DECODING COLOUR WORDS IN ENGLISH MARITIME AND NAVAL TERMINOLOGY

Dr. Galina V. Velikova, Assoc. Prof.
Nikola Vaptsarov Naval Academy (Bulgaria)

Abstract. The present paper attempts to investigate colour words and phrases which give a special flavour to Maritime and Naval Terminology in English. It is based on a list of the most common words and phrases excerpted from specialized dictionaries and strives to systematize them using the lexico-semantic method. Bearing in mind their particular status in language it is found that colour words abound with figurative meanings and give rise to both metonymy and metaphor. The findings in this study can be applicable when teaching English maritime and naval terminology.

Keywords: maritime and naval terminology; colour words and phrases; classification, metaphor; metonymy

Introduction

Scholars have done a certain amount of research on colours and how they relate to everyday experiences. The issues covered in it range from the number of colours which turns out to be culture-specific, distinction of colours into basic and non-basic, the tendency to create colour terms based on concrete objects, saturation, tone and brightness, and so on.

It should be borne in mind that the question of how many colours are there will not be a point of discussion here. According to Berlin and Kay (1969), there are 11 basic colour categories: white, black, red, green, yellow, blue, brown, purple, pink, orange and grey which exist in the English language. It is true that these categories differ from culture to culture which has much to do with the availability of these colours and their function and frequency in practical life (Mc Neill 1971, 21 – 33). However, very little attention has been paid to colour words use in terminology.

The present paper addresses colour words and phrases which give a special flavour to Maritime and Naval Terminology in English. Colour words abound with figurative meanings which have been systematized in the so-called colour coding. We are going to try to decipher this code using a list of the most common words and phrases containing a colour term based on specialized dictionaries such as the

Dictionary of Maritime and Transportation Terms, the Sailor's Illustrated Dictionary, Dictionary of Nautical Words and Terms, Dictionary of Naval Terms, Naval Terms Dictionary and Learner's English-Bulgarian Maritime Dictionary.

The present paper attempts to systematize them using the lexico-semantic method and keeping in mind their particular status in figurative language, more precisely in Maritime and Naval terminology.

Analysis

Cognitive Linguistics has devoted a lot to metaphor and colour and the interrelation between them. However, not much work has been dedicated to the figurative meanings of colour. The list compiled for this study gives evidence about the developments in meaning of colour words and phrases, as well as the ways in which metaphor and metonymy interact within the domain of colour.

There is a lot of investigation focusing on the differences between these two processes. A standard distinction made by Kövecses is that metaphor is based on similarity and involves two different domains, while metonymy is based on contiguity and involves only one domain (Kövecses 2010). Philip observes: "Colour words have a rather particular status in figurative language, because their semantic transparency is so great that they are almost obliged to conform to truth conditions. As a result, they regularly form metonymic relations" (2011, 87). On the other hand, metonymies function in a specific domain which is extremely difficult to establish even in one particular subject-field. We would accept the view of Hamilton who concludes that while a colour phrase has a clear and traceable metonymic motivation, it is extended in some way, moving into the area of metaphor (2016, 265).

Therefore, for the purposes of this study a distinction will be made between metaphorical and metonymic colour terms. The literal use of colours will also be mentioned as it serves as a source for the figurative meanings of colours.

Philip prefers to name the literal meaning of a colour prototypical "as the only true literal meaning of a colour term is found in its iconic capacity; the sun is yellow, the sky is blue (or grey…), blood is red. When used in this way, colour terms carry no meaning beyond the representation of hue." (Philip 2006, 66 – 67). Names of fish, are literal: for example, a *blue fish* has a blue or greenish colour, a *red mullet* is bright red in colour, a *redfish* has a red skin or flesh. UK national ensigns also exemplify only a prototypical meaning of colours. Thus a *blue ensign* is flown by merchant vessels commanded by retired officers of the Royal Navy or officers of the Royal Navy Reserve. A *red ensign* is flown on all British merchant ships and many pleasure boats while a *white ensign* is seen on Her Majesty's ships and shore establishments under naval command. Similarly, manuals such as the *Engineers Black* or *Red Book*, the Watch Officers Guide which is the *Blue Book* or the *IACS Blue* and *Green Books* providing technical support to the shipping industry are called so simply because of

the colour of their hardcover. No extension of meaning is observed in the examples given, neither does the colour impart any unique quality to the objects.

Hamilton highlights that there are two types of metonymy with colour words and phrases (2016, 29). One is deriving a great number of non-basic colour terms from the names of pigments, dyes, plants, fruit, minerals, metals and animal-related words; all items which have a prototypical colour association (Kerttula 2002, 242 – 250), for instance *milky sea* – a phosphorescence on the surface of the sea with light enough to read. The other type of colour metonymy is when a colour word or phrase including a colour term can stand for a non-colour concept, for example, the distinction of personnel on board an aircraft carrier according to shirt colour for easy identification:

blue shirts are personnel who chock and chain aircraft on a carrier flight deck

brown shirts are plane captains and air wing leading petty officers

green shirts are members of the catapult or arresting gear crew

purple shirts are aviation fuel handlers working on the flight deck

white shirts are squadron plane inspectors, safety observers, medical personnel, etc. and

yellow shirts are plane directors, aircraft handling officers, catapult officers, etc.

Hamilton also argues that the boundary between literal and metaphorical language is often not clear, and metonymy often lies in between (Hamilton 2016, 38). Besides, she adds that "from a synchronic perspective, if language users understand the motivation behind a phrase it can be interpreted as metonymy whereas if they do not it can be interpreted as a metaphor" (Hamilton 2016, 35).

Our classification distinguishes between two subtypes of metonymy: paradigmatic and syntagmatic. According to Bulgarian linguists Pernishka and Popova the paradigmatic axis represents part-whole, whole-part, genus-species and species-genus relationships, while the syntagmatic one focuses on causal, spatial or temporal relationships (Pernishka, 1993, 180, Popova, 2007, 9 – 29; Popova, 2012, 343).

Our list includes mainly examples of paradigmatic part-for-whole metonymy. The following subtypes are differentiated within this relation:

1.1. When part of clothing stands for a person – a *blue jacket* which means a US navy sailor below chief petty officer. They are also referred to as a *white hat*. A *black shoe* is a slang for US officers on Navy ships and a *brown shoe* – a slang for an aviation officer.

1.2. When a colour denotes a group of objects or people. To begin with the International Code of Flag Signals where only five colours can be used – red, blue, yellow, black, and white, usually in combination, there are only two plain colour flags – the *yellow flag* which is also the quarantine flag (referred to as the *Yellow jack*) and the *red flag* standing for dangerous goods on board. As a matter of fact, red is generally used to signal danger, e.g. the *red sector* of a lighthouse indicating a danger area on a chart, or a *red light* – the portside light which acts as a stop signal in a crossing situation. Two more flags can be added here – the *Black jack* otherwise

known as the Jolly Roger, and *Blue Peter* indicating that the ship is about to put to sea and to recall personnel back on board.

Two other examples featuring substantivization of the colour to denote a class of people in the military are worth mentioning, too: *blues* which stands for the blue uniform worn by navy personnel and *greens* – the respective colour uniform for aviation.

Overall, syntagmatic metonymy can be represented by the relation *colour for characteristic*. We have named this model so because colours in the corpus are used to characterize objects or places. Thus, colours are terminologized in *blue*, *green* and *brown waters* depending on place whether they are the deep waters of oceans, coastal waters, ports and harbours or navigable rivers and their estuaries. Respectively, the navies operating in these regions are also called *blue, green* or *brown water navies*.

An interesting case of metonymy again related to the water colour are the following phrases – *white horses, white caps* and *white water*, all of them associated with the white froth formed on the crests of waves sometimes adding the idea of shallow banks.

In the sphere of cargo types *oils* are *black* and *white* according to whether they come from the bottom or the top of the refining process. Accordingly, the vessels carrying them are either *black oil* or *white oil tankers*.

A second type of metonymy *colour for event* is illustrated by the phrase *black tide* which usually occurs during an oil spill. Another example supporting it is *green seas* also known as *greenies* because of the bluish-green colour of the waves coming aboard the deck in stormy weather.

Instead of offering a classification of all metaphorically-designated colour words and phrases we are going to examine the figurative uses of each colour one by one. Some of the so-called metaphorical extensions are compared with those defined by Hamilton (2016); others are based on our associations with colours.

Thus, the colour **black** is most often linked with legality or rather breach of law. For example, *black cargo* is cargo banned by general cargo workers for some reason. A *blackbirder* used to be a vessel employed in transporting black slaves. A *black gang* is a term still in circulation to designate unlicensed or enlisted members of the engine room force. The latter phrase also conveys the idea of lack of light. So does the word *blackout* where the lack of electrical supply signals absence of light. A *black squall* accompanied by heavy rain and dark clouds imparts the idea of anger and lack of control or a supernatural force.

On the other hand, expressions like the *Black book of the Admiralty* or *the Black List on Port State Control* point to disfavour through a misdemeanour, bad behaviour or poor performance. Black in *black ice* may draw on the idea of danger as it is thin, dark with no snow on it.

It is only natural that **white** in contrast to black should enter into opposing metaphorical meanings but this is not always the case. So in the *IMO White List*

are included countries implementing the STCW Convention. *The White List on Port State Control* comprises quality flags, therefore the idea of legality is employed here in its positive sense. *White ice* is a first year ice, the focus being on light. However, a *white rainbow* sometimes seen in a thick fog and a *white squall* which is a sudden and violent windstorm at sea not accompanied by black clouds point to the idea of the supernatural. Likewise, *whiteout* denotes a blizzard or snowstorm that reduces visibility leading to the senses going blank.

Blue is one of the colours most commonly used revealing several figurative meanings. Not incidentally this colour is associated with uniforms as it is usually connected with stability, unity and conservatism. Probably this is why the *Blue Angels*, a group of aviation officers performing precision formation acrobatics, got their name from the uniforms they wore and the aircraft they flew. In their case the blue colour communicates significance, importance, and confidence. In recent years though there is a change in the colours of their planes but the idea behind the name is still kept. The *Blue Riband*, given to the passenger liner crossing the Atlantic at the highest possible speed, points to the idea of award.

Yet, blue can also be associated with old age as in *blue ice* which is the oldest and hardest form of glacier ice. It can be linked to cold as in *bluenose* referred to someone who has been North of the Arctic circle by ship or boat. It can evoke a surprise as in a *blue light* used by pilots to attract the attention of passing vessels entering port. Not accidentally it is modified to denote other hues – navy blue, sky-blue, aquamarine, etc. Steinvall argues that a colour may be named after a group with a distinctive uniform colour, such as marine blue (Royal Marines) and navy (blue) (Royal Navy) which he views as a type of type of part-whole metonymy (2002, 214).

Obviously the colour **green** is mostly associated with the environment and how to minimize the ecological impact of shipping activities but when it is part of a collocation it may acquire the meaning of inexperienced, young, new. It is reflected in the examples *to green the economy, green plus class notation, green audit*, etc. where it is used in the meaning of environmental politics. But in *green timber* the colour means not suitable for use. The other extension of green points to a metonymy-based meaning of permission as in a *green light, to give the green* where the starboard side light in a crossing situation means a go signal.

Contrary to the numerous extensions of meaning, **red** here has very few connotations quite often in contrast to green. In the example *red label* it refers to a high risk as it is required to be placed on flammable cargo. So the colour code here may be interpreted as a warning. *Red right returning* reminds navigators that red buoys are on the starboard side of the channel when returning to port (in the US), so again what transpires is a warning. A *red tide* however is associated with killing marine life, therefore, with blood and death.

The rest of the colours have a very limited usage in Maritime English. Thus **grey** goes closely with black when a breach of legality is concerned, for instance the *Grey*

List on Port State Control which is a midpoint on a scale in-between black and white. In *greywater* it signifies lack of colour and vagueness.

Brown appears in only one example – *brownbagger* which is a slang for a married man who brings his food for lunch in a grocery bag. The figurative meaning conveyed here is of informality and low-cost.

Yellow and **amber** associated with *light* both share the meaning of caution. However, in *yellow metal* interpreted as naval brass the idea is of low rank. Yet another interesting usage of the colour as a verb is used about a Royal Navy officer who has been informed that he is not going to be employed any more. So in this case *to yellow* means become yellow with age.

Finally **purple** is mentioned in only one expression - a *purple light,* which can be observed over the western sky after sunset and the eastern sky before sunrise, therefore the idea of supernatural is imparted here.

For **orange** and **pink** no figurative meanings were found.

Conclusion

The analysis finds that colour words abound with figurative meanings some of which overlapping. These meanings are deep-rooted in the context they appear. There are many ways in which metaphor and metonymy interact within the domain of colour. Both metonymy and metaphor as linguistic devices exist in all human languages but are conceptualized and reflected differently in the choice of terms. Both are most frequently met in multi-word terms.

Bearing in mind that most of these terms require both expert knowledge and good general language proficiency, we believe that language learners' attention should be drawn to them. After all, future mariners should be taught to know and show their true colours – a way of saying to someone to show who they really are. The phrase has its origins in the use of flags or pennants by warships long ago. They would carry flags from many countries in order to confuse or mislead their enemies at sea. It was common practice back then, for ships to hoist their national flags before commencing battle.

The findings in this paper may be relevant when teaching maritime and naval terminology. Besides, they may be a good starting point for further research on colour words in terminology in general.

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✉ **Dr. Galina V. Velikova, Assoc. Prof.**
Web of Science Researcher ID: D-5980-2012
https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5870-8341
Nikola Vaptsarov Naval Academy
73, Vassil Drumev St.
9002 Varna, Bulgaria
E-mail: g.velikova@naval-acad.bg