

# The Metaphorical Expressions of Basic Color Words in English and Chinese

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## Abstract

This study makes a comparison of color metaphors about the similarities and differences between English and Chinese for few articles study the metaphorical usage of shared basic color terms in Chinese and English. The author makes a relatively systematic study of the color metaphors, which has some significance in the light of the cross-cultural communication, language teaching, language learning, as well as translation practice.

**Keywords:** basic color terms, color metaphor, contrastive study

## 1. Introduction

For most people, color is an immediate and essential component of their perception of the world (Elliot, Fairchild, & Franklin 2015; Hurlbert & Owen 2015). But, every country possesses diverse cognitive meanings for the color terms in its own languages because of different cultures, living environments and so on. These diversity also implies disparities in the way people perceive the world for color terms are the product of human cognitive ability. Color terms serve to facilitate the understanding of the similarities and differences of various cultures. Ray (1953) proposes that every color system aims at putting the color world into order as to simplify human's perception of color, and further to make the action feedback, especially the speech feedback and communication more effective. Furthermore, it is not hard to find that color terms are often employed metaphorically.

Although many experts concentrate their study on either different metaphorical meanings of one or two color terms in Chinese and English or basic color terms in a certain language from the perspective of cognitive linguistics, few articles compare the metaphorical usage of shared basic color terms in Chinese and English. To fill up the gap in the field of color terms and to help us further understand the color metaphor, this thesis will make a contrastive study of six common color terms between English and Chinese.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Research on Color Terms in the West

In the 19th century, most research on color terms was carried out from the aspect of culture (Zheng 2015). Scholars thought that the number of color terms in various languages was closely related to the development of the culture it rooted. Both Gladstone (1858; 1877) and Geiger (1871) held that less cultivated areas offered their languages fewer color terms. On the contrary, the so-called advanced cultures produced more color terms.

After the Enlightenment, cultural relativity dominated the studies of color terms (Zheng 2015). Sapir (1921) and Whorf (1956) contended that a person's native language determines how he or she thinks. According to their hypothesis, in terms of color terms, people's perception of the color world is determined by color terms themselves.

With the publication of a book *Basic Color Terms: Their Universality and Evolution*, the universality of color terms marked a new age in this field (Zheng 2015). Researchers began to give priority to the universality of color terms across cultures rather than focusing on their variations (Berlin & Kay, 1969).

Berlin and Kay (1969) conducted a comprehensive and scientific study of ninety-eight human languages and concluded that the basic color terms were acquired and developed by all cultures in a certain order, as shown in the following figure:

white/black< red< green< yellow<blue < brown<purple/pink/orange/gray

Figure 1 An evolutionary sequence for the basic color lexicon

After that, Bornstein (1973) made a more comprehensive study of basic color terms in 155 languages and found that cultural differences in basic color categorization or nomenclature have been variously explained by biological evolution, linguistic relativism, or semantic evolution.

Nowadays, greater attention has been paid to the issue of basic color terms and they have been investigated in terms of philosophy, ethnography, anthropology, linguistics, sociology, physiology, psychology, physics, neurology, and even genetics to help derive the development criteria of color terms in languages (Saunders 2003). The progress achieved contributes a lot to people's understanding of color terms.

### 2.2 Research on Color Terms in China

Studies of color terms were mainly conducted in the following five aspects. The first aspect was based on the view of the figure of speech. For example, Tan (1984) explained Chinese color terms in the light of their categories and functions. The second aspect focused on the studies from the connotations of the color terms. Zhang (1988) explored the causes for different connotations of color terms in Chinese language and made a conclusion that the connotations of color terms were closely linked with the perception of colors and people's experience. The third aspect studied color terms from the development of basic color terms. Wu (2012) provided a detailed description of Chinese color terms and claimed that there were eight basic color terms in Chinese (white, red, black, yellow, green, blue, purple, gray). Therefore, the first six basic color terms will be explored in this article based on the research of Berlin & Kay (1969) and Wu (2012). The fourth aspect was centered on the comparison of color terms among different languages ( Shao 1994; Pan 1996; Tang 1996). The fifth aspect was on the basis of semantic analysis (Wu 2002; Hu 2004; Li 2007), which further elucidated the study of color terms in use.

### 2.3 Research on Metaphor in the West

Studies of metaphor in the West boast a long history, theories originated from which could be classified into two types: traditional metaphor theories (comparison theory, substitution theory, and interaction theory) and one modern conceptual metaphor theory. Comparison theory defines metaphor as a comparison on the basis of the similarity between two elements.

It is Quintillian that first put forward the substitution theory (Shu 2003). Quintillian (1920) claimed that metaphor is a shorter form of simile, while there is a further difference that for the latter we compare an object to the thing we wish to describe, whereas for the former this object is actually substituted for the thing. Thus, metaphor is just the decoration of a language.

With the publication of *The Philosophy of Rhetoric*, Richard was regarded as the first one who put forward the interaction theory. Richards (1936) pointed out that all languages were vitally metaphorical and metaphor is not an added power of languages but their constitutive form as the omnipresent principle of languages. Later, Black (1962) further developed Richards' interaction theory to a more rigid theory. But, according to traditional views, metaphor is still described as the extraordinary use of language, instead of a matter of thought.

It is not until the publication of a book *Metaphors We Live by* that metaphor is studied from the cognitive perspective. Lakoff and Johnson (1980) declared that "Metaphor is pervasive in everyday life, not just in language but in thought and action and our ordinary conceptual system, in terms of which we both think and act, is fundamentally metaphorical in nature. The way we think, what we experience, and what we do everyday is much a matter of metaphor".

### 2.4 Research on Metaphor in China

Studies of color metaphor have been conducted mainly discussing different metaphorical meanings of one or two color terms between English and Chinese or basic color terms in Chinese. Chen (2011) compared the metaphorical meanings of two basic color terms between English and Chinese. Huang (2011) compared the metaphorical meanings of a basic color term red in English and Chinese from the perspective of cultural differences. Xing (2009) analyzed basic color metaphors in Chinese from the view of semantics and pragmatics. However, little research compares the metaphorical usage of shared basic color terms between English and Chinese.

### 3. Metaphorical Usage of Shared Basic Color Terms

#### 3.1 Black/黑

##### 3.1.1 Same Metaphorical Meanings of “Black and 黑” in English and Chinese and Corresponding Examples

- Anger: A black mood/黑着脸
- Evilness: Black magic/黑色魔法
- Illegality: Black market/黑市
- Disgrace: Black one’s name/抹黑
- Disapproval: Blacklist/黑名单
- Unconsciousness: Blackout/两眼一黑

“Black” and “黑” both can refer to a very angry mood. The corresponding word of “a black mood” is “黑着脸” in Chinese. “Black” and “黑” also indicate evilness because “black magic” or “黑色魔法” is used for evil purposes by invoking the power of the devil. Besides, “black and 黑” can express the meaning of “illegality”, “black market” or “黑市”, for example. The color term “black” or “黑” in “black one’s name” or “抹黑” indicates the meaning of disgrace. “Black” also has the connotation of disapproval in “blacklist” or “黑名单”. “Blackout” or “两眼一黑” implies someone becomes unconscious for a short time.

##### 3.1.2 Specific Metaphorical Meanings of “Black” in English and Corresponding Examples

- Surplus: In the black
- Depression: Black dog

##### 3.1.3 Specific Metaphorical Meanings of “黑” in Chinese and Corresponding Examples

- Injustice: 背黑锅
- Justice: 黑脸
- Unexpected winner: 黑马
- Unregistered citizen: 黑户

However, the color term “black” has some specific metaphorical meanings in English and Chinese respectively. In English, “in the black” is used to imply a government has spent less than it received in taxes. The phrase “black dog” is most commonly used to describe a state of depression. While in Chinese, the color term “黑” means “injustice”, “justice”, “unexpected winner” and “unregistered”. “背黑锅” is to take the blame for others. “Black facial makeup” or “黑脸” is the symbol of a character who is righteous in Beijing opera. If you describe someone as a “黑马”, you mean that people know very little about her or him while she or he may have recently had success or may be about to have success. If someone is not officially recognized and recorded, then he or she is a “黑户”.

#### 3.2 White/白

##### 3.2.1 Same Metaphorical Meanings of “White and 白” in English and Chinese and Corresponding Examples

- Purity: Whiter than white/清正廉洁
- Pale: White as a sheet/脸色煞白
- Brain work: White-collar worker/白领
- Uselessness: White elephant/白辛苦
- Giving up: Pull a white flag/举白棋
- Peace: Peace dove/和平鸽

The color term “white” has same metaphorical meanings in English and Chinese, including “purity”, “pale”, “brain work”, “uselessness”, “giving up” and “peace” in “whiter than white/清正廉洁”, “white as a sheet/脸色煞白”, “white-collar worker/白领”, “white elephant/白辛苦”, “pull a white flag/举白棋”, “peace dove/和平鸽”.

##### 3.2.2 Specific Metaphorical Meanings of “White” in English and Corresponding Examples

- Well-intended: A white lie
- Sleepless: White night
- Hope: The white hope

- Cowardice: Showing the white feather
- Brightness: The gray past, the white future.
- Electrical equipment: White goods

### 3.2.3 Specific Metaphorical Meanings of “白” in Chinese and Corresponding Examples

- Funeral: 白事
- Understanding: 明白
- Scorn: 白眼
- Rebellion: 白色政权
- Nothing: 空白
- Innocence: 清白
- Ungratefulness: 白眼狼
- Free: 吃白饭
- Plastic pollution: 白色污染
- Poverty: 一穷二白
- Confession: 坦白
- Idiot: 白痴
- Prologue: 开场白
- Evil: 白脸
- Serious situation: 白热化
- Commoner: 白丁
- Pale: 苍白
- Gray hairs: 白发

In English, “white” has some special metaphorical meanings. If you refer to an untrue statement as a white lie, you mean that it is made to avoid hurting someone’s feelings or to avoid trouble, and not for an evil purpose. “A white night” is a sleepless night. “A white hope” means a person who is expected to bring honor or glory to his group, team, etc. “The white feather” is regarded as a symbol or mark of cowardice in Western culture. As the old saying goes, “The gray past, the white future.” in which “white” expresses the meaning of “brightness”. “White goods” are not something white but large pieces of electrical equipment in the house.

In Chinese, however, “白” conveys various kinds of meanings. A ceremony, usually a religious one, for burying or cremating is “白事” in Chinese. If you “明白” something, you know how it works or what it means. “白眼” means treating someone or something with scorn. “白色政权” aims to change their government using violence by some of the people in a country. “Blank space” or “空白” shows empty, with nothing written, printed or recorded on it. The fact of not being guilty of a crime is “清白”. If you do not show or express thanks for something that someone has done for you or given to you, then you are a “白眼狼”. “吃白饭” implies always accepting free food and accommodation from other people without giving them anything in exchange. Plastic pollution refers to “白色污染” in Chinese for the reason that most plastic shows in white. “一穷二白” is the state of being extremely poor. “Confession” or “坦白” is the act of admitting that you have done something that you are ashamed of or embarrassed about. If you call someone a “白痴”, you are showing that you think they are very stupid or have done something very stupid. “A prologue” or “一段开场白” is a speech or section of text that introduces a play or book. “White facial makeup” or “白脸” is the symbol of characters who are evil in Beijing opera. People always use “白热化” to describe the situation is becoming extremely serious or fierce. “Commoner” or “白丁” is used to describe a person who does not come from a royal or noble family. “Pale” and “苍白” refers to the skin that is whiter than usual because of illness, a strong emotion, etc. It deserves much attention that “白发” is not “white hairs” but “gray hairs” in English.

### 3.3 Red/红

#### 3.3.1 Same Metaphorical Meanings of “Red and 红” in English and Chinese and Corresponding Examples

- Embarrassment/shame: Someone’s face turns red./脸红
- Happiness: Red-letter days/喜庆的日子
- Warning of danger: Be on red alert/红色警报
- Warm welcome: Roll out the red carpet/铺红毯
- Eroticism: Red light district/红灯区
- Modification: A red-pencil/红笔
- Love: A red rose/红玫瑰

“Red” has identical metaphorical meanings in English and Chinese, “embarrassment/shame”, “happiness”, “warning of danger”, “warm welcome”, “eroticism”, “modification” and “love”, for example.

#### 3.3.2 Specific Metaphorical Meanings of “Red” in English and Corresponding Examples

- Celebration: Paint the town red
- Deficit: In the red
- Official rules: Red tape
- Rage: See red

#### 3.3.3 Specific Metaphorical Meanings of “红” in Chinese and Corresponding Examples

- Jealousy: 眼红
- Bonus: 分红
- Wedding: 红事
- Good fortune: 红运
- Popularity: 走红
- Communism: 红军
- A beautiful lady: 红颜
- Healthy: 面色红润
- Black tea: 红茶
- World of mortals: 红尘
- Honour roll: 红榜

There are some specific metaphorical meanings of “red” in English. “To paint the town red” is to celebrate. “In the red” indicates that the amount by which something is less than what is required or expected, especially the amount by which the total money received is less than the total money spent. People refer to official rules and procedures as “red tape” when they seem unnecessary and may cause delay. When you “see red”, you become strongly angry. Nevertheless, specific metaphorical meanings of “红” in Chinese are totally different. “眼红” expresses a feeling of being jealous. “分红” is an extra amount of money that is added to a payment, especially to someone’s wages as a reward. Chinese people are accustomed to expressing “a marriage ceremony” by means of “红事” because “红” stands for “good fortune”. “Popularity” or “走红” is the state of being liked, enjoyed or supported by a large number of people. “Red army” in China characterizes communism. The Chinese character “红颜” is a description of a beautiful lady. If someone praises you for your “面色红润”, which shows he/she believes that you are in good health. “红茶” is not “red tea” but “black tea” in English. If someone sees through the vanity of the world, he/she may call human society “红尘”. “Honor roll” or “红榜” shows a roster of names of persons deserving honor especially.

### 3.4 Yellow/黄

#### 3.4.1 Same Metaphorical Meaning of “Yellow and 黄” in English and Chinese and Corresponding Example

- Warning: A yellow card/黄牌

“Warning” is the usual metaphorical meaning of “yellow” or “黄” in English and Chinese.

### 3.4.2 Specific Metaphorical Meanings of “Yellow” in English and Corresponding Examples

- Mean: Yellow dog
- Coward: Yellow bellied
- Newspaper reports: Yellow journalism

### 3.4.3 Specific Metaphorical Meanings of “黄” in Chinese and Corresponding Examples

- Royal: 黄袍
- Golden age: 黄金时代
- Ripeness: 金黄的麦穗
- Sickness: 面黄肌瘦
- Failure: 买卖黄了
- Out of date: 明日黄花
- Pipe dream: 黄粱美梦
- Silly: 黄毛丫头
- Pornographic: 黄色电影

In English, the color term “yellow” can be used to indicate “cowardice”, “a telephone book” and “newspaper reports”. People use “a yellow dog” to describe someone unkind. People who are “yellow bellied” are easily frightened. Yellow journalism is a type of newspaper reports that are exaggerated and written to shock readers. While “黄” has more metaphorical meanings than “yellow”. “The imperial robe” or “黄袍” means the clothes are connected with a king or a queen or their family. “Golden age” or “黄金时代” indicates a period during which something is very successful, especially in the past. “金黄” in “金黄的麦穗” is a typical feature of “ripeness”. Negative meanings also exist in the color term “黄”. If you are “面黄肌瘦”, you might be in a bad health. “买卖黄了” indicates the deal is off. “明日黄花” means “something is out of date”. If your plan is impossible to achieve or not practical, then it is a “黄粱美梦”. “黄毛丫头” is a girl who is stupid, especially in a way that is more typical of a child than an adult. “黄色电影” or “blue films” are concerned with something pornographic.

## 3.5 Green/绿

### 3.5.1 Same Metaphorical Meanings of “Green and 绿” in English and Chinese and Corresponding Examples

- Environment protection: Green policy/环保政策
- Youth: Green years/青葱岁月
- Allowance: Green card/绿卡
- Permission: Green light/绿灯

“Green” has sever same metaphorical meanings in English and Chinese, such as, “youth”, “allowance” and “permission”.

### 3.5.2 Specific Metaphorical Meanings of “Green” in English and Corresponding Examples

- Lacking experience: A green hand
- Jealousy: Be green with envy
- Hope: In a green old age
- Money: Green back

### 3.5.3 Specific Metaphorical Meanings of “绿” in Chinese and Corresponding Examples

- A cuckold: 被戴绿帽子的人
- Permission: 绿色通道

In English, if we say, “He is a green hand”, we mean “He is not experienced”. The phrase “be green with envy” expresses the meaning of jealousy. If a man is “in a green old age”, then he is old but vigorous. A green back is a United States banknote such as a dollar bill. But, Chinese people are used to expressing the meaning of “permission” in “绿色通道” and “a man whose wife has sex with another man” or “被戴绿帽子的人”.

### 3.6 Blue/蓝

#### 3.6.1 Same Metaphorical Meanings of “Blue and 蓝” in English and Chinese and Corresponding Examples

- Manual work: Blue-collar worker/蓝领
- A plan: A blueprint/蓝图
- Without warning: Out of the blue/晴天霹雳

The color terms “blue” and “蓝色” are related to “manual work”, “plans” and “without warning”.

#### 3.6.2 Specific Metaphorical Meanings of “Blue” in English and Corresponding Examples

- The reception room in the White House: Blue Room
- Sad: Feeling blue
- Nobleness: Blue blood

#### 3.6.3 Specific Metaphorical Meaning of “蓝” in Chinese and Corresponding Example

- A wonderful dream: 蓝色的梦

“Blue” bears on the meaning of “the reception room in the White House”, “sadness”, “nobleness”, whereas “蓝色的梦” in Chinese especially means “a wonderful dream”.

## 4. Conclusion

Examples above demonstrate the similarities and dissimilarities of cross-culture color metaphors. The similarities of color metaphors in English and Chinese demonstrate the cognitive meanings of metaphors from the perspective of color terms while the dissimilarities of that provide vital evidence for the influence of cultural variation on metaphors and contribute to overcoming barriers in language teaching and learning, cross-culture communication as well as translation practice (Yang 2018).

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