, the kind of wine that is very pale yellow, amber or golden is called white wine. *White wine* and *white coffee* are only relatively white. The phrases, ‘white lies’ and ‘blue jokes’ do not seem to have any logical link with a colour. With white coffee, the meaning can at least be guessed at considering the two constituent words. The white in ‘white lies’ may imply purity of intention. But in the idiom, blue joke, the blue doesn’t offer any clue to understand the meaning of the phrase. Since the constituent words of idioms are independent in expressing connotations, idioms can have wide freedom. As no justification avails for vulgar jokes to be blue, Spaniards call them green. Chinese associate such things with yellow (Poole, C.S., 1999).

English and Tamil Expressions Associated with Colour Terms

Some interesting expressions associated with colour terms, the constituent words of which incorporate colour terms, are considered for discussion here. The commonness in meaning of some of the expressions in both of these languages provides evidence for the cultural similarity of the two nations to some extent.

While some traditional expressions involving colour terms seem to be common in these languages, some others have been directly translated from English into Tamil and are found to be in frequent usage, particularly in electronic and press media, presently.

Traditional expressions

The colour term *green* referred to as ‘pachchai’ in Tamil is used to denote the state of being immature, inexperienced and easily fooled, in both English and Tamil. It could be noted that when leaves or fruits are unripe, they remain green. Hence, in the same sense, the term *green* is used to represent the quality of being immature. An example in English is the expression, ‘a young green novice’, while in Tamil, phrases like, ‘pachchai pillai’ (literal meaning – green child) and ‘pachchai thanneer’ (literal meaning – green water) are used to refer to a person who is very innocent or harmless, to imply the state of being immature.

There is the Tamil proverb, “Ik katai maddukku ak katai pachchai” (literal meaning – For the cow grazing on this side, the other side seems to be greener) which is the equivalent of the English proverb, “The grass is greener on the other side” and one can observe the occurrence of the colour *green* term in both proverbs.

The figurative usage of green meaning flourishing, fresh or full of vigour as in the utterances like, ‘Memories are still green’ in English and ‘pasumai ninaivuhal’ (literal meaning – green memories) in Tamil is found in both languages.

Also, in both English and Tamil, colour term ‘red’ is used to refer to the mental state of anger or shyness.

The term ‘pale’ referred to as ‘veliral’ in Tamil, is associated with emotional states, fear and shock in both languages.

Translated Forms

The following formations in current usage in Tamil are direct translations of the English phrases involving colour terms.

English Phrases

white paper

black market

Tamil Formations

vellai arikkai

karuppu santhai

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black out	iruddadippu sei
black mail	vilak meyil (used as a borrowing)
give green light	pachchai kodi kaddu
blue film	vulu pilim (used as a borrowing)
red carpet treatment	senkampala varavetpu

Of the above examples, except the phrases involving colour terms green and blue, in the other phrases, one could recognize the logical link between the colour term and the meaning suggested by it. For instance, the phrase ‘black market’ connotes secret and illegal transactions since the term ‘black’ implying darkness refers to secret environment conducive to unethical practices. The same connotation of darkness as secret environment is found in Tamil as well. Hence it’s fair to maintain that though the phrases in the examples are of English origin, the connotations of the colour terms in them are common in both English and Tamil.

Concluding Remarks

In this article, the author has explored the cultural affinity of the English and Tamils by analyzing the usage of some phrases/expressions incorporating colour terms in English and Tamil and the he readily admits that this analysis is very scanty. Hence, he hopes that an extensive study of this nature encompassing other languages too, by other writers would bring in more interesting information regarding linguistic, cultural and anthropological aspects of the languages of the world.

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