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METAPHORICAL EXTENSIONS OF THE COLOUR TERMS *BLACK AND WHITE* IN ENGLISH AND SERBIAN¹

ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on the basic colour terms, one of the quite well covered topics not only in linguistics, but also in anthropology, physics and psychology, trying to establish a one-way analysis (Serbian to English) which compares and contrasts the metaphorical extensions of the two most basic colour terms, *black* and *white*, in Serbian and English. These two terms have been identified as *the* most basic ones, since they were found to exist even in languages which have only two names for colours. In our analysis, metaphorical extensions were isolated after comparing several Serbian and English dictionaries, and attempts were made at making hypotheses about how these extensions came into being. The study shows that there is a relatively high degree of correspondence between the two compared languages in terms of the existence of underlying conceptual metaphors with *black* and *white* serving as source domains.

Key words: colour terms, black, white, metaphorical extensions, conceptual metaphor, English, Serbian.

1. INTRODUCTION

Colour terms have been studied in a number of different ways and from many different perspectives, especially in relation to linguistic relativity. In this paper, we decided to take a look at the most basic colour terms (*black* and *white*) in Serbian and English, their metaphorical extensions (through the framework of conceptual metaphor), and some speculations as to how they came into existence over the years. Almost every study concerned with colours and colour terms has Berlin and Kay's famous book *Basic Color Terms: Their Universality and Evolution* (1969) at its foundation, and this one is not going to be an exception. Berlin and 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.

¹ * Prepared as a part of the project number 179013, conducted at the University of Niš – Faculty of Mechanical Engineering, and supported by the Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development of the Republic of Serbia.

In a broader sense these two terms refer to light and darkness. As for the explanation of the variety of their metaphorical extensions, we can refer back to the cognitive linguistic view, which maintains that:

“in addition to objective, pre-existing similarity – conceptual metaphors are based on a variety of human experience, including correlations in experience, various kinds of non-objective similarity, biological and cultural roots shared by the two concepts, and possibly others” (Kövecses 2010: 79).

Furthermore, Kövecses (2010: 18–22) touches upon the subject of the basic colour metaphors (i.e. their implied meaning of light and darkness) by mentioning them as some of the most common source domains, corresponding to life and death as one of the most common target domains. He adds that:

“Life is understood as a journey to some destination. Moreover, it is metaphorically day, light, warmth, and others. Birth is conceived of as arrival, whereas death is viewed as departure, as well as night, darkness, and cold” (Kövecses 2010: 26)

A number of authors have dealt with the semantic development of these two terms throughout history, and it is interesting to look at some of their findings, as they might be related to the metaphorical extensions these words have in modern Serbian and English. For example, Casson (1997: 227) writes that *black* in English descended from ‘*bhleg*’ in Old English, which means *to shine, flash, burn*, and that it also had the conventional hue sense of *burnt, scorched*. This aspect of meaning was lost in Modern English. Ivić (2002: 37) adds that this is not the case with *black* in Serbian, which has a synonym expressing this particular aspect of meaning (shine) – *vran* (almost exclusively related to fur) (Hlebec 1988: 149). On the other hand, *white* in Serbian has retained the aspect of its original meaning which has to do with sheen, and this fact may account for *white* having a metaphorical extension related to temperature, which is not the case with *black*. Referring back to Proto-Slavic, Ivić (1999: 142) states that white in Serbian used to be synonymous with *clear* (beside comprising the *sheen* meaning component). Similar is true for English, according to Casson (1997), who talks about the evolution of English colour terms from brightness to hue, saying that ‘*kweit*’, which was Old English for white, quite often denoted

luminosity and reflectivity. This meaning, however, was partly lost starting from Middle English, when the term became hue-oriented to a great degree (however, even with the switch from brightness to hue, white in English has retained its relation to temperature, i.e. heat).

We certainly cannot completely rely on the semantic development of the terms through history to explain their metaphorical extensions, but it can help us make certain assumptions based on this development (e.g. the notion of clarity as a meaning component of *white* in both languages may be the reason behind the extension of the meaning of *white* to morally pure and innocent).

There is a number of conceptual metaphors involving *black* and *white* which can be exemplified by using Serbian and English linguistic material. In the following section, we will present the matching metaphors that *black* and *white* have in these two languages by comparing the corpus extracted from *OED* to the corpus extracted from *RMS* (other dictionaries listed in Bibliography were consulted as well, but the above-mentioned ones offered the best examples for this study). Further research, which would have English as the starting point, is necessary for a complete insight into the similarity of underlying colour-related metaphors in these two languages.

2. WHITE | BELO

2.1. GOOD IS WHITE | DOBRO JE BELO

The book entitled *Language and Ideology* (2001) gives an informative passage which can serve as an introduction to this most basic metaphorical extension of *white*, standing in opposition to BAD IS BLACK | LOŠE JE CRNO and pointing to the general positive connotations that this term has:

“the source domain in this metaphorical structure is [...] conventional understanding of human bodily experiences with sunlight and the colour spectrum. The conceptual system involves a fundamental acknowledgement that pure, unfiltered, unrefracted sunlight is white. When no sunlight is available (i.e. when it is filtered out so thoroughly as to be completely blocked) the colour experience is what we call in English black. In this way, the opposition between black and white is established conceptually [...] there is nothing inherently good about white and nothing inherently bad about black. The distinct values conceptually associated with the images in this

iconographic frame of reference are direct reflexes of a fundamental root value system which reveres the experience of life and reviles the experience of death. In this case, life and death are understood relative to experience of the Sun” (life forms thrive in environments in which sunlight is available) (Language and Ideology 2001: 41).

The examples from *RMS* and *OED* which illustrate this metaphor are, respectively: *borba između bijelih i crnih bogova, no misao moja nije tako bela, i bijelo i crno u nama živi, ni belo ni crno* (meaning neither good nor bad), *čuvati bele pare za crne dane* (where money is associated with white as something that can potentially help in times of need, which are in turn associated with colour black in our example) and *There ain't a whiter man than Laramie Jack from the Wind River Mountains down to Santa Fe*, whereas the definitions of white in the two dictionaries include *honourable; square-dealing* on the one hand and *čedan, nevin; svetao, častan* on the other. In Christianity, *white spirit* refers to a person who does good to others. Ivić (1999: 3) talks about the Serbian rural community, which used the colour term *white* in relation to agriculture in order to describe particularly favourable events in this domain, or the high quality of fruits and herbs: *oko mene struk bela bosiljka, bele loze vinove*, etc. This basic metaphor, together with the components of meaning mentioned in the introduction (i.e. light(ness), sheen, reflectivity for *white*, and scorching, burning, etc. for *black*), terms which were used synonymously with colour terms (i.e. clear as a synonym for *white* in Serbian) and various cultural factors, served as the starting point for the derivation of other metaphors which relate white to phenomena perceived as having generally positive connotations².

2.2. INNOCENT IS WHITE | NEVINO JE BELO

This particular metaphorical extension is probably derived from the more literal association of black with dirt, out of which by contrast we associate white with clean, unsoiled. “[...] *Ideas of dirtiness and impurity are themselves grounded in the perceptual experience of the color black, which is seen not just as the opposite of white, but also as a potent impurity that can contaminate whiteness*” (Sherman and Clore 2009: 1019). An interesting study was conducted by these two psychologists, who examined automatic associations between words with moral and immoral meanings and the colours black

² There are exceptions to this general rule, though, as we can see in *RMS* which presents us with the meaning of *white* which refers to cataract and blindness when used to describe eyes, or to epileptic fit in the phrase “white foam” around the mouth (*bela pena*).

and white. “*The speed of color naming in a Stroop task³ was faster when words in black concerned immorality (e.g. greed), rather than morality, and when words in white concerned morality (e.g. honesty), rather than immorality*”(Sherman and Clore 2009: 1019). This proves that people instinctively associate *black* with immorality, i.e. *white* with moral purity. Appropriate illustrations were also found in *RMS* and *OED*: *Da mi je ljubav osetiti blagu, o kojoj ne zna, a govori svet, naivnu, belu, u životu zlom*, and *It is I whose duty it is to see that your name be made white again*, coupled with the appropriate definitions: *morally or spiritually pure or stainless; spotless, unstained, innocent and čedan, nevin, častan*. Further examples include: *ostao je svetla obraza, osvetlao je obraz* (Ivić 1999: 8), which refers to innocence in the sense of moral and spiritual pureness in Serbian, and: *he is white-handed* (which stands for both honest and innocent) and *white lies*, which is a collocation used to describe the kind of lie which aims to avoid hurting the person it is intended for in English.

2.3. PEACEFUL IS WHITE | MIROLJUBIVO JE BELO

This metaphorical extension became firmly established through certain historical circumstances which introduced the white flag as the symbol of peace. We can probably assume that morality (moral purity) and honour served as intermediate steps between white as the source and peaceful as the target domain, as in times of war soldiers guaranteed with their honour that the exchange of fire was to cease in case the symbol was used. In his book *The Rights of War and Peace* (2005), Grotius briefly mentions the history of the white flag. The first mention of white flags used as a sign of surrender was made between 25–220 A.D. The color white was used generally to indicate a person was exempt from combat; heralds bore white wands, prisoners or hostages captured in battle would attach a piece of white paper to their hat or helmet, and garrisons that had surrendered and been promised safe passage to safety would carry white batons. In 1625, Hugo Grotius described the white flag as a “*sign, to which use has given a signification*” (Grotius 2005: 271). *RMS* and *OED* offer appropriate examples: *Neće nikad stići u bijelu luku mira* and *There met him a ship of the Carthaginians, garnished with white flags of peace*, with *RMS* offering some additional adjectives for this meaning, such as *spokojan* and *siguran*.

2.4. HAPPY IS WHITE | SREĆNO JE BELO

The following metaphor varies greatly across cultures, which is perhaps best exemplified

³ The Stroop task demonstrates the cognitive interference that occurs when a person is instructed to name the color of ink in which an incongruent word is printed (e.g. to say “red” aloud in response to the stimulus word BLUE printed in red ink.)

by the colour of clothes worn on certain occasions, particularly weddings and funerals. In the western world it is customary for brides to wear white, whereas in China this colour, together with black, is more appropriate for funerals (even though recent years have seen a great deal of western influence, so Chinese are turning from red, which is the traditional colour for their wedding dresses, to white). The custom of wearing white attire for funerals persists in some parts of Hungary as well. In Serbian and English, however, we have a matching opposition of metaphorical extensions HAPPY IS WHITE | SREĆNO JE BELO and SAD IS BLACK | NESREĆNO JE CRNO, which is supported by examples from *RMS* and *OED*: *Noć vam dođe sa Vuka jednoga, danak beli, braćo, sa drugoga*, and *What is called by Schoolboys Black Monday, was to me the whitest in the whole Year*, that also include defining adjectives *svetao* and *propitious, favourable, auspicious, fortunate*, respectively.

2.5. HOT IS WHITE | VRELO JE BELO

Several factors could have played a part in the origin of this metaphor. There is a certain possibility that it has sun as the source of light (which acts as a synonym of white, as mentioned in the introduction based on Ivić's research) at its core. Together with light, sun also provides heat, so this can be one possible explanation for this extension. Another explanation could be the physical perception of objects made of metal glowing white when heated to extremely high temperatures. Both languages have examples of this metaphorical extension – the definitions including *zažaren, usijan do beline* in *RMS* and *white-hot = heated to such a degree as to radiate white light; at white heat* in *OED*, as well as the examples of *Znaš da je to bijelo željezo na staru ranu* (*RMS*) and *To display all these colours at the same time the wire must be white-hot* (*OED*) and *Kenamun was in a white rage*.

3. BLACK | CRNO

3.1. DIRTY IS BLACK | PRLJAVO JE CRNO

The conceptual metaphor linking *black* to *dirty* (and *prljavo* to *crno*) has no counterpart in those metaphors involving the colour *white*. It is somewhat less metaphorical as compared to other metaphors described in this section – it employs one physical domain to describe another physical domain, which can, however, be extended into a non-physical realm (*dirty* has its transferred meaning and connotations). Nevertheless, we may track it in both languages included in the study; in both English and Serbian we may find examples that support this metaphor. One of the definitions of *black* in *OED* is: *deeply stained with dirt; soiled, dirty, foul* – this seems to be illustrative enough, but can be further supported

by examples such as the one coming from the proverbial rhyme *I'd rather have black hands, and plenty of meat, than never such white ones, and nothing to eat*. The phrase *black hands* in the rhyme obviously refers to soiled hands, which were clearly engaged in some kind of work. Similarly, *RMS*'s definition of *crno* includes *nečist, prljav, zamazan: rublje, crne ruke*, which all reflect the same kind of link between the colour *black* and the concept of *dirty*.

3.2. BAD IS BLACK | LOŠE JE CRNO

This metaphor operates as the counterpart of the metaphor *GOOD IS WHITE | DOBRO JE BELO*, which was dubbed the most basic of all mentioned in the previous section dealing with *white*. It is the most basic in the same sense as its counterpart as it deals with a domain which includes various elements of *disturbing, sad* or *guilty* and other abstract domains described by means of the colour *black*. In the definitions of *black* in *OED* and *crno* in *RMS* we may find elements which connect *black* to *bad*: *black* is defined as *having dark or deadly purposes, malignant; pertaining to or involving death, deadly; baneful, disastrous, sinister*, whereas one of the definitions of *crno* includes adjectives *rdav* and *zao*. The examples from English which support this metaphor include *I think it is madness to be unprepared against the black moment*, as well as *The throne was usurped by the Queen's black enemy, Philip*. Other examples from spoken English which can be added to the list include: *Now every profession has got its black sheep*, *The public scandal left a black mark on his career*, and collocations such as: *black money* (obtained by illegal dealings), *black market*, *black future* (future with no hope), *a black look* (an angry look). In Serbian, we find the example of *Zar mu je mogao biti crnji dušmanin od Ignjata*. In the listed examples, *black* is used to modify the noun *enemy* (*enemy* in English and *dušmanin* in Serbian), which speaks enough of its negative connotations.

We also have a number of examples with colour *black* coming from Serbian epic poetry. Ajdačić (1992) illustrates this with examples in which *black* is used to amplify the power of curses: „*Tebi, majko, burma potavnila/na desnici u crnoj zemljici!*” and “*Po dvoru ti svako drvce raslo/A najviše crna trnovina!/U njemu se svaka tica legla/A najviše crni kukavica!*”.

3.3. DISTURBING IS BLACK | ZLOKOBNO JE CRNO.

The following metaphor, *DISTURBING IS BLACK | ZLOKOBNO JE CRNO*, can be considered a variation of *BAD IS BLACK | LOŠE JE CRNO*. It, however, has a set of meanings which are not included in the semantic field covered by the adjective *bad*. This is best seen in the

definitions of *black* and *crno* found in the dictionaries of English and Serbian. One of the definitions of *black* describes it as *of the countenance, the 'look' of things, prospects: clouded with anger, frowning; threatening, boding ill; the opposite of bright and hopeful*, which is quite similar to what we find in Serbian: *mrzak, odvratn, koban, zlokoban*. There are examples in both languages which reflect the threatening and ill-wishing semantic elements. *OED* provides us with *When the face of affairs looked blackest and no glimpse of comfort appeared, The crew will no longer regard my child with black looks, the black forest was a monster waiting to devour you into the branches and his black eyes were holes into the pit of evil*, whereas *RMS* offers *Neka ne umre dokle mu ta crna zloba ne izgori na vražjoj duši*, which also supports the previous metaphor, *LOŠE JE CRNO*. Furthermore, this particular extension also has its ground in Serbian epic poetry: „*Sinoć mene crna knjiga dođe/Crna knjiga, a u doba crno/Crnom bješe bulom zabulana/A krvavim slov'ma napisana*” (Ajdačić 1992). The verses repeatedly employ *black* for the purpose of stressing the sinister and ominous nature of the news received.

3.4. SAD IS BLACK | NESREĆNO JE CRNO.

A further step towards the realm of abstraction can be found in the conceptual metaphor relating the colour *black* to *sadness* – this link can be found in many cultures around the globe (Munro 2004). We can trace it in English and Serbian linguistic material as well. Among other definitions, from *OED* we can learn that *black* is *dark, sombre, dusky, gloomy* and this is supported by the following example: *The blackest sky foretells the heaviest tempest*. We may say that, linguistically speaking, the direct links connecting *black* to *sad* are most likely to be labelled obsolete (the latest example dating from two centuries ago), but culturally speaking, the links between *black* and *death/sadness* seem to be still “alive”, which may be certified by funeral customs in the UK and the USA. Examples from spoken English which further illustrate this metaphor are the following: *He has been in a black mood ever since he lost his job* (where *black mood* refers to sadness, depression and ill temper). The situation in Serbian seems to be a bit different, as even in linguistic terms these links are quite active – *crni* modifies personal names in everyday Serbian to signify that someone has done something wrong and ended up being in a difficult, sad situation. One of the definitions of *crno* involves *nesrećan, jadan* and it is supported by *A ti ćutiš kao sužanj crni* and *Kuku mene, crni Vukadine, a šta si to uradio?*

3.5. GUILTY/WICKED IS BLACK | GREŠNO JE CRNO.

Finally, in both English and Serbian *black* is used to symbolize *guilt* or *wickedness*.

Black in English is defined as *foul, iniquitous, atrocious, horribly wicked*, whereas its definition in *RMS* does not include an explicit definition supporting this metaphor – however, the example *Neka ne umre dokle mu ta crna zloba ne izgori na vražjoj duši* supports it well enough. Moreover, examples of *black* symbolising sin are found in Serbian epic poetry. Ajdačić (1992) provides an example of a poem in which the sin of child murder is underlined by this colour: in the murderer’s hands red flowers turn black, and when she falls to the ground her eyes turn into a black lake („Bog nikom ne ostaje dužan”, Vuk Karadžić). *OED* is richer in examples which support the conceptual metaphor GUILTY/WICKED IS BLACK. The examples are: *Red Seas to drown our black Egyptian sins, The portion of the blackest criminals, I shall never be guilty of such black ingratitude and Concealing facts of the blackest dye*. On the whole, we might conclude that this metaphor has a better grounding in English than it does in Serbian.

4. CONCLUSIONS

Having in mind that the analysis of the researched corpus was performed in one direction, we can say that there is a relatively high degree of correspondence between the two compared languages in terms of the existence of underlying conceptual metaphors with *black* and *white* serving as source domains. Pairs such as GOOD IS WHITE | BAD IS BLACK, HAPPY IS WHITE | SAD IS BLACK, INNOCENT IS WHITE | GUILTY IS BLACK can be supported by examples from both languages both in terms of dictionary definitions and the examples which accompany them. We have seen that some of these meanings and uses are obsolete, whereas some others are still quite active. Nonetheless, from a cognitive linguistic point of view, it is very important that even those obsolete existed, as it might also imply that they can ‘reactivate’ at some point in the future, having in mind the systematic nature of conceptual metaphors. Studies involving (1) the other direction, (2) other colours and (3) other languages would be crucial in the process of revealing how important colour terms tend to be in the process of conceptualization. Using native speakers as respondents could give us additional material for analyses of this kind.

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METAPHORICAL EXTENSIONS OF THE COLOUR TERMS *BLACK* AND *WHITE*
IN ENGLISH AND SERBIAN

Summary

The aim of this paper was to explore the metaphorical extensions of the basic colour terms *black* and *white* in English and Serbian. This was a relatively small, one–way research (Serbian to English), with the corpus limited to several English and Serbian dictionaries, the most important of which were RMS and OED. The paper offers some

hypotheses concerning the meaning development of *black* and *white* metaphors over time. Ten metaphors in total were singled out and analysed. Even though we can conclude that there is a relatively high degree of correspondence between the two compared languages in terms of the existence of underlying conceptual metaphors with *black* and *white* serving as source domains, it has to be stressed that further research in the opposite direction (English to Serbian) is needed to point to potential ‘metaphorical gaps’ and dissimilarities between them.

METAFORIČKI PRODUŽECI TERMINA ZA BOJU *CRNO* I *BELO* U ENGLESKOM I SRPSKOM JEZIKU

Sažetak

Osnovni zadatak ovog rada bio je da istraži metaforičke produžetke značenja osnovnih pojmova *bele* i *crne* bojeu engleskom i srpskom jeziku. Radilo se o relativno malom, jednosmernom istraživanju (od srpskog ka engleskom), sa korpusom koji se sastojao od nekoliko rečnika engleskog i srpskog jezika, od kojih su najbitniji RMS i OED. Rad nudi i nekoliko hipoteza vezanih za istorijski razvoj značenja metafora koje uključuju pojmove crno i belo. Izdvaja se i analizira deset metafora. Iako možemo da zaključimo da se može uočiti visok stepen korespondencije između dva upoređena jezika u pogledu postojanja pojmovnih metafora u kojima *crno* i *belo* služe kao izvorni domeni, moramo da napomenemo da je potrebno obaviti dodatno istraživanje u suprotnom smeru (od engleskog ka srpskom) kako bi se ispitalo moguće postojanje „metaforičkih praznina“ i razlika između dva jezika.

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