

## Semantic Extension of Color Terms in Chinese

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Berlin and Kay's (B & K) revolutionary study (1969) on basic color terms has sprouted countless investigations and debates on the categorization and development of color terms cross-linguistically (e.g. Hays et al 1972; Heinrich 1972; Bornstein 1973; Sahlin 1976; Kay and McDaniel 1978; Derrig 1978; Mervis and Roth 1981; Kikuchi and Lichtenberk 1983; Mills 1984; Wierzbicka 1990; Corbett and Davies 1995, 1997; Skara 2000). Most of these studies provide evidence from dictionaries of different languages to argue either for or against B & K's claim that there exists a universal order in the development of color terms. There have also been numerous language-specific studies of color terms, especially of Indo-European languages. Chinese color terms, however, has not been thoroughly studied in the last few decades. Only a few studies (e.g. Baxter 1983, Munro 1983, Tao 1996, Zou and Zhang 2004) investigated the early development of basic colors and some aspect of the functions of color terms. This paper aims to explore the semantic extension of basic Chinese color terms in historical texts (written from 770 B.C. to 2000 A.D.), using the current theory of metaphoricalization and semantic extension in grammaticalization. It is demonstrated that semantic functions of Chinese color terms can be chronologically classified into three types: original meaning, extended meaning, and abstract meaning. Evidence from historical texts suggests that semantic extension of Chinese color terms from their original meaning to abstract meaning has been primarily affected by Chinese people's perception and understanding of color terms relevant to their cultural and pragmatic world. It is argued that when Chinese speakers detect the same semantic domains of a color term as that of the speakers of other languages, Chinese color terms have developed the same or similar extended and/or abstract meanings as their counterparts in the other languages (e.g. "black" in Chinese, English, German and Spanish). If, however, Chinese speakers perceive the semantic domain of a color term differently from speakers of other languages, Chinese color terms have then attained different extended and/or abstract meanings from their counterparts in other languages (e.g. "red" and "blue" in Chinese and English). This finding contradicts the claim that language-idiosyncratic development is purely accidental (e.g. Kikuchi and Lichtenberk 1983). The result of this study shows that only a small number of extended/abstract meanings of Chinese color terms have been developed accidentally; the majority of color terms (i.e. ninety-five percent of examples studied) have extended their meanings systematically through metaphorical extension or pragmatic referencing.

### Selected References:

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