



ETYMOLOGY OF COLORISTIC IDIOMS IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE (RED, BLACK, WHITE, GREEN AND BLUE)

Ametova Arzigul Ganibaevna
PhD student -Nukus State Pedagogical
Institute named after Ajiniyaz

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.17704553>

Abstract. *This paper investigates the etymological foundations and semantic evolution of coloristic idioms in the English language. Color terms are among the oldest and most symbolically loaded elements of vocabulary, reflecting human perception, cultural associations, and historical development of language. The study explores the origin, metaphorical meaning, and cultural significance of idioms that include color adjectives such as red, black, white, green, and blue. By examining their etymological roots, the research aims to reveal how color-based expressions have developed from literal to figurative meanings across different historical periods of English.*

Keywords: *color idioms, etymology, semantic change, metaphor, English language, color symbolism.*

Аннотация. *В данной работе исследуются этимологические основы и семантическая эволюция колористических идиом в английском языке. Цветовые термины являются одними из древнейших и наиболее символически нагруженных элементов лексики, отражающими восприятие человека, культурные ассоциации и историческое развитие языка. Исследование исследует происхождение, метафорическое значение и культурное значение идиом, содержащих цветочные прилагательные, такие как красный, черный, белый, зеленый и синий. Исследуя их этимологические корни, цель исследования - выявить, как цветные выражения развивались от буквальных значений к переносным значениям в разные исторические периоды английского языка.*

Ключевые слова: *цветовые идиомы, этимология, семантическое изменение, метафора, английский язык, цветовая символика.*

Annotaciya. *Bul jumista inglis tilindegi koloristikaliq frazeologizmlerdiŇ etimologiyalıq tiykarları hám semantikaliq evolyuciyası úyreniledi. ReŇ atamaları sózlik quramınıŇ eŇ eski hám simvolikalıq júklengen elementlerinen bolıp, insan sezimi, mádeniy asociaciýalar hám tildiŇ tariyxıy rawajlanıwın sáwlelendiredi. Izertlewde qızıl, qara, aq, jasil hám kók sıyaqlı reŇ sıpatlamaların óz ishine alǵan frazeologizmlerdiŇ kelip shıǵıwı, metaforalıq mánisi hám mádeniy áhmiyeti úyreniledi. Izertlewde olardıŇ etimologiyalıq tamirlarin úyreniw arqalı inglis tiliniŇ hár qıylı tariyxıy dáwirlerinde reŇge tiykarlangan sóz dizbekleriniŇ dástúriy mánilerden awıspalı mánilerge qaray qalayınsha rawajlanganlıǵın ashıp beriw maqset etilgen.*

Tayanış sózler: *reŇli idiomalar, etimologiya, mánilik ózgeris, metafora, inglis tili, reŇ simvolikası.*

INTRODUCTION

Actually, language is not merely a means of communication but also a reflection of the cultural and historical experiences of its speakers. Among the most vivid linguistic phenomena are coloristic idioms, expressions that incorporate color terms and convey



metaphorical or symbolic meanings. Thus, the study of color idioms occupies a central place in linguistics, particularly in lexicology, cognitive linguistics, and cultural linguistics, since color words often reveal how a given culture categorizes and interprets reality [Wierzbicka, 1996: 122].

In fact, the English language, with its long history of contact with other linguistic systems—Latin, French, Norse, and Celtic—contains a rich layer of color-based idioms. These idioms serve as linguistic witnesses to the social and psychological development of the nation. Moreover, understanding their etymology provides insight not only into the evolution of English vocabulary but also into the mentality and worldview of its speakers [Lakoff, 1987: 56].

The objective of this paper is to analyze the etymological origins of coloristic idioms in English, focusing on how their literal meanings have undergone semantic transformations leading to metaphorical or idiomatic expressions.

Theoretical Background

As a matter of fact, the term etymology refers to the historical study of word origins and their semantic development. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, etymology aims to “trace the history of a word from its earliest recorded form and meaning” [OED, 2010: 34]. In the field of idiomatic expressions, etymology often explains why certain combinations of words became fixed and how their figurative meanings diverged from literal ones.

Color words are among the earliest lexical categories in all languages. Berlin and Kay, in their classical study *Basic Color Terms: Their Universality and Evolution*, demonstrated that color terms emerge in a universal order, starting from black and white and gradually expanding to include red, green, yellow, blue, and others [Berlin & Kay, 1969: 8].

In English, color terms originate from various linguistic sources:

- Old English contributed black, white, red, green, blue;
- French influence after the Norman Conquest introduced blonde, violet, scarlet;
- Latin borrowings enriched the lexicon with azure, crimson, and purple.

The symbolic meanings of colors, however, were shaped by cultural and religious traditions. For example, white symbolizes purity in Christianity, black denotes mourning, and red represents passion or danger [Turner, 2005: 147]. When these symbolic meanings entered idioms, they became vehicles of metaphorical thought [Kövecses, 2010: 112].

Etymological Analysis of Selected Coloristic Idioms

1. Idioms with “Red”



Initially, the word red derives from Old English *rēad*, Proto-Germanic *rauthaz*, and ultimately from Proto-Indo-European *reudh-* meaning “ruddy” or “blood-colored” [Harper, 2020: 1].

Futhermore, idioms such as red tape (meaning bureaucratic delay) date back to the 16th century when official documents were tied with red ribbons in British offices [Simpson & Weiner, 1989: 238]. Similarly, to see red—meaning “to become angry”—originated in the 19th century, probably from the bullfighting context, where red capes were associated with aggression [Ayto, 2010: 286].

The idiom in the red, meaning “in debt,” originates from accounting practice: losses were recorded in red ink, while profits were written in black [Spears, 1998: 96]. Thus, red in English idioms frequently conveys notions of emotion, danger, and loss.

2. Idioms with “Black”

The color black comes from Old English *blæc*, meaning “dark” or “without light,” linked to Proto-Germanic *blakaz* [Harper, 2020: 3]. Culturally, black has long symbolized evil, death, and misfortune, which is reflected in idioms like black sheep (an outcast) and black market (illegal trade). The idiom blackmail (originally “protection money” paid to border raiders in Scotland) derives from *mail* meaning “rent” or “tribute” in Old Norse [Partridge, 1961: 74].

Similarly, blacklist appeared in the 17th century, referring to a list of people to be punished or excluded. The association of black with negativity shows how moral and emotional evaluation influences the evolution of idiomatic meanings.

3. Idioms with “White”

White originates from Old English *hwīt*, Proto-Germanic *hwītaz*, and PIE *kwei-tos* meaning “to shine” [Harper, 2020: 5]. It has traditionally been associated with purity, innocence, and goodness. The idiom white lie (a harmless or minor lie) appeared in the 18th century and reflects the ethical ambivalence of human communication [Ayto, 2010: 497].

White-collar (office workers) and blue-collar (manual laborers) idioms emerged in the early 20th century, marking class distinctions in industrial societies [Simpson & Weiner, 1989: 336].

Thus, the etymology of white idioms reveals semantic extensions from physical brightness to moral and social values.

4. Idioms with “Green”

Green comes from Old English *grēne*, from Proto-Germanic *grōni*, meaning “to grow” [Harper, 2020: 7]. It is associated with youth, freshness, and inexperience. The idiom greenhorn (an inexperienced person) originally referred to young animals with



newly grown horns. The expression green with envy dates to Shakespearean times, when the color green symbolized jealousy [Shakespeare, 1603: Act III, Sc. 3].

The word's agricultural and natural origin influences idioms like the grass is always greener on the other side, illustrating metaphorical transfer from nature to human psychology.

5. Idioms with “Blue”

The color blue entered English from Old French *bleu*, meaning “sky-colored,” and from Proto-Germanic *blawaz* [Harper, 2020: 9]. Blue blood originates from Spanish *sangre azul*, referring to noble families whose pale skin showed blue veins [Spears, 1998: 188].

The idiom feeling blue (sad) first appeared in the 18th century, connected to the naval tradition of flying blue flags when a captain died during a voyage [Ayto, 2010: 88]. Hence, blue idioms reflect both social hierarchy and emotional states.

DISCUSSION

The etymological study of coloristic idioms demonstrates how the meanings of colors evolve through metaphorization and cultural reinterpretation. Colors originally denoted perceptual categories but gradually became symbols of emotions, morality, and social status [Kövecses, 2010: 114].

English idioms show a strong tendency to transfer color associations from physical to abstract domains. The process of semantic extension often involves:

- 1) Metaphorization (e.g., see red → “get angry”);
- 2) Metonymy (e.g., red tape → “bureaucracy”);
- 3) Cultural borrowing (e.g., blue blood → from Spanish nobility);
- 4) Historical symbolism (e.g., black sheep → moral exclusion).

This interplay of etymology and cultural cognition confirms that idioms are not arbitrary but grounded in shared human experience and collective symbolism [Gibbs, 1994: 217].

CONCLUSION

The etymological analysis of coloristic idioms reveals deep interconnections between language, cognition, and culture. The color lexicon of English has developed under the influence of Indo-European roots, foreign borrowings, and sociocultural evolution. Through centuries of metaphorical reinterpretation, color idioms have become integral elements of the linguistic worldview, encoding attitudes toward morality, emotion, and social identity.



The study confirms that etymological investigation of idioms contributes not only to understanding the historical development of English vocabulary but also to uncovering the conceptual and cultural foundations of human thought.

References

1. Ayto, John. Oxford Dictionary of English Idioms. – Oxford University Press, 2010.
2. Berlin, Brent & Kay, Paul. Basic Color Terms: Their Universality and Evolution. – University of California Press, 1969.
3. Gibbs, Raymond W. The Poetics of Mind: Figurative Thought, Language, and Understanding. – Cambridge University Press, 1994.
4. Harper, Douglas. Online Etymology Dictionary. – etymonline.com, 2020.
5. Kövecses, Zoltán. Metaphor: A Practical Introduction. – Oxford University Press, 2010.
6. Lakoff, George. Women, Fire, and Dangerous Things. – University of Chicago Press, 1987.
7. Partridge, Eric. Origins: A Short Etymological Dictionary of Modern English. – Routledge, 1961.
8. Simpson, John & Weiner, Edmund. The Oxford English Dictionary. – Oxford University Press, 1989.
9. Turner, Mark. The Literary Mind. – Oxford University Press, 2005.
10. Wierzbicka, Anna. Semantics: Primes and Universals. – Oxford University Press, 1996.