

# Connotative meaning in English and Italian

## Colour-Word Metaphors

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### Abstract

Colour words are loaded with attributive, connotative meanings, many of which are realised in conventional linguistic expressions such as *to feel blue*, *to be in the pink*, and *to see red*. The use of such phrases on an everyday basis reinforces the currency of the connotative meanings which they assume in particular cultural and linguistic settings, and the phrases themselves are often cited as evidence of the existence of colours' connotative meanings. But how do the colour words in conventional linguistic expressions relate to the multitude of symbolic meanings that colours (in general) are said to represent? Based on data extracted from general reference corpora as well as traditional reference works, this article examines the use of colour-word metaphors in English and Italian. It pays particular attention to the ways in which colour words take on connotative meanings, how the meanings are fixed linguistically, and similarities and differences across the two languages under examination.

Farbbezeichnungen enthalten viele attributive und konnotative Bedeutungen, wobei viele von ihnen in umgangssprachlichen Ausdrücken vorkommen, wie z.B. *to feel blue*, *to be in the pink* und *to see red*. Die Verwendung derartiger Ausdrücke im alltäglichen Umgang trägt zur weiteren Verbreitung der konnotativen Bedeutungen innerhalb eines bestimmten kulturellen und sprachlichen Umfeldes bei, und die Ausdrücke selber werden oft als Beweis für den offensichtlichen konnotativen Aspekt der Farbbegriffe angeführt. In welchem Verhältnis stehen aber die konventionellen Ausdrücke zur großen Anzahl symbolischer Bedeutungen, die doch Farben (im Allgemeinen) darstellen sollen? Ausgehend von Resultaten allgemeiner *reference corpora* wie auch herkömmlicher Studien wird hier der Umgang mit Farbbezeichnungsmetaphern (idiomatische Ausdrücke) im Englischen und Italienischen untersucht. Insbesondere soll hier hervorgehoben werden, wie Farbbegriffe konnotative Bedeutungen erhalten, wie diese linguistisch fixiert werden, und welche Ähnlichkeiten und Unterschiede diesbezüglich in beiden Sprachen bestehen.

### 1. Introduction

Colour words are an interesting and extensively studied lexical set. Their high degree of salience makes them semantically flexible, as they are easily and immediately comprehended. All colours have a prototypical realisation – the focal point on the spectrum at which the hue is deemed to be the “best example” of the colour – expressed in language by collocations such as *blood red*, *grass green*, *pitch black*, and so on, but colour terms can in fact cover a surprisingly wide range of the chromatic spectrum. It is therefore not uncommon to find them operating in terminology, where they distinguish, separate and identify entities on the basis of their hue: *black ink*, *a red car*, *a green bottle*. However, the range of application of a colour

word can push well beyond the bounds of the prototypical hue. Language yields many examples of cases where the literal (prototypical) reference of a colour are stretched to the limits: a beetroot is purple, not red, yet the collocation *beetroot red* is conventional in English; a Granny Smith apple is a *green apple*, but grapes with the same colour of skin are *white grapes*. Apparently anomalous examples such as these are quite widespread, although they are rarely conspicuous enough to attract much attention. However, they make a significant contribution to understanding the range of hues that a colour term can cover in a given cultural and linguistic reality, not least in that they provide a starting point for identifying possible sources of metonymical motivation for figurative language, and can help to explain why different languages encode similar meanings with different colours.

Although the etymology of metaphorical colour-word expressions is well accounted for in monolingual reference works, no comprehensive account exists regarding the ways in which connotative colour meanings are incorporated into the language, and how the symbolic and connotative meanings of colour are exploited in the conventional repertoire of different languages. This study seeks to fill that gap, contributing a corpus-based dimension to work that traditionally eschews the use of large data sets.<sup>1</sup>

## **2. Quantifying Colour**

Colours have received much attention in linguistics because of their apparently universal character. All humans with normal vision can see colours, and it follows that names will be given in order to make reference to them. But not all cultures name all colours, and the ways in which the colour spectrum itself is divided change from language to language, culture to culture.

### **2.1 Defining Basic Color Terms**

Because of its sheer scope, Berlin/Kay's (1969) survey of colour terms provides a platform for most linguistic and anthropological research involving colours. The aim of the study was to identify the basic colour terms for each of the languages studied, and the order in which these come into use, with a view to developing a picture of the acquisition of colour terms in

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<sup>1</sup> Except when otherwise indicated, the corpus citations and frequency data cited in this paper are taken from the two largest general reference corpora available in the languages under study; namely the Bank of English (Harper-Collins publishers), and CORIS (CILTA – University of Bologna, Italy). The author expresses her gratitude to the corpus providers for granting access to the data.

language as a whole. A colour term can be defined as *basic* if it fits the following criteria: it should be monolexemic; its meaning or signification should not be included within another term; it should not be used only to refer to particular objects, or within a narrow or specialised field of reference; and it should be salient, i.e. be relatively frequent in general language use (Berlin/Kay 1969: 5ff).

At first glance, the definition of a basic colour term is unremarkable. On closer inspection, however, it becomes apparent that the definition is based on norms which are oriented towards norms which represent the English language and English-speaking culture, and while the definition poses no great problem for English, it should not have been assumed that the definition would be satisfactory for all the languages under study, given their great number and diversity.

Although it is understandable that a term such as *sky blue* should be excluded (it is composed of two words, and is also a hyponym of *blue*), other cases are less easily set aside. The condition that a term be monolexemic is reliant on there being an established orthographic system for the language, in which words are separated from one another by white space. Yet it is also true that a monolexeme may in fact be a compound in origin, which has acquired monolexemic status through repeated use. Furthermore, the requirement for monolexemic form limits the potential for colour names to refer metonymically to real-world objects and phenomena when more than one orthographic word would be required to make the relationship apparent (*\*sky colour, \*same as blood*).

In a similar vein, the exclusion of specific terms such as *vermilion* and *burgundy* is justifiable in that they are included within *red*. It is a less straightforward matter to exclude terms in a language not spoken by the researchers, as their perception of what is or is not specific, based on their native language, can interfere with the identification of hyponymy. For example, Hungarian has two basic terms which correspond to *red* in English (Crystal 1987: 106), and Russian has two basic terms for *blue* – *sinij* (*dark blue, indigo*) and *goluboj* (*light blue*) (ibid.) as does Italian (*blu* and *azzurro* respectively). Yet these important additions with respect to the English-language model are not taken into account in Berlin/Kay's research report. One can surmise that the researchers normalised their data to fit with their pre-existing model (for those languages that were investigated first-hand), although it should be made clear that not

all of the world's languages were investigated in the study,<sup>2</sup> so some omissions are inevitable. While some acknowledgement is made for the possibility of there being a twelfth basic colour term for Russian (Berlin/Kay 35-36), the finding is presented as inconclusive, with later comments (Kay/McDaniel 1978: 640) suggesting that perhaps not all speakers would recognise *goluboj* as being distinct from *sinij*, thus diminishing its status as a separate basic colour term. This point will be discussed further in Subsection 5.2.3 with reference to the Italian terms, *blu* (*dark blue*) and *azzurro* (*light blue*).

The exclusion of specific and contextually bound terms is also subject to the researcher's perception of norms, as again, cultural conditioning comes into play. Contextually bound terms may have more or less importance in the general language depending on the importance or prestige of the particular context in the society as a whole. *Terracotta*, for example, is used only in the context of ceramics and fine art, and the prestige of art in Western culture means that the term is likely to be fairly salient and frequent in the everyday language of the educated classes – more that would be true less well-educated, or indeed for those with no interest in art; and while a bride might assign great importance to precise shades of *white*, from *ivory* to *pearl*, *cream* to *vanilla*, the general public is on the whole unconcerned with such fine details. Matters relating to the prestige, importance and currency of specific and contextually bound colour terms involve a degree of cultural knowledge and sensitivity which cannot be guaranteed in a study which is as wide-ranging as Berlin/Kay's.

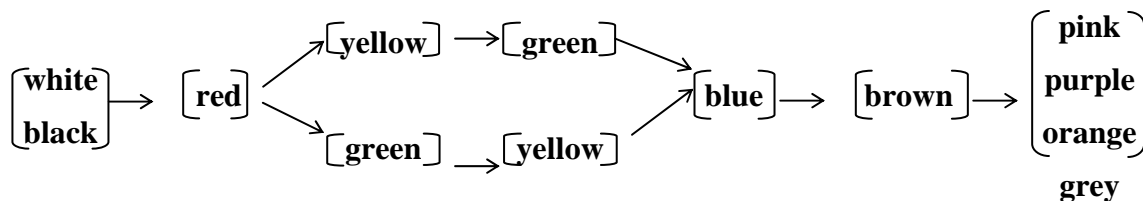
Terms such as *chartreuse* (which straddles the basic colour terms *yellow* and *green*), or *ochre* (*yellow* and *black*) are specific, but neither particularly salient nor widely used, as can be shown by referring to a large general reference corpus of English such as the Bank of English or the British National Corpus. Yet notions of frequency and general currency are difficult to ascertain reliably when there is no such reference data available, as was true at the time that Berlin/Kay's study was carried out. Unless there are linguists amongst the informants, it becomes problematic to locate elicited data within the broader linguistic repertoire for the language in question. Thus it may be that terms acquire greater or lesser significance, resulting in their inclusion or exclusion from the criteria for "basicness" set out above.

Although Berlin/Kay's study has its shortcomings, not least due to the Anglocentric bias of

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<sup>2</sup> The study collected field data directly from twenty languages, each belonging to a different language group. This data was then integrated with information from existing literature for a further seventy-eight languages, taking the total number of languages to ninety-eight. Italian was not included (Allott, 1974: 377-379).

the research design (see Lucy 1992, Davies 1998 for more detailed criticism), the extent and scope of their work is without equal. The researchers found that there were eleven basic colour terms common to the world's languages, and, perhaps more importantly, that these terms appear in languages in a fixed sequence (Berlin/Kay 1969: 4; see Figure 1), suggesting that there is a highly consistent order with which cultures identify and name basic colours. The order of appearance of the colours can be expressed as follows:



**Figure 1:** Order of appearance of the basic color terms (Berlin/Kay 1969:4).

Or:

If a language has only two colors – and all languages have at least two colors – they are always white and black; if a language has three colours, the one added is red; if a fourth is added, it will be either green or yellow; when a fifth is added, it will then include both green and yellow; the sixth added is blue; the seventh added is brown; and if an eighth or more terms are added, it or they will be purple, pink, orange, or gray (Brown 1991: 13-14).

The basic colours are *black* and *white* (or, in a more generic sense, darkness and light) plus the primary colours, *red*, *blue*, *yellow* and *green* (*yellow* is primary for pigments, while it is *green* that is primary in terms of light refraction). These are supplemented by the colours which are obtained by mixing the primaries – *orange* (red plus yellow), *brown* (red plus green) and *purple* (red plus blue), plus those which involve mixtures with *white*, namely *grey* and *pink*<sup>3</sup>.

## 2.2 Frequencies of colour words in corpus data

Berlin/Kay's analysis of the order in which the basic colour terms appear in languages can be postulated because not all languages have all eleven terms. It is therefore possible to posit not only a universal order of appearance of the basic colour terms, but also to present, to all effects and purposes, a universal frequency of occurrence of the terms from most to least pervasive.

This leads to a further research question: does this order of appearance correspond with the relative frequencies of the basic colour terms within any single language? The matter is of

<sup>3</sup> It is here that the postulated twelfth term – light blue – would be positioned (Kay/McDaniel 1978: 640-641).

interest from a corpus linguistics standpoint, in which frequency data is deemed highly indicative of what is “central and typical” in a language (Sinclair 1991:17). It is acknowledged within lexicography and corpus linguistics that there is a significant correlation between the frequency of occurrence of a word and the number of meanings it is likely to generate, so presumably the colour terms which occur frequently in the language will be more polysemous than those which occur more rarely; and the more meanings a word has overall, the more likely figurative and metaphorical meanings will be included amongst them. If a colour word proves to be very frequent in the corpus data, it would follow that more metaphorical meanings, and more conventional phrases exemplifying these meanings, would exist for this word than for a much lower-frequency item. The same principle (greater frequency = more meanings) should lead us to expect that, as far as this study is concerned, more figurative meanings of colour words will be found in the English data than in the Italian data because the English corpus is five times larger than Italian corpus: the larger data set is likely to contain a greater number of uncommon or infrequent meanings.

Considering that all eleven basic terms are present in both English and Italian, it can be revealing to test the notion that some colours are more basic than others. One would assume that the lemmas *black* and *white* will be more frequently encountered than *pink* or *orange*, but are the differences statistically significant, and what implications does greater frequency have, both for the meaning potential of the colour word in question, and for the colour term in its cultural and linguistic setting?

Using large general reference corpora for English and Italian, a frequency count was carried out for the eleven basic colours, and the raw figures are shown in Table 1.<sup>4</sup> Although raw frequency of occurrence does not necessarily correspond to order of appearance of a term in the language, it is interesting to note the correspondence to Berlin/Kay’s posited order.

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<sup>4</sup> The figures in Table 1 refer to the singular form (masculine and feminine) of the lemma, except for the four invariable Italian terms, indicated by §. Proper names and homographs are included.

| Berlin/Kay | Bank of English |           |        | CORIS   |           |        |
|------------|-----------------|-----------|--------|---|-----------|--------|
| colour     | colour          | raw freq. | # pmw  | colour  | raw freq. | # pmw  |
| white      | white           | 142084    | 331.19 | black ( <i>nero</i> )                         | 13194     | 164.92 |
| black      | black           | 132407    | 308.64 | red ( <i>rosso</i> )                          | 11527     | 144.00 |
| red        | red             | 81925     | 190.97 | white ( <i>bianco</i> )                       | 9888      | 123.60 |
| green      | green           | 62421     | 145.50 | green ( <i>verde</i> )                        | 8071      | 100.89 |
| yellow     | brown           | 61029     | 142.26 | blue ( <i>blu<sup>s</sup> &amp; azzurro</i> ) | 8343      | 104.29 |
| blue       | blue            | 54775     | 127.68 | pink ( <i>rosa<sup>s</sup></i> )              | 6455      | 80.69  |
| brown      | grey/gray       | 28317     | 66.00  | yellow ( <i>giallo</i> )                      | 4310      | 53.87  |
| purple     | yellow          | 22872     | 53.31  | grey ( <i>grigio</i> )                        | 3344      | 41.80  |
| pink       | pink            | 16687     | 38.89  | purple ( <i>viola<sup>s</sup></i> )           | 1771      | 22.14  |
| orange     | orange          | 15841     | 36.92  | brown ( <i>marrone</i> )                      | 688       | 8.6    |
| grey       | purple          | 6674      | 15.56  | orange ( <i>arancione<sup>s</sup></i> )       | 464       | 5.8    |

**Table 1:** Order of colour words in English and Italian by frequency of occurrence

The raw figures are supplemented by their translation into occurrences per million words (pmw) in the corpora consulted. This makes it possible to draw comparisons based on relative rather than absolute frequency, and highlights the fact that basic colour words are often twice as common – sometimes more so – in the English data.

Table 1 shows that there are several anomalies in the corpus data as compared to Berlin/Kay's order of colour-term acquisition. These are most apparent in the Italian data, drawing attention to the possible Anglocentric bias of the study mentioned in Section 1. While variation at the bottom of the table might be unremarkable, as colour terms can share the names of fruits and flowers in one language but not the other,<sup>5</sup> it is surprising that the positions of *rosso* and *bianco* should be inverted in the Italian data, and that the proportions of these two colours should differ so considerably, especially when we consider that *bianco* means both “white” and “blank”, whereas *white* refers to the colour alone. Even the prevalence of the lemma *rosso* as a surname cannot explain this difference, as it is usually found in the plural, and not as the singular form shown here. Is *bianco* less frequent in Italian because *pallido* (“pale, pallid”) and *chiaro* (“fair”) are the preferred terms for describing skin colour? Or perhaps English uses the nominal pair *black and white* more frequently than Italian, which can express the same concept with *monocromatico* (especially with film and photography) and the compound *bianconero* (especially to refer to football teams). *Yellow* is remarkably less frequent than Berlin/Kay's order would lead us to expect, probably because of the tendency in English to use the synonyms “gold” and “blond” for their more positive connotations of wealth and

<sup>5</sup> *Rosa* and *viola* are also flowers in Italian (rose and violet respectively); but *arancione* is only a colour, not the fruit (*arancia*).

beauty. It is therefore interesting to note *yellow* and *giallo* share a score of approximately 53pmw, making *giallo*'s relative frequency considerably higher than that of *yellow*'s. The greater relative frequency of *giallo* can be explained to some degree by the language- and culture-specific use of the colour to refer to detective stories, originally in book form (in the 1930s, a major publishing house started issuing detective stories with a yellow cover), but now also on film, and by extension to any unsolved mystery. *Rosa* has a related history (romantic fiction was published with a pink cover), and so romance and news relating to love affairs and amorous scandal are typically referred to by the colour ("pink"), which does not happen in English. *Brown* sits high up on the table for English due to its ubiquity as a surname – in particular, the surname of the UK Chancellor of the Exchequer at the time when the data was compiled – which greatly increases the rate of occurrence of the term in the English data, but which would probably not be reflected in corpora of other varieties of English. *Brown* is also commonly used to describe hair and eye colour in English, whereas alternative terms such as *castano*, *bruno*, *moro*, and also *nero*, tend to prevail in Italian.

The most important observation of all, however, is that the frequency of occurrence of basic colour words in the Italian data is substantially lower than in the English data – sixteen times lower in the extreme case of *brown* and *marrone*, but more often the frequency of the Italian colour words is between 30% and 50% that of their English counterparts. English appears more inclined to use basic colour terms than Italian is. But if Italians really do use (basic) colour terms less frequently than their Anglophone counterparts, why should this be? What words do they use "instead"? Although corpus composition may possibly be in part responsible, the reasons for this mismatch in frequency cannot be stated with any certainty, and it is beyond the scope of this paper to investigate the whys and wherefores regarding its causes. Nevertheless, the effect of the relatively low frequency of colour words in Italian is felt in the data, which contains only a very limited set of metaphorical and figurative expressions for Italian, each of which occurs fairly infrequently.<sup>6</sup>

### **3. Basic colour terms and prototypical colours**

When dealing with colour words, the notion of literal meaning is very problematic, 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

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<sup>6</sup> For a listing of the colour-word metaphors presented in this study and in Philip (2003), see Appendix.



beyond the representation of hue. Instead of *literal*, it is helpful to speak of colour as having *prototypical* meaning, which allows a greater degree of flexibility in the range of application: just as we might prefer to use the superordinate term *tree* instead of specifying *oak*, *ash* or *birch*, we are more inclined to say that wine is simply *red*, rather than *a deep ruby colour with a purple tinge* (which is the description that a wine expert might prefer). And while prototypical *red* is the colour of blood, the term can be extended in meaning to refer to a range of different, though related, hues. The same is true of all the basic colours: *black* and *white* are used to describe race, even though the colours of human skin cover a range from pink through all shades of brown, and only very rarely arrive at either extreme, and *yellow* or *red* are even less accurate indicators of skin colour, but they are used and understood nonetheless.

One way of identifying the range of shades to which the prototypical colour can be extended is to study comparative structures in which a real-world entity is compared to a colour. In canonical similes, including *white as a sheet*, *red as a lobster*, *black as pitch*, the relationship of colours to objects and phenomena are fixed in the normal repertoire of the language user; however other, non-standard and “one-shot” collocations provide a fuller indication of the chromatic range that colour terms can span.

The canonical similes relating to *white/bianco* which occur more than once in the corpus data are shown in Table 2.

|                                 |  |
|---------------------------------|--|
| white as a sheet (44)           | bianco come un lenzuolo (12)/ cencio (5) |
| white as [the driven] snow (33) | bianco come [la] neve (10)               |
| white as ice (2)                | ...                                      |
| white as a ghost (14)           | ...                                      |
| white as paper (7)              | ...                                      |
| white as milk (6)               | bianco come il latte (8)                 |
| white as [candle] wax (4)       | bianco come una candela                  |
| white as the moon (4)           | bianco come la luna (2)                  |
| white as a sheep (2)            | ...                                      |
| ...                             | bianco come un cadavere (3) [corpse]     |
| white as bone (3)               | ...                                      |
| white as chalk (3)              | bianco come il gesso (2)                 |

**Table 2:** Recurrent similes for *white/bianco*

Bearing in mind that the relative frequency of colour terms is lower in the Italian data than in the English data, inevitably limiting the range of expressions present, it should be noticed that there is a considerable degree of overlap, thus confirming that the colour terms operate within the same range of reference (though this should not be assumed to be true for all basic colour

terms). Table 3 completes the picture by providing a range of exploitations and variant forms of recurrent, canonical similes, and other expressions that occur only once in the data.

From the information presented in Tables 2 and 3, we can be confident that the prototypical attributes of *white* and *bianco* are, if not the same, then at least highly contingent, with *snow/neve*, *milk/latte* and *sheet/lenzuolo/cencio* being the most frequently-occurring of the prototypically *white* objects; and the same is true of other colour comparisons for this language pair, such as *red/rosso*, whose range of reference in linguistic expressions runs the gamut from the orange- or pinkish-red of crustaceans (*red as a lobster/rosso come un gambero*) through blood and fire, to purplish-red (*red as a beetroot*), all of which are perceived as relating to the prototypical hue. (Philip 2003: 148-151).

|  |
|--|
| White as... the proverbial sheet, a clean sheet, the collective sheet, the sheets and hoods of the Ku Klux Klan; a tablecloth, a banqueting-cloth; shrouds |
| White as... his shirt, a banker's shirt, the shirts worn by his players, the shirt he was wearing; a doctor's coat, a surplice, his England singlet        |
| White as... alabaster, porcelain, the purest marble  |
| White as... the feathers of the albatross; a snow goose's breast, the swan on the lake, a heron  |
| White as... the Wembley touchlines on Cup final day  |
| White as... the cliffs of Dover  |
| White as... an alaya shell   |
| White as... ivory  |
| White as... coconut flesh  |
| White as... sugar  |
| White as... his father's dog-collar  |
| White as... a nun's thoughts   |
| White as... a virgin's g-string  |
| Bianco come... il suo candido sorriso ("his bright smile")   |
| Bianco come... un giglio ("a lily")  |
| Bianco come... la colomba ("the dove")   |
| Bianco come... pietra ("stone")  |
| Bianco come... spose ("brides")  |
| Bianco come... un santone ("a saint")  |
| Bianco come... le luci al neon ("neon lights")   |
| Bianco come... il membro di un membro del Ku Klux Klan ("a KKK member's member")   |

**Table 3:** creative and one-shot similes for *white/bianco*

Of the 230 concordances of *as white as...*, a high proportion of the examples found are based on the fixed expressions *white as a sheet* (44 canonical versions, plus the exploitations listed in Table 3) and *white as snow* (27, plus a further six instances of the related form *white as the driven snow*). Other less conventional collocations focus not only on the prototypical hue, but also on other characteristics of *white*, especially luminosity (*white as the moon*, *white as bone*,

*white as [candle] wax*). In addition to the attributive qualities traditionally assigned to the colour, such as pallor from fear or shock (*white as chalk*, *white as a sheet*), and moral purity (*white as the driven snow*, which is Biblical in origin). Each of these collocations can be seen to undergo a degree of variation at the level of semantic field, producing examples such as *white as candles* from *white as wax*, and *white as the cliffs of Dover* from *white as chalk*).

It is the non-standard versions that really give an insight into the conceptual range occupied by colour terms. It is necessary for a colour comparison to be fairly immediately understandable, and its meaning both transparent<sup>7</sup> and relevant enough for the expression to convey information effectively. The variants that arise in Table 3 exploit “whiteness” as a prototypical colour, as in the comparisons made with *a snow goose’s breast*, *the Wembley touchlines on Cup final day*, *il suo candido sorriso* and *candle wax/candela*, and *un giglio*; but they also give further evidence of the association of white with the concept of purity and immaculateness, such as *the purest marble*, *a clean sheet*, and *spose*, not to mention *a virgin’s g-string*.

Failure to fulfil the necessary truth condition of physical or conventionally metaphorical whiteness in colour similes is likely to lead to humorous or ironic interpretations, as the reader seeks to interpret the intended meaning. The idiomatic expression *whiter than white* (see Table 4), while related to the canonical similes in Tables 2 and 3, refers specifically to moral purity through the connotative values of white in religion. Variations to the set phrase rely on the comparison of this metaphorical whiteness with that of the physical manifestation of the colour. This knowledge creates an expectation within this emphatic comparison, i.e. that the comparison must be made with something that is white in hue, for the comparison to be truthful.

The standard form that variations to the idiom take is to make a comparison with the same kinds of white phenomena found in the canonical similes discussed above, such as *snow*, *milk*, or *chalk*. The resulting dead metaphors require no further elaboration on the part of the reader, as the intended meaning is both truthful and immediately understandable. Other forms of the idiom are less immediate, and require more interpretative effort. Some pose few problems because, although non-standard in form, their meaning is still easily accessible and transparent: this is true of expressions such as *whiter than fine bone china* and *whiter than dried rice*.

| <b>canonical form</b>        | <b>whiter than white (158)</b>  |
|------------------------------|---|
| <b>dead metaphors</b>        | whiter than snow (7)<br>whiter than the driven snow (2)<br>whiter than milk<br>whiter than ivory<br>whiter than chalk                     |
| <b>transparent metaphors</b> | whiter than fine bone china<br>whiter than dried rice   |
| <b>semi-opaque metaphors</b> | whiter than an alpine meadow in December<br>whiter than driven cocaine  |
| <b>opaque metaphors</b>      | whiter than Persil<br>whiter than next week's improved detergent<br>whiter than a Newt Gingrich fundraiser<br>whiter than Michael Jackson |

**Table 4:** variant forms of *whiter than white*

Semi-opaque expressions require more effort in order to access the meaning: *whiter than an alpine meadow in December* requires a degree of semantic elaboration before the oblique references to *snow* is identified, i.e. that a mountain region in mid-winter is assumed to be covered in snow and therefore white. The successful interpretation of *whiter than driven cocaine* requires that the reader be aware that cocaine can be euphemistically referred to as *snow*, which then introduces a paradox, as the purity implied by the canonical expression is blighted by illegal drug-taking.

Opaque metaphors are difficult to access, being obscured by several layers of meaning. In the examples shown in Table 4, a considerable degree of pop-cultural knowledge is required for interpretation to succeed. In these examples, all ironic in tone, the normal expectations of purity and whiteness are not always fulfilled. Such metaphors are opaque because they violate truth conditions (we know that Michael Jackson is an African American who has become “white” through extensive plastic surgery), because they require extensive inferential knowledge (does the reader know who Newt Gingrich is, and what relevance “white” may have in this context?), or because they fall short of the expected metaphorical meaning (detergents wash away dirt, but not moral stain); and sometimes opaque metaphors exploit more than one of these categories, as is true of *whiter than Michael Jackson*. This illustration of humorous irony violates truth conditions, in terms of both racial whiteness and moral purity (at the time when the example was extracted from the corpus, he had not yet been cleared of child abuse accusations).

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<sup>7</sup> If a meaning is transparent, the reader can “see through” the words and access the meaning without difficulty.

#### 4. Contextual and decontextual meaning

The high degree of saliency of colour words means that they occupy a somewhat privileged position in figurative language, as their transparency compels the language to adhere to truth conditions: colours occur naturally and are consistent in their manifestation. The use of prototypical colour terms illustrated in Table 4 brings us to the farthest extreme of what can safely be defined as literal: figurative meaning begins with metonymy and transparent metaphor and then works through a continuum of increasing opacity and metaphoricity. Colour metaphors displaying no metonymical motivation whatsoever are very rare indeed, and thus highly marked. *The sky is blue like an orange*, an example coined by Group *mu* (cited in Day 1996, section 6), is a case in point. It is intentionally surreal, because although particular atmospheric conditions can turn the sky orange, under no natural circumstances can oranges be blue. The comparison is invalid, because its presentation of impossible colour associations violates truth conditions.

Metonymical motivation is a prime factor in the generation and coining of colour word expressions, but it is a little misleading to suggest that colour-word expressions are metonyms proper; and it should be stressed that metonymical motivation does not in any way preclude opacity of meaning. While some colour-word expressions have remained more-or-less transparent through the maintained currency of their underlying conceptual relations, a great many others, coined deep in the past, have lost their immediacy and semantic transparency with the passing of time. When the figurative meaning of a colour-word expression is not immediate, we can investigate its etymology in order to understand its original *raison d'être*, the cultural and connotative values that brought it into being. In doing so, however, the linguist has to be very careful to avoid over-interpretation, bearing in mind that the average language user's awareness of meaning is limited to the pragmatic function of the expression in a discourse situation, and does not generally extend into the diachronic dimension.

To illustrate the difference between pragmatic, contextual meaning, and citation meaning, let us consider *out of the blue* in the following selection of corpus citations<sup>8</sup>:

1. Er indeed the directive was promulgated as the minister said but I don't think it was a bolt **out of the blue**, it was of course something that we around for some considerable time before that and of course that excuse hardly applies to the delay in establishing the European parliamentary constituency committees, er as the minister er will know very well, ...

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<sup>8</sup> These citations, and others, can be retrieved from <http://sara.natcorp.ox.ac.uk/lookup.html>.

2. You've still got the problem of addressing praise, because quite often you've only, if you've given somebody a specific task then it's easy to praise or not to praise in that situation, but if they've just come in, done their job and gone home, you know, just sat on a checkout for four hours, right it's my time to leave, then, if they've done nothing **out of the blue**, extraordinary, so they don't do anything wrong, or, you know.
3. It struck him that it seemed weird that Leeds rejected continuous bids from Blackburn all through the season and then suddenly, **out of the blue**, accepted one.
4. How would you like to be an innocent old woman quietly doing your knitting, and then get a letter like that **out of the blue**?
5. Two days before she was killed, she phoned me **out of the blue**.
6. It only takes a few minutes to write yet receiving a letter **out of the blue** can mean such a lot to somebody.
7. "I have got a very good deal, and it came virtually **out of the blue**," said the Doncaster-based rider, who until last week thought his future lay with a new team being planned in Belgium.

These examples show that *out of the blue* is used as a conventional idiomatic phrase with a fairly stable set of cotextual features (*letters, phone calls* and other surprises are the principal collocating words). There is no evidence to support the notion that the phrase is used to refer to objects falling out of the sky, although this is the situation that gave rise to the phrase in the first place. Once the language user becomes aware of the origin and metonymical motivation for the phrase, his/her perception of the meaning may change slightly, as the new image is contributes an additional layer of literal, compositional meaning to the otherwise non-decomposable string (Philip 2003: 238-242). Decontextualised settings, such as dictionary citations, favour a similar distortion of the pragmatic function of language, highlighting elements of meaning which may no longer be relevant in a synchronic perspective. This should be borne in mind in Section 5, which seeks to identify the connotative meanings traditionally ascribed to the colour words in the dictionary citation forms of the English and Italian expressions listed in the Appendix (for detailed treatment of non-canonical and contextualised forms, see Philip 2000, 2003, 2004).

## 5. Figurative meaning in colour-word expressions

### 5.1 Black, white, and shades of grey

#### 5.1.1 Black

Berlin/Kay (1969: 4) identified *black* and *white* as the most basic of the basic colour terms, occurring as they do in all languages before any other colour term (but see Table 1). However *black* and *white* are not colours (hues) proper as they contain all the colours of the spectrum in combination. *Black* absorbs all light – Democritus (cited in Aristotle 350 B.C. b) asserted that *black* is related to roughness – and its relationship to darkness, both literal and figurative, is immediate. All sorts of ill deeds occur under the cover of night, when they go easily unseen, and for this reason irregular dealings are typically linked to this colour: the *black market* (*mercato nero*) and the Italian extension of the concept to speak of work that is paid cash-in-hand (tax-free), often with no contract: *lavorare/pagare in nero*. Italian also uses the colour to describe local news consisting mainly of crime reports and minor scandal, in the section of newspapers known as the *cronaca nera*, which is not immediately understood by an English speaker. Individuals who act suspiciously or maliciously again acquire darkness as an attribute: *bête noir* (*bestia nera*) and *black sheep* (*pecora nera*) are common to both languages, whilst *anima nera* (“black soul”) finds no true parallel in English.

English demonstrates a willingness to redeem offenders through expressions such as *as not as black as s/he is painted* (the expression never occurs with positive polarity in the data), in which an attempt is made to salvage somebody’s character, and *the pot calling the kettle black*, in which the accuser is told to consider his/her own actions before criticising those of other people; these find no appropriate equivalent in Italian. *Black humour* (*umorismo nero*) has sinister or malicious undertones although it is ultimately intended to be laughed at.

*Black*, as extreme metaphorical darkness, is the colour of evil and, by extension, of the Devil and the supernatural in general: the *black arts*, *black magic* (*magia nera*). Even the popular image of the warty old hag – the connection between ugliness and evil – goes back to Plato (360 B.C. b). *Black magic* uses the supernatural for personal gain, paying no heed to the harm – often death and great suffering – that it causes. It therefore links together darkness and evil with suffering, misery and destitution: *miseria nera*, *fame nera*, and *crisi nera* are still current in Italian, whereas English favours adjectives such as *dire* or *extreme* in place of colour words. In these instances, *nero* adds its sinister connotations to an already desperate situation, admitting the possibility that death may be just around the corner.

Biggam (1993: 49) writes that in Chaucer's time, *black* was considered to be the colour of disease and illness, mourning and sorrow; and although *black* is still traditionally the colour worn by mourners in both cultures, the concept does not seem to have been transferred into linguistic expressions. However the association of *black* with the melancholic character (in the Hippocratic tradition) survives in Italian to a greater extent than in English. *Nero* can be found in a variety of collocations regarding depression and desperation: a *periodo nero* is a particularly bad period, and linked to this expression are the *Black Mondays* of the stock market (in both languages). A bad mood may be called a *black mood* (*umor nero*), and induce one to have negative thoughts (*pensieri neri*), to see the worst in everything (*vedere tutto nero*) and *fare un quadro nero della situazione* ("to paint a black picture of the situation"), as well as cause *black looks* to be thrown. It is interesting to note that *nero* is the colour of depression in Italian, while *blue* is preferred in English. This is discussed further in 5.3.

With *black* being the colour of mourning, it acquires qualities related to the state of bereavement, especially sobriety and, by extension, reliability and authority. These connotative values of authority and reliability underlie the Italian Fascist regime's adoption of black shirts as part of military uniform, although the connotations now ascribed to the infamous *camicie nere* (*black-shirts*) are warped beyond recognition of their more worthy origin, tending to focus on violence, restriction of freedom and intolerance – qualities associated with the wearers of the uniform, not with the colour. The written word, on the other hand, is still regarded as the ultimate authority: evidence and proof must be written down and not merely attributed to hearsay, thus black ink on white paper has assumed great importance. Legislation and other authoritative information must be *put down in black and white* (*messo/ scritto nero su bianco*), and one must guard against unwelcome surprises which happen *di punto in bianco* (*out of the blue*). Here, the written word, disappears from the *white* (or blank) page, causing disorientation and dismay; but it serves as a reminder that writing is not as stable and permanent as we would like it to be.

Misdemeanours are indicated by having a *black mark* (*punto nero*) set against one's name, or, in English, finding oneself in someone's *black books* – not to be confused with finding oneself in someone's private *little black book* of essential contacts, which may have more favourable repercussions. Finally, in Italy one must be careful to avoid *vedere bianco per nero* ("seeing white instead of black"; *having the wool pulled over one's eyes*); being tricked into seeing something that is not there, or believing that something is present when it is in fact absent.



While the connotative values attributed to *black/nero* are similar in both cultures, it becomes immediately obvious that these similarities are often lexicalised differently. It is also true that sometimes there appears to be no recurrent lexical expression to express a concept, as is the case with *black* as the colour of mourning, which can be experienced first-hand as a cultural reality though it does not appear to be reflected in the data. As *black* is closely connected to the concepts of darkness and depth (where light cannot penetrate), it should be remembered that other words are available to both language to express these concepts, hence the apparent lack of translatability of the expressions. In reality, the meaning being expressed through the colour in one language may find a very close rendition in the other language which, however, does not involve *black* or *nero*. One such example can be found in the translation of *umor nero*, which may be called either a *black mood* or a ***dark mood*** in English; in other cases, a different colour is typically chosen (*nero* vs. *blue* for depression) though this is less common.

### 5.1.2 White

Although *white* occurs with comparable frequency to black in the English data, the proportion of fixed expressions involving this colour appears to be considerably lower, displaying a far more restricted range of connotative meanings (see Appendix). While *black* – the antithesis of light – is linked to activities that take place under the cover of darkness, *white* is the reflection of light and thus assumes positive connotative values associated with daylight, including clarity, visibility, honesty, and perfection. This in itself can help to explain why there are fewer metaphorical expressions involving *white* than there are for *black*: while surreptitious dealings and illegality are worthy of mention, lawfulness and openness are more likely to be taken for granted and simply not spoken about to the same extent.

Plato (360 B.C.a) writes that “[w]hite is a colour suitable to the Gods”, and sets out an extended symbolism in which good, beauty and obedience relate to *white*. The religious connotations of *white* remain to this day, the colour being typically associated with goodness and purity. These values are reflected in *white lies*, which are benign untruths, and *white magic* (*magia bianca*) which is magic performed with the intent of doing good, standing in stark contrast to the malicious, *black* variety which pervades folk culture. *Whiter than white* (see Section 3) rests on the connection between white and purity or, more specifically, moral righteousness, although the actual use of the phrase in context points towards the negative

values of self-righteousness, smugness and the sanctimonious.<sup>9</sup>

Further religious connotations are related to purity of thought and body, and evidence of these can be found in the apparently equivalent forms *white wedding* and *matrimonio in bianco*. Both expressions relate to sexual purity, but whereas the English phrase also carries with it the expectation of a “traditional” wedding with all the trimmings – virginal blushing bride dressed in white, picturesque old church, flowers, and so on – the Italian is dramatically different both in imagery and consequences, as it describes an unconsummated (and, by extension, unhappy) marriage, making this another example of the apparently positive *white* being used with negative value. And *white* assumes a negative tone again in the Italian expression *passare una notte in bianco*, even though its etymological origins would point to the contrary. The phrase finds its origins in the Mediæval ritual, practiced throughout Christendom, for a man to spend the night prior to his knighting ceremony in prayer and meditation, dressed in white as a symbol of his purity and moral integrity (Zingarelli 1994: 1118).<sup>10</sup> Yet it has lost its immediate relevance, and is now considered broadly synonymous with *passare una notte insonne* (to have a sleepless night). This is facilitated by the polysemous nature of *bianco* (meaning both “white” and “blank”), which has led to the total loss of the original connotative meaning of the expression.

*Bianco*'s polysemy is also evident in the expression *carta bianca*. If we are given *carte blanche*, we have the freedom to write our own rules rather than adhere to another's instructions. This meaning does not appear to be connected to the connotative meanings of *white*, however, which may go some way towards explaining why English expresses the concept through a borrowing from French, thus avoiding the (possibly inappropriate) translation with a colour word.

The remaining expressions found in the corpora relating to *white* are not derived from the colour's symbolic values, but are more simple metonyms. The original, literal, *white elephant* was presented as a gift, and turned out to be extremely costly to maintain, as well as being of little practical use; by extension, the term is used as a criticism for anything that is overly costly and of questionable utility, especially if these are perceived as inappropriate use of public spending by local or national government. No equivalent idiomatic expression appears

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<sup>9</sup> This adds weight to the hypothesis that negative attributes are talked about more than positive ones.

<sup>10</sup> It may be of interest to note that although the same ritual was carried out in Britain, English has retained no equivalent expression.

in the Italian data. Finally, a *settimana bianca* is the name given in Italy to a winter break at a ski resort, literally a week in the snow, which has no parallel idiomatic expression in English.

As was true of *black*, *white* shares common connotative ground in the two languages, but this does not entail the use of similar expressions. The apparently positive connotations of *white* is not wholly reflected in language use, even when the etymology would suggest otherwise, and is important proof that the origins of a phrase do not necessarily correspond to its actual meaning.

### 5.1.3 Grey

*Grey* can both temper the negativity of *black* and detract from the positive values associated with *white*, and this means that it serves as a mid-way point between extremes. As far as conventional linguistic expressions are concerned, it is the indeterminacy of *grey* that is favoured. Its relation to obfuscation and uncertainty is reflected in both languages: a *grey area* (*zona grigia*) is something that is unclear and open to a variety of interpretations, and which can potentially be manipulated for gain, and an *éminence grise* (*grey eminence*, *eminenza grigia*) is a figure who exerts power from behind the scenes, being unanswerable to others.

The commonest of the conventional expressions involving *grey/grigio* in both data sets was the metonymical *grey matter/materia grigia*, which is literally *grey* in appearance. This would seem to be the only instance of the colour having a positive connotation, *grey matter* being the seat of intelligence in the human brain, as opposed to *white matter* (*materia bianca*) which is merely a filler substance.

*Grey* is often said to denote dullness, and there are several one-off examples in the data which testify to this, not least the once-frequent appellative *the grey man* with which British newspapers used to refer to John Major, UK Prime Minister in the 1990s. Italian uses the conventional expression *esistenza grigia* (a mundane, insignificant life) with the same connotations. This connotation can often be found in the corpus data where *grey* is used instead of the standard colour in creative variations based on conventional colour metaphors, especially in journalism (Philip 2003: 213-215). It is in the same kind of context that *black* or *white* can be substituted by *grey*, effectively undermining the full connotative power of the original words; however, it is also true that expressions which typically involve *grey* or *grigio* can be worsened by substitution with *black* or *nero* (Philip 2003: 208-211).

In general terms, the function of *grey* is not to represent itself, but to detract from its purer neighbours, *black* and *white*, and, to a lesser degree, to dampen colours down to a

monotonous, nondescript hue. Thus the meaning of *grey* in both languages (and cultures) is entirely dependent on the meanings of *black* and *white* or *bianco* and *nero*.

## 5.2 The primary colours

### 5.2.1 Red

Of all the basic colours, *red* is the one that is most favoured in the coining of metaphorical idioms in English (whereas it is *nero* for Italian). *Red* is the first primary colour to appear in Berlin/Kay's sequence, almost certainly because it corresponds to the shortest wavelength on the chromatic spectrum, making it the most readily perceived of all the hues. The ease with which *red* is perceived must surely contribute to its ubiquity in the language, and its high frequency predisposes it for polysemy.

Setting aside such abstract considerations, however, the very fact that *red* is the colour of blood gives it importance language, as blood is found not only within the body, causing the manifestation of blushing from emotion or exertion, but also outside the body, when it is spilt through accident and warfare. This overt metonymical link is responsible for a vast number of the connotative and symbolic meanings traditionally ascribed to the colour; others derive from its position on the spectrum, and date at least as far back as Aristotle;<sup>11</sup> and the costliness of red dyes such as *kermes* in past ages account for *red*'s association with wealth and power.

While the association of *red* and blood can be said to be virtually universal, it does not necessarily follow that languages will encode the concept in the same ways or to the same extent. As far as the emotions are concerned, both English and Italian use *red* to refer to anger, embarrassment, shame, as well as physical exertion, though it is interesting to note that they do so in different ways. Anger causes blood to surge to the head, making us *red in the face*, *go red*, *be red with anger/rage* (*diventare rosso [in viso]*, *essere rosso di rabbia*), and it clouds our vision to make us *see red* (*vedere tutto rosso*). However the Italian data shows that *rosso di rabbia* is in fact less common than *nero di rabbia* (black), and *verde di rabbia* (green, "livid") has the same frequency as *rosso...*, while English prefers the *pink-red-purple* range to express variation in intensity of the emotion, and *white* (more commonly associated with shock) as the emphatic form. All of these colours have some basis in metonymy, but the differences in linguistic preference for an apparently universal phenomenon are surprising.

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<sup>11</sup> Red is the colour of sunlight as seen through dark clouds or smoke, and thus a dark form of light. With reference to the rainbow, it is the first colour to arise out of the darkening of light (Aristotle 359 B.C.a: III/2).

The relevant data are shown in Table 5.

| Italian                       | English                         |
|-------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| nero di rabbia (8)            | ...                             |
| rosso di rabbia (5)           | red with anger (18)/rage (28)   |
| verde di rabbia (5)           | green with anger (1)/rage (2)   |
| viola <sup>12</sup> di rabbia | purple with anger (1)/rage (21) |
| bianco di rabbia (2)          | white with anger (7)/rage (9)   |
| blu dalla rabbia (1)          | ...                             |
| ...                           | pink with anger (3)/rage (2)    |
| ...                           | puce with anger (1)/rage (2)    |

**Table 5:** Paradigm for [colour] di rabbia, and English translation

Extreme anger can lead to crimes of passion, and murderous intent clearly lies at the origin of the phrase *catch someone red-handed*, bloody hands serving as evidence of the perpetrator's guilt. The equivalent phrase in Italian, *preso con le mani nel sacco* ("caught with one's hands in the bag") reflects the pragmatic meaning of the English phrase, which is not used to talk about murder or bloodshed (see Philip 2003: 167-171; 2004).

As Itten observes (1961:134), *red* is also the colour of revolution, because of its links with political fervour and spilled blood. In this way, the connotations extend outwards from anger of the individual to that of the collective, giving us the origins of *red* as the colour of revolutionaries, most notably manifested in the Communist red flag (*bandiera rossa*), *reds* (*i rossi*) and *camicie rosse*. The latter is more frequent in Italian, probably because of the country's greater historical and proximity to Communism. *Camicie rosse* forms a pair with the Fascist *black-shirts* (*camicie nere*) mentioned in Subsection 5.1.<sup>13</sup> On a less revolutionary note, someone who goes out to *paint the town red* intends to cause (metaphorical) havoc in the course of enjoying an evening of pubbing and clubbing.

Anger is not restricted to humans, however. The apparent brutality of the animal kingdom, and the fight for the survival of the fittest, is expressed by *red in tooth and claw*; the traces of blood serving as a grim reminder of the death that is necessary if a carnivorous animal is to eat and survive. And the folk belief that bulls are angered (*see red*) by the colour *red* is recalled in the British and American equivalent expressions *like a red rag to a bull* and *like a*

<sup>12</sup> Many examples present on the Internet, though none attested in the corpus.

<sup>13</sup> A fairly recent development on the Italian political scene has been the introduction of *camicie verdi* (green-shirts); not referring to the environmentalist Green Party, but rather to the separatist, right-wing *Lega Nord*; the connotative value created is thus a blend of the fascist *camicie nere* and the party's adopted colour, green.

*red flag before a bull*. Neither of these expressions are reflected in the Italian colour-word data, although their meaning is transparent and easily appreciated by the non-native.

A second type of emotional passion is amorous in nature and, as with anger, the connection with blood is due to the physical manifestation of blood causing the face to flush during emotional arousal. This is manifested in the romantic symbolism of red hearts and red roses, but also appears in the rather less romantic *red light* districts (a *luci rosse*). In common with the link between *black* and mourning, the association of *red* to amorous passion is not found in linguistic data for either language, though it can be verified by cultural observation.

*Red* as the colour of danger and warnings is related to the ease with which the colour is perceived. Thus a *red flag* (*bandiera rossa*) can be hoisted or waved to indicate danger, such as rough seas on a bathing beach; and a *red alert* (*allarme rosso*) is the most serious of all alerts in military parlance. *Red* as the colour of heat and fire combines with urgency in *linea rossa* (hot-line), the information being conveyed through such channels often taking the form of warnings and alerts.

Unrelated to the emotions is the adoption of *red* as the colour of authority, importance and royalty and, by extension, bureaucracy. Importance is conferred by *rolling out the red carpet* for someone – literally giving him/her a [right] royal welcome; yet while the *tappeto rosso* is also common to Italian, it does not appear in an equivalent metaphorical idiom. *Red tape* is culturally restricted to the United Kingdom, as it refers to the pinkish-red ribbon which is traditionally used to bind official documents, and has taken on the extended (negative) meaning of overly constrictive bureaucracy.

Another metonymically-motivated meaning associated with *red* is found in finance, where credits are notated in black ink, and debits in red, the two distinct colours serving to differentiate and highlight the contrasting sides of the account. The expressions *in(to) the red* and *out of the red/ into the black* (*avere il conto in rosso/nero*) have arisen as a result of this practice. *Bleed red ink* highlights not only the debt, but parallels it with the seeping away of a company's metaphorical life-blood – its finances. In doing so, it attributes to *red ink* a suggestion of blood that would not otherwise be present, but which is reiterated in the related expressions *to bleed someone white* and *to bleed someone dry* (both meaning “to drain someone of their finances”, though the former is the more emphatic: the implication is that one's blood is being siphoned off, leaving a white corpse behind). *Red ink* was also used to indicate festivities in the ecclesiastical calendar, thus *red letter days* have no etymological

connection with stamps and envelopes, but refer instead to the metonym whereby festivities were annotated in *red*. While both these uses of *red ink* are common to Italian, only *avere il conto in rosso/nero* appears as a conventional linguistic expression.

*Red herrings* do not exploit colour symbolism, but, like *white elephants*, are metonymically motivated and culturally restricted. Smoked herring, which are a reddish-brown in colour, give off a strong odour, and are used to put blood-hounds of the scent of their parry; so by extension, a piece of misleading information is a *red herring*. The proverb *red sky at night, shepherds' delight.../rosso di sera, bel tempo si spera...* is based on observation of meteorological phenomena, and again has no symbolic or connotative reference to the colour as such. It is shared by both cultures, because it constitutes a useful piece of arcane knowledge that is worth transmitting proverbially, although the precise wording differs.

### **5.2.2 Green and yellow**

*Yellow* and *green* are two sides of the same coin, vying for primary status as *yellow* is primary when dealing with paints or dyestuffs, yet *green* is primary in terms of optics and light refraction. The poorly defined boundaries between *yellow* and *green* in historical sources find a parallel in Berlin/Kay's findings regarding the acquisition of the colours (see Section 2.1). The lack of a clear-cut distinction between the colours has often resulted in their being treated as one and the same, with the result that much of their symbolism is shared.

*Yellow's* affinity to gold is mentioned by Pseudo-Dionysius (500: 196), and the colours are generally treated as being co-referential nowadays. The greater monetary value of gold means that it has higher prestige and hence more positive connotations than *yellow* does, and this may be one of the reasons why both *yellow* and *giallo* are so noticeably less frequent in the corpus data than Berlin/Kay's sequence might lead us to suppose.

The Classical viewpoint, as expressed by Democritus [in Gage 1993:12] does not separate *yellow* and *green* formally, with *leek green* and *sulphur yellow* being considered two shades of the same hue. This inevitably shifts the point of recognition of the focal point of both *yellow* and *green*, possibly meaning that the prototypical colours can no longer be expressed as *grass green* or *lemon yellow*, but at some mid-way point; and if this is indeed the case, then the metonymically motivated connotations associated with the colours undergo corresponding shifts.

Hippocratic medicine assigns *yellow* to the choleric personality, characterised by bile, which is yellowish-green in colour. The metonymic connection between *green/yellow* and bile gives

rise to a set of expressions in Italian – *verde di bile*, *verde di rabbia*, and *verde di collera* (green with bile/anger/rage) – which are not expressed in similar ways in English. The existence of *verde di rabbia* is documented in Table 5 (above); but other emotional states are also encoded with the colour *green/verde*, as can be witnessed in Table 6.

| <b>verde di [emotion]</b>         | <b>green with [emotion]</b> |
|-----------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| rabbia (5) “anger”                | anger (1)                   |
| bile (1) “bile”                   | ...                         |
| invidia (2 <sup>14</sup> ) “envy” | envy (136), jealousy (4)    |
| collera “rage”                    | rage (2) <sup>15</sup>      |
| paura (2) “fear”                  | ...                         |
| dolore “pain”                     | ...                         |
| ...                               | seasickness (1)             |

**Table 6:** Paradigm for verde/green + emotion

While most of these emotional states are related to physical and metaphorical states of nausea, the English preference for *green* as the colour of envy and jealousy is worth noting. In most of continental Europe, jealousy is symbolised by the colour *yellow* (*giallo d’invidia*), but by the 16<sup>th</sup> century, *green* had already taken its place in English (*green with envy*, and *the green-eyed monster* in Shakespeare’s *Othello*). However, given the overlap between the colours, it is not surprising that some such differences should emerge.

What the shifting of envy from *yellow* to *green* has permitted is for English to assign a particular set of concepts to *yellow*, which are not related to envy. In fact the “missing” correspondences to the Italian expressions in Table 6 are due to English’s preference for *white* to describe pain (c.f. *verde di dolore*), and *yellow* to refer to cowardice (c.f. *verde di paura*), although it is true to say that this meaning is no longer in widespread use: both *yellow-bellied*, and *yellow streak* occur only a handful of times in the corpus data.

The metonymical connection with bile and the liver is also responsible for this meaning of *yellow*, though the focus is different: the adrenal glands secrete the so-called “fight or flight” hormone, with cowardice relating to the latter. The liver is still acknowledged as the source of courage in Italian, which renders *to have the guts* to do something daring with *avere il fegato* (“to have the liver”), which is mirrored to a certain extent by the nigh-obsolete *lily-livered*, meaning cowardly.

*Green* is the colour used in English to describe the pallor of a person’s face caused by nausea,

<sup>14</sup> Both instances occur in translations from the English, and are not generally considered acceptable in Italian.

<sup>15</sup> Both instances occur in the title of a music album, and are otherwise anomalous in English.



shock, fear and illness; yet the expression *to feel green* is generally interpreted as an expression of envy, adhering to the same general concept as *green with envy*, i.e. to feel so envious that the bile makes you feel physically unwell. In order to be interpreted as *not* relating to envy, the polysemous *to be green* usually requires disambiguating in a context which clarifies which of the two other established meanings is intended. The older one can be glossed as *to be young and inexperienced*. This is derived from the metonymic link with *green wood* – young wood that is greenish in colour and very supple and flexible – and the expression combines the characteristics of malleability with youth, with the additional factor of youth corresponding to inexperience. This connection is quite opaque, as it is based on a metonym that was once taken for granted but is no longer part of the cultural baggage that an ever more urbanised society carries around. This is reflected in the low frequency of occurrence in the corpus data.<sup>16</sup> Italians too speak of a *verde età* (*green age*), whose frequency is only slightly higher.

The environmental and ecological meaning of *green* is based on the more transparent and immediate relationship between the colour of plant life and nature in general. Although a relatively recent coining (dated to 1972 in the *OED*), this meaning is both more salient and far more frequent, occurring several hundred times in the Bank of English. The connection between *green* and plant life is also present in the expressions *to have green fingers* (*avere il pollice verde*, "to have a green thumb")<sup>17</sup> and *to have the rub of the green*, used to describe people who have a special ability in cultivating plants.

Metonyms deriving from the use of the colour *yellow* in publishing exist in both languages, but in quite distinct contexts and with very different meanings. Exclusive to Italian culture is the association of the colour *yellow* to detective stories, because of the association of the colour of a book being transferred to the genre as a whole. Therefore a *libro giallo* is specifically a detective story, and a *film giallo* the corresponding type of film, with the general use of the term *un giallo* being synonymous with an unsolved mystery (whether fictitious or factual), usually involving murder. The English use of *yellow* to talk about print has no connection either with the connotative meanings of the colour, nor with the Italian usage. Although virtually obsolete, *yellow press* finds a modern equivalent in the *red-top* tabloids of

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<sup>16</sup> This meaning of *to be green* occurs only 20 times in the Bank of English, six of these occurring in the same text, and includes a further three citations plus an exploitation of *In my salad days/when I was green in judgement* (in Shakespeare's *Anthony and Cleopatra*).

<sup>17</sup> This is the preferred version in American English.

the present day. It, like them, owes its name to the colour of the masthead on the front page, and occupied itself with scandal and shock-horror tales. By extension, the term came to mean scandalous and scurrilous journalism, much akin to what is now termed the *gutter press*.

### 5.2.3 Blue

*Blue* (*azzurro*, “light blue”)<sup>18</sup> represents the air, the sky, heaven, and the divine because of its direct metonymical link with the sky. Until the Renaissance, it was this *blue* that was considered prototypical: the darker shades (Italian *blu*) were more frequently grouped together with *black* (darkness) or with *purple* (Aristotle 350 B.C.a:III/4). As a consequence of this, it becomes apparent that some of the connotative values attributed to these other colours have rubbed off onto *blue*, particularly the darker shades. Itten remarks that in its darker shades, blue “falls into superstition, fear, grief and perdition” (1961:136). Although English metaphorical expressions do not generally specify which blue is being referred to, the lighter shades of *blue* (*azzurro*) are not as readily associated with depression as the darker shades (*blu*) are.

As English has only one basic term for *blue*, the various symbolic attributes of the colour(s) tend to converge: *blue* is both the colour of the sky and of the sea, and of metaphors relating to these. On the other hand, Italian has been able to preserve the distinction between the values for *azzurro* and those for *blu*, so the sky is *azzurro* and the sea is *blu*, and as a consequence those metaphorical meanings relating to the sky will be associated with *azzurro* (and not *blu*), while any relating to the sea will be associated with *blu* (and not *azzurro*).

Unexpected events can be said to come *like a bolt from the blue* or simply *out of the blue* (c.f. Section 4), and are thus compared to a lightning bolt appearing, quite unexpectedly, when the sky is calm and clear; this concept of sudden and unsettling change is expressed in Italian with *di punto in bianco*, which draws on quite different imagery (c.f. section 5.1.1). The sky is again alluded to when people wander *off into the wide/wild blue yonder*, when they appear to be swallowed up by the sky, although in reality the movement involved is not upwards but forward to the horizon line. Here again, Italian does not use a colour-word idiom; equivalen means of expressing this idea focus the horizon (*orizzonte*) which has connotative links with the future and all its uncertainties.

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<sup>18</sup> Because of Italian divides *blue* into two distinct categories but English does not, the Italian terms *azzurro* and *blu* will be used to disambiguate which shade is being referred to in this commentary.

Metonyms stemming from *blue* phenomena include *once in a blue moon*, used to describe very rare and unusual events, recalling a similarly infrequent and noteworthy phenomenon when the moon appears to turn blue; this concept is expressed with very different imagery in the Italian *ogni morte di papa* (“every death of a Pope”).

Probably metonymical in origin, although the precise connections are unclear, is the *Principe Azzurro* (Handsome Prince) of fairy-tale legend. Here, *blue* may represent truth and constancy, attributes derived from the constancy of the sky, or it may be related to the (real or imagined) apparel of the Prince. This again is likely to refer to constancy, however, in the same way as the Virgin Mary is often depicted in blue robes: it is the connection with the sky that forges this connotation, which has also given rise to the term *True Blue* (“faithful individual”), especially used in political contexts where the colour *blue* takes on the additional connotation of conservativeness.

The notion that water is a boundary marker forms the basis of the expression *clear blue water*, used to emphasise the distancing of one political party from the policies and actions of another. Yet in this case it is likely that it is the connotations of water, not of *blue*, that contribute to the relevant meaning, with *blue* acting as an emphatic marker. Similarly, *deep blue* can mean both “profound in depth, and blue”, or “dark blue” in English, but the former reading is the more likely in *to be caught between the devil and the deep blue sea*. The expression refers to finding oneself in a no-win situation, where either course of action is as risky and undesirable as the other. The Italian equivalent, again evoking very different imagery, is *essere tra l’incudine e il martello* (“to be caught between the anvil and the hammer”); the pragmatic effect is similar to the English, but no connotative value is present, as is also true of the synonymous expression *to be stuck between a rock and a hard place*.

The proximity of *dark blue* to *black* on the colour scale, and its historical grouping with dark colours, may have contributed to *blue*’s links to depression and to fear – *to have the blues*, or *to feel blue*. As stated in Section 5.1.1, Italian prefers on the whole to use *nero* for depression. Fear, on the other hand, is expressed by *blu*, though it is of note that emphatic variants can be found in the data which use *nero* in place of *blu*, e.g. *fifa nera* as an emphatic form of *fifa blu* (*blue funk*). It is difficult to ascertain whether blue is really linked to fear in English, as the only relevant expression is *scream blue murder*<sup>19</sup> which has an alternative rendering in

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<sup>19</sup> This may be a result of transfer from the French exclamation *sacré bleu!*; *bleu* here being a corrupted form of *Dieu* (God).

*scream bloody murder*, linked phonetically, but not semantically, to the colour word.

When the human body takes on a physical appearance of *blue*, metonymical expressions can arise to describe the state and its causes. Extreme cold causes the blood vessels to contract, draining blood away from the superficial layers of the skin and giving the appearance of pallor or blueness: *blue with cold*, *mani blu* (“blue hands”). A similar effect arises from a lack of oxygen. To *talk a blue streak* or *talk until you are blue in the face* connects verbal overproduction to a lack of breathing and oxygen intake. Although Italian does recognise the relationship between near-asphyxiation and blueness in the face, the concept has not found its way into conventionalised expressions and is not generally used to recount excessive verbal activity. Bruises are generally *black and blue*, but are simply *viola* (*purple*) in Italian, yet a bruised eye is *black* in both languages. *Blue blood* (*sangue blu*) is not *blue*, but the expression recalls the sight of blue veins appearing through white (untanned) skin, this lack of exposure to the sun being the real sign of nobility.

### 5.3 The mixed colours

The basic colours formed by mixture attract relatively little importance as far as symbolism and connotative meanings are concerned, partly because they have often been grouped together with the more dominant primaries,<sup>20</sup> and partly because their symbolic values consist of a combination of the attributes of the colours of which they are composed.

#### 5.3.1 Pink

We saw in 5.1.3 that *grey*, standing at the midway point between *black* and *white*, can temper the negativity of *black* and obfuscate the clarity and pureness of *white*. In much the same way, *pink*, being a colour mixed from *red* and *white*, takes on a tempered version of the symbolism attributed to *red* due to the presence of *white*;<sup>21</sup> so while *red* indicates fiery passion, *pink* evokes hearts and flowers and romanticism in general. The English use of *pink* in the language often refers to health and good fortune, as it indicates the colour of a healthy, peaches-and-cream complexion: *in the pink*, *tickled pink*. Mild embarrassment causes individuals to *go pink* (*in the face*) rather than *red* – an illustration of the way in which the tempered colour reflects the tempered emotional state. However Italian prefers *rosso* to describe both a healthy complexion and mild embarrassment, possibly because Italians are

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<sup>20</sup> In Aristotle 350 BC b: III/4, the rainbow is composed of only three colours: red, green, and purple.

<sup>21</sup> The same can be said of the relationship between *blu* and *azzurro* (c.f. 5.2.3), and *purple* and *violet*.

generally not as pale as their British counterparts, with the result that the term chosen reflects reality more faithfully.

In common with English, Italian expressions with *pink* tend to refer to romanticism, and romantic fiction is referred to as *letteratura rosa* (c.f. *libro giallo*, Section 5.2.2), and *vedere tutto rosa* is *to see the world through rose-tinted spectacles*. However, *rosa* can also refer to a less soft-focused view of love than is typical in English: *cronaca rosa* (c.f. *cronaca nera*, 5.1.1) is celebrity gossip focusing on amorous relationships, and a *scandalo rosa* (“pink scandal”) is the furore caused when illicit love affairs are uncovered by the tabloid press. This different emphasis is not particularly apparent in the use of the colour in the two cultures, yet is encoded quite clearly in their linguistic conventions – something that happens more readily in reverse according to the other data in this study. The connection between *pink* and homosexuality, by virtue of the feminine connotations of *pink*, is not attested in the corpus though evidence of terms such as *pink power* (*potere rosa*) can be found on the Internet.

### 5.3.2 Purple

*Purple* is problematic at source level because *porphurion*, the term used in Classical texts, refers to a deep shade of *red* (which is still called *porpora* in Italian) and not to *purple* (*viola*). The religious and imperial symbolism linked with *purple* are institutionalised, and like *red*, originated because of the costly dyestuffs which only the rich could afford. However, direct linguistic evidence of the relationship between *purple* and wealth, influence and power can really only be found in colour terminology: *imperial purple* (*porpora regale*)<sup>22</sup>. In English, the colour is imbued with the notion of sumptuousness, though often taken to the extreme and thus tinged with negative connotations: *purple prose*, and the related expressions *purple passage* and *purple patch*, all of which refer to excessively ornate passages in literary prose.

The Church’s adoption of *purple* at Easter time is probably responsible for the colour’s symbolic connection with strong emotion – passion – whether romantic or otherwise: *Viola* is considered unlucky in Italy because of its association with the Passion and death, though this association is not present in Anglophone cultures, nor can it be found in metaphorical idioms or other conventional linguistic expressions in Italian.

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<sup>22</sup> When used in the context of regal or ecclesiastical robes, *porpora* can be translated as *crimson* (a kind of red) or *purple*.

### 5.3.3 Orange

The only symbolism generally attributed to *orange* derives from its connection with the colours of fire and light (*red* and *yellow*). No linguistic metaphors involving this colour have been identified in either of the languages under study.

### 5.3.4 Brown

*Brown*, the tertiary colour, is a muddy mixture of all primaries. As far as symbolism is concerned, it receives no mention in any of the sources consulted. It has a close connection with the earth and soil, and of dirt and excrement, leading to the coining of the English expression, *to brown-nose* (to be unnecessarily subservient and ingratiating). There are no Italian metaphorical idioms involving *marrone* in the data consulted.

## 6. Summary

The correspondences between conventional linguistic expressions and the various meanings attributed to colours observed have a dual function in language and culture. In the first place, it is evident that colour metaphors are heavily influenced by metonymy, as Niemeier (1998) points out, because most of the connotative meanings assigned to colours seem to be grounded, at least to some extent, in reality. Secondly, the connotative values of colours that are demonstrated in conventional linguistic expressions consolidate and perpetuate folk beliefs about colour meaning: the language user can appeal to his or her linguistic knowledge to support a belief such as *red means violence*, because he or she can quote linguistic expressions, such as *see red / vedere tutto rosso* and *red with anger / rosso di rabbia* as proof.

However, it is interesting to note the different colour terms used to express metonymical relations between bodily experience and colour, especially those pointed out for *red*, *blue* and *pink* (Subsections 5.2.1, 5.2.3, and 5.2.1). While these can possibly be ascribed to differences in skin tone, this explanation is not altogether satisfactory, not least because skin-colour variation found within Italy alone is greater than that found between Italy and Britain. It is more likely that the focal points for the prototypical colours are slightly different in the two languages under study, resulting in term variation when the colour being described is distant from the focal point. A further hypothesis is that because the colours chosen in conventional linguistic expressions are not selected actively by the speaker, but rather predetermined by the habitual patterns of the language, these language habits subsequently affect the speaker's, and the language community's, perception of the colour.

Conventional collocations perpetuate the symbiotic relationship holding between the colour term and the colour observed, helping to fix the boundaries between one colour term and another. The prototypically *deep blue sea* can of course appear *green* or *azzurro*, and be described as such, but conventional collocations such as *blu oltremare* (ultramarine blue) and *blu notte* (midnight blue) exert a greater force than less fixed collocations do. Niemeier suggests that although ideas can be *green* (unripe) in English they cannot be so in German, and she puts this down to the currency (in Goethe's *Faust*) of *Grau, mein lieber freund, ist alle Theorie, und grün des Lebens goldner Baum*<sup>23</sup> (Niemeier, 1998:144). A parallel in the English-speaking world would be to suggest that *grey monster* could mean *jealous person*: Shakespeare's coining of *the green-eyed monster* put a stop to any such linguistic inventiveness, to the extent that even in the 450 million-word Bank of English there is no eye colour other than *green* used to mean "jealous", whether or not the collocate *monster* is present. Although colours have many apparently arbitrary meanings, examples such as these allow us to appreciate that they are at the same time relatively stable.

This article has shown how colour metaphors relate to colour symbolism, connotation, and metonymy. Yet decontextualised forms do not tell us the full story. While etymological investigations can inform us about the origins of an expression, this does not necessarily correspond to the received meaning in a synchronic perspective, not give any indication of how the expressions are used, and in what kind of texts. Some idea of this has been given in this paper: the connotations of *white/bianco* appear to be less positive than appearances would suggest; *caught red-handed* is not used to talk about murder or bloody crimes; the sumptuousness of *purple* has turned to distasteful excess. It is by contrasting not just the expressions, but also the way in which they are used, that real cultural and linguistic comparisons can be made. The conventional colour-word metaphors discussed in this paper undergo widespread variation and exploitation in the corpus data, which have only been briefly alluded to in passing because it is beyond the scope of the present article to address them in the necessary detail (but see Philip 2003, 2004). However, within the confines of this study, it has been possible to show how corpus data and more traditional language reference materials can be usefully combined to provide an informative picture of the similarities and differences that exist in colour-word meaning in English and Italian.

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<sup>23</sup> All theory is grey, my friend, and green is life's golden tree.

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APPENDIX 1: Colour-word expressions in English and Italian

**BLACK**

|                                   |                                      |
|-----------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| (bête noir)                       | anima nera                           |
| (not) as black as you are painted | bestia nera                          |
| black and blue                    | camicia nera                         |
| black look                        | crisi nera                           |
| black mark                        | cronaca nera                         |
| black sheep of the family         | fame nera                            |
| in black and white                | fare un quadro nero della situazione |
| in the black                      | lavoro nero                          |
| pot calling the kettle black      | mercato nero                         |
|                                   | miseria nera                         |
|                                   | nero su bianco                       |
|                                   | pecora nera della famiglia           |
|                                   | pensiero nero                        |
|                                   | periodo nero                         |
|                                   | umor nero                            |
|                                   | vedere tutto nero                    |

**WHITE**

|                     |                              |
|---------------------|------------------------------|
| bleed someone white | dare carta bianca a qualcuno |
| carte blanche       | di punto in bianco           |
| white elephant      | far vedere bianco per nero   |
| white lie           | matrimonio bianco            |
| white wedding       | passare una notte in bianco  |
| whiter than white   | settimana bianca             |

**RED**

|   |                                  |
|---|----------------------------------|
| bleed red ink                             | bandiera rossa                   |
| catch someone red-handed                  | camicia rossa                    |
| go red                                    | diventare rosso in viso          |
| in(to) the red/ out of the red            | linea rossa                      |
| paint the town red                        | luce rossa                       |
| red as...                                 | rosso come...                    |
| (not a) red cent                          | rosso di rabbia                  |
| red flag                                  | rosso di sera bel tempo si spera |
| red herring                               | vedere tutto rosso               |
| red sky at night, shepherds' delight      |                                  |
| red in tooth and claw                     |                                  |
| red letter day                            |                                  |
| red rag to a bull/ red flag before a bull |                                  |
| red tape                                  |                                  |
| roll out the red carpet                   |                                  |
| see red                                   |                                  |

**GREEN**

|                    |                        |
|--------------------|------------------------|
| be green           | avere il pollice verde |
| green fingers      | essere al verde        |
| green light        | verde di bile          |
| green-eyed monster | verde età              |
| green with envy    |                        |

**YELLOW**

|                |                            |
|----------------|----------------------------|
| yellow bellied | film/ libro/romanzo giallo |
| yellow press   |                            |
| yellow streak  |                            |

**BLUE**

|  |                  |
|--|------------------|
| between the devil and the deep blue sea    | fifa blu         |
| black and blue                             | principe azzurro |
| blue blood                                 | sangue blu       |
| (talk until you're) blue in the face       |                  |
| clear blue water                           |                  |
| feel blue                                  |                  |
| into the wide/wild blue yonder             |                  |
| like a bolt from the blue/ out of the blue |                  |
| once in a blue moon                        |                  |
| scream blue/bloody murder                  |                  |
| talk a blue streak                         |                  |

**GREY**

|                               |                  |
|-------------------------------|------------------|
| grey area                     | eminenza grigia  |
| grey eminence/ éminence grise | esistenza grigia |
| grey matter                   | materia grigia   |
|                               | zona grigia      |

**PINK**

|                       |                   |
|-----------------------|-------------------|
| go pink (in the face) | cronaca rosa      |
| in the pink           | letteratura rosa  |
| tickled pink          | romanzo rosa      |
|                       | scandalo rosa     |
|                       | vedere tutto rosa |

**BROWN**

|            |  |
|------------|--|
| brown-nose |  |
|------------|--|

**PURPLE**

|                |  |
|----------------|--|
| purple passage |  |
| purple patch   |  |
| purple prose   |  |