

THE MOTIVATION OF FRENCH COLOUR IDIOMS

ISABEL NEGRO ALOUSQUE
Universidad Complutense
inegro@ccee.ucm.es / isana@ono.com

ABSTRACT

The use of figurative language is not limited to poetry but rather pervades everyday speech. Figurative language has been a central research subject in the last years which has been approached from different perspectives: psychological, cognitive and linguistic. The present contribution paper focuses on a central set of figurative expressions, colour idioms, in the French language. The study concerns the different types of motivation (metaphoric or cultural) underlying French colour idioms.

KEY WORDS: idiom, figurative meaning, motivation, metaphor, cultural symbol.

1. INTRODUCTION

Figurative language has been vastly researched in the last years (GIBBS, 1989; MOON, 1998; DOBROVOL'SKIJ & PIIRAINEN, 2005; BOERS and STENGERS, 2008). As Gibbs (1999:88) points out, «the scholarly study of figurative thought and language has exploded in recent years. It seems impossible to study how people think, act, speak and interact without having to address some aspect of figurative thought and language.»

Among the various categories of figurative expressions, idioms have attracted much attention. This article addresses the issue of the motivation behind idioms through the analysis of a group of colour expressions in the French language. The choice of this particular domain is justified on the following grounds: (i) colour is a basic domain; (ii) this particular domain gives rise to a relevant idiomatic set in terms of size.

We selected idioms as they are the largest category of figurative expressions containing colour terms. Besides, unlike other thematic groups (body idioms, animal idioms), colour idioms have not received much attention (BENNETT, 1988; SWEETSER, 1990; WIERZBICKA, 1990; LUQUE, 2001; TRIM, 2007). A few studies (WIERZBICKA, 1990; LUQUE, 2001; TRIM, 2007) have focused on the semantic extension of colour words. Others (DERRIG, 1978) have investigated the cross-linguistic similarities in the semantic expansions of basic colour terms in a number of languages.

The 57 idioms under scrutiny, which have been drawn from two dictionaries, *Le Nouveau Petit Robert de la Langue Française* (2010) and *Dictionnaire Culturel de la Langue Française* (2005), are the following :

NOIR 'black' : *or noir, blouson noir, chemise noire, liste noire, magie noire, bête noire, humour noire, tomber dans le pot au noir, film noir, roman noir, marché noir, travail/travailler au noir, avoir des idées noires, voir tout en noir, regarder d'un oeil noir, mettre noir sur blanc, broyer du noir, n'y voir que du noir.*

BLANC 'white' : *la blanche, produits blancs, un petit blanc, col blanc, les blouses blanches, éléphant blanc, merle blanc, être blanc de peur, avoir une peur blanche, être blanc de colère.*

BLEU 'blue' : *un bleu, le grand bleu, or bleu, les bleus, col bleu, la planète bleue, avoir une peur bleue, prendre quelqu'un pour un bleu.*

ROUGE 'red' : *talon rouge, voir rouge, être/devenir rouge de colère, se fâcher tout rouge, agiter le chiffon rouge, être dans le rouge.*

VERT 'green' : *classe verte, tourisme vert, produit vert, années vertes, langue verte, vieillard vert, aller au vert, être vert de colère/rage, donner le feu vert, avoir la main verte/les doigts verts.*

JAUNE 'yellow' : *rire jaune, un jaune, péril jaune.*

GRIS 'grey' : *matière grise, l'or gris.*

2. THE MOTIVATION OF COLOUR IDIOMS IN FRENCH

The idioms in our sample show two types of motivation: metaphoric/metonymic and cultural.

2.1. Metaphorically- and metonymically-based idioms

Cognitive semantics (LAKOFF and JOHNSON, 1980; GIBBS, 1989) have provided the theoretical framework for the study of metaphorically-based idioms. In a cognitive view, conceptual metaphor or conceptual metonymy from a wide range of source domains underlie many figurative expressions. In this line, cognitive semanticists (LAKOFF and JOHNSON, 1980; LANGLOTZ, 2006) have pinpointed the metaphorical roots of numerous idioms. As Langlotz (2006: 53) remarks, «conceptual metaphor is an important basis for the semantic structuring of idioms».

Colour words are frequently used to mean something other than a perceptual quality. In this light, Mollard-Desfour (1998: 23) goes so far as to claim that the denotative and figurative senses of colour terms are closely related.

Colour perception is not confined to the perception of a sensory property but extends to the perception of an emotion linked to the colour. Trim (2007: 124) claims that the sensory properties of colours produce «emotion resonances», which explains the figurative meanings of colour terms. Thus, colour idioms are often used to denote an emotion (IÑESTA and PAMIES, 2002).

Sweetser (1990) has explained the figurative meaning of colour idioms in terms of metaphorical extension. Some metaphors and metonymies behind colour expressions are grounded on experience. The most basic type of metaphor is that hinging upon the understanding of colour as a perceptual quality. This view gives rise to metaphors underpinning identifying idioms (DOBROVOL'SKIĬ, 1992: 291) such as *la blanche* (hero-in), *un bleu* (overalls / a bruise), *le grand bleu* (the ocean), *produits blancs* (household appliances), *or noir* (oil) and *or bleu* (drinkable water). In these expressions the colour of the referents accounts for the figurative meaning.

The meaning of other colour idioms can be described on the basis of the underlying conceptual metaphor or metonymy. Iñesta and Pamies (2002) formulate two conceptual metaphors: FEAR IS A CHANGE OF COLOUR and ANGER IS A CHANGE OF COLOUR. As a result, blue and white express fear, and the colours white, black, red and green denote anger, as evidenced in the idioms below:

- Fear: *avoir une peur bleue*, *être blanc de peur*, *avoir une peur blanche*.
- Anger: *être blanc de colère*, *regarder quelqu'un d'un oeil noir*, *voir rouge*, *être/devenir rouge de colère*, *se fâcher tout rouge*, *être vert de colère/rage*.

Finally, a number of colour idioms instantiate a conceptual metonymy. The expressions containing 'blue', 'white' and 'red' earlier mentioned can be considered to be based on a metonymy. Recent research (KÖVECSES, 2000) has shown that the physiological reactions accompanying emotions are metonymically related to these emotions. A few French colour idioms for emotions have a metonymical basis, the physical manifestation of the emotion standing for the emotion itself. Thus, when somebody is frightened, their veins either constrict and then turn white, or they dilate, causing the person to turn blue. This explains the association between the blue and white colours and fear.

The same kind of metonymic motivation lies at the heart of the idioms for anger *se fâcher tout rouge* and *voir rouge*. When somebody is angry, their veins dilate and the person turns red. This has an effect on sight.

A few idioms instantiate other types of conceptual metonymy, the most recurrent ones being the PART-FOR-THE-WHOLE and the EFFECT-FOR-THE-CAUSE types. Let us illustrate these metonymies with some idioms:

(i) *PART-FOR-THE-WHOLE metonymies:*

la planète bleue 'the earth' (blue is the colour of oxygen, a component of the earth)

les blouses blanches (hospital doctors wearing a white coat)

les bleus (the French football/rugby team)

blouson noir 'black bomber jacket' (young criminal wearing this article of clothing)

chemise noire (Nazi)

talon rouge ‘red high-heel’ (the red high-heeled shoes standing for the nobles who used to wear them in the seventeenth century)

(ii) EFFECT-FOR-THE-CAUSE metonymies:

péril jaune ‘yellow peril’

(iii) CONTAINED-FOR-CONTENT metonymies:

matière grise ‘intelligence’ (*matière* standing for the brain)

un *petit blanc* ‘a glass of white wine’

We have also found both a metaphoric and a metonymic motivation behind the following idioms: *col blanc*, *col bleu*, *prendre quelqu’un pour un bleu* ‘take somebody for a novice’, *l’or gris*. For example, the meaning of *l’or gris* ‘old people who make a contribution to society’ arises from a metaphor (*or* ‘gold’ representing a source of wealth) and a metonymy (*gris* is the hair colour of old people).

2.1. Culturally-based idioms

Culturally-based idioms draw on cultural knowledge. Dobrovol’skij and Piirainen (2005: 214) suggest five types of cultural knowledge which provide a motivation for idioms: social interaction; material culture; intertextual phenomena; fictive conceptual domains (e.g. ancient folk theories) and cultural symbols.

There is evidence of the cultural foundations of some French colour idioms. There are some expressions where the colours black, green and yellow occur in a symbolic function. The issue of colour symbolization has been explored by Portal (1989), Ferrer (1999), and Pastoureau & Simonnet (2005), among others. Pastoureau and Simonnet, for example, have studied the symbolic value of colours, as shown in table 1:

COLOUR	SYMBOLIC VALUE
blue	sobriety, conservatism, sadness
red	violence, passion, eroticism
white	pureness, virginity, truth
green	immaturity, freedom, changeability, ecology
black	austerity, elegance
yellow	deception, treachery
pink	gentleness
grey	intelligence

Table 1. Symbolic values of the basic colours (Pastoureau & Simonnet, 2005).

Black is a culturally-relevant symbol for bad, wrong or unhappy in the following idioms:

Meaning ‘bad, evil’: *liste noire*, *magie noire*, *bête noire* ‘somebody’s pet hate’, *humour noire*, *tomber dans le pot au noir*; *film noir*; *roman noir*.

Meaning 'wrong': *marché noir*, *travail/travailler au noir*.

Meaning 'unhappy': *avoir des idées noires*, *voir tout en noir*.

The symbolic link of green with the environment has become conventionalized in a number of idioms: *aller au vert* 'take a rest in the country', *classe verte* 'school camp', *tourisme vert* 'country holidays', *produit vert* 'green product'.

The symbolic reading of green 'inexperienced' is relevant to the semantic interpretation of the idioms *années vertes* (youth), *langue verte* (argot), *vieillard vert*.

Yellow appears to be a symbol for treachery in the idioms *rire jaune* 'force oneself to laugh' and *un jaune* 'strikebreaker'.

Other idioms are motivated by knowledge of material culture. It is the case of *mettre noir sur blanc* ('put in writing') and *être dans le rouge* ('be in the red') The colour adjectives *noir* 'black' and *blanc* 'white' are seen in their literal meaning on the basis of knowledge about print products. The figurative meaning of *être dans le rouge* draws on knowledge about the habit of recording losses in bank accounts in red.

A last example of culturally-motivated colour idioms is provided by *donner le feu vert*, which refers to a social convention, green traffic lights meaning permission for vehicles to go ahead.

On the contrary, the idioms *agiter le chiffon rouge* (raise a controversial topic), *éléphant blanc* and *merle blanc* draw on common knowledge. The first idiom relies upon the belief that bulls do not like the colour red. The figurative meaning of the idioms *éléphant blanc* and *merle blanc* is based on the knowledge about the colour of elephants and blackbirds, which provides an explanation for the meaning 'extraordinary thing' which the two idioms share.

We found both types of motivation, metaphoric and cultural, in the semantics of several idioms. Thus, some metaphorically-based idioms explained above cannot be put exclusively to a conceptual metaphor but should also be seen as a cultural product. The expressions *être vert de jalousie*, *vert de colère/rage*, *de peur* trace back to knowledge about the humoral theory prevalent in old times. Likewise, the idiom *broyer du noir* is metaphorically motivated as a whole as it reveals the metaphor THOUGHTS ARE OBJECTS (*broyer* means 'crush'). At the same time, the expression draws on knowledge about the way pigments used to be obtained and the colour adjective must be interpreted in terms of symbolic value ('unhappy').

The same holds for another idiom containing 'black', *n'y voir que du noir*, where the colour term occurs in the same symbolic function and profiles the metaphor THINKING IS SEEING. Similarly, in the idioms *avoir la main verte / les doigts verts* ('to have green fingers'), the PART-FOR-THE-WHOLE metonymy (the hand '*main*' and the fingers '*doigts*' standing for the person) intermingles with the symbolic link between this colour and the environment.

3 CONCLUSION

The present paper has explored the motivation underlying numerous idiomatic expressions through the analysis of colour idioms in French. We have examined two different types of

motivation – metaphoric and symbolic. The study has shown that many idioms are motivated in the sense that there is a link between the literal and the figurative meanings which is rooted either in conceptual structure or in culture. Such finding implicitly refutes the view about the arbitrary nature of many idioms.

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