Colour word usage within languages follows the Berlin and Kay ordering

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Abstract: Colour word usage within languages follows the same ordering as that proposed by Berlin and Kay between languages. This provides additional validation and support for Berlin and Kay’s schema.

In a recent commentary (McManus 1997a) on the target article by Saunders and van Brakel (1997t) (S&vB), I tried to make the substantive point that the Berlin and Kay (1969) ordering of colour words between languages is in part validated by the appearance of the same ordering on the usage of words within languages, citing studies of my own (McManus 1983; 1997b) and others (Hays et al. 1972) on a range of languages, including Chinese. In addition I made some minor comments, as did others, about an “appearance of sloppiness” (S&vB’s original phrase) in their own work.

In their reply Saunders & van Brakel (1997t) chose to ignore the question of variation within languages due to “marginality” (their Table R2). Instead, under the heading of “Sloppiness” they claimed that McManus indicates that he has reported data on the frequency of colour words in Chinese poetry, which would lend support to Berlin and Kay’s (1969) order of evolutionary antiquity. Table 1 and Figure 1 of McManus’s (1983) data are labelled “Chinese poetry” (Chou & Chen 1935). However, Chou & Chen (1935) say nothing about Chinese poetry, providing data only on colour preferences of Chinese students (p. 214).

I am not sure whether this comment was put under its heading with ironic intent, but sloppiness seems here to be self-referential, because on p. 301 of their paper Chou and Chen (1935) clearly state: “Ouyang (10) and J. Y. Chen (3) had counted the frequency of various color words contained in Chinese poems and prose. The frequencies of appearance in Chinese literature of our nine colors are shown in Table 7.” Table 7 then sums the data from the two colours and provides a rank ordering. It is these summed data that I used in my 1983 paper.

Perhaps now that the precise reference to the frequency of colour word usage in Chinese has been spelled out, and similar data have also been cited for English, Spanish, French, German, Russian, Romanian, and Hebrew, S&vB could address the substantive issue? Does now what would otherwise seem an inexplicable coherence of ordering within a range of different languages actually provide strong support for the ordering of Berlin and Kay (1969)? If it does not, then some alternative explanation of the data must be provided.

“Universals of colour” from a linguistic point of view

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Abstract: Saunders and van Brakel’s observation that “linguistic evidence provides no grounds for the universality of basic color categories” also applies to the concept of “colour” itself. The language of “seeing” is rooted in human experience, and its basic frame of reference is provided by the universal rhythm of “light” days and “dark” nights and by the fundamental and visually salient features of human environment: the sky, the sun, vegetation, fire, the sea, the naked earth.