

## A SEMANTIC AND PRAGMATIC ANALYSIS OF ENGLISH COLOUR IDIOMS\*

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Idioms have been vastly researched in the last years from various perspectives (psychological, cognitive and linguistic). The present contribution sets out to explore the semantic and pragmatic dimensions of idiomatic expressions through the analysis of a small corpus of colour idioms in the English language. First, we will examine the motivation underlying idioms. Colour words are frequently used to mean something other than a sensory property. They have developed figurative meanings grounded on conceptual structure or on culture. Secondly, we will discuss the usage of idioms with data drawn from *The Times*. Our ultimate aim is to demonstrate that the use of idioms in context shows their communicative purpose, as is shown through their occurrence in headlines and through idiom modification and creation. Our focus will be on the effect of idiomatic variation on the semantic motivation of idioms.

**Keywords:** *Idiom, motivation, metaphor, metonymy, variation.*

Las expresiones idiomáticas han sido objeto de estudio en los últimos años desde diversas perspectivas (psicológica, cognitiva y lingüística). El objetivo del presente artículo es analizar las dimensiones semántica y pragmática de los idiomatismos a través del estudio de un pequeño corpus de fraseologismos de color en inglés. Analizaremos primeramente la motivación subyacente a las expresiones. En este sentido, los términos de color no poseen siempre un significado asociado a una propiedad

sensorial, sino que tienen un sentido figurado basado en la estructura conceptual o culturalmente específico. Posteriormente abordaremos el uso de las expresiones idiomáticas con ejemplos extraídos de *The Times*. El objetivo último es demostrar que el uso contextualizado de los idiomatismos revela su función comunicativa tal como se refleja en su presencia en titulares de prensa y en la variación y creación idiomáticas. Nos centraremos en los efectos de la variación idiomática en la motivación semántica de los idiomatismos.

**Palabras clave:** *Expresión idiomática, motivación, metáfora, metonimia, variación.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Figurative language has been vastly researched in recent years (Gibbs 1989; Moon 1998; Dobrovol'skij and Piirainen 2005, among others). Among the various classes of figurative expressions, idioms have attracted much attention. Idioms are to be understood as syntactically and lexically fixed multi-word units whose meaning it is often difficult or impossible to retrieve from their components.

Research into idioms has addressed a wide range of issues, ranging from the metaphoric motivation of idioms (Lakoff 1987, 2006; Lakoff and Johnson, 1980; Gibbs and Steen 1999; Kövecses 2000, 2006; Langlotz 2006; Boers and Stengers 2008) to cross-linguistic idiom description (Awwad 1990; Dobrovol'skij 1992, 2000; Corpas 2000; Dobrovol'skij and Piirainen 2005).

Studies on colour idioms (Derrig 1978; Bennett 1988; Sweetser 1990; Wierzbicka 1990; Luque 2001; Trim 2007) have focused on the semantic expansion of colour terms. This article attempts to provide an explanation for this semantic extension by examining the different types of motivation underlying colour idioms in English.

The motivation of idioms has already been the subject of linguistic research (Tristá 1988; Corpas 2003; Dobrovol'skij and

Piirainen 2005), the bulk of it being undertaken from a cognitive-semantics perspective (Lakoff and Johnson 1999; Langlotz 2006; Boers and Stengers 2008).

This paper provides a semantic and pragmatic account of English colour idioms through the analysis of a dictionary-based corpus containing 27 idioms drawn from two dictionaries, the *Oxford Idioms Dictionary* (2010) and the *Cambridge International Dictionary of English Idioms* (2007):

- **BLACK**: give somebody a black look, in black and white, be in the black, black list, black spot, get a black mark, black humour, black day, black market, black sheep.
- **WHITE**: be white with fear, be white with anger, white sale, white lie.
- **RED**: see red, red with anger, red light district, red tape, roll out the red carpet, give someone a red carpet treatment, be in the red, red herring, red-letter day.
- **BLUE**: have/take/fall into a blue fit, feel blue.
- **GREEN**: have green fingers.
- **GREY**: grey matter.

## 2. SEMANTIC ANALYSIS OF ENGLISH COLOUR IDIOMS

The background of our analysis is the assumption that many idioms are motivated (or semantically transparent) in the sense that the conceptual links between the actual meaning and the image component are immediately comprehensible (Dobrovol'skij 2005). This claim has led us to discard semantically-opaque colour idioms, e.g. 'talk a blue streak', 'white knight', 'once in a blue moon', 'white knight', 'be green around the gills', 'red-blooded man'.

As mentioned earlier, the motivation of idioms has been approached from a cognitive perspective. In this light, Lakoff (1987), Langlotz (1996) and Dobrovol'skij and Piirainen's (2005) have put forward different models of idiom motivation. While Lakoff and Langlotz discuss the motivation of idioms on the basis of conceptual metaphor, Dobrovol'skij and Piirainen's (2005: 87) suggest two types

of motivation: iconic and symbolic. Iconically-motivated idioms can be described either on the level of the underlying conceptual metaphor/metonymy or on the basis of the imagery evoked by the lexical structure of the expression. In contrast, symbolically-motivated idioms are dependent on symbolic knowledge, i.e. cultural knowledge about the symbolic value of concepts. In this sense, the latter can be regarded as a category of culturally-based idioms. This leads us to postulate that the idiomatic character of many English colour idioms can be explained in terms of their metaphoric or cultural foundations. As a matter of fact, the analysis of our corpus reveals that the idioms are either motivated by cognitive mechanisms such as metaphor and metonymy or draw on cultural knowledge.

The links between the literal reading and the actual meaning of several idioms are provided by a conceptual metaphor or metonymy. Metaphor is a conceptual mapping (a set of correspondences) between two domains that involves understanding the elements and structure of one domain (the target) in terms of the elements and structure of another domain (the source). Metonymy is also defined as a conceptual mapping, but it differs from metaphor in two ways: first, the mapping takes place within a conceptual domain; second, in metonymy the source stands for the target.

Several studies have investigated the metaphoric basis of idioms. Sweetser (1990), for example, has explained the figurative meaning of colour idioms in terms of metaphorical extension. Cognitive theory (Lakoff and Johnson 1980; Lakoff 1987; Gibbs 1989) has highlighted the role of conceptual metaphor in the construction of the idiomatic meaning of many expressions. As Langlotz (2006: 53) remarks, “conceptual metaphor is an important basis for the semantic structuring of idioms”.

The conceptual metaphors underlying colour idioms capture an emotion. In line with this, Trim (2007: 124) claims that the sensory properties of colours produce “emotion resonances”. Thus, Iñesta and Pamies (2002) postulate the metaphors FEAR IS A CHANGE OF COLOUR and ANGER IS A CHANGE OF COLOUR. The former would come into view in the idiom ‘be white with fear’, whereas the latter would be instantiated by various idioms: be white with anger,

have/take/fall into a blue fit, see red, red with anger.

Nonetheless, the view of negative emotions as changes of colour does not account for the choice of colour terms to express those emotions. An alternative explanation has been provided by Kövecses (2000). He shows that the physiological reactions accompanying emotions are metonymically related to these emotions, the visible sign of the emotion standing for the emotion. Thus, when somebody is frightened, their veins constrict and they turn white. This explains the association between the white colour and fear.

The same kind of motivating link is found in the idioms for anger. When somebody is angry, their veins dilate and the person turns red ('see red') or blue ('have/take/fall into a blue fit').

A few idioms instantiate other conceptual metonymies. Thus 'red light district' (i.e. district where there are brothels) and 'in black and white' instantiate a PART-FOR-THE-WHOLE metonymy: in the former idiom, the red lights stand for the brothels; in the latter idiom the colours evoke ink and paper. Similarly, the idiom 'white sale' is based on an EFFECT-FOR-THE-CAUSE metonymy - the sale of household linen. A further example is provided by the idiom 'grey matter', which activates a CONTAINED-FOR-CONTENT metonymy ('matter' standing for the brain).

The semantic interpretation of another set of English colour idioms rests upon cultural knowledge. Dobrovolskij and Piirainen (2005: 214) propose five types of cultural knowledge that provide a motivation for idioms: social interaction; material culture; intertextual phenomena; fictive conceptual domains (e.g. ancient folk theories) and cultural symbols. The relevant types for our analysis are material culture and cultural symbols.

The semantic reading of some idioms involves knowledge of old customs. Thus, the actual meaning of 'red tape' is linked to the custom of tying up official documents with red ribbon or tape.

Likewise, the meaning of respectful or deferential attention associated with red in 'roll out the red carpet' and 'give somebody a red

carpet treatment' is based on the custom of laying a red strip of red carpet for important visitors to walk on.

In much the same way, the meanings of 'be in the black' and 'be in the red' are derived from the habit of recording profits and losses in bank accounts in black and red respectively.

The actual meaning of 'red herring' (a diversionary topic to deflect attention from the truth or main subject) results from the pickled herrings used in a drag hunt to destroy the scent and confuse the hounds.

Last but not least, the meaning of a red-letter day (a special occasion) is linked to the custom of painting saints' days and holidays red on calendars.

Another set of culturally-based idioms draws on knowledge about the symbolic value of colours. The issue of colour symbolization has been explored by Portal (1989), Ferrer (1999), and Pastoureau & Simonnet (2005), among others. Pastoureau and Simonnet have studied the symbolic values of the basic colours, as shown in table 1:

COLOUR	SYMBOLIC VALUE
blue	sobriety, conservatism, sadness
red	violence, passion, eroticism
white	pureness, virginity, truth
green	immaturity, freedom, changeability, ecology
black	austerity, elegance
yellow	deception, treachery
pink	Gentleness
grey	Intelligence

Table 1. Symbolic values of the basic colours (Pastoureau and Simonnet 2005).

Black occurs in a symbolic function in the following idioms:

Meaning 'bad, evil': black list, black spot, get a black mark, black humour, black sheep, give somebody a black look.

Meaning 'unhappy': black day.

Meaning ‘wrong’: black market.

White is another culturally-relevant symbol for ‘good’, ‘correct’, as shown in the idiom ‘white lie’, where it attenuates the meaning of the kernel constituent.

The different types of motivation overlap in some idioms. Thus, the idiom ‘in black and white’ has two meanings: the meaning ‘in print/writing’ obtains via a metonymy (see above), whereas the meaning ‘as good or bad, with no grades between them’ relies on the symbolic function of these colours (white=good, black=bad). A metaphoric and symbolic reading can also be suggested for ‘black sheep’ (undesirable person). On the one hand, the idiom instantiates the metaphor PEOPLE ARE ANIMALS. On the other hand, ‘black’ is a symbol for ‘bad’ in the expression.

The same holds for the idiom ‘have green fingers’, where the PART-FOR-THE-WHOLE metonymy (the fingers standing for the person) intermingles with the symbolic link between this colour and nature.

### 3. PRAGMATIC ANALYSIS OF ENGLISH COLOUR IDIOMS

The communicative effect of idiomatic expressions has been highlighted by several authors (e.g. Herrera and White 2010). Our corpus-based research shows the high occurrence of colour idioms in the press. To give but one example, *The Times* has listed 1,272 tokens of ‘red carpet’ in the last eight years. The frequency of occurrence of colour idioms in British newspapers is evidenced in the following examples:

- (1) Service industries were in the black and capital flowed into Britain from abroad.
- (2) This is not just a stain on the face of football, it is a black mark against society as a whole.
- (3) The European Commission has produced its own black list of airlines it considers unsafe.
- (4) But we can not yet quantify the impact of culture on grey

matter.

(5) Many investors who followed the bellwether felt blue about a blue chip that seemed more institution than enterprise.

(6) Armstrong will not give an interview to The Times, and that is despite swearing that he no longer has a black list of the newspapers and journalists to whom he will and won't speak.

Example (5) illustrates the use of a colour idiom to present a contrast with another colour idiom. Example (6) points to the ideological value of idioms since the expression 'black list' is used to assess Armstrong's attitude to the press.

Interestingly enough, many colour idioms appear in headlines. This fact supports the communicative impact of idiomatic constructions, since headlines aim to draw reader attention.

The following headlines exemplify the use of colour idioms in actual discourse:

- (7) Troublesome tourists blacklisted by hotels
- (8) Red-letter day for village that has won back its beloved phone box
- (9) Jim Cahill refuses to feel blue at Everton's poor start to season
- (10) President rolls out the red carpet for rescued miners
- (11) Faster help for patients as red tape is cut
- (12) No black spot
- (13) Black day for Wales as they lose their way again
- (14) New Cambridge website makes Oxford feel blue
- (15) Green groups see red as BP plans the closure of its alternative energy office
- (16) Hamilton's red-letter day
- (17) Why pink makes me feel blue
- (18) A black mark for senator White

The communicative impact of the idiom in the last example is enhanced through contrast with the name of the politician involved in the event being discussed.

A point worth mentioning is the high degree of variation with

which colour idioms occur in our sample. Such variation has a communicative potential deriving from two factors (Herrera and White 2010: 171): a) the modification makes the presence of the underlying canonical idiom more strongly felt; b) the variation calls reader attention, thus contributing extra communicative impact.

We found evidence in our corpus of two types of idiomatic variation which have a bearing on the semantic motivation of idioms earlier mentioned:

Lexical variation (i.e. variation in lexical structure)

Semantic variation (i.e. variation in meaning)

Further, we encountered two forms of lexical variation: a) addition of elements to the canonical idioms; b) substitution of an element in the canonical form.

Some colour idioms deviate from the canonical form by introducing a new lexeme. Such addition is meant to intensify the idiomatic meaning, thus enhancing the idiom's communicative effect, as illustrated by the following example:

(19) During our conversation she tells an utterly harmless white lie.

The positive symbolic meaning of 'white' is highlighted by the addition of the modifying phrase 'utterly harmless'.

The addition of an embedded element may touch upon the semantic motivation of the colour idiom inasmuch as it operates a metaphorical/metonymical extension, as shown in the following instance:

(20) He has green fingers with horses.

The addition of the element 'with horses' involves the expansion of the metaphorical meaning of the canonical form. Thus, the figurative meaning 'be good at gardening' has expanded in such a way that the idiom has come to denote skill in other fields, the

symbolic meaning of 'green' being lost.

The following example illustrates idiomatic variation through substitution:

(21) Opening soon: the huge pink elephant funded by the Arts Council

The item 'white' in the canonical idiom ('a white elephant') has been substituted by 'pink' to evoke the colour of a new gallery in London which has had high funding. The substitution bears on the semantic motivation of the idiom in that the metaphor lying at the heart of the idiom combines with a PART-FOR-THE-WHOLE metonymy (the colour of the building standing for the building).

The substitution may have more relevant consequences on the semantic plane, as shown in the following extract:

(22) Tempus: Sir Tom extends green fingers

A battle royal is shaping between the two businessmen for control of Dobbies Garden Centres.

The substitution of the verbal constituent 'have' by 'extend' entails the modification of the idiomatic meaning. Although it is true that 'green' retains its symbolic value associated with nature, the modified idiom reflects the metaphorical link of the hand with control and power. It is worth noting that the context plays an important role in yielding this interpretation of the idiom.

A more interesting form of idiom modification is semantic variation. The meaning of colour idioms is modified in either of two ways: (i) through ambiguity (Langlotz 1996), i.e. by giving the expression a literal reading; (ii) by providing the idiom with a new meaning. In both cases the variation has the effect of eliminating the metaphorical or cultural motivation behind the colour idiom.

Ambiguity is exemplified by the following instance:

(23) Look for the blood on the red carpet at this year's Oscars.

The phrase ‘the blood’ disactivates the cultural metaphor ‘red carpet’ and activates a metaphor where this element represents a person’s social status or rather an actor’s placement in the Hollywood hierarchy. Again, the context helps this reading of the idiom.

The idiom ‘black list’ has a different meaning in the headline *Football’s emerging force on the Black List* (notice capitalization), where it refers to the emergence of black footballers in the British League. It is clear that the semantic variation changes the type of motivation underlying the idiom. Thus, there is a shift from a culturally-motivated idiom (black being a powerful cultural symbol) to a metonymically-motivated expression, the colour term reflecting a PART-FOR-THE-WHOLE metonymy.

Further examples of semantic variation involve the idiom ‘have green fingers’:

(24) Green fingers

(25) Little green fingers

The former headline refers to the fingers of Robert Green, who committed a goalkeeping error in a match. In contrast, the latter headline suggests a reduction of the idiomatic meaning since ‘little’ refers to children, the article giving advice on how to help children build a garden.

What is most striking is the creation of new idioms on the basis of existing ones. This emphasizes the communicative function of idiomatic expressions. We found two instances of idioms built on the pattern of ‘white lie’:

(26) [...] a white lie (I say I am not going to vote Obama, but secretly I will) [...] a black lie (I say I am going to vote Obama, but secretly I will not).

(27) [...] launched his political party, Veritas, yet with a little white lie. Actually, that is not true. It was a little tanned lie.

The idioms ‘a black lie’ and ‘a tanned lie’ have been coined on

the basis of the symbolic meaning of white and black. The use of 'tanned' has an attenuating effect as compared with 'black'.

Another example of semantic variation is provided by the headline *Wine: Time to see red*. The idiom 'see red' loses its meaning and the link between the literal and the figurative meaning is closer, 'see' being a perception verb. The new semantic interpretation is grounded on a PART-FOR-THE-WHOLE metonymy, 'red' standing for red wine.

The same type of metonymy underlies the idiom in the following examples:

(28) See red at the most famous local fiesta – the tomato-throwing La Tomatina ('red' stands for the colour of the tomatoes thrown at the fiesta)

(29) Communists see red on Stalin birthday ('red' stands for the red carnations placed on Stalin's grave on what would have been his 103<sup>rd</sup> birthday)

#### 4. CONCLUSION

The present contribution has focused on idioms. We have addressed two issues: the semantic motivation underlying idiomatic expressions and the use of idioms in actual discourse. The semantic analysis of a small corpus of English colour idioms has yielded two types of motivated idioms: metaphorically-motivated and culturally-motivated. The pragmatic analysis has shown the communicative impact of colour idioms in the British press, as evidenced in their high occurrence and degree of variation. At the same time, such variation bears on the semantic motivation of idioms by triggering a different type of motivation. The scope of this paper being limited, it appears that the interdependence between the semantic and pragmatic dimensions of idioms should be further investigated in corpus-based studies.

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