

Basic colour terms revisited - cross-linguistic variability and regularity in the colour term lexicon

Marina Pusenjak

Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München, marina.pusenjak@campus.lmu

Keywords: lexicon, colour terms, cognitive typology, writing systems, anthropological linguistics

Colour vocabularies show arguably the most exciting lexical gaps that anthropology and linguistics have addressed. Over the past 164 years, the rationale has changed from assumed anatomical deficits in historical populations, to linguistic-cultural arbitrariness, to a universal-evolutionary approach. The last paradigm shift, Berlin and Kay's (B&K) colour word theory is critically examined in this talk.

The theory developed between 1969 (cf. Berlin & Kay 1969) and 2009 (cf. Kay et al. 2009), partly in collaboration with other researchers, and has significantly determined typological colour word research. B&K's universal and evolutionary colour word theory has since been criticised in numerous publications (e.g., Crawford 1982, Hickerson 1971, Lucy 1997, Saunders 1992). While the theory has gone through some changes, especially considering the sequence in which colour terms develop, the methodology and as part of it the criteria for BCT, have not been revised by B&K.

What can cross-linguistic variability and regularity tell us about the composition of colour term lexicons? In my research I investigate the way of reasoning and methodological weaknesses of B&K's criteria as definition for their concept *basic colour terms* (BCT), to create improvements for future colour word research. To achieve this goal, I evaluate B&K's theory. If we look at the colour term lexicon from a cross-linguistic viewpoint in a bottom-up manner instead of top-down, it will open a different perspective on morphological considerations, translatability, language structure as well as inconsistencies in application of the BCT criteria. The languages used for this comparison are Chinese, Japanese, and Croatian among others. This will not only shine a light on the shortcomings of the current criteria, but also help to understand how the methodology stands in the way of new findings.

References

- Berlin, Brent & Paul Kay. 1969. *Basic Color Terms. Their Universality and Evolution*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Crawford, T. D. 1982. Defining 'Basic Color Term'. *Anthropological Linguistics* 24 (3). 338-343.
- Hickerson, Nancy. 1971. [Review] Basic Color Terms: Their Universality and Evolution by Brent Berlin and Paul Kay. *International Journal of American Linguistics* 37 (4). 257-270.
- Kay, Paul, Brent Berlin, Luisa Maffi, William Merrifield & Richard Cook. 2009. *The World Color Survey*. Stanford: CSLI Publications.
- Lucy, John A. 1997. The linguistics of 'color'. In Clyde L. Hardin, Luisa Maffi (eds.), *Color Categories in Thought and Language*, 224–239. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Saunders, Barbara A. C. 1992. *The Invention of Basic Colour Terms*. Utrecht: ISOR.