

A Semantic Study of Color Metaphors in Kurdish and English: A Contrastive Study

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Abstract: The study under investigation is a contrastive study that concentrates on the metaphoric uses of color terms in Kurdish and English with reference to proverbs and idioms in those two languages. The study is conducted within the framework of cognitive linguistics and it adopts basically the revised model of in which he deals metaphor as a cognitive cultural phenomenon. Color terms are used in many proverbs and idioms in both languages and this study investigates the metaphoric-semantic background of the use of specific colors in Kurdish and English and why languages vary and contrast in their uses of color metaphors. The differences that are found in the two languages are attributed to the culture-specific nature of the color metaphors in those languages. I propose that even the color terms in different languages refer to the same color in the real world but the use of those color terms in different languages vary according to cultural, norms and uses of those colors. I also propose that there will be some similarities in the use of the proverbs that have color terms due to the universal norms.

Key words: Color metaphor, proverbs, idioms, cognitive linguistics, Kurdish, English

INTRODUCTION

The world around us is colorful and every color has an effect that could be positive or negative. The language uses different words and vocabularies to describe those colors and give them different shades of real and metaphorical meanings. Colors terms get a lot of attention in recent years by many linguists as they can be used to express in a few words a whole life situation especially when they are used metaphorically in a proverb or an idiom.

Color terms in linguistics have been studied thoroughly and Berlin and Kay (1969) research is considered as one of the great research in this field. By using certain paradigm, they found that all languages choose their color terms from a set of 11 color categories called basic color terms white, black, red, green, yellow, blue, brown, purple, pink, orange and gray. Berlin and Kay's argue that, those color terms have common characteristics) they are monolexemic, so, their signification is not included in that of any other color term) they are used to describe unlimited kinds of objects and) they are psychologically salient for informants. Furthermore, as Kay *et al.* (1991) state most members of a

particular culture typically know these color terms. Based on these criteria, only spee (white) rash (black) suur (red) sawz (green) shin (blue) zard (yellow) and mor (purple) are considered as basic color terms in Kurdish.

Berlin and Kay (1969) claimed that as languages develop, they next adopt a term for brown, then terms for orange, pink, purple and/or gray in any order. Finally, a basic light/dark relativistic term appears such as "light" blue/"dark" blue (in comparison to blue sky/blue ocean) or "pale" red/"deep" red.

Table 1 shows the color in Kurdish and the natural sources that were taken from. Various explanations, even they sometimes contrast each other have been throw spotlights on to construct basic color terms as Kay (2005) argues and provides shreds of evidences that support both the existence of universal constraints on color naming and the influence of color-naming difference on color memory and discrimination which refers to the universality of color naming. The same view is shared by Hardin (2005) as he suggests a strong connection among the mechanisms of color vision and naming basic colors. Even the question about the relation between the shared human attributes of color perception and the development and structure of cross-cultural basic color categories is

Table 1: The colors in Kurdish

| The natural color in Kurdish | The natural sources taken from |
|------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| Rash (black) | Coal |
| Spee (white) | Yogurt |
| Suur (red) | Blood |
| Shin (blue) | Sky |
| Zard (yellow) | Sun |
| Mor (purple) | Bruises under the skin |
| Prtaqali (orange) | Orange |
| Qawaii (brown) | Trunk of the tree |
| Kholameshi (grey) | Ash |
| Pyazi (light tan) | The peel of the onion |
| Pamaye (pink) | Flower |

still unanswered. Lindsey and Brown (2002) study results suggest that the occurrence of some colors in languages near the equator has a fundamentally biological basis because even certain colors terms are not found in those languages but the speaker of those languages can recognize the colors.

Dedrick (1998), describes and criticizes empirically and conceptually unified models of color naming that relate basic color terms directly to perceptual and ultimately to physiological facts, arguing that this strategy has overlooked the cognitive dimension of color naming. He proposes a psychosemantics for basic color terms which is sensitive to cultural difference and to the nature and structure of non-linguistic experience.

Roberson *et al.* (2006) presents a summary of recent research that has reexamined the nature of linguistic and nonlinguistic color categories and the relationship between them. Improvements in experimental paradigms combined with a better understanding of the relationship between physiology and higher level cognition have led to a kind of understanding of the complexities of the relationship between culture, language, cognition and perception. It is concluded that possession of linguistic color categories facilitates recognition and influences perceptual judgments, even in languages with terms that are less abstract than English.

MacLaury (1997) analysis of color and naming reveals complex and often surprising relationships among the ways languages categorize colors. His findings add cross-cultural data for all students of Mesoamerica and those findings adds a lot to the literature of the color theory.

Although, a considerable number of publications have dealt with color terms, very few have paid enough attention to the metaphorical nature of colors, especially from a cross-cultural perspective. By comparing and contrasting color metaphors in Kurdish and English, the primary objective of this study is investigating the figurative role of colors in these two languages concentrating basically on how color metaphors are linked to language, thoughts and culture. The tool that will show

how language, thought and culture are linked together are the proverbs and idioms in those two languages and how color terms have been exploited in those proverbs and idioms metaphorically.

Kovecse's cognitive linguistic theory of metaphor: This study follows the model of Kovecses (2003) cognitive theory in which metaphor is sighted as a cognitive cultural phenomenon. Kovecses (2003) states that although the theory of conceptual metaphor that was first developed by Lakoff and Johnson (1980) is still a great source to most anthropologists and linguists working on metaphor, it should be taken with caution for a couple of reasons first, it inclines to overstate the universality of conceptualization and second, it does not pay attention to the culture-specific nature of metaphorical thought. That is why Kovecses tried to propose a theory of metaphor that covers both universality and culture variations.

Color terms and metaphors: In Kurdish and English languages, the words and phrases that are used to express different colors are miscellaneous. Colors carry different messages to people of different cultures. Color is a kind of natural phenomenon. Color terms play an important role describing objects, expressing word's meanings and give them new dimensions. They have strong associations with culture because different cultures use different colors to express different things in another word, they can be used either literally to refer to or metaphorically to convey their associative meanings. According to what is cited in Phillip (2006), "the color metaphors are influenced by metonymy because most of the connotative meanings assigned to colors see to be grounded, at least to some extent to reality" (Susanne, 1998). Additionally, the connotative values of colors emerged from conventional linguistic expressions that are constructed around folk beliefs about color meaning. The language user can appeal to his or her linguistic knowledge to support a belief (Susanne, 1998; Phillip, 2006). In what follows I will discuss the significance of the colors terms that are used in Kurdish proverbs concentrating only on white, black and red and comparing them to the same color terms that are used in English. I went over 400 different proverbs and idioms in Kurdish. My exploration will be confounded with those three colors.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The study under investigation is descriptive analytic study and the researchers used a web based survey and

content analysis depending on the online English and Kurdish proverb dictionaries, books and journal articles in Kurdish and English, e.g., The Oxford Concise Dictionary of Proverbs from which many English proverbs have been cited and compared to their Kurdish equivalents and Rhetoric in Kurdish Literature (MacKenzie, 1962) that was consulted to know the meaning of the proverbs in (1-3), MacKenzie, 1961; Kurdish Dialect Studies-II to collect the data according to the BCTs suggested by Berlin and Kay (1969). Some other Kurdish references have been consulted as Hussien (2012) from which the meaning of the proverbs in (4-7) are cited. Kurdi (2008) and Sabah (2016) were consulted to verify the meaning and the use of the Kurdish proverbs used in this research.

The metaphorical use of white, black and red in English and Kurdish

White: In the western culture, white stands for happiness, purity, good deeds and bright side of life. Many sources and articles state the bright and the positive metaphorical uses of white as a symbol of peace, purity and happiness. People usually say “a white wedding” to refer to the white dress of the brides and the start of a new life. There is the saying of “white as the driven snow” which is used to describe an innocent person or “whiter than white” which also symbolizes the righteous person. In Western history, people describe the good days as “white days”. There is also a white-hearted person who represents forgiving and virtuous individual a white record is a clean and impeccable one ‘a white hand’ is a generous and kind hand as mentioned in (Mohamadi, 2015). White color symbolizes the purity of nature as white fluffy clouds, crystal, pearls and cotton which all connote every grace and virtue possible in the world but there is another side for the color white, a negative gloomy side that is not talked about and high lightened as in ‘white as a sheet’ and ‘White as a ghost’ that means a scared person, a ‘white flag’ that represents surrender. The ‘white elephant’ means a useless thing or very expensive thing. The color white also symbolizes bad people as ‘white trash’ which means uneducated, socio-economically disadvantaged Caucasian people. The white color refers also to a bad action as ‘to bleed someone white’ to take everything someone has, esp. money. The white color does not connote only the bright positive side as most of the articles and state but it has a negative gloomy side as shown above (<https://aimdanismanlik.wordpress.com/2012/03/04/color-idioms-and-phrases-in-english/> <http://idioms.thefreedictionary.com/white>). The color white (spe) in Kurdish denotes positive and negative aspects as well. Usually, the white color is used metaphorically to describe

the beauty of some one’s face by saying he has ‘a white glowing face.’ The white represents purity and beauty in the bride dress and clothes. In some proverbs in Kurdish the white color is used symbolically to refer to experience and wisdom as in 1.

(1) Sar-i labar hataw spe na- kird hair-his
under Sun white not do “His hair got gray
because life troubles not because exposing
to the sun”

The proverb means that when someone’s hair got white it is not because the sun affects his hair but rather because he went through a lot of situations bad and good, difficult and strange, so, he got wise and learnt from those situations in life. The white color often stands for the hope, peace, happiness and light but it also has the derogatory connotation in Kurdish culture. Such as in 2.

(2) Sar u rishi-m spe buu lataw mnalakan- im
hair and beard my white got because children
my “His hair and beard turned to white
because of his children”

The proverb characterizes the person whom hair and beard got white because all the hardships and heartaches that he/she faced to raise his/her children up. Kurdish people compare the face of a frightened person to a face of a dead person by saying ‘his/her face is white as a dead one’. This shows that the white itself can’t define and draw the different boundaries between good and bad as much as the situation and the state in which the color is used in do and this point will be clearer in what will come.

Black: In the Western culture black in all its metaphorical uses in the saying and situations symbolizes evil, bad, and darkness. It is used to state shameful disgrace actions as in ‘black magic’ which is used to achieve malevolent purposes. There is also ‘blackmail’ which refers to the action of taking money from someone illegally. The saying ‘to blacklist someone’ that connote prevents someone from being hired by destroying his/her record or ‘to blackball someone which means to shut someone out from group participation. The black color is also used to describe bad people or moods as in ‘a black look’ that symbolizes an angry facial expression and also ‘as black as nigh’t that means very dark black. There is also ‘black-hearted’ a person that shows how cruel or evil he/she might be. The saying ‘black person’ has a racist meaning and refers to a person from an African heritage and there is a whole history of how black people have been treated as slaves. Black has been used to denote

places and days that are not legal or acceptable as in 'black market' and 'black day' which represents a day when things are not going smoothly. There are much more sayings that utilize black to metaphorically denote 'not good' concepts in different aspects of life. There are some situations in which the bad and good overlaps in the metaphorical uses as in the situation when people wear black clothes for funerals to show sadness and wear black on formal occasions as black suits and dresses. Actually one cannot decide for sure that a certain color symbolizes specific fixed meaning because the situation changes that concept to the opposite as is the case of the black outfit.

Kurdish culture considers black is the color that symbolizes bad virtues, devil and evil. When a Kurdish speaker tells someone (I wish God turns your face black), he/she literary implies that may God turn your face black like a devil as in 3.

(3) Ru-ut rash bet face-your black turn "May your face turn black"

This also could be true when someone did something bad and wrong, usually people would refer to him/her as 'the person with a black face. The proverb of 4 expresses a kind of mocking when a turkey tells another turkey that you have a black face. This resembles the English saying 'Pot calling the kettle black' which implies that both have the same problem but they criticize and blame each other.

(4) Qal ba qal-i wut ru-ut rash-a turkey to turkey- a told face-you black is "A turkey told another turkey your face is black" "Pot calling the kettle black"

What is interesting is that there are many proverbs and saying in Kurdish in which black and white are used to show the contrast between the light and the dark side of things. It is usual in Kurdish society to hear someone advices another one to not spend money unwisely as in 5 which literary means one need to save his/her (white) money at the prosperous days for the days of poverty (black) days.

(5) Mal-i spe bo rozh-I rash home-of white is day-of black "Save your money to use them on the poverty days"

This proverb encourages people to save their money for the days in which man needs money the most. There is a funny proverb that imply the person having bad luck in everything as in 6, this proverbs literary means that he/she has a bad luck (black luck) in everything even when

he/she buys a watermelon and opens it, the watermelon is (white) not red and sweet.in other words that person a schlemiel person.

(6) La hamu-shtek baxt-i rash-a la shutya nabet baxt-i spe-a in every thing luck-his black is in water melon only luck his white is He is a schlemiel person"

There is a one proverb in Kurdish that utilizes black and white in one place and emphasizes sometimes bad person can do good deeds as in 7 which literary means that even black chicken lays white eggs.

(7) Mreshk-a rasha helk-ay spe akat hen-the black egg of white lays "Red face"

In English, I found one instance that utilizes black and white together and it carries a neutral meaning as in 'to be in black and white' which refers documents written down officially. Building upon what have been discussed and shown black and white metaphorical uses in daily proverbs and saying in both, Western and Kurdish culture cannot be related to specific bad or good connotations as much as it can be related to the situation and the mentality of the user.

Red: In the western culture the color red is usually associated with unfavorable meaning as blood, fire, lust and violence. Red is utilized metaphorically to state people condition and mood as in 'to turn red' means get embarrassed or 'redhead' which means a person with orange colored head. To be in the condition of 'not one red cent' means there is no money at all. The red color and its shades also have been exploited in the metaphorical use as 'scarlet women' that refers to the sinful woman or scarlet fever which is a disease. The 'red flag' signifies something wrong and a 'red herring' refers to a false clue.

I found situations when red can connote a positive signal as in 'red carpet' which refers to occasions in which red carpet is laid for either celebrities or presidents. To 'roll out the red carpet' signifies a big special welcome and treatment to a guest. The examples that have been shown here are just samples to illustrate the point but of course, there are much more that can be explored.

In Kurdish, red has a good connotation as one would wish his loved ones would have a 'red face' as in 8 which means the person is so good and great that his/her face is glowing out of joy and happiness. Red in Kurdish signifies courage and strength that a person would be famous for. The proverb in 9 tells a whole story about a

head of a clan who was very brave and his red mustache distinguished him and it becomes symbol of bravery. Another man with a red mustache pretends to be strong and brave as Hamza Agha because of his mustache but unfortunately he was not as brave as Hamza Agha. Therefore, people took as a lesson to learn from that not everyone who has a red mustache can be brave as Hamza Agha.

(9) Hammu smell suur-ek Hamza agh-a
nea every mustache red-have Hamza sir
is not It is not necessary that who has a
sword is brave person”

The color red has a bad connotation when it is used to describe the face of an angry or a shamed person.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The study explores the metaphorical connotation of three colors in English and Kurdish. The colors are white, black, and red that are the most used colors in proverbs and idioms in the languages referred to in the study. The use of white color in English and Kurdish was common and there were some similarities in both languages in some instances as both cultures use ‘white dress’ of the bridegroom to refer to the start of a new happy life, there is pure as ‘white snow’, ‘white as a ghost’ and we can also English and Kurdish share the connotation of ‘white flag’ to signify surrender. There is also ‘white days’ that is common in both languages. I found one instance in Kurdish for the metaphorical use of white to refer to experience and another use to refer to hardships and ups and downs of life that I could not find in the use of white in English culture.

For the symbolic use of the color black, I found out some common uses between the two languages as in ‘black hearted’, ‘black days’ what is interesting is that both cultures the English and the Kurdish use the idiom of ‘black’ to refer to the color of a person’s face but the connotation is different in the two languages in English has a racist meaning when it is used to describe an individual but in Kurdish it would signify a bad person or a person who did many sins. The allegorical use of the ‘black’ color in English to describe outfit of people is tricky because it could be used in funerals or in parties while in Kurdish it is used only to signify the outfit in funerals which means sad occasions.

I explore some proverbs in English and Kurdish and realize that they have the same connotation but by utilizing different words to express the same meaning as are the cases of the proverbs mentioned in 4 and this proverb

expresses a kind of mocking when a turkey tells another turkey that you have a black face. This resembles the English saying ‘Pot calling the kettle black’ which implies that both sides have the same problem but they criticize and blame each other.

Red has another story because English apply it to signify many unfavorable situations as ‘red tape’ and ‘not one red cent’ and a favorable meaning which is used in Kurdish too as the use of ‘red carpet’ to signify the importance of the guest as a political visitor to a different country. The various metaphorical uses of color have been stated by Kovecses (2003) who proposed that when an abstract entity is metaphorically conceptualized in similar ways by different languages and cultures, three possibilities should be considered: “It has happened by accident one language borrowed the metaphors from another and there is some universal motivation for the metaphors to emerge in these cultures”.

Kovecses (2003) supposition is very clear in instances that have been explored in English and Kurdish, for example, the ‘white flag’, ‘the red carpet’ which seems to be borrowed from English as they carry meaning that belongs to recent history.

The other instances that are used in both languages seem to ‘emerge’ from the culture and the people who live in that culture which supports, Kovecses (2003) second point in regard to the culture that resort to that kind of symbolic uses as the use of ‘black’ face which signifies bad individual in Kurdish and it has a religious meaning behind it because in the wholly book of Islam the bad sinful people were described as ‘having black faces’ because of their sins which is the opposite of having a white face to signify honesty and purity. Instances as ‘black sheep’ and ‘black mail’ seem to emanate from the recent English history in which those actions spread in the society to signify bad actions done by some people.

The common metaphorical conceptual used in both languages seems to be universal according to Kovecses (2003) that emerges from universal motivation can be interpreted by the “neuroscientific version of the notion of the embodiment of metaphor” according to which “the source domains typically arise from more concrete and physical sensorimotor experience whereas target domains are less physical in nature”. In the instances of the conceptual metaphors, the source domain is a color term, which has been emerged from the concrete and physical scope of colors visualized by the speakers of English and Kurdish. Then, a kind of correspondences occurred between these colors and the less concrete and abstract objective domain to yield an abstract thought. This abstract thought as Kovecses (2003) assumes, “is based on correlations in a bodily experience that result in

well-established neuronal connections in the brain". These correspondences or mappings, lead to the conceptual metaphors.

CONCLUSION

The data examined in this research show that even some languages that have different cultures, share many similarities in their metaphorical conceptual uses especially the ones that utilizes colors in their content. The similarity can be attributed to the phenomenon of borrowing that occurred among languages as Kovecses (2003) states. This similarity can be traced back to the similarity in the physiology of human beings and the similar experiences that they have had regarding emotions and feelings.

The dissimilar metaphorical uses can be traced to what Kovecses (2003) called Universal motivation that emerges from the nature and the atmosphere in which the language is used. The cross-cultural variations among Kurdish and English color metaphors occurred due to some important reasons: Kovecses (2003) puts the causes of variation in metaphor into two classes different experiences and different cognitive processes which research together and cannot be separated from each other. It seems that most Kurdish and English color metaphors vary because the experiences and the culture of the Kurdish people and Western people vary.

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