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THE PERCEPTION OF *BLACK* AND *WHITE* IN ENGLISH AND ARMENIAN IDIOMS

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Colour is a silent language with the help of which people can communicate. It is rich in hidden meanings and symbolisms. We think of colour as an independent concept with a part to play in every aspect of our lives. Colour, as we know, does not exist in the outside world, beyond us, like gravity, protons and oxygen do. Instead, colour is created inside our heads. It is the characteristic of human visual perception. The recognition and interpretation of colour are determined by numerous factors: cultural, religious, spiritual, physiological, and psychological. Colour terms are widely used in phraseological units. Among most common ones are the idioms with the two opposite spectra – colours *black* and *white*. The present article discusses the perception of *black* and *white* in English and Armenian idioms. The current research is an attempt aimed at revealing the similarities and differences in these two languages through comparative-contrastive and descriptive methods of analysis.

Keywords: *colour perception, colour symbolism, idioms, collocations, positive/negative connotation.*

Introduction

The origins of idioms are often rooted in cultural, historical, or perceptual contexts. Here are a few approaches about why colour idioms exist and how they may have developed:

1. Visual Associations: Colours are highly visual and evoke strong emotions and associations. People may have started using colours in idioms because they are effective in conveying certain feelings or situations. For example, the colour *red* is often associated with strong emotions like anger or love, so “seeing red” or “painting the town red” becomes a vivid way to express intense emotions.

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2. Cultural Symbolism: Colours often carry cultural significance and symbolism. In various cultures, certain colours may be associated with specific qualities or emotions. For instance, *white* is often associated with purity or innocence, while *black* may symbolize darkness or mystery. These cultural associations could influence the development of idioms.

3. Common Experiences: Colours are part of everyday experiences, and people tend to draw on common experiences when creating language expressions. Idioms related to colours may have emerged from universally shared experiences, making them easily understandable and relatable.

4. Metaphorical Thinking: Language is inherently metaphorical, and colours provide a rich source of metaphorical expressions. For example, phrases like “green with envy” or “feeling blue” use colour as a metaphor for emotional states. Metaphors help convey complex ideas in a more accessible and concise manner.

5. Historical and Social Contexts: Idioms often reflect historical or social contexts. For instance, “in the red” and “in the black” originated from accounting practices where losses were written in red ink and profits in black. Over time, these terms extended beyond finance to represent general financial well-being.

6. Psychological Impact: Colours have psychological effects on individuals. Certain colours can influence mood and perception. Idioms may have developed to convey emotions, attitudes, or situations more effectively.

Colour symbolism serves an important role in art, religion, politics, and ceremonies, as well as in everyday life. Its strong emotional connotations can affect colour perception so that, for example, an apple or a heart-shaped figure cut from orange paper may seem to have a redder hue than a geometric figure cut from the same paper because of the specific psychological meaning that is associated with the shape. In addition to emotional associations, factors that affect colour perception include the observer’s age, mood, and mental health (Nassau, 2001, p. 20).

People who have similar personal traits most often share colour perceptions and preferences. For instance, schizophrenics are known to have atypical colour perception, and young children at the initial stage of distinguishing colours generally show a preference for red or orange. Psychologists consider that analysing an individual’s reaction to colour can provide information about his physical and psychological state. Specific colours are believed to possess a therapeutic effect on physical and mental disabilities.

Colour can cause certain physical and emotional reactions. Normally, rooms and objects that are white or in light shades of “cool” colours such as blue or grey may visibly seem larger than those that are in intense dark or “warm” colours like red, orange and yellow. A room painted in baby blue can require a higher

thermostat setting than a room painted in orange to attain the same feeling of warmth. “Some colours induce a feeling of pleasure in the observer. When an affectively positive or pleasurable perceived colour is viewed after a less pleasant colour, it produces more pleasure than when viewed by itself, an effect known as *affective contrast enhancement*. Thus, the effect of combinations of colours on an observer depends not only on the individual effects of the colours combined and the composition of the pattern; the perception of colour depends on the individual experience” (Nassau, 1998, p. 22).

A vivid example of the above stated is a quote by Vincent van Gogh:

In another category of ideas - when for instance one composes a motif of colours representing a yellow sky, then the raw hard white of a white wall against the sky may be expressed, if necessary, in a strange way by raw white, softened by a neutral tone. For the sky itself colours it with a delicate lilac hue. Furthermore, imagine in this so naïve landscape, which is reasonable, a cottage whitewashed all over (the roof too) standing in an orange field - certainly orange, for the Midi sky and the blue Mediterranean provoke an orange tint that gets more intense just as the scale of blues gets more vigorous tones. The black note of the door, the windows and the little cross on the ridge of the roof produce a simultaneous contrast of black and white just as pleasing to the eye as that of blue and orange. To take a more amusing motif: let's imagine a woman in a black and white checked dress in the same primitive landscape with a blue sky and an orange soil - that would be a rather funny sight, I imagine. In Arles they often do wear black and white checks. Suffice it to say that black and white are also colours, for in many cases they can be considered as colours, for their simultaneous contrast is as striking as that of green and red, for example.¹

There is no denying that colour idioms can be found in different languages and cultures since they give emotional colouring to the speech. They help the speakers to express their feelings and emotions figuratively, thus making the communication more intense and expressive. The objective of the present study is to draw parallels between English and Armenian perception of colours, revealing the peculiarities of the latter in idioms. The comparative-contrastive analysis comprises colour idioms with two opposite spectra – *black* and *white*. The use of

black and *white* in English and Armenian idioms often stems from cultural, historical, and psychological associations with these colours.

Black and White in English and Armenian idioms

The perception of black and white idioms refers to the interpretation and understanding of phrases or expressions that use the colours *black* and *white* metaphorically. These colours play significant roles in various aspects of life, from art and design to culture and symbolism. They are used in a wide range of contexts and have diverse meanings across different cultures and societies. Idioms with *black* and *white* are common in English and Armenian languages and cultures and add vividness to these languages. The perception of these idioms can vary depending on cultural context, personal experiences, and individual interpretations. While some idioms may carry negative connotations, others may be neutral or even positive. Additionally, the meanings of idioms can evolve over time, reflecting changes in society and language usage. The use of *black* and *white* in idioms is a product of cultural symbolism, historical practices, psychological associations, societal norms, metaphorical thinking, and the visual impact of these colours. These elements combine to create idiomatic expressions that vividly convey meaning, often rooted in the contrasts and associations attributed to *black* and *white*.

Black in idioms mostly carries a negative connotation, as opposed to ***white*** which symbolizes purity, virtue, innocence, and other high merits.

Let us examine the idioms with *black*, where the latter has a negative implication:

a black mood (անսրբամտություն) – a fit of depression, bad temper.

It must be mentioned that this phrase in some cases is used in plural when it collocates with *suffer from*: *have one of one's black moods* – *սև ուրբաթի մեջ լինել*. It has several synonyms: *to feel blue*; *to be down in the dumps*; *down in the mouth* – *մռուրջը կախ*.

black sheep – an outcast or someone who is expelled from a group and never discussed, or that member of a family who is thought to be a disgrace to other members of it because he is a criminal or because he does not measure up to their imposed standards.

This idiom is usually used as *the black sheep of the family*. It probably originates from the fact that most sheep (those that conform) are white and only the very different one (the one that does not conform) is black.

The Armenian idiom contains an opposite colour – *white*: *սպիտակ ագռավ* literally means *white crow* (most crows are black and only the very different one is white).

a *black spot* (աղետի գոտի) – a place or area where unpleasant and unwanted things occur regularly and without much chance of improvement: for instance, epidemics, crime, traffic accidents, unemployment;

a *black look* (պղտոր հայացք) – a look of strong dislike, disapproval, resentment;

black out (գիտակցութունը կորցնել) – to lose consciousness temporarily.

The colour *black* is preserved in the Armenian idiom: *աչքերի դեմը սևանալ, սև կտրել*;

a *blackout* as a noun means *a period of unconsciousness*. The expression is also used when the electricity goes out in a city.

black and blue– bruised (physically or emotionally).

Literally, this phrase means ‘marked with a large number of bruises on the body, either because of an accident or a beating’ (կապտուկներով). Figuratively, it means ‘to feel depressed’ (հուսահատ) (e.g. *He is still black and blue from his divorce*).

a *black book* (սև ցուցակ) – a book containing the names of people to be punished, blacklisted, etc. (to be in someone's black book);

black bottle (թույն) – poison;

Black Death (սև տենդ) – (black) plague;

black economy (ապօրինի եկամուտ) – that portion of the income of a nation that remains illegally undeclared (as a result of tax evasion);

a *black eye* (վատ համբավ) – in its direct meaning it means *bruising round the eye*; figuratively the phrase means *a bad reputation* (e.g. *That kind of behaviour can give us all a black eye*);

a *black frost* (դաժան սառնամանիք) – a frost without snow or rime that is severe enough to blacken vegetation.

Some idioms with *black* (with a negative connotation) are the same both in English and Armenian:

a *black mark* (*beside one's name*) (սև բիծ) – an indication that somebody has done something bad that others disapprove of; a mark of discredit.

Collocations: to earn a black mark; to leave a black mark on/against sb/sb's reputation, prestige, career, etc. It is the same as *to blacken somebody's name* (սևացնել մեկի անունը).

a **black day** (սև օր) – a day or some specific point of time when something sad or disastrous happens to somebody;

a **black market** (սև շուկա) – a system of buying and selling illegal goods or at illegal prices or quantities;

black humour (սև հումոր) – a morbid form of humour;

a **black list/blacklist** (սև ցուցակ) – a list of persons or organizations to be disapproved or suspected of disloyalty, misconduct;

black magic (սև մոգություն) – magic used for evil purposes by invoking the power of the devil.

Antonym: **white magic** (սպիտակ մոգություն)

black money (սև/կեղտոտ փողեր) – that part of a nation's income that relates to its black economy; any money that a person or organization acquires illegally.

In Armenian idioms, *black* mainly (if not always) has a negative implication:

սև սիրտ – unhappy, miserable, depressed (in English *black heart* is a defect in the stone);

սև թուղթ – a letter informing of the death of a relative (whereas *black letter* is *Old English Gothic type of font*);

սև բախտ – unlucky, unfortunate;

սև/չար հոգի – a wicked person;

սև/չար մտքեր – evil thoughts.

However, not always does *black* carry a negative connotation in English idioms:

a **black tie** (lit. սև թիակ) (պաշտոնական երեկույթ) – a formal occasion in which men wear black bow ties and dinner jackets or tuxedos and women wear formal, long dresses.

This expression originates from *the black bow tie* that is part of men's formal clothing.

a **black belt** is worn by an instructor or expert competitor in the Dan grades, usually from first to fifth Dan – սև գոտի; figuratively, a *black belt* means *an expert at sth* (զինակ).

in the black – to be prosperous, make a profit. (e.g. *The company has been in the black since they began to adopt many new ideas to cut costs.*)

This idiomatic expression originates from the colour of ink that was used on the credit side of a business ledger or account book. Investments were registered in black ink.

In Armenian, *սևի սեջ* has a marked negative implication – լինել տխրություն, սգո սեջ;

Antonym: *in the red* (to have financial problems).

In Armenian, on the contrary, *կարսիրի / կանաչ-կարսիրի սեջ* լինել means *to be happy* (լինել ուրախ, երջանիկ).

Of all the phrases discussed above, *in the black* must be very marked, for it bears a very positive connotation. Therefore, we shall deduce that not all phrases having *black* in their shell are notorious.

As mentioned above, *white* mostly implies purity and strongly opposes black; it mainly carries a positive connotation.

A *white lie* (սպիտակ սուտ, պոչավոր սուտ) – a minor, polite or harmless lie (especially uttered in the interests of tact or politeness); a lie that does no harm and is merely more convenient than telling the truth; ‘an innocent lie’;

a *white hope* (հույս) – a talented person who is expected to bring honour, success or victory to his group, team, etc. (e.g. in sport);

a *white flag* (սպիտակ դրոշ) – a white flag or a piece of white cloth hoisted to signify surrender or request a truce;

a *white knight* – a champion or rescuer, esp. a person or organization that rescues a company from financial difficulties, an unwelcome takeover bid, etc.

This phrase is translated into Armenian *սպիտակ ասպետ* which is used in quite a different context: a white knight on a white horse (resembling the medieval knight) is the dream of most girls awaiting their love and marriage.

whitewash (ոճաբիլիտացիայի ենթարկել, արդարացնել) – to conceal or minimize the importance of something bad; to make something look better than it really is.

The idiom originates from the paint-like substance called *whitewash*, made from lime and water, which is used to paint houses and fences cheaply. It has a positive shade in its shell and denotes something or an action which, if white-washed, is quite justifiable.

Yet, *whitewash* may also be used negatively – meaning *to conceal the shortcomings, errors*.

Not always does *white* carry a positive connotation. Let us consider the following examples:

a *white night* (անքուն գիշեր) – a sleepless night (from French “nuit blanche” with the same meaning);

a *white slave* – a white skinned prostitute, especially one inveigled into a foreign country by the promise of other employment.

This phrase is also used in plural and has its attributive use; the white-slave trade/traffic.

a *white sepulchre* (lit. սպիտակ գերեզման/դամբարան) – a hypocrite; somebody who pretends to be pious, righteous, although he is not: դրսից քահանա, ներսից սատանա կամ դրսից հայելի, ներսից ածելի;

a *white crow* (սպիտակ ագռավ) – a person who is ignored for he is different from others;

a *white feather* (սպիտակ փետուր) – a symbol or mark of cowardice.

The phrase *show the white feather* originates from the belief that a white feather in a gamecock's tail was a sign of a poor fighter;

white fury (կատաղություն) – violent or uncontrolled anger; wild rage;

white heat (անտանելի շոգ) – intense heat or a very high temperature, characterized by emission of white light;

bleed somebody white (մինչև վերջին թելը կողոպտել) – to take away almost everything somebody possesses, often by drastic, unfair or deceptive means (esp. of money, but also of physical or emotional resources);

a *white elephant* – an item that no one wants to buy or that is difficult to get rid of; a costly but useless possession.

This idiom originates from a traditional custom in Siam, present-day Thailand. If a rare albino (white) elephant was captured, it was the property of the emperor, and was sacred to him. Only he could ride or use the animal and it could not be destroyed without his consent. Whenever the emperor wished to ruin someone who displeased him, he would give the man a white elephant. The man would then be forced to feed and take care of the animal but could neither use nor destroy it.

In some English and Armenian idioms *black* and *white* stand side by side. Denoting two opposite spectra, they create a marked contrasting background:

black and white (սև-սպիտակ) – the absolute wrong or right without recognizing any more subtle variations; a clear choice; this one or that one (e.g. It's not just *black and white*: it's a hard choice);

in black and white (սև-սպիտակ) – in extremes (e.g. He always saw things in black and white);

put down/write in black and white (սևով սպիտակին) – very clearly (e.g. It's written *in black and white* that you must follow these instructions);

in black and white (գրավոր) – in written form;

swear/prove black is white – say emphatically or stubbornly that something is true when it is not so – մաճունին սև աւել;

call/make white black – make wrong statements (by claiming the opposite) – սպիտակին սև ասել;

turn white into black – reverse things (in the wrong/opposite direction) – սպիտակը սևացնել;

Of particularly great interest are the proverbs and sayings comprising *black* and *white* in their component. Let us observe some of them:

The pot calls the kettle black – պտուկը պտկին սևերես է ասում; (e.g. *When politicians say that bankers have been lying, it's like the pot calling the kettle black.*)

(Synonym: *Look who's talking/speaking!* – ով խոսի, դու սուս արա);

The devil is not as black as one is painted – not as bad as it/one is said to be (սասանան այնքան էլ սև / սարսափելի չէ, որքան որ նրան նկարագրում են)

The above proverb is used when something, which is initially unfavourable or terrible, turns out to be nicer. (e.g. *I can't believe that actress is as cold-hearted as the gossip columns say she is. The devil is not so black as he is painted.*)

Two blacks do not make a white – սևը սևի հետ սպիտակ չի դառնա; (Synonym: *two wrongs do not make a right* – *ուրիշի հանցանքը քո հանցանքը չի արդարացնի*)

Namely, one cannot justify a wrong action by saying that another has done something similar. Somebody criticizes another for a fault which he has himself in an equal degree.

These idioms showcase the symbolic associations of *black* and *white* in English and Armenian languages, with *black* often representing negativity, secrecy, or irregularity, while *white* is associated with purity, truth, or the absence of deceit. It is important to note that these associations may vary based on cultural contexts and individual interpretations.

Overall, the perception of *black* and *white* idioms involves the recognition of their figurative meanings and interpretation within English and Armenian cultural and linguistic contexts.

Conclusion

The comparative analysis of colour idioms within English and Armenian cultures has uncovered specific peculiarities, as well as similarities and differences in these two languages, conditioned by the perception of colour. As we can see, there is a vast number of idioms with *black* and *white* in English and Armenian. The thorough study of the material has brought us to the conclusion that *black* in

English idioms mostly carries a negative connotation, but it may also be used positively. *White* symbolizes purity, virtue, innocence and other high merits, yet not rare are the examples with negative implications. In Armenian, the perception of *black* and *white* is more contrasting: *black* – with a marked negative and *white* – with a positive connotation.

Since languages differ greatly in their colour vocabulary, studying how speakers of different languages perceive and think about colour provides insights into the relationship between language and thought.

Notes

1. The quote is from the letter of Vincent van Gogh to Emile Bernard, written 6-11 June 1888, in Arles. Translated by Mrs. Johanna van Gogh-Bonger, edited by Robert Harrison, number B06. Retrieved March 16, 2017 from <http://webexhibits.org/vangogh/letter/18/B06.htm>.

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ՄԵՎ ԵՎ ՄՊԻՏԱԿ ԳՈՒՑՆԵՐԻ ԸՆԿԱԼՈՒՄԸ
ԱՆԳԼԵՐԵՆ ԵՎ ՀԱՅԵՐԵՆ ԴԱՐՁՎԱԾՔՆԵՐՈՒՄ

Նաիրա Ավագյան
Նաիրա Ներսիսյան

Գունանունները լայնորեն կիրառվում են անգլերեն և հայերեն դարձվածքներում: Ամենատարածված գույգերից են սև և սպիտակ՝ հակադիր սպեկտրի գույները: Հոդվածն ուսումնասիրում է սև և սպիտակ գույների ընկալումը անգլերեն և հայերեն դարձվածքներում: Համեմատական վերլուծությունը ցույց է տալիս, որ սև գույնն անգլերեն դարձվածքներում հիմնականում կրում է բացասական իմաստ, բայց հանդիպում է նաև դրական իմաստով: Մսկիտակ գույնը խորհրդանշում է անաղարտություն, անմեղություն, բայց քիչ չեն սպիտակի բացասական իմաստով կիրառության օրինակները: Հայերենում սև և սպիտակ գույների ընկալումը շատ ավելի կոնտրաստային է: Սևն ունի ընդգծված բացասական, իսկ սպիտակը՝ դրական ենթատեքստ:

Բանալի բառեր՝ գունային ընկալում, գունային սիմվոլիզմ, դարձվածքներ, բառակապակցություններ, դրական/բացասական ենթատեքստ: