

Socio-Cultural Associations of White and Black in Arabic and English

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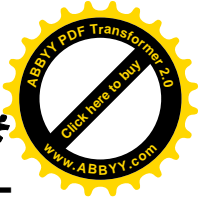
خلاصة البحث

تدعو هذه الدراسة إلى تحري بشكل مفصل الألوان الأكثر أساسية ضمن مجموع المصطلحات اللونية (الأبيض والأسود) في اللغتين العربية والانكليزية. توجد أنواع متعددة من المفاهيم الاجتماعية - الثقافية ذات الدلالة و العبارات المتضمنة لهذين اللونين .

هذه المفاهيم اللونية تلعب دور مهم في التواصل المتداخل بين المجتمعات المعاصرة وبسبب الخلفيات المختلفة لهذه المصطلحات في المجتمعات المختلفة، فان استخدام هذين اللونين في عالما إما بارتدائهم أو استخدامهم في عبارات، له وظيفة بلاغية ذات اثر وانطباع مميز.

المجتمعات العربية والغربية عادة ما يكون لها خصائص مختلفة، فبعض المفاهيم الدلالية تعطي تخصيص لمجتمعات محده دون غيرها مما يجعل اللون لون مناسبة معينه. لذلك هذه الدراسة تحاول بحث اللون على خلفيات ثقافية مختلفة منعكسة في مفاهيم دلالية متعددة.

للإيجاز، يمكن إن نلحظ إن تأثير الثقافة الاجتماعية على الكلمات الدالة على الألوان لها جذور متأصلة . لكل واحد من هذين اللونين له معاني مختلفة وخصائص ثقافية متنوعة في أمم مختلفة. لذلك فان معانيهم المتنوعة تلون حياتنا. بعد هذا كله، كل امة تظهر ثقافتها وقيمتها من خلال طرق مختلفة. لذلك فهي حقا إحدى أهم حقول المعرفة البشرية في العالم بأسره، وعلى قدر معرفتنا بشكل كبير عن المعاني الاجتماعية للون، على قدر فهمنا الأفضل للثقافات الأجنبية.



Abstract

This study does purport to investigate in details the most basic colours among all colour terms (white and Black). In both languages Arabic and English. There are various kinds of socio-cultural associations and phrases about these two colours.

These colour words play a very important role in the intercultural communication of the modern world. Because of different backgrounds of these terms in these cultures, the use of these colours in our world whether in clothing or using phrases, has a very strong rhetoric function and impression.

Arabic and Western cultures often have different characteristics, some associations give more specification to certain cultures than others to make the color become a color on certain occasions .So, this paper is an attempt to explore the color in different cultural backgrounds embodied in the different cultural associations.

To be short, we can see the influence of social culture on colour words is deep-rooted. Every kind of color has different associations and different cultural characters in different nations, and their different meanings make our life more colourful. After all, every nation shows its own culture and value in a different way. It is, indeed, one of the most important fields of human's recognition of the world. Therefore, the more we know about the colour words, the better we understand the foreign culture.

1. The Pragmatics of Colours (General ideas)

Colour is a subject that has attracted attention for rather along time. Aristotle cites and sheds light on the essence of colours with their manifestation and importance. Brown (1991: 13-14) provides, a very well description concerning the importance and classification of the different terms of colours. Absolutely, the analysis of a wide variety of conventional fixed collocations and expressions of the most basic colours, i.e. white and black, is strongly investigated in this work to show the pragmatic meaning of these colour words. The analysis, here, accounts for the existence, connotative meaning of white and black.

Originally, it is impossible to ascertain where the colour terms (white , black) came from. So, it is more appropriate to concentrate on the connotative features, i.e., the intentions of the use of these different colours in society. Gage (1993: 33) states, that all colour terms are arranged hierarchically. If any

language has only two colours , they are always white and black ; if a language has three colours , the one added is red ; then the fourth will be either green or yellow, then the others are arranged as (blue, brown, purple, orange, and grey) . In different countries, words of cultural connotation are different. Cultural connotation means the vocabulary is endowed with the meaning of metaphor, association, symbolism and so on.

Berlin and kay (1969: 70) claims that there are eleven basic colour terms to be found in human languages and they are arranged in sequence. Bailey (2001: 186) states that these terms are arranged hierarchically in a very strict system i.e. no colour term trespasses the others positions as shown in table (1). Bailey (2001: 187) states, that no language will acquire a blue term before black or a pink term before a blue one.

Table (1) Arrangement of Colour terms

White
Black
Red
Green
Yellow
Blue
Brown

Colours are divided into three types ; the basic colour terms which are (white and black), the scope of this paper, then the primary colour terms which are (red, blue, yellow, and green) latterly, the last group which is seen as a mixture of the last fifth terms. These terms are used widely in every language to convey different meanings to different people and culture.

In this paper , the investigation will be due to Berlin and kay (1969), analysis of basic colour terms in English as shown in figure (1) below :

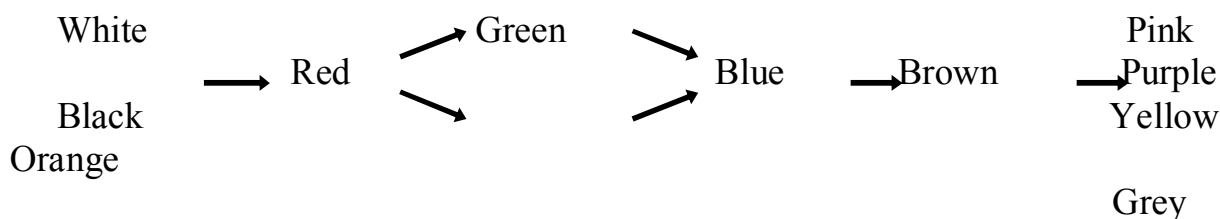


Figure (1): Berlin and Kay's Colour Analysis

2. General Views on Colours Meaning

Colours, in English as many other languages, carry different meanings which derive from the natural world. People see colours the same concerning their terms and reflection, but they think of them differently. So, they use colours to mean different things. Gage (1993: 33-35) explains that colour terms are used to represent feelings, cultures, countries, and even people. In fact, colours mean many different things to different people and cultures. In the Oxford dictionary (2000), the word "meaning" is defined as the thing or idea that a word represents, as said earlier, the meaning of colours derived from the natural world, for instance, the meaning of the colour "blue" comes from the natural world to refer to "sky and sea". A great deal has been written about colours and what they are thought to mean. Gage (1993: 33) says that "blue" is associated with air, "green" with water, "yellow" with earth, and "red" with fire.

In English, there are eleven colour terms as given in figure (1) above, but only two terms are to be described in this paper.

3. White and Black Associations

Hays et al., (1972: 50-52) talk lengthily about these two colours saying that these two basic colours have a very long history among all the other colours. Their importance is derived from their use in different cultures. In both cultures, these colours convey a wide range of connotations.

3.1 White in Arabic and English

The white colour is almost seen and described as one of the basic colours in both cultures English and Arabic. It has many different facets of meaning. Its basic connotation is the positive one that which conveys the meaning of innocence, goodness, purity, and peace.

Generally, Smith (1995: 50) states explicitly that all the terms of the colours, not only white, are sometimes used literally to describe perceptual experiences but their symbolic values and meanings can be used specifically in particular areas of life and different cultures. So, there is a need to mention the basic various associations of this colour in English and Arabic.

3.1.1 The Socio-cultural Associations of White in English and Arabic

1. Innocence and Happiness

This association is the most one in use. In Eng., this colour is basically used to refer to positive connotations . Innocence as a quality encompasses other qualities within as purity, cleanness, and peace. To be innocent means to keep off any evil deeds, to be clean, to be pure and peaceful. All these are used as synonymous or equivalent to being innocent. In both cultures, this colour has a very good association. It conveys the meaning of honesty, innocence, perfection, and peace. In English, this connotation is clearly expressed in the frequent use of certain phrases, for instance, the use of the phrase "**to be white**" means "being pure and bright in heart and mind".

In clothing the white colour, reflects the innocence of the user as in Arabic, one of the most prominent example is the pilgrims when they put on white robes during their performance of pilgrimage. Here, white is used to convey concepts like purity and blamelessness. Approximately, it is the colour of the angels and mermaids as mentioned in the Holy Quran:

سورة الصافات :
كَأَنَّهُنَّ بَيْضٌ مَّكْنُونٌ (٤٩)

As-Saffat, or Those Ranged in Rank:

49. "As if they were (delicate) eggs closely guarded"(Abdullah, Y., 2000: 439).

Here, the eggs are used metaphorically referring to the mermaids in paradise because of their purity and virtuousness. Here, they are compared to eggs, they are as white as eggs.

No doubt that this colour, here, is closely related to the idea of being clear and bright. In both languages the phrase "white money" is used to refer to the well-gained money that can be used in black, unlucky days. In Arabic We say:

القرش الأبيض ينفع في اليوم الأسود

The white "well- gained" penny is used in the black days.

Economically and financially, there is a very dangerous term "money-laundering" to legitimize the taboo gained money. Many other phrases have the term white to give the idea of being innocent and pure that is the use of the phrase "white face" to indicate those with well deeds and good works English

and Arabic, in the Holy Quran we find this verse to show the whiteness of the believers as in:

سورة ال عمران:
يَوْمَ تَبْيَضُّ وُجُوهٌ وَتَسْوَدُّ وُجُوهٌ فَأَمَّا الَّذِينَ اسْوَدَّتْ وُجُوهُهُمْ أَكْفَرْتُمْ بَعْدَ إِيمَانِكُمْ فَذُوقُوا الْعَذَابَ بِمَا كُنْتُمْ
تَكْفُرُونَ (١٠٦).

Al-'Imran or the Family of 'Imran:

106. On the Day when some faces will be (lit up with) white, and some faces will be (in the gloom of) black: to those whose faces will be black, (will be said): "Did ye reject faith after accepting it? Taste then the penalty for chastisement faith (Abdullah, Y., 2000: 67).

The association of happiness of this colour is well referred to in the wedding party in both cultures. The bride usually wears a white dress to give the impression of purity, happiness, fidelity, and virginity. When the young get married, the bride wears the snow-white wedding dress. This tradition begins from the Victoria Ages, at that time dominant colour in that era.

Before the Victorian Age, brides kept dressing white wedding dress but indeed they did not attach much importance to colours. At Roman time, brides wore the white dress, because the white is a symbol of celebration and it emphasizes the connotation of sanctity and loyalty.

To sum up, in this association ,this colour is widely used to refer to cleanness and clarity as in:

سورة طه :
وَاضْمُمْ يَدَكَ إِلَى جَنَاحِكَ تَخْرُجَ بَيْضَاءَ مِنْ غَيْرِ سُوءٍ آيَةً أُخْرَى (٢٢).

Ta-Ha:

22. "Now draw thy hand close to thy side: it shall come forth white (and shining), without harm (or stain) - as another sign- (Abdullah, Y., 2000: 307).

Here, the hand's whiteness basically refers to good deeds.

3. Surrender and Resignation

In English, to say "it is a kind of white feather" is to give a symbol of cowardice and timid. So the use of white flags is an obvious way of surrender. The same is true of Arabic in which the uses of white flags conveys the feelings of surrender in contrary to the feelings of peace which pilgrims normally practice by raising white flags on their way to perform pilgrimage.

4. Sadness

Unlike English, Arabic as verse to English, might white use to convey the sense of sadness and pain as in "white eyes" which conveys the association of sadness and grief, as in:

سورة يوسف :

وَتَوَلَّى عَنْهُمْ وَقَالَ يَا أَسْفَىٰ عَلَىٰ يُوسُفَٰ وَأَبْيَضَّتْ عَيْنَاهُ مِنَ الْحُزْنِ فَهُوَ كَظِيمٌ (٨٤)

Yusuf, or Joseph :

84. " And he turned away from them, and said: "How great is my grief for Joseph! And his eyes became white with sorrow, and he was suppressed with silent sorrow(Abdullah, Y., 2000: 239).

In English no such connotation is found; it is something related to cultures and their use of such terms to convey certain senses.

5. Death

This connotation is used as a symbol of "death" in the Arabic culture. The coffin "the shroud which wrapped around a dead body is white ", though it is the symbol of cleanness but it gives the impression of death . Another instance is to show their readiness to martyrdom as a symbol of purification and cleanness of their deeds

3.2 Black in English and Arabic

The black colour is the sign of darkness, it refers to the ugliness of the world and the bad deeds. It exemplifies the unfavorable meaning which people do not like or prefer. In most of its connotations and socio-cultural associations it stands for the devil, evil, pain, and misfortune. Both in English and Arabic cultures, it symbolizes bad objects, sadness, and is associated with funeral and crime.

When black is followed by a noun, it often means bad things and something without any hope Allan (2008: 628) states that, this colour may reflect the

significance placed on the negative connotations of death, bad omen, crime, and disease in the Asian culture.

3.2.1 The Socio-Cultural Associations of Black

1. Death and Sadness

Black in English and Arabic has the connotation of death and sadness. Sadness is best exposed in the Arabic culture with dressing black suits and clothes as a sign of death and funeral. Women in both cultures wear black dress and scarf to show their sadness.

2. Evil and Bad Deeds

Black in culture conveys the message of being in a bad deed or illegal action. In Arabic culture, black-faced is an idiomatic expression referring to a person with bad deeds as mentioned in the Holy Quran:

سورة الزمر :
وَيَوْمَ الْقِيَامَةِ تَرَى الَّذِينَ كَذَبُوا عَلَى اللَّهِ وُجُوهُهُم مُّسْوَدَّةٌ أَلَيْسَ فِي جَهَنَّمَ مَثْوًى لِّلْمُتَكَبِّرِينَ (٦٠)

Az-Zumar, or the Groups :

60. " On the day of judgment wilt thou see those who told lies against Allah;-their faces will be turned black; is there not in Hell an abode for the Haughty? (Abdullah, Y., 2000: 457).

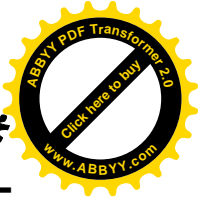
Here, the reference is culturally associated with those who commit shameful deeds including the unbelievers

In English, the black-faced person is that whose face designates fury or that who exerts too much effort.

Evil is well exposed with this colour concerning the use of black clothes by the terrorists or using black flags to frighten others as bad omen or something alike. Hence, black in both cultures always does not almost give people the feeling of terror especially in English. So those who want to terrify others always wear black scarves and clothes to stand for hatred and enmity.

3. Elegance and Sobriety

In both cultures, the "black" colour symbolizes not only death, evil, and disaster, but it also has the association of sobriety. For the westerners, this colour was the favorite traditional one in clothing. Accordingly, the use of black



suit and black dress was their tradition. On certain occasions, all the celebrities like black clothes; instance, for all the members of the symphony orchestra are all in black to show sobriety and elegance.

3.2.3 Phrases in Both Cultures With Black Associations

The colour "black" is connected metaphorically with other words to reflect its association in different phrases. Leech (198: 51) states that colours play an important role in human culture in that the black colour as the others has different connotations derived from human culture. In English, the black colour is almost related to sadness, mourning, terror, and so on. In classical Arabic, the black colour is used on different occasions to refer to something not widely used nowadays. In classical Arabic, they call "Iraq" the black land (arthu – alsawad) referring to the dense palm-trees plantation which cover its land. So the "swad" "black" in Arabic used to refer to the density of vegetation in:

* ارض السواد

* Arthu- Alsawad → land covered with plants and palm trees.

* سواد الناس

* (Sawadalnaas) the public which refers to masses or common people when they gather up in large numbers.

Also, classical Arabs used to call the dates and water as " al-aswadan" "the two blacks" as an obsolete association of such objects.

1. Black faced

→ English : It represents failure or disgrace.

→ Arabic: fury, exerting too much effort or having shameful deeds and dishonorable action as referred to the Holy Quran.

2. Black hearted

→ English : It represents unkindness, rudeness, etc.

→ Arabic : unkindness, envies, etc.

→ both cultures : unlucky day.

3. Black Day

→ both cultures : sad day with bad occasions, as in "black Wednesday". It is used to symbolize a tragic event.

4. Black comedy → In both cultures, it is the comedy that criticizes bad aspects in society. This type of comedy is based on the tragic events in society.

5. Black magic → It refers to evil deeds affecting people.

6. Black money → Illegal money gained through suspicious transactions.

7. Black market → It has to do with the illegal ways of bargaining i.e. monopolizing goods.

8. Black list → It is the list that comprises all the illegal and forbidden items and objects.

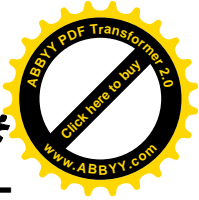
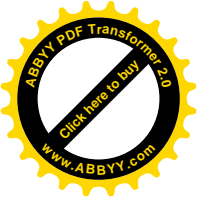
4. Conclusions

This research is an attempt to explore and discuss the socio-cultural associations. Here in below are the findings that the researcher has come up with :

1. The two colours white and black have different connotations and associations in accordance with the cultures they are used in.
2. The associations of these two colours in English and Arabic cultures are somehow similar only on certain occasions.
3. The connotations of the white colour are border than that of the black.
4. One colour may involve two opposite connotations , i.e. ,white is the colour of happiness as well as sorrow and death, while, black is the colour of fear and pain but in certain cases it refers to elegance and sobriety.

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