

**The Semantic Field of Colour Terms in English & Arabic:
A Contrastive Linguistics**
الحقول الدلالية لمفردات الالوان في اللغة الإنجليزية و العربية: دراسة مقارنة.

Rawan Muayad Kareem

روان مؤيد كريم

Supervised by: Inst. Ali Kareem Latif

المدرس: علي كريم لطيف

University of Imam Ja'afir Al-Sadiq (PBUH)/ Branch of Salah al-Din/
College of Arts / Department of English

جامعة الإمام جعفر الصادق (ع) / فرع صلاح الدين / كلية الآداب / قسم اللغة الانجليزية

rawanmuayad32@gmail.com



Abstract

It is a hard nut to crack to conduct a pure contrastive study for two languages culturally, semantically and syntactically different. English and Arabic languages are a good example of such a great difference because both languages are from different families. The aim of the current paper is to investigate the differences and similarities of the semantic fields of colour terms in English and Arabic. The data of the study are taken from three Glories Quran verses involving colors terms. It is worthwhile to note that colors take a great importance of people's lives. Colors are everywhere around. So, it is important to give a great deal of attention to deal with this linguistic phenomenon and how it is expressed in human languages. All languages; however, have terms for colors. The terms of colors in Arabic and English languages in general and its use in the Glorious Qur'an in particular are what this paper deals with. It is hypothesized that the semantic fields of colour terms in the Glorious Qur'an have different meanings and structures compared with their English translations.

Keywords: (Semantic fields, color terms in English, color terms in Arabic, comparison).

من الصعب إجراء دراسة مقارنة بحتة للغتين مختلفتين ثقافيا و دلاليا و تركيبيا . و افضل مثال على ذلك الاختلاف الكبير بين اللغات اللغتين الانجليزية و العربية لان هذه اللغات انبثقت من جذور مختلفة. تهدف هذه الورقة البحثية إلى التحري في معرفة اوجه التشابه و الاختلاف بين الحقول الدلالية لمصطلحات الألوان العربية و الإنجليزية. تم اخذ بيانات الدراسة من ثلاث آيات كريمة تحمل في طياتها مفردات الالوان و مقارنتها مع الترجمة الانجليزية. تأخذ الالوان حيزا كبيرا في حياة الناس فالألوان تحيط بالإنسان في كل جوانب الحياة ولهذا فإنه من المهم اعطاء مساحة كبيرة لدراسة ظاهرة الالوان اللغوية و كيفية التعبير عنها في اللغة. كل اللغات في العالم لا بد ان تتضمن عدد من المفردات الخاصة باللون و موضوع بحثنا الحالي يتحدث عن مفردات الالوان في اللغة بشكل عام و استعمالها في القرآن الكريم بشكل خاص. افترض الباحث بأن الحقول الدلالية لمفردات الالوان في القرآن الكريم مختلفة دلاليا و تركيبيا مقارنة بالترجمة الانجليزية.

الكلمات الرئيسية: (الحقول الدلالية و مفردات الالوان في اللغة الانجليزية و مفردات الالوان في اللغة العربية و المقارنة).



1. Introduction

The exploration of meaning remains a highly debated, unclear, and intricate topic within linguistics. Scholars specializing in semantics propose two main methods for studying meaning: the analytical (referential) and operational approaches. According to Al-Yahya (2010, p. 23), the analytical method defines meaning by examining the component features of words, while the operational method looks at words in their usage. Trier (1931), who advocates for the analytical approach, notes that words cannot be isolated and are interconnected through relationships like 'sense relations.' Meyer (2005, p. 154) argues that the semantic field in one language rarely matches the meanings of words in the same field in another language, even when cultural backgrounds are similar.

Yemisi (2006, p. 757) notes that a word's meaning often relies on its association with other words. Consequently, a word or lexeme lacks meaning in isolation and gains significance only in relation to other words or lexemes within a sentence. The shared meaning of a word, derived from these relationships, is its "sense." Recently, there has been a heightened interest in comparing languages. Numerous studies indicate that each language possesses its own distinct system and structure. For example, Habash (2010, p. 113) compares the Arabic and English languages and finds that Arabic contains many homographs, leading to more ambiguous interpretations than English. Additionally, he discovered unique meaning distinctions in Arabic. For instance, the Arabic word "قلم" is used for both 'pen' and 'pencil,' while the word "صلاة" is specifically used for 'prayer' in the context of worship (pray to) and not in the sense of requesting (pray for).

2. Semantic fields

Crystal (1992, p. 346) defines a semantic field as the perspective that a language's vocabulary comprises a network of interrelated lexical terms, rather than a collection of independent items. He also refers to this concept as lexical field theory, citing examples such as the semantic fields of vehicles, colors, and body parts. He stresses the importance of context, stating that it's crucial to consider it when



assigning a lexical item to a field. For example, "hospital" can relate to the semantic field of health (as in "I was in hospital last week") or to buildings (as in "The hospital needs a new roof") (ibid, p. 347). Additionally, Crystal (1987, p. 140) notes that the linguistic approach to semantic fields was first proposed by German scholars in the 1930s. One of the earlier studies (J. Trier, 1934) demonstrated how the structure of a semantic field can evolve over time. For instance, in Middle High German, terms for knowledge changed significantly between 1200 and 1300. In 1200, there was no distinct lexeme for cleverness. The language included "kunst" (courtly skills) and "list" (non-courtly skills), as well as "Wisheit" for all forms of knowledge, whether courtly or not, both mundane and divine.

Murphy (2010, p. 6) confirms that lexical semanticists study semantic relations such as paradigmatic relations for two reasons: first, semantic relations play crucial roles in logical relations between sentence meanings, such as entailment; and second, they may reveal how the mental lexicon is structured. To create a coherent speech, lexical semantic relations like synonymy, hyponymy, and antonyms are helpful; using comparable words increases speakers' capacity to describe the same thing and provide a variety of information, present things in multiple ways, and avoid discourse repetition (ibid).

3. Lexical semantic relations

Murphy (2010, p. 6) asserts that lexical semanticists study semantic relations, such as paradigmatic relations, for two key reasons: firstly, these relations are crucial in forming logical connections between sentence meanings, like entailment; and secondly, they may illuminate the structure of the mental lexicon. Lexical semantic relations like synonymy, hyponymy, and antonyms are valuable for creating coherent speech. Utilizing similar words enhances speakers' ability to describe the same concept in different ways, provide a range of information, and avoid repetition in discourse (ibid).

3.1 Synonyms

Synonymy is considered an inter-lexical sense relationship in semantics. Palmer (1981, p. 88) defines synonymy as "sameness of meaning." He notes that English has many synonyms due to borrowing phrases and idioms from various languages, including Anglo-Saxon,



French, Latin, and Greek (ibid). Meyer (2005, p. 155) illustrates that "there are probably no two words in any language that are identical in meaning in all contexts." Yemisi (2006, p. 760) identifies another type of synonym called descriptive synonyms, which "are used connotatively to express the speaker's feelings towards what he or she describes." For instance:

Suha is thrifty and Layla is economical.

Ali is a bachelor and Amer is an unmarried man.

This orange is rotten and that orange is sour.

3.2 Antonyms

Murphy and Koskela (2010, p. 16) define antonyms as "the paradigmatic lexical relation between two lexemes that are opposite in meaning, such as big/little, female/male, and down/up." Yang and Huaxin (2001, p. 51) illustrate the nuances in antonym relationships. They highlight that, unlike the polarity between hot and cold, antonyms like man and woman represent a relationship where the denial of one implies the assertion of the other, with no third option. Buren (1975, p. 131) introduced the idea that antonyms are complex lexical semantic relations involving multiple meaning-related relationships. He distinguishes between "contradictories," such as male and female, which always consist of two members, and "contraries," like cold and hot, where a set can have more than two members.

3.3 Hyponymy

Finegan (2007, p. 181) defines a hyponym as a subordinate, specific term whose referent is included within the referent of a superordinate term. For instance, blue, white, green, red, and black are hyponyms of the superordinate term color.

4. Lexical relations in Arabic

As far as lexical relations is concerned, there are four types of lexical relations in Arabic language which are given below:

4.1 Synonymy

Synonymy in Arabic is an ancient linguistic phenomenon that attracted the interest of linguists as early as the second century A.H. It is described by many linguists, including Leabi, as having "multiple words that share one meaning." Prominent Arabic linguists like Al-



Asmaee and Sibawayeh supported the concept of synonymy for various non-linguistic purposes, despite it not being a major topic of discussion at the time. They noted that:

Some synonyms are created to enhance meter or rhyme in poetry and prose.

Some words are obscure to certain individuals due to their lack of popularity in the culture; hence, simpler or more refined words are used to convey the same meaning.

The phenomenon of synonymy allows speakers to choose from a variety of words, using the one they remember.

In cases where speakers cannot use specific phrases due to certain reasons, such as stammering, an alternative word with the same meaning can be used to resolve the situation (Al-Mubarak, 1986, p. 100).

Let us consider the following Arabic synonyms:

السيف او الحسام و اللسان او اللغة

4.2 Antonyms

AlKhamash (1991) explains that Arabic antonyms are lexical items with opposite meanings, and their intended meaning is revealed only through context. He identifies several reasons for the creation and frequent occurrence of antonyms in Arabic, many of which are linked to the phonological and morphological characteristics of the language. For example, some antonyms are homonyms with opposite meanings derived from the same root, interactions between active and passive participles, or verb conjugation. For example:

(هنا وهناك/ الأفراح والأتراح/ الخير والشر/ أين هذا من ذاك؟/ فلا تخافوهم وخافون)

4.3 Polysemy

Arab linguists refer to polysemy as "الاشتراك اللفظي". According to Al-Jürjani (1954, p. 365), polysemous terms are generally unrelated, and no clear relationship can be established between them. As-Suyüti (1971, p. 384) argues that polysemy enhances the language, making it more capable of describing the surrounding physical reality. However, he denies that "الاشتراك" is based on the idea that a single word can have



multiple meanings. The following examples from the Holy Quran illustrate the phenomenon of polysemy in Arabic: النجم has two different meanings in Glories Quran

a. star

b. herb

The two meanings of النجم are clearly viewed in the following two glorious verses :

في قوله تعالى: ﴿وَعَلَامَاتٍ وَبِالنَّجْمِ هُمْ يَهْتَدُونَ﴾ / النحل: ١٦.

("And marks and sign-posts; and by the stars guide themselves") (Al-Nahl: 16) (Yousif, A., 1989)

b. herb

في قوله تعالى: ﴿وَالنَّجْمُ وَالشَّجَرُ يَسْجُدَانِ﴾ / الرحمن: ٦.

(And the herbs and the trees both bow in adoration) (Al-Rahmān: 6) (Yousif, A., 1989)

4.4 Meronymy

Meronymy is defined as a structural relationship that holds between meanings, while part-whole relationships are physical entity connections (Croft & Cruse, 2004, p. 151). In Arabic, meronymy operates on two linguistic levels: syntactic and semantic. At the syntactic level, meronymy is utilized through the grammatical phenomenon of apposition. In Arabic, apposition falls under the category of "followers," which are grammatical connections where one form follows another in the same syntactic case. Arab grammarians describe apposition as the intended follower that does not require a conjunction to relate to the preceding units (Ibnul-Hajib, 1982, p. 449). The part-whole relation is used to establish the second kind, in which the second unit refers to a portion or portions of the first unit's reference. For example:

أكلت الرغيف نصفه.

The second unit (نصفه) indicates to a part of the more general referent in the first unit, while the word (الرغيف) is used to refer that the



speaker

ate half, not all, of the bread.(ibid)

While the meronymy on the semantic level, the meaning is different, for example:

قوله تعالى: ﴿يَا أَيُّهَا النَّبِيُّ إِذَا طَلَّقْتُمُ النِّسَاءَ فَطَلِّقُوهُنَّ لِعَدَّتِهِنَّ﴾ / سورة الطلاق: ١.

In this instance, Allah refers to Prophet Muhammad using the word "prophet," yet the plural form of (طَلَّقْتُمُ) signifies that the address is to the entire Islamic nation, as the Prophet is part of the whole and its leader. It's important to note that the part-whole relationship includes the specific-generic relationship, where the particular is a component of the generic (ibid).

5. Color Terms

Wilson and Keil (1999) observe that each language possesses its own set of color terms. However, these color designations do not uniformly divide the meanings of color. In other words, each language uniquely reflects the cognitive linguistic concept of "color."

5.1 Color Terms in English

Berlin and Kay (1969, p. 1) aimed to contribute to linguistic semantics by examining English basic color terms, exploring how to characterize the semantics of linguistic categories. Colors significantly influence our perception of the world, and it's fascinating from a linguistic standpoint that the meanings of primary colors and their shades can be similar or very different in people's minds. In their book "Basic," anthropologist B. Berlin and linguist P. Kay explored the universality of colors. They compared other language groups to English and found that not all languages include the same eleven color names: white, black, red, yellow, green, blue, brown, purple, pink, orange, and gray. For example, in the Bernimo tribe (New Guinea), blue and green are used interchangeably, while in Vietnamese, there are no clear distinctions between red, yellow, and orange. The researchers attribute this difference to a developmental lag compared to Western languages. Generally, people accept "the principle of basic colors" as universal, despite variations in color terminology across languages. Historically, the Azerbaijani language's vocabulary system developed color terms closely tied to social, linguistic, extra-linguistic, and historical-



geographical contexts, allowing them to represent numerous concepts in our minds. Color symbolism is a unique linguistic tool that provides a more realistic "image of the world" (ibid).

5.2 Color Terms in Arabic

Amana (2011, p. 207) explains that in Arabic culture, there are six primary colors: black, white, red, green, and yellow. However, Arabs recognize eleven basic color terms (black, white, green, blue, red, yellow, grey, brown, pink, orange, and purple), similar to speakers of other languages. Each color term carries three meanings: the basic meaning, which is the original; the extended meaning, derived from human experiences; and the additional meaning, which is further abstracted from the extended meaning (ibid).

5.2.1 Basic Meaning of Color أبيض

According to Houghton (2007), the primary meaning of the color white is associated with nature, linking it to elements like clouds, cotton, crystal, water, and air. In Arabic culture, this term also refers to unmarried women, as in "as white as a virgin." Conversely, Arabs associate the color red with the concept of stains or blood. From a religious perspective, white symbolizes purity, morality, or innocence. Therefore, Arabs typically wear white garments during pilgrimage or prayers as a sign of respect for their God and religion.

The color white is also linked to positive meanings, such as a white dove symbolizing a messenger bringing good news. In Arabic culture, seeing a white dove signifies receiving good news and a happy future. However, white also has negative connotations with burial shrouds, the pallor of death, and ghostly apparitions. This connection extends to the 'sign of death,' where the deceased are buried in white coffins. Additionally, the meanings of white extend to various idioms (Amana, 2011, p. 208):

White hand: Generous, charitable, and humane.

White heart: Sincere and kind.

White eye: Blind, indicating the person being addressed is blind.

White face: A youthful and innocent individual.

White lies: Untruths told to spare feelings or out of politeness.

White hair: Signifies old age, wisdom, or common sense.



White day: Denotes a good, fine, and worthy day in Arabic culture.

White days: In Arabic culture or the Islamic calendar, white days (13th, 14th, and 15th) are related to the waxing of the moon.

5.2.2 Basic meaning of color الأسود

According to Houghton (2007) and Salah (2006), the color black in Arabic culture often signifies negativity or death, likely due to the absence of light and the clarity of darkness, as illustrated by the phrase "dark night." Black carries additional semantic functions associated with negative connotations in Arabic culture:

1. ****Death****: Black is linked to funerals, with women wearing black dresses to express mourning for the deceased.
2. ****Black hell****: In the Quran, hell is often described as "dark and black, with punishment and pain."
3. ****Past Decades****: Black on the Arabic flag symbolizes the war experiences of the past decade, representing "death for our people and nation."
4. ****Black crowd****: Typically associated with ill omens, warnings, or signs of impending danger.
5. ****Black heart****: This expression denotes cruelty or unkindness.
6. ****Poor fortune****: This term refers to bad luck or misfortune, common in Arabic superstitions.

However, black can also have positive connotations in Arabic culture:

1. ****Black gasoline****: Synonymous with richness, power, and wealth.
2. ****Black eyes****: A metaphor for the beautiful, dark, large eyes of Arab women, symbolizing sophistication, elegance, and style. Both men and women may wear black abayas to show respect for their culture (ibid).

5.2.4 Basic meaning of color الأخضر

Anthropological extensions show that the color green in Arabic culture carries positive and favorable connotations, symbolizing honesty and goodness. Additionally, green has several positive semantic functions in Arabic culture, as illustrated by the following meanings:



- i. Green hand = generous, kind, money.
- ii. Green land is synonymous with growth, nature, grass, and palm trees.
- iii. Green flag = the Arab flag, whose green color represents their Islamist ideology.
- Green age equals youth, vitality, and maturity.
- v. Green light = favorable indicator. (Amana, 2011, p 209)

5.2.5 Basic meaning of color الأحمر

According to Houghton (2007), the primary symbols of red are blood and red roses. In Arabic culture, the extended meanings of red clearly signify positivity, as previously mentioned.

c. Abstract significance

- i. Arab flag emblem = revolutionary army, valiant army.
- ii. Red cheeks indicate shyness.
- iii. Red eye = fury (ibid)

5.2.6 Basic meaning of color الأزرق

James (2004) notes that the primary symbolism of blue is nature. Similar to green, blue holds symbolic significance in various world religions because it is the color of the sky and ocean and is associated with divinity (ibid).

5.2.7 Basic meaning of color الأصفر

The primary symbolism of this colour is the colour of nature, as in the sun, autumn and the hue of the Arab region (desert) (Ibrahim, 2008, p 223).

6. Methodology

6.1 Data collection

Data of the current study is taken from the Glorious Qur'an verses compared with three English translation of the Glorious Qur'an involving Abdullah Yousef Ali (1989), Muhammad Taqi-ud-Din Al-Hilali, Muhammad Muhsin Khan (1996) and Muhammad Mahmud Ghali (2008).

6.2 Data analysis

The analysis of the current study is to investigate the structural and semantic aspects of colour terms in the Glorious Qur'an and compared



them with three English translations of the meaning of the Glorious Qur'an.

SL No.(1)

﴿قَالُوا ادْعُ لَنَا رَبَّكَ يُبَيِّنْ لَنَا مَا لَوْنُهَا قَالَ إِنَّهُ يَقُولُ إِنَّهَا بَقَرَةٌ صَفْرَاءُ فَاقِعٌ لَوْنُهَا تَسُرُّ
النَّاطِرِينَ﴾ / البقرة / ٦٩.

TL Texts

1. "They said, 'call upon your Lord for us to make plain to us its colour'. He said, 'He says, 'It is a yellow cow, bright in its colour, pleasing the beholders'"

(Al-Hilali and Khan, 1996, p 25).

2. "They said: Beseech on our behalf thy Lord to make plain to us her colour'. he said: 'He says: a fawn- coloured heifer, pure and rich in tone, the admiration of beholders!" (Ali, 1987, p 35).

3. "They said, 'Invoke your Lord for us that He make evident to us what color she is". He said, "surely He says that surely she is a yellow cow, bright (is) her color, pleasing to the onlookers" (Ghali, 2008, p 10).

Discussion

In the mentioned Qur'anic verse, the word *لونها* appears twice as a noun. Initially, it presents a color-related query. The second instance describes the vividness of the color. In the first occurrence, all three English translations treat it as a noun. However, in the second instance, translations (1) and (3) use it as a noun, while translation (2) uses the adjective "coloured." The Arabic word *لونها* is feminine and singular. The English translations do not indicate gender, but they do reflect its singular form. All the English translations of *لونها* use singular nouns, except for the second instance in translation (2), which uses an adjective. Semantically, the words *لونها* and *صفراء* are linked by hyponymy, with *صفراء* being a hyponym of *لون*. All translations employ the semantic type of translation. The functions of the word *لونها* are visual and aesthetic.

SL Text No. (2)



﴿وَأَمَّا الَّذِينَ أَبْيَضَتْ وُجُوهُهُمْ فَفِي رَحْمَةِ اللَّهِ هُمْ فِيهَا خَالِدُونَ﴾ / آل عمران: ١٠٧.

TL texts

1.“ And for those whose faces will become white, they will be in Allah’s Mercy (Paradise), therein they shall dwell forever” (Al-Hilali and Khan, 1996:98).

2.“ But those whose faces will be (lit with) white, they will be in (the light of) Allah’s mercy: therein to dwell (forever)” (Ali,1987:150).

3.“ And for the ones whose faces are whitened, they will be in the mercy of Allah, they are therein eternally (abiding)” (Ghali, 2008, p 63).

Discussion

The word "أَبْيَضَتْ" (whitened) is a perfective verb in the plural form, with the (ت) indicating femininity according to gender. In English translations, versions (1) and (2) use the adjective "white," while version (3) uses the perfect verb "whitened." There is a collocational relationship between "أبيض" and "وجه." In this Qur'anic verse, the term's functions are visual and aesthetic.

SL Text No. (3)

﴿أَلَمْ تَرَ أَنَّ اللَّهَ أَنْزَلَ مِنَ السَّمَاءِ مَاءً فَأَخْرَجْنَا بِهِ ثَمَرَاتٍ مُخْتَلِفًا أَلْوَانُهَا وَمِنَ الْجِبَالِ جُدَدٌ بَيَضٌ وَحُمْرٌ مُخْتَلِفٌ أَلْوَانُهَا وَغَرَابِيبُ سُودٌ﴾ / فاطر: ٢٧.

TL Texts

1.“ See you not that Allah Sends down water (rain) from the sky, and we produce there with fruits of various colors, and among the mountains are streaks white and red, of varying colors and (others) very black” (Al-Hilali and Khan, 1996, p 570).

2.“ Seest thou not that Allah sends down rain from the sky? With it We then bring out produce of various colors. And in the mountains are tracts white and red, of various shades of colour, and black intense in hue” (Ali, 1987, pp 1160-61).

3.“ Have you not seen that Allah sends down from the heaven water. So we bring out there with products of different colors? And among the



mountains are streaks white and red, of different colors, and black crags” (Ghali, 200, pp 437).

Discussion

The word "مختلف" paired with "ألوان" refers to variations not only in physical color but also in types, shapes, and tastes in its first mention. However, all translations only reflect the physical color differences for "ألوان." Syntactically, "ألوان" is the plural of "لون" (color), and "ألوانها" is feminine. In English translations, "ألوان" is translated as "colors," always using a plural noun. In the second mention, "ألوان" refers exclusively to the variety of physical color. All translations have used the same meaning. There is a hyponymic lexical relationship between "ألوان" and "سود", "بيض", "حمر" with "ألوان" as the superordinate term. All three translations employ a semantic approach. The function of "ألوان" is visual and aesthetic.

SL Text No. (4)

﴿وَمِنَ النَّاسِ وَالْدَّوَابِّ وَالْأَنْعَامِ مُخْتَلِفٌ أَلْوَانُهُ كَذَلِكَ ۚ إِنَّمَا يَخْشَى اللَّهَ مِنْ عِبَادِهِ الْعُلَمَاءُ إِنَّ اللَّهَ عَزِيزٌ غَفُورٌ﴾ / فاطر: ٢٨.

TL Texts

1. “And likewise, men and Ad-Dawabb [moving (living) creatures, beasts] and cattle are of various colors. It is only those who have knowledge among His slaves that fear Allah. Verily, God is All-Mighty, Oft-forgiving” (Al-Hilali and Khan, 1996:570).

2. “And so amongst men and crawling creatures and cattle, are they of various colors. Those truly fear God, among His servants, who have knowledge: for Allah is Exalted in might, oft- Forgiving” (Ali, 1987:1161).

3. “And of mankind and beasts and cattle in like (manner) (are) different colors. Surely only the ones of His bondmen who are apprehensive of Allah are the knowledgeable. Surely Allah is Ever-Mighty, Ever-Forgiving” (Ghali, 2008:437).



Discussion

The plural noun "ألوانه" is preceded by the modifier "مختلف," which means "different," indicating a difference in color. Differences in variety can also be considered. In the three translations mentioned, only the variety of physical color is noted. All three translations are literal and of the semantic type. The suffix (ه) is added to "ألوان" to denote masculinity, whereas the English form is neuter. The word "ألوان" serves two functions: visual and aesthetic.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the color terms used in the Glorious Qur'an exhibit various structures and occupy different classes in Arabic syntax. There are semantic variations in many verses of the Qur'an regarding color terms. Cultural differences influence the use of color in language. Several syntactic differences exist between the Arabic color terms in the Qur'an and their English translations in this study, while no semantic differences are detected between Arabic and English. Lastly, the use of color terms in the Qur'an serves different functions, including visual, aesthetic, symbolic, and expressive purposes.

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