

“Black Day, White Face”: Color Terms in Kurmanji Kurdish Phraseology

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Abstract: This article examines color-related phraseological units in Kurmanji Kurdish, a topic that has received little dedicated attention despite growing cross-linguistic interest in color idioms. Drawing on lexicographic, folkloric, and ethnolinguistic sources, including material from the Yezidi communities of Armenia, it analyzes idioms built on five basic color terms: *reş* “black”, *spî* “white”, *sor* “red”, *şîn* “green/blue”, and *zer* “yellow”. For each, the study traces the etymology of the color word and identifies the cultural, social, and symbolic meanings it encodes. The analysis shows that *reş* is the most productive and diverse term, while the others range from purity and honor to vitality, fertility, and ambivalent symbolism. It offers a systematic account of color phraseology in Kurmanji and its place in Iranian ethnolinguistics.

Keywords: color idioms; Iranian languages; Kurmanji Kurdish; phraseology; symbolism; Yezidi culture

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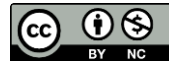
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The research is timely, given the growing global interest in color idioms and other phraseological units containing color components. Recent years have seen a surge of cross-linguistic studies in this area, many of them identifying culture-specific characteristics in color vocabulary (Golda et al. 2022: 41, Hastürkoğlu 2017: 11–17, Skara 2018: 66–70).

1. The study of the issue

The Kurdish language exhibits a wide range of dialects, the result of several factors. Historically, the Kurds have been dispersed across the Middle East, divided among different tribes and groups. The lack of a unified Kurdish state and of a single standard language¹ has further contributed to this diversity, allowing dialects to flourish independently (Asatryan 1990: 154–163; 2009: 11–13, Yusupova 1990: 165–174). The Kurds also have a vibrant and long-standing oral tradition, rich in idioms and expressions that are characteristic of everyday speech. While these are also found in Kurdish literature, they occur most frequently in daily conversation (Khamoyan 1979: 5). Kurmanji in particular is rich in set expressions and idioms, which form a substantial part of the language's phraseology. Early research focused on the idioms and proverbs of Kurdish oral tradition, particularly from the mid-nineteenth century onward, when Kurdish literature began to appear in print and the first Kurdish dictionaries were compiled. These dictionaries frequently recorded idioms and phraseological units (Tsukerman 1977, Farizov 1957, Jaba 1879, Kurdoyev 1960, Lescot 1940; Paul-Margueritte and Bedir Khan 1937). Researchers have also examined phraseological units in connection with compound verbs, analyzing how they function within compound-verb structures (Avaliani 1970).

While dictionaries and previous studies have touched on color-related phraseological units, no dedicated study of Kurdish color idioms has yet been undertaken. Some comparisons have been drawn with somatic phraseological units — those involving body-part terms such as head, face, eye, hand, and heart — but a comprehensive examination of color idioms remains absent (Bakayev 1969). Given that Kurdish is an Iranian language, it is unsurprising that many of its idiomatic expressions reflect conceptual patterns similar to those of other Iranian languages, especially Persian (Avaliani 1970: 9–13). Several studies have examined idioms in general, and color idioms in particular, in Kurdish and English (Alotaibi 2020, FaqeAbdulla 2023, Kareem 2019, Sabah 2016).

¹ During the mid-twentieth century, considerable efforts were made to establish a standardized Kurdish language, with particular focus on Kurmanji. Jaladat Ali Bedir Khan, working with the French orientalist Roger Lescot, published a Kurdish grammar intended to lay the foundation for a standard literary language; widely reprinted, it proved highly influential (Bedir Khan and Lescot 1970). The Soviet authorities likewise supported a unified Kurdish literary standard, contributing a Kurdish alphabet, a comprehensive grammar, and lexical expansion. Kurdoyev (1957) published a grammar of Kurdish with the similar aim of providing a basis for standard literary Kurmanji.

2. The color *black* in idiomatic expressions

The Kurmanji word *reş* “black” goes back to Old Iranian **raxša-* (cf. Old Indic **rakṣa-*, said to denote “red”). This etymon is reflected in several ancient languages: in Khotanese, *rrasa-* denoted a color resembling “gray-yellow”, while *ryś* meant “spotted”; Persian *raxš* refers to a blend of red and white — sometimes even light blond — especially of horses; and Talyshi *raš* denotes dark brown, dark, or gray hues (Tsabolov 2010: 194).²

In Kurmanji, the color black carries negative connotations, frequently linked to darkness, misfortune, mourning, and death. These associations are most often expressed through simple idioms, typically combining *reş* “black” with a noun or verb.

In Kurmanji, *roja reş* (lit. “black day”) refers to a “bad situation”, an “unfortunate situation”, or an “unlucky life”. Similarly, *bextê reş* (lit. “black luck”) means “bad luck” or “bad fate”, and *bextreşî kirin* (lit. “to make black fate”) extends the same association, meaning “to bring misfortune”, “to act dishonestly”, or “to betray” (Kurdoyev 1960: 68).

Kurmanji forms many black-color idioms on a single pattern, combining *reş* “black” with a noun or verb. Thus, *reş wergirtin* (lit. “to dress in black”) and *reş girêdan* (lit. “to tie [on] black [headscarf]”, i.e. “to cover one’s head with a black kerchief”) are both symbolic expressions of mourning (Chyet 2003: 509).

These idioms also occur in larger expressions. The sentence *wê reşa birê xwe girêda* — literally “She tied her brother’s black” — conveys that her brother had died and she had put on a black headscarf in mourning. Similarly, the proverb *reşa mêra girêdidin, ya jina girênadin* “The black [headscarf] is tied for men, not for women” reflects the custom of wearing black headscarves only after the death of a male family member (Jndi 1985: 449). The phrase *gulî reş vegirtin* (lit. “to weave the braids in black”) is a figurative expression meaning “to suffer a misfortune or tragedy”, with its attendant sadness and grief (Khamoyan 1979: 78).

The Yezidis of Armenia use the phrase *reş hildan* (“to take off the black [headscarf]”) for the act of letting go of grief.

The Kurmanji phrase *reşa min serê te be!* (lit. “May my black [headscarf] be on your head”), though ostensibly about a black headscarf, functions as an emphatic affirmation or vow, equivalent to “May I die”. The expanded form *reşa min serê te be wekî derew dibêjim* (lit. “May my black [headscarf] be on

² We use different transliteration systems for each language: Hübschmann–Meillet for Armenian and the scholarly (Slavist) system for Russian; Russian and Armenian personal names, however, are given in their conventional English forms. For Kurmanji, the Latin-based alphabet developed by Jaladat Ali Bedir Khan is used.

your head if I tell a lie”) underscores the speaker's conviction that the statement is true (Jndi 1985: 449).

The Kurmanji phrase *reş kirin* (lit. “to make black”) describes not only painting something black but also, figuratively, “to disgrace” someone — that is, to damage their reputation. Similarly, *reş bûn* (lit. “to become black”) extends beyond its literal sense to mean “to lose one’s honor”. The phrase *ber çava reş bûn* (lit. “to become black before the eyes”) figuratively means “to lose honor in someone’s eyes”, as in *ew ber çavê te reş bû* “He/she lost honor in your eyes” (lit. “He/she became black before your eyes”) (Khamoyan 1979: 193).

Kurmanji also draws on “black-faced” imagery to express embarrassment and shame. *Rûreş bûn* (lit. “to be black-faced”) means “to be embarrassed”, *rûreş derketin* (lit. “to come out black-faced”) “to become embarrassed”, while *rûreş kirin* (lit. “to make black-faced”)³ and *rûreş derxistin* (lit. “to bring [someone] out black-faced”) mean “to embarrass” or “to disgrace” someone. *Şixulê rûyê reş* (lit. “the deed of the black face”) denotes a shameful act, and *rûyê te reş e* (lit. “your face is black”) is a direct way of saying “you are disgraced” (Kurdoyev 1960: 649).

Yezidis living in Armenia use the phrase *min rûyê xwe reş kir û tiştek xwest* (lit. “I blackened my face and asked for something”) to describe someone who, though shy, persists in asking for what they want. The expression highlights the act of overcoming social discomfort to achieve a goal, even at the risk of embarrassment or humiliation.

Kurdish uses metaphorical expressions involving “black water” to describe blindness. In Kurmanji, *ava reş* or *avreş* (lit. “black water”) refers to glaucoma, and *ava reş hat ser çavê wî/wê* (lit. “black water came down on his/her eye”) means “He/she became blind” (Khamoyan 1979: 30, Kurdoyev 1960: 54). The phrase *xwedê ava reş anî çavê filankesê* (lit. “God brought black water onto so-and-so’s eye”) is a way of saying that “God made so-and-so blind” (Khamoyan 1971: 287). In some contexts, *ava reş* can also mean “coffee” (Chyet 2003: 509). In Kurmanji, *êşa reş* (lit. “black pain”) refers specifically to cholera or plague (Kurdoyev 1960: 401).

In Kurmanji, *serreş* (lit. “black-headed”) denotes an “ordinary person” or “human being”. The phrases *e’bdê serreş* and *bendê serreş* (both “black-headed person”) reinforce this sense of a “common” or “ordinary” individual (Kurdoyev 1960: 244, 670). Among the Kurds of Moks, *serreş* (lit. “black-headed”) is used instead to denote an unmarried girl with uncovered hair — a localized, dialect-specific usage (Orbeli 2002: 175).

³ The Persian phrase *rû siāh šodan* literally means “to become black-faced” but figuratively “to be put to shame”, “to be embarrassed”, or “to be ashamed” (Ghafel and Eslami Rasekh 2011: 207).

The Kurmanji phrase *xunava reş ser da barîn* (lit. “for black dew to fall on [someone]”) conveys the idea of hardship and bad luck. The phrase *xunava reş ser wîda/wêda dibare* (lit. “black dew falls on him/her”) describes someone experiencing misfortune (Kurdoyev 1960: 378). The comparison of misfortune to “black snow” and “black dew” evokes an image of darkness.

A related Kurmanji phrase, *reş-spî ji hev cuda dike* “[he/she] distinguishes black from white” (Khamoyan 1979: 193), denotes the ability to read and write and, more broadly, to tell right from wrong and good from bad.

Kurmanji also has phrases expressing the opposite. The saying *reş-spî hev cuda nake* — with variants *reş-spî hev başqe nake* and *reş û spî hev dernaxe* — literally means “[he/she] does not distinguish black from white” and refers to someone who is illiterate.

In Kurmanji, *rûvîyê reş* (lit. “black fox”) signifies misfortune. The expression *rûvîyê reş bê pêşîya filankesê* (lit. “May the black fox meet so-and-so”) is a curse wishing misfortune on someone (Khamoyan 1979: 197).

Kurdish folklore also employs animal imagery to represent misfortune. The phrases *qirkê reş / qirka reş* (lit. “black crow”) and *pûpîya reş* (lit. “black cuckoo”) describe unfortunate individuals, often mourning women (Khamoyan 1979: 193). This association likely stems from the traditional symbolism of crows and cuckoos as harbingers of bad news. Likewise, *beqê reş* (lit. “black frog”) serves as a metaphor for an unfortunate person (Kurdoyev 1960: 69); this may reflect the frog’s generally negative cultural associations.

In Kurmanji, the phrase *warê reş danîn* (lit. “to set up a black abode”) refers to a childless marriage (Khamoyan 1979: 193), reflecting the cultural importance placed on having children. The Yezidi community of Armenia similarly uses the term *warê reş* (lit. “black abode”) for a childless family.

In Kurmanji, *caba reş* (lit. “black news”) signifies bad news, while *ronaya reş* (lit. “black light”) represents misfortune; the phrase *bûye ronaya reş* (lit. “[it] has become a black light”) indicates that a misfortune has occurred. In folklore, *ricafa reş* (lit. “black shiver, black tremble”) symbolizes both misfortune and death, conveying the trembling associated with hardship or impending death. The phrase *ricafa reş filankesê girt* (lit. “black shiver gripped so-and-so”) describes the moment someone begins to die (Khamoyan 1979: 193).

Xûdana reş (lit. “black sweat”) embodies the pain of dying, as in *hetanî xûdana reş ser ra davêje* (lit. “until black sweat covers him/her”), meaning “until he/she dies”. *Xûna reş* (“black blood”) signifies death, particularly from a heart attack: *xûna reş hilşîya nav dilê filankesê* (lit. “black blood poured into so-and-so’s heart”) means “so-and-so had a heart attack” (Khamoyan 1979: 193).

The Yezidi religion has a sacred text known as the *Meshefa Reş*, literally “Black Book” or “Black Scripture” (Asatrian and Poladyan 1989: 143–148, Joseph 1909: 111; 1919: 222).

Yezidis in Armenia refer to the Ottoman army as *Roma reş*, “Black Rom”. The term likely stems from their historical contact with the empire: Iranian-speaking peoples often called the Byzantine Empire (the Eastern Roman Empire) and the Sultanate of Iconium Rum or Rom, and the Yezidis extended this usage to the Ottoman Empire (Amryan 2020: 52).

Another phrase used by the Yezidis of Armenia, *ew agirê reş e* (lit. “he/she is a black fire”), describes someone mischievous or quick; here “black” conveys the fast, unpredictable nature of such a person. They also use *şerma reş* (lit. “black shame”) for a deep sense of disgrace.

In the speech of the Yezidis of Armenia, *reş* “black” very often functions as an intensifier, conveying “very big” or “tremendous”. Thus, *be’ra reşe mezin* means not merely “the big black sea” but “the vast, tremendous sea”, and *Ûrsêta reşe mezin* means “vast Russia”. In this use, *reş* expresses overwhelming size or vastness.

3. The color *white* in idiomatic expressions

Kurdish employs the color white in idioms expressing innocence, purity, justice, and the absence of wrongdoing or malicious intent. These idioms typically follow a simple structure, combining *spî* “white” with a noun or verb. The Kurmanji word *spî* “white” goes back to Proto-Iranian **spaita-* (cf. Avestan *spaēta-*, Middle Persian *spētak*, Persian *sepīd*). The Armenian word for “white”, *spitak*, is of the same Iranian origin (Acharyan 1979: 265, Tsabолоv 2010: 278, Chyet 2003: 561).

In Kurmanji, *rûspî bûn* (lit. “to be white-faced”) denotes moral integrity — a clean conscience or innocence. *Rûspî kirin* (lit. “to make white-faced”) means to protect someone’s honor and dignity, sparing them shame or humiliation;⁴ *rûspî derketin* (lit. “to come out white-faced”) means to be exonerated and proven innocent; and *rûspî derxistin* (lit. “to bring [someone] out white-faced”) means to defend someone, vindicating their actions. Finally, *rûspî verê kirin* (lit. “to see [someone] off white-faced”) denotes a respectful, dignified farewell. In Kurmanji, *spî kirin* (lit. “to make white”) can refer to painting something white, peeling fruit (Chyet 2003: 561), or something becoming white in appearance. Similarly, *spî bûn* (lit. “to become white”) can signify turning white or growing old (Kurdoyev 1960: 688).

⁴ The Persian phrase *rû sifīd šodan* (lit. “to become white-faced”) figuratively means “to be victorious” or “to succeed completely in an undertaking” (Ghafel and Eslami Rasekh 2011: 207).

Several proverbs offer insight into aging. *Spî bûn cinse* (lit. “turning white is a matter of kind/breed”) suggests that growing old is largely hereditary — the whitening of hair being a physical consequence of age, not a sign of wisdom. The proverb *Spî bûna serê wî nenihêre, çîya jî spî dibin* (lit. “Do not look at the whiteness of his head; the mountains too turn white”) reminds us that graying is universal, just as mountains turn white with snow (Jndi 1985: 483).

The expression *çavê wî/wê spî bûn* (lit. “his/her eyes turned white”), widely used by the Yezidis of Armenia, literally denotes a physical change but symbolizes the emotional toll of hardship.

4. The color *red* in idiomatic expressions

The Kurmanji word *sor* “red” goes back to Old Iranian **suxra-* (Avestan *suxra-*, Old Persian *θuxra-*) (Tsabolov 2010: 276).

In Kurdish folklore, red carries strong symbolic weight, often linked to health, beauty, and strength; these associations shape how red is used in idiomatic expressions.

The Kurmanji phrase *sor û fît dike* (lit. “he/she makes [it] red” or “he/she appears red”)⁵ means “he/she looks healthy” (Khamoyan 1979: 211). A Yezidi saying in Armenia runs *qîze sor in, xorte kor in* (lit. “the girls are red, the boys are blind”), suggesting that the girls are beautiful but the boys fail to notice.

The Kurmanji phrase *heta guha sor bû* (lit. “[he/she] turned red up to the ears”) likewise expresses shame or embarrassment (Khamoyan 1979: 211).

In Kurmanji, *sor kirin* (lit. “to make red”) has several meanings: “to paint red”, “to make (something) appear red”, “to heat (metal) until red-hot”, and “to fry (food)” (Chyet 2003: 558).

It can also mean “to make someone feel ashamed”. Similarly, *sor bûn* (lit. “to become red”) has several senses — “to become red”, “to blush”, “to become red-hot” (of metal), “to be fried” (of food), and “to be ashamed” (Kurdojev 1960: 685). In Kurmanji, *sor bûn*⁶ can also express anger: the phrase *çavê filankesê sor bû* (lit. “so-and-so’s eyes turned red”) means “so-and-so got angry” (Khamoyan 1979: 211).

The Kurdish proverb *sor dike zimane, spî dike dirane, gişk şe’dê derewane*⁷ (lit. “the tongue turns red, the teeth turn white, all are witnesses of lies”)

⁵ The Persian proverb *Ḥakīmī ki xod bāšadaš zard-rūy, az ū dārū-yi sorxrūyī majūy* “Seek not the means to rosy cheeks from a pale-faced physician” underscores the association of red with health in Persian culture (Ahmadi and Ketabi 2011: 16–17).

⁶ The Persian phrase *sorx šodan az asabāniyat* “to become red from anger” is figuratively akin to the English idiom “to see red” (Alotaibi 2020: 104; Mashhady et al. 2014: 146–147).

⁷ In Persian, *zabān-i sorx* (lit. “red tongue”) denotes a dangerous speech habit marked by furious, reckless, or inflammatory language, which can jeopardize the speaker’s

implies that someone is lying (Jndi 1985: 482). In Kurmanji, *çêleka sor* (lit. “red cow”) describes a person who is inflexible and unwilling to change their character (Khamoyan 1979: 211).

Some images are language-specific. In Kurmanji, death is figured as a “red carpet” laid at everyone’s door, signifying an unavoidable reality: the proverb *mirin ber’a sore, ber derê h’emû kesîye* (lit. “death is a red carpet, [and] at everyone’s door”) captures the inevitability of death (Jalil and Jalil 1972: 222).

5. The color green in idiomatic expressions

Kurmanji *şîn* denotes both green and blue. The word goes back to Proto-Iranian **axšaina-* “not shining” and is connected with Avestan *axšaēna-* “dark(-colored)”, Old Persian *axšaina(ka)-* “blue, sky-blue”, and Middle Persian *axšēn* “blue” (Tsabolov 2010: 324).

In Kurmanji, idiomatic units featuring green typically combine *şîn* “green/blue” with a noun or verb. *Şîn kirin* (lit. “to make green”) has several context-dependent senses — “to paint green”, “to grow” (of plants), “to make appear green” — and *şîn bûn* (lit. “to become green”) likewise means “to turn green”, “to be painted green”, or “to grow/bloom” (of plants).⁸

Kurmanji also has another word for green, *kesk*⁹ — which, unlike *şîn*, denotes only green, not blue. The compound *keskesor* (lit. “green-red”) means “rainbow”.

The Yezidis of Armenia have a blessing that uses color differently: *bedena te şîn be* (lit. “may your body become green”) means “may you have children”. It is customarily offered to women, especially newlyweds.

In Kurmanji, blue carries complex symbolic weight, with both positive and negative aspects. Despite this range of meanings, relatively few phraseological units use the color term directly.

The Kurdish phrase *rengê wî/wê şîn bû* (lit. “his/her color turned blue”) means “he/she got angry” or “turned blue with anger”, and in some contexts “he/she got worse (from illness)”. The Kurmanji saying *tunebûn kevîrê şîne* (lit. “poverty is a blue stone”) means “poverty is a cruel thing”, implying that

social standing by provoking conflict or even violence (Mashhady et al. 2014: 137, 147). The Persian proverb *zabân-i sorx sar-i sabz mîdahad bar bād* (lit. “the red tongue gives the green head to the wind”) warns that reckless speech can have disastrous consequences for one’s safety, freedom, and life (Ghafel and Eslami Rasekh 2011: 203).

⁸ Kurmanji shows a strong link between *şîn* “green” and vegetation: the words *şînayî* (or *hêşînayî*) and *şînahî* (or *hêşînahî*), all meaning “greenness”, “vegetation”, or “grass”, are derived directly from *şîn* (or *hêşîn*) (Chyet 2003: 252).

⁹ While Kurmanji uses *şîn* in a wide variety of color idioms, *kesk* appears in significantly fewer such expressions.

poverty is a cold, unyielding force, very hard to overcome (Jalil and Jalil 1972: 277).

The Yezidis of Armenia use *bûza şîn* (lit. “blue ice”) for something extremely hard and resistant to melting, and by extension for a person of unwavering character. They use *delinga şîn* (lit. “blue skirt”) to symbolize a violation of religious custom; specifically, *delinga xwe şîn kirin* (lit. “to turn one’s skirt blue”) means to marry a non-Yezidi (Voskanyan 1999: 239).

Among the Yezidis, the phrase “blue ink” signifies a forbidden act, recalling a period when writing was discouraged in the community — a reminder of past restrictions on literacy.

6. The color *yellow* in idiomatic expressions

The Kurmanji word *zer* “yellow, golden, pale, gloomy” originates from Old Iranian **zar-* or **zarita-* and Avestan *zar-/zari-*, all meaning “yellow” (Tsabolov 2010: 510; Chyet 2003: 686).

Yellow has complex meanings in Kurdish and other languages, with both positive and negative associations. It can signify creation, energy, and optimism, but also cowardice and fear, conveying sadness, despair, and timidity (FaqeAbdulla 2023: 377).

The Kurdish phrase *zêrê zer* (lit. “yellow gold”) signifies a positive quality: *ew zêrê zer e* (lit. “he/she is yellow gold”) means “he/she is a very good person”, and *zêrê zer jê dibare* (lit. “yellow gold pours from him”) implies that someone is good and brilliant (Khamoyan 1979: 128).

7. Conclusions

The analysis of color-related phraseological units in Kurmanji Kurdish demonstrates that colors function not merely as lexical elements but as important carriers of cultural, social, and symbolic meanings. The study reveals that color idioms are deeply embedded in the worldview of Kurdish speakers and reflect traditional beliefs, values, emotional experiences, and collective cultural memory.

Among the color terms examined, *reş* “black” is the most productive and semantically diverse, predominantly associated with misfortune, mourning, shame, death, and social disapproval; among the Yezidis of Armenia it shows additional developments, including its use as an intensifier. By contrast, *spî* “white” generally symbolizes purity, innocence, honor, justice, and moral integrity. *Sor* “red” is connected with health, beauty, vitality, shame, and anger, while *şîn* “green/blue” reflects notions of growth, fertility, hardship, and social norms. Finally, *zer* “yellow” shows a dual symbolism, expressing both positive qualities (such as value and excellence) and negative associations (such as weakness and melancholy).

The findings confirm that color phraseology constitutes an important component of Kurdish linguistic and cultural heritage. Since the study of Kurdish color idioms remains relatively underdeveloped, further comparative and interdisciplinary research may contribute to a deeper understanding of the relationship between language, culture, and cognition in Kurdish and other Iranian languages.

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