

Theoretical-Methodological Issues in Colour Term Research

Colour vocabularies show arguably the most exciting lexical gaps that anthropology and linguistics have addressed. Over the past two centuries, 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. Overall, the B&K colour term theory has diminished its predictive power about universals over time. While the theory has gone through some changes, especially considering the sequence in which colour terms develop, the B&K methodology has not been greatly changed since the 60s. B&K's universal and evolutionary colour word theory has since been criticised in numerous publications (e.g., Lehmann 1998, Lucy 1992 and 1997, Saunders 1992, Saunders & van Brakel 1997, Wierzbicka 2005).

My research aims to contribute to clarifying the question whether the typological comparison of colour words was successful in the theory and methodology of B&K. The chosen method for this goal is a critical research report combined with elements of individual language analysis. B&K's theory is described in its development, compared to previous research, analysed, and confronted with critique that attacks its basic premises. In this talk, I focus on methodological issues that start with using a standardised colour chart and cards (chips) for elicitation. This takes us further to the underlying concepts of colour, colour space, and the comparability of presumed colour terms.

Due to expectations of finding colour terms and open elicitation questions in the original *Instruction to Fieldworkers* (Kay et al. 2009, pp. 585-590), it is conceivable that miscommunication between researchers and native speakers happens. The elicited terms could be visual descriptors instead of colour terms. Especially languages that are considered to have just two opposing terms should be revisited. The possibility that not all languages have colour terms shifts the point of comparison from colour to visual descriptor.

Furthermore, my talk will show that the question of what is meant by *colour* is anything but trivial. B&K's theory omits a definition of the English umbrella term *colour*, and their method lacks the instruction to elicit a corresponding term or investigate the concept of *colour* in the researched languages.

References

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