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Colour word usage within languages follows the Berlin and Kay ordering

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periential categories, for example, what *we* would separately call texture, luminosity, freshness, and so on (see, e.g., Conklin 1955). Or, if they have no concept of colour, and lack names for colours as such, they may have words that they use to describe the appearance of things in terms of what *we* would designate as colour. There is, therefore, no “natural” way of classifying colours, no cross-cultural support for a separate domain of “pure” colours onto which different languages are mapped. Colours, as *we* know them, are not universals of human perceptual experience.

The natural and the normative. Physical nature and human nature are part of the framework in which we categorise colours. How the world is and how we are constituted as sentient beings are preconditions for identification. However, it is the language we speak that limits our understanding and, in turn, the knowledge we bring to bear when we categorise. Rather than having their meanings imposed by the constraints of nature, colour words take on such constraints insofar as these can be put to use for social and communicative purposes, that is, insofar as they are meaningful. This inverts the assumed priority of things. The received (Platonistic) view takes colour categorisation to be the outcome of attaching labels to an ordered set of focal colours that are naturally salient to our visual system, then generalising to similar instances. However, although aspects of our conceptual scheme depend upon our neurobiology, the former cannot be elucidated in neural terms. The criteria for explaining the colours of our scheme are logically distinct from the physiology of the enabling system. Practical purposes establish pertinences. For example, although our colour sense enables us to distinguish blues from greens, it is only if we have a use for this distinction, only if it serves a communicative purpose, that we make it meaningful. Those colours that are important for us are selectively and differentially attended to by our culture. Thus we distinguish blues from greens, whereas other cultures, for whom this distinction is not important, see these as the same colour, as belonging to the same category. Colour, though visually salient, is not conceptually salient until cultural development makes it so through the acknowledgment of colours. It is the need for any conceptual scheme for colours to be socially accessible that explains the biological correlates and cultural regularities of such schemes.

Nontrivial constraints on colour categorisation must exist if we are to explain why people within a culture talk about and communicate by means of colour. However, such constraints are to be found in the logic of particular colour grammars.

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 (1997r) 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.

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