

## Issues on colour symbolism as component of ethnic culture

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**Abstract.** Language can mean in two fundamental ways, both of which are intimately linked to culture: through what it says or what it refers to as an encoded sign, and what it does as an action in context. The problem of symbolism has been dealt with in the investigations of a number of authors. An important problem arises in connection with the study of colour-symbols in modern linguistic and cultural studies. The basic idea is that colour-symbols are universal code of cultures independently from its cultural and geographical distances. The paper abounds in illustrative material, examples. The author tries to throw light on the problem of functioning colour-symbols in Kazakh culture through comparing it with other languages. Comparison of the data obtained, has made it possible to assert that colour-symbols in Kazakh culture plays very important role in metaphorization and phraseologization of colour-denotation; it enables us to draw a conclusion that colour-denotation is one of the main component of ethnic culture as well.

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### Introduction

Language is considered to be the principal means of communication whereby we conduct our social lives. When it is used within the context of communication, it is bound up with culture in multiple and complex way, so we should consider the language as the way of expressing the language portrait of the world through the language and the culture of this or that people, the way of thinking and expressing people's disposition.

To begin with, the words people utter refer to common experience. They express facts, ideas or events that are communicable because they refer to a stock of knowledge about the world that other people share. Language also reflects the people's attitudes, beliefs, and viewpoints upon the world. In both cases, language expresses cultural reality.

But members of common speech community do not only express experience; they also create experience through language.

Language is considered to be as a system of signs that is seen as having itself a cultural value. Being the members of common speech community, they identify themselves through their use of language; they view their language as a symbol of their social and cultural identity. The prohibition of its use is often perceived by its speakers as a rejection of their social and cultural group. Thus we can say that language symbolizes cultural reality.

*We shall be dealing with these two aspects of language culture* throughout this paper. But first of all before our considering the issue of the given problem we need to clarify what we mean by culture.

One way of thinking about culture is to contrast it with nature. Nature refers to what is born and grows organically, originated from the Latin *nascere* – to be born, as it concerns the word **culture**, which is originated from Latin as well, refers to what has been grown and groomed, *colere* – to cultivate. The interpretation of the word **culture** evokes traditional nature/nurture debate: Are human beings mainly what nature determines them to be from birth or what culture enables them to become through socializing and schooling?

To identify themselves as members of speech community, people have to define themselves as a bearer of common culture, which unite them as a representative of this or that cultural and language society and create conditions to exist as a nation.

As Claire Kramsch states in her writings that the study of language has always had to deal with the difficult issue of representation and representativity when talking about another culture [1].

An important problem arises in connection with the study of the outline about the relationships between language and culture, language and mentality, language and the way of thinking. The possibility of creation of cultural-semiological paradigm of language is based upon the fundamental outline of cognitive science orientated to the study of the relationship language system with the language environment. According to the writings of A. Bondarko, language environment considers to be as “the multitude of language elements, which plays in this respect in coordination of language sign with environment, where the language functioning [2].

In our viewpoint the notion “environment” postulates ambiguity and duality of the language portrait of world. It includes objective reality and its reflection in consciousness that is reality and the ideal world of the man.

Linguists and philologists have been interested in the diversity of human languages and their meanings since 18<sup>th</sup> century. Many theories, which further discover the connection of language and culture, language and thinking, come into being. The Sapir-Worth makes the claim that the structure of the language one habitually uses influences the manner in which one thinks and behaves [3].

We can agree to his ideas that the language reflects reality in their own way; it depends on cultural, historical, social backgrounds.

Language can mean in two fundamental ways, both of them are intimately linked to culture; through what it says or what it refers to as encoded signs, and through what it does as an action in context. The crucial feature that distinguishes human being from animal is that it has human’s capacity to create signs that mediate between them and their environment. Every meaning practice makes use of two elements that is a signifier and a signified.

In connection with the study of the signs we should focus our attention on the meaning of signs, i.e. the signs show the relation between signifier and signified. For example: words-attribute white, black which point to the colour or outer indication proper, as well colour association. Their meaning, that can be looked up in the dictionary is denotative. On the other hand, the meaning of the words white and black is more than just the colour indication. They are linked to the many associations they evoke in the mind of the speaker: white and dark might be associated with humane feelings within its stylistic context. The word white is used in the meaning of something pure, elevated, for example: white magic is magic which is used only to do good things. and black, something sorrowful; it expresses grief, distress, sorrow, making people feel unhappy or lose hope for example: *it was the blackest moment of my life* or it shows angry or unhappy feeling (*a black mood, a black look*), or something unpleasant things such as death, illness. Both words draw their meaning from their connotations.

In addition to denotation and connotation, there exists a third kind of meaning that words can entertain with their object. For all the signifiers concerned, they not only point to, and associated with, their objects. They can also be images or icons of them. For example if we want to make effect on a reader or listener we shall use the means of making the imagination

Our consideration of the problem will not be comprehensive without definition of the notion cultural encoding. So let us pass to the consideration. The code is not something that can be separated from its meaning. In wholesome, it is one inseparable unit unified by entity of meaning and form.

As Sapir and Whorf assert, that different signs denote reality by cutting it up in different ways [3]. For example: in Russian and Kazakh encodes the whole leg from the hip to toes through one sign Russian *noga* and Kazakh *ayak* so that “*U menya bolit noga*” and correspondingly “*Menin ayagym auryp tur*” might mean “My foot hurts”, whereas English needs at least three words ‘hip’, ‘leg’ or ‘foot’.

But the diapason of the concept of word “horse” in Kazakh overwhelmingly wider and more specific than that in English and Russian. This concept represents national cultural phenomenon of Kazakh people in the light of symbolism and social and cultural environment. For example, Kazakh words denoting *at, tay, biey, kulyn, zhorga, zhylky* corresponds in English only two words horse and mare. Kazak people differentiate in details naming of the animal connecting with its age. Thus, it is reflected in the dominant theory of lacuna which studies the lack or gap of concept-words in comparing languages and cultures [4,5,6].

The encoding of experience differs also in the nature of the cultural associations evoked by different linguistic signs. Let us analyze some national concepts which are considered to be basic for Russian and English culture, for example the concept-words “soul” or “mind” in English and their equivalents in Russian “*dusha*”, “*razum*” each of these signs is differently associated with their respective objects. For Russian culture, not only *dusha* is more frequently used than “soul” or “mind” in English, but through its associations with religion, goodness, and the mystical essence of things it connotes quite a different concept than the English correspondingly its meaning and use much wider in Russian.

With the passing of time, signs easily become not only naturalized, but conventionalized as well. Taken out of their original social, cultural and historical context, linguistic signs can be emptied of the fullness of their meaning and used as symbolic shorthand. For example words like “freedom”, “choice”, “right”, “Justice”, “democracy”, when uttered by politicians, may lose much of their denotative and even their connotative meanings, and become political symbols in democratic rhetoric; signifiers like “*October revolution*”, “*Holocaust*”, “*Perestroyka*”, “*Glasnost*”, “*Zheltokzan*”, “*Reloading*”, “*EuroMaidan*”, “*Bolotnaya*” have

simplified an originally confusing amalgam of historical events into conventionalized symbols. The recurrence of these symbols over time creates an accumulation of meaning that not only shapes the memory of sign users but confers to these symbols mythical weight and validity [1].

The passage of time validates both the sign itself and its users correspondingly. As it concerns signs, they are reversible; signs have the potential of changing the way sign-makers view themselves as well, and therefore they act. The use of signs enables current speaker to place past events into a current context of talk.

Considering the notion of sign and symbol we should come to the idea of mentality, which takes an important part of investigation of the given problem.

In modern cultural studies the notion “mentality” is used in two meaning of viewpoints;

- Ethnic and social conditionality of our consciousness;
- Sources of spirituality and entity of people.

In these sense frames, this notion can be used cognitive cultural studies. We would like to analyze color symbols of Kazakh language and their role in speech, in society and imagination. It is not the new view that symbol is closely connected with other spheres of our life, with philosophy, psychology, linguistic, archeology, anthropology, folklore and history of religion, mythology and rituals of a nation, which all together organize wealth of symbolic tradition and becomes part of speech with very interesting content and history, which can be varieties of ways of people thinking.

In the investigations of the colour-denotation there appeared a new scientific trend, which was named colour linguistics. Theoretical aspects of colour linguistics are represented in L. Bayramova's writings, she determined the main trend of investigations “historical studies of colour lexicology”, (evolutionary trend), psychological basement of colour-denotation, cognitive aspects, and cultural studies [7].

Colour is the marker of the culture, many cultural phenomena cannot be comprehended without taking into account of colour-denotation. Colour-denotation possesses great cultural significance. As a component of culture, colour acquires a complex and divergent system of senses, interpretations, becomes an embodiment of cultural values. Colour environment, colour vision of the world is comprehended in accordance with colour cultural directions in every epoch.

N.B. Bakhilina in her investigations claims, that the origin of all colour-denotation is rooted in

historical past and bears ethno cultural character [8]. Colour is represented as one of the cultural category. This point of view was expressed by N. Zharkynbekova in her paper, where she claims that colour is represented as one of the constant or one of the principles of culture, which can be represented as a model of development reflecting the ways of forming, mastering and securing phenomena in cultural memory, not only in common but national marked concepts as well [9]. Colour gives some information about the nature, environment, history, customs and tradition of the people. It reflects peculiarities of national culture and expresses its values as well. Colour-denotation formation took much time and was found in the people's consciousness and was determined colour perception of social groups. It has been established by recent studies that there exist differences in colour-denotation from the gender point of view. R. Lakoff reveals this problem and asserts that the spectrum of colour-denotation depends on differences of reception of colour by different sexes. Man differentiates less colours, correspondingly he has less colour-denotation as it concerns woman, she has broader spectrum of colour-denotation [10]. She explains that men deal with colours less regarding women; they have much deal with colours that is purchasing, decorating, designing. Lakoff says that linguistic behavior of the woman is less perfect than that of the man. Male's colour-denotation is more concrete. However, D. Simson and A. Tarrent in their writing “Sex- and Age-related Differences in Colour Vocabulary” [11] asserts that if a man has much to do in designing, in decorating or he has it as hobby, he possesses more colour-denotations. People started to associate environment through the colour spectrum, three main colours were single out, which represented main and important for a human being things and phenomena such as light, darkness, fire, sky, sun, milk, plant. Associations with colour were formed on the unconscious level.

Colour portrait of Kazakh culture considers being very conservative in using colour spectrum. Mostly Kazakh people use three colours, they are: white, black, red,

White colour in national culture is one of the important elements of the colour symbolism, opposing the black colour as well as its lexical units and its denotation. White and black colour stands in opposition one another in colour spectrum, and their nomination and symbolism are antonymous.

In the symbolic sphere of correlation ak-kara (white – black) might be included in the equivalent set of couples ak – kara (white – black);

Antonymous couple Akpen kara (black and white) expresses injustice.

Obviously that the role of colors has huge symbolical value in life of society, its tradition and in consciousness not only of whole ethnoses, but also in life of one person. Studying of the nature of colors is a quite topical issue in separately taken languages.

The color symbolism in language can be divided into national, psychological, physiological, linguistic, social, national, international, traditional, geosymbolics, etc. Each color influences not only to person, but also to animals individually.

Each people, ethnic group tries to give definition and value to each color. It is possible to assume that it was done in order to be different from any group of people, society, nation, country. Even if to consider the Turkic people during the different periods of their development and existence, it is possible to define that during centuries certain colors played an important role in this or that tribe or in people's life. In ancient times each Turkic people, a tribe had customs, signs, anthems, a flag and the press, outerwear, the tool, emblems and the coat of arms, and even marks to gave the cattle. And each attribute had the color designation and divided them from each other and these colors were given bigger value in social relation.

In Kazakh culture different codes for various colors are used. According to M. Auezov, for Kazakhs there are two primary colors: white and black. "Antithesis of white, black is its equal in terms of absolute colour.

And now we shall begin by considering the role of the colour within the cultural context reflecting the national portrait of the world.

The black colour in the language consciousness of Kazakh people has speech ambiguity, that is:

Black colour reflects positive phenomenon in Kazakh culture. In this connection the following observation can be made:

*Al-Farabi atyndagy Kazakh Ulyk Universitetimiz bizdin Kara shanragymyz*

In English it can be translated in this way: "Al-Farabi Kazakh National University is our Alma-Mater". *Kara shanrak* symbolizes experience, tradition, history, and steadiness. *Shanrak* is that part of *yurta* (nomad's dwelling), which supported with the round top part, it symbolizes the foundation of the Kazakh home. Why is it black? Because of time it turned into black colour, it means that it is used by people many times and it stayed to be home and shelter for many generations.

In the process of historical development of any language under the influence of linguistic and extra linguistic factors take place changes in semantic relations resulted in appearance of connotative meaning.

Connotative meaning usually motivated through a direct meaning it takes place on the base of simile of objects by shape, colour, motion, and character. In accordance with wide spread outlook there exists common motion tendency from concrete thing to abstract. It concerns colour-denotations. The share of denotative contain in the lexical meaning of the word depends on the character of visual-sense imagination. The more generalized and abstract visual-sense imagination is the less share of denotative content.

Main denotative meaning of the word *kara* has unlimited validity and is used in its direct meaning naming the colour of the surrounding objects and appearance.

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Black ("*kara*") colour – colour of the earth, night, sometimes a grief. For Kazakh people black colour is perceived as power, force and fear of something. As well as for other distant and close cultures, black colour in Kazakh culture symbolizes the death and sadness. This colour always brings with it difficulties, a grief and the evil. For Kazakh culture the lexeme *kara* in the set-phrase "*karaly kun*" (black day) leads to the hell. Another connotative meaning of the set-phrase "*Kara zhel*" (black wind) denotes strong wind symbolizing physical strengthen, expresses danger as well. The main connotative meaning which is expressed by the word *kara* (black) covers also different meanings positive in the set-phrase "*Kara tastay*" "*Kara agashtay*" they symbolize quality.

As it concerns European culture "Black, as the colour of melancholy, pessimism, sorrow and misfortune, is applied in everyday language in such terms as black magic, black books, blackmail, black market, black mass and so on. The Romans distinguished unlucky days with a black stone and different disasters have stigmatized Mondays, Fridays and Saturdays as 'Black'" [12].

Colours are used for defining the age of the person. During ancient times when in a family someone died, on a *yurta* sewed a flag with a certain colour which designated age of the dead. Red color designated that died young; black was used for people of middle age and white – a symbol of death of mature aged person. In many areas of Kazakhstan there was not tradition to lay red and black coloured tissue to the top of *the yurta*. Because according to the tradition, black and red coloured clothes of dead were laid outside of house where it was shown in order to inform that in *the yurta* there is a dead. We can scoop information about any nation and their culture from colours. For example Turkic nation,

including Kazakh people used to sew black string to white flag; it means that someone died in this family. In some regions of Kazakhstan people used to hang black flag in a spear.

Black colour also can be a symbol of a Kazakh woman, her beauty and magical power: “*Kazaktyn kara kozderinin sikyrly kushy Europa ayelderinen kem emes*” (The magic power of beauty of black eyes of the Kazakh woman isn't worse than the European woman has). There are also phrase as *kara shash* (black hair), which also a symbol of the Kazakh woman and beauty. Nowadays a lot of Kazakh girls are named *Karashash* (Black haired) and *Karakoz* (Black eyed), fact of transformation of the phrases to personal names.

For a long time among the Kazakh people seven primary colors were used as symbols: blue, dark blue, red, white, yellow, black and green.

Blue and dark blue colors designate infinity and depth as represent an image of the sky and the sea. In turn, blue is a symbol of wisdom, intellect and belief, and dark blue – stability, justice and freedom. In political symbolic dark blue color connected with moral and religious aspects, because it symbolizes protection, silence and the peace [13].

White color (“*ak*”) is a purity, wisdom, hope and peace. As confirmation can serve the literature written by Kazakh authors, where sense of high human morals and beauty is connected with value of white color.

“*Ak kagazday taza korip zhuretin Akbilek endy kuye zhakkanday kagaz...*” (Akbilek who was innocent and pure, now was slung mud). This fragment testifies that using white color *Ak kagazday* (as white paper), the author more strongly wanted to show beauty of soul of the character, her innocence and purity. The same symbol of purity, innocence and virginity we can see in following example of white color “*ak tos*” (*white breast*): “*Shanymen, ak tosine aram deneny oynaktatyp, ashylmagan kauynyn aram pyshakka zhargyzgany ma?*” (Really, whether it means that her innocent body will be seized by the impious man).

White color can also symbolize death in Kazakh culture. Thus it is set sometimes at the start and sometimes at the finish of the daily round and of the manifested world, which endows it ideal and asymptotic properties. However, the finish of life – the instant of death – is also the moment in which we cross the bridge between the visible and the invisible and is therefore another starting-point.” We can see it in clothes attributes on a funeral. Kazakh woman don't put black kerchief on a head. **White** kerchief is a symbol of **Black Death** and men bind belt from white fabric.

“In all symbolic thought, death precedes life and all birth is rebirth. For this reason white was originally the colour of mourning, as is still the case in the Far East and as was for long the practice in Europe, especially at the court of the Kings of France” [14].

In ancient times when batyrdar (*heroes*) gathered for battle, they spoke: “*Olsem kazam ak bolsym*” (if I die, let my death be white (literally)) which means that death overtaken the person in battle, in fight is white (*pure, heroic*), as though blessed from height, innocent death, courageous, heroic withdrawal from life. Besides, Kazakhs wished happy journey, telling “*ak zhol bolsyn*” (let the journey to be pure) that symbolizes good luck, a good trip.

Each ethnos has the features inherited only in itself and distinguishes it from other ethnic collectives. They can include various images, characters, stereotypes, material and spiritual values. All these values are reflections of cultural development of the people. Symbols can be transferred by many ways, in particular by means of language which people speak; they fix all phenomena and events in memory of ethnical lingua-cultural community.

An analysis covers the problem of phraseologization of set-phrases with colour component and they are realized through the way of transformation mainly metaphorically. Metaphor, as it is known, arises on the base of real and imaginable similarity of indications or features of different objects and phenomena. Let us consider the examples of Kazakh culture, *kara bet* (black face) – a dishonest person; *kyzyl koz pale* (red eyed misfortune) – a harmful person. Thus colour-denotation plays an important role in metaphotization of the character of the person.

## Conclusion

Each colour has a definite meaning. Very often a symbol as an image arises in words under the extra-linguistic factors, peculiarities of people's disposition. Definite systemic relations characterize colour-symbols. As it concerns Kazakh culture symbolic meanings have mainly black, white, brown, red, yellow colours. Words-symbols bring us understanding of national peculiarities of every language. It enables us to draw a conclusion that colour-denotation is one of the main components of ethnic culture; main colours in Kazakh culture are black, white, and red, yellow, brown that coincides with cultures of other nations despite their areal and cultural distances.

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