



## A Discussion of Color Metaphors From the Perspective of Cognition and Culture

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### Abstract

Metaphor is a pervasive phenomenon which has traditionally been considered as a figure of speech used for special effects in a speech or an essay. It is pervasive in everyday life. Color terms are usually used to depict the colors of objects in the world. Every object in the world has its own color. There are a large number of metaphorical expressions with color serving as the source domain in both English and Chinese. As a very important human experience, colors have attracted many scholars attention.

The study revealed that possible reasons for the similarities of color metaphor in the two languages can be attributed to the common perceptual and cultural experience, while the dissimilarities originated from the different living environment, religion, custom, and philosophy etc.

This essay makes a comparison of color metaphor about the similarities and differences between English and Chinese. Understanding similarities and differences of color metaphor between English and Chinese is of great importance in the cross-cultural communication. It's beneficial for us to do English teaching, English translation, and appreciation of English culture.

**Key words:** Metaphor; Color; Cognitive study; Cognition and culture

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### INTRODUCTION

We live in a colorful world. There are a great variety of color words to describe the colorful things in the world. English and Chinese, as languages with a long history, are both abundant in basic color terms.

In recent years, both subjects of metaphor and color terms have received much attention and been widely researched by many researchers. More and more people begin to realize that metaphor plays an important role in human cognition and social activities.

The study of metaphor has a history of more than two thousand years. Since Aristotle, metaphor has been considered as a deviated use of words and expressions outside their normal, conventional meanings. The publication of *Metaphors We Live By* of Lakoff and Johnson (1980) brings a turning point of metaphor study. Since then, metaphor is not only a figure of speech, but also a way of thinking. Lakoff's cognitive view on metaphor is regarded as a breakthrough in metaphor study.

All of us know everything in our natural environment has a color, and every language in the world has its color terms. Among these color terms, there is a special subset known as basic color terms. According to Berlin and Kay (1969), who carry out a landmark research on color terms, English has eleven basic color terms: black, white, red, green, yellow, blue, brown, purple, pink, orange and gray. Obviously, there are nine shared basic color terms in English and Chinese.

This essay tries to focus on the metaphorical meanings of the basic color terms through the comparative study by using some linguistic data, aiming to examine the similarities and dissimilarities of the usage of color metaphor in English and Chinese, and tries to give a persuasive explanation for the reasons causing the similarities and dissimilarities.

## 1. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 1.1 Studies of Metaphors in English Countries

The greatest thing by far is to be a master of metaphor. It is the one thing that can not be learned from others; it is also a sign of genius, since a good metaphor implies an eye for resemblance (Aristotle, 1950).

The earliest study on metaphor could be traced back to Aristotle who has had a tremendous influence on the history of Western rhetoric and poetics. Metaphor was initially discussed in detail by Aristotle in his two great works, *Rhetoric* and *Poetics*. In *Poetics*, Aristotle defined metaphor as “the application of an alien name by transference either from genus to species, or from species to genus, or from species to species, or by analogy, that is proportion” (Ibid.). His view toward metaphor maintains the classical representation theory. According to Aristotle, Metaphor is a kind of expressive way, replacing one word with another. His claims are thought to be the origin of the comparison theory. For more than 2000 years, metaphor has been primarily studied by philosophers, rhetoricians, and literary critics as a matter of language or a figure of speech.

Richards is the first who proposed the interaction theory. He raised “the interaction theory” in *the Philosophy of Rhetoric*. He points out, that “metaphor is the omnipresent principle of language”, and that “we cannot get through three sentences of ordinary fluid discourse without it” (Richard, 1936). Later on, it is Max Black who inherits and develops the theory. He developed and modified Richard’ work. He views metaphor as a distinctive accomplishment rather than conveying literal meaning. Furthermore, he sees metaphor as containing positive cognitive content, which may indicate that metaphor can convey much more than the connotative meaning of the word itself.

In 1980, the publication of *Metaphors We Live By* (Lakoff & Johnson ) makes a milestone in metaphor study. In this book, the idea of “conceptual metaphor” is put forward for the first time. Lakoff and Johnson claim that, “Metaphor is pervasive in everyday life, not just in language but in thought and action. Our ordinary conceptual system, in terms of which we both think and act, is fundamentally metaphorical in nature” (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). They also point out that “the essence of metaphor is to understand and experience one kind of thing in terms of another”. In this view, metaphor becomes a valuable cognitive tool and inevitable part of everyday human communication, understanding, and reasoning.

### 1.2 Studies of Metaphors in China

China has a long history of metaphor (Hu, 2004), but in the classic Chinese books metaphor wasn’t precisely defined as the ancient Western scholars did. People still treat it as a kind of figure of speech that contains no figurative word.

After 2000 years of development, Chinese metaphor has been considered as the rhetoric, meanwhile by means of advanced theories and methodologies from the Western metaphorical study, metaphor develops in a scientific way (Ibid.). The cognitive study of metaphor in Chins didn’t begin until the middle of the 1990s, some Chinese scholars began to introduce theories of Western cognitive linguistics and cognitive approach to the metaphor study, of which book reviews of the important

works appeared in the core journals of foreign language study, such as Lin Shuwu’s *A Review of Metaphor Study Abroad* (1997). The cognitive linguistics and cognitive theory on metaphor have been introduced from the Western academic world, and books on metaphor study are published, for instance, *Metaphor and Cognition* (Ibid.). All of these show a growing interest in metaphor study and the considerable progress that has been made in this field in China. The metaphor study in China turns into the cognitive study from the traditional rhetoric study.

### 1.3 Studies of Color Terms in English Countries

The study of color terms has a very long history in Western countries. Nearly 2,500 years ago, the color was systematically studied for the first time as a basic cognitive domain. Aristotle held the view that simple colors related to some basic elements of the physical world and the nature of colors are assumed that simple colors were mixtures of “black” and “white”. In 1666, Newton, for the rest time in his life as well as in human’s history, distinguished seven colors in the order: red, orange, yellow, green, blue and purple, that pushed forward the study of color a great deal. The color terms study could be explained from the linguistic perspective by using the linguistic relativism proposed by Sapir (1921) and Whorf (1956). In 1969, the ethnologist Brent Berlin and Paul Kay coauthored a book *Basic Color Terms: Their Universality and Evolution*. They found the evidence that people rely on some focal colors for categorization. Correspondingly, these focal colors form the basic color words in languages. Berlin and Kay reached 98 languages, and found the basic color words expressions nearly all orderly came from 11 basic colors, and their order is shown in the following table:

**Table 1**  
**Order From 11 Basic Colors**

Black	Green<Yellow	Purple
<Red<	Blue<Brown<	Pink
White	Yellow<Green	Orange
		Gray

This table tells us that, if a language only has two color words, they must be black and white; if the language has the third color word, it must be red; if it has the fourth one, it must be green or yellow, and the rest may be deduced by analogy.

Influenced by Berlin and Kay's publication, basic color terms theory has resulted in great achievements in cross-discipline researches. Since then, many scholars have studied color terms from different perspectives.

#### 1.4 Studies of Color Terms in China

The history of Chinese color terms could be traced to ancient China, about 2000 years ago, and research on color terms could be found in some classic works, for instance, the ones in the book of *Shi Jing* (the Classic of Poetry), but they are limited to Chinese color terms. Later due to the development of silk industry, the expressions of color terms have been abundant. The systematic studies on color terms did not emerge until the introduction of Berlin and Kay's (1969) *basic color Terms*, which have aroused the interests of Chinese scholars who dedicated themselves to the color issue and achieved some progress.

The period from the late 1980s to 1990s is the peak for the study of color terms and many contrastive researches have been carried out, aiming to find the differences in language and culture and contribute to the cross-cultural communication. Professor Yang Yonglin of Qing Hua University contributes a great deal to this field through a systematic and scientific investigation. In 1990s, his study viewed college students as the subjects, aiming to study the color code cognitive of Chinese learners of English at the university level in an English learning situation and he has published two books on this aspect.

All of the studies contribute a lot to the research on color terms in China. The color-term system has very distinctive cultural connotation, which makes itself a special window for the researchers to study the whole system of words, to make contribution to better understanding and more effective communications.

## 2. COLOR METAPHOR

Metaphor is the "mapping of the logic of one domain (usually, but not always a concrete domain) onto another (usually more abstract) domain" (Taylor, 2001). As a universal phenomenon, color is an important part of the human experience and plays a vital part in our daily life. People always use color words to express their understandings and thought, which will be shown in the following examples:

- a) He is black hearted.
- b) 在这里红包喜事他都参加。

Obviously, in the above sentences, these color terms do not refer to colors, but are used metaphorically. "Black hearted" means evil, negative. It is the basic taboo color in the Western culture to be black, reflecting Westerner's spiritual abandonment and disgust. More examples in English may include "a black day", "a black sheep" and "a black look". "A black sheep" refers to member "of a family or other groups" who is thought to be a disgrace to other members, just like the meaning in the sentence "Now

every profession has got its black sheep". In Chinese culture, "红" and "白" indicate different occasions. Occasions do not have colors, but in China the color "red" plays an important role in Chinese people's daily life. People usually associate "红" with weddings and joyful, happy occasions. On the contrary, white is the symbol of death. Therefore, "白事" actually means funerals.

Besides, other colors also have special meanings. For example:

- c) He was blue over his dismissal.
- d) 黄色电影

It is obvious that sentence 3 simply means "He felt sad for his dismissal". In English the color blue is usually associated with unhappy feelings. "Having the blues" means a sad, gloomy or depressed mood. "Blue Monday" also has the same meaning, as in "It was blue Monday and he didn't feel like going back to work". In sentence 4, "黄色电影" sometimes called "黄片", are pornographic movies. It doesn't mean the movie is in yellow.

## 3. A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF COLOR METAPHORS BETWEEN CHINESE AND ENGLISH

We are living in a world full of colors, the blue sky, the green tree, the golden sun and so on. We are familiar with them, so they become a good substance to view and to express something unfamiliar, complicated and abstract. When we use colors to express, explain and comprehend other categories, we use them metaphorically.

According to the metaphorical meanings of each color term, the major color conceptual metaphors include similar and dissimilar between English and Chinese. In this thesis, a comparison will be made between the five basic color terms: black and 黑, white and 白, red and 红, yellow and 黄, blue and 蓝.

### 3.1 Black and "Hei (黑)"

For human beings, black is the color of mystery, the symbol of darkness, and darkness can afford people the best shelter when they are engaged in secret business. Illegal things are often carried out in the dark. In Chinese, "黑社会" (literally black society) refers to the illegal world. "black money" refers to "黑钱" (income from illegal activities). In English, such expressions as "black future" and "blackout" are also connected with "darkness". "Black future" refers to the future without hope, just like "你的前途很黑暗" in Chinese. "Black out" refers to a period of darkness caused by a failure of the electricity supply. Some other expressions related to "black market" can be found out in English, for instance, "black market goods", "black market trader" and so on.

In Chinese, the color black is often associated with negative qualities, and is related to an awful, evil and illegal meaning. Such as "黑手", "黑心肠", the person

with “黑手”, here “黑” means rebellious, refers to a vicious person manipulating somebody or something from behind the scenes. “黑心肠” refers to evil mind.

It is not difficult for both English and Chinese to conceptualize the concept disgrace in terms of black. Let's see the following examples:

The public scandal left a black mark on his career.

他的不良行为给家里抹黑了。

As we all know, people's general psychological reaction to the black color is depressed or unpleasant, and disgrace is of course something unpleasant. Besides, “black” also means a very anger or resentful mood both in English and Chinese. “A black look” refers to an angry look in English. In Chinese, we can find the corresponding words like “黑面”, “黑着脸”.

In English, sadness is often linked with the black term. For example: “He has been in a black mood ever since he lost his job”. “A black mood” refers to a kind of depression, bad temper, etc. With regard to the causes of sadness, people may think of death and misfortunes. In Bible, black is the symbol of evil spirit. “Black Friday” refers to an unlucky day, because it is the day of the Crucifixion to Christians. However, there is an exception in business English, in which the concept black has a positive meaning. The phrases “in the black” and “black figure” indicate the business is run profitably. In Chinese, the color term “黑” has some special connotations. In the Cultural Revolution, as an opposite to “红”, “黑” “黑干将”, “黑纲领”, “黑帮子女” and so on. “黑五类” includes landlords, rich peasants, reactionaries, bad elements of society, and the Rightists as well. In modern Chinese, “黑马” refers to unexpected winners.

### 3.2 White and “Bai (白)”

White is the color of snow. White conveys purity, cleanness in English and Chinese as well. People in Western countries believe that Jesus and his angels wear white dress, so the color white is the holiest color in Christianity. “White spirit” refers to a person who has a pure heart always does goods to others. “A white man” means a person who has virtues. Weddings taking place in the church are called “white wedding”, because the brides are dressed in white, white is applied to describe the quality or state of being pure. Chinese expressions such as “洁白”, “白璧无瑕” show purity.

White also bears a meaning of innocence. We can find some commonly used expressions of this in both languages. For instance, “He is white-handed”, meaning he is honest or innocent. In fact, a man who is honest or innocent can be expressed as “white hands”. In Chinese, the equivalence of “white” is “白” and “素”. The Chinese word “白” in the phrase “清清白白” is associated with purity and innocence. When we say “他是清白无辜的”, “清白” means innocence and cleanness.

In English, “a white elephant” means possession that is useless and often expensive to maintain. “White” here

is useless. Similarly, in Chinese “白说”, “白做” also convey the meaning of uselessness.

In ancient China, “白衣” was used to refer to “illiterate or commoner”. Such as: “白衣” and “白丁”. Those who didn't get any positions in offices were called “白身”. Food that costs nothing in Chinese is called “白食”, which also utilizes the concept white to portray things getting without payment. In Beijing opera, the colors of faces have profound meanings, “唱白脸” here white symbolizes the persons who are slyness.

### 3.3 Red and “Hong (红)”

Red is usually associated with celebrations and joyful occasions. This is true in English speaking countries and China. In China, the red color plays an important role in Chinese people's life, seen as the color of sun and fire. People get direct benefits from the warmth of the sun and fire. It is the color of luck, associated with prosperity and happiness. In Chinese, the expression “红喜事” refers to a wedding because red is the color of wedding. “披红挂彩” is a traditional way to celebrate an event of happiness. “开门红” the red color shows the symbol of good luck. In English, we find such expressions as “a red-letter day”, “holy red” and so on. “A red-letter day” refers to holidays such as Christmas and other special days. When some important visitors come, English people will “roll the red carpet” for reception.

In Western countries, red is the color of life, as well as the color of fire and blood. In English, “red” is used to be a sign of warning some dangers in most of the cases. For example, “Red Cross” is an international organization that helps people who are suffering from disease or who are injured in wars or some natural disasters. “A red alert” is the state of being to deal with a sudden dangerous situation.

Both in English and Chinese, Red conveys feelings of anger and embarrassment. “To become red-faced” shows embarrassment or shyness. If somebody sees red, it means he or she is very angry. In Chinese, “他气得脸红脖子粗” means he is red with anger.

Red is considered as the symbol of revolution and communism in China as well as in Western countries. In English, the term red can be used to indicate a person supporting revolution or radical policies. The expression “red in tooth and claw” describes a violent revolutionary who shows no mercy and makes no compromises. In Chinese, “红区”, “红色政权” are all related to revolution.

In English, “be in the red” means owing money or in debt. For example, “He is in the red now”. On the contrary, he is out of the red when he is no longer in debt or gets into a state of credit. In Chinese, “赤字” has the same meaning as “be in the red”.

In Chinese, red is also closely related to females because ancient Chinese girls liked using rouge to dress up, such as “红颜”, “红妆”, “红粉佳人” and so on. While in English pink refers to pretty women or fair ladies.

### 3.4 Yellow and “Huang (黄)”

Yellow is bright, sunny, cheerful. Lots of its associations both in Chinese and English are positive. In English, “yellow boy” is gold, equal to “黄金” in Chinese. “黄金时代” is golden age and “黄金周” is golden week.

In English, the term yellow is often used to refer to the dishonest style in editorial comment or presenting ordinary news in a sensational manner. “Yellow press” denotes the newspaper that deliberately includes sensational news items in order to attract readers. In most American homes, one can find a big thick book called “Yellow Page”, but it is not a “黄色书” in Chinese sense, but a “黄页”. This is a book with the telephone numbers of different shops, business, organizations, etc, arranged according to different categories. In English, “黄色书” is a “blue book”.

In China, according to the five-element theory, the color “黄” is the symbolic color of “earth”, standing for the center of the universe and is regarded as a color of nobility. What’s more, in Chinese, “黄” has the same pronunciation with “皇” (literally emperor), hence the yellow color has been the color of emperors and the color “黄” has been used to symbolize imperial power. In Chinese, there are quite a few expressions with “黄” related to the emperor. The imperial dress is called “黄袍”; the palace where emperors lived is called “皇宫”; the imperial edict is called “皇榜”, “黄袍加身” means “to be dressed with the imperial robe by one’s supporters and emperor. However, in English, “purple” is the color related to emperors.

Yellow in Chinese also means failure. For example, “我和他黄了” means he and I broke up.

### 3.5 Blue and “Lan (蓝)”

Blue metaphor in English and Chinese has little in common. Blue is a natural color. Blue makes us calm. Blue is the color of sky. The equivalence of blue in Chinese is “蓝” or “青”. The color blue is extracted from a kind of indigo plant. Therefore in Chinese there is a famous proverb “青出于蓝而胜于蓝” (Blue comes from the indigo plant but is bluer than the plant itself), but it is often translated into “the pupil surpasses the master”. “蓝天” is also called “青天”, and it often refers to a sunny day without black clouds.

In English, blue is usually associated with the feeling of sadness and depression. If we say “He is in a blue mood”, or “he has the blues”, we mean that he may feel gloomy and depressed. Similarly, “a blue Monday” implies the first day of work or school after a relaxing and carefree weekend, and most people have to endure the successive five days.

In English, blue is commonly regarded as the color for male. For example, boys in blue refer to police officer.

Blue is also associated with the high social position, honor. For example, “He is a real blue blood” means he is from an aristocratic family. “Blue ribbon” refers to the highest honor or championship. In American English, “blue book” is not a book with a blue cover, but it is a book with names of well-known persons, especially government officials.

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## CONCLUSION

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Color plays a remarkable role in people’s daily life and intercultural communication. The essay has made a comparative study on English and Chinese basic color terms to find out their similarities and dissimilarities by analyzing their different meanings and cultural background. However, there are some limitations in this thesis. Firstly, there are so many color terms in the world, and we cannot contrast all of them. The contrast in this essay only focuses on five basic color terms. Secondly, there are so many expressions with color terms in both English and Chinese, I cannot list them all. But the examples given in this essay are enough because the purpose of this essay is not only to find out the similarities and dissimilarities, and the key point is to realize and understand it. In order to overcome language barriers and smooth cross-culture communication. There is still a lot in this field waiting to be studied, and study on color terms deserves more and more attention.

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