SHOULD THIS BE BLUE PENCILED OR CIRCLED RED? : A TRANSCULTURAL INTERDISCIPLINARY STUDY ON COLORS

By

NADIA GHAZANFARI-MOGHADDAM *   MOHAMMAD ALI MOKHTARI **   MASOUD SHARIFIFAR ***

Lecturer, Neuroscience Research Center of Kerman, Iran.
*** Lecturer, Translation studies and Faculty member, Shahid Bahonar University, Kerman, Iran.*
*** PhD, Assistant Professor, Shahid Bahonar University, Kerman, Iran.

ABSTRACT

Color terms are one of the constituents of Chomskey's substantive universals, and they exist in all languages. Colors usually bear cultural implications as well, since they are adopted to express intentions metaphorically. Colors may then become symbols that represent certain objects, emotions, facts, etc. of their environment. This culture-oriented facet of color terms can create complexity in language learning process and also in the practice of translation. As languages share some basic concepts, and express them through different expressions and symbols, the interest of this study was to answer the following question: are there any shared concepts between English and Persian that are represented (symbolized) by different colors? By collecting a number of expressions which held color terms, the complexity of this territory of intercultural communication was demonstrated along with its impacts on second/foreign language learning and translation practice. Slight differences at the linguistic surface level can occasionally cause difficulties especially when the deep structure is the same in both languages and cultures. More specifically and for the purpose of this study, when the same concept is represented through different colors, this is likely to cause difficulties. Failing to communicate via appropriate surface structures is probable to lead to cultural shocks in the listener (in case of language communication) or reader (in case of translation) , and impedance in the interlingual communication flow.

Keywords: Color Terms, Language Learning, Translation Practice, Culture, Intercultural Communication.

INTRODUCTION

Color Terms: Substantive Universals with Culture Specific Roles

According to the Inter- Society- Color- Council (ISCC) when color terms were noted as symbols and represented their cultures, the usage of color terms had built a link between human thought and language; therefore, investigations in this field became a prime interest of many philosophers and linguists. Color terms contributed to scholars to comprehend how humans classify and perceive objects and thoughts through colors. These studies later lead to other investigations concerning language differences (available at : www.colorsystems.com).

"There is a very close link between the life of a society and the lexicon of the language spoken by it." (Wierzbicka,1997:1). The outside world is observed differently from one community to the next, and these different "observations" fabricate notions such as social

norms, behavioral patterns, and even culture. "It is commonly observed that the manner in which an idea or 'fact' is stated affects the way we conceptualize the idea" (Brown: 2007:208). " [language] … is not merely a vehicle which carries ideas. It is itself a shaper of ideas, it is the programme for mental activity" (Whorf, 1976 cited in Spender 1980: 145) so " each of us has *to learn to see*" (Williams 1975:33 cited in Spender 1980: 146, emphasis not mine) as " language is a perceptual creation" (Croce 1902: 37) and " there is no doubt, … that a language reflects the thoughts, attitudes, and culture of the people who make it and use it" (Schulz, 1975: 82).

Sapir(1949:162) states "language [is] a symbolic guide to culture" (cited in Wierzbicka, 1997 : p. 1.). " [Culture] is a "glue" that binds a group of people together" (Brown: 2007: 188). Newmark (1988:94) differentiates "culture" from "universal" and "personal" languages and defines culture as: "… the way of life and its manifestations that are peculiar to a community that uses a particular language as its

means of expression". These expressions are, for the most part, cultural specific in the implicit (indirect) meanings that they propose. Accordingly, color terms exist in all languages (thus universals) but communities may apply them similarly to or differently from other communities in order to symbolize concepts (thus cultural-specific). It is worthy to state that languages may differ in the quantity of colors that they have; and this can also - along with cultural differences - turn into an intercultural problem in language learning and translation practice.

Color Terms and Metaphorical Expressions

Color terms symbolize both concrete objects and abstract concepts. They also transmit emotions and intentions more tangibly and emit words more effectively. To restate, they can magnify the strength of words and clarify the speaker's or writer's intentions in a communication setting, colors can be used metaphorically; and metaphors, to Newmark (1988:104) have two purposes: cognitive, and aesthetic. The first is to describe a state, person , object , etc. whereas the second expresses enjoyment and creates a more effective communication. Newmark (1988:105) mentions that it is essential for the translator to understand 1) the cognitive and denotative meaning and 2) the positive and negative meaning of a metaphorical expression. These two approaches ameliorate not only the quality of a translation, but language learning as well, as the language learner is taught to differentiate the various facets of meanings of lexicons and linguistic combinations, just like the translator. According to Wierzbicka (1997) a good perception of those metaphors which refer to concrete objects proves to be constructive and contributing to a better understanding of abstract metaphors .

According to Larson (1984:6) "meaning components are 'packaged' into lexical items, but they are 'packaged' differently in one language than in another." This can point to the impact of culture specific tendencies of societies toward different aspects of life. Users of all languages employ metaphorical expressions in different contexts everyday to vividly express their intentions. Additionally, Karoubi (1383/ 2004: 156) mentions from Haghshenas (1367/1988 : 52), some lexis may bear denotative and connotative meanings simultaneously in a given context.

This is observed in cases such as metaphorical expressions, ironies, and other literary and metaphoric combinations (e.g. green when placed in ' he was green with envy', here the intention is not the color, but what it represents: envy). The connotative meaning, to Haghshenas (ibid), may also bear symbolic meanings too. Languages use symbols to express attitudes more tangibly. Jung (1978: 4) defines a symbol to be " … a word or an image … [which] implies something more than its obvious and immediate meaning" (cited in Barden & Williams 2007: p. 45).

The special connections between the lexicons of a language are always at first encounter recognized by the native speaker (unlike a non-native). These relations to Karoubi (1383/ 2004), are the result of the excessive use of certain words, over and over, by its native speakers. Karoubi (ibid), in the same place, also states that the result of such excessive usage is that those combinations will turn into 'habits' or even 'norms' for the native language users; and at times, the connections among the lexcons in these combinations may become so firmly bonded together that 'collocations' emerge. Color terms are used in most metaphorical expressions, and it is in these fixed lexical relations that they bear specific implications which are at first hand perceived by the native speaker. Colors gain different senses in these relations and consequently become symbols of certain objects, event, or concepts. They provoke different emotional responses in the native speaker.

This can stand as a good example to explain why teachers always delineate the importance of acquiring (new) words in their context of use. Memorizing decontextualized vocabulary, may cause "interlingual" errors (that occur between the mother tongue and the second/foreign language) or "intralingual" errors (occur in one language) in the language learner's mind (Ziahosseiny, 2008; and Brown: 2007). Another advantage of learning contextualized vocabulary is that learners will also learn the frequency of occurrence of the words and their appropriate practical use.

Color Terms in Language Learning and the Practice of Translation

When two languages are close in their grammatical structure, and also cultural and religious background

information; their translation, according to Abbasi and Manafi Anari (2004: 65), is likely to lead to a more natural and intelligible product at the end .Parallel to this, it can be claimed that the same goes for language learning, those languages that share basic social, cultural, religious etc. background information are likely to be more convenient to acquire and understand; especially when it comes to information connections between the native language and the second/foreign one (Brown 2007: 225). The complexities in language learning, however, are most observed when a shared concept is dealt with differently in the two languages; consequences are : interlingual errors, different frequency of occurrence, diverging pragmatics and discourse, and (as the focus of this study) slight surface structure differences.

'Culture' and 'cultural differences' do not just cause difficulties in language learning, but they also cause complexities in translation practice. When lexicons are decontextualized, they are simply taken for their first meaning (the first definition stated in the entry of that word in a dictionary), yet, when they get into lexical relations they offer a wider range of meanings which are crucial for a good translator to distinguish. Therefore, colors are not problematic per se, but at the point where the colors contain additional cultural specific meanings and are locally contextualized some challenges arise. To elaborate the same on color terms, as they get into lexical relations colors may suggest a range of different senses. The implied concepts may consist of cultural, historical, social, and even ironical senses.

Usually a literal translation strategy is used for those lexical combinations (as metaphors) which hold color terms. For instance, in Benjamins (2004:212) there is a sample sentence which contains the color "green". Three translation versions have been proposed by three different translators who have surprisingly preserved the color 'green'.

* " A valley where **the color green** must have been born , and where rainbows made their home." (extracted from Benjamins, 2004: 212)

This sentence was translated into three languages. Benjamins cited the back translation of these three versions as follows:

- "where **greenness** must have be born and where rainbows had their home. "(ibid)

- "where **the green colour** seems to have been born and where rainbows ended."(ibid)

- "in an **evergreen** valley where the sky was decorated by rainbows."(ibid)

Although the focus of Benjamins' (2004:212) study was on another aspect of translation, but this example vividly demonstrates the fact that color terms are usually (unconsciously or consciously) preserved in a translation of literary texts; and although the sense may not be transmitted properly but the exact color is often maintained especially in cases where colors refer to concrete objects and have a more denotative (direct) meaning. Karoubi (1383/2004) stresses that a literal translation would be an abortive approach in such cases, as it focuses merely on words so much that in times, the actual connections between the words in a given context is ignored and thus the translation reads unnatural.

Review of Literature

Colors are rather likely to be assumed as shared assumptions, used to communicate thoughts and attitudes of the outside world; however, it is interesting to delineate that this is not always true. In fact a number of studies have concluded that the number of color terms used in languages differ from one another, and even while one language may differentiate a specific color, the other has no lexical item dedicated to it at all. Some studies have concluded that if a language were to have only two colors, those two would be 'black' and 'white' - since they represent a shade of 'darkness' and 'brightness'. Then, the third color would be red (the color of blood and life) and after that 'yellow' or 'green' (or both). This is while ' Blue' and 'brown' come at the fifth and sixth levels, respectively. These seven colors are believed to be the main colors that all languages contain. *Black*, *white*, and *red* are claimed to be the basic shared hue terms in all languages (Portal, 1957; and Ardalan, 1973).

In a study that Berlin and Kay (1969) carried out on basic color terms, approximately 100 languages were analyzed.

The basic hues in their study were: black, white, red, blue, green, etc. Thus terms such as : light green, or dark blue were excluded from the focus of their study. The result of their paper was that no language had less than two, and no more than eleven basic hue terms. (cited in Alvarado & Jameson : 2002).

Alvarado and Jameson (2002) conducted a study on color terms and hue modifiers. These two scholars attempted to investigate, what they recalled: 'monolexic' and 'polylexic' naming color labels. This study was done via a comparative cross- cultural study between Vietnamese and English with the aim of reaching conclusions that could be universally stated and applicable for all languages. Alvarado and Jameson (2002:16) concluded that "When the interaction between modifiers and basic terms is … understood [through] …. Languages, structural universalities may emerge that clarify the debates about the evolution of color naming" .

The translatability of color-containing idiomatic expressions was investigated by Ahmadi and Ketabi (2011). In their study the main focus was basically on the applied translation strategies for transferring color expressions from English to Persian. They concluded that idiomatic expressions are translatable and that the translation strategies introduced by former scholars suffice this purpose. On the other hand, they also investigated the cultural similarities and differences of these expressions: claiming that "black" , "white" , "red" , "yellow" and "golden" are "… associate[d] with exactly common images or symbols in both English and Persian cultures" . They explain , however, that the implication of these colors may in other cases be different and thus not the same translation strategy is employed for their transmission. Ahmadi and Ketabi (2011) also concluded that English adopts more color expressions in both formal and informal contexts, while Persian employs color expressions most in informal contexts.

Regarding all the above, the focus of this study was to investigate instances of expressions that held shared concepts between English and Persian, yet differed only slightly at the surface level – more specifically, they differed in the colors that represented the shared concept. The aim of this study was to answer the following questions: As languages share some basic concepts, and express them through different expressions and symbols, are there different colors that express the same concept between the two languages? If so, can cases be detected that the syntactic surface of the expressions are basically the same between English and Persian but only differ in the color term that symbolizes the shared concept?

Based on the researchers' knowledge, no research has yet been done on the present issue and the effects that it has on second language learning and also translation practice. It was attempted to illustrate, through examples, how complex these instances may become, and especially how time and memory consuming the acquiring process of these expressions may turn out to be (regarding intercultural competence). The results are optimally promising for language teaching purposes, translation studies, and translator trainings.

Methodology

For the purpose of this study a number of expressions which contained color terms were collected from English and Persian dictionaries. The color expressions that held shared concepts were extracted and their meaning – denotative, connotative, metaphorical, positive, negative, neutral, etc. – was carefully analyzed by contextualizing them in their own culture. The expressions were later matched and compared with their equivalents in the other language. Data was then classified into two groups and discussed: (i) Those that matched semantically and had the same or similar color terms and (ii) Those that matched semantically but differed in the color that represented the shared concept.

Data Discussion

Based on the extracted data and the discussion that follows, the answer to the first question was positive. There does exist expressions between English and Persian that hold the same or similar concept. And to continue on with the second question, there were some expressions that represented the shared concept via different color terms. In other words, the two languages held different colors as symbols for a shared concept.

Color Referring to a Concrete Object or an Observable

Image:

[1]E.Ex. She is red- faced with anger

[2]P:AZ FARTE KHASHMO ASABANIAT KABOOD SHODE

[3]LT: Her face has turned purple/ dark blue/ black and blue with anger

In a Persian context when it is said that someone's face is *red*, it usually expresses the same meaning that is stated by the English ' s/he blushed' or ' s/he turned pink': a state of shyness or embarrassment - either positively or negatively. This is while in English, *a red face* represents a state of anger, which in Persian the same concept is resembled by 'purple' / ' bluish purple' or black and blue (the color of a bruise).

E.Ex. She blushed and turned pink

 P: AZ KHEJALAT SORKH SHOD

 LT: she turned red from embarrassment

E.Ex. you look as white as a sheet

P: RANGET EYNE GACHE DIVAR SEFID SHODE

LT: the color of your face is as white as a chock wall

E.Ex. To be black and blue all over

P: KABOOD SHODAN

LT: to bruise/ to turn the color bruise

The word "KABOOD" (bruise) along with is denotative(direct) meaning, is also recalled as a independent color in Persian to express what is meant by the English "black and blue", yet, with the slight difference that in Persian, the color is basically perceived to be closer to purple, than 'black' or 'blue'. Additionally, sometimes a 'black and blue eye' is metaphorically mentioned to resemble an egg-plant (because of the dark purplish color of its cover).

E.Ex. Leaves turn brown (BRITISH)

    Leaves turn red (CANADIAN)

    Leaves turn golden

P: BARGHA ZARD MISHAVAND / DERAKHTAN ZARDO NARENJI MISHAVAND

LT: leaves turn yellow / trees turn yellow and orange

E. Ex. Her skin is very brown

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[1] " E. Ex. " stands for English expression example.

[2] " P " stands for Persian expression example.

[3] " LT " is for the Literal Translation of the Persian expression.

P: GANDOMGOON AST/ SABZEH AST

 LT:her skin is greenish

Color Corresponding to Abstract Ideas:

E.Ex. Yellow- bellied / white livered

P:NAZOK NARENJI

LT: to have a thin Vermeer like an orange

E.Ex. I just 'saw red' and stared shouting

P: KHOON JOLOYE CHESHMAM RA GEREFT

LT: blood covered my eyes

Ex.E. It was the blackest day of my life

P: ROOZEGARAM (MESLE SHAB) SIAH SHOD

LT: my life became black (as night)

Colors Corresponding to Semi- Abstract Ideas

E. Ex. Blue- penciling something P: DORE CHIZI KHATE GHERMEZ KESHIDAN

LT: marking something with a red circle or to mark something redE.Ex. Pink- slip

P: BARGEH HOSHDAR GHERMEZ

LT: red notice

E.Ex. Red cent

P: [4]POOL E SIAH

LT: black money

E.Ex. the red carpet treatment

P: JOLOYE KASI FARSHE GHERMEZ PAHN KARDAN

LT: to spread a red carpet in front of one's steeps

Other Achievements

Through the data analysis the below stated results were also gained:

1) Expressions were observed whose colors were the same, or similar (e.i. in the same color zone) in both English and Persian, and expressed the same or similar main concepts. In other words, an overlap of meaning and lexical components was discovered in them.

E. Ex. Her face became red, her face turned pink

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[4] POOLE SIAH or its literal translation: Black money, actually has two meanings: one states that the money is not worthy of anything, and that we should not concern ourselves with money, and be materialistic.(what is meant in this example and matches the red-cent expression). And the other meaning is : the money that is gained from wrong ways like smuggling.

P: SORKH, GHERMEZ, KABOOD

LT: red, red, bluish-purple/ bruise (color)

There are two lexicons used in Persian to express the color 'red' they are ' SORKH' and ' GHERMEZ'. The first, has a more positive meaning, and is also more frequently employed in romantic contexts, like for a red rose, blushing for an experience of love , etc. while the latter, is neutral in meaning, so it can be used in negative contexts as well.

E.Ex. Black market

P: BAZARE SIAH

LT: black market

Just like 'red' which is expressed by two lexis in Persian, 'black' has two equivalents in Persian as well. ' Black ' is represented by two lexis in Persian which differ only in one or two meaning components: 'SIAH' and 'MESHKI'. The only connotative difference that these two have is that while the former represent a negative and (usually accompanied with) more sorrow connotation, the latter represents a more neutral and even in some cases positive connotation. 'MESHKI' is also frequently used to express 'prestige', 'power', and 'fashion' as well. Thus, a vampire all in black would be translated with the term 'SIAH' while a good looking man in a black jacket, would be translated with the word 'MESHKI'.

2) Color terms were most used in English expressions than in Persian ones. Even cases were observed in which color terms were used to express the five senses.

E. Ex. Black Coffee

P : GHAHVEH TALKH

LT : bitter coffee

4) In business and political contexts, 'blue' and 'white' were more frequently used in English, this is while colors are used less frequent in business texts and politics.

E. Ex: the white book, blue law, etc.

Conclusion

Colors universally exist in all languages and because of their denotative (direct) meaning, at the very first level, they are recognized as universal substantives of Chomskey's semantic universals (referring to Chomskey's theory cited in James, 1980: 55). At the second level, however, there is a rather reverse stance. Color terms, in a certain cultural context , are occasionally accompanied by and observed with certain lexicons, gain a cultural specific sense; and hence are only understood by native language users who can recognize the additional implications that the color term expresses in a given context.

Language learning consists of many stages. Learning through the similarities between the two languages, or to state differently, learning the shared assumptions which are expressed by the same or quite similar syntactic and lexical surface structure is contributing and promising to all stages of language learning - especially at the beginner's stage. Differences can also be helpful if the learner differentiates and acquires them appropriately in their relevant discourse. Yet, learning similar assumptions that are resembled via slightly diverging surface structures may cause serious complexities (in concordance with Oller, and Ziahosseiny's moderate version (1970) cited in Brown: 2007), confusion, reluctance in learning, and the learner's guard against the *different* language material. When it comes to pragmatics and translation practice, in case of misusing these combinations, bizarreness and cultural shock are likely to occur in the readership.

Based on the present study, it was concluded that the translation of those expressions which contained the colors 'white', 'black', and 'red' was much easier than the expressions which had other hue terms. The three above mentioned colors represented similar concepts in both English and Persian. This can also support the previous mentioned assumption that these three colors are the basic hue terms common in all languages.

Cases were observed that a color in one language represented a concept that was completely different in the other. For instance, while ' green ' is a color that represents 'envy' in English, it represents ' happiness, happy ending, good luck ' and a symbol of a happy marriage in Persian. In such cases wrong substitutions of color terms may result in major cultural shocks in translation and intercultural communications. Additionally, a few examples were found in which a color represented a positive concept in one language while in the other language the same color represented a neutral or perhaps negative meaning.

A number of expressions were detected that held shared concepts in the two languages and were expressed through (similar or dissimilar) color terms. It can also be generally stated that since some behaviors (action and reaction), attitudes, and thoughts are common among all nations these behaviors and attitudes can be thus considered as universals. For instance, we all know that if we do something wrong and the result would harm us in some way, we normally would withdraw from repeating that action. Therefore, this is a universally accepted fact; but the lexicons and context that are used to express them vary from community to community. Where in English it is said "once bitten twice shy" in Persian it is said "MAR GAZIDEH AZ RISMANE SIAHO SEFID MITARSAD" (literally translated as: someone who is bitten by a snake would always fear even a rope that may seem like a snake). Both languages state that people would naturally and by experience avoid what has once harmed them – and interestingly English and Persian state this with almost the same lexis and image. It is suggested for further studies that scholars investigate the present issue in other language cases and optimally detect universal patterns. One other quite interesting and challenging field may be body language and facial expressions in intercultural communications.

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Nadia Ghazanfari-Moghaddam is currently teaching EFL as a part-time lecturer at the Neuroscience Research Center of Kerman, Iran. She has completed BA and MA in Translation Studies at Shahid Bahonar University of Kerman, Iran. She has published a number of Journal and Conference papers and has a 7-year experience of teaching EFL to adults and children.

Mohammad Ali Mokhtari is currently working as a Lecturer, translator, and a faculty member at the Department of Foreign Language and Literature, of Shahid Bahonar University of Kerman Iran. He has published numerous paper and his research interests are Translation, Literature, and Linguistics. He has also been the author of many books, dictionaries and glossaries.

Masoud Sharififar is currently Assistant Professor at the Department of Foreign Language and Literature, of Shahid Bahonar University of Kerman, Iran. He has published a number of papers on linguistics and Translation Studies. He is also a member of the Editorial Board of The Iranian EFL Journal.